Fallout
EQUESTRIA
PROJECT HORIZONS
by SOMBER
Immersive Edition by Novel Idea

Contents

Immersive Edition Introduction & Credits

Volume 1: The Security Mare
Chapter 1: Inception
Chapter 2: Trust
Chapter 3: Learning Curve
Chapter 4: Innocence
Chapter 5: Work
Chapter 6: Play
Chapter 7: Prices
Chapter 8: Long Roads
Chapter 9: Stone
Chapter 10: Ante Up
Chapter 11: Peace
Chapter 12: Denial
Chapter 13: Turnabout
Chapter 14: Strength
Chapter 15: Flank
Chapter 16: Walk the Hard Road

- - -

Volume 2: Blood and Stars
Chapter 17: Identity
Chapter 18: Monsters
Chapter 19: EC-1101
Chapter 20: Mercy
Chapter 21: Waterfall
Chapter 22: Damned
Chapter 23: Walkabout
Chapter 24: Hell of a Night
Chapter 25: Competition
Chapter 26: Descent
Chapter 27: Salvage
Chapter 28: Orientation
Chapter 29: Mortality
Chapter 30: Allegiances

Chapter 31: Battle
Chapter 32: Choir
Chapter 33: Black

- - -

Volume 3: Second Chances
Chapter 34: Birthday
Chapter 35: Learning
Chapter 36: Victims
Chapter 37: Winning and Losing
Chapter 38: Blood
Chapter 39: Wages of Sin
Chapter 40: Recovery
Chapter 41: Paths
Chapter 42: Reaper
Chapter 43: Lucidity
Chapter 44: Mares and Stallions
Chapter 45: Meatlocker
Chapter 46: Caper
Chapter 47: Hightower
Chapter 48: Inferno

- - -

Volume 4: Homecoming
Chapter 49: Consequence
Chapter 50: Selfishness
Chapter 51: A Good Day
Chapter 52: Reunions
Chapter 53: Upgrades
Chapter 54: Fate
Chapter 55: Noblesse Oblige
Chapter 56: Royal Pains
Chapter 57: Best Night Ever
Chapter 58: Departures
Chapter 59: Turbulence
Chapter 60: Civilization
Chapter 61: Action, Reaction
Chapter 62: Between the Wolf and the Lion

- - -

Volume 5: Horizons
Chapter 63: Perceptions
Chapter 64: Labyrinth
Chapter 65: Knowledge
Chapter 66: Ruin
Chapter 67: Goldenblood
Chapter 68: Morning
Chapter 69: Whiplash
Chapter 70: Calm
Chapter 71: Ignition
Chapter 72: Captive Audience
Chapter 73: Apogee
Chapter 74: Call
Chapter 75: To the Last, Part One
Chapter 75: To the Last, Part Two
Chapter 76 - Paying the Price
Chapter 77 - All In
Epilogue - Tomorrow

# # #

Part Six - Appendices: Author & Editor Notes
Appendices Introduction
-
Volume 1: The Security Mare Appendices
Chapter 1: Inception
Chapter 2: Trust
Chapter 3: Learning Curve
Chapter 4: Innocence
Chapter 5: Work
Chapter 6: Play
Chapter 7: Prices
Chapter 8: Long Roads
Chapter 9: Stone
Chapter 10: Ante Up
Chapter 11: Peace
Chapter 12: Denial

Chapter 13: Turnabout
Chapter 14: Strength
Chapter 15: Flank
Chapter 16: Walk the Hard Road
-
Volume 2: Blood and Stars Appendices
Chapter 17: Identity
Chapter 18: Monsters
Chapter 19: EC-1101
Chapter 20: Mercy
Chapter 21: Waterfall
Chapter 22: Damned
Chapter 23: Walkabout
Chapter 24: Hell of a Night
Chapter 25: Competition
Chapter 26: Descent
Chapter 27: Salvage
Chapter 28: Orientation
Chapter 29: Mortality
Chapter 30: Allegiances
Chapter 31: Battle
Chapter 32: Choir
Chapter 33: Black
-
Volume 3: Second Chances Appendices
Chapter 34: Birthday
Chapter 35: Learning
Chapter 36: Victims
Chapter 37: Winning and Losing
Chapter 38: Blood
Chapter 39: Wages of Sin
Chapter 40: Recovery
Chapter 41: Paths
Chapter 42: Reaper
Chapter 43: Lucidity
Chapter 44: Mares and Stallions
Chapter 45: Meatlocker
Chapter 46: Caper
Chapter 47: Hightower
Chapter 48: Inferno

-
Volume 4: Homecoming Appendices
Chapter 49: Consequence
Chapter 50: Selfishness
Chapter 51: A Good Day
Chapter 52: Reunions
Chapter 53: Upgrades
Chapter 54: Fate
Chapter 55: Noblesse Oblige
Chapter 56: Royal Pains
Chapter 57: Best Night Ever
Chapter 58: Departures
Chapter 59: Turbulence
Chapter 60: Civilization
Chapter 61: Action, Reaction
Chapter 62: Between the Wolf and the Lion
-
Volume 5: Horizons Appendices
Chapter 63: Perceptions
Chapter 64: Labyrinth
Chapter 65: Knowledge
Chapter 66: Ruin
Chapter 67: Goldenblood
Chapter 68: Morning
Chapter 69: Whiplash
Chapter 70: Calm
Chapter 71: Ignition
Chapter 72: Captive Audience
Chapter 73: Apogee
Chapter 74: Call
Chapter 75: To the Last, Part One
Chapter 75: To the Last, Part Two
Chapter 76 - Paying the Price
Chapter 77 - All In
Epilogue - Tomorrow

Fallout: Equestria: Project Horizons (Immersive Edition)
by Somber
(Somber at FiMFiction)
Based on Fallout: Equestria by Kkat
(Kkat at FiMFiction)
Immersive Edition, Scrivener Compilation, Sigil eBook
Refinement & QA Testing by Novel Idea
(Gardens of Equestria)

Immersive Edition Details
For better story flow, all author and editor notes have been moved to their own section under Appendices. Please check them out at the end of the document. They are listed under their respective chapters. Links to YouTube songs have been verified, cleaned and should operate effectively. Minor edits were also made to the formatting of the chapter quotes and footnotes, as well as content warnings.
Content warnings are now verified links that will skip the relevant section to the next "safe" point.
In addition, most section, memory orb and other styles of intra-chapter breaks have been cleaned and fixed to allow for a consistent reading experience. Note: This may add additional spacing in places depending on your reading device.
For more details about other changes, please see the Changelog at the end of the introduction.

Compilation Date: 3.25.16 (V4.0)

Cover Art Credits
Original Cover Art by Sw1tchbl4de (http://sw1tchbl4de.deviantart.com)
Fallout: Equestria Project Horizons Logo by ArtisticMink
Vertical eBook Cover Design by Novel Idea
Fallout and related logos are trademarks or registered trademarks of Bethesda Softworks LLC.

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is a registered trademark of Hasbro, Inc.

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic was originally developed for television by Lauren Faust.

Novel Idea is the Executive Producer, Lead Designer & Creative Director for the Manehattan Project.
The Manehattan Project is the studio dedicated to bringing you Gardens of Equestria: This Coming Storm, a unique Fallout: New Vegas/Fallout: Equestria story-driven experience. For more details, please go to www.gardensofequestria.com.

Changelog

Version 3.2
Fixed Cover Art showing Lyssinna instead of Novel Idea

Version 3.4
Fixed paragraph indents to be a consistent single tab space instead of a variety of spaces. Fixed several section break spacing errors. Edited several footnotes to be more consistent with either Fallout or Fallout: Equestria. Added line between each chapter quote and the beginning of the chapter. Edited several footnotes for spacing, capitalization or grammatical errors. Changed footnote breaks to solid lines both before and after the footnote.

Version 3.9C*
Code change: Removed all "hard-spaces” (&160; and) to remove the double-spaces between sentences and in other locations. Fixed a few missed indents. Fixed 5-space indents to become tab indents. Fixed space after all “…”. Adjusted a few section breaks. *(Don't ask why it jumped from 3.4 to 3.9C. Making book-wide changes to a 1.5 million word book can cause unexpected side effects...especially when they're no undo.)

Version 4.0 - Final Version

Corrected numerous indent errors and spacing errors in Chapters 57-Epilogue. Combined Chapter 75. Removed intra-chapter warning for content warning in Chapter 74. Adjusted Vanity's Epitaph. Minor formatting edits to the

Appendicies. Added back in the space after "..." Changed all JUSTIFIED paragraph justification to LEFT for a better reading experience. Changed all Footnote lines to full horizontal breaks.

Volume 1: The Security Mare

Chapter 1: Inception

"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria…"

War. War never changes. It had consumed our home, a war fought by foreign aggressors until great and terrible magics had been unleashed to burn all the world to ash and dust. Only our constant devotion to the Princesses had carried us through that terrible war, just as our unwavering faith in the Overmare maintained our continued survival within the earth. Trust in the Overmare; obey the Overmare.

The grating buzz of my alarm yanked me away from sleep. I stuck my left foreleg out from under the blankets, away from my head, felt around for the end table next to the bed, found it, and proceeded to whack my PipBuck against the tabletop until the right button was hit and the noise stopped. I groaned and smacked my lips, tasting the sour gunk in my mouth before rolling onto my back and huffing softly, "Good morning, Blackjack. Welcome to another thrilling day in Stable 99." I half crawled, half rolled, half fell out of bed and gave myself a vigorous shake. Life in Stable 99 was routine, with any deviation punishable by the security mares. I had half an hour to wash, half an hour to eat, and an hour to report to my duty station. The same as it had been every day since I'd gotten my cutie mark.

Slowly, I shuffled through the copious junk I'd accumulated. It was mostly recycled food chips and old drink bulbs, though I liked to pretend that some of the open bottles on the dresser were some sort of fermentation experiment... Maybe a pet? Colonization by our future fungal overlords? Heh. A mare could dream…My horn glowed white as my magic lifted my uniform from one of the heaps. I gave it a test sniff…ew…unacceptable. I tossed it back on its pile and sifted around for another. Sniff…sniff…yeah, this'd work.

Trotting down to the showers, I passed the murals designed to inspire camaraderie and cooperation…at least, according to what

I'd been constantly taught in classes. 'We are all the Overmare's foals' declared the caption of one picture of an abstract white unicorn hugging dozens of tiny ponies in her hooves. Another showed one lone weeping mare under the caption 'Selfishness Separates'.

I trotted into the sector's communal bathroom, and immediately my ears perked to a familiar giggling. Walking past a stall, I glanced in at two mares employing unauthorized and probably ineffective washing techniques. According to the training manual, behavior like that in public spaces was punishable by whipping and restriction to C class rations, so it was pretty understandable that the pair looked up with some trepidation when they spotted me.

"Oh, it's just Blackjack," the dappled mare, Pastels, said in relief before flushing and snapping at her partner, "I swear, you are trying to get us flogged!"

"Fun," giggled the white mare, Misty Hooves from the bakery, nuzzling her. Misty was a chronic offender. I didn't know if she liked the kiss of the whip or if there was something else wrong with her. Or both.

I sighed. In theory, I was supposed to discourage this kind of thing. However, it fucking *sucked* being the mare who was supposed to discourage this kind of thing. "You won't think so if it's Daisy doing the flogging," I commented, and instantly their smiles disappeared. I couldn't blame them. With the constant duty and honor bullshit, a little flank spank was one of the few reliable means of recreation, and a lot of the security mares got really... enthusiastic about it. I stepped under the spray and immediately jerked. "Cold!"

"Yeah. Heating talismans are really slow today," Misty said.

"Well," I said after a moment, "go back to your quarters and finish up your fun. Make sure you're back in your beds by curfew." That's me, big badass security pony. The pair glanced nervously at each other and then quickly finished their showers.

"I wonder if we can do it in the atrium and not get caught," I heard Misty mutter to Pastels as the two trotted out. I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Some mares have all the luck. Not that they were the only two, or even the worst two. Half the ponies in the stable seemed to have at least one flavor of crazy. I supposed it was only inevitable when half your day was devoted to keeping this place going.

And we had to keep it going. If we didn't…don't think about it.

Stable 99 was all that was left. Every filly learned that as soon as they could read; the megaspells unleashed across Equestria had sterilized the surface. Radioactive death was all that awaited us outside. So we kept the stable working. We kept order. We kept loyalty…because at any moment…any moment…

"Fuck, Blackjack. Don't think about another Incident," I muttered softly. "The Overmare Protects"…but I felt a gloomy specter rising inside me at the thought of the entire stable being in the hooves of a filly a year younger than me.

There were exactly five hundred jobs to be filled in Stable 99. Four hundred and something were covered by mares like myself who inherited our jobs from our mothers. My mom was security. I was security. When I had my daughter, she would be security. And so on and so on. In the rare event of a mare dying before she could breed, a lottery would be held for some other mare to produce an extra filly for the spot. Because the population had to stay at five hundred. Everypony had to behave and follow the rules. Otherwise…there'd be an Incident.

Stable 99 couldn't take another Incident. This bathroom alone showed the flickering lights from overtaxed generators and the water that couldn't settle on whether it wanted to be freezing or boiling. You couldn't think about it; all it would take was one thing to go wrong and we'd all die. One busted generator…one broken recycler…one accident, and we'd all be choking on our own unrecycled breath.

"Fuck! Don't think about it…" I said, trying again to shove it from my mind. That was made ridiculously easy by Midnight trotting past me towards the atrium. Instantly, my ruby eyes popped wide at her cute flank and graceful tail. Black on black and *oh* she needed to be mine! "Hey! Midnight! Midnight! Hey! Hey! Wait up!" I shouted as I tripped and raced to catch up with her. Of course, she didn't wait; she never did. Instead, she picked up her pace. "Damn it, Midnight! No running in the halls!" I shouted as I ran after her. What? I was security! I was allowed to break the rules when pursuing a fine flank!

Unfortunately, there was a flash and a pair of hoofcuffs materialized around my forehooves. "Oh sh--" I barely got out before rolling head over hoof. I glared around at the source. It could only be…"Daisy. Marmalade. Excellent cunt block…top notch." The pale earth pony mare and honey colored unicorn both smiled at my

predicament.

"No running in the halls, Blackjack," Daisy said, stepping out of the side hall she'd been lurking in. When Stable-Tec made the stable, clearly they hadn't had mares of her size in mind. Her ears nearly brushed against the ceiling as she looked down at me with her snide little grin. "Not even after pussy." Marmalade gave an echoing little snicker.

"Right. You got me," I said as I held up the hoofcuffs. "So?"

"Aww…don't know the spell yourself? I thought all the security unicorns did. Marmalade does," Daisy taunted as she stepped over me, making her way towards the atrium stairs. The vapid unicorn gave a slack grin and nodded, and then both of them had a good laugh as they trotted away. I rose, glaring at their backs before hobbling after the pair.

All security unicorns were supposed to know a selection of spells for policing the stable. Me…I had telekinesis…and telekinesis…and oh! Did I mention telekinesis? I couldn't cuff or stun or do interrogation spells to save my life; all the practice I'd put in merely gave me a migraine. I'd have been better off being in maintenan-- wait, that would mean I'd be responsible for the stable. Strike that…better I were in food prep. Nice, low-responsibility food prep. That was the life for me…

But I was security. Because Mom was security. Because her mom had been security. All the way back to the legendary Card Trick, the one who'd carved 'Security: We Save Ponies' above the entrance to the security level. Hurray for completely irrational expectations! I knew I'd never save 99. I couldn't even get out of these hoofcuffs.

Whoa, pity party; table for one! Or not. I didn't have any time for the 'poor me' routine. Never played well. Nope! I just had to get out of these cuffs…and I had an idea how…

The huge atrium was the heart and soul of pony life in 99. Almost half the stable could fit in the room for large events, more if everypony was really friendly. Huge support pillars had been sculpted in a parody of tree trunks, and the support beams had been fashioned to resemble branches. That was about the extent of trying to make 99 look like something outside. Besides, the effect was ruined by the huge banners of the Overmare smiling down at us all and her stupid patriotic slogans of 'Help the Overmare, help 99' and 'Stableity over all'. I mean, really. 'Stableity'? The music piped in was half parade march and half hymn.

Any wonder I tried to stay out of this place? There was also the fact that most ponies refused to look at me. They'd drop their conversations, look aside, or leave. It didn't matter that I tried to be nice; the fact was that all I had to do was drop a name and they'd be hauled in for interrogations. I'd witnessed enough to know I didn't want to drop a name…besides, I'd already tried it once. Never worked for the ponies who deserved it.

I passed the cafeteria where ponies loaded bowls with green recycled algae slime, scooped recycled fungus cubes onto trays, collected synthetic recycled carrot sticks and apple flakes into bowls, or heaped up stacks of green recycled grass chips, brown recycled hay chips, and white recycled cake chips upon their plates. All the food in 99 was recycled into more food. All the waste in 99 was recycled. *We* were recycled. And yes, even having lived here my entire life, I still found it easier to pretend that the machines just magically made the food poof into being. Still, despite being made out of recycled poo water, the chips were pretty tasty!

You just had to not think about it.

Midnight was talking with Rivets and Textbook, and the black unicorn's eyes widened at the sight of me hobbling to her table. "Mind if I join you? No? Great!" I said as I set my hooves on the table before she could shoot me down. "Hey, Riv. Hey, teach…" the earth pony school mistress sniffed disdainfully at my intrusion.

"We were having a private conversation," Textbook said sullenly as she glared at me. Rivets, an older gray earth pony, showed far more amusement at my predicament.

"Great. Do I have a story to tell! Here I was, just minding my own business, hurrying to catch up with a particularly lovely mare, when these hoofcuffs appeared on me like magic! Can you believe it?" I asked with a grin as I tapped them on the table. "So, there I was, pondering and bemoaning my fate, when I remembered a certain vision of angelic equinity whose magic far outshines my own and whose kindness and generosity would surely compel her to free me from my predicament!" I said, grinning ear to ear as I fluttered my eyes at Midnight.

"Blackjack, I'm a PipBuck technician…" she began.

"Which means you're intelligent. Skilled! That you possess far more competence than a lowly security pony like myself!" I said as she hesitated. I almost had her convinced! "I'll pay you in oral sex!" I blurted. Textbook turned the shade of a spoiled apple, and Rivets

covered half her face as she chuckled.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Midnight said to Rivets as she trotted to another table.

"I'll be telling your mother about this," Textbook added to me before going to join Midnight.

I groaned and pressed my face into my bound hooves. Rivets patted my shoulder. "Oral sex, huh? What's the going rate on that?"

"I'm an idiot," I muttered. Rivets chuckled, certainly not arguing.

"I had no idea. I didn't think you were into mares," Rivets said with a smile, munching on her grass chips.

"Eh…" I shrugged. "It's more the fact she always tells me no." I glared down at the cuffs on my hooves, growled, and then bit the conjured metal. "She always plays hard to get…" I said around the mouthful of metal.

"Well, it's your time to waste. Her spot on the queue's up, though, so I really doubt she'll have time for you," she said matter-of-factly.

"Really?" My red eyes widened and then drooped along with the rest of my body. I slumped till my chin rested on the tabletop. "Bummer."

"We all have our little trials," Rivets said with a sigh. "I've got to get Duct Tape's filly on the duty roster. She's taking over for her mom." She sighed. "Hopefully she knows which end of the wrench goes on the nut."

"Duct Tape died? How?" I gasped. She was one of the nicer ponies in maintenance. I frequently bumped flanks with her on C shift, though never actually talked with her, of course. After all, I was security and she was scared to death of me.

Rivets snorted in irritation. "Don't you ever pay attention? She died a week ago. Tried servicing the Overmare's terminal and it blew up in her face. Power junction wasn't closed."

"But Scotch Tape doesn't even have her cutie mark yet, right? She's still in school," I pointed out, twisting my hooves errantly in the cuffs to try and free them.

"Does that matter? I've got a hundred and fifty maintenance mares to manage and I've got a hole on the C shift and she's got to fill it," Rivets said firmly, narrowing her eyes as she pressed her lips together. "I feel for the kid. Really. But the stable takes first, last, and middle priority. She'll just have to get over it."

"Really? I thought it was Overmare first, last, and middle," I replied, enjoying a little smack talk. Normally it would get a grin.

The look on Rivets's face now, though…I'd never seen her look so angry in my life. My black-and-red-striped mane itched terribly and I just wished my hooves were free so I could scratch it.

Rivets groaned. "Don't talk about the Overmare to me. She's been throwing all kinds of special work orders and studies my way. The little foal is demanding peak efficiency and she's countermanding my work assignments to make damn sure it doesn't happen." She reached into one of the many pockets on her utility barding and drew out a notepad. "Last month she ordered the stable recreation broadcaster in Maintenance One overhauled, but then she collected every piece of scrap electronics and conductor for inventory and kept the entire terminal crew occupied with 'searching and cleaning' the stable databases!"

Maintenance One was the little closet of a utility space next to the stable maneframes and the massive Stable-Tec hatchway right outside the atrium; I sometimes used it for naps when I knew the Overmare was out. "Did she say why?"

"Do overmares ever?" Rivets countered with a snort. "Her mother was bad enough; I sure didn't shed any tears when she died last year. But that little tyrant is going to…" and she drew herself up short, realizing that even though I was the most irresponsible mare in security, I was in security. She coughed and then gave a little shrug. "I'm just concerned about the stable. That's all."

And that was the story of my life. No matter how friendly I was, I was security. She wasn't. I enforced the Overmare's rules and punished those who didn't. I sighed, my ears drooping a little. "Well, see you at the card game tonight?"

There was some considerable doubt in her eyes as she stared at me. She rose with a cool, "Of course. You're always welcome at the game." Not because I was actually *welcome* welcome, but more because having me there would assuage fears that the game would be raided. After all, I was the only pony in security who liked associating with the maintenance mares after hours. "It's in Atmospheric Maintenance Three this time. Bring your bits." Because I would be leaving with exactly as much as I came with, because I was tolerated. Not wanted. Goddesses, why was my mane crawling thinking about the look that she'd just given me?

I looked at the cuffs on my hooves, feeling as if there were something I was missing, then growled as I narrowed my eyes and bit them again!

* * *

There were five hundred ponies in Stable 99, and one tenth of them were resigned to the duty of protecting and safeguarding the stable and executing the will of the Overmare. Unfortunately, we also had to frequently tackle the question of which one took priority. The briefing room was festooned with graphic reminders that 'Service to the Overmare is Service to the Stable'. I hobbled in just as the security head started with the evening briefing.

The security head was Gin Rummy, a middle-aged unicorn who still looked better than several of the younger mares. Her purple and red striped mane contrasted well with her lavender coat and bright pink eyes, and those pink eyes looked right at me with immediate disapproval the second I hobbled in.

Gin Rummy trotted up to the podium and flipped through the notes organized on her PipBuck. The microcomputer on the leg of everypony in the stable had a ridiculous amount of data storage space on it, but I wagered hers was nearly full. She'd been head of security for longer than I'd been alive, and I'd never known her to not be organized, confident, and secure in her knowledge of what was going on in Stable 99. Daisy and Marmalade snickered as I limped in, and I gave the rest of the security mares a sheepish grin and a shrug before taking my seat. Gin Rummy just sighed and looked at me with a slow, disappointed shake of her head. Still, wasn't much she could do.

"So, everypony. I want to thank you for your hard work. Stable incident reports are down to under five percent this month. There hasn't been anything more severe than a few class C incidents of violating curfew. Springs was caught this morning hoarding Med-X, but she surrendered her stash willingly. Punishment will be twenty lashes in the atrium tomorrow morning."

"Ohhh! Ohhh! Pick me! Can I do it?" Daisy asked with a grin, waving her hoof in the air. Gin Rummy did not share her humor.

"Punishment will be administered by a random pony from A shift, Daisy. You know that," she replied firmly. Daisy snorted, glaring at me. I responded with my best 'what?!' expression.

"In other news, medical reports that we're missing a male. There's a new P-21 to round up for retirement, but he hasn't reported back after his last breeding assignment. C shift, your job is to sweep the

stable. If a mare's sheltering him, write up the incident and escort him to detention. If not, find him," Gin Rummy said firmly. Daisy rubbed her hooves together gleefully. Most mares simply looked bored. I tried my best not to squirm. Damn it, why were hoofcuffs so hard to get out of?

Everypony in Stable 99 had a job assigned to them from birth. Maintenance ponies maintained, security ponies secured, and baker ponies baked. The forty or so males in Stable 99 were no different: they were breeding equipment. From birth, they had their segregated quarters in medical and were signed out by mares for reproductive purposes and, more frequently, recreational. There were twenty unicorns and twenty earth ponies on the breeding rotation. Once a male reached…how old was it? Twelve? Fifteen? -- they were put into breeding. Of course, to keep the number in rotation the same, that meant that a male had to be taken out of breeding and retired.

"So, if there's nothing else?" Gin Rummy's pink eyes scanned the assembled security ponies before landing on me. "Very well. Oh, and tomorrow, I'd like any ponies confused about how to dispel a hoofcuff spell to please report to security at twelve hundred hours for remediation." Maybe I could do more than telekinesis after all. I was in the front row, and yet, magically, I still knew that every eye was on me. Amazing. "All right. A shift and B shift are off-duty. C shift, stable is yours." Daisy nodded in response. And with that, the mares dispersed to get their last shot at dinner before curfew went active.

"Thanks. I really appreciate that," I said as I looked at the head security mare sourly.

She returned the look coolly. "You're not a blank flank anymore, Blackjack. You have duties and obligations to this stable. If you can't fulfill them, then it's my obligation to train you to meet them."

Yeah, except nopony ever asked me if I wanted them. She started for the exit. "Hey…" I called after her, and when she looked back, I sat down and raised my cuffed hooves. "You mind, Mom?"

She sighed as she looked at me for a long moment and finally went from being head security mare to being my mother. Trotting back, she lowered her horn to the cuffs, and with a flash she dispelled the summoned restraints. Technically, every security unicorn was supposed to be able to do that. Technically, every unicorn, much

less every security unicorn, was supposed to be able to do a whole slew of spells that I couldn't. Maybe Mom would get lucky and outlive me. One thing was sure: the second I became head security mare, Stable 99 was doomed.

"Marmalade's work?" she asked in that tone that always seemed to prelude her fighting my battles for me. It was really tempting, I admit. Of course, this was why even most of the security ponies gave me a lot of space; nopony wanted to offend the boss's daughter.

"Don't worry about it, Mom. I can handle it," I said, trying to put on my big girl look. Okay, I was definitely old enough to have it by default, but she always looked at me like I was her little blank flank…when there was nopony else around to see, of course. Thank the Goddesses.

I trotted out after everypony else, pretending not to hear her sigh. Yeah, that just about summed up my feelings on the subject as well.

Outside, I glanced down the hallway. The uppermost levels held security, the armory, the Overmare's office, and all the maneframes that ran the stable. Down at the end of the hall were the Overmare's office and the maintenance room with the maneframes. The Overmare was talking very agitatedly with Midnight and a few of the other mares responsible for the information systems. The dirty white unicorn filly who was our supreme leader looked mad; there was nothing new about that, but tonight she seemed like she was in a grade A pissed mood and was determined to share it. I'd never seen Midnight looking so upset.

"Get out! Get out get out get out! Leave before I have you all shot! You're useless!" the Overmare concluded in nigh-hysterical shrieks. It was at moments like this that I was glad the laws didn't allow summary execution. Really glad.

"Midnight!" I shouted as the Overmare returned to her office.

She looked back at me, ears drooping as she rubbed her eyes furiously. "I don't have time for your flank spank right now, Blackjack. The Overmare's pissed."

"Yeah, I got that around 'have you shot'," I said as I fell in besides her as we trotted back downstairs towards the atrium. "Why?"

Midnight looked at me, then sighed and shook her head, "She wants a data file. An old one."

"And you couldn't find it?" I said with a frown. Unlike me, Midnight was actually competent.

"No, that's just it. It was already found by Duct Tape weeks ago. The thing was buried deep in the stable's archives, but she found it. Goddesses know how," Midnight said as we stepped into the large chamber. The stable chimed out that curfew was about to begin and all mares not on C shift were to report to their quarters.

"So what's the problem?"

"It's encrypted," she said with a sigh. "We can't get it to open up for transfer. She wants us to break the encryption, but we haven't been able to all week." She chewed on her lip. "I thought that if we got it ready to transfer into a PipBuck she'd be…well…less pissed, but she was hysterical! I've never had the Overmare say I should be shot!" Clearly, Midnight was shaken. I could relate. There was bitchy Overmare, and then there was whatever I'd just witnessed.

"Mom wouldn't let her," I said, and for the first time in about forever received a small smile in return. "Look, don't worry about it. You'll get it eventually."

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said with obvious relief.

Okay, this was my chance! I grinned. "So…I've got ten minutes before I have to start my rounds. Can I swing by your quarters on my way for that flank spank?" I gave her my best 'I promise you'll enjoy it' look.

She snorted, looked at me, and gave a flat 'in your dreams' "No." Then she trotted away from me as I sat down hard, watching her go.

"Oh come on! I was being sympathetic! Nice! Midnight?" But she didn't look back as she disappeared down towards the residential quarters with the rest of the mares. "Ugh, what does a mare have to do to get a little service in this place?!" I sighed, head hanging. "So unfair…"

* * *

Stable 99 was arranged with one level atop another. At the apex were the Overmare's office, security, the armory, and the maneframes. Underneath that were the atrium, cafeteria, stable entry, and the two dozen or so recreation, education, and medical facilities. Underneath that were the residential quarters for the stable's population. And underneath it all lay the utility and maintenance levels, a section larger than all the rest of the stable combined. The recycling systems were all found down here, as were

the magical generators that kept everything going. Manufacturing equipment, storeroom after locked storeroom, and, of course, all the little hidden fun spots: the makeshift stills, the love nests, and the nooks for gambling.

Most security ponies stayed at the top of the stable. The tunnels below were dark, undecorated, and filled with the stench of all kinds of foul leaking fluids and chemicals used to keep the stable habitable. The Overmare might have had complete authority over the top half of the stable, but this was Rivets's domain. She and her maintenance mares were always the most rebellious and independent element of the stable. One day…no, don't think about it. If there was an Incident between the Overmare and maintenance…well, I knew which side had all the guns and which side knew how to keep the stable alive...

"Hit me," I shouted over the hum of machinery as I looked at the worn playing cards. They were so old that I'd bet Rivets could tell them by the wear patterns. Good thing this wasn't poker. Rivets dealt me a four of spades; I really had no idea how earth ponies managed cards. They just did. Me, I levitated them around as I looked at the other players.

Tonight I was even less welcome than usual. The other four ponies kept muttering to each other, telling jokes and stories that left me out, and my winnings were virtually frozen. Nopony mentioned the Overmare; clearly, they were watching themselves around the security mare.

Because one word of sedition or talk about getting at the armory and we'd have an Incident. Please, don't say something that would cause an Incident…

"So, Blackjack, I notice you keep getting shit from Daisy and the others," Rivets said amiably as she smoked on her cigar. She'd offered me the cigar at the start of the game, a blatant class B violation that I'd never ever report her on. I had no idea how she manufactured them, but it was just another indication that things were painfully tense in the stable. After one puff, I'd coughed so badly that she'd taken it back. "They've been doing that for… what…three years now?"

"Oh, longer than that," I said with a small smile. Ever since my first big fuck up. "But what can you do?"

"Well, that is the question, isn't it?" Rivets asked with a spread of her forehooves before dealing out the cards. "We can't do anything.

Daisy is security. You get your job and it's yours, no matter how you abuse your position." She chuckled, friendly like, but I knew enough laughs to tell it was an act. "Don't get me wrong, your momma is a fine mare. She's always tried to do right by the stable. She just won't do more."

Oh, Rivets, please don't go there. "Well, it's the way of things, isn't it?"

"Is it?" Rivets asked in return with a look that made my mane crawl. "You think it's right that ponies like Daisy and Marmalade get to give you that ration of shit day in and day out?"

"Well…no. But what does it matter what I think? It's the way things are," I swallowed, noticing that nopony else seemed to be interrupting.

"But does it have to be?" Rivets asked. There was one answer she wanted to hear and a whole slew of wrong answers. I shrank back; why did she have to be asking me stuff like this? Couldn't we just play the game?

I needed to change the subject, fast. "So…what is the Overmare up to?" I asked as I glanced at the others. They looked at one another, then at Rivets. She was still smoking her cigar with slow, steady puffs. I snorted. "Look, I know everypony's a little more on edge than usual, but this is Blackjack asking. Come on, Rivets. I got my cutie mark here." In fact, I got my queen and ace of spades playing this very game. "You can talk to me."

Rivets chewed slowly on the end as her eyes measured me up. Finally, she gave a minimal shrug. "You tell me. Overmare has us running like crazy for a month updating her on the stable, seizes inventory, and Duct Tape dies doing work for her. Now she's screaming at Midnight that she's going to shoot her and has her own little guard of security ponies following her around tonight."

"She what?" I blinked, having left with Midnight so quickly that I hadn't heard anything about that.

Rivets nodded slowly. "She's got all of us really concerned. *Really* concerned. Some of us wonder if we're all safe with her in charge."

"She's the Overmare. It's her job to keep us all safe," I replied, almost by rote as my red eyes looked from one to the next. Only Rivets met my gaze.

"Some ponies don't think she has a clue what her job is. Heck, some ponies don't think she even knows herself. And some ponies have to wonder why Blackjack's so insistent on coming to this

game. Maybe to keep tabs on all of us?" Rivets asked as she nodded to the equipment around us. "After all, with all the interference, I doubt you can track us by our PipBucks."

The foreleg-mounted minicomputers were marvels of arcane technology; even if I didn't understand the first thing about how they worked, I had to admit that they were useful. One of the functions most used by security was the ability to, if you had the correct address tag, track any other PipBuck. All I had to do was put in their name and I could find their location almost anywhere in the stable. Down here, though, it was another story. Probably why the missing male had gone to ground down here.

"Look, I just wanted to have some fun!" I protested. Was it really that hard to believe? I looked from one to the next; these were all mares I'd known my entire life. Heck, Rivets was virtually my godmother from all the time I spent down here! But from the looks I got…yes, yes it was.

I slowly slipped back from the table, leaving my bits behind. "I'm going to go…you know…do security stuff. Got a stallion to round up and…um…stuff," I finished lamely. All of them watched me back slowly out of Atmospheric Maintenance Three. Not one took their eyes off me.

* * *

Several minutes later, I took a breather. Rivets was just pissed. She always bumped heads with anypony in authority, always sure nopony knew as well as she did how to run the stable. As soon as the Overmare calmed down, everything would settle down and we'd be able to get back to normal. Don't think about it. It was how everypony in the stable survived. I'd just forget about it and, in a week, Rivets and I would be laughing as usual!

Please, let everything be alright.

Well, with the game a complete fiasco, Midnight continuing her cold shoulder, and me with six hours left in my shift, I might as well actually do some security work. Mostly the ten or so of us on C shift patrolled and wrote up any mare violating curfew. Down here, I might find more interesting violations, but it was rare that I'd ever run into anything major. I snapped on another function of the PipBuck: the Eyes Forward Sparkle.

Instantly, a number of yellow bars filled my vision as the arcane

device detected the number of ponies within a few hundred feet. It also had a few red bars, likely a few hungry radroaches looking to take a bite out of me. The E.F.S. was a function few ponies used regularly. After all, it only gave direction and hostility, and the indicator didn't even tell you how far above or below you the bar was. For all I knew, that yellow bar was around the corner or a floor up. I entered in the P-21's PipBuck address, but the little icon twitched around spasmodically. Likely he was down here… somewhere.

It wasn't often that we had a buck who tried to hide from retirement. Most just reported to security or medical to get their shot and that was that. Occasionally there'd be a crying or screaming fit in the atrium. Rarely, they'd suicide…ugh, please don't let me find him hanging or poisoned down here. The plain fact was that this was a stable; the only exit had been sealed four generations ago during the last Incident, and eventually he'd starve to death. It wasn't like bucks knew how to get into food stores and the like. They just bred. That was all they knew, all they needed to know.

Right?

I trotted past a row of gurgling pieces of equipment barely lit by wan yellow spark lamps. Knowing my luck, the yellow bar ahead of me was actually one or two floors above me. If I was lucky, I could get through this shift without any more disasters and, if I was really lucky, talk to Mom and not the head security mare about the rising tension. The former might be able to do something. The latter would have to crack down on Rivets, or, worse, tell the Overmare.

Then I heard a faint sniff and soft sobs over the hum of the equipment. Looked like I'd found my pony. "Okay, come on out and let's get you up to security. A quick shot and it'll be all over."

The sniffling stopped, and then a tiny olive filly with teal eyes peeked out at me. My jaw dropped as I saw the pain and fear in her eyes. "Oh! Ah…you're not…ahem…" I sat hard and rubbed my head. Could this night get any worse? "You're not supposed to be down here. It's dangerous and after curfew. Where's your momma?"

She just stared at me, and her eyes dropped to her hooves. "Recycled…" was all she blubbered. She touched her PipBuck and her ID flashed. 'Scotch Tape, Maintenance Shift C'.

Oh…I tried to think up some creative profanity but…eh…I got nothing. "Oh…well…ah…" What was I supposed to do? If this was

Duct Tape's kid, then she was supposed to be here. Should I say something about her mom? Give her a hug? Tell her she's doing a good job? Tell her not to be a cryfilly? "Um…sorry about your mom. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get the hang of it." I grinned at her as she clenched her eyes closed, pulled a wrench from her barding, and nodded before trotting back between the massive round machines.

I trotted away as quickly as I could. "Wonderful, Blackjack…'You'll get the hang of it?' What is wrong with me?" I berated myself as I glanced back over my shoulder.

I really wasn't good at this whole life and death thing. Really. You just didn't think about death in 99. It wasn't really like 'death' so much as one day you're there and the next day you're replaced by your kid. And someday they'll be replaced by theirs. I was glad that Mom would probably last forever. I didn't know how I'd handle the stable with her gone.

I couldn't help but reach out and touch the steel walls of the stable. Somepony had daubed 'Fuck the Overmare' on the gray metal in flaking white paint. A shout of rebellion from the Incident almost a century ago, the last time the stable had torn itself apart. Back then, it'd been bucks challenging the Overmare and the rules imposed by Stable-Tec when the stable had been established. Today, it was Rivets against the Overmare.

Why'd I have to get stuck in the middle of this shit?

And, just as I was getting a nice batch of self-pity whipped up, I stepped right in a puddle of leaking sewage. My hooves slipped in the slippery mung and I went over, getting a faceful of the cold sludge. Coughing and retching I kicked away, wiping my face furiously. My red and black striped mane and tail were smeared with grunge as I leaned against the wall, coughing and spitting. How nice that the Goddesses were making my metaphoric life literal.

I tried to think about what I knew of the newest P-21. He was green…no…brown? Ugh…I paid more attention to the unicorn breeding population than the earth ponies. I'd heard that this P-21 was already notorious for 'disappearing', though, so it wasn't much of a surprise that he'd pulled another vanishing act. Nopony was sure how he managed to get out of medical. Males weren't supposed to be smart enough for that.

Wait…what was that?

It was another yellow bar, but one that, when I moved my head, changed direction far faster than any of the others. That meant that it was a lot closer. As in right on the far side of a door marked 'Emergency Storage #3'. I frowned, tried the handle with my horn, and was astonished to find it unlocked! Not even Rivets left these unsecured. Slowly, I levitated out my baton, opened the door, and flipped on the lights. Row after row of metal boxes lay on dusty shelves for the day another Incident occurred. Of course, there weren't any weapons or ammo, but clearly some of these boxes had been opened.

I toggled the lamp on my PipBuck, flooding the far depths of the chamber with light. There, in the corner, hid a blue earth pony mare in ugly gray utility barding. I immediately relaxed as she watched me with worried blue eyes. "Sweet Celestia, what are you doing in here? I thought Rivets kept this place locked up tight."

She just looked at me with wary eyes. "Just... getting some stuff for Rivets." Her soft voice was surprisingly deep for such a puny pony. "I'll just get it to her," she said, slipping on her saddlebags and starting slowly towards the exit. But as she drew close to me, I frowned. I knew all the mares on the C shift, and the only blue earth pony was a medical mare. "What shift are you on?" I asked with a little frown.

"Um…C shift…of course…" she swallowed as she turned, facing me and backing away.

"Right," I said as I frowned at her, slipping into full security mode. I might not have found the missing male, but hopefully this would redeem me a little in Mom's eyes. Still, why anypony would want to steal century-old supplies was beyond me. "Identification, please."

She gave it by turning to bolt for the door. Now, I might not be very good at magic, but I definitely knew how to swing a baton and tackle a fleeing thief. She made it a half dozen steps out the door before my glowing stick swept her legs right out from under her. As she went down, I jumped on her back and was amazed when she went completely still. "Okay! Identification!" She didn't move, didn't respond in the slightest. She just lay there, shaking and crying silently. I frowned and reached over to use my security override.

'P-21: Breeder. Retire from service immediately,' flashed on the screen of her…no…his PipBuck. "You're the new P-21," I muttered, staring down at his saddlebags and clothing. Keeping him pinned

with my hooves, I stripped him of his stolen goods. Sure enough, those were parts that didn't belong on any mare! "What…what the hay is going on here?"

He didn't move. He simply lay there with his eyes closed, curled up. Saddlebags full of food. A utility mare's outfit. Had he planned on trying to actually live down here? Like all bucks, his cutie mark was a white male symbol with dots underneath it; his had two rows of ten white dots. Below that would go one more dot…though I was never sure why, since after that he'd be heading straight to retirement.

Well, time for the next bit. "Ahem…according to Overmare and Stable-Tec bylaws, you are to be escorted to security for final processing and chemical retirement. You are obligated by stable laws to accompany me or you will be compelled. Do you understand?" Goddesses, I hated playing the security mare part. He knew the rules. I knew he knew. He knew I knew he knew. Why did I have to pretend? Meanwhile, he just lay there like a blue doll, his eyes wide and glassy.

"Just kill me…it's what you do, isn't it?" P-21 muttered.

I blinked down at him in confusion. "Um. It's not my place to kill you. I'm not an executioner. You're going to be…ah…retired." I tried to grin and put him at ease, because bucks sometimes did stupid things. It wouldn't be the first time one attacked me without provocation. He looked back, and his eyes slowly drew into focus. I'd never seen a male look at me like that before. The cold anger inside made me wonder if he really was going to do something crazy.

"Like you retired him," he replied softly, his storm blue eyes darkening as he stared at me.

"Uh…I think you're confused. Medical takes care of the actual retirement process," I said as I backed away.

"You're all murderers," he muttered as he rose to his hooves and looked back at the stolen clothes and supplies. "I was so close, too…" With that, he started to walk slowly towards the stable's central staircase.

"Close to what?" I asked, but he didn't answer. I couldn't blame him. If I were about to be retired, I doubted that I'd be in a chatty mood. Still, it was hard to take him calling me a murderer. I'd never killed anypony! I followed him closely, baton ready in case he came back at me. We trotted past an open doorway to a storeroom, and

the olive filly peeked out with a sad eye as we walked by.

I wish that that was all that happened.

Just as we reached the stairs to the higher levels of the stable, a baton wielded by a pale yellow mare whirled out from a side hall and struck his rear knee with the sickening, tearing *pop* that signaled a damaged joint. He fell to his side, screaming in pain as Daisy and Marmalade stepped out. The huge pale mare spat out her baton, caught the strap on the end of her hoof, and twirled it. "About time we found the missing penis." She slammed her hoof into his face as he tried to curl up into a tight ball. "And he's with you," Daisy added with a grim grin. "Bonus."

"Daisy! Marmalade! What the fuck are you doing?" I asked as Marmalade's floating baton thumped hard against his ribs and Daisy smashed him with her hooves again.

"Saving medical some work. This little fuck's had us down here for hours," she said as she grinned at Marmalade. "So I figured we'd take care of him ourselves."

What the fuck! "You can't fucking do this! Medical retires ponies, not security!" Was I actually quoting stable bylaws now? The worst security pony in the stable? What the hell was happening here?

"Oh, he's fighting us," Daisy said as she circled him, and brought her hoof down on his swelling knee. "Resisting security. A real dangerous case, right Marmalade?" The honey colored mare nodded with a dumb grin.

And just like that, they set themselves to beating him to death before my eyes. I wondered if this was some kind of nightmare that I'd wake up from…but as he cried out in pain, I clenched my eyes closed. Just wait a few minutes and it'd be over. Just do nothing, Blackjack. Don't think about it…

Don't think about it. Don't think about the thumps and the cries and the sobs and the begging.

No.

Security saves ponies.

I looked at the pair beating him in glee and charged Marmalade first. Last thing I needed was another pair of hoofcuffs on me! Her orange eyes widened in shock as the baton cracked loudly against her skull with such force that she tumbled over. Goddesses, I hoped I hadn't killed her.

Daisy's shock transformed into rage much faster. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? He's a fucking worthless male! He's

disposable!" She charged, and while normally I'd back away from her kicks, this time I charged to meet her. Our chests slammed together, and it was all I could do to keep from being crushed under her. Sweet Celestia, how much did she eat to be this strong?

As we struggled, though, I still had one advantage she didn't. My horn flashed white as I wielded the baton in my magical grip. And one more thing I could do with telekinesis: with another thought, I triggered my PipBuck's 'Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting System'. The S.A.T.S. was a magical spell that momentarily slowed time almost to a stop and let me line up my attacks perfectly. Each attack cost some spell charge that had to build back up over time, but right now I wasn't going to waste any of it. Three baton strikes to the head. The spell even gave me the probability of each strike landing!

Triggering the spell, time sped up but still seemed to move at a crawl as my baton rose and fell soundly upon her head. The first split the skin above her eye. The second busted her nose. The third…missed. Still, when the spell faded and time fully resumed, she staggered back in shock. I stood over the fallen stallion, swinging the baton with all the force I could as she retreated for once.

Then Marmalade rose, looking at me with a hurt, betrayed expression. Suddenly, this looked bad…

Then our PipBucks crackled, the built-in radios squawking, "All C shift security personnel are to report immediately back to security. Repeat. All C shift security personnel are to report immediately back to security."

Daisy stared into my eyes as we both panted, my baton trembling in the air before me as I stared at her, heart racing. This wasn't training, with Mom watching and other mares keeping an eye on me. If they came at me, it would be to kill the male beside me. Even if he was slated for retirement, he didn't have to die like that! Nopony should have to die like that. Period.

"Forget it. You can handle the little cock. I'll report you're bringing him in," Daisy said sourly as she touched her bleeding nose and then glared at me. "One day, I'm going to have your fucking head on a stick, Blackjack. Promise you that."

I swallowed, doing all I could to keep my magical focus on my baton. "Maybe, but not today." The metal rod wavered in the air, my heart thundering in my chest. Despite the fear in my gut, the baton remained upright.

She harrumphed and made her way up the stairs. Marmalade gave me one last confused, injured look before following her up. I felt bad for that. I doubted Marmalade would have ever hit anypony if Daisy hadn't hit him first. Once I felt that they weren't going to double back, I knelt and began to see to the stallion. Aside from his swelling bruises, the worst thing was his rear leg. Limbs really weren't supposed to bend that way. I swallowed as I looked around, feeling panic rising in my throat. I wasn't a medical pony. I couldn't do a healing spell to save a leg!

Then I spotted the olive filly watching us from down the hall. "You! I need a first aid kit, please! Right away!" She gasped, and for a moment I was sure she was going to run. "Please! Help me!" She swallowed, gave a nod, and disappeared.

"Why?" he asked softly, eyes clenched in pain. "Why did you stop them when they're just going to kill me anyway?"

"Because…" I felt lame and confused. "Because…I had to. All right? Now stop thinking about it and just hold on." He didn't say another word, instead simply looking at me with confused anger. I needed to keep him talking. "What's your name?"

He looked at me like I was an idiot, despite the pain in his eyes. "I'm P-21."

"That's your designation, right? What's your name?" I asked as I looked in the direction the filly had gone. It was more to stall for time than out of any real interest; after all, he was going to be retired soon.

"P-21 is my name," he replied softly, with a touch of irritation.

"Oh…" Males in 99 lived in medical and were identified on their breeding roster by their designations. P for earth ponies, U for unicorns. Don't ask me why the former wasn't E; I'd never gotten a straight answer. Maybe the Overmare who set up the system was a lot like the current one. 1 would be the newest buck on the breeding roster, 20 the oldest. Being 21 would mean that a male was to be retired. Somehow, though, I always figured they had their own names in their quarters. Names were like cutie marks; everypony had them, even males. Then again, looking at the breeding mark on his flank...

Funny…but when I was with a male, conversation was the last thing on my mind. Heck, this was the most conversation I could recall *ever* having with one.

I thought for a moment that maybe the filly had run off, but she

returned a minute later with a small yellow medical case marked with pink butterflies. Setting it next to me, she opened it up and I was at once glad to see that nopony had cleaned it out. The cases were supposed to stay stocked at all times, but sometimes ponies would steal the contents for one reason or another. There were two healing potions, small bottles of rich purple fluid capped in plastic. All a pony had to do was to bite hard on the end, crack the seal, and suck down the magical healing contents. As he gulped down the contents of the bottle, the bruises immediately began to disappear. His leg, however…"I'm going to have to set this," I said as I looked at the limb.

"You know how to do that?" the olive filly asked. P-21 just groaned as he clenched his eyes shut.

"Nope," I replied and took out the syringe of Med-X painkiller. I yanked the cap off the needle, jammed it into his leg, and squeezed the soft plastic tube to force the drugs into his system. 'For all your hurting ouchies'. Well, this was one doozy of an ouchie. He relaxed a bit as the drugs took effect. Then I looked at the leg, bit my lip, and hooked it with my forehooves and magic.

"On three…" I said as I looked at him. "One. Two…" And on two I pulled and pushed to bend his leg back into proper position. There was a pop from his knee like a gunshot as he screamed, the limb jerking back into place. The poor olive filly looked like she was going to be sick. I didn't think it was broken, exactly, but it sure didn't look good.

"Was that the plan?" he asked weakly.

"I never was good with waiting," I replied before shutting him up with the other healing potion. Unlike the beating, his knee didn't seem to heal much. When he tried to move it, he cried out despite the painkiller. I looked at the filly, "Is there a brace or anything in there?"

"Oh…um…maybe!" she said as she set aside a second syringe of Med-X and a container of Buck labeled with a muscular mare flexing. It was technically a class B controlled substance; I'd be scrubbing the bilges for a month if caught with it. Surprising to see it outside medical or security. Then she pulled out a black leg brace for broken limbs.

He jerked away from me as I grabbed his uninjured haunch to pull him around. "Oh, stop it, you baby," I muttered, but he simply closed his eyes and shook as I strapped the brace in place. Bucks

were so weird; would he have preferred hobbling up the stairs to medical with a bum leg? Finally, I moved away from him and shook a tablet of Buck out of the jar. “Here. Eat this,” I said as I pressed the carrot-flavored medicine to his lips.

Slowly, warily, he chewed it. I looked at the filly. “Thanks for your help.”

She gave me the first hint of a smile since I’d seen her. “Sure. I better get back to work before Rivets blows a seal or something.” She gave a little wave before running back the way she’d come.

The chems fortified him enough for him to get to his feet. “Why do you keep helping me?” he asked as I supported him enough to get his legs under him. “You’re just going to kill me…”

I lowered my gaze. “Well, I can’t stop that. But I can at least try and help you. It’s what security mares are supposed to do.”

* * *

Security during C shift was normally a place of quiet tedium. Reports for the next day had to be filed and firearms practice had to be carried out, but neither of those were what anypony would call exciting. As we finally reached the top of the stable, though… something felt very wrong. There were only ten security mares on C shift, including me, and, for the first time since I’d started working security a few years ago, we were all in here together. The seven other mares clustered around Daisy and Marmalade, talking in low voices as I limped in with P-21.

Worse, they all stopped talking as soon as I entered. Great. My mane itched fiercely as we walked slowly past them to the cells. I got the PipBuck key and magic-male-dot-maker-pen-thing from Mom’s desk drawer, then carefully removed his PipBuck and added the last white dot. I could wait until morning to notify medical, though. No need to rush with everything being weird. I took his PipBuck and closed the cell door just as the Overmare stalked out of her office.

Some ponies liked to say she looked like my little sister, though never in earshot of Mom, of course. The Overmare’s white hide was a little more dingy than mine, and her eyes were a lighter pinkish color. Her mom had once styled her mane in elaborate curls and dressed her up in fancy outfits, but, since her death a year ago, the Overmare had chopped her dove gray mane short and worn nothing

save her PipBuck, almost flaunting her Stable-Tec logo cutie mark.

I always assumed that being Overmare was a stressful condition. You had the whole stable on your shoulders. Despite that, the Overmare usually managed to keep a neat appearance. Now, though, she looked like hell; her eyes were bloodshot with huge bags beneath them, her mane resembled tangled wool, and she smelled. But there was one thing above and beyond all that which made my blood run cold: she was smiling.

When she saw P-21 and me, her smile only widened. “Oh…you found my trick pony!” she said, clapping her hooves together in glee. Her trick pony? P-21 stared straight ahead, his eyes unfocused pinpricks as she walked up to the bars. “Oh we’re going to have so much fun. Oh yes we are. Yes we are. You’re going to be mine forever. Yes you are.”

I glanced at the other security mares. Not one looked back at me. The Overmare suddenly seemed to remember I was there and glared at me. “So. Have a nice time in the bottom levels? Have a nice meeting with Rivets?”

“I…wasn’t meeting with Rivets,” I said, trying to look more clueless than usual.

“Lies,” the Overmare hissed. And then went back to smiling. “But that doesn’t matter. Not anymore. This is my stable. Mine. And I’m not going to let that gray nag run it any longer. It’s mine!” she declared as she she looked out the window to the atrium.

I caught P-21’s look. He was glancing at my PipBuck, then his… then mine…then his…

Huh?

He swallowed and mouthed the word, ‘copy’.

I glanced at the Overmare as she addressed the others, thanking them for their loyalty and devotion. Once more, I’d seemed to have slipped her mind. I quickly connected the two PipBucks with a cable. I hit the ‘Copy All Files’ button and dumped the data into an evidence file. I might not be able to manage a security spell to save my life, but I could at least move bulk files from A to B using the clearly labeled button for it. In my E.F.S., I saw the progress bar slowly fill.

“Is that his PipBuck?” the Overmare asked with a snap.

“Um…yes,” I said lamely as I cuddled it in my hooves, hoping she didn’t see the connection.

“Give it to me,” she replied imperiously.

“Um…certainly,” I asked, wondering how I could stall as the little bar filled up. “What for?”

“That is stable security business,” she replied in a low, dangerous voice.

Almost done. “Aren’t I in stable security?”

Her lips turned up in a nasty smile. “I don’t know. Aren’t you? Why don’t you tell me where Rivets and thirty other maintenance mares are hiding? Do they have weapons? Are they planning on sabotaging my stable?”

“I…don’t know?” I muttered lamely.

“Lies,” she hissed, and her magic reached out and grabbed his PipBuck from my grasp just before the files finished transferring. A big error message flashed across my vision. She tossed it to Marmalade. “Make sure everything on there gets deleted. I don’t want anything going wrong,” she said as she trotted to the armory door and opened it with her PipBuck. “Everypony get armed.” And then she looked right at me. “Except for you.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as Daisy came up and shoved me hard into the cell with P-21. The PipBuck key fell out of the pocket I'd stuffed it into and clattered to the floor, making me wince; if it was damaged, I'd get another speech from Mom about taking care of our tools.

“Taking back the stable,” the Overmare said with a satisfied smile as everypony else armed themselves with shotguns and security barding.

“With nine security ponies?” I gaped.

“I can’t be sure of your mother. I’ve ordered Rivets arrested several times, and she always gets in my way.” Because without Rivets, the stable was doomed. “I don’t know who I can trust on the A and B shifts. Who will side with me and who won’t.” She smirked as she looked at Daisy. “Fortunately, some ponies have proven themselves far more loyal. So you just sit tight. This will all be over in a few hours.”

After that, the ten of them marched out of security. Daisy looked back at me with a decidedly nasty grin. Why’d I suddenly feel like P-21 wasn’t the only pony in deep in the recycler?

* * *

Whatever they were doing, they were certainly taking their time. I

was left in one corner while P-21 sat silent as a blue statue in the center of the cell. I looked at the diminutive pony; there was something vaguely familiar about him, but I felt that way about half the stable.

All I knew was I needed to get out of here and…what? Tell Mom? Would she actually stand against the Overmare? I wanted to say yes, but the more I thought about it, the less certain I was. She'd never countermanded the Overmare unless she had some clear evidence that what the Overmare was doing would endanger the stable. She always put the stable first. Always.

That left me locked up with a buck who wouldn't say two words to me, flipping through all of P-21's files trying to find something… anything…that I could use for when Mom got here at the start of A shift. Unfortunately, the broken connection had given me a whole slew of static and corrupted files.

"Do you know what she's doing?" I asked for the umpteenth time. But he just looked at me and then looked away again. Given he was set to be retired in the morning…unless the Overmare did what she was planning…whatever that was? "Arrrrgh, why couldn't they do this to a smart pony!?" I insisted, getting a small smile for my trouble. No answers, though.

His breeding queue for the last few months had been booked almost solid by the Overmare, and then…Duct Tape? No mare ever got exclusive access to a buck like that. I glanced at him and stumbled across an intact audio file. I didn't have anything better to do, so I played the intact section.

It crackled once and then began to play the noises of two ponies bumping flanks. I felt my mane crawl as I heard the Overmare's joyous shrieks and a male's grunts of…something. Then her door chimed, and a moment later a mare asked, "Overmare? You wanted to…oh…my…"

The sounds of coupling trailed off, and the Overmare grunted, "You're early, Duct Tape." There was a strange wet noise I didn't even want to imagine and the sounds of belabored male breathing.

"I…I didn't want to be late," she said in a worried voice. "Is he…is everything all right?"

"Tisk, it's nothing serious. He's such a good little pony," the Overmare said in tones that made my mane crawl. "Now, were you successful?"

"I…ah…I…did as you asked. I've a list of…of everything you need

for it," Duct Tape said in a little, timid voice. "But really, this is something you should talk to Rivets--"

"No! No, thank you. Rivets has so much going on that I wouldn't want to trouble her." The Overmare continued smoothly, "The question is, will you be able to carry out the repairs?"

"Me?"

"Yes, Duct Tape. You. This is a special project for the wellbeing of the entire stable. You're the only maintenance mare on C shift I can trust to carry this out…with care. After all, I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise."

I didn't have any trouble imagining the mousy gray mare blinking at the word 'surprise'. We didn't know each other well; I think I scared her just by being in security, but I remembered that she always liked nice surprises. "I…but…I mean…I suppose I could, but--"

"Excellent. Excellent. I can't tell you how relieved I am to find a mare willing and able to help the stable." Then the Overmare hmmmed softly. "You deserve something special for all your hard work!"

"I…don't think so. I mean…um…shouldn't we get him to medical?" Duct Tape said in clear worry.

The Overmare didn't answer for a second. "You like this buck?"

"Well…I suppose. He helped me with Scotch, after all," she replied in far softer and warmer tones than 'suppose'.

"I see. I see. He is a gem of a pony. Wonderful technique. Truly," she said matter-of-factly. "If you're doing such excellent work for me, I see no reason not to put a word in with medical. You might be able to spend a lot more time with him."

"Really?" There was no missing the eagerness in Duct Tape's voice.

"Really. Provided you keep it from Rivets and everypony. This is a critical project. Without it, I fear, the stable will not survive."

"I…well…I mean…that might be very…nice…I'll give it my best! For... for the stable, of course." Oh Goddesses, I could practically hear her blushing. The Overmare's titter offset the warm and cozy feeling.

"Good. Everything you need will be provided for--" and with those last words from the Overmare, everything dissolved into static. I thought about that. If I hadn't just seen the Overmare…ugh, but that wasn't enough!

The Overmare's position could not be challenged at any time.

Period. That was the law. A stupid-ass law, but my mom always honored the law. Sometimes she seemed a little neurotic about it, actually, and a sneaky conversation between the Overmare and a dead maintenance mare didn't seem like anything that would get her to violate the law. It would have to be something big. Damn big.

I wished I could just tell my mom things, but there was always a line. She would be my mom until a point was reached, and from then on she was firmly 'Head of Security'. And that always came first.

I glanced at the silent blue buck. "It sounds like Duct Tape was fond of you."

"She was fond of anypony who gave her love and attention. It's why she had her foal," he replied quietly. "They didn't even need to force her. I was just bait to shut her up while the Overmare worked."

"There's something important on here, isn't there?" I said as I waved my PipBuck at him. "She knew you had something, didn't she? That's why she made sure to have it erased." He grit his teeth, closing his eyes; I imagined he wasn't feeling too good right now with the Med-X wearing off. "Help me!" I finally exploded at him. "Why won't you help 99?"

"To hell with you, this stable, and everypony in it!" he shouted back at me, his eyes blazing as he looked for a moment like he wanted to attack me. Then he slowly relaxed, fighting for calm, "My whole life, you mares have fucked me. Now you're getting fucked by your own. It's nothing less than what you deserve."

I blinked at him in shock. "How can you say that? This stable is your home! We're your family. We're all that's left in Equestria!" He gave me a sharp, angry look. I couldn't believe how selfish he was being! "If that's how you feel, then why tell me to copy the files at all? Why not just let her destroy them?" His angry eyes looked away. Slowly, I approached him, and he winced as he backed away into the corner. His eyes kept twitching from mine to the floor and back again; it was annoying! "Look. I'm sorry the rules are what they are. If I could just let you go, I would. But I can't. If you know what she's doing or what's going on... something I can bring to the head of security…then help me."

He clenched his eyes shut. "If I help you…you have to help me." He looked at me again with a ferocious glare. "You have to let me

leave this place," he said in slow, even tones of carefully measured control. "Even if I die outside in ten seconds, at least it will be ten seconds free." What, he wanted to die outside rather than be retired? Ooookay…

"I…if there's any way I can…I will." I nodded. He stared back at me, and I gave him the most sincere smile I could. Finally, he nodded as well. "Sweet. It's a plan," I said as I clopped my hooves together in glee. Okay, my only ally at the moment was a reluctant, wounded, pissy male, but I'd take what I could get.

He stood, then lifted his tail, carefully pulled out a bobby pin, and extracted a small screwdriver from his…body cavity. I blinked, realizing that I'd botched search protocols. "Listen to the last recording I made with Duct Tape," he said as he walked to the lock, wiped off the screwdriver, stuck it into the lock with his hooves, fed the pin in with his teeth, and began wiggling them around. So that was how he'd gotten into the supply room. I wondered what else he'd broken into, or out of. Also…ew.

I flipped through the files, looking at the tags and scanning for 'DT'. I might not be able to do magic to save my life, but I only slept through half my PipBuck training (in my defense, it was the boring half). Finally, I found the last file tagged DT; it was dated a few weeks ago.

It began, as I expected, with the sound of slapping flanks. I blushed…listening to Duct Tape doing it was different than listening to the Overmare. She actually sounded like she really liked it. Funny, I never expected her to be so…loud. Afterwards, they settled down into the little kisses and nuzzles. Then her soft sigh. "This has been so wonderful. It feels like a dream come true. The Overmare's been so wonderful lately."

P-21 said nothing right away, but then muttered in a low, flat voice, "Yeah. She can be nice…sometimes." From the way he said it, I expected that 'sometimes' meant 'the times when she wanted to get something from somepony'.

Duct Tape gave a little giggle. "I was talking about you to her the other day, P-20. She says that, when her plan is over, you can stay with me forever. You can be my…my…what was it again? Oh yes… husband. We can be the first ponies married in 99 since…you know…the bad thing happened." That had to be the Incident she was talking about.

P-21's response was a monosyllabic 'mmmm'.

“And we can have another foal together. Or two. Because once we’re out, we won’t need the quotas.”

“What?” P-21 said softly. “Out of what?”

Duct Tape cussed softly under her breath and then sighed. “Well…I guess you won’t tell anypony.” She gave a little giggle, but P-21 remained silent as Duct Tape went on. “The Overmare has gotten in contact with Stable-Tec! The outside is safe and clean and we’re all going to be able to leave the stable soon!” She gave another joyous giggle. “In fact, she’s getting a broadcast from Stable-Tec right now!”

What the fuck?

Stable-Tec built Stable 99 and set up the rules and the Overmare. Going outside? But every day, the stable broadcasts told us that the outside was a death trap.

“How? The door to the outside was sealed after the Incident…” he muttered softly.

“Well, just because it was sealed once doesn’t mean it can’t be unsealed. You know all the parts that the Overmare is inventorying? Well…I fixed the door! I even programmed the Overmare a special code to open and close it. See?” I heard the sound of a PipBuck beeping.

“And she said that the outside is safe?”

“Mhmm! I even took a little peek myself. I think it’s…what did Text call it…winter? It was all cloudy…but I saw trees. They didn’t have any leaves, but they were trees!” I couldn’t imagine a tree… not really. Trees were pictures in books, so I could only picture grainy green blotches as far as the eye could see. “You could survive out there. We all can. We don’t have to stay here anymore.”

“But…why keep the secret? If the door is open and it’s safe outside…”

“Well, Stable-Tec is afraid that all the ponies in here will freak out. The Overmare wants to avoid a panic, so she’s only told a few ponies. I don’t even think Gin Rummy knows. Stable-Tec says they need a special data file from the stable that will tell them how we’ve been doing the last two centuries. EC-1101. So she’s had me extracting it from the system. It’s a doozy of a file, and buried pretty deep.”

There wasn’t a response from P-21. Then she said softly, “I thought you’d be happy.”

“What? Oh…I…it’s just a lot to take in,” he said quietly. Then he

said softly, “Duct…do you trust the Overmare?”

“Of course! We all must trust the Overmare. She’s our protector and our guardian. We’d be lost without her,” she said in rote fashion like half the mares in 99. Of course, I’d say the same, but I’d be thinking sarcastic thoughts while I did.

P-21 was quiet for a minute, then said softly, “Don’t trust her. Not for a second.”

“What? How--”

“You remember how you saw me in her office?”

“I…” she trailed off.

“Don’t trust her. You’ve been…nice. One of three. And so I’m telling you…don’t trust her. Protect yourself. Protect your filly.”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “I…I suppose I could throw an encryption on it. Something she can’t crack till she promises to let us out…” she mulled softly. “Maybe make the password that name you liked so much…”

“Huh? Which name?” But she was going on about algorhyming or something, and a few seconds later the recording cut off.

Stable-Tec! Going outside! This was huge! Epic! A real game changer! With Stable-Tec here, all the Overmare and Rivets’s ponyshit didn’t matter. Maybe I wouldn’t have to be security anymore. Maybe…

Don’t trust the Overmare. That was what P-21 had said, and that was the look in his eye right now as he worked on picking the lock on the door. And suddenly, I remembered an old pony saying: if something sounds too good to be true…it probably is. If the Overmare were serious about this, she would have told Mom.

She’s getting a broadcast right now…I glanced at my PipBuck. There were dozens of radio channels on it, but only six were used by the stable. I clicked to security, but it was dead during C shift. Then to maintenance and the dry chatter about a recycling pump malfunctioning in the bilges and that Scotch Tape should get right on it. Service was dead since the cafeteria and food recycling were shut down during curfew. Medical just had the automated message about locating P-21 for retirement. Recreation had the regular looping brass band and glory to the Overmare. Education had a dry recording about how Stable-Tec had placed the Overmare for our protection…which would be suspicious if I hadn’t heard it a million times.

Then I clicked over to the next channel. Static. The next…and the

next…and next…

"Beep be booop beep be beep boop bip beep…" suddenly streamed out of my PipBuck. I had no idea what it could be; some sort of PipBuck jabberese? It was faint, though, and with many little crackles and breaks in the signal. That meant that it was probably coming from outside the stable. It was so weak that I doubted the signal would be detectable on the lower levels even if a pony was bored enough to go flipping through the static. I recorded about a minute of it, hoping it would be enough.

That was it. I needed to get out of here. I needed to talk to Mom…

Except…would it be enough? Mom…I wanted to think that she'd believe me. That I'd be more than 'Blackjack the screwup'. That she'd take it seriously because it came from her 'little blank flank'. Or that she'd stay in 'security head' mode but accept the evidence I had…and would do something about the Overmare.

Then there was a soft click and the door to the cell opened. I gaped in astonishment as P-21 put the bobby pin back in his tail and… okay, closing mouth before it becomes an escape route for my stomach contents. "You did it. How…where did you learn that?"

"Have you ever spent a week with a bobby pin, a screwdriver, and nothing to do but wait for a mare to want to breed you?" he asked back. "I'm sure even you could figure it out eventually."

"Don't count on it. If I need a lock opened, I get a key," I countered as I pushed open the grate and trotted into the deserted security section. Oh, key; reasoning that I might as well not make things worse, I scooped up the PipBuck key and pen-thing and put them back in the drawer. Right, back to the Overmare going crazy. I could try and get Mom on the radio, but I knew Daisy and the others would be listening to that channel. Everypony else would be asleep or under curfew. "Look. I need to get down to tell Gin Rummy about this." Then I looked down the stairs…I also needed a gun.

Goddesses, was I really thinking of shooting security ponies? Even Daisy…the thought of such a thing made my stomach churn. No crime was worse than murder in the stable. Killing another mare was robbing the stable of somepony needed to keep everypony alive! But if the Overmare was up to something…I trotted to the armory door and hoped I wasn't going to set off an alarm or something. Normally Brandybuck would be stationed outside it during C shift, but she'd left with the others. "Can you open this?"

He glanced at it and then moved over to the terminal next to it. "Um…maybe? With some time?" Unlock the door with the terminal? He caught my surprised look and rolled his eyes. "Look, don't you have a mare to warn?"

Right. Right. He was a smart pony who knew about locks and terminals and, despite being a male, probably a lot of other things I didn't. Great, even the *males* were better than me. Enough of that! Now was *definitely* not the time for self-pity. "Okay. I'll be right back." Oh, how I hoped I'd be right back with Mom and all of A and B shifts behind me.

I picked my way down to the atrium and heard the Overmare and Daisy's voices raised in argument, but with the echoes and distance I couldn't make out specifics. I crept across the wide open space, trying to use the reinforcing columns as cover. Then Marmalade glanced back across the atrium at me. She blinked, then gave a simple little smile and a little wave of her hoof. Smiling slackly, I returned it and nipped into the cafeteria before anypony else noticed. My heart hammered in my chest, and I didn't dare glance back towards the tiny chamber off the atrium. I didn't know what the Overmare was planning, just that it was time for the shots to be called by a smarter pony than me!

I scrambled down the stairs past the medical clinic, school, and other support rooms. I was in such a hurry that I smacked my head on the door to the living quarters before it fully recessed into the ceiling. Eyes watering, I rubbed my noggin and clenched my teeth. "Mom! Moooom!" I shouted as I raced to her room. Then I saw that her bed was still neatly made, and for a moment I felt my heart stop. She wasn't here? Why wouldn't she be here? She was always here!

Except now. I sat hard on my rump, thumping my head with a hoof and not helping my headache at all. "Think, Blackjack. Think think think!" Unfortunately, saying it didn't really help my brain any. Her tag! I punched it into my PipBuck and brought up my EFS. Then I turned in a circle, looking for the little arrowhead.

Nothing.

I screamed a little in frustration, beating my hooves in front of me! Of all the times for her to disappear! She could be blocking her tag. The head of security could do that, I think. Or she might be somewhere in the stable where she couldn't be traced. Oh…what if something happened to her?

All that didn't mean anything. The Overmare was doing something. I needed to know what. I needed to know what all those signals the Overmare received meant. I needed a smarter pony that actually knew something about PipBucks.

Well…I'd been looking for an excuse to bug Midnight in her quarters for months. Looked like I finally had it! I stopped only long enough to write a note; 'Overmare up to something. Stable in danger. Gone to Midnight's! BJ.' Then I was hurrying down the residential quarters to Midnight's.

Being a security mare, I had certain privileges. Like being able to override most residential door locks with my PipBuck when the stable was in danger and I didn't have time to knock.

I wish I'd knocked. Actually, I wished I knew another mare in data systems I could go to.

The sight of pink U-10 huffing and rutting away froze me in my tracks. Oh, yeah…she was on the breeding queue now, wasn't she? I blinked and tilted my head. U-10 certainly went at it with enthusiasm…ugh! What was I doing! "Midnight…" I muttered as she gave a little whinny. "Midnight." They still slapped flanks. I rolled my eyes; for the love of Celestia…"Midnight!" I shouted.

She shrieked as he finally stopped ploughing her plot and the two gawked at me. The pink buck pointed at me in confusion and Midnight's pupils constricted. "B…Blackjack?"

U-10 pointed his hoof at me. "I didn't know I was scheduled for a double," he said as he checked his PipBuck.

"Midnight, I need your help," I said as I approached her bed. Unlike my room, she kept hers spotless. Her terminal and workstation were both sparkling clean.

"Get out!" she shrieked and charged me, hammering at me with her hooves. "Of all the times to come to me for flank spank you choose now? Get out right now or I'll--"

I grabbed her shoulders and stared right in her eyes. "This isn't about flank spank, okay? It's not about sex of any kind. And if you help me I promise I will never try to get under your tail again, all right?"

She closed her mouth, looking annoyed, then troubled, then a little pouty. "Alright. What do you need?"

"The Overmare is getting a signal from outside the stable," I explained as I found the recording on my PipBuck. "I need to know what it's saying." Playing the odd string of beeps and boops seemed

to finally convince her I was serious.

She gave me one last long glance and then sighed, trotting to her workstation. “You are going to owe me so much for this, Blackjack,” she muttered as she activated her terminal, her horn’s magic pressing keys infinitely faster than I could. She attached a cable to my PipBuck. U-10 hummed to himself as he stood patiently off to the side by the door, looking over Midnight’s knickknacks. Midnight’s roommate was nowhere to be seen; no surprise. I knew I wouldn’t want to be around another mare on the queue…Probably.

“It’s a Stable-Tec transmission code all right. Old one, too. None of our stable security modifications,” Midnight said softly as she worked. Time was crawling by, and I kept swapping my tag back and forth. Mom was off the system. Daisy was... by the main entrance, I thought. So was the Overmare. Now Daisy was moving…back to security? My ears twitched as I thought I heard… something. One benefit of life in Stable 99 was that the quarters were nearly soundproofed. “Shouldn’t be hard to clean it up,” she said as she manipulated the file in her terminal. “And…done!” she said triumphantly. Then she frowned. “Wait…it’s a text file.”

I blinked, leaning in to make sure I didn’t mistake it: *Stable-Tec security forces incoming tonight, 0100 hours. Have EC-1101 prepared for extraction. You’re doing the right thing, Overmare. You’ll be getting control of your stable back. Deus.*

“Stable-Tec wants that program? Why?” Midnight blinked. “We haven’t removed the encryption on it yet!”

“I have no idea,” I said with a sigh. “Where is this EC-1101?” Wait…forget the file.

“In the stable’s communication maneframe; you can access it in Maintenance One outside the Overmare’s office. Since we couldn’t break its encryption, I had it bundled for transfer to a PipBuck. It’s a weird file. I had to package it in a permanent rewrite protocol,” she said in a rush. My ears twitched again at a distant sound. What was that noise and why was my mane crawling? She must have taken my look for confusion, because she simplified herself for me. “Once you put that file on your PipBuck, there’s no way to take it off. It’ll be permanently etched into a PipBuck’s data matrix.”

I looked at her. She was still talking about the file? I looked at my PipBuck. One of the most commonly used features was the chronometer. The time? 0122.

There was a beep of an override on the door, and it hissed open.

U-10 smiled genially as he turned to face the door beside him. There were five hundred ponies in Stable 99. I might not know them all by name or even quite all of them by sight, but looking at the mare in the doorway, there was no possible way that she could have been from our stable. Her mottled hide was a stained and blemished yellow decorated with scars and bite marks. The whites of her eyes were stained a solid piss yellow. Her mane had been pulled into bloody spikes. She wore barding made of strips of leather and tires and decorated with countless nails jutting out. Her reeking brown teeth curled in a grin of pure glee.

And if any of us had the slightest doubt remaining, she blew off U-10's head with the sawed-off single-barreled shotgun clenched in her jaws. Bits of blood, bone, and brains splattered over both of us as the pink unicorn dropped in a thrashing heap. The mare spat out the gun, casually reloading it as she giggled. "Bang…yer dead…" she slurred around a bloody tongue; it looked…chewed.

Midnight stood there stunned and wetting herself. I was not far from that state myself, but, unlike her, I was security. The fear and horror I felt were unceremoniously shoved into the closet in the back of my brain where I put all the things I didn't want to think about, leaving me with enough wits to telekinetically pull out my baton just as the mare snapped the shotgun closed. With a crack, the glowing metal rod tore the bite grip from her rotten teeth and, from the sound of it, probably broke the firearm.

Unlike Midnight, this mare wasted no time in counterattacking. Rearing up, she slammed me to the ground next to U-10's body with enough force to make me see stars. The baton went bouncing away somewhere out of sight. Then she was on top of me, drawing a rusty carving knife from a sheath at her shoulder. She jabbed the dull tip into the neck of my security barding, twisting her head back and forth as she tried to work it through the tough fabric and into my throat. I glanced at the slain unicorn beside me and at the paralyzed Midnight who'd be next.

I looked down at that knife and applied all my magic to the blade, fighting to twist it away. The rusty metal shook as the mare bit down even more tightly. Then the rusty knife snapped in two and I reversed the tip. With a telekinetic shove, I rammed the sharp metal as deep into her throat as I could. Her yellow eyes shot wide as her sliced throat spurted blood over my chest and neck, smearing my barding with her gore. Finally, something gave inside the

nightmarish mare, and she slumped limply against me.

I gasped, my heart hammering as I kicked my way clear. I'd just killed a pony…a diseased and demented pony, but a pony nonetheless. Before I let that train of thought go any further, I wrestled it into that closet with the rest of the things I didn't need in my head right now. Because right now, Midnight was going into shock as she stared at the corpses in her quarters. I looked at the bloody PipBuck on the murderess's foreleg; it was from Stable 99, and from the gore covering most of it, I doubted it had been removed or donned with a key.

"#340," I said softly. "Snowdrop." A loyal, quiet security mare who'd always been cool to me. One of the nine that'd been with the Overmare.

"You!" rasped a pony from the door, a unicorn floating a rusty razor blade in front of her. I found something better…I hoped…in the rusty twenty gauge shotgun dropped by the earth pony I'd just killed. I didn't even need to use the mouthgrip. I slipped into S.A.T.S. as she charged, the blade slashing wildly in front of her, the world dropping to a crawl. In the spell, I could target her legs, body, or…

Time crawled forward, and the cone of lead blasted out the end of the shotgun. I watched with sickening clarity as the lead abraded her face. She screamed, slashing blindly, kicking and biting in a frenzy. I grabbed her with my hooves to hold her still, reversing the butt of the gun and bringing it crashing down on her skull. Again. Again. Then two things broke: the butt of the gun and her skull. She flopped over limply, twitching spasmodically as I fought furiously to keep my focus. Don't think beyond right now. That closet was getting pretty full, though.

Midnight was making little screams in her throat and I stood, blocking the sight of the bodies. Two…had I really just killed two? No. Don't think about it. I should be good at that. "Midnight…" I said sternly, staring into her pinprick eyes. "Midnight!" I shouted, and because I'm not a medical pony and couldn't think of anything else to do, I smacked her hard across the face. That snapped her out enough to look at me. "The stable is being invaded. You've got to find security ponies and my mom and get everypony else down into the maintenance tunnels. Find Rivets. She can take care of everypony. Okay?"

"Find security…get everypony down below…" she muttered

weakly and then nodded. “What are you going to do?”

That was a very good question. Fortunately, there was a simple answer as I found my baton and levitated it up. “Well…guess I’ll thump ‘em with my stick.” Goddesses, it must have sounded sick to crack jokes now, but I had to ignore everything I’d stuck in the back of my head.

Of course, as good as my stick was, a gun was better. Sadly, the shotgun was out of commission; the broken butt had bent and unseated the breech. That was probably for the best, though; I'd been lucky it hadn't blown up in my face. There was an easy way to tell which way the raiders had come: they’d left a trail of blood from residential door to residential door all the way down the hall. Since there wasn’t any blood past Midnight’s, I hoped it was clear. “Go, Midnight. Go,” I urged as I made my way carefully down the hall, trying to be as quiet as possible.

I didn’t understand these ponies, if they really were ponies and not some sort of mutant pony-shaped predators of some sort. They reeked. They seemed to revel in bloodshed. I had no idea how they could have penetrated the stable... unless they’d come in when the Overmare opened the door.

Inside one room, I saw a red bar moving towards the door, and I slipped into S.A.T.S. the second her head was in view. My glowing baton crushed her windpipe in a single lucky hit. Her yellow eyes bulged and rolled as she dropped a .38 revolver from her mouth; hey, I might have slept through two thirds of my classes and Textbook’s lectures, but I paid attention to my firearms training! My backswing smashed her temple, sending her slumping against the door frame.

She was so dirty I couldn’t tell what color she had been originally. She’d mutilated her own cutie mark. I hesitated as I pointed the baton at her. “Who are you?” I asked as she choked, coughed, and inexplicably started to giggle between gasps as she looked at me... and insanely went for the gun! I kicked it away. “Who are you? Why are you here?”

Then I saw the blood smeared over her grimy lips and took my eyes off her to look into the room she’d been in. Air Duct and her filly Vent were laying still on the floor…but the smears of blood… holes chewed in the blue filly’s side…the blood splashed about. The psychotic mare finally gasped one word, “Yummy!” Then she lunged, grabbing my leg and trying to bite through my security

barding!

"You! Sick! Fucker!" I yelled, bringing the baton down with each word. Her skull finally cracked, blood leaking from her orifices, and with a sigh she went still.

Okay…murderous? I got that. Crazy I could deal with, too. But how the fuck did these ponies get into the habit of eating other ponies?! I looked at Vent…had she been dead when…

Oh, puking now. I couldn't help myself, my lunch coming up in the doorway. When I finished, I did all I could to lock that thought in with the others and push a mental dresser against that closet door in the back of my mind. I could freak out and deal with this later. I checked the revolver. Four rounds…and six more on the earth pony mare.

Three down…how many to go? There was an awful lot of red in my E.F.S. as I made my way towards the stairs to the Atrium.

"I can't stand these sick fuckers," a buck said from the stairs above me. That it was a buck made me guess that they weren't quite the same ponies as before. "Murdering, psychopathic rapists the lot of 'em." Maybe there was the possibility of negotiation?

"Look at it this way: they'll exhaust themselves killing every last motherfucking pony in here, and then we can get rid of them easily," a mare answered, snuffing any thoughts of working out a deal before continuing callously, "Deus gets that program he wants so desperately. My boss is happy. The Reapers are happy. Everypony wins." Except my damned stable, you mule.

"Makes me wonder what's so damned special about it," the buck muttered as I crept up the stairs. "Deus just grabs a dozen of us at random from the arena, trots us out here, fetches these nutjob raiders, and waits for the stupid cunt to open the door?"

"It's smart. He knows a Flash Filly like me would never work with a Halfheart Gang loser like you to screw him. This way, everypony gets their caps and everypony's happy," the mare said matter-of-factly. I could make out her head now, and I pointed the rusty .38 revolver at it. I licked my lips and swallowed. All I had to do was pull the trigger. Just pull the trigger…

But she wasn't like the other murderers. She seemed sane, if callous and wicked. Somehow, I had no doubt she would have the same hesitation if I were in her sights. But that was the difference. If I killed her…I tried to push myself. The pale mare was dirty and streaked with blood, her shaggy black mane smeared with gore and

some kind of grease. She had a necklace of cheap looking gemstones. She was a pony, a person. How could I just…just shoot her?

Then she glanced at me, and her eyes widened and then narrowed as she smiled. “Awww…stable pony’s got a piece. Bet she can’t fire it,” she said as she ducked her head to a leg holster and…drew a weird metal box with a mouthgrip? It didn’t matter, though; if she was pointing it at me, I doubted it was anything good. And from the look in her eyes, the pale earth pony was dead certain I wouldn’t fire back.

I wasn’t sure I could either.

The shot was luck. Pure luck. It caught her in the left eye and blew a bloody chunk out behind her left ear and over the buck. Sprayed with brain and skull, the brown stallion staggered back as the pale mare dropped to the floor, muscles writhing a moment before going still. The buck levitated a piece of sharpened rebar like a spear as I tried for another shot, but the revolver gave an unhealthy ping of rust and stopped, hammer drawn back.

I ducked under the deadly spur of metal and scrambled for the mare’s strange box…weapon…thing! There wasn’t even a trigger! What was this thing supposed to do? “Never seen a beam gun before?” A what gun? Then the metal was whipping towards me again and I barely brought the beam thingy up in time to block the tip. There was a flash, a fizzle, and the metal spur continued on with no hesitation right into my flesh.

I screamed as the sharpened steel caught me above my collar and ripped a hoof-long tear along the side of my neck. Again it was only luck that protected me as I fell back, tumbling down the stairs as my own blood smeared my barding and spattered the steps. I landed on my back as the scraggly brown buck descended with the crude but effective weapon ready to spear me like a radroach.

“Stupid soft stable ponies…” he said as he raised the sharpened bar. I watched, unable to move, sure I was about to die.

Then there was the resounding sound of a gunshot in the halls, and a hoof-sized hole appeared in his chest. His eyes popped wide as he jerked back, staring down the hall past me.

“Nopony kills ponies in my stable,” Mom said firmly, her sidearm floating precisely over her eye. As her second bullet caught him in the face and tore off half his head, I doubted that she even needed S.A.T.S.

I stared at his body as all those thoughts I'd stuffed into that mental closet started to tear down the door. My throat began to work as I stared at the draining holes in his head. I had to do something…something…scream…vomit…wet myself…curl up in a ball sucking my hoof till this was all over. Something!

"Blackjack." Mom's voice cut through all that, and I tore myself away from the blown-open corpse. "We still have a stable to save." Her calm words were a layer of concrete across the closet door in my mind. As much as I'd love to fall apart, I couldn't. Not now. Not in front of her. Even if I was the worst security pony in Equestria, my stable was in danger.

"Yeah. Sure…" I said as I stood on my hooves, and in her eyes I saw her overwhelming pride. It helped reinforce that concrete. "So…is there a plan?" A plan would be nice, so long as it wasn't my plan.

"I still don't know what's going on or how these…things…got in here," she said as she checked her sidearm. "Somepony taught them the basics of how to use PipBucks. They went right for security ponies' quarters. I'm just glad they didn't get far." Distracted by all the foals to slaughter. Damn it, if I'd just been faster I could have… done…done something!

"Yeah, but how'd they get them on?" They would have had to…oh, don't think about that. "Okay, well, they're here because the Overmare let them in." And in that comment I saw several fuses blown in my mom's mind. "I'm pretty sure she wanted to use them to take on Rivets."

"Take on Rivets? Rivets is the head of maintenance!"

"Well, tell it to the little psycho when we find her," I countered. "She got Duct Tape to open the hatch and find something these invaders wanted. These ponies didn't just come here to kill. They came here for some program the Overmare found in the stable."

"A program?" my mother asked with a frown. "Why don't they just take it and leave?"

"'Cause they're evil?" I suggested, looking up the stairs towards the atrium. She didn't laugh, but she did give me a ghost of a smile. "If I can get to the terminal in Maintenance One, I can put it on my PipBuck and then…do…something." Something to get them to leave the stable, but what? Throw it out the main hatch and close it behind them? No…that wouldn't work!

"Ugh, why can't a smart pony figure this stuff out?" I whined as

Lock and Barrel, two A shift security mares, came up with batons out. For them to leave, the program would have to leave too. Somepony would have to take it out. “What if I took EC-1101 outside? They’d have to follow me then, wouldn’t they?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Blackjack. It’s certain death outside,” Mom retorted immediately.

“It’s pretty reliable death in here, Mom. Erm…I mean…Miss Head Security Mare…ma’am…” I fumbled, blushing a little. She swept me up in a hug. Okay, now I was blushing a lot. She quickly let me go, reddening herself. Mom never was very good with being Mom. Not that she was a bad mom, just…. Ugh! Why’d I have to get so many conflicting things going on in my brain right now?

Gin Rummy took point, going up to the atrium. As we advanced up the stairs, I heard a filly squeal. Harsh laughter filled the air as we reached the doorway. Carefully, we peeked around the corner. The invaders were on the far side of the atrium, right outside the door to the stable entry. At least a dozen mares were dead; from the smears of blood, they’d been dragged here from their quarters below. The door to security was clear.

“Come on. We can run for it!” Lock said eagerly, then without waiting jumped out the doorway. The blue mare was fast; in recreation, she could do a lap around the exercise grounds in under a minute. This was at most a hundred feet.

Thunder filled the atrium, and Lock exploded in bloody chunks. The wall behind her buckled. But despite all that, I didn’t stare at the heap of her remains.

I stared at where the thunder had come from.

From the midst of the staggered invaders rose…a thing. A thing of pony and metal. Hydraulics braced the metal plates attached to its hide as it stepped forward. For all its mass, it seemed to trot almost effortlessly. Red eyes stared at where Lock had been blown to pieces. Two huge guns pointed over its shoulders, cannons built into its body.

Then it slurred in a metallic sounding voice, “Cunt thought she was fast. Cunt was wrong!” The invaders laughed in agreement. “Now, watch that door. Might need to go get another batch of raiders.” Go get more? As long as that thing was here and the door open, why not? It could just keep sending in more of these killers. A half dozen moved forward, one of them wearing a bloody PipBuck.

“Hey! Red bars!” he crowed in glee. “These fuckin’ things are

great!"
"Cunts still got some fight in them! Cunts are fucked." And from the laughter of the others, I really couldn't disagree. We fell back.
"Now what?" Barrel asked, the green mare visibly shaking in fear.
"I'm open to suggestions," Mom said grimly.
I frowned, then looked back at the landing. "I've got an idea…"

* * *

This was a terrible idea…but it was mine and the only one we had. I'd shucked my security barding and was now putting on the ratty clothes of the unicorn mare. Our coloring was close, and Mom was blackening the red in my mane with grease from a maintenance closet. "Good thing your horn is so small, little Fishy," she said, finally past all her arguments about why this wouldn't work. Mom was lavender, Barrel was green…I was the only filly that looked close to the mare I'd killed.
"Mom, I'm about to pretend to be a psychopathic wild pony," I replied flatly. "Please don't call me that." The last thing I needed was that stupid name…and her talking about my horn. Which wasn't that small, anyway... it was just... compact.
"This is suicide," Barrel muttered as she smeared more dirt in my mane and tail.
"Then they won't expect it," I said.
"How are you going to get past their E.F.S.?" Barrel countered.
I rounded on her. "Barrel, do *you* want to do this?" The green mare looked like she wanted to crawl under her bed and cry. I knew I did. I looked at Mom. "How am I going to get from security to the entry, though? Folks will notice too soon if I just trot out past them."
"There's a passage from the Overmare's office to the entry chamber. The Overmare's grandmother used it to sneak out of her quarters after curfew," Mom said as she transferred a code to my PipBuck. "That should get you through. I doubt the Overmare even knows it exists." She sighed as she looked me in the eye. "Are you sure you want to do this?"
"I'm the only one who can," I replied evenly. It wasn't like there were countless pale security mares. The only other two were Daisy and Snowdrop. "So…if I make it…close up the stable as quick as you can. Heck, I'd reseal it if I were you. If that door opens again,

99 is doomed."

I floated the weird box gun into my holster and checked one more time in the mirror to make sure my horn was covered by matted mane. This wasn't even barding! It was…clothes. Rummaged together clothes to try and make a sort of intimidating outfit. I felt like a two bit trick pony. The only good thing was that it covered my cutie mark. There was no way I could mimic the two gold coins on the dead mare's rump.

Making my way back towards the atrium I heard a pony scream and somepony else cackle, "She bit it off!" I didn't have any time to speculate on who was biting what as I approached the door. Another pony yelled, "Here comes another one!"

"Don't fucking shoot!" I bawled as I stepped out. There were a whole lot of guns and eyes on me and I gave up any and all thought of shooting. Hell, I didn't even have a weapon. "It's me," I said, encouraged by the lack of gunfire. The feeling of pieces of Lock under my hooves was simultaneously trying to make me throw up again and giving me a really, *really* good reason not to do anything that might break my cover.

"Two Bit?" the buck wearing the bloody PipBuck said. "That you?"

"Of course, who the fuck do you think it is?" I countered, and my belligerent tone seemed to put him at a sullen ease.

"What the hell is going on down there? I thought the scum had taken out all their fighters," he said sourly.

"They got security ponies and are putting up a fight," I countered.

Then a metallic voice grated, "Then what are you doing up here, Cunt?"

I stared up at the metallic monster, and our eyes met. I heard a tiny whirr as its red, glowing eyes tracked my movements. "I…I…" I nearly died right there, because in that instant I almost forgot that I was supposed to be an earth pony. I ducked my head, bit the mouth guard, and pulled the damaged weapon from my holster. Apparently, something about that struck half the ponies as hilarious.

"Flasher lost her flash! Ha!" the buck wearing the PipBuck roared in glee. I wanted to balk. Instead, I glared over the mouth guard. But the metal monsterpony didn't find it funny.

With shocking speed it swatted the gun out of my mouth, and suddenly the only ponies laughing were the yellowed-eyed mangy ponies with their insane giggles. "Cunt doesn't have her gun. Cunt

is useless, then. Cunt should be fucked, huh, Cunt?" He placed an armor-plated hoof on the dropped weapon and leaned on it. The casing gave and flattened with a crunch. At the moment, I was pretty sure that I knew how it felt.

I suddenly became very aware of one part of him that wasn't mechanical. A part that I was fairly sure was going to be inside me in a few seconds. I became aware of a whimper and looked over at a prone white shape. The Overmare. One of the filthy, yellow-eyed ponies was pinning her down and raping her, her mouth and flanks bloody. The idea was utterly alien to me, and I did all I could to tear my eyes away and hide my horror. Mares might occasionally force another mare against her will, a class A crime, but for a buck to do that to a mare was…focus, Blackjack!

"I'm not useless," I answered as evenly as I could. "I heard one of these stable ponies talk about the program you want and where to get it. It's set for a one time transfer onto these PipBuck things."

He looked over at the Overmare. "So the little cunt wasn't lying."

"I told you," she sobbed as she lay like limp meat, blood streaking her muzzle and flanks alike. As much as I didn't want to get blown into pony pieces, I'd take it over that.

"I'll go get it for you," I said evenly.

His red glowing eyes drilled into me. "I'm getting bored, Cunt. Fifteen minutes, then I'll make my own door," he said with a nod at the huge cannons.

A brown unicorn buck stepped forward. "You can't, Deus! If you destroy the terminal, then Sanguine will *never* get the file!" This unicorn didn't fit in with the others. Despite the fact he wore the same dirty clothes, he still seemed cleaner. Healthier, though still scrawny. The PipBuck on his leg didn't look like it'd been stripped from another mare. Then I glanced at his flank: a blue male symbol with twenty-one dots beneath it.

A Stable 99 buck? How?

"I don't care. I want these cunts dead. Fucked and dead or dead and fucked, I don't care. This is taking too long!" he said almost in pain before he stared at me. "Fetch, Cunt! Kill the ones left up there and bring me the program! Do it now, Cunt!" Wow, Deus sure had a favorite word, didn't he?

"I should go with her. I should be the one who gets it," the brown unicorn whined. Now I recognized him. He'd been in my breeding queue once. The whimperer. U-21 now. I'd never signed up for him

again. I'd thought he'd been retired a month ago…

"I don't care who gets it! Get it!" he bellowed, and now seemed like the perfect time to run to security.

U-21 scrambled past me to get through the hatch first. "Okay…get the program…don't get killed…get the program…don't get killed…" he muttered.

I stopped him at the foot of the stairs, hearing banging from above. "What's going on up there?"

"What's going on? Those two security mares who escaped barricaded themselves inside! That's what." He stared at me in confusion. I felt a little stir of glee. And Deus, massive as he was, couldn't fit through the door and couldn't blast it bigger without risk of breaking the program.

"Daisy made it?" Of course she made it! She was too tough and mean to get killed by anypony!

"Daisy?" His eyes popped wide, and he reached up a hoof to brush my matted mane aside to uncover my lit-- my compact horn! "Blackjack!"

"That's me. How did you end up with--" But my attempts at interrogation were for naught as he opened his mouth wide to yell. I shoved my right hoof in his mouth. "Really sorry about this," I apologized, then swung my PipBuck hard. The reinforced casing smacked his head once, twice…thrice. Finally, he went down in a quaking ball; not concussed but too traumatized at the moment to bring shit down on me. "Like I said: really sorry." Unless he was involved in all this…

I ran up to the security level and heard the yelling and banging. There was a door that divided the Overmare's office, armory, and some utility rooms from detention, briefing, and the gun range. The door itself had been forced open, but Daisy had barricaded it with a desk. Now a huge red mare with a fire axe was chopping her way through it. Three more cheered her on, shouting encouragement as they either brandished their own weapons or giggled in glee. One dingy unicorn mare chewed on her own bloodied hoof as she rocked in place and fiddled with the security shotgun in her faltering magic glow. A second earth pony buck brandished an automatic pistol as he growled and spat cheers around the mouth grip. The last was another yellowed buck grinning in glee and anticipation and knocking a baseball bat between his forelegs as the red mare chopped again and again.

“Hey, can I see that?” I asked as I pointed a hoof at the shotgun and a grin at the mare.

The pupils of her yellowed eyes were pinpricks. Who the fuck gave this mare a gun? She was chewing on the end of her leg so much that I thought she was going to gnaw it right off. She gave a delighted giggle and pointed it at me. “See?” I nearly soiled myself as she pulled the trigger.

At least nopony had been dumb enough to give her ammunition. “Give me that!” I said as I grabbed the floating weapon with my hooves. Her magic was shit and collapsed as I tugged it from her grasp. “Where are the shells?” I asked the automatic-wielding buck. He arched a brow skeptically, looking at my empty holster. “It broke, okay!”

He snorted and tossed me a small bag of twenty gauge buckshot shells. My horn glowed as I loaded the rounds into the gun. He spat his pistol into his holster to speak. “Just make sure you keep it away from that psycho," he said, not taking his eyes off the barricade and waving a foreleg at the mare I'd taken the shotgun from. "Why the hell Deus brought them along, I’ll never know."

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“Who knows? Raider scum like her are all alike,” he muttered. “Once they get that way, they’re as good as dead.” He looked at me as I racked a shell into the chamber. “You know how to use that thing?” Then his eyes widened as he took in the glowing shotgun. “Wait…weren’t you…”

“Yep,” was all I replied. I looked him right in the eyes as I slipped into S.A.T.S. and realized what I was about to do. What I was really about to do. The sane raiders I’d killed had been attacking me, and she’d died more by accident than anything. But now, with time practically frozen, I looked into his eyes and deliberately toggled two shotgun blasts to the head. It was still self-defense. I was security and I was protecting my stable.

It didn’t make it any easier, but it did make it possible.

Time returned, moving as if in molasses. The Stable-Tec Assisted Targeting Spell slowly discharged, and I watched the cone of lead fan out in a narrow wedge of death. I watched his flesh pulverize and tear away around each pellet, his head deform, and blood and bone fly away behind him. The second shot repeated the devastation, and I watched in horrified fascination as his head detached completely and he dropped like a sack of meat.

I stood there for a second, staring in shock. I'd just decapitated a pony!

It was a second too long. With a scream, the mare with the bloody hoof launched herself at me as the buck with the baseball bat swung it wildly. The clothes I wore were little protection against the heavy impacts of the bat; sweet Celestia, he'd driven nails through the end! I cried out in pain as the rusty lengths pierced deep into my shoulder. This seemed to make the mare enter into a frenzy of biting and chewing, snapping at my neck as I tried to shove her away. The only upside was that, with the two crowding me, the mare with the fire axe couldn't chop me down. Unfortunately, she had the presence of mind to dive for the dropped automatic.

S.A.T.S. took a while to recharge, so in the meantime I backpedaled for the stairs, firing wildly at the maddened pair. One of the perks of a shotgun was that 'close' was good enough in tight quarters like this. The shotgun held five more shells, and I pumped them out as rapidly as I could, the buckshot peppering them with oozing wounds. It was nowhere near as effective as those first two shots, though; S.A.T.S.'s accuracy was truly terrifying. I was glad that none of these ponies seemed to have access to it or knew what it could do.

The buck went down with the fourth round, giggling even as foamy blood poured out of his mouth. The fifth shot missed the mare entirely, and she slammed her bloody hooves against me in a frenzy, cackling all the while. I saw the red mare pick up the dropped automatic pistol and turn towards me. "I don't have time for this!" I shouted, throwing my hooves around the frenzied mare's throat and twisting as my horn furiously scrambled to reload.

The pistol's nine millimeter rounds thumped into the mare with abandon; clearly, these psychotic mares were disposable. She didn't even seem to realize she was shot, but I certainly did as I felt the bite of one that travelled through my temporary shield. "Hugs," the mare rattled in my ear before she slowly slumped down out of my grasp.

Fortunately, I'd reloaded my weapon, and the red mare seemed to realize that shotgun trumped pistol and axe. I fired as rapidly as I could as she snatched her axe in her mouth and raced across into the briefing room. Reloading, I ran to the door. There were a few offices and detention through there. She could be--

Then there was a bang behind me, and ten red hot needles stabbed into my rump. Screw this plan! I was never ever going without barding again. I saw the honey yellow glow around the shotgun and cried out, “Marmalade! It’s Blackjack! Stop shooting me!” I could feel the burn of the pellets in my backside. Sweet Celestia, I’d never get shot again if I could help it!

I slumped as I heard the barricade being drawn back. The red bar wasn’t moving towards the door. Maybe she was waiting for help to arrive? It didn’t matter. In just a second, Daisy would--

--smash my rear legs out from under me, kick me on my back, and knock the wind out of me with a blow to my gut. Okay, not what I’d been expecting! I screamed as I rolled over onto my back just in time to block her next strike with the reinforced casing on my PipBuck. “Daisy. It’s me! Blackjack!” I coughed and sputtered.

She looked at me coolly, spitting out her baton and twirling it on its loop around her hoof. “I know. If we’re all about to die, at least I get the pleasure of finishing you off!” I stared up at her, and oddly, the word Deus was so fond of roared through my mind. My anger was enough to get a little more oomph from my horn, and I grabbed her baton, using the loop to twist her foreleg in and up. Overbalanced, she crashed forward on her side and I rose, pressing the shotgun to her face.

“I don’t have time for this,” I said, my heart thundering in my chest. The shotgun shook as my magical focus was rattled and I hoped that closet would stay sealed closed. “I know we got problems, but I have a plan to save the stable. So please cut the ponyshit, and you can just kill me when I get back.”

“Back?” Marmalade blinked slowly. She’d been badly beaten and had blood matted around her mouth. “You’re going somewhere?”

“Outside,” I said as I turned away from Daisy. I couldn’t kill her. I had a better chance of killing her by accident than intentionally.

“But you’ll die,” Marmalade said softly. “I don’t want you to go.”

I rose to my hooves, my backside really complaining as I limped to the door. “Really? Why?”

“‘Cause you’re my friend,” Marmalade said simply with her wide, vapid smile. “Why else do you think I fooled around with you all the time?” She levitated a trio of healing potions from a medical kit. “Here. I was gonna use ‘em, but you’re all shot up.”

I stared at her with a worried frown. Marmalade? Friend? She’d always been the slow pony in Daisy’s shadow. Too stupid to work

alone, so simple she was annoying…nopony I'd ever called a friend. I drank the potions, glad for the cooling, healing sensation on my hindquarters, and looked at the honey colored mare with unease. "Well…thank you, Marmalade." She smiled and gave a little nod.

Daisy shoved past me. "Yeah yeah yeah. Sunshine and hugs and all that horseshit," she said as she slammed the barricade back into place. Her angry scowl turned skeptical as she regarded me. "You're really leaving?" Was I about to faint, or did she really sound the tiniest bit concerned?

"The raiders are here for a program. I'm going to steal it and hope they all come chasing after me. Then Mom and you can retake the stable," I said with a little nod, stripping off the useless clothes. Marmalade gave a soft 'ooh' of comprehension and, without another word, shrugged out of her security barding and handed it over.

"P-21? Are you here?" I asked as I pulled it on. I gave Marmalade a grateful smile.

"That useless cock pony?" Daisy snorted.

"You called?" P-21 said dryly as he stepped out of the door to Maintenance One. There was an unmistakable smug look on his face at the shocked expression on Daisy's face. His eyes met mine and his smug expression disappeared. "You changed your mind. You're retiring me after all," he stated flatly as he glared at me.

Daisy chuckled in glee. "Now we're talking. Just hold still... " she said, taking a step towards P-21.

P-21 slowly limped backwards. "You never pass up a chance to break a male, do you?"

"Male? Pssh... I never miss a chance to break anypony... " Daisy said with a sharp grin. Okay, this nonsense needed to stop now!

I racked a shell into the shotgun, and Daisy turned to look at me. Had to be careful. I only had a dozen or so shells left and wasn't going to rob Marmalade. The armory door was still closed tight. Probably needed the Overmare's or Mom's personal codes to open it. I thought of the cornucopia of weapons stored for an Incident and thumped my hoof against the floor.

"Look, now really isn't the time," I said firmly. Okay, if I was being the voice of maturity, then Stable 99 was officially doomed. I looked at P-21. "The plan's changed a little. You're still getting out of here, but I'm going with you."

"Not happening. You're big. Noisy. Obnoxious," he stated flatly.

"Ugly. Oh, and fat," Daisy threw in.

"Really lazy…a bit of a letch…" Marmalade added. "And her horn's so tiny…" Hey!

"And female," he concluded in a tone of finality.

Okay. Didn't I have an ego? Oh, yeah, there it was. That mashed up thing on the floor. "Maybe, but I'm also the pony with the plan. Here it is. I get the program. I run out of here with all of them chasing me. Mom and the rest of security push them all out. Door gets sealed forever. If you think you can sneak past and make it outside on your own at any point in that plan, feel free. Otherwise, I'm going with you," I said as I thumped his chest. P-21 glared in return. Sweet Celestia, what was his problem?

"Fine," he finally muttered. "But after we're out, you're on your own."

Right. Probably for the best, anyway. "So, Midnight said that there was a program on the terminals up here. EC-1101. I need you to transfer it on my PipBuck." He nodded with a scowl and led me into the little closet dignified with the name of Maintenance One. There was barely enough room for both of us as he connected my PipBuck to the machines. I noticed Daisy following, walking a little stiffly. "What's the matter with you?"

She flushed furiously. "Go buck yourself, Blackjack."

"Sodomized," P-21 said simply. I was really glad that Daisy didn't have a shotgun at that moment. She did, however, launch herself at P-21 with the clear intention of smashing him into blue jelly. I was barely able to stop her. What, was he trying to get killed?

"How'd you know?" Marmalade asked curiously, but he just gave her a flat look and went back to work. "Rude."

I watched him work. "I wonder what it does."

"Opens a camera," Marmalade said, looking hopeful that she was being helpful. "Well, that's what they said it did."

What? I shook my head; this was Marmalade, after all. "Nevermind. Is it transferred?"

"Almost. And there's a whole bunch of Overmare files here I'm adding. Just in case…" I always thought it was cute how it looked like earth ponies were prancing on the keys with the tips of their hooves. Then he pushed one more button.

The stable around me vanished as my E.F.S. went crazy! "Whoa whoa whoa! Hey, what's going on!" Columns of numbers and diagrams and maps and -- what the hell was that supposed to be?! -- all flashed by one after the other. Then, as quickly as it began, it

ended. A tiny cursor appeared.

> Permanent transfer completed.

> EC-1101 transferred.

> Warning: unknown encryption detected.

> Warning: biomedical peripheral insufficient.

> Warning: navigational data unavailable.

> Warning: Equestrianet data connection not available.

> Please commence manual transmission.

Please what? I opened my mouth to see if a smart pony might have an explanation for what just happened, but at that moment there was a roar from the atrium followed by an explosion that shook my teeth. I suspected that Deus had gotten tired of waiting. “Okay! The running part of the plan!”

“Problem,” he muttered, pointing at his injured leg. Oh, yeah. That.

I pulled out another syringe of Med-X, jabbed it into his leg, and injected the painkiller. “Problem solved.” I could have used some myself; I had a hell of a headache from that light show!

We moved into the Overmare’s office. The room looked ransacked; it had probably been searched before Daisy and Marmalade got away. They hadn’t guessed that the program was in a little room right next door. Though it looked like somepony had pissed all over the Overmare’s huge ring-shaped desk, it was still intact, as was an old piece of paper taped behind it. The title caught my eye: ‘Enemys’ was crookedly scrawled at the top of the page in large, block print. There were a lot of names on that list. Topping it, and circled: ‘Overmare.’ She counted herself as an enemy? Rivets’s name was right underneath it. Mom’s name had question marks around it. Daisy was on it?! Not me, of course. Oh, wait! There I was... at the bottom...

Uuugh! Focus! No time for this! I accessed her terminal and used the code Mom had given me. The desk hissed as it slowly rose into the air on hydraulic legs, revealing stairs disappearing into the gloom below. I activated the lamp on my PipBuck and threaded my way down with P-21 right behind me. A minute later, the desk closed behind us as another impact reverberated through the stable. We moved down the hall to a second door, and I used the code again. Slowly, it opened. Very thankfully, the noise it made was relatively quiet compared to the racket in the atrium.

The entry hatch to the stable, a massive cog-tooth-edged slab of metal, was rolled away to one side, and a long rough-rock-walled

tunnel led up beyond. Bones lay crushed on the other side of the door, mashed by the entry of Deus and his raiders. “Better get a head start,” I warned P-21, nodding to the tunnel. He nodded back and began making his way out. I wondered if he’d stay with me longer than ten seconds. Probably not.

Going to the door from the entry room to the atrium, I saw the Overmare lying limp against the larger room’s wall. I supposed the raiders had gotten tired of her. Even she didn’t deserve that…but I had bigger problems. Or, rather, I was about to.

“Hey, doofus!” I bellowed across the atrium, and to my shock, he froze completely. Then his head slowly turned to look at me. I saw certain annihilation in those eyes. “I got your program here, jackass!” The raiders around him looked even more shocked than Deus!

Then he was turning and I suddenly had a vision of a cloud of Blackjack settling around a PipBuck and hoof. ‘Ohshitohshitohshit!’ I thought as I turned and raced for the stable door.

“Cuuuuuunnnnnttttt!” he roared, and the shells detonated behind me. Luck saved me from a messy splat as bones churned beneath my hooves.

I caught up to P-21 and shouted, “Running now!” From the roaring behind me, the plan had worked. I was leaving the safety and security of my stable with a pissy, hostile male, an unknown destination ahead, a mechanical nightmare pony of death behind, and a mysterious program that apparently sparked it all. Odds were that, if I survived the next five minutes, I’d be wishing I were dead inside a month.

So why was I smiling so much?

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Rapid Reload - All your weapon reloads are 25% faster than normal.

Chapter 2: Trust

"In the end, we all have to trust in something…"

Outside. Everypony in the stable imagined it at some point. According to the Overmare, it was supposed to be an irradiated desert, a death quick enough to doom anypony caught beyond the main door but slow enough that you'd wish you could put yourself out of your misery. To be honest, I'd imagined the outside to be a really big atrium. Just a huge flat space with better air and better lighting. Of course, we knew that the outside hadn't always been deadly, but there wasn't much in the school about how it used to be except grainy pictures in books. Apparently, recycled wafers grew on things called 'trees' while there was an edible carpet called 'grass' everywhere.

Me? My first impression of the outside was made simple by the presence of two invaders standing on the other side of the boarded-over hatch. The two ponies were just starting to turn towards the exit when we burst out, taking both by surprise. If it hadn't been for S.A.T.S., I never would have been able to take the shots. It was just pure luck that the first shell from the pump action delivered a hit to the first raider's throat and the second wounded his companion enough that she turned to run for her life.

Running! Excellent idea. We set off in the general direction of 'away'; that was all I could think of as Deus thundered up after us. There was some…stuff? Shrubs? Trees?--that I hoped would make us harder targets when he did eventually step out. For now, our direction was 'downhill' and our speed was 'for our lives'.

At least, it was for five minutes. Then P-21 started limping. Soon, he started slowing down. I passed him and glanced back. Our eyes met. There was no animosity, just a question: 'Is this the plan?'

I could leave him, I realized. Deus wanted me. They might just ignore P-21 altogether. Then I mentally hit myself as I remembered little Vent lying next to her momma. If these ponies killed foals so

casually, P-21 would be no better off in their hooves. It would be more merciful if I just shot him myself and made it clean.

No. I couldn't do that. I slowed and enveloped his leg in the faint white glow of my telekinesis, trying to add support; he looked panicked for a moment, then realized that I was trying to help. His pace didn't pick up, but at least he wasn't slowing down as much.

"Turn left," a voice buzzed to our left. Left was nothing but rock and more of these gray bushes and a…bug? A metal bug that was bobbing in the air before us with little fluttering wings.

Wha... huh... talking metal bugs? I had about a hundred -- okay, a dozen -- questions pop into my head, and the dumbest spilled out first. "Why?" I gasped, panting. I didn't think that I was in that bad shape, but then there wasn't much need for running for my life in 99.

"You want to live?" And it zipped away through the bushes. I could hear Deus now. It was like the rapid thumping, grinding noise the old food wafer stamping machine was making before it blew. From the snapping and crunching, I wondered if he was even bothering to go around the trees or just running straight through them. Come to think of it, I did want to live. I glanced at P-21, who shrugged at my look, and we turned to the left and raced in the direction the weird metal bug had taken.

We came to a house. Well, if you could still count two standing walls, a toilet, and a bathtub as a house. I tried to ignore the pony skeleton curled up in the tub as we ducked behind the wall. "Hide," the strange metal bug said, and then it zipped away into the underbrush.

"But--" I started to say when I heard a panicked cry to the south. Not my voice, but definitely a terrified mare. I almost started after it when I realized that it had the same tinny buzz as the bug. A second later, Deus and four raiders galloped past.

We didn't move for a minute or two, but then, finally, I laughed. "Well, that was exciting." Then I choked.

I was gonna die.

I can't explain it, but when I looked into the sky, I thought it'd be like the atrium ceiling. Instead, there was just this great big emptiness above me with distant gray that blurred into obscurity. Despite my head being tilted back, I felt like I was looking down. My brain screamed at me that if I took so much as a step I was going to fall into that immense nothing. I hate to admit that, after

everything I'd been through, it was just the simple sky that made me wet my barding.

"Blackjack? Blackjack?" P-21 said, first with annoyance and then with growing alarm. I barely heard him. I couldn't move. I could only breathe as fast as possible.

Slowly, he reached up with his hooves and covered my eyes. Immediately, the sensation of up being down ended and I fell over. I wanted to retch, but there was nothing to bring up. I made sure my eyes were on the dirt when I opened them. I could finally lower my breathing rate to normal levels. "Thanks," I said softly, sincerely. He could have just trotted off and left me like that. If I'd left him behind, that's exactly how Deus would have found me eventually.

There was another faint buzzing, and I raised my gaze enough to look at the little flying bug. Had I been out of it for that long? Now that I could look at the bug while not running for my life, I could see that it was actually just a flying robot made to look like a bug. Well, that was at least less weird than a *non*-robot metal flying talking bug. There was a faint crackling noise, and the tinny voice spoke again. "Well, he was sure in a hurry. Don't worry, I've sent him off on a wild sprite chase to the south." For some reason, though, I couldn't shake the feeling that it had somehow also been watching us.

"Thanks," I said, and I meant it. "Now, I hope you don't mind, but just who and what are you?" I was more curious than suspicious; I was fairly confident that, if the metal bug thing wanted us dead, it could have just let Deus catch us.

"You can call me Watcher. As for what, this is just a spritebot. You'll find them wandering all over the Wasteland. I just took some in this area over when I noticed you two helping each other." So, 'Watcher' wasn't this machine thing? She... he -- the voice didn't sound very mare-ish; I sort of imagined a robotic P-21 behind that speaker -- he was just controlling it from afar? I really wanted to know how anypony could do that…and I put that question somewhere in the forties or fifties on my rapidly growing 'What the fuck?' list.

"Thank you," P-21 said calmly, as if he wasn't fussed at all with meeting a robotic talking bug, the dry yellow stalks of grass, or that entire great…big…empty…

I gave myself a shake to try and ignore it, but it was like the sky

was Deus hovering above me. I couldn't freeze up like that every time I looked up, though! "Yeah. Thanks for all your help. I don't suppose you can magically make shotgun shells pop out of that thing, can you?"

There was a soft chuckle. "No, but you've got the right idea. Believe it or not, you're better off than some ponies I've met." Then, in a softer tone, as if to himself, "Though she didn't have raiders hunting her right out of the stable…" Who?

"So what should we do?" P-21 asked respectfully. The little machine seemed to be regarding us, and I suspected that this Watcher pony was deciding something about us.

"You've got one gun. Get more and all the ammunition you can put your hooves on. One of you has decent enough armor, but keep your eyes out for more and better. Now all you need is some direction. Might I suggest west? You might find something useful that way. Lastly, make friends. The more ponies you have looking out for you, the better your chances." Another metallic chuckle. "Though I suppose the two of you have a head start on that one."

"What?" I looked at P-21 and gave an awkward laugh. "Oh…no no no. We're not friends. In fact, we really just met today…" when I rounded him up to be retired. My laugh withered as P-21 just looked away. "Okay, awkward."

"Oh." For some reason, the spritebot sounded disappointed. "Well…for two ponies who aren't friends, you might want to think about it." The spritebot gave a sharp crackle and buzz and began to bob and bounce in the air to the hefty 'ooompha-ooompha' of a tuba. Then it wandered off into the Wasteland. O... kay.

I looked over at P-21 and then looked down at my PipBuck. Watcher had said we should go west? I knew that my PipBuck had a navigation function, but until now I'd never actually needed it. Loading the map, I noticed two interesting things. First, there was a little icon of a gear marked 'Stable 99', and secondly, there was a location tag off to the west. I looked around for the spritebot to ask Watcher if he'd done something to my PipBuck, but it was already out of sight in the underbrush, the music lost to the soft hiss of wind in the dead grass.

"Well, I guess west is better than south," I said as I rose, keeping my eyes firmly towards the dirt. I took a half dozen steps before I realized I was alone. Looking back, I saw P-21 on his knees in the dirt, eyes clenched shut. "What's the matter?"

He didn't answer. It was then I noticed his tears. Oh, damn…good thing I hadn't said I was his friend; what a shitty friend I would have made. "Your leg?" I asked him as I knelt. Stupid question, Blackjack! He was injured and just took his injury out for a ten minute sprint! He swallowed hard and looked away from me. Aside from the most basic first aid, I didn't have a clue what to do. I had healing potions, but they were for immediate injuries. The kind of damage that had been done to his knee needed major magic.

"Well, lean on me," I said as I pressed my white shoulder against his blue one, and together we started hobbling in the direction marked on my PipBuck. For a few steps. He jerked away from me, then cried out as he fell on his side. I knelt beside him, "What's wrong? You're not shot or something, are you?"

"I don't… " he muttered.

"Don't… ? Don't what?" I said with my ears twitching. Voices… P-21 started to answer, but I grabbed him and clapped my hoof over his mouth.

"There! That way! Please listen to me," came the plaintive whine of U-21.

"Shut up! Do all stable ponies whine this much? 'Please don't kill me, I don't wanna die. Please don't rape my ass! It hurts, don't do that.' Bitch bitch bitch… " a buck said sharply. "Now hurry up. When we find the big guy, he'll decide what we do." U-21 shouted off a few more protests as they continued off to the south.

I finally relaxed again… and then I noticed the blue pony shaking hard in my hooves. It looked almost as if he was having an attack or something. Oh, crap! "Your leg! I'm sorry," I said as I got off him. Yet for the longest time, he didn't move. He just lay there, shaking. I swallowed, looking to the south. "Come on. We can't stay here. We need to get going." Do *not* tell me I have to leave you here.

He started to rise, his braced leg sticking out to the side as he started to hobble… east? "Hey, where are you going? Watcher said to go west."

He didn't look back as he slumped against a dead gray stump. Pain in his eyes, he glared at me. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

I stared at him. "Really?" I pointed my shotgun in the direction that the invaders had gone. "You want to wait here for them? You heard how they were treating U-21. Is that what you really want?" He hung his head, hissing softly through his teeth as he clenched his eyes. "Look… you're a smart pony. Smarter than me. How long

are you going to last on your own, injured like that?"

He took a long, slow breath. "What should I do?" he said so softly that I wasn't really sure if he was talking to me or not. "What would he want me to do?" He? He who? But before I could ask, he said to me, "Fine. Till I can go on my own, I'll go with you." He tried to take a few steps, but at this rate we'd manage fifty feet in an hour. I moved up beside him and leaned my shoulder against his again.

"Don't touch me!" he blurted. Funny. I would have thought a male would be used to being touched. Of course, when I pulled away, he nearly fell over. Again. He flushed, closing his eyes. "Please don't touch me... a lot." Wow, he sounded like he was begging; maybe he was hurt worse than I thought?

"I'll try not to," I promised in a softer tone. I did my best to support him, and we hobbled to the west. Maybe we'd get lucky and run across a miraculously skilled unicorn surgeon who worked for free? I could keep my mind off the sky above trying to work out the odds for that one!

* * *

We'd been travelling for almost three hours, and it felt like a lot longer; there was no sense of time in the gray twilight beneath the rolling clouds. Walking shoulder to shoulder with P-21, I knew we weren't making good time, but it was increasing the odds that Deus wouldn't find us. I spent a little bit of time thinking about Mom and the stable. Had they cleared out the raiders? Who had died?

It didn't matter, as I'd never see them again, but I felt homesick. I wanted to be able to look forward to Rivets's next game. I longed for my boring and uneventful night shift. I remembered how thrilled I had been at the idea of being on the surface and wanted to kick myself.

We hadn't come across anything too serious yet. Some fat bloated fly things had spat nasty thorns at us. I didn't waste rounds after the first one; the butt of the pump action was more than sufficient. When I put their carcasses in my bag (well, we'd have to eat at some point; not that I was at all confident that they were edible, but they'd be better than air or dirt and quite possibly better than two-centuries-dead grass), my PipBuck's inventory system labeled them 'Bloatsprite Meat'. There was even a 'value' next to it. How the heck would my PipBuck know the value (in a totally unknown economic

situation) of a bug it'd never seen before? I should ask Midnight how--

Damn it.

I had to remind myself that this was my life now, but my mind kept going to the past. As lousy as things were in the stable, they were better than this. I once complained…okay, whined…to Mom about not wanting to be in security. It wasn't any *fun*. 'Sometimes survival comes before fun,' she'd told me. I wondered if *fun* would be anywhere on my priority list for the foreseeable future.

Ahead, the dead trees parted to reveal an immense, soggy field. Flooded squares housed patches of thick weeds around scummy pools of muddy water. Still, that water did look incredibly inviting after over three hours struggling through the filthy Wasteland. Then I heard the ticking. That was new and strangely ominous. I'd only heard it the one time I'd gone near 99's magic generators. I looked at my PipBuck and stared at the sight of the little radiation needle bouncing back and forth in the green.

"Oh, that's not good," I muttered as I took some more steps forward and the clicking increased. This wasn't the 'flesh stripping radiation' I'd been warned of in school safety courses, but suddenly the pools seemed as inviting as a raider's welcome mat. Moving up the hillside, we could see a small still-intact farmhouse next to a barn. I could also make out the rainbow swirl on the pools and several rusted barrels sticking out of the water. More barrels were spilling from a large smashed vehicle that looked as if it'd just fallen from the sky into the center of the fields.

Clearly, this sturdy farmhouse had been built by somepony who took pride in their work, and the building was just far enough from the water that the clicking from my PipBuck stopped. The door and windows were all intact, and, unless I was mistaken, this would be a good place for P-21 to rest. Who was I kidding? I needed the break as much as he did! I needed a roof over my head desperately. I kept imagining suction tugging at me towards the clouds.

Inside, the place had been ransacked. Most of the furniture had been tossed about, the shelves were mostly bare, and the floors were covered with broken dishes and garbage. Some old bones and rags had been tossed in one corner, and a few newspapers lay in grubby heaps in another. 'Hoofington's Angel of Death strikes again!' declared one headline. 'Four foals filleted', said the one beneath.

I spotted some pictures that had been knocked off of the wall and turned over the cracked frames with my hoof. The photographs were badly faded, but there were some I could make out. One of a mare and a huge buck wearing some sort of harness around his neck and a bandage around his waist. Kinky sex? Somehow, I doubted it. There was something off in the images for that. A picture of that same teenaged mare with the apples for a cutie mark carrying a filly with a bow. Foalsitter? Again…something about the image didn't sit right. An old mare smiling sleepily as she stood behind three foals dressed…what *were* they wearing? They looked like little monsters. Another of a filly wearing an old, battered hat so enormous it covered her head completely. But the two pictures that really threw me had the old mare next to a buck. That it was a buck didn't shock me.

An old buck. He was every bit as wrinkly and crooked as the mare. Clearly, the massive old hat eating the filly's head was his. In another picture, he was kissing the shocked-looking old mare on the cheek! Two mares, looking like older versions of the pair from before, stood side by side in smart looking business attire. The large buck in the harness now wore a smart military uniform. The old buck pushed the old mare in a wheelchair…

Family. They were family. Not the mother-daughter dynamic of Stable 99, but a family. I could vaguely remember hearing about the old ways in history class, but seeing an actual, happy family like that…

P-21 was looking at the pictures of the old buck and the uniformed stallion with a shocked expression, one he quickly covered up the second he caught me smiling at him.

"What?" he said defensively as he looked away. Goddesses, was he blushing? The mares were cute enough, I supposed. Something about the one with the three apples made me imagine a little fun flank spank. The male… no… what was the word? Brother? He was pretty delicious. I could really eat his apple.

"Awfully cute," I said, giving him a playful wink. I needed to get his mood up. Hopefully, it would take his mind off his leg, which was so swollen at the knee I was afraid he wouldn't be able to wear the brace.

Of course, my intentions went down like a radroach sundae. "Are all mares sex fiends? Is that it?"

"Huh?" Where did that come from? "I was just trying… "

"Don't you get it?" He lifted the black and white photo of the calm buck in the uniform. "Males as soldiers. Husbands. Brothers. Not as breeding equipment." I tilted my head to the side as I was now completely lost. "You see them, though, and... and... cute? *That's* all you can say about them?"

Pissiest... male... ever…"I was just trying to lighten the mood," I said in a softer voice. He blinked, then resumed his grumpy frown. Midnight. Why couldn't I have run out of the stable with a beautiful dark unicorn mare? Really? If you were going to have a travelling companion, it'd be hard to beat that. Or a pony with a sense of humor. Was that too much to ask?

There were a few other things in the room. A terminal set atop a desk. P-21 had to smack it with a hoof a few times before the green screen lit up. Next to it was a small safe set in the floor. From the scorch marks in that corner of the room, it looked as if somepony had tried to blast it open! I guessed it was a miracle the terminal still worked. I also found a locked ammo container that was way too heavy to be empty.

"Can you get that to work?" I asked him as he started to tap on the keys. The work seemed to calm him down.

"Maybe," he said quietly, "Duct Tape showed me a few tricks, and it looks like it's still pretty much intact... "

"You two close?" I said, now feeling genuinely curious. Maybe it was the pictures. Both Watcher's comment and what we'd been through had made me wonder about this odd blue pony.

For a moment, I thought he was going to launch into a new tirade of anger, but it seemed like I'd exhausted his supply for now. Instead, he looked almost... guilty. He didn't answer for a minute as he tapped the keys, and then said softly, "She was close to me." He suddenly shut down the terminal and then started it back up again. Meeting my surprised look, he said in his calm voice, "I have to close it out…too many wrong answers and the terminal could lock me out permanently."

And this was why I didn't touch terminals. "So, she taught you how to do this?"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I'd rather not talk about it. She's dead. I've escaped. I don't want to remember that place." He looked at the screen, his voice level and cool. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to focus on this."

Well, so much for friendship. I sighed and stood. "Well, I'm going

to check to see if the sink in the bathroom still works." I needed a bath. I desperately, terribly needed a bath. The blood I'd rolled in had hardened like black paint. I smelled of blood, urine, and feces. I'd take one of Rivets's icewater baths right now if I could.

Still, I hesitated a bit when my PipBuck notified me that the water in the sink was also radioactive. ... I wasn't going to drink it, though. That'd cut down on some of my exposure, right? I found a rag, soaked it, and tried to scrub myself off as well as I could. By the time I finished, my PipBuck radiation meter bounced back and forth in the middle of the green gauge. I guessed that that meant that I wasn't near flesh-stripping radiation levels yet.

Returning to the living room with the terminal, I smiled. "So, am I glowing?"

For the first time ever, a look of absolute, incredulous shock settled on his face. "You're pregnant?!"

I laughed as I flopped on the couch. "Oh, Goddesses, I hope not. I just washed in some water that was a little more radioactive than I'd like." Of course, if I were pregnant and irradiated…okay. Not thinking about that now. It definitely killed the joke though.

"Oh. You look…cleaner," he replied with a flush as he returned to the screen. He hit a few more keys and suddenly smiled. "Finally. 'Granny'. Interesting password."

"Nice," I said as I looked at the safe. "Can you pick the lock on that, too?" I suspected it wouldn't be easy for him. It was a safe, after all.

"Why?" He hit a key on the terminal and a click came from the safe. Okay, now he looked smug. It was a nice change from the stoic or pissy looks he normally wore. Then he looked at the ammo crate. "Now that I'll have to try and pick."

We swapped seats, him dragging the ammo box to the couch while I investigated the safe and terminal. Inside the safe were two stacks of bits, a small bag of bottle caps, another healing potion, another syringe of Med-X, some food that simply *had* to be past its expiration date, a revolver, and a half-empty box of ammo. I just dumped it all in my bags for now, my PipBuck tallying my inventory automatically. Then I turned to the terminal. There was a series of log entries. The dates after each were so much gibberish, though. Oh well, I had nothing better to do while P-21 opened the ammo crate.

Entry 1) Well hello there. Not exactly sure what I'm supposed ta be

writing about. Doctors said it'd keep my noggin from falling apart if I write stuff down. 'It's important to keep a journal, Hoss.' Personally, I think it's a bunch of hooey, but since Apple Bloom went through the trouble of sending Granny this contraption, I may as well learn to use it!

Entry 2) Well, in a time of one boneheaded decision after another, one more shouldn't be much of a surprise. Celestia's out and Luna's in. A thousand year rule's a goodly stretch, I suppose. Unfortunately, I doubt that this whole shake up is gonna do anypony a lick of good. Ministries? What are they doing that wasn't done before? Heard they're gonna remove the gardens cause each one has to have their own headquarters or some such. Glad I retired when I did. Don't think I could stand the hurt of seeing it all torn up.

Entry 3) Big Macintosh is dead. I know they said he died a hero saving Princess Celestia. I'm glad that Celestia's alive and all, but I also wish Granny's grandson were still about. Instead, they're going on and on about how heroic he was. Makes me want to spit. Big Macintosh wasn't a hero for saving Celestia. He was a hero because he'd have tried to save anypony who didn't deserve to die. Granny's not doing too well since the funeral. I don't think any statue in Ponyville's gonna make up for this.

Entry 4) Buried Granny Smith behind the farm. Apple Bloom sent her condolences. I dunno if Applejack's heard. Getting a message through to the Ministry of Technology's a hassle and a half. It's been a long time coming, watchin' her slip away. Somehow thought she'd last forever, though. Things are getting so bad that I'm feeling like I want to join her some days. This world's so angry. It's so full of hatred that all I can do is shut it out and try and keep this little corner green and healthy. It's all I can do anymore. Made a new friend, though. Marigold at the garden club. Kind filly. Said she'd stop by and show her foal the farm.

Entry 5) World ended today. Thought that was worth writing down. I guess the war is over. Hurray. Load of ponies streaming through my fields to get up into that stable on the hill. I sent Marigold and her foal up that way since they can't reach 90 in time. Hope it does some good. Hope there's some good left anywhere.

Entry 6) Sky carriage crashed in the fields last night. I figger that's it, then. Dunno what that sludge is, but it melted those two pegasuses. Liquefied 'em. There's some kind of green snow starting to fall. Pretty sure it's going to kill me. Done killed everything else. Ain't seen anypony since that black mare snuck in the barn. Invited her inside, but she just skedaddled. Feeling tired now, but maybe that's just my age. Never wanted ta live long enough to see all this. Just wish I had the strength to

rest with Granny. Fels wrong dyin lie tis.

Entry 7) one genration pases away and anothr genertion comes, but Euestra abides fore

Log-in time out. Disconnecting.

* * *

I didn't know how long I sat there reading the entries over and over again. It wasn't until I heard the pop of the lid coming off the ammo box that I looked over at P-21. I felt completely torn, on one hoof feeling bad for the old pony who'd lived just long enough to see his world blasted apart. On the other, he hadn't lived to see just how bad things would get. Seeing me blubbering, P-21 suddenly looked uncomfortable as he opened up the case. "Um. Want some more bullets?" he asked as he tilted the ammo container.

"Yeah. Thanks." I didn't want bullets. I wanted seven entries of Hoss telling me how wonderful life was. I rose to take the loose, shifting rounds out of the case and dumped them unceremoniously into my bag. I had no idea what kind of gun they went to. Perhaps a rifle?

As I scrolled through my inventory to distract me from the bones in the corner, P-21 read through the journal entries himself. I don't know what I expected. Tears like mine, I supposed. I wanted to know my reaction wasn't weak or wrong. When he finished, though, he didn't cry. He simply looked at me with that even blue gaze. "Do you want to do something about it?"

"Do? What do you mean?" I asked in confusion.

"Well, you can sit there and cry," he said as he rose with a groan, leg brace squealing softly before he limped towards the door, "Or we can do what he asked."

Confused, I stood and walked out after him. He looked around at the grass around the farmhouse and then slowly limped out. Was it just me, or was it getting darker? About fifty feet up the slope was an odd squared-off stone. Some wit had used it for target practice, and the marble was so chipped as to be illegible. "Start digging. Carefully," he said before he returned to the farm house.

...Oh. Slowly, I started to scrape away the soil with my magic. It was hard work, and I was glad. Focusing on this, I felt my horror of that open darkness above me fading away. The nightmares of the attack dwindled away. I didn't see Air Duct's foal lying with her

head nearly sawed off. I didn't think about Hoss's last moments. I simply thought of dirt as my horn's magic scraped away layer after layer.

He returned just as my magic brushed against something more substantial. With great care, I levitated the dirt around the buried bones of the pony. Finally, I stopped. My horn hurt. My head hurt. My eyes burned. But I did feel a little better as P-21 laid old Hoss next to Granny. Then I noticed something in Granny's hooves: a little figurine of a cheerful orange pony I recognized from the pictures. Her hooves kicked at the air above her as she grinned confidently at me.

Carefully, I levitated the little statue from the grave and gently brushed the dirt away from a tiny plaque at the base. *'Be Strong'*. Looking at the orange pony, her little cowboy hat and three-apple cutie mark, I couldn't help but smile. I wanted to be strong. I needed to be strong. I glanced at P-21, but he was simply placing the bones.

"Would it be okay?" I asked softly. He glanced at me, then at the figurine, before going back to placing Hoss's remains in the earth.

"I'm curious why you're asking me," he said as he finished laying out the bones. He finished by placing a brown moth-chewed hat atop the old skull.

"Because you seem to know what's right," I replied. I felt so confused right now, I'd welcome any advice.

"I guess that depends on why you want it," he said as he sat on the edge of the grave, looking at me.

I hesitated before I answered. For some reason, I wanted to be completely honest with him right now. If I'd come across this beauty just hours ago I'd have swapped it for some treats, drinks, or sex. But now, everything was changed and different. "Because. I want to remember him…because no one else does but us." I looked at him and gave a snotty sniff. "And I've got to be strong…" And I wasn't strong. Not really. I had a shotgun and an overactive proclivity to using it.

He looked at the figurine in my hooves for a long moment, then said softly, "Then I guess it'd be all right."

As I looked at the figurine, a sensation settled around my shoulders. A focus driving away some of the terror and worries that were nibbling at the back of my mind. I carefully placed the figurine into my bag, and I was oddly happy that it didn't instantly

have a value assigned by my PipBuck. Then we both stepped clear as I gently pushed the soil back into place around their bones. I even tried to put the yellowed grass back down. When I finally finished and my glow faded, only the faintest red smudges of light remained on the western horizon. Together, we returned to the farmhouse.

* * *

The familiar alarm on my PipBuck woke me. I swung my limb at the end table once…twice…and then opened my eyes and blinked. There was no end table because this wasn't my bed, nor was it my bedroom. I looked up at the ceiling…how strange to see one that wasn't dull gray metal. Lying on my back, I traced my eyes along the cracks, and that was when it really sank in. I was outside.

At once, I regretted leaving so soon. I'd been in such a hurry to get out with EC-1101 that I hadn't realized it might be the last time I saw Mom. Without Deus there and with the stable sealed, I knew that eventually Mom would retake it. They'd do something about the Overmare if she was still alive…big 'if'…and get on with life.

But could I go back? With Deus still out looking for me, what was to stop him from following me back in? He'd probably have somepony watching the stable and would come back the second I returned. I barely escaped once. Could I just 'lose' my PipBuck? I didn't have any way to get my PipBuck off…and if I could, I probably wouldn't be able to find my way back. And it was possible that I'd annoyed Deus enough to have him be after me personally. And, even if I dealt with Deus somehow…another big 'if'…there was still the pony who sent him. If she could send one small army to invade my stable just to get the file, she could probably send another.

No…I couldn't go back.

Crap…why was I missing home now? My body wanted a hot shower. It wanted a meal in the atrium. It wanted to report to the shift change briefing. It wanted to find Midnight and see if saving her life got me under her tail. But all that was over. Done. I'd never see Midnight again, or Rivets…Daisy…the Overmare…Mom…

And just like that, being outside sucked.

And speaking of sucking…why were there red bars on my E.F.S.?

Shit.

Slowly, I rolled to my hooves. P-21 had to be the yellow bar next door. He refused to share my bed, looked pissed that I'd even joked about it. Did he really prefer to sleep alone? I retrieved my shotgun and carefully opened the door a crack.

"I'm telling you, she's here," a vaguely familiar voice said. "I have her PipBuck tag." Shit! I knew that whine: U-21.

If he had my PipBuck tag, he could find me…was there a range on these things? Everypony in security was locatable anywhere in the stable, if there wasn't local interference. I activated Mom's tag… nothing. Maybe it was blocked by the stable walls. "She better be. I've never seen Deus this pissed before," a mare muttered softly.

"If he'd listened earlier, we'd have had her hours ago," U-21 started to grouse.

"Will you two shut up?" a different mare hissed. "Let's finish this and get the damned thing. This is raider territory, and unlike Deus, we're tasty snacks to the freaks out here."

They were coming down the hall. In a few seconds, they'd be at the door. Correction, two were coming down the hall. Two were back in the living room. They reached P-21's room. I heard the door open, my heart suddenly pounding. "Empty," one mare announced.

I stepped to the side, and slowly the door creaked open. I saw the barrel of an automatic pistol. The mouth biting the grip. The eye searching me out. And then our eyes met. I suddenly saw a buck decapitated by my shotgun. I saw his head blown into chunks. I saw the terror in the mare's blue eye as she saw with certainty her own demise. I wanted to scream at her to run. My throat sealed shut. I wanted to shoot right above her head and make her flee; I couldn't move my aim. She turned that barrel towards me, and in her eyes I saw the doomed look of a pony knowing they acted in futility.

I pulled the trigger. Eight pellets of lead travelled less than two feet, turning the firearm into scrap and her lower face and throat into pulp. She made a noise; not exactly a scream, with all the bubbly froth coming from her. Her whole body whipped wildly, flinging gore before she collapsed in a thrashing heap.

"Fucking hell!" shouted a mare as I moved into the doorway. She had a security saddle with two single-shot rifles connected to it and a welding helmet protecting her head. Her gang colors didn't do shit to protect her, though; I knew the difference between barding and Wasteland 'armor'. We fired almost simultaneously as she backpedaled, yanking on her bridle. One bullet slugged my hide but

didn't penetrate. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and aimed for her…chest. So I didn't want to blow another mare's face off... call me a wuss.

Three rounds of buckshot turned the hall and most of her front into blasted ruin. As that accelerated time wore off, she slumped to the ground, her last shots chewing up the floor before she fell over in a bloody mess. I looked down at the mare still thrashing on the ground as she tried to breathe through the ground meat of her throat. I wanted to put her out of her misery. From the tears in her eyes, she wanted it too. I pointed the shotgun at her head; she stilled a little. Just pull the trigger. End her pain…

…I couldn't do it. "Sorry…" I muttered to her. She shuddered and closed her eyes. I hoped that that was that.

And a second later, I'd have bigger worries as a unicorn mare floated another automatic pistol around the corner and fired blindly. A lucky shot nicked my ear, which probably saved me by getting me to duck down. The mare then stepped into the hallway with two automatic pistols floating before her, aiming them right at my head.

The shotgun blasted a cone of leaden destruction that had her scrambling for cover again. Her shots were wild, but I only had three more shells in the shotgun and no time to reload. I tripped over the bloody mare's corpse at the end of the hall, rolling over it as the remaining mare fired at me. U-21 was behind her, apparently learning about a little firearm feature called a 'safety' the hard way.

"You're dead! Fucking dead!" screamed the mare as she pointed her automatics at me. S.A.T.S. was still recharging. We were going to make a mess of each other…and then my magic reached out. There was more than just a safety on an automatic. I fought to split my attention to hit those nubs directly beneath the safeties. A push, and the magazines slid out of the guns. Two bullets, and only two, punched my barding hard. Two shells, and only two, turned her chest into a bloody hole. She died with a confused look on her face, her fading horn still pulling the triggers.

Then the brown unicorn got his weapon working, putting a round in the wall. He took one look at me and screamed as I brought the shotgun around, firing his weapon wildly in my general direction. He was the pony that had told the raiders how to use the bloody PipBucks to find the security mares; no other raider could know. And he'd been working with Deus. And he was shooting at me... okay, trying to shoot at me.

This was a shot I could take. Red bar. Red and it's dead. The last shell in the pump action shotgun blasted out.

In his final second, he'd raised his hoof to shield himself with his foreleg; he'd have been toast but for one thing: he was wearing a PipBuck. This one might not have a reinforced case, but PipBucks were tough suckers. The blast was virtually point blank and the lead shot didn't have time to spread, almost entirely ramming into the device. The unicorn found himself peppered with wildly flung shrapnel but not turned into a smear on the floor. Screaming, he raised his hooves to his ears and rolled back and forth. The arcane device still attached to his leg was now so much sparking metal.

Breathing hard, I reloaded as quickly as I could. He'd flung his gun when his focus snapped. I couldn't risk him getting it again. I lifted the reloaded shotgun. P-21 was shouting something, but there'd be time for that later!

Then I got shot in the ass. The sudden bloom of pain in the back of my leg scattered my thoughts as well. Damn it, hadn't I decided back in Stable 99 not to get shot any more? I looked back, and my eyes met the shocked face on P-21. He was shaking as he bit down on the brown unicorn's gun. I calmly put the safety back on, and just in the nick of time, as he pulled the trigger a few more times. The friendly fire had turned my E.F.S. red. I supposed it was the first time he'd shot a gun.

"Aim. Then fire," I said through the haze of pain. I turned back to U-21.

"Blackjack!" P-21 yelled in a strangled voice behind me, and I looked back at him. There was a look on his face; strained and anguished. "He's done! Please! Don't murder another 99 male."

What? Still, U-21 did look pathetic. The blast had probably temporarily deafened him. I sighed. "Waste of ammo anyway."

P-21 let out a held breath, then frowned at me. "Yeah, thank goodness you didn't waste the ammo on that mare." I glanced down the hallway with a frown at the mare in the door to the bedroom. That was completely different.

Wasn't it?

I checked U-21 but only found something that looked like a weak healing potion. It barely took care of the shot to my rump and my other nicks and injuries, but it was something. I knelt down and said loudly, "Where's your boss?"

U-21 whimpered, curling up into a fecal-smelling ball. He was

going to be useless. “Let’s go.”

P-21 stared at me. His features slowly hardened once again. “No.”

“Huh?” I blinked back at him. “What do you mean ‘no’?” Were we back to this again?

“It’s a pretty simple word. Two letters. Pretty sure even you can figure it out.” He pointed a hoof at the other male. “Help him right now. Give him one of your potions,” P-21 said firmly. “Otherwise, get going.”

Suddenly, the thought of being on my own loomed inside me. It was a feeling I didn’t like one bit. One of the most effective forms of punishment in 99 was isolation. I’d gotten it twice: twenty-four hours in a virtual closet for mouthing off about the Overmare. It was worse than detention; at least in there you could hear ponies through the bars.

“P-21…” I said softly.

“You said I know this stuff better than you, right? Then help him. Otherwise, you’re on your own,” he said firmly, his lips pressing together. He meant it too.

I floated out one of the potions Marmalade had tucked into her barding pockets and set it next to him. He could use it when he pulled himself together. I felt a little ashamed, a little annoyed, and a lot confused. Did he think I spared the mare because I wanted her to live? Did he think I favored mares over bucks?

That was just crazy.

With a sigh, he gave one last look at U-21, and together we left the farmhouse.

* * *

We continued following the PipBuck’s directions west. I took it for a good sign that neither that metal abomination nor any raiders had found us since. Walking under the open sky, I still felt the pit of my stomach drop when I glanced up, but I didn’t lapse into bladder weakening horror like I had before. I didn’t stop keeping my eyes down at my own level as I looked for something more hazardous than bloatsprites, though.

P-21 was walking on his own, but slowly. I’d given him the Med-X, but after a long hesitation he simply put it in his pockets with a mutter about how he might have to run again. The pain was obvious, but he bore it as stoically as possible.

The issue of him taking the revolver or one of the pistols, on the other hand…

"No," he said simply.

"But you remember what Watcher said. If you can't protect yourself, then you're going to die."

"Then I'll die, but I'm not taking it." He stared me right in the eyes. "And if you were smart, you wouldn't want me to have it." Ugh, more cryptic, angry statements...

That had started the disagreement. No matter what, he refused to take one of the guns. I didn't want to fight right now, not after everything he'd done for me the night before. Still, it bothered me. I also didn't like the idea of him being unable to protect himself or to save my butt if things went bad. I couldn't get him to open up about anything.

We weren't friends.

That was the truth of it. He was smart, clever, and resourceful, but we were not friends. Was that really so surprising? Clearly, there was far more bothering him than just his injured leg. Yet he wouldn't talk. It's like he hated me or something, but hadn't I saved him from Daisy? Didn't I help him escape from 99?

I had to admit, I was glad when we finally reached the destination on my PipBuck. The sight of the small town warmed my heart greatly; of course, that was before I realized it was abandoned. The dozen or so buildings along the road were mostly intact, but scattered further away were the ruins of thrice that number that had been all but demolished by time. In the middle of town was a large two-story building made of brick. As we got closer, my PipBuck chirped; I looked at it and I saw two new icons. 'Flooded Fields' lay behind us, and this town was apparently called 'Withers'.

Suddenly, red icons began to appear on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, and we moved to take cover behind a standing wall. I peeked around the corner, searching for the source. Then I spotted the two raiders on the roof of the large square building. From their mottled appearance and black leathers, it was pretty clear that these were similar to the breed that had attacked our stable. It helped that they'd decorated the roof of the building with a variety of severed pony heads. Both raiders were armed with rifles. I really didn't want to pit the accuracy of a shotgun, revolver, or auto pistol against them until I was close enough to make it not matter.

Their patrol along the roof would take them out of sight for a

minute or so. I could run for the front doors then. There was just one catch. I looked back at P-21. “Well?”

He didn’t seem to know, himself. Finally, though, he looked at me and nodded once. I watched the two, and when they were out of sight I hurried towards the front door. P-21 managed to keep up for the short sprint. Then I glimpsed the word above the front door: ‘School’. Somehow, I didn’t like this one bit.

Stepping inside was like entering a mouth full of rotten meat. Flies buzzed everywhere around coagulating pools of blood. Bodies…no, these were body parts…lay strewn and scattered like gory decorations. I nearly slipped on the layer of sludge covering the floor. Glancing behind me, I saw P-21 looking with his stoic expression at the butchered corpses draped across the front desk.

Then the raider stepped around the corner. Her eyes widened and the brown mare ducked her head to pull an automatic pistol from a holster on her left foreleg. She didn’t even aim before starting to fire wildly.

I only had thirteen or fourteen shells and... and I hadn’t bothered to check how much ammo I had for the revolver or auto pistols. As she started to fire, I triggered S.A.T.S. and placed two shots in her pockmarked face. Executing the spell, I watched in slow motion as her face disintegrated in chunks of bone, blood, and brain. Unfortunately, as her corpse fell to join the others, I heard yells from within the school. The shouts, cackles, and errant gunshots left no confusion as to their intent.

One raider holding a magically levitated knife and another with a sawed-off shotgun raced to the front door of the school. S.A.T.S. was still recharging, so I narrowed my eyes and filled the doorway with spray after spray of buckshot. The bucks finally dropped, but I definitely didn’t like the five rounds it had taken. I began moving to check Sawed Off for more, but the sound of another raider approaching sent me ducking behind the counter. I levitated a stream of shotgun shells from my bag, each one clicking into place inside the magazine tube. I racked the pump action shotgun as I rose and spotted the fourth raider advancing with steady shots that chewed through my cover.

P-21 reached over and lifted a dismembered pony’s head. He looked at me grimly and then pushed the head above the counter’s edge. Instantly the head jerked as the raider swapped targets. I rose, hit S.A.T.S., and ended his barrage with two solid shots to the torso.

P-21 immediately dropped the head and wiped his hooves on my barding. I just looked at him a moment, wondering if he really just did that. Then he flushed. “Sorry.”

There weren’t any more approaching at the moment, though my E.F.S. detected at least a half dozen further in. It also identified some non-hostiles. I went from slain raider to slain raider and simply unloaded whatever they had into my bags. At least half of it seemed to be trash, but my PipBuck handled the inventory well enough. It even displayed the approximate weapon quality; no surprise that most of these weapons were junk. Unfortunately, Sawed Off had apparently never heard of proper ammunition care, and the few shells he had would probably be more dangerous to anypony trying to fire them than whatever they were being aimed at.

Glancing back to make sure P-21 was behind me, I advanced down the central hallway, looking to the left and right and trying to keep track of the red marks ahead of me, alert for rapid movement that suggested they were charging. The raiders had spared little effort defiling the school. Most of the posters meant to motivate learning were defaced or torn down. Ruined books covered the floors in heaps of moldy paper. I peeked into one classroom that had been turned into a slaughterhouse, the foals’ desks transformed into butcher’s blocks.

I was so fixated on the room, I almost missed the butcher. He, however, didn’t miss me. I turned just in time to see a gore-coated raider emerging from a bathroom swinging a cleaver at my neck. Once again, my security barding saved me from being crippled or decapitated, but by the Goddesses, it hurt. I entered S.A.T.S. and hit him point blank with a shotgun blast to his head; much more effective.

Much more noisy, too. Two more raiders came running, and they had rifles. I was at the wrong end of a shooting gallery. I leaped into the butcher shop, finding cover behind the stout teacher’s desk. My neck throbbed terribly, but I couldn’t look away. I waited for a head to come around the corner. Instead, there was a laugh and two round metal apples clanked through the doorway, rolling around the floor.

The explosion was more stunning than the blow from the cleaver. The desk deflected a little of the blast, but my entire left side was coated in blood. Personally, I was amazed at how little pain there

actually was. Strike that. I was amazed that I was actually alive. The fact that they hesitated before rushing in gave me the time to drink down a healing potion. That, unfortunately, resulted in me making noise.

Another metal apple came in through the doorway. Not *this* time. As it hit the ground, I wrapped my magic around it and tossed it back out the door. A yell and a muffled crump sent rattling chunks of metal back through the doorway. I was limping as badly as P-21 when I stepped out. They were still moving. Two shells fixed that.

I glanced down the hall. No reinforcements. Were they deaf, waiting, or running? No, the three marks were steady. I guessed that they were setting up some kind of trap. Good. I looked over at P-21, who'd survived the explosions unscathed. My horn glowed as the revolver floated to him. "Take it. I need your help."

"I told you…"

"Unless you give me a reason right now, I don't care," I shouted at him. My barding was half shredded, and my hide wasn't much better.

"If you give me that gun, I might shoot you again," he replied softly, not looking at me.

"If you don't know how to fire a gun, it's not that hard. You point the end with the hole at the bad guys and pull the trigger. The bad guys, not my butt," I added for emphasis. Okay, there was a lot more to it than that, but I finally got him talking.

"I know the basics." And now he looked at me with that calm look. "I mean that, if I have a weapon, I might kill you."

...Okay, what?

I looked at the remaining three hostiles. They were still holding steady. I wondered if they could have imagined why we were holding back. Probably not. "Okay. Elaborate for me?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he replied firmly. "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to remember it." He clenched his eyes shut and started to shake. "Just... I can't. I don't know what I'd do with a gun right now, Blackjack. Please... don't make me use one... " he begged softly, keeping his eyes squeezed shut.

I opened my mouth with a hard comment in mind, then closed it with a grimace. No. Watcher had suggested we become friends. I really never had any in 99. Not till Marmalade... and that lasted all of five minutes. Being in security, I always made folks nervous that I'd bring trouble on their heads. I thought about Rivets and

Midnight. I'd have to talk to him like I talked to them... minus the whole sex thing. Pity, but for a breeder, he didn't take that well. "You don't want to talk…all right. I'm not going to make you talk. It's just that there's two of us here and only one of us shooting."

There was a guilty look in his eyes. "I don't trust myself with a gun right now…" He looked away. "I'm glad you know who you're supposed to shoot. I feel like I want to shoot everypony. You know who to shoot." Somehow, I suspected he wasn't talking about my PipBuck's Eyes-Forward Sparkle.

Him shooting me in the farmhouse... and trying to fire again after I hit the safety... those had been accidents... right?

I remembered back at the flooded fields farmhouse looking at the figurine in the dirt. *Because you seem to know what's right.* That... don't think about it now, Blackjack. You're in the middle of a nightmare. Try to focus.

I took a deep breath and did my best to summon my most Nightmare-Moon-may-care smile. Now was no time to show doubt; hell, I needed to convince myself as much as him. "Oh, well, that's simple. We just need to get you another PipBuck. Yellow, be mellow. Red, it's dead." I was glad to see him return my smile… okay, it was a half-assed smile, but right now I felt like half my posterior was blasted off. I noticed a red line creeping slowly towards us.

"I don't think that would help much. In 99, all the PipBuck showed me was red," he said as he looked at the revolver and pushed it back towards me. "I'll try and back you up however I can. Just please don't ask me to do this."

I could try and force him to carry the revolver. It seemed so ridiculous here in the Wasteland. We were sitting in a school that had been transformed into a grisly morgue, but he still refused. Somehow, even in all this, he wouldn't cross that line. I doubted that when Watcher talked about us being friends, it involved me shoving a gun into P-21's mouth and sending him to kill ponies.

"All right. Just promise me you'll tell me why some day. Okay, P-21?"

Relief flooded his features. "You'll be the first to know. Probably because you're the only pony in the Wasteland who has a clue what 99 was like, but still…first to know." He was trying for a joke! It was so precious.

Great…I almost couldn't help but laugh. Almost. I watched as the

sneaking raider poked her face around the corner. I had to admit, the expression on her face was pretty funny. I smiled right at her, despite the apple-shaped bomb in her hooves. I looked right into her jaundiced face and yellowed eyes with their tiny, pinprick pupils and gave a little shake of my head. The shotgun floating three feet from her head probably helped. Instantly, my PipBuck tag swapped from red to yellow as she dropped the bomb and raced for the exit as fast as her legs could carry her.

Somehow, the sight of a raider running from the two of us struck me as unbelievably funny, given that I was half blown up and P-21 was unarmed. I couldn't imagine what the sound of my laughter would mean to the raiders. "All right. Let's finish this," I said as I walked past the apple bomb, carefully moving it inside the classroom. Sure, it looked simple enough, but I sure didn't want to touch it. I had no idea how big a boom it would make. I preferred weapons with a more predictable area of destruction.

I made my way towards the second classroom. As I neared the door, one knife-wielding raider sprang at me. Knife vs. shotgun. Really lousy odds for her, but it cost me two of my four remaining shells. Only one raider remained with the friendlies. I trotted past more scattered filth, heedless of the risk. At this moment, I just wanted it over with and cleared. The other classroom had a pen of sorts constructed of chain-link fence in the far corner. Within were a half-dozen filthy, terrified-looking fillies. The raider crouched behind them.

"Cunt," he said, then gripped the stem of an apple bomb with his foul brown teeth. What was it with raiders and that word? Still, something felt off. He wasn't acting suicidal. He was acting cocky. Then again, if I shot him and that apple thing exploded, then this would definitely have an unhappy ending. Carefully, I shifted the shotgun into my front hooves and turned it to place the trigger in my mouth like I'd seen other ponies do. Then I slowly advanced. It had to be the most awkward approach attempted in pony history, but it was working. His grin wavered as he looked confused and then worried. Finally I took a step too far and he yanked the stem from the apple.

Or, rather, tried to. My horn glowed as I focused all my magical strength on that little stem and keeping it connected. Step by step I moved up till the barrel of the pump action pointed through the chain link. I tried to make eye contact with the foals, looking to the

floor. One or two caught the look. “Met downd, girs,” I said around a mouthful of trigger. They hit the deck, and his eyes widened in panic. S.A.T.S. ensured the shots would go where they were needed. My last two shots rang out, and his ribcage vanished. The assorted viscera within came slithering out in a messy heap over his hostages, but at least they were still alive. Suddenly, the girls started screaming. Then there were two bangs from behind me and an explosion and everything turned white and then dark.

* * *

I was still alive. This hurt way too much to be death. I was stripped and face down on a mattress. He’d warned me that he’d try to kill me. I just didn’t actually expect him to do it...

I heard voices and glanced over to see P-21 surrounded by the nervous fillies eating some of the two century-old food from the farm, as well as what I assumed were the raiders’ supplies. Apparently, it was still edible. A small fire crackled in a trashcan next to them. The foals all wore ragged cloaks draped over their flanks. My back was wrapped in layers of medical bandages and movement made everything hurt. My low groan tipped P-21 off, and he rose to trot to my side. “How are you feeling?”

“You shot me in the back,” I groaned.

“I didn’t... ” he stammered.

“*Somepony* shot me. In the *back*.” I growled, glancing up at him. Was I going to have to get used to this?

“He really didn’t, ma’am,” a little filly said, trembling slightly. “See?” She pointed with a hoof towards the door.

There were some extra raiders in the hallway. “The one you spared must have gone for help. They snuck up behind you, and I thought they’d killed you,” P-21 said quietly.

“And who killed them?” I asked as I looked at him with a cocked brow. He suddenly looked sheepish. I looked at the scorch marks around the body parts of the raiders.

“Well, they walked right past me after you, and they were just standing together, and that apple bomb was just sitting there,” he said, looking troubled. “I didn’t realize just what it would do.”

“It’s called a grenade. It blows ponies up! Everypony knows that!” a pink filly called out as she lifted her face from her box of cereal, her muzzle coated in sugary dust. It was a little disturbing how she

cleaned it all away in one lick.

"He's funny," a teal filly said as she grinned at P-21. "He was actually apologizing to 'em after they was blowed up!" One of the girls laughed. The rest had expressions ranging from pained to tired to even happy. They didn't look *scared*. Though with how I must have looked right then, it'd be a miracle if anypony was scared of me.

"I don't think I'll be able to do that again anytime soon," he said softly, flushing as he looked at the girls who were tucking into the raiders' supplies. There were boxes of it tossed in the corner. Food that old couldn't possibly be healthy, but it was apparently quite tasty. Why were the raiders butchering ponies if they had other food, though? It was just crazy.

I looked at the teal one, who, aside from looking very sore under her tail, seemed the oldest and most composed. "So, what's your name, how did you get here…and how loudly do I have to whine before you share some of that with me?" I said as I pointed at a box of dried apple shavings in her hooves.

She blinked, then grudgingly parted with half the box. I was a little skeptical till the first bite, and then my eyes went wide. I'd never tasted anything so sweet and tasty in my life. My PipBuck's little radiation clicks went unnoticed as I chowed down. Sugar Apple Bombs leaped right to the top of my favorites list!

"As for my name, I'm Scoodle. Them raiders grabbed us while we was out lookin' fer stuff fer the Finders."

Scoodle? Well…who was I to judge? "My name's Blackjack."

"P-21," he chimed in.

"Y'all got funny names." That seemed to count in our favor. The teal pony lifted the box of Sugar Apple Bombs and poured them into her mouth, chewing frantically before letting out a loud belch, much to the giggles of the other fillies. She pointed at P-21. "He's got a great nose for findin' stuff. Got into that safe in the office and everything. Just click and open! Y'all should join up with 'em."

He nudged a duffel bag closer to me. "There weren't any shotgun shells, but there's another automatic pistol and some ammo." He seemed a bit put out about finding a gun in a school. "The nurse's office also had some bandages and stuff, but we used most of it on you."

"Thanks." I looked at Scoodle. "So what's a Finder?" I asked as I felt the most wonderful buzz running through me. The look she

gave me suggested I was an idiot for not knowing this bit of information. “We’re not from around here.”

“Stable ponies, huh? Don’t know nothing.” She shook her head in disappointment, then adopted a lecturing posture and a tone so like the Overmare that I fought not to giggle. “Finders are a buncha ponies what find stuff. They trade and swap fer the darnedest stuff. Even junk, but they pay good for ammo, weapons, or anything we find that we don’t use. They’ll trade with almost anypony.”

“So you’re Finders?” Apparently they were not, from the sour look I received.

“No… ” she said as she stood with pride to show the tiny patch crudely sewn onto the ragged plaid cloak. It was a little soiled white cloth showing a rearing filly. “We’re Crusaders.”

“But…where are your parents?” Immediately, they all looked sad or angry. I got the distinct sensation that I’d just fucked up, but I couldn’t see how. If they were kids, they had to have… somepony? Right?

P-21 answered me in a whisper, “Blackjack, they’re *orphans*.”

* * *

I really didn’t want to move, but the sugary goodness compelled me. That, and I wanted to peek around Withers real quick and see if there were any more red marks on the E.F.S. I still wouldn’t look up at the sky. It made me feel silly. These children had been captured, tortured, raped, and had watched some of their colt friends get killed, and here I was scared of the sky! Still, I had to admit, the cool air was quite nice. I’d never realized till now how thick and humid 99’s air had been.

There was a billboard at the edge of Withers where the road straightened to the southeast. ‘Welcome to Hoofington, city of tomorrow!’ read the caption over an image of soaring gray towers connected by bridges. In the sky above, seven pegasi flew like an arrowhead trailing crackling thunder. ‘See Shadowbolt Tower!’ declared bold words in one starburst. ‘Home to the Hoofington Reapers!’ announced another burst next to a grinning gap-toothed cartoon buck in a black helmet. ‘Tour Robronco’s Headquarters. Free for fillies and colts!’ a little robot pony said with a wide smile.

There was one thing off, though. Written across the billboard, in faded red spray-paint, was, ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.’

Not exactly the best advertisement for the city. I could barely make out an eerie green light far in the distance down the road.

The plinking of a piano and the twang of a banjo filled the night, preluding the spritebot's arrival. I narrowed my eyes as it bobbed through the air past me. For just a moment, I thought it was going to continue into the dark when it paused and turned towards me. "Watcher?" I asked, sitting up a little.

The obnoxious music cut off at once, and the little flying machine flew in front of me. "Well, you're alive," said the tinny little voice. "Glad to see it."

"Glad to be it," I replied with a wince. I smiled as I looked at the bandages that half covered my body. "Half blown up, but yeah. Alive." I looked back at the bot. Something niggled in my mind and I frowned. "You put this location tag in my PipBuck, didn't you?"

There was a long, awkward silence. "Well, raider bases are a good source of ammunition and other goods…" the voice said awkwardly.

"No doubt, and I bet there are lots of those all over the place." I lay down, folding my hooves in front of me. "You knew, didn't you? About the Crusaders?"

The spritebot hesitated, and I felt he was picking his words carefully. "I might have had some intelligence about them being held till slavers could pick them up."

I was angry, but I wasn't sure exactly why. "Why didn't you just tell us?"

"Please, don't. Do you have any idea what it's like to tell people six fillies are being held by raiders only to have them turn and run the opposite direction? Or, worse, kill the raiders and sell the foals to slavers themselves?" There was anguish in his voice that said he knew all too well. "I just wanted to point you in the right direction and hope it would work out."

I sighed as I lowered my chin to my hooves. "Do me a favor. Next time, tell me. Alright?"

The spritebot hovered a moment longer, then resumed playing the banjo as it bobbed into the night.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Telekinetic Precision - You've got a steady horn on your head for when you need to count sand, thread a needle, or keep a pin in

a grenade.

Chapter 3: Learning Curve

"I'm so sorry…"

We waited in the Withers public school till morning. Really, once the flies and the reek of rotting meat reached a certain point, all of us were glad to get out of there. I still resembled a mummy with all the bandages coiled around me, but their healing magic was doing the trick. Though it'd taken two healing potions to bring me back from the gunshots to my back and the back of my head, my luck was still holding out. The first had just grazed my skull rather than turning it into all kinds of bloody brains, and the second had been slowed by what was left of my barding and lodged in the muscle at the base of my neck. Fortunately, even P-21's minimal medical skills were up to removing it.

I'd taken some time looking at a map on the wall of the classroom. It was badly stained and aged, but I could make out the name of Withers and a road leading to what seemed like a big city. Hoofington. One of the cities Hoss had mentioned when he described the balefire bombs going off. There were other strange posters rotting in their frames. In the office, a pink pony with her mane striped almost identical to mine, but pink and gray rather than black and red, stared out with a grin above a caption that read 'Trouble can start in the smallest places'. A purple unicorn sat on the library wall, looking clever and surrounded by floating books, saying 'We need every idea'. Well, that's what I thought it said. Some wit had scratched out 'idea' and written 'penis'. I got the joke. In the nurse's office, a soulful yellow pegasus hugged a bunny while telling me 'Little ouchies are still ouchies'.

I knew there had been a war. Even security ponies had to learn history in 99. Zebras had attacked and attempted to exterminate all of ponykind. There'd been six ministries that had done all they could to end the war and find peace for ponykind. They'd failed. It might have been unfair of me, but I hoped that they'd done more to

try and end the war than just make pithy quotes for posters.

It had been a little amusing, and a little disturbing, to see Scoodle handling the revolver from the farmhouse as casually as if it were a toy. No. Not a toy. She wasn't playing with it. She understood it was a weapon. She understood how to use it. She didn't even have her cutie mark yet and she was better with guns than P-21. There was something profoundly depressing about that. When we'd gathered the weapons and ammo from all the raiders, it'd proved a somewhat daunting amount of firearms.

"How are we going to carry all that?" I asked as I looked at the heap. There were at least four rifles, a shotgun, a revolver, the automatic pistols, two knives, a cleaver, two grenades, and the assorted junk we'd taken from the raiders. Between P-21 and me, we'd be able to do it, but it would still be quite a weight.

"Ya don't need ta carry all of it," Scoodle said as she looked at the heap. "Well, ya wouldn't if ya had some tools. What ya can do is take 'em apart and just put the best pieces together."

"Take them apart?" I levitated a rifle and concentrated. It was tough to telekinetically hold an object while messing with one small part of it, but I was able to unscrew and disassemble the various portions of the weapon. Immediately, I saw what the teal pony had been talking about. Some of the screws on one rifle were almost rust-free. Another had an intact slide. One had a superior barrel. Of course, I had to listen closely to her directions as I assembled one weapon from four. When finished, my PipBuck suddenly showed a much higher value for my new rifle than any of the original four. How it knew that was slowly driving me crazy. When I finished I loaded five rounds into the clip and heard a comforting click as it loaded smoothly.

"What about the rest of this?" P-21 asked as he opened up the duffel bag. To be honest it looked more like a garbage bag with all the junk inside.

Scoodle looked at it with a smirk. "Well, if it's light, take it. There'll be somepony that'll buy it for caps. If it's heavy and worthless, just toss it unless yer close to a buyer. Most ponies haul around as much as they can carry and when they find something good they'll drop some more junk. Otherwise let the Finders worry about the coffee cups and stuff." She looked in the bag and the teal pony frowned, seeming to be thinking of something unpleasant, and then smiled. "Oh. And keep the caps. They're money."

Bottle caps? Did they really use bottle caps for money? From all the glares Scoodle received from the others, it was pretty clear they weren't happy with her for mentioning it. "Scoo!" shouted the pink pony, Boing, "We're supposed to tell stable folk they're trash, remember?"

I saw that the teal pony that had been so helpful was getting upset so I adopted my easiest smile as I looked down at the fillies. "Well, I'm pretty sure she just wanted to be helpful after all the things that happened last night. Remember?" Scoodle definitely perked up at that, but the others still didn't look too happy. I couldn't blame them. I'd be ticked too if I saw some rube talked out of unloading a stack of bits back in 99.

Once we were outside and under the clouds I felt a little vertigo. I still didn't look up. I'd have liked to think that I'd get over this eventually, but somehow I didn't think I would. Not completely. Still, as long as I kept my gaze at or below the horizon I felt with it enough to move on. The road we walked along was faded and crumbly, but I felt a little more confidence with a clear path in front of me. While the open spaces to my sides weren't as overwhelming as above, I still liked to pretend I was surrounded by nice straight halls.

At first I'd been nervous about accompanying the Crusaders in my current condition, particularly with P-21 being so stubborn about not carrying a firearm. Scoodle assured me that the Crusaders could handle themselves and that the raiders' capture was simply a case of bad luck. I passed out what weapons and ammo we had, saving the rifle for myself. I might not have known the specifics, but I knew which end went bang. I admit, I was skeptical as many of the Crusaders chattered quite openly about what would happen when they got to 'town'. Then I noticed that Scoodle and Boing weren't joining in the conversations. When we encountered some strange spiny animals rooting through the rotten ditch beside the road, all they had to do was stop and the conversations ended. The five unarmed fillies disappeared into cover on the far side of the road. In fact, given how quickly P-21 disappeared as well, I was feeling just a little bit exposed standing alone in the middle of the road!

Only once Scoodle and I had finished off the last of the strange mutated animals did my worries about them fade. If it hadn't been for my E.F.S. I wouldn't have known where any of the others were hiding. Once the danger was past the Crusaders came out and at

once carefully carved off some pieces of meat, wrapping them in some scrap paper from my duffel bag.

I tried to hide my disgust as I asked, “What are you doing with that, Scoodle?”

“Huh?” She looked up with a bloody knife clenched in her jaws; I did my best not to shudder. She stuck the tip in the corpse and answered brightly, “Oh, this? Radhog is good eatin’!”

I just turned my back and busied myself with not being nauseous or watching them finish their work. I’d stick with the Sugar Apple Bombs.

The trip along the road was made far easier by my E.F.S. picking out threats before they actually engaged us. The most prevalent were the bloatsprites and radhogs. The wildlife seemed incredibly aggressive and even lone radhogs didn’t hesitate to charge our group. I took the opportunity to talk with Scoodle about the Wasteland. She seemed to delight in knowing more about the wastes than P-21 or myself.

“See, there’s three kinds o’ folks. You got folks that’ll help ya out, folks that’ll put a bullet through yer noggin, and folks that won’t lift a hoof fer ya, but probably won’t kill ya less they got reason. Make sense, Blackjack?”

“Plenty. So which are the Crusaders?” I asked with a little smile, half teasing and half curious.

“We’re the third, ‘less yer on yer own. Most folk are,” she said without hesitation. “Crusaders look out for our own and any filly or colt what needs protectin’. Past that we take care of ourselves.”

“Not to insult you, but how do you take care of yourselves at all?” P-21 asked in his calm voice.

“What, ya think because we’re young we’re helpless?” And with a flick of her head she scooped the pistol out of her holster and pointed it right at his head as if she had a S.A.T.S. spell herself. Then she grinned around the handle before spitting the pistol back into her holster. “We don’t fight lest we gotta. We stick together and hide when we can. We got lots of forts all around we can hole up in if we need ta,” she said as she trotted along. “See, we can get in places big ponies like yerselves can’t. We find all kinds o’ good stuff in cellars and tunnels and stuff.”

She sure seemed confident, and I reminded myself that these children lived in a brutal environment. Weak things didn’t seem to last long in the Wasteland, that was for sure. “What about these

Finders?"

"Shoot, Finders care only about the caps. You got caps, they're yer best buds in the world. Ya got nothing and they'll piss on ya soon as look at ya. Finders ain't nopony's friends and don't you believe 'em when they say otherwise." Scoodle and the other Crusaders definitely didn't seem very happy, even though we were apparently heading towards their town.

"So who might help us?" I asked her.

"Help ya with what?" she asked in return.

That was a very good question.

P-21 and I hadn't really talked about what our next step was. I had one goal, but I didn't want to involve P-21 just yet. I wasn't really sure how he'd handle it. Beyond that…"Information. Somepony attacked my stable. I want to know why and what for."

I described Deus and the filly immediately looked concerned. "Well from what you said, I'm guessing he's a Reaper."

"Why does that just scream 'bad' to me?" I asked sarcastically, getting a smirk in return.

"Reapers is what happens when raiders grow up. They're the baddest of the baddest. Don't take shit off nopony. There's only a hundred of 'em, cause the only way to join is ta kill another Reaper hoof to hoof. Monsters one and all," Scoodle said darkly.

"Arloste's a Reaper now," Boing said to Scoodle.

"Arloste's too nice ta be a Reaper, so it'd never happen," Scoodle countered.

"Arloste?" I asked, curious about this little digression.

"Crusader. One o' the first. Got us started with the reverend," Boing said as she bounced on her hooves in glee. "I heard they had a thing but then they had a fight and she went to join the Reapers."

"So what, I should go and ask a Reaper for info?" That sounded just a little suicidal to me.

"Well not unless you want a busted leg." Scoodle looked down at P-21's limp and flushed a little. "Sorry." Looking back at me she went on, "Reapers is folk though. Gotta cozy up to 'em, or pay 'em off in caps. The only time Reapers join up is if somepony's crazy enough to attack 'em at the Arena."

"Anypony else that might help? The first kind?" I added with a small smile.

Scoodle seemed to mentally scan her list. "Well there's DJ Pon3 on the radio. He's off in Manehattan, but he knows stuff what's going

on everywhere. You can hear him all over the place." P-21 and I shared a look and added it to the mind bogglingly long list of 'what the fuck are they talking about?' "There's also them Society ponies. I guess they technically count since they do help. Bunch of stuck up thoroughbreds that give ya a meal and then tell ya how thankful ya should be for getting it."

"They sound like a joy," I muttered. "Anypony else?"

"Well, ya can talk ta the college ponies. Call themselves the coll… co…um…well most folks just call 'em Eggheads. They're way over past the Core, but you might run across 'em. They wanna fix Equestria. Dunno how. They're nice to us most often. If we ever come down with worms we always ask them fer help. They got this medicine that'll clean ya out lickity-split!"

I winced at that. "Thanks for the tip."

"Oooh, you forgot the Steel Rangers!" Boing said as she made machine gun noises.

"I didn't forget 'em. Wasn't gonna mention 'em," she said sourly at the pink filly. "Rangers might help ya. They might not. Might shoot ya. They got their own things going on, mostly trying ta figger out how them roboponies work in the Core. I can tell ya they won't give us a glass o' piss."

"Roboponies?" P-21 asked, curiously.

"That's what they are, so don't you laugh. Pony gadgets wandering all over the Core. Dangerous critters, too. You see a pony made of wires and lights, you best run. Can't kill 'em." Scoodle frowned in thought. "There's the 'Clavers, if you want, but I don't trust 'em one bit."

"The Enclave are pegasus ponies! They're gonna swoop down and save us all!" Boing cried with a little cheer. A few of the other fillies also looked hopeful.

"I'll believe 'em when I see the sun," Scoodle replied sullenly. "They give me the willies."

"They're no worse than ghouls!" Boing countered, "And ghouls will eat ya!"

Scoodle caught my look. She sighed and rolled her eyes, explaining to the clueless stable ponies, "Ghouls is ponies that are…well…they look dead. But they ain't! I been to Meatlocker, and they wasn't nothing but friendly to me." Her certainty faded a little and she amended, "Well, some of 'em might try and eat ya, but they ain't no different from raiders."

Ghouls. Enclave. Steel Rangers. Eggheads. Society. Reapers. Finders. Crusaders. I was suddenly getting a picture of Hoofington as a city with different stables all around it, each group fighting against the others for control and dominance.

P-21 looked at Scoodle as he asked, "You mentioned the Core? What is that?"

"The Core? It's what got blowed up in the big war. I heard there was all kinds of tech and stuff being studied there. Least it was before the zebras blowed it ta smithereens."

"Wasn't the zebras!" Boing jumped in. "Them ponies made something what blowed up in their faces!"

"I heard that Princess Celestia sent the whole city to the moon right before the bombs went kablewy," offered a gray unicorn filly.

Another quickly shook her head. "Nuh-uh. It was a dragon. Biggest, scariest dragon of all. He breathed green fire."

"That's what the bombs did, ya ninny!" Scoodle roared. I winced at their noise, wondering if this was how they had gotten caught in the first place.

I drifted a little to the side to let them argue over what, precisely, destroyed Hoofington while I leaned towards P-21. "So what do you think?"

He looked at me with his level, cool gaze. "I think they should be quieter. Unless they're trying for more radhog meat."

"I mean about what we should do? While I don't mind helping ponies who need it, I doubt that Reaper has given up. We need information." I lifted my PipBuck. "We need to learn about that Reaper. We need to find out what EC-1101 is. Why it was worth attacking Stable 99."

"Did the Overmare say anything about it, Blackjack?" P-21 asked as he looked at the bones of ponies lying along the road.

Oh. I'd completely forgotten about the files he'd transferred to my PipBuck. "Um…not yet?"

"There might be a clue about EC-1101," he pointed out in his calm, reasonable voice that was just a little aggravating.

"I know. I know! I'll check it when we stop," I said in a soft huff. Then I noticed Boing listening in. "Something up, Boing?" I asked, not sure if I should be angry or not.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing!" she said with a giggle as she bounced along back over to the other Crusaders.

That's a lot of bones. As we proceeded southwest along the road,

the skeletal remains grew thicker and thicker, and the Crusaders grew quieter and quieter. Rags and rusty bits intermixed with the bleached bones as scattered white lumps turned into nearly a solid sheet. Then mounds and piles of gleaming white remains rose to either side of the road.

My PipBuck chirped. 'Boneyard' appeared on the map. I noticed the girls weren't talking anymore. Now they looked wary, and walked right in the middle of the road cleared of the remains.

"What happened here?" P-21 asked, keeping his voice low.

Scoodle looked at us and then pointed ahead. "When Hoof went boom, lots of ponies tried ta run for it along the road." She pointed the way we came. "That way's Manehattan…and when Manehattan went boom, lots of ponies from there came running fer the Hoof. Thousands and thousands. They all got bunched up here, and died." She glanced warily at the heaps of bones around us. "Don't touch anything."

"Why not?" As far as I could see there was lots of stuff for the taking, and not a single threat to be seen.

"There's bad stuff here. Ghouls. And Tiara." That was all she said before she bit down on the pistol again and continued walking.

The whispering was beginning to creep me out, but I wasn't about to raise my voice not knowing what might be around. There were hundreds of busted wagons and carts scattered amid the skeletal remains. Lot of boxes, even some ammo crates. I looked at the Crusaders keeping an eye all around them and ignoring the ammunition right beside us.

"We should take some of this," I whispered as we passed a tipped-over wagon half buried by bones. I couldn't see a single target on the E.F.S. aside from the eight of us.

Scoodle looked at me with an expression of horror and outrage, shaking her head.

"There's nothing here." I couldn't explain the PipBuck's targeting system to somepony that had never worn one before.

"I think you should listen to her," P-21 murmured.

That did it for some reason. Fillies scared of bones I could accept, but being told what to do by a pony that wouldn't carry a weapon himself just annoyed the shit out of me. My mane was itching in irritation and I wasn't about to pass up something that could keep all of us safe. "It's fine!" I said as I reached out with my horn, grabbed a nice heavy ammo box, and pulled it from the bones. The

bones clattered in to fill the void left behind, filling the still air with a dry rattle.

Then I saw the creature within the heap of bones. It looked like a pony that had been cooked past well done, and now that it was exposed it began to move! It reared up and opened its maw wide, letting out a scream that no living pony could make. And then, it was answered.

Instantly, my PipBuck came alight with red bars as horrific screams raised in the air. The mounds around me shifted and from the depths emerged chunks of rotting meat clinging to pony frames. Shredded lips allowed jagged mouths to open far wider than any living pony's could. There was nowhere to run; they stepped out onto the road in both directions.

"Heads!" was all Scoodle shouted before drawing her gun and taking aim at the running forms. I wasn't familiar with a rifle at all, but I knew I should use it before they closed the distance. I popped S.A.T.S., but the rifle required a great deal more energy per shot than my pistol or shotgun. I carefully lined up my shot in that moment of frozen time, then released the spell. I could almost see the bullet as it spun through the air, striking the ghoul pony in the head and blasting it apart into meaty chunks. Without S.A.T.S. I had a harder time lining up the shots. What took one round to the head would require four to the chest.

The Crusaders were holding up better than I'd anticipated. Maybe the fact we were ridiculously outnumbered and probably going to die helped them focus on putting every round in the screaming ghoul ponies' heads. P-21, unarmed, simply kicked and shoved to try and keep the ghouls off the Crusaders.

Scoodle's revolver blasted ghoul after ghoul, not firing till she had a head shot. She would be an amazing markspony when she grew up; a pony to be feared and respected. But as she turned to gun down one, two others pounced upon her. S.A.T.S. recharging, I tried desperately to line up the rifle, but the shots failed to drop them. One ghoul pony gripped Scoodle by her haunches, the other by her shoulders. With monstrous strength they each pulled their half.

The teal filly was ripped in two before my eyes.

I fell into a moment of horror that felt like a S.A.T.S. that would never end as I saw with terrible clarity the organs and viscera pouring out over the asphalt. I smelled the wash of blood even over the unnatural reek of the undead monsters around me. I saw the

stunned look on her face as she slowly fell, and a pony that had weathered raiders and who knew what else died because of my stupidity.

I knew that I would never stop seeing that image for as long as I lived.

"No!" I roared, rage seeming to guide my shots. Despite my tears blurring my vision, I laid down a rain of fire such that even the ghouls were momentarily beaten back. Every other bullet seemed to find skulls and vulnerable joints, though my horn ached from the effort. When the rifle clicked on an empty chamber, a telekinetic stream of bullets flowed from my bag into the magazine, and my attack continued. But there were more ghouls than I had bullets, and every second it seemed like more of the mindless monsters emerged from the bone piles.

Soon the rifle went from firearm to club; there were just too many and too close for it to be effective. I'd have given my teeth for some shotgun shells. The monsters were starting to surround and overwhelm us, snapping with their broken teeth and kicking with shattered hooves. I would happily have stayed there till I was torn to pieces, but there were five more Crusaders and P-21 on the line. They were all going to die, and it was my fault.

It couldn't get any worse than this, I thought.

I'd soon think to myself, 'Oh, silly Blackjack, it can *always* get worse.'

The scream from a nearby bonepile froze us all in place. A luminous green light spilled forth from a ghoul pony that at once started my PipBuck clicking. "Tiara!" the ghoul screamed, looking down at us with its baleful gaze. The presence of this glowing abomination was tempered by one saving grace: its presence made the hordes of ghouls back away momentarily. "Tiara? Is that you?"

Step by step, it approached, and my PipBuck began to click faster and faster. I glanced behind me at the scratched and clawed Crusaders. If there was any way I could get them out of this nightmare, I'd take it. I put on my best smile and approached the glowing ghoul pony. "Um…yes. It's me. Tiara." I looked at the glowing cutie mark etched in her blackened flank. Was it a mirror? No…A rattle? No…

"Really? I think I lost my glasses." Up close, I could see that the glasses weren't lost: they were melted. Glistening glass clung in cracked, fluid shards, the blackened metal frame now seared to the

flesh. Behind them, eyes glowed. She raised both her hooves with a creepy smile, then frowned as I hesitated. What was she doing, holding them up like she was going to do a…a hoofshake! I immediately tapped my hooves against hers. Instantly she smiled. "Bump, bump, sugarlump, rump!" she intoned, not seeming to notice me scrambling to match her moves. "Oh, it is you, Diamond Tiara! I've missed you so much!" She pulled me into an embrace, my PipBuck clicking like mad.

"Um…yes…it's been a long time... " I held the hug for as long as I dared before backing away. A glance at my PipBuck saw the needle entering the yellow. "Yes, it has been much too long. Work and all." Once more luck saved us as my eyes glanced at some of the rusty debris around us. A brown metal spoon caught my eye. "How have you been…ah…Spoon?" I prayed to the Goddesses that it was a part of her name and not something like ladle.

But my guess had been lucky enough to get a sigh of frustration. "Oh, it's been terrible since I lost my glasses. I think something very bad happened, and I was looking for somepony who might be able to direct me to the Ministry of Peace for a new pair! I simply can't process all these stable orders for Golden without my glasses." She leaned towards me and missed me leaning away. "Do you know what that pink hag told me? She said 'Silver Spoon, if you can't bake cupcakes, then you'll have to clean the pans!' Like, what does that even mean?"

"Well there's just so much…ah…work to do." I glanced over and saw a trio of ghouls devouring Scoodle while I chatted with the monster that was slowly irradiating us. "And speaking of work, I really should get back to it. Busy busy busy!" I said as I grimaced, fighting the urge to charge down the ghouls defiling the slain filly.

"You work far too hard at that silly prison. They should give you more time off." Her glowing eyes turned to the Crusaders and P-21. "Is that what you're doing now? I didn't think that you had to escort them yourselves." I opened and closed my mouth, at a loss, and simply gave a smile and an exaggerated shrug. She sighed. "We really should get together next week. You know, sometimes I think something terrible is going to happen. I really do."

Something terrible did happen. And a small part of it was my fault. "Well, take care of yourself, Silver Spoon." Then I looked at all the ghoul ponies waiting around us. "I don't suppose you could ask them to step aside?"

"Oh sure!" she said brightly as she faced the ghouls. "Like, get out of her way, losers, and find my glasses!" Slowly the yellow dots began to disappear as the ghouls dug their way into the bone mounds. "Well I'd better keep looking. Otherwise, that hag is going to have me scrubbing pans again…or whatever."

I dared to look back at Scoodle; nothing remained but bloody bone and scattered flesh. I tried to find an excuse to go and collect the remains. In truth, with my PipBuck's needle in the red, I almost wanted to stay a little longer, chatting with Silver Spoon till I was just as dead. I couldn't. I had six others who might need my protection, flimsy as it was.

We walked silently for several minutes before from behind us came the plaintive wail of "Tiara! Tiara! Where are you?"

* * *

It was half an hour before we exited the boneyard. It didn't take long for the radiation I'd been soaking in to catch up with me and have me puking up my lunch. I felt like crap. I deserved to feel like crap. My guts gurgled and every square inch of my body felt like it'd been beaten. The Crusaders didn't say a single word. They didn't look at me or each other, but I could almost hear their thoughts in the back of my mind saying over and over again 'She killed Scoodle for a box of *bullets*.'

Finally clear, I looked behind me, trying for some kind of smile… something…to make this not the utter disaster it was. "Safe and…" Only P-21 was behind me. "Sound…" I looked at the long dead grass and bare bushes along the road. There was no sign of the Crusaders to be had. "They left…" How profoundly insightful I'd become since I'd fucked up.

"Yeah. A little bit ago," he replied evenly as he looked along the road. "I think there's a house up there. We can rest and take care of you."

"I don't want to be taken care of," I muttered softly.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" P-21 walked in front of me, his sure blue eyes bearing down into mine. "Sometimes we don't get what we want," he said as he nudged me towards a single story house beside the road. "Sometimes we don't get to sit around and have pity parties for our mistakes. Sometimes we just have to keep going because, otherwise, we might as well just die."

"That's what…" I started to say.

He hit me hard enough to knock me on my side. I stared up into the sky and felt my guts churn and my pupils contract. "I'm sorry. Were you about to say you wanted to die? Is that it?" he said as he glared down at me. "If you were this weak, you should have just given yourself to Deus and been done with it."

"I killed Scoodle!" I yelled up at him. It felt like a confession.

"Yeah! You did, you fucking idiot!" he screamed back down at me. "Didn't I tell you to listen to her? Didn't you say to me that I know what's right when it comes to this sort of thing? But she's dead, Blackjack, and unless you wallowing in pity or dying will somehow magically bring her back to life then this is accomplishing nothing except indulging in your own selfish wishes!"

I slowly opened my eyes, looking into his. He hated me. I hated me. Yet no matter how much I wanted to be done, I had to admit that he was right. Me dying right now wouldn't bring back Scoodle. It wouldn't right some great cosmic wrong and fix anything. It would just be another corpse in the wastelands. "I'm so sorry," I whispered softly.

"Then prove it, Blackjack. Live and don't ever fuck up like that again. Learn from this, because if you ever kill another pony through stupidity then I will fucking end you." He shoved his head under my shoulders and turned me over so I no longer stared into that terrible void above…only now I had an equally vast void within and I couldn't look away from it.

* * *

When I had been a little filly, I'd been drilled on the various stages of radiation poisoning. Nausea arrived first, followed rapidly by diarrhea, headache, muscle weakness and fatigue, bruising, mane loss, neurological disorders, and at the most extreme end, being cooked by the prolonged exposure. That was the 'flesh melting radiation' I was so concerned about. P-21 managed to get me into the derelict house after I'd shat myself but before I collapsed. Lying on my side on a filthy mattress, I felt like I was rotting from the inside out. That wasn't completely inaccurate, as the next time my bowels moved it was to dump blood over my hind legs. I drifted between guilt-ridden consciousness and blissful unconsciousness.

The worst was when I was stuck between the two. I saw Deus laughing at me as he sawed off my PipBuck with a chainsaw penis. The Overmare reminded me that I was ultimately disposable. The

little orange pony figurine told me that she could only help so much; I'd have to get up and be strong on my own. I felt eyeglasses melting on my face and covering my cheeks in cracked glass. Scoodle's severed head lay on the bed next to me and whispered softly over and over again, "Stable ponies don't know nothin'. Don't touch anything!"

All the while, P-21 nursed me back to health. He'd disappear for hours on end and I'd lie there wondering if he'd died or simply moved on. I didn't understand why he wasted his time with me, and yet he did. He didn't say a word of complaint, nor did he mention anything more about the events in the boneyard.

When I awoke to lucidity, feeling like a clogged up toilet, I saw the spritebot hovering before my face. Watcher cleared his throat. "So. Is this it?"

I carefully raised my head. The spritebot wasn't transforming into some face eating nightmare. "Watcher?"

"Yeah. That's me. What about you, Blackjack? Is this it? Is this the point where the Wasteland breaks you?" The spritebot looked particularly solemn as it hovered before me.

Carefully I pushed myself up and covered my face with my hooves. "I fucked up, Watcher."

"You're not the first. And if I can be blunt, your fuck-up only killed one filly. I've known ponies whose fuck-ups killed millions. So on the grand scale of fuck-ups, I think you're overrating yourself." Slowly I dropped my hooves from my face to look at the little machine as it went on. "So I'm asking you: is this it? Are you just a pony that wallows in self-pity and kicks herself for a mistake, or not? Because if this is it, then I'll leave you be. I can't help you. You can't help anypony."

It would have been easy to just fold right then. But as I sat on the edge of the bed, damn me, I couldn't help smiling as I looked at the machine. I reeked of vomit, crap, blood, and despair but I still felt my lips curl mirthlessly as I looked at the device. "Are you on that grand scale of fuck-ups too, Watcher?"

There was a long pause, and I wondered if I'd offended him to the point that he would just wash his hooves of me. "Yeah. I am."

"Did your fuck-up kill someone who didn't deserve it?" There was silence and I knew he wouldn't answer. He didn't have to. I sat there for a minute longer, looking at my hooves. "I was so proud when I saved those girls from those raiders. Now…" I closed my

eyes and grit my teeth. It would be so easy just to give up. Fold the hand. Cash in the chips. Quitters might not go bust, but they'd also never make it big. I opened my eyes as I looked right at the machine, wondering what Watcher's face looked like right now. Finally, I asked softly, "So how do I move on, Watcher?"

"You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow when your life is over that your lifetime will come close to making up for the wrong you committed." Watcher spoke so clear and true that I couldn't stop smiling and crying at the same time.

"Well. That sounds like a plan," I whispered. "So where do I start?"

* * *

Turns out, starting involved me getting off that filthy bed and finding some RadAway before I either died outright or grew a second head. While that might have doubled my smarts, it wasn't something I was exactly looking forward to. On the plus side, Watcher knew a possible source of the radiation-purging drug. A sky carriage had crashed with a load of Ministry of Peace supplies that hadn't been scavenged. The reason was simple.

"Those are some nasty looking reptiles," I muttered as I looked down at the lake surrounded by dead trees and gangly weeds. A small island on a cove was connected to the mainland by a rotten bridge. I could barely make out the sight of the upside down sky carriage mixed in with the remains of a gazebo. P-21 and I were crouched in the flattened remains of a small cottage a small ways above the gray waters of the small lake. 'Lake Macintosh' appeared on my PipBuck map.

I had no idea what the reptiles might be. No doubt if I put a hunk of their remains in my bag something would pop up. In his scavenging, P-21 had rounded up six rounds for the rifle and six shotgun shells. It would have to do.

"You're being stupid again," P-21 warned me.

"Ending me stupid?"

"No, just standard stupid."

"That means I'm improving," I said, and even he smiled at it,

shaking his head. I looked out at the gazebo and crashed carriage. The E.F.S. informed me that there were three, but, after the boneyard, I wasn't going to take it for granted. "I'm dying without that RadAway," I said as I slumped against the mossy foundation stones. "A few more days and I'll go like Hoss did. Say I'm wrong." He pressed his lips together as he scowled at me.

"So let me sneak over there and get it," he pressed.

"No," I replied firmly. "I appreciate all the help you've given me, P-21. I'm not going to let you risk your life for mine over this." He might be sneaky, but I had no idea if those mutated animals could sniff him out; I wasn't about to let him take that chance.

"Let me? You're dying of radiation poisoning, Blackjack. How are you planning to stop me?" he asked as he turned towards the ruined gazebo.

I just looked at him, then down at the lounging mutant alligators. The rifle came up and without any hesitation I fired a shot right into a mutant gator. It gave a bellow and rose out of the water, charging towards the two of us. P-21 stared at me with a scathing look that would do any raider proud, eyelid twitching, before he turned and ran for cover. "Sorry, P-21. I've got to save my own life this time," I said as I faced the enemy.

One way or another, it was about to be resolved. I triggered my S.A.T.S. and placed two rounds exactly in the forehead of my target. The fourth round caught his eye, and the beast staggered. The fifth missed. The final round, three past what I'd hoped to use, dropped the beast in its tracks. I discarded the rifle and backed away up the hill as rapidly as I could. The radiation poisoning and fever were slowing me down, but it still kept the gators in front of me.

Out came the shotgun as the two closed in. The recharge on my S.A.T.S. slowed to a crawl as I unloaded shot after shot into the leading crocodile. Three shots left. Two. One. The buckshot of the final round scattered its brains across its back.

Unfortunately, I was now out of ammo. This would normally be the point where I would die and P-21 would take over and probably do the Wasteland a lot more good. There was just one catch: I wasn't done paying for a little teal pony. As the gator lunged, my magic flipped the shotgun vertical and rammed it into the gator's mouth. It hissed and tried to claw at the pump action, the weapon bending under the ferocious strength of its jaws.

From my saddlebags I floated an apple-shaped grenade and

plunged it straight into the radigator's maw. My telekinesis plucked the stem from the tip as it disappeared down the gator's throat. Five…four…three…two…one…huh. The shotgun snapped in two and immediately I backed away, trying to draw out my last grenade.

The mutant gator exploded in a nice spray of faintly radioactive blood. Given the massive dose I'd already taken, I quickly moved away before I simply keeled over dead. I really didn't want to win and then fall over. Slowly I staggered my way down towards the rotten bridge and the gazebo.

P-21 emerged at my side. "Feeling better?" His tone might have been snide, but there was some sincerity in his question.

"A little bit," I replied. The wastelands were giving me a brutal education, but I would rise to the challenge. I'd be stronger, and I'd try to never let my stupidity endanger another pony if I could. "I know you wanted to help me, P-21. I'm sorry that I couldn't let you this time."

He rolled his eyes and gave a long sigh. "I'm back in the stable again." I detected more than a little bitterness in that comment.

I looked over at him in confusion as we walked over the bridge. "Huh?"

He rounded on me, teeth bared as he glared with undisguised anger. "My whole life, I've had mares telling me what I can and can't do. I wasn't even allowed the option of turning a mare down if she was on my breeding rotation." He gave a little snort. "Did you know some males in 99 would cut or beat themselves just to get a break? Just to do something we wanted instead of what we were instructed to do?"

I honestly didn't have a clue. I could barely imagine. "We all had to do things that we didn't want to do in 99. I didn't want to be in security." That was how 99 went. You did what you were told, filled your role, and never thought outside it.

"You didn't want to be anything, Blackjack. If there was a 'sit on my tail and play cards all day' job you'd have been fine, but otherwise you wouldn't have been happy doing anything," he said as we approached the wrecked gazebo. The rusty sky wagon still had bright yellow paint and a pink butterfly visible. Inside were a number of rotten and rusty boxes, but there were at least three that appeared intact. "Tell me you had some pining need to be a maintenance mare like Rivets. Did you curse your rotten luck that

you missed out on protein recycling duty or an exciting future in waste management?"

"Well…" I stammered.

He stood there, staring at me with his lips pressed together.

"Can we hold this conversation until after I'm not irradiated?" I asked with a feeble smile.

"No. No, I don't think so. I think I want to have this conversation *now*," he said in his firm and irritated voice. I could see that now the dam had been cracked, and nothing was going to stop this deluge. "So what is it, Blackjack? If you had a choice to not be in security, what would you do? Huh?" He stomped to the first box, clenched his teeth on the bobby pin, and started on the lock.

And to be honest, I didn't know what to answer. I'd always thought that I was stuck with security, which meant I resented it. To be honest though, it hadn't been a bad job. Taking males out of the population was about the worst it got. There was dealing with the Overmare more closely, but there were plenty of ponies that worked a lot harder than I had whose jobs were far more critical to the survival of the stable.

"I guess you're right. I guess security wasn't that bad for me," I admitted. I was also too tired and feverish to do more than sit on my butt as he worked. "What about you, P-21? Tell me what you wanted to do." He kept his glare on the lock. I sighed. "If you want, that is."

He glanced at me and then opened the lock. Inside were two healing potions and some Rad-X. 'Don't let radiation get you down', the label read. "I wanted to be a teacher," he finally said softly.

"A teacher?" I winced at the skepticism in my voice. I just couldn't imagine a male doing…that.

"Yes, a teacher." He examined one rusty lock on the second, jammed in the screwdriver, and gave it a hard twist. With a pop, it opened right up. "Before I was P-1 I tried to learn all I could about arcane sciences. That was how I knew Duct Tape so well; I studied off her as she went through training. I thought that if I knew enough that maybe the Overmare would let me teach. I would have been fine doing both jobs." He opened up the crate and took out two empty syringes and two boxes of some kind of canned meat. "Know what the Overmare said? She said she'd let me teach sex education in my breeding rotation."

I winced. That sounded just like her. I lay down, feeling

lightheaded. My eyes stared at the third container as he attacked the lock with bobby pin and screwdriver. “Still…a teacher,” I said as I closed my eyes, feeling exhausted. “I bet you would have been good at it. I saw how you were with the Crusaders.”

He glanced at me and then carefully adjusted the lockpick. There was a quiet scraping noise as he worked whatever magic he did, then a soft click as the top opened.

Inside were three clear plastic pouches filled with amber fluid. ‘RadAway, your source of radiation relief’, it proclaimed. “Well, if it’s any consolation, I think you were one of the best mares in security. Nopony else would have tried to stop Daisy and Marmalade from beating the snot out of a male. And you were the one who came up with the idea to lead Deus out of the stable.”

“You have no idea how depressing that statement is,” I said. He hoofed me the first pouch and, after fiddling with the straw for a moment, I slurped it down. Ooh, orangey! On my PipBuck, the rad meter dropped a bit closer towards yellow. By the time all three doses were inside me, the needle hovered around the middle of the yellow band. I still felt crummy, but a little better than I had before. With luck, I wouldn’t lose my mane or turn into one of those ghoul things.

“I was just being stupid,” I muttered, keeping my eyes down. “I have a habit of doing that.”

“You have a habit of being reckless, Blackjack. What you did was brave, even with that glowing ghoul. I never would have thought to talk to it or do hoof bumps,” he said calmly as he proceeded to dig through the remains of the cart as the drug did its work. Sadly, there were no bullets to be found on a Ministry of Peace sky carriage. He did, however, find a glowing marble in the wreckage of the gazebo. “What’s this?”

I held out my hoof and looked at it. Well, it wasn’t radioactive, didn’t go bang, and didn’t seem edible. I dropped it in my bag and frowned as ‘Lake Macintosh Memory Orb’ appeared in my inventory. How the heck did my PipBuck know what it was when I didn’t? “No clue. I’ll worry about it later.” Standing, I had to admit I felt stronger…not 100% yet, but better. “So. Does this mean next time I see Watcher I can tell him we’re friends?” I was only half serious, but the other half was curious about his thoughts.

“No,” he replied firmly, and then gave me a grudging smile, “but we’re closer to it than we were.”

“Well. That means I’m improving.”

Footnote: Level Up.
Skills Note: Guns (50)
New Perk: Run and Gun - Better accuracy with ranged weapons while moving.
Quest Perk added: Minor Mutation: Rad Sight - When under the effects of minor radiation poisoning, gain +1 Perception in low light conditions. -15 to sneak, speech when not wearing sunglasses, authority glasses, or mirrored sunglasses.

Chapter 4: Innocence

"Another donut! Extra sprinkles!"

Stable Overmare's log 11-#231: There is a threat to my stable and my ponies. A threat within that must be dealt with. Numerous problems plague the stable, and I am certain of the cause: her name is Rivets. When I assumed the Overmare position, as per my right, she resisted me from the very beginning. Patronizing. Insulting. Countermanding and fighting me at every turn. I am the Overmare! Stable-Tec created my position, gave ME authority, but she believes the stable is hers. Worse, she has a significant following among the security ponies. The head of security herself dared countermand my arrest order! Oh, she claimed there was no law, but I am the law! Something will have to be done about the nag. I won't let her do it to me again.

"Ugh," I muttered as we walked through the constant drizzle. I'd hoped it would have stopped by now, but it seemed like this rain stuff was going to be going on for a while. "You know, I knew that the Overmare was a neurotic little trotter, but I never realized she thought of herself as the princesses reborn."

"Nopony knew the Overmare," P-21 muttered. He'd been in a snit all morning, grumbling to himself and giving me sullen looks. Really, was shooting a bunch of radigators so bad? He scowled at every lump of dead grass beside the road. What was he worried about? My E.F.S. would pick up any threats.

Except buried ghouls…I started looking a little more closely at those lumps, too. When they continued to not be zombie ponies in hiding, boredom crept back and I hit play for the next audio log. Maybe it'd give me a hint. At least they'd help pass the time.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#233: If help cannot be found within the stable, then it must be found without. To do that, I'll need to make contact with the outside, and I think I've found a pony to help me with that. Duct Tape from the night shift. She's quiet, well trained, and obedient. Above all, she's lonely and naïve. I just need to find the correct

leverage to use against her. Perhaps her foal? Or maybe I won't even need that; I had her move some stable broadcast equipment to Maintenance One, and she did so without question or speculation. Best of all, it infuriated Rivets.

Through her foal? What the hell, would she actually hold a filly hostage to get Duct Tape to cooperate?

I snorted softly. "I don't get it. I mean, she always seemed to have it good. The best food and fanciest clothes... why the hell did she turn so crazy psycho like that?" All my memories of the Overmare were of her trotting around next to her mom like a little white shadow dressed all in frou-frou girly dresses and fancy makeup. She was the only filly who got to do that.

P-21 looked at me and then gave a disinterested shrug. "Don't ask me. There's nothing in 99 I want to remember."

The next few recordings were little more than rants against… well…just about everypony. Rivets featured extensively, but my mom was referred to in unflattering terms more than once. Surprisingly, I heard myself mentioned, too. 'Put on C shift to keep an eye on me for her mother.' I could have told her that Mom put me on C shift because that was when I'd be least likely to embarrass her.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#238: Duct Tape has successfully unsealed the stable. I've placated her by giving her unrestricted access to P-20. I will miss my trick pony. He always knew exactly how to relax me.

My companion froze in his tracks. I glanced over, but his blue eyes stared straight ahead like he was in shock or something.

I need somepony to go out and find assistance, but who? Her absence would be noticed immediately when she failed to report to her duty station. Oh, of course. A male. He wouldn't have to do anything hard, merely find somepony and help them make contact. I've set up the radio for communications. Oh, I can't wait to see the look on Rivets's stupid face when I retake my stable!

He didn't move a muscle, and I cleared my throat. "Um…so…since you were in the stable, I'm guessing she didn't send you?" He blinked, then scowled at my PipBuck. "Hey, you're the one that copied the files!" I said defensively. He huffed, glowering at the city barely visible far down the road. I reached out a hoof to nudge his flank. "P-21? Are you okay?"

He actually jumped away from me, shaking. His leg almost collapsed under him, making him yelp in pain, but he waved me

off. “Just! Just listen to your stupid recordings and leave me out of it, Blackjack. I don’t want to remember her or that place. Leave me out of it.” He dug out a syringe of Med-X and injected it in his leg with a sigh. That always improved his mood.

I almost stopped…but fuck it. He was going to be in a bad mood either way. Why’d I have to leave Stable 99 with the pony carrying a whole stable’s worth of issues? Why not U-14? Least then I’d be in the Wasteland with some fine flank. Sighing at the injustices in my life, I listened to the next few entries.

Stable Overmare’s log 11-#240: Success! U-21 made contact with Stable-Tec almost immediately. He has put me in touch with Stable-Tec’s director Sanguine…a male, apparently. He verified his position by accurately identifying several Stable-Tec passwords from when the stable was first sealed. He was quite sympathetic to my needs and assured me that, once the stable was back in my hooves, Stable-Tec had no interest in interfering. His only price for assistance was a file in my databases. I suspect deception, but I have no alternatives. I will put Duct Tape on extracting this file.

I wondered why the Overmare made these recordings in the first place. Each of them was damning…but maybe she’d been so power-mad that she didn’t care. The next ten were all boring rants about just how the Overmare planned to punish us for our disobedience. Even I got mentioned once for failing to lower my eyes respectfully.

Stable Overmare’s log 11-#250: Duct Tape’s progress has been infuriatingly slow. I’ve filled her head with all kinds of ideas about her life outside the stable, as if she’d ever have such a thing. What would be the point of such a life? Who would do her duties here? Still, the foal is besotted with ideas that may be distracting her from progress. Perhaps I should allow her a step outside to refocus her efforts.

Stable Overmare’s log 11-#251: What a difference five minutes can make to a pony’s focus. I truly believe Duct Tape will extract this EC-1101 for Sanguine now. She’s determined to get her reward: a life on the surface with my trick pony. Good. Sanguine is becoming impatient about the delays. I don’t want Stable-Tec to do something premature… The less shock to my stable, the better. I’ve already approached Daisy and the other C shift security ponies and made sure that they’ll aid me… except Blackjack, of course. Fortunately, Gin Rummy’s daughter remains as oblivious as ever to the stable around her.

I snorted. “I am not oblivious!” Then I tripped on a chunk of asphalt and went sprawling on my face. Okay, maybe a little

oblivious. I glanced at P-21 again, but he was doing his best to ignore me now. I remembered Duct Tape being so perky and focused. I'd never have guessed the reason why she was so glad to spend hours in Maintenance One.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#259: Finally…success. Everything is ready. Duct Tape has completely extracted the files from the Stable-Tec system into one terminal. She nattered on for hours about the size, complexity, and difficulty of extracting the files. I've notified Sanguine that everything is ready. He's sending a representative, Deus, along with his own security ponies. So nice to see another Over…stallion…extending me proper courtesy.

As I recalled, Deus's courtesy involved a few pints of semen. Likely not what she had expected. After listening to this, though, my sympathies were pretty played out.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#260: The traitor! The little traitor! I select her, let her go outside, and she dares insist that I give her her reward? How dare she? How DARE she! She's placed some sort of encryption on EC-1101 and refuses to lift it. Even when I threatened to throw her and her little filly into the recycler! Silence may stay her for now, but Deus is on his way! He'll be arriving any day now! What to do?

"Sounds like Duct Tape took your little 'don't trust her' speech to heart," I said with a chuckle.

"Yep…" P-21 said mirthlessly as the next recording played.

Stable Overmare's log 11-#261: Duct Tape has been disposed of. The sabotaged terminal worked far better than I anticipated. I had to finish her off with my own hooves, but I doubt anypony will check the body. She'll be in the recycler by morning. I've now tasked the entire data management team of the stable with breaking the encryption. I have no time to waste. Deus is outside the stable!

P-21 sighed softly. "And my advice cost her her life."

I watched him, his odd mask-like expression. What was he thinking? "Did you... like her?"

He glanced at me with a cool look. "She liked me. That was all that mattered."

"That's not what I meant. I mean... " Goddesses, could I slog through an awkward conversation or what?

He looked at me and sighed. "She helped me. That's something only one other mare's done. So I'm thankful for that and sorry she died, but no. I didn't like her. Not like you're asking."

The next few recordings became more and more hysterical.

Screaming, crying, and desperate rants. Half of them involved the Overmare begging somepony not to hurt her. The other half about how killing 'her' was the only thing she could do. Finally, the last log.

My log…it's time. Sanguine can worry about the encryption himself. Blackjack is meeting with Rivets as I record this; I have no doubt that the coup is imminent. Deus has several dozen ponies ready, and now I must take back what is mine. If I don't act now, then I'm certain that tomorrow I'll not have a stable. I will not be the final Overmare of Stable 99. This is my stable. And nopony shall ever hurt me here again. Not her. Not anypony.

"Hurt her? Who hurt the Overmare? She's the Overmare! No pony could ever touch her!" I sighed and shook my head. P-21 walked pensively beside me, hanging his head a little. "You're blaming yourself for Duct Tape?"

He looked at me sharply, then sighed. "If I hadn't prompted her to act, I wonder if she might have survived the attack."

"From Deus and the others' actions, I don't think any of us were supposed to survive." I sighed as I closed the Overmare's logs. I'd hoped that they'd…I dunno. Give me some kind of hint about what I was supposed to do next. "Well, that sure was worthless."

"Worthless?" P-21 sounded surprised. "That told us a good deal."

Huh? "Well, it just confirmed to me that the Overmare was crazy. What did all that tell you?"

P-21 sighed. "First, that this 'Sanguine' was probably watching the stable before U-21 left it. You know how dangerous this place is. A lone stable unicorn wouldn't have lasted long. Second, Sanguine has some links to Stable-Tec; the Overmare confirmed that with his codes. Third, he clearly had a grasp of the Overmare's psychology. I suspect we're looking for somepony who's spent time in a stable themselves. Fourth, he's got established contacts with Reapers and raiders. Deus might have been brutal, but he also showed restraint rather than charging through and killing everything."

"So we find and kill Sanguine and we win? Sweet. I love a simple plan," I said with a smile, hoping to get one in return. Even a little one?

He gave me a flat look. Was he born with that face?

"Okay. So, probably not simple. What about Deus? What if we find him?"

"Did you forget those guns he's carrying? Not to mention that he

might have another small army of raiders and Reapers with him. I'm happy never seeing him again," P-21 said firmly. "I think our best bet is to try and find out what the heck EC-1101 is. If we learn that, it might tell us who Sanguine is."

"Well, you're better at the thinking thing," I admitted. There was one other goal on my list, but I really didn't want to talk about it just yet. If I could, I'd make it a surprise. "For the moment, we need guns, bullets, and caps."

"Yeah, but it's not like we're just going to happen across some place we can just…" He trailed off as he saw my grin. His blue ears drooped. "Red bars?"

"That way," I said, pointing off the side of the road with my security baton. I gave the baton a swing with my magic. The metal was definitely dinged up, but still serviceable. I definitely would have preferred a firearm of some sort, but this would do.

He sighed and shook his head as he followed me. "Seeking out death and danger for fun and profit. What a life."

"It's a life," I replied, "and that's what you wanted, as I recall." That drew a small smile. Keeping a tight grip on the end of the baton, I prowled through the woods and underbrush. "But just in case this is something nasty, be ready to run!"

"Again with the running plan. Always a running plan. Never a sneaking and avoiding a fight plan," P-21 whispered as he limped along behind me.

Then I heard the sound of something moving through the brush. Not a bloatsprite buzz or a radhog snuffling or a ghoul's scream. It was…clicking with strange beeps. Step by step I advanced through the dead trees.

Suddenly a metallic equine head emerged into a gap between the trees. Then it swiveled and looked at both of us. Its eyes flared like a pair of angry rubies, and from a port atop its head flashed a bright red beam that left a smoking black line on the leafless trees around us. I remembered Scoodle mentioning roboponies. Well now I had a real killer robot in front of me.

"Keep back," I said quietly, having no clue how well it could hear us or understand us. Then I hustled to the side, trying to move close enough to bring my baton to bear while avoiding the flashing lines of fire. The rad sickness wasn't helping, but the machine was slow and its magical energy beam had a few seconds' recharge time between shots.

The baton made a resounding clang of metal on metal as I ran around it as quickly as I could. Despite being made out of metal I could definitely hear the sounds of more brittle interior parts crackling with each strike. Finally my telekinetic backswing crushed the firing port over its head. Something inside whined, and then there was a small internal explosion. It popped and crackled, and then slowly fell over as acrid smoke rose.

"Huh…I think I prefer raiders. They at least carry loot," I said sourly as I looked at the plate on its chest that read 'Robronco'.

"Well, there might be something worthwhile," P-21 said as he drew his screwdriver and carefully removed a smoking plate. He carefully withdrew several components: small containers of crushed crystals that were apparently ammo of some sort, something called a 'spark battery', and quite a bit of 'scrap electronics'. Still, it was better than a poke in the eye.

Argh, why'd I have to think that? My eyes were itching like mad!

While he finished, I continued forward towards more red dots. The dead wood ended abruptly at a crumbling concrete wall. At least four more red bars crawled around in my E.F.S. I could hear their dull metallic footsteps on cracked concrete. Slowly I made my way around the wall till I spotted a rusty gate hanging open. Keeping the E.F.S. on the robot I heard on the far side of the wall, I waited till it was passing before stepping into sight. Its eyes flashed red as its head rotated to face me.

I hit S.A.T.S. at once and, as before, unleashed three blows on the machine's head. Fast as I was as I made the attack, the beam proved faster and scorched a line across my neck. The third blow snapped something vital, and the entire head peeled off. One down, three to go. I carefully peeked around the gate. The three remaining robot ponies were walking much closer together. I swallowed, rubbing the burn along the side of my neck. I'd just gotten my head together. I didn't want to lose it entirely.

I pulled out the last grenade and swallowed. I could see their bars on the E.F.S., and soon I heard the slow plodding steps. I pulled the stem and telekinetically dropped it on the far side of the wall. There was a muffled 'crump' and two of the hostile marks disappeared. Stepping around the gate in the wall, I wasted no time finishing the last one off.

As P-21 emerged from the yellow underbrush, he looked at the wreckage. "These have been outside for a while," he commented as

he nudged the rusted plate with his hoof. All the ponies had dented plates from bullet impacts. “I guess they weren’t made to resist being attacked by some pony with a heavy metal stick.”

“Design oversight,” I agreed as I looked at the large concrete building on the far side of the wall. Two stories and apparently reinforced. Then I noticed the bodies at the door. Not decades or centuries old, these were fresh, pungent, and swollen. I approached the two corpses while fighting the urge to retch, but even that was suppressed at the sight of the wings sprouting from their sides. “Pegasi…” I murmured, having seen them only in books.

They wore simple utility harnesses that seemed pretty pathetic armor. Carefully I searched their bodies, and was rewarded with some tools and a strange boxy object shaped like a pistol. They even had some bottle caps on them and some strange flimsy paper money I’d never seen before. There were also more of those powdered magic gem cartridges.

“Any idea what this is?” I asked, pointing the boxy pistol at the wall. My telekinesis pressed a small button on the handle. With a sharp pop of expanding air, a red bolt of energy shot out and left a singe on the concrete wall. A glance at my PipBuck confirmed: magic beam pistol. I also noted our location: Weather Monitoring Station 4.

“A beam pistol or an overpowered flashlight,” he said as he checked it with a soft sigh. “It’s been through the wringer too. Starting to rust.” He handed it back to me. “Well, you wanted a gun.”

“A gun comes with some recoil, sights, magazines, and rounds. This is just weird,” I said as I levitated it in front of me. “How am I supposed to aim it?” I sniffed the tip, wrinkling my nose at the tang of ozone instead of the stink of cordite. “It doesn’t even smell like a gun.”

“Isn’t there a firearms rule about not putting the barrel up your nose?” P-21 said as he examined the tools, his muzzle breaking out in a smile.

“It doesn’t have a barrel!” I countered, but l took his point to heart. “Well, better than nothing. Ready to go in?” I asked, nodding to the doors.

He looked at the dead pegasi in their black utility barding. “I’m pretty sure these two died trying to get out.”

“Well since they didn’t have anything expensive on them, we can

assume that anything valuable is still inside."

"As well as whatever they were running from," he added. When he saw my grin he gave a soft groan. "Try to be careful, Blackjack."

"Sure. Be back in five minutes," I replied, grabbed the door handle with my magic, and pulled. It barely squeaked open enough for me to squeeze through, and when the door slammed shut I found myself enveloped in pitch blac-- no, not pitch black. There was some light, despite there being no windows. Everything was outlined in a strange dim amber glow. Emergency lighting? Maybe the pegasi had done something? Thin, delicate bones crunched underhoof, making me wince at their loud snaps.

I didn't take much time to explore the reasons as red bars began to move ahead of me. The robotic ponies clanked in my direction with more haste than I expected. Nothing for it, I'd have to use the strange energy weapon before they turned the hall into a shooting gallery. I ran towards the first as it stepped into the hallway, hoping to close the distance as much as possible before jumping into S.A.T.S. Unlike the robots outside, these hadn't been softened up by time and previous attacks.

I was amazed to get four shots programmed with the S.A.T.S., and, while the blasts were definitely not as tightly placed as with a normal gun, my luck didn't seem to care what weapon I shot. A round went through the beam gun atop the robot and made the machine's head explode in a flash of sparks. As I came out of the accelerated state, another robot walked up behind the remains of the first one. I kept moving, not letting its head lock on as its weapon flashed back and forth across the hall. Blast after blast of my gun's crimson beam melted small glowing holes in the robot's chest. Finally, it too popped and went still, smoking with an acrid reek.

A third was clanking closer from a nearby room. The little dial on the back of the pistol was hovering on 'E'. I backed away, using my telekinesis to try and figure out how to reload the damned thing! Finally I must have pressed something right as the rear of the boxy weapon opened and ejected a smoking cartridge. I levitated out a fresh cartridge of glittering crystals, slammed it into the space, and fumbled to get it closed up and zapping again.

I'd been still for too long. The robot's red searing beam struck me in the chest, scorching my barding and reminding me to move my ass! I zigzagged, my hooves slipping and sliding on bones scattered

across the hall, but I succeeded in getting closer and jumped into S.A.T.S. a second time. Four shots transformed the robot into a smoldering ugly statue. Wincing, I took a healing potion to alleviate the burn on my chest. Damn thing hurt. I carefully watched the remaining red tags, but their wanderings were slow and predictable. Not coming to attack, I supposed.

There were more pegasus corpses in the hallway; I found a second energy pistol and more of the magic powder cartridges. I carefully made my way through the ruins of the bottom floor, the magical beam box pointed ahead of me at all times. I found a safe, two ammo boxes, and a locked medical box that I made sure to remember for P-21. I also lucked into a cafeteria and found some delicious Big Mac 'n' Cheese and a working vending machine. Sitting at a desk, I had myself a snack and pocketed the rest. Soon as we ran out of recycled wafers, my cohort would be getting hungry.

Why are there so many bones in here? We'd come across so many remains that it was hard for me to think of them as ponies. With the exception of Hoss, Granny Smith, and Scoodle, the remains of the dead were so numerous and so prevalent that I just couldn't feel for them as I should. Yet even I felt something off with this concrete building. There were enough bones for a hundred ponies, and lots of them were quite small.

As I reached the stairs at the end of the hall I heard the scrape of P-21 entering. No doubt he'd start on the robots in the hall. Trying to be stealthy, I climbed up the stairs and round the corner at the top. A robot pony immediately turned and started blasting away with its beam of light. I leaped to the side, held down the trigger, and washed my beam over its head and chest till it popped and collapsed.

Another dead pegasus lay nearby. I pocketed his weapon cartridges, a gun that looked better as a blunt weight, and another strange apple grenade with a bright blue band around the middle. The last two red bars were close together, and as I watched them separate I saw a tiny yellow line almost directly between them. What the heck did that mean?

Slowly, I advanced down the hall with the energy weapon floating before me. I couldn't hear anything but an odd humming noise, like a vent fan. Reaching the door at the end of the hall, I bit the handle of the pistol, gently gripped the doorhandle with my magic, and

slowly turned it, wincing at the grinding noise. I heard the whirr of a robot's magic weapon charging on the far side. I didn't know where the yellow non-hostile was in the room, and I'd be damned if I tossed a grenade around a non-hostile.

"Fuck it," I muttered and ducked down, kicking the door open. Instantly a fusillade of crimson beams swung back and forth across the hallway as I backpedaled and ducked as fast as I could to the next doorway. Two robots stood shoulder to shoulder as they filled the hall with sweeping flickers of death. I fired wildly back at them, hitting but not doing anything critical. By the time I reached the open doorway behind me, I had angry red burns all across my chest and forelegs. I hissed in pain as I took a healing potion and waited in the small closet.

Clicking and clanking, the robot ponies approached towards the doorway. My sole saving grace was that this door was too narrow for them to pass through in unison. When the first came into view, my magic beam weapon was at point blank range. S.A.T.S. assisted in four energy shots decapitating the machine. As it fell, the last came into view. I screamed as I moved back and forth as much as the closet allowed and held the trigger down with my magic. It didn't help much as more lines burned my limbs and shoulders.

The red bolts of energy chewed through the metal plating of the Robronco sentry, and a white glow spread along its frame. It collapsed into a pile of warm ashes and smoldering metal. Letting out a sigh, I collapsed onto my haunches, looking at the energy pistol with a new appreciation. "Well, that's new."

I holstered the energy pistol and trotted into the room the robot ponies were guarding. There were a few more ash piles lying about the interior of the room; I guessed they had to have been either more pegasi or bots. In the room were a half dozen little bays large enough to hold the sentries, so I doubted they were the latter. One wall was dominated by a massive terminal that had clearly seen better days, while a corner held shelves with an automatic pistol and two ammo boxes. I couldn't help but smile as I lifted the far more familiar weapon and checked the slide. Fair condition.

Then I looked at my PipBuck and at the non-hostile reading. It pointed right at the terminal. "What the heck?" I muttered, looking it over with the strange amber glow that filled my vision. That's when I noticed the grate the terminal sat on. Slowly I looked down through the grate at a crawlspace just barely large enough for a

pony to fit. “Hey? Hello?”

“Are you okay, Blackjack?” P-21 shouted from the hall behind me.

I walked along the grate to the corner of the room where a little hatch lay open. “I think somepony’s in here,” I said as I carefully lowered my head and peeked into the space.

My amber gaze saw the many cables of the terminal, but hiding behind them was a small pony shape. She peeked out around the corner at me, and I gave her my most comforting smile. “Hey. There you are.”

Her eyes widened in terror and she moved her head completely out from behind the cable. My smile vanished as I looked at the boxy business end of a magic beam pistol. The yellow mark turned red as she screamed around the clenched handle and my world became filled with red light.

* * *

“She shot me,” I groaned, my face sporting an ugly black burn that ran from jaw to ear. It looked like my luck was enough to preserve my eye; was not getting shot in the first place too much to ask? I looked at the pegasus, scowling. “You shot me! In my face!” I pointed at the burn, making her wince. My already messed up vision was even more out of whack as I waited for the healing potion to take away some of the pain and injury. “What is it with people shooting me when my guard is down, huh? That’s twice in two days.”

“Blackjack,” P-21 said softly. “She was alone, starving, dehydrated…and to be honest I probably would have done the same.”

“Is this more of that ‘I can’t trust myself with guns around you?’” I asked as I sipped the Sparkle-Cola. Given how much radiation I’d sucked up recently, the trace amounts didn’t worry me.

“There’s a bathroom down the hall. Go look in the mirror,” he said as he took out my last bottle of purified water and rolled it to the pegasus curled up in the corner of the room next to the hatch. I had no clue how P-21 got her to surrender her weapon, but she did. It was all she’d done since P-21 had patched me up.

I walked down the dimly lit hallway and into the bathroom. Most of the mirror had been broken out, but there was enough left for me to see…what the fuck?

Since when did my eyes fucking *glow*? Now that I was paying attention to the amber light, it wasn't the result of light slipping through boarded over windows or emergency lighting. The light came from my eye sockets as if I had a little PipBuck lamp glowing in the back of each. "Well…fuck…" I said lamely as I finished the bottle of lukewarm soda. After everything that had happened in the last three days, I'd finally reached the point of numb acceptance. My eyes were glowing. What could I do about it?

I returned to the terminal room, looking at the pegasus in the corner. "Given that my eyes are glowing, I'd say shooting me was no harm, no foul. This time," I said as I looked at her while she sipped the water slowly. She looked pretty ragged. Her black coveralls were torn and stained with waste. She didn't look like a wastelander. In fact, she looked more rattled than the Crusaders. "I'm Blackjack. He's P-21." She didn't say anything as she stared at me with wary, bloodshot eyes. I glanced at P-21 as he struggled with the locks on the cases he'd found downstairs before looking back at her.

She didn't say a word. Even with my PipBuck lamp lit, my eyes must've still been glowing. "Look. I'm not going to hurt you. If you want to go, then go." I stood and carefully stepped aside. The silver-gray pegasus slowly started to crawl for the exit as I walked to P-21 on the far side of the room. I waved my hoof as if coaxing her to go if she really wanted to. I didn't envy her odds alone but…

She disappeared down the hall. I let out my held breath. Well, good luck, I silently wished. P-21 glanced up at me and shook his head. "What? Do you think I should have shot her or something?"

"You spared that raider and got shot in the back," he said softly.

"Yeah, and I tried to help her and got shot in the face." In my fucking face! "Still not going to tie her up and keep her as a prisoner. She wants to go, then she should go." I rubbed the burn, feeling the magic healing the damage quickly. I tallied up how much I owed him just on healing potions he'd found stashed away or locked up. I looked at the massive terminal. "So…any clue what that thing is for?"

"No idea," he said as I started on my last Sparkle-Cola. Darn things were addictive! Enjoying the warm carroty taste, I glanced back down the hall. Our pegasus hadn't run far. I guessed she had probably encountered those pegasi in the hallway. "It's on a security lockout." He glanced at the piles of ash and the robot

recharge bay. “I guess they failed to enter the right password. That activated the sentries.”

And that meant there was no chance to hack the terminal without ending the lock-out. “Great…” I muttered as I spotted another pegasus skeleton in the corner…It wasn’t the species, though, that made me curious: it was the sight of the weathered recording cartridge under the bones. Carefully, I levitated it and connected it to my PipBuck. “Maybe somepony happened to mention a security override,” I said as I started the playback.

The recording was clearly old, but I heard a dull chuckle. *“Yeah dude. Rainbow may be hot but, like, you got no chance man. Dude, isn’t she like the spokespony for mare riders? Heh…yeah I hear that. So you check out my score on the last basketball match with monitor one? Shyeah, we kicked tail thanks to yours truly. Hey, what happened…?”* Suddenly I could hear a noise with a deep reverberation and a sucking sound that transformed into a roar.

The recording crackled and snapped with static and buzzing voices. Suddenly a male spoke out in a tense, thick voice, *“…this is crazy. The Hoof is fucking gone, man! It’s fucking gone! There’s green…fire shit…like…everywhere! Nopony knows what’s going on. Fuck man! Game over!”* The recording broke off in a harsh crackle that made me wince. After some more static, the buck’s voice returned.

“I got a whole bunch of kids from the Fluttershy clinic south of here! We need ponies to fly them out! Get them to the Shadowbolt Tower? Thunderhead? Somewhere! Come on you fuckers, I know you can hear us. I got a transmitter and power! Fuck! Answer me you fuckers!” he screamed into the recorder, his voice breaking into a peal of static. When it returned he was coughing. *“Fuck. It’s so quiet outside. I think the fucking radiation’s getting in somehow. If anypony can hear this, this is Brolly in Hoofington Weather Monitoring 4. I contacted Thunderhead, but they haven’t sent shit to help. They told me to come home. There are kids here who need to be evacuated. Can anypony hear me? This is Brolly in Weather Four!”* There was a long pause and then he screamed once again, *“Answer you fuckers!”*

I stared at the PipBuck, feeling dread prickle up and down my spine. The static crackled for the longest time and when it returned, his voice was a raspy whisper. *“Kids aren’t doing so good. I’m not doing so good. Fuck. Couldn’t get to Thunderhead now if I wanted. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I contacted Jack Knife at Weather One and Bluebells at Weather Three hours ago. They were told to abandon too. Think Jack*

left, I dunno. Nopony's answering anymore. Somepony help us. Anypony." The recording gave one last crackle and I heard him whisper, *"Fuck…they're fucking kids…fuck…"*

For the longest time I thought that was it. Then I heard a grating rasp that rose and fell. It wasn't static. *"Fuckers…fuckers abandoned us…told me…told me to stop transmitting…switched channels on me…fuckers…didn't give a shit for the kids."* There was a spate of coughing. *"Is that blood? Shit…it is, isn't it? Fuck…Dash was right…I thought…shit…Fucking right…fuck…"* With that, the recording continued playing silently for several minutes before I finally stopped it.

Damn it! I'd been fine when the bones were just bones. I didn't want to think of dozens of foals dying slowly of radiation poisoning while someone, somewhere, casually let them die. "How could they?"

P-21 stared at his hooves with his inscrutable expression. "Maybe... maybe things were so chaotic…"

"They told him to stop transmitting," I said as I stood. "They told him to shut up and die along with dozens of young ponies! They were organized enough for that!" I sighed, rubbing my stinging, itching, mutated eyes and feeling the tears start. "Fuck. I'm going to have to dig another grave."

I spotted her hiding in the doorway, sitting down on the floor looking at her hooves. "There was nothing we could do," she said in a soft, buzzing drawl. "After the bombs went off…every pegasus that could get home was recalled. We had to save as much as we could."

I felt my temper spike, but P-21 limped in front of me and shook his head slightly. Swallowing what I'd been about to say was like vomiting in reverse, and just as unpleasant. He took a seat, stretching out his injured leg with a sigh. "Come on in here. We're not going to hurt you." I forced myself to relax as well.

"Yeah," I said as I kept the pistols away. When she stepped back in I marveled at how compact and delicate she appeared. Her coat was a soft gray and her purple mane cut back into a buzz. I supposed it was some sort of military look or something. I looked at her uniform and remembered what Scoodle had said. "You're Enclave?"

"Morning Glory, serial number 221-12-9921, first Volunteer Corps," she said as if reciting the information. She licked dried lips and I floated what remained of my Sparkle-Cola to her. She took it

hesitantly and then drank it slowly. Still, it made her smile. That helped me to relax. “Thank you,” she murmured.

“*Volunteer* Corps?” I asked.

“The Volunteer Corps enlisted with the Enclave to help with restoring contact with the surface,” she said in a shaky voice. “It wasn’t…wasn’t supposed to be like this. They warned us…” She looked at the ash piles. “But I didn’t believe them.”

“Warned you?” P-21 gave me a concerned look.

“That the surface was deadly and savage,” she said softly as she rubbed her face with her hoof. “That all surface ponies do is rape and murder and then rape what they murdered.” She looked at the ash piles with a little shiver. “I…all my friends…we were sent to make contact…we had gifts…no heavy weapons. No power armor.” She began to shake and clenched her eyes tight. “Oh Celestia! The things…they did such horrible things!”

“Sounds like you ran into raiders,” I replied.

“Half of us they slaughtered and ate. Some were still alive. We fell back here when I detected the transmissions. We couldn’t access the system though, and the sentries activated. I…” She clenched her eyes shut. “I’d crawled underneath to connect the power. I heard them all die.” She started shaking again.

“Hey. Hey. Breathe, Glory... just take some deep breaths.” I gave P-21 a long look before I tried to put her at ease. “Sounds a lot like what the two of us just went through. Wasteland seems to love tossing one nightmare after another against a pony. So why don’t you just, you know?” I gestured skywards with a nod of my horn.

She flushed and looked away. “I…I just can’t.”

Okay. Psychological trauma *and* distrust. I knew exactly what this called for. “Want to do something about it?”

P-21 looked at me and just groaned. Morning Glory glanced at me, then at P-21 in confusion. “Do? What do you mean?”

“If you ran here, those raiders’ camp can’t be far. I say we go and make sure they don’t eat any more ponies,” I said with a sure little grin. “Trust me. Hunting raiders is pretty…” I rolled my eyes, tapping my hoof thoughtfully. “Help me out here, P-21.”

“Asinine? Juvenile? Hazardous?” he suggested as he passed me the weapons and ammunition he’d scavenged. A nice replacement automatic pistol and some clips of ammo; finally, something I could aim that went bang!

“Nah…fun!” I said as I clapped my hooves together.

P-21 sighed, looking mournfully at Morning Glory. “You get used to the madness.”

Clearly Morning Glory hadn’t quite figured out our style of banter just yet. “You want to kill the ponies that killed my platoon…for fun?”

I let out a long sigh. “Actually, no. First, I don’t want anypony caught by raiders if I can do something about it. Secondly, I don’t like the idea of raiders having beam weapons taken off your comrades. Thirdly, there might be five young fillies in this area and I don’t like the idea of them getting captured again. Fourthly, I need caps and ammunition and taking it from murdering scum sounds fine to me,” I said as I listed them all off, rolling my eyes in thought. “Oh yeah, *and* it’s fun. You’ll find that out if you come with us.”

“Come with you?” she asked in complete shock.

“Sure. Your friends were attacked and killed. You’ve been trapped in a coffin under a terminal for a week. I’m pretty sure some part of you wants some payback.” She just stared and shook her head. I grimaced. “Not even a little?” Another shake of her head. “A smidge?” I offered, holding my hooves a millimeter apart. She finally gave me the ghost of a smile but still shook her head.

Great. I wagered I was the only pony in the Wasteland who could attract *pacifists*. “Okay. Well you can stay here and we can come back for you, come with us, or else good luck.”

“I’ll…I’ll come with you. I don’t want to be alone,” Morning Glory said warily, clearly not trusting me. I levitated her beam pistol back over to her. Still looking uncertain, she took the weapon and slipped it into her holster. That put her a little more at ease.

“Not to be nit-picky, but are all of you armed with…well.” I nodded to the dinged up beam pistol. “Seems sorta poor quality.”

“Oh no. The Volunteer Corps are issued surplus arms and armor separate from security and scouting forces.” Armor? She counted that uniform as armor? My security barding was better armor than that! “May I see some of the others’ beam pistols? I might be able to improve things,” she asked warily. I remembered what Scoodle had done with the rifles, so I put the four other beam pistols down and let her get to work. P-21 looked on in interest as she skillfully broke the weapons down and repaired the best of the lot. When she finished, it looked much more impressive. She didn’t even have to slam the cartridge container closed.

"Nice work. Do you normally fix stuff?"

"I…I was a student at the Thunderhead academy," she flushed. "There were some protests…nothing serious. Just a lot of us wanting to come down. That's why the Volunteer Corps were established." And ripped to pieces by raiders. Convenient.

Something about all of this stunk. "So…the Enclave came here to help the Wasteland. They let volunteers like you come and help out. Then they give you old weapons and uniforms…did they even train you how to use them?"

"I…I had a two week training and survival course," she said defensively.

Right. And then they sent these volunteers on a peace mission to raiders? If that was incompetence, they deserved an award for the sheer scale of it. I had a real bad feeling it wasn't incompetence. Did their scouts miss the severed heads and mutilated corpses? I glanced over at P-21, but he looked grim as well as he gave a little shake of his head. Morning Glory was young, traumatized, but still innocent. Maybe it was just paranoia, but suddenly I understood why Scoodle had been wary of the Enclave.

"Well, your call," I said, gathering up Brolly's remains in a bag. Outside, I found a tree and cleared out a hole at its base with my horn. There wasn't room or time to do anything fancy, so I set the bag into the depression and covered it once again. I levitated a pointed rock and scratched out 'Brolly' and 'He tried.' on the trunk. I spotted both of them staring at me oddly; P-21 had an approving look and Morning Glory simply seemed confused.

"So. Coming with us?" I asked as I checked the automatic pistol and my ammunition. Morning Glory nodded and I looked to her beam pistol, floating several cartridges to her. "I know you might not like the idea of shooting raiders, but trust me…try. Especially if you see me shooting." Red, it's dead. Yellow, be mellow.

* * *

As we journeyed back towards the west, I let Glory take some potshots at the bloatsprites. She could shoot when she worked up the nerve. I couldn't begin to guess how she aimed a weapon like that with no sights, but between a half dozen bloatsprites and one radhog I was pleasantly impressed.

"So just how is the Enclave trying to help? I mean, I haven't seen

signs of swooping pegasi flying over and laying waste to every raider that pokes their heads out," I said, glancing to the sky. Mistake. I staggered so hard I ran into Morning Glory and nearly knocked her over. "Sorry," I muttered, getting my gaze below horizon.

"Well. We're trying to assist by providing food and clothing to the locals around the Skyport. There's been diplomatic missions as well." Like her mission to get friendly with a bunch of raiders? What genius thought that up? "We also offer free medical assistance."

That got my attention as I glanced back at P-21's limp. "Really? That's generous," I said. He was in such pain that he just grunted his agreement.

"Unfortunately there's many factions that appear to be quite hostile to Enclave activities. The Steel Rangers in particular have attacked us at the Skyport. There's a lot of distrust I simply can't understand. Why won't ponies let us help?" Morning Glory's frustration was clear. Personally I wasn't opposed to the idea of helping folks who needed it, but there was something off with the Enclave's offer. I kept thinking back to the Overmare's recording about this Sanguine giving her everything she wanted.

Generosity didn't come cheap here.

There was some irony in that the raiders were based out of a donut shop along the road from Withers; if I hadn't made that detour, we'd be facing much stiffer resistance. A faded brown unicorn held a ring and the chipped lettering read 'Pony Joe's'. How cute, they'd nailed body parts to the hoof as sprinkles. Artistic and grotesque. The PipBuck detected only a sole hostile wandering out the back door. I glanced back at P-21. This would be a lot easier without him giving the alarm. I slowly slid the baton out of its holster.

"What if he's…" Morning Glory whispered hoarsely.

"Innocent? Unarmed?" I looked at the raider as he squatted beside a ditch. PipBuck read as red. I closed my eyes. What was the difference between me and the raiders, besides that I seemed to have a little more discretion as per my PipBuck? If I didn't have that convenient red bar, would I be as much a murderer as the raiders? "If he gives up…fine."

I approached as quietly as I was able, baton floating beside me as the raider let out a rather epic bowel movement. He'd probably have to kill it with a shovel afterwards. Fortunately, he'd brought

one with a jagged bloodstained edge. The reek made me gag, but I closed the distance and was quite glad he finished. He muttered something sounding like a language of strung together obscenities as I gripped the baton even tighter and poked him with my hoof. "Hey."

He froze and slowly turned to stare at me. One eye was a swollen, pus-dripping mass that couldn't close. The other pupil was so contracted I wondered if he was blind. He slowly grinned, revealing teeth sharpened to points as he started to giggle. "Don't…" I warned as his giggles grew louder and louder. "Don't," I repeated through grit teeth, but it was too late. He jerked his head, grabbing the handle of the shovel. I had no choice as I brought the baton down on the back of his head with all the strength my horn could muster. A pulpy noise that oddly matched his bowels filled the air and his whole body jerked and fell flat next to his reeking pile of filth.

I looked at Glory watching in horror and frowned at her. "Happy?" I asked as I pointed at his frozen maniacal grin with the baton. She looked away, and P-21 gave me a look that read simply as '*not fair, Blackjack*.' I didn't care; I didn't want to discuss the equinity of any pony so crazy they adopted radical new styles of dentistry to suit their dietary habits. "Now, I'm going in there. If I have to get out fast I'd really appreciate if you could be ready to cover me." I didn't look to see if she'd nod or not. Hopefully P-21 would get through to her.

She'd shoot me in the face but didn't want to kill a raider. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck…

I carefully opened the back door to the diner. Old donut making equipment stood coated in black and crimson sludge. The stench coming out the door was so intense that I almost retched. Flies buzzed over every surface, and there was an industrial mixer with limbs sticking out. There seemed to be more than a few wings. Maggots thrived in great squirming lumps that popped underhoof as I moved in as carefully as I could. The knot of raiders seemed to be concentrated in the dining area.

"Squarr! Finish shittin' and get in here! Squaaaaar!" a mare shrieked from the front. "I'm gonna make him eat it. Anyone wanna see him eat it?" Raucous laughter filled the air as one bar detached from the mass, coming towards the doorway. I looked left and right, and then tried my best to squeeze into the fetid corner between the wall and mixer. I couldn't help but glance in and wish I hadn't.

There was some kind of jelly in there. It was moving...

When the mare walked past my hiding spot I saw the floating beam pistol in front of her. Knowing how fast they shot, and really sick of burns, I hit S.A.T.S. at once and brought the metal curve of my baton across her throat. Any warning she was going to make died as the second swing smashed across her face, and I saw with disturbing clarity the orb of her eye burst and spray viscous yellowed jelly across her cheek. I couldn't stop if I wanted to, and I really didn't want to as the final swing finished caving in her eye socket. I grabbed her with my hooves to keep her from falling and lowered her to the floor of the kitchen. The laughter from the far side had drowned out her collapse.

I glanced at the beam gun: just like the ones at the monitoring station. I counted four more bars moving. I doubted I'd be lucky enough to catch another alone. P-21's method had dropped two; time to finish it Blackjack style.

Coming around the corner, pistol raised, I wasted no time going into S.A.T.S. and putting all four rounds into the nearest raider's skull. The third round effectively turned his skull into chunks and I immediately backed away. Red blasts of light peppered the doorway as I waited. Sure enough, one came around wearing a welding helmet. The automatic roared along with me as each round scooped out great bloody hooffuls from his chest. After the fifth burst he finally went down.

A metal clang and clatter beside me was all the warning I needed; I dove back into the dining area and crouched low. The grenade's explosion made my eardrums throb and blew pieces out of the remaining mare's neck and head. She tried to draw a beam pistol, but my bullets bit into something arterial and a bloody spray spewed out from her neck as she collapsed, twitching. That left…oh fuck!

This raider had something new; over his raider armor he was wearing a harness that slung his weapons at his sides. Said weapons were two large, long, boxy things, bigger versions of beam pistols. I tried to kick into S.A.T.S., but the spell still needed time to recharge. I fired wildly as I dodged back into the kitchen as the beam rifles mounted to his sides ignited a smoking line where my head had been a second before.

I couldn't counter that firepower! I gave ground as he pursued, his shots melting the festering equipment in the kitchen as I emptied

my clip. Still backing up, I ejected it and levitated a new one into the mag well before diving out the back door.

"Flash! Flash flash flash!" he screamed in glee over and over again as he stepped outside. My automatic suddenly seemed woefully inadequate as he pointed both barrels at me. I kept trying to drill his head with the automatic, but the metal helmet he wore deflected most of my shots.

Suddenly, Morning Glory appeared on the roof of the donut shop, pistol clenched in her teeth as she stared down at him. She was shaking so badly I was sure she was going to drop the weapon! She fired a shot that had to be by accident, smoking the gravel beside him. Slowly he turned, looking up, bringing the beam rifles to bear. We'd already established that my automatic wasn't of sufficient caliber to threaten him.

"Shoot!" P-21 and I shouted in unison.

"Flash!" screamed the raider. The air filled with red beams.

Suddenly the raider's backpack let out an immense spark and crackle as Glory's shots tore into it. He screamed as burning components cascaded down his sides. The two beam rifles smoked as he tried to fire at the shaking gray pegasus. "Nooooo! Flash! FLASH!" the raider screamed as he looked at me rising.

"Stop it! Just run away!" Glory screamed down at him. The raider wasn't listening and bolted for the sharpened shovel. Damn it! I raised the gun again, trying to find some vulnerable place to drop him with as he picked the shovel up in his jaws and began to swing it at me.

I went through a second clip before the sharpened edge sliced almost exactly opposite the burn that Glory had given me. Fuck! Was it too much to ask them to watch the face? I drank my last healing potion and went to reload…two bullets? Two fucking bullets!

Not good.

I used S.A.T.S. to place the shots in his head. Effective, but not fatal. He seemed to not feel the slightest bit of pain as he stabbed the shovel edge into my upper foreleg. I drew my baton, hoping it could finish him off.

Suddenly Glory appeared above him and fired every single shot left in the beam cartridge. One shot seemed to consume him in a bright red glow that fully engulfed him and sent him collapsing into a heap of ash at my hooves. I scrambled back as Glory continued to

fire, tears on her cheeks as she landed. When the gun was empty she spat it out, screaming at the smoking pile of ash, “I only wanted to help! I wanted to help!” She then shook and voided her stomach as she staggered to the side, weeping. I did the only thing I could; I put my hooves around her and held her close as she shook and whimpered over and over again that simple plea.

Me too. The Wasteland made murderers of everypony.

* * *

“She’s an emotionally unstable and naive liability, Blackjack,” P-21 said when we’d found a trailer to hole up in for the night. It didn’t do more than keep the rain off us. P-21 had only been able to strip the weapons off the raiders and find a number of mixed rounds and other lousy weapons before he’d gotten sick. I’d try using a beam pistol for now; we had twice as much ammo for that as we did for the automatic. How I missed my shotgun.

“Perfect. She’ll fit in fine then,” I replied. My leg burned terribly from the untreated slash. Without healing potions all I could do was hope we came across some help.

“I’m not saying leave her here. I’m saying don’t let her carry a gun. She nearly shot you as much as that raider,” P-21 argued softly. Glory lay curled on her side on the far end of the trailer in her smelly uniform. I’d give sexual favors for a laundromat right now.

“I’m not disarming her either, P-21. There are three of us and I can’t be the only one shooting. So, unless you’re going to start packing…”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Right. Well, she can. She just needs to get her hooves under her and some training discipline. As for her ideals…what can I say? I might think there’s something off with this whole Enclave business, but she wants to help. I do too. I think it’s the only difference between us and raiders.” I had to admit that in three days I’d fallen into a somewhat frightening eagerness to shoot ponies.

P-21 sighed and looked out the window at the drizzle that clanged against the roof in a soft staccato. “How long is it supposed to keep doing this?”

“Glory said it could go on for hours or even days. Pegasi don’t try and control the weather anymore, remember?” That had been a shock to me. I’d thought that interminable gray-black layer was the

sky. Learning that it wasn't, that it was a mass of clouds perpetuated by the pegasi, really undermined the whole 'Help Wastelanders' argument. Glory hadn't been too happy to admit it either.

I didn't particularly mind the rain. It was cold and wet, sure, but the steady noise reminded me of the hum of ventilation recyclers constantly turning over the thick, stinky air. Even though it was depressing, I liked to think the rain was doing all it could to wash away the bloodstains.

Listening to rain, though, was hardly stimulating, and I quickly found myself bored. I didn't want to listen to the Overmare's craziness, though. I switched over to the radio channels, doubting that there was a chance I'd pick up 99's internal radio signals. Still, I slowly clicked one channel after the next, and then blinked as music filled the dingy trailer. Music in 99 was all stately pomp reminding us how we should all be loyal to the stable and Overmare. It was never this sweet, pining music that seemed to drive out the gloom before it.

"…let it go. Let it go. Let it go. Let it go…

When pain is all you have, let it go."

The voice demanded every iota of my attention and I gave it happily. I had no idea who she was or what she was singing about, but I knew pain. All of us did. And as she sang on I felt my chest relax just a little bit. For a few brief minutes I was able to leave the Wasteland behind and be someplace else.

It finally trailed away, and a buck gave a long sigh. "That was Sweetie Belle with 'Let it go'. Just giving us all a reminder that sometimes, when things are at their worst, it's best to just forgive and forget. This is DJ Pon3 with a shout-out to all my listeners back east around the Hoof. I know some of you feel like you don't get as many headlines out there, but it's a great big old wasteland. So this news is just for you, Hoofington.

"Turns out the road between Manehattan and the Hoof is just a little safer now thanks to a pair of ponies fresh from a stable. You're gonna love this…looks like the Hoof has just a little more Security than a few days ago. That's right, she's got it displayed loud and proud. She's already carved up the raiders from Withers all the way to Megamart, and she doesn't look like she's going to be stopping any time soon. So here's a big thank you from DJ Pon3 to the Security Mare. Looking forward to seeing what law and order you

bring down next."

What the fuck? "What the fuck? Who the hell was that? How does he know what I'm doing? What…" Suddenly I knew. "Watcher…"

"Watcher?" P-21 said with a little frown.

"It's gotta be. Who knew we left a stable and took down raiders in Withers?" I crossed my hooves and nodded. "It makes perfect sense."

P-21 looked skeptical but didn't argue. Then he cracked a smile. "Security Mare, huh? Catchy."

I didn't feel catchy. I felt pissed! "He just told Deus where we are! The road…"

"Is really long and even Deus probably can't search the whole thing," P-21 interrupted reasonably.

"Well…what about that 'bringing down law and order' stuff? I'm not doing that. And he didn't even mention you beyond 'pair of ponies'!" I had to admit I was more than a little paranoid now. Why had Watcher just told Hoofington what I was up to? "It's like he's making me out to be some kind of law pony!"

"Well, aren't you? You attacked those raiders without hesitation in large part because what they're doing is wrong. You might not be upholding a written law, but you yourself said what they're doing is wrong and you were going to stop them." P-21 seemed to enjoy needling me. "So what's wrong?"

"'Cause he's skipping the parts where I fucked up. No mention of what I did in the Boneyard or how I got Scoodle killed." It was like he was making me into some damned folk hero. I didn't want that.

Of course, the question was: how could I stop it?

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Friend of the Night - Your eyes adapt quickly to low-light situations.

Chapter 5: Work

"Step one…stay alive. Step two…I dunno. Step three…profit!"

So. That's Hoofington. The Hoof. Or 'the Core' if you were talking about the inner city where all the technological marvels were supposed to be. Glory had been filling us in all morning as we continued along the decayed road. But now, as it rose into an overpass, I had my first look at the city. And I didn't like it one bit.

The Core of Hoofington lay on an island surrounded by sluggishly flowing green fluids swirling with noxious pink contaminants. With such limited space, the buildings within the Core rose higher and higher until the tops disappeared into the cloud layer. Some buildings ended in broken-off spars, while others leaned precariously against their neighbors. Clouds of green clung to the black, crumbling spires, and if there were pegasi in those clouds… well, good luck to them. The entire Core was backlit by a perpetual green glow that pulsed and flickered like a heartbeat. I could barely make out the skeletal remains of a bridge several miles ahead of us beside a large oval structure.

On the sides of the river were the boroughs, the suburban sprawls that had once held the populace. Far less resilient than the skyscrapers of Hoofington proper, they formed a thick belt of crumbling buildings and blocked roads. With the exception of the highway cutting towards the Core, I couldn't see a way through it. The river flowed to the north on our left, the sprawl changing into more industrial-style buildings. To the right were more dead trees and raider territory. I could barely make out the top of a large building to our southwest.

But what mattered to the three of us was the massive square building beyond the overpass. The building was surrounded by a berm of scrapped carts, sky carriages, and other debris. Four large turrets clung to the corners, sweeping their long barrels back and forth. Bright neon lights flickered in the rainy gray weather:

‘Megamart’, they said, and beneath that in bright red paint was ‘Finders Keepers’. Unless I was mistaken, this was the headquarters of the Finders.

We approached under the ominous gaze of the turrets. Each barrel seemed a match for Deus as we walked along the crumbling highway towards the gate. The half dozen ponies looking boredly at the small trickle of traffic perked up at the sight of the three of us. “Entrance fee,” a unicorn mare said as she looked over my barding. Her green hide was mottled with the oddest brown and gray splotches.

“We have to pay to get in?” P-21 said skeptically.

“Five caps a head. Ten per Bessy. Or you can just become a Finder for the discount price of a thousand caps. You don’t like it, pick a direction and start walking,” she said matter-of-factly.

One of the guards looked closer at me and then broke into a grin. “Hey, Keystone! It’s her. Security Mare!” The others took note as well and immediately started to chuckle and talk to each other. I could have found DJ Pon3 and punted him clear over the Core. They were saying it like I was Superpony. “Bottlecap wouldn’t mind if we gave her a pass.”

The camouflage mare looked at me coolly. “So she killed those psychos at Pony Joe’s. That’s not so much,” she said as she looked me over. I half wanted to agree with her. I also didn’t want to give up any caps just to get inside.

“Hey, I couldn’t just let them hang out along the roads. Pretty sure you folks need them,” I said as if it wasn’t anything at all, but from the looks I’d scored a win. I grimaced, not happy with the role, but if it’d save me some money…

It looked like I’d managed to say the right thing. “Go in. Make sure you talk to the manager. She was talking about you earlier,” Keystone said as she stepped aside and let us in. “Fire a weapon and bring the wrath of Gun down on you.”

“Nice job, Security Mare,” P-21 said once we were past, as we approached the front doors beneath the buzzing neon sign.

I snorted. “Shut it.”

“You can be sore about the reputation or you can use it. Not both,” P-21 replied casually. I stuck my tongue out at him, much to Glory’s surprise.

I was surprised that the interior more resembled a junkyard than anything else. Piles and pallets of scrap lay in carefully stacked

rows. There were perhaps a dozen booths with vendors hawking their wares. I saw a drum-fed shotgun and promptly started salivating. There was a crude medical clinic set up over by the pharmacy, and their advertisement of 'radiation purging' appealed more than the shotgun. A row of cots served as a hotel of sorts, and there was a kitchen. Overhead rested 'Gun', a huge cannon mounted in a ceiling turret. I didn't even want to imagine…okay…in my imagination the sight of it firing was pretty cool, but I'd be happy putting off witnessing the reality. Thing looked like it fired I-beams.

There were also probably as many ponies here as there were in Stable 99. They moved in small clumps, keeping a wary eye as they looked around. Some were obviously raiders, and I had to glance up at Gun to remind myself to behave. Most appeared to be fairly benign, talking and laughing with each other while they swapped stories and goods. Two well-dressed fillies were escorted by a dozen bodyguards as they chattered on about 'slumming'. Six ponies stomping in full power armor were given a wide berth as they seemed dead set on buying every grenade and missile they could get their hooves on. I felt a stab of guilt at the sight of four Crusaders walking out with a bag full of canned goods, though at least they weren't the ones I knew.

"It's a regular slice of the Wasteland. I wonder where the Enclavers are?" P-21 said, frowning as he looked at a bin full of grenades. "Where do they find this stuff?"

"All over," a lemon-furred blue-maned mare answered brightly as she approached us. She had three bottle caps for her cutie mark. She wore a slightly off-color navy blue vest with a name tag that read 'Hello, my name is Bottlecap, your Megamart Manager.' "Hoofington had more military bases around it than any city in Equestria, on account of the enemy constantly attempting to disrupt research and development. After the bombs fell, the ordnance just sat around in hidden caches and arsenals. We pay top caps for any and all war materiel." Her eyes looked at my security barding and she smiled. "Ah, you're the mare who cleared the Manehattan highway!"

Okay. Maybe there was a security discount or something. It was the only silver lining I could see. "Yeah. It's not a big deal. It just sort of happened," I said with an awkward smile. She gave me a very calculating look that made me shift awkwardly. "I mean, they were just raiders. Anypony would have killed them."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said as she looked at me with a cool little smile. "Anypony would have given them a wide berth while they tried to extort my caravans. You were the one that shut them down. Perhaps not a big deal to you, but we've lost six caravans in as many months. Trade to Tenpony and Gutterville was down to a trickle." She reached into her vest and took out a small plastic bag filled with caps. "Consider this a 'thank you' from the Finders," she said as she tossed it to me with a smile.

"Wow. Very generous," P-21 observed curiously. There was a clear look of suspicion on his face. Was I the only pony in our merry band that tried to look open?

"Well, it was a standing contract. I am fairly sure you'll spend it here, so I'll recover some of it from the vendors. And if it outfits you, well, the more likely you'll bring in profitable goods in the future," Bottlecap said, regarding him with an even look as her explanation mollified him.

I glanced at my PipBuck and saw the amount. Five hundred caps, not counting the miscellaneous junk we'd acquired. I glanced at P-21 and Glory, both of whom were looking around in surprise. I counted out two groups of twenty-five caps each and handed them to Glory and P-21. "Why don't you two get something to eat and look around? Maybe you'll find some Enclave ponies," I suggested to Glory.

"No. We're not allowed here. This place is restricted," she said sullenly as she took the caps and turned to walk along the rows. P-21 gave me a curious look before he followed her.

"She's Enclave?" Bottlecap asked with a frown. I nodded hesitantly and she immediately scowled. "Be careful then. You may not realize it – she may not realize it – but she's trouble."

"I doubt she's very dangerous," I replied and got a dry look in return. Okay, Enclave a sore topic. I looked back at Bottlecap and gave her my surest smile. "Sorry about P-21's suspicion. He's dealing with a lot of pain. It's been a rough few days for us."

"Just a few days, imagine that," she replied dryly, arching her brow in a way that suggested I hadn't seen anything yet.

"Yeah…" Okay, try not to sound like a complete idiot. "I was wondering if we could get some information."

"Information is a commodity like bullets and armor," she answered back. "Simple questions are easy enough, but if you're looking for

something specific then it'll be pricey."

I winced at that. "I have a data file. EC-1101. I need to find out what it is."

"Data analysis? Sweet Goddesses, you know how to jump to the top of the price list," she said, looking slightly pleased at this fact. I showed her the file and she frowned at my PipBuck. "Encrypted?" I nodded and she closed her blue eyes, swaying her head back and forth a little before she concluded, "Ten thousand caps." She looked at me with an even, sober expression. "That includes our processing fee."

Had her expression been anything but professional and serious I would have laughed. "Ten thousand?"

"If you want a safe and reliable job, yes. I can think of cheaper sources, but they'd more likely shoot you and take the data themselves. If you want to buy an answer, ten thousand caps," she said with a conciliatory smile. "Sorry, but that's the honest answer."

Great. The 'get the info quick' plan just went swirling down the toilet. Now I needed to work on a 'get rich quick' plan. "Thanks. At least I have a number to aim for," I said with a sigh. A five-digit number. I gave my best 'Nightmare Moon may care' grin. "So, any suggestions on a way to get ten thousand caps?"

"I assume you want this money relatively quickly, rather than over the course of a lifetime?" Bottlecap asked with an arch of her brow and an approving smile. When I nodded she looked me over. "Well, competent help always demands a price," she said as she walked to a large bulletin board that was covered with pieces of paper. Some were printed documents, but most were hoof-written. "We don't just find things. We also handle ponies looking for special help. Sometimes it'll be retrieving goods, other times it's contract work like clearing out nests of dangerous wildlife or bounty hunting."

"Bounties?" I said as I looked over the papers. "You mean killing ponies for bottle caps?"

"Oh yes. That can be quite lucrative…provided you don't mind letting another decide if somepony should die," she said as she pointed at a section with a hoof. "Don't let the language fool you. They'll all be described as raiders, murderers, thieves, and killers… whether they are or not. Some are. Some aren't. You decide."

I needed ten thousand bottle caps, and in front of me I had a wall of opportunity. "Thanks. I'll have to read these closely." Actually, P-21 reading them would be a safer bet... P-21... I looked back at

the yellow mare. “One last question. My friend was injured a few days ago. It’s really hurting him and he’s going to need some substantial healing. More than just a standard healing potion.”

“Magical surgery’s almost as expensive as data decryption and analysis.” She regarded me for a long moment. “However, west of here is the Fluttershy Medical Center. If there were something salvageable, it would be there. The upper floors haven’t been thoroughly looted or explored. It’s a…difficult place. But shy of going to the Ministry of Peace’s hub in the Core I can’t think of any place it would be available.”

“Thanks, Bottlecap.”

“Don’t thank me, Security. I just gave you a direction. You’re the one that actually has to do the work. Good luck,” she said as she walked off, hailing two ponies encased head to hoof in metal armor with some impressive multi-barreled hardware strapped to the sides. “Welcome, Steel Rangers! Missiles, grenades, or 5mm ammunition today?” So they were the Steel Rangers? Well it was good to know Deus wasn’t the only one packing cannons.

I stopped by the clinic, where prices were scratched out on a busted slab of blackboard in chalk. *‘Patchwork: 50c. Rad purge: 100c. Teeth pulled, 10c each. Worm and parasite removal: 25c. Ask about our stock of drugs, certain to pick you right up. Specials: Dash 75c. Amputations in under a minute or half off.’* The doctor, and I use the term lightly, was a scrawny old brown unicorn with a bonesaw for a cutie mark and wearing a white coat covered in old yellow stains.

I opted for the ‘patchwork and purge special’ for 125c. I unbelted my barding and let the blue and yellow padded armor be lifted from me. Beneath it my white hide was a roadmap of bruises, yellow discolorations, angry red lines, and half-healed strips of medical bandages. My neck still ached from the shots in the school and my cheek throbbed from Glory’s welcome present. Bonesaw levitated a pair of spectacles onto his muzzle as he blinked at my injuries. “Well now. Somepony’s been busy? Rad burns. Beam burns. Bullet holes. Lots of healing potion fixes.” He shaded my eyes with his hoof and gave a grim nod. “Interesting. I’ve seen eyes like that before.”

“Really?” Maybe he could fix them?

“Yup. See ‘em all the time on ghouls,” he said with a grim chuckle. “Looks like Security doesn’t come easy.”

“That’s not my name,” I said as my ears folded. “I don’t know why

DJ Pon3 called me that, but it's nonsense."

He looked at me coolly. "Girl, I've been in the Wasteland a while now and outlived my children and grandchildren. If there's one thing more precious than clean water and bullets, it's the feeling that tomorrow you're less likely to die than today. Those raiders might be replaced by some other band, but yesterday we nearly had a party when we'd heard we could send caravans safely to Manehattan again. That might be nonsense to you, but it means the world to us."

I didn't know if I should feel encouraged, annoyed, or embarrassed, so I settled with shutting up and letting him get to work. P-21 and Glory stopped by, the former sipping water through a straw as the latter enjoyed a Sparkle-Cola. Both of them seemed a bit taken aback at the sight of me in my hide. Not that I was too embarrassed about that; clothing in 99 was a matter of duty and I'd been fine trotting around off-duty with my mark just hanging out. Bonesaw gave me a cup of some chalky gloop as he went to work with his magic. I had to admit that as scraggly as he was, Bonesaw knew his trade. By the time he finished I felt like I'd just received treatment at 99's medical center.

"Ten thousand caps?" Glory gaped at the pair of us once my treatment was finished. The doc had given me something called Buck, and I had to admit I felt more energized than ever. Glory frowned. "Is that a lot?"

"That Sparkle-Cola was ten caps. So it's the equivalent of a thousand colas," P-21 said calmly.

Glory winced. "Yeah. I guess that is a lot." Then she thought for a moment. "Well. There might be a cheaper option. I'm pretty sure that if we got to the Skyport, the Enclave might be able to crack the encryption for free. I'm sure they'd be happy to in exchange for returning me." She frowned, rubbing her mane as she rolled her eyes a little. "I'm…just a little unsure of how you get to the Skyport from here though. I think it's east…ish?"

"That's…a possibility." Maybe once I knew more about the Enclave than just two opinions. Morning Glory, I knew, would have happily helped. When I thought about Brolly's last broadcast, the clouds, and what had happened to the Volunteer Corps, I had doubts about the rest of the Enclave. Then I remembered something. "Glory, who is Rainbow Dash?"

Her eyes went round with shock, lips pressed close together as if

trying to keep from blurting something out. Finally she stammered, "Rainbow Dash? She…ah…oh my…" Clearly this wasn't a topic she expected to discuss. "Well, she was the greatest heroine of the pegasi during the war…but…well…" She looked at me sadly. "When the bombs fell, she wanted us to go down to the surface and help."

P-21 looked at her in confusion. "So what's wrong with that? Isn't that why you're here?"

She shook her head firmly. "I want to help now, but she demanded the pegasi fly down and help despite the magical radiation of hundreds of balefire bombs poisoning the atmosphere. Tens of thousands of pegasi would have died, or more…We'd already lost Cloudsdale, so the pegasus council refused. She left…and probably died of radiation poisoning," she said quietly, looking at her hooves. "Some ponies really respect her for that, but…"

"I'm guessing you don't?" I asked with a little smile.

She sighed with a little frown, shaking her head. "If she'd stayed and listened to the council, she could have shaped things for the better. The Enclave was established to protect the pegasus people, and they do. But…" She glanced around the Megamart. "Well, maybe if Rainbow Dash hadn't left then the Enclave would have started helping the surface sooner. Instead she left and it took two hundred years of petitions and peaceful demonstrations for the Volunteer Corps to do what she'd wanted us to do right after the bombs blew." She finished drinking her Sparkle-Cola.

I had to admit my mane was itching in curiosity. "So, what's life in the clouds like?"

Again, clearly not a question she expected. "Um…it's different. That's all I can really say," she said softly. "We're not supposed to discuss Thunderhead. It's all classified." Huh, go figure. Secrets for her, suspicion from him. I could tell I had a long way to go on this whole 'making friends' thing. P-21 still wasn't even willing to carry a gun; he still saw me as embodying all the fucked up shit he'd endured in Stable 99.

Time for a topic change! "So, P-21. Have you seen their little bulletin board? I'm pretty sure if we can knock out some jobs, sell any salvage we don't need, and get lucky then we might be able to get that ten thousand caps pretty quick." Quick hopefully meaning that we wouldn't need months of searching. I really doubted we could evade Deus that long, particularly if that stupid DJ was giving

my position away every other broadcast. I pulled out a couple of slips of paper and slid them to him. “I was hoping you could help me pick?”

“Right. Get rich quick. That’s a plan that always works out,” he replied sardonically, but took the papers. “Okay…kill so and so… no. No. No.” He looked at one oddly, arching a brow. “Okay…kill and defile…no. Defile and kill? Ugh. What is wrong with these ponies?” He then frowned as he smoothed out a rumpled note written on the back of a lottery ticket. “This might be okay. Some mare wants us to collect radscorpion venom glands.”

“Oh? To make anti-toxin?” Glory asked curiously.

“Casserole,” P-21 answered with a small roll of his eyes. Glory mouthed the word in bafflement as P-21 went on. “Apparently they’re delicious and nutritious. She’s paying twenty-five caps each. Six hundred caps if we can bring her twenty. Apparently there’s a pit west of here that’s full of them.”

“What’s a radscorpion?” I asked, glancing at Glory.

“Well, I heard they’re like scorpions…only bigger.”

“Great. So what’s a scorpion?” I asked with a crooked little smile.

Clearly she wasn’t used to facing my level of professional ignorance. “Um…a bug. Well, technically an arachnid, but…”

I stomped my hoof, cutting her off. “Aha! Bugs. I can kill bugs. Bring on the caps!” No moral ambiguity there. “What else you got?”

He sifted through more. “Murder…murder…not enough caps… murder…murder…Wait. Salvage.” He lifted the yellowed printout. “Ironshod Firearms R&D center. The poster wants us to get some components from their maneframe. Bonus if we can extract any blueprints still within the system.”

“Great. So we get to the maneframe, rip out the blueprints and yank any spare parts, and get rich!” I declared, getting winces from both of them. “What?”

P-21 looked at Glory. “Can you remove the parts?”

“Well…I mean…I know the basics. Maybe?” Glory said with a sheepish smile as she tapped her hooves together. “Probably better than just yanking them out.”

“That would be a thousand caps, plus two hundred per blueprint,” P-21 said calmly as he fished through some more. “Huh. This is a recent one. ‘Time sensitive.’ Two thousand caps to remove squatters at the Fluttershy Medical Center.”

My ears immediately perked. “Remove? As in kill and mutilate?”

Glory looked at me with some concern. “What? You’ve heard these contracts. The mutilation’s always implied.”

“It just says remove. Doesn’t say they’re raiders like all the rest so it might be legit.”

“Well, we should give it a shot, then. After that, we can poke around. We might find something valuable.” I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible, but P-21 still looked suspicious…okay, he usually looked suspicious. Honestly, what was the deal? You round up a guy for summary execution and they never trust you again? Well, if we found something to help his bum leg, maybe then he’d start thinking of me as a friend rather than ‘stable reminder’.

“Okay. So we stomp some bugs, yank out some wires, and roust some squatters. How hard can that be?” I said with a grin at the other two. P-21 covered his face with his hoof while Glory clearly seemed to have some doubts. “What?”

“She just had to say it,” P-21 muttered.

* * *

“I just had to say it!” I shouted over the chittering, snapping horde that was advancing at me. The drum-fed combat shotgun I’d picked up for a hundred caps roared over and over again as I retreated around the gravel pit, a half dozen of the radscorpions clawing at me with their pincers and stabbing with their venom-tipped stingers. I couldn’t miss at this range…but I also wasn’t having the best of luck piercing their hides.

S.A.T.S. had finally failed me, too. The targeting and time manipulation spell might have slowed things down, but it didn’t *stop* time. By the time it finished, two of the radscorpions were dead, but the remainder had put new holes in my forelegs with their razor-sharp pincers. I was going to have to visit Bonesaw again when this was all done. Fortunately, their barbed tails hadn’t penetrated my barding yet.

The gravel pit was filled with rusted machinery that made Morning Glory’s job infinitely harder. She had to swoop under and around the girders, busted conveyors, and decaying equipment to try and follow me as I blasted ammo like crazy. She proved much more adept with the beam pistol fighting insects than ponies. I had no clue how she could aim the boxy contraption clenched in her teeth, but the soft ‘crak’ of each shot mixed well with the throaty ‘boom’

of my shotgun.

"This is getting out of hoof!" P-21 called from the lip of the pit, watching through a pair of binoculars. While I really wanted him to get a gun and join in the fight, I was glad for any help right now. "More are coming out of that cave, Blackjack!" he yelled as he gestured to the far wall of the gravel pit.

"Glory!" I shouted, leaping aside as one got close enough to jab me with its stinger. It was with some satisfaction that my return shot took its tail off. Now if it just didn't have claws, pincers, or razor sharp mandibles…"Flash 'em!"

The small pegasus blushed furiously, but the term was appropriate enough. The radscorpions didn't seem to know how to attack a flying enemy. Meanwhile, her beam pistol rained down more shots to keep them off the grounded and more munchable pony. The flashing shots kept them disorganized, and I took some satisfaction when her shots killed one of the smaller varieties.

I tripped over some rusty equipment and flailed as I struggled to stay on my hooves. One of the radscorpions pounced, and I rolled onto my back while kicking with all four hooves to try and keep all its nasty pointy bits out of myself. Fortunately, I didn't need my hooves to fire my gun. I floated the barrel right against the scorpion's head; a single shot transformed the head into a spray of green globules and shattered chitin. If I could just keep them off me, this could be easy; they didn't seem to realize the shotgun was the real threat, not me. I kicked the corpse off, and the remaining radscorpions shied aside long enough for me to get my hooves under me.

I turned and ran, feeling nicks to my flanks as I took a healing potion, telekinetically unloaded the spent drum, and levitated a fresh one from my pack. Smacking it in place, feeling the magic take away some of the pain from my injuries, I turned once more and laid down a rain of buckshot that eroded the tenacious arachnids. Finally the last one dropped and I was able to go help Glory. I was quite glad she'd managed to keep them off me as I ran in towards the confused, milling mass. They were already worn down by the time I got there, too; half a dozen shots finished the rest of the chittering vermin.

"Okay. That wasn't so bad," I said with a laugh as Glory landed beside me.

"That was terrible!" she countered. I decided not to tell her what

I'd seen inside Pony Joe's. I'd take fighting bugs over smelling that any day.

Why'd the ground just move? "Look out!" I screamed, seeing flashbacks of ghouls exploding from heaps of bone as I knocked Glory aside. From the middle of the pit heaved the largest radscorpion I'd ever seen! It was as large as three ponies combined, with pincers large enough to snip my limbs and head like a daisy… well…pictures of daisies. I always thought they were flimsy looking flowers…but why was I thinking about flowers now? Its tail struck with such force that I could imagine it going right through me.

"Run away!" We didn't have anything that could harm something like this. The problem was, for me at least, that the only way out was behind the giant radscorpion. Worse, the thing was fast! I'd expected something so big to move ponderously, but it skittered after us with tenacity and swiftness. The only thing we had going for us was its size and the wreckage in the base of the gravel pit. A few shots revealed that I was right that the shotgun and beam pistol did nothing to it.

Still, I had one ace in my pocket. I fished out the grenade with the blue band. "Eat this!" I shouted as I telekinetically shot it right at the beast's maw. Eating was this thing's forte, and I pulled the stem right before it disappeared into the radscorpion's mouth. Five seconds. Ten…why was Glory looking at me like that? "What?"

"That was a shock grenade!" she yelled as the giant radscorpion scurried around towards us.

"A what?"

"It only works on robots!" she screamed at me.

"Who makes a bomb that only works on robots?" I screamed back at her. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever…look out!" I yelled as its tail shot out through the wreckage and nearly took Glory's head off. I kept looking for some opportunity to get past it and run out of the gravel pit, but it kept moving left and right. I could only fall back as it moved me towards…the cave…oh hell no! "It's herding us!"

"What?"

"It's pushing us back towards that hole." And once in there I seriously doubted I'd last long.

"Let me fly you out!" Morning Glory yelled as the giant radscorpion was tangled in some rusty cabling from a steam crane. There weren't enough words to express my skepticism, but then

there also weren't enough words to stress how much I really didn't want to be in that pit.

"If you think you can," I said as it scurried towards us. I felt her bite the back of my barding behind my neck and felt her hooves hook into my straps. Her wings beat furiously and I was stunned as we slowly rose up into the air.

Rising: good. Slowly: not so good. The giant radscorpion jumped up on the side of the steam crane and snapped its tail out. Morning Glory cried out as the barbed tip bit deeply into her flank, and gravity returned with a vengeance. Had I fallen to the ground I probably would have broken something vital. Instead, I landed on the roof of the huge steel crane. I looked back to see Morning Glory fluttering down to the floor of the gravel pit. The radscorpion turned and started to scuttle towards her.

I saw a teal filly torn in two before my eyes.

"No!" I bellowed as I ejected the drum and slammed in a fresh one. I only had a dozen or so slugs. They'd do the job or it wouldn't matter. I jumped from the roof of the crane and landed right in the middle of the giant monster's back. Crouching low on the middle of its heaving back, I triggered S.A.T.S. as I pressed the barrel against its tail. The slugs tore into the meaty appendage with a spray of sour yellow flesh and greenish-black ichor. A third shot severed the tail entirely, and more importantly made me its first priority.

I jammed my front hooves into a groove in its armored carapace, feeling my limbs squeezed almost to breaking as it bucked and squirmed wildly. Its claws weren't quite agile enough to simply pluck me off, so instead it swept the claws back and forth over its back to knock me loose. I ducked my head down, gritting my teeth as I waited for S.A.T.S. to recharge enough to chance a shot. I locked in a blast that caught the radscorpion at the base of the pincer and took it completely off. When it finally flipped over on its back to scrape me off, I kicked free and rolled in the loose gravel, screaming as I rose to my hooves and charged the monster. I wanted every remaining slug to matter as I closed to point blank range and opened fire.

It attempted to shield itself with a claw, and I had just enough charge in S.A.T.S. to target that limb as well. The shotgun's roar stretched out as the black pincer spun off in a slow arc. "Die! Die! Die!" I screamed again and again as I pulverized its head with my three remaining slugs. Finally I reversed the spent weapon and

smashed the butt against whatever goop might have constituted a brain stem. I didn't stop until it did. In fact, I might not have stopped even then if P-21 hadn't yelled to snap me out of it.

"Ow…ow…ow…" Morning Glory cried as she limped over to us. "No offense, but I really am starting to dislike the surface."

"Join the club," I remarked, then saw their looks. I was splashed almost head to hoof in radscorpion bits. P-21 gave Glory one of our healing potions, but even though the hole in her flank right above her sunrise cutie mark closed, she still didn't look so good. "Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Yeah, sure. I'm just a little lightheaded; hope it's just blood loss. I'll be fine," she said as she took a seat.

"When we get back, I'm going to find you some decent armor," I promised. "That uniform you've got is worse than useless."

I had no idea what constituted a 'radscorpion poison gland', but apparently P-21 did. He and Glory went from scorpion to scorpion collecting them. It looked like we'd be making that bonus. Meanwhile, I headed over to the cave…more of a pit in the wall, really. Dozens of bones and other debris filled the cavity. Mostly earth and unicorn ponies, but there were two picked-over pegasi too. I took the time to sift through with my telekinesis and was rewarded with an assortment of ammunition, two energy cartridges, and a workable bolt-action rifle. I also found a Crusader's cape. There wasn't much of it left, but I still saw the rearing white filly on the stained blue patch. Carefully, I tore it from the scrap.

Part of me wanted to wear it. Even though my mother was still alive, I doubted I would see her again, but then I thought about Scoodle and Boing. I thought about asking P-21, but…I couldn't keep using him as my ethical barometer. I owed the Crusaders. Carefully I took the patch and slipped it into a pocket.

"Blackjack!" I was really starting to hate people shouting my name. I ran back out and saw P-21 kneeling over the prone gray pegasus.

Damn it! She wasn't fine. "She's poisoned, isn't she?" I demanded as I ran to them. I wanted to hug her and kick her.

"Sorry," she said weakly. "I said I hoped it was just blood loss."

I hissed softly through my teeth. I couldn't shoot, kick, or beat poison out of her. "What can we do?" Because we had to be able to do something. If I just had to sit here and watch her die then I would completely lose it.

"I could synthesize an antidote. One poison gland…one healing

potion…but I'd need lab equipment…" Morning Glory said softly, her breathing labored.

I looked up to the west at the large brown building that my PipBuck identified as the destination for the next job. "P-21, R&D means research and something, right?"

"Development, yeah," he said as he followed my look.

"Let's go," I said as I loaded a fresh drum into my shotgun. Morning Glory needed a lab, and I would find one. We weren't going to lose another pony on my watch.

* * *

Ironshod Firearms; I could have worked for these ponies. I really could have. Just looking at the faded pictures of firearms sitting over desks was enough to make my insides moist. Especially at the sight of the drum-fed IF-88 'Ironpony' combat shotgun. Now that was a glorious-looking weapon! Still, I had no time to admire their works when it seemed like every automated turret and Robronco sentry was out to render us into glue.

"I want that gun," I shouted, my buckshot peppering the head of a sentry pony as I embarked on a grand unofficial tour of the premises. "I want a lab first, but after that I want an IF-88 'Ironpony'. Can I have one?"

"I'm sure you do," P-21 said as he carried Morning Glory on his back, watching as my second shot destroyed the sentry. "Ask your mother."

"She'd never let me have one." It was crazy. I was crazy. Every second I had to keep moving or I'd look at Morning Glory. I had to joke because if I thought about Glory…without waiting for S.A.T.S. to recharge, I hopped right over the blasted sentry and into the next room. A sweep with my gun and a check with my E.F.S. and I was moving on to the next hallway. Jumping through the next door I heard an ominous beep underhoof.

I glanced down just in time to hit the override button on the mine with my magic. That sent prickles up and down my spine. I'd help nopony if I got us blown up. Levitating the mine into my gear, I moved through this hallway with more care, finding two more mines hidden under debris. The two were so close together I detonated them with a shot just to move faster. Passing bathrooms, I moved into a large production area.

“Greetings, zebra scum! Time to get wiped!” a metallic voice cheered with gusto as a multi-limbed hovering robot lowered down and sprayed fire across the doorway.

“Wipe this!” I shouted, the moment’s levity leaving me feeling raw as I moved under the bot, firing into the levitation talisman built into the base. With a sizzle of sparks it collapsed behind me, and I finished it off with some more bullets to the central processing matrix.

“The labs might be on the second floor,” P-21 suggested as he looked up the stairs with their narrow catwalks. What kind of pony designed places like this? Still, we’d only seen offices and this manufacturing space on the first floor.

“I’ll take her,” I said as I carefully transferred her from his back to my own. She felt like she was burning up. That was good…I’d take feverish and alive over cold and stiff. Using my telekinesis to hold her in place, I ran up the steps as fast as I dared.

For once something went our way. Passing through a door, we found ourselves surrounded by lab equipment…and spent shells. Lots of spent shells. I almost dropped Glory as my hooves skidded beneath me. There were reloading benches, work tables, and lab equipment. Some of it was smashed but... “That’s the stuff you need, right Glory? Glory?” I gave her a telekinetic slap. “Glory!”

She stirred and looked around in a daze, muttering softly, “No. I don’t want to do this anymore.” Her pupils were unfocused as she stared around. “No more weapons. Please…”

“Glory! Antidote. You said you can make one?” I gave her a little shake.

“Antidote…why…wouldn’t make any sense…it’d need to be an antibiotic…” she muttered weakly. I gave her another slap and relaxed a little as her eyes focused on me. “Stop…stop slapping my face…”

“You *shot* my face. Tell us how to make an antidote,” I said as P-21 checked the lab equipment and burners.

“Poison gland…mix with a type A or B healing potion…simmer…filter the extract…inject…” she murmured in a daze.

“Please, please tell me you understood that?” I asked P-21.

“I think so,” he said as he got to work. He dug through his bags and extracted a used needle, sterilizing the tip on a burner flame. “Did you get the impression she’s more than just a good-intentioned idealist?”

"I don't care. She helped us. We're going to help her," I said sharply as he worked. This was *not* the time to bring this up with me.

"But…"

"Enough with your suspicion!" I yelled as I rounded on him. "Right now she needs our help. I know you don't trust anypony, but we are going to do this." Clearly my outburst shocked him. I took a deep breath and sighed. "Look. I know she's Enclave. I know she says she wants to help. I also know I'd love to see what the sun is really like. But letting her die isn't an option for me."

"I…" He looked over at her and then sighed. "I wasn't going to let her die. I just…why do you trust her? You trust everypony. Watcher. Bottlecap. Even the Crusaders. Morning Glory. You even trust me when I've told you that I want to shoot you."

I looked at him as he worked to mix the gland and the healing potion. "I don't know. I can't help it. I just accept people until they try to kill me or hurt somepony else." Maybe it was an effect of 99. With the exception of the Overmare, there was no real chance for guile there; everypony knew everypony and even deep secrets were common enough knowledge. The closest you came to deception was bluffing at poker. I probably knew the dirt and flaws on a hundred different mares in 99. "I just believe that ponies are more likely to help than screw each other over."

He chuckled softly. "Just what the wasteland needs: an optimist."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "P-21…"

"I mean it," he said seriously, surprising me. He instructed me to fill the syringe since my magic was a touch more precise than his mouth and hooves. Once it was full, we injected it into her leg. A minute later she shuddered as her breathing deepened. "You frustrate me, annoy me, and sometimes scare me half to death, but you also impress me terribly from time to time."

"So does that mean next time I talk to Watcher I can tell him we're friends?" I asked with a smile.

"Closer to friends," he said as he held his hooves a millimeter apart. "About this much."

I laughed and shook my head. "Okay. Good to know I'm making progress." I sighed as I finally returned to actually paying attention to my surroundings. There were a number of red marks on my E.F.S. "I'm going to clear the lab and see if I can find the maneframe."

"Right. Don't try and take parts out of it," he said with a half joking, half serious smile.

I proceeded further into the lab, kicking brass and shotgun hulls with each step. I had to admit I was glad nopony had made it up here before us. There was a veritable cornucopia of ammunition up here. I passed by ammo crates with pistol, revolver, shotgun, and rifle ammunition. Several of them had markings I'd never seen before: red, orange, green, blue, and black bands. And here I had a number of sentry robots to try them out on!

Red proved to be some sort of incendiary that seemed rather futile. An orange shotgun shell, on the other hoof, exploded on contact like a grenade! Perhaps not as large a blast radius as the thrown variety, but still impressive! Green just splattered some sort of goo all over the metal. Then I fired a blue shell at a turret. There was an electric flash and then the turret just stopped. I looked skeptically at the disabled device and then at my gun. At first I'd been impressed. Then a minute later, the damn thing powered back up again, and I had to disable it the old-fashioned way: with buckshot. Black simply fired a bunch of tiny sharpened nails that bounced right off the armor of the few remaining sentries.

I got to one door and immediately froze. I could feel the tingle in my skin even before I could hear the clicking of the PipBuck on my foreleg. Whatever was behind the locked door, I could live with the mystery. Finally I cleared the last turret and discovered an office. 'Dr. Trottenheimer. Research Lead.' was written on a tarnished plaque on the front. Inside were a safe and terminal; I'd leave them to the more reliable hooves of P-21. A unicorn skeleton sat in the chair, an unusual pistol on the floor next to it.

As I looked, however, I noticed the bones appeared…wrong. Like his skull was made of wax and left too long near a heating duct. The hole in the skull didn't look blown out, but instead appeared melted. I reached out with my magic and carefully lifted the gun. I'd never seen its like before, but something about it made me squirm. I put it in my duffel bag. Most ominously, perhaps, my PipBuck identified it as simply 'Trottenheimer's Folly'. Then I looked at the wall the exit wound pointed at...

Like most buildings in the Wasteland, Ironshod Firearms R&D was ridiculously overengineered. I might not have known the first thing about construction, but there were some walls with three inches of armored plate squeezed inside a foot of reinforced concrete. It was

made to withstand missiles. So when I walked to the hole in the wall, I could only stare through the glassy tunnel that passed through the armored office and the exterior wall of the room beyond that. I glanced back at Dr. Trottenheimer's corpse, then looked back at the hole. What the fuck kind of bullet had done that?

* * *

It was an hour later when I swapped shifts with P-21 so he could work his lockpicking magic. He passed me a ratty old magazine with half the pages falling out. Apparently, it was some sort of 'cookbook', though it had some pretty odd articles like 'Plastic explosives and you' and 'How did Pinkie Pie foil the Prance bombing? Three theories'.

Glory's breathing had slowed and deepened, and it was a few minutes after P-21 left that she finally opened her eyes. "I'm alive?" she asked quietly.

"Does this look like the afterlife?" I said with a snort. "Yeah. We flipped a bottle cap and it landed carrot up, so we had to save you," I said with a flippant grin.

"You flipped…"

"A joke," I explained. "Don't Enclavers joke?" I asked, arching a brow.

"It's just Enclave ponies, Blackjack. Not Enclavers... " Morning Glory looked away. "And no. I don't suppose that we do," she said as she slowly sat up, holding her head with her hooves. "Ow… ow…"

"Headache?" Stupid question. I fished in my bags for a bottle of Sparkle-Cola and levitated it to her, deftly flipping off the top and pocketing it. She smirked as she held it in her hooves and took a drink. "So. You said some things while you were out of it that made P-21 curious."

Instant evasive look. Not good. Worse, she looked upset. "I did?"

"Something about 'no more weapons'? I mean I just found it ironic given the nearest lab we found was a munitions laboratory, but P-21 was a little more curious," I said softly, hoping to coax her into opening up a little.

She closed her eyes, looking away. "I…I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine. Just fine." P-21 wants to shoot me for reminding him of home but he doesn't want to talk about it. She did something with weapons in the Enclave and doesn't want to talk about it. I'd give one of my left legs for somepony without a dark and troubled past. "Just, if you ever do, I know that I'd be glad to hear it," I said as I rose, leaving her to her Sparkle-Cola.

"I didn't have a choice," she said to my back, softly.

"Excuse me?" I looked back at her with a politely curious expression.

She stared down at the fizzy carrot flavored water. "I didn't have a choice. In the Enclave…if you have aptitude then you're... encouraged... to accept training and an assigned job in your field." She sighed and closed her eyes. "My aptitudes were in technical engineering and medical procedures. I never worked on anything critical, but there was always…talk. Talk about how something could be weaponized. Talk about how something could be used for the Enclave's security." She looked back at the bottle. "I didn't like it."

"So you couldn't just quit?" Gee…looks like Stable 99 wasn't so unique after all.

"I could, but…it would have been complicated." I could tell she wasn't going to elaborate past that. "So I transferred into the Volunteer Corps. Got my two weeks training and came down here."

I gave a crooked smile. "You know, someday I'd really love to hear about life in the Enclave. Compare notes and all that?"

"It's…I can't. Please…it's not that I don't want to," she said softly as she stared at her hooves. "It's that I can't. If they ever found out I broke that protocol…I have family." Her lavender eyes begged me to understand. "They'd be investigated. There'd be inquiries. My sister might lose her job. My father would certainly be disgraced. I can't talk about it. Not about Thunderhead or what I did there. Nothing." She covered her face with her hooves. "It's not that I don't want to tell you. I can't," she said as she gave a snotty sniff.

I felt that if I pushed right now I could make her crack. My mane itched just right to get some solid answers. Instead I sighed and brushed my magic along her purple mane. "Don't worry about it. I get it. And I'll tell P-21 to drop it as well." So it looked like I'd be putting up with secrets for a bit longer. I rose and stretched. "Finish that off, and then do me a favor; take three or four of those glands

and mix up a few more doses of antidote. I'd like to avoid doing this again." She smiled and nodded. Sure, we wouldn't get the full bounty, but I'd live with that. We might not live without it.

"I'm going to go find P-21. Find out if he needs any help." I had no idea how I was going to help him crack terminals or locks, but hey. It sounded better than saying 'I'm useless unless there's something to shoot.' Leaving her to recompose herself, I headed back to the doctor's office. While I walked I levitated out the pistol. I'd never seen its like, and the design was absolutely bizarre. I couldn't find a place for a clip, so it couldn't be an automatic as I had assumed. The caliber was huge; almost as big as my horn! It seemed as if the pistol had been armored. It loaded from a breech like a break-action shotgun, but clearly it'd been engineered for precision.

Well, worse came to worse I could hit someone with it. It had a value of more than two thousand caps, but I couldn't imagine it would fetch that price if I didn't find bullets for it.

"So…any luck?" I asked as I sat on the desk, crossing my rear hooves as I perched upright, getting a distinctly odd look from P-21. I noticed a little plaque on the desk. *I have become death, destroyer of worlds.* Creepy.

"I'm on attempt sixty-one," he replied with a soft sigh, returning his gaze to the terminal. After a moment, he suddenly brightened a bit. "And…apparently sixty-two is the charm." There was a click, and the safe in the corner opened up. "There are some journal entries here. Want to read them while I see what we have?"

"Ugh…I probably shouldn't. It'll just depress me," I said, but did I mention I hate being bored? I really couldn't help myself as I rocked forward onto my hooves and trotted around the desk to read the journal entries off the terminal.

Entry 1> I am writing these entries in the event that I am detained or have my memory modified by the MoM. My move from Horizon Labs to Ironshod Firearms is jarring, to say the least, but vital to my safety. G.B. is doing everything he can to protect myself and S.S. from the director. I fear it may not be enough. B was quite thankful to get an intellect such as mine on his R&D staff, but I've noticed considerable resentment of my addition from the old team. That doesn't matter; though the new work may be far below my abilities, it is at least enough to provide for myself and my family. And, considering the current circumstances, it is probably better for me to keep my genius to myself for a while anyway.

Entry 2> T.B. came by trying to convince me to work with the new

director. Odious mule. He has no loyalties to anypony but himself. It's clear that he feels quite superior for his betrayal; he kept going on about 'the winning side'. P.P. sent more MoM goons to search my files, but they did not find these records. I hope I will be safe, if only for the moment. G.B. is fighting for us all.

Entry 3> G.B. came to me last night. I've no idea how he bypasses security. I've never seen him so…disturbed. For once, G.B. appeared quite at a loss, and he was truly desperate for my expertise. After P.H. and P.S., haven't I done enough? No. For him, for his faith in believing in me when none would…I owe him this. He swore it would never be used on P.L. or P.C. He said the most peculiar thing: 'There are greater threats.' I am uneasy, but I will do this for him. Fortunately, I've grown quite adept at keeping secrets from my loved ones; this would only worry them, and the less they know, the safer they'll be from the MoM.

Entry 4> I fear that my security may be compromised. Another conspicuous visit by the director again. He may be quite amiable, but I cannot allow him to sway me. He promised me a transfer to the M.A.S. if I agreed to work with him. It was tempting. I was destined to work with the greatest forces known to ponykind, not to make…bullets. As glorious as it would be to work under T.S. again, I had to decline. The director was quite put out.

Entry 5> G.B. has provided the metal, flux, and cores necessary. As I am working for a firearms manufacturer, I craft the devices in the shape of bullets and guns. It is true enough to their function. I warned G.B. of the risks, but he was quite dismissive. I am not certain of him anymore. Is his agitation paranoia or legitimate alarm? Am I crafting another 'Dragon Killer' bullet like the ones that slew B.M.? I do not know any longer. Four Leaf wants me to spend more time at home. She says the girls miss me terribly. I hope that, after this, things will finally settle down.

Entry 6> We are undone. G.B. has been arrested. My lab was raided by MoM officials. I don't think I've ever seen P.P. so happy. She questioned me personally. I told her precisely what I had done; it was not my fault that she lacked the intellect to understand me. I foiled her interrogation spells and sent her mind-digging lackeys on a tour of the Trottingham countryside. They've seized all my work, but they missed bullet #9 still in the fabricator. It was quite pleasing to watch them gape at my art like stupid mules. Still, I am feeling quite ill from the flux. I should go home but... there's still so much to do. Even with G.B. gone... there are others he trusted, and I know how important he thought this

was, even if I don't know why.

Entry 7> There's something going on in the city. I thought it was just another attack when the sirens went off, but this was something different. Something far more substantial. For a moment I heard the most horrible scream. After that, the entire building went into security lockdown. I can't leave my own office for fear of being vaporized by our own security ponies! There is no line out of my office. I suspect something quite terrible has happened. I fear the illness from flux contamination is progressing.

Entry 8> There is no more point in waiting. Nopony is coming. I'm not going to wait days for flux contamination or dehydration to claim me. The BGP, and one BBP. Ironic. So much work and sacrifice for it these past weeks, so much concern for the vitally important need G.B. never bothered to tell me the details of, and this will be its first and only use. I've decided to rename it 'Trottenheimer's Folly'. I am sorry, Four Leaf. You always said I was an unlucky pony; I don't know about unlucky, but I feel that I have been incredibly stupid. If anyone should ever discover this hidden log, please know that I always endeavored to serve Equestria with diligence, dignity, and honor. If by some chance my family should read this, know that Daddy is sorry. Farewell.

Okay. Well, at least I was right about one thing: it had depressed me. Also confused me out of my horn. I looked at the hole blasted through the wall and floated Folly in front of me. No shell casing remained in the breech. "What do you think did this?" I couldn't think of anything that could have caused that kind of damage. With bullets that ignited, exploded, shocked, perforated, or poisoned, what did you need that could do more than that?

"No idea," P-21 said as he put some gold coins in my duffel bag. There were tons of finance reports and other papers in the safe, as well as a strange black case. It was a little longer than my hoof, but skinny. As I touched it, there was a soft pop and it opened. He immediately looked a little agitated. "Wait. How'd you open that? I didn't see a lock or a seam or anything!"

I furrowed my brows as I smiled at him. "Um…P-21? I shoot things. You're asking the wrong pony," I said as I flipped open the lid and looked down at the empty interior. "Well, that's anticlimactic," I muttered as I looked at the orange velvet-lined space, showing it to him. He looked equally baffled.

After carefully going through the lab and the downstairs offices, I found myself sitting on more ammunition than I'd encountered yet.

I even had a sizable collection of the specialty rounds, but nothing marked 'BBP'. Despite my reservations, P-21 opened the locked door and discovered a room filled with dozens of containers. One labeled 'Biomagical Flux #13' had broken open and oozed strange rainbow-colored fluid that glowed softly. My PipBuck clicked ominously, and I closed the door once again. If there was anything valuable in there, some other, more radiation-proof pony could benefit.

We found the Ironshod Firearms maneframe in the basement. Of course, all I really did was sit there while P-21 entered the doctor's password and downloaded the contents into my PipBuck. EC-1101 could have some company. I looked at the musty poster that read 'Ironshod Firearms: How do you like *them* apples?' and chuckled at the joke.

Then, with nothing in particular to do, my mind wandered back to the journal entries from Trottenheimer's terminal. Just what had been going on in this place before the bombs fell? "Hey, Glory, who was running this place during the war?"

"Well, probably the Ministry of Wartime Technology, ultimately." I looked at her blankly and she back with unease. "The Ministry of Wartime Technology. One of the six Ministries that ran all of Equestria?" I smiled and cocked my head to the side. "Didn't they have a school in your stable?" she blurted.

"Does Blackjack strike you as very studious?" P-21 asked with a thin smile.

Glory sighed. "Well... in a nutshell... the Ministries ran the war effort. There were six of them, and the Ministry of Wartime Technology was in charge of Equestria's private companies, particularly the defense contractors. The Ministry Mare of the M.W.T., the pony who ran it, was Applejack," Glory supplied as she peered into the guts of the machine. "I don't really know much about her personally, I'm afraid. There was apparently plenty of friction between her and the ponies under her, though. Half of Hoofington was probably connected to the M.W.T. in some way. Ironshod. Robronco. Flash Industries. Aegis Security. Boom Incorporated. They were all developing weapons for the war effort."

"All in Hoofington?" I asked as I found a desk and sat my haunches on it, facing her and earning an amusingly baffled look.

"Hoofington *was* the war research effort. I understand it used to be a college town, but when the war picked up, the old town was

leveled in a surprise zebra raid early on. The survivors swore to rebuild, and they did with a vengeance. Hoofington existed to invent things to kill zebras. And they were very good at it."
Carefully, she deactivated the power and started to remove some internal components. "Hoofington was a strange city, though. All the Ministries were involved here. Even the Ministry of Awesome, since Hoofington housed the Shadowbolts. Still, according to the official records, Hoofington was almost like a country unto itself. Lots of secrets. Manehattan might have been bigger, Canterlot the capital, Fillydelphia the industrial nexus, but Hoofington was the city of the future. Small wonder the zebras never wasted a chance to attack it. No other city in Equestria was targeted more."
"And then everything blew up," I commented softly. "Along with the future."

Footnote: Level Up.
New Perk: Shotgun Surgeon - When using shotguns, regardless of the type of ammunition used, you ignore an additional 10 points of a target's damage threshold.

Chapter 6: Play

"I know lots of other ways to take care of you. Don't worry. You're gonna get better."

The rain had returned while we were in Ironshod Firearms R&D; this time it was a seemingly endless drizzle that cut the world down to a thirty-foot bubble around us and rendered the ground a layer of slippery muck. It made what should have been a simple trek southwest to the Fluttershy Medical Center a real toil. I wasn't going to discard a single bullet or bit of loot that might contribute to our ten-thousand-cap goal, though, and with P-21's injured leg and Glory's lack of pockets, I was left slogging through knee-deep mud while they trotted ahead.

I didn't worry quite so much with my EFS and compass. In fact, with the navigation tag up I couldn't get lost. The rain gave me time to think, which is always a bad thing. Ten thousand caps just to find out what EC-1101 was, and once we found out, what then? Deus was still out there, somewhere. So was Sanguine, who directed him. Then there was Hoofington, a city of technology and a city built on its hatred of the zebras. A country within a country, as Glory had described it. A place of secrets.

"Ugh. I am not a smart pony. Why do I have to deal with all this complicated shit?"

"Stop whining, Blackjack," P-21 said from ahead.

"I am not whining. I am complaining."

"No. I'm fairly sure that's whining," Glory commented overhead.

No respect. I tell ya, I get no respect.

Never had I been so happy to reach a parking lot. The rusting carts and sky carriages slowly decayed in little heaps across the cracked, weathered, and uneven asphalt. Still, it wasn't mud, and that was all I cared about at the moment. Okay, that was a lie, but if I actually thought about all the things in the back of my head I'd get a migraine. So I was in denial. Who could blame me?

And that's a really *big* building.

Even through the veil of rain, the Fluttershy Medical Center rose before us like an immense tree stump. Multiple wings branched from the central structure. I'd never seen a structure like it before, which admittedly wasn't saying much. I simply couldn't help but think of twenty Megamarts stacked one atop another. If Bottlecap had been right, this was my best shot at finding something to fix P-21's leg.

The yellow bars on my PipBuck gave me pause. One day, I'd find somepony who could explain how the magical cuff could tell if something was going to shoot me offhand or not. Maybe P-21 could figure it out. Still, might as well be friendly, so I holstered the shotgun across my back and shouted into the hazy rain, "Friendlies coming! Don't shoot!"

The yellow bars immediately started to mill about as we approached. P-21 gave me a look, but personally I would be less inclined to shoot a pony who asked me not to. True, I was an idiot, but still. As we got closer, we came across a low barricade of rusted sky wagons and, behind the barricade, four ponies pointing rifles at us. Pointing, but not shooting. I could live with that. "Somepony needed some squatters removed?"

"Yes," a buck called out into the rain. His tone sounded dignified and just a bit like the Overmare. "I'm so grateful somepony decided to come. Please, come and get out of the rain." I immediately looked at P-21 in surprise. Manners? In the Wasteland? I walked past the barricade and towards the center of the encampment, where, I now saw, a long sky trailer had been draped with canvas to create an island of dryness in the middle of the drizzle. The first thing I took in about the ponies sheltering there was they were clean, and not clean in an 'I was just rained on' way. Their clothes were trimmed and patch-free. They wore some sort of light armor similar to my security barding and their weapons were of distinctly higher quality.

Then I saw a unicorn inside the trailer who had to be the pony in charge. Charisma and charm seemed to drip from his ivory hide and cobalt mane, and he gave the impression of illuminating the dim interior of the rusty trailer. His smile made my knees feel like I'd just glanced up at the sky. "Greetings. I am Prince Splendid." *You bet you are!* "I'm glad somepony responded to my requests in a prompt manner. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"Sure. Refreshment sounds great." Hot body, manners, and feeding us? This day just got a whole lot better! In fact, I was pretty sure that this was the high point of my entire experience in the Wasteland. Heck, of my life!

Refreshment involved chilled Sparkle-Cola RAD, which had a delicious sharp radish flavor – and more clicks on the radiation sensor – and some fresh carrots and apples. I could only imagine where he'd gotten fresh produce from. "So, excuse me for wanting to talk business while we eat, but who exactly are we evicting from that building?" P-21 asked as he batted a half-eaten carrot around his plate. I gave him a sharp glare that hopefully said 'do not piss off the nice unicorn with the hot flank'.

"Members of the Collegiate that have some academic interest in the site," Splendid said calmly, without showing the slightest bit of umbrage. "We've tried to negotiate with them, but they've adamantly refused. You know the Collegiate." Actually, I didn't. "There's nothing in Hoofington that they don't want to study. So we need somepony to convince them to leave until my business is concluded."

"And just what is your business here?" I asked, giving him my winningest, flirtiest smile. True, I'd only employed it on Midnight with little success. "It must be important for somepony like you to be here."

He looked at me with momentary consideration, his smile softening before he sighed. "My father is old and very ill with a wasting disease. Fluttershy's Ministry of Peace pioneered revolutionary medical technologies and procedures, from simple healing potions to megaspells that could resuscitate entire battlefields. I believe there must be something here that will restore my father to health. Without my father, I fear the Society will tear itself apart."

Society ponies will give ya a meal and then tell ya how grateful ya should be ta get it. "The Society?"

"Ah, yes. You're from a stable. I should have remembered that you'd be unfamiliar with the various political factions of the Hoof. My apologies." He stood and said with great pride, "The Society members are the descendants of the aristocracy of Equestria. Our king and leaders are related to Princess Celestia, and thus we are the rightful inheritors of Equestria." He gave a great sigh. "Sadly, few in the Wasteland will acknowledge our bloodline claims."

I tried to keep a pleasant smile as Stable 99 returned with a

vengeance and the Overmare popped into my mind. “So…you think you should get to rule because your ancestors did?” He smiled and nodded, pleased that I’d gotten it. Great. That splashed ice water on my hot, steamy fantasy.

He seemed to detect my skepticism and smiled graciously. “I understand that the burden is on the Society to prove its worthiness to lead. We don’t expect everypony in the Wasteland to bend knee to us simply because we say so. But for a thousand years and more, Equestria knew peace and harmony under an autocrat. Why should it not be so again?”

Somehow, the fact we were in a rusty sky trailer drinking two-hundred-year-old soda and finding fresh food a luxury made such a simple nostalgic desire both tantalizing and disappointing. Worse, Prince Splendid seemed to believe every word.

“So you want access to the clinic. If I can convince these Collegiate ponies to let you in, would that be okay?” I asked, tapping hooves before me. Things were so much easier when I could just shoot ponies. If I lived, I won.

“If you can, it would be a miracle, but an acceptable one. We have no argument with the Collegiate and their naive ideals. I merely want access to find something to cure my father.” Still, a solution with nopony getting killed was preferable.

Prince Splendid was a gracious host, but there was way too much awkwardness. I had to admit, I was impressed by what I saw; his ponies were better armed and equipped than most. He had fresh food; that was a miracle in and of itself. It was simply the fact that the Society seemed to believe it had some inherent right to rule. Even if he got this super cure for his father, who would it help besides ponies who already had so much?

We stepped back out into the rain with our stomachs fed, but my head, already struggling with earlier doubts and questions, now throbbed. Plus, it didn’t help that my loins were very interested in Splendid, and I had no clue how to address that; in 99 I’d put myself on his breeding queue. No doubt Splendid would have had a backlog of years. Now, I doubted it was just as simple as getting him alone and lifting my tail.

“So, what do you think?” I asked P-21, and then frowned as I saw him staring out into space as he limped along beside me. “Yoo-hoo…Equestria to P-21…” I swished my tail through his field of vision.

He blinked out of his reverie, looking…embarrassed? “Yeah? What? Oh, think? I think…ah... ” I stared in fascination as he actually stammered! “I…I’ll leave it up to you.” Rarely have such ominous words been uttered by so level-headed a pony. I didn’t think he could stammer!

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, and grinned as he went even redder.

“Nothing. I mean…I’m just thinking about what he said to you…” He scowled and then clenched his eyes closed. “Never mind!” he said as he limped ahead of us.

“What was that all about?” I asked Morning Glory. Prince Splendid had been rather gracious to me. “Is he jealous?” I looked back at Splendid’s encampment and then at P-21’s backside. He was! It explained everything. I couldn’t help but nicker.

The gray pegasus looked up at me in confusion and a touch of worry. “You’re asking *me*?”

Good point. We crossed the parking lot, heading towards an entrance surrounded by sandbags. And two turrets…hello! Still, the bars remained yellow rather than red. “Hey! Don’t shoot!”

“One day you’re going to give somepony ideas,” P-21 muttered.

Ponies scrambled at my call, and soon three pointed weapons from behind the sandbags. “Go away!” a buck yelled, his thick glasses looking almost like goggles as he gaped at us standing in the rain.

“Calm down!” I said as I sat. “We don’t want trouble. We just want to talk.” Preferably out of the rain.

“Are you with the Society?” he asked at once and then blurted nervously, “Tell them we’re not leaving!” Their beam rifles looked like they’d fall apart with a sharp kick. Those turrets on the other hand…

“I’m here to talk. If I can work out a deal where nopony gets killed, even better,” I said truthfully. “My name’s Blackjack.” Incomprehension. I sighed and added, “Security?” Comprehension dawned and they started to relax a little. Urgh…as much as I hated to admit it, that little title of DJ Pon3’s was making my life easier.

“I’m Archie. Come on in,” goggle buck said as he turned and trotted back into the hospital. It looked like this was some sort of emergency ward or the like. It’d seen much better days. The butterfly wallpaper was peeling off in brown strips, a layer of muck coated the floor, and it looked like the emergency beds had been converted into sleeping quarters. A strange drum hummed softly in

the corner, providing power to a number of flickering terminals. There were a dozen or so ponies working in the dingy space.

"So are you the pony in charge?" I asked.

The brown buck with the scraggly black mane nodded. "For now. My boss went upstairs a week ago and hasn't come back," he said nervously as he looked at the three of us. "Prince Splendid's tried to take over more than once. First he tried to sweet talk us, then bribes, then he attacked."

"Must be something really worthwhile here, then," I commented lightly, and got a worried look from the twitchy brown buck. "Something that a lot of ponies need," I amended quickly, and he noticeably relaxed.

"There is. When we got here, we found that the upper levels are completely untouched. They must have sealed hermetically when the bombs fell and only disengaged when the radiation dropped to survivable levels." He looked at several racks with medical goods stacked on them. "Unfortunately, the team who went up there didn't come back. Neither did the team that went in to look for them. Now we're stuck here till the Collegiate can send reinforcements."

"Prince Splendid thinks there's something here that will help him with his sick father," I said as neutrally as possible as I saw Archie frown.

"There is! Well…probably," he said as he turned to the terminal. "We've found notes on several new healing potions. Targeted antibiotics. Even regeneration spell infusions." He pointed at the terminal. "If we could find samples and study them, we might be able to discover how to make more. That could take years though. The prince just wants to take the samples and use them. Even offered to buy them, as if you could put a price tag on this knowledge!"

Great. It looked like what everypony was after was above us. My mane started to twitch. "Well, how about this, then: my friends and I take a peek upstairs, see if we can find your teams, maybe find something to make both you and the Society happy, and everypony lives?" What were the odds that I'd only find one dose of magical experimental super heally stuff?

Damn, my mane was itching like crazy.

We left the emergency room and walked into the central atrium, stepping into a virtual forest. The interior of the massive structure

was hollow, and far above us the domed skylight had shattered, allowing rain and runoff to cascade down into the fountain set in the center of the chamber. Chipped and faded concrete vines coiled up the interior, giving the impression of being within some mythical wood. Butterflies and birds perched, frozen and forgotten for two centuries. Glass tubes had once held elegant brass elevators, but now they were smashed or leaned out over the interior.

In the center of the fountain rose the bronze statue of a pegasus pony, one hoof around the shoulders of a young unicorn filly, the other stroking the mane of an earth pony colt. On her shoulder perched an elegant bird. At her hooves, a small rabbit seemed to glare rather insolently out with his forelegs crossed. A plaque at the base of the statue read, 'We Must Do Better'. Looking at the pegasus's gentle smile, I couldn't shake the feeling that the statue wept for all the decay around her.

"Who was she?" I asked Glory softly, feeling a strange sense of reverence and sadness.

"Fluttershy. She was a ministry mare, and a friend of Rainbow Dash. She founded the Ministry of Peace and dedicated herself to helping the ponies of Equestria throughout the war." Morning Glory looked wistful as well as she looked up at her. "As the war progressed it took its toll on her. Some claim she aided the enemy, despite orders to the contrary, and gave zebras medical supplies and other care. At the end... well…I was taught she went mad with grief and wandered out into the Wasteland to die. She simply couldn't live with having failed Equestria."

I stared at the bronze statue a moment longer. "If she failed, I can't believe it was for lack of trying," I said softly as we headed towards the stairs. Morning Glory, however, examined the remaining elevator curiously. "Something wrong?"

"I think it's still functional. It just needs a spark battery and some scrap metal," she said as she pried up a panel in the center of the platform. I looked at P-21. No need to make him climb ten flights of stairs if we could avoid it. I checked my inventory and nodded, floating the components to her for the repairs. A few minutes later the brass platform hummed softly inside its tube and an eerie noise filled the air.

"What is that?" I asked as the three of us stood upon the metal disk. It wasn't music but…similar.

"Birds," Glory replied simply as we lifted into the air. Higher and

higher the platform rose, and I suddenly had to clench my eyes tight. There was way too much open space around me, and the glass walls didn't help. I levitated out my shotgun and reloaded the drum, checking the wear and tear that had built up over the last day. I was definitely doing a number on it.

When the doors to the fifteenth floor opened I jumped through, breathing hard as I fought the urge to be sick. When my heartbeat slowed I looked back at the elevator where P-21 and Morning Glory were frozen in place. "What?" I asked as they stared at me…no. Not at me. Slowly I turned and looked at the wall opposite the elevator. In flaking black-maroon letters, a single word was written as if with a paintbrush. 'PLAY'.

Oh horseapples…

* * *

Time had stopped as effectively as if I'd triggered S.A.T.S. and simply left it there. My PipBuck's chronometer might've still marked the time, but every minute felt like an hour. Normally I'd be bored to stupidity, but here my every nerve was screaming at attention. Step by cautious step we walked together, me first, then P-21, and lastly Glory watching behind us. The word was painted every few feet, sometimes in elegant cursive and sometimes in wild, broad letters. The lights flickered and dimmed, but I was used to dim and uncertain light. I was not used to the soft, chiming melody that played all around us like an invisible music box with a cylinder that turned just a touch too slowly.

"Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head…" a filly sang softly in the hallway behind us. Slowly P-21 and I turned and looked back at Morning Glory without saying a word. Our combined look was enough to silence the pegasus. "Sorry," she muttered. I did not want to hear my childhood lullabies right now.

There were other little variances. Dolls hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the hallway. A stuffed rabbit tucked into a hospital bed…no, not tucked. Strapped. Two dozen bed sheets stretched across the hallway, decorated with maroon houses and stick figures. And more detailed paintings of ponies. And…fire. And ponies fighting. Ponies dismembered.

Something moved beyond the sheets, but when I yanked them aside I saw only empty hall.

"What the hay is going on here?" I muttered softly. I suddenly found myself longing for Pony Joe's. "Give me bodies…or something shooting at me…or something. Not freaky pictures and words written in dark paint." I glanced back and saw both of them staring at me. "What?"

"She doesn't *know*?" Glory whimpered to P-21.

"Apparently not," P-21 said as he looked behind us.

"Know what?"

Glory swallowed. "That isn't *paint,* Blackjack." She pointed at the black-red letters on the wall.

I closed my eyes. Oh I really really wish she hadn't said that. "Right. Of course it isn't." I looked down yet another empty hall and shouted, "Okay! You're officially sick fuckers! Now come out so I can shoot you!"

Then we heard a soft *'thump, thump, thump, thump'* in the hallway ahead of us. A bright red ball bounced down the dimly lit hall towards the three of us. No…not a ball. It was too irregular for that. It rolled to a stop at my feet, leaving bright wet splotches on the floor. The face on the severed head was a mask of terror.

A foal giggled in the darkness.

"Cute," I muttered. This head was fresh.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," P-21 repeated over and over again as he stared down at it.

"Calm down," I muttered, trying my best not to freak out. "It's just a head." As we watched, a knee-high door in the wall opened up and a small mechanical pony trotted out and washed off the smears of blood with rotating buffers on its hooves. It ignored the severed head. Now that was some shoddy programming. Then it turned and disappeared back into its little door.

"Maintenance robots," Morning Glory whispered as we continued down the hall past empty hospital rooms. The music box tune continued its soft, too-slow melody as we reached a nurse's station. Everything neat. Everything put away except for the creepy little artifacts and associated body parts. After so many ruined buildings, the cleanliness disturbed me almost as much as the music.

I tried my radio, but the only channels I could find had the same music box melody.

We came across an active terminal. "Finally! Maybe there will be an inventory," P-21 said with some relief as he focused on the terminal. I slowly panned the E.F.S., but my vision kept flickering

as if something here jammed my signal. I knew that head didn't come from nowhere though. He struggled for several minutes as the music box looped over and over again. Then there was a soft beep as he cracked the password. I looked over his shoulder, and then frowned as the screen went blank.

>**Peek-a-boo. I see you.**

The scream that began to play from the terminal rose and fell at earsplitting volume. "KILL ME!" she screamed over and over again between agonizing cries. I grabbed P-21's mane in my teeth and pulled him away from the terminal. Then I put an explosive orange shell into the thing. Silence dropped around us till our ears recovered and picked up the sound of the music box.

"What the fuck is going on?" P-21 whispered, staring down the empty halls.

"Want a gun?" I asked softly.

"I'd just start shooting wildly," he muttered in return. Well, that was an improvement over saying he'd deliberately shoot me. We resumed our search. 'PLAY', the sanguine words demanded. Yellow and red bars flickered so wildly in my PipBuck's E.F.S. that I deactivated it before it made me sick.

We came across a door with something new carved in the wood paneling. 'Ollie Ollie Oxen Free'. I carefully opened it telekinetically, revealing a desiccated corpse rolled in a fetal position in the tiny space at the bottom of the linen closet. She wore a nurse's uniform. Scratched in the wood before the body was a simple eulogy: 'I don't want to play anymore.'

Morning Glory hyperventilated as P-21 talked to her in a hushed tone, holding the young pegasus to keep her from falling over. Given that she herself had almost died of thirst in an equally tiny space, it was understandable. That left me with the task of checking the body. Her hide had dried to a leathery texture that crackled when I carefully swept it with my magic. I found an ID card that read 'Chief Nurse Tenderheart'. A little magical glyph glowed on the bottom of the badge. "What's this?"

Morning Glory refused to look towards me, so I floated it to her. "It's a key for special door locks. The kinds that can't normally be picked and need magic to bypass them." Hopefully door locks like the kind that protected experimental healing goods…

* * *

Going up a floor hadn't helped. If anything, the scenery worsened. We came across storage rooms that had been raided. A cold room that Glory had described as a blood locker was completely empty. Drained potion containers were stacked from floor to ceiling. We found what I guessed was one of the Collegiate ponies…he'd been skinned and bristled from head to hoof with spent syringes. 'Mr. Needle is your friend' had been written above him.

I really wanted to introduce somepony to Ms. Shotgun.

We encountered a box in the hall, a large metal cube with small pink hearts painted on each side. I couldn't explain why, but I had the strangest fondness for the box. There was a little handle sticking out of the side. I glanced at the others, reached out slowly with my magic, and began to turn it. "All around the mulberry bush…the monkey chased the weasel…" Glory sang softly, and I couldn't bring myself to stop her. I knew what was coming, but I was powerless to stop. When the note hit 'pop', the metal top snapped open, and out flew a pony. No…half a pony. The skinned front half bounced back and forth on a heavy metal spring, front hooves crossed as if hugging itself. Bony wings flopped around behind it.

"A pegasus?" gasped Glory in horror.

Then the box suddenly played the rest of the tune and there was a second metallic boing as its front legs popped wide and dropped three metallic apples. Through reflex more than thought my telekinesis flung them away as the three of us hit the deck. Silence. Silence. Silence. Slowly I lifted my head and carefully turned the nearest grenade with my magic. A hole had been neatly drilled in the bottom of each.

Sick fu-- wait... not sick *enough*. "Run!" I yelled as I grabbed P-21 with my magic and scooped Glory up as I bolted down the hall. A few seconds later the bombs hidden inside the box exploded. The three of us landed in a heap.

"How'd…how'd you know?" P-21 muttered in shock, blood dripping from a nostril.

"The only thing more messed up than scaring us with duds is scaring us with duds, letting us have a moment of relief, and then blowing us up with the real bomb."

"I don't know which concerns me more. That someone thought of that, or that you figured it out," P-21 said with his usual dry smile.

I stood and carefully trotted back towards the box, not sure how to

take that. I doubted there'd be a second bomb. It wouldn't be as much fun. Far more effective, yes, but whoever the fuck was behind this wasn't trying to kill us. That wasn't the point. I found the pegasus torso and head. "Is he Enclave?"

Glory glanced at the body, shuddered and looked away, then looked again with a small frown. "I…" She swallowed and walked closer. "I think so. He's slightly desiccated…maybe dead a month or so? But we weren't supposed to go anywhere near the clinic."

Only near raider nests. "So this guy's not with the Volunteer Corps?"

"No. He must be with security," she said softly. Surprise surprise...

I looked ahead with a scowl. "Whatever's in here had better be worth it; I'm in a shooty kind of mood."

* * *

Things didn't improve as we encountered more bodies. A tea party of four bony ponies around a petrified cake with their hooves nailed to the table and party hats on their heads. A body dressed in a foal's tutu impaled on a turntable. I was starting to become numb to the next horror around the corner, yet I couldn't stop looking. The music kept playing; I could barely hear things moving around out of sight.

We found ourselves in a staff lounge. Everything was neat and clean and tidy; I was starting to hate the cleanliness. I longed for a wrapper. An empty tin can. A soda bottle left on a shelf. Anything that was a sign that at one time normal ponies lived here. I was getting sick of wooded wallpaper and frozen birds and butterflies. Oh…and grotesquely posed corpses. I longed for the boring gray walls of 99.

I used the bits we had to clean out the soda machines, sharing two of the fizzy drinks with Glory and P-21. Anything that might have been a personal item was by and large missing. I did find a newspaper clipping posted to the bulletin board. It was so yellowed and brittle I feared even touching it with my magic as I read. The beginning had fallen off, but the remainder I could just make out.

…intosh was ninety minutes from Ministry of Peace care following the assassination attempt on Princess Celestia at Shattered Hoof Ridge. Thousands of soldiers and countless non-combatants suffer while waiting for medical care. Today, the Ministry of Peace, working in concert with

the Ministry of Arcane Science and the Ministry of Wartime Technology, has devised a means of preserving injured or sick ponies until such time as treatment is available.

No small measure of thanks goes out from the Ministry of Peace to the Office of Interministry Affairs. Without their tireless work bringing together ideas from all across Equestria, we would never have been able to complete this new facility. Countless young lives would be cut short or left to misery. They are a testament to what needs to be done to end this war and open a new chapter for us all.

-Fluttershy

A means of preserving injured or sick ponies. "This is it," I said in excitement. "If Splendid can bring his father here, they can keep him alive till the Collegiate makes a cure. Heee! I love it when a plan comes together!"

"Blackjack," Morning Glory said softly. I glanced at her, and followed her gaze into the top corner of the room where a carved white bunny watched us sternly. There was the tiniest little hum, and I watched a camera in one eye of the bunny slowly focus.

"We should get going," I said softly, leading us back out into the empty hallway. As soon as we were through it, the door to the staff lounge closed behind us and locked with a solid click. "Oh, that's not good."

Suddenly the lights clicked out, plunging the hall into absolute darkness. Then a red light appeared at the end of the hall. "What the heck is…?" I started to ask, taking a step forward. From the ceiling came a sharp flash, and I felt the bite of a beam weapon hit my chest. Suddenly, the red light turned green, and from the hallway behind us something metallic screeched, coming closer. I fired blindly down the hall, but the muzzle flashes only illuminated something big and bloody. Suddenly the light turned red and it stopped. We all froze.

Oh Goddesses…it's a game.

The light turned green and I screamed, "Run!" My magic grabbed P-21 and dragged him along beside me as the machine crashed along behind us. Red light. "Freeze!" I bellowed and everything stopped. One second. Two. Three. Four. Green light! We raced ahead as fast as we could, but the crashing behind us grew closer. Red light! Silence. Green light! Red light! Green light! Red light! Morning Glory staggered a half step forward and cried out as the beam turret struck her leg.

This red light I could feel the soft tickle of a breath on my hindquarters. I just stared at the red light as I floated out a little disk and set it beneath me. My magic hovered on the button. Green light! I pushed the frag mine's arming tab and wasted no time dragging P-21 closer towards a door beneath the green light. The mine beeped immediately and a second later there was a resounding PONG of metal being struck. Three feet. Two feet. One foot. I was through the door, and pulled P-21 after me, but Morning Glory was a few feet behind us. Red light. In the sanguine glow I could see the vaguely canine grin of metal right behind her as she trembled, frozen in terror.

Then the door closed in our faces.

"Glory! No! Glory!" I screamed as I fired several rounds into the door. It didn't even dent. I beat it with the butt of my shotgun and kicked it with my hooves. "What the fuck do you want, you fuckers?! What!" I screamed down the hall. "Whaaaaat?!" My own voice echoed back at me.

'PLAY' answered the blood on the walls.

* * *

Do you want to come with us?

I'd killed Scoodle through ignorance. Now I'd killed Glory through incompetence. How could I have gone through the door without making sure she'd been through first? I'd seen her get hit by the beam. I should have known she'd be a few steps slower. I'd sunk down with my back against the door, knocking my head against it with the shotgun cradled in my hooves.

"Come on. We need to keep going," P-21 muttered softly. I levitated the shotgun, shoving it controls-first towards his mouth. "What are you doing?!" he stammered in shock, trying to push it away.

"You said if I ever got another pony killed by being stupid that you'd end me," I muttered, looking at my hooves. "Time to make good on it."

"I'm not going to kill you for this, Blackjack," he said softly. "This wasn't your fault."

"I'm the leader. Whose fault is it if not mine?"

"Whatever sick fucker is behind this," he replied. I didn't move, still just trying to give him the gun. His stoic mask crumbled as I

saw fear creep into his features. “Blackjack, I can’t do this without you,” he said softly as he sat down beside me.

“Either I’m incompetent or I’m cursed. Either way, you’re better off without me,” I muttered. *Is this it? Is this the part where the wasteland breaks me?* “I don’t know what to do and I keep getting ponies killed that don’t deserve it,” I whispered.

P-21 sighed, hugging the shotgun with his hooves. “I don’t know what to do either. If there isn’t a terminal or a lock I might as well be back in 99. I’m so scared right now that the only thing I know for sure is that I’m going to die, and it’s going to be ugly. I’m not you, Blackjack. I might be smarter than you, but I’m not as brave as you are.”

It hurt so much, but what could I do? Give up and die…that was the easy out. The contemptible way out. Give in to hatred and just kill and kill and kill? That was so tempting right now. A bloody part of me craved it. Kill the Collegiate, take their stuff, kill the Society ponies and repeat the process. Kill, take, kill, take, and never feel again. It was a more thrilling form of suicide.

You keep going, knowing that it will never be enough. You spend every second trying to make it right, knowing you never can.

Slowly I reversed the pull on my horn and took the gun from him. I rocked forward and stood. I wasn’t quite done just yet. Despite everything, despite the fact I was not a smart pony, a plan crept out of my meager brain. Worse... I was looking forward to it. “P-21… you’re ten times sneakier than I am. You know terminals. You can open locks and get where you need to go. Somewhere in this place is someone controlling everything. You’ve got to shut them down.” I passed him the keycard.

“You’re splitting us up,” he said flatly. “You know nothing good can come of this, Blackjack.”

“It’s the only way I can think of. Together we’re a big target. Alone…you might be able to shut them down. I’ll be a nice, big, stupid pony to keep their attention,” I said with a grin. I tried to keep it as I added, “You might also find Glory.”

“You really think she might be alive?”

No. “I’m not going to give up hope just yet.” Giving up hope was so ten seconds ago. “Just do what you do best and leave being a decoy to the not smart pony.”

“You’re not stupid, Blackjack,” he said quietly, then caught my arched brow. “Okay. Well. Good luck.” I loaded up the drum with

orange shells and spun it once loudly as I trotted in the opposite direction. As I trotted I felt an old song nibbling at the back of my mind. I started to hum the tune as I slowly smiled. It was phenomenally stupid, but that was something I excelled at!

"You put your right hoof in…you put your right hoof out…you put your right hoof in, and you shake it all about," I sang, tired of the music box playing in the background. Okay, it was more shouting than singing as I charged down the hallway. "You do the pony pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about." I paused and grinned as I heard the music box cut off, replaced by the very tune I was singing! That's it, you sick fucker. Pay attention to the crazy filly with the shotgun!

"You put one shell in! You take another one out!" I shouted as I blasted another bunny camera. "You load another shell in and you blast it all about! You do the pony pokey and take the fuckers out. That's what it's all about!" Move fast, shoot, and shoot some more. If a turret popped out of the ceiling I popped it before it got to fire more than twice. Don't think. Don't let the fucker mess with me with spooky fucked up shit. Shoot…shoot…*kid.*

I froze in the hallway, and the music cut off as if with a knife. The foal stood there in a strange pink dress. Her lavender hide sported a massive scar running up her side and disappearing into her pink mane that fell across her eyes. Her mouth was sewn in a grotesque grin as she stood before me in a doorway.

Shoot, Blackjack! "Play?" she whispered without moving even her lips. *Shoot her!* "Do you like my costume?" Slowly she tilted her head up towards me. *Shoot shoot shoot!* Her mane fell aside, revealing two red lights for eyes. Her mouth wasn't sewn in a grin. It was sewn shut! "I wanna be a unicorn," she hissed. The gun shook in my magical grip as my focus wrestled with what was before me. "Can I be you?"

The filly's dress ripped as two metallic tendrils burst from her shoulders. A razor sharp scalpel gripped in one slashed across my face, and I barely blocked it with my PipBuck. The shotgun roared, and the shell struck the filly in the face. The lavender hide ripped like cloth, revealing the smoking head of a small maintenance robot within the sewn together skin. I put a second round into it and it crackled softly before collapsing. "Tag!" I shouted down at the thing. "You're it!"

"We're it," a voice whispered down the hall. "We're it…" In the

dim light I saw two red eyes looking at me. Four. Six. Lots. “Play!” they whispered in delight.

Okay. I definitely had their attention! Now it was time to run! “Catch me if you can!” I laughed as I ran like I’d never run before.

* * *

I had no idea if I’d evaded the abominations, if they’d gotten bored, or if they were setting up more games. I’d moved up a floor, and there weren’t any more hospital rooms. This floor was for surgery. The lights kept flickering on and off, making me jump as entire hallway segments appeared and disappeared. The music had returned, this time a cheery tune about cleaning up winter. Not only was it creepy, it muffled what little noise the abominations made as they moved.

I found an office and pushed my way inside. I was heartened to see the lock on the safe had been opened and the terminal decoded. Whatever else had happened, P-21 was still out there. The safe held a few healing potions and some gold bits. I walked behind the desk, setting the shotgun down in front of me. The specialty shells had one downside I hadn’t realized: they wore down my weapon like mad. I really didn’t want to try and fire it again if I could help it. Not without some significant repairs. That left me with the automatic pistol from the weather station and Folly, which had no bullets. Carefully, I took out the pistol and loaded the blue spark rounds interspersed with normal lead rounds.

This office had been thoroughly trashed, but I really couldn’t tell if this was the result of the abominations’ vandalism or if the owner had just been particularly sloppy. The stacks of papers were almost as high as my horn. With a wry smile, I picked up a file on top of one of the towers. ‘Marigold: PH medical authorization: Denied.’ Only the Ministry of Peace could have a form denial stamp with frowning bunnies, I supposed. Then, stamped on top of it in pink ink with butterflies: ‘Medical waiver: Approved.’

“Lucky Marigold. I could sure use some of that luck now,” I said as I flipped through the first few pages and glanced at the picture of a blue unicorn with bright glasses standing in front of some kind of missile. I was sure that, if I didn’t have monsters after me, I’d somehow be even more bored. I tossed the file back on top of the stack and then started as the entire pile collapsed to the floor with a

rustling, sighing soft crash. “Great,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes and hoping P-21 could find a way to stop all this. I sure wasn’t smart enough to.

I noticed a sound file loaded on the terminal. Why not? I hit the playback as I prepared my clips. At least it would give me something to do.

Entry one: We’ve taken control of the facility here. Data files have all been corrupted or deleted. We need to find the central maneframe if we’re going to find anything worthwhile. Took us forever to get in through the roof, but thank Celestia this place is intact. We’ll probably move our entire biomedical team in here once it’s secure. I’ve never seen so many medical supplies in one place; nothing special but we’ve got healing potions to burn.

Entry two: Found the stasis chamber and the maneframe. Dozens of pods still with power. They can just stay asleep for all I care. Some idiot severed the maneframe control …kzzzzzzt…scalpel and got electrocuted for her trouble. Shouldn’t be a hard fix. Once it’s connected we’ll bring in the biomedical team.

I stood and looked at some of the pictures hanging askew on the wall. Fluttershy looking rather terrified on a stage in a weird dress; goddesses, she looked adorable! The yellow mare smiling shyly beside a purple unicorn with a pink streak in her mane and an orange-coated, blond-haired mare in a cowboy hat; the construction site in the picture looked like it might be that of the Fluttershy Medical Center.

Entry three: Everything is up and running. Still some kinks to work out. We’ve got to kill the sound system; that music box is driving me crazy. Is this what they actually listened to two hundred years ago …bkzzzttt…

Entry four: Brighthoof and Sky Sparkle are both AWOL. Probably fucking in the staff lounge again. Toys keep on showing up in the hallway; I think the soldiers are starting to get antsy. I need to organize some …kzzzzzzt... should be okay though. The biomedical team found the …kkkkzzztt…experimental of course, but it’s almost a megaspell-level infusion. Practically a cure for death.

Looking at the computer terminal, I spotted a little square of note paper, ‘Please don’t ask about that procedure again, RH. We’ve only had one success. I won’t risk any more babies. I can’t. I’m sorry. F’

Entry …bkzzzzt…gone. Something cut them apart. Skinned them alive. They were... posed. It’s got to be Morn…kzzzzt…or Nigh…kkkztttt… find them, they’re arrested and command can figure out who to shoot.

Fuck it. I'll shoot 'em myself and save command the trouble.

Skzzzzzzt…roof access is sealed. The biomedical team is just gone. Somehow he took them out. He's the only one not accounted for. Somehow he got control…kzzzzzttttt…fuck…I'm tired of this game. How the fuck could anyone in my team crack this hard?

….zzzzzzt…tired of playing…

I finished loading the last drum and clip for the shotgun and automatic pistol: shock rounds in the latter, slugs and explosive shells in the former. Then the recording started screaming. I didn't pale or freak out or shoot the terminal. I simply sat there a moment listening to the screams. Then I stretched out a hoof and clicked it off. I loaded a clip into the automatic, worked the slide, and walked to the door. I stood in the hall, looked left and right, and then shouted at the top of my lungs, "Play time!"

It started as a whisper. Then a mutter. Then a roar. Pick a hall. Any hall. I started running, but I was done with running away. Keeping the automatic in a careful grip, I fired the rounds ahead of me at any nightmare stepping into my line of fire. The maintenance robots sparked and jerked, ripping apart the skins that had been sewed around them. "Bad pony!" they cried as I used S.A.T.S. and dumb luck to chew my way through them. I paused only long enough to smash in their heads with the baton, just to make sure they didn't start moving again.

"That's right! I'm a bad bad pony! And I'm coming to spank you!" I yelled out, half mad and all furious. I giggled as I saw some turn and totter away. "That's right! It's time for spankings!" I screamed as I chased them down.

"Bad pony," a deep voice said from the doorway. I turned and looked at a huge heavy robot draped in slabs of meat. "Time out," it said firmly as, with shocking deftness, it flung a glowing white ball of glass at me. A grenade or…something. I reached out with my magic to swat it back at the machine and…

oooOOOooo

What the fuck was going on? Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I talk? Why couldn't I scream? Instead, I was lying on a couch and reading a newspaper about the continued outcry over the assassination attempt at Shattered Hoof. It was as if I'd somehow been shoved into this strange mare resting on the couch. The only

thing vaguely familiar was a PipBuck, a far fancier version than my own, strapped to her hoof.

A white mare with graying pink hair stood behind the desk in... an undamaged version of the office I'd just been in? She had a bright red cross on her flank and a white lab coat draped over her shoulders and forelegs. She fidgeted with her pencils on her desk, nudging them back and forth. I looked over at her. "Calm down, Doctor Redheart."

"Calm down? How can I calm down, Garnet? She's coming here." She tapped her hooves against the desktop.

"It is her hospital, after all," Garnet said, and I could feel her smiling.

Redheart sighed, frowning. "Still, I can't believe Cheerilee went straight to the Ministry Mare for this! I thought all objections had been dealt with. How could she bring this up now?"

"I'm more impressed that the Ministry Mare is coming all the way here to talk with her about her reservations. It can take days to arrange a conference with Applejack or Rarity. And forget Rainbow Dash or Twilight." The pony I was in sighed and folded the paper, her sparkling red hooves glittering from her pony pedicure. "They're almost inaccessible, even for the O.I.A."

"Are things that bad? I hadn't heard," Redheart said in concern.

My host waved a glittering hoof dismissively. "Oh no. I wouldn't say things are bad. Just…tense right now. Everything would be so much easier if we could just disband the Ministry of Awesome and tuck whatever she's doing into the Ministry of Wartime Technology. But Luna won't hear of it."

Then the door opened and admitted a purple mare with smiling flowers on her flank. She had wrinkles around her eyes and her hair was completely gray. Garnet watched as the two mares looked at one another with clear dislike…and yet I could tell there'd once been the foundations of friendship between the two. Nopony shows that much regret without having lost something dear. "Cheerilee. So good to see you again. How are things at the education bureau?" my…host? inquired, rising and giving a polite hug.

Cheerilee seemed quite relieved to have somepony to talk to. "Things are…well…like they are everywhere I suppose. Thank you for working with the Ministry of Image for us, Garnet; sometimes it seems we always get bumped down the priority queue. If it wasn't for your help, we'd probably never get the materials we need."

Then Cheerilee frowned. “Though, could you please tell them that the Ministry of Peace’s schools don’t need their more…creative… history books? I received a text telling how ancient zebras drank blood and practiced ritual pony sacrifice!”

“Ah, yes. Sometimes the Ministry of Image can get a touch… inventive with their textbooks.” I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. If zebras didn’t drink blood, why say they did at all? Since I couldn’t get off this ride, though, I thought I might as well pay attention to it.

Then the door opened and all the talking stopped. I’d seen her cast in bronze; now I was seeing her in flesh. The yellow pegasus may have been smaller and less dramatic than her statuary counterpart, but as I watched I couldn’t shake the grace and beauty and aura of kindness that seemed to radiate off her. She greeted everypony by name, shook hooves, and talked with clear sincerity and interest. Just touching her hoof made me feel special, and it wasn’t even me!

Once everyone settled into a little circle, Redheart immediately spoke to the purple mare beside her. “I know you’ve had second thoughts, Cheerilee, but we’re already committed to their use.”

“Redheart. We can’t use these devices yet. We don’t even know all the spells that have gone into them!” Cheerilee looked across at me as she said that. “We have no idea what the long term effects will be.” She turned to Fluttershy. “You need to stop until we’re sure they’re safe.”

“I know that you’re upset, Cheerilee, but we’ve tested them for three months with no ill effects, aside from a few complaints about boredom.” The mature mare’s tone reminded me of Mom saying ‘trust me’.

“You’ve tested them on animals and adults. These are children, Fluttershy. Three months being trapped in your own body might be tough for an adult who understands what’s going on, but what about a child? They want to run and play and talk. They can’t simply be locked up for weeks on end. Fluttershy, it’s cruel!”

Then Fluttershy spoke in a soft and gentle voice, “Are you saying I should leave children to die when I have a way to keep them safe and alive until they can be healed?” At that instant I knew that Cheerilee was screwed.

Cheerilee paused and then let out a struggling, “No…but… Fluttershy… ”

“Tell me that I should let children die and I will stop the use of the

pods right now and start long-term testing. A year at least," Fluttershy said in that soft, reasonable voice. A pony would need a heart of stone to say those words.

"Fluttershy, I don't want any colt or filly to die. You know I don't. But I know kids. I know this isn't an answer."

"I know children too…"

"No, Fluttershy. You like kids. You don't know them. You never even had one…" Cheerilee cut off at a soft gasp from Redheart. Awkward silence. "…I'm sorry." Fluttershy simply closed her eyes as if bracing against an inner hurt. Cheerilee looked horrified at what she'd said, but the words were spoken.

More silence. Then Fluttershy spoke softly, "Me too. I'm sorry, Cheerilee, but I can't delay using something I know can help." Slowly she stood. "Excuse me."

"Damn it…why did I say that?" Cheerilee asked with a snotty sniff. I saw the specter of Redheart and Cheerilee's friendship appear as the former walked over, bit a box of tissues, and offered one to the other mare. She took it and blew her nose.

"Don't worry, Cheerilee. It's not as if the children will be left alone. They'll have constant interaction with the staff, me, family, and teachers. They won't be neglected," Redheart assured her. "Most of the time they won't even be awake. We can keep them sedated and dreaming sweet dreams until they can be woken up. Beautiful dreamers."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Children don't stay children forever. They always become something else." The purple mare rose and quietly left the room as well.

Redheart shook her head. "I'm sorry you had to see that." She put the tissues away and looked to me. "She's a teacher, and a good one. I think she'd been much happier staying a teacher rather than working with the ministry's schools."

Garnet nodded. "I can appreciate her concern. I'm glad she hasn't found the report of the subjects developing resistances to the sedative over time. Certainly twenty years is a long time, though. It's not as if we'll keep them in stasis for centuries."

"She was right about there being some confusion regarding the spells involved, though. Some of the nursing staff is concerned. There was a memo about spells from the Ministry of Image being involved, but that couldn't be right."

"No no. I'm sure that it was an error, Redheart. Some days we can't

tell what's coming out of the Ministry of Technology and what's originating with the Ministry of Magic. We just do our best. Still, we're quite glad to see the Ministry of Peace going ahead with the facility. I'll try and get more specifics sent your way."

"Thank you, Garnet. I appreciate it."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Oh, just a heads-up that Robronco will be here to tie the maintenance robots into the system maneframe. Once their control system is linked to the bots, your nurses shouldn't have to worry about them causing messes."

oooOOOooo

I returned to my body, screaming as fire roared from crotch to ribcage. I lay on my back, strapped to an operating table, pulling against the restraints on my limbs. Overhead, a robotic spider on a white boom hovered over my body. Little scissors were slowly snipping open my belly as I screamed and thrashed against the restraints. "You fuckers!" I hissed through clenched jaws as spit ran down my chin.

"Bad pony. Potty mouth pony. She said a bad word!" gibbered the sewn-together abominations around me as the scissors went 'snip snip snip'. "She needs a time out. She needs to be punished. Bad pony!"

The children were sleeping.

All around the perimeter of the room were metal pods with observation windows and padded interiors; at least forty was the best count I could make under the circumstances. In the pods were foals. Some were missing legs and eyes. Others appeared burned or worse. Others appeared intact, so I could only guess they suffered from some internal disease or condition. They all lay so still they might as well have been corpses. Each had a tiny monitor with zigzagging lines on it that was too far beyond my intelligence level to understand. The cables all ran to a central drum decorated with a dozen terminals. Running from this drum was a thick cable that disappeared into the floor. Blackened marks showed where the hoof-thick connection had been mended.

I wouldn't scream. Crying was unavoidable, but that helped me focus. "What do you want?" I yelled as I focused every bit of magic on the scissors and pushed the arm away, leaving the foot-wide incision.

“Mommy! Play! Die! Live! Cry! Hug! Blood! Mommy! Please! Cookie! Fuck! Daddy! Pain! Skin! Mommy! Toys! Puppet! Doggies! Birthday! Outside! Home! Die! Kill! Costume! Sleep! Hurt! Out! Play! Die!” the robots around me chanted.

We’re not going to leave them in stasis for centuries, Garnet had said. What if they were left anyway? How many years had it taken before the children became resistant to the sedative? How many more before the handful of survivors had been unable to keep the children focused? How long before they went mad and sought ever bloodier and more terrible games?

Somepony, I suspected Redheart, had cut the connection between the repair bots and the facility maneframe. They’d sat here alone, incapable of any interaction at all. Unable to sleep. They couldn’t even kill themselves. Then the Enclave arrived and connected the maneframe again. The children had resumed their games, honed after decades of being trapped within themselves.

Now I was next. My telekinesis pushed against the medical robot as I clenched my teeth so hard that I felt a tooth crack. It wasn’t enough. A three-fingered hand reached in and pulled out a loop of gray-pink intestine like a thick noodle. I wouldn’t scream. I might choke on the vomit rising in my throat as I felt inch after inch slipping out.

Then I heard a sharp crack from the ceiling directly above me. An air vent cover collapsed onto the robotic arm, jamming its metallic hand deeper into my innards. Glory poked her head in, eyes wide, teeth clenched on her beam pistol. Right now, she was a more welcome sight than Splendid stepping out of a hot shower.

“Bad. Bad. Bad ponies. Bad,” the robots chanted as the medical arm released my guts and reversed to slam itself against the fallen grating. Glory dived from the ductwork, circling the arm as she looped above me. All eyes were on her, except for mine, which noticed the small blue shape of P-21 slip in through a door. Carefully he picked his way towards the terminal. Glory wouldn’t be enough.

I lifted my head and looked at the buckles on the straps holding my limbs. Pain made the world black out around the edges of my vision as I fumbled with my magic. One of the buckles came free. Then another. Then another. Slowly I kicked myself free as the abominations surged forward. “Bad ponies. Bad ponies.” I sat up, spotting my shotgun. I could make out the orange shells in the

drum.

I levitated the gun to me and slowly rolled off the table. And then I discovered something truly disturbing: I could either handle the shotgun or hold my guts in, and I wasn't doing the latter. A hot, wet slipperiness moved out of me combined with a sensation that made me want to put a shell through my skull. It was only twenty feet to my target, but that was the longest twenty feet of my life.

P-21 typed desperately. Glory flew desperately. I tried to walk desperately. Had the abominations realized what I was trying to do, they could have stopped me easily. I think they just took glee in watching me struggle. Maybe they thought I was trying to help P-21 or run. Instead I staggered my way to where the cable emerged from the rear of the machine. Suddenly my intestines went taut and I almost blacked out again. "Would you mind getting off my guts?" I croaked.

The cable was thick. Even with the explosive rounds it'd take me several shots to chew through. The shotgun didn't have that many shots left in it. That was okay. I only needed one. I grinned back at my abomination audience. "Playtime is over!" I ejected the drum and kicked it underneath the cable. One round remained in the chamber. I pressed the tip of the shotgun to the ammo drum and fired.

The explosion was barely equivalent to a grenade, but it did the job. The cable snapped once more as I was showered with shrapnel. With a soft hum the arm froze in its pursuit of Glory. The abominations froze in place, puppets with their strings cut. The zigzagging lines went crazy as darkness finally caught up with me.

Heh, crazy kids.

* * *

When I came to, I felt good. Great. Wonderful, in fact. I opened my eyes, and immediately felt my midsection. Only an ugly red line remained, and that was healing before my eyes. The table I was lying on had a strange talisman that covered me in a pink glow. Some kind of regeneration magic pulled my torn body together.

"Oh, good. You're awake," Glory said from beside the table. The pegasus looked like she needed a few days sleep and a few years of therapy. Maybe we could get a two for one special.

"Oh good. You're alive," I replied, and got a little smile in return. I

looked at the strange egg-like talisman. “Please tell me there are more of those.”

“There are more of these,” she replied softly.

“Oh thank goodness--” I began, then saw her looking away. “There really aren’t more of these, are there?”

“You told me to tell you…” But I shut her up with a hug.

“I thought you were dead. I was so sure I got you killed,” I said as I hugged her tightly. “How’d you get away?”

“Red light,” she said softly with a little shiver. “It went on and on. I think they were paying attention to you on the other side of the door. The vent was right above me, so I shot through. They called me a cheater. After that it was just following the shouting and gunshots.”

The wound across my middle had completely healed. At once my eyes widened. “Get P-21 in here! We can heal his…” There was a buzz and the pink glow disappeared. “…fuck.”

“The talisman only works on one subject,” P-21 said as he limped in from the doorway.

“I wanted to heal your leg,” I muttered softly.

“Why? You didn’t break it.”

I sighed as I climbed off the bed, looking at the burned out talisman and feeling as if it’d been wasted on me. “I thought if I healed your leg I’d stop reminding you of 99. Then maybe we could be friends.”

He arched a brow and smiled, shaking his head. “Ever think it’s not about you, Blackjack?” I blinked stupidly at him and he sighed softly. “Guess not. Come on. We’ve got one last thing to deal with.” He started back out the door. “And it’s going to suck. It’s going to suck a lot.”

We trotted back into the operating room. I tried to ignore the drying bowel strung over a quarter of the room. He stopped in front of the large central terminal.

Ofillia Stasis System Review:

>Current patient survival prognosis: 0.00%

>Patient intercom system: Error. System disabled.

>Terminate Power: Y/N?

No. “No no no…fuck no. Fuck!” I yelled as I looked at the pods around me with their wildly zigzagging readouts. I could imagine their screams as they were locked up once again. I rounded on P-21. “I’m not killing forty children! Are you out of your mind?”

"No. I'm not," he replied as looked at the terminal. "We have two choices: we leave them in stasis, or we shut down the whole thing and they die."

"Wake them up! See if they're crazy." I could kill *crazy* foals…I hoped. Oh Goddesses, did I actually just think that?!

"We can't, Blackjack," Morning Glory said softly. "They were dying when they were put in the pods. They're *still* dying. Some wouldn't last a day, according to their records. If we leave them…maybe…I don't know. Maybe someday the Enclave can do something to help them."

P-21 shook his head firmly as he looked at the wide-eyed pegasus. "The Enclave lost a biomedical team to these kids. And they've been trapped here for two centuries. Are you willing to leave them trapped, again, on the hope that someday they might be able to be saved?" He sighed. "I told you this would suck."

"Why are you asking me?" I said softly as I looked at him.

"Because there is no right answer here. Because she's right. Because I'm right. And no matter what, they're going to suffer." He sighed. "I want to do one. She wants to do the other. You're the tiebreaker." 'And you're the leader', his eyes seemed to say.

No. Fuck him! Fuck me! No! Put me back on the table and rip out my guts, but don't leave the decision up to me! I slowly looked around at all the pods. "I can't…I don't…fuck!" I shouted, clenching my eyes closed. I wanted back into that dream the orb had put me in. Neither of them would look at me. I gazed at the pods. There was no right answer here. I was damning myself either way. I thought of flipping a cap, but what if it came to the shutoff and I tried for two out of three? Or vice versa? Damn me! Damn me…

Slowly I straightened as I looked at all the pods. "I don't know if you can hear me, or understand me. I don't know who any of you are or what you want. I only know you didn't deserve being trapped like this. I'm sorry," I whispered as tears ran down my cheeks. "I don't know…I don't know what's going to happen yet. Where I'm from, when you die, you just go away." I sniffed as I bowed my head. "I hope…I hope that if you do go somewhere…I hope that it's some place better."

I turned and looked at the terminal. 'Y' and 'enter'. The hum of fans died one after another as I murdered forty children. I swallowed, knowing there was no forgiveness possible for this, and sang softly, "Hush now, quiet now. It's time you lay your sleepy

head. Hush now, quiet now…It's time to go to bed."

I choked, but then Glory sang after me, "Drifting off to sleep, exciting day behind you. Drifting off to sleep. Let the joy of dreamland find you." She was falling apart as badly as I was. The only light in the room was the jagged readouts on each pod that became less and less erratic till they became flat lines.

P-21 then shocked us both as he raised his voice and finished, "Hush now, quiet now. Lay your sleepy head. Hush now, quiet now. It's time to go to bed." With that he bowed his head as well as I sank to the floor. Finally the flat readings winked out one after the other.

Damn me. Damn me. Damn me…

* * *

Redheart had crawled into the storage room that had held the regeneration talisman. Half her hide had been skinned off before she'd severed the connection. Had she come in here to try and save herself? To protect the various talismans and experimental goods? Did it really matter? If there'd been a cure in here for any of the children, I had no doubt she would have used it. She lay curled on her side, covered by a bloody, shredded lab coat. The body had mummified in the sealed storage chamber.

I noticed she seemed to be cradling something protectively in her hooves. Given what I'd already done, robbing the dead was icing on the proverbial cake. To my bewilderment, Redheart yielded the object to my magic surprisingly easily.

It was a figurine of Fluttershy. Her soulful blue eyes looked up at me as she hugged a disgruntled white rabbit beneath her hooves. So gentle. So forgiving. 'Be Kind' was written on the base. Her head was cocked just so, as if she knew I desperately needed to talk to her.

"I'm sorry. I tried. I tried to do better. I tried to help…" Slowly I held the Fluttershy figurine to my chest as I slumped over onto my side, weeping and blubbering like a foal. "I'm so sorry." As I lay there alone in the storage room, I suddenly knew exactly why Redheart had come here:

To beg for forgiveness she would never receive.

Footnote: Level Up.
Skills Note: Speech (50)
New Perk: Foal at Heart - This perk greatly improves your interactions with children.

Chapter 7: Prices

"YOU TOUCH IT, YOU BUY IT. We take cash or credit."

I'm a killer.

The first pony I killed had been a male unicorn getting removed; that had been before I even got my cutie mark. I'd been told to tell him that he was now U-21 and ask him to report to security. I didn't know what that meant at the time. I took my sweet time doing it, going to the atrium cafeteria for a green gel smoothie, poking in on Midnight trying to learn her PipBuck routines, and taking a nap on a humming moisture condenser before I finally found him. He'd just smiled sadly and walked back with me.

I remember his white and red striped mane, like a candy cane. I remember his laugh. How sad his eyes looked as he walked beside me. Mom read the formal statement, I gave him his last dot, and then we stood by as the medics gave him a shot. He closed his eyes. Let out one last breath. That was it. I could almost imagine he was sleeping, except I knew he'd never wake up.

I know the excuses. I was just doing as I was told. We were just following the orders of the Overmare. We had no choice. There was nothing we could do. We had to prevent an Incident. I never actually gave him a shot. It was peaceful. It was merciful. I didn't know any better.

Horseapples. I killed him because I never once asked the question: is this right or wrong? I killed four other males in exactly the same way. I would have killed P-21, too, if the Overmare hadn't let Deus in first.

The first pony I killed with my own horn had been a raider. She'd surprised me. She'd had a shotgun and nearly used it on me. She'd killed others in my stable, one right in front of me, and would have killed more. Again, I know the excuses. It was self-defense. I was protecting Midnight. I was defending my stable. There was no time.

There was nothing else I could do.

Raiders. At first, I didn't think much about them. They were mangy, psychotic killers or ponies who'd decided to be evil. Killing them had been required. My PipBuck turned every moral question into a simple answer: red it's dead, yellow be mellow. The next time I'd faced them, I'd killed many. Then I'd spared one, for the simple reason that the PipBuck had gone from red to yellow. Suddenly, she wasn't a raider anymore. Suddenly, she was free to go. I even laughed while she fled.

I'd deserved to be shot in the back.

Scoodle was the next pony I'd killed. Hers was the first death that actually got to me. Before that, all I'd demonstrated was that I was a slightly more effective killer than the diseased and maddened raiders I'd faced thus far. I hadn't listened to her…no, that wasn't true. I'd listened. I hadn't believed her, and I'd been so full of myself that I was sure I could face anything the Wasteland had to offer. I thought that after forty-eight hours I knew more than a filly who'd spent her entire life on the surface. I was wrong. Dead wrong. But I was "lucky" enough that somepony *else* had been killed by my pride, arrogance, and stupidity.

At Pony Joe's I'd tried to turn Glory into a killer just like me. Mad? Upset? Scared? Kill somepony. Pick you right up. Of all the ponies I'd faced, though, the one that stuck with me was that poor bastard shitting himself, and me feeling so clever and cocky for sneaking up on him while he was occupied. I hadn't learned one thing. I thought I'd changed. That I'd devoted myself to being the better pony. And then I smashed his head in with a baton. I'd thought he'd yell or attack or something. Red is dead. Execution by PipBuck.

Now I'd just killed forty more colts and fillies. Some had been sick; there was no question of that. Letting them live would have been… what? Who the fuck am I to judge if a pony deserves to die? How did I know the Enclave couldn't have helped them? Or the Collegiate? Or…somepony? Fluttershy said to do better. Better for me was increasing my body count. And the final twist? I ended up with my body completely healed. I felt *great*.

"Hey, Blackjack. Are you okay?" P-21 asked as I tightened up the brace on his leg. He looked down at me with some concern as I buckled the straps.

No. I'm not okay. I'm a killer. I'm a cleaner, healthier raider with better aim. "Yeah, sure," I replied with a smile. "Not too tight?" He

shook his head. “Did Glory get her healing potions, antidotes, and drugs squared away?” The gray pegasus had found some Enclave remains with a flight harness that doubled her pockets and holsters. He nodded again as I straightened and walked to the exit into the stasis pod chamber.

“Blackjack. Are you sure you’re okay?” P-21 repeated the question, his dark eyes locked on mine, lips curled in a worried frown.

“Yeah. Just fine.” Shoot me now P-21. “Let’s grab Glory and get paid.” Shoot me before I kill somepony else. “Come on.” Please, P-21. “Let’s go.” Please.

* * *

Prince Splendid was not happy. The Collegiate ponies were not happy. I really couldn’t care less, but I didn’t want them killing each other once I left. “The Collegiate can figure out what systems work and don’t work and see if they can reproduce some of the more powerful spell talismans. The Society can feed them and keep adequate guard so that they can work without being harassed.” I looked at Splendid with a level stare, seeing him start to fidget and frown. “They can also see about getting the stasis pods to work again to deal with your problem, and you’ll have first dibs to their findings.”

He opened his beautiful mouth and closed it once more. I stared into his eyes, unblinking as I felt my horn twitch. Finally, he smiled and said graciously, “That will be acceptable to the Society.”

“And you,” I said as I looked at Archie sharply. “If somepony comes needing medical help, you try and help them. You’ve got a whole hospital to scavenge; I know you’ll find enough. Charge caps if you want, but help. *Do better*,” I said as I glared into his eyes, stressing each word. He swallowed hard and backed away so quick he landed on his rump.

“Right! Sure. The Collegiate is always happy to help. I’ll make sure my superiors know when they get here,” Archie stammered quickly.

I looked up towards the broken dome atop the interior chamber. “Also, keep an eye out for Enclave. I don’t know why they were here, but they were after something and they may be back.” Hopefully Glory would fill me in soon on what that something might be. I knew she’d found more than just parts for her beam pistol.

Prince Splendid signed the note to Bottlecap to pay me for his contract, and with no further delay we were on our way back. I took point, as usual, letting the pair trail behind me. Glory was showing off something she'd found. "It's called a battle saddle. Most of the security forces use them. They let us handle larger guns without occupying our mouths," Glory said as she fiddled with the strange harness she'd found. It looked more to me like some kind of weird bondage gear with beam pistols attached. I wasn't quite sure she knew how to work it.

As we followed the road back east, I walked slow and steady. My head crashed over and over with what I'd done, pushing the mystery of EC-1101 from the forefront of my thoughts. Maybe I should have turned the kids over to the Collegiate. No…while they'd been fascinated by the notes I'd found, they'd been relieved that I'd disposed of the foals. Not their problem. The Society? Same. Everypony was glad they didn't have to deal with forty traumatized and dying young.

"She's not okay," P-21 muttered softly. My jaw set.

"I thought she was going to shoot both of them if they argued," Glory replied in her own whisper.

I glanced back at the pair and didn't say a word. Glory immediately took a few steps back. P-21 just looked sad. "Blackjack…"

"What?" There was no good answer to my question. I was so angry I felt like a broken Sparkle-Cola bottle.

"It wasn't your--"

"Shut up," I snapped, and I was glad to see him angry. Because he was about to say it wasn't my fault. If it wasn't my fault, was it his for leaving the choice up to me? Glory's for not stopping me? The Enclave for reconnecting the maneframe to the maintenance robots? Redheart? Fluttershy? Should I just blame ponies who fucked up two centuries before I was even born? Celestia? Zebras? Who was to blame? Who had to pay for what I'd done?

Somepony had to pay the price. Better me than P-21. Maybe if he was smart he'd ditch me before I got him killed. They'd be better off together without me. Perhaps in a few months they'd find me frothing mad, psychotic, and put me down.

I was so preoccupied that I walked right into the ambush. It didn't help that I hadn't reactivated my EFS after the interference in the hospital. As I walked past an overturned sky trailer there was a resounding bang and the familiar shove of buckshot against my

barding from behind. Tally up a new bruise, but nothing penetrated. I looked up at the two ponies in the trailer, Shotgun reloading as another gripping a pool cue jumped out at me. Two more stepped out of another overturned carriage.

Out came the automatic pistol and S.A.T.S. popped up. Four shots to Shotgun's head. Execute. Then I noticed that instead of turning his head into meaty goo, the two shots that hit just sparkled off his hide. Shit. I'd forgotten I'd loaded the clips with shock rounds: great against robots, but lousy against everything else. Pool Cue swung with all the strength she had, but I raised my PipBuck and let the wooden shaft shatter on its casing. My horn glowed as I plucked a foot-long shard with my magic, seized her shoulders with my hooves, and drove every inch into her eye socket. One.

Glory flew above, her aim wild as she tried to get her battle saddle to work. P-21 had his binoculars out. "Blackjack! Fifth one on the hill! Sniper!"

I wasted no time. When Shotgun reloaded, I heaved the female's body into his line of fire and felt only a sting of a pellet or two. Then I was in the trailer with him. I had no wish to use a whole clip of ammo, so out came the baton. He backed away, but there was nowhere to go; his hiding spot was also a dead end. He tried to say something, but simply gagged as I shoved him hard against the wall and magically swung the baton till his head went from convex to concave. Two.

One look at the shotgun and I tossed it aside. A single shot between reloads? My baton was better. I did levitate a clip of lead rounds for the automatic pistol out of my pocket and swapped ammunition before running back at the second pair Glory was keeping occupied. Her aim was horrible, but the beam pistols she'd hooked to the battle saddle were quite effective at keeping the pair moving as she circled overhead. One with an automatic pistol didn't even see me coming. Automatic turned his head just in time to see me take a stance, pistol raised, and aim five shots into his noggin. There was little left. Three.

The fourth one with a baseball bat tossed his weapon at me. At first it seemed nonsense till I saw him duck his head for a grenade hooked to his vest. His mouth closed around it just as my magic flicked the tab right off the end. His head lifted, tongue working to remove the pin that was already gone. I just stared into his eyes as his gaze widened in horror. Then his head exploded. Four.

The rifle round struck me in the neck at the line of my security barding. Sniper was already running for his life now, though. My PipBuck showed a red bar. Red is dead. Without listening to the shouts behind me, I tore up the hillside after him. A large concrete tower stood at the apex, with dishes pointed every direction. He could run, but not hide. I wove up through a gap in the dead trees, putting my gun away so I could telekinetically push dead bushes and branches out of my way. I saw him, and he saw me coming after him.

So did his friends. I staggered into the camp at the base of the tower with four more red bars and a number of yellow. “Granite, you dumb fucker! It’s Security!” a unicorn screamed as she levitated an SMG at me. I’d seen a brief demonstration at Megamart. No time to use my gun against that rate of fire. Instead I snapped out the baton again with a very specific target: her horn. The swing fell just as she started to fire. With a purple sparkle and a spray of blood the lavender spire shattered and the SMG fell uselessly into the dirt.

Sniper tried to put another round in my back, but I’d ducked for the swing and his shot went wide. The others drew a knife, baseball bat, and tire iron.

I levitated up her dropped SMG.

I braced my magic and legs as I stood over the squirming, dehorned unicorn and unloaded a spray of lead that started with the sniper and then washed over the other three. Five. Six. Three seconds later the clip was empty. Thirty-five bullets in three seconds? I gaped at the weapon. The only way I could waste ammo faster would be to just dump it down the barrel of a shotgun and pull the trigger! Two ponies were still squirming; my automatic stopped that. Seven. Eight.

What the fuck am I doing? What the fuck am I doing?! The automatic started to shake in my telekinetic grip and I dropped it into the dirt. They had been done! Why did I just kill them? Just… killed. Eight. Eight. Eight.

“Thank you,” somepony whispered from nearby. That was when I noticed that these raiders hadn’t been alone. There were at least a dozen ponies chained together in a row by collars. They were filthy, many bloody.

The dehorned unicorn lay curled up, hooves pressed to the sheared-off stump of her horn as she shook. I’d once heard getting your horn smashed was like having all four legs cut off. It’d take

some serious magic for that injury to heal. “What the fuck is going on here?” I’d seen plenty of raiders. These weren’t raiders. Not unless they were going for a full-on twelve course banquet. P-21 and Glory ran up from the road.

“They’re slavers,” the lead pony in the chain said as he stared hard at the unicorn.

“Slavers?” I asked, frowning in confusion. The lead pony looked a little concerned that I didn’t recognize the term. “I thought they were raiders.”

“Not much difference except in levels of crazy,” he muttered. “Not every wastelander is a psychopathic cannibal,” he said as he looked at my stable barding. “Slavers round up ponies and sell us to places like Paradise, Appleloosa, or Fillydelphia.” The gray pony glared at the squirming unicorn. I knew that glare. “They work a pony to death, and it doesn’t take long.” Nine, my head started to count.

“Blackjack,” P-21 said in worry as I lifted the SMG, ejected the clip, and loaded it with explosive rounds.

Glory landed next to me. “Blackjack, stop. Please!”

Red rage boiled in my vision and I ignored them as I pressed it against the unicorn’s head. Nine…

“What the fuck is wrong with you people? Aren’t fucking raiders enough? Why the fuck are you doing this shit? Why!” I screamed in her face, pressing the short barrel against her clenched eye. “Am I going to have to kill every single fucked up pony in the Goddesses-damned Wasteland just to end this shit? Am I?” I roared as I stared into her terrified eye.

“I just…gotta survive,” she whimpered as tears ran down her cheeks. “I have a kid…”

If I pulled the trigger I wouldn’t stop. Nine. Not ever. Make it nine. But here was a pony willing to sell ponies for caps. I could almost forgive raiders now; they were at least crazy. She’d chosen to perpetuate this nightmare. Her life was forfeit! I just had to end her. End everything. Make it nine!

Be strong. Be kind.

My grip on the SMG trembled as I slowly pulled away from her eye. “Well how’s that working for you?” I snapped. Eight was enough. One was enough. Fuck, I was crying now too. I tossed the SMG aside, grabbed her head between my hooves and clenched it as I stared into her eyes. “Get the fuck out of here. Find another line of work. Tell every slaver you know to find another line of work. I see

you doing this shit again and I will turn you into paint! Do you understand me?" I shouted into her face.

"Yes…" she whimpered.

"Do you fucking understand me?" I roared.

"Yes!" she screamed. I shoved her away from me. She took one last look and ran as fast as her hooves would carry her. I saw fourteen pairs of eyes all staring at me. Some looked just as scared of me as the unicorn had. Others appeared angry I hadn't ventilated her.

Fuck them if eight wasn't enough. My death count was one less than it could have been. I looked to P-21, saying in a shaky voice, "Unlock them…please…" I walked away from the slaver camp. I found a rock, pressed my face to it, wrapping my forehooves around it, and I wept, choked, and sobbed. Then I felt a hoof stroking along my mane. I peeked up at Morning Glory as she gave me a soft smile.

"You did the right thing," she said gently.

I lifted my head. "I wouldn't know the right thing from a hole in the head," I said as I curled up on the rock. "I wanted to put every round into her, reload, and do it again."

"Blackjack," Glory said quietly. "I wanted to kill her too." Slowly I raised my head to stare at the delicate, compact pegasus as she closed her eyes. "At first it was because I thought she was a raider, but when I saw they were slavers…I wanted them dead. How dare they buy and sell ponies for bottle caps?" She sighed softly as she looked away in the direction the maimed slaver had taken. "I couldn't have. I don't think I could ever kill a pony that wasn't trying to kill me first. But I wanted to."

"But you said I should have let her go." Now I was just confused.

"Yes," she replied as she looked back at me. "What she did was wrong. Killing her won't undo it. But she's still alive and she'll have to make a choice. Maybe she'll choose to stop. Maybe she'll convince others to stop. Maybe she won't. No matter what, we're not going to make the Wasteland any better by killing everypony. Even if we really think they deserve it."

"I'm no different from her," I muttered softly, voicing the poisonous words.

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true. I'll kill anypony if my Eyes Forward Sparkle says to. Red it's dead. Yellow be mellow. Right?" I felt disgusted at my supposed wit.

"Was she red or yellow?" Glory asked as she lay down and crossed

her forelimbs.

"Huh?"

She nodded in the direction the slaver had fled. "Was she red or yellow when you spared her?"

"I…" I frowned. "I don't remember. I don't think I checked."

"So you chose to spare her. Not your PipBuck," Glory said with a little cock of her head that made me smile. "You're a killer, Blackjack, but you're not a raider. You can choose. You care enough to choose."

"Right," I muttered, and I gave her a smile. Clearly it was what she wanted. "Well, we should probably head back then." She rose to her hooves and flew up and over the trees back towards the camp. I hesitated.

She was right. I could choose. I chose to kill forty colts and fillies. No pep talk or show of mercy would change that. There was a price to be paid for being a killer. I was going to pay for it.

* * *

It took about an hour to get the captive slaves freed and distribute the slavers' weapons. I'd thought the dozen freed ponies would travel together. Instead they began to bleed off in ones and twos. Many shot me nervous glances; apparently my little display proved just as unnerving as the slavers themselves. The gray colt in the lead got the SMG, though I'd replaced the bullets. The explosive rounds would probably detonate if fired on full auto. I probably could have sold it for enough to replace my shotgun, but at the moment I felt so damned numb that I couldn't care less about caps. They headed off to the north, perhaps because I'd already wandered around it and cleared most of the raiders.

The gray pony with a bow tie cutie mark was the last to go. "I'm heading down to Flank," he said with a grateful smile. "If you get that far south, look up Frisk. I'll see about putting a good word in for you." I didn't deserve a good word. I deserved a good warning. Blackjack: contents under pressure. Highly volatile. Reacts poorly to bullets.

Once we were alone again Glory took her time seeing to my spreading bruises. Nothing serious, but I was thankful for the relief. Then I watched with a detached, surreal feeling as she took the dropped knife, tested the edge, and started to saw off the head of

one of the slavers. My eye twitched slightly at the sight. “Um… Glory? What are you doing?” She didn’t seem like the kind for desecration.

She jammed the knife between vertebrae and gave a sharp twist. I winced at the loud pop. “Well, you were talking about raiders, right?” Was this a rehearsal? “I got to thinking…why are raiders so aggressive? They attack everypony on sight. Even if they already have food, they attack. The only time they flee is in the face of overwhelming odds. So I was thinking that if I could examine a raider’s brain compared to a non-raider’s brain I might be able to detect something.”

“Um…I doubt Bottlecap will be okay with us bringing in *heads*,” I pointed out as she wrapped up the intact noggin. “Besides. What are the chances we’ll run into raiders between here and Megamart?”

I had to ask.

The fight with the raiders proved terribly short. Nine. Almost disappointing. Ten. There were only four of them and they didn’t have a gun between them. Eleven. Glory got her second head and looked decidedly happy about the fact. Twelve. Walking back, P-21 asked about the radio. I hadn’t turned it on since that broadcast by DJ Pon3, but it’d be hours to reach the Finders. Nothing hostile on my EFS. No excuse to not turn it on.

I had to admit, I liked the music. So much of it was upbeat. The parts that were sad were also a relief. When DJ Pon3 came on I cringed, but he just warned folks around New Appleloosa to keep their eyes out for trouble and to watch out for each other. Occasionally he referenced other ponies fighting the good fight all across Equestria. One that he called the ‘Stable Dweller’ seemed to have completely shut down a town of slavers. Now *that* was impressive. I doubted the Stable Dweller would ever kill a room full of helpless ponies.

“And for all you folks out east who feel like you don’t have a ‘Stable Dweller’ of your own, here’s a little heads up on what Security’s been up to. Yes, Hoofington, she’s been busy busy busy. If you thought cleaning up the Manehattan Highway was impressive you should see what else Security is doing for the Hoof. It looks like the Fluttershy hospital is open for business again, courtesy of… whoa, can this report be accurate? It must be! Looks like Security actually got the Eggheads and the Bluebloods working together. Talk about a miracle. And it seems like she’s got a bone to pick with

the slavers in Paradise. Let's play the audio!"

I froze dead in my tracks as my voice, slightly strained and tinny, played out from my PipBuck. *"Get the fuck out of here. Find another line of work. Tell every slaver you know to find another line of work. I see you doing this shit again and I will turn you into paint! Do you understand me? Do you fucking understand me?!"* Followed by her cry of 'Yes!' Did I really sound like that?

"Looks like the Security Mare is just reminding Paradise that ponies selling ponies to ponies who work ponies to death is wrong. And Security doesn't like wrong. So in light of that, Hoofington, this is just for you from Sapphire Shores's hit…" Whatever else he said and the heavier beat that started went ignored as I felt numb from horn to hoof.

I sat down right in the middle of the cracked road, then turned the radio off. Looking at P-21 I gave my sweetest smile. "Shoot me? Please?" Please please please…

"Like it or not, you have to admit DJ Pon3 is helping you. It's clear that the Finders and the Collegiate only were willing to work with us because he told them what you'd done," Glory said with a curious smile and tilt of her head. "So why resent it?"

I sighed. How to explain it without saying the wrong thing? "It feels like a lie. Like he's playing up all the best parts and overlooking what really happens. Sure, I got the Society ponies to work with the Eggheads, but what about all the other stuff that happened? Would DJ Pon3 give me such high praise if he'd known what I did back in the hospital? Even playing that recording…like I'm going to take out every slaver I come across…"

"Are you saying that, if you did come across a band of slavers and your PipBuck labeled them yellow, you'd let them past?" P-21 asked skeptically.

"No. Of course not. But…"

"And…how did DJ Pon3 put it? Ponies selling ponies to ponies that work ponies to death need to be stopped?" Damn it. They were both smiling. I felt my heart start to pound.

"Yeah…but…"

"Then what's the big deal? Let him call you a hero," P-21 said with his sure little smile, "and just be a hero."

"I'm not a fucking hero!" I yelled at him, so angry I was glad that I wasn't holding a gun. Thirteen. Oh wait…I was…"I kill ponies that try and kill me or try and kill ponies who don't deserve it! I didn't

kill those slavers because they were evil and wrong! I shot them because they shot first and my PipBuck was red." Thirteen…"If I hadn't chased after that sniper I wouldn't have had a clue there were slaves up there at all!" I said, watching their smiles vanish, seeing the gun tremble in my magical grip.

I couldn't catch my breath as I covered my face with my hooves. Thirteen. I felt my magic tighten more and more on the automatic's handle. Every part of me was shaking as my breathing became louder and louder, faster and faster. I saw the snapped-off tip of a knife rammed into a neck. One. I saw a teal foal torn in two. Twenty. My body felt like it was burning up as I felt P-21 shaking me…or killing me…whichever he decided. I saw a skinned pegasus pop out of a box on a spring. Everything started to spin as I felt like I was falling off the world.

I clenched my eyes shut but all I kept seeing was ponies dying. An eyeball popping under my baton. Twenty-two. A head disintegrating as I raced out the tunnel. Nine. Guts spilling out amid bones. Twenty. Automatic fire tearing holes in three ponies. Seventy-three, four, five…Pushing a button. Twenty-seven to sixty-seven. My heart beat harder and harder and I could make out the distant noises of them saying things to me. Guts spilling from my torso; I felt like I was falling into the sky to break against the dark clouds overhead. The roaring in my ears chased me into the blackness.

What was the price for killing so many?

* * *

I awoke to the steady tap of water falling into a coffee tin near my head. My head pounded as I opened my eyes. I wasn't exactly sure where I was, only that I was alone. For once I didn't feel like crying. It felt as though something inside me had snapped. Maybe I'd finally gone off the deep end and killed both my friends. Wouldn't that be something? Water dripped through a hole in the roof into the tin, and I could dimly hear the sound of rain.

The room was small but neatly organized. A desk in one corner with a terminal. A safe. A shelf holding numerous books. A refrigerator in the second corner. Wastebasket. Then the cot I occupied in the third corner. I saw a toilet and sink through one open door. A faded plastic banner hung near the ceiling reading

‘Megamart, always lowest prices, always highest quality’. Lowest prices…

There were other things too. Little hints of a world before this one. The Megamart employee of the year had been somepony named Boxcars. There was a little award for record profits selling ‘canned and preserved foods and ammunition’. A strange photograph of two groups of soldiers in the parking lot, one in green combat armor and the other…zebras with red stripes? A curly-maned mare with purple glasses bumped hooves with a red zebra filly. The caption read ‘Macintosh’s Marauders invade Megamart with the Red Stripes. Great deals ensue.’

I was back with the Finders, which meant that my friends were probably alive. I felt a little relieved at that thought. I should have felt more relieved. Slowly I rocked back and forth before tipping over onto my hooves. I could only assume that this was Bottlecap’s office, though why I was here I didn’t have a clue. My stomach felt like a pit, but there were some biological urges that needed addressing. Once I’d flushed, a drink of rainwater from the tin helped alleviate some of the pounding in my skull.

“Welcome back,” Bottlecap said softly from behind her desk as she casually turned the pages of a book, making me jump. My magic immediately grabbed for weapons that weren’t there. It took me a moment to finally sit back on my haunches and blink at her as she scanned a hoof along the page.

“You are a very quiet pony,” I muttered, feeling embarrassed by my alarm.

“Not really. You have very noisy bowels. Leave the fan on and close the door,” she said as she continued to read. I reddened but did as she asked, feeling apprehensive. I expected a question or comment but Bottlecap didn’t say a word as she just read. Then she said softly, “Your friends handled the transactions while you’ve been indisposed. They took your barding to be repaired. I recommend some additional protection. Four hundred and twenty-five caps for the glands. Twenty-five hundred from the Society account. Twenty-two hundred from Orion’s Herd. You’re halfway to your goal, minus the cost of resupply.”

News that we’d amassed a small fortune in caps didn’t do much for me. “Did they…did they tell you what happened?” I asked as I sat back down on the cot in that vertical fashion that drew a curious look from Bottlecap.

"Should they have? You were unconscious when the three of you got here. I felt you'd recover better with some privacy." She looked up from her ledger and gave a little smile and shrug. "I'm usually too busy to sleep, so it was no trouble."

I rubbed my face. "I fell apart out there," I admitted. "I must have gone a little crazy."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it. I suspect it was simply the result of you throwing yourself at a bit too much wasteland. I take it that, DJ Pon3's accounts aside, your experience has been somewhat terrible?" I cringed in anticipation of the h-word, but it never came. Instead Bottlecap looked back down at the book. "I never understood his habit of casting ponies in the role of hero or villain. It seems a bit immature."

"So you don't think I'm a hero?"

"Hero." She said the word almost with disdain. "The Wasteland is no place for heroes. It chews heroes up and swallows them. They burn out, burn up, or change for the worse. The price of being a hero is just too high in the Wasteland," Bottlecap said as she sat, looking at me with a warm smile. "I think you are an individual and judge you accordingly, instead of holding you to some romantic ideal of how I think you should act."

I gave the yellow mare a grateful smile in return. "Well, thanks for loaning me your bed. I'm better now. I should probably check in on P-21 and Glory and look for more work." Yup. All better now. Whatever had happened on the road was done with and I didn't have to worry about it. Nope. Not at all.

Guts spreading over cracked asphalt…

Not at all.

"It's three in the morning," Bottlecap said simply. "Your friends, and most of the Megamart, are asleep."

"Oh. I didn't mean to keep you awake," I said as I looked over the ledger, but it made little sense to me. "What are you working on?"

"Finding a way to keep the Megamart in business," she replied as she looked at the numbers. "The same thing I do every day. Your work on the Manehattan Highway gave us some wiggle room, but we're bleeding trade month after month."

"Really? I'm sorry you're losing money." I knew less about business than I did terminals and medicine. My condolences seemed to amuse her.

"Money comes and goes. What we're losing is trade," she said as

she closed her ledger. “There’s three trade hubs for the Finders and we’re all in competition with each other.”

“Competition? If you’re Finders shouldn’t you work together?”

Bottlecap sighed and walked to the fridge, taking out two Sparkle-Colas. She bit the caps off and spat them into her desk drawer. I levitated one over and enjoyed chilled carroty goodness. “It’s more complicated than that. You see, my father is the owner of the Finders. He has three daughters, one of which is me. Each of my sisters controls the other two hubs. Unfortunately my sisters and I have…differing economic philosophies,” she said with a scowl and a regretful sigh. “When Father dies, one of us will assume control. I’m sure you can see the dilemma.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t get it,” I replied. “Sorry, I wish I was smarter about this whole marketing stuff.” One good thing about talking with Bottlecap: it occupied all of my brain power. I barely thought about pushing a button…barely…I swallowed as I felt my hooves shake on the bottle. “What, you don’t get along with your sisters or something?”

“Caprice is of the opinion that the Finders should diversify away from pure salvage. She peddles sex and chems to anypony willing to pay for it from the Finders hub in Flank. She sees nothing wrong with sucking every last cap out of an addict. She’s quite experienced at that.” She scowled in thought, then glanced at me with a small smile. “As you can guess, she thinks I’m simply a prude.”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t getting caps the point of business?”

“What would be the point of having a pile of caps? To swim in it?” Bottlecap said with a smile as she dug out one of the caps and held it up. “This is just a stamped piece of metal. What matters is trade. Taking goods for caps. Selling goods and getting caps. The amount of caps doesn’t matter compared to the trade. If anything has a chance of holding us together, it’s trade. After all, everypony wants something.”

I laughed softly, hoping I wasn’t being too rude. “Sorry, but you sound so serious about it. How do merchants save Equestria?”

“Is that so shocking? Trade requires rules, understanding, and agreements. It demands a certain level of respect and acknowledgement for others. I suppose I could have pushed my profit margins a little more aggressively, but that would strain trade even more. This way I help contribute to the peace and order of the Wasteland,” Bottlecap said as she finished her Sparkle-Cola. “I know

it might seem silly, but it's a big wasteland and I'm absolutely lousy with a gun."

I remembered how often I thought I was useless because all I could do was shoot things. "Trust me, being good with a gun isn't much better."

"I disagree." Bottlecap cocked her head with a pleasant smile. "You do things, Blackjack. By your hoof and your will, ponies live and die. That's a power that…" Her eyes looked at me solemnly and sadly. "I see…"

My heart had redoubled its pounding. I struggled for breath. The bottle of Sparkle-Cola slipped from my magic and the brown fluid sloshed over the floor. I did everything I could to stop the shaking in my forelegs. "It's not…It's not a power I should have. That anypony should have."

She looked at me steadily and didn't say a word. She waited for my heart rate to slow; for the vertigo to pass. Then she spoke in a softly respectful tone. "But it is a power you do have, Blackjack. And it's a power that many ponies are willing to use. Eager to use."

"I used my power to kill children," I said as I clenched my eyes shut. I could still hear the singing. Why had we sung as they died? Forty…I couldn't help myself. I poured out every terrible event that occurred, finishing with what happened with the raiders.

Bottlecap closed her eyes, seeming to ruminate on everything that I'd told her. Then she said quietly, "There was no right choice, Blackjack, but I would have done the same thing." Slowly I opened my eyes to look at her solemn features. "The Collegiate are fine ponies, but they don't care for fixing ponies broken centuries ago. They're more interested in discovering lost spells and technology. Those foals would have remained as you left them for centuries. They wouldn't have pulled the plug. They simply would have closed the door. As for the Enclave helping…why would they? They weren't pegasus foals."

"Maybe. The blood is on my hooves though. I'll have to pay for it someday," I muttered. I levitated the bottle up, drank what remained inside, and then carefully levitated the fluid off the floor. I wasn't very sure I could do it, actually, but I managed to get most of the spilt soda into a fizzy, dirty, faintly radioactive ball and down the sink.

Bottlecap waited for me to finish before continuing. "Yes. You will. You're paying for it right now." I looked at her in shock. I'd

expected…what had I expected? “And you’ll keep paying until you don’t care anymore. You’ll pay for that blood even if you do nothing but sit back in a glorified store.”

“You? But…unless your employee discipline policy involves executions, who have you killed?” I gasped. Bottlecap, a killer? I wasn’t seeing it.

“You’ve seen the bounties posted. I’m not naïve enough to believe they’re all guilty and deserving of death, but I connect bounty hunters to bounties. I sell the ammunition and weapons that kill them. In my own way I’ve facilitated the death of thousands of ponies. But I have to hope that in the end I’ve helped more than I’ve hurt.” She looked at me, saying levelly, “If I lose that, then I’m no better than my sister Usury in Paradise.”

“Usury?” I straightened as I remembered the freed ponies mentioning Paradise. I might not have been a smart pony, but I made the connection. “Your sister runs the slave market? The Finders are involved in the slave trade?”

“We are now,” Bottlecap said as she closed her eyes with a reserved frown. “Usury believed it was a mistake to ignore the slave market. That ponies are every bit as much a commodity as salvage or sex.” She sighed softly. “Like I said, Megamart is losing trade. More and more ponies go to Paradise and Flank instead of here to exchange goods. And when Father dies I’ll either be selling drugs and flesh, or ponies.” She smiled grimly. “Though, more likely, I’ll simply quit and set up shop in Tenpony or Friendship City. Some things I’m not willing to buy or sell.” Somehow I figured she wasn’t talking about salvage any more.

I looked at Bottlecap for the longest time, feeling odd emotions churning inside me. Respect…no. Admiration. Here was a pony that had lived in the Wasteland her entire life and refused to sell out her integrity. Even when it hurt her business, she insisted on doing the right thing. I didn’t really think it was possible for businesses to care more about their effects than wealth.

I suddenly had a feeling about how I could pay off some of my debt.

“So…how do I hurt her trade?” I asked quietly.

“Are you able to?” Bottlecap stood and walked to me with a probing expression. “Because if you want to do something in the Wasteland, somepony is going to get hurt. Maybe you. Maybe your friends. Maybe somepony who deserves to hurt. Maybe somepony

who doesn't. Can you handle it?"

Then I realized what she was asking me. Could I hurt? Could I kill? Could I handle paying the price for being a killer, or would I keep breaking over and over again till there was nothing left? "I don't know," I replied. "I thought I was. Now I don't know what to think."

"Guess we'll find out," Bottlecap said softly. "You already struck a blow against her, thanks to DJ Pon3. I'll never know how he got that recording, but I'm sure every slaving band is wondering just how much of a threat you really are. The more you disrupt supply, the better. But, eventually, you'll have to tackle the demand. Some, like Red Eye in Fillydelphia, probably wouldn't stop unless he died. But there are others, like Brimstone's Fall, where the slave operations are smaller and more manageable."

I glanced at my PipBuck and noticed that it had added a square far to the south and west of Megamart. How did it do that? Bottlecap noticed my look and smiled. "I can't, of course, offer you a contract for this. If my sisters thought I was deliberately undermining them, it would be all-out war within the Finders."

I looked back at her. *Do better.* Could I? I had to. Otherwise I'd be nothing more than a killer. "Know of any contract work in the area?" I offered a tense smile. "After all, trouble seems to find me easily enough. When it does, who can say what'll happen?"

* * *

The jobs were simple and legitimate. Patrol the Sunset Highway between Megamart and Flank, poke through the Miramare Air Station for some electronic parts, and deliver some mail to Flank's residents. The route would also take me within spitting distance of Brimstone's Fall. If something should happen that put a dent in the demand side of the slave trade, then it'd not only help the people of the Wasteland but Bottlecap as well.

I wasn't sure if I was good with this or not. Unlike my first talk with Watcher, I didn't feel much more confident. I still wanted to do better, though. Watcher, DJ Pon3, Bottlecap…even the figurine of Fluttershy all extolled me to do better. Do more. Help others. If I did, maybe I'd be able to come to terms with all the wrong things I'd done. Pay my price.

Still, first things first: get a new shotgun and pick up my barding.

The specialty rounds were effective, but hell on the workings of a gun. I'd need to save them or start carrying backup shotguns. Actually, given that everypony was asleep at this hour, what I should have done was go back to bed till dawn. The thought of trying to take a nap didn't appeal much, though.

"Ante up," I heard a mare, Keystone, I think her name was, say from the entrance. My ears stood right up and I moseyed over to where five ponies sat around a table. And they had cards and colored chits. A true, real smile crossed my face.

"Deal me in?" I gave her my widest and sincerest 'I won't tell the Overmare' smile.

The mottled gray and green mare looked up in surprise, and a little suspicion. "You know Head and Hoof style?" I shook my head, but I guessed that they knew we'd gotten paid today. It was actually really similar to a style of poker Rivets had been fond of. You got two cards face down (your head) and then two cards were turned face up (your hooves). Every round you added a card to either your head or your hooves as you raised the bet. Everypony made the best hand out of seven. With six players, that meant keeping track of forty-two cards. With half a deck in play, it was more gamble than figuring out the odds. They forwarded some chips for me and we got to playing.

In two hours, the game broke down more and more between me and Keystone. She was a lot smarter than me, and she kept making smart bets. Me? I won big. I lost big too. Still, I won just a bit more than I lost with each hoof dealt. The cards and the winning were only half of it, though; contrary to what I'd thought, I'd missed this. The banter. The jokes. The remembrances of a life where I didn't expect to kill somepony every day.

Then, of course, there was the whiskey. I had to admit that I'd never really drunk before. We didn't have legal alcohol in Stable 99, so my first drink went down like a Sparkle-Cola. Once I'd stopped coughing and choking, I figured out that whiskey was supposed to be drunk slowly rather than fast, and soon I had a pleasant warmth in my belly that quickly drove out all the fears and doubts rolling around in my skull. I felt happy.

Then I saw a ghost. The unicorn buck stood at the end of a row of scrap metal. His tan mane and brown hide were nothing spectacular. The only thing that stood out was an odd cutie mark. A cutie mark identical to P-21's.

U-21. I rose to my hooves as he disappeared out of sight. “Deal me out this round. I need to…take a leak.”

“That was information I did not need to know,” Keystone replied, happily taking my cards. When I ran down the row…okay, weaved down the row…she called after me, “Hey! Toilets are that way! Don’t be pissing on the merchandise!”

“Heeere…pony pony pony…” I called out as I made my way to the end of the row and turned. “I just want to ask you a few questions about Mr. Deus and Sanguine. I’m not gonna hurt’cha.” I really hoped I wouldn’t have to hurt him. It’d be nice to get some answers without hurting anypony.

I spotted him fidgeting next to two pallets stacked high with rusty generators or electrical equipment. He stared at me, swallowing as he trembled. “Hey. U-21. You met somepony named Sanguine. I really want to meet him too.”

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, and then his shaking stopped. His lips curled in a small satisfied smirk. “But he only wants your PipBuck.” His horn flared brightly.

“Oh horse--” I started to say, when a powerful telekinetic field wrapped around my throat and squeezed tight, lifting me into the air. Then what I’d taken for a heap of scrap slowly rose to his hooves.

“Hello, Security Cunt.” In the stable, he’d looked big. Now, he looked *huge*. Even ignoring the metal plates fused to his hide and the pistons supporting his weight, he stood a whole head higher than me. The sight of metal plunging into flesh, distorting it as he moved, would normally have turned my stomach. Just at the moment, though, I had enough sobriety to notice but more than enough inebriation to not care about it. Or that I was dangling helplessly between his massive guns. “You have no idea how aggravating it’s been to find you.”

“Hasn’t been fun for me either,” I gasped with a forced grin. “So. Heard you want a certain computer file I’ve got? Won’t do you any good. It’s encrypted.”

“Sanguine doesn’t care about that, cunt. All he wants is your PipBuck.” He reached out with his hoof and caressed my cheek…it was like being touched by manufacturing equipment. “If you’d given it to me right outside that damned stable, I might have let you walk away. Eventually. Crawl, perhaps. But after leading me on a chase for nearly a week? I’m afraid I’m not in the mood

anymore."

"Funny." I laughed in his scowling, ugly face. "If you'd pulled this a few hours ago, I'd probably have just given you my PipBuck. Probably the leg too," I said as I gave him a little smile. He blinked in confusion as he looked at me. "There's just two little problems right now: one, I dunno if you noticed, but I'm really stupid. And two…" I paused as I looked over at the cannons. Yup…*that* was probably it right there. Least I knew my guns. "Two…I'm pretty sure I'm drunk."

And my own magic reached out and deftly depressed the trigger mechanisms on those two cannons pointing to either side of me. The roar of the shots blasted second by second just feet away. Shells sent pallets of scrap flying and tumbling down on U-21, breaking his magical grip on me. I landed in a heap in front of Deus, curling into a little ball. I couldn't hear anything as my ears rang and l went fetal. *Oh thank you sweet merciful whiskey for you have taken the concussive beating that comes from hanging a few feet from a firing cannon muzzle and rendered it into a nice full-body numbness.*

He stood over me, his mouth working as his metallic hoof pressed down right over my leg. It sounded like he was screaming at me from under water. "What did you think that accomplished, huh, cunt?" He started to apply pressure; I wondered if he could just stomp my leg clean off. Probably.

"Wrath of Gun," I muttered, and then he looked up. The massive turret was swinging the barrel around to point right at Deus. He stepped back, eyes widening, and I curled up as tightly as I could, giggling, "Mine's bigger." Gun fired.

Wee…I'm flying!

Whoopsie. Never mind. Gravity works.

I crashed through the chain mesh draped across a firearms stall and landed behind the counter. Ammo boxes weren't particularly soft; actually, they were the antithesis of soft. But they did hold ammo. And so, as I lay there behind the counter, marveling at the many painkilling properties of alcohol, I took said ammo and loaded said firearms.

It was crazy time in Megamart. I could make out the long, drawn-out noise of 'Cunnnnnt!' being shouted by Deus. Keystone and the other ponies were scrambling. Gun was tracking Deus, but not firing. And me, I was staggering out from behind the counter with my new…shotgun? Rifle? It was all kinda blurry at the moment. Oh

well. I could tell the business end from the trigger and that was all I needed. “Hey Deus! You still want my PipBuck? You can have it when you pry it off my cold…dead…” Oh. Vomiting. Not nearly what I’d been going for.

Oh look! There was Deus. Minus one gun. It looked like he’d missed getting shot by Gun, but his gear hadn’t. That made him keel over with each step as he fought to keep his balance. I blew him a kiss. He blew one back…wait, no. That was a shell. It was only luck and him being so off balance that kept me from turning into a Blackjack colored stain.

Another low, deep ‘crump’ from overhead and the shell buried itself in the concrete, throwing rocky debris everywhere. I guessed Gun’s shells didn’t go boom like Deus’s…made sense being inside and all. Off balance and heavy as he was, Deus was still a quick pony!

“Hey Deus. I got a gun too,” I shouted, or I think I shouted. I might have just said, ‘Hadahhhhsss! Mwahhhguaaataaa!’ but he was charging and I really had no time for elocution. Instead I pointed my gun thing and fired, hitting S.A.T.S. as the shell left the barrel and rocketed towards him. Wait? S.A.T.S. then fire…S.A.T.S. then fire…Canceling S.A.T.S. I watched as the shell hit Deus right in the chest. Darn. I’d wanted to aim for his head.

Then Deus exploded! I looked down at the weapon in my magical grip, focusing on the blurry letters. Grenade…launcher? I thought you just threw ‘em! Unfortunately Deus was not a dead pony. He wasn’t a happy pony either. Actually, looking around, there were a *lot* of unhappy ponies. Well, not me. I was happy. I had a tummy of whiskey residue and my head was going around and around and whee.

P-21 and Glory found me and immediately started dumping healing potions down my gullet. Funny, but why did I hurt more when I was healed? The spinning and the underwater noise receded and I became aware of the copious amounts of blood coming from my ears and nostrils. Heck, I looked like I’d gotten peppered with concrete buckshot. Suddenly I didn’t feel so good. In fact I was rapidly going from good to ‘aw fuck’. Why couldn’t I stop shaking?

They helped sit me up as Bottlecap, flanked by Keystone and the rest of her security team, kept weapons trained. “This is done, Deus. I’ll send the bill to Big Daddy. You two can settle it between you.”

“This isn’t done yet.” He pointed a hoof right at me. “Hand her

over, Bottlecap. I'll pay fifty thousand for her right now."

"You don't have that kind of money," Bottlecap said, but I could hear her doubt. "Besides, even if you did, some things aren't for sale."

"Bullshit, Bottlecap. This is a store. Everything's for sale!" he said with a wide grin.

Bottlecap looked at him with complete disdain. "You've got me confused with my sisters. You don't have a clue what it is you're trying to purchase from me. Now get out, Deus, or I'll sell what's left of you to the ghouls."

He glanced up and around, then scowled. "Fine. But I got one last piece of business here." He pointed his hoof at me and yelled, "Bounty on Security. Fifty thousand caps. You want to collect, bring her head and her PipBuck -- intact -- to the Arena! If she's alive, one hundred thousand bottlecaps! Usury will back me up on payment. After all, she's the sister who doesn't give a fuck," he added, sneering down at Bottlecap. He grinned at me one final time and then the cybernetic pony walked for the exit. U-21 limped after him, smirking at me with malicious glee.

Suddenly more ponies were glancing at me and muttering to each other. "Come on, Blackjack. Let's get you to Bonesaw," P-21 said as he shoved up underneath me. "Ugh, good Goddesses, we just fixed you up, Blackjack. It's like there's some universal rule that you've got to get hurt all the time."

"Just the price I got to pay," I muttered softly as they helped me away.

* * *

I was getting pretty familiar with Bottlecap's office by now. Deus had come in like any shopper and simply waited, knowing that I'd arrive eventually to collect on my contracts. Now that there was a price on my head, Keystone and Bottlecap had thought it best I recover out of sight before I started a riot. Without putting up a single piece of paper, Deus had created the largest bounty in Hoofington history. And that was me dead; me *alive* was twice as much.

"Most ponies are lucky to see a thousand caps in their life," Keystone said with a scowl as she brought me my barding. "We've got to get you out of here or they'll tear the whole place apart

looking for you." My whole body throbbed, most particularly my head. I'd thought that Bonesaw took care of patching me up, but the throbbing in my head made me wonder if I had a skull fracture he missed. Even with everything he'd done, I still felt like I'd been shoved in a dryer set to spin.

I regarded Megamart's security chief with a curious half smile. "Not looking to collect yourself?" Keystone didn't smile back.

The mottled gray and green mare gave a snort. "I'm not an ungrateful shit. You helped us and helped others. I get my paycheck the honest way now," she said as she tossed the barding down on the cot beside me. "Courtesy of your poker winnings."

I levitated it and then frowned. Why was it heavier? "What happened to it?" I felt stiff plates sewn underneath the kevlar weave.

"Armor plates. I thought you needed something a little more substantial. You get shot way too much," Keystone said with a small smile. "I also included something special. Hurry up and kill Deus so we can have another game."

"Any clue where I can find him?" And head in the opposite direction?

"He's a Reaper. If he's not killing somepony, he's probably at the Arena." I looked at my PipBuck…yup. 'Hoofington Sports Arena' was now on the map. If I wasn't wrapped head to hoof in healing bandages I'd be screaming about how. "He's one of Big Daddy's Four Horses of the Apocalypse…and yeah. They really do call themselves that."

P-21 and Glory had spent a sizable amount of our caps on a new drum-fed shotgun. I'd take better care of this one. There was also a backup automatic pistol and a brand spanking new baton. "Thanks. It's not even my birthday." I looked over at Bottlecap. "So I'm guessing those jobs are going to be on hold for a while?"

The lemon mare smiled. "Why? Your bounty doesn't disqualify you from getting paid for other jobs. Every trade hub is supposed to be neutral ground, and you can send Glory or P-21 in to collect payments. Just be careful. That is a lot of money for a bounty, and I know many ponies won't care if you're Security or not."

"Not to be a wet blanket, but how are we supposed to get out of here without said hordes of avarice descending on us the second we set hoof out the door?" P-21 asked, in perfect deadpan wet blanket fashion.

Bottlecap just smiled, and my mane proceeded to itch.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Quick Draw - Holstering and drawing weapons is 50% faster.

Quest Perk added: The Stare (level one) - You can intimidate non-hostile contacts through eye contact.

Chapter 8: Long Roads

"Are you sayin' my mouth is makin' promises my legs can't keep?"

The word spread like wildfire. Did you hear about the bounty? What bounty? *The* bounty. The bounty of the year. The bounty of the century. Fifty thousand caps dead. A hundred thousand alive. A hundred thousand caps, imagine it! All for the head and PipBuck of some stable dweller? A stable dweller? Yeah, Security. Security? The mare DJ Pon3 talks about? Yeah, she's somewhere around Megamart. Are you going after her? Are you?

The answer had been yes. As I watched through P-21's binoculars I saw them drawn by the promise of easy money. That very morning a camp formed outside the main gates; only a half dozen. By noon it was twenty. By sundown, fifty. Most of them had pathetic weapons, rusty rifles and barely mended work implements. But that was changing. The professionals were starting to arrive. Professionals who were asking questions. What did Security look like? What weapons did she carry? What foods did she like to eat? Who were her friends?

By morning the next day, Megamart found itself inundated with 'customers'. Keystone made sure every one of them paid the toll, and even restricted weapons in case Gun wasn't enough deterrent. Each of the 'shoppers' kept an eye out for the mare with the black and red mane. Had a single one of them laid eyes on me I think they'd have torn me to pieces and hauled me to Deus in a bucket.

Still, for all the watchful eyes, nopony seemed too interested in the four wastelanders and their brahmin. Dressed in rags and cloaks, reeking of brahmin droppings, their packs rattled with salvage from all across Hoofington as they slowly crept north. Reaching the overpass, a gang of ten stopped them. "We're looking for Security."

"Oh, Security escaped last night. Didn't you hear? She was an Enclave agent. Cut her wings off ta fool us all," the old buck leading the caravan of wastelanders cackled.

“Horseapples,” spat another caravanner, a gray mare with crossed knives for her cutie mark. “She’s still in there. Security’s from Tenpony. Got enough money ta buy the Finders. They’re finally making their move on the Hoof!”

“She’s travelling with a pegasus and an earth pony,” the crème buck gang leader said as he glowered at the caravanners.

“Ain’t no turkeys here,” the old buck cackled again as the gang searched the packs. He was obviously telling the truth; clearly none of the travelling ponies could be hiding wings beneath their dusty robes and cloaks.

The leader of the ten looked at his fellows. “Yeah, well, we think Security might try and sneak out.”

“Shit. Ya caught me,” the left head of the brahmin muttered.

The other head gasped, “You’re Security? You fucker. What’d you do with Hank?”

A few of the bounty hunters snorted at the two jabbering heads. The leader looked at the remaining buck and mare. “You. Get over here,” he demanded briskly of the mare. “Get over here and get those rags off.”

“Don’t you lay a hoof on my girl!” The olive green buck glared, his eyes drilling into the leader. His wild black mane rose in a mad tangled ridge from brow to tail. A trio of varmint rifles fixed on him, making him bristle but step back.

The purple mare gave a coy giggle. “Oh, don’t worry hun; I’m sure they’ll be gentle.” She wiggled out of the robe, revealing a petite body dressed in frilly, if slightly worn, lingerie that covered both flanks and back legs. Quite a cute mare, if you overlooked the male bits between his haunches. He fluttered his lashes at the leader. “Happy?”

The ten immediately lost interest and returned to looking at Megamart, scrambling as they realized three more caravans were leaving for three other directions. The caravan continued north, laughing and sharing jokes. A few miles beyond the overpass the two ponies following them turned back.

I never thought I’d be glad to see Pony Joe’s again. As our ‘caravan’ walked around the back of the donut shop I glanced behind us once again before cackling with glee. “‘Ya caught me’…you nearly made me laugh,” I said fondly to Hank and Tony.

“I do standup,” the brahmin’s left head said with a chuckle.

Bottlecap smiled fondly as she reached back, licked over the

crossed blades, and then carefully peeled off the cutie mark decal, spitting it into the garbage. “Are you sure you won’t keep the disguise a little longer?” Bonesaw didn’t really have much to remove from himself, as all his disguise entailed was his robes, so he helped me pull off the wiry black hair that’d been stuck to me with wax.

“Folks need to start spotting Security somewhere other than at Megamart. If they think we’re still hiding there, sooner or later they’ll try and storm the place or burn you out. If I know DJ Pon3, soon as I plug a raider he’ll be all over it.” Plug a raider…‘cause killing them was a joke. I really was that callous.

“You’re lucky you’ve got such a puny horn. Never woulda been able to cover it otherwise,” Bonesaw said as he magically yanked the clump of hair-coated wax off my brow.

I frowned, feeling a little hurt. “My horn isn’t puny.”

“It’s barely bigger than a foal’s!” he cackled.

I feigned an injured yet dignified expression. “It’s not puny.”

P-21 removed all his wastelander garments, frowning as he glanced at me with a small, almost amused smile. “Bonesaw, does the size of a unicorn’s horn have any indication of their magical prowess? Because, Blackjack, I have to admit that I’ve never seen you do magic before,” P-21 teased. The wrinkled old buck rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“My horn isn’t puny! I just wasn’t taught any magic. That’s all,” I said defensively. “I was supposed to learn spells once I took over for Mom.” Okay, that was a lie, but it was the best excuse I could manage.

The truth was that I *couldn’t* really do magic. Oh, I could levitate guns and swing batons as well as any unicorn, but my telekinesis was hardly all that impressive. In medical they concluded that my magic hadn’t fully developed yet. I still had bad dreams of spending hours with Marmalade trying to summon magic hoofcuffs or cast a stunning spell. Trying to get interrogation spells to work had been an absolute nightmare, particularly when my mom decided that it might help if she demonstrated them by using them on me. Having your mother dig through your porn stash was bad enough, but having her dig through the memories of how many times you put yourself on the breeding queue? And having her critique your performance and offer suggestions?

P-21 was looking at me in concern. “Blackjack? You okay?”

"Yeah. Just…yeah…" Oh Goddesses, was I really becoming that much of a basket case? "I didn't freak out, did I?"

"Well…" He gave me a definite smirk…oh yes, he was really smirking! That was a Blackjack kind of smirk, instead of a sullen, P-21 smirk. "It seemed like you were turning pretty interesting colors under that paint job."

"Ugh…leave the mental patient alone," I countered, but I was glad I wasn't thinking about Mom recommending I raise my hips--Goddesses, I was thinking it again! Groaning, I fished around for any other topic I could think of. "Hey, Bottlecap. Are ponies like Deus common in the Wasteland?"

She took out a bottle of mildly radioactive water--no way you'd waste filtered stuff for washing--and starting scrubbing the gray paint off her hide. "There's always been Reapers around Hoofington, but most aren't as strong as Deus. When you become a Reaper they do something to you, make you stronger and tougher. But the oldest Reapers like Big Daddy and Deus have potent internal healing talismans and the like; the only ponies that come close to challenging their firepower are the Steel Rangers."

"Oh, why is that?" I asked as I peeled off my cutie mark decal and started scrubbing off my olive paint. For some reason wearing it made me…twitchy. I liked seeing my ace and queen of spades. Then I glanced over at P-21's male symbol and twenty-one dots before he covered them up with his saddlebags. What would his cutie mark have been? A book? A candle? A stubborn jackass?

"Steel Rangers have the Ironmare naval station. The HMS *Celestia*'s tied up there. If they get the guns working on that ship, they'll be able to lob shells across half of Hoofington. They've got numbers and ammo and they're stocking up on every missile they can get their hooves on." Bottlecap looked to the east, but highlands to the north and east of us blocked our view. "Most Steel Rangers just worry about stockpiling weapons and technology from the past. I'm pretty sure 'Star Paladin' Steel Rain plans on something bigger. Fortunately, the Reapers love to pick fights from the west and the Enclave has them bottled up from the south, leaving them mostly stuck in Ironmare."

"You think they're going to try and take over Hoofington?" P-21 asked.

Bottlecap chewed her lip. "Elder Crunchy Carrots…never. But Elder Crunchy is growing increasingly old and feeble, and I think Steel

Rain would just love to show Equestria what the Rangers can actually do. Unfortunately, the Enclave's of similar feelings. If they go to war, a whole third of Hoofington might be lost."

I frowned as I scanned the skies. "Speaking of the Enclave, where is Morning Glory? She left before us. She should be here." I glanced behind me at the door to the donut shop. "No. She wouldn't have actually gone inside…"

I walked to the back door and carefully opened it, expecting a wash of pure nausea. Instead, all I smelled was hot air. DJ Pon3 played calmly from within. Inch by inch I opened it and peeked inside the kitchen of horror, only to find…"It's clean." Well…clean in a figurative sense. The industrial mixer had been removed. The ovens and food preparation surfaces were so clean they sparkled. The bodies were all missing. Somepony had come by in the last day or two and scrubbed away every sign of atrocity.

Okay, this was one of the more creepy experiences I'd had in the last week. Not as bad as a few places, but still. I walked inside and found Glory reading a magazine in one of the booths, the radio in the corner filling the dining area with soothing music. A Sparkle-Cola sat on the tabletop beside her. If she hadn't been wearing that Enclave uniform and battle saddle, I would have thought she was a ghost, a pegasus filly from two centuries ago sitting here and waiting for her date to arrive. "Hey, Blackjack."

"Hey. I don't suppose you've been holding back a shocking talent at housecleaning, have you?" I said as I sat in the booth opposite her.

"Um, nope. You mean it wasn't like this before?" She gestured with a hoof. The duffel bag with my shotgun and reinforced barding rested next to her. She also had P-21's things in a sack.

I gave her a skeptical look. "This was a raider nest. You saw how they lived. This place should have bodies for decoration and guts for streamers." Fuck, did I really say that? I took a deep breath, feeling my head start pounding. "Somepony cleaned this place up."

"Well, it wasn't me. I've been waiting all morning," she said with a little smile, gesturing at some empty bottles of cola next to her. "There's running water in the sinks, but I think it might be radioactive. You should have P-21 check in the ladies' room. There's a locked first aid kit in there." She sighed, propping her hooves under her chin as she looked back down at her Scientific Equestria. "Though why anypony would lock up emergency medical

supplies is beyond me."

"It does seem counterproductive," I agreed, then went out to tell the others they could come inside. P-21 went right to that locked first aid kit. The bathrooms were much more effective at removing the rest of the paint, even though Glory was right about the radiation. My eyes started to itch and my vision turned distinctly more amberish: minor magical radiation poisoning for sure. No patch and purge special this time.

I left the bathroom decidedly cleaner, went to the duffel, and sucked down a pack of RadAway, enjoying the tangy orange flavor. They could have bottled this stuff! Then I put on my new and improved…and heavier…armor. It certainly felt much more substantial. There was also a reinforced helmet made in the same blue and gold motif. I could feel the metal plates sewn inside. Hopefully it would prevent more 'Blackjack got blown up within an inch of her life' mom--

Somepony had sewn the Crusader patch on the left flank of my barding, right below the word 'Security'. It might have been dingy, but seeing the little gold filly pawing defiantly at the air made me smile and choke up at the same time. Somehow I'd pay back the Crusaders as well. The faction everypony forgot about deserved help the most.

Stepping out, I saw Morning Glory talking with both Bottlecap and Bonesaw. I hung back, pretending to be interested in Glory's scavenged magazines. "Once the slides are prepared, please see they get to Dr. Morningstar at the RDSP with my notes. I'm sure he'll be interested in more. Let him know I'm travelling with Blackjack."

"You could just take them yourself," Bottlecap pointed out. "It's hazardous, but Keeper's caravan goes by the Skyport every two weeks."

Glory looked over at me with a small smile. "Well. As terrifying as it's been, I think I'll stay with Blackjack. She's saved my life and she's trying to do the right thing. Maybe I can find more samples, too." D'aww, watch me blush.

"Well, glad to have you with us," I said, and I meant it. She was a little…literal, but she'd seen a lot of the same horrors I had and hadn't fallen apart nearly as badly as I did. And she could fly. Her Enclaveness was certainly concerning, but I was convinced her heart was in the right place.

Once everything was squared away, the three of us headed west

towards Weather Monitoring Four, the broadcast tower a handy landmark. Now that I had shed the disguise, I felt a definite twitching between my shoulder blades. I also felt…good. Maybe it was just the day of downtime not killing anypony or Glory's vote of confidence or just the fact that I'd run into Deus and come out alive.

"So did your brains tell you anything?" I asked her, half teasing. I figured anypony after my head would show up as red on my EFS, but the only hostiles in these woods were bobbing bloatsprites.

"Yes. The raider sample had numerous lesions in the frontal lobe…" She caught my 'I'm not a smart pony, remember?' look and coughed. "The fronts of their brains were full of little holes. It looked almost like a sponge." See? Translate smart into stupid and I had no problem following along. "The front of the brain is where most of your impulse control and long-term decision-making happen."

"You'd probably see the same thing with Blackjack's brain," P-21 said, grinning at me. I did all I could to not say a word, feeling my heart throbbing in my ears. "So what do you think causes it?" he continued, not noticing my discomfort. "There's lots of ponies that live in the Wasteland who manage to stay sane." Sure, they might kill us anyway for a mountain of caps, but that was sane.

"Some bacteria or virus, I think. The decay is progressive; likely it takes months or years for full psychological breakdown to occur. Given that raiders are so aggressive and cannibalistic, they might spread it through eating infected ponies," she replied. "The Enclave reports that there's something down here that turns all ponies into raiders, but we've come across plenty that aren't. The slaver brain was perfectly healthy. No lesions at all." She looked positively ecstatic. "More samples are needed, of course, but the Enclave can get that. If I'm right, once they lock down the source, they can work on a treatment. Imagine a Wasteland with no more raiders!"

"That just leaves radiation, ghouls, bandits, killer robots, slavers…" P-21 listed. I gave him a little shove. Taking raiders out of the equation would go a long way towards making Hoofington a safer place to live. He was right, but if she was right and the Enclave could come up with a cure, I'd sure be happy. Then they could just do something about those clouds…

While I wasn't exactly thrilled about resting at the weather station, I knew there was food we'd left behind, and unless the robots rebuilt themselves we should be safe. By the time we reached the

station, the rain had started to pick up and turn the ground into mud soup. We slipped back into the reinforced structure and I carefully and respectfully cleared out a room for us to use; I might not have been up to burying dozens of skeletons, but I didn't have to toss their bones around like garbage, either. I levitated some mattresses over and we got settled in for the night.

…Have I mentioned I hate being bored?

I had one little curiosity sitting in my bag. Slowly I pulled out the glassy memory orb I'd received from the broken gazebo beside the lake. Lying on my mattress, I batted it back and forth between my hooves. Bonesaw had explained how they worked: a trip down somepony else's experiences. See what they saw and feel what they felt. I assumed the first orb had been Miss Glitterhooves's memory: Garnet, recalling an actual meeting with Fluttershy, Cheerilee, and Redheart. Granted, this time I probably wouldn't wake up with my intestines…okay. Not thinking about that now.

"I think I'm going to take a peek inside," I said as I looked at the orb.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" P-21 asked with obvious skepticism.

"It's one of my ideas. Of course it isn't good," I said as I lifted it in my hoof. "As soon as I go into this thing we'll be stormed by bounty hunters, ghouls, and Deus. But I'm bored and I'm curious, so I'll need you two to protect me from Deus raping me with his cannon."

Glory frowned, rubbing her chin with a wingtip. "I really don't think it'd fit. That bore has to be a hundred and twenty two millimeters and that's almost the width of a mare giving birth so figuring in the thickness of the barrel…" She finally caught my look. "Oh. Blackjack humor. Sorry." She smiled sheepishly. "Yes, we will protect you from a hypothetical Deus and his hypothetical cannon."

"Next you should teach her about innuendo," P-21 observed dryly. Then he looked at me in concern, "I'm not sure exactly how that thing works, but be careful if you can."

"Heh…it's probably a nightmare phantasmagoria of blood and death, the way my luck's been." I touched the tip of my horn to the glowing orb and made the magic connection. The world faded to black...

oooOOOooo

Stars. They'd been a five letter word and a black page covered in white speckles in a history book I'd been too bored to really read. Now a million points of light filled the heavens above me. That was nothing compared to the moon: luminous and white like a polished bottle cap. Ugh, had I just used junk money to describe the moon? I had no poetry in my soul.

The lake before me looked as if it were a piece of the night sky: no scummy gray water, swampy weeds, or radigators fouling its flat peacefulness. The air was filled with the sweet smell of clean water and delicate fragrances I could only imagine were flowers. The unicorn mare I occupied fit so well I felt as if I myself were standing there. I wanted to taste that water and explore those sweet scents. Sadly, I could not, as she stood underneath a gazebo roof that hadn't yet been crushed by falling sky wagons.

I heard hoofsteps on the bridge to the shore and I felt her lips curl. "You're going back again, aren't you?"

"Ayep," a deep, mournful voice said softly. I felt him brush up against her flank, felt her body lean against his, her eyes closing as she took in his rich smell and felt his strong body beside hers.

"Isn't fifteen years of your life enough, Macintosh?" she asked softly, stroking her cheek against his neck.

"They need me," came his slow reply. "The Princess will be there. I think this might finally be over."

"Over... " She opened her eyes to look up at his powerful jaw and those soft yet so wonderfully strong eyes gazing down at her. "Will it ever really be over for you, Macintosh?"

He smiled and lowered his head to nuzzle me with shocking tenderness for so powerful a stallion. "Now that I've got you, I reckon so." Oh how I adored this…she adored…oh Goddesses, it was getting hard to tell where she ended and I began. "I gotta do this. For my sis. For all my friends I've lost. For the Princess. Heck, for you. Gold says the zebras respect me. If I'm there…maybe they'll be more likely to go for a ceasefire."

I felt her lean against him. "Then I guess you have to do it," she whispered. A soft sigh, and then she asked in a much firmer tone, "Have you told your sister about me?"

He jerked and gulped, "Well…um…she's busy…and…ah…"

"Big Macintosh! We've been together for a year and you still haven't told her?" I kicked his leg with a forehoof, but felt myself

smiling. He was far too strong for my hoof to hurt him.
"I'm sorry. I just hoped that if we were together long enough that she'd figger it out." He gave a sheepish smile. "I'll tell you what, Miss Maripony. When we're done at Shattered Hoof I'll hand over my resignation then and there…"
"And?" I felt myself arch a brow.
"And I'll tell my sister and everyone who this wonderful pony is…" he added as he lowered his head to my own.
"And?" I asked softly. He looked apprehensive for only a moment before he sighed.
"And…I'll tell 'em we got to start planning for a wedding."
I melted against him once again, kissing him and feeling him hold me. Finally, like trying to tear out my own heart, our lips parted. "Well…all right then," I whispered, tears running down my cheek. There were the sounds of a sky carriage approaching and landing by the house on the hillside beside the lake. "I've waited this long. I can wait a little bit more."
"I love you, Maripony," he whispered in my ear.
"I love you, Macintosh," I replied. We stood together like that for a moment or two longer, and then parted. I hadn't realized how cool the night was till I stood there alone beneath the stars. I listened to his fading footsteps across the bridge, glancing back to see him looking at me. Then he boarded the sky carriage.
Then my eyes closed and I felt my lips move; a whisper so soft that I could only make it out from the shapes of my lips.
You're going to be a father.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory at once, staring at the softly glowing curve beneath my horn. Love. It was like stars. I'd never seen it before, not like that. Not love so obvious it made my chest hurt. Glory and P-21 looked at me in concern. "You…are you all right, Blackjack?" P-21 asked.
Was I? I had no idea. Could I do anything without having my brain or emotions wrenched in an entirely new direction? I sat up, trying to sort my emotions into the correct holes. "Who was Macintosh?" I asked, looking at both of them.
"Did you sleep through *all* your classes?" P-21 asked with a still concerned frown. "Big Macintosh was the hero of the Equestrian

Army. He never became an officer, but he was pivotal right up to his death at the Shattered Hoof assassination attempt."

Assassination? Suddenly I remembered old Hoss's journal entries at the flooded field farmhouse. "He died saving Princess Celestia," I said as I looked back at the innocuous orb. "Did he have anyone?" They looked at me in confusion. "Did he have anyone? A family? A kid?" I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. "Somepony named Mari? Maripony maybe?"

"His younger sisters were Applejack and Apple Bloom…but other than that, no. I don't think so," Glory said as she shook her head.

Shit. Now I knew how to feel. Was there some sadistic being out there beyond the stars serving up a buffet of misery and regret for me to wallow through? No…I couldn't let myself start thinking that way. There was no way out of that hole.

"I'm sorry. I guess it was bad," Glory said softly in concern.

"No…" I said quietly. He'd died and left her alone with a child, completely forgotten by everypony. "It wasn't bad. It was wonderful." And that made it so very much worse. I closed my eyes as I walked out of the room to step outside and let the rain wash some of the sorrow away.

* * *

When I'd come in out of the rain, I shared what was on the memory with both of them. Surprisingly, P-21 looked more touched than Glory that the hero of Equestria had a love that never made it into the history books. I wondered why she had been forgotten. Had she remained silent, bearing a colt or filly free of the stain of that tragedy? Did she try and connect to Applejack? Had some editor just thought she wasn't worth printing? And, most pernicious of all, what had been her ultimate fate? Had she died beside that lake with Big Macintosh's child, the waters fouled by radioactive fallout as the world crashed around her?

I knew that I shouldn't care. She'd been gone more than two centuries. So why care about a pony that no longer existed? Was it vanity? Did I want somepony to remember Security two centuries from now? Was it loneliness, now that my world had gone from a stable of a few hundred to less than a half dozen ponies, and was I desperate to connect to somepony good? Somepony that could teach me about positive things in life? Just seeing Fluttershy's

statue had inspired me to do better. I needed to do better.

I watched the memory three more times, but there was nothing there but regret.

I'd like to say that in the morning the rain stopped. Actually, I'd like to say the rain stopped and for the first time I saw the moon and stars and maybe the sun too. The reality was the rain slacked up enough to travel, but drizzled enough to turn everything into wet muck. We were north of Ironshod R&D, but I wanted a good look around with P-21's binoculars. A hill rose to the west and I guessed that we might be able to see the Sunset Highway from the top. It'd be nice to find out just how many bounty hunters were on our tail.

The slope wasn't anything terrible and it was covered by patches of yellowing grass and thorn bushes. Still, the saturated ground sometimes slumped alarmingly underhoof as we made our way upwards. My PipBuck mapping tool chimed: Hill 255. Suddenly there was a metallic groan beneath us. The entire hillside started to slide out from underneath our hooves. Glory took to the skies as I wrapped my magic around P-21's leg and we scrambled to the side.

To my amazement a vast metal shape turned over as it breached the water-drenched surface. Slowly it came to a stop behind us, and I stared at the mud-slathered turret of a two-hundred-year-old tank. Around it and beneath it, poking from the slumping mud, were hundreds of rotten bones freed from the earth. Slowly, I swept my eyes across the field to the west of us. There rose the mountains, stark and sheer. North lay the lake; was it my imagination, or could I see the tiny remains of the gazebo from here? South I could make out the many wings of the Fluttershy hospital.

But immediately south and west lay only battlefield. Even two hundred years hadn't obscured the battle lines. Armored skeletons lay next to strangely graceful zebra weapons. I made out one large glowing crater southwest of the hill; it wasn't alone. Small lakes and ribbons of contaminated water lay everywhere; even atop the hill my radiation scanner ticked softly.

A ring of concrete crumbled at the top of the hill and I could make out something spray-painted on it: '*Take care of…*' but the rest had been lost to time. Taking out the binoculars, I scanned the terrain behind us.

"Wow…there's a lot of folks between here and Manehattan." I could see them moving like bugs along the two lines of asphalt

between the Boneyard and Megamart. South of us there seemed to be quite a few wandering eastward from the clinic. Past the clinic, though, it looked like most of the road was abandoned. I made out a few large rectangular buildings beside the winding highway. I smiled a little. “I think if we just skirt around the Fluttershy Clinic and keep our heads down we might be able to get past.” Then I noticed P-21 wasn’t listening as he looked down at the tank.

P-21 rubbed his chin thoughtfully with a hoof as he looked at the wreck now lying on its muddy treads. “Think we could get it working?”

“You want to fix the tank? It’s a two-hundred-year-old relic that’s been buried upside-down in a hill!” I said incredulously. Then I blinked and looked at Glory. “Think we could get it working?”

Thank Celestia the gray pegasus simply gaped at the wreck. “I wouldn’t have a clue where to begin!” Leaving the wreck and visions of rolling along in an armored war machine behind, we picked our way south. The PipBuck mapping function just labeled the entire battlefield as ‘No Pony’s Land’. Given the number of decaying zebra weapons and sets of armor, I’d say it was accurate.

I clicked on the radio, glad to have the music to cut some of the gloom. We didn’t have long to wait before the DJ -- Bottlecap had finally explained what a DJ actually was yesterday -- came on. “Can’t beat Sapphire Shores for sass and spunk. That was ‘Ain’t gonna hang my head’. Well, if you were listening earlier you probably heard Security Mare’s little declaration of war against Paradise Mall. It looks like Paradise has responded in kind by putting a big bounty on Security.

“Now I know times are tough. I know a number like that is bound to turn anypony’s head. But given where the money’s coming from I just gotta ask: what’s to stop ‘em from turning around the second you step out the door, taking the money back, and tossing your tail into Brimstone's Fall? Even if they do let you walk away, enjoy spending every day of your life keeping an eye out for bandits and slavers. Oh.” There was a shaking of paper and a conspicuous clearing of his throat, “And I got a little memo from the Tenpony Tower management: those caps count as raiding activity should you collect, so don’t plan to come here with ‘em.

“We’re never gonna do better if we kill everypony trying to do the right thing. Ponies selling ponies to ponies who work ponies to death is just wrong, no matter how you buck it. So with that in

mind," the music began again, "here is Sweetie Belle with 'Priceless'."

For the first time, I was starting to warm a little to the DJ. I had to agree, making me out to be a hero was annoyingly helpful, but it was good to hear anypony arguing against fifty thousand caps for my head. I just wish he'd got it right that it was Deus that made the bounty…though on second thought that bastard would probably enjoy it. It also explained why so many hunters were watching every inch between Megamart and Manehattan: if DJ Pon3 was in my corner, maybe I was running there now.

Somepony started shooting.

First, it wasn't any of us. Second, it wasn't at any of us. I relaxed as I took out the shotgun. The gunshots came from the south, and moving quickly I could make out lots of yellow bars on my EFS. Glory glided carefully between the hills as we came across a siege. A dozen ponies fired potshots at a bunker that returned fire through armored slits.

"Getcher tails outta there!" shouted a mustard brown pony in a battle saddle armed with two automatic rifles as we circled around behind them. "We're gonna skin ya for them brahmin ya eet!"

"Not a very convincing argument for them to get out," P-21 said as he glanced at me. "We could just go around and let them shoot it out."

That would be probably the smart idea. Unfortunately, I am not a smart pony. I moved up behind Assault Rifles and levitated out my baton. "Hey. What's up?" I asked brightly.

"Got a bunch o' them thieving Crusaders holed up in there. Ate three of our brahmin," Assault Rifles said as he scratched his pockmarked hide with a hoof. I might not have cared for his hygiene, but I had to admit that I liked the mirrored sunglasses he wore. Very snazzy.

"Twelve adults shooting at Crusaders?" I said incredulously.

"Yeah…well, it's our third brahmin they eet." He glanced at me and then at the door of the bunker.

"And you're sure it was these kids and not, say…a radigator or something else?" I said as suggestively as possible. Doubt flickered in his eyes as his scowl turned sourer.

"Well…I guess. Maybe," he muttered, and then he looked over at me. He lowered his glasses to stare at my barding. Then his eyes widened as dreams of avarice bloomed in his eyes.

“Don’t do it,” I warned, giving him the look, pressing the tip of the baton against his chin. “You won’t live to get your share.”

“Right. Well. Guess we might as well git outta the rain. Come on boys,” he said with a sickly grin. The other ponies gave a few more shots, but quickly they moved off into a clump, talking between themselves and looking back at me more and more.

“I’ve got a distinct feeling we’re going to have to fight them pretty soon,” P-21 said sourly as the mob moved further south. “That bunch is just screaming ‘ambush’ to me.”

“Then when they shoot first they can find out how bad an idea it is,” I said as I approached the door to the bunker. “You can come out, Crusaders. They’ve gone.”

The rifle shot against my barding told me they weren’t convinced. It stung like mad, but no penetration. The bars were still yellow, so I could only guess that that was a warning shot. I reached out with my magic and gave a hard yank on the muzzle. The rifle came flying out the slot in the door. “Hey! Not fair!” somepony protested inside.

There was some tense muttering inside and then one by one fillies and colts stepped into view. All wore the same cloak with the same patch on it. A chartreuse unicorn’s eyes widened at the sight of me. “Whoa…it’s Security.” A little bit of pride blossomed inside me. Then she turned to the other three, “If we take her out, we can get thousands and thousands of caps!” That pride shriveled and died and rotted in a pernicious cloud of decay.

If I had to kill Crusaders, I’d just put my head on a platter for Deus and give ‘em the full bounty.

“Don’t be an idjit, Medley,” a rose colt with magenta mane snapped. “She kills raiders by lookin’ at ‘em. Besides, she helped Boing’s band out of a pinch.”

“And got Scoots ate by ghoulies, Allegro,” a lackadaisical blue colt with a purple mane replied.

“And she got us outta a pinch too. Or you think them brahmin farmers were gonna just let us outta here?”

A purple filly with a silvery-white mane looked curiously at the patch on my barding. “And she’s a Crusader too.” She easily had to be the youngest of the four.

“What? No she isn’t, Sonata. She’s too old!” Medley said as she scowled at me, walking around to look at the Crusader patch. “Wha…what are you doing wearing our patch?” she demanded

crossly. “You’re old!” I wonder if she thought there was a certain age that the patch would just pop off.

“How old do I have to be before I can’t be a Crusader?” I asked her and she scowled, opened her mouth, then closed it again in confusion. “I do want to help the Crusaders if I can.”

“Well…don’t hear that often,” the rose colt said with a grin. “I’m Allegro. That’s my bro Adagio. Over there is Sonata. And the horn head is Medley.” He leaned towards me and added in a stage whisper, “Don’t worry about her. She’s a pill.”

“I am not!” she shouted back at them. “I just don’t think we should be nice to her. She got Scoodle eated!” Medley pointed an accusatory hoof at me.

I sighed, sitting down in front of the four. “I did. I was stupid. She tried to tell me what to do and I didn’t listen.” Medley’s scowl faded a little. “I thought she was stupid and frightened. I was stupid. I should have been frightened. If I would have died it would have been fair, but I didn’t. She did. For that I’ll always be sorry.” I could only hope that they’d believe me. I don’t think I could have fought them if they didn’t.

Medley frowned but looked away with a huff. The three earth ponies seemed to accept my apology. “It’s okay, miss. Ghoulies what don’t talk’ll munch most anypony,” Sonata said solemnly.

“So why were those ponies after you?” P-21 asked with a nod of his head in the direction the dozen ponies had taken towards the south.

“Oh, those lot think we’re poachin’ brahmin,” Allegro said with a snort. “We got one rifle and brahmin ain’t stupid! Well…not as stupid as radhog. But they got it out fer us. Bad blood and all.” He pointed a hoof towards the crater. “There’s a bunch o’ mutant critters livin’ in them old bunkers what got blowed up.”

“They’re dragons,” Adagio said lazily as he lay down next to the rose colored colt. “All mutanted up.”

“Dragons?” Glory said in alarm.

“Mutanted up.” The blue colt gave a slack grin, “Ain’t nearly so big and dumb as mud. They come out, snatch a brahmin that’s strayed, run back inta the rocks. Some breathe fire too. But Crusaders is easier than going huntin’ fer dragon critters.”

I looked to the south. “Are there a lot of ponies at this ranch?”

“The Stockyard? Oh yeah. Biggest town on Sunset till Flank,” Allegro supplied. “Twenty…thirty ponies?”

I didn’t want to have to add twenty or thirty ponies to my list. I

looked at P-21 and Glory. He sighed, “You want to go dragon hunting, don’t you?”

“If we don’t we might have to shoot our way through a whole bunch of ponies. I’d rather avoid it if I can.” I looked over at the Crusaders. “And besides, maybe we can patch up some of the…uh… bad blood?”

“Blackjack, do you even have a clue what we’re going against?” he asked plaintively, cocking his head.

“Yup,” I grinned as I sat with the Crusaders. “Dragons. Mutanted up.”

* * *

Okay. I admit it. I had no idea what I was facing. I didn’t know how tough they were or how many of them there were. All I knew was that for a change I had an option to help ponies instead of shooting them. That was what I was going to do. I didn’t want to die. I just wanted to do the right thing.

If these dragons turned out to be sentient and starving with a pitiful sob story…well, then I’d want to die. Till then…

The cave the dragon mutants lived in was a crevice in the ground that I almost fell into before spotting. Just to the south stretched the pasturelands and their brahmin. I could make out a few ponies with rifles, but either they hadn’t seen us or weren’t that fussed about us being on the north edge of their land. I loaded the shotgun with a drum of slugs and a second drum with black needle rounds and orange explosive rounds. I had no clue how tough the dragons’ hides would be. Just another reason why this was a bad idea.

I was going anyway of course.

I dropped carefully into the crevasse, sliding down ten or twenty feet. Glory carried P-21 down with her. I didn’t like him going in unarmed, but that was nothing new. Inside the crevasse my rad meter started to click. Glory deftly pulled three syringes from one of her many pockets and gave us each an injection. The clicking slowed to less worrisome levels. “Let’s go quick,” I said as I took the lead. As the light dimmed, my vision turned amber and the interior of the cave grew in sharp relief.

We didn’t have to go far. As we slid down a slope, my EFS lit up with eight or ten red bars. The first two picked over the bones of a slain brahmin. They were much smaller than I anticipated: barely

larger than foals. Their heads were flat and topped with wide staring eyes that glowed bright yellow. Sharp claws tipped their fingers and toes. Thank the Goddesses they didn't appear sentient at all, just dangerous.

Soon as I stepped around the corner they opened their toothy maws wide, hissed, and charged, gnashing their teeth ravenously. At such close range I hit S.A.T.S. and placed both shots right in the closest one's mouth. The buckshot easily took its head clean off. These things might look like dragons, but they weren't nearly as tough as in the stories.

Glory's beam pistols slammed into the other and the fourth soft beam 'krak' transformed it into a heap of popping ash. I chuckled, looking at P-21. "Piece of cake. These things aren't nearly as tough as dragons."

"Or they were babies!" Glory cried out, as from the tunnel emerged one twice the size of the first two. Its mouth looked large enough to bite me in half. Glory leaped up to a ledge a few feet higher as I tried to move to the side and find more room. The shotgun blasts did little to its hide and it bit down, grabbing me in its mouth. Its little forearms tried to tear through the barding as its teeth scraped against the steel plates.

"Stop chewing on me!" I yelled as S.A.T.S. recharged and I swapped out the baton. I levitated it right above the thing's head and targeted four blows, then released the spell. As resistant as the mutant was to bullets, its neck smashed just fine. On the fourth strike something in the dragon mutant snapped and it fell into a twitching heap.

Unfortunately, more were coming up the tunnel. I swapped drums, mourning the damage the specialty rounds would do to the weapon. Then I noticed P-21 sneaking closer to the dragons and tossing two mines out in the middle of their path. *Why was he carrying mines?* He fell back and covered his head as the first mine beeped, then the second a moment later. The explosions blew the legs off two leaders. "Yes!" I cheered at P-21, who now did all he could to disappear against the cave wall. I charged forward, screaming, grinning like a madmare as Glory nimbly sprang along the rock ledges above me. Her beam shots did little, but I'd take all the help I could right now.

S.A.T.S. let me target two shots to one mutant's chest. The first explosive round blew out a plate-sized circle and showered me with

shards of shell. The second shot fired a hoof-sized spread of the finned darts into the hole. Blood sprayed from the creature's chest wound and mouth as the flechettes tumbled through its meaty interior and shredded vulnerable organs. Maybe it was just luck, but the dragon mutant went down in a heap.

With no time for S.A.T.S., we wore down the sixth dragon through a barrage of shots. It died messily; I was plenty beaten and bruised under my barding. I definitely owed Keystone for upgrading it. I slugged down a healing potion and then turned to look coolly at P-21. "Okay, Mr. I-don't-trust-myself-with-guns. What are you doing with mines?"

He shifted a little in embarrassment. "Well they're not guns, are they?" He opened his saddlebag to show a number of the round tins. And some grenades. And round sticks tipped with brass caps.

"What are these?" I asked as I lifted one out, casually flipping off the brass cap as I did so. It instantly started to hiss and smoke. *Oh that can't be good.*

"Toss it! Toss it!" P-21 shouted, diving for the ground. I threw it as hard as I could down the tunnel. The boom was both sharper and quieter than the detonation of a grenade. He firmly closed his saddlebags. "It's called dynamite; as explosive as a grenade, but a lot cheaper."

"Right. Pop the top, throw. Simple enough." I found myself unsurprisingly unnerved by the explosives. "So why are you carrying them again?"

"Because I'm sick of being useless," he replied sharply, closing his eyes, pressing his lips together. "I still don't like firearms, but explosives take more…deliberation. It's harder than just pulling a trigger. So I think I'm safer with them."

He's safer with explosives than with something that puts a nice, neat hole in things? Why did that not make me feel better? "Well… please don't blow us up, okay?" He nodded. I still didn't feel much better!

"We'd better hurry," Glory said as she landed beside us. My rad meter now crept into yellow.

I could still make out two or three further in. Theoretically we could have taken one corpse, left, and said 'Huzzah, proof!' but it'd be head and hooves better if we could say 'Huzzah, they're all dead! Please don't shoot at me for the bounty.' So without further ado we moved forward as quietly as we were able. The path sloped

downwards and after several twists and turns disappeared into a hole in a concrete wall. Inside was a bunker of some sort, half filled with rubble and numerous crates and containers. Most of them were all manner of smashed, but a few looked intact. Of more immediate concern was the beast charging at us.

Glory immediately took to the air and began strafing maneuvers while I stepped forward with S.A.T.S. ready. Then I noticed a stick of dynamite fly over my head and directly into the path of the mutant dragon. My mane rose on end, but the detonation sent the charging monster sprawling on its face. I glanced back at P-21 with a wide-eyed look; clearly this would take a lot of getting used to! With S.A.T.S., I finished off the torso. I winced at how loose the feed felt as I reloaded.

Some of my luck must have rubbed off on Glory because one of her beam pistols neatly incinerated the remaining dragon mutant. She landed beside me. “That it?”

No…actually it wasn’t. There was one red bar remaining in the room, but all that lay in that direction was a big heap of rubble. Then I cocked my head and groaned softly, “Aww…fuck me…”

The rubble shifted and rolled, and from behind it stirred a gray shape even larger than the ones we’d just finished off. I watched in horror as it climbed out of a depression in the floor; this was clearly much more dragon than mutant. The creature's back legs had atrophied almost to nothing, but its swollen forelimbs were more than capable of dragging its hulking mass over the ground. It let out a mindless shriek and opened its maw wide to spray flame across the three of us. We managed to jump behind the cover of some storage crates, but there was definitely some scorched mane smell in the air.

“Okay. Beam guns. Shotgun. Explosives. What sounds best against a dragon?” I asked, looking from one to the other with wide, bulging eyes.

“I don’t think I have a bomb big enough. Even all my bombs!” P-21 shouted.

It was crawling towards us, making the bunker shake and sending rocks and pebbles raining down on us. I looked up. The ceiling was a mess of cracks and gaps. I grinned. “Wanna do something stupid?”

P-21’s mouth hung open for a second. “Sure! Why not?” he said, throwing his hooves up in a shrug.

“Use those explosives of yours to bring the roof down.”

“On top of us?” Glory said, her eyes wide with shock.

“There’s more of him than us,” I pointed out as her brows furrowed together.

P-21 looked at where the cracks snaked down the walls. “I’ll need some time. These bombs will have to be deliberate.” He reached into his barding, drew a syringe of Med-X, and jammed it into the side of his leg through the brace straps. Then he sighed and…pulled out a magazine?

“You’re reading *now*?!” I shouted as I saw the dragon was coming after us. The magazine seemed to have something to do with explosives.

“I am if you want this to work!” he shouted, not taking his eyes off the diagrams of the article. “Keep it busy!”

“I love when a plan comes together. Let’s do this!” I shouted and ran out to the side, ejecting the drum with explosive rounds, snagging it, and taking out an empty drum. As I raced ahead of the spewing flame, a stream of green-banded rounds slipped into the drum.

I saved S.A.T.S. and shouted, “Go for the eyes, Glory!” I went for everything else. I began to fire the green rounds. They didn’t penetrate in the slightest. Instead, green gunk spread over its limbs, then flared bright green and sank through the thick hide. The dragon lurched, now looking a bit ill as the toxic rounds went to work. I had no idea if their effect was cumulative, but it seemed to slow and disorient the beastie as P-21 raced around the edge of the room.

“Hey! Hey dragon! Hey! Yo ugly!” I shouted and shrieked as I kept light on my hooves. Glory buzzed around, her battle saddle strafing him with little effect. The dragon’s mouth opened wide, and she tucked almost into a ball to avoid being bitten in half. Me? I had to worry about a tail thicker than I was snapping out and sweeping around. Unfortunately, even though I dodged it, it created a wave of debris that swept me off my hooves.

Come on, P-21!

“Blackjack!” he shouted from the crevice leading out. I dared to take my eyes off the dragon long enough to see the dynamite he’d stuffed into the cracks.

“Get out, Glory,” I yelled as I focused my horn. Trying to flick a brass cap off a stick of dynamite from across a room while a dragon wanted to pulp me wasn’t exactly easy. I holstered the shotgun and

raced around the perimeter of the room ahead of another massive tail sweep. Every cluster of dynamite I passed, my magic swept out and popped off a half dozen caps.

The debris carried by its tail caught me just as I finished arming the last row of caps. Knocked off my hooves again, I rolled along with the dented crates and hunks of mutant dragon spawn. BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Suddenly the air filled with dirt and rock as the cracks gave way and the other half of the bunker fell in. I found myself crouched in the tiny gap between a block of concrete rubble and a heavy steel crate. Clouds rolled overhead and rain trickled in. A half dozen farm ponies poked their heads over the edge, looking down at me laughing like crazy.

Then the dragon got out.

Okay. Not completely out. I should have been clued in when I saw it slept underneath these armored crates. But it was definitely not going to stay pinned long.

"P-21! Grenade!" I yelled as I rose to my hooves. Wooo…not steady. No time for that. I hit S.A.T.S. but this time I queued up a little improvisation. The first attack involved a six foot piece of rebar. I had so much radiation poisoning my vision was perfect and the jagged metal pierced its eye like a knife. Steaming yellow mung immediately spurted out as the second attack triggered. P-21 pulled out a grenade and tossed it towards me. I flicked off the stem of the grenade and magically plunged it deep into the eye.

The blast covered me head to toe in mutant dragon eye gunk.

It also didn't kill the dragon.

Of course it didn't fucking kill the dragon!

"Die! Die! Die!" I screamed as it worked itself free and I charged towards its snapping head. Luck kept me from being bitten in two as it spasmed. I leaped into the hollowed-out eye socket and jammed the muzzle of my shotgun into the tiny bloody hole in the back of the eye cavity. Round after poisoned round deposited the toxin directly into its brain. It reared up, clawed at the wound, then gave one last shudder and collapsed.

Slowly I stepped out of the dragon's skull. Blood and yellow vitreous fluids dripped from my security barding. My eyes glowed like mining lamps as I looked up at the farmers and Crusaders with a wide grin. "Now who wants to try and collect on that bounty?" I yelled up at them, waving my steaming shotgun overhead and laughing wildly into the rain.

There weren't any takers. Honestly, P-21 could have finished me off with three hooves tied behind his back. The dragon, curiously enough, had been the source of the radiation in the cave. Seems crawling into the irradiated body cavity of a dragon was as smart as climbing into a barrelful of magic waste. When I emerged I was radsick. Oh sweet Celestia I had radiation oozing out of every hole. I felt like I could piss balefire at that moment. I wondered if it'd be better to just keel over dead or try out ghouldom.

Fortunately, Stockyard had their own medic. Okay. She was a vet. At this point I'd take medical care from Deus. Her local remedy of brahmin milk, RadAway, and Rad-X along with a healing potion did the trick. Okay. It got me off death's door, and stopped the more embarrassing side effects of radiation poisoning before I was shitting myself. A plus. Really. I was also fairly sure that once word of this got around I wouldn't have to deal with swarms of poor desperate ponies.

I really didn't want to deal with killing poor desperate ponies. Sweet Celestia, please don't make me have to kill poor desperate ponies!

Roundup, the buck with the assault rifles from earlier, was apparently the leader of Stockyard and gave some mutters of thanks, along with some apologetic sounding words to the Crusaders. Then he told me to leave. Given that he wasn't trying to shoot me in the back, I considered this a fair enough trade. I did make one small demand. I took his snazzy mirrored sunglasses and slipped them over my glowing eyes. "Thanks, Boss," I said as the seven of us continued down the road.

* * *

"Then she was like 'Die die die!' and the dragon was all like ROAR and she was all 'Who wants some!' and they were all like 'not me' and that was so awesome!" Sonata shrieked as she bounced in glee around me on the tips of her hooves. Clearly the event of her life. Adagio hummed along with Sapphire Shores on the radio.

"We know, Sonata. We were there, remember?" The chartreuse unicorn certainly hadn't repeated that if they turned me in they'd have enough caps to swim in. Now that my body was far less radioactive, I had to admit that the fight with those dragon critters hadn't gone that badly. I may have been battered and bruised, but I

hadn't gotten burned or munched.

"You know, I got to wonder…how'd you four hear about the bounty? It's only been two days." I couldn't believe word got out that fast.

"Oh. Redbeard was going on about it on Paradise Radio. You can pick it up this far south," Allegro said as he pointed at my PipBuck. "Gotta warn ya, he's a bit o' a jerk. We just listen ta him 'cause sometimes he'll talk about a big score. We make sure we ain't tha score."

I frowned and switched channels, getting a sigh of disappointment from Adagio. After two channel changes there was a sharp crackle, and then a buck's harsh and grating voice filled my ears. It sounded like the voice of a rusty bucket. "…know what I think? I think it's a scam, that's what I think. We've got it pretty good around the Hoof. We got better tech, better food, better water, better everything. In bad times we're on top. So what does Tenpony do? They dig up some cunt, dress her up, and send her here to stir up trouble. We already got Enclave poking their snouts where they don't belong. We got Steel Raiders…oh, sorry. Rangers…threatening to blow up half the city. One outsider after the next coming here stirring up trouble.

"And now Security. Either she's a Manehattan thug with an itchy trigger horn, or she's one of these brain-damaged stable ponies now out in the wide world and can't help but fuck with us. This is our home! Our lives! She butchered Roses's group, smashed her horn clean off, and then gave her a five second head start before siccing the goons on her. Oh, yeah, Security is all up in arms against bad things happening to ponies, unless you're the pony she doesn't like. Then she doesn't give a fuck about you! That's why I'm glad Usury didn't just back Deus's bounty but matched it. The sooner this hypocrite is out of our manes, the better. So, someone put Security to rest and collect yourselves a hundred thousand caps. Or, better yet, give her skanky ass to Deus and double that! What do you say? What do you fucking say?!" The sound of cheering and stomping hooves answered him.

I switched the radio off, feeling like I was going to be sick. Okay. I hadn't expected that. I'd thought that DJ Pon3 was bad enough. "Two hundred thousand caps…"

"Yeah. That's pretty amazing actually," Adagio said lazily. "I thought that 10k for Bill the Slasherpony was a lot, but that's

nothing."

Honestly, I had no idea how many monsters I could kill that would be a deterrent for desperate ponies after my head. Ponies after a lucky shot. Ponies who'd kill me in my sleep. Worse…I had to agree with him. If you were red on my PipBuck, there was no mercy or consideration. I'd basically threatened every slaver with death, but like Roses had said: she had a kid.

Then P-21 smacked the back of my head. Hard. I hissed, hugging my throbbing skull. "What'd you do that for?"

He rounded and looked me square in the eyes. "I know that look. I'd rather not have you pass out again." His blue eyes narrowed, "What was Miss Roses doing when you 'butchered' her group?"

"She was…slaving?"

"As I recall, she was trying to kill you, Blackjack. Remember that machine gun? But yeah, she was slaving too," he said with a huff, sitting in my path. "So to review, she was trying to kill you while slaving. Do you think when she started that career she was aware that maybe somepony might kill her for that? Or did somepony issue some sort of slaving license to her that makes her immune?"

"Actually, Paradise does that. Slavers ain't allowed to shoot slavers what have a Paradise license," Medley offered with a smile. She received a number of dirty looks and the unicorn filly gave an injured, "What? They do!"

P-21 took a deep breath. "Right. So unless you started working for Paradise slavers, you have no reason to blame yourself for any of that. You are not responsible for the grief and blood that others bring on themselves by being greedy, cruel, or stupid."

"I don't want to kill ponies that just want a better life."

"I do! Especially if the way they're trying to get that better life is by killing my friends!" he shouted at me. "Anypony that takes a shot at us has forfeited any right to live, Blackjack. You have got to learn this!"

"No!" I shouted back. "I can't do that! I can't just kill somepony because they're red on my PipBuck." I took a step back, trying to get my heart and breathing under control. "If somepony comes after me…I kill them if I have to. If I can get away…or scare them off… or something... 'Red is dead' can't be my first option, P-21!"

He covered his face with his hoof, shaking his head. When he lowered it, he wore a small smile. "You are absolutely amazing, you know that?"

"Comes from being stupid," I countered lamely, pawing at the cracked asphalt with my hoof. "So…um…I'm your friend?" I gave the smallest smile of my own.

He coughed, eyes going wide as he rubbed the back of his head with a hoof. "I don't know a word for a pony that drives me crazy with her stubbornness and refusal to use basic common sense. If that's a friend, then that's exactly what you are."

I heard a crunch and looked over at the Crusaders and Glory sitting in a row. Allegro had pulled out a box of two-hundred-year-stale popcorn and munched it. The pegasus was red from ear to throat as she stared at us. "Just kiss her already!" Medley shouted.

We glanced at each other and I started to laugh as P-21 stammered and then snapped, "Oh, shut up!" Somehow that made it all the funnier. So, I finally had a friend. I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to tell Watcher.

* * *

Medley shrieked as the buck ploughed into her over and over again. Sonata just whimpered with every shove as she took it like a broken doll. Adagio curled up as he was stomped again and again till bones cracked, skin split, organs spilled... Allegro tried to fight. Out came the knives as they started to carve him into pieces. Glory screamed as they pulled her wings clear off and then fell over in a bloody heap as they proceeded to mount her as well. P-21's severed head lay beside me as he muttered, "Should have fought 'em, Blackjack. Them or us."

I screamed as I felt Deus pin me beneath him and with one shove rip me in two.

My eyes opened as I lay in the darkness of the culvert, listening to the gurgle of water flowing beneath the platform built in the middle of the concrete pipe. Four mattresses lay in a row; they smelled a bit like mildew, but they were more comfortable than the ground. It took me several minutes to get my breathing slowed enough to look over at the sleeping forms of the Crusaders and P-21. My hooves trembled slightly as I unzipped my duffel and took out one of Keystone's parting gifts: a bottle of whiskey.

I carefully undid the top and sipped some down. Not enough to get drunk, I hoped, but enough to put a little warmth in my stomach and steady my legs. One more sip for luck, and then I put the bottle

back in the duffel. I didn't want to wake everypony putting the security barding back on, so I simply seized the baton. Then I carefully walked towards the edge of the culvert to climb up to where Glory was keeping watch.

"I don't get her. I don't understand her behavior at all." I heard her voice from above. Looking up, even with the glasses, I could see her in my amber sight lying perfectly on the edge of the bridge. "She can be obtuse, vulgar, and obscene in one moment and then in the next she's kind, laughing, and more noble than any pony I know. She killed children one day and saves them the next. Is it some kind of dissociative identity disorder, or can a pony actually survive being torn in two directions so severely?

"Her companion is equally inscrutable. More of a realist, perhaps; it's clear he's dealt with far more long-term psychological trauma. It seems to have helped him adapt to the realities of the Wasteland better than she or I have. His insistence on deliberate self-control is remarkable, but I worry about its source. Unlike Security, he doesn't seem fixated on some ideal self-standard but instead has a deeply repressed rage kept contained. I think he's right to not want a gun."

I carefully moved up the slope and saw her talking into a small device between her forelegs. "And me…have I adapted at all? I still operate inside a bubble of terror. I feel like if I leave her presence I'll be trapped under the floor once again. I'm in a constant state of anxiety. She throws herself in harm's way with almost suicidal eagerness; I'd likely have died many times had she not. When I came here, I expected savagery, not protectiveness. I have to do something." Her mouth lowered as she whispered softly into the device.

I smiled and backed away down the slope to the mouth of the culvert, coughed, and climbed up the slope with much more noise. When I reached the road again, the device was gone. "Hello Blackjack. What are you doing up? Your watch doesn't begin for an hour."

I stood there for a moment, staring out into the still night before answering, "Had to take a leak. I doubt I'll get back to sleep now." I looked at her with a smile. "Why don't you go tuck in early? You look a bit spent."

She looked concerned, but then nodded. "All right. Good night." She hopped onto the edge of the bridge.

"Glory?" She froze. "I got to wonder…we friends?"

She looked back at me, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly before she gave a little worried frown. Finally she showed a shy smile. “I’d like to think so.” Then she gracefully leaped off the edge and disappeared into the concrete pipe beneath the road.

“Yeah. Me too,” I said softly as I looked up the road in the direction we’d come.

Five red bars slowly approached. I twirled the baton in my magic grip. I saw them trying to sneak along the road towards our camp. Trotting in the middle of the road, I approached them instead. Two unicorns. Three earth ponies. A shotgun, a rifle, a pipe, a shovel, and a pitchfork. Exactly the kind of ponies I didn’t want to fight. I tapped the baton against the cracked asphalt. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“Make it easy then. Come with us nice and quiet. Your bounty will go a long way helping the Stockyard,” the unicorn mare with the shotgun said softly.

I asked curiously, “You ever lose someone to slavers?”

“We’ve all lost someone, Security. Except you, it seems.”

I sighed softly as I closed my eyes. “Yeah. I guess you’re right.” Who had I lost? I heard them moving closer.

When I opened my eyes, S.A.T.S. activated and out came the baton. In slow motion it swung down before me. The unicorn tried to use her shotgun as a shield, but she wasn’t my target. The baton smashed into the upraised gun once…twice…and it tumbled away in two halves. The third swing brought the baton around upwards, connecting with the other unicorn’s levitating rifle and knocking it skyward. Coming out of S.A.T.S., I battered the weapon with two more swings, glad when the magazine was dislodged with a metallic crunching noise. The unicorn pulled the trigger wildly, but it merely clicked.

The other three moved, trying to ponypile on me. I knelt and tagged one on the face with a double hoof kick as my magic swept the baton low in front of me. Legs buckled and folded as the joints gave way to my swing. I kept moving, light on my hooves as I swung the baton. When S.A.T.S. recharged I unloaded one strike each per opponent rather than simply beating in one skull after the next. I raised both front hooves and blocked the shovel with my PipBuck, glad for the reinforced casing, and then brought my baton up smartly between his legs. He dropped his weapon, but I got a pitchfork in the ass for my trouble.

I telekinetically grabbed the end of the prong, pulled it out, and gave the whole pitchfork a hard twist. The wielder's jaw cracked like a gunshot. Shotgun mare grabbed the shovel with her magic and tried to stab me with the sharpened tip. The baton popped up in my own glowing magic grip, deflecting the implement up as I ducked beneath it and body slammed her to the ground.

"I!" Kick. "Do not!" Stomp. "Want to fight!" Ram. "You!" I finished as I stood over her. Then I realized she wasn't breathing. Oh sweet Goddesses. Not again! "Glory!" I screamed as the other four backed away.

The gray pegasus dropped from the night sky, beam pistols ready as she landed. P-21 emerged from the gloom with a grenade in his mouth as he looked at the remaining four and slowly shook his head. Glory at once started to pull out equipment. She administered a healing potion, and then pulled out two small talismans on wires connected to a spark battery. "Get back," she told me as she connected one talisman to the fallen unicorn's horn and the other to her cutie mark: a brahmin, curiously enough. There was a crackle and a rainbow light shot through her as she was revived by the spell.

"She just killed you," Glory said quietly to the gasping unicorn. "And she just saved your life. Leave her alone now, please. She's got better things to do than beat up farm ponies after a quick cap."

The unicorn mare staggered to her feet and the other four battered ponies together started their way back towards Stockyard. "Thank you," I muttered.

"I knew something was wrong. Those five must have been waiting till your shift. You saw them, didn't you?" She gestured to my PipBuck. I nodded. Glory looked down at me and said softly, "We're friends, right?"

"I'd like to think so," I replied softly.

"Then don't do that again. Understand?" Glory said firmly. "Friends let friends help them, even against themselves." Morning Glory then crouched and the petite pegasus leaped into the air, flying back into the culvert.

I sighed, noting that she hadn't given me a healing potion for my own injuries. I looked at P-21. "Your turn?"

He just thought a moment and spat the grenade back into his saddlebags. "Nah. I think she covered it." He started back towards the culvert. "No offense, Blackjack, but sometimes you really *aren't*

a smart pony.”

I groaned and flopped on my back, my butt throbbing as I covered my eyes with my hooves. “Tell me about it.”

Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Melee (50)

New Perk: Rad Resistance - You resist 20% of radiation exposure. This makes you 20% cooler!

Chapter 9: Stone

"There was no talking. There was no smiling. There were only rocks."

I was not a smart pony. I'd said it before. Others knew it. I was impulsive. Immature. Reckless. I knew two very smart ponies, though. P-21 taught himself to pick locks and hack terminals when he wasn't even supposed to be allowed to read. He somehow convinced Duct Tape to break just about every rule for fraternization and teach him the skills he'd need to eventually escape from the stable.

Morning Glory was a medical technician of the Enclave. She was younger than me, and she was already working for the only ponies who seemed capable of designing anything new. She could discern injuries and administer drugs at the drop of a feather. She'd even begun researching reasons behind the mental degradation and psychotic tendencies of raiders by analyzing their brains.

Me? I shot things. It wasn't not an intellectually demanding job. In fact, I was pretty sure it was based on one of the top three most common skillsets in the Wasteland. It involved a steady horn, a wanton disregard for personal injury, and lots of ammunition. And when shooting things was insufficient, I swapped to bashing things with a heavy metal stick. The effectiveness of both methods varied greatly from situation to situation. For instance, when I'd ignored the warnings of a young filly, both proved woefully inadequate in preventing her from being torn in two.

So I had come to accept that I was not nor would ever be a smart pony. Thus, when P-21 and Glory stated that I was an absolute idiot facing down five farm ponies almost unarmed and unarmored, I could only conclude that they were right. When they elaborated that I should have involved them because my safety mattered to them, I likewise could only assume that they knew something I didn't.

There was just one catch. It seemed that with two events I had somehow ended up with a rather gargantuan bounty on my head. The simple act of cutting my head and PipBuck off and presenting them to one Reaper named Deus would earn a staggering amount of wealth. Capturing me alive would double that amount, presumably so that Deus could take his time torturing me and violating my anus. He was that kind of pony.

P-21 would have me kill any and all would-be bounty claimants. By attempting to take my life, he assured me, they'd forfeited theirs. Eye for an eye. Hoof for a hoof. Everypony ending up blind and lame. I couldn't do it. Those five ponies weren't Deus. They weren't monsters. They had a need for the money, same as anypony. I could have killed them easily. Playing it back in my head, it wouldn't have taken much. They'd hoped to take me unawares and alone. A lucky shot in the night.

Was I wrong to let them live?

Morning Glory was put out with me for quite another reason. In facing said threats alone, I had somehow violated one of the tenets of friendship. One of us faced a threat, we all faced it. That was apparently a rule of friendship. Trying to protect her was wrong. Better she stood beside me like she had fighting the dragon mutants. She wanted to be there when I fought monsters. When I faced down bounty hunters. When I murdered a roomful of traumatized children.

Didn't she realize I wasn't a good pony? I wasn't a hero. I was just trying to do better because everywhere I looked I saw things getting worse and worse and the only thing that made any sense was trying to make it better. Old Hoss said that Big Macintosh was a hero because he would have given his life for anypony. I sometimes wondered if I could turn in the bounty on myself and split the proceeds among the Crusaders, P-21, and Glory.

She was going to get hurt if she stayed with me. Hurt very badly.

To top it all off, I had a mystery inside my PipBuck. A computer file that was apparently so valuable that my stable had been raided to retrieve it. It was encrypted. Finding out just what it was supposed to do was going to be likewise very expensive, yet it was the only reliable chance I had short of trusting the Enclave, which I wasn't ready to do.

At the moment, though, none of that mattered a damn as I sat in 'detention' in a classroom on the second floor of the Roosehoof

Academy library building with P-21, Glory, and the Crusaders. We'd found the academy under 'lockdown'. I didn't want to speculate on what had happened to any students caught in the lockdown two hundred years ago, but at least there weren't a lot of bones in the classrooms. Robronco sentries patrolled the academy perimeter, and so far no bounty hunters had faced the metallic protectors.

The seven of us had stumbled onto the grounds and been ordered to report to the office or face immediate vaporization. I had to admit, I considered the shooting option first and second. But the fact was that the academy buildings were the closest and largest structures to Brimstone's Fall, and if we started shooting it'd not only draw attention but also take away a layer of protection I could use right now. The seven of us had been taken in to see 'Acting Dean Hardy', one of the spidery levitating-style robots.

The office was a complete disaster area, which was actually pretty typical given that Equestria as a whole was a complete disaster area. A skeleton lay in the corner with a bullet hole through its skull. "Please explain why you are breaking lockdown procedures, Miss…" A buzz, click, whirr, and beep. I looked down at some of the yellowed papers on the desk, scanning them for a name.

"Marigold," I supplied, and seizing on a sudden whim I threw my hooves around P-21, who went stiff as rock. "I was just looking for some alone time with my buckfriend…" A glance at the page. "Um…Sureshot? Please don't call my mom." Because she was in a stable and I was pretty sure she'd be miffed if she had to come pick me up from school.

More clicks and beeps. "Miss Marigold, this is the third infraction for fraternizing with male students you've made within two hundred and -bzzzt- years. I'm afraid I have no choice but to contact your parents and have you all report for lunch detention in the library for the duration of the lockdown."

"Yes, Dean Hardy," I said as adolescently as possible. "Can we at least go to our rooms and get our homework?"

The dean beeped as his camera swung from one of us to the next. "Very well. Please carry your hall passes with you at all times or risk vaporization." He reached into the drawer of the dean's desk and withdrew a stack of faded faded paper cards covered in yellowing lamination. Each one hung from a lanyard and still had a faintly glowing glyph stamped on it. "Now please report to detention in room 203 of the library."

Thus the seven of us became the newest students of Roosehoof Academy. “That was brilliant!” Glory gushed as we trotted by Robronco sentries urging us to get to class. “How did you think of that?”

“Do you have any idea how much time I spent in detention?” I asked her with a grin.

“Oh!” Suddenly she went red.

I blinked at her and then grinned. “Let me guess: your first time?”

“Well…yes,” she admitted.

I put a hoof around her neck and pulled her close, grinning at her. “Well then, let me give you some advice. Always sit in the back row. Always pass on notes. If the teacher asks what you’re doing, the answer is ‘working’, not ‘studying’. Oh, and remember: you have a bladder the size of a pea.”

“You really were in detention a lot,” Glory muttered with some worry as I lowered my hoof. She looked over at P-21. “You were probably a much more diligent student,” she said to him. I winced. Please don’t bite her head off, I silently begged.

Thankfully, he was in one of his more wistful moods as he looked at the decaying library. “No. But I would have been,” he said as he looked down at a textbook showing two red-striped zebras. I thought they looked a bit like hooved candy canes myself. I looked at the caption beneath. ‘The Proditor, or ‘traitors’ in the zebra tongue, were those few zebras willing and allowed to fight for Equestria against their own kind. Using talismans to permanently alter their stripe color, they fought with distinction until being phased out due to security concerns after the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge.’

I noticed the Crusaders were looking a bit nervous. “What’s up?” I asked them. “First day of school jitters?”

“No,” Allegro protested, trying to look tough.

“It’s just…” Adagio muttered, “…there’s supposed to be ghosts here.”

I would have laughed, but then again I laughed when Scoodle had seemed afraid in the boneyard. Not again. Besides, with the Wasteland, who knew what you might run into? “Well. If there are, they’ll have to get through me first!” I replied. Sonata looked a little more at ease, at least.

Using their hall passes, P-21, Glory, and the Crusaders dispersed from the classroom and set about looting anything edible,

drinkable, or medical they could get their hooves on. If they found an armory here, well... that'd just show how hardcore Cheerilee made education prior to the bombs going off. This left me alone in the second floor of the library and looking out at Brimstone's Fall. And we were doomed because I was going to have to come up with a plan. Me. The not a smart pony.

Brimstone's Fall wasn't much to look at, really; just a round, jagged hole punched in the badlands' surface. It had been a gemstone mine. Then, during the height of the war, a dragon had fallen right on top of the mine workings. The 'Shadowbolts' pegasus strike force, along with heavy ground support, slew a powerful dragon allied with the zebras, but hundreds of soldiers had died before the dragon perished. I knew all of this because there was a framed news article hanging next to the window.

In two hundred years it hadn't changed much. It lay right beside rail lines stretching to the southwest, towards Fillydelphia. On the surface were a large administration building and two long barracks-style houses. Since I didn't see any slaves, I assumed that they had to be quartered underground. Two nested chain link fences topped by razor wire surrounded the hole and the three buildings, with a guarded hoof bridge built over the rail spurs where they passed through the fences. A chain link gate blocked the space under the bridge. Maybe we could find--

What the fuck? I stopped and stared at the corner of the room. Had something just moved? One of the Crusaders playing a trick on me? My mind finally cracking? Slowly, I rose to my hooves and checked my E.F.S. Nothing. My eyes scanned the room thoroughly, mane itching like crazy. "Huh…" I muttered. Nothing at all.

Bullshit. In the Wasteland it's never *nothing*. I put my back to the wall until the others returned. It happened again; I'd swear that I'd seen some dingy papers shift on their own right before the six entered the room. I rubbed my eyes, but then the others were inside. "You okay? You look spooked," P-21 said concernedly before he tossed me a Sparkle-Cola.

I caught it with my magic and deftly popped the top. It was warm, but it was Sparkle-Cola. "Yeah. Just trying to figure out how to get in there," I said as I scanned the mine once again for some chink in their defenses. The guards moved in threes and fours. There wasn't the slightest bit of cover to use to approach from the ground. And then there were the neighbors. Along the highway between the

mine and the road was a strip mall. Most of the shops seemed more or less intact and there was a large gathering of ponies there. At least twenty or so. “Allegro? Who’re they?”

He trotted to the window and I held the binoculars for him. “Oh, them. Pecos. They’re just a gang outta Flank. Not as crazy as raiders. They usually work protection for the slavers.”

Great. Between the Pecos and the slavers I was looking at forty or fifty enemies. “They’re not slavers?”

Medley huffed, “I told you but no one listens to me. Slavers gots ta have a license outta Paradise to be slavers. Otherwise they’d just make slaves of each other. The licenses are, like, super expensive.”

“Explains why they could afford my bounty,” I said as I pursed my lips. Then I frowned as I watched a train come out of the mine. It was only four cars, which were being hauled by a dozen slaves as a slaver liberally lashed them with a whip. To my amazement, I saw several zebras among the slaves! I supposed slavers couldn’t be choosers. The train slowed to a crawl as it passed under the bridge, the guards above sweeping their weapons while two ponies checked beneath for escapees. Once past the checkpoint, the train started to crawl towards Hoofington.

“Where are they going?” I asked.

“Tracks lead to the tunnels. Ain’t safe down there. Ghouls and worse. Not sure where they go past that,” Allegro said with his own curious frown. I chewed on a hoof as I looked down at the strip mall again. If I attacked the mine, then the Pecos would reinforce the slaver guards. If I attacked the Pecos and lived, then the mine would be alert. I looked from pony to pony. They all wore cowpony hats and leather jackets with some twister or tornado patch on the back. Better yet, this gang was co-ed.

I smirked. “Hey, P-21. Think you can sneak down there and snag me a hat and jacket?”

“Why? What are you planning?” he asked with a frown.

Something not too smart. “Well, if we’re going to be stuck in detention all day, at least one of us needs to be in a gang.”

* * *

It took P-21 quite some time to get the garments I needed. That was fine. I asked the Crusaders for every bit of trivia on the Pecos I could; the gang had muscle, pride, ambition, and not much else

going for it. Not quite a joke, but definitely a long way from the top of the gang food chain. The sun was just starting to set when the train returned. Lots of empty boxes and crates; apparently the trade was all one way. Did the gems go back to Paradise, or somewhere else?

As I waited, Glory and the Crusaders went to look for more supplies. That left me alone with my thoughts. The plan wasn't quite together yet. I wanted the slavers out of operation, but niggling questions kept popping up. What'd stop another band from returning to the mines? I could blow the mines, assuming P-21 had the skills and the mine had the dynamite. What about the slaves that had nowhere to go? Sending them to Stockyard was hardly a sure bet, and sending them anywhere else would be making them bait for raiders or more slavers.

And I was not alone. I could feel it. My mane went nuts as I slowly looked around the room once more. I couldn't see anything. I couldn't hear anything. I still didn't think I was alone. I rose to my hooves, looking at the overturned desks, the bookshelves and cubbies. The teacher's desk. The teacher's desk…I trotted over to stand right in front of it with a small frown. My horn glowed as I shoved the large desk back against the wall as hard as I could.

Something shimmered faintly as hooves clattered on the teacher's desk top. Then a long, thin rifle barrel appeared from thin air, pressing right against my forehead. This close, I could make out the faintest of blurs in the air. "Hey. You've had hours to shoot me in the back. So what's up?"

No response, and that rifle continued to press just underneath my horn. I didn't blink, and somehow I doubted they did either. Then there was a blue flash and a shimmering gray cloak appeared draped around a lithe equine. A lithe…striped…equine. He reached up with a hoof and brushed the hood of his cloak back to look down at me with deep azure eyes.

I had to admit I was impressed and scared out of my gourd at the same time. I also didn't dare show it with a rifle to my head. He held it in his forelegs in the strangest way I'd ever imagined, yet without the slightest bit of strain, his mouth resting lightly on the trigger; I wasn't sure how he avoided falling on his face, balancing on just his back legs. "Blackjack," I said, gesturing to myself. "And I really hope I don't have to talk slow 'cause then I'll really look dumb," I added.

His voice was just as soft as P-21 on his surly days. “Lancer.” Name? Occupation? Hobby?

“Okay, Lancer. Like I said. I don’t think you want to kill me. I’d rather not kill you.”

“Liar,” he said quietly. “All ponies do. It is what you live for.”

“Of all the shit going on my life, you’re telling me I’m going to get killed over a war that was over two centuries ago?”

“The war is not over. The Remnant persists,” he answered.

“Right,” I groaned as I folded my hooves on the desktop, rested my chin on them, and closed my eyes with a sigh. “Who is holding a rifle to whose head? Who pushed a desk rather than firing a gun? I don’t want to fight you.” Particularly since he could turn invisible and had a rifle longer than my body pressed to my noggin. Those were pretty impressive liabilities to overcome. I was taking a good long look at that weapon while trying not to go cross eyed.

You’re going to make me do something stupid, aren’t you, Lancer? The sound of Glory and the Crusaders (and possibly P-21 as well) returning made his eyes dart to the door. Yup, time for stupid. My horn flashed as I deftly depressed what I prayed was the magazine eject while my magic ratcheted back the bolt and ejected the round in the chamber. Then I caught the shell with my magic and beaned him right in the face with the heavy bullet. My hooves on the desk shot out and yanked his rear hooves out from under him.

He recovered quickly. Damn, didn’t he though! He flipped through the air, catching the fallen magazine in his hoof and slamming it back into the weapon as he landed on all four hooves. The rifle lay along his back, his tail curling around the trigger as he sighted along the underside of the rifle. Then he felt the barrel of my shotgun press against the underside of his chin and his eye glanced down at the glowing weapon.

“I do not want to kill you,” I said quietly. But I would, and damn him if he forced me to use P-21’s universal counterattack policy from here on.

Lancer slowly pointed the rifle away, looking surprised for a moment. I took my gun off him. As Glory’s hooves reached the door I said loudly, “I have company, Glory. Please don’t spook him. He’s very good with a rifle.”

Glory frowned as she poked her head around the door. “Oh,” she said delicately, eyes wide in shock as she laid her eyes on Lancer. Slowly he backed up, keeping his rifle roughly between the two of

us. “A…ah…oh…” The Crusaders immediately took cover.

“Right. So. Like I said. I don’t want to kill you. I’m pretty sure you don’t want to kill me.” I looked out the window and gestured to the mine with my head. “In fact, I bet you’re here for the same reason I am: free the slaves?” He didn’t nod. He didn’t smile. He didn’t blink. I covered my face with my hooves, groaning, “Ugh. Would you just trust me?”

“I would not be opposed to seeing my people returned to freedom,” he finally answered.

Progress! Progress is good. “Okay. So. I’m trying to get a plan together. A zebra with a gun like that would fit in very nicely.” I had no clue how, but I wanted to know if he’d cooperate at all.

“Do you serve the stars?” he asked me bluntly. *Wha…?*

“I’ve never even *seen* the stars with my own eyes. Or the moon. Or the sun. All I’ve ever seen of the sky is that.” I pointed out the window at the cloud layer.

“Then who do you serve?” As calmly as he said it, I was pretty sure that my answer might lead to me getting shot soon. I really did not want to get shot by that rifle.

“Of all the ponies in the Wasteland, you had to ask *me* a philosophical question? You should know that I’m something of an idiot,” I said, hoping for a reaction. A laugh? A smile? Nothing. Great. I sighed, closing my eyes. “I don’t know if there’s a who anymore, but I guess I serve a what: doing better, making things better,” I said as I looked at him. “If that’s not good enough or specific enough then I’m sorry. I didn’t know there was going to be an oral exam today!”

He straightened, and I relaxed as he sat and directed his rifle at the ceiling. “It is sufficient,” he said calmly. “How do you plan on freeing the slaves?”

“Well, that depends on if P-21 had any luck shopping,” I said as I leaned over to look past Glory at the blue pony, who looked positively stunned at the sight of a zebra in our detention room. I hadn’t seen his eyes so big since Prince Splendid. I smiled at him. “Hey. P-21? This is Lancer. He’s been very nice to not shoot me. Please be nice back.”

He set down a jacket and a beaten cowpony hat, and some boots. “Oh. I’ll try.” And he did. He actually managed a smile. “Um…hey.” Lancer did not respond. Apparently zebras had a stoicism…thing. At least Lancer certainly did.

The hat and jacket had clearly seen better days. I shucked my security barding and shrugged into the jacket. I really hoped the material came from something other than a brahmin, or worse. I looked at Glory. “So here’s the plan. I’m going to go down there and find out just how keen these Pecos are on protecting the mine. If things go bad, I’d like you on the roof of that building at the end. If I have to bolt, some covering fire would be great.”

“You realize that the Pecos wouldn’t blink at killing you for the bounty, right?” P-21 asked. “I heard them talking. Apparently the only thing keeping them from running off looking for you is their deal with the mine.” I could use that as a plan B if I had to.

“I figured as much, but if their leader’s smart, I might be able to give them a better long term arrangement.” I had to saw the back of one of the boots apart to get it to fit over my PipBuck; fortunately, Glory had some duct tape that closed it up. Hey, in the Wasteland, beggars couldn’t be choosers. I unzipped the duffel bag. “Okay. Alcohol, booze, cigarettes…if you picked them up anywhere, put them in here. I’m going to need to make myself pretty popular on short notice.” P-21 and Glory went through their saddlebags and produced a fair enough amount of the things I’d asked for. “Where’d you find all that?” I asked as I looked at the half empty bottles of scotch and cartons of cigarettes.

“Teacher’s lounge,” P-21 replied, not quite taking his eyes off Lancer in the corner.

Figures. “Okay. It’s getting dark. I’ll start down now. If you see me running, do what you can to keep them off me,” I said to Glory. The gray pegasus beamed brightly and nodded once. P-21 nodded as well. Lancer just stared. I set my bag across my shoulders and floated up my shotgun as I headed for the stairs down.

“Blackjack,” hissed Sonata from the filly’s bathroom, her eyes wide as she glanced through the door at Lancer. “You shouldn’t trust him,” she warned.

“Why? Because he’s a zebra?” I asked with a little half smile.

“He’s a bad zebra. The Remnants…they do terrible things, Blackjack,” the filly said as she shivered. “We can’t stay here. Soon as we can, we’re gonna run. Robots won’t chase us far if they catch us at all.”

“But where will you go?”

“We got a place over near Chapel. We’ll head there.” She pointed with a hoof along the railroad tracks.

I glanced back at Lancer again as he looked coolly down at the textbook I'd glanced at earlier before kicking it aside. Maybe she was right, but I needed all the help I could get. "Okay, Sonata. I'll remember what you said." I stepped back and let her run down the hall towards the stairs. The other three peeled out of their hiding places to follow her. Great. And now my mane was itching again.

* * *

I was not a smart pony. For example, none of my plans were completely pulled together. There were little gaps here and there that I had to fill in on the fly. Actually, if you looked at all my plans, that's how they generally ran. Nice strings of improvisation piecing together a tiny bit of solid reasoning. This plan was simple: send the Pecos off on a wild parasprite hunt to the north. It wasn't always just because my brain was being lazy, though. Sometimes, it was because that no matter how well you plan, you'll always hit that point where everything falls apart.

For instance, I wasn't even halfway to the strip mall before somepony started shooting. Again, it wasn't me. And again, it wasn't at me. The fact that somepony was shooting this close to me, though, certainly put the nice and simple plan behind determining just what was going on. My E.F.S. gave me one clue: a big red bar and two amber non-hostiles. I put my rump in gear as I raced across the scrubland towards the shooting. Escaped slaves? The Crusaders in trouble?

Nope. Radscorpion, one every bit as large as the monster that had nearly eaten Glory and me in the gravel pit. Two ponies tried to return fire with a lever-action rifle and a revolver, but in the twilight their accuracy was at a huge disadvantage. Me? I had enough radiation in me that I knew exactly what I was aiming at! "Yeah!" I shouted as I raced towards the scene. Just in time, too; as I got close, the monster knocked one of the ponies down with a swipe of a huge claw. "Here! Here! Come here!" I didn't even bother with buckshot, loading slugs on the fly. The heavy shot battered and splattered its many eyes as I fired into its front as fast as I could.

Its heavy pincers snapped at me as I moved, but in the minimal armor of the Pecos outfit I was able to leap aside while blasting it again with the shotgun. I laughed like a maniac; anything to keep

its attention on me and off the fallen pony. The other, the unicorn with the lever-action, wasted no time picking her shots. The magnum rounds fired by her rifle were almost as effective as my own slugs. With two targets so close, the radscorpion stung at one of us and pinched at the other. Finally, my luck worked out and a slug obliterated its skull; it collapsed into a twitching heap.

"Tumbleweed! You stung?" the unicorn asked as she rushed to her fallen friend. The earth pony curled up in a ball, shaking. "Shit. Damn it." I knew exactly how that felt.

"I got something for that," I said as I opened the duffel bag and pulled out some of Glory's anti-venom. I jammed it into the poisoned pony's flank and pushed the plunger. She shook a little bit longer, then relaxed a touch. "Anti-venom. Never leave home without it."

"Thanks. How you managed to dance around that critter I'll never know. Can't see my hoof in front of my face," she complained as she searched around. I pushed the mirrored glasses a little further up my muzzle as I checked the earth pony's breathing. She seemed like she was doing better.

"What are you two doing out here?" I asked.

Before they could answer, a spotlight from one of the towers on the fence lit up and washed us in its harsh yellow glare. A voice over a loudspeaker said, in mock sympathy, "Awww. I shouldn't have bet on the scorp." There was laughter, and then the voice warned, "Get back to your hole, Pecos." A bullet smacked into the dirt at our hooves.

"They were in range?" I marveled, and then seethed. "Assholes."

"You must be new. Fresh out of Flank?" she asked as we helped her friend get to her hooves and walked her away from the tower.

"Yeah. Name's Marigold," I replied.

"Dusty Trails. This is Tumbleweed." She snorted as we picked our way towards the distant lights. I had little trouble, but the pair stumbled over the uneven ground. "Well, you want my advice? Keep walking. Being a Pecos is hell out here. It's fun enough when you can strut around in Flank, but we're getting screwed in the worst ways here."

"Oh yeah?" My mane prickled like crazy. "How so?"

"You just saw it. Sidewinder's got his protection racket, but he gets the caps and we get left out here for weeks. We're supposed to deal with the trouble, but all we really get is bashed around by those

bastards at the mine, the critters in the waste, and any slaver looking to up their quota."

The strip mall had to be getting its power from somewhere, as neon light poured into the cracked parking lot. It wasn't a town, per se. I couldn't see ponies raising families here. It seemed more like a glorified hangout for the Pecos. One large shop bore flickering red neon letters: 'Pecos Bill's Western Wear'. The other was a bar named 'Twister's'. In the middle were a liquor store looted long ago, a gun store, and a barbershop. "Seriously?" I asked as we made our way towards the bar. "You're supposed to be protecting them, but they'll snatch you if you're alone?"

"Yup. We're not 'licensed' with Paradise, so better not be near the mine on your lonesome. They'll invite you in and then never let you leave." She sighed, "But being a Pecos is better than being solo, or so I keep telling myself every damned day." I gave a grin and prayed to Celestia she didn't ask *me* why *I* happened to be on my lonesome.

"I'm gonna go lay down, Dusty," Tumbleweed said, the brown mare giving me a grateful smile. "Thanks for the medicine, ma'am." There was something in her vacuous eyes that bothered me. She kept…twitching. And swallowing.

"You sure she's okay?" I asked worriedly, watching her twitch as she made her way towards the apparel store.

"Yeah. Probably just the poison, or something she ate," Dusty Trails said, the sandy-hided pony leading me towards the bar.

Suddenly three bucks rolled out the door, kicking and biting each other. Dusty just stepped around them. Inside were ponies drinking, talking, hoof wrestling, or reading very ragged magazines. It was the cards being dealt, though, that drew my eye. "You play?" Dusty asked with a nod of her head.

"A bit," I said with a grin. A few minutes later I settled in at the table, passing around a bottle of whiskey and swapping cigarettes for poker chips. It wouldn't do for me to seem too ready to play. But once I settled in I felt more relaxed than I had in days. Sure, any of these ponies would kill me for a huge bounty if they had a clue that I was Security, but why worry about that now? Five hands in, I wasn't winning, but I wasn't losing either. "So what's your story, Dusty?"

"My story? What am I, a two bit novel?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Nah. Five bits at least," I said with a laugh.

She joined my laugh as we drew new cards. “Well, the name says it all. I was born to a caravan family. Soon as I could walk we were roaming. Here to Friendship City. Even Fillydelphia, but that was years ago.” She took two, shuffling her hand back and forth before raising. Then she continued, “My dad liked to say he specialized in ammunition, and he was happy to give out free samples to raiders. Then one day we did some business, and he found an armed landmine in his saddlebags. They came back and finished off the rest of us. I was only a year past my cutie mark, so they sold me in Paradise.”

“You were a slave?” The thought of a pony who had been a slave protecting other slavers was beyond comprehension.

“Something like that. Got picked up by a Society pony. They like to call their slaves ‘servants’ or ‘serfs’, but you’re somepony else’s property all the same. Mostly was used for sex and housekeeping for an old mare in the Applette family. Coulda been a lot worse.” I wasn’t paying attention; my little pair was a joke to her three of a kind. “When she died, her granddaughter didn’t really know what to do with me. Didn’t want me for sex. Didn’t need me for cleaning. So she just let me go. Sweet girl. ‘Course, unarmed and broke, I wasn’t in a real good position to survive long. Got into debt to one of Usury’s little pet ponies. Joined with the Pecos to pay it off.”

I didn’t really know what to say. I’d thought I’d gone through a lot in my week in the Wasteland, but the reality was that I hadn’t really experienced anything. She was so matter-of-fact about the circumstances that led her to this point that I felt more confused than ever. Worse, it seemed I’d opened a door and, one after another, the Pecos were stepping through. A buck named Big Red, who was the smallest pony at the table, had been a whoreson in Flank. He’d nearly been sold for chems by his mother before running away. He’d bounced from gang to gang between Stockyard and Paradise before landing with the Pecos.

Poleaxe had been at different times a bandit and a slaver and had even once run with a Reaper gang, drifting from place to place for as long as he’d lived. He also freely shared his Sugar Apple Bombs with me. Yeah, he killed ponies, but it wasn’t personal. It was work, that was how he saw it. If he didn’t work then he was gonna die. And apparently banditry and slaving was hard work: one mistake or misjudged target and you were dead. He didn’t target foals though, and preferred not to force mares. After all, one good kick and they

could take his bits clean off. His last band had gone raider. When they'd tried to get him to turn cannibal, he'd refused, and that'd put him on the menu instead. Now he was with the Pecos. 'Cause it was work.

Harbinger claimed she had been an acolyte for the Steel Rangers, but that a Reaper attack gutted their bunker. She'd gotten lost, ended up on the west side of the river, and signed up with the Finders for a spell in Megamart. Eventually, she got bored and hooked up with the Pecos for some excitement. She'd been able to get the buildings power from a still-active subterranean power line.

"You mean there's still power in the city?" That shocked me, given the devastation I saw all around us. "How?"

"Nopony's gone to the Core to figure it out. Anypony who does doesn't come back. The Collegiate thinks the spark turbines in the Hoofington dams are providing power, but the controls are all wonked. Or maybe there's some power plant in the badlands sending juice to the Core," Harbinger said as she checked her cards. "But yeah. They buried all kinds of stuff underground. Folks might not realize it, but Hoofington's a fucking fortress. The whole city was designed by the best minds at the M.W.T. and Stable-Tec. The zebras seemed so dead set on destroying the city that they had to. At the end of the war, Hoofington was getting attacked by the hour. Zebras wanted it bad, but they never took it," she explained as she drew four cards with a soft hiss of disappointment. "Now the underground is ghoul territory, and worse. Drives the Steel Rangers crazy, not being able to get at all the tech buried down there."

"So, which stable did you grow up in, Marigold?" Dusty asked me with a grin, just as I took a pull off the whiskey bottle. I choked, stinging alcohol burning in my sinuses. I didn't even have a chance to lie! "Knew it."

For a moment I was sure I was in trouble, but then realized nopony was screaming for my head. "That obvious, huh?"

"Stable ponies are always asking questions. So what's your story?"

"Not much. I was in my stable... Honestly I have no idea where it is," which was truth enough. It was somewhere north, but I'd be hard pressed to find it, even with my PipBuck's navigation software. "Our overmare went nuts and tried to kill everypony in the stable." Also kinda true given that she'd let in Deus and some raiders for her own aggrandizement and survival. "I managed to get out before everypony died. Been wandering around since."

Something was wrong. My head felt…off. Like my thinking was slowed down a little. Then I caught the slight glow of magic around Harbinger's horn. What were the odds that Steel Ranger acolytes were taught interrogation spells? Was she reading my mind? If so, she had a poker face to die for. A truth spell? No, or I'd be a lot more accurate. A lie detection spell! Easiest to learn…even if I couldn't.

"And what did you do in your stable?" Harbinger asked sweetly.

I gave a non-committal shrug. "Honestly, as little as I could. Played cards mostly. 99 was all about the Overmare, so as long as I didn't cross her I was in the clear." Technically true. I hoped that it was at least true enough for her spell. Since Harbinger looked disappointed, I assumed I'd squeaked by.

"So why'd you join the Pecos?" Dusty asked me.

Technically I hadn't. "I dunno really," I said, thinking. If I had to join the Pecos, why would I? Then I looked at the bottle of whiskey, the cards, and the ponies around me. "Guess so that I wouldn't be lonely any more. Have a life like I did in 99."

Harbinger's horn finally stopped glowing and I took a breath. "Well here's to your life. Hope it's worth it."

A bit later, the game broke up as Big Red and Harbinger left. I needed a little bit of air, so I stepped outside…and into the faint drizzle. Not even really rain. I looked down at my hooves. Was there still power underneath me? Even after two centuries and the bombing? *Hoofington was like a country within a country. Lots of secrets are buried here. Hoofington's a fucking fortress.* I looked to the north at the faint green glow in the distance. Secrets. Why did it feel like EC-1101 was burning a hole in my leg?

A buck lay on the porch outside Twister's, his muzzle pressed into a filthy plastic bag reeking of dung. He inhaled deeply over and over again, twitching. Dusty caught my look and chuckled. "Yeah. Believe it or not he's supposed to be in charge here. Poor jackass is so hooked on Dash that he's trying to get a buzz from huffing brahmin shit."

"Can he do that?" I asked in a tone of disgust.

"Nope, but it doesn't stop him from trying," Dusty said, closing her eyes and letting the rain play along her sand colored face. "So, guess you're not one of Sidewinder's more clueless spies."

"You thought I was a spy?"

"Showing up in the middle of the night? Asking questions like you

do? You're something," Dusty said with a grin as she looked up at the clouds. "Not a bad night. Didn't get eaten by radscorps. Got a new Pecos that's decent at cards. What more could a mare want?"

"A life of her own?" I asked as I looked at her speculatively. She caught my tone and looked at me. "Dusty, how do you feel about slavery?"

"Why do stable ponies ask the dumbest questions?" she asked in turn with a sigh and a frown. "It doesn't matter how I feel. Slavery happens. It's not even the worst thing that can happen to a pony. Ghouls losing their minds? Going crazy and turning into cannibals? Mutating into some creature? Being torn in half by waste critters? There's a thousand and one ways to die. Wearing a slave collar is somewhere in the middle of that list."

"But is it okay?" I pressed.

"It happens. Who cares if I think it's okay?" she retorted with a frown as I pressed my luck. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"What if you could?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She stared at me, now looking scared. "Who the fuck are you really?" I just looked at her, pulling off the glasses to look straight into her eyes. She shook her head slowly. "No…fuck…no…no you're not…no fucking way…"

"Yeah. I am. And I'm going to do something about the mine. Just like I said I would. But I'm going to need help. I need your help. If you really don't care about slaves then yell for the others. I wouldn't blame you. And I won't kill you. But if you do want to do something about those slaves, then help me."

"No…I can't…fuck…no! How-- how the fuck can you do this?" she hissed as she paced back and forth. "You saved my fucking life. You saved Tumbleweed's too. How the... " She clenched her eyes shut as she sat and thumped the sides of her head. "This is some fucked up booze dream and I'm going to wake up right the fuck now."

I put a hoof on her shoulder. "It's not a dream. It's a chance to do better. I can't guarantee it'll work. In fact, given how my plans usually go, I'd be fucking scared to death. But it's still a chance for a free life. For you. For those slaves in the mine."

Dusty Trails closed her eyes, raising her face to the clouds as the rain drizzled along her muzzle. Finally she pulled off her hat and sighed as she glared at me. "Fuck…"

* * *

The strip mall rang with shouts and cries as the Pecos scrambled to their hooves. Security had breached their defenses, shared their liquor, bypassed their interrogation attempts, and basically pissed in everypony's faces. Now the night was filled with cries for the hundred thousand bottlecap mare's head and they scattered to the north and east in a vengeful frenzy. A lone spotlight opened up and swept across the empty buildings in an almost forlorn fashion, as if stung there'd been a party and they couldn't attend.

There was such a rush for vengeance and money by those certain that Security was off east towards Flank that nopony thought to check along the railroad tracks just north of the ruined little strip mall. The sound of the nighttime drizzle, now punctuated by the occasional shout and gunshot, gave way to the grinding of rusty wheels on rusty metal and the snap of a whip on sweaty ponies' backs. The incoming train rattled and banged its way towards the mine, the sound of the pulling slaves' hooves loud on the track, until the cry of 'rocks' filled the air and the pullers began stumbling. The whip master immediately grabbed a wheel next to her seat with her magic and spun it as fast as she could. Rusty squeals filled the night air.

"Move them, you worthless slugs. Move them!" The brakes were released, and the railcars began crawling slowly along as the lead bucks shoved the rocks off the tracks and the rest continued to pull the empty flatcars forward. With only a few hundred yards to the mine spur, there was no time to build up their earlier momentum, and the cars crept slowly past the tumbled stones on the track and onto the spur.

The gate on the incoming track opened and the cars began to pass under the bridge, spotlights slowly sweeping back and forth over the cars and across the interior field of the yard. One or two guards gave a cursory glance underneath the flatcars, but the hard magical glare of the spotlights ruined any night vision they may have had. Once the train came to a stop, half the guards detached the slave ponies while the rest headed to the two long barracks, glad for a night's rest. Apparently three trips in one day was exceptionally productive for them.

Some of the spotlights winked out. Others turned back towards the wasteland. Carefully, the four of us crept out one after another. We moved quickly to the dark administration building. If I were a slave

owner, I'd keep the guns as far from my own guards as from my slaves. Just inside the door was a meeting room with two bored guards; Lancer's rifle made a pair of soft little 'pfft' noises, and they turned into two dead guards. I resolved to never, ever annoy a zebra who could make two ponies dead before the first one even started falling. We moved inside before somepony spotted us.

P-21 and Glory went to work looting anything potentially valuable as I made my way up the stairs. Green light shone through an open door as a pony frantically typed on a terminal. "I don't care how much Sanguine wants. I'll sell for half price if he takes that thing out of here," I heard a pony whisper hoarsely. I peeked in, but saw only a fat pony typing his message and a filthy cobalt mare wearing a dark black collar and chained to the wall beside the bed. I carefully opened the door, the mare looking at me as I held my baton to my lips.

She looked at me, looked at him, and then made a quiet motion of her hooves slamming together. Was she telling me to beat him up? Gladly…wait. He wore something on his hoof. Too small to be a PipBuck. What if it was some kind of alarm?

He turned to spot me in my security barding and his hoof reached for the band. S.A.T.S. popped up immediately and I targeted four strikes, praying I didn't kill him. Not that in this case I'd be that fussed if he expired, but I had questions. In rapid succession I slammed the baton twice against each of his front fetlocks and was rewarded with crunches of splintering bone. He cried out, wetting himself as the he curled up in a fetal position.

"You're going to get us all killed," he whimpered as his broken legs shook. Whatever the device on his hoof was, it was a lot less resilient than my PipBuck.

"Isn't that line supposed to be 'You're going to kill all of us'?" I asked as I searched his desk and found a key to the shackles the mare wore.

"He's talking about Gorgon," she said as I freed her. "He's taken over the mine's operation. Demands huge output. I don't know what he is, but he's a monster." The mare rubbed at where the shackles had chafed her forelegs raw. "Please tell me you can take this off?" she asked as she pointed to the collar she wore.

"What is it?" I asked, looking closely with a small frown.

"A bomb," she replied. Instantly I wasn't looking nearly so closely.

"A bomb?" I stared at the black collar and then hissed at the fat

buck, “Why the fuck would you put a bomb on someone you screw?!”

The mare gave a sigh but also small smile as she explained. “It keeps us from running away. Get too far and... boom. Can you deactivate it?” Deactivate it? I didn’t even want to breathe hard on it! I shook my head and she sighed. “Too much to hope for.”

Somehow I found the prospect of fighting something that had the slavers scared witless a little concerning. “What is Gorgon?” I asked the mare as I hauled the fat, whimpering buck into her place and chained him by his back legs. “Is he a Reaper?” Just what I needed, another cyber-monster to get blown up by. While she spoke, I went over to the terminal and transferred what files I could on to my PipBuck. The bastard had mentioned ‘Sanguine’. We *were* going to talk about that later. Searching his desk, I found a sack of caps and two glowing memory orbs. All of them disappeared into my bag.

“He’s…I don’t know. He’s strong and bulletproof,” she said. I nodded as I listened. If slugs wouldn’t cut it, maybe grenades? They seemed incredibly effective when used internally. “He also has…a spell I guess. He looks at you and he turns you into stone.”

“Into *stone*?” Okay. That just bumped him above Deus on the what-the-fuckometer. A few days ago I would have laughed at such a claim. Forty-one young ponies later I admitted he could probably do exactly what she said. “So. Strong. Bulletproof. Turns ponies into stone. Anything else?”

“He can fly?” the mare offered. I facehoofed. I just had to ask, didn’t I?

I pointed at the mine boss. “Please sit on him and make sure he doesn’t try anything.” Downstairs I found P-21 picking at the lock of a door. A half dozen bobby pins lay scattered around him as he grit his teeth and scraped at the lock. His blue eyes swore a death oath to this door and lock. Then there was a soft snap as the metal broke in his teeth.

“Allow me,” I said as I floated the mine boss’s key to the lock, and opened it. From the look he gave me, I’d violated some lock picker code of ethics. Inside, however, we were greeted by quite the little arsenal. Assault carbines. Another shotgun. More ammunition that I happily dumped in my bags and let my PipBuck reorganize. There were energy cartridges for Glory and a strange pointy pistol-like object that smelled of ozone, so I guessed it was an energy weapon. I tossed it to her as well, and she gave a little squee as she

immediately swapped out one beam pistol for the new weapon.

"Do I want to know?" I asked as I tied the carbines together to make them easier to carry across my back. P-21 clenched his eyes shut as he dropped a few automatic pistols and revolvers into his bag. I'd have to carry the ammo, I knew. Lancer watched the door, utterly disinterested in our looting.

"It's a disintegration pistol! It magically breaks down the bonds…" she faltered at my 'I am not a smart pony' look. "Well, they do much more damage than energy beams. There's a chance it can start a chain reaction that…well…disintegrates things."

"Good. You almost lost me at the word 'reaction'," I said as we finished cleaning out the armory. Glory spotted a medical container that had a few healing potions, but far more chems. "Just take it all." No idea if it'd come in useful or not when things got rolling.

"Lancer, have you ever heard of a pony named Gorgon?" No reaction. "I take that as a no. Glory?" She shook her head. "Okay. Apparently there's a…something…here named Gorgon. He's strong. He's bulletproof. He can fly. He can turn you to stone with a look." Even Lancer looked taken aback at that.

"Fuck me," Glory muttered softly, then blinked and went bright red as she looked at her hooves. "Sorry!"

"That's my line," I replied with a grin at her. "Anyway…I just wanted to warn you. He's in the mine. So dynamite and internal grenades if we can swing it?" I looked at P-21. He nodded. "Zappy zappy disintegration fun from above?" Glory, still embarrassed, gave a nod. "Shoot him in the eye?" I asked Lancer. He looked thoughtful and then nodded stiffly, seeming quite put out by taking a suggestion from me. "If all that doesn't work…I'll try something stupid." Both Glory and P-21 winced.

"That's your plan?" Lancer asked skeptically.

"Good one, ain't it? Lots of flexibility." Now he had a definite expression. Worry. It looked good on him. The stoic mask was getting old.

We dragged the bodies into the arsenal and locked them inside, wiped up the blood as well as we could, and then made our way quietly to the mouth of the mine. A barricade had been built across the entrance to the sloping tunnel that led underground. Once again, the mine boss's keys expedited our entrance, much to P-21's chagrin. I passed him the keys once we were inside. "Just think of them as really accurate lock-picks."

“Or I could think of them as keys,” he replied sourly as we slipped inside the mine.

“Cheer up. We’re facing a monster. No moral angsting here!”

He gave me a little smirk. “Oh yeah? What if it turns out he was tragically transformed into a monster and wants only to be normal and loved?”

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.” And suddenly the niggling thoughts began to rise up in the back of my mind. “Maybe we should talk first and…” But P-21 suddenly stopped smiling as he reached up and turned my head to look at the side of the tunnel. *Broken statues,* was my first impression. The most horribly accurate pony statues ever carved. Their faces were frozen in expressions of absolute horror and pain. “Right.” I grabbed those niggling little thoughts, wrapped them in duct tape, and tossed them into the closet.

We found a guard station and four guards behind a second barricade. The sounds of machinery and grinding rock reverberated in the air, making sneaking almost unnecessary. The lighting must have been abysmal to anypony without mutated eyes. Really, it was more an execution than an attack, with the exception that there was a large red button next to them. I didn’t know what that button was connected to. An alarm? A lockdown? Detonate slave collars? I just knew I didn’t want to find out just now.

Lancer’s silenced rifle took down the one closest to the button. Glory strafed with red beams from one pistol and slower-moving pink bolts from the other. The remaining guards scrambled for weapons and to hit the alarm, but my buckshot tore into them equally. Nopony reached that button, and thanks to our barrage, nopony would. P-21 searched through the remains as I stared at the red button on the wall, chewing my hoof. What did it do?

“Stop staring at the button, Blackjack,” P-21 said without looking up.

“What? I wasn’t…” I huffed and made a big show of checking my shotgun. When we were ready to move on I glanced at the button again. Someday…Alarm? Self-destruct device? Buzzer? Decoration? Arrrrgh!

My mood now thoroughly ruined by the thought of being transformed into a horrified statue, and thus being prevented from ever discovering the function of the mysterious button, I slogged ahead in the lead keeping an eye out for... oh, hello! The chamber was a massive dome pierced by a round hole at its apex. On the

ground, white bones lay amid gem encrusted stones. Strange pink and green energy seemed to bleed slowly into the rock.

Crawling amid the immense slabs of stone were dozens and dozens of ponies and zebras. A squad of guards bored down into the blocks using some kind of drill, set some explosives, and blasted the blocks chunk by chunk into smaller pieces. These were loaded onto smaller flatbed minecarts that were then pushed up stone ramps by mares to a stone platform ringing the chamber and dumped onto a shaking metal ramp that fed into a rock crusher. The crusher fed a conveyor belt that ran up to the hole in the roof; young ponies, many of whom didn't even have their cutie marks, were running up and down the belt, pulling the brightly-colored gemstones from the gravel.

Somepony had thought of a mining system that effectively used foals in the production process. Somepony needed to meet Mr. Baton. Everywhere we looked were statues of ponies frozen in positions of agony. A few appeared to have been guards rather than slaves. The guards weren't guarding. They were working. Some looked as ragged as the slaves they were supposed to be watching. I felt a small sense of justice at work, but no pony or zebra deserved this.

And there, lying atop the softly glowing bones overlooking the whole mining pit, was Gorgon. At first, very first, I might have mistaken him for a white pegasus. Then you realized that whatever he was, it wasn't a pony. His wings weren't softly feathered like Glory's but instead were leathery. He had scales along his spine and flank. A long, serpentine tail swayed back and forth behind him. For the first time ever, I saw a pony with eyes that glowed exactly like mine.

I knew they did because they were looking right at me.

Gorgon rose to his hooves, stretching languidly, first his bleached white wings and then his powerful legs. "Scatter!" I yelled, barely audible over the din of the machinery in the booming cavity. He launched himself into the air as we separated, landing with a thunderous crash where we'd stood moments before. I didn't target him. I simply fired wherever I thought he was and prayed to Celestia I didn't hit somepony else. I stole little glances as I could, dancing around on the broad stone ledge. The ponies up here ran for cover, but the ones below continued working.

Glory fired a stream of energy bolts from above that seemed

moderately more effective than my shotgun shells. I tossed the carbines on my back at the feet of two mares. “Take them!” I yelled. The dust-coated ponies simply looked at me in horror and shook their heads. They actually grabbed pickaxes and resumed trying to gouge gems from the walls around the ledge.

They were so scared they didn’t dare stop working. Even working to death was better than being turned to stone.

My shotgun was useless at this range, so I flipped it behind my back and drew one of the automatic assault carbines. I marveled as my PipBuck provided a magazine of…interesting. Armor piercing rounds? My curiosity was piqued as I looked at the solid-jacketed bullets. I didn’t have many from the armory, but maybe I wouldn’t need that many.

I flicked the fire select switch to burst mode, my eyes picking out Gorgon and Glory’s shapes as they flew around and through the jagged dragon bones heaped in the center. When Gorgon came into view I gave a S.A.T.S. guided set of bursts right into his head. They didn’t even seem to penetrate. “What the fuck is he made of?” I shouted, ejecting the magazine and moving to green rounds. I bit my lip as he came around again. I had enough S.A.T.S. charge for one burst. The toxic rifle rounds just dripped off his hide.

Glory clipped the tip of a spur of bone, jerking in midair. Gorgon caught her in his hooves as they landed on the far side of the pit. His glowing eyes stared into hers, and I watched as I saw her writhe. I’d never imagined turning to stone would be... slow. Her equipment and violet mane turned white first. Then her limbs froze in their twisted state, and finally her head finished in still alabaster.

‘Lancer, please tell me you can shoot him in the eye,’ I thought as he took to the air once again. I raced past still-laboring ponies as I made my way to her. Not one looked at me. Not one dared to stop working with Gorgon still alive. Some of the workers were fresh statues as well, having been turned to stone by accident for watching our fight.

Suddenly I heard muffled booms over the din of the machinery. P-21 demonstrated his affinity for explosives by tossing dynamite as quickly as he could pop the brass tops. When Gorgon landed and advanced, P-21 backed away, throwing mines in his path. The monster didn’t even try and step around them. The explosions scuffed his scaly hide, and not much more. I raced as quickly as I could to help. Maybe I could ram a stick of dynamite up his scaly

ass! Where was--

I ran into a stone wall. No. Make that an invisible stone wall. My head spun for a moment before I looked up. I reached out with a hoof and saw the faint shimmer. Apparently being turned to stone hadn't disrupted the enchantment in his cloak. I looked through the petrified zebra, watching as P-21 was transformed into a statue as well.

Monsters. Deus was a monster. Gorgon was one too. My weapons were useless against monsters like them. How was I supposed to fight something like this? The only thing I could do was see, which would apparently kill me. Then I looked at the magical lights illuminating the space. My mane began to itch. "Fuck. Something stupid, then."

I immediately began to shoot out every light I could. With each detonation more and more darkness claimed the interior. As darkness spread, I saw Gorgon begin searching; he couldn't see in the dark. Finally, I had something going for me! I couldn't plunge the entire room into darkness; the radiation from the dragon's remains provided some illumination. I needed some way to kill him. I looked at the pile of dragon bones in the middle of the room… they'd withstood two centuries of mining around them.

No. I needed another edge. Something to avoid being turned into stone. Gun had been my edge against Deus. Deus... Deus!

Oh shit. Would that work? My mane itched like mad. Deus and Gorgon were both monsters the likes of which I'd never seen. The mine boss had mentioned Sanguine. Maybe…maybe. I trotted into the gloom, hearing Gorgon's wings whoosh even over the grinding machinery. Gorgon was bulletproof, beam poof, and bomb proof. I hoped he was as cocky as I'd be if I were him. I moved to the nearest edge, and then turned on my PipBuck, bringing the file EC-1101 to the top. The letters should be a nice bright lure in the gloom.

They were. Gorgon landed in front of me and our eyes met. Instantly I felt a needle stab through my eye sockets and into my body. It felt as if every inch of my body were being slowly pinched off cell by cell. I couldn't look away if I wanted to, but I could scream. "See this! Sanguine wants this!" I yelled right into Gorgon's face, and for the first time since the battle started, he balked. "You turn it to stone and the data is fucked!" I had no idea if that was true or not, but all I could hope was that he didn't know either.

The sensation abruptly reversed and I swayed on my hooves a moment. That was a sensation I'd happily avoid. I pulled out my baton as I backed till my rear hooves touched the edge. I knew there were lots of nice jagged pieces of dragonbone down there. "Come on…you want it? You'll have to take my leg first." I had no idea if he could hear me over the din, but from the smile blooming on his face, I guessed he could.

He charged: a reckless, full frontal assault that only an impregnable abomination would undertake. I didn't swing the baton, I *threw* it right at his head. Whether through reflex or annoyance, he closed his eyes before he rammed into me. I knew he probably planned on winging me away to tear me limb from limb. Only I didn't just grab his scaly hide with all four hooves. I also used every bit of magic I could to hold his wings in place. We tumbled end over end over the edge…

…and landed on the wide metal slide covered in rock chunks being fed into the rock crusher. Gorgon looked down at me and pulled back his foreleg, slamming it down with enough force to turn the rock next to my head into stinging powder. I didn't let go as we struggled on top of the rolling, tumbling rocks. A second kick grazed the side of my head, and only the helmet Keystone had given me kept my skull from being pulped. His wings struggled for freedom as he fought to get airborne once more. I gripped him as tightly as I could, not giving him the leverage. He struggled against the flow as the angle increased. I shoved hard, forcing myself a foot or two above him.

I saw the first signs of fear in Gorgon's eyes.

His scream was muted by the roar beneath us as his long snake-like tail was caught in the grinding teeth of the rock crusher. Not even I could hold him then, but now I didn't have to. I kicked and shoved and did all I could to keep him under me. "No you don't!" I screamed, not caring if only Celestia heard, as rocks battered both of us. The working jaws and flow of stone pulled him down inch by inch. Hooves slammed into the teeth, and for a moment I feared he might actually break the mechanism. Then one of them caught in the pumping jaws. There was a resounding pop.

I heard *that* scream.

I stomped my hooves into his face, watching as the heavy iron jaws of the rock crusher turned red with muddy pulp. Inch by inch he was fed into the machine, and it was all I could do to keep him

beneath me. I clawed up the stream of rock as the poor foals continued their labors, kicking wildly as popping fragments and flailing hooves battered at my barding. Some mechanism within gave a yank and his chest disappeared into the gap. The teeth slammed down with a dry explosion of ribs, his mouth opening wide as bloody organs spewed over my legs. The jaws withdrew and Gorgon's glowing eyes stared up at me for one final moment before the jaws slammed shut.

His skull was just another rock.

Unfortunately, now I struggled to keep out of those jaws myself! I kept imagining a great big red button marked 'Emergency shutoff'. I hated to admit it, but I was getting tired; all I would need was one rock to pin my leg or crack my head. I wondered if I'd go through as well and these poor bastards would just keep working, never realizing the monster was dead.

Then wings beat above me. I felt hooves hook in my barding. I glanced back at the glorious gloriousity of Morning Glory as the pegasus lifted me from the crusher's feeder and into the air above the work pit. The conveyor belt to the surface was a ribbon of pulped Gorgon. "If he regenerates from that, I quit," I said. At least, I hoped I said it. My ears were filled with endless ringing and throbbing.

Glory set us down, and I saw that realization of Gorgon's demise had finally spread to the workers. The unicorns were arming themselves with the carbines. The earth ponies took up the revolvers. I looked around for the guard workers, but saw they had had a complete change of heart after being on the receiving end. There were a few lips moving from my friends…my not petrified friends. Indeed, many of the petrified ponies were once more free to move around.

Broken stone ponies, though, remained broken stone.

The workers used strange hoof signals I didn't understand as we made our way up out of the pit. I enjoyed the sensation of a Med-X painkiller accompanied by a healing potion. I really could have used a Sparkle-Cola, but given how the slaves around us appeared it would have been crude. We reached the barricade and I looked at that bright red button with a parting sigh.

We stepped out into the drizzling night. The guards had gathered, looking unsure of what to do when we emerged. Most of the slaves were exhausted. Many had multiple injuries. All of them were

hungry. Few were trained in firearms. Some ponies, the guards apparently included, based on how they began rallying, might think that that would put the slaves at a disadvantage against the twenty or so armed, healthy, rested guards that remained. They would be right, except that such a pony had likely never imagined the absolute rage a pony could feel when armed and facing their tormentors.

Even then, with the guards outnumbered three to one, the fight that ensued was vicious. Glory strafed the few snipers that tried to pick off the freed slaves from the towers along the wall. P-21 restrained himself from using explosives. Instead, he raced around the side of the battle, shouting directions and gestures to the slaves to return fire. When bullets ran out, the guns became clubs.

Then the Pecos arrived. The thirty or so gang members surged in down the rail line and under the bridge, the gate having been quickly smashed open. The slavers bolstered and readied themselves to put down the uprising once and for all. Across the fighting, my eyes met Dusty Trails's. I couldn't say anything. I couldn't hear anything. I could only hope.

The Pecos crashed into the backs of the slavers and took them out in one charging wave. The nasty final moments involved a few desperate hoof to hoof fights.

Then it was over. Dusty Trails and the other Pecos helped deal with the wounded slaves. Whatever guards had been in the mine, they'd shed their uniforms by now. Any allegiance to the old mine was forsaken. When it was over, I yelled for P-21 to find the pantry to get them fed and Glory to do what she could to help the injured. Dusty Trails directed the Pecos to take positions in the guard towers; there were other things in the wastes to be wary of.

I had no idea where Lancer had gone, nor did I know what I would have had him do. The dozen or so zebras stood apart from the others, watching the development with trepidation. I rubbed my ear furiously, trying to rid it of the ringing as I approached them. "Hey. Rough night, huh?" They glanced at each other and made gestures. Then I realized every single one of them was deaf. An elder buck approached, bowed formally to me, and then said in an odd accent, "We thank you. We cannot hear your words. We must read them on your lips."

"Well. You are free to go. Or stay, if you want," I said, my mouth

exaggerating a bit. I wasn't used to talking to deaf folk.
"That is not necessary," Lancer said behind me as his cloak deactivated. His shot between my shoulder blades slammed me into the ground, knocking the wind from my lungs and numbing my entire lower body. For a horrible moment, I wondered if I was paralyzed. Then I realized that that wasn't even the beginning as he pointed his rifle at the clump of zebras. "For your treason against the fallen Caesar... " The stream of 'pffft's filled my ears as I watched him butcher every buck, mare, and foal with stripes. When the shots ended, not a pony raised a rifle to stop him. Everypony seemed paralyzed... even me. "The war is *never* over, Security," Lancer said softly before the zebra's stealth cloak shimmered and he disappeared once more.

Footnote: Level Up.
New Perk: Tough Hide (level one) - The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have toughened you. You gain +3 Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

Chapter 10: Ante Up

"Oh* yeah.** ***You think you can do better, cowgirl?"
"I* know** ***I can… Oh for Pete's sake!"

I hate the Wasteland. In less than half a minute I'd gone from feeling good…battered and slightly traumatized, but good…to watching a dozen zebras gunned down right before my eyes by one of their own kind. I hate a world where the trust I give then turns around and kills somepony else; I can accept it if I'm the one who suffers for my poor judgment, but when I keep sailing through while innocents (or at least as innocent as a pony can be in the Wasteland) drop around me? I hate that this is even possible, that there isn't some universal fail-safe that kicks in and says 'time out, too fucked up.' The numbness in my legs is just an errant worry compared to all that.

I hate that, as I'm lying here, I'm the one everypony is running to help. I hate that they're telling me not to move, that they're worrying for me. I can see a starved foal curled up no more than twenty feet from me. She could almost be asleep if not for her missing face. I hate that she had less than an hour of freedom before a zebra who had accompanied me ended her life. I hate that there was any reason why Lancer would ever do what he did. I hate that I'm so weak I can't even draw a breath to scream out to the others 'Help them! Even one of them! Save just one if you can, and don't worry about me.'

I hate that I was protected by another's kindness but was incapable of the same. The quarter-inch steel plate had buckled as it deflected the bullet. I hate that I had been warned twice and still hadn't questioned 'why is Lancer working with us?' I had arrogantly assumed that any threat he'd posed would be to me. Because I'm the mare with the hundred thousand cap bounty on her head. Because I'm a pony, so naturally his threat would be to me. I hate that I am such a stupid pony that I hadn't considered that he might

have wished harm to the prisoners.

I hate that right now all I can do is cry as Glory tells me to stop moving. I hate that P-21 and Dusty Trails are pinning me down instead of letting me drag myself towards those unmoving striped bodies. I hate that she's wasting painkillers and healing potions on me when she should be using them on the zebras. I hate her for not saving one. Not even one. I hate that I'm not strong enough to make all this right. Most of all I hate the blackness that's rushing up to claim me because I know it will not last.

I hate the Wasteland.

* * *

I'm on my stomach. That makes no sense; I sleep on my back. I'm also on a table. Why am I on a table? You sleep on beds. You play cards on a table. There are ponies around me? Why do I smell blood? Why do my shoulders hurt so much?

Why is P-21 saying that I'm waking up? Why is Glory yelling? What's the big deal? I need to wake up. There was something important I was doing.

I look at Glory with a bloody knife in her mouth as she leans over me. I'm…cut open again, aren't I? I've got to get out of here. I need to go. Somepony needs my help.

P-21 presses a little glowing ball to my horn. A little zap and I'm in a nice place. The stars are so beautiful. So very beautiful.

The lake is gone and I'm back on the table. Glory is shouting about my heart rate.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Back on the table. Glory needs more blood? Less please. There's plenty of blood here.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Back on the table. I'm crashing? No, I'm floating.

Zap. Back under the stars.

Please let me stay with the stars.

* * *

"I can't send anypony after Lancer right now, P-21. He's a zebra who can turn invisible. Kinda hard to track," Dusty Trails said firmly somewhere below me, which made little sense given that I

was on my stomach on a mattress smelling of blood, sweat, and bad perfume. I risked opening my eyes and saw I was on the mine boss's bed. One of the places I didn't want to be. "Besides which, even if they could, I wouldn't send them anyway. He'd just kill them too."

"We can't let him get away with it," P-21 said in his angry, low, pissed-at-the-world voice.

"That's exactly what we're going to let him do. I know you want to get even for Blackjack, but I don't have the ponies to go tearing after Lancer," Dusty Trails said firmly. "And even if I did, P-21, Sidewinder's not going to take our defection lightly. I got thirty or so Pecos to ditch that bastard. We might get another ten or so if we're lucky. He's got at least fifty and a powerful incentive to come here. If he kills us then he'll not just have revenge but the mine and the bounty as well."

"Please keep your voices down. Blackjack needs to sleep. She's lost a lot of blood," Glory said in concern. I closed my eyes.

P-21's voice rose up the stairs. "Blackjack needs to get moving, Glory. Everypony who finds out she's here will be coming. I mean everypony. To them she's just a cap bounty ready to be cashed in. How soon till we can move her?"

I'd never heard Glory's voice so sharp, so tense, "Do you want her dead, P-21? We can't move her. I'm astonished she didn't die in surgery. The trauma to her spinal cord…if we move her she's dead or paralyzed. If I had access to some Enclave medical supplies…"

"Then go get some!" P-21 snapped. "You got wings! Fly up there and get what you need, Glory."

"I told you, I can't!"

"Horse hockey! Why the hell can't you? Give me one good solid reason."

"Because I'd get killed, alright?!" Glory yelled at him in a wet snuffling voice. "Don't you think the Enclave has protection against that sort of thing? If anything…pegasus, hot air balloon, flying machine, whatever…goes too high there are defense systems that will blast it to pieces. Thunderhead has more lightning rods than any place in the skies. We designed the lightning rod system! So I fly up there and I may as well shoot myself now."

"Well, get them from somewhere else, then!" P-21 demanded. "You say you want to help us, then help!"

"Where, damn you! Point me to the Skyport and I'll go right now! Tell me where there's an Enclave base and I'll go! I have no clue

where the Enclave is in this damned city!" Glory sobbed brokenly. "I wish I'd never come. I wish I'd stayed in the clouds!"

There was silence for a moment and then P-21 said softly, "Don't say that. Please. If you hadn't been here, Glory, she'd never have pulled through."

I closed my eyes. I'm so sorry Glory. You should have stayed in the clouds. You should have stayed where you could see stars. They're so beautiful…the stars…

* * *

I like playing cards. Like now. I'm playing cards with the Pecos: some draw poker. The whiskey is warm in my tummy. I've got a bowl of Sugar Apple Bombs. Life is good. "Ante up…," says the dealer. Not too sure about this hand so I put one chip in the pot. A teal filly looks up at me in worry. But it's a bad hand. Dealer wins. Guts spill all over the ground.

A new hand. Not bad. I win and add a chip with a pretty pegasus. "Ante up." Great hand. A surefire winner. I put forty foals in the middle of the table. Call. "Oooh, too bad. Ever wonder what if…"

"Shut up and deal," I hate this dealer. He never stops smiling when he's shuffling the deck.

"Ante up." I throw my chips in the pile. Get lucky. Get a few chips. "Ante up."

It's a hell of a set. A hell of a set. Not good enough. Thirteen zebras get taken.

"Ante up," the dealer tells me.

"I want to cash out," I mutter.

The pony skull grins endlessly at me as his hooves shuffle the cards before me. "Oh, you wanna cash out? Just stick around, Blackjack. You'll cash out soon." He started to deal the cards. "Otherwise, ante up."

* * *

I woke to the sounds of tapping on a terminal. I opened an eye, glad to be away from the card game for a spell. P-21 was at the mine boss's terminal, poking through the files. For the longest time I just watched him. He looked…tired. No. Not tired. Older. There were fresh wrinkles around his eyes.

“Find anything on Sanguine?” I asked quietly. He jumped, looking guilty. He doesn’t do the guilty look well.

“Everything and nothing,” he said, accompanied by another moment of typing. “This says that he arranged a contract for gems and expects the mine to deliver to the buyer over in ‘Progress’. Here’s one where he’s paying a 10% bonus for increased gems. Arranging for one hundred more slaves.” He tapped some more keys. “Near as I can tell, the mine owner was pocketing the incentives. Then Gorgon came to ‘encourage’ production. After that all the messages are him begging Sanguine to recall Gorgon. I bet he never had to deal with a bulletproof pony that could turn folks into stone before.”

I closed my eyes with a groan. It was so hot and stuffy in the room. I wished the rusty old fan overhead would work, but it seemed a century past its warranty. “Sounds like a lot of information.”

“I wish it was,” he said, thumping his hoof irritably. “There’s nothing to say how we contact him. Where is he? What does he want? He seems to be a broker, a middlepony, so to speak. I don’t know if he was getting gems for himself or somepony else.” He closed his eyes. “I know you count on me to know stuff, but… I’m sorry Blackjack. I should have known better.”

I looked back him hanging his head. “What are you talking about?”

“I knew Lancer was no good. I saw the way he looked at those zebras from the moment we left the mine. He didn’t approach them. No hugging or hoofshakes. He just disappeared as soon as they were outside. I thought maybe he was sniping the last of the guards, but he wasn’t. I should have warned you. Gotten them out of sight. Something.” He rose to his hooves. “I got them killed.”

I looked at him for a long moment. How…ridiculous? How could he be blaming himself? So what if he’d not said anything? Things were pretty hectic. I hadn’t even noticed Lancer acting funny. “Not your fault. He never would have been there if not for me.”

“No!” he shouted sharply, stomping his hoof hard and making me flinch, then wince. “Damn it, Blackjack, will you let me accept some of the blame for once?” he snapped. “You’re always doing that. It’s not always your fault. This was my screwup, Blackjack. Don’t you dare blame yourself for this!” he said as tears ran down his cheeks. “Damn it,” he said as he scrubbed his eyes. “I just want justice for a change.”

I looked at him as he bowed his head, gritting his teeth as he tried

to fight the tears. I wondered how many times he'd cried in his life. Slowly I smiled, then closed my eyes. "Okay. Fine. Damn it, P-21. How could you let your super amazing smarts fail to read the mind of a psychopathic cold-blooded zebra assassin? Really, I was totally expecting you to shove a stick of dynamite right up his rump."

P-21 gaped at me as if I'd kicked him, or kissed him, before he went bright red, and shook with snickers. Or more tears; I couldn't tell which. I'd like to think it was laughter though. "Oh…That is wrong on so many levels, Blackjack."

"If I'm going to do something wrong, I prefer to go all the way. That way everypony notices." I closed my eyes again. "Can you pass on a message to Glory? Can you ask her when I'll be able to feel my legs again?"

He jerked and swallowed. "Yeah. Should be soon. Probably."

"Good. 'Cause we need to get going," I muttered softly. "I feel like I have a great big bullseye on my back."

"Yeah…we're looking into that," he said as he limped to the door. "You want something to read? Apparently there was a serial killer in the Hoof." He reached over and lifted a paper in his mouth. 'Angel of Death: 8 foals. Hoofington Guard: 0 killers.' read the headline. Beneath that was something about the 'Proditor' being suspended for their involvement in Shattered Hoof Ridge. Right now I wasn't in the mood for either... or reading in general.

He caught my look and chuckled, tossing the paper aside. "You go ahead and rest, then. I'll see if I can actually think of something for a change." I couldn't help but smile as he walked away. Leg brace or not, P-21 sure had a cute ass.

* * *

"What do you want?" Mother asked me, holding me in her hooves.

"To play."

"What do you want?" the Overmare asked me coldly, pink eyes digging into me.

"Revenge."

"What do you want?" Deus asked, sneering down at me.

"To kill."

"What do you want?" Lancer asked, with the rifle to my brow.

"Death."

"What do you want?" Dusty Trails asked, as she dealt the cards.

“Freedom.”
“What do you want?” Fluttershy asked, hugging a dying foal.
“To do better.”
“What do ya want?” Big Macintosh asked, looking over his shoulder at me.
“Love.”
“What do you want?” Bottlecap asked with her calm, sure smile.
“I don’t know.”
“What do you want?” Scoodle asked, lying in two.
“Forgiveness.”
“What do you want?” Morning Glory asked around the bloody scalpel in her mouth.
“Truth.”
“What do you want?” P-21 asked, with that skeptical smile.
“You.”
“What do you want?” Blackjack asked.
“ ”

* * *

I opened my eyes again to the feeling of a wet cloth across my brow. And my legs. And my butt. I looked up at Glory draping another across my shoulders. Ugh, I felt bad. Given my latest experiences with ‘feeling bad’, from getting shot to getting rad poisoning to getting battered in a rock crusher, this was oddly more mundane. Hot. Weak. Tired. Sick. That was it. I felt sick. I should report to medical…wait. Glory didn’t work in medical. That’s right. This wasn’t the stable.
Crap. Was I *that* fucked up?
“What’s up, doc?” I muttered, making her jump.
“Blackjack! I didn’t realize you were awake,” she said softly as she tugged the cloth off my face. “You have a slight postoperative infection. I think we’ve used every healing potion we could to try and fight it and get you back on your feet but…”
“Don’t worry about it,” I muttered with a groan. “I’m sure you’ll have me fixed up in no time, Glory.” I wiggled a rear hoof and smiled. “See…almost good as new. Though…I have to admit I’m curious…you’re what? A medical technician?”
“Something like that,” she muttered before she dabbed the sweat off my brow.

"So where does a medical technician learn to do surgery like that?" I asked quietly, looking up at her before I closed my eyes. Maybe it was the fever; I figured I'd have to be on death's door to put two and two together. Glory chewed on her lower lip as she looked away. I sighed and smiled. "You don't have to tell me, but I have to admit there are a lot of questions adding up."

Glory stroked her hoof along my mane. "I worked under a very good teacher. An exceptional teacher. I was…ugh, I hate the word…they all said I was a prodigy. I'd already completed most of my preliminary studies by the time I got my cutie mark. I was right on the track to go into full medical, studying under Dr. Morningstar."

"I could really go for studying under a Dr. Whiskey right now."

"Alcohol's not going to help much at this point. We used all of it trying to sterilize you and the equipment anyway."

"I'm sterilized? And here I was hoping to make Mom the first grandmare of Stable 99." Oh the colors the small gray pegasus could change! "Pity the whiskey's all gone." Then I peeked at her. "Got any scotch?"

She laughed, trying to hide her grin by rubbing her hoof across her nose. "Funny, that was his favorite method of anesthesia after dealing with his students. That or it was the cure for his lectures. But he was a very good teacher and a wonderful doctor. I was given the opportunity to observe surgeries that I'd normally have to wait years to watch. He even let me assist on minor operations." She bowed her head as she murmured softly, "I saw him perform a procedure on a spine trauma similar to yours."

"So what happened?" I noticed her wince, looking away. "Oh no. Don't you start getting all evasive on me now. You were really on a roll there, Glory." She gave me a small smile.

She opened and closed her mouth several times, struggling for what to say. Finally she just sighed. "Well. The Volunteer Corps happened. The movement had been building for years. The Enclave always tightly controls access to the surface, but there were hundreds of students and faculty at the academy that wanted to do more. There were several petitions to the pegasus council. Finally the Volunteer Corps was established." She sighed softly. "Dr. Morningstar was…well…not a supporter of the Corps. He'd been to the surface with science teams."

Glory sighed, closing her eyes as she looked out the filthy windows.

“We had a terrible fight. Absolutely terrible. I told him he was rude, callous, and monstrous for keeping his skills to the pegasi. He called me an idealistic fool destined for a pointless death.”

“Ouch,” I muttered.

“Yes, well, he tried to mend our relationship afterwards, but I’m such an idiot sometimes. I was quite turned off by the attitude. Pegasi I knew for years accused us of being Dashites and turning our backs on the Enclave.” She looked so… angry. It wasn’t an expression I’d seen on her often.

“Dashite? I’m guessing that’s a bad thing.” Given I was sick with an infection, I really didn’t want to risk pissing off my doctor. Still, this was the most I’d gotten out of her in… ever!

Her scowl faded, but the hard frown remained. “Yes, it is. Some ponies leave the Enclave. They don’t like the rules. A few flee to the surface to avoid punishment for their crimes. Others do it out of admiration for Rainbow Dash.” She gave a little shiver. “It is an unpleasant prospect. A few find feral clouds to settle in. Most are forced to the surface. Once you’re a Dashite, you are banned from the Enclave forever. Worse is the shame you bring to your family. Parents can lose positions. Siblings can become pariahs. It’s not something that should be done lightly.” There was a firm certainty in her voice that I’d never before heard from the petite pegasus.

“Have you known any Dashites?” That question had been a mistake. I’d never seen Glory looking… well… like P-21. “How are the Volunteer Corps different?”

“We wanted to change the rules, not break them. Our laws aren’t carved in stone. Clouds change. So should laws that aren’t needed any more. I think Thunderhead just let us come down to end the annoyance, but the point is they let us.” She closed her eyes and said solemnly, “Rainbow Dash was a fine pony whose heart was in the right place, but whose head wasn’t. Had she waited twenty years, just twenty years, she could have changed so much.” She then looked at me with a very odd smile. “She was a phenomenal pony. She and her friends. But she was a bit of an idiot.”

“Oh, see. I must be getting better,” I said with a grin. “I think that was a crack at me.” I’d had enough of angry Glory. I hadn’t believed she had angry in her.

“”W… what? No, I’d never. You’re… I mean…well…you’re phenomenal as well, Blackjack.” She grinned nervously as I gave her the look, and then she sighed and added ruefully, “And,

occasionally…you can be an idiot too. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Everypony knows I'm not a smart pony," I said as I relaxed against the mattress. "I just wish I could have saved one. Even one. But Lancer killed them all." Glory didn't look sad, though; she looked confused. Then she brightened.

"Oh no, he didn't." Blink. What was this? "Sekashi and her filly Majina both survived. They're injured, and it was touch-and-go a bit with Majina, but they'll survive." Glory smiled at me. "Lancer was a murdering monster, but even he couldn't make thirteen fatal shots in ten seconds flat."

I could have kissed her, except that that would have required standing. And kissing. "I…thank you for telling me." I chuckled, closing my eyes and thinking of the bony bastard shuffling the cards. You don't get two. "He still has eleven to answer for," I said, taking a deep breath. You don't get two, you bony bastard. "I'd like to talk to them later. Right now, do you think I could take a nip into Macintosh's memory orb? My back is killing me."

"Ah…sure. And I'll take a look at your dressings while you're out," she said as she went to my bags, withdrew the orb, and pressed it to my horn. I smiled as I made the connection, looking forward to seeing the stars again. It was so different from looking up at the sky. It was…peaceful.

oooOOOooo

Not peaceful! Not peaceful! Get me down! Get me down now! I was flying and couldn't close my eyes as I snapped and banked through the smoky air. Bullets buzzed and popped in the air as monsters that were half bird and half giant cat yawed and cut back and forth behind me. I bit the bridle in my mouth as my wings snapped and I made a flip in the air. Facing backwards and upside down, one of the eagle creatures flew across my vision, and it felt almost like I had entered the stillness of S.A.T.S. The rifles at my sides let out a stream of leaden death interspersed with red fire. Burning, the eagle creature tumbled towards the ground below.

The ground way *way* below. A ground that became far far closer as the body I was in pulled his…his? -- Holy shit…*that* was definitely a his! -- legs and raced for the ground with the other eagle critter on his ass. Definitely not feeling much in common with this host right now! If I could have thrown up, cried, or wet myself, I'd have given

all three a shot. A blue pegasus below suddenly powered straight up at me. She was going to hit!

At the last possible moment she rolled left and my host rolled right. They passed by each other so close their hooves clapped together. Then she unloaded a stream of her own automatic fire as soon as her guns passed my host's tail. The bursts tore into the eagle creature, and it banked away smoking and racing for cover.

"I hate when griffins get away," the blue pegasus mare said with a grin as she looked at him. I gave a shrug and she nodded, "Yeah, yeah. There's always more. Let's get back to position. Zebras want something out here bad," she said, and we moved off.

Together we dove back towards the ground. I could see what she meant. We were flying over no pony's land and there was a zebra army pushing its way into the pony lines. Dragons swooped and looped towards the south; it seemed almost as if they were looking for something.

We landed at a concrete fortification atop a hill. A dozen or so ponies held off ten times that in zebra attackers. A huge gray pony swung a multi-barreled weapon in a socket back and forth, sending a killing stream of lead down the hill and into the enemy. "Eat it you bitchessss!" he roared in glee as the chain of bullets rapidly disappeared into the weapon. "Twisssssst! Reload!" he yelled.

A red-maned mare with a buzz cut ducked down and ran to the gun's spent ammo feed box with a fresh box in her mouth. She kicked the almost-empty container aside and dropped the new one in its place. He took his hooves off the trigger toggles, his teeth champing impatiently. Flicking the lid off, she pulled out the end of the ammo belt with her teeth and with practiced ease used her hooves to latch it to the end of the one trailing from the gun. "All set!" she called out.

"Thanks!" he shouted as the gun started to fire its raking line of hot metal again. "Die, you striped mooootherfuckaaas!" the gray pony shouted in glee as he painted them with lead.

"No problem," the crème mare said with a grin. She looked completely out of place with most of these ponies, being perhaps half the age of some and wearing thick glasses held together with duct tape. Yet despite the bullets and rattle of the minigun, she looked excited. As she passed the pegasus I was in, she said, with a snicker and a nod to the minigun-wielding stallion, "Such a badass, isn't he, Stonewing." I heard my host snort and felt his wide grin.

A yellow earth pony buck with a headset and so much equipment on his back that he resembled a camel or something was fumbling with what looked like the most awkward PipBuck I'd ever seen; it was almost as large as his lower foreleg. "Command wants us to pull back to position 210. The weather monitoring station."

"Shouldn't we fall back, then?" asked a sober-sounding buck draped head to hoof in a flak jacket. I couldn't even make out his face under the oversized helmet he wore. Unfortunately, my host barely glanced at him.

The blue pegasus looked over at a corpse in the corner. "Well, our officer can't confirm the order with a hole through his head." A big gold bar (now with a hole in it) decorated his helmet. Yeah, it sort of screamed 'shoot me'. The pegasus mare just snorted, "Forget what Command says. Half the time I don't know who our command really is."

"We need to follow the chain of command, Jetstream," Flak Jacket said in a low voice as he glared at the blue pegasus.

"What does the big guy say?" Twist asked.

I'd expected everypony to look over at the maniac with the chaingun. Instead, all of us, including the maniac, looked over to the left edge of the fortification, where a big red buck stood in a battle saddle mounting an automatic rifle and a belt-fed shotgun. He chewed on a grass stem as he looked down at the advancing zebra forces. "Anope," he said lazily. "We just got here. I reckon we oughta stick around."

"All right, Big Macintosh." Twist looked at the pony in all the electronic gear. "You heard 'im! Tell them we're pinned or busy or something!" She hopped to the edge while still remaining low, then pushed a helmet up above the parapet. The metal jerked as rounds struck it. Twist looked at the impact holes carefully. "Ooo…I'd say a hundred yards out," she said as she grinned at my host.

Why was she looking at m--EEEEEEEE!? I was back in the air with the blue pegasus and we were cutting our way through the sk--no, the sky was definitely farther above things to run into. The male I was in spun, dove, and strafed along a low ridge at the foot of the hill. I couldn't see anything, but suddenly zebras shimmered into being as the snipers' invisibility cloaks flickered. From atop the hill came a steady pour of fire. Not frantic, though they were drastically outnumbered. They became a rock that the zebra sea broke upon.

And the foundation of that rock wasn't the hill itself or the

fortifications. It was Big Macintosh. He moved constantly but did not retreat or hide behind cover. He never swore or shouted at the enemies fighting their way up. With the rifle he fired precise and disciplined bursts of fire. When the enemy came too close, the shotgun would come into play with a deadly barrage of shells. Some zebras, running more swiftly than I thought physically possible, attempted to attack him with their bare hooves! Yet Big Macintosh remained atop that hill and took them down with awe-inspiring discipline and courage. Some ponies were wounded. Some ponies died. But while Big Macintosh stood, they would not break, even as the zebra line crawled closer and closer to their fortifications.

That small band of ponies returned fire and death against twenty times their number. Stealth cloaks were of little use against the minigun, but even the minigun couldn't fire everywhere at once; some managed to sneak all the way up to the fortifications. I was amazed to see Twist, the smallest, leap on them in furious hoof-to-hoof combat rather than let them attack her comrades. A white unicorn stood like a noble prince facing a monstrous horde as the guns in his battle saddle were supplemented by a pair of elegantly wrought pistols. I had to learn *that* trick! A black unicorn hardly moved at all as her rifle picked off zebra officers with disturbing accuracy.

These were heroes I could not have imagined. This was valor and courage I could never hope to match. I was so in awe of what I glimpsed that I forgot my fear of heights and the sky. Even my host and Jetstream amazed me. Remembering it was not actually me flying, I marveled at their skill and grace and peril. Jetstream was faster, my host stronger. I had more of those griffins try and attack, only to have Jetstream pick them off while their attentions were on me.

Eventually, the enemy was actually forced back down the hill, and I landed back atop it next to the other pegasus. "That was super, Jetstream," Twist said as she reloaded our ammo drums. She grinned around a peppermint stick lodged in her teeth. "Want one, Stonewing?" Stonewing, apparently the pegasus I was in, nodded enthusiastically.

The blue pegasus smiled and chewed hers happily. "Thanks…those are so good. When do you find time to make 'em?" I'd have liked the recipe myself. That was good eatin'! Of course, I couldn't cook to save my life, but it's the thought that counts.

"Eh. It's a complete mystery," she said with a grin, then looked over at a unicorn staring through a scope down the hill. "You want some, Psalm?" My host put his wing in front of Twist, shaking his head.

The pegasus beside me looked sad as we looked over at the black unicorn staring downhill, her lips moving softly. She made slow, almost mechanical, shots with a long-barreled rifle. BLAM! "Forgive me Luna, for I have sinned: I have taken the life of another." BLAM! "Forgive me Celestia, for I have sinned: I have taken the life of another." BLAM! BLAM BLAM BLAM…each death came with a plea for forgiveness in a hopeless whisper.

I was seeing the forging of the Wasteland before my very eyes, one crushed soul at a time. Well…Stonewing's eyes…ugh! These memory orbs were confusing!

"How'd they get so close to the Hoof? We should have intercepted them long before they got here," Jetstream asked as she watched them reorganizing their lines for another attack.

"Dragons. Brimstone and a dozen more managed to carry an entire legion with them," said the handsome unicorn who reminded me of Prince Splendid, save for the emerald eyes and mane, and wore an automatic rifle on each side. I would have killed to know how he looked so delicious covered in mud and blood.

"But why *here*, Vanity? They're not pressing towards anything!" Jetstream protested. "I thought they were going for the clinic but they seem to care more about these hills. Setting up a foothold for a bigger invasion?"

"Stop trying to think like an officer, Jetstream. You don't have enough brain damage," Twist said as she looked downhill once more. "So are we staying, big guy?"

All eyes went to Big Macintosh, who calmly chewed his grass stem. He gave a long slow nod. "Ayep. Figger they want this hill pretty bad. They're gonna have ta pay fer it."

Looking at all the zebra bodies on the hillside, that was a hell of a price.

The pony with the electrical equipment perked his ears. "Um… Command again. They want us to *hold* the hill now. Shadowbolts are inbound. ETA two minutes. All pegasi are to form up and give support."

"Shadowbolts? They must be targeting the dragons. There's a big one south of here." Jetstream looked at my host with a lazy little

grin. “Well let’s go ahead and give Rainbow Dash a hoof. You gonna try and get her autograph again, Stone?” My host nodded again, grinning eagerly.

“I tell you, I read in Stud magazines that Dash is all about the fillies. You’re wasting your time,” the big gray pony said with a lazy chuckle.

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” Twist asked with a scowl.

“Nah. But I kiss yours.” Twist bristled and for a moment I was sure she was about to tackle the gray pony that was twice her size and age!

“Could you two please stop?” Flak Jacket muttered in irritation. Given that he was carrying a lot of grenades, I personally didn’t want to see his bad side.

“He’s right. Knock it off, Doof,” Big Macintosh said softly, and instantly all of them stopped and returned to the fortification. “Their big push is comin’ soon. Jet. Stone. Get goin’. Back up the Shadowbolts and take out those dragons before they get here.”

“You just be here when we get back. How can we be Macintosh’s Marauders without Big Macintosh?” Jetstream asked before the pair crouched and flew off in unison. Dozens of pegasi from other units further east were rising as well, forming into long wings. I really wished I could close my eyes right now, but from Stonewing’s grin this was the time of his life.

Then they met the dragons. Fire and armored griffins broke the pegasus lines into snapping, screaming combat. The largest dragons had riders giving rifled air support! This was insane, and apparently a new challenge for the pegasi. They seemed at a loss of what to fight first. Griffins? Zebra snipers? The dragons spewing flame? For a minute or two I was certain that I was about to witness a rout.

Is that a rainbow?

The rainbow streak tore straight from Hoofington flanked by lines of crackling thundercloud. Below I had seen a squad of ponies fight like heroes. Now I saw nine pegasi who fought like goddesses--no. Not plural. Singular. As I watched, the nine never broke formation into smaller groups, as we had. The pegasus mare trailing a rainbow raced across the face of a dragon, blasting it with her guns. The next two did the same. And the next. And the next. And the last pair. The explosive shells of the concentrated fire blew the dragon’s skull to pieces. Slowly it wheeled over and dumped the snipers into

the air. Okay, I really didn't want to see that!

Wherever the rainbow went, the shadowy thunderclouds followed. If their formation broke, it reformed the instant they passed the obstacle. Whatever the rainbow mare shot, the others followed suit. I had never imagined such coordination or unity! They were not invincible, though. As they began to attack the largest dragon I could have imagined, one three times the size of the mutant we'd killed, two were caught in its fiery breath. Now seven, they closed ranks and never let up the attack.

"Stone!" I dimly heard the shout of warning. Then something struck Stonewing's head with an immense blast of pain and he fell spinning into darkness.

oooOOOooo

My eyes popped open, and I let out a gasp for air followed by a groan as my body reminded me that now was no time for strenuous activity. I was just glad I could move all my hooves. "You were out for a while," Dusty drawled softly, the sand colored pony sitting beside the bed. "Last time we couldn't keep you in the memory. This time I couldn't snap you out of it."

"She gave me the wrong memory," I groaned as I lifted the orb and looked at its swirling light. "They need to find a way to slap labels on these things."

"Afraid we all got bigger problems. You got only a couple hours before all hell arrives. Redbeard's found out yer here and wounded and I think every yahoo with a rifle is on their way. Got to get you outta here before then."

"What about you and the Pecos?"

"Don't worry about that. Your bounty is the only thing giving Sidewinder a chance at keeping most of the Pecos under him to try and take this place. With you gone and the freed ponies armed, I think we'll fight him off. Especially if I offer to hire 'em on." She chuckled and then shook her head. "If we get a few hundred bounty hunters after you…then things get impossible." She coughed and pulled out a crude mouth-drawn map. "Way I see it, your best bet is to follow the rails west, skirt between the Everfree Forest and the badlands, and come up through Ponyville. Heard somepony cleared out a healthy bunch of the raiders that live in those parts. From there you can get to New Appleloosa or try to get into Tenpony

Tower." She looked at the map and frowned. "Should take about a month but…"

"I'm not spending a month just to run to Manehattan," I said with a groan as I tried to rise to my hooves. Emphasis on tried. Oh wasn't that a mistake.

"Maybe you haven't realized yet, but you're half dead and well on your way to becoming all dead. The slaves you freed here idolize ya, but they're just about a hundred and fifty or so folk against every greedy son of a gun that ever crawled outta their momma lookin' for caps. That'd be a lot."

"I didn't say stay here," I said with a groan as I looked at the map. Lots would be coming from the north following the Sunset Highway. Others would be coming west from Flank and Paradise. "What's the other way?" I asked as I pointed at the rails going towards the Core. "Somepony mentioned rail tunnels."

"I can shoot you now. It'll be easier. You'd need an armed escort to get through the tunnels. Feral ghouls are all over down there. Radiation. Taint. The boss sent trains through there only on account he didn't want Gorgon petrifying him." Then she frowned. "Thing is, there's not much else that way either. Chapel's the only community, and I doubt they even have radios. There's other places you can hole up, too. Even a stable, or so I heard." Really…I had to admit I was curious. Terrified, too. Not something to mention to P-21 just yet.

"If we follow the train rails, we might be able to slip out with nopony the wiser. Let in a few bounty hunters to see I've gone. Let 'em chase me to Ponyville if they want."

"Funny. Does being sick raise yer smarts or something?" she said.

"Smart would be your plan," I said. "Well, been in bed long enough. Best get to my hooves…" And I tried to rise again. Again, tried was the operative word. A more accurate way to describe the situation would be 'moving one's limbs and groaning in pain'.

"Okay. I take back the smarts part," she sighed, scowling at me. "It's going to take forever to carry you out of here at this rate."

"Actually, I have an idea…" I said with a little smile.

* * *

Things were coming together. There were gaps in the plan, but I thought we could work through them. I was also able to stand. Walking... not so much. My fever had broken, but my back still felt like a hammer had been used on it... which technically would have

been preferable to a bullet. P-21 had shown me the quarter inch-steel plate from my armor the last time he'd stopped by. It'd been bent in a 'U' around the impact.

I'd taken the time to write a little letter to Bottlecap about Dusty Trails and the change of ownership of Brimstone's Fall. With some luck, she might be willing to cut them a discount in exchange for first dibs at the mine. Magical gemstones like these were in huge demand, given how many magical weapons seemed to be floating around the Hoof. All that was left for me to do was wait for…ah. I heard the door close below. Time to get moving. My mane was starting to itch from being in one place for too long.

Funny. They were taking their time getting up here. Whoever was on the stairs walked with a slow, ponderous gait that I didn't like at all. A raspy laugh rose up the stairs as the door to the boss's office was slowly pushed open. The brown earth pony mare swayed as she stood in the door. I relaxed. "Oh, hey. How are you feeling, Tumbleweed?"

Those were the stupidest words ever to come out of my mouth… today. No. Something was very wrong as she swayed on her hooves. Tears ran down her cheeks as she slumped, and the most horrible laughing, sobbing noise rose in her throat. There was blood smeared across her lips…fresh and red. Bite marks covered her legs. Hooves shook as she stared at me with eyes that were already yellowing.

"Help…me…" she begged, giggled, sobbed... all at once. I'd gone through my own share of the shakes, but I'd never seen another pony losing their mind before my eyes. *Weeks to months for 'mental decay' my ass, Glory!* Tumbleweed was falling apart in front of me, bloody froth creeping down her chin. She twitched continuously as her pinprick pupils jerked away from meeting my eyes. I started hoping this was some strange card game dream rife with metaphors. If so, I'd pass on whatever fucked-up wisdom my subconscious was trying to dredge up!

By the wonders of adrenaline, I shifted and prayed I didn't paralyze myself. I slowly pushed myself onto my side to face her, hooves pulled up and ready. I tried to speak nice and calmly.

"Tumbleweed. Where's Glory? You need Glory." That was a lie. She needed a lot more than Glory. She needed a prayer and a bullet; damn me, I couldn't give her both.

"Turkey…I like turkeys... tastes good…" she whimpered, and I

could only lay there in horror as I saw her raise her leg and suddenly spasm, biting down hard. As fresh blood spilled, I watched as she started to swallow. “Tastes…good…tastes so good…” she said a moment later. She gave one last sob, choking in the back of her throat. “Help me…” she whimpered before resuming giggling, long and slow, but building. My magic grasped around for something I could use as a weapon. Empty Med-X needles. Plastic jars of Buck. Fucking pillows. And as much as I wanted to help Tumbleweed, I had an even more horrifying thought: had she already come across Glory? What if some of that blood wasn’t hers?

That giggle rose higher and higher. Her entire body was shaking now. “Tastes so fucking good…fucking good…Yeah!” It was like watching somepony dying of radscorpion venom, only when she expired I was next on the menu! Sweet Goddesses, if I’d known I’d have let her die from the poison! I tried lifting the terminal on the desk, but it was bolted down. I yanked the drawers open one after the next as I looked for something lethal. A knife. A pipe. A frigging pencil. Anything! My magic rifled through each frantically. Wait! What was this?

I yanked out a clipboard covered in two hundred year old finance information. Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck…She lunged for the bed, bloody mouth wide and screaming in glee.

Rolling onto my back hurt like mad, but it was the only thing that let me push her away as she tried to turn me into lunch. Unlike other raiders, she wasn’t half-starved and raw. She was quite a healthy pony, and she was trying her hardest to chomp on my belly. I pushed her snapping, giggling, biting maw aside with my telekinesis and forelegs, but it was so hard. Every motion made it feel like a drill was working in my spine. And if it was true that she had a disease…rabid raider Blackjack! No thank you!

Right now though, she was stronger than me. I’d die for my baton…my gun…which was funny given I was about to die lacking them! All I had was my telekinesis, but I had to have something to use it *on*. It wasn’t like you could just shove telekinesis at something... right? I stared at her. “Tumbleweed. Please stop… please…” Oh don’t make me try this…“Please!” This was not an experiment I wanted to do right now! I almost didn’t want it to work. My magic focused from pushing against her head to pushing just one single point. There was no way this could work. No way. Crap...

Fuck it. I shoved my focused little cone of telekinesis right into her eye. She screamed and fell back, covering her head with her hooves as she writhed in agony. Finally she stilled, clutching the socket as clear, faintly yellow fluid crept down her cheek. “It hurts…it hurts…my head hurts…I’m so hungry... so angry…please... ” she begged as she stared at me with her remaining pinprick pupil.

“Tumbleweed,” I panted, my breath hissing as I nearly hyperventilated. Oh Celestia, did that ever sting! “Have you ever eaten meat?”

“No…” She started to giggle again as she rocked towards me. “But I’d love to!”

I focused all my telekinesis into another bolt and rammed it into her head. Still not enough. I glanced at my PipBuck. Would it even work? Looking at Tumbleweed, I entered S.A.T.S., and to my surprise--and a little bit of concern--I was able to queue up two attacks: ‘Telekinetic Bullet’. My horn flashed twice and I watched the magic augur into her skull. The second time, the tiny cone of magic burst out the rear of her head. She jerked and spasmed before she slowly slid down to the floor beside my bed.

I prayed it was just my wishful thinking she looked so happy to be dead. I looked at the bites on my forelimbs, feeling a new cold worry settle in my gut. I brought up the ridiculously long list of things to worry about and scribbled the newest one on it. Then I sighed. Nothing to do about that now.

Slowly, I rolled onto my side, my horn throbbing as if I’d just been smacking myself with my own baton. “Not going to be trying that again soon,” I said softly as I looked down at the mare’s still form. Sweet Celestia, what was hell was going on here?

* * *

There are times, rare and momentous, when Blackjack, daughter of Gin Rummy, granddaughter of who knows, has a good idea. Perhaps the stars overhead were aligned just so beyond the clouds. Maybe I was finally getting a little karma in my favor. Perhaps it was even something so radical as me getting smarter. Rather than try and get a whole flatcar together to haul my butt out of Brimstone’s Fall, we simply rolled up two flatbed minecarts. The tracks in the gem mine had the same gauge as the rail lines, and the minecarts could be pulled fairly easily by only one pony each. Dusty

and two other unicorns carefully lifted me up and carried me down to the first floor of the administration building. I was glad to see that P-21 had gotten their collars off.

I slumped, my legs shaky and my back achy, wishing to know why I could slug down healing potions right and left and they didn't do anything. Healing potions should heal! My eyes passed over a framed news clipping: 'Officer Softheart clears Brimstone's Fall of involvement in Angel of Death killings. Investigation continues.' A unicorn mare in a uniform shook hooves with some manager-type pony. Personally, I thought 'Softheart' vs. 'Angel of Death' to be a bit of a mismatch.

Dusty was leading the way with my duffel bag slung across her shoulders. She still hadn't said much about Tumbleweed. I sensed the relationship between the two had been more than simple affiliation with the Pecos. Now that I was leaving though, she started to talk. "How could that happen? She wasn't a raider. She wasn't even a good Pecos! She didn't even eat meat!" She stomped her hooves in aggravation. "A week ago she was in Flank whining about her salad being all... wilty! What kind of Pecos whines about their salad and then turns around and tries ta eat themselves!?"

"Glory thinks there's something that causes raiders around the Hoof. Some disease that turns their brains all spongy." I swallowed as I was levitated through the meeting room. Thankfully, whatever Tumbleweed had said about turkeys, Glory had been seeing to the injured zebras. More's the pity. If only something could have been done. Get two zebra back, pay one Tumbleweed.

"Okay, stop." I said as we reached the door. "Set me down."

"Down?" Dusty trails asked, then looked at the door. "Oh no. You think you're going to walk out of here in your condition? That is a whole new level of stupid, Blackjack." She coughed and muttered, "Besides, Glory would probably kill me if I let ya."

"Then you're surprised? Good," I said as I looked at the unicorns. It was the look. Slowly gravity took its hold. My hooves touched down; as I assumed my own weight, my legs started to feel like they would bend like wet clay. I was still standing, though. Standing was good. "Good. Mind stepping out just a second? I need to ask Dusty something." The two unicorns looked at me in worry before they stepped out.

I'd faced a pony abomination, a mutated dragon, a glowing ghoul pony, and being eviscerated. All of that was nothing compared to

the challenge of standing. “Good. Pass me the Buck?” Dusty looked stubborn. I looked…probably really pathetic. Fortunately, I’d saved her life, handed her one of the most productive gem mines in the Hoof, and stopped her friend from becoming an equicidal maniac (okay, so I did that by *killing* her friend, but still...).

She floated the bottle over and carefully unscrewed the cap. “You know, Glory warned us to only give it to you if you crashed.”

“Good. I’m about to crash,” I said as my legs shook. She floated a tablet to my mouth and I chewed the chalky tablet before swallowing. I could almost feel the sensation as the chem hit my stomach and then rapidly spread. The shaking stopped and I even felt, dare I admit it, better. “Now my barding.”

“I think you’re turning into a raider too,” she said as she pulled it out and draped it over my body. I was hot. My limbs, fortified by Buck, still felt like jelly as the armor settled around me. On top of everything else, said armor hurt like crazy as it was buckled in place. I searched my pockets and found a syringe of Med-X. ‘For all your hurting ouchies’. Boy did I have an ouchie. I jammed the needle into my leg and the fire between my shoulder blades dwindled somewhat. Now it only felt like I had rebar stuck there instead of one of Deus’s guns.

“Why are you doing this?” Dusty was clearly concerned and just a touch worried.

“Which do you think is better, everypony out there seeing me for the cripple I am, or everypony seeing me walk out of here on my own hooves?” I asked as I straightened. “Better yet, when the bounty hunters hear about it, hopefully they’ll think that maybe I’m just as dangerous as before and go the fuck home. I can do this. It’s just walking to the minecarts.”

“Well, that and dealing with the mine administrator,” she said with a little smile. “The ponies you freed wanted to give you a special parting present.”

Fucking what? Ohh! Maybe they were going to let me push the button down in the mine! Big red buttons should always do something amazing! But then the door opened and Glory stared up at both of us. Her lavender eyes widened and the gray mare stared at me. She then closed her eyes. “You are an idiot, Blackjack. Get on those carts before you die on your hooves in front of everypony!” she hissed as she stepped aside, giving Dusty a withering glare. The Pecos made herself busy looking at anything other than the glaring

pegasus.

That was a lot of ponies. The entire mine yard was filled with dozens of ponies. More than a hundred. Most had the worn look of slaves, but I picked out the Pecos with their hats and jackets. The few guards who'd joined the revolt were visible from their subdued expressions. I could tell it'd be a long time before they completely shed that past. I slowly made my way down the stairs, glad, despite the way my legs felt, to no longer feel the unicorns' telekinesis supporting me. If the sham were revealed I'd never shake most of the hunters off me.

Step. Step. Step. It was the longest walk of my life, longer than when my guts were dragging on the floor be…*do NOT think about that now, you moron!* The former slaves parted in front of me with expressions of awe and concern. There was no way I could hide the pain. I doubted I could hide the fever. I just had to hide the weakness. *Be strong.* I lifted my head and forced my lips to curl back.

The crowd exploded into cheers. I nearly fell over right then and there.

Reaching the two mine flatbeds, I was relieved to see that it wasn't much of a step. I climbed aboard and sat with relief. There was just enough room for one pony per flatbed, or two if they were cozy. P-21 looked at me from the second flatbed with a sigh, shaking his head. "You're amazing. Ridiculous, but amazing."

"Thanks. And I'm glad you were able to get the collars off them safely."

"I'm glad I didn't have any accidents while doing it," he answered with a strangely smug smile. "And I'm glad they won't be going to waste."

I looked back at him in worry. "What…you're going to use them in the mine?" I rubbed my twitching mane. There was something being set up on the one of the flatbed train cars. The crowd began to back away.

"Better," he said as the movement of the crowd revealed the fat pony. His forelegs were swollen to the size of melons and he'd been beaten till he looked like he was part bloatsprite. But what really chilled my blood, despite the heat, was the sight of him wearing dozens and dozens of explosive slave collars. "For justice."

Sweet Celestia, what the fuck made you think this up, P-21? Dusty smiled as she floated over the flimsy little shackle I'd busted off him

during the breakout. There was a shiny red button attached. "Thought it right you give the fucker a send-off he deserves."

I felt a further chill wash over me, despite the lingering fever. "Are…you…fucking…insane?" I whispered as softly as I could. P-21 jerked as if I'd just shot him in the face with a telekinetic bullet. The crowd went wild, stamping their hooves as they yelled his damnation. I stared at the pathetic, blubbering mass on the end of the car. He shook as if he was going to faint at any moment as he stammered for his mommy.

"I'm sorry, is there something to think about here? This buck is responsible for the death of possibly hundreds of ponies. He's been in charge of Brimstone for years!" P-21 said in a low voice. "He's hurt everypony here. Now they get justice!"

"This isn't fucking justice!" I hissed as I stared at him, unable to touch that button, unable to look away. "It's murder."

Now I regretted my show. If I'd appeared near death... no, that would have put the blood on somepony else's hooves. And he'd be just as dead.

P-21 would have killed me right then if he could. Cold rage burned in his eyes as he leaned towards me. "Do you know what fucking justice is? It's giving to others as is given to you." *Be kind.* "It's killing the fucker to make sure that she never does it again." *Be kind.* "It's making sure every bastard who even thinks of copying her crime hesitates because they know they might face the same punishment." *Be kind.* "It's what's fair!"

…be kind…

These ponies needed justice. Was this it? Killing him wouldn't bring anypony he had killed back. Would it even bring peace? Or would somepony else decide that it wasn't enough and drag one of the former guards up there next?

He was dead anyway. Send his broken body out the gate and the Wasteland would eat him. They'd track him down and lynch him. It wasn't any different in Stable 99; he'd be retired without hesitation. Recycled. If he was put on some kind of trial, what verdict would be returned besides guilty? How was this not justice? Just a week ago I wouldn't have hesitated. In fact, I probably would have been honored to push the nice red button.

... be kind…

Ante up.

"Listen!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I almost fell off the cart

as the entire world spun, and only Dusty's magic suddenly gripping me and stopping me from falling on my face preserved my illusion. Shouts faded away bit by bit as eyes turned upon me. "I know you want me to kill this pony. I know he deserves it. I know he's hurt you over and over again for his own gain."

I clenched my eyes shut, twisting my hooves against the metal beneath me. "A long time ago there was a war between ponies and zebras. I saw a memory of it not long ago. I saw the hate and the blood and carnage. Some ponies think the bombs ended it. But I disagree. This is a war that is still being fought today, only now we're fighting between ourselves. And every single time we kill, we keep it going."

I wondered if, when I finished, I'd be next. "I've learned of a pony from that time who realized what everypony else didn't. The war had to end, and if we were ever going to win it we would have to do better. Be better. Not better killers. Not more ruthless. We would have to be…kind.

"I'm not an executioner. I'm Security. If he'd threatened another I wouldn't stop fighting him till he gave up. If he threatened your lives I'd do all I could to end his. But like this…I can't give you what you want. I'm sorry." I floated the detonator back to Dusty Trails, who looked at me with an unfathomable expression. Contempt for my weakness? Pity? Respect? "I know I can't stop you from killing him. I know that many of you need this. But I'm begging you…please…be better. Be kind."

Before, I think that some of the freed slaves had actually fought with each other for the privilege of pulling the mining flatbeds. Only Glory and the zebra Sekashi pulled the squeaking vehicles out of Brimstone's Fall. Her filly walked quietly beside us. Cheers had been replaced by little mutters and hard looks. I'd tried to look the hero. I'd tried to be inspiring. I'd tried to be better. I'd forgotten just what the Wasteland did with heroes. I didn't look back.

Still, my words must have had some effect. They *were* kind. They were kind enough to let me get out of sight before pushing the button.

* * *

I hated the Wasteland. I hated that bony bastard dealing the cards and stacking the deck. I hated ponies, 'sane' ponies, killing other

ponies. Raiders at least had the excuse of holey brains. I hated P-21 for thinking that I'd want to kill the mine administrator like that. I hated being a coward. I hated being weak. If I'd just pushed the button, everything would have been better.

Be kind. What kindness was there in what I did? What did kindness even mean in the Wasteland? What was it other than a liability? I'd tried to be kind to P-21, and his leg had been shattered. I'd tried being kind to Glory, and I'd left her feeling abandoned. I want to be kind, Fluttershy. I want to be better. I want to be good. Because the alternative was to become the Wasteland. Cruel. Hard. Murderous.

I couldn't think about that fat bastard on the train car. I'm glad I only heard the explosion instead of seeing him turned to paint. I thought about Lancer. Was I really just a hypocritical coward? Lancer deserved to die. I wanted to kill him. But would I? Deus was a monster trying to hunt me down. He deserved to die. Was that justice? Vengeance? Or was it just the Wasteland trying to wiggle its way inside me and crush whatever good remained inside?

Good. Had I *ever* been good?

"I am reminded of a funny story," Sekashi said brightly as she looked over her shoulder. I admit, I hadn't paid very much attention to the zebra and her filly. She had a strange cutie mark: abstract lines that seemed to form a smiling face. Her green eyes looked back at me with a bright curiousness in them. I hadn't seen eyes like that in a long time. Without waiting for permission, the lithe yet strong zebra said, "Once upon a time, in my homeland there was a very good but very silly zebra. He wished for some fine shoes and paid well for them. Walking home, however, he lost a nail."

"'How terrible,' he cried out. 'How could I have lost it? Somepony will surely step upon it!' But he did not see the nail being picked up by another whose shoe barely clung to her hoof. He continued home, but soon the shoe came off entirely. It sailed through the crowd and struck a fleeing thief in the head. But he said, 'Oh no, my shoe hurt him. How terrible I am!' He limped home, and once there met his wife and three children. He was very sad. He had the shoes removed and let each of his children take them away. 'Oh wife, I am such a terrible husband. I have lost my shoes. I am a terrible zebra, for I hurt others. I am a terrible father, who gives only a shoe apiece to his children.'

"But his wife was a very clever wife, and the next day when he went out he found the mare who had needed his nail, and she

thanked him. If not for his nail, she would have lost her shoe as well. He thought that very strange, and as he walked he found the guards who thanked him for stopping the notorious thief by throwing his shoe. He thought this very odd as well. When he returned home, he found his lovely children playing with the shoes he had given them. They thanked him for the present.

"'My wife! What a strange day I have had. Zebras keep thanking me for helping them. But I am a terrible zebra. I do not know why they do as they do!' But his wife just nodded. 'Often it is the good we do not realize we do that matters more than the good we intend, husband.'" The zebra mare gave a long sigh with a smile over her shoulder back at me. "But of course he did not understand, for he was a very good but very silly zebra."

"I am sensing a moral," I said with a mirthless smile.

She looked at my lips carefully, but then gave an easy smile. Sweet Celestia how I wished I could smile like that again. "Ah, but that would ruin the story! So therefore it cannot have such a thing," she said with a prim nod. I chuckled despite myself.

"So, if I can ask, why did Lancer…do what he did?" I asked softly, hoping that it wasn't treading on sensitive hooves. The deaf zebra nearly tripped on a stone, yet she was so nimble on her hooves that I barely noticed her recovery.

"Ah. That is another funny story. Once upon a time there was a great king who ordered all his people to go forth and make great war against a terrible enemy. And so they did. It was great and it was terrible. And when it ended the king was slain, the enemy was slain, and all the armies of the world were slain. But afterwards, some who remained remembered the great king's order and so went out to do war with an enemy long past. And they marched left and they marched right and they raised their spears and shouted old cheers and all they came across they counted as their enemy. When they found other zebras they insisted they follow his orders as well. Any who refused were counted as the enemy. And so they fight a silly war against enemies of their own making for a great king long since fallen."

"That's not funny! That's terrible!" Glory protested. The zebra glanced at her, and Glory flushed as she spoke with exaggerated lip movement, "How can you call something so terrible like that silly?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps something is lost in the translation. Still, one might think such zebras to be quite foolish, and it is only fitting to

find fools funny. Why would they try so hard at their foolishness if they did not wish us to laugh at them?"

I couldn't imagine laughing at Lancer, but I had to admit that there was something phenomenally stupid about continuing a war two hundred years past. I chuckled despite myself. "So you were zebras who refused to fight? He killed you for that?"

"Oh no no no. There are many tribes that refuse to fight. So long as they bow and quiver, they are spared. My tribe's crime was infinitely worse," she said with a solemn expression as she glanced back at us. "Our crime was that we laughed at their foolishness. I suppose it was too much to hope that they would laugh as well. A fearsome fool is a fool still, and it is hard to fear something so funny."

"So when I meet Lancer again, I should laugh at him?"

"Can you imagine anything more terrible?" she countered. For a zebra like that, I had to conclude that I really couldn't.

"You seem incredibly perky for a slave," P-21 said sourly.

The zebra looked back at the blue pony in surprise. "I am kinky for a slave?"

The look on P-21's face was priceless as his eyes popped wide. "Perky, perky! Why are you so *happy*?!"

"Ah, I am sorry. I suppose I could think of many terrible things. Scowl. Weep. But I am alive. My daughter is alive. I may be hungry tonight and dead tomorrow, but for now I shall choose to think of better thoughts. They are fewer and all the more precious than those that are sad." P-21 looked away with a soft hiss.

Glory frowned back at him. "What is the matter with you, P-21? Don't you have any sensitivity at all?" He glared back at her.

'You know this right and wrong shit,' I'd once told him. Now I wasn't so sure. It was as if we were swapping places and he was becoming more and more reactive and I more and more reserved. Our friendship had barely set and already cracks were forming. I looked at him staring away with his worried blue gaze. What should I say? Tell him it was all right? Say he was wrong?

As the cart ground towards the northeast, towards Hoofington, I wished that somehow I could be smart enough to know what to say. But I am not a smart pony. I am not a kind pony. All I could hope was that I found a way to be a better pony.

The mining cart passed the weathered bones of a pony stretched out along the side of the tracks. Its frozen grin said quietly: ante up.

Footnote: Level Up.

Perk added: Intense Training - Your experiences traveling in the Wasteland have allowed you to add one to your Intelligence.

Quest Perk added: Telekinetic Bullet Spell (level one) - You may now attack enemies at close range with a bolt of telekinetic energy equivalent to a pistol.

Chapter 11: Peace

"Sweet Celestia, she's drunk!"

Blackness. Unending. Absolute. Unyielding.

And then there was light.

I found myself lying naked on a strange mattress in a strange room, a dingy and cramped room that smelled of wax and hay. "Easy," said a male next to me on the bed. "Don't panic." That was an incredibly stupid thing to say, because this seemed like an ideal time to panic. I opened my eyes, took in what looked like some sort of basement lit with a few candles and dressed in the usual Wasteland décor, and immediately kicked at the male sitting beside me.

I still had my PipBuck, so I entered S.A.T.S. and queued three telekinetic bullets at the black unicorn. Maybe it was all the sickness, injury, and disappointment I'd suffered, but for some reason I hesitated and used that moment of frozen time to get a good look at my captor. I didn't know exactly what to expect. Ravenous raider? Blistered and bloated bounty hunter? Downgraded Deus? Okay, definitely not the last one.

He looked, in fact, quite ordinary. His black coat sported numerous thin scars all along his body. Mane was a dirty white, tail too. He wore no barding and I couldn't see a gun. In fact, the PipBuck said he was a non-hostile yellow. His cutie mark was a strange outline of a pegasus with hooves stretched above her and wings wide, surrounded by a sunburst of rays of light. I'd almost blown the head off a completely unarmed, non-hostile buck. I could hear the bony bastard shuffling his cards in the back of my mind.

When time resumed I flopped back on to my seat and took a shaking breath. "Right! Don't panic. Who's panicking? Me? Psssh. I kill monsters and slay slavers. No panic here." I grinned like an idiot; he looked at me with definite concern. I took a deep breath and thrust out my hoof. "I'm Blackjack. Nice to meet'cha."

"Priest," he replied. "Likewise."

Priest, huh. What were the odds that he was religious?

"So. A few standard questions I like to ask when I wake up in a strange bed next to somepony," I said, then cleared my throat. "Where am I? Where are my friends? Where are my clothes? Where's the bathroom? Was I good? Is this going to get back to my mother?" Then I blinked and added one. "And why do I feel… better?" I still felt on the battered and bruised side of life, but the 'Celestia fucked my spine with a power drill' pain was gone.

To my relief, he smiled. Maybe not laughed, but smiled. If I ran into another stoic buck, I was going to shoot him on principle. Maybe not kill him, but he was getting shot! "That is quite a list. Does this happen often?"

"Oh, after the last couple of days…yeah. It's become policy."

"All right. First question: you are in Chapel." Then his lips curled. "But of course you already knew that from your PipBuck." I did? Fuck! I tried to look nonchalantly down at the screen. "Naturally, you're testing my honesty?"

"Of course. That's it precisely," I said softly before glancing down at the navigation tool. Sure enough…"Oh Celestia! How did I get way over here?" Chapel was right across the river from the southwestern side of the Hoof! That should have been two days walking, at least! "How long was I out? Why was I out?"

"I love answering questions, but if you keep tacking them on, we're never going to get out of bed," he said with an arch of his brow. "And I don't know about you, but I'm hungry." I had to admit that I was too. Ravenous, in fact. Walking ahead of me, he opened the cellar doors and stepped out into the drizzle. Did it ever stop raining in Hoofington?

Chapel consisted of four or five small buildings circumscribed by a wooden picket fence. Each house had raised growing beds covered by tarps and canvas sheets. The post office across the street seemed to hold most of the life in the town, as I saw several young mares stroll inside. In fact, the ponies caring for the vegetables were young too. Aside from Priest, I didn't see a single adult anywhere. "Okay... " Then I spotted the raggedy blue flag with a rearing white filly, fluttering weakly in the breeze. "Oh! Crusaders! This is where the Crusaders live?" Then I winced. "Oh, yeah. Adding it to the list."

"You must have quite a collection of questions already," he replied

with a chuckle. *You have NO idea.* "As for your second question, about your friends, you were found alone. So I'm afraid I don't know where they are."

That brought me short. "What? They're…" I felt…I'm not sure how I felt. It was like all of a sudden two pieces of my insides had been yanked up into my throat. "Oh, shit…er…horseapples," I amended, looking at the black unicorn, giving a small smile. Yeah, that was the best I could fake; hopefully I'd hidden at least *some* of the extent of my distress.

His amusement shifted to concern. "I'm sorry. When the Crusaders found you, you were unconscious and alone. They recognized your security barding and carried you here. That patch convinced them; not many ponies wear Crusader patches. Unfortunately, your equipment was more than they could carry, and they had to hide it there instead. So as for your clothes, they are back where they found you, beside the tracks." He arched a brow. "Do you really need to go to the bathroom?"

"No. And you don't need to answer if I was decent or about my mom. Stupid questions…" I muttered. My friends were gone. Dead? Oh, why did I just think that? My head felt like I was looking into the sky. I sat down hard on my rump. "Shit. I…sorry. I know you're not supposed to swear around clergy ponies." I admit, I hadn't liked Stable 99's spiritual leader; she went around killing fun faster than the security ponies did, but I respected her. It wasn't easy, addressing the worries of a few hundred neurotic mares.

"Glory was just…she was starting to talk to me. Opening up." I didn't feel like crying. I didn't feel angry. There was just this hole where she'd been that was now filled with a great unknown. "She told me about her teacher. And her ideas about what causes raiders. And…there was more." Priest just gave an understanding smile as he waited.

And P-21. I'd called him insane! I'd said he was a murderer for setting up the execution of the mine boss. He'd been mad. Angry. I'd hurt him. I'd hurt him, and I don't think I apologized. And then there were Sekashi and her child. "I've got to find them. I have to. What happened?" I asked as I stood, looking at him.

"The Crusaders found you by some train tracks to the north. You were alone with your belongings scattered. I noted your injuries, but I suspect the culprit was this." He tugged a ragged plastic baggy from his saddlebags with his mouth. A memory orb glowed softly

within. I reached out with my magic, but he tugged the bag back and muttered, “Don’t!” around the mouthful. He dropped it at his hooves. “It’s trapped.”

“How do you *trap* a memory orb?”

“Carefully. When the war was at its peak, memories could no longer be left accessible to any unicorn that happened across them. Zebras had unicorn sympathizers. The Ministry of Morale, together with the Ministry of Peace, eventually devised methods of extracting and sealing dangerous or sensitive memories away. The process was so difficult that it was used only for the most critical memories, but with constant zebra infiltration and sabotage, the technique of locking memories became vital here. Too many secrets in this city.” He nudged the orb with a hoof as he looked down at it. “It has a password: some thought, or idea, or name you need to be thinking of.”

“And if you don’t have the password?” I asked, looking at the orb like it was a bomb.

He shook his head and sighed. “Most of the time, nothing. But if you try to force contact, it can render you unconscious. Place you in an endless nightmare. Even kill you.”

What the *fuck*? “Kill me? Are you serious? How can a memory kill me?”

“Your mind resides in your brain. Your brain keeps your heart beating. I’ve never encountered such an orb, but I’ve heard of them.”

“Yeah. Okay. No more memories for me,” I muttered, kicking the little bag away from me.

“Don’t say that,” he replied with a small frown, walking to it and returning it to me. He looked…sad. “Please, don’t say that. Memories are more than experiences. They’re lessons. They teach us things that others have gone through.” He cocked his head. “Is there any sense in suffering through the past twice? Have you not learned something from an orb?”

I sighed and looked away. Would I have ever seen the stars with my own eyes? Those beautiful little gems in all that black? Would I know love if I’d never seen it breaking in another mare’s heart? Or seen the courage and valor of ponies now long dead? “I guess…”

“Forewarned is forearmed,” he said calmly. “Fortunately, I’m decent with a number of spells and I was able to disconnect you from the orb. I also took advantage of your unconsciousness to heal

you with magic."

Wait? This was magic? "I've been slogging down magical healing potions right and left and I've never felt like this!" Well, that wasn't true. The regeneration talisman had done a dandy job on me. "How long have I been out? I feel like I've been sleeping for a week." Aside from the lingering soreness between my shoulders, I felt ready to hunt down my friends.

"A few hours. So you don't know about the Enervation?" he asked as his horn floated two healing potions out of his bags. One was a typical watery purple; the other looked as vivid as wet paint.

"That's one of those ten cap words I never picked up in the stable," I replied, and pointed a hoof at the bright purple vial. "What's that one? A super mega healing potion?" Maybe I could get it for when I found P-21.

He chuckled, "Comparatively, perhaps, but they're both the same kind of potion. The fainter potion is simply a week older."

"Wait…so what happened to it? That Enervation thingy?" I guessed, and felt pleased when he nodded. Miracle of miracles, could I be learning?

"During the war there were countless projects and studies. All the strange energies and magics scarred the landscape, even before the bombs fell. There's contamination deep within the very soil of Hoofington. For miles around the city, the Enervation saps the life and magic of any living thing. In some places there are Enervation fields strong enough to kill a pony. You won't see a thing. You'll simply start to die." Seeing my horrified expression, he added, "Your best defense is to get away as quickly as possible." Dying from bullets and raiders and monstrous vermin was one thing, but now I had to worry about keeling over from invisible magic?

"Can my PipBuck detect it? Is there an Enervation sensor on this thing?" I said as I waved it at him.

"No. But since the Enervation saps healing magic, keep an eye on your healing potions. If they go clear, that means the Enervation's drained them enough to make them useless. If the potion starts turning other colors, gets cloudy, or starts to smell, run, and lose the potion. It'd only make you sick. And if you start bleeding from head to hoof, get away."

"Why does *anypony* actually *live* here?" I asked, then glared at the towers of Hoofington. The blackened spires and scorched walls seemed to ask the same question. From the green light glowing

from the depths of the city, it felt almost as if the broken towers had a special loathing of anypony within a hundred miles.

"Why do you think life is so tough and desperate here? Almost anypony who can leave the Hoof does. Those who can't live in the safest pockets they can find. But there are also great opportunities to be had here. Weapons and armor. Lost technology. Mineral wealth. Secrets. Things worth risking lives for, apparently. Some ponies come thinking they'll strike it big. Then they get a cut on the hoof, an infection, and wonder why their healing potions no longer work. The strong prey on the weak and the land dies a little more each day." He bowed his head solemnly. "Celestia protects. Luna defends."

Do they? I didn't see it. I never saw it. In 99, Hymnal usually went on and on about how Celestia had appointed the Overmare, how we should have faith in the Overmare. That questioning the Overmare was like questioning the divine Princesses themselves. I'd seen exactly what came of that kind of blind loyalty.

"It's just…ugh. I hate discovering one bad thing after the next. First it was raider disease. Then magical radiation poisoning. Now it's trapped memory orbs and invisible zones of death. Hoofington needs an instruction guide for idiots like me. With big print and bright colorful pictures!" I stomped my hooves hard, and then noticed his smile. "What?"

* * *

"Why didn't I have this a week ago?" I muttered as I lay on a mattress on the floor of the post office; in front of me was an open copy of 'The Wasteland Survival Guide: Hoofington Edition'. Dangers of scavenging! What's that beeping noise? Robots and you. The who's who of the Hoof. Information that would have come in so handy over the last few days lay right before my eyes. "This should be stapled outside every stable for any hornhead that goes racing out into the Wasteland!"

While I did want to track down P-21, Glory, and Sekashi, Priest had pointed out that my friends knew I was coming in this direction. Chapel being the only community near the rail line, it was a good bet that they'd come here if they could. If we were all wandering around looking for each other, we might never find one another. As I'd read the book I'd told him what I could; he'd proven

a wonderful listener and conversationalist as I'd outlined my last few days to him. An inner voice, sounding very much like P-21, muttered that he was probably a foal-fondling cannibal who sacrificed ponies to his idols of Celestia and Luna. It seemed impossible that the Wasteland would allow somepony nice to exist.

The Crusaders had proven to be quite curious about me. Why was I lying beside the tracks? Was I a super mutant raider bandit Wasteland walker who could shoot deathbeams from my glowing eyes? Where was I from? Sugar Apple Bombs or Sugar Carrot Cakes: which side was I on? Dolls or colts and robbers? Did I lose my momma too? More than twenty foals were at the post office, which had been made part rec room and part hotel. Toys scavenged or manufactured by the young ponies lay everywhere; it was a bit of a trick not to slip and bust a leg.

"Would you have taken the time to read it?" he asked with a chuckle. "As I recall, you had a horse of the apocalypse after you at the time. I don't think I'd stop and grab a book with Deus Ex after me."

I glanced at him curiously, "You know about Deus?"

"Most ponies know of 'Deus Ex Machina'. The name's zebra-speak for 'God of the Machine'. And yes, he gave it to himself. He's been around the Hoof…" The black unicorn frowned a moment in consideration before continuing, "for as long as I can remember. He's the Reaper's Reaper. The Raider God. Number two in the Arena behind Big Daddy Reaper."

I'd found the section about Big Daddy Reaper and the Arena. The old photograph of the Hoofington Sports Arena dominated most of the article.

Reapers: Your best friend or else.

You see that pony? Not the one foaming at the mouth, that's a raider. Not the one with the nice explosive collars, that's a slaver. Not the one taking all your stuff, that's a bandit. No, that *pony. The pony so badass over-the-top amazing-looking that you are sure he's going to kill you with a glare? That's a Reaper.*

Reapers have been in Hoofington since before there was a Wasteland. The stadium was home to the Hoofington Reapers, and that's where Big Daddy took the name from. What kind of ponies are Reapers? Well, before the bombs, the Hoofington Reapers hoofball team claimed the records for most consecutive injuries, fouls, and penalties in the E.H.L., and they were proud of it. That's not to say Reapers kill everypony on

sight, but they are very good at it. The only ways to become a Reaper are to kill a Reaper in one-on-one combat or to win against dozens of wannabes at a tryout, so whatever Reaper you're meeting is probably more badass than the Reaper they replaced. That means they're almost certainly tougher than you.

In their odd way, Reapers are celebrities around Hoofington. Lots of ponies have a favorite like Deus, Rampage, or Psychoshy, and discussions of their various fights can usually be found across Hoofington. Reaper matches are one of the few forms of entertainment Hoofingtonites actually get to enjoy. So if you meet mister Reaper pony, be polite. Do what he asks. Pray that he's gentle. Because if you cross a Reaper, you have just invited an entire world of hurt on yourself.

I was about to ask if shooting a Reaper with ceiling-mounted artillery counted as 'crossing' when a light pink filly…no, make that colt…approached us. "Excuse me, Priestie, but there's pilgrims coming to the chapel." His cutie mark was making me thirsty.

Priest looked solemn at the news. "How many, Sparkle-Cola?"

"Three. None our age," the colt replied.

"Thank Celestia for small favors," he said as he rose to his hooves with a deep sigh. He smiled at me. "Sorry. I really should see to them."

"Is anything the matter? Can I help?" I asked as I sat up.

His smile was tinged with sadness. "You just did by asking. But no. This is my burden to bear. You should go on reading. The more you know, the better prepared you are." He walked out, his head hanging slightly.

"Shouldn't he be glad to have pilgrims? I mean, that's a good thing, right?" I asked Sparkle-Cola, but the colt with the poofy soda-brown mane gave me the 'stable ponies ask stupid questions' look and returned to his friends. I sighed, looking down at the book. Quickly, I started to flip through the wrinkled pages, trying to find--there it was.

Chapel: A small community located on the Fillydelphia Turnpike outside the Core. Noted as a place for troubled ponies to find peace. Home of Hoofington's Crusaders, see page 56.

I flipped to the cover, looking at the author's name below the pony skull picture. "Thanks, Ditzy Doo," I muttered sourly, then blinked. On the wall was a faded poster, intact only because of the glass pane covering it. A gray mare with a yellow, walleyed expression goggled at me with a stack of envelopes in her mouth. The caption

beneath read ‘Sign up with the Equestrian Mail Service: Ditzy Doo needs your help!’ I couldn’t help but find the pegasus with bubbles on her butt as incredibly cute. It had to be a coincidence. Ponies didn’t live for two centuries in the Wasteland. Not without becoming monsters. It was impossible.

I opened the book again and started looking through the early pages. There was a short section near the front on 'Other Famous Wasteland Locations' with a few paragraphs of text for each entry and the advice to get a non-Hoofington-edition copy of the Guide if you were planning to leave the city. Most of it I skimmed over, but the entry for Canterlot caught my eye.

Once the capital of Equestria, Canterlot and the surrounding area should now be avoided by everypony who isn't a Canterlot ghoul and doesn't have a really good reason to be there. The city wasn't hit by any balefire, but that's where the good news ends; the zebras detonated a megaspell inside the city that sent out a Pink Cloud laced with some really nasty magic. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were in the city at the time and put an enormous magical bubble around the city to trap the Cloud inside, probably saving much of central Equestria from suffering the same fate as the capital. Sadly, and I'm sorry if you've just left a stable and haven't learned this yet, the Pink Cloud trapped and still building inside the bubble was enough to kill even them; while many of us believe that Celestia and Luna live on in another form, their bodies died with Canterlot. The ruins of the city are still filled with the Cloud to this day, as is the area under the city that was drenched by Cloud-infused water when the bubble failed, and both are filled with feral Canterlot ghouls. If you've never fought a Canterlot ghoul before, try to keep it that way; they're extremely hard to kill and very dangerous. If you really must visit the city, I'm afraid that, though the general Guide includes more information you need, there's no edition of the Guide specifically for the area; the ruins are still mostly unexplored. My advice to you is to find a non-feral Canterlot ghoul guide, but that's not likely to be easy.

I leaned back. I hadn't really expected the Princesses to be alive, of course; if they had been, they'd have been…doing something. Helping ponies. If they'd been alive, how could they have allowed the Wasteland to exist? On the other hoof, though, it was hard to wrap my head around them really being killed; I'd never been really into history or religion in 99, but still. They were goddesses. Of course, their physical deaths hadn't stopped people like Priest…I sat

there for a few moments, staring into space. Eventually, though, I sat forward and started flipping through the book again. What had happened two centuries ago didn't really matter much now, I supposed, and however dead the Princesses really were, they certainly didn't seem to be able to help the Wasteland in any noticeable way.

I turned back to the section on 'Places to go, Places to avoid'. Megamart, been there. Stockyard, Ironmare (only if you had Ranger business), Elysium, Flank (only ponies eighteen and over), Hoofington U., the Arena (at your own risk), Meatlocker, and Paradise. I was a little amused to see Paradise listed as both a place to go and a place to avoid. Apparently, the Fluttershy Medical Center and the Rainbow Dash Skyport were 'safe' salvage places.

Most of the places to avoid had vague names and not much else. A few I knew: Pony Joe's (any Pony Joe's, apparently -- Raiders seemed drawn to them). Brimstone's Fall was there, too. I wondered if someday it'd pop over to the places to go side. I really hoped so. No Pony's Land. Boneyard had a high feral ghoul warning. If I'd read this long ago, would Scoodle still be alive? Because I would have believed a book more than her? There were other places, though, that were little more than a list of names to me. Boom Inc. Refinery, Black Pony Mountain, the Luna Space Center and Museum, the Hoofington Dams, and Robronco HQ, just to name a few.

What surprised me the most, though, was the section marked 'The Core'.

So, you want to go to the Core? Think you'll nip in, get some kind of super tech, get out, and be rolling in the caps? It's the city center, right? It's still standing. It's got to be a mother lode of wonders unimagined! It probably is.

Because every single living pony that's tried to go into the Core has died. Every single one. There are some places in Equestria you do not go. Canterlot. The Badlands. Splendid Valley. Do not go to these places. They are too toxic, too infested, or too radioactive to inhabit. The Core of Hoofington is different: it is all of the above plus a designed deathtrap. I know because I tried going there myself. I made it as far as the wall and I've only met one pony who can say the same. Automated energy turrets nearly vaporized me. Pegasus robot drones scrambled. If I hadn't gone for a swim, I'd have ended up a dusty ghoulie.

And for you ghouls who think radiation is another pony's problem,

there're energies in that place that'll remind you of your death. I felt it sucking out…I don't know. My mind? My soul? Yes. THAT is how dangerous the Core is. So don't go. There are lots of other thrilling and exciting places in the Wasteland to explore, places that aren't guaranteed to kill you by simple proximity. Turn down the forbidden treasures and have a nice and happy life.

It was stupid, but for some reason, her warning made me want to go even more. I wondered if there was some way to neutralize the defenses. A sniper like that black unicorn I'd seen with Macintosh's Maruaders. Maybe Gun could be…ugh. What was wrong with me? The very magic of that place was deadly! There was just something so tempting about the word 'forbidden'. *Forbidden? Not to* this *little miss Blackjack.*

"Ugh. I'm being an idiot again," I groaned as I stood up and gave myself a good shake. "That's the problem with reading stuff. It puts unhealthy ideas in your head." I closed the guide, glancing again at the poster on the wall. "One dusty ghoulie…really."

I trotted over to the customer service desk, which doubled as the store for the Crusaders. "One Sugar Apple Bombs and a Sparkle-Cola, please," I said to the young filly.

"Thirty-five caps, lady," she said as she dug around behind the counter.

I blinked. "Um, don't you think that's a little expensive for some cereal and a soda?"

"Nope," she countered as she put them on the counter, and then covered them with her hooves.

"It's highway robbery! Twenty-five caps."

She looked at me flatly. "Oh, so I'm a robber huh? Forty caps."

"Forty! That's not how you haggle!"

"Go find yer sugar apples someplace else then," she said as she pulled them back behind the counter.

I took a deep breath and gave a polite smile. "Hun, it's just two little things. I'm Security, I gotta save money to buy bullets and guns and things to take out the bad ponies," I said with a grin.

Her eyes got big. Her smile got wide. "You got the money ta buy guns and stuff? Seventy-five!"

I muttered about how the little extortion artist should intern for Bottlecap as the filly put the goods back on the counter. I reached back with my magic for my caps…reached back…I looked back and remembered that all my stuff was hidden out on some rail line or

something. I looked back at the yellow filly with a wide smile. “Put it on my tab?” My growling stomach added ‘please?’

* * *

Forget Bottlecap, that filly should study under Usury. She had a heart of stacked caps. I’d at least gotten her to agree to spread the word to the other Crusaders to keep Glory, P-21, or Sekashi from following me till I returned. She also attempted to sell me the location of my stuff for fifty caps, even after I pointed out that I didn’t have money with me. This didn’t bother her in the slightest: I’d owe her when I got back.

Of course, as soon as she told me, even though I had no idea where the shed she talked about was, there was instantly a little toggle on my PipBuck telling me where to go. With no roads, I figured I’d climb up a low hill and get the lay of the land. I also turned on DJ Pon3; with some luck, I might hear something about my friends. DJ seemed to have a thing for heroines. I imaged he didn’t get out much.

Atop the hill to the north, I looked back through the still-falling drizzle at the little community beside the turnpike. Just past the post office, along the road to Hoofington, I saw what had to be Chapel’s chapel. The building was set back behind a low ridge, so I couldn’t make out more than the steeple and long roof. It didn’t have quite the same level of neglect as the rest of the buildings. It actually looked as if somepony had painted it in the last decade.

Play.

Fucking STOP, brain. I am sick of it! Still, I felt my pulse spike and my head throb.

I had to take a few deep breaths as I looked over at the Core of Hoofington. That Steel Ranger acolyte had called the city a fortress. Now I realized exactly what she meant. Hoofington hadn’t just been the R&D heart of Equestria’s war effort, it had also been, in many ways, the primary target. The city had been built to withstand any attack. Gray walls of concrete rose above the slithering moat of the Hoofington River. The towering buildings behind that wall had no windows facing out. They’d forsaken a view of the world outside in return for greater security. I couldn’t imagine an uglier city. I honestly couldn’t imagine any ponies actually wanting to live there.

Hills rose to the south of Hoofington, but they were dwarfed by a

massive, nearly-sheer-sided piece of granite rising from the southern end of the Core island; Mount Hoof. Atop the giant rock was another of those huge, tapering concrete towers, and from the cliff stretched a wall of concrete half as tall as the miniature mountain. The great curved wall stretched across the mouth of a wide valley to meet another, smaller tower built into the steep hillside on the other side of the valley, and from the base of the wall flowed the branch of the Hoofington River that flowed along the western shore of the Core island. I could make out an immense erratically-spotlit relief of a unicorn…No…it had wings too…It had to be an image of one of the Princesses carved in the concrete. Given the pockmarks the dam had received, I couldn't guess which Princess it was supposed to be. One of the Hoofington dams, I supposed, but my PipBuck apparently wasn't close enough to pluck its name out of the ether. The lights still glowed atop the dam, atop that curtain wall surrounding the Core, and on the ugly pillar-like buildings. If you overlooked the green glow of radiation and the cracks and leaning towers, you might almost imagine ponies still living in that damned city.

I looked away; I wasn't getting any closer to my stuff by standing on this hill. It was getting dark, but with my eyes that didn't mean much. I pretty much navigated by PipBuck, anyway, keeping the little blinking icon straight ahead of me to the north. What I didn't expect was for my PipBuck to chirp with a new location marker. Beyond the dead trees and thorny gray bushes rose a single large square building. Four round pillars were wrapped with desiccated vines, and even with my mutant night sight I couldn't make out the letters over the door. Fortunately, my PipBuck supplied the location: Hoofington Museum of Natural History.

I had told the Crusaders I'd be going straight to my stuff and back, but honestly, walking alone in just my coat didn't sit well with me. Besides, I still had a ten-thousand-cap goal to attain. If there was something useful within, maybe I should see if I could find it. The front doors were reinforced, and from the scorch marks it looked as if somepony had tried to blast their way in. Well, so much for that idea.

I picked my way around the corner, saw a clear path north past the building, and turned my mind back to retrieving my stuff. As I passed the next corner, though, I happened to glance at the back wall of the building. There was a concrete loading dock in the back,

the remains of a wagon full of decaying boxes still sitting there partially unloaded (or loaded? I couldn't tell). Apart from that, rusty tin cans and scrap metal were all that remained on the concrete pad. And bones, of course. It wasn't the Wasteland without bones. I walked up to the loading dock door, where another unicorn skeleton huddled against the metal. There was a tiny cardboard box in its hoof. I lifted it and gave it a shake, looking at the two slightly rusted bobby pins.

I looked at the scratched-up lock. P-21 had explained the procedure of picking a lock to me; he'd even demonstrated once or twice. I didn't have a screwdriver, but maybe magic would do. I smiled as I recalled his calm, serious voice. "It's half feeling and half listening. You find the right angle, tap it against the pins just so, and twist." I'd gone through five of his bobby pins before he'd taken over and opened the medical box. Now I just had two.

Half feeling. Half listening. I tapped and scraped, listening to the tiny ticks of the pins inside the lock. My horn glowed as I rotated the lock, then felt it jam. A moment later the bobby pin snapped in two. I sighed, glaring at the lock. P-21 made this look so easy…I realized more and more how I much I depended on him. I needed my friends. I moved the pin into a slightly shallower angle, and instead of twisting all at once, I stopped the instant I felt the lock struggle. Twist the pin a little more, rotate…and…I stared in amazement as the lock clicked.

"Hope for me after all," I said as I slipped inside. "Though, given that I'm breaking and entering, or trespassing, I wonder if I'll have to bust myself," I muttered, and then I paused. In a glance back out across the dark lot at the weeds and sickly trees, I thought I saw... something. Was it... no. That was crazy. I glanced through my E.F.S…. yellow bar? I slowly took a step forward, then another. My amber eyes pierced the darkness to make out a vaguely pony-shaped object. A horn... wings...

"No way... " I whispered. Then, with a flash, it disappeared.

I sat there for the longest time, just wondering what it was I'd seen... because I knew I couldn't have just seen Princess Luna.

Could I? I thumped my temples and closed my eyes. No, it wasn't possible. They couldn't still be around, and if they were, they wouldn't be playing peekaboo with a security mare out for a midnight stroll. They'd be fixing things... I sighed, looking at where it had vanished. "Just... don't think about it, Blackjack."

Suiting the action to the word and putting it out of my mind, I slipped into the storeroom in the back of the museum. There were tons of boxes, but nothing that looked as if I could really count it as valuable. Though... I looked closer. Yes, bullet holes. What were bullet holes doing in a closed-up museum? I couldn't smell any cordite, so I guessed these weren't recent additions. So what was with all the red bars on my E.F.S.?

One of the skeletons wore worker's coveralls. I carefully removed the bones and wiggled into the clothing. Pockets. Pockets were good. Guns would be better. Few things were better than guns. Oh! Healing potions. And Sugar Apple Bombs. Personally I doubted I'd find any of them here. After all, what did they keep in museums besides crates and crates of boring?

More bones. Bullet casings. Small caliber automatics; small machine guns? Old, though, and covered with dust. I checked the bones for signs of bullet impacts. Yes, somepony had shot these workers a long time back. Great. Security arriving two hundred years after a multiple murder.

Speaking of murder, it looked like Softheart had finally caught her mare. 'M.o.M. victorious! Four-year murder spree comes to an end!' was the headline of a paper beside one of the bodies.

The Ministry of Morale reports that the notorious murderer known as the Angel of Death has been apprehended by M.o.M. officers. The Angel of Death is believed responsible for over twenty foal slayings over the last four years, with many cases unaccounted for. While her identity has not been released, Ministry officials have declared that "she's an evil wicked no good very baaaaaad pony, and we're going to make sure that she can't do it any more!"

Huh... who would have thought that the Ministry of Morale had cops? I thought they only threw

parties.

The success came at a terrible price, however, as Officer Softheart was critically injured in the arrest. Ministry of Peace officials refuse to disclose her condition. The Angel's first victim was--

Suddenly, I noticed one red bar moving back and forth much faster than the others. I straightened, wondering what it could be. Feral zombie children out for an outing? Killer security robots? A two-century-old mummy glad to finally have somepony to eat?! Bring it on!

Then a particularly large bug scurried into view, waving its

antennae at me. “Ew,” I said flatly, feeling slightly disappointed as I looked at the large bug and stamped my hoof hard. It gave a satisfying crunch. I was not going to angst or panic over squishing bugs.

I found the break room and rummaged through things a little. Some pre-war bits earned me a Sunrise Sarsaparilla from the vending machine. I missed the carroty goodness of Sparkle-Cola. And really, what was a little radiation? I tried my horn at picking the lock on a simple medical kit. Success on the lock, but the healing potions within were a pale lilac. Not good. Then I really scored: a half-empty bottle of Wild Pegasus bourbon in a locker. “Somepony’s been naughty,” I said as I swirled the bottle before my eyes. The smart thing would have been to save it till later, but fortunately I was not a smart pony. I proceeded further into the display section of the museum with a warm glow in my gut.

Moving into the next room, I emerged into a large central hall and foyer. More bones. More bullet holes and shell casings. What the hay happened here? As I walked, the emergency lights began to flicker. There was a crackle of static in the air, and then music began to fade slowly in and out as the audio system struggled to play some sort of light and airy melody. The skeleton of a dragon posed in the entrance rotunda menaced patrons; I wasn’t impressed. As I touched the front doors, there was a buzz overhead and an automated voice said, “I am sorry -bzzzt- patron, the museum is under temporary lockdown. Please contact -bzzzt- in security.”

“Heh. I *am* Security,” I said as I looked at the open doors on the sides of the atrium, slightly put out that I hadn’t yet found anything particularly useful or valuable. ‘Rocks of Equestria’. Pass. “Come on. Where is the ‘Guns of Equestria’ exhibit? ‘Batons of the Ages’?” I wondered aloud as I stepped down the side hall and into an exhibit. The emergency lighting flickered to life as I stepped closer.

“The Hoofington river valley was first colonized -bzzzzt- ago by nomadic zebra tribes. Although their exact numbers are unknown, they eventually established some of the oldest communities in -bzzzt- bzzzt-. However, due to mysterious circumstances, the Hoof -bzzt krraak- was abandoned by all inhabitants. Equinologists hypothesize that a volcanic event may have led to a catastrophic -krakle bzzzt- primitive tribal communities. Other experts suspect a spread of unknown -zzzzzt- causing a population crash.”

I looked at the smashed display cases. These hadn’t been looted,

but the contents hadn't aged well. Torn woven baskets and smashed clay jars lay in abundance all over the floor. There were pictures on the wall that were either faded or eaten by mildew. I saw one diorama of a 'Potential Ancient Zebra Settlement' still protected inside its case. A tiny magical volcano puffed wispy rings of smoke as it loomed over the zebra settlement at its base. I picked up a zebra spear, only to have it crumble in my magic's grip; it was just a wooden replica. There was a picture of a zebra with red stripes being pelted with rocks and sticks with a caption above: 'Red stripes, the mark of shame.'

Moving into the next room, I was struck by the image of a white unicorn wearing leather barding and a metal helmet and levitating a brass spyglass before his face. The entire dramatic effect was spoiled by the statue lying on its side next to the base it should have been mounted on. The lights flickered to life. "The first Equestrian explorers to reach the Hoofington -bzzzzzzzt- ley were an expedition led by Prince Blueblood the Third. According to his highly questionable memoirs, he faced cannibalistic zebra pigmies, a swarm of highly territorial -kzzzt- griffins, and one ursa major. Despite his ardent claims, no proof has ever been found to substantiate -bzzt-. Upon his return to Canterlot, -kraaapop- denied his claim to the entire region, giving him a small part of the upper river valley as reward for his discovery."

I didn't really listen to the playback. I had seen a sword, but not just any sword. A sword twenty percent cooler than any sword I could ever have imagined, a sword made of white silver metal and decorated with etched unicorns. One look at it hanging in its case and I knew that my self-defense concerns would soon be dealt with. I hammered the case with my hooves. I levitated the heaviest thing I could manage and smashed it over and over. I even tried to pick the lock, but it was so complicated that I couldn't even get the bobby pin in to try! Figures.

There were four pictures that I found interesting. The display was titled, 'How the Hoofington Volcano destroyed the zebras'. The first showed a large volcano with a large zebra city at its base. The second showed half the mountain blowing out over the zebra city. The third had a large crater sitting at the base of the granite dome, the depression full of lava. The last showed the filled crater cooled, with the river flowing in two branches around it. Ash coated everything in sight. It looked like the Wasteland.

Stepping into the next room, I froze at the sight of the alicorn. She stared down at me in complete contempt, horn leveled to strike me down. Then, as the lights rose, my heartbeat slowed as I saw it was just another statue. “The tiny hamlet of Hoofington played a small role in Nightmare Moon’s first appearance. Local lore suggests that, prior to making her challenge for supremacy over Equestria, Nightmare Moon was spotted many times -bzzzzzzt-. While Manehattan academics strongly dispute these claims, sufficient eye witness -skrrrr klick-.”

I really didn’t see anything else interesting in this section. Certainly nothing valuable. I trotted into the next section. The lights flickered several times. This room had more pictures on the walls and a small diorama in the middle; the diorama depicted the large knob of granite I’d seen outside, the town at its base, and some of the surrounding area. There were several smaller communities on either side of the forked river. “Over time, Hoofington developed from a rural -bzzzt- into an academic and cultural center for much of Equestria. While many prestigious -fzzzt- continue to operate out of Canterlot, Hoofington specialized in higher learning and technological advancement. Numerous doctors, scientists, alchemists, and other academics flocked -zzzzz- peace of Hoofington.” Lots of pictures of big brick buildings with white pillars out front. Yawn. Lots of eggheads. Got it.

The next room certainly wasn’t boring! It was made to look like it was on fire. The crackling music died, replaced by the sound of flaming timber. “The Burning of Hoofington will often be remembered as the night that sealed the city on the road to total war. Following the unprecedented slaughter of innocent students at Littlehorn, the zebras wasted no time in committing another atrocity with a surprise attack on the city. Though it had never before been targeted in the wider campaign, zebra commandos penetrated deep within Equestria to bring the war to Hoofington. With incendiary explosives, the zebras ignited a firestorm that destroyed the city’s heart; an estimated nine hundred innocent civilians lost their lives trying to flee from the flames that consumed the island.”

Suddenly, there was a pop and then a whirring noise from overhead; I jumped back, expecting a killer turret or something. Instead, a projector started to shine an image on a blank square of wall. The image was so grainy that I couldn’t make much out.

Burned buildings to the sides, a pony crowd looking up at some sort of platform, and somepony addressing them. Then a buck's staticky, crackling voice started to speak.

"Today, zebrakind has revealed its true face to all of Equestria, not just in the killing of the helpless and innocent foals of Littlehorn, but now against unarmed pony civilians deep inside Equestria. They have attacked our places of learning, of discovery, of creation. And I will tell you why: fear. Fear of what our accomplishments will mean. Fear of a future where their superstitions are left behind. Fear of what we are capable of. Well, I tell you now, they are right to be afraid!

"I call on all of Hoofington, all of Equestria, and all of the free-thinking intellects of the world, to come to Hoofington and make the nightmare of the zebras a reality. To build a city devoted to the victory of all ponykind. To dedicate ourselves to unlocking the secrets of the stars themselves and to making our enemies pay for their crimes! I call to the generosity of our wealthy to help fund this reconstruction; for all that you have given, your reward is the advancement of our people. I call upon the working ponies to lend their sweat and muscle to make this city a reality. I call upon the intellectuals to give the genius and vision needed to craft a city of knowledge and light.

"And I call upon the zebras to look on in terror and hatred. You thought to kill us through murder and secrecy. Never again! Hoofington will rise, and you will break your hooves and teeth against its foundations before we fall again! From this city, we shall return the pain and blood that you visited upon us a thousand fold! And when the future arrives, you will come to Hoofington in awe and wonder and shame! For Equestria, for Princess Luna, for all of Ponykind, Hoofington rises!"

The crowd went wild, breaking into mass stomping, and cheers of 'Hoofington Rises!' built and grew on each other. The cheers blended together into one massive voice, chanting in unison, 'Hoofington Rises! Hoofington Rises!' The projector flickered just as I thought I was about to make out the buck's face. The speakers spat out some garblygook at me, then gave a static whine and went silent.

Oh damn. There was something severely wrong with me…I wanted to learn what happened next! After a speech like that, I could understand how the survivors of an entire city would rally together.

Hell, this girl would give her all for the Hoof! Still, the effect was spoiled somewhat by the reality of knowing the zebras had, in fact, won against the Hoof. Somehow they'd gotten a balefire megaspell into the center and blown the entire city apart. So much for 'Hoofington Rises'.

In the next section I paid more attention to the faded and decayed pictures. One showed four parallel rail lines with a train on each and building materials stacked high on every train cart. Apparently ten percent of Fillydelphia's output went into the first two years of reconstruction; I supposed that was a lot. Another picture showed cranes and teams of pegasi lifting slabs of stone and concrete into place. One picture had robots working alongside earth ponies as they dug trenches and underground tunnels beneath the city. A small corner talked about zebra ruins excavated in the reconstruction. 'The Manehattan Archaeological Society protested the destruction of zebra artifacts. Reconstruction office's response: 'Hoofington Rises.''

The display that caught my eye the most was on the six ministries. There was a large color picture that had browned with age, but I could make out six mares standing around a table, pointing at papers and designs while dozens of ponies looked on in concern and anticipation. The speakers crackled and popped before saying, "Following the kingdom's commitment to the reconstruction effort, it was decided that each of the new ministries would have a -bzzzt- presence in the city to interact with each other and help coordinate their efforts to protect Equestria. To facilitate this goal the Office of -kzzzt- was founded in -bzzzt, crackle, zzzzt- with the Princess."

Office of what? I looked around and spotted a tiny poster showing a gray ring. 'Office of Interministry Affairs. Join today.' Somepony needed to fire their poster designer.

A radroach's squeal was followed by a wet pop. I looked down... I hadn't stepped on one.

I froze and slowly panned my gaze across the museum. There were a whole lot more red bars in here!

"Idiot," somepony whispered as my ears twitched.

"I hate them damned bugs," a pony whispered back, right around the corner from the sound of it.

"You'll hate it even more if she bucks your head off. You lot get upstairs. The rest of you watch the back door. This is our best chance to get her alive if you don't screw it up!"

Well, Celestia, shall I just kneel down now and spread my back legs wide for the fucking you've delivered unto me? I felt strangely... detached. No guns. No real weapons. No armor to speak of. Not much healing, and the museum was just full of ponies very intent on delivering me to Deus. So why was I smiling?

Two ponies came around the corner and just froze. There was a moment when their grins showed this to be the best night of the lives. I hoped they enjoyed that moment as I walked slowly towards them. My eyes locked with theirs as I turned my head and smiled sweetly. "Hey boys."

"Sweet Celestia's crotch, she's *drunk*," whispered the one in a dual-rifle battle saddle, goggling in astonishment. His companion grinned around the pistol gripped in his mouth. I winced at the rust I could see flaking the weapons. I approached, step by step, hips swinging as I took a pull off the bottle.

"Mmmm, just a bit," I said as I closed the distance between us. Suddenly concern began to strike them as I continued to stare.

"You…you stay back," the buck with the varmint rifles warned with a gulp.

"Aww…scared of a girl?" I teased as I felt my cheeks go all rosy. "One sec. Still got a little left," I said critically as I swirled the bottle one more time and then poured the rest into my mouth.

"Now…you come along quietly…no fuss…nice and easy," the blue battle-saddled buck said as he swallowed. "You ain't gots a gun, so no point in making this hard."

"True. I don't have a gun," I said as I stood right before him, my lips curled in a happy little smile. "And you do make a good point," I purred as I stroked my hoof over his chest, making his eyelid twitch. "But there's just one problem with that surrendering stuff," I sighed with the bottle swaying beside me. "Like you said…I'm just a little bit drunk."

The bottle shattered as it smashed into the side of pistol boy's face, and I telekinetically drove every single shard as deep as I could, dragging the remains across his features and down across his throat while my mouth opened wide and bit the bridle of the other pony's battle saddle and I hooked my forehooves around the rifles. Then my horn glowed again as I lifted the dropped pistol. The blue buck opened his mouth wide to yell for help and received a mouthful of gun. I spat out his bridle. "And *now* I gots a gun." And I sent the back of his head across the room.

"You hear that?" somepony muttered. There were sounds of things getting noisy in some of the other display rooms. "Hey! Joss? Haystack? You there?"

I rounded the corner back into the atrium and spotted a mare with a levitated sawed-off just ten feet away from my doorway. Three more stood further away. "Nope," I replied as I sent the remainder of the clip into her face. Releasing the pistol, I swept the double-barreled shotgun into my magical grip as I walked around the platform holding the posed dragon skeleton. Unfortunately, the other three further into the room were a bit outside blasty range. While whiskey mathematics might have made two shells equal three dead ponies, their return gunfire definitely skewed my inebriated calculations. The bullets did nothing to the dragon bones, but the wires holding them together were another story; they started to ping and snap as the bones swayed. The three ponies advanced, firing wildly as I hunkered down, the dragon bones above creaking ominously.

I started to hum to myself as I looked at the skeleton and the two pipes holding its base. Twelve gauge shots took care of those. I shoved the skeleton backwards and the wires snapped apart, bones cascading down over the three. The gaping skull landed right on one's head, the impact snapping the widespread jaws shut. Before I knew it, I found myself singing a tune I'd heard the Pecos playing.

"Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey
When they saw the trouble coming,
Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey!"
Then they wouldn't be a-running.
Times are tough and things are bad
So why be dumb and risky?
When you see the trouble come,
Ya better just send the whiskey!"

One pony picked herself out of the jumbled bones and tried to bring her assault carbines to bear on me. I jumped onto the platform, she sprayed fire where I'd just stood, and I kicked two hooffuls of bones in her face. The flinch was all I needed as I jumped from the platform and onto her back, wrapping my hooves around her neck and smashing the butt of the sawed-off shotgun against her skull again and again. Eventually, something in her noggin snapped or crunched or something; she went down in a twitching heap. Unfortunately, the third one pulled himself free and

grabbed one of the bones in his teeth, charging me as I continued to shout the song.

"Now, I hear wine is mighty fine
It makes you feel so frisky!
But trouble's come, so get 'er done
And don't forget the whiskey!"

He had a nice long bone in his mouth. I had pieces of a shotgun. This needed to be fixed. I grabbed a bone too, a much smaller one. He swung, but right now I wasn't feeling too much pain from the impact as I rose up on my hind legs, hooked my hooves around the bone in his jaws, and pushed down as hard as I could. His eyes stared wide, neck straining back, as I brought my bone across his throat. My bone happened to be a six-inch-long dragon claw. The ponies upstairs were rushing down, shouting. I could run for cover. Instead, I raced up the stairs to meet them, yelling the song.

"Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey,
When ya heard that trouble's coming
Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
Then all this woulda been nothing!"

I rammed my shoulder into the lead buck, shoving hard and pinning him between me and the boys behind him. My dragon claw plunged deep into his chest over and over again as he tried to duck his head enough to blow my butt off with his mouthheld revolver. Unfortunately, I wasn't going to finish him off in time, so I stopped pushing and ducked aside. The shoving bucks behind sent him tumbling down the stairs in a heap. The nearest of his two friends lurched beside me. Our eyes met, and I was the one grinning as I ducked down underneath him.

I see Hoofton, I see Prance... My dragon claw swept before me, sending a horrified shriek echoing into the air; I then heaved my body upward, flipping him over the railing and down into the mess of bones below. Darn, he was still squirming, clutching his groin and howling in pain as I grinned at the remaining buck right above me.

He stood for one second and then jumped over the rail after his friend. Even with his newly-busted legs, he tried to stagger for the rear exit. He was unable to do this, as, in addition to his injured legs, that exit was now blocked by more ponies surging into the room below me. "Take her alive, you idiots! She's worth more alive!" Somepony wasn't up on the plot.

“Now vodka grows from winter snows
That make you cold and shivery!
But that icy bite just don’t feel right
So best send me a whiskey!”

Fearless Leader calling for my capture looked up just in time to break my fall. Unfortunately, while things under my hooves snapped nicely, the fall sent *me* staggering too. A unicorn swung her shotgun around towards my head. I responded by sending the dragon claw as deep into the barrel as I could. She fired, and the claw whizzed back inches from my head as the back of her shotgun exploded into her face. My telekinesis took her ruined shotgun, pulled it from her grip, and spun it around, smashing in the side of her head.

Unfortunately, that still left two fully-grown bucks ramming into me with such force that I was slammed upright against the display case. “Cut her fucking throat! Hurry!” one yelled.

“But we got her!” the other laughed. I grinned into the face of the smart pony. Then I looked at his friend with the nice knife that would have done wonders if he’d used it. My horn glowed, plucking the weapon deftly from its sheath and stabbing it into his neck over and over again.

“Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
When you knew that I was coming!
Oh you shoulda just sent the whiskey
Then you wouldn’t get a thumping!”

“Freak!” he shouted as he leapt back, biting his battle saddle bit and bringing his rifles to bear.

I queued S.A.T.S. and my horn flared brightly as three telekinetic bullets slammed into his face. He staggered, blind as he fired wildly where I’d stood.

“Times are rough and things are bad
But don’t you get sad and weepy!
When you know that I’m a coming
Just send me your whiskey!”

I finished the song, cutting his throat with the Bowie knife, feeling my heart pounding as I limped around the floor, stepping past the buck squirming and curled up, protecting his precious bits (or what was left of them, anyway). I searched the bodies, and sweet Celestia suckle me, I found a second bottle of Wild Pegasus. Levitating it, I walked to where Busted Legs and Nicked Jewels squirmed in terror.

I took a drink and then sat beside them. “Sorry about that,” I said as I felt that wonderful burn all the way down. “Still got ‘em?” I asked the buck clutching himself with his hooves.

The pair looked at me in horror.

“Damn. That was low of me. Heat of the moment and all that,” I said as I floated the bottle to Busted Legs. He took a gulp as he shook. “Now, I know we all need caps really bad,” I said, trying to be the voice of reason. I gave Nicked Jewels two drinks. “But I need to live too. There’s a whole heap of ponies that deserve my kind of trouble, and I’d rather you two not get it.” I passed Nicked Jewels the few healing potions I had. “So I’d appreciate it if you could pass on to everypony you know that there’s safer ways to get their caps and keep themselves intact.” I offered them both another drink.

“Yes ma’am,” Busted Legs muttered. Nicked Jewels just whimpered. I don’t think he wanted to check and see how bad his injury was.

“Now sit tight a second,” I said as I went through to make sure I had all the guns, bullets, knives, ammunition, and dragon claw I could manage, as well as poking through the upstairs. I found a holotape recording and a terminal, but the latter defied me…and then locked me out. Damn it. Terminals needed to be easier. I did find a medical brace in the security office, and helped splint one of Busted Legs’s busted legs. And I gave another healing potion to the other male.

“Well, take care of yourselves,” I said, rising with a groan. I hummed as I took what I’d salvaged from the bounty hunters and strolled on towards the exit. The whole world was swinging as I sung to myself and swayed in return.

“She’s a fucking monster drunk,” I heard Busted Legs say to the other.

“Shut the fuck up! Do you want her to come *back*?”

* * *

“Sweet Celestia, kill me now. Give me a bullet,” I groaned as I sprawled on my face on the mattress. Having both successfully scavenged the looted museum (and the unexpected attackers) and retrieved my belongings, I should have been quite pleased with myself. However, I had returned to Chapel in quite the state of amusing inebriation. The Crusaders, having discovered my alcoholic

melodies the night before, now proceeded to take vicious advantage of my hangover by jabbering to each other at an earsplitting level.

"One bullet, three caps," the filly behind the counter declared firmly. "Otherwise use yer own. Priestie might put you out of yer pain fer free, but I ain't running a charity here." That young lady was going to run the Finders someday.

Priest strolled over with an amused look on his face. "Ah, the price we pay for the gift of Celestia's merriment."

"Heal me. Please heal me," I whimpered.

"I did, when you returned, singing," he replied with a soft chuckle. "What you're feeling now is your body teaching you that too much alcohol is bad."

"My body fucking sucks," I groaned, curling up and clutching my throbbing skull.

"I'd disagree," he replied calmly, and I opened one eye to peek up at him. Did he just make a pass at me? Was that even allowed? "Regardless, I'm glad you spared those two. Your mercy speaks better of you than your wrath."

"Priest, I think I gelded one of them," I muttered as I sat up. He looked at the counter and asked for a bottle of water. To my chagrin she levitated it to him without once demanding payment. Her scowl to me told me to not expect the same treatment.

"Well, small mercy is better than no mercy," he said with a soft cough before rising. "I'd suggest getting some air outside as well. Take a walk in the rain. Clear your head."

"How are your pilgrims?" I asked, looking up at him, trying to ignore the headache pounding on my skull. Evidently those telekinetic bullet spells packed a wallop to my noggin, which didn't help things much. I couldn't even levitate the bottle of water to my lips with my current focus.

"Leaving soon," he said softly, sadly. I guess he wanted more time with them.

"Sorry, I guess you don't get many out this way," I said as I sat up, held the bottle with my hooves and look a drink. Water…no rads… no buzz…sure it kept you alive, but where was the great taste?

"On the contrary. I get all too many, it seems," he said cryptically before leaving the post office.

"Arrrgh…more elusive bucks. Why can't they just say what's bugging them? Why is that so-- owwww…" I whimpered as my voice caught up with my hangover. "Stupid hangover. Stupid

brain."

"Ten caps for the water," the salesfilly said sharply from behind the counter.

"What? You *gave* it to him." I pointed towards the door with my hoof.

"But *you're* drinking it." She took a deep breath. "Ten caps please!" she yelled at the top of her shrill little lungs.

That little salesfilly was going to own the Wasteland someday. Every single cap would be hers. It was just a matter of time.

I hated to admit it, but the air did me some good. The rain tasted metallic on my lips; it was probably unhealthy, but it also helped soothe my throbbing brain. Clearly, museums and other places of learning were unhealthy to ponies like me. I trotted up the ridge towards the chapel and then froze.

That's a lot of headstones. Row upon row of marble knobs stuck out of the yellowed grass. I couldn't even begin to guess how many. Thousands? Tens of thousands? Row after row stretched back as far as the eye could see. I couldn't even guess where the graveyard ended, with all the long grass. This wasn't from the bomb. This was from ten years of Hoofington being right in the zebras' crosshairs. I hesitated for a moment, then slowly walked across the field. A name. A race. A date. A cutie mark engraving. The shortest of epitaphs on the small marble headstones: loving father, caring mother, best damn bastard, surest friend.

I'd never seen something like this before. Not the dead. I'd seen so many pony bones that it seemed like they just blended into the background. Only when a name was attached did I care. These dead were cared for. In Stable 99, when you died it was as if you simply never were. Death had been an annoyance because you were then obligated to breed and train your replacement. The dead were taken to the machines and recycled, along with all the byproducts of the stable. Recycled. Reprocessed. Mixed with vat-grown algae, yeast, and fungus and made into chips. It wasn't cannibalism; there was nothing equine about your meal. We didn't eat Leg of Duct Tape. It was just the way things were. You lived in Stable 99 till you didn't any more, and didn't think about it.

I read the epitaphs as I passed for as long as I could. Eventually, I thought I'd rather have stared at the sky than imagine long passed ponies as I walked through the soggy grass.

The chapel had also seen better days. It'd clearly been vandalized

several times, but somepony had fixed it more times than torn it down. Even slapped a coat of whitewash on the boards. I felt like an intruder as I quietly walked up the steps. There were two rows of threadbare pillows on the floor for the congregation and a balcony along the back wall. Most of the windows were boarded up, but somepony had taken the time and effort to restore one window with a design made of colored glass tiles. It depicted Celestia raising the sun, perfectly matching Priest's cutie mark. I turned and looked; over the door, a similar window showed a calm and certain Luna. Something about the image was comforting.

Painted on the walls were pictures of six mares: the Ministry Mares I'd seen in the museum. Time had done what it could to destroy the images, but somepony had painstakingly repaired them. I gazed at the image of Fluttershy, feeling the urge to hug somepony. Rainbow Dash looked like somepony I'd want to drink with. Applejack… reminded me of Mom. Pinkie Pie seemed…off. Rarity…yeah. Somehow a pony looking that good was simply wrong to me. And Twilight? I found myself thinking of P-21.

Priest was talking quietly to the three pilgrims; they looked horrid. Emaciated. Tired. One of them had a yellowing of her eyes and a twitch that convinced me she was on her way to becoming a raider, if Glory was right. Still, she wasn't trying to bite Priest's hoof as he touched her brow gently.

A few other ponies sat scattered on the pillows, looking more like 'locals'. A gray mare reading a ratty magazine about the princesses. A pensive looking filly gazing at that stained glass image of Celestia. A large unicorn mare dressed head to hoof in black mourner's garb. She whispered prayers softly to herself as she rocked back and forth on her pillow.

The three pilgrims stepped back away from Priest. They wept, yet they also appeared oddly happy. "You can return if you want. There's no need to hurry," Priest told them in his collected voice. He was crying too…but why? He said he had plenty of pilgrims stopping by. I supposed each one was precious to him.

"No. It's time. Thank you. Celestia protects," the twitchy mare said quietly.

"And Luna defends," Priest said in a tone of finality, and the pilgrims began slowly walking out.

"You know," I said with a small smile. "Last night I was almost certain I saw Princess Luna. It was on my E.F.S. and everything.

Crazy, huh?" I held the grin that he didn't share.

"No. You didn't see the princess. She's gone now." He spoke with an iron certainty as he looked up at the picture of Luna. Weird; I expected him to be more... excited.

"Are you all right?" I asked softly once they'd left.

"No, but it's the price I pay for my virtue. Sometimes ponies just need a sympathetic ear and a kind word. I'd hoped to convince one to stay a few more days, but they arrived together and they'll depart together." Clearly he wasn't happy about that, but it seemed pretty intrusive, even for me.

"Your virtue?" I asked him with a questioning cant of my head. "That's just…being nice, right?"

"I suppose some might think of it that way," he said as he looked at the paintings on the wall. "Forgive me if I sound a little preachy; it comes with the job." He took a deep breath. "According to what I believe, all ponies possess a virtue. It's an aspect of themselves that is their most pure and honest self. It is what makes a pony good, an integrity that nopony can take from you."

I swallowed, feeling oddly guilty. "Ah…well that's easy. My virtue is getting drunk and causing huge disasters." I tried to smile, but for some reason my levity died as soon as the words left me. I mocked something clearly important to him. Strangely, it felt important to me as well. "I'm sorry."

He gave me a patient smile. "Ponies who know their virtue can keep a sense of self. Have you met any ponies who seem…together? Even with the horrors that we all face?"

Bottlecap, Keystone, Bonesaw, and even Dusty Trails stood out in my mind. "I have," I replied.

"Ponies who know their virtue and embrace it can last longer in the face of adversity. They have inner strength to support their flesh and blood." He bowed his head. "Unfortunately, virtue is not enough. It needs something more."

"More?" Great, now I really felt lacking.

"Friendship. A virtue alone will inevitably erode. The Wasteland will poison it, corrupt it into a dark reflection of itself. A virtue corrupted is a horrible thing," he said solemnly as he turned to look at me. "Friendships that support and bolster the virtues of the participants empower them against any challenge. Friends united in a common cause are stronger than anything the Wasteland can throw at them."

I remembered how I'd felt when I'd discovered I was alone. "And what about friendships of ponies who don't know their virtue?"

"They may remain together, but there will always be strain and struggle. I can't think of any friends lasting for long without knowing themselves. How can you be friends with a stranger?" he said with a soft shrug.

I could think of many things to describe myself, but none of them were particularly virtuous. I really doubted stupidity counted. "What's your virtue?" I asked softly.

"Only Celestia truly knows my virtue," he said quietly, but from the look on his face it would be all he'd answer. Maybe you didn't have to know it. Maybe you could just live it.

I looked back at the door behind me. "I hope your pilgrims will be safe on their trip home."

"They're not going home," he replied softly. "They're continuing their pilgrimage."

Now I frowned. "You mean to other chapels?"

"To Celestia."

I stared at him a moment, my eyes widening as they saw the sadness in his expression.

"How could you?" I whispered and then turned and raced out the door. I looked up the road, hoping to see some sign of them. That I was wrong. Instead, I looked towards Hoofington. There they were, just starting across the bridge towards the city.

"Wait!" I yelled, running as fast as I could towards the trio. My heart thumped in my chest as busted asphalt cracked up under my hooves. My head be damned, I had to warn them. To stop them! "Wait! Don't go that way! Stop!" I screamed as my hooves clattered on the bridge.

The twitchy filly with the yellowing eyes stopped to look back at me. The other two just kept walking.

"Please! Sweet Celestia, don't!" I yelled.

She was still smiling as the red beams lanced out from the top of the wall and swept through their bodies. Red energy swirled, consuming every inch of her being and turning it to ash. Celestia damn them, her smile was the last thing to disappear.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Tough hide (level two) - The Brutal experiences of the

Equestrian Wasteland have toughened you. You gain +3 Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.
Skills Note: Lockpicking (25)

Chapter 12: Denial

"Obviously, that's why I zipped my mouth closed, then locked it with a key, then dug a hole, then buried the key, then built a house on top of the hole where I buried the key, then moved into the house on top of the hole."

I sat down on the cracked asphalt, looking at where three ponies had stood. The rain increased, pouring out great wet drops that washed away any remains left on the rusting span. They were just gone, and even though I hadn't known them, I somehow missed them. How could I miss complete strangers?

"I'm sorry," Priest said over the rain hissing off the river.

"Why didn't you stop them?" I asked as I slowly turned to glare at him over my shoulder.

He didn't look angry. Just sad. Somehow, that made me even more furious. "Because it's not my place to stop them."

"Not your place?" I whirled, glaring into his eyes. "You're a…a… whatever you are! How could it not be your place to stop them?" No mare in Stable 99 would ever kill herself and deprive the stable of her abilities. Every life was needed! Important!

"What should I have done, Blackjack? Locked them up? Drugged them?" No anger. Why wasn't he angry about this? How dare he be so calm about letting three ponies walk to their death! "I talked to them, just as I talked to you. I listened. I prayed. But in the end the choice was theirs."

"You just let them kill themselves because it was a choice?" I felt my horn tingle. I was about to make a choice of my own.

"Yes. We get so few choices in the Wasteland, Blackjack. Most of them are too horrible to contemplate. Do I starve or do I let my children starve? Do I die or do I kill to survive? Do I do the wrong thing and live, or not?" Calm. "I try to talk each and every pony out of it. Try to convince them to choose to live. I tell them that they'll have a home in Chapel if they want, or I'll help them get to

Stockyard or Gutterville. But the choice to live has to be theirs. Otherwise, I am no different than the Wasteland. I won't take away the choice to die painlessly of their own volition. And if they do make that choice, how can I deny them a little peace?"

My pulse thudded in my ears as I breathed low and fast. "So if I were to walk down this bridge right now, you wouldn't try to stop me?" I asked, my mane itching like crazy.

"No. I would not," he replied calmly. "I would argue, politely, that you have far more to live for than to die for. You have your friends out there, looking for you. You have questions for which you lack answers. You have enemies that wish you to die. And I suspect that Celestia and Luna would be disappointed if you took that walk." He was so rational and calm about it. "You've never thought about that choice?"

"No! I…" But I faltered as I glared at him. Hadn't I? Lying on a mattress dying of radiation poisoning, in the hall after I was sure Glory had died following me into a deathtrap... they'd both been moments when I'd have happily died to escape the guilt. If I'd been standing here now after killing Scoodle, would I be arguing against taking that walk? I wanted to be angry. I didn't want to think about this! "What about foals? Do you let them walk too?"

From the look of pain on his face, I knew the answer. "My only rule is that children must go last. The Crusaders exist for that reason: to give them a family to live with once their own is gone. But yes, some make the final walk too. And Celestia damn me, I let them." He turned and slowly started to walk back towards the village. I watched him go, hating him for being capable of doing that. P-21 was right: there was no way the Wasteland would allow a nice buck to exist. It poisoned everything, and if you couldn't see the poison right away, you just weren't looking hard enough.

Don't think about it. That's all there was to it. Don't think about it and get through the day. Somepony had written something on the asphalt long ago in flaking white paint. Carefully I approached, looking down. The rain splashed down over the carefully written letters: 'Mercy'.

When I finally got my butt off that bridge and back into town, I spotted a line of ponies funneling into the chapel. I didn't want to go in after them. I'd have much rather just returned to the post office and slept off what remained of my hangover. I didn't want to know what they were gathering for; it was probably just to discuss

who was going to kill themselves next, or worse.

It wasn't as if I'd never felt that suicidal impulse, but at the times I had there were ponies who stopped me. They'd talked me down, and I'd listened. I'd like to think that if I hadn't, they would have done something to save me from myself. Yet as I stood there on the road, looking at the chapel and at Priest standing beside the door, I found myself questioning that. If I hadn't gotten off that mattress, would Watcher have tried to force me? If I had tried to blow my own head off after thinking Glory was dead, would P-21 have fought me?

I don't know what drew me towards that white building. I know it wasn't something spiritual; I didn't have a single spiritual bone in my body. Curiosity, I suppose. If this was some morbid gathering of death, then I'd leave. That would be that. I stood at the door, looking in at a few of the occupied pillows. I smiled a little at the sight of Medley sitting alongside the little capmonger and a few other unicorns. I hoped the other four were here too, but I couldn't spot them.

Priest looked at the gathered, his eyes lingering on me just long enough for me to give an awkward smile in return. "Today we give voice to our hope for the future: that it may bring us happiness. We pray for our faith that the sun and moon remain just beyond the clouds. We stand together, shoulder to shoulder, together, for the day when we may be reunited with our princesses once again. Celestia protects. Luna defends."

Everypony bowed their heads. Well, everypony except me. Call me a cynic, but to me barding and a shotgun protected and defended much more reliably than belief. Then a tiny mote of light appeared at the end of Priest's horn. For a moment, I wondered just what was to happen. From the tiny little glow of magic emerged a soft melody. I'd never heard an instrument that could make music like that, like a hundred deep flutes playing in unison. I froze as the simple tune played once. A pause.

And then everypony except me began to sing. Motes of light glowed from the horns of the unicorns, and flutes, violins, banjos, a drum, an accordion, and a harmonica joined in, Priest's great piping music pulling them into a blend that almost knocked me to the floor. Thirty young unicorns on a balcony united in song, blending together into a tone of harmony. From below, the adults raised their voices as well, supporting the melody in soft voices, rough voices,

quiet voices, and deep voices. All raised their voices to Celestia and Luna in hope and reverence.

One rainy night I'd discovered Sweetie Belle. I would always be a fan of Sapphire Shores. I'd heard music that could inspire, amuse, even invigorate. This was as if I were hearing all that music for the very first time. This was music that saved. It saved the adults from that final leg of their pilgrimage across the bridge. It saved foals from being consumed by the Wasteland. Everypony belonged to it, except me. I don't think I could have made a tune or sung a note right then. I was too busy crying.

I'd never before experienced music so honest and good that it hurt. I ached as it swept me along, and yet it was a good hurt. It felt as if something dark was being drawn out of my chest and set aside. It wasn't perfect. I could hear off notes. That didn't matter. Ponies weren't perfect. But for just a few minutes, there was beauty in Equestria.

I'd finally had to leave. Maybe someday I could stay and listen, but right then I couldn't stand it any longer. For the first time since I could remember, I felt…good. Did Big Macintosh and his Maripony feel this way? Had everypony felt this way before things had gone wrong? I didn't fool myself, I knew that there wasn't any greater magic to it. When they finished singing, the Wasteland would still be the Wasteland. Hoofington still loomed ominously to the northeast. The skies were still dark with clouds.

But at least it'd stopped raining.

* * *

I'd done another sweep of the surrounding area, more to compose myself than to look for trouble. I'd come across some nasty radigators that'd gotten a bit too close for my taste, but my shotgun still took them out before they could do any damage. I'd tried my hoof at opening a locked ammo box I found, and instead of opening it I just lost my second to last bobby pin; not confident in my ability to do it with the last one but also unwilling to lose something potentially useful, I decided to just lug the heavy thing around until I found another pin to try with. I'd also listened to the holotape I'd found in the museum:

"I am recording this message for legal purposes. Until I receive a formal request from the mares of both the Ministry of Wartime Technology

AND the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, in writing, I will not turn over our mineralogical collection to your office. I do not care how many times you appeal to 'the greater war effort', Miss Ebony. The museum is not a part of the ministries and the history of our collection began long before the war; the samples are not under your jurisdiction. Many pieces are unique. So please, end all requests for the collection, or I shall be forced to appeal to higher powers. Curator Buttercup," a mare said quite primly.

That hadn't been good enough for somepony. The museum had been attacked, and given that it was still locked down when I'd come across it, I could only imagine the attack had been on the day the bombs fe--…wait. There were a lot of bullets. That meant machinegun fire. I hadn't found any machineguns among the bones, though. *That* meant that the attackers had gotten out of the museum after they'd finished, but since the other bodies had just been left there…Whoever had attacked the museum must have done so with just enough time to get in and get out before the bombs fell; any more, and the lockdown would have ended so that the bodies could be cleared away, but any less and the attackers would have been caught too. That was some freaky luck. Come to think of it, how had the attackers managed to get out while the museum was locked down? It didn't really matter; I doubted that the particulars of a two-hundred-year-old shooting at a museum would still be important.

I had quite a pleasant surprise when I got back: one of my friends had arrived while I was out. Okay, I wasn't quite sure that I had any right to call her that, but now that I was on my own I'd take even a friendly person as a friend. Sekashi sat in the middle of the post office, an enraptured audience in front of her as she told a tale with far more grace and amusement than I had at my 'interrogation' at the hooves of the Crusaders. Majina sat nearby, apparently unsure how to handle the attention from the several foals who were admiring her stripes.

"…and so that is how the first zebra got her stripes," Sekashi said with a broad smile, clearly in her element. When she spotted me her eyes brightened; returning her attention to the Crusaders, she said, "Ah, sweet Security has arrived. Please, let me speak with her, and when I return I will tell you why ponies come in so many colors." That offer seemed to mollify the Crusaders a bit, and they let her rise and walk to me. She gave my cheek a nuzzle before

leading me outside.

"Sekashi, I am so glad to see you. Where are P-21 and Glory? What…" Then she turned around and gave me a wry smile. "Oh, right. You can't hear me."

"Sadly not. But Majina's hearing may recover. She is young and I have hope," she said as she walked to one of the houses and sat beneath the porch roof. The clouds overhead rumbled softly, reminding me that a lack of rain seemed to be the exception rather than the rule in Hoofington and prompting me to join her under cover. "Now, I know you have many questions about your friends."

"What happened? Where're P-21 and Glory?" I said, exaggerating my speech just a touch.

"Ah, that is a funny story. We were travelling along the rails towards the city. Your whining was quite impressive, whines to make the most savage hellhound cringe in terror. You did not like having nothing to do, and so it was suggested that you look into the other orb. This you did with some difficulty, scowling and swearing and insisting it was broken. Then there was a flash and you were out. It was quite a relief to the others.

"Soon we were not pulling up hills but fighting to go down them safely. We encountered a brown unicorn on the tracks. I set the brake, glad for a rest. Your friend seemed to know him. They talked. They argued. I could only see the brown one's words. He asked your friend to give you up. He asked your friend why he would travel with a mare from your stable. He was…not kind."

"What did he say?" I asked, finding myself whispering. I had to repeat myself so she could see the words formed by my lips.

"He asked if you still used your friend as reproductive equipment. Your friend was outraged, that I could see, but I fear he was hurt as well. The brown one asked your friend if he enjoyed being used. If you commanded him. If you cared at all about him. He asked your friend if you had apologized. I fear your friend was listening to his poisoned words." I swallowed. I hadn't apologized; instead, I'd insulted him at Brimstone's Fall and hadn't been able to make it right.

"After that, they tried to take you; numerous hunters waiting in the woods struck. The brown one used a spell, tying your blue friend head to hoof in straps and rope. They charged from all sides. Your winged friend did all she could alone, but she is not as ferocious a fighter as you. Then, from the sky came more pegasi. The fight was

brutal, terrible, and fierce. I did not see how we could prevail. So Majina and I detached ourselves from the cart and released the brake. Then we fled, letting the cart roll away more swiftly than I had anticipated."

"What happened then? What happened to P-21 and Glory?"

"With their prize lost, the brown one took your blue friend south. The pegasi took your winged friend north. I could see both their struggles. I'm sorry, but I left them, hoping to find you. I did not imagine the downhill track would carry you so very far." She frowned and rubbed her chin with her hoof, saying, "Perhaps that story needs a bit more work to make it truly funny."

"I fell off at some point. I should be glad I didn't break my neck, I suppose." Especially given how weak I had been. I frowned, imagining the mine flatbeds rolling down the hill, going faster and faster towards tunnels filled with death and worse. How could I have survived falling off at those speeds? Was it really just luck? "Will you come with me?"

She started at my question and gave me a sad smile. "No, brave pony. I am not a fighter, or scholar, or healer. I am a teller of stories. I would not be able to help. Worse, I would fear for my daughter and you would fear for me. If you are to rescue your friends, you cannot worry about a silly storyteller and her child." She gave me a warm smile. "I will stay here for a time. I am sure these children might appreciate my tales, and there may be fresh stories to learn here."

"So close to Hoofington?" I asked in concern. I was astonished to see an almost…cheeky smile.

"Ah yes. Let me see the Wicked City," she said as she walked to the edge of the porch and looked out. "My, it certainly fits all the tales told. I can almost feel it sucking my soul and feeding on my blood." She glanced over at me and my stunned expression, and then laughed. "I am a storyteller. I can tell the threads of truth from the yarns of fancy."

"You're not afraid," I said with a smile.

"It is a city. Stone and steel and machines and dark magics. Ugly, certainly. Dangerous, unquestionably. Yet, should I fear it for that? Should I act as if it is going to gobble me whole from here?" She snorted as she looked at it for another long moment. "Someday I would like to know its story, though I fear it will be quite a trick to make it happy."

“I just thought…you being a zebra…”
She arched a brow. “Oh ho. And being a zebra I what?”
“Well…I’d heard zebras thought Hoofington was cursed.”
“Do you fear the city, pony?” Still she was smiling, and I admit I hadn’t thought of it.
“A little…I guess. It’s dangerous, but so is a gun or grenade.” I cocked my head. “So what do you think about the Hoof if you’re not scared? Angry?” Lancer certainly seemed that sort.
“No. I am sad. I pity such loss and pain. So much folly. But it is not a bad feeling, because it encourages me to learn from others. So I travel this place, seeking stories to share. It is odd, isn’t it?” I could honestly think of worse things to do with one’s life.
“It’s the Wasteland,” I said with a smile and shrug. “You should talk to Priest. He’s got lots of stories to share. And I think he’ll like talking with a zebra like you; he needs to smile more.”
“Oh…oh ho!” Sekashi’s eyes lit up as her lips curled in a wide grin. “A he is he? Perhaps you would better suited to make him smile, then? A foal I have already.”
“"I-- I don't have time for that!"
"Not now, but later... Or is there another buck you have your heart on? Perhaps some blue pony?” She arched a brow. This was ridiculous! I needed to get my stuff and get going, not answer questions about my…that! Besides I…he was…ugh…I didn’t want to think about it.
“P-21 is my friend. He’s smart and focused and…” Wraps explosive collars on ponies and gives me the button to push. And helps keep me together when I’m falling apart. And I need him and he needs me. “Ugh…things were just easier back in the stable. You put yourself on a male’s breeding queue and waited for your turn. Easy.” But now it was Sekashi who looked shocked.
“And these ponies…they could refuse?” There was a look in her eyes I didn’t like.
Refuse? “Why would a male refuse? It’s what they’re for. I mean, all bucks like sex,” I said with a small frown. Sekashi looked disappointed in me, even disturbed.
“And if a buck refused?”
“Well…they just don’t. They don’t want to refuse.” Why didn’t she get that? It was simple. It was just the way things were; there was nothing to think about. Males wanted sex because it felt good. It was what they were for. How they were wired. “Look, as interesting

as your suggestion is, I need to get going. The sooner I find P-21 and Glory the better. Then I can get my caps and find out what's hiding out on my PipBuck."

Sekashi just looked at me in the strangest way. She smiled but looked like she wanted to cry. "I hope you find P-21 and Glory soon, Blackjack. And when you do, ask him about his life. And if he tells you, then please accept my apology."

And with that she turned and immediately walked away. I stared after her. Her apology? For what? "I tried asking him about what he was feeling and he told me he wanted to shoot me," I called after her as I rose to my hooves, but of course she didn't hear. I'd tried to understand him. I had. I'd tried to be nice and then he pulled that stunt with the collars. He'd hissed about the need for justice, as if the mine boss had wronged him or something. The way he'd looked at me…

I couldn't think about that now. I had to get going. I stepped off the porch and started across the road to the post office where I'd left my things, but stopped when I saw Priest quietly walking up the road from the chapel. Our eyes met. He had the lightest golden eyes. He smiled wistfully. "You're leaving?"

"I ran into one of my companions. She told me what happened and where to start looking," I said awkwardly. "I…sorry. For what I said on the bridge. I know that you care. I just can't think of doing nothing. Of just letting them die."

"I know you can't, Blackjack. You act. You do. But sometimes the best action is no action," he said quietly. "I know you can't agree." He was right, I couldn't. "Good luck with finding your friends."

"Thanks. You should talk to Sekashi. Can't miss her with her stripes," I said with a smile and added with emphasis, "She's not here as a pilgrim." That definitely lifted his spirits.

"Celestia protect you and Luna defend you," he said quietly as he bowed his head towards me.

"Take care," I muttered awkwardly. I wanted to…uggh, what did I want? Apologize? Feel that calm he radiated? Jump him? Well… that last one certainly; it'd been a week since anything had gotten betwixt my nethers. Instead I just smiled like a moron, turned, and walked away. Damn it, why couldn't I be a smart pony and figure this shit out?! I was missing something, but I just couldn't tell what.

* * *

With my gear stowed, I was on my way back to the rail line; from what Sekashi had said, I could reach it more quickly than I'd thought by simply going straight west overland. I'd traded most of the weapons to the cap fiend (I'd gotten her name, but I simply refused to call her 'Charity'.) for whatever fresh medical supplies she possessed, but I'd kept one of the carbines, now repaired to some state of decency, for some longer-ranged ordinance. I had my automatic pistol for close-in work, and I'd fixed up my drum-fed assault shotgun with whatever parts I could get from the museum's salvage. I'd cleaned out my bags, amazed at the mass of junk within.

I turned on DJ Pon3 as I walked, keeping up a brisk pace that ate the distance under my hooves. For once, I wasn't shot up, my back injury was only a distant ache, and I felt fairly good. Sekashi's suggestion slithered around in the back of my head, but I just shut that door, locked it, dropped the key into the toilet, and flushed it away. Then, for safety, I welded the door shut and stacked some barrels of magical radioactive waste in front of it. I didn't need to think about that now.

I was keeping my eyes up and looking for any threats on my E.F.S. Bloatsprites. A radhog. For once my passage was relatively danger-free. I kept the carbine out to get some practice with a longer-ranged weapon. Shotguns and automatics were what I'd trained with, but the practice of sighting and leading was a new one to me. There was nothing more embarrassing than taking six shots to kill one bloatsprite.

Why did P-21 want to kill me? My mind dug the key out of the waste processor and turned it over and over. Don't think about it. Safer and easier. He'd been mad because I'd been the one to find him. 'If you give me a gun, I might shoot you,' his voice whispered from behind the door. I'd just spoiled whatever plan he'd had for his own escape.

The mare singing her indifference to the world trailed off her last glorious notes and DJ Pon3 gave a long, soft sigh. "Ah, there's nothing like Sapphire Shores to make a pony strut their stuff. That was 'Fearless', and for me it brings to mind some interesting things I've heard coming from out east. Now, I'm sure you remember Security's bold declaration against the slavers operating from Paradise. Well, Paradise and Reaper Deus teamed up to lay a record

bounty on Security. Sadly, ponies hither and yon have got into a bit of a frenzy for the elusive mare around the Hoofington region.

"Now you'd think forcing a change in management at the Brimstone's Fall jewel mine would convince some ponies to come to their senses about hunting a mare who is working for the freedom of everypony. But no! Some have still taken it upon themselves to give her some grief. Well, I have a special recording from two of these would-be bounty hunters about their run-in with Miss Security. Let's play the tape."

There was a burst of static. Then Busted Legs's trembling voice stammered, "There…there were eleven of us…we spotted her alone…she was unarmed…unarmored…we had her cornered in the museum. She busted necks, smashed in heads, broke my legs…" I heard a snuffling in the recording. "She got our guns and just… just…blew us to pieces. And she was drunk. Drunk! And singing like a demon mare in heat!"

A mare then asked, "What happened to *you*, sir?"

There was a sniffle and stammer, and then Nicked Jewels wailed, "She fuckin' gelded me!"

DJ Pon3 coughed, then chuckled, "There you have it. You bucks might be happy to risk your lives for the bounty, but are you prepared to risk *that*? And Security, when you're done fixing the slavers in Paradise, how about a recording or two?"

I winced, feeling a little guilty as the next song wound up. I hadn't really wanted to cut him *there*. In fact, I hadn't been completely sure I'd done that until now, thanks to the hangover and all. Well, any deterrent was a welcome deterrent, right? I levitated out a box of Caramel's Corn Crispies and shook it into my open mouth. Sweet and crunchy good--

I tripped and landed flat on my face. That I tripped wasn't special; it could happen to anypony.

That I tripped over a fresh corpse: only *my* luck could be *that* bad.

The poor mare hadn't just been killed. Whatever had done it had torn massive rents in her sides, cleaving right through her ribcage and spilling her organs across the field. I felt my pulse start to pound and backed away, clenching my eyes and fighting to slow my breathing. I could feel the incision in my gut being snipped open. Then I felt one of my rear hooves land in something.

Oh please don't tell me I stepped in what I think I stepped in.

I glanced back to see the hoof lodged in the splayed chest cavity of

an earth pony buck. The gore on my hoof was still lukewarm. I fought to keep the corn in my stomach as I wiped the bloody smears off the end of my leg. Carefully I looked around, working to keep my breathing slow and level. It was half a dozen ponies, all of them armed with rifles; from the ratty clothes they wore, though, I doubted that fighting was their main occupation. The dead bushes had concealed them in death.

I looked in the direction from which I'd been walking to this little copse of trees and bushes. They'd have had a nice shot, and could I have taken them out if hit by surprise from a distance, especially considering that they had cover? Something had gotten them first, and it hadn't just killed these poor bastards. They were dismembered and their bodies crushed in, every weapon smashed in two. The only things intact were their ammunition, their caps, and two burlap bags containing some meager foodstuffs and bottles of rainwater.

Something had just done me a favor, and I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all.

* * *

Reaching the rail line, I picked up the pace a little. Running for more than short sprints wasn't something I was very used to, but right now I had plenty of incentive to try. The slaughtered ponies in that camp reminded me that I still had a price on my head. I noticed how much of the grade behind me was downhill; I could only imagine how I'd fallen off the cart in my crippled state without dying. If my luck was that good, I shouldn't have gotten shot in the first place.

My thoughts went back to my... helper. I didn't like somepony helping me all sneaky like, but I had to admit it was better than shooting me in the back. On the other hoof, though, I *really* didn't care for their methods. At all. Anypony that tore other ponies to pieces wasn't exactly what I'd call an ally. The idea of anypony who could even *do* that didn't sit well with me. Still, at the moment I had other problems that sent me ducking down.

Crouching, in my amber vision I could see the turned-over mine flatcar. I could also see a camp made beside it. There was a crude barricade built around the area, and a campfire made my mutant night vision flare and fight with my normal sight. There were four

yellow bars and a number of red bars inside. I frowned, rubbing my muzzle with my hoof. Slavers? Hunters? It couldn't be a coincidence that they were right at the flipped cart, could it? I could make out the four ponies, weapons pointed outward. Waiting.

"Great," I sighed as I floated out my carbine and focused down the barrel. Definitely not my weapon of choice. I saw the little twitches as the amber and red bars moved. Just pull the trigger and make your life easier, Blackjack. I kept the sights lined up perfectly. Pull the trigger. Pull…the…trigger…

"I really wouldn't have minded if Celestia gave me a few more brains," I said as I stood. "This is gonna get me shot." I kept the assault carbine up and advanced towards the camp, saying loudly and cheerfully, "I'd really love to avoid a wholesale slaughter, so if you folk would keep things cool I'd be much obliged!" I added the biggest, widest…possibly psychoest grin I could.

No shots, not that I minded not getting shot at. It was refreshing, actually. It was also driving my mane crazy. The fires turned the ponies into silhouettes. No replies. No warnings. Threats? Just red and yellow bars. I'm not a sneaky pony. Oh, I try. You'd think moving quietly would be a simple thing. Just don't step on anything noisy! Usually, though, there just seemed to be something noisy that I somehow missed. So the fact I reached the low barricade of desiccated tree limbs without getting shot gave me just a touch of confidence…until I got a good look at the inside.

There was a good explanation for why these ponies weren't shooting at me: they were all tied up! Their rifles had to be the flimsiest varmint rifles I'd ever seen, and were lashed to their hooves. On each pony's back was a sack that jerked and hissed with insect fury: radroaches. In the middle was a large metal box with a terminal on it.

Suddenly, floodlights illuminated the barricade from all sides and a ring of red bars appeared around me. The terminal flickered and flashed to life, and a mare spoke out in a staticky tone of glee. "I have you now, Security! You have fallen into the brilliant trap of Virgo Zodiac, seventh daughter of the Zodiac family!" I looked at the five bound ponies and then out into the glare of the floodlights. "Your capture will earn me an impressive fortune for my research. Surrender in the name of arcane science!"

"Oh, really? And what kind of research are you doing?" I shouted, not sure if she could see or hear me through the terminal. I pulled

off the bags with the radroaches and yanked out the dragon claw. A few dead bugs later and the four hostages relaxed a bit.

There was a stunned silence. “Oh! You mean…you really want to know? I’m trying to unlock the secrets of PipBuck manufacturing! They truly are a marvel of ancient magical technology. I’ve been able to repair one or two, but the arcane matrices are so complex and difficult that components are dreadfully expensive!”

“Uhuh. Gotta say you got a good notion there. I’d have been dead long ago if it weren’t for mine,” I said, then pulled the head of the closest hostage to me and whispered, “Don’t run just yet.” He swallowed, staring into my amber-glowing eyes and nodding. I sliced his gag and then his bonds, moving to the next. “Well, I gotta say I’m pretty embarrassed at getting caught at all. You must be the smartest of…what was it again? The Zodiac family?”

“Yes! The Zodiac family is the greatest family of bounty hunters in all of Equestria. Granted, I haven’t gotten far from Hoofington… experiments and all…but I am sure this is going to cement my fame with my siblings,” she said in a rush as I cut one pony after the next free.

“So…Virgo. Care to explain this trap to me? I’ve got to admit that I’m not the smartest pony. I’m guessing there’s something in the box?” I said loudly as I hunkered down. I could make out floating spiderbots, similar to Dean Hardy at Roosehoof Academy, surrounding the camp.

“Ah, yes. It took me days of planning to come up with it and hours to set it all up. See, I thought I’d lure you in with the hostages. Actually, I thought you’d just shoot them and go running in to loot the bodies. That’s what most ponies do…I wonder why. Anyway! Inside that box is a deadly neurotoxin specially devised to knock you unconscious in a matter of seconds…maybe minutes. It shouldn’t be more than that. There are landmines activated to keep you put until then. If you try get close enough to deactivate one, the others will get you. And finally, I have my sentry drones ready to finish you off if you somehow get past the mines,” she concluded, then broke into hysterical laughter, then broke into a fit of coughing and wheezing.

I looked at the monitor. If somepony was going to watch my butt, why couldn’t they have dealt with this piece of work? I looked around at the others and mouthed ‘any ideas?’ but there were only blank looks in return. Well, time for my standby. It’d probably get

us all dead. “Yup. Just two little questions, if you don’t mind. One, are those robots the kind that’ll just swarm in and blast a pony to pieces if you shoot at them?”

“Yes, and they’re on a hair trigger. So I warn you now, don’t you dare think of trying to shoot them, or they’ll all be on top of you! Besides, do you have any idea how expensive sentry robots are? Really. They charge a hoof and a leg over at Scrapyard,” she said in a wounded voice, then whined, “You’d think they could give me a discount for being a loyal buyer, but nooo. Everypony’s just in it for the caps. Never knowledge!”

“Yeah, the world’s unfair like that. One last question: why do you call it deadly neurotoxin if it’s supposed to put us to sleep?” I asked as I rose up and sighted the closest hovering spiderbot. A stunned silence answered me. “You know, why don’t you think on that a bit?” And I took the shot.

“Better wiped than striped!”, “Die you zebra commie!”, “For the herd of the free and the home of the hay!” the robots shouted as they all advanced in unison. Pink bolts of disintegration energy lanced out from their spider legs.

“No! No! What are you doing?” There was a click and a hiss as a green gas started to seep from the metal box. However, the container wasn’t exactly what I’d call heavy, nor was it anchored to anything. I kicked the terminal off the ground and into the air, sending it bouncing and rolling toward the minefield.

“Get down!” I shouted…a bit redundantly, really, given that they *already* had their heads down to avoid the flashing bolts of disintegrating magic. Then a mine exploded with a resounding ‘crak’. This set off the three closest to it. And those set off the next, and the next, and the next... Within a second the entire minefield had detonated in a ring of shrapnel destruction, the sentry bots lying in sparking heaps. The floodlights fell over, their magical bulbs breaking and cutting off the harsh glare.

Something hot whooshed past less than an inch from my eyes, smashing my glasses off and singeing my mane. I blinked, then, in the thunderous silence (if you didn’t count the ringing in my ears) left in the wake of the world exploding, carefully felt around with a hoof to be sure that my face was still attached; somehow, it was. I looked at the four prisoners, who were now staring at my amber gaze in terror, and grinned sheepishly. “Wow, close, huh?” The four looked as if they wished it’d been just a touch closer.

"My…my trap…you…oh, this is so not fair!" a voice--Virgo, I realized, but quieter and without the static--whined. "Daddy's gonna be so mad at me!"

"Oh…I don't think you have to worry about that," I said as I aimed the rifle at the sole remaining red bar on my E.F.S. I sighted right at the pink unicorn pony's skull…and then sighed. I swapped targets. "Now, you and your family leave me alone," I told her just before I fired.

"Yipe!" she shrieked as she rose, reaching back to grab her rump as my bullet grazed it. The red turned to yellow as she ran off, calling faintly, "You're gonna be in so much trouble when I tell my daddy about this!"

I let out a sigh as I flopped back behind the barricade. "Wow…that was dumb of me…wandering into a trap like that," I said, grinning at the other four ponies. The mares and bucks just stared back in amazement. "Um…are you okay?"

"Y…yeah," a pale purple mare with a pitchfork cutie mark stammered. "Um…I suppose we should thank you? Yeah. Thank you."

"Sure." I thought about asking them if they had any caps they could spare for my saving hostages fund, but figured that that would be a little bit crude. "Hey, look. I'm looking for two ponies. One was taken north by pegasi and the other south by a brown unicorn with lots of dots under his cutie mark. You see either of them?"

They looked at one another and tan buck muttered, "Well, my brother said he thinks there's them Enclave ponies holed up in the Miramare Air Station up north."

"Thanks." It was the best lead I had, and once I had Glory's brains helping me I'd be able to avoid traps like this and save some time. "Well, you four take care of yourselves, alright?" I said. They nodded slowly and I hopped over the barricade to start on my way north.

"So, are we gonna jump her now? She's getting away," one of the bucks asked dully just as I left earshot. The sound of hooves against his butt was answer enough.

* * *

It'd been a great night! So far, I hadn't had to kill anypony, and

while falling into Virgo Zodiac's trap had been annoying, I had to admit it'd turned out more or less for the best. I was on my way to find one of my friends. The rain had even decided to let things dry out a little. All in all, things were looking up! I *had* been walking for hours, though, and my legs were starting to feel a bit wobbly. Time for a snack and a nap.

Of course, finding the right place wasn't easy, but eventually I happened across a ring of trailers at an old campsite. The first trailer I tried didn't have much in it save for a mattress, but that was good enough for me. I sank down onto the soft (compared to the ground, at least) surface with a sigh. A few hours' rest and I should be ready to go. Just needed to nod off. Relax…relaxing…any second now…come on. Re…lax…

Fuck.

I was tired, but I just couldn't get my brain to turn off. I kept thinking about the day: that horrible bridge, the wonderful singing and music, that terrible scene of slaughter, and that curious encounter with Virgo. Maybe I should have put the bullet in her head, but she'd been interesting at least. She'd nearly gotten me. If I hadn't been lucky, she would have.

The night was just full of dripping noises and silence. I lay on my stomach with a sigh, pulled my PipBuck in front of me, and started fiddling with it. I hated being bored. It was right up there with waiting. I brought up EC-1101 in the hope that it'd gotten bored too and decided to save me trouble and caps by decoding itself. Of course, no such luck. Then I noticed the file directly above EC-1101.

'PipBuck #214: P-21 audio files'. I slowly moved the cursor up one space and just stared at the highlighted entry. Maybe what I needed was a little bit of... *entertainment* to get me to sleep. It wasn't like it was invasive or anything. I knew what P-21 had done in the stable, and I wouldn't see another mare from there again. So what was wrong with listening to some bumping flanks while I gave myself a good rubbing? The naughty idea took root, and I gave a nicker as I opened the audio files. Most of the mares' names were acronyms anyway.

OM…no thanks. I'd heard enough of that little sociopath to last me a lifetime. DT's were cute, but I needed something new. GR? If that was who I thought it was, no thank you. RIV? Two weeks ago I'd have killed for this file. MID? I guessed that over ten years P-21 had really gotten around.

...BJ?

I blinked at the three entries. I only knew one mare in 99 who'd use those two letters: me. When had I ever been around P-21 to be recorded? Granted, I'd been around a lot of males. When you were born in 99, they gave you a sterility implant until your mother passed away. Then the implant was removed, and simple habitual breeding would usually result in a foal. Implant back in. Simple. You did your job and enjoyed what fun you could. If a mare died without producing a replacement (usually because of an accident... or, well, suicide *did* happen occasionally, but the perpetrators were even more thoroughly forgotten than the normal 99 dead), then the Overmare would allow an extra mare to be bred.

I swallowed as I moved the cursor over the first entry with my acronym. I felt a squirm in my gut. It was in the past. What could it hurt? Don't think about it.

The sound of stable-approved recreational music in the atrium. The babble of many voices echoing. There were only three kinds of large celebrations in 99: a cute-ceañera, which marked when a mare could start performing duties for the stable, the birth of a foal (but that was usually a smaller affair in the cafeteria), and the Overmare's birthday. Since the music wasn't blaring about how wise and kind the Overmare was, I guessed the event was an example of the first one. My pulse calmed.

Nothing special had happened that day. There were six of us celebrating at once. Daisy and I were going into security. Midnight was going into her tech work. The others escaped me. There'd been green cake made, and a sort of punch that was supposed to be mildly alcoholic, but wasn't. Yeah, parties in 99 were pretty lame, but any sort of fun was craved. Even the Overmare's birthday.

"Let's go play with the bucks," I heard Daisy shriek. "*Dibs on the unicorn!"*

"Daisy! At least give me the unicorn. You take the blue one," I heard myself whine, my voice growing clearer. *"I mean look at him. He looks defective. And he's just P-1."*

"Too bad. I called the unicorn," she laughed, and I heard hoofsteps receding into the distance.

"Ugh, mule... " my petulant voice whined in my ears. *"Well, come on, you."*

"Please…" P-21 whispered softly, audible only to his own PipBuck. The sounds of the party dimmed. A door closed.

"Help me get out of this party dress. I don't want a work detail to cover a stain." Party clothes were passed from filly to filly each cute-ceañera. Nopony owned fancy clothes, except for the Overmare.

"I…" P-21 stammered in a tiny, terrified voice.

"Huh?"

"I don't want to do this…please don't make me do this…" he whimpered.

"Ugh, are you actually talking?"

"I…"

"Look! Here's the plan. You're going to make me feel good. That's your job. If you can't do that, then get to medical and have them fix you till you can." I gave a little annoyed sigh. *"You don't actually do anything here except breed, so the least you should do is be happy about it--"*

I cut the feed. It'd been a horrible party. Daisy had gotten the unicorn buck. That was all I'd remembered. I'd gotten the P-1. The whiny one. The one who'd cried... the... whole... time... That'd been him, and I hadn't even remembered. I hugged my head, my mind trying to process this. Trying to find some way to accept what I'd heard. I'd been young. I'd been following the rules. It was Stable 99's fault. It wasn't *mine*.

They don't want to refuse. All males want sex.

I looked at the remaining two files, feeling nauseous. There was no time to waste. There was no way I was going to be sleeping now. Or doing what I'd been about to do. Or taking the time to listen to… more…

I couldn't think about it.

* * *

Like just about every major building in the Wasteland, Miramare Air Station was an overengineered monstrosity, a black brick of a building topped by a tower. It was that overengineering that kept the building intact when almost every other structure was blasted away by the red-glowing crater on the east end of the runway. Armored sky chariots lay tumbled in heaps and piles. The hangars slumped in concave mounds where their roofs had collapsed. Ground carts had simply been reduced to scattered chassis, with the hulk of a tank the only recognizable vehicle.

It was also quiet. Too quiet. If there were pegasi here, they were being pretty sneaky about it. Not exactly the behavior I'd expected

for a group trying to help the surface. I kept getting an impression of two personalities from the Enclave. The former was nice, idealistic, naive, and bumbling. Easy to trust. The latter had snuck into the Fluttershy clinic and ignored the psychological states of forty colts and fillies trapped in stasis. This place had entirely the second feeling to it: the Enclave here was up to no good.

Worse, there were red bars on my E.F.S., but I couldn't see anything ahead of me. The tarmac was empty except for scattered vehicles. My mane twitched like mad, suggesting this was the place. I just didn't know how to proceed. Traps? Invisible monsters? Pop-up turrets?

Well, when in doubt…if there was something here looking to eat me, I might as well ring the dinner bell. I strolled out towards the main building, whistling to myself as my eyes kept a watch for something shooty, pointy, or bitey as I made my stupid move. Then I spotted two ammo crates poking out from underneath an overturned wagon. Well, I supposed that technically none of this stuff was the Enclave's. I didn't exactly see a flag planted, and… shit. Who was I kidding? Scavenge and pillage!

I turned sharply just as the crimson beam of an energy weapon popped the tarmac in front of me.

Okay. Now that wagon took on a whole new importance as I dove beneath it, a trail of beam shots following in my wake. A quick look around. Nothing. Well, since I was down here I took the chance…to curse my inability to open the locks on these crates. Ugh. I really needed that blue pony!

So, there was somepony out there with either a beam rifle or a doozy of a beam pistol. I really did not want to end my days as a pile of smoldering ash. But where would the shooter be? Along the rooftop seemed natural. It's where I'd be if I were shooting somepony.

But the Enclave were pegasi.

They wouldn't be on a building. They'd be in the sky. Directly above me. No matter which way I went, they'd have my back torched. I looked up at the rusted metal overhead. It was intact, but it wasn't like it was an armored wagon bed. I brought out the shotgun and loaded one explosive round, clenched my eyes shut, and fired. The shot made both my ears ring. I looked around, but they were still taking their time. They had all the time in the world.

I rolled onto my back and looked up through the hoof-sized hole

popped in the metal. There he…or she…I wasn't sure which…was. Clad in some sort of black armor and hovering with an automatic rifle on one side of their battle saddle and a beam weapon on the other. The carbine slid up through the hole. Then I took a deep breath and shouted at the top of my lungs. "Parley!" No response. "I really don't want to fight you!" Still no response. "Really!"

Fuck. Why was nothing ever easy?! I sighted up through the hole, hit S.A.T.S., and aimed for their hoof. Maybe if I winged them…so to speak…they'd be willing to talk. I had Deus, every slaver, and half the Wasteland after my head. I didn't want to add the Enclave as well!

I popped off the first burst, the second, and the third. As the last three rounds tore into the pegasus's limb, I watched it fall off! The pegasus swayed wildly, blood raining in spurts from the severed stump, and then started back toward the main building. They didn't get far before folding and crashing with a definite crunching noise a few dozen feet away. Necks were not supposed to bend like that. I crawled out and looked at the body and swore. "Damn it, you bony son of a bitch! I didn't want to kill him!" I shouted at that card-dealing bastard I'd come to view as personifying the Wasteland.

I was Security, the mare seemingly dead-set to piss off everypony in the Wasteland. Well, nothing to it now. The fall had bent the barrel of his automatic, but I got some parts off it to improve my carbine a hair. The beam rifle I detached, along with the spark drum that provided its ammo. Maybe Glory could use it, but I couldn't even figure out where the trigger was! Also, his armor, made of hard plates of something somehow melded with some sort of thick fabric, was surprisingly lightweight, but still far more resilient than the flimsy gear she'd worn before. Pity it didn't cover the legs or head, though. I rolled it up and stuck it in my bag.

I made my way to a side door and found it locked. Still, this was a pretty simple lock. Easier than those tiny little things on the ammo crates. I nudged the door open and then carefully stepped into a bathroom 200 years in need of a cleaning. There were a lot of red bars in here. Either I'd already pissed them off somehow (it happens; I seem to have a knack for it) or they were shooting anything without wings. Well, one way or another, we'd get this dealt with. I switched from my carbine to my shotgun, loaded with standard buckshot for the moment, and moved past grime-encrusted toilets and chipped sinks.

The reek of mildew filled the air and glass from broken lights overhead ground against the concrete floor with each step. This was a locker room. I passed by the showers and walked silently by the rows and rows of lockers... okay, no, I silently checked the lockers for loot. There were a few that held useful things. A few caps here and there. A plastic jar of Buck. Some Med-X. Plenty of junk, too, most of which I skipped. I found book titled 'Martial Mayhem' and took it only because of the picture on the cover: a zebra kicking a head clean off!

I happened across a storage locker with some cleaning supplies and duct tape. Well, I could carry a little more, I figured. Into the bags they went. If nothing else, it would give me something to trade with the capmonger back in Chapel.

I'd almost slipped out when I noticed, on a bank of larger lockers, one tiny placard on the front: 'Stonewing'. These lockers didn't have the same degree of battering as the others. In fact, it looked almost as if they'd been kept polished and clean by the soldiers. I read the next one. Jetstream. Vanity. Twist. Doof. Echo. Psalm. A... something; somepony had purposefully defaced the name tag. Big Macintosh. I couldn't see any locks, but a tiny terminal glowed at the end of the row.

A prompt read, "Please specify locker." I entered 'Stonewing'. "Please specify password."

I looked at the terminal keys, frowning at them. Slowly I reached out with my magic and typed 'Rainbow Dash'. There was a soft click and the large locker door opened.

I don't know what I expected. There were a number of pictures glued to the inside of the locker. Stonewing grinning like an idiot as he shook the hoof of the rainbow-maned Ministry Mare. An autographed picture of Rainbow Dash giving a wink, with the writing 'Don't give up yet'. Some money I wasn't interested in taking. A photo of him with his squad. Another with Jetstream at a beach. Several pictures of him grinning happily.

The only thing that remained was a folded note. "Hey. If you're reading this, please get out of Stone's locker. I took his harness and put it where it's safe. And if it's you, Jet, it's in the place where he did that thing that one time. Pick it up whenever you're ready. Big Macintosh. P.S. Honestly, Stone? 'Rainbow Dash?' What were you thinking?"

I chuckled and closed the locker. Really, it hadn't been that much

of a guess. Whatever had been important was gone and safe. I supposed that was all that mattered. Still, I have to admit I felt a bit of annoyance; something cool had been in here once. Unfortunately, none of my other guesses at the other lockers' passwords were any good, so I left the armored lockers and moved carefully out the only exit I could find and into some barracks. A few of the bunks had been cleaned up, but the majority were a mess. I carefully went from hooflocker to hooflocker, taking anything remotely valuable I could.

I stepped into the cafeteria, right in front of two pegasi who were busy eating. I had the shotgun raised, my amber eyes glaring at them. "Don't." They froze in place. "Take off your weapons," I said low and slow as I moved closer to the pair. They didn't blink as they pulled their pistols out of their holsters and tossed them onto the floor. "Ammo too." Their clips clattered to the linoleum. "Now, where is Morning Glory?" I asked as I levitated the weapons and ammo into my bags.

"Find her yourself," the red-wine-coated buck said levelly.

"Fair enough," I said, and then levitated out the roll of tape. It was a bit tricky handling both, but I managed. As I started to tape down their wings, their eyes went wide. They looked indignant, but I just asked them softly, "Would you rather be shot?" That mollified them a little. Then I took out a bottle of Wonderglue and squeezed out two globs on the floor. "Sit."

They glared at me, then promptly put their butts in the hardening resin. Inside a minute it'd set. They'd have to be cut out of their uniforms to get free. I stretched out two last pieces of tape and covered their mouths. "If it's any consolation, I really wanted to avoid this."

The pegasus I found in the hallway a minute later hadn't been nearly so easy to manage. As she spotted me, she immediately turned, crouched, and opened fire with the automatic weapons on her battle saddle. She didn't seem to have much skill at hitting a moving target in a narrow hallway, but even those few impacts she managed stung like crazy! I dodged left and right as I closed the distance. She backed into the wall. Then she got a lead shower. With a cry, her guns went silent and she fell limp.

I took what I could and continued on, sweeping through the first floor. I found offices, record rooms, a gift shop, and a deli with some scrumptious Crispy Carrot Cakes. They were still fresh and

went perfectly with a Sparkle-Cola. I also pocketed some pickle chips and Radish Surprise, and I found a new pair of aviator glasses. I grinned in the mirror. Oh yeah, freaky eyes hidden. That helped my mood a bit.

I found stairs up and stairs down. If I were a pony who could fly, would I want to be upstairs, where I could jump out a window, or downstairs, trapped in a hole? My money was on upstairs. Carefully, I made my way up step after step and pushed through the door at the top.

A veritable army of red dots appeared; something must have been shielding them from my E.F.S.! There had to be twenty at…then I heard the telltale scuttle. Radroaches? Well now, that was an indication that the pegasi weren't up here. Still, since *I* was, I might as well check out the place.

The roaches weren't hard to deal with. A broom handle and some focus took care of most of them. These rooms were mostly more offices, but of a nicer variety. There were terminals I couldn't touch and safes I could only look at with undisguised frustration as dreams of treasures danced in my mind. Still, I found a medkit with good drugs and worthless, spoiled healing potions. More Wonderglue. More duct tape. Some turpentine. Nothing special, but it might prove useful. In a break room I rescued a case of Bridle Buck Beer and decided that, well, being drunk hadn't made me lose last time! An open bottle floated beside me as I reached a door that led to a winding stairway up.

The stairs ended in the empty air traffic control tower. The terminals were all long dead. So were whatever operators were up here when the bomb went off. I looked at the scorched bones and blown-out windows. And…a memory orb? Yes, a memory orb, sitting out on the rail just outside the windows. I looked out and immediately got the sensation of everything spinning. Okay. Lots of nothing out there. Looking down was every bit as hard as looking up. I took a deep breath and then reached out with my magic.

"Careful…careful…" I muttered as I lifted and pulled the little glowing orb towards me. "Don't want to drop it. Don't want to…"

oooOOOooo

Damn it…

Flying again, a pegasus, a mare this time. Thank goodness. How

did bucks even walk with that thing tucked between their legs? She was flying up towards the clouds as the sun set and the stars came out. In perfect synchronization, the moon rose over the horizon. Seeing it for the first time, I felt a little of what I imagined Priest felt when looking at his windows: comfort in a higher power. Tears streaked down my host's cheeks as she landed on a small white cloud.

Then there was a green flash behind me. My lips curled in a little smile. "Checking up on me, 'morale officer'?"

"Well it's in the job description. You should see the manual. Grief counseling, interventions, M.o.P. procedures." Then Vanity walked…wait, walked?! Yup, the unicorn was standing right there on the fluffy clouds! I felt a little part of my brain twinge and snap at that sight! "None of which means a damn when it comes to actually doing the job," the white unicorn said calmly beside my host. His emerald mane looked perfectly styled, even in the camouflage uniform he wore. "Let me guess, Jetstream: from the note you wrote me, you're blaming yourself. Then I'm supposed to tell you it's not your fault. Then you argue that it was your fault. We yell at each other." He sighed. "Ugh, we're going to be at this for hours." My host glanced at him, but his smile was soft and sympathetic.

"Everyone's told me it's not my fault."

"Oh, good. That cuts through a whole chapter on addressing denial."

"They're wrong."

"Or not," the unicorn signed, patting her shoulder. "Go on."

"I saw him dealing with those griffins. I saw he was getting targeted by those snipers. If I'd given him more warning…taken the threat seriously…"

"Stonewing got shot all the time. You know this. We joked about it," he said quietly. "And you're not the only one. Twist is blaming herself for giving him the sweet, as if that did it. Psalm is having a crisis of faith. Big Macintosh is hurting and keeping it all inside. And of course it's the fault of all zebraki--"

"I was the one who flew with him."

Vanity let out a slow breath. "You were the one who loved him." She sniffed and looked at him and his easy smile. "Did you think I didn't know? That's in my job description too."

"I don't feel love. All I feel is hurt. It's eating me up inside. I just

want to forget. I want to forget everything I felt for him." I rubbed my eyes. "This shouldn't have happened."

"You knew something like this could, Jetstream. It's war," he said softly, but firmly. "In fact, something like this was likely to happen. The Marauders have been together for years and we've been lucky. That luck had to run out."

"I know, Vanity. I know. Damn it," I said, falling back and looking up at the stars. It was a rare time when looking up didn't make my guts clench. "It's just…stupid."

"It's not stupid. What you're asking me to do is stupid. Jetstream, you loved him--" Vanity began, but my host gave a dismissive 'tch'.

"And he loved her. Just the way it all works out, isn't it? Rainbow Dash. Twenty percent cooler in ten seconds flat." Oh boy, bitter much? She sighed as she rubbed her face. "I doubt she even knew he existed. Or that he died trying to clear the way so she and the Shadowbolts could get a little more glory."

"She had losses too," Vanity said as he sat calmly on the cloud beside me.

"Yeah. I know. Sky Ramble and Streak. I went to their funerals. Stonewing didn't even get one. All he got was a memorial and a little plaque in Cloudsdale." She slammed her hoof against the clouds, getting a little rumble of thunder from within. "And how could the Ministry of Peace just lose him?! They ask us to fight and die for that damned city, and they can't even give us a decent burial when we bite it?!"

"Things have gotten tense. You'd think Brimstone's death would have been a deterrent, but the zebras are getting more dragons and griffins than ever. Mistakes happen," Vanity said as the gorgeous unicorn looked down into her eyes. "Like this. Asking me to take your memories so you don't have to feel pain isn't going to make you feel better, Jetstream."

She wept into her hooves and shook her head. "I keep seeing him fall. I keep seeing that bastard shooting him. I keep going back there, Vanity! To that second. And it's ripping my head apart!" She sniffed and then sat up, looking at him. "Do you know what that's like? To see something horrible again and again so you can't get it out of your head?"

I knew.

"We all have images like that. But I can tell you that this won't make you happier," Vanity said quietly. "You take a memory out

and it might hurt less, but the hole will remain. It doesn't heal."

"He's gone. I don't plan on being happy ever again," she said as she looked at her hooves. "I just want to be able to do my job. I want to make sure that if one of us goes again, it's me."

"Are you sure? Because I really wouldn't mind it if Doof goes before you," Vanity chuckled. "We took a poll and I'm pretty sure he voted for himself."

She gave a soft, mirthless chuckle. "That idiot…" She looked down towards the setting sun. "So. Will you do it, Vanity?"

The green-maned unicorn sighed. "I'll be fed to an ursa major if it gets back to the Ministry I did this, but I'm supposed to be our squad's morale officer. Just try to remember that if you ever want them, I'll give your memories back. I'm not going to throw them away. Deal?"

"Deal," she said as she closed her eyes. I felt his horn touch her forehead.

oooOOOooo

Big Macintosh and his Maripony. Now Stonewing and Jetstream. I had to wonder what it was like to love somepony but never feel it in return. Actually, I'd be happy just knowing what it was like to love someone. 'Jetstream, it's in that place where he did that thing that time.' Now she wouldn't even remember that.

I had to get Glory out of here. Once we were together, we could free P-21… and I could work stuff out. Glory might have been naive when it came to love, but she was a smarter muffin than me. Maybe she'd taken morale psycho-thinky classes like Vanity? I tried to pull my head together and draw a line between then and now.

Ugh, memory orbs. I didn't care what Priest said about them, they were just no good. I--oh. Hello, Enclave soldiers. I'd finally pulled my head together enough to notice that I wasn't in the air traffic control tower. Four of the grim-faced, black-combat-armored soldiers surrounded me in a stark cinder block room with my weapons gone and my hooves duct taped together. I looked from one scowling pegasus soldier to the next. Okay, this was tough, but I'd faced worse odds! At least I had a little buzz going.

"Sneaky trick with the memory orb. You guys put it up there, didn't you? Just knew I'd go after it." Okay, I'd have to magically take them all out with my telekinetic bullets, free my legs through

sheer force of will, open a probably locked door, and take out the rest of the base with my bare hooves. I could handle this!

"Actually, I told them to put it there," a familiar mare said as the door opened. In stepped Morning Glory, wearing a freshly-laundered black uniform. Her lips smiled warmly. "Hello, Blackjack. Welcome to the Enclave."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Finesse - Your attacks show a lot of finesse... or maybe it's just dumb luck. Either way, you have a higher chance to score a critical hit.

Skills Note: Speech (75)

Chapter 13: Turnabout

"Ahem…hint hint?"

I think it would be fair to say that I've been in some hostile situations before. There have been places the Wasteland has shown me that simply said, "This place is going to kill you." The Boneyard, Pony Joe's, the Fluttershy Medical Center, Brimstone's Fall. Heck, I'm pretty sure Hoofington was built two parts menace to one part creepy. Granted, there had been a few times when I hadn't taken the Wasteland's warnings seriously enough and paid for it, but that was my fault; the dangers of the Wasteland were usually fairly obvious.

In the Miramare operations center, all the usual decorations that came with the Wasteland had been cleaned away. The lights had been replaced, the terminals had been repaired, and the debris of two centuries had been swept aside and removed. With only a dozen pegasi, the Enclave had restored a little bit of civility to the Wasteland. And since it was civil, I was expected to put all my ammunition and weapons into a secure locker in the base's security station. I appreciated the irony. I also appreciated the firearms they'd collected from around the base. They'd repaired the collection to pristine condition.

So why'd they issue beam weapons that were nigh nonfunctional to Glory's team?

"I really wish I could have contacted you before you came to the base, Blackjack. We could have avoided the mess above," Glory said with a warm smile as we trotted through the metal hallway. We had to be at least a hundred feet down, maybe more. The operations center at Miramare had been designed to withstand anything short of a direct hit from a balefire bomb. Too bad that that's exactly what had happened to the base. I figured only the shielding of a stable could have blocked the radiation. "I told them you'd probably come looking for me, but Operative Lighthooves was

skeptical."

Operative: there was a title that just screamed 'gonna shoot you in the back'. That crimson buck just gave a genial chuckle, smiling casually as we walked through his base. The athletic pegasus had been quick to forgive me for killing two of his team, and had seemed more interested in laughing at me gluing the rumps of two of his ponies to the floor. I wasn't laughing; I was inclined to shoot everypony in the ops center--not kill, just shoot--till they started answering questions.

"Not that I'm not thrilled you're okay, Glory. But what are they doing here?" I asked as my mane itched all the way to my shoulders... which I worried was appropriate, since that's where Lancer had shot me. "And why did they take you away from P-21?"

"Why don't we hold off on questions for just a tick?" Lighthooves said as he trotted along ahead of us, "But for a start, our purpose here is simple: to bring peace and stability to the surface and in doing so protect the pegasus community of Thunderhead." It sounded like a well-rehearsed line. *I'll bet...*

They escorted us into a break room next to a pair of doors marked 'Command'. Inside sat a pegasus and…what was a unicorn doing wearing an Enclave uniform? Maybe... maybe the Enclave really weren't just out for themselves? But then what... this was confusing. The green unicorn buck pushed his lips together in annoyance as he adjusted the round glasses on his muzzle. The pegasus, a deeper blue that bordered on purple, gave me a frown that was probably much more honest than Lighthooves's pleasant grin.

"Ah, good. Blackjack, may I introduce Special Adjutant Minty Fresh and Sergeant Wind Whisper?" The unicorn nodded at the former name and the pegasus nodded at the latter. Lighthooves walked to the vending machine, popped out three cold Sparkle-Colas, and, hugging them with his wings, returned and passed one to me and one to Glory.

"What is a unicorn doing with the Enclave?" I asked, pointing a hoof at Minty Fresh. Said unicorn twisted his lips in a smirk. A very kickable smirk. Everything about him screamed 'kick me'. I'd have liked to oblige.

Calm down, Blackjack; these are Glory's people, I had to remind myself, taking a deep breath and trying to dial back my aggression just a smidge.

"Interested in signing up?" Operative Lighthooves asked with a

grin. I gave him a look and he coughed awkwardly before continuing, “When we were forced, regrettably, to seal away the skies for our own protection, there were a small number of unicorns still in the clouds. Some worked in the weather factories, others in the war effort. Thanks to spells and talismans, they were able to remain, and their assistance to the Enclave has been incalculable.”

I nodded, remembering Vanity standing on the cloud with Jetstream. “Alright. Obvious question done. Important question now: what are you doing with Morning Glory?”

“Blackjack, they’re bringing me back from the dead,” Morning Glory said with a smile.

I blinked and looked up and down at the gray mare. “Come again?”

“I was reported missing a week and a half ago. Then I was assumed KiF, killed in the field, when they found the rest of my unit in Weather Monitoring Four,” she said, almost looking embarrassed. “When Bonesaw had my samples and notes couriered to the Volunteer Corps at the Rainbow Dash Skyport, though, they immediately launched a search for me. Then they heard about our liberation of Brimstone’s Fall and snatched us up. I had no idea they were so close.”

“I’m sorry that we weren’t able to extract your other friend, too. I imagine it would have made your life easier, but the sergeant only had orders to retrieve Morning Glory,” he said with an apologetic look. I was getting sick of that look. It was wrong on his face.

“Yeah, well, better you than whoever took him,” I replied. “So what are you all doing here?”

“Observing, for the most part. For years the de facto policy of the Enclave was isolationism. Due to the efforts of vocal and influential members of the community, like Morning Glory’s father, we’re experimenting with engagement. If we can help stabilize the surface, then that increases security at Thunderhead.” A perfectly reasonable explanation, so why did I want to grab Glory and run? “Understandably, there are power blocs in the Wasteland that resist our efforts.”

“Yeah, I can only imagine how the Society and Collegiate feel,” I muttered, though I didn’t actually have a clue.

“We try to operate with a low profile; some ponies take offense to some of the Enclave’s policies,” Lighthooves said, all apologetic smiles. Yeah, policies like blocking out the sun; who would have a problem with that? “Ms. Morning’s ordeal was actually quite useful

to us in terms of the information she's gathered; now that we have her back and safe, we need to do some debriefing about all that she's learned while out and about with you. And her discovery of the disease associated with raider behavior, a stroke of brilliance! I'm fairly sure that all of Thunderhead's medical research division is going to want a piece of this young lady. Figuratively speaking, of course."

Something in my heart sank as I listened to all this. The idea that Glory would be leaving with me was growing more and more remote; she was getting her life back and then some. It was like me returning safe and sound to the stable, only better because her home didn't suck.

"Actually, I was hoping I could stay down here with Blackjack," she said brightly. Habazawa? I gawked at her in astonishment.

"You what?" I asked, wondering if it'd been my imagination.

"Well the surface is extremely hostile, but it's not so bad. I can better serve the Enclave out in the field than doing work in some laboratory. After all, if I hadn't been with you, the disease never would have been discovered. I'm sure Thunderhead will start working on a cure at once." Glory seemed quite thrilled by the prospect, but what struck me was who else seemed happy about it. Lighthooves and Minty Fresh both looked quite pleased by this turn of events.

"I'm sure something may be arranged. There's just the paperwork to fill out. Reports to ready. Interviews. It'll just take a little more time." The operative looked at me, his hooves folding on the table in front of him. "I know you want to rescue your other friend too, but that job will be far easier with a half-dozen Enclave soldiers backing you up. If you don't mind helping us out with some local trouble, you can put down some raiders and help Morning Glory gather more samples while we work." He smiled at me. They were all smiling. Perfectly reasonable.

So why was my mane going nuts?

* * *

I really hated flying. It didn't matter that I couldn't actually see how high up we were; the fact we were in the air at all screamed to me that I was seconds from plunging down through the clouds and transforming into a tiny smear on the Wasteland. The armored

skywagon we were in was an ominous monster in and of itself, armored front to back. It was called a Vertibuck, I was told, after its ability to climb extremely quickly; I hoped that I wouldn't get a demonstration of that particular ability. It was pulled by two pegasi in bulbous compartments mounted above and to either side of the rounded front, with baffle-shielded holes in the back for them to thrust through and armored windows. A magical thingy mounted between them apparently gave them the ability to steer and lift the huge mass of armor. It boasted more firepower than I'd ever seen, with two racks of missiles and two enormous energy cannon turrets at the front.

The Enclave ignored me, with the exception of the occasional laugh and the constant disapproving attention of Sergeant Wind Whisper. They wore reinforced black armor and either pistols or top-notch battle saddles with quality gear. I heard one complaining about lacking power armor support; I could only imagine flying Steel Rangers, and it was not a reassuring mental image. Sergeant Wind Whisper then told the speaker to close his trap, and that was it for conversation for the remainder of the flight.

The target was a farmhouse turned raider nest. Aside from some meager crops in muddy fields, I didn't see much in the way of a farm. Just a single two-story structure and a barn. It seemed pretty isolated. "You're sure there are raiders here?" I asked the sergeant once I'd gotten used to having dead grass underhoof again.

"Yes," she replied tersely.

I looked around. Field. Dead forest. "It's just, every raider nest I've come across had some victims nearby. A road or something they could prey on." I wasn't seeing anything like that here.

"They're here," she insisted. "Maybe you'd like to lead the way?" The Enclave soldiers chuckled, quite keen on that plan.

I unslung my shotgun, loaded it with buckshot, and ratcheted a round into the chamber. "Why not?" That got some looks of surprise, and I marched up towards the farmhouse. If they were raiders, they would attack. If not, hopefully they'd come out and explain the situation to the death squad commandos behind me. Everything about this felt nine shades of wrong. I could hear the bony fucker shuffling the cards. What was my ante this time?

When I reached the door, I could smell it: that sweet rotten odor of putrefying flesh mixed with the stench of sewage. It was like a mouthful of rotten meat. I started approaching the door when the

first raider appeared around the corner of the farmhouse. He had a pitchfork clenched in his mouth, and his work clothes were soaked in old blood. The tiny pupils, yellowed eyes, and rictus grin took care of any other doubts I had about his sanity. Even then, though, something was wrong: raiders didn't wear farm clothes, no matter how bloodsoaked. I'd seen them in some ridiculous outfits, but they were never remotely normal. They seemed to have a psychological need for spikes and black clothes.

Of course, none of his apparel prevented me from taking off his head with two sprays of hot lead buckshot.

The E.F.S. gave me a few more exterior hostiles, but I had no idea if they were raiders or radroaches. "If you keep shooting them in the head, it's going to be impossible to get decent samples," Wind Whisper said softly and smugly behind me. I just looked at her and with a snick drew the dragon claw. Her smirk faded as I kicked the door open.

"Security!" I yelled as I charged inside. I'd hoped for some yellow bars; all I saw were red. A pair of bucks and a young mare were gathered around a grisly feast: their mother. They screamed, whooped, and giggled that insane little chuckle as they charged right in, heedless that both of us were armed.

It felt like an execution.

My claw cleanly decapitated the front running filly with a lucky hit. I caught the head in my magic and tossed it over my shoulder at the sergeant backing me up. The second one had the thought to grab a cleaver and charge with it, swinging wildly. I blocked it with my PipBuck's reinforced casing, then drove the dragon claw into his throat with my magic. His giggles became choked whines as I cut him from ear to ear. Let Wind Whisper take off his head.

The third lifted the rustiest revolver I'd ever seen. He cackled and drooled around the weapon, tongue trying to pull the trigger. Too rusty, it seemed. Shaking with maddened rage, he threw the revolver at me.

Wind Whisper's shots passed by my head so close that they made my ears ring. The young buck jerked and then went still. Wind Whisper, her nice black combat armor mussed with blood, gave me a look. "Any more?" Apparently she knew about E.F.S.

"One," I said, glancing up the balcony overlooking the living/dining room. I paused to examine the mother: partly cannibalized, but what shocked me was the amount of food I could see on shelves

next to the dining room. Far more than their scraggly crop suggested possible. And there were apples! Where had an isolated farming family gotten their hooves on fresh produce like this? For that matter, Glory had suggested the disease spread through cannibalism or fluid transfer. Nopony would turn to cannibalism with a stuffed larder like this!

Sergeant Wind Whisper just narrowed her eyes as she walked over to the shelf and deftly flicked up a fresh red apple. “Want one?”

I did, but there was a raider to deal with. “Afterwards,” I said as I tossed it aside. I’d hoped our banter would have drawn him down to us, but he was still up there. I trotted up, humming the pony pokey loudly. Two doors. I went to the first. Pushing open the door, I saw the four bunk beds, the scattered blood, the toys and meager belongings. These were not rich ponies. These were fucking poor as you got ponies. I turned to ask Wind Whisper how the fuck they could have afforded all that food when I saw that she wasn’t behind me.

She’d gone to the other door. I reached the doorway just as she kicked it open. I saw the red bar race across my E.F.S. and Daddy came flying out the door and wrapped his hooves around her neck; the two went through the railing and crashed down into the middle of the gory meal with such force that the table collapsed beneath them. Her wings were useless on her back, her rifles extending beyond his shoulders as he lowered his mouth to her throat and started to chew.

I didn’t have any time for stairs. I ran at the balcony rail and leaped out over the two of them. My stomach and the back of my brain screamed like yearling foals as gravity took me right down atop both of them. The impact of my hooves snapped his back, but it didn’t stop him from trying to eat! I put every bit of magic I could into lifting his jaw. When it pulled away enough, I wrapped my hooves around his head and pulled his head further and further back. *Be strong.* Suddenly there was a snap, and the forward half of his body went limp as well. Damn me, though: he was still attempting to chew!

I shoved his corpse aside and saw the blood gushing from the injury in Wind Whisper’s neck. I might know next to nothing about medicine, but I knew that wasn’t good! I pressed my hoof to the wound as hard as I could and floated out a healing potion. It was translucent and milky…better than bleeding out. I forced it down

her throat. Please work. Please work. Please work…

She suddenly jerked and took a shaky breath. I pushed her back down, warning, “Don’t move so much. He almost tore out your throat.”

Wind Whisper stared up at me, going red as I climbed off her. “Well…yeah…” she muttered as she rose. *I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘thanks’, Sergeant?* Weak on her hooves, I helped her out of the farmhouse. The rest of her squad seemed to be amusing themselves by looting the barn and setting it on fire. I knew from the smoldering that it was futile; nothing burned well around Hoofington. I escorted her to the sky carriage, where she got another healing potion that smoothed the raw circle next to her windpipe.

Now that the sergeant was in sight, the others busted their butts to clear out the farmhouse. I thought about how wrong everything here was. One gun. One. How the hay had these isolated farmers turned into raiders? If they ran into raiders, period, they’d have been lunch! Had they come across a raider and gotten bitten? Boy, that sure didn’t sit well with me. Secret cannibal ponies? I couldn’t see it. Damn it, why couldn’t I be as smart as Glory, or, Celestia forbid, P-21? The Enclave brought the contents of the pantry out in two metal crates. I smiled and levitated out an apple as Wind Whisper watched with round eyes. “Now I can enjoy some lunch,” I said with a grin.

To my amazement she scowled and smacked it right out of the air with her wing. Her hoof mashed it to applesauce in the dirt. “That’s Enclave property now. Keep your mouth off it or I’ll shoot you.” She turned to the soldiers and snarled, “Get that shit locked up and let’s get going,” and trotted off to the pantry goods.

‘*Cuuuuunnnttttt!’* roared the back of my mind, sounding eerily like Deus. Oh well, I didn’t need her stupid apple. I had Sugar Apple Bombs, and I munched them sullenly as they finished loading the ‘samples’. As we lifted into the air, I suddenly regretted my timing for lunch as the carriage swung around. A pop and sharp hissing noise sounded off from either side of the armored vehicle.

Things might not usually burn well in Hoofington’s rainy wasteland, but the two missiles transformed the farm house into a pyre that burned quite readily before the sky wagon turned back towards Miramare.

* * *

Helping out Sergeant Wind Whisper helped in one regard: the remaining Enclave soldiers seemed to back off a touch. They didn't let me wander just anywhere, but I no longer had one or two of the black-armored ponies following me around. My zone of permitted access expanded from the interrogation cell in security to the beds upstairs, the cafeteria, and the break room where Operative Lighthooves had sold me his plan: cooperate now and get help tomorrow.

"I don't like it, Glory," I muttered, stomping my hooves as we filed out of the break room. "Everything about this feels wrong."

Minty Fresh looked back at me, smirking as his horn glowed. "I like this, Glory. Everything wrong about this I like," my voice said back to me. I was hoping to give him a 'die in a fire' glare, but I was too shocked by the spell.

"Relax, Security Mare. Everything is under our control," he said to me with a dismissive sniff before he looked at Glory. "I've got some notes to go over, then we can finish your debriefing. Best to get it all done here, right?" He was already striding away.

"Ugh, there! See? They're up to something!"

Glory sighed, looking up at me. "I know their methods are occasionally... unconventional... "

"Creepy is the word you're looking for."

"But they're Enclave. I'm Enclave. We're both working towards the same end: protecting pegasi and helping the surface." She pressed a hoof to my chest. "I know you don't trust them, but can you trust me?"

Not fair, Glory. Not fair at all. I sighed and bowed my head. "Fine."

"Thank you, Blackjack. Please behave yourself," she said as she walked off after Minty Fresh. I mentally went through my entire list of insults for stubborn mares twice. It was a short list. I wasn't that inventive.

Of course, that didn't stop me from poking around. Something was off... I caught the smell of a backed up toilet mixed with the smell of blood, but I couldn't tell if the source was down here, or if my barding just needed a wash. I poked around, only to get stopped. This was then repeated. The third time, Sergeant Wind Whisper personally escorted me up to the first floor. She walked me all the way to the gift shop by the front doors. Her dark purple eyes sized

me up, frowning at something she saw.

The dark navy mare looked me levelly in the eyes, then said softly, "You should leave."

I blinked, surprised. After Lighthooves's schmoozefest, the blunt suggestion was almost refreshing. "Come again?"

She stepped closer, her voice low. "You should leave here right now. Go after your friend."

"I was under the impression that the Enclave was going to help me get him back," I said calmly, arching a brow as I smiled. She didn't look happy, not one bit. "Guess not, huh?"

"The Enclave has only one priority: protecting ourselves and pegasi. Period. Like our methods or not, that's our job. It's why we're here. You aren't Enclave and you're not a pegasus, so you should go. Let us deal with Morning Glory," she said as she scowled at me.

I looked at her, frowning. I couldn't imagine Operative Lighthooves approving of her candor. "Shouldn't that be 'escort her back to the safety of Thunderhead?'" No response, only a smoldering glare. "Ah, I see. So there *is* something going on. Mind cluing me in?"

"I don't know. It's above my pay grade or interest to know. I don't like the operative's methods or mission, but he is in charge. You should not be here. You reek of fuckup. You're either going to compromise us or betray us."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Wow, and I thought Glory was bad in the literal department. What exactly are you afraid of?"

"Everything!" she hissed, sweeping her hoof across the decayed walls of the first floor. "Look at this place. Mutants and psychopaths, radiation, taint, Enervation, ghouls and killer robots, hostile parties everywhere we turn, and we're supposed to help these freaks? Fuck them and fuck you," she said with a snarl, then gestured to her chest. "We have safety. We have security. The pegasi earned our prosperity and I will not see it compromised because some of us want to play Nurse Nightingale to the Wasteland! You want prosperity? Earn it!"

I looked at her levelly for a few moments. "Easy words from somepony that already has a good life. You want to tell me how those farmers were supposed to prosper? You saw those fields. I imagine they worked every day trying to get something to grow. Kinda hard when it rains constantly and we never see the sun."

"We have to do that!" she protested.

"Horseshit!" I snapped back at her. "Every second of every minute of every day? You couldn't even give folks some sun one day a week? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to starve us to death." And I still wasn't sure they weren't. Worse, Wind Whisper didn't look sure either.

"I'm telling you that you should leave. I don't know what the operative is planning. I just know that he's been talking with her all day since she's gotten here. I don't think he's after answers anymore. But it's not my job." She turned and started back towards the stairs leading down. "I didn't think I'd ever owe my life to a dirt pony, but I do. So I'm telling you now: get out. Go save your friend. Leave Morning to us." And without another word she walked back down the stairs.

Did I mention how much I hated this place?

* * *

There were too many things being watched down below, so I decided to sneak upstairs to peek at those safes in the larger offices. I tried to imagine what went on here. Generals looking at maps with grim expressions? Meetings with notes and minutes being taken? I saw a few posters of Princess Luna around and a few others with a creepy stare from the grinning mare of the Ministry of Morale. I leaned to the left, leaned to the right. Yes, it definitely felt like her eyes were following me.

How the hay could anypony work with that looking at them?

I tried messing with a few of the terminals, almost pressing keys at random. The safes were lost causes as well, and from the broken bobby pins around them, somepony else had already failed at picking them. Most of them I couldn't even imagine how to access. Then, though, I happened across one terminal that was still logged in after 200 years. I looked over at the unimpressive oil painting hanging askew on the wall; a fat white buck straining his uniform. Colonel Cupcake. Most of the data was corrupted, but there were a few files that stuck out.

10-11-XXXX: I don't care how good they are, the Marauders need to be brought to heel. They've lost three lieutenants in as many months. Send that big red bastard to the academy for a week and throw a bar on his helmet. Better yet, just throw a battlefield commission on him and make him a lieutenant. And if he protests, have him shot for insubordination!

We can't have some of the most effective fighters on base tangentially controlled. At least make him a sergeant or something!

I recalled the devotion the other Marauders held for Macintosh. Somehow, I had a hard time imagining him as an officer giving orders. He led by being there and doing what he did best: being steadfast and courageous. I moved down to the next interesting-looking file.

11-4-XXXX: Thank you for your condolences, Your Majesty. The loss of Big Macintosh has been a blow to Miramare and the ponies he served with. There have been some severe depression issues among the members of the Marauders; I believe that it may be best to rotate them off the lines and separate them. I know a security officer is needed in Zebratown, and I think Twist might be useful as an instructor at the Camp Ponyton training center. I believe that if the unit is to remain cohesive to drum up enlistment, as the MoI suggests, we need to get them past this hump.

I winced as I leaned back, blinking at the amber letters. If the Marauders were shaken by Stonewing's death, then the loss of Big Macintosh must have destroyed them. The more I thought about it, the more it felt like his death, his sacrifice, had sent ripples through Equestria. My thoughts drifted back to that mare in the memory by the lake, left all alone and pregnant with his child. The Marauders hadn't just lost their core, but each other as well.

12-13-XXXX: When the ministry sends us something to 'look at' you might want to remind them not to send the thing in a sealed container! We've been trying for weeks to get this damned thing open. I'm tempted to use it as a paperweight, but the MWT wants to know what Ironshod is up to. I'm pretty sure the OIA wants to take it too, and you know how grabby those bastards can get. I've already got a fine crop of hemorrhoids just dealing with the zebra, so see if you can magic it open or something! If I'm called to Canterlot, just use the key taped under my desk.

I reached under the desk, scraping with my hoof. There! The end of my hoof brushed against the duct tape underneath it. I peeled it away and the key softly thumped to the moldy carpeting. Carefully, I lifted it, slipped it into the lock, and twisted, anticipating treasures! Instead, I received some two-century-old paperwork. I looked at the moldy papers and swept them aside with a sigh. Clearly ponies before the bomb had a weird paper fetish. That was the only explanation. Then I frowned as I saw something on a little

shelf in the back: a black box as long as my foreleg. I cautiously levitated it out.

It was exactly like the box I'd seen in Ironshod R&D, except this one was much heavier. I reached out and touched it with my hooves. There was a click and the case opened. The bullet within was nearly a hoof long, the tip seemingly coated in gleaming silver. Something was inscribed on the base of the casing: 'BBP-001 #5'. A sudden sustained burst of clicking from my foreleg informed me that it was also radioactive! I snapped the box closed and tossed it into my bag. 'Silver Bullet' appeared on my inventory screen.

"Silver bullet? That's it?" I shook the PipBuck and thumped it with my hoof. "You can magically tell me the value of radigator meat without ever coming across a radigator, but you can't do better than 'silver bullet'? You are so fired, PipBuck." A bullet this big could only fit in a gun like Deus's massive cannons.

I blinked as my ear twitched. I heard Glory talking from somewhere nearby. Finally! A chance to speak with her without our escorts. I trotted towards a far office, but then paused outside the door as I frowned softly at what I heard. "I can better serve Rainbow Dash out in the field than work in some extremely hostile laboratory. Thunderhead is like a disease; the surface is a cure."

"Glory?" I called as I pushed the door open. The room was empty. My mane felt like it had the mange as I tugged the glasses down a little and stared at the empty office. I had that same feeling as back in the classroom. Somepony was in here, whether I could see them or not.

And Glory couldn't turn invisible.

I looked over at the bookcase and ripped the pages from a ruined pre-war tome. "You want to play hide and seek? Fine." Manipulating a cloud of particles wasn't much different from digging in the dirt, as long as I wasn't trying to do something fancy with them. I guided a flurry of flakes of paper in around the office, sweeping it back and forth. Then the whirling flurry outlined an equine shape.

Right next to me.

There was a soft 'pfft pfft' and a numbness spread down my neck. I touched the side of my head as the world fell out beneath my hooves. I saw blood on my hoof. '*Sweet Celestia, did I just get shot again?'* I thought, as everything faded to black.

* * *

"This is an absolute outrage, Operative Lighthooves. Completely unacceptable. You told me that we were past this. I vouched for Blackjack and she willingly worked to help Sergeant Wind Whisper. Now somepony shoots her twice within a facility under your control? What is going on here?" I'd never seen Glory so livid before. She practically quivered with rage as she bared her teeth. "Is this the best the security apparatus can do?"

I had to admit, lying on the operating table with some fine, fresh, potent healing juice flowing into me, that I was really glad that rage wasn't directed at me. Operative Lighthooves was trying the nice routine and it wasn't working. "She killed two of my team entering this facility. Somepony must be bearing a grudge to shoot her from behind like that."

"Do I have to contact the Enclave operations director about this? Or my father? Find whoever did this to my friend," she demanded in a low, dangerous voice I'd never heard before. "Now get out of here at once. I need to talk to my patient."

No more nice buck routine. I could see Glory had crossed a line; his eyes no longer twinkled merrily as he smiled at both of us. Instead they looked at her like she was a problem to be removed. Worst of all, though, he hadn't stopped smiling. "Of course, Morning Glory," he said politely with a nod of his head before he stepped out.

I slowly rose to my hooves, groaning. Wind Whisper had found me and gotten me downstairs. Fortunately, whatever the weapon had been, it packed far less punch than Lancer's sniper rifle had. The Enclave had top notch medical supplies, that was for sure. "I can't believe somepony shot you."

"Everypony shoots me. It's like it's an achievement: 'I shot Security'." I took a deep breath. "Glory. There's something very wrong here," I said as I rubbed my throbbing head. She looked sympathetic, floating over a bottle of water. "I heard your voice up there. It was you talking about how the Enclave was bad."

"What?" She looked scandalized. "Blackjack, I would never say that. I'm a part of the Enclave. I have been my whole life. Just like my father and…" She trailed off as guarded Glory returned and looked at me in worry. "Are you sure that's what you heard?"

"I…" I rubbed my head. Had I been sure? I'd thought so, but getting shot twice in the head did little to help a pony's memory. "I

think that's what I heard. And that's not the only thing. That 'raider' nest was just wrong. Isolated raiders away from victims? Tons of food available, but no clue how they got it?"

"Maybe they scavenged it? Maybe they traded some infected meat; you've seen ponies eating it. They could have been exposed in any number of ways." Glory gave me a sympathetic smile. "I know you don't want to be here. A few more hours and we'll take the Vertibuck to Flank and save P-21, and then we can continue together. I meant it when I said I wanted to stay with you. You've done more good on your own than the VC has since we got here a few weeks ago."

Okay, now she was making me blush. Still, there was something else I wanted to ask. "Glory. Who's your father? 'Cause what I just saw a second ago was not the mousy, blush-at-everything Glory I've known." The Glory I'd seen a second ago had been downright bitchy.

Now she looked incredibly nervous. "I…an…well. This is awkward." She swallowed. "Well. My father is Councilor Sky Striker. He's one of the…ah…elected leaders of Thunderhead." Oh Celestia, could you lube up before fucking me with these little revelations?

"Your father is a politician?"

She nodded. "Yes. A prominent one. He was the one who helped form the Volunteer Corps. He's worked closely with the Enclave for years, trying to make it a reality." She paused for a moment with an expression of discomfort. "I told you I entered medical school because I was seen as a prodigy, but…really, that's only half true. My father's name carries a lot of weight in Thunderhead. He used to be Enclave security and he was instrumental in dealing with a dragon attacking the city ten years ago. He's something of a local hero to a lot of ponies."

But not, I wagered, to Operative Lighthooves. "And he doesn't have enemies? How do you know Lighthooves isn't going to kill you just to get back at him?"

She sighed and frowned. "Because I was already killed, remember? My father gave a heartbroken speech about the sacrifice he'd paid, but how he still believed in the goals of the Volunteer Corps. He even demanded the Enclave offer better protection to the VC." Glory put her hoof on my shoulder as she continued. "I know you're suspicious of some of the things the Enclave does, but they're good

ponies trying to protect ponies. Their methods might be sneaky sometimes, but I swear that in the end they're trying to do what's right. Like us."

I sighed, knowing I wasn't going to break through to her on this. Not yet. I had to find some evidence, some something to convince her to get the hell out of here. Once we rescued P-21, I'd walk her right to the Skyport if she wanted, but I had to get her away from Operative Lighthooves. "Yeah, I guess," I muttered, looking away.

"You rest. Lighthooves said we'd go get P-21 in a few hours. I need to finish recording a message to Father about everything that's happened here." She gave me one final pat and then slipped from the medical room. I watched the door close, then sighed.

How were you supposed to deal with somepony this deep in denial? There had to be something here that I could use to convince her to leave with me. Unfortunately--barring Glory being right and me just being paranoid…but, hello! Wasteland!--I couldn't see how I was supposed to do that from this one little room. I didn't even have my bags, let alone my guns! Plucking the healing potion feed from my PipBuck, I slipped to the door and peeked out. Yup. There was a guard. Of course there was a guard. Sweet Celestia, why couldn't I get an apple thrown to me every now and then?

I really didn't want to kill more pegasi if I could help it, at least not until I had Glory firmly on my side. I looked at the drugs on the shelves. Buck and Med-X, I knew. Mint-als? Dash? I would have loved it if my PipBuck could be bothered to explain what these chems were for! Rebound…alcohol! Yeeech…that was no Wild Pegasus! Tasted horrible. Aspirin. Chloroform. Acetaminophen? Words were hard enough on their own; now doctors were making new ones up?

Then I spotted it and thought, in my expert medical opinion, that this should work just fine. I popped open the door, and as the guard turned to look I smashed an empty oxygen tank upside his head. His helmet saved him from losing his brains, for which I was grateful. He staggered and swayed as I grabbed him with my hooves and magic and hauled him into the medical room. A second smack upside the head reduced him to a twitching heap. I stripped his black, reinforced armor and sidearm before heaving him onto the table and strapping him down. I put the healing potion supply tube in his mouth and started the drip. Well, at least he was still breathing.

I wiggled into his uniform, tucking as much mane out of sight as I could. I was able to hide my compact horn, and hopefully nopony would realize that my 'wings' were just flaps of linen. It didn't have to be a good disguise, so long as it worked. With a sidearm in my hoof holster and a baton in my belt, I almost felt good.

Unfortunately, my freedom didn't seem to be doing me much good as I trotted through the underground tunnels of the Miramare base. I kept reaching sections that were clearly damaged by the balefire blast. One maintenance room had its floor collapsed into some concrete pipes. From the radiation clicks, I wondered what the odds were that they connected to the outside? I smiled, wondering if the Enclave were crazy enough to poke through a radioactive crater to check for entrances to their secret base.

Aha. A door with a guard. That meant something useful, or at least important enough for a guard. He stared ahead with a bored, patient expression as I trotted over and adopted the same position on the far side of the door from him. "Boring, huh?"

"Yeah," he sighed softly.

"Can't believe they're making us guard this," I muttered.

"I know. They should just put the damned things on and be done with it. It's not like that Security mare will be able to do anything to them," he said with a bored sigh. Then he blinked as he looked at me, my 'wings'... my PipBuck... my grin. The automatic pistol pressed into his ear canal. He swallowed and muttered, "Aw... shit."

I had him open the door and we went inside some sort of high-tech maintenance bay. Some electrical cord and duct tape later, I had him tied up and was carrying two automatic pistols. Then I got a good look at what he'd been guarding.

I admit that I can be somewhat irrational when it comes to weaponry. I still had warm and tingly feelings in my crotch about the IF-88 Ironpony. What sat in this bay were two pieces of machinery so over-the-top lethal that I nearly climaxed at first sight. From the four sleek rifles to the glossy armored plates to the wicked scorpion tail at the rear, there was nothing about this armor that I didn't love. Had I the slightest clue how to use it, I'd have been happy for the rest of my life. But this armor looked like it was made to fly.

'Operative Lighthooves' was written on one, 'Sergeant Wind Whisper' on the other. If I couldn't use them, then I sure-as-Celestia didn't want either of those two using them against me. I looked at

the shelves of Wonderglue, duct tape, scrap metal, and turpentine. I looked at the taped-up pegasus and smiled. “I wonder just how much damage I can do in five minutes…”

Four and a half minutes later I left, confident that those suits of power armor wouldn’t be used anytime soon and that I owed the Enclave a doozy of a repair bill. I could only imagine how hard it would be to get a suit of that armor on with all the seams filled with glue, or fly in armor soaked in turpentine. I continued my way around the loop, and that was when I noticed it. If the Enclave had left everything a mess I probably wouldn’t have noticed the scent of fecal matter.

I peeked around the corner at another guard and slowly approached. The mare looked over and immediately her eyes widened. I knew her; she had sat her butt in a pool of Wonderglue for me. Her tail had been shaved to a stub in the process of freeing her. I raised the pistol faster than she could draw her own. “Hi. Now, I said it last time and I’ll say it again. I don’t want to kill you. I just want some answers.” I knew that stench creeping out around the hatch. I’d smelled it hours before. “Open the door.”

She swallowed hard. “I can’t. It’s locked, and I don’t have the key.” I carefully took her gun from her holster and added it to my growing collection of sidearms. Then I looked at the lock. I doubted I could pick it *and* watch her. I glanced at the puce pegasus, my lips pressed together, and transferred the gun to my mouth. Then I put as much of my telekinesis into the lock as I could, focused, and twisted. The resistance made my eyes water, then there was a metallic crack and the door swung open. “There. Inside,” I said after transferring the Enclave pistol back into my magical grip.

The door opened and a physical wave of stench rolled out. I saw her visibly recoil, tremble, and then puke at the reek. Clearly she’d never been to a Pony Joe’s. I poked her in the rump with the sidearm as she moved into a storeroom that had been converted into a prison. A half-dozen cells each held a foaming raider who jerked against their bonds and snapped at us in desperation as their haunting giggles filled the room. Some had chewed off their lips and tongues, greeting us with bloody grins and pinprick yellow eyes. This was the end result of raider evolution. If they couldn’t eat somepony else, they’d eat themselves.

I was more interested in the tan pegasus strapped to a frame. She was missing her wings; they’d been amputated, and her cutie mark

was just a round scar over an outline of a cloud and lightning bolt. The brand looked old. The amputation looked recent. Her eyes spotted me and started to shake as my prisoner started to vomit again. “Please…please…no more needles,” she begged brokenly. I looked over at a tray holding several large sample syringes. Many of them held blood.

“Unlock her. Now,” I ordered my prisoner, who was just holding herself together enough to realize that I was in the perfect mood to toss her into the nearest cell. The puce pegasus hurried to unlock the tan prisoner. “What happened to your wings and your cutie mark?” I asked her softly.

I could see the look of pain on her face at the question. She wasn’t going to answer, and what would I have done if she had? Torn off the wings of my prisoner? After a moment, she sobbed, “It’s my mark…the mark of all who leave the Enclave. I’m a Dashite.” Once she was freed of the frame she took a few weak steps.

“What were they doing?” I asked her gently, grinding the gun against the back of my prisoner’s head.

“I don’t know. They kept giving me shots and injections. They were trying to get something to work... ” She was visibly falling apart before my eyes as she tried to flutter her missing wings and sobbed. It’d be like if they’d cut off my horn.

“Get on the frame,” I ordered my prisoner, and she reluctantly moved into position while I buckled her into place. Then I turned to the mare. “You can get out if you go…”

She lay in a heap, the top of her head missing. I didn’t think, I simply grabbed everything in range of my magic and threw it around the room. In one spot, the debris bounced right off an invisible barrier. I’d never lifted two pistols before. Theoretically, it should be possible. Two pistols came up, aimed right at the void, and I unloaded a spray of fire that would have done a small machinegun proud. There was a shimmer and Adjutant Minty Fresh appeared, bleeding from numerous holes in his armor as he staggered back.

He tried to bring the silenced pistol around, but I dropped both my weapons and seized it in my own telekinetic grip. As we struggled, I ducked down, spun around, and slammed both rear hooves into his face. That took care of what remained of his concentration. I quickly picked up all the guns; a dropped firearm was a useful firearm for a unicorn. Then I picked him up with my magic and

hooves and slammed him upright against the bars. “Why?” I said as I glared into his eyes.

He spat in my face, smirked…and then I received help from an unexpected source. The raider within hadn’t been as tightly secured as the others; she still had the use of her limbs. And now she lunged at the bars and bit down hard into the side of his neck. He screamed as she started to chew.

“*Why?* What are you doing here?” I demanded as I slammed against him, pushing his exposed limbs through the bars. The raider giggled in delight at the banquet I provided.

“Fuck! I don’t know…I don’t…” he screamed as he tried to fight his way free.

I forced more of his nearest limb between the bars. “The fuck you don’t! You’re one of the Enclave’s special unicorns. You fucking know!” I roared into his face.

“I don’t! I don’t! Sweet Luna save me I don’t!” he yelled as tears poured down his face. There was a wet ripping sound followed by frantic swallowing. He started to pass out, and I levitated out one of the healing potions from the medical room and shoved the contents down his throat. He choked as he swallowed, then screamed again. “The disease! We need…It doesn’t…” He struggled to speak as the raider chewed frantically.

“Tell me!” I roared, giving him another healing potion.

“It doesn’t affect pegasi!” he screamed as the raider gave a twist and pulled his forelimb off. I administered another healing potion. “We don’t know why! They’re immune! Sweet Goddesses, stop!”

He’d shot me twice in the head. He’d killed this unarmed and mutilated pegasus prisoner from invisibility like a coward. I could easily see the blood on his hooves; the fuck I was going to stop! “Then why do this?” I demanded and shoved his rear leg through the bars. The raider inside squealed in delight.

“Because--” he started to say when his head exploded in front of me in a flash of crimson light.

Operative Lighthooves stood in the doorway, his battle saddle on and twin beam rifles pointed at me. He looked…impressed. Perhaps a little bit nauseous. “I’d have sworn that Minty Fresh would have died rather than talked. Clearly I didn’t anticipate interrogation by raider. I’ll have to remember that one.”

If I could have drawn and fired I would have, but he was on a hair trigger. He continued, his voice low and controlled. “If you’d just

waited a day…just a day…all this would have been nice, clean, and wrapped up. But no. You come in here, complicate everything, disrupt my operation, and then feed my trusted lieutenant to a raider to make him talk…" He blinked and then smiled. "I don't suppose I could interest you in a job, could I? The Enclave security forces could really use you."

"Fuck you," I replied. Not eloquent or catchy, but I was in a really bad mood at that moment. "So you vaporize me now?" He was clearly thinking about it. I saw him glance down at the ravenous raider pulling more of Minty Fresh through the bars before glancing back at me. Yeah, he was definitely thinking about it.

"I really should. You are not a pony for me to underestimate again. It would be wise to kill you." He took a deep breath. "But you have great value to my operations. Handing you over to Deus and Usury will calm a lot of air for me," he replied matter-of-factly. It was refreshing to hear someone wanted to turn me over for something other than a ridiculous amount of caps. "So you are going to strip and you are going to walk very politely to security's jail. Then I can finish up here and things can get back to normal."

Carefully, I shucked the disguise I'd adopted. Two more pegasi entered; one freed the pegasus I'd strapped up and the other gathered my gear. "Clean that up," Lighthooves said to the released pegasus, gesturing to the raider and her green unicorn snack. "Fortunately, he completed his work before going looking for you."

"Why?"

"That's a question that is going to drive you crazy if you keep asking it," he replied casually, but I could feel his beam weapons aimed for my head. "Suffice it to say that Councilor Sky Striker has forgotten that the role of the Enclave is to protect the pegasus people from any and all threats. Even from our own good intentions. I really have nothing against you or Miss Glory. I'd be content to let you both go if you weren't so terrifyingly effective at times, Blackjack. But Glory's 'death' didn't make her father see the folly of his ways."

"So what will?" I asked as we reached the jail and he marched me inside, shutting the door behind me.

I could tell part of him wanted to make me squirm; not because I'd killed his men, but simply because he was a bastard. Then he replied simply, "Her defection." He looked at the guards. "No guns. No batons. Take a Buck, a Hydra, and a shot of Stampede if you

need to and beat her into paste with your bare hooves. There's two of you against a girl. If she tries something, yell for help and then kill her." He paused, looking at me with that sick smile. "She *will* try something."

With that he turned and left the room with my unarmed and very apprehensive guards. I paced back and forth, my amber gaze moving from one to the other. "So. He's a shining example of all the Enclave stands for. What all of you stand for," I said as I stared them in the eye.

"The moron knew she was getting in trouble by coming down here. It's her own damn fault," the first muttered with a sneer.

"Shut up. Don't talk to the prisoner," said the second. He also had a tail that was shorn short.

"Oh, relax. She's got nothing. She's in here and she's going to sit there," he said with a dull chuckle.

There was a crackle over the speakers. "My name is Morning Glory. I'm making this statement to notify the ponies of Thunderhead that I can no longer tolerate your callous and cruel abandonment of the surface. We live in our clean and safe world while below us is suffering and death."

I stared at the speaker in the wall. It was her voice but…off. "How?" But then I knew.

"Minty Fresh. I'll give it to that horned goat; he could magic around words like nopony's business. Make anypony say whatever he wanted," the first guard chuckled. "Pop that into a holotape recording and voila. Instant confession."

Glory's voice continued, slightly dull and monotone, as if her normal inflections were blurred together. "Years ago my mother left the Enclave because she realized she could no longer stand by while ponies suffered. She believed in Rainbow Dash. I believe in Rainbow Dash. The cowardice I see in your faces sickens and appalls me. At least some of you joined the Volunteer Corps, but it's not enough. I won't suffer foolishness any longer. I can better serve Rainbow Dash out in the field than work in some extremely hostile laboratory. Thunderhead is like a disease; the surface is a cure."

"Minty's been listening to her talk for hours. He could probably make her sound like she was turning tricks on Red Rainbow Street," the first soldier chuckled.

"Shut the fuck up man. Stop pissing her off," the other said as he looked at me in fear. "You didn't see what she fucking did to him."

I closed my eyes, trying to ignore the tirade against Thunderhead. They were things she might normally have said, but stripped of her Enclave loyalty and pride in Thunderhead. I could imagine Rainbow Dash telling off her own kind for being too scared to fly down and help.

"Just what is she gonna do? What?" he taunted.

I looked from one to the other. "Quick question: which one of you has the keys?"

The second guard looked at the first while the first's eyes went wide. I stared right into his eyes and toggled S.A.T.S. Three telekinetic bullets straight to his face. Luna must have been listening in; his head exploded before me. Coming out of it, I looked over and my glare drilled into the second guard's eyes. I didn't talk, threaten, or even blink as he started to shake. "Get the keys and open the door," I said slowly. "I don't want to kill you," I added. But I would if he did anything besides what I told him to do right now.

He shook as he dug out the keys from his friend's pocket and fought to control his shaking enough to unlock my cell. I could smell he'd wet himself; good. I stepped out, still staring at him before I nodded to the cell behind me. He stepped in and I closed the door. "Don't come out," was all I told him as I searched his ally and found the Buck, a large syringe marked with a four headed dragon critter, probably Hydra, and an injection kit I figured was the Stampede.

Then I heard Glory screaming. Not even the thick metal door marked 'Interrogation' could cut out her wails. I beat on it with my hooves, scrabbled at the lock with my magic. Nothing. I looked at the door past it, 'Observation', and kicked it open. It was empty save for a metal table. Then all my world turned red with rage.

Through the window I could see Glory bent over the table inside, one buck pinning her torso and the other fighting to keep her rump in place. It could have been textbook rape if the skin of her flank wasn't darkening, reddening, and smoking as some chemical burned away her cutie mark. The sunrise on her flank set forever, darkened to a dull hemisphere.

I slammed my hooves against the mirrored window. The glass rattled, but aside from sparing a glance they continued their work. One pulled out a brand; I'd seen the mark less than an hour ago, burned into the flank of the Dashite prisoner. He stretched it into

the flame of a blow torch and I watched as it slowly turned red, then yellow. I rammed my hooves as hard as I could into the glass, but it didn't break. Operative Lighthooves gave a long-suffering sigh as he looked at me from the far side of the interrogation room window.

The brand touched her blackened cutie mark, and it disappeared entirely behind a veil of smoke and a hiss and a scream that punched straight to my core. *Do better.* I chowed down on the Buck, shot myself full of Hydra, and then without the slightest hesitation injected myself with the Stampede. All the world went red in a scream that went on and on and on.

* * *

I knew it had been minutes because everything still felt warm, but cooling, when my brain restarted. I sat painted head to hoof in blood. Copper fluid filled my mouth, as well as strings of meat. One metal table jutted through the gaping hole in the window; the other had been twisted out of shape. I could only count the dead by their torsos. Little else remained. The door hung open, and I had the furious certainty that none of these bodies belonged to Lighthooves. But all that didn't matter. Glory was crying.

I'd failed her. Failed to convince her of the risk. Failed to find the evidence in time. Failed to put together Lighthooves's plot in time. Failed to reach her. Her cutie mark was gone, taken by the ponies she'd trusted completely. And it was my fault. The raw brands were dark and oozing, a ring of black filled in with glistening angry red showing a circle with a cloud and lightning bolt within. A Dashite symbol.

"Come on," I rasped, my heart beating furiously in my chest and pounding in my skull. Gently I nudged her with my nose. "Come on," I groaned, then coughed as I hung my head and fought for breath. "We need to get out of here."

"Leave me," she whispered, almost too soft for me to hear.

I collapsed next to her. "Nope," I replied, glad to be off my hooves. Lighthooves had said 'beat her into paste'. Now I had a literal example all over me. "Not gonna do it."

"I've ruined everything," she said as she sobbed into her hooves.

Oh yeah. Been here before. And even though I thought I might pass out and was covered in pony goo I reached out and pulled her into

a hug. “You haven’t ruined everything, alright? He played you. It’s his fault.”

“I can’t ever go home. I’ve ruined my father’s work. The Volunteer Corps. Everything,” she said as she wept with tiny little gasping sobs.

I patted her back gently. “Only if you give up,” I said quietly. “If you give up, you’re dead. One way or another.”

She sniffed but finally opened her lavender eyes to stare up at me. “Thanks, Blackjack,” she whispered softly, “But I still feel like I messed up.”

I just smiled. “Well, at least your fuckup didn’t kill anypony. I’ve heard there have been ponies whose fuckups killed millions.” I nudged her to her hooves; it was like trying to help a foal walk again, despite the look of pain on her face. “Now let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“And wash,” she said in a shaky little voice. “I really need to wash. I need to get this place off me. And…” She swallowed hard, fighting to smile. “You really need one too. You’re gross right now.”

“Oh? The raider look doesn’t suit me?” Okay, that was a stupid thing to ask. Now I looked at the eviscerated torsos that I’d ripped apart with my hooves and teeth and prayed it was just the drugs at work. I rose to my hooves and step by step we struggled out the door. Thank goodness all my stuff was in security; I ignored the squishy sensation as I pulled it on. I could only see three bars on my E.F.S. down here, and they were yellow. I would come back and loot the place properly once Glory was safe.

We made our way outside. I figured we could get to the camp trailers and then…

Everything exploded.

Sweet fucking Celestia, why the fuck does everything explode?! Why!

I pulled myself to my hooves, the face of the building collapsing behind us to bury the front doors. The Vertibuck swung around before us, its near-silent motion eerie for something so large, its turrets lining up to take a shot. “Glory, fly!” I shouted, but she was too hurt or too overcome to do more than curl up like a foal. I staggered as fast as my hooves would carry me. I had to lead it away from her before it could take us both out; with luck, they’d go for the running target and assume that they could take care of her later. My heart was still thudding in my chest as I weaved back and

forth erratically, taking out the assault carbine and loading armor piercing rounds.

My 'armor piercing' rounds turned out to be pretty overrated; the bullets couldn't even damage the machine's windows, much less its armor. Its guns, on the other hand, spewed rapid fire bursts of glowing death that blew small craters in the tarmac around me. I leaped and rolled for my life, chips of flying concrete stinging my hide. The high-speed clatter-squeak of the guns kept me moving and scrabbling for cover as I thought desperately of anything I had that could put a dent in it! "Okay. This is getting ridiculous!" I shouted as I staggered and tried a clip of explosive rounds. They just made pretty flashes across the reinforced glass protecting the two pegasi keeping it aloft. I could just about make out the pilots in their armored pods grinning at me! They were fucking playing with me!

I needed more gun.

I needed a bigger bullet.

And, with a mental click, I realized I had both.

I swallowed as I dropped the carbine and pulled out Trottenheimer's Folly. The pistol's breech swung open with a heavy thump. I took out the black case with my mouth, the magical lock clicking open as the silver bullet fell free. I slipped the shell in as another burst of light hit the tarmac next to me, blowing me off my hooves and peppering me with more debris. I really was tired of getting shot at today. Actually, make that in general! I saw the heavy pistol nearby and pulled it over with my magic. I snapped it closed as the Vertibuck came by for another pass.

My turn. I levitated the pistol and activated S.A.T.S. Strange arcane marks appeared on my E.F.S. as the weapon did…something…with my PipBuck. I could only target one shot, which was good, given I only had one. Then I started--mentally, of course--as words appeared in my vision like on a terminal.

>PipBuck synchronization: complete.

>Blood pattern analysis: confirmed.

>Magical field analysis: confirmed.

> Authorization confirmed.

>Warning! BBP loaded. BGP armed.

>Do you wish to fire? Y/N?

If I hadn't been frozen in magical stillness I would have screamed. What kind of gun asks if you want to fire? I toggled yes over and over again.

>Firing.

A white field of energy wrapped itself around me, locking me in place. A second field formed a cone projecting forward towards the Vertibuck. I couldn't move! I couldn't breathe! The armored skywagon lined up its shot perfectly. Then I felt the trigger pull.

The recoil made a twenty-foot chunk of ground jerk around me as the world went red. The magical fields held me and the weapon steady, and the only thing that remained in my ears was the roaring noise. I needed to run. I'd stayed put for too long! I could imagine another pair of missiles heading in to blow me into…

The Vertibuck was gone.

As was the air traffic control tower.

As was a circle of clouds.

Distant stars twinkled at me as if waving before I slumped over on my side. As it happened, this gave me a perfect view of a hovering form that could only be Operative Lighthooves. Of course the fucker would escape on his own while the Vertibuck took me out. Somehow he'd managed to get into his power armor, too; I hoped he had scrap metal scratching at a tender place.

Lying like this, I was an easy target; all he had to do was take the shot. He hovered in place, and I could almost feel him looking down at me. I narrowed my amber eyes and lifted Folly up, my weak focus making the huge armored pistol shake. I took a deep breath and steadied myself, pointing it at him. Like a flare, he flew straight up towards the cloud layer.

"Bang," I rasped before falling on my face with a groan.

* * *

I'd lost. It was like walking out of the hospital; sure, I was alive and breathing, but that bastard had hurt Glory and gotten away with his doctored confession. I had no clue how much damage it would do to her father. I honestly didn't care. I just knew that the thought of what he'd done to her cause had carved out that shining light of optimistic hope inside her.

'*Not fair, you bony fuck. Not fair. Play your games with me*,' I thought as the rain began to drizzle once more. *'Fuck with me all you want. Not her. Not P-21.'*

'*Oh, can't I fuck with everypony?'* I could almost hear that card-dealing bastard reply as I looked at the truncated air control tower.

The hole in the clouds had closed up, but I could still remember those beautiful jewels in that terrible black. '*I used him to fuck with her. Used her to mess with you. Used you to screw with him. You're a piece in the game, just like everypony is.*'

'I'm not. I'm not your tool. My friends aren't,' I thought as I tried to pull Glory together. I wished I had a regeneration talisman on me; I wished my horn wasn't so incompetent that I couldn't even manage a healing spell for her.

'Oh. You're not? You don't want to be a player, that makes you a card.' That bony cheating bastard shuffled the deck in the back of my mind. '*And what, I have to wonder, makes you different from everypony else? You think you've got virtue? Friends? You're broken goods travelling with damaged wares, Blackjack. But don't worry, I don't mind busted things.'* I could hear the cards being dealt as he chuckled, like bones in a steel drum. '*Ante up*.'

The clack of power armor announced the arrival of Sergeant Wind Whisper. Reeking of turpentine fumes, she could evidently fly without her helmet. I looked up at her from where I sat beside Glory. I could kill her: three telekinetic bullets right to her head. But I didn't want to. I was burned out, beaten, and my heart still hadn't stopped thundering in my chest. But I could kill her.

"We're withdrawing from here," she said formally, not taking her eyes off me. The two pegasi following her had shorn-short tails: the pair I'd spared earlier. They looked at me now like I was a mutant dragon. Maybe I half looked the part. "The operative took our flight pass, so we'll have to head to the Skyport."

"What will you report to your superiors?"

"The truth. You attacked and destroyed an Enclave security operations base in the Miramare Air Station. That I heard the confession of Morning Glory broadcast over the speakers. That Operative Lighthooves was involved in some sort of project regarding the raiders," she said very matter-of-factly before she looked up at the remains of the air traffic control tower. "I will also recommend…strenuously…that we not attempt any retaliatory strikes against you."

"It didn't happen like that. That's not what happened," Morning Glory whimpered as she hung her head. "I'm not a Dashite. I'm not like her."

"That's what I know and what I heard. You find something else, have it couriered to me…specifically to me. Otherwise my wings

are clipped." She looked back at the base. "We took care of the raiders for you. Anything that remains is yours."

Thanks for small favors. "Right," I muttered softly. The three started to fly away. "Wind Whisper," I called after her. She stopped and turned, hovering. My eyes narrowed. "Why'd you stop me from eating that apple?"

The pegasus looked down at me coolly a moment. "We gave those farmer ponies that food three weeks ago when we got here. A show of good faith, he said."

"You knew it was contaminated."

"No, and I still don't. I'm in security, not medical or research. But I suspected," she said calmly as she met my amber gaze. "But I didn't anticipate a dirtsider would save my life. The least I could do was return the favor. Be careful, Security." And with that the trio flew away. I could appreciate the irony.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Sniper - Your chance to hit an opponent's head in S.A.T.S. is greatly increased.

Quest Perk added: Telekinetic Bullet Spell (level two): Your telekinetic bullet now does damage equivalent to a shotgun slug. You are limited to a number of bullets per day equal to your endurance.

Chapter 14: Strength

"THAT was a truly feeble performance."

How had it gone so wrong? That was the question that kept bubbling up inside me. I'd come to Miramare expecting to find calm, reasonable, intelligent Morning Glory. I'd planned to talk with her about mending things with P-21. About that horrible recording and what it meant. She'd try to help me work through the thoughts niggling at the back of my mind, and I needed that help; those patches I'd welded across that door weren't holding as well as I'd like.

Now I was the one caring for Glory. The confession Operative Lighthooves had engineered from her own words was damning to anypony who didn't know her, and she seemed convinced of its impact. In her own way she'd been raped: not a violation of her body, but of her identity. Now, more than ever, I had to be the strong one. I had to be tough. Confident. Because if I wasn't then we'd be eaten alive by the Wasteland. So I threw some more Wonderglue on that door in the back of my mind, broke out the duct tape, and hoped it could hold for a little bit longer.

With the Enclave gone, we went in through the locker room. I tried to show her the Marauders' lockers, but she couldn't have been more disinterested. Apparently when they left, Sergeant Wind Whisper had pulled out some critical components. The lights were now dead, with the exception of the weak emergency lighting. The food was also gone, and many of the fine weapons had been carted away. Fortunately, there was still clean water for drinking and washing up. Glory found some bandages for her scarred flanks. I tried to explain to her how the Hoofington Enervation sapped healing magics. The old Glory would have been keen for details.

Now she simply nodded and, without another word, went looking for healing potions instead.

I really wanted Lighthooves dead. I wanted Deus dead. I wanted Usury dead. I wanted Lancer dead. I really hoped it was a side effect of the Stampede, Hydra, and Buck all wearing off at once. I felt my limbs shaking as I stood in the shower, letting the lukewarm water wash away the blood, grime, and gore that had accumulated on me. I tried holding up the barding to rinse off some of the larger stains. I wanted to find a bottle of Wild Pegasus, curl up, and sleep for a few days. I'd gone so long without sleep that I felt like I was floating.

I couldn't. No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't. Don't think about it. I fought the shakes as best I could, breathing deeply. Don't think... *about Scoodle torn in two…* don't think…*about my guts trailing behind me…*don't think…*about Tumbleweed's head being blasted open…* don't think…*about the mine boss exploding…* I shook so badly that my legs collapsed beneath me. Not now! Not now! Don't think…*please, I don't want to do this…*

It took me a shot of Med-X and another of Steady to calm me down enough to stop wasting time worrying about myself and help the pony who deserved it. I went and got Glory, helped her out of her Enclave uniform, and started the water for her. "Blackjack?" she asked, barely audible above the water.

"Yeah?"

"Could you leave me alone for a little bit?"

"Yeah," I said as I left her there in the wan glow of the emergency light and tried to ignore her sobs. "I'll be…" I said as I glanced back at her, at those two burned lightning bolts where sunrises used to be, the only sunrises I'd ever seen with my own eyes... "I'll be... " *Useless. Pointless. Worthless.*

I sank down to my rump and leaned back against the wall. I couldn't cry; whatever part of me that enabled tears had been ripped out of me, as surely as whatever had powered the operations center had been ripped out. Glory finished her shower and stepped out, her wet gray flanks showing the burns in terrible relief; nothing else remained. Her sunrise had set forever. Together we went back upstairs. She never said a word, just covered herself in her blanket and sobbed for half an hour before she went to sleep. Me? I had another method for not feeling any pain.

Finding the bottle of Stalliongrad's Finest was the best thing that ever happened to me... well, since I'd gotten to Miramare. I unstopped the cap and took a gulp of the clean, biting vodka. My

empty stomach clenched a little. I didn't care. I wanted to drink till I drowned all the thoughts and the terrors and the failure churning within me. I drank and drank till I went past doubts, fears, concerns, failures, and nightmares and plunged myself straight into merciful oblivion.

* * *

I awoke with my cheek in a pool of cold vomit. I couldn't tell if Glory was asleep or awake, but her back was turned to me. Hard to imagine that a day or so ago I'd felt on top of the world. Like maybe things were improving. I was such an idiot. I *am* such an idiot. I sat up as quietly as I could and finished off the last inch in the bottle. I had hoped for warmth in my gut, but apparently there wasn't any to be had in vodka. Just a sharp bite that dulled the hurt inside me. But my limbs stopped shaking, at least. Kind of.

I flipped the mattress over as quietly as I could to hide my mess--let some other bastard clean it up--and went down to wash my face. The water was nice and radioactive now that the Enclave had left. Good. I needed my eyes glowing right now. Before I'd gotten sidetracked playing liberator, I was sent to get some equipment from the base. When I selected the contract from my notes--and sweet Celestia, how the heck does this machine know what is supposed to be a note--a tag appeared on my E.F.S. I picked my way down to the room marked 'Command'. Thank Celestia there was enough power to open the electric door.

Inside, it was clear the Enclave had been busy. Planning biological extermination of the surface or just playing games? I didn't really care anymore. The best Enclave pony I knew had just gotten her cutie marks seared off; the other two were bastards. Wind Whisper might not have tried to blow my head off, but she hadn't raised a wing to help Glory. I poked around the technological remains of the command center and found the terminal for 'Air Navigation'.

I had to keep moving. I had to be strong. I couldn't let myself fall apart. I couldn't deal with all those thoughts fermenting in the back of my brain. Focusing on trying to magic out the screws in the side panel helped take my mind off things. I was a stupid pony. I shouldn't be thinking. Thinking is what got me in this mess in the first place.

'We do not always see the good we do.'

Yeah, Sekashi, but sometimes we don't see the evil we do either. The evil I did…

"Fuck!" I shouted and slammed my head against the side of the terminal. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" I shouted over and over again. "Stop thinking! Stop thinking! Stop thinking!" I felt blood trickle down between my eyes from a nick beneath my horn. I hugged myself as I drew a slow, shaking breath. Dear Luna, was I losing my mind? Was this when the Wasteland broke me?

I couldn't do this now. Not now. But I could barely focus my magic to unscrew the rest of the screws in the side of the large terminal. I sighed, looking around with my amber vision before I spotted a side door. More desperate to act than genuinely curious, I rose and looked at the name over the doorway: 'Colonel Cupcake'. Cracking the door, I was greeted by the familiar smell of dust and decay. Clearly, the office of a long dead officer was not high on the Enclave's repair and cleaning priorities. Trash from the operations center had been tossed in one corner, and I had to step carefully over broken shelves, ruined manuals, and useless clipboards. In the far corner was the desk with the skeletal remains of Colonel Cupcake draped across it. His white uniform was now a soiled gray, but the brass buttons still seemed to shine.

Yellowed pictures lay haphazardly across the floor, shaken free from the walls by the balefire bomb. I levitated one up, looking at the fat brown pegasus with the white mane and tail and the cake cutie mark. Beside him loomed, with his easygoing smile, the image of Big Macintosh. A second picture showed the colonel in uniform facing a squad of ponies and saluting. The Marauders were right there in the front line, saluting back. They looked so clean. So eager to get into the fight. The third picture was of an incredibly skinny and thin blue pony holding up a tray of cupcakes. The colonel, wearing a golden helmet, grinned at the camera over a caption reading 'Guard cupcake eating champion ten years running.' The last was of a lime green pegasus wearing a string of pearls nuzzling up against him. The image was so…strange. So…not what I thought of when males and females were together.

Somehow, I didn't imagine an officer as being a cupcake eating champion. When I thought of officers from our lessons in 99 I always pictured grim-faced generals with tons of medals, eager to keep fighting. Carefully, I walked around behind his desk and saw his safe. I fished out the key I'd found in the office above and tried

the lock. To my relief, it opened, and there wasn't a ton of papers in this one. I'd hoped to find another silver bullet; wouldn't that make my problems with Deus easier! Instead, I found two memory orbs, a revolver, some pre-war bits, a box of ammunition, and two folded pieces of paper. The revolver was for a much larger caliber of bullet than my automatics.

I opened up the first note, glad for the distraction exploration afforded.

Dear Director,

You can take your request and shove it up your tail sideways. I don't care what 'investments' you made in the Marauders, the buck was a patriot and a saint who gave everything for his country. His funeral will be at the Ministry Walk in Canterlot. I will be there personally, armed, and will blow your damned head off if you set one hoof at the funeral.

Sincerely, one pissed off Cupcake.

Underneath it was scribbled: *'Not bad for a rough draft. Now to write something I can actually send.'* I laughed. Despite how rotten I felt inside and out, I laughed. I wished I'd known Colonel Cupcake. He seemed like a decent buck. I opened the second.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter stating my intent to resign from the Equestrian Army immediately. As per terms of service 2355.221J and article 12.1 of the Equestria Enlistment Act, I have put in an excess of ten years of combat service and am entitled to immediate release from active duty. I wish to thank the Army for its support and diligence, but I can no longer participate in its operations.

Big Macintosh. SN# 23-110019-E.

A smaller piece of paper was stapled to it: *'Thanks for helping with the legal parts, Cupcake. Hold on to this for me till I get back from Shattered Hoof Ridge.'*

I wondered if the rest of the Marauders had known.

Suddenly I heard my name called in a rather frantic voice from the hallway, saving me from thinking about the idea of a male giving up his role for his own interests. "I'm here, Glory!" I yelled as I rose quickly, then grabbed the memory orbs with my mouth rather than risk a trip down memory lane. I scrambled for the door, slipping and sliding on the trash underhoof as I moved into the command center and then out into the hall. "I'm here! What is it? Raiders? Enclave? Ghouls?" Crap, where had I left my guns and barding?!

She stared around her and looked right at me. Then I recalled she

couldn't see in the dark. I activated my PipBuck light. "I'm here. What's going on?"

She stared at me as she shook and rubbed her nose. "I…I woke up and you were gone. I didn't know if I was dreaming," she said, her eyes bright and wet in the glow of my light. "This isn't a dream, is it?" I hated that tiny catch of hope in her voice. Almost as much as I hated smothering it.

"I'm afraid not, Glory," I said, and saw that little flicker die in her eyes.

"Oh. I guess you can't ask if you're dreaming in a dream, can you? And dreams don't hurt."

"Yeah. If it sucks, you're probably awake," I said, trying to get a smile from her. It wasn't happening.

Her lavender eyes looked at me in the wan light of the PipBuck. "You look really bad. Are you okay?"

She'd just had her cutie mark burned off and she was asking me if I was okay. I had to focus on the throbbing in my forehead to keep from bursting into tears right then. "Yeah, sure. I'm aces." Did I just refer to my own cutie mark? I deserved a few hours of intimate time with Deus. "Are you okay?"

"No," she replied quietly. Make that a few days with Deus. "But thank you for asking. What are you doing down here?"

"Work…well, actually snooping around. Seeing what was left that we can salvage. There's that job about those electronic parts." I looked over at the partially-disassembled terminal. "But I'm all hoof here. Can you get these parts out? I'm pretty sure that we're not getting paid by the pound."

"Wouldn't that be nice," she said as a touch of the old spark returned. She pulled a screwdriver from her Enclave uniform. I sat down beside her, giving her illumination. She took out one screw, then looked at me and put the screwdriver down. "What was your father like, Blackjack? Did he teach you cards?"

I moved my mouth like a mute idiot. Of all the things she had to ask, why that? It was like trying to talk with my heart on a spit. Finally I choked out, "N…no. I never knew my…my father." Father was a word in stories for a buck who was a mare's permanently devoted breeding partner. Somehow, I severely doubted that that was what she meant.

"Oh, I'm sorry. How did you lose him?" she replied quietly as she opened the door.

Some mare had taken him to security, given him his twenty-first dot, and stuck a needle in his neck till he bled out into a jar. Then he was tossed into a machine that 'recycled' him into protein mixed with algae and fungus. And then we ate him. I jerked and slammed the back of my head against the terminal so hard that I thought I'd black out for a second. I wanted to black out. Glory jumped back, her eyes wide.

"I don't remember," I muttered, lying through my teeth. "Sorry Glory. I really don't want to think about Stable 99."

"I'm sorry. I thought it was your home," she said as she removed the panels.

"It is. It's just…not what I thought it was," I muttered and then stood. "I…do you have enough light to finish? I need…there's something I…I just need to go." Because I thought that if I didn't, I was going to explode, and she didn't need to see me melt down now. My heart beat so hard in my chest that it was getting hard to hear her quiet voice.

"Yes…and... I'm sorry, Blackjack," she said softly. "If I'd listened to you…maybe things would have been different."

'*Yeah, they would.'* I wanted to tear out whatever part of my brain had just thought that petty, snide, hateful thought. How could I think that? "Don't worry about it. I'm fine. I'll meet you upstairs when you're done. Alright?" I walked away without waiting for her answer. I couldn't stop shaking. I couldn't slow my heart down. My breathing was turning into choking gasps. My legs were so unsteady that I staggered into things, despite seeing everything in my piss-yellow gaze.

I wasn't fine. I wasn't near fine. I was fucked up bad. Dying of radsickness bad. But Glory was worse, and so I'd have to be better. Do better. That's what Fluttershy said. That's what…where the fuck was I? Where had I been going? I rubbed my eyes hard, trying to focus and setting the world spinning. I sat hard, my rump landing on a layer of thick, dried blood. My eyes saw the bars. The bodies within. The raiders. I sucked in breaths still reeking of fetid air, waste, and rot.

I saw Minty Fresh's headless corpse…what hadn't been pulled inside. I saw the raider with the burst belly, her face frozen in a rictus grin. The dead dashite whose name I'd never known. I'd have vomited again, but I couldn't move and had nothing to bring up anyway. At the rear of one cell were the bones of a pony: a unicorn,

blackened and twisted like melted wax. His mouth wide in a scream, a hole through his skull. How could he scream like that? How could he look like that? I could imagine my bones melting and twisting inside me.

"No…no…no…I'm not you. I'm not dead. I'm not walking down that bridge yet," I whispered into the still room to the motherfucker with the cards as tears ran down my cheek. "Glory needs me. And I need to talk to P-21. After that…fucking after…then you can take me. Not before…You hear me? Not before." I couldn't walk, so I'd crawl. I did everything I could to force myself to my hooves.

I made my way to the infirmary, but I doubted that healing potions or the like would do me any good. Then I found a little tin marked 'Fixer -- for those next day regrets' tucked away in a drawer. It was either a painkiller or a contraceptive. Either way, what could it hurt? I had to lick up two of the tablets because my magic focus was shit. I chewed. I swallowed. I prayed.

Bit by bit the trembles stopped. My racing heart calmed its pace. I took a few deep breaths that didn't feel like I was drowning. I lay on the floor of the infirmary, praying that Glory didn't find me like this. The cool tiles were nice under my cheek. I heard dusty cards behind shuffled as I closed my eyes. "Go away. I am not in a 'happy crazy' mood right now, and you're not real." This was definitely more of a 'fucked-up crazy' state I was in.

The old buck shuffled the cards deftly in his hooves as he sat on the examination table. His cobweb-gray mane and blanched coat were a small improvement on the bones. His raggedy hat looked like Applejack's after it'd been run over by a mutant dragon. He just looked at me with the softest of grandfatherly smiles. "Oh, well then. I'll just come back at a better time. How's four-thirty for you?"

I lay there and damn me, I chuckled. "I didn't expect my crazy to be funny. Now go away. I'm trying to pull myself together."

"Yeah, I noticed that," he rasped in his feathery voice. "Not having the best of luck with that, are ya?"

"Too many chems…too much stress…not enough sleep," I muttered, feeling…less bad as the Fixer worked its magic on me. The chems seemed much more resilient to Enervation than the healing potions. "Any second now you're going to go away. Then I can get Glory and we can get the hell away from this place."

"Well then, I won't keep you," he said as he tugged his ratty cowpony hat over his eyes. "Just wanted to let you know…you're

going to have to think about it. And…just my advice…you're going to have to listen to those last two recordings before you meet him."

I closed my eyes. "There's no point. I already know what I did to him. I know he'll never forgive me for it."

"No doubt. But what exactly is he going to not forgive?" He chuckled, and I looked up at the empty table. Deus, bounty hunters, radiation, ghouls…right now I'd be glad to lose my life to the Wasteland. The last thing I ever expected to lose was my mind.

* * *

We finished looting everything that I could carry that might be valuable. I searched the medical bay for more Fixer, but there was none to be found. While Wind Whisper had taken the guns, she'd left some ammunition; I was able to replenish my supply of buckshot. We found Glory's Enclave uniform and battle harness in her room, and I admit I was surprised to see her put both on.

"You're still an Enclave pony?" I asked as I cinched down my own barding.

She closed her eyes as she straightened the black uniform. "It's all I know. They might have put a brand on me, but I don't know what it means to be a dashite," she said softly as she turned and loaded cartridges for the beam pistol and disintegration pistol into the cartridge slots along her back. "I still believe in the Enclave," she said simply as she finished loading her pockets with the cartridges, saving her saddlebags for larger salvage.

"How can you, after what they did to you?" I asked as we left through the side door in the locker room.

"Because if I don't believe in them, then I don't believe in anything," she said with that hurting smile. I just wanted to hug her then and there. I didn't know how she could do it, but somehow she was holding together better than me. Then I saw the tears in her eyes, caught the soft catch in her throat, and I knew exactly how: layers of denial and pain. I put my hooves around her, holding her till she calmed.

Broken wares and damaged goods: some terrors of the Wasteland we were.

Finally, though, we were back on the Sunset Highway, and I had to admit I felt better. Sure, there was still P-21 to rescue in Flank, Deus to avoid, bounty hunters on my tail, and EC-1101 to unravel,

but it felt good to be going somewhere. The rain had even stopped for a bit, though every now and then it threatened a drizzle. We were actually just north of the strip mall where I'd met Dusty, and could see Brimstone's Fall.

It was clear that, sometime in the last few days, Sidewinder had arrived and tried to storm the mine. There were a lot of bodies around those towers, and the bloatsprites and radscorpions were having a banquet on the carrion. Now I could spot a dozen camps around the mine. It looked like Sidewinder had gone from an attack to a siege, and I wondered if I'd left just to doom Dusty and the miners to a slow death by starvation.

Then, to my amazement, I saw a winged pony fly almost vertically out of the center of the camp, pulling a small sky cart. A few feeble potshots rang out, but the pegasus was well out of range and flying west towards the rest of Equestria. Maybe it was just my mutant eyes, but there seemed to be something wrong with her wings. From this distance they appeared almost... skeletal.

Lying on our stomachs, watching, I noticed something that hadn't been at the strip mall before: boxes. Lots of wooden crates that seemed to hold most of Sidewinder's supplies were surrounded by a simple barbed wire topped chain link fence. I smiled as I levitated out my carbine. "What are you doing?" Glory asked as her eyes went round.

"Better," I replied, slapping in a freshly loaded clip of bright red rounds. I sighted the boxes and with a certain smile started to fire the rounds into the crates. Even though the boxes were wet, eventually the fires started to catch. The final touch was a crate marked with three X's, which exploded! "That ought to help Dusty Trails out."

Shouts rang out from the bar and cowpony livery store as a dozen or so Pecos began milling about. It only took a few seconds for them to spot the pair of us on the highway, and with a yell they raced towards us.

Glory just looked at me, smiled, and shook her head. "What?" I asked with a crooked smile as I loaded a fresh clip and raised the carbine. Damn, but it felt good to be in an honest to goodness fight. Now I could really practice my rifle work. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and used the magic to assist me in taking out the leader .

A pegasus's head exploded a foot from my face.

I swallowed as the rifle spat again and again while the spell

reloaded. Morning Glory waited for them to climb the highway embankment before firing alternating red beams and pink bolts of magical energy. One Pecos ignited as the energy slowly transformed him into a crumbling cascade of ash.

Her smile was the last to go.

My legs staggered as my heart began to pound. I had to keep moving back. I did not want three Pecos beating on me with sharpened shovels and baseball bats; I didn't care how tough my barding was. The only problem was that my legs weren't working right. The shaking was getting so bad I almost couldn't move. I levitated out some Steady and felt my jerking muscles relax as I swapped out the carbine for the shotgun.

I watched a raider's head disintegrate into bloody chunks as I fled through the tunnel from Stable 99.

A Pecos whirled and slammed both rear hooves into my face. I was knocked flying and landed on my back. His sharpened shovel rose up as he reared above me. I stared as my horn pulled out the dragon claw. The six-inch curved claw slashed diagonally across his belly and my horn glowed and I yanked out his viscera. He fell back, screaming for his mother as I stood and just stared at the bloody gray lengths around my hooves. Glory's beam silenced his screaming as my focus was lost and the claw clattered to the ground beside me.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern. I was losing it. I had lost it, and there were four more still attacking.

"I'm fine," I lied. I had to be strong. She was trying to be strong. I couldn't think about it.

I could feel the cuts across my middle. Snip. Snip. Snip.

I levitated up the shotgun and swapped in flechettes. The big guy in the back reached into a burlap sack and started to toss sticks of dynamite as the other three used saddles armed with shotguns. The pump action shotguns were larger than my own drum-fed model and they had me skidding across the asphalt as my barding absorbed most of their impacts. "Fly, Glory!" I shouted as the red sticks started to explode.

"Yee haw! I'm gonna blow you into chili!" the buck shouted as we fell back. Glory, however, remained grounded and tried to keep back from the worst of the buckshot. Her black Enclave uniform didn't offer her nearly the protection my reinforced barding did.

"Eat this!" I shouted as my magic gripped the next tossed stick of

dynamite and floated it right over to one of the gunpony's heads. He leapt aside as it blew and it knocked him off his hooves. I walked over, feeling my legs shaking despite the Steady I'd taken, and saw I'd transformed his head into paste.

I sat coated head to hoof in the blood and gore of three ponies.

My shotgun fell to the ground as I staggered. The three were now focusing all their attacks on me, and only the metal plates in my armor were keeping me from getting pulped. Fortunately, the boss had opted against throwing more dynamite my way; more's the pity.

There wasn't anything for it. I chewed down another Buck and injected myself with more Med-X and Steady, trying to get some control over my own body. My head…maybe Dash or a Mint-al? No time to experiment now. Not with my heart slamming in my chest and the Pecos' shotgun shells doing all they could to pound me into goo. I got my hooves under me and put some more space between us, letting the pellet spread dilute their firepower while I went back to the carbine. S.A.T.S. was up. I queued two bursts at one of their heads and was rewarded with the gunpony dropping in their tracks.

Glory's magical energy weapons finally liquefied the third. Boss ducked his head and turned, racing back towards the nearest camp and shouting for help. I got a few rounds in his rump, but I really wasn't in much of a state to chase him down. My heartbeat thundered so hard it felt like tiny explosions in my ears.

"Are you all right?" Glory asked, wide-eyed. I grit my teeth together. I forced a grin…smile, damn it!

"Yeah. Sure. Those shotguns pack a wallop though," I said, grinning like an idiot as I sat on my rump. The supplies were cooking nicely, and while I'd have liked to loot some of it for myself, I was glad not to be keeling over. "Think you can get those shotguns off their battle saddles? I'd like that kind of firepower."

She frowned at me but then nodded and rushed to the two guns that were still intact. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply as my heart pounded and pounded. I shook out two more Fixers and popped them in my mouth, chewing and breathing and recovering. They seemed to help. I might have taken a beating, but at least I was still able to walk. Among the three chems I was finally able to relax enough to examine the firearms.

She returned with the two pump action shotguns, similar in design to the ones I'd used in the stable but of a larger gauge shell. "Nice.

Well, we should probably get going. I think Mr. Sidewinder is going to be put out with me for burning up his things." Glory was still looking at me funny, but I think I put on a convincing enough act to reassure her. She returned my smile, at least.

* * *

The Sunset Highway turned sharply east past the strip mall. On my right, the badlands stretched to the south: red rock and scrubland. To my left were the tangled weeds and dead trees around Hoofington. The terrain was much more hilly, and soon we'd lost sight of the bonfire beside the mini-mall. The Fixer was wearing off and I could feel my heart pounding again. "So, why did you stay grounded that fight, Glory?" I asked to distract myself from the increasing pain in my chest.

She started with a little gasp, looking up at me with her wide lavender eyes before looking away again, her purple hair falling across her face as she hung her head. "I don't know. I just… couldn't. I wanted to. I tried. But I couldn't get my hooves off the ground." She gave me a worried glance. "What about you, Blackjack? You look…terrible."

"Yeah, Mom said the same thing when I was born. She told the doc to put that bun back in the oven; it wasn't quite done yet."

Glory looked skeptical. "I don't think they can push a premature foal back in, Blackjack. There's muscle contractions that…" She caught my cool 'you are missing the joke' look and flushed, looking…ashamed? "I'm sorry. I wish I was smarter like you."

"What?" I turned to face her…and the world kept turning. I sat hard on my ass so I wouldn't fall on my face. "Why would you call me smart? I'm so clueless I let a little capmonger charge me double just because she knew I had the caps. And let's not go into my tactical 'shoot, shoot, and shoot some more' methods! And if I even look at a terminal it breaks."

"You knew that the operative was up to no good," she said quietly. "I didn't. I actually thought you were a little jealous of him. You were completely right and I was completely wrong. I--" I silenced her by pressing my hoof gently to her lips.

"If I was right, it was only by accident. I am not a smart pony. I'm lucky to remember which end of my gun goes bang," I said as I brushed her mane out of her eyes. "Your kind of smarts actually

helps ponies. You got through school. You're a prodigy, so you're not so good with reading people. Your brain could kick my brain's butt with a brainy hoof tied behind its back." Then I frowned and rubbed my chin. "Or maybe my brain could win; I mean, it's got to be as hard as a rock."

"You're a good pony."

I felt a cold chill rush through me as my stomach clenched. "No, Glory. I really don't think I am."

"How can you say that? You're brave…"

"Glory…"

"Courageous, clever…."

"Glory."

"Steadfast, loyal, compassionate…"

"Glory! That's enough!" I snapped, and she jerked back looking scared and a little concerned. I sighed softly, hanging my head. "I did something terrible back in Stable 99. I didn't…I didn't know it was bad then. I barely remembered even doing it until now. But…" Say it. Just spit it out! Tell her and get it out of you. But what if she left? She'd be killed. What if she hated me? Right now, I could hardly stand. I let out my breath, looking away. "Sorry. Never mind. I'm just being stupid."

I started to move, but my legs didn't quite get the message and I staggered, tripped, and landed on my face. I groaned, and then there was a green line of energy cutting through where I'd stood only moments before.

"Get off the road, Glory!" I shouted as adrenaline helped me move my shaky limbs into the ditch on the southern side of the road. Three more shots lanced out from the hillside ahead of us, but I couldn't see the shooter on my E.F.S.; either they were invisible, or that was one hell of a sniper! Lying there in the dirt, I heard a soft blip of a landmark being marked on my navigation program. Normally I wouldn't have cared... but the mark said: 'Stable 90'.

And if the ponies there were just as fucked up as in 99...

A stable? Here? Realistically, I knew the odds of there being a stable we could get into should be minimal, but I'd take them over being stuck out in the open with my legs shaking, my heart hammering, and my head spinning while some possibly invisible pony took shots at me with a long-range magic beam rifle! "Glory, this way!" I said as I tried to run south towards the broken rocks that might offer some cover.

If it hadn't been for my PipBuck, I never would have found it. The tunnel entrance was wedged between two heaps of stone, looking like an abandoned mine. Two heavy-duty rails ran underneath the door. Fortunately, it wasn't locked, and I pulled it open and stepped through. Once inside, I turned on my lamp to illuminate the tunnel. And the bones. Lots of bones. Twice I was sent sliding when a heap of bones shifted underneath me. Finally, we got though to the stable door. A huge '90' in the middle of a great round gear-toothed hulk of metal. "So…ah…how do we open it?"

Glory examined the controls next to the door, then rolled onto her back and started to dig at the underside of the control panels. She pulled out some scrap electronics, duct tape, and a spark battery. Once wired in place, the console lit up. "Well, it's got power. Try transmitting your overmare's access command?"

I frowned and dug through the files I'd taken from the Overmare's office. Glory actually had to pick it out from the list. It transmitted, and the light on the control flashed from red to green. There was a loud click…and then…nothing. "Well, it's unlocked at--"

The door slowly started tilting inward. With a resounding bang that made my teeth rattle, the heavy door fell flat on its back inside the stable. Within lay only darkness and silence and bones. Again, lots of them. The air was strangely hard to breathe, but that may have just been my own body. Step after step we walked into the empty space. The reason the door had fallen had been simple: the hydraulic mechanism that moved and closed it was gone.

This stable wasn't finished. As we walked into the atrium, what I saw were the barest bones of a stable--walls, floor, ceiling, the balconies--but everything else was missing. Yet there were signs of ponies once living here. Two huge piles were formed: one of scraps of clothing and luggage. The other... bones. Of course.

"Why would they all come here if the stable wasn't finished?" Glory whispered, walking so close to me our shoulders brushed together.

I couldn't imagine…wait…"They didn't know it wasn't finished." No terminals. No wires or pipes or equipment. No water talisman or air purification talismans. Nothing but bare metal. I could see only one door, and it was to the overmare's office. We picked our way up the stairs to the balcony and to the office door. 'Murderer', 'Cunt', 'Motherfucker', and other epithets were written across its scratched and dinged surface.

Sure enough, it was locked, and I didn't have any bobby pins with me. I glanced at Glory, sighed, and pressed my horn to the lock. Twisting…twisting... Tears ran down my face, and then there was a snap. The door handle came right off! I beat on the door, but it was no less locked.

"Great. Now what?" I muttered.

Glory stepped back and looked above the door, at a gap between the structure and the armored ceiling of the stable. "Can you give me a boost?" she asked, her wings pressed firmly to her sides. It looked like she still wasn't quite able to fly. I helped push her up to the space and there were little metal clops as she walked over to the empty round window of the office. They were followed by the noises of Glory slipping through the window, and then there was a click as she unlocked the door from the other side.

"Wow…I can't believe that worked," I muttered as I pushed the door open. The contents of the overmare's office consisted of the overmare's desk, a single set of bones, a suitcase, and several empty Sparkle-Cola bottles and Fancy Buck Cake wrappers. Cavities meant for terminals gaped in the walls. There wasn't even a window in place.

I noticed the wrappers had writing on the inside. I carefully smoothed them out and started to read.

Day 1: Hello. My name is Buttercup, appointed overmare of Stable 90. If somepony is actually reading this, yeah…we're fucked. Sweet sweet Celestia are we fucked. I was notified by Stable-Tec that the real overmare died in a skywagon accident three days ago. I'd been told the stable was finished, furnished and ready to go. I was even going to get a tour and inspection next week and do our practice drills. I got the memo from the president of Stable-Tec telling me how Stable 90 was supposed to be some sort of tech experiment. Newest Pip-Bucks and terminals for everything. Then we got here and…nothing. We had to push the door open and closed again. The locks are the only thing holding it on, I think. There's no power. No water. No air. Yeah. Did I mention we're fucked?

Day 2: Things are getting ugly down there. Folks are screaming for my head. Anypony that had food and water has probably had it taken from them. There's been fights over bottles of Sunrise Sarsaparilla and Sparkle-Cola. Goddesses, if they knew I'd brought a twelve pack with me and some snacks... I guess the radiation shielding is working because nopony has died…yet.

Day 3: Yet has arrived. The old and anypony who's sick. They're now yelling for me to come down and open the lock, but I know better. I go down there and I might as well slit my own throat. There's water, if you want to call it that, from the sumps and lowest places in the stable. I wish it were bone dry. I know what's coming.

Day 5: A mother begged me to let her and her daughter out. I told her plainly and simply that she could die in here or out there. She wasn't happy. Oh Celestia was she not happy. I keep thinking about all the work I didn't get finished, like it matters now. We were supposed to have a visit from the VP looking at the new tech coming out of our office. The best of it is probably going in 98, 99, and 101. Unless they got screwed too.

Day 7: I'd guess a quarter of the ponies are dead. They've made two piles: one of belongings and the other of the dead. Too bad they're not thinking clearly. If they heaped the dead on this side, then some of them would get the chance to climb up and kill me.

Day 10: I'm thinking of killing myself. That'd be just, right? I don't know what went wrong; communication screwup? Willful fuckery on the part of Stable-Tec? I think the only reason I don't is because I deserve to be the last pony who dies, so I can see this. I don't know if I'm responsible or not. I just know I feel responsible. I was with Stable-Tec. The paperwork said 90 was finished. I toured 89 just to the east of here. What the fuck went wrong?

Day 12: They've figured it out. Took them long enough. They've started to eat the dead. Goddesses, the smell; everything here smells of rot and decay. Some of them are throwing body parts up here to fuck with me. I throw them back. There's an insanity here. Something's snapped inside almost everypony. As we slowly starve, all the rules have broken down. It's not enough that we're starving; some of us have to kill.

Day 15: My last Fancy Buck Cake. It's banana. I hate banana. Funny, huh? I think it's funny. The survivors have a purpose: kill me. Or rape me and kill me, I'm not sure which. They howl for hours about what they're going to do when they catch me. The air's going bad though. Funny. We might suffocate before we all starve to death. Won't that be lovely? I've stopped throwing the body parts out. I might need them before this is done.

Day 18: The cannibals are now eating their own. The corpses are spoiling faster than they can be eaten. The air is simply foul. Every breath tastes like shit. It won't be long now. I'm out of Sparkle-Cola. I wonder what's left of the Hoof. I mean, I've heard Applebloom say that

the Hoof is so overbuilt that nothing could take it out. I hope that's true. I hope we have one city left as a great 'Fuck You' to those zebra bastards.

Day 22: I watched the last two fight to the death. They're not eating each other anymore. I think they're just…ending it. When it was over, the one survivor just looked at me like he'd lost. Just looked at me. For hours and hours. Finally he said, "My name is Muddy." And that was it. He just lay down and never got up again.

Day 24: Done. I'm done. Stable 90: Shortest-lived stable in Equestria. Thought of ending it…don't deserve the quick end. This is Buttercup, acting overmare of Stable 90, and these are my last words: fuck Stable-Tec. Our stables suck. No. Those aren't my last words. I wanted to say

I put the notes back together again, carefully, and tucked them under Buttercup's bony hoof. I couldn't have imagined: these ponies had no more choice of whether to live or die than the ones who'd been trapped outside the stable door... No, they'd had a choice: how to die. Priest had tried to explain that to me, that how we choose to meet our end was a choice he couldn't take away. Buttercup had chosen to delay her death and bear witness to the end of a stable.

Glory was looking at me funny. "Blackjack, when was the last time you ate something?"

"Huh? I'm not hungry." Especially not here and now. Actually, even after walking all day, I still wasn't hungry. My appetite was just gone. "Why don't you eat and rest?" I suggested with a grin. "I can take first watch. If that sniper finds this place, they won't be able to hide from my E.F.S." Then I looked at her burns and my smile became even more forced. "You need to take care of yourself, Glory. You don't want to get an infection on top of everything else." She looked at me in worry and then walked over to a small heap of Buttercup's clothes: a meager bed, but the best in this stable.

"Wake me in two hours, alright?" she asked quietly.

"Sure," I lied with an easy smile. She could use the rest. I knew I wasn't going to be sleeping. Not without some severe assistance from alcohol.

She gave me one last lingering look. "Alright, but eat something, please. You look terrible."

"Yes, Mom," I said sarcastically, but the concern in her eyes didn't fade like I'd hoped. She lowered her head and in a few minutes drifted off. She must have been exhausted.

I wasn't much better off. I sat down next to Buttercup as the time

crawled by. The shaking had returned. My heart still hadn't slowed down, though at least it wasn't beating so loudly that I couldn't hear. A Sparkle-Cola was enough for me; I really didn't need much more than that right now. Sugar to keep me awake, water to keep me from getting thirsty, and I was good. Well, good enough.

I looked around the room for something to stop my mind from wandering. An old newspaper talking about a scandal at the Ministry of Peace; apparently some strings had gotten pulled and some ponies were still sore about it. There was even an investigation underway. The world falling apart with half-finished stables, and they were worried about mares calling in favors to be the first in a rocket ship. Small wonder everything blew to hell and stayed there.

"You look terrible," rasped the old buck beside me as he fanned out the cards between his hooves.

"I feel terrible, so it's appropriate," I muttered softly, not looking at somepony who wasn't there.

"Actually, I am terrible. Why beat around the bush?" I glanced out the window into the atrium, seeing the heaped-up bones in the far corner of the room. "Do you like doing all this?"

"Asking questions of your hallucinations is a bad sign," he warned softly.

"I've got to talk to somepony," I whispered.

"I didn't do this," he said with a leathery sigh. "I didn't make ponies and zebra go to war. I didn't make them lose their senses. I didn't make them blow the world to hell. You folks did that all on your own. You created me. And now, for whatever reason, you folks just insist on perpetuating me. I can count the number of ponies really trying to end me on one set of hooves. The others fighting me are just being pulled along, and there aren't even many of *them*." He stopped shuffling and looked up at me from under his hat. "Oh, and in case you were wondering, I didn't make those bastards burn her, or make you lie to your friend."

Glory shifted in her sleep, hiding her face in her hooves as she gave a soft whimper. Then, with tiny little sobs, she started to weep. She shook, and quietly I forced myself to my hooves and walked to her. As carefully as I could, I tried to hold her without shaking her awake. Fortunately, my limbs decided to listen to my damaged brain as I held her. "No…" she whimpered softly, "Mommy…no… please…"

The old buck looked at me with tired eyes as she gradually stilled; her breathing slowed and she eventually relaxed. I sighed softly, stroking her mane as he muttered gruffly, “I didn’t do that either.”

“No. But somepony did,” I whispered. “They should pay for it.”

“So you’re saying now you’d push the button? Damn, if you’d done that back at the mine you might have gotten a chance to sleep in a nice bed tonight.” He reached over and picked up a beer (with his hoof, somehow, but of course it was all a hallucination anyway), taking a sip as he watched me move away from the now quiet Glory. “So is this it then? Are you a killer?” He waved his hoof slowly in front of him. “Blackjack, executioner of the wastelands?”

“No. I’m not an executioner,” I replied quietly.

“Well then, I’d suggest you figure out what you really are while you can hold on to it,” he said as he held the beer out to me. “While there’s still something to save.”

“There’s nothing in me worth saving. I’ve just got to take care of her and talk to P-21,” I muttered, bringing the… empty Sparkle-Cola bottle to my lips. I looked at the little purple cartoon unicorn on the label and sighed softly before walking towards the door. “I really could have used a beer, too.”

I made my way to the fallen stable door. I might have been in a body that was falling apart with a brain that was having conversations with hallucinations while my psychology frayed like a cheap saddle blanket, but I didn’t need to spend my night breathing stinky air. I looked at the remains of the desperate ponies trying to get in and those of the ponies who’d been desperate to get out. I reached out with my magic and levitated a little stuffed unicorn from inside the stable and set it on the door with me. I’d had a unicorn like this when I was a foal. Like everything in 99, it’d been passed down from my mother and grandmother, only mine was purple and this one was purple and white.

The old bastard was right, though: I had a lot of hate in me. I wanted somepony to blame for this. Something that I could direct all my hate at so that it wasn’t eating me up inside. Something I could point at and go ‘There! There is the motherfucker responsible! Deal with him and everything will be fine!’ But the ponies who had been the cause of this were long gone. I rolled onto my back, feeling my spine straighten and groaning as I hugged the little stuffed unicorn.

“I can count the number of ponies trying to stop me on four

hooves," I muttered, wondering if my mind wasn't trying to send me a hint. The Stable Dweller was clearly one. That pony was fighting with every inch of her hooves to save the Wasteland. She'd never lay around and mope like this. I bet she'd get on her hooves and kick her way through all this mess! Maybe DJ Pon3 too, in his own weird way. I'd listened to his broadcast earlier on radiation and taint; I supposed Enervation was a Hoofington problem. He might not have had a shotgun like the Stable Dweller, but he was at least trying to help.

That made me think of Bottlecap and what she had said. I hadn't really thought about it, given that I wasn't a smart pony, but I think she was trying to end the Wasteland too. She saw a way for trade to curb the impulses that tore down society. She might have been a businessmare with an eye for profit, but business was a means to an end, and that end was everypony getting what they needed.

Priest had to be the last. Not me. He was trying to end the Wasteland one soul at a time. He gave young ponies a home and a place to belong with the Crusaders; he cared. He genuinely cared for ponies whether he knew them or not. How could he go on caring day after day for ponies who he knew would eventually be gone? What kind of pony did that? While a dark and cynical part of my mind snickered 'Masochist', I had to admit I couldn't do it. I was lucky enough to care about Glory.

Slowly, I sat up again and looked at the stuffed unicorn. "The Stable Dweller wouldn't be afraid to listen to a recording," I muttered to the toy -- and if it started talking back to me, that was it! Get me a straightjacket. Talking toys is where I draw the line! I sighed and selected the recording 'BJ #2' on my PipBuck. I closed my eyes, getting ready for a kick to the gut.

I heard the sound of unsteady footsteps and ragged breathing. From the echoes and the whirr and gurgle of ventilation and pipes he had to be in the maintenance halls. Suddenly there was a rapid tap of hooves, an 'oomph', and a sound of two ponies sprawling. *"Hey! What…wait, what's a male doing down here?"* I heard my voice say. I couldn't remember this one, either. I was stationed down in the maintenance level due to my frequent slips in discipline. *"P… 13?"*

"Please…please…" he begged me softly.

"Sweet Celestia, what happened to you?" I heard myself mutter.

There came a distant shouting. *"Hey! Where the fuck are you, you*

blue cock?" Daisy's voice; I'd know it anywhere. *"I still got an hour! Get the fuck out here!"* Her yells echoed off the concrete tunnels.

"Shit. Come on... hurry. She's tracking your PipBuck." My low voice was followed by the sounds of hooves on the concrete. I knew the maintenance tunnels. Daisy didn't. I knew where the generators futzed up tracking, all the good hiding places. *"Okay. Here's the plan. We wait here for her to go, wait for the hour, and then I'll get you up to medical."*

"Why are you helping me?" he whispered.

"Huh?"

"Why are you helping me? You're a mare."

"So what? I'd help anypony get away from Daisy. Besides, it looks like she tried to kick your head off. What did you do?"

"She didn't…climax," he muttered.

"What a cunt," I grumbled in return. *"No excuse to go damaging stable property just because she can't get off."* As I listened to myself I clenched my teeth and squeezed my eyes shut. Damaging property, because I couldn't figure out then that he wasn't property, he was a person! A person getting beaten because he didn't push Daisy's buttons right.

There was a soft pause. *"No. No excuse for that."*

"It's not like bucks don't try to make it nice... " I said in annoyance. Was I always this fucking chatty when hiding?

"We have to…"

"What?"

"We have to…if we don't…in medical…they give us the shock."

"The what?"

"A shock. Till we can. Or drugs. Or they beat us. Or just retire us…"

An awkward silence. *"Oh…well…I get double shifts if I slack off. We all have to do our job, right?"* I bit the stuffed unicorn to keep from screaming at myself. I had to work a double shift if I was bad. He was electrocuted or beaten or killed if he didn't please his rapists!

"…right…" I could barely hear him over Daisy's shouting.

"Shit. She's coming this way. Look, I'll lead her off. Have her talk to Rivets if she's seen you. Just stay out of sight."

"Thank you."

"Don't worry. It's the least I can do."

There was the noise of me greeting Daisy and receiving a slew of profanity in return. Then the noise of our voices retreating as we commiserated on 'fucking males'.

“Yeah…it is…”

The least I could do. More because I was interested in pissing off Daisy than in actually helping the ‘damaged property’. Because once he’d gotten back to medical they would have patched him up and then punished him for skipping out on his duties. I never got shocked no matter how much I screwed up. Mom never beat me with a stick…although she should have. And while some ponies threatened to kill me, I never really took it seriously.

But now that I was thinking about it, males were retired all the time. Not just for becoming the newest 21. You’d hear about some mare flipping out and damaging ‘breeding equipment’. You’d be mad, not because some poor buck had been smashed, but because you might be pushed back in the breeding rotation. If a female died, everypony knew. When a male died, it was barely even mentioned.

The least I could do. What could I have done? I could have put the beat down on Daisy; she was bigger and stronger than me, but I could have at least tried. I could have talked to medical; the ponies there freaked me out, but they might listen to me. Fuck, I could have talked to Mom. She was head of security! Certainly something about that fucked-up stable could be fixed. Or I could have gotten a gun, killed the Overmare, and ended the whole sick game.

I’m not an executioner.

I slowly opened my eyes, looked at the stuffed unicorn with her fabulous purple mane. Right now, honestly, I wouldn’t mind some advice, even from a toy. Still, I doubted it would be of much help. Crazy hallucinations or not, they came from my crazy brain.

* * *

I awoke to the unfamiliar sensation of clothes draped over me. My eyes popped open to the furious beating in my chest. I flopped spastically, then rolled to my feet. “I’m up! I’m up!” I quickly looked around the entrance to the stable. “Glory? Glory!” I shouted as adrenaline rushed through me. I took another step and my legs buckled, sending me sprawling on my face. “Ow…” I muttered, lying there.

“I’m over here, Blackjack,” she said, waving from the stack of clothes and suitcases. An old spark lantern flickered beside her. “I’m glad you got some sleep,” she said as she opened a suitcase and rifled through it. I fumbled with my pack for the tin of Fixers and

chewed one down before the shakes began.

"Sorry I fell asleep," I muttered, finally able to sit up and trot over to her.

"You needed it," she replied with a smile, then looked at me critically. "Come to think of it, you look like you still need it."

"It's not that bad," I insisted and rifled through my saddlebags for a bottle of Sparkle-Cola.

"You need food. Not sugar."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I'm just having trouble sleeping." Not last night though. I think I must have passed out. I sat down and watched her dig through the suitcases with a small smile. "Find anything good?"

"Mmmm…yes, actually," she said as she hopped down off the stack and nudged some magazines towards me. "There's an excellent Scientific Equestria here. A Big Book of Arcane Science. Even a Canterlot Journal of Medicine!" I couldn't…and really didn't bother…hiding my yawn. She sighed and then smiled, "I also found an Ironshod Firearms catalogue."

"Oooh, Gimme!" I said with a grin.

"Only if you eat," she said firmly, pressing both forehooves down on the magazine. "I don't care what, but eat something. Then you can read up on your guns."

"Ugh…fine." My ears drooped as I rifled through my bags and came up with a Fancy Buck Cake. I could imagine the old bastard laughing. Instead I settled for Carrot Crunchies. She gave me the magazine and I couldn't help but grin as I buried my muzzle in the box while reading over the top.

"Lots of photographs and letters, too. I don't think they had a fire; good thing or they would have smothered." I gave a general grunt as I looked over the spectacular firearms in the catalogue. And they were all new! "Look, here's a photo of Fluttershy," Glory's comment made me pause.

I swallowed and lifted my eyes from the page. She'd found one of the few things that could have broken my attention from the shiny bang sticks. With orange crumbly bits stuck to my mouth, I trotted over and looked at the photograph.

She's beautiful. Maybe that was a strange thought to have, but at least the cynical part of my brain silently agreed. She had a strange, wholesome appearance that simply made me feel good. She wasn't like the white unicorn beside her with the purple mane. She

reminded me more of Midnight, so I guessed that the unicorn kept her appearance through painstaking effort. Beyond them was the familiar image of my orange figurine. Applejack. I tapped a hoof at the unicorn. “That’s…Rarity?”

“Mhmmm.”

“She looked different in my textbooks,” I said as I glanced at them. The Ministry of Wartime Technology was pretty cut and dry: they made guns. I had to admit though, Applejack didn’t look nearly as thrilled to be in front of the audience. It looked like Rarity was practically thrusting both of them into the spotlight. “What did her Ministry do again?”

Glory reached over and bit the corner of my box of Carrot Crunchies, passing them to me before answering, “The Ministry of Image was…well, actually, I’m really not sure. They just did stuff for the other ministries. Printed books. Arranged events.” I continued eating as I flipped through some more pictures in the stack Glory had found; they were obviously professionally done. I saw the cavernous atrium of the Fluttershy Medical Center in all its beauty, so I guessed that whoever took these had to be a photographer. One picture showed Applejack next to a green earth pony buck, her large hat blocked my view of his face. Still, he was standing awfully close in most of these pictures.

Then I saw a picture that just…confused me. It was of Rarity standing in a niche off to one side, talking to some buck. He faced away from the camera, and all I could see of him was a white coat and a golden mane. What confused me was the look on her face, like it was midway between shifting expressions from anger to something else. Fear…and she did not strike me as a pony that showed fear lightly. Unfortunately, I didn’t see any other pictures of the buck Rarity’d been talking with.

As interesting as the pictures were, I didn’t see them as being particularly valuable. All they really seemed to do for me was remind me that once upon a time life had been better. I gave Glory one more hour to pick through the contents of the suitcases as I finished browsing the articles in the front of the Ironshod catalogue, watching her from the corner of my eye. I took another Buck and Steady while she had her head in the pile, and then finished it off with another Fixer tablet. I felt like I was almost approaching normal.

With her bags full we carefully picked our way back up to the

surface. No long-range beams of death; good. Instead of going straight towards Flank, we moved overland along the edge of the badlands. The broken terrain was a pain to navigate, but offered much more cover in the long run. Unfortunately, we'd barely been travelling for an hour when the Fixer wore off. It'd been growing more and more abrupt each time it stopped working.

My legs gave out beneath me and my hooves scrambled for purchase on the slope. Grit and gravel popped under my feet as I went over the edge and tumbled down the rocks. I crashed at the bottom and lay there. My PipBuck flashed warnings of a little unicorn with her limbs and chest bright red. I clenched my eyes shut as I first took a Med-X for the pain, and then another Hydra. I felt the fractures in my crippled limbs slowly healing, and I could see the bars slowly fill. I was finally able to choke down a tablet of Fixer to calm my beating heart.

"Blackjack!" Glory called from above. For once I was glad she wasn't flying. Limping on broken legs, I picked my way along the base of the slope till we met. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," I smiled. "You've seen me. It'd take more than just a tumble like that to slow me down." I couldn't be weak. I couldn't. "I got a peek over the edge and…well…got dizzy, I guess."

"We should head back to the road," Glory said as she looked at the next ridge. It was even higher and steeper than the one I'd rolled down. I couldn't argue. Right now I was feeling delightfully numb as I was spared the discomfort of two broken legs and a busted set of ribs. If I'd had some Hydra on me when fleeing Stable 99, P-21 wouldn't have his limp.

If I just had a steady supply of Fixer, this wouldn't be a problem.

Making our way north towards the highway, we were lucky enough to come across a rusty, mineral-encrusted piece of equipment that hissed steam and dripped hot water. 'Well #33', my PipBuck said. Pipes from the equipment ran up and over the ridge to the east. I was more interested in the two dead Steel Rangers; well, actually, I was more interested in their weapons and ammunition. If the value listed on my PipBuck was any indication, it'd help our profits immensely. Still... *something* had to have killed them.

"What the heck is it?" I asked, gesturing at the steaming mound of metal. Glory knew more about machines than I did, unless it was a machine that went bang.

"A geothermal wellhead. Um…a hot spring?" Glory quickly amended. "It pipes hot groundwater to a town or building." She smiled up at it. "I was reading about them in ScientificaEquestria. Hoofington experimented with all kinds of alternative power sources. Geothermal, hydroelectric, arcane spark reactors…things that might have ended Equestria's need for zebra coal."

"Huh…" I said as I looked at all the pipes and valves, pretending that I understood half of what she had said. It had more than a healthy amount of rust and minerals, but it still seemed intact. Pretty impressive for--

The green energy beam punched right through my barding…my chest…and my barding. Again.

'Ohshitshitohshitshit…' was all that went through my mind as my chest filled with fire. Falling behind the remains of the Steel Rangers, I was surprised at how little the injury hurt. Maybe it was the Med-X, the regeneration from the Hydra, or the fortifying effects of Buck, but I wasn't *quite* dead. However, I certainly wasn't going to be moving for a bit... quite a bit, probably, since I now had a pencil-thick hole lined with cooked meat running all the way through my body.

Glory darted beside me, crouching behind the armor as she turned me on my side and started pouring every healing potion she had into the hole. "Don't move. Don't die. Don't move. Don't die," she repeated over and over as I felt my body drag itself back from the edge. She looked at the hole and muttered, "Shit…I don't want to use this, but…" and pulled out an ampule of Hydra. Why she wouldn't use it first, I had no idea. I nodded and she pumped the wonderful regenerative chem into my chest. My heart and head started to pound as the magic repaired the most critical damage. But I couldn't slow my breathing as adrenaline coursed through me.

"Okay. I'm good," I groaned. I was a long way from good, but I had just crossed into 'shooting this fucker many many times' territory.

"You are not good. I just injected you with Hydra. When it wears off, your heart could stop." Excuse me? Cardiac arrest was not on the list of possible side effects! Actually, I wasn't sure. Had there been a list of side effects? She dug in her uniform's pockets for a Buck tablet. "I hate to do this but…eat this."

"Yeah. Good idea," I muttered. "And then let me have a tablet of Fixer…slow my heart down before I pass out."

"Slow your heart rate? Fixer wouldn't do that. It'd make a heart

attack more likely. Put you in shock."

I saw the red bars appearing one after another. "That's all mights and maybes. They're coming, and that sniper will kill me, and maybe you, if they get another shot," I said as I dug out my own tablets from the infirmary and swallowed one down. I fumbled for some Steady, and then kicked myself when I realized I was out of that particular chem. "Now I need some Steady…and a plan."

"Blackjack! You've taken Hydra, Buck, Fixer, and you want to take Steady too? Why not add some Rage and Dash and complete the set? Are you trying to kill yourself with a pharmacological reaction?"

"Big words later, Steady now," I said as my limbs spasmed. She looked more scared than me as she dug out her own supply of the chem and injected it. Fortunately, it had the effect I needed. I lay back behind the fallen armor. "Okay. Better now. Much better." Enervation or not, enough magic and chems had been pumped into me to bring about my recovery. "Now for a…"

There was a sharp ping as a round ricocheted off the dead ranger armor inches from my head.

"We've got to get out of here," I muttered, imagining the gunponies advancing on our cover while the beam sniper readied a killing blow. But if we moved, odds were that one of us was going to get hit. I doubted I could survive a second hit from that gun. There were rocks further up the valley that might offer some cover... but we had no way to reach those. Then I looked back at the wellhead behind us. The hissing little streams of white…

"Glory?"

"Yeah?" she asked, peeking to the side.

"This hot spring thingy…it's got steam, right?"

She looked back behind us. "Yeah…"

"A lot of steam?"

"Maybe. I think so. Enough to cook us, yeah."

"Enough to hide us?"

She buried her face her in hooves and groaned. "Oh no."

I pulled out my carbine, looked at the mass of tubes and valves, and slapped in a clip of armor piercing bullets. "Ante up!" I shouted as I took aim at the pipes and sprayed the clip back and forth. Scalding water and jets of steam burst out with a cry like a possessed tea kettle. Great plumes of steam erupted in white, sulfur-scented clouds that washed over us. My hide immediately began to

scald as the white mist boiled past. It was now or never. I took the Pecos twelve gauge and raced out to the side, towards the first red bar on my E.F.S.

Maybe it was the chems or the hole that had just gone through me, or maybe my brain had finally cracked, but as I charged the bounty hunter who backed away from the swirling wall of steam rising before him, time seemed to slow. I heard a saxophone start to play, and Sapphire Shores was singing a sad, lonely tune…

Toooooo-night, I feel your love has gone
I feel this same sad song
When I'm without you…

I slid towards him as his rifle shots went high, my knees churning up the dirt as hot condensation and sweat dripped off my grinning lips. I pressed the barrel beneath his chin and removed his head. Grabbing his falling body with my hooves, I jerked it into the rain of fire that had followed me out of the swirling steam.

You saaaaaaay our time has finally passed
You think this love can't last
But I'll prove you wrong…

As I came around the rear of my shield, every thundering beat of my heart marked quarter seconds; each beat took an eternity as if I was swimming through S.A.T.S. The next two ponies turned, trying to bring their battle saddles around as I ran behind the pair, my floating pump action swinging to unload twelve gauge buckshot to the backs of their heads. One rolled, leaping wildly as the other fell in a more bloody fashion.

Some ponies think…I'm a fool standing here
Expecting you to walk through that door.
Moonlight is shining…through the darkness of night
And I know what's in stoooore...

There were more coming out of the rocks and shrubs. My barding took a pounding, the steel plates deflecting some of the fire, but not all. I kept moving, leaping at a unicorn floating an SMG towards me far more quickly than the others with their heavier saddles could turn. My magic reached out and precisely ejected the clip as he fired. I wrapped my forehooves around his neck, stared into his eyes, and unloaded two telekinetic bullets into his face.

I knooooooow one day that you'll be back
One day you'll take the track
Back to my heaaaaaart…

Blood spurted past my eyes as I pulled him around, throwing his body with all the force I could muster into the face of the next enemy. Steam and guns and so many red bars. Flashes of light told me that Glory still wasn't out of the fight. The saxophone and piano played on in my head as my vision started to darken. As the hunter tried to deflect the tossed cadaver, my shotgun tore great bleeding chunks in his leather armor.

Tooooonight you might be long gone
But as I sing this song
I feel my love is strong
As I wait for…you... ...

As I listened to the last chords of the piano, my body slowly crumpled beneath me and slammed into the dirt. Foam coated my lips as I gasped for air, my heart no longer individual beats but now almost a constant purr. Blood poured from my mouth and my eyes as I lay there choking, looking up at the gunners as they slowly moved in to finish me off. The final notes trailed off in my mind, finished by Sapphire Shore's saucy little 'oh yeah'.

The half-dozen or so remaining fighters slowly moved around me as I lay there, unable to even raise my head as my heart crashed inside my chest. I heard Glory struggle against two earth ponies who were practically atop her, holding her down. I heard one of them mutter about Paradise.

I'm so sorry, Glory.

From the middle of the hunters stepped an orange earth pony with a red mane and a lion cutie mark. He was dressed in one of the most elaborate battle saddles I'd ever seen. He wore a helmet with a pair of targeting goggles attached to the brim. His beam rifle showed heavy modifications that I could only guess were what had allowed him to shoot through me. "Well now. Looks like old Leo Zodiac finally brought down Security, eh folks?" he said as he turned to the other hunters. "Told ya, didn't I, that I'd be the one to take her down?" He pointed with a hoof at my PipBuck. "Get that off her lickety split."

One voice rose above the babbled praise, dripping with contempt. "Oh yeah, Leo. You're such a badass," the mare said, and the cocky smirk vanished. Through the dust and smokey haze approached a pony shape that seemed made of jagged steel.

"We're done here, freak. We don't need your help after all," he said sharply, turning to point that gun as the newcomer slowly

advanced. Something was definitely amiss, though; she didn't seem at all worried, despite being outnumbered with a beam gun pointed at her. In fact, she looked as happy as me with a full bottle of Wild Pegasus.

As I saw more, I decided that that was the least odd thing about this mare. At first, I thought she wore magical power armor like the Steel Rangers. Instead, the polished steel plate formed a shining armor that covered not just her torso but the exterior of all her limbs, chest, and belly. Along her back rose a ridge of blades that slowly scissored with each step she took. The helmet that covered her face was topped with a wide, horn-like blade. Each hoof ended in curving metal claws attached to her horseshoes, and something woven into her red, braided tail gleamed. A number of blades were strapped to the outside of her armor.

This had to be a Reaper.

"Oh, Leo. I'm sorry I didn't make myself clearer earlier. When I said I was coming with you to find Security, I wasn't after the bounty. I don't do bounties," she said casually, walking in front of the ponies with a sure little smile. She stopped, standing right in front of me as she looked at the hunters.

"Right. Sorry. My mistake." And with those words the buck gestured with his head. Leo's beam rifle fired, striking her right in the side as all of the other guns roared, spraying the pale mare with a barrage that plinked and popped off her polished armor. She looked down at me gasping for air, and winked.

Then the gunfire stopped and she grinned at the hunters. "My turn!"

I could only imagine how much all that steel weighed. So when she crouched, I anticipated a charge. Instead, the pale mare jumped into the air in a glittering steel arc. Leo turned to run without another word, but everypony else just watched her. A second later, four bladed hoofclaws crushed one of the hunters like a baby radscorpion.

Things rapidly went downhill from there. I admit, I can get brutal in a fight, but I was as tame as a newborn foal compared to this. The pony in metal didn't fight; she annihilated all that came within reach of her hooves. I watched a hit from one of her hindhooves stave in the side of a mare. She reared and utterly pulverized the face of a buck with devastating rakes of those blades attached to her forelegs. When the rest got the clue to run, she didn't let them

get far.

When she returned, she even carried Leo's twisted and broken beam rifle in her mouth. Spitting it aside, she sat on her rump, regarding me coolly as she dripped gore. Correction, dripped gore *happily*. A small but important and disturbing detail. "Hi. You really look a mess." She walked to one of the corpses and ripped open its saddlebag. After rooting for a bit, she pulled out a bottle of water, twisted, and removed the top. She spat the plastic cap into the brush. "Stampede and Hydra?" she asked in a strange, slightly slurring voice as her pink eyes looked down at me.

"Buck... s…Steady…Hydra…" I coughed.

"Wuss," she said with a snort as she held the water to my lips and carefully trickled it down my throat. Glory came limping out of the brush, her uniform glistening with blood. I started to try and rise, but she put a bloody hoof atop my head. "Stay down." She looked at Glory. "She'll live. Zodiac wasn't trying to hit anything major on your friend."

"Who are you?" Glory asked as she approached the armored mare.

"Somepony helping," she replied. "But most folks call me Rampage. It's that certain something that makes me special." She grinned at the pair of us. "Now, barring your heart exploding in the next fifteen minutes, you're going to lie there and breathe. If you try and get up, I'll sit on you."

"You know a lot about chems?" Glory asked, looking a little more sure.

"Through trial and error," she replied as she looked down at me. "Give her water if you've got it." Glory immediately started to dig through her bags as the armored mare grinned and looked down at me. "Could be worse, though. She could be strung out on Dash. That shit's fucking obnoxious. Or Mint-als: even worse than Dash."

"So. What's the plan? Help me recover and then trot me to Deus?" I rasped, not even bothering to try and stand. My nose bled from the thundering blood pressure.

"Oh, you think I'm after Deus's bounty?" she asked with a sneer, and stood. She turned sideways, dragging her hoofclaws through the dirt as she grinned at me like some horrid hybrid of dragon and pony. Her tail glistened from the razor wire woven into it. "Do I really look like a pony that gives a fuck about bottle caps?" I really couldn't say she did.

I carefully sipped the water for a second. “Why help us, then?”

“The kindness of my heart?” she suggested, pressing a hoof to her chest. I kept my look as level as I could manage. She snorted, “Well maybe not. Just be glad I want to help you.”

“Not good enough,” I said as I forced myself to sit up, even with my legs shaking so hard they threatened to buckle beneath me. “Last pony I trusted without finding out what they wanted ended up killing a whole lot of folks who didn’t deserve it. Why?”

“I’m more curious what you think you’re going to do if I don’t answer. You can barely sit up,” she said with a little smirk. I levitated the shotgun under her chin. To my consternation, she grinned. “Go ahead, do it.” I almost did.

“I’ve had bad experiences with one Reaper already. And last time I trusted somepony to ‘help’ me, a lot of innocent zebra died. So, again…why?” I tried my best to keep my voice level. It took every bit of my focus to prevent the gun from shaking.

She looked sour a moment and then shrugged, her pink eyes staring into my red ones. “Big Daddy Reaper asked me to. Happy? If you want to know why, ask him.” The Reaper gave me a grin I’d seen plenty of times before. All she needed was a deck of cards to shuffle.

Footnote: Level Up.
New Perk: Chemist - Chems you take now last twice as long.
Skills Note: Guns (100)

Chapter 15: Flank

"That wasn't the doozy? How could that* not *be the doozy?!"

Once upon a time, when I was just a filly, my flank was blank, and then one day it wasn't anymore. Rivets had inherited a deck of cards from her mother, and we were playing blackjack, the only card game my feeble math skills could handle. Rivets, Daisy, Marmalade, Hatches, and I were sitting around a table in a storeroom, drinking synthetic apple juice and betting impossible sums with nuts, bolts, screws, and the occasional actual old bit. We were having a great time.

Then Hatches had to go pee. The door of the storeroom was like most: a pair of metal plates slid up and down by an electric motor connected to a button. She'd pressed that and started through. There had been a short, and the door had closed on her, the large, heavy slab falling from above and the smaller sheet being pushed up from below, with her body in the middle. A horrible snapping sound, then the mechanism had caught and the door opened again. Over in a second. We'd just watched, stunned, as she kept walking on shaking limbs. She'd reached the stairs before she crumpled and died two minutes later. We still just watched, too shocked to even move.

Did I mention that we only started calling her Hatches after she was crushed?

I couldn't even remember her real name. I wished I could remember her name, because I now knew exactly how she felt walking down that long metal tunnel. My heart continued its rapid staccato as every step made my organs feel as if they were sloshing around inside me. Only the Buck kept me walking; we'd run out of Steady, and I was forced to walk between Glory and the curious Reaper that had saved our lives.

"I need a Fixer. Why can't I have a Fixer again?" I asked as I slumped against Rampage's polished metal armor. The articulated

plates shifted under my thrashed barding.

"Fixer is not a cure. Fixer is an even worse drug than most of what you've been swallowing while my back was turned." Glory was decidedly snippy and had retracted her previous statement about my intelligence. Instead of lecturing me about how I'd screwed up so badly, she had decided to try and fix the problem by educating me about it. "Fixer's a psychoactive like Dash and Mint-als. It doesn't do anything for your actual symptoms but make them ignorable. You have been trotting around with your heart rate at over a hundred beats a minute when you should have been lying down, trying to metabolize the chemicals and recover."

"Besides, you ate the last tablet an hour ago," Rampage added with an amused snicker. In the few hours we'd been travelling together, I'd learned little from the strange pony with shining armor, who was still smeared with darkening gore. Her hoofclaws tapped the asphalt with a persistent metallic beat as we walked. I had, though, been able to see that her armor wasn't part of her body or something, like Deus's; it was just really good metal armor, and the pony under its bulk seemed not much larger than me. I'd also noticed that the few bits of coat the armor left exposed bore strange bright red markings in a pattern that looked almost like zebra stripes.

She also ate Mint-als like clockwork, taking out the white tablets and popping them in her mouth one by one. But did Glory give her a fifteen-minute lecture on the properties and perils of Mint-als? Nooo. Instead, I learned more about pharmacology than I ever cared to.

Steady, I discovered, caused nerve damage if used too frequently. Med-X could cause the mind to experience phantom pains. Buck was damaging my joints and muscles and doing a number on my reproductive system. But the real monster, apparently, was Hydra.

"Only unicorns can perform magical healing, and there are few who can perform the service. As a result, pegasi and earth ponies found a way to regenerate injuries using a hormonal extract of certain glands from hydras, hence the name. The harvesting is difficult enough, but the real peril is that the chemical suppresses normal recovery long after it wears off. Your body's natural healing processes fail, and you die cell by cell." She looked scared. "One Hydra is bad enough, but two or three…you can drop dead on your hooves."

“And that’s not counting taking a stroll through some nice quiet E-fields,” interjected Rampage. “I’ve seen ponies liquefy from a combination of Hydra and a strong enough Enervation field. Kinda cool to watch, actually,” she said brightly, grinning at the sick look Glory and I shared. “Oh, what? You think that’s the worst way to die?”

“No,” I muttered. “I’ve seen worse.”

“Like what?” she asked with a mocking little smirk.

I really wasn’t in the mood for Reaper taunting. I looked at her flatly. “I fed a pony through a rock crusher once.” She blinked, looking speculative. “Tail first,” I added, and was rewarded with a small look of shock on her face. Now her pink eyes looked skeptical. “It’s true. It was the only way I could kill a pony monster named Gorgon.”

Rampage stopped in her tracks, and I slid off her side and fell flat on my face. “You really killed Gorgon?”

“At Brimstone’s Fall,” I answered as I tried to get my hooves to support me. “He was trying to kill me. He’d taken over the mine and I had to take him out.” Her wording hit me. "How did you…" I nervously started to ask.

Rampage gave me an even stare. “Gorgon is…was…I knew him.” I felt dread creep up my spine. If she decided to attack and avenge him, what could I do to stop it? My only chance was three magic bullets to the face, and even then I wasn’t sure I could pull it off. “And he was a friend,” she added, and I almost switched to S.A.T.S. right then. But instead of looking angry or upset…I couldn’t tell what that expression was. Was it happiness? “Lucky bastard.”

She bit the neck of my barding and hauled me to my hooves. “You aren’t mad?” I asked.

“Should I be?” she asked in return once I was standing.

Glory looked at her, as confused and wary as me. “He was your friend.”

She sighed. “There are worse things you could have done to him.”

“But…who was he? What was he?” Glory asked.

“My friend the monster,” was all she answered, and after a look at the scowl that accompanied it I nudged Glory and shook my head. Rampage was not a safe pony to press right now. Not till we knew more about her. She certainly wasn’t the psychopath I’d envisioned... but that didn’t mean she wasn’t a psychopath I *hadn’t* envisioned.

We walked along together for a bit in welcome silence. We were entering a small valley where the Sunset Highway crossed over another road from Hoofington before heading off to the southwest towards Fillydelphia. We'd been hit by raiders twice. Fortunately, I simply sat my butt down, floated the carbine over my head, and played gun turret while Rampage eagerly dismembered them. The white and red pony's serrated armor tore our attackers in half, and each kick of her hoofclaws shredded hide and armor alike. Watching her moves, I realized two things: I did not want to fight her, and I appreciated just how tough Reapers had to be.

Reapers... just like Deus.

"Have you ever heard of somepony named Sanguine?" I asked as we finished looting the second band of raiders. I wasn't finding any links to the Enclave on them, but paranoia was nibbling at my mane.

"Sure," Rampage replied. "He's a unicorn ghoul. Real nutcase too: drinks blood. Lots of business deals and a surprisingly snappy dresser. Used to be a doctor before the war, or so I heard." She looked down at me with a smirk. "And no, personally I don't do much business with him. He works out of Paradise, though; he's hoof in frigging hoof with Usury."

"Is there a way I can get in contact with him?"

"Why would you want to?"

I lifted my PipBuck. "He wants a file on this. He sent Deus to my stable, and I'm pretty sure he's why Deus is after me."

"Uh…no. Having a vagina and having shot at him with artillery is why Deus's after you. But yeah, he works a lot with Sanguine." She took a deep breath. "If you really want to hand the file over, he'd probably pay you and smooth things over with Deus and Usury. Maybe get you out of the Hoof. But if he wants that file, it's because somepony else wants it. Somepony with a lot of pull in the Hoof. I can only think of two or three with that kind of swing…four, if you throw in the Enclave," she added with a glance at Glory. "Big Daddy Reaper, Elder Crunchy Carrots, and King Awesome."

I couldn't have heard that right. "King…Awesome?" And here I thought calling myself Security was pretentious.

"He's the head of the Society," Rampage said and then snorted. "Hey, don't look at me. I didn't name him."

"And is he?" I asked with a wan grin. "Awesome, I mean?"

Rampage shrugged. "The Society is the biggest source of real food

in the Hoof. King Awesome managed to get the plantations working, screwing over the Eggheads in the process. They charge a premium, but food is food." She glanced at me. "Of course, they use slaves to farm it."

Any affinity I had for Prince Splendid withered on the vine. "They what?" Rampage seemed amused by my anger.

"Sure. You don't expect aristocrats to get their hooves dirty, do you? Until Red Eye came along, they were the premier slaveholders in the Hoof…heck, maybe in all of Equestria." She frowned and rubbed her chin. "You know…I always wondered where Red Eye got the caps to pay for all those slaves he's been funneling into Fillydelphia. Hmm." She shrugged and looked at me again. "Anyway, the Society prefers to call them 'serfs' and 'servants', but it's one pony wearing an explosive collar and another pony with their hoof on the trigger. So it sounds like slaves to me."

Even feeling as lousy as I did and with everything churning in my brain, I somehow managed some fresh, smoldering anger. It was refreshing to have something wrong to focus against. I might not be able to do anything right now, but it was something to think about. I added it to my mental 'things to do' list somewhere underneath 'Survive' and above 'Save Equestria'.

We arrived. The town filling most of the valley had evidently once been a major suburb of Hoofington. Several five and six-story buildings hunched sullenly together in the center of the ruins like brooding mares. We passed by a sign that read 'Welcome to Flankfurt. Hope you like your stay.' That warm greeting was marred by less charming messages like 'DASH: 20% more fucked!', 'STELLA!', 'Fuck Caprice: 50 caps', 'Fried in ten seconds flat', and 'DIE ZEBRA DIE!' There was a balefire crater to the north, but most of Flank appeared burned rather than blasted. A morass of ponds and muck lingered in and around the roofless remains of the houses, but I didn't see one strand of swamp grass. Nothing grew in Flank.

Then I felt it. My heartbeat was becoming irregular and I staggered, my hooves falling out from under me. Blood was trickling down my nose and out of my ears. Tears much too thick to be simple salt water ran down my cheeks. I couldn't seem to breathe as I feel flat on my face.

"Blackjack? Blackjack! What's wrong?" Glory yelled as she turned me on my side.

“Enervation, probably. Flank is full of E-fields,” Rampage said in mild irritation. “Guess the Hydra weakened her body enough that she’s crashing.”

“Do something!” Glory said as she looked up at the Reaper, “Please!”

Rampage rolled her eyes and gave a dismissive snort, grabbed me, and dragged me several feet back. My heartbeat steadied as I lay there. Now, more than ever, I suddenly realized just how fucked up I was. I could have died! I could have liquefied…I…

It finally happened: I was afraid of dying. Not of dying personally; that was sort of a ‘well, it would suck if I did’ kind of concern. No, it was thinking about not resolving things with P-21. It was wondering what would happen to Glory if I died. Thinking of that, for the first time ever, I realized I was scared shitless that I’d kick it and leave them to go on without me.

I was such a stupid pony that I had to bleed from my tear ducts before I could see that.

I don’t know what Glory was doing; injecting me with the very chems that had deteriorated my body, I supposed. She gave me a healing potion that tasted like ass, but I couldn’t even throw it up.

“We have to get her to Flank’s doctor now,” Glory said desperately as she looked down the highway at the distant gates. It was at least a mile or two. Maybe more.

“Give her some Dash,” Rampage said as she eyed the ruins around us.

“Oh, pop another Mint-al!” Glory snapped back.

“She’s this close to dying anyway,” Rampage said as she took out the tin and licked up one of the tablets, chewing. “If she can make the run, maybe Scalpel can get her in the auto-doc fast enough to do something. Otherwise, she’s a corpse.” She frowned. “And in case you missed it…we got scavengers coming.”

I saw them creeping out of the burned-out ruins. Naked and emaciated or wearing the thinnest rags. Bloodshot and yellowed eyes. Slat-sided ponies, poor and desperate, crept slowly closer and closer. They all looked just as wrecked as I was, but there were a lot more of them than of me. “Give it to me,” I wheezed.

“Oh dear Luna, I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Glory groaned and took out a red cartridge with a mouth tube attached. She put it to my lips. “Breathe in a deeply as you can…” she muttered as her hooves compressed the cartridge and I felt a hot, stinging gas fill my

lungs.

Funny. I didn't notice much difference. What was the big deal? I stood up and shook myself off as I grinned at all the gaunt ponies starting to surround us. Heh. They were all staring at me, which made sense. I'm Security. The bad ass. The mare with the hundred thousand cap bounty! In one puff I'd gone from dying to amazing in ten seconds flat. Glory just looked at me like she was going to cry; why? I felt great! I was great! I think I just felt an orgasm, yeah!

"Hey, Blackjack, bet you can't beat me to the gate!" Rampage taunted as she started to run. Oh, miss Reaper thought she could beat me? Nothing could beat me! I could fly right now. And I was going to prove it as I started to run. I was so badass I was drooling! Yeah! Badass! As we ran I felt all sickly, but freaky freaky magical fields can't touch Blackjack!

Everypony at the gates of Flank was staring and stepping aside. You bet they would. 'Cause Blackjack was in town! Look out Flank, I'm bringing the gun and the fun and the funktastica! I didn't even know what that word meant, but I was bringing it, because I'm Blackjack! The Security Mare. Awwwww yeah!

"We're walking!" Rampage said as she walked ahead of me. Oh, miss armored pony thought she was going to win? No way! 'Cause I am Blackjack, made of awesome. Bleeding awesome! Yeah! I couldn't really pay much attention because my eyes weren't working. That's 'cause I got freaky freaky mutant eyes. 'Cause I'm cool…and stuff…

It was getting kinda hard to walk. Rampage bit me by the neck of my barding and dragged me the last few feet into a building that smelled of blood. And piss. And shit. And blood. Oh, that must be me. Because I smell awesome. Once inside, she dropped me to the floor.

"Mom!" Rampage roared. "Warm up the autodoc, now!" It looked like some sort of doctor's office, like medical back in 99. A long counter ran across the middle of the room and four armored guards were rising to their hooves.

"Rampage?" An older lavender unicorn poked her head into the foyer and looked at me through thick, black-framed glasses. She wore a profound expression of disappointment. Her white labcoat was smeared with numerous stains. "Not another one, Rampage. I can't keep treating every poor thing you bring in. Just give it some Dash and let it die in peace."

“It’s Security, Mom,” Rampage said. Everything began to tumble away. “And I think her heart’s stopped…”

* * *

“So, who can name the six ministries established by Princess Luna to combat zebra aggression and save Equestria?” our teacher, Textbook, asked as she looked over all the attentive fillies and colts as we sat together in Stable 99’s classroom. The projector showed cartoony pictures of six mares arranged around Princess Luna. A gray circle looped around them. The red mare lowered her glasses. “Blue?”

The young blue colt sitting ahead of me cleared his throat as he stood. “The six ministries were Awesome, Arcane Sciences, Wartime Technology, Image, Morale, and…Peace!”

“Very good, Blue,” she praised the young colt.

“Wasn’t there a seventh ministry?” Daisy asked, the shy little earth pony jumping when a colt glanced her way.

“That’s a good question,” Textbook said as she changed to the next slide, a flow chart. “There certainly was more to Equestria than just the ministries, though the ministries did revolutionize Equestria in a very short time. There was Luna’s government, which was responsible for enforcing Luna’s decrees and laws with the common pony. There was the military, which operated independently of the ministries, but worked with all of them. There were also private businesses, many of which worked with the ministries.”

I kept dozing off, and my eyes were drawn to the gaps between the bubbles on the flow chart.

“So can you tell me the responsibilities of the O.I.A., Go Fish?” Textbook asked.

I shot upright in my seat and shouted, “Blackjack! My name is Blackjack!”

Giggles filled the classroom. Blue looked back at me with a warm smile. He was my best friend and…

The sound of cards being shuffled filled the room like static. Everything turned gray and fuzzy. When focus returned, the colts were gone, as were all the bright colors. Everything was now mixed with gray. Daisy smirked back at me; she was my best friend…if that was what a friend was. Duct Tape cringed from the snide smirk of Marmalade. Only Rivets didn’t put up with our shit. Textbook no

longer smiled, instead talking with the apathetic boredom that came with rote instruction. “Go Fish. Blackjack. Whatever.”

“The O.I.A.…I don’t think this was in the book, teacher,” I protested.

“Nevertheless, it’s something you should know,” she said with a bored, disinterested sigh. “So can you answer or…ugh… nevermind.”

I snorted as I folded my hooves on the desk and rested my chin atop them. Who cared who some dumb O.I.A. was, anyway? The ministries were the ones who ran Equestria. And Luna. They were all blown up centuries ago. I raised my hoof. “Teacher, I need to take a leak.”

“Uh-huh…” She waved her hoof at me and I stepped out of my desk and trotted to the door. I was in security. It didn’t matter if I knew history, just so long as I could shoot a gun or swing a baton.

Outside the classroom, the colors were bright and cheery. Bucks and mares talked as they strolled along, discussing their jobs and what was needed in the stable. Blue sat outside the classroom, the young colt listening in. “Oh hey, Go--” he began when he caught my look and gave me a sheepish grin. “Blackjack! Much better name.”

“Hey Blue. I had to get out of there.” I smiled brightly at him. “Say, wanna sneak down to maintenance? I can help you with your reading and we can…”

The purr of cards plunged the world into gray hues. Mares walked along in isolation and talked in low, soft voices. The colt cowered behind metal crates, listening in. “…take you back to medical. You’re not supposed to be out here. You’re a colt.”

“Please,” he stammered. “I was just listening.”

“You’re a colt. That means you have to stay with the colts till a filly wants you.” Why a filly would want a colt for anything was beyond me. Colts didn’t actually do anything in the stable. They didn’t work. They didn’t study. They just ate food and did…whatever they did.

“I don’t want to go back…” he said quietly as he peeked through the crack at the teacher droning on and on about how wonderful the ministries were. “Can’t I listen? I want to find out about all this stuff.”

“No. You’re a boy. You should go to boy school. This is a school for fillies,” I said and stomped my hoof. “Anyway I’m in security. So I gots to take you back. That’s what Momma would want.” I kicked

his flank. “Now march.”

A flicker of color. Maybe I was going to kiss his booboo. Maybe I was going to ask him his name. But the purr of the shuffling cards kept all the colors dull.

We got to medical and instantly the colors returned. The nurses and doctor were very thankful to me for finding Blue and gave us each a peppermint stick. I watched as he was escorted through to the colts’ school, where two dozen foals and colts sat in desks listening to a much better lesson on rainbows and why rainbows were awesome. I wanted to ask if I could be allowed to stay, even if I was a filly.

A sigh. A shuffle of the cards. The colors drained away. There was no school. No rainbows. No lesson. Just rows and rows of bunk beds on which curled the colts of Stable 99. Their toys were broken things, things that fillies didn’t want any more. They were all so… small. Such a little space to live in. The nurses kicked him back into the room, demanding to know how he’d gotten out. The head doctor scowled at me and suggested I go back to class.

Then Big Macintosh strode in through the doors with all the Marauders in a burst of pure awesome! “Alright. We’re shutting you down. This has gone on long enough.”

“May Celestia forgive you for what you have done here,” Psalm intoned gravely.

Fluttershy flew in and guided the colts out, with Pinkie Pie giving them all a cake and Rainbow Dash making them grin just by being Rainbow Dash.

A sigh. A shuffle. Macintosh’s Marauders were long gone; Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash too. Everything that had once been glorious and good and bright was just a dream. Nopony stopped the screams coming from the colt as he was shocked again and again as they demanded he tell them how he’d escaped.

* * *

So, still not dead. I was lying on a bed next to a machine full of strange glowing tubes, jars of fluid, and glowing magical gems. I felt…better. Not like I had after Priest had finished with me, but definitely better. My legs were only a little twitchy. My heartbeat had dropped to rates below ‘running for my life’. I had a brand new pair of puckered scars, one to the left of the middle of my chest and

the other halfway down my left side; entry and exit wounds for a beam of energy.

The dingy room had a glass-fronted cabinet full of chems. I looked at the red Dash inhalers with surprising longing, remembering just how great I'd felt. Still, if it wouldn't help me help Glory, I didn't care. The injectors of Stampede were a much larger draw.

"Don't even think about it," the middle-aged lavender pony said gruffly as she walked in, her tired purple eyes watching me sharply. "I've developed a sixth sense for when a patient is up and eying my stocks." Her mane had gone prematurely white; I could still see hints of purple. A pair of crossed scalpels decorated her flank. "You're lucky. If it hadn't been for that friend of yours, I wouldn't have even bothered. She knows how to use an auto-doc as well as I do. In case introductions weren't made while you were choking on your own bloody froth, I'm Scalpel."

"Blackjack," I replied, trying not to eye the chems. "Sorry about that…nearly dying thing. Thanks for patching me up."

"Oh, you're not out of the woods yet," she replied as she walked over to the auto-doc. "This is a machine that, with enough time, skill, and healing magic, can restore almost any injury. It can analyze, diagnose, repair, and regenerate just short of a megaspell-level super restoration. There's only two things it can't cure or heal. One's death, the other's taint," she said as she worked the controls and a cartoon image of a frowning pony appeared on the machine's screen. There were all kinds of cute icons showing bloody lungs, a leaking heart, black guts, and broken bones.

"And since I'm not dead," I said, closing my eyes. "Let me guess…"

"Mhmmm," Scalpel said with a little sigh. "Sometime in the last few days, you were exposed to it. I already checked your friend; she's clean," she added at once as I opened my mouth and closed it again. "If it hadn't been for the taint, I think you probably would have pulled through on your own, at least well enough to reach here without your heart exploding. That taint interacted with the chems, making for a doozy of a mess. You're going to need at least two more treatments to reverse most of the damage."

"Radiation, Enervation, and now taint. Is there any other mysterious and lethal aspect of Hoofington I should know about? Ghosts, maybe? Death beams from the clouds?" I said as I rubbed my head between my hooves. I'd read the entry on taint in the Wasteland Survival Guide. Nopony knew what it was or what

caused it, but if it got inside you then it would slowly mutate and corrupt your mind and body. A lot of the wildlife had been horribly mutated by just a little of it. Knowing my luck, I'd gotten a lot more than a little. "So, am I going to grow tentacles? A third eye? A penis? Eye tentacle penises?"

"Probably not. There's no surefire way to measure just how much you were exposed to." She pointed at the display with her hoof. "Major trauma to the heart. Some damage to your lungs. Your brain…eh, who knows?" She looked at me with a little tilt of her head. "You seem to be taking this pretty well, all things considered."

I laughed; I couldn't help it. "I've got a doozy of a bounty on my head. I've got the Reaper Deus after me. My one friend thinks I'm a drug fiend, my other…" I felt the shakes starting and took a deep breath. "I don't suppose you moonlight as a therapist, do you?"

She sighed and lifted her scratched glasses off the end of her muzzle. "Well, I am charging you thirty times my normal price, so I'm probably in the therapist ballpark. What's on your mind?"

I took a deep breath, wondering how I could admit it…"I raped somepony." There. I said it. Just like that. I'd expected I'd have to fight it. Choke it out. Dance around the confession. Instead it slipped out of me as easily as bleeding. "I raped a buck in my stable."

She looked at me oddly. "Okay. And?"

'And?' What the fuck did she mean, 'and?' "And it was fucking wrong!"

She just sat on her haunches, looking at me as if mildly baffled. "Huh…well that's novel."

"What is?"

"Guilt," she replied as she walked over to the locker and lifted a key from her pocket. She brought out a bottle of Wild Pegasus and two shot glasses. Locking the door again, she trotted to a little table beside the auto-doc. "It's a pretty rare condition in the wastelands. Results from either an overabundance of morality or getting kicked in the head too often," she said quietly as she poured two shots.

I looked at the nearest shot skeptically, licking my lips. "You're treating me for chem damage; are you really supposed to be giving me alcohol?"

"I can drink both if you'd prefer?" she asked with a lazy smile as she lifted a shot.

"Well, I don't want my doctor too drunk," I rationalized, and took my shot with glee.

She chuckled. "Oh trust me, it'd take far more than two little shots to get me drunk," she said, smiling mirthlessly as she looked at me. "In the great hierarchy of the shit messed up in your life, the booze is pretty low." She downed her own drink, gave a shiver and smiled. "If you're feeling guilty about this rape you did, then there's a reason for it."

"Because it was wrong," I muttered.

"Why?" she asked, and she was still smiling!

"What do you mean why? Are you telling me rape is okay?!"

"Considering the number of mares I've treated over the years, apparently," she said with a small shrug. "I've heard males brag about raping mares, mares brag about 'seducing' bucks, bucks crowin' about buggering colts and fillies laughing about breaking fillies. You say it's wrong and I'm not disagreeing with you. I'm asking you why."

I clenched my eyes shut. "Because I wouldn't want that to happen to me. If our places had been swapped then I would have…I don't think I would have survived."

"Oh, well, that's the easy bullshit answer," she said as she poured two more shots. "Do unto others as I'd have them do unto me. Till you have to kill. Till you kill somepony who deserves it. Till you fuck somepony that doesn't want it. Take what isn't yours. If I accept that other people will rape me, does that make it okay and right for me to rape others?" She put the cap on the bottle.

Was that true? It was, but only up to a point. If I was okay with somepony putting me down, was it right for me to kill everypony I wanted? No.

"He…he's my friend. Though I can't be sure of that anymore."

"So, when he wasn't your friend it was sex, but when you cared about him suddenly it was rape? Simple solution. Shoot him in the leg and it'll be sex again," Scalpel said with a chuckle as she took off her glasses and rubbed a hoof across her bloodshot eyes. "That's an even lamer excuse than the previous one. Why is this problem for you, Blackjack?"

"Because I want to be good, all right?" I yelled at her, glad I had recovered enough to shout. "I don't want to be fucked up! Everything is fucked up. You're fucked up! Everything I see is one pile of shit after the other and it's looking more and more like the

only way to be good is to die!" I shouted at her, knocking the shot glasses and bottle of whiskey away with a sweep of my hoof. "I'm sick of seeing everything fucked up and wrong. I was happy when I didn't have a clue how fucked up the world is. That I was making it more fucked up! That I am still fucking it up, even after the shit I've gone through," I said as I sat back down. "I raped P-21 and didn't even realize it was wrong. I couldn't save Glory from fuckers I knew were bad news. And it seems like the only way for anypony to survive is to become like Deus and kill everypony and anypony that they want."

Shit. Here I was, crying again. My stupid tainted brain and wicked tainted heart throbbed as I lay down on the ground, hiding my face under my hooves. There. I'd finally thought about it. The Wasteland was fucked up, and so was I. Strip away my good intentions and I was just as sick as the raiders and slavers I'd killed. Was it too much to simply want to be good?

"I want to be good too," Scalpel said quietly. I peeked up at her tired smile and sad eyes. "Some days more than others. Month after month I see ponies chewed up by addiction, injury, and hopelessness. More than any other part of Equestria. I deliver stillborn foals because their mothers can't get out of the Enervation fields. I try to keep Dash addicts from huffing brahmin dung because the act of living hurts. I sew them up, heal their hurts, numb their pain, and send them back out into this fucked up world. And I'm usually the last one who sees them before they kick it. And damn me, I still care, even knowing that they're destroying their lives. Because I can. Because I don't want to be another heartless doctor handing out healing like I'm an auto-doc. Because that's the only difference between me and the fuckers that cause the hurt. I care. And caring hurts, no matter how you fucking slice it."

"Blackjack?" Glory said from the doorway. I stared at her in horror and saw the expression mirrored back at me. I clenched my eyes shut, feeling the shakes start. "Did…is what you said…did you really…" she asked in a tiny voice. I'd been so focused on Scalpel that I hadn't heard the door open.

"Yes!" I said, unable to look at her. "Stable 99 is nothing more than just one great big rape factory. And I was a part of it. I didn't know better…I should have…I'm sorry, Glory." And now she knew who I really was. I wasn't strong. I wasn't good. I certainly wasn't smart. And if she had sense at all, she'd leave me before I did the same or

worse to her. Trying and wanting to be good wasn't enough.

"Blackjack," she started as I shook more and more. "How…"

"Because I'm not a good pony. So just leave, Glory. Staying with me cost you your cutie mark. It's just going to cost you more and more." And now I was tainted, too. Contaminated. Would it drive me crazy, like the raider sickness? Twist my body till I was grotesque and mutated beyond recognition? I suddenly had an image of Gorgon. Would that be me, eventually? Would Glory someday smile when she heard I'd been fed through a rock crusher? "So just go and find somepony better than…"

Then I felt her hooves gently reach around me and hold me as she pressed her face underneath my jaw. I couldn't move. I could only shake as I returned the gesture. "I've spent my whole life working for ponies that betrayed me and branded *me* a traitor. For all I know, I could have helped them with their plans against the surface and not had a clue," she whispered softly. "I think about every raider we've run across and wonder 'did I have a part in that?' No matter how remote that possibility may be, I still can't help but feel like I am to blame. You're a good pony, Blackjack. You keep trying and you never give up, no matter what you have to do."

I fell apart at that point, and Glory did too. I think we both needed to just give in a little and hurt.

Because caring hurts, no matter how you slice it.

* * *

Two hours later, I was back in the auto-doc frame. Scalpel's horn glowed as the machine whirred and chirped and did whatever it did to put me back together again. There were tubes of nasty gray, maroon, and yellow feeding into collection jars as she tried to remove as much damaged tissue, and hopefully the taint along with it, as possible. I spent most of the time explaining the fine nuances of Stable 99's fucked up society to Glory.

Glory listened as she fiddled with Leo's broken beam rifle. I personally thought it was a lost cause, but right now I wasn't going to begrudge her. Still, just standing here was boring, and I certainly didn't want to pay attention to what was being removed from me by the auto-doc. "Glory. Could you come here and play an audio file on my PipBuck?"

I glanced at Scalpel, who returned the look with an indifferent

shrug. Glory trotted over and sat down. With my limb restrained by the auto-doc, she had to operate my PipBuck for me. “Which one?”

“P-21’s auto-files. You need BJ#3.” I sighed as I looked at her. “I may as well. It’s not like it can get worse than raping him and neglecting him, right?” Glory gave me a troubled look. Yes, I was going to keep beating myself up with that till we resolved things with P-21. She worked the controls deftly and then there was a crackle.

“We’re safe here, U-20. They can’t track us down here. A security mare told me so.” P-21’s voice was soft and rushed. Panting desperately.

“P-17…we can’t stay down here forever. This is a stable. There’s nowhere we can go. Eventually they’ll come down here and check all the places they can’t track.” Soft noises of nuzzlings and quiet little sobs.

“You stay here, then. I’ll find whoever’s going to be the next U-1 and kill them. I just need a little more time!” P-21 said desperately. *“I’ve got a mare teaching me how to access the Overmare’s terminals and get her override commands. We can sneak out together.”*

“No, P-17. No. You’re not going to kill a colt for me.”

“I’ve done it before,” P-21 whispered. *“You’ve done it before.”*

“And you’ll never do it again. Even if I have to turn myself in right now,” the soft voice of U-20 said firmly, bringing more tears from P-21. *“Us killing our own is what the mares want. Takes the blood off their hooves and puts it on ours.”*

“I love you. I don’t want to lose you,” P-21 whispered.

“You knew you would,” U-20 said quietly. Soft noises of kisses and quiet strangled sobs.

Then I heard my voice echoing in the tunnels. *“They’ve got to be down here. Somewhere near the spark generators, I think.”*

“See? That didn’t take them long.” U-20’s voice was quiet and resigned. *“You stay here. Keep out of sight. They just want me.”*

“No! Please, no!” P-21 sobbed.

“I think I hear them,” I said. Then a pause. *“There you are. U-20, as per Stable 99’s bylaws, you are required to come with me to security for your removal from the unicorn breeding population.”* I’d never realized how bored I sounded when telling a pony they were about to die.

“I understand. I’m ready,” U-20 said.

“No!” yelled P-21. A thump, and then the sharp crack of a baton striking skull.

“What the heck has gotten into you, P-17?” A thump. Another thump. I could hear my heart rate increase on the auto-doc monitor.

"Please, stop!" yelled U-20. And there was the sound of a shove. Another sharp crack. Deeper. Wetter. A yell from me and another crack. And another. And another. Another. And then the thud of a body hitting the floor of the concrete tunnel. Another. Another… then a sickening quiet, punctuated by P-21 sobbing brokenly as I cursed about stupid crazy males.

"Don't cry." I heard U-20's softest whisper. It could have only been caught if P-21's microphone had been at his mouth by cradling his head.

"I love you. I love you."

More hooves echoing in the tunnel. *"Whoa, Blackjack? Is he dead?"* Daisy's voice, sounding impressed. I wanted to puke.

"Yeah. I think so. Fuck, I'm going to get in so much trouble for breaking procedure."

"You okay? Going to off the blue one too? Can I watch?"

"I already fucked up once today. I'm not going to make it twice. Can you girls haul the body up to security? Go through the motions?"

"Yeah, sure. Come on, Marmalade, lift your end." The sound of a dead unicorn being hefted on to Daisy's back followed, and then hoofsteps receding.

P-21 wept with horrified little sobs.

"So. Here's the plan, P-17. We're going up to medical and they can give you a shot to calm the fuck down or something. Okay? Okay."

"Kill me," P-21 said between shaky, gasping breaths.

"What was that?"

"Kill me right the fuck now. Or I swear by Celestia and Luna, I will end you."

"Right. You're upset. I can see that. Males are always so overemotional. But those are the rules. Take it up with the Overmare if you want, but I'm not your executioner."

"Why?" He broke down sobbing again. *"Why kill him and not me?"*

"That was an accident…" Yeah. My baton accidentally beat him to death.

"Not that! You're going to kill me anyway in a few months. A year at the most. So get it over with!"

"I can't. It'd be wrong." The sounds of me making him stand. *"Come on… don't think about it."*

The tape cut out.

'*I mean that if I have a weapon I might kill you.'*

Not because I was a mare, but because I murdered the buck he'd

loved.

'Do you know what fucking justice is? It's giving to others as is given to you.'

I'd remembered that; tracking down U-20. He was a good male. Give you a rutting and then you could talk and he'd listen and nod like he really cared. I'd been honestly bummed that he was being taken out of rotation. Only he'd disappeared from tracking. That had been unusual because most males never went down to maintenance, so how could he know where tracking was scrambled? But I knew. I knew all the spots. And I'd found him together with a blue earth pony that was only barely familiar.

He'd been upset and I'd assumed it was 'normal' male hysteria. He'd attacked me with my guard down and I'd used my baton. I admit, I was a little panicked. I'd never been attacked by a male pony before. U-20 had come to his rescue, shoving me away with his magic. I'd thought they were both going to attack me.

I beat him to death.

At the time, I thought I'd caught hell. Double work shifts. My position on the breeding queue was revoked. I was even under lockdown for a month. But the rule of 99 was 'don't think about it', and eventually everything went back to normal.

I felt strangely calm. My limbs weren't shaking. My heart was beating steadily.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked as she looked up at me. "Are you…are you okay?"

"Yeah. Sure. Don't worry about it." I wasn't. Because I knew exactly what I needed to do.

I needed to give P-21 a gun.

* * *

Three hours later, Scalpel had restored me as much as the taint allowed. The old lavender pony simply scowled at a display that refused to change any further for the better. When I would get worse and how I would get worse remained to be seen. Scalpel had been surprisingly mute on the subject of magical chems. "Some folks handle them just fine. Some folks don't. If I were you, I'd avoid 'em, but I'm not you." That was much better than Glory, who seemed ready to bludgeon me into senselessness with big egghead words.

My barding was far less effective since the sniper beam had punched a hole clear through the front and left side. The thought of the cost of repairs made my withers quake. That was after the fifteen hundred cap fee paid out to Scalpel. I didn't even try and haggle with her. I could see just how badly she needed the caps. With my barding rolled up, I felt decidedly exposed stepping out into Flank.

I needn't have been concerned. Flank was the first true pony town I'd seen in the Wasteland. Little villages like Chapel and Stockyard, and, I hated to admit, Megamart, had nothing on Flank. Six large buildings filled a block of four-lane street. While the top floors were uninhabitable, light still glowed in the bottom floors. Strings of lights stretched back and forth across the street, and flashing neon signs constantly bathed the visitors in their colorful glow. The bland sign of 'Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare' was hardly helped by the addicts lingering about outside the doors.

Across from the clinic was the Exchange, a bank partially converted into a market. Quality vendors had booths set up, and while I saw lots of weapons and chems for sale, there wasn't a lot of the extra material stacked on pallets like in Megamart. After selling our salvage, I'd inquired about getting my barding repaired. The price the vendor quoted made a liar of Bottlecap: the simple patching of holes in armor was apparently infinitely more expensive than data analysis. I bought a Stable 89 utility harness; hopefully Glory would work some of her repair magic.

Outside the Exchange, we saw Mixers and the Trough. Mixers was a shop, one that peddled chems exclusively. It was also a club of sorts, but the music was certainly nothing like I'd heard on DJ Pon3. It was all beat, and so fast that I supposed you'd have to be high on Dash to really enjoy it. Mixers seemed to take chems to a whole new level; Stampede was one thing, but what was Rainboom? Or Filly Flash?

The Trough surprised me; I hadn't ever seen a place devoted solely to food. In the first floor of an office building were a half-dozen little shops and restaurants catering to the inhabitants and visitors of Flank. I had to admit, I choked up a little at the sight a store named '200 Years Fresh' that seemed devoted to salvaged food. The sight of box after box of Sugar Apple Bombs made my mouth water. There was a butcher shop that definitely had me a bit nervous; all meat looked the same chopped up.

And there was an Enclave shop in the Trough. It was called 'Cloud Fresh'; outside were two pegasus mares in less severe looking uniforms than what I was familiar with. In fact, with the amount of flank they showed, it was hard to determine if they were wearing clothes or lingerie. There were bright, colorful banners showing apple trees growing amidst the clouds. 'Volunteer Corps: Let Us Help!' Their produce was certainly fresh, packed on ice or in trays, and cheaper than the produce being offered by the Society ponies.

'*Wonder how much of it will turn you into a raider?'* I could still see Tumbleweed's head coming apart from my telekinetic bullet spell.

The two mares took one look at Glory and immediately closed for cleaning. They didn't even bother to hide their expressions of contempt for her fresh pink Dashite brands. Scalpel had healed the injury, but the scars from the chemicals used to burn away her cutie mark were permanent, even with magic. I supposed it would take a megaspell to restore her cutie mark.

Gee; slave-grown produce from the Society, or Enclave produce that could turn you into a cannibalistic psychopath? I chewed my two-century-old apple cereal with a bit more satisfaction.

'Rooms' was simply that: a hotel with rooms ranging from a mattress in the lobby to private suites.

That left Stable 69.

The parking garage was certainly nothing impressive on its own, but it had been draped in neon lights that proclaimed 'Finest Flank in Equestria'. A two-story-high pink neon mare winked suggestively out at the street next to a ridiculously endowed blue stallion. "Oh my…" I muttered, going a touch pink myself.

"Eh, I've seen bigger," Rampage snorted as she squinted up at the stallion, chewing another Mint-al.

"Aren't you eating a lot of those?" Glory asked, tapping her hooves together nervously. Rampage's pink eyes glared at her and she gave a little squeak, jumping behind me.

"They calm me down and keep me from killing ponies that criticize my choice of mood improving chemicals," she growled softly. "So aren't you glad I've got a lot of them?"

"So aren't you eating a lot of those?" I asked now, coolly. I wasn't going to jump, no matter how she glared. "Don't threaten her, Rampage. She's just concerned."

"She doesn't have to bother," she said with a little snort. "I've survived a lot worse than Mint-als."

I took a deep breath. “All right. Well we need to keep an eye open for P-21 or U-21. It took us two days to get here, so we might have gotten here first. I also need to cash in these contracts for the Finders.” I looked at the entrance to Stable 69. “Which means I need to go in there.”

“I need to find parts for this beam rifle,” Glory said as she twisted and pulled out Leo’s magical beam weapon, setting it between her hooves. The internal workings tinkled ominously as she turned it upright. The barrel had an obvious bend in the middle.

“You’re seriously going to try and fix that piece of junk?” Rampage asked as she tapped her hoofclaws against the metal housing. Was it just me, or did something new break just from that contact?

“Junk?” Glory bristled. “Do you have any idea what this is?”

“Do you have any idea how little I care?” Rampage replied dully as she leaned back.

“This was an AER-14 prototype, one of a limited run that was developed to replace the Novasurge rifle! Only twenty were produced before research was cancelled due to…well…the balefire megaspells.” She lifted it in her hooves. “And look! It has an emerald refocusing crystal instead of the standard ruby. And a type D spark capacitor! A type D! I’ve only seen them in books.” She glared at Rampage. “And you broke it…”

Rampage just sat there a moment and then smacked the wrecked weapon once more with her hoof, denting the casing. Glory hugged the barrel to her chest with a whimper. “You…you…barbarian!” she gasped as the striped Reaper grinned at her.

“Why, thank you!” she replied with a grin. “Well since you two have your plans, I’m gonna go get ploughed. Mmmm…see you later,” she said as she trotted away eagerly, swaying her hips and making her metal plates rattle as she danced her way into Stable 69.

“She’s terrible. Why don’t we just leave her once we have P-21?” Glory asked with a little frown.

“We owe her,” I said with a shrug. “She’s also one of the few ponies I can think of that really doesn’t care about the bounty on my head. Plus, I’d rather not have her prowling around behind me.”

“She’s still terrible. And she’s always eating those Mint-als. I have to wonder how bad she is when she's off them,” she said as she stowed the ruined rifle between her wings. “I’ll head over to the Exchange and see if I can find anything out about P-21.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

“Are you sure you’ll be?” Glory countered, looking at the brothel behind me. “I know you’re not in uniform and that Flank has a neutral ground policy, but what if somepony tries something?”

“Well, then I’ll do something stupid,” I replied with a smile. “I’m good at that.” Glory winced.

The wrecked wagons inside the parking garage were stacked up in a corridor that funneled down towards an open service hatch. Pink lights gave the service tunnel a vaguely organic feel that made my limbs creep. Posters with mares on one side and bucks on the other advertised the selection to the clientele. Had I not been preoccupied by P-21 and what I’d done to him, I might have been in the mood for some enjoyment as well.

I reached the round door to the stable, surprised to see that instead of rolling, it was mounted on a swing arm. A huge pink 69 seemed to greet us, as did the handsome buck and cute mare standing in the entryway. I looked a little closer at the numbers, and saw the actual number of the stable had been 89, with part of the 8 painted over to resemble a 6.

After seeing Stable 90, I’d expected to walk into an atrium like in 99. Instead, we were threaded past a utility storage area. The doors were all locked, and it’d be a little conspicuous to fiddle with them with patrons passing me by. Finally, the hallway split with three arrows: ‘Finders’, ‘Fun’, and ‘Future Employment’. As tempting as the second was, caps came first. The Finders office was also the overmare’s. I had to admit, I wasn’t too happy about that.

Something else I found unnerving: no guards. No turrets. I couldn’t believe that nothing was protecting the stable. I walked to the overmare’s door with a sigh and a frown. I guessed it was time to do business with Bottlecap’s sister…

‘Out to Lunch. Be back whenever.’

…or not. Great. I hate waiting.

Since ‘Future Employment’ was not interesting to me, I followed the majority of the ponies in the direction of ‘Fun’. Finally, we reached the atrium, and I found myself surrounded by a pinkgasm. The color was everywhere! Couches and pillows were arranged around little tables as bucks and mares circulated with suggestive smiles and strange, elaborate and kinky outfits. Given that ponies have no problem trotting around naked, covering up in feathers, lace, furs, or in strange outfits was one of the kinkier things I’d

seen. In fact, I couldn't see the goods of a single mare or buck. Rampage was nowhere in sight, so I figured she'd already snagged her victim. I had visions of orgiastic excess, which showed just how off my mind was. There were a number of bucks who seemed drugged out of their skulls as they sat around smiling pleasantly at everyone. Dash inhalers were everywhere. Me, I stuck with Wild Pegasus.

"You don't look like you're having fun," a peach-colored mare observed from behind the bar as she poured my second shot. Purple hair fell across her eyes a little as she gave me a friendly smile. "Is it the drinks? The company? Do you need a hit?"

"I'm just waiting for Caprice to get back to her office." The little earth pony gave me a worried little frown. "It's not you or this place. The whiskey's good, and I don't mind the decoration. It's just that there's a lot on my mind right now."

"Oooh, a lot on the mind. Yeah, I hear that a lot," the barpony said with a sympathetic nod. "Still, if you can have fun, you should. Sitting there all sour doesn't do you any good." She immediately perked up. "I know. Let me make you something special."

"You don't have to…" I started, but she was already diving into the refrigerator and pulling out various bottles. I wasn't sure if she was doing cooking or chemistry with what was going in that shaker. She sat up, shaking the metal cups briskly, and then poured something yellow into a glass.

"Here. This should make you smile," she said as she pushed the glass to me. I glanced at it skeptically, but she seemed too earnest for me not to try it. '*Well, here's hoping it's not drugged or something*,' I thought, and took a drink. Instantly, sweet tartness splashed across my tongue, and I swallowed in surprise. The sour tang lingered for just a bit, and then it was replaced by a slight alcoholic burn that made quick friends with the whiskey I'd drunk before. I smiled, despite my mood, and drank the other half.

"That's…really good. Thank you," I said as I looked her up and down. "I'm Blackjack."

"I figured. That one's on the house. You looked like you needed it," she said as she looked at my cutie mark. "You know, there's gambling over at Rooms. Cards. Dice. Roulette. You might have some fun there."

"You seem to be a bit fixated on my entertainment," I observed with a smile.

“Is that so bad?” she said as she took off her apron and handed it to one of the other mares behind the bar. “I mean, everything in the Hoof is so terrible, so why not a place you can enjoy yourself? We have ponies from all over come here to unwind. Dance. Get high. Have sex. Pay for the pleasure and go home with a smile,” she said as she trotted out from behind the counter.

“Yeah. Sounds great in theory. But then you look at all the blasted ponies hanging out around the Quik-Kare and the price gets a little steep. Caprice makes money off misery.”

She cocked her head and looked at me sadly. “You really think so?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it. How does she live with making money off selling chems to addicts?”

“Believe it or not, Flank isn’t in the policy of stringing ponies out till they’re falling apart. The original stable was a chemist’s dream come true. There were chemicals stored here that had names so long you’d have to take a breath, or two, to name them. Unfortunately, the place was also lacking in entertainment, so some enterprising pony mixed up something fun. Then another did. Then another.” The peach mare sighed, rolling her eyes a little. “Eventually, the party ran out because somepony mixed up a nerve gas and released it into the ventilation systems.”

“Whoops,” I muttered. Had the stables been designed to self-destruct? Had Stable-Tec been some sick experimental dream?

“Pretty much. The survivors got out and fortunately ran into Keeper. The original Flank was a mess of drug dens and brothels. It’s only been cleaned up in the last couple years. Still, there’s all kinds of secondary dealers who couldn’t care less who they sell to. They keep the scavengers picking over for anything valuable in the ruins. The secondary dealers sell that in the exchange, buy more Dash, and the cycle continues.”

“So why doesn’t Caprice stop it?”

“How? Dash is easy to make and there’re caches of materials all across Flank. If it were banned, then the buyers with real money would just go straight to the dealers and all control would be lost. It’s better for some wealthy Society aristopony to get high than a starving addict looking for a fix.”

“So if somepony took out these dealers, what would happen?”

“Well, I know Flank would be grateful. Since Mixers doesn’t sell samples, the addicts would have more incentive to go to Qwik-Care. It would raise prices, making treatment easier than another high. Of

course, Scalpel would probably complain about all the extra work…"

I frowned. I knew I should be looking for Caprice and P-21. I knew I shouldn't be looking for trouble. But I also remembered how I had felt, my body dying, craving more Buck, more Steady, more Hydra. How much it'd hurt. Maybe it was the drinks, or maybe it was thinking about what I'd said to Scalpel. I looked at the peach pony and then smiled, "And where would a pony find these dealers?"

* * *

"Are you sure about this idea?" Glory whispered as we looked at the factory and storage tanks a mile north or so of Flank. Once I'd found her and explained my plan, she'd been skeptical, but she came with me after using the 89 barding to patch up my security gear. It might not be much right now, but I just felt better with it on.

"Of course. It's my idea. I'm sure all my ideas are bad," I replied, as we looked over the warehouse.

"Well then why--" she began and then she saw my smile and flushed. "Blackjack humor. Sorry."

The first dealer had been a simple affair: one mare working out of the back of a wagon with two bucks guarding her. All it had taken was the look and a suggestion that she sell me her entire stock of Dash and get out of Flank now. I suggested Brimstone's Fall. I only hoped that she'd make the trip.

The second dealer had been a larger operation: a half-dozen ponies working out of a gas station. That fight had been messy but not particularly difficult. I'd used the pump action shotgun loaded with flechette rounds; only one pony had enough armor to require the heavy revolver from the airbase. Not only did we secure their drug stash, we also greatly improved our own goods with their weapons and stockpiled wares.

This dealer was different. I wasn't looking forward to fighting off two dozen guards. On top of the two-story building was a large sign that read 'BOOM Inc' in letters surrounded by fireworks. From all the empty barrels outside, I suspected they weren't just reselling drugs from Flank; they were manufacturing their own, too. There were wagons just waiting to be loaded; this wasn't just some little side operation. This was a full-on competitor.

Rampage gave a great yawn as she shook herself. “So you want me to just go over there and kill them all?” she asked as she narrowed her eyes at the building.

“No,” I replied with a frown. My mane was itching like mad as I watched them roll a barrel of magical waste into the building. What the hell were they putting in these drugs? “First, because I don’t know if you can.” She looked vaguely insulted. “Secondly, I don’t want to kill the guards and let whoever’s running the show slip out the back.”

“Ugh. Fine. So if we’re not going to just charge in all nice and sensible, then what?”

I admitted I wasn’t entirely sure. We circled around to the side, but the back of the warehouse was completely sealed up. A large, round water tank rose up behind the building with a bridge of pipes connecting one to the other. I couldn’t exactly see how we could get up on the water tank. I looked at Glory. “Are you sure you can’t fly?”

The gray pegasus looked pained as she looked back at her wings. She bit her lip and started to flap, clenching her eyes shut. Her hooves rose from the ground, but then she jerked and flopped over on her back. She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “Sorry, Blackjack.”

“Don’t worry about it.” It looked like we were going to have to go in shooting. Then I noticed the metal stairs going up to a second story door. They looked pretty rickety, but it was them or go in guns blazing and hope for the best. After getting a hole punched through me by Leo, I wanted to save that for a plan B. Ugh, I must be getting old.

We picked our way around to the side of the warehouse and then made our way up step after step. I made sure Rampage waited till we were up. The door was locked, but I thought I might get lucky. I screwed my face up, sticking my tongue to the side as I lamented yet again P-21’s absence. Two pins later, I found the sweet spot and twisted. There had to be an easier way to open locks...

Moving inside the second floor of the BOOM fireworks factory, I was struck by the cobwebs and debris strewn across the floor. Clearly, this wasn’t a part of the factory that was in use. I made my way through a few offices, but aside from a dozen or so caps in a drawer, there wasn’t much of interest. Faded pictures decorated the halls, many showing elaborate fireworks over a shining white palace. Pinkie Pie danced with a sparkler in each hoof under a sky

filled with fireworks, underneath a caption that read 'Explosions are fun…in the sky! Safety first!' We found one room loaded with boxes and boxes of fireworks and rockets.

Yes, Pinkie Pie. Explosions are fun…

We found another office with a large poster of Pinkie Pie shaking hooves with a black pegasus with, of course, a firework explosion cutie mark. Carefully nudging aside the rag-wearing bones behind the desk, I noticed his terminal was still on and logged in. I wiped away the dust on the screen.

Memo #34: Hey, Sparkler! I couldn't help but notice that the latest batch of fireworks was a lot less fwoosh and woosh and a lot more fizzle and pizzle. It's just not a party if folks see a little pop and then nothing. So could you please do me an itsy bitzy teeny weenie favor and up the bang a little? Pretty please with sprinkles on top? P.P.

Memo #35: Howdy Sparkler. Got to say I'm a mite distressed. I got folks wondering where our whole shipment of ammonium perchlorate went and I'm a mite curious myself. So I'd be one grateful pony if you could make sure your next batch of the stuff gets to my munitions plants. Can't fight zebras without the stuff what goes boom! Braeburn.

Memo#38: Ugh, Sparkler! Where did that AP go? I got MoM and MWT up in my mane and I don't know what to tell them. I'm sending you some more materials so try and catch up. Who's our liaison with the O.I.A.? Onyx? Or is it Emerald? Do THEY know where it went? Prez Boomer.

Unfortunately, the rest of the terminal was corrupted gibberish. I looked at the indolent expression on Rampage's face as she asked sardonically, "Find anything useful?"

"Nope, but you never know," I replied as we returned back into the hall. A few more bobby pins later and the door at the end of the hall was unlocked as well. Pulling open the door, I saw a long catwalk stretching out over a production floor. Hundreds of barrels were stacked on pallets, and many of them had fallen over and spilled heaps of white powder. In the middle were a dozen chemistry sets and a trio of cooks busy making…something. Dash? Yes, I saw the empty inhalers in a bin next to one workstation, but they were also making something else. Those ampules were familiar.

What was glaringly out of place was a pen near a hatch on the second story; it was full of filthy and destitute scavengers. Were these dealers accepting slaves as payment? There were also a lot of

guards…and automatic turrets watching the doors. I looked at Rampage and all that noisy, clangy metal. Even with the radio blaring Redbeard's bluster down by the cooks, I couldn't imagine that the ponies below would miss that racket.

The radio host's rusty voice boomed in the cavernous production space over the hiss of hotplates and bubbling equipment. "Now, I like to keep my ears open. Like to be a pony of the people. So eventually I'm going to hear some kind of brahmin shit about Security. Well guess what, folks? Looks like Security is a tried and true devotee of the Slut of Flank after all. I heard it on very good authority that Security charged into Flank this afternoon foaming at the mouth and grinning like a Dash-head in heat. So you heard it here first, folks. Security: big tweaker."

Rampage snickered softly, and I gave her a look. "What?" she asked defensively. Then my lips curled as I glanced at her hoofclaws. "What... " she muttered, now worried. A minute later she sulked out of the office with strips of Sparkler's rags wrapped around each hoof like booties. "This is humiliating."

"Shhhh…" I warned her, and Glory, bringing up the rear, struggled to not laugh at the sight.

"Hey! We need more juice! Crowbar!" one of the cooks shouted up to the balcony.

"Yeah! On it!" a unicorn buck in leather barding yelled back as he walked to a crate and lifted some Dash inhalers. Another guard opened the doors of the pen and let out a slow stream of ponies. "Come on, folks. We promised you Dash, and you're gonna get Dash... " There was something decidedly creepy in his tone and grin as he bobbed the inhalers above their heads, leading them out the door. When fourteen or fifteen were out, the doors were closed in the face of the next pony and the other guard brought up the rear of the addicts.

I raised a hoof to my lips as we followed the catwalk towards the balcony. There were still two guards remaining, and right now I found myself really wishing that I had Minty Fresh's silenced pistol. Fortunately, Luna does provide the occasional blessing, such as a wooden hoofball bat lying on a table next to some very dated copies of Playbuck and Ponylife.

"Dash…ya gonna gimme Dash?" one of the prisoners mumbled.

The guard turned, spotted me and my barding, and took a deep breath. That was as far as his shout got as I swung with all my

horn's strength and crushed his windpipe with a meaty thud. His mouth worked, forehooves scrabbling at the indentation in his throat. The bat came around and knocked his rear hooves out from under him. As his face blackened and I kept him pinned, I heard a crack and thump from the direction of where the other guard wa-- had been.

Apparently cloth booties were little protection against a mare that could kick your head so hard that it'd flop around like a horn puppet.

"Come on," I whispered as we moved along the balcony towards the open door. A few of the ponies in the cage looked at me dully. One called out to ask if I had any Dash, but the ponies below ignored the noise. The door led to the bridge connecting to the large, cracked concrete water tank outside. From above, we could see that the dome atop the tank was busted and four large cages were bolted to the top of the tank around the rim. Yellow hazardous waste containers were strewn around the edges. For the moment, though, I was focused on the ponies loading the cages with addicts.

"What are they doing?" Glory asked softly.

"Can we just kill them all and not care?" Rampage replied, munching down another Mint-al.

"Not yet." I glanced at the box of Dash inhalers and lifted it to us. "I want you two to get those prisoners out through the offices. Get them clear and make sure they're quiet."

"You're saving Dash-heads?"

"I'm saving ponies, Rampage. You can leave if you don't like it."

She looked at me levelly, then sighed and shook her head with a smile. "Fine. I can play white hat. Best have her do the talking, though." I was surprised by that.

"When the rest are clear, I'm going to start lighting up crates. I dunno if they'll explode, but there's got to be enough fireworks around here for something to go up. If not…well…do something smarter than what I'd do. Now get them out of here quietly," I said as I nodded to the cage. Glory approached with soothing words as Rampage brought the box of Dash inhalers.

That left me with the other prisoners. Carefully I stepped out onto the bridge that ran atop pipes stretching from the fireworks factory to the water storage tank. Fortunately my luck seemed to be changing. Everypony with a gun was loading the addicts into the heavy-duty cages running around the edge of the collapsed roof of

the water tank. I moved as nonchalantly as possible, carbine loaded with standard rounds. Of course, one look at me and the party would start. There were lots of crates and empty waste barrels stacked along the bridge that I hung close to as I approached.

"It's getting too big, Domino. Too damn big!" I caught the voice of the unicorn buck that had led the addicts out onto the water tank. Crowbar watched as the addled unicorns were loaded up. "We keep putting the barrels down there like he said but it's not working."

"Bigger is better. We're making caps horn over hoof. All we need is a few dozen more lab rats and we'll have product better than anything Mixers can offer," said a unicorn with the strangest mottled black and white coat. She had an odd white mask for her cutie mark. "Ring the bell."

Crowbar levitated a crowbar from his belt and rapped it hard against an empty barrel. The guards shoved one pony into the tank with a yell that cut off with a splash. Then a deep growl filled the air.

A serpentine head rose slowly above the edge of the hole and opened its mouth to let out a shriek. Even in severe Dash withdrawal, the prisoners began to scream. A chain opened a door on the far side of one of the cages, and the head slipped into the hole and started to munch. The chain dropped and the heavy door closed, trapping it inside with its meal. A unicorn plunged a sharpened pipe into a pink, pulsating knot of flesh on the neck, and brownish-red sludge poured out into a barrel.

Suddenly I knew exactly where Hydra came from. Just as suddenly, I knew I never, ever, wanted to take Hydra again.

"Show is fucking over! Let them out!" I yelled as I stepped around a stack of pipes. The trapped hydra head began to jerk at its bonds now that there were no pony treats within to savor.

"You!" the dapple-coated mare exclaimed as she backed away. "Kill her quickly! Before the others arrive!"

Ante up. Crowbar wasted no time swinging his length of steel at my head, and I had little time to waste as I danced back and hit S.A.T.S. just as he jammed something into his thigh. Then, to my amazement, he started to actually move! The potion he'd injected accelerated him to the point that he crept closer in my vision. I toggled for four shots to his head, and released the spell.

This time, S.A.T.S. wasn't fast enough. Crowbar moved inside the range of my carbine barrel and slammed into me as the guards left

their positions near the cages and ran around the edge of the water tank. As I came out of the S.A.T.S. spell I found myself on my back with the rust-colored pony atop me. Then his horn glowed as the crowbar smashed across my face with such force that my next shots with the carbine went wide. I just needed a few seconds to focus. Just a few seconds.

"Pity to smash such a pretty face," he taunted, bringing the bar down right at my face as I struggled to control the gun. Then I opened my mouth wide, and the steel bar slammed right between my jaws. I felt enamel crack under the impact, but living in a stable had given me an unexpected advantage: healthy teeth. My jaws clenched down, and I grinned around the bar as he tried to yank it free. The carbine steadied and unloaded six rounds into his back. Screaming in pain, he rolled off me to get away.

Then I realized why there were four cages as a second head rose above the edge of the tank, dripping rainbow-tinted water. And a third. And a fourth. Smaller vestigial heads snapped at the air like hungry pustules. Clearly, it had risen in the anticipation of a meal and was not happy to find the cages closed. Brown and twisted teeth snapped at the heavy metal bars ironically now protecting the addicts inside. The practical beast began to strike at the guards instead.

"Kill her! Kill it! Kill something!" Domino shrieked as she levitated a sleek black automatic from her holster and began to fire. I rolled to my feet, feeling the impact on my plates. I ran for the nearest cage, narrowing my eyes to cut down the nearest guard with some well-placed headshots. I slid behind the heavy metal just as one head snapped at me, moments too late. My horn flipped the carbine and emptied the remainder of the clip into the head. Annoying to the mutated behemoth, no doubt, but satisfying.

Domino and the guards were for the moment occupied with the other angry heads. The trapped head was now jerking with such force that I could hear the metal groaning and twisting. I looked at the lock. No time for bobby pins! I grabbed it with my magic and twisted. Slowly, the tumbler rotated bit by bit. Almost…almost….

Snap, and the lock broke. Really, Celestia? I mean, *really*? I looked at the old padlock. Well, I may not have been able to open the lock, but I still had a crowbar. I jammed the prybar in and put all my weight upon it. I even tried to bounce a little. Then the lock snapped open and I fell flat on my face. Oh, that was a tooth

missing, all right.

Getting to my hooves, I swapped out for the twelve gauge pump action. “Get ready to run!” I shouted at them. “Follow the catwalk through the offices! You’ll find Dash outside!” Okay, drug craving plus survival instinct trumped their brain addled wits. “Go!” I shouted as I jumped out from behind the cover of the cage, firing as fast as I could and screaming like a maniac.

One hydra head looked over at a portion of its buffet out in the open; three of the ponies were sickly and easy targets, but I was the one dancing around like an idiot with a shotgun. It snapped as I dove to the side. My shotgun blasted three solid hits to its skull as its deformed jaws snapped where I’d stood a second ago. Scrambling, I kept running as Domino backed around behind the cage with the trapped head.

A guard charged towards me…or maybe he was running for his life, I dunno which. I hooked my front hooves into the bars and swung my entire body around, slamming him back. He staggered, staring at me in fury as he drew a machete from his belt. Then a hydra mouth grabbed him and yanked him upwards. The mouth released him, flinging him screaming into the air. Another mouth grabbed his head, a third his haunches, and together they tore him in two.

Don’t start! I warned my brain, smacking my forehead against the steel. For once my subconscious seemed to be cutting me some slack. I looked at the lock. Focused. Twisted…and…snap!

“Luna piss on you and all locks, you rusty piece of shit!” I screamed at the indifferent inanimate object. I jammed the crowbar in and put my weight on it again. I even tried to use my horn to add the last little bits of force. The crowbar bent…then the lock broke. “Through the…” I started, but the three ponies inside bolted as soon as the door opened. One hydra head snapped out, catching the leg of a mare.

I screamed, running towards the head before it could get a better bite. I blew out one of the five eyes with one shot, and then jammed the barrel into the oozing cavity for a second shot. Gore splattered me. For all I knew I was adding to my taint total, but that didn’t matter right now. My shots worked; I managed to get its attention in a big way. The mare limped for her life as the wounded head reared back.

The trapped head twisted and thrashed, pulling and pulling, and

the whole wall of the water tank began to crumple. I ran around towards where the last cage perched, and suddenly the ledge gave way. The cage fell into the scummy rainbow-slicked water along with the cage holding the hydra head. Water began to pour out of the breach as the trapped head worked itself free. The edge of the water tank crumbled under the dapple-hided unicorn, and with a scream Domino tumbled into the water and disappeared from sight. Small favors...

That was it, then. No more reason for me to stay here. I stood and started back for the bridge when Crowbar slammed into me like a rabid dragon. We went rolling, my shotgun skittering out of range. He laughed hysterically as he kicked and stomped like a maniac. The bullet holes weren't slowing him down at all, and I could see why. From all the empty ampules and needles scattered about, he'd dosed himself with the entire medicine cabinet.

The hydra began to pull itself free, but Crowbar had only eyes for me as he grabbed my ear in his teeth and pulled me over off my hooves. "Gonna smash you! Gonna smash you good!" he screamed. I struggled to push him off, but it was no good. I raised my rear hoof and slammed his nuts with all my might. He didn't even feel it. I hit S.A.T.S and toggled three telekinetic blasts to his face. The first smashed his eye like a hammer, but he jerked his head and the last two did far less damage. In fact, as I watched, his eye was regenerating!

"Gonna kill you! 'Cause I'm stronger! I'm stronger!" he screamed as he pressed his hooves to my skull and started to squeeze. I felt ominous noises. The chems had made him stronger…tougher… regenerating... but then I looked at the oozing gray flesh. It was time to raise or fold.

"Yeah! But you're not…heavier!" I shouted as I braced my limbs and lifted for all I was worth.

The hydra's head came down, bit into his back, and lifted him into the air. His death grip on my head was so tight that it yanked me into the air after him. Another head lunged for me, a tasty helpless snack, when I slipped free and fell to the metal planking. Two bites and Crowbar was gone. I prayed it was just my imagination that I was hearing him scream as he slid down the monster's gullet.

I got on my hooves and ran for my life. The entire bridge shook and suddenly slanted up as it crumpled under the hydra's weight. My hooves scrambled for purchase on the metal as the monster

crawled out of its tank after the next morsel in sight; me. For once, I'd gotten lucky; the garbage stacked on the leaning bridge thumped into the hydra more than it did me, and I pulled myself up, firing blindly behind me. When the shotgun was empty, I swapped to the carbine again.

Inside the factory, Glory stood on the catwalk strafing enemies while Rampage engaged half a dozen as a screaming, thrashing madmare. The turrets were smoking wrecks, but there were more than a dozen cooks and guards firing at the pair. I ran to the rail and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Run!"

Glory stopped raining magical beams on the enemy. The guards stared up at me in shock. Rampage clutched a pony in her hooves, mindlessly chewing on one ear. For a second I was sure that they would all flee…

Then, "Kill her!" And now they were firing at me *and* Glory, and had resumed dogpiling on Rampage. I screamed in frustration as I ducked for cover.

Then four hydra heads roared with hunger and once more the shooting stopped. The four heads slammed through the open door behind me, snapping at me as the monster's incredible bulk tore the wall apart. The balcony collapsed with the wall behind me, slumping down into the floor below as the catwalks collapsed. Glory yelped as she scrambled back into the offices. Rampage snapped the neck of her pony, then looked at the hydra with a whoop.

"All right! Now that's something to fight!" she said as she tossed the body aside and leaped to her hooves.

"Run, you idiot!" I said as I picked myself up, facing the monster as it crawled through the hole after its lunch.

"Run?" She looked positively incensed. "Run?! I'm a Reaper. We don't do run!" she yelled as she charged at the hydra. One mouth bit down on her steel-plated ass, another grabbed her head and lifted her into the air, pulling and twisting. Rampage laughed in glee, twisting and kicking whatever she could as her bladed armor cut into the monster's mouths. "Yeah! You like that?! I'll tear you apart from the inside out!"

She might be psychotic, but she did give everypony a chance to get out of there. Unfortunately, I couldn't imagine that even she'd be enough to *stop* the thing! For not the first time, I lamented my lack of heavy weaponry. Even a grenade would be…wait. Boxes of

strange and hazardous chemicals? Drums of older strange and hazardous chemicals? More boxes thrown off to the sides and full of fireworks? And me with lots of incendiary bullets.

Stupid, crazy, and liable to get me killed. What was I waiting for? My telekinesis loaded the carbine with red incendiary rifle rounds and I raced across the factory, shooting anything that looked remotely flammable. The beakers and chemistry sets in the middle of the room started burning quite readily, but they didn't have the force I needed. The two free heads of the hydra continued snapping after me as the other pair continued to break their teeth on Rampage's armor.

I focused on any crate marked 'BOOM', guessing the fireworks were my best bet. One crate started to smoke…fizzle…and then there was a pop. That was it. "Oh come on! What kind of fireworks don't explode?"

The hydra had had enough of the Reaper. With a snap of its heads, it threw her with such force that she shattered the reinforced glass in a window and went flying out. Now there was just one edible morsel and four hungry heads. And after it ate me, would it eventually wander to Flank? I backed towards the door behind me and took aim at the metal barrels across the room marked Ammonium something or other. Three burning rounds punched through the metal.

There was a hiss. A pop. Then a flame so bright it nearly blinded me jetted out from the metal drum and sprayed across the back of the hydra. The fire spread to the rest of the stack…

I really wished I had one of Crowbar's acceleration potions as I ran for the door.

There wasn't a boom so much as a roar that built and built. A great wind lifted me up and threw me through the door like a bullet as a chemical sun dawned in the Wasteland. I rolled across the parking lot and landed sitting in a heap.

Then the factory exploded.

The BOOM Inc. factory lived up to its namesake as the walls disintegrated in a detonation that slammed me flat on my back. Any Hydra that might have remained inside was vaporized, and the shockwave drained what remained in the water tank. The deluge put out most of the fire; though not much remained after that explosion.

I picked myself up, slung the carbine around my neck, and walked

to where the remaining guards and freed ponies watched in amazement. I looked at them, grinned at the lot -- minus one tooth, damn it -- and said, “Pinkie Pie was right. Explosions are fun.” Then my eyes rolled up in my sockets as I crashed face first into the ground.

* * *

Apparently me blowing up a factory and monster in one go was enough of a spectacle that none of the survivors thought to cut my head off while I was out. Glory, who’d had the common sense to flee, and Rampage, who’d been ejected for being indigestible, had reinforced how that would be a bad idea, and so I came to once again in the auto-doc. Apparently shockwaves are bad for the brain, particularly when you just recovered from a near death experience less than a day prior.

“You stay here another week and I’ll be able to retire to Tenpony Tower,” Scalpel said with a dry chuckle as I emerged from the machine a fourth time. Then she shook her head a bit sadly. “Never seen a pony so set on getting herself blown up.” Her eyes peered up at me, as if searching for something. “So, you did good?”

I stretched and shook myself, then brushed my black and red hair out of my face. “You tell me.”

The mature lavender mare shrugged. “I got thirty or so ponies lining up to start detox. It’s a lot harder for scavengers to get cheap Dash. And I heard that Caprice is plenty happy somepony finally took care of that operation over in the fireworks factory. So yeah, I’d say you done good.”

I sighed as I sat. “Still not enough, though.”

Scalpel shook her head. “You’ve done more in a night for folks than anypony ever did. How can you not be square after that?”

I sighed as I closed my eyes. “You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you’ll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow, when your life is over, that your lifetime will come close to making up for the wrongs you committed.”

Scalpel stared in shock. “What was all that?”

“Something somepony told me to make up for a wrong I did. I

thought it was my first. It wasn't. It wasn't even my worst wrong," I said quietly, still smiling. "It's why it'll never be square. It's why I've always got to keep trying to make it square. And I'll always lose." I sighed. "There were three ponies who died in a cage… maybe I could have saved them if I'd tried harder. I don't know…"

Scalpel looked at me for one more moment then grumbled, "You're an idiot." Then she put her hooves around me in a brief, tight hug before releasing me. "Bravest, boldest damn idiot in the Wasteland, but still an idiot," she muttered as she stood and walked to the door. "Now if you don't mind, I've got a whole waiting room of Dash-heads wanting to try and kick their fix. So if you'll excuse me, I'm pretty sure Caprice got you a place to stay at Rooms."

To be honest, I was pretty tired. Glory was looking for P-21 again. Rampage was…doing whatever it was she did. I just wanted to buy something to eat at the Trough and sleep till I woke naturally. No explosions. No horrors. Nothing. I passed on some fresh apples from the Society, even though they were offered at a discount. I'd take two-century-old food over the product of slave labor. Then I trotted to the hotel to find that a room had been booked for me. Very nice. Quiet. Third floor.

I had to admit, of all the places in Equestria, the suite sure fit the bill. The room smelled only a little bit of mold and the water stains on the ceiling weren't super huge. I locked the door and sat back to read the hoof to hoof book that I'd found in Miramare's locker room. Thank Celestia for the big pictures. I read about a style of fighting called 'Fallen Caeser' that reminded me of the zebras in No Pony's Land charging the Marauders. It looked…terrifying, to be honest. Doombunny technique sounded even worse; martial arts with Stampede could not be pretty. The entry marked 'Fool's Gambit' made me chuckle. Who ever heard of a fighting style based entirely on moment to moment improvisation?

Unfortunately, while I could really use a nap, my brain still wasn't making it any easier for me to get one. I kept playing back the fight with the hydra. I kept looking at that cage full of ponies falling into the rainbow water. Could I have jumped in and saved them? Had that been an option I missed?

Ugh, why did my stupid brain never make anything easy?

Not being able to sleep bordered on boredom for me, and boredom was intolerable. I considered reading one of Glory's Scientific Equestrias, but half a paragraph about magical crystal reactors had

me feeling stupid, not sleepy. I needed something else to do.

Well, I still had those two memory orbs from Miramare, the ones I'd found in Colonel Cupcake's office…

"No! No no no! The last time I was inside one of those things, I was captured by the Enclave. Before that, a magical trap in one shut my brain down," I muttered, but I dug out the orbs anyway. The door was locked; I was perfectly safe, right? It wasn't like I needed a guard while I was out. I looked skeptically at the two orbs and lifted one with my magic.

I felt the magical connection form. Then…nothing. Clearly this orb had been locked as well. Maybe it was some classified secret of Colonel Cupcake's? Maybe it was about the Marauders, or Vanity's little memory extraction of Jetstream? I wished that I could have another peek at Macintosh's Maripony and the stars--

oooOOOooo

Okay. Warning next time please! This memory seemed to have little to do with stars, however, as I found myself surrounded by a cacophony of noise and activity. Dust and smoke filled my lungs as I walked…no, not walked. I loomed. I rose above the milling crowd with slow, sure steps. Careful steps. A sprig of wheat dangled out my mouth. Big. Chewing on grass. Glimpses of red hide and brown mane? I had an inkling whose memory this was!

All around me I saw the reconstruction of Hoofington. A massive open pit in the north end of the island connected to train tunnels. As the train cars pulled through, teams of pegasi would fly down and attach hooks to the I-beams or sacks of concrete or whatever else they were unloading and lift them with cranes out of the pit and onto rail cars that ran along the city streets. Teams of earth ponies stood by, hauling their loads out into the city in a constant stream of activity. Everywhere I looked, ponies worked. Everywhere I looked, Hoofington rose.

Unfortunately, all the construction around the pit made it more than a little bit hazardous. Big Macintosh kept his eyes open, but the same could not be said about a light blue unicorn trotting along with her face in a map! "Now if this is north and that is east then I think I need to head this way…" she muttered as she peered at the map in her face.

"Miss?" Big Macintosh warned as she approached one of the rails.

Six tough earth ponies were hauling a stack of metal rods along the rails down the middle of the street. The locals stopped well back of the supply line, but the blue unicorn didn't seem aware of how close she was to the rails.

"But I already *went* that way. Oh, confound it! Why can't anypony label anything in this city! It's crazy!"

"Miss!" Big Macintosh raised his voice a touch higher in concern as more ponies started to shove in behind her.

"Ugh, why can't this place be more like Manehattan? I can at least see the Statue of Friendship in the harbor and…" There was a hard shove as three arguing ponies rammed into the blue unicorn, knocking her onto the rails.

"Get outta the way!" the pony leading the cart shouted in alarm. "We can't stop!"

Big Macintosh didn't hesitate. He dove towards the fallen unicorn as the lead ponies almost stomped her. "Don't worry, miss! I got--"

She disappeared in a flash of purple magic.

"You?" Macintosh staggered forward onto the tracks. He looked at the oncoming train and jumped clear just in time. The pulling team shouted for him to go back to Ponyville. He sat down hard as the supply train passed, looking around. "Miss? Miss! You all right?"

"Over here," the light blue unicorn said as she adjusted her thick glasses and then blinked. "Big Macintosh?" Her mane was a darker navy with a streak of electric blue in her tail and mane. I couldn't make out her cutie mark; her saddlebags covered it up too well.

"Ayep. You know me, miss?" he said as he stood and walked towards her. As the supply train passed the crowd resumed their motions around the city.

"Ah…" Her blue eyes widened behind her glasses. "Um… Applejack! The Ministry Mare mentioned you. You're her older brother."

"Oh. You work for AJ, huh?" She smiled nervously and gave a hesitant little nod.

"Kind of. I'm actually with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, though."

"New to the Hoof?" he asked, his very presence making the crowd break around him like a river. I wondered if she appreciated it; she was kinda puny.

"Does it show that much?"

He chuckled softly. "Ayep. What's your name, miss?" he asked with

an easygoing smile. More impressive, he wasn't checking her out. She had the cute librarian look down perfectly but his eyes stayed off her butt and on her face.

"Ah…my name? Is…ah…Mari…pony," she stammered as she blushed and forced a grin. Oooh…somepony definitely liked Big Red. "Maripony. And actually I have an appointment at the Ministry of Arcane Sciences hub. Only…" She looked around. "I'm not really sure where that is. I have a map…had a…oh dear." She found her map, ground and mangled to pulp between the tracks.

"Ministries are around the plaza pit. Gotta go towards Mt. Hoof," he said, pointing up the street at the knot of granite rising from the south end of the island. "I'll walk you," he offered with a casual smile.

"Oh no, you don't have to do that," she said with a blush.

"Ayup, don't have to, but I will anyway." Take him on his offer, Maripony! You won't regret it! Of course I guessed she probably accepted, given what I'd seen before. Though…maybe she did regret it…arrgh! Why did I have to think that? It was like I'd come across a juicy novel but had already read the last chapter! Such a spoiler...

Still, she finally accepted his offer and seemed to relax a bit. "So what's your business in the Hoof, if I may ask, Miss Maripony?" he asked as they walked along the busy streets. Many of the buildings were already ten stories tall and growing.

"Organizing this mess. Since the ministries were established, we've been running our tails off trying to get things organized. Pinkie Pie has it easy; it really doesn't matter if ponies are arranged in a department of amusement parks or the birthday cake corps. And Fluttershy's ministry is organizing itself for her, I think. But the M.A.S. and M.W.T. are a lot more complicated. The Office of Interministry Affairs is trying to sort it all out, but with the reconstruction and all, things in Hoofington are a little fuzzy."

"I see. So you're here for Twilight Sparkle trying to get this hub situated?"

She glanced at him and then gave a little nod. "Mhmm. Something like that. The Manehattan and Canterlot…and other hubs…are already well organized, but since Hoofington is all about interministry cooperation, this hub needs to be established from the ground up. So here I am."

"Surprised Twilight Sparkle didn't come herself," Big Macintosh

said as they stepped aside for a wagon loaded with crates and boxes.

"Oh, she wanted to," Maripony replied with a grunt. "But one of the things about being a ministry mare is that you can't take two steps without everypony falling all over themselves trying to either suck up to you or trying to be genuinely helpful and doing everything for you."

They reached the edge of an enormous pit in the earth. Here the rails didn't just enter the bottom of the pit; they were actually on bridges spanning the gulf. More infrastructure was being built even further down in the pit. Maripony's eyes popped wide. "How in Equestria did something like this get dug out?"

Big Macintosh chuckled. "Sand dogs."

"Sand dogs?" Big Macintosh walked to the fence surrounding the pit and pointed a hoof down towards where several teams of canines were working. Their claws seemed to magically tear away the rock before them.

"Well, they used to call themselves diamond dogs. Then the war got started and their home was mined for gems for the war effort. Threw 'em out on their tails. So when reconstruction started, Gold went out and offered them all a job to dig out the tunnels under the city. They get paid in gems, have a place to live, and Hoofington rises. Most of 'em hope to return home someday."

"Oh. Well, I hope that'll be possible, one day," Maripony said softly. "Still, I'm glad somepony found a place for them."

"Hoof has a place for everypony, long as you're willing to work and you're not striped. Folks around here have a particularly powerful dislike of the zebra folks."

Maripony sighed. "But there's not any evidence that the zebras even caused the fire!" The comment drew a lot of angry glances. If it hadn't been for Big Macintosh, I suspected somepony might have tried something.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Hoofington rises all the same," he replied, eyeing the crowd. "Anywho, this is Ministry Plaza. You want the purple one."

Maripony seemed to balk at the sight of the buildings. "It's… purple? Why purple?"

"Matches Twilight Sparkle." Maripony gaped at him and he chuckled. "What? All the buildings are standardized. Gotta do something to make 'em stand out. Blue for Awesome. White for

Image. Pink for Morale. Orange for Tech. Yellow for Peace. Purple for Arcane Sciences."

"I guess it does make sense," she said with a sigh, looking over at the rising skyscraper covered in purple-colored stone. Even half finished, it was clear that it was already quite busy. Each ministry building filled up an entire face of the six-sided block around the pit, and they were built with bridges connecting each ministry to the ministry next to it. "That's still a lot of purple…"

"Well, Miss Maripony. There's your stop. I guess I'd best leave you to it."

"I…yes. Thank you, Big Macintosh," she stammered. He looked back at her with that easy, confident smile.

"No worries, miss. If you're ever in Hoofington, let me know. I'm stationed over at Miramare. We can meet in a little town I know named Withers if you'd rather get away from all the noise. Got some kin that live up that way too."

"I'd like that. Very much," she said with a happy bob of her head. She was reluctant to turn away, but did so with notable awkwardness as she trotted towards the ministry building.

Big Macintosh chuckled as he turned as well. "Hmmm…Maripony, huh…?"

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory, I felt that familiar sense of disorientation; though really not as bad as leaving Stonewing's memory.

So that was Macintosh's first memory of Maripony. I wonder why he'd saved it. Maybe he'd planned to give it to her as a present, entrusting it to Colonel Cupcake…no. I sat up in the bed, looking at the little glowing orb with a small frown. "No…not for when he got back. He saved it in case he didn't come home from Shattered Hoof Ridge."

Maybe Maripony hadn't wanted it. Maybe Colonel Cupcake hadn't been able to find the blue unicorn.

Maybe I was wearing an explosive slave collar.

I rolled to my hooves, seeing the gray band tight against my throat in the cracked mirror. U-21 sat next to the door, a floated detonator beside him. "Ah ah ah…none of that now."

"Told you. Takes her forever to snap out of those things," a buck at

the table said as he flipped through Glory's copy of Scientific Equestria. P-21 set the magazine aside, his blue eyes hard and dark as the deepest holes of Stable 99 as he smiled at me. "Evening, Blackjack. Miss me?"

Footnote: Level Up.
New Perk: Hit the Deck - You've been hit by one too many explosions. Perhaps it's time to consider a new career? +25 Damage Threshold against explosives.

Chapter 16: Walk the Hard Road

"What are we gonna do?"
"We're…gonna…run!"

P-21 was alive? P-21 was alive! He was pissed, but he was alive. No bomb around his neck. No bruises or bloody marks. No burns or bullet holes. He was alive, okay, and pissed off at little old me! I laughed as I scrambled off the bed, startling the pair of them as I hugged him happily. "You're alive! Oh thank Celestia!"

"Get…get off me! Blackjack!" He scowled as he kicked at me. I licked his cheek and his scowling face snapped to an expression of shock! "Ew! Blackjack. Stop it!" I fell back on the ground, laughing like I hadn't laughed…well…ever. He frowned down at me, wiping his cheek as I lay back on the carpeting. "You are so…random." For some reason that made me laugh even harder. I had tears in my eyes from laughing so hard!

U-21, the scrawny brown unicorn buck -- scrawny from years of being locked up in a room by mares, I reminded myself -- watched the display with utter bafflement. "Now, if you'll be a good little mare…" I wasn't paying much attention. He was alive. P-21 was probably going to kill me, but at least I'd be able to do what was right. To do better! "Ahem! We're going to step outside and…" His tan eyes twitched and he stomped his hooves. "Will you stop laughing! I have a detonator, you know."

I stopped laughing, but not smiling, as I looked up at U-21. The brown unicorn resumed his nasty smile. "Now, you're going to walk nice and easy along the Sunset Highway till we meet up with Deus. If you try anything…anything at all…I'll blow your head off. And this detonator's a deadpony's trigger. I let go for any reason and you're a headless horse." He rose and started for the door. Distantly, I heard the rain start to pour again; good old soggy Hoofington.

And just like that I thought about his demand, his collar, and his detonator and just cackled. "Oh don't be stupid. I'm not going

anywhere with you," I said as I wiped my tears, still hiccupping with the occasional laugh.

U-21 stared at me. "Cunt! You've got a bomb around your neck and I've got my hoof on the trigger. You're going to do exactly what I say or--"

Maybe it was the word. Maybe it was the rush I was feeling from seeing P-21 again. Could have been that a few hours ago I was inches away from being eaten by a giant tainted abomination, that a few hours before that my heart had stopped, or that a few hours before THAT I'd been shot through the left side of my chest by a beam weapon. Regardless, I felt a dangerous little lucidity that brought U-21 and his detonator into my complete attention.

"Or fucking what? You're going to kill me?" I rolled to my hooves, laughing at this as well. "Maybe you didn't get the memo, but I'm dead already. All you'd be doing is saving me from the discomfort of mutating into some freak before dying of taint."

P-21's eyes widened as U-21's jaw dropped open. "You suicidal m-moron," the unicorn started to stammer as I grinned at him.

"And now that I think of it, blowing my head off might *kill* me, but it would completely *fuck* you. You work for Deus, right? Deus, the Reaper I shot with artillery? Deus, the Reaper that wants to invent whole new methods of mayhem to try out on me? I would just love to see what he does to you when you tell him that you cheated him out of his revenge!" I said with glee.

"I…that's not…he wouldn't…" U-21 muttered as he stared from me to P-21 and back again. "You're insane!"

I laughed again. "I'm insane? Trust me, you have no idea." I snickered and rubbed my chin with my hoof before pointing it at him. "Come to think of it, Deus wouldn't be the only pony pissed to not kill me. I got an entire family of bounty hunters after me. Ever hear of them? The Zodiac family? And I just know that there'd be hordes of bounty hunters all over the Hoof who'd be mighty put out with a brown unicorn cheating them of their hopes and dreams." I stomped a hoof, making him jump. "*Especially* if you actually collected on the bounties and had thousands and thousands of caps in your pockets!"

P-21 looked on in worry as the brown unicorn waved the detonator in my face like it was some kind of magic charm to drive me off. I pushed it aside, moving my grinning face even closer to his. "You're wearing a bomb! That's…that's…crazy. You're crazy." He sat down

on his rump, his weak focus making the detonator shake.

"Crazy?" I threw back my head, cackling. "I've been passed beer by frigging hallucinations, don't you tell me what crazy is!" I laughed, definitely feeling past the edge. "The Enclave might be okay with you killing me, but after what I did to their Vertibuck, I'm pretty sure they'd be pissed at you for cheating them of their chance to interrogate me with their newest death plague, or the chance to feed me limb by limb to a bunch of raiders," I said as I stepped even closer to him, my eyes wide and staring. Oh, if only I had some rad poisoning right now! Though I imagined my natural red eyes were bright enough.

U-21 was shaking head to hoof and was apparently so unsure of his telekinesis that he'd transferred the detonator to his hooves to keep the trigger down. "I…you…"

"And that's not mentioning what my *friends* would do to you. I have helped a few ponies in the Hoof, and I'm pretty sure that some of them wouldn't mind getting some payback on my behalf. Dusty Trails, Bottlecap, and potentially every colt and filly you pass might want to put a bullet in you. Then there's Rampage. Has Deus mentioned Rampage? Fellow Reaper? Actually wants me alive for her own plot or scheme or amusement? And if she doesn't, you can spend every second of the rest of your life wondering when Morning Glory is going to vaporize you from above at the speed of light. Have you ever been sniped with a beam rifle? Have you?" I shouted as I yanked open my barding to show the puckered scar. "'Cause I have!"

"Blackjack…" P-21 said in a warning tone as U-21 shrank back against the wall.

"But what's really funny to me…really really funny…is that P-21 would put a bomb on me and hand you the button. 'Cause if there's going to be any pony in all of Equestria -- in all the bloody, fucked-up world! -- that has a Goddess-given right to blow my head off, it would be *him*!" And I magically seized the detonator and yanked it into the air, shaking it at him. "See this? This does nothing! P-21's too smart to give you the real trigger!"

"Blackjack, that IS the detonator," P-21 shouted in alarm.

I blinked, looking at him and the hovering trigger before me. "It is?" That brought be back down to earth…well, closer anyway. "Well, I hadn't expected that." I sat down hard, looking at the mechanism that could take my head off with the release of the

trigger. I scratched my mane vigorously as I looked at him. “Um… oopsy on that last one.”

“We only had one detonator,” P-21 said with a sigh, rubbing the back of his head. U-21 had decayed into a hiccupping fit, and by the smell coming from him I knew that housekeeping wouldn’t be happy with me. “And it’s hard to read a magazine and keep that little tab held down all the time.”

“Huh,” I said as I trotted over to my bags, dug out my roll of duct tape, and taped the trigger down. Then I tossed it to the blue pony. “There you go. You can pull the tape off later, if you want,” I said.

“You *are* crazy,” U-21 muttered in shock.

“Probably,” I chuckled. Still smiling, I rummaged a bit more and pulled out a bottle of Wild Pegasus. I looked around the suite and found three coffee cups. Okay, they weren’t shot glasses, but they were better than nothing. I poured two, and then looked at P-21 as he watched me, a touch wary. “Want one?”

He put the detonator on the table beside him, shaking his head. He looked…conflicted. Could I blame him? I levitated one cup over to U-21. “Here. Have a drink, then go in the bathroom and clean yourself up. Then we’ll talk.” The cup shook between his hooves as he gaped up at me. I took a drink as I looked at him with a smile. Now that he wasn’t making stupid demands, I felt a little bad for the brown unicorn. I was responsible for some shit in his life one way or another.

He took his cup into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. I glanced at the stain and wrinkled my nose a little. “Was I that scary?”

“A little bit. Yeah. Didn’t help that he was so sure the collar threat would work,” P-21 said evenly as he looked at me. “You seem…” I twitched my ear, wondering if I was better or worse. “Different,” he concluded, looking at my chest wound. “You’ve been through a lot while we were separated.”

I sighed and took another drink. I couldn’t stop smiling. I should be sobbing and hugging his hooves, begging him for forgiveness. “Not just me. Glory too. The Enclave betrayed her. Branded her a Dashite to discredit her when we found out they were making some plague weapon.”

“Goddesses…” P-21 shook his head. “When you went rolling away after that little speech at the mine…I wasn’t sure you’d come looking for me.”

"You're my friend," I replied with a smile. A friend who had every right to kill me. "I think it's a rule: if you get separated from a friend, you have to move hell and high water to get back to them."

"I wasn't sure I still was after what I pulled," he replied. "At the mine, I mean."

"I know why you did," I said softly as I looked into the cup and felt some tears start to creep. "Justice. I just didn't think about what that meant." I finished off my cupful with a sad smile so I wouldn't have to see that look on my face. "I've been doing a lot of that lately. Thinking, I mean."

"Must have hurt," he said with a snort, but his hard look softened as I smiled at him. I hoped it reached my eyes.

"It did. A lot. If you'd tried this a few hours ago I probably would have cut off my own head to save you the trouble." I told him about going to Chapel, waiting for them to arrive, then Sekashi's arrival and the encounter with Virgo. "I got to where you two were attacked and knew I needed Glory. I can't figure out a rescue to save my life…or save a cutie mark."

He looked at me in confusion when the bathroom door opened and U-21 stepped out. He looked at me as if fearing I'd bite him or something. A few minutes ago I might have. "Hey. Want some more?" I asked, lifting the bottle of whiskey and swirling it.

His eyes flickered from P-21 to me and then back again. "What is the matter with her? Why is she being nice? What kind of sick game is this?" he demanded as he pointed a hoof at me.

I chuckled, and made him wince. "Let's just say you caught me in a really good mood. If you want to go, though, I won't stop you." I poured a little more whiskey into my cup, and after a moment of hesitation U-21 nodded for a refill as well. "If you don't mind my asking, what happened after you were taken?" I asked P-21.

"Don't tell her. It's a sneaky trick," U-21 muttered as he flushed.

But P-21 just shook his head. "She's not capable of sneaky tricks." He sighed and looked out the window. "When the Enclave attacked, we ran. They didn't pursue. There was some talk of trying to find Sekashi, following the rail lines, or trying to intercept you between the tracks and Flank." He gave a crooked grin as he looked at the brown unicorn. "I might have mentioned that it'd be a very bad idea to follow you, given you'd be in a bad mood when we found you."

"You're right," I replied as my maudlin feelings spread. "And I

never would have had the time to think about things if you had." I would have continued on like an idiot, ignorant of my crimes against him.

"Finally, we made our way here to meet up with Deus and the rest of the hunting parties. Since there were ten of us, it took a lot longer than I'd expected. He's been rounding up bounty hunters for his band. Meanwhile, U-21 here," he said with an even stare at the brown unicorn, "spent every free minute trying to remind me of everything I wanted to forget. We arrived just after you torched that factory, then we followed you up here. I heard you mention an orb, and we waited a bit, knocked, and picked the lock when you were out of it." Smirking a little, he added, "It was a pretty good lock, but not good enough."

"I gotta know, what was the plan if I didn't have an orb?"

"We were gonna all ponypile in and tackle you," U-21 muttered into his coffee cup. "Use my rope trick to tie you up and throw on the collar."

I winced. "Do you have any idea how bad I'd have hurt you?" I suspected they didn't know about my 'look at you and explode your unarmored face' trick.

"It doesn't matter anymore!" he slurred, "Deus is done with me. When he thought I might be able to lead him to you, then I had a little protection... but I'm done now! This was my last chance!" He fell on his face, burying it in his hooves. "I am so fucked. I am so sick of getting fucked over by everypony."

"Join the club," I said softly, feeling that warm buzz slowly cooking my brain. "For what it's worth, U-21, I'm sorry."

"Huh?" He sniffed, rubbing his eyes.

"For what happened in Stable 99. I used you, and I did you a wrong. I'm sorry for that." I sighed, closing my eyes as I leaned backwards on my rump and pressed myself against the mattress, head tilted back. "I am so tired of feeling guilty all the time. Most of it I can live with, but every time I think back to Stable 99 I just… hate myself. Worse than Deus or the Overmare or anypony. And it doesn't matter that the rules said it was okay. A part of me knew it was wrong. Always did. I guess I forgot to remember to not think about it."

U-21 looked at me in amazement. He probably never expected to hear those words. He looked down at his hooves. "I…sorry. Ever since I left 99…"

I rocked forward with a curious frown. “What did happen when you left 99?” I asked, feeling giddy thoughts churning around with simple curiosity and the knowledge that soon I’d have to talk with P-21 about what I’d done. “How’d you run into Deus? Did you meet Sanguine?” I asked as I scratched my itchy mane.

“I…” he began when there was a knock on the door. We looked cluelessly at each other.

“Yes? Who is it?” I shouted.

“Room service. We have a gift for Security from Caprice,” a young mare said brightly from the other side of the door.

I sighed and shook my head, scratching my mane vigorously in annoyance. “Probably a fruit basket full of Dash,” I muttered as I stood.

“Wait. It might be Deus’s ponies. We left them outside town,” U-21 said as he walked to the door. I stepped aside, levitating out the twelve gauge and loading it as I stepped back. Why hadn’t I picked up more ammo at the Exchange, or fresh healing potions from Scalpel? The brown unicorn glanced at me and then slowly pulled the door open, peeking through. He relaxed and opened the door fully. Two young white unicorns stood behind a food cart loaded with fresh, delectable treats. It must have cost a few hundred caps at least. “Wow, that looks good,” U-21 muttered.

The unicorns were identical twins, brilliant white with deep red eyes; they had the absolute cutest smiles and wore the faded hotel uniform I’d seen below. Their horns glowed as they pushed the cart in. “Courtesy of Caprice,” they said.

U-21 was looking at the fresh apples. I was looking at the mares’ eyes. Those weren’t the eyes of innocents, and the cart wasn’t glowing.

“Get down!” I shouted as two SMGs floated up from behind the food cart and strafed the room in a full storm of automatic fire. I jumped forward, sliding across the carpet and slamming my hooves into the food cart. It hurtled towards the twins... as their uniforms dropped through them? What? I watched in amazement as the cart passed right through the unicorns and back into the hallway, slamming against a green buck who was readying a large rifle. He carried a large duffel bag draped across his back.

“Surprise,” said one of the ghostly mares as the two brought their guns back to bear. Guns I couldn’t see through. The frayed uniforms had been caught by the cart and dragged part of the way into the

hall.

I slammed the door closed, knocking the twins' SMGs into the hallway. The mares might be intangible, but their weapons weren't! "No fair," they said, stepping--literally--back through the door.

"Is everypony alright?" I asked, looking at P-21 getting out from behind the bed. U-21…oh no…

He slumped, a line of red holes running between his neck and chest. "You…do have…a lot…of enemies…" He hiccupped and choked, blood dripping out of his mouth as I knelt and held him upright.

"Yeah, I do…" I said lamely, wishing that I could trade my bullet spell for something actually worth a damn.

His eyes stared at me as his chest bubbled with horrible sucking sounds. "Not…me…right?"

"No. Not you. I'm sorry, U-21."

"Not... your…" he began to say, then gritted his teeth as a spasm rocked his body. He looked sad, then his eyes went wide with panic. He opened his mouth, coughed a great deluge of blood, and drew a raspy breath. "Pro…ject…Chi…mer…a…" And with that his body began to relax.

Project Chimera?

"What did he say?" P-21 asked as looked over at the unicorn's limp form.

"Something mysterious that will probably nag at me for days," I said with a sigh. Then I looked at P-21 with a smile. "Assuming I live that long," I added.

A white mare's face poked through the wall! Her bright red eyes narrowed in glee as she grinned at me like a ghost. "Hi. Don't suppose you could hold still a second?" I raised the shotgun and blasted her smirking features. The wall behind her peppered with holes. She looked at me indolently. "Thanks."

P-21 charged at me and knocked me to the side as a hoof-sized hole appeared in the wall and a thunderous detonation came from the far side of the door. The little ghost head started trying to find a better firing position. "Ugh, stop moving around, please! It's actually very hard to aim through walls!"

"Who are these ponies?" P-21 asked as I tried shooting her in the face again. I hoped that I was at least distracting her, a hope that grew a bit when the next blast was not accompanied by me or P-21 exploding.

“Who are you? Are you with Deus? Enclave? Is there somepony *else* after my head?!” I shouted as another round cut through the wall, missing me by inches.

“Gemini Zodiac, at your service. I’m Gem. That’s my sister Mini.” There was another shot through the wall; another near miss. She rolled her eyes. “And that is our brother Taurus. Pleased to meet you.” She gave me an apologetic look. “I’m very sorry about all this, but *please* stop moving around. This’ll be much more pleasant for everypony involved if you stop.”

The other unicorn stepped halfway through the wall as well. “Will you hurry up? Flank’s security is already on its way.” She looked at me, wearing an expression identical to that on her sister’s face. “Sorry about killing you, but really, you should have just given your PipBuck to Leo.”

“Should have…he ambushed me! And shot through me! And set a small army on me!” I shouted as the second intangible pony proved as bullet-immune as the first. Two more high-powered rounds punched through the faces of the ponies as they kept following my movements with their heads.

“This is taking way too long.” The second stepped back through the wall. “Taurus. Plan Boom.” The other sister’s eyes opened wide, and she too disappeared.

“Did she say Plan B or plan Boom?” I asked P-21. His look confirmed my fears. We grabbed our bags. We ran to the bathroom. The cast iron tub was half full of tepid water. We jumped in the large basin and pulled our bags atop us.

Plan Boom went boom as a missile punched through the hole that one of the shots had blasted through the door. The boarded-over windows blew out as shrapnel and debris tore through the small suite. The shockwave made the tub break free of its fittings, and the busted pipes began to spray water. I looked down at P-21 and muttered, “You know, when I imagined this reunion, there were a lot more tears and a lot fewer explosions.”

“I’ll bet. Is there a plan?”

“I’m not sure,” I muttered, then rocked the tub. “You got grenades, right?”

“U-21 and the others didn’t exactly trust me enough to let me walk around with a lot of high explosives,” he replied. Then he reached under his brushy tail and pulled out a metal apple with a bright green stripe around it.

"I don't want to know how you hide stuff back there," I said, but at this point I wasn't complaining.

A mare poked her head through the door. "Oh. Shoot. Sorry about that. Thought we'd get you with one shot. Hold on a second." And she disappeared again. "Taurus, hit the bathroom," she called out. I grabbed the edge of the tub and flipped it over, pulling P-21 underneath and pulling down with as much magic as I could manage. The entire tub rang like a bell, a dent bending the middle of it. I had no idea what green meant. "Think we got 'em? I sure hope the PipBuck's intact," she said from outside.

"Yeah. Those things are indestructible…" the other replied, her voice trailing off. "Are they hiding under the tub?"

P-21 lifted the edge as I looked out at two pairs of ghostly hooves and tossed out the grenade.

"She doesn't learn--" one began to comment before both screamed. There was a bright green flash, and then nothing.

"What'd I do?" I asked as I lifted the tub to see the smoldering room. Suddenly the entire floor began to groan and tilt. As stout as its construction had been, clearly it had drawn the line. With a groan and pop the side of the floor facing the door gave way. As it collapsed, the tub tilted upright again, thanks to having lost its legs, and started to slide along its curved bottom as it picked up speed. We went speeding down the slope as the large green buck standing near the door just watched, the missile launcher in his jaw. The tub rocketed through the door of the room a floor below, sliding along the hallway and then down a flight of stairs as we held on for dear life!

The cast iron squealed across the cracked foyer tile as scrambling security ponies froze in their tracks, watching as we slid past and out the front door of Rooms. We juddered down the front steps and into the rainy street before the tub came to a rest.

I panted in time with my blue friend, our eyes staring into each other's, before he swallowed and demanded, "How did you just do that?"

"I'm pretty sure if I knew how I did it, it couldn't be done," I said with a chuckle. As he tried to stand, the cast iron tub tipped over, spilling us on to the cracked asphalt. I couldn't help myself; I knew I had three Zodiac killers after me, but for a moment I just lay there and laughed.

Then somepony started shooting at us. Make that someponies. A *lot*

of someponies! The rounds pinged off the bottom of the tub, dimpling it as we ducked down behind the cover. I felt a sinking in my gut as I looked towards the north gate through the rain. At least three dozen bandits were filing through, shouting and hollering as they overran the few guards watching that end. Most important to me, however, was the one in the rear. Nopony else in Hoofington had guns quite like that!

Either seeing me or sensing me, Deus shouted out across Flank, his voice seeming to echo off the rain, "CUNNNT!" Yup. No other psychopath could holler vulgar terms for mare genitalia with that kind of eloquence!

"Running now!" I shouted, keeping my head low as we wove around the various rusting wagons and crates left in the middle of the four lane street towards the exit to the south.

We ran into the barpony from 69 crouching behind some wagons with two more security mares. I had to admit, I never thought body armor could be both stylish and effective. She holstered a delicate looking needle pistol as she looked at me. "What the heck is going on?!"

"Deus the Reaper is after me," I said, looking over my shoulder. "He's pushing through the north gate and as soon as I'm out the south gate…"

Wait, why were the security mares pointing their guns south?

"Find her! Find that varmint now!" hollered Sidewinder as an even larger horde of Pecos ponies pushed through the southern gate, shooting wildly and randomly. I saw a flood of local ponies rushing for Stable 69.

"We need to get to the stable, right now!" the barpony said as she looked to the north. Fortunately, it looked like Deus was more interested in checking the hotel than the occupants of projectile bathtubs, but that wouldn't last. He'd tear Flank apart looking for me.

Glory ran from the Exchange, ducking and yipping as bullets pinged around her. "Blackjack, I…" She stared at P-21. "You! You're…" Then she looked at the collar around my neck. "Blackjack…what... " She sat down hard, looking on the verge of tears. "What's going on here?"

"We'll get to that in a second, Glory." Like when I didn't have two small armies and three Zodiacs after me! "I want you and P-21 to get in the stable," I said briskly.

"No," P-21 said firmly.

"I'm not leaving, either," Glory replied, equally adamant. I gritted my teeth and smacked my head against the side of the rusted wagon frame. Of course. I didn't listen to sense or sanity. Why should they?

"Not unless you come too," Glory added quickly.

For a moment the thought of being in a stable, especially one that wasn't a formalized rape factory, was immediately appealing. There was just one problem: I'd be trapped there. And given that the Zodiacs had unicorns who could walk through walls, I wondered just how long Stable 69 would stay sealed. "I can't. Deus managed to get into one stable. I doubt he'd sit out here and wait. If we're lucky, Deus and the Pecos will just kill each other. I need to keep moving till we can get out and run."

"Always with the running," P-21 muttered softly.

"Or hide," I amended quickly. "Either way, not trapped where Deus knows where I am."

"Right," the barpony said with a nod as she chewed her lip. "If you can get to the top floor of the Exchange, there's a group of pipes that lead over the wall. You might get out that way. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"Thanks. And tell Caprice I'm sorry for bringing her this trouble," I said as I peeked out at all the Pecos and the broken rooftops of the Exchange. The doors had been sealed up tight and, it being a former bank, I doubted I could just knock on them to get them to open.

The barpony just blinked at me, then smiled. "Sure. No problem." And with that the three of them ran quickly towards the parking garage.

"So, where to now?" Glory asked as she suddenly scowled, "And where is that psychopath when we need her?"

I wondered that myself, but it wasn't as if I could do anything about it. I could only really see one direction to take, and nodded to Mixers. "In there!" We raced into the building adjacent to the Exchange. I could only hope there'd be a way upstairs. We just had to get clear of this mob!

Mixers had evidently been a club even before the war. Despite the cracks in the walls and floor and an occasional busted light, the place was in somewhat decent repair. A long bar ran along one wall, a hovering spiderbot patrolling back and forth overhead. It turned and focused its camera on me. "Good evening, madam. What is your chem of choice? We have the house special, Rainboom, for a

mere 100 caps."

I glanced at Glory, but she just pressed her lips together, pretending not to be paying attention. I could really use the edge at this point, but the thought of the drugs reacting with the taint in my body and the memory of crashing on the Quik-Kare floor won out in the end. For now, at least.

"P-21, find us a way upstairs." He frowned, but nodded once as I turned to the light gray pegasus. "Glory, get your beam guns ready." She nodded as well. I noticed P-21 hadn't moved yet, his eyes lingering on Glory's brands; I gave him a nudge. Looking a little abashed, he trotted off to check the rest of the club. I scanned for something else that might help, then noted two yellow bars on the display.

There was a strange glass booth near the ceiling, and I was stunned to see two earth ponies sitting behind a counter of controls and looking down at us through their thick shades and strange metallic helmets studded with rainbow LEDs. I heard the shouts approaching the club doors and looked up at the pair. "Can you help us get to the roof?" I yelled up at them. They looked at each other. "Hello? Can you help?"

They looked back down at me and then nodded in unison as Pecos started to flood into Mixers. Suddenly, the speakers began to blast a blaring beat that stunned both the Pecos and me. The bizarre, rapid-fire music pumped into the club like some sort of sonic weapon; it sure wasn't Sweetie Belle! Neon bars of light rose and fell in rainbow cascades behind their plastic casings, and beam talismans began to fill the space with flickering bars of dancing color. I looked up at the box, giving it a withering glare. This was help? The pair just grinned from ear to ear.

Then it was fighting time. Out came my favorite weapon as I charged the milling Pecos balking at the sudden display. The twelve gauge shot fanned into the crowd in a deadly spray as the music beat in tune with my heart. I had no idea which beams were Glory's and which were decoration, but neither did the Pecos. And I had to admit, despite myself, that Mixers was starting to grow on me. Then my gun clicked on an empty shell just as a bloody Pecos charged me with a rusty axe clenched in his jaws.

I blocked the swing with my PipBuck, looking him in the eyes as my horn flashed and sent two glowing magical bullets into his face. As he went down, I took his fire axe in my magic's grip and swung

it at the next closest Pecos just as he brought a sawed-off shotgun to bear. My barding took the slugs with a crackling that probably heralded another trip to Scalpel's, but I didn't lose my focus on the axe. One low swing and the blade of the axe knocked his legs completely out from under him, then the axe whirled, reversed, and drove the spiked end through his cowboy hat and into his skull.

A mare screamed around the automatic pistol in her mouth as she charged, firing. I pulled the axe free as her rounds started to chew through my barding, then jumped into S.A.T.S. and queued up my attack. Time resumed, and the head of my fire axe flashed out to ram into the weapon jammed between her teeth and shove the gun's handle all the way into the back of her throat. She gagged, struggling to pull it out. The fire axe came around and its spike punched a hole through her temple.

There were more Pecos coming in, but now they were hanging back near the door, keeping their distance from me as they brought automatic rifles in battle saddles to bear. I started to switch to my automatic carbine, but I still had ponies pressing in on all sides. From the look of it, the ponies at the door were just waiting for their fellows to fall before opening up on me.

From the balcony overhead fell glittering death. Plunging twenty feet, Rampage landed on two of the Pecos standing by the doorway. Her heavy armor crushed both bucks beneath her hoofclaws as she drove them into the dance floor. A mare stepping in had one moment to regret her mistake before Rampage's tail lashed around her throat, the razor wire digging in as the Reaper charged two ponies pressing Glory, who had taken cover behind an overturned table and had been darting out with shots of her disintegration and beam pistols. The mare was dragged along behind the Reaper till the razor wire tore through her neck and sent her head bouncing across the floor.

The first buck she ducked right beneath, letting the serrated blades along her back saw him almost in half. The other buck shot her in the head at point blank range with a shotgun. I stared as I watched her eyes liquefy at the impact. Still, blind or not, she reared up and slammed her hooves down so hard that he didn't just crumple from the impact; he bounced. She reared again, dropping her hooves to slam him for a second and final time. Still, with a head wound like that…

I used S.A.T.S. to help guide my last axe swing into the head of the

pony I was fighting and was rewarded with a lucky hit that took his head almost completely off. Unfortunately, the luck ended when the edge of the fire axe caught in his spine and I couldn't pull it free. No time for that now. I didn't even wait for his body to drop as I rushed to where Rampage stood, head bowed as she breathed deeply. Her face looked as if it'd been covered with synthetic strawberry jam, only red. "Rampage?"

Then I saw one ruined eye pop free of its socket, and then the other. Two pale pink eyes focused on me, blinking before she wiped the bloody gore away with her hoof. "Ugh, I hate regrowing eyes," she muttered and blinked, looking around. "Aw, none left?"

The pumping music had covered the noise of our fight, and for the moment we were clear. The ponies in the booth bobbed their heads to the music, but also thankfully turned it down a bit. "There's lots more. How did you…ugh…no time right now," I groaned as I looked at her. "Are you going to be okay?"

For whatever reason my question made her look sad. "Trust me. I'm *really* hard to kill," she said in a slurred voice before spitting out a mouthful of buckshot. "How are you?"

"Battered, but intact," I said as I looked at Glory. The small pegasus didn't look too much the worse for wear, simply drinking a healing potion and then passing me one. Figures that she would think to buy fresh potions from Scalpel while I just took a nap! She was starting to get good in a fight, too... and why did that make me feel bad? "P-21?" I asked, looking around and spotting him looting the dead, picking out bullets and shells and the occasional chem potion. Or weak healing potion. Better yet, most of the Pecos had a few sticks of dynamite! "Did you find a way out of here?"

"Stairs behind the robot. They only go to the third floor, though," he replied coolly.

"Good. Now can you take that collar off and--" Glory began.

"No," he said just as calmly as before, his blue eyes hard as glass as he looked at me.

"You can't…" Glory started to say in disappointment.

"I won't."

The gray pegasus just stared at him, her lavender eyes wide. "You…won't? What…P-21! What are you talking about? Stop messing around."

"I'm not messing around," he replied without the slightest raise of his voice.

Glory's jaw dropped. "You bastard! How could you do this? How? Do you know what she's gone through for you? To help you! You… I'll blow your head off right now if you don't take it off!" she shouted as she started to cry.

"Glory!" I said as I stepped between them. She started to shake as I put my hoof on her shoulder. "You heard the recording. You know what I did to him."

She gave a tiny hiccup as her mouth worked. "But…Blackjack…" she whimpered.

"I wronged him, Glory. You know that." She shook even more as she clenched her eyes shut and I gave her a hug. "I'm sorry, Glory."

Rampage let out a long sigh. "Oh, what kind of party is this when you're being all dramatic? I mean, duh, bo-ring!" she said as she flicked a hoofful of blood at Glory, making her jump aside and scowl at the striped mare. "You three get out of here and take the angst with you, and I'll hang around and slaughter anypony that comes in!"

"But what about Deus?"

"Pfffft. Who's afraid of that doofus?" she said with a snort, looking over her shoulder as she walked to the spider robot. "Now you crazy kids get going. I'm pretty sure there's more on the way and I'm in a mood to do something…Reaperish."

"Hello, madam. What is your chem potion of choice?" the spider robot asked as Rampage put both hooves on the bar top. Her grin definitely made my mane crawl.

"Everything," she said with chilling eagerness.

Okay. This little revelation into the nature of one of my… companions…certainly upped the creepiness factor, but I had to admit that she'd cut off Glory and P-21's argument. Even if they were pissed with each other, nopony wanted to hang around Rampage as the robot pushed its needles into her limbs and she started giggling wildly. P-21 led the way up the stairs as her giggles became hysterical laughter.

The stairs led up to the third floor, which was apparently a flophouse for ponies looking to sleep off the aftereffects of their benders. A few of the rooms were still occupied by ponies too unconscious or uncomprehending to be aware of the danger; I couldn't see them as being a risk to anything but themselves as we moved along the hall. Unfortunately, rubble blocked any further progress up.

"How are we supposed to get to the fourth floor?" I asked, more to stave off the fight brewing between the two over my bomb collar.

"Hey," a blue mare asked in a long, strung out voice as she stepped into the hall. Her pupils were huge, and she blinked in the meager light of the hall like it startled her. "Hey…are you moon ponies?"

"Excuse me?" Glory asked nervously as the mare reached out a hoof to touch something that wasn't there. "Are you all right?"

"Ponies from the moon are coming to take me away. I'll be with Luuuuunaaaa," she crooned as she swayed. "Are you moon ponies?"

"Er…yes. Yes I am," I said quickly with a smile. "But I need to get to the roof so I can use my…um…moon communicator!" I raised my PipBuck and grinned as sincerely as I could. "Do you know the way up?"

"Oh sure. Princess Celestia will send you. Straight to the moon. And we'll all be with Luna." She had, I noted with a pang, a crescent moon cutie mark. No wonder she was strung out on drugs.

I wanted to shake her, but doubted it would do much good. "Ah, no. The roof. We need to get up."

"Up to Luuuuunaaaaaa…" she crooned as she walked back into the room where another mare waved a hoof at the air above her. Then the blue mare looked at us with her dreamy smile. "Are you coming?"

Hesitantly, we walked in and saw a portion of the ceiling had caved in. A treacherous ramp of debris led up to the hole. "I… thanks…" I said as I smiled with a little guilt for misleading the high mare.

"Give my love to Luna and come and get me soon. I really don't like being here," she said as she fell back on a mattress, waving her hooves in the air above her. "Luuuunaaa…I'm gonna go see Luuuunaaa…and live on the moon with the moon poooo-nieeeees."

"Yeah. We'd all love to go live on the moon," I muttered as we carefully pulled ourselves up the slope, leaving the mare to her visions.

"What was that all about?" P-21 asked softly once we were all up on the fourth floor.

"Moon Dust," Glory replied in a far more snippy tone. "Scalpel was telling me about it. It's a hallucinogen. It's also very addictive," she added, giving me a sharp look as well. She glanced back down at the mares lying on their backs, waving their hooves aimlessly in the air. "Who doesn't want to escape the Wasteland whenever they

can?"

I couldn't blame the mares at all. Still…"I hope Rampage didn't include that when she asked the robot to give her 'everything'." Glory couldn't hide her smile at that one as she started to crawl up through the hole.

The fourth floor had been neglected for some time. The rooms were filled with heaps of junk, rusting boxes, barrels, littered Dash inhalers and empty bottles of booze. The shag carpet under our hooves squished with every step, and a tangy, coppery smell clung to everything. So much debris filled the hall that I could barely navigate through the narrow space. In many places, the plaster had all but liquefied from the moisture, showing the rusting steel and crumbling cinder block underneath.

The hallway came to an abrupt end at two heavy cabinets and desks jammed between the walls. I frowned as I pushed and shoved, but, aside from squealing with a terrible racket, they weren't budging. "Maybe we can get through one of these doors?" Glory suggested as she looked behind us. Unfortunately, the first door was locked. Fortunately, P-21 was back. In, twist, and click. I could have screamed at how effortlessly he did it!

The room inside hadn't been filled with unwanted junk and was still relatively intact, if you could ignore a section of collapsed wall that *had* been half covered with junk. A terminal on the table cast a sickly green glow over the interior of the room. A few decayed posters still covered the surviving wall, their surfaces warped and faded by the constant exposure to moisture and spotty, hardy mold. They showed four ponies standing before a large audience on a magnificent stage.

P-21 had gravitated to the terminal while I tried to shift the steel crates choking the hole in the wall. Water splashed and dripped through the hole, so I hoped we'd be able to get up another floor. Glory searched the rest of the room. She pointedly avoided disturbing a pile of bones piled before a large, rust-pitted cabinet.

From the terminal came a buzz and crackle, followed by a mare's voice. "*…made it to Flankfurt. It's a big step down from Canterlot…and Manehattan…and Hoofington."* The speaker gave a frustrated sigh I knew only too well. *"Nopony seems willing to promote us after that charity concert last year. You were right; I should have just played nice with the Ministry of Morale, but I can't shake that what they're doing is wrong. The proceeds of that concert were supposed to go to victims of*

the war, both pony families and zebra refugees. It wasn't as if we were trying to help the enemy!

"I've found a place over a club. You should come see it; I'd really like it if you could see it. I'd like it if anypony would see it. I know I've never been... sociable... , but I would dearly like it if somepony would visit me. Even write to me. It feels like I've been exiled from Equestria without a formal decree. All four of us have been blacklisted. They don't even need me at the M.o.I. anymore.

"I can only hope that I can land a job with one of the aristoponies out here. They've got estates all over and are fans of our music. It's like they're either running for the hills or circling the wagons in Canterlot. I don't know which is a safer bet. I can't see the zebras wasting a balefire bomb on Flankfurt. There've got to be better things to bomb." Through the cracked window I could make out the glowing red crater to the north. Apparently not.

"Anyway. I know it's not your kind of music, but I've got some recordings of our last concert together. I hope you'll accept them with my apologies. Your once, and hopefully future... " But the recording fuzzed out at the end.

We shared a glance, and I looked at the cabinet. Carefully shifting the bones to lie on the bed, I opened the doors of the cabinet. The passage of the years had not marred the finish of the burnished brown wood nor rusted the strings of the beautiful instrument. The cello -- or maybe it was a double bass, I couldn't tell -- rested comfortably in its frame while the interior of the doors were covered with pictures of a somber gray mare performing before a crowd of thousands. Pictures showed her cool and aloof, a bit like P-21, I had to admit. But there was one large photograph that stood out from the rest.

The charcoal-maned pony sat beside a white unicorn mare with electric blue hair and opaque glasses. She was licking the gray pony's cheek, and, from the shocked and blushing expression on the gray mare's face, it was a gesture that hadn't been anticipated. A note was written at the bottom: '*Hey Octavia. Lighten up, chill out, and have some fun, girl! Take care of yourself. Pon3.'*

"Were there music files still on the terminal?" I asked P-21 quietly. He nodded, and I trotted over to the device. There wasn't a way to take the instrument with us, but I could at least take the music. He transferred the files to my PipBuck. I looked at the cabinet and bones, hoping that I would remember to return and move the

instrument someplace safe rather than leaving it to eventually rot. There were a few books of sheet music as well, but I couldn't see much reason for bringing them. Tragically, my PipBuck couldn't even assign a value beyond one cap for a 'pre-war book'.

It didn't take long for me to clear out the rest of the hole. Water sloshed across the rusty, debris-littered floor as rain poured through a large hole overhead. We were barely able to scramble up the slippery slope to reach the fifth floor, and then only with me shoving P-21's rump up towards the top. We emerged into a twisted tangle of broken concrete, rebar, and shattered glass. Whatever floors had once stood above the fifth were long gone now. And worse, from the shouts coming from the wagon parking garage next door, we hadn't found the only way up here.

Lightning flashed overhead. Okay, now it was officially worse. Thank you, Luna, but this is as exciting as I need it to get right now. Thank you. A white bolt snapped across the sky.

"We need to move. Now!" I urged as we picked our way through the tangle towards the Exchange. Bullets began to zing and whiz though the pouring rain to plink off concrete. I couldn't tell if the shooters were Pecos or Deus's ponies; I supposed it didn't matter. Fortunately, their night vision was as crap as ours in this rain, but they were making up for lack in accuracy with quantity of bullets. When possible, we crawled behind cover as they fought to catch up to us.

The Exchange rose six stories, and the gap between the two buildings was bridged by a narrow slab of concrete. Worse, it had no cover. Even *worse* (again), the slippery uphill climb would be dangerous all on its own. "Get up there, Glory," I shouted as I swapped out for the carbine. There weren't many bullets left for it, so I switched to antipersonnel flechettes and picked my shots carefully. The miniature darts punched right through the flesh of our pursuers and fragmented into dozens of razor-sharp lengths inside the body. I could only assume that, aside from being highly injurious, it was painful as hell too. Right now, I'd take all I could get.

Once Glory was up, P-21 was next. After he'd ascended the slippery slab, I turned and ran as quickly as I could, hooves slipping and scraping as I kicked my way up to the top of the Exchange building. A missile hissed past my head, blowing a chunk out of the concrete wall past me. I stared across the street at the large green pony

standing atop the Trough and calmly lining up another shot with his missile launcher. Worse (I was really starting to hate that word), he'd gotten to the highest corner piece of the crumbling building and could fire down at us with ease.

I froze on the slope, wincing at the rounds that bit into my flank as I swapped magazines and aimed my carbine as carefully as possible. We fired almost as one, but the missile detonated only twenty feet away, knocking him from his perch and sending the launcher flying down into the street. I could only hope it was a really long fall inside the building... now all I needed was...

Sweet Celestia, why is it never easy? The top of the Exchange was a hollowed-out disaster. A drop of two to three stories plunged down beneath us into a jagged mess filling the shell of the building. While floors were missing, parts of the walls were still intact and created fragile and thin bridges like a jigsaw puzzle. Debris and beams also bridged the voids. Looking down, though…oh fuck, why did I look down? I quickly closed my eyes and focused on the horizontal plane. I didn't see how anypony could survive that fall. Bullets pinged off some rusty barrels stacked near the ramp; from the sound of it, trying to roll the barrels down the ramp would at best be only a temporary distraction, and it would probably just let somepony shoot us while we were trying to shift them.

Fortunately, I could see the pipe bridge coming in the side of the building…three stories down. A nearby concrete stairwell looked almost intact enough for us to get down, though, and, better yet, it'd protect us from Taurus's... damn, why had he stopped shooting? My eyes scanned the blown-out windows of the Trough, but I could see neither hide nor hoof of him. Or the two ghosts. My mane felt like it was trying to crawl clear off my neck!

Though Glory might not have been able to fly, she was still by far the most agile of us. She hopped nimbly from beam to beam and reached the stairs before us. "Come on. It's clear all the way--"

Two bolts of energy lanced out from the underside of a beam below me. One struck her in the chest, a shocked expression crossing her face as she tumbled slowly down the stair, landing limply at the first landing. I looked straight down at the black armored carapace of Enclave power armor sitting on the underside of the beam. It looked back up at me.

And that's about the point I lost it. With a scream, I launched myself over the edge, grabbing the armor mid plummet and

wrapping my hooves around its neck. Whatever spells allowed it to fly and stick to things weren't strong enough for two ponies. Gray armored wings tried to fly as we tumbled end over end down towards the debris below. I jumped into S.A.T.S. in mid fall and sent two telekinetic bullets into the pegasus's head, but the magic was ineffective against its helmet.

Apparently some goddess was looking out for me still, because when we hit the ground, I was on top. Even shaken to my hooves, I didn't waste any time. I felt like I'd just injected a dose of Stampede. "Me!" I screamed as my magic pulled over a chunk of rebar-studded concrete and, with my forehooves helping, brought it smashing down on the power armor's helmet. "Me! You kill me first! You got it? Not Glory. Not P-21. Not anypony till you kill me!" I screamed as I brought it down again and again on her…yeah, I was pretty sure it was a her... head. I paid little heed to the pain in my back and haunches as I smashed in her visor.

"Blackjack! Stop!" Glory begged from the stairs.

I wanted to ignore her. The stupid tail kept beating at me, so I pinned it beneath some rubble. Here was one of the Enclave that had taken her cutie mark and disgraced her. I wanted to send my magic bullet right down the pony's throat! One thing alone stopped me: Glory's plea. She was wrong. I should kill this soldier. It was like in Miramare. I was right. I knew better.

"Blackjack, stop," P-21 said calmly beside me. "Trust me. Please."

I stopped my attack and looked down at…Glory? Yes, the gray coat was a little darker, the lavender eyes a more purplish shade, and the face a touch more mature, but it was the spitting image of Glory staring up at me. Glory limped down, drinking a fresh healing potion to close some of the burns on her chest. It was then that I realized my barding was soaked in blood. The bladed stinger had been ripping into me and I hadn't even noticed.

Glory passed me a restoration potion, and I noted with distaste that it was already turning a paler shade of purple. Still, it closed most of my injuries well enough. Glory was looking down at the Enclave soldier with an expression of sadness. "Hello, Dusk. How are you, Sister?"

Oh shit. Why, Celestia? Just…why? Deus, Pecos, Zodiac, rain and lightning, and NOW you're throwing a family reunion at me?

"You don't have any sisters, Morning. You left your family, just like her. You've destroyed Father. My career! Everything!" Dusk hissed

up at her. “We’ll be lucky if we’re not exiled from Thunderhead for this, you dodo!” She glared at me.

“I didn’t fall, Sister. I’m not a Dashite. I’m still Enclave. There are things going on…” Glory began in a brittle, heartbroken voice.

“I know all about it, Morning. You’ve taken up with this surfacer terrorist.” With a great mechanical heave she threw me off and rolled to her hooves. That impact had really done a number on her shiny black armor. I really hoped I’d taken those lethal energy guns out of commission. “Off on your own selfish crusade to save the surface. Just like her!”

“No!” Glory shouted back. “Operative Lighthooves! He’s making a disease! A bioweapon.”

“Lighthooves was studying the surfacer plague, you featherbrain!” Dusk roared. “He was sent to determine if it was a threat! And you two killed nine Enclave soldiers for that!”

“What?” Glory sat hard, her eyes wide.

“You two destroyed an operations base. Why? Because we weren’t clearing away the clouds fast enough? Because we weren’t showering the surfacers with enough food? They don’t deserve the sun!” Dusk shouted, pointing a hoof at P-21 and me. “And neither do you.” Those energy rifles pointed right at both of us.

“I met a pony, vegetarian, who contracted the raider disease,” I said sharply as I stepped between her and Glory. “And I’m pretty sure she got it after eating your food. And I was sent with Enclave soldiers to an isolated farm that had turned raider. Again, your food was given to them. So unless the Enclave is fine with using innocent ponies to test a plague, there’s more going on here.” While fury still burned in her eyes, there was a moment of hesitation. “They manipulated her speech magically and branded her. Don’t believe me if you want, but that’s what happened.” Still, I doubted that my word would sway her.

Her dark purple eyes glared at me. “The Enclave doesn’t turn against its own. Ever.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. You are definitely her sister.” Now she was about to shoot me. Good. Bad as it might be for Glory, I could live with defending myself to her death. “I’m also going to say... you try and shoot me or my friends again and I’m going to make it ten Enclave soldiers dead.” Red eyes stared into purple, neither of us blinking as we waited for the other to twitch.

“Mare pissing matches aside,” P-21 said dryly as he stepped

between us, looking at the older pegasus, “You’ve got something to say?” I fought the urge to snort; only P-21 could come up with that.

“What…do you want…Sister?” Glory begged the question between her tears.

Dusk’s eyes now showed some doubt, but that doubt didn’t stop what came next. “You’re dead now, Morning Glory. That’s the only way any of our family will survive. Father’s ruined, but he’s not totally shamed. I am going to report you as dead. Maybe they won’t believe it, but that’s what I’ll report. Lose your name and the uniform and stop pretending to be one of us. Because if so much as a rumor gets out that you’re still alive, I will bring my entire wing down on you.” Her eyes swapped to me and she added in a hiss, “And I’ll be sure to kill you first.”

Only the fact that it would devastate Glory if I killed her sister stopped me from putting a magic bullet through her eye.

With that she leaped into the air, past the broken crossbeams, and hesitated only long enough to blow the ponies who had made it up the ramp into ash. She scooped some into a pocket on her armor and then without a second look back flew up into the stormy sky. Glory slowly curled up and collapsed into a sobbing heap.

“We’ll have to carry her. We can’t stay here,” I muttered as I knelt down to scoop her over my back.

A chunk of concrete whirled around and smacked me upside the head, sending me staggering to the side. A length of rusty rebar followed it and was barely deflected by my PipBuck. Both levitating up anything heavy or jagged, the two ghostly unicorns had the audacity to look sad. “Sorry about this,” the first said softly with an apologetic smile as she stabbed at me with another piece of rebar.

“But Deus is already up here and on his way, and we really need to finish you off quickly,” the second said as she floated towards me. I pulled out my shotgun, but the shot was just as ineffective now as it had been earlier.

“If it’s any consolation, we’re sorry about your friend,” the first said as she moved around to the side. “I can’t imagine how bad it’d hurt to lose family.”

“Wait! Didn’t Rampage kill Leo?” I asked as I watched one float above me with her rebar weapon.

They glanced at each other and giggled. “Oh, she did worse than kill him,” said one as she flew at me and solidified just fast enough to kick me upside my head with her full weight. I tried to blast her,

but she went ghost too fast. Then the rusted steel hit the side of my head. She wasn't very strong, but grabbing the weapon with my magic just made her pick out something new to hit me with.

The second came flying out of the floor, solidified, and gave my chin a rear leg buck that knocked me to the ground. "She broke his gun!"

"And his legs, Mini," Gem giggled as she resumed beating on me with her rebar while her sister kept flanking me. "And his face."

"His poor, poor face," Mini said as she kicked out at my rear legs; it didn't knock me down, but every hit was wearing at me. I kept trying to shoot them, but they kept using that damned intangibility spell! The cheaters!

Then I looked over at P-21 next to Glory. They'd screamed at the grenade he'd thrown. Why? "P-21! What was that grenade you used?"

He looked at me, his eyes widening in comprehension. "Magic!"

I dropped the shotgun and raced towards Glory. "No!" shouted the one with the rebar as she speared it into Glory's beam pistol. The casing cracked open with a sparkle of rainbow light. I rolled her over, yanking the disintegration pistol from her battle saddle with my teeth. I had no clue how to use it. I just had to get them. If I couldn't, then they'd bludgeon me to death.

I wasn't exactly a good shot with the disintegration pistol, but I could at least point it in the right general direction and fire. The deadly pink bolts raced through the air, forcing the translucent mares to keep dodging. A bolt struck finally struck one of them and she screamed, solidifying in midair and dropping toward the jagged debris. At the last second, she ghosted again and disappeared through the floor.

So, a hit from the disintegration pistol would disrupt whatever it was that let them fly and pass through things. If I could disrupt them with one shot, I could take them out with a second. Of course, that would mean I'd have to hit them *twice*... but it was the only thing I could do. I kept my focus as I fired pink bolt after pink bolt.

Then the gun died. I stared at the cartridge and tried to figure out how to eject it. For that matter, what was I going to reload it with? And at that moment, one of the mares launched herself at me through a collapsed wall. "Now, Gem! Finish--"

My telekinetic, *magical* bullet fired, striking Mini in the torso. And just like that she stopped, staring at me with a horrified look on her

face. Her very solid face. She hung there like a decoration, half her body on one side of the wall. Half her body on the other side. “Oh,” she whispered softly. “That’s…not good.”

“Mini!” screamed Gem, hovering in front of her sister. “Go ghosty! Do it!”

“I…can’t. I don’t think the spell works inside something,” she said softly. “I can’t feel my legs.”

Gem solidified before my eyes, the three of us forgotten as she held her sister. “No, do it. Do it!” she begged as she changed ghostly and passed her hooves through her sister. “Mini! Go ghosty. Please!” Again and again she solidified and desolidified, trying to get her sister to do the same. I looked on, wishing that Mini could somehow free herself.

Gem finally threw her forelegs around her twin sister, sobbing brokenly.

“I’m sorry…I mean…” I said lamely. I’d meant to kill her, but I hadn’t meant for…*this*.

Mini looked at me with a small smile. “It’s okay. We were trying to kill you. I mean, it’s only fair.” Somehow that made me feel even worse as the trapped mare gently stroked her sibling’s mane. “It’s okay, Gem. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Gem? Mini?” a male said from behind us. Standing on the pipes leading to safety was the green buck. He must have started moving the second we were out of sight. If Gemini hadn’t slowed us down he wouldn’t have had the time to head us off. I whirled, looking at the stallion as he panted for breath, his sides gleaming with sweat. His gun was slung across his neck, though. Something about him reminded me of Big Macintosh. His dying sister seemed worth infinitely more to him than caps. “Ah no…Mini…” he whispered as he walked past us without a second glance.

“We should go. Now,” P-21 said softly as he gestured to the now-vacant pipe bridge that passed over the fence and into another ruin just outside the south gate. Looking around and venturing a cautious check of the street, I couldn’t see a lot of Pecos. In fact, I couldn’t see much of anything moving except us, the three Zodiacs, and the rain. Then I heard a soft mechanical click overhead.

The pipe bridge exploded. Of course it exploded…not from a bomb, of course, but from the two massive cannons that sent a heavy boom thumping through the building. With a rusty squeal and a spray of fetid, stinking water, the remains of the old pipes tore free

of the building and tumbled down into the gap below. Standing at the top of the ramp, the rain sheeting off him as his cannons smoked, loomed Deus. The pony who had made my life a living hell for the last two weeks or so. “Done. This running is finished,” he growled as he looked down at the three of us, then over at the three Zodiacs. His red eyes widened and he chuckled, “Is that little cunt stuck in the wall?”

I started to move, but P-21 got in my way. “Hold the fuck still, I need this,” he growled as he reached up with his hooves and did something to the front of my collar. To my amazement, it fell right off. I blinked at him, feeling overwhelmed. Too much shit was happening right now, and it felt like my brain had gotten whiplash trying to determine what to feel. He looked right into my eyes, though, and said softly, “We still need a talk. So live long enough for that.” Then he smiled at me. “Plan Boom.”

So, there was a plan? “Um, yeah,” I muttered, looking up at Deus, wondering how the hell I was going to beat him.

“Well this is just too pathetic for words, so…” He swung the barrels down towards the two pale unicorns. “First, the distractions!”

“Stay away from my sisters, you metal son of a bitch!” Taurus shouted as he backed away, then gritted his teeth around his rifle’s handle and, kicking through the rubble, expertly fired shot after shot at the massive Reaper above us. Our eyes met, both of us mirroring the other’s apology. This was his way to make it up to me. This was my chance to make it up to him; I’d killed his sister, the least I could do was see to it that she wasn’t blasted for the sadist’s amusement. The rifle was loaded with some kind of armor piercing rounds, and, as I scrambled up the concrete steps, I was glad to see them punching holes in the cyberpony’s side.

What I hated was how those holes didn’t seem like more than annoyances to him. He shifted his stance and swung the two cannons over to point down at the green pony. The shots echoed like thunder pouring into the remains of the building. The structure began to groan and sway as his cannons blasted Taurus with explosive shells. The large green pony couldn’t run in the debris. He couldn’t hide from the blasting explosions. So, he died.

“One done,” Deus said as I reached the level he was on, my shotgun loaded with slugs. I had no clue how I was going to stop him. I just knew I’d either do it or die trying. His eyes narrowed as he smirked. “Are you finally done running, cunt?”

"Yeah," I muttered as I looked back at him across the beams and walls that crossed the void beneath us. "You're not afraid you're going to blow this up?" I asked, lifting my PipBuck as I glanced down at P-21 working on something. Glad one of us had a plan.

"Nah. See, when you have guns like these, I don't have to hit you. I just have to hit near you." And triggered by a thought, the firing mechanism gave a loud metal click before the guns roared, and I was running as the blast took off the top of the steps in a shower of rubble. I am not the nimblest of ponies, but right now I kept my focus on blasting him with slugs and moving ahead of the clockwork explosions ripping the ruin apart behind me. I could only hope that nopony below was buried in falling rubble.

I didn't aim, I simply fired as fast as my shotgun allowed. He didn't run or dodge. The lead pancaked and fractured off his armored hide and all I could do was keep moving and keep firing and keep praying that whatever P-21 was doing would work. When I tried to sprint to point blank range, he blew the beams out ahead of me, grinning and saying something that was lost in the ringing in my ears. Worse, my legs were starting to go numb from the constant battering concussion. One misstep and he wouldn't have to shoot me.

I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't strong enough. I had to be more. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and tried to think of something. Nothing around me would be very useful, so... my inventory. I lacked explosives (and knowledge of how to use them). My shotgun was my strongest weapon, and it wasn't doing anything to Deus except amusing him. I needed... what I shouldn't use. I had them; Glory hadn't taken them from me. I could use them. I knew it was wrong and stupid. It was going to get me killed... but then, so was Mr. Cyberpony's shooting spree. I had to do better. I had to talk to P-21. I had to make this better for Glory. I had to give Mini some peace before she died. I had to.

Buck. Rage. Med-X. Flash. I dropped S.A.T.S., then pulled open my pack as I kept dodging. I chewed and injected like a fiend, trying to close the distance at the same time. Damn me... it felt good. When the Flash hit my system, the world crawled to a halt. It was almost like I was back in S.A.T.S., but I could still move. When the drug wore off, Deus found me in his face. Or rather, my shotgun in his face. I fired four S.A.T.S. guided rounds at point blank range... and a little shield popped up on my E.F.S. with each. Even now, he was

too tough for my weapons to touch.

I didn't give a shit. For all his pistons and steel, he was still a pony and I forced my way underneath him. "Gonna give me a blow job?" he laughed as he smashed my shotgun with one hoof. It would be his last laugh.

Then he screamed. I had a feeling that he had never screamed like *that* before. I prayed to the Goddesses that this was one injury, no matter how superficial, that he couldn't regenerate or heal. With my final, extremely satisfying magic shot, I gelded God.

All sadistic banter went away as he stomped and kicked wildly. To stay underneath him was to be rendered into bloody paste. I hooked my hooves around the ammo feed to one of his guns and was jerked out from under him, flipping onto his back. All I could do was hang on for dear life, biting into his mane to keep from slipping off as he reared and kicked in a frenzy of his own. One swing would have tossed me out over the edge if not for my hoof being caught in his ammo feed. Finally, he managed to get his teeth on my mane and pull. I felt my flesh tear, but more terrifying was that I was yanked off his back and thrown into the interior of the groaning building.

By pure luck I slammed into a metal pipe and wrapped my hooves around it desperately, dangling over the jagged floor two stories down. I looked up at Deus, my neck throbbing despite the painkillers, as he stared at me with maddened eyes. He wasn't going to shoot near me. He was going to render me into bloody vapor and fuck EC-1101. Looking at the ruin between his hindquarters, I couldn't blame him.

Then a white unicorn ghost floated in front of him with a slave collar stuffed with dynamite on her left and a detonator on her right. "Gem! No!" I screamed as she went solid, bit the end of the duct tape, and pulled it off the glowing detonator as she began to fall.

The explosion blew me right off the pipe. I hit a landing on the concrete stairs, then flopped down the steps limply like a doll.

I had thought that I'd heard Deus scream before. I was wrong. Rearing up on his hind legs, the flayed Reaper's mechanical mouth gaped, forcing a shattered jaw to stretch impossibly wide. An articulated metal windpipe released that horrible noise as flaps of skin dangled from him. Broken pieces of skull clung to an armored sphere that was still horribly attached to his mechanical spine. The bilious fluids pouring from the tubes along his throat and chest

oozed and steamed in the rain. And he still wasn't dead.

One red eye-camera focused right on me, and he pointed his cannons at my prostrate form. "Cunnnnntzzzzzz…" an electronic speaker crackled. The cannons' firing mechanism clicked... the cannons, the barrels of which were now fouled from the blast and his mad thrashing, backfired.

The explosion of the shells tore his cybernetic body in two. The magazines went off a second later, and with that the exterior corner of the wall gave way, tumbling outward as the ruined stone collapsed like a house of cards. Sections of the other walls followed it down, and it was only by luck that we weren't crushed.

Good and bad luck.

I looked to P-21 and the still trembling Glory. Both alright…No. Not alright. None of us were alright. But we were alive.

And so was Mini.

Slowly, I made my way towards where she was still breathing shallow little gulps. I floated out Cupcake's revolver. "Mini…" I said quietly, though with the ringing in my ears everything felt quiet. I was numb from horn to hoof.

"Hey." She gave a shaky smile. "It's the Security pony…" she said quietly as she hung there. "Where're Gem and Taurus? She had to go... "

I looked over at one of the rubble heaps and the motionless green head poking out of it. "They…they left. They got away." *Please, if there is any goddess in all of Equestria, let her believe me.* "They're both…just fine…"

"That's good. Gem does silly things without me," she said quietly as she looked at me, red eyes just like my own, crying just like my own, as her lips trembled. I wasn't that good a liar. Were it not for the mane, I might have been looking into a mirror as she asked, "Are…are you going to finish it?"

I couldn't say it. I could only nod as my eyes blurred with tears.

Her lips smiled as she whispered, "Thank you."

I wrapped my hooves around her, hugging her as I levitated the gun up under her chin.

'Pull the trigger. Pull the trigger. Pull the Goddesses-damned trigger. Damn it, you bony son of a bitch, let me be able to do this!' I sobbed as I held her, shaking as I poured everything I could into this. Five pounds of pressure was all I needed. '*Pull the motherfucking trigger, Blackjack. Do it! Do it! Please, for the love of Celestia, do it!'* I begged

myself.

"I'm sorry." I sobbed, gritting my teeth together. Clenching my eyes closed. Wishing it was my head that the gun was pressed against.

Mini just laughed softly. "You're a good pony, Miss Blackjack." I felt a second unicorn's magic on the gun.

One last gunshot sounded out across Flank.

* * *

The mournful tones of a cello came from my PipBuck and filled the rainy night alongside the slow, heavy notes of a piano. The hushing sigh of rain pattering over the rubble around us complemented the sorrowful music. Looking at the clouds, I was too dead within to care about that sensation of being swallowed by the sky. I wanted it to swallow me. Send me to the stars.

It was over. If there was anypony still after me, they were dead or had fled. I couldn't care which. I felt hollow inside, and the only hint that I wasn't just another corpse littering the Wasteland was my Buck-withdrawn heart thudding in my chest. I sat under an overhang on the edge of the Exchange, looking out at the pouring rain. I was alive. Deus was dead. Another fucking win…

Yay.

Glory only pulled herself together enough to take off the black Enclave uniform and toss it over the edge. She looked like she wanted to follow it. Instead, she just curled up out of the rain beside me, staring into the gray downpour.

Rampage had jumped up to us. I was so numb, I didn't care how she did it. "Congratulations. You're a Reaper now. If you want it." Even with the rain, the striped pony looked like she'd been put through a meat grinder. I couldn't think of how many she'd killed below. I didn't want to care about ponies trying to kill me anymore. I just wanted to burn that part out of me.

It'd be easier to rip out my own heart. "Is it worth it?" I asked as the cold water dripped into my eyes.

She didn't answer right away. "Not really, but it's better than being alone," she said as she gazed out at the rain with a distant, sad expression. Finally she sighed and muttered, "Fuck, I hate this maudlin shit." She stood. "I'm going to go wait for 69 to open. I need... something... bad." She hopped down from three stories, then

walked down a road strewn with dismembered corpses.

P-21 slowly trotted over and lay down beside me. I floated Cupcake's revolver to him and laid it at his hooves. "Here. You deserve this," I muttered quietly as the rain poured over me.

"What's this for?" he asked softly, nudging it with his hoof.

"Justice," was all I said. He looked at me and then nodded once. He reached down and took it into his mouth, teeth tightening on the handle. Slowly, he pointed it at me. Smears of Mini's blood still glistened on the end. I wondered if it would hurt. I hoped so. I deserved for it to hurt.

Then he tossed the gun out into the street below.

I looked down after it, seeing the dull metal flickering in the remaining neon lights. "Why?" was all I could ask. "After what I did to you…"

"I don't blame you for Stable 99," he said softly. "Not anymore. For a while I did…but…if we were there right now, would you put yourself on the breeding queue?" I shook my head dumbly. "Would you blow away the Overmare and anypony that tried to keep that sick place going?" I nodded and he let out a breath.

"Then for Stable 99, I can forgive you," he said simply.

I closed my eyes. "And for U-20?" I felt him stiffen beside me, sucking in a breath. "You loved him. You loved him and I beat him to death in front of you."

The longest silence yet was followed by a quiet, "No. Not for that." I closed my eyes, imagining that the dead weight in my chest was whatever was left of my heart.

"Then why not kill me? Why didn't you kill me when we first escaped? Or after I killed Scoodle? Or…or any of the other times?" I asked at I stared at him.

"I wanted to. I still want to…a little. And I don't think that will ever go away. I still see it. Still feel it. And no matter what, that murder and Stable 99 are part of me," he said as he bowed his head. Then he looked at me. "But for as long as I've known you, I've known you're something special. You could have killed both of us out of spite. Out of sadistic glee; I know Daisy would have. You could have let Daisy take me. You could have left me for Deus when we fled 99. You could have killed Scoodle and blamed *her* for her death. You could have left the killing of forty psychotic foals up to me or Glory. You just fought the scariest fucking monster in the Wasteland while trying to defend three ponies that were out to kill

you, Blackjack!

"Time and time again the Wasteland gives you the easier path and you refuse to take it. You could have just given EC-1101 over. You could have not cared about 99. You could have just left me to die. Or the Crusaders. Or Glory. You take the hard road no matter how damn much it hurts you, and I can only watch in awe that you keep walking it. And every time I think you're going to do what's wrong and easy, you surprise me. I couldn't do it. I would have cut a deal the second I was alone outside 99. But you're sticking it out, trying to find out what makes the damned thing so important.

"You walk the hard road, Blackjack. And sorry, but you deserve this." I clenched my eyes shut.

He hugged me. He actually hugged me. At that point, everything fell apart in broken sobbing as the assorted fucked up emotions filled up that great big hollowness within me and poured forth. And I felt Glory silently lay down beside me as well, holding me in her hooves. I pressed my face into the wet concrete. I may not have been forgiven, but I was at least cared for.

I wasn't alone on this hard road…

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Action Mare (level one)– You know your targeting spell like the back of your hoof, making you about 20% cooler in combat. For each level of this perk, you gain +15 action points in S.A.T.S.

Skills Note: Melee (100)

Volume 2: Blood and Stars

Chapter 17: Identity

"It's all secrets and lies with those ponies!!"

I'm starting to wonder: am I still Blackjack? Sure. My cutie mark is the same queen and ace. I have the same security barding, modified and very patched up though it is. I'm still not the smartest pony and I have a terrifying habit of stringing together half-baked ideas on the fly and calling them a plan. I'm still as mule-headed as ever; that will never change.

But since I've left the stable, I've killed ponies. I did that before, too, only I painted it with colorful euphemisms like 'taking out of service' and 'defending myself to their death'. Now, I just killed, plain and simple, with shotgun and carbine and fire axe and my bare hooves if I needed to. I was also more concerned with survival. In Stable 99, everypony knew that the stable was one hard sneeze from failure. Now I had ponies that would kill me for bottlecaps. Heck, even the very land itself would kill me. There was already a time bomb inside me that might finish me, or maybe mutate me and *then* kill me.

Still, at least spending most of my time almost dead made the few poor bits I had left feel a lot better. Relatively.

There have been changes in me, too. I think a little more. I know that I'm still not a smart pony, though. I just don't know things. I don't pick up on them as I should. I can shoot things and hit things and that's about it.

I find that I care a little more. It's funny to think of myself as less callous outside the stable than inside it, but it's true. I feel bad for ponies who are trying to kill me; how crazy is that? They're trying to kill me, and I feel bad for them about it.

...Maybe it's not that I'm changing. Maybe I'm just realizing that the pony who lived in that stable wasn't who I thought she was. But if she wasn't... then just who is she?

* * *

It would take us a while to get down from the top of the Exchange. Walking wasn't the problem; my legs were strong enough, and Deus's final moments had knocked down so much of the walls that we had plenty of slopes we could scramble down. The problem was simply summoning up the will to stand and make our way to the streets below. While I kept staring out at the rain P-21, ever practical, went to dig out Taurus and check his belongings. I couldn't fault him for that; some scavenger would come by sooner or later for them. The duffel bag carried a few missiles and a few dozen rounds for his hunting rifle.

I had to admit, that rifle was a beautiful weapon. The stock was made of well-worn and oiled tan wood with a brand of a bull on the stock. The action slid like silk, with only the softest rasp, and the scope was cleaner and truer than my assault carbine. I ejected the clip, looking at the armor piercing rounds that had tried to bring down the technomagical monster and failed. I'd done no better. In the end, it was P-21's bomb and Gem's sacrifice that had mortally crippled Deus, and his own weapons that had finished him.

I had so many reasons to be happy for his death, so why wasn't I? I doubted that any bounty hunters would be after me now that he'd been finished off. Heck, technically this made me a Reaper. Nopony would mess with me now, right? He'd violated my stable and made my life a living hell with the price he'd placed on my head. He'd threatened my friends and mocked a mortally wounded Mini. So why wasn't I dancing in the street right now and singing 'ding, dong, the Deus is dead!'?

"I dunno," answered the old pale horse sitting beside me on the ledge, slowly working the cards between his hooves as he looked at me with his sad, milky old eyes.

"Shut up. I'm in no mood for crazy right now," I said softly as I closed my eyes.

"I reckon not, but here I am," he chuckled.

I rubbed my eyes, then glanced over at him again. The cards hissed softly between his hooves. "What is this supposed to accomplish? I get it. Taint is driving me nuts. So what's with all the spooky little card metaphors?"

He just smiled and shook his head. "Oh, well, us hallucinations need to do something to keep things interesting. Otherwise, some

ponies just don't think," he said as he dealt five cards to me and five to himself. "*You* know why you're not happy, don't you? Deus wasn't exactly the brains of the operation, was he?"

Don't look…don't look. "No. Sanguine, and whoever is employing him." I sighed. He'd told me to listen to the recordings and I had.

The cards were right in front of me; I couldn't help myself. I slowly picked them up, looking at the spread. I didn't have any idea what game we were playing now. A pink mare with a curly mane was balancing on a ball on the edge of a cliff, a cupcake on one hoof and a present on the other. A white alicorn grasping a pair of scales with a sad expression. A pair of red eyes peeking out of a cage of nine swords. An empty bottle of Wild Pegasus with eight upside-down shot glasses on a bar with a mare silhouetted in a doorway. A purple mare hanging by her rear hoof from a rusted street light.

"I think I got a flush," I muttered, glancing at him. "Why can't my fucking broken brain just play things straight for once?"

"You tell me. It's your brain," the old buck chuckled as he put down his spread next to mine. A moon overlooked by a sad young black alicorn. A handsome unicorn buck smiling, his mane and horn bright yellow. The black towers of Hoofington wreathed in green light. Six swords piercing the clouds with upturned blades. A yellow pegasus with long, beautiful pink hair sitting before a pool and hugging a strange little blue and green ball in her hooves. I couldn't tell if the card was upside down or not.

"I'm sure that this is all fascinating and chock-full of meaning and mystery, but you should know that I'm not a smart pony. I don't get stuff like this." I sighed, closing my eyes. "I don't understand anything anymore. Why can't I do anything? I can't protect Glory. I can't make everything right with P-21. I can't understand Rampage. I can't even be happy that one of my enemies is dead." I slowly lay back, rubbing my face with my hooves. "And to top it all off, I'm having conversations with crazy hallucinations that give me mysterious, creepy cards."

"Blackjack?" Glory asked softly, "Who are you talking to?"

"Just myself, Glory." I sighed, looking over and seeing that he was gone. I sat up and looked at her again. Her eyes were dull and lost. What could I ask? 'Are you okay?' Of course she wasn't. 'How are you feeling?' She was miserable. Finally, I sighed, stood, and walked to her. "What can I do to help, Glory?"

"You can't call me that anymore," she replied softly.

I closed my eyes, wishing that I could turn her elder sibling into a feather duster. “You don’t have to listen to her, Glory.”

“I have four sisters, Blackjack,” she said. “Dusk is the oldest. Then Moonshadow. Then me. Lucent and Lambent are younger. My father lives on his pension through the Enclave. Dusk is an Enclave security officer. Moonshadow is in research. Lu and Lamb are in Enclave schools. Do you know what a family member turning Dashite will do to them?” she asked. I shook my head dumbly. “My father will be forced to disown me publicly. Maybe he already has. Otherwise, he loses his home, his income, everything. My family would be forced to live on some feral cloud near the Everfree Forest, or worse, come down here to survive! Moonshadow might have been bumped from whatever project she’s working on. And I know the kind of trouble Lu and Lamb are getting from their classmates.”

“How can they do that? How can the Enclave betray you but be so hard on pegasi strong enough to walk away from that?”

“Walking away isn’t strong!” she snapped back at me. “Sticking it out, backing your fellow pegasi, doing what must be done…that’s strength,” she said firmly. “The Enclave didn’t betray me; Lighthooves did. And every single time some pegasus goes Dashite they completely destroy everything Rainbow Dash wanted to do. Like they decided to drop her loyalty and courage and become the greatest egotists of the pegasi.

“There was one a few years back, a real high profile case. Deadshot Calamity. A legend in the security forces, the kind of pony who could have really forced the council to engage with the surface. He gets an audience in front of the pegasus council. Does he call for opening contact with the surface? No. Does he say we should trade food and medicine to the surface? No. Instead, he spends half an hour calling the entire council cowards, featherbrains, and negligent murderers. Then, when his wing went looking for him to beg him to reconsider, he killed them!” she shouted and stamped her hooves. “That featherbrained idiot almost singlehoofedly destroyed ten years of work getting the Volunteer Corps established!

“So I know just how damaging what Lighthooves did was. And every time there’s a report mentioning ‘the Dashite Morning Glory’, Dusk’s career falls a little more behind. Every time a news release talks about Dashites, Lambent and Lucent will suffer the mutters

and glares of their classmates. The only way my family gets to have any real peace is if I'm dead. Dusk gave me a choice: die for pretend or die for real."

"Your own sister would kill you?" The idea chilled me; it was like me killing Mom.

"She was going to before you stopped her," Morning Glory replied softly. "But she gave me a choice instead, and that was generous of her."

"So you're giving up?"

"Of course I'm not giving up. I have to find some way to stop Lighthooves and expose him and what he's doing. Not because he wronged me, but because he wronged the Enclave! I can't believe that he's operating with the blessing of the pegasus council. And if I can prove my loyalty and clear my name, then maybe I can be Morning Glory again." She sat up and sighed. "Till then, I'll have to be somepony else," she said as she stood, looking out at the drizzling rain.

"Morning Glory…" I said softly, looking at her. At her burned-away cutie mark and that pale brand on her flank. Did losing your cutie mark change you? Had it changed P-21, or was there a unique mark underneath the spell 99 had put on his flanks?

"Fallen Glory," she corrected quietly. Then she looked at me with a sad smile as the rain dripped off her purple mane. "I think it's a Dashite-esque enough name. And besides, you can still call me Glory. You and P-21 are the only ones that really do."

"Glory…you don't have to do this," I whispered, looking into her hurt eyes. Just like Mini's. I couldn't shake the thought that this was some kind of suicide, bloodless but no less wrong.

Her lips trembled as she closed her eyes. "It's better this way. What did I have left that was Morning Glory's, anyway? My career and reputation are gone, my family is ruined, my sister wants to kill me, and I don't even have my…" She clenched her eyes and teeth in a hiss of pain. I couldn't tell what was rain and what was tears anymore. She drew a shaky breath. "All I have are my friends. That's more important to me than any name." Her round, wet eyes stared up at me, begging me to accept it. Accept her.

What could I do? Everything about this felt wrong…but…I put my hooves around her and murmured, "If this is what you really want, Fallen…" She gave a little sob; it wasn't, but it was what she thought she had to do.

When she stopped crying, I took a deep breath and gave her a look of stoic determination. “I also have to confess something. A grave and dark secret from my past. Something I’ve not told anypony…” I said, watching her eyes get round as she braced herself. I took a deep breath. “My name…The secret, true name of the Security Mare…is…Go Fish.”

She blinked at me in confusion, and then I let out a snirk and curled my lips in a smile. She let out a hiccupping little giggle. Then another one. Finally we both broke out in laughter. “I guess you had a really big aquarium in 99, huh?” she said as she gasped for air.

I just smiled and nuzzled her forehead. She didn’t get the joke; she was still my Glory, no matter her name.

* * *

When Stable 89 opened its doors, they found me in the tub. Despite being battered and banged and bloody, the cast iron tub in the middle of the street proved surprisingly comfortable as I lay back and occasionally refilled it with water from a nearby down spout. The cute little security mares poked their heads out of the parking garage and stared at the bodies filling the street and the rubble of the top floors of the Exchange. I raised my almost empty bottle of Wild Pegasus at them. “Hey,” I called out with a nice, inebriated smile. They disappeared back inside.

“I say something wrong?” I asked P-21 as he came limping up with his duffel bag. With a pull I emptied the bottle.

“Eh. Probably didn’t expect us to hang around,” P-21 said as he set the bag down and unzipped it. “No honor in the Wasteland, it seems. Anypony who wasn’t killed stripped most of the good gear before running. Still, I found a few with some useful things.” He scooped up two hooffuls of bullets.

“Ugh…nine millimeter and twenty gauge shells,” I muttered as I pawed my hoof through the collection of ammo. Still, maybe we could sell or exchange them for something more substantial. I wanted some more clips for the hunting rifle. “Automatic pistols. Revolvers. Oooh!” I said, sitting up. “An IF-33 Applebuck!” I picked out the weapon and immediately drew back the slide. “Twelve point seven millimeter rounds. Semi-automatic firing. Seven round clip.” I pointed it away from anypony and gave a small frown.

“Been through the wash a few times, though. Let me guess. No more twelve point seven?”

“Ask your PipBuck. I just collect the bullets. Those are short. Those are long. Those are round and plastic. That’s about all I can do,” he said with a smirk.

“Right, sorry,” I said.

“And a dozen sticks of dynamite. Some frag grenades. A few landmines. This,” he said as he pulled out a half-full bottle of whiskey.

“Ooooo, gimmie!” I said with a grin, holding out my hooves. “You are a gentlecolt and a scholar.” I said as I swirled the contents and took a pull. Letting out a sigh, I sang in whatever key I stumbled into, “Oh rain may fall and the wind might blow, the earth could quake or clouds bury us in snow, but as bad as they are there’s one thing I know…with friends and whiskey is how I plan to goooooo!”

He winced. “Blackjack, that was terrible!”

“You’re just jealous that I am a mare of many hidden talents,” I said primly.

“I also found this,” he said as he pulled out the dark, wickedly curved claw.

“My dragon claw!” I said gleefully, giving him a hug and licking his cheek. I have to admit, I have never seen a buck that stiff before. I could have used him as a hoofball bat!

He shoved me off, looking confused. “*Your* dragon claw?” he asked, scrubbing where I’d licked.

I lifted it with my magic and inspected it. Still harder and sharper than anything else I’d ever encountered. “I picked it up in a museum and dropped it on the way here. I thought it was gone forever.” I lay back in the tub and took a pull off the bottle. “I might actually get laid if my luck keeps going this way.”

He coughed and flushed a little as he looked away. “And to firmly change the subject off your reproductive organs…why did Glory burst into tears when I called her Morning Glory?”

I sighed and slumped, my muzzle dipping underwater to blow bubbles a moment before I rose and explained, “Glory wants us to call her Fallen Glory now. I don’t get it. It’s like…she’s willing to die just so she doesn’t inconvenience others. Just don’t get it.” Then I looked at him sharply and took a slow pull of the amber fluid. “What about you?”

“What about me?” he asked in confusion.

"Ever think about changing your name? P-21…you could name yourself…ummm…Boomer. The Blue Bomb! Maybe see if Scalpel can remove that…whatever it is on your butt so we can see your real cutie mark under it," I said as I gave him a smile.

He sighed and shook his head. "No."

"All my friends keep sighing and telling me that," I grumbled as I narrowed my eyes with a pout, "Why can't they ever say 'Oh yes, Blackjack, you're so right. Brilliant, in fact!'" I tilted my head back, looking up at the sky and too drunk to care about my stomach falling up. The rain had actually let up a bit. "It'd be so refreshing."

"I've thought about it," he replied and then quickly added, "The name thing, not the brilliant thing." Oh, thanks, P-21. Just crush my hopes. Crush them like a tiny crushable thing that is easily crushed…like…meh. I blew a raspberry at him.

"Some bucks think about names in 99…who we'd be if we could be somepony else. Our names. Our cutie marks." He hooked his hooves on the edge of the tub and rested his chin upon them. "Fact is, I like being P-21. I like that I'm the buck they were supposed to kill but couldn't. I can't forget 99. It's a part of me. So I might as well take some strength from it."

I pursed my lips and tapped his forehead. "You think too much. How abouts you take some of my fun, and I take some of your smarts, and then we'll be…like…unstoppable!" I said with a laugh.

The stable security mares peeked out at us. I gave them a sardonic grin and they disappeared once again. "Ugh…why do they keep doing that?"

"No idea," he said with a chuckle. "But one little piece of advice: when most ponies take a bath, they take their barding off first." He trotted off to check for more salvage.

I blinked and then leaned over the edge of the tub, shouting after him, "Most ponies haven't been shot at as much as I have! I've got a bounty on my head, you know! My head is worth thousands of caps!" I leaned further and further out as I waved my hoof at him. "How much is your head worth, huh?" And with that I was refamiliarized with the concept of balance as the legless bathtub overturned and sent me sloshing across the crumbling asphalt. The mares by the parking garage just stared in shock.

"I have a very very valuable head," I muttered to the sky.

* * *

A few hours later, after a soggy nap in the street, I was dry and miserable as my treacherous body metabolized the alcohol, dehydrated my tissues, and gave me the sensation of having been kicked upside my dumb head. I knew this because Glory had told me in clinical detail what my body was doing to make me feel so miserable. Of course, my head throbbed far too badly to care. Hah! Take that, smart ponies! The fact that I was still feeling shaky after the chems I'd taken to fight Deus didn't help much.

We were gathered in the lounge of Stable 89, alone save for the barpony who was mixing up something she called 'The Price'. She trotted over with a tray carrying a shot glass and a large bottle of orange fluid. "Here you go. Fix you right up."

"Are you sure we can't go back to Scalpel's clinic?" I muttered, looking at the glass. It was filled with some kind of red fluid with a raw egg on top and some sort of reddish-brown... stuff sprinkled all over it. "It smells like butt. It's gonna taste like butt, too."

When I'd visited the clinic, Scalpel had just given me a look that said 'This isn't chem withdrawal, this is taint eating your heart. STOP HELPING IT,' and tossed me out on the street. She was very good at giving looks like that.

"She has a standing policy of not treating hangovers," Barpony said brightly. She had the most bizarre cutie mark I'd ever seen or imagined: a hodgepodge of a balloon, streamers, glitter, a shot glass, a tiny wrapped present, and a mare's outline, all crammed onto her butt. "You drink this one first," she said, pointing to the shot. "Then you drink from the bottle before you throw up. It helps if you pinch your nose shut."

I rose to my hooves with a lurch. "I'm going to Scalpel's. I'll pay her double." Glory and P-21 pushed me back down, ignoring my whining.

"She's dealing with injured ponies now," P-21 said firmly. "You're not injured. Drink."

I sighed and lifted the shot glass. "When I throw up, I'm aiming for you," I warned him, then downed the spicy, slimy, egg-y, salty, tomato-y concoction in one go. There was definitely a greasy sense of something trying to crawl back up my throat. Then I blinked as P-21 started to shy away. I held the shot glass out to Barpony. "Not bad. Can I have another?"

"And thus her legend grows," Rampage said with a snicker. I'd no

idea what she'd done to improve her mood, but I hoped it hadn't involved maiming. The barkeep with the peach coat looked at me with a surprised smile, then went to mix me another while I drank the orangey-tasting liquid. I had to admit, when I finished it off, I was feeling a bit better.

"What I want to know is where Caprice is after all this! Because I got to tell her that her security stinks. This place might be a lot more fun than Megamart, but I can't believe her only defense was two gates and a bunch of mares who were completely outgunned!" I gave a scornful sniff, then noticed that everypony was looking at me funny; what, were my eyes glowing again?

"Blackjack, I'm pretty sure that that fight last night involved five to ten percent of the entire population of the Hoof. Deus rounded up dozens of ponies hunting you and the Pecos called in favors to get three other gangs to join in. I don't think even Bottlecap's turrets or Gun could have stopped it," P-21 pointed out.

I snorted and shook my head. "Don't use your fancy mathematics to muddle the issue! If Flank had some decent defenses, neither Deus nor the Pecos would have tried storming it. It wouldn't matter if they could. They'd have gone 'Nuh-uh. I don't want turret death beams turning me inside out. We'll hide and ambush Security when she comes running for the hills!' and last night would never have happened."

"You wouldn't believe how often I hear that one," Barpony replied as she brought me three more 'Prices'. I gulped down the first. Glory gave one of the glasses a sniff and immediately looked like she was about to be sick. "So what do you suggest? What would make Flank safer?" She'd also brought me some more of the orange-flavored water; it was kinda like RadAway but not as tasty.

I lifted the empty shot glass with my magic and spun it as I tried to think. "First off, one of the best things Bottlecap has are those turrets. Just knowing that they're there probably cuts off a lot of problems. You've got six buildings that would give you an excellent field of fire on the ground. You'd just have to get the turrets, install them, and make sure that every guest knows that doing something stupid gets them shot."

Glory rubbed her nose as I sipped the water. "It shouldn't be that hard. A turret is basically a gun, a frame, a spark battery, and a targeting talisman. If there's any place around here with robots or military weapons, we should find most of what we need."

"The second thing is this place's defenses. One gate is hard enough to defend, but two is a real nightmare. Stables have one door for a reason," I said with a frown as I stirred the contents of the second shot glass with my magic. "Also, that chain link fence might keep some ponies in and out, but the Pecos just blew a nice big hole in the wall and Deus walked right through it. You need something sturdier. Stacked rubble at least. Wagon frames. And then something to keep ponies away except for where you want them. Landmines, maybe."

"Landmines aren't hard to set up," P-21 said, looking a touch green as I gulped down the second shot and swished it in my mouth, "But you'd need a lot of them. You'd also want to secure them so that a unicorn can't just disarm them with their magic." The slimy consistency was a little bit seminal, but not that bad. Had to admit, I loved the spicy bite! I gulped it down and watched him shiver.

"How do you do that?" I asked, curious.

"Drill a hole in the bottom and attach a wire to the detonator. Unicorn sees the mine, disarms its detonation tab, picks it up, wire rearms the mine and boom." Okay. I'd be letting P-21 handle any mines I happened to come across. "The real problem is moving rubble around to make a decent barrier."

"Pffft," Rampage snorted. "It's not like any of those slabs off the Exchange are heavy. Pass out some Buck and some booze and get working. Be cleared away by suppertime." She reached over and grabbed the third shot, sniffing it skeptically.

Barpony looked at the four of us oddly as she said, "Yes, that would be very helpful but... "

"But," I finished for her, "It won't mean a thing if Caprice can't get some decent security ponies in place. I don't blame them for not being able to stop both those bunches, but I do blame them for running. *You* were braver than they were." Barpony closed her mouth, just blinking in shock. "They need some adequate weapons training. They need to be confident that they can handle risks and deal with problems. I saw the security ponies when we were leaving Rooms; they were just standing around and didn't know what to do."

The peach-coated mare just looked from one of us to the next. "Yes, that would all be wonderful, but…don't you three have something more important to do?"

I blinked. To be honest, the last couple of days had involved

running, fighting, running some more, and fighting some more with interspersed breaks of gloom and depression. Still, she had a point. I had to find this Caprice... assuming she hadn't just abandoned Flank, in which case I was going to hand everything over to Barpony and get my caps to pay for decoding EC-1101 from *her*. But for the first time in almost a week, I had something I wanted to do instead of something I had to do.

"You know what?" I slapped my hooves on the tabletop before me. "No, I don't. Call it a working vacation. This is the first big slice of civilization I've seen in a while, and if I can make it secure, then I will."

"But…you haven't even discussed payment…" the peach mare stammered as Rampage downed the shot. I wasn't exactly sure what I saw in Barpony's eyes.

I just shrugged. "I don't care about that. I just want to do something for a change that doesn't involve me running for my life or killing somepony. Caprice can pay me whatever is fair when she decides to show herself," I said with a scowl as I looked around the brothel. "Honestly, where is she? I can't believe she's still hiding! Or did she run?" The peach mare just blinked at me as if she thought I was joking or something.

Glory looked at me with a worried little smile as she said, "Blackjack, Caprice is--"

Unfortunately, that was the moment that Rampage's stomach decided that it didn't like The Price and that the drink should be returned. The rest of the stomach's contents, in a show of solidarity, decided to follow it out. Vast quantities of semi-digested meat splashed over P-21's back and he froze in place, twitching. The striped pony scrubbed her mouth with the back of her hoof. "That's disgusting! How the hell did you swallow three of those?!" she said as she pushed a hoofful of Mint-als into her mouth and chewed vigorously.

P-21's bright blue glare cut back over his shoulder at Rampage, promising explosive retribution.

I staggered back and then rose to my hooves, waving a forehoof at the stench. "Well…I guess that's that. Why don't I meet with her security in an hour or two in the parking garage? See if Caprice will spring for the parts Glory needs in the Exchange. And…um…get a mop?" I suggested.

"Good idea," Barpony said, still finding something about the

conversation funny. “Why don’t you use room B-10 in the living quarters while I show P-21 to the shower? Eat something and finish freshening up. I know Caprice won’t mind. I’ll pass on the message to the security ponies to get ready.”

“Good,” I replied with a nod. My head still wasn’t quite over my last bout of inebriation. “And let Caprice know that I really want to meet with her, okay? For one thing, I still need to get paid for these contracts.” I looked around in concern; everypony was looking at me oddly again. Well, except P-21; he was looking at vomit.

“What?” I insisted.

Glory just sighed, shaking her head with a smile. “Just... never mind... ”

* * *

I had to admit, Stable 89’s layout was a lot different than 99’s. For one, it was cleaner, with brighter light and no faint tang of mold and leaking sewage. Since Stable 89 was apparently designed for eggheads, there was lab equipment in every room. I passed numerous storage rooms with shelves holding all kinds of chemicals and arcane science materials in jars and containers. In contrast, their security station was barely larger than a closet, and I couldn’t even see a sign for an armory.

I could only guess that when Stable 89 had been taken over, the lack of facilities translated to a lack of security. In 99, Security had an entire *floor* to ourselves. A room for baton training and target practice, a jail for detention and interrogation. Either Stable-Tec had assumed that a bunch of scientists wouldn’t need law enforcement, or it was a pretty severe oversight.

The living quarters were divided into sectors A, B, and C; I supposed it was an egghead thing. A was dedicated to sexing, but it seemed like the other two were for the ponies living and working here. I found B-10 and stepped in, wondering if all the living quarters were unlocked, if Caprice had already set it aside, or if the security clearance in my PipBuck opened it up even though it was for another stable. It didn’t really matter. Aside from an alcove with a work table in one corner, I might as well have been home.

Home. After everything with P-21, I’d thought that Stable 99 would be branded a horrible nightmare, and it was. Yet seeing this neat little steel can, I had to admit that I felt a pang of longing for that hole in the ground. I wanted to play cards with Rivets. I wanted to

try and tease Midnight into my bed…oh Goddesses, how I needed somepony in my bed! I missed Mom telling me what to do. It was dull and thoughtless and monstrous, but it had been my life.

I flopped down on the bed, feeling odd little twinges in my horn and head. Hangover? Taint? Both? "Ugh…I can just imagine what Mom would say: 'Blackjack, you're neglecting your duties and yourself.'" I sighed as I rolled onto my back, loving that wonderful familiar mass-produced Stable-Tec mattress. You sleep on one and you've slept on them all.

Funny thing was that the idea of helping Flank be safer just seemed good to me. I might have first thought of it as some kind of drug den, but having been here and experienced the joy of eating new food, or the music in Mixers, or even the thought of sex in 'Stable 69', I felt that the Wasteland needed Flank. Something to look forward to. Something to want that was more than mere survival. I just hoped Caprice wasn't a complete tool when I finished setting up security; ugh, I was helping this mare, and she couldn't even shake my hoof with a thank you?

…Crap, now I was starting to get bored. In fact, technically I was waiting, which was worse than just boredom.

I still had that other memory orb from Miramare…

"No! Fuck no!" I said as I sat up and smacked my temples with both forehooves. "No more orbs, brain. They are *not* healthy for you. They make you sad, or make me wake up all alone, or wearing a bomb! So no orbs!" Then I blinked and rubbed my face as I realized that the idea hadn't gone away. "If I use one I'll wake up…I dunno…with a tattoo, or two centuries from now, or pregnant, or something!"

I looked over at my saddlebags. Tick…tick…tick…I let out a long sigh of disgust. "This is going to end badly, brain. Very badly." I floated my bags over and set them next to me. "Okay…just warning myself…this is a bad idea. Last chance to do something sensible like…sleep…masturbate…something?" Nope…still wanting to check the orb…I sighed and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Wow…no password or anything? Refreshing…My body was… okay…those were wings…that was a…uh huh…pegasus stallion. He was wearing some kind of armor from head to hoof; not armored

barding, but actual plate armor. He had the taste of chocolate in his mouth and his nose itched terribly.

The place seemed to be some kind of fancy tent. A large display showed two train tracks and some sort of railyard. There were dozens, maybe even hundreds of train cars all lined up on the model. There were all kinds of ponies standing around looking grave and talking in low voices. My host carefully snuck out something from under his wing and, under the pretense of adjusting a strap of armor, popped an entire cupcake in his mouth.

"You keep doing that and you're not going to fit in your armor," a mare said in a soft, teasing tone. He looked over, and both our hearts stopped as we looked into the bright teal eyes of a beautiful dark alicorn. I was stunned by her beauty, and terribly embarrassed. My host choked down the cupcake in one gulp, fighting the urge to cough as he returned to attention. Then a dark wing stretched out. "Oh look. Crumbs." The softest feathers imaginable flicked them from his lips.

I'm fairly sure both my host and I could have died right at that moment.

I was used to Princess Luna being a painting on a wall or a picture in a book. The concept of Luna being sent to the moon for a millennium, only to be returned for a few years and then assuming control of Equestria, was some dry chapters in a book for me. Respectable and tragic, certainly, but she wasn't real.

Not until now. I never could have imagined Princess Luna appearing as a mare a bit older than me. That intelligent, even calculating, look in her teal eyes that seemed to take a measure of everything they looked upon. Her easy smile, friendly yet also mysterious, as if you couldn't quite be sure what she was smiling about. Nopony could have told me of the silvery luster of her dusky blue mane, like a beam of moonlight in the middle of the drab tent, nor of the delicate taper of her horn that caught the light just so and made it appear as though a star alighted on the tip when she moved. Suddenly, I was in the presence of something more, so very much more, than a worthless pony like myself. I wanted to rage at the nobles chatting softly with one another and say 'Look! Look at her! If you do what you do, then you are going to lose *this*!'

The flap of the tent opened and Princess Celestia entered. I'd heard her described as a 'ruler'; I admit, I always imagined her as an 'Overmare'. I expected something small, petty, fussy, and ruling

because the law said so.

With Celestia before me, I mentally bowed along with my host. It was reflexive; had she made a request I would have carried it out that instant. An aura of maternal kindness seemed to wash from her and touch everypony in her presence. Her rainbow mane constantly shifted in an ethereal breeze that I felt only in my imagination. In her sad gaze was a love absolute and unconditional. Nopony had ever possessed eyes like that, and none ever would again; of that I was certain.

You lost this*? YOU LOST* THIS*?! For coal and pride and fear you sacrificed* this*?* I wanted to scream at these ponies, and the princesses themselves. I wanted to show them this empty world that would follow them. No price, none, was worth the loss of these princesses. The world was less without them.

My host, however, did not move a feather. I swore his lips still tingled from Luna's playful brush, but all his attention and every sense were focused on Celestia. Celestia's own features were worried, like the sun hidden behind a wall of clouds. Luna immediately approached her. "They said no?"

Celestia took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Your Majesty, this goes beyond insult! That coal was paid for nearly two years ago. It is illegal for the zebras to halt shipments due to a…political disagreement!" a fancily dressed mare snorted in disdain.

"The Caesar remains adamant. The coal will not be released until his government can verify the legality of our claims," Celestia said softly as she looked at the models. "His representative also hinted that we should re-evaluate our own gemstone embargo."

"It's a ploy, Your Majesty. The Caesar is just using this as an excuse to extort more beneficial contractual terms in exchange for our gemstones," a unicorn buck harrumphed. "They are simply being stubborn. We can't just bend neck."

A pony wearing more businesslike attire coughed politely. "It may be moot, Your Majesty. Zebras do not need gemstones to survive. Hippocampus Energy estimates that, even after cutting back power supply to forty percent, we can only keep power going for another month. After that, Equestria will go dark."

"Somepony remind me whose great idea it was to build an infrastructure on an energy source Equestria doesn't have?" Princess Luna asked in a faintly sarcastic tone. Only Princess Celestia smiled

at the attempted humor. The rest of the ponies in the tent looked nervous.

A pegasus in fancy formal dress tapped her hooves. “Well, we have the guard here. We’re in the right. Just take the coal and let the Caesar choke on it. If their king can’t govern, why should we suffer?” Murmurs of agreement grew. Celestia simply looked sad.

Then a young voice said from the corner of the tent, “That would be a terrible idea.”

Every eye in the tent turned to a unicorn buck who seemed to realize that this was not his place to make a comment of any sort. He was the same age as me! Pale of hide and with a straw yellow mane and oddly yellow horn, his cutie mark was a yellow teardrop. I hoped it didn’t signify him wetting himself; he certainly looked like he wanted to. Yet Celestia smiled to him. “And you are?”

A handsome unicorn stallion with a compass rose on his flank glared down at the young buck and then quickly chuckled, “Oh don’t mind him, Your Majesty. He’s still learning his place.” And clearly his place was to shut the fuck up; I’d gotten plenty of looks like that from Mom.

The white unicorn with the yellow drop then pressed his lips together and stepped past the larger. “The Caesar is the protector of the zebra people. He’s not a king. He’s a protector. When the Wonderbolts extracted the hostages from the Barberry Coast, it was an insult to his ability to protect people in his lands. He has to restore his respectability.”

“Quiet, you,” the handsome buck muttered with a glare before giving a suave smile at the princesses. “Don’t mind him, Your Majesties. He spends a few years in their land and thinks himself an expert.”

“Perhaps. But I want to hear all options. Continue.” The elder unicorn looked like he’d just downed a shot of Barpony’s ‘Price’.

The yellow-maned young buck swallowed. “This Caesar…since he rose to power, he’s suffered many setbacks: monster attacks, drought, and now the hostage crisis. He needs a win, Your Majesty. Give him the gemstone concessions he wants, and when things calm down they can be renegotiated.”

The pegasus mare gave an outraged little snort. “That’s treasonous talk, putting zebra interests ahead of our own! We can simply take the coal.”

“And the Caesar will fight back. He has to. That’s his sacred duty.”

He looked around at all the assembled ponies. “I know it’ll take longer and be more difficult, but I’m sure it’ll be better than violence.” More disdainful and dismissive talk. ‘*Listen to him*,’ I wanted to scream! Then he blurted loudly, “Please, listen to me!” Apparently this broke so many rules of protocol that everyone did. “The zebras have a word for this. It’s not a fight. It’s not a battle. It’s war. They use it when their entire country faces terrible threats. Flights of dragons. Swarms of manticores. They’ve done wars before, where every zebra is drawn into the fight. And they are terrible things. Please, don’t resort to war to try and solve this problem when there are other means.”

There was a fragile, momentary pause. Then the unicorn with the compass rose on his flank gave a disdainful snort. “War. Hardly sounds serious. Let the Caesar bring his war.”

“Let him. I doubt the zebras have the stomach for a real, drawn-out battle. I give them six months before they beg us to take their dirty rocks,” a buck harrumphed.

A mare laughed. “Three months! And they’ll give us their mines too.”

“Please, they’re only striped mules. Once they face our magic and flyers they’ll cower and beg for peace. One month, at the most,” the unicorn buck with the compass rose said with a cocky little grin, earning cheers from the onlookers.

Only the business ponies, the guards, and the princesses weren’t laughing. The business ponies looked at their clipboards. “Your Majesty, I can’t talk about fighting or politics. I can only tell you that without coal our economy will come to a crashing halt. Half of Fillydelphia’s work force is on furlough. Manehattan is dark for most of the night. That’s *right now*. If we can’t get coal we won’t be able to ship food to the large cities. It’ll be more than an inconvenience. It will be a famine.” The cheers and talking died out.

Princess Celestia smiled at the assembled ponies. “If you gentleponies would please give us a moment alone?” There were mutters and talks as the aristocrats and businessponies were funneled out of the tent, leaving only the guard. Celestia looked as if she was going to cry once they’d left. “How has it come down to this? Taking what we want? Fighting? War?” Celestia rubbed her eyes. “I’d forgotten that word; it’s been so long.”

“That young buck was mistaken. It’s not a zebra word. We invented

it. When you fought me," Luna replied softly. "*Wyrre*…wasn't that how it was said back then?"

"Something like that. I also remember how much I hated it." She took a deep breath, looking at her sister. "What do you think, Luna?" Princess Celestia asked gently.

Luna sighed as well. "I don't really see us having much choice. We've been at this for months now. It's not a question of if we want to fight. We have to have the coal. We could agree to all the Caesar's demands, and it could take months to resume shipments." She looked towards the tent flaps. "I wish we'd had that young buck when this started. Who is he?"

"One of my nephew's children," Celestia replied with a disgruntled sigh. "Blueblood saddled him with some horrid name. Brandyblood?"

"Another one? And Blueblood actually brought one of his… offspring…with him to court?" Luna looked disdainfully at the tent flap. "It amazes me that any mare would let him into their bed, yet his bastards clearly show some success in that regard."

"You almost did," Celestia said with a half smile, making Luna flush before Celestia continued, "His mother was a friend and died last month. He returned for her funeral. I suggested to Blueblood that the boy might enjoy court. Bring him back from his virtual exile in the zebra lands." Celestia frowned. "Another good intention gone horribly wrong."

Luna looked sympathetic. "You couldn't have known the Caesar would take our rescue so personally."

"I should have, Luna. I've ruled for a thousand years. His father was flexible. And his grandfather. He's more in his great great grandfather's demeanor." Celestia sighed, shaking her head. "Sometimes it's so hard keeping them all straight over the centuries. I thought the rescue a simple, elegant solution. I feared delay would kill the hostages. And now…having lost the Wonderbolts…"

"The Wonderbolts saved lives at the loss of their own. Nopony can do more than that," Luna said as she put her wing around her sister. "No hope with diplomacy?"

"Negotiations have danced around in circles since then. The solution should be obvious, but for some reason we simply can't agree. They need the gems desperately; they're needed for the most potent weapons against the monsters in their lands, but we can't give in on our gemstone embargo; it's the only leverage we have."

She rubbed her eyes again. “I miss the days when my biggest concern was a snoring dragon’s smog problem or parasprites in Fillydelphia.” She gave her sister a sad smile. “Want to take over? I could do with a nice long vacation.”

Luna laughed. “Not for all the sugar cubes in Equestria. Besides, I know you’re not serious. It’ll take a lot more than this to make you quit, Tia.”

“True,” Princess Celestia said with a soft sigh. “So then, this is how it starts. I only hope the Caesar realizes how dire our need is and reconsiders.” She levitated a scroll of parchment and pen, deftly writing with the practiced ease of a thousand years. Then she coiled it up and approached my host and a unicorn guard beside him. “Take this executive command to Captain Lighthorn. He is to take custody of the coal shipments. Take care to keep casualties to an absolute minimum. Understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” the guards said in unison, the unicorn hovering the instructions as they saluted and trotted out of the tent.

“Can you believe that?” my host muttered, “Intense.”

“We don’t talk about the princesses’ business, Cupcake,” the unicorn muttered beside my host. Then she looked a touch worried. “But, yes…that was…intense.”

Outside the tents, the nobles had gathered in little herds, while off to the side Blueblood was administering a rather physical education of his own as he smacked the straw-maned young buck over and over again. “How dare you, you little embarrassment? You inconvenient little... squirt!”

The young buck cried and protected his head. “Please, Father! I only wanted to help her!”

“Don’t you dare call me that, you hear me? You have no father,” Blueblood growled.

“Cover for me,” Cupcake said as he made a swift detour. The brown pegasus thrust himself hard between Blueblood and the young buck. “Excuse me sir, but you are distressing the gentlefolk.”

Blueblood scowled down at his son and then glared at the guard before raising his snout into the air and trotting away to make his apologies. Cupcake just sighed and shook his head before looking down at the buck. “Say, are you all right? What’s your name, kid?”

He looked up at Cupcake then and I felt myself start. His eyes weren’t yellow, but a brilliant gold. Blood trickled down between them from a small gash on his brow beside his odd, metallic-gold-

colored horn. Despite his tears, his gaze was steady and held a confidence that shook me. “Thank you, I’m fine,” he said as his intense golden eyes stared into mine, “And my name is Goldenblood.”

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory, I immediately jumped to my hooves! Okay, more accurately, I fell flat on my face intending to jump to my hooves! Still, I looked around for the bounty hunter monster pony cyborg ghosts that surely had sprung upon me while in the orb. All I saw and heard was the glow of the lights and the whirr of the vent fans. And then I slowly lifted the small glowing orb. Tears trickled down my cheeks as I stared at the little cloud of light within.

Priest had tried to explain it to me; that memory orbs were more than just experiences. They were testaments, proof of the existence of ponies centuries ago that had shaped the world today. They were more than just curiosities or battles or relationships that played out in better times. They were lessons of just what we had lost and how very far we had to go to reclaim it.

I pressed the orb to my chest, holding as tightly as possible the most precious object I could imagine in all of Equestria.

* * *

Four hours later, I collapsed against the concrete rail on the top floor of the parking garage. My training session with the security mares, and I use the term because there wasn’t a single buck among them, had been an unmitigated disaster. They could shoot and they could swing a baton, but they didn’t have the attitude. “That was terrible. Just terrible. Teaching is hard.”

Below me, the cleanup of last night’s wreckage was just getting started. Slabs of the Exchange were being cut free by Morn-- by Fallen Glory’s disintegration bolts or small blasts of dynamite. Rampage and a few hardy bucks would slip into straps and start pulling. Unicorns levitated lengths of pipe under the slabs to roll them along. Smaller pieces were heaped up along the fence perimeter. It’d take a while, but with everypony working together, at least the foundations would be laid. Apparently, Caprice had told

all the visiting bucks that nopony was getting laid till it was cleaned up. I'd never seen such hard work in all my life.

"Oh, I don't think it was so bad," Barpony said as she pulled out two Sunrise Sarsaparillas from her saddlebags. She'd stopped by to listen and stayed for the whole lecture and even tried to shoot; she was hopeless with a gun, though. I'd given up on finding her name; she seemed too amused by the question to give me a straight answer.

Below us came the sounds of shots and the occasional crash of an empty bottle shattering. I hadn't anticipated that many of them didn't know how to use a gun and swung their batons like they were afraid of hurting themselves. "They were scared of me," I muttered, glancing at her. "Worse, I think I sounded like Mom and made them feel like they were worthless at the same time."

"You just have to realize that most of the ponies here aren't exactly brave warrior folk. They're prostitutes that rotate their security duties, mares who are trying to kick Dash and Dust addiction, and fillies desperate not to fall into either trap. And bucks who sign up just try to use it to get free drugs and sex."

"Which were you?" I asked, and then winced. "Um…don't answer that."

"Prostitute, but I have a lot of side jobs now," she said without hesitation or shame. "And you are so cute when you get two hooves in your mouth." I blushed, and I wasn't sure if it was at her occupation or her flirting. It definitely made me chuckle, though.

"What I wonder is how Flank's lasted so long without falling before."

"The fact is that Flank's always been vulnerable. We keep everything nice and happy, and we hope that if somepony gets out of line, somepony like you will step in. And it's worked for years; the Pecos were our unofficial security contractors, paid in booze, Dash, and sex. Sidewinder could have taken us over if he'd had a little more sense and a little less whiskey." I caught a momentary haunted look on her face, but then she caught me looking and smiled.

"Well, not anymore," I muttered as I looked at the street. Even the rain hadn't washed away all the blood. The bodies were still being dragged out into the swampy ruins of the town. "So sooner or later, somepony else is going to try something." Again, that... strange expression.

“I think you did better than you realize,” Barpony said firmly. “I was surprised, to be honest. I didn’t expect you to talk about restraint so much.”

“Why, ‘cause I’m so bad at it?” I asked with a grin and got a nod in return. I sighed. “Well, guess I’m a hypocrite on top of everything else. Still, Mom always taught me that if you can get someone to do what you want by asking nicely, ask nicely. Then escalate. A security officer that goes for their baton or gun first is a thug with a uniform.”

“And is that what you do?” Barpony asked.

“Most ponies I’ve run into are either nice or pre-escalated. Those bounties go a long way towards that,” I commented ruefully, listening to the pop of small arms fire. “When they’re able to put themselves in harm’s way, they should be much better at security work. I can tell they’re tough mares. It’s just a step from looking out for yourself to looking out for others.”

And just like that, I was being kissed; sweet Goddesses was I getting kissed! My eyes went so wide that I felt like they would just roll out of their sockets! My rear legs gave out as I fell soundly onto my haunches and felt her tongue doing things inside my mouth I could barely imagine. When she finally gave me a breath I felt myself blushing from horn to hooves. “Habazawah… ” Then I shook myself hard. “What was that for?”

“I didn’t want to have not done that,” she said as she turned and curled her silky tail around my throat. “Now come on.”

“Huh…where are we going?” I asked as I trotted after her. Then she gave me a look and I quivered down to my hooves. “Oh…”

* * *

When we finally took a break, I felt good. No. Screw that. I felt great! Truly and honestly great. For once, I didn’t have any regrets about leaving my nice, safe, ugly life in Stable 99. From my rear emanated a buttery goodness that spiked through my entire body. Our limbs were tangled together in the middle of my bed. I still had fluttery contractions twitching in my hindquarters.

She was watching me with her amused pink eyes, reflecting the colors like stars. “I felt like I was a virgin there for a bit,” I said, getting my breath back.

“You mean you weren’t?” she asked with a teasing smile. I winced

and she gave a soft murr as her hoof stroked my cheek. “I’m teasing. You were actually very sweet.”

“Why is it that you make ‘sweet’ sound like ‘virgin’?” I asked as I knit my brows together in worry.

“Because virgins are sweet too,” she said archly.

I sighed, closing my eyes with a deep breath. “You’re taking advantage of my afterglow. No fair.”

“Fairness doesn’t exist in the Wasteland,” she said as she licked my cheek, making me shiver. “Another?”

“I think I’ll melt if you do.”

“Then I’ll just bottle you.”

“Liquid Security?”

“Security-Cola.”

“I’m not sweet enough for that.”

“I beg to differ,” she said as she nibbled my ear. “You are very sweet.” Okay, blushing now!

Unfortunately, I also had some work to do. “Why don’t we take a little break? You can go ask your boss when she plans to meet with me, and I can go make sure things are working out above?” I gave a little chuckle. “You know, the longer I’m here, the more I like this place.”

She paused as if considering me, almost measuring me, and then grinned. “Well that’s good. That’s the point of Flank. Fun for everyone,” she said as she stood and gave herself a shake. “You go ahead. Save up some energy for round two. Three…four…five…”

I nearly danced down the hall of the stable, not caring who saw me or what they thought. Maybe it was because I was helping ponies because I wanted to, or maybe it was the fact that Miss Barpony could tickle my nethers like I’d never imagined, but I was feeling really good! I know I got all kinds of looks, but I didn’t care. Didn’t care! Didn’t care. Did. Not. Care!

Outside, I found Glory working her magic with the machinery, getting the frames together. Given all that she’d been through, she seemed to be throwing herself into her work. When she spotted me she pressed her lips together and scowled. “Oh look, she emerges.”

Okay, sad Glory I could handle, ridiculously loyal Glory I could deal with, but where did pissed off and snippy Glory come from? “Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m all right. I’ve just been working my tail off while you’ve been getting your labia lubed,” she said as she grabbed a

wrench and firmly tightened a nut. She spat the tool back into a toolbox beside the frame. “I sure hope she was spectacular. She apparently costs a hoof and a half an hour.”

“Hey! You don’t have to talk about her like that,” I said sharply with a scowl. Her angry eyes started to tear up, but she scrubbed them away before I sighed and put a hoof on her shoulder. “What’s wrong with what we’re doing? I thought you were okay with making these turrets.”

“I am… ” she said with a sigh. “It’s just…why couldn’t you have asked us about this first? I don’t like helping Caprice.”

“I’m not that thrilled about helping her either, but there are good ponies here that deserve our help. Why shouldn’t we help them?”

“Because she’s a drug dealer who now has a monopoly on the addicts of the Hoof?” Glory said sourly.

I sighed. “Glory, it’s not like that. She can keep the price high and…”

“And she can keep the price low too,” Glory responded. “I don’t buy the argument that all those scavengers in the ruins got their drugs from these outside suppliers. I don’t believe she’d undercut her profits through ethics. They’re lingering here, Blackjack. And I know Scalpel’s trying to treat more addicts, but I think she’d be happy with even one additional patient.”

I had my doubts, too. Barpony seemed to know what was going on. Perhaps she could let me know if Glory was right, or convince her that this was okay. I just felt creepiness itching along my spine. “I’m sorry I sprang this on you. Is there anything I can do to help?”

She sighed, looking at me as she seemed to shuffle through her list of things she needed. “Targeting talismans. Without them, these are just weapon display stands.” She looked out over the ruins of Flankfurt. “There’s a Robronco retailer somewhere south of here. It might have working talismans.” I checked my PipBuck, and sure enough, a little navigation icon popped up along with the note ‘Objective: recover targeting talismans.’

Underneath it was another. ‘Objective: deliver Flank’s mail.’ I blinked and started. “What? I’d completely forgotten about that one!” I frowned and looked at the note. “Can’t I just give the mail to somepony here and let them hand it out?” Of course it didn’t answer. There were a dozen arrows on my map around the town. Most of them were in Flank itself, but not all of them; wondering how it knew the locations was driving me crazy!

"Okay, well it looks like I've got two reasons to go out now. Want to come with me when I do?" I asked, and her mood brightened before my eyes.

"I suppose I have to. Do you even know what a targeting talisman looks like?" she said with a small smile, returning to the Glory I knew.

"It's a talisman with a target on it?" I offered.

She laughed, shaking her head softly. "Okay. Come get me when you're ready to go." Victory!

I wandered around, looking for the ponies the letters were addressed to. One to the butcher in the Trough. Another to the robot-masked ponies in Mixers, who apparently never left their armored booth and required me to feed them through a slot. I wondered how they got food in there, or went to the bathroom… okay, not wondering anymore! Two were to Scalpel from former patients. One to Caprice; I'd deliver it when I finally met her.

One was to Octavia. What, I was delivering mail to dead ponies now? At least I knew where her room was, and once the letter was inside, my PipBuck dutifully informed me that this letter was officially 'delivered'. I looked at the yellowed paper envelope nestled between the bones on the bed. It was two hundred years old; it really wasn't wrong to read, right?

The old pale buck chuckled softly in my ear. "Tisk tisk…tampering with the mail. That's a serious offense."

I ignored the amused hallucination as I tore open the envelope. I wasn't prying, I was reading it to Octavia…or rather her bones… okay, getting away from creepy thoughts now!

"Dearest Octavia, I am so glad to hear that you've found someplace to rest your hooves. I'm very sorry that Pinkie Pie was so upset about your charity concert. I tried to talk to her about it, but she treats it like a personal snub. She's so odd these days. I can't tell what the matter is with her, but she's changed. I suppose we all have, to some extent, but some days it's like I don't even know her anymore.

"Regardless, I'm sure that with time she'll come around. She still fondly remembers the pony pokey your quartet played for her all those years ago. However, I was not simply writing to offer my sympathies. I wanted to follow up on you after your procedure. Are you noticing any ill effects or differences? I recall how unpleasant the experience was for you, and I don't want you to feel abandoned." I glanced at the terminal. Considering her recorded message to Pon3, it was clear that she had

been. She'd never gotten this letter. She'd died alone with her instrument.

"I hope that sometime in the future we can get together. I rarely have time to get away from Canterlot, but I'd like to speak with you more in person. Oh! And there's a certain mare named Glass who may poke about asking about what happened. I hope that you can keep everything in the strictest confidences. She's such a nosy little thing!

Sincerely, Rarity."

That made me blink. The Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Image checking up on Octavia? Did she have a career resurrection spell or something?

From the taped-up cabinet came a soft thunk, making me jump to my hooves. I frowned, looking at the tape on the rusty doors. Carefully, I pulled the tape away and opened the doors. Everything was exactly as I had left--no, wait. The pin that had held the bow had fallen out of the back of the cabinet.

I honestly had no idea how to play an instrument. Music was something other ponies did and I enjoyed. The only magic my horn could master was used to kill things. It wasn't my place as security to try and make something…beautiful. I looked at the black hairs in the bow and then at the strings. I sighed softly; this was stupid. I should be doing things…helping…not staring at a musical instrument I had no hope of playing.

Still…

"Ugh, I hope I don't break it or something…" I slowly levitated out the surprisingly heavy instrument and set it on its peg. I looked at the pictures taped inside the doors and carefully stood on my rear hooves. I rested my left forehoof on the strings at the top, right forehoof pinching the bow behind my right fetlock. I pressed the black bowstring to the wires and dragged it slowly across.

The slow, deep note filled the dirty little apartment with a single mournful tone. Carefully I reversed the motion, and played another note. And another. I couldn't call the sounds of me sawing back and forth music, but I wanted to continue. Slowly, the instrument seemed to say. Slowly. No need to rush. I carefully ran the bow across other strings, my ears picking out the different tones as they rose and fell with each of the four strings. I had no idea what I was playing, if I was playing at all. I simply couldn't stop, not right now as I dragged the bow back and forth. This was noise, not specific notes or music, but even then it was beautiful noise.

It took the sight of P-21 watching me with his wide eyed stare before I stopped, flushing. “Ah…oh. Sorry. I got distracted.”

“Blackjack, you can play?” he demanded in shock.

“I can’t. I didn’t!” I blurted as I looked at the pictures inside the cabinet. “I was just copying her.”

He looked incredulous as he stared at me. “Well, you fooled me. I mean, I couldn’t say what you were playing exactly, but it sounded good.”

I extended the bow to him. “Why don’t you try?” He looked skeptical, but copied my stance. He held the instrument awkwardly and dragged the bow across the strings with an anemic little noise that made me wince. Yeah, no wonder he had been staring. If I sounded like that playing, I’d stare too, wondering if I should put the bullet in me or him. “That was…nice…” I said, forcing a grin and letting out a mental sigh, glad he’d finished.

“If you say so. Still, I’m impressed you got it in tune and everything,” he said as he carefully put it back in the cabinet. “Glory told me you were going to go out looking for targeting talismans?” When I nodded he continued, “I want to go with you and see if we can’t pick up some landmines from Deus’s camp.”

“Are you sure that’s safe? I’m pretty sure Rampage didn’t kill all the ponies he sent into Flank.”

“Maybe, but I know he kept a lot of things locked up, and I just don’t have the mines to really make this place secure. I need a few crates of the things,” he said, glancing to the window. “Besides, I think folks here might be glad for the break. I think we’re freaking them out a little.”

“What do you mean?” I frowned, worried. “We haven’t done anything.”

“Haven’t done anything?” He arched a brow. “You apparently ran in here dripping bloody foam. You then blew up a factory. That was followed by blowing up the number two Reaper in the entire Hoof. And today we’re fortifying the place. It probably looks to them like we’re taking over.”

“That’s ridiculous!” I snorted. “Four ponies couldn’t take over a town.”

He didn’t laugh. “Blackjack, one of us could if she wanted to. Have you seen Rampage today? She’s hauling around rocks with the strength of ten ponies. Heck, with the way things are now, Glory could if she could fly. And with you in the mix…Blackjack, I’m

thinking leaving sooner is better than later."

I sighed with a scowl. What was the point of saving this place if somepony else came along and just took over? I wanted Flank secure. "When I'm sure that everything will be okay, then we can go. Maybe even tomorrow, if we're lucky." Or the day after that. What's the rush?

"If that's the plan," he said with a sigh. "Still, if we're going out, we should leave soon. I'd rather explore the ruins with daylight rather than at night."

"Yeah, and I have mail to deliver out there," I said as I lifted my remaining letters.

He looked a little concerned. "You know, you can probably just leave them with Caprice and let her handle them."

"Tell that to this thing!" I snorted, waving my PipBuck at him. He just smiled, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as he stepped out. I sighed and returned to the opened cabinet, looking at the picture of the gray pony with such poise and confidence. How sad for her to end in this lonely room. I reached out and plucked each string with a hoof, smiling at the clear tones before closing the doors.

* * *

With a shot, Taurus's rifle tore out the guts of the sentry robot mindlessly patrolling around the Robronco retail store. Sighting with the scope was immensely more effective than using the lighter assault carbine, and the heavy hunting rounds punched through their armor soundly. It was a bit more challenging than just running and shooting, but infinitely safer.

"You know, I could just run in and stomp them all into scrap metal," Rampage said in a bored tone as she drew a picture of a filly in the mud with her hoofclaws.

"And you'd stomp the talismans with them," Glory pointed out. "That's why I'm not zapping them either." Well, and because her AER wasn't working yet and I had the longest ranged weapon.

"And…" I fired off the last shot. My aim was just a little bit off and the head of the robot exploded in a spray of shrapnel. "Awww, horseapples," I muttered, glancing at the small pegasus. "Sorry about that."

"Well, we might find more inside. Remember, no smashing the heads if you can help it. Talismans are usually pretty brittle," she

reminded us. “Unless they’re made out of diamonds, but still.” She trotted ahead to examine the robotic remains.

“She still isn’t flying?” P-21 asked me softly.

I shook my head, wondering about that. “I dunno why either…” Had removing her cutie mark somehow damaged her ability to fly? Was it psychological? Or maybe something else? “Ugh, I am not a smart pony. I don’t even know how pegasi fly, period.”

“Maaaaagic,” Rampage taunted as she trotted past us towards the store.

“Ah, of course,” P-21 muttered with a smile, rolling his eyes and limping after her while I picked up my spent casings before catching up. I watched his leg with a sigh. Scalpel could have healed it after a day or two, but the injury had set; it would take a fully operational health restoration matrix to repair it; basically, a medical megaspell. He would still have to wear that damned leg brace. I silently wished the Wasteland could be a little more fair for once. Bust my leg and let him walk. But the Wasteland didn’t work like that. He got to limp and I got to guilt.

I loaded Cupcake’s revolver and carefully moved into the Robronco retail store. Brown tiles, cracked and water-stained, crunched underhoof as I moved in. Row after row of rusting models stood at attention on their display pedestals. I took three steps before a buzz filled the room and a few lights flickered to life. “Welcome, visitors to the Flankfurt Robronco Outlet Center!” the speakers crackled, and wispy music began to play as we moved through the store. There were red bars on my E.F.S.; clearly not all of these robots were just on display.

As we walked, occasionally an automatic message would spout off as we moved through the display floor. “Here at Robronco, ‘Quality is Key’ is our motto and the motto of our founder, Mr. Horse. Every Robronco unit comes installed with a spark generator capable of months of sustained operation, and with your own handy recharging station, your Robronco robot can operate indefinitely. It’s not just a purchase for you, but for your grandfoals too! Talk to our automated sales rep today.”

“You have to admit, machines working two centuries without supervision is pretty impressive,” Glory said quietly as she looked at the spritebots floating around the store and playing the bland music.

“Why are you whispering?” Rampage asked as she pointed at the

machines. “They’re playing music, so I’m pretty sure that if something here can hear us, it doesn’t really care.”

As she returned her attention to the store around us, I noticed that P-21 was *looking* at her, his eyes roaming over her more closely than I’d ever seen him regard a mare. “Hey, Rampage… ” She looked over her shoulder at him, arching a brow. “Those stripes… ”

She just smiled like he was a tasty little Mint-al, her pink eyes locking with his. “Yes?” she asked in a tone that did not invite further questioning.

“Well… I… ” he began, then swallowed. “Nevermind. I just… ” I really wondered if he’d dare trot through this minefield. “Why do you look like a red zebra?”

She blinked, and then laughed. “Oh! Is that all? Wow. I thought you were going to ask me something… you know… personal.” She smiled warmly at him as she approached. “Well the reason is pretty simple… ”

“Yes?” he asked as she walked towards him languidly.

She grinned as she stretched her face towards his, making him lean back nervously as she replied, “It’s ‘cause I want to.” Then she turned and continued picking through the store. He gave a smoldering glare at her and then glanced at me, daring me to comment. I just smiled as I looked at some of the interesting robots.

I passed by the standard ‘Protectapony’ sentry model and two spidery ‘Mr. Handy’ and ‘Mr. Gutsy’ models, levitation talismans long ago given out. I noted a larger metallic pony balanced on two wheels between its hooves. A flat screen stared out of where a face would normally go. “The PDQ-88p Securipony is our newest upgrade for home and municipal security. With its automated repair and restoration upgrades, the system will be able to continue performing indefinitely against all threats.” There was a momentary pause, and then the voice said, softly and quickly, “Automated repair and restoration options are not yet available at this time. Please contact a Robronco customer service representative for further details.”

In the corner hulked a massive four-wheeled robot that looked more like an enormous crab than a pony. Four heavy tires supported each of its splayed legs, and its vaguely equine head was nestled between armored shoulders. A minigun poked from one shoulder and a missile launcher from the other. “The SP ‘Workhorse’ series of sentry ponies combines maximum firepower

with a reinforced and magically shielded chassis capable of withstanding shock spells. When in place, you know the Workhorse is going to be keeping you nice and safe." I looked at the looming mechanical monster, scratching my mane absent-mindedly as the speaker added softly, "Robronco not liable for collateral damage, injury or death thirty days after placement. Please contact a Robronco customer service representative for further details."

"I didn't know Robronco was in the business of supplying tanks," Glory said solemnly.

"Tanks?" Rampage looked up at the machine and snorted. "That's not a tank. A US…that's a tank." Then she stopped and scowled, but I couldn't tell at what.

"A what?"

"Robronco Ultra-Sentinel. And if you find one, you'll know. Then you'll be dead," Rampage said as she focused and suddenly struck out with her hoof. The impact left an inch-deep impression in its armor.

P-21 looked at the indentation and then asked with a smirk, "Then how do you know about them and yet still live?"

But for some reason the question really seemed to piss her off. "'Cause I'm really tough to kill," she replied with her own scowl.

I rolled my eyes, keeping the revolver floating beside me. The door to the back was marked 'Maintenance Garage: authorized Robronco employees only.' From the red bars, it was fairly clear that whatever was in there was unfriendly.

I guardedly pushed my way through into a mess. Neat stacks of robot parts had tumbled down and lay rusting in iron-reeking pools. An unwholesome rainbow hue spread around the racks of spoiled electronics and scrap metal piles. A broken pipe near the ceiling sprinkled foul water down into the mechanics pits. Despite the corrosion on every surface, however, the beam turrets near the roof slowly rotated this way and that, searching for intruders, and I heard the odd hum of a levitation talisman somewhere on the second floor.

My PipBuck began to crackle as I walked past a bank of spoiled spark batteries. The burst containers oozed purple and orange glowy fluids into the water around my hooves, and my radiation meter responded accordingly. Without a word, Glory passed out tablets of Rad-X. Rampage looked at it scornfully. "What, you're immune to radiation too?"

“Nope. But it can’t kill me,” she said as she then trotted ahead of us out into the open. “Enough sneaking around!” she yelled brightly, “This is getting boring!”

“Warning! Warning! You are not authorized to be here! Warning! Surrender immediately!” Unfortunately, neither the robots nor the turrets seemed to recognize ‘surrender,’ and Rampage certainly wasn’t in the mood as Protectapony robots shambled forward like metal zombies and the turrets began to spray beams of crimson death at her. Her metal armor blackened as it deflected some of the energy, and she launched herself across the room to rip the robots to pieces.

“Mind the heads -- yipe!” Glory called out as the turrets detected us and let out a rapid-fire stream of magic energy that scorched holes in my barding and hide. I narrowed my eyes and brought up S.A.T.S., putting four heavy revolver rounds into the casing. Glory finished it off with two pink bolts of disintegrating magic. Unfortunately, our fire seemed to be waking up more of the machines. They stepped out of their waterlogged recharging stations, dripping rust. In fact, I wasn’t exactly sure how much of a threat they were till their unrusted heads started to fire.

I put the last two rounds into the chest of a shambling metal pony. Then, with an electric shock, the pony exploded! Hot, sharp metal showered down over me as a jolt shocked my hooves. “C…careful! They’re really…unstable.”

“They’re not the only thing!” Glory shouted, Rampage laughing like a maniac as she bucked the sparking remains into a turret. A door slid open, and out rolled a Workhorse sentry.

“Rampage! Big one! Sic it!” I shouted as I dumped the shell casings into the water and loaded six more of the large-caliber pistol bullets. The robot’s left shoulder popped open and sent a missile through the air, blasting into the striped pony and sending her flying into a heap of robotic scrap. It rolled slowly around, bringing that gatling gun to bear. “Nevermind! Scatter!” I shouted as I ran across the loading bay, away from P-21 and Glory. Cupcake’s gun barked in rather pathetic fashion, even with S.A.T.S. guiding the shots to the eerie whine of the minigun strafing after me.

The sensation of being hit by a minigun was entirely different from anything I’d felt before. I felt as though I’d been slipped underneath a sewing machine without thread. From ass to rib, a line of small deadly rounds tried to perforate anywhere not covered by armor,

and managed to punch through a few places regardless. I collapsed into the mucky water, falling behind an overturned desk.

"Stay down!" P-21 shouted, drawing a shock grenade as the Workhorse sentry rolled through the water. He tossed it right in front of the robot, and it detonated with an oddly anticlimactic beep and crackle. The robot, however, jerked spasmodically as its spell matrices were assaulted. It didn't stop, though.

Suddenly, the pile of scrap was tossed aside as Rampage rose with a hysterical laugh. The left side of her face had melted to the bone, yet I could see the flesh crawling back into place. Her lips dripped foam from Stampede and, laughing madly, she charged through the muck towards the robot. It turned its minigun on her, and I watched in horror as the stream of rounds ripped face from flesh and flesh from bone. Yet she didn't fall! She ran against the stream of fire even as it tore into her chest, as if it was just a light shower of rain! Churned organs fell into the water as she closed the distance. Suddenly the gun clicked, its ammo expended.

Rampage lacked face, throat, and apparently lungs. None of that stopped her from launching herself through the air and slamming into the robot with such force that one of its front legs was torn from its socket. Her head turned and gripped the handle of one of the blades she carried, pulling out something resembling a cross between a chainsaw and a knife. Her bloody jaws clenched and the weapon began to whirr. Hooves locked on, the Reaper began to tear into the body with the sparking saw blade.

The robot responded by simply collapsing against Rampage. I heard bones shatter as even *her* strength wasn't enough to stop its incredible mass…or was it? Slowly, she rose on broken limbs and tore her way deeper into the machine with savage sweeps of her head. A panel finally gave way, and with an electric shock it exploded and went silent. Rampage stood there, shaking, a strange pink light seeming to stitch her slowly together as we watched. Glory approached with a restoration potion in her mouth, but Rampage just looked her in the eye and shook her head firmly. Glory brought the potion to me instead.

The strange pink glow faded, her flesh restored. Suddenly, she hunched over and puked a deluge of bloody minigun rounds over and over again. As the magic potion restored my flesh, she screamed and began to claw at herself, tearing open gruesome knots that bulged under her skin. As each tore open, blood and more

minigun rounds tumbled into the water. With a scream of rage she went through the shop like an earthquake, ripping and tearing at everything around her in blind fury. We simply retreated upstairs, unsure if she could recognize friend from foe.

Finally she collapsed, shaking as she hung her head and wept. Slowly I approached her. “Rampage? Are you okay?” It was right at the top of my list of stupid questions I shouldn’t ask.

She stared right at me with her wet pink eyes and spat a bullet in my face. “What the fuck do you think?” Without another word she turned and walked back out front.

I returned to the others upstairs. “What did that? Stampede?”

“I…” Glory opened and closed her mouth in shock. “Nothing could do that! Nothing. Did you see that trauma? She was missing her face! Multiple compound fractures in her limbs and ribs and she still stood.”

“Right... ” I looked the way Rampage had gone and then looked at Glory. “Right. You find your talismans…” I looked at P-21. “You see if you can find anything else valuable. I’m going to make sure she’s…stable.” Clearly they didn’t envy me my job.

I made my way out in front of the retail store and was met by the sight of Rampage picking her nose with a hoofclaw. I balked a moment as she snorted, and then blew three bloody rounds from her sinuses. “This is a real bad time, Blackjack.”

“What are you?” I asked as I walked to her.

“Good question,” she muttered.

I stepped in front of her. “I need to know. How did you just do that?”

“Piss off, Blackjack. I don’t owe you or anypony else answers.”

I sighed. “Rampage…I want to help you if I can.”

“You…you want to help…heh…” She began to laugh, sitting down hard. “Well of course you do. That’s what you do, after all.” She grinned at me and I suddenly appreciated how shiny recently regenerated teeth were. “So why don’t you go ahead and tell me? What am I?”

“Don’t fuck around with--” I began, but she rose and thrust her face into mine.

“What the fuck am I?” she screamed in my face, and it took everything I had not to shoot her with a magic bullet in reflex. “How the fuck do I do what I do? How did I just do that? How do I know what an Ultra-Sentinel is? I’ve never even seen one before!

Why is it I can speak Zebra? How come I can drink radioactive waste till I'm shitting rainbows and still not fucking die? Why do I come back again and again and again?" She gripped my shoulders with her hooves, claws digging in as she screamed, "Who the fuck am I, Blackjack?"

"Rampage!" I shouted through gritted teeth as her hoofclaws shoved in deeper and deeper.

"Who!? What? Why can't I fucking die? Why!" she yelled hysterically.

Okay. There was 'not okay', and then there was an entire world of fucked-upness that transcended all boundaries of normalcy. I'd visited there for a couple of days while travelling with Glory. Rampage apparently lived there full time. Unfortunately, Rampage was also about to rip my forelegs off. I hit S.A.T.S. and togged four magic shots at both her knees. My horn flashed over and over again as the magical bullets tore through flesh and bone. With two small explosions her forehooves came off and we fell away from each other.

She hissed in pain as I panted, drawing the pump action shotgun. I doubted it would actually do anything, but I wasn't going to fuck around. Those claws hurt. Before my eyes the pink light returned and she shook as bone extended from the stumps. Flesh and muscle wrapped around it, and finally skin and hoof materialized.

For a moment I was afraid she was going to charge me, but instead she just took a deep breath and walked over to her own dismembered legs, removing the claws and tossing her limbs aside.

"You don't know who you are or what you are?" I asked softly.

She looked pissed, but finally slumped as she said softly, "My earliest memory was a while ago. Some ghouls found me in the Miramare crater with half a tank lodged in my skull. They must have thought I was a ghoul like them because they pulled me out. Surprise surprise when I had a pulse. I was completely clueless. They used me, then sold me to some pieces of shit that eventually founded Paradise. After a few years I was sick of getting fucked and broke free.

"I drifted a little bit and found Scalpel when she was still a wandering medic with old Bonesaw. Tried to figure me out. Scalpel eventually found that heap of a healing booth, rigged the auto-doc and put down roots in Flank. Bonesaw settled down in Megamart. Me? I ended up in Chapel when it was just me and a dumb colt

wanting to fix up that stupid church of his."

"You knew Priest?" Something about my question make her smirk.

"Knew him? I fucked him." That sent a slap through me, before she added with a chuckle, "Or I wanted to anyway. We hung out together and found more kids; usually the young of ponies making the walk…"

"Pilgrims," I muttered.

"Yeah, that's what he called them. Young colts and fillies, though… they're tougher, haven't been worn down as bad. They stuck around rather than following their parents, and we formed the Crusaders together." She sighed softly. "I always wished I could be one of them." I remembered what Scoodle had mentioned so many days back.

"Arloste…" I murmured, getting a sharp look. "That's your name."

"It was a name Scalpel made up for me. Before that I was 'the fuckmare'," she said sharply, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Arloste. Are Lost." She shook her head. "Eventually I got sick of it. I wasn't like him. It…hurt…to be around him. So I left. Wandered around. Crossed paths with a Reaper named Rampage. She swore she could kill me twenty different ways. I was only looking for one. Turns out she was a lot squishier than me. Big Daddy Reaper let me join. Took her name and her armor…I was tired of Arloste. Too many regrets."

"And then Big Daddy sent you to me," I said in conclusion.

She gave a mirthless smile and shrug. "I want to fucking die, Blackjack. You've been out in the Wasteland for a couple of weeks. I've been staring it in the face for years, and it's not getting better. The Hoof is a meat grinder. Ponies keep coming and they keep dying. It's getting worse. The poison spreads a little more every day and one day, if I don't die, I think I'm going to be the last living thing in the stinking corpse of Equestria."

"So just go to the Core. They'll vaporize you instantly and... " And our eyes met. Her face was a mask of horror. "You've been there, haven't you?"

"I'm not going to talk about it," she whispered softly.

"But…"

Like that she was on top of me. "Not! Talking! About! It!" And looking into her eyes I knew she'd kill me right now rather than say another word.

"Okay. Okay…" I grunted in pain; she was heavy in that armor.

Slowly she climbed off me. “I just wish there was something I could do….”

“Join the club. But that’s the great thing about the Wasteland: it will throw shit at you time and time again, letting you stare at it in frustration like a glass of nice cool water on the other side of some bars while you’re dying of thirst,” she said as she looked at me, “And you want to know the really fucked up part? You’ll go crazy and bash your skull to paste before you die of thirst.”

* * *

Inside, I found P-21 in the upstairs offices as Glory examined the glyph-marked talismans glowing calmly on their shelves in a storeroom. He was working on a terminal, scowling at the screen as he struggled with password after password. He looked up at me. “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but how is she?”

“Messed up, so she’s in perfect company,” I replied with a wan smile. “It’s weird. I’m so used to being the nexus of messed-upness in the universe. I don’t know how to handle other ponies’ pain.”

“How did Glory and I help you?” he asked with a smile.

“Lots of hugs, and not killing me,” I added with a chuckle.

“Yeah, that last bits helps a lot,” he said, then closed out the screen again. “Ugh, somepony was a paranoid bastard!” He looked at me with a sigh. “This is taking forever. All I can say is, it better be worth it, or I’m going to invent time travel just to kick her ass!”

I thought back to the memory orb of the princesses. I’d try and do…better…if I had such a spell.

“Anyway, present for the horn head club,” he said as he reached into his pouch and pulled out another memory orb. “Found it hidden in a drawer. Not sure if you’d want it…” he added. “Your track record with orbs is a little spotty.”

“Yeah but…” I swept it up in my magic and looked at him. “Like you said. I may as well since I’ll be waiting either way.”

“Sure. We have to do the actual looting while you take a stroll through other ponies’ memories.” From the nervous look in his eyes I could tell he wasn’t serious; he clearly remembered the last time I went into an orb and didn’t come out of it.

“It’s a dirty job, but some mare’s got to do it!” I chuckled and raised the orb in a salute before touching it to my horn, hoping I didn’t come out of this dead, mutilated, or crying. The world

whirled away.

oooOOOooo

I was standing in a factory of some sort. A laboratory? Lots of ponies standing around a table looking serious and frowning at a heap of scrap metal. Lots of nervous ponies in lab coats. I was in a mare; no wings, but she had a horn. Somehow things were just clearer when I was in a unicorn mare.

"Three Ministry Mares for a test demonstration? Is Horse mad?" a mustard-colored mare whispered softly in my ear. Then I noticed the three sets of cutie marks directly in front of my host: three apples, a group of white stars around a large purple one, and a cloud and thunderbolt.

Rainbow Dash gave a very vocal yawn. "Boring. When's this thing supposed to start?"

"Shhhh," Applejack shushed, "He may be a cocky jackass, but Mr. Horse knows robots like no other."

"I wish he'd start," Twilight Sparkle said with her own impatient little huff.

"Tarnation girl, you in that much of a hurry to get ta the lunch reception?"

Twilight Sparkle bowed her head a little. "Actually, I had some other things to take care of, since I'm in Hoofington anyway."

"You actually want to do things here?" Rainbow Dash asked with a small frown. "If Shadowbolt Tower weren't here, I'd never come. Hoofington's like the fug-ugliest city I've ever seen." A number of bucks and mares looked at her with poorly concealed frowns and she added, unabashed, "Well, it is."

"Still, it's churning out discoveries by the week. If things weren't so busy in Canterlot, I'd relocate some projects here. It's nice to be able to coordinate things with the M.o.P. or M.o.M.," Twilight Sparkle said brightly.

"Speaking of Morale, have you talked to Pinkie Pie, Twilight?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Like, recently?"

"No. Not for almost a month, with everything so busy. Is she alright?"

Rainbow Dash looked hesitant as she rubbed her mane. "She's… just being way more random than usual. I haven't seen her like this since--"

“Fillies and gentlecolts, thank you for coming,” a pale gold earth pony buck said as he trotted up to the table with a cloth-covered round drum on his back. He had the strangest little pencil-thin mustache and sparse, narrow brown mane. His cutie mark, perhaps appropriately enough, was three gears. He bucked his hips, caught the round cylinder neatly on his head, and then bounced it off to hold it in his hooves before the crowd. “What I have inside this container is going to revolutionize manufacturing as we know it.” Even Rainbow Dash looked interested now, as he set the container besides the pile of scrap metal. “I give you, the mechasprite!”

And he whisked the cloth away to reveal…a glass jar full of ball bearings?

“Uhhh…that’s it?” Twilight asked in confusion.

“The normal ones are annoying enough! Now we’re making our own out of metal?” Rainbow Dash complained.

“I beg you to be patient,” he said with a broad grin, his eyes sweeping the ground and silencing the murmuring. “Think of all the steps involved in manufacturing! Ore must be extracted, refined, and shipped; parts must be fabricated, then assembled. If only there was a way to shape the raw material directly into the end product!” He stroked the glass jar lovingly. “Well today, there is! With the simple application of a magic field…” He flipped a switch at the base of the jar, and suddenly every ball bearing’s eyes lit up. Two tiny wings appeared on each, and the little metal orbs fluttered out of the jar and into the air.

“Well, at least they’re not as cute. Can’t see Fluttershy adoptin’ ‘em…” Applejack muttered.

Mr. Horse continued with his broad, confident smile, “Any design can be programmed into the mechasprites, and they will proceed to seek out raw material, ingest, process, and produce the design. Watch!” And he pushed another button on the base. The mechasprites began to bob in the air with the strangest chirring noise. Then they suddenly descended on the scrap metal and began to take little bites out of the twisted lengths. They chewed up the bits of metal and spat out wads of shiny liquid metal on the table, forming the globs into solid steel. They smoothed the metal with licks of their tongues and in a minute an automatic pistol lay on the table. “Voila! From scrap to weapon in ten seconds flat.”

Mr. Horse clearly had a strange sense of time, but I saw his point. Wait? Were there more mechasprites? As I watched, one opened its

mouth and belched out another mechasprite that was rust red. “As you can see, the mechasprites will use surplus materials to manufacture more production units. They can even specialize to improve efficiency.”

Twilight Sparkle raised a hoof. “Not to be an alarmist, but what’s to stop them from eating…say…Hoofington?”

“Excellent question, Miss Sparkle.” His grin clearly said he’d hoped somepony would ask that. “Get them outside the magical field and…” He caught one in his mouth and pulled it from the others. Its eyes went wide, and then the wings wrapped around it and it retracted back into a round ball. My host started to fidget with something in her bags.

“Uh…are they supposed to be doing that?” Rainbow Dash asked as she pointed at the table. The scrap metal was all gone, and now a veritable swarm of mechasprites devoured the metal table…and began to gnaw on the metal bleachers the audience sat upon.

Mr. Horse’s smile turned a touch more nervous. “Aha…eager little things aren’t they?” He stepped up to the case and flicked the switch off. The mechasprites, however, continued to eat and multiply in greater and greater abundance. “What…this isn’t possible!” he gasped as he stared at the device.

“Well they’re doing a whole lot of eatin’ for impossible!” Applejack cried out. “Look out, everypony!” she yelled as one of the beams holding the roof groaned and bent.

Mr. Horse gave a frustrated sigh and nodded to ponies watching on nervously. They immediately tossed dozens of apple grenades into the swarm; bright blue bands flashed brilliantly as the shock grenades scrambled the magic animating the machines. As one, they folded their wings and clattered to the concrete floor.

The yellow buck ran his hoof through his mane. “Well. That was an unforeseen glitch we haven’t encountered before, but certainly you can see the potential…”

“I sure can. Potential for disaster,” Rainbow Dash scoffed. “I don’t think the M.o.A. will need your mechasprites, Mr. Horse.”

“Ain’t nothing good that can come from something based on those critters,” Applejack agreed as ponies started filing out. “Come on, Twilight.”

The purple mare approached Mr. Horse with a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Horse. It really did have amazing potential.”

“They shouldn’t have done that,” he replied firmly.

“Well, something caused them to. I’m sorry. If you like, perhaps we could take a second look at them? Find out where they went wrong?” she asked politely.

He looked at her sharply a moment, but then relaxed. “Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. I suspect this is…an internal matter…”

Twilight looked concerned, but finally just shrugged. My host rose and left with the other ponies filing out after the three Ministry Mares.

“Can you believe that? Mechasprites? I thought this guy was supposed to be some sort of mechanical genius,” Rainbow Dash scoffed, “Instead he nearly turned Flankfurt into mechasprite munchies.”

“Well, in every harvest you’re gonna get a few rotten apples. He’ll do better next time,” Applejack said with a sigh, “Looks like I’m gonna have to skip lunch. Gotta head over to Aegis next and see how they’re working on the latest combat armor.”

“Applejack, I haven’t seen you in weeks. You promised!” Rainbow Dash said irritably.

“I know, I know, but this is important too. My brother’s signed up, and if he’s going fighting, I want somethin’ protecting him other than his thick skull!”

“Ugh…all right. You and me then, Twilight!” Rainbow Dash said brightly, then frowned and looked over at the purple mare. “Um… Twilight? Equestria to Egghead…come in Egghead…”

She immediately started. “Oh…ah…I actually can’t. I have a… um…meeting.”

Rainbow Dash hung her head with a groan, muttering, “Worst day ever…”

My host turned down a side hall and went up some stairs to a window overlooking the demonstration floor. Mr. Horse and a number of research mares were gathering the mechasprites into baskets. Then my host took off her saddlebags and pulled out a small arcane device. “It worked,” she said softly, passing it to an open door. A hoof took the device and slipped it inside.

A moment later a heavy bag of bits was tossed out at her hooves. “Thank you.”

My host nickered happily as she stroked her hooves through the gold coins. “I could do more. I have access. I could completely screw his research,” my host said as she tucked the bits into her saddlebag.

"That won't be necessary," the hidden mare said softly. "We only wanted to discredit, not disrupt."

My host frowned sharply at the cracked door. "Well you might want to pay to keep me around and handy."

The air filled with a tense pause. "And if I don't?"

My host smirked. "I might feel chatty…"

"I see." Then I felt something tickle her ear. She looked over and saw the silenced barrel of a pistol floating beside her head. "I would rather Mr. Horse waste his time with this setback, but an equicide or suicide investigation would do, Ms. Fairhoof. And it would be cheaper." My host's guts immediately loosened as she started to shake.

"P…please…"

"Don't play games with us and we won't play games with you, Ms. Fairhoof. Trust me, you won't like our games." The hidden mare chuckled as the gun disappeared through the door. "They're killers."

oooOOOooo

I emerged from the memory with a chill. First, of course, I checked for inevitable zebra ninja assassins or Enclave agents; damn, it was odd not to worry waking to find Deus sodomizing me. Okay, disturbing image, please go away. Still, I rose and gave myself a vigorous shake. "Everything okay? Nopony dead?"

"No, but somepony should be." P-21 scowled at the terminal. "Twelve key password…all to hide the dirty notes the manager here was passing to the secretary at Robronco HQ. Looks like they were arranging a little party of their own in her office," he said with a little chuckle, "Has her password and everything. Was sex always this complicated before the bombs fell?"

"Probably," I said as I lifted the orb. "Where'd you find this?"

P-21 snorted and rolled his eyes. "Taped to the back of her drawer, actually. Guess she didn't want somepony to find it."

"Was her name Fairhoof?" I asked as I looked at him. He frowned in confusion. "The manager?"

"No," he said, "it was Merry Penny. Why?" But I could see why.

There was a grainy newspaper clip on the wall behind him. 'Robronco retail manager dies to runaway robot.' Most of the rest of the article was illegible, but I could at least make out that the

manager had been an unicorn mare.

'*You won't like our games. They're killers.*' Ponies sabotaging other ponies' work? Bribes? Murder? "What the hell was going on in this town?" A lot of secrets in the Hoof. Like a country within a country. Why was my mane creeping at the thought of that?

* * *

I left first. Our sacks were bulging with nummy looted goods. I was sure that once we converted them into caps, I'd have everything I needed to pay for EC-1101's decoding. Unfortunately, the pensive look of Rampage doused my excitement, but one look from her pink eyes as she slowly chewed on a Mint-al made it clear that pity would be hazardous to my health. P-21 and Glory exchanged a look but kept their comments to themselves. I chuckled softly to myself, wondering if we were the most dysfunctional band of friends in all the Wasteland.

Probably.

"So why are we delivering a two-hundred-year-old letter?" Glory asked as we trudged along a flooded street, clammy cold mud squelching under my hooves as I moved in the lead. My rifle swung slowly back and forth at the red bars that inhabited the ruins. Bloatsprites for the most part, and I didn't waste rifle ammo on them. Since I was already running low on ammo for the carbine, I picked them off with that and swapped back to the scope to check for trouble.

Another two bobbing sprites ahead; a swap-out and five shots later, the carbine was dry and the street ahead clear.

"Because the PipBuck says so," I replied grandly as the clouds overhead threatened more rain. "Who knows? Maybe it's going to a ghoul who will be touched that we delivered mail to it and give us a super sweet silver bullet so I can vaporize whatever monster Sanguine sends next."

"Or, you know, eat our brains," Glory added with a chuckle.

"Always with the brains. Honestly. It's not like ghouls can chew through skulls," Rampage said with a scornful little snort. "Actually most ghouls favor the softer organs. Liver. Lungs. Entrails."

My stomach lurched a little. "Yeah, that's more than I needed to know."

Glory frowned in thought and then looked at me. "Is that true?"

“Why are you asking me?” I wondered with a nervous laugh. “I’m creeped out enough by raider cannibalism. Don’t even make me wonder about ghoul diets. You can ask one when we meet one.”

“I know. I know,” she huffed as she fluttered her wings. “It’s just the scientist in me. I mean, if they’re immortal and healed by radiation, why the drive to eat at all? Is it a reflex? Instinctive? Is there an actual need to eat or do ponies simply taste good?”

“So…Fallen Glory is a scientist?” P-21 asked with a small smile, making her almost trip. I frowned at him, but of course he didn’t care.

The light gray pegasus gave a little frown. “I…I don’t know…but Glory at least is a curious pony.”

I smiled at that. Morning Glory had been a shy, scared, and blindly loyal pegasus. Glory was curious, but wary. What would Fallen be like? I hoped that she’d just be a mask Glory wore when she was around Enclave ponies.

“So who are we delivering this piece of junk to?” Rampage asked as she punted a half submerged skull aside.

I looked at the faded lettering on the envelope. “A Mister and Missus Cake at…” I glanced up and my voice trailed away. “Sugarcube Corner…”

The rotting structure leaned precariously out over the alley where it slouched against the burned-out shell of its neighbor. The colorful pink paint had decayed into a fleshy grayish tone, the white trim darkened and peeling with the constant moisture. The roof had warped in the rain till it resembled mummified leather. A tower once resembling stacked cupcakes now creaked as it leaned over to the side like a vengeful hoof about to fall. One wall had blackened, but not burned, a testament to the sturdy building materials. Leaning plastic candy decorations poked out of the muddy ground before the store. Broken colorful glass stood in twisted window frames like squinting eye sockets. Over the front door dangled a sign hanging from one corner. ‘Sugarcube Corner’, it read, and beneath that, ‘Cakes and Confectionery’.

And there were yellow bars inside.

I put a hoof on the front step, and the structure gave a great groan. I clenched my eyes closed at the thought of being buried delivering mail to ponies probably long dead; Deus would laugh his ass off. “Okay. I don’t think we should all go inside. Just me and maybe Glory.”

“Sure. Somepony’ll have to dig your butts out after it falls on your head,” Rampage muttered as she looked at the tottery structure.

Slowly, we made our way up the steps and past a mold-spotted poster reading ‘Official Ministry of Morale Confectionary Center’. The sight of Pinkie Pie popping out of a cake with that grin on her face made me shiver. The waterlogged floor sagged a little with each step. I looked at the walls tilted at crazy angles, the splintered paneling showing the soaked, crumbling bones of the building. I kept glancing at my PipBuck. The second it said this job was completed, I was out of here! There was a little arrowhead on my EFS, but still the note wouldn’t clear.

Clearly, ‘Sugarcube Corner’ wasn’t good enough. One look in the kitchen was enough to convince me not to go inside. It looked like the brick ovens were the only things holding up that half of the building. That left the stairs. I put my weight on the leaning steps, glad they leaned with the slouch of the building rather than against it. My hooves fought for purchase on the uneven surface as the structure groaned and swayed around me. The door at the top of the stairs wasn’t flimsy wood but rusting steel covered by a splintered wooden veneer. Stepping onto the second floor, I noticed that that wasn’t all that was wrong here.

Why would a bakery need a room full of rusted terminals and monitors? A large chalkboard slumped against a leaning wall. On it were drawn three columns: ‘Good Ponies’, ‘Bad Ponies’, and ‘Really Super Naughty Wicked Bad Ponies’. Only the second and third columns had names in them. There were posters up here too, but of a decidedly different bent. ‘Remember, we keep Equestria fun and SAFE,’ the poster read as Pinkie Pie twitched her tail. ‘Only you can prevent trouble,’ read another.

There were also a lot of bones in here. Now I had a problem. Left was where my PipBuck was telling me to go, right were three yellow bars. Non-hostiles. Well, if I didn’t have to bother whoever was that way, then best to not bother them.

I walked to the left towards an actual bedroom. Two skeletons greeted me, one splayed across a terminal and the other curled up in the corner of the room. I looked at my PipBuck. This was definitely the place. “So, are we done here?” Glory asked.

No. I sighed and remembered what I had done with Octavia. Slowly I tore open the paper and withdrew the letter inside.

“HEY!!!” a giant pink head screamed in glee.

I fell to my rump as I dropped the paper and the tiny pink talisman in the middle of the page shot glitter and streamers all over me. A deep groan rolled through the building. The huge ghostly head of Pinkie Pie flickered as she grinned down at me. “Hiyas Mr. Cake! Hiyas Mrs. Cake! I wanted to try out this super terrific invitation spell and thought that it’d be just perfect for you.” She gave a sympathetic little frown. “I know you two aren’t happy being away from Ponyville, but you’re the only two good ponies who are so super good terrific that you’d never turn your back on me…or say I have a problem…or call me…what *she* called me... ” The smile was now a rictus, her cheek twitching as she stared at me.

It was scary how the friendly smile seemed to melt off her face, her curly mane slowly straightening before my eyes as she quivered. “You two have always been the nicest nice ponies I’ve ever known. You’re like…like my mom and dad…” she said as her head started to shake and she gave a hiccup. “I think…I think there’s something wrong…very very wrong…super terrible bad wrong…and I have to stop it. I’m the only one who can. Then…then maybe…maybe we can have a real party. In Ponyville…like we used to.”

She suddenly stiffened. “But first we have to find the bad ponies in Hoofington. I know Quartz is a no good terrible bad pony. And those Four Star ponies too…but I think there are others. I think…I think the ponies in my hub there are bad. I think they know what the bad ponies are up to. It’s all secrets and lies in that place. Nopony is who they say they are. Nopony is…

“Except you two! Right? Right…Right! So…please…find something. Anything. Please?” Hooves covered her face. “You’re the only ones I could give a piece of myself to. You’re my real parents. Please…Mom…Dad…help me…”

With that, the tiny engraved sliver of rose quartz snapped in two, and the glowing ghostly head disappeared, leaving us covered in magical pink glitter and streamers.

Pinkie Pie needing help? I thought she was supposed to be the happy one, yet that was almost begging. Terminals. Lists of ponies? I thought the Ministry of Morale was supposed to be about fun? How in the Wasteland had she gone from fun time Pinkie Pie to that?

“Can we go now?” Glory asked softly as the building groaned around us. There were faint popping noises in the floor. “Please… Blackjack,” Glory begged as she backed out the door.

"I…wait," I muttered as I looked to the skeleton in the corner. Slowly I crawled closer. I could feel the floor quivering under my hooves. There! A flash of pink under the bones. Gently, I reached out with my magic and tugged the tiny pink figurine free. Slowly I pulled it close and turned it with my magic, my eyes widening as I stared at the tiny plaque. *'Awareness: It was under 'E'!'* it read. I looked at her mischievous grin, her bright and shining eyes…not that desperate and sobbing pony I'd seen just a minute earlier.

Why were the walls around the Cakes full of bullet holes?

I could see them as clear as day through the layer of filth and peeling candy cane wallpaper. The holes were evenly spaced; an automatic sweeping from left to right. This was a murder. Another two-hundred-year-old murder. My mane crawled on my neck as I remembered the ponies in the museum. And then I spotted the writing on the wall. The sort of thing that you might try to write as you bled out while cradling the statue of your surrogate daughter.

Project Eternity.

Then my senses picked up something else: clouds through gaps in the roof and Glory screaming as the room slowly peeled away from the rest of the structure. I gripped the statuette in my mouth and scrabbled for the door as rotten carpet sloughed away underhoof. The rotting turret leaning out over me was starting to collapse as well.

Then hooves wrapped around me as Glory leapt through the door and squeezed me tightly as she flapped her wings for all she was worth. Out we went, over the broken side of the building as the turret crashed down. The wind nearly knocked me from her hooves as it passed. "Glory! You're flying!" I cheered and then looked back. "Glory, we need to go back! There's three more in there and it's about to come down!" Indeed, the entire building seemed to be disintegrating before my eyes. In a minute or two it would pancake flat.

She just looked and then nodded, swinging me through the air back towards the second floor hall.

I ran smack into a buck scrambling for the stairs. Then I noticed something unusual… *It was under 'E'!* For one, he was mostly clean. Two, he smelled of semen and musk. Three, there was blood on his rear legs. Fourth, I knew him. I saw the bow tie on his gray flanks.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, ignoring the shaking building as joists popped and creaked.

"Run! It's collapsing!" he shouted; he hadn't tried to run until I'd fallen out.

My eyes narrowed. "What the fuck are you doing here?" He stared into my gaze and then looked over his shoulder at the back room. I grabbed his ear in my teeth and with a pull threw him over my shoulders and tossed him out over the edge. Fortunately, I was aiming for beyond the wreckage and he landed, thrashing and sputtering, the muck having broken his fall. "P-21, sit on him! Rampage! Prop this building up!" I turned and rushed towards the room with the other two non-hostiles. I could hear the bricks of the stove below collapsing.

Inside were a number of metal bed frames and a unicorn mare and a filly who were bound to one with a particularly bloody mattress. The filly was just tied with rope, but the mare had been chained and hoofcuffed. I made one swipe with my dragon claw and freed the filly. "Get her out of here," I shouted at Glory as I looked back at the mare.

At the lavender unicorn mare with a broken horn.

'I just gotta survive, I have a kid.'

A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the tight cuffs locked around her hooves. They were cutting into her hide. Hopelessness bloomed in her eyes. "Please, take care of Thorn," she shouted.

"Not happening!" I said as I looked at the locks. I had no clue if I could pick them. "You're going to get out of here…" I focused my horn on the locks. I didn't even have a bobby pin on hand! Instead I just forced the lock to turn, my eyes watering.

Snap! With that clear, crisp breaking noise, I knew that that the lock connecting the chain to the beds wasn't coming off. I glared at the two cuffs. Carefully…carefully…my eyes watered as I fought to maintain focus.

Snap!

"Sweet mother fucking Celestia, cut me some slack here!" I screamed as I bit down on the chain, wrapped it in my forehooves, braced my hindhooves against the metal headboard, and started to pull. "Come onnnn!" I screamed as I strained, my heart thudding in my chest as if I was riding a high of Buck. Buck! The way my heart was beating now…could I take some more? *Be strong.* I had to be strong. I had to be better. I levitated the tablet of Buck and chewed. The energy surged to my limbs as I screamed and pulled with all my might. My heart beat so loud that I couldn't hear the collapsing

building around me.

Then the chain gave way with a loud ping. I didn't hesitate a second as I shoved my head through her cuffed hooves and lifted her onto my back. Ducking my head, I ran from the collapsing building. The floor dropped out from under us as I leapt for the doorway to the missing room. A great gust of wind picked us up and shot us into the debris as the building collapsed behind us.

We were together in a tangle of limbs, chains, and broken wood. Rampage pulled herself from the wreckage, gripping a jagged spar that impaled her torso and pulling it free as if she were removing a splinter. I knew exactly how she felt. My heart beat so hard it felt like there was a spear of wood in my chest! I really wished I could yank it out, too. I struggled to breathe, but each pant didn't bring in any air! Glory flew to my side. "Oh, you idiot! What did you take? Buck? Hydra? It was Buck, wasn't it?" she cried as she fought to keep my head above the foul water. "Your heart is going to explode, you jackass!" she shouted, and then pulled out a Med-X and jabbed it home. The pain lessened and I liked to imagine that my heart rate was slowing down.

"Is she going to be okay?" the unicorn with the broken horn murmured. I was struck by the ironic sight of flowers for her cutie mark. I'd only seen them in pictures.

"No. She is not," Glory said firmly. "She is going to kill herself at this rate. Because she is not a smart pony!"

"She…saved me…" the lavender unicorn said as she sat down.

Glory looked at her broken horn and her eyes widened. "You're that slaver." She winced and her foal ran to her side. Glory looked at the young filly and then at the slaver. "You…She…Urrrrgh!" The pegasus walked to one side and began stomping plastic candy lawn ornaments. "I preferred Deus. At least it was easy to hate him... " she fumed.

"No offense, but what are we going to do with him?" P-21 asked as he nodded down to the buck he sat on; P-21 had shoved an apple grenade in the buck's mouth. I wasn't exactly sure if that was the smartest thing to do, but the buck wasn't trying anything.

Slowly I sat up, the Med-X calming me down enough to catch my breath. "What?"

"He's a rapist. Are we going to let him go to do it again?" P-21 asked as he tapped the stem of the apple.

"Take it out of his mouth, P-21." I felt oddly numb. "You're…Frisk,

right?" I asked as P-21 removed the explosive. "What the fuck do you think you were doing?"

"Getting even," he muttered as he glared up at me. "When she had the guns she tied me up and was happy to sell me to Paradise."

"And she got her horn smashed for it. Are you saying she tried it a second time?" He just glared up at me. I looked at the unicorn as my heart thudded in my chest.

I heard a whisper in my ears. "So…what's the proper punishment for a rapist?" the old pale buck murmured in a voice like shuffling cards.

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered.

"Blackjack!" P-21 hissed in outrage. "How is this fucker different from 99?"

"He's different in that I have to pull the trigger," I said firmly as I stared down at him. "I won't make you or Glory murderers."

"It's not murder," P-21 argued.

I looked at him. "He's unarmed."

"He's not Mini. He's not dying slowly and tragically. This buck is scum," P-21 retorted.

Glory just swallowed. "I know what he did was wrong. And I don't want him to ever do it again, but killing him isn't the answer."

We glanced at Rampage. She cocked a brow and snickered. "What, you want my opinion?" She then turned to the foal who watched us all warily. "Did he hurt you, sweetie?" she asked with a surprisingly gentle smile. The filly returned a scared but slow shake of her head. Rampage shrugged. "Eh, I'm good either way."

I looked at the mare then; the mare that I had maimed in my own battle rage. "Do you want me to kill him?" I asked, hearing those cards shuffle over and over again. I'm not an executioner. I'm not. This is justice. This is what's fair!

She met my gaze and gave the tiniest of nods.

Out came the hunting rifle. Funny how I couldn't hear my heart anymore. It was as if everything inside me had gone still and quiet. "Let him up," I muttered, and with a frown P-21 agreed. My eyes met Frisk's. "You have till the count of ten to run." P-21 pressed his lips together as the buck scrambled to his hooves. "One," I said softly.

Frisk backed away slowly. "Two," I counted as I lifted the barrel with my magic. He immediately turned and ran. I grit my teeth. "Three."

"Are you going to be able to do it, Blackjack?" P-21 asked with a scowl. Would I?

"Four," I intoned, watching him run through the ankle deep water. With rubble to either side of him, he could only go in one direction. "Five." The water sprayed up around him as I leveled the crosshairs on the back of his neck. "Six."

"You can't do this, Blackjack. Please. You're not a murderer!" Glory begged. Was I? I'd always been a killer. Was I ready to becoming an executioner, killing coolly and deliberately?

"Seven." I'd thought he'd be further along, but he was slowed by the water and junk hidden under the surface. "Eight." I saw the crosshairs tremble on the back of his head.

Rampage didn't say a word. *You'll bash your skull to paste long before you die of thirst.* "Nine."

Is this how it begins?

"Ten."

Be kind.

I clenched my eyes shut and collapsed in the water, tears running down my face as I fell to my knees, hugging the rifle to keep from losing the weapon in the muck. I let out a sob as I bowed my head. I could imagine P-21's disappointed expression as I failed him again.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. Then I looked at the maimed mare. She stared at me in shock. "I couldn't…I wanted to, but I couldn't. I'm sorry."

The mare just held her wide-eyed foal. Then she said softly, "I really don't mind…you didn't kill me either."

* * *

"You are one strange pony," Scalpel said as I stood in her auto-doc, letting the machine probe and restore me through her magic. "Most ponies don't bust a horn one day and pay to replace it the next." Roses, the mare I'd rescued…and almost killed... was resting upstairs with Thorn.

"She quit being a slaver," I replied softly. "That has to count for something."

"She lost her gun and her crew. That doesn't mean she quit."

"Frisk raped her. She deserves something," I muttered.

“If it wasn’t in Flank, doesn’t matter,” she replied as she took another drink.

“It matters.”

“To you, sure. To me, a bit. But to most ponies, it was her own fault getting caught. Hell, most ponies would think it fair payback to a former slaver.”

“She has a foal.”

“Well, that’s a first in the Wasteland,” Scalpel said with a chuckle. “You know what your problem is?”

“Brain damage?”

“You think all ponies are good people, and you want to help them.”

“That’s a problem?”

“It is if you think you can help all of them on your own.”

“Don’t you help everypony you can?”

“Sure do, but I’ve narrowed down my ‘can’ a bit to what I can manage. I recognize that some ponies can’t be helped. Too addicted. Too burned out. Too eaten up. They’ll take every bit of help I can offer and still mess themselves up. So I have to make the rotten call and write them off. And they die, sure enough as if I’d shot ‘em dead. But if I didn’t, I’d be just as dead.”

“So it’s you or them, is that it?”

“They don’t have a chance without me,” she replied with a shrug.

I sighed and closed my eyes. “I could have killed her, but I didn’t want to be an executioner. I wanted to kill him, but I couldn’t do it. Why?”

She tapped my head. “Because you want to save ‘em. You want them to be good ponies again. But ponies ain’t good or bad. Ponies is ponies, and the sooner you realize that, the easier it’ll be.”

“Yeah, but I’m too stupid for easy.”

“Well, I’ll say something nice at your funeral.”

“I get one? Sweet. Will there be cake?”

She laughed as she deactivated the machine. “You are one twigged mare.”

“I’ll take that as a good thing,” I replied with a grin.

Her expression turned more serious as she adjusted her glasses. “Are you looking to take over Flank?”

“I dunno. Should I?”

“Not if you believe in good ponies.”

“The ponies here aren’t?”

“Nopony is. Some try, but Flank isn’t about helping. Here,

everypony is looking out for themselves and doing what they have to do."

I closed my eyes, imagining Barpony. "I know two that are looking out for others."

"Well, that's two more than I know," she replied.

I smiled and gave a shake before slipping my barding back on. "I need to find Caprice. Is she back in her office yet?"

"Ask your friend at the bar," Scalpel said with a little snicker. "You do know who she is, don't you?"

"I keep trying to find out," I muttered.

"Oh, well, I won't ruin the surprise for you."

I huffed softly. "And that keeps happening."

Something was wrong, and once again I couldn't put my hoof on it. Did Scalpel always look so…tired? "Well, speaking of Caprice, I should probably go and tell her that we'll have finished fortifying this place soon. And if she doesn't like it then I'm handing it all to that barpony. Or you. Or somepony. Hell, I can run this place better than she can." Great. Now Scalpel looked worried.

"Well…I'm sure she'll be glad to hear that. Why don't you get a bite at the Trough first, though? Magic is no substitute for food," she said with her frayed smile.

"Good idea. See you later," I replied. Walking out, I noticed something else; these were the same addicts as I'd seen before. In fact, they were the same as when I'd first been brought in. I supposed treatment took more than a single day; look at how many times I'd been back to deal with the damage I caused myself.

Still…

Things weren't much better in the Trough. For some reason, I was noticing how off things were. The bountiful food really wasn't all that great in amount; they just spread it out more. The 'fresh' produce from the Society was withered and pale. The apples on top were decent enough, but most of the remainder were soft and overripe. Even 200 Years Fresh had empty cardboard boxes behind the packages. The only food that actually looked appetizing, I'm sorry to say, was the food in the Enclave shop, and that was closed and locked up.

Something was definitely off. I supposed that, having been around Flank for a while, I'd finally started to notice things. Still, had the security mares always followed me around like that? They didn't look like they were after more pointers. P-21 and Rampage had

gone to raid Deus's camp of everything not nailed down while Glory and I returned to Flank. She was now in the Exchange, trying to convert our salvage to caps.

And me? It was time to see Caprice.

I strode into Stable 89, my eyes starting to flicker amber as I'd finally sucked up enough radiation to trigger my mutation. I was resolved to see Caprice and get this done.

Then I saw Barpony chatting with Scalpel. The former seemed to be waiting for me, and my nethers gave me other options as Scalpel trotted further in. I guess even doctors needed to scratch that itch from time to time. "Hey," I said, with an easy grin. She looked good…tired…tense…worried…but good. Really good...

"Hey yourself," she said as she bumped my rump and passed me a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. "Heard you had a busy day helping the town."

"Yeah, something like that." I took a pull off the bottle. It tasted… odd. Sweet, but also bitter. It must have been an old bottle…"But I need to see Caprice. I have business with her." Her eyes twitched to my barding, my guns.

"Oh? Well, she's still out, but how about we go back to my quarters till she gets back?" she asked, and only the thought of her offer kept me from going through the roof.

"Sure," I said with a chuckle, groaning as she nuzzled my mane. I had to admit, watching this filly's flank was even more appealing now. It was like a moon…like a beautiful peach moon…

* * *

I had to admit that there was something nice about her room. Maybe it was the light. Everything in the room had a whitish silvery glow to it. I was glowing. She was glowing. It was like we were making love in the stars.

I just gave such a wide grin my cheeks hurt. "Okay. I'm ready for another."

"Unfortunately, I need to check on a few things, and then I'll be back," she said as she slipped from my hooves.

I closed my eyes again with a soft groan. "So not fair…"

"Don't whine, Blackjack," she told me with a little wink. "It makes you sound virginal." With that she slipped out the door and I groaned.

I lay on my back, trying to touch that soft shimmery light.
"Blackjack," the old buck rasped.
"Go away. I've orgasmed. I don't need to talk to crazy."
"Blackjack. You need to take a Fixer," he said softly.
"Fixer doesn't fix nothing. That's what Glory said," I muttered as I looked up at the colors. "I feel good. Why do I need to fix that? Everything's so…ugly. She's pretty. She's nice. Let me feel good. Please?"
"Maybe. But this isn't real. You need to take a Fixer. She has some in her drawer."
"How do you know that?"
"You know it," he replied simply.
I started to cry. "Just let me stay here. Please. I don't want to go out there where it's horrible. I am so sick of horrible. I liked it better when I didn't notice how…bad…things are."
"That's a price you pay for noticing. Look at Pinkie Pie. Look at what she saw. See how it destroyed her? You can't lie here, Blackjack. Get on your hooves." I slowly rolled out of bed and staggered over to her desk. I lifted the package of Fixer, wincing at the way the red colors of the packaging bled into the silver glow.
I pressed the bitter tablet to my tongue and chewed.
The glow disappeared and I gave myself a brisk shake. Everything from the hallway to the bed was a blur. My barding and stuff was nowhere to be seen. "Please…" I whispered to the memory of long dead goddesses, "Please please don't let this be a set up…"
Her room was decorated with strands of colored lights. Every inch of the room had strange little trinkets and nick-knacks. I looked at some of her treasures. A spent magic cartridge? A foal hoof bootie? A kazoo? They were all teasing me, making me wonder about this mare.
I noticed a lot of papers in a waste basket. I probably wouldn't have paused if I hadn't noticed the writing was all fancy and looping, like how I'd seen Princess Celestia write. I floated one out, narrowing my eyes. "My dearest Peach Pie. I look forward to munching on your apricot of love. No words can adequately express how full and throbbing my rhubarb is for your delectable flower. I long to nuzzle your sweet grass and look forward to your lips full of celery. Your sweetest cherry, Lord Orange. Oooookay…" Then I glanced down. "PS: I am including an incentive of ten thousand caps to sway you to my garden of love."

Ten thousand caps for sex? I couldn't imagine. I looked at her desk and the colorful bottles; not just soda. Perfume bottles. And there were foal stickers all over her terminal. And glitter. And…

It was under 'E'!

Then I noticed it: a little spot of something drab on the bookshelf. Something plain. It wasn't hidden so much as simply placed behind layers and layers of junk; that's what all this was. Not trophies or important mementos but simply stuff. Stuff to deceive and mislead. A veil. Slowly I walked to the bookshelf and my horn carefully moved aside the bottles and levitated out a picture in a dusty frame.

Softly I swept it aside and looked down at the grainy, black and white photograph of a grizzly buck standing over three fillies, hugging them all in his hooves. The one on the left, with the disdainful look at the other two, I didn't know. The one on the right, grinning gleefully up at the old buck, was the barpony who'd given me all kinds of wonderful feelings minutes ago. But in the middle…

Bottlecap.

The door hissed open right then and in walked Caprice. Suddenly I could see around her edges. The apprehension underlying her smooth demeanor. The wariness in her eyes. The *fear*. She was afraid of me. Why? I wasn't her enemy, was I?

Yes…I was.

"You're…you're up…," she said, trying to keep her voice smooth. She may have pulled it off before too, but now I heard the strain in her voice.

"Yeah. I think I took something," I said calmly as I put the picture back and then I levitated the package of Fixer. "So I took something else," I said, frowning. "Why didn't you tell me you were Caprice?"

"I was just playing…" she began, sliding into an easily prepared line. My lips pressed together. That was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. Not even most of the truth. "Blackjack, please…why don't we continue our fun, hmm?"

I looked at her, not smiling now. I just stared and watched her slowly unravel. The tense smile. The pleading eyes. The nervous shake. A little pressure and they were impossible to hide. "No. I think we're done with that, Caprice."

"Please don't kill me," she whispered as she shook.

"What? What are you talking about?" I frowned as I looked at her, feeling my mane crawl. "Gemini and Taurus…they knew exactly

where to find me. And U-21. And Deus. You sold me out!" I shouted at her as my eyes narrowed. "You fucked me!" She started to back out the door, but my stare locked her in place. "You told the security mares to step aside, didn't you? You wanted me to come into the stable. Make me nice and comfortable. Drug me up and hand me over to Deus? And Taurus knew exactly where that bridge was to cut me off. He could have sniped me easily if I hadn't trapped Mini."

"I had no choice!" she cried out. "It was hand you over or Deus would have leveled Flank and buried us alive inside the stable! This town is everything. It's all I have," she said as she finally backed away. "Now you're taking over. Just like Usury did at Paradise and Bottlecap did at Megamart. You're going to take Flank away from me!" she yelled as she backed towards the door.

"I wanted to protect it. I wanted to protect you. You could have told me! You could have just asked me to go. I wanted to help you, Caprice. Not Flank, you!" I snarled as the white glow of my magic sheathed my horn. It was like back at the mine; I was looking right at a softer, sweeter Lancer. A snake. If I didn't kill her now, she'd just bite me again later.

A dry shuffling of cards and an expectant silence.

"But I am NOT a fucking executioner," I snapped as she backed away through the door into the overmare's office. I walked over to my saddlebags and pulled out her letter from Bottlecap and threw it in her face. "There! Message delivered. The Finders owe me for three contracts. Pay up."

She looked at the letter at her hooves, shaking. Without opening it she tossed it into the trash and then walked to her safe. She pulled out five bags marked '1000c' and set them on the table. I swept them into my saddlebags. She stiffed me 10%... but I didn't care at this point. I just wanted to get the hell out of Flank.

"I'm sorry…" she muttered softly. "I just…liked not being me."

"Yeah," I muttered back, chewing down another bitter tablet. "I liked you not being you too."

* * *

I'm the security pony. I'm the one that shows up to kill all the fun. Flank was glad to see me go. They had their turrets; the rest was up to them. I'd wrangled a few concessions for our hard work: a

working wagon, the contents of Octavia's closet, a few recordings from Mixers. Those two had been the only ones genuinely sad to see me leave. Even Scalpel had just looked at me with her tired, burned out eyes and just given me a shrug.

Roses and Thorn would be coming with us to Megamart or just someplace that wasn't here. When Rampage and P-21 returned, we simply loaded it all in the cart and left.

"So. You figure out who Caprice is yet?" the Reaper asked.

"Shut up, Rampage…" I muttered.

Ponies is ponies, Scalpel had said. They're not good or evil. Maybe that was true; maybe we were all somewhere on a slope of gray. But I knew there were ponies who struggled every day to stay as high on that slope as they could, and others that just apathetically slid further and further down.

Footnote: Level Up.

Perk added: Action Mare (level two)–You know your targeting spell like the back of your hoof, making you about 20% cooler in combat. For each level of this perk, you gain +15 action points in S.A.T.S.

Skills Note: Lockpicking (50)

Chapter 18: Monsters

"It seems like the only thing royal about you is that you are a royal pain!"

What is 'security'? I know I have the word on my barding, but what does it really mean? For most of my life, security meant walking two hours patrol through the living quarters, listening for the occasional alert, and long tedious hours writing reports so banal that I could fill them out in my sleep. Security was keeping the peace, maintaining stability, and preserving order.

But what is security in the Wasteland, where there's no peace, stability, or order left to keep? Am I supposed to create them on my own? I'm just one mare. I'd tried to instill them in a community where I thought security was needed. A gift, or so I thought. But my attempts were seen as threats, an attempt to usurp Flank from ponies ultimately content with the discord, instability, and disorder. I wasn't just unwanted; I was everything they opposed.

What am I supposed to be doing in the Wasteland? All my life, I had a role. P-21 rebelled against his, but while there aren't words for how much I respect him for that, my role was comfortable, and in a way I've grown even more attached to it since I left the stable. Damn me, I like being security. When I see the raiders, slavers, bandits, and thugs that infest the land around Hoofington, standing in opposition to them makes me feel like I'm a little bit above the rest of the heap. Call it pride, if you want. But more and more I feel…lost.

And through it all, resting in my PipBuck is EC-1101, a mystery that I am simply not smart enough to solve. So what is my place here? Am I to simply find somewhere to call home and defend it to my dying breath? Chapel. Even Megamart. They wouldn't be bad places to live. The question is, would I be able to close my eyes and cover my ears to everything beyond?

What's better, to fight against the entirety of the Wasteland and fail, or to care for a small part and ignore what remains? How can I do better?

* * *

The rain dripped in streaks along my glasses as we trudged along the road northeast towards Chapel. The fact that we were heading to one of the few decent places in all of the Wasteland didn't do much to raise my spirits. That snide little suspicion was already whispering: something was going to go wrong. Something always went wrong.

I glanced at P-21 as he rode in the wagon next to Thorn. Well... maybe not quite always.

The wagon was full of gear from Deus's camp; despite the few survivors of the Battle of Flank who'd stopped running long enough to loot the place, there'd been more locked chests and ammo boxes than the bounty hunters could open. Most of it was junk, but some of it was useful. P-21 busied himself with cracking the containers open as we travelled along the broken asphalt past rusting wagons. I could only watch in awe as he ignored the swaying and errant bouncing.

We stopped for a break outside a Hippocampus Energy skywagon battery-swapping station as the rain picked up. My throat felt all scratchy and my nose wouldn't stop running. Thorn wasn't doing much better. Rampage busted some Sunrise Sarsaparilla crates into fuel for a fire, and Roses started to boil water in an old coffee pot. P-21 stayed in the garage, continuing to work. When he started on a heap of medical boxes, I nudged his flank. "Let me try those? You can tell me what I'm doing wrong."

I don't know why, but he actually smiled. Ugh, bucks are weird. "What brought this on?"

"Roses almost died because I couldn't open a lock. I don't want that to happen again," I said as I levitated a bobby pin out of his cardboard box. "So tell me what I'm doing wrong so I can do better?"

I hated picking locks. I hated having a cold. I hated being clammy and shivery all the time. As unlikely as it was, I imagined Lighthooves somehow manipulating the weather just to make me miserable. It felt good to have somepony to blame. Still, I had to

admit that this was nice, just lying side by side while I winnowed down his supply of bobby pins.

"A little farther…now tap, don't twist. That's it…almost…" And SNAP. I thumped my head against the yellow case, loathing pink butterflies. "Well, close."

"Unless there are healing grenades in there, I don't think close counts," I said with a sigh, sliding the box over to him. "Sorry for wasting your time."

He blinked, waving the bobby pin at me with his lips. "Excuse me?" he asked around the mouthful.

"With trying to help Flank," I said as I looked out at the pouring rain. "If I hadn't been clueless and actually realized she was Caprice…I dunno."

"You think that somehow you could have magically made them good and deserving ponies?" he asked with a half smile, arching his brow. When I nodded, he sighed and shook his head. "Blackjack, I wish you were right. I thought that Flank was…okay. Maybe a little too vice oriented, but okay. But the ponies there made up their minds a long time ago about the kind of people they were going to be. You can't make ponies change just by wanting it."

"I know, I was just so stupid," I muttered. He thumped the back of my head, then opened the medical kit with a flick of his screwdriver. I don't know which stung more.

"You were optimistic, Blackjack. It's one of your best qualities. I wouldn't have tried helping them. If you were wrong, then some lousy ponies would luck out and get something they don't deserve. If I was wrong, ponies who needed our help wouldn't get it. Which sounds better to you?" It did make a little bit of sense. I coughed, turning my head. I definitely didn't want to share my budding cold.

"So what's inside?" I asked as I flipped the hatch open with my horn. The rotten egg stench hit me immediately. The healing potion inside was so corrupted by Enervation that it'd eaten right through the metal stopper on the bottle. Two needles of Med-X looked intact; the bottle of filtered water, too. I looked out at all the rain. Maybe I could replace it with whiskey. "That's what, the fifth spoiled potion?"

"Twelfth, if you count the ones that were so weak they looked like water," he said as he set the goods aside and threw the case out into the rain with the others. Some of the potions were so corrupted that I swore they were moving inside their vials. He glanced back at me.

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you about Caprice, Blackjack,” he said softly.

“I must have looked like quite the idiot,” I said with a little smirk, then coughed hard.

“You looked happy,” he replied. “I think you really liked the idea of helping ponies out just because it was the right thing to do. I couldn’t have done that.”

I crossed my forehooves. “I was happy. And it was nice, even if it wasn’t real.” But I remembered Pinkie and that horrible glee that seemed to rot away into a begging mess before disappearing. Had the pink party pony really been happy? I’d never seen a poster of her without a smile on her face. I looked at P-21 with a little smile. “So…what makes you happy?”

He blinked in surprise and then shook his head with a smile. “This,” he said with a sweep of his hoof.

“Rain? Picking locks?”

“Everything. Oh, sure, there’s a lot of it that pisses me off, too, but I’m alive, Blackjack! I’ve spent every year of my life knowing that, when I got that twenty-first dot, I was dead. I spent a year trying to think of a plan to escape and now…I’m out. Thanks to you,” he said with a smile as he looked down at me. “I’m pretty sure that someday the Wasteland might take that from me, make me bitter and disappointed, but right now I couldn’t be happier.”

Then he chuckled softly and corrected himself, “Actually, I would be happier knowing that 99 had ended its reproductive policy.”

“I think so. I mean, with the Overmare dead and the attack and the stable’s problems, they just can’t keep going. I know Mom will get things in order, and then they’ll have to come out. And if they don’t, then when we have EC-1101 worked out, we’ll go back and bring ‘em kicking and screaming outside,” I said with a smile.

“And will you be able to give justice to those that won’t give it up?” he asked before picking at a case with a tight, tiny little lock. I had no idea how he managed to open it up, but a stack of bright orange shells greeted us. They were each almost as long as my hoof, and I curiously brought out Folly and slipped one in. No dice. These shells were still a little too small.

I sighed softly. “I don’t know. I realize that the only way to really stop a pony is to kill them, but I think that if I start killing ponies…even if they deserve it…I won’t be able to stop.” I turned the shell over and looked at him. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

He sighed, looking at his hooves. “Because I really…really… wanted to kill him. If I’m going to kill somepony, I don’t want it to be because I’m getting back at Stable 99.”

“You’re a good pony, P-21,” I said as I set the shells aside... and then noticed a small wooden box taped into the corner of the case. What really drew my attention, though, was a written note on it that simply read ‘For Security’. “What’s this…” I muttered. My horn glowed--and P-21 reached over and touched it with his hoof, looking serious…okay, more serious than usual. The contact broke my concentration and set me blushing furiously.

Carefully, he nudged the tape back and checked around the sides of the box. Then I saw the tiny wire connected to an adjacent explosive shell. If I’d just pulled the box, it would have yanked the wire, detonated the explosive shell…and all the others. I felt like I’d been plunged into a tub of ice water. He nudged the lid of the box open slowly to reveal a folded-up note and a glowing memory orb. These I carefully levitated out. Once the box was empty, he carefully lifted both box and shell and trotted out into the rain.

I unfolded the note.

Security Cunt, I know it’s you reading this. I know because any other fucker is blown to bloody chunks. That’s good. This orb has a little message from me to you. Look at it. Don’t. I don’t give a fuck. But I want every bitch and bastard to get what they deserve. Especially you. Especially him. Especially me. From the pits of hell, fuck you Security.

D

“You can’t seriously take him up on his offer,” P-21 said softly as he looked over my shoulder; I hadn’t heard him come back.

“Of course not,” I said as I levitated the orb. “This is probably some kind of deathtrap or something. I mean, I really wouldn’t be dumb enough to do what he wants; even I’m not *that* big an idiot,” I said with the most wide and sincere grin I could manage. I tossed the memory orb out into the rainy night. “There. See?”

He relaxed a little. “You had me worried there for a moment. Memory orbs from psychotic Reapers are nothing you need to experience.” He looked at the rest of the boxes and then back at me. “Why don’t you head inside? I’m down to my last bobby pin. I’ll go in as soon as it snaps.”

“All right,” I said as I stood and trotted towards the door to the store, pausing to glance out at the rain. “I didn’t need his orb anyway. I don’t want anything Deus can offer.”

Inside, the lavender unicorn boiled water inside a rusty coffee can. All her worldly belongings were in two ragged saddlebags, but among them was some kind of grass. Her purple eyes were scared to death of me, but her kid looked at me more curiously now that she was sure I wasn't going to hurt her mother. Rampage had found a sock and somehow fashioned it into a crude horn puppet that she waggled on the end of her helmet's spike.

Glory brought me a coffee cup full of water that smelled of weeds. "Roses made some tea."

"'Tea'," I muttered slowly as I took the steaming cup. "I'm drinking a letter?"

"Just drink it, Blackjack. It'll help with your cold," Glory said, giving my shoulder a nudge. I took a slow sip of the warm water that tasted like weeds had been boiled in it. "Swallow!" she ordered me as my cheeks bulged. But I couldn't swallow this disgusting slop! "Do it!" My eyes watered and I gulped it down. Okay, it did help my throat, but…ugh! Glory relaxed a little. "Now drink the rest of it."

"Can I put some RadAway in it first?" I muttered, getting a dangerous look from the gray pegasus. She'd swapped her uniform for regular black wastelander clothes. I wanted to get her something a lot more substantial, at least on par with security barding, as soon as we reached Megamart. I sullenly drank the boiled weed water.

"She can gulp down hangover shots like they're nothing, but balks at tea," Rampage muttered softly, shaking her head.

"So…what are your plans?" I asked Roses as I set the cup aside and scrubbed my tongue.

"Take care of myself and my daughter," she said in a soft, hopeless voice. "I don't know how I can do that, though."

"Without being a slaver, you mean?" I said with a frown. She looked at me nervously and nodded. "How the heck did you get into that, anyway? I can't wrap my head around it."

"I was originally a caravaner. There were more villages back then, little stops along the Sunrise Highway," she said quietly, keeping her head bowed. "One day, I was at this little village where they were about to hang a pony. Murder…rape…I can't remember the crime anymore." She looked at her daughter, but the pink filly was captivated by the dirty little sock puppet. "I thought it was stupid. He was strong and healthy…and the Society always needed more workers. So I offered to take him off their hands for a hundred caps.

It was a win-win for them. They got paid and he was taken away. I sold him at Elysium for five hundred caps. After that, wherever I went I kept my eyes open for ponies who were selling other ponies. Usually criminals, or accused criminals."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It wasn't easy work. You have to keep slaves healthy and calm, or they'll get sick or fight. There were always raiders to worry about. Pay for food and the like. One day I came across a village that'd been hit hard. Bandits, I think, since there was more stuff stolen than murder and cannibalism. There were four survivors. They were starving, so…" She sighed and shrugged.

"You enslaved them," I muttered.

"And saved their lives," she added sharply. "I know it sounds terrible, but most places take care of their slaves. Food. Shelter. It's not a nice life or a long one, but it's life. If they work the slaves to death, then they have to shell out the caps to replace them." Roses shook her head. "I don't know how operations like Red Eye and Brimstone's Fall can operate. They must spend caps out the nose to keep buying at those rates. It's insane."

"Money tends to make some ponies like that," Glory observed dryly.

"I have a kid," she said quietly. "Flank may not have been the best home for her, but it was a home. I know what I did was wrong, but I had to do it."

"And would you do it again?" I asked levelly. She shuddered and shook her head, but now I could see it in her eyes. She would do it again, if she had to. "Hopefully you'll be able to find something in Chapel. A better life."

"I hope so," she said. Because if she didn't, she might try to be a slaver again, and if she did that then I'd turn her into paint. I wondered if I actually could. Or would I just chicken out once again?

"Hey, Blackjack. What is that?" Glory asked as she pointed a wing at the instrument case.

I rubbed my runny nose and adjusted my glasses. "Just an instrument. I don't even know how to play it or what it is."

"Then why bring it?"

"I don't know. Why not?"

Glory smiled and arched a brow. "Because it's the size of a tank?"

"It's a contrabass," Roses said softly as she rose and walked to the

case. She opened it up slowly and sucked in her breath. “A very good quality contrabass.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I worked with the Society. You have to pick up these little things if you want to get ahead with those ponies. I can even pretend to like opera around those folks,” she said as she plucked a string, the note sounding sour and short. “It definitely needs some tuning.” She looked over at me and managed a shaky smile. “I can show you some basics on how to play. In return for everything.”

“I thought unicorns made their music through their horns,” Rampage muttered.

“If they know an appropriate spell, and even knowing the spell they might not know the first thing about playing. I could make a sound like a flute and play a few tunes, but it’s much harder to sound good.” She looked at the sheet music. “And if you want to impress the Society, then you have to be good.”

I looked at the others, but saw only polite curiosity. “Okay, but I apologize for bleeding ears,” I said as I lifted the bass with my magic and then stood behind it. Roses immediately smiled. “What?”

“You’re holding it like an earth pony. You can just use your magic,” she said as she lifted a sheet of music and flipped through it. Her own magic was barely strong enough to turn a page.

“This is the way that feels…right,” I muttered, already self-conscious. Ugh, even Rampage and Thorn were watching! I felt a little weak in the gut. This was going to be terrible.

I lifted the black-haired bow, pinching it behind my fetlock, and drew it across the strings, a smile rising to my lips at the note. Roses started. “I…guess it doesn’t need to be tuned.” She turned to the music and explained the notes and how each one corresponded to a position on the instrument. To my amazement it came to me as easily as cards.

“You’re certain you’ve never played before?” Roses asked as everypony looked on.

P-21 came in, looking curious. He smiled at once. “Well, I’ve made noise, but I’ve never actually played something.” Looking at the music was like looking at a hand of cards; I could see each value between the notes, half notes, and quarter notes like different suits. “This is going to be terrible. You all know that, right?”

“Oh, just play. It’s not like we’ve got much else to do tonight,” Rampage said with a snicker as she sat Thorn in her hooves,

holding her gently. Roses looked a bit nervous, but I pitied anything that dared threaten the foal at that second.

I looked at the notes. Slowly. Relax. Don't worry about it. And the bow began to stroke over the strings. See the note, execute. I could have been practicing with a baton as I moved the bow and tried desperately to get the song right. At least I had accompaniment.

"Twinkle twinkle little star; Luna alone knows what you are. Up above the world so high, like a pony in the sky. Twinkie twinkle little star; Luna alone knows what you are." I had to admit, I was more on key than she, but Thorn was ten times more fearless than I!

"Blackjack! That was amazing! How…that can't have been your first time!" Glory gushed.

"Really. It was," I said, feeling lightheaded. "Can we do another?"

Roses turned to the next one in the book. The song was unfamiliar. Something about cupcakes, and it was much faster than the first. Still, I focused, trying to get every note right; I didn't, of course. Nopony seemed to mind the occasional slip as my hoof pulled the bow back and forth against the strings. When I finished, I panted at the exertion. Playing music was harder than I'd anticipated.

"You've got a real talent for that. I'm really shocked you don't have musical notes for a cutie mark," Roses observed as Thorn clopped her hooves vigorously upon the floor. Her simple statement struck me.

I'd never had a choice. As I touched my cheek to the neck of the instrument, I realized that from birth I'd never have been allowed to do this. I was security. I was allowed to listen to music, but play it? Create it? It was like listening to Sweetie Belle for the first time, or hearing that chorus ringing through the chapel and aching within to join it. My eyes met P-21's. Had I gotten my cutie mark simply by default? I was good at cards and luck, but could I have been something else?

I'd always thought being forced into security had been an annoyance. I'd never imagined that Stable 99 had robbed me of something so personal.

"Well, that was incredible," Roses said as she flipped through the book. The next one was about dresses and much slower, but somehow richer. Then one about winter; did Equestria even have a winter anymore? I probably butchered both, but at this point I didn't care. She turned to the next. "Oh, you'll love this one, Thorn," she said as she turned it to the next page, "It's your

favorite." My eyes went straight to the notes, glad to play for the delighted filly.

Then I played the notes. Thorn clopped her hooves in glee and sang off key, "Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head…"

My poor, diseased heart tightened into a hard gnarled hoof in my chest as I continued to play. I bowed my head, not needing the music. Not needing anything but to stand there and endure. I could see Thorn, not sitting safe in Rampage's lap, but trapped within the glassy pod wearing the wire mesh cap. I could hear the fans in the machines dying one after the other. The silence growing as I killed them.

The bow clattered from my hoof as I hugged the instrument and slowly slid down to my knees. I hid my face behind it, fighting to keep the sobs quiet. "Wha…what is it, Momma? Did I sing bad?" Thorn asked in worry.

"N…no. Blackjack loved your singing," Glory stammered as she rushed to my side. "She's just…"

A murderer. A monster.

I put the instrument away in its case. Everypony just stared; some in confusion and some in worry. Glory wept, of course.

"Blackjack…" she started to say as I walked past her. I saw her extend her hoof after me, P-21 stopping her with a shake of his head. Thank you, P-21.

I stepped out into the night rain. Just like that first time that seemed so long ago, the day when I'd killed my first young filly. My legs gave out beneath me. I closed my eyes, raised my head, and prayed desperately for the rain to wash it all away. I heard that song over and over in my sick heart, feeling hot tears mix with cold rain.

* * *

The best thing about being cold, wet, and sick to your heart is that your body couldn't care less. And so, in the middle of the night, I felt the call of nature and stirred to my hooves. There was a ditch beside the station that would do. I had done my business and started back when I spotted the faintest mote of light in the wet, dead grass. Slowly, I walked over to it and looked down at the memory orb I'd thrown into the rain.

I lifted it, staring at the memory of a monster. I'd thrown it away

with every intention of letting his vileness be lost to the Wasteland. That was before I was reminded of my own brand of vileness. Maybe it was a trap. Maybe this was one of those orbs that would kill me. Lock me into unconsciousness. I wouldn't put it past him. He'd wired it to a bomb, so I had little doubt that he wanted me dead. He was a monster.

So was I. I might have been a monster who felt guilty, but I was a monster all the same.

"So…" I muttered as I stared at the orb, its light casting my features in its ghostly glow, "One monster to another…what's on your mind, Deus?"

oooOOOooo

It was a trap.

Pain shot through me from head to hoof. Every motion, every breath, even the beating of my heart, ripped through me in a chorus of screams. I wanted to howl, but I had no mouth; to run, but I had no legs; to beg for release, but I had no life to snuff out. My body moved, and I felt mechanisms pull and pinch and tug at my bones, muscles, and flesh. A thousand upon a thousand nerves rasped and rubbed against inorganics trapped inside me. I wanted to take my dragon claw and rip them all out!

Then my host lifted a needle and jammed it into his neck. I felt a burning sensation as the agony melted away. And then I heard his voice, that faintly metallic speech. "Not fun, is it, cunt?" he asked low and soft as he trotted in front of a mirror. Even with the chem, I felt the pain chewing on my nerve endings. The only part of him that wasn't on fire was his crotch. "This is five times stronger than Med-X. It'd kill anypony without a cybernetic heart. I've got no idea where Sanguine gets it, or how he makes it."

He stood in a tent before a broken mirror, holding the empty syringe before his eyes. "This was my last fucking needle, cunt. Last. Fucking. Needle." His hooves came together, crushing the syringe. "So as soon as I'm done here, I'm coming for you. Since you're listening to this, I'm probably dead." He took a deep breath. "Thanks for that. Hopefully it was quick, but I wouldn't bet on it with my fucking luck."

I'd never had a chance to truly look at him up close. Now I could see the raw, angry flesh around the protruding bits of metal, the

way his eyelids had been ground away by the mechanical devices implanted in his sockets. I could feel how horribly heavy his body was, how the implants inside him tugged and twisted at his insides.

"So…I've got a choice. I want to fuck him. I want to fuck you. I really want to fuck you both, but if I had a choice…it would be him. So listen up. Sanguine does his business out of Paradise, but he keeps a special lab north of the Arena. Hippocratic Research." He gave a little snort, but his smile melted away. "Some prewar technology place where he tries to make…monsters…like me."

He sat hard, and I wanted to scream as I felt something internal tear. He didn't even flinch. "He didn't make me, though. I was always a monster. I just needed some armored organs for everypony else to figure it out." He looked at me with those ragged, torn eyes. "I'm glad you were a better fucking monster than me. And I hope you get put down before you're a worse one." He turned to look at a blue unicorn standing beside him, and then paused.

Then he scowled as he looked at himself in the mirror, seeming to be pondering something. "If you want to fucking know…if you care…go to the Miramare Air Station. There's special lockers there. Fifth one. Password is…'Momma'. Have my shit. Enjoy it. And just know that…fuck…I didn't want this. None of this." And for a moment, the monster slipped away, and I looked at the face of a tired old buck in pain and suffering. Then the moment passed, and he turned to the unicorn and shouted, "Now get this shit out of my head and lets go kill this cunt!"

oooOOOooo

With that, the pain ended, but not its effects. I lay in the wet grass, my limbs twitching as phantom pain shot through them. My eyes were wide as I stared off into the night. He hurt. I had never imagined, could not imagine, pain like that. I'd never imagined that the implants forced into his body would be painful. Every inch of reinforced flesh came at that horrible price. Only one region had been unenhanced and free of pain.

I'd changed that. I could only thank Celestia that he'd died so soon afterwards.

"Don't you have the sense to get out of the rain, Blackjack?" a tinny little voice asked above me.

Slowly, I turned over, the pain slowly fading from my twitching

limbs as I looked up at the bobbing spritebot overhead. I sat back up, my head throbbing, my throat scratchy as I croaked, “Watcher?”

The tiny bot bobbed slowly as it watched with its large blue eyes. I looked up at the clouds, wishing I could just fall into them. “You look rough.” I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to do. So I did the absolute worst thing possible.

I bawled like a lost foal.

* * *

Sitting in the shelter of the garage next to empty footlockers and medical boxes, I told him everything. Everything I could. Everything I could think of. I told him what happened in the Fluttershy clinic. I told him about Brimstone’s Fall and failing to stop the execution. Failing to save Glory from betrayal at Miramare at the hooves of her own people. I didn’t stop, couldn’t stop. I told him what I’d learned about Stable 99, about how I’d hurt P-21. Of sparing a slaver only to have her become a victim, freeing a slave only to have him become her rapist. Of failing to make any part of the Wasteland a better place. I even told him what I’d learned about Deus just minutes ago. I stopped only because my inflamed voice gave out.

For the longest time, the little robot just hovered there. I wondered if he’d really been listening. Finally, he just muttered, “Wow. And I thought LittlePip had it rough.”

“Who?” I croaked.

“Just another mare with a talent for diving headfirst into trouble,” Watcher said with a dry little chuckle. “I’ve been trying to keep up with you and P-21, but you’ve been moving and running around all over Hoofington so much that it’s been tough. I guess that bounty doesn’t make things easier.”

“Am I a monster, Watcher? I mean, you must have seen monsters before, right? Watching?”

He was quiet for far longer than it took to say ‘of course you’re not’. “I don’t think you are. I’ve seen real monsters. But the terrible fact is that every real monster I’ve seen started as a pony just like you. Monsters are made, and the Wasteland’s great at picking at exactly the right thing to make you into one. If it can’t tear you down from without, it’ll do it from within. If it can’t get you, it’ll go after your friends. And if it can’t turn you, then it will try to make

you so miserable it will destroy you."
I hugged myself as I shook. "I'm such an idiot to think I could do this."

"No!" he replied at once, and then repeated at a lower volume, "No, Blackjack. No. You are doing it. What you've gone through… what you've survived…is amazing. It's more pain than a dozen ponies could endure, and you still haven't lost yourself. I won't say there's no risk of it, but you've stuck by your friends rather than abandon them. You still care, even to a fault. I know you see yourself and think that you're failing. Trust me, you're not. Not like me…"
"Like you?" I asked, rubbing my nose with a hoof and getting it all snotty.
"I sit here watching the Wasteland, hoping to help in the smallest way possible while I watch amazing ponies do what I can't." He let out a tired sigh. "And sooner or later, they fail. But I just hope that one group might turn things around and make the Wasteland a better place. LittlePip... you…"
"The Stable Dweller," I added, "She's incredible…what she's done."
There was a momentary silence and then a restrained laugh. "Well, I hope she hears about the Security Mare someday." He let out a sigh. "I just…wonder…if I can trust you…"
"Trust me?"
"Not you, personally. Well, not exactly." He paused, and I imagined him struggling a moment. "I've seen so many ponies try and step up, only to be torn down. Some I've helped. Others…I couldn't. But eventually, there's a point where they ask me to do something. Talking to a bot isn't enough; they want to talk to me in person, or have me do favors for them. And as much as I might want to…I can't trust them." He gave a soft sigh. "I think LittlePip's reaching that point…the questions she's asking. The things she wants me to do. I don't know if I can handle it if I have to tell her no, too."
"Well, you're talking about it," I said with a small smile.
"You told me so much," he replied. "And you don't seem to care who I am."
"'Cause I'm an idiot," I said with a chuckle. "You want advice from a brain-damaged mare?" I offered. "If she asks, let her."
"But…"

“I don’t know who you are, Watcher. You might be DJ Pon3. Sanguine. Somepony else messing with me. And I really doubt I’ll find out. But you’ve been trying to keep ponies away, and it doesn’t sound like it’s working for you.” I closed my eyes. “Sometimes, if you really are a friend, you have to prove it.”

“I know, but it could destroy everything,” he muttered.

“Or maybe, it could be exactly what you need,” I said, then turned my head, coughing and hacking. “Please be aware, this advice is coming from the most unqualified and reckless pony in the Wasteland. I don’t even have the sense to stay out of the rain with a cold.” Or to not look into memories left for me by my most hated enemies.

There was a long silence from the bot. “Maybe. I’ll think about it.” I imagined he sounded skeptical. I would be, too, with advice from me. Then he chuckled. “And in return, let me give you some advice. Get in out of the rain, Blackjack. I know your friends are worried sick about you.”

With that, the bot chirped and bobbed away playing a marching song. Definitely not something I could play on the contrabass. I rose to my hooves and walked slowly to the door. Despite myself, I felt a little better. Hearing those words from Watcher had cheered me up a bit.

I started back towards the door inside, my body finally separating out the pain that was mine from the pain that was Deus’s. It still wasn’t happy with me. Just as I reached the door, I spotted something at the edge of the dead trees. Maybe my eyes hadn’t quite sucked up enough radiation; maybe what I thought I saw was just my imagination.

Princess Luna was standing there, watching me.

Of course, given my head, clearly this was just some sort of hallucination. I rubbed my eyes hard, and when I looked back she was gone. Back into the depths of my subconscious, where she belonged.

* * *

P-21 looked up immediately, as did Glory. Rampage lay on her side, snoring like her ripper weapon, with Thorn in her hooves. Roses looked pensive. I sat down between P-21 and Glory, and she immediately gave me a hug and pressed her hooves to my brow. “I

can't believe you were out there for so long. You're running a fever." Her lips pressed together as I saw concern vie against the desire to tell me what an idiot I'd been.

"It's okay. I needed to be alone for a bit. That song…" I shook my head. "I thought I'd put all that past me." Now I wondered if I ever would. I wondered if I ever should. Was a brain filled with mental landmines the price of virtue?

"I was afraid you'd do something stupid…" P-21 began softly. Then I lifted Deus's memory orb. His eyes widened, then he closed his eyes and shook his head with a groan. "I should have known. So… what did it do?"

"Hurt," I replied. Glory brought me another cup of boiled weed juice, but with how my head and throat felt, I really couldn't bring myself to complain. I held the drink between my hooves, looking down at my steaming reflection. "Did you know that Deus was in agony? Constant agony. I've never hurt so bad. Sanguine was the only source of the painkiller that made it bearable." I glanced over at Rampage. "He thanked me for killing him. And told me where Sanguine is hiding."

"I don't get it. If he was in such pain…why…" Glory began and then flushed. "Why didn't he just…kill himself?" she asked in a near whisper.

I closed my eyes as I thought a moment. "Why don't you? Why don't I? He might have had a shitty life, but it was his. He wasn't going to just check out. He had to go out fighting. That was the kind of pony he was." I couldn't think of him as a monster anymore. A vicious and dangerous pony, yes, but he'd had reasons for it. I don't think I could have stayed sane with that constant pain.

Monsters come from somewhere, Watcher had said. I might not be able to save them, and I might not prevent myself from becoming one, but I could at least give him a little sympathy. After all, he'd been a Marauder... once.

* * *

Continuing down the road in the morning, I had to admit I was feeling…rotten. Okay, my head was two sizes too small for my brain. My throat felt like I'd scrubbed it with a wire brush, and I had green snot oozing out my left nostril. Still, I was better than last night. Thorn had apologized in a near constant stream since she'd

woken up and found I had returned, and I could only assure her over and over that it wasn't her fault the song made me cry. It was a very good song, I promised her.

I managed an hour before Glory ordered me into the wagon with P-21 and Thorn. Since we'd gone through half the locked boxes from Deus's camp before exhausting our bobby pins, there was enough room for me.

We listened to DJ Pon3 as the rain continued to drizzle. I smiled, thanking the Stable Dweller for recovering brand new Sweetie Belle recordings. Rampage trudged along, eating her occasional Mint-al and poking fun at Glory, P-21, or me. We were getting close to Chapel, and despite myself I found I was looking forward to seeing Priest and the Crusaders again. Even the capmonger would be welcome!

"So, in case you've been living under a rock, or you have a rock for a head and have been listening to Redbeard Radio, it looks like there's been one heck of a fight on the streets of Flankfurt. On one side, a motley alliance of thugs and gang ponies under the Pecos out for revenge, and on the other, a wicked band of bounty hunters working for the Reaper Deus. What were they fighting over, you ask? Why, the head of the Security Mare of course!

"You may be asking yourself which side of this terrible clash came out on top. Did the Pecos manage to get back for Security's help with freeing Brimstone's Fall, or did Deus finally get his mare?" DJ Pon3 gave a hearty chuckle. "Well folks, it's my delight to tell you…neither! When the dust finally settled and ponies dared poke their heads from their homes, it was Security who greeted them with a grin on her face! The Pecos are scattered all across the Hoof, and Deus, the Reaper who started this whole mess, is dead.

"That's right, folks. For twenty years Deus has been the nightmare of Reapers, but this time he was outclassed by a single security mare. People out there may want to keep that in mind when they start thinking about doing things like hunting down ponies working their tails off to make the Wasteland a safer place."

I groaned and stomped my hoof on a case. "Damn it, DJ! I didn't do anything but get shot at!" I said, drawing a startled look from Roses. "Gem and P-21's bomb were the ones that actually killed him. And even then, it was all his ammo blowing up that finished him off!"

"Yeah, but you've got to admit that you killing him is a better

story," Glory said brightly.

"In other news around the Hoof, it looks like there's been a recurrence of raiders hitting the Manehattan Highway and the Sunset Highway between Megamart and the river. Looks like you can't keep the psychopaths down, so be sure you double up if you have to go anywhere near there. And if you don't have to go, don't go!

"Now, if you'll excuse me, hot damn, it's time to get my toaster fixed!" And with that the music resumed. I blinked in confusion. *His toaster fixed?*

"I guess he *really* likes his toast," I muttered cluelessly.

Rampage snorted as we crested a ridge. I could see the towers of Hoofington again, and the bridge, and even the tiny white spire of Priest's chapel. There were some ruins off to one side of the road; some kind of large house. "Yeah, well, I bet you he's getting--"

Roses threw a tin can at the back of her head, glancing at Thorn. Unfortunately, at that moment a hard wet gust cut down the hillside, and with a deep rumble of thunder a torrent poured upon us. This was more than just a Hoofington drizzle; the cold deluge soaked through my barding in seconds, and Thorn yelped as she hid inside a wooden crate.

"Of course! Of course you pick now!" I yelled up at the rain. I stood in the back of the wagon and thrust my left forehoof up at the black skies. "Well, forget it! We're going to Chapel and there's nothing you can do to--"

The world turned white.

* * *

I knew I was alive because death didn't hurt this much. I thought for a moment that I'd been dumped back into Deus's orb, but then I realized this pain was mostly external. I lay naked on a mattress with a blanket over me. "Oh…I could really use a day when I…" But my raspy quip died the second I looked around and realized I was alone. Slowly, I sat up and winced as I looked at bright pink patches on my white hide. Funny, but they seemed a little familiar. Then I looked over at the pile of scorched metal plates that was the utter ruin of my barding. Glory must have used every healing potion we'd gotten from Flank.

The room I was in wasn't much better. Bookshelves, filled with

rancid and pulped books that tainted the air with a sour milk smell, ran floor to ceiling. A chandelier still hung from the cracked and water-stained ceiling, dusty crystals giving off a wan greenish-white glow that rose and fell like a breath. The fine carpet underhoof had transformed into a blackened rag that looked liable to disintegrate at a touch. I could feel the spongy floorboards underneath it.

And worst of all, my PipBuck was dead as a doornail. Burns ran from the end of my hoof across my body; the ones on *me* were already partially healed, thanks to Glory, but the ones running across my PipBuck's screen... E.F.S. Navigation. Inventory. S.A.T.S. Everything was gone. Suddenly, I had a far better understanding of my friends. I'd never been in a situation where I couldn't detect something in the next room or past a door. Slowly, I pulled myself to my hooves.

"Oh boy," I muttered as I looked around for my gear but found only a few empty crates. From the mattress and the tipped-over table, it looked as if they'd hidden me here and then fled. I coughed and rubbed my drippy nose. "So…alone…unarmed…unarmored… PipBuck dead and I've got a cold…did I miss anything, you bony old bastard?" I muttered. From outside the windows came a white flash, followed at once by a booming crash. "Right! Almost forgot." I walked to the door and then quietly pushed it open.

A pony in bloody plate armor loomed up before me. My horn glowed, but I caught myself before releasing the spell. It wasn't a pony, just armor. The metal had transformed into an almost solid piece of rust; it'd clearly been posed in the rearing posture. I let out my breath. The hall, if anything, was in worse condition than the library behind me. Sandbags were stacked in barricades across it with pony remains crumpled behind them. Of course, their weapons and barding were all long gone.

I moved as silently as I could, knowing that eventually I'd hear one of my companions. *If they were still alive*, added a fatalistic portion of my head. I found myself missing the old card-shuffling bastard. This'd be the perfect chance for him to read my hoof with some cryptic clues. Then again, as I passed beneath a mold-spotted oil painting showing a grinning white unicorn buck, the place was creepy enough already.

An inequine scream tore through the house, making my mane stand nearly straight on end. Okay, my heart did not need to hear that! Finding friends and getting the hell out of here! Now!

I heard something moving on the far side of a door. The steps were slow, heavy, and relentless. Now I knew that opening that door was a bad idea. I knew that that wasn't Rampage strolling in a corner. But I also knew that there was a chance that one of my friends might be trapped inside. I opened the door, the hinges creaking as it swung.

The pony within looked as if it'd been cooked far too long on a stove. Its once elegant dress now hung in tatters upon its frame, blending with the flaps of hide dangling off its body. Its dull green eyes took one look at me, and it reared with a scream that sounded like it'd have stripped the flesh from my throat if I'd tried to echo it! I activated S.A.T.S. and--

The charging ghoul rammed into me as my routine failed me. I barely had time to fire one magic bullet into the ghoul's chest before it was upon me. Without S.A.T.S., I couldn't fire magic bullets quickly and accurately enough to have them do any good! Jagged teeth gnashed as the monster lunged hungrily, jagged hooves digging into my unarmored hide. Its unnatural strength bowled me onto my back as it snapped at my neck.

I had one saving grace: the reinforced casing of my PipBuck rammed through broken teeth and knocked the ghoul back. My horn glowed as I flung anything and everything into its face, distracting it long enough for me to get to my hooves. I reared up, smashing the dead PipBuck against its head again and again as hard as I could. Finally, its skull burst like an egg, splattering me with clammy, partially rotted brains. With a sigh, it slumped down into a heap, and I took a few seconds to finish smashing its head.

Finally I slumped, looking at the still twitching undead pony before I sneezed and blasted snot all over it. "Ugh... gross…" I muttered as I wiped my nose…and smeared glowing ghoul brains over my nostrils and upper lip. I froze...

Balefire bomb me now, Celestia. Just do it. Get it over with.

This room had been some sort of study; it seemed to have far more filing cabinets than books. Most of them had been pulled out, the files scattered and trodden upon until mold and moisture rendered them into pulp. The ghoul still had a trio of bobby pins in her mane…as well as a half dozen bottle caps embedded in her hide? Huh. There were two other ponies, but they were long dead, their formal wear rotten and threadbare.

'LIAR' had been painted across the wall in black…no. Nevermind.

Not paint. Oh boy, my mane was crawling, and I could feel the scissors snipping at my…I smacked my forehead into the wall as the tremors started. “No! We are NOT thinking about that now.”

The skeletal ponies did give me something useful, though. I left the study with one of their thighbones in my telekinetic grasp.

The next room was empty save for decaying stuffed beasts and… things I hoped were beasts. That one looked more like a sand dog from Maripony’s memory. As I started to leave, something caught my eye. Was that... yes! The room wasn’t quite empty after all; built into one corner was a gun cabinet! It was locked, which meant that it probably hadn’t been looted already, but…I swallowed and tried to focus on P-21’s lessons as I scrabbled at the lock. It was harder than most, and I winced as one pin snapped. The second opened the case with a click. I felt pretty good as I pulled it open and…saw a box of twelve gauge shells and a tube of Wonderglue. Yay... I didn’t even have a way to carry them! I made a quick jaunt back to the library to snag the blanket. Torn in half, it would at least make for an impromptu sack.

I looked at the bones, the glue, and the stuffed canine and slowly smiled. Ten minutes later, I trotted out with a thighbone studded with claws and fangs. As I turned the corner, two more ghouls screamed and charged me. I really wished I had S.A.T.S. to ensure my hits, but my magic was good enough as it swept the jagged weapon in an upwards arc that shredded the front of one ghoul’s throat and tore away its lower jaw. I stood on my rear hooves and rammed my PipBuck into the maw of the other as it lunged with a bite. Hugging its head, feeling its cold, slimy mouth slobbering on the end of my leg, I focused on bringing the thighbone around in a smash that tore off the first ghoul’s pulpy head.

One down, I tightened my grip on the other, twisting my forelimbs and body around till my weight levered it onto its back with me around to lying on top of the undead monster. I pinned it as it struggled and flailed. I looked down into its one cloudy eye and one empty socket and shouted, “Where are they? Where are my friends?”

For a moment, I thought it was going to answer. Its eye narrowed and met mine. Then it looked at my horn and screamed, “Liar!”, then lunged for my face.

You keep trying to save everypony…I closed my eyes and brought the bone down again and again on its skull till the creature shuddered

and went still.

Then I found the foyer. Sandbags had been made into barricades across the front door and built up in both windows. Machineguns that were more rust than gun lay amid the bones of ponies who had used them. The ammo containers were another story. Carefully, I pulled them open, looking at the well-preserved five point five six millimeter rounds. Rifle ammo and me with no rifle. One of the barricades had been stoved in fairly recently. I peeked out into a courtyard filled with pony remains. I could also see a dozen ghouls shambling about the yard…and our wagon. I could see the fine marble walls pitted with bullet holes and blackened by fire.

Again, more signs that something had gone terribly wrong. I looked at the carved busts of dignified stallions smashed and broken against cracked tile floors, and moldy tapestries creeping slowly down the walls they once decorated. There were wire nooses dangling over the edge of the balcony, and somepony had spray-painted vile epithets against the nobles…and even Celestia and Luna as well. After experiencing that memory, I wanted to kick the hay out of them!

I looked down another hall and I froze as my brain let out another spurt of craziness. Luna had returned, standing on the far side of the hallway with the foul water swirling around her ankles. “So... are you going to deal some cards, or what?”

She just looked at me and then at the swirling water. Then I saw this water was a lot more... colorful... than it should have been. My mane started to itch as I backed away from the dark alicorn. “Right. Radiation is bad. Good thinking, me. I’ll just go this way... ” I turned to peek down another hall, and when I looked back Luna was gone. Of course she was... she hadn’t really been there... right?

Okay, time to get my friends and get out of here! I moved along the first floor of the rotting manor as quietly as my hooves could carry me. One peek in the banquet hall at the ghouls sitting expectantly at their tables and I closed the door as softly as I could. My ears strained for something that could hint at where my friends could be. Everywhere I looked were signs of battle, a mob of ponies storming the manor in one last desperate surge.

In one room that held the fanciest terminal I’d ever seen, the logged in screen told me that P-21 had at least gotten this far. I looked at the files. They appeared to be some sort of correspondences.

> To your eminence Lord Brandybuck of Trottingham,

> Surely you can't be suggesting that ponies of our breeding and lineage retreat to a common stable with the rest of the herd? While existence within Stable 1 might be appropriate for ponies of our standing, provided the Princesses attended, I suspect that ponies such as yourself demand a sophisticated stable appropriate for the aristocracy. Fortunately, I know of just such a stable in development. It is being produced clandestinely, outside the notice of the ministries or Stable-Tec. Imagine a stable with appropriate waiting staff, stocked with provisions as befits our refined palates? A stable to preserve not just our lives but the culture and dignity our status demands as well?

> However, such a stable will require a significant amount of capital if we are to be prepared against every contingency. A minimum investment of one million gold bits per household member is required to secure our proper future free of ministry meddling and the common rabble. I have every faith in your strictest confidences in this matter. I await your reply.

> Prince Blueblood.

The next three were the same, asking for vast sums for inclusion in an 'exclusive' stable. The final message was different, though.

> It happens today.

> When the fine nobility of Equestria is ready at your manor, we will transport all of you securely to the stable. Make haste. It won't be long now.

That simple message froze my blood. Had there been ponies who had known of the balefire attack in advance? Suddenly, I thought back to Mr. and Mrs. Cake, and the Hoofington Museum. The automatic fire in the first two. The riot here. Somepony had known, had taken advantage…but why? What good was anything of the old world if it was blown to hell? I found one of the heaps of old bones in the hall with a folded paper spotted in brown mold. The words were hard to make out, but if I squinted and rotated the page...

'I found out from a friend that there's a huge stable hidden right under Blueblood Manor,' the note read. 'It's three times bigger than any other stable. A super stable! Just for those aristocrats. I couldn't get a straight answer from Stable-Tec, but there's something to this. Keep your eyes open and your hooves ready.'

Something bad had happened in Hoofington. Something that had gotten a lot of ponies killed, but why and for what? I slowly looked over the decayed manor, the torn apart rooms, the desperate

fighting by the aristocrats and their guards. And worse, why did my mane itch like mad the more I thought about it?

* * *

My hoof for a shotgun. Trying to bash and ram these ghouls to death -- or redeath…or whatever killing ghouls was! -- had me exhausted. Of course, that might have just been the cold that brought every ghoul in earshot whenever I coughed or sneezed. Which was frequently. Why couldn't I be trapped alone and naked while healthy?

The first floor offered little. I found evidence of Glory in the form of pink heaps of glowing dust and of P-21 in a few fresh detonations in the halls. Some ghouls that were crushed and dismembered had to be the work of Rampage. Whatever had happened to my friends, they at least had their weapons!

I found new annoying, nagging clues: an auditorium with weapon turrets and destroyed robotic sentries…and a lot of dead aristocrats. A makeshift gallows off the foyer. A skywagon that had been dropped into a conservatory, smashing through the glass, scattering its load of yellow barrels and littering the room with pools and splashes of rainbow-colored goop that'd crept to every inch of that wing of the manor. Oh, forget my shotgun! I'd give anything for my PipBuck to be working!

But first, I needed a kitchen. Not just because I was hungry. I tried to stay as quiet as possible as I trotted past the banquet hall and down into the adjacent disaster area. Instead of my eyes, I used my ears. The kitchen had flooded with rancid water that had become a kind of soup of spoiled rot. Pausing and listening, I heard the slow gait of a ghoul.

Or two. Or three. I was on my fourth thighbone; two hundred years in the Hoofington damp did nothing to help preserve these remains. If I was lucky, though, the kitchen would have something more substantial.

Then my ears twitched. "Taking forever…really…how does he expect me to create masterpieces in these conditions?" The voice sounded like a rattled cup of rusty nails. Carefully, I poked my head around the corner and looked around with my amber gaze. A large ghoul stood patiently before a stove, apparently unaware that it'd long since stopped working.

I took one step into the muck filling the kitchen and his remaining ear twitched; he turned surprisingly quickly and looked right at me with yellow eyes. A cleaver and a carving knife levitated around him. “Who dares trespass in my domain?” Our eyes met, and the boiled-looking pony suddenly grinned. “Eh? A glow job? Nice. He finally hired some quality wait staff for poor Cookie?”

I see ‘em all the time on ghouls. I must have sucked up enough radiation for my eyes to glow like those rare ghouls, and given the mess that was my coat, I supposed I looked appropriately ghoulish. “Yeah. What do you need done, boss?” My cold-ravaged throat made me sound just as nasty as he. I saw a disintegration pistol on the counter beside him and edged closer.

“Boss, huh? I like that.” The ghoul grinned from ear to missing ear. Actually, that was all he could do. I got the impression he wasn’t exactly all there, as most of his kitchen lay half submerged. “These nobles…always in such a rush. Why don’t you set started on dicing the vegetables while I get ready for the main course,” Cookie said as he pulled the hatch open a little. “I hope they like the new menu…Ooooh, the turkey is almost done.”

“Let me out!” Glory screamed at the top of her lungs from the depths of the oven.

I’d moved closer, looking for what I needed, when my thinking stopped. Without a moment’s hesitation, my horn grabbed the largest, heaviest, and probably dullest cleaver on the counter and swung the chopper into his spine. The last vestiges of sanity went out at that moment as Cookie whirled; apparently ghoul anatomy differed a bit from that of the living, as his animated flesh continued moving. He let out that mad scream as he reared up.

This time, their habit helped me. In that second, I yanked out the chopper and brought it sideways through one of his rear legs. Despite the rusty edge, the weight of the blade was enough to cut clean through the limb. He fell back against the stove, and I was on top of him, trying to keep him pinned as the chopper fell again and again. Finally, it finished cutting through his thick neck with a solid ‘thunk’, and the massive ghoul fell still.

“Glory!” I shouted, yanking open the stove and looking into the tiny space. Her pinprick pupils stared back at me as she lay there, curled up in the stove. I could see and smell that being trapped in the tiny space had been too much for her. I reached in and pulled her out, hugging her tightly as she shook more and more. “Shhh…

Glory…it's okay, Glory. It's okay. You're okay. You're safe," I said over and over again.

How did Glory and I help you? Finally, the shock broke as she sobbed into my shoulder. I stroked her mane with a gentle smile, and she started to calm down. "You're alive. You're alive," she muttered in relief as she pressed her face to my shoulder.

"Glory, what happened? Where are we?"

She looked at me in surprise, then sighed. "You got struck by lightning, Blackjack. Right in the PipBuck. It was bad. I think most of the charge went through the plates in your barding, but it heated them till they melted through your armor." She blinked and tapped her hooves together. "Oh. And your heart stopped. Roses managed to conjure a spark strong enough to restart your heart, and we gave you every healing potion we could. I even almost used Hydra," she confessed, looking guilty.

"The storm was getting worse, so we headed for this manor. Unfortunately, as soon as we got inside, the ghouls attacked! P-21 dragged you off somewhere. Roses and Thorn went upstairs. Rampage and I were forced down here." Glory started to shake as she pointed to a small door. "We thought to hide… okay, I wanted us to hide in there but…there was a hole. She fell in."

I walked over to the door she'd pointed to. The little alcove was just big enough for two ponies. "What hole?" Then my hoof felt the rusty edge. There had been a metal lid, but it hadn't been up to holding the weight of the Reaper's armor. "I think…I think it's a well," I said as I looked at the still water.

"Poor Rampage. I can't believe that's how she'd go…" Glory said softly.

I felt a niggling horror. "Glory…I doubt she is."

Glory looked in the room and then at me. "You think she's still *alive*?" She started shaking. I had to admit, it was unnerving to me as well.

I couldn't imagine Rampage not trying to drown herself. "We'll need some rope or chain or something. If she's alive, we can't leave her down there," I said, wondering how deep the water-filled pit was. Why was it never easy?! I raised the chopper. "Get your pistol. Once we find the others, we'll try and get her out, and then we'll have to get out of here. I dunno how bad it is, but we're sucking up radiation." One of the many PipBuck functions I missed terribly.

"It's broken. Too many shots without replacement parts," she said

as she splashed through the muck to the burned-out weapon and her shredded gear. “What should I use?”

I looked at Cookie’s cleaver and lifted it into the air before Glory. She looked ill. “Or would you prefer knives?” Now she looked really ill. “Just think of it as really intense surgery. The procedure is head amputation.” Okay, that got a little crooked smile.

“Blackjack, how can you crack jokes like this?” she shouted, then reached out to take the cleaver between her hooves, looking both upset and a little amused despite herself.

“What? I should be scared?” I said as I looked around the kitchen, grinning as if it were nothing at all. I couldn’t help it! “Why…

“When I was a little filly and the lights would turn down looo-o-ow.
The darkness and the shadows would make my fear grooo-o-ow.
I’d hide under my bed from what I thought I saw
But Gin Rummy said that wasn’t the way to deal with threats at all!”

“You’re…singing?” Glory murmured in shock as I strode out into the hall, calling out like a bucket of rusty nails and drawing every hungry bastard in earshot. “How can you be singing?!” Unfazed I continued:

“She’d say: Blackjack, you need to stand strong,
Lower your center of maaa-a-ass
You’ll see that they can’t hurt you
If you cut them off with a paaa-a-ass!”

The ghouls that spilled out after us met each swing of my rusty chopper, heads and legs parting under its heavy, jagged blade. “Ha! Ha! Ha!” I laughed out with each sucking ‘thock’ of the blade into the monsters in the hall as we advanced. If I didn’t get one, Glory finished it off behind me, watching me with astonished eyes. “Soooo…

Chop up all the ghosties!
Tear up all the grossly!
Glare up at the creepy!
Smash up any weepy!
Kick out at the kooky!
Slice up all the spooky!”

A final surge of ghouls charged as I spread my legs wide in the hall, bracing myself and swinging the chopper as I shouted, “And cut that big dumb scary face and kick him hard in the throat if he won’t leave you alone and if he comes at you again then he’s got another think coming and the very idea of him hurting you just wanna…hee

hee HAHAHAHAHA!" I laughed wildly as I lunged forward, the jagged chopper tearing the ghouls into piles of parts as I finished with one horrid buzzing note, "Chooooooooooooooop!" With my last swing, the head of the last ghoul arched over my back to land at Glory's hooves.

Standing in the hall with snot running down my face, grinning from ear to ear, my eyes glowing like amber moons, I looked back at her. "See? Just need the right weapon and the right attitude."

Of course, that was the moment when, as we stood exposed in the main hall beneath the balconies, a half dozen ghouls charged, and these had died wearing body armor that still looked intact enough to be trouble. Still, have chopper, will chop!

Then something metal pinged off the ground in the middle of the crowd of undead and an explosion ripped most of them to pieces. I glanced up at P-21, who was looking at me in furious frustration. "Hey, P-21. Good timing," I said as I walked, taking off head or limb, whichever I got to first, into the midst of the ghouls as they struggled to rise. Behind me, Glory looked at one squirming ghoul and gave a hesitant little chop that just made the corpse jerk and squirt semi-congealed blood on her face. I think she was about ready to climb back into the oven.

"Blackjack, are you brain damaged?" he shouted down at me.

I blinked, thought about it for a second, sat on my haunches, and held my forehooves a few inches apart. "Little bit."

"Little…I…oh…you…" He stomped his hooves as I strolled towards the stairs. "You are…the most…the…I…" He was actually sputtering by the time I reached him.

"I missed you too," I replied as I nudged his hip with my own, cutting him off. "And thanks for taking care of me while I was out."

Now he'd gone from babbling with fury to stammering with embarrassment. "Ah…yeah," he said as he stepped back from me, rubbing his head and apparently unsure how to react. "You're okay? Right?"

"You and Glory are. If we can free Rampage and find Roses and Thorn, I'll be fucking ecstatic," I chuckled, looking at a second set of barricades at the top of the steps. "Please tell me you found some working firearms?"

"Not unless they shoot rust. I've got some shock grenades and a magic grenade left, and that's it."

P-21 went over to Glory, and I sighed and bent over, coughing and

hacking, spitting phlegm over a fallen picture of some pretentious-looking unicorn. I took a few breaths, trying to steady myself. “How is she?” P-21 asked Glory; I was surprised I heard them at all.

“She’s doing it again,” Glory muttered softly, probably watching me in worry.

“Pushing herself?”

“Mhmm... ”

I turned and gave them both a smile. “Hey. I’m fine. I’ve fought Deus. A head cold is nothing,” I said as I rubbed my sweaty brow with a hoof. Oh Goddesses, how I could use some Buck right now. “Come on. Let’s find Thorn and Roses.” I looked at the three second floor wings. “Have you checked them all?”

“All but that one,” he said, nodding his head at a barricade before us. The fancy furniture was sprinkled liberally with bullet holes and shell casings. From the corpses on the far side, it clearly hadn’t been enough to keep out the vengeful ponies below; we carefully picked our way over the top. Fewer attackers had made it this far, so the vandalism was somewhat reduced. Generations of handsome unicorn males decorated the walls, fungus nibbling away at the once vibrant colors of their portraits.

“I don’t suppose you know how to get this working, do you?” I asked P-21 as I waved the PipBuck at him.

“What do I look like, a PipBuck technician?” he asked with a worried little smile.

My ears twitched and I raised a hoof to my lips. I walked to the door and pressed my ear against the paneling. “Shhh…be very quiet and the bad ponies will go away,” whispered a voice. I checked the door. Locked. I stepped aside to let him at it. Two bobby pins later, the lock opened.

I knocked on the door. The pair stared at me in shock. “Bad ponies don’t knock,” I said before opening the door and stepping inside.

A nursery. Oh sweet Celestia, full of grace, don’t make me fight ghoul foals.

The bright colors were faded, the edges of the room sporting faint decay. The toys had definitely seen better days, and the books, for all the care paid to them, were clearly on their last legs as well. Sitting on a soft couch was a surprisingly young ghoul mare. Her decayed teal wings spread out to protectively hug the dead pony children around her. She wore a faded and threadbare nurse’s uniform. “Please…don’t hurt the children…” she whispered softly,

her cloudy eyes following me warily along with the gaze of the dead foals.

And one live pony.

Thorn rose out from under her wing. “No, Miss Harpica. This is a good pony. This is Miss Blackjack,” she said softly as she wiggled out of the cluster and gave herself a shake before she smiled up at me. “Are you okay, Miss Blackjack? You don’t look so good.” She then turned to face the other ghoul foals. “She got zapped by lightning!” That was apparently quite impressive.

I didn’t feel so good, to be honest. I hadn’t healed fully from my ‘zap’, my coat was scratched all to hell, and to top it all off, I felt dead on my hooves…well…relatively. “Yeah. I’m just a bit sick.”

The foals slipped off Harpica’s lap and moved to different sections of the nursery to play with the toys. There was something disturbingly... methodical about their play. The actions weren’t done out of joy. The children played because they had always played. The rote behavior was all they knew. Harpica stood, and the undead pegasus approached with a nervous look. “Um…miss…if it pleases you, miss…may I suggest a rejuvenation potion? Or I could try and summon the nurse for you. Things have been such a mess since…well…the bad night.”

“Well, a restoration potion would be wonderful but…” But she was already trotting over to the medical box. I didn’t know how to explain that by now the potion was likely so much sludge.

She returned with a vibrant purple bottle. I took it from her, staring at it dumbfounded. “Is something the matter, Miss Blackjack?”

“I guess there aren’t any Enervation fields here,” I said, smiling and glad to finally get a break. The restoration potion soothed delightfully as it went down my throat, its magic restoring and regenerating my aching body. The wonderful sensation tickled from horn to hoof. Despite the exhaustion and the sickness creeping through my body, I found myself oddly refreshed.

Glory looked around the nursery. “Ah…Harpica? What happened here?”

“Oh. Well. You see, their parents came here expecting to go on a journey to someplace safe. It was a bit of a festivity, you see. Quite the to do. I wasn’t really a part of it all; my place was here with the children. However, I understand there was some problem with the sky carriages being late. The guests all became very nervous. And

then…then there was the most horrible flash. And another. And another. The guests were all terribly upset with the good Master."

"I'll bet. He seems an easy pony to be upset at," I muttered. The ghoul's cooked-meat-colored cheeks creased faintly as she fought to hide a smile. Then it faded.

"There was a problem down at the door. Apparently, many ponies from the surrounding towns and villages came here thinking there was safety. They claimed the good Master had a stable built below the premises. I thought it quite odd; if he had such a thing, why wouldn't he have gone inside? But the ponies, they were convinced that safety was within. Then the fighting began. Master Vanity came by and offered to help me escape…but…" She looked at the ghoul foals with a sad smile. "But I was hired to care for the children till their parents return for them. I couldn't leave them."

I felt a chill rush through me. Were all pegasi so loyal? Without really thinking about it, I put a hoof across Glory's shoulders and hugged her closer to me.

"Finally, there was a great crash, and soon after that the fighting stopped. It became very quiet. I peeked downstairs and found the skywagon and the dripping barrels. I felt…quite odd. When I returned, I think I had some of the... stuff on me. We've been waiting since then." She looked at the foals and gave a little nod. "They've all been quite well behaved. Even with…" She glanced at her ghoulified flesh and sighed.

"Waiting for what?" P-21 asked with a sad frown.

Harpica just gave a small smile and shrug.

Then I blinked. "Master Vanity?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, the good Master's younger sibling." Her lips curled in a fond smile. "He was quite kind…" Then she immediately blushed and added, "Not that I'm thinking above my station, miss! I believe he had his eyes on another pegasus any…oh dear, now I'm gossiping! I'll lose my position."

"I don't think you have to worry about that," P-21 said dryly.

"You said that Vanity helped ponies to escape? Did he leave with them?"

Her smile grew. "Master Vanity was positively valiant. He single-hoofedly fended off dozens of attackers. He always was the superior duelist."

"And did he escape as well?" I asked with a smile, imagining the roots of King Awesome and the Society.

Her smile faded a little. “His room is just down the hall, miss.”

I swallowed hard, looking over my shoulder. “He’s still here?” The suddenly solemn pegasus nodded once. “We’ll…be right back.”

“Blackjack? What are you doing?” P-21 asked as we stepped back into the hall.

“He was a Marauder! One of Macintosh’s Marauders,” I said with a little hop on my hooves. “He might be able to tell me about Macintosh and Maripony.”

“He might eat your face,” P-21 suggested.

That sobered me. “Then he needs to be laid to rest,” I muttered softly.

We carefully checked the other doors for some sign of Roses, though I liked to think that Vanity was protecting her like he had the others that terrible day. The bodies in the hall were arranged in odd crescents. We came upon three more roaming ghouls, their guard livery rusted into plates on their undead hides.

Finally, the last arc of slain foes lay right outside a pair of double doors. I swallowed, wishing that I had my E.F.S. and could have some clue if he was hostile or not. Finally, though, I sighed and knocked on his door. No response. Not good. I swallowed and tried to open it, but it was locked.

“You know this is a bad idea,” P-21 muttered before he knelt and started to open the lock.

“You didn’t see him. He’s a hero. A real, true war hero,” I said, nearly bouncing on my hooves in eagerness. When the lock clicked open, I opened the door slowly and stepped into a room lit by a flickering magical chandelier. Dust covered every surface, and the lack of tracks on the carpet dashed my hopes of finding Roses in here. A huge canopied bed was draped in fine sheets that stirred faintly at our passage.

Then I spotted him sitting before a desk. He was lying back in his chair in that odd fashion that I occasionally assumed, his eyes closed, his hide in surprisingly good condition despite being a ghoul. Oddly, he still possessed his slightly faded emerald mane. “Vanity? Um…Prince Vanity…? I’ve wanted to meet you ever since I found out about the Marauders. I wanted to ask... ” My voice faded away as I saw he hadn’t moved.

My horn glowed, and I gently brushed the dust off his features. No facsimile of life lingered in his dull eyes, nor had his skin sloughed away. He sat in perfect repose as he had for two centuries. Black

powder lay thick over his lower limbs where it had pooled and spilled. In his lap lay a silver picture frame. Ever so carefully, my magic reached out and brushed the dust away.

Jetstream grinned up at me with a faintly blushing and awkward-looking Vanity sitting beside her. They both looked so young in their brand new uniforms, he dressed in purple and she in blue.

P-21 opened the desk drawer, making me jump. "What are you doing?"

"Seeing if he has anything useful. Like, say, a gun?" I hated to admit it, but he was right. Sour as it was, he might have something we could use.

The only thing of note was a carefully folded piece of paper resting on a wooden box. I lifted it and unfolded the paper.

Dear Director,

Courtesy demands that I say that I hope this letter finds you in good health and spirits. In honesty, however, I pray you are suffering as slow and terrible a death as I. Project Redoubt has been successful beyond your dreams. It is my sincerest hope that you die in your hole; you have doomed hundreds with your duplicity, and I have been complicit in their murder. My lesser regret is that I will never be able to deliver this resignation in person along with a blade through your callow heart. For my greater regret, I can only pray that someday, somehow, she retrieves these. I held them for her, as I swore I would.

Celestia and Luna, forgive your nephew for my perfidy.

Vanity.

A war hero…he was supposed to be a war hero. I hadn't imagined him as something else.

Project Chimera. Project Eternity. Project Redoubt. I could scream. Had there been a *Project A Clue for Blackjack?*

I opened the wooden box and looked at the four orbs within. One had been smeared with blood, the black streaks marking it the most recent.

"No, Blackjack. You are not jumping into memory orbs right now," P-21 said as be reached over and closed the box. "We have to find Roses."

"Yeah," I muttered as I backed away. Was it just my imagination, or was Vanity smiling?

* * *

After half an hour and a dozen rooms, we'd found no sign of Roses. My nose was running, my throat burning, my body aching, and my mane itching. I'd really had enough of the creepy house. My only relief was that the pale bastard hadn't shown up with strange little teasers and ominous card tricks. He was really missing out on his opportunity here. The levels of weirdness were increasing exponentially as we went from room to room.

In one, there was an art gallery dedicated to Fluttershy, apparently done when she'd been young and…a model? That was what it looked like, though I had a hard time imaging the yellow pegasus surrounded by screaming fans. Strike that. I could imagine it easily. There were also pictures of a younger, lighter-haired unicorn who bore a striking resemblance to Rarity. 'Sweetie Belle'.

A second room seemed devoted to the Ministry of Image, ranging from pictures of the buildings in Canterlot and Hoofington to internal papers and documents to news clippings about the Ministry Mare, which seemed few and far between. It looked like the M.o.I. was not big on self-promotion.

Another room held pictures of Rarity. Many of these pictures were more clandestine in nature, ranging from a few official pictures of the great mare to secretive photographs.

One room was completely empty save for eight defense turrets and a pedestal holding a wedding ring. I thought it best not to investigate further.

One room was full of dresses…

Then Glory's ears twitched. "Is that music?" I paused and listened. Definitely chamber music, recorded, by the scratchy sound of it... and an oddly familiar contrabass. "Hurry," I said as we ran. The double doors were blocked, but I could see through into the decayed ballroom. Roses stood in an elaborate and fine ball gown. Dozens of bruises bloomed across her face, blood leaking from her nose and split lip.

Most ghouls were, of course, disturbing. Seeing one dressed in formal attire was slightly more so. However, this buck's cheeks had rotted away clear to his ears. His lidless eyes transformed his entire countenance into that of a monstrous mad horse. Grayish-brown mane stuck out in tufts along his spine down to his threadbare tail. I could only hope he was insane; I could not imagine existence with such features.

Strike that, I really hoped he was sane…and nice…and had saved

Roses from some other source of injury.

From the look of terror on her face, I doubted it.

"Now!" he said grandly, his boiled-sounding voice booming over the scratchy recorded music. He gestured to a silk rose in a small jar. "Say it…right." He took a deep breath and gestured to himself, his breath hissing through those horrid vents in his face.

"Well, Hello. I am Prince Blueblood."

Oh, sweet Goddesses, did he just waggle his eyebrows? Did the pony that once bragged the war would only last a month just... hit on a beaten unicorn?! In what universe did alicorn princesses have to die while this... this... *thing*... was allowed to persist!

"And I am…Rarity?" Roses whispered.

"No!" he shouted, reared up, and slammed his forehooves into her face. As she lay there, sprawled and quivering, he knelt and then said in a softer voice, "Oh dear, you've fallen. Let me help you back on your hooves." His magic hauled her upright.

The three of us shared a look and immediately started to tear at the desks and boxes blocking the door.

"Please, let me go," Roses begged, sobbing as she slumped. "I have a daughter. Let me go back to her, please."

"No! No! No!" Blueblood screamed down at her. "She doesn't have a daughter! She was supposed to have sons. MY sons. But she didn't. She wouldn't. She dared…dared…reject me! Didn't she know who I was? I would have made her a princess! I would have made her everything." He then levitated a sword off the table beside him. "Now, dear lady, I pray you, say it right."

Roses looked over at us trying to break through the doors. Just another minute or two and we'd be through.

"And I am R…Rarity," Roses said in a shaky voice. She looked over at the fake flower. "Oh my, w…what a lovely r…rose."

I think he was actually trying to grin; too bad it was already his default expression. "Why, you mean, this rose?" He swept it up, held it in his jaws, and then neatly slipped it into her hair. "It goes with your lovely eyes."

Roses gave a shaky smile as Blueblood lifted his hooves and held her shoulders. "Did I say it right? Are you happy now?" His voice rose higher. "Are you happy now? Are you? Are you happy?!" He screamed in her face. "Did I do it *right*?"

"Yes!" she screamed in desperation.

"Liar!" he roared, plunging the sword into her chest. "You always

lie to me!"

"Roses!" I screamed as I hacked at the last barrier blocking the door.

From down the hall roared a mare, "Move, Blackjack!" I turned in time to see Rampage, lacking armor and dripping wet, racing down the hall towards me. I barely had time to leap aside as she rammed into the barricade with enough force to crash through the wardrobe blocking the door.

Blueblood gave a long-suffering sigh as he twisted and withdrew the sword, muttering, "Wonderful. Peasants."

"You bloody animal!" screamed Rampage as we followed in behind her. The ghoul simply raised his sword before him with a bored expression. At the last moment he stepped aside, the sword flashing in her path.

With a thump, her head went rolling across the ballroom floor, her body walking ahead a few more feet before collapsing.

"Such rude interruptions," he muttered, then his eyes landed on me and they brightened. "Sweet Rarity. Have you come to reconsider my offer?"

"I've come to kick your ass," I screamed as I brought the chopper around in a sweeping arc. He jumped over the jagged edge with shocking ease. I didn't care. The sight of Roses stabbed through the heart and of Rampage's head lying there with a slack, confused expression fueled me to destroy this monster. Especially before I started to care about it.

"No!" he yelled as his sword feinted around my wild blows and chops. The tip sliced into my hide as he adopted that hissing voice of horrid geniality. "You are supposed to say: sweet Prince Blueblood, of course I accept your proposal of marriage. That is what you are supposed to say!" He hissed through those gaping teeth, "Then we live happily ever after! Like we're supposed to!"

I swung the chopper about as I bled, my wilder swings gouging out chunks of moldy dance floor as I struggled to get clear of his blade. His fine steel grated and rasped against the heavy edge of my own weapon as we circled each other. Worse, as effective as the chopper had been against mindless ghouls that charged recklessly forward, it was painfully useless against his darting and slashing saber. He danced away from my awkward swings and around me as if this were a ball, while the tip of his blade sliced and nicked my exposed limbs and hide. For all his pomposity, two centuries had clearly

been long enough for him to get really good at slicing a pony up. Maybe some magic bullets would work? The first glowing cone of force smacked into his torso instead of his face and didn't seem to faze him at all, and the second he actually dodged! Without S.A.T.S., I could barely hit him with them, and it looked like they wouldn't hurt him even if I could! As much as it galled and terrified me, I didn't know how I was supposed to beat him!

"I'd say Rarity had you pegged perfectly," I said as defiantly as I could, panting as blood pattered under me. He was standing with alert poise, not even looking at all tired. As ravaged as his body was, none of it was due to me. "You don't deserve a mare like her."

"I am a prince. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to find a princess that meets the proper standards?" he said grandly as he looked down at me with that mocking, endless rictus. "I would have made her everything. Her children would have had the blood of alicorns in them!" His voice rose more and more and I hoped he'd made some mistake I could exploit. "And why? Because I refused to eat her friend's carnival fare? Because I didn't want to walk through a puddle? I am a prince! There are expectations of me that she could never understand!" I watched Glory move around behind him, but with contemptuous ease he whipped the tip of his blade at her. She dropped her cleaver and fell back, pressing her hooves to the left side of her face.

His voice dropped back to a calm hiss. "Something peasants like you... and she... could never appreciate." He advanced for the kill. "I would have made her glorious."

"She made herself the mare that she was. She didn't need you for anything!" I charged again. He ducked his head under my desperate blow as his sword flashed. I knew that feeling. I knew it all too well as I fell on my rump, my forehooves hugging my gut as I felt my insides threatening to spill out once more. Oh... please don't vomit in front of this... thing... I could only barely keep my magical grip on the chopper as his sword floated around and pressed to my throat. "She didn't need you... " I whispered softly, shaking as I felt myself near my limit, the blade starting to slice into me.

"Of course she didn't. Nopony did. But I needed her," he hissed softly.

"Hey, Prince Asshole!" P-21 shouted from the doorway. "You need this?" he asked as he held up the wedding ring and then set it atop the green magic grenade. He flicked the stem away and ran,

dragging Glory with him.

"No!" Blueblood screamed as he ran toward the ring and grenade. The flash of magic disintegrated most of his face, his chest, and his sword, sending him sliding back towards me. One eye still focused on me as his corpse was cooked for real. "Ra... ri…ty…" he gurgled in his throat, extending a hoof towards me.

Blood dripped over my squeezing hooves as I looked down at him. "I'm not Rarity," I said as I raised the chopper with all my focus above his smoking neck. "But even if I were, the answer would still be no!"

And the heavy thud of the cleaver echoing across the ballroom reinforced that.

I slumped on my side, feeling the disturbing sensation of my blood spilling and my guts trying to slither out of my abdominal cavity.

"Nice job," Rampage said with a grin as she looked down at the decapitated ghoul.

I stared up at her pink eyes and scarred hide. I looked over at her severed *head*. Her thick red mane hung in tangled curls around her striped body. P-21 looked even more astonished. Glory, however, was still curled up tightly and shaking, clutching her face as tightly as I held in my guts.

"He cut off your head!" I groaned.

She just looked at me with a smirk that didn't reach her eyes. "Eh, I got better."

* * *

I'd like to say that I marched triumphantly out of Blueblood Manor, but the fact is that they dragged me out on the bloody dress. P-21 and Harpica brought out Roses covered in a dusty sheet. Rampage fetched her armor from the bottom of the well -- I didn't exactly want to know how -- and obliterated the few remaining feral ghouls outside around the wagon. The rain may have been miserable, but at least the lightning had let up. From the blackened trees around the manor, going inside had been the right thing to do.

I didn't anticipate sharing the wagon with thirteen foals, however, dressed in their prim cloaks and summer hats against the weather. The ghoul foals seemed positively thrilled, thought they kept it more or less to themselves. After all, I was bleeding out slowly and Thorn was now an orphan. "We know how you feel," one of the

ghoul foals told the pink unicorn. “Our parents are dead too.”

As we left, I glanced back at the wing where I hoped Vanity rested peacefully. Once more I glimpsed the dark alicorn, this time looking out a window at me before walking out of view. My mind was playing peekaboo with my senses. All I needed now was an obscure reference to card houses or a sight of Celestia poking around and I’d be set.

* * *

Our arrival at Chapel was a bit chaotic. Priest immediately rushed to Glory, who then turned him firmly towards me. That was about the time the amount of blood still in my body dropped below the amount of blood needed to remain conscious. I am pleased to note that in this state of unconsciousness, I had no dreams that involved metaphoric fatalistic card hustlers. Sometimes even I get lucky.

I came to slowly, lying on a mattress with the strangest sense of having done this before. It was the same cellar as last time, only now there were two IV racks that held a slow drip from a blood pack, another from a pack of RadAway, and one of Med-X. My entire torso was wrapped in healing bandages. I might have been put out with Scalpel for working with Caprice, but right now I could really use her healing contraption.

“Hey,” a tinny, mechanical voice said above me.

Slowly, I looked up at the strange little bug robot. “Hey,” I replied weakly. “Let me guess. I look bad?”

“You look pretty awful. Yeah,” Watcher replied as he lowered himself down to eye level. “I heard you killed Blueblood. I didn’t even know he was still alive.”

“He was too obsessed to die. Even at the end, he wanted the one mare who told him no,” I said, shaking my head with a groan. “I think he wanted a second chance with her, but had to win.” I shook my head a little. “I feel sorry for him.”

“Well, I was going to mention this to LittlePip, but I think I’ll have to save it. No way anypony would believe this,” Watcher said as his wings buzzed almost inaudibly. “She’s coming to see me.”

“She is?” I blinked, in a bit of a sick, Med-X haze. “She is…way to go.”

“I thought about what you said and…you’re right. For two hundred years I’ve been trying to be like Blueblood. Have everything just so.

Everything the way I want it to be, nice and safe. But if I keep that up, eventually I won't be able to reach out to anypony. I'll just be stuck here forever."

"I hope it works out. I know that LittlePip must be a special mare for you to take this chance." I gave a lazy little grin. "Need some pointers? I've dealt with professionals."

There was a momentary pause. "What?"

"Well you…and her…together for the first time?" I gave a lazy smile.

There was a long silence, and then, "Blackjack, that's just wrong on so many levels." I hoped that he was laughing in those pauses. I think he was. Hoped so. "I also wanted to say congratulations. A friend of a friend told Bottlecap that you had the money together, and she told that friend to tell her friend that she was going to arrange for the meeting. You'll finally find out what EC-1101 is."

"Yeah, about that... " I sighed and pulled my hoof out from under my blankets. I held up the charred casing and burned-out screen. "Is this gonna be a problem?"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Ghoulfriend - 10% more damage to ghoul targets and an opportunity for additional speech options.

Chapter 19: EC-1101

"Does my crown no longer count, now that I have been imprisoned for a thousand years?"

I leaned against the metal railing of the Celestia Bridge, just a few yards away from 'Celestia's Mercy', listening to the gurgle of the gray water passing beneath me. My eyes looked at the enormous relief of Luna on the floodlit dam. I knew it was Luna, now, after feeling her feathers on my lips. She gazed down at me despite the holes zebras had attempted to blast in the concrete.

"How are you feeling?" Priest asked as the black pony quietly walked up beside me. "Still have a fever?" He raised his hoof to touch the side of my head. I grimaced, pulling away. He kept looking at me with that annoying gaze that wasn't trying to get me in bed.

I coughed a few times, proud to resist the urge to spit in the river. "Oh, me? I'm fine. I've faced the Wasteland's worst. A little cold isn't going to nail me." I tried to keep up the act for a moment longer, then slumped a little. "Honestly, my nose is running worse than this river and my throat's been scrubbed with a rusty wire brush... but I do feel better. Thanks." He smiled a little more at that. I didn't even want to mention the injury to my gut.

"You're welcome," he said, hooking his forehooves over the rail next to me and looking at the water flowing underneath on its journey to... wherever rivers go. There was a moment of silence. "You've changed."

I closed my eyes with a little smile. "I picked up this nasty habit called thinking. Pretty bad stuff. Caused me all kinds of misery." I sighed and shook my head, still smiling. "I'm still not very good at it."

Since I'd gotten up and about, I'd bumped into Sekashi and her foal. Priest. Harpica. Chapel was starting to look more like an actual village, even if three quarters of its population were still colts and

fillies. Of course, one thing hadn't changed at all: the capmonger had greeted me with a look promising that, when I left, I would be capless. I just hoped she didn't clear me out before I paid for EC-1101's decryption.

Provided the file even remained in my PipBuck after being struck by lightning, of course.

"There were ponies who were very good at it and still didn't realize that what they were doing was wrong," he sighed. "Anyway, I wanted to thank you for all your help."

"Me? What did I do?"

"You cleared out Blueblood Manor enough for us to be able to scavenge it safely. The Society will pay nicely for statues, cutlery, and things that aren't rotted. We can use that money to buy some decent building materials and try to expand Chapel. I don't know if you saw, but we're getting a little crowded."

Trade is going to save the Wasteland? Maybe it will, Bottlecap. A village expanding. Growing. I'd tried to do just that two days ago. I smiled softly. "Well, let me know if you need any help."

I looked at him again. "Could you not touch one room? Please?" I told him about the memory orb and Vanity and showed him the letter. "He apparently did something bad, but for all that, I still think he was a good pony."

He looked at me and then gave me a little nod. "So, now what's your plan?"

"Oooh, I'm a bad pony to ask for a plan," I muttered. "Something always seems to explode when I plan something. So for now, nothing." I couldn't tell him that Watcher had made the arrangements to meet with my data analyst. I'd best stay put until Bottlecap contacted me…however she would. "Got a place we can lay up for a little bit? At least till the funeral?" We'd be burying Roses in the cemetery; she might not have always been a very good pony, but I still felt that she deserved to be buried with respect.

"Funny you should ask that. Care for a walk?" he said as he gave me his easy smile. I had to admit, I was a little intrigued. We walked back to the shore, but instead of heading southeast towards the town, he turned sharply south towards the hills and the dam. I could hear the sounds of water roaring through the spillways as we made our way up. Then I spotted the house sheltered from the sight of Hoofington by a low ridge of rock. It looked out across the graveyard's swath of yellow grass and Chapel beyond.

"I haven't been inside in years, so be careful," he said as we walked towards the front door. There were little miracles growing beside the door: small flowers that looked like yellow and gold balls of color. Flowers. Actual flowers! Walking to the door, I reached out to the latch with my hoof and found it locked. Automatically, I reached for a bobby pin and focused, trying to remember exactly how to open it. The pin stuck and snapped. "Shoot."

He tapped my shoulder and coughed with a hint of amusement. "Ahem."

I looked up and saw the key floating beside me. "Oh, sure. Do it the easy way." Still, I took it and opened the door. As I stepped in, I checked my E.F.S. for intruders. Nothing on it, so whether the place was empty or there was a cloaked zebra hit squad in there... or the damn PipBuck had been struck by lightning and I'd forgotten. Ugh, why couldn't I be a smart pony?

The cottage hadn't been occupied in quite some time, but it looked like it'd been inhabited in the last few years instead of just the last few centuries. A layer of dust covered every inch of the place, and there were water stains on the ceilings and floors from old leaks. Still, it didn't reek that badly of mildew, and what furniture I could see was in pretty good shape. Metal dinnerware was stacked neatly in a corner kitchen, and some old pillows sat before a stone fireplace. There were also stars everywhere. Painted on the ceiling, carved into the stones, made of polished copper, silver, and brass and nailed to the wall around a crescent moon... It had a feeling of great age to it, and I couldn't help but touch one of the six-pointed shapes carved next to me.

"What is this place?" I asked in awe.

"We called it the Star House when Arloste and I lived here," he said with a wistful smile. I glanced at him, wondering if he knew that Arloste had returned in Reaper armor. I wasn't sure; she hadn't come into Chapel with us, saying something about fixing her gear.

"What was your relationship?" '*Knew him? I fucked him, or I wanted to.*' I couldn't help myself as I smiled. What was it about good bucks...

He looked surprised, and maybe a little concerned, but answered, "I was an orphan. My parents came here and made the pilgrimage, though of course nopony called it that yet." He sighed, his eyes looking at something more distant than the walls he faced. "I couldn't go with them. I stayed behind and eventually wandered

into the church. It was a mess, vandalized and defaced, but I felt a purpose in restoring it. I met Arloste shortly afterwards. She wandered down the road... I think looking to make the pilgrimage herself. Scared. Confused. Maybe even a little mad. We talked for hours, and I earned her trust, and she decided to stay a while." He coughed quietly. "I thought she was my first success."

I smiled. It'd be okay to tell him... .

His wistful smile hardened. "Then she killed a foal."

What. The. Fuck? I blinked and cocked my head, forcing a smile... or a grimace. "Come again…?"

He looked at me, both angry and sad in equal measure. "We'd started collecting the Crusaders. For a time, she was…happy. Wonderfully happy. She said she'd never gotten to be a Crusader, but she couldn't tell me what she meant by that. Only as time went on, she became…odder than usual. The fact she didn't get older was strange enough, but she'd talk to herself or mutter in strange languages. One morning, a foal was found strangled. The hoof marks on her throat were too large to be made by anyone here except Arloste."

Old anger and sadness lingered on his face. "She denied it, but I couldn't trust her alone with the foals anymore. And worst of all, I'm not sure she believed it either. We couldn't kill her…she had a strange ability to heal injuries, like she had a built-in healing talisman, but she couldn't stay. A lot of the oldest Crusaders still miss her." And from the tone in Priest's voice, he did too. "So I moved into a house by the road proper and locked this place up."

I thought about Arloste lying with Thorn between her hooves in the garage. If we hadn't been there, what would have happened? I swallowed hard, definitely feeling some hard questions coming for Rampage.

I hoped she didn't kill me for asking them.

"It's a wonderful house. Thanks for showing it to me," I said as I looked at it with a sigh. It was like a house in the stories I got to read as a filly. Well, when I was interested enough in reading, which wasn't often.

Priest chuckled softly. "You misunderstand. I'm not just showing it to you." He floated the key to me and put it in my mouth. "I'm giving it to you."

My butt and the key hit the floor. "You're giving me a house? This house?"

"I don't want it. I don't even count it as mine. I was just holding onto the key," he said as he looked at the stairs. "It needs some fixing, but your friends can help set that up. There's some furniture upstairs... old belongings... We never used it, and it felt rude to just throw it out."

"But why?" I asked, feeling a little lightheaded. "I didn't build you turrets or make walls or kill anypony for you…why would you give me this?"

"So you'll stop by Chapel more often, of course," he said with a simple, pleasant smile.

I kissed him. If my legs had been cuffed and hobbled, I still would have found some way to kiss him.

He didn't kiss back. And when our lips parted, I looked him in the eye. His smile was polite, tolerant, and forgiving…and that was all. I smiled sheepishly at him in embarrassment, then growing confusion. I felt a little ashamed, even if he didn't look angry.

"Well, I'm glad you like it," he said, covering up the resounding awkwardness as I blushed and rubbed my mouth sheepishly, kicking myself again and again. I'd acted just like I was back in Stable 99. Had I learned nothing?

"Yeah…" I muttered, fighting for a smile. "I like it. A lot."

"Well, I'll let you look around," he said as he walked towards the door. Then he paused. "Also. Could you please tell Arloste that I'm glad she's okay, but that she shouldn't come into Chapel?"

My gut dropped once more, like I'd just been cut... "Yeah…I'll tell her."

He closed the door, and I walked to the nearest wall with an elegant six-pointed star, closed my eyes, and beat my head against it. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

* * *

A while later, after my head stopped feeling as if somepony had hit it with a wall repeatedly, I poked it into each of the small rooms. The two other rooms on the first floor had clearly been lived in by Rampage…Arloste…and Priest. Thankfully, it looked like they hadn't been sharing them. The first room I checked probably wasn't Priest's, since it still had so much stuff in it, though I wondered if he'd cleaned up; it seemed remarkably neat for what I expected of Rampage. I found a quite dented brass star-shaped badge that said

‘Hoofington Guard’. There were also a lot of books: police procedurals, murder mysteries, and books of forensic science, mostly. She’d also collected wooden carvings of ponies. No, of zebras. I frowned as I looked from one group to the other.

Munching on some peppermint sticks I’d found in a desk drawer -- only a little bit dusty -- I peeked into what I assumed was Priest’s room. It was mostly cleared out, but there were sketches and drawings of the church. A picture of Celestia’s window was pinned to a wall over the bed. Beyond that, there wasn’t much left. I peeked at the full wastepaper basket and lifted out the wads.

“Why throw these out?” I muttered softly as I smoothed them out.

Arloste looked back at me. The look was posed, and done with more detail than even the drawing of Celestia’s window. I stared into her eyes. Priest should have had a pencil for a cutie mark.

No wonder he hadn’t wanted to kiss me. He’d loved her. Then she’d done…something. Had she really killed a foal? How can you love a murderer?

I picked out the intact drawings from the trash, took the ones on the walls down, and collected them in a small stack in the middle of the room. I’d return them later. I thought that maybe…could there be some way…perhaps if I…

I sighed. *Always trying to save ponies.*

I wondered just how long it would take for me to be contacted. Would Bottlecap send me directions? Should I be listening for a clue from DJ Pon3? Maybe I should try and find out how to repair my PipBuck? Virgo Zodiac said she studied them, but I had no idea how to find her or if it would be safe to contact her.

I walked upstairs. Clearly, this was where most of the belongings of the previous tenants had been stored away. Priest’s hornwork was visible here, too; all throughout the upstairs were nice neat boxes that only showed a little bit of rusting. I walked in on a room with a full moon painted right above the bed. Curious, I opened the closest metal box and saw a number of slightly warped photos and other knickknacks.

A young light blue unicorn in thick glasses and braces grinned beside a far younger looking Twilight Sparkle and Cheerilee. She was levitating a little model of the globe with the sun and moon orbiting it. An award rested around her neck. I reached down and pulled out the little medal still hanging on the blue ribbon that had once hung around her neck. ‘Ponyville junior astronomer award’.

Then a picture of her older, still wearing glasses but without the braces. She stood in a blue uniform beside a dozen other mares. ‘Spacemares’, read a caption under it.

Another photo, and she smiled at me through her thick glasses as she stood before some massive pieces of machinery. Another had her with a small cluster of ponies looking up at a model of the stars and planets. And another with her meeting with Twilight Sparkle and Applejack. The blue unicorn clearly possessed an eager hoofshake, as it looked like she was trying to shake off the purple unicorn’s leg.

As I looked at the streaks in their manes, I frowned. It was amazing how similar they looked. Had Twilight Sparkle had a sister? Then I looked at the next picture, and my frown deepened. Was it a… missile? No. It looked much too big for that. Like a minaret mounted atop a delicate jewel-encrusted alabaster spire supported by four tapering buttresses. Some kind of…rocket?

A picture from the moon.

My entire body went numb as I stared at the image of a world hovering above a gray horizon of faintly luminous white dust and rocks. The sun silhouetted the world above me, but I could see the tiny winking lights of cities, the darkening blues of what I could only imagine were seas. The greens of plains and forests. It looked so small and fragile, surrounded by all that darkness. Yet there was light, too. Motes of light more beautiful for all that harsh darkness around them. The stars seemed to almost be welcoming, teasing, taunting…maybe even flirting a little.

We went to the moon. Not in some kind of fairy tale of an alicorn banishing her sister to the moon, but actually travelling there. We did that, I realized, as I looked at the next picture, showing the rocket sitting upright on the open and empty plain. It possessed a terrible loneliness, stark but beautiful. Pensive. Like Princess Luna, I found myself imagining.

There was only one picture of the blue unicorn on the moon, and I gawked at the strange bubble helmet and silvery, gem-studded suit she wore. From the way she hovered in the air, upside down as if in the middle of a somersault, I wondered if it was the suit or the moon that was allowing her to float effortlessly like a pegasus.

Another picture showed white, cloudy gems embedded in the stones and glowing with a strange light. The moonstones seemed similar to the talismans that Glory had collected, only lacking any

kind of spell glyph within. Maybe they were the source of the moon's gentle glow?

I lifted the box from the stack and set it on the floor before me, looking deeper into it. I perused the newspapers behind the photos. 'Back from the moon!' proclaimed one headline, the picture of the rocket sitting back on Equestria with dozens of ponies gathered around it and cheering. The next had a front page article, 'Our future on the moon'. But it was crowded out by a report of a terrible zebra battle south of Hoofington. The next paper, dated a month later, read 'Scandal strikes the moon program'.

And then 'Astromare Marigold a moon momma? What tricks did she pull to land in the cockpit?'

The last: 'Space program suspended indefinitely pending investigation'. I looked at the picture of the mare smiling radiantly on the moon, then at the picture in the paper of a tiny-looking mare sitting before dozens of frowning, scowling ponies. A tiny little side article read 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences preserves space explorer Marigold's ministry stipend'. There was a little quote: '"Never has a mare sacrificed so much to go so much farther than most ponies could ever dream." –Twilight Sparkle.'

Finally, perhaps most heartbreaking of all, was a small picture. It wasn't of the moon or on the front page of the Hoofington Post. It was of a tired and sad Marigold digging in her garden with an old brown buck looking on with his own sad eyes and passing her some of the colorful poofy flowers I'd seen outside. Beside her rested a basket holding a purple unicorn foal batting at a little star tied to the handle.

A wrinkled note lay folded beside that picture. 'Thank you for the flowers from your garden, Hoss. I just know that Tarot will love them…if she'll stop eating them!'

There wasn't anything past that. I wondered what had happened to her. I wondered if she'd died in the bombing. I wondered if there was anything past that sad photograph.

* * *

Back downstairs, I looked at the blackened casing of my PipBuck and sighed. I hated waiting. I didn't want to confront Rampage just yet. Glory was avoiding me too, since her own injury. P-21 had said something about haggling with Charity over selling some gear. I

thought of visiting Sekashi, but honestly I was simply drained by my disastrous attempt at romance and thinking about that poor mare who'd been to the moon and been ruined for it.

And as for trying to rebuild some sort of relationship with Priest... really, I probably wouldn't have less of a chance than I did now even if I decided to shoot him.

It was probably a bad idea, but I levitated out Vanity's orbs. I glanced at the bloody smear on the fourth. I didn't want to deal with his death now. Goddesses, I was so sick of death. From Roses to Vanity, why did everypony have to die? Want to die? Weren't there ponies who liked life? Who wanted something new in the Wasteland?

Well, there was P-21. Too bad I'd killed his lover.

Ugh, I needed a drink. Why didn't I ever have some Wild Pegasus around when I really needed it?

I picked up the first orb from the set, then stopped and trotted over to make sure the door was locked. Then I frowned and shoved the entire couch against the door. Blackjack was not available!

I lifted the first orb to my horn and closed my eyes. I tried to make the connection…but it was hard. Not like the orb was locked, but like my horn was scared to make the contact. I supposed that that was understandable. I had to breathe several times before I finally felt the connection take shape and the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Oooooh! A party. As in a full five stars, red alert, don't let the Overmare catch us, wow party! Lights flashed, the music was bright, and I wanted to dance! Not that I knew how dance, but right now I'd have tried figuring it out if my host would let me! A banner bedecked with balloons and streamers proclaimed that this was 'Ministry of Morale Hub Inauguration Party Time!' Now this was what the Ministry of Morale was all about!

And in the middle of it all, both physically and socially, was a middle-aged earth pony mare with a poofy pink mane just starting to develop gray stripes. "Come on, everypony. I know what'll make you shake your hoove things!" Pinkie Pie cheered as she immediately danced right up against bucks and mares half her age. Her infectious mood spread like a fever.

I was in Vanity; at least my host was a unicorn buck instead of just

a buck. Stonewing and Jetstream flanked me. Twist, Big Macintosh, and a yellow earth pony who looked like a geeky egghead brought up the rear. The large gray Doof seemed to be arguing with the ponies at the door. The young mare snickered as she adjusted her glasses, “That was mean, Macintosh.” From the rest of her squadmates came highly amused chuckles.

“I just told ‘em I wasn’t sure he was on the list,” Big Macintosh said with a languid chuckle. “Didn’t think a buck that keeps on hitting on fillies what aren’t interested would be.” Twist’s smile turned more genuinely grateful as Macintosh’s gaze darkened a touch. “If that boy can’t figure out how to manage his gun around ladies, then he shouldn’t be allowed to have one.”

“Hey, hear that, Jetstream? We’re ladies now,” Twist laughed gleefully.

“Us? Psalm, maybe,” the blue pegasus said with a quirky sort of grin. “I can’t believe that she passed up a chance at a Ministry of Morale party to go *pray*.”

“Well, could be worse. Applesnack just doesn’t have *time* for parties. Ugh, did that pony get his stick installed before he enlisted, or was it special issue?” Twist asked with a snort, giggling with a little bounce. So, with everyone else except Psalm here, that had to be Flak Jacket’s name, the one that had been scratched off on the lockers. She pulled out a peppermint stick and munched on the end. “Ooooh, I love these,” she said around the stick poking out between her lips.

“That one of those ‘special’ sticks?” Jetstream asked skeptically, “You know any zebra crap’s illegal.”

“Oh come on. They’re peppermint leaves. Peppermint! You can’t tell me leaves are contraband now! Besides, the Proditor eat them all the time,” Twist said with an easy laugh as the Marauders started to split up and go their separate ways. Big Macintosh went to speak to Pinkie Pie, the egghead following like his ghost. Stonewing and Jetstream flew up to the second floor balcony, leaving Vanity watching with a wistful sigh. Twist spoke around the candy cane sticking out of the corner of her mouth like a cigar. “I keep telling you, your royalness, munch one of these and you might actually be able to ask her out.”

“What? Who? Me?” Vanity sputtered. “I…she’s an enlisted mare and I’m a morale officer. It could never work.”

“Sure. But that doesn’t stop you from wanting to make it work,”

Twist said as she bumped her hip against his before bouncing away. This was clearly not Vanity's sort of party, and he migrated slowly towards the edges with the other lookers-on, sipping his drink, listening to the music, and keeping his eyes open for Jetstream.

"You look pensive, Uncle," a voice rasped softly in my ear, and both of us jumped. The sound was like the voice of a rusty can, and we turned to look at the fair hide and golden mane of Goldenblood. His brilliant golden eyes looked searchingly at Vanity. As he talked, his breath rattled so harshly in his chest I could hear it over the blaring music. "Hardly the Grand Galloping Gala, is it?"

"Golden!" Vanity smiled and gave his shoulders a friendly squeeze. "I didn't know you were out of the hospital. You sound…better." To be truthful, he looked…probably as bad as me. Dark hollows hung around his eyes, and his hide had unhealthy blemishes on it. He wheezed softly with every breath.

"Thank you, Uncle. I'm sorry I didn't get to attend your commencement," he said in that soft, horrid voice. "It's exceptional that you signed up at all. I don't know any other aristocrats who volunteered for a front line position."

Vanity gave a disgusted little snort. "After so many inspirational speeches, I thought somepony would have to sign up. At least a token noble." He tried to smile dismissively. Goldenblood's smile was more…aloof.

"So you signed up out of pride then?" Even I caught the note of disapproval. "Not out of loyalty to the Princesses?" The question seemed to catch Vanity by surprise as he focused on his nephew's earnest expression.

"Well, I suppose for Luna as well. She needs all of our help."

"Indeed. But I wonder if she has it." Goldenblood spoke calmly, but even I could hear the tension in his voice. "Do you really think my father is loyal to Princess Luna? Do you believe that any titled pony is?" He swept his hoof to the side. "They hold their balls and galas, wasting their money on their own indulgences as war threatens the kingdom. They use their lineage to leverage safe postings around Canterlot and Manehattan rather than place themselves where they might actually have to fight. Is there any value to the aristocracy at all, Uncle?"

His question struck me as unusually direct, but I also had to admit that Goldenblood had a point. I hadn't seen anything of Blueblood or the other aristocrats that seemed worth a damn. Vanity was the

first and last aristocrat who seemed to care about the actual fighting of the war. Still, his gaze hardened as he looked at the sickly stallion. “Tradition. The noble houses have always existed to serve and support Equestria and the Princess. It is our duty and our sacred honor.”

Goldenblood’s hard look softened slightly. “Undoubtedly, Uncle. But I have to wonder, do they serve her still?”

Suddenly, a leg went around my shoulders, a flash of pink to my left as Pinkie Pie pulled Vanity’s head into a crushing hug. “Hey! Why are you ponies over here looking like such sourpusses? Don’t you know it’s supposed to be a party, smarty?” Somehow, despite her grin, I detected a note of annoyance in her voice.

Suddenly her eye twitched and she went stiff. “Ahh! Left eye blink. Ear waggle. Rump itch? Oooh!” She suddenly headbutted the two aside just as a sick Doof was violently ill over the rail. “Ewww… somepony partied too hard?” she said with some sympathy as the club’s staff hurried to clean up the mess as the huge gray pony groaned. “Good thing my Pinkie Sense saw that coming!”

“Pinkie Sense?” Vanity asked with a skeptical smile. Goldenblood looked intrigued, however.

“Oh you won’t believe me either,” Pinkie Pie said as she rolled her eyes with a slightly sad smile. “Twilight Sparkle’s been trying to study it for years, and she still can’t figure it out. I just get little feelings that things are going to happen, and then they do!”

“It sounds…convenient,” Vanity said as he hid his smile behind a feigned muzzle rub. I had to agree. It wasn’t like you could tell when bad things were going to happen just from an achy knee or itchy mane.

Pinkie Pie rolled her eyes with a sigh. But then Golden said softly, “It sounds…lonely. Knowing things that others can’t understand or accept. You bear it well.” Pinkie Pie’s manic grin disappeared as she looked at Goldenblood with a look of uncertainty, then a growing smile.

“You believe me?”

“I think there are many things in this world that can’t be explained rationally, so therefore irrational explanations should be considered.” He glanced up at where Doof hung over the rail. “If it prevents us from getting vomited upon, I’d freely consider it.”

The pink pony grinned and swept him up in a hug. “I knew you were a good pony, Goldie Oldie Boldy!”

Goldenblood suddenly hunched over and started to cough and retch. Pinkie Pie immediately released him, patting him on the back. “Oh, are you okay?”

He just gave her a tense little smile and then returned to coughing, stepping away a little. “Just…adjusting,” he said as he levitated a cloth from his vest and coughed into it before drawing a slow breath. Vanity looked at the spots of pink and red left behind on the cloth.

Twist bounced her way across the club, smiling like nothing in the world could bother her. She nudged flanks with Pinkie Pie and grinned, “Hey Pinkie, this is a great party, but I’ve got something that will make it even better!” she said as she pulled out one of her candy canes and tossed it to Pinkie Pie, who caught it balanced on her nose and looked at it cross-eyed. “You’ve got to try these. Just take one. They’ll blow your mind!” she said with a grin.

Pinkie Pie smiled and tossed the candy cane in the air, caught it in her mouth, and chewed. “Mmmm…pretty sweet, Twist.”

“Yeah. They’re really super, aren’t they? I made them myself!” she said proudly, fluttering her eyes behind her thick glasses.

But Pinkie Pie wasn’t paying attention anymore. The pupils of her bright blue eyes expanded and her smile grew from ear to ear like mine had my first time playing the contrabass. “Oh wow! This really is super duper trooper good!” the mare said as she bounced gleefully on her hooves. “Wooo! Wooo! Wooo!”

She pointed a hoof at Twist as she started to giggle. “You’re still sad about Apple Bloom, aren’t ya? I can feel it!” She looked right into Vanity’s eyes. “And you keep thinking you’re a murderer and scared you’re going to turn into a monster. And you are!” And then she looked at Goldenblood. “And you…” Her smile slowly faded away. “You…” And like in ruins of Sugarcube Corner I watched as her face turned from glee into an expression of fear. “You’re going to hurt a lot of ponies. Lots and lots and lots…”

Goldenblood didn’t say a word as he simply looked back with his golden gaze.

“Pinkie Pie. Relax. It’s a party,” Twist said in worry as she gave Pinkie’s flanks a nudge, but now the pink mare wasn’t paying any attention to us. Her eyes were sweeping from one to the next. “And he’s a rapist…and she’s…she’s stealing! And…and…no!” She sat down hard, muttering. “Twitchy mane…hot hoof…tingly knee…dry tongue…what does it mean?”

"We should call a doctor," Vanity said as he looked around. Twist knelt, apologizing repeatedly for the candy as she hugged the trembling Pinkie Pie. The crowd was starting to notice, but that was when a huge cake made in the shape of the pink ministry hub was wheeled in.

Pinkie Pie looked right at it and pointed her trembling hoof. "It's a bomb…it's a bomb…there's a bomb…a really big bomb…" she whimpered over and over again as she shook. Then she looked around at the crowd. "You have…you have…there's so many pony…you have to do something!" Twist looked skeptical. Vanity just shook his head. Goldenblood's face was a stoic mask. Pinkie Pie stared at him. "Please Goldie…please don't let them get hurt…." she begged as tears ran down her face.

Goldenblood closed his eyes, and then said in a tone of command that made Vanity's ears rise up, "Vanity, get a message to the Hoofington Guard; there's a terminal you can use in the club's office. Tell them somepony planted a bomb at Prance. Twist, yes? Find Big Macintosh. Tell him the cake is a bomb." He began hacking and coughing again but struggled to keep his breath. "Pinkie Pie. Listen to me." The shaking mare looked up at him. "You need to smile. You need to calm down. Where you go, the party goes. And the party needs to go outside."

Pinkie Pie stared at him, then swallowed and nodded. And like that she was okay again. Her smile returned, her hair seemed to curl… only her eyes remained terrified. "Oh…sure Goldie. Great idea."

Goldenblood just gave Vanity a look, and my host ran for the office as Pinkie suddenly cried out, "Come on everypony! You know what'd be a great idea? A block party! Outside!" she said as she bounced towards the door while singing something about 'raising the roof' and 'a party for Hoofington!' The cake looked quite forlorn as the club emptied calmly. Prince Vanity's name seemed to help the city guard take the threat seriously. Big Macintosh and Doof encouraged the rest of the staff to leave.

When the club was almost empty, Vanity carefully scraped away the pink frosting and cake. It peeled away enough for us to see the gray blocks of explosives within. She hadn't been crazy after all.

When Vanity found Pinkie Pie, she was tackling one of the cooks. "You did it! You made that bomb. You're a bad pony! I can tell! A mad bomber pony!"

"You're crazy, lady! I just picked up the cake from the bakery!" he

protested as she glared down at him.

She grabbed his head in her hooves and pulled his face within an inch of her own. “Don’t call me crazy, you wicked, bad, no good pony. You’ll tell me what you were doing! I’ve made dragons talk; you’ll be easy.” She looked at the guards. “Can you take him to my hub? I think we’re gonna need a special private party-warty.”

The crowd cheered as the buck was dragged towards the ministry hub, still shouting his innocence. Oddly, Pinkie Pie didn’t look happy with their cheers. In fact, standing this close to her, she looked…angry. *Scared* and angry, and her smile was almost vengeful as she trotted out of sight. Vanity and Goldenblood followed. She was pacing. Fuming.

“It’s all secrets and lies. All of it. All those ponies,” she said, more to herself than the two unicorns. “I saw what they were doing. I just…the pieces all came together and…and…” Her bright eyes darkened. She suddenly slumped. “I…I dunno how I can stop it. I couldn’t stop it when I knew it was a bomb.” She sniffed as tears went down her cheeks. “I’m so stupid. All I can do is throw parties. I don’t know how to stop bad ponies and keep the good ponies happy and safe!”

Vanity just sighed and rubbed Pinkie Pie’s shoulder. “Don’t feel bad about this, Miss Pie. Leave it up to the city guard; it’s their duty to keep peace and security. They’ll find the bad ponies.” And for a moment, it looked as if that was going to be that.

But Goldenblood was just looking at Pinkie Pie. Then he answered slowly, “I don’t know, Pinkie Pie. I think you can do more than you know. The Ministry of Morale’s more widespread than any ministry. You’ve got contacts and roots in the community. And you have the Pinkie Pie Sense; that’s something nopony else has. If there is anypony in Equestria who can keep us safe, it’s you.”

Pinkie Pie looked at him, her face a mask of desolation. Then she sniffed and rubbed her nose. “I…maybe. I’d need more of Twisty’s candy. And…there’s so much to keep track of. I don’t even know where to begin.”

Goldenblood glanced at Vanity, his lips curling slightly. “Oh, I can think of a few places. After all, I know there’s lots of aristocrats who you should use your Pinkie Sense on. Especially if they’re not helping Princess Luna as much as they could.”

Pinkie Pie closed her eyes and then murmured, to herself or to the unicorns, I wasn’t sure. “Oh Goldie, I asked you not to let them get

hurt…”

oooOOOooo

I jerked out of the memory and at once took stock. I was still on the couch pressed against the front door. I wasn’t disemboweled. Deus and Blueblood hadn’t resurrected themselves and come out of the darkness to gang rape me. No spritebots. I had to admit that, for coming out of an orb, this was pretty smooth.

So for once, I could actually think about what I’d seen. It’d been pretty clear that Goldenblood had a grudge against his father and the other aristocrats. Maybe it was his father’s treatment, maybe it was his loyalty to Luna. Whatever it was, he’d clearly set Pinkie Pie on the road to putting monitoring equipment into bakeries and sending her surrogate parents to spy on her behalf. Paranoia, or had Pinkie Pie really sensed something?

Still, I’d heard the argument. The doubt. Goldenblood seemed determined to bring down his father and the aristocracy, and he’d used Pinkie Pie and his uncle. I just wondered…

…why I heard hoofsteps upstairs?

“I could really use an E.F.S. right now,” I muttered as I rolled off the couch and readied the dragon claw and Cupcake’s revolver. “Actually, I could really use a drink right now.” Too bad neither Priest nor Arloste had kept a liquor cabinet. Slowly, I made my way upstairs. I’d only checked the one room, the one with Marigold’s belongings. I’d never checked the other…Images of more ghost ponies peeked into my mind. I cracked the door open.

The unicorn mare in black lace who’d been praying in the chapel when I first visited it was in the house, her back to me. Up close, I could suddenly appreciate how big she was. Her horn glowed as she lifted away her dress. A dusky purple hide appeared…and wings… and…

Oh sweet Princesses, it was Luna.

No. No, *not* Luna, I realized. I’d seen Luna. What stood in the room was like a copy, a pale imitation. The light was dull upon her horn, and no magical moonlight seemed to glow on her matte hide. And to seal the appearance, there was no cutie mark on this mare’s flank.

Still…what the hay?

I considered my options: a tiny P-21 told me that I had the element

of surprise and shouldn't waste it. A tiny Glory warned me that she might not be hostile. A tiny Blackjack lay in a bathtub and whined about how she wanted a drink. A tiny Rampage just gave a shrug.

Fuck it. I closed the door softly, then knocked on it. "Hi. If you'd like to talk, Miss Alicorn, come on downstairs," I said loudly, turning around. I'd probably just invited another monster to kill me. Maybe she was another Zodiac? Or a monsterpony like Gorgon? I really didn't care at this point. If she tried to attack me, then I'd kill her…or something. The plan was still a little fuzzy. I hopped back onto the couch, propping my head up on one of the arms as I dug through my saddlebags for a Fancy Buck Cake and two Sparkle-Colas. I hummed to myself, trying to avoid the urge to go back upstairs.

Then there was a hoofstep on the stairs. Then another and another. Purple eyes peeked around the corner. "Hey. If you're going to kill me, mind waiting till I'm done eating?" I muttered around a mouthful of gooey cherry filling. She just stared at me a moment before slowly walking the rest of the way down into the living room. "Want a soda?" I asked, lifting one. I'm fairly sure that, of all the things she thought I might have asked, that wasn't even on the list.

The purple alicorn seemed at a bit of a loss. "The Goddess…does not require a soda," she finally said in a low, quiet voice. I really was amazed I could hear it at all. There was something... unnatural about it, something…off. Something about it sounded familiar, too, Luna only knew how.

"Didn't ask if you required one. Just wanted to know if you wanted one."

The alicorn's horn glowed softly, and she lifted the drink to her lips. She looked suspicious and wary as she took a very small drink from the bottle. "You are…unusual. You are not afraid of us?" She'd somehow managed to say that *while* drinking, without moving her lips. Putting that aside for the moment, I focused on what she'd said rather than how she'd said it. I suspected that this was not the reaction she expected. Good. And was it my imagination, or did I now detect a hint of a smile?

"Sorry. Call me jaded," I replied after swallowing, "But after you have a cybermonster pony screaming 'cunt' at you while hunting you clear across the Wasteland, it's sort of hard to raise the bar on that." I popped the last bit of the cake into my mouth, chewing

briskly. I gulped it down and wiped the crumbs away. “Not that you’re not interesting, of course.”

“We are…the Goddess,” she said, again without moving her lips. There was some confusion and hesitation in her statement, as though even the purple alicorn wasn’t exactly sure. Personally, I would have thought that a goddess would be much more… assertive?

“Well, when I start seeing double, I’ll start calling you plural.” I sat up and coughed, hacked, and spat a glob of phlegm into the cake wrapper. The alicorn went from looking suspicious to looking disgusted. I wiped my mouth with a hoof as I looked up at her. “Do you have a name, or will ‘Goddess’ suffice?”

Now, I know some ponies might have fallen over themselves at the sight of somepony that looked like the Princesses and called themselves a goddess, but I’d seen the real thing. I’d even been touched by Luna’s feathers…well, secondhand. I could still remember the feeling of them on my lips, and so, looking at this alicorn, I felt curiosity but certainly not reverence. I should have been more suspicious, I suppose.

She just looked so…sad.

Again, that long silence. It was almost as if she were considering options. “Lacunae.”

“Lacunae. Let me guess, it’s a name that’s absolutely rife with meaning and mystery that’s completely over my head?” I said with a grin, and Lacunae looked a bit more wary. “Well, my name is Blackjack, but you know that already. You’ve been watching me for some time.” I looked at her from over the tops of my mirrored glasses. “In the chapel. And in the mansion.”

“We were considering you for Unity and joining the Goddess,” she replied softly. As with all of her speech, her lips did not move, and it looked like she hadn’t altered her breathing, either. That was one of the less strange things going on, though, and I could wonder about it later.

Joining the Goddess? Was there a part of that which didn’t sound creepy? I waved my hoof before me. “Pass. I’ve got way too much trouble on my hoof. I’m damaged goods.”

“We agree.” She hesitated, head cocked as if she were listening and not quite sure how to express it. “We have observed some positive traits. You are…unusually tenacious. However, you are also unpredictable. Unstable. Irrational and self-destructive. And whiny.

Definitely whiny." There was a long pause. "We no longer wish for you to share in Unity."

"Huh," I grunted softly, not entirely surprised but still slightly hurt. Was I *that* whiny? "Well shucks," I said with a chuckle. "So if you're not interested in me for this Unawhatsit, what are you doing here?"

"We…I…we…live here," she said. She took another hesitant sip, almost as if this wasn't something a goddess was supposed to do. I supposed that, with the cottage being abandoned, this was a natural place for a big alicorn goddess thing to live. Either that, or Priest had omitted a really big part of his time here. "Am I dreaming?"

Okay, the questions were becoming more interesting. "I don't know. Are you?"

"I…we…I am always dreaming. We are dreaming each other's dreams. But my dreams are missing." She looked at the stars painted on the ceiling. "This city is full of nightmares. They scream in me. I do not want to be here, but we need me here."

"Nightmares?" I muttered, thinking back over the last four days. Ya think?

"They are hateful dreams. Spiteful. Full of malice. They make it hard to hear the Goddess. I wish I could hear us more clearly. I need her forgiveness. I need her confidence." She looked in the direction of the Chapel. "I can hear us most clearly in the house of faith. That is why I remain here, where there is less to fear." She looked at me. "Are you afraid?"

I sighed, looking at the strange creature. "Hun, I recently escaped from a rape factory. An emotionally scarred buck who half-wants to kill me is my best friend. We've got a pegasus with us who was booted from the Enclave but still thinks of herself as one of them, and we've got a Reaper who survived getting her head cut off and who may or may not be a psychopath. I've faced monsters, been really annoyed by two-hundred-year-old mysteries, and shot at. A lot. You're going to have to be a little more specific."

"Are you afraid for your soul?"

I blinked and groaned, burying my face in my hooves. Philosophy. Why did she have to ask me about philosophy? Still, I thought about it. "I'm afraid that I'll turn into something I hate. I'm afraid that I'll hurt ponies who don't deserve it. I'm afraid that one day I won't want to stop killing. So yeah. I guess I am." I sighed and then smiled. "Guess we've got that in common. But, I've got mysteries to solve, questions to answer, and bastards to kill."

"I…" Then she paused. "May I tell her?" Then she fell silent and I frowned as I watched her closely. She drooped a little. "I…am looking for something as well, but it is difficult searching alone. We do not like the nightmares of the city. One can be ignored, but dozens spread the nightmare through us all. I do not want to search alone. May I accompany you?"

"You…what? Why? Lacunae, I get shot at almost daily. There's not a day seems go by when something isn't trying to kill me. I'm not exactly sure it would be safe." For either of us. For all I knew, this whole 'Goddess' bit was just a ploy by Sanguine to do…something. "I have no idea who, or what, you are or what your agenda is." She definitely seemed psychologically unstable and was clearly withholding secrets.

"Please?" I blinked hard. Had an alicorn…just used the 'magic word' to try and convince me? Did she…or they…really think that I was that trusting of a complete stranger who was somewhat nuts?

I just looked at her for a moment, then raised my hooves into the air and snorted. "Welcome aboard! You get the dishes Tuesdays and Thursdays. Just make sure you try to schedule your emotional breakdowns when they don't conflict with ours. One of us is bad enough, but when we all get going…whew." I rolled off the couch and then struggled to pull the couch away from the door.

Then a brighter glow enveloped the couch and easily pulled it away. Great, and she was stronger than me. It was probably because of her great big…ugh! I didn't need a case of horn envy right now! "Okay. I need to fill in my friends. I need to make sure Glory is okay. She almost got eaten last night, and she's been acting weird. I need to tell Rampage not to try and gut you. I should probably also ask about that whole foal murdering thing. And I need to let P-21 know that we've got another mare with us. He'll be thrilled."

As I slipped out that door, I heard her mumble softly, "Are you sure we want to do this?"

* * *

I know…I know…there wasn't much of this that wasn't branded 'really bad idea', but despite that, I had to admit that there was something about her that made me want to help. Okay, she wasn't a normal pony, but it felt so much like she was…lost. And I simply couldn't believe this 'Goddess' gave a twig about a bounty.

I'm damaged goods travelling with broken wares and trying to save the Wasteland. "Where does it say that everypony I associate with closely has to be scarred, betrayed, crazy, or something else?" I wondered aloud.

While I might have wanted to talk to Glory first, Rampage was the first I came across. She was lying on a stone with her forehooves crossed, resting her chin on top of her hoofclaws and looking down at the town. "Hey," she said sullenly. "So, he showed you the clubhouse, huh? Do I still have my old room, or did he turn it into a den?"

"Actually, he gave me the clubhouse, so yeah. You get your old room back, Rampage," I said as I joined her on the rock. "So," I said as evenly as I could.

She didn't look back as she said in just as even a voice, "So."

"Did you fucking kill a foal, Rampage?" I asked softly as I looked at the town.

"Probably. That's what everypony tells me. My hoofmarks on the body," she replied, her pink eyes downcast.

"Then what was what you were doing with Thorn?" I asked, my magic pulling the heavy revolver from my bags. If I shot her in the eye fast enough and managed to get some rounds lodged in her brain…

"Being happy. Is that so hard to understand?" she said as she sat up. "I love kids. I mean, love 'em. I look at all this shit, and the one thing that gives me the slightest hope is that some foal might grow up and be able to do something about it. I come across some fucker who hurts a kid, and I eviscerate him or her. No regret. No hesitation. Because as fucked up as the Wasteland is, nothing makes it worse than what we do to each other."

"So what happened then?"

"I don't remember. It was a boring day. We didn't have any pilgrims. Just the usual ponies in town. I went to bed and woke up with the foal beside me, body beaten and neck crushed. I was so mad…so hurt…so…everything. A lot of the kids stuck up for me, but Priest couldn't. I couldn't either." She hung her head. "I know what I remember, but I also remember the sight of her lying there. I still see her, even with my eyes closed. Even with my eyes gouged out. Every second is frozen in my mind."

I could relate. I really could. "Till we figure this out…if I see you alone with a foal…I'm going to take you out." Then I frowned,

rolling my eyes as I looked up at that great vasty badness above. Ooooh, mistake! Falling up now! I clenched my eyes shut for a moment.

"Oh? And how are you going to going to do that?" she asked with a little smirk.

"Well, you were found in a balefire crater…" I said as I grinned at her.

"Yeah, but you don't have a balefire megaspell," she said with a snort, and then looked at me with a touch of uncertainty. "Do you?"

"Give me time." I grinned, and she smiled back, maybe with a touch of unease. Hey, it wasn't completely impossible! "So…on a totally unrelated note, have you ever heard of alicorns in the Wasteland?"

"Alicorns? Here?" She sat up. "I've heard they're around other parts of Equestria, but Hoofington's never had them before." She looked at me suspiciously, then gasped. "Wait…there's one here, isn't there?" She suddenly grinned. "Did you make friends with it?" I blinked, flushing as her grin grew and she cackled. "Oh sweet Celestia, Blackjack. Do you have a pet hellhound or something? Maybe keep a radscorpion in a shoe box? Only you could make friends with something that practically everypony in the Wasteland thinks is a monster."

"I made friends with you, didn't I?" Rampage looked at me with a slightly less snarky smile as I went on with all the smugness I could muster. "You know, it could be that I'm just using her. This could all be an elaborate ruse! I can do ruses you--" I started with a snort, then sneezed hard, blasting my hoof with streamers of snot. "Eugh…"

Rampage smiled sardonically. "Right. You are clearly the puppet master. We are all your puppets." She rose to her hooves, looking back at the cottage as she squinted up the hillside. "Well. I guess I should go meet this monster."

"Don't fight her, Rampage," I warned as sternly as I could manage, scraping the snot off my hoof on the rock. "She's…strange."

"She's an alicorn. Isn't that required?" Rampage asked. "It's kinda like becoming a Reaper or Steel Ranger: you just have to be off just to make the cut."

"I know her," I said sharply. Then I sighed as I sat. "I just don't know where I know her from. Something about her is familiar. It doesn't make any sense; I just look at her and feel…something."

"You're hopeless," Rampage said with a shake of her head. "Fine. I'll play nice." She swayed her glittery razor-wire-wrapped tail. "Oh…and chessmaster Blackjack? You have snot on your butt."

I glanced back behind me, ears flattening as I glared at her. "It's only because I'm plotting! Plotting the plots of…plotness!" I said as she walked towards the cottage. "Just you wait! Nopony's gonna see this plot coming!"

* * *

Once I'd dealt with the boogers on my butt -- honestly, I had a cold! Couldn't they cut me a break? -- I headed into town, where I heard the delightful sound of Charity getting murdered. Okay, technically it wasn't delight, but could anypony blame me if I did feel just a bit pleased?

"You…you're trying to take advantage of me!" Charity cried as she stood on a stack of crates. "I work…and I slave…and I try so hard to get caps for town…and you want thirty caps for a landmine?" She sat hard, bawling as twenty assorted foals and fillies watched on. "Why are you being so mean to me?"

"I'm not trying to take advantage of you!" P-21 sputtered, red in the face. "Twenty caps is too low! Even thirty is too low!" he protested as he raised his hooves. "Stop crying! I'm just trying for what's fair! Twenty five caps. Twenty three?"

"You…you…you're trying to rob me…you rob little ponies! How can you be so mean?" the unicorn bawled as she rubbed her eyes.

P-21 wavered and then slumped. "Fine. Twenty caps."

And just like that, the tears stopped and she said happily, "Deal." Hopping off the crates, she trotted towards her bag, muttering, "Stable ponies is so easy."

"She's not a pony," P-21 muttered. "She's some kind of bottle cap collecting monstrosity."

"She'll own the Wasteland someday," I agreed solemnly as I sat beside him. "So…what'd you buy?"

"Believe it or not, these fillies have dug up some decent stuff. I was just hoping to hang onto some more mines rather than sell them all," he said as she returned with a huge stack of caps and set them on the crates. "Is that all my caps? All two thousand?"

"You don't trust me?" she asked, her eyes going wide with hurt.

He smirked and narrowed his eyes. "Oh no. You're not getting me

with the waterworks this time."

And then Charity sighed, a soft little heartbroken catch in her voice. "I knew I'd never get away with it. I mean, we try so hard to get ahead here…but I know all too well how tough things are." She turned and started to walk slowly back towards her store. "I'll get the rest of them…" It sounded like he'd demanded her prized teddy bear or something! Even I looked at him with disdain, and these were our caps!

He lowered his head and gave a grunt of defeat. "Nevermind," he muttered, putting the caps in his saddlebags.

"Come again!" she replied brightly as she and four other Crusaders pushed the cart loaded with landmines into the post office.

"You should have seen me the first time. She charged me for a bottle of water that she gave as a gift to Priest," I replied, looking at the boxes. "So what'd you buy?"

"Some ammunition, a magazine extender for your twelve gauge, some more dynamite for me, and some barding for you and Glory."

"What about you?" I asked as I nudged open the box and pulled out some light black leather armor. A little closer to 'raider' fashion than I liked. A pony could get shot wearing this if she wasn't careful.

"If I get hit at all, it's 'cause I got noticed. I'll just stay nice and quiet in the background while you three get shot up. That way it's my own damn fault if something happens to me."

I looked at the black leather barding. "Well, I suppose it'll do till we get to Megamart. I wonder if we can spray-paint 'good guys, don't shoot us' on it?"

He looked at me with a smirk. "Blackjack. That's *Glory's* barding."

"This?" I looked at it in shock. "P-21, she can't wear this!" It was… ugly. I could only hope it was some sort of disguise or something.

"It's what she asked for," he replied with a shrug. "She wanted something that looked like she could kick tail. Personally, I think it's going to take more than clothes for her to be able to do that. No, your barding is in the other box."

I put the black leather aside. Honestly, it looked more like it was for sex work in Stable 69 than something Glory should be wearing to stay alive. I levitated that box aside and opened up the metal crate beneath it.

Black and blue beauty greeted my eyes. This armor wasn't just reinforced security barding, it was actual combat police armor, like

I'd seen on the back pages of the Ironshod Firearms catalogues. Magically treated black ceramic plates on a matte blue kevlar jacket. This was armor for my whole body and wouldn't leave my belly exposed. Blueblood couldn't…okay. Not thinking about it. Not thinking about guts spilling out all…

I smacked myself hard, much to the alarm of P-21. I took a deep breath, trying to will my heart to slow. "Sorry, just making sure this wasn't a dream." He looked skeptical as I pulled out the pieces of blue armor and saw that, to make the icing perfect, 'Aegis Security' had already been printed upon the plates. "Oh, I could kiss you!" I said as I hefted the armor.

"Yeah. Please don't," he said, raising his hoof to ward me away as I wiggled into the combat armor. "Does it fit?"

I blinked and then looked back at him. "You know what's weird… barding always fits. I have to wonder if there's some kind of 'one size fits all' spell made into these things." Cinching it up under my belly, I had to admit that it was a little heavy, but not as much as the reinforced security barding had been. It had a sling for a shotgun on the left side, and a loop for a baton that would hold my dragon claw on the right. It even had saddlebags with pockets for holding healing and restoration potions as well as chems.

As I redistributed my stuff, I told him about the Star House. He smiled. Then I told him about why Rampage hadn't been seen around town. He stopped smiling. And then I told him about Lacunae. He seemed more upset about her than about what Rampage had told me. "How do you know this Goddess thing isn't some kind of trick?"

"I gave her a chance to attack me and she didn't take it," I replied as I snapped the combat helmet into place. Thankfully, my glasses still covered my faintly glowing eyes. "I don't know. She's strange. I want to figure her out."

He sighed. "Does she seem like she has some psychological or emotional problem that you think you can help her with?"

I sat, tapping my hooves in front of me as I flushed. "Maybe…"

"Of course she does. And is she sad?"

I rubbed my nose as I awkwardly said, "A little. Maybe. Just a bit?"

"Blackjack, are you trying to turn us into the deadliest band of angsty whiny ponies to wander the Wasteland?"

"Maybe," I replied, and he sighed as he facehoofed. "What? It could work. Bad ponies could see us coming and go, 'Oh Goddesses,

no way I want to mess with them because then she'll start crying, she'll be suicidal, and then he'll blow us all to the moon!' I know I wouldn't want to tangle with that."

He tried to suppress his laugh, shaking his head, and then sighed. "Alright. Just…please keep on your hooves, and make sure this isn't another Lancer or Caprice." That certainly helped sober me up a bit, and he passed me the twelve gauge ammo he'd picked up. Trust was good. Trust that gets eleven zebras executed, not good.

* * *

Speaking of zebras…

I really didn't expect to see Sekashi kick Glory in the face when I encountered the pair. My eyes widened as I went for my dragon claw before a pink pony in my saddlebags bucked me upside my head and I noticed Sekashi wasn't pressing her attack.

"You are rushing, Fallen Bird. Do not be in such a hurry to hit me that you fail to connect," the zebra said as Glory picked herself up out of the yellow grass. Sekashi glanced at me, her smile widening before looking back at Glory. The gray pegasus hadn't noticed me approaching while she was picking herself out of the grass. "Why do you wish for this, Fallen Bird? You are not a fighter like your friends."

Glory shook herself hard. "I told you! I'm sick of being useless all the time."

Glory? Useless?

"Back in the mansion, I survived only so long as Rampage was around. The second she wasn't I got stuck in a stove!" she said as she started to shake. "I couldn't even help Blackjack against Blueblood. He cut me without even looking back, and I just sat there as he gutted her! I nearly got her killed!" Glory shouted back.

"It is a poor fighter who forsakes their strength for a weakness, though I know very funny stories of fighters who do just so," the zebra said with a wistful smile. "Perhaps I should write a tale of the Fallen Bird, who wished to fight like the dogs because she thought her wings too weak." Her green eyes looked back at Glory. "Ah, but how would the story end?"

Glory panted and hung her head. "I don't want to hear stories! I…I saw what that…that…. wh…wh…that slut was trying to pull. I knew it was Caprice and I didn't tell her! She does everything for

me. She saved my life and I just stood there as she was dying in front of me on the road. Rampage got her to Scalpel, not me. P-21 killed Blueblood. Not me." She sat down hard, hanging her head as she started to cry. "I can't do anything."

"You caught me," I said softly as I walked up beside her, taking off the helmet. Damn thing was uncomfortable.

"Oh my! Look at the sun! I believe I owe the Crusaders a story about two friends helping one and other. Excellent story. Very funny. Remind me to tell you some time!" the zebra said as she turned and trotted away. "Such a pity I cannot hear what two friends say to one another!"

I walked to her and lifted the black, spiked barding from the bag. "So, I'm guessing this isn't some sort of disguise thing," I said as I sat down beside her. She turned her head away from me. "And I'm guessing that 'Fallen Glory' isn't so much about keeping your identity secret as trying to be all tough?"

"I have to be tougher, Blackjack. For you. I... " She flushed as she stood. "You do everything. You get shot, blown up, cut up, hunted and betrayed…and all I do is…nothing. I feel…I feel like I'm still trapped in that oven and just waiting for the monster to eat me. Like I can't live if somepony doesn't come by and save me!" she said as she started to shake. She lifted her hooves, watching them tremble. "I…I can't…I can't even…stop…"

I did what worked for me. I hugged her. I held her as she quaked in my limbs. She wanted to be stronger. She wanted to be better. "You help me, Glory. Whether it's with your beam guns or with just being good and loyal, you help me." I stroked her mane, and then looked into her eyes. Despite Priest's healing magic, a thin scar remained, running from her brow to her cheek. She'd nearly lost an eye to the strike.

She kissed me. It was probably the most awkward kiss in the history of pony kisses.

I was so shocked that I barely moved, and she pulled away, her budding hope crumbling in the face of my stupor.

"I'm sorry…I guess…I guess I can't even control myself," she muttered as she looked away.

"No! I'm…I…just…didn't know you felt that way." I was certainly stunned by it; as awkward as the kiss had been, there was no mistaking the emotion that had been behind it.

"And…do you feel the same?" she asked in a tiny, hopeful voice.

And if I was honest, I'd crush her.

"I…don't know how I feel, Glory."

"I know you like mares. You were with her after all," she said with a flush. "I could…do that…"

Oh Goddesses, Glory was actually trying to proposition me? "Caprice was sex. Mutual masturbation. She made me feel good, but nothing my own hoof couldn't do for me. We were just using each other," I said as I struggled to somehow defuse this emotional dynamite factory before it all blew up and she was crying…or worse. "I don't want to use you like that, Glory."

And crush. She didn't have to say a word. She lowered her head, dropped her gaze, her shoulders hunched and her front legs rubbed against each other. "I see…sorry."

Urrrgh. Was that as annoying for everypony else when I did it? "No, Glory. You don't have to apologize. For anything," I said as I hugged her as platonically as I could. "It's just…yeah. I have sex with mares. And bucks. It's all fun. But…you're different. You're special, Glory. And every single pony I've…been with…was just sex. That's all it's ever been. If I were with you…if we were together… I'm afraid it'd be the same. Then you'd stop being my friend and then you'd leave. And I don't want you to leave…"

"So... " She fidgeted. "What now?"

I sighed and chuckled. "I don't have a clue. I'm not the smart pony, remember." *Be kind.* "Right now, it's something to think about. But what I'm more worried about is you feeling like you're useless. You're not useless, Glory. You're the only pony in the Wasteland that has a clue how to deal with the raider disease. You keep me going when I'm doing everything short of falling on my face. Heck, even when I *am* falling on my face."

"I guess so. Though I don't know what good I am with the disease. I'd need a lab and months of work to come up with a treatment." She looked at the black barding. "I'm just sick of seeing you get hurt protecting others when I can't do anything to protect you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm Security. It's part of the job," I said, giving her the easiest-going grin I could.

She sighed and shook her head sadly. "Oh, Blackjack…" She was smiling, so why did I feel like I'd said the wrong thing?

I told her about Rampage and Lacunae, and we were both grateful for the change in topic. Her caution mirrored P-21's, but she seemed far more interested in the Star House. "You say there are

pictures there from the moon? From the actual moon?" In her excitement, she seemed to forget all about the awkward patch we'd stumbled upon.

"Well, it looked like they were from the moon, and from the newspapers she'd kept it seemed like it. Why? Does it matter?"

"Well, we thought that the Equestrian Space Program was a hoax, just a way to stir up public support during the war that got axed when it failed to produce weapons or a boost to morale like it was designed to. We didn't even know if Marigold existed or if the scandal was just a way for the program leaders to wash their hands of a wasted experiment. I mean, the launch center is real enough. I think there's a ghoul village there called Rocket Town. You can see it from the Skyport. But I never thought in a million years that those rockets could actually fly."

"Apparently they did, once," I said, glad to see that she hadn't put on the dreadful barding and happy that she'd cheered up a bit. "What do a bunch of ghouls want with rockets?"

"Oh, they're some sort of cult or something. Plan to fly to the 'great beyond' or to some far off promised land. Since most of the space center is radioactive, we never went there. But Orion's Herd is decent enough if you don't mind ghouls." From her shiver, it was clear there were some ghouls worth minding.

"Well, let's get you some barding that's actually protective and not something that makes you look like a raider," I said as we headed towards the post office. Harpica strolled along with the ghoul foals in two rows behind her, and she gave us a very soft and polite greeting. Since arriving, the little ghouls had been quite well behaved and seemed too scared to wander off. A world that was more than four walls was an intimidating concept; I knew that firsthoof.

Still, at least the Crusaders were friendly enough and interested both in them and me. A blue colt with a cutie mark of a pitcher of pouring water even played with my black and red streaked tail curiously.

Inside the post office, my eyes met Charity's and we narrowed our gazes in unison. I licked my lips. She chewed slowly on a candy cane sticking out the side of her mouth. I walked to the counter and set the barding on it. "I want to make an exchange."

She neither said a word nor took her eyes from mine nor blinked. She just swung the candy cane around to point the tip at a sign on

the counter that read ‘all sales are final.’

“Look. I don’t like you. You don’t like me. I get that,” I said quietly as I pulled down my glasses a little to look her in the eye. “But see that pegasus back there? That really nice pegasus? I like her, and I want to keep her safe. That means dressing her in some barding that doesn’t make her look like a raider. So I want an exchange.”

She just chewed slowly on the end of her peppermint stick. “Your friend…she mute?”

“Huh…?”

“Mute. Can she talk?” Charity demanded.

“Yeah…”

“Feebleminded then?” the little filly queried.

“No, but…”

“Fillyphobic?”

“Look…”

Charity chewed up the rest of the peppermint stick. “I’m just trying to figure out…if this is for her, why are *you* the one doing the talking?”

Glory blinked and then stepped up past me. “Hello. Um…I need better armor than this,” she said as she pointed at the black barding.

“Welcome to Charity’s, where we ain’t,” she said with a polite smile. “You need better barding than this?”

“Well, yes please,” Glory said in surprise. “Something light.”

Charity walked to a shelf behind the counter and pulled out something light blue. It had been patched up more than a few times, but it seemed tailored for pegasi. “How’s that?” A faded patch on the shoulder read ‘Equestrian Skyguard’.

“I…” She took it and looked it over, then back at me, then at Charity. “It’s good. How much?” I braced myself.

“Eh, we’ll call it a swap. You need beam guns too, I hear?” My butt hit the ground about the same time as my jaw. “Beam pistols all right? Saddle-rigged?” Glory smiled gratefully at the filly and nodded. The filly put two of the boxy weapons, minus mouth grips, on top of the barding. “Four hundred caps and I’ll even throw in some gem cartridges.” Glory dug into her saddlebags for the caps as I just gaped.

“Thank you! And thank you, Blackjack. Again…for everything.” She gave a little squeal. “Oh I can’t wait to rig these on my battle saddle.”

I just stared at the filly behind the counter. “Why?” It was all I could say just now.

The filly looked at me coolly. “She needed the deal. You and your friend didn’t. You were just after caps. So I was just after caps. That’s what Bottlecap taught me,” she said before thumping her hoof on the counter. “Now are you going to buy something, or am I going to charge you for loitering? Ten caps a minute, starting now!”

I ran for my wealth!

* * *

I felt a little bit…itchy. Not in a mane sort of itchy so much as an it’s-been-a-good-day-and-nopony’s-shot-at-me kinda itchy. I was starting to feel a little bit overdue for something bad to happen to me, but the skies were dry and most of the Crusaders and the few adults were getting ready for Roses’s funeral in the afternoon. So why was I feeling so jumpy at everything being…ordinary? Had I been so stressed for so long that I was starting to anticipate threats that weren’t there?

Then the skywagon swooped over the town once, and before I knew it my revolver was out. It was the Enclave! They’d finally…

…sent a delivery wagon pulled by a ghoul pegasus? ‘Absolutely Everything. Yes, I do deliveries!’ was painted on its side. I looked at my gun and at the sight of a lavender filly climbing out of the back of the wagon and found myself starting to shake. Deus was dead. Blueblood was dead. The Zodiacs hadn’t jumped at me in a while, and I had yet to find out what monster of the day Sanguine had waiting in the wings. Just breathe.

“I’ll go get Charity, Ditzy!” the small lavender pony with the blond mane called out as three or four Crusaders rushed to the wagon to help unload boxes.

Slowly, I walked closer, looking at the ghoul. Her mane might be almost gone and her wings so much bone, but that googly-eyed expression fit the poster in the post office almost perfectly. Noticing me, she pulled out a piece of chalk from her bags and lifted a slate that hung from a string around her neck.

She wrote on the slate and lifted it. ‘Blackjack?’

Slowly, I trotted closer. “That’s me.”

Rubbing it clean, she dug into her bags for a folded piece of paper and passed it to me. I looked at her and then floated the note in

front of me.

Blackjack, I've made the arrangements with the person who can assist you with your decryption. She's very secretive, but has always been trustworthy in our dealings. However, she operates under some paranoid rules. Ditzy will take you to her and then back to Chapel. You have to go alone and unarmed. When you reach the building, you'll have to go into a memory orb. Then you'll be taken to her. -Bottlecap.

I looked at the note and then at Ditzy. She blinked her offset eyes at me, then gave me what I assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile. I sighed and then coughed. "Okay. So I'm with you, then?" I had to admit, even for a trusting fool like me, there were a lot of things that could be going on. But the fact was that if I was going to find out what EC-1101 was, and what Sanguine wanted it for, I'd have to trust them.

I gave the ghoul pegasus a smile that she happily returned. "Okay. I'm going to tell my friends and drop off my stuff." I pointed up the hillside to the southeast. "There's a house up there where you can pick me up in a little bit." Ditzy looked where I'd pointed and then nodded. I quickly trotted away to look for my friends.

I was pleasantly surprised to find all of them at the Star House. I was more surprised to find that nopony had killed each other. Lacunae sat by the stairs while Rampage cleaned out her old room and P-21 took Priest's. Glory was working on attaching her new beam pistols to her battle saddle. I had to admit, she looked a lot better in the Skyguard barding than that black monstrosity P-21 had bought for her. Five ponies and only four bedrooms. Oh dear.

I stamped my hooves loudly on the floor. "Well. Good news, everypony... "

Rampage peeked out at me. "You're pregnant."

I blinked and then scowled at the smirking Reaper. "No."

"You're drunk?" P-21 asked as he walked out with a box of Priest's drawings balanced carefully on his back. "You seem pretty happy, but more coherent than I anticipated."

"No! I'm not drunk. I'm…"

"Oh, please tell me you're not taking Buck again. I don't know if Priest can heal the damage like Scalpel," Glory fretted.

I sat with a little scream of annoyance. "I am not pregnant, drunk, or high!" I took a deep breath. "I'm going on a little trip to get EC-1101 decoded. Alone."

The three of them took it about as I expected.

“Trusting the alicorn is bad enough, but now you’re going someplace alone, unarmed, and unconscious? What if you’re being sent to Paradise? Deus might be dead, but Usury still has the caps to inspire all sorts of trouble,” P-21 said sharply as he pointed to the door.

“I trust Ditzy Doo to get me safely there and back again. And if I show up armed and with all of you, then she won’t even show.” Still, the more I thought about it the more I didn’t like it. “But... maybe there’s something we can do.”

* * *

One minute.

That’s how long it took before my brain started screaming at me. The sky wagon lifted and in one minute and I was certain I was going to die. Every thought was crushed away by that one impulse that grew and swelled within me. And while I knew that I wasn’t going to be sucked into the clouds while being smashed into paint on the ground, all I could do was scramble for an orb and clutch it to my horn as my heart beat faster and faster. I fought to try and make the connection, even if it was just to unconscious oblivion if the orb was trapped.

I wanted to be with Maripony and Big Macintosh. I wanted to be with the Marauders. I wanted to be with Twist and Vanity and Jetstream and Stonewing and even Doof if I had to. I wanted to jump, insane as it was. I’d be happy taking a spin inside Deus, Blueblood or Gorgon or even Sanguine --

oooOOOooo

I was lying in a bed. A hospital bed, from the beeping machinery and the feeling of tubes going in and out of my body. Blissful lethargy filled me. I could barely move my head as the sensation of floating filled every limb. Everything felt so…distant. I couldn’t tell who or what I was inside right now, just that I was sprawled on my side on the bed. I had the feeling that there were a lot of ponies standing outside my field of vision, but I couldn’t move to see them.

Then a maroon unicorn buck in a white lab coat stepped into view. “A pony truly is a thing of wonder. The arrangement of limbs. The paths of nerves. The circulation of our blood. Magic is in our very

bodies and souls. It courses through us. It gave me the ability to alter the universe. Gave you flight." His magic reached out to dab a cloth at my host's drooling lips.

"Sadly, for all our wonder, our flesh is limited and our souls finite. But this war…this darling war…has offered us an opportunity to expand and explore the very possibilities of life itself. And you are going to play a role in that. You should be honored, Lance Corporal Stonewing," he said as he adjusted his glasses. "You see, not only are we going to mend your flesh, we are going to enhance it. Empower it." He patted his cheek softly. "We are going to make you…better."

And with that he moved out of my field of sight, his hooves echoing across a tiled floor. The murmuring increased.

"I don't like this at all," a familiar mare's voice said with an edge of tension as she approached the bed I lay upon. "I want to speak to him."

"The subject is under heavy sedation for the procedure, Fluttershy. He shouldn't be conscious. He shouldn't even be alive, with his spine severed," another mare said as the pink-haired pegasus stepped in front of my host and lowered her soft blue eyes to meet mine.

Her lips curled slowly, and I felt his curl to match. "Don't worry, soldier. We're going to fix you right up. We're going to make sure you never ever get hurt again." I felt a rasp in my throat that might have been a question. I didn't feel…good. What little of my body I could sense felt like it was crawling inside.

"We've got his consent in writing and recording," the mare with the familiar voice said softly. And then a bright red unicorn mare with a short white trimmed mane stepped into my vision. She wore magenta glasses with glittery plastic frames and a sure smile I didn't like at all. "Dr. Trueblood's got the other subject prepared for the megaspell." A glittery red hoof came to rest on Fluttershy's shoulder. "We really can't wait any longer. We're already committed."

Fluttershy just looked tense. Her eyes were surrounded by wrinkles. Stonewing made another noise of confusion. Something about this was all wrong, and we both knew it.

The red mare continued softly, "They won't use your megaspell on the battlefield, Fluttershy. But we can still put it to use to keep ponies safe. That's what all this is about after all. Keeping ponies

safe. And he will be safe, and he'll be able to keep other ponies safe as well. He won't even have to kill zebras any more. He'll stop them with one look. Turn them back with another."

Fluttershy looked at me a moment longer, her eyes full of both sadness and a terrible kind of need. A need for…something. She wanted this, I realized, but she didn't want to admit it. Couldn't admit it. I think that my host realized it too as he breathed harder and faster, trying to say something…anything to stop this. But Fluttershy just backed away and let the nurses and doctors come and gently pull back his sheet and levitate him into the air. I saw jars full of a familiar and disgusting rainbow concoction dripping into a tube that disappeared into my limp hoof. Slowly, I was levitated over into the middle of a circle of unicorns.

I wasn't alone. Something else floated there as well; something I first thought was some kind of chicken. Then I noticed the wings. The claws. The serpentine body. But before my eyes, it was changing. Bubbling. Melting as if it were made of wax. "Careful," the medical buck called out. "You don't want to liquefy them too much. Remember the last four subjects."

And so was my host. I caught a glimpse of his hoof stretching like wax before my eyes.

I wanted to cry out, but all he could do was rasp as I felt his body return. They'd said they'd sedated him. They'd lied, or it wasn't nearly enough. And when sensation returned I felt the violation of the creature being pressed into his body. Flesh twisted as I felt it struggle and thrash for freedom inside him. And it was slow…so horribly slow. The creature felt like it was swimming inside him, as if his flesh were a net it tried to escape from. And worse, I had the distinct feeling of something happening inside my skull. My eyes crawled as I felt the sockets change.

"Excellent. He's blended nicely." I heard the medical buck say sharply. "Right. Purge the contaminants and let's see what comes out of the oven." The glow dimmed, and I felt something horrid being expelled from my orifices. "Good. Superfluous biological material removed. Everything going exactly as it should." The buck stomped his hooves eagerly. "Wonderful. The fusion megaspell is a success!"

I dropped to the floor in a pile of colorful ichor and fleshy goo and slowly turned my head towards the sound of the stomping. The maroon unicorn in the lab coat seemed quite enthused. Meanwhile,

Garnet was escorting Fluttershy to the door. I rose to my shaky hooves…feeling a body that was no longer my own. I tried to talk around a serpentine tongue, tried to call out to Fluttershy. I imagined him begging her to turn him back.

Then, with one parting glance over her shoulder, Fluttershy left the room with Miss Redhooves.

A nurse stepped in front of him. “He seems aware, Doctor Trueblood,” she said as she stared into my host’s eyes. Then she jerked and gasped, crying out in pain as her limbs solidified before me.

“Excellent! Magical traits of the addition transferred intact!” the maroon pony in the lab coat said, actually dancing in glee.

Then my host reared up and smashed the petrified pony into rubble. Screams started as he began to charge through the megaspell chamber. I noticed that he was trying to struggle to the doctor, his bat-like wings fighting for purchase. But then spells filled his body with a lethargy. He collapsed as the numbness robbed his strength once more. A sack went over his head. Conjured ropes bound his limbs.

“You said he’d maintain his sapience, doctor!” The mare with the glittery hooves shouted as she returned. “Fluttershy almost saw that!”

The unicorn buck chuckled in delight. “Oh, he did. I’m sure of it. He came right towards me, after all.”

“You’re sure?”

“Oh yes. Project Chimera is a complete success. We simply need more subjects to make the process more efficient. Explore combinations. Trace possibilities.” The doctor chuckled from nearby. “I think we should classify this strain as ‘Gorgon’.”

The glittery-hooved mare spoke from right above me. “I hope you’re right, Doctor. We’re trying to procure more combat personnel for the prototypes. Luna wants war resources, and we’re going to give them to her, though we’ll have to keep billing this as a Ministry of Peace project to keep the others distracted.”

“Ugh. Cloak and dagger intrigues I leave to you, Garnet. Are you going to forward our results to Emerald?”

“Of course, Doctor Trueblood. The M.A.S. should be briefed about the possibilities of Flux-accelerated megaspells, and we’re already exploring possibilities with the other ministries.”

“Are you sure that’s wise? Shouldn’t the Ministry of Peace maintain

exclusivity?"

Garnet laughed brightly. "Oh, Doctor, then we wouldn't be able to get away with nearly as much!" I felt magic lift Stonewing's body as the red pony said softly, "Let's make sure his memory is nice and clean and then put him in storage till we're ready to duplicate the process."

I felt a horn touch his forehead through the bag, and everything swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Coming to, I felt myself shaking as the memory left me. Gorgon. Project Chimera was Equestria's monster making program. And Fluttershy had known, had been involved. She had said to do better. That wasn't better. That was insane. I swallowed hard as I twitched there on the ground. After Deus's orb, and now Gorgon's, I wasn't sure I'd be able to go into any more orbs for a while. I felt sick at the thought of it. It was like sticking my hoof in a fire.

So, where the heck was I now? I slowly opened my eyes and looked around. This was some kind of office, and a fancy one if you looked past the fallen ceiling tiles and rotting floor. Streamers of water trickled constantly from broken and cracked pipes overhead and washed over the moldy carpeting in miniature rivers. The emergency lighting still flickered and twitched on and off. The big desk in the room... looked just like the Overmare's. And the open door leading from the office was a stable door... or at least a flimsy, half-sized replica of one. This couldn't be a stable, though; no stable had armored windows looking out at the Wasteland, as this office did.

I walked to the door. It looked like a stable, if you'd built one with rooms twice as large as normal. No stable I'd seen had hallways this roomy. I watched the rusty river trickling along the hall and cascading down some stairs. Judging by the cracks and holes in the wall, clearly this place wasn't built as tough as a stable either.

A ping sounded, and one of the replica stable doors down the hall slid open. Okay, once again, have I mentioned how much I really wish I had my E.F.S.? And my gun? And my barding? And my friends? I really hate being alone, especially in any place that looked remotely like a stable. Stables were not places for lone ponies.

The door opened into an elevator, its walls lined with posters. ‘Stable-Tec, Voyage to the Future!’ proclaimed one. ‘Save yourself and your family. Sign up today!’ read another. Looking at the pictures of ten-story stables with swimming pools and internal gardens, I wondered why I’d never heard of a stable like that. 99 must have opted out of those features. And who knew, maybe it had. How many stables had been built? Perhaps stables one, two, and three had been paradises, but towards the end, they had to replace underground greenhouses with recycling equipment out of a simple need for expediency?

I stepped into the elevator, the doors slid closed behind me, and the car started descending. As long as I kept my eyes on the walls, I didn’t feel the panic building…too much. Ten seconds later, the elevator slowed and the car doors opened. I stepped into a hall almost completely sealed with rubble. One door remained clear; written on it in chipped white paint were the words ‘Stable-Tec R&D’. The few other doors I could see were open and led to rooms that looked so damaged that they might collapse on me if I so much as sneezed in the general area. I really hoped that I wouldn't have to try them.

The door slid open in front of me, and I stepped onto a catwalk over a floor covered in worktables. I picked my way slowly around the edge to stairs down to the work floor. An entire wall was almost covered with glowing monitor screens. Looking up at the upper left, I saw a flickering label over a slowly rotating design. ‘Stable One: completed.’ Next to it was an even larger design. ‘Stable Two: completed.’ And the next. And the next. Some of the monitors were dead. A few were marked as ‘delayed’ or ‘redesigned’, but the majority of them were complete.

I saw the sprawling layout of stable 89 with all its many storage areas and labs. It looked similar to 90 and 91. Then I frowned as I looked at stable 90. ‘Complete?’ *This stable’s not finished*, Buttercup had written. A mistake, or had something else happened?

I smiled at the sight of 99, despite everything. I’d never realized how big 99 actually was. The four stories of habitation blocks around a central stair linking atrium to living quarters to utility storage to maintenance to reactor. It looked a bit like a tree, curiously enough. And it was ‘complete’, if ‘completely fucked up’.

Over the workstations were more stable designs flickering and rotating silently on their screens. ‘Rapture Hydrostable’ resembled

dozens of bubbles. Was it supposed to go underwater? ‘Sea Star Hydrostable’ looked more like some sort of floating island. ‘Celestia Astrostable’ had rotating wheels like a wagon and long sweeping wings while 'Luna Astrostable' actually looked a lot like 99 but built inside a big aboveground pyramid for some reason; I couldn't see how ponies were supposed to reach the door all the way up at the top. ‘Big Macintosh Megastable’ was positively huge, looking as if it’d been designed to hold thousands instead of hundreds. ‘Scootaloo Aerostable’ seemed more designed for cloud dwellers, while the ‘Pinkie Pie Aerostable’ hung from huge balloons! There were other designs that seemed even less concrete.

Along the opposite wall were monitors showing the evolution of maneframes, terminals, and PipBucks. The first machines were room-sized monsters, progressing through smaller and smaller boxes until they reached desk-sized maneframes like many we’d run across. The first terminals were already small enough to fit on a desk, but they looked bulkier than the ones I was used to, with smaller screens and more awkward-looking keyboards. Then the ‘Personal Information Processor: Alpha’ appeared in the form of a PipBuck so large that it covered an entire pony, boxes, straps, and wires everywhere like some odd form of armor. Beta PipBucks covered most of a limb and still had a backpack. After that, terminals became more simplified and refined, though I couldn’t see any differences between a standard, a hardened, and a reinforced terminal. The differences in the PipBucks were far more obvious. The Gamma models were what I had on my hoof, from the slightly bulkier 2000 to the more compact 3000. There was a Delta model, too, that seemed even simpler and more flimsy than the rest. Terminals shrank to hoof-sized ‘contact nodes’. I wondered if eventually the two would merge. Well, would have merged, if things hadn’t blown up.

There weren’t any exits on the first floor, so I climbed back up to the catwalk. Most of the offices off the catwalk were locked and dark, but one was lit by the green glow of a terminal. I made my way to that door.

The office within was cluttered in an absentminded way. There were wadded-up designs piled high in the wastebasket, drawings taped to every available surface, and scale models dangling from the ceiling on fishing line. A foal-sized robotic pony stood silently in one corner, looking forlorn and abandoned.

There were pictures of things other than technology, too. Three fillies wearing blue and gold capes piled one atop the other, laughing at the camera. The trio, a bit older, proudly displaying their cutie marks. I was struck by how similar they looked. The three again, this time mature mares apparently enjoying a night out together. There were pictures of Applejack, and one of Big Macintosh, and a third of an elderly green pony.

The terminal had only one thing on its screen. 'Area of Inquiry?' I looked at it and the keys, then typed slowly. >EC-1101

The screen flickered once.

>Hello, Blackjack.

I was looking at the blinking cursor when a flicker and flash from behind me caused me to spin around, reflexively trying to ready a weapon that wasn't there. The light was coming from the robot, and as I watched it grew more and more concrete until a flickery image of a young Apple Bloom stood in front of me, identical to the filly in the picture save for the luminance that glowed around her. Looking at the strange, glowy earth pony I relaxed a bit, though not much.

"Um…hello?"

"Heard you got yerself a puzzle on yer hoof," the filly said as she trotted towards me. "Well, I never got a puzzle solving cutie mark, but most folk figured I was a clever pony."

"If you don't mind…what the heck are you?" I asked in shock. "Who are you?"

She gave a smile. "Well, that's the million bit question, ain't it? Maybe I'm a pony running things from a terminal somewhere, helping you out. Maybe I'm just a machine doing what I'm programmed to. Or maybe I'm Apple Bloom. You can call me Applebot." Then she looked at my blackened PipBuck. Her eyes widened in shock. "Landsakes! How'd you fry a 3000? They're supposed to last forever!"

"Um…lightning?"

"Lightning?" The robot sounded skeptical. "You got it struck by lightning?" I nodded weakly. She rubbed her mouth as she looked at the blackened electronics, then shrugged. "Well, that'd do it. I guess you'll be needing a new one."

"So…the data's not lost?" I asked warily as two mechanical... hands, if you could call the clusters of tools that, rose from the robot's shoulders. The tools on the end of each finger began to deftly remove my PipBuck.

The little pony smirked. “Oh, it’d take a lot more than that to kill your data. Ta do that, somethin’d have to destroy your PipBuck outright. And probably you, too. Nah, you just fried the interface, which I gotta admit is still pretty impressive.” She set the device on the table, then trotted over to a metal cabinet. “Now…3000…. 3000…nope. Fresh out of 3000. Looks like you’re going to have to make do with a Delta model.”

“A Delta?” I asked as I watched her remove a sleek, polished silver PipBuck. I looked at it and then at my more bulky model. “Um…do you have anything a little bit heavier?” The little Apple Bloom cocked her brow at me. “Well, it’s just that I hit ponies with my PipBuck.”

“You hit ‘em?” She clicked her tongue, and said with a touch of playful sarcasm, “That ain’t no way to treat sensitive electronics.” She replaced the flimsy silver one and dug around a bit. “Aha! Here we go.” She pulled out a matte black PipBuck that seemed marginally more bulky…but only barely. “Was designing this for the Shadowbolts, but it never made it into mass production.”

Setting it next to my old 3000, the robotic hands removed the covering as I watched. “So…how’s

Stable 99 holding up?” Applebot asked curiously.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“Stable 99. I put a whole lot of new stuff in there. Was wondering if it worked out or not.”

“Ah…well…it’s still working. I mean, I hear Rivets complain all the time about leaking pipes, but the recyclers still work like a charm.”

“Well that’s good to hear. I was a little worried about the reprocessors. I mean, I know they purify and remix the waste. I ate the sample chips myself. Still, there’s still something just…off… about that.”

“Yeah, especially when you have to reprocess a buck after being removed from the breeding population.”

The robot froze as she finished removing the casing. She looked back at me. “What did you say? You do what now?”

“Put dead ponies in the reprocessors…” I blinked at her shocked and disgusted expression. “What? That’s what we’re supposed to do, right?”

“Uh, maybe if you like a high protein diet,” she said, still looking a little shaken. “Reprocessors weren’t made for that, though. That’s why I installed an incinerator.” She gave a disgusted little shiver.

“And breeding what now?”

“Well…in Stable 99…” and I explained the whole breeding process as the little Apple Bloom’s mechanical armatures carefully removed a flat, glowing gem plate. It looked like a wafer of pure diamond with a magical glyph in the center. She placed it in the new PipBuck and deftly screwed it into place.

“You what?!” was Applebot’s response to my explanation.

“Well, that’s what we’re supposed to do! I mean, didn’t Stable-Tec set it up that way?” I said defensively.

The robot shook her head slowly, the magical hologram flickering slightly as it turned back to the PipBucks. Then there was a hiss and a click and a mare’s voice sounded from my new PipBuck.

“Hi. This is Scootaloo…and you know what? I’m sick of these recordings. I am just fucking sick of ‘em! I can’t…I don’t…Fuck!” the mare yelled. *“How’d things get so messed up I had to do over a hundred of these?! Damn it... I’m just so sick of it all.”* There was a teary sniff. *“To hell with it…”*

“Okay! Again. This is Scootaloo, VP of Stable-Tec. You’ve got yourself one heck of a stable. We made it as good as we could. You’ve probably noticed you don’t have any orchards or food warehouses, right? Well that’s because the machines in 99 recycle all your waste, purify it, mix it…ugh…you know what? Don’t think about it. Okay, just don’t. It’s gross no matter how you slice it. It just means that you won’t run out of food anytime soon...

“So long,” she continued sharply, *“As you keep the population stable. You should have enough contraceptives to last at least two centuries. You also need to keep a one offspring per pony policy. Keep things stable, Overmare. There’s other stuff here too, but you know what…I don’t care anymore. I don’t care. Do what you have to do, but keep things stable. Survive…and do better than we did.*

“Apple Bloom! You two are doing the next ones! Got it? I need a fucking drink. 99…fuck…99…”

The voice cut off. “Those’re all the instructions given,” Applebot said. “There were some additional plans, but the fact is that by 99 we left it largely up to the ponies to decide what they would do. I mean, the only restriction 101 had was that it was earth ponies only. Who knows what they cooked up?” She gave a soft sigh. “Poor Scootaloo…it wasn’t fair to her, but she was the only one who could record those messages. I got tongue tied, and Sweetie Belle just bawled.”

"But…how'd we go from that…to…" I just stared at the enormity of it. It hadn't been some messed-up Stable-Tec rule or bylaw. It was us. We'd created the nightmare P-21 and I'd escaped from. I swallowed hard and looked at the hologram-wrapped robot. "Are you really…Apple Bloom?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm just a copy of her," she said as she finished and powered up the new black PipBuck. "Hard to say, really. But there's some truth to saying that you shouldn't use yourself as a test subject. Just ain't healthy," she said as the robot's hands slipped the device around my hoof. "There you go. Complete with a fully functional broadcaster and terminal interface." At my blank look, she rolled her eyes and then explained, "Basically lets you contact terminals through your PipBuck…if you have a signal source recorded."

She then looked down at my PipBuck. "So…EC-1101. It still exists."

I felt a shiver go down my spine. "EC-1101. What the hell is it?"

Applebot smiled sadly up at me. "The keys to the magical kingdom of Equestria, Blackjack."

* * *

Once upon a time, Equestria had been ruled by two princesses. The older ruled because, quite honestly, she was immortal and magical. There wasn't a civil war or a crisis of succession because the princesses couldn't die of old age. Celestia had a thousand years of experience, and the kingdom was familiar with her leadership. She wasn't a tyrant. She didn't have to be a tyrant. The status quo was so comfortable and predictable that Equestria simply accepted her rule. Beneath her was a hierarchy of lesser nobles tasked with administrating the smaller day to day local concerns and maintaining the order of things. Equestria had a thousand years of near social stasis.

Of course, the return of Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna disturbed all that. It wasn't big at first, but the presence of two princesses prompted a change in attitude across the kingdom. There were many reasons for Celestia to continue, but what if other possibilities were considered? New avenues of thought opened up simply because the societal fabric had altered its paradigm. Magic became arcane science. Nobles found their station questioned and

challenged. Businesses arose. Trade with outsiders, both of goods and ideas, exploded. Life was new and good.

But then the war came, a war such as Equestria could not have known. And like so many things, ponies were not prepared for its novelty. The violence tore at Equestria, and fear and desperation ripped at its underpinnings. Some stresses pushed science and magic further than ever dreamed. Others tore ponies down. But through it all went the ironclad belief that, whether under Celestia or Luna, a princess would rule.

Shattered Hoof Ridge changed all that. Only Big Macintosh's sacrifice prevented Equestria from discovering the hard way just how integral the princesses were to the country's collective psyche. The death of a soldier was tragic, but the idea of losing one of the fundamental parts of the kingdom proved unbearable. It introduced an insidious question: what would Equestria do if the princesses were killed?

EC-1101.

"Equestrian Command 1101 isn't a computer file," Applebot explained softly as her mechanical hands withdrew into her shoulders. "It's a delayed-trigger megaspell designed to transfer control of the country's crucial systems from the princesses to another individual in the event of both of the princesses' deaths. It was supposed to use the terminal network; it would travel from terminal to terminal, node to node, seeking out the next designated target."

"So who were the targets?" I asked, just before the realization hit me. "The Ministry Mares, of course."

"Yes. First Twilight Sparkle, then Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Rarity, and finally Pinkie Pie. The spell would locate them all and bestow upon them the authority to run the country and give them full control over the countless information, magic, and technological systems that ran Equestria. If it failed to do that, it would seek out the heads of the armed services, the courts, the Office of Interministry Affairs, or the descendants of any of its targets. Unfortunately, it seems, the spell could not make contact with anypony."

"So how did it end up in Stable 99?"

"Sheer size, unfortunately, and the fact that it wasn't triggered till the fall of Canterlot, which took far longer to die than the rest of Equestria. Most nodes handle small packets of magical information.

EC-1101 was not small. It was a highly complex behemoth of a spell, and unlike normal files, it had only a few networks it could move through swiftly. The balefire bombs shattered those networks. The last jump it made, I suspect, was from the Ministry of Morale's hub in Manehattan just prior to, or during, the city's destruction. Then the Stable-Tec link between Stable 99 and the rest of Equestria severed, and the spell remained trapped in Stable 99's systems."

"So…why is Sanguine after it now? The Ministry Mares are all dead; everypony's dead." Gee, what a rosy thought that was, Blackjack.

"Correct, none of the Ministry Mares had offspring, and the likelihood of locating the descendants of the military or judicial branches is minuscule. The spell might recognize a ghoul, but I'm skeptical. Still, it is a key, and I think somepony with the right skills might be able to use it to force an override of something, maybe turn off a security system or break into a database. The fit would be rough, though, and it would prob'ly work only two or three times before the spell got completely wrecked."

An idea struck me. "Have you ever heard of something called Project Chimera?"

She looked thoughtful, rolling her eyes as she stared at the ceiling. "There! Found an index." She nodded once. "Project Chimera. O.I.A. Project sealed by Royal Command." Her flickering eyes widened. "Holy smokes…sealed by Royal Command?"

"What's that mean?"

"It means that Luna, personally, put her hoof down and killed that project. A lot of the ponies involved probably went to jail, too."

"Could EC-1101... well... open it up again?"

My mane crept on my neck as the little robot blinked, thought, and then nodded. "Prob'ly. If a princess locked it, somepony with a princess's access privileges would have to unlock it."

"How about Project Eternity?"

"Project Eternity. O.I.A. Project sealed by Royal Command."

"Project Redoubt?"

"Project Redoubt. O.I.A. Project. Sealed by Royal Command." Then she blinked in shock. "Well now. Looks like Luna was cleaning house at the O.I.A. I wonder why."

"Me too…" I frowned and rubbed my nose with my hoof. "Are there any other O.I.A. programs that were shut down by Royal

Command?"

"I don't…wait…I've got…Project Steelpony…Project Partypooper... Project Starfall. Project Horizons." Applebot paused, then the flickering robopony frowned in consideration. "You want something else that's weird? They were all shut down on the same day, a month before the bombs fell."

I heard the soft rustle of cards as I thought about those names. "O.I.A. Office of Interministry Affairs, right? Who were they?"

"Oh, them. Not much. They acted as liaisons between Stable-Tec and ministries other than the M.W.T.," she said with a dismissive little shrug, "A bunch of overworked ponies who were really busy managing the gaps between the ministries."

"What do you mean by 'the gaps between the ministries'?" I asked with a little frown.

"Because that's what the O.I.A. did. Say there was somepony in the M.A.S. that had an idea they wanted to work out with the M.o.P. The O.I.A. would pass that idea to someone in the M.o.P. They'd set things up for the two ministries to work them out. Make bridges between the ministries and fill the gaps.

"Or say some inventor came up with a new talisman, but both the M.W.T. and the M.A.S. wanted dibs on it. The O.I.A. would work things out so that everypony had access without wasting time fighting and arguing. Some ponies liked to call it 'Spike's Ministry', but I'm not sure if he was involved."

"Hmmm…" I sighed, feeling the nasty thought. "Why would they make monsters, then?"

That seemed to surprise her, and I explained Gorgon's memory orb. "That's…very disturbing. But while I've no doubt the O.I.A. might set up something like that, it was probably originated at the Ministry of Peace. While most were diligent about helping Equestria, and even the enemy, there were some ponies there that were decidedly…creepy."

I sighed, looking at the PipBuck with a little grunt. "Well, damn. As interesting as all this was, I have to admit, now that I know what it is, I still don't know what to do with it." I tapped the screen showing the file name with a hoof. "I mean, it doesn't tell me who Sanguine is working for or how to stop him." I frowned at her. "Would he be able to use EC-1101 to make more monsterponies?"

"If that's what Chimera was for, I suppose," Applebot said thoughtfully.

“So much for just giving the damned thing up. Could I just destroy it?”

That made her pause. “I suppose. Sure. Not even your PipBuck spell matrix will survive something like a balefire blast,” Applebot replied, and I felt staggered. That’s what it would take? “But are you sure you want to? You don’t know what those other projects are or who you might be able to help.”

Great. Guilt trip me with that. “I just wish I could find some offspring of Applejack or Pinkie Pie and shove it in their lap.” And then what? I started fiddling with the new PipBuck, checking some of its features. Huh. The E.F.S. was blue instead of amber. That was at least twenty percent cooler.

“Yeah. Unless you’re some long lost descendant of Twilight Sparkle, it’s not much good to you,” she said, looking sympathetic. “If you want my advice, EC-1101 was en route somewhere when it got stuck in Stable 99. If you can get it to where it was going, you might fight some answers about what’s going on and who’s really after it.”

“So how do I do that?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Go back to whatever terminal you got EC-1101 from and see which terminal it was going to next. Go to that terminal and repeat the process till the routing is finished.”

“Go back…?” I muttered weakly, my eyes widening. My mane was suddenly feeling very scratchy indeed.

Back to Stable 99.

I had to go back. I wasn’t exactly sure about Applebot’s suggestion of following the routing, but it was all I had at the moment. Above all that, though, was the fact that Stable 99 was a chapter I needed to close. I knew now that what they were doing was wrong, and I had the guns and friends to make sure it stopped for good.

“Well, it’s a plan, at least,” I said, smiling.

“Good. I think that, whatever you do, you should track that--” And then there was a ping and a crackle as the illusion wrapping around Applebot flickered and the small robot slowly keeled over. With a clatter, it sparked and the illusion disappeared. Then automatic fire ripped through the windows of Apple Bloom’s office and I fell onto my side. The robot gave a buzz and the light in its eyes went out.

“Gonna try and take me alive?” I shouted at the tops of my lungs as broken glass settled over me.

A rock flew through the shattered windows and bounced off the

top of my head, making me curl up as it landed in front of me. An apple-shaped ‘rock’ with a bright red band around the middle. Reflexively, I threw it back through the window as I dove for cover under Apple Bloom’s desk. The grenade erupted into a sheet of flame that splashed over the desk and the ponies immediately outside. I grabbed Apple Bloom’s terminal and yanked it hard, snapping its cords.

Floating the terminal in front of me, I raced out of the burning office and onto the catwalks. One earth pony was scrambling, trying to extinguish her armor and bring her automatic pistol to bear on me at the same time. Another started taking shots that sparked and pinged off the terminal housing. I looked down and toggled S.A.T.S. with a thought. In that moment of accelerated time, my horn flashed thrice and her head transformed into gray, red, and white pulp. Sweet Goddesses, how I loved S.A.T.S.!

Now I had a gun and a terminal. I lifted the former and heaved the latter at the mare with a similar ten millimeter automatic. She dodged away as I raised the pistol, took aim, and carefully planted a quartet of bullets in her face and throat. There were still a lot more red bars on my cool blue E.F.S., though, as I swept up her gun. I wished I had time to collect bullets.

“Aries! She’s up there!” shouted a colt from the far side of the lab. The catwalk was clear, and I raced for the door. Suddenly, a plume of flame sprayed up through the grate and swept towards me! Burning office behind me and plume of flame to the front, the only way to go was down. I leapt over the catwalk railing. My tail, a little too late to avoid the spray of flame, trailed smoke. I landed, my legs giving a resounding pop as something gave way. I rolled and slid across the grimy floor, ending up underneath a worktable. I heard the ping of a grenade bouncing off the top before rattling further away and then detonating with a fiery ‘whoooph’.

Something walked with ominously slow and heavy steps. The rest were moving fast. One slid across the floor with a victorious look in her eyes. Our gazes met, and her jaws worked the trigger. My horn was faster and with a pop ejected the clip.

That didn’t stop the ten millimeter round still in the chamber from thumping meatily into my front leg, but nothing she could do prevented me from filling her with a half dozen rounds from both guns. Struggling to my feet, I snatched up her clip in my teeth and kept my head low as I limped as fast as I could, hoping that the

smoke filling the room would screen my movements.

A wall of flame sprayed across my path, cutting off the stair back to the catwalk. I backpedaled from the heat so quickly that I fell over. I looked at the source of the flame. The Steel Ranger power armor had been spray-painted a brilliant cherry red with a fireball on the flank. A heavy incinerator was mounted on one side of the armor and a grenade launcher protruded from the other. Shit! I was dealing with a flaming Deus!

And worse, I doubted these bullets were going to cut it. I hobbled my way forward as two other ponies ran around to cut me off and finish me. I screamed around the clip in my jaws as I strafed the pair. Then I body slammed into one, collapsing into a tangle of limbs. The other mare was so eager to finish me off that she sprayed bullets into her teammate. I hauled the corpse over my body as a meat shield, hissing in pain as two more holes opened in me. My head started to spin…

'*Be strong*', a little orange pony told me. I ejected the spent clip and slammed the one in my mouth home, narrowing my eyes as I clutched the body over me like a macabre blanket. She had no such cover, and my bullets raked across her until she finally fell. I swallowed, fighting the urge to vomit. I could hear Aries walking closer and saw the remaining two red bars. Still, I needed healing desperately. Digging through their bodies, I found two cloudy gray potions and grimaced. They tasted like sour milk, and they didn't do much for my injuries. The Med-X helped far more, letting me haul myself to my hooves.

"She's getting up. Moving to your left," the colt called out, and I reversed as grenades clattered in that direction, filling the air with more patches of crackling magenta fire. There was a hiss, and from a few feebly-glowing talismans sprayed cones of water. I doubted it would be enough to fight the kind of blaze that Aries was creating, but it washed out some of the smoke and made it easier for me to think. The colt was tracking me somehow. Not with an E.F.S.; I was pretty sure the power armor had something like that. This was something giving him the distance he needed.

I ran--okay, limped horribly with my leg threatening to make me fall flat on my face with one wrong step--in the direction of the door again. As I approached the stairs and the catwalk, I saw the blue unicorn colt with the pitcher cutie mark from Chapel looking down at a strange little device between his hooves. Then he calmly

levitated a revolver and started blasting away at me. Falling on my face in the slippery pool of cold water was the only way I could keep from eating some more rounds of lead. I rolled over and pointed the pistol at his face, but he just smirked with certainty and fired again.

Damn it! Sure, he was a colt, but he was shooting at me! Why couldn't I blow him away for that?!

I scrabbled through the water as his bullet took off the tip of my ear. The Med-X wasn't enough to fully keep the edge off the pain as I staggered ahead of Aries and out of the blue colt's field of fire. I just needed a healing potion…and to stop bleeding…and for the world to stop spinning.

I limped along in a circuit. Aries had swapped to fragmentation grenades now, lobbing them with infuriating accuracy. My tail was both ragged and scorched now, and my butt was laced with superficial holes from chucks of shrapnel. The second I slowed down even just a little, I was toast! I wondered if they were toying with me for Gemini and Taurus...

Wait…my tail…I took cover behind an overturned workbench and ran my hooves and magic through my singed tail. Then I felt it: a small ball the size of a corn puff and almost as light was clipped to my tail. It had a small blinking light. A tracking device?

Good. I was so glad I wasn't going to have to yell at Ditzy or Bottlecap.

Still, what good did it do me against that power armor? Eventually, I'd bleed out or burn up, even if I crushed the thing. What I needed was some way to disable Aries, like with one of P-21's spark grenades. Some way…

I looked at the rows and rows of stable monitors and the cables hanging behind them.

"Left! Forty feet! Now!" the colt yelled as Aries turned and fired another shot with the grenade launcher. To the right, I scrambled on top of the closest workbench and prayed. The grenade exploded, the monitors flickering wildly as the power cables were severed and the wires dropped into the churning water. There was a resounding pop and a smell of ozone. The power armor's weapons drooped as the crackle went on, and then everything went dark.

Slowly, I walked towards the stairs and looked up at the colt. Now his smile wasn't nearly so cocky. "Aries? Aries! She's…she coming!" In my mutant gaze, I could see him clearly as I walked through the

darkness towards him and tossed the gun aside.

He gave a desperate giggle and hiccup as he levitated his revolver and pointed it at me. My horn shoved the barrel aside as he fired. He reaimed, and again I shoved the barrel in the other direction. The bullet passed so close beside me I could feel it. I stared him right in the eyes as he pressed the hot tip of the gun to my forehead. “You won’t kill me! I’m a kid…I’m just a colt! You won’t! Please don’t!” As he scrambled back, I saw his strange cutie mark was peeling away; a cutie mark decal. His flank was blank beneath it.

He pulled the trigger, but there was no recoil as my magic gripped the hammer before it could release and fire the round. Now he shook in terror as his levitated weapon jerked ineffectually. “You’re right. You are just a colt…” I said low and soft, my grin spreading. “And I’m not an executioner.”

Then I grabbed him in my bloody hooves and twisted, sitting atop the stairs and pulling him across my lap as my magic flung the weapon from his startled grasp. He wailed as I pinned his head with one hoof and then spanked his ass as hard as I could, grunting with each smack, “Do! Not! Shoot! The! Nice! Security! Pony!”

Then I shoved him away from me and limped towards the elevator, leaving him sniffling behind me. From the depths of the power armor came a mare’s tentative, “Uh…hello?” as I limped into the door.

* * *

I made my way back up to the office I’d awoken in and found my way up to the roof. Ditzy Doo waited nervously with Silver Bell as each of my friends, who *technically* hadn’t come with me to the meeting, each stood watch at a different corner of the building. Well, three were watching. Rampage spat loogies over the edge. As the doors slammed shut behind me, Rampage looked up and noted the new holes in me. Her face split into a grin. “So, run into any trouble?”

My smoldering look gave them their answer. Really, it was my own damn fault. I’d said ‘Wait on the roof and keep an eye open for trouble,’ not ‘Stay ten feet behind me and keep quiet.’ The Zodiacs had gotten in some other way, and my friends had been up here the whole time. I flopped onto my side, dug out an orb, and got ready

for the flight back.

oooOOOooo

Jetstream. The memories that flowed from the orb weren't the same as I was used to. Somehow, they were concentrated and accelerated, coming in flashes and little insights.

Jetstream meeting Stonewing in summer flight camp. The pair learning to fly together, she with ease and he with difficulty. There is a race between them and some rivals, but a thunderstorm brews. A gust of wind blows all of them into a mountainside, with the exception of Jetstream. She flies faster than ever before. Stonewing, slowest flyer in all of Equestria, proves himself also the strongest as he carries three pegasi across the finish line on his back. She's gotten her windy cutie mark. He's gotten his granite wings.

The pair, older, seeing the Wonderbolts perform for the Summer Sun Celebration. A cyan pegasus with a rainbow mane talks about wanting to join the team. He can't take his eyes off her. Jetstream can't take her eyes off him.

They're sitting together in his home in a city of clouds, reading about the rescue attempt and the deaths of so many Wonderbolts together. He wonders about the mare. She just sighs and looks away.

They meet behind the weather factories. He tells her he's going to enlist. She tries to talk him out of it. They show up in basic training together. Stonewing lifts Big Macintosh on his back. He gets applause for the first time in his life. She smiles, so happy for him.

They fly in their first battle together. Griffin mercs can't resist the slower flyer, but their rifles can't drop him. She picks them off one by one with lightning passes. After the battle, she receives commendations from their captain, Cupcake. She tries to give credit to Stonewing. He just shakes his head with a smile and limps away to the medic.

Dinner on a boardwalk with the Marauders. Doof challenges Stonewing to a garlic eating contest. They eat bulb after bulb. Doof goes red. Then green. Then he loses. Stonewing eats three more bulbs. Jetstream gives him a victory kiss anyway. They watch the fireworks over the bay, her head resting on his firm shoulder.

Another mission. She's hit and spirals down. Zebra ninja warriors swarm in. Stonewing lands among them like an avalanche. A

bayonet catches him in the throat, ripping it open. His wonderful bass voice goes silent forever. He doesn't fall, standing over her till the rest of the Marauders extract them.

A dinner alone on a mountain top. She's going to do it. She's ready. She's going to tell him. She's going to let him. But there's an explosion in the village below, and he's away, flying to help. She watches, realizing how alone she'd been before flying after him.

The bombing at Prance. She tries to get him alone. She tries to tell him how she feels. He listens. He smiles. He shakes his head and kisses her forehead. He breaks her heart as gently as possible. She's grateful for the bomb.

An argument. She wants to leave. He wants to reenlist. She can't see the reason. He just shakes his head. She's had enough fighting. He's not done yet. She signs the papers to stay another year.

They watch the rocket rise on a pillar of fire. Stonewing grins like an eager colt. She smiles and can't help herself. She rests her head on his shoulder again, hoping he can't feel her tears.

Brimstone's Fall. She sees the sniper. She starts to open her mouth. The bullet strikes him in the neck and he falls like a brick wrapped in a dirty sheet. She flies to save him, to repay him, but the medics load him on to an evacuation wagon with a tag around his hoof.

An argument. Big Macintosh tells her to be strong. Tells her that it's alright. Tells her the war can't last forever. Tells her to remember Stonewing and all they'd done together. She cries out and strikes him. She hits him again and again as the rest of the squad looks on.

She sits alone on a cloud. Vanity teleports to her. She tells him what she needs. He tells her it's a mistake. She asks once more. He kisses her cheek softly, tells her he understands. Her eyes widen as he touches his horn to her brow and takes the tears away.

oooOOOooo

I awoke on the floor of the wagon, my gut and inner ears telling me that we were still flying. Fortunately, my brain had been through enough that, instead of screaming incoherently, I just lay there and groaned.

"Try to relax, Blackjack. We're almost back to Chapel," P-21 said quietly as he stroked my striped mane. "Guess we weren't much help after all."

"Eh…it was my plan. Not your fault," I replied with a groan.

"What's wrong with her?" the young filly asked as she looked down at me.

"Just…not good with wide open places," I groaned softly. "Too many memories, too. Pinkie Pie. Stonewing. Jetstream."

The little filly suddenly looked curious. "A memory of Pinkie Pie? What was it about?"

"Somepony tried to bomb a party she was at." Talking helped a little. Took my mind off of... falling…hurk!

"Spew…" muttered the disgusted filly. "I'm not cleaning that up!"

"Don't worry about it, Silver Bell," Rampage said as she tossed a dirty rag over the puddle. I tried to go back into Jetstream's rapid-fire memories but it was useless now. My horn refused to make the connection.

Then I looked over at Rampage and saw she'd removed her steel barding once more. Lacunae had to carry it so the cart wouldn't be overloaded. The striped pony had no problem looking out, but I supposed that was because if she fell she'd…ugh…My eyes drifted further down to her flank, and then I froze.

A cutie mark was a pony's most innate self, an ultimate expression of who and what we were. That'd been as far as I'd gotten in the lecture before passing out from boredom, but I had the gist of it. Cutie marks mattered.

So what was the meaning of a cutie mark of a teddy bear having its rotting guts torn out by barbs of rusting metal sprouting from candy while the bear itself ripped at a distorted a zebra glyph of a skull while fleshy tendrils pulled and shredded at the normally smooth lines and black lightning struck and shattered wineglasses while in the background swirled a spiral like a whirlpool? Yes, it actually moved. As I watched, the barbs of rust melted into chains while the teddy bear pulled its guts back in and screaming pony faces bubbled to the surface.

Our eyes met, red on pink, and she gave a little smile and shrug. "Ha. Beat that for a cutie mark. Mine moves."

I didn't want to beat that. I'd rather die than beat that. "You win," I replied softly.

I shut up for the rest of the flight. I wasn't going to say one single

word of complaint right now. There were worse things than flying.

* * *

Roses's funeral was something of an aberration. Few ponies actually left bodies to be buried when they came to Chapel. The sentry beams turned all pilgrims into ash. Still, she'd left Thorn behind, and I'd asked Priest if he would allow it. I hadn't expected anypony else to be here. To my surprise, the entire town attended. The Crusaders marched out en masse to support Thorn, and I suspected that for them this was a service for their lost parents as well. The hoofful of adults remained in the back. Lacunae looked right at home in her black lace. After my fight in the Stable-Tec R&D building, I limped as badly as P-21 as we walked out to the field.

Rampage was not in attendance. I could have asked his permission. She might have come.

Of course, this was the moment the clouds started to threaten rain. Well, my cold couldn't get much worse, could it?

Priest stepped next to the sheet wrapping Roses's body, bowing his head respectfully for a moment before speaking in his soft, clear voice. "We all have a journey in our lives. A path to walk, a road to take. Each of us walks that road in our own way and at our own pace. Sometimes alone, if we must; sometimes with others, if we are lucky."

The fillies and colts around Thorn nudged her gently, reminding her that she wasn't alone. She was a Crusader now.

"The road may be dark. It may be hard and painful. And all too frequently, it is cut short by another. We walk these roads as we are able, whether with vigor and excitement or a heavy load. But we all walk.

"Roses's road has come to an end like so many do in the Hoof. It was not a noble road, but while there was the blood of others upon it, there was also virtue. A love for a daughter and a wish to keep her protected and safe. So if some would speak ill of the dead, let them do so when the passed are not present."

I'll bring cake to your funeral. You mean I get one? Sweet. How many lives had I ended that had never gotten this opportunity? Had Air Duct and Vent received one? Where was the funeral for Scoodle? For those forty nameless foals? For Tumbleweed and eleven zebras?

Where were the kind words for U-21? For Vanity? For Gorgon? For Deus?

I did not want to die alone and forgotten.

"Your road is at an end, Roses. Rest in the embrace of Celestia and Luna. Let the Goddesses receive you with their peace and mercy." We bowed our heads, and then six unicorns, myself included, reached out our magic as one and lowered her down into the earth. The assembled ponies shuffled by. Medley dropped in a poem or note. Priest set a drawing of Thorn upon the stained linen. Charity laid two bottlecaps beside her. Glory a feather. Me? Two of the little golden flowers.

The young earth ponies then took whatever spades they had and started to fill in the dirt. Harpica lay beside Thorn, holding her close under her dried and desiccated wing with an air of having done this many a times for a foal. Ditzy Doo's leg held Silver bell closely, the overcooked ghoul nuzzling the jagged scar on the filly's brow. As the dirt piled up, Thorn began to sob, "Momma! Momma!" Then a second later she wailed "Wampage! Wampage!"

I felt myself start to shake. I was already crying, but I had to hold it together. There was one last part. Glory had suggested it; P-21 had agreed. How could I not?

Slowly, I lifted the contrabass from its case and stood on my hind legs. *You hold it like an earth pony.* I rubbed my cheek on the cool wood and whispered softly, "Please don't let me mess up." Priest's sheet music floated before me. I levitated the bow to my hoof, pinched it behind my fetlock, and dragged it slowly across the strings.

As the contrabass's slow, sad notes rose over the sound of spades, it was joined by a violin. I looked at Charity in amazement, the filly giving me a grudging little nod as music rose from her glowing horn. I still didn't like her, but for this there were more important things than what I liked or disliked. Priest calmly added the notes of a deeper stringed instrument. I don't know what 'Adagio for Strings' meant, but as the music rose and fell, rising and falling, I could only feel my own disgusting and diseased heart trying to lift with it. And it hurt. Oh how it hurt. It didn't matter if I cried; the rain was falling now. Higher. Higher. *Just a little further*, the instrument seemed to say. Higher!

Silence.

I hung my head as we played the last few chords, my heart starting

to beat once more in my chest, I don't know what magic let me get through all that, but when the last note died, we were left with only with the hissing rain, a muddy pile of dirt, and a piece of wood marked simply 'Roses'.

* * *

Most ponies, being smarter than me, know to get out of the rain, and this time I was at least clever enough to follow them. In the post office was a mournful celebration as the Crusaders talked about fallen friends and lost family. There were tears, but there were just as many smiles. This was a funeral for far more than just Roses. It was a funeral for Scoodle, and for everypony who had died yet was remembered. It was for that nameless Dashite, for those infected farmers, for Hoss and Granny Smith and Macintosh and Maripony and all the fallen Marauders.

I limped over to the lace-veiled Lacunae. "So…Goddess…"

"The Goddess isn't here right now," Lacunae replied in a low tone of near…scorn. I was astonished I could hear it over the din. "She could not bear to be here right now. She is ignoring me and distracting herself with inconsequential thoughts of the others."

Looking at the alicorn, I frowned, not sure if I was upset at her or her Goddess. "I thought goddesses were supposed to care."

"They are. They're not supposed to die, either, but they do. Excuse me," she said as she rose and walked into the bathroom. There was a purple flash under the door, and when I peeked in she was gone.

Stepping out, I saw P-21 and Glory standing apart. The pair didn't seem to associate with the Crusaders as well as I did. I looked at Charity, and she looked back at me. The truce would last a little longer. "Lacunae's gone... somewhere."

P-21 frowned at me and shook his head. "I don't trust it. We don't know what it can do!" Glory scowled at him, probably for his choice in pronouns.

"Well... um... you can add disappearing to the list. And wings. And unicorn magic."

"Telepathy," Glory added absently. At my uncomprehending stare she rolled her eyes. "She talks inside our heads, Blackjack. Ever notice how you can hear her no matter how noisy it is?" Um... yes. Yes, but it hadn't occurred to me that that was because her words could skip straight past my ears and into my brain! But that was

definitely good to know. So she could talk in my head. Though that did make me wonder what else she could do...

I drifted through the crowd a bit more, then bumped into Harpica. The dusty ghoul looked at me in worry. “Oh, Blackjack? Have you seen Thorn anywhere? I brought her inside but she’s disappeared, and the rain is getting worse. Oh, the Master will be so upset if I lose track of one,” she fretted, forgetting that her master was the one who had killed Thorn’s mother.

I sighed. “I’ll see if I can find her,” I said softly, fearing that I’d have to tear her from her mother’s muddy grave. Oh please…please don’t make me do that. I sighed, my mane itching from all the damp. I needed a bath. A hot bath. .

I stepped outside, coughing and spitting up more phlegm. I needed a few days’ recovery, and I wasn’t getting it. Even with the bullet holes healed, I could only hobble along. Pretty soon, I’d be as bad as P-21.

I slowly scanned the town, but my E.F.S. was bare. She might have been in one of the houses, but I’d have to go into each one. The cool blue colors of the Delta PipBuck seemed to conspire with the rain to make this day as gloomy as possible. I looked towards Roses’s grave and felt relieved and saddened that nopony was there. I sighed and coughed again, wanting to go inside. If Thorn was like me, she probably wanted to be alone.

Then a tiny pink pony inside my head smacked my brain hard and pointed out something on the road. A tiny rain soaked rag.

A horn puppet.

No. No no no. Thorn wasn’t like me. She still had somepony to go to.

I ran to the puppet and saw the lavender filly running towards the bridge. I forgot about my cold and shivery body and ignored my aching legs as I started to run. I yelled out into the rain for her to stop. Had one of the Crusaders told her about the bridge, that she’d be with her mother on the other side?

There was another pony on the bridge. A pony that caught her in her limbs and held her as I ran to catch up. Rampage, missing her armor, just held her in her hooves as Thorn sobbed horribly into her shoulder. I stopped, lungs burning, legs feeling as if they were about to break. Her cutie mark seemed to still, the rest blending away into the image of the teddy bear. “Shh…shh... it’s all right.”

“Wampage…” Thorn sobbed as she hugged her close.

“Shh…Shh…It’s okay…” she said as she held her. I struggled to tell Thorn to step away. For all three of us to return together. Don’t make me shoot her in front of you.

My eyes met Rampage’s. I jumped into S.A.T.S., toggling three magic bullets. My useless, exhausted little horn let out an anemic flicker and went dark.

Her teddy bear melted away. “You’ll never hurt again.”

The rain hissed as a crunchy pop filled the air.

“It’s okay,” Rampage said softly to the bloody mass, a bony equine skull grinning at me from her flank. “It’s okay. You’ll never hurt again…”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Dealer’s Ante: Every time you kill an opponent in S.A.T.S., the spell immediately regenerates 20% AP.

Chapter 20: Mercy

"Tough love, baby!"

It'd been raining for a while now. A cold rain. A hard rain. The kind of rain that makes you feel like somepony up there doesn't like you. My throat burned, my legs ached, and every breath I took sounded like rasping metal. I looked up into the rain, too tired to even cry. But not too tired for this; for what I had to do.
I started to dig.

* * *

"It doesn't hurt…It doesn't hurt anymore…It doesn't," Rampage whispered to the crushed Thorn over and over again.
She was right. It didn't hurt. The shock rolling through me had mutated into something completely new: a fury so absolute and complete that I launched myself at the striped pony, not caring about my injuries or even that I'd no way to kill her. It'd taken a combat drug cocktail last time. This time, it was something even more potent: my absolute and complete failure to protect a filly I'd sworn to. Rampage had told me she was a monster. If it took a monster to kill her, then that is what I'd become.
"Murderer!" I screamed as I struck her, knocking the poor foal's body from that ghastly embrace. I screamed again, seizing her head in my hooves and slamming it against the metal railing again and again. I heard bones break and felt the spongy material within. Then I felt the head resolidify. No problem. I'd just do it harder and faster, again and again and again, till it *worked*!
Every bit of frustration, all my failures, built into a horrible frenzy within me. I was supposed to keep ponies safe! I was Security, damn it! Of course the first pony she'd go to was Rampage! And I'd been warned; I'd told her I'd stop her if she was alone around a

filly. But nopony had thought to tell the Crusaders to keep Thorn away. How could we have explained it to her, anyway; she'd just lost her mother! She'd just watched her get put in the ground! How could I have been so stupid?

Just one! Just save one, Blackjack. Couldn't I even manage that?

Crack! Crack! Crack! Finally, Rampage heaved me away, her inequine strength sending me rolling across the cracked asphalt. The look in her eyes, the tone of her voice, the way she stood…it was all…different. "Murderer? You monster…don't you get it? This is the merciful thing to do," she said calmly as she charged at me, her lips curled in a snide grin. Her cutie mark churned over and around the pony skull.

I wrapped my forelegs around the railing behind me, twisted, and planted a double rear kick to her face just like a certain little orange pony would. The kick would have knocked out most mares, the crunch of a broken snout ending the fight. Rampage was not most mares. "She was suffering. I gave her mercy," she said quite matter-of-factly. Like I was an ignorant foal.

"You didn't have to kill her to end that, Rampage!" I yelled as she came at me again, throwing her forelegs around my neck and starting to squeeze. Only the rain allowed me to slip my head free before she popped it off entirely. I ended up beneath her and bucked to toss her up. As she dropped back down on me, I slammed my spine into her ribcage. Her breath whooshed out in a satisfying gust. I tossed her off my back; she landed, choking and gagging, on the cracked concrete. Adrenaline was carrying me only so far. I really needed some Buck and Stampede!

"It was the kind thing to do!" Rampage gasped, choking as her eyes stared out into the rain over the bridge. "So much pain…so much suffering…I had to do it. Fluttershy couldn't end it! Celestia couldn't. But I could take their pain away." She glared at me in contempt, those glyphs twisting around the skull. "Can't you understand? They were in pain. Even when we took the nightmares away, they still suffered. So I gave them mercy! Wouldn't you do the same?"

Terminate Power: Y/N? A cold hand gripped my rotten heart. "No…" I said, but my denial skills had gotten rusty the last few days. "It's not the same! They were crazy and trapped. I would have had to leave them there!" I tried to slam her to the ground again, shut her up for good! I didn't want to think about it. Don't think

about it!

But when she hit the roadway with the sound of another bone breaking, she arched a brow and grinned in that haughty, condescending manner. “Oh? Oh ho ho ho ho…so…you have given out mercy as well. Killed a helpless foal to spare them the pain? Pulled the plug?” I felt numb and stumbled, and she shoved me away from her. “Oh, so that was it? I’ve done that too.”

“I had no choice!” I yelled, trying to convince through volume.

“‘I had no choice!’” she mocked in return. “Isn’t that how it *always* goes?”

“No, you didn’t have to kill her!” I said desperately as we circled each other, my body suddenly feeling very tired and weak. “There was nothing I could have done!”

“Nothing? Really?” Her voice lowered even more. “Didn’t stay with them? Didn’t help them? Didn’t find somepony who could? Didn’t devote yourself to doing everything possible to save them?” Her questions slammed into me harder than her hooves as I backed away, towards the flaking word “Mercy” on the asphalt.

I’d thought my choice was lose/lose. I knew some of the children were crazy, but had I gone from pod to pod to find out for sure? Could some of them have been saved? I’d thought the Collegiate and Society wouldn’t have helped, but had I asked them? Had I dragged Archibald and Splendid up there to find out for sure that there were no medics in the wasteland? Had I devoted my life to finding some way of saving those terrible innocents?

No. I’d pulled the plug, sung a little song, and then gone back to Megamart to collect some bottlecaps.

Rampage pounced, knocking me onto my back on the warning sign and lying atop me. “You’re no different from me. Not at all. Sanctimonious, cruel, and vile. This world is too painful, too corrupted, too hateful! Mercy is the only decent thing we can give them!” she said to me softly, contemptuously, as her hooves crushed down with terrible power. “But don’t worry, Blackjack. I know you’re in pain. I know you’re sick. I’ll give you mercy, too.”

“Rampage…” I gasped, my legs kicking and struggling against her, but I wasn’t even sure I was really fighting her anymore. Whoever this mare atop me was, she wasn’t the Reaper I’d known.

“You keep calling me Rampage…” she said softly as I gasped and choked, “That’s not my name.”

“Get off her, you cunt!” Glory screamed. The gray pegasus dove

from above, and a stream of red beams burned smoking holes in the striped pony's body. The holes closed before my eyes, but Glory had the bit of her battle saddle clenched and poured on the fire. Finally, one red beam from her boxy pistols hit in just the right way, and the immolation reaction flashed along the striped pony. Her hooves burned my throat as she collapsed into a pile of ash atop me.

Something hard and heavy landed on my chest. I coughed and hacked as I looked at an egg of pink quartz wrapped in golden wire and glowing with an eerie pink-tinged light. A strange glyph in the egg's center, a twisting whirlpool that throbbed like a heart, glowed more brightly than the rest, and there were more lights within. I shoved it off and rolled onto my side as Glory landed next to me. "Easy, Blackjack. Easy. She's dead now. Breathe. She almost crushed your windpipe." From the worry on her face, I suspected that she wasn't sure about the 'almost' part.

"What the heck is this?" I asked softly as I held the egg aloft.

"I…I think it's some kind of rejuvenation talisman…It looks like... " Glory trailed off, rubbing her chin thoughtfully.

Suddenly, a pink cloud began to collect around the egg, forming worms of crimson that spread and curled into fresh veins and arteries. Tissue crawled over the surface and formed into a pinkish-red mass that began to beat. I watched as bones grew like weeds and muscle stretched to cover them. Finally, young pale skin covered in brilliant red stripes spread like moss over her frame.

The Rampage foal jerked, took a shallow breath, then another, then another. Her pink eyes opened and looked at me in utter misery. "I did it again, didn't I?" As I looked down at her, I wasn't sure I could answer. Slowly, the tiny foal curled up and wept. "I'm sorry," she whispered over and over again, but to whom I couldn't be sure. Her flank bore a dark mark, like a bruise.

"Sweet Celestia," Glory breathed in amazement.

"Rampage?" I asked softly as the two striped sticks wrapped in barbed wire appeared on her flank.

"I did it again, didn't I?" she said again as she sniffed. Then she looked at Thorn. A look of such pain crossed her young face that I couldn't help myself. I hugged the striped foal as she sobbed into my shoulder. "Not again…why did it have to happen again?" I'd been repulsed by what she'd done, and hurt by what she'd said, but at this second, all I knew was that she needed my help. And maybe a hug would calm everypony down enough for somepony to explain

what was going on…

Glory watched her closely. “What happened, Rampage?”

“I…went away. I was bummed…I like being by water, so I thought I’d come out here till the funeral was done. And then Thorn was running…and she…she was crying…and…I wanted to give her a hug but…but I was afraid…and…I went away. Till just now…”

Glory listened closely with a little frown. “I guess I got disintegrated…that’s usually the only time I come out of it little like this.”

“So…you’re crazy,” I said with a little half smile. “That should have been obvious.”

“I guess.”

Glory rubbed her chin in thought. “How long do these blackouts last?”

“It’s not…” She sighed and smacked the sides of her head. “It’s like I’m there and then I’m somewhere else. And it’s…it’s a bad place,” she whispered as she trembled in my limbs.

“Then it’s not crazy,” Glory said with a small frown. Our eyes met and she gave a small apologetic smile. “Please remember, I’m drawing on one class of psychology and something I once read in a Canterlot Journal of Medicine, but in real psychological disorders, another personality doesn’t just completely take over. That’s not how it works.” Rampage looked shocked.

“Huh…I always figured…I mean…are you sure I’m not cracked?” she asked with a confused, worried little look.

“You just regenerated from some talisman in your chest,” Glory replied with a shake of her head. “I’m not sure of anything with you. But if it was something as simple as being crazy, then it would be consistent. Or you’re one hell of an actress…but if you wanted to kill us…heck... kill all of Chapel…you could have. So I don’t think that a part of your brain twigged.” She sighed and frowned. “This is something else.”

I saw others running up and took the opportunity to engage in another bout of rasping and coughing. I rubbed my bruised windpipe, hoping that maybe sometime soon the Wasteland would give at least my respiratory system a break.

“Blackjack!” P-21 shouted as he limped towards us. Sekashi, carrying a burlap sack, was hurrying up behind him. The zebra took one look at the three of us, sighed, and came straight to me. She dug into her bag and pulled out a Sparkle-Cola bottle filled with

something that had the consistency of paint. I took a drink and felt the familiar sensation of a healing potion, though it tasted somewhat odd. Good, though! P-21 stopped so short at the sight of Thorn's crumpled body that he tripped and fell on his face. "Wha… Thorn…" He looked at the tiny Rampage. "What the fuck is going on?"

I slowly rose, spitting and hacking phlegm as the zebra brew did its work. I was glad I could still swallow, even if it hurt. Finally, I rasped, "Somepony killed Thorn. Not Rampage." My voice sounded worse than a ghoul's!

"What?" he said flatly and pointed at her broken body with a hoof. "Rampage…what?" He looked at the shaking foal with a look he'd reserved for me and the mine boss and thoughts of returning to 99. "What!" he shouted, his eyes glaring from one to the next in outrage.

"Something took control of her," I said firmly, the tiny Rampage looking at me as if she couldn't believe it any more than P-21 did. "She killed Thorn. Said she was giving her a mercy. She did it. Not Rampage." I looked at the slain foal, feeling empty and brittle again. "She tried to kill me next. Glory vaporized her. And then she regenerated into this."

P-21 clenched his head between his hooves. "Are you telling me we're travelling with a psychopath?" I gave a stiff nod, and his eyelid twitched as he threw his hooves in the air. "Oh, so her being crazy makes it all okay? That's so much better!"

"I don't think she's crazy," Glory replied. "Something else is behind this."

He glared at her, narrowing his eyes. "You're as bad as Blackjack."

Glory didn't back down. "I'm telling you that Rampage needs our help."

"Thorn needed our help!" he yelled at her.

"You're right!" I yelled at them both, feeling something tear in my throat and set off a coughing fit that silenced the argument. I gritted my teeth, trying to get the words out. "Thorn needed us, and I failed to protect her! Me! But we can't help Thorn now," I said as I staggered to my feet, coughing and hacking up snot. I nearly fell flat on my face, and was saved only by Glory propping me up. "It's my fault Thorn is dead. Mine." Be mad at me, P-21. Not Glory, not Rampage."

"No, it's not," P-21 said darkly, looking at the striped foal. "If she

can't be killed, let's dump her back in Blueblood's well and blast it shut."

"That'd be fair," Rampage said softly. But the thought of burying anypony alive…even after what Rampage did... The cards shuffled again in my mind. I knew that at any second I was going to start having death ponies in my head and looking crazy.

"No. We're not going to do that." It would be like the clinic all over again. "Whatever killed Thorn was not Rampage. Understand, P-21?"

"I don't care who did it; the blood is on her hooves! What do you think the Crusaders will do when they find out? She was one of them, Blackjack!"

"I don't know, okay?" I rasped. "But you bury her alive, then bury me too! I'm just as guilty as she is! Or did you forget what I did at the clinic?"

He stared at me, his eyes widening. "It's not the same…"

"I know it's not, P-21! I know it's not. But…" I stared at the shaking Rampage…Arloste... I wanted to scream. I felt like I was the one going crazy now. "Just…trust me. Please," I begged him as I slumped against Glory.

He just looked at me. "You can't save everypony…" he said softly as I slid back to the ground.

"I know. But if I give up, then how can I save myself?" I asked as I hid my face in shame. He gave one last sigh.

"What do you need me to do, Blackjack?" I looked at him and gave him a grateful smile…at least, I hoped I was smiling.

"Tell Priest." I couldn't. I'd rather die than see his face when I confirmed that Arloste had been a murderer. He gave a stiff little nod, then limped away towards Chapel.

"You should have let him bury me," Rampage muttered.

"Stop!" I croaked at her, then took a slow breath. "Just stop. I don't know who or what you are, Rampage. I know what I saw and what you said. I don't know if you're crazy or not, but stop saying that we need to kill you. That won't bring Thorn back." I sighed as I looked the clouds, my gut clenching before I doubled up and hacked and coughed through my bruised throat. I spat out another wad, hoping that that stuff wasn't blood.

Then I looked at her curiously. "So…why are you little?" The look she gave me could have curdled Sparkle-Cola. I swallowed and chuckled, "Okay…you don't know. How long are you going to be

like this?"

She gave a little shrug. "Days? Honestly, it's been almost five years since I was disintegrated."

Right. "Glory…can you take her back to the Star House, please?"

"Blackjack, you should come too." But I just gave her the easiest smile I could, and she sighed. Of course Glory was more worried about me. After a look, though, she finally turned to Rampage. "Come on, kid."

Rampage blinked and frowned at her. "I'm at *least* fifty years older than you."

Glory smiled. "I can't help it. You're just... so cute!"

"I am not cute! I'm one of the top Reapers in all of Hoofington, and I'm a crazy, immortal death machine!" Rampage said with a little stomp of her hooves. "That is not cute…" She glanced back at Thorn with one last mournful look. "Not cute at all."

* * *

I scooped at the mud, but it slid back into the hole. It was more bailing than digging now. My breath burned in my throat as I coughed and hacked and scrabbled. Working hard and accomplishing nothing…I had to do better. I had to be strong, and kind, and aware…but I wasn't. I was just a filly scraping at the mud.

* * *

"I need your bag…" I rasped softly.

"Come. Let us get you out of the rain," Sekashi said as she started to help me up.

"Didn't you hear me–" I started, and then sighed. Of course she hadn't. Because she hadn't lived a life of relative ease in a stable; she'd been trapped in a mine, going deaf while the rest of her people were worked almost to death and then gunned down around her. I took a deep breath and looked into her eyes. "I need your bag. And I need you to tell me a story."

Sekashi's eyes widened. I looked over at Thorn. Without hesitation, she bit the end of her burlap sack and dumped her belongings onto the bridge. She pawed through the strange herbs, stones, and bottles she carried. "What kind of story does a guardian need?" She

deftly bit a bottle and tossed it up onto to her snout, extending it to me. I coughed as I took it, hoping it was some kind of medicine.

"A funny one," I said with a little smile. "But what I really need is a story about a pony who cannot die."

Sekashi blinked, then tried for a smile. "Ah…well, it just so happens that I do know such a story. Quite humorous, too. Orion's story. Once, he was a zebra, the same as you or I." She paused and chuckled. "Well, I suppose that he wasn't the same as you. He wandered the plains with his tribe. He was not the strongest hunter, nor the bravest, nor the most capable. He was, in fact, the weakest, the most cowardly, and the most inept. Truly, poor Orion would not last long. But still, he wanted mares, and respect, and to stand proud and tall amongst his people."

As Sekashi talked, I limped to the still form of Thorn and, as gently as I could, tried to slip her into the bag. Her dull eyes looked at nothing at all, not understanding what had happened to her. I prayed, as I brushed her eyes closed, that her last thought hadn't been of Rampage's betrayal. "I'm so sorry," I whispered to her ear. Sekashi's story halted, and she coughed in the rain before continuing.

"And so, as young bucks are wont to do, zebra or no, he made a foolish choice. One night, he called out to the stars, asking them to make him strong and brave and terrible. And the stars heard and granted his wish, and gave him forbidden knowledge no zebra should know. He put his spirit within a rock and the rock within his chest."

I sat up, looking at her as I pulled the drawstring tight with my magic. "His spirit?" There couldn't be a coincidence between the story and what I'd just seen, could there?

She nodded. "Yes. All things have spirits. What you call a soul. It is the truest reflection of one's self." Funny... I recalled a particularly boring lecture about cutie marks. "Why would that make him… well…invincible?"

"There is a power to spirits. Our spirit is the truest reflection of self, the thing that makes us exist at all. And when we die, it is the piece of us that persists to eternity. But if we damage that spirit willfully and place it within another vessel, that vessel gains the resilience of the spirit."

"And what happens to the pony that loses it?"

She gave a shrug. "Who can speak of such things? It is a dark

subject, and I speak only happy, funny tales. When they die, their spirit may linger in its vessel, trapped for all time. But perhaps, some day, the spirit may be free and reunited with the rest. That is what I can hope."

"So what happened to Orion?"

"Ah, poor silly Orion with the heart of stone found himself stronger than the most terrible monster of the savanna. With his spirit within the unbreakable heart, he knew no fear, and so nothing could stand before his spears and hooves. But his tribe questioned how Orion could have gone from so little to so much. They questioned if he had used the forbidden magic of the stars, and Orion grew angry. He was strong and terrible, how dare they question how! In a rage, Orion slew his tribe from the elders to the youngest foal. And so he was left alone.

"For years he wandered. All zebras fled from Orion the traitor, for the blood of the slain had marked him in stripes of crimson. No monster could slay him, even as he wished it, for they could not devour the stone heart. No spear could fell him. And so he cried out to the stars to take their gift back. But the stars do not undo what they have done. So finally, he jumped so high that he reached the stars and joined them, hunting for the most terrible monsters of the skies in the hopes that one may slay him."

She finished her story as I rested my hoof on the bag. "How could somepony put their…their soul into a rock? Why? It's like…like… defacing your own cutie mark!"

"Or erasing one's glyph," Sekashi agreed, looking on as a spasm of coughing rolled through me. "There are many stories of doing such things, though. Of silly zebras wishing for power, or knowledge, or long life. Pursuing their desire, they sever their spirit and burn it in fires of magic, or barter with beings too terrible to name, or simply secure it within a new shell. The powers gained, and the knowledge, and the life…however, are rarely worth the price one has paid. But there are always fools who do not heed the warnings of the stars."

"Warnings from the stars? Or warnings about the stars?" I asked as I gently lifted the burlap sack and placed it across my shoulders. Too light and yet so very heavy…too young…she should have been given a chance at more life. A chance at happiness. Like those foals in the clinic.

"Yes," Sekashi said as she used a bit of string to tie together her

bottles and belongings as well as she could. “I know that for ponies they are pretty lights in the sky, but just because something is pretty does not make it harmless. The stars are powerful, otherworldly, and fickle. A foolish zebra or pony who calls upon them dooms not only themselves but others as well.”

“So zebras believe the stars are evil?” I asked, remembering those pictures and Maripony’s memory.

“Some may, but did I say evil? No. Dangerous. Perilous. Fickle. But they do not wish our destruction, for otherwise we would surely be destroyed.” She gave a sad little smile. “It is far too easy to simply say that something is evil. To invite their attentions and to plead for their aid is folly, but they are not cruel and wicked,” she said, her eyes lingering on Rampage before she looked up at the clouds. “There are stories of the stars giving guidance to those who need it. Stories of the stars granting succor and inspiration. It is when we demand of the stars that they grant our desires. Much to our pain, as your Nightmare Moon discovered.”

“Nightmare Moon?” I asked as we talked, glad for the excuse to take my thoughts off what had happened minutes ago. “What does she have to do with stars?”

“Who do you think it was that gave her such power?” she asked as she kept her eyes on me. “The lesson of the stars is not that they are wicked things. How simple that would be! So many make that mistake. It is that they allow us to bring our true horrors to the forefront, and the pain may be left for generation upon generation. The stars did not make your princess into that monster. The monster was there to begin with.”

“But…Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna were two different ponies!” I protested. There was no way that the cute, intelligent princess I’d seen could be a monster.

“Can you tell me the tale of how she became Nightmare Moon? The change from one to the other?” Sekashi asked. I opened and closed my mouth like an idiot. I knew the story of her banishment, but...

“I don’t know…”

“Nor do we, but many believe that she made a plea to the stars and that they answered her call. And though her sister and people forgave her easily, that which the stars touch, they change forevermore.”

“That seems pretty severe,” I said softly. “What if I were touched

by the stars?"

Sekashi laughed. "Oh, my dear Guardian, it would explain a great deal to me." But despite her laugh, there was uneasiness in her eyes.

* * *

I'd only excavated a hoof deep. My throat throbbed with every swallow. My eyes burned as I tried to scoop out a little more muck. "I'm wondering…" the Dealer whispered as the rain hissed off the yellowed grass around me, "if there isn't some symbolism to this?"

"Fuck you and your symbolism," I muttered as I scooped out a double hoofful of sludge from the hole, the mud slathering my legs. "I have to do this." I'd failed…it was my responsibility.

The Dealer just leaned against the wooden headstone, cards passing back and forth between his hooves as he looked at me with a rheumy old eye. "You're only a pony, Blackjack. No shame in that."

"I have to be better…" I gasped.

"Well, then, maybe you should see if you can get Sanguine to fuse some sand dog into you, or get some mechanical limbs. Maybe put a talisman where your heart should be so you can kick yourself in the ass for all of eternity?" With each question, he showed me a card. Gorgon, Deus, and the snide and cruel Rampage. "Would that be better?"

"Fuck you," I muttered as my legs gave out on the cold, wet ground.

"You're going to need more than harsh language to be better, Blackjack. And since you won't use what you've got…best get something that's better than nothing."

"And what have I got?" I rasped softly, looking at the burlap sack as blood slowly stained through the cloth. My voice cracked, then failed entirely.

"Blackjack, you idiot…"

* * *

Side by side, we entered Chapel, and Sekashi looked at me with her easy smile and worried eyes. "Let me check on Majina. I fear…I just wish to check on her." She tried to keep her eyes on mine, but they

could not help but glance at my passenger.

"Stay with her. At least one of us should have the sense to get out of the rain," I crackled, feeling cold and tired. It was how I imagined Scalpel and Bonesaw must feel. I wondered what it was like to be a mother; the thought was simply terrifying. I could barely take care of myself with my friends' help. What would it be like to worry about a foal? To lose one?

I was walking slowly past the post office when Priest stepped quietly out into the rain. The water spraying off his shoulders seemed to glint around him like an aura. Our eyes met, and there were no words. I looked with eyes of guilt, he with silent recrimination. He'd warned; I'd failed. What needed to be said past that? He stepped past me, giving the sack a small nuzzle of farewell, and walked off towards his church.

The door to the post office opened, and three young ponies tumbled out. Medley, Adagio, and Allegro rolled into the rainy street. Little Sonata followed the four; she'd have been the perfect age to be a friend for Thorn. Allegro struggled to get free with his treasure: a bottle of Sparkle-Cola RAD. Adagio hugged his rear legs while Medley clambered up his back, her horn glowing as she struggled to pull the bottle from his lips before he could drink it all. "Give it back! It's mine…" she shrieked as she pummeled his head with her hooves.

"You said I'd get a drink, Alleg!" Adagio protested laconically, the blue colt tugging at his limbs.

"Geff off!" the rose-colored colt growled, and the chartreuse unicorn yanked the bottle of soda from his mouth and held it above them. "Hey!" he protested, stretching up to reach the glowing bottle.

"It's mine now!" Medley declared, only to have Allegro grab her in a bear hug around her chest. Unbalanced, the pile of foals tumbled over with a loud thump. The glow around the bottle faded, and it fell into Sonata's hooves. Three pairs of eyes met hers. The little purple earth pony smiled and then promptly spat into the bottle. A chorus of "Ew…" filled the air as the filly enjoyed her radish favored soda with a small smile of triumph.

"Hey, it's Security Pony!" Medley said, pointing a hoof at me as she lay upside down upon the blue Adagio. They rolled to their feet, and suddenly I felt a pit opening inside me. "Did you find Thorn? Been looking everywhere for her."

"What's in the bag?" Allegro said with a grin of acquisitiveness, but he must have read something on my face. "Hey? What's wrong? You don't look so good." What could I say? How could I explain that one of my friends had killed their newest member?

"Hey, Sonata! Did you win?" Charity said from the doorway. Then youngest of the four took a drink with a wide smile.

"She spit in the bottle," Adagio whined.

"Just like I told her. Good girl," Charity said before she yelled into the post office, "Sonata won! Pay up!" Then she glanced at me and her smile faded. She looked at me and the sack on my back. "What are you doing?"

"She's acting funny," Medley said suspiciously.

But Charity's eyes met mine. They flashed a moment like beam weapons before she said softly, "Thorn's dead, ain't she?" The four looked at her, then looked at me in worry. I couldn't speak, I could only nod. "She took the walk, huh?" Her gold eyes looked at the bag on my back and I knew that she was lying through her horn, but once again all I could do was nod.

The four didn't looked shocked. They looked sad. Resigned. As if this wasn't the first time.

"I thought she was going to stay," Sonata said softly as she hugged the almost empty bottle. Medley put a hoof around her. "I really thought she wouldn't walk."

"It happens, Sonata. It happens," Medley said as she nuzzled her ear. This was how the Crusaders survived.

Adagio looked at his brother, wilting in the rain. "Wonder who told her about the bridge. Probably Pander or Crisp…I'll thump 'em if they did," the blue colt muttered dully, and that was how colts survived.

"Head inside. No point in being stuck in the rain," Charity said, stepping aside. When they'd gone back indoors she looked at the bag again. "You going to take care of her?" All I could do was nod and her gaze dropped. "Good." The yellow filly turned back to the post office.

"Don't you want to know how?" I croaked, and then coughed. I was soaked through, exhausted, and just wanted to dry out.

She looked back at me with her sad gold eyes. "No," she said simply as she stepped back inside. She didn't need to know. Thorn had died, and I was taking care of her. That seemed to be enough. I'm sure a pony like her would eventually find out the details from

Priest.

Alone, I walked to the grave where the trampled grass and muddy earth were the only indication of the ceremony that had taken place barely an hour ago. I looked at the wooden post. “Roses…” Gently, I laid Thorn on the grass. “I’m…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen,” I said as I closed my eyes, hanging my head. “I bet you’ve heard that a lot, huh, you bony bastard?”

“You’re talking to me?” he said from my left, where he was sitting and looking at the grave solemnly. I glared at him hatefully. He returned my gaze and had the audacity to look upset. “Yeah, it’s an old theme. The road to hell and all that.”

“Why can’t I make it any better? Why can’t I save even one foal who just lost her mother? Why do you take everything away?”

“I didn’t kill her,” the white horse said softly as he tugged the ragged cowpony hat further over his face.

“You know what I mean…” I said quietly as I looked at the brown muck before me. “Why do you have to make it so hard?”

“I don’t, Blackjack. You do…because you care so damn much,” he said softly, looking at me with a sad, avuncular smile. “And you know what caring means.”

“Caring fucking hurts, no matter how you slice it,” I whispered, and then I began to dig.

* * *

I don’t know how long I worked on digging that hole. It could have been minutes; it felt like days. I rasped, coughed, and had conversations with my own fractured psyche. I just couldn’t stop. I’d failed in all other regards; I would at least see her laid to rest or drop in the attempt.

And, sure enough, my aching legs finally gave out and sent me sprawling next to the sack, coughing and struggling just to breathe.

“Blackjack, you idiot,” P-21 said softly beside me. “Don’t you have the sense to get out of the rain?” he asked as he walked to the shallow hole and moved in to my left. The rain matting his navy mane, he started to dig alongside me.

Glory slipped in on my other side. Her lavender eyes met mine, and her wing gently wiped the rain from my eyes. She set down her packs and pulled out a blanket to drape over me before she moved to the hole as well.

Across from us stepped Rampage. She looked too small to help, but all the same she lay on her stomach to dig out the mess. Black hooves stepped in beside her, and she stared up at Priest in shock as he floated a shovel before him. Giving one long look at the tiny Rampage, he proceeded to dig as well. Then, to my amazement, the rain stopped…No. It hadn't stopped raining. It had simply stopped falling on us. Standing a little ways apart, Lacunae watched us toil, her horn glowing. Sekashi walked up with more of her potions and medicine. And then, most miraculous of all, Charity arrived with a shovel and bucket.

Beside me, the old pale buck watched with a wistful look of longing. "See that? That's how it should be." Lacunae glanced in my direction as I muttered to myself.

"I should be doing it…"

He gave me with a look I was all too familiar with. "You are, Blackjack. You can't do it all yourself, Blackjack. You don't need to be better…smarter, maybe, but not better," he said as he looked at me. "You just need your friends to carry some of your load."

The six of us together made quick work of the hole, despite the mud and wet. Priest levitated Thorn down beside her mother as I watched. "Rest easy, Thorn. Roses. Be united forever in the everafter."

"I…I never meant…I didn't want this to happen again. Not again… not ever again," Rampage blubbered as she looked down into the grave like she wanted to crawl into it as well.

Filling the grave was far easier than emptying it. Priest just closed his eyes as Charity collected her shovels. "I know, Arloste. But it did," he replied evenly.

"Yeah…" she muttered softly, and gave him a wan half smile. "Blackjack's going to help me figure out how to die. Pretty cool, huh?" He glanced at me and then at her. "Then…then I'll get what I deserve…and I won't ever do it again."

"Nopony deserves what you're going through, Arloste," Priest replied softly. "I wish there was something I could do to help, but you're still a threat to the Crusaders. You'll still have to stay away."

Rampage just nodded. "Can I see her before I go?"

His lips curled in a sad smile. "Of course."

She gave a nod, and the foal-sized red-zebra-striped pony walked quietly out into the rain beyond Lacunae's spell. Not towards the houses, but further into the graveyard.

"Where's she going?" Glory asked as she watched.
"She's visiting our daughter," he replied quietly.
Their *what*? Glory covered her mouth in horror, and even P-21 looked shocked. "I was barely a buck, but…" He gave a little shrug. "Old enough for it to happen once, after a lot of scotch and persuasion. I'd never seen her so happy. Then…out of nowhere… she killed her. It drove her crazy, I think. She tried so many ways to kill herself, it scared the Crusaders. Finally, she went into the city. I lost count of the number of times she was vaporized by the defenses. I thought that would be that. Only she appeared two years later as the Reaper, Rampage."
"Why doesn't she just…bury herself or something?" P-21 muttered, now with a touch of shame and pity.
"Because it wouldn't kill her. Someday…maybe in days, or years, or centuries, she'd escape. And when she did, who knows what kind of monster she'd be? The only punishment she feels is acceptable is to die," Priest said firmly. "She has to ensure that she'll never hurt another--"
"So she gets off easily…" P-21 muttered.
"--and be tormented eternally in Hell," Priest finished. P-21 blinked, then glanced at me. I think he finally realized just how deeply what she'd done had hurt.
There was just one last thing to do. I dug in my bags and pulled out my dragon claw. My horn was so dead that I had to grip it in my teeth and scrape it against the wood. When I finished, I looked at the post. 'Roses', and beneath it, my additions. 'Mother…Thorn… Daughter'.
"I'm done," I whispered through my ragged throat, slumping against Glory. "Time to get out of the rain."

* * *

Unfortunately, my departure for Stable 99 was going to have to wait a little while. I was sick…sick sick sick sick. I'd almost prefer dying of radiation sickness to coughing, hacking, and generally feeling miserable. I know, Rampage was in an infinitely worse place than me, but she was simply dealing with a second childhood…or third…fourth... and at the moment there was nothing I could do as they put me upstairs in Marigold's old bed.
Sekashi stopped by to administer her healing draughts and brews.

Apparently, a zebra who didn't know how to mix simple concoctions was merely a striped pony. I know they may have smelled foul, but they were far better than the boiled leaves Glory brewed up. I was also admittedly curious about zebra culture. Pretty much all I'd learned about them was that they were the enemy during the war.

To hear her speak of it, the zebras had once lived in tribes across a vast grassland. Most were nomadic (though legends and archaeological evidence indicated that this might not have always been the case), and, rather than set up large towns and cities, they simply established a few buildings for healing and protecting their wells. Unlike Equestria, which had tamed most of its wilderness, the zebra lands had been rife with monsters and threats. These were respected by the zebras, and zebra bucks and mares would test themselves against these threats. What they lacked in unicorn magic they made up for with rare and potent magical talismans.

Apparently, a long drought changed much of this way of life. With the savanna dying, zebras were forced to gather in villages and cities built around water sources, and, with the zebras no longer able to just move away from them, competition with the natural predators became acute. A decade or so later, the land's gem deposits were exhausted, and the dearth of the gems that were the foundations of the zebras' magical talismans threatened their survival. They found a twofold solution in Equestria. Equestria was industrializing, and many of the technologies it was beginning to develop held promise of replacing the need for talismans altogether. At the same time, though, Equestria had large supplies of gems, and, fortunately for the zebras, its burgeoning industry also meant burgeoning demands for energy, demands that the quickly-dwindling Equestrian coal supplies were unable to meet. Agreements were made: Equestria would supply the zebras with gems and give zebra industrialization a boost with the knowledge and technology for coal mining, and in return the zebras would send coal to Equestria.

The demand for mining and the desire for technology completely changed their nomadic way of life. The zebra lands were tamed and exploited for their resources, and the zebras began to develop their own technologies, both earth-pony-like and alchemically based, to supplement and enhance their traditional tools and talismans. The Caesar, the latest to occupy a position that was formerly just a sort

of highly experienced diplomat in charge of settling the largest inter-tribal disputes, took up the increased power the sedentary lifestyle had given him and declared a bold new future, but it was not easy. The zebras, experiencing the same sort of technological growth as Equestria, also began to experience the same sorts of unsteady social changes. City dwelling was no longer just something in legends, done by only a few small tribes, or done to weather a drought; now it was the norm. Railroads snaked across the land, turning journeys that might once have been weeks of hard travel into a few days in a well-appointed coach. The increasingly unified zebra military, armed with new weapons and new magic, stopped simply keeping the beasts away and began to hunt them down. New thoughts shot through zebra culture like lightning, and among them was one that began to climb to a dangerous boil.

Most zebras had never been able to spare much thought for how things were elsewhere. They'd been too busy surviving, and it wasn't as if things in faraway lands would matter much to them. Those who did think about it, though, tended to be quietly resentful of Equestria. Equestria, chosen land of the living goddesses, where the monsters were tame and even the seasons were ordered for the ponies' comfort. Still, that resentment hadn't mattered much; Equestria didn't care much about the zebras, and the zebras couldn't do anything about the ponies.

The first wake-up call came when Nightmare Moon returned and delayed the dawn. That was when the resentment started to rise, but there was still nothing those bearing it could do. Then, years later, the trade agreements were signed, and, though they were very good for the zebras, they were even better for Equestria; the zebras were paying in coal ten times what the ponies were paying in gems. And those gems were even more valuable to the zebras now than before; the new industries might have reducing the relative utility of the old talismans, but at an even higher rate they were creating new uses for enchanted gems.

With all of this and more beneath the surface, it only took a small nick to start the process that would end with the world exploding. The hostage crisis was that nick, and the disaster proceeded from there.

The Caesar withheld the coal until fairer trade terms could be negotiated. In response, Equestria withheld its gem shipments. Pony power, transportation, and manufacturing were cut back, then cut

back again. Zebra industry faltered as the gem supply dried up, and the campaign against the monsters of the land found itself expanding beyond the capabilities of its suddenly-reduced supplies; this only further increased zebra reliance on coal-fueled technology, increasing the domestic demand for coal and decreasing the demand for foreign gems.

Peaceful diplomacy failed and Equestria, desperate as its ponies lost the infrastructure they'd come to rely on, began seizing coal shipments by force.

It was curious…almost cute…to hear about the first battles. Great care was taken to minimize casualties. Prisoners were exchanged immediately. Medical care offered. Meanwhile, Celestia constantly strove for some sort of armistice. But as the war progressed, the fighting grew worse. Weapons development, new combat spells, and dangerous new spell talismans pushed the destruction onward. Every pony and zebra involved seemed to agree that the fighting should stop, but none were able to let the other side fire the last shot. Zebra refugees and displaced ponies became increasingly common, and violence and resentment against them grew.

Then came the Littlehorn massacre.

I only knew it as a footnote in my history books: the attack on a school prompted Celestia's abdication and elevated Princess Luna to the throne. I hadn't known that it had been Luna's school. I didn't realize that the attack had employed a terrible new poison talisman. The Caesar denied that the school had ever been a target and said that the weapon had been lost and would never have been authorized. But the slaughter changed everything. Nopony was interested in peace any more. The only drive was to win at any cost.

Of course, the burning of Hoofington came soon after, and the reconstruction soon after that. It was as if, once unified in a common direction, ponies raced to discover how much they could do. Nopony had seen that the new horizon they were racing towards was a cliff–wait.

"Somepony did," I muttered. "Somepony knew." I remembered the museum and the Cakes. Somepony had known the day and the hour and had taken steps…but for what, I couldn't imagine.

* * *

"You gave me your damn cold," P-21 muttered as he visited me

with his own runny nose.
"Bah. I gave you nothing. You stole it," I retorted as I lay in bed.
"Well, take it back, then!" he muttered, sneezing hard. "Ew…" He stuck his tongue out at the snot on his hoof. "Ugh…I hate being sick."
"Apparently, stable ponies catch it more easily. We're lucky we're in Chapel where there's not a lot of Enervation. If we were in Flank, it could take days to get over." I sipped from one of Sekashi's bottles. "You should drink this. I think I've coughed up every color of the rainbow, but I feel better."
"Pass. Those zebra drinks taste like mare ass," he said as he stuck out his tongue.
I rolled my eyes. "Please. Do you even know what mare butt tastes like?"
He looked at me. "Well it depends on how clean she keeps herself back there." I winced and he reached over and pretended to read the label on the back, "Oh look. Side effects may include nausea, loss of appetite, rainbow snot, and putting all four hooves in your mouth." He took a drink and his eyes widened, his navy mane frizzing as he jerked. "Okay…tastes worse than–"
"I defer to your experience," I said quickly.
He took another drink and then sighed, setting the bottle back on the nightstand. "I also want to apologize. I know you're trying hard…harder than any of us. I just didn't handle it well."
"I'd be scared if any of us did," I said as I leaned back in the bed, looking at the moon painted on the ceiling. "I'm sorry too…I want to save her. I do. And Thorn. And Roses. And Flank. Why is that so hard?"
"Because it's better. It would have been easier to leave Roses and Thorn in that ruin or write off Flank. It's what I would have done." He sighed and shook his head. "You want to know what bothers me the most, though?" I cringed inwardly but nodded. "I really didn't care that she was dead. It was wrong and all…completely messed up…but I was more angry that Rampage didn't get punished for it."
"She is," I pointed out.
"Maybe. I'm not quite sold on the 'not crazy mare still innocent of killing a foal somehow 'cause she feels really bad about it' theory," he said with a wave of his hoof. "And I still want to know what Lacunae's angle is."
"Maybe she just wants to help make the Wasteland better?"

"I don't think she has a clue what she really wants…or this Goddess. I talked with Priest about it. Apparently there are acolytes all over the Wasteland selling this whole 'Unity' religion. An alicorn takes you away to become one with the Goddess. Catch is, nopony ever comes back," he said as he rubbed his nose.

"Apparently I'm too damaged for Unity," I said with a rueful smile. "And too whiny."

He wasn't smiling. "Blackjack, nopony is too damaged for Unity. They'll take anypony. Murderers. Rapists. Raiders. Slaves. It doesn't matter. I can't really believe that they'd turn anypony away for being 'too whiny'."

I frowned at that. "Maybe. I just don't understand where the Goddess ends and Lacunae begins. She sounds like she's a part of it, but…not. She said something about Hoofington being full of nightmares." I caught his look and chuckled…then coughed, hacked, brought up something a decidedly 'bugh' color, and spat it into a rag before shaking my head. "Ew…anyway…not normal nightmares, scary dreams. It's definitely an alicorny thing."

"Well," he said as he wiped his nose on his leg. "Just…don't let this bite us in the tail. I mean…I know you want to help her, but she and her Goddess are one great big unknown. Okay?" I sighed and nodded, taking another sip of the tasty medicine. It was kinda like licorice... salty licorice? P-21 relaxed a bit. "So…last question. What are we going to do at Stable 99?"

"Take it over," I replied calmly as I rubbed my bruised throat. "I mean it. If Mom won't listen, I will shoot her till she does. I will feel very guilty about it afterwards, but I'm not going to let that place continue." Then I took a deep breath. "After that, anyone who doesn't like the new rules can have fun in the Wasteland."

He looked at me with a sigh. "I notice that plan doesn't have anything about punishing them for what they did."

I closed my eyes. "Sorry. I'm not an executioner. I'd give you the Overmare if I could, but Deus took care of that."

"Well, get back to Stable 99 and take over. I assume profit follows on step three." He crossed his forelegs on the edge of my bed as he cocked his head. "And if it doesn't go to plan?"

"Drink some Wild Pegasus, sing some dirty limericks, shoot a lot, and try not to die," I said as I looked him in the eye. "But I'm not leaving there till it's taken care of, P-21."

"Good. That I can live with," he said softly.

"I know you don't believe it," I said with a smile, "But most of Stable 99 are good ponies. We won't have to kill them all." Because if we did, then I was going to follow them. But I couldn't believe Mom and the others would hold onto rules that weren't even a part of the stable to begin with!

"You're an optimist, Blackjack. Still, while I'm not sure about their goodness, I'm pretty sure they aren't going out of their way to screw us. If they have a choice, then they'll do what's easier." He gave my hip a nudge. "I'll be honest. Fighting you…is hard." I smiled at that. I needed to make cards. 'Security: Don't fight me, it's hard.' "And afterwards?"

"Put Mom in charge as the new Overmare and put them in contact with Bottlecap. There's got to be valuable things to trade. Trade will save the Wasteland," I said with a smile. "Then we get the routing to the next destination for EC-1101, and maybe make a little stop at Hippocratic Research and see if I can't talk Sanguine into giving up on it."

"Sounds…good," he said, actually sounding impressed. Then he chuckled. "You know that something's going to go wrong."

"Yeah. Probably Sanguine," I said, rolling my eyes. "The Zodiacs knew I was at Stable-Tec R&D. He'll probably guess that I'll head to Stable 99 to find the routing. He's probably going to throw every raider, bandit, and slaver against me. Probably why DJ Pon3 said the area was so much more hostile now." I brought up my PipBuck and tapped the screen. The sleek black display showed the navigation tool in soft, cool blue. I was amazed at how many places I'd reached in the last few weeks. "Ditzy is flying back to New Appleloosa tomorrow. She can drop us off at Miramare. From there, it's two days to Megamart and two more to Stable 99."

"That's a lot of ground to cover. Any chance Ditzy could fly us straight to Stable 99?"

"She's not a taxi. 99 is way out of her way, and we used up most of our caps paying for EC-1101." Most of that money went to Ditzy for flying all the way out to Hoofington and back, a trip she usually risked only every other year or so. "We can't keep her from her business just to save us some walking."

He made a face. "All very well for you," he said with a grimace. "All your legs work."

"My knees are half shot too, after jumping off that catwalk," I reminded him; I could have taken a Hydra, but after all the damage

done to me by the drug, not to mention seeing the manufacturing process, I'd rather wait a bit instead. He looked a little unconvinced. "It'll work out. And just think, in a few days, we'll be able to set Stable 99 right once and for all!"

He rubbed his chin. "Well, that's a point. Maybe, though, we could find one of those magic flying wagons of our own? That would make travel much easier."

"I doubt that Glory would be up to flying us all around the Hoof," I said, not sure if a pegasus's lift was related to their size. Then again, Ditzy wasn't the largest pony in Equestria, and her wings didn't even have feathers, so... so I didn't know how it worked. Well, nothing new there.

"Glory would fly through fire if you asked her to," P-21 pointed out.

I flushed a little. "It's not like that. She's…it just feels weird to lust after her. And I'm not going to exploit her crush on me. So we'll stick with the plan."

"Mmmm…maybe. I don't know, it just seems that, every time you have a plan, it ends in disaster and heartbreak," he said as he rose. "I should go make sure we have everything we need."

Leaving me in bed presented an interesting problem. On one hoof, I was tired, on the second, I felt too rotten to sleep, on the third, I wouldn't feel anything if I was asleep, but on the fourth, my dreams were full of the sound of crunching foals and Thorn singing 'hush now'. However, being stuck in bed felt suspiciously like waiting, and I'd finished my gun magazines and the hoof-to-hoof training manual. Then, in desperation, I'd even tried reading one of P-21's arcane science books. There simply wasn't any way to make arcane radiation gem reactors and spark generation as thrilling as reading about Fallen Caesar fighting techniques. And don't get me started on his books on locks!

I still had two more memory orbs that I hadn't viewed yet. Theoretically, I was safe as houses, provided no stealthed zebras or ghost unicorns attacked. I levitated the two from my bag. I still didn't want to view the bloodstained orb, so I lifted the third…then frowned and floated Cupcake's revolver into my bed. Slipping it under my pillow, I breathed out and touched the orb with my magic.

Nothing. Not that it was locked, or anything. It was just that I could feel Stonewing being merged with the cockatrice, sense the

creature squirming inside me as I shifted and distorted. It made my hide crawl! I took several deep breaths, closed my eyes, and tried again to coax myself to make the connection.

Nothing…

I was sick. I was tired. My horn sucked. Always decent explanations, but somehow they didn't comfort me. How would I learn about the projects and see the Marauders if I couldn't even get my horn to make the connection?

I lay back in the bed, staring up at the moon. Had Marigold felt this way when she was being slandered and torn down by the system that had happily put her in harm's way? Exhausted, disconnected, and alone? I tried to make the connection again and again before finally dropping the orbs back into my bag and turning over in bed. Just one more thing I couldn't do.

* * *

I sat alone on a mountain. It shifted and rumbled beneath me, but I could almost reach the clouds. If I could reach them, I could tear them aside and see the stars again!

"Don't look down," rasped the old voice with a chuckle. "Care for a game? Draw Poker? Hearts? Go Fish?"

"Very funny," I muttered.

"I try. We've got that in common."

I stretched and strained to reach the clouds. "Go away." Just a little bit farther…

"Hey. You're the one dreaming me. You wake up," he said with that purring of his cards. "So, what are you trying to do?"

"Get to the stars," I replied. "If I can reach them…maybe they can help me."

"Sekashi told you they were dangerous."

"Only to selfish ponies who try to use them to become super powerful and stuff," I said as I started to push the clouds aside. "I'm going to use them to help." I wobbled as the rocks beneath me shifted a little, but I kept my eyes turned upward. "Nothing bad's going to come of that."

"So thought Fluttershy," he rasped. "But you saw what came of trying to force a better pony."

"Well, making the Wasteland happy, then."

"And that's Pinkie Pie's thinking. You're just going from bad to

worse now," he said as he shuffled the cards beneath me. "Come on down from there, Blackjack, before you hurt somepony."

"I can't! I've got to help," I said as I finally pushed the clouds aside. I could see the twinkling lights.

"Help who?" the Dealer asked from below me. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to turn into a monster if I don't," I said as I reached up and pinched a star between my hooves. It glowed like a memory orb, but hot and terrible.

"Oh? Then what are you now?" the Dealer asked. I looked down to tell him to shut the fuck up and–

I stood on P-21's corpse. And Glory. Rampage. Lacunae. Bottlecap and Caprice lay further down the slope of corpses. Roses embraced the crushed body of her foal. Dozens of Crusaders lay still in their tattered cloaks, the filly patches fluttering softly in the breeze. Hundreds of ponies in Stable 99 barding. Thousands of ponies dressed as raiders. Enclave pegasi littered the slope like broken birds. At the edge of my sight loomed the blasted corpse of Deus, the pulped remains of Gorgon, and the smoldering body of Blueblood. And past them, the bodies continued farther and farther till they blended with the horizon.

"Told you not to look down," the Dealer said, sitting on Rampage's face.

The mass then shifted and the slope collapsed beneath me. I fell through the darkness, my friends' bodies burying me in a crush of limbs, the star coolly looking on between my hooves.

* * *

I jerked awake, knocking the box of Vanity's memory orbs across the sheets and sending them rolling across the wooden floor. I looked around, the images of the stars no longer quite so comforting. I sat up in bed, curling and pressing my head between my rear knees as my forelimbs hugged my head tight. "Please… don't take that from me. Don't take the stars," I whispered to my poor crazy brain.

I finally calmed down enough to climb down off the bed and gather up the fallen memory orbs. One must have rolled under the bed, and I huffed softly as I lay down on my stomach and peeked under for the orb…wait? Orbs? Two memory orbs glimmered at me from under the bed. What, were they breeding now? Very carefully, I

pulled the pair out. One was quite dusty. I put Vanity's orb back in the case, looking at the newcomer; Marigold's. I touched it to my horn. "Please…please please please…" I begged, trying to make my horn work.

A flicker, and world faded away.

oooOOOooo

This unicorn mare fit me like a sock. Even her glasses felt like my glasses. Her headache matched my own. All she needed was a runny nose and a scratchy throat and we'd be interchangeable.

I also knew this building. This was the Fluttershy Medical Center, and I even knew this hallway. Even though it wasn't half-lit and painted with a blood-lettered 'PLAY'.

She stepped into Redheart's office; I at once noticed that the stacked up papers and files seemed even higher than when I'd visited. The tired mare behind the desk pushed her glasses back and gave a frayed smile at my host. "Thank you for coming, Marigold. I know this is terribly short notice."

"Well, you made it sound like it was life or death," Marigold said in a soft and thoughtful voice edged with some tension. "Why else ask me to come out here in the middle of the night?"

Redheart trotted around from behind the desk to put a hoof on Marigold's shoulder. "I know this has been…a difficult time for you."

"Difficult?" Marigold said in a soft, taut voice. "Spending three years of my life on a dream I've had for as long as I can remember, only to get pulled for a medical review two weeks before the launch? Yeah. I suppose that counts as difficult."

"It's been challenging for all of us, with the assassination attempt. Big Macintosh's funeral last week and all…well…yes. Difficult." Redheart then pushed a file towards Marigold and she glanced down. 'Marigold: P:H medical authorization: denied.' And then atop it, 'Medical Waiver: Approved.' Her eyes went over those stamps once, and then twice. "So I'm glad to make things a little less difficult for you."

"Why…?" Marigold asked in shock.

"Because we've reviewed the test results for your heart and found them…less severe than we anticipated. And because Fluttershy knows what it's like to have a dream. And because…we need your

help." Marigold frowned as she walked to a cushion and took a seat across from the elderly mare. Redheart gave a small smile. "Fluttershy has a dire medical emergency involving a pregnant mare. Without your help, she may lose the foal."

"My help? But how can I help? I'm an astropony and an astronomer. I don't know anything about medicine."

"Fluttershy wishes to perform a procedure that will transfer the foal from the patient to you, making you a surrogate mother." Marigold's ears stood almost upright at this.

"You want me to do *what*? To…to have a baby?!"

"Yes," Redheart replied calmly. "Afterwards she'd be transferred to an M.o.P. foal services caregiver. You wouldn't be expected to raise her." As Marigold balked, Redheart continued, "I know this is hard. Normally we wouldn't even attempt a surrogacy spell like this without far more preparation and counseling, but when we reviewed your files, we found you to be an ideal candidate. And time is critical."

Marigold looked at the file and then at Redheart. "And does this waiver disappear if I say no?" And from her tone, I knew that she'd walk if it did, even if it cost her her dream.

"No, Marigold. That was Fluttershy's and my final decision. You don't *have* to do this." But from the look in the pale pony's eyes, it was clear that she was desperate for Marigold to agree. "But we hope you will."

Marigold reached up, rubbing her temples with her hooves. "You just…it's going…ugh, don't you realize it's going to be pretty funny if all of a sudden I look pregnant?"

"The foal is currently the size of a chicken egg. It'll be months before you start to show."

"Not to mention suspicious that I was turned down and then got a waiver. Somepony's going to raise a red flag," she said as she chewed on a hoof nervously. "It might…maybe…foul up the mission…"

"Well then, you should say no," Redheart replied in a no-nonsense tone. "I know you're willing to face terrible risks. This is no less a risk; perhaps even more dangerous than going to the moon. But I can tell you that the mother needs this. Fluttershy needs it. And I think a great many ponies will need it too, even if they never realize it. This is your chance to save one pony."

I'd do it, but then, I'm an idiot. Marigold sighed as she looked at

Redheart. “I almost wish you’d blackmailed me. It’d be easier,” she said as she closed her eyes. “All right,” she finally agreed.

What came next were a number of papers signed in a flurry. Clearly, she wasn’t reading them all, just signing on the X’s. Then two unicorns gave her a number of injections, but I was relieved that none of them seemed to involve the horrible rainbow-colored sludge I’d seen with Gorgon’s memory. Now definitely woozy, she was led into a room decorated like a forest. There were actually living tree branches coming out of the walls! I wondered what kind of spell did that. A veil of leaves separated one half of the room from the other.

On the far side of that thin barrier, a mare sobbed inconsolably. “Shhhh…shhh…it’ll be all right... ” Fluttershy said calmly over and over again.

The mare spoke in a voice thick with grief. “Y…y…you must t… think I’m t…terrible…I am terrible, Fluttershy…” she stammered around the tears.

“No. No, I don’t think that anymore. I think you’re sad, and hurting…and if I can help I will…” A blue eye peeked through the fall of leaves. “Oh. The doctor’s here. Are you absolutely sure?” Fluttershy said, and there was another sob. “Okay then. Just a little shot and we’ll get started.”

The mare’s thick voice said softly, “Fluttershy, can you take it all away? Please? I don’t…I can’t…there’s so much…”

A soft sigh. “Of course. You kept my secret. I’ll keep yours.” *Be kind.*

Then, a few minutes later, Fluttershy stepped through, gave Marigold one teary look, threw her forelegs around her, and hugged her with a teary sniff. “Thank you. Thank you so much.” Marigold relaxed and put her forelegs around Fluttershy, returning the gesture.

“She doesn’t know, does she?” Marigold said softly.

Fluttershy shook her head. “She couldn’t bear it if she did. And she has so much to do. So very much to do that she was willing to give up her baby.” She looked back at the leaves. “If the public found out, she’d be finished.” And if they found out about *this*, she’d be equally finished.

“But who…” Marigold started to say before she shook her head. “I guess it’s better if I don’t know.” Fluttershy gave a sad smile and nodded.

"Hopefully, when the war is over, she'll be strong enough to remember and meet her again. And she'll have the opportunity, thanks to you." Fluttershy took her hooves. "I know a lot of ponies look up to you for going into space and all, but this makes you my hero."

I don't know about Marigold, but I felt damn good about that.

oooOOOooo

When I opened my eyes I stared up at the ceiling, feeling conflicted. That was nothing new. Every single time I went into an orb, it felt like 'Blackjack' was getting a little more scrambled up with other ponies. Was I learning? Maturing? Or was I actually doing some kind of inherent harm to myself with these memories? Had Marigold selflessly become a surrogate, or had she feared that Fluttershy and Redheart would rescind her waiver? And what of the mare that was behind the veil? Was she wrong to have wanted to end her pregnancy, not knowing that Fluttershy had an alternative? Who had she been? Important, obviously. A Ministry Mare? *There* was a scandalous thought. Or even one of the princesses?! Or maybe I was thinking too grandiose, and she'd just been a mare that Fluttershy wanted to help.

I pulled my pillow over my face. "Ugh…why can't anything be black and white!" I shouted into it. Everything had to be so… tangled. I sighed, then pulled the pillow away, looking at the moon overhead. Marigold had gotten her dream, but the scandal had destroyed her. The nameless mare had suffered terribly, but did that make it right? "Why am I the pony that gets stuck thinking about this?"

"Because you care," Lacunae said softly beside me. I jumped so hard that I fell out of bed in a tangle of sheets. The alicorn cocked her head as she looked at me lying on the floor. "Are you alright?"

"I…wa…don't do that!" I panted, feeling my heart thud. "I've had bad experiences coming out of memory orbs." Which was probably why I had so much trouble getting into them.

"Forgive me," she said politely. "I hope it was a pleasant memory."

"It was…complicated." Slowly I rose to my hooves. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting. Glory is attempting to cook. Her cooking is not going well, so I thought it best to check on you and get away from the

smell," she said as she looked at the memory orb. "So…is it worthwhile?"

"More questions," I whined, but looked at the orb. "What do you mean?"

"I…we…we live within our memories, and the memories of each other. The Goddess directs and we act, but within her we flow from dream to dream and thought to thought. I can no longer remember which are my own and which are the dreams of the Goddess."

I wondered if that was why I was having so much trouble entering the memory orbs. Was I becoming afraid of changing?

"Do you…or the Goddess…know anything about magic?" Lacunae actually smiled broadly, and my answer was in her smile. "Okay. Dumb question, I guess. But I'm wondering about something Sekashi told me about a zebra who put his soul in a rock. Is that possible? I always thought that a soul was…well…you."

"It is, but there is dark and cold magic that can do such things. What you describe is a soul jar," Lacunae said in her distant voice.

"But... I don't understand…how does something like that work?" I walked to the door, opened it, and was greeted by the reek of burnt apples smothered in melted rubber. Gagging, I closed the door and rested my back against it. Okay…there was gross, and then there was that.

Lacunae seemed to be listening to something; her Goddess, I assumed. "Imagine if you were to take a gun…something special and inherent to you…and then you placed within it a piece of your soul. That gun would retain the resilience of your soul. Perhaps it would never jam or rust. It might always be oiled. Perhaps even more accurate than identical firearms. In extraordinary circumstances, perhaps it might fire an extra bullet or two before needing reloading. To you, it would simply be a weapon, but to anyone else it would be a weapon beyond any of its kind."

"So what's the catch? Because that sounds way too good to be true," I said as I looked up at her, rubbing my runny nose with a hoof.

Lacunae smiled sadly, "The catch is that, so long as your soul is here, you can never pass into the everafter. And there is a price paid for rending something eternal. Souls do not heal, and it would take an exceptional pony to rend their soul thus and not suffer horrifically for it."

I closed my eyes, trying to get my brain to work right. What had

Priest said earlier…about her healing like…"What if you had…I don't know…like a healing talisman. A really powerful healing talisman…" Like the kind that had stuffed my guts back into me in the clinic…"And you made it a soul jar? Could it keep you alive forever? Even if you were vaporized?"

Lacunae looked intrigued. "Perhaps…"

I imagined the pink egg I'd seen earlier. Just like the one I'd seen back in Fluttershy's clinic, but with a tiny, ghostly Rampage stuffed inside. Indestructible, powered by the soul trapped within, remaking Rampage again and again. It didn't explain what she'd done, any of her other abilities, or Glory's theory that it wasn't simple madness, but it did explain how she could get turned to ash and still reform.

"Is there any way to free a soul from a soul jar?"

"Ah…" Her lips curled in a slight smile. "For that, you'd need a… very special book."

"Don't suppose you'd know where?"

"Canterlot, perhaps? In the Ministry of Image." Something was off. Years of poker had taught me the little tells that something was awry. The hint of a smile. The tone. Everything. "We've been searching for one for a very long time."

"Canterlot?" I huffed. "May as well be in the Core."

"It may," she replied softly. "We know of one book for certain, but there may be others. A copy was seized by the O.I.A., but whether it was turned over to the Ministry of Image or not is unknown." Then her eyes looked at my PipBuck, her smile widening. "But perhaps you possess a means to obtain it from the O.I.A. Hub, yes?"

I gave a snotty sniff, narrowing my eyes slightly. Maybe it was due to Caprice's games, but I just wanted to know for sure who was pushing my buttons. "Funny. What kind of Goddess wouldn't know?"

"WE DO NOT NEED TO DIVULGE EVERY–" I smiled.

"Gotcha," I said with a little smirk. "Goddess. Right? Mind letting Lacunae back?"

"WE ARE THE INFINITE AND ALL-KNOWING GODDESS! WE DO NOT…" But the Goddess was now hissing her words in pain. "NOTHING CAN…WE…ARRRRGH!" She clenched her head as she trembled. "THIS…IS…UNBEARABLE! HOW DOES SHE TOLERATE IT!?"

Right. Lacunae okay. Goddess, not okay. "You okay?"

I'm sure that somewhere, P-21 was grinding his teeth. Suddenly, she swayed and collapsed onto the bed. "That is…most disagreeable," Lacunae said softly.

"So. I guess that the Goddess doesn't like Hoofington."

"Hoofington screams in my dreams. I have become used to it. I fear the Goddess had not," suddenly her eyes widened. "And I fear she is very put out by your irreverence."

"Yeah? Insecure goddesses don't impress me," I said as I pulled out Cupcake's memory orb. "I've seen Luna and Celestia. They didn't act all-knowing. There was a hell of a lot they didn't know. I don't have time to waste on a Goddess that pretends to."

Lacunae closed her eyes for a long moment. "Oh yes, very put out."

"Are all alicorns like that? Like you?" I asked as I put the orb away.

"No. Most are…extensions. We exist within her, and within her we act to carry out her will. But we remain ourselves. She can dictate our actions as she wishes. I am an aberration."

"So you're a mutant alicorn?" I asked with a little grin, but she smiled and nodded politely.

"I have been in Hoofington for many years. I am…resistant to the screams of the city. Few alicorns can survive in it for long. In some places, it is physically damaging," she said with a little shudder. I wondered if she was referring to Enervation, or if this was yet another horror of the Wasteland that I just hadn't encountered yet.

"I'm pretty sure she wants me to find a book for her."

"It is magic she lacks," Lacunae agreed.

I paused, frowning in thought. "Can it help Rampage?"

"I do not know," Lacunae replied softly. "We have only hints at its power."

"Right," I sighed, rubbing my muzzle. "Well. Good to know." Then I sniffed as the rubbery smell increased. There was a soft knock from the hall. I glanced at Lacunae, then opened the door.

"I made breakfast…er…lunch? Brunch," Glory said, trotting in with a tray balanced between her wings. She turned and presented something that looked like mashed Sugar Apple Bombs soaked in milk and wrapped in a fried egg... then burned to crunchy sticks of carbon. I lifted one, wrinkled my nose, and took a bite. Somehow, she'd managed to make it charred on the outside and gooey within. "I had to improvise on a lot of the ingredients."

I chewed thoughtfully for a few moments. "Not bad. Is that vinegar?" She smiled and nodded. "Huh, pretty good actually."

Glory beamed; I'd probably just made her day as I slurped down the rest of the interior and then munched the crunchy shell. I levitated another at Lacunae. "Want one?"

The alicorn shied away as she asked politely, "Blackjack, by any chance are you part dragon?"

* * *

By morning I felt, if not better, at least decent. Between Priest's healing and Sekashi's tonics, I'd coughed up most of the sludge in my lungs, and my throat no longer sounded like a rusty tin can full of nails. While I had to admit that the smell was off, Glory's cooking really wasn't that bad. I thought that what she could do with the few ingredients rattling around in our packs was pretty creative; Rampage promptly told me that, if I suggested she try one, she would be aiming for me with her vomit this time.

I took stock of my armaments, laying each weapon on the bed before me. The dragon claw for close in work, then Cupcake's .44 magnum revolver, after that the twelve gauge pump-action shotgun, and finally Taurus's rifle. The rest I'd traded, along with surplus ammo, for ammo for these. I'd kept Folly, of course. To be honest, I didn't know who'd buy a gun with impossibly rare ammo. While the IF-33 would be tempting, I barely had enough ammo for a clip, and the 12 mm gun had been trashed. With the exception of the incendiary bullets, I'd blown through most of the specialty ammo we'd picked up at Ironshod Firearms R&D. I hoped we'd come across some more, especially the explosive rounds.

The Aegis Security combat armor had pockets and holsters for most of these weapons. I had to admit, I felt better wiggling into my armor than I had in a while. While I missed my old security barding, the polymer and ceramic combat armor more than made up for it. Some spray-paint and I was just Security again. Best of all, Charity had used a stencil and some white paint to mark the rearing filly on my rump. I secured the weapons, clips, and the handful of healing potions I'd acquired and made my way downstairs.

"Wow," Glory muttered, her eyes lighting up at the sight of me.

"No helmet?" P-21 asked with a little frown.

"It cuts off my vision and hearing too much, and it's uncomfortable as hell," I said as I saw that Rampage was now Charity-aged. Apparently, while Glory's own cuisine was too much for my friends,

Rampage had gone out of her way to get every remotely edible bit of meat in our packs cooked up. Growing up, even with the assistance of a healing talisman, clearly used up the calories. I really preferred my Sugar Apple Bombs. Glory had 'assisted' her with some mixture of nausea, fascination, and disappointment that she wasn't allowed to indulge in any culinary experimentation.

He just looked at me like I was doing something stupid again.

"What?" I asked levelly.

"Nothing. It's great armor," he said before going back to his Carrot Crisps, adding, in a mutter just loud enough for everypony to hear, "Boom. Headshot."

Yeah, like he had room to talk! He still wasn't using any barding, period! Still... maybe I should reconsider the headgear.

I looked at Lacunae. "What about you? Do you need armor?" Black mourner's lace hardly seemed like adequate protection to me.

She looked at me, or, rather, at my horn. "I will be fine."

"Are you sure? I mean, P-21 likes to be all sneaky, but you're a little too…big…for sneaking."

"I'm good, thank you," she answered.

"Okay. Just saying…I'm pretty sure Celestia and Luna weren't bulletproof, so no harm in wearing some."

"Blackjack. I don't need armor. I have magic," she said with a small smile of irritation.

"Right. Of course you do. Because you're part unicorn. You do magic. Excuse me…" I said as I stalked over to the kitchen, muttering sourly under my breath about big-horned alicorns and their magic. I could sing while blasting away ghouls. Could she do that?

Once everything was set, I gave the house a parting look and locked the front door, feeling slightly less secure in the knowledge that anypony with some skill and a bobby pin could open it. Oh well. Not much I could do about it now.

* * *

As a…pleasant surprise, Glory's food didn't taste much different on the trip back out and into a paper bag that Ditzy kept in her wagon for just such occurrences. I found two boxes in the back, wedged myself between them, and did everything I could to avoid screaming, crying, wetting myself, or taking my mind off my striped

friend. Filly Rampage looked oddly like Silver Bell's striped sister as the two sat in the back. I kept my magic grip on the revolver. If I saw a skull appear on her butt, I was going straight into S.A.T.S.

Glory and Lacunae flew at our flanks; Ditzy had stared at the alicorn with some nervousness, but of course she hadn't said anything. I had to admit, the sight of the lace-draped alicorn was decidedly surreal. Then again, I was travelling with a pony with a soul thingy lodged within her and a hallucination that liked cards, on my way to…liberate…my stable. Reality was now a lot more subjective.

Then P-21 peeked out the back with a small frown. Why didn't *he* freak out at the sky? "Blackjack…"

"Urgh…" I grunted in reply.

"What is that?" he asked as he peered through his binoculars.

I carefully moved to the back, careful to avoid looking at the clouds above and the ground way way below. "What is what?" I asked, and then frowned as I spotted a black speck behind us. "What is that?" I lifted Taurus's rifle and sighted through the scope.

At first, I thought it was the Enclave. Maybe Dusk was coming to finish off Glory? But there was something off about how it moved, and I couldn't see any mounted weapons. Its wings were as big as Lacunae's, and it was gaining on us…fast. Really fast!

"Behind us!" I shouted as the creature rolled faster than I could follow with the scope. "Ditzy! Get us on the ground," I yelled as it swept over us. I heard the buzz of Glory's beam weapons crackle as she shot at it.

My stomach rose in my throat as every terrifying nightmare I had about falling rose in my chest. Ditzy was getting us on the ground by the fastest means possible: straight down! As she dove, I saw the flash of beam guns and flickers of lightning from our airborne friends. After that, I was just holding tight as half of Ditzy's wares battered P-21 and me. Rampage laughed in delight, and even Silver Bell appeared more thrilled and less scared by the drop.

Just before we hit, Ditzy flattened out, flying over the rubble strewn fields of Miramare. The wagon suddenly lurched to the side and the wagon cover ripped, four sets of brown claws tearing open the canopy. Something growled overhead, and I wasted no time thrusting Taurus's rifle upright and blasting away blindly. With a snarl, it released the wagon, and Ditzy was able to pull up over the main building. "Get ready to jump out!" I yelled.

The wagon came to a stop and the three of us spilled out. I could have kissed the ground…if we weren't facing some kind of clawed, winged, flying thing trying to kill us. It wasn't in sight, but I doubted that would last.

"Get the door open, quickly!" I said as I nodded at the door to the locker room. "We gotta get out of sight!" I looked over at the ghoul pegasus. "Best get out of here. It'll be after us." And oh, how I hoped that was true and that this wasn't some sort of ridiculously aggressive predator with a taste for ghoul flesh. "Thanks, Ditzy! I owe you a new canopy."

She grinned and shrugged, then winked a cloudy eye at me and took off. I made sure to fire a few rounds at anything that might be a bat-winged thing. To my relief, I didn't see anything go after the damaged wagon.

Rampage looked at the duffel bag between my shoulders that held her spiked armor. "I hate being little. How am I supposed to kick tail like this?" she said as she gestured at herself.

"You'll find a way. I have no doubt about that," I assured her. Behind us, the door clicked open. "Quick, inside!" If we were fighting something that flew, the lower the roof, the better. We disappeared inside just as the winged thing flashed over us. Whatever this thing was, it was fast. Really damn fast!

I'd just closed the door when an oozing brown stinger punched right though the heavy metal. "Ah!" I shouted as I reeled back, blasting at the appendage. It jerked free with a metallic squeal, leaving a hoof-sized hole.

A bright blue eye peeked through and then narrowed. "Peek a boo," a low feminine voice growled.

"Peek a this," I muttered as I fired the rifle, but the eye jerked away with a laugh. "Well, at least it's a happy monster."

"Great. So you won't be adopting it, then?" P-21 asked as he took a magic grenade and carefully positioned it at the base of the door so that anypony opening it would flick the stem off the weapon. We quickly moved further into the locker rooms. It wasn't trying to come in through the doors. Maybe it was going to enter through the second floor to flush us out?

"Well, you never know. It could have some horribly tragic sob story," I said as I rushed to the Marauders' lockers. Actually, given my track record with these kinds of things, it was probably likely. I selected Doof's locker and typed 'Mamma'.

There were a stack of papers, a memory orb…of course there was a memory orb…and some large boxes of ammo. In the back was a… gun? It was a short tube about two feet long, with a mouth grip stock. Really, it resembled the biggest single-shot gun I'd ever seen before. A heart was carved in the stock with the words 'Twist + Doof', and somepony had painted 'Persuasion' on the barrel.

No time for reading, and certainly no time for a memory orb. I dumped them into my bag and then turned the gun over. It sure wasn't something I'd seen in any Ironshod Firearms catalogue.

"What the heck is this?" I asked with a frown. "It's sure no Ironpony."

"What's what?" P-21 asked, and I showed it to him. "Oh! It's a grenade rifle."

"Great. Enjoy," I said as I pushed the tube into his hooves.

His eyes went round. "Blackjack! It's a gun."

"It's a grenade gun!" I countered. "You do grenades. So logically you should be fine with it."

His eyes went even rounder. "There's nothing logical about that!"

I sighed and slid him the ammo. "Look. I trust you. Trust yourself and ante up. This isn't some gun you point and shoot, right?" He frowned in worry but nodded. "Gotta figure out angles and delays and stuff?" He nodded again and I tapped his forehead. "Then it is right up your alley, egghead." He sure didn't look happy about it, but he took the weapon and the grenades and slipped them into his saddlebags. And if I was wrong and he was feeling 'shoot Blackjack'-y, at least it'd be quick.

Now there was just the question of how we would connect with Glory and Lacunae. Unless miss big purple horn had a magical location spell, and I wouldn't put it past her, we'd have to go out or they'd have to come in. If I were the flier, I wouldn't want to be stuck inside, so I guessed she was somewhere on the roof waiting for us to come out the second story.

"We can get out through the crater," I muttered. "But we need to tell Glory so they don't come in and have us chasing each other in circles."

He frowned, then dug through his bag and scribbled a word on a piece of garbage. 'Rads'. "Hook it onto the hole on the door and let's go," he said as he carefully unhinged the gun and slid a grenade into it. I did as he asked. Unless the monster was standing right outside, the pair would see it when they checked the door.

"Why 'Rads'?" Rampage asked.

"It's the official term for measuring the intensity of magical spell radiation," he explained as he looked back at us. "So unless that monster has cracked open a copy of Scientific Equestria or a Big Book of Arcane Science – ACK!" I swept him up in my hooves and gave him a hug. "Leggo! I got a grenade! A whole lot of grenades! Blackjack!"

"I got a smart pony," I said to Rampage with a grin.

* * *

In the main hall, I kept my eyes up. Vermin had gotten in: huge bloated mice that weren't much more threatening than radroaches but still packed a wicked bite. I still wished the E.F.S. would give me a scale of bad guys-ness, but the bars were just red or blue. I had to watch for something a bit more substantial.

I hadn't realized that something substantial was watching for us.

As we made for the stairs down to operations, I heard the low growl rumble through the halls. My mane did the pony pokey as we looked at all the open doors. Was it that bar by the barracks? The gift shop? Maybe somewhere above? Of course not.

I'd just turned the corner to go down the stairs into operations when a great leonine shape pounced up at me. Its mangy hide was covered in bald patches and sores, but that did little to detract from its crushing weight or sharp fangs and claws…and wings... and stinger?! What the fuck, Wasteland? This had to be one of Chimera's critters, right? How else do you stick a lion, bat, and scorpion together?

Knocked on my back, I had no choice but to keep rolling. If it pinned me, I'd be dead. Fortunately, it had to hop to the top of the stairs first, and so I found my footing and levitated the shotgun in my white magical grip just as it started a second pounce. S.A.T.S. lined up three blasts to its head. Three blasts stripped great bloody swaths away from its face and shoulders.

Didn't kill it. I hopped away, avoiding a strike by its stinger tail as I fired and moved away. Its claws scraped horribly on my barding, and I was very glad all I'd face was a bruise…for the moment.

"Another one!" P-21 shouted around the mouth grip of Persuasion as he pointed it towards the second floor. The weapon made a curious 'Thump' noise and sent the grenade up to the second floor,

where another of these monsters was starting down after us. The explosion took off the creature's legs. Unfortunately, there were more behind it, and they were far more wary.

Rampage tugged at the drawstrings of my duffel bag where it had fallen. "Blackjack! Why'd you use knots? I need my gear!"

"A little busy!" I yelled, jumping and moving as quickly as I could.

"Come on! I can't rampage like this! I need my ripper! Hoofclaws! Something!" I sent my dragon claw skittering across the floor towards her. "Thanks!" she said happily and started to saw through the knots.

"Rampage!" I yelled in exasperation. P-21 smirked – yes, he was actually smirking – as he fired another grenade to the top of the stairs.

She blinked, looked cross-eyed down at the weapon in her jaws, and then rolled her eyes. She let out a fillyish squeal as she raced to the monster and hugged its back leg with all her hooves. Her head jerked back and forth as she sliced into the thick tendons behind its knee. It let out a roar as it staggered, and I was able to move away from it and reload with slugs.

The monster then swung its tail and speared Rampage through the side. She twisted, grabbing the scorpion stinger in her hooves and started to slice through that instead as blood foamed out around the dragon claw. She simply continued to hold tight and slashed away at the stinger tail. The monster, seemingly confused by the squirming filly's refusal to die, cut to the chase and pulled her towards its maw.

Unfortunately for it, that meant taking its eyes off me. I pressed the barrel of the shotgun against its head and took off half its skull. As it spasmed and flopped, Rampage was thrown free. One last shot and it went still. "We're running some more."

"Always with the running," P-21 muttered as he limped down the stairs. Rampage wasn't walking much better as her mouth foamed, but the hole in her side was healing with pink light. Once we got downstairs, I slammed the door behind us.

I noticed Rampage was already intact, but still dripping white foam from her lips. "You okay?" Not the best question to ask her, but still.

"Poisoned," was all she rasped. I pulled out one of the antivenoms Glory had made for radscorpion stings and poured it down her throat. At once, she gagged and clutched her throat, falling over.

"Rampage?" I asked in alarm, dropping beside her. Had I somehow made it worse?

"That…tastes…disgusting…" she coughed.

I rolled my eyes and licked the end of the bottle. Okay, so it was a *little* bitter. "Baby."

"I am *not* a baby. I'm older than both of you combined," she said as she pointed at me with a scowl. "You've just got a…a…a mutant tongue! That's what!"

"Hey, could we focus–" P-21 started to say as Rampage charged at me. I stuck out a hoof and pushed against her forehead; even small, she nearly shoved me off my feet.

"Oh yeah? Better check," I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

Rampage blinked, then tackled me with a roar. It wasn't nearly as effective as it would have been if she was her normal size. "Oh yeah! Really mutated! Just like those bruises!" she said as she swung her hooves at me.

"Awww, somepony needs her nap. She's all cranky!"

"Ladies!" P-21 shouted, making us both look at him. "Imminent mortal peril here! Chimera monsters hunting us down and you… you two are…uuugh!" He sat down, pulling his mane before he jabbed a hoof at both of us. "Do not make me put you in corners! Now, are we going, or do you two want to keep acting like two-year-old foals?"

We both stared at him a moment, then pointed at each other in unison and said in chorus, "*She* started it."

* * *

Travelling through the operations center gave me a sense of déjà vu. I'd fed Minty Fresh to a raider trying to get info out of him. Glory…I was really glad that Glory wasn't down here again.

P-21 had strung a wire across the bottom of the stairs and up overhead, then had me tie three frag grenade by their stems. Jerk the wire, grenades pop free…boy I was glad he was on our side.

"Hey," the Dealer whispered from a dark doorway. "Got a second?"

"Not right now," I muttered.

P-21 looked at me. "Blackjack?"

Great. Now I was starting to act crazy. Crazier anyway. "Just…go away. I'm not crazy anymore and I don't need you creeping me out. Okay? I've got monsters to deal with, and Rampage and Stable 99

and…you know what? This relationship just isn't working out. It's not you. It's me. Okay. So just go away and stop bugging me." I smiled to the old pale pony as pleasantly as I could, then saw the pair staring at me.

P-21 repeated himself in a far more unsettled tone, "Blackjack… who are you talking to?"

"Nopony! Okay. I'm just…ah…" I sat down hard and blurted, "Sometimes I see this pale horse who has a real fetish for cards and he likes being all cryptic and mysterious and I think he's some crazy part of my brain but I'm not crazy anymore so I don't need to talk to him so he just needs to go away…" I took a deep breath, glaring at the old buck. "Right now!"

The old buck just nudged his hat back, looking at me with an amused smile.

"Okay!" Rampage said brightly, grinning at P-21. "Suddenly my problems don't seem quite so bad!"

"*You* killed Thorn," he replied bluntly, taking away her grin as he sat next to me. "This been going on for a while?"

"Since Glory got branded," I admitted. "I mean…I kinda had hints before then, but it was after she got branded that he started showing up for chats."

"Why didn't you tell us?" he asked in a slightly hurt tone.

"Well. I mean…you were just getting over wanting to kill me…you are over that, right?" His eyebrows arched as he looked at me coolly. "Okay…mostly over that. Anyway, Glory was hurt, I felt completely useless…then we fought Deus and the Zodiacs and there were all the problems in Flank and…I just wanted to seem like I had it together. Okay? That I could tough it out."

He just shook his head. "Blackjack, you're an idiot. You sing while chopping up ghouls. You befriend any monster than seems the slightest bit depressed. You seem to make enemies with shocking regularity. And you think that seeing things that aren't there is too much? I figured you were crazy when you stopped Daisy from bashing my head in, and nothing I've seen has changed that much." He nudged my shoulder with his hoof. "You might be one twigged mare, but you're also a good pony and a good friend."

Rampage looked from me to P-21, and then asked, "Um…are you two gonna kiss or what?"

The Dealer just smiled and chuckled softly, shaking his head. Immediately, we both went bright red. P-21 stammered and pointed

at me. “Kiss? Her? She’s a mare!” Rampage broke into giggles as P-21 scowled. “I don’t even like her like that…really! I have grenades, you know!”

I just smiled and shook my head, then stepped past the Dealer into the room. The office had once been somepony’s living quarters, but clearly the Enclave had cleaned house before abandoning Miramare. There hadn’t been much in here to begin with. Just a terminal I hadn’t even bothered to try accessing. Locks were one thing, but I had no clue how to–

I might not, but…“P-21! I need you! Right now!” I shouted. Rampage’s giggles exploded into peals of laughter.

He stepped in with a look promising to find some way to murder a certain striped pony. “It’s not for sex or a joke,” I added quickly. I stepped over to the terminal. “Can you access this?”

His scowl disappeared. “Maybe. Let me see.” He hobbled in front of it. “Ugh…huge password. It better not be mares setting up more sex dates.” Rampage walked in, rubbing tears of mirth from her cheeks. He started his magic as I tapped my left hoof on the top of the monitor. Then he hit a key and the terminal let out a beep. “Whoa…I’m in on the third try! That was lucky,” he said, pleased at the turn of events.

Yeah... luck. I looked over his shoulder. “And…so much for luck. Most of the files were auto deleted. Looks like…just garbage here.” Then he moved the cursor over one entry. “Wait, here’s one.”

To: Minty Fresh

From: Lighthooves

Nice job getting that confession. I knew that Dashite was just itching to tell us her true contempt for the Enclave. Morning Glory’s whole family is no better, really. It’s in their blood. Can you believe she’d accuse us of misconduct? Where is her loyalty? Her sense of duty? Her honor? Ah, well, as long as she has that surfacer terrorist assisting her, there’s not much we can do. Since she’s insisted we brand her, I suppose that’s what we’ll have to do. Such a pity. We were making some real progress investigating potential cures for the surface, but she’s mucked up the whole operation. Now she’s probably run off to Flank or Megamart. I suppose we’ll have to hope Yellow River offers better fruit. Get ready to relocate.

I wanted to shoot somepony. Actually, I’d already wanted to shoot him, but this moved him back to the top of the list. But, oddly, despite my horn twitching with the need to put a hole in the screen,

something held me back. “Something’s wrong,” I muttered. “Back out. All the way out.” He frowned and did so. I looked at the screen and selected the first password option from the screen of gobbledygook. Then the second. Then the third.

‘Exact match.’ I repeated it two more times, and every time the third guess brought up the password, no matter how I put in the password. “That bastard,” I muttered.

“I would like to buy a clue, please? Something in a size four,” Rampage said as she peeked up from between my legs.

“This is why Dusk tried to kill Glory. This wasn’t for me. This was to put Dusk on Glory’s trail.” And if she’d been a little more lucky with her Novasurge shots, she would have killed her right in front of us. I read the message again and tapped the screen. “Yellow River. That’s for me.”

“Yellow River? What’s Yellow River?” P-21 asked in confusion.

“Well, if you’ve ever seen me drink a whole lot of Sparkle-Cola all at once--” Rampage began with a little smirk.

“I don’t know, but he wants me to go there. A trap. A set up? Something.” I gritted my teeth. I had to go. It was the only lead I had for helping Glory at the moment. “He’s playing me.” Like the Goddess.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Play along. Then I’ll play rough and dirty when the time comes for it. Find something to hang him with. And if all that fails, feed him to a hungry raider. Alive,” I muttered.

“Yeah, right. Like anypony would do that…” P-21 began, and then our eyes met. His grin slowly slid away as he muttered sheepishly, “Oh. Damn. Awkward.” A loud explosion echoed through the operations hallway, followed immediately by a bestial roar of pain. “Saved by the monster,” P-21 muttered. “Blackjack, if there’s a way out, now’s the time.”

I agreed, giving the Dealer a cold glare…not that it mattered. He wasn’t really there anyway; I just hated that disingenuous look of innocence he wore. We made our way to the storage utility that had been blown out. Both of us took a pill of Rad-X, and I held one out to Rampage. She just snorted and slid down into the hole in the concrete pipes in the floor. My PipBuck immediately began to spike, the readout showing a blue pony turning green and then yellow as the rads increased. I hoped this wasn’t going to be a long tunnel, or the whole thing would be moot.

Thankfully, we were able to reach the open pipes at the base of the crater, and sure enough, there was Lacunae, waiting patiently. Was it just me, or did she look even…well…more alicorny? Her coat glistened and her horn seemed to shimmer with potency. Radiation did an alicorn good, apparently. "Good. You made it. I was about to come in after you. We must be quiet. Glory is nearby."

I took a look around and my jaw dropped. That was a fuckton of red bars! I passed P-21 some RadAway, then gulped down some myself (not even getting to savor the sharp orangey flavor!) before the four of us crawled up out of the crater to where an armored vehicle lay on its side. Glory sipped on a packet as well, looking at me nervously. "Oh, good. You made it out," she said with clear relief. "We're surrounded by manticores."

"Mantawhats?" I muttered as we crouched in the hull. Everywhere I looked, there were more of the lion/bat/scorpion hybrids. "How do you know what they are?"

"Manticores are a constant threat in the Wasteland, though they're usually not so well organized." I'd thought for sure that they had to be something from Project Chimera, but apparently some abominations the Wasteland just whipped up on its own. "I think that she's controlling them somehow."

"She who?" I asked as I looked through P-21's binoculars.

Oh…she *her*. Now THIS had to be something from Chimera. The tawny pony prowled back and forth on the roof of the main building. Her legs ended in razor-sharp claws rather than hooves, and the wings on her back were leathery instead of feathery. The scorpion tail she possessed snapped and stabbed at the manticores that didn't shy out of her way quickly enough, and with her lips parted I could see a set of wicked fangs. As disturbing as she was, it wasn't as bad as the flock of manticores lounging around the airbase. I couldn't see how we were going to get a hundred feet without one of them spotting us.

And the radiation was still building up in us.

"Okay. We need to get the heck out of here," I said as I looked at the twisted wreckage concealing us. Rampage was examining a heap of bones in some frayed and charred uniforms, while P-21 seemed to be checking his grenades and Glory took another Rad-X.

"Would you like to return to Chapel?" Lacunae asked casually.

"Well…yeah. That'd be great, but I don't know how we're going to get there without all of them piling on us," I said and then frowned.

“Are you telling me you can return all of us to Chapel? That’s miles away!”

She took a long, slow, luxurious breath as she looked at the glowing crater. “Right now? *Most* certainly.”

“Right.” Ten or fifteen more minutes here and it’d be moot. I trotted over to Rampage, who seemed to be staring down at the bones with a wistful look. “Come on, Rampage. We’re leaving.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” she said as she crawled through the gutted vehicle. For a moment, I almost joined her, but then I moved to look down at the same pile of bones. This far into the transport, the body was a little more intact. Nothing valuable, of course. Just a rotten, scorched uniform, two tin ID tags hanging around her neck, the junk of two centuries ago. Slowly, I took a closer look at the name stamped in the tin.

‘Twist’

I stared at another of Macintosh’s Marauders. Slowly, I bent down and nudged the brittle bones. Her hooves had pinched something between them, bundling them in the rags of her uniform. With care, I liberated the objects from her rags.

The pictures were all partially burned, discolored, or waterstained. There were little mouthwritten notes on the bottoms, smeared but still barely legible. Twist on a playground next to a foal so alike that only Twist’s glasses really set them apart. *Weren’t we alike back then, Apple Bloom?*

Twist standing in a candy shop with a sign that read ‘Peppermint’ under two crossed candy canes. *Too bad about my candy shop, huh?*

Twist standing proudly amid a line of recruits with a buzzed mane, the youngest and smallest but looking eager to fight. Big Macintosh loomed beside her, giving her a brotherly glance. *Look at my mane! It’s so short!*

An older and more mature Apple Bloom posing for a picture in front of a stable door marked with an immense number 2. *Looking good, Apple Bloom. Looking really good.*

Twist putting Big Macintosh in a hooflock as the rest of the Marauders cheer and laugh at the sight. Psalm smiling in reserved amusement, Stonewing grinning as Jetstream leans against him. Vanity shaking his head with a smile. Even Doof having a great time.

Then a picture of the Marauders all gathered together in Prance. Her grin around the peppermint stick goes from ear to ear. *My*

family.

The next picture was of Twist and three red-marked zebras. As sad as she looked, they appeared…haggard, yet also proud. She's hoofbumping the leader. *Last of the Proditors.*

All but one of the Marauders standing in grim lines on one side of a casket, the Ministry Mares on the other. Applejack resting her head upon the corner of the coffin as Twilight Sparkle holds her shoulders. Applesnack's eyes looking at the orange mare past Celestia giving a eulogy. I had never seen such a look of repressed pain on a buck's face before. Twist just looks…lost.

One of her in the hospital, looking hurt, but Vanity, Echo, and Applesnack are with her. Three out of eight friends; her eyes show far more pain than joy.

She wasn't smiling in the last picture. Oh, her lips were curled at the edges, but there was no mirth in her eyes as she stood alone on a tank, sergeant stripes on her uniform. She had the eyes of a ghoul: flat and lifeless and eager to die.

And so she had.

There was one last picture that had fallen away, and I almost missed it. I recognized the young Apple Bloom as almost a spitting image of Applebot. I didn't know who the orange pegasus or the unicorn with the purple mane were. They seemed to be in the middle of a fight in a garden, surrounded by statues, as Twist looked on with a sad smile. *The worst day of my life was when I got my cutie mark, and you didn't.*

I pressed the pictures back between her hooves as I heard the others call out a warning and bent my nose to nuzzle her skull. I prayed that she'd finally found rest at last. With one regretful look back, I returned to the others. There was a brilliant flash of purple light, and the world disappeared.

* * *

Okay. I admit that I was a little frustrated. I had another monsterpony after me with a small army of flying monsters. I had no doubt, as lay there in the post office, sucking down my third RadAway, that she was probably already looking for us.

Worse…if she found out we were in Chapel…

"Why so gloomy?" Adagio asked lazily as the quartet collected around me. "If it's about Thorn, it happens. Sometimes a colt won't

even stay an hour before they take the walk."

I gave a little smile to the blue colt. "Thanks, but it's not that. It's just that I need to travel way up north, but it's become a lot more complicated."

P-21 nodded. "Yeah," he said as he looked at a crude map Priest had drawn for us. "We'd have to travel all the way south to Flank, head into the hills to cross the river upstream of the dams, north through Society territory, past the Collegiate ponies in Hoofington U, past all the Enclave at the Skyport OR sneak past Paradise, get past the Steel Rangers, and cross the river again near the coast way up north." It was going to take weeks. Lacunae wasn't familiar enough with anywhere up north to teleport to it, even if it was inside her range.

"So why don't you just take the boat?" Medley asked, giving us a look that questioned our intelligence. P-21 and I stared at each other; in all our time in Chapel, nopony had ever uttered the syllable 'boat' in our hearing.

"There's a boat?" P-21 asked sharply.

She rolled her eyes. "Stable ponies don't know nothin'. 'Course there's a boat," the chartreuse unicorn filly said. "The *Seahorse* goes up and down the river all the time. Her captain's a bit off, you know, but she's the only one brave enough to risk it."

I looked at her skeptically, and then took out the Hoofington Edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. After flipping through a bit, I found an entry on the Hoofington River.

No visit to the Hoofington area is complete without spotting the Hoofington River. The largest river in all of Equestria in our times, the Hoofington River runs north from Equestria's second-largest lake to the sea. Its progress is only interrupted by the dams, south of the city, that continue to provide power to the region to this day!

Now, you might be tempted to stop and take a swim, or, if it's a rare dry day, take a drink. Take my advice and don't. Upstream contamination has made all of the water mildly radioactive and tainted. That's led radigators and river serpents of prodigious size and appetite to spawn. Even if none of that gets you, the river is choked with debris and its current is powerful. All the rain goes somewhere, ponies.

For those folks desperate to travel along the river course, there are always a few brave souls willing to make the trip for caps. The most successful ferry is the Seahorse, which is still operating even after years on the water. The passenger is recommended to bring plenty of caps for

the trip. However, the captain is quite…erratic in his pricing.

Allegro nodded. "Yeah, the captain is one rough, tough, twigged pony, but they're always good for getting us up and down the river. Doesn't deal in slaves, and so as long as your caps are good, the captain's usually fair. Crazy, but fair."

I looked at P-21, beginning to see a pattern. He grunted sourly, looking at me. "Another unstable pony. Wonder if he's as twigged as you are."

"What?" I said defensively to the snickers of the four. Giving P-21 a slightly incensed look, I asked Allegro, "So, when does the boat stop by Chapel?"

"She's here now," the red colt said with a grin.

"Now? As in, right *now* right now?" P-21 asked as he and I looked at each other.

"Yup! She's tied up under the bridge. Charity's doing her trading now." With one last look at each other, we turned and raced to the door.

* * *

I really didn't know what I expected when I thought of the word 'boat'. Could it carry five of us? Would it be safe? Fast? Would Sanguine anticipate us taking it? Would we have the caps the captain wanted?

P-21 found the concrete steps that led to a crumbling concrete slip underneath the bridge. Panting, we picked our way underneath and saw…the hunk of junk that looked as if it should be lying under the river instead of floating atop it. Okay, maybe that wasn't fair. What did I know about boats? I just didn't think that they should look so…rusty.

It was almost as long as the bridge overhead was wide; maybe seventy or eighty feet? The hull had been patched and painted so many times that it was hard for me to figure out what its original color was. It was made of wood with metal sheeting hammered over the top; I knew this because of all the places where the metal sheeting was no longer there. At the front of the boat was a small enclosed turret with two machine guns pointing out.

It looked as if there were seven or eight crewponies, and the biggest buck of all was sitting at a card table staring at Charity with his forehooves crossed. With his scruffy black beard, anchor cutie

mark and scarred hide, I guessed he was the captain. Charity stared back undaunted, as if trying to will him to part with his caps.
"You'd better wait here," P-21 said. "I'll see if I can get us a ride."
"Great. Waiting," I muttered as I sat with a grumpy frown as he trotted down and started trying to break into the staring contest. He might as well have been talking to a wall for all the notice he got.
"Tell me about it," said a mare beside the river. "So boring just waiting for them. They've been at this for hours." The turquoise unicorn mare had a mane so filthy and chopped that I wasn't sure if it was blue, gray, or some mottled mix of the two. She wore a battered black cap complete with skull and crossbones, like from a story book. A leather eyepatch covered her left eye. She swirled an amber drink in a bottle. "Want some? It's rum…or grog…one of the two." She glared at the contents suspiciously. "Sneaky little drink... "
"Sure," I replied as I joined the inebriated mare, plopping down beside her and taking a swig. Rum (or grog, maybe), I discovered, was a bit sweeter than my preferred intoxicant. "That's not bad."
She offered her hoof. "Thrush."
"Blackjack." I bumped it with my own.
She eyed my security barding, leaning back and squinting as she fought to focus her gaze. "Security…Security…where have I heard that before?" She suddenly pointed the bottle at me with a gasp. "You're that…that…mare with the bounty, ain't 'cha?" I felt my mane start to prickle, but then she grinned. "Well, good for you. I always said that if you're doin' something good enough for somepony to pay to want you dead, then ya must be doing it well."
"So, you're not looking to collect?"
She took another pull off the bottle and then burped. "Who, me? Collect for Usury? HA! *Fuck* Usury! Fuck her right up her ass with an anchor! Bitch wanted me to transport slaves for her." She scowled at me. "Do you know what kind of mess slaves make? I mean really? Smell lasts for…ev…er…" She made an annoyed face. "So I told her to go fuck herself, and everypony in Paradise, and I think Equestria too while I was at it." I just grinned as she frowned and rubbed her chin. "I think I might have shot her too. Shot at her…one of the two."
"Really?" I said with a chuckle.
"Well I was drunk at the time, and I don't quite think she understood all the implications therein. She took it all personal-like.

Put a ten thousand cap bounty on my noggin. I don't think she realized most bounty hunters can't swim," the turquoise mare muttered as she upended the bottle into her wide open mouth. She swallowed, then blinked and stared into the bottle. "Gone…why is it always gone? A great tragedy strikes the Wasteland once again." She looked at me through the bottom. "Oooh, wavy."

I smirked. I had been waiting for a special occasion to enjoy it. This would do. I floated out a bottle of Wild Pegasus that Glory had bought. "Security to the rescue," I said with a little grin. I might not be able to save ponies who needed it, but I could at least get somepony drunk who'd appreciate it.

An hour later, I had a nice warm glow in my stomach that gave rise to a pleasant buzz spreading throughout my body. "So, what's your story, Thrush?"

"Who? Me? Pffft. Story? I'm lucky if I got a limerick." She cleared her throat. "There once was a pony named Thrush, her mane was like a dirty old brush. But her daddy was captain and when his luck was cashed in, on his boat she'd have a serious crush," she said as she balanced the bottle of Wild Pegasus on the end of her horn. Since she had her horn stuck in the bottle, it wasn't that impressive.

"No second verse?"

"Same as the first!" she said with gusto, and I laughed even though it made no sense to me at all. "I've been steering the *Seahorse* all around Equestria. My daddy showed me all the neat little hidey holes and hazards to avoid. Normally I ply from Ironmare to Friendship City, but I tuck up river to see what the Eggheads or Crusaders have scavenged up every now and then. Damn skilled fillies and colts." She sighed as she tilted her head left and right, making the bottle rock on her horn. "Most boats are lucky to last a year on the water. I've lasted three." She looked at the dinged-up rustbucket with a look of love. "Saved my life, being captain. Having some control…"

Somehow, I doubted that there was nothing more to her than just five lives of verse. "So…wait? You're the captain?" I asked in confusion, and then I gestured at the scruffy looking buck with the thick beard. "Then who's he?"

"Him? Tarboots? He's our quartermaster. He tells me where to go to make money and I go there. It's not like I understand any of this business stuff. I just turn the wheel that points the *Seahorse* in the right direction and try not to get sunk. Hasn't happened yet." She

let out a long, low belch, then smirked at me. “What? I’ve got biggest hat. That makes me captain.”

“I can’t argue with logic like that,” I said with a laugh.

“And you? How the heck does a mare go around with a big ‘Security’ on her barding, shooting up the countryside?”

I took a deep breath as I balanced the rum bottle on my horn… okay…stuck my horn in the rum bottle. Ta-daa! “Well damn, if you’re a limerick..,” I coughed and cleared my throat. “Blackjack steps outside. She tries to do good and help. Poor Equestria.” Never underestimate the powers of inebriation for inspiration! “Anyway, now I’m trying to get way north. Going home actually,” I said as I stretched over and showed her my PipBuck’s navigation map. “See? Stable 99. Way up top there.”

“Oh…up there huh? Raider territory these days. Didn’t know there was a stable up there,” she said as she rubbed her nose. “Well, I can drop you off here at Boardwalk. Just a quick stroll to your stable, then.” She then looked at me skeptically. “Question is…can you follow the rules?”

“Probably. Depends on the rules,” I said cautiously.

“One... and this is a big one…listen to the motherfucking captain.” She lifted her hooves in frustration. “I cannot tell you how vital rule number one is. I tell you to shoot, you shoot. I tell you to shut up, shut up. I tell you to hide, then you hide. I tell you to swim for your life, then you swim for your life. ‘Cause otherwise somepony is gonna shoot you. Probably me.”

“Sometimes it feels like the day’s not started without somepony shooting Security,” I said with a resigned sigh.

“Price of virtue,” she said with a grin before continuing. “Two. Stay on the boat. You hop off for any reason and we gotta burn power to pick you up. Lots of places there isn’t anywhere to pull in. You got fliers?” I nodded and she looked curious. “Then they really have to stay in. If they take off, they’ll get thirty or forty feet before the city picks them off.”

“The city doesn’t shoot things in the river?” I asked curiously.

“Doesn’t have to.” She pointed a hoof at where the city wall met the river. A curtain of white rolled along it. “See all that rough water? It’s all busted up concrete and steel scrap. Besides, that close you’ve got ten minutes before the Enervation sucks you dry.”

“So no flying. I’ll truss them up like a turkey myself if I have to,” I said with a nod, wondering just how one tied up an alicorn.

Politely, I guessed. Tying up Glory…that led into some downright disturbing neighborhoods of thought.

"Third, you pay for your own gas. That means spark batteries, gem cartridges, even raw gemstones. If you can't swing that, then you get to point your horn into a flux converter and channel till it falls off. And trust me, it'll feel like it if you do."

"Right," I said with a nod, watching as P-21 and the large gray Tarboots strolled up. "Hey, P-21."

"Hey, Blackjack. I got us a deal with Captain Tarboots here and–" He stared at me. What? Did I have something on my face?

The gray pony interrupted him. "Captain Thrush? Got a request for five passengers…" He broke off with a sigh. "Captain?" The Turquoise mare blinked at him, and he coughed. "Captain…you have a bottle stuck on your horn again."

She looked at him coolly and said, with as much dignity as she could muster, "I knew that. I did. Ahem. One moment." She rose to her hooves, her magic carefully unscrewing the bottle from her horn. "Excellent observation, Master Tarboots…BUT…I'm afraid you'll have to tell this adorable little guy that I have already agreed to provide passage to this filly and her friends." The scarred buck opened his mouth, and she raised a hoof. "No no, Master Tarboots! This is an adventure!"

I looked at her with a wide grin that was mirrored by the turquoise unicorn and bumped hooves against hers. "You bet. I'll get every spark battery I can, even if I have to tie Charity up in a sack to do it." Okay, maybe I wouldn't go that far. Maybe I'd pay for them and THEN tie her up in the sack.

The bucks stared on in shock as they looked from one of us to the other. "Sweet Celestia," muttered the grizzled buck as P-21 set down on his rump with a groan.

"There's two of them. There's two…" the blue buck moaned in despair. "Celestia save us all... "

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Ferocious Loyalty:When you drop below 50% health, your companions temporarily gain much greater resistance to damage.

Chapter 21: Waterfall

"I shall save you! Show yourselves, you dogs! You curs! Ha! There you are, you mangy mutts."

It actually seemed like the Wasteland, for once, was throwing me a carrot. Sure, we'd lost the whole morning going to Miramare only to have to teleport back to evade another monsterpony, but then we'd discovered an alternate route. One that might get us past without having to worry about flying death... or at least not worry so much. And I'd have somepony to get drunk with!

Of course, we'd need spark…magic-y…stuff…to make the boat run.

"Charity!" I cried as I stormed into the post office. The yellow filly didn't bother looking up from the stack of boxes next to her.

"No time to deal with you now, Blackjack. I've got to double-check this stuff and make sure Tarboots didn't swap me those mines for a few boxes of gravel," she said sourly around a pen as she scribbled on a notepad.

I leapt over the counter in a clear violation of every rule of the Crusaders and seized Charity's shoulders with my forehooves. "Charity, I need spark batteries and magic cartridges! Now! Or gemstones! I need them right now. Please!"

Her eyes lit up and rolled thoughtfully, and with a flip of her head she spat out her pen and sent it spinning through the air to land neatly behind her ear. "Well, adding in processing costs and the Getting On My Nerves Tax…I figger I could sell 'em for…"

"And we're broke," I added. Paying Ditzy and trading for what we'd needed had sapped most of our caps. I grinned as widely as I could and tried to ignore the feeling of sweat running down the back of my barding.

Her smile disappeared. "Get out," she declared imperiously. She flicked the pen from behind her ear, caught it in her mouth, and resumed checking her list.

I fell to my knees. "Please, Charity! Please! Without the boat, we'll

have to walk, if we walk the monsterpony will find us, if she finds us then I'll feel sorry for her before I kill her, and if I do that then I'll feel guilty, and if I feel guilty then I'll whine! Please don't make me *whine!*" I begged as several Crusaders peeked over the counter to watch in amazement.

"I…you…what are ya…" she sputtered as I fell on my face and hugged her hoof.

"Please Charity! Please please pretty please pleasepleaseplease PLU…LEEEEZZZEEE!!!!" I wailed as I kicked my back hooves.

"All right!" she yelled down at me, yanking her hoof free of my embrace as she blushed. "I can spare one!" My eyes grew large. "Erm…two?" Tears ran down my cheeks as my lip trembled. She let out a grunt of disgust. "Oh, just take the whole box, Blackjack!" She walked over to a shelf, pulled out a wooden crate, and tossed it to me, six glowing spark batteries rattling within. I just gave a whimper, the whine growing higher and higher.

A bottle of Wild Pegasus plopped on top of them.

Humming in glee and floating the box in front of me, I made my way back towards the bridge, the humming faltering not a bit when, a few seconds after I got out of the shop, Charity screamed after me, "It's going on yer tab, Blackjack! You hear me? With interest!"

* * *

"*Seahorse* used to be an Equestrian Navy patrol boat," Oilcan, the rust-coated engineer mare, explained as she trotted to a hatch in the stern deck, her horn glowing as she undid the dogs and secured a rag in her curly red mane. "Doubt there's anything original on it besides the engine, though. I figger the last twenty years or so we've had to replace everything at least once." She hopped nimbly up into the air and disappeared down through the hatch.

The rest of the crew was finishing up business with two caravaners from Flank who'd come to trade chems and boxed food for bullets and music recordings brought from Tenpony in Manehattan. Sore as I was at Caprice, I'd gotten some Sugar Apple Bombs and some more Buck (just in case I had to wrestle Rampage again) from them in exchange for a few rounds of hunting ammo. A dirty look from me proved quite effective at getting them to shave a bit off the bill.

"Come on in," Oilcan said cheerfully. "Plenty o' room for all."

Glory stared into the hole with an audible gulp. I just gave her a friendly nudge on her hip and a smile that would hopefully convince her not to worry about it. P-21 jumped down happily; stable ponies had no problem with nice, tight, cramped spaces.

The engine itself was a block of polished brass inset with rubies and emeralds. It was connected by wires to a sapphire water talisman, twice the size of what we saw in 99's utility room, that was hooked up to several large pipes. "This here's the engine. It converts the raw magical spark energy into power for the water talisman. That makes the water that jets out the back to move the boat."

"Is there supposed to be this much water in here?" P-21 asked, looking down at the inch or so of scummy water that was sloshing about our hooves. My PipBuck clicked slowly; there wasn't nearly enough radiation to worry me unless I had an engine bilge water slurpee.

The motherly mare grinned at him. "Well if you'd like ta grab a bucket and do something about it, I know we'd be much obliged." She reached into my box and pulled out a spark battery, flipping the heavy square container in her hooves. Inside the crystal hovered a red ball of magical energy that shed little waving lines of light. She opened a panel with her mouth and pulled out an empty container, then slid the fresh one into the receptacle. There was a sudden hum as the gems lit up. "Of course, for when we don't got spark batteries, we've got a flux converter." She gestured at a circle strung with a spider web of glistening crystal strands. "Ain't nearly as efficient."

"And if that doesn't work?" I asked.

"Well, then ya can get out and push. We've had to do that a few times."

P-21 looked at the grease-slathered boards of the exposed inner surface of the hull. "I'm just curious why it's made of wood."

"You know what happens when you take a nice metal boat out on the ocean? Pretty soon it's a rusty boat at the bottom of the ocean. Sure, lumber might be a bitch to find, but it's a damned sight easier to get and work than steel plate. We seal her up with tar and pitch as well as we can, paint her if we can get it, plate the hull if we can manage it, and she's the best damn boat in Equestria."

"With an interesting captain," P-21 observed dryly.

Oilcan chuckled. "Yeah, Thrush ain't what most folks expect, but

her daddy was two buckets shy of a dry hold. Once, we were stuck on a beach off Manezibar with this tainted sea serpent watching us past the reef. So the captain, he somehow gets a whole flock of rock crabs to carry the boat on their backs to the far side of the island!" The rusty mare slapped P-21's back as she laughed. "Thrush ain't quite the measure of her daddy, but she's the best girl for the job," Oilcan said firmly as she smiled at P-21. "I had my reservations, but she's the mare who loves *Seahorse* the most. She was willing to let her daddy go to keep it."

The rest of the spark batteries went in a locker above the engine. "Seems to me going downstream wouldn't require much power," P-21 said.

"Shows you don't know boats, boyo," Oilcan replied. "Going downstream, you've got the water pushing you into rocks, beams, snags and worse. Half our power is spent maneuvering around obstacles and the other half fighting current. Just wait till you see the Towers. Any boat that tries to just go with the flow is in for a nasty surprise. The Hoofington River eats ponies. With all the rain about, there's a lot of energy in all that water."

Just another thing about this place I hated. I found myself scowling in the direction of the city. It seemed so wrong, like it was a trap trying to draw everypony in with lures of riches and food. I wondered how many ponies had come to Hoofington and ended up killed by raiders, poisoned by taint or radiation, or sucked dry by Enervation fields. The more I thought about it, the more disturbing it became. Even Lacunae's Goddess seemed distressed by this place.

Hoofington: the city that kills. It'd killed ponies when the zebras burned it. Killed zebras as it made itself the target of the war. And now it killed everypony it lured in. I could almost hear the cards shuffling in my head.

"Hey, you okay, Blackjack? You've got a shooty look on your face," P-21 asked, giving me a nudge. I had a 'shooty' look? I needed a mirror.

"Just…not a fan of Hoofington," I replied sullenly.

Oilcan chuckled as she rubbed her nose with a dirty hoof. "Heh. Join the club. I used to live in Friendship City. Nice town. Maybe a touch crowded, but a good place to live," she said as she checked some power cables. "One day, her daddy's in port and so damn drunk that the town assigned him a guard so he wouldn't blow something up on accident. He mentions that he needs an engineer.

I've got a comfy life ahead of me, but he goes on about the riches, the adventure, the sights, the adventure, the rum, the adventure, the sex…oh yeah, did he mention adventure? Boyo talked me into bed and then onto his boat. Been a lot of places. But Hoofington's always been the worst. Always has enough treasure to bring you here. Always has enough grief to make you wonder why you came in the first place. Bilgewater got eaten by a river serpent this trip. I doubt he'll be the last…but the *Seahorse*'ll be back. I'm sure of that."

"So why do you stay?" P-21 asked.

Oilcan sighed and smiled, reaching out to touch the engine. There was a lover's look in her eyes. "Back home, I had a pretty comfy life; wasn't no Tenpony, but comfy. Out here…well…we ain't found riches, the sights are all pretty damned ugly, the rum's watered down, and the sex gets a little awkward on a little boat like this… but the adventure? He sure wasn't lying about that. Long as the captain can steer her straight, I'll keep her running. To Hoofington or Hell itself."

* * *

Seahorse wasn't exactly made for a luxury cruise. The five of us had one room to ourselves, and that had only four hammocks. We had to shift the footlockers into the middle of the space and throw some blankets atop them for Lacunae. We were allowed to be there or sitting on the narrow walk that ran along the sides of the boat between the rails and the superstructure. P-21 pointed out that, since I couldn't fly, all my fancy new barding wouldn't be much better than an anchor. Damn it, what was the point of having cool looking armor if I never got to wear it?

There was a hum in the back of the ship that grew louder and louder, then two streams of choppy water blasted out the rear of the boat just below water level. Tarboots and Oilcan untied the lines and jumped nimbly into the rear of the boat, and the swoosh of the water plumes increased. At the stern, on top of the superstructure at the highest point of the boat, was the wheelhouse; for windows, it had rusty slats of metal that Thrush peered through as she moved the *Seahorse* upstream of the bridge before slowly turning the boat around. Immediately, the whoosh died to a gurgle as the powerful current carried us downstream.

I admit that I am a complete and utter pansy when it comes to flight, but, if the whole 'height' thing was taken away, I liked the sensation of being carried along without having to walk around.

"Keep your eyes open," Captain Thrush called down to us as we sat on the walk, leaning on the metal rail.

I kept Taurus's rifle handy as my eyes scanned the scummy brown water. "What am I looking for?"

"Till we get to the Fork, anything poking out of the river bottom or anypony with a missile. We might come across some hoppers after the Fallen Towers, but till then our biggest risk is running into something sharp and pointy," she said calmly, making only the slightest adjustments to the boat's heading and letting the current do the rest.

"Are ponies with missiles a common problem?" I called back, looking at the increasingly thick ruins lining the river and deliberately not looking at the enigmatic towers on the other side of the boat. This close to the Core, I felt…odd. Lightheaded. I could only assume it was the Enervation fields of the city nipping at my cells. Thrush was keeping the *Seahorse* in the middle of the river, but I felt the urge to ask her to move closer to the rubble-strewn western bank.

She grunted. "Reaper wannabes and raiders, mostly. They gather in small groups to prey on Riverside or Flotsam. Unless they've got something big, we generally don't worry too much about it." She gunned the engine and threaded the *Seahorse* around a spur of concrete just barely below the surface; I spotted it only as we slid past it close enough to spit.

Glory proved the most valuable pair of purple eyes. Standing in the bow just in front of the turret, she and the crew's lookout, a young green earth pony mare named Seabiscuit, spotted hazards lying just under the surface that I couldn't see even as we passed them, Glory pointing them out with her wingtips so that Thrush could steer around them. As the river carried us along, the ruins became even larger and more elaborate and damaged. Blocks of apartment buildings had slid right into the water and filled it with deadly debris. Pipes blasted jets of yellowish-brown foamy, filmy water every few hundred feet as the land drained into the river.

A small camp of four ponies. Raiders, from the bloody bites on their limbs. I sighted them carefully, didn't see anything resembling a missile, and was about to fire when the Captain said, "Don't.

Gunshots carry on the water." Reluctantly, I lowered the rifle.

"I thought you weren't an executioner," the dusty voice said softly.

"I'm not an executioner. They were raiders," I muttered to myself, glancing at the Dealer, who was looking at the raiders with pity. "They're dying from a disease already. It's going to kill them one way or another." I remembered the mare in Miramare who had gorged till her stomach burst. "It's not an execution if they're already going to die." I flushed in anger as I saw Glory look back at me. Great. Now everypony was going to know I was losing it.

"Oh…well, that's convenient," he said with an understanding little nod. "So long as you're granting mercy, it's okay. Funny…wasn't there another pony using the exact same logic just yesterday?"

"Shut up," I hissed softly.

"Of course, it wouldn't be the first time you've done it," he continued.

"Shut up!" I yelled at the pale bastard, levitating Cupcake's revolver and pressing it to his forehead. "Why the fuck do you do this? I was feeling halfway good and then you…why are you trying to make me remember killing them all? Why can't you let me be happy?" My magic tightened on the trigger; sure, it wouldn't kill him, but I'd feel *better*.

"Blackjack?" Glory said in a fearful voice as the Dealer melted away.

The gun was pointed right between her shocked eyes.

My magic released the gun at once, and it bounced off the deck and landed in the river with a little splash. I stared into Glory's fearful and hurt eyes and felt myself start to shake. I hadn't had the shakes like this in a while. I thought that I was over it. I'd put it behind me. Matured. Moved on.

I am a fucking idiot.

I hadn't put anything behind me. I'd thrown it in the closet and forgotten about it. I'd murdered forty foals. Executed them. I'd rationalized. I'd justified. But my mind wasn't letting me let it go. "I'm sorry, Glory. I wasn't talking to you. I was…I'm just…sorry."

I saw the conflict in her eyes as I looked down into the water. Then she jumped over me and disappeared below decks.

"Well, that was interesting," Thrush said from behind the wheel.

"I don't want to talk about it."

She smiled and shook her head. "Didn't ask if you did. You don't have to explain to me. I talk to ghosts too, sometimes."

Not quite what I was dealing with... at least I hoped not! “You do?”

“Sure. Dad asking me to shoot him,” she replied in a soft, casual voice that made me shiver, “Looking back, I probably should have, so it’s only fair he gets to haunt me from time to time, right?”

Sometimes all it takes is one second, one wrong action, one little mistake, and something precious is gone for good.

All except for the regrets.

* * *

P-21 had as much affinity for sea travel as I did for the air. He lay with his face in a bucket on the stern deck behind the wheelhouse. Really, I didn’t mind the rocking at all. It gave me something to think about besides that my brain was playing nasty tricks on my mind and I’d almost shot Glory in the face. True, she’d shot me first, but we were way past that.

My ears flicked as I heard a distant sound, like a deep breath being drawn continuously. It made my mane begin to itch in apprehension as I looked first at the fire-gutted ruins across the river and then at the grim walls of the Core. “What is that?” I asked Thrush as I rose to my hooves.

“Fallen Towers,” she replied in a soft, grim tone. “You ponies better get down inside and tie yourselves in. This is going to be a little rough!” Her horn glowed as she lifted a length of rope and started tying herself to the boat.

Somehow, I sensed a whole riverful of understatement in that as I rose as high as I could, looking for the source of that terrible sound. I heard the others getting below, but I couldn’t go hide. I had to see just what we were facing. The captain yelled something at me about breaking the first rule as I staggered forward. Passing the gun turret, I saw Oilcan pulling out the guns. Our eyes met, and I saw the fear in them. This was something bad.

I rushed to the front of the boat and ran into Seabiscuit trying to go the opposite direction. The sea green mare balked and backed to the bow of the boat as the deck heaved. We were moving fast… really really fast. The wide river now seemed ominously narrow, as if all the rubble and junk had constricted it into a foamy flume. The boat gave one more lurch, and the mare gave up trying to move back and instead began to frantically tie herself to rusty metal rings set in the deck. “Tie yourself down!” she yelled, but I wasn’t really

listening at that point.

My eyes stared out in front of me as I felt a sensation like taking a cold bath wash over me. Like everything else in Hoofington, I suspected that the massive Core towers rising to the rolling clouds were ridiculously overengineered. However, despite that, during the war's fiery end, one of the towers had broken off ten stories or so up and had fallen across the river. The heavy, armored face of the fallen tower acted as a dam of sorts, and the tower's fall had shattered and knocked down a half dozen more buildings that were now also lying in the swirling fury of frothing water. The water poured over the jagged stumps of the fallen foundations like saliva over teeth. The river was hungry.

"How in Hell are we supposed to get though that?" I shouted. Then I stared as the boat flew between a pair of street lights. We weren't going down a river any more…this was a street! The impromptu dam had driven the river out of its banks, and now we were navigating racing currents running through the ruins of the shattered office buildings. Broken foundations and rusted streetlights flew past us as the water flew forwards faster and faster towards the source of that perpetual inhalation.

"Tie yourself down!" Seabiscuit screamed again as she grabbed a second length of rope, knotted it around my chest, and tied it to another ring. "Captain will get us through!" she yelled, the green mare staring back at Thrush with a look of frantic faith.

The Captain just stared grimly ahead.

Then I saw exactly where she was taking us. The tower had not fallen completely intact. A split had opened up inside it where the top third had snapped back like a peppermint stick and created a yawning chasm that the river was forced into. However, I didn't see a way through, only endless black. The *Seahorse* seemed to hang, suspended on that eerily smooth rolling tongue of water that poured down endlessly into the gullet of the fallen skyscraper.

And then, with a blast of cold wet mist, we plunged into the darkness. I gripped the rail with my hooves as we plummeted into the hollow interior of the skyscraper. Then, just as we'd fallen down, the water rose into a vertical wall again, and this time we were going *up*. The *Seahorse* rode the arching wall of water as it poured along the interior of the building like an enormous pipe. In my mutated sight, I could see the rusted steel beams stabbing at the *Seahorse* like spears. Something banged against the underside of the

ship, and I felt the entire vessel jump as we raced wildly down the interior of the building. Cracks in the wall sprayed cold, foul water in my face. I had no idea how Thrush, how *anypony*, could navigate this passage.

Then I spotted light ahead, and with it the sight of another wall of water churning sideways. How could a vertical wall of water move *sideways*? "Hang on," Seabiscuit screamed in my ear. I wrapped my front hooves around the railing as we approached that surging sweep of fluid.

For a terrifying moment, I swore we flew. My stomach rose in my throat as we were ejected from a second split in the side of the tower and right at the face of a fallen apartment building. The water rose up and up, and we rose with it. Higher and higher the boat rose, and I stared *down* towards the stern. I wasn't sure if I was simply soaked through or if I wet myself at the sight.

Then our rise stopped, but Seabiscuit's did not. She continued going up and out, connected only by the rope tied to the ring. The rope went taut. Then, with a metallic 'ping', the metal snapped. Her teal eyes widened in horrified resignation as she started to plunge back down towards the churning water as the boat hung in the air.

I screamed as I set my hooves and launched myself into the air, my legs flailing.

Save one. Just save one…

Her trailing rope smacked me in the face, and I gripped it with hooves, teeth, magic, whatever. My rope went taut as well, and the ring held as we swung back and crashed into the deck of the *Seahorse*. My teeth rattled as I hit the rail and hooked a rear leg around it; she tangled with the turret.

I wondered if we would hang like that forever. A small tilt in the wrong direction…backwards towards the surging torrent spraying from the tower... Then the boat fell. With horrifying, ponderous slowness, it tilted away from the crumbling apartment face as I was looking down at a swirling froth of brown water. There was nothing I could do but clutch that rail with every bit of strength I could muster.

Every inch of me was slammed with more force than I'd ever thought possible as the boat fell upside down. My breath blasted from my body in a bubbly scream as I felt like the rope was about to cut me in two! Then I was lifted from the water as the *Seahorse* reverse-capsized, coming to the surface dripping wet and pointing

her nose downstream. I opened my eyes, looking for the sea green pony and staring at the rope trailing in the water. The rope burn had torn two raw strips of flesh from around my forehooves.

Just one…please, let me save just one...

I floated a Buck to my mouth and chewed down as the *Seahorse* raced towards a jagged strand of crushed buildings and debris. My heart thundered as I heaved with all my strength. I could barely breathe as I looped the rope around my forelegs, pulled, and looped again. I clenched my eyes shut, imagining the beams and concrete ripping her apart. It felt as if one of those jagged spurs had lodged straight through my chest as I pulled again and again.

And then a limp green form came over the rail and fell atop me. Water dribbled from her mouth as she lay there.

"One…just…one…" I whispered softly as I rolled upright and pressed down on her sides, trying to force the water out. Thorn. Roses. Tumbleweed. Scoodle. Eleven zebra. Forty foals. Let me save just one!

She lay there, another corpse, my heart racing so fast that I collapsed beside her.

Thorn. Roses. Tumbleweed. Scoodle. Zebras. Foals. Seabiscuit.

Then she coughed, gasped, retched, and vomited water. I shook as I fought to sit up, trying to do something helpful and managing just to blubber and hold her shoulders as Tarboots walked carefully along the heaving deck, rushing to help. She drew one shaking breath after another as I fell on my back, gasping for breath with the blood-soaked rope tight around my hooves.

Everything fell away as I smiled.

I saved one, you bony son of a bitch…

I saved one.

* * *

"Wake up, Fishy. Fishy?" my mom called over to my bed. "I know you're awake, Go Fish. You're smiling."

"Am not! Sleepin'." And I snored loudly to prove it.

She bumped me with her nose. "Security mares have to wake up and do our jobs, Fishy."

"I dun wanna be Security, Momma. It's no fun," I muttered, looking up at my lavender momma with her smart, indulgent smile and striped purple and red mane.

“Security’s the best job in the stable,” she said softly.
“Everypony says that ‘bout their job,” I said as I rubbed my eyes and yawned.
She just chuckled. “But ours really is. We get to save ponies.”

~ ~ ~

“Why do we gotta be so mean to the boys, Momma?” I asked as my eyes looked over at two bucks walking with their heads hanging, following two mares. They looked hurt and…something else. I didn’t know what shame was back then.
She smiled sadly as I got a green alfalfa smoothie from the cafeteria, munching on the sweet grassy sludge. “We don’t. But a lot of mares can be mean, so a lot of mares are mean to ponies they think it’s okay to hurt.”
“But why? They’re not in my classes or nothing. What do the colts do?” I asked as I ignored the spoon and straw and chowed down.
“They do something very important for the stable. They make babies.”
I imagined something like a factory where little fillies were assembled like dolls. “They do?”
“Mhmm. One of them made you,” she said with a smile. “Not sure which one, but…” She flushed slightly as she said that to herself more than me.
“But what did they do?” I asked with a little frown.
“Well in your grandma’s time, colts and fillies shared all kinds of jobs. All except for one: the Overmare. Everypony got one baby to take over their jobs when they died, whether they were bucks or mares. Then, one day the Overmare had a baby colt. The males were happy because there were a lot more mares than bucks, anyway, and they thought the rules weren’t fair.”
I grumbled, “I don’t think the rules are fair either. It’s stupid I gotta go to bed when I’m not even tired.”
“If you did, maybe you wouldn’t have problems waking up,” she said as she levitated a napkin to wipe my face clean. “Anyway, the Overmare said that the colt couldn’t be an overmare because he wasn’t a mare. The bucks said the Overmare was breaking the rules because she couldn’t have another baby. Then her foal died in medical. The bucks said the Overmare had killed him to have another baby and demanded she be replaced, but there’s nothing in

the rules for taking away an overmare's job."

I gasped as I squirmed, trying to get away from her floating napkin. "And did she, Momma?"

She just smiled sadly and shrugged. "The bucks thought she did and they were angry. They took over the maintenance level and threatened to do something very bad if the Overmare didn't step down. The bucks had a lot of mares wanting to help them before, but breaking the air purification talismans would have killed everypony. There was a nasty fight, and several important parts of the stable were damaged. Finally, most of the bucks were captured, and the Overmare said that from then on mares would run the stable and bucks would make babies."

I munched my green smoothie, making a mess of my face again. "Huh. I wondered why I never see any colts in school. Well, except for this one. He's always hiding near the door. Or he was," I said as I tapped my hooves against the table. "I haven't seen him since I took him back to medical."

She gave me such a sad smile. "Try not to think about it, Fishy."

Because once you started, you wouldn't stop. Not till it drove you mad.

~ ~ ~

Security were friends with security. Thus, my friends were, by default, the children of security mares. Daisy limped to the corner of the schoolroom where we were being taught our core lessons and security training by the bored, burned-out banality of Miss Textbook. Marmalade looked at the crème-colored filly in concern, at the darkened red bruises on her face and the twitchy look in her eyes. There were bandages on her legs, side, and flank.

"Are you okay, Daisy?" I asked, looking at the bruises on her cheek and muzzle.

"Yeah. I got in a fight," she said, sniffing as if it were no big deal. Daisy always got in fights. As security, she was supposed to fight; we all were. But I always wondered just who she was picking them with. "So, what's teach going on about?" she asked, and the honey-colored Marmalade and I looked at each other in concern. Daisy never cared about what the teacher taught.

"The Ministry of Awesome and how it was just a bone thrown to Rainbow Dash, since she never actually did anything," I said softly.

“Sorry I asked,” she yawned, and we relaxed.

Then Duct Tape walked by and the homely gray filly looked at the three of us…no, looked at Daisy. Daisy looked at her. “What are you looking at?” Duct Tape shook her head as she backed away. “I said, what the fuck are you looking at!” And as Duct Tape turned to run, Daisy charged her.

“No! Please! I’m sorry!” Duct Tape begged as Daisy ploughed into the smaller gray filly and proceeded to pummel her.

“You didn’t see anything! You understand?! Nothing, you gray pussy!” Daisy shrieked she kicked the other filly over and over again while Textbook just looked on with a mild expression of annoyance that her lecture had been interrupted.

“Daisy!” I shouted in alarm, and the cream earth pony jumped as I raced to shove myself between her and the fetal Duct Tape. Marmalade just followed, because that was what she did. She didn’t have the sense Celestia had given a roach. Still, I shoved my way between them and kicked Daisy’s face firmly with my forehooves. That seemed to snap her out of it enough to make her fall back. “Get Tape to medical, Marm!”

The yellow unicorn looked at me, then Daisy, then Duct Tape, and finally realized I was asking her to do something. She bit Duct Tape by her mane and dragged her out the door. “What is wrong with you, Daisy?” I yelled as the rest of the class pretended to listen to the teacher. Because that was safer than listening and thinking.

The bandages had fallen away, and I stared at the cuts in Daisy’s sides and flank. They’d only been barely healed by the magical bandages. And unless she’d been hiding a horn her entire life, there was no way Daisy could have made such regular cuts. “Who… how?!”

Now I was the one slammed to the ground. “Nopony. It was an accident. I mean…a fight! That’s ALL it was!” she said as she shouted down at me.

Don’t think about it. Don’t ask. Don’t wonder. Crawl back into my desk and pretend like it never happened. Agree it was a fight, and don’t ask who. Agree it was an accident, and don’t imagine how. Do that and she might forget as well. And you’d be friends... friendish…

“Did your--“ was all I said. All I got out. She knew the question. I knew the answer as she tried to shove every ounce of her pain into me, and she had a whole lot of it to shove.

* * *

I opened my eyes, feeling the bobbing of the boat and hearing the sounds of ponies walking above deck. “You okay?” Glory asked as I stirred.

“I feel like I got hit by a boat,” I muttered, lying there and feeling my heart thunder. I felt bruised from horn to hoof.

“You did get hit by a boat,” the captain replied as she leaned on the rear hatch. “Didn’t I tell you to get below and strap in? The rest of your friends did. You? You ran right out to the worst place you could.” The captain did not look happy about me breaking the first rule.

“Seabiscuit? Is she okay?” I asked as I looked at the torn skin on my front legs. At least my PipBuck had saved me from some of the burns…but from the pain on my sides, I suspected I was missing hide there, too.

The captain’s look softened. “Yeah. So I won’t shoot you for breaking the first rule. Besides,” she added with a grin, “I have to admit, there’s no sight like going through Fallen Towers.” I had to agree; I’d be having nightmares about it for a while. I noticed that the captain was also showing raw rope burns and bruises.

“Normally, I would have waited a few days for the water to subside. The water level was half again as high as it should have been for safe passage, but you folks are in a hurry.”

“Not in that much of a hurry,” I groaned, momentarily sitting up and regretting it. I fell back into Glory’s hooves with a groan. “Where are we? How long have I been out?”

“We’re in Riverside, just below the falls. That crash did more than just crush both of you; it also busted a seal on the bottom. We can patch it, but it’ll just take a while,” the captain said. “There’s not a lot to see here, but you can take a peek around town. It’s a Finders village, so it should be safe…ish.”

“Safeish. I like that word. Not quite safe, but in the neighborhood,” I muttered sarcastically. I slowly dragged myself to my hooves. “Well, get me my barding.”

“Blackjack!” Glory said. ”You just woke up from passing out after having a ship fall on you, and from your pulse you’ve taken at least another Buck! Why don’t you just stay here and do something radical, like rest?”

I took a deep breath as I steadied myself, fighting to keep from hyperventilating. Nice and slow. Calm. “Well, Glory, there’s three reasons why I have to go. First, I need to get out there so that whatever eyes and ears Sanguine and DJ Pon3 have can see me so he doesn’t send that monsterpony to Chapel. Second, I want to see if there’s anypony I can help. Third, and most important of all…” I took a moment, looking at her gravely. “I really…really…need to go to the bathroom and I’d rather not hang my fanny off the side of the boat.”

Glory took one look at me in shock as the captain collapsed with laughter, then seized a pillow and beat me with it till I grabbed my bag and fled outside.

* * *

After a visit to the town latrine (a ditch that reeked so badly it almost had me reconsidering the boat), I found myself in Riverside. The town of two dozen inhabitants was built in a horseshoe-shaped strip of shops adjacent to the river. One floating dock made of old empty barrels stretched out to a post and the *Seahorse*. The roads north and south were barricaded, and the park in the middle of the village held planter boxes filled with vegetables and waxy green grass. Shops were selling pale sides of smoked fish and slabs of radigator meat, and at one outdoor butcher shop I saw two ponies cutting and chopping up an enormous frog.

Despite the town’s size, I got the impression that it’d once seen better days. There were apartments above the repurposed stores that now had busted windows and were boarded shut. One shop had only some scrap metal, electronics, and nine millimeter ammo. I couldn’t see any signs of families; there was a terrible sense that, at any moment, the last occupants would just fade away, leaving Riverside just another ruin.

“What happened here?” I muttered as I looked at the ponies moving like ghosts around the almost empty shops.

“Same thing that’s happening everywhere, Miss…,” an old unicorn mare said as she mended a fishing net. I had to question the sense of anypony who ate anything out of that river. Slowly, I walked to her, and started as I realized that she was blind. Her milky eyes stared out at me as her hooves skillfully felt out the tears and her horn mended them.

“Blackjack.”
“Fishy,” she replied.
Now that made me feel all kinds of strange and alarmed. “What? How did you know--”
“My name. It’s Fishy. Granny Fishy. Nice to meet you,” she said with a soft chuckle.
“Oh.” I sat down across from her. “What do you mean, the same thing happening everywhere?”
“Riverside used to be a nice village. We were smack in the middle of the west side ruins. There was plenty to pick out of the countryside. Food. Safety. But the ruins’ve been picked clean, mostly. There’s more and more raiders, bandits, and Reapers. Less folks bring in less food. So villages just dwindle away. Death picks off the ones who stay, and there’s fewer and fewer boats.”
“This lady bothering you, Mum?” a pink mare with a pair of fish on her flank asked as she trotted up.
“No, thank you, Perch,” Granny said as she waved a hoof at the mare, who took it between her own and guided it to her head so Granny could pat her. “She was polite enough to ask about the town.”
“It’s those damned dogs that are to blame,” Perch said with a stomp.
“Dogs?” I blinked.
“The sand dogs,” the elder unicorn answered. “They live underneath the western ruins.”
Perch, clearly having a lot more to say, stomped her hooves again. “And they’re a menace. They scavenge the ruins, but they don’t trade, and I know they’ve got some decent salvage in their holes. They’ve got some weird cybernetics that make them too tough for most raiders and bandits, so *we* have to deal with them instead.”
“Now, that’s enough, Perch. Times are tough enough without making things harder for some folks who don’t deserve it,” Granny said firmly to the younger mare.
But the pink pony wasn’t listening. “You want to help?” she said to me. ”Go down to the Riverside station of the Sunset Line, shoot every one of them, and open up the tunnels for scavenging. That’ll turn this place around, no sweat,” she said as she lifted up one of Granny’s nets and sulked towards the river.
The blind elder mare just sighed as she ran her hooves over the netting. “Please, do not mind her. She is just desperate to save the

home she knows," Granny Fishy said as she tugged the nets with her horn and hooves. "I suspect you feel the same way."

"You do?" I gave a nervous little smile. "No offense, but you don't know where I'm from. Trust me, nopony would want to save that place."

"Oh? But isn't that where you're going? Or maybe it's where you've been. Who can say?" she said as she carefully tied a hole. "I suspect you have a long trail before you to reach your home."

My mane started to tingle as I regarded her. "What do you know?"

She chuckled at that wary question. "Know? My dear, I simply mend holes in nets," she replied with a toothless smile. "But I have a sense about you. The past and future reach through you. Messenger, harbinger, and judge. Life in one hoof. Death in the other. Which will you decide? Not even the stars can tell... " Okay, that just jumped the creepiness factor up by fifty at least!

P-21 and Glory trotted up, the two probably noticing my slightly uneasy look. "Blackjack? Who's this?" Glory asked politely.

"Granny Fishy," she said with a broad smile as she thrust her hoof out in the general direction of Glory. Glory took it in her own and gave it a shake. "Ahh…a pegasus. How interesting." How'd she get that from a hoofshake?

"Fallen Glory," Glory said softly as she glanced at me, then frowned at the old mare. "Did Blackjack…tell you?"

"No. I just get a sense of things," she said as she released Glory's hoof and returned to the net. "Like your name…Fallen. How far have you fallen, I wonder. Have you learned to hate? Have you learned to spite? Have you learned to crave vengeance? If not, how can you know how to forgive, Fallen Glory?"

"How…what did you tell her, Blackjack?" she asked, clearly startled.

"Nothing. I just met her," I said defensively.

P-21 looked at Granny mending the net, then looked at me. I cocked a brow. "What?" he said. "I don't want creepy mystical mutterings about my fate or destiny, thank you very much." He backed a few steps away from Granny. "Leave me out of it!"

"Oh, don't worry young buck. Your fate has come and gone. It only begs the question of what happens in the epilogue," the old mare said with a lazy wave of her hoof. For some reason, that seemed to bother him more than some cryptic remark.

Then Perch yelled across the square. "Granny! Stop with the

fortune teller routine and get that last net patched up!" The blind mare chuckled, and I gave her a skeptical glance. Had all this just been a local messing with rubes?

"Ah well, fun is fun, but I'd best get back to work," she said. "Don't give an old blind mare's words too much thought." As we walked away, I looked back and saw her still wearing that lingering old smile.

* * *

"Blackjack, are you sure about this?" P-21 asked as we moved through the ruins.

"It's one of my plans. Of course I'm not sure about it. But Perch said that if we could deal with the sand dogs, it'd open up the underground tunnels for salvaging again. And you know that there's always time for dealing with raiders and bandits. We've got at least three hours till Thrush patches up the boat, so why not do some good while we're here?"

"I have to wonder how your foes will view your good," Lacunae said from the rear. She'd shed the heavy black lace dress and veil once we were out of sight of town.

"Oh, don't get her started with moral relativism," P-21 groaned. "She'll be stuck all day!"

Moral whatism? "Look. It's simple. We're good. They're bad. That's all I need to know."

"Right. Till one of them starts crying," the blue buck muttered. "Why are four smart ponies being led around by an idiot?"

"Can't be that smart, then." I stuck my tongue out at him and looked at Rampage. She still wasn't much bigger than a filly, but I wasn't going to pick a fight with her with that chainsaw knife in her jaws. "Hey, Rampage. Are you smarter than me?"

She spat out the blade and balanced it atop her head as she said something in zebra to me. A toss of her red curls and she caught the blade again in her jaws with a grin. "I'll take that as a yes," I said with a roll of my eyes.

The plan was simple. I'd keep an eye open on my E.F.S. for red bars. Glory would scout them out. We'd annihilate them and save the day. My PipBuck navigation already had a toggle set on Riverside; how it knew, I'd never know. Once the dogs were out of the tunnels, the *Seahorse* would hopefully be ready to continue

downstream.

I just hoped we didn't get lost amid these ruins. They were unlike anything I'd ever seen; the swampy remains of Flankfurt were nothing compared to the cracked and broken ten and twenty story buildings that loomed over us. Most bore the telltale black charring of firestorms, and the streets were littered with rubble, smashed and twisted wagons, and, of course, bones. Still, a century of scavenging had turned the ruins into rain-drenched shells. Perfect little lairs for predatory ponies.

And speaking of which, there were some red bars straight ahead...

I gestured to Glory, and she flitted from blasted-out window to blasted-out window, her gray hide and pale blue barding blending in with both sky and rocks. I had to keep track of her blue bar at times. She scouted the hostiles and returned. "About nine or ten, some in an old store right around the corner and the others in a coffee shop across the street. They've got a sniper on the third floor. I couldn't tell if they're raiders or bandits, but they're all armed."

"Red, it's dead," I muttered, glancing at my PipBuck. I imagined the cards shuffling in my mind, but I wasn't even going to acknowledge the pale bastard. If they were armed and hostile, this wasn't an execution. This was trouble and we were taking care of it.

"Okay, so I'm in front. Glory from above and tagging that sniper. Rampage mixing it up. P-21, keep your eyes open and use Persuasion if there's a knot of them. And you…" I looked at Lacunae and suddenly felt at a bit of loss. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll back you up," she said with a faint smile. Right, that was less than specific or comforting.

"Okay. Don't shoot me, please," I asked with a half joking smile. I started towards the hostiles when P-21 cleared his throat. "What?" I asked, looking at him and his sardonic little smile. He stretched out a hoof and tapped the helmet sitting atop my saddlebags. "Oh! Right. Headshot…good thinking." I levitated and strapped the helmet in place, flushing slightly. Okay! Now, were we ready?

We were.

I strolled down the street as clear as day with Taurus's rifle floating ahead of me. Rampage moved like a ponified cat, unnervingly quiet without her clanging metal armor. Glory moved overhead like a silent guardian angel while Lacunae walked behind me. Where P-21 was, I had no idea. Laying mines? Readying grenades? I just knew

he'd be there.

Through the scope, I saw a mare walking from the coffee shop towards the corner grocery store. I saw the spiked armor, the sawed off shotgun, and, more importantly, the half dozen hooves dangling off the sides of her barding. Most of all, I saw the eager grin that split her scarred face, yellowed eyes widening in glee at the sight of me.

Then I sent her brains out the back of her head with a clean shot through her left eye.

All hell broke loose. At once, three more ponies rushed out, but they had the sense to go for cover behind the piles of rubble. One opened up with an SMG, a 10mm zebra model if I knew my guns, and sprayed bullets down the street at me. Where the heck had raiders gotten enough bullets to waste them with an SMG? The pistols were a little more accurate, but my barding took the rounds with equanimity as I took aim with the rifle and blew the noggin off the mare with the SMG.

From overhead came the boom of a rifle round, and a resounding 'PING' glanced off the side of my helmet. Somewhere, I was sure, P-21 was thinking smug thoughts. Okay, enough badass stupidity. I had their attention now, so I made for my own cover behind a fallen wagon as my head throbbed. As nice as the rifle was, it just didn't have the time or rate of fire for messy work. Good thing I had a shotgun!

Glory swept sideways, raking the sniper's nest with her beam pistols. There was another loud boom from the sniper, but she deftly twisted clear of the shot, pirouetted, and resumed cooking the sniper with little beams of death.

I just waited as Rampage raced in towards the two raiders with the ten millimeter automatics. The sight of a charging little zebra-striped pony seemed to make them hesitate in amusement. They realized their mistake too late as Rampage leapt over the rubble and wrapped her hooves around the mare's neck. Then the ripper roared as she sawed her head clean off in a fountain of blood that seemed to make the remaining raider stare in awe. No wonder Deus had been able to command these psychopaths.

Unfortunately, her awe made her a sitting duck for a round of buckshot to the head. Now, where were the rest…

From the inside of the store spilled the remainder of the raiders; they'd been taking their time getting their barding on and guns

ready. Another unicorn came out, spraying Rampage and me wildly, and this close in the shots were much more effective. I slipped into S.A.T.S. to plant two neat blasts in her head, then fired two more into the milling raiders behind her.

Rampage jumped right over the fallen unicorn and slid on a sheet of blood to saw and kick wildly at the limbs of the raiders as I fired off two more shots and then reloaded as fast as my horn could manage. Then, from the coffee shop behind me came the purr of a minigun motor. Instantly, my ass began to vibrate as the stream of shots started to chew through my barding. The five millimeter rounds lacked individual punch, but I knew that in seconds those individual rounds would add up to a very holey Blackjack! Raiders behind me. Raiders in front of me. Not good.

There was a soft thump, and a moment later the raider with the minigun was enveloped in a blast that tore off their head and all four limbs; what was left collapsed in a bloody heap that writhed for a few seconds. As two more came rushing to the door, P-21 emerged like a blue ghost, bit the stem off of a frag grenade, and tossed it through. A second explosion, and two more red bars vanished.

With Rampage already raising havoc inside, I charged in through the door and proceeded to paint the raiders with lead. One had heavy metal armor, but no helmet. S.A.T.S. allowed the buckshot to render his head into paste. When the gun was empty, I tossed it into my sling rather than waste time reloading, then grabbed the fallen unicorn's 10mm SMG. One raider was taking aim with a hunting rifle. In a second, I unloaded the twenty-five bullets left in the clip into him. His rifle shot still hurt like hell.

And then, like that, it was over. There was one red bar in the back of the grocery store, but I didn't see a target. Back room? Unconscious? I'd find out, I supposed. Lacunae walked calmly behind me, her hooves avoiding stepping in the blood. "Watch out. There's one more in the back." I looked at the carcasses put on display. Odd that so many of them were striped; they must have ambushed a zebra tribe nearby. It explained all the 10mm ammo. The guts dangled like garlands over the shelves. I moved towards the rear door that I guessed led into the stockroom.

I paused and noticed a forlorn bottle of Sparkle-Cola sitting in the dead refrigerator. I floated it out, popped the top, pocketed the cap and took a drink, then continued to the door with the bottle floating

on one side and the gun on the other. Carefully, I swung the door open, ready to pop S.A.T.S. and end the hostile.

This was a nursery. I saw the foals lying together inside some kind of pen next to a roll-up metal door. My mutant eyes picked out the shapes…one of them shaking and sobbing and rocking amid all the rest. “Hey…it’s okay…” I said softly as I put the gun away. She was clutching a little ball to her chest as she sniffled and hiccuped. “You’re safe now…”

Then she looked at me. She giggled, her scarred lips slashed all the way to her ears as she raised her ‘ball’ and bit off the stem. I just stood there as she threw it at me from the heap of dead fillies and colts. I couldn’t move. I could only think ‘PLAY’ as I watched the grenade arc towards me.

A shimmering whiteish-purple field appeared around the filly and the grenade. The explosive hit it and bounced back just before the fuse ran out. The room shook, part of the roll-up door blew out, and I just stood there, looking in a daze at the pulped pile of ponies. A voice whispered in my head. “I told you I’d have your back.”

* * *

The raiders had a surprising collection of firearms and explosives, something we helped ourselves to. Despite myself, I kept a pair of the ten millimeter SMGs and collected as many thirty-round clips as I could. Glory looted the sniper’s nest on the third floor and brought locked ammo containers down for P-21 and me to open. Rampage was munching down in the raiders’ stores; I really hoped she was keeping it to identifiable food and skirting cannibalism, but she was a growing girl. Literally; I thought she looked as if she’d added half an inch since we left Riverside. I made sure to grab some extra cans for later.

We heaped up the raiders in the middle of the street, and P-21 tossed in two incendiary grenades. With two soft ‘whomp’s, the raiders began to cook in the magical magenta flame.

The real surprise was Lacunae picking up the minigun with her magic and turning it over curiously. I was struck with how she handled it, ejecting the belt before detaching it from the slain raider’s battle saddle. She tested the motor, rotating the barrels slowly as she maneuvered the massive weapon with shocking grace. She kept the weapon pointed towards the ground as she examined it

closely; she knew guns. “Is there something you need?” she asked quietly as she noticed me watching her.

“I just didn’t expect the Goddess to be into guns.”

“More than a few who have joined the Goddess know about guns,” she said patiently, but there was a strange scornful undertone in the telepathic voice. “The Goddess, of course, knows that guns are weak and worthless compared to raw magic. What are bombs and missiles to the energy of the cosmos itself?” she asked as she turned the weapon over again, pointing it down the street. I had no idea how you aimed a minigun.

“You disagree?”

“One of the few who can. The Goddess is quite disgusted with me for even handling such a weapon,” she said calmly as her magic lifted the heavy ammo drum from the battle saddle and slid it underneath the weapon, connecting the belt once more. “There is a certain destructive elegance in it, however. They are tools of war crafted with care and skill.” I noticed her magic had no difficulty at all handing the weapon and ammo. I doubted I’d even be able to carry it.

“So now you have a bigger horn *and* a bigger gun,” I grunted softly.

A long regretful sigh drifted through my mind. “Perhaps, but you have friends, Blackjack.”

“Are you saying that the Goddess doesn’t have friends?” I asked, scratching my head. She slowly shook her head in a negative. I gave a confused smile. “Wait, I thought all you alicorns were connected, right?” She gave a single nod. “Why would the Goddess want friends if you’re…well…all together?”

“Just because we’re bonded doesn’t mean we like each other,” she said as she pointed the minigun down the street and narrowed her eyes. The motor whirred and a spear of fire and lead lanced out to chew through the rusted side of a wagon. Her eyes relaxed as the gun whirred down. “Sometimes, I think the Goddess desires friends more than anything else in the Wasteland. She simply can’t admit it.”

* * *

There’s nothing that says ‘Welcome, we have milk and cookies!’ quite like a welcome mat that really did bear the words ‘Welcome,

we have milk and cookies!' So it was somewhat understandable that, standing in front of the Riverside subway station, I felt a distinct sense of unease nibbling at my mane. I looked at the welcome mat sitting in front of the only unbarricaded door to the subway. "Well…should we knock?" I muttered as I stepped closer to the door.

BEEP! BEEP! BE--

I jumped back just as a cone of shrapnel blasted up from the covered landmine. "Right. No knocking. That might count as a doorbell, though." Carefully, I gripped the door with my magic, imagining a canine Deus rushing out at me screaming 'cunt'. Nothing came out, however.

"Maybe I should go first," P-21 said as he looked at the black doorway. Emergency lighting flickered in the depths. "And try not to touch anything," he said as he dug through his saddlebags and took out a pair of wire cutters. He knelt in the doorway, and there was a metallic snip as he cut a tripwire strung across it. He stepped cautiously through and past two rigged single shot shotguns. I snagged the box of twelve gauge shells as I followed close behind him.

The subway was a nightmare of tangled junk and debris with one path snaking back and forth through it. There were two mines half hidden on the edges of the trail, but P-21 walked with extraordinary cautiousness. I almost made him put on my barding; I might survive one mine, but he certainly wouldn't.

He froze at a dingy bucket. "Blackjack, could you please turn that to face me?" he said softly. I slowly rotated the mouth of the bucket to face us, swallowing at the mine within. Calmly, he stretched forward and tagged the disarm tab with his hoof. "Thank you." My respect for him rose even more.

"How did you know?" I asked.

He gave me a sardonic look. "I thought 'if I wanted to kill a mare stomping at the front of a row of ponies, what would I hide a mine inside so she'd kick the bucket?'"

Glory gave a nervous little laugh. The pair of us looked back at her and she blinked. "Oh, that wasn't a joke?" Yes Glory, it was a joke. It just wasn't very funny.

"Why don't I just trot ahead and set 'em all off? It's not like they can kill me," Rampage suggested with a cocky little cant of her head.

"Because if you miss one, then we get blown up anyway," P-21 replied as he continued his crawl. We reached the turnstile, and P-21 started to push through when he froze. "Glory. Can you fly over this and check the far side?" The little gray pegasus nimbly flew over the top and landed behind the gate.

"Don't…push through that. There's a gas tank and a grenade." P-21 had me float his clippers to her, and she snipped the wire to the grenade. Only then did we move past. Thankfully, the space beyond the turnstile was clear of the heaps of debris, and we were able to spread out a little. There were bathrooms to the side with red hostiles.

I pushed through down to the round lounge and relaxed at the sound of skittering radroaches. I stomped them with my hooves, then blinked as I saw a Sparkle-Cola machine. Smiling, I trotted over and started to push the button to see if I could get out a few more sodas. "Blackjack!" P-21 warned, and I froze. I looked back at him, then at the machine. Slowly, I stepped back. It was finally starting to click that I shouldn't touch anything in here.

Then I heard the metallic click of a first aid kit being unlatched near the door to the bathroom. I turned. As it creaked open, a round tin fell into Glory's hooves.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

She stared at it in horror, frozen.

It exploded in her face.

Glory fell back, screaming as she writhed, her hooves shredded up to her elbows as she thrashed wildly in agony. I leapt atop her, pinning her, holding her tight as I levitated out a Med-X and jammed it into her leg. She stilled enough to go from screaming to sobbing. "I can't see," she said around bloody and torn lips. "Goddesses…I am sorry…I am so sorry…"

I stared down at her as I tried to tear my eyes away from her bloody sockets. Save this one, Blackjack. No matter what, save *this* one. I fought to shake off the urge to fall apart. I looked at the metal embedded in her face. Oh this was going to suck...

"Shut up," I said as my magic proceeded to pick the bits of shrapnel out like tweezers. She gritted her teeth, trying to strangle her screams as piece after bloody piece was removed. Then I poured Sekashi's healing potions down her throat. And there was nothing for it…I took out a Hydra and injected the gray sludge into her as well. She immediately started gasping and squirming as her face

began to knit back together thanks to the influence of both potions. Then she opened her bloody eyes and stared at me in shock. Sobbing, she curled up tight against me as she shook. Her face still looked red and raw, but not blind or dead.

"Shhh…it's okay. You're okay…" But she nearly hadn't been. "Okay…so the rule is…don't touch *anything*."

"It might be too late," P-21 muttered as he looked behind us. "They must have heard that."

"Yeah, well they almost killed my friend. They're about to hear a lot worse," I muttered darkly.

We picked our way down. P-21 found a grenade box with a live grenade inside, a bottle of Sparkle-Cola tied to a bomb inside a steel crate, and three grenades rigged to a tripwire. All that was before we even reached the stairs going down to the actual subway platform itself! Three more mines were on the steps, and he slowly crawled down to them. Then I glanced up and grabbed his rump hard with hooves and magic, pulling him back.

"Stop," I said sharply as I looked directly above him. Three little amber lights were shining on the roof just above his head. If there'd been a beeping, who would have looked up?

And then I felt him shaking in my hooves. "G…g…get off…" he stammered. I looked exactly at what I'd grabbed and suddenly felt the noxious mix of shame, embarrassment, and general horror at what exactly I'd pulled in getting him back. It was as if he couldn't move even once I'd moved away. I wanted to give him a hug as he trembled and gasped for air; I knew that was the one thing I couldn't give him.

"I'm sorry, P-21…it was an accident…" I muttered.

"I know…just…I know," he said before pressing his trembling lips together as he walked away from us. "Just, give me a second," he said as he walked back towards the bathrooms.

"Blackjack," Rampage said in a tone mixing impressed with scandal.

"It was an accident!" I sputtered as I blushed furiously. "I hadn't meant to grab…that…with my magic. He was about to get blown up!" I stood and started towards the bathroom. "I got to go apologize…"

"You…" Rampage said firmly as she stepped in my path, "Need to disarm those mines while somepony with a lot less history, a lot more annoyance, and a lot more regeneration talks to him. Okay?" I

stared at her in shock as she turned away, looking at the teddy bear on her flank as she disappeared down towards the bathroom. I frowned and snuck to the door as well. I wasn't going to allow a repeat of Thorn. I'd bury her alive if I had to.

"Go away, Rampage," he said in that short-breathed voice. "I'm not in the mood to talk about it, especially with you."

"No surprise," she replied.

"So then why are you staying?" he demanded crossly. "Why is it every mare around me thinks she can tell me what to do now! This isn't 99!"

"No, it isn't. And I'm not making you talk. I'm not your friend. You can keep silent and not feel guilty. Lie to my face. Beat the snot out of me, if it'll make you feel better. All I'm going to do is sit here." There was a soft thump. "And listen in case you do or until you're ready to go... or Blackjack blows us all up with a well-timed sneeze."

"I'm not going to talk about it."

No response from Rampage.

"Go away, damn it. There's nothing to talk about," he said in an trembling voice. I pressed my back against the wall, my ears twitching as I dreaded what he might say. Then his breathing caught and he said, "I can't believe she grabbed me like that…"

"Well, Blackjack doesn't do anything if it's not spectacularly. Even groping the last buck in the Wasteland who'd want it," Rampage said dryly, and despite myself I felt my cheeks burn.

"It's stupid. It was an accident. I know that!" His thin voice cracked again. "I thought I was over this…"

"Yeah. Funny how it's never over till it's over," she said. "So, is it because she *grabbed* you or because *she* grabbed you?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he said in a brittle voice I'd never heard before. I was so used to him being calm and stoic. And then there was a horrible hitch in his throat, and then a sob reached my ear.

"Took you back, didn't it?" Rampage said in a calm, mature voice so terribly different from her

normal impudence or the snide tone after killing Thorn. "It was an accident, P-21. She saw the mines overhead and just acted. It's what she does. And I know she feels horrible for it."

"I know…I just…she killed him…and she used me…and…I know she's a good pony and didn't mean it but... " He broke off in a

shaking sob.

"So. It's because *she* grabbed you," she murmured softly.

"I know it was an accident…I just…I sometimes wish she'd left me outside 99. That she hadn't tried to find me in Flank. I feel so glad to be alive till…something…anything…reminds of me that place and it feels like I'm back there!" He sniffed terribly as I clenched my eyes shut. "And worse of all…the second she did, I was ready to... to…" He choked like he was being strangled.

"Perform?" Rampage softly offered and he sobbed again like a colt. I sat there helplessly, crying too as I listened to him right around the corner. A good pony…that's what he'd called me. He was the good one. Even Rampage, barring the murderer within her. They were all good ponies.

I was the one so cowardly I had to eavesdrop.

"I couldn't help it. She touched me like that, and it was like she was next on my breeding queue. Everything I've felt and thought and…wanted…was just gone. She touched me like that, and I was back there again." He gave a hysterical half cry, half laugh. "You want to know what I thought? What I really thought? *I hope she likes it.* That's what I thought! Not '*get your horn off me*,' not '*how dare you*,' not '*why did you do that*,' not even '*pretend like it's not a big deal...* '"

"You've been conditioned to think that way. It's not your fault. Blackjack is heading back there now to deal with the ponies responsible, right? You need to not blame yourself. This was a stupid accident. She didn't mean to do it. You didn't mean to react as you did. Neither of you is to blame." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to contact Dr. Helpinghoof in Manehattan. He's a lot more reliable than those Ministry of Peace hacks. I probably wouldn't have been able to stay in the Guard if he hadn't--"

"Rampage. What are you talking about?" P-21 asked softly.

There was only silence, then she stammered, "I…I don't know. I don't know what I'm talking about! I don't know…any of that. But I can tell you Helpinghoof's clinic's terminal number. His receptionist is Carrot Cake. He tries to sing Sweetie Belle. I…I don't know why I can or how I can…So why the hell did I just say it?" Now it sounded like Rampage was the pony falling apart, but it also seemed to be pulling him back together as well. She let out a shaky little sniff. "Do you think maybe Blackjack's assembling the deadliest therapy group in the Wasteland?"

"Goddesses, I hope not. Blackjack the therapist…we're really doomed." Then he paused. "You know, I haven't heard anything explode in a while. You don't suppose she's listening to us right now, do you?"

"Come on. Even Blackjack wouldn't be that dumb." I grimaced, rose to my hooves, and tried to sneak away as I blushed shamefully. I needed to find a hole and bury myself till I sprouted some new brains. They grew like mushrooms, right? Keep them in the dark and feed them shit? Maybe smarts grew the same way. Unfortunately, I was so occupied by thoughts of fungal brains that I kicked an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle.

"Blackjack!" the two shouted indignantly as I ran, but afterwards… there was laughter too.

Maybe there was also some hope.

* * *

"Okay. What kind of sick creature traps a baby carriage?" Glory asked loudly, blatantly deflecting every trace of awkwardness off of my screwup on the stairs. The baby carriage trap had been extremely effective, using a baby's cry. Only a reflexive telekinetic shove by me had pushed it down into the gap between the platforms before it exploded. A second later, and only Rampage would have been walking out of here.

"Smart ones. It almost got all of us," P-21 muttered as we looked around the subway platform. "And we also know that Perch was right; these sand dogs are sitting right on top of a treasure trove of salvage to be able to set up traps like this."

"So where are they? They have to know we're here," I muttered. This subway station was clearly a home…or den…of some sort. There were beds set up in the subway trains. A table with some recently opened cans of food on it. A radio playing DJ Pon3, of all things. Were they out scavenging? Raiding? Lying in wait? I walked over to a table and looked at some busted open energy cartridges. There was also a small smattering of ruby flakes.

My eyes scanned the room, but my E.F.S. came up blank. I trotted to a door marked 'Maintenance Access' on the far side of the room. There was a blue bar inside. "Hello? Is anypony there?" Then I remembered that we weren't looking for ponies.

The maintenance space was filled with electronics and strange

mechanical devices. The opening door brushed against strange metallic limbs hanging from racks over workbenches that rattled against one another. I looked at the tools set neatly in order. On one workbench sat empty Sparkle-Cola bottles that held a small stash of emeralds, rubies, and even some diamonds. One corner had a bed and filthy blanket covering it. I had to admit, I was tempted to take everything that wasn't nailed down.

For some reason, somepony had taken a small plush Rarity unicorn toy and had turned it into a pincushion. It didn't look like there was much of a need for needles in a workshop like this. There was a little sign above it: 'No whining.'

The wall by the bed was covered by papers. A lot of them appeared to be old plans and designs. 'The Victory Plaza Rail Station'. 'Shadowbolt Tower'. 'Tunnel 456'. 'Luna Hydro Spark Generator System'. 'Tokomare Reactor Facility'. All of them were stamped 'Ministry of Wartime Technology: CLASSIFIED', 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences: TOP SECRET', or 'Ministry of Morale: FOREVER!'

Here and there were photographs of a trio of dogs. One showed them dressed in army fatigues similar to those of Macintosh's Marauders and armed with energy weapons and a lot of explosives. They were grinning while behind them smoked numerous craters. Another one showed the three standing in the middle of a half-buried ruin, bizarre and disturbing spirals carved in the walls and doors. A third, this one grainy and black and white, showed a valley that possessed a stark kind of beauty to it. There were a few more here and there of individual dogs, and I was surprised by the sight of the dogs in some sort of eating contest with Twist while Vanity looked on in disgust. The picture next to it had Twist sprawled out in defeat.

The other interesting thing was the newspapers. 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences declares Pleasant Valley Relocation act. Diamond dogs to be moved to appointed land outside Appleloosa.'

Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle invoked eminent domain to appropriate the Pleasant Valley Mine Works and has started eviction processes for the current inhabitants, beings known collectively as 'diamond dogs'. Although the natives protested the relocation extensively, Princess Luna granted the royal decree and dispatched members of the newly reformed Equestrian Army to maintain peace in Pleasant Valley and surrounding communities like Olneigh.

Twilight Sparkle said that she sympathizes with the diamond dogs, but

that the needs of Equestria must take priority. Pleasant Valley is being designated a critical M.A.S. research facility for the testing and implementation of radical and potentially hazardous spells as well as a high risk storage area for any potential by-products. She assures the diamond dogs that a new community for them will be founded elsewhere in Equestria.

Another article caught my eye: 'Trail of Broken Diamonds'.

Military units supervised the relocation of the diamond dogs from Pleasant Valley this week to a temporary holding camp near Appleloosa. Units from the 1st regiment were deployed from Hoofington and the 99th from Fillydelphia to ensure that the diamond dog removal went smoothly. Despite their apparent submission, several diamond dogs made a futile and savage attack on the ministry mare Twilight Sparkle. Their attack was foiled by a handful of troopers led by Big Macintosh of Ponyville, who quickly came to the rescue of Miss Sparkle and were able to subdue the attackers without casualties.

Some critics have dubbed the relocation the 'Trail of Broken Diamonds', citing the unprecedented move to force non-ponies from their homes. Legal experts have pointed out that diamond dogs, being non-citizens of Equestria, are not protected under law. Ministry Mare Rarity was quoted saying, "Oh don't worry about those things. They're not like ponies, or even zebras. As long as there are some gems for them to dig up, they'll be perfectly fine. Well, except for the breath, and the fleas, and their nails, oh and don't get me started on their manners!" Critics of the plan have pointed out the region set aside lacks sufficient clean food and water for the diamond dog population and speculate they will try to return to their homes in Pleasant Valley.

I looked at the picture of a very relieved and slightly mussed Twilight Sparkle shaking the hoof of a slightly flustered Big Macintosh. Behind them were two rows of canine creatures walking away and carrying bags and sacks or pulling wagons. Pegasi flew overhead with their guns trained on the canine creatures. Off to the side, Applesnack, Doof, and Twist were pinning three canines while Vanity tied them up.

'Hoofington -- Goldenblood to welcome diamond dog workers for Reconstruction', and beneath it, 'Goldenblood unfit for position?' I saw one of the three from the second photograph shaking the hoof of a pale, sickly looking unicorn. The canine, his vest ripped and patched, hardly looked happy about the deal. To be honest, neither did the unicorn.

Goldenblood, once famous for his stirring 'Hoofington Rises' speech prior to his collapse on the ruins of city hall, has arranged for several of the strange diamond dog beings to be permitted to aid in reconstruction efforts. 'The reconstruction effort has stalled due notably to the fact that ponies are absolutely lousy with digging. Diamond dogs possess a capability to dig that far exceed what we can accomplish with sweat and magic alone. Employing diamond dogs is the difference between having Hoofington completed in three years or thirty.'

A Hoofington native, Goldenblood has received increased criticism for diverting substantial resources to the reconstruction effort and has drawn the ire of aristocrats across Equestria for proposed taxes to pay for the war. His recent comments about ending the war at any cost have drawn many to question his commitment to serving Princess Luna and the kingdom. Others question his physical soundness after his injuries--

I heard the faintest sniff from beneath the bed, breaking me away from the article. Who hides under a bed? I knew who. "Come on out," I said as softly as possible. "I won't hurt you."

It took about a minute before she emerged. I'd seen the sand dogs in Maripony's memory and in the pictures, but I had to admit that there was something distinctly creepy about the strange upright build of the being. Its arms hung down almost to its knees when fully upright, but nearly reached the ground as it slouched forward before me. A wet black nose sniffed constantly as she…unless diamond dog colts were in the habit of wearing dirty dresses…kept her eyes low. I was shaken by how thin she looked; but then, she hadn't had a stable feeding her three recycled square meals a day.

"Hungry?" That got her looking at me, at least for three seconds. I fished around in my bag and came up with some cans of Cram. Personally, I wasn't convinced it was meat, but I wasn't going to eat radmeat to find out. However she recognized the can at once. I tried pulling on the tab, but it snapped off and I was left staring at it stupidly. "Damn…"

"I can open it, pony," she said, holding out her hand; her other forelimb ended in a stub just below the wrist. I looked at her sheared-off stump, then nodded and floated the can to her. She sat on the bed and braced it between her knees, her remaining claws ripping the lid off the square can as easily as tearing tinfoil. She wasted no time bringing it to her lips and chowing down as quickly as she could. I feared she might choke, but she finally ate the last

bit of salty pink meat and licked the inside clean. She still looked wary. “Are you going to make us leave?”

Was I? An hour ago, sure. Why not? Help Riverside out by clearing out raiders and sand dogs. Now? “No. No I’m not.” For some reason, that made her shake as she backed away from me on the bed with a whimper.

“Please don’t kill me,” she whimpered softly.

“What? I’m…” And that was as far as I got as a powerful hydraulic limb closed around my throat and lifted me from my hooves. I looked around at noth-- the magical cloak hiding him crackled away before my eyes. I stared at another... canine, though this pale gray creature seemed more machine than flesh. The green eyes were quite sharp, though, as they glared at me like a balefire blast.

“Go away, pony. This is our home now! You leave or die.” From the malice in his eyes, it was fairly clear he definitely preferred the latter. Metal teeth gleamed from within old graying gums as an acrid reek make my eyes roll. He wore a faded and frayed collar studded with pale rhinestones and there was a weathered dog tag that read ‘Rover’.

My first instinct was to try and blow his face off with magic bullets, but I took in how much metal he had on his skull. My magic had lousy armor penetration, and I could tell he could pop my head like a can of Cram if I didn’t kill him. “I don’t want to fight you.”

For some reason, the statement just seemed to piss him off more. “Oh, then you want us to leave? Or you wish us to dig? Or fight? Or experiment on us? Or you just wish to whine at us?” he snarled as I dangled from his grip. “Why not ponies just leave us alone?”

“I will! I didn’t know. I’ll take my friends and go. I don’t want to kill you,” I replied, and I really didn’t want to die. Somehow, he looked sour about that, but given how hungry he looked, I was glad he wasn’t adding pony to the menu.

He carried me out into the subway platform where more dogs were appearing from holes in the tracks, ceiling, and, for some, thin air. A few clearly had some sort of cloaking talisman built into their cybernetics. P-21 and Rampage were both pinned down physically, and Glory, who’d flown up to a vent in the ceiling, was kept pinned by small arms fire. Lacunae remained standing calmly behind her magic barrier with the minigun focused on the three largest and most heavily augmented dogs, driving them back with bursts of fire that sparked and rattled off their metal limbs.

“Fight’s over! We’re leaving!” I shouted.

“Not yet! I almost got them exactly where I want them,” Rampage yelled as she squirmed beneath one who sat firmly upon her.

“Fight’s done, Rampage,” I said as I glanced back at Rover. He looked decidedly sour, but set me down. Slowly the combatants released each other and I got a better look at these sand dogs.

This was just like Riverside. There might have only been two or three dozen at the most, and, even if these people were far stranger, there was no missing the signs of hunger, the slat sides and thin limbs. Even their augments didn’t seem to be working with as much power as they could. I saw one Sand Dog take the ruby flakes from the table and brush them into a little port on their limb; instantly, the lights on the arm glowed brighter.

I glanced over at P-21 as he was released, then looked up at Rover. “You know, there was a raider camp we took out an hour ago not far from here. They had food,” I commented lightly, and instantly saw the excited looks and heard the sniffing. Rover glanced down at me with a disgruntled little snort, but then the old dog gave a wave of his augmented hand. About half the camp went running the way we’d come down, sniffing our trail. “Can we talk?”

“Always talking. Why can’t ponies just leave?” he grumbled as he started back towards the maintenance room.

“Because I want to help you,” I replied. I heard P-21’s groan from all the way from across the platform. “What happened to you?”

“What happened?” He froze and straightened, turning and looking down at me. His eyes seemed to glow. “What happened?” he growled softly and then turned with a snarl, flinging his arms wide. “Pony happened! Pony take home! Pony take gems! Pony take lives! Pony take world! Pony take everything! Pony tell us do this! Pony tell us go there! Pony tell dogs shut up! And always pony is whining about stupid pony war!” he said as he slammed his mechanical claws into the platform. “Why is pony always whining about pony? Piggy not whine. Cow not whine. Chicken and dogs not whine. Only pony is always whining about pony!”

Okay. Somebody had issues with whining ponies. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you mad. Please…I just want to know how I can help you.”

“Please…hrmph…” he said with a little snort as he looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Only one pony say please and mean it, but he just use dogs too.”

"You mean Goldenblood?"

He gave a hiss. "He comes to us in desert…dry sandy ground. No gems; only rocks. Tunnels cave in all the time. Not home. He ask us to come to city. Dig tunnels. Pay in gems. Say city home to all that help build. We come. We dig for ponies and he pay in gems. Digging is hard and dangerous. Dogs get hurt, and pony magic not work well on dogs. Pony use dogs to make machine parts for dog and pony. But city tunnels not home either. Dogs want dogs' home. Gold Pony say he try and help."

"And did he?"

"He talk to Pretty Pony Princess. He try to tell us not go home. Home not home anymore. Gems gone. Nothing left. But it is home, do ponies not understand? Home! And we wish to return. So Gold say maybe if dogs fight zebras, we go home. And we fight, but there are many many zebra. Then, one day, not many dogs left. We ask, can we go home now?"

He made the strangest little snuffling noise. "Golden take me home. Valley…gone. Big Pony building instead. Tunnels full of poison! Ponies poisoned our home! Our home! Dogs not poison pony home! Dogs not make pony kill for dogs. I go back, try to tell, but others return home anyway. Poison home is still home. Ponies call them stupid. Ponies try and make us leave." The snuffling noise increased, and I realized the old dog was trying to cry, but had lost the ability.

"Dogs know, okay pony? It is our home! Dogs know we die there, but it is dogs' home! Let dogs die in our home. But Gold ask we come back to Hoofington. He say please. He say sorry. He means both. Some come in tunnels dogs dug. And we stay. Bombs fall, many pony die, many dogs die too." He let out a growl. "But even after bombs, pony is always telling dogs to go. Always. Always always always."

And I had too, I had to admit, feeling sick to my stomach. The moment Perch told me there were things in these tunnels with something that could help Riverside I'd taken a tangent away from saving 99, like an idiot. They'd been right to fill the entrance with mines. They'd mined aid containers and soda machines and things ponies would go after first. Even the baby basket had had a pony doll inside it.

"Pony now knows. Pony should leave," Rover said as he took the young dog's hand and returned to the maintenance room. I sat

down hard and looked over at my friends and the dogs who had remained to watch us.

Slowly, I stood and trotted back towards the still-open door. As I knocked, I heard Rampage say to P-21, “Told ya. Five bits…pay up.”

“May I come in?” I asked as I saw Rover trying to wire together a child-sized mechanical hand. He growled faintly as he glared at the metal. Well, it wasn’t a no…so I stepped inside and watched as he worked the tools with familiar skill. He opened up a tiny port and shook in a few crushed emeralds. The lights on the hand immediately lit up, the claws twitching.

“I’m sorry,” I replied. “I didn’t understand.”

He took the hand and attached it to a brace; the young dog took it and attached the device to her stump. She gave a yelp, and then the hand twitched as magic animated the metal. She stretched up and gave the old dog’s scarred cheek a lick before backing away.

I fished out another can of Cram for her; Rampage didn’t need all of it. Her mechanical claws tore open the can as easily as her natural ones did. She looked up at me warily. “Thank you, pony,” she said, drawing another sharp look from Rover. Then as an afterthought she added, “I’m Fifi.”

I gave her a smile. Kids were kids, after all. Unless they were Zodiac colts, but still. My kindness didn’t seem to sit well with Rover, who looked at me like he wasn’t sure if he should thank me or not. “What do you want, pony? You tell us where find food. We let you go. Why you stay, pony?”

“I want to help you,” I said with a smile. “It’s sort of my thing.”

“We do not want pony help,” he said, pointing a finger at me. “Pony help always hurt dogs. Always.”

“Please…you need food and you need gemstones, don’t you?” I thought back to Bottlecap. “You can trade! Trade for food with Riverside…and I know a pony who runs a gem mine.”

“Pony does not listen,” he growled as he rose and faced me. “Pony help always hurt dogs. We try trade. Ponies cheat us. Ponies steal from us. Ponies attack us. Dog can not trust pony!” he said as he looked down at me with a strange look. “Who is pony who come here and think she make everything all right?”

“I’m…Security. I just want to make everyp…everyone safer,” I said lamely. Who was I to think I could just trot down here and overcome two centuries of pain and mistrust? I was such an idiot.

‘My friend has a gem mine.’ Oh, really? Ever heard the phrase ‘too good to be true’? And I had no idea if Dusty Trails would help, or if Perch would be willing to play fair.

He just looked at me with a scowl, his green eyes hard and suspicious. Then Fifi tapped the half empty Cram can against his metal arm. “Eat.”

“Dog not eat pony food,” he replied sourly.

She beat the can against his arm again. “Go play, Fifi.” She frowned, narrowing her eyes and banged the can against his arm several more times. Finally, he gave a resigned sigh, lifted the can, and let the slimy pink mass remaining plop into his mouth. He chewed, looking at me thoughtfully. “Pony thinks she can get other pony to listen?”

“I…I can try.” That was the most I could promise.

Rover scratched his white, tattered ear in a little cloud of dander. “I did not think pony help Fifi. I not think Security on radio real pony. Or she help dogs.” He pointed his mechanical claw at me. “We will bring…things…to trade. If village ponies are good and fair, we will trade for food. If not… ” And he just sighed. If not, then they’d slowly run out of food and gems to power their limbs. And then they’d die.

“I’ll try and convince them. I will.” I’ll do better. I couldn’t change the past, but I could at least try and do better now and in the future.

* * *

I had to admit, we were spoiled by the Miramare teleport. I’d thought that Lacunae could simply teleport us all across Hoofington at will. She firmly corrected that notion. She could teleport herself across Hoofington if she had to, with potentially one passenger. Without soaking up gobs of radiation, however, she’d only be able to teleport the five us of a few hundred feet. That was enough for us to get outside, but it left my head spinning and feeling as though I’d just gotten struck by lightning again.

Lacunae donned her black lace dress before we returned; a large purple unicorn caused far less commotion than an alicorn. She wrapped her minigun in a burlap sack as she floated it casually beside her; the weight seemed easily within her range of handling. If I tried carrying that weapon, my horn would burn out after five

minutes!

Back in Riverside, I approached the dozen or so ponies about the sand dogs coming to trade. The tone was immensely skeptical. Perch outright suggested ambushing them just to thin out their numbers.

"Listen to yourself!" Glory suddenly shouted, the half-healed cuts on her face giving her a somewhat ghastly expression. "Aren't you supposed to be ponies? Because all I'm hearing is a lot of bandit talk! Kill first! Take now! How is anything supposed to get better if ponies just kill and steal and take? It's got to stop!"

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed, and it shut up Perch enough that the villagers seemed open enough to give it a try. The only thing they had to lose was everything.

* * *

I tried giving Thrush a hand with repairs. However, there are certain ponies who should never be given anything like a hammer or nails, and I am just such a pony. After nearly braining Oilcan with the hammer and spilling my nails into the bilge water that'd collected from the leaks, it was generally agreed by everypony that I should go wait in town for them to finish. Glory and P-21 proved far more capable at heating up the clumps of tar that were being used to plug the gaps. I almost burned the boat down!

I think I've mentioned a few times that I hate waiting. Especially in a small town where there was literally almost nothing to do. I walked the perimeter of the food court four times, the Dealer just standing there watching me. He wasn't talking to me. I wasn't talking to him. In fact, if I could, I'd ignore him for the rest of my life. He'd almost made me shoot Glory. I still hadn't answered for that.

Something that bugged me, though, was the door he stood next to; it was just a simple metal door set between a Fantastic Hoofware and Radio Stable. The symbol on it was small and seemed faded even before two centuries of exposure. Glaring at him once, I took a closer look. It was seven familiar symbols; a moon, a starburst, three apples, three balloons, three diamonds, three butterflies, and a cloud and lightning bolt. The moon sat in the center, surrounded by a ring. The six other symbols were arranged around it, and two more gray lines weaved in and out of them, seeming to tie them all

together.

At the bottom, written in small letters: 'Office of Interministry Affairs, Riverside Branch.'

This was the O.I.A.? It looked like a janitor's access! I tried the door and grimaced as I found it locked. Well…time to see if I'd learned anything from P-21's lessons. Carefully, I knelt down and started to tease the lock with a bobby pin. Two snaps later, I was wondering if I was doing this right, when suddenly there was a faint click. I glanced up at the Dealer, who simply shrugged.

Inside were stairs going down, lit by flickering emergency lighting. I tried the light switch, but there was nothing. Instead, I picked my way down into a workspace that was rather tight even to a pony who'd worked in a stable. Papers were piled high on standard issue desks amidst a few dead, dust-covered terminals. A few apathetic posters hung on the wall. 'O.I.A.: we bridge the gaps,' and 'How can we help today?' The only one that caught my attention at all was one that read 'Do better.' There weren't any pictures of the Ministry Mares; in fact, the pony who did decorate the walls was Princess Luna. Her expressions varied from stern to mischievous to knowing.

I flipped through some of the papers at random. A memo from the M.W.T. to the M.o.M. about spritebot interference with radio reception in Riverside. An M.o.I. letter asking if a particular brand of magic insecticide talismans were being accredited to the M.A.S. or the M.W.T. Was the M.o.P. inspecting all Stable-Tec stables to make sure they were accessible to handicapped ponies? Clarification from the M.o.M. asking if the Macintosh Memorial was going to be set up in Ponyville or Canterlot. A petition for the immediate inspection of the Yellow River Detainment Facility for health violations. Damn, if only it said where that was!

As I read on, I got two impressions…one, the O.I.A. was really boring. Really, really boring. In fact, my vision started to blur trying to keep interested in all this pointless paperwork. Really, why would anypony care about whether Mr. Horse was a Hoofington native or if the M.o.I. preserved any zebra artifacts excavated during the reconstruction or why Twilight Sparkle had missed an appointment in Hoofington's M.A.S. hub? Who cared? But, apparently, that was the O.I.A.'s job. And that led me to another thought…

The O.I.A. was everywhere. They were connected to everything in Equestria. Even outside Equestria. There were memos from Little

Wing Imports asking about delayed permits for zebra wares, contract agreements being negotiated with griffins to supplement pegasus forces during Winter Wrap Up, buffalo mineral access requests…was there anything the O.I.A. didn't get stuck in the middle of? And yet, while all the focus was on the ministries, there was barely anything on the O.I.A. itself. Nopony seemed to be asking questions about its offices or practices. In fact I saw one letter that read, 'How does one join the O.I.A.?' It had been circled and a note written, 'M.o.M.?'

I didn't understand how a bunch of egghead pencil pushers could be doing so much unnoticed. How could Project Chimera be legal without the M.o.I. exposing it or the M.o.M. arresting Dr. Creepypony? Or had it been as Applebot claimed; that the ministries themselves were behind the project and the O.I.A. facilitated? Maybe that was why they'd been shut down so abruptly; they knew too much.

I moseyed into a small hallway, past two bathrooms (the yellow aid boxes within held healing potions that had melted through their bottles) and saw a smaller office with something interesting: a dead pony. In the dry air, she'd mummified almost as much as Vanity had. The black flakes clinging to the wall next to her desk and the small 9mm pistol in her lap told me this was probably a suicide.

Her terminal still hummed softly. I tapped the keys, and after a flew flickers the screen came to life.

'O.I.A. EMERGENCY CODE EC-1101 ACTIVE! PLEASE AWAIT FURTHER CONTACT FROM EC-1101 FOR SUCCESSION PROTOCOLS!'

The terminal was stuck on that message. On a note beside it the cherry red mare had written 'Luna is dead. Equestria is dead. Sorry, Director.' I thought of the pictures out in the main work room. Apparently, having no Ministry Mare, the O.I.A. had latched onto the princess herself for inspiration. Looking down, I noticed something by the dead unicorn's horn: a memory orb. However, instead of being clear, this one was a definite warm yellow gold. There was a letter half-stained with blood.

'I know you're depressed, Cherry Soda. I know these are tough times. The O.I.A. has a mission to fulfill and duties to perform. Have faith in the Princess. Cooperate with Horse however you can. Hopefully, this will show you even I err. The password is--' And of course the rest of the letter was blackened in blood! I screamed

with frustration and stomped my hooves, lifting the letter with a scowl.

Then I paused, looking at it. I walked to the bathroom and turned on the sink, listening to the rads slowly add up as I carefully wetted the bloodstained section and rinsed away some of the blackened fluid. I squinted, but I could barely make out the rest of the sentence. '…what your buckfriend refused to give you.'

Okay, now I was cursing and stomping my hooves again. I lifted the orb and squinted, thinking. Anal sex? Muffins? Diamonds? Head? Damn it! An answer? A foal? What?

I took a deep breath. Okay. Think about bucks and mares as something outside Stable 99. What was something a buck gave a mare? Semen! Damn it, Blackjack! I tried to concentrate. Bucks and mares were different back then. They didn't just schedule a time to do it; they certainly weren't forced to do it. They had relationships. And those relationships eventually became like…like Mr. and Mrs. Cake. And to do that you had a wedding. But before you had a wedding you had to receive a proposal--"

oooOOOooo

Oh boy, somepony put this poor bastard out of his misery! The buck I was in lay on his side, and from the pain and lethargy in his body he couldn't be long for this world. His insides bubbled with every breath, and he ached from horn to hoof. There was something that felt like a numb horn pointing in his side.

"You've looked better, Goldenblood," a familiar, wonderful, intelligent voice said calmly from the doorway. My host looked slowly over at the majestic sight of Princess Luna standing in the doorway, and his lips curled in a reactive smile.

"Your Majesty. My apologies for not rising but I'm afraid I'm a bit indisposed," he said with soft, wry humor.

"That's alright. I've only been ruler for three days and I've had enough bowing, scraping, and 'Your Majesties' to last me a lifetime," she said as she trotted before him and levitated a pillow, sitting neatly upon it. "I was told you gave quite a speech. 'Hoofington Rises'? Very catchy, particularly when you kept giving it even when you were bleeding out of half your orifices." She reached over and brushed his mane from his eyes. "Does it hurt?"

"Not at all. I suspect the zebras' poisons burned away all the nerve

endings. Painkillers take care of the rest," he lied boldly, and from the sympathy in her eyes it was clear she didn't believe him. But they could both pretend and not think about it. "So, to what do I owe the honor?"

"I wanted to talk about…Littlehorn."

I felt Goldenblood deflate a little, collapsing against the mattress. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. It's not something I can discuss."

"You were the only survivor, Goldenblood. What happened? What really happened, besides what was in your report? I know you left something out. I can feel it,"

"It's all there in my memory, Your Majesty. Every bit of horror. Every monstrous moment." He took a breath like a bubbling kettle before he hocked up a wad of pink and spat it in the basin. It smoked.

"I know." But there was still something left out. Something unsaid.

"So, what's really bothering you, Your Majesty?"

She took a deep breath and rubbed her eyes. "I'm in charge of the country and a war that is consuming half the world, and everything is a mess. A complete mess."

"So why tell me?"

"You were right, ten years ago. You were right about what we should have done. Had we just done things differently… " She shook her head and then looked at him with a firm gaze. "I know the mistakes Celestia made, but what I'm not sure about is how to fix them. We're drowning in disorganization and chaos. The entire government was utterly formed around Celestia, and everypony around me seems torn between treating me like my sister with a coat dye job or flinging their hooves into the air and crying doom."

He closed his eyes, and I could just barely hear him humming something softly under his breath. Then he looked at her. "You aren't Celestia." She gave him a wry smile. "Celestia was such an effective monarch because for a thousand years the government formed around her. Everypony could anticipate her wishes, tell her what she needed to hear, do what she needed done. You are not Celestia. The moment the bureaucrats, nobles and people realize that, this country is lost."

"You seem to know a lot about politics, Goldenblood," she observed. "Most of the books I've read about the subject start and end with Celestia. And the so-called experts just seem to want me to grant them better favors than Celestia did!"

“I spent a great deal of time in Roam, growing up, and I read far more than is healthy. The zebras have a far more robust political system for selecting their Caesar,” he said with a groan as he paused and coughed that wet, retching noise.

She looked down at him and then asked softly, “What do you think I should do, Goldenblood?”

He paused and coughed up another burning gob. What was inside him? “What you need is to remake Equestria.”

She just looked at him with a dry smile. “Oh? Is that all?”

“Equestria is still in shock. Between Littlehorn and Hoofington, the entire country is in paralysis. When it wears off it will be too late to act. If you announce a reformation…reorganization… restructuring…something, it will give ponies hope in change. Confidence in audacity. Refuge in the knowledge that you are going to act. And the more different it is in appearance from Celestia’s government, the better.”

“I see. So anarchy it is then.”

“Of course not. And if you wanted anarchy, you wouldn’t have accepted the job.” He stared at her, and I felt the urge to blink, even though they weren’t my eyes. Luna closed her own with a small frown.

“I will rule. Celestia gave Equestria more than a thousand years of peace and prosperity. I will do no less.”

“Not good enough,” he replied, closing his eyes and tugging the blanket over him. He peeked out at Luna’s slapped expression.

“What?” she stammered.

“If you’re trying to run Equestria to soothe your ego and prove you’re another Celestia, then you’re going to fail, and fail miserably.” Luna’s eyes fell as her confidence melted. “And you know it too. Nopony wants their lives hanging on a princess trying to one up a legacy that’s impossible to copy.” He broke into another fit of coughing.

“No one’s ever said that to me before,” Luna muttered, still looking a little shocked.

“Well, I’m dying, so I have certain liberties,” he replied, spitting up another noxious, bloody gob. He took a slow and deep breath. “For the right ruler, ponies will give anything and everything they can. They will fight to the death, sacrifice their lives, and walk into fire. We’re ponies. It’s our nature. So here is my proposal: beg an armistice and prepare to pay out the nose for peace, and abdicate as

well. See what government the ponies come up with, and wash your hooves of it. Otherwise, decide why anypony should bow to a princess that doesn't even know why she should rule save she's a princess."

Luna glared at him coldly, but I could see the uncertainty in her eyes. "Our people have suffered for ten years in this war. Now it's my chance to make things better. To make those ten years count for something! To make it all mean something. And I will do so even if it means my life! 'Princess' may be my title, but I am not going to forfeit my responsibilities and obligations to my people. And I will make things better! I will give the ponies of Equestria the future they deserve, at any cost!"

At any cost? Could she imagine the cost? Could he? He closed his eyes and then gave a resigned sigh. "What you need is a reorganization of form more than substance. You want to stay in charge, but you need a break in Celestia's status quo. You'll have to do something she never did before. You'll have to share power, or at least make the appearance of sharing."

"Share power? But how? Celestia…"

"The roles and obligations of government remain the same. Under Celestia, they were executed almost automatically. A thousand years of political stagnation will do that. Instead, you're organizing them into bureaucracies or groups; a different form with the same function." He paused as he closed his eyes again, and for a moment I wondered if he'd just died or something with how still he lay there. "You're going to need help. Ponies you can respect and who respect you. Ponies with skill."

"Well I respect you," she said, and he looked at her and I felt his heart beat faster. "But why? Aren't I supposed to rule directly?"

"Not even Celestia ruled directly. She ruled through inference and tradition. If she'd had to make every decision like you're trying to do, she'd have been crushed. The government that she formed was largely automatic. What you need are bureaus or ministries who can act while you rule. They'll screen a lot of the day to day activity. But you'll need a figurehead for them to solidify around. Somepony that can rally the people's faith and deflect their criticisms. A pony with enough ability to be effective, but selfless enough to lack ambition. And that will not be easy to find."

But Luna was smiling as she stared at the door. "Oh, I don't know, Golden." He turned his head to look at a familiar yellow pegasus

with sweeping pink hair. “Hello, Fluttershy,” Luna said with a calm smile as Fluttershy gaped in stunned silence.

“H- h- h- h-” And she finished in a squeak, her one visible blue eye peeking adorably from a gap in her pink mane.

“Fluttershy’s been nursing me along,” Goldenblood said with a fond smile at Fluttershy; one she returned as she drew up her forehooves, hiding her mouth behind them as she hovered. Her eyes darted from one to the other as she blushed terribly.

“Y…yes…I volunteer at the hospital whenever I have time,” she said with a shy smile, “I…I know I can’t do much, but I want to help out however I can.”

Luna just gazed at her with a glowing smile. “Do you think ponies would rally behind that, Golden?” Fluttershy blinked as she looked from one to the other in confusion.

I had to agree, it did seem perfect. So why wasn’t Goldenblood smiling? He spoke softly, in a near dead rasp, “I suppose they would, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Goldenblood. You’ve given me a lot to think about. In fact, you may have saved Equestria,” she said and she reached down and touched his side. A wash of magic poured through him and he gave a spasm. It felt as if a cooling wave passed through his wet, poisoned lungs. Suddenly he was able to take a deeper breath with only the barest hint of that wet rattle. When the light faded, even Luna looked like that spell had taken quite a bit out of her. “And get well soon, Goldenblood. I’m going to need you more than ever with this reformation.”

She walked to the door and Fluttershy hovered to the side. Luna gave her that clever, intelligent gaze. “Fluttershy, is Twilight Sparkle still in Ponyville? I need to speak with her about an important matter.”

“I…I think so. We were meeting there this weekend,” the yellow pegasus said as she rubbed the back of her head with a hoof.

“Thank you, Fluttershy. I’ll see you soon. I think that we’ll be seeing much more of each other in the near future. It’s time for the Elements of Harmony to save Equestria once again.” And with one last passing look back at Goldenblood, she walked from the hospital room.

“What was that about?” Fluttershy said in confusion before she smiled down at Goldenblood. She landed and brushed his gold mane from his face and then started. “Why…why are you crying?”

"Nothing. She simply said I was useful," he rasped softly as he sat up in the bed.
"Well, let me get you cleaned up and check your burns," Fluttershy said brightly.
"Fluttershy?" He closed his eyes but I could feel the few slow tears inching over his face.
"Yes, Golden?"
"I'm so sorry…"

oooOOOooo

Coming out of that, I felt as though I were flying through the air, a hiss filling my ears. Still, I couldn't help but remember something Watcher told me: *'I know ponies whose fuck-ups killed millions.'*
I'd just seen such a fuck-up. Goldenblood had given advice to Luna that she then took and applied to form the ministries. And Goldenblood had been horn deep in it, apparently. And…
I blinked as I stared out at the river before me, the water flashing past my dangling hooves as I hung off the bow of the *Seahorse*, my back hooves tied to the rail. I screamed, waving my hooves wildly as we flashed across the storm gray waters.
"Okay! She's awake now!" Glory yelled back, waving her hooves.
"Get me off this thing!" I begged.

* * *

"I will never ever ever ever go into a memory orb alone where my friends don't know where I am. Ever. Okay?" I muttered for the tenth time as Glory and Rampage lay atop me, pinning me to the rear deck above the captain's wheel. Rampage was definitely getting heavy.
Glory thumped her hooves on my head. "You better not. We were ready to go five minutes after you left, but suddenly we couldn't find you anywhere. Lacunae finally magicked up a spell to find you. Then you were out when we really could have used you clearing out Hoofington Bridge. So…what do you say again?"
"I will never ever ever go into a memory orb alone where my friends don't know where I am. Ever," I replied with a grumble.

Apparently, while I had been in la-la land, the *Seahorse* had had to pass under a bridge that a slew of Reaper washouts had managed to take over since the boat passed upriver; unfortunately, they'd had a missile launcher. I'd missed out on the fun of teleporting up and wiping most of them out. On the plus side, though, we'd added to my store of ammunition and odd weapons for resale.

Glory finally decided that enough was enough and climbed off me. I shoved Rampage off as I looked around with bruised pride. Actually…what pride? I'd been an idiot trying to get into the orb alone in the first place! I knew it; this was just my friends letting me know how much I'd scared them.

"Still, I wish you could have seen it. Luna and Goldenblood coming up with the idea for changing the government and Luna laying the foundations of the ministries. I mean, I didn't get a lot of the political gobbledygook…but it was still amazing to see."

"Well, I figured the ministries just…happened," Rampage said as she scratched herself. "Like one day Luna asked Twilight Sparkle and her friends 'Hey, wanna help me run Equestria and blow up the world? It'll be great fun!'"

Lacunae looked over with an unfathomable expression.

"Well, things have to get started somewhere, don't they?" I said with a sigh as I looked at the golden orb. "Luna needed to rule, and Goldenblood told her what she needed to do to get everypony to follow her. And it worked…until the war and everything got out of hand." So why had he told Fluttershy he was sorry? Why had he seemed more keen on getting Luna to surrender and abdicate than to actually follow his ideas? And why had he given her advice at all only to seem to regret it later?

"I think all those ponies were just crazy," I said with a little nod as I put the orb in my saddlebags. Maybe it'd come in useful later, or maybe Lacunae would want to see it. She hadn't said a word when I offered it to her.

I hopped up into the wheelhouse and sat next to Thrush, who was staring ahead intently. "So, where are we, Captain?"

"We're coming up on the Fork," she said as she slowed the boat. "Dangerous spot here. We'll let the current take us in for now."

"What makes it dangerous?"

She gave me a sardonic look. "Oh, lots of things. Hoppers. Leeches. Snags. Ever see a river serpent?"

"Captain, I grew up in a stable. I hadn't even seen clouds till three

weeks ago," I reminded her as I looked ahead. We were off the northern tip of the Core, and the river had widened to the point that it more resembled a big lake to me. There were buildings rising out of the water; streetlamps, signs, and countless smashed boats littered the water like so many toys in a bathtub. We passed by a large barge bleeding rusty rainbows from a mountain of barrels stacked on its deck. Past that, a large skywagon made a bridge between two apartment buildings standing like tall, lonely islands.

"What caused this?" P-21 asked, covering his nose with a hoof. The water reeked of iron and worse. "Balefire bombs?"

"Landslide," the captain said simply, pointing a hoof between the buildings to the north. "Used to be a bluff overlooking the river. In the attacks, the entire slope gave way. Blocked half the river. There used to be a lot of water traffic, too; all those boats and barges just floated about and got snagged up in the flooded ruins. There's a community, Flotsam, out here, but I think we'll avoid it tonight unless we have to." She looked at the scummy buildings rising around us.

"Why's that?" I asked curiously.

"One, because I really don't want my boat stolen in the night. Two, because I don't want a security pony to ride out and try to save the poor fishers. And three, because they have explosives in the water and I don't want to get blown up if you get a shooty look." Again with the shooty look. I needed to see this look.

"Fair enough," I admitted, curious about Flotsam and also curious about what had happened in Riverside.

Thrush separated watches, putting one of my friends with one of her crew.

We found a building with an intact roof and carefully pulled through a fallen wall. Oilcan got out a bucket and put in a few pieces of wood, and Thrush ignited it with a spell. It must be so nice to not be a one trick unicorn. In the fire she stuck a length of metal that she propped up against the bulkhead near the middle of the boat. "What's that for?"

"Leeches. Don't shoot if you see one. Just give it a few stabs till it goes back in the water. If you see something that looks like a big frog, shoot that if you have to, and if you see two really big eyes and a mouth the size of the boat, do everypony a favor and keep quiet so we can die peacefully in our sleep," she said with a wink. "You watch the front of the boat. I'll watch the back."

She levitated an egg timer, cranked it for two hours and settled back against the frame as the rest went below and closed the hatches. Thrush and I wrapped ourselves in blankets as a veritable cloud of insects seemed to rise from the water and seek out every uncovered inch of pony flesh. The smoke from the fire in the bucket seemed to help keep them away a little bit, but I was smacking my hide raw with magic trying to swat them all. Thrush didn't seem that bothered with them.

"So, Thrush. Why'd you say you killed your dad?" I asked as I looked at the dark walls of our shelter, glad my eyes could peer through the shadows.

"Boy. You sure know how to slide into a conversation topic, don't you?" Thrush said after a moment. "We were in the Cervine Isles trying to find a new water jet talisman for the *Seahorse*. We snuck into a pirate camp."

""Pirates?" I glanced at her hat with a little smirk.

"Raiders on water, only not as nice. Pirates like to keep mares around for proper raping. Draw it out over a few weeks before killing you. Anywho, we got the talisman, but there were a whole slew of slaves as well. I wanted to free them. But twelve ponies sneaking through the jungle makes a lot more noise than two, and they came after us. Dad got injured and told me to take it, get the hell out of there, and make sure everypony knew he died a big damned hero. I took the talisman and abandoned him. Heard the shots, and then him screaming. Got back to the *Seahorse*. Sailed away." She pulled out my bottle of whiskey…hey! I checked my saddlebags, and sure enough, it was gone! I gave her a sharp look, but from the distant stare on her face I couldn't exactly blame her.

"So, some regrets, I take it?"

"Every damn day," she replied with a mirthless smile. "What gets me most, though, is that I play it over and over, and no matter how I try and look at it, it was my choice that killed him. If we'd just left them locked up he'd still be drinking and wenching all across the ocean." She passed me the bottle and I took a pull, smacking at the biting bugs with a hoof.

"How about you?" she asked as she stoked the fire in the bucket. "Regrets?"

"A few. One big one. Broke into a sealed off section in the Fluttershy Medical Center. There were a bunch of colts and fillies kept in some kind of stasis. They'd been trapped like that for

centuries, dying of diseases and injuries that couldn't be treated. They'd gotten control of the maintenance robots and killed the nurses. Skinned them. Killed whoever entered that part of the hospital. We severed their connection to the robots. Then I had to choose whether to pull the plug or leave them locked up and trapped like that."

"You pulled the plug, didn't you?" she said with a smile. I nodded and she sighed. "Yeah. That's what I figured. Because that's the hard choice. Leave 'em locked up, tell yourself somepony else will take care of it; maybe they do but maybe they don't. The fact is, sometimes there is no right choice. You're damned either way. The whole world is like that. Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

I listened to rain falling on the gurgling water outside. "So what do you do?"

She gave a dry laugh. "Say 'fuck it' and go on living either way. 'Cause part of living is being damned, and the only way to get out of it is to stop living."

I thought about Priest and the Crusaders, Bottlecap and Dusty Trails, and even Caprice in her sick way. Yeah, each of them had screwed up somehow, but they kept going on. Was goodness just a illusion? Virtue just the best we could muddle through?

Virtue. What was my virtue? Why did a not-smart pony like myself have to think about these things? I just wanted to be better than the Wasteland around me. I wanted to leave ponies better for my helping them. I seemed to just leave them dead.

No. I'd helped in Riverside, hadn't I? And Chapel, though by accident. I'd keep helping if I could. I'd find out where EC-1101 was supposed to go and turn Hoofington around in the process. I could do it. I had to.

If I couldn't, then I'd be really and truly damned.

* * *

I was staring out at the front of the boat when I noticed it: a strange black mark in my mutant night vision, like a blob of night creeping along the edge of the boat toward me. Somehow, I couldn't move or think as that shapeless mass undulated closer and closer to my hooves. It was like a black, shiny, pony-sized thing crawling towards me for succor. The mass of darkness was a thing from my nightmares, and I stared as the pointed, tapered end of it

lifted and opened. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of hooked teeth glistened as it oozed its saliva from the tip. I stared, wondering if my brain had truly snapped for good.

Then the glowing tip of the iron floated past my head and pressed into that maw with a sizzle and a iron reek. The blob hissed and writhed as it fell back into the river with a soft splash.

"Huh. Usually leeches are bigger than that," she said in my ear before returning her iron bar to the fire bucket.

Leeches. It went on my mental list of things to hate about Hoofington. Then it was underlined, circled, and had stars put around it.

~ ~ ~

The atrium of 99 was the heart of social life in the stable. Ponies came into the open space to discuss their jobs and the few recreational activities various ponies organized. The stable picnic allowed a few dozen mares to gather, spread out blankets on the metal floor, eat some recycled chips, and pretend that we were all on the surface rather than think about our current situation.

I didn't like Daisy's mom. Nopony did. She was by far the largest mare in the stable and in charge of the second shift, which put her right behind Mom on the pecking order. She could be nice, but without warning she could shift straight into vicious little comments that could become painful beatings or kickings with the slightest provocation.

So, it helped a great deal that I am such an idiot when I trotted right up to her and told the biggest, meanest, mare in the stable, "Petunia, I'm placing you under arrest for beating up Daisy. Please come with me to security for processing." Mom, sitting right beside her, went very still.

"What the fuck is this, Gin Rummy? You put your brat up to this as a joke?" Petunia said as she chewed slowly on a gray fungal chip. A chip named 'Go Fish', no doubt.

"Go Fish, what are you doing?" she muttered in horror.

"Being security," I said firmly, pointing a hoof at Petunia. "She beats up Daisy! She cuts her, too!"

"Fish, go back to our quarters please," Mom said firmly as she rose and escorted me from the atrium. When we were out of sight she

whirled on me. “Go Fish! How could you say such things?”
“‘Cause she does, Momma!” I insisted, stomping my hoof as I looked up at her. “Daisy comes to school all bruised and cut up! Petunia’s the only one who can be doing it. Daisy can’t cut up her own flanks, can she?”
Mom looked at me steadily, closed her eyes, and sighed as she shook her head. Without another word she led me up to Daisy’s apartment and opened the door. Daisy looked up in shock, wiping tears from her eyes. Mom looked at her. “Daisy, Go Fish made a very important accusation just now... ” Daisy stared at me in horror as Mother asked slowly, “Does your mother hurt you in any way? Kick you? Cut you?”
And Daisy just bowed her head. “No ma’am. I get in accidents a lot. And fights.”
“I see,” my mother said in resignation. “And you know to report it if she does?” A slow lethargic nod.

“Daisy! Tell her! Tell her what she does to you!” But Daisy just gave me a chilling look. I’d gone from her friend to something else entirely. Something past what Duct Tape was... this was all going very horribly wrong. “Let me save you. That’s what security ponies do.”
“That’s enough, Go Fish. Let’s go. You’ll have to write an apology to Petunia... ”

~ ~ ~

I woke to the creaking rock of the boat and the sound of P-21 breathing nearby... and somepony else. I glanced up at the sight of Lacunae with her horn touching mine, my eyes going wide. “You have interesting dreams, Blackjack... ”
“You can read my mind?” I thought at her, trying not to think of a slew of expletives to add to that.
“Like this, yes.”
“And why are you reading my mind?”
“You have interesting dreams,” she repeated with a tone of amusement. “And this way we will not wake the others.”
I am not okay with this... I thought back at her, “Have you done this with the others?”
“Wouldn’t you? I desired to see if you meant me any harm.” And

what about the other way around? She followed up with a simple, "I'm sorry you can't trust me yet... "

Considering what she'd just done, that statement was more than a little ironic. "Yeah, well, the telepathy thing is... freaky." And sneaky. "But you know we don't want to hurt you, right?"

"Your blue friend does. He wants to hurt all of us. And he wants to help all of us. I cannot imagine a more conflicted male." I sighed. P-21 still wasn't over everything that I'd done to him. When I hurt a pony, I left scars. Deep ones. Just like Daisy. "What happened to your friend in the stable?"

"There is this one door with a faulty electric motor. She led her mom in there... brought the door down on her head. Said it was an accident. I never went near that door again; I never knew if she was inside, waiting to crush my head like a grape." She took her mom's position and that was that.

"Do me a favor... all of us a favor... stay out of our heads," I thought as I looked up at her.

"Of course. Good night," she said as she pulled her horn away from mine with a parting, "Sleep tight."

Yeah... sleep... that wasn't happening...

* * *

In the morning, I found Glory shaking, holding one of the cold metal rods as if it were a magic wand to protect her. P-21 was as far from the water as he could get, and Rampage was roasting a chunk of leech over the coals in the fire before laying in. "What? It's good!" she protested as she chowed down on the rubbery flesh. Another day and she'd be at her adult weight.

The *Seahorse* crept out into the flow, the morning glow barely starting to illuminate the clouds to the east. Everything was coated in a sickly sheen of black mold and rotten fungus; not true growth, but the only slime that could spread in Hoofington's Enervation fields and tainted waters.

Now that we were moving, I turned on the radio, hoping to hear more of the Stable Dweller and things around Hoofington. About an hour after I turned it on, the familiar voice of DJ Pon3 addressed the Hoofington region. "And to all my listeners out east, I'm afraid there are some ugly times. A veritable army of raiders has popped up in the north. They've hit every caravan and village from Toll to

Megamart. These raiders aren't the normal, half-starved psychopaths you're used to, either. They're healthy. They're organized. And they're eating everypony they can get their hooves on.

"So, who is responding to this menace? Well, not the Reapers. No, they got their hooves full trying to harass river traffic and seeing who is the most badass pony in Equestria. And it's not the Steel Rangers, oh no. They don't interfere with locals, and they're busy stockpiling every bullet and missile they can get their hooves on. Aaaand it's not the Volunteer Corps, either; come on, Enclave, if you really want to help, do you have to be so incompetent? I'm not saying you're not trying, but is this the best you can do?

"Unless one of these three powers wants to pony up, things are going to get pretty brutal pretty fast. Otherwise, we'll just have to cross our hooves and hope that Security can do something about it. Because once they strip Hoofington, it's just a hop, skip and jump to Manehattan. So move your little rump if you can, Security. Folks need you more than ever."

Thrush looked at me with a curious smile. "Well…you've got an interesting time ahead of you."

My mane itched like mad from all the humidity off the river, and I scowled as I looked out at the slimy buildings and bobbing ruined boats and barges. "Where the heck are they all coming from? I cleared out Withers and Pony Joe's."

"West side's always been lousy with raiders. East side of the river, there's too many ponies with really big guns for them to build up past small groups, but on the western half ponies are exposed and fair game. The Reapers don't keep their numbers down unless they get annoying; heck, half the bandits and raiders in the Hoof seem to want to join up with the Reapers." Thrush slowed and gave a barge covered in giant frogs a wide berth. "My guess is an entire village ran out of food and went raider. Not sure who it could be, though. There's a lot of little squatter villages between here and there."

"In other news, more tragedy in the Hoof as I've confirmed that the village of Riverside has gone silent. There's no activity in the community at all. No bodies, either. Whether the raiders got that far south or something else happened is unclear, but the entire town's been hit. Hopefully survivors make it to safety and are able to tell us what the heck happened.

"And I really wish I could end there, Hoofites, but if you're in the

south, keep your eyes open for stripes. There's been reports of zebra sniper teams working all along the Luna Space Center and Black Pony Mountain targeting ghouls, Society farms, and even taking a few shots at the Skyport. Please note this seems to be only a small group or tribe, and don't take it as an excuse to butcher every zebra from Glyphmark to Roam, people!

"And while normally I would nip down for some cheese and wine at the news of Paradise getting its just rewards, I'm afraid I can't. Looks like Red Eye's put his hooves down and has taken control of the slave market directly. So expect your local slavers to be really interested in grabbing you, your loved ones, and anypony else they can, because Red Eye wants them all. No word on what happened to Usury, but it's to my (grudging) regret to report that Redbeard was impaled on his own radio tower. Red Eye: it's called 'temperance'; look it up. I'd tell you to look up 'restraint', too, but then you'd get all hung up on the collars and chains...

"And that's the news from around Hoofington. I know things are always tough, but you always hang in there. If ponies don't help each other, who will?"

I sat down hard. Riverside gone? What had happened? Had Rover decided that ponies couldn't be traded with and murdered the survivors? Had Riverside gone and invaded en masse after we'd cleared out the traps, before Rover could replace them? Or were there other raiders we'd missed that'd wiped them both out? I thought of Fifi and Granny Fishy. What had become of them? Damn it, why did this keep happening?!

Still, Paradise taken over by Red Eye? I doubted that the bounty on my head still existed. I really would be glad to stop running across Zodiacs and desperate ponies.

* * *

"We need to put in at Flotsam for an hour," Thrush announced with a sigh, more to her crew than to us. "Anchors owes me a barrel of tar and at least a case of spark batteries." She looked at us. "I'm invoking rule one. You go wandering around Flotsam and I'm leaving you there. This isn't like Riverside. Half the ponies here will shoot you in the back and claim they found you in the river. The other half will shoot *them* in the back. So just wait here. Tarboots and I will be back straight away."

I blinked. Why was everypony looking at me? "What?"

Skimming along the water, we approached what looked like just another logjam of wrecked barges and ships, except that these looked even more mangled and twisted. It wasn't until we got closer that it became clear that these weren't an accidental mashing. Two barges had been welded together into one immense platform, and dozens of cargo containers had been converted into rusty shacks. Four large cranes trailed in the river, and there were countless nets and smaller cables dangling in the water as well.

As we pulled close, one of the nearest cranes lifted a massive metal claw, spraying water and mud, and dumped the entire mass onto an open deck. The claw moved away, and a half dozen ponies began to pick through the sludge for anything of value. It sure didn't seem like a very good deal, but I saw them going immediately for yellow medical boxes, ammo crates, and any remotely valuable pieces of scrap.

What a life.

We pulled up, and immediately a dozen ponies looked at us with blatant speculation and sharp calculating stares. I just stood on the roof of the wheelhouse and looked back with Taurus's rifle beside me, giving them my own baleful stare in return. Eventually, the group mostly dispersed, but there were always eyes on the boat.

"Five minutes. No exploring," Thrush warned me as she and Tarboots hopped off and trotted towards the largest crane.

"Everypony acts like I can't control myself," I muttered as I walked along the rail, looking out at the filthy, muddy ponies. Not just filthy. Half the ponies I looked at were deformed; a bent horn here or a twisted hoof there. Some had grotesque tumors sprouting from their hides.

"What happened to all of them?" Glory asked softly.

"Taint," Oilcan replied simply. "It's in the water. There's nothing to eat but things that live in the water. They absorb the taint, and it gets transferred to anypony that eats them."

All of us glanced at Rampage. She blinked. "What? I just got *disintegrated*. If taint can still mess with me after *that,* then find me a great big barrel of the stuff and we'll see if I can die from it."

She had a point. I supposed if she got too mutated, she'd just walk towards the Core and come back fine.

Then there was a sound of yelling and screaming. A colt had apparently found a sealed gun case and had pulled it free of the

mass. A larger scraggy mare was taking issue with his find, and lifted her hooves to beat on him as he hugged it for dear life.
“Okay…not exploring…” I started to say as I rose. “Just going to kick some ass!”
“You can’t!” Seabiscuit said as she grabbed my hoof.
Oilcan added gravely, “You’d just make yourself free game, and us too.” I gritted my teeth in frustration.
Then there was a jerk that made the whole boat rock and I blinked as I looked around for the source.
Rampage was gone.
She landed like a candy-cane-striped meteor on the back of the mare, knocking her flat on the deck beside the terrified colt.
“Aggravated assault on a minor!” she yelled as she cupped the back of the mare’s head in her hooves and slammed her face into the neck. “Premeditated foal abuse!” She slammed again. “Resisting arrest!” And a third smash that finally made the mare spasm, her face covered in blood as Rampage stood and snarled at the crowd, “Who feels like being an accessory?!”
Apparently they all did. Rusty spars of steel, hooked poles, jagged blades, and baseball bats materialized in the crowd around her. I stared as I watched her cutie mark swirl into that strange zebra glyph as she rose on her back hooves. They surged en masse, but with a hop she jumped clear over the leading edge. Then she was a one pony wrecking machine, her hooves seeking the joints, ribs, and necks of her enemies. I’d seen this kind of fighting before, in static pictures of fighting techniques.
These moves were the light side of Fallen Caesar technique, fighting with restraint rather than to kill. And she could kill with a tilt of her hooves from flat to point. Just that, and her hooves would be going through her enemies rather than bruising ribs or spraining joints... Her red stripes seemed particularly brilliant as she moved through them like an avalanche. Ponies on the cranes were rushing out now with high powered rifles. But any fight that was left found itself sprawled out across the deck.
Just like that, anypony who had a problem with Rampage left rather than face her glare. The colt had released the fallen gun case and now shook the fallen mare. “Momma! Momma!”
I saw the skull forming like it was rising from the depths... Saw that smile on her lips...
Fuck. No.

One shot fired, passing under her ear; the hollowpoint tearing off half her face as it exited. Floating the rifle, I advanced as she fell, keeping the barrel on her. When she regenerated, I fired again. And again. And again. The entire village stared in shock as I repeatedly blew her brains out.

"Will somepony get this kid and his mom out of here?" I shouted, and then fired as she started to rise. I did not want her to make me deal with a murderous pony using Fallen Caesar style on me!

Some ponies got their wits together enough to drag both kid and mother out of sight. Some other scumbag snagged the gun case. I hoped it was loaded with armed grenades. Finally, we were alone in the center of a large area of nopony wanting to look at the crazy mares. Rampage just lay there, and I watched as the skull seemed to dissolve into a swirl.

"Thanks," she muttered as she sat up and looked at the red and gray smears across the rusty deck. "Whoa…what'd I do?"

"Rampaged." And thank goodness without her armor. "Do you remember?"

"I…some cunt hit a kid and…I think I was going to…ah…arrest her?" She blinked at me owlishly before nodding. "Yeah, I think that was it. Then it all got fuzzier and fuzzier."

"Freeze! Don't fucking move!" two unicorns shouted as they pointed rifles at both of us. "Nopony disrupts salvage operations in Flotsam."

Rampage just took one look at them and then leaned forward to press her forehead against the barrel of the gun. "What, you think your gun can drop me when hers couldn't? Go on. Try. And then, when you run out of bullets, I'll fuck you with the butt of your own rifle."

Okay, that was a little more disturbing than I'd anticipated. I put on my best cocky as fuck grin. "Look. Fight's done. See to your injured, be glad they're not corpses, and let's forget all about this little disruption?"

The two looked at Rampage and then at each other. The striped earth pony kissed at the one pressing her rifle to her head. Finally, the pair backed away. "Just…get the fuck out of Flotsam," they finished lamely as they backed away.

Gladly. We trotted back towards the *Seahorse*. I'd seen all I wanted to of this place. Then I paused as I saw a pony sorting junk. My eyes were drawn to a slim black case the length of my fetlock next to a

heap of bent sporks, cracked Ministry of Awesome coffee mugs, and battered plates. The buck pretended I was invisible as I pulled it out with my magic. "Where'd you get this?"

He looked at me finally, then at the case. He lifted a hoof, and I stared at the tentacles that wiggled at the end of his limb. "Ministry of Awesome sky carriage last year. Good salvage. You like it?" he asked with a hungry grin.

"Ten caps," I said, trying not to shudder as his tongue slipped out. It looked like a gray pipe.

He seemed to struggle for something to haggle over. Charity would have owned him. "Is very…ah…black. And shiny. Fifty caps."

I looked at him flatly. "Ten and I'll throw in two cans of Cram."

His eyes lit up. "Done."

We got back on the boat and I touched the sleek black case. There was a soft click and it opened in my hooves. Inside gleamed the massive magical shell and a folded up note. *'Rainbow Dash, you seen anything like this before? That nutjob Trottenheimer whipped it up. Does it have anything to do with the work he did for you?'* I carefully slipped the silver bullet into my packs.

Ten minutes later, Thrush returned. She looked at Oilcan. "So, did she?"

"Leave the boat? Sure," Oilcan said with a smile. Tarboots started to grin. "But not to explore or help anypony. Her friend decided to administer a little law enforcement and she jumped out to haul her back in…" Then Oilcan looked at me with a disturbed little smile. "After shooting her in the head…repeatedly."

"It takes a lot to get my attention," Rampage replied.

The pair looked at each other. "Huh. Well, I bet she'd leave to help somepony. You bet she'd explore. Oilcan said she'd wander off being bored. Damn…. I guess none of us win."

"Wait! You bet I'd leave the boat anyway after telling me not to?" I said sharply, feeling slightly hurt.

"'Course we did," she said as Tarboots passed the box to Oilcan. Her lips split in a grin. "You don't think I'd stay put if somepony told me not to, do you?" I wanted to cry; I'd tried to be good and stay put. I had! Was I really that predictable?"

From the smirks, yes. Yes I was.

* * *

We were leaving Flotsam and the Fork behind, heading north. I admit, I was glad to be putting some distance between me and the Core. The east side of the city was full of industrial ruins rather than residential. A number of huge rusting tanks and containers rose from the crumbling buildings like fungus. Like the west side, most of the factories bore black char marks from the intense flames. 'BOOM Inc.' rose over the largest container, spelled out on smokestacks that looked like sticks of dynamite.

I could only imagine THAT fire when the city went up.

The river was carrying us north towards a gap between two hills connected by a concrete arch. "Okay, if we can make it past Zenith Bridge, we should be okay," Thrush said as she looked up at the structure.

"And there's a problem with that, isn't there?" I asked as I looked through the binoculars. Both sides of the bridge had been fortified with trailers, slabs of concrete, and sandbags. On one side was a black pony skull on a red flag; on the other side's flag was a half-apple with an inlay of three magical sparks ringed by gears, held by crescent-shaped wings, and overlaid by a sword of war with a mouth-brace hilt.

"The Reapers and the Steel Rangers both contest the bridge, and neither side is so short on ammo that they won't take shots as us down here. It can get kinda hairy at times, since both sides have missiles." She sighed. "Usually we pass by at night, but that's eight hours from now."

"So…" I rubbed my chin. "Just speaking hypothetically here…if something exploded on the Reaper side…they'd be more inclined to shoot at Rangers than us, right?"

Thrush nodded with a smile. "Yeah, we've done that before…but we don't have any missiles." She looked again and scowled. "Shit. They've spotted us. Probably waiting for us to get in range now."

They were looking at us and each other. Maybe that meant they wouldn't be looking up.

I looked at Glory. Thrush looked at Glory. She gave a nervous little smile. "What? Why are you both smiling at me like that?"

* * *

Five minutes later the *Seahorse* barreled past the bridge as gatling

guns hummed, missiles exploded, and grenades popped in rapid fire succession. And to think, all of that was due to one grenade dropped by one pegasus. Only one missile streaked down at us, but we powered past it as it blasted a pillar of foamy water behind us. Two minutes later, we were clear and the Reapers and Rangers were still busying themselves with pounding away at each other.

Glory fluttered to the deck, looking back. "Oh, I hope nopony gets hurt." Given that they were both using missiles, I wasn't counting on it.

"Look at it this way: they can stop firing any time they like," Thrush said with a grin as we powered down the river to the north. From the rattling of guns and the boom of missiles, that wasn't going to be any time soon.

* * *

Toll was the last bridge crossing the river. Much lower than the Zenith span, it had a section that rotated in the middle to allow ships to pass on either side. That center span held the village nestled right on top of the powerful drives that moved the bridge. Fortunately it was open, and the *Seahorse* just powered past with a wave at the scowling ponies whom I was sure did not like getting cheated out of a payment. The bridge past the turnstile to the west showed recent battle, though, and some of the craters were still smoking.

With the last obstacle out of our way, we powered down the last mile of river and into…

The sea…

I'd never seen the sea before. Never imagined it. Never could imagine it, not even from the little gray pictures in books I was too bored to pay attention to. A great leaden sheet of rolling water stretching as far as the eye could see. Half of it was obscured by a port to the east, but my eyes stared out further and further till my gaze reached the horizon. Far off, I could see strips of blue.

Suddenly, I didn't want to stop. I wanted to ask Thrush to continue on out into that great open emptiness and get away from the nightmare that was Hoofington. I wanted to leave it all behind, for good.

Cards shuffled in my mind, and I let out a long sigh as I looked to the west at the large hills over the sea. I couldn't go, no matter how

much I wanted it. And it didn't matter if I wanted to go somewhere else. Thrush's father had been lost to pirates. The Wasteland was more than just Equestria. It was the entire world. There was no getting away from it.

"What's that?" P-21 asked as he pointed to the east towards the largest damn ship I could have ever imagined. It was tied up to a pier but listed to the side somewhat. It had turrets mounting the biggest damn guns I could ever imagine. They looked longer than the *Seahorse*!

"Her Majesty's Ship *Celestia*. They called it a battleship; guess what it was for?" Thrush said with a snort.

"It's enormous!" P-21 gushed.

"The HMS *Luna* was bigger," Thrush said as she pointed at a darker patch in the middle of the harbor above a rusting tower of metal. "Took a direct hit from a balefire bomb and still took almost a century to completely sink. The *Celestia*'s now the local headquarters of the Steel Rangers."

"What's their story? I get that they have power armor, but why are they in Hoofington?" I asked with a small frown.

"Well, back in the last years of the war, Applejack designed magic power armor. Soldiers that were trained in its use became an elite group. When Equestria went boom, they buried themselves in bunkers and stables and waited it out. About thirty or forty years ago, they crawled out of their base in Manehattan and started to spread. They've got some sort of edict to collect and protect the M.W.T. technology, and since ponies aren't M.W.T. tech, we can go fuck ourselves.

"Twenty years or so ago, they came down to Hoofington. I guess Elder Crunchy Carrots took one look at the *Celestia* and orgasmed. If they could get the guns to work, they could take over the city. If they could get the damn thing seaworthy…hell…I don't think any place within twenty miles of the sea would be beyond their control."

"Could they?" I couldn't imagine those enormous guns firing. How big were the actual shells? If it could fire for miles, even the Hoofington defenses might not be enough. They could batter down the wall and the city would be theirs. Except for the Enervation… but what if their suits blocked it? Oooooohhh…my mane didn't like that idea at all!

"No idea. I think Crunchy Carrots just wants it working to make it

work. Steel Rain, though…he's definitely of the opinion that technology's meant to be used." She sighed and shrugged. "They're mostly bottled up in the Ironmare base. I don't have much dealings with them, since the *Seahorse*'s engine's probably pretty high on their list of 'Tech to Confiscate'. I don't plan on finding out just how high anytime soon."

The *Seahorse* turned away from the *Celestia* towards the west side of the bay, where the land rose in high gray and brown hills. I looked back at the gray waves and the crashed and piled boats that had been jumbled together or half sunk in the harbor. From the depths of the sunken HMS *Luna*, I could see the telltale rainbow glow of magical radiation. Even the sea, as vast and wide as it appeared, hadn't escaped the war. Nothing had.

"I'll drop you off at the boardwalk. Unless you've had a sudden outbreak of sanity and want to come with us to Friendship City?" Thrush grinned widely. "Oh, it's a great place. There's this bar run by the fattest mare you could imagine, but her swill will get you messed up faster than you can spit. Pretty sure she cuts it with antifreeze."

I knew she didn't want us to split up. We were a lot alike, but she had her boat and her crew. I had my…whatever it was. Quest? Mission? Brain damage? "Ooooh, tempting. I normally never pass up liquor that makes me blind, but I've got a long overdue appointment back home." Ahead, we were approaching something like a carnival set on some long wooden piers. A huge ferris wheel bearing the rusted face of Pinkie Pie grinned out at the harbor with an impudent little wink while a wooden roller coaster leaned perilously out over the water.

Thrush carefully maneuvered the *Seahorse* to a rotten stair at the end of pier. It was rickety, but we were able to climb up to the top. My PipBuck pinged softly. 'Boardwalk' appeared in my vision.

"Take care of yourself, Security. I look forward to having another adventure with you in the future," she said with a grin and a little wave.

"You too, Captain Thrush. Don't get sunk," I replied then frowned. "Or shot. Strangled. Raped. Disemboweled…"

"I'll stay safe," she replied with a laugh. The talisman at the rear of the boat hummed and hissed, and on twin jets of water the *Seahorse* pulled away and set out towards the open sea.

I sighed softly, watching her go.

"You wanted to stay?" Lacunae said softly.

"Of course. I mean, she has a life that's exciting and not filled with one messed up nightmare after the next." I checked my rifle and swept it across the Boardwalk. Nothing in view, nothing on my E.F.S. Had I actually gotten lucky twice in two days?

Carefully, we made our way down the pier and into the amusement park. The massive wheel creaked softly in the wind as we passed beneath it. There was an army of raiders operating somewhere around here. Maybe some of them were around Boardwalk?

They were. Only they were dead. Really really dead. Somepony had tied three of them to a rail and then eaten them…alive, apparently, from all the blood spatter and how the wire used to tie them had nearly cut their hooves off in their struggles. Congratulations. There were ponies in the Wasteland more fucked up than even raiders. I just hoped we didn't run into them between here and 99.

* * *

The path home had an interesting sense of déjà vu behind it. Despite the fact we'd run in an entirely different direction, I still kept looking for the farm with flooded fields or the ruin where we first met Watcher. I was also keeping an eye on my E.F.S. for raiders. We kept coming across signs of them. A bloody brahmin skull hammered into a tree. A pony stretched over a stump before being eaten. I didn't check that closely, but I couldn't imagine that had been the only thing done to her. The broken soda bottles near her hindquarters were evidence of that.

In once clearing, we encountered two bucks completely torn to pieces, the remains thrown like garland over the dead trees and thorny bushes. Even their skulls had been pulverized. The only thing not destroyed were their genitals. The specificness of that carnage made my mane crawl. I didn't like it. These psychopaths were way too close to my home, but I needed to check and make sure it was safe before hunting these fuckers down.

Then I spotted it. The mine door was still intact; even Deus hadn't blown it off its hinges, apparently. I picked my way towards it, looking down. The remains of raiders lay in heaps outside the… No. Not raiders. Brahmin. I looked towards the door, a dread settling upon me.

I couldn't hear the voices of my friends as I stepped through. The short dark tunnel downwards was filled with a sweet stench of carrion. Down and down I moved, faster and faster, ignoring the shouts of my friends as I raced to the bottom. If the door was open, if the raiders had gotten inside…but no. I gave a sigh of relief as I saw that door was closed and secure. Perhaps the raiders had tried but failed. I smiled as I rested my head against the metal surface.

Lifting my PipBuck, I activated the Overmare's override for the door. There was a mechanical groan, then a hum. Finally, I could see Mom…Midnight…sleep in my own bed…play a game with Rivets.

I was home.

A blast of hot, dank air hit me…. I'd been outside for so long that the dankness made me gag. I heard shouts from behind me, but I didn't care. I toggled in my mom's tag and was astonished to see that she was in the atrium. Right through those doors…I walked to them and squeezed through the gap before the door finished opening.

"Hey everypony! Guess who's…" I stared at the severed head of a mare... rotting lavender hide hanging in slats, striped purple and red mane spattered with dark bits of gore. It was speared on a shorn-off pipe with her PipBuck locked around it and the sign 'Traitor' written beneath it. Splayed torsos were nailed to the wall, guts and entrails dangled from the overhead rails like streamers. The black-brown stain of blood covered every wall, and from the halls off the stable came a low mad giggling.

A hiss crackled over the speaker, and I heard the Overmare's voice. "Welcome home, Blackjack. We missed you." Her mocking giggle rose higher and higher as I began to scream.

The raider army was Stable 99.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Light Trot – You are agile, lucky and always careful; or maybe you have just mastered the art of self-levitation. Either way, you never set off enemy mines or floor-based traps.

Chapter 22: Damned

"You've got to get into the spirit of things! After all, this is your new home!"

"Not anymore."

Death.

I've seen a lot of it. I've seen old death in fields of bones where soldiers were left to decay, or dried-up bodies stuffed in closets for centuries to mummify or rot. New death in the ponies I've shot, cut, smashed, or crushed. Casual death, as casual as blowing the head off a raider because she's a raider. Merciful death in a mare killing herself to escape the agony of dying in a wall. Sudden death in a door crushing a stablemate. Slow death in scavengers dying around Flank. Meaningless death in a mother getting run through for being mistaken for a long-dead mare. And cruel death in a comforting hug that transformed into a deadly embrace.

Through it all, I've tried to find a line. I've worked to keep to a standard. Struggled up the slippery slope. I'd only kill the bad ponies. I wouldn't kill the helpless ones. I'd do better. I'd be kind. Be strong. I'd hang in beside my friends. I wouldn't allow myself to become an executioner.

Now I'd returned home. It wasn't a perfect home. In fact, it was a pretty monstrous one. We'd done horrible things here. All of us. Everypony was complicit. But I took solace in the hope that all it would take was an outsider's view, a fresh perspective, and the mares of Stable 99 would realize their mistake. They would go out and become a part of the world again. They'd work to make it better.

Instead, they'd made it lunch.

The disease Glory had discovered, that the Enclave were developing, that I'd encountered face to face in Tumbleweed and those farmers, had found its way to Stable 99. The Overmare, who I'd assumed dead and gone, had clearly become one of its first

victims. Her laughing cackle rose higher and higher over the intercom as she pranced in front of the armored window, her pale legs covered in bites and sores as her bloody red lips curled in glee.

My home had become a nightmare. Stable 99 had a population of five hundred ponies. With one germ, a third of the known population of Hoofington had transformed into a mass of psychopathic killers. Worse, these were physically healthy, armed, organized, and relatively trained psychopaths. And they'd been hitting caravans and villages, no doubt bolstering the stable's armory with whatever they could take.

Since I'd stepped out into the Wasteland, I'd struggled to find my virtue. Was it justice? Courage? Perseverance? Idiocy? I'd struggled against the Wasteland so hard that it had become personified in a hallucination that seemed determined to test me and push me towards misery. Perhaps the Dealer wasn't trying to break me, though. Perhaps he'd been spending all this time trying to get me to accept the truth:

My virtue is death.

And right now? If the Wasteland needed an executioner…then I'd be a fucking executioner.

* * *

There were no words I could say. No songs I could sing. No refuge from the sight of my mother's decapitated head spiked in the middle of the atrium as giggling, laughing ponies I'd known my whole life spilled from the hallways leading to the large vaulted chamber. They wore security barding stained black and rust brown from coagulated blood, decorated with spikes and spurs of scrap metal, chopped off hooves, hooks, chains, and other vicious implements and trophies. No escape was offered from the metallic stench and sweet reek of slowly drying blood and putrefying flesh.

I had two ten millimeter submachineguns, each holding thirty rounds of twelve gram ammunition per clip with a firing speed of ten rounds per second. Both came out of my saddlebags as the raiders charged towards me, shrieking in delight. The first I saw was Dewdrop. Morning shift, nice and calm and professional pony. Her lips were now smeared with blood as a strip of pony meat dangled out the corner of her mouth. In three seconds, I sent sixty rounds at her and the deluge of ponies behind her.

Not one dropped.

Of course not one dropped. My aim was shit, and these weren't ponies that had been emaciated and weakened by exposure to the Wasteland. These were healthy and robust ponies wearing body armor. They had access to Med-X, Buck, and other controlled substances kept in reserve for an Incident. I ejected the clips and slammed fresh ones home, then slipped into the calm of S.A.T.S. I could see every inch of Dewdrop's face, those purple irises and pinprick pupils surrounded by sick, piss-yellow sclera. And in that magical, decelerated sight, I could watch in perfect detail.

Six rounds coated her faceplate in webs of cracks and chips.

Six more shattered the plate into jagged and broken polymer chunks.

Six more transformed the face of a mare who could balance three stacked food wafers on her nose into strawberry jelly.

Six more, and I watched as the pulverized remains tumbled from her neck and bounced across my hooves, her body crumpling like a broken toy.

Goodbye, Dewdrop.

"Blackjack, come back," Lacunae's voice whispered urgently in my mind as time returned and I focused the remaining rounds on Shuffle and Primer. Their shotgun blasts slammed into my armor as I raced to the side, flinging away the smoking clips as two more lifted from my bags and slammed home. More shots beat my plating, shoving me around. I ignored the pain, ignored my friends, and let the rage sweep me along with its own terrible poetry.

Pony, Pony, rage resound
In the stable underground,
What immortal horn or hoof
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Primer staggered as the stream of bullets crushed and snapped her forelimbs, but still she came on. Shuffle raced around behind me, blasting at my combat armor. I felt my bones groan in protest as I rose on my hindhooves to meet Primer. Then we met, and I grappled with the mare who'd taught me firearms, her head turning to bring her automatic pistol in line with my face, blue and yellow eyes wide with glee and thrill as the hot, reeking barrel pressed against my cheek.

Two SMGs pressed their smoking hot barrels against her ribcage, and without blinking I sent the remainder of the clips into her chest

cavity. She folded against me, her jaw trying to work the automatic to take me with her. I dropped the exhausted SMGs and seized her weapon as life left the pony who taught me to never waste ammunition.

In what fallen city or land
Did your spirit break so grand?
How much pain did you endure
To protect and life secure?

I whirled as Shuffle reloaded her shotgun, the yellow unicorn mare fumbling with her ammo; madness hadn't robbed her of that. She was always better on the dance floor than on the firing range. Her screaming laughter speckled the inside of her visor with pink globs as I charged in. She ratcheted a round as my magic scooped up Dewdrop's helmet and flung the bloody-maroon contents across her visor. She shrieked, firing wildly and blindly as she scrabbled to lift her helmet's face shield with her hooves. She managed to get it up.

She stared down the barrel of my gun as I stamped it against her eye and sent the bullet to obliterate a lifetime of amazing dance moves. Primer would have been so proud.

And what friends and what love
Could lift your heart up above?
And when your tears began to fall,
What dread sorrow held you in thrall?

My friends were fighting behind me, screaming and shouting my name like distant ghosts beckoning me. More ponies were coming. Friends. Acquaintances. Rivals. Ponies I barely knew or recognized save that we'd once shared a meal at the cafeteria or passed one another in the hallways from time to time. S.A.T.S. recharged, and I slipped into it to put three automatic rounds into the mare that worked the cafeteria on evening shift and always managed to slip in a little more sugar than rations allowed. She staggered and twitched, her eyes widening in an expression of lucid wonder before I blew out her throat in an arterial spray.

More ponies were coming now. They came with mad giggles and jeering cries, their familiar faces stretched into caricatures of the ponies I'd known. They tittered madly through bloody grimaces as they advanced on me from both sides. I felt the distant wet sensation of blood on the inside of my armor; I ignored it. Like I ignored the screams of my friends, the frantic whispering in my mind, or the shuffle of cards within my soul. There were five

hundred ponies that needed killing.

What the shotgun? What the flame?
In what torment birth your shame?
That the rifle? What dread eye
Guides your bullets as they fly?

My friends fought in a knot behind me. Rampage was a one pony stampede, a spiked wrecking ball even in armor a size too large. She was as strong as ten ponies, but she had ten blasting her and ten more shoving back against her armored sides. Lacunae swept the minigun like a magic wand, its tip sending out a line of sparkling death that made the pack surge back and forth in a sick unison while her shimmering shield deflected their shots. Only the occasional explosion announced P-21's presence as blasts and bursts sent knots of them reeling. But they had potions protected from Enervation by the stable's shielding, and I watched bloody holes close as they drank and rallied.

Glory flew from balcony to balcony, trying to draw fire up into the air of the atrium as she circled and darted from one side to the other and blasted magical light at everypony who tried to use the higher platforms to fire down at us. I wondered if it was easier for her, not knowing that she'd just killed Textbook, the worst teacher in Equestria and the only one that I'd ever known. The one who'd who tried to teach a little filly about a war, ministries, and the mares who ran them.

I felt a stab in my rear left leg and looked down at a filly just old enough to have her cutie mark. She was jabbing a carving knife though a gap in the plates. I looked into her wild diseased eyes, wondering what her name was. What was her job in 99? Who was her mother; was she on evening shift? What did she like? What did she dream of?

Then I realized that none of that mattered; I brought the dragon claw across her unarmored throat like it was water. She looked down in confusion at her own blood spattering across her forelegs, then she looked at me as her gaze unfocused, the knife slipping from her slack mouth. Yes. That's your blood, sweetie. And then her eyes half closed as she curled up for an endless nap.

When your guns and pistols roar
And promise doom and death in store
Do you smile, your work to see?
Do you kill, to be set free?

I was failing. Falling. There were too many in the room, all armed…all armored…all family. They rolled in front of me in a wave, their own S.A.T.S. guided shots cutting into me like knives as I struggled onwards. My shotgun roared, the barrel now glowing a cherry red. Angles, one of the structural engineers, slammed into me wearing cobbled-together armor from her workshop. The spikes plucked at the holes in my armor as she bit at my throat. I'd cheated off her math homework for years; she'd known. She never hid it. Shoving her back, I plunged my dragon claw into her eye and kept pushing till the back of the socket gave way and the curved tip pushed deep inside her skull.

Thanks for the answers, Angles…With each mare I killed, I killed a little more of myself.

Pony, Pony, rage resound
In the stable underground,
What immortal horn or hoof
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

P-21 slammed into me. I wished I'd made him get some barding too. His sides gleamed with blood from bites, cuts, and kicks, yet he was still on his hooves. Goddesses, he was tough. He'd endured a lifetime of this. He fired Persuasion low, the grenade skipping between my hooves to bounce between the ponies in front of me. The blast knocked a near perfect circle up and out. Some died. Many screamed. But far far more laughed hysterically at the slaughter.

He pulled out a purple bottle and held it up to me. I stared at it dumbly before I realized it was a healing potion taken off one of the fallen. 'Is there a plan?' his eyes begged me. Even with all his hate, even with all his pain, he hadn't wanted this. Not this.

But there wasn't a plan. There was nothing at all but blood and death and giggling madness and the mindless fire we returned to it. Simply shoot, and shoot, and shoot...

And then he was grabbed, his tail yanked as his hooves skittered on the bloody floor, and he was pulled into that mass of raiders, of mares who had used him in the worst possible way. Rampage struggled on three limbs as more and more raiders piled onto her. Lacunae's shield disappeared in a flash, her minigun turning briefly from firearm to bludgeon before she teleported away.

And then I was falling as half the stable disappeared in red, my legs folding beneath me as an odd numbness spread through my left side

and the world sounded like I'd dunked my head under the water in the tub. I wanted to keep shooting. I did. But my magic didn't seem to know what to do with triggers or the like.

Glory descended, screaming through her tears as she landed atop me, her gray wings spread wide as if to shield me from the world as her beam guns flickered weakly, failing from overuse. I could only lie there, the stable spinning around me as blood poured down my neck. Fly away, Glory…Fly away…Go back to Chapel…please…

And then Rivets and Midnight came out of the crowd, and they were screaming and firing and dragging me away to join Mom. I was so tired. The Wasteland wanted to know when it'd broken me?

Consider me broken.

* * *

"So. Is this it?" Watcher asked me as I lay on a filthy mattress, listening to the rain patter on the roof as I sat in a heap of my own excrement, vomit, blood, and worthlessness. A terminal flickered on the desk with a simple message: *>Terminate Power: Y/N?* The Dealer calmly, quietly, looked on with tears in his eyes as he slowly shuffled the cards between his hooves. "Are you done?" asked the little bug robot.

"What else is there?" I asked as I lay alone in that room. "I've failed."

"You think you're the first?" asked the robot. "You think you're the worst?"

"No," I muttered softly. "It's not a fucking contest, Watcher. I'm tired. I'm tired of evil, fucked-up shit. I'm tired of a world of evil, fucked-up shit where no matter how hard I push there's something worse to push back. I kill Deus and get a new Project Chimera monster. I try and help the sand dogs and wipe out Riverside. Every step forward I take comes with three steps back."

"You don't live for the evil, fucked-up shit, Blackjack. You live for the good parts. You live for the parts that matter," Watcher told me as he hovered overhead. "Only an idiot lives for the misery."

I closed my eyes, feeling the cold, reeking vomit under my cheek as I curled up a little tighter. "And what if there aren't any more good parts, Watcher?" I whispered.

"Then…you fight like hell to make some," Watcher replied. "You fight till you're out of bullets. You fight till your limbs are broken.

You fight for your friends. You push and bite and you don't give up till things are right again. Are things right, Blackjack? Are you happy with how things are right now? Is this it?"

I couldn't answer him. I couldn't tell him. I couldn't do anything but look at the Dealer as sad tears ran down his cheek and he slowly rose, his worn cards fluttering around his hooves. "I'll be outside when you're ready," he rasped quietly as he walked to the door and stepped out into the rain.

"Damn it, Blackjack!" Watcher shouted at me as I slowly lifted myself to my hooves. "We need you! P-21 needs you! Rampage needs you! I need you, damn it!" His tinny voice crackled as he fluttered in my face. I felt the chunks of foulness oozing southward. "Fight! We can't do this without you!"

"I can't fight anymore. All I do is get ponies killed. The list just gets longer and longer," I said quietly as I walked towards the door. "Time to pay the price…" A pain grew, sharper and sharper as if something were being bored into my skull.

"Damn it, Blackjack! I won't let you die!" Watcher screamed with Glory's voice. "I'll save you…somehow…just like you saved me. I can't lose you, Blackjack. You're all I have left." I clenched my eyes shut as the pain grew and grew until it was all I knew. My whole world was pain.

* * *

"Got it!" I heard Midnight's shaky, triumphant cry as something was pulled from the side of my head. There was a ping as a glowing, bloody bullet was tossed into an empty tin can next to my writhing body.

"Give her another dose of Med-X," Glory instructed. "I'd even use Hydra if we had some…" she said as I squirmed against the ponies holding me down. "And get those healing potions inside her!"

"Hurry up," Rivets rasped as she pinned me down. I didn't feel the prick, but I did feel the numbing relief as the pain was taken away. A metal funnel was lifted to my lips and forced between my clenched teeth. The slightly bitter tang of healing potion dripped down my throat. I swallowed reflexively. More of the pain went as I drank along, injuries going away as the healing magic spread through my body.

Finally, I relaxed. The whole side of my head hurt, but it felt like

my body was coming back together again. “What…” I muttered weakly, looking up at the gray earth pony, the black unicorn, and Glory. “What happened…why’s my head hurt?”

“Are you asking about charging into a stable of raiders, or the part where you got shot in the head?” Glory asked with a mixture of new relief and old irritation. “Didn’t you hear P-21 warning us to slow down? That something wasn’t right?”

“I think…vaguely…but I wanted to make sure the stable was closed. Then everything went sort of…fuzzy on me.” I blinked as I sat up, wincing as I touched the side of my head. “I got shot? But I was wearing a helmet!”

“Which is why you still have a head,” Midnight said as she floated my helmet to me. Actually, I’d gotten shot in the head multiple times, judging by the dings and scrapes. One round, however, had punched through the armor and straight into my head. I glanced at the bloody round in the can. .308 armor piercing round. What I’d use, if I hadn’t been in over my horn killing…killing…

Oh Goddesses…My heart started to pound faster and faster as I realized what I’d done. Dewdrop. Shuffle. That filly with the knife. I’d killed them…I started to fall apart in front of everypony. No! I couldn’t do that now. They couldn’t take it now! I needed to hold it together, as tightly as Glory hugged my hoof in her own.

Her question saved me from a complete meltdown. “What happened here?”

Rivets looked at Midnight and then at me, and then the repair mare spoke slowly. “Well, you had us evacuate down here to the maintenance levels, and for a while there were shots and bangs. Some of the invaders tried to get downstairs, but we used pipes, horns, and hooves to fight them off. Then everything got real quiet, and we waited for somepony to come and get us.” Because mares in Stable 99 did what they were told. I’d told them to hide.

Midnight looked at me with a solemn little smile. “There was shouting and fighting, and soon there was shooting. The Overmare had been…attacked…and she said that you and your mother were traitors. That you had let the raiders inside. But I’d heard the transmission on your PipBuck. I knew she’d been sending and receiving transmissions from outside. She called me a traitor too and said I was going to be arrested.”

Rivets nodded gravely. “So, I figured we’d just sit tight till we figured out what to do. Some ponies went topside, but most of us

were trying to figure out how to get answers from the Overmare."
"Why didn't you just arrest her?" Glory asked with a little frown.
"There's no system in place for it. No precedent," I explained, then realized that that wasn't completely true.
"Well…" she said softly, but I knew her well enough to know she was thinking 'that was stupid.'
"The last time somepony tried overthrowing the Overmare, the stable was almost lost," I added, glad for the mental distraction. "It's a really big deal here." That mollified her a little. "So what happened?"
"Well, at first the Overmare just sent snippy little messages that we were all traitors and in rebellion and stuff…but then she started to get creepy. She spent one whole day just giggling into the intercom. At first, we were sure that somepony up there would realize she'd cracked a seal and lock her up…only they were getting creepy too. She said that if we didn't want to starve, we'd have to go up and be punished. We'd have to…eat…dead ponies. At that point, we improvised what weapons we could," Rivets said, gesturing to a nozzle attached to a steam cleaning pack used to scrub the reactor.
I thought about that. I could see an infected Overmare demanding we eat the dead. Worse, I could see ponies doing it, too. She was the Overmare, and some ponies would probably slit their own throats if she asked them to. Or slit others'.
"Poor Marmalade…she'd come down here, too. She told us that the Overmare had ordered a 'victory meal of the dead'. It was disgusting…but it was an order. Anypony who didn't eat the meat… became the meat." And Stable 99 mares were used to following orders... "Then she got sick. She kept giggling and biting herself. She tried to eat her own legs." Rivets shuddered as she drew in an uncertain, halting breath. "I had to put her down…never imagined doing something like that."
Glory could sympathize.
The gray pegasus rubbed her nose with a wing; something that both my old friends found fascinating. "It looks like the disease causes increased aggression and an insatiable urge to eat protein. Like likes like, so anypony who doesn't eat becomes part of the menu. Thus the disease gets spread. Once the cannibalism occurs once, there's an urge to expand the infected. Pretty fascinating social vector," she muttered. I tried not to scowl. She was the only thing holding me together right now. I didn't want to think about

P-21 being up there…

Assuming he was still alive at all, which I was, because I'd lose my mind otherwise. "So, what have you been doing?" I asked.

"We've been living off all the old stored food that was shoved down here after the Incident, trying to figure out what to do next." Midnight looked at Rivets with uncertainty. "We were so glad to hear shooting; they'll sometimes bring ponies in from the outside, torture them, or let them join. I think the Overmare just likes having us down here, slowly starving. She keeps trying to bait us with food, but we're not desperate enough to come out yet."

"How many ponies are down here?" I asked as I sat up and finally took stock of our surroundings. We were in Atmospheric Maintenance Three, the processors humming their unending purr as they moved and purified the air of the stable around us. I looked at the table I lay on, now smeared with my blood, and at the precious playing cards now scattered across the floor. I looked out with my strange mutant sight and saw, through the flickering lights, dozens of scared eyes staring back at me. Slowly, I rolled off the table, trying not to step on the fallen cards.

The hall beyond was filled with ponies. Dozens and dozens.

"Three hundred and fifty…Three hundred eighty?" Midnight asked as she looked at Rivets for confirmation.

More than half the stable? Much more than half! I felt struck by lightning…okay, actually I felt shot in the head, but I pretended it was lightning! Maybe that lead would do my brains some good! Unfortunately, healing potions hadn't magically made the hole in my head completely heal, and I found myself staggering to the side, fighting for balance. "I need a plan. Right now. Something that doesn't involve the two of us fighting off fifty raiders apiece."

"We have one…sort of," Rivets said as she walked over to a big, inactive arcane machine and popped it open. "You remember the Incident, Blackjack?"

"I have brain damage, so you'll probably have to be specific," I said as I stepped next to her and looked at a talisman shaped like a pinwheel around a gemstone. Ugh…why'd my head hurt so damn much…oh yeah…brain damage.

"I've known that for a while," Rivets said with a smirk. "Most folks don't know that, when the Incident occurred, the stallions sabotaged one of the air purification systems. My great grandfather was involved in it. He left notes, just in case." She reached her head

into a saddlebag and pulled out a very old book stuffed with added pages, then dropped it on the floor and hoofed it open. “Normally, the talisman converts carbon dioxide and any contaminants into oxygen.” She reached out and tapped the book with a hoof. “According to this, this talisman…doesn’t.”

“So what does it convert it into?” I asked as I leaned in towards the sickly green gemstone.

“Chlorine,” she said simply, and I heard Glory gasp. I looked at it more closely.

“Chlorine, huh? And what’s that do?” I asked as I reached out to tap the glyph with my hoof.

“Blackjack! It’s a very poisonous gas!” Glory blurted. My hoof froze inches from the green stone. Of course it is. Slowly, I pulled my head away from it. Glory gaped at Rivets. “How did he even do that? I’ve never heard of sabotaging an air purification talisman to do that.”

“He doesn’t go into detail, but apparently, you go far enough back, and my family worked for one of the ministries doing all kinds of sneaky, hush-hush stuff. I’ve got recipes for napalm, homemade explosives, thermite…” At my ‘remember-Blackjack-isn’t-a-smart-pony’ look, she amended, “Stuff that burns good, stuff that goes boom, and stuff that burns through just about anything.” Rivets chuckled as I flipped through the book. Lots of arcany sciency formula thingies that were way over my head.

“Unfortunately,” she said with a sigh, “Chlorine is a heavy gas, so we’d have to close of all lower return venting feeds while the talisman is active. That requires a command from the Overmare’s terminal and confirmation from the head of security and a maintenance supervisor.” She patted her hoof against the brass machinery as if consoling it that this wasn’t its fault. “So that’s where that plan hits a snag. Right now, if I turned it on, we’d just gas ourselves first and they’d have plenty of time to clear the upper levels.

“The alternative is somepony sneaking through to the armory. They’ve got so many weapons up there that, if we could capture some and blow the rest, maybe we might have a shot. That’d probably be suicidal, though. They’re watching every inch of security.”

“Not if we found Lacunae,” I said, looking at Glory with a wide grin. “Listen, Lacunae can read memories, right?”

“She can?” Glory’s eyes went wide. Crap, I hadn’t filled her in on that.

“She told me she can,” I amended quickly. “If we find her, then she can read my mind and whisk us straight into the armory! Then she can teleport the guns back down here. If we’re really lucky, we could have all their weapon stores down here before they know it. We can take back the stable without gassing anypony!”

“But where is she?”

“She teleported away, but I bet she’s somewhere close. I don’t think she’d leave unless she knew we were dead. The Goddess still wants me for something. Maybe in the tunnel, or right outside, where she could watch but still get away if attacked,” I said thoughtfully. “Then we just need to find P-21 and Rampage.” With any luck, Rampage would have taken over the raiders through sheer personality. I always wondered how exactly Deus cowed the others into obeying him. Maybe they’d been infected but not completely gone.

“Blackjack…P-21…” Glory began softly.

“He’s alive. All right?” I said sharply, frowning at her. “I can’t believe he’s dead. He’s too clever and tenacious to die. So until I see his corpse, he’s alive.” He had to be alive. I owed him the Overmare’s head for all he’d done. Then I blinked. “What about the males?”

Rivets looked at me in confusion and said in scorn, “What about ‘em?” My eyes must have flared like the pits of the damned, because she instantly balked, raising her hooves as she stammered, “They’re…I think they’re okay! Maybe! When everything was going crazy I heard Gauze telling Crutches that they’d barricaded the door with their bunks. They’re still using water in medical, so I suppose they’re drinking out of the toilets or something.” Midnight at least had the decency to look a little upset at that.

“Right,” I said, feeling better. “Okay. So the plan is…find Lacunae…get guns…take back stable…let P-21 turn the Overmare into a piñata for the males…and then have a party before getting to work making 99 a part of the Wasteland. In a good way.”

Glory raised a wing. “Um…yeah. Question…how are you going to get out of here to find Lacunae?”

Yeah…this part. This was going to be messy. “We’re going to need Marmalade.”

* * *

Raiders are not stupid. They might be brain damaged, over-aggressive monsters, but then so am I. The sight of a yellow mare in filthy security barding, her mane coated in gore and grease, trotting out from the hatch with unsteady steps and incessant giggling, gave them all pause. A unicorn horn dangled from around her neck, a contrast to the orange jars on her flank. The welding goggles she wore were odd, but then most raiders seemed to have a sensitivity to light. She laughed, looked at them and their guns, and laughed some more before shuddering and biting her foreleg hard enough to draw blood. “Hey…” she giggled…“Got anything to eat?”

As Glory said, like likes like, and the raiders stepped out from around their barricade to approach with their own eager and enthusiastic grins. “Are they fucking dead in there, Marm? Finally fucking dead?” the closer one asked as she looked at the cutie mark of a mare she knew. She was Angelheart, one of the meekest mares I’d ever known…actually, she’d been a little annoying before. Now she had decided to screw bits of pointy metal into her forehoof.

“Nooooo…” the yellow mare giggled, “They’re finally pissing themselves in the deepest holes since their hero is dead in the head….” She rocked back and forth. “I think they’re just about ready to join us…” A look of relief passed between the two.

“About time. Once you eat…it all gets so much easier…it’s not sick…not sick at all!” She laughed in glee.

“Yeah. It is.” And out came my dragon claw across her throat. Her eyes went wide, enough of the ghost of the kind mare I’d known left to look shocked before she fell limp. The other scrambled for her shotgun, but my horn flicked on the safety as she pointed it at my head. Her mouth worked the trigger frantically, but Pastels was an artist, and for all her desire to kill me, she had no clue about the little button she had to press to disable the safety. My hooves snapped up and spun the gun in her mouth, breaking loose two of her teeth as it was knocked free. She fell back, giggling louder and louder as I raised my goggles and stared into her eyes. It seemed to draw some sanity back into her.

“Is…is…is…it over…?” she asked me between hysterical little hiccups, her yellowed eyes looking into my glowing ones in desperation. “It…it doesn’t get…easy…say it’s over…”

“Yeah. It is,” I said softly as I lifted the dragon claw to her throat.

“It’s over, Pastels.”

“Good…” she stammered, “Good…good…” And her words transformed into a gurgle of red flowing down her chest before she went still.

Being an executioner was easy…

I lowered Pastels to the floor, looking in the direction of the stairs to the living quarters. Surely she’d have more than two guards…but really, what was the point? The raiders knew there was nowhere for the rest of the stable to go, and time was on their side. As ponies got hungry and desperate, they’d start coming out. And then the raiders would get to start having fun.

I carefully applied more blood to my disguise, trying to obscure the dried strips of hide Wonderglued over my cards. I painted a bit more on Marmalade’s PipBuck too; the black delta model had been far too conspicuous, so Midnight had put Marmalade’s on me and copied over all the files except EC-1101. The dye at least looked right. I was careful to keep the blood away from my mouth, of course. Finally, I lowered the goggles back into place and made my way towards the stairs.

Moving up, I quickly saw why they hadn’t bothered with more guards. They’d trapped the living quarters with landmines and rigged tripwires to single shot shotguns. They actually had plates of food left out like bait for animals. I pocketed the green food chips as I stepped neatly over the tripwires and disarmed the mines. It’d make the eventual attack easier. I made my way up towards the cafeteria…and the screaming. The screaming, rising and falling, growing muddled, then clearer, then muddled again.

When I came across the second barricade, I had the dubious comfort of seeing the two guards looking back at me with expressions of overfed gluttony. They started to stir at my approach, then Carrot Sticks just belched and sank back down with a groan. “Hey…” She looked at me with her pinprick gaze. “Hurry up and get some…” Her horn glowed as she waved a bloody bone at me.

“Oh…yeah. Looks tasty!” I said with as much enthusiasm as I could fake.

“She is! Real tender!” the orange mare said in delight, belching again before she peeled away a few more strips with a delighted groan. A fresh scream echoed from the cafeteria. “‘Course it’d be nice if the entrée would shut up…”

I swallowed as I walked around the corner and felt my legs wobble

at the sight of a foal trotting out with a dark hunk of organ in her mouth, dripping blood down her face as she chewed in delight.
"Her liver's back!" squealed a voice from inside.
No…sweet Celestia and Luna no…
Rampage lay on her back, chains holding her to a table as Mince and Chopper cut away regenerating hunks of flesh almost as fast as they reappeared. The chains holding her to the table were being grown around, trapping her in this nightmare. Suddenly, as terrible as it was, P-21's worst fate was nothing compared to Rampage's. They could eat her forever…hauled around wherever the raiders roamed as an eternal source of meat.
Goddesses, I almost wanted to use Folly on her then and there.
"Marmalade? Is that you?" asked a deep, low voice from behind me. Slowly, I peeked back over my shoulder and up. Way up. Most of my life, Daisy had terrified me because she was always half a hair from beating somepony within an inch of her life. Now, Daisy terrified me because she looked half a hair from eating somepony. Her yellowed eyes watered, the pupils contracted to near points as she glared at me. "Where have you been and what's with the goggles?"
I worked my mouth once, and her scowl appeared. Not fair; normally I got five seconds before she scowled and beat somepony to a pulp. "I was hiding…sorry," I muttered lamely, my usually witty replies lost in the sight of her discolored skin. She didn't have any bites; I suspected that that was because she always had somepony else on hand to bite. "And the light hurts my eyes."
She just looked at me for the longest moment, as if trying to peer into my soul, and then shrugged. "Yeah. Me too," she said before she stepped past me and everypony got out of her way. Her barding had been augmented by battered and hammered plates sharpened into spikes. She slammed aside anypony too slow to get out of her way. "Lunch time." She grinned maliciously.
Rampage lifted her head, looking at Daisy with mad pink eyes. "I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill all of you," she vowed in agony. Daisy put one hoof on Rampage's head, lowered her mouth to her throat, and bit a hole right through her windpipe. As the hole started to close, she grabbed something purple and pinkish red and pulled hard. There was a rip and a wheezing scream as Daisy's head jerked back and forth till Rampages tongue flopped free.
If I'd actually had Folly with me, I *would* have used it then and

there.

Daisy chewed indolently as she looked down at me with that familiar, contemptuous smirk. “Aww. Hungry, Marm?” She looked over at Mince. “Give her the heart. Should be nice and tasty.”

The…fuck….

Suddenly, all eyes were on me as Mince’s horn glowed and she cut and tugged the beating organ free. Like likes like, and I knew without a doubt that any hesitation or excuse would have them tearing me apart. Mince tossed the pumping organ at me, and I caught it in my hooves. It was still beating slightly. I grimaced, praying that I could somehow do this horrific deed. Heartless, tongueless, and with her chest splayed open, Rampage just stared at me as her body regenerated the mortal wounds.

Goddesses…

I bit down as hard as I could, trying to imagine it like some sort of giant grotesque tomato. My first impression: disgust. Not at the taste, actually; it just tasted like blood, and I’d tasted plenty of my own during numerous fights. Disgust at the act. The impression that immediately followed? Hearts were tough to eat! I swallowed the first leathery bite and immediately had to follow it with a second to keep from gagging. I tried to chew through the strong cardiac muscle. A third bite. Fourth. Fifth. By the sixth, the heart was half gone, and I feared that no matter how tough my stomach might be, I was going to puke from disgust.

“Full…” I muttered, half playing the role and half in shock myself. At least it’d stopped beating…if what I’d eaten wasn’t convincing enough, so be it.

“You’re such a wuss…” the huge mare snorted, sounding exactly like the pony I’d known all my life. “Just like that blue buck the Overmare was so keen on getting in her office. Just trotted after her like a good little fuckstick.” Daisy scooped the remains of the tough organ meat into her mouth, chewing it like bubblegum as her attention left me and returned to Rampage. Like that, the spell broke and everypony went back to waiting for the next course to regenerate.

P-21…I had to help him…I had to…I…was gonna throw up.

I staggered from the cafeteria, passed into the stable door chamber, and was glad to see it was empty. I stepped into the little monitoring alcove and promptly puked like my life and soul depended on it. Funny, but it seemed harder to bring up than it had

been to choke down, and I had tears pooling inside the goggles. My throat burned, shame coiled up inside me. The first time I'd used a raider disguise in 99, I'd only pretended to be one. Now I was getting my first taste.

I had to stop this. Even if it killed me, I couldn't let this continue. The Overmare had everything she needed to make an unstoppable psychotic army. She could force feed infected flesh to prisoners, and with Rampage they'd always have a source of fresh meat. Maybe they'd eat themselves to death, like that one raider in the Miramare pens, but I doubted it. I couldn't chance it. If the Overmare infected the entire stable, even Megamart's turrets and Gun wouldn't stop them. And with all the weapons in Megamart…

Sweet Luna defend my stupid ass, this had to stop!

Then I heard a soft hiss behind me. I turned, my mouth still dripping bile and chunks of cardiac muscle. Lacunae stepped out of the secret passage connecting the stable door room to the Overmare's desk. She must have plucked it out of my head from when I'd escaped 99; at this point I really didn't mind. Glowing arrows hovered around her. I grinned, wiping my bloody mouth.

Then she shot me.

Why do all my friends shoot me?

"Lac!" I croaked as two of the magic projectiles punched deep into my chest. Ugh, first shot in the head and then in the chest? Could this day get any worse? "Lacunae…" I gasped as I slumped next to my regurgitated meal.

Instantly her remaining arrows disappeared as her purple eyes widened in shock. "What…you…ah…oh my…this is awkward," she said with a flustered tone to her mentally projected words as she levitated me to my hooves and pulled me inside the passage. The bodies of four more raiders were piled there. She stared in shock at my flanks. "How did you change your cutie mark? And…what were you doing…?" She looked though the open door at the pile of regurgitated heart.

"I skinned Marmalade's cutie mark and glued it over my own, and I had to eat Rampage's heart to prove I was one of them," I groaned. "Do you have a healing potion?" I said as I touched the bleeding holes her magic had left in me. Looks like I wasn't the only pony in the Wasteland who could make magic projectiles appear.

"You…what?" I'd never seen an alicorn look sick before. "How… could you?"

"To find you," I groaned. "Healing potion…yes? No? Lacunae?"

But she seemed to be arguing with herself, the mutterings inside my skull increasing. "No, we did NOT see this coming…ugh…yes…fine…" She sighed softly and floated a healing potion to my mouth. "The Goddess wants you to understand that she was simply testing you. You passed." She paused, then added, "And…she'd just like to note…this is not typical heroic behavior."

"Welcome to the Wasteland," I muttered as the magic soothed the really nasty pain in my chest. I'd almost preferred the mini… nevermind. Unfortunately, the four raiders she'd taken had been armed only with simple melee implements. Hopefully that meant that the Overmare lacked the weapons to arm all her raiders well. That or she didn't trust them enough to let them go around armed all the time. "Look…you said you can teleport yourself a couple times, right?" Lacunae blinked and then nodded. I told her the plan.

"The Goddess is not a…a courier service!" she blurted in that indignant voice within my mind. Then there was the sound of a long sigh. "If it is what must be done, I will do it…."

Suddenly, she jerked her head upright. "Certainly not! Clearly this mare is incapable of…"

"Look at what she's accomplished!" the Goddess said to…herself? Was that Lacunae? It felt…off.

"She's mad! We're wasting our time with her and her stable…"

I had no time for this.

I rose to my hind legs, ripped off the goggles, and stared right into her purple eyes. "Goddess, right?" I hissed, blood and bile bubbling on my lips as I grinned. "Look…you want something in Hoofington, right? Well, right now I want to save my friends and my home. You help me do THAT, and I will get whatever it is you want. Because right now, I really do not need this shit. I have to save my friends. I have to save my family." One wasn't going to be enough this time.

She stared back, and I heard countless whispered mutters and pleas. Vaguely, I could make out a mare saying, 'Please…Trixie…'

Then there was an overwhelming sigh that silenced all the other voices.

Finally Lacunae shuddered. "Fine. The Goddess will allow you to help your friends, but the Goddess will hold you to your promise. Tell this one what you need done." I was so relieved that I slumped down, shaking. If I'd made a deal with the devil, it'd be worth it if it meant that I'd save 99 from the Overmare.

She touched her horn to mine and I closed my eyes, doing all I could to remember the armory, the Overmare's office, and Atmospheric Maintenance Three. Then I dug up every memory I could of the males' quarters off medical. I'd only seen it once, and that had been long ago. I prayed it would be enough for her to get in and check on the males. Get them out. I wasn't sure how many trips she could handle. I could hear that vast whispering inside her head; it felt like we were being watched by ghosts.

Finally, she pulled away. "I think I have enough to make it. I dearly hope they have some appropriate ammunition," she said as she lifted her minigun with a sigh. "What will you do now?"

"Get P-21 back. Once he's safe…I'll see if we can use the gas." Rivets had downloaded her supervisor's code into Marmalade's PipBuck, and Midnight had transferred the Overmare's code in from my delta model. All that left was for me to free P-21 and have him get the security code. Locks I could handle now; terminals I'd still leave to him. "If we can end this without any uninfected ponies getting killed, then we should." Funny, the Dealer was missing a doozy of a chance to make me feel like a murderer. Then again, maybe I didn't need him to; I was already feeling like a monster today.

"I'll get started, then," she told me. "Where will I find you and P-21?" I was so thankful that she didn't ask 'what if he's dead?' or 'what if he's had a full three-course infected meal?'

"Here, or outside the stable door," I said as I looked at my PipBuck's chronometer. "Please, get the males out if they're alive. I really…really…don't want to gas them," I begged her, knowing there'd be no forgiveness for that.

"I will. I'll get them first, then the guns," Lacunae promised.

"And thank the Goddess for me…for letting you do this," I added. Lacunae looked surprised, then oddly amused before she shook her head with a smile and disappeared with a flash.

I sighed and pulled my dragon claw from the stained barding. Did the raider disease kill a pony's sense of smell? Slowly, I made my way up the stairs to the Overmare's office. I struggled to hear through the flooring overhead. I knew the sound of slapping flanks. She was damn loud. I hit the switch and winced at the hiss of pistons lifting the floor up. I hit the switch again after a few feet and wiggled through, trying not to grunt any louder than she was.

"Ride the pony!" she giggled in juvenile glee from the bedroom

adjacent to her office. I mouthed the words, blushing horribly. Okay; yes, she was a psychotic little brat that had sold out my stable, abused my friend, and killed my mother…but really? Ride the pony? I checked my E.F.S... .Three red bars…and only one of them moving around and making the noises. Either she was really into voyeurism, or…Slowly, I trotted to the door and opened it a crack.

You know, when she said 'ride the pony', I'd assumed that she was the one getting ridden…

Maybe it was the sight of my friend, gagged with a bridle, chained to a bed, and being sodomized by the current greatest incarnation of evil I'd ever encountered in the Wasteland, but something about the scene brought out my inner Deus. I kicked open the door, snapped out the dragon claw, screamed "Cuuuunt!" and charged the bed.

Then I saw the glowing horn, and then the straight razor pressed against his throat as he whimpered and she didn't even stop thrusting. "I knew you'd be back. He told me you'd be back. And he was right, and here you are." She gave an extra hard shove, and he cried out into the gag as blood and tears flowed in equal measure. Overhead, two turrets dropped down, their guns swiveling towards me. "I should thank you for bringing my favorite buck back to me. He's always been my favorite trick pony."

I felt a pit open up inside me. This was my fault. I'd been in such a reckless hurry that he'd gotten taken. "You're sick…" I hissed, wondering if three S.A.T.S.-assisted bullets could take her head off before she could slit his throat. From the lines she'd carved in his neck already, I could tell she'd been playing at it. Target her horn? Maybe, but if I missed….

"I am the Overmare. It is my duty to maintain the security and stability of this stable. Anything I have to do to blow off steam is perfectly acceptable! I can do anything I want. Anything!" she hissed, eyes narrowing as the razor drew another line of red in his throat. "And then you had to make everything difficult. You brought them here. Betrayed me. Just like your mother. Yes…"

She was mad…just plain stark crazy. Whether it had been the disease or not, I had no idea. "You stupid little brat…do you have the slightest clue what the world outside is like? I've seen ponies fused with machinery and monsters, faced two-century-old ghouls who can't get over their crushes, still have a serious hankering for

some drugs, and had a boat dropped on me."

"You don't get it. I can do anything. Nopony will ever hurt me again," she said with certainty.

"You mean Deus…" I muttered, looking at her. "I killed him."

She hissed back, "I mean my mother!" And she shoved so hard he screamed.

"Your mother…" But then that made it clear... where she'd gotten a 'toy' like the one she now wore? "Your own mother…"

"Every night," she hissed at me. "Every night. Because she was Overmare. She could do whatever she wanted. But not to anypony. Just me." She giggled brokenly as she shuddered. "I tried telling your mother. I did…but she said there was nothing she could do. Nothing! Nothing!" she yelled, her eyes wide and mad. "So I did it myself. I waited till she was drunk…I stole the razor from the dresser... one cut…and then I was Overmare." She gave a sickly affectionate look at the bound buck. "You brought back the only buck who listened. My favorite trick pony. I can ride him like she rode me…"

I sighed as I looked at her. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry my mother couldn't save you. That's what Security is supposed to do. She should have done something." Damn it, Mom, why didn't you? "But none of that makes what you did all right."

"The stable's dying. I saw the reports. A year at the most. But now we're strong, the door is open, and we got guns. We've found the strength of meat and the strength of pain. We'll take over the surface. Everything will be mine. And nothing will ever hurt me again." She giggled as she thrust with wild vigor. "Now I get everything!"

"Right. Including this." Enough was enough. I entered S.A.T.S.: horn, head, horn, head.

In an accelerated flash, the four bolts of concentrated magic struck her like a barrage of stars, and she shrieked as she fell one way and her horn spiraled away the other. P-21 gave one last scream as she was forced out of him, immediately curling up on the bed. I raced for the bed as the turrets began to pepper me with bullets. I tossed the filthy sheet up and over one turret, blinding it, and targeted the second as my horn sliced into the cable of the blinded one. With a shower of sparks, the cables parted and the turret lost power just as the sheet shredded.

"P-21, are you o…" No. He was not okay. He was so far from okay

that I doubted he could find it on a map. His blank eyes stared off into space as he tried to curl into a ball as much as the chains would let him. First Rampage, now this. My shame redoubled on itself as I focused upward and fired three more shots. My magic was notoriously poor with armor, but I must have hit something vital; the second turret sparked and went dead. I fished out a bobby pin and wiggled it into the lock. “Hold on. I’m going to get you out of here…just hold on…”

Then I was rolling away as the Overmare tackled me, knocking me off the bed and sending us both rolling across the floor. Half her horn was missing, and it sparkled as she tried to work magic with the stub. One bloody socket dripped down in my face as she sat on top of me and slammed her hooves into my face and throat in a frenzy of kicks. Between getting shot in the head once, shot in the chest twice, and shot in the back multiple times, this was starting to look like a bad day.

“I’ll fuck all of you…every one of you! I’m the Overmare! It’s my right!” she screeched as her voice rose higher and higher with wilder laughter. “You’ll never fuck me again! Never!”

Then a chain flipped over her head and pulled tight against her throat as two blue hooves yanked it taut. The chain dug in tight, the hoofcuffs keeping it from slipping free as her mottled skin went from dirty white to a horrible blue. Then purple. Her dark tongue rolled out as her horn sparked desperately for something to shoot him with. Finally, she gave one last shudder and went limp.

He collapsed, shaking, sobbing, still entangled with her body. I sat up and carefully undid the bridle as he stared with eyes empty of everything except pain and humiliation. “I’m not your trick pony… I’m not... I’m not…” he whispered.

“P-21…” I said softly as I crawled to my hooves.

“I’m not…I’m not a trick pony…” He just shook more.

“She’s dead now,” I murmured. “She’s dead…let her go…”

He sniffed as he looked at me like a lost colt, the shaking increasing more and more. He’d pulled so tight the chain had creased her throat, and I carefully pulled it off and unlocked it from his hooves. He looked at the raw, bloody marks and shook even more before he hugged himself to a stop. I hugged him, desperately praying it was what he needed right now and not something that would make things even worse. He pressed his face against my chest, bawling brokenly as I held him, crying like he’d never wept

before.

I looked at the Overmare. Pain…passed down from one generation on to the next. I might hate what she'd done, but I hadn't worn her shoes. If my mother had been an overbearing monster, would I have killed her to escape, only to become a monster myself? Like Daisy passing on the pain she endured for her mother's sadistic amusement? How far back did it go? Where had the sin been bestowed that would be passed to the daughter? Daisy. The Overmare. Had I just gotten lucky that my mother was affectionate? Was that the exception rather than the rule?

No. I couldn't believe that. There were hundreds in the stable; I couldn't believe that abuse was somehow normal and right while being loving and caring was aberrant. If pain were the norm, it wouldn't be hidden and shameful. It wouldn't drive a pony mad with power and the need to control and humiliate others before others did so to her. She'd betrayed the stable, but I wondered if perhaps she'd simply seen it as hurting us before we turned upon her, or the stable itself broke down and slew her.

How was it that the Wasteland could hurt ponies, even in the stable? Was it something in the land, or in us?

Finally, he croaked in a raw voice, "I need a shower. I need to get her off me…"

"I'm sorry," I whispered in his ear.

His unfocused eyes found mine, and for a moment I was afraid I'd see disgust and scorn in them. Instead, there was only confusion. "For what?"

"I…didn't listen. I ran in…this is my fault."

To my horror, he smiled, like I'd made a joke or something. "No. It's my fault. I let her use me as her trick pony again. I should have blown us both up…but…I…I couldn't…I couldn't fight her." He gave a hard gasp, as if fighting to keep something down inside him. "I had a grenade, and I…she told me to put it down…and I did! I couldn't do anything but let her…I let her…" He was falling apart again, and I held him tight.

"No!" I kicked myself as he flinched.

I quickly softened my tone. "Blame me, P-21. Blame her for doing it, or me for being stupid, or her mother, or anypony…but not yourself. Understand?" I said sharply. I could handle him hating me. I couldn't handle him hating himself.

"I need to wash…please…tell me we can get out of here. I want to

go back to Chapel. Or Megamart. Flank. Anywhere. Just not here," he said with a shaky breath.

"Not yet. Not yet. I've got a plan." He blinked at me in confusion and I faked my best grin. "It's a good plan. One of my best."

He looked at me for a long minute, then hiccuped, then gave a crooked smile. "Oh…so…we're doomed, then?" He might have been sarcastic, but there was a terrible hope in his voice too.

I felt a little relief. "Smartass…" I said as I trotted to the Overmare's terminal. "Can you get into the system and download the head security mare's password into this PipBuck?" I asked as he limped after me, moving much more slowly and tenderly than before. He nodded, and with a few taps he was in.

"She didn't change her old password," P-21 said in an eerily detached voice. He wasn't out of the woods yet. "Gin Rummy's primary security password is…Blackjack," he said with a glance at me. I sniffed…great. Couldn't have guessed that, could I?

I raised the Overmare's desk in time to see a purple flash. Lacunae staggered, looking quite mortal. Her black lace dress was spotted with sweat. I didn't know alicorns did 'sweaty', but Lacunae certainly appeared to have exerted herself quite a bit. "The males are safe. The weapons are moved. Is the gas ready?"

"Almost. Will you be able to take both of us?" I asked Lacunae as I poked around some of the other files.

"Perhaps one at a time," she said as she looked at P-21. "I'll take him to the other males. He needs medical attention." From the look in her eyes, it was clear she wanted to do far more for him than that. "Unity would give him peace."

I suddenly felt prickles run up my mane. "Would it take away the pain?"

"No. But we would help him bear it," she said softly in my mind, "As we help bear mine." And with that, she and P-21 flashed away. Maybe it was just me, but it seemed like alicorns had a real love for melodrama.

Then the Overmare's door hissed open, and Daisy walked calmly in with her bloody lips wide. "So, she dead yet?" Given her black-faced corpse lay at my hooves, it might have proven a silly question, except that the two raiders behind her started to giggle in glee and ran back into the stable crying out the news. "Good job, Blackjack," Daisy said as she narrowed her yellow eyes.

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. "You knew I was going after

her…"

"Knew? I watched." She nodded to the large round window set in the wall of the office.

"How'd you know it was me?" I replied.

"Um, yeah. Marmalade wouldn't have lasted two weeks alone. If she were alive, she'd have come back or died trying," she said as she trotted towards me. "But you…Blackjack…the second I saw you there in the café, I knew you'd be the only one able to glue a dead mare's cutie mark over your own and eat a heart to save your friend from the Overmare. You'll move heaven and earth if you have to. You always have."

"So you wanted the Overmare dead," I replied.

"I wanted her dead years ago," she replied with a glare at the corpse that was oddly tinged with regret. "I thought, a few years back, that we understood each other. We could be something. But she was already too pissed off…too hurt and crazy. I saw her offing her mom coming for months. I'd have killed her sooner if I'd thought your mom would actually take over the stable."

"Then why not do it yourself?" I asked, wondering if Lacunae was going to be coming back. I really didn't want to fight Daisy with just my claw.

"It's funny. Once we started eating the meat, everything crystallized. I mean, we followed orders before, but once we ate it was almost instinctive. If I killed her, they'd have turned on me before I could get them under control. But *you* killed her. I'm in charge now." She grinned widely. "I have plans for this place. We've been rotting under here. The Overmare just took whatever she saw. Me, I actually talked to the merchants before we ate them. We're going to force the meat into everypony's throat down there, and when they take the flesh, they'll be with us. Then we'll take Megamart. Then the Reapers. We beat them, we'll have fear and respect…and, hell, maybe we'll feed them the flesh too. With that delicious little striped pony, we might have food for dozens, even hundreds of us. And I bet other villages will be glad to pay us in meat to not to eat them."

My nightmare realized. "Right. So I suppose this is where you tell me to eat the meat for real and join you or die?"

Daisy snorted and shook her head. "What, do I look stupid? No, you're just going to die."

She drew a gun, one that definitely hadn't been on the armory

inventory. The silver-plated IF-33 Applebuck had belonged to Mom, as it had to every head of security in the stable going back to the door being sealed. Their names had been scratched on the handle. The damn gun even had its own name: Vigilance. The irony that I was about to be shot by Mom's own pistol was not lost on me.

The gun came up as we both entered S.A.T.S. together. With eerie smoothness, we acted almost as one. But while she was trying to blow my head off, I had a different thought in mind. My magic reached out and neatly depressed the clip eject as she fired the round still in the chamber. It nearly took my head off; I could see it passing by me in the slowed down time. The bullet buzzed softly past my ear. I took the hefty clip and promptly smacked her across the face with it twice.

Do it, Daisy…do it.

She drew a second clip with her hooves, and I jammed the first clip back into gun. She dropped the second clip to rack the slide, and I ejected it and hit her with two floating clips. Her yellow eyes blazed with familiar fury as she drew a third clip to load into the gun, but I jammed one back in. Then she screamed in rage and threw the weapon aside. My smile grew as I floated the gun to me and racked a round into the chamber with my magic. S.A.T.S. ran out.

"I fucking *hate* unicorns…" she spat, then snapped out her baton with a jerk of her head and charged me, keeping her head low. There were rules to fighting. Earth ponies had to get in close and dirty, break a unicorn's concentration so she couldn't use her magic. Unicorns had to stay away or risk getting crunched.

The Overmare's office was NOT conducive to the latter. I popped back into S.A.T.S. with enough charge for one shot. I lined it up, executed the spell, and sent a bullet straight into her leg. I wasn't going to risk a headshot that might not do more than piss her off, but at least I could slow her down a little. She still slammed into me like a train, but I'd been hit by boats before and kept my concentration on the gun.

Rule two: to disable a unicorn, take out her horn. I brought Marmalade's PipBuck up over my glowing horn as the baton fell with the creepy certainty of S.A.T.S. and cracked loudly against the casing. She swung again and again, smashing my forelegs and beating against the PipBuck casing as my horn pressed Vigilance right up against her gut. Rule three: a unicorn doesn't have to move to hit you with a levitated weapon. She threw herself aside and off

me just in the nick of time as the gun fired into the ceiling. I rocked forward on to my hooves as Daisy came back around for another charge, and I took another shot at her legs. Then she was on me, all swinging and biting and kicking as she tried to take me out before I could pistol stamp her again.

Instead, I cheated, dropped into S.A.T.S., and blew two more magic bullets into her face. The helmet she wore deflected some of the force, but the energy nearly flayed her features, sending blood pouring into her eyes. I curled up and rolled out from under her, bringing Vigilance around and putting two more solid rounds in her left flank. I heard sounds of more shooting from below. Either Lacunae hadn't been able to come back for me or else the raiders had made a push now that the Overmare was dead.

I was battered and bruised, but I had the gun. And she had…a rejuvenation potion, Hydra, Buck, and Stampede? Not fair! She chowed down, and I watched my hard work healing away before my eyes. Next time she came at me, I'd be unicorn paste, and we both knew it.

So I ran. I jumped down into the passageway beneath the Overmare's desk even as she slammed her hooves down where I'd just been. I ran, flinging what weapons I had left behind me as I shot out the two flickering lights illuminating the hallway.

"Blackjack!" she yelled as she raced after me.

"No! It's 'Cunnnnnttttt'!" I screamed back as I fired down the hallway at the charging mare, aiming for her legs, doing all I could to slow her down even as she regenerated the damage.

Then the mines I'd tossed started beeping. She screamed as three tremendous bangs filled the tunnel and she went down hard. Carefully, I approached as she trembled from drugs, madness, and injuries. "I'm glad you came back, Blackjack," she wheezed as she slowly pushed herself to her legs again. "I'm glad. If there's anypony that could end this, it was you." I could hear the grind of bone as her limbs knit together. Her lower body looked flayed as the magic potions kept her alive, and I hesitated.

What the hell would it take to finish her? "I want to help you, Daisy…" I stammered.

"You don't know how to help me. You didn't then," she gasped as she looked at me with her crazed raider eyes. I met her gaze with my mutated stare. I wondered which of us was more the monster after all this time. "I mean…telling on my mom? Do you know what

she did to me? I disappeared for a week and you didn't wonder why?"

"I thought you were avoiding me," I muttered lamely.

"I was in medical, you jackass!" she yelled as she started to advance again. "She beat me senseless, had them heal me, and beat me again! Because you had to try and arrest my mom. What did you think would happen?"

"I wanted to save you!" I countered, raising the gun but struggling to shoot. "I still do." I just didn't know how.

"That makes two of us," she replied as she gained enough fury to charge once more, despite the two rounds I put in her chest. She ducked and whirled, hitting me with a double rear kick that sent me flying back into the railing of the stable door. The impact sent a disturbing tingle through my rear legs and knocked the wind out of me. As I lifted my head, I caught sight of two hooves, and then my head was snapped back so hard I was certain she'd busted my neck. I collapsed underneath the railing, struggling to keep my wits as I backed into the atrium.

I'd happily trade my horn for some Med-X, an ice pack, and a bottle of whiskey. "How…how was I supposed to save you?"

"Kill Mom. Kill me. Either way, it'd end. But you couldn't, and your mother wouldn't, so you didn't," she replied. "It's as simple at that, Blackjack." She kicked me clear across the atrium floor, and my journey was stopped only by hitting the stake in the center of the room. She stood over me, looking disappointed. "Sometimes, the only way to save a pony is to kill the pony."

And Daisy was about to save me.

Then a white and red striped cannonball flew across the atrium and slammed into Daisy. The mare rocked but didn't fall. Rampage, though, had her hooves around Daisy's throat. "Eat my fucking liver, will you? Eat some floor!" She flipped over backwards and slammed Daisy's face into the ground. I stared as I saw dangling lengths of chain sticking out of her body, wondering if we were going to have to disintegrate her again to get them out.

Daisy rolled to her hooves as the shooting and shouting increased and Rivets and Midnight pressed into the atrium along with dozens of other ponies. They might not know how to use guns, but they had the basics of point, shoot, reload. Rivets dumped a tin can of scrap metal into the nozzle of her steam cleaning pack, and with a great whoosh and clattering bang she blasted a chunk of raiders

with shrapnel and scalding vapor. Their weapons sparked off her welding helmet and thick protective barding.

"Hey, meat wagon, get out of the way!" she yelled. Rampage stepped away from Daisy with a sharp grin.

"You don't fucking get it, do you?" Rampage sneered up at the larger pony. An emerald beam of light flashed from the balcony, the energy burning away Daisy's barding and cooking the meat beneath it.

"We're her friends," Glory said. The small gray pegasus had been forced to mount Leo's old gun to fire over her shoulder to accommodate its size and weight.

There was a purple flash behind Daisy, and Lacunae appeared inside her sphere, the minigun motor already purring at speed above her. "That means…"

P-21 knelt beside me, forcing a stable rejuvenation potion to my lips as he glared at Daisy. "She doesn't have to fight alone!" He gave me a shaky little smile as he looked down at me. "Right?"

"Right…" I slowly crawled back to my hooves as the rest of the raiders rallied around Daisy. The giggling mass was armed, armored, drugged, and crazed. Even with them outnumbered by me and my friends, it was a daunting task. But for the survival of the stable, it'd be finished.

The final battle for Stable 99 was on.

The atrium roared and thundered as both sides tore into the other with reckless abandon. The raiders, with their diseased aggression, fearlessly took hit after hit for the pleasure of hearing the screams of the stable dwellers. But three weeks of fear and deprivation had eaten away at the stable ponies' fear and doubt, and there wasn't a single pony here who wasn't ready to fight and die for their home.

The close quarters and deadly weaponry swiftly took their toll, but when one of the stable ponies fell, their fellow ponies would drag them to safety and administer healing while the others fought on. If one ran out of bullets, another would spare a clip. The raiders fought as individuals. Brutally, but alone. Even Daisy, snatching weapons from whatever raider she came across, might as well have been by herself for all the help she gave to the rest.

Ponies, decent and civilized ponies, would win the day for once. For once, the Wasteland would lose.

Perhaps she saw the inevitable, but, her disfigured barding covered in gore and her lips foaming from the drugs pumping through her

system, Daisy leapt forward in a final charge. She had the strength and frenzy to kill plenty of ponies before she was finally dropped.

We weren't going to give her that chance. From the balcony above, a stream of emerald light flashed down across her frame. Lacunae's finger of flaming metal washed across Daisy and every raider that joined her in that final charge. With a deft toss, P-21's fragmentation grenade bounced under her and exploded directly behind her, shredding her legs. But just as momentum threatened to carry her into our lines, Rampage charged forward into the fire and reared up, shoving with every bit of strength in her frame. Daisy reared on bloody legs as gunfire bit and cut into her before finally they crashed to the side.

The giggling rose to hysterical levels as something broke within the raiders, and they milled, fighting each other more than us. I slumped as the adrenaline receded, leaving me weak and shaky. I approached where Daisy had fallen, her body broken and riddled with holes and her blood pooling beneath her. "So…is it…over?" she gasped softly, sucking in short, shallow breaths as she looked up with her jaundiced eyes.

I lay down next to her, pushing off the goggles and nodding.

"G…good…" she panted softly with a smile. "You…saved…me… Black…" Her eyes twitched as she took one last hiccupping breath and then slowly relaxed, her pupils expanding in some final semblance of sanity. Of peace.

"Take care, Daisy," I murmured softly, my magic closing her eyes. "Goodbye." Sometimes, to save a pony...

* * *

We'd won. Victory was supposed to bring certain feelings. Joy. Elation. Celebration. Certainly, everypony in the stable felt this to some degree, but a third of the stable was dead. There was no celebration for that, and I was so exhausted that it was all I could do to shrug out of the rancid security barding, take another healing potion, tell Rivets and Midnight to dump the bodies outside, and crawl to my room…my room.

It was just as messy as I'd left it, with coveralls all over the floor, stale food chips lying in bowls on the bed, crumbs everywhere. There was a definite stale pong in the air I'd never noticed before. Slowly, I crawled onto the mattress with a groan. There was so

much to do. I needed to check on P-21. Rampage. Glory. Even make sure Lacunae was all right. I had to find out who'd lived and died. I had to talk to Rivets and Midnight about the males and how they couldn't be used that way anymore. Contact Megamart.

Instead, I fell flat on my face asleep.

* * *

Somepony was touching me. It wasn't a painful touch, but it was decidedly unusual. There was a very faint chemical smell, too. "If you're planning on gassing me, could you please do it quickly?" I mumbled. "I'm way too tired and sore to draw this out."

There was a familiar eep, and I glanced back at a blushing Glory as she pinched a rag between her hooves. A small metal flask of turpentine rested beside her. "I…I was…ah…Just…uncovering your cutie mark," she said as she pointed at the exposed cards on my left flank.

"Oh…" I replied lightly. "Well…carry on…" I said, closing my eyes with a wry smile.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked me in her soft, timid voice.

"Mhmmm?" I asked as she teased Marmalade's hide off my rump.

"I'm sorry about your friend," she said quietly.

"Me too…though Daisy wasn't a friend, exactly." I sighed. "She was the first pony I'd failed to save. Her mom was beating her. I tried to get her arrested. It didn't work; I'm pretty sure I'm to blame for making her so…hurt."

"Why?" Glory asked softly. "You're not to blame for everything that goes wrong in the Wasteland, or even your own stable. You tried to help. That has to count for something."

"Good intentions don't excuse bad results," I said with a sigh. "Do you think we could have helped them? The infected?"

Glory started to say something as she nudged the glued flap of hide aside, then sighed. "No. It's not like you can just wave a magic wand and have a cure. There was once magic that might have been able to help, but today…no. A cure would take months, maybe years of research."

"But Lighthooves created that damn thing... " I winced as she pulled the flap free and tossed it into the trash.

"No. I seriously doubt he did. I don't know where he found this disease, but even the Enclave can't create something like this from

scratch. So even if he altered the contagion, he might not have a cure himself. I'm guessing they increased its rate of progression…it sounds like most raiders take months to break down, but this does it in less than a week."

I sighed as the turpentine evaporated off my butt, feeling a niggling sensation. "You know…the flesh eating parts aside…I wonder if Lighthooves was after something else. The infected ponies were all loyal to the Overmare and Daisy. What if Lighthooves wants the disease to create unconditional loyalty? It would explain why he would want to accelerate the infection rate and find a strain that would work on pegasi."

"Maybe…but why? Most of us are already loyal," she said a touch defensively.

"But would you kill…say…helpless surface ponies? Or other pegasi if given the order to?" She looked particularly troubled by that. "Maybe the Enclave is after a disease that ensures loyalty. The aggression is just a bonus."

"That's…a terrifying thought. It would mean that Lighthooves plans on asking pegasi to do things that are grossly illegal or immoral. That's treasonous," she said nervously, then shook herself. "This is all speculation, though. We don't actually know why he's developing it."

I groaned. "Why can't a smart pony think about this?"

"Smart ponies are," she assured me with a pat on the shoulder. Then there was a moment's hesitation. "Blackjack…on the boat…why'd you point that gun at me?"

I sighed, "'Cause I'm crazy…"

"Blackjack."

"No, really. I'm crazy, Glory." I sat up with a groan, looking back at her. "For the last week or two I've been seeing a pony. This pale buck. He comes and goes, but he's always talking to me…taunting me. He builds me up when I'm falling apart and tears me down when things are going good." I looked around the room, half expecting him to be there. "I can't understand it, other than me being crazy."

"A hallucination you have conversations with?" she said with a frown. "When did they start?"

"Mmm…Brimstone's Fall?" Then I frowned. "Well, actually, I didn't start having conversations with him until Miramare." Oh, great. Now all my paranoia alarms were going off! "You don't think

Lighthooves did something to me, do you? Put the Dealer into my head to drive me crazy?" I had an Enclave mind control device in my brain, I was sure of it! "Glory! I need you to do brain surgery on me, quick!" I said, seizing her shoulders in my hooves.

She looked at me flatly and smacked my face with her hoof. "You do not need any more holes in your head, Blackjack." Okay, maybe she had a point there. The gray pegasus sighed softly and rubbed my cheek. "So, this Dealer didn't make you try and shoot me?"

"No. I…I don't know. I mean…if it's not some Enclave plot…" Now I was feeling confused and anxious.

"It could also be the taint," Glory said softly. "Maybe that's how it's getting to you." Oh, yeah…that. I'd kinda locked that fact up in the back of my head. Glory stroked my filthy mane. "I just wanted to know…if I'd done something…anything…" She chewed on her lower lip in worry, her lavender eyes looking up at me.

I blinked and flushed. "No. Glory, you've been…wonderful. You saved my life in that fight. You save me more than I deserve…" And I knew that look in her cute little face. That was a kissing look. She was giving me a kissing look. My knees felt weak, my tummy fluttery, and my nethers were giving me some definite signs of approval. I liked her kissing look…

And why did I suddenly not mind nearly as much as I had in Chapel?

I had to admit, she might not be very good at kissing, but she felt very…very…nice. It was different from just a kiss, though; I'd kissed plenty of mares and a couple of bucks, and only once did I do it beyond foreplay. Only once did it mean something special. As our lips met, I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"Blackjack," Glory purred softly once our lips parted, her eyes closed.

"Yeah?" I murmured, my head spinning. I'd never kissed like that before.

"You need a shower," Glory said softly. "And clean your room."

* * *

When she'd told me I needed a shower, I hadn't anticipated company. The showers weren't exactly the sort of place two mares could get frisky; you never knew when a filly might stroll in. Somehow, though, we had the entire bathroom to ourselves for

once. Hot water, glorious and wondrous hot water, cascaded down on both of us as Glory calmly washed the grease and gunk from my mane and scrubbed the yellow stain out of my hide. Soap, simple soap, was a luxury I'd never appreciated before as she scrubbed every inch. I'd never been washed like this before. I doubted that Glory had, either.

And then, when her washings went to my back quarter…suddenly, I couldn't care less about hot water or soap or anything else at all. After everything I'd been through, this simple contact and bliss sent my hooves tingling and my eyes rolling in absolute joy. It was as if I were finally getting a reward for doing something good.

The only thing better was getting to return the favor…

* * *

"So…where'd you learn that?" I asked with a grin. I couldn't stop grinning. If I were faced with Deus, Blueblood, Manticore Pony, Sanguine, and the entirety of the Zodiacs, I'd have laughed at the lot of them. I'd just…I don't know. It wasn't just sex, but something a thousand times better.

Glory flushed as she helped me clean my room, as she'd insisted. It was a little surreal. There were a thousand things I should be doing, first and foremost checking on P-21. But he was still helping the males recover and dealing with his own pain. He needed time and space; I could at least give him that. Rampage had told me she'd deal with the chains stuck in her body…that was all she'd comment on. So now I was cleaning my room, and I couldn't help but giggle every third step. Had I ever been this happy?

Probably not.

"Around," Glory said evasively as she blushed, looking at me from under her purple bangs. At my arched brow, she went more rosy. "Honestly…P-21 and Rampage."

That surprised me. "Really?"

"Well, P-21 was a little more clinical about what mares do together." I watched her squirm delightfully. "Rampage…well… she's really been around. I thought my coat would turn pink when she tried demonstrating zebra tantric sex positions." That made my brow arch, and she starting going from pink to red. "Well, she did!"

I decided teasing was not called for just now as I heaped up all my dirty clothes in a canvas sack while Glory made the bed. "So…have

you always been interested in mares, or am I just really lucky?"

"Both?" Glory offered as she tapped her hooves together. "Dusk is…very much…and I didn't want to be like her, so I just didn't have intimate relationships. I just figured I had too much studying and other work to do to worry about it. You finally got me to act on it."

"You have terrible taste. I'm probably the last mare you should have done that with. I can introduce you to Midnight, though," I said with a crooked little smile.

"Don't do that," she told me softly. Huh? I'd done something? "Don't tear yourself down like that…even if you're joking. I'm glad I was finally able to do that with you. I don't want to do it with anypony else." Great, now I was pretty sure *I* was blushing.

I tossed the bags full of dirty laundry by the door, looking at the shockingly clean room. "Wow…if Mom knew it'd take three weeks in the Wasteland to get me to clean my room, she'd have thrown me out of the stable years ago." Mom…Suddenly, all the happy feelings started to slide away as I sat on the floor beside the bed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Glory asked as she reached out to stroke my cheek. I couldn't help it; I closed my eyes and leaned into her caress even as I felt tears run down my face.

"I don't know. I just…I don't know how to feel right now. I'm sad she's gone, I'm mad she was killed…I don't feel much satisfaction from killing the Overmare or Daisy. It's just…I don't know," I finished lamely. "I was so excited to think I'd finally get to see her again. Tell her everything I've learned. Show her that…that I really was the security mare she wanted me to be. But I can't. There's so much that we'll never get to talk about now." I sighed as I sat up a little more and hugged Glory closer to me. "I don't know if she knew that I loved her before I left. Now I never will."

"She knew," Glory replied with a smile. "You're not exactly the best at hiding your emotions."

I feigned indignance. "I'll have you know I'm one sneaky, lying pony when I want to be."

Her wing stroked my horn…oh, sweet Celestia, she could do that all night and day if she wanted to! "But when you don't want to be, you're pretty obvious, Blackjack."

* * *

I have to admit, things were looking up. I had an honest-to-goodness marefriend and an inkling of why Midnight never said yes to me. The males were free…well, sort of. Breeding rotations were suspended, and as soon as Rivets and I could get something concrete down, they'd be abolished. The males, starved to the point they could barely walk, were being treated by the very medical staff that'd tormented them their whole lives. They flinched when I tried talking to them, and for the most part just ate their algae slushies and tried to recover as well as they could.

That left P-21.

"Hey," I said as I found him in medical, calming three colts who were still not convinced the mares weren't going to kill them all. He flinched at my voice and looked back at me with wary eyes. He was trying to coax them into eating real food, but they weren't convinced his apples and carrots weren't some bizarre poisons from outside.

"Hey," he replied. "You look good," he said with a ghost of a smile. "So, did Glory finally pounce you?" I flushed but smiled back.

"Yeah. She told me you helped with that?" I asked, glaring at the medical ponies with my shooty look. At least, I hoped it was my shooty look; I really needed to remember to try it out in a mirror. It worked, though, and they found something important to do away from us.

"I just gave her a nudge in the right direction. Rampage gave her the mare on mare dissertation," he replied calmly.

"And how are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Sore…but…fine," he said matter-of-factly, looking at me with that stoic little smile. I reached out a hoof to brush his mane out of his eyes and he jerked away. Our eyes met and he looked away. "Maybe not one hundred percent fine…"

"You'll talk to me if you need it?" I asked, and he nodded. That was the best I could hope for. I looked at the apple core. "Introducing them to wasteland cuisine?"

"Just trying to get them off recycled food," he said with a sigh. "I know we grew up on the stuff, but eating food recycled from waste is just…gross. I don't care what kind of magical filtration you're using." I stuck my tongue out as well. I would never again stray from my two-century-old delicacies. Then his voice dropped as he spoke the question we were all dreading. "Also, what if…what if some infected bodies got in there?"

I shivered at the thought. “I told Rivets and Midnight they had to be dragged outside. She assured me the system can handle a body put into it, but I don’t know.” I sighed, rubbing my temples with my hooves. Reality was pissing on my good day; at least that was a sign that this wasn’t all a great dream. “If they don’t have the recycled food, then what are we supposed to feed three hundred ponies? They’ve eaten all the stores already.”

“I know,” P-21 said with a sigh. He looked around medical. “I just…I don’t think the threat is real to them. Raiders…diseases…all everypony can think about is not thinking about it. Going back to the status quo.” He sat down beside me. “P-4 and U-9 were asking me when they were supposed to go back to their breeding queue. They just…can’t understand they don’t have to do it anymore.” The frustration showed clear on his face. “And U-13 is trying to convince the other colts that a breeding queue is preferable. He actually *liked* it.” He looked so upset that I thought he might cry... or blow somepony up.

“He’s been conditioned to. It’s not his fault.” But I knew there were mares who had been cheated of their reproductive chance and were not happy about it. I looked at the medical ponies on the far side of the room watching us with poorly concealed resentment. “I don’t know…they’re glad the killing’s stopped, but it’s almost like they hate us for staying here.”

He frowned at them. “I’d be happy to introduce them to Persuasion.”

“Don’t do that…” Because a lot of the mares had guns now, guns out of security and guns from the raiders’ stores. And they weren’t giving them up.

“It isn’t how it’s supposed to be, is it, Blackjack?” he asked me softly as he looked at the colts walking back into their dingy quarters. “We won. It’s supposed to be better. Right?”

“It just feels wrong,” I admitted.

“It feels like Flank.”

* * *

“So, program routing log for EC-1101?” Midnight asked as she handled the Delta PipBuck with some admiration. She’d marveled as the broadcaster made contact with the maneframe without needing a single connection. “This is amazing.” She scrolled

through the options as she looked at the cool blue screen. “You can actually access terminals at range with this. Fully StealthBuck compatible. Huge radio sensitivity. A major step over the 3000 model.”

I sat back, fiddling with Marmalade’s PipBuck as Midnight worked. Clearly, the last few weeks had been tough on her, but now it really showed in her puffy eyes and ragged look. “Fully what compatible?”

She looked at me with an annoyed frown. “StealthBuck. One-shot invisibility spells you can trigger with your PipBuck,” she explained as she searched for the routing data, then noticed my stunned look. “What? It’s in the PipBuck maintenance guide, page 141. I mean, I’ve never seen one before, but they were supposed to make you undetectable.”

Invisibility spells? I thought of Brimstone’s Fall, Flank, Blueblood Manor, even the sand dogs’ lair. Fuck you, Hoofington. Why couldn’t you send a couple of those my way, huh?! I scrolled through my inventory system, looking at the myriad of different kinds of ammo, the guns I’d salvaged, the brass casings I hauled around, and dozens of pieces of associated crap I hoped to turn into bottle caps in the future. And there, right near the bottom of the list…*StealthBuck x2*. I gritted my teeth to suppress a scream.

Have I mentioned I am not a smart pony? Not…at…all. I wondered if I had some kind of magic ‘you win’ device hidden somewhere in my bags that I just didn’t know about yet.

I heard the shuffling of cards in my mind as she accessed the data.

“So. Where was this program trying to go, Midnight?”

“Shut up a second and I’ll tell you,” she snapped, then frowned. “Sorry. Tired…” She looked at the terminal. “I can tell you where it’s been…every ministry hub in Canterlot, Stable-Tec HQ in Fillydelphia, someplace called Maripony, the M.A.S. and M.o.M. hubs in Manehattan, Helpinghoof Clinic, half of the MASEBS network, Stables 1 through 7, 9, 14 and 15, 18, 24, 29, 45, 60, 73, 78, and 99. And its next destination was…MASEBS broadcast tower 14.”

My navigation tool brought up an icon almost due southeast.

I looked at a list on the terminal.

Twilight Sparkle> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.
Applejack> Stable 2. Blocked by Stable 2 Special Protocols. Denied.
Rainbow Dash> Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.

Fluttershy > Location unknown. Search timeout. Denied.
Rarity > MoP Hub, Canterlot. Deceased. Denied.
Pinkie Pie > MoM Hub, Manehattan. Deceased. Denied.
General Stonehide > Canterlot Command Center. Deceased. Denied.
General Borealis > Location unknown. Search timeout. Pending.
General Shimmerstar > (Hoofington Command Center). Primary check in progress. Pending.
Chief Justice Fairheart > (Fluttershy Medical Center). Primary check uninitiated. Pending.
Director of O.I.A. Horse > (Robronco HQ, Hoofington). Primary check uninitiated. Pending.
Descendant protocol > N/A. Error. Error.

Now I frowned. It had found Applejack's location, so why had it moved on? What were 'Stable 2 Special Protocols'? And why was General Borealis's 'Search timeout' marked 'Pending' while the others were 'Denied'? ... I really didn't know anything about programs, did I?

She smiled a crooked, tired little smile. "So, now that you have the data…when are you leaving?"

I simply looked at her in shock. We'd saved them from a mad Overmare just yesterday, and today they were trying to shove us right out the door? Disappointment welled up inside me as a shiver went up my mane. "Why? Do you want us to go?"

The black unicorn signed and rubbed her temples. "I don't know…" she said as she looked tiredly at me. "I just want things back to normal where all I had to worry about was PipBucks."

"Join the club," I said with a little grin, but she didn't return it. "I'm sure with a little time you'll get used to the Wasteland. I know you and Rivets will love all the scrap and parts in Megamart. And there's a church dedicated to the Goddesses in Chapel. Even Flank wouldn't be a bad place to visit as long as--"

"Blackjack, don't you get it?" she cried out as she whirled on me. "I don't want to see Megamart, Chapel, Flank, or whatever. I want to shut the door and get back to fixing PipBucks. If you want to go… go. But I don't want to know that that world exists! I want to close the door and never let it open again." She looked at me a moment before her ears drooped and she collapsed, sniffing. "I'm sorry. I just…So many friends are gone. I think I'm going to see Pirouette in the cafeteria, but she's gone. And I think about Sparkler…eating… and…I just want to forget. I don't want to think about it, Blackjack.

None of us do."

I stared at her, feeling numb. The Dealer shuffled his cards as he looked at me gravely. I said quietly, "Midnight, this is my home."

She looked back and me and faked a smile. "Yeah, Blackjack. But… I'm not sure you belong here anymore…I'm sorry." And she dropped my PipBuck and rushed out before she could even remove Marmalade's.

"Don't start," I said sharply to the Dealer. "They just need time. A few weeks and they'll be able to deal with the Wasteland. And you. That's all."

The Dealer just looked at me like my mother, the cards sliding past each other. He just looked at me with that patient, sad expression. "Just let me know when you're ready…"

* * *

P-21 was right: it was turning into Flank all over again. My friends all found themselves increasingly isolated. Lacunae walked like a purple ghost through the halls, scattering the stable ponies in her path. Even with wings hidden and minigun put away, they avoided her like death itself. Rampage found herself consumed by boredom as she tried to engage stable ponies and found them shying away. Even Glory was forced to spend more time with me than with the ponies she wanted to heal; was a pegasus really so aberrant? Most tragic of all, P-21 found himself shunned by the males he'd hoped to save. He was P-21, and so he was dead to them.

It wasn't that the ponies were entirely ungrateful. There were dozens of small parties and impromptu celebrations between surviving friends. The slain were mourned and the Overmare cursed... but we weren't a part of it. I'd hear the laughter and the talk, but it all died the second I walked through the door. Then everypony would look awkward until we left again. They didn't know how to deal with us; it was like they were waiting for the moment when we'd turn on them. Even Midnight was avoiding me.

Rivets became the de facto Overmare. I tried to spend every minute I could convincing her to send ponies to Megamart, trade for things the stable needed. I even echoed Bottlecap's little 'trade will save the Wasteland' speech, but the gray earth mare just muttered and gave a halfhearted 'we'll see.'

I looked at my friend, sitting there behind her desk, looking drawn

and spent. “Rivets? You can’t keep Stable 99 bottled up anymore. The systems are falling apart.”

She rubbed her bloodshot eyes. “Ugh, you sound just like the Overmare.” She slapped her hooves down on the desk. “Do you think I don’t know this stable, Blackjack? I know every pipe! Every wire! Every talisman! Everything!! I don’t care what the data says; we can keep this stable going for two more centuries if we have to!”

“But the--” I began, but then she laughed. It made my mane crawl to hear that coming from the cool-headed mare. She rocked back and grinned at me.

“The stable. Is. Fine! Sure, things have been breaking down since the Incident--the first one--but we’ve been fixing them. Every Overmare since then has been sure that tomorrow we’d all die,” she said, her eyes narrowing and her teeth grinding, “But I know what this stable can do; what we can do. So don’t you come in here telling me my job. I’ll fix Stable 99 without having to set hoof out in that... that great... open... hrrrugh!” She shuddered violently. Apparently, I wasn’t the only pony who went all oogly from that wide... empty... urrrg...

I took a deep breath, trying to get her to understand. “Rivets. It doesn’t have to be this way. I know you don’t like the outside, but--”

“No. We’ve lived this way for over a century, safe and secure!” she shouted. Then she took a deep breath and settled back in her chair. “Sorry,” she began, her voice softer. “I guess you’re still just trying to help, but you’ve got to understand that you’ve already done everything we need. The ponies here don’t want to things to change, and neither do I. We don’t want to trade, we don’t want to explore, we don’t want to set hoof outside at all. We want to shut the door and go back to the way things are supposed to run. You were a good security mare, and you *have* done a lot for us... but if you keep trying to cause trouble, I’m going to have to ask you and your... friends to leave. Understand?”

I tried to think of some new argument to try, but my mind came up blank. After a few moments of thought, I just gave a resigned nod.

“Good,” she said, rising. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to meet with some other maintenance ponies about keeping the stable running.”

* * *

I found myself alone in the atrium. Alone in the largest community gathering space in the stable. Ponies entering would take one look at me and then promptly continue to someplace else. I found myself reading Rivets's book: 'Duck and Cover: an Equestrian Patriot's Guide to Survival'. Really, it was more a guide to blowing stuff up. The copy had been highly annotated. 'Napalm: add a cup of cinnamon oil per five gallons to the mix. Zebras can't stand the smell.' 'See if you can mix a little magnesium with the C-4. Boom and flash trumps boom.'

A photograph showed a unicorn mare and an earth pony buck sitting in front of a crater, grinning at the camera. There were remains of what appeared to be dragons littering the rim. A little note was written at the bottom. 'What else did you expect from the Ministry of Awesome?'

I smiled as I flipped through, looking for other little notes. There was a drawing of a building with arrows pointed at the base. 'Set charges here.' Another of a bridge over a river, and the comment, 'They'll never see us coming.' There were diagrams of zebra factories, towns, water works, and bases, all with notes of what to sabotage or blow up.

A little photo in the back displayed a dozen mares and three bucks posing together. 'Ministry of Awesome, Ground Pounders. We bring awesome to earth.' I blinked at the picture and the one lone pegasus in it. Jetstream sat with a sad half smile surrounded by grinning unicorns and earth ponies.

'Saw Rainbow Dash talking with the director today. Didn't seem happy. Too much peace talk. Too much ending the war rather than winning it. Goldenblood seems certain we're going to win, but I can't tell if he was blowing smoke up Dash's butt or really believes it. Sometimes it feels like the war is going to go on forever.'

One picture showed what I thought was a distant sunrise, but the spherical shape was wrong…and it was in front of the mountains rather than behind them. 'Trottenheimer's megaspell goes boom. We're out of a job.'

The last black and white picture in the back showed the mare and buck sitting outside the entrance to Stable 99. A young, crying unicorn foal was cradled in the unicorn mare's hooves. The note on the back read, 'End of the world time. We'll be back. Card Trick's playing security now, and I'm fixing machines instead of breaking

them. Card Trick took the kid when her mom's pass was denied. Said she couldn't reach Stable 90 in time. No one says no to Trick.'

I smiled as I pulled out Vigilance. Card Trick. Tarot. Little Poker. Full House. 52 Pick-up. Straight Flush. Aces. Royal Flush. Bridge. Hearts. Gin Rummy. Go Fish.

Go Fish. I felt an odd little chill run through me. I hugged the pistol to my chest, feeling a connection to a mare I'd never imagined and a mother I'd never appreciated till it was too late.

* * *

Only two days later, the only ponies who wanted to spend any time with me at all were my friends. Every eye looked at us with fear and suspicion. Sometimes, I'd see a knot of ponies and wonder if maybe they were going to try and force us to leave. We were reminders of the outside world, alien and dangerous.

I was healed up. Glory had gotten her AER-14 to work. Rampage had extracted the chains with the assist of a winch; the less I knew about the details, the better. And Lacunae kept looking at me expectantly…I just knew the Goddess was waiting to call a favor due. P-21 didn't even try and talk to the males anymore. He was sleeping on my couch. Eventually, Lacunae excused herself; she'd wait on the surface. I suspected she needed a good dose of Enervation to put some distance between herself and the Goddess.

The third day after the attack, I woke to find a petition taped to my door. 'Request for Blackjack and company to depart the stable'. I counted a hundred names before I gave up. Midnight was right there on the first page.

I curled up with Glory on my bed, the papers tossed aside as I nuzzled her neck. "We'll go tomorrow."

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I know what it's like to want a home," Glory said softly. She knew far better than I did. I held her a little more snugly now, knowing what she'd lost.

Mom was dead. My old friends were dead or had decided I reminded them of things they wanted to forget. My new friends were unwelcome. It was time to go.

* * *

My mother and I were one of the few mother/daughter pairs given

the luxury of our own rooms. I rarely went into her quarters; it simply felt wrong. But in the morning, we'd be going to MASEBS #14, and I'd never have this chance again. Someday, the stable would replace both of us; how, I didn't know…honestly, I didn't really care anymore. They'd made their feelings clear. All I could do was respect their wishes. Given how everypony was acting, when I told my friends that we'd need to go to the tower to find out more about EC-1101, they were all more or less glad to be leaving. It was a destination in the direction of 'away from 99'.

Even after weeks, the room still smelled like her: a curious mix of powder, gun oil, and lavender soap. There wasn't much special; everything in the stable was mass produced. You'd try and put a unique stamp on things, though; in its own way, my mess was my attempt to personalize the impersonal. At least, that was a good enough excuse for me to not clean my room. Mom had decorated hers with pictures and drawings. I knew Mom sketched, but I never realized how well she could draw. I wondered if her baton and cuff cutie mark was like mine, a talent she'd defaulted to because she wasn't allowed to be the artist she wished to be.

I wished she could have heard me play…

I saw a drawing of herself and Petunia as fillies; Daisy's mother had a hard and aggressive look about her, just like Daisy at that age. Another self portrait of her in her security barding with a strange mare I could only assume was my grandmother. More older mares. Some dignified. Some lonely. A few with smartass expressions. So that was where I got it. The oldest showed the mare from the Ministry of Awesome pictures, her hooves holding the young unicorn filly. 'Never had a kid of my own. Mother wandered off north. Hope she finds what she needs there.' Then I saw a picture of me as a foal with a Joker card stuck on my horn. I smiled as I turned it over. 'My Lucky Girl'.

I felt tears running down my cheek as I folded the pictures. I was lucky... luckier than I deserved. I just wish I'd appreciated it when it could have meant something.

* * *

It was late, and my friends were sleeping. My internal clock told me I needed to be doing a patrol just now, and odds were that I was the only security mare left in the stable. I knew I wasn't going to be

sleeping, and, odd as it was, I wanted to do one last sweep of the place. Tomorrow, I'd have Midnight swap Marmalade's PipBuck for my own, and we'd be off, this time forever. We'd saved Stable 99 as much as it wanted to be saved.

Just like Flank.

I trotted through the dim halls, hearing a few late celebrations in distant living quarters I knew better than to try and attend. The laughter and giggles tugged at me, though, and I still wished I could share in the festivities.

I made my way down to the humming halls of the maintenance and utility levels instead. My hooves were so familiar with the path that I could let my mind wander as I walked along. I passed the storeroom where I'd found P-21 stealing supplies. I found the nook under the generators where I'd hid him so long ago. I went all the way down to Atmospheric Maintenance Three. It hadn't been cleaned up; my blood was still dried on the table, and cards were still scattered about.

My magic gathered them all up, one after another, stacking them in my hooves with practiced ease. Then I slipped them into the worn cardboard box with the familiar scribble on it. It was something often done by young in the stable to claim some trinket or toy. 'Property of Tarot'.

Tarot?

Then there came a muffled crump and a resounding pop and hiss from somewhere else in the labyrinthine maintenance level. No alarms though. No alerts on the radio channels. I slipped the cards into my pack and quickly rushed in the direction of the hiss. A foul reek of decay filled my nostrils as black water crept along the floor. 'Biowaste Recycling Tanks #2' was on the door.

Inside, there were two enormous metal tanks as high as me, four times as wide, and almost as long as the room. Numerous pipes marked with faded labels ran to and from each tank. From a burst seal sprayed the noxious gray water. I gagged from the stench.

"I knew that seal wouldn't hold!" a young mare shouted from around a monkey wrench clenched in her jaws as she entered from behind me. She raced past and climbed a stair to reach the spray. Her brown utility barding quickly took on a dark stain from the water. "Close the number four valve!" she yelled as she tried to tighten the bolts around the spraying connector.

I looked around cluelessly till I saw her waving a hoof in the

direction of some big wheels on the wall. One had a number 4 on the pipe above it. The wheel glowed as my magic turned it. The spray increased and the filly shrieked, “Close the valve, not open it!” I yelled my apologies and reversed direction. What, it wasn’t like the damn thing was labeled!

With the valve closed, the spray slowed to a trickle. “I knew the system was overpressurized. I knew there was too much methane, but do they listen to me? Noooo…” she said as she wiped the gunk from her face.

“What happened?” I asked, my body adjusting to the sweet and sour reek enough to avoid gagging.

“What usually happens when somepony tries to eat ten times more than they should. It ran out of space to put stuff. Damn thing built up too much methane and burst a seal. Just like I told them it would,” she said as she tugged and yanked on the wrench. “Of course, it’s not like the morning crew can deal with it? Oh no, best leave it to the new girl. That way, when the system’s fucked in the ass, everypony will know who to blame!”

I couldn’t help myself. “What’s your name?”

She shook her head firmly, flinging away some of the muck. “Scotch Tape.”

I blinked and then grinned. “You’re Duct Tape’s kid?” Now that I looked at her with that in mind, I could see that she was indeed the filly from back before…everything. It hadn’t actually been that long, but she looked older now and much more confident; it seemed like she really had gotten the hang of it.

“You knew my mom?” She seemed both impressed and a little nervous about that.

I rubbed my nose and regretted it. Fortunately, the stench seemed to have paralyzed my sense of smell... mostly. “Yeah. I can kind of say that; if it wasn’t for her, I’d have never gotten the chance to leave.”

She gave me a crooked sort of smile. Underneath the filthy overalls she was... a lot like her mom. Not beautiful or pretty, but cute with her light blue mane. “Yeah. I can only imagine how awesome that would be.” Oddly, I was both touched and inspired by her attitude. She was the first I’d come across that didn’t treat the outside with suspicion.

“What can I do to help?” I asked as I looked at the maze of pipes and arcane machinery.

“Going to have to vent the excess pressure,” she said as she looked at the massive metal tank and wiped the foul film off her mouth. “Okay…you want to explode, or do you want to puke?”

“What the hell kind of choice is that?” I asked, wondering if I should run and get Rivets. “Not explode.”

“Open the valve marked ‘purge’ and say goodbye to your lunch,” she said grimly as she pointed at a large, open-ended pipe at the base of the tank. She hopped down to one side, and I stood on the other. Together, we struggled, and then there was a pop and a hiss and black foamy water began to spray out. The reek was so intense that I doubled over and gagged, puking into the sludge spraying out around our hooves.

“Yeah! Nothing like biowaste and digestion talismans!” she said as the flow continued for several minutes. Then she rapidly wrenched shut the valve. The flow cut off, the knee-deep fluid dropping as it spread out in a nasty tide of goo.

The filly slogged through and turned on the vents to full blast. “Okay. Now we probably won’t blow up. Probably. Lots of methane coming from these digestion vats, though, and best not stand in it too long.” She gave me an insolent grin. “Though when this smell hits the living quarters, you know morning shift will finally be down here to do their damned jobs and not leave it up to the new girl.”

“You got a hell of a way to get help,” I said, spitting out a chunk. She gave me a friendly grin back. The first I’d received in days.

“Serves ‘em right for dumping me down here while they have fun upstairs, and being bottom of the pile means they can’t bust me any lower!”

Dark lumps appeared on the floor. The sludge slowly receded and my mane began to itch. Badly. “What is that?” I asked as I lifted one lump with my hooves…and stared at a broken half of a skull.

Oh no…no no no…Rivets…what have you done?

The lumps were the bones of ponies. Dozens and dozens of recently killed ponies.

The mare looked at what I held with a shiver of disgust. “Yeah, I guess they thought the recyclers would be up to it. I guess the old gray mare was a little pissed with that Security what’s her name told her to dump them outside. It’s been blowing seals and filters for days though. Sending one body through is no big deal, but dozens? Forget about it.”

For the last three days, Stable 99 had been gorging themselves on disease-infested food. My legs went weak as I slumped against the wall of the tank. “Have you been eating the food above?”

“Me? No time. Rivets dumped evening and night shift on me. I haven’t even seen my bed since the liberation happened,” she said sourly. “Been eating old boxed shit. Why?” She saw my face, and concern bloomed in her eyes.

It made sense. Like likes like. None of my friends or I fit in. This filly wasn’t infected. We were being driven off and isolated. I gave her a tired smile. “Listen. You want to do the stable a favor? My friends and I are going to be heading out soon. Really soon. There’s a place called Megamart that’s got tons of stuff the stable needs, and Rivets will need a maintenance mare to get it. Want to come along? It’ll get you out of clean up?”

She looked at me skeptically. “Are you serious? Outside? Like, Outside outside?”

“I’m serious,” I said with complete sincerity. “Get anything you need and meet me at the stable door. You have ten minutes. Don’t eat anything. Nothing. Do you hear me?” She stared in shock, then nodded.

One hundred raiders had devastated a corner of Hoofington. What would almost four times their number do?

* * *

I’d almost reached the stairs up to the next level when a gray blur slammed into me. My muck-slicked hide sent me sliding several feet to hit the wall, fortunately not very hard. I looked up to see Rivets glaring down at me in the dim light. The other maintenance ponies behind her gripped wrenches and hammers... and they were looking at me like I was the leak.

“So... you not only think you know this stable better than me, now you think you can do my fucking job?” she hissed softly. “Or maybe... you’re down here trying to make work for me. Is that it? Trying to force us all outside?”

I struggled to my hooves, the muck making standing a disgusting challenge. “Rivets! You... you put the raiders in the recycling! I said--”

“I’m sorry? When did you become the Overmare, again?” I stared at her in shock as she snarled. “We’ve put ponies in there for years.

Nothing happens."

My eyes widened with horror. "Rivets. You've exposed everypony here to the disease."

"There is no disease!" she shouted. "This is just you trying to drag us out of our home and into the Wasteland! To starve. To die!" She spat in my face. "That's what I think of your disease. I've made sure everypony's well fed and safe, and none of us are sick. We're fine."

No. You aren't. You aren't, and you're getting worse by the minute... "Rivets, I've seen the raiders outside... you need... " what? At this point, what could I do? What could anypony do?

"Need... what?" She suddenly broke into peals of giggles. "Trade? You think we want to fucking trade? We have everything we want right here. We don't need to trade with the outside. We don't need anything from them. And we don't need you."

I felt a chill wash through me from horn to hoof. "Rivets... " But what could I say? She'd placed her faith completely and utterly in her work and the stable's systems.

"Get out. You've broken enough things here. Now get out before you kill us all," she snarled as she walked past, laughing that mad giggle that rose higher and higher.

* * *

I stopped only long enough to shower the majority of the gunk off myself before I returned to my quarters. "Everypony get your stuff together. We need to get going, now," I said softly. P-21 met my eyes. "That thing we were afraid of? It happened."

Horror blossomed on his face. "It's infected?"

"The whole food supply. They've been exposed to it for days. Three square meals a day." Anguish bloomed on his face as he pressed it to the floor as he grit his teeth in pain.

"We failed…" he muttered. "We failed…we failed…"

"That doesn't matter anymore." In a few more days the rest of the stable would turn on us. "We're leaving. I met a filly who probably isn't infected. The only one who acts…normal."

"But…we can't just leave them like this," Glory said in shock. "They'll leave the stable and…"

"I know, Glory." They might not be as deadly without the Overmare or Daisy leading them, but they'd learn, and fast. I'd been talking about guns at Megamart; I knew Rivets would eventually get

the same idea. “We’re going to sabotage the stable door. The Overmare once disabled it. We can disable it for good.”

The others stared at me in horror. Glory said in a near whisper, “Blackjack…it’ll be like Stable 90.” Eventually, they’d stop eating the chips and start eating meat…each other.

“It’s the only way to protect the Wasteland from the stable,” I said softly, appreciating the irony. Here I’d thought we’d have to do the opposite. “Get your things. We’re going…I doubt they’ll stop us.”

We got our things and made our way up to the door. I was glad to see Scotch Tape had taken my warning so seriously she hadn’t changed out of her stained coveralls. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it? Rivets isn’t even answering her intercom.”

Yeah, something. “Everyone through. I’ll disable the controls and jump through before it closes.” I turned to P-21. “Grenade?” What, how else did they expect me to disable something? I opened the door, and together they stepped through. They’d meet Lacunae somewhere outside, I hoped. Then I hit it a second time and ran to the entrance as the door once again started to close.

The Dealer stood beside me with sadness in his eyes. “You don’t have to do this, Blackjack.”

Yes. I did.

My glowing eyes met Glory’s. I smiled. Her eyes went wide as I levitated the Delta PipBuck and threw it through the closing door along with my bags. The rest looked on in shock as Glory screamed my name. Then the door closed in my face, the Dealer fading away with a sad sigh. I set the grenade and blew the controls.

It wasn’t enough.

I wasn’t sure if Rivets would be able to repair the damaged controls or not. I didn’t know if, centuries from now, somepony might open the stable and be infected with the raider disease. And I knew there were dozens of foals who didn’t deserve the slow and painful death of the murder, starvation, and horror that was to come. Nopony here deserved what they were about to get.

Except me.

There was only one way to save Stable 99. That way came with a price I had to pay. I made my way up the secret passage to the Overmare’s quarters and carefully locked the door. Then I accessed her terminal, still logged in from days before.

Ventilation Control.

>Activate All Air Talismans

Warning: Compromised Air Purification Talisman Detected!!! Do you wish to proceed? Y/N

>Y

Security head concur with password:

>Blackjack.

Maintenance head concur with password:

>Endurance.

All Air Talismans Activated.

The vents began to blow, and within seconds I smelled it. It was a strange scent…like pineapple and pepper…and at once my eyes started to water. I heard yelling from the atrium below as I stepped in front of the window and looked out at the greenish yellow haze that started to fill the room. Ponies started racing about. Their screams built higher and higher as they realized the very air of the stable was becoming toxic. The office being the highest room, I supposed I would be the last one to die.

Fitting. I knew exactly what Buttercup had felt as she stood there watching her stable die over a hoofful of weeks. This would be over in minutes.

I saw two foals and a filly stagger and fall prone as tears ran down my face. Males who'd experienced just a few brief gasps of freedom now lay where they fell, scratching and clawing at their eyes as they gasped at the poisoned air. Rivets staggered out of the cafeteria and looked up at me, the betrayal etched in her rugged face... fresh bite marks on her forelegs. There was no forgiveness for this. No atonement. Midnight staggered out onto the atrium balcony, her eyes already starting to yellow as they stared at me in rage, even as she slumped against the metal rail, fighting to breathe as the poison gas built. Nopony would ever set foot in Stable 99 again.

A minute more, and it'd be over. My eyes watered and my lungs burned...

Suddenly, there was a purple flash behind me, and I heard the Goddess's voice as clear as day. "We had a deal, Blackjack."

"No…no no no NO!" I screamed as she wrapped her hooves around me. I blasted her purple hide with magic bullets.

"Blackjack! You murderer!" Midnight screamed as I was stolen away in a purple flash. The word echoed endlessly in my mind.

The only death I couldn't give was to the only pony who deserved it.

Myself.

Footnote: Level Up.

Perk added: Intensive Training - Your recent experiences in have granted you a +1 to your Endurance.

Quest Perk added: The Power of Friendship - When fighting alongside your companions, you receive an additional +5 DT and +10% damage inflicted.

Chapter 23: Walkabout

"When all the truth does is make your heart ache, sometimes a lie is easier to take."

The sea rolled back and forth in front of me, slowly breathing its hushed breath on the rocks far below. The cliff rose in an almost sheer face up to the chiseled edge on which I sat. I looked out at the waves slowly marching to their deaths against the bottom of the cliff. Once, there'd been a rail along the clifftop path, but now there was nothing but rusting lengths of pipe and dead grass. I closed my eyes, listening to the softly breathing water. I pressed the cool metal barrel beneath my chin. Was this how Mini felt before she died? I took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

I was over. This was done.

I pulled the trigger.

* * *

I was dropped on the cold, wet grass, coughing and gagging with foam on my lips as my body struggled for breath. Maybe, for once, I would catch a break, and the chlorine I'd inhaled would finish me off for good. My eyes burned and my hide itched terribly as rain pattered down. I felt a potion bottle pressed against my mouth and clenched my jaws, fighting, coughing and snorting until the healing draught had been emptied mostly onto my face.

"Help me!" Glory gasped as I writhed. Each breath felt like it was my last…if only…but my body jerked to take another sharp, shallow inhalation. My hooves scraped against my chest, as if I were trying to tear open my body and toss away my burning lungs. My eyes stared wide, the chemicals burning the glowing surfaces as I squirmed, rear legs kicking up clods as they spasmed and tried to get me away from the pony I didn't deserve.

P-21 sat apart, eyes closed, head bowed as he shook with silent

tears. He glanced at me, pain etched in his blue gaze. Pain and anger…good. Be angry at me, P-21. Take it out on me, I mentally begged, but he came over and tried to hold me down.

Rampage's own haunted look was masked by her frustration as I kicked her soundly in the face. With a sickening crunch, her nose shattered. A moment later, it crunched back into place. She grabbed my rear legs and forced them still.

Scotch Tape merely stared in shock as she looked from me to the tunnel entrance in horror. Congratulations, welcome to your first taste of the Wasteland. She pushed back her goggles, her green eyes widening as the young olive mare muttered in shock. "They're… they're dead? Everypony? She killed everypony?!"

"They were infected," Glory sobbed as she pulled out another purple potion, fighting to get it down my throat. "She had no choice."

Lacunae stepped next to me. "Of course she didn't. Necessity is the mother of atrocity," she said as she knelt and used her magic to force my thrashing body to still. "Shhh…hush now," she murred as she touched her glowing horn to mine. There was a flash, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

A memory…just like a memory orb. I supposed it made sense. Unicorn magic extracted memories, and the alicorn could read minds, so I guessed she could swap memories. 'We live in each other's dreams', she'd told me. I wondered if this was Lacunae's memory, or the Goddess's, or somepony else's? From what I'd heard, it could be from any one of hundreds, possibly thousands of ponies.

You're a murderer, Blackjack.

So…first things first. Body? Mare. Unicorn. A little older than me, I suspected. The place? A long, boring-ass hallway. It looked familiar. Really familiar. I caught a glance at a nameplate beside a door. 'Colonel Cupcake'. So this was Miramare, not yet all blown up. It was late at night, but this didn't have the feel of a patrol. No…from the way she moved, it was more of a pensive wandering. Huh…I could relate.

Now if she'd only pass by something shiny so I could get a good look at her.

You're a fucking murderer, Blackjack.

"She lied to me, Vanity," a stallion with a deep voice said softly somewhere nearby. The voice was thick with the sound of tears. Slowly, the mare drifted closer to a closed door, standing in the spill of light underneath it. "She's been lying to me since we first met." From outside, I could hear the dull boom of thunder and the soft hiss of rain on the roof.

I heard Vanity's patient sigh. "I know this is hard for you, but take a deep breath and think about it a little."

"What's there to think about?" he said with a sniff. "It's over. I trusted her, trusted her with my life, with my heart, and she lied to me. It's like…it's as if my sisters lied to me. I just didn't think it could happen."

"How'd you find out?" Vanity asked softly.

"I had some suspicions after running into her at Maripony. It just seemed awfully convenient. Wonderful, but convenient." He gave a deep sigh. "And then there were the things that she knew that nopony should know. I knew something was up. Then, we were mugged and it all came out. After that, she confessed." He sobbed softly. "She was using me…"

"I know it's hard, but you should forgive her," Vanity said calmly, reasonably.

There's no forgiveness for what you did.

Shut up, brain. I'm trying to listen to other ponies' problems.

"Listen to what you just told me. You knew, she confessed. Do you think she still cares about you?"

"You don't understand! She lied to me!"

"So you're too good to lie to?" Vanity said with a chuckle. It wasn't returned. "She had reasons to lie, and, unlike with most ponies, hers were actually valid. Think of her job. She had to lie to you. To everypony. How else could she keep doing what she has to?"

"I understand all that. Still, it hurts."

"If you expected to go through your whole life never getting hurt by somepony you love, then this is long overdue," Vanity replied firmly. "Yes, she hurt you, but she didn't mean to hurt you. You have to ask yourself: is it worth losing all the good times over this one mistake?"

Killing my stable wasn't a mistake. It was an atrocity. I should have done better…

The mare turned away, and the hallway seemed to smear in my

vision, and... I found myself in a kneeling stallion in a well-lit office decorated in purple and gold. Ooohkay; apparently I'd switched to a different memory. There were numerous books stacked up in heaps on the tables, the desk, and the floor. A purple scale hung from the side of the desk's terminal on a braided length of purple hair. A figurine of Fluttershy and another of Rainbow Dash sat beside it.

My host was connecting some kind of device to a series of wires, working with great urgency, when I heard a mare calling out from outside the room. "Goldenblood! I'd like a word with you in my office, please." My host suddenly gasped, pushed the panel back against the wall, and levitated the screws back into place. The door opened, and my host dove under the large oak desk, curling up as tight as he could.

I heard the familiar wheezing rasp, the dry coughs. "Yes, Twilight?"

"What is Project Chimera?" My host saw her lift a folder from the bookcase behind the desk, floating it towards the middle of the office. Fortunately, there was a mirror in the corner of the office, and I could see Goldenblood facing Twilight Sparkle. Both looked… tired. Old. Angry. The scars on Goldenblood's hide had healed somewhat, but his metallic eyes had lost none of their conviction. Twilight looked like she'd aged a lot recently. Her eyes had developed wrinkles in the corners, and her mane was growing fainter and grayer in certain streaks.

He didn't answer right away, locking eyes with her before giving a dismissive wave of his hoof. "A defunct and failed branch of research, Twilight. A stab in the dark between the M.o.P. and the M.A.S.," Goldenblood rasped softly, but with resolute conviction.

"Failed? I read the reports. The fusion megaspell worked! It worked!" She waved the folder like she was going to strike him with it. "Why am I only finding out about this now? Why did I have to find out from Dr. Trueblood and not from you? Why did you keep this from me?" There was a hurt tone in her voice.

"Dr. Trueblood is an intellectual opportunist who takes far too much glee in debasing and deforming ponies, and I'll see him transferred to Yellow River for this. He can spend the rest of his career cleaning out bedpans and dealing with zebra hoofrot."

"Goldenblood," Twilight began when he turned away from her.

"It was a mistake, Twilight!" he said sharply, then hunched his shoulders as he started to gasp and wheeze for breath. Still, he

struggled to continue. “We fused ponies with cockatrices…ponies with diamond dogs…ponies with manticores and griffins and baby dragons. Baby dragons, Twilight!” he said, turning and pacing, his head still hanging low. “Every fusion was a mistake. It doesn’t matter the powers the test subjects gained; every time, something fundamental was lost.”

“But that just means the research was a failure, Goldenblood. You just missed out on that missing element. If you’d brought this to me sooner--“ she began, but he cut her off with hacking. To my horror, I saw blood on his lips. Had his body still not healed from its injuries after all this time? “Golden!” She started to rush to her terminal, and my host clenched his teeth as he drew as far back under the desk as possible.

“I’m fine... Twilight,” he gasped. “Fine…just…let me catch my breath…” He sat as she slowly approached him again, my host relaxing slightly. “Twilight…we’re not going to win this war by turning into monsters. I tried to explain that to Trueblood. He couldn’t care less. I don’t know what he’s told you about Chimera, but it was a mistake. It has *nothing* more to offer Equestria.”

I have nothing to offer but death.

Not true. I saved one. By one. By one.

A point one percent success rate doesn’t excuse a ninety-nine point nine percent fatality rate.

Great, my mind was using math to damn me.

“Nothing. Goldenblood…think about it! If we can alter the megaspell, perfect the mutagenic element, we could do more than just fuse ponies with non-ponies. We could create alicorns!” she said, her eyes lighting to the possibilities. “Imagine dozens, or hundreds of princesses fighting on our side!”

“No!” he shouted and struck her hard across the face with a hoof. He looked just as shocked as she at what he’d just done. “I…I’m sorry…”

Twilight rubbed where he’d hit her, looking confused and angry, but still concerned as he coughed and retched, his lips spattered pink with bright specks. Twilight looked at him for a long moment before her face hardened and she said gravely, “It’s my duty to pursue any and all research to win this war, Golden. This should have been brought to me from the start. I’m going to launch a full review of Project Chimera. If it’s a dead end, like you said, then we’ll put it to rest for good.” Goldenblood crumpled a little before

her, gasping for air as he wheezed. “I want access to every file. Every book. Every sample. Every test subject.”

He closed his eyes. “It’s all at Hippocratic Research, Ministry Mare.” His whisper barely reached my host’s ear. “But remember, nothing good comes from making monsters, Twilight.”

“I won’t, Goldenblood,” she replied, sounding tired. “I’m trying to find something…some spell, some... something that will put everything right again and help us win this war. I know you’re trying to do the same. We just have to work together. Right?”

Goldenblood was coughing too much to answer, but from the haunted look he gave her, I suspected that he hardly agreed. “Come on, let’s get you to the nurse’s station. And I need some ice on this bruise.”

The door had been closed for several minutes before the stallion relaxed. “Chimera, huh? Bet Pinkie would be mighty curious about that,” he said to himself as he returned to installing the device on the wires.

Suddenly, the memory bled away…reforming in pain as he was being dragged by a telekinetic glow along a catwalk over immense vats, screaming along with dozens of other ponies. Alarms rang in an anemic attempt to give warning as he weakly scrabbled for something to hold onto.

“No! No! I don’t want this! Mommy! Mommy!” he sobbed brokenly. He hooked a limb on a bar, but the force pulling on every inch of his body grew and grew. There was a snap, a grinding noise as pain exploded along his aching, burned hide. Then the telekinesis released him, and he drew a shuddering breath…seconds before the force redoubled and tore him screaming from the catwalk and into the churning, bubbling vat of rainbow and blue below.

The sensation that followed was nothing less than what I imagined it’d be like to be shoved through Stable 99’s recycler. What emerged was not what went in.

We live in each other’s dreams and memories...

The world smeared and congealed back into a hilltop in a flash of purple; in the distance was a city of black towers wreathed in baleful green light. Now I was in…yes. This was an alicorn. I felt… strong. Healthy. Powerful. I wasn’t sure if I was actually hearing it, but a vast whispering host filled my mind, at the moment drowned out by a grand proclamation. “Red Eye has yet to even touch Hoofington, my children. Now is an excellent chance to save more

of these poor ponies!"

We slowly advanced, my host, two greens, and three blues, each one alike save for her color; who knew they came in different shades? I felt myself sliding like oil from among the perspectives of the group as we approached the swampy morass of Flank. Then I became aware of a sound…yet not a sound. A noise within my host's head was the only way I could think of to describe it. The noise increased. With it came the pain.

Screams.

The city was screaming inside me. With every second, I felt myself jerked more and more erratically from one alicorn to the next. It was as if the screams were pulling something fundamental from my host, and the more that overpowering voice rose, the louder the cries became. Hundreds of screams crying in agony. Thousands. Millions. The jerking became a blur, and I was certain that at any moment I would be torn to pieces.

A purple flash, and once more I was on that hilltop overlooking the distant city. The whispers were silent, the Goddess silent. Then a mare's voice in my host's mind said, "They're gone."

The Goddess snorted. "That's ridiculous. Impossible!" But I could hear the quaver of uncertainty and fear. "They can't be…gone…not even death truly separates us." The whispers rose and fell.

"They've been torn…" another mare said, and then a different mare finished, "…from Unity."

Now that great chorus began to quail in fear. "Silence," the Goddess commanded. There was a long quiet moment, and then the Goddess asked, "Do *you* know?"

For several minutes there was naught inside the purple alicorn but stillness. Then a strange, oddly familiar voice said solemnly, "This magic…it's cold. Like Rarity's Black Book." Another long and drawn out silence. "It must be some kind of necromantic effect. Something we never imagined. And it's saturated Hoofington."

"If a necromantic spell were that powerful…" one mare began, "… Hoofington would be sterile for miles," another finished.

"Not if we are…as distant a possibility as it is…just particularly vulnerable to it," the calm voice pointed out, setting off a riot of argument and fear. I wondered if the Goddess was in control of that whispering, panicked mass of thought or if she fought against it for control of herself.

"We are vulnerable to nothing! We bathe in taint and glow in

radiation! And do not forget, we have experienced necromancy. We scoff at it! It cannot truly harm us."

"It just did." The calm familiar voice said. "We need…"

"I will decide what needs be done!" the Goddess proclaimed as the whispering rose and fell. Then there was a pause. "But what is *your* idea?"

A long sigh. "We must try and send another mare into Hoofington to learn what is causing this and how we can stop it."

"Didn't *you* just see what happened? We all felt it; every one of us. It would be torture. Neigh, suicide!" The Goddess's voice oozed in disdain.

And, barely 'heard' over that whispering chorus, a mare said meekly, "I'll go."

Again, silence. "You'll go? You?" The Goddess seemed incredulous. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"To get what I deserve," she murmured softly.

"This is a waste of time. Better to send more of our children to try to obtain the Black Book before Red Eye becomes too much of a difficulty," the Goddess declared imperiously.

"We agree that finding the book…" the first of the paired mares said as the other finished, "…is more likely to be successful." The whisperings rose and fell, a consensus seeming to settle around leaving Hoofington alone.

Finally, that lone, calm voice said softly, "What's one, if she's willing to endure it? We will have to block her connection partially…mute her experiences…but she may find the answers we need. I'll help her."

"*You* will do no such thing. I know what *you* are capable of! Do not forget that I am the Goddess!" The Goddess roared across the collective, silencing it. Finally, though, the Goddess asked, "You are certain you want to do this? You will be isolated and alone. I know…we all know…how terrible that is."

The meek whisper rose above the chorus. "If it's what you need, I will do it for you." The murmuring rose and fell again in consideration. "I know Hoofington."

The Goddess seemed to consider that. "You do, don't you? Very well. *You*, give her what she needs. Block the rest. I don't want to feel that sensation again, do *you* understand?"

"Of course." The muttering whispers seemed to go away, and that mare asked softly, "Are you sure about this?"

"It's what I deserve." And with that, everything swirled and smeared away again.

oooOOOooo

It figured. I had to be the only pony in the world who could be trapped in a stable filling with poisonous gas and live. Was my luck really that bad? Couldn't whatever malicious and depraved being that was in charge of the universe just let me die? Apparently not. I was lying on a soggy mattress that smelled of old water and faint rot. My lungs sounded just a little better than Goldenblood's and felt a little worse.

I wasn't sure where this was. Big building, from the hiss of rain and the splashes echoing in the distance. There were peeling and split ministry posters; I barely made out Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy, but whatever encouraging message they offered had returned to pulp ages ago. My eyes traced along the ceiling tiles overhead, as if there was some answer or meaning in the cracks and crevices.

Murderer.

Midnight's last word echoed in my mind over and over again with perfect clarity. I know that some ponies might say it was Rivets's fault. They'd be wrong. If I'd been stronger…better…I would have forced them to march every corpse outside and purge the recycling systems. But I hadn't, and in doing so I'd allowed Rivets to commit an act that doomed 99. That wasn't what made me a murderer, though. The ponies of 99 were doomed; nothing I could have done would have changed that. But when it was my hoof activating the gas, I'd damned myself. It's tragic for hundreds to die. It's murder when it was my actions that caused their deaths.

Necessity is the mother of atrocity. I remembered the stallion being ripped into a vat of…not thinking about it…and transforming into an alicorn mare. But I also remembered his burns. The heat…the damage all around him. Faced with such a choice of letting him die, or saving him by forcing him to change, what was the more virtuous choice? Or was the Goddess, like me, damned simply by being there? Act, and you transform ponies into monsters. Don't, and you're a murderer for standing by when you could have acted.

But that wasn't what really damned me.

"I'm sorry, Glory," I murmured softly.

There was a shift beside me, and a cool rag dabbed at my brow.

“Hey. You made it. I was worried there for a bit.” Her fond tone wasn’t what I’d been expecting. “If you ever pull a stunt like that again…”

A stunt? I…“What are you talking about, Glory?” I asked warily.

“Lacunae filled us in while you were out. How you…how you had to do what you did in the stable.” She sighed softly as she wrapped her hooves around me, resting her head on my chest. “I’m so sorry, Blackjack. For a while there I thought…I thought that you’d tried to…to do something. Something horrible.” She pressed her face against my chest.

My mouth was dry as I held her atop me, staring at the water stained tiles overhead. “What…what did she tell you?”

“That you’d worked out her teleporting you out, but that you activated the poisoned talisman early. That Rivets and the others tried to stop you and Lacunae got injured,” she said quietly. “I’m so sorry you had to do that. I know you thought we’d argue, but…I wish I could have been there with you when you had to do it.” She let out a great sigh as she lay atop me. I felt as if I were falling. “Don’t ever do that again. I couldn’t take it. Not if you did that.”

She’d lied. Lacunae, or the Goddess, had lied to save my tail.

Quiet tears streaked my face as I stroked the soft hair and delicate feathers of a mare I’d never deserved. “Yeah. I had to do it. I had to.”

Murderer. Liar. Monster.

* * *

“Why the hell do I need to learn all this stuff again?” I heard a filly grouse grumpily from the next room. “I mean…who cares if a ghoul is a zombie or not? They sound disgusting!”

“Some of them may be, but a few are still ponies inside. We’ve met some pegasus ghouls who were quite kind and sweet,” Glory pointed out.

“Besides, Blackjack, Glory, and I learned all of this the hard way. Trust me; you’ll deal with far fewer bullet holes if you read up,” P-21 said in his calm, soft voice. “But if you want to learn the hard way, we can have Rampage teach you though the stallion to the head system.”

Once I’d pulled myself together enough to get to my hooves under me, I walked like my body was made of thin glass. Every step I

took, I felt I was going to break or something. I kept hearing the word, seeing the still bodies of the foals. I could smell the chlorine reek in my nostrils. Sweet Celestia, please let me hold it together. I faked the most sincere smile possible. “Yeah, worked wonders on me…” I said as I walked out slowly into the room with the others.

Rampage was going over the Hoofington edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide with Scotch Tape, giving pointers. “Go for the eyes, Tape. Go for the eyes.” The young olive mare looked at me with an expression that mixed gratitude with fear and added touch of hate. She quickly looked back at the book as if her life depended on it. With a little bit of luck, she’d do a thousand times better than P-21 and I did coming out.

Said stallion was lying on some rags in the corner. I walked slowly over, and he looked up with bloodshot eyes. “Hey,” I said as I sat beside him. He shied away. I guess I couldn’t blame him.

“Hey…” he murmured as he closed his eyes. “So. There was a plan?” he asked softly.

I looked over at the inscrutable features of Lacunae gazing out at the rainy night. “Yeah. Something like that.” I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not. I couldn’t tell if he cared or not. He seemed empty and brittle, like one good shove or wrong word would snap him for good, and I’d lose another friend. I didn’t deserve to have him, either; I didn’t deserve any of them.

“I saw you…did they…” He drew a shaking breath. “So…was it fast?” His soft voice still varied, and I saw Scotch Tape looking over with her wide green eyes, shifting nervously.

Rampage swatted her head. “Hey. Spikey death dealer giving you pointers. You should listen to them, or I’ll give you points instead.” Scotch quickly flushed and looked away as she nervously chewed on the end of her dusky blue tail.

“It was over quick,” I lied. Sure, minutes were better than spending your last few days eating each other, but minutes of agony…I’d done that to foals…my hooves started to shake. I felt bile rising in my throat. I had to fake it, had to pretend like it didn’t affect me. I wanted to sob right there. Instead, I grimaced. “I just had the luck to get just enough to mess me up. My chest still feels like my lungs were scrubbed out with a brush, and my eyes hurt.”

I killed my stable…and I was complaining about my eyes?

“Blackjack…how are you doing? Really?” he asked softly as his eyes met mine, and I felt my grin strain even more.

"I'm fine…just fine…I had to do it…I had to…" Keep repeating that. Keep on repeating it till you believe it.

For some reason, that seemed to disappoint him even more. He turned towards me a little and stretched out a hoof…paused…and then drew it back with a shameful look. "Because…Because I just had a stable full of ponies I honestly didn't care that much for die, and I'm barely holding it together. Just…they're gone. And they were pretty shitty to me, and I still feel bad they're gone."

I couldn't meet his eyes anymore. I pretended to find batting an empty can fascinating to keep from shaking. "It doesn't matter…I had to do it…" Had to. Had to.

"Blackjack." He put his hoof on the can. "They were your friends. Your family. Your mother--"

"Don't!" I yelled, and promptly all eyes were on me…except P-21's. He flinched away, clenching his eyes shut. Glory started towards me, but I gave her a look. I couldn't handle this. I was about to explode…it was all I could do to control my breathing. "Don't…talk about her. Them. Any of it. Please." I could smell it in my mane. Feel it on my skin. I heard that shout echoing endlessly inside me. "It's over. It's done. I can't…do this now…please," I begged.

Scotch Tape looked at me in shock as her own tears began to fall. Rampage took one look at her and declared boldly, "Hey! Scotchy wotchy! Don't you think you should give Blackjack her PipBuck back? Not that that the classic version isn't peachy keen, but she really needs the über black one back."

Scotch Tape blinked up at her incredulously as sorrow and shock vied with her request. "Are you serious? Do you know how hard it is to remove one of these?" she asked as she held up her own PipBuck. "If it were held on with nuts and bolts, sure! Let me get my wrench. But short of taking off her leg, these things don't come off without the proper tools."

Which, I gathered, was part of the point of Rampage asking. The striped pony grabbed Scotch's PipBuck and started to tug. "Come on…it's gotta come off somehow…" she said, and the young mare fought for her life, swatting her armor in futility. "I know…I can chew it off!"

"Ack! Get me out of here! Everypony outside is crazy!" she wailed as Rampage started to slobber over the screen.

I couldn't help myself. I laughed. I cried too…but I think the laugh covered it up.

Thank you, Rampage.

* * *

The building we were in had been some kind of publishing house. Copies of 'Hoofington Weekly' newspapers lay in soggy stacks, heaps, and, more frequently, barely-recognizable lumps. I really had no clue what kind of salvage might be available, but we split into pairs to look around the three story building. We badly needed ammo, and, as much as I hated to admit it, needed salvage for caps. We wouldn't get far if we were broke. Glory and P-21 took the second floor, and Rampage and Scotch started off to check the first. I began heading towards the basement with Lacunae, but halfway down the stairs I realized what had just happened. I took the stairs up two at a time, ignoring my body's protests, and half ran, half skidded down a hallway. I spotted Rampage and Scotch through a doorway as I passed and managed to catch myself on it, panting and wheezing. The two looked up in alarm.

"Rampage," I began, "Could I talk…to you alone?"

Scotch gave a questioning look at me, then another at Rampage. The Reaper nudged her towards the door as she headed out. I motioned Rampage into the far corner.

"Rampage," I asked quietly, meeting her pink eyes with my own and then looking back at Scotch, who was now talking with Lacunae. "Is she going to be okay with you?" One sneer. One half-lidded look, and I'd be putting a bullet in her head. Then I'd be swapping her with P-21 while she popped the bullet out of her noggin.

She blinked at me, then smiled slightly sadly. "No... I think she's a little too old for that." Okay... tiny bit reassuring, more than just a little creepy. "I'll keep her safe. I promise. I won't... slip... again." She'd better not. I was already suicidal. I didn't know how I'd take another Thorn. Would I freak out? Try and kill Rampage by putting her through the printers? Cry? Just break? Or would I feel nothing at all? That last possibility scared me more than all the others. I nodded at her, then went back into the hall, tried to smile at the odd look Scotch was giving me, and headed back towards the basement with Lacunae.

Our hooves clopped softly as we moved together, me in front and she behind. My glowing eyes pierced the darkness, but aside from

radroaches, this place was dead... ooh, bad thought. I kept waiting, hoping, for something to jump out at me. I needed something to distract me from how similar these tunnels were to Stable 99. Needed something to drown out the word echoing in my mind.

And Lacunae wasn't saying anything about what she'd done. About what I'd done. I was glad she couldn't read my mind at this moment, as I was fairly screaming with questions about what she'd said. About saving me. But the alicorn remained stoic and silent, illuminating her way with a little spark of light.

I got to apply my lockpicking skills, at least; despite everything, I had to admit that I was getting better at the delicate process of tricking open locks. Security Mare: lockbreaker. Somewhere, the Goddesses must be laughing at the irony. I opened one locked metal door and was greeted by a storeroom. "Oh, look! Turpentine and Wonderglue!" I said with infinitely more enthusiasm than was warranted. "Scrap metal. Always useful. Sensor modules. Even a spark battery." And in the back was a yellow medical box. The healing potions inside were the consistency of tar, but I took the Med-X and Mint-als.

"Truly a cornucopia of caps," Lacunae agreed softly with just a hint of sarcasm.

"Hey. It'll tide us over till we find some nice high quality guns to sell," I said as I lifted a metal box lid and swept four measly bottle caps into one of my pockets. Storeroom stripped, I glanced back at her. "The thing you put me in? Was that Unity?"

Lacunae didn't look at me, her thoughts sighing softly. "It is…like Unity. It is as close to Unity as you can know."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I took a lead pipe and casually squashed a hungry radroach that wandered too near.

She sighed again as she plucked a gobbet of radroach meat from the corpse with her horn and deposited it into a plastic jar kept for Rampage's high protein diet. Somehow, I doubted a goddess liked crawling through tunnels for scrap and harvesting bug flesh. "What you experienced was an outsider looking at Unity. You remained you. Your memories, your experiences, your point of view…they were all intact." At my 'I'm an idiot, remember?' look, she elaborated, "At any point, did you not feel like yourself?"

I wish. "No; it was like a memory orb."

"Exactly. There was a wall between you and the memories you viewed. You did not become the original person experiencing the

memory. You didn't know what they thought. You can infer, you can sympathize, but you remain apart from them. In Unity, there is no such separation," she said quietly.

We walked past some hulking turbine-engine-things; amazingly, they still had power. Most of the indicator lights were red, though. 'Lockout', one read. "So, you're you and not you at the same time?" She smiled, looking a little surprised.

"In Unity…you are yourself, but you are also countless others. It is like being in a great dark room, and not knowing where you begin and the others end. I am me, but I might also be a pedicurist, or a soldier, or a librarian. And who I was originally is lost. I have some semblance of independence and personality, but I've no idea if this body was originally mine. If this brain held my original memories or housed my soul. And at any moment, the me who is me can be replaced by the Goddess."

"Why is that?" I asked as I remembered that imperious voice. "Who is she? What makes her so special?"

"She is…the Goddess. She is the glue that binds us together. She is…difficult to describe," she said softly with a sigh. "She is attempting to ignore me. I'm separated from the others, though not yet severed."

"But why?"

Lacunae looked right into my eyes and asked me softly, "Would you like to experience somepony gassing a stable? Feel her guilt? Know her horrors and shame?" I felt myself start to shake, my eyes wide as I looked back at her. I broke my gaze to the floor as Lacunae went on. "There is much pain in Unity, but it is dispersed. Separated. Tolerable. In me, it is concentrated. The Goddess hurts enough with what she has become. She does not wish to include the pain I witness in her own burden."

I hadn't thought of that. What would it be like to know, to have experienced, the suffering of hundreds, maybe thousands, of individuals over centuries? To never be able to be apart from it? It would drive a pony crazy. "And then there's the Hoofington problem," I added as I found some dusty ammo containers. Why would there be ammo containers in a publishing house?

"What…" she started. "What do you know about it?"

"The screams. That jerking. How you lost five ponies from Unity." I poured the bullets into my saddlebags and turned to face her. "It was something I saw while I was away. The screams."

"Yes…the screams." She shivered. "I…that is what I am here to discover. What magic…what power…can affect us so. Alone, the screams are…manageable. They rise and fall constantly, but do not overwhelm."

"But put two of you together and you bounce back and forth like radroaches in a shoebox," I said, and she looked impressed once again. "So that's why you're here alone. That's what the Goddess wants. But why?"

"Because in Unity, there is comfort and safety. We have no promise of an everafter, but in Unity we endure. Kill one of us and it matters little. Some of us have been slain and then returned to slay our attacker in a new body, having learned their tricks. Few ponies can maintain the level of creativity and ruthlessness to keep ahead of us." She looked away with a momentary scowl. "That one little mare and her friends, however…" Somehow, I didn't think she meant to mutter that into my mind.

I couldn't help but smile, wondering who she was referring to. Still, stay on topic. "So, when those others were lost…it must have been pretty terrifying."

"When you are as we are…something fearful is intolerable. Therefore, we must either ignore it or hunt it down and destroy it at all costs. I am a rare exception; I was sent to learn about this threat." By *'you'*.

"The screams…they hurt you, don't they? Even alone?" She just closed her eyes with a small smile and shrugged elegantly. As much as I found the Goddess a twit, Lacunae was perfect for our group. "You said you deserved it…" Now there was shock on her face. Apparently, she hadn't known exactly what I'd experienced in that dream state. "Why?"

She walked a little ways past me and then stopped. "I did something terrible. I don't remember what, or why, but I remember the shame. The horror. I know what you went through when you closed that door on your friends. And I know…how much it would hurt your friends if they realized just what you tried to do.

"I had friends once, I think." She closed her eyes, tilting her head back. "Dear friends. But I lost them somehow, one after the next. Eventually, we were all alone. And one by one, we were consumed. Just as you are being consumed."

I sat down. "I don't know how to go on. EC-1101 seems so…so stupid now, Lacunae. I killed my stable. How do I live with that?" I

looked up at her, tears streaking my cheeks. “How am I supposed to live with that? How do I tell Glory that…as much as I care for her… I wish I’d died along with my stable?” Lie to her? Go through the motions of being interested in a life I couldn’t care less about?

“I don’t know, Blackjack. I have no choice but to live and endure. It’s my punishment. It’s what I deserve. But you…I can’t weigh your sins against your virtue.” She approached and nudged my shoulder with a motherly sort of smile. “Come. There’re no answers found in a smelly basement.” With her minigun floating above her, she proceeded down the hallway.

* * *

An hour later, we’d come across a few more storage rooms, and my bags were filled to overflowing with assorted crap I’d gathered in the hopes that it could be put to some sort of use. We were on our way back up towards the first floor, not having any good way to carry more stuff even if we could find it. “So, deep and profound questions of identity aside, what were you doing in Chapel?” I asked as I stepped over the radroach carcass. “How long have you been there?”

“Chapel is a hollow, a refuge; the screams of the city are muted somewhat. I hadn’t been there long, though; a few months at the most.”

“And nopony commented on the giant unicorn in black?” I asked with a slight tease. “I mean, not to be rude, but you do stand out.”

“One advantage to being a giant unicorn is that few bother you with *why* you are a giant unicorn,” she replied with a calm smile. “Priest suspected something, I’m sure, but I think he was more interested in preventing me from trying to enter the city. The Crusaders gave me a wide enough berth. That delightful filly Charity made the most delicious daisy sandwiches I’d ever eaten, though. Where she found the flowers I can’t imagine, but they were worth every cap.”

I couldn’t imagine Charity making me a daisy sandwich. In fact, I couldn’t imagine a daisy sandwich without getting some disturbing visuals. “Yeah, and she probably charged you a horn and a hoof for ‘em,” I muttered sourly, then blinked. “Wait. If you don’t have to eat…?”

“Why would I buy food from her?” she finished, looking at me in

surprise. “Why, because they’re quite tasty.” Her lips curled with elegant delight.

On a whim, I peeked into an office near the stairs. Wallsafe? Unopened? I felt the most curious nibble at my spine, like that locked door had insulted my mother by being locked! Well, we’d see about *that*! “Hold up a sec,” I said as I nipped inside and floated out a bobby pin. “Okay. How are we going to do this? The easy way or the hard way?”

Lacunae stood behind me. “What’s the hard way?” she asked in an amused tone of thought.

“I cry and have to get P-21 to open it for me. It’s ugly. Trust me,” I assured her.

It wasn’t the worst lock I’d run across, though I had to press my ear to the side of the door to hear the faint tap of the pins, screwing up my face, and I went through two pins before the third one opened it.

Inside, there were some gold bits, a nine millimeter automatic pistol, two magazines of nine millimeter ammo, and a folder with a note taped to the front that read: ‘We can’t print this! Image would kill us!’ Okay, M.A.S., M.W.T., even M.o.M., I could understand, but what would the Ministry of Image do? Write a bad review?

The Armor of Image

By Ace Buckley

We all know the picture of the ministries as the pillars of modern Equestria. Bold, strong, and working for the betterment of all ponies everywhere! We know that image because of the tireless efforts of the Ministry of Image and its Ministry Mare, Rarity. Its duties are to protect, inspire, and brighten our dull lives with fabulosity.

So why is the Ministry of Image creating magical armor?

Yes, that’s exactly what I thought when a confidential source informed me that Rarity was conducting experimental spell and material research on creating armor. This is normally the stuff I expect to come from the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the Ministry of Arcane Science…heck, even Awesome would be up to it. But Image? It’s like a Ministry of Peace weapons program!

Image has downplayed inquiries that Rarity was simply exploring the possibility of creating low grade armor for Equestrian citizens. If that’s the case, they’re certainly pursuing the research with a decidedly low horn. According to documents obtained from the M.o.M. at Hightower Jail and Shattered Hoof Penitentiary, several

‘undesirable elements’ were transferred to Image custody and unknown destinations courtesy of everypony’s favorite spooks at the O.I.A..

But, thanks to an exclusive inside source, I can now tell you that these prisoners were used to explore radical and dangerous new techniques of magic. The victims of the experiments were so traumatized that they simply wasted away. Others were driven mad, and we have confirmation that some were sent to Happyhorn Gardens. Unfortunately, Ministry Mare Fluttershy was not willing to comment on these patients, citing confidentiality. However, she said she would discuss the matter personally with Rarity. Will the details be shared with this reporter? Don’t hold your breath!

So, what is the status of Image’s armor research project? Will Ministry Mare Rarity come forward to disclose just what she’s up to? Will she explain to the families of these prisoners why she subjected them to such dangerous magics? Will she disclose her findings to the M.A.S. and independent review? Or will she simply deflect them with a laugh and a wave of her hoof and find something new to distract us with? Inquiring ponies want to know.

Okay. That was definitely more interesting than I had expected.

Suddenly, there was a loud hum, and the lights overhead flickered to life. A radio tuned to a long dead station poured out a sea of static, and the office terminal flashed, crackled, and then died in a puff of acrid purple smoke. “I didn’t do it!” I said to Lacunae. Then a portion of the wall retracted, and a four-wheeled robot rolled into the hallway. “Get down!” I shouted as the sentry robot’s visor bar turned a brilliant crimson.

“Unauthorized presence detected. Initiating removal protocols. Surrender immediately and be disintegrated!” the sentry bot declared, and I knew that there was a robotics programmer two centuries ago needing a swift buck to the head. Of course, by the word ‘removal’, Taurus’s rifle was coming out, and I’d slammed home armor piercing rounds by ‘be’. Then the robot’s missile pod flipped out of its shoulder, Lacunae’s glittering shield flashing up just in time to take the blast. The shimmering magic wall dropped, and I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired four rounds through its head.

Of course, it didn’t keep its brain there, so the effect was a little bit spoiled. Lacunae’s minigun bullets simply dinged and sparked off its armored hide, and after a moment she put the weapon aside, her horn flashing as three glowing arrows manifested next to her and

streaked into its chest. With a crackle and pop, the sentry went still.

"I dislike these machines," she declared calmly as she opened a side panel and pulled out the robot's 5mm ammunition belts.

"Oh, why don't you push yourself? Be peeved. Mildly annoyed. Disgruntled?" I said with a chuckle, my brain running on bullet time rather than 'think about what you did and are doing to your friends' time. The missile launcher came off in one big piece, and I held it in my hooves. "Hey! Try using this!"

She looked at the weapon coolly. "Don't be ridiculous. I could never use that." I stared at her in shock. "It's loud, noisy, and smelly."

"Right. How silly of me!" There was no way I'd manage it. My magical strength wasn't nearly enough to fire it accurately, and when using missiles I sure as heck wanted to be accurate. We made our way up the stairs and towards the sounds of continuing gunshots and explosions. Scotch Tape's PipBuck tag flashed in my vision, leading the way.

We entered the room filled with printing machines. Whoever had turned on the power hadn't anticipated turning on the security, because turrets were lighting up and more sentries were activating from their hidden nooks. A missile streaked across the room, exploding in time to send a white and red mass arching overhead, splatting wetly into the wall above us and then falling limply. Rampage opened her eyes as her blown off limbs started to regenerate. Scotch yipped as she scrambled along the edge of the room to join us.

"Did you push something?" I asked sternly.

The olive filly blanched and pointed her hoof at Rampage. "She told me to!"

"It was a shiny red button. How could we not push it?" Rampage groaned as she stood on her restored legs. "Round two, you metal motherfucker!" she cried in glee, charging at the sentry bot that strafed our corner of the room with its minigun.

"Well, I guess I can excuse a shiny red button," I said as I looked at the robots rolling around. "Can you shoot?"

"Shoot? Shoot what?" I rolled my eyes at her response. That answered that question.

"Right." I shoved her down and grabbed her PipBuck. "Okay. Pray I remember how Mom did this," I said as I pulled out a connection lead and plugged it into her PipBuck. "Okay…security operations…

deputize. Confirmation, Marmalade."

Her eyes widened. "Whoa. I can see a little target in my vision." Good. That meant it worked.

"Yeah. You should have a target, Eyes Forward Sparkle, and S.A.T.S." I said as I lifted out the automatic and pushed it into her mouth. "The little X is where your gun is pointed. Pull the trigger with your tongue. Push this catch to eject the spent magazine. Put in a fresh one and load a round into the chamber with your hoof. Shoot at the smaller robots and, whatever you do, don't shoot me."

"O--" she said around the gun, pulling the trigger with her tongue as she tried to speak. She dropped it in shock, and I fell back with my armor stinging from the impact. I glared at her as she flushed. "--kay…" she finished lamely.

"Welcome to the group," I muttered as I stood and pulled out the shotgun, loading slugs. More robots were orienting on our position as one of the massive printers started to spark and smoke. I supposed trying to run after two centuries of no maintenance was a little risky. "Lacunae. Go to the second floor and get Glory and P-21 down here and out." There were more sentries and Protectapony robots making their way towards the disturbance in the print room.

Lacunae nodded once and flashed away from view. Then it was fight time. Rampage was the target, drawing most of their attention. I played flanker, running around behind the sentries to fire point blank into the gaps between the different parts of their chassis. I just prayed Scotch Tape lived through this fight.

Then the room exploded. Okay, no, the missile exploded. Apparently, I was more target than I anticipated and found myself on a ballistic journey across the room. I landed in a numb heap, my combat armor smoking as the Workhorse sentry oriented towards me. I couldn't help but smile as its gatling gun started to spin. I could get away, maybe. I might be able to blast it. I just felt so tired. So heavy. So slow.

Then the sentry jerked, and I blinked as the red bar disappeared.

Scotch Tape ducked down from behind it with wrench in her jaws and a spark battery between her hooves. She stared at me, trying to shout something around the wrench to the effect of "Wha re oo doeng? Ooove!"

Okay, when a fresh-out-of-the-stable filly almost half my age is telling me to move, then I know I need to get my ass in gear. I scrambled to my hooves and snatched up my gun. Even though she

couldn't die, Rampage could still lose and we could still bite it. I had to get my head in the game, or I'd be burying my friends instead of them burying me.

We were moving again, trying not to let the robots get a decent bead on us as I did my best to take out the sentries engaged with Rampage. Even she was regenerating slower and moving with increasing disorientation. If she gave out, how long could I withstand their fire?

"Scotch. I need you to get me something," I said with a grimace. I was going to need a bigger gun. No, not Folly. That was like…an anti-*building* gun. I told her what to do as I watched Rampage go down again. Two sentries began to turn towards me, and I ran as missiles streaked after me, cooking my tail as Rampage struggled to rise again.

I took cover behind one of the groaning, chattering printing presses and reloaded, my ears ringing and nose bleeding from the overpressure of the explosions. I panted through my mouth to keep my ears from popping as I backed away from the next sentry rolling around the corner towards me. I really missed those spark rounds.

Then Scotch Tape backed out of the hallway with the missile launcher I'd removed in tow. "Good job!" I yelled as I stuck my shotgun in its sling and raced to her. The heavy weapon shimmered as my magic strained to lift and orient the reinforced tube. "Cross your hooves," I yelled as I jumped into S.A.T.S. and put almost the spell's whole charge into the shot.

The missile streaked towards two of the sentries, striking soundly in the middle. My magic failed and the backblast sent the missile launcher back down the hall behind me. Still, with an explosion of metal, the sentries were blasted into pieces. That just left three more. "Go get it!" I called out, bringing out the shotgun again.

"What am I, your dog?" she yelled at me crossly.

"Yes! Now fetch!" I laughed, feeling…good? Excited? Not like a corpse waiting to die? One of them. Glory and P-21 came out onto the catwalks overhead, and precision green beams joined strafing minigun rounds and grenade blasts. Rampage ripped off the head of one robot and crawled inside as it wheeled about helplessly. Finally, Scotch Tape dragged the missile launcher back and loaded it, and I tried for a shot at the last sentry, which was sending one missile after another at the catwalks.

I entered S.A.T.S., took my target, and breathed out as the hovering

weapon fired. This time, I managed to keep the missile launcher from flying back as the explosive projectile blasted the remaining sentry bot. I sunk to my haunches, laughing, hugging the hot metal tube to my chest. Missile launchers. Loud, noisy, smelly, and fun!

But as I sat there, the smoke hazing the air, I felt like I was looking out of the Overmare's window once more. My throbbing ears could hear the distant screams choked silent in gagging, gasping agony. I pressed my face to the warm green metal. *Murderer.* I felt the tears running down my cheeks. *Foal killer.* I grit my teeth, hovering somewhere between tears and laughter. I could smell the chlorine. I could hear the screams.

Scotch Tape sat next to me, staring in shock as I hugged the tube, unable to stand. I sobbed as I did all I could just to curl the ends of my lips up. "I'm sorry, Scotch Tape. I'm so sorry I killed our home."

She looked at me, seeing the real me. Not the laughing idiot or even the fake hero, but the murderer. I hated the pity in her eyes, even if it was what I desperately needed. "Yeah. Me too," she said quietly before she rose. "Hey! Don't mess with that! Let me see if there's something good in there!" she yelled as Rampage proceeded to smash the robotic remains.

We survive in the Wasteland through doing. Action. If we think, we drown. We grasp for meaning in vain. Why was I alive? EC-1101? No. Helping a Wasteland determined to sink and die in poison and hate? Not if I were honest with myself. Glory? Goddesses, let it be for Glory. Please.

* * *

MASEBS Broadcast Tower 14 was only an hour or two east of the Hoofington Weekly building we'd left in our wake. To the northeast, I could barely make out the sliver of gray ocean, while to the south I could see the round building of the Hoofington Arena. Beyond that was the Core. Scotch Tape stared up at the huge white metal spire rising endlessly towards the clouds overhead. Lights glowed dimly on a broadcast dish-festooned ring platform high, high above the ground but not even at the midpoint of the tower. The outside was distracting her from what we'd left behind.

"How high does it go?" the young mare asked Glory, who seemed amused with her fascination.

"Higher than the clouds. Nopony knows what they were for

originally, but we use them today to grow our food. Thunderhead has the distinction of being one of the most advanced agricultural centers in the Enclave. We're one of the few that managed a surplus harvest every year for the past fifty years." She didn't try to hide the pride swelling her chest. "No other pegasus community has managed that."

"Thunderhead? What's that?" Scotch asked as she craned her neck back.

"Well…it's my…it's where I'm from originally." She deflated almost instantly; there was no covering the hurt. She took a deep breath and fell into a vaguely pedantic tone. "Before the bombs fell, Thunderhead was a support settlement for the forces working out of Shadowbolt Tower. When the war ended, we became one of the primary Enclave bases in the east; at first, this was just due to our possession of the tower, but, as the new order settled in, it quickly became clear that Thunderhead was preserving and building on the innovative, productive spirit that Hoofington was famous for. Today, Thunderhead enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the Enclave, and its people are forward-thinking technologically, scientifically, and socially. It's even the first Enclave settlement to begin sending aid down to the surface."

Scotch Tape looked at the ruins to the south. "So, where exactly are they sending this aid?"

Glory flushed and glanced at me. I arched a brow. Did she really want me to come to her rescue on this? I half-agreed with the filly. The little gray pegasus sighed. "Well, here, but there's a lot of work to do and there's been a lot of resistance. But we're trying to do better."

When they're not developing biological weapons.

"Why didn't you come down sooner?" Scotch asked as she walked beside Glory, her utility harness jingling with the tools she'd had on her when she'd fled. None of them were for removing PipBucks, unfortunately.

Glory sighed again. "We wanted to, but for years the surface was too radioactive. Then there wasn't anypony down here to help. Then for a while, the ponies that *were* down here were savage, mindless monsters. And of course there's always fear of biological contamination."

Biological contamination. I cocked my head, trying to think about this some. "Glory…Lighthooves was trying to infect a pegasus with

the raider plague. Why would he do that? Why not just spray it over every pony village down on the surface and wipe us all out?"
Glory blinked at me and then shrugged. "We've been thinking about the cannibalism and the mindless loyalty the disease fosters…" I continued, "but what if…what if all he's after is a spectacle? A contagion that would be an excuse for pegasi to never ever come back to the surface again? Who cares how it works if it's something they've never seen before and scares the feathers off them?"
"If there was a real contagion like the ones they talk about on the Science Network…" Glory chewed on the end of her wing as she thought about it for a moment. "Something verified by outside sources as a deadly threat…you're right. I don't think we'd ever come down here again." She shivered. "And the lightning rods would keep anypony down here from making it to the clouds. It'd permanently sever any hope of fixing things between pegasi and the surface."
"Especially if Thunderhead is responsible for finding a cure," P-21 added. "Seems like a perfect way to keep the status quo."
I didn't answer. Thinking of Lighthooves made me feel…nothing. I wanted to stop him, but it was an abstract and distant desire. It was the same as how EC-1101 had gone from a burning curiosity to a dull interest. Everything inside me had been snuffed out by chlorine gas and strangled screams. I tripped over a rock and nearly sprawled on my face. Damn, I couldn't even walk anymore.
"You should turn on your radio," Rampage said as her tail swished behind Scotch Tape and swatted her rump, making the young mare jump; thankfully, it hadn't hit hard enough to rip her barding. "Now that you're on the outside, you need to hear DJ Pon3. He's a big fan of Blackjack."
"He's a fan of Security," I muttered, not wanting to listen in on what he might say. "No surprise, since he's the one who made her, Goddesses know why."
"Security?" Scotch Tape asked, then flicked the radio on. I was thankful to hear Sweetie Belle's melodious voice rise from her speaker. The olive filly looked shocked. I remembered how I'd felt the first time I'd heard music that wasn't stable sanctioned and glorifying the Overmare.
I gestured to the word on my armor. "DJ Pon3 found out that I was helping ponies out here and started calling me the Security Mare." She looked at me skeptically, and I shrugged. "Don't look at me. It's

not like I asked him to."

"That hasn't stopped her from taking advantage of it when she can," P-21 said with a little smirk. But I didn't mirror it. Once, I'd been both annoyed and secretly proud of being Security; it'd somehow made me stand out above the rest of the Wasteland, corny as it was. But it'd been a lie. I wasn't better than the scum out there. I was worse. Maybe this Red Eye might have killed as many ponies as I; anypony nasty enough to take over Paradise sounded like a piece of work.

"Stop it, Blackjack," P-21 muttered beside me. I looked at him in surprise. "You're thinking about it? Aren't you? Kicking yourself isn't going to solve anything."

"No. I'm fine. I had to do it. I know that." I gave him a broad smile.

"It's okay to be sad, Blackjack."

I wasn't sad, though. I felt…hollow. Empty. Brittle. I was going to the tower from inertia; I didn't want to go. It was just the only destination any of us had. It was pretending like everything was okay. "I'm good, P-21. I'm just fine." Maybe I didn't want anything, but I knew what I didn't want. I didn't want my friends hurt. I didn't want them to worry. I didn't want EC-1101 in Sanguine's hooves. I didn't want to keep walking like this. I just had to keep up the lie. Go through the motions. Hope.

Eventually, the music came to an end, and the robust stallion came on. "Well, hello there, children! It's your MC of the Wasteland, DJ Pon3! Time for some news." I relaxed a little as he went on about the troubles around Manehattan and with Red Eye and other difficulties. My ears strained for some word about the Stable Dweller; I needed to believe there was somepony out there who could fix things in the Wasteland without murdering innocent ponies. Unfortunately, it looked like he didn't have anything to say about her at the moment.

After a mention of things happening around Stalliongrad, he then said the words that I'd been dreading. "It's time for some news for our friends out east. Some of you might notice that things are a little quieter than usual out there around the Core. Yeah, I can hear you from here, kiddies: 'But DJ, weren't you telling us to hammer up the windows, barricade the doors, and turn off all the lights 'cause a bajillion raiders were coming to eat us?'

"Yup. I did. I admit it. But…" He gave a low chuckle of anticipation. "Turns out that somepony out there must have been

listening up, because she went right where they were thickest and all of a sudden it's quiet. Dozens of raiders simply gone. No shots. No bodies. Just quiet. Now that's some pretty good work. Now we can just hope the Reapers and Rangers get the clue and knock off their latest pissing match over the Zenith Bridge before Security heads in that direction.

"In other news around the Core, what do folks make of these 'Volunteer Corps'? Now, we all know that, somewhere up above, the pegasi are making clouds right and left so thick that even I can't see through 'em, but now out of the blue a whole slew of them are around the Hoof offering to help. Well, that's awfully nice, but when you ask 'em to take care of some raiders or maybe something really crazy like let the sun through, they're just hemming and hawing. Look. I'm glad you're back, but if you're going to help, then make like Security and help. Don't just show up with a skywagon full of excuses why you can't do what we really need.

"So let's hear it for Security, for fighting the good fight and taking it right to the heart of the matter. Here is a mare that'll do whatever it takes to make the Wasteland a better place. This is DJ Pon3, bringing you the truth…no matter how bad it hurts."

Speaking of hurt, it really stings when you walk right into a tree! I fell hard on my rump, clutching my horn in my hooves as I hissed 'Ow…' over and over again. I tried not to think about what I'd just heard. I looked back at the others who'd watched me just smack my dumb face into a dumb tree. "Woopsie. Looks like listening and walking at the same time is too much for me. Think we can turn off Pon3?" I asked, grinning as widely as I could, keeping my eyes closed so I wouldn't have to see their faces.

Doing what had to be done. That sounded so simple. It should be easy. Blame Rivets and Stable 99 obstinacy, calmly and coolly accept that their death was inevitable and that I'd prevented more harm than if I had simply sealed them up.

So why couldn't I do it?

I wanted the Dealer here. I wanted some kind of cryptic bullshit to confuse me. I needed something inscrutable to make me not face the simple truth. I had to smile. I had to keep it together. Everypony needed me to hold it together.

Sweet Celestia, why couldn't I stop the screaming?

* * *

I have a special talent with ambushes: I walk into them with surprising regularity. This one, I was simply staying on point, keeping my back to all my friends, when the bullet slammed into my left shoulder. Oh, hello. Red bars. I grinned and laughed as my friends took cover, feeling the dull thump against my barding as the three or so raiders fired at us from the cover of a covered wagon. Out came the rifle and I peered down the scope, not even registering who or what I was shooting at.

Red, it's dead. S.A.T.S., three shots to the head. Engage…Boom… boom…Then I was being knocked do the ground by P-21. I just looked up at him as he shouted down, "Blackjack! What do you think you're doing?"

"Daddy!" I heard a filly wail as Glory took wing and flew to where the poor scavenger ponies curled up, their varmint hunting rifle discarded. Hastily, Glory worked to treat the massive damage I'd done to my target's head.

I just looked up at him, his staring eyes wide with fear and confusion as I murmured softly, "Red, it's dead. Red, it's dead."

* * *

"She's losing it," P-21 said quietly from the campfire. The stallion I'd shot wasn't doing well at all. Healing potions could do a lot, but not much for a brain that had taken a bullet through the middle. I lay apart from the others, staring into the darkness. Just a little family scavenging unit scared to death of being trapped in raider territory, and who'd shot first without the benefit of an E.F.S. to let them know I wasn't hostile.

"She's been under incredible strain. She's coping as well as she can," Glory said. I could feel her eyes on my back.

"No. She isn't, and you know that better than any of us, Glory. You've seen her push herself to the point of physical collapse." I'd tried so hard to be strong. And I was trying to keep it together. I was. I was trying to be happy. I was trying to live for them.

Glory didn't say anything. I knew she didn't have to. "She's going crazy, isn't she?" Scotch Tape summed it up excellently. The gray pegasus gave a soft sob.

"I'm going to check on him. Give him some more Med-X," Glory said thickly as she rose and walked back into the cargo wagon that

had become a makeshift hospice.

"What are we going to do?" P-21 said quietly. You're going to do better. Whatever you do, you'll do better than I have. I'm a murderer. A killer. This proves it.

"What would you do if there was no Blackjack?" Rampage asked.

"I don't know," P-21 said quietly. "I just don't know. Goddesses, I need her. Her and her stupid quest…it kept us going. Now that she's falling apart, I don't know. Try to find a life in Megamart or Chapel…or something." I should tell him that he'd be fine without me. That he was too smart to let the Wasteland hold him down. Without me, he'd do something amazing.

"And me?" Scotch Tape asked. I'd saved her life and killed everypony she knew. And now she was travelling with her killers. She was a good pony, for now. I didn't imagine her mother beat her and tormented her.

"Well, fortunately, there's always a job opening slaughtering wannabe Reapers while picking fights with the Steel Rangers across the river. It's a living," Rampage said quietly. Lacunae said nothing. I supposed she would do…something. Return to Chapel? Continue searching on her own?

And Glory…who had lost everything…what would she do? Where could a Dashite go in this world? Would she continue her search to clear her name? Take on Lighthooves by herself? Or try to find a quiet part of the Wasteland to live in?

Till slavers took her. Till poison choked her. Till monsters ate her. Till the Dealer took one more pony. And one more. And one more. Because that was what the Wasteland did. 'It's not getting any better,' Rampage had said. 'It's getting worse. The poison spreads a little more day by day. And one day, if I don't die, I think I'll be the last pony left in the world.' You're right to be afraid, Rampage, because you are. And there wasn't anything I could do. The Wasteland always won.

From the trailer rose an anguished wail. It joined perfectly with the screams in my head, echoing that word over and over again.

And one more.

I couldn't stay here. I couldn't do this. I had to leave…but I couldn't. So I did the next best thing. I floated an orb from my pocket and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Pony…male…earth. I felt big and heavy. Uniform. Gun. Peppermint cologne? That was unexpected. He stepped in front of the mirror. Doof still had all the charm of a cinderblock. He turned this way and smiled. That way and grinned. It somehow managed to resemble a leer. Slowly he collapsed on his rump, pressing his hooves to his head. “This just ain’t gonna work, Momma. I know you say I gotta be brave and all…show her how I feel…but it just ain’t gonna work.”

“Doofus, you idjit!” a crabby mare snapped from the other room. “You like this mare, don’tcha?”

“Yeah, Momma. More than anything.”

“And yer saying she’s hurtin’ bad right now?”

“We all are, Momma,” he said as he tried to slick back his black mane. “With Big Mac gone…it just hurts us all.”

“Then she needs ya, don’t she? Ya need to be there and tell her how you feel and let her know ya like her,” his momma said in a vinegary voice. She stepped into view, bony and sour-looking, but she still smiled. “There you go. Look just like your daddy.” Somehow, that didn’t seem to reassure the gaunt pink mare. “Now, you go and do your best, you got it, Doofus?”

“Yes Momma,” he said with a nod of his head. “I promise I won’t screw up again, Momma.”

She sighed and patted his chest with a hoof. “Just do your best,” she said as she stretched up to nuzzle his cheek. “How’d I birth such a great big lump?” He chuckled and nuzzled her back fondly before stepping back. “You have a nice night, Doofus.” I had to admit, I’d never heard that particular word said with such fondness before.

He ducked out and trotted to a bus that took him back to Miramare. It seemed particularly subdued. I supposed they must have buried Big Mac recently. He stepped off the bus and started to trot towards the main building, passing by a half dozen mares who struggled to unload their sky wagon. They saw Doof and immediately nudged each other.

“Hey! I betcha you can’t unload all these crates in five minutes,” one said loudly to her friend.

“Aw…nopony could do that,” her friend protested, and then added, “Not even Doofus.”

His ears stood straight up. “What you ladies talkin’ ‘bout? I can get them unloaded, lickety split.”

I mentally groaned as he immediately climbed into the back, bit the canvas rope at the end of the wooden crate, and pulled it off and onto his broad shoulders. I had to admit, these crates were damned heavy, but Doof was one strong pony. He talked between crates. “See ladies…this is why…mares like you…need stallions like me…around!” The mares just grinned at each other as he sweated profusely, doing their work for them.

One nudged the other. “Hey, Doofus. We heard Twist talking about you.”

He dropped the crate, his head snapping to her immediately. Oh no…”Really, Brass? What’d she say?” The crate banged solidly on his hoof, but he completely ignored it.

Brass, the coppery red mare, gave a smirk as she looked at her friend and then at the big, dumb stallion. “Well she was saying how she was looking for one particular stallion. Big. Strong. Brave.” I could feel his idiotic grin.

“Well I’m big, strong, and brave,” he said, missing sweaty and smelly as well. Damn but he worked up a sweat!

“But she was saying what she really needs is a big, tough stallion who will just take charge and give it to her between the flanks good and hard.” While her friend might have liked this talk, the others were quickly frowning at her blatant manipulation.

“Really? But Momma said I should be nice to her.”

“Tch…and what’s that got you? I’m telling you, she wants it. You just have to buck up and give it to her.”

“Doofus,” one of the others began, but the nasty mare’s friend cut her off with a glare.

“Well, I got to go, ladies,” he said as he trotted towards the building.

“That was nasty, Brass,” one admonished as he trotted away.

“What? Not my fault he’s a fucking idiot. Twist will kick his ass good and proper. It’ll be a great laugh.” I didn’t know if what she said registered or not, but he didn’t take his eyes off the Miramare building.

The Marauders had their own shared quarters. I was astonished to see that Doof had once roomed with Big Macintosh. How had they both fit in there? He walked up to another room. Twist and Jetstream. He knocked with his hoof. A few seconds later, Twist opened the door; I knew that look. Her pink eyes were puffy and bloodshot, her nose wet and red…and her breath reeked of

peppermint schnapps. “Doof? What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you. I…ah…wanted to help…”

She wrinkled her nose but stepped back and let him in. Her quarters were neat and tidy. “Don’t know how you’re going to do that. Jetstream’s cracking, I think. Vanity’s been talking with her all day about Big Macintosh.”

“We all knew it could happen, Twist. You could die. Or me,” he said sourly as he sat beside her little table where she’d been having some bread and cheese. He took the knife and cut off a huge hunk, munching noisily. “Mmm…tasty!” I wanted to facehoof.

“It wasn’t just you or me, Doof. It was Big Macintosh. He was…he was like a big brother or daddy I never had. Like, as long as he was there, we were going to be okay. Even after Stonewing.” She sniffed as she rubbed her eyes. “Goddesses, I’m a mess. I feel like my shop’s burned up again. I dunno if we’re gonna be able to stay together. Not as the Marauders, I mean.”

“We could become Doof’s Destroyers,” he suggested, and I could tell he was serious. Twist, however, broke into sharp, tense laughter.

“Oh that’s a good one,” she snorted. “Might as well rename us Twist’s Terminators or Psalm’s Slaughterers.” She sighed, shaking her head and rubbing her temples. Then she turned away and flicked her tail as she walked to the fridge. Oh…I knew that smell. And if I was smelling it…oh jeeze. I could already feel the effect it was having on Doof’s nethers. This was not a good time for a mare and a stallion to be alone together with one of them stupid and the other drunk and both of them hurting! Not at all!

“Well…I could take care of you,” he said dumbly as he raised a hoof to brush the candy canes on her flank.

“Doof, get off!” she said crossly as she scowled back at him, getting out the bottle of peppermint flavored liquor and took a pull off it. Then she pointed a hoof at him. “How many damn times do I have to tell you ‘I am not interested’?”

“But…”

“Not. Interested. I don’t care what you smell. That’s hormones. And even with them, I still don’t want anything to do with you. Not unless that’s a huge Doof costume and inside you’re a crème filly with a red mane who talks in drawl and wants me to be her friend again.”

I had to admit, I echoed Doof mentally. “Huh?”

She looked at him with inebriated scorn. “I’m gay. Fillyfooler. Marelicker. Take whatever damn label you like. And the only mare I’ve ever been interested in stopped being interested in me when I got my cutie mark and she didn’t. You ain’t her. So just get out.” She turned her back on the poor, confused, dumb stallion whose brain told him one thing while his cock told him something else. And maybe, maybe it would have ended there. He’d take a cold shower, she’d sober up and cool off. And that would be that.

Then he grinned slowly. “Oh…I get it.” No Doof! Don’t do this. She was a lying cunt. She was messing with you. Stop!

But he didn’t.

Perhaps Twist might have kicked his ass. She certainly seemed capable. Like she’d usually be capable. But she was drunk and tired. It wasn’t good. It wasn’t fun. It didn’t feel nice. And eventually, she simply stopped crying and fighting and everything but enduring. And when it finished and she just lay there, Doof stood over her, seeming to be waiting for something. For her to tell him that it was what she’d wanted…that he’d hit her spot…something.

“What the fuck did you do?” a male said from the doorway. Applesnack was not a happy pony at the best of times. And now? Now the green stallion looked like one immense raw bundle of nerves. Right now, he was looking for any excuse to take a pony apart.

Right now, Doof was exactly what he needed.

Somewhere in the beating, everything smeared as the memory shifted. Doof found himself sitting in a concrete cell. He’d saved some newspaper clippings. ‘Macintosh Marauder convicted of sexual assault,’ screamed one headline. ‘I knew he was always dangerous’ started another clipping beside a picture of Brass and her friend. He’d scribbled ‘cunt’ beside both their heads. ‘Marauders disbanded. Hoofington’s legendary squad disgraced.’ The last was a little letter. ‘Please don’t write me any more, Doofus,’ was all it said. There was no signature, but the paper was warped and smeared with tears.

Then the guards came, and the nurse with them. They looked at him like he was scum. Perhaps he was. Perhaps he wasn’t. They gave him a shot; I felt the Med-X take effect quickly as he was walked down the concrete hall. They stood him over a padded frame and strapped him down. “Whut are yew doin’?” he slurred numbly as they finished scrubbing him with harsh-smelling alcohol.

“We’re experimenting on how to make a better, stronger pony,” a mare said softly. The black earth pony looked down at him in contempt. “As you might understand, it’s better to experiment on a worthless piece of scum like you before we give the Steelpony treatment to real soldiers.”

“I ain’t scum,” he muttered thickly as unicorn mares with scalpels floating over them approached. He jerked his legs against the strong restraints. “Let me go…you can’t do this, you cunts!”

“I assure you…we can,” she replied softly. The Med-X might be a painkiller, but it did nothing for the sensation of his hide being cut open.

“You cunts!” he shouted as he jerked again.

“We are…”

“Cunts!”

“And you deserve it.”

“Cuuuuuunnnnnttttts!”

The memory smeared once more. The pain, that rolling pain though every fiber of his being, was barely held off as the needle was stabbed into this throat. The painkiller went straight to his brain, and he shuddered in relief. The floating needle pulled out, and a ghoul rasped, “Ah, a thing of wonder is a joy forever.”

“So, I just got to get to this stable and get the Overcunt to give you this EC-1101 and you’ll tell me how ta make that drug so I don’t hurt no more?” Deus asked thickly as he rose on his hydraulically augmented limbs and looked down at the ghoul.

Sanguine. I don’t know what I’d expected. I’d seen a few ghouls in the Wasteland, but never one like this. Wisps of pink gas danced around his lips and leaked out of cracks in his charred hide. His crackled mouth split in a grin. “That’s it. You go in there and get me that program, and all your ouchies will be gone for good.”

“And why do you want it?”

“Why? My. Do you think you can understand?” he asked, chuckling brightly. His business suit looked like it’d just come off the rack of a store. I had to admit, the sight of that abomination in that freshly pressed suit was more unnerving than if he’d been dressed like a raider. He trotted to a window that looked out at the blasted landscape. “Isn’t it beautiful? Poisoned. Sick. Broken. This is the purest expression of Equestria! The culmination of all our sins! But it is also an opportunity.”

Deus had an E.F.S., and I watched the target line up perfectly with

the back of Sanguine's head. "You talk too much," he muttered.

"Apologies. It's an occupational hazard for visionaries like myself," Sanguine said with a disarming little chuckle. "Let's simply say that, with that program, I will be able to create and explore new evolutionary paths otherwise unrealized. We tasted a sip of it during the heyday of Chimera. Just a sip of the possibilities. Twilight Sparkle succeeded, despite all odds, and the alicorns are just one possible path. I want to use the Wasteland as my canvas and explore the myriad possibilities of pony evolution!

"It will also," he added, turning back to Deus and trotting to him with a freaky little dance, "Discharge a certain obligation I hold to a very important pony. A pony whose dreams far exceed mine. Now that it's been found and the Overmare is opening the door, all you have to do is get it."

From the next room came a soft chime. "Ugh…now, if you'll excuse me, go ahead and bully some of those raiders into helping you, and let me get to work." And with that, he trotted to the door. Perhaps he underestimated the huge gray pony, or perhaps the unicorn was simply too mad to care. Deus, however, lingered at the door, his augmented ears picking up every word.

"Hello, good sir! And how are you on this most splendid of days, Director?"

The mechanical voice reminded me of Watcher. "Progress?"

"I've just sent an errand stallion to get the program."

"And the biological sample?"

"Safe and sound. We put it in her hooves, and we get everything we want. I get Project Chimera. You get everything else. She gets to play at being queen of the Wasteland. Everything according to plan."

"No."

"No?" Now Sanguine sounded perplexed. "No? Nix? Null and void?"

"We must stop him."

"Him?" Then a pause. "Him?! Sir, with all due respect, he was stopped two centuries ago. I saw it. He died with the princesses, Project Horizons died with him, and we are all the better for it."

"He lives. I know it. Find him, Sanguine. He's here. I can feel it. I can feel him!"

"Of course. Of course," Sanguine rasped in mollifying tones. "I'll get right on top of that, Director."

Deus turned from the door, muttering softly, “Project Horizons, huh? Interesting…”

oooOOOooo

I awoke in the rain. Nopony talked. Nopony smiled. They sat apart from me, together. Occasionally, one would glance in my direction, but I couldn’t imagine what they expected. Was I to say something? Do something? Be something? I knew what they wanted; they wanted me to lead. To stand up, grin, point them in a direction and move out. Because we were friends. Because they trusted me, even after all I’d done. All I’d done to them.

I didn’t deserve them. I didn’t deserve to draw another breath.

I slowly rose to my hooves. “Blackjack?” Glory said in worry as she rushed to my side.

Slowly, I started walking. “Let’s go,” I rasped softly as I walked towards the tower.

“Blackjack…it…” But then she met my eyes and realized it didn’t matter if it had been an accident or not. “He’s…okay. He’s going to pull through.”

I felt nothing at all. No relief. No joy. Nothing. I smiled. “That’s good. Really. I’m glad.”

“Blackjack?” she asked as she touched my cheek. I pulled away, looked away. I may as well have slapped her.

“Listen. He’s hurt really badly,” I said. “You should take him to Megamart. Make sure he pulls through. Take Scotch Tape, too…it’ll be safer there.” I looked at Lacunae. “You can go with her and teleport both of them back when he’s safe and sound.” That would take at least several hours. Maybe more. “Then you meet up with the rest of us.”

“Blackjack. Are you sure?” Glory asked. “You’re really scaring me, Blackjack. Please…”

“I’m sure,” I replied quietly, sincerely. “Get him and his family to safety.” Keep me from adding one more to my count. Goddesses, how much blood was on my hooves?

She rushed to me and hugged me as tightly as she could, shaking. I tried to return the gesture. To get some feeling…some compassion…in the embrace. “I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

My words caught in my throat. I swallowed hard and murmured, “I know. I love you too.” And I did. I did. Glory turned away, going to

the wounded scavenger's family. She gave me one last look, worry etched in her face. I smiled as hard as I could. She returned it with a slight lifting of the corners of her mouth. Then, as they left, I murmured softly, "Goodbye."

* * *

Rampage, P-21, and I didn't say a word as we approached the massive armored base of the tower. I couldn't imagine what it was for; broadcasting, I supposed. The door to MASEBS #14 looked like it could have had a balefire bomb detonate while taped to it and only just have its paint a bit scuffed. The door was locked and sealed, of course, but, after taking care of the lock on a panel beside the door with a pair of bobby pins and spending several minutes glaring at the terminal ensconced within, P-21 found the password. With a groan and a slight hiss and hum, the yard-thick slab began sliding down into the ground. Goddesses, how'd I luck into having a smart pony like him? We slipped through the door, walked down a short corridor that I suspected was just to get us past the armor plating, and found ourselves in a spartan, metal-walled antechamber. The lights were still almost all on and the place was reasonably clean. "See what you can find," I said to P-21. The blue stallion looked at me skeptically, then nodded and started off through one of the doors with his usual diligence.

"Watch out for him," I said to Rampage as I opened another door, found some stairs, and slowly began climbing them, looking for…I didn't really know. A command center. Maneframe. Something I could plug the Delta PipBuck into, I supposed. I made my way up; it seemed a natural direction. I passed by rooms filled with machinery still running even after two centuries. I wondered if it drew power from the city or some other source.

Then I heard a familiar stallion's voice. "… know ghouls might not be the most comfortable ponies to be around, but you can say the same thing about half the ponies in the Wasteland. So if you see a ghoul sitting there all by their lonesome, pop over and just say hello. Give them a smile. It might be the only thing that keeps them from losing what little equinity they have left." I frowned; right now DJ Pon3 was the last pony I wanted to listen to.

I approached the voice and stepped through a door into a room marked 'MASEBS Relay Station: authorized unicorns only'. Within

were a dozen dusty monitors and speakers. Two unicorn skeletons lay curled up on a mattress surrounded by empty tin cans and Sparkle-Cola bottles. Most of the monitors showed pictures of the Wasteland. To my shame, I saw Glory making her way towards Megamart with the scavenger's family. I reached out and touched her image on the display.

There was one picture that was off, though. A small gray unicorn mare with a glowing horn was talking into a microphone, which was odd enough. What really confused me was how her mouth movements matched the stallion's voice coming out of the speakers set in the roof. I put my forehooves on the control panel to lean in and watch her lips moving.

"DJ Pon3 is a mare?" I asked, staring in shock.

Suddenly, she stopped talking and looked around. Her eyes looked towards a monitor. "Oh boy! Looks like we've got some technical difficulties, my little ponies. I'd send my assistant for a certain repair pony, but then it'd never get fixed! Enjoy some Sapphire Shores in the meantime!"

She trotted towards the camera and began to work some controls. Then she blinked and smiled up at me. "Heck of a time to break into the radio biz," she said in that stallion's voice. She blinked and made a face, her horn glowing for a moment. Then she said in a softer, feminine voice, "Sorry about that."

"DJ Pon3 is a mare?" I repeated dumbly.

"Yup. Fortunately, you hit the 'transmit studio' button instead of the 'transmit all' button. Otherwise, I'd have some explaining to do," she said with a sheepish grin. "My name is Homage." Then her eyes widened as she stared at me. "You're her? Aren't you? MASEBS #14! Yes, you are her! You're Security!"

I nodded again as I sat in front of the screens, looking up at her with a small frown. "Yeah. I guess…"

"I've got to say, I never actually thought I'd get a chance to meet you. I mean, Hoofington's a long long way from Manehattan. You're clear past Ponyville and Canterlot," she said as she brushed her blue bangs back behind her ear. "I'd like to tell you, you're doing an incredible job out there. The Heroine of the Hoof."

"Stop…" I muttered as I felt myself start to shake.

"What's that?"

"Please…stop all that Hero Security crap. I'm not a hero."

She smiled. "I didn't know you were modest too. I've heard from

dozens of ponies how you're cleaning up the Hoof. Sure sounds like a hero to me."

"I'm not a fucking hero!" I yelled as I covered my head with my hooves, my whole body shaking. Her eyes went wide. "Heroes save ponies. That's what Security is supposed to do. Save ponies." I sobbed as I looked up her. "Heroes don't murder whole stables of hundreds of ponies! Heroes don't walk around praying somepony blows their brains out! I'm not a hero, Homage! I'm one of the bad ponies!"

Homage just stared at me in shock and slowly gave me a sad smile. "Tell me about it?"

I had no idea what I was supposed to do. What I was supposed to say. I just found myself talking, starting with how I'd heard about the attacks around my old stable and how I was returning home anyway. I then went on about how I'd discovered my stable had been infected by the raider contagion and how we'd fought like hell to free it from the Overmare. I explained how I'd told them to toss the bodies outside, but had never checked up on them actually doing it. How I'd discovered the entire food supply had been contaminated, how the entire stable was infected.

"And then…then…I activated a poison gas talisman in the ventilation system," I sobbed as I shook, feeling that emptiness ripped apart by pain as I hung my head back. "In a few minutes, I killed four hundred ponies, Homage. Four hundred! I killed everypony I knew in the stable. I…I killed foals. I killed stallions who'd finally gotten their freedom. I killed them all. I know there were probably some uninfected in there too. I killed them. I killed them before they became monsters."

Hanging my head, I bawled before her. "I wish I'd died in there with them. That would at least have been fair. I'm a murderer, Homage. I can still hear their screams. I can hear them calling me a murderer. I can smell it and feel it and all I want is for it to end. For me to get the punishment I deserve." I drew a slow, trembling breath and dared to look up.

She had her hooves folded under her chin, tears streaking her cheeks. "I forgot just how rough it was around Hoofington…" she said quietly. "But I know this, Blackjack. You are a hero. To so many."

She tapped her controls and one of the monitors changed to a caravan crawling past Pony Joe's. Another brought up the

Fluttershy Medical Center, where ponies were limping into the emergency entrance for care. Then up came Stockyard, the brahmin eating their meals unmolested by the mutated dragonlings. Brimstone's Fall showed me a lone railcar loaded with boxes of gems and other goods being pulled along the tracks towards the city; nopony had a whip. Another monitor flashed to life, and I saw Blueblood Manor with a wagon being pulled by Harpica outside the front entrance while the Crusaders brought out boxes of salvage from the ruined estate. Flank was back open for business, now more secure. And another of Riverside, where a caravan of merchants was trading with the fishers and the sand dogs at the same time. A blurry, heavily-zoomed-in *Seahorse* cruising along the coast with a barely distinct sea green mare in the bow. The last was of Chapel, where they'd cleared and leveled a plot of ground for some new buildings. I saw the distant black form of Priest talking to some pilgrims…and then watched as they started away…not towards the bridge, but back out into the Wasteland. There was Sekashi, telling her not always so funny stories to the ghoulish foals.

We do not always see the good we do.

"You've touched so many, Blackjack, in the things you've done. I know you don't feel like it, but every time you keep fighting the good fight, you're making Hoofington a little better. And if Hoofington can get better, I really think there's hope for the Wasteland as a whole," Homage said as she scrubbed her eyes.

I didn't know what to say. "I'm glad I helped. I am. But…how am I supposed to go on? Am I supposed to get over it? Am I supposed to forget about it? I can hear them. I feel like I'm still choking on the chlorine, Homage. How am I supposed to live?" I begged her softly.

"I don't know," she replied. "That's something everypony has to decide for herself. It's as vital to us as our virtue, our friendships, and our loved ones. You need to find that special something inside you. You need to know it's there so that you can move forward," Homage said gently. "If you find it, come and talk to me. I'll keep the hero talk toned down till you change your mind. But if you don't mind, I'd like to tell folks about Stable 99. I think it's important that they know just what their safety and security cost you."

"Please. There's nothing good to remember about 99," I lied. I had plenty of good memories. Waking up and working with Mom. Card games with Rivets. Hitting on Midnight. Even if there was plenty of

shit mixed in, there were gems, too. “But if you want…please, don’t call me a hero. It wasn’t heroic. It was murder... ”

Homage just gazed at me like she’d heard this before. “I’ll just tell the truth folks need to hear and nothing more,” she said solemnly.

“Thanks.” I started to turn away, then paused. “You like music, don’t you?” Her eyes brightened at once; I supposed it was a stupid question. I pulled out the Delta PipBuck. “I’ve got some music here. I don’t know if it’s your thing…it’s no Sweetie Belle. Just some that I’ve picked up here and there. Some music by a pony named Octavia…”

“What?” Homage burst in glee. I started from her sudden enthusiasm. “You have something by Octavia? I thought the M.o.M. and M.o.I. banned her for that charity concert! All her recordings were destroyed!”

“Well, I found some…um…with her.” And Homage’s smile turned more sympathetic. “She ended up in Flank, but she still had a ton of records with her. I have them in Chapel and downloaded others from her terminal.”

“Thank you, Blackjack. I know you don’t like being told this, but you’re my hero for sending this to me,” she said, and I went red once again.

“Well…yeah. And some music from some weird ponies in Flank, in a club called Mixers. And…um…some that I played,” I added lamely as the PipBuck broadcaster made a connection with the computers. “It’s horrible, though. Just horrible.”

“You play?” She grinned at me.

“Horrible!”

“What instrument?”

“... A contrabass. Or so I was told... ” I muttered as I tapped my forehooves together awkwardly.

“Just like Octavia?” Could she grin any wider?

“Did I mention I was horrible at it?” I said as I flushed…and… funny. I felt…better. Oddly more alive. Hurt and hollow, but… better. “Anyway…I’ll just send it all to you. I know you like music. Maybe some of your listeners will too.”

She shook her head. “You’re incredible. Someday, when all this is over, the three of us need to get together and share stories. I think it’ll be the finest interview in the history of DJ Pon3.” Me, her, and... Glory? It didn’t really matter at the moment.

“We’ll see,” I said as I watched the PipBuck upload the music files.

I could only hope that Homage would know how to retrieve them.

"Thanks, Blackjack," she said with clear sincerity. "Look, I need to get back on the air. Folks get anxious if I'm away for too long, and there's stuff happening in the west. I hope you find what you need to find, Blackjack. And I hope you think about what I told you. You might not feel like it now, but you are a hero." She gave one last smile of comfort, then left to return to her microphone.

"What kind of hero wants to kill herself?" I muttered softly to myself as I sat back.

"One that really fits Hoofington," the Dealer murmured. I looked at him shuffling his cards.

"I thought you were gone for good. You've missed some real opportunities to fuck with my head," I said sharply as I rose to my hooves.

He looked at me with a thin smile. "Well, there's not much point to kicking a mare who's beating herself down already. Where's the fun in that?" he asked, then looked at his cards. "Don't kill yourself… you know it's wrong."

"Of course I do," I said softly as I looked down at the delta's cool blue screen. The good feelings were going fast. I was already starting to smell chlorine. "I know I'm loved. I know I helped people. I just feel like it doesn't matter. The ponies I saved today are just going to die tomorrow."

"Everypony dies. You've seen what happens when they don't. Don't tell me that's preferable," the Dealer said as he showed me three cards depicting Rampage, Blueblood, and Deus.

"I'm not talking about eventually. I'm talking about dying bad. We're just barely holding on, and every day a little bit more just falls away. Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me there's hope in this poisoned land." He sighed and stopped shuffling the cards, just holding them between his hooves. I sat down beside him. "I need to know what I'm living for. I need to know that…that there's something better possible. That it's not going to keep getting worse and worse." I sighed and leaned back, tapping my head against the metal wall. I was sick of being the universe's chew toy.

"I know, Blackjack. It's a question I ask myself too," he said with a small, old smile.

"Of course you do. 'Cause you're my crazy," I said as I looked down at the sleek black PipBuck. "So how am I supposed to find out where this EC thing is supposed to go next?" Was I supposed to

thump it? Shake it?

"You're asking me?" he chuckled, and the PipBuck blinked. 'Equestria Military Command Hub: Hoofington. Ironmare Station.' The display showed the navigation further east and was even kind enough to copy it on to Marmalade's PipBuck.

I held up the black device with my magic. "It can calculate the value of radroach meat, tell me if somepony plans to kill me or not, and can download the data I need and move it around for convenience even if I don't have a clue how to look for the data. Is there anything it doesn't do?"

"Tell you the secret of happiness, apparently," he replied dryly, shaking his head. "So…are you going to kill yourself still?"

"Probably," I muttered as I looked at him. "I can't live with what I've done. I know it wasn't my fault. I know that. But every second I'm not doing something, it's tearing me apart. Homage was right. I need to find something to live for. Something that matters. Or I need to kill myself before I become a complete monster." He just stared at me, and I smiled mirthlessly. "I can feel it happening, Dealer. It happened in the stable. I fought to kill until I almost died killing everypony around me. What if I pulled that in Megamart? Or Chapel? I can't let that happen. I can't let gassing my stable ever be okay. I just can't."

He put his hoof in mine. "You remind me of how things used to be, Blackjack. I hope you find what you need. The Wasteland needs you. Your friends need you. I need you." And with that, my crazy hallucination went away.

I found a pencil and some scrap paper in my packs. 'Went for a walk. Might not be back. Meet you in Megamart if I am. Sorry. BJ.' Then I fished out the StealthBuck, and, after some fiddling, activated its magic. I headed down till I heard P-21 searching. I looked at him with a parting smile. I slipped the note under my Delta PipBuck and set it down in the doorway for P-21 to discover. Then I headed out the door. Feeling better than I had in ages, I started north.

Towards the sea.

* * *

I wasn't really paying attention to how long I wandered. An hour?

Two? Three? Night arrived, my eyes transforming everything into amber hues. Due north, the land became rocky, and here and there were thin gray trees with a few sick leaves clinging to them. I could hear the steady, repetitive but constantly unique sound of the waves growing louder and louder with each passing moment.

And then the land ended.

Before me was a great wedge of stone thrusting out into that great endless plane of churning water. Cold wind snapped at me, the clouds overhead spitting occasional cold blasts of rain that mixed with the salty tang in the air. Step by step, I walked along a narrow trail that wound towards that point, passing by desiccated picnic tables and rusted fire pits. Marmalade's PipBuck chimed softly. 'Star Point' appeared on the navigation tool. Finally, I came to the end. The tip of the great stone triangle. Surrounded by all that openness, I felt that old familiar sensation swallow me. The rusted remains of guardrails ran around the edges of that great wedge of stone. The long grass rattled softly in the wind.

At least I had company.

One lone skeleton lay there in the center of the rock, protected by a slight divot. A few rags and a decayed duffel bag anchored the unicorn's remains. "Hey," I said softly to the bones as I clenched my eyes shut, feeling the familiar panic rolling back and forth within me giving way to a resignation that, bad as it felt, was tolerable.

I opened my eyes again and looked out at that cold, vast emptiness. A hard mountain loomed to the west. The harbor ruins stretched to the east. Behind me was 99 and all my bloody sins. Ahead of me, nothing but stark emptiness. I felt as if I were alone on the moon.

"I hope you don't mind some company," I murmured softly as I drew Vigilance. I was over. This was done. I pressed the gun to the underside of my jaw and clenched my eyes. If there was something, anything to keep me alive, now would be the time for it.

I pulled the trigger.

The weapon clicked softly as the cool metal ring kissed the underside of my jaw. Slowly, I moved the gun back into my field of view and stared down at it. At the safety. I slowly shook as I looked at that little tab above the trigger. Salty tears mixed with the ocean spray as I curled up beside those bones. I looked at those eye sockets and the salt-crusted glasses that lay atop them. They seemed to stare at me, asking me why I was doing this.

Had this mare come out here to die when the bombs fell? Choosing

where she would finally meet her end? Had she died weeping? In pain? Or had she wanted to live? To stay with the ponies that loved her? To stay in a world that was dying and falling apart?

What sense was there living in a world that only got worse? In a world without princesses? Where the only reward for doing good was misery and everything worthwhile became tarnished? I flicked off the safety. Four hundred murders. Forty colts and fillies. Scoodle. If the penalty for murder was death, then I wished I could die four hundred and forty one times to pay the price in full.

Bowing my head, I put the barrel in my mouth. Felt the cool silver plate. Tasted the salt on the barrel.

The skull of the pony broke free and bumped against my leg. I looked down at it and the still-faintly-blue horn touching my knee. "How do I go on living?" I whispered.

Then I saw that the seam on the bag had split. A few ratty clothes. A foal's rattle. A battered recorder. I carefully pulled it out; the machine was trashed, but I connected my PipBuck to it. There were only two fragments recoverable. I played the last.

There was lots of yelling, shouting, shoving, and scared cries. "Mommy, I'm scared. Where are we going?"

"We're going to a stable, sweetie. Remember? Just like I told you," she said softly,

"I don't want to go to a stable! I want to go home. Why can't we go home, Mommy?"

"Shhh. Shhh. We have to go. It's the only safe place left."

"Stable pass?" asked a mare.

"Here. For me and my daughter."

"Whoa whoa whoa! This pass is for Stable 90! Not 99. You can't just swap these things."

"Please, there's no way we can reach Stable 90 in time!"

"That's not my fault. Get back!"

There were sounds of a scuffle, and another mare asked in a more authoritative voice, "What's going on here?"

"Please. Our passes are for 90, not 99, but…please take her!"

"The rules are clear, Trick." The mother gave a sob.

"Hrmph. Fuck the rules. My pass says I get to bring a kid if I want. Well, I don't have one." Her harsh tone softened. "I'll take her."

"You will? Oh thank you. Thank you! Honey, you need to go with this nice pony, okay?"

"No! Mommy! I want to stay with you!" the filly wailed. "I want to

go home. Why can't we go home?"

"Listen! Please. Please!" her mother begged frantically, the filly sniffling. "You have to go with her. This is your home now. You need to live. You have to grow up. To be a big girl. You're going to do great things. And you're going to have kids. And they're going to do great things too. But to do that you have to live."

"No, Mommy, no…"

"Always remember how proud I am of you. How glad I am to see you go becoming such a good girl. You kept me going. You kept me strong. And now you have to go and help other ponies, too. Please. Promise me you'll keep going. Promise me you'll live."

A sob, a sniffle, and then the filly said, "I promise, Mommy. I promise."

"That's my big girl. My good girl. You have stars in your eyes. Don't ever forget that."

"We've got to seal the stable, ma'am," the mare said softly. "There's a whole mob coming."

"Thank you." A sniff and a nuzzle. "I love you. I love you."

"I love you, Mommy," the little filly blubbered. "I love you!"

"Come on, honey. Let's get inside. I'll show you a trick. It's my super special talent."

"Goodbye…" the mother whispered. There was a metallic grind of the door rolling into place.

I wept as I looked down at her bones. She'd given her daughter away to save her. How many parents had made that same sacrifice? Who had something they loved so much that it was more important than their own life?

What was I living for? What would I be willing to die for? Glory? I cared for her, maybe even loved her a little. Revenge? No, as much as I might hate Sanguine for what he did, I didn't have some burning vendetta in my heart. Was it virtue? Friendship? Were either of those enough?

Would I be here if they were?

I pressed the gun to the side of my head, leaning back this time. I clenched my eyes shut, my magic increasing on the trigger. Then I opened my eyes for one last look at the poor, sick world before I left it.

Stars.

The hole in the cloud was no bigger than my hoof, and only a dozen or so stars twinkled softly in the night.

Only a fool would demand power of the stars.

"Please…" I said as I stared up at that gap in the heavens, at those tiny winking jewels in the sky as tears ran down my face. "Please… help me. I need something. Anything. Anything that can make me bear this." My gun trembled as I begged the heavens for something to stop this. To give me a reason to go on, a reason that I could live with. Something that could made the murder of hundreds bearable.

My horn brightened.

"Blackjack?" asked a tiny metallic voice behind me. "What are you doing?"

Slowly, ever so slowly, I turned to look at the bobbing spritebot. "Watcher?" I whispered, my voice cracking.

Those robotic eyes just stayed focused on me as I sniffed and said, "I'm afraid I fucked up again."

The tiny machine bobbed closer. "I'd disagree with that. Why don't you put the gun down and tell me about it?" Slowly, I lowered the weapon and told the robot everything that'd happened from the gas station to now. I told him everything, my lies and fears and how much I hated myself for wanting to die when so many others wanted to live but didn't. This poor mare had lost everything to save her daughter. Why couldn't I find a reason to live in this dying, poisoned world?

"Wow. Blackjack. Just…wow," the spritebot said in its tinny voice. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine anything that would make that easier."

"Yeah," I said as I faced the robot. "You told me the way to survive Scoodle's death was to fight every second to make things better. But I haven't made things better. I've just raised my death count by a factor of ten." I closed my eyes. "You told me you knew ponies whose fuck-ups killed millions. Do you think those ponies could live with those deaths?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"How do you survive, Watcher?" I asked quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you watch the Wasteland. You try and get ponies to do good things. You've seen failure time and time again. You've seen the Wasteland decaying. What keeps you going?" I asked softly.

He fluttered before me. "Hope," he replied after a minute. "Hope that someday my mistakes can be forgiven and hope that Equestria can heal."

I looked out at that endless dark water. "I don't see how anypony

can have hope anymore."

The spritebot just bobbed there for a second. Then he said quietly, "Would you like me to show you?"

"What?" I asked as I looked at the bot sharply.

"You're literally only a few minutes from me. If you promised not to tell another soul…and I showed you what gives me hope day after day…do you think you could live?"

I just stared at him and then gave a shrug. "Maybe."

"Then stay there and don't move." And with a crackle, the bug robot resumed its normal behavior and flew back into the gray woods.

Don't move? I looked around the flat slab of rock. The rainy woods. The black waters. The gray ruins and the looming dark mountains.

One minute. Two. I sighed, and then saw something glint through the tear in the bag. The frame was corroded and flaked from the salt, but the glass had preserved the drawing within. The unicorn mare with the streaks in her mane looked down at the small filly in her embrace, holding her still for the artist. I looked at the two streaks of color in her shaggy mane, rather like a skunk and not like her mother at all. Even after two centuries, there was a bright light in the filly's eyes. I supposed that that could have been artist's fancy though.

Then I stared hard at the mother. I'd seen her before, but where?

And then I was flying through the air, screaming like crazy as the dark waves flashed beneath me. Razor-sharp talons tightened against me as we flew higher and higher, powerful wings blasting me with a gale. I looked at the massive reptilian head, the scaly purple hide, and the lashing tail as we lifted clear up into the clouds. All the while, I screamed like crazy. This was NOT how I wanted to die.

"Relax, Blackjack," the dragon growled in its deep voice. "I told you I was coming to get you, didn't I?" he said as he flew higher, up through the tops of the clouds, and higher still towards a cave near the top of the suddenly much closer mountain.

"Watcher?"

He grinned down at me.

I took a deep breath and yelled at the top of my lungs, "Couldn't you have mentioned you're a frigging dragon?!"

* * *

Heights like this were no good. No good at all. I was glad the flight was mercifully brief and that I hadn't the opportunity to soil my armor before I was deposited inside the cave. The large purple and green dragon immediately started to check the cave. "Wait here," he growled as I stood next to a massive pile of gems. If that treasure wasn't what he was so worried about, then I didn't worry about idly kicking a few errant diamonds back towards the heap. On one spot of floor was a black charred patch that reeked of burnt flesh. I gave it a wide berth.

He returned with a relieved look on his face, walking to the pile of gems and flopping down on it as he pressed a hand to his chest. "Whew. I don't think I've left my cave in…forever. It looks like the Enclave didn't have time to sneak in and try something." He looked at the burnt patch on the floor. "They're a little bit sore with me, at the moment."

The sheer absurdity of the situation snapped me out of my funk enough for me to smile and approach, extending a hoof. "Hi. I'm Blackjack. And you are?"

"Spike," he replied as he rolled on to his side, reaching down and shaking my hoof with remarkable care. "Though most ponies, and I can count the exceptions on two hands, only know me as the Watcher."

"Well, thanks," I said as I looked at the massive dragon and sat down hard. "You know, I really was not expecting this," I said as I gestured with my forehooves. "I figured you were some ghoul sitting in a shack or bunker somewhere."

"Ponies aren't the only ones concerned with the future of Equestria. Griffins. Zebras. Even dragons have a stake in seeing it put back to normal."

"I'm still a little fuzzy as to why? Your name rings a bell… "

He sighed with a sad little smile. "No surprise. Rarity always kept me on a low profile. With so many dragons helping the zebras, well… it got awkward." He sat up a little. "You're looking at Twilight Sparkle's number one special assistant."

I stared at him and gave my head a hard shake. "Twilight Sparkle… had a dragon… as an assistant?!"

"Well, I was just a baby at the time," he replied with a modest smile. "This was a long time ago. Before the ministries. The war. Everything. Back when it was just the seven of us in Ponyville and

my biggest problems were diamond dogs kidnapping Rarity." He looked wistfully away. "Sometimes, I can close my eyes and almost smell Twilight's daffodil and daisy sandwich."

That stabbed at me. "As if that will ever happen again," I muttered, my gaze dropping.

That claw reached down to tilt my face up. "It will. You asked me what it was that gives me hope every day. Hope to try and help ponies in the Wasteland. To help them to do better?"

I swallowed hard and nodded. Please…please let this be what I need.

He slowly stood once more and started towards the back of the cave. "Why don't you come with me? You need to see something."

"What?" I asked as I followed.

"The thing that may someday save Equestria."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Weapon Handling - Either your horn's gotten tough enough to handle the kick or you've broken in that battle saddle. Weapon strength requirements are two less for you.

Quest Perk added: Startouched - The stars are watching out for you: others suffer a 10% penalty to crit chance and a 25% penalty to crit damage against you.

Chapter 24: Hell of a Night

"It's the horrifying story of the messy inconsiderate ghost, who irritated everypony within a hundred miles! OoooooOOOwwwwOOOoo… "

I had to admit, I had no idea what to expect. Something here gave Watcher the ability to go on day after day, year after year. The strength to face a future that seemed determined to get bleaker and darker till everything was lost. I needed that strength. Virtues. Friendships. Even love wasn't enough. I needed a reason to live.

Or else I was already dead.

Spike stretched his arms and wings far overhead as we walked. "I don't think I've ever left like that before. You mares must be rubbing off on me," he said with a rueful chuckle.

I couldn't help but smile nervously. He was a huge, scaly, fire breathing carnivore. "You seem like you're in a good mood."

He blinked, then looked at me with the smallest of smiles. "You know…I am. Between you and her and everything, I feel better than I have in decades."

"Her? Oh! That mare you were talking about. How'd that go?"

He snorted, glaring at the burned patch. "Aside from the Enclave making asses of themselves, just fine," he said with a low, worrying growl. "They're up to something, though." Tell me about it.

I looked around the cave. Now that I was a bit less nervous, I could appreciate how... unexpected it was. The huge pile of gems I'd been next to was only one of several, but that wasn't surprising in a dragon's cave. What *was* surprising were the high shelves packed with books that covered most of the walls. We also passed a dragon-sized circular bed which, aside from its size, shape, and being built into the floor, was a perfectly ordinary bed with pillows and blankets. An ordinary-looking terminal stood on a pedestal next to the bed. I looked up and saw a rough, stalactite-strewn ceiling: exactly what you'd expect in a cave. I thought of asking Watcher if

all dragon caves were actually like this, but decided that there were more important things to worry about at the moment. “So…you have something to show me?”

“I do,” he replied in a softer voice, stopping in front of a passage leading deeper into the mountain. “But I need something from you first. Something very important: a promise. You have to keep this from your friends. From everypony you can.”

“After what I pulled tonight, I’m not sure I still have any friends,” I muttered, ears drooping. Then I met his green gaze, sighed, and straightened. “I promise. I’ll do everything I can to keep your secrets, Watcher.” He looked at me for a long moment, as if trying to gauge the sincerity of my words, then nodded.

We wound our way further into the cave, as Watcher (or should I call him Spike?) talked in his slow, deep, rumbling voice. “When the ministries were formed, Twilight Sparkle devoted herself to helping Princess Luna win the war. None of us thought that it would be easy, but I think there was a conceit that, now that we were involved, it’d all be wrapped up soon. But the bigger the ministries got, the less Twilight saw of her friends.

“Did you know that, for years, Twilight lived almost completely alone in Canterlot?” he asked, looking back at me, and I shook my head dumbly. “She had me, of course, but her entire life was studying and thinking and learning new magic. Then Princess Celestia sent her to Ponyville; she met her friends there and stopped the rise of Nightmare Moon. Together, they could do anything. But once they dove into the ministries, they were slowly pulled apart.

“It wasn’t like there was some plot to keep them isolated. The war was just so big that, honestly, there was no way for us to be together like we used to. And Twilight, she regressed to how she lived in Canterlot, except that she was desperate for those moments when she could be with her friends. For times where they could pretend like everything was okay. Most folks thought she was happy being in charge of an entire ministry dedicated to arcane sciences.”

He let out a great sigh. “Deep down, I think she hated it more than anypony.”

“I don’t understand how it happened, though. I mean, why didn’t they just quit if they were so unhappy?”

He stopped and looked down at me again. “How it happened is a bit more complicated. But as for why she didn’t just quit…why

don't you quit being Security?"

I arched a brow and gave a little smile. "Spike, I was going to blow my brains out fifteen minutes ago."

"That was suicide. I mean, why don't you quit?" he asked, pointing at the word 'Security' on my barding with his huge claw. "Take that armor off. Go back to Chapel. Let everypony know you're done with wandering the Wasteland and helping out Hoofington. Why don't you do that? Seems a bit saner than killing yourself."

The thought hadn't entered my mind, and I sat down hard. Why hadn't I thought of that? Just give up the job without giving up life? But the thought of what my friends would say…what DJ Pon3 or Priest or Bottlecap would think...

I swallowed hard at the unpleasant thoughts, and he nodded. "Exactly. It's easy to die. Not so easy to quit. Once they were the Ministry Mares, they couldn't stop. They wanted to. I don't think even Rainbow Dash liked what they'd become. But they couldn't… not without completely humiliating themselves and letting down Princess Luna." He looked away with a wistful gaze. "There was a time, about five years after the M.A.S. formed, that I thought she was going to do it. Step down…hand the ministry over to Mosaic and Gestalt. Just walk away to the life she wanted."

"So what happened?"

"Shattered Hoof Ridge. The assassination attempt on Celestia, I think, broke something in her. After that she became…consumed. Her friends grew further and further apart, especially her and Pinkie Pie. But even I wasn't around like I should have been."

"Then, one day, she showed me this…" he said as we reached the end of the tunnel. The chamber beyond was *huge*, large enough for Spike to rise to his full height. I'd never seen so many maneframes.

The six walls of the chamber formed a hexagon lined with gems and arcane machinery. In the center of the room, though, rose a large, elegant stalagmite of technology that made the walls seem like only a step above bare rock. It seemed to breathe silently, as if it were asleep. My eyes were drawn higher and higher up that spire until I was looking out at a black patch of faint stars.

Then I promptly fell back with a limp thud. Spike blinked in surprise. "Sorry…" I muttered lamely. "I'm not good with heights…" I rose to my hooves and gave myself a good shake. "What is that?"

"This is a Crusader super maneframe," he said quietly, as if it could

hear him. “It’s one of the single greatest arcane machines ever invented, capable of handling both technological data of staggering complexity and employing precision magical effects.” He looked up at it. “She designed it herself, completely secret from the rest of the ministries and even her own people.”

I couldn’t believe that. There was no way one pony, or even one pony and a dragon, could build something like this or keep it secret. The materials and technology…Then I looked at him again. “The O.I.A. did this, didn’t they?”

He looked shocked. Even a little impressed. “You know about them, huh?” He looked at the supercomputer with a grudging glare and sighed. “Yes. She commissioned it from the O.I.A. Goldenblood got the machines, the equipment, from somewhere. Everything completely off the books. A hundred ponies lived in this cave for two years straight constructing it. Then he had their memories erased.”

“I don’t understand. Why the big secret? What is it?” I asked, looking at the sleeping machine as if expecting it to wake up and talk to me. Was this what EC-1101 was for?

“This machine is designed to cast a spell, the single greatest and most powerful spell of all time. A megaspell specifically crafted to affect, potentially, all of Equestria.” I looked at the device in awe. “It has the ability to purge the Wasteland of taint, neutralize radioactive contamination, and restore life to the land. It’s called *Gardens of Equestria*.”

I fell over again. “Oh, is that all?” My head reeled at the possibilities. I could imagine the Dealer dropping his dusty cards in shock at this!

He nodded as he gazed at the machinery. “It taps into a source of power greater than even Princess Celestia and Luna: the Elements of Harmony.” He walked along beside me as he pointed at jeweled necklaces sitting on crystalline pedestals surrounding the central machine. “Honesty. Kindness. Laughter. Generosity. Loyalty.” He paused for a moment, his green eyes lingering on the last, which was a strange crown thingy instead of a necklace. “Magic.”

“So…let’s get this show on the road! How do we fire it up?” I asked as I looked at the machine. Maybe there was a button that needed pushing? A bright red one? I reached towards a likely-looking gem but caught Spike’s look. Right, no touchie.

“We can’t,” he said softly, “It won’t work without the Elements of

Harmony."

"But…I thought you said that *those* were the Elements of Harmony?" I said, waving a confused hoof at the necklaces and crown thingy. He looked like he was trying to decide whether to smile or not.

"They are, but... " he began after a moment, "I suppose you could say that they are dormant. The physical forms of the Elements of Harmony aren't enough; for their power to be used, they have to be wielded by ponies who embody the Elements. The Ministry Mares were the bearers, once…but that was a long, long time ago."

There was a pause as we both thought. The only sound was the beeping of the active maneframe wall.

"So... " I said, "You're looking for ponies that fit the bill?"

He nodded solemnly. "For two centuries. Every now and then, I might find one…but then they die, or they lose themselves to the Wasteland, or just never meet any others. I try to encourage the Elements and foster them wherever I can... " Like when he saw P-21 and me helping each other outside the stable. "But I haven't been able to find enough yet."

I thought of my friends. Glory…was she still loyal after what I'd pulled? Or was her virtue something else? I doubted Rampage's laughter would fit. P-21? Lacunae? Would this even work with an alicorn? "I'm sorry, Spike. I really wish I could be one of those six ponies, but I don't think I'm your mare." To be honest, I'd be terrified of any megaspell that included me as a component.

He reached down and patted my head; okay, I tried to appreciate the intent, even if it did just remind my body that I was standing next to a *dragon*. "It's alright. The fact is that, even after all this time, I doubt I've come across more than a dozen ponies that were possibilities. Think of how hard it must be to find honesty in a place like this. Or generosity, when ponies kill each other for what was effectively litter two centuries ago?" He looked at the majestic machine with a sigh, reaching out to touch it lovingly with his claws. "But so long as there are ponies, I still have hope that, someday, I might find the six needed and give Equestria a chance to be reborn."

It was a long shot. I knew it. So did he. But as I sat there looking at the machine, I gave a little frown. My eyes were drawn to the necklace with the diamond-shaped jewel, and I had a niggling thought. What about Bottlecap? Maybe…though I feared that her

trading in weapons might disqualify her. While she was generous, in her own way, she had caused harm as well. Caprice…yeah, right.

I did know one pony, though…one infuriating…obnoxious… ruthless little pony who had no scruples against trading for every cap she could get her dirty hooves on…but who also went above and beyond in making sure that everypony had what they needed. A pony who somehow found a way to make a daisy sandwich, gave me a box of spark batteries, and sold Glory the barding she'd need so she wouldn't look like a raider. I groaned, pressing my hooves to my temples, hoping I wouldn't regret it.

"Is there an age limit on this thing?" I asked with a rueful smile.

* * *

As we walked back to the main chamber, I felt something settling inside me: a dream of a green Equestria. I knew that Gardens wouldn't magically make everything perfect; there was still the Enclave and the mysterious Projects to deal with…and the raiders, and the slavers, and the bandits, and the Remnant, and Goddesses-knew-what-else, but an Equestria where the land could grow uncontaminated food and the rivers lacked irradiated water… maybe it could even disrupt the Enervation that sickened countless ponies! The idea…the sheer possibility…was intoxicating.

Sure, the odds were slim. But I'd beaten Gorgon and Deus and had a boat dropped on me. I could take those odds! I looked over at a display case, minuscule compared to the bookshelves that surrounded it, smiling fondly at the set of six figurines inside it. Together, they just looked…whole. Happy. Compared to those six figurines, every memory I'd had of the friends was stained with gray.

I told him about Charity, and my hunch that her virtue might be generosity. The dragon rubbed his spines, a little skeptical but willing to consider the possibility. It was the best I could do.

"It's hard to believe that all of this was done secretly," I marveled, but noticed Spike seemed a little put out by the comment.

"You'd have to know Goldenblood. Then you wouldn't be surprised at all," he muttered darkly, plucking up a ruby. His green eyes narrowed as he squeezed it, crushed it into powder, and tossed the clawful into his mouth.

"Did you know Goldenblood?" I asked, and he nodded with a dour

look. I felt curiosity nibbling at my mane. “I see the ministries everywhere I look, but the O.I.A.’s been nearly impossible to nail down.”

“It was designed that way. Again. You’d have to know Goldenblood.” He licked the rest of the red powder off his fingers, then blinked and looked at my wide grin. He sighed. “Everypony knows about Celestia, Luna, and the Ministry Mares, but nopony knows about Goldenblood because he was always two steps away from everything. He was smart. Not like Twilight Sparkle smart… but he knew things that I couldn’t imagine anypony knowing. He could read Zebra and speak Dragon. He probably knew most of the most influential ponies in Equestria. But above all, he knew politics. And he was the one who knew that what he was doing was wrong and did it anyway.”

“I don’t understand. Why was forming the ministries wrong? Didn’t your friends agree? Princess Luna didn’t force them into it, did she?” I asked, remembering that beautiful, if faintly flirty figure.

“If you mean ‘were spears involved’, no,” Spike muttered, then sighed. “I was there when Luna met with my friends, and so was he.” The purple dragon snorted softly. “She explained how Twilight and the others were ponies she respected, ponies who had saved Equestria in the past and now were needed to help protect Equestria again. How something had to be done to restore confidence after Littlehorn. Then Goldenblood tried to talk us all out of it,” he said sourly.

“He what?” I blinked, stupefied.

Spike stretched his arm to the terminal and with shocking deftness accessed a file. “Twilight somehow got her horn on this recording.” The terminal crackled for a moment, then Twilight Sparkle’s voice came out loud and clear.

“I don’t know how we’re supposed to help, Your Majesty. This war seems too big for us. For any one pony to be able to affect.”

I knew the rasping gasp that came next. “I know it’s intimidating to consider, Twilight.”

“We’re not afraid,” snapped a mare, and my eyes were drawn to the figurine of the cyan pegasus.

“You should be, Rainbow Dash,” Goldenblood said grimly. “We’re not asking you to risk your lives in a fight, or to go on a quest for some treasure. What we are asking you to do is to assume responsibility. You will be given the power not just to act but to

direct others to act on your behalf. To work under your direction. To make your vision a reality. This is not the same as working on your own or with your friends. If you fail, the consequences fall not just on your heads, but on thousands…perhaps millions…of lives.

"Can you accept that responsibility, Twilight? Or you, Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Fluttershy? Rarity? What about you Pinkie Pie?" he said in a grave voice. "If not, then make your apologies right now, and go."

"Goldenblood. This was your idea!" Princess Luna protested.

Then there was another wheezing gasp, coughing and wet. It sounded like he was drowning. "Your Majesty. I know you wish to rule, and to see this war to victory. I beg you to reconsider. We have an opportunity to create a new future for Equestria. A new society. No good can come from perpetuating this conflict. Sue for peace. Let the ponies of Equestria find another path. Live a life away from power."

Luna sighed. "I can't. Goldenblood, you know I can't. They took Littlehorn from me. Please. Help me make this new government a reality."

A long pause. A soft, resigned sigh. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

The recording ended, and Spike turned back to me. "After that, he worked with Twilight and Luna to get everything organized. He talked extensively with each of my friends, working out what powers and ideas they wanted and codifying those into laws. He worked with Rarity on the image that was needed to shore up the ministries. He worked with generals, aristocrats, and bureaucrats to get them to go along." He gave a snort. "Finally, he had a heart attack. Nearly died. Fluttershy personally nursed him back to health." He rolled his eyes and gave a soft sigh. "It was funny at the time."

A pony so fixated on something that their heart stopped? Where had I heard that before? Oh, yeah, my own stupid butt nearly dying in the ruins of Flankfurt! "He almost died creating them? But…I thought he was against the ministries?"

He sighed and shook his head. "I know. I know. With one breath, he told us not to do it, but then he put every effort into making the ministries a success. That's the kind of pony he was. For a time there, I really hated him." His low growl made me glad I didn't have any yellow on me.

"You did? Why?"

"Because, before he and Luna showed up, I had a good life with my friends. Oh, there was the war, and Celestia's missions, but they didn't feel much different from the adventures we'd had before," he said sourly. "But you know what he told me? He asked me if I hated him. I told him…I was a little cranky at the time, so I won't repeat the language, but I called him every last name in the book. And he told me that no matter how much I hated him, I was right to, and he'd always hate himself more." Wow.

"So where did the O.I.A. come in?"

"Right from the start, it was pretty clear that there were going to be conflicts. I mean, my friends might have liked each other, but they still fought. You can't imagine how Rarity and Applejack could carry on. Pinkie Pie wanting giant balloon fortresses floating off the towers of Canterlot with Rarity saying that they were tacky…things like that. Even Twilight could be awfully stubborn if she put her mind to it. So, Goldenblood stepped in and help work things out. There were still fights and arguments, but the O.I.A. kept things running smoothly."

Spike sighed again and shook his head. "I remember that day so well. All my friends sharing ideas. Talking about ways they could help, what they wanted to do. I remember Fluttershy crying when she was told that she'd be able to help thousands of hurt ponies all at once. And all the while, Goldenblood was taking notes and watching and making suggestions."

The massive dragon climbed out of bed and walked over to one of the shelves. "Sometimes, I think that if there hadn't been an O.I.A. or a Goldenblood, the ministries wouldn't have worked out. Or my friends would have quit. Something." He reached up to a shelf too high for me to see the contents of, and brought down an intricately carved wooden box. "Here. Maybe this will help you understand what I mean." He opened it to reveal dozens of memory orbs in labeled, velvet-lined niches. He picked out one and then carefully set it on the floor next to me.

"I need to check on things anyway. I get…anxious…if I stop paying attention to things going on for too long," he said as he returned to the bed and started typing at the terminal. I looked at the offered orb and gave a half smile. Well, it'd be rude not to, right?

I tapped the orb against my horn. "Come on…probably nothing gruesome in this…come on…come on…" Finally, I felt the tickling connection as my reluctant horn reached out and made contact. The

world swirled away around me.

oooOOOooo

Okay. Mare…wings…pegasus. The place looked like some kind of mansion…no, if I had to describe this place, I'd say 'palace'. Red and orange mane obscured the right side of my vision. She walked with her head hung, tail dragging, and let out a soft sigh. Still, this body felt good. Healthy. Fit. And for some inexplicable reason, I felt twenty percent cooler just watching this memory.

"So. Ministry of Awesome?" rasped that horrible, wet and rusty voice behind her. Every feather (and wasn't *that* a freaky sensation) ruffled as she froze in place then glanced behind her at the scarred pony with the golden eyes.

"Oh, hey Golden," she said, turning and giving the most insincere grin I'd ever felt…and I was an expert. "I just thought I'd slip out. Stretch my wings. Take some air." Through the doorway behind Goldenblood, I could see a room with a large table. Twilight Sparkle was talking, gesturing to some diagrams on chalkboards.

"Of course. I imagine a member of the Skyguard doesn't have many opportunities for flying about and getting some air," he said in that whispery, rusty voice. He approached, and I felt her take a few more steps back. Goddesses, he'd be so much less freaky if he'd just blink. "What's the matter, Rainbow Dash?"

She looked at the table and all her friends behind him. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's great. Just great! Why would you think anything's wrong?" she stammered.

"I've made an art of furtively skulking out back ways and exiting unnoticed my whole life. It's rarely done because a pony is feeling particularly bubbly about their circumstances." He kept up that staring gaze, his scarred face sympathetic. "So, what's bothering you?"

Rainbow Dash looked at him for a long minute, then sighed. "It's nothing. I just…I'm useless."

"I can see why you think so," he replied, and she blinked and frowned.

"Gee, thanks," she said sarcastically, then faltered. "Or, wait…was that a cut? Ugh…can you smile or twitch your tail or something when you're messing with me?"

He turned and walked towards a pair of double doors. His horn

glowed, pulling them open. “So, Ministry of Awesome. Where your job is to be awesome? Make awesome? Sell only awesome of the highest quality?” he asked with a ghost of a smile.

“It was all I could come up with,” she replied with a grumble. “It’s easy for Twilight. ‘Ministry of Magic’…or ‘Arcane Sciences’… whatever. Magic’s always been her thing. Makes sense for her to coordinate it. Or Fluttershy wanting to run hospitals and stuff. Gee, who saw that one coming?” she said crossly as she rolled her eyes.

“But you’re a flier…” Goldenblood rasped softly.

“But I’m a flier…” Then she blinked and narrowed her eyes at him. “Don’t do that…” He just smiled a little more broadly as Rainbow Dash walked to the rail and looked out at the night. Canterlot was aglow with lights. Far to the west was the golden glow of Manehattan. She sighed and closed her eyes. “But the only thing I’m really good at is flying. So…what, am I supposed to have a ministry that regulates flying? Holds air shows? That’ll really help Equestria.”

“You do have other strengths besides flying. Your loyalty goes without saying. You’re brave, if reckless. Tenacious. Beautiful.” Okay, I felt her blush something fierce, but then he said, “But I know you feel inferior to your friends.”

She snorted. “Yeah, right! What do I have to feel inferior about?” He smiled softly at her, and she muttered, “Right. Don’t answer that…” She took a deep breath. “Look, I’ll be fine. I’ll figure something out. Somehow.” She huffed as she folded her hooves on the marble rail of the balcony. “It’d just a lot easier if I were… well…more like Twilight.”

“Why, because she’s smart and you’re not?” Rainbow Dash looked at him, her ears drooping. But he simply put a hoof on her shoulder. “You are not stupid. Perhaps you’re not like Twilight or the others, but you are cunning and creative. I’ve seen you fly.” Rainbow looked at him more directly now. “What you really need is a challenge.”

“Well yeah. That’s part of the reason I joined the Skyguard! But this isn’t a race I have to win or something. I can’t just fly out there and beat up all the zebras with my own hooves…” Then she paused and rubbed her chin, adding, “Maybe.”

“We’re in a contest now. War is a team sport, with deadly and desperate odds. Win, and you live. Lose, and you might die,” he said quietly, then smiled slowly. “But there’s more than one way to

win this contest. Say…if you cheat?"

"Cheat?" Rainbow Dash blinked. "How the hay do you cheat at war? I didn't know there was a rulebook."

"Most ponies might think that wars are won on the battlefields, and there's no doubt that battles are critical. But what if an army arrives to the battle hungry because their food supplies were blown up? Or lacking weapons because the shipment was delayed? Or late because their base lost power?" he asked with that steady little smile. "Do you think that might change the battle?"

"Well…sure! That makes sense." She cocked her head at him. "So…don't we do that?"

He gave a tiny shrug. "Our military is all about winning the battle. They aren't creative or cunning enough to risk going behind enemy lines and fighting dirty. Sabotage. Infiltration. Spying. These are tools the army just isn't flexible enough to use efficiently." He was good. So good that I couldn't tell if he was playing her up to create that ministry or actually trying to help her.

Rainbow Dash sat hard, running a hoof through her mane. "And you're saying the Ministry of Awesome could do all that?"

"It could do far more, but that would be a start." Rainbow Dash's eyes went wide as she stared at him. Why did he look so…so sad? "Princess Luna will need a mare who can get special projects done. Tricky projects. Secret projects that nopony can know about if we're going to win this war," he rasped. His golden eyes now stared out at the distant city as his breathing became harsher, punctuated with soft coughs. "As you might know, the best kind of cheating is the kind you do when nopony knows you're cheating."

Rainbow Dash stared hard and pointed a hoof at him. "You mean I shouldn't tell anypony what I'm doing with my ministry?"

"Does anypony expect you to do a lot with it? Did any of your friends really act all that surprised when you suggested the 'Ministry of Awesome?' If somepony thinks less of you, they'll underestimate you. They'll make mistakes, and they'll give you the freedom you need to act."

"Whoa." Rainbow Dash blinked, her eyes going wide. "You are scary good, you know that, Goldie?"

"Good at everything except breathing," he said with a self-deprecating smile. Together, they started back towards the conference room. But I thought about what he'd just said. I wondered if all of his deflections weren't just ways to make others

underestimate him.

I imagined a chill when I realized I didn't know Goldenblood at all. Was he a bastard manipulating everypony around him for his own ends? Was he truly trying to save Equestria? Was he a good pony or a villain? What had he been thinking when he had ponies turned into monsters with Project Chimera, or made half machine with Project Steelpony? And the other projects: Eternity, Redoubt, Partypooper, Starfall, and Horizons. All created by Goldenblood on some level, all sealed by EC-1101.

oooOOOooo

I came out of it alone. I could only figure that Spike was checking on Gardens, or organizing his books, or…whatever it was reclusive dragons did when they weren't helping Wasteland ponies in a never-ending search for six virtues. I carefully levitated the orb to the case and slipped it back into the empty nook, closing the lid. There were probably days' worth of memories here, but, as much as I might have liked to go through all of them, I had to get back to my friends. Then I'd have to hug their hooves and beg then to forgive me. Tears would likely have to be employed.

...

You know, I really am not good with waiting…

I started down a little side tunnel, one a bit too small for a dragon unless he really wanted to squeeze. Plenty of room for me, of course. Gardens of Equestria had been a monumental feat of engineering and secrecy. Virtually a miniature stable had been built during its construction and development, though of course, not a true stable. Double bunk beds lay in dusty rows, and I suspected that the workers had slept in shifts.

The normal priority of scavenging went: weapons, armor, medical, food and drink, and something to sleep in. Since I was about as abnormal a mare as you could get, the first place I hit was the kitchen, where I was rewarded with not one but two boxes of Sugar Apple Bombs and some Fancy Buck Cakes. Cherry! And to complete the miracle of the Wasteland, there was a six-pack of Buckweiser in the fridge. I had to admit, I wasn't precisely the greatest aficionado of fermented hops and barley, but after the last few days I honestly didn't give a shit. I savored one bottle as I poked around further.

Then I took the liberty of checking the toilet facilities and found

myself a porcelain basin of heaven. My insides melted. My knees were weak. I might have been marginally aroused. Ah…hot water. Was there any surer sign of civilization then the ability to pour unending amounts of steamy fluid over one's body?

The spritebot found me lying back in the tub with a bottle floating above me as I hummed a song of inebriation to myself. Two empty bottles joined me on a sea voyage as the little robot looked down at me. "Oh, that's where you went. I was worried." Then a pause. "Are you drunk?"

"No. That is incorrect. I am drinking. More accurately, I am approaching the state of being that is drunk." I scowled at the half empty bottle. "A journey that is taking me somewhat longer than I anticipated. It'd only take me a quarter bottle of whiskey to get this buzzed." I raised the bottle to the bot. "I drink to your good health, good sir dragon."

There was no answer for a bit, and then he simply replied, "Blackjack, you are so random."

* * *

After a soak, which did a marvel on my attitude, I stopped and considered myself in a mirror by the sinks.

Ugh…the last three weeks had done a number on me. I was definitely skinnier than I had been. The shiny scar on my chest was my most obvious souvenir of combat, but it was joined by a satellite of injuries all around it. Between the chemical burns and the shower, I was almost a mottled pink instead of white. And my mane needed a grooming badly. I chuckled ruefully. Going from suicidal to wanting a haircut: that was progress, right?

"So, going through for supplies?" Spike asked.

"Yeah. Hope you don't mind," I said as I tugged open the box of cereal. "I know that this is all your stuff…"

"Don't worry about it. I'm not using any of it. Honestly, I forgot that those smaller tunnels were down there." I personally wondered how Spike had managed not to go stark raving mad all alone. I supposed having guests like me and his mysterious marefriend did him a lot of good.

"So, tell me about your friend," I asked around a mouthful of Sugar Apple Bombs, wonderful powdery dust all over my muzzle as I floated the box on my left and the beer on my right. I found an

arms locker and did a little happy dance at the sight of the ammo containers. It was almost like my birthday!

"Who? Oh! You mean LittlePip and her friends?"

"Yeah," I said as I looked in one ammo box and gave a little squeal of delight. Despair, my poor shotgun, because somepony had included explosive rounds in this arms locker! I had missed the little orange shells of boom. "What's she like?"

"Well…ah…it's kind of hard to describe her. She's…kinda like you, actually." That made my ears perk. "Minus the drinking…" he added. I snorted. If she couldn't handle a little Wild Pegasus... "She struggles every day to make the Wasteland a better place, no matter what." ... Okay, I could excuse sobriety for that.

"She's like me? Poor dear," I said with a smile, cleaning out his supply of shotgun shells but leaving the other ammo. Maybe someday this LittlePip or some other pony might need some. I also found a second pump action and a sweet muzzle choke that would help reduce the spread of my buckshot. "And her friends?" I asked as I pulled the two guns apart and started pick out the better parts.

"Well, there's Velvet Remedy. She's the closest thing to a real pacifist I've ever seen in the Wasteland. Thank goodness she's got her friends to keep her safe. Then there's Calamity, a Dashite with a real beef against raiders. I like him, but he's definitely got a past he's trying to leave behind. Steelhooves, a Steel Ranger from Manehattan, is their heavy weapons pony. Not really sure about him, but he's much better than the rest of the Rangers," Spike said with an annoyed snort.

I cocked my head and looked up at the little machine. "You have a problem with the Steel Rangers?"

"Anypony who puts more importance on a suit of power armor or a gatling gun than on a pony needing help isn't much of a pony in my book. Plus there's the fact that they feel they've got a mandate to possess any and all technology they deem advanced enough." He noticed my 'I am not getting the problem' look and sighed. "What's the most advanced technology in all of Equestria?"

Oh... shit. "You think... they'd try and take it or something?"

"More like try something and get it damaged when I stop them," he replied, and I could just imagine a toothy draconic grin.

I thought about that; I really didn't know very much about the Steel Rangers. Then again, there was so much that I didn't know very much about.

"So, is that all of her friends?"

"Her close ones, the ones who travel with her, yes."

I inspected the shotgun parts in silence for a few moments, but then a thought struck me.

"Do you know the Stable Dweller too?" I said with a small grin.

There was a pause. "Um…yeah."

"What's she like?" I asked as I carefully added the mod. I didn't want my gun blowing up later because I'd screwed the thing on wrong.

"Well…ah…Blackjack? You mean you don't know who she is?"

"Well, no. It's not like she gets out east a lot," I said with a small huff of annoyance. "I like to imagine her as some big, tough, take-no-shit kind of mare. Sorta like…did you know Big Macintosh? You knew Applejack, so you must have…" I said as I wandered into a small medical bay. Oooh... spare Buck, magical bandages... and dusty but still beautifully lustrous purple healing potions that would really heal! Goddesses, I hated Enervation. "That. That's what I imagine she's like. Big and tough and strong and doesn't let anything cross her. She probably dual wields miniguns with missile launchers strapped to them." I brightened as I grinned. "She's probably got some kind of power armor too. Like magical super heavy plate that blasts lightning from her horn. And flies!" There was a prolonged silence from the little machine. "Spike?" I frowned. From somewhere deep inside the mountain, I thought I heard laughter echoing down the halls.

* * *

Well, Spike must have seen something really funny on his monitors, because for the moment I was left alone. Hopefully he'd share the joke. Then, in the corner of the barracks, I saw a small door I'd nearly missed. Well, couldn't pass up the broom closet, now could I? But this led to a small office and side room rather than more storage.

The room was quite full but very neat. Somehow, it felt like my mom's room, and I felt like a trespasser inside. Books lined the walls in alphabetized neatness, and there were diagrams and designs of the supercomputer I'd seen earlier. Two beds. Two desks. Two terminals. A safe.

The terminals took one look at my feeble hacking skills and

virtually spat in my face in contempt. I had better luck with the safe, though. Inside were a lot of papers, a bag of bits, and a recording device. I played back the recording.

"Is that everyone, Goldenblood?" Twilight Sparkle asked softly.

"Almost," he replied. "I've modified their memories. They'll remember working on Stable 93, when a gas leak knocked them all out and the stable had to be evacuated." He gave a horrid raspy little chuckle. "Close enough to the truth for your ends, I think."

"I'll never know how you arranged this with Stable-Tec…or managed to keep it a secret. It's incredible, Goldenblood." And then there was a soft sound of a kiss.

"Twilight. No." Oh, wasn't that an awkward silence!

"I…I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me," Twilight stammered.

"You're happy because you finally made something that will save Equestria if the worst happens. I hope it does." Hope it works, or hope that the worst happens?

Now it was Twilight's turn to sound skeptical. "You sound like you've already given up on winning the war."

"Well, pessimists are always pleasantly surprised," he replied faintly. "But if you really believed this would end well, you wouldn't have bothered to create Gardens."

"Somehow, the zebras got their hooves on megaspells. I can't imagine it. Our most critical and highly guarded secret, and they've got them now. It's now just a matter of time before they're weaponized." Twilight muttered softly.

"Yes. But that's something for Morale to uncover," he replied, and got a long low hiss of disgust. "Something wrong?"

"Morale…Pinkie. I don't know what's wrong with her. What's gotten into her? The spying? The drugs? The arrests? How did she turn into this?" Twilight muttered softly.

There was a momentary pause and then he said quietly, "You, of all your friends, should understand."

"What?" There was a little shock and anger, but curiosity as well.

"You know what it's like to be in a room filled with hundreds and feel utterly alone. You're brilliant, Twilight, but you know that there are few who really and truly care for you. You're respected, certainly, but feared as well. You know how sensitive and perceptive Pinkie Pie is. Do you really think there's a single pony around her that likes being with her?"

“Well…I mean…the parties... and drugs…and…” There was a long, drawn out sigh.

“You’re feared for your accomplishments. Pinkie Pie is feared for her threat. With a single proofless accusation, she could make almost anypony disappear. The M.o.P. is modifying memories with ever-increasing regularity. How could Pinkie Pie ever be happy knowing she’s surrounded by ponies who fear her? Who hate her?”

“But…she shouldn’t be hated!”

“Of course she shouldn’t be. And you shouldn’t be feared. Big Macintosh shouldn’t have died. Littlehorn shouldn’t have happened. This whole war shouldn’t have been fought. The mistakes, obvious, one after the next, shouldn’t have happened. But they did.”

“We can still save Equestria,” Twilight Sparkle said with conviction. “If all else fails, my friends and I will use the Elements and save the kingdom.”

“I have no doubt.” There was a clinking of glasses and then a sound of them being filled. I looked at an empty bottle of wine and two stained glasses, one broken on the floor. “A toast…to our efforts to save Equestria. One way or another, she’ll be returned to what she should be.”

A sound of drinking, then a sigh. “Well, I guess there’s nothing left but to erase your memories now as well, Goldenblood.”

“Ah, yes. I’m afraid we’re going to hit a snag there,” Goldenblood said softly. “I’m sorry Twilight…”

“Golden? What are you talking…about…” And then there was a soft thud.

“You are brilliant, Twilight. But sadly you’re not sneaky enough. You won’t be able to keep this secret forever. I will,” he said softly. “If your method fails, mine will succeed.”

A few minutes later, a much younger sounding Spike asked, “Twilight? Golden? Is everything okay?”

“Just fine, Spike. I’m afraid she’s exhausted, though. I removed the memories of this place just like she planned. I’ll take her back to the M.A.S. hub in Hoofington to recover.” Another pause. “You know what you have to do?”

“Yeah. I just don’t like it. Keeping secrets, I mean.”

“You have to keep it from everypony, Spike. Even Twilight. I’m sure she’ll feel upset…like she’s wasted two years of her life and accomplished nothing.”

“But why do we have to?”

"If Princess Luna finds out what we did here, it would be a sign that we think she'll fail. Planning for disaster means you believe disaster will occur. I'd be exiled, or imprisoned, or imprisoned in exile. Twilight might face even worse. I don't want that to happen, and I know you don't either. Besides, if the zebras found out that Gardens was here, then it would be immediately targeted."

"Right. I'll just tell everyone that I'm ready for a lair of my own. I'm finally flying now…pretty soon, I won't even be able to fit in the Ponyville library anymore." He let out a long sigh. "I just wish that you and Twilight had agreed to wipe your memories instead of hers."

"Yes. But I can keep secrets better than she."

"I don't like keeping them from her," Spike grumbled.

"I know what you mean. Neither do I." A long rusty rattling sigh sounded. "I'm drowning in secrets, Spike. One day, all these secrets are going to kill me."

I sat back, looking at the recording in horror as the playback ended. I took a slow, thoughtful sip of my beer. Twilight had sacrificed two years of her life to make Gardens, and she hadn't even known about it. "How could he?"

"Yeah. That's the kind of bastard he was," the spritebot said behind me, making me jump to my hooves and whirl to face him. "One moment he was talking with her about Pinkie Pie, and the next he was drugging her and wiping her memory of the greatest accomplishment in history."

"What happened to her?" I asked quietly.

"She became obsessed with winning the war. She got her hooves on another O.I.A. dirty secret and renewed its research. Everything became focused around that. All the rest of us just fell away."

"Why did it sound like you were working with Goldenblood if you were Twilight's assistant?" I asked, hoping this wasn't going to be a sore point.

"It's complicated," he said. When wasn't it? "I worked with Goldenblood on and off over the years. Said I wanted to do my part and all that, but really, I was just spying, trying to find something to use against him."

"I take it that it didn't work out like you expected?" I said with a sympathetic smile. I trotted my way back out to the lair as Spike went on.

"Goldenblood wasn't what I expected. You saw the memory and

heard that recording. I thought he was a villain who took my friends away. I thought he liked the war." Spike sighed. He did that a lot, but I supposed that he had plenty of reasons to. "Did you know that, throughout the whole war, the O.I.A. kept back channels with the Zebras trying to negotiate peace? Or that he ran constant interference to protect non-ponies too? He'd work for hours, sometimes days on end before he'd collapse. Then he'd crawl back and work some more. He kept saying that he was trying to save Equestria. Not win the war. Not even end the war. It was always to save Equestria."

I thought about that as I joined him in the main chamber again. The spritebot chirped and flew up to a hole near the ceiling. I had to admit, I still didn't know what Goldenblood was either; if anything, I was even more confused now. Sinister manipulator? Misunderstood genius? A pony who saw the writing on the wall because he'd written it himself? How had what he'd wanted been any different than what Twilight had? Or myself?

"The more I hear about Goldenblood, the less I like it," I said; I saw Spike's smirk and added, with my own smile, "Not him, so much. But it feels like he was the one who set up the big things." My magic levitated some square gems and placed them on end. "Luna comes to him for advice and he sets up the ministries. He talks your friends into becoming the Ministry Mares. He works in the O.I.A. behind the scenes. The war gets worse and worse and he starts doing the Projects like Chimera and Steelpony. Then…" I knocked one gem and it fell against the next, which fell against the next, and then whole pile was tumbling over.

"Yeah. Now you know how I feel about Goldenblood."

"So what happened to him in the end? Wasn't he removed from being director?"

"Suspended. Luna found out something she didn't like. I don't know what, but it caused a major shakeup. Still, I don't think even Luna realized just how much power he had at that point. I know that Horse might have been in charge, but the entire O.I.A. still went through Goldenblood and Hoofington. Nopony wanted to touch him. He knew too many secrets. Had too much leverage. Then, finally, he was arrested for treason."

"Treason?" I gasped.

He nodded gravely. "Nopony knew the details. It didn't matter, though. The next day, the bombs fell. Canterlot was consumed by

the Pink Cloud. Goldenblood probably died in his cell." He flicked away a diamond with an expression of 'good riddance'. I frowned up at him. This wasn't quite what I expected. This wasn't anger. There was something else to this.

"Spike, why are you really upset with Goldenblood?" He gave me a sharp look, and I was reminded that I was on the wrong side of Spike on the food chain to press questions. "Please. Tell me. I think that Goldenblood might have done something in Hoofington. Something that's not over."

Spike looked at me for a long moment, then let out another sigh. "Dragons aren't exactly real big on family. Twilight raised me, and I loved her like a mother. She tried to teach me right from wrong. I grew up surrounded by mares, and don't get me wrong -- they were my dearest friends, too. There was just one little thing missing."

I thought of my own upbringing. Funny. Three weeks ago, I never would have thought of it. "No father?"

"Yeah. Not a lot of guys in Ponyville were real keen on hanging out with a baby dragon. Oh, there were Big Macintosh and Angel Bunny. Snips and Snails. But yeah. Not a lot of guys." He sat up and put his elbows on his knees, cupping his chin in his claws. "You know how I said I originally cozied up with the O.I.A. to find some dirt on Goldenblood?" I nodded, and he sighed. "Well, over time, it sort of changed. I'd never really spent a lot of time around a guy like him. I told you how scary smart he was? Well, that didn't wow me much. Twilight was smarter. But he was also…strong. Determined. Focused. As much as I resented how he created the ministries, he was also the closest thing I ever had to a father.

"He told me once that a stallion had to devote himself to an idea and, whatever that idea was, it would shape him for the rest of his life. Like a virtue, it would define you. Build you into the person you are. It didn't matter if that idea was good or bad, so long as a guy stuck to it at all costs." The dragon looked back towards the depths of the cavern. "Sometimes, when I get lonely, or frustrated, or just tired of this…I think of that. I think of what it means to be a guy. That I have to remain true to this. And even though I hate him a bit…at the same time, I can't hate him completely. I've tried, but I just can't do it."

He sighed and shook his head. "The last thing he ever said to me, the night before he was arrested, was how proud he was that I protected the secret. That I kept the vigil. He was proud of me. I

don't know if he was just lying to me or if he meant it, but I still feel it inside."

"Well. You should be proud," I said. "I think that, through it all, you've tried your best to stay true to Twilight and what she tried to do here." I immediately brightened as I pointed a hoof at him. "In fact, why can't you be the Element of Loyalty? I'm sure you'd make a great Rainbow Dash!"

He blinked and waved his hands at me. "Oh, no! There's no way I'm going to try impersonating her again! It didn't end well the first time and it won't end well now," he said firmly, but then chuckled. "But thanks for the thought."

"No problem. So…" I looked at the mouth of the cave. "I guess I should get back to my friends. I'm going to have to kiss Glory's hooves bigtime when I see her. And there'll probably be some groveling involved. Tears." I sighed, looking around the cave. "I don't suppose I could hang out here for a few years, could I? Just as an option?"

"Go find your friends, Blackjack. I know they're worried sick," he said with a sigh. "I'd fly you, but after leaving once, I'm positive the Enclave is on high alert for me to leave again. I won't be able to go out for a good long while."

Oh. Great. That just left me on the top of a really high mountain. Fortunately, the inebriation was making me feel a little less ooggly about the prospect than usual. He must have seen my face, because he chuckled. "Don't worry. There's a path. I've got a few connections with ponies across the Wasteland to bring me food and fresh gems in exchange for info. Just hug the side of the mountain."

"Sure. Right. Sounds like a blast." I trotted up to him. "Thanks, Spike. For everything. For showing me something better."

"You're a good pony, Blackjack," he said as he stroked my mane with a clawtip. "I know you don't feel it, or see it, or believe it, but you are." I hugged his claw tightly, being careful not to cut myself. I'd only had Mom for a family, but now I had an inkling of what it meant to have a big brother, too.

* * *

'A trail down' was something of an exaggeration. At times, the trail was simply a ledge with a cliff rising on one side and a void plunging down the other. Only my inebriation kept my stomach

from completely unloading as I picked my way down. I came to a gap in the trail and peeked down. Aw, buck me, was that a river down there? All the way down there?

From this high, I could see forever. Well, no, not forever, but it sure seemed like it. It felt like I was close enough to the cloud ceiling to reach up and touch it…which, actually, was pretty much the case. Grays and sickly green and browns stained the landscape below like the hide of a rotting corpse.

Yet instead of the usual depression creeping in, I remembered that it could be better. Because of Twilight Sparkle. And Spike. LittlePip and the mysterious Stable Dweller.

For the first time in a while, I felt glad to be out here. I just wished I could have had a better look at the stars. Even though the cave was above the Enclave's cloud ceiling, there was a higher layer of thin cloud that not only blocked the moon and the dimmer stars but spread the moonlight out and made even the brighter stars difficult to pick out. Still…the rainbow halo the clouds gave the moon had been one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. If I could've stayed up there forever...

But I still had my friends to meet up with…copious apologies to make…a brain that was slowly breaking down…possibly a really big bounty on my head…old plots that were still doing plot stuff… Enclave plagues…I cast one last look at the path behind me running up into the cloud ceiling, took another long pull off my bottle of Buckweiser, and tried to set my mind firmly ahead.

"First…just got to do this," I muttered as I looked at the gap. I could imagine a little pony singing in my head that all I needed was a hop, skip and jump. "Right…so…a hop…" Really, it was more of a step. "…a skip…" A second step. "And a…." Don't look down! So of course I looked down, my eyes widening as I plunged to my death!

Or not. My forehooves landed on the far side of the gap. I heard an orange pony groan softly in the back of my mind. Okay, more voices in my head, but, on the other hoof, still a head to have voices in. Not plunging to my death. But now what?

Missiles make everything easier.

The rocket streaked from above, and my legs kicked me across the gap as it exploded behind me. The blast knocked me horn over heels and smacked me into the ledge on the far side. I lay there, upside down, as two suits of black Enclave power armor landed on

my ledge while a third remained hovering above us. “Damn it, Boomer! Can’t question her if she’s blown to pieces,” yelled the leader through her helmet.

“Right. Saves us all the yappin’,” muttered the buck beside her.

“Till command asks why we used up a missile!”

I chuckled as I fell over, then pushed myself upright and sat there against the stone. I looked right at the mare who had more fiddly bits on her armor; I took her as the one in charge. “You’re coming with us. We got questions ‘bout that dragon in thair.” I slowly rose to my hooves, laughing.

“Uh…why is she laughing?” the buck beside her asked. “Is she… drunk, Twister?”

I levitated out my last bottle of Buckweiser and popped the cap with my magic, tucking it in my pocket as I stared right at the pair. “Yup,” I said as I took a swig off the bottle and pulled out my shotgun. “I think I’m just about there.” The three stiffened, but then I started to eject the shells one after the next and put them in my saddlebags.

“Right,” the lead mare said as she watched me unload the weapon. “You drop your guns and come along peacefully and there won’t be no trouble. Just want ta ask ya a few questions.”

“Oh…I don’t really think so,” I said as I stared at them and started loading the orange-banded shells. “You want to know what’s really funny, though. If you’d pulled this…mmm…an hour ago…I probably would have gone along without a fuss.” A normal, smart pony would probably have shot me right now. But I had my shootiest look going, staring at the trio like I was the one who’d ambushed them.

“Yer twigged,” the mare muttered, and I laughed even more.

“Oooh, just a bit,” I said with a grin.

“There’s three of us and one of you! And yer not in power armor! And ye’ve only got a shotgun! Stand down, mare. I won’t be askin’ a second time.”

“Maybe if you’ve got six more waiting, I’d be worried,” I said as I racked a round into the chamber. “But right now, I got my gun, my beer, a fire in my belly and a grin on my face, and there’s not a mother fucking pony in the Wasteland who can stop me!”

“Right,” she drawled, unimpressed. “Sunset.” The hovering mare’s gatling energy rifles started to spin.

But it was already too late for them.

I leapt straight at Twister as I slipped into S.A.T.S. for one special attack and one standard, and as time resumed the beer bottle was flung end over end to smash across Sunset's visor and coat it in sudsy froth. She reared back, her shots going high and blasting a crater field into the wall behind me as my second attack sent an explosive shell straight into the leader's face. Her beam rifles flashed over me as smoking rock rained down on all of us. With a final leap, I slid between the pair and fired a third shot; but what I'd intended to be a gut shot on the leader simply blasted her scorpion tail.

Oh. By the way, did I mention this was taking place on a ledge?

My hooves scrabbled on the gravel as my rear end slipped over the edge. Boomer stabbed his tail at me wildly, the sharpened spike sparking off the stone. I stretched out my left hoof, gritting my teeth as the spike smashed hard into the reinforced casing of Marmalade's PipBuck. The powered armor lifted me right into the air and nearly jerked my leg out of its socket. I blasted the end of his articulated tail, bouncing once and rolling to my feet.

"Look out," the leader mare said, blood in her eyes as red beams of magic tried to turn me into barbecued pony as I charged at Boomer. Sunset, her visor cleared, strafed me with rapid-fire disintegration bolts; I'd have to deal with that lickety split.

You know. I was discovering a new fondness for missiles.

I shoved hard against Boomer as I snapped out my dragon claw. There was no doubt the articulated black armor was tough stuff. With the exception of the visors and the extremities, I didn't really have much that would chew through it without a lot of sustained fire. However, there was one particular part of that armor that was just covered with reinforced rubber and waste collection systems. Tough stuff…

My claw was tougher.

I slid in close, using him as cover from the leader, then jabbed the claw hard against his nethers. "You'll be the third male I've gelded if you don't shoot the flier with a missile right now!"

Boomer froze. "Ah…ah…" I wiggled the tip. "Aw, shit…Ah'm sorry, Sunset!"

"What?" the hovering mare asked blankly before he sent a rocket right up into her chest. The missile exploded and sent her arching over the gap to land with a crash on the far side.

"Boomer, you idjit!" the leader shouted in rage, and there was a

blast and her red beam struck my dragon claw squarely. In a flash, the weapon was reduced to sizzling chunks of bone. “Take her down or Ah’ll shoot your jewels m’self!”

“Ah’m tryin’!” he shouted as he shoved me away, but I’d swapped back to my shotgun and was blasting at his wing guards and weapons now. The leader had taken to the air; her weapons were far more accurate at range than my shotgun.

But not much more than my rifle.

In S.A.T.S. I targeted her head. Two rounds would probably do it. *Be kind…* Except…if I killed her, it would probably make even more trouble for Spike. They already had questions for him. I cancelled the two shots and placed one on each of her beam rifles instead. Luck was with me; the armor piercing rounds I’d loaded in the print shop tore right through the delicate magical weapon components.

Boomer was turning to face me as he loaded another missile, but once more I was running. My barding smoked from the beam impacts, but at least *I* wasn’t smoking as I jumped on top of him and put two rounds straight through one of his wing guards and into the feathered appendage.

That was when the leader swooped in and tackled me. In a second, we were over a very long drop as my legs wrapped around her. “Gotcha!” she laughed. I had to admit, she had very pretty lilac eyes.

Then I pressed the shotgun against her head.

“Y’all can’t be that crazy!” she shouted as her eyes went wide. “Y’all die too!”

Yes, and the thought of plummeting hundreds or thousands of feet to a very squishy end sent a very familiar fear screaming in my head. However, at this exact moment, the alcohol and the high I rode took that fear, tied it up, tossed it in the back closet of my mind, and beat it into submission with rubber hoses. “Me? I’ve had cyberponies blast me with artillery! I’ve been shot in the back by zebra snipers and taken an armor piercing round through my skull! I’ve had my face attacked by almost every single pony I call a close and personal friend! I’ve had boats dropped on me! Don’t you tell me what will and won’t kill me!” I shouted in her face as I grinned from ear to ear. “You hear me?”

“Yer fucking loco!”

I jammed the gun hard into her temple. “Do you fucking hear me!?” I roared even louder, wondering if I could use her like a

parachute.

She must have seen it in my eyes. “Yes!” she yelled.

“Then fly your ass east, right now!” I said, and then glanced back at all the nothing underneath me. You know, for being beaten with hoses, that fear was still mighty loud. “And get me on your back, damn it!” Please!

* * *

What took Spike all of two minutes took Twister almost an hour. For the longest time, all she’d give me was her name and a string of numbers, followed by a colorful collection of expletives about my sexual habits, breeding, health, and weight. She only once touched on the subject of my mother, which resulted in the connection of my shotgun butt against her skull and a short fall before she regained enough consciousness to fly.

After several dozen assorted questions, I got around to asking, “So messing with the VC isn’t bad enough, and now Thunderhead’s sending ponies to spy on dragons?”

“I ain’t no Dunderhead!” she swore, then cursed herself as we flew low. I might even survive a fall from this low; I’d break every bone in my body, but I might survive.

“You’re not from Thunderhead?” I said in surprise.

“Do I look like I’m one o’ them fancy prancin’ cloudhumpers?” she replied crossly. Honestly, if they weren’t ghouls or Glory…“Thunderheaders are half a feather above surface scum in my book.”

Really? Wasn’t this interesting... “Well, so glad to meet a better class of Enclave. So where are you from?”

“Won’t mean nothing to ya,” she drawled as she glared back at me.

“No harm in telling me, then,” I countered as we approached Star Point.

“Neighvarro,” she replied after several seconds. “You mind telling me what you and the dragon were yapping about?”

I thought about it and then shrugged. “He was helping me out with a problem.”

“Problem?”

“Yeah. I got a lot of ponies killed. Hit me hard. He was helping me get through it. He’s nice like that. You really should leave him alone.”

"Nice?" She snorted. "That dragon torched one of us for trying to take a fugitive into custody. Don't you tell me how nice he is."

I laughed. "Wait, you tried to take something from a dragon's lair?" Even I wasn't *that* stupid.

She glanced back at me, her lavender ears reddening. "Well, yeah!"

"Right. Good call. Be glad only one of you got toasted. He probably could have killed all of you," I pointed out, and she clearly didn't like it.

"Ain't nothing you'd understand," she muttered.

"Maybe not. But I was in security in my stable. So I'm sorry. I know how bad it hurts to lose your own." And I could still hear that word and smell that smell as if I were still there. I wondered if I always would. Then I adopted a lighter tone. "Still, I got to admit that I am just burning up with curiosity about your problem with Thunderhead. Because they've really got my hate too, and it seems damned stupid for us to fight each other."

"Yer a surfacer. I ain't allowed to talk to ya bout nothing," she muttered stubbornly. "Got to keep our own safe and sound."

"Believe it or not, I understand that better than you know. Security, remember?" I said as she finally touched down on the rock. I slipped off her. "Thunderhead operative Lighthooves created a plague that infected my stable. Turned them all into raiders. I had to put them down myself," I said softly as I found Vigilance amid the rocks and lifted it.

"You…what?" Her eyes widened in shock. "Yer lying!"

I stared right into her eyes. "Tell me I'm lying again." And as I stared into her eyes, I thought of Midnight's scream. I thought of limp foals lying on the atrium floor. I thought of that horrible smell. But, as much as it hurt, I didn't feel that hollowness inside. She looked away quickly and I took a slow breath, opening a Sparkle-Cola and taking a sip. "Anyway, you should probably get going," I said as I unslung Taurus's rifle.

"Why? So you can shoot me in the back?" she asked in alarm, her eyes narrowing.

"No. Because I'm seeing red bars. Lots and lots of red bars," I said with a swallow as I lifted the rifle and looked through the scope. Through the darkness and spitting rain I picked out a leonine form and stinger tail amid the stunted and dead trees. "Manticores."

"Manticores?" she said in alarm as she shielded her eyes from the rain. "Damned Hoofintun sky piss…" She spotted them without the

scope, backing away in alarm a little. “What are critters like that doing out here?”

“Following me, I bet,” I muttered. No sign of the monsterpony that controlled them. “Well, take care. Have a good one. You held up your end of the bargain.” I swept the rifle back and forth, looking for a skull to perforate.

“You’re just going to stay here and die alone?” She goggled at me.

“Well, you could stay and I’ll have company. Your armor is trashed and those manticores can fly. It’s me they want. Not you,” I muttered as I glanced back at her.

But she was looking at me funny. Like she wasn’t sure if I were crazy, something else, or both. “Can you buy me time?”

“Possibly. For what?”

“Let me get some scrap metal, and my armor will make repairs. I’ll need a few minutes, though,” she said as she opened up a panel on her forehoof similar to a PipBuck.

Well, any stable in a storm…“Right. I’ll try and leave some for you.”

She snorted and smirked. “You better.”

I ran towards the woods, hovering the rifle to my left and the shotgun to my right. Sure, it looked bad ass, but I doubt anypony would be impressed with my aim. I found a nice picnic bench, rested the hunting rifle on some boxes of junk, and took sight. Two manticores roared and broke free from the group, bounding across the uneven ground as their claws scraped off the stone. S.A.T.S. let me line one of them up perfectly. One, two, three rounds in its skull, and the leonine monster staggered and fell to the side, unmoving.

One down, a lot to go. I swapped targets and guns, my focus lining up a shot from the hip. The explosive slug fired, but lacking a hard surface refused to detonate; just slammed the monster back and stopped it in its tracks. I wasted four more before the beast went down.

And the rest were coming. As quickly as I could, I swapped the explosive rounds for buckshot and loaded a magazine of hollowpoints into the rifle. I started backing up, firing with the rifle till they were close enough for a pounce and then swapping to the shotgun. There was no finesse in this, no elegance. Simply firing and moving as quickly as I could and not letting the giant felines pounce. If I’d had a wide open area I’d have been fine.

My butt hit a rock at the exact moment one pounced. I blasted twice with the shotgun…and the third time I heard the sickening sound of it firing on an empty chamber. Its forelegs sunk two heavy claws into my shoulders and it opened its mouth wide to chomp my head off. My eyes went wide as I stared into its gaping mouth.

Three magical bullets exploded right down its throat. The monster vomited hot blood over me, and then slumped against me. My horn throbbed with the sudden release of magic. Unfortunately, I was still pinned by the heavy body as I struggled to shake the claws out of my barding. Two more were racing at me. How many rounds were in the rifle? Two?

I brought out Vigilance and opened fire. The heavy twelve millimeter rounds bit deep into the massive monsters, enough to hold them at bay for a few precious seconds as I struggled to free myself. The second I ran out…

Even with Vigilance's expanded magazine, it went through ten rounds far too quickly. The less injured of the two pounced.

Shit. I wasn't going to have a chance to grovel before Glory…

Find out what the other Projects were or where EC-1101 was going...

Have a chance to find the other elements...

Have really great make up sex with Glory…

"Fuck that!" I screamed in furious defiance as I smacked the manticore across its face with Vigilance while thrashing my way free of the corpse. It didn't have to kill the monster, just distract it. A few more seconds.

I pushed myself free, shoving the body aside as I tried to summon a few more magic bullets. They weren't nearly as effective as the first volley, but they still blasted holes in the manticore's hide. Finally, the combination of pistol rounds and magic bullets dropped the beast in a heap.

Unfortunately, there was one more and I had three unloaded weapons and a horn that was shot and three seconds between now and the moment the remaining manticore tore my head off. It leapt at me, claws extended and spittle spraying in a glistening arc as the beast prepared to rend my flesh.

Then crimson beams flashed past me, the light striking it and transforming it into a glowing gray statue that exploded in a cloud of ash. Stepping onto the rock above me, Twister shouted in glee, "Yeeehawww! Bring it, you flyin' pussies!"

With her momentarily drawing their attention, I reloaded Vigilance and my shotgun. She played the crimson beams at range while I moved in for close and messy work. The remaining manticores scattered and disappeared back into the woods. My strength gave out as the adrenaline faded. “Well, thanks for the assist there.”

“T’weren’t nuthin’,” she replied, and my mane crawled at the tone in her voice. “Couldn’t let an intelligence asset get killed.” The hum of two charged beam rifles purred behind me.

I let out a long, low sigh. “Why is nothing ever easy?” I said as I lifted Vigilance, turning it over before me. “I help Flank…turns out they were looking to sell me out. I try and help my stable…then I have to kill my stable. I spare you and your friends, and you want to shoot me in the back.”

“You don’t understand, you idjit. When you made me fly down here you exposed me to sky knows what. My own team might shoot me on sight rather than let me expose ‘em to whatever crawling plagues and diseases are down here. And the Dunderheads would just hang me for a spy. I want to get back, I’ll need something that’ll put me through decon rather than put a bullet through my brain. I got to take you back with me.” I knew that desperate tone. I’d shared it myself on more than one occasion.

“You won’t get contaminated so long as you don’t eat contaminated ponies or food,” I said matter-of-factly as I stood and holstered my weapons. “The Volunteer Corps seems to operate just fine.” When they’re not sending their own ponies on suicide missions to give peace offerings to raiders.

“What are you doing?” she asked nervously as I started walking away.

“Going to meet my friends,” I replied.

“You idjit! I’ll blast you!” she blustered, and I turned to face her.

“Mhmmm,” I replied blandly. “And I’m sure they’ll be willing to decon-whatever you when you come back with a bottle of ashes.” That made her mouth work soundlessly before her lilac eyes narrowed.

“Well, if I’m fucked either way…” she began.

“You can be stupid and try to kill me for some petty revenge,” I said, staring into her eyes and making her balk. “Or you can come with me, and I’ll introduce you to some ponies who might be able to help you.”

“I…you…” She licked her lips, looking around as if some other

option might magically appear. Finally she stomped her hooves hard. “Tarnation, this ain’t fuckin’ fair!”

I blinked at her and grinned, spreading my forehooves wide as I laughed, “Welcome to Hoofington!”

* * *

I had to admit, I felt a little bit guilty about Twister’s predicament, but it was her Enclave’s stupid rules and paranoia that had grounded her here. It’d taken about five minutes of weeping, hoofstomps, and shooting manticore corpses before she finally realized that, either way, she was fucked. She could try and go back and get shot for her troubles, stay with me, or kill me and be stuck down here alone and *really* fucked. I took the time to harvest manticore venom sacs. They were the only part that seemed to have some value.

Once more I was riding her through the air, keeping an eye out for more of the flying beasts. She alternated between cursing and flying silently. We managed to reach Pony Joe’s before she finally put down for a breather.

I swept the inside, but it was still clear and clean. “So. Mind if I ask you something?”

“Shut up. I’m busy bein’ pissed right now,” she drawled.

“Yeah, I know. But you can be pissed and educational,” I replied softly, stifling a yawn. “You’re not a Thunderhead pegasus…I got that. So…why are you so pissed off at them?”

She looked at the café sullenly before she shrugged. “They think they’re so special…like prancing artistoponies or some shit. Ain’t a pegasus outside Thunderhead that don’t hate them something fierce.” That surprised me. From the way Glory made it sound, the rest of the Enclave should be thankful.

“Look. Enclave is a whole passel of towns trying to do our best to survive. We do what we got to do to protect our own. Always have. Always will,” she said, and added without bitterness, “Even if we gotta cut off one of our own to do it.” I guess idiotic levels of loyalty weren’t just a Glory thing. “But it ain’t easy. You probably don’t realize it, but clouds ain’t exactly the best place ta grow crops. One mistake in management or just an unlucky equipment breakdown, and a town can face some hardship pretty quick. But we pull together and help our own.

“And Dunderheads don’t help no pony at t’all,” she said grimly.
“I don’t really follow.”
She sighed. “When the bombs fell, what we had is what we got. You ever try and get a gun ta work without fail for two centuries? Ain’t happenin’. And gems don’t grow in the sky. But Thunderhead had something none o’ the rest of us did: Shadowbolt Tower.” At my blank look, she sighed, “Dirt ponies don’t know nuthin’…
“Back durin’ the war, Hoofintun was the biggest target in all o’ Equestria. More so then even Canterlot, it seemed. There was something here that really twigged them zebra off. So when Rainbow Dash founded the Shadowbolts, their primary base was here. Shadowbolt Tower. Fuckin’ city was building like crazy, and they took the Awesome hub and just kept building higher and higher. Said they were going to build clear to the moon.”
“That…sounds about right,” I muttered, remembering ‘Hoofington Rises’.
“Yeah, well, when the bombs fell, the Tower stood. It was so damn high that the top levels weren’t irradiated. It had all sorts of magical fabrication equipment. Arms stores. Weapons. A fuckin’ treasure trove. But that wasn’t the most important part. Shadowbolt Tower had something nowhere else in the clouds did.”
I thought for a moment, and then caught her staring at my horn. “Unicorns? Of course! Unicorns.” After all, Minty Fresh had been working with them.
“Mhmmm.” She nodded slowly. “The tower’s arcane science and technical staff pretty much all made it to the top of the tower before they died from the radiation. And they’ve been helping Thunderhead ever since. A fertilization talisman burns out? A unicorn can fix it. Need new beam weapons? A unicorn can make it. Clouddamned hornheads keep Thunderhead sitting pretty.”
“But…they’re still a member of the Enclave, right?”
“Technically,” she said with such disgust that I doubted it was more than a formality. “To listen to them, they’re the most important member. But the thing is, they don’t just help the rest of us. Heck no. They’ll trade talismans for favors. Extra food for favors. Technical assistance for favors. All them favors add up to a right comfy lifestyle for them and a downright shitty deal for the rest of us.”
“So why doesn’t the Enclave do something about them?”
“Tried.” She huffed softly. “Nearly went to war to take the Tower.

Don't know the details at t'all…it was my grandma's time. Finally, there was an agreement made. Thunderhead disarmed, agreed it wouldn't have firepower greater than them Vertibuck contraptions. No Raptors or nothing, and they'd provide parts and technical assistance, and Thunderhead got to keep its unicorns and a no fly zone from the rest of the Enclave. They're the most independent group of featherbrains in the clouds and don't give a shit about the rest of their own kind."

I recalled just how angry Glory got at the idea of disloyalty. If she felt that way as a Thunderhead pegasus, I could start to imagine just how furious the rest of the Enclave was. "So wait. If Thunderhead disarmed, why not just take it anyway?"

"There's this little thing called honor. Look it up," she said dryly. "But besides the treaty, I don't know. Times are damned strained right now though. Hell, half of us were watching the dragon and the other half were watching the Dunderheads. Now they're pulling this volunteer crap, violating some of our most basic rules and laws. All 'cause they can." She tapped her hooves on the tabletop. "It ain't gonna end well."

I had to agree with that. "Any chance your folks will come for you?" She looked at me in confusion. "I mean, are they really just going to leave you here?"

She definitely didn't like thinking of this. "If it was anywhere else, I'd probably be tracked down, extracted, questioned, and hopefully put in decon. And you'd be questioned," she added, reminding me we weren't exactly on happy-happy terms. "Unfortunately, I'm a Neighvarro pony in the no-fly zone and now everything's political. If the Dunderheads got their hooves on me…" She suddenly blinked. "Oh, horseapples."

"What?" I blinked and rose to my hooves. "Can they track you?"

"I gotta get this off me. I got to get out of here right now! They're probably on their way!" Twister shouted as she started to disconnect the seals of her armor.

"Can't you just deactivate whatever they track you with?" I asked, wondering how the hay anypony was supposed to get in and out of that getup.

"Maybe. The transponder's there," she said as she reached back and opened a panel on her flank. "I honestly didn't expect to ever find somepony with such skills though. Where'd you learn Enclave power armor maintenance?" she asked as I moved to her side. She

blinked as I loaded a round into the shotgun.

The blast of buckshot knocked her right off her hooves with a shower of magical sparks, sending her rolling across the aisle. “I didn’t,” I confessed as she lay there groaning. “You okay?”

“Dirt ponies…suck…” she groaned.

“Yeah. Did it work?” I asked as I looked at the smoking arcane devices. It sure smelled disabled.

“You almost took off my leg, you idjit.” She groaned as she stood and looked back at the wreckage. “Yeah, but we got to move. Thunderhead probably already sent a team the second we left that point. Can’t believe I didn’t think of it sooner. All this damn dirt’s making me stupid,” she said as she started for the door.

“What will they do?” I asked, and she gave me a scared look back. “They wouldn’t kill you, would they?”

“Dunno. Every Enclave pony ‘recovered’ by Thunderhead ain’t right afterwards. I don’t wanna find out,” she replied nervously as she looked around. Something knocked faintly against the roof; it wasn't much of a noise, but we were both jittery and my mane was itching like crazy.

“Quick, out the back!” I shouted, and we rushed to the back door. I nearly tripped in astonishment; one of the bulbous, armored Vertibucks has hanging directly overhead; it must have bumped the building while coming in. Any second now, pegasus soldiers would come spilling out the rear hatch. If they didn't decide to just use the autocannons.

I sprinted for the trees, jumped the ditch running along the side of the donut shop, and ran into the dead woods as Twister glided almost even with the ground in front of me. We put a few dozen more trees between us and them. Twister paused and canted her head. “They’re broadcasting for me to come out. Says they’re here to extract me.” She spat to the side. “In a pig’s eye.”

“Does your armor have an Eyes Forward Sparkle?” I asked, looking up.

“Yup.” Great. So an errant glance in our direction would give us away. Now we really had to get moving! “Leastways it does when the visor’s not all shot up,” she added, looking at me sharply.

“You were trying to arrest me,” I countered.

“You were dealing with that dragon,” she snorted.

I rolled my eyes as I ducked under a branch. “It was just a friendly visit. ‘Hi. How are you. Nice gems you have here.’ That’s all,” I said

with a smile.

She looked at me sharply. “Oh, yeah. Just bein’ neighborly with yer local dragon?”

“What, I should be a jerk to something that can eat me?” I countered. “I might be stupid, but I’m not *that* dumb.” Then a red beam lanced down so close to the front of my nose that I nearly went cross-eyed looking at it. “Not smart enough to shut up and keep running, though!” I shouted as I pulled out Taurus’s rifle and hit S.A.T.S. Three rounds to the head…and I bucked my dumb ass brain for forgetting I had hollowpoints loaded. The rounds shattered off the armor.

Her crimson beams were definitely more effective as the Thunderhead Enclave peeled off out of her line of fire, their armor smoking and crackling from the damage. I loaded the rifle for more armor piercing rounds. “Damn, they’re on us now.” She glanced at me. “Only chance for you is to get out of here.”

“Not happening.”

She arched a brow skeptically. “Uh…you don’t owe me anything. Quit being so damn stubborn and git! I’ll fly circles around these buzzards.” Before they shoot you out of the sky, I added for her.

“I got you into the mess. If I had just shot you in the head, none of this would have happened,” I said as I tried to track one of the red bars from behind us. More red bars ahead of us. Damn, did a second Vertibuck arrive? Then I glanced over and saw her incredulous look. “Well, you’d be dead and all, but still.”

“Yer one twigged mare,” she chuckled as she strafed the sky.

Then I frowned. Knot of Enclave behind us…but…I raised the scope in time to see a raggedy pelt, leonine fangs, and a scorpion tail though the trees. “New plan! Back to Pony Joe’s!”

“Plan? How you figger that’s a plan?” she asked in bafflement. “That’s not a plan! It’s a direction!”

I fired the rifle, aiming for the manticore’s flank. It let out a roar that was echoed by the rest of its kin. Meanwhile, I was running straight for the Thunderhead Enclave behind us. “See? Plan!” I laughed as the beasts closed in.

The whole pride (or flock…whatever!) of manticores was fast on our heels. Twister stared at me in wild eyed amazement. “You’re plum loco is what you are!” The Thunderhead Enclave seemed to share the sentiment as they stared at us racing past. Then the snarling, stinging beasts were upon them. The animals seemed to

take particular aggravation with the Vertibuck, latching on with their claws and scratching at the armor in an attempt to get at the pegasi within.

With both enemies more interested in shooting at each other, we raced south towards Megamart.

* * *

"That was insane. Absolutely crazy," Twister said as we trotted towards the overpass between us and Megamart.

My treacherous body was already giving me a doozy of a headache; oh, alcohol, why must you hurt me so? "It worked, didn't it?" I asked with a shrug.

"You could of got us shot. Or ate. Or shot while getting ate!" she pointed out crossly.

I smiled and shrugged. "Yeah. But I didn't. Things just sort of work out…or they don't." And I do my best to live with the mistakes… The really big and terrible mistakes. My whole body shuddered with the force of my yawn. "Sweet Celestia, I'm tired. I need a few hours' sleep or a few more bottles of Buckweiser."

"Is this life on the ground?" she asked as she looked at the stunted and gnarled trees.

"This your first time down here?" I asked her.

She looked a little sheepish and nodded.

I sighed and gave a wistful little smile. "Pretty much. The Wasteland breeds trouble like radroaches. And Hoofington breeds them like bloatsprites on a dead pony. Thing is…I've also come across things so beautiful they almost hurt. Like the sound of a church full of children singing. Or seeing slaves freed from bondage. That really struck me. Or finding a pony's personal treasure two hundred years after they died." I saw her looking at me oddly and smiled a little. "I know, it sounds a little bit corny, but if the Wasteland was nothing but pain and suffering, eventually you'd get numb to it all. It has just enough good to be worth fighting for."

And to really make you feel the horrible parts.

I yawned again and put on DJ Pon3. Pretty soon, I'd be sleepwalking at this rate. There was a crackle, and suddenly an old buck cackled around us, making my whole body shiver. "She's getting awfully big, Mari. Who's a big pony? Yes she is! Yes she is!"

What the hay? I looked at the PipBuck screen; in my stupor I'd loaded the other audio note from the recorder I'd found on Star Point.

"Unca Hoss! Hat Unca Hoss! Hat! Pleeeeeze!" a filly squeeled.

The old buck chuckled softly. "Here you go, Tarot."

"Now be careful. That hat's as old as your uncle Hoss."

There was an old chuckle. "An' nearly as tough, too. Don't worry none, Mari." There was a squeal of joy that faded a little as a filly sang, 'I gots a haa-aat!' The old buck asked quietly, "How are you holding together?"

"Day by day, like everypony, I imagine," Marigold said softly. "I keep waking in the middle of the night thinking that we missed the signal and we're going to die. I feel as if, any second, something terrible will happen. Everypony is telling us to get into the city. That the spell shields will keep the bombs out…but I can't leave Star House. Tarot loves it there."

"Spell shields?"

"Horse installed them. One of his first 'projects' as the new director." She snorted scornfully. "I hope they work, but Horse's grandstanding isn't doing anypony any good."

"Mmmm…well, give an idjit some power and watch him turn into a mule," Old Hoss grumbled. "You still working on your book?"

"Yes, I picked up this recorder. Army surplus, not pretty, but as least I don't have to worry about Tarot accidentally breaking it when she plays 'Star Rangers'. She loves that show…" There was a pause, then a little sniff followed by a sob. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"This stupid war's getting in the way of living," Hoss muttered.

Fortunately, Tarot hadn't seemed to notice as she shrieked "Oh noes, it's a horn eating monster. Eeeee! Momma! It's eating my horn!" A pause. "Momma…it's *eating* my *horn*."

"Oh? Oh! Ahem…" Marigold cleared her throat. "Evil horn eating monster! Star Ranger Mommy will stop you!" Tarot giggled in glee as Marigold made zapping noises. "Are you okay, Miss Junior Star Ranger?"

"Yes, Star Ranger Mommy!" she said with a giggle. "Common Star Ranger Hat! Let's explore for cookies!" With a wooshing noise Tarot ran off.

"Landsakes. In my day it was ponies versus buffalo. I was always the buffalo…" he mused.

"She probably did that just for me. All this fighting…it's even

getting to Tarot a little bit. She doesn't know why I'm upset, but she knows I am."

"You should see a physician, Marigold," Old Hoss said softly. "Yer way too young ta be driving yerself crazy like this." He chuckled and added, "Of course, once ya get to my age everything turns out ta be a case of 'old'."

Marigold laughed softly, mirthlessly. "I can't. You've heard the stories of how they're handling cases of war fatigue. Memory wipes. Drugs. Other spells. I can't risk anything happening to Tarot. She's everything to me now." There was a soft sigh. "Funny, considering she's not mine."

"You're her momma. You clean up after her, see she gets fed, and worry about her night and day. If that ain't a momma, dunno what is." He hesitated, hemming a little before he asked softly, "Has her first momma…"

"No. I don't know who she is, and if Fluttershy did what she said she did, I doubt her real momma knows she even is a mother." Marigold let out a sad sigh. "She'll never know what a wonderful child she gave up."

"Yer a peach, Marigold…"

"Sometimes though…I wonder…"

"You can't have regrets, Mari."

"No, not regrets. I just wonder…what would have happened if her mother had kept her? Would I have gone into space again? Would the rocket program have kept going? Would things be different?" Marigold sighed softly. "I didn't anticipate being a mother. Just being pregnant was scary enough. I thought that…I'd have her and that would be that. I never imagined just how much she means to me."

"Heh. Like I used to tell Missus Hoss back in the cave pony days, we love 'em so much so we don't put them on a spit and eat 'em!"

They shared a laugh. Then there was a shrill beeping. "Oh no…" she murmured. "My stable pass is active. But 90 is all the way past Flankfurt! It will take us hours to get there by hoof!"

"Now relax, Marigold. It's probably just a drill," he said comfortingly. "They've been testing the system all month." But neither of them talked as the pass continued to go off, an annoying little beep that went on and on while Tarot played.

But it wasn't a drill. From the direction of the city came the long low wail of a siren. It rose and fell, echoing out over the

countryside in a faint, ghostly call. It was a herald of doom as the pass beeped continuously. “Momma... I don’t like this, Momma... ” Tarot whimpered in the voice of a child who still had faith in their mother to do anything. Minute after minute crawled by, the dread deepening.

Then we heard it. From the recording came the sound of an explosion that shook the house to its foundations. Tarot shrieked as things crashed in the background. Then a terrible silence fell. Hoss muttered breathlessly, “Miramare. They hit Miramare.”

“Come on, sweetie. We have to go to the stable now…Maybe… maybe the Sunset Highway is still intact…” But there was another explosion. Then another. Another.

“Mommy. What are those lights?” Tarot said in worry. “They’re scary!”

“Come here, Tarot. It’ll be okay.”

Old Hoss rumbled and coughed in his throat. “You have to head for the stable up on the hill. It ain’t the one ya were assigned, but a pass is a pass.”

“Come with us?”

“Aw, now, no sense in that, Marigold. You know it. I’m just an old buck who's stuck around to the end of things. You get that filly where she’ll be safe.”

“Unca Hoss! Your hat!” Tarot said in alarm.

“Keep it, hun. I don’t need it anymore.”

“Nuhuh! It’s your hat, Unca Hoss. Your head’ll get cold. No Star Ranger wants a cold!” Tarot said with a sniff. “Please, Unca Hoss. I’ll wear it when I get back.”

Suddenly all three of them began to cry out as if in pain, but all I could hear was a terrible silence. Then there was a distant crack and a great wind that gusted through the leaves of the trees around the farm. Distant cries and wails sounded through the night, growing and falling and building as the survivors ran through that horrible time.

Old Hoss murmured softly, “Princesses…Hoofington…what… happened…? What was that…screaming…?”

“A bomb inside the shield. They must have smuggled one inside… oh sweet Celestia…”

“You go, Marigold. Hurry. Just follow all those ponies. You see to your little one.”

“Thank you.”

"No regrets, Marigold. You just do better than those idjits that caused this mess."

"Goodbye," Marigold whispered. "Come on Tarot. Stay close, honey. We need to get to our new home in the stable."

"Bye Unca Hoss! I'll see you soon."

"Luna protect us, I hope not, sweetie," Hoss said quietly, and faintly I heard the old buck murmur, "Guess I'll see you soon, Smith."

The recording turned to static before it cut out completely.

That was what it sounded like when worlds ended. One second, you're playing Star Rangers with your foal, visiting a friend. Then you're giving your child away to a complete stranger in the knowledge that she'd die otherwise.

I felt shivery all over. What were the odds that the bombs would drop on that day, when they were visiting the farm? If they'd been in Star House, they would have gone to the doomed Stable 90. What were the chances they'd run across Card Trick, who'd take her in as her own? What was the chance that I'd have found this recording when I was so desperate to pull the trigger?

How could I have been that much of a fucking idiot?

I'd never kill myself now. I might want to, but I'd never be able to throw away a life that was the product of those extraordinary circumstances. The odds were nothing less than miraculous. And I'd almost thrown it all away. I might have thrown away my friends in that moment of horrible weakness.

Thank you, Marigold. Hoss. Fluttershy.

"I can't believe that's what it was like," Twister drawled, looking down at my PipBuck in astonishment. "I mean, we hear 'bout the Emergency Broadcast and the Great Recall in school…but hearing those bombs go off…they talked about a scream. What was that?"

"I don't know," I replied, looking at the lavender Enclave pony. "I didn't hear anything."

"Hoofington must have been packed when the bombs went off, if folks thought magic shields would keep 'em safe," she mused aloud. "But it looks like the only thing that worked was closing the sky."

"Yeah. War's over now, though. You can open it back up again," I muttered as more fat drops of rain started to fall.

Her ears drooped a little. "Not an option, sorry to say. We need every bit of cloud we can get for food. Sorry." She looked out at the dreary landscape. "I never thought it'd look like this, though."

I looked at her; this was how pegasi became Dashites. I could see the guilt on her face; she might have thought it necessary, but she didn't think of it as right.

"Can I ask you a question?" She looked back at me coolly but curiously. "Why didn't you just fly off and leave me back at Star Point?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. "I've been out of basic for two years now," she said. "You know how much action I've seen? Zero. We fly around, do our formations, shoot target practice and play the occasional war game. And we're told it's all for our people." She took a deep breath. "Fact is that was the first fight that felt like the good fight." She kicked a muddy clod. "Like I said. Dirt's making me stupid."

Then the Enclave found us.

Fortunately, the bars were amber as one landed in front and the other behind. "Twister! We found you!" called out a mare. I looked at the scorched armor of the mare with the gatling beam rifles and the male I'd nearly cut.

"You…" Twister's eyes widened in shock. "You came after me?"

"Well, o'course! Couldn't leave you in the hooves of this surfacer terrorist," the buck growled, his missile launcher pointed right at me. Oh sure, he was brave now that I didn't have a razor sharp claw to his genitals. "Want me to blast her? Make sure she cooperates."

"No Boomer. She got me away from the Dunderheads," Twister muttered numbly, then shook her head hard. "But what are you three doing? We're all contaminated now!" Twister pointed out with a glare.

Sunset shrugged, a weird sight to see in power armor. "Eh. We'll say we were lookin' ta kick some Dunderhead tail. Get two weeks detention."

Boomer nodded. "Can't toss ya in a cell if we back you up, right?"

"You two idjits…ugh…I'm gonna be stuck with paperwork for a month for this…" She looked at me. "You're sure I'd have to eat… you know…to get sick?"

"Ask your own medics," I replied with a shrug. "But you should be fine."

"What's she talkin' 'bout?" Boomer asked, keeping that missile on me.

"Nothin', Boomer. Nothin'." She looked at me then smiled. "Well. You take care o' yerself, Blackjack. Got to say this has been a hell of

a night."

From the slightly less dark and gloomy east, I could tell it was nearly morning. "Yeah. For me as well."

* * *

Megamart's guards took one look at me and opened the gate, not bothering me for caps as I stepped though. Either I was so damn scary-looking they didn't want to, or they took pity on a mare who'd been through a rough night. I didn't care. I had to find my friends now and apologize. Grovel for forgiveness.

Inside, business was oddly quiet. The vendors were moving into their booths, but their eyes slowly followed me nervously. Were my glowing eyes freaking everypony out that badly? I tried to remember where I'd left my glasses. Star Point? They were probably in the ocean by now. Where were Bottlecap and Keystone? I'd expected them coming as soon as I showed up. I headed over to the clinic where the old doctor lay back on his own operating table, snoring loudly.

"Hey. Hey Bonesaw." I nudged him hard.

He jerked upright and banged his horn against the light that dangled over the table. "Gallstones…" he swore, clenching his eyes shut as he hissed. "Clinic is open when I am! Go away."

"Bonesaw. It's me. Security?" I asked with an awkward smile.

He cracked open an eye, then the gap-toothed old unicorn gasped. "You! You're here. You can't be here! They're here for you!"

I immediately focused my EFS. No red bars, yet.

"Who is? Enclave? Zodiac? Usury? Killer zebra death commandos?" I asked as my eyes swept through the crowds.

"No…them!" he said as he pointed a hoof.

From down the aisle approached three ponies in traditional raider attire…No. That was backwards. Every raider I'd ever seen had been trying to copy this look. The confident swagger in the three mares. Tough eyed, tough hided, wearing spikes and chains. Their leather barding had the unmistakable muted hues of being ponyhide. And their weapons were top notch and well cared for. These were ponies who were ready, willing, able, and eager to kick tail and get kicked. Not out of madness, but sheer confidence.

These were Reapers.

It made sense; they couldn't all be monsterponies like Deus. He'd

been a special project, connected to Sanguine through the need for his super painkiller. But I had the clear impression that these three ponies still knew a lot about fighting.

And I was about to get a firsthand lesson in it.

I glanced up at Gun. The weapon was already turned towards me, as if anticipating I'd fire a shot. "I need a weapon," I said tensely, not taking my eyes off the three mares. Two of them were earth ponies; one swung a weighted chain lazily in her jaws. The second grinned around the handle of a fire axe, one without even a spot of rust upon it. But the unicorn's weapon put them all to shame. The mallet had to be nearly as long as her body, with a huge reinforced head of steel, and she floated it without the slightest bit of strain.

A scalpel floated into my line of vision.

"Thanks," I said as my magic gripped the tiny blade. I slowly trotted down the aisle towards the three.

"You're Security, right?" the unicorn asked. I was hoping she'd be fiddling with that hammer, or scornful of the tiny blade. She wasn't. I could tell they took me seriously. No taunts. No insults. They were just as serious about kicking my ass clear to Flank.

"Yeah," I said as I wondered if my magic bullets would register as gunshots to Gun.

"You're coming with us," the unicorn said as they started to spread out. This was a far cry from what I was used to: no charging in for the first hit or quick kill.

Great. "I don't think so. I just want to find my friends, beg their forgiveness, and sleep for six or seven hours." I kept looking at Chain and Axe; the earth ponies were moving more and more to flank me as I backed away. Hammermare just stayed right in front of me. "Is this about that stupid bounty? Deus is dead, Usury's gone…give it up!"

"Piss on my horn…she told us you were stupid, but I didn't expect it was this bad," Hammermare said as she turned the head of the mallet around in her magical grip. "We do this three ways. You let Cuffs lock you up nice and neat, we beat you unconscious and lock you up anyway, or we kill you. Those are your options."

"Right…" Well I knew this was coming. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and selected my attacks. I charged forward as my magic stabbed the scalpel right at her face. She raised a hoof, the blade drawing blood as it stabbed into her forelimb. I lunged to tackle her, raising my hooves to knock that massive hammer out of the way.

Funny. I really hadn't expected her horn to be that strong. The floating haft of the hammer didn't budge an inch; instead, I was halted in place gripping it and staring stupidly down at her. She grinned even wider and the hammer shoved me away, then swung in an upward arc with an ominous hum of magic.

My only saving grace was that I got the PipBuck raised in time to prevent my face from getting crushed. That didn't prevent the blow from knocking me clear off my hooves and bouncing me on the concrete floor once before sliding away. I shook my head, wondering if my leg or head were busted. That blow nearly took off my horn!

Then Cuffs swung her chain around my rear leg, and like that she was racing back towards Hammermare and I was being dragged along behind her. The glowing hammer lifted, the hum growing as a talisman in the head built up energy. I did the only thing I could and rolled to the side, the taut chain cutting underneath Hammermare's hooves and knocking her down atop me. We rolled as we were dragged along, kicking and biting before she finally fell away.

Cuffs didn't stop, though, as the chain-draped mare raced towards the end of the aisle. She snapped around the corner, swinging hard and I wailed as I was slammed hard into a stack of scrapped generators. Then she was off again, dragging me back towards the other two. Hammermare raised the powered mallet for another blow, and Fire Axe likewise readied the sharpened spike on the end.

"Enough of this!" I shouted as I curled up and sent three magic bullets right at Cuffs's rump. One caught her square in the flank, and she staggered enough that I was able to hook my forehooves on a heap of scrap. With a jerk, the chain around my rear leg went taut and Cuffs fell to the ground. I did not like that pop in my rear knee nor the pain that radiated from it, though.

I pulled myself to my hooves, watching Hammermare charge. I shook off the chain before it could be yanked again. The bullet spell hadn't triggered Gun, but seeing how tough these three were, I wasn't sure it'd be enough to drop them. What I needed was a decent weapon!

Fortunately, Fire Axe had one.

My horn flashed, trying to twist it out of the Reaper's mouth. To my shock, she grit her teeth and fought me.

And that hesitation gave Hammermare the opening she needed.

The mallet slammed into my side, and I felt several ribs snap as I once more slid all the way to Bonesaw's clinic. I opened my mouth and gasped, then coughed a mouthful of blood over the floor. The old buck stared as he backed away, not getting involved in this fight. I couldn't blame him.

But, he did have medical supplies.

"Bill me," was all I choked out before yanking open his cabinet, grabbing an ampule of gray sludge, and injecting it into my side. At once, I felt the disgusting regenerative potion at work as the Hydra mended my ribs and did…whatever other damage it was doing. I chowed down a Buck and injected a Med-X for good measure before slugging down his freshest healing potions. I rose to my hooves and faced the three. My eyes felt like they were glowing like the fires of hell. "Okay! You three are between me and my friends and I am fucking sick of it!" The sensation of my knee being pulled into place made my stomach churn.

Hammermare looked a little surprised that I still had some fight in me, while Cuffs and Fire Axe backed away a few steps. I charged at the unicorn, who readied herself, hammer held parallel to the ground before her like the first time. I leapt and hooked my forehooves around the handle. As before, it didn't budge.

Which let me swing my rear legs up and smash both my rear hooves into her face with almost as much force as her mallet. She reared and fell back as I flipped in the air and grabbed the mallet from her faltering magical grip with my own magic. She had just enough presence of mind to lift her hooves and catch the hammer on them rather than her chest, but from the crack, I knew I wasn't the only pony who'd need Hydra after this fight.

Fire Axe and Cuffs didn't abandon Hammermare, though. The red earth pony swung the axe with swift and sure cuts that had me dancing back as I countered with massive blows of the heavy hammer. I wasn't quite as strong as Hammermare, but at least I was holding my own. Or at least I thought I was when Cuff's chain whipped around my throat and went taut. The chain yanked me back, making me rear up as I struggled to defend myself against Fire Axe.

The heavy metal axe head slammed against my gut and blasted the breath from me. Levitating the hammer, I swung wildly behind me. There was a dull thump as I connected with something, and the chain relaxed enough for me to suck a gasp of air. Fire Axe charged

in while she still had the opportunity, but I slammed my forehooves hard against her face, knocking her to the floor.

"Hey Security! What's soaking wet and clueless?" a mare called out above me. I looked up in time to get a bucket of water, bucket included, dumped on my head. "Your face!" she snickered, then hit me so hard that I was knocked bouncing across the floor again.

I pulled the bucket off and looked up at a yellow pegasus with sweeping golden hair and a decidedly bitchy grin on her face. Arcane devices on each of her hooves sparkled with energy similar to Hammermare's super sledgehammer. "What the fuck... "

She laughed as her blue eyes looked down at me. "Aww... do you want me to kiss it and make it all better?" Her wings snapped and she slammed the sparkling power shoes against my face with another blast of magical energy. I brought up S.A.T.S. and tried to blast her with magical bullets, but two missed and the remaining two didn't do enough to take her out completely. Oh Goddesses, did my horn ache right now.

Butterflies with razorblade wings... that was a new cutie mark.

Then she was smashing her hooves against me again and again as more Reapers showed up. "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" she shrieked with glee. "Don't you just love me?"

"Psychoshy!" snapped a familiar voice from the end of the aisle. I groaned as I sat back up again. Rampage slowly approached with a solemn look on her face. "That's enough."

"She's weak! She's useless!" the yellow pegasus said in disgust as she landed beside my friend. "We should just take back her head."

"She's fine. You just caught her at a bad time," Rampage said softly as she knelt and looked me in the eye with a sad smile. "Hey, Blackjack. Everyone's okay. Nervous, but okay. I'm really glad you made it back all right."

I lay back, my head spinning after Psychoshy's beating. "Rampage, what's going on?"

She sighed softly. "Bad news. We're at war, and you've been drafted," she said as she looked down at me. "Welcome to the Reapers, Blackjack."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Terrifying Presence - When you've got that shooty look going, you can make lesser enemies run in terror and balk greater

opponents.

Chapter 25: Competition

"I was gonna say 'In all of Equestria', but that might be gilding the lily."

"Psychoshy, Security," Rampage said as she gestured from the hovering yellow pegasus to me and then back again. "Security, Psychoshy. If you're going to kill each other, do it in the arena where we can all watch the show." She stepped between me and the pegasus, dragging her hoofclaws over the concrete. "Understand?" she asked in a lower, more menacing tone.

"Sure. She's not worth my time anyway," the mare said as she flicked her mane dismissively. "Her blue buck is much more interesting! See you later, Wahhhpage." With a snotty little giggle, she flew off through the store.

"Wow. I can't think of a single pony who's gone from 'complete stranger' to 'pony I need to kick the crap out of' faster than her," I groaned as I lifted myself to my hooves. Then I shuddered; my heart was beating…wrong. It hurt like it never had before, and its usual steady, paired beats had been replaced by what felt like some complicated, energetic dance. "I…I just need a second here…" I groaned again as I lowered myself back to the ground, rolled over onto my back, and listened to the irregular thudding in my ears.

"Why is it I keep meeting you when you're half dead?" Rampage asked, rolling her eyes. She grabbed the collar of my barding in her teeth and started dragging me back to Bonesaw. Hammermare was sitting on a couch, her forelegs twisting as the bent limbs were tugged back into place by his healing potions and Hydra. She didn't look all that pissed at me. Quite the contrary, actually.

"Hey, Mallet," Rampage said around my collar.

"Rampage," she said respectfully, flushing a little.

"You owe me some caps," Bonesaw said sourly as Rampage dumped me on the operating table.

My striped friend gave him a level look, and he muttered under his

breath as his horn glowed and he started trying to fix the damage the chems and taint had been doing to me. “Don’t worry, you old goat. You’ll get paid.” The old buck’s grumbling died down a bit, though he still didn’t look happy. Rampage popped a Mint-al into her mouth, chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then spoke. “So… what happened?”

“Long story short, went to go kill myself, ran into somepony who talked some sense into me, walked back here,” I said with a half smile.

“And we couldn’t have talked some sense into you? Glory was hysterical when we told her.” I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth. She sighed. “You’re an idiot, Blackjack. Don’t do that to your friends. Okay?”

“Yeah. I won’t. I think I worked all that out of me.” She smiled, looking relieved. I looked around. “Where *are* Glory and the others?”

“Glory’s on the roof with Lacunae. Scotch and P-21 are in the office. I made damn sure that the ponies watching them aren’t stupid.” She looked over a few aisles to where Psychoshy was fluttering over a small crowd that seemed quite excited to meet the pretty pegasus psychopath. “Psychoshy wanted them taken as hostages. Since that’d get a lot of ponies killed, I told her you’d be fine coming with us to the Arena to meet Big Daddy Reaper.”

My heartbeat was stabilizing even as the ache in my chest grew. That Hydra had been a bad idea. Knit ribs didn’t help when the rest of me felt like it was falling apart. Rampage arched a brow. “*Are* you fine with coming with us? Because I really don’t want to call Cuffs over here.”

To be honest, this was so far out of left field that I didn’t know how exactly I felt about it. “Some explanation would help. What’s going on?”

Rampage sighed. “You remember when you killed Gorgon? Well, he was one of us. Gorgon the Stonegaze. Not really all that popular. One of Sanguine’s ponies. He left three months ago to help with production at Brimstone’s Fall. Then, two weeks ago, we find out from DJ Pon3 that the mine’s been liberated. A few questions later and we found out it was liberated by a mare who killed Gorgon all by herself. So Big Daddy sent me to find you.”

“Why me? I’m not interested in joining the Reapers.”

“Yeah. I figured as much, but you have to understand that the

Reapers survive by being the biggest, baddest gang in the Hoof. If there's a pony strong enough to kill our own, we want them as a Reaper. If they won't join, then we come down on them hard. We just can't let powerful ponies get away to start rival operations."
The striped pony rubbed her nose. "I figured out pretty quickly, though, that you weren't all that big a threat of becoming a rival. If you'd stayed in Flank, maybe you might have been, in time. But that didn't work out."
I groaned and closed my eyes. "I still don't follow. You're not here to kill me, so... "
Rampage sighed again, this time in annoyance. "Great. Well, it's about history, and I'm not much of a history teacher. You can ask Big Daddy to explain it."
"Come on. At least give me the abbreviated version?" I asked, then winced as something inside me squirmed. Oh, I really hoped that it was supposed to do that.
Rampage rolled her eyes. "A while back, there was a group of six ponies that tried to clean up Hoofington. They went from one end of the city to the other, and, believe it or not, Hoofington was even worse back then. Big Daddy was one of them: the biggest, toughest, meanest pony ever to wander the Wasteland... if you listen to his version."
I winced as I felt…something…inside me move in response to Bonesaw's magic. "You're done," he said as he nudged me off the table. "Next!"
I slipped off, feeling…'better' wasn't quite accurate. 'Intact' worked. My insides felt like a bowl of giant leeches. I did not want to imagine what they looked like. Maybe they were like rotten loops of guts with…ugh, stupid brain. "What happened to them?"
"They split up. Not really sure why," Rampage said, giving me a significant look. Probably because one of them ran off to do something foolish like killing themselves. "After that, Awesome crowned himself King Awesome of Hoofington, Crunchy Carrots went back to Manehattan and came back with a whole slew of Steel Rangers, Keeper went his own way to set up the trade routes around the city, and the professor established the Eggheads over at the university." She rubbed her chin. "There was a sixth, but I dunno what happened to her."
Six friends? Why'd that make my mane all twitchy? Right; that didn't matter now. I'd stalled long enough. Unless the Reapers or

somepony were going to ambush me…I had to do this. “Where’s Glory again?” I said as I stood…well, lurched to my hooves. Goddesses, I was tired. It’d been a hell of a night. Rampage walked towards a metal staircase that led up to the roof and nodded her head at it.

“Word of advice: she still loves you,” Rampage said softly, then added, “Oh, and word of warning: if Psychoshy or anypony else finds out I’ve been giving relationship advice, I’ll have to kick a lot of ass. Including yours.”

“Thanks.” I paused, fighting the urge to yawn as I looked at her. “You’re not mad at me?”

She smiled and shook her head. “I know what it’s like to find life unbearable. I’m just glad you found a way to bear it.” She patted my shoulder. “But if you ever do that to your friends again, I’ll consider it a form of suicide and squeeze you in half.” She gave a grin and a wink. “So just keep that in mind next time you plan on leaving a *note* behind.”

“Right,” I said with a little nod before making my way up the stairs. Funny, but after riding a dragon and a pegasus, the drop to the floor of Megamart…was still enough to make my insides squirm. Wasn’t I supposed to eventually get used to things like this? I clambered through the hatch to the roof and the rain. A number of metal crates had been converted into shelters for the vendors who worked below.

Lacunae and Glory were with two more Reapers. I couldn’t say they were the best guards, as both mares were locked in a hoofwrestling contest, but at least neither Glory nor Lacunae seemed to be threatened by the two. Glory lay curled up as tightly as when I’d seen her trapped in that stove. What an unbearable shit I am. I didn’t deserve her, and she didn’t deserve this.

I approached quietly, the two guards barely acknowledging my presence as I walked slowly towards the little gray pegasus. Lacunae’s dark purple eyes followed me though the Hoofington drizzle, her magic deflecting the cold spray from both of them. “You broke her heart, Blackjack,” was all she whispered in my head as I sat down beside Glory. I reached out and ran my hoof gently along that splendid amethyst mane and down to the graceful curves of her wings.

“Yeah,” I murmured softly. “‘Cause I’m an idiot.” Looking back, I couldn’t believe what I’d nearly done. To myself, my friends…her.

She stirred and opened one bloodshot, puffy lavender eye. "Blackjack?" she whispered, looking at me. Fear and hope mixed in one terrible note.

I took a slow breath. This wasn't going to be pretty. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" she whispered as she slowly rose. Clearly, I was not the only pony who had been up all night. "Sorry?" Her body trembled and her lip quivered, then she hung her head. Purple mane hid her face. "You…I…you come back and…" She lifted her head again and glared at me. "Blackjack, you…you…" I sighed as she flapped her wings hard enough to lift herself off her hooves and then brought both of her forelegs down on my head with a cry of "Idiot!"

Lacunae rose, and the two guards broke off their match to watch the show. The alicorn in the lacy funeral dress looked coldly down at both of them. "Um…we're supposed to…watch?" Then they flinched and trotted off for the stairs, Lacunae accompanying them, as Glory pummeled every inch of my body she could reach.

"You…you fiend! You monster! You creep! You filly seducer! You…you…bad pony!" Glory said as she thumped me over and over again. The magic had left with the alicorn, and the Hoofington drizzle poured down on both of us. "How could you do that to us? How! I'll…Ohhhh! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!" she chanted over and over again as she kicked at me. I put up only a halfhearted defense.

"Ow! Glory! Let me explain!" I begged as she gave me a particularly good clop upside my head.

"I don't want your explanations! I'm going to beat every last little drop of stupid out of you so you never ever do that again!" she cried and sobbed. "I…we met with P-21…and he was crying… crying! And you! You were gone, and I was…I had nothing left, Blackjack. No family. No home! No Blackjack! Nothing! Do you understand? Nothing!"

"I…didn't…" I said weakly, not having the slightest clue what to say. What could I say?

Then she collapsed atop me, sobbing as she held me tight in her hooves. "I thought I'd lost you…I thought you were dead…" she whispered as she shook. I held her, marveling at the softness of her wings, the silkiness of her mane. She was a gem in the Wasteland.

"You did lose me. I lost me," I said softly as I nuzzled her ear. "I couldn't handle it. If Lacunae hadn't covered for me, I think I would have lost my mind completely." She sniffled as she looked up at me with her hurting purple eyes; my magic brushed her mane from

them. “I killed my stable…I know I had to…I know it wasn’t my fault…but I was the one who pushed the button that gassed foals… my friends…my home. I couldn’t handle it…it killed me. But Lacunae took me away before I died.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me? Talk to me?” she asked softly. “I would have helped you. We all would have.”

“I didn’t want help. I was stupid and cowardly. I wanted to escape. I can still smell the gas. Right now, holding you, I can smell that chlorine. I can hear Midnight calling me a murderer.” I closed my eyes, a part of me trapped in 99 forever. “I couldn’t live with it. I couldn’t handle it. I ran to either find something to keep me going... or…or end it.”

Glory trembled as she looked away. “And…I wasn’t enough.”

“No.” I turned her face back towards mine as I repeated softly, “No. Glory, you weren’t ‘not enough’. You were too much. Too much good and wonderful that I didn’t deserve. That I still don’t deserve,” I said as I closed my eyes. “I wanted…needed…to punish myself. I couldn’t do that with you with me. I was falling apart and dead inside.” I sighed as I stroked her wet mane. “I should have turned to my friends. Not away from them…”

She sniffed as she looked at me, then she finally gave me a small smile. “Idiot…” she said softly, reaching up and tapping the side of my head. “I…don’t know if we can be like we were, Blackjack. I just don’t know. I…you make me happy. But you hurt me, too. I’m going to need some time.”

“Take as long as you need,” I said as she slowly pulled away, looking down at me with an expression equal parts affection and wariness. I slowly rose to my hooves, the cool drizzle welcome for once on my battered flesh. “What do you think about these Reapers?”

“I expected psychopaths,” Glory said, gathering herself and readily accepting the change in subject. We started back towards the hatch downstairs. “But, aside from that unpleasant yellow mare, they seem much more…together. Horribly aggressive and violent, but… considering what we’ve encountered in the Wasteland so far... ” She gave a little shake. “Fortunately, Rampage seems pretty well respected by them.”

“Eating a minigun and living will do that,” I replied as I pulled open the hatch and started down. “So. To avoid another massive fight, we’re going to go with them and--” But then my hoof slipped

on the wet metal and I rolled and banged the last dozen feet or so to the ground. Glory flew down as I lay there groaning. “Gravity… sucks.” Then I glanced at my forehooves and stared at the slick black oil on them. I looked back at the steps.

“Gravity doesn’t suck. You do,” Psychoshy snickered as she walked past us, snapping her tail at me.

“Are you kidding me…” I muttered, staring at her as she walked out of sight. “I fight off a swarm of manticores and Enclave and I now have to put up with adolescent jerk ass school pranks!?”

“Or you could…you know…shoot her,” Glory said as she helped me to my feet.

“Tempting, but, Gun aside, I think I should talk to Big Daddy first before killing Reapers.”

She smirked. “I didn’t say kill. Just shoot her a few times. She pulls a stupid prank? Shoot her. She acts mean? Shoot her. Think of it as a spanking with bullets.” Our eyes met, my lips twitched, and then we were both laughing as we walked to Bottlecap’s office. We might not be lovers anymore, but at least I knew I still had her as a friend.

“So…” she said, “tell me about these Enclave you mentioned?”

That sent my spirits down again. This was going to be tricky.

"Well…I was up in the mountains, and I can't tell you why, or how."

"Blackjack…" Hearing the disappointment in her voice made me want to tell her the whole story right there, but…I'd promised Spike, who was protecting the best hope for Equestria's future, and I really didn't want to get a dragon mad at me.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, but it's *really* important and I made a promise," I said with desperate hope.

Then was an eternity of silence as she considered, and then, "Alright. I'll trust you." *Be worthy of it this time,* she didn't say.

"Thank you. So…anyway, I was climbing back down, when these three pegasi... "

* * *

“…so then they flew out again, back west,” I finished as we reached the door to the manager’s office. I was dead on my hooves, but I needed to talk to P-21. And then Lacunae... and Scotch…ugh. Suicide would have been easier…

I stomped hard on that thought. Never again.

Glory, for her part, found Twister's paranoia more amusing than ominous. “A touch overdramatic. We’d have just extradited her back to Neighvarro with a slap on the hoof for violating the no-fly zone.” Hm. Glory might still have faith in the treaty, but after Miramare and Lighthooves, I’d stay on the skeptical side of things.

I passed by Cuffs, Mallet, and Smokey, the mare who’d wielded the fire axe just half an hour ago. To my surprise, there was no animosity. Mallet asked about a rematch, and Cuffs asked Glory if she needed some quality chain to keep me from getting away. I flushed as Glory looked at me in consideration of her offer.

Then Smokey looked over at something. “Look out. It’s Psycho,” the red mare muttered, and all of them watched sullenly as Psychoshy slammed her hooves against a nearby merchant’s counter, apparently haggling to get the price to zero.

“You don’t like her either?” Glory asked in surprise.

Mallet snickered. “Of course not. She’s a complete cunt.”

“And one of Sanguine’s suck ups,” added Cuffs. The turquoise mare looked a little nervous.

At my questioning gaze, Mallet sighed. “Most Reapers work up from our gangs. We work to be the best of the best before trying to join the Reapers. Sanguine, though, he finds ponies and gives them powers. Gorgon. Deus. Anypony associated with that ghoul is fucked up. Everypony knows he’s a horned undead leech.” Psychoshy trotted away from the shaking vendor with a ransom of little treasures. “Psychoshy’s that ghoul’s favorite trick pony. We hate her. And she knows it.”

Trick pony…if it was anything like what P-21…that had to be like getting fucked by a jerky stick! Okay…there was a mental image I wanted burned from my mind. “And Rampage?” I asked curiously, though honestly I was more interested in banishing the image of… stop it, you stupid brain!

Mallet gave a wary sort of smile. “She’s cool…weird…super weird…but cool.”

“Anypony who can survive decapitation automatically gets points with us,” Smokey agreed. “Even if she’s…weird.” So surviving decapitation wasn’t the weird point. Welcome to the Wasteland, where the surreal was cool and the psychological weird.

“Oh, I’m not so bad once you get to know me,” Rampage said softly in just the precise tone to make even the three Reapers’ manes stand on edge, not to mention mine and Glory’s. She put her hooves

around Mallet and Smokey's necks, pulling them into a headlock that had both strong mares struggling. "Now, why don't you three help me get our wagon ready?"

"Sure, Rampage. We're on it," Cuffs said quickly as the other two gagged for a few seconds more before they were released and ran for the door.

"Kids today," Rampage sighed, and shook her head as she trotted after them.

"Are we sure we want to do this?" Glory asked me, watching them go in concern. "I mean, we might be able to sneak away."

"I don't want to leave Rampage," I said softly, dropping my gaze. "I snuck out on my friends once. I'm not going to do it again." I caught Glory's smile. I might not be the smartest pony, but I could be taught. A little. Slowly.

* * *

The stench of fecal water hit my nostrils like a hammer as I pushed open the door to Bottlecap's office. A filly inside gave a garbled war cry accompanied by a furious splashing, and I poked my head inside to see Scotch Tape gripping some kind of crankcase in her jaws as her forehooves turned the pedals at a furious rate, making a cable disappearing into the toilet spin and thrash filthy water. Behind her stood P-21, looking a little lost, as he gripped a plunger in his mouth. The yellow merchant mare watched anxiously from behind both.

Bottlecap spotted me first and at once smiled with a small look of concern as we walked in. She leaned towards me. "I thought a little job might keep them distracted for a bit... " She looked apprehensively at Scotch Tape as the young mare cranked the levers like mad. "I didn't expect her to be quite so devoted to…fixing my clog."

I caught the change. The turn of a blue ear. The slight widening of his eye followed by a slow sag of his body. His teeth tightening on the handle of the plunger. Eyes that refused to look away from Scotch Tape at work. He was pissed too, and hurt, and I knew that, unlike Glory, he wouldn't do the sensible thing and beat the stupid out of me. Oh no. He was going to bottle it all up and be in a complete snit till it finally exploded.

Well, not if this security mare had anything to say about it! I

trotted right up next to him, smiling as I watched Scotch Tape at work. Then I turned my head and licked him from jaw to ear in one long wet slurp. His blue eyes shot wide, the plunger falling from his shocked mouth as he jumped away. “Damn it, Blackjack!” He scrubbed at my lick with a hoof as he looked at me in shock and embarrassment. “Fine! You’re back! Glad you’re not dead.”

“Hey, P-21,” I said as I looked at him sitting his rump down with a sore wince. Bottlecap nudged Glory out the door and followed her, shutting it behind them, and Scotch Tape seemed completely fixated on consulting a magazine on plumbing and repairs. I sat before P-21. “So…you miss me?” I said, giving him a small smile, hoping he’d get the clue that this was when he got to beat the everloving snot out of me.

But he didn’t. I’d hurt him again. Wronged him. “No. I didn’t,” he replied with sincerity before reaching into his bags to pull out my Delta PipBuck and throw it in my face. “Don’t leave your junk with me next time, Blackjack.” And with that he trotted from the room.

I took a deep breath. What had I expected? I’d run out on my friends. It wasn’t like I could just come back and everything would be wonderful again. Face it, I’d gotten lucky with Rampage and Glory.

Suddenly, there was a gurgle of water and a flush accompanied by Scotch letting out a whoop of glee. “Hah! Never met a clogged toilet that could stop me for long!” She grinned back at the office, then pushed her goggles back, blinking. “Awww, man. Victory of a lifetime and nopony gets to see it?” Then she looked at me. “Oh, you’re back. Guess you didn’t kill yourself, huh?” Well, neither anger nor tears…

“Probably. I might be a ghost though.” She immediately blanched under her grime. “Kidding! I’m kidding. There aren’t ghosts in the Wasteland…I think.” Were there? I’d have to check the survival guide. “So…why are you fixing a toilet?”

“‘Cause everypony was going crazy with you gone.” More guilt? Yes, please! “Glory wanted to fly off and find you. Rampage wanted everypony to wait here. P-21…” But she just shrugged and shook her head. “So, that Bottlecap mare mentioned that she had a nasty clog and she’d pay to have it fixed.”

“Yeah, but how do you know how to fix toilets?”

“Ugh, ‘cause I’ve been doing it my whole life?” she said with a huff as she coiled up the cable on her stained utility harness.

“Maintenance mares generally gave me all the muck jobs, and that includes toilets.” She looked at me oddly and asked, “Weren’t you practicing shooting and fighting when you were little?”

“Well…” I hadn’t really thought about it. Wrestling, practicing with batons, training with BB guns, firearms training…and of course lots of bullshit indoctrination lessons about how we had to serve the Overmare without failure or question. “I guess I was.” I watched as she pulled out a rag and wiped her face. “And how are you doing?”

She gave me a wary look I knew well. Then she sighed as she looked away from me and shrugged. “In 99, I was forced to fix pipes and unclog toilets. Out here, I’m fixing pipes and unclogging toilets, and getting shot at by killer robots…using guns…under that big freaky open sky thing.” She shivered and then shook her head. “I dunno how I’m doing. Just…bit by bit, I guess.”

“You don’t have to come with us if you don’t want to. I’m sure, after fixing this, Bottlecap can help you find a job.” Megamart had to be safer than following me around. I was just one long string of disasters.

She looked worried as she looked back to her tools, making sure they ended up in the right pockets. “Thanks, but…you and P-21… you’re the most normal ponies I know now.” And didn’t that make me cringe a little inside. “I’ll just stick along.”

“All right…but make sure you wash?” I wrinkled my nose.

She snorted in scorn. “You spend a few weeks on the surface and get so soft you can’t even handle the smell of honest work. Sad, Blackjack. Really sad,” she said as she passed by me.

“I…you smell of poo water! That’s not soft!” I yelled after her. “I’ve had boats dropped on me. You can’t survive that if you’re soft! Hey!” The door closed behind her and I pouted a little. “I’m not soft…”

* * *

An hour later, we were more or less ready to leave. The Reapers had a large covered wagon rigged up and a harness for four. A shield of corrugated metal sheets extended around the front of the wagon to provide some cover. Three ‘normal’ Reapers were on the roof watching for trouble, leaving the rest of us to crawl inside.

Glory took one look at the confines of the trailer and swallowed. “I’ll scout from above.”

"Aww, don't want to be inside the tight, narrow, crushing wagon?" Psychoshy snickered, then said with false concern, "Oh, does it feel like it's getting smaller…and smaller…and smaller?" Her grin widened with each 'smaller'.

Glory looked back at her flatly as she hovered. "How is it nopony's killed you yet? Really?"

Psychoshy grinned as she flew closer. "Think you'll be the one to pull it off, Dashite?"

"I'm not a Dashite," Glory replied, her purple eyes narrowing. Psychoshy snorted as she turned towards the wagon. "And neither are you…" Glory suddenly yipped as the tip of Psychoshy's tail snapped the end of her muzzle.

"Hey, Psy," Rampage said with a small smile. "Your turn?" The simple question made the pegasus hiss through her clenched teeth before she glared at Glory.

"Don't pretend like you can ever know me, turkey." Psychoshy's angry gaze promised a murder, and Glory swallowed hard as she backed away a little. Smirking, the yellow pegasus swooped into the trailer.

"She's such a ray of sunshine, isn't she? Put me through a wood chipper when I first joined the Reapers," Rampage said as she trotted to the back of the cargo wagon.

"She put you through a wood chipper?" Scotch Tape gawked at Rampage skeptically, then glanced at me for confirmation. I smiled and shrugged.

"Mhmmm. Industrial strength." She rubbed her chin and then glanced at Scotch Tape. "Oh, it wasn't so bad. Just a burst of pain and then coming back together. I think reforming on the far side was the most infuriating day of poor Psychoshy's life."

"Why?" Scotch asked in confusion.

"'Cause she said she'd go through it too, so long as I went first," Rampage said with a decidedly unhealthy grin, "And I can't wait to see how well *she* handles it."

Okay. This opened up whole new vistas of the fucked-upness that was Reaper life, and I really didn't want to see more of them. I glanced at P-21 but saw him not paying attention to us. Certainly not to me. I needed to talk him out of this. Find some way to make amends. I needed to…oh, look. There were mattresses inside the trailer. I'd…just…lie down…and talk to…P-21…

~ ~ ~

I walked through the yellow-green haze, lungs burning, eyes watering, as the shouts and screams echoed through the metal halls. Every breath burned inside my lungs, but, though froth dripped down my chin, I didn't fall. My eyes watered, fighting to open. To see where I was going. I had to stop this. The screams and cries echoed and built as I pushed my way along the halls. It was more by feel than anything that I found my way through security.

The Overmare stood at the window, gazing out at the thickening poison with a smug grin on her face. My horn flashed once. Twice. Three times. The world crawled as if it were in S.A.T.S. as her skull exploded. Black and red mane flew in all directions, two glowing eyes turning into luminescent pulp. I struggled to her desk, my hooves working the controls. Slowly, magically, the gas began to clear.

The Overmare's office was actually the atrium, and I was surrounded by dozens and dozens of friends, coworkers, and mere acquaintances. They looked at me, stomping their applause as they smiled. As they grinned. As they giggled. As they closed in. I'd saved them! I'd saved them! They fell on me, teeth biting. Rending. Tearing.

I stared up at the round window, looking at the Overmare with her black and red mane, her glowing eyes. I saw the cold contempt on her hard face as her horn glowed. The gas began to slowly hiss into the room.

I watched as the yellow gas filled the atrium below. The foals and mares milled about, screaming in pain, fear, and confusion. 'Murderer' echoed through the stable; never diminishing, never ending. The gas grew thicker and thicker. The door opened and admitted the security pony. Her horn flashed. Once. Twice. Thrice. My skull exploded.

I walked through the yellow haze…

~ ~ ~

"You're a masochist. Do you enjoy this?" the Dealer asked softly as we sat together at one of the atrium tables, the air clear and the stable empty. Quiet. Still. Nothing lived here, because I'd killed them all.

"You tell me. You're my crazy," I said quietly as I rested my chin on my crossed hooves. The Dealer looked younger and healthier, the pale buck looking at me with mature eyes. Where had I seen them before?

"I think that you have a confused self-centeredness with a need to martyr yourself," the Dealer said calmly as he dealt me five cards. Celestia. Luna. Twilight Sparkle. Goldenblood. Myself. "You think that, if you can just die in some appropriately gruesome fashion, particularly if there's lots of pain and suffering beforehand, that somehow you'll save the Wasteland." He said 'save' with a vague smile and a wave of his hoof.

"Makes sense," I replied, discarding Goldenblood. "Security is supposed to save ponies," I said firmly, and he smiled as he dealt me a Fluttershy. "I think I got a straight. Or is this a flush?"

"Yes," he replied, and I laughed. "But does it beat mine?" He showed his hand: P-21, Glory, Rampage, Lacunae, and Scotch Tape. Then he reached over, took the card of me grinning like an idiot, and added it to his five. "I think this is a winning set."

I frowned at them. "I don't deserve them."

"I. I…I…I…" He gave a great sigh. "You must be the most self-centered pony in all the Wasteland, you know that? Not everything is about you, Blackjack." He lifted the card between his hooves, the picture changing before me. Blackjack grinning like a fool. Blackjack crying. Blackjack looking broken and hollow. Blackjack looking shooty. "Why do you always assume that you're the beginning and end of everything that matters?"

"I don't know. I've always been that way," I said softly, looking at the spinning card. Blackjack the foal, crying for attention. Blackjack the filly, getting her friend Daisy beaten by doing what she thought was right. Blackjack the security mare, breaking the rules to cross the Overmare. Blackjack, invisible and sneaking off rather than admitting to her friends that she wanted to die.

"Do you really think everything is okay, Blackjack?" the Dealer asked.

I slammed my hooves on the table. "I know it's not okay. I should be fixing things right now. I need to apologize to P-21. I have to find out if Rampage is really okay after I ate her heart. Or Lacunae. I need to know how Scotch Tape really feels about what I did!"

"I. I, I, I again," the Dealer rasped softly as he shook his head. He didn't take his eyes off me. "Didn't I just tell you? It's not about

you. Not your needs. Not your wants."

He lifted Glory's card. "What about her? What does she need? What does she want?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Before 99 I could have answered that. Now…"I don't know…"

"Oh…and here I thought you loved her."

"Shut your mouth!" I shouted, rising to my hooves as I pointed at him. "I…" and the rest of my objection died in my throat. Was he right? Was I really that self-centered?

He just looked at me for a moment, then lifted P-21. "And what about him, hmmm? What is he feeling? What does he want?"

"He's pretty angry at me. He probably wants to shoot my ass," I muttered.

"I…me…my…It's not all about you, Blackjack," he said softly as he collected the cards. "Is that your virtue? Selfishness?"

"I don't know," I said as I looked down at my clasped hooves. "I don't know anything anymore." Everything had been broken in 99. I'd broken. I used to think my life had been divided into before leaving the stable and after leaving it. Now I knew better. It was divided into before killing 99 and after killing 99.

"My suggestion? You'd better find out," he said quietly as the gas started to hiss. "Otherwise, you'll really wish you'd stayed in here." He turned, walking through the swirling poison vapors as the screams began once more.

"Wait!" I shouted after him as the thick rolls of burning yellow gas rolled between us. I struggled after him, tripping over pony corpses as the wailing increased. I tripped upon a still body and fell to my face. Then another mare fell upon me. And another. And another. And another…

~ ~ ~

A particularly jarring bump brought me to consciousness and my eyes opened to look into P-21's face. His gaze lingered in the past, lined in hurt and betrayal. He lay on the mattress next to me. I stretched out a hoof towards him. His distant eyes focused on mine, and for one foolish moment I was certain he'd accept it. Then his eyes hardened, and with a grunt he turned away from me. I held my hoof out, hoping that somehow he'd look back at me. He didn't.

You're the most self-centered pony in the Wasteland, Blackjack. I did

what I wanted. I got what I needed.
All it cost me was a friendship.

* * *

A few hours later, I woke again, this time to the sound of yelling. Not screams, but cheering. It was like being back in Brimstone's Fall, walking to that train cart. Thankfully, my dreams were fading away. They'd kept drifting among Boneyard, the hospital, and 99. Screw suicide, I just wanted a bullet for my subconscious.
"What's going on?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, a little groggy but no longer exhausted. The wagon was empty and I staggered out, not sure if I should be fumbling for my guns or not…shit, where were my guns? I had my combat armor, but no weapons. A strange yellow light was filling the air and I blinked at the sudden brilliance. Despite myself, I gazed up at clear blue skies. The sight of it made me land firmly on my rump.
Only then did I note the holes in the sky.
What I'd taken for sky was in fact the inside of a large arcing dome that had been enchanted to look like a sky. The large oval space could have easily fit a thousand times the number of ponies that were now inhabiting just one end of it. The field of grass in the middle was carefully fenced off, and I realized that here was another powerful lure for ponies: the promise of steady meals, even if they were only grass. The cushions that once held the rumps of thousands of ponies had been torn up, and platforms and structures had been built along the terraces. Tents and shacks of all sorts were oddly spaced apart from each other. All of them flew flags with strange markings: crossed guns, an axe in a brahmin skull, some kind of paw print.
The wagon had been parked with some others at one end of the arena. On the far side was a huge scoreboard covered in flickering neon lights that boldly declared 'Hoofington Sports Arena' and, beneath that, 'Home of the Hoofington Reapers'. A cartoon mascot of a skeletal pony wielding a scythe made me imagine shuffling cards.
A large stage had been built up in the opposite end zone, and atop it was a massive caged dome netted in barbed wire. Beside it were smaller rings fenced in and surrounded by seats. Curiously, I saw that the track that ran the perimeter of the field was still clear of

debris. While hoofball might not be played here, they still had a variety of competitions. As I walked towards the end with the scoreboard, I passed by clumps of bandits and gangers hoof wrestling, sparring, drinking, and practicing. I had to admit, the amount of muscle I saw made my horn twitch nervously. These ponies were buff and denoted their allegiance with scarves, tattoos, brands, and other markings.

"Boy, can you sleep," Mallet said, the caramel-coated unicorn floating her hammer overhead. How she managed that weight for that long baffled me, but the buff unicorn handled the weapon with familiar ease. "Rampage went to go tell Big Daddy that you'd arrived. Your friends are being given a box seat for your stay."

"As long as nopony tries something like taking them hostage," I warned, looking at the knots of ponies in their little camps. "Where are my guns?"

"Safe with Rampage. No one carries firearms in here. It tends to prevent things from becoming messy," she said with a grin as she twirled her supersledge. "Melee weapons are exempt, of course."

Great. And my favorite melee weapon was lying in so many pieces of burnt bone on a mountainside somewhere. I looked sourly at the various ponies warily watching us. "Are all these ponies Reapers?"

"Mostly just the ones in ponyhide," she said with a wicked grin, gesturing to her barding.

Ah, yes; that. Now that I could actually focus on it, I couldn't help but feel more than a little creeped out. "Yeah…about that; you all really wear ponyhide?"

"Oh, most of us who aren't the top ten. They're tough enough to wear whatever they like." She grinned at me almost teasingly. "And there are some cryponies who just wear normal barding."

"When did this become a good idea?" I asked, looking at her clothes in disgust. "It seems kinda... morbid."

She rolled her eyes. Clearly, I was falling rapidly into 'crypony' territory. "It's simple. If you challenge us or try to join and fail miserably, then everypony who sees us wearing you will know the price of weakness," she said with a smile and a shrug. "Every pony you see in my barding was somepony I had to kill to become a Reaper."

"Okay. I guess that makes sense... in a grisly kind of way," I admitted, still feeling a little squeamish. "So, who are all the rest of these ponies?"

"Most of these are thugs, gangers, and tribals," she said as we trotted towards the scoreboard and the pens. "There're really only sixty or so Reapers, which still makes us one of the biggest and toughest gangs around. Those are the Flash Fillies out of Progress," she said, gesturing to two mares with white collars and power shoes. "Over there," she said, looking at the bonfire burning in the next little encampment, "are the Burner Boys. Nasty rivalry with the Fillies on account Burners are all assholes. There's the Flotsam Four…the Pecos, or what's left of them now that Dusty's taken over... " She gestured to a half dozen or so forlorn looking ponies. They glanced at me and immediately ran into their shack.

"Looks like they remember me," I said as I looked at Mallet ruefully.

"Sounds like you got a good reputation, then," she said with a smirk. "Most of these are aspirants…what we call wannabes. Supposedly, the toughest of the tough of their respective tribes and gangs." She snorted in disdain. "Only a few will ever be tough enough to join the Reapers. The rest are just paying tribute to Big Daddy and hangers-on."

"Why's that?"

"Because nopony wants to get on Big Daddy's bad side. Even the Society sends ponies with stuff they think he wants, and the Society hates the Reapers. Not much love lost the other way, either," Mallet said as we headed up the stairs towards a sign that read 'Box Seating A-H'. 'Top Ten Only' was painted beneath it.

"Top ten?" I asked as we passed the sign.

"The top ten greatest Reapers in all of Hoofington. Best of the best. Deus was one. So was Gorgon. You killed both, so there's a lot of contestants eager to fill the gaps in the roster. Oh…and that means fighting you."

"To the death?" I guessed, pressing my lips together. She arched her brow, then gave a shrug.

"Not as often as most ponies think," she replied. I must have looked surprised, as the mare gave a chuckle and explained, "Fights to the death mean we lose a good fighter either way. Normally it's just fights to the surrender…though Luna help you if you give up too quick. And accidents happen." She grinned at me. "I'm pushing for Gorgon's spot. Not sure who I'll have to challenge for it, though."

"What about me?" I asked, hesitating to look at two mares sparring

against each other with lengths of pipe. Their stance was definitely too narrow, and they were going to break a tooth if they weren't careful.

"That depends on you and Big Daddy. Kill a Reaper and he might let you walk. Kill a top ten? Never happen. Kill two? Never happen twice," she said with a chuckle.

Upstairs, we entered a wide hall that was marginally less choked with debris than the stands below. There were a number of faded posters in broken frames showing the various teams that'd played at the Arena: the Cloudsdale Skykickers, the Canterlot Cavaliers, the Fillydelphia Fillies, and the Appleloosa Pioneers were just a few of the teams that were intact. The best preserved seemed to be to the Manehattan Maulers, which had been converted into a shrine of hatred. Epithets were written on the wall, floor, and even ceiling for ten feet, but the poster itself was untouched. Directly opposite it was a shrine to the Hoofington Reapers, with chipped plastic trophies filled with bottlecaps, magazines, and pictures of the team. Was it my imagination, or did they look particularly unpleasant?

"I don't get it. Most of the other posters are torn up a little. Why not them?" I nodded to the Maulers.

She looked at me like it was obvious, and then adopted the 'stable-ponies-don't-know-nothin' expression. "They were the Reapers' greatest rivals two hundred years ago."

Now I was more confused than ever. Wouldn't that make the poster more likely to get scribbled on? She looked at the poster of the eighteen ponies in green and white. "You don't dishonor your greatest rival. You respect them, and look forward to the day when you can kick their ass." She smirked at me. "You have no idea how hard Big Daddy's tried to find some Manehattan ponies willing to form a hoofball team. I think he could die happy if he could play them himself."

We reached a door marked 'Manager', and she knocked once before stepping aside. I glanced at the caramel mare and then at the door. I took a deep breath, feeling like I was about to step into the security office for a major chewing out. My horn glowed and opened the door.

Inside, there was a threadbare couch in front of a projector pointed at a blank stretch of wall. There was a bar in one corner with a gnarled old buck mixing drinks behind it. Newspaper sports pages showing the old team were plastered to the wall. I noticed that the

Manehattan Maulers seemed to have a lot more wins than the home team. Oddly, one spot on the wall was completely devoid of papers.

Standing in front of the window was the largest buck I'd ever laid eyes on, and I'd seen some pretty big ponies. He had to be a hoof higher than Big Macintosh and even more muscled than Deus. His jet black hide was oiled, gleaming in the synthetic sunlight coming through the window, and his fiery red mane was styled in a fierce narrow fan of hair running down his neck. He wore lengths of spiked chain around his neck and forelimbs as he stared out at his domain.

"Okay. Just nip this in the bud and move on." I gave a glance at the old buck mixing some sort of drink, but, unless he had a gun behind the counter, I didn't think he'd be a problem. I really hoped he didn't run for help. The old buck arched a white brow as he looked at me, his dark sunglasses hiding his eyes. I took a deep breath, put on my shootiest look, and marched right up to the huge buck. "Hey! Big Daddy!"

He turned, looking at me with a scowl as if questioning who was this mare who dared speak to him in such a tone. "What?"

I pressed forward and thumped my hoof against his chest. Hopefully I could just bowl him over and convince him that I wanted no part in his war. "Look, you. I'm not a Reaper and I've got better things to do than beat the crap out of ponies." His scowl darkened into a glare. I thumped his chest a second time. "I don't care if I killed Deus and Gorgon. I had to do it, and I needed help anyway. So give the position to somepony who wants to fight in your stupid war. It's none of Security's business." And some last words in time with more beats against his chest... "So leave me out of it!"

He stared right back into my eyes, his gaze narrowing. I wondered if he could break me with his stare alone. "What are you talking about?"

"I…you…um…" I took a half step back and thumped his chest again halfheartedly before giving a sheepish grin. "Ah…hi! You're not Big Daddy, are you?" I felt myself bending under that glare as I smiled and stroked a hoof over his oiled chest. "Heh…heh… shiny…"

The old buck behind the bar cackled as he trotted out with three drinks on a tray balanced on his head. "Oh, don't you worry none, Brutus. Big Daddy's got some business with this filly," he said in a

gruff yet definitely snarky tone as he grinned at me. “I’m Big Daddy, little missy. Pleasure to meet you. Rutabaga smoothie?” Big Daddy offered as he set the tray down on an end table besides the couch.

Brutus leaned over, wrapped his lips around the edge of one glass, and downed the contents in a single gulp before setting it down. “So you’ll talk to her?”

“Oh, I’ll talk to her, Brutus. Don’t you worry about that. And if she don’t get the message, then I’ll talk to her so she does,” the old grayish-white pony said as he pinched a glass between his hooves and slurped up the goopy contents through a large plastic straw.

The huge black buck simply nodded once, his scowl softening before he glared at me and snorted. Then he marched for the exit. When he’d left, the old buck chuckled, “Hope you forgive Brutus his manners. He’s having issues with a mare who don’t understand that no means ‘stop-crawling-in-my-bed.’ I swear, sometimes I feel more like a schoolmarm than the head of a gang.”

I stared at him. “You’re Big Daddy?” He wasn’t particularly big… fit, certainly. He was covered by stringy, wiry muscles that stood out in stark relief against his scarred hide. A raggedy white beard dangled under his chin. He bobbed his head once. I pointed a hoof at him. “You’re…Big Daddy... ”

“At your service,” he said with an amused grin.

“But you’re…old…” I finished lamely.

He blinked and suddenly swayed. “Oh my goodness…you’re right…oh…there goes my knees. Oh…my back…it ain’t what it used to be... ” he moaned as he suddenly tottered and began to stagger towards me. “Help me…get me my walker…oh, I’m goin’ the way of old Mr. Abernathy…” he whined as he stretched two staggering hooves towards me. Despite myself I reached out to help steady the swaying buck.

My offered hoof was seized in a grip of steel and suddenly I knew exactly why that one spot on the far wall was free of papers. With a resounding thud I slammed into the wall and landed in a heap on my stomach. Little Glories flew around my head as the buck leapt atop me and in one swift grab seized me with his rear hooves, grabbed my left foreleg, and twisted it behind my back. I had no idea how he managed to hold on; the one thing I was definitely sure of was that that leg wasn’t designed to bend that way!

“Who’s your daddy?” he cried out. I couldn’t even see him for a

magic bullet spell!

There was nothing I could do but howl out, “I don’t know! I think we retired him when I was nine or ten!”

“Wrong answer!” he shouted, twisting my leg even more. “I’m your daddy! Say it!”

It felt like my leg was about to come off. “You’re my daddy!” I wailed.

“And your daddy is a young, healthy, handsome son of a mare, ain’t he?” he demanded.

“Yes, he is!” I cried out. “And strong! Tough too!”

And with that he let go of my leg. “Wow. You figured that out pretty quick.” He got off me and trotted back to his drink.

“How’d you do that?” I asked as I rose to my hooves, my shoulder throbbing terribly. It felt like he’d almost popped the joint out of its socket.

He took a long, slow drink of his pulped vegetables, then grinned again. “Pony I once knew said that a good hooftoss was all simply applied leverage. Me, I love applying…leverage.” He nodded to my drink, and, not wanting to be thrown a second time, I levitated it to my mouth and took a sip of the glue-like beverage. To my surprise and relief, I found it quite palatable. A bit like wallpaper paste, really. He nodded in approval, pointing a hoof at me. “That particular recipe I got from a zebra witchdoctor outside Trottingham. Three days’ worth of fiber in one glass. Keeps the pipes rust free and flowing easy.”

“Mmm! I hope you’ll share,” I replied as I finished the glass. There was this pulpy tangy goop at the bottom that was pretty bitter but still not bad.

“So. If I recall your little outburst with poor Brutus correctly, you’d like to opt out of the Reapers. Might I ask why?” he said as he trotted over to the couch and took a seat. Then he grinned at me and patted the seat next to him.

With a bit of trepidation, I sat on the other end of the couch. “Well…it’s not really my thing. I don’t want to be a Reaper. I want to help ponies, not beat the everloving snot out of them.” Okay, I could make an exception for Psychoshy, but really, who couldn’t?

“Then help ponies and don’t beat the everlovin’ snot out of ‘em,” he replied. “Ain’t no hairs off my tail what you do with yourself.”

Um, once more Blackjack had landed in not-a-clue land. “Aren’t Reapers always about beating snot and other assorted violence?”

"Heh." He grinned. "Ohh yeah. There's always a good fight or two with the Reapers. But that ain't the point. No siree. If you think that's what the Reapers are for, you need the bigger picture." He reached into the end table and pulled out a cigar, bit off the tip, then deftly ignited the end with a brass lighter. With the smoking stick hanging out the side of his mouth, he blew a smoke ring in the air above him. "Twenty…thirty or so years back, I and some ponies I knew tried to clean up Hoofington. Oh, it was a mess. Dozens of little tribes butchering the fuck out of each other. There was one lot that actually thought Hoofington was Princess Celestia's resting place and sacrificed ponies by throwing them into range of the defense beams.

"But the six of us, we made a go of it. One by one, we beat the snot out of all of them. Tried to teach them some common decency. Some equinity. And every tribe had some warlord or champion that always thought they was the baddest badass in all the Wasteland. Till I showed 'em different." He gave a throaty chuckle, then looked at me and turned so I could see the horseshoe cutie mark he wore. "You might say fighting's always been my super special talent."

I nodded like it all made perfect sense…"Still not getting it."

"Well, after…Goddesses, was it really five years?" He rubbed his chin, then sighed. "Yup…after five years, guess how much things had improved? I'll give you a hint." He took a long pull on the cigar and blew another ring, staring up at the circle before continuing, "Zip. Zilch. Nada. Not a bit. See, we kill the badass tribal champion? Three months later, they'd be replaced by a new champion that was usually bloodier and nastier than the first. Hell, we could wipe out an entire tribe, and they'd be replaced inside a year. We went through tons of ammunition, piles of healing potions, crates of grenades, pallets of missiles, gallons of flamer fuel…and in the end, the Hoof was even worse for all our attempts to do better.

"See, we simply thought that if we killed the bad, whatever was left over had to be good. Well, turns out that what was left over turned bad pretty quick. Or they'd be killed by something bad that we missed. Finally, after five years, we were sick of it. Sick of each other. We'd stopped trying to do anything worthwhile, fixated on our own plans on how to fix the Hoof."

He pointed at the pictures on the wall with the cigar perfectly balanced on the end of his hoof. "Me, I took one look at the

Hoofington Reapers…at the team…and realized that the only real way to calm the Wasteland down and make the tribes behave and play nice was to have a gang so over-the-top badass that all the other gangs would knock the shit off or risk pissing us off. When being a Reaper became prestigious…then the other gangs calmed down even more. We siphoned off their biggest and baddest champions for ourselves; sure, there was lots of fighting involved, but it was more structured. Less 'rape, pillage, and burn' and more 'let's prove we're better than them at the arena.' If a tribe produced a psychopath, we'd kill 'em one way or another. And if they had a pony that had half a brain and could play along, they did all right."

I had to admit, I was a bit taken aback by that. Still, I found the whole thing a little bit off. "So if I say yes, what do I get?"

He flipped the cigar into the air and caught it between his grinning teeth, rolling it to the corner of his mouth. "Plenty. For starters, there won't be a gang or thug in the Hoof that'd dare cross you. You could trot one end to the other, and nopony will give you grief. You'll also find all sorts of ponies are generous to a Reaper. You'll have room and board here, maybe not as cushy as at Elysium, but comfortable. And you'll have backup from the biggest and toughest fighters in all the Hoof."

"And the catch?" I asked. He considered me for a moment and rolled the cigar to the other corner of his mouth. He stroked his chin as he regarded me through those glasses.

"The catch is you back up your fellow Reapers. That means stomping anypony that crosses us or threatens us. That includes the Steel Rangers, Society, or anypony that does us wrong. It also means proving yourself in the ring every few months. Show that you're tough enough to take on a challenge or four. I heard how you handled Mallet when she was sent to retrieve you. She's good, and you took her and her friends. As far as I'm concerned, that shows you got the guts to shine in the Reapers."

I thought about it. I really didn't owe the Steel Rangers anything. In fact, I didn't know much about them or their plots, period. But I also didn't need to screw them arbitrarily. "And if I say no?"

He let out a long low sigh. "Well, then you go your way, and I hope you come to your senses and change your mind. But the fact is, Security, you've become a bit too high profile around here. It was cute when you were doing Finder errands and the like, but after dealing with those psychopaths in that stable? Somepony is going to

want you to sign up with them. And if it's not the Reapers, then I won't need a hundred thousand caps to get every ganger, thug, and killer on your tail. Hell, I'd consider it good season training. But I'd hate to think of the waste of time and life it'd be when we got a scrap brewing with the Steel Rangers."

I frowned at him. "Why are you two fighting?"

"Oh there doesn't have to be much reason, but, you see, we had a ceasefire going since raiders were hitting us, Megamart, and Toll. An agreement in good faith." He snorted two smoke rings from his nostrils. "Then, a few days back, they launched a surprise attack on the Zenith Bridge. Fired a grenade right at our barricade. We responded, and then they had the balls to claim we broke the agreement."

Oh…dear…"This was four days ago?" He nodded once.

About the time we were passing under the Zenith Bridge on the *Seahorse*. Shit…

"I see. Well, then, I'll have to think about your offer," I said as I rose to my hooves again. "One thing though…Sanguine."

He snorted. "What about him?"

"He works for you?"

"Sanguine works for nopony but himself. He keeps my fighters healthy and makes some of them even tougher," Big Daddy said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. "Got some old world magic from before the bombs."

"And he creates monsters," I added.

Big Daddy grinned from ear to ear around the cigar. He set it in an ashtray and pushed down his glasses so I could see his glowing amber eyes. "Oh, we're all monsters here in the Reapers, Security. Best to stay with your own."

* * *

We'd gathered in Rampage's quarters, which were a little more cluttered than I expected. A dozen Mint-al tins lay stacked neatly on the desk along with a few candy canes. A bookcase held police procedurals and training manuals. Another corner had three strange wooden masks and a weird curved stone statue that looked like molded rock. She also had a lot of knives displayed on a wall, from rusty metal carvers to heavy mechanical rippers and even elegant single-edged swords. Rampage herself had shrugged out of her

armor and lay on the extravagant king-sized bed. Glory was trying to fix a snack in the little corner kitchenette, but I supposed that I'd be the only one with an appetite for it.

"It's not much, but it's home," she said with a thin smile as I looked around. "You could have Gorgon's room, but you'd have to deal with having Psychoshy as a neighbor."

"I'm not sure I'll be taking him up on that offer," I replied.

Rampage sat up, brushing back her red mane. "Are you sure about that? I mean, really sure? 'Cause I'd reconsider if I were you."

"I heard Big Daddy say his piece," I replied as I walked to the window and looked down at the practice rings.

"Let me ask you something, Blackjack," she said as she rolled off the bed and trotted in front of me. "We went a long way from Flank to 99. Did you notice us getting attacked by the Blinkerton Boys, the Choppers, or the Halfheart Gang?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked in confusion.

"Right. You never even heard of them. That's because I was with you, Blackjack. They didn't mess with you because they didn't want to mess with me. The Halfheart gang had us in their scopes all over Riverside and could have dropped all of us without a problem. They saw me. They left us alone," she said as she tapped my chest lightly. "If Big Daddy sends word that you're free game, it's going to be a whole lot tougher getting around. Even me being with you won't be protection anymore."

I hadn't realized it, but it'd been true. We'd trotted across half of Hoofington, and, with the exception of raiders, we'd never crossed another soul. That was a lot of wide open territory for gangs to stake out. "Why not? If you're a Reaper…"

"Big Daddy's call for a stomp down trumps me being a Reaper. Hell, they'll try their best to kill me too." She closed her eyes for a moment. "And I'll be expected to join them."

I felt a cool tingle run through me. "And would you?" Rampage looked at me, then sighed and shrugged.

"Don't know. Ask me when they do. I like you, Blackjack…you got me out of that nightmare in 99. I really…really…thought I was screwed." She gave a little shudder. "But I don't know if I'm willing or able to throw this away. Being a Reaper is all I have. They're the closest thing to a family I know."

"They're not the only thing you have," Lacunae said softly in our minds. P-21 gave a snort of sorts, then a sigh, glancing at me and

then staring out the window at the simulated sky outside. I really needed a chance to talk with him about my mistakes.

"Maybe there's something we can do to put us in good standing with Big Daddy but not become a full Reaper?" Glory said as she dumped various foods and drinks into a blender. I'd told her about his smoothie, and she'd been keen to see what she could make blend.

Rampage considered that. "Maybe. He only calls for stomps on ponies that cross the Reapers."

"What if we stop this fight with the Steel Rangers?" I asked.

The striped pony looked intrigued. "Why do you want to? If Reapers are fighting Rangers, then Big Daddy probably won't be able to call a stomp."

"Because it's our fault." I explained how Glory's grenade had kicked off the conflict. The gray pegasus looked horrified at the news.

"I did this?" she asked as she fluttered in place, gesturing to herself in shock.

Rampage snorted. "Believe me, this fight's been brewing for years. It was going to happen, and now it'll keep going until somepony wins. If we back the Reapers, then Big Daddy will owe us big time." I noted her use of 'we' and 'us'. That made me smile.

"And if we help the Rangers?" P-21 asked.

"I don't know," Rampage said, though she didn't look all that enthusiastic at the idea. "Probably, they'd give us some of their guns and bullets. I can't think of more than that."

Lacunae rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Which power would be best to back in Hoofington?"

"Well, there's the Reapers and the Steel Rangers. You've got the Society down south. Finders are all over the place. And the Eggheads in the college," Rampage said.

"The Society ponies are all aristocrats?" Lacunae queried.

"Yeah. They're based out of the Elysium resort, a special spa that was made to cater to the Princesses, the Ministry Mares, and the rest of the really elite. They control the food and a lot of the money. Lots of politicking now that King Awesome is getting on in years," Rampage said with a sniff.

"And the Eggheads are interested in learning and technology," I said, remembering Archie at the clinic. "Can't the factions get along? Splendid was able to work with Archie."

Glory coughed. “Um…Blackjack, I’m not sure you remember, but when we left you looked like you wanted to shoot both of them on general principle. I don’t think they actually wanted to work together.” She poured some pickled eggs and Sparkle-Cola into the blender.

I didn’t like the Society ponies for using slaves, but I didn’t know enough to really decide. The Eggheads sounded good, but, when I thought how hopeless Archie had been, I wondered if they could actually do anything.

“There’s also the Enclave to consider,” Glory added.

I rounded on her. “What?! There’s no way I could assist the Enclave, Glory. Lighthooves--“

“Is one rogue operative. The Enclave is the strongest power in Equestria. Perhaps some elements are... misguided, but the rest are still good and might be capable of helping us. If we assisted the Volunteer Corps, perhaps we might be able to persuade them to investigate Lighthooves closely and make him pay for his disease.” Glory looked at the blender, apparently satisfied, and hit the ‘on’ switch.

“Do we have to pick a side?” Scotch Tape asked. “I mean, can’t we just tell them all ‘sorry, not interested’?” The young olive mare had a point.

“I don’t think so,” Rampage said, shaking her head. “Big Daddy wasn’t wrong. When we stopped all the raiders in 99, I think all the powers realized that Security’s a big deal. We might stall them for a while, but eventually they’ll start assuming we’re not with them.”

I looked at all my friends and then at P-21. He sat quietly beside the window, looking pained. I supposed his knee was hurting him more than usual. “What do you think?”

He looked at me, eyes narrowing, and said in a low voice, “Do whatever you want, Blackjack. You always do.” I felt like he’d slapped me as he rose and limped to the door.

“What was that about?” Scotch Tape asked in confusion. “Are all males so cranky?”

I didn’t know how to explain to her how I’d betrayed our friendship. Glory poured the blender’s contents into some glasses and came to my rescue. “Who wants to try some?” she asked brightly, the glasses balanced on her outstretched wings.

I wished I could have tried it. I could have done with a nice frothy smoothie. I trotted to the door. “I need to find P-21.”

"Oh…well, Rampage? Lacunae?" she said, looking to each. Both quickly broke eye contact. She then gave a smile at the curious, if slightly skeptical, Scotch Tape.

"Oh, come on. It can't be that bad. I've had poo water in my mouth," Scotch said with a snort at the other two as I stepped out. There was a loud gulp and then, a second later, a thud.

"Great. You killed her," Rampage said crossly. I glanced back at the green mare curled up in a fetal position, eyes staring straight ahead.

"Momma…is that you?" she whispered in a daze.

"I didn't think it was that bad!" Glory said in a rush, shaking the shivering earth pony.

I closed the door, catching Lacunae's thought asking, "Glory, do you ever actually *taste* your own cooking?"

* * *

I looked all over for P-21, but if he didn't want to be found then I wasn't going to find him without a PipBuck tag. Still, that didn't stop me from looking. From the skyboxes down to the rings, I searched high and low for him. Everypony I passed gave me a look like they were sizing me up for a fight, coupled with expressions that varied from fearful to respectful. I couldn't care less. I had to fix my relationship with P-21 as soon as I…

Sanguine.

The seared ghoul looked quite ironic in a business suit that appeared freshly pressed and laundered. It wasn't even scuffed up or frayed. His eyes swirled with a bizarre pink light I'd only seen on a few glowing ghouls. Pink tendrils of vapor leaked out of holes in his ribs and around his lips. He hummed to himself as he trotted right past me. Then he slowed and stopped. "Well well well…" He turned his head to look back at me. "It's you."

I wanted to drop into S.A.T.S. and plant four magic rounds in his head, but I wanted answers too. "Yeah. I'm like a brass bit. I just keep popping up," I replied as I turned to face him. A number of ponies were noting our conversation; I wondered just how many would come to the ghoul's defense if I shot him. "So, what brings you here? Looking for this?" I asked as I shook my PipBuck at him.

"Actually, I was checking on some clients, what with the upcoming war and all. But if you'd give that to me, I could repay you in some augmentation to make you the terror of the Wasteland."

“Augmentation? Like what you did to Stonewing?” I asked, and I was overjoyed to see the cooked unicorn ghoul floored in shock.

“How do you know about that?”

“I know all about Project Chimera. Equestria’s little monster making program,” I said softly, my eyes narrowing. “U-21 mentioned it in Flank before he died. Let me guess, you told him that if he got EC-1101, you’d give him powers too?” Again, surprise. “I suppose it’d be an easy offer to give a buck tormented and abused all his life. Easy power.”

“Oh yes. He was quite keen to be crossed with a dragon. As if we would replicate that little monstrosity,” he said with a small shudder. “But he’s dead, you’re here, and you have a PipBuck I want very badly. So let’s deal.”

“Deal? You think I’d deal with you?” I scoffed. “You’ve made my life a living hell for nearly a month.”

“And I’ll happily leave you be once I have that file,” he answered with a grin as if it’d all been some sort of poorly-implemented joke. “To be honest, I’d have tried to buy it from you earlier, but Deus was so determined to get it himself.”

“He was in agony,” I replied, my eyes narrowing.

Sanguine just smiled and polished his hoof on his vest. “Well, the desperate are so much more tractable. That’s why we thought of the bounty. Then Usury kindly doubled it after your bold declaration. I can’t believe nopony was able to bring you down.”

“Not for a lack of trying,” I grumbled.

“Sanggie!” cried a voice from above.

“Speaking of the desperate…” Sanguine muttered, then smiled widely as Psychoshy swooped down into an embrace. To my disgust, the yellow pegasus kissed the ghoul with a positively nauseating amount of tongue. “Fluttershy, so nice to see you again. How are you, my dear?”

“Sanggie, you promised you’d make me better. I’m supposed to be better,” the yellow pegasus said with a pout.

I gaped at her. “Fluttershy? I thought your name was Psychoshy.”

The yellow pegasus gave me an indignant glare. “A horrible nickname perpetuated against the kindest and most wonderful mare in Equestria.” She released Sanguine and frowned as she looked back at him and whined, “We’re going to be in a fight, Sanggie. I need to be better for it. You promised.”

“In a bit, Butterflanks. This mare has the PipBuck I need,” he said.

Psychoshy looked at it sharply and then glared at me.

"You have it? A weak loser like you?" I couldn't help myself, I held it in her face and gave the device a little shake. She snapped, "Give it to me right now!"

I snorted, "As if…"

She narrowed her eyes. "I challenge!" Suddenly the ponies looking on began to talk to each other in excitement. Somepony instantly started to call out bets. The odds, I noticed, were not in my favor.

"Excuse me? You're going to have to explain this Reaper stuff to me," I said dully. Fortunately Mallet appeared from the milling throng, looking flatly at the yellow pegasus.

"What's the challenge?" the caramel mare asked Psychoshy.

"I want that PipBuck," she said imperiously.

Mallet turned to me. "Do you accept her challenge?"

"Wait? Challenge?" I looked at Mallet and sat, thumping my chest with both hooves. "Sta-ble po-nee. I don't know this Reaper stuff!"

"Any Reaper can challenge another pony in the arena," Mallet explained. "She wants that PipBuck. You can decline and give it to her, or you can accept her challenge and name terms of your own."

"You mean a Reaper can just…take whatever she wants?" That seemed ridiculously unfair.

"No, but she can challenge for it. A pony doesn't have to accept," Mallet said calmly.

I could have just handed it over. It didn't have EC-1101, and I needed to find P-21. Still, I had to admit I was aching to thump her ass and this might be a shortcut to getting all the answers I needed. "I accept," I replied. "And if I win, I want answers from him."

"You can't challenge for something of his. He's not fighting!" Psychoshy objected crossly.

Sanguine, though, smiled. "I accept. If you are victorious, I'll answer all your questions."

Mallet said calmly, "A property challenge is to submission. First to yield or be knocked out loses." She looked up to where Psychoshy tittered in glee, dancing in the air as she hovered. "I'll set up the match."

In the crowd I saw the Dealer watching me with a grim, stern expression. I could hear the cards purring in my ears.

* * *

Word had gotten around at the speed of Dash, and soon it seemed that everypony had clustered around the great steel wire dome. I watched as Big Daddy trotted down next to Brutus to take a special seat overlooking the action. This seemed to be the only thing that made the gangs, with their scarves and strange markings, blend together. Apparently, challenges required us to enter in only our hides. The walls of the dome were festooned with just about every melee and thrown weapon imaginable. Some, like a chainsaw, were padlocked. Also padlocked were marked medical boxes. If we fought well, the audience might throw us a key. If not, we'd be left with the most basic and flimsiest weapons.

"Blackjack, what do you think you're doing?" Glory asked as my friends got a special seat with the Hammerdown Gang next to Mallet and Cuffs.

"Getting some answers I've wanted for a long time," I said, as a pony wearing a scuffed PipBuck from Stable 89 removed Marmalade's PipBuck from my hoof with her strange tools. I wouldn't have the advantage of S.A.T.S. in the cage. It would just be me and her, and I was okay with that. I looked around but there was no sight of a little blue pony. "Where's P-21?"

"You were looking for him. Didn't you find him?" Glory asked in concern. No, I'd gotten sidetracked... but soon as this fight was done I could have both my answers and my friend. Then we could decide how we'd end this war.

The day illusion swapped to one of night; it was spoiled only by the wan light peeking through the holes in the dome. A dozen spotlights illuminated the cage and the gaunt unicorn buck standing within from all angles. A top hat perched on his lanky black mane, and long elaborate robes draped over his thin frame as a crystal tipped staff hovered beside him. He brought the tip down with a crackle of thunder, and instantly the crowd fell silent. The crystal began to glow as his lips curled.

"Listen, all!" he proclaimed as he stood on his rear legs, waving his forehooves overhead. "This is the truth of it. Fighting leads to killing, and killing gets to warring. And that was damn near the death of us all. But look as us now! Busted up, and everyone scared of the taint and radiation. But we've learned -- Hoofington learned. Now, when tough ponies get to fighting, it happens here! And it finishes here! Two ponies enter; one pony leaves."

"Um…he knows this isn't to the death, right?" I muttered with a

gulp as the crowd cheered in approval and repeated the line over and over again.

Rampage gave me a mirthless smile. “It’s always to the death Blackjack. Especially when it isn’t. Now hush. It’s bad luck to interrupt Dealgood.”

The pony swished the staff through the air. “Right now, I’ve got two ponies, two mares with a gut full of hate and avarice.” His voice dropped to a lover’s whisper, magnified by the spell as he purred, “Fillies and gentlecolts…Boys and girls…Dyin’ time’s here!”

He pointed the glowing crystal at me, and a spotlight stabbed down to illuminate me through the mesh door. “From the depths of the stable and into the hard rain she’s walked. She’s meted out bloody justice with every step that she’s taken. She’s the hard law of the land, the bloody kick of retribution. She’s…the Security Mare!”

I opened the door and stepped in only to be greeted by angry mutters and jeers. “Woohoo! Kick her ass, Blackjack!” called Scotch Tape, pumping her hoof in the air.

“Um... yeah. Yay,” Glory added sheepishly, her eyes full of worry.

“Don’t die,” Lacunae suggested from the back of my mind. Wonderfully helpful advice there!

“And over here, we have your favorite of the Hoofington Reapers. She’s the loveliest in all of Equestria. The softest, gentlest, and nicest way a pony could die! You know her! You love her! She’s… Psychoshy!” he called out grandly as he looked to the top of the dome.

She flew in from the top of the dome, swooping along the perimeter to the howls of adoration. Ponies with keys waved them at her, screaming for her to splash them with my blood. She landed next to Dealgood and screamed, “You’re going to love me!” Her roar, magnified a thousand times by Dealgood’s crystal, echoed through the stadium.

Okay…I could admit it. I was fucked.

We trotted in front of Dealgood. “Fight’s simple. Get to the weapons. Use them however you can. This is a challenge to submission. Fight as long and hard as you can till your bones break if you must. Tap three times and you’re done. Get knocked out and you’re done. Die…and you’re done,” he said with a greasy grin at me. “Other than that, don’t worry about the rules. There are none.”

“I’m going to break you for being so mean to Sanguine,” Psychoshy hissed softly at me.

"Won't be the first time," I countered as we trotted to opposite sides of the dome. A rope was looped around our necks. If I tried to grab a weapon with my magic or she lunged for one, we'd be choked. I looked longingly at a shotgun chained just a few feet from me with a bright red padlock on it. Looking around, the ponies waving the red keys sure didn't look all that interested in tossing them to me. I saw an old, ratty, sharpened shovel to my left.

Then I felt hooves on my tail. "Hey…" I started, but then looked back at P-21. His blue eyes were…strange. Bloodshot. Tired. Haunted. He held my tail for only a few seconds, and then released it. Looking at me, he swished his own tail. What was he trying to tell me?

"Good luck, Blackjack," he said softly. "I hope you get the answers you're looking for." With that, he turned and started back into the crowd.

I turned my back to the fight. Suddenly, the meaninglessness of this fight hit me right between the eyes. I'd forfeit, let him have the PipBuck. I needed--

Then the crowd roared as four hooves smashed me against the door with such force I wondered if she'd snapped my back. I shoved back purely on reflex. "Glory! Help P-21!" I tried to yell out over the crowd as I turned to face Psychoshy. I just had to stomp my hoof three times and they'd have the stupid PipBuck. Once. Twice…but before I could smack my hoof a third time the yellow and gold pegasus whirled through the air and smashed my face with her rear legs.

"Oh, no giving up now," she taunted.

"I need to help my friend! Take the stupid thing," I said as I stomped my hoof again twice, but once again she slammed into me.

"The only way you're leaving here is if you beat me," she said as she grinned down at me from above.

My horn flared and seized the rope dangling about her neck in one fury-empowered yank to bring her down, face to face. "It. Is. ON!" If I had to break her head to see to my friend, then that's what I'd do! Psychoshy brought her hoof up and kicked me upside the head again. My focus faltered just a little bit, and she was able to shove the rope off from around her neck. I wasted no time, grabbing the sharpened shovel and stabbing the jagged edge at her face.

No matter how bitchy and obnoxious she was, she was also fast. Faster than me and my shovel. My stabs and swings had her

dodging about, but she excelled at dodging. Worse, more than once she'd swooped in and clipped me with a hoof.

"White Key! White Key for Psychoshy! We looove you!" screamed the Flash Fillies, tossing a key into the air. The yellow pegasus swooped away to catch it before it fell and kissed the mare who'd thrown the key. I wonder if the mare knew where that mouth had been. I looked around for another weapon.

Something faster. Rusty knives. A rake. A carpenter's hammer. What I really wanted was the shotgun.

Dealgood trotted atop the cage, announcing in his amplified voice, "Oh, surprise surprise. The Fillies have flung their key into the ring. Well, they've always had a warm and electric spot for the beautiful, lovely, kindly mare." I snorted. In a radhog's eye.

I stomped my hoof three times, but nopony was paying attention. I nearly screamed in frustration. They wouldn't let me quit till they had a good fight! Then I noticed a tan key being held out towards me. Dealgood caught that, of course. "Oh ho ho ho! It looks like the Pecos out of Brimstone's Fall have decided to throw Security a bone." Psychoshy had gotten a power hoof from the Fillies. I saw a tan medical kit and raced over, jamming the key into the lock. I popped it open, hoping for something…anything…that could end this fight early!

What I got was an earthenware jug.

"Well now. Looks like the drinks are on the Pecos. Unless I miss my guess, that's some of Dusty Trails's own grade A moonshine!" Dealgood chuckled, "Personally, I'd rather have the power hoof, but beggars can't be choosers."

Psychoshy's hoof crackled with energy as she gave me that grin I knew and loved. There was only one thing to do with a bottle of alcohol. I pulled the stopper and lifted the bottle to my lips. It was like drinking pure fire. Suddenly, my aches and pains didn't feel like much at all and now I was grinning too. I thrust the jug overhead and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Yeeeeeehawwww!"

They wanted a fucking fight. It would be a fucking fight! Psychoshy charged straight at me, her hoof crackling with arcane energies that'd probably blast my face off. I squatted, dropped the bottle into my forehooves, and then threw the heavy jar right into her face with all my strength. Her eyes went wide as the jagged bits of pottery slashed at her hide and the burning alcohol splashed in her eyes. I reared up and brought my hooves down just as she

slammed into me, hitting her so hard she bounced.

She sprawled out on her back before me. “Don’t you get ‘tween me and my friend!” I bellowed as I reared again to finish the fight. Then she drew back her hind legs and smashed both of them right up into my reproductive organs. Moonshine or no, I felt that!

“Ooooh…and Security gets a hoofjob from her loveliness herself. Doesn’t look like she enjoyed it much,” Dealgood laughed from overhead.

I forced myself to my hooves, focusing on standing. I lifted the shovel to block her glowing forehoof, but the weapon shattered under the impact. Slowly I limped backwards. My horn snatched up a rake. Shattered. A hubcap. Shattered. Every weapon I grabbed was busted by that crackling power hoof. I tried to fire a magic bullet at her, but without S.A.T.S. every time my horn flashed she’d dodge aside.

“Awww, fuck it,” I shouted and then lunged forward with no weapon at all, catching Psychoshy by surprise. There were rules to fighting, but right now I was chucking them all out the window! I tackled her instead, and though I wasn’t as hefty as an earth pony, I was heavier than her! We rolled in the dirt with me punching, biting, and kicking every inch of her I could. “You wanna fight dirty? Let’s fight!”

Close in, her power hoof wasn’t as effective. I was too dumb to guess why and too pissed to care. I bit hard on her ear, chewing like it was Rampage’s heart. With a great heave she threw me off and took to the air again, looking hurt and pissed…and worried. I spat a chunk of her ear…or maybe it was my tooth…to the side as I grinned up at her.

“Pink key! Pink key for Psychoshy!” yelled some ponies that looked familiar. I thought I might have seen them around Flank. Psychoshy flew over to the appropriately labeled box and opened it. A restoration potion and some needles lay there. Aw, why couldn’t I have had that key? I charged across the arena, but she gulped down the potion and jabbed the chem into her leg.

“Is that Stampede from the Halfheart gang? Why I think it is!” Dealgood crowed in glee. “Let’s get ready to looooooove!” I stared in horror as Psychoshy’s pupils shrank to pinpricks.

“LOVE!” she screamed as she slammed her power fist at me with a crackle. “LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! LOVE!” With each cry she battered at me with no thought or care for defense. I ate one hit, and after that

it was all I could do to avoid another. The crowd was chanting along with her, and each time the word was uttered it seemed to push Psychoshy harder and faster. Even with the moonshine, I was definitely feeling run down.

Then I ducked as she swung her hoof into a metal post, and with sparks and a crackle the power hoof finally died. A united 'awww' of disappointment rose from the Flash Fillies. I turned and gave her face an Applejack applebuck, crushing her nose and knocking her back enough to get some space. I needed something and nopony was offering to help me. I looked at my friends, but they had no key to give me. Nothing to help me. Psychoshy was still under the effects of Stampede; any second she'd be all over me again like fleas in my tail.

P-21…swishing his tail…touching my tail…I lifted my tail and stared at the tiny brass bobby pin.

Of course he'd cheat to help me. I pulled the pin out and jammed it into a dark blue box, much to the outrage of the crowd. I had only seconds to do it, and I doubted I'd have a chance to force the lock. With a click, the container opened and I saw a rejuvenation potion and a tin of Mint-als. Scooping up both with my magic, I jumped aside in time to avoid the hoof that dented the armored healing kit. What did I have to lose? I chowed down on both.

As the healing washed through me, I realized I'd committed a major faux pas. Clearly, using a bobby pin was a violation of the spirit of the game and there were a half dozen offering their keys to Psychoshy now. She was in such a Stampede-induced frenzy that she missed them, but that wouldn't last. I needed something to get them back on my side.

And Big Daddy was watching. Suddenly, I realized that it didn't matter how much I stomped, he was going to keep this fight going. I didn't just have to win. I had to win like a Reaper. Like one of the top ten. And that meant I'd have to put on a show.

"Psychoshy! You're under arrest for being a spoiled brat, a complete bitch, and for getting on my nerves! I'm taking you down," I yelled as I pointed my hoof at her. I had to time it perfectly, but, fortunately, it felt like I was as close to S.A.T.S. as I could be without taking Flash. I smashed her face with my hoof each time she charged. "You have the right to remain silent! Use it!"

That got a chuckle out of some of the crowd. I grinned at them like

I was having the time of my life. “Anything you say can and will be used against you to kick your ass!” I was still getting beat on, but there was less and less howling for my blood by the second. “You have the right to speak to an attorney. If you don’t have one, you can speak to my hoof!”

Now there were laughs as she was the uninteresting savage and I was the show. They weren’t chanting ‘love’ now. “Shut up!” she screamed at me, but I laughed as I backed away. I wanted to get the hay out of there. I wanted a nice cold Sparkle-Cola bottle between my legs; the healing magic had done little for that particular pain. I wanted to find P-21. But to do that, I had to put on a show.

“Do you understand these rights as they have been read to you, or do I have to beat your ass till you do?” I asked at the top of my lungs.

She darted forward again, but not to kick as I’d anticipated. She bit down on the end of a rope. A rope still around my neck. Oh shit…

I started to lift it away just as Psychoshy pulled it taut. It crushed down on my throat, and I gagged as she lifted me up into the air. My hooves scrabbled as she lifted me to a hook set in the roof; maybe put there for this very reason, and wrapped the rope in place. “Looks like we’re going to need another sheriff!” Psychoshy called out, and then she began to beat me as I strangled. “You give up? You give up? Huh, Security? Tap out!” But there was nothing to tap, and I wasn’t sure they’d stop even if there was. It’s always to the death, even when it isn’t.

I looked up at that hook as my vision went red, my heart thundering like I’d just taken a dose of Buck. My throat spasmed as my lungs tried to suck in air. “Tap! Tap!” Psychoshy said in glee as she kicked my dangling body.

I looked up at the hook, trying to concentrate and focus. My magic bullet was shit on metal targets, but what else could I do? No unicorn was strong enough to levitate themselves! Tears ran down my cheeks as my eyes bulged. The first magic bullet went wide, and Dealgood jumped aside as he was narrowly missed. The second just dispersed off the metal. I tried to push everything out of my mind, focus on that hook and my spell. The one spell my little horn could manage…

The bolt flashed from my horn and struck the metal. It creaked, and then snapped free with a resounding ping. I plummeted to the ground like a sack of potatoes and stretched out my hoof to tap it

once, twice, thrice.

In a flash, Lacunae teleported above me and pointed her glowing horn right at Psychoshy. “This fight is over!” she roared telepathically in all our minds. Rampage kicked open the door and Glory swooped in, pulling the knot out enough that Rampage could slice it with her hoofclaws. Nopony seemed keen on arguing with a giant purple unicorn who could shout in their heads.

My lungs didn’t seem to work right. Glory held my muzzle carefully and took a deep breath. Then she blew into my lungs. I felt my chest inflate and gasped, coughing and hacking.

“Hrmmph! Loser.” Psychoshy fluttered a little unevenly, the Stampede wearing off, to meet the adoration of her fans. I just focused on the adoration of breathing.

Dry hoofstomps drew my attention as Sanguine approached, my PipBuck hovering beside him. “Well, that was an incredibly amusing fight. Still, I have what I want, and with this some very important ponies will be quite happy.”

“You’re Trueblood, aren’t you?” The well dressed pony gave a wide bow as his cracked lips spread in a grin. “That’s how you know about Project Chimera.” He looked impressed.

“Of course,” he replied softly. “I was involved in Project Chimera from the beginning. Goldenblood’s gift to Fluttershy. A project to take her mind off her broken heart. We’d make ponies too tough to kill, adaptable to any environment. It was quite a joy. Truly. Gorgon was the first stable specimen. But, with time, we made others.”

Then he let out an irritated hiss. “Unfortunately, two years after the assassination attempt, Goldenblood started having… reservations. He cancelled the project, sealed its findings, and put the specimens in suspended animation. I was transferred to projects making insecticide talismans. Me. The master of biological arcane research…killing bugs.” He bristled at the indignity before calming and continuing. “Fortunately, Twilight Sparkle proved infinitely more open to the possibilities of transforming ponies into alicorns.” His eyes turned to Lacunae, his glowing pink eyes swirling with speculation. “I’d love a biological sample.” Clearly, he wasn’t mistaking her for anything but what she was.

“Over your dead body,” Lacunae replied coldly.

“Been there. Done that,” he answered with a chuckle. “Ah well, with EC-1101, I can make a whole lot of ponies happy…especially

myself!"

Now I had my turn. "What are you talking about? I don't have EC-1101."

He froze. "What?" All his smug amusement melted away.

"My PipBuck was destroyed when it got struck by lightning," I rasped softly. His eyes immediately widened and a look of absolute horror washed over his face.

"No. That's not possible!" he stammered. "If it were, Horizons would have--" But then he shut up. His eyes glared at me balefully and a long, thin plume of pink mist curled out of his muzzle like a tongue. "Oh…sneaky. I didn't think heroes were allowed to lie."

"I'm not a hero," I groaned as I rubbed my throat. Rampage handed me my gear and I dug out some watery healing potions from 99. In a few more days, they'd be worthless. "Project Horizons would…what?" I asked as I drank three in rapid succession, healing most of my battered body. I'd definitely keep the bruises around my throat, though.

"Never mind. It must be on some other PipBuck." His eyes immediately latched on to Scotch Tape's.

Oh no, no psychoghouls on her! "You're right," I said as I dug in my bags for the Delta PipBuck. "It's right here." I activated it and brought up the file. To my shock, immense relief bloomed in his face. "Why? What is Project Horizons?"

"Something dead and gone, along with its creator. That's all you need to know about Horizons," he said with dire solemnity. Then he lifted Marmalade's PipBuck with a little half smile. "Well, I'll see if there's anything else interesting on here, Blackjack. Maybe find something else to convince you to hand it over. One way or another."

"Not a chance," I rasped, then coughed. I was going have a hell of a bruise.

"Pity. Well then, it was very nice meeting you," he said politely. "I look forward to when we can do it again." And, with Marmalade's PipBuck floating beside him, he trotted to where Psychoshy was recovering.

"Why didn't you tap out sooner?" Glory asked me as she rubbed my throat. "You didn't have to win her stupid fight."

"She tried, but sometimes Dealgood's got lousy vision," Rampage said with a glare at the gaunt buck and the two floozies that flanked him. "My bet is Big Daddy kept the fight going."

"You'd surely win that bet, Arloste," Big Daddy said with a chuckle. "I wanted to see for myself just what Security was made of. Good stuff."

I glared at him hard, but he wasn't ashamed of what he'd done. I could see it clearly now. If Psychoshy hadn't challenged me, somepony else would have. It would have been just as deadly, too. He caught my look and pointed a hoof at me. "Oh, don't look at me like that. I needed to know you had the sand, and you did. Even picking a lock mid fight. Ballsy. Then that show you put on for the crowd? Genius."

I couldn't tell if I was drunk or not; the Mint-als seemed to be counteracting the effects of the potent moonshine. I sure was pissed, though. "I needed to find my friend. Something's wrong with him."

"That little blue guy? Didn't see him," Big Daddy said with a shrug as he trotted over to congratulate Psychoshy.

"Where is P-21?" Glory asked in concern. "I saw him at the start of the fight, but now he's gone. He should be here."

"We have to find him," I muttered, rubbing my aching throat. "Glory can search the stands from above. Lacunae and Scotch can look around the tunnels. Rampage, talk to anypony you can. I'm going to the skyboxes to get my gun." I'd be damned if I trotted around here without a firearm any more.

* * *

Once I'd gotten my weapons, I was still sorting out the conflicting sensations of inebriation and being Mint-al'd. With the Mint-als, things seemed sharper and clearer, but the alcohol was making my brain feel like it was running in tar. All I knew was that something was wrong with P-21. The way he'd wished me good luck with that look in his eye…something had happened.

Then I saw the little piece of paper sticking out of the barrel of my shotgun. Slowly, I lifted it, my focus making the paper tremble in front of me as my eyes took in the words.

Can't handle it any more. I'm sorry. Good luck.

Dread floored me as I stared at the paper. "You're the stupidest, most selfish pony in the history of Equestria, Blackjack," I muttered. I'd assumed that he'd been upset with me. That I'd been the reason he'd looked so hurt and haunted. That I was the cause of his distress, and if I just fixed it then he'd be happy with me. "You

idiot. You fucking idiot!" I cursed as my mind raced. Panic must have been cooking off most of the alcohol from my brain as I raced into the hall. If he was leaving us…well, then I probably wouldn't find him. But if he was doing what I'd done…I looked back and forth along the hallway. He'd want someplace to do it alone.

Goddesses, please, no. Luna, Celestia, somepony…help me!

This was what he'd felt. This was what I'd put him through. I'd thought that what I'd done was terrible, cruel, mean, and wrong. I was right. But I hadn't known…really and truly *known*…what it was like till I read that horrible piece of paper. I deserved this.

He didn't.

It was like a little pink pony was kicking my head to get me to look down at the door at the end of the hall. There were two skyboxes not being used…that were empty. I raced to the one with Deus's name on it, but it was still locked tight. I hurried down and tried the door to Gorgon's room.

It opened easily.

Gorgon's room was a disaster area. It more resembled a den than a room, with the walls smashed and kicked. There were dozens of empty syringes lying about and a few filled with rainbow sludge. My PipBuck was clicking softly from the background radiation in the room. The bed was more of a nest than a mattress. The only sign of sanity was a small collection of pictures and a little statue.

But no sign of P-21.

I almost left then and there to tell my friends what had happened when that pink pony bashed my brain with a super sledge and my eyes saw the door. The bathroom. I scrambled across the room, knocking over a drum of radioactive goo. I couldn't care less. All that mattered was that I find P-21 in time. That was all that mattered. All that mattered.

He'd used a wire.

It was wrapped several times around his neck and an exposed pipe in the ceiling. He'd stepped off the sink. His face was the color of Lacunae's hide as he dangled there limply. My scream died in my throat as I got underneath him and heaved. Take a breath! Breathe! Nothing. I stared up at the pipe and the wire. My horn flashed as I fired bullet after bullet into the pipe. Finally, it snapped, and he fell upon me like a doll.

The wire had cut so deeply into his hide that it'd disappeared from sight. My eyes dripped as I pulled it free from around his neck.

“P-21…” I whispered as I looked at his glazed eyes. “P-21!” I pressed my lips to his, blowing in his mouth as Glory had into mine minutes ago. His chest rose. “Damn it, P-21! You can’t do this! You were out! You were free!” I breathed again. I thumped his chest, like he was just asleep and all I had to do was wake him up.

He lay there... so very still...

“Damn it, P-21! You have to live! You have to! You can’t let this place kill you! Can’t let me kill you! Damn it!” I sobbed and tried breathing for him again. Again. Again. “P-21! Please! Don’t leave me. Don’t leave us. I’m sorry. Please,” I begged his slack face. “Call me an idiot! Call me stupid! Hate me! Shoot me! Just don’t die!” I begged as my raspy voice burred in my half healed throat. I clutched him, holding him, weeping utterly alone.

“I couldn’t save you…”

The whisper was so faint that I didn’t know if I’d heard it or imagined it. Maybe I’d finally lost my mind. Then I felt him move faintly in my hooves. There were no words. I just wept like I never had before; like I cried for all of 99 as I just held him. “I couldn’t save them…I’m sorry…I couldn’t save you…” he whispered.

I hated him. I loved him. The entire spectrum of emotions crashed through me in a storm. I wanted to kill him and yet he was the most precious thing in the Wasteland at the moment. His face was returning to its blue complexion as his throat bled from those lacerations encircling it. I settled on holding him as we wept together. Now I knew. Now I knew what I’d actually done.

* * *

When we’d both stabilized a bit, we sat on the remains of Gorgon’s shredded mattress. He couldn’t look me in the eyes, so I just looked at his hooves. “I couldn’t do anything. When we went back to 99, and we found the males were still alive, I was sure that, given the chance, they’d be like me. They’d want to be free. To live their own lives. To be happy. To be ponies. People.

“They didn’t. They…they were more comfortable with the abuse that was familiar to them than the possibility of being on their own. It didn’t matter how I cried or argued or begged…they were just waiting for us to leave. Even the new P-20 and U-20…” He hunched over a little and sobbed, “They hated me for being the P-21 who got to live. For cheating. For daring to want to live.” He glanced at me,

tears running from his bright and haunted eyes. “They told me that I should have died when it was my time.”

It would be easy to ask how they could feel that way, but after so much conditioning and trauma…“The mares were the same,” I said softly. “They wanted safe and predictable more than freedom. The thought of change was too much for them. The only ponies interested were young ponies like Scotch Tape.”

He sniffed and nodded. “There was one colt who I thought would leave with us…but the older ones cowed him…told him it wasn’t his place to leave.” He gave a terrible noise, half laugh and half sob. “I always thought it was the mares keeping us down. They didn’t have to. We did it to ourselves. We did it.”

I hugged him, and though he stiffened, he didn’t push me away this time.

“But worst of all was when I made you kill Stable 99,” he whispered, shaking in my hooves.

“What?” That was my call…

“I knew there was a chance the food supply was contaminated. I guessed it’d been contaminated since the first round of raiders... but I was more concerned about the bucks than about making sure that the stable was safe and secure.” He drew a shaking breath. “You’d just lost your mother and found Glory. And, as you’ve said, you’re not the smart pony. I am. I should have done something. Done more. It’s my fault Stable 99 was contaminated.”

“No! It’s my... ” When was I going to learn? Everything didn’t begin and end with me. He looked at me, and I realized that he felt every bit as much guilt as I had. How had I missed it? Why didn’t I realize how deeply he’d blamed himself?

What kind of friend was I?

“When you told us we were leaving, I knew you were going to do something about the stable. You had to. I thought, when we were all out, that we’d talk about it. Glory would object. I’d back you up. I was already thinking about how I could collapse the tunnel. Then you threw the PipBuck through.” He shook even more as he sniffed.

“When we told Lacunae what you’d done, she disappeared and then came back with you a minute later... and you were gasping and dying.” He clenched his eyes closed, “I knew you’d tried to kill yourself. I knew that Lacunae was covering for you. But... I hoped... somehow... ” He pressed his face to my chin as we wept. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you. I wanted to save you... like you saved Scotch

and so many others. But I couldn't... and when I read your note... when I read it... "

He fell apart again, and I did too a little bit. Now I knew exactly how he felt. I just held him till he quieted. "I wasn't able to help you... and I was so angry at myself for failing... again and again... and angry at you for not caring... I couldn't stand it. I couldn't do anything. It hurt so much inside that I'd done that to you and everything I did just made it feel worse."

"Shh... " I said softly. "If you'll forgive me for leaving... I'll forgive you for the same."

He didn't say a word. He just gave the tiniest of nods against me.

I wouldn't tell anypony about this. It was his secret and his shame and his pain to share or keep hidden away, but I would be here for him. I walked a hard road, but I was a fool to think only I felt pain along that trail.

* * *

After we'd put most of our tears behind us, he was cognizant enough to realize that I had rainbow goop splattered across my legs. "Blackjack! You need to wash that stuff off!" he said in alarm as I tried to get to my hooves, failed, and staggered against the bed. My head ached and throbbed and I just sat there feeling... drained. A plug had been pulled, and suddenly everything inside my head had been sucked away down the toilet.

"Huh?" I muttered dully as I looked at the tingly smears on my hide. He pulled out a scrap of bedsheet and began to wipe it off, cleaning where it'd transferred on to him as well. I couldn't seem to move or think. Some very distant part of me agreed with him that it was bad, but all I did was sit there like a lump.

"What's the matter, Blackjack?" he rasped painfully as he stared into my eyes. I swore I could see little stars in the corners of my vision.

"Just... not feeling good," I muttered as I rose to my hooves, successfully this time... but where was I supposed to go? I couldn't go anywhere or do anything. I couldn't help my friends or myself or anypony. Couldn't do anything. Useless.

"What is this stuff?" P-21 asked as he shoved me away from the puddle of sludge.

"Sanguine made it... made Gorgon... " I muttered stupidly. Because

I was stupid. Idiot. Fool. It was like my brain had suddenly transformed into the same rainbow sludge that was spattered over the floor. P-21 was trying to push me even farther from it, but I sat down hard and then slowly walked to the little table.

One picture showed Big Macintosh, Applesnack, Jetstream, and Maripony together at a hoofball game, the huge red buck looking odd out of uniform and the blue mousy mare bedecked with every bit of Reapers paraphernalia she could bear as she peered through her glasses. She had her nose in a copy of 'Hoofball for Dummies' and was smiling shyly for the camera. Another of Stonewing with his left wing around a furiously blushing black unicorn mare and his right around a happy looking Jetstream. Twist, Psalm, and Jetstream all on a beach at the Boardwalk while Doof, Applesnack, and Stonewing looked on appreciatively. A 'Mare's Life' article on Jetstream.

There were medals, too. I didn't know if they were his or not. I lifted one that was a disk framed with two laurel leaves around the edges, a winged thunderbolt down the middle. There was a faded paper beneath it that read 'Commendation of Valor for defense of a wounded comrade at Black Pony Mountain'. A purple heart and matching ribbon with a pair of wings. That had to be when he'd saved Jetstream and lost his voice.

There was only one image of Rainbow Dash.

That was the statuette. It rested on a yellow envelope. Gently, I lifted it in my magic. "It's just like Spike's," I said softly, catching P-21's confused expression out of the corner of my eye. I looked at the tiny words on the base. 'Be Awesome'.

"You're just like her," P-21 rasped softly. No. Nopony was like Rainbow Dash, but it was nice gesture. It felt as though a little blue pegasus was gathering up all the gloomy clouds of stupid and clearing them from my mind. In ten seconds flat, I felt better.

"Thanks," I said with a smile. "Stonewing was always a fan of Rainbow Dash. She got him to sign up. He worshipped her. But he missed how much Jetstream loved him."

"Did he?" P-21 asked as he gestured at the pictures. "She's in almost all of these."

I looked at the envelope resting on the table. 'To ta ponee tha kiled me' I looked at P-21 and then slid out the letter inside. The writing was sloppy and in block print, but I could barely make it out.

der kiler

thank yu for kiling me. i am sorrie you kiled me. i kno it was hard. i kno i am monsher now. i am not monsher realy but i look liek won. i sorrie. i hope i not hurt yu. i not smart ponee. i had acci- axi- i got shot in my hed and turned into monsher. if you kiled me thank yu. if not stop reding plese.

i wat to say i am sorrie. i am sorrie jetstrem. i kno you liek me. i liek yu too. i just want yu safe and hapy. i am sorry big mak- macen- big m. i didnt men to get shot in my hed and make you sad. i am sorrie i not ther to stop yu from geting shot. i kno geting shot is no fun. espe- expe- specshully wen you get kiled. i was turned into a monsher and so i couldnt help yu. i am sorrie evriepony for geting shot and turned into a monsher.

so plese dont be sad for kiling me. you did gud. i am hapy now. i am with jetstrem and big m and all my friends now. i dont hurt anymore. and i wont hurt anymore ponees like a monsher. i am not a monsher. i just look liek won.

i am not a monsher but thank yu for kiling me. plese tak care of ranbow dash. she is awsum.

gudbye. stonwing.

My tears smeared the 'gudbye'. Funny. Seconds ago I felt certain that I'd used up all my tears and now here were a few more. Someday I'd pay Sanguine back. When I did, I'd be sure to give a little bit from Stonewing as well. I slipped the statuette into my pouch. "Come on. Let's get back to our friends. Let them know we're okay." I paused as I looked at him. "Are you okay?"

He opened his mouth once, then closed it again. Slowly he took a breath. "I... I don't know. I think I am... just a little bit. I still can't stop thinking about it though. I still remember them telling me that I should have died. Asking when they'd be put back into the breeding queue."

"I still smell chlorine," I said softly and watched him shudder. I nudged his shoulder. "You can always talk to me about it. No more running away. No more notes."

He nodded. "Yeah. No more notes."

The world was full of pain, but we didn't have to suffer alone.

* * *

Side by side, we made our way back to Glory and the others. The gray pegasus took one look at the cuts in his neck and the bruises

around mine and gave a soft ‘eep’ of comprehension. Our eyes met and I smiled and shook my head. She swallowed, nodded slowly, and used my bandages on his throat. I didn’t know if there was any healing magic left in them, but at least his injuries would be less likely to get infected.

In fact... I frowned as I looked at that fine field of green grass. At the numerous scars that decorated the Reapers. Everypony healthy. Food growing. Something felt... off. Not wrong, exactly, though.

This place felt like Chapel.

That made me wonder something. As Glory wrapped the bandages around P-21’s throat, I trotted up to Lacunae and Scotch Tape. After letting them know that P-21 was okay, I quietly asked Lacunae, “Is this area... um? Different? Special?” She stared at me in shock, and I glanced around before asking even more quietly, “Are there no screams here?”

That made her take a step back. “But... how could you know?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just that this place is a lot like Chapel, isn’t it? And it doesn’t have the same kind of Enervation, does it?” If it had, the constant fighting and injuries would be slowly wearing them away. That also explained why the Reapers were so much better off here than gangs abroad. It was like ponies in a stable: living away from the Enervation, they became fit and healthy.

“If the screams are quiet here, and everypony is healthy... ” I frowned and thumped the side of my head as if trying to shake loose the idea. “Perhaps they’re connected... somehow?”

Scotch Tape sat on her rump and dug out the Hoofington edition of the Wasteland Survival Guide. “Okay... where did I miss the part about screams? I found Enervation under ‘E’, but there wasn’t nothing about screams.”

“It’s something I hear in my mind. The wailing and screaming of countless ponies. Here it is almost... quiet.” Now Lacunae seemed to be pondering the relationship as well.

Scotch Tape just huffed, crossed her forelegs, and sat down. “I wanna go back to 99. I don’t care if it’s full of poison and cannibal ponies. Screaming ghosts is where I draw the line.”

“They’re not ghosts,” I said, then frowned and looked at Lacunae. “Are they?” Lacunae simply gave a slow shrug. Of all the time for a shrug, now was not it.

* * *

“I’m going to pass on your offer, for now,” I told Big Daddy as we met down on the field. I had to admit the act of simply eating grass... not something recycled or cooked or packaged... was definitely weird. Still, it was food... boring bland green food. Gimme Sugar Apple Bombs any day! The PipBuck technician that had removed Marmalade’s PipBuck had put the Delta PipBuck back on my left hoof where it belonged.

Big Daddy chewed thoughtfully as he looked at me over the top of his glasses, his eyes glowing. “Well, can’t say I’m happy to hear that. I liked how you well you handled Sanguine and Psychoshy.”

“Not sure we were watching the same fight. She beat me,” I argued.

“You were distracted. In a fair and focused fight, you’d have beaten her. Heck, with enough training you might beat me... when I’m all old and crotchety,” he added as an afterthought.

“I’ve got a mystery I’m trying to unravel. Something bad that happened in Hoofington two hundred years ago. Murders. Conspiracy. Secret projects.” I groaned softly as I sat down, looking at the fake sky. Knowing it was a roof stopped my stomach from flopping around. “Why does a not smart pony like me have to be the one to figure all this convoluted stuff out?” I sighed and looked at him. “Have you ever heard of the O.I.A., Goldenblood, EC-1101, or Project Horizons?”

He twirled his beard around his hoof. “Would you stay, join the Reapers, and help us stomp the Rangers if I did?”

I smirked at him. “Maybe. I told you, though: Rangers didn’t attack you. It was us.”

He snorted, “Same difference. Rangers want a fight and we’re gonna give it to ‘em. I look forward to breaking as many of Carrot’s toys as I can till she cries for mercy.”

“So no chance for peace?” I asked with a soft frown.

He sighed, looking at me skeptically. “Do you really want it? Steel Rangers aren’t any better than Reapers. In fact, some of them are every bit as bad as Sanguine.” He took a bite and chewed as he stared at me with his own unnatural gaze.

“I want to keep ponies from dying. Too many die for no reason,” I said as I plucked a clump of grass with my horn and looked at it, seeing still foals on a stable floor. I looked at him again. “So... have you ever heard of them?”

He sat back as I chewed, gazing at me before he took a deep breath and sighed. “Only the O.I.A. and then only a little bit here and there. Compared to the ministries, they seemed like nobodies. Paper pushing bureaucrats. But I can tell they matter to you.” He looked in the direction of the Core. “Thirty-five years ago, we came here from Manehattan. Hoofington was just a dot on a pre-war map back then. We didn’t even have access to the broadcast towers here. But when I saw those black towers with the green glow, I knew... I just knew... this was a bad place. Something wrong happened here. Something that could kill us, even today.”

I shivered, then asked another question to cover up my discomfort. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Is it about my age? I think I can make the goalposts from here,” he said dryly.

“No. Your eyes... ” He looked surprised, then chuckled.

“Oh there’s a whole lot of speculation. Lots of ponies think that they’re a product of too much mutation. That I can see in the dark... or that I know the flaws of my enemies... there are some ponies who think that I can even kill with my stare.” He locked gazes with me a moment. I matched him stare for stare. His eyes slowly narrowed. Mine matched his. Then I broke first with a snort, and he chuckled.

He rubbed his glowing eyes. “Truth is, they’re the product of a zebra curse. Back when we were bashing every two bit warlord and champion around the Hoof, we came across an old zebra. Now, most zebras hate the Hoof with a passion that’s nigh on religious. But this nutter, he was looking for something. He’d gotten himself captured by a starving tribe and almost ended up on the menu. I happened to free him.

“He fed me some crock about the Hoof being surrounded by evil spirits and that they were drawn here by a great and terrible wrong. Figured he was talking about the Core. Then he blew some glowing sand in my eyes and said it would give me the sight of the sun. The old kook took off after that.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t know exactly what he did... being I don’t have a horn on my noggin... but ever since then, I’ve been able to look at ponies and see them for who they really are. It’s how I know Sanguine’s a crooked snake who’s going to kill me someday. And it’s how I know the Reapers will be good in Brutus’s hooves when he does.”

“You know he’s planning on killing you?” I asked in shock. He

looked back, clearly disappointed.

"I look like my mind's going, girl? I could tell he was no good the moment he showed up here with Deus and Gorgon. He's made of hooks and needles, cutting away pieces of everypony around him. I didn't need magic eyes to tell that. But if he doesn't kill me, old age will. 'Cause I *am* old," he said, thumping my chest with a hoof, making me flinch. "And I'm getting older. And I'd rather die from a knife in my back than from some stupid organ of mine failing."

I looked at him, pity welling up for the old buck. It had to be hard to get old in the Wasteland.

Then he reached out and smacked me upside the head sharply enough to knock me over. The world spun as I clutched my throbbing skull. "What was that for?" I asked. My brain wasn't quite over the hangovery feelings from the fight earlier.

"Looking at me all sad like," he said sharply. "Ain't avoiding the fact. Just don't like being reminded of it."

"So... what do you see when you look at me?" I asked with a touch of trepidation.

He stared at me for a long while. My mane began to crawl as I swallowed. I'd just about asked him to forget it when he said softly, "Blood and stars."

Oh... of course...

"Blood of the innocent. Blood of the guilty. Fresh blood. Cold blood. Old blood. You're standing in a river of the stuff. It's flowing through you. Gives you strength. It's also tearing you away and drowning you. And for all the blood that's soaking you through and through... it's nothing compared to all the bloodshed you're going to prevent." He sighed and shrugged. "I also see stars above you... stars beneath you... stars within you. You're made of stars. Bloody stars."

"Is there some sort of rule that old ponies are supposed to give cryptic prophesies to fuck with the minds of the young?" I asked sharply. Then I was practicing my flying skills as his hooftoss sent me sailing towards the goalposts. At least I didn't hit the horizontal bar before landing in a heap. He trotted over and helped me up.

"Sorry about that. Principle. And nope. I just call 'em like I see 'em. But there's one thing that cheers me up about seeing all that," he said with a grin.

"Really? What's that?" I asked dryly.

"I ain't you," he said with a chuckle.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Nerves of Steel -- You now regenerate AP as if you were Rainbow Dash: 20% faster.

Quest Perk added: Magic Penetration -- Your magic bullet spell ignores 15 DT of armor.

Chapter 26: Descent

"Curses are artificial, fake magic. It's conjured with potions and incantations, all smoke and mirrors meant to scare. But curses have no real power; they're just an old pony tale."

In the early morning, before the sky outside was switched on for the day (the illusory night apparently being used for matches rather than actual night), I lay in Rampage's room. The striped mare was snoring heartily, but what had actually woken me was the disturbing sensation of my heart fluttering in my chest. To make matters worse, my head was throbbing with the promises of a migraine.

I lay there on the mattress while the rest of my friends slept around me, my amber eyes fixed on a spot on the wall. The cracked plaster slowly crumbled away, a black mold crawling along the edge, wet, pulpy, and glistening and growing before my eyes. It grew only because I looked at it, but if I looked away it would consume us all. My heart beat faster and faster. Something was inside that rot and fungus. Something was moving. Something was looking back at me. An inexplicable reek of ammonia reached my nostrils.

Suddenly, Scotch Tape jerked to her hooves next to me, snapping my gaze off that horrible patch of wall. The young olive mare muttered softly, "Damn it. Not again…" and trotted into Rampage's bathroom with blankets still wrapped around herself.

I looked back at the wall, at the small cracks in the discolored plaster. All was normal. All was as it should be.

Thump thump…thump thump…thump thump thump…thump thump…

* * *

"You know, it would have been nice if Big Daddy could have thrown me a bone and let us cross the Zenith Bridge," I muttered as I spread the map of Hoofington in the back of the Wasteland

Survival Guide out against the row of bleacher seats in front of me.

Earlier in the morning, I'd gone to see the Reapers' medic and swapped our salvage for some more little purple potions. Doctor Contusion, who, in her ponyhide armor covered in cutie marks with a disturbing medical motif, looked if anything more unnerving than the other Reapers, had also confirmed my guess about the low level of Enervation around the arena.

After that, I'd tried to get a new melee weapon, but, for all the bloody panoply of deadly implements I'd been shown, I hadn't seen any that really appealed to me. I just didn't have the horn for giant hammers or swords made from wagon fenders, and I felt wary about using rippers and chainsaws. I wouldn't grow back my head if I accidentally sliced it off.

"Even if he did," P-21 said, "the Steel Rangers aren't letting anypony cross. And, according to DJ Pon3's latest report," he continued, pointing at the other crossing north of the Forks, "Toll's been closed since the fighting started. Unless you have another *Seahorse* around here, I don't see how we're going to get to the far side."

"Can't she just fly over, blink back, and teleport us all across?" Scotch Tape asked, pointing at Lacunae.

The alicorn sighed. "Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to teleport a pony such a distance?" The young mare gave her a dry look, and the purple alicorn huffed softly. "The energy needed is the product of the square of the amount of mass to be transported, the square of the distance to be covered, Fireflash's constant, and the inverse of the amount of radiation I've absorbed."

I just stared at her for a minute, then said softly, "Lacunae, pretend for a minute that I don't know anything about alicorns, mathematics, teleportation, or arcane science. Can you teleport us all across the river?"

"I could, but only one at a time; that would take all day, and I would be exhausted after each. That would leave us woefully exposed."

"You teleported the bucks to safety in 99," Scotch Tape pointed out, "And the guns."

"That was a distance of no more than fifty feet, and afterwards I was so exhausted I could do no magic for almost two whole days." I looked around, glad to see that nopony was asking why a Goddess would have such limitations. "To teleport across the river, I would

need to find a significant landmark and memorize it in detail. It is unlikely that I'd find one near the water on the far side."

"Could you just fly us across?" I asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. But some of you are heavy, and it is almost certain that the Steel Rangers would try to shoot us down. Alone, I could handle that, but if I have to focus on carrying somepony else at the same time... " That didn't sound like a risk we wanted to take.

"So, we can't cross on a bridge. Can't fly over and probably can't swim across. Can't teleport all of us without taking a really long time... " I sighed and rubbed my chin. Couldn't go over. Couldn't go across. Couldn't cheat with alicorny magics. That left... "Can we go under the river?"

"Under? Are you crazy?" Rampage said as she jumped to her hooves. I smiled softly at her, crossed my forehooves calmly in front of me, and arched a brow in a perfect expression of reasonability. Rampage groaned, pressing her face to her forehooves. "Of course you are…"

P-21 muttered, "Welcome to my world." I smiled at him and felt warmth when he smiled back.

"What's wrong with under?" Glory asked with a small gulp of nervousness.

"The tunnels of Hoofington," Scotch Tape read aloud from the Guide as she lay on her belly on an old cushion, her rear legs waving idly in the air, "are particularly deadly. Today they are the home to desperate raiders, feral ghouls, and packs of savage beasts called cyberdogs. Perhaps even more dangerous are the automated defense systems, including magical ward screens and patrolling robots, and pockets of intense radiation and Enervation. Extreme care should be employed, and visits should be brief.

"Over a thousand miles of tunnels, subways, and other pieces of underground infrastructure were constructed in Hoofington, and much of it remains intact and unflooded thanks to still active pumps and ventilation systems. Care should be taken to stick to sewage maintenance tunnels and blue line subway tunnels. Enter into green industrial tunnels only in dire circumstances. Red tunnels should be avoided at all costs. These security tunnels were restricted during the war and contain potent defensive systems. Remember: Red and you're dead.

"Ooooh pictures!" She lifted the book up in her mouth, showing us a robotic sand dog-esque monster that appeared more machine than

meat. I sure hoped that that was artistic license and not an accurate depiction.

"More than a thousand miles?" Glory gasped. "Where did they put them all? The Core is only five miles across at the most! How in Equestria did they dig out that much that fast?"

But I remembered Big Macintosh's memory of the city during reconstruction. "Tunnels on top of tunnels on top of tunnels," I said as I rose to my hooves and started pacing. "They dug tunnels to bring building materials under the river. And they buried all the power lines and the like after zebras started attacking with dragons; it was safer. They probably connected all the bases to the city by tunnels too."

Hoofington was a fortress, but it was more than just the Core. The Core was like a great big fat bullseye, a challenge to the zebras. But, in reality, the entire valley was a fortress, a death trap for the zebras to attack over and over again. 'Here is our technology. Here is the city you tried to raze. Come and get us.' I had to wonder how many thousands of zebras had died besieging and assaulting the city. Tens of thousands? Hundreds? Millions?

I'd seen the bones in Nopony's Land. That was just one small hill along the western edge of the city. How many were in the badlands south of Flank? Or east, toward the zebra lands? The zebras had come to Hoofington over and over again to die. The city wasn't a fortress. It was a killing machine.

"So, is there a tunnel from here to the east side of the river?" P-21 asked as he looked over the filly's shoulder at the guide. We all looked at Rampage, who gave a shrug.

Suddenly, I smiled. "We might not know, but we know somebody who does."

* * *

"Ponies know nothing. Why do ponies always stick noses where not belong?" Rover grumbled as he picked through the wall of his workshop. We'd been walking all morning to hoof it from the Arena to Riverside. On a map, the two locations were fairly close. In reality, we'd had to snake our way through the rubble-strewn streets and more than once pick our way through fallen buildings. The Halfheart gang was also making our lives difficult now that word was out that Security had turned down Big Daddy's offer.

We'd been dealing with snipers all morning; it'd gotten to the point where Lacunae shed her dress and, together with Glory, swept out the snipers' nests in the windows of the crumbling apartment buildings.

By the time we reached Sunset Station, I was carrying Scotch Tape to give her hooves a rest. P-21 was slowing us down too, but he simply set his lips together and tried to keep up the pace. The sand dogs had nearly attacked us a second time before they caught sight of Lacunae. She was a figure both pony and dog tended to remember, particularly with her minigun hovering ominously over her head. The alicorn had developed a habit of occasionally revving the motor when one of the bionic canines got too close.

"We have to get to the east side of the river. Are there tunnels that will get us there?" I asked. Fifi and Scotch Tape stood nearby, seeming to find each other fascinating but both a little too nervous to talk to each other. All the sand dogs were doing far better with gems powering their mechanical parts. Food came in through Riverside and salvage from the tunnels left. A lot of that equipment was being traded with Brimstone's Fall and Chapel. Trade was saving the Wasteland.

"Yes yes yes, pony," Rover grumbled sourly as he walked over to a pile of papers and pawed through them, muttering. "Tunnels is very dangerous for ponies. Yes. Many dangerous things in the deeps. Ponies should not go in tunnels. Tunnels is dogs' home." He dug through pile after pile while I looked at strange arcane plans and blueprints on his wall.

Luna Dam Power Generator Assembly #4. Fort Pony Annex. Samophlange housing. "Why do you keep these?" I asked, trying to figure out what the Tokomare was supposed to be. Or a section 44 emergency release valve. Or why anyone would want to hang on to diagrams of them.

As Rover continued to dig through the old boxes, I noticed a dusty memory orb sitting in a stained coffee cup marked 'Aegis Security'. Curious, I shook out the slowly swirling orb. I glanced over at Rover, wondering what good a memory orb would do a sand dog. "Excuse me," I asked, lifting up the orb. "Do you mind if I look at this?"

He snorted in dismissal. "Is pony garbage. Dog uses as nightlight for Fifi. Pony can do with it as pony wishes."

Leaving him to dig through his papers, I smiled to myself and

tapped the orb against my horn. Sometimes, physical contact seemed to be the only way to help the connection along. I felt the shock of connection, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Okay, not liking this memory. Correction: not liking this body! Something was very wrong here. My legs ached, by back was sore, my hips felt all tottery, and my vision was a mess of blurs. But, despite all that, I could smell the most amazing collection of scents…I wasn't exactly sure what they all were, but I could smell them. I could also hear voices talking quite clearly. With a groan, my host rose and trotted…well…walked, at least, down a cloudy hall.

"…glad that you're all right, Applejack. An accident like that... it's terrifying that something like that can strike right out of the blue," a buck said in conciliatory tones. The smell of mare, apples, bed linen and buck filled my nose.

"Well, we're not completely convinced that it was an accident, Horse." Applesnack's low, serious voice perked my curiosity. "Elevators don't generally fall on their own."

"I…I hadn't thought of that. I hope that the Ministry of Morale is taking a hard look at that possibility," Horse said in concerned tones. "Well, in light of that, maybe…" He trailed off, and silence fell for a moment.

"What is it, Horse? I can tell ya got some idea stuck in yer noggin," Applejack said tiredly. My host rose up, and I smelled her scent of mare, a bed occupied for far too long, and healing bandages. Something reached out to rub my host's ears…wait? What kind of ears were those? They felt…furry.

"There's been a lot of concern about high profile ponies being at risk from zebra assassins. We've been exploring some possibilities. Running a few experiments. We've found ways to place an organic brain inside a mechanical robotic body."

"I heard about that," Applejack said sourly. "I can honestly say that that's one o' the most ghoulish things I've ever heard."

"Unconventional, perhaps," Horse admitted, sounding like he wasn't too happy with the practice either. "We only use convicted ponies from Hightower, and only after removing most of their memories and personality. The brain, preserved in gel, just acts as a

processor."

"Cut to the chase, Horse. What does all this have to do with Applejack?" Applesnack demanded.

Horse cleared his throat and said delicately, "Well, you see…we've also been developing a canine model. In fact, it's almost ready for production, given that there's far more canine brain samples available. We're just looking for a subject for our production prototype." An awkward silence ensued.

Finally, Applejack muttered, "Horse. If I could get outta this bed, I'd buck your head clean off your shoulders! I know what you're thinking!" Applejack swore and groaned. My host whined, licking her leg and tasting lotion.

"Well, *I'm* not under doctor's orders to stay in bed... " Applesnack growled.

Horse spoke quickly. "Please, listen to me. I know you love her, but face facts. Winona is old. She's an exceptional dog: intelligent, loyal, and well trained. Better than a lot of ponies, honestly. And," he continued in a calmer tone, "as you said, you think somepony is trying to kill you…and I agree. Let me give Winona a fresh new body. Onyx and Glass are both sure they can preserve both her mind and her personality. And she'll be able to keep your foals and grandfoals just as safe as you."

"Yeah, as if that'll happen any time soon," Applejack said in a slightly sharp mutter. Applesnack coughed awkwardly. The mare stroked my host's ears and rubbed between her aching shoulders. Despite her words, I could tell from her tone that she was... pensive.

"Just consider my offer. We'll be moving on to the security and combat prototypes one way or another. I just wanted to give you a chance. I know Winona would want to keep you safe." There was another moment of silence. "Well…I hope you feel better soon."

"Yeah. You too, Mr. Horse," Applejack muttered in worry. Her ears swiveled as Horse trotted away; a moment later, the door closed.

My host gave a worried whine in the back of her throat and nudged Applejack's hoof with her muzzle.

"I can't believe he'd propose something like that while you're still recovering," Applesnack muttered darkly.

"I didn't stop being the Ministry Mare just because I fell down an elevator shaft," Applejack replied. "He means well. Horse is the only one of the lot of 'em that didn't look like he was glad I'm laid up. Heck, even Braeburn seemed glad I'd be out for a while." There

was a sigh. “Can ya help Winnie up?”

Applesnack, smelling faintly of sweat and musk and anger, trotted behind Winona and boosted her onto the bed. My canine host gave a happy bark and wiggled up next to the orange mare. Applejack sighed softly, running her hoof through my host’s fur. “You’re a good girl, Winona. Yes you are. You’ve always been my good little helper.”

There was silence as Applejack just stroked my old body. “What do you think?” she finally asked.

“I don’t know. I usually leave all this technology stuff to you, Applejack,” the buck said softly. “I just know that, if we’re right, I don’t want you at risk again. And Horse was right…she is getting old.”

Applejack gave a soft sigh and sniff. “T’aint fair. Angel Bunny don’t seem any older at t’all.”

“Yeah, but who knows what chemicals and potions that little monster’s taken?”

“Don’t let Fluttershy hear you say that,” Applejack said with another sniff. “You’re a good girl, Winnie. A good girl, ya hear?”

My host lifted her muzzle and licked away salty tears…

oooOOOooo

“Sand dogs dig. Sand dogs help make,” Rover muttered as he pulled out an old wooden box filled with still more rolls of paper. “Dogs make things that matter.”

“You helped make them?” I asked, curious. The sand dogs didn’t strike me as the most engineering-inclined people. Then again, they had bionic parts, so who was I to judge?

“Ponies have horns,” he muttered. “Dogs have thumbs.” He wagged the appendage at me for a moment with a grin before pulling out another piece of paper. “Thumbs is better, pony. Ponies think of things to make, but dogs make them. Heavy, sweaty, dangerous work, but we did it.”

I supposed that was true. “Goldenblood really wanted to help you, didn’t he?”

Rover growled but then sighed. “Golden Pony want impossible. Want things as they was. Want home as once was. Dogs home and pony home. He try to make dog town new home, but pony city is not dog home. Dogs have only one home.”

“Why is that? Isn’t home wherever you live?” I asked. He snorted in distaste, muttering to himself for a bit as he pulled out a few more papers and then finally seemed to settle on one.

“Home is home. Dogs have one home. That home is gone. Golden Pony say he fix home if could. Get rid of poison. Make apologies. But he not. Over time, he forgot about us till very end. Even Golden pony used dogs.” He growled faintly in a tone of finality, “Ponies is not nice.”

I felt a bit stung at that. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” I said, looking down at my hooves.

He pointed a finger at me. “Pony is using dogs now too. Pony wants information from dogs, tunnels only dogs know.” He snorted, a gob of snot dripping from his old gray muzzle for a moment before he wiped it off on the ragged sleeve of his jacket. “But,” he conceded, “Pony is at least nicer about it than most ponies.” He shook out one more paper and grinned. “Ah…yes. This will get ponies across city. Yes. Yes.” He spread out the wrinkled, faded map. “Green line to Factory. Through Factory. Into blue line. Out at big pony school. Safest path.”

“Factory?” I blinked at that, shocked. “Down here?” Then again, if there was power, why not? I wondered if, if those factories still worked, it might be possible to use them to make things to help the Wasteland.

Rover nodded absently as he traced a claw along a route on a paper and tapped a square. “Mmm. Many old factories underground. Make gun. Bomb. Magic. Robot. Many many things. Most quiet. Some broken.” He marked the route in chalk and then folded the paper up. “Do not stay long. Radiation and Enervation is strong down below, pony.”

“Thanks, Rover,” I said as I slipped the map into my saddlebags. He looked particularly grouchy about helping me. “If I may ask, do you know what happened in Riverside? DJ Pon3 said the village disappeared and then reappeared?”

“Hrmph. Day after pony come, dogs go to village with scrap and salvage. Village not trust dogs, dogs not trust ponies. Almost shoot. Then flying monsters come. Half cat, half bat, half scorpion. Dogs dig tunnels and ponies follow.” He twisted his lips as he crossed his arms, waving a warning finger at me. “Fifi ask we save them, so pony not thank dog for it!” he grumbled, refusing to meet my smile.

That was a more literal example of ‘trade saving the Wasteland’

than I had expected, but it was no less welcome for that. “Well, I’ll have to thank her, then,” I replied. “I owe you, Rover. I hope that someday I can find a way to get you back to your home.” All it would take was finding six ponies that could be friends. How hard could that be? He gave a soft sigh as he waved me away.

As I left, I heard Rover mutter softly to himself, “Just like Golden Pony.”

* * *

Rover’s entrance to the industrial line was near the tracks where the Crusaders had found me. Since I didn’t relish the thought of crawling through more of Riverside’s ruins getting shot at, we were talking an alternative route under the town. This way, we’d hopefully avoid the Halfheart gang’s hit and run potshots.

Water dripped, trickled, and splashed through countless cracks in the walls and ceiling of the train tunnel. Rusted train cars hunkered on their decaying rails, the bones of countless ponies within. In more than a few places, blackened and wet skeletons half hung through warped window frames, terrifying testaments of the occupants’ last moments. Scotch Tape hung close to me, shying away from the remains. More lay along the sides of the tunnels, and when a bone snapped underhoof, the filly jumped nervously. I was more concerned about the steady, low clicking on my PipBuck.

“What happened to them all?” Scotch Tape asked as she peeked at bones frozen in postures that made it look like they were still trying to pry open doors of the train car.

“When the balefire bombs exploded, one of them must have breached the train tunnel. The tunnel acted like a chimney, carrying the flames along and burning up everything in its path. Afterwards, I think ponies tried to take shelter in here…and the radiation finished them off,” Glory said solemnly. “The Enervation kept the remains from rotting further.”

“Have I mentioned today how much I love this place?” P-21 said as he clambered over some collapsed ceiling.

“Could be worse,” Rampage said with a chuckle.

“I know it could be worse. I expect it to get worse,” P-21 said as he looked ahead at the striped pony. “In fact, things are so pleasant right now that it’s starting to make me feel paranoid.” The seepage splashed around our hooves as we picked our way along the rusted

tracks.

To be honest, I was getting a little paranoid as well. We'd been moving along the tracks for nearly half an hour, and there was no way to keep half a dozen ponies quiet. We should have been drawing all kinds of trouble, but my EFS remained clear.

We reached the end of the Luna Line at Museum Station and picked our way up the muddy concrete stairs. This was a cold and heavy rain with fat drops that slammed into us with almost painful impacts. Standing at the subway entrance across from the museum, I looked down at my friends. Everypony was cold and wet. "Let's get out of the rain for an hour. The loading dock door is open."

The last time I was here, I was a bit too drunk to remember exactly how trashed we'd left the building. After two battles, mine and whatever had happened two centuries ago, the museum was definitely looking a bit worse for wear. Somepony'd gone through and tossed the place for anything of value. Maybe it had been the survivors from the ponies who'd attacked me; I supposed that was payment enough for what I'd done to them.

The lights were even more shot than I'd remembered. They flickered and flashed sporadically, and speakers slurred incoherent words and phrases like a mob of drunken ghosts. The bodies had been left and were desiccating rather than rotting. Enervation. I supposed that, in time, they'd get so dry that they'd disintegrate rather than rot, leaving only bones and ligaments behind. "Well, at least it's out of the rain," Glory said with an attempt at a bright smile.

"Yeah. And a nine point one on the creepometer," Scotch Tape added. Suddenly, she jumped and pulled out her wrench, gripping it in her jaws as she pointed a hoof through the door to the mineral display. "Ehd Arrs! Ehd arrs!"

I looked, saw the red marks, and heard the telltale scuttle. "Just radroaches. Calm down." Then there was a long, low rumble of thunder and my mane crawled as the lights went dark, then slowly flickered back to life again. The building didn't seem to know which ambient music to play, and so two melodies slurred together. "Everypony stay close. Just in case."

Somepony had absconded with not just the dragon skeleton's remaining claws but with its fangs as well! "Well that's not fair," I muttered.

"That's right. Only Blackjack has a right to cool and deadly

weapons in the Wasteland. Celestia forbid somepony else take them for their own survival," P-21 said sarcastically as I poked through the bones for even so much as a pinkie toe claw.

"Really? How did she get that right?" Glory asked politely as she looked at the bones. She caught our shocked looks, and her ears folded back a little. "I mean, it's quite convenient for her."

I smiled, then blinked. "Well…there might just be a cool and deadly weapon here for me after all!" I said as I wrapped my tail around P-21's neck and tugged him after me. "This way, Snarky McSnarkerson!"

I let him go and trotted to the sword case I'd been forced to leave earlier. "So, master lockpicker…ready for a challenge? Think you can get this open?" I asked as I tapped the sword case. The blade still sat on its crushed blue velvet. He looked at the weapon in surprise, then narrowed his eyes at the compact lock.

"Let's find out." He took out his screwdriver and pins.

I turned to the others. "In the meantime, let's see if there's anything here that was missed. Lacunae, can you watch his back?" The purple alicorn gave an elegant bow of her head, but looked at the sword with an odd expression of unease. Okay, well best put my best hoof forward. "Okay. Scotch Tape, with me," I said as I looked at the filly with a small smile. She looked back, a little curious and slightly wary. I turned to Glory and Rampage. "Can you two sweep upstairs?"

The gray pegasus nodded. "Sure."

Splitting up in a creepy building might have been a recipe for disaster, but it'd save time. As Rampage and Glory headed upstairs, I went into the 'Rocks of Equestria' exhibit. Vigilance floated ahead of me, the twelve millimeter pistol sweeping across anything that looked remotely threatening. Long clear cases stretched in neat rows up and down the long room. The sight of a poster of Twilight Sparkle wearing a mining helmet and holding a rock in her hoof over a caption reading 'Rocks are cool!' struck me as incredibly… dorky. Okay, she created Gardens of Equestria, but there was no doubt that she was an egghead through and through.

Most of the cases had been ignored. The mineral samples within were just rocks, and one thing the Wasteland had plenty of was rocks. The only display that had been touched was a large display of 'magic gems' that glittered in their armored case. I could tell it was armored because it looked like somepony had tried using

dynamite to blast it open and still the case was quite intact. I couldn't even smell the char.

"So…how are you doing?" I asked errantly as I used a magic bullet to turn a skittering radroach to goo. The filly jumped; I wasn't sure if it was from the shot or the question.

She spat her nine millimeter automatic into a leg pocket that served as a holster. "I'm fine," she said with a hard look around her. "Just…don't like this place."

"It's a lot different from the stable, isn't it?" I frowned too as I looked at the room with its flickering lights. She gave me a 'no duh' look. "There's a place near here. It's called Chapel. There's a bunch of ponies your age who live there; they're called the Crusaders. They've lost their families. I'm sure they'd be glad to have you. You know more about machines and the like than any of them."

She didn't answer right away. She stared at a pile of rubbish with that hard expression. Then, after a few seconds, she glanced at me. "I'm fine."

"Scotch." I trotted next to her and put a hoof across her shoulder. "You're not fine. None of us are. A pony that's fine would probably run screaming from the room at first sight of what we've dealt with."

She sighed, her olive body drooping a little. "Mom died a month ago. I remember her telling me that she'd help me go over the terminal technician manual when she got home. I was having problems with passing that class." She looked right at me with the dark blue-green eyes behind her goggles. "She told me that if I just toughed it out, it'd all make sense. I just had to be tough.

"Then I was being told by Rivets that I'd be taking Mom's place. I didn't even have a chance to say…to say anything before she was recycled. In the morning, I had a mother. In the evening…I…" Her voice caught and she drew a shaky little breath. "I didn't." She sniffed and rubbed her nose, pointing her hoof at me. "Then everypony went crazy and…and then you showed up. And then…then…one morning I woke up with a clogged digester to fix. And in the evening…everypony I knew was dead." She glared up at me, her lips pressed tightly together. "And you killed them."

"Scotch, I had to. If I hadn't…"

"…we'd all have become crazy raiders too," the filly said as she closed her eyes and nodded. "I know. I know. But…now I don't have Mom…or home…or anything. All I have are you and your

friends. You're the last bit of Stable 99 I have. And you left too. And…" her voice trembled again as she clenched her teeth together, "and I am…I don't want to lose anypony else. I'm going to be tough. I'm…" she pressed her face to my chest and she gave a soft little sob. "I'm not crying," she said softly amid the tears.

"I know, Scotch." I said softly as I put a hoof across her shoulders, sitting with her. "I'm sorry."

We were all broken. We were all hurting. All of us were playing this game for stakes we didn't understand. Was this why P-21, Glory, Rampage, Lacunae, and Scotch followed me? Because I pointed in a direction, and any direction, even Hell itself, was better than sitting around and slowly falling apart? Big Daddy had once tried to save Hoofington. Goldenblood had wanted to save Equestria. This was what I was trying to save, just five ponies. I looked across the room at the rows and rows of rocks. Had there really been a time when they mattered more than ending a pointless war?

Why was that display broken open?

As I stared across the room, I spotted the only display that had been successfully breached. The explosion hadn't just destroyed the armored glass, it had blasted out a chunk of the wall. That had taken a lot more than just dynamite! Scotch Tape seemed to sense my attention was elsewhere, and she lifted her goggles, wiped her eyes, and looked at the blasted display as well. "What? What's wrong?"

"I don't know…" I said softly, but my heart was thudding and my mane felt like it was trying to stand on end. "Keep your gun out," I whispered as I walked slowly towards the case. Debris and mud fanned out in front of the display. Broken stars crunched underhoof as I looked at the plaque, which had broken off. I levitated the brass plaque, turning the heavy plate over.

'Rocks from the sky. Meteorites and meteor fragments recovered from the Hoofington area, Everfree Forest, and across Equestria.' A glob of wet mud slowly crawled down the front as the spot right between my shoulder blades tingled.

Wait? Wet mud?

I whirled in time to see the rifle barrel pointing out of empty space from the above end of the display cases behind me. The rifle fired with utter silence. Only plain, dumb luck had the plaque between my face and the rifle. The impact of the bullet with the plaque

didn't make the slightest sound as it indented right in front of my eyes, almost knocking it from my magic's grip.

I slipped into S.A.T.S., but to my frustration, nothing was targetable by the system. Even the gun was shrouded enough to lower my hit chance to zero. I dropped out of the spell and fired at the faint blur around the barrel as I sprinted towards the shooter. His bullets smashed silently against the plaque, the tiles around me, and my combat barding as I fired back. My gun, to my horror, was just as silent. In fact, I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out.

Scotch Tape was equally silent as she fired wildly behind me, as evidenced by one shot zinging my rump. Fortunately, the low caliber weapon didn't penetrate. The shimmer leapt into the air and disappeared. I had only a second to guess, and Vigilance was dry. Sense and reason said to reload and wait for whatever spell was on me to expire. *Be awesome*, suggested a little blue pegasus in my mind. Screw sense and reason. I leapt and slid on my side under the display cases and finished reloading Vigilance as I emerged on the far side. From thin air that barrel appeared, but now it had to swing down towards me. Vigilance came up as the shooter's motion opened the cloak enough to see their face.

Lancer's face.

His rifle pointed at my horn as he stood on his back legs in that freaky zebra stance. My glowing pistol illuminated the calm, certain expression on his face. Eleven zebras, you striped bastard! It felt like we'd hit S.A.T.S. as we pointed our guns at each other. That moment stretched on as our eyes locked together, our gazes warring as if trying to break the other through sheer will before firing.

Scotch Tape was under no such spell. The filly had all the marksmanship of me on moonshine while blindfolded, but the rounds striking the cloak made that barrel twitch ever so slightly off my face. My horn flared, knocking back the bolt of his weapon and ejecting the round. As fast as lightning, he caught the bullet in his teeth and spit it back into the rifle breech. His hoof slammed the bolt home as the rifle moved back towards my face. He was fast. Damned fast. Fast as when he'd shot us at Brimstone's Fall.

This time, I was twenty percent faster.

I leapt at him as the silent rifle flashed right by my ear. If it hadn't been magically silenced, I'd likely have been permanently deafened in that ear; as it was, the heat of the shot burned my cheek as I

tackled him like a hoofball player. He flipped and twisted in my grip like an eel, and as we landed in a heap on the floor between the cases he jerked out of my grip. Refusing to let him get away, my mouth seized the invisible fabric of his cloak and locked down. Vigilance came around, the pistol flashing in eerie silence as I fired right in front of my face.

Then the cloak shredded as he jumped free once more. The blue gemstone brooch holding the cloak crackled and died. The tattered remains hung around his striped form as he slung the rifle around his shoulders and jumped back from me, tail coiling around the trigger. Suddenly, sound returned in a rush of Scotch Tape shrieking, Rampage bellowing, Glory zapping, Lacunae's minigun purring, and P-21 yelling "Blackjack, you idiot! Where are you?"

"In here!" I yelled as I kept Lancer moving for the door out into the atrium.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape yelled as he disappeared around the corner. She pointed at some blocks of gray explosive I'd seen stacked in a party cake in a memory. More ominous, though, was an... egg shaped, pulsating, multicolored glowing *something* strapped to the pile. I didn't know what it did, but I assumed it was probably really, really bad.

"Can you disarm it?" I asked. She gave me a look that put my question on par with 'can you levitate it with your earth pony powers?' "Right! Let's get out of here!" I shouted as we raced into the atrium and absolute chaos.

"Proditor!" snarled one mare at Rampage as she launched a flying hoofhick that actually dented Rampage's heavy steel barding.

"Spurius!" the red-striped pony yelled back, and atop the information counter the two engaged in the most graceful and terrifying display of hoof to hoof combat I'd ever seen. If it hadn't been so obvious that they were trying to crush each other underhoof, I'd have thought they were dancing. The scariest damn bit of dancing I'd ever seen.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to enjoy the sight, as a zebra overhead using the balcony for cover opened fire on Scotch Tape and me while her comrade kept sniping at the weaving and beaming Glory. I shielded Scotch as we raced across to where P-21 was loading another grenade into Persuasion.

"We need to get out of here! There's a bomb in there!" I said as I pointed back at the rocks exhibit. His eyes went round before he

fired the grenade towards the two on the second floor. To my shock and amazement, one of the zebras shot the projectile as it dropped towards their cover, making it detonate uncomfortably close to Glory. That was just not fair!

Unfortunately, all of us getting out the one exit would be particularly difficult given that Lacunae was blocking it with her spell shield and minigun. The two zebras pressing were so fast that, by the time the gun started firing, they were already out of the line of fire. She couldn't strafe without risk to us all, so was having to use her magic arrows to keep the zebra hoof fighters off her. If her magic was anything like mine, though, I doubted that she had an unlimited supply. Worse, her shield was protecting her from the snipers, but zebra hooves seemed quite capable of passing through it.

"Unfortunately, they don't seem keen on letting us out first," P-21 said dryly. Then he blinked and reached into his pouch, drawing out a weapon that made my heart quiver. The sword was a thing of beauty. Deadly art. As my magic lifted it, I immediately wanted to try it out on those zebra hoof to hoof specialists. Hell, I wanted to go back to the Arena and give Psychoshy a rematch! "Blackjack?" P-21 said as he looked at me in worry.

"Nothing. Just a sweet sword," I grinned. "You go ahead and take care of the bomb. I'll take care of the rest."

P-21 stuck his head out and nearly got it blasted for his trouble by the sniper on the balcony. I looked at him and shielded him with my body and barding. "On three. One, two, three!" And together we charged back across the atrium. The zebra rounds were enchanted to electrocute, and when one hit me I nearly fell on my face as my muscles jerked for a few seconds. We reached the stairs, and I used them for some cover while P-21 disappeared into the 'Rocks of Equestria' exhibit.

I charged my way up the stairs, readying my sword. The balcony ran in an L, and all I had to do was get around the bend and I'd have a clear shot around their cover.

Then everything went silent.

I dropped to my face and saw a hole blown in the wall ahead of me. Without looking behind me, I rolled to the left. A second hole appeared. I rolled back to the right. A third hole appeared. I jumped to my hooves. A fourth hole appeared right against the second. *Awwww, yeah*, a little blue pony crowed in my head as I looked over

my shoulder with a grin at Lancer. The zebra stared at me as he hung out of a door behind me, left eyelid twitching a little in shock. Then I entered S.A.T.S. and my horn unloaded a rapid fire barrage of magic bullets right in his face.

Unfortunately, he was one tough, quick zebra. His face and chest bleeding, he disappeared back around the corner. I charged after him, bellowing silently…it was the thought that counted, damn it!

Then I froze in the doorway, sweeping the security office before me with my mutated gaze. There was a large terminal over a bank of monitors. I took two steps forward in that silence. There was a light on the floor right in front of me. A light on a small tin. I put a hoof on the disarm button and took another cautious step.

Then he shot the mine.

The fragmentation mine lifted me off my hooves and dropped me in a heap. My PipBuck gave me all kinds of warnings about how my chest was crippled. Really, given the staggering amount of pain I was in, I found the little crying pony icon rather redundant. I fell to my side and managed to sneak out a slightly Enervated healing potion before I blacked out completely. I couldn't fall now. I had to press on! I had to find Lancer and cut his striped ass!

Then he shoved me over onto my back and pushed the sniper rifle underneath my chin. Goddesses, zebras standing on their hind legs was a freaky sight! He had his hoof nudged against the trigger as he looked down at me in an expression of extreme frustration. Then he tapped a small bat-shaped talisman on the side of the gun.

"How'd you manage to not set off the mine?" he asked softly.

"I'm a light step," I muttered, trying to pull my focus together enough to cut his head off.

He looked just a little impressed. "You must be part zebra." The impressed look vanished. "Did you remove the bones of the stars?" he asked softly as blood dripped down his face and chest. S.A.T.S. was recharging, and even then, as fast as S.A.T.S. was, he might blow my head off before the first shot and certainly before the second. And if my horn glowed to seize the sword... I needed an opening.

"The rocks? You're here for rocks?" I groaned and pointed to one of the shuttered windows. "Go outside. Plenty of rocks. Enjoy!"

He crushed the barrel against my throat, making my breath rasp. Okay, I had enough chest trauma at the moment that I was raspy already. "Where are they? Where are the bones of the stars?"

I coughed, glancing at the door and getting another shove with his gun. “Why do you care? Sekashi said--”

But the name had a galvanizing effect on the buck as his eyes bugged out and he spat out something forcefully in Zebra. I didn’t have a clue what he actually said, but I bet it was dirty. “She is dead! They must all be dead!” I bet that’s what you told your boss, bastard.

Suddenly, I had a bad feeling. “She is dead. She told me before she died that the stars are not all evil.”

“She was correct. The stars have power for any pony who dares.” He chuckled darkly, obviously relieved to hear of her passing. “Clearly, they work though you. You guided me to my target. And you are here now when we discovered that the bones once lay here.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said as I glared up at him. “We came here to get out of the rain. That’s all.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe in coincidences. Or loose ends…”

I saw the shadow and smirked. “Do you believe in Glory?”

An emerald beam struck Lancer in the chest. He fell back, and I pushed the barrel of his gun aside as it fired and blasted a hole six inches from my neck. Instantly, the world was reduced to a single ringing ‘squee’ as my left ear exploded in pain. I flopped in rather unawesome fashion as my magic struggled to grab the sword. Bleeding and burning, Lancer hooked the rifle sling in his hoof, threw the gun over his head, and raced out with Glory blasting at his fleeing backside. One shot struck the terminal, which sparked and sent the monitors flickering.

“Please don’t need a Hydra…please don’t need a Hydra…” Glory chanted as she rolled me onto my back and quickly pulled open my armored vest. “It doesn’t look like anything penetrated too deep,” she said in relief. “Just some broken ribs and contusions…” Thank goodness for Security’s armor. She started to pass me some piss weak healing potions, carefully working towards stronger and fresher potions. My ear thankfully recovered with enough application of magic. Oh sweet Celestia, did I love healing potions.

Suddenly, the speakers of the terminal cracked, and a mare said in a panic, “…any Hoofington Guard units, this is Security Chief Cloverleaf at the Hoofington Museum. We’re under attack!” On the monitor, I saw an image of ponies with SMGs and black security

armor similar to my own sweeping through the museum. I cringed at the sight of mothers and young gunned down without hesitation. “They overrode the lockdown! They’re using machineguns! They’re killing everypony!” Behind her voice came the rising crackle of automatic fire chattering away. “Please! Send help immediately! This is Security Chief Clover--“

The door behind her clicked open, and a unicorn wearing unmarked black armor appeared in the doorway. Without hesitation, she raised a glowing zebra ten millimeter SMG and put a burst into the mare’s back. She trotted over the corpse and put a hoof to a little device clipped to her ear. “U-2 to team leader. Security is pacified. I don’t think she got a signal out. No sir. It looks like the jamming worked.” There was a muffled explosion that shook the cameras. “We’re collecting them now, sir. Yes, sir. Five minutes to extraction. Yes sir.”

“Help,” gurgled Cloverleaf, still barely alive after all.

“Sure.” The unicorn in the black armor looked down and pointed her SMG. There was a brief burst. “There. You’re helped. All of you were dead anyway.” She turned and ran for the door. “Come on, ponies. We’ve got half an hour till showtime! Move it!”

“Show time?” Glory muttered in horror as she stared at the monitor. “They knew. They knew that the bombs were going to fall! How could they know and not tell anypony? How could anypony do that?” I felt a cold horror inside too, but it was mitigated by two hundred years of radioactive barbarism and a half dozen zebra troopers.

“I don’t know,” I groaned as I rose to my hooves. “But I know it doesn’t matter now. These zebra must have been after the same rocks, but they’re two centuries too late.” I lifted the sword and looked in the direction Lancer had fled. “I’m going to find that sneaky bastard and cut him apart alphabetically.” Then I glanced at her. The recording had rattled her terribly. I wondered if it was her emphasis on loyalty or the sheer monstrousness of what they’d done. “What would I start with?”

She blinked and then looked at me and swallowed. “Depends on how specific you want to get. You could start with ‘abdomen’ or ‘amygdala’.”

“Amygdala? That’s that dangly thing in your throat, right?” I asked her with a grin as I closed my slightly perforated armor up.

“No, that’s the uvula. The amygdala’s found…” She stopped herself

when she saw my look and flushed. “Right. Joking. Catching on.”

“‘Cause you’re a smart pony,” I said as I tapped her head. I stepped to the door he’d disappeared through and stopped short. Wow, that was a lot of mines. Ah well, have horn, will disarm! I smacked the tab on the first mine with my magic and stepped forward to pick it up. Then, without warning the mine exploded in my face! As I fell back, the redundant pony display once again flashed to life and told me my forelegs were severely crippled.

I screamed as I sat, feeling the blood drip down my limbs. “He tampered with the mines! That bastard!” I shouted as I brought out Vigilance and blasted at the mines and anypony that dared poke their head down that hall. Maybe he’d wired them so that they’d detonate when ‘disarmed’; wouldn’t that be a sneaky trick?

“Well, I always wondered why anypony would make a landmine you could disarm just by pressing the button on top…” she remarked as she dug out a fresh healing potion and dribbled it right on my bleeding forelegs to help focus their healing power where needed. I sighed in relief and satisfaction as one mine, then the next, then the next, detonated and filled the hallway with the reek of cordite. What was the point of having a brand new razor sharp sword if you didn’t have a striped bastard to try it out on?

“Blackjack!” P-21 bellowed from the museum atrium. I let my breath hiss out through my teeth. I really wanted some zebra to test this sword on. Particularly a zebra who was a murderer and had shot me in the back. Twice. I almost started back down the hall after him when I saw Glory’s worried look and grunted. Fine… hopefully P-21’d handled the bomb and…

Oh…hello. Another bomb sat right under the terminal. I looked at that sickly-glowing egg, heard my PipBuck clicking, and knew that where there were two, there were definitely more.

I ran back to the security office door and looked out. My friends were by the front door, shielded by Lacunae and her bursts of suppressive fire at the balcony snipers. Rampage’s armor looked like it was a dented can of Cram, and she was still fighting brutally against one of the zebra melee specialists. The other one was smeared across the information desk. I had no idea what language they were speaking, but boy did that zebra look pissed!

Now if only Lancer would make an appearance.

I ran down and stepped carefully through the shield, my whole body tingling as it passed through the magical barrier. Lacunae’s

dress was almost shredded, and her purple hide showed a number of significant injuries. Still, she stood with poise and focus as she fired her weapon in controlled bursts. I doubted she had much ammo left, though.

"Tell me you disarmed them!" I shouted as I looked at the zebra attackers.

"Them?" he yelled back over the gunfire, his eyes wide. "I couldn't! They're wired to a remote detonator!" My mane did not like this one bit. The zebras weren't withdrawing, but Lancer was nowhere to be seen. And there were a lot of really bad explosives in this place.

What were the odds Lancer'd sacrifice his own zebras to cover his escape?

"Lacunae! Get us outside. Now!" I shouted.

Her purple eyes widened as she looked down at me. "The shield will drop when I cast the spell, and Rampage will need to be closer." That meant ending her dancing, twisting duel with her striped opponent.

"I got it. Glory. Scotch. P-21. Keep the snipers' heads down," I said as I stepped out the shield, feeling every hair in my mane tingle from the magical charge. I had no time for flashy hoof to hoof combat at the moment. "Sorry Rampage!" I yelled as the bubble dropped and Lacunae's horn began to glow. Immediately, the zebras rose to fire but ducked out of sight again as our fire sprayed the balcony.

"Eta?" She glanced at me as I racked the shotgun and blasted at her striped attacker. Rampage caught more than a little friendly fire, but her opponent dropped in a bloody, striped heap. Okay…so not the most honorable thing to do but--

"Futuere!" she snarled as she planted her forehooves and swept her rear hooves in an arc that knocked my legs out from under me. I flipped in the air as she halted and blasted me into the air with a double hoof rear kick. Suddenly, I was getting a much better view of the roof before I came back down in Glory's grasp. Only my armor had kept me from getting disemboweled by Rampage's hoofclaws.

Glory beat her wings furiously to keep me aloft as I coughed and hacked, "Get us…outside…"

With an electric crackle and a purple flash, we disappeared and reappeared out in the rain next to the subway stairs. I slipped from

Glory's hooves just as a very pissed off Rampage yelled something in Zebra and actually somersaulted into the air to bring her hooves down in a fearsome blow. I dove to the side, rolling across the broken asphalt. I really did not need this right now; Lancer could be setting up an attack, or worse, getting away. I really wanted to check another enemy off my list.

Unfortunately, Rampage had entered a spinning, kicking, thrashing frenzy against us. "You will not harm her!" she swore in an oddly accented voice. P-21 was raked by her tail; when was I going to force him to wear some barding? Sneakiness be damned!

She launched herself, rolling in a ball and bringing her razor spines down at my face. I rolled completely on my back, all four hooves and every bit of magic I had in my horn pushing against her. The tips of her blades nearly perforated me from pelvis to sternum as I shoved her back into the air. I could only watch in amazement as she unrolled, twisted in midair, and landed on all four hooves.

"Fuck me…" I muttered.

She reared above me and brought her forehooves down in a crushing blow. I lifted my sword horizontally, catching her hoofclaws as she glared down at me with murder in her eyes. I didn't have Mallet's magical strength and had to press my forehooves to the flat side of the single-edged blade. She was stronger and heavier, and her head tilted down to point that helmet saber right at my throat.

"Rampage," I rasped as Glory and Lacunae alike blasted at her thick armor. P-21 and Scotch Tape watched helplessly as my legs slowly bent under her weight. "Sorry about this…"

"Eta?" She blinked as I levitated the gun to her chin and stared into her eyes.

"Sweet Celestia!" P-21 swore as Rampage's body went completely rigid, a cascade of blood, brain, and bone splattering onto my face as she fell. Scotch Tape screamed in horror as she backed away. Glory landed and started to approach when I gave her a warning look. I hoped Rampage would be back, but I didn't want to take risks. I wiped a leg across my face and pointed Vigilance steadily at Rampage as pink light shone. Even Lacunae seemed at a loss as I waited for her brains to regenerate.

She opened her pink eyes and glared at me as I held the gun less than half an inch from her left eye. "Are you in control?" I asked softly over the hissing rain.

"You had no right to interfere!" she spat, muttering something in Zebra.

I heard the crash and roar of the bombs going off, felt the pressure blast against us, and saw the scintillating light of the fireball flood through the parking lot. Firelight from the burning ruins bathed us both, but I didn't blink. Neither did she. Not even with chunks of the building raining down around us. Lacunae blocked the largest pieces with her shield as Rampage and I kept our gazes locked. "Getting us away from that gave me the right."

"You think that because I can heal that I am eager to get shot? You think that because I volunteer to fight against my own, that you can just gun us both down!" she said, hissing in rage. "You ponies…I gave my oath of loyalty! I swore my allegiance to my home! And you shoot me!" She spat in my face. I didn't blink or wipe it away as I kept the gun steady.

This wasn't Rampage. I wondered what cutie mark was under the armor. Thorns? Tentacles? Something else? "What is your name?" I asked as I moved the gun off her eye a little.

Confusion entered her eyes as she started to look at us. "Shujaa," she said as she straightened a little. "Did you miss the red stripes? Are you colorblind?" She looked at my barding in suspicion. "You are not with the army."

"No, I'm not. I'm sorry," I said as my mane prickled. "Shujaa…do you know where you are?"

She blinked and looked at the blasted remains of the museum. Then she looked to the east to the green glow around the black towers. "Hoofington, of course. Near Miramare, I think. Were we overrun? Where are my friends?" Confusion and distrust were etched on her face. "Where is Twist?"

"Shujaa. What is the last thing you remember?" I asked softly.

She scowled at me. "I owe you no answers!" I racked a fresh round into Vigilance's chamber without blinking. I wasn't going to take another chance with a pony capable of smashing any of us to goo. She pressed her lips together, then said slowly, "We were scouting a zebra encampment south of Brimstone's Fall…We were…ambushed. Wounded. Twist…" She blinked in shock. She froze as she stared into my eyes. "Is this a dream?"

"I don't know," I replied softly. "What about Twist?"

"No!" she said sharply as she backed away. She looked around in a panic. "Twist! Where is…she…Twist!" She screamed in shock and

started to babble in zebra talk. I didn't know if she was going to attack, cry, or run.

I sighed as I lined up the gun, jumped to S.A.T.S., and shot her with three hollowpoints.

"Blackjack!" Glory said in horror as I waited for Rampage's brains to regenerate. "You don't do therapy with bullets!" she said sharply, jumping between me and Rampage.

"You do when you're dealing with a regenerating mare who thinks she's a crazy zebra," I replied, watching carefully as I loaded a fresh magazine into the pistol.

But it didn't seem to be necessary; Rampage rose and groaned, clutching her head. "Oh, dear Luna, stop the hammering," she muttered as she blinked up at me in confusion. "Where'd the zebras go? How did we get outside…" Then she looked at the flames leaping out of the gutted remains of the museum and gave a half smile. "And did I do that?"

I sighed and holstered Vigilance. "Nope. A zebra named Lancer did."

She gave a sour frown and rubbed her temples. "Good. I'd hate to think I caused that and missed it." She hissed softly and muttered, "Why does my head hurt so bad?"

I glanced at the others; their looks ranged from horrified to concerned to shocked to disapproving. "You were out again. I had to shoot you." I flushed a little. "Repeatedly."

Her eyes shot wide. "Is Scotch Tape alright?" She immediately looked around, but sighed and slumped a little in relief as she saw the confused young mare.

"Rampage, does the name Shujaa mean anything to you?" Rampage shook her head in confusion. "What about Twist?"

"Twist?" Rampage frowned. "I think…" she began, narrowing her eyes as she thought. I watched her eyes as she errantly pulled out a pack of Mint-als and licked one up. Then she sighed. "Sorry. It sounds familiar, but I'm not sure who that is."

"Right," I said as I scanned the night with my EFS. No red bars. Nothing.

So why did I feel even worse?

* * *

As much as I wanted to go straight to the Green Line, we had to

take a little detour to Chapel first. I was blasted and battered and we were all wet and tired and it was late afternoon. To be honest, I wanted to go to Star House and sleep in an actual bed. My mood was as lousy as the weather. I kept glancing back towards the burning museum, expecting a silent bullet to come out of nowhere.

The Remnant had wanted those space rocks (Glory had had to explain the concept of 'shooting stars' to me…twice) for some reason. I could have screamed in frustration. Why did I have to get hit by every single mystery of the Hoof? The Remnant. Thunderhead. Sanguine. EC-1101. Goldenblood…fucking Goldenblood alone, who seemed like he'd set all this up two centuries ago just to fuck with me!

"Why does the not smart pony have to figure all this out?" I muttered as we walked through the rain towards Chapel. But I knew the answer: as stupid as I was, I was also tenacious enough to keep plodding along.

When we reached the grassy slope leading down to the town, I was stunned at the sight of the place. The tiny village was expanding in a big way. There were two wagons loaded up with scavenged lumber, metal sheeting, and other building supplies. While the Crusaders were everywhere, there were at least a dozen more fully grown ponies as well. As we approached, a bony shape appeared from the sky, and Harpica landed before us.

"Careful, ma'ams and sir. There's mines buried around the town now," the ghoul pegasus rasped.

"Gya…ya…ya…!" Scotch Tape stammered as she waved a hoof at the ghoul. "It's a…a…"

"Ghoul. Not a zombie," Glory finished firmly. I supposed I couldn't blame the olive filly. After all, I didn't have a clue what ghouls were till I met Harpica and Ditzy Doo. And Silver Spoon…

Harpica led us around the edge of the minefield to the road. An impromptu tower had been erected with a machinegun mounted on a pivot. It took at least three Crusaders in oversized combat helmets to crew the weapon, but it would lay down an effective field of fire…so long as their position wasn't hit by a missile.

"You've been busy," I commented to the ghoul pegasus mare. Scotch Tape looked ready to climb on top of Rampage at the sight of ghoul foals chatting politely with the more rough and tumble Crusaders.

Harpica nodded. "Indeed. It would seem that Blueblood Manor

held items of significant value to the Society. They've been most generous in exchange for simple trinkets." She then looked at me and added, "However, the salvagers have not disturbed Master Vanity." I smiled, relieved at that.

"Welcome back," Priest said as he trotted up the road towards us. "You and your friends are always welcome in Chapel," he said…to P-21? I think the blue pony was more surprised than I was.

"Even me?" Rampage asked in worry, looking cute as she fidgeted in her spiked armor. Priest looked at her solemnly for a long moment before he sighed and slowly shook his head. "Right. Sorry. Should have known better." She dropped her eyes. "I'll just go wait up at the Star House."

"I'll be there soon, Rampage," I promised. She just gave a sad half smile before she trotted back the way she came. I turned to Priest. "She's gotten better."

He looked calmly back at me. "Are you willing to take responsibility if she kills another foal?" I winced at that; I wasn't. Heck, now I knew that she also had a zebra inside her who took poorly to getting shot. Well…honestly, most sane folks did that. He smiled that sad little smile of his before he stepped up to me and pressed his horn to my shoulder. The glow of magic heralded the delicious sensation of healing. I wanted that spell…why couldn't my horn manage to do more than go bang? Was that too much to ask?

"Are you going straight up to the house as well?" Glory asked as she waited in line for her own healing. We were all battered up; of course only Lacunae looked decent. After all, her horn could even conjure a mending spell for her damaged dress. Stupid big horned alicorns... my horn was plenty good enough. It wasn't little! It was…compact!

"I need to talk to Sekashi," I said with a little frown. "I think she knows more about the Remnant than she let on." Lancer certainly knew and cared more about her than he would about any simple zebra.

P-21 looked less curious than Glory. "If it's all the same to you, I'll head back to the house. After all, somepony's going to have to pick the lock and let her back in."

Priest smiled at the small blue buck. "Actually, I was hoping to talk to you after I was finished healing your friends." That definitely piqued our curiosity, but none more so than P-21 himself. In fact, he looked almost wary of the black unicorn, but he nodded anyway.

"Well, then I'll see you later, P-21," I said as Priest's healing spell saved us from using our freshest healing potions. Maybe Sekashi would have a fresh batch. I floated out the key to the cottage and passed it to Glory. "Here, you can let everypony--"

"Chaaaarrrrge!" screamed a group of fillies and colts as they raced out of the post office and pony piled upon me. "Crusaders collection agents!" shrieked Medley as she leaped upon my back while Allegro and Adagio seized my forelegs. Sonata gave a much more reserved headbump against my flank. "You owe Charity for six spark batteries and a bottle of Wild Pegasus! Cough 'em up!" Medley declared as I wailed and collapsed beneath the four, thrusting my PipBuck into the air before I disappeared from sight.

* * *

"And to think, I once recommended her to Spike to be the Element of Generosity," I said to myself as I limped to the house provided to Sekashi and Majina. Sure, I'd had the seven hundred caps, but sending young colts and fillies to beat the money out of me? Okay, it'd taken Sonata's big sad eyes look to make me cough up the money, but still. "No cap in the Wasteland is safe from her greedy hooves, the little capmonger!"

There was an odd little wooden mask on the door, and I felt my insides squirm softly as I knocked. Majina peeked out the window at me, and a minute later Sekashi opened the door. "Ahh, greetings, Guardian! Come in. Come in. I will prepare something fair to eat."

"I'd love to have some of that cold medicine too," I said as I looked at more half-carved masks.

She looked back in concern. "Oh, is one of your friends ill?"

"Nope. But that stuff is pretty tasty," I said with a grin. "Mix it with Sparkle-Cola and a radscorpion egg and it's even better." I could see Sekashi wasn't exactly 100% with me on my opinion of what makes for a great drink. She moved into the kitchen and began preparing a tray. The deaf zebra handled the knives with skill a unicorn might envy as she chopped the greens for the salad. We sat at the table, and Majina tucked in with gusto. "Where'd you get all this fresh food?"

"The Society ponies have been quite thrilled with our wares of late. One in particular was overjoyed at the dresses we collected and has compensated us well in food and wealth. The Finders bring in all

sorts of other delectable goods with the building materials." And trade saves the Wasteland.

The salad might have tasted fine, but it could do with some RadAway to give it that citrusy zing. "I ran into an old friend of yours a few hours ago. Quiet buck. Likes to shoot helpless zebras."

She touched a puckered scar on her shoulder. "Ah. That one."

"Yeah. And," I said somewhat hesitantly, "after chatting with him, I got to thinking that maybe you weren't being completely honest with me before." Her ears folded back as her eyes turned wary. "A zebra like him wouldn't have spent all that time trying to kill thirteen zebras just because their tribe mocked the Remnant. They'd let the mine break them. Lancer was there to make certain you and the others died." I stretched out a hoof to touch hers. "In fact, I think Lancer was there to kill you, specifically."

She closed her eyes and sighed softly. "You are correct. He was not there to kill the others. He was there to kill me." She opened her sad green eyes and smiled. "There is a funny story I know: once upon a time there was a young zebra who was a member of the Remnant. She trained in the Zenith style of combat, learned her potions and poison, and the art of wind…of infiltration and stealth. She was skilled, and drew the eyes of the leader of the Remnant, Legate Vitiosus. He took her as one of his wives.

"But, one day, she was on a solo mission scouting the lands around the black city when she fell in a storm. She was wounded and lost, and feral ghouls were closing in. Then she spotted through the clouds a single star. She promised anything she could to escape that horrible night, and the star accepted her promise." She sighed softly and bowed her head. "But it also exacted a horrible price, for in her heart doubt was seeded."

"What happened?" I asked when our eyes met again.

"She questioned the need and goals of the Remnant. What was the purpose of fulfilling the wishes of a Caesar two centuries passed? Were the stars truly evil? She used her position to learn lore of the stars, a forbidden subject to all but the most trusted zebras. But, eventually, the zebra became foolish, and the Legate learned of her studies. His rage was…profound." She looked at the numerous scars on her hide. I knew now that not all of them had been received in the mine.

"She took the knowledge she had learned and with her child she fled her home. His rage redoubled, for a wife to flee her husband

was the gravest insult. He ordered she not be allowed a moment's respite until she was captured. His hunters were skilled. Dreadfully so. But none more than his son, trained in the midnight style of combat. The son named for the slaying lance. So keenly, so quietly did he pursue that she found a group of zebras destined to toil in the earth and joined them to escape his bullets. Still, he found her, but in his haste he missed the shot that mattered most. Now dead in the eyes of the Remnant, she sought sanctuary in the shadow of the most dreaded of cities."

She gave a sad little smile. "Have ever heard something so silly? Such a silly mare for wishing upon the stars."

I rose and walked around the table to hug her. I knew she couldn't hear, but I whispered anyway, "She sounds pretty courageous to me."

When we parted, I asked quietly, "Why do zebras hate Hoofington so much? I mean, I hate all the things that happened here two hundred years ago, but that was ponies messing stuff up. What's the zebra angle?"

She shivered. "To explain that…you must know of the Eater of Souls."

* * *

The stars are capricious, fickle, powerful, and mysterious. To some, their interference may be malevolent, but such malevolence is reflected only in our desires and wishes. Others see inspiration and feel the hoof of destiny in their patterns and movements. However, by and large, their actions and motivations are beyond our understanding and knowledge. The wise leave the business of the stars to the stars. The foolish call upon them. The damned demand of them. Such is the nature of such things.

But there are stars who are malevolent. Stars evil and cruel who are cast out from the skies to turn into hard and crushing destruction. When they strike, their destruction is absolute. Their wrath and poison are unimaginable. Their hatred knows no limit and their cruelty possesses no bounds. Cast from on high, they fall with terrible wrath. Such stars are truly the monsters most zebras dread.

Once a great zebra city spread out across this valley. Its towers rose to the heavens and its tunnels plunged into the earth. Its occupants were wise and its armies strong, its markets filled with fields of plenty and its fields green and flowing. Gold and silver and gems decorated all from

the highest prince to the lowest slave. It was every bit as fine as the ancient zebra capital of Roam.

But for all its greatness, pride gnawed at its belly. In its desire to surpass all others, the city turned to folly and wickedness. Hearts hardened, minds closed, and its wealth was squandered. Its scholars and sages whispered their vile and poisonous worship to the skies and tainted the heart of a star. And so they attempted a terrible ritual. Ten thousand zebra magi carved the talismans of the city into a glyph stretching for miles in all directions. Rare, potent, and dark reagents were prepared. And in unison, they cast a spell that united their powers…magnified it… and magnified it again.

And they called down a star: The Eater of Souls.

Perhaps they meant to capture it for their own. Perhaps they erred and meant for it to fall upon glorious Roam instead. Perhaps they knew not what their great spell would do, only knowing it would be wondrous and terrible. Regardless, the star fell. It shattered the great city, blackened its foul towers and ancient libraries. Its fires scorched the fertile fields and turned them to ash. The city's great wealth was buried, its knowledge lost. And so was the dread city lost for all time.

* * *

The candle on the table had burned low by the time she finished, casting flickering orange light over Sekashi's face. "Or so we thought. When ponies came to this land, we tried to warn them of the star's evil. We told them that fallen stars only sleep within the earth, not lie there dead, and that which sleeps may dream. They would not listen. And so they built a new city atop the old. And so they repeated the folly of the old."

"You really think there's a fallen star under Hoofington?" I asked softly, feeling a little skeptical.

She smiled. "I know ponies do not think so. Ponies do not believe in curses, hexes, and zebra hocus pocus. They dug and searched, and though they found the bones of the star, they thought them little more than rocks. But dark things are ever associated here; it was here Nightmare Moon rose to challenge Celestia. Here the long night was darkest. Here where the great towers rose and the great battles were fought. And the towers stand still, a headstone to the land that was slain in its war."

"It makes for a good story," I admitted, "but it's not proof." She

shrugged helplessly, her smile sad. How do you prove a story from so long ago? “So why would the Remnant be looking for meteorites?”

“Perhaps he simply wished to dispose of them. When we find bones of the stars, we hide them in deep caves, bury them in desolate deserts, or sink them far at sea. It is a great honor for any zebra,” she said matter-of-factly. Still, I’d bet my itchy mane it had to be something else.

I groaned, burying my face in my forelegs. “Do these stars also produce horribly convoluted plots and mysteries that are supposed to be solved by the most immensely unqualified ponies in the world?” I asked as I looked at her plaintively.

She reached over the table and patted my head in consolation.

* * *

Walking back to the Star House, I had to admit that I felt a little disturbed at the thought of stars, great and powerful entities, manipulating me and countless others. I simply couldn’t accept that we were all puppets of these terrible beings; it was too overwhelming. Fate was something I simply couldn’t accept. Was I fated to kill 99? To wander the Wasteland with EC-1101 on my leg? Finding a virtue was hard enough; being a plaything of vastly powerful beings was more than I could handle.

Sekashi had told me that the Crusaders had left a path through the minefield up to the house, so I headed to the little gate in the makeshift barricade by Chapel’s chapel. All I wanted was to save ponies and help my friends…and find out what Project Horizons was about…deal with Sanguine…and Lighthooves…and Lancer… and now fallen stars too, apparently! It made me want to stick my head in a hole and scream.

Then I heard a suppressed giggle. It wasn’t the giggle itself that caught my attention, though, so much as who it sounded like and the fact that I’d never expected to hear it from him. Carefully, I trotted to the corner of the chapel and peeked around behind it. Yes, P-21 and…oh…my…

Priest and P-21 sat together in each other’s hooves, the smaller blue pony resting his head on the black unicorn’s shoulder. It wasn’t just that they were cuddling that was shocking, though; it was the smile on my friend’s face. “This is nice…” he murmured. “I haven’t

felt like this…happy…in a long time."

"You deserve some happiness. All of you do," Priest said softly.

"I don't," P-21 murmured as he reached up to touch his neck. Priest silenced him with a kiss that turned his whole face red. I started to pull away, but what I heard next made me linger.

"Do not start talking like Blackjack. You both deserve to be happy. It makes me want to thump you both when I hear you talking like you don't," Priest said firmly.

P-21 flushed and touched the scar around his throat again. "She saved me. She *keeps* saving me. Everypony does. Over and over again." He closed his eyes. "I can't understand it. I'm not her. I'm no hero trotting around the Wasteland. I don't even like most other ponies. Sometimes, I feel like I *hate* everypony in the world. Especially her." He pressed his face into Priest's neck. "Especially me."

Priest didn't recoil or pull away but simply held him. "I'm glad she did. I like you, P-21. You're serious and you're focused and so determined. And you have a lot of reasons to be angry with the world. I hope that I get to give you the kind of love and attention a pony like you deserves." He sighed gently. "You have no idea how hard it is to see so many ponies you want to desperately help…but know that they're just going to finish their pilgrimage and rejoin Celestia."

P-21 looked towards the bridge a little longer than I liked, but then he shook his head. "No. I don't think I'll do that now." Then he pulled away and gave the black unicorn a little smile. "So…if you like bucks…why…" He gestured vaguely in the direction of Star House.

"You mean Arloste? I was barely older than a colt and an older, powerful mare took me into her bed. And she was like you… confused and hurt…so there was no way I could tell her no. I won't say it was forced, but she was the first mare I was ever interested in. And the last." Okay. That was my cue to go!

"Not even Blackjack?" Or stay! Damn it, P-21. Why'd you have to ask that?

"No. No offense to Blackjack, but I could never be in a relationship with her. She's far too…self-destructive," Priest said gently, but with a firmness that made my butt hit the floor. Another kiss, and I started to creep away, face burning in embarrassment. I definitely didn't want to hear any more. Then…"Do you like Blackjack?"

I dashed back as silently as a zebra, poking my head around the corner to peek at the pair again. Okay! Maybe I should hang around a little while longer. Just in case. I bit my left foreleg just to make sure I didn't speak as my ears twitched. He couldn't. He wouldn't…

"What's not to love?" P-21 sighed. *Habazawah?!* "She saves ponies. She'll save the entire world if she can. I can't even make it on my own for ten minutes." He closed his eyes. "I just wish I didn't hate her so much." That made my blood chill till I heard him choke and he curled up a little. "I just wish I understood what I was supposed to feel! I'm used to hate. I hate so damned much. And I feel horrible for hating my friends!" he said as he pressed his face to Priest's neck. The black pony hugged him gently. "I'm such a bad pony… and she's... she's so good it hurts! But she killed him, though…I *should* hate her! Shouldn't I? You can't forgive and love somepony who killed somepony you loved! That's…messed up…"

Then Priest calmly looked right at me! My eyes popped wide in shock and embarrassment. But he slowly shook his head with a little smile. "The first step towards healing hatred is admitting it. Get it out of your system…don't let it fill you up until you're drowning in it. You feel what you feel. You do what you do. And you don't let fear, shame, and hatred control you." He stroked P-21's mane. "I'm sure you can tell her how you feel…"

But P-21 clenched his eyes and shook his head. "I can't. Not to her. Not till…not till I can look at her without wanting to kill her. Not till I can…without feeling…shame…" he said softly and trembled. "She…she saved my life, and a part of me *still* wants to kill her... " He cringed as he curled up against Priest. "What is wrong with me?"

Priest just patted his back. "You're in the Hoof, P-21." And that was all that needed to be said. "I'm sure that when you're ready… she'll be happy to listen to you," he said as he looked at me with a firm gaze that demanded I treat P-21 with far more care than I had. Still biting my lip, I nodded. I'd never bring it up…not till he was ready. Priest sighed, stroking his mane as he looked back down at the buck in his embrace.

P-21 sniffed quietly as he looked up into Priest's eyes and Priest gazed back. "He told me…he told me that meeting me was the luckiest day of his life."

"I know the feeling," Priest said softly. And once more, their lips

met and their eyes closed, Priest's in kindness and P-21's in desperation. I was pretty sure that that was my cue to leave. I trotted silently away.

* * *

For once, we had a nice night in Star House. Priest had stopped by with P-21, the two nudging rumps more than a few times as they stood close together. Medley brought some purchases for Glory, mostly ammunition. Glory made dinner. Rampage pretended to be poisoned by it. Everypony was laughing. Medley gave Scotch Tape the 'stable ponies don't know nothin' routine when asked about where the bathroom was. Scotch Tape complained bitterly about having to use an outhouse, the filly promising to bring proper sanitation to the Wasteland or die trying. I teased her about having a toilet for a cutie mark, and she looked so embarrassed that she checked immediately. Lacunae quietly watched from the periphery with a sad, lonely little smile.

Until I asked her to do some magic tricks. Suddenly dragged into the middle of our attention, the alicorn couldn't seem to help herself. The 'Great and Powerful Lacunae' summoned a little thundercloud that zapped Rampage's rump, animated a rope that prompted a bondage joke that had me blushing and Glory grinning, and made little neon illusions of my fight with Psychoshy. I grumbled a little at the crotch shot; my nethers were twinging in reflex.

Then somepony suggested I get Octavia's contrabass and play for them. Lacunae and Scotch had never heard me perform before, and so I pulled it downstairs and stood with the bow. Both Priest and Medley still seemed faintly amused that I'd use an instrument instead of magic; apparently, you just weren't a real unicorn musician if you didn't use your horn to play... I really didn't know what exactly I was playing as I started to drag the black horsehair bow across the strings, but apparently it was good enough to earn stomping applause. Then Priest stood and moved next to me. His horn glowed, and a violin began to play alongside me. I noticed that the magic music was a little tinnier than that produced by the actual instrument.

Side by side we played, me horrible and him more than making up for my little mistakes. Medley listened before she rose to her hooves

and joined us with a second, higher violin noise. She was definitely far more snarky and playful as her music danced and flitted about Priest's more serious notes. When we ended the song, I looked at Lacunae with a speculative little smirk.

"No no no…We couldn't. We shouldn't!" she stammered. "The Goddess…erm…I mean…I don't play!"

"You know the spell, don't you?" Priest asked calmly. The purple alicorn nodded once. "Well, then, we'd love for you to join us. But you don't have to."

"Don't worry, Lacunae. You can't be worse than me," I said as I rested my cheek on the neck of the instrument, feeling oddly like I was hugging somepony. "So don't worry if you're not good."

Slowly, she moved to stand behind the three of us. I levitated one of the books of music over and flipped through. "What should we play?" I asked as I looked at the titles. Then one caught my eye. "Canon D? What about A, B, and C?"

"A fine choice," Priest said in approval.

"Oh, yeah. That's one of my favorites. Won't be the same without Sonata's kazoo, though," Medley added.

"Yes…We…I know it well," Lacunae whispered solemnly in our minds.

I took a deep breath as I gripped the bow, looking at the music. Slowly the notes began to roll out across the living room. I took some comfort in the easy pacing for my instrument as it rose and fell as casually as breathing. Then Priest began to play in careful, calm, considerate notes, his horn glowing steadily as he closed his eyes, playing by ear. A few seconds later, Medley joined in, her notes prancing after his with little variations that mixed nicely with his steady playing.

Then Lacunae started to play. She wasn't good. She wasn't even decent.

She was spectacular.

Her violin, sounding deeper and richer than the other two, rolled out beneath Priest and Medley in a sweet, sad melody. With Priest and Medley, we heard music. With me, we heard noise that might have been mistaken for music. What rose from Lacunae's horn was pure soul. As she played, I imagined a little purple alicorn sitting all alone, playing the only instrument that gave her joy.

Lacunae had said parts of her were missing. I'd eat my tail if this wasn't one of those parts. Lacunae, alicorn or not, was a musician. I

was sure of it as our four notes blended together into one whole. The contrabass hit the eight notes with regularity, providing the foundation for the other three. Harmony. It might not be Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, or Loyalty, but as sure as the stars in the sky and overhead, it was Magic.

* * *

That night, Star House was full once more. We doubled up the beds since there was so little sleeping space. I'd given Glory a grin, but her face mirrored Midnight's to an unnerving degree as she trotted to her own room with Medley. Priest and P-21 slipped into the room they'd both claimed. Rampage took her bed with Lacunae in the living room. That left Scotch Tape with me. She didn't seem very happy with it, but there was nowhere else for her to sleep. There was more than enough room as we settled in for the night.

My dreams were normal, full of chlorine and screams, rooms full of foals with a softly singing lullaby, and a hanging friend. I wasn't sleeping on exhaustion, so every few hours I woke, looked at the sleeping Scotch Tape, and drifted back to sleep. Once, I woke to her crying in her sleep, patting her shoulder softly as she called out for her mommy in her dreams.

Then I woke to a very unexpected sensation of warmth on my side. I smelled the ammonia smell and jerked almost completely awake. Scotch Tape blinked as I floundered. I breathed more heavily than I had while getting shot at by Lancer, my heart flopping like a giant leech inside my chest.

All because Scotch Tape had wet the bed.

The olive mare just wrapped the blankets around herself as she hung her head in shame, doing all she could to not break down completely. I kicked myself for my reaction; I'd dealt with far worse. She didn't need me freaking out now. Slowly I trotted around the bed to sit next to her. "I'm sorry…" she sniffled. "I guess I'm just a big…dumb…foal…" she muttered as she shook.

I hugged her close. "No. You're a filly that's had horrible things happen. That doesn't make you dumb or a baby," I said, repeating almost word for word what had been said to me. She let out another sob as she broke down, vomiting out all the pain she'd been trying to hide.

"I miss her so much! I miss them all so much!" she wailed into my

chest as she held me tight in desperation.

I sniffed softly, my tears slower and more practiced. “I do too. I dream about them every night.”

It took about ten minutes for her to calm down. “I’m sorry. I thought…I thought I could be tough. Not a cry baby. Peeing the bed…” she said in disgust.

“Hey, it could be worse. You could have been me. I wet the bed till I was almost as old as you…only I didn’t have anything bad happen to me. I just couldn’t be bothered to wake up,” I said, exaggerating the facts just a little.

She laughed despite her tears and I lifted the sheets to wipe her eyes. “Ewww…gross, Blackjack.”

“I’m serious. It was so bad Mom requisitioned yellow sheets. Almost had medical check me,” I said with a grin as she laughed.

Finally she slipped out of the bed and stripped off the wet blankets. “Thanks,” she said softly.

“We’re all damaged, Scotch. All of us. Even Priest. Probably Medley. You don’t have to pretend like you’re the only pony in the world too tough to be messed up,” I said as I bundled them up with my magic. Quietly, we trotted downstairs to where Lacunae was mending the rips and tears in her dress.

She could teleport, shoot magic arrows, shield herself, use a minigun, play beautiful music, and sew…what couldn’t she do? Apparently laundry. We found a bucket in the closet and filled it with some detergent and water, my magic scrubbing and rinsing the sheets clean with water from the pump behind the house. We’d just finished as the others woke up.

Glory looked at the sheets in confusion. “Um…isn’t it a little early to be doing the wash?” she asked as I strung them out on some low hanging branches. It’d be a miracle if they ever dried in Hoofington’s weather. Scotch Tape flushed as she looked away; Glory looked at the olive filly questioningly.

I took a deep breath, trying to think of something to say. “I wet the bed!” I blurted. She blinked in shock. “Terrible. Absolutely terrible,” I added, going more and more red as Glory just stared. “I think the mattress might be destroyed.”

“You *what*?” Medley said from the doorway, her eyes going round with glee. So much for last night earning me some respect or bonding from the chartreuse filly. She raced towards Chapel, laughing. If only I had Taurus’s rifle…I could claim it was an

accident. A terrible accident…

"You know you shouldn't drink so much before you go to bed," Glory said, adding, "and always make sure you go potty before going to sleep if you think it'll be a problem." I was pretty sure my hide matched the red in my mane.

"What's going on?" Rampage asked as P-21 and Priest stepped out as well.

Oh, sweet Celestia, would it ever end?

* * *

Priest had agreed to shutter the house and finish the laundry. Of all my friends, he seemed to have guessed the truth, but if he had he'd decided to keep it to himself. Well rested and restocked with food and ammo, we were ready to take on the tunnel. I expected it to be dangerous. I expected it to be dark and creepy.

I hadn't expected it to be huge!

The tunnel was wide enough for four tracks to disappear into the earth and high enough that even Glory didn't appear too claustrophobic. Hanging overhead were immense winches and cables that still remained taut despite the rust and corrosion. An entire freight train loaded with heaps of rusting crates and boxes was still connected to the apparatus, kept from plunging down the steep grade into the earth by what looked like solid rust.

"What were those for?" Glory asked as she looked at the cables overhead.

"Probably to help the freight trains up and down the grade into the tunnel," P-21 said as he pointed down into the musty depths. The walls of the tunnel had been painted a noxious green, and over the entrance were the words 'Hoofington Industrial Access Tunnel #1'. Beneath that, 'Restricted Area' and beneath *that*: 'Protected by Aegis Securities'. P-21 pointed at the hulking engine at the end of the train. "That doesn't look like the steam locomotives in our books."

"It's not," Rampage said as she trotted past the immense vehicle. "At the end of the war, almost nothing used coal besides the power plants. This probably used a spark generator to power the train."

"I wonder how train flats from Brimstone's made it through here if it's so dangerous," I muttered.

"Oh, that's simple. Ride down into the tunnel without brakes and throw a few slaves off to feed the ghouls. Works every time, I've

heard," Rampage said with a mirthless smirk. "Getting through the tunnels is tons easier when you've got some acceptable casualties with you."

"Bottlecap says that Dusty now just stops at the tunnel and hoofs everything over to Chapel. She's buried in business now. They don't even try the tunnels anymore," Glory added as we slowly trotted down the steep tracks. I wondered why they didn't use a gentler grade. Great, another addition to the millions of questions I'd likely never the answers to. Maybe Rover knew…

The subway tunnels had been a mess of broken trains, crackled walls, and collapsed concrete. In comparison, the green line was almost completely intact. The concrete didn't show the slightest bit of cracking, and even the metal surfaces showed barely any corrosion. There was far less rubbish down here, too. There was the occasional tin can or barrel, but for the most part the trains sat silently connected to taut cables, waiting for the control or command to get them moving again. When the grade flattened out, we moved through an immense green switch yard beneath the earth. A low thrum surrounded us, and I could feel a dry, warm breeze blowing from deeper down.

"It still has power," Glory marveled. "We could do so much with Hoofington…you know? If the radiation level's not too high and we could solve the Enervation problem, we could do so much for Equestria."

"But where does the power come from?" I asked as I looked at the green lights set in the ceiling. Each one cast a wan circle of light spaced along the tracks, but many of them had broken, leaving sickly spots of light amid cloying shadow.

"The dams," Rampage replied. "At least, that's what the Steel Rangers think. If they hadn't been so fixated on the HMS *Celestia*, they probably would have set up shop in the dams. Of course, the Eggheads are the only ponies that can actually get the damned power where it needs to go."

"So why don't they work together?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Because that would be sane and sensible," Rampage replied. "But the Steel Rangers want to control technology. Eggheads want to fiddle around with it. Not a lot of compromise between the two."

I floated out Rover's map. "So, we need to find the G-3 tunnel," I said as I looked into the gloom.

Something flitted through a distant patch of light.

Out came Vigilance and my new sword. Nothing on my EFS. Not a sound to be heard, either. After the museum, however, I wasn't trusting bars. Everyone else had frozen too. "What is it?" Glory asked as she hovered above us.

Then I heard the soft clicking sound. Faint, rapid, and soft. And all around us. "Something bad…" P-21 muttered as he loaded a grenade. A low and unnatural growl echoed through the cavernous chamber. "Make that really bad."

Suddenly, the clicking doubled, and with my night vision I saw a faint shimmer charging right at the six of us. "Here they come," I shouted as I raised Vigilance and fired at the racing blur. The bullets clanged as they struck metal, and there was a magical flash as my target leapt the final distance. I rose, my hooves meeting the mechanical monster as it rammed into me. Claws ripped at my armor and pneumatic jaws hissed as they snapped closed inches from my face. The canine was almost entirely metal save for a gray blob of brain matter in a jar atop its head. I'd heard about robot ponies with brains, but this was a first.

Then, as I struggled with the first, a second raced forward and bit my hind leg. A jerk and the cyberdog had pulled my leg out from under me! I went down, kicking and screaming, as the mechanical monster on top slowly twisted its head and opened its jaws for my throat. All around me, my friends opened fire as more and more of the cloaked robots appeared and attacked. Green lightning flashed from the robot's glassy dome, and my vision blurred as the world twisted around me for a moment. It was all I could do to magic its jaws apart.

Then Scotch Tape jumped on its back, squeezing tight with all four hooves as she beat on the dome with a wench clenched in her jaws. The dome cracked, popped, and finally shattered as she pulverized the gray wad with the end of her wrench. The dog gave a spastic jerk and tumbled off me. I sat up and my horn flashed, three magic bullets shredding the transparent brain casing of the other one.

As big a weakness as a targetable brain was, they could have done with a few more. The machines were strong, fast, and worked together. They also had those disorienting brain zaps. When not engaged in combat, a blue talisman in their chests would flare and they'd disappear. Glory and Lacunae fought together side by side, Lacunae strafing the open areas around us and Glory sending emerald beams of death into any shimmers that appeared. I worked

with Scotch Tape, more shielding the filly than I liked to admit. I wasn't going to have another Scoodle on my conscience! Rampage freely engaged three or four of them at a time, ignoring the friendly fire from P-21. After his grenades hit, she mopped up what was left as her own injuries healed.

"Why are you…nunngh…grinning like that?" Rampage asked the blue pony.

P-21 laughed as he popped open Persuasion and loaded a new grenade. "Oh, this is very therapeutic."

Then four of the cyberdogs fell upon Glory and Lacunae. I had no idea if they'd jumped or could run on ceilings. One of them clamped its jaws down on Glory's wing and began to pull. The jaws worked, chewing and crushing the appendage as she screamed and tumbled. Lacunae teleported ten feet up, leaving the cyberdogs to crash beneath her. The minigun swiveled down and blasted at the fallen canines, eroding them with a pillar of fire and bullets. Then two more glued to the support pillars raked the alicorn with their brain lightning.

"Glory!" I shouted as I raced to her, slipping into S.A.T.S. to blow the dome off the cyberdog. It died with its jaws clenched on the wing. "Hold still!"

She grimaced with pain as she trembled beneath it. "I'm not going anywhere."

I tried to pry it open with the sword, but it wasn't moving. "Scotch! I need you!" I called, returning my attention to the fighting. The olive filly raced up with two snapping at her flanks till I split one dome with the sword and blasted my last three rounds into the dome of the other. "Free her, quick!" I said as I shoved the second one away. It wasn't quite getting the message that now it was supposed to die!

As Scotch Tape worked, I saw things weren't going well. I had no idea how many of these things there were. Dozens? Hundreds? Thousands? P-21 was trying to use the heavy barrel of the grenade launcher as a bludgeon, his shoulders bleeding from claw lacerations. The canines were now blasting Lacunae almost continuously with their green zaps and Rampage was all but buried beneath them. Then one of the dogs bit me and ripped at my armor so hard that the saddlebag split and dumped half my possessions across the floor. I shouted and struggled without success.

Then one bit a forehoof. Then one bit a rear hoof. And then I knew

exactly how Scoodle felt as they started to pull! We were about to be ripped to pieces by robotic brain dogs. Could it get any worse? Did I actually just think that?

A mechanical growl cut through the cavernous space, echoed and magnified. Suddenly, the cyberdogs went still. My legs were released as they cautiously backed away. From the gloom approached a massive beast of metal. This was the Deus of cyberdogs. Armor plating covered every inch of its matte black form. Its red eyes glared balefully at the six of us as two shoulder mounted cannons pointed right at me. This wasn't a cyberdog! This was the size of a bear!

It opened jaws big enough to crush my head as it snarled in my face. I swallowed as I stared at grinders inside its throat. Who the hell had designed this thing?

Then it closed its mouth, red eyes staring down at me. Slowly, it turned as if inspecting the battlefield. Its heavy metal claws scraped at the stone as it walked to the fallen Ministry Mare figurines; it stepped right on Rainbow Dash, but the figurine was apparently too awesome to be pulverized by mechanical death beasts.

It stopped and then stretched down to bump its muzzle against the tiny orange form of Applejack. From within the beast came a low little whine. Again and again it nudged the bucking figure before it sat down and raised its head in a long low howl. Looking at the figurine one last time, the giant mechanical beast turned and stalked back the way it had come. One by one, the remaining cyberdogs rose and trotted after it on softly clicking claws. Just like that, they disappeared back into the recesses of the tunnel.

"What the fuck was that?" Rampage asked as she adjusted her armor.

"I… " Was that… "I don't know," I said as I levitated the little orange figurine, sitting and hugging it as I looked in the direction the security cyberdogs had gone. I found myself imagining that the tiny Applejack was crying, though.

* * *

We found the tunnel we needed, moving quickly and quietly along the wide open space. There was no debris blocking our way, which also meant that there was no cover. Twice turrets dropped from the ceiling above to rake the tunnel with flashing pink bolts of

disintegration magic. Without cover, we had only moments to destroy them before they destroyed us. And we didn't always succeed…

"Don't laugh," Rampage muttered as she trotted beside Scotch Tape, the striped filly cursing under her breath in decidedly unfillylike fashion.

"You shielded me," Scotch Tape said awkwardly, "I'm not going to laugh. I just…I wonder why you're this old?"

"Huh?" Rampage blinked as she looked at the olive filly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you look like you're five or six…right? So why don't you regenerate as a newborn? Or my age?" Scotch Tape asked. "Why five or six?"

Rampage opened her mouth…then closed it with a small frown. "I dunno. I never thought about it," she said as she cocked her head. "I mean, I'm fifty or sixty years old…but I don't know why I'd pop back to this specific age every time." She rubbed her chin. "Now that you mention it…I don't age up older than twenty or thirty-ish."

And *another* to the hundred or so mysteries we were dealing with. Right next to 'what was the source of all this radiation?' It wasn't a lot, but it was consistent. Everypony except Lacunae had taken a dose of Rad-X. I supposed that she was benefiting from it…but even she seemed definitely…off. It was almost as if she were in pain.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I nudged the purple alicorn. She flinched and bit her lip, shaking her head firmly.

"The screams are…strong. Very strong. I don't want to stay here," she said in a whimper in my head. "Please, let us hurry."

But we only got a hundred yards further when we came to an immense door that completely sealed off the tunnel. 'Hoofington Core Access #12-411J.' "This must go to the Core," I muttered as I thumped the door. Heavy as concrete. "I don't suppose you can pick it?" I asked P-21 with a grin. He gave me a look that suggested that that question opened up whole new worlds of how stupid I was if I was serious. I consulted the map. "Okay. Good news, we don't have to get through the door. Look for Sewer Access 12-99. It should be in that wall." I pointed to our left.

Glory had found it. Her wing still wasn't right, even after taking a healing potion. Of course, the hatch was locked, but P-21 got out his pins and got to work. Two tries later, he had it open. This tunnel was far ranker, the air heavy and wet. Oddly, there wasn't any

mildew or rot down here. I supposed the radiation killed everything. There were also no lights, so I turned on my PipBuck lamp. Scotch Tape did the same. Lacunae's glowing magic illuminated the rear as we entered the tight tunnels. Everything curved, so I couldn't see how far we had to go.

"Think you can get DJ Pon3 down here?" Rampage asked. "All this quiet is freaking me out."

"Doubt it…but…" I turned on my radio and set it to search for a signal. Static. Static. Static.

Then a mare spoke in a rush, "…is Team Delta. We're trapped in Adjunct 33-99B. The shields are up. Please lower the shields. We've got critical information from Canterlot. The Sun has risen. The Moon has not been freed. The Stars are still in play. I repeat, team leader, the stars are still in play! This is Team Delta. We're trapped in adjunct…" And the message kept looping over and over again. I looked at Rover's map but couldn't find an Adjunct 33-99B anywhere on it.

"One of those teams, you think? The ones who knew about the bombs?" Glory asked from behind me.

"I suppose," I said, wondering if that broadcasting had been looping for two centuries with a message that had never reached its recipient.

* * *

"I think we're lost," I muttered after half an hour. I turned the map over in front of me and squinted at the faded lines. "I don't know if we're supposed be going in this direction or not."

"Lost?" P-21 said as he nudged in to my left to look at the map.

"No…I think we're supposed to keep going this way," Glory said, pointing with her uninjured wingtip as she squeezed in to my right.

"I thought it was right at that last tunnel," Rampage said as she squeezed in under me, looking at the map.

"No, this is the right way. See?" Scotch Tape had wiggled in next to Rampage and was pointing up with her hoof.

"But then shouldn't we already be at that factory thingy?" Rampage asked.

"I believe we should," Lacunae agreed, leaning over my head to look down at the map.

"A little personal space, please!" I shouted. I immediately winced

at the echo sounding off through the tunnels, but at least my friends fell back enough to let me breathe. Looking at the map, I poked a little square marked ‘HMF’. “If this is the right way, then this place should be just off to our left. Look for some sign of ‘HMF’, whatever that is.”

We spread out a little bit, but the further we went, the more certain I was that this wasn’t where we were supposed to be. Why did this tunnel look... burned? A distance past that, we did find a door marked HMF, but, instead of being tightly sealed, the entire thing was twisted in its frame. The burn marks were very prominent here, especially on the wall opposite the door and the floor and ceiling near it. I squeezed through and found a deformed metal-lined passage; the walls of the tube looked like they'd melted slightly and then resolidified. My radiation meter suddenly started to click a lot more urgently. I proceeded down the tunnel cautiously, but it seemed safe. Well, relatively. Nothing down here but drippy-looking metal.

“Come on through,” I said, peeking out. I helped the others squeeze through, and then only Lacunae was left outside. I looked expectantly at her, but she took one look through the gap and flashed through to the far side. I looked at her, the gap, and then at her again; okay, yes, expecting her to squeeze through that was not one of my better ideas.

The alicorn immediately took a deep breath and smiled blissfully. “Oh, this is better.”

I took one look at my radiation meter spiking and swallowed. “Yeah. Better.” I shared a look with the rest of my friends and we immediately took another Rad-X.

We advanced down the passage and found…it looked like something in another chamber had half blasted, half melted through the tunnel's wall. Twisted debris had been melted into the walls, and the floor was covered with what looked like hardened flows of mixed liquid metal and rock. The tunnel continued a bit farther to a short flight of stairs leading up to a heavy door, but that had melted into its frame. If we wanted to continue, we'd have to go through the hole.

The hole looked like something a giant bullet would punch in a metal target, except that whatever had done this had blasted through rock and two layers of metal. On the other side, there was a drop to the ‘floor’, but there was enough congealed molten ruin

for us to scramble down. The room was one massive pile of slag. Whatever had happened in here, it had melted every surface into a frozen landscape of dripping metal. Blackened steel stalactites dangled down above us, and we had to take care not to step upon or trip over lumps and spikes extending from the floor like alien and dangerous works of art. In the very center of the mass was a large hunk of cracked, blackened rock; I looked up at the ceiling, but there didn't seem to be anywhere the rock could have fallen from.

"What the hell is this place?" I asked as we spread out a little. There were red bars in my vision in all directions, but for all I knew they could be above, below, or through solid rock. Still, I gestured for everypony to have their guns ready.

"Someplace bad," Scotch muttered, drawing her wrench. I couldn't disagree. There was a runny doorway, sans door, in the side of the room; behind it was a stairway leading up. Fortunately, the stairs had been dug as a tunnel rather than built in a vertical chamber and were still mostly intact. At the top was a room full of fried terminals and scattered scrap. One wall of the room had what looked like large windows in it, but blast shields had lowered over them... and been melted through. Now the twisted voids looked out on the room we'd just come from. Burned out talismans and crystals were in abundance. Whatever had happened here, it hadn't been good.

There was a door in the wall opposite the windows; on the other side, two identical-looking metal corridors led off at angles. The damage here wasn't as bad; these looked more like the entry tunnel I'd squeezed into than the liquefied blast chamber. At random, we picked left.

At the tunnel's midpoint was a melted-shut metal door that was probably the one leading to the tunnel we'd entered through, and at the tunnel's end was an intersection identical to the one we'd found outside the melted chamber. This one's terminal-filled room was more intact, though, and had a large #5 painted against the far wall beside the observation windows. Sooty ash and burned bones lay everywhere around the observation room, but the chamber beyond the windows wasn't burned at all. In fact, except for the glass of the windows, everything in the room on the other side, including the large gray rock in the middle, looked as if it was covered in frost!

"Hey, this one is still active," P-21 said as he sat before one

terminal and started to type. Then he frowned. “Okay. Definitely going to take a while.”

“Do we have a while?” Scotch Tape asked as she looked at her own PipBuck.

“Let’s look for a way out while he works. Scotch, can you give him a hoof?” I asked from the intersection, peering down the other passageway. She nodded, looking grateful to be staying behind with the blue buck. We broke into pairs and split up, Rampage and Lacunae continuing in the direction we'd been going while Glory and I started back to investigate the other corridor at the melted room intersection.

We found a T intersection and, after discovering going straight ahead would take us to another identical junction, turned right instead. Glory looked a bit pained as we walked, that savage bite to her wing still bleeding a little.

“How are you holding up?” I asked softly as we trotted past storerooms filled with knocked over, twisted shelves of scrap electronics, spark batteries, and Wonderglue. Most of them were fire damaged, but here and there were ones that didn't look that bad. I made sure to pocket all the reasonably intact-looking ones for when we got out of here.

Glory peered down the hallway before she glanced at her injury with a worried look. “I don’t know. I’ve never hurt my wings before.”

“Never?” I asked in surprise. They looked delicate. Fragile, even.

She gave me a crooked little grin. “I know I’m not a flier like Dusk, but trust me. Pegasus wings are tough. Once a pegasus is airborne, well…there’re stories of pegasi during the war flying full speed straight down into zebra formations. That’s why Rainbow Dash was always trying to get pegasi to sign up.” She swallowed as she looked nervously at the bite. “That dog gave me everything it had. If it’d bit my leg like that... .or my throat... ” She gave a nervous little shake of her head and smiled. “Lucky me, it bit the toughest part of me.”

“Still,” I said as we continued along the metal hallway, “I’m sorry you keep getting hurt following me.”

“Don’t worry. I’m tough,” she said as she looked through a doorway and frowned. “What is that?”

It was another mostly-intact monitoring room, this one lit with a strange, sharp arclight glow. Side by side we moved forward, me

with my slug-loaded shotgun ready while Glory hovered above with a look of sharp discomfort. The lights weren't just sharply defined… they were moving. And what a coincidence, the red bars moved with the light. Step by step, I shuffled closer, and…

Was that a unicorn?

It might have been a unicorn once, but its flesh had melted away and left only the glowing skeleton. Its tattered and burned uniform still hung on its brilliantly glowing bones; a nimbus of glaring white light was emanating from the skeletal remains. They didn't walk so much as hover silently over the ground as the light flickered around and through them. They looked more like milky crystal than bone. The…thing looked right at me as the green glow within its sockets flared.

Oh, fuck this. I entered S.A.T.S. and blasted four rounds into its skull. Shining bone and tattered cloth exploded around it. It let out a scream so high it was almost beyond hearing but nearly floored me in pain. The bones flickered and went dark, though, and the skeleton collapsed in a shattered heap.

Too bad it wasn't alone.

Two more floated into view, and from the horn of the first a line of distortion wavered through the air and swept across the passage. It had absolutely no effect on the walls, my barding, or my flesh.

It did, however, shatter every bone in my legs as it passed through me. I fell into a screaming heap, tears running down my cheeks as I fired round after round into the floating skeletons. Glory's emerald beam seemed far less effective than my crude but brutal shotgun slugs. I lunged to the side, feeling the broken shards digging into my flesh as another bone-shattering beam sliced vertically past me. The second one shattered in a shower of bone, and finally our combined shots transformed the third into a heap of glowing ash.

I lay on my side, feeling four crippled limbs sag against the floor. "What was that?" Glory asked as she pulled my barding aside to look at the smooth, uninjured skin and the broken bulges beneath it.

"I don't care, so long as we can kill it," I groaned as I lay back. I saw the hesitation on her face. "What is it?"

"I…Our healing potions aren't much good down here. I don't think…"

"Give me a Hydra," I replied without hesitation.

"Blackjack, remember what Rampage said! Enervation plus Hydra

equals liquid Blackjack. And there's the taint in it to consider."

"Don't go Lacunae on me and start quoting fancy math," I replied with a shaky smile. It felt like all four of my legs were being dipped in fire. "Dead Blackjack here or dead Blackjack when we run into more of those things. You decide. If you have a Hydra, give it to me."

Glory closed her eyes and fished out the syringe. The gray goop went to work at once, and I did all I could not to cry out as I felt my shattered limbs regenerate. The shards were pulled into place piece by piece and reformed. Oddly, the pain suddenly slackened to a dull ache, and I blinked as I rose to my hooves. Was it just me, or did I actually feel…good? "Huh. It looks like that did the trick."

"It doesn't hurt?" she asked in confusion, and I shook my head. She didn't say anything else, but she looked troubled as I walked to one of the large observation windows. There was an odd rainbow glow shining through it.

The chamber beyond wasn't melted at all. At the center of it was an immense diamond as large as a pony's head and shining with a corona of light. Arranged about it in an almost a perfect ring were a dozen unicorn skeletons. Four more trotted around, moving as if checking the equipment along the periphery. I didn't think that any of it looked functional; it was as if the bones were simply going through the motions.

I glanced at Glory and forced a grin. "Let me guess. That's just a really big gemstone and has nothing to do with all the spooky glowing bones, right?"

Glory shook her head. "No, I think it's a direct cause, Blackjack." I resisted the urge to facehoof. At her next words, I found that very easy. "I think that that's a megaspell chamber."

"A what?" I shouted. Then I clasped my hooves over my mouth, but it looked like the bones down there still hadn't noticed us. "That's a megaspell?" What idiot puts *megaspells* under a *city*?

Glory nodded. "I've seen diagrams in textbooks. The spell matrix amplifies a spell exponentially with every unicorn that's channeling the spell. The diamond is sort of like a giant spark battery; it stores the spell until it's triggered. Or the storage framework destabilizes; they don't last that long--usually," she added with a curious and worried look at the chamber below, "--which is why fully staffed bases like this had to be built." I frowned as I looked closer at the circle; I had seen something like this before…when I was inside

Stonewing getting fused with a cockatrice. Over the glare I could barely make out a magical symbol floating inside the huge diamond. “That glyph is a representation of the stored megaspell’s effect.”

“Effect? I thought that they just went ‘boom’,” I said with a little frown.

“Well, there were megaspells that exploded. The very first weaponized megaspells were ignition spells amplified by a million, like lighting a billion candles all at once. But there were tons of other megaspells developed that were a lot more insidious. Like one that was supposed to make every zebra in an entire city want a worthless rock to the point of killing each other. Or one that was supposed to transform everything in its volume of effect to water. I understand that one megaspell actually was supposed to made every zebra affected swap sides and be loyal to Princess Luna.”

I shivered at the thought. “Mass mind control…yay.”

Glory gave a wan smile. “Better than killing them all, right?” I wasn’t exactly sure about that. Glory looked pensively at the room below for a moment. "This spell shouldn’t have stayed stable for anywhere near this long. I think that when it started to degrade…it probably animated those bones, and they've been restoring it since. It's a feedback loop."

“Wow. You know, I think I like the tunnels of Hoofington even more than Hoofington itself. We really should bring everypony down here for tours,” I said as I backed away from the window. Knowing my luck, I’d sneeze and set it off.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Blackjack. This place is far too hazardous for…” She caught my arched brow and smile. “Ah…right. Could you please warn me when you’re going to be sarcastic?” she asked, hanging her brow and looking a little sheepish.

“Of course not. That’d ruin the fun!” I said with a chuckle. Then I heard the faintest whirr. For a moment, I thought it was just a fan of some sort working, but then a sharp-eyed pink party pony poked my brain and pointed out a camera no bigger than an apple set in the corner. And as I moved towards the exit, it tracked to follow me.

Somehow, I doubted that it was Spike…

* * *

Over the next half hour, we'd come across three more megaspell chambers, but these were dark and dead. Their diamond cores had transformed into lumps of ugly gray stone. We'd also come across several more unicorn remains trotting about their business. One lot's horns fired pink disintegration bolts that nearly had me turned into a pile of pink goop. Another, to my infinite chagrin, fired powerful magical bullets at me in a near exact copy of my own signature spell! That just wasn't fair!

And every camera we passed followed us.

There was other fun, too. Protectaponies and turrets happily opened fire the moment they could target us.

I had to admit, getting attacked by a table was a little weird, but Glory had reduced it to emerald dust before it'd rammed into me. Neither of us could figure out how or why it had suddenly come to life.

Finally, we came to what looked like a large control room of some kind. 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences Hoofington Megaspell Facility' was written over a large emblem of a unicorn in profile against a starry sky. It had the same charred look as most of this place: not melted, but definitely not what I'd call intact. A massive monitor covered one wall, the screen blackened and slightly warped but still displaying an image. A…map.

"There! Look. That's Hoofington," Glory said as she pointed at a little mote along a river. To the east and south were all kinds of other names but few that I recognized. The entire map was covered in transparent blotches of different colors. Most were green or pink.

"Who marked up the map?" I asked with a smile as my eyes looked at the names. Canterlot. Manehattan. Fillydelphia. Roam. Slowly, my smile faded and my eyes widened as comprehension dawned.

"Megaspell targets. Balefire strikes," Glory breathed softly.

Not dozens. Not hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands. They crawled over the map like a fungus, peppering more of the world than I could have ever imagined. In that map was reflected the insanity of two races unable to stop themselves from mutual annihilation. In that map were the deaths of tens of millions of ponies, zebra, and other creatures swept up in their conflict.

What have we done? The little ponies inside me couldn't answer that.

"Blackjack! Glory!" Rampage squealed as she charged into the room. A somber-looking Lacunae followed her at a more sedate

pace. “We found the way out. It looks like it leads exactly where we’re supposed to go.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. Let’s get the others.”

Then Lacunae said softly inside my mind, “Shouldn’t you do something about all that blood?”

“Blood? What…” But my words failed as I looked at my forehooves. The black material between the plates glistened wetly. Bloody hoofprints marked my passage perfectly. Fortunately, Glory was too occupied with Rampage’s tales of fighting skeletons to have noticed. I forced a grin at the purple alicorn. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not bad. Doesn’t hurt at all…”

Not at all.

Together we left the control room, the cameras watching us all the while.

* * *

Meeting back up with P-21 and Scotch Tape, I transferred what files remained on the terminal to my PipBuck so we could get out of here. We’d already spent far too long underground. As we moved back into the tunnels marked on Rover’s map, I brought up the files.

Hoofington Megaspell Facility Status

Matrix 1 > Discharged. Target 114.5 N, 13.4 E Gallows Crossing

Matrix 2 > Discharged. Target 119.1 N, 17.6 E Redstone Train Spur

Matrix 3 > Discharged. Target 103.9 N, 19.2 E Grayridge

Matrix 4 > Discharged. Target 140.0 N, 17.8 E Okambo

Matrix 5 > Discharged. Target 112.1 N, 4.5 E Longrun

Matrix 6 > EMERGENCY ERROR! EMERGENCY ERROR! EMERGENCY ERROR!

Matrix 7 > 5% charge remaining. Target not selected.

Matrix 8 > 100% charge remaining. Target not selected.

I sure hoped that the one Glory and I had found was the 100% one. I dropped to the next file. There was a lot more corruption, but I managed to find a few more bits of information.

Spell Matrix 5> Details: Refrigeration. ERROR. Data Corrupted.

Spell Matrix 6> Details: Combustion. ERROR. Data Corrupted.

Spell Matrix 7> Details: Come to Life Spell. ERROR. Data Corrupted.

Spell Matrix 8> Details: ERROR. Data Corrupted. ERROR. Data corrupted.

The last bit of useful information was a simple list.

18.41.99> Hoofington defensive alert issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.05.23> Martial Law issued for Hoofington region; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.15.10> Stable-Tec Emergency Broadcast issued: Hoofington region; auth. STec VP Scootaloo.

19.26.11> Redoubt Priority Evacuation issued; auth. ERROR.

19.45.32> General Emergency Evacuation issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.50.54> Megaspell Release issued; auth. Princess Luna EC-1010.

19.51.01> Spell Matrix 1: Discharged.

19.53.08> Spell Matrix 2: Discharged.

19.55.19> Spell Matrix 3: Discharged.

19.57.49> Spell Matrix 4: Discharged.

19.59.28> Spell Matrix 5: Discharged.

19.59.35> Hoofington Defense System activated; auth. Gen Stormbreak.

19.59.59> Emergency shutoff override issued; auth. Gen Stormbreak

ERROR ERROR ERROR ERROR

It looked like trying to raise the shield to save the city while firing off megaspells wasn't the smartest of moves. I could barely imagine the chaos: trying to give warning, trying to fire back, trying to defend themselves from the falling bombs. And something bad had already been brought here by the zebras. Some weapon that had killed everypony in the city.

Or Sekashi was right and an abomination from beyond the stars did it...

Great. Now I *really* loved being down here.

One thing was certain: the longer I was here around Hoofington, the more I wished that the balefire bombs had destroyed everything. This place had so much creepy history that it felt like the city itself was just waiting to finish killing everypony off.

* * *

Yes, that's definitely what it felt like. All of us, with the exception of Lacunae, were suffering from the radiation. It wasn't getting stronger, but it wasn't getting weaker. Slowly and steadily, it poisoned us with every little click of my PipBuck. Lacunae had another problem: her magic was failing her, the screams wearing on her. She could barely lift the minigun and had been forced to balance it between her wings.

We'd finally found the subterranean factory; in reality, it felt more like a stable than anything else. There were dozens of small rooms interconnected by conveyor belts. The stillness of the place made me shiver. Rover was right, this place did feel asleep. I knew that Glory was excited by the idea of machines helping the Wasteland, but I didn't want this factory running. I didn't know what it made. I didn't want to know. Every second we were down here, I felt more and more…watched.

Then we reached another large door sealed up tight and I

swallowed hard as I looked at the map. It wasn't marked. Either Rover had forgotten, or…what did it matter. The heavy door needed power to open, regardless. Otherwise it was just a lot of wall. A wall covered with a large Robronco logo.

All of us looked tired, despite the fact we hadn't had much of a hard trip in the tunnels. We'd passed a few pony corpses, salvaged what we could from them, and continued on our way. The tunnels simply sapped our strength as quickly as the radiation poisoned us. Suddenly, there was a sharp pop, and Glory yelped as the reek of rotten eggs rolled across my nose. She dug out a healing potion. It wasn't just spoiled, but looked like boiling ink inside the bottle. Quickly, we removed our remaining healing potions; every single one of them had spoiled. Some of them appeared to be turning toxic.

Not good.

"Let's see if we can find a control room or a button or something that can get this door open," I said as I rubbed my nose. The too-dry air was starting to make my nose all scratchy.

We fanned out in pairs, me with Lacunae. The poor alicorn was in such distress that she finally just dropped the gun. I grunted as I lifted it and slung it across my back. Ugh, how the heck could she fight with a weapon like this? I felt panic nibbling at my spine at the slow creep of death working its way inside me. Every minute, the rad meter crept a little higher. I didn't think we had enough RadAway to get out of here now. It was like suffocating.

"And that's a pretty deep hole," I muttered as I came to a raw rock wall with a diagonal shaft descending even deeper into the earth. It looked like the factory had been expanding or…or something. Power cables plunged into the earth along a metal stair. I felt an unnerving sensation of being drawn into the hole, despite the fact that the breeze blew out from it. I heard the slow shuffle of cards in my mind. Okay, now I definitely didn't want to go down there.

"Blackjack! I think I need you!" P-21 shouted from within the factory.

Lacunae seemed in such a daze that I sighed and nudged her. "Stay here. I'll be right back." I trotted along with the Dealer following me. "What are you doing here? I don't have time for crazy. I have enough scary."

"Somepony's looking for you," he said softly.

"Lots of ponies are looking for me," I said crossly as I looked

around for him. “It’s been a running theme these last three weeks. Deus. Sanguine. Now zebras. I’m sure that, any second now, the Zodiacs are going to appear too.” I was so glad that my paranoia was giving me a memo. “If you don’t mind though, I’m in a hurry!”

It took me a minute to find him in some sort of control room. “I think you might be able to unlock the door.”

“Uh, you’re the one that knows terminals, P-21. Not me,” I said warily, looking at the screen.

>EC-1101 Authorization pending.

“It wants EC-1101?” Did that mean that this factory had something to do with one of the projects?” Or was it something else?

“I don’t know, but it looks like all the systems are shut down until it receives a signal from EC-1101,” P-21 said as he worked the controls. “That includes the doors.”

“Okay. So... how can I do this?” I asked as I lifted the PipBuck.

“Go to your broadcaster and see if it can contact a Robronco terminal. I’m hoping that just contacting the locked program will be enough to access the system. Otherwise, we’re just dying in here.”

I accessed my PipBuck and opened the broadcaster function. “Oh, wow…um…that’s a lot of Robronco terminals.” And Hoofington Defense terminals. Hoofington Stable-Tec networks. Then my eyes widened. O.I.A. access node?

I glanced at P-21 as he typed on the terminal, trying to do whatever he needed to do to get us out of here. I selected the access node.

>EC-1101 Access Required. Proceed? Y/N

>Y

“You sure you want to do this?” the Dealer asked, the old buck staring hard at me. I glared at him as I pressed yes once again.

EC-1101 suddenly flashed and gobbledygook and strange numbers scrolled past faster than I could see.

Then my PipBuck went black. “Uhhh…P-21?” I tried to hide the rising panic in my voice.

Then the lights went out in the factory. The ventilation fans stopped running. The silence that settled became overwhelming. Then a long, deep unnatural voice crackled through the air. “YOU!” Every monitor in the control room flashed on, each one showing a staring eye. Each one looking at me as that voice crackled through countless speakers echoing throughout the factory. “EC-1101! GIVE IT TO ME!”

“What the hell! What the hell is that!?” P-21 shouted as he staggered back. Why was the room turning…green? A green light began to replace the darkness as green electricity crackled along the walls and machinery. The engines began one after the other, but instantly began to scream and smoke. Alarms started to ring out as the monitors showing those staring eyes popped one after the other. The wires within were moving!

“Running! Running now!” I screamed as I scrambled out with P-21 and Rampage. I had no clue where we were running to. All around us, the machines were going crazy. At first I thought that they were going to start making killer robots, but then I saw that the machines weren’t making anything. They were moving. A housing burst apart as the metallic guts spilled out, rearranging themselves and creeping towards us. Green lightning flickered and danced along the writhing mechanical surfaces as they formed claws and tendrils.

“GIVE IT TO ME!” those thousand voices screamed at once.

That was a face…the machines were forming a massive pony face! It was slowly pushing out of the machinery as if the gargantuan monster was being birthed from the equipment. Green light blazed from its eyes as it opened its mouth and vomited dozens of electrical cables that crackled and snaked towards us.

We weren’t getting out the door. The door was becoming a part of…of IT! There was a scream of metal as an entire assembly line lifted like an immense skeletal hoof towards us. I felt cables snaking around my legs. There was nowhere to run. Every part of the factory had become a part of the abomination. My friends screamed and struggled but our weapons were nothing. I didn’t think a missile launcher would help against this thing.

But something else might. I reached into my pouch and withdrew the massive pistol, cracking open the breech. The silver bullet hovered in front of me.

And then the abomination froze. Its green eyes widened in shock. “YOU! YOU DARE USE THAT?!”

In reply, I slammed the bullet into Folly and clacked it closed. Instantly, the cables tightened, the lightning coursing along them burning me through my barding. “DIE!” it screamed through a thousand electrical mouths.

“You first,” I gasped. I glanced at my PipBuck, seeing it active once more. I levitated the pistol and activated S.A.T.S. Once more, strange arcane marks appeared on my EFS as the weapon interfaced

with my PipBuck. I waited impatiently in the magical stasis for the words to appear in my vision.

> PipBuck synchronization: complete.

> Blood pattern analysis: confirmed.

> WARNING: Biomagical pattern contamination at 25%. Please seek immediate medical attention.

> Magical field analysis: confirmed.

> WARNING: Esoteric threshold exceeded by 98.9%!

> Authorization confirmed.

> Warning! BBP loaded. BGP armed.

> Do you wish to fire? Y/N?

I had no choice.

> Firing.

The magical field spread over all of us, holding us in place and stopping that horrible constriction. The abomination reeled back, raising its forelegs as if it was a pony trying to shield itself.

The world disappeared in a roar of white light.

* * *

I choked and gasped, feeling half dead as I sucked in the smoky air. My whole body screamed in protest as I sat up and stared at the collapsed half of the room. Nothing remained but slightly glowing rubble. I had electrical cable wound around half my body, but I was able to carefully disentangle myself as I looked around for my friends.

Scotch Tape was in a bad way. She'd curled up completely, staring straight ahead with her hooves clamped over her mouth. Glory wasn't much better, rising on her trembling and shaking hooves. Rampage was more together; at least she wasn't shaking. P-21 simply looked right at me and asked, "What did you do?"

I raised my hoof defensively. "Hey, don't blame me for summoning that…thing. I just used EC-1101 to access a terminal. I have no idea what that…thing…was…" I looked at the melted rock and tried to take a step. My legs felt like rubber. Not weak…soft. I almost didn't want to take another step for fear that it'd bend. I was trying to keep myself together. We still had to get out of here…

One problem: no doors.

"Lacunae?" I shouted, praying that the alicorn could stand. I had no idea how we'd get her out if she couldn't. Fortunately, the

purple alicorn stepped out of the gloom on unsteady legs.

There was a staticy crackle inside my head that made we wince. Then she swallowed, her mouth opened, and she said in a surprisingly high and thready voice, “Impressive.”

“Thanks. I aim to please,” I said, trying to joke through my panic. “We need to keep going. We need to get…out of here. Now.” At this point, I wished we’d tried to swim across the river. Hell, I’d have happily blasted my way through the Rangers…signed up with Big Daddy.

Goddesses, I could feel my bones bending with each step! I drew a desperate gasp to hide my panic as I stretched down to shake Scotch Tape. She only whimpered and curled up tighter. I looked at the others, then said apologetically, “I’m sorry, Lacunae, but I can’t carry her and your gun and ammo.”

“It’s only a gun,” the alicorn replied simply. I shrugged the minigun and ammo drum aside and carefully laid Scotch Tape across my shoulders. I should have left her with the Crusaders. Why had I let her come with us? I took a step, feeling the give in my bones. Another. Another.

“Are you okay?” Glory asked me, her injured wing dangling beside her uselessly. It was a phenomenally silly question. Right now, none of us were okay.

“You betcha,” I said with a grin. “Right as rain! Just a little wobbly-legged.” I forced myself to keep smiling. And step. Step. Step. In the only direction we could.

Down.

* * *

Stairs were not high on my list on things I wanted to try right now. I slumped against the guardrail the whole way down. While my legs could support me, they felt as if they might buckle at any wrong step. I did all I could to not drop Scotch Tape. Glory walked with slow, pained noises as her bloody wingtip dragged beside her. P-21 was slumping against Rampage. Lacunae seemed capable only of walking. She moved like a zombie as we continued down. And down. And down.

And I heard the screaming.

It wasn't a scream as if from a pony's throat. It was almost like the memory of a scream that I couldn't get out of my head. And this wasn't a single pony…it undulated and rose and fell and was mixed with hysterical laughter, babbling, crying, and pain. I couldn't shut it out or shut it up. Scotch Tape whimpered on my back, shaking. She'd broken at the sight of the abomination…what was a little more grievous psychological damage?

It'd almost be more merciful to let her die down here…

I misstepped and staggered, my legs giving out beneath me as I smashed my face against the guardrail. Stars swirled in my vision as I struggled to catch myself. Fortunately, I hadn't dropped her. I slowly took a deep breath and stood.

Then I proceeded to beat the everloving snot out of myself for daring to ever think that. Security saves fucking ponies. And even though I had fucked up…and fucked up…and fucked up…I would die first before I ever killed her in some fucked up gesture of mercy. I could swear I could feel Rampage's eyes on me, and I was suddenly very glad she was a filly.

"Too old" or not, I wouldn't be leaving her alone with Scotch Tape again.

Why were there stars underground? In the wan light of my PipBuck, I saw countless motes of shimmering light below us. Step by step we descended, closer and closer to those lights. Not stars… these were moving.

"What the… " I rasped, then coughed, tasting blood in my mouth as I stared at a wonder ahead of me.

The cavern was roughly triangular in shape, perhaps a hundred feet high and longer than I could see. Buildings of ghostly white stood silently in cracked decay. All around us swirled and drifted countless glowing motes of shimmering gold. They floated in and out of the stone at random. A flat plane of dark water reflected the countless floating lights. Knowing my luck, I'd plunge into a hole

and drown. Step by step. I walked forward between the smashed and crumbling buildings.

A tiny mote drifted across my horn.

oooOOOooo

The glorious white unicorn looked particularly splendid in her rubber boots and coat as she surveyed the smashed artifacts and statuary with distaste. “Terribly gauche, wouldn’t you say, Goldenblood? The marble is positively chilly. Really. What were they thinking?” she asked as she tossed her magnificent purple mane.

His chest burned horribly as he gasped for breath. “Likely…that they wouldn’t be…a quarter mile…underground…”

oooOOOooo

I nearly fell on my face as the memory flashed out again. The mote continued on its way. I coughed for breath, feeling blood dripping out my nose. “Memories…they’re memories... ” I said as I looked back at my friends.

It didn’t matter what they were now.

Lacunae looked as empty as a doll. Rampage looked even more unstable than usual. Her cutie mark shifted so rapidly it simply looked like a smear. P-21 hobbled on three legs. And Glory…

I stared as the skin holding the wing slowly stretched like taffy and then broke, the wing splashing softly into the water beside her.

I stared at her standing in a daze. She didn’t know. “Glory…” I rasped, blood dripping down my chin. “Your wing…”

She looked at it lying there beside her. She slowly picked it up and held it in her hooves. “It fell off…” she said with a whimper, like a foal who’s favorite toy had broken. She started to shake, at first with tears…but then she threw back her head, laughing hysterically. “It fell off! It FELL the fuck off!” And with bloody tears she laughed and sobbed at the same time. “We’re going to die! We’re going to die! Please let us fucking die!”

I turned to face her... a light drifted across my horn.

oooOOOooo

"We're safe! We're saved! Sweet Celestia! We're saved!" the earth pony mare I was in sobbed in relief as she hugged her children. Green fields of magic rose up in all directions around the city, and the bombs flashed against them without effect.

Then her nose began to bleed. Her foals began to wail. Her sight dissolved in a red slurry as her body collapsed, but the scream went on and on and on…

oooOOOooo

"We…we are not going to die." I gasped, coughing and spitting up more blood. I felt like my heart was going to stop at any moment. "Just…keep walking, Glory! There's a way out. There's got to be."

"I'm not even a pegasus now! I'm not Enclave. I'm not anything," she wailed as she broke into bloody tears, hugging her wing to her chest.

I used my magic to pull her mane down and make her look me in the eyes, not daring to try and hold her for fear that I'd drop Scotch Tape. "Listen to me. Listen to me!" I croaked as I stared into her eyes, stopping her sobs for a moment. "Wings don't make you Glory. The Enclave doesn't make you Glory! Not giving up…that makes you Glory! Keeping going…makes you Glory! And you have to keep going. We are going to get…out…"

P-21 just slumped, and I wondered if his leg would drop off as well. "He kissed me…he kissed me…"

I shook and suddenly puked a torrent of blood and worse into the water at our hooves.

oooOOOooo

"All these artifacts will have to be removed at once," the unicorn mare said regally as we walked between the broken buildings. "We don't need any more protesters or resistance on trying to get the new zebra laws implemented."

Goldenblood walked after her, rasping and coughing. "These ruins are proof that the zebras were here first. Something happened to

bury these ruins. They should be investigated, Rarity."

Rarity simply sniffed disdainfully. "Oh, very well. See that these artifacts are collected, catalogued, and sent to that ghastly building they're erecting up above. Remember, these artifacts are supposed to be tippy-top secret."

Goldenblood smiled thinly. "But of course…"

oooOOOooo

I drew another shaking breath as I stared at P-21, forcing myself to grin. "You're going to…you're going to kiss him again. And…and you're going to show him your real cutie mark…and…and you're going to do…do…whatever colts do. And you're going to be happy. But you have to keep walking. You hear me. Keep. Walking."

Rampage collapsed, her body shaking and muttering. The tiny motes seemed to be drawn to her, slipping in and out of her tiny striped body. With each one, her cutie mark flashed…a bird…a bike…two horns…I reached down and bit her mane and started to drag her further between the ruins.

oooOOOooo

"What's going on?" a pegasus buck demanded as he stood before a panel of equipment. "What's happened?"

"Cloudsdale. Maripony. Manehattan…they've been…there's been an attack, sir," a mare in an army uniform said in shock.

"Raise the shields immediately. Seal the city! I want this city sealed!" the buck demanded as everypony worked furiously. There was a green flicker.

"There's not enough power for the shields! We're only at 10% capacity!"

"Where's the rest of the power?!" He charged to a terminal, smashing buttons furiously with his hooves. When the picture came up at a smirking green image of a pony, the pegasus roared, "Horse! You bastard! We need those shields, now!"

Horse looked perplexed. "Why? Is something happening, sir?"

"The zebras…it's an attack! An all out attack! We need more power."

"Well…the reactor's on standby. We can increase its output at any time."

“Do it!”

oooOOOooo

“Momma… ” Rampage sobbed, “I want my momma…where’s Momma,” she gasped as I dragged her through the water. She suddenly stiffened and purred, “I’ll help you find your momma…” She spasmed and shook. “You have the right to remain silent….” Then she sobbed once more. “Apple Bloom…”

Step. Step. Step. We walked through those broken ruins. Step by step. Broken ruins. Broken ponies. Going on because we had to. A mote slipped through my horn.

oooOOOooo

Rarity stood facing me, and I knew that rasp. “I know what you have, Rarity. I know where you got it. And I know what it is.” I felt my lips curl in a thin smile. “And I know what you’re doing with it in Hightower.”

“You know nothing,” she hissed as they stood together in the garden-atrium of the Fluttershy Clinic. But there was fear in her pretty blue eyes. “Leave me alone, or I’ll destroy you.” She started to step past him, but he blocked her passage with a wheezing laugh.

“Is it starting to talk to you? It is promising you secrets? Offering you ideas?” Goldenblood whispered in that horrible rasp. “I know it didn’t talk to Celestia. I know Celestia gave you the benefit of the doubt that you’d try and destroy it. I don’t think Luna would be so understanding.”

I didn’t think it possible for a white mare to look paler, but somehow Rarity pulled it off. “You can’t have it.”

“I don’t want it. I don’t need it. I’ve got my own sources. You might have snatched it before I could retrieve it from Zebratown…but it was hardly the only one of its kind,” he said with a sure smile.

Uncertainty was etched in her face. “What…what do you want, then?”

“Anonymity. I want you to wipe…hide…and bury every story about the O.I.A. You do that…and I will forget about just what you have.”

“And do you have one?” she asked in return.

He just smiled. “Of course not. That would be treason. And we’re not treasonous ponies…are we, Rarity?”

oooOOOooo

Step. Drag. Step. Drag. Step…I stared at them. My friends. I’d led them here. I was responsible. I was to blame. Call it self-centered. It was. Call me a selfish cunt. I am. I got them killed. I cost Glory her wing. I was the one responsible.

“Is this it?” the Dealer rasped softly in my ear.

I choked my reply, blood dripping from the corner of my mouth.

“Is this when the Wasteland breaks you?”

“I…I can’t…” I gasped, feeling lightheaded from all the blood I was losing. This was it. This was when the Wasteland killed us.

“Take two more steps,” he said softly.

“I…can’t…” I whispered. “I can’t move…I think my heart stopped…”

“Your heart is too strong to quit. Now take two steps!”

“Why…” I asked I sat in the cold water. “Why the fuck…do you care?” I asked as I shook. “You’re not real!”

The old buck smiled at me. “Just because I’m not real doesn’t mean I don’t care. Now. Take two more steps.”

Slowly I took one step forward.

Slowly…I took another…

And saw the elevator sitting right around the corner…

* * *

Together, we climbed onto the steel platform, one by one. Broken. Bleeding. Dying. Alive. I reached over and slapped the talisman, and then my rubbery weak legs gave out and I collapsed next to the limp Scotch Tape. The machine gave a grind. Then, slowly…and faster…and faster…we began to rise.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Forged in the Hoof -- You’ve sucked up more Enervation than any pony should live through. You suffer 25% less Enervation damage, and your healing items decay half as fast while in your possession.

Chapter 27: Salvage

"Bah! Trixie is exhausted from performing feats beyond imagination. Begone with you until morning!"

The halls of 99 echoed around me with the screams of a dying stable as I lay in the center of the atrium. A thousand years seemed to pass, the wall rusting before my eyes, the bodies moldering, liquefying, black fungus spreading from their corpses as the metal pitted and corroded. Acidic water hissed and bubbled in pools that slowly ate their way through the floor and covered the walls in a caustic sheen.

Through it all I lay there. Not dead. I didn't get that blessing. I couldn't move. Didn't want to move. I simply listened to the dripping. The hissing. The groaning of stressed metal. The clatter of breaking glass or tumbling ceramics. The pressure forced the burning chemical I'd unleashed into every pore of my body like countless fiery razors. Still, I lived. I didn't deserve to die. That was for better ponies…like my friends.

I wasn't alone, though. Not alone. He was here too, with his hat and watery pale eyes. He hadn't come for me. He wouldn't take me. I'd broken, but I still wasn't gone. I just wanted to die, move into the everafter…become whatever ponies became when life was over and done with. But he wouldn't take me. My stable. My mother. My friends. But not me.

"Is this Hell?" I whispered.

"If so, does that make me the devil?" he asked in return.

There was nothing to say as the pressure built more and more. Nothing to do but wait, lie there for another thousand years. I dropped like a rag doll to the level below as the floor rotted out beneath me. And the level below that. And the next. Then, finally, I landed in the liquefied remains of Stable 99. Only the pitted feces-colored metal shell of the stable remained, the armor keeping the Wasteland out and the poison in. Submerged talismans still

bubbled, still faithfully pumping out more and more of the gas.

The Dealer sat on a long jagged spur of metal resembling a severed gray wing. That vast shell groaned and creaked above me. Beneath me. Within me. From far above, a massive stable door, sealed by centuries of corrosion, gave. A hurricane wind blasted the rubble-choked tunnel beyond clear. A shriek like the screams of so long ago. The wind slackened, and died.

With one final bending, breaking, tearing cry, that armored shell gave way, and the hilltop collapsed inward as if under the hoof of an angry goddess. *Finally*, I thought…annihilated with a smile.

~ ~ ~

"She's waking up? Sedate her!" some mare cried distantly.

"We did! She's not responding to the Med-X!" another answered. Distant blurry lights entered my vision. And pain, but I was used to pain by now. I reached for that blur, pushing through the darkness. If I was alive, then Glory might be as well. All my friends might still be alive! I couldn't lie here and do nothing!

A wave pushed me back towards the black, but I refused to succumb. "Sweet Celestia, she's still waking up! Bluebell!"

"I already cast it again," the mare panted breathlessly, "it's not working!" I could see faces now. Bloody faces in paper masks. Unicorns. They had scalpels and little bloody scissors hovering over me. My chest and gut burned as I pulled together my focus. One unicorn's horn flashed, trying to push me back into Stable 99. I fought that urge to sleep. To dream. I'd kill them all. Teal eyes widened in shock as I stared back into them, pulling together a bullet spell as I slowly sat upright. "What is she doing? Hold her down! Get her under, now!"

"Won't…let…you…" I choked around a tube in my mouth, my horn glowing white as I readied a shot right at her head. Then hooves grabbed my shoulders and forced me back down. I saw bucks in filthy white coats stained and spotted in blood. "Glory…" I rasped around the tube. "Glory!" I shouted, then choked.

"Get a memory orb!" The unicorn mare ordered as I struggled. I felt something inside me tear, but I ignored it. It didn't matter how much I hurt now. I had to get free. I had to save my friends. "Security! Calm down! We're trying to help you."

A lie. They were Enclave. Or Sanguine. Or somepony that was

going to sell me out…betray me. My horn flashed as I struggled, and one of the bucks yelped as my bullets bit into his flank. Somepony blinded me with a rag across my eyes. I fired wildly, desperately. Another sedating surge washed through me like a blanket, the lethargy blurring away the rest of my senses.

A glassy sphere was pressed to my horn but I resisted…fought. I had to get free! I had to help my friends! Glory! I had to help Glory.

"Come on you stubborn idiot!" the unicorn mare said, grinding the orb against my horn. "Let me save you!" Not me, you idiot! Help her! Her wing…sweet Goddesses, her wing…

Please…

I tried to fire another bullet, but my concentration slipped away. There was a spark…no, Glory! I had to find Glory and all my friends. "Gluh…Reeee…" I choked, feeling myself cut open and my organs exposed to the chilly air. Then my horn spasmed, and the connection was made. The world faded away.

Glory...

oooOOOooo

I didn't want to be here in this mare. I wanted nothing to do with this place. I needed to find Glory and put her wing back on. I needed to find Rampage and discover just what was inside her. To do something to help Lacunae recover from that horrible doll-like state. But instead, I was stuck here. And worst of all, I felt two wings.

"I can't believe we get to go to the Grand Galloping Gala!" Twist squealed. She was wearing a green dress which, despite the mint leaves around the collar, looked vaguely like forest camouflage. "Oh, I get to wear the pretty dress and have the pretty mane, and look! My hooves are painted!" she squealed as she danced on the sparkly ruby hooves in glee. "Best! Night! Ever!" I could only wonder how much brushing and blowing it'd taken to get her curly mane to lay flat. I suspected that magic was employed.

"Famous. Last. Words," Vanity replied, smiling indulgently at the ladies and making Twist pout a little. The handsome buck wore a pristine white dress uniform. "If your night is pleasant, then consider yourself fortunate. The Gala has a well-deserved reputation for driving mares to drink."

"Do we all have to attend?" Psalm asked softly, shuffling and

fidgeting in a deep midnight blue dress decorated with tiny enchanted flecks of sapphire. Her white mane obscured her face as she looked worriedly out the door, chewing softly on the end of a lock. Twist sighed and brushed it out of her mouth, making the delicate black unicorn blush slightly.

"The Princess herself is decorating us, so the answer is probably 'yes'," Jetstream said as she stood before the mirror and carefully nudged her dark hair into place with a brush. The orange and gold dress made her look like she was on fire. A bit too garish for my -- what was I thinking? Why did I give a fuck about her dress right now when Glory needed me! Besides, when had I ever worn a big frilly party dress? The blue pegasus grinned over at Big Macintosh and Applesnack standing calmly in crisp pressed uniforms. "Besides, half our boys are escorts of the Ministry Mares. It's not like they can just skip out." She looked over at Stonewing, who seemed to positively vibrate in anticipation, and gave a soft sigh.

"I can't believe you set me up with your sister. She's going to hate me!" Applesnack muttered as he brushed his shaggy tan mane aside. "Couldn't you have been your sister's escort?" he asked the big red buck with a frown.

But Big Macintosh just gave an easy chuckle. "Anope. How'd it look if she was escorted about by her big brother?" He rolled his green eyes towards the door, his grass stem still sticking out his lips. "Besides, she needed me with one of her friends."

"Still don't see why I don't get no Ministry Mare," Doof muttered dully. It was like seeing a cinder block in a dress uniform, and his perspiration was already starting to show through. "It'd be nice to go out with a pretty mare like them." Half the Marauders shared a look, and thankfully nopony laughed.

There was a knock on the door, and a lilac mare poked her head in. "Is everypony ready? I need you gentlecolts to come with me, please. The Princesses are about to make their entrance." Macintosh, Applesnack, and Vanity all trotted out. Stonewing brought up the rear, still almost half-flying, half-vibrating across the floor.

"Um…I- I- I'd like to go to the G- G- Gala with a Ministry M- M- Mare too," Echo stuttered; the yellow buck, looking positively tiny out from under the heavy communications equipment, was nearly stepped on as Doof snorted angrily and plodded out the door.

"Trust me, Echo. Those mares are nothing but trouble," Jetstream

said sourly. “And they’re missing out by not having a great guy like you at their side.” He brightened up immensely at that.

“Well, we should probably get to the party too,” Twist said, sashaying after the others.

Jetstream trotted to Psalm, giving the black unicorn a little nudge on the flank. “Come on, Psalm. It’s just a party.”

“I’d rather not. I haven’t done anything that deserves honoring,” she whispered, her silver eyes looking up into Jetstream’s. “Are you sure I can’t stay here till it’s all over? I don’t like…crowds.”

“It won’t be so bad. Vanity says that it’ll probably just be boring aristoponies talking to one another. And once you have your decoration, you can go.”

“All right,” she murmured. “I’m sorry, though…”

Reluctantly, the pair exited the room together.

The Grand Galloping Gala was a positively spectacular affair that I might have enjoyed a great deal more if I hadn’t been trapped in it while my friends... Mentally, I was climbing the walls, trying to find some way…any way…to get myself out of this memory. I needed to help them. To beg for forgiveness. This was almost worse than leaving them to die. They’d been hurt following me.

I’d never seen more stuffed shirts and fancy dresses in my life. The Gala was clearly the social event of the year. Even more so given that, from the snippets of conversation rising around us, this was apparently Luna’s first. It seemed that there was more than a little apprehension from the aristoponies that the Gala would devolve into a common carnival slog. ‘Could you imagine?’ ‘How gauche!’

We trotted past a unicorn buck with a unicorn mare on either side of him. I wished I could plunge a sword into his heart and save two lives and one soul. “How dare she pick him over me! I’m the eldest. It should have been me!” he muttered to the bored-looking mares to either side of him.

Trumpets blared and formal processional music began to play. Twilight Sparkle entered in a splendid gown of purple and swirling silver galaxies. Macintosh trotted at her side, his eyes steady and his lips curled in that casual, confident smile. They approached the wide central throne dais. Applejack, dressed in surprisingly normal businesslike attire, entered alongside Applesnack, the former doing her best to smile as casually as her brother while the latter did his best not to be sick. From the doorway flew Rainbow Dash in a dress that could almost pass for a uniform, a grinning Stonewing beside

her. There was some applause and cheering from the crowd, which the Ministry Mare obviously relished. Jetstream gave a little sigh.

Pinkie Pie bounced in on her hooves with an escort on either side. The buck and a mare were decorated as formally as two clowns could possibly dress, but the rainbow wigs still killed it. Then I was astonished to see Fluttershy enter in a simple white gown decorated with pearls and rubies; the design was vaguely reminiscent of a nurse's uniform. At her side, walking with pain evident on his face, was the scarred Goldenblood. More than once he broke stride, coughing for breath as she waited patiently with a concerned and tender expression. Of course, that was how she always looked.

Rarity and Vanity entered with a fanfare, and almost everypony save one gave a collective gasp of approval at her exquisite gown. The only pony who didn't share their approval ground his teeth furiously behind Jetstream. Vanity, a familiar sword belted at his side, somehow made the white dress uniform even more splendid. For a few seconds, he gazed straight at Jetstream, and I knew that he would have rather had her by his side than the magnificent unicorn mare. Every noble muttered in complete approval, for here were two equines that embodied the image of all that was good in the noble lineage. Truly, there were no finer nor more lovely ponies in all the world!

Or were there? The lights dimmed as a great glowing orb and a shining silver sphere drifted from on high to land side by side at the entrance. Celestia looked as she always had. Perhaps a little more tired and wan, but glorious as ever. Beside her, looking young and vibrant and confident, stood Luna. And, side by side, the Princesses walked through a procession struck dumb with adoration. There was Rarity at her finest, and then there was this! Together, they moved with utmost dignity as everypony in attendance bowed before them. Not out of fear, but out of love and respect. They were Celestia and Luna. There was no other like them in the world.

When they mounted the dais, Celestia gave a formal bow to her sister and then moved to the far right of the stage. Clearly, this was Luna's show, and Celestia refused to upstage it. Twilight Sparkle stood at Luna's right, giving concerned looks at the former monarch. Goldenblood looked as if he was struggling to stand, supported by Fluttershy at his side. I was no expert, but it didn't look like an act. Luna gave him one concerned glance, then looked across the gathered masses of Equestria's finest. She took a slow,

deep breath, and when she spoke it wasn't in some blasting clarion but with a strange projection, as if she was talking to me and me alone.

"Ponies of Equestria. For twelve long years we have struggled…we have sacrificed…we have toiled against an enemy without reason or remorse. And, despite our pain and hardships, we have risen to these challenges with determination and vigor that would make the stars themselves tremble in awe." As she spoke, the volume slowly rose, as if the castle itself were speaking to us. "Regardless of the troubles we have faced on these long and uncertain nights, today we take comfort in our traditions and celebrate our dignity, our unity, and our strength! Therefore, it is with humility and thanks that your Princess welcomes you to this most glorious of nights, and declares: let the Grand Galloping Gala…commence!" And with that word, it felt as though Equestria itself was giving the speech, and the crowd broke into cheers.

With a gleeful squeal, Pinkie Pie rushed to a bellpull dangling nearby. A gong resounded, and suddenly velvet drapes were yanked up to reveal dozens of clowns, acrobats, jugglers, tumblers and singers. A cascade of fireworks exploded outside with such energy that, for a moment, it seemed like day had returned. Streamers descended like rain, and a cloud of countless balloons rose from cleverly hidden boxes about the throne room. The stunned aristoponies suddenly found themselves swept up in a party two short steps removed from a riot.

Jetstream, Psalm, and Echo made their way down the stairs and to the dais where the Princesses, the Ministry Mares, and the other Marauders were meeting with a few other select individuals. "A bit much, wouldn't you say, Pinkie Pie?" Rarity observed as a pie-juggling pony in a loud checkered suit rolled by on top of a large ball.

"What do you mean? I just made the Gala what it should have been! Ponies playing, ponies dancing... !" She fluttered her eyes at the unicorn with a cheeky grin. "Would you rather it be like the first time?"

Rarity took one look at Blueblood watching sullenly and shuddered. "I'd rather not."

"Excellent speech, Sister. I'm glad you modified the traditional Canterlot voice," Celestia said with a fond smile. "I never found much use for it."

“You used it for two hundred and sixty three years,” Goldenblood rasped, sitting with his eyes closed while Fluttershy held a hoof to his brow.

“You should be back in bed. You’re still not well,” the yellow mare fussed softly.

“Oh, I should last another hour or so,” he said as he looked at Rarity. “Wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, it would get their attention elsewhere,” Rarity said with a small worried frown. “But only if you’re sure.”

“I’d hate to cause a spectacle,” he rasped, coughing into a handkerchief. Fluttershy pulled out a healing potion from the dress; apparently, the similarity to a nurse’s uniform didn’t end with the style. For just a few seconds, he was the focus of a great number of ponies as he drank the restorative draught.

“The Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Peace, dressed as a nurse, is giving aid to a member of the aristocracy,” Vanity said softly from beside Jetstream. “Very well done, nephew.” The look Rarity was giving Goldenblood was far less admiring. In fact, it looked like a faint expression of unease.

“You’re not staying, Princess?” Twilight Sparkle asked as Celestia turned away, walking towards an exit behind the throne.

The rainbow-maned alicorn looked back at Twilight and shook her head with a sad little smile. “No. I’m afraid my heart isn’t in celebrations. Besides,” she said a touch coolly, glancing at Goldenblood coughing pink and red flecks into the handkerchief, “I wouldn’t want to detract from my sister.” Goldenblood gave a mirthless smile as he looked up at Celestia before clenching his eyes in another fit of soft coughing. He almost looked…ashamed.

Celestia extended a hoof to Luna’s shoulder and said as if sending her off to battle, “Good luck, Luna. Stay strong. The Gala has broken many great and powerful ponies before.”

“I think I can handle some aristoponies at a party, Sister,” Luna said, as if a touch insulted at the implication that she couldn’t.

“You’d be surprised at just how they can push you if you’re not careful,” Celestia warned as she looked at the crowds.

“Oh, like the one hundred and thirty first Gala, where you transformed half the attendees into frogs and the other half into pigs?” Twilight offered with a kind smile. At her friends’ looks, she flushed. “I was curious whether our experience really was the worst gala ever.”

Celestia shuddered. “Yes. Exactly like that one. I don’t think anypony looked me in the eye for two years after that.” With that, the Princess gave Twilight a parting nod and smile and walked quietly towards the exit.

“I suppose we should mingle and chat things up with folks?” Applejack asked, looking as if she’d rather chew tacks than waste time talking to all these snobby ponies.

Pinkie Pie bounced along with a crowd of performers, giggling wildly. “No, silly! We should have fun!” she said with a squeal. Fun was certainly a relative term. I’d been known to get a little crazy from time to time, but never on the scale that Pinkie Pie operated on. I wondered if, in the time since founding her ministry, she’d opened a school for clowning specifically to have the number of performers needed for the Gala. They were everywhere, and the aristocrats seemed stunned, unable to figure out what the proper actions were. Nopony would dare leave with the Princess in attendance.

The Ministry Mares and their escorts started to break up into clumps and mix in with the chaos. Jetstream was left with Echo, the pair having the dubious distinction of being the least interesting ponies to talk to. Other than Doof, who saw the buffet and never looked back.

“…I’m telling ya, they’re all a bunch of lying, cheating, no good snakes, the whole lot of ‘em,” Applejack complained bitterly to a knot of aristocrats (and one mime doing her best to imitate Applejack’s scornful looks and motions behind her back) as we passed. “They’ll take whatever you give ‘em, then they’ll sell for twice what it cost ‘em in the first place!”

Rarity coughed delicately, commenting, “Applejack, I think that’s what we call ‘profit margins’.” Behind the orange mare, Applesnack grabbed the mime in a hooflock.

“Really? It’s what I’m callin’ profiteerin’! And greedy shenanigans. I’m trying to keep ‘em honest by putting some kin in charge and seein’ if that helps straighten’ ‘em up. I got no complaints if they make a bit or two, but they ain’t gonna get away with what they done before,” Applejack said with a firm stomp that coincided perfectly with Applesnack punting the mime clear over the crowd.

“Well, surely there must be some you can work with. You’re putting Braeburn in charge of Ironshod Firearms,” Rarity said with clear concern.

Applejack gave a sheepish smile. “Um, Rarity, not sure you noticed, but Braeburn’s got a few tumbleweeds in his acre.”

The white unicorn nodded thoughtfully. “Mmm, yes. He does seem a bit distracted at times.”

“And he’s family. The rest of ‘em…Hippocampus, Flash, Boom…I walk into a room and it’s like they’re just nodding and waiting for me to leave so they can continue their shenanigans! I feel like I’m foalsittin’!”

“I wish I could make some recommendations, but I’m afraid most of my contacts are limited to my own ministry.” Rarity gave Applejack a sympathetic smile.

“Oh, Goldenblood’s suggested a few business ponies, but I can’t tell them from the snakes.” Rarity looked decidedly unhappy with the mention of the sickly pony as Applejack went on. “Horse is the only one I’ve met who doesn’t seem to give a damn how many bits he can pull out of this war. Cares more about his gadgets than making money. But Golden told me I should be careful with him. Careful.”

“Well, as useful as Goldenblood might be, I don’t need him to tell me how to run my business,” Rarity declared firmly.

“Oh? He’s meddling in Image too?”

Rarity opened her mouth, then balked. “No…no, he really isn’t. He’s not telling me things that I wouldn’t have done myself.” Her lips pressed together as she looked across the room towards Fluttershy. “But I still don’t like him. He’s... ” But whatever he was fell out of earshot as Jetstream strolled away. Normally, I’d have been fascinated, but right now all I could do was wonder if my friends were alive. I knew better than to hope that they were okay.

Jetstream wandered through the crowd, clearly looking for the gray pegasus. Pinkie Pie was dancing on the piano in one room, grinning with an expression of ‘have fun or else.’

“I was just wonderin’ if I could ask you somethin’ about Miss Maripony,” Big Macintosh said in his low, confident voice. He was standing with Twilight Sparkle in an alcove off to the side, and Jetstream peeked a little closer, her ears twitching. I’d be curious, too, if I wasn’t thinking about Lacunae following me about like a broken doll. When was this stupid memory going to end?

“Who?” Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion.

“Maripony?”

Twilight Sparkle suddenly started. “Oh! Yes, Maripony.” She laughed awkwardly. “I…ah…I get her confused. You know…with

the Splendid Valley site. Happens all the time," she said with an embarrassed smile.

"Well…I was wonderin'…has she mentioned me at all? I mean, does she talk about me?" Big Macintosh looked so uncertain and concerned that it was quite touching.

Twilight blinked, then smiled. "Well, yes. I suppose she does, now that I think about it. She wishes she could get away from the ministry more to see you. Everything's so crazy."

"Really? Huh…" Big Macintosh looked baffled and even a little worried.

"Did I say something wrong?" Twilight asked in concern.

The large red pony sighed. "It's just…she's so much smarter than me. I just…I don't understand why she likes to be around me. She's such a clever, nice little mare. Don't see what she sees in a pony like me."

Twilight blinked and then smiled a little. "Oh, don't worry about that. Really." She sighed as she looked at her polished hooves. "At the ministry, everything is crazy. I mean, you throw so many eggheads into one room, and there're so many ideas flying around that, by the end of the day, you feel fried. A pony like you, who's…" She trailed off and he smiled down at her as she fished for a word.

"Simple?" Big Macintosh offered, and she blushed.

"Easygoing," Twilight countered with a smile. "It lets a pony like her unwind and relax from all the pressures we deal with at the ministry." Twilight sighed as she looked back at the crowded room. "Trust me. Being smart isn't a guarantee for being happy." Then she returned her gaze to him with a smile. "And you make her happy."

Big Macintosh's mood quite obviously improved as his casual smile returned. "Well, thank you, Twilight. I hope you'll tell her I look forward to seeing her again. I was thinkin' on taking her to a hoofball game with some of the other Marauders."

"Hoofball?" Twilight Sparkle blinked in confusion and a little unease. "Um…well…I don't think she's ever been to a hoofball game." The purple mare rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Sure! It'll probably be fun!"

"Ayup!" he agreed with a nod. "Then I'll be sure to ask her. Thanks, Twilight."

Twilight Sparkle seemed to start, then slumped a little. "Oh. Yeah. Sure. No problem."

Normally, I would have been interested in the pair and curious about the implications, but at the moment I was simply wondering if I'd be trapped in this memory for hours…days? How long could a memory orb last? It wasn't a bad memory. In fact, compared to many memories I'd experienced, I'd normally enjoy the party and the obvious fun. Pinkie Pie had taken the stuffed aristoponies and forced all her gaudy, gauche, glittery gala games into their dreary dignified lives. Clearly, it was not what they were used to, but no one dared to complain with the Princess doubling her fun.

There was joy and laughter, too. Two gorgeous tumbling fillies kissing Echo's cheeks simultaneously, making the young buck blush to his hooves. Doof had found the cheese tray and its unfortunate digestive implications to anypony downwind. Stonewing flew through a solid wall, much to the amazement of the onlookers, including Rainbow Dash, and the chagrin of Big Macintosh. Vanity and Rarity drifted through as a respite and a focus of calm and civility.

The Gala culminated with the Marauders getting medals for their work at securing some coal mine or another east of Hoofington and holding it against overwhelming odds. Finally, the party started to wind down... and Jetstream heard a mare cry out. "Help! Someone! Please, help!"

My host took to the air and swooped down the hall like a comet. She found Fluttershy in an alcove with a collapsed, coughing, and rasping Goldenblood. She was pressing a hoof to his throat. "Your heartbeat is irregular and very weak! We need to get you to the hospital." She looked at Jetstream. "Get Twilight! She can teleport him! Or maybe Rainbow Dash can fly him there. He's not heavy!"

"On my way!" Jetstream said at once, readying her wings.

"Stop!" Goldenblood gasped as Jetstream turned to follow Fluttershy's instructions. The blue mare froze, looking back at him as he struggled to rise. He coughed again, blood speckling his uniform. "Please. Stop. I'll…I'll be fine."

"You will not be fine! Your heart is failing," Fluttershy insisted, but he raised a hoof to her mouth, silencing her.

"My heart…has been failing... for years. I'll be…fine," he said in wet, laborious tones. "Just another hour. Then…Luna will have retired…and the…important…ponies will…have gone home." He spasmed and hugged his scarred chest, wet coughs rasping softly in his torso. "Everything must go perfectly tonight. Right…to…the

end."

"But why?" Fluttershy asked in concern, brushing his sweaty golden mane from his scarred forehead.

"Where the nobles…go…the people…follow. Luna…is changing things…they have to accept her. Accept the ministries. Support both," he said in snort, breathless gasps. "Confidence in Luna…is all that matters…now. If the nobles believe…the people…believe. And they will fight for her…because…they will believe in her…" He panted as she held him closely. "An hour, and I'll go."

Fluttershy's gaze hardened. "I'm not going to let a patient of mine die. We're getting Twilight."

"Twilight…needs to…be seen…with Luna…now!" he insisted as he held her foreleg in his clammy grip. "Half an hour. Then… everypony…will be…leaving. The attention…can go…off Luna." He squeezed her foreleg. "Please, Flutter…shy…My life…doesn't matter…compared to…you seven. Please…"

"I can fly him!" Jetstream said confidently. "No one will miss me. I got my medal. I can fly him to the hospital, and you can follow me."

Fluttershy looked down at him with a gentle smile. "We're going to the hospital, Goldenblood. And I'll find some way to make you all better. And you are not going to argue. Understood?" Jetstream shed the frilly dress and, with Fluttershy's help, carefully got Goldenblood on her back between her wings.

"You should…stay here. The six…with Luna. Symbolic…"

"Does he always talk this much?" Jetstream asked as she adjusted his weight.

"He is a very bad patient," Fluttershy said quietly as, together, they flew out of the side of the palace. The shadow and firework flashes hid them as they moved together out over the city.

"And not…a very good…escort…I'm sorry…" Goldenblood murmured with alarming weakness between gasps as they flew into the night amid fireworks and sparklers.

"That's okay. I'm not very good with big parties, anyway," Fluttershy replied as she flew close beside him. "But I'll take care of you, Golden. I'll take care of you."

oooOOOooo

As the memory faded away, I was left lying on my back in a bed, a

blindfold wrapped across my eyes and tied in place. I lifted a hoof to push the blindfold away, only to find it restrained by a hoofcuff. I jerked all my limbs once, finding them all strapped down. I jerked again and again.

"Like the memory orb?" a mare said to my side, and I turned my head in her direction, my horn starting to glow to remove the blindfold. Something heavy tapped against my horn. "Don't. You hurt two of my nurses. Take off that blindfold and I'll smash your horn, then dump you outside for the ghouls. Understand?"

"Where are my friends? Who are you? Where am I?" I asked. If this was the Enclave, then I was going to take them all apart or die trying.

The mare sighed. "Your friends are alive. Some of them are still in serious condition. My name is Doctor Triage. You're at the University. You're a guest of the Collegiate." There was a pause. "I'm going to remove your blindfold. Please stay calm. We almost killed you trying to sedate you earlier."

I felt the blindfold slowly tugged away, my eyes--my right eye; there was a bandage over my left--trying to focus on the mare before me. Everything was blurry, and sparkles danced in the corners of my vision as it struggled to focus on the pale blue unicorn with a deep indigo mane. Her doctor's coat was speckled with blood. I gave a tug on my cuffs and she arched a brow skeptically. "Are you going to be able to follow my instructions and stay in bed?"

"I want to see my friends," I said as evenly as possible.

She sighed again. "Why does nopony ever listen to their doctor?" Walking to the door, she pushed it open. "I need a wheelchair, please," she called down the hall before returning to my bed. "Now, I want you to stay calm. We went through some rather extraordinary measures to try and save you. If you hadn't helped us at the Fluttershy clinic…well…"

"How is Glory?" I asked softly. See? Look at me being a picture of calm.

"She's stable, and in better shape than you are. You have severe biomagical contamination. The damage is extensive. We had to place you in the autonomous healing booth just to stabilize you long enough for surgery to remove the necrotic tissue and put you back in for a second run. Be glad the professor likes you. I don't recall her allowing anypony two trips through the tube before." She

lifted a key with her magic. “I’m telling you all this because it took nearly six hours to put you back together. I don’t want you to ruin all that work with an overdose of stupid.” One by one, she removed the cuffs.

“I need to see my friends. Now,” I said resolutely as I slowly rolled out of bed and onto the floor. Then I fought the urge to scream as my legs bent under me and I collapsed onto the yellowed tile. My legs bowed before my eyes! They weren’t supposed to bend like that!

“You really need to listen to your doctor,” she said as her blue magical glow wrapped around me and laid me back down on the bed. “Several of your bones have transformed into something the consistency of thick rubber. We’re trying to find a treatment to strengthen your limbs. Fortunately, your spine, skull, pelvis, and ribs are still largely intact. Your legs, however…” And she gave a non-committal shrug as a white earth pony buck with a pink heart cutie mark trotted in pushing a wheelchair.

“Tell me Glory’s condition. Were you…” I swallowed hard. How could I just ask if they could get her wing back on?

“We were able to stop the internal bleeding in the four of you. The alicorn…well…I won’t hazard a guess as to her physiology. Rampage recovered on her own. She was the one who found us. Went right to the professor,” Triage said as she carefully lifted me once more and put me in the chair. With my left eye covered by the bandage, I had to keep turning my head to see things. We exited into a far grimier hospital hall than the Fluttershy clinic…but at least this one didn’t have ‘PLAY’ written on the walls. She trotted ahead as the buck pushed me along. “Believe it or not, your injuries were by far the most severe. Physically, at least.”

“Blackjack!” Rampage shouted, rushing down the hall and shoving aside anypony who got in her path like a filly avalanche. She slid on the tiles, and only Triage’s magic stopped her from slamming into me. “How are you? They said you were stable, but…but…how are you?” she asked, her eyes huge and round. She put her weight on my knee, and I gritted my teeth as I felt it bend. She jerked her legs back, and the expression on her face somehow made the sensation even worse.

“I’m fine. We’re going to check on Glory,” I said as I brushed her mane. From the horrified look on her face, my heart began to thud limply in my chest. “What happened, Rampage?”

"I don't know. I don't remember anything after we went down those stairs. When I came to, we were on an elevator that opened up at a construction site near the university. I came straight here for help."

"She was very insistent," Triage said softly as she trotted ahead of us, "I think she swore a personal, unending, and eternal war of annihilation if we didn't help you right away. Fortunately, the professor agreed."

"I woulda too," Rampage replied with a scowl. Triage simply rolled her eyes with a huff.

"Rampage, how is Glory? You've seen her…haven't you?" I asked, and she quickly looked away as the orderly stopped pushing me. The other staff in the grimy ward watched me warily; given that I could shoot them with a look, that wasn't much of a surprise.

"I haven't been to see anypony except P-21," Rampage said softly. "I didn't want…you know…anything to happen." She bit her lip. "Since I woke up, I keep feeling…I don't think I'm safe…you know?" She looked at me with shame in her pink eyes before she quietly stepped back. Magic glowed around the wheelchair as Triage pushed me the last few feet into the dirty, dim, dank room.

Oh, Glory.

I wanted to weep as I saw her lying still in the decrepit hospital bed. A magical monitor beeped softly as she lay on her stomach with a blanket around her haunches. One gray wing lay slack at her side. The other…wasn't…. I shook as I stretched out a hoof towards her, tears running down my cheeks as I watched my outstretched limb slowly droop as the muscles cramped. I hugged my leg to my chest as I looked at her, unconscious.

"You couldn't save her wing? Put her in the magical restoration thingy again…" I muttered thickly with a sniff, my body starting to shake. This was my fault. I had caused nothing but pain and misery in her life. "Do something! Please!" I said as I twisted and grabbed Triage's dirty medical coat between my hooves. "I'll do anything you want. Just fix her!"

The doctor just sighed. "We can't. When her wing was separated from her body, putrefaction began immediately. All that reached the top of the lift was bone, dead meat, and feathers."

"Give her Hydra! Something!" I begged, gritting my teeth as I felt my forelimbs bend. "I…I can't leave her like this."

Triage grunted in annoyed resignation. "Even if it could work, the

amount of Hydra we'd have to use would probably induce such massive amounts of taint contamination that she'd be dead anyway. Just like you," she said as she lifted a clipboard.

"Contamination? Me?"

"I haven't seen taint corruption like yours in a long time. You should have seen your heart! We removed at least a half dozen tumors in your lungs and lymphatic systems. I can't even begin to guess what it's doing to your skeletal structure." She poked me in the chest with the clipboard. "You know what? Forget your bones," she said as her lips curled in an angry smirk, "I can't even begin to guess how it's fucking with your brain."

"My brain?" I muttered dully, receiving a look like I'd just proven her argument.

"The brain's an organ, and your organs are fucked. I'm having trouble finding biological systems that aren't compromised on some level. Muscles. Epidermis. Looks like your reproductive bits got lucky. That's about it, though," she said as she looked at the clipboard. "You know, a rare few might get exposed to taint and get some decent benefit from it like regeneration or the like. But most, like you, just die. Normally I wouldn't give a damn, but I spent a lot of time, energy, and good chems trying to piece you back together. The very least you can do is try to pretend like you're going to try and keep that hulk of meat you call a body in something vaguely resembling working condition."

"You don't get it," I said softly as I stared at Glory's unconscious form. "This is my fault. Going through the tunnels was my idea. I cost her her wings." Her wings. I might as well have lit her on fire and called it a day. "I have to make this right."

"You have to take care of yourself. You've got six months to live. Maybe a year. We removed the most blatant taint tumors, but there are others inside you, and--" I silenced her with a hard shake.

"Don't you understand, Doctor? I don't matter! All that matters is helping my friends. I die in a year, so what?! Glory will have to spend the rest of her life stuck on the ground because I took a tunnel and she followed me in." I clenched my eyes shut, trying to control my shaking. "I have to help her fly again. Tell me there's a way."

Triage staggered back out of reach, and I tumbled right out of the chair and sprawled on my face. "Incredible. I've heard DJ Pon3 talk about you, but I never thought it could possibly be true," she said as

I tried to get my limbs under me. Triage lifted my chin with her hoof and stared into my eye with wonder. “How the fuck aren’t you dead yet?” Her tone was one of marvel and sick disgust. “You’re telling me that you seriously…sincerely…don’t give a damn about yourself? That you’re willing to die and rot so long as you’re helping others? We should have just let you die and save ourselves the materials.”

“Funny…I thought helping others was a good thing,” I muttered, “you’re the second doctor I’ve met who thought I was stupid for hurting myself to help others.”

She stared into my eye and shook her head slowly. “What good is your help if it kills you? You think ponies won’t need your help after you’re gone? That your friends won’t need you? If you don’t take care of yourself, then all you’re doing is a sick, masochistic suicide. And I don’t waste my skill and effort on suicide cases.”

She shoved me away, stood, and levitated me back into the chair. “As to your friend, I’ve only had two pegasus patients before her, neither with severed wings. I suggest that, if you want a more informed opinion, you can just crawl down the road to the Skyport and ask the pegasi there if they have some treatment for regrowing a wing, because I don’t.” And with that, she trotted out of the room.

I sat there for the longest time using my magic to nudge myself closer to the bed. I reached out, gently stroking her choppy amethyst mane as I dreaded when she’d finally wake. It was growing out quite fast. Pretty soon, it’d be thick enough for her to hide behind again.

A soft clearing of the throat made me look over at P-21. Rampage was curled up outside the door, looking as lost as I felt. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey yourself.” He looked wary. Scared. Worried for me. But I also noticed something else: he wasn’t limping any more. I looked back and saw the brace was gone from his rear leg. “They fixed it?”

“Apparently, that regeneration booth is some heavy duty magic. Removed the scarring; I finally feel like I can walk without my leg falling off, which is good, because that Enervation almost fused my entire leg,” he said with a mirthless smile. “Scotch Tape and Lacunae are in a bad way. Scotch Tape had some major internal bleeding. I think, being younger, she was more susceptible to the magical fields. She’s…not talking to anypony. And Lacunae just stands there. She’ll follow you if you lead her, but that’s about it.” I

closed my eyes. I didn't know how I could possibly help them. But I had to…I had to help them all.

"At least you're still with me," I said with a smile as I reached over to nudge his shoulder with my limp limb. But his sad smile melted away as he looked off to the side with a worried frown. "What? What is it?"

His blue eyes looked away at the wall, the door, Glory…anything that wasn't me. "I'm…I'm not sure I can keep doing this, Blackjack. I don't know why we keep throwing ourselves into harm's way over and over again. 99 is done. Throw EC-1101 in the river or down that shaft or something and let's go back to Chapel and have some kind of life again with no monsters or killing. Just a quiet life for as long as we can." He closed his eyes. "Priest is there. Sekashi. The Crusaders. Even Charity." He pressed his lips together and gave a snotty sniff. "I found someone that makes me feel whole and complete and…I don't want to lose it again. I was down in that hole and…I was going to die. I was going to lose it all forever and I almost let it happen. And if you keep on doing this…"

"You will," I said softly, feeling as though my rotting, worthless heart had been ripped from my chest and only a void remained inside. I closed my eyes, feeling the ache.

And what hurt the most was that he was right. I was cursed. I was like a walking ball of pain and misery, and everypony I encountered…good, bad, or otherwise…was smashed apart as I rolled along. I used to think that, if I kept my friends close, at least I could take the hurt myself. Catch the bullets with my damn hide. But I couldn't do that anymore. I'd tried to be strong, but I wasn't strong enough. I'd tried to be tough, but I wasn't tough enough.

Hell, I couldn't even take care of myself anymore.

"Well, then…as soon as you're all feeling better…you should go," I said. "Head back to Chapel. You're smart and clever; they'll need you if they're going to build that place right. Take Glory and Scotch Tape with you. Lacunae too. And Rampage, if they'll let her."

"But you won't be coming with us?"

"I can't," I said softly, closing my eyes. "There's something bad in Hoofington. Something…something bad that started a long time ago. Goldenblood did something…some plan or plot involving EC-1101." Besides, if I did go to Chapel, the trouble would follow me there, too.

"What does it matter, Blackjack? It was two hundred years ago."

"It matters!" I snapped, glaring at him. He looked shocked at my reaction, and I drew a shaky breath. "One thing I'm absolutely sure of is that Goldenblood didn't do anything that didn't matter. And I know…I just know deep in my soul that it's bad. Maybe it was that thing I shot with Folly. Maybe it's whoever Sanguine serves. I don't know. All I know is that somepony needs to stop it, or Hoofington will just keep killing. If the killing isn't going to stop, I can't give up."

He just stared at me with that sad-eyed gaze. "You're incredible, Blackjack. You really are…but I'm not. I'm sorry," he said quietly as he hung his head again.

"Don't be. It's the smart thing to do," I murmured quietly, "and you know me. I'm an idiot."

He sniffed as he rose to his hooves and quietly left the hospital room. I simply reached forward and stroked her cheek again, trying to ignore the bones bending in my leg. He was doing the right thing. He was a smart pony.

* * *

I don't know how long I sat there alone, listening to the monitor that beeped out her vitals minute after minute, hour after hour. Then I saw the tiny shift of her head. The hairs falling across her eyes as they slowly opened. She didn't look at me. She didn't have to. Her right wing lifted only an inch or two and fell back. Her left…the bandaged stub moved slightly. Her eyes slowly closed again, seeking that solace of oblivion as she started to weep broken, gasping sobs.

She'd taken the betrayal of her people, the loss of her cutie marks, the abandonment of her family; she'd suffered humiliation and terror and endured my selfish self-destructive desertion. Now she'd lost her fundamental self. I'd only ever reached the point where the Wasteland *almost* won, but that was me. Now the Wasteland was attacking my friends, and it was winning.

I stretched a hoof towards her, and she rolled away from me, pressing her face to the mattress as she wept as silently as she could. Slowly, I withdrew my limb, clenching my eyes shut as I felt a little ball of pain and rage constrict more and more inside me. Glory had fallen for real, and I had to find some way…any way…to make her better again. Drawing a slow and shaking breath, I stared

at the back of her head.

Ante up.

I used my magic to turn the chair and wheel it back out into the hall. Rampage immediately jumped to her hooves. “How is she?” My look was answer enough. I’d been told I had a shooty look. Right now, I expected I had a balefire bomb look going.

Unfortunately, the orderlies didn’t seem to quite catch on as they trotted up. “Doctor Triage said to take you back to your room.”

I didn’t look at him. I was too busy trying to burn a hole through his chest with my stare alone. “I need my gear, now.”

He laughed. “Your gear? You can’t even support your own weight. How…” And then my horn flashed and blasted the wall beside his head. He staggered to the side, staring at me in shock. “You’re crazy!”

“Then don’t fuck with me. My gear. Get it,” I said as I rolled the wheel chair past him. He, however, seemed to feel the need to play hero and kicked over the chair, sending me sprawling. He yelled for help as I rolled onto my chest. He hadn’t been wrong; my legs weren’t supporting me. They bent and flopped as I tried to rise. Oh yeah, and they hurt…a lot. “Rampage, can you find my stuff?”

“Sure, Blackjack. But what are you going to do?”

“What my doctor recommended,” I said as I looked down the hall. She trotted off quickly.

If I couldn’t walk, then I’d crawl. I opened each door and checked the contents. Bathroom. Bathroom. Office. Locked. My horn reached out to the next lock and twisted without finesse, but it clicked open. My luck seemed to be holding for now. Opening the door, I looked at the medical supplies in nice neat rows. Including a metal box with four leg braces. I tried not to smile as I saw that one of them had a tag reading ‘Stable-Tec: #99’. Carefully, I buckled each brace tightly on its appropriate limb.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered as I lifted myself to my hooves. It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t comfortable. It wasn’t easy, but at least I was standing on my own.

P-21 and Rampage appeared in the doorway. “What do you think you’re doing?” P-21 asked me as he saw me standing in the braces.

“Going to the Rainbow Dash Skyport,” I replied as I levitated my barding and started to strap it into place over the braces.

“You’re going to the Enclave?” He stared at me as I nodded and checked my shotgun. “Is this a suicidal relapse?”

I loaded the weapon with buckshot, slung it, and moved on to check Vigilance. “Nope. I’m coming back. That’s part of the plan. There’s only one thing I know that will help her, and it isn’t me,” I muttered softly as I pointed the pistol and scowled. My depth perception was all futzed up. I tore off the bandages, but it didn’t help. Then I saw the horrified looks on their faces. “What?”

“Your eye,” Rampage muttered.

I trotted past them into the bathroom and stared in the mirror. The right side of my face looked fine. The left…raw red lines formed a Y meeting right over my eye socket. A raw and bloody hole lay where my eye should have been. I sighed as I stared at myself; I didn’t even look like Blackjack anymore. I looked like some old, scarred Wasteland raider. “Well, fuck,” I muttered. What else could I say?

“Blackjack, don’t go. Take some time to recover,” P-21 said softly.

“I thought you were going back to Chapel,” I replied as I walked past him, the braces clicking beneath me. *That was a cheap ass shot, Blackjack*. I stopped, bowing my head a little. “I have to go. I have to help her. Don’t you see? If we’d just let her go after we left weather station four…she never would have gotten hurt. She didn’t deserve any of this. So I’m going to find the only thing in the Wasteland I think can help, or I am going to go stark raving mad.” I glanced back over my shoulder at him. “I don’t expect either of you to come with me. In fact, you should be going back to Chapel. The further you are from me, the safer you’ll be.”

Without another word, I left my friends behind. Where they were safe.

* * *

Nopony tried to stop me on my way to the exit. I drew every look, though, as I stepped out into the foggy day. Great, as if Hoofington’s normal drizzle wasn’t bad enough. Six gray four-story granite buildings rose around a yellowed rectangular field filled with scrapped military vehicles, tents, and cargo containers. Barricades had been built across the gaps with bits of steel and rubble. Turrets atop the corners of the buildings pointed out at the Wasteland, moving slowly as they tracked for hostile targets.

“I think you might be the second worst patient I’ve ever had,” the doctor said as she trotted out after me into the rain, pulled a cigarette from her pocket, and put it between her lips. A little flash

ignited the tip. “You know, there’s at least three ponies here fighting for the chance to get first dibs at studying your corpse? I don’t think we’ve ever had a pony exposed to the degrees of Enervation, radiation, and taint you’ve been.”

“Sorry to disappoint them,” I said as I continued through the clammy gray mist. “Which way to the Skyport?”

“The Skyport?” Triage’s eyes narrowed. “You seriously think the Volunteer Corps is going to help you? Your friend is a Dashite. I saw the brand.” I gave her a shooty look, but, to her credit, she didn’t look away. Maybe it was only half as effective with one eye.

“I only need help from one of them. They’ll tell me where to find them,” I said, my braces clattering softly with every step. “If not, I’ll make enough noise that they’ll come find me. Now, which way is it?” I asked as I looked around…though it wasn’t as if there were signs saying ‘Enclave this way’.

Triage just took one long look at me standing there before her and sighed as she pulled out the cigarette and pointed the burning tip towards a scrap metal gate. “Go out the north gate by the planetarium. Watch for ghouls. When you hit Celestia Boulevard, go east. It’s about five or six miles.” She put the cigarette in her mouth. “You’re really going? Alone?”

“I’m not going to get any more ponies hurt following me,” I said firmly.

She just sighed, and her horn pulled a black eyepatch from her coat pocket. “Here. Put this on. At least try to keep an infection out of that socket,” she said as she floated it in place and tied it over my missing eye.

I smirked, then started as a pony trotted abruptly into my field of vision on my left. Okay…this was going to take some getting used to. “So, I guess this makes me a one-eyed Blackjack.”

“I think that taint’s given you some hardcore brain damage,” she said as she looked at me with a shake of her head. “Fine. I’ll just let you know that the professor wants to talk with you before you go. Chat with her or don’t. She’s in the planetarium, if you care. Second floor.” She trotted back towards the ‘School of Medicine’ building behind me.

I sighed and made my way across the muddy field towards the large domed structure on the north end. I stopped by a merchant working out of a burned out bus and converted most of the junk in my saddlebags into specialty ammo for my shotgun. The healing

potions in stock looked absolutely pitiful, but they would probably be okay for a few more days.

No time to waste; I'd talk when I got back. The guards at the gate were pathetic, but I had to admit that the energy turrets they had rigged looked formidable enough. They gave me incredulous looks as I passed by. "Good luck," one of them muttered just before the door slammed shut behind me.

Once past the razed ruins around the Collegiate's base, I found myself almost lost in the mist. Grim gray buildings were simply dark patches till I moved close enough to their shattered remains. Broken statues reared in silent poses in the mist, and I could swear that they were watching me. There was other debris, too, largely in the form of rusting sky carriages. Cold gray patches of water sat like glazed mirrors between the crumbling buildings on the edge of the campus.

Then I heard a shot. And another. And another. Distant and…hard to tell the direction in the muffling mist. Then there was an inequine scream. And another. And another. Suddenly, I heard the splashing…much closer. I twisted my head in time to see a mottled black-and-red boiled pony lunge out of the fog at me. I brought my shotgun up to its neck to block its lunging bite, forcing me to push back with my forehooves as its splintered and jagged teeth chomped at the air before my face.

S.A.T.S. and two magic bullets exploded that head with a spray of rotting matter. I whirled in time to face two more as I set my braced legs and focused on blasting instead of running. My shotgun roared, the buckshot ripping into their soft, pulpy bodies and stripping rotting flesh from yellowed bone. As soon as they dropped, I reloaded, bringing out the sword as more raced at me.

I didn't really know how to fight with a sword, so I treated it like a baton. A disturbingly sharp baton. The razor edge cut into them quite nicely, and once or twice I was even lucky enough to hew off limbs. The shotgun rendered their skulls to bloody goo. My braced legs clicked and strained under my barding as they bit and snapped at any limb they could get their mouths on.

"Why…" I shouted over the hissing and snapping. I brought the sword down and split the leathery hide of one ghoul's face. "Are ghouls…" I cut the blade horizontally across another's throat and was rewarded with its head arcing off completely. "Always…" I pressed the shotgun to another's chest and, with a sickening pop,

blasted rotten guts and rancid organs out of its torso. Another shot to the face finished it. “Hungry?!” I yelled as I emptied the last two shells into one trying to chew through both brace and barding on my hind leg.

More and more came at me, and soon I was forced to move as they flanked me. Whatever the reason inside their feral brains, I was food. Better still, I was slow food! I just couldn’t move as fast or smoothly with the braces on. Their undead jaws and broken hooves pummeled my already not quite intact body, and I was firing as fast as I could reload while slashing wildly behind me with the sword. I was lucky I didn’t cut my own tail off! The flechette rounds, however, proved my salvation. The razor sharp darts shredded the pulpy flesh even more efficiently than buckshot! With their gray flesh rendered to reeking goo, they fell one after the next.

Then, as fast as they had appeared, the last one fell. I gasped for breath, turning this way and that. There were red bars still in the fog, but for the moment I wasn’t being attacked. I wiped their gunk off the sword, reloaded with flechettes, and continued along the broken road north.

I wasn’t alone anymore either. The Dealer trotted along beside me. “You sure about this, Blackjack?”

“It’s not like last time. I’m not going to die. I’m going to get help for my friend,” I said as I trotted along a flooded street through the fog. There were more gunshots ahead, more ponies I’d probably have to kill.

“Alone?”

“It’s better this way. This way, the only pony who gets hurt is me. I have to walk it alone,” I replied, feeling the hollow inside me. “P-21 knows it. He’s the only one brave enough to admit it.”

For a while, he said nothing as we walked side by side. “You ever think…maybe you should just accept what happened to her?”

I really wished that I could shoot him. Really. “Accept what? That Glory will never fly again? No. I can’t accept that.” I kept my eye locked straight ahead. There were more red marks that way, too.

“Maybe you’ll have to.”

“Shut up!” I screamed at him. “What is the point of you? I’m fucked up enough in the head without having my stupid brain telling me what I already know. I’ve accepted that I’m the cunt that cost her everything. Now I’m going to give something back to her. The only thing that I can give back to her.”

The gunshots were becoming louder, and then I came across them: two ponies trapped on a second story ledge accessible only by a thin ramp of debris. It was the only thing keeping them alive as a dozen or so ghouls slowly crawled up towards them. Their low caliber rifle was barely adequate for radroaches and bloatsprites, and feral ghouls... Soon as they got tired or ran out of bullets, they'd be ghoul chow…

I didn't care.

As I stared at the scene…I realized that I didn't care that they were going to die. I didn't know those two ponies. I didn't need to help them. I didn't want to help them. I could simply back away, go around, and get to the Skyport to help the one pony that did need my help. Even if I did help them, they would probably shoot me. Or I'd have to escort them back to the university. Or worse…they'd want to hang around me.

In that instant, I stopped being Security. I was just another wasteland scavenger, tainted and corrupted and putting myself first. I might not have had a clue what my virtue was, but at this moment I knew I didn't have it. I slowly backed away, looking for a way around. A blue pegasus inside my head was very put out with me. They all were. This was the antithesis of awesome.

I heard one of the mares calling for help. I clenched my eye shut, tapping the barrel of my gun against my forehead. "Yup... She's right, Blackjack. You're brain damaged…it's the only explanation!"

With a scream, I charged…okay, trotted rapidly towards…the mass of ghouls, firing cones of razor sharp metal into the wheeling, hissing creatures. A few of the glowing variety received S.A.T.S. guided magic rounds into their noggins. The rest were slowly abraded away by shotgun flechettes. The swinging blade kept them at bay as I reloaded and resumed tearing out chunk after chunk of dead pony flesh.

Finally, I blew the legs out from under the last ghoul. My horn throbbed so badly that I wondered if it would go the way of my eye and just explode or something. Then the pink unicorn mare poked her head out, levitating the rifle at me warily. A bloody earth pony mare peeked out next to her.

Then so did two foals.

"Thank the Goddesses. It's Security. Security saved us!" she exclaimed as she lifted the rifle from me. With a clatter my legs gave out beneath me and I fell soundly on my rump as the four

scrambled down the narrow ramp towards me. The brown earth pony mare's battle saddle had gotten twisted and fouled, the hunting rifles pointing uselessly beneath her. The pink unicorn paused, looking worried again. "Are you all right, Security Mare?"

No. I almost let you die. I nearly trotted off to let you and her and your young become lunch for ghouls. "Yeah. Sure. No problem. No big deal for me," I said with a grimace. "Are you heading south?"

"Mhmmm," the brown mare said with an enthusiastic nod. "The Eggheads have a book bounty; one hundred caps for any pre-war book that's undamaged. It's tough to find books that aren't pulped, though."

"Well, I fought a bunch of ghouls a little bit ago between here and the college. If you hurry, it should still be clear." I looked at the brown mare's rifles. "Want to trade rifle rounds for shotgun shells?"

"Twenties?" The pink unicorn asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "Twelves."

"We don't have many twelve gauges…" the unicorn said as she levitated out a half full cardboard box. "Just buckshot…"

"I'll trade you thirty rounds of hunting ammo for them." Almost two for one, but who was using math?

"We've also got fresh food from the Enclave," the brown unicorn added. I felt a chill go down my spine.

"I'll buy every bit you have. Three bullets each," I said without hesitation. I had plenty of ammo…and hopefully they hadn't eaten any of it. Looking confused, they agreed. The four hurried to the south, eager to get to the shelter of the Eggheads. I waited till they disappeared in the fog and dumped four apples, three carrots, and a head of lettuce into the mud. Then narrowing my eyes I smashed them all to mush.

Maybe they weren't contaminated. I wasn't going to take that risk. I wasn't going to let there be another 99. Checking my shotgun, I continued my path north.

* * *

The fog never lifted so much as thinned into tattered swirls and chest-high banks. The mucky, broken road underhoof sloshed with every step. This area had a different feel from the ruins around Riverside. There were smaller homes of stone and rotten wood instead of the large apartment buildings. Upscale, but not nearly as opulent as Blueblood Manor. This region hadn't suffered a direct hit from a bomb, but there was more than enough radiation in the

water to prohibit long term habitation.

Oh, yeah. And there were leeches.

Every few minutes, I'd have to flick them off my barding with the sword. Their chisel teeth gnawed at the ceramic plates, and every now and then they were tenacious enough to get at my hide underneath. It didn't matter how many of the things I killed, more were always wiggling through the water. Thorny briars wound around the stones, and there were strange mushrooms growing in the cracks. Deep croaks periodically shot out, making me jump. The skitter of radroaches and the buzz of bloatflies were everywhere. I'd finally found a place around Hoofington teeming with wildlife, and all I wanted was to drop a balefire bomb on it.

Wait…teeming with life?

I paused, feeling something nibbling at my hoof. Maybe a little bit of Glory had rubbed off on me, but I levitated out a healing potion and held it before my eye. In my experience, a healing potion only lasted a few days after being brewed by a unicorn with the healing spells. It'd been milky purple when I'd purchased it. After three hours, I expected the color to fade a little or maybe for it to become more transparent. Instead, I found it still milky purple.

I looked to the west; here, it was impossible to tell where the river ended and the marsh began, but the black towers of the Core were still visible. Conventional wisdom was that Enervation was the result of magical contamination, that too many experiments and spells and bombs and worse had just created this energy that sucked the life out of everything. If it didn't kill you, it'd sicken you till something else did. But what kind of accidents or magical contamination could have produced that cave with Enervation so strong it made Glory's wing simply drop off?

Ow…I lifted my hoof to see a black leech the size of my horn chewing into the base of my hoof. Flicking it off with my sword, and batting its friends off as well, I kept moving. My depth perception was lousy. Past twenty or so feet I was all right, and inside three feet I could guesstimate, but between those two, things were off. I wondered if it'd been the taint that'd gotten my eye, or the Enervation..

The Enervation was strongest within the Core. Maybe something had happened that made it originate there? The magic shields or something reacting with the megaspells going off under the city. Maybe one of those megaspells had been an Enervation spell?

Except Chapel…the Arena…this bog…they were practically next door to the Core but had green things still growing. Meanwhile, places like Flankfurt were miles and miles from the city but were virtually sterilized by the Enervation fields. Could a megaspell nuke the city core itself and splash across the entire area at random? I couldn't envision it. And one would think that, after two centuries, the Enervation fields would weaken; it would require some sort of heavy duty megaspell-level magic to keep them going after all that time. "But I never hear DJ Pon3 talking about Enervation away from Hoofington. So it's not something natural, either…"

I rubbed my eyepatch. Maybe having my brains rotting was making me smarter? How's that for irony? "If it's not accidental…and not something that happened in the Core…there must be some other source of Enervation." But what? Even my taint-riddled brain wasn't figuring that out.

Then there was a splash as a frog twice the size of my hoof landed next to me. It swam onto a grimy rock and climbed atop it, facing me with green glowing eyes as it let out a low croak.

"Ribbit to you too," I muttered as I kept walking.

It followed, hopping from rock to rock as it kept pace with me. I stopped. It stopped. I moved. It moved. "Okay. As Scotch would say, creepiness factor rising." My mane was giving it a 6.2 on the itchiness factor. It let out another long low croak, and two more swam over to climb onto the stones. These two were even larger than the first. In unison, they let out another long croak. Creepiness factor approaching shooty levels…

Then a pair of briar bushes were shoved aside, and a massive frog easily the size of four ponies pushed its head out.

"Braaawwoorrkkkk!" it croaked, and then opened its mouth wide. Long yellow fangs glistened as its tongue shot out and connected with my barding. It stuck fast, and I was nearly dragged completely off my hooves as the muscle contracted. My hooves slid through the muck towards that pony-sized maw.

"I do not need this right now!" Sword met tongue in desperate slashes, but the flesh was almost as tough as cable. I'd nearly been dragged completely into its mouth before the tongue severed. Steadying myself, I brought the shotgun up and blasted it, but the peppering darts didn't seem to do more than irritate the monstrous frog.

Its bloody tongue disappeared into its mouth and, with an

enormous splash, it launched itself into the air. If the meal doesn't come to the froggy…My braces clattered as I barely staggered aside and reloaded flechettes. These didn't appear much better than the buckshot. As I watched, yellow bile seemed to ooze from the frog's wounds, and they were healing almost before my eyes! Okay. Shotgun wasn't working. I couldn't get enough range for the rifle. I had no idea where its weak points might be.

Crap.

The giant frog gave a short hop and rammed me. The yellow ichor burned where it touched, and I kept moving back more and more. The water was getting deeper, and it was moving me around towards the river, its bulbous green eyes never leaving me. It knew exactly what it was doing; once I was swimming more than walking, I'd be easy prey.

Well…since they were the only things I could see…I slipped into S.A.T.S. and targeted a blast at each round eye. But as I fired, the eyes retracted into the critter's skull! "Cheater!" I shouted and pulled off a hoof-sized leech, then tossed it into its mouth. It bit down, and I watched the black slug nearly liquefy instantly in its acidic spittle. Glad I hadn't tried the 'let it eat me and shoot it from the inside' plan!

"Not good," I said as I tossed leech after leech into its mouth. Okay, technically this was feeding rather than fighting, but so long as I wasn't eaten myself I was still okay. I even managed to scramble into shallower water, but the giant frog looked like it was getting bored with appetizers.

Its tongue flashed out again and smooshed against my chest, the tip fully healed. I dug in my hooves, but it simply waddled towards me, ignoring my frantic shots.

"Get down!"

My ears swiveled behind me; it couldn't be! *Thump*…

I dropped into the muck as a grenade flew over my back and into its mouth. Its eyes bulged, "Brrrooo…" And then it exploded in great bloody chunks. I rose from the churned water, a leech wiggling across my face looking for something to bite for a second before I tossed it aside. Then I looked back behind me at P-21 walking through the chest-deep muck. He slung Persuasion as he trotted through the muck at me.

"Are you okay?" P-21 asked as he put a hoof on my shoulder. I stared at him for a long moment, then hugged him close.

"I thought you were doing the smart thing and going back to Chapel?" I sniffed.

He flushed, looking away. "You're not the only one who's allowed to do stupid things."

"But…" I looked around at all the mud and fog around us. "How did you find me?"

"I didn't," he said softly, "she did."

I looked back at Scotch Tape rising from some rushes, looking at her PipBuck sheepishly. She looked shaky and scared but trying to keep up a brave face. "Well…like you said. We're all…all messed up. I just didn't think you should be…you know…messed up alone."

I looked at the rest of the weeds and thorns. "Is Rampage…"

"Staying behind with Glory and Lacunae," P-21 finished. Then he bowed his head as he pressed his lips together. Finally he said softly, "I'm sorry…I'm sorry I was weak."

I stared at him, and some hateful, petty part of myself wanted to rub it in. Hurt him. Four little ponies went to work beating the living snot out of that shameful part of myself as I walked to him and nudged his shoulder with a smile. "You weren't weak. You were smart. Being around me will get you killed." We trotted back to Scotch.

"Anypony can die," Scotch Tape muttered as she looked at the mucky water beneath her. "Even Mom wasn't safe in the stable…"

"But…I led you into those tunnels. It's my fault…"

"You led, Blackjack. We followed. You didn't make us do anything." He took a deep breath. "Chapel will be there whenever we're done. Till then…well…" He gave a shy smile and a helpless little shrug. Then he blinked as he caught the look of disgust on my face. "What?" Then he looked at the matching expression on Scotch Tape's muzzle. "What is it?" He suddenly blinked and his eyes went flat. "There's a leech on my butt, isn't there?" We slowly nodded. "More than one?" Another nod. "Big ones?"

"Uh huh…" Scotch said weakly.

He looked back. A blood curdling cry echoed through the mire.

"We have got to get you some decent barding," I muttered, launching a black bloodsucker into the mist. Once we had them all off his rear, Scotch Tape hopped onto his back and we continued north, passing by the corpse of the giant frog. A dozen smaller amphibians were already having a cannibalistic feast. "Enjoy your lunch," I called out to them.

"Thannnnks," one of the larger ones croaked in reply. I think that all three of our manes stood on end before we raced away from the scene as fast as my clattering legs would carry me.

* * *

"So, that's the plan?" P-21 said skeptically as we walked along the Celestia Boulevard.

"It's all I could come up with," I replied, keeping my eye on the long ago looted shops and smashed cafés. We weren't quite clear of the bog or the fog banks.

Scotch Tape blinked up at the mists. "Why is it so foggy and rainy here at the same time?"

"Probably the Enclave," I replied, glad it didn't obscure my E.F.S. I hadn't seen anything red in fifteen minutes.

"It would make it harder for somepony to take pot shots as they fly in and out of the Skyport," P-21 speculated. "Also, nopony would be able to keep track of them."

"Yeah, but it's still depressing," Scotch Tape said, and then started as she pointed to the side. "Somepony's over there!"

I looked at the blue bars. "Relax. They're not hostile." Not yet, anyway.

The bars belonged to four bedraggled mares and one buck. They had filthy sacks and patched saddlebags filled to bulging with more junk than I could imagine. "Stay back!" the buck warned as the mares readied flimsy shovels, pry bars, and a cracked baseball bat. They also looked ready to run for their lives.

"No trouble!" I said, making sure my guns were away.

"They're Red Eye's slavers!" one of the mares squealed, "they found us!"

But the buck looked at my barding. "No. That's Security." At once, the five relaxed, and the tension left the three of us as well. "Sorry. We…I…um…never thought we'd see you."

"We're on our way to the Rainbow Dash Skyport," I said, trying to look as friendly as I could. "You thought we were slavers?"

The buck cleared his throat. "Ever since Red Eye took over Paradise, the slavers have been out in force. You join him willingly, and he gives you a gun and sends you to the Everfree. Otherwise… well…you disappear for good in Fillydelphia. Scrapyard was completely wiped out this morning. Even with three VC soldiers, we

couldn't fight them."

"VC soldiers fighting Red Eye?" I asked. Gasp, were the Enclave really doing something to help? Something that actually *mattered?*

"Well, they were when we fled, though Red Eye's griffins were all over them. I don't think Scrapyard had a chance," the buck muttered darkly.

"You're from Scrapyard?" I asked, looking at their bags of junk. They nodded warily. "Where are you going?"

"The pegasi trade food for ordinary junk," one of the mares said, sounding somewhat baffled. I squirmed inside, but seeing how slat ribbed these five ponies were...

"Do a lot of ponies eat the Enclave food?" P-21 asked.

"It's the only food if a pony wants to avoid taint. You can eat hoppers and leeches, but you'll be tainted in a few years," the mustard-colored buck said with clear distaste. "Otherwise, it's preserved food or Society food."

P-21 nodded thoughtfully. "With taint in the water, any plants that live get contaminated. That eventually builds up in whatever eats the tainted matter." I sighed, remembering a lone dragon with the only hope to someday rid Equestria of that poison.

"Ugh. Why does anypony actually live in Hoofington? This place is like a butt and butt sandwich with extra butt on the side," Scotch Tape groaned.

"I'd go back to Gutterville, if I could…not sure if it's still there, with Red Eye, but still…better than here," one of the mares opined. I had to agree, though my home was currently saturated with chlorine gas.

* * *

"Food trade, medical aid, or other business?" the bored puce pegasus asked from behind her counter as we shuffled through the Skyport gate. The huge rusting hulks of several massive skywagons formed an impenetrable wall along the remains of the chain link fence. If it took two pegasi to lift a Vertibuck, then I imagined it would take teams of pegasi to pull one of these from Manehattan to Hoofington. I'd thought that the fog would lighten up the closer to the airport we got, but everything here was shrouded in mist so thick that you couldn't see twenty feet in front of your nose. From the blue bars on my E.F.S., I could tell there was somepony

overhead. It made my mane twitch.

"Food trade," each of the ponies from Scrapyard said in soft, respectful tones. "And medical…please." The puce pegasus pressed her lips together tightly as she issued them each a green collar and red collar.

"Follow the green lines to the trading station. Follow the red lines to the medical station. Next!" she snapped, sending the ponies following lines painted on the cracked tarmac. Then her eyes took one look at me and widened in shock. "You! You- you- you-"

I trotted to the counter, leaning against it, eye staring into hers as she stammered. "Other business," I said with a grin.

"You…you can't be here. You're that…that terrorist," she said as she licked her lips. I could make out vague outlines in the mist atop the skywagon hulks to either side of the gate.

"I'm not here to cause trouble," I said in an even, calm, civilized, not-going-to-shoot-you-unless-I-have-to voice.

"What are you here for, then?" she asked, swallowing and looking at P-21 and Scotch Tape as if they were going to suddenly pull out death rays and start blowing things up at random.

"I'm looking for the pony in charge. If you'll tell me where to go, I'll get out of your mane and let you get back to boring everyday work." I smiled as comfortingly as possible. Okay…maybe there was just a little shootiness in my grin.

She looked at two other mares processing the visitors, then swallowed and pulled out three yellow collars. "Please put these on." I glanced at P-21, levitated them over each of our heads, then smiled at her again. My cooperation seemed to disturb her even more. Sometimes, you just couldn't please a paranoid pegasus pony.

"T…this way," she said as she left the counter and followed a yellow path painted on the ground. I had to admit, it was an efficient way to manage ponies. Anypony on the wrong trail would get noticed right away.

"Thank you," P-21 said softly, but the puce mare jumped anyway.

"Come again?" she asked in confusion. A Vertibuck landed beside us in eerie silence, and Scotch Tape gaped at the missile pods and energy cannons.

He glanced at me and Scotch. "Thank you for helping these ponies," he elaborated.

"Oh. That." Her nervousness gave way to a little irritation. "You're welcome…I guess." She looked sharply at Scotch Tape. "Stay clear

of the Vertibuck, please."

"Something the matter?" I asked, watching as the pegasi started to load the Vertibuck with what appeared to be heaps of scrap metal and other junk.

She shook her head a moment as if trying to think of something to say that wouldn't get her shot. "Just.. not how I imagined it. Always hungry ponies…always sick…dirty…smelly…a lot of them crazy or violent," she said, then swallowed. "I just thought it'd be…I dunno…different."

What did she expect? A nice orderly stablemeet? "This is the Wasteland. And this is the Hoof. Worst of the worst. I almost got eaten by a giant frog just an hour ago. A frog. How crazy is that?" And before that, I was nearly eaten by a mechanical abomination. She looked a little uncertain, and I gave a half smile. "So, if there's any place in all the Wasteland that needs your help, this is it. It's really appreciated." She brightened a little, and while she wasn't exactly friendly, she stopped twitching at my every move.

The yellow line led to the terminal, and once inside, I felt my spirits lift immensely. That perpetual fog was gloomy, even for Hoofington. Once inside I saw a number of terminals, monitors, and, of course, pegasi of all colors flying around the large open-aired building. Somepony had hung a banner across the 'Rainbow Dash' part of 'Rainbow Dash Skyport' that now read 'Thunderhead'. A cloud split in half by a lightning bolt motif was on every crate and terminal.

There were also flaws. Most of the ponies I saw looked tired, unwashed, and strained. Weapons were of poor quality and everypony wore threadbare uniforms. There was a general feel of malaise and frustration in the air.

I saw a grand total of three suits of power armor, and they were looking more like they were keeping an eye on the pegasi than looking for trouble. More than a few looked almost afraid of the scorpion tailed armored ponies standing above them with their beam rifles. I also wasn't much of an engineer, but the Thunderhead power armor looked…fancier than the power armor of the Neighvarro Enclave. More little flashy bits and a shinier finish made me wonder if their armor was newer.

I had to admit, the disintegration rifles following me really made me wish they weren't nearly so fancy.

The puce pegasus led me to an office door marked 'Security'; that

made me smile. “Lieutenant? That…um…it’s the…ah…” She glanced at me. “Terrorist? The one who attacked Miramare?”

“Terrorist. You blow up one Vertibuck, and suddenly everypony’s convinced that you’re a complete monster,” I muttered dryly.

“You did *what*?” Scotch Tape and P-21 asked in unison.

“Didn’t I tell you about that?” I blinked at their surprise. Then again, with everything I had to tell him earlier, I might have left that little detail out. “They shot first, you know. I was merely defending myself,” I said primly.

“Funny. Didn’t you geld a buck ‘defending yourself’?” P-21 asked. Scotch Tape gawked, covering her mouth with her hooves as she blushed and started giggling.

I tried to maintain my dignified posture. “That was different. I was drunk. And singing. I got carried away.”

“You do that a lot,” a mare said from within the office. The puce mare stepped aside as I slowly trotted into the office. It couldn’t be…

The navy mare behind the desk narrowed her eyes as she looked at me evenly. “Sergeant Wind Whisper,” I greeted her. The puce mare stammered her farewells and quickly stepped out, closing the door once we’d entered. Behind the sergeant flashed a dozen screens showing various sections of the Skyport. I was disappointed not to see the pony I was after in any of them.

“It’s ‘Lieutenant’, now, though being a lieutenant in the Volunteer Corps is like being captain of a griffin dung cleanup crew. After Miramare, a lateral transition was called for by my superior,” she said as she glanced at P-21 and Scotch. “I don’t see your Dashite friend. A report was filed that she was dead, but, oddly enough, every report on your activities always has you in the company of a gray Dashite with a purple mane and matching eyes.”

“You’ve been spying on me?”

“After all that you’ve done?” She laughed, “Of course. I have a pony on staff whose job is to keep track of all five of you. You destroyed a Vertibuck with an unknown weapon of frankly terrifying destructive power. I’d be an idiot to not keep track of you,” she said as she stood and trotted to the fridge to get a small wire basket with six Sparkle-Colas. “Not an easy job, since our last report had you in Chapel yesterday, and yet here you are. I’m dying to know how you and that Dashite travelled without being detected,” she said as she passed out one to each of us. “Really?

Chopping her mane, putting on some barding, and calling herself 'Fallen Glory'?"

"Yeah, I guess that wasn't the best of disguises," I agreed, rubbing the back of my head awkwardly as I popped the caps off our bottles and swept them into my pouch, adding sternly, "But she's not a Dashite, Wind Whisper. She's still loyal to the Enclave." I looked at her steadily. She seemed to be staring at me. "What?"

She frowned as she rolled the bottle back and forth between her hooves. "Nothing. You just seem…different." I wondered if it was the mud, the fact that I had more scars on me than a masochistic raider, or the leech holes chewed in my armor.

"It's the eye. Once you lose an eye, it throws everything off," I replied with a snort.

The corner of her mouth twitched in a half smile. "Not that. When we first met, I thought you were an idiot."

"Can't imagine why," P-21 muttered.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now…I can almost believe what that radio personality said about you," she said as she leaned back a little.

Habazawa? "What did DJ Pon3 say about me? When?"

"Two days ago," she replied, looking surprised that I didn't know. It wasn't like I always kept my radio tuned to the station. She reached over to the terminal on her desk and started typing. A moment later, DJ Pon3's voice crackled to life. "You know, I'd go to jail for listening to this back in Thunderhead," she said as she sat back.

"…like to take a moment to talk about a word I hear thrown around a lot. 'Hero.' I know. I know. I can hear you from here: 'But DJ, you use that all the time.' I know, my little ponies, but let me tell you exactly what I mean when I use the word. In Postapocalyptia, everypony struggles to stay alive and to protect whatever they can. Sometimes it's all a pony can do to get by for themselves, let alone their children. And it's even tougher if they can survive while preserving their sanity and decency. Not everypony can.

"But, every once in a while, a pony comes along willing and able to give something of their own to help preserve the life of some somepony who can't make it. Sometimes, it's nothing more than a bottle of purified water to a thirsty soul. Sometimes, it's a kind word to somepony who's been living hard and rough for too long.

And sometimes…just sometimes…it's a pony willing to take a bullet so somepony else doesn't have to. Who deals bloody vengeance to anypony who thinks that other ponies are fair game. Who's willing to give their life, just because they can.

"I know you probably think I mean just the Stable Dweller, but she's not alone. There's her friends as well, fighting the good fight beside her. There's ponies from Trottingham to Stalliongrad willing to give their own pain and suffering to make life a little better. And there's some ponies called to sacrifice things that you or I never imagined. Some of you may recall a few days back about an army of psycho raiders rampaging all over the northwest corner of Hoofington. I know most of you get the jitters just thinking about them, but when we're talking Hoofington raiders, they won't kill you. They'll eat you, and worse. That's right. A hundred or more bloodthirsty, pony-eating psychos spreading out with nothing to stop them.

"Nothing, that is, but the Security Mare. She went right to the heart of their territory and stopped them cold. Now I know what you might be saying: 'give me a few crates of ammo and some guns and I'd do the same.' But what you folks don't realize…what I didn't realize…was that those raiders weren't just a bunch of psychopaths. They were a stable full of hundreds of ponies all looking to treat the Wasteland as their personal buffet. And not only that children…you see that stable? It was Security's home.

"She didn't just stop hundreds of ponies willing to kill, rape, and pillage. She stopped her friends. Her family. Everypony she'd ever known before leaving to bring justice to the Hoof. All to help ponies who a few days earlier had hounded and hunted her for a whole mess of bottlecaps. And that, my little ponies, is what I mean when I use the word hero. If there are ponies able to do that then what excuse do any of us have not to give a bottle of water if we can spare it, or a kindly word if we can share one?

"Food for thought, children. This is DJ Pon3, bringing you the truth…no matter how bad it hurts."

I stood there a moment, stunned as Wind Whisper just watched me. That wasn't the truth! She'd left out that they weren't raiders yet! That I tried to kill myself along with them! What the hell, Homage, how can you call that the truth?

"It's true," Scotch Tape said quietly and I jerked, looking at her with my heart pounding in my chest and feeling my breath catch in

my throat. “They all went crazy…killing and eating and…worse. And she stopped them.”

No. That’s not how it happened! I murdered them! I killed foals!

“And I doubt even the Enclave could have stopped them. They were set to sweep all across Hoofington,” P-21 said quietly as I bowed my head, shaking and making the braces clatter. I clenched my eye shut. I wasn’t a hero. I wasn’t. I was just a stupid mare too dumb to die, too stubborn to kill myself, and stupid enough to throw myself in harm’s way over and over again.

“I see,” Wind Whisper said in a softer, less cynical voice. “Well then…in light of that…what can the Enclave do for you, Security?”

Think of Glory. Remember the plan. Pull yourself together and do it right for a change! I fought to get my heart and breathing under control, but the organs weren’t quite working like they should as I looked at the blue pegasus in her black uniform. “My friend is hurt. Badly. She…lost her wing.”

“Impossible!” Wind Whisper blurted, looking disturbed, her own wings fluttering a little behind her as she scowled at me in disbelief. “You’d need a chainsaw or something to…” And her disbelief fell away as my eye drilled into hers.

“I remember a pegasus at Miramare missing her wings,” I said slowly. “So don’t tell me it’s impossible.”

Wind Whisper frowned at the mention of the airbase, but also absently stroked the tip of her wing. “I apologize. It’s just…not something a pegasus wants to think about.”

“No different than a unicorn losing her horn,” I replied, feeling a belated stab of guilt to Roses.

P-21 glanced at Scotch Tape. “Gee, I’m so glad that earth ponies like us have nothing integral to lose.” That drew a little snort from the olive filly.

“She’s hurt badly, and I need some way to help her,” I said softly, trying to keep my calm and civility. “Do the Enclave have any way to restore a wing?” The question seemed to almost nauseate the navy blue pegasus.

“I…maybe in the tower. But that’s only a maybe. Usually, a pegasus dies before their wings come off. I only know one mare who’s ever lost her wings and lived to talk about it.” I felt a stab of hope, but it died at the look on Wind Whisper’s face. “She killed herself…stepped off the clouds.” She gave one last shiver and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Security. I don’t think I can help you. I’m

sorry."

"Yes, you can." My tone brooked no argument as I stared at her. "I need to find a particular pegasus…"

* * *

"I can't believe there wasn't anything she could do for her," P-21 muttered as we left the Skyport. I'd felt my spine itching the whole time the power armored ponies watched me. Most of the Volunteer Corps appeared equally relieved to see me go.

"You heard her. Pegasi just don't break their wings. They must have used a chainsaw on that poor Miramare pony's wings." I shivered, glad I'd fed Minty to that raider…and wishing that I could have added Lighthooves as well. Still, hopefully I'd get to take care of that soon. "At least she told us where to go."

"Scrapyard. Only two miles, too." He looked at my legs. "How do you feel?"

"Sore. These braces chafe," I muttered, then flushed as I looked at him. "But you know that, don't you?"

"I have to admit, I'm glad to have it off," he admitted with a chuckle. "Funny, but the doctors seemed surprised that I didn't have a problem with that booth. In, get magicked up, and get out. Wish we had one in 99."

Scotch Tape didn't seem to share his carefree feelings on the subject. Indeed, she looked horrified. "I…didn't like it," she said grudgingly, shivering. She caught my concerned look, and her ears folded back. "I thought…I thought it was going to eat me…"

P-21 snorted, and I smacked his rump hard with my tail, making him jump. "Scotch…it's all right now. I don't know what that thing was, but I shot it with the strongest damn gun in Equestria. It's gone." She shivered and nodded but didn't look particularly convinced. I supposed it was hard to believe that monsters didn't exist when you were nearly eaten by one.

Walking due south through the Enclave's fog bank, I was glad to be heading uphill and into drier land. We still couldn't see farther than twenty or thirty feet, but I suspected we were entering some sort of industrial district. We passed by one of the yawning entrances to the Green Line, giving it a wide berth. There were tons of railways here, and rusting train cars had dumped heaps of black rock all over the place.

There were also red bars out here.

Scotch Tape and P-21 moved quietly on their hooves. Me? I clicked and rattled and clattered with every step. I glanced at them and nodded for them to hang back a little. I really wanted to get some barding for him. She at least had that utility barding. Softly, I started to whistle about cleaning up winter as I trotted slowly towards the bars.

The bars moved in the fog, fanning out along the train cars. I heard hooves tapping softly on rusting rooftops as I whistled to myself like I didn't have a care in the world. The fog swirled around my hooves as I took step after clicking step. I saw the vague shapes in the mist. I was completely and totally surrounded.

"You there," a mare said from the fog, "throw down your weapons. You have been selected to serve in Red Eye's glorious rebirth of Equestria." Step by step, a creature emerged that I'd only seen in a memory: one half a predatory bird and the other a powerful cat. She'd decorated her plumage with bright red dye, and the power armor she wore was decorated with a bright red eye. A pair of miniguns pointed right at me, and I doubted that my dinged up armor would last long. Why couldn't I ever have cool power armor, huh?

"Yeah. Sorry. Can't do that. I got a friend to help," I said as I picked out the other half dozen red bars. There were also two blue bars. "Maybe next time."

She scowled at my response. "Maybe you don't understand. We're not giving you a choice!"

I looked at the griffin and then smiled. That seemed to make her even more unnerved. "What's your name?"

"I…you don't need to know my name! Now throw down your weapons!" Her gun's motors hummed as she revved them threateningly.

My eye locked with hers and I repeated in an even softer tone, "What's your name?"

She glanced up at the ponies ready to blow me away. "Scarlet."

"Scarlet? Lovely name," I said as I kept staring at her. Clearly, I wasn't following the script. "Scarlet, my friend is hurt and she needs my help and you are slowing me down. I'm the Security Mare. I've killed hydras, blown up Vertibucks, and put a monsterpony through a rock crusher. And *you* are in my way. So, please, go away." I glanced to the side where P-21 peeked out from under the train

with Persuasion gripped tight in his jaws.

Unfortunately, the glance seemed to break the spell. “K…kill her!” she shouted.

At that, both of us were blasted by three bombs set around us as her paired stream of rapid fire death went high and wide. A heavy thump filled the air, and she barely took to the sky before the grenade launched her end over end to arc out over the train cars. The last two struggled to recover as I rose to my hooves and gave each a faceful of buckshot. In less than ten seconds, the ambush was annihilated.

I frowned at P-21. “Is it just me, or are we getting really good at this?”

“Well it’s not like it was hard with all of them staring at you,” he said as he dug through his bags for another brick of that gray explosive.

I trotted to where Scarlet was starting to pull herself out of the heap she’d landed in. “You…you are…dead…so…” she said as her blasted armor smoked. The minigun motors ground horribly as they jammed. The griffin’s red eyes went wide as I pressed the shotgun to her chin and she gulped.

“I’m not an executioner,” I said softly, “I just want to help my friends. You’ve slowed me down. I take it there are more of you at Scrapyard?”

“I…I won’t betray Red Eye!” she stammered as she clenched her eyes shut. I could tell she was expecting imminent death. I could hear the cards.

“I can respect that,” I replied, pulling the gun from her head. If she was really willing to die rather than tell me, I wasn’t going to be able to force anything out of her. Besides, she’d already told me what I needed to know. Her eyes looked at me in shock and disbelief. Then I smiled. “But I can’t have you follow me, either.”

Five minutes later, we continued on our way. “I’ll kill you! We will have our revenge. I swear, I’ll get you for this if it’s the last thing I’ll do!” It’d taken two rolls of duct tape, a broom handle, a plunger, and a half dozen tubes of Wonderglue, but I doubted that she’d be getting her revenge any time soon. I know it was silly, juvenile, and an utter waste of time…but the three of us enjoyed a good laugh. Four little ponies in my head joined in as the Dealer sulked in the back of my mind.

* * *

"Okay. This might not be so easy," I muttered without a smile on my face as I stared at the village of Scrapyard. It'd apparently been a junkyard even before the war, and half-ripped-apart skywagons were stacked up as ad hoc apartments next to a large factory-style building. There had to be twenty ponies on the ground, and three griffins were watching from the roof of the factory. Gunfire cracked from the ponies in the thinning mist towards the open building. It was returned with pink disintegration bolts. There were a couple bodies and a few heaps of pink sludge, but I didn't think they were slavers.

I scanned the compound with my scope and located two ponies guarding one of the locked up skywagons. Jail? The ponies we'd met had said that the slavers were taking everypony they could get their hooves on. No sense in slaughter. I looked at P-21. "Okay, I need a smart pony now."

"A smart pony would be back at the college," he muttered as he peered through his binoculars. "Looks like the Enclave isn't done putting up a fight just yet. Those griffins are keeping them grounded. Probably waiting for them to run low on ammo and try to make a break for it. That skywagon's filled with prisoners, I think. And that one is probably holding their commander, judging by those runners going in and out." Oh, that was a little detail I missed. He looked at me. "Do you still have that spell thingy?"

"I have many thingies. It's sometimes hard to keep them all straight," I said as I showed him my inventory. He smiled a little. "Is there a plan? That looks like a plan!" I asked with a grin.

He frowned back at me. "There is, but you're not going to like it." And he explained it to me, drawing it out in the dirt.

"Forget it!" I shouted, stomping my hoof on his diagram.

"Unless you've got an extra PipBuck on you, she has to," he said as he pointed a hoof at me. "All she has to do is get it there." I seethed at him for even suggesting this! This was bordering on 'following Blackjack' reckless! Scotch wasn't looking very sure about it either.

"P-21, this is your daughter we're talking about!" I said, gesturing to her with a hoof. How could he suggest that she--

"What?" Scotch Tape gaped at him, her eyes popping wide. *Aw crap*…P-21 closed his eyes and shook his head as he clenched his jaw. I could almost see the curses he suppressed. The olive filly just

gaped at him, then at me. “You’re my…”

“Sire,” he said flatly. “And that’s it.”

“P-21…” I began, but then he gave me his shooty look…it was better than mine. Scotch Tape stared at him in amazement, but he refused to look at her. Slowly her eyes drooped along with her ears.

“But…I mean…” Scotch Tape looked at her hooves. “Why…why didn’t you tell me?”

The blue buck sighed. “To avoid all…this….” he said as he gestured around the three of us. “And of course Blackjack picks now of all times to bring it up.”

“I thought you’d forgotten,” I said, feeling worse for Scotch than I had before.

“I…you…I…I mean…Momma always talked about you,” she said as she stared up at him. “She said she loved you.”

“That’s nice,” he replied, glancing at her with a scowl. “I didn’t love her. She could teach me what I needed to escape. She was…tolerable. But she just used me just like every mare did in 99.” He sighed. “Forget it. I’ll do it.”

“You don’t have a PipBuck,” I reminded him. “I’ll do it, and then…”

“I’ll do it,” Scotch said at once, silencing both of us.

“But…” I began, but she gave me a hard, hurt look. Short of tying her up, there wasn’t any way I was going to get her to not do her part of the plan.

“Fine. I’d better hurry, then,” P-21 said as he took off his saddlebags and dumped out the contents. He fished out some wires and a spark battery and started to work. He focused with such a great severe look that Scotch Tape just sat back with her eyes on her hooves. I kept my eyes open for more Red Eye patrols.

At least that way the only ponies I’d hurt would be the bad guys…I hoped…

* * *

Two saddlebags lighter, I took position as close to the factory as I dared. I set up in a notch behind a tub and a refrigerator and took sight at the ponies firing away at the pegasi trapped within the factory. The griffins were looking bored, and there were fewer and fewer disintegration bolts coming out those doors. I didn’t think it’d be long now.

Looking through the scope, I watched as a few faint hoofmarks appeared in the dirt approaching the scrapped sky wagon that looked like it was being used as a headquarters or…or something. There were ponies coming and going at regular intervals, bringing out more ammo. If it wasn't a headquarters, then at least it was an important building. I had no idea how long the StealthBuck lasted… was it five minutes or three? I didn't think it muted sound…

It didn't matter, though. She was determined to do it. If I'd just kept my mouth shut about P-21 being her father...

"Come on, Scotch." I looked at the jail. Two of Red Eye's ponies had brought another struggling young mare with bloody flanks and tossed her inside a few minutes ago, confirming P-21's theory about the building's function. P-21 was somewhere over there…I knew better than to even bother trying to look. I swept my scope back to the first building, licking my dry lips.

Then the door opened, and out came a mare with an ammo box in her jaws. The door swung closed behind her, but then bumped open for just a second before closing completely. I stared at the door, feeling lightheaded. Then an orange pony bucked my brains and reminded me not to be an idiot and forget to breathe! It'd been three minutes…it had to be! I checked my PipBuck. No, two and a half. Damn it, Scotch, get out of there.

Ammo Mare trotted back towards the door. She shoved it open with a hoof…just as a buck was exiting. I almost relaxed, but then I stared at the two just standing there, talking in the doorway! "Come on, in or out…Damn it…" I muttered as I stared at the two. It had to be a hundred feet, and if I started the party early with the rifle…

I narrowed my eye. I'd never tried to take a shot with my magic bullet at a range like this! Pressing my lips together, I focused like I never had before. I pressed my hooves to my temples as I dropped into S.A.T.S. and targeted her rear leg. I wondered if I'd already passed my stupidity quota for the day! "Aw…fuck it... "

The magical bullet streaked across the space between us with a sharp crack and smashed right into the rear of her leg above her hoof. I fell back against the scrap, feeling like I'd just got bucked upside the head and had a basket of apples tumbling out of my nose. Oh…never mind. That's blood. From the yells and screams, confusion raged at the door. No one seemed to be screaming for a sniper, though. I poked my head up and peered at the ground next to the skywagon.

A tin can lying on its side just seconds ago was now upright. The signal that she'd gotten clear.

I looked at a Sparkle-Cola bottle on top of the refrigerator. All I had to do was set it upright. Just…set it upright…

Something exploded in my head, and stars danced in my vision as my horn flared and went dead. I lifted a shaking hoof to my brow, checking to see if my horn was still there. I swallowed as I lay back. Apparently, that last spell had been too much for my little horn to manage. I stared at the bottle just three feet above me, trying to focus. The pain just built and built inside my skull while the bottle didn't budge a hair.

Oh crap.

Slowly, I shifted onto my hooves, the world spinning as I moved my head. I had to set the bottle upright. Every second I wasted was a chance for Scotch's presents to be discovered! I stretched up the rusty side of the fridge and carefully fumbled for the bottle. I bumped it, fumbled with it…and knocked it off the far side of the fridge. Rover'd been right! Thumbs were better! I looked around for another bottle.

"Hey, is somepony over there?"

Oh…crap…

I fumbled with the rifle, trying to get the mouthgrip out and in my jaws. Ugh, when was the last time I cleaned this thing? My jaw struggled to keep it steady as I propped the rifle on the bathtub, steadying it with my forehooves. How the hell did Lancer DO this?

Then a deep throaty roar of flame, shrapnel, and pressure erupted as the satchel charges within the command center went off. I'd thought I was a fair distance from the blast. I probably would have been too, but I'd ignored what a mare bringing ammo out meant. And there was a lot more than just bullets inside. The secondary explosion a second later rained flaming shrapnel over everything. Taurus's rifle was dropped as I jumped into the fridge a second before half the flaming sky wagon rained down over Scrapyard! My ears kept popping every time I opened my mouth.

Then something slammed into the fridge and sent it flipping over down the slope. With a crash, I was flung flat on my face surrounded by at least a dozen stunned and concussed ponies in a very bad mood! I rose to my hooves, staggering stiffly on the braces. Then I pointed my hoof at the lot of them. "You! You're…all under arrest! Drop your guns and weapons and lay flat on the

ground." I stared as hard as I could, willing their surrender!

The moment lasted for all of three seconds. "Kill her!"

Fine! My horn…fucking hurt as it refused to drag out Vigilance! Something snapped inside me. "You fuckers are keeping me from Glory!" I screamed and, braces or not, charged right into the nearest spear-wielding pony. I didn't kick or bite her; instead, I threw my entire body at her and bit hard on the haft of the spear as we went down together. Her teeth were rotten brown lumps. My teeth had the benefit of modern dentistry. Twisting hard, I tore the spear from her grip, rolled atop her, and drove the tip under her jaw, putting all my weight on the haft and driving the tip out by her ear. Twisting, I yanked the spear free as she thrashed and screamed.

No time to finish her off as I rose, barely setting myself for the charge of the next three ponies. The first caught the tip in her chest, my shove driving it clear into her sternum as her momentum impaled her on the shaft. Then I was the pony slammed off my hooves by two earth pony mares far better suited for fights like this. I bounced across the field as more ponies came around to ponypile on Security.

My mouth burned as my teeth clenched down on a smoking piece of skywagon and slashed it across one mare's face while my horn failed over and over again to do something as simple as draw a pistol! The mare yelled as her partner jumped on my back, driving my rump to my hocks as she stabbed at my shoulders with a carving knife. The plates kept the edge at bay as her head jerked again and again. I threw the scrap at the mare before me before rolling and thrashing wildly.

Either she'd gotten lucky, or I'd just impaled myself with that roll…either way, my left shoulder burned horribly as I knocked her free. I twisted my head, barely caught the handle with my teeth, and pulled it free. Oh…now I was bleeding too. Well, no time to worry about that now! I fell atop the tossed mare, ramming the carving knife into her windpipe and tearing as hard and brutally as I could. Something arterial split, and hot blood spurted across my face. I grinned despite myself as I felt my own blood running down under my barding.

They were getting the message. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one. "Shoot her!" somepony yelled, and from the shotguns and rifles being lifted, they were happy to do so.

I screamed around my clenched teeth as I staggered at the face cut

mare, throwing my hooves around her and jamming the knife into her shoulder. I wasn't trying to kill her…yet. I twisted as hard as I could to put her between me and her compatriots as they opened fire. She screamed. There might have been a "stop" involved as I fought to keep her upright. Shots that penetrated her thumped off my barding as they sprayed lead at both of us. New holes opened in my hide as she finally went limp and fell out of my grip.

My armor glistened from the blood of three ponies covering half of it, and my eye glowed as if I could annihilate them with my glare alone. They stood in an arc before me, staring in horror as I rose. The braces pinged beneath my barding as they gave way. Only the broken remains kept me upright as I stood there and bled. "You! Can't! Kill! Me!" I bellowed each word at them as they scrambled to reload.

The griffin begged to differ as she flew over me and drew a line across my rump with her minigun. I sat awkwardly as my legs shook. My horn flickered as it fought to pull out a weapon. A healing potion. Something! I clenched my eye shut. I was going to fail. She was going to be trapped on the ground forever. Because I wasn't tough enough. Wasn't good enough. A second line drew over my shoulders, and only my locked limbs kept me upright. The griffins were hovering over me now, interested in just how long they could draw out using their miniguns before I expired.

They were reloaded. They were ready to put down the crazy mare that defied them. I took the deepest breath I could and screamed out, "Glory!" Every eye was on me. Every eye wasn't on the factory...

Then one griffin melted in a flash of pink goo as a trio of pegasi in dinged and pitted armor flew from the factory and sprayed pink disintegration bolts and slicing red beams. From the opposite side came a roar from two dozen recently freed ponies armed with every weapon we'd picked up. They closed on both sides like a manticore's jaw, a griffin falling from the sky with her feathers aflame while another was blasted from the sky by a grenade shot that bordered on art. One mare bleeding to death was forgotten as they scrambled to their own defense.

I felt my body giving out as my useless limbs fumbled weakly for a healing potion. I managed to get one out of my bags, but the glass bottle slipped out from between my bloody hooves and landed before me. I fumbled with it, the broken braces fighting me as my

softened bones bent. I slowly started to fall over. I couldn't die now. I still needed to help her! And Lacunae! And Rampage. Everypony! Death could wait, damn it! But my body couldn't keep up any more. Looks like I didn't need to worry about that taint after all.

Then two hooves pushed me back upright, the pain on my shoulder from the shove snapping me back from the fuzzy blackness. "Hang on!" Scotch Tape said through the sounds of the battle around us. She grabbed the bottle in her mouth and flipped it into her hooves, biting the stopper and pulling it free before holding it to my lips. "Here!" she shouted, and I drank the milky purple potion. I wasn't sure how much it helped, but I wasn't feeling any deader.

"Let me get another!" Scotch said as she dug at my bags. But I sighed.

Sorry Scotch.

I shoved her away as one of Red Eye's raiders charged with a spear, the tip cutting the olive filly's flank as it punched through my failing armor and drove deep into my side. "You die! For Red Eye!" the mare screamed before biting the haft to pull it out, determined that if they were going to die, she'd take me with her. And the filly as well.

I bit hard on the spear in my side, jamming it inside me. She might kill me, but I wasn't going to make it easy for her. She wouldn't kill anypony else for as long as I was alive, even if that was just for a few seconds! Get clear, Scotch. Sorry I didn't tell you about P-21 sooner. Sorry…Glory…

Then there was a loud bang beside me. Scotch Tape stared in shock at the hole that had opened in the mare's neck. The mare released the weapon, staggering away. Another twelve millimeter hollowpoint blasted out another bloody chunk. Then a third, and the mare fell limp besides me. I slumped over as I saw something die inside the teal eyes behind Scotch's goggles.

"Sorry…" I murmured softly.

Then she noticed me, and the gun tumbled into the dirt. "Blackjack! I'll…I have…please…please don't die!" she begged around her tears as she grabbed the spear in my side with her jaws.

"No…don't pull…" But then I felt it pull out as I fell on my side. Then she was pouring healing potions down my throat as fast as she could pull the stoppers. I think I just about cleaned her out as the fighting slowly died around us. She cradled my head as I stared up at the sky…really wishing I could look somewhere else. "Did we

win?"

"We won," P-21 said. Slowly, I looked at the dozen or so ponies still standing, at the bodies of Red Eye's ponies lying amid smeared heaps of pink goo and piles of ash. Two pegasi stood apart, seeming at a loss for what to do at this moment. They kept their guns pointing in my general direction as I gritted my teeth and shifted slowly on to my hooves, the broken braces struggling to keep me upright. "Blackjack! What are you doing? Wait and rest," P-21 said as he tried to push me back down.

"No. I need to talk…now…before she flies off." I took step after step towards her. I tried not to have my shooty look, but after being nearly painted in blood, I supposed any look of mine was pretty creepy. P-21 kept me on my hooves as I swayed and then sat down hard. "Hello, Dusk."

She tapped the side of her helmet, the armor retracted, and hard dark eyes stared at me suspiciously. "How did you find me?"

"Wind Whisper," I replied. "Luckily, you were nearby." I took a deep breath. "You owe me. Agreed?"

"We could have…" she began, but then she looked at all the ponies lying around me and glanced at her companion. Her lips twisted sourly and she shook her head. She sighed, narrowing her gaze as she glanced at me. "I guess I do."

I nodded once. That was one hurdle I was glad to be past. "You can repay me easily." The dark pegasus looked at me skeptically. "One. Help me back to the college. I'll tell you two when we get there."

She certainly didn't look happy. Right now, she probably could have turned me into a glowing pile of goo. Heck, right now, I was so shot up that a hard sneeze would turn me into goo. "Alright. But how are we supposed to get you there?" she asked with a small frown. I glanced at their equipment.

"I thought they called it power armor. Not pussy armor," I replied.

* * *

Funny. I never thought I'd fly Pegasus Airlines again, but I here I was slumping against Dusk as the pair winged their way through the cloud ceiling itself. Scotch Tape did all she could to keep me on the flying mare's back while P-21 rode Dusk's companion, a mare named Lightning Dancer.

"So, what was all that about?" I asked as we flew by a

particularly... solid looking?--cloud. I looked at the spire of white tipped with glowing amber talismans. A lightning rod, I presumed. "I mean, why were you fighting Red Eye?"

"We're not. We have no interest in surfacer politics," Dusk said firmly.

"Well, then, what were you doing in Scrapyard?" I asked, and was quite proud of myself for not insinuating they were spreading tainted food.

"Buying scrap, obviously." She glanced back at my incredulous expression. "I'm not sure if you noticed, but clouds don't have much metal in them."

"But what does Thunderhead need with lots of metal?" I asked with a smirk.

"Stuff," was all she said, and I doubted that I'd get more than that.

"So if you don't care, why fight?"

"They attacked the town while we were negotiating salvage rights," Dusk answered sourly, "we would have withdrawn, but their griffins forced us to bunker down inside that factory. They attacked with a full wing but left those three once we were cornered." Leaving them in big trouble till I came along.

We flew through a fissure that nearly reached the bottom of the ceiling; looking up, I could see a band of distant blue. Maybe it was blood loss, but I was finally getting over the urge to vomit as we made our way along. Then, through the fissure, I spotted a huge shape of odd uniformity above the rest of the clouds…like a giant flying donut with its main axis perpendicular to the ground. The interior of the donut had been removed and replaced with tier upon tier of buildings. "Is that Thunderhead?" I panted, marveling at the size of an actual city like long ago. Not a village of a few dozen or even hundreds of ponies, but tens of thousands.

"You're the second surface pony to see it," Dusk replied.

"It's amazing," I murmured. Then we were at the other end of the already-closing fissure, and the sight was replaced by more gray.

I imagined a smile from the pride in her voice. "Yes, it is."

Scotch Tape gave a sniff as her hooves tightened on me, making me wince. She hadn't said much since we'd lifted off. "Are you okay, Scotch?"

"Wha…yeah…I'm fine," she murmured in a perfect 'not fine' voice.

"What is it?" I asked.

She sniffed, pressing her face to my bloody, stiffening mane. "I…I

killed a pony. I…I didn't even think about it. I just…I pointed and… and…" She shivered behind me. "It wasn't like shooting the robots."

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, thinking back to that raider I'd killed with the broken tip of a rusty knife. I'd been so carried away that I'd never thought about it. "I know it hurts," I said softly, reaching to pat her with my floppy hoof. "It'll always hurt. It never gets any easier."

"That's not true," Dusk replied evenly. I really wished I could have smacked the pegasus without falling a long way to my death. "Once you've killed enough ponies, it's easy. Point, pull the trigger, and dead," she said quietly, and for a minute I'd thought that she'd decided to stay silent for the rest of the trip. She did, after saying quietly, "You kill enough ponies…and you can kill anypony…"

* * *

I slowly opened my eyes, looking at an oddly familiar filthy ceiling. "If this is the afterlife…I'm not impressed…" I murmured, trying to shake chlorine dreams. Slowly, I started to rise, and then my body gave out and I fell back against the gray sheets. The windows were dark; night, or close to it. It'd been a busy day, and I wasn't even halfway done. "I must have passed out on the flight back…"

Slowly, I rolled onto my belly and looked back. The bullet holes were gone, only Leo's scar remaining. I still felt…off. And sore, but whether that was from taint or injury, I couldn't tell. I suspected I really owed the Collegiate. I also doubted that they were healing me out of the kindness of their hearts.

"Congratulations. You've set a brand new record," Triage said as she trotted in, her horn glowing as she lifted the clipboard in front of her. "Punctured lung. Torn muscle. Thirty two different gunshot penetrations. Probably a nasty case of magical burnout. Two liters of blood lost…Luna only knows how you didn't die from shock… and the first pony in history I think to go through the autonomous healing booth three times in one day." She adjusted her glasses. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Huh?" I muttered as I looked over at her, unlit cigarette dangling from her mouth as she looked dully at the clipboard.

"Well, if you ask me the scientific conclusion is inescapable," she said as smiled at me. Suddenly, the glowing clipboard swung through the air to smack me upside the head. "You! Are! Not!

Bulletproof!" she shouted, smacking me with each word. "If you can't do this heroic shit without getting holes shot in you, then you need to quit and retire!" She pointed the clipboard at my nose. "If you're so set to die, then do it somewhere nice and quiet."

"What does it matter if I'm dead from taint in a year anyway?" I shouted back at her, anger providing a wonderful stimulant.

"It matters because every halfwit with half a brain hears all about your noble sacrifices and next thing you know they're getting shot, stabbed, gutted, and killed by ponies who have spent their entire lives preying on the helpless. And I'm the one who has to put their bodies back together! Even when they're rotting, drugged, or undead, I still have to put them back together again," she said as she jabbed her cigarette at my face. "It's crazy ponies like you who make my job difficult."

I just stared at her. "What…you'd prefer it if I'd let ponies die and get enslaved?"

"Of course not," she said with every bit of as much contempt as I felt for her. "I'd rather ponies stopped relying on heroes like you and the Stable Dweller and saved the Wasteland themselves. Because every time that DJ starts to gush about how brave and wonderful you are, eventually…inevitably…you die, or worse, you become just as bad as the ponies you're fighting. Ever hear of the Iron Mare? How about Strider? Ranger Steelhooves? Big Daddy? Each one a hero till they broke down, gave in, or gave up. One day, the glorious Stable Dweller and Security Mare will fail too. It's a fact of the Wasteland," she said as she glared down at me. "Any idiot with a gun can kill for a cause and get shot up for their trouble. How about an idiot who builds a school? Or runs a clinic? Or makes machines work? Oh, no heroism for them. They're just the poor schmucks who should be grateful for the brave hero till heroing gets too tough."

"If you think it's so easy, you do it!" I countered.

"I don't think it's easy. I think it's stupid. You can get shot ten ways to Celestiday, but how does it make the Wasteland any better?" She pointed a hoof. "Your pegasus friend is still critically depressed. That alicorn thing is catatonic. That filly is probably traumatized for life! You can't fix that with bullets."

Glory! I rolled and scrambled out of bed and cried out as my legs buckled beneath me. "I…there was a pegasus…in power armor…" I gasped as I tried to lift myself to my hooves. They buckled again,

and I sprawled on my side. “I need…I have to talk to her... ” I broke off in a cry of pain as my limb bent at a right angle and I rolled onto my back, feeling the rubbery limb slowly straighten.

“Stop!” Triage said sharply as she wrapped my hoof in her magic and tugged it. “Why do you do this? What masochistic messianic moronity makes you try and walk when you can’t? Why do you have to do this?” she demanded as my limb slowly straightened.

“Because I have to. Because I owe her,” I said as I said there, eyes closed. “I hurt her. I was stupid and selfish and…and I got her hurt. I cost her her wing.”

“Enervation rot took her wing. And unless she’s a foal, getting hurt is a part of life. So why are you doing this?” Triage asked, looking at me with the ghost of concern in her eyes.

“Because I love her!” I shouted. I took a slow, shaky breath. “I never loved anypony but myself. Never. But she’s always been there with me. Even when it cost her her cutie mark. Even when it cost her her family and career. I’ve been beaten and battered and broken almost daily since I left the stable, and she’s always trying to keep me going. To help me in my stupid, fucking…*quest*!” I said as I lifted my PipBuck and slapped the screen with my other hoof.

I went limp and sighed, staring at that ceiling like it was a soiled sky. “EC-1101 is meaningless to her, but she still believes in me enough to help me crawl along no matter how much it hurts her. And…I have to help her. I have to help all my friends. I’m tired of ponies getting hurt just for helping me.” I clenched my eyes shut as I started to shake, and nothing was stopping it this time. “She shouldn’t get hurt for me. I’m not worth it…”

Triage stood there with a half-lidded mask of an expression before she took a deep breath and let it out slowly in a sigh. “Wow. Two hundred years ago, I could have written a paper on your particular brand of crazy.” She turned, and her horn glowed as she steered in a wheelchair. “Well, your pegasus friends have been waiting for you and making everypony really nervous, so the sooner they’re dealt with, the better.”

“They haven’t been causing trouble, have they?” I asked with a worried frown.

“No, but it’s no secret that if you want healing, you come to us…or the Enclave. Folks are thinking they’re here to trash the place or something. Makes everypony wonder, you know?” She lifted me into the wheelchair and made me promise not to throw myself out

of it this time. “Is your horn working again?”

I looked at the chair and concentrated, then winced as magic sparks shot from the tip of my horn. “Owww….” I tapped it with a limp limb. “I think I broke it.”

“Just burnout. It happens. Next time, don’t push it so hard.” Triage waved down one of the nurses. “The pegasi outside, could you escort them up here?” The nurse glanced at me sitting there looking like I’d been thrown down a few flights of stairs, and I gave her a smile.

“Can you take me to Glory’s room?” Time to do this.

“She’s been completely non-responsive,” Triage said quietly as her magic pushed the wheelchair. Did everypony in the Wasteland have stronger telekinesis than me? “She won’t eat. All she’s asked is for us to leave her alone.”

“She’s badly hurt,” I said as she pushed me to the door.

“Well if she doesn’t recover soon, we’ll have to toss her out.” Triage caught my glare and returned it. “Wasteland. Limited space. We fixed her flesh. Mind and soul…that’s outside my specialty. So I hope you can help her.”

“You do?” I asked, a little sarcastic. For some reason, cynical healers were really aggravating.

She arched her brows coolly. “Just because I don’t appreciate cheap heroism doesn’t mean I don’t want to help ponies. I can’t help her. I hope you can.” I just dropped my gaze, chewing on my lower lip.

Dusk and Lightning Dancer appeared in the hall, approaching with wary steps. Dusk’s dark eyes stayed locked on mine while Dancer’s citrine ones looked around a bit more curiously. “So…what’s the second favor? Let’s get this over with.”

I just nodded towards Glory’s room. “I need you to help your sister.”

Her pupils constricted as she jerked away from me. “Go fuck yourself.”

Damn the promise. I launched myself from the chair and tackled her as the wheelchair went clattering down the hall behind me. Throwing my hooves around her neck, I counted myself lucky she sat down hard as I slumped before her, staring into her eyes. “Listen!” I hissed in her face, glaring like I could vaporize her with rage alone, “I don’t give a fuck about Enclave politics or tradition or your own fucked up issues with pride or honor or whatever you

pegasi call it! Glory is in there and she needs your help."

"If she wanted my help she shouldn't have become a Dashite!" Dusk yelled in my face.

I kicked her as hard as I could…which was honestly pretty pathetic as my limb bent under the blow. "She lost her wing!" I shouted back, and that statement shocked her far more than my physical assault. "She got injured and the Enervation rotted it right off her body! So here is what you are going to do…" I growled as I pointed to the closed door. "You are going to go in there. You are going to talk to her. You are going to smile. You are going to make her happy. I don't care what you have to say, how you have to lie, or what you have to do…you are going to find some way to make her want to live," I said as I clenched my jaw, tears running down one cheek. "Because I can't…"

Dusk closed her eyes. "You don't understand. If anypony found out she's alive…"

"Wind Whisper already knows. She doesn't care. Don't you get it, Dusk?" I said as I felt my legs slowly give out beneath me till I was sitting, "I've been where Glory is right now. It almost killed me. It would have if I hadn't forgotten about the gun's safety! And the only thing that snapped me out of it was someone giving me something…anything…to live for." I bowed my head shamefully. "I can't do it…I…I'm the one who hurt her. That's all I do…and she needs to live." I took a deep breath and stared into her eyes once more. "You're going to do this. And do you know why?"

"Why?" she asked, so stunned that the anger and attitude were momentarily abandoned.

"Because she's your sister, you love her, and you're a good pony," I said, trying to convince myself as much as her that it was true. "You're her older sister. You have to help her…"

Dusk finally relaxed with an angry sigh. "Fine. I'll…I'll try…" Then she jabbed my chest with a hoof. "But after this, we're even…no matter what happens! Got it?"

"Just…help her. You're the only one who can," I said as I finally crumpled. This was it. This was all I could do. With a sharp glare at me, Dusk opened the door to her room and stepped inside.

"Hey, Featherbrain... " Dusk said before closing the door behind her with her scorpion tail. I bent over as all the stress and strain of the day poured out of me. When had my life turned into near daily dramatic trauma?

"You okay?" Lightning Dancer asked as she returned with my wheelchair. She used her scorpion tail to scoop me up and help me take a seat. She gave me a casual, easygoing sort of smile. Her citrine eyes and brilliant orange mane contrasted with her stark black power armor.

I rubbed my face with my hooves and sighed. "I haven't seen okay in a long time. I used to be okay. Heck, I used to be happy. Then I started thinking, and it's been all downhill from there."

"Eh, what can you do?" she said with a shrug, nudging the wheelchair. "So, you going to just hang out here? 'Cause if I know those two, they'll be at it for a while. Dusk and Morning never could fly in formation together."

"No…I…" I sighed and laid my head back, looking at the ceiling. "Yeah…I need to see Lacunae. I don't have a clue how I'm going to help her…"

"The big purple pony? She's down the hall, I think," she said as she hooked her tail on the frame and trotted towards the far side of the building.

"If you don't mind my saying so, you're not like most Enclave I've met," I said with a little smile.

"Oh you mean the serious, devoted, lightning-rod-up-the-rump attitude?" She glanced back at me and grinned. "Yeah. They were fresh out of rectal rods when it came to me. Cost me some advancement but, eh…Dusk's more hardcore about that anyway. Who needs the stress?"

I stared at her for a moment. I'd almost forgotten what carefree looked like. "I... I envy you." Her brows arched in surprise, and I explained, "You just seem…happy. I used to be like that, but now everything's gotten…weird…"

"You and Dusk…" the yellow mare chuckled. "Well, don't worry about it. Dusk is always a hardass, especially when it comes to Dashites. The only time she actually unwinds is in bed. Usually takes a good licking, too."

I blinked and flushed a little. "You and her?" Glory had mentioned something about being like her sister. Dancer just grinned. "Huh…Is this going to really cause problems for the rest of her family?" The yellow pegasus arched a brow, and I elaborated, "I mean Glory being alive…and branded?"

Lightning Dancer rolled her eyes. "Oh, that. I told Dusk to let it go, but of course she just couldn't." She rubbed her chin in thought. "I

suppose it's a big deal 'cause of what happened with her mother."
"Her mother?" I blinked in shock. "What about her mother?"
"Oh, her mom, Dawn, went Dashite ten years ago," she said calmly. Then she noticed me gaping in amazement. Lightning Dancer cocked her head in confusion. "Hasn't Morning Glory told you about it?"
"No…she hasn't…" I said quietly, glancing at the closed door. No yelling. No shooting. I hoped that that was a good sign. "She told me about her father, but…"
"Well, it was one hell of a scandal. It started when Thunderhead was attacked by Fiendfire. He's the only dragon who actually managed to damage the city. During the fight, both her dad and the dragon fell to the surface. He was found by a surfacer pegasus. She came back with him. Oh, but wasn't that a load of bad wind!"
"You mean her mom wasn't Enclave?"
"Nope." She seemed amused by my surprise. "What? It happens. Sometimes Dashites have foals, or you'll get a throwback or something. Most of them last long enough to fly up and get hit by a lightning rod." She gave a shrug. "For the best. This place has so many diseases and mutagens…well, I had to get two dozen shots just to be down here, and I'll have to be in quarantine for a month before they let me back up top. But he brought her back and threw all his weight around to bend the rules. Once medical cleared her, they got married. The dragon slayer and the surface mare," she said with a sigh and a shake of her head.
"But she went Dashite?" I asked. Dancer nodded, looking a little uncomfortable. "Why?"
"Well…Dawn was always funny. I mean, she never really fit in with Thunderhead society. She was always talking about how much we could help and telling stories about the surface. Somepony actually took a shot at her at a speech she made at the university. Finally, somepony planted a bomb in their home. Didn't kill anyone, thank goodness, but soon after that she went back down. Huge disgrace for her family." She looked over at the closed door with a worried frown. "Hit Dusk hardest, I think, being the eldest. We were both finishing school when her mom left. Councilbuck's wife going Dashite…it was pretty bad for her family for a while."
"And Morning Glory?" I asked as we reached the room. Lacunae stood as still as a statue in the corner.
"She was hurt more than angry. I mean, she was just a filly, and

suddenly her mom was gone and everypony was calling her dad a traitor. I think she believed in her mom…and Dusk didn't."

"And what happened to her mom?"

"It's a big Wasteland. Who knows?" Lightning Dancer said as she looked at Lacunae closely. "So this is an alicorn, huh? Never seen them around the Hoof before." She hovered in front of her, frowning. Then she wagged her head back and forth. "Wagabawagawagah!" she said, her tongue flopping back and forth as she rolled her eyes. Then she followed it up with three more goofy faces before her citrine eyes widened. "Wooo…she is so out of it."

"Out of it…" I frowned up at Lacunae. "Maybe that's what happened to her…"

Lightning Dancer looked at me. "This is a unicorn thing, isn't it?"

"Something like that," I muttered, wondering just how I was supposed to do this. "Can you boost me up? I need to touch horns with her." It was a shot in the dark, but it was the only thing I could think of.

"Isn't that unicorn foreplay?" She grinned as her tail wrapped around my waist and lifted me up on her back. Her wings lifted to keep me steady as I stretched up and touched my horn to Lacunae's. I had no idea if my horn would even work in the middle of burnout, and looking into her empty eyes didn't build confidence.

Nothing. "Come on, Lacunae…I know you're in there…" I tried to concentrate, but there wasn't even a flicker from my horn. There had to be something…some way to make a connection. Something that linked us.

Then it came to me. I closed my eyes as our horns touched and began to hum. It'd only been two days ago, but it seemed like forever. Softly I hummed the notes she'd played in Star House. I felt a tingle in my horn, and the world fell away.

oooOOOooo

I stood on a black plain, the ground scoured bare of everything save shiny stone. A gale tore at me in one constant and unending gust. Only the stones provided any respite from the storm that cut at me with every second. The stone itself had been eroded into drawn out spears of glass that shattered with the slightest pressure. In the distance were the black spires of Hoofington…

I could hear the screaming from here. I couldn't tell if it was the wind or something else. Embers were swept along in the gale, but I had no idea what their origins were. Everything was rendered in shades of gray, and I took a look at myself. Instantly, I wished I hadn't. My body was translucent white, but there were black blotches that seemed to crawl and creep slowly within me.

Okay. Freakiness established. Now…where was Lacunae?

I trotted across this hellscape for who knew how long before I spotted them. A tree. A street lamp. A chapel…one that I knew.

Slowly, I approached the building, my normal colors returning as I stepped inside. Something was definitely off, though. Things seemed to blur and run together in the corners of my vision and only come into focus when I looked directly at them. The building seemed off, as well: larger and better built than I recalled. It was late, the room lit only by candles and the city glow through the window.

"Sweet Celestia, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another. Dearest Luna, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another," a young mare whispered as she sat on a small pillow beside me. She was jet black with a cutie mark of a lit candle. She rocked slowly back and forth, head bowed as she murmured the lines over and over again.

"Lacunae?" I asked softly as I stood beside her. No response. Then I reached down and stopped her rocking. She blinked, then slowly looked up at me. "Psalm?"

"Who are you? You shouldn't be here. The chapel is closed until the Goddess wishes to return."

The gale outside made the building rock and creak. "Psalm…this isn't real, is it?"

She shook as she dropped her gaze to her hooves. "Sweet Celestia, please forgive me, for I have taken the life of another…" she began again, shaking as she clenched her eyes shut.

I stopped her again, the whole building rocking and groaning in the wind. "Psalm…you're the Marauder, Psalm." She gasped, her eyes going wide. "Macintosh's Marauders?"

Before my eyes, she aged to the black mare in body armor. She hugged the sniper rifle, bowing her head. "This is my penance."

"Your penance? For what?"

"For us," whispered a host around us. I turned my head, and dozens of zebras appeared around us…and ponies too. "Why did

you kill us, Psalm? Did your Goddess forgive you for our murders?" they whispered in unison. Each one had a perfect ring in their head, with matching holes blown out opposite sides.

"Sweet Celestia, please forgive me…" she prayed desperately. I looked at the dead. The zebras I could understand, but why ponies? Why…young ponies?

"Psalm…what did you do?" I asked softly.

"She took the shot. Pulled the trigger. Ended our lives. She deserves to go to Hell. Eternal punishment. Not forgiveness."

"No!" Psalm cried out as she hugged the rifle tighter. "The Goddess forgave me! The Goddess took me in Unity!"

"The Goddess cut you off! Unworthy! Blood soaked hooves!" wailed the host. "You killed my family. You killed my children! You killed me!" shrieked the undead host around her as the building continued to creak and shake like it was about to come apart.

I stared at Psalm. Doof had been a rapist. Vanity had worked for Goldenblood. What had happened to Psalm after the Marauders split up? Slowly I knelt, reaching out to hold her. "Psalm…I know what it's like to do the wrong thing. I know what it's like…to kill… because it's all you can do. Because you have no choice," I said softly.

"She had a choice!" roared the slain. "She chose to pull the trigger!"

"F…F…Forgive me…for…for I…" she stammered softly.

"I do," I said quietly. "I forgive you." I pulled the plug. I pushed the button. I knew what it was like to damn myself. For all I knew, Psalm was a monster worse than Deus, but right now she needed my forgiveness. After all, there was no way she could forgive herself.

The room around me turned into glowing yellow embers and whooshed inside me. For a moment, standing on that tortured plain, I knew exactly how much forgiveness she needed. I'd killed forty with the push of one button and four hundred with the push of another.

Psalm had been one hell of a sniper. She'd killed one…by…one…

I looked at the remaining two structures, smelling chlorine and thinking about headshots. Slowly, I approached the second, the street light. Somepony stood beneath it, and as I approached I heard the strange city sounds building. Slowly, the mare came into focus. Her blue hide was a perfect match to P-21's, but her mane was a

pale blue-white. She wore a gauzy dress of faintly discolored white lace that drew more attention to her intimate bits than concealed them. And there was shame, empty shame in her soft lavender eyes as she looked at me with a hollow smile. “Hey…want to see a trick? Twenty bits.” As I stared at her, her smile trembled at the edges. “I mean…fifteen?”

I was completely baffled. “Who are you?”

The question was a knife through her. “I’m…ah…Trixie…cause I can do…you know…tricks…” I supposed the look she was trying for was ‘sultry’ but delivered ‘pathetic’. “Twelve bits? Please?”

Trixie? Who the hay was Trixie? I opened my mouth… reconsidered…then forced a smile. “Sure.” I never saw a unicorn look so relieved to earn so little. I’d found that many bits just sorting through the trash.

“Thanks…you…you know…I’m really good…so maybe you might…um…pay more? If I am, I mean?” Somehow, it didn’t seem to register that I didn’t have any way I might be keeping money on me. Either she couldn’t tell in this…memory? Projection? Or she was just really bad at this! She led me to a nearby motel just down the street.

“Rent’s due, Trixie,” the sour lemon buck said without looking up from his television. “Better fuck a gold mine out of her.”

I wanted to shoot him right then and there for the shame on her face. But she didn’t say a word. No comeback comment. Nothing. From the shame in her eyes, it was clear she was hoping to get a goldmine out of me. So to speak…

The dingy little room had a musty, musky smell to it, and the sole bulb painted everything in amber. Still, there were posters on the wall, aged and delicate things showing a mare on stage while bold letters declared ‘Behold the Great and Powerful Trixie!’ There were pictures of her animating a rope, of summoning a swirling lightning cloud. I looked away from the posters to ask about them.

She was trying to do a striptease…and was so bad at it that I hadn’t even noticed. “So…do you like what you see?” she said as she climbed onto the bed. I didn’t. I didn’t want to have sex with her. I wanted to hug her…but a hug would kill her. Still, I went through the motions with her.

It wasn’t good. This wasn’t good. No amount of sex should have that many quiet tears.

When we finally gave up and lay there together, she stared at my

chest. I stroked her mane; it needed a good washing. “So…um… again? …baby?” she added as she dared to meet my eye. I killed her with a look. My expression crumpled her like a tin can as she shook. “I’m sorry…” she whispered.

All I could be was kind as Trixie clung to me in that filthy room surrounded by walls of failed dreams. If things had been different… But I stroked her softly. I’d maimed her with my pity. “Not even worth one bit…”

Worthless. I knew that feeling. I knew what it was like to feel undeserving. Unwanted. Unneeded. To think my life amounted to just a legacy of murder and death. I cuddled with this strange mare, wondering who she was. How was she in this nightmare of Lacunae’s? I touched my horn to hers. “I don’t think you’re worthless,” I whispered in her ear, kissing her softly. I wanted to take her away from here. Protect her. Prove her wrong and find out about that mare in the pictures.

But I was two hundred years too late...

The room dissolved in a cloud of blue sparks, and I was left on that wind-scoured stone. As they disappeared inside me I felt the slow decay of a mare’s life…failure after failure…till all that was left was turning tricks in a dirty motel room. I wondered what had happened to Trixie…Had she died in that place when the bombs fell? No…she must have survived long enough for Unity… somehow. How else could she had been inside Lacunae?

I had self-loathing and self-worthlessness coiled inside me. I looked at the tree with trepidation. What was Lacunae, a toxic angst dump?

As I approached the tree, I saw it wasn’t just a tree but some kind of building. I ran my eyes over the sign out front. Ponyville Library? “And the weirdness just keeps on coming…” I said as I took a deep breath and slowly pushed the door open.

I would have loved to have seen something bright and clean. Really. But the library looked as if it’d been ransacked. Dozens of books lay in disarray. Some piled in heaps, others scattered and ripped. “Spike? Is that you?” a mare called from the stairs as she walked down with slow, unsteady steps. The middle aged mare levitated a bottle of wine beside her as her purple eyes narrowed, then relaxed. “Oh, good…”

Twilight Sparkle?

Gray shot through her mane in premature aging, and wrinkles were

forming creases in her face. She looked…tired. And drunk. “If you’re here to check out a book, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. EC-102…the book review…all books are to be reviewed for appropriateness to the conduct and wellbeing of Equestria.” She scowled at the empty shelves and dirty piles. “I used to love this place…” she said with a scowl before taking a drink from the bottle.

I approached cautiously. “You’re…you’re Twilight Sparkle.”

“The one and only!” she said with a bitter twist of her lips, spreading her hooves wide. “Or a piece of her. The garbage that doesn’t matter,” she said as she waved the bottle around the building, “Nice endopsychoillusory projection, huh? I wonder what all this represents? Huh? The loss of my friends? My hypocrisy?” She saw me staring blankly and sighed. “Figures... first pony I get to talk to, and she’s a moron.”

Okay... that stung, but still. Getting pissed at a ‘projection’ wouldn’t help. “Hypocrisy?”

She scowled at me. “Oh, don’t be stupid. I was the biggest hypocrite in Equestria.” She pointed at a picture of herself hanging askew on the wall. “Read! Only it’s kinda hard when I stood by and did nothing to stop Rarity’s Image from sucking every remotely seditious phrase from the shelves of Equestria.” She sighed, took a long pull off the bottle, and stared down at the sloshing contents. “For ten years I did everything I could to try and help ponies. Luna. Fucking Equestria! Everypony except the five ponies who really needed it.” She took another drink and grimaced. “Ugh…I’m glad I never actually drank this swill.”

Okay, this was approaching critical levels of ‘huh’? “What do you mean? You mean, you know you’re not…well…real?”

“I’m a part of a mare who was, and all this is a reflection of that part. That’s all I am. The worst parts,” she said with a twisted little smile, then shook the bottle at me. “Twilight never drank. She should have... but she didn’t. No, she just condemned her friend who was consumed by addiction. Covered for her. Lied for her. Let everypony manipulate her. But she didn’t drink herself.” She set the bottle on the stairs.

“The other parts…they didn’t seem to know,” I said as I trotted towards her. “How are you…here?”

“It’s called poetic justice,” she said with a snide little laugh. “I’m getting everything I deserve. See, when I failed…again and again…to win the war for Luna, I got a little bit desperate. We were close

to hitting the million mark for pony casualties…fuck only knows how many zebras we'd slaughtered. Then Trueblood came to tell me about a highly classified project."

"Chimera."

She blinked and smiled. "You know about it? Huh, I didn't know about it. Goldenblood had shit going on that I couldn't imagine. It was crude and unfinished…but the second I read it, I had the idea: an army of alicorns! Unstoppable! I'd finally accomplish something. I perfected the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion from Chimera's crude mutagenic gunk." Her eyes peered at me. "I can see you've already had a dose of it yourself."

"What?" I said as I looked at myself, then at her.

"You call it taint," she said as she slumped on the stairs. "So even my crowning achievement is a grotesque failure." I frowned at the naked self-pity before me…this wasn't Twilight Sparkle. This was a part of her. The worst part. She looked up at the dirty ceiling. "I found a mare I knew I could manipulate into taking it. See? I'm soooo much better than Rarity…I trick mares into being my test subjects rather than use criminals. I located Trixie, who'd just barely clawed her life back together, and gave her an offer she couldn't refuse. Power. Glory. Fame. I might have thought I was helping her. Really, I was just the final nail in her coffin."

I thought of the blue mare I'd laid with and couldn't argue. A mare in that state…"So, what happened?"

"Bombs fell. Everypony died," she said with a shrug. "More specifically, they fell right in the middle of the test. But, good news…my potion worked! Trixie got her power. Her glory. Her fame. And, in thanks, she saved us by pulling us all into her…one after the next. Glued together in that…being. That monster I created."

I stared at her with a small frown, trying to figure out the pity party. Or was it self-pity? "What about Gardens?"

Her eyes stared away and she took a slow pull off the bottle. "Gardens was a dream. I made a few experiments. Got the restoration megaspell to work in Tenpony…the arcanum nullification matrix was tricky…then there was the contagion devivification spell that had to be added…" Then she sighed. "All for nothing. Goldenblood talked me out of it…Luna wouldn't tolerate anything that would suggest she'd failed. So two and a half years of my life wasted. And tens of thousands of ponies while I

wasted my time with a pet project that'd never come to pass."

I stared at her in shock. She really didn't know! Goldenblood hid the truth from everypony but Spike, and Spike had kept it to protect Twilight Sparkle. "Probably for the best…" Twilight muttered, "if I had created it, the Goddess would do everything to make sure it's destroyed. After all, if alicorns are perfect to survive in the Wasteland, she'd have done all she could to destroy something that could save the wastes. Or worse, she'd have me corrupt it."

My words died in my throat. Was that true? "It…it wasn't a waste. Maybe…maybe someday, somepony could finish it?"

"Yeah. I'm sure that'll be a mistake, too," she said with a sniff. "I should have listened to Goldenblood back at the beginning…I shouldn't have been responsible. None of us should have agreed. We should have found another way. Any other way. Such a mistake…" she said as she grit her teeth. "Pinkie Pie…why didn't I stop you? Why didn't I realize what Fluttershy had done? Why didn't I keep Rarity from…from gutting so many books? One of a kind books…! Why didn't I do the right thing?!"

Why hadn't I gone another way? Why hadn't I convinced Morning Glory to leave Miramare? Why didn't I leave forty foals alive till somepony could help them? I should have…I'm sorry…

Regret.

Lacunae *was* a dump. A place where the Goddess had dumped all the memories and feelings she hadn't wanted. If Lacunae was going to be separated, why not rid yourself of things you didn't want to feel?

I trotted to Twilight and did what I did best: I hugged her. "I wish I could tell you more, but your life wasn't one big mistake. There were better parts to it." We don't always see the good we do. "I know you mattered to other ponies... and your friends. It wasn't all a mistake."

"I wish that were true," she murmured softly as everything around us fell away.

The ruined library dissolved into purple motes, flowing inside me. And now more motes were floating from across the blasted landscape towards me, in spite of the wind. They came with the shame, guilt, and angst of broken ponies. The repairpony who neglected his wife and kids till they left him and died in Manehattan. The raider who had let her foals starve to feed herself. The green unicorn twins' shameful incestuous relationship because

neither could love another as much as they loved each other. More and more.

Lacunae: something missing. I'd thought that Lacunae had been a pony whose memories had been taken away. She wasn't. She was a collection of the pain and angst of hundreds of ponies. Their shame. Their regret. Their guilt. All collected into one vessel sealed off and tossed into the one place they couldn't be heard. I wondered what such a being would be... stripped of all its misery and doubt. No mistakes. No confusion...

Suddenly, the stories of alicorns abroad being complete monsters made a whole lot more sense.

With that, the motes were gone. "So... now what? Is something supposed to happen? Are we done here?" I asked as I turned around to look at the windswept field. For once, I actually wanted the Dealer to show up and provide me with a clue.

Instead, I got a mirror?

Slowly, I approached it. Just a simple standing mirror. A bit fancy. Maybe I'd seen it in Blueblood Manor... or maybe it was something from the countless memories inside me. I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath as I trotted towards it. "Okay... horrible mind rape or emotional crush time incoming. Bring it on." I stood before my battered, bloody, bleeding self. "Okay! Bring it on! Evil twin combat? Mind messing? Some horrible self-revelation? I can take it."

But... nothing. Just me. White hide. Two bright red eyes. Clean. Goddesses, how long ago had it been since clean was normal and muck, mud, and blood an aberration? Neat security barding. Old normal PipBuck without some damned megaspell program inside it. Happy. Goddesses, I looked so happy! Well fed. No worries but to deal with the next shift and the next game.

I stared at my reflection. Really? What was the point of this? I narrowed my eye, gritting my teeth. "What? I get it! I was an idiot then! What's your point?" I yelled at myself, then reared up and shoved the mirror back. It shattered... no... not the mirror. Me. And when I looked again, there was the mirror... and there was me...

Bloody, battered me on my weak limbs. My one freakish glowing eye staring back at me. Goddesses... did I look this hurt to everypony? I turned, looking at the bullet hole scars dotting my hide. The ugly splash on my chest. The mar on my face. My hide looked like it was starting to become diseased. I was so dirty that

I'd never be clean again; the dirt and blood seemed part of my hide. Mutated limbs bending before my very eyes... like I was turning into some sort of pony leech hybrid. Even my teeth were going yellow, my ribs showing. I didn't even look like a stable pony any more.

"I get it! I suck! I'm dying! What's the fucking point?" I screamed, shoving it over again and seeing myself shatter in bloody bits.

The mirror... I didn't want to look in it now. I was sick of this place. Sick of these mind games. Sick of always being hurt...

The pony in the mirror...

I screamed as I shoved the mirror away, clenching my eyes. I wasn't that. I wasn't going to be that! That pony belonged in a cave! I was going to be dead in six months... a year at the most!

Please... let me be dead...

"You still want to die... " whispered a mare inside me. It sounded like Trixie.

I closed my eye, lifting my head as I fought the despair inside me. Even after Gardens... Even after finding out about Marigold... I didn't want to live if it meant turning into that thing. I was becoming a monster. A bloody, brutalized, beaten monster. The Wasteland was molding me into another Gorgon or Deus with all the finesse that Sanguine could muster. I fought the sob in my throat. "I'm scared... "

And that was it. Fear. I was afraid. Afraid I'd hurt my friends. Afraid of what I was becoming. Afraid of what would happen to everypony if I died. Better for me to hurry the process along. Fall apart. Push as long and hard as I could before I fell apart for good. Death was easier. I sobbed there in that dark emptiness, ignoring the contents of the mirror as it wept too. "I don't want to die... I don't want to... to become that thing!" I said as I pointed at the mirror with a limp hoof. "I want to live!"

"Then live," Twilight murmured softly inside me. "Live for your friends. Live for Gardens. Live for something you want to live for. Don't make my mistake... Don't live for something you hate."

I sniffed, looking at that thing. It couldn't look back at me. "And... what if... "

There was silence for a moment, and then Psalm said quietly, "That's what friends are for."

I sat there a moment, blubbering like an idiot. The fact that I was going to inevitably die young looked back at me. Twilight's taint

was slowly and inevitably transforming me into something monstrous.

"I'm sorry... " I whispered to that thing in the mirror. To those mares inside me.

"There's no shame in fear... "

"The shame is in letting your fear control you."

"You have to keep faith, even when you're afraid."

"You gotta giggle at the ghosties, even when laughing's the last thing you want to do!"

"Don't let being afraid stop you from being awesome!"

"Don't let fear turn you mean and hateful."

"Be honest with yourself. Lying never changed nothing."

"Ante up... "

I finally looked at that thing that was once a happy and healthy mare and sighed, "I'm going to be dead soon... or I'm going to be a monster." And then I smiled a little. "Well... guess I better make the time count. Now... how do I get out of Lacunae?"

"Just ask... " the mare replied, complete and whole within me. I heard the soft hum. My own humming. And I hummed along with myself. Maybe I was doomed. I was afraid. But I wouldn't let fear destroy me. I had too much to do.

oooOOOooo

I gazed into Lacunae's eyes as they focused on my own. She blinked, then looked down at Lightning Dancer holding me up. "Ah... " she said delicately, "I assume that there have been... developments?"

"You could say that," I said, and the yellow mare nodded and deftly placed me back in the wheelchair. "Thank you, Lacunae," I said as I settled back, looking up at her with a soft smile. "That last bit... with the mirror. That was you, wasn't it?"

The alicorn fidgeted a little and gave a sheepish smile. "It only seemed right. You pulled me out of the dark and put me back together again."

Virtue isn't something inherent. The Goddess and countless ponies within had shoved their flaws and weaknesses into the equivalent of a closet and created a mare who was gentle and kind, who had learned from her mistakes. Who was better for them. You couldn't have empathy if you anesthetized yourself to the pain of others.

“You get a horn, and suddenly everything’s all magical and mystical,” Lightning Dancer said with a teasing grin, looking at Lacunae curiously. Clearly, anypony with wings was an okay pony to a pegasus.

“Yup. It’s a great, mysterious world for us horn heads,” I replied with a grin. Lacunae lifted me easily with her horn, adjusting me in the seat. I had to admit, I felt a bit foalish being lifted around like that.

“Well, if you’re done, I’ll go wait for Dusk. She’s probably going to need some cloudberry wine and a good cry after all this is done,” she said with a smile and a roll of her eyes. “The tougher the mare, the bigger the softie inside.” Deus must have been stuffed with down fluff, then. She trotted off back towards Glory’s room.

“That is a very interesting mare,” Lacunae said softly.

“Ponies keep surprising me,” I agreed with a smile. Then I looked up at her. “I need to find P-21 and Scotch... and Rampage. Push me? My horn isn’t really working right now.” I frowned, screwing up my face. There was a sparkle from the tip, then a zap like the blowing of a light bulb. I rolled my eye, looking at the char barely visible on the tip of my horn. "Yup. Still not working." I pouted. Stupid little defective horn... hurmph.

* * *

It took a bit of time to find them in the ‘School of Literature’. One classroom had been converted into a kitchen. The fare was distinctly basic, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Most of the Eggheads sat around with books, talking about their ideas, problems, and plans. Scotch Tape stared at a Sparkle-Cola slowly going flat before her. P-21 read an arcane science book like his life depended on it. Rampage was explaining in exact detail the best way to snap a neck to two horrified-looking research mares.

She gets turned into a filly, deals with a tech abomination, has at least three different mares inside her, and goes on without a tick. I owed her a hug. Later. Right now, I pointed at P-21 and Lacunae steered me to his table. He glanced at me, glanced at the alicorn, and returned to reading with a focused stare that implied that either he didn’t want to talk or he was trying to levitate it with his earth pony magic. Somehow, I doubted it was the latter.

“I didn’t realize it was a problem for you,” I said softly.

"Well, given that I didn't tell her, I would have thought you'd have picked up on it. Silly me," he replied in an acid tone.

I supposed I deserved that. "So, why is it a problem?"

He finally looked at me. "Blackjack, what does the word 'father' mean to you?"

I hadn't exactly thought about that. "Well... um... when a buck and a mare love each other very much... " I said lamely, but he clearly wasn't in the mood for jokes. Definitely in grumpy pony mode. "I don't know. I never really thought about it. Textbook told us that they helped mares care for foals back before the Incident." And that we didn't need them any more with the breeding queues.

"Well, to me it means 'sperm donor'," he replied flatly.

"I still don't see the problem," I said.

He clearly fought to repress what he wanted to say. Then he said, in low, even tones, "Scotch Tape now thinks of me as family. As her 'father'." He sighed and closed his eyes and he sat back. "Her mother always went on and on about us being a family once we were out of the stable. Living together. Having more children. Love... " He sighed and rubbed his face. "All I wanted was to escape. Now she expects me to be a 'father' to her... I doubt that she knows what that means either."

"Maybe not," I replied softly, "but here is what I do know. Over the last month, that filly has lost more than you or I. She's lost her home... her mother... and today she lost her innocence. Now, maybe she does have expectations of you that aren't fair, but you are twice her age and she needs all the help she can get. We're all she has in the world!"

"You don't understand," he hissed, clenching his eyes shut as he rubbed his face. "I can't be her father... it's... I just can't!" I'd seen that look in his eyes just a few days ago. There was more to this than just unexpected relationships.

"All right, but I hope someday soon you can at least tell her why," I said softly. I wouldn't press further... not right now anyway. I could still see the angry ring around his neck. I nodded for Lacunae to wheel me over to Scotch Tape.

The filly didn't look up from her bottle. "Hey. Rubber hoof brigade, coming through," I said as I waggled my limp limb at her. "Wooga wooga wooga."

She narrowed her eyes, leaning away from me. "You are so weird, Blackjack!"

“I’m trying to get you to smile,” I replied,
“I’m not a foal,” she said with a huff, returning her gaze to her soda. I glanced at P-21 sitting in the exact same pose. Dear Celestia, their obstinacy was genetic!
I gave her a flat look. “I’ll have you know that I have body tackled raiders, Enclave power armor, and monsterponies.” Oh, now she was looking at me like I was disturbed. I grinned. “So tackling you and tickling you till you cry probably isn’t impossible.”
“You wouldn’t!” she gasped.
I did, and to hell with everypony who stared like I’d lost my mind! I didn’t stop till she was laughing and gasping and begging for mercy. I was laughing, too. And from across the room, I thought I saw a ghost of a smile on P-21’s face.
“Thanks, Blackjack,” she said softly once she’d caught her breath. “For caring… ”
“We all care about you,” I said as I shifted and shoved myself into sitting upright against the wall next to the olive filly.
“He doesn’t,” Scotch Tape said. “He hates me.” Three guesses as to who she’s talking about, Blackjack…
“P-21 doesn’t hate you. He’s just… he’s just like that. He’s serious about everything,” I said as I gave her a patient smile and brushed her mane out of her teal eyes.
Her smile didn’t last. “I screwed up,” she said softly.
“Come again?”
“In the office?” she reminded me as she stared at her hooves. “I was so scared I just froze up. I think I wet myself a little… ”
“Well, it was dangerous… ” If it hadn’t been for my clattery leg braces I’d have done it myself.
“Not that,” she said softly, pressing her limbs together. “I saw… it. The monster from the tunnels.” She drew a trembling breath. “There was a heap of scrap in there. Just a pile of junk… but I knew it was going to come alive. It was going to eat me… eat us all. I would have stayed there till I reappeared if some mare hadn’t brushed against me. I nearly got caught anyway… .”
She shook, and I put a leg across her shoulders. “I see it all the time. I hear it in the walls.” She pointed at a Sparkle-Cola machine in the corner. “I… I think its in there, and any second it’s going to pop out and eat us all.”
“Scotch, it’s gone. I shot it with the strongest gun in Equestria. It’s not coming back,” I said, but I saw she wasn’t convinced.

Triage trotted in and immediately approached me, four new leg braces floating beside her. I broke into a wide grin. “Finally! I am so tired of being pushed around like an old gray mare.”

“Oh, no, old gray mares are *much* better patients than you. Speaking of which, the professor wants to make sure that you speak with her before you run off again.” Funny, she didn’t seem like she was very happy about that. My mane was starting to prickle.

“All right, just let me check on Glory first... ”

“I’m afraid that that wasn’t a request,” a buck said from the doorway. The unicorn levitated a bow and arrow, the black arrowhead glowing with an inset talisman. Looming behind him was a massive sentry bot with a white crab painted on the front. A zebra mare bearing a scorpion cutie mark-- were they still called cutie marks on zebras?-- and carrying a rifle the spitting image of Lancer’s skulked on his left, and a white pegasus mare with two needle rifles on her battle saddle stood to his right. The buck with the arrow glared right at me. “Professor Zodiac will see you. Now.”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Made of Stubbornium -- You just don’t know when to up and die! When reduced to 25% or fewer hit points, you gain +6 DT and regenerate 2hp/sec till above 25% hit points.

Quest Perk added: Magic Bullet (level three) -- The range of your magic bullet spell has increased by a factor of five.

Chapter 28: Orientation

"Thanks guys, you're all great friends too, even when I don't understand me!"

"What am I afraid of? Seriously? I've seen some real fucked-up shit around the Wasteland. I've seen foals bought, sold, and rented. I've seen monsters tear a pony to pieces. I've seen ghouls crawling out of the earth. But, for the most part, I've never been afraid of it. I'm usually more 'oh fuck, this is gonna hurt', than 'I'm afraid'.

"You want fear? Fear is being strapped to a table as a permanent lunch for a bunch of cannibals. Knowing they're going to rip you apart and eat you over…and over…and over again. Fear is knowing you might spend years or centuries that way, your flesh fueling the nightmare and you helpless to stop it.

"But even that's nothing. You want real fear? Fear is not knowing. Fear is looking at the future and knowing that something bad is hidden in it. And the greatest fear of all is knowing that the something bad might be you.

"I'd rather take a dive through a dragon's digestive tract than face that."

* * *

Okay. Four Zodiacs. One of them was a heavy mech, the zebra probably had dangerous sniping skills, and I anticipated some sort of deadly diversity from the bow-wielder. The pegasus…eh, I had nothing. Poisons on the needles? On our side, I was unarmed, my horn wasn't working, my legs weren't working, Rampage was a filly, and Scotch, P-21, and Lacunae were unarmed. Well, only one thing to do.

"Rampage! On the zebra! Lacunae, arrows on the big guy! P-21, use whatever you have hidden on the pegasus! Scotch, find Glory!

Arrows is mine!" And with a battle cry, I snatched an eating utensil from the table in my teeth and lunged towards the bow-wielding green unicorn.

Nopony moved as I flopped on my belly with my mouth set determinedly around my weapon. "Ell chut yer eart oot!" I swore as I swung my head wildly in his general direction. Everypony just stared in shock as I wiggled towards him. Then Triage's magic enveloped me, and I was lifted into the air and dangled in front of her as if held by the scruff of my neck.

"The Collegiate is the home of the Zodiacs, you half-horned idiot!" the blue medical pony told me firmly and with just a hint of exasperation. "How do you think we get the caps to keep this place running? Trust me, sickly ponies are not cash makers!" I glared at her, my teeth tightening on the weapon's handle, and she looked at me a little uneasily. "And take that spoon out of your mouth!"

I spat it right in her face as hard as I could, and the impact distracted her just enough to break her magic's hold. Lacunae's purple glow immediately enveloped me, and I threw my forelegs around Triage's neck, pressing my horn to her throat. "Now my horn may be…compact, but I bet it's long enough to hit one of those vein thingies in your neck. And since you saved my life like, three times, it'd be really shitty to kill you, but I'm not going anywhere with them. So. Zodiacs leave. We get our gear. We get Glory if she's feeling better and... wants to come. Then, and *only* then, will I meet this professor." I felt her swallow.

For a tense moment, I hung there, wondering just how big a mess this would be if somepony said 'no'. Then the security bot said in a tinny mare's voice, "Please back down, Sagittarius. I believe that Security will come see me now in good faith." The security bot's metal head turned towards me. "Correct, Blackjack?"

I glanced up at the indentation my horn was making on the paralyzed Triage and didn't dare nod. "Sure."

The green unicorn had an arrow trained right at my eye, but he couldn't be sure I wouldn't take Triage with me. Then he nodded once, and the four carefully backed out of the cafeteria. "Go get our things, Rampage. P-21, check on Glory," I said as I hovered there in Lacunae's magic. If the Zodiacs tried something, they'd have the best chances of surviving and evading. "Got me, Lacunae?"

"Easily. Though I feel obliged to point out that, typically, heroes do not take doctors that have repeatedly saved their lives hostage," the

purple alicorn said wryly. “The Goddess does not know if she should be impressed or disappointed.” Or concerned, but she didn’t add that one out loud.

Triage didn’t say a word till my friends returned. “I couldn’t find Glory,” P-21 informed me as they dumped my gear on the table. “Dusk and the other one are gone too,” he continued, clearly worried about how I’d take this news. To be honest, I didn’t like it, but I couldn’t help Glory myself. Ever since meeting me, her life had been one painful mistake after another. If Dusk could get her back to the Enclave, good.

Wasn’t like I was going to be around much longer anyway.

Now that I had guns, barding, and leg braces, I released Triage. She staggered back, rubbed her throat with her hoof, and stared at me in shock. “You…you would have killed me?”

“Dunno. Maybe,” I replied as Lacunae buckled the braces onto my limbs. I looked at her shocked and hurt expression and pointed to the scar on my chest. “You see that? Leo Zodiac did that. Aries burned me. Heck, even that Virgo mare used hostages to try and kill me. That’s beside the dozens of ponies I’ve had shooting at me for a bounty! So, having four trot in on me like that was not good. Once my friend was okay, you might have pointed out that I needed to talk to the professor. No problem. Like to meet her. But springing four Zodiacs on me was not a smart move.” Lacunae helped me strap the barding on over my braces. “Be glad that it didn’t go bad.”

“Still…I can’t believe that you did that,” Triage muttered, flushing.

I wasn’t feeling very sympathetic at the moment. “In case you didn’t notice, ponies try and kill me a lot. You didn’t take me seriously, so I grabbed what leverage I could.” And you’re a bit of a nag, I added mentally. “Yeah, I help ponies. Yeah, DJ Pon3 thinks I’m a hero. Me? I’m just Blackjack. And I’ll do whatever I have to against any enemy to survive and save my friends.”

Triage actually smiled. “That’s the first sensible thing I think I’ve heard you say.” Getting approval from Triage was certainly a mixed sensation. Sort of like Scalpel telling me ‘good job’.

Armed and armored, the five of us walked out. I might not have been a smart pony, but I was nopony’s fool.

* * *

Clearly, my treatment of Triage hadn’t endeared me to the

Collegiate, but I was in little mood to worry about that. Finding out these ponies had sent the Zodiacs after my head didn't endear them to me, and while I was grateful for their doctors saving my life and the lives of my friends, I wasn't going to roll over for them.

The planetarium was on the northeast corner of the complex, a huge, heavy concrete building topped by a massive dome. The Zodiacs, with the flaming red Aries in her power armor, the blue Aquarius colt, and a soft pink unicorn mare, presumably Virgo, wearing a PipBuck were in attendance. I looked at the first Zodiac I'd ever encountered; she looked the same age as Scotch! Back outside Miramare, I hadn't realized I'd almost shot a filly. I'd been more concerned with the color on my E.F.S. back then.

As we stepped inside the heavy structure, Scotch Tape balked. "We're…we're not going underground, are we?" Panic rapidly spread across her features as she looked around the foyer; with the heavy gray walls, it looked a lot like we already were.

"Relax, Scotch," I said, smiling at her. She didn't, but she continued with us.

The green unicorn, now without his bow, greeted me with a challenging stare. His eyes took in my weapons; I supposed we'd have to leave them behind to meet this professor. Instead, he looked at Taurus's rifle. "I heard you killed Gem, Mini, and Taurus," he said gravely. "Is that true?"

The question took me by surprise. I could still hear Gem pleading her twin to 'go ghosty'. "The Reaper Deus killed Taurus. Mini died in an accident. Gem killed herself to kill Deus," I replied softly. "I would have killed them if I had to. They were after my head, after all."

"They were after your PipBuck. Sure, they might have been a little... intense... about getting it, but they weren't after the bounty," he explained with a little shrug. "Virgo was the only one after the money; she didn't understand why you were different from the others. Kid's a prodigy, but damn thick sometimes." He took a deep breath. "We were just wondering. We didn't know." With that, he turned and led us up some concrete stairs. We passed a two-century-old display: 'Explore the constellations! Get your free temporary magic zodiac cutie mark tattoo at the gift shop!' declared a Twilight Sparkle cutout.

"How can you use fillies and colts to collect bounties?" P-21 asked curiously. Rampage did not look happy about that... which was a

bit odd to see, considering her current apparent age.

"Because they're willing and able," he replied evenly. "We don't use just anypony, and this place needs caps the same as any settlement. And they work. Any village has colts. Aquarius can blend in, get intelligence, drug drinks…kid's good like that. Gemini was even better getting in and taking down marks. It was a game to those two. Virgo's more of a special case. She's a Zodiac because her father's a Zodiac." He screwed up his face and added, "Sorta…"

He stopped at a pair of double doors. "Okay. Professor Zodiac is inside. She's protected, so don't try and pull something again. She just wants to talk. Alright?"

"I can do talking. I like talking," I said with a smile. See? Blackjack being the calm, civilized pony. Sagittarius didn't look particularly convinced.

The door opened into an immense, domed chamber. I immediately thought of the Reapers' arena, though this room was still far smaller than that immense space. A dozen tiers ran around the perimeter of the room; some still had black floor cushions scattered on them, but most of them had been removed for the rest of the junk that occupied the space. In the center rose a massive black piece of equipment studded with hundreds of gemstones that twinkled brightly; a large metal cylinder stood next to it. Cables snaked all over the place, and I spotted several pieces of what looked like sand dog bionics. Countless robots, ranging from Protectaponies to sentry bots, stood silently on the tiers and around the edge of the central floor, and, in my amber night vision, I thought I could see a telltale stealth ripple next to one of them.

"I love this part," Rampage muttered to Scotch Tape. The olive filly shrank away from all of the mechanical devices surrounding us, chewing on her bottom lip and fidgeting with her goggles.

The lights suddenly dimmed, and the massive machine in the center lit up and slowly rose into the air. From the countless gems emerged a million points of light that splashed against the great dome overhead and formed slowly into a starry sky. Unlike the arena's enchanted ceiling, this projection looked…deeper. Still, I couldn't help but feel these little motes to be somewhat lame; they just didn't match up to those tiny lights I'd seen in Maripony's memory.

Wait a minute…The stars were moving, slowly, then flying off the ceiling and drawing together into an immense glowing unicorn

head floating in the air above the central machine and staring down at us! A booming voice echoed throughout the chamber. “I am the great and powerful Professor Zodiac! Mistress of the Mechanical! Lorekeeper of Legend! Look upon me and tremble!”

Scotch Tape gave a little shriek and dove under me, shaking as she hugged my hoof. P-21 kept backing up towards the door. Lacunae was staring at the image in mild confusion. Rampage, however, just grinned as she looked up at the starry head. I looked down at Scotch and scowled, then levitated out my shotgun and turned back to the floating head.

“Yeah? Well I’m Blackjack the tired and annoyed! So turn down the volume and turn up the lights before I start sharing my bad day!” I bellowed up at her as I racked a round into the chamber.

She blinked in shock, and then the stars almost instantly scattered back into their original positions. The room lights came up a bit, the volume dropped to a normal level, and from the device in the center flickered rainbow beams. They formed into a middle-aged, normal-sized silver mare with glowing white eyes who scowled at Rampage. “You told her, didn’t you?” There was something…off… about her, though, besides her being a glowing, translucent projection. Was it her face? Her tail? She looked…just odd, somehow.

Rampage fell back, laughing. “I didn’t say a word. I knew Blackjack wouldn’t fall for the great floaty head of doom routine, Zodiac. That’s fifty caps you owe me!” The ghostly mare snorted, and one of the Protectaponies trotted over to Rampage. A little door opened up, and out tumbled a hoofful of caps. “Here, hold on to these for me, Blackjack,” she said as she dumped them in my bags. I noted that my PipBuck counted only forty-five caps.

The flickering, ghostly silver mare looked at me and snorted softly. “Fine. Again, without the showmareship. I’m Professor Zodiac, head of the Collegiate. I was hoping to talk to you earlier, but you just trotted right out of here. Wanted a word before you left again.”

“About what?” I asked sullenly, suspicious of flashy ponies wanting things from me. And I just knew it had to be something to do with the program in my PipBuck.

“Your bill,” she replied. “We utilized a considerable amount of our limited supplies, time, and resources to restore you and your friends…you in particular,” she said with a grin, pointing a hoof at me, “More than we would have for anypony else. Certainly more

than we would have for free."

"I…I…" I blinked and considered the caps we'd amassed. "How much do you want? I think I can swing a few thousand…"

"Oh, you used enough healing materials to well exceed that. One trip through the booth costs five thousand caps. So, I think we're looking at…for the five of you treated…and you, two additional times…plus surgery…healing potions…rejuvenation talismans…time…eh…fifty thousand caps!" she said with a grin. "Rounded down."

My mouth worked silently. Suddenly, I felt like I was back at Megamart with Deus putting a price on my head. "Fifty…fifty thousand…"

"Oh yes. And that's not counting hospital time for your friends... " she said as she rubbed her hooves together. "But! I am happy to waive that fee and all future uses of our medical facilities…in exchange for EC-1101."

I felt my head spin. "What? What do you want it for? Project Chimera?" Of course! With that, she could make all kinds of freaky new pony-things to use as bounty hunters.

"Project Chimera? You know about that?" She was momentarily surprised, but then laughed. "What do I look like, a Canterlot ghoul with delusions of grandeur? Don't be ridiculous." She shook her head in amusement. "I'm interested in an entirely different project," she said, then looked at me levelly. "I want Project Steelpony unsealed."

"Ah…excuse me. Question!" Rampage said as she waved her hoof over her head. "What the heck are Project Chimera and Project Steelpony?"

P-21 nodded grimly. "Yeah, I'd kinda like to know that as well." Lacunae nodded primly, and even Scotch Tape seemed to overcome her worry to look at the glowing unicorn questioningly.

Professor Zodiac smiled smugly and opened her mouth. "They," I said, "were secret projects during the war. Project Chimera made Gorgon from a pony named Stonewing and a cockatrice. Project Steelpony made Deus. He was originally a soldier named Doof who was convicted of raping a squadmate." Four pairs of eyes stared at me in shock. Professor Zodiac's expression, though, was more intrigued.

"There are perhaps three or four ponies outside this room who know that information," she murmured softly.

My friends were a little less sanguine about it. “You mean you know who made Deus?” P-21 shouted, then waved a hoof at the ghostly pony. “And she wants to be able to make more of him?”

“Gorgon was one of the few Reapers I liked! What do you mean he was made that way? Who? How? Why?!” Rampage demanded as she grabbed my head to look me in the eye.

“Was that monster in the tunnels from that project stuff?” Scotch Tape asked as she tugged at my leg.

“The Goddess wishes an immediate explanation, Blackjack! How is it that you came by this information?” Lacunae said imperiously and in full Goddess mode, despite her expression of discomfort.

I looked from one to the next, my head spinning. “Well…I…I must have told you! I mean…didn’t I?” I looked from one to the next. “I mean…I’ve told you about Goldenblood. The O.I.A.?”

“You never told me you found out what Chimera was,” P-21 said with a scowl. “And the only time I’ve heard you mention Goldenblood was when you told me he was up to something. I thought you were referring to Sanguine, but you were so focused on helping Glory I didn’t press you.”

Zodiac chuckled softly. “Well, Security. It looks like you’ve got some explaining to do. But, first things first. Now, as I was saying, I can take all debt and worry off your hooves in exchange for EC-1101.” A robot approached, two mechanical arms ending in PipBuck removal keys.

I was so overwhelmed that I landed firmly on my butt. My friends were pissed with me... and now I owed more caps than I could even imagine! I wanted to scream! I wanted to hand it over, along with all my questions, worries, and annoyances. Just then, I wanted to give it all up to a pony who actually seemed to have a clue about what to do with the damned thing. Take my PipBuck. Enjoy! I was toast anyway. Take this damned weight from off my hoof and do something better than trot all over a damned city with it.

Then a clear, wonderful voice shouted over the babble. “Blackjack doesn’t owe you anything!” I turned and stared at the sight of Glory looking more beautiful and radiant than I’d ever imagined, even with one wing replaced by a dull nub. She looked at me with her brilliant purple eyes and gave me a smile that made me want to melt in her embrace then and there.

Zodiac frowned at Glory. “Excuse me, but we spent serious money on you and your friends…”

"Did Blackjack agree to assume these debts?" Glory asked sharply, pointing her wingtip at the flickering pony projection.

"Of course not, she was unconscious. But Rampage…" Zodiac began, but Glory cut her off with a magnificent sweep of her wing.

"Did Blackjack ever say that Rampage spoke for her and the rest of us? You might want to collect your fifty thousand caps from *her*."

Rampage blinked, then the striped filly suddenly grinned. "Sure! I got fifty caps on me. I'll pay the rest later." Zodiac looked like she'd swallowed a shot of The Price... well, like Rampage did when she'd swallowed a shot of The Price. Rampage nudged me. "Hey, Blackjack? Can I get my fifty caps back?"

Glory stepped past us to slowly walk back and forth in front of the projection. "Not once did Blackjack agree to pay you anything. Not once, I bet, did you ask her, or even mention that you were going to want her to pay for it. You spent all that material before telling her so that you could spring all of it on her at once and guilt EC-1101 out of her." My jaw dropped as I stared at the shimmering mare. And it had almost worked!

Zodiac looked pissed for a moment, then finally slumped. "Okay. I admit it. I was hoping to get her to pass it to me and leave and be grateful."

"But you had me unconscious for hours. Why didn't you just take it?" I asked as I rose and stepped forward next to Glory.

The professor rolled her eyes. "Blackjack, do you know how much success anypony's had at taking *anything* from you? Your PipBuck? Your life? Your friends? Heck, you've faced half the Zodiacs and lived! If I were Sanguine, I'd be living in constant terror of the day you finally track him down!" She sighed. "I hoped that, if I just convinced you to give it up, you'd move on. No harm, no foul."

P-21 stepped next to me. "Well, then, if you don't mind…right now, I think we'd all love to hear everything Blackjack knows about…everything," he said, looking a little bit hurt. "Along with an explanation of why she didn't tell us sooner." Oooh, there was fifty thousand caps worth of guilt right there in his expression. I hung my head and sighed.

Everything I knew…well, that wouldn't take long. "It's not like I was trying to deceive you or keep it from you. It just…snuck up on me," I said as I took a seat, rubbing my striped mane. Glory sat down next to me, stretching her wing across my shoulders, and the others sat in a circle around me. I sighed as I was gently pulled

against her. Smelled her sweet hide. Heard the faint beat of her heart. Okay, I could do this. “Well…I guess I should start with a pony named Goldenblood…”

* * *

“How do I feel about Blackjack? Do…do I have to answer? Okay… she’s…she’s not going to hear this, is she? ‘Cause…you know…I don’t want to say anything bad. Okay...

“Blackjack is…scary. I don’t really mean that I’m scared of her. I mean…I am. A little. But I know she’s not a bad pony. She cares. But Blackjack…I think she’s a little bit crazy. She left the stable, which was crazy. She came back, which was crazy. She killed everypony…which was crazy. And I think, if she was given the choice, she’d do all three again. And that makes her crazy scary.

“So, I know if something bad happens, she’s not going to do what’s smart. She doesn’t think about things like that. She just does *things and hopes that they work out. And sometimes they do. And sometimes they don’t…but no matter what, she’s going to do something. She just doesn’t hang back and think. She goes…and if what she does is crazy, then it’s better than just standing around doing nothing.*

“I mean…she said she wet the bed…I mean…really? Heh…Thanks, Blackjack…”

* * *

A few hours later, their questions for me were exhausted, as was I. I’d told them every bit I could think of about Goldenblood, the O.I.A., and the projects. The only things I omitted were Gardens of Equestria and Spike. The professor, using more robots, had brought drinks and snacks, playing the part of the contrite host. My friends’ reactions varied from worried, to baffled, to suspicious, to bored, to angry. I never expected Lacunae to be the angry one. “That…that fiend. That plotter! That…oooh…the Goddess does not want to hear any more!”

“But how could the O.I.A. pull off such a widespread deception?” P-21 asked. “Didn’t anypony think to check what he was up to?”

The professor chuckled softly. “Oh, Goldenblood was a sneaky bastard, but, really, back then, most ponies didn’t think about things like that. They were used to a thousand years of Celestia

running things. Celestia was always open and honest. Luna's government was as different as night from day, using deception and obfuscation to keep ponies confused and obedient. And Goldenblood knew all the loopholes, tricks, and intricacies. After all, he helped Luna set them up." She rubbed her ghostly chin. "And I suspect that Luna herself enjoyed the games on some level."

"But you can't tell me the Ministry Mares were okay with that!" Glory protested as I slumped against her shoulder. Had she always smelled this good?

The professor shrugged. "They were used to working for Celestia too. They expected straightforward deals from their ruler. Friendship. Trust." She sighed and shook her head. "Luna respected the Ministry Mares and their capabilities, but... really, I was always shocked they were sucked in as readily as they were. They really seemed to believe Luna was their friend. I doubt that the Princess ever had a real friend."

I looked at the shimmering projection, the others followed my gaze, and then P-21 asked the questions on all our minds. "What are you, and how do you know all this?"

The shimmering image seemed to consider him before responding. "I am Professor Zodiac. What you're looking at is an arcane projection. A nice little modification of the planetarium system developed by Flash Industries. It's a pleasant way for me to have conversations with ponies." She gave a little shudder I nearly missed. "As for how I know…well…I was there two hundred years ago." She looked right into my eyes and gave an apologetic little smile. "I was one of the research leads of the Office of Interministry Affairs."

* * *

We'd had to take a little break. My brain was reeling. Here was a pony who'd tried to trick me out of EC-1101 and who'd actually known Goldenblood. Who'd worked under him. Who possibly had answers to all my questions. Glory and I'd gone up to the roof; I stayed in the doorway while she took in some air. Rampage and Scotch Tape had finally left with the Zodiacs; the machinery clearly scared the filly to death. She wasn't over the tunnels yet. Lacunae had walked off, still talking to herself in the plural and apparently very put out with Goldenblood; I wondered if she knew I could hear

her faint telepathic babble. P-21 skulked off to be on his own.

"How are you feeling?" I asked softly.

She glanced over her shoulder at her missing wing for a moment, then immediately lowered her gaze to my hooves. "Grounded…but better." She looked at me, and her smile returned. Goddesses, she was so beautiful. "You actually tracked down my sister to help me?" she said, cocking her brow at me.

"It was all I could think of…" I said lamely, tapping my rubbery hooves together.

She gave me a wry smile. "You realize that Dusk and I hate each other, right? I think she spent more time shouting at me and comparing me to Mother than comforting me." I winced, but she smiled. "It was the kick to the rump I needed. Thank you."

"I knew…I knew I couldn't help you." She looked at me more sympathetically as I went on. "I cost you your wing. I cost you everything. All I've done is hurt you, Glory," I said with a sniff, feeling myself start to shake.

And then she was hugging me. Holding me. I took a deep breath to try and steady myself, feeling her feathers, so soft on my cheek. "You saved my life, Blackjack. Again and again. I don't blame you for my wing." She drew back enough look me in the eye and smiled. "Not telling me about Goldenblood and the projects, though…"

"I'm sorry," I repeated for the twentieth time. "I really didn't mean to keep it from any of you. It wasn't a big secret. It wasn't a big deal at first. Just…sorta cool, secret stuff. Stuff that happened two centuries ago. But then I found out about Chimera and the other projects…saw Goldenblood's memories…It all sort of built up around me."

"Well," she said, relaxing a little bit, "I think that Lacunae is even more upset. I think you managed to offend the Goddess big time by not mentioning that Sanguine has Chimera." Then Glory looked me in the eye, stroking my cheek under my eyepatch. "And how are you doing?"

"Me?" I felt a cold shiver along my spine and lied with every bit of effort I could. "Fine. Never better. Just great. They fixed me up swell…" I felt my grin become so tense that it felt like it'd snap. She looked at me like she was about to cry. Finally, I slumped. "You know, huh?"

"I was there for part of the procedure…while they had you open…"

Glory said softly.

"Oh." I sighed, hanging my head a little. "And do I really look that bad inside?"

"You really do," Glory said softly as she stroked my cheek. "Your organs are in bad shape, Blackjack…Triage told you?" Clearly, she shouldn't have, from the look on Glory's face.

I grinned. "Oh…about the whole six months thing? Ppppft. Never tell me the odds," I said as I grinned back at her. "I'm sure I can pull off…like…a year…" I was grinning, right? "No big…big deal…" Smile, damn it! Damn it…My head slowly bowed as I started to shake again. She put her hooves around me as I pressed my face to her chest as the sob broke out all at once as the inexplicable truth crashed through me: I was going to die.

I was going to die! Without Glory's suffering and the Zodiacs and the professor to distract me, there was nothing I could do to avoid facing it. The taint inside me was going to twist my body up more and more until finally something critical failed. Better if I blew my brains out now while I was still whole and 'healthy'. Better if Red Eye's slavers had killed me! I could almost feel my insides churning up, my sick and diseased heart beating slowly. My braces clacked as I hugged her close and sobbed against her again and again. I hated it…. hated these tears…but I couldn't…stop…

"It's…It's not fair…" I gasped. I shook with each new spasm of tears. "I…I wanted to save Mom…I wanted to save Midnight… and…and everypony in 99. I wanted to save you. Have a kid someday. Have a…have a life! I found something to live for, damn it!" I said, my voice hoarse and choking as snot and tears seemed to flow equally. "And now…now I'm just…just going to die?! Why the fuck is this happening to me? What the fuck does it take for me to get a fucking break? To have something fucking good happen? Anything!" I yelled into her chest. "I'm sick of it!"

I used to think that there was a bottom to tears. That eventually you just couldn't cry anymore and then you'd feel better. But now I knew better. Whatever strength I'd shown facing the Zodiacs was a lie. My confidence was a front. I was going to die…and it was going to be a bad death. And, like that, I was falling into a pit from which there was no escape.

Then I felt Glory's tears falling on the back of my head. "I'm sorry…" she whispered softly in my ear. "I'm sorry I can't help you. I wish there was somepony in the Wasteland I could find to help

you."

I closed my eye. What was I doing? How could I be crying and pitying myself like this now? It wasn't fair? No, it wasn't fucking fair. It wasn't fair that Glory had lost her wing. It wasn't fair that P-21 had been raped. It wasn't fair that Scotch Tape was an orphan, that Lacunae was the dumpster for a Goddess's insecurities, or that Rampage had been denied her own identity. None of it was fucking fair!

Am I trying to turn us into the deadliest band of angsty, whiny ponies in the Wasteland? Maybe. Despite everything, I finally put a lid over that pit inside me. Right now, Glory needed me to be strong. I sucked at being strong, but for her, somehow, I pulled myself together and wiped the tears from my eye to look at her.

"You do, Glory. Every second I'm with you, you make things better. Make them easier. I couldn't do this without you," I said as I looked into her eyes. Our brows touched.

Our lips did the same. Sweet Celestia, how I missed this.

I was going to die, but at least I wouldn't be dying alone.

* * *

"Sooo, am I forgiven?" I asked as we trotted back down to the planetarium.

She smiled. "Dusk may be an infuriating mare who tried to kill me, but she said that anypony who'd do what you did after the stable shouldn't be touched with a ten foot cloud…unless she did what you did when you found out how hurt I was." She gave my rump a nudge with hers. "Then you should probably get another chance." She had a weird little smile…and why was she blushing?

"I always liked Dusk, you know?" I said as trotted along, my braces clattering.

"She also said that you were a terrorist and an idiot and would probably get me killed," Glory added.

I cocked my head, thinking about that for a moment. "Mmmm, nope! Still like her." I glanced at her and, of course, risked injecting a cloud into the discussion. "Did she have any news from Thunderhead?"

Glory sighed and nodded. "Yes. Most of it mixed. Dad refused to resign, challenging my 'confession'. I'm MIA at the moment, since my 'remains' couldn't be magically analyzed. So, technically, there's

a warrant out on me. Lambent and Lucent were both pretty upset by it all." She looked at me and asked in concern, "Do you know anything about a surface pony named Red Eye?"

"I know he took over Paradise. Apparently, the Stable Dweller is fighting him." I had images of magical unicorn power armor striding around firing death beams from its horn. Pzow! Pzow!

"Well, he's got the rest of the Enclave stirred up. And, apparently, they're very upset with Thunderhead. They're blaming the Volunteer Corps for drawing attention. And I suppose they have a point," Glory said with a sigh. "Even though DJ Pon3 barely mentions us at all, most ponies wouldn't even think of us if it wasn't for the Volunteer Corps."

"The Volunteer Corps is also pretty much the only good thing I've heard about pegasi doing since the war," I said softly as I bumped her rump back.

She gave a pleased little smile. "Well, the rest of the Enclave is using it as an excuse to demand all sorts of things from us. They want new energy weapons, new talismans, and a larger food reserve built up in Neighvarro. And they want the VC ended, never mind that our food trade is how we're getting the materials for weapons, gemstones for talismans, and new food."

I didn't like the thought of the Enclave getting more weapons, but I was more surprised by that last bit of news. "The pegasi are importing food? From the surface?" I blinked in shock.

Glory smirked at me. "Believe it or not, that's one of the major selling points of the VC. The fact is that only a few surface crops were adaptable to cloud seeding. It gives us basic staples but lacks something in the way of variety. Have you ever tasted a strawberry?" I shook my head, and she gave a shiver. "Well, neither had anypony in Thunderhead. Father won a major vote to get the VC more assistance from the security forces after passing out a dozen cartons. And there was nearly a riot when blueberry samples were provided."

"A riot? For berries?" I muttered, stunned.

"Oh, yes. Cloud grain may be nutritious, but it's hardly tasty," she said with a laugh. "Folks were so amazed by the flavor that now anything with the word 'berry' in the name is classified as a controlled substance. So, despite all the stories of death and disease, VC recruitment numbers haven't dropped off as much as some anticipated."

"They do know that the Society is probably the only place in Equestria where you can find berries, period, right?"

"I think that they gloss over that point in the interview. But the public consensus seems to be changing to the surface being worth something rather than just being death, misery, and violence. That's leading to some major gusts of foul air with the rest of the Enclave, though; the VC period is bad enough, but anything good about the surface…I guess the science and political broadcasts are having a sunny day bashing Thunderhead right and left. Criticizing our independence and our willingness to break tradition." She actually sounded proud of that. Despite the fact that I still wanted to buck Lighthooves to the stars, Glory made Thunderhead sound like the Blackjack of the Enclave.

They were doomed…

* * *

Once we'd all gotten back inside the planetarium, Professor Zodiac shimmered into being before us as the robots cleared away some of the junk and brought over cushions from the seats. "Sorry. Normally I don't have visitors. They come, are awed, and run off."

"Sorry for being so jaded," I replied as I settled down. Braces might let me walk, but they were a long way from comfortable.

The silvery projection laughed brightly. "Oh, don't be. Aside from my Zodiacs, I never have as much company as I'd like."

P-21 looked towards the door. "What is your deal with them? Is it like a Reaper thing?"

"No. Honestly, it's more like the Zodiacs have a deal with me than the other way around," the professor replied softly. "Many ponies have come through here for help. We do what we can, take what payment they can make, and send them on their way. A few, however, stay. The Zodiacs are twelve ponies who see themselves as…I don't know? Knights, I suppose. While their activities abroad are as bounty hunters, bringing in caps we need, here they protect the Collegiate. This is their castle and I'm their princess. I don't command them, though."

Zodiac Knights. "So, then, why'd they come after me?" I asked with a little frown.

She gestured at my hoof. "Because I needed your PipBuck. Virgo thought you were just another exceptionally large bounty. Oh, and

thank you very much for not killing her," she added quickly. "The others were hoping to get it from you one way or another. They actually turned it into a bit of a contest till I told them to cut it out."

I sighed as I settled in on my cushion. "So. What's your story?" P-21 asked.

Professor Zodiac sighed and looked around at the walls wistfully. "Well, originally my name was Silver Stripe, and I was a professor of engineering and arcane science here at Hoofington University." Suddenly, the professor's image dissolved and the air overhead filled with dancing lights that coalesced into a moving image of a lecture hall. The view seemed to be from a camera set in the corner of the room. A white unicorn mare with gray zebra-like stripes on her legs and mane was writing on one of the boards at the front of the hall with a piece of chalk. She finished writing a line of weird mathy stuff, put the chalk down, and sighed.

"There. Well, I hope that you've found my lessons useful. The university will see to getting you an acceptable instructor for this class by next week," she said, turning to a lecture hall that was virtually empty but for a dozen students. They didn't seem to be paying much attention, either, and most of them shuffled out immediately. A few gave her commiserative farewells though, and one even offered a comforting hug. The professor maintained her composure as she said her goodbyes and put her notes into a saddlebag but slumped after the last student had exited.

"So sorry you lost your tenure, Professor Silver Stripe," a rasping voice said. A soft cough followed the words as the voice's owner walked down from the back of the lecture hall. I pointed him out, and my friends murmured softly as the scarred buck approached the mare in the picture. "I suppose that the Board of Regents felt a halfblood to be a complication in the present climate," Goldenblood said in his raspy, rusty-nails voice. He looked like hell, even worse than at the Gala; his pale hide looked raw, as if it were flaking off.

She flushed, narrowing her eyes. "Yes, no thanks to you and your grand speech! The ministries have made it abundantly clear that a zony like myself is a liability to the war effort and tantamount to a spy." He hacked sharply, sitting and bowing his head, and she softened a little. "Are you all right?"

"There're apparently several ponies in the Ministry of Peace answering that question. I'll be fine in a moment," he said, catching

his breath. The scarred buck then leveled his golden eyes at her once more. “I sympathize with your predicament, Professor. Nopony, or zony, should be discriminated against for their lineage. I have some personal experience in that regard.” And, more and more, I saw her relax.

“Well, regardless, the ministries have made it abundantly clear I am not trustworthy,” she said as she slipped on her saddlebags. “So, whatever it is you desire of me, I can assure you the ministries will not approve.”

“Your father is Doctor Propos at the Roam Academy of Sciences and a part of the Caesar’s cabinet. Your mother is the aunt of a ministry mare. The suspicions of the ministries are unfortunate but not unreasonable,” he said in his soft, raspy voice. It made Silver Stripe lean towards him a little. “However, I am not here on behalf of the ministries. I am here looking to recruit you for an alternative program of my own. And, I assure you, I could not care less about your lineage.”

The image scattered, and the shining projection returned. “That was my first meeting with Goldenblood. I’m sure you noticed his timing; approaching me right at the end of my last lecture?” she said as she arched a brow. “How he pointed out that his own lineage had been used against him? That was classic Goldenblood to a T. He got me involved in the Office of Interministry Affairs as a science advisor.”

“You were a zony?” Scotch Tape asked, drawing a slightly annoyed look from the projection.

“Even after two centuries…” she muttered, then sighed. “Yes. My father was a zebra. My mother was a pony. Hence, zony. The only consequence of it should have been an inability to have children, but it was used against me from the start of the war until the burning of Hoofington. I didn't have any loyalties to my father's people, even when Equestria was making it so hard to be a productive member of society, but ponies just saw the stripes. Goldenblood really didn't care, though; I honestly can’t remember a single instance of my background being used against me at the O.I.A.”

“But…what did the O.I.A. actually *do*?” Glory asked with a little frown. “I mean, Blackjack said that they were supposed to facilitate projects between the ministries. How did you get from that to… making Deus?”

“Luna’s government was nothing like Celestia’s, but few ponies truly appreciated how radical it was. On the surface, the ministries handled most of the functions of government, and the rest were covered by Luna herself or the civil service. But in the shadows was the O.I.A. It did what it was supposed to do, let the ministries work together on projects more easily, but it also got things done that couldn’t have been done otherwise. Sometimes the Ministry Mares would have a project that simply couldn’t be done in public view. Monsterponies? Extensive cybernetics? The public couldn’t handle it. So, the O.I.A., ignored by or unknown to the public, was tasked with developing these projects in the shadows to their fruition.” She gestured to herself. “I was involved with some of the technical aspects of Project Steelpony and Project Eternity.”

“And Sanguine? He supervised Project Chimera?” Lacunae asked, sounding like she already knew and just wanted confirmation. “I thought it’d been destroyed…”

“Yes. And Trottenheimer handled everything to do with Project Starfall and Project Horizons.” She rubbed her chin, then waved a glowing hoof. “Don’t ask me about specifics of the other projects, though. Goldenblood was very adamant about keeping information contained in each project, and I only know the most basic information about the ones I wasn’t working on.”

“So what was Project Steelpony?” I asked.

The air above her flashed into a still image of a hospital ward full of ponies with missing limbs. Fluttershy and Redheart were looking over them with aching concern in their eyes. “Like Chimera, Steelpony got started in the Ministry of Peace. Despite the M.o.P. pushing healing magic to its limits, ten years had disabled thousands of combat and non-combat ponies.” The image changed to a mare swinging a silvery foreleg and hoof. “Originally, we focused on prosthetics. Making them resilient, adaptable, and as effective as the missing limb.” Then images of diamond dogs getting their limbs replaced filled the air. “Eventually, most of the research was done in Hoofington. Reconstruction and the battlefront gave us a constant supply of needy test subjects.

“Then we had soldiers wounded in battle who returned to the war and found themselves more effective than before.” The overhead image showed steel-legged ponies smashing zebra soldiers in brutal hoof-to-hoof combat. “Suddenly, the emphasis of Steelpony wasn’t just replacement but augmentation. But that pushed things further

than Fluttershy or Applejack were comfortable with. It's one thing to want to protect ponies; it's another to turn a pony into a war machine." The image overhead showed Applejack and Fluttershy shaking their heads gravely at a solemn Goldenblood and frustrated-looking Silver Stripe.

The image disappeared, and Professor Zodiac grinned at us. "So we continued it anyway."

"You what?" P-21 blurted. "How?! I mean... it had to take money and materials and…somepony should have caught on."

The professor shrugged. "Goldenblood was related to royalty. He never had problems paying for materials. I don't know where the money came from, but he always paid his bills on time." I frowned; had Goldenblood been fantastically wealthy in addition to a sneaky bastard? Could even a fantastically wealthy pony's money have covered all of the O.I.A.'s secret expenses?

Zodiac seemed to take our silence as a cue to continue. "It was thought that, if we introduced the augmentations gradually, the ministries would accept them. We started with animals before working up to non-pony sophonts and then ponies themselves. Doof was our first fully augmented battle model. And he exceeded our wildest dreams."

Another moving image took shape overhead, this one showing Deus being dropped, literally, from a skywagon onto an enemy tank. He landed like a multi-ton cat, smashing an indentation in the turret's armor, and proceeded to blow apart the enemy lines. Some of the zebra hoof-fighters inflicted considerable blows on his armor, but they repaired themselves before my eyes. Heavy weapons tried to blow him apart, but he was either too tough or too fast for them. Eventually, the zebras scattered. I suppressed a shudder; if it hadn't been for all the munitions blowing up in his guns, could we have ever beaten him?

Then he started raping the survivors; Glory snapped her wing in front of Scotch's eyes, in time I hoped, and immediately after that the image scattered. The professor coughed delicately. "Sorry about that. We determined we had to leave some parts of him intact for psychological reasons. Other test subjects became so listless and apathetic after conversion that they just lay there till deactivated." Funny. She said 'deactivated' like I would have said 'retired' not long ago.

"So what happened?" Rampage asked. "Balefire bombs fell,

everypony died?"

She shook her head with a sigh. "Nearly, but not quite. Towards the end, the O.I.A. went too far. Goldenblood did something that pissed off Luna…immensely. She removed him and put Horse in charge, but the fact was most of us were loyal to Goldenblood. That tick Trueblood was the only one who sucked up to Horse. And Goldenblood had made damn sure that all of us were integral to the O.I.A. Horse wanted to fire all of us, but he wouldn't have had an O.I.A. left. If he'd had a year, he would have cleaned us out and put his own ponies in charge. But as fate would have it…" She made a gesture.

The next moving image that shimmered into being was of a city. A massive city far larger than even Hoofington. Balloons of…Pinkie Pie?... floated in the air as if looking for naughty ponies. It looked like a perfectly calm, blue-skies day around noon. Normal. Like life was supposed to be. The viewer was standing in a posh café far up in a fancy building.

I glanced at my friends as they stared up at the image of life before the bombs. I was the only one among us, with the possible exception of Lacunae, who'd really seen it before... well, if you counted memory orbs. Scotch seemed astonished at the sight. P-21 looked more pensive. Glory's expression was mixed, but then, she'd grown up in a civilized world with a view of the sky. Rampage... well, clearly not all Wasteland ponies were interested in old times, as she was picking at her nose with a hoof. Lacunae appeared coolly indifferent, even a touch scornful; after all, what place would she have in such a world? Me? It looked... nice.

Then a second, smaller sun burst to life low in the sky. A roiling, green sun with a garish rainbow sheen that clawed at the eyes. All around, ponies began talking in worried tones. More murmurs, almost curious rather than worried. A purple field rose up over every window in the room. Directly in front of us was a large pink building. I wondered if the architect had intended it to kinda resemble a--

In a horrible flash of stabbing light, it was transformed into a black silhouette. From behind it rose a dome of fire expanding in all directions. It flowed like water between the skyscrapers and along the narrow streets. Moving like a living, hungry thing, it probed and poked and crept around every building till they were all aflame. Some buildings it shoved over entirely. Others, protected from the

flash like this building and the distant pink tower by flickering magic shields, became consumed in the firestorm like party candles.

The artificial sun receded, but the fires spread farther and farther. The clouds of smoke in the skies stabbed down with thin spikes, and at the tip of each spike another green sun was born. No moon rose above the opposite horizon in that artificial twilight, a darkness punctuated by bursts of terrible light and fire. Nopony in the café screamed. Talked. Moved. Not till one turned away. Then another. Babble. Screams. Cries and sobs. Reality, such as it was, reasserted itself.

The image flickered away. Professor Zodiac hung her head as she said quietly, “I survived in the Manehattan M.A.S. hub along with everyone else fortunate enough to be inside the tower when the world ended.” She looked a little pained. “At first things were…as good as could be expected, under the circumstances, but my O.I.A. affiliation and sterility made my place in the Twilight Society rather difficult. I put up with it for a while but eventually decided to leave and try to find a new home for myself. Fortunately, my augmentations gave me quite an edge. I ended up falling in with a group of others with roughly the same idea, and, after some time spent wandering what used to be Equestria, my friends and I dared venture into Hoofington.”

Twilight Society? What was-- “Excuse me,” Glory said with a frown. “Your augmentation?”

“Oh. Well…” There was a hiss next to the projector, and the walls of the metal cylinder peeled away to uncover a glass tank within. “I wasn’t just in charge of Project Steelpony…” she said as we stared at the contents of that jar. In the hazy water was a pony, technically a zony, flayed of its skin and missing three of its limbs. Wires and tubes snaked in and out of the carcass and into a port in the floor. Tangles of wires emerged from empty eye sockets and missing ears. And, maybe it was just me, but the corners of the ragged mouth curled in a smile as the projection declared, “I was also a client.”

And that was when Scotch Tape started screaming.

* * *

“Do I like Blackjack? Are you serious? Really?

“…

“Fine. No, I don’t like Blackjack. Because every second I’m around her

I'm reminded of a place that hurt me. Because every time I think I'm over it she does something to remind me of how much it sucked. She's a walking, talking reminder of everything that I hate. Sometimes, I don't think that I'll ever be over it till she's dead.

"But no matter how much she hurts me, I know it's nothing compared to how much she hurts herself. She seems to have this masochistic need to suffer for simply surviving. She runs on guilt and angst, and one day she's going to choke on it. And I hate it because there's nothing I can do to stop it. She's like an addict hooked on martyrdom. She'll sacrifice her body, happiness, sanity, and life trying to help others even if they don't deserve it. And she'll beat herself miserable when she fails.

"How can you like a person like that? How can you love a person like that?

"…No more stupid questions."

* * *

Okay. Letting Scotch watch the end of Equestria…kick…Letting her sit in on the meeting…kick…Letting her leave Chapel with us in the first place…kick kick kick! I mentally kicked myself over and over again as I waited outside the hospital room that had once housed Glory. I suspected that at this rate they were going to name a wing of this place 'The Blackjack and Co. Trauma Wing'. Maybe two wings.

Triage stepped out with a sigh. "She's sedated. Just upset."

Glory shook her head softly. "She's not the only one. What the heck was Professor Zodiac thinking? How could she think that that was appropriate for a filly to see?"

Triage just looked at her levelly. "Right, because most things in the Wasteland are age appropriate," she said in a tone saturated in sarcasm. She pulled out a cigarette and lit up. "Anyway, you survive for two hundred years, spend the last twenty stuck in a jar, and then tell me what's appropriate and inappropriate. I'm glad the Prof isn't a complete basket case."

"But what happened to her?" Rampage asked as she looked in the direction of the planetarium. "I mean, most ponies don't end up in jars. Not unless you folks take making pickles to a whole new level."

Glory coughed at the smoke. "Excuse me…" she said, fanning her wing and wafting the cloud aside.

Triage ignored her and snorted another roll of smoke from her nostrils. “Not quite. She took an exploration team down the elevator shaft you lot came up. When she came back, half her body was gone. If it wasn’t for her augments… ” She shook her head slowly. “The Collegiate got her stabilized and in that jar, and she’s been that way ever since.”

I sighed, looking around. No sign of P-21 since we’d left the planetarium. I scowled, *not liking this at all*. Whether he wanted to admit she was his daughter or not, he should at least be here! Lacunae was also MIA.

“Excuse me!” Glory said again. “You’re smoking? In a hospital? Around patients? And oxygen tanks?” Her eyes blazed. “You’re a doctor!”

Triage blinked at Glory. “So? Look around you.” Glory snapped her wing out and swatted the cigarette out of the air. Triage scowled. “What are you, the last Ministry of Peace inspector?”

“You are a doctor. That means being more than a pissy, bitchy, angry nag. You’re supposed to be a professional. Act like it!” she said as she brought her hoof down on the burning end. Wow. Go assertive Glory! “Now, to the subject of Scotch Tape and not the person who tried to trick Blackjack. Are you certain there’s nothing else you can do for her?”

“Look, unless you want us to start messing with her memories, there’s nothing I can do. And memory therapy was hard enough before everything was blown to pieces,” she said crossly, glancing down at the mashed cigarette.

“But you can do it?” I asked with a small worried frown and a glance at Glory. Somehow, this felt…easy. It made my stomach churn…though, honestly, that could have been the taint.

Triage sighed, glowering at Glory one more time before floating another cigarette to her lips but not lightning it. “Well, I did get a few books from the Fluttershy Clinic on how the spells are performed. I know enough to remove a block of memory. Everything from event one to event two. I’m not going to start dicing up her memories to take out just the bad stuff, though, and I’m *definitely* not going to try adding things. That’s freaky stuff even I can’t do.”

I sat down with a clatter as Rampage trotted up beside me. She was definitely aging, looking much more the mature filly. Still needed about a day, though. “Blackjack? Are you actually going to do

this?”
“I don’t know,” I muttered.
Triage rolled her eyes. “Well let me know when you do know. I’ll be outside, finishing my unprofessional cigarette.”
Rampage watched her leave. “I think she’s angrier about losing a cigarette than nearly having your horn through her throat.”
Personally, I could do with a shot or two of Wild Pegasus. Could I just…have her memories taken away? Would that fix her? Make her happy? It felt dirty. Like a cheat. Rampage seemed to read my thoughts. “You can’t do this, Blackjack. Taking away her memories just to make her happy is wrong.”
“She had a panic attack, Rampage. Are you saying we should just let her keep suffering?” Glory countered with a worried look.
“Should we take Blackjack’s memories of 99 away?” Rampage asked sharply. “Or yours, Glory?” I could never forget 99. I didn’t deserve to forget that scream or that smell. The striped pony took in a deep breath. “Our memories make us who we are. Scotch Tape is hurting really bad, so we help her work through it. Send her back to Chapel and the other Crusaders. Let her get over it.”
“And what if she never does, Rampage?” Glory countered. “What if she can’t get over it? So she loses two lousy days of pain and misery. There’s nothing in that day I want to remember anyway. I could do with losing an hour or two myself.”
Rampage stared at both of us. “Not…remembering…sucks. As terrible as it is, I wish I remembered killing Thorn…and…” She closed her eyes and swallowed hard before continuing, “because it would feel like I actually did it. Then my guilt would be justified but I think about it and all I remember is crying and then…nothing! And next thing I remember, Blackjack got me disintegrated and everypony was pissed and…and Thorn was…” She gritted her teeth. “I’d give anything to remember so I could understand why!”
Glory sniffed and rubbed her nose with her wing before resting her hoof on Rampage’s shoulder. “It’s not the same. Scotch didn’t do anything in that time but experience monstrous things. She’s not losing anything.”
I slowly pulled myself to my clattering hooves. There was only one way to deal with this. I trotted across and tried to use my magic to open the door. Thankfully, the glow flickered a few times and then stabilized long enough to turn the handle and let myself inside. I closed the door behind me; I’d heard from positions A and B, but

now I needed to hear from position Scotch.

I hated hospital rooms, I realized. I hated the equipment that told you second by second if you were living more or less. I hated the promise that you are always going to get better when in reality, some day, you wouldn't. My days might be numbered, but I wasn't going to end them in a place like this if I could help it. Scotch looked tiny and abandoned in the hospital bed. And thinking about P-21…perhaps she was.

"I haven't seen you for a while," I said quietly to the Dealer.

The old pale buck stood opposite me. "Haven't needed to be seen. I reckon you got enough on your mind without me." He paused. "You look like hell, Blackjack." I felt like it too. Goddesses, I was tired of being shot up. It didn't matter how many times they'd stuffed me in a magic healing box, I felt injured. I'd give anything to remember what it was like to not know how it felt to hurt all the time.

"Eh…I'm dying," I said with a shrug. Just like that. Tears of angst to a shrug. I really had to be crazy. "So…what's your position on this?"

"My position is no position," he replied softly. "What happens, happens."

"Because I'm screwed either way?" I muttered quietly. Goddesses I wished I could shoot the Wasteland right in the face.

"If you want to think of it that way," he replied as he shuffled his cards and dealt a three of hearts, a four of hearts, a five of hearts, a six of clubs, and an eight of hearts. "You might have a hand like this. Can't win with it. Got to discard one. So what do you chose?"

"The six of clubs. Better chance at a flush." He tossed it away and dealt the next card. Ace of spades. I smirked. Of course I didn't get the card I needed. "Surprise surprise."

"Yeah. You lost. So tell me, should you be kicking yourself for not discarding the eight and going for a straight?" I blinked in surprise, and the cards disappeared. "You want to do the right thing because you're afraid that, if you do the wrong thing, she'll suffer for it. Celestia wanted to do the right thing. Twilight Sparkle wanted to do the right thing. Even Goldenblood. But no matter how you analyze and predict, the fact is, sometimes you just lose. And you have to deal with it. Dealing with it isn't looking back with regret for making the wrong move."

"Yeah, but…she's just a filly…" I murmured softly. A filly who was watching me with a look of confusion. Sedated didn't mean

unconscious. Right. She was looking at me with more than a little worry, which was probably not unjustified. I smiled, rubbing the back of my head. “Ah…sorry! Just talking to myself. Me and my crazy…me…” Okay, she wasn’t smiling. I sighed as I trotted to the side of the bed. “I’m sorry, Scotch.”

“He’s not coming, is he?” she whispered. “I’m not really his daughter, am I?” Ooooh, P-21, you are in SO much trouble right now…and so am I for spilling the beans. “Mom told me I was different from other fillies. That…that I had a daddy in the stable. I had to look up that word in the database; it’d been blacked out of the books at school. And when you told me I…I thought it was a good thing. I thought I wasn’t alone.” She squeezed her eyes closed. “I wish you hadn’t told me, Blackjack.”

I stroked her mane with a soft sigh, trying to figure out how to tell her I could take it all away. Or if Rampage was right and we should just help her struggle through, painful as it was? I stroked her mane gently. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be fine…”

“No, I won’t. I can’t look at a wrecked wagon without wondering if it’s going to move. I saw that…that thing in the jar, and I thought she was going to eat me! I loved working on machines. I do. Mom taught me how to fix stuff when I was just a foal. If something in our quarters broke, she’d show me step by step what went wrong and how to make it work.” She shook her head. “Now…now I think the machines are going to eat me.”

Damn it. For once, I’d like the Wasteland to be ‘Here’s a nice and easy choice, Blackjack! Door A with fluffy bunnies and carrots or Door B with spikes and landmines!’ Oooo, tough call. “Just try and rest. The doctor will check up on you in a bit,” I said quietly. She didn’t say a word, closing her eyes again with a miserable little sniff. I wanted her back in Chapel now. With fillies her age, fixing up the place. Playing with Allegro and Adagio. Having a better life than any other filly in Equestria. But this wasn’t Equestria. This wasn’t even the stable. This was the Wasteland, and I should just be happy she was alive. But I wanted to give her more...

What was the price of peace of mind in the Wasteland? Could I give her that? That indulgence?

How could I not?

* * *

I told Triage what I needed. She couldn't care less either way. I could have asked her to cut Scotch's head off and stick it on a spike and she probably would have. She just made sure I understood that she'd be erasing everything from the tunnels to now. The story would be that she was injured in the tunnels. Glory nodded; Rampage muttered a 'whatever'. Both would be present while Triage did the spell.

That left P-21. Unfortunately, I had no idea where to find him... until I glanced out a window and was amazed to see him sitting with his back against a dead tree in the muddy quad as the rain drizzled down. I trotted out to him but slowed as I got a good look at him slouched there. I knew that slouch. He had a barely touched bottle of Wild Pegasus and an empty syringe of Med-X next to him; I guessed his leg still bothered him. "I thought this stuff was supposed to make you feel good," he said as he nudged the bottle with a sour frown. "Just makes me feel sick."

"You get used to it," I replied as I carefully levitated the bottle. "You mind?" He groaned and gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. I pulled the cap off, took a pull, and then looked down the neck at the amber contents. It was like looking into a glass well of piss. I felt like I'd stepped across a mirror in that hole underground and now nothing was right. Glory had one wing. Rampage was pissed. The Goddess was back in spades. And I'd lost my happy friend for this blue lump.

"Scotch Tape?" he asked softly as the rain pattered around us.

I tried to assemble a response, feeling that dull glow starting in my gut. Thank the Goddesses for that. "Asked for you," I replied, seeing him wince in response. "You don't have to worry about it now, though. Triage is altering her memories. As far as she's concerned, you're a stranger now."

"I always was," he replied crossly. "I never wanted to father her." He scowled at me; I snorted and took another drink, making his frown increase. Then I stood and started for the planetarium. "I never had a choice!" he shouted at me.

I rounded on him. "Yes, you did! Maybe not in 99, but you had one now!" Maybe it was the rain or the booze, but right this second I wasn't taking it. "You could have been something to her. You could at least have been nice!" I hissed at him as I glared. "She never wanted to lose her mother, home, and everypony she knew. Damn it, you could have at least tried!"

He closed his eyes and laid his head back against the tree. He looked like a corpse. I sighed. What was I trying to do, make him feel even more like a shit? I could still see that mark around his throat. Even P-21 had a limit. I sighed. “Well, now you don’t have to worry about it. If you want to be her father, you tell her yourself. You don’t? Don’t.” I floated the bottle back into his hooves. “Take it from a booze pony like me, P-21. If you’re gonna drink, don’t do it out in the rain. Hangovers are bad enough without adding a head cold to the mix.” And with that, I turned again, leaving him under that dead tree and the hard, cold, Hoofington sky.

* * *

“So, if you were involved with Project Steelpony and Eternity, what was Eternity all about?” I asked as I sat in the planetarium. I still had questions and a choice to make.

“Eternity?” the flickering image said sourly. She’d been scanning the ruins to the east with some sort of bobbing sensors on top of the buildings, letting me get a look at the activity around the Skyport. I’d half hoped to catch a glimpse of Lighthooves there. “Eternity was a complete flop. Rarity micromanaged that project into the ground and wouldn’t let me get past setting her up at Hightower Jail.” The air above her came alive showing a number of pages of text that made little sense to me.

“Why was Rarity managing it? Was it related to Image?”

“If it was related to Image, Rarity wouldn’t have needed the O.I.A. She would have just done it herself.” She sighed and mused, more to herself than to me, “A way to keep her friends safe forever... ”

Forever. Sounded nice. Better than six months. “What’s it like?” I asked softly as I fiddled with my leg brace. She looked at me in surprise and a little confusion, so I elaborated. “To live longer than anypony, I mean?”

Professor Zodiac smiled sadly. “I want to go to a Pony Joe’s and get a chocolate-dipped cinnamon ring with extra sprinkles. I know they don’t exist anymore. Haven’t for two hundred years, but there’s a part of me that’s always back there. I think about friends. Work. A vacation I was slated to take after the conference at Tenpony. You’d think it’d all fade away, or blur, or something…but it doesn’t. It just gets stretched out.”

“But how do you deal with the pain?” Again, she looked baffled.

“I…I found a memory orb from Deus. He was in agony every moment.”

“Ah. Yes.” The flickering image hung her head a little. “It rather depends on the nature of the augmentation. Deus’s implants were invasive and the link to his nervous system was fairly crude. When I was forced to get my upgrades, a year of refinement had taken place. But it doesn’t feel…normal.”

I regarded the flickering projection with a little sympathy. “Why’d you get them in the first place?”

“Oh. That.” She sighed. “Let’s just say that some ponies took Big Macintosh’s death quite personally and any held anyone with stripes culpable. I was accosted by a mob on my way home. It was quite unpleasant…and afterwards I needed a new heart... among other things. Fortunately, hearts were the first synthetic organ we’d made for Steelpony. After that, it was a gradual process of replacing this for that. New eyes. New lungs. Stronger legs and a reinforced hide. I never installed an augmentation I wouldn’t put in myself,” she said with a touch of pride.

“Not even Deus? I don’t see hydraulics sticking out of you,” I replied. Why was I defending him? Deus had been a monster… but…did he really deserve all that for one mistake?

She looked at me and said levelly, “I am sorry for the pain I caused him, but Deus was a convicted rapist. I honestly did not expect him to survive the battle testing.” Boy, that was reassuring! “When he did, Goldenblood put him in stasis somewhere. The point was made. If things hadn’t exploded, I anticipate that all Steel Rangers would have been augmented into steelponies within a year. Why worry about power armor when you can become power armor?”

“Probably because you can take power armor off and it doesn’t hurt all the time?” I suggested.

She rolled her glowing eyes. “You sound like Applejack.”

I sighed, pressing my lips together. Sanguine wanted Chimera to make new and interesting monsters. Zodiac seemed nicer, but I trusted her as far as I could throw that projector. Did the O.I.A. intentionally go after borderline nutjobs, or did working for Goldenblood turn them that way? I didn’t like thinking about what two hundred years in the Wasteland had done to her. “So, Trueblood wants to make monsters. What about you? Going to make an army of Deuses?”

“Monsters? Is he still going on about that?” Zodiac said with a sad

smile. “All that ‘endless possibilities and biological potential’ garbage?” The glowing projection shook her head sadly.

I blinked. “Are you saying that he wouldn’t do that?”

“Oh, eventually. Probably. But I doubt that that’s what truly drives him,” she said with a sigh. “But as for making more Deuses, no. I don’t want Steelpony to win a war two centuries over that was pointless in the first place. Very simply, I want out of this jar,” the projection said as she trotted to the metal cylinder and soundlessly gave it a soft tap. “You probably noticed my meat parts, but the reality is that I’m in bad shape. My repair talisman, which is responsible for rebuilding damaged components, needs to be reactivated. With that fixed, I could repair my internal healing talisman. With *that* fixed, I could get out of this bathtub. Otherwise, this jar isn’t just my prison, it’s my casket too. Five years…ten…fifteen…”

“So you’re in the same boat I’m in,” I muttered.

She looked at me with a slightly sympathetic smile. “I suppose, but I’ve at least had a decade to come to terms with it. To the well prepared mind, death is nothing to fear. Of course, after years in this jar... ” The glowing projection sighed. “To be honest, I owe you an apology. You see, I was the one who told Sanguine that EC-1101’s routing ended at your stable.”

“What…you’re…you…” I spluttered, trying to get a handle on my anger. “How could you?”

“It was my only hope to get out of here,” she replied firmly. “Would you turn down the only hope at getting your life back? I had no idea that Stable 99 was intact. Most of the stables were complete failures, so I saw little point in not telling him.” That helped me get my emotions under control. It wasn’t like Zodiac had gone out of her way to screw 99. “He gave me the usual sales pitch…find EC-1101, use it to force open Chimera and Steelpony... So six months ago I tracked down the data paths with the help of the Collegiate. Of course, as soon as I told him where to find it, he cut off contact.”

“But if you were to get out…are you saying you wouldn’t return to your research?” I said skeptically.

The glowing pony smiled, cocking her head as she rolled her eyes a bit. “Oh, perhaps. One day. But it would take years to set up new augmentation production. Maybe a decade to get production scaled up to the point where it could help the Wasteland.” She sighed

softly. “Funny, when the six of us came out here after so long, I was so eager to return and find out what became of the O.I.A. and Steelpony. Now I wish we hadn’t.” She shook her head. “This city has a way of tempting you with exactly what you want.”

“You were with Big Daddy!” I blurted.

She chuckled and nodded. “And Awesome, Crunchy Carrots, Finders Keepers, and little Dawn. Six friends trying to save Hoofington.” She sighed and shook her head. “Such a horrible time. So much killing and for nothing. And eventually we turned on each other.” She looked at me and her eyes seemed to turn soft. “You care for your friends, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Then leave this place. Spend what remains of your life somewhere else. Hoofington destroys everything around it. It consumes friendship as readily as life. Go to Tenpony. New Appleloosa. Friendship City. Stalliongrad. Trottingham. Even Fillydelphia…but get out of here as fast as you can and don’t look back.”

“But…what made you split up?” I asked softly. The projection went still for a long moment, frozen in place.

Zodiac looked back at me, and her lips curled in a little smile. “Sorry, Blackjack, but I usually don’t talk this much, and I think the projector’s getting overheated. Why don’t you come back tomorrow?” she asked, and the big machine flickered and went dark. Big secret? Painful memory? Both? I paused at the entrance and gave a look back over my shoulder, my eyes lingering on that metal cylinder.

* * *

I needed to think, which was a bad sign. I’d spent most of my life not thinking about things. My time in Hoofington had changed all that. Now I couldn’t stop thinking, and my poor mutated brain kept tumbling over and over again. If only I was able to dig through all the stuff rolling around inside my head for something useful…like what I was going to do now.

Think. Think think think. What would the Stable Dweller do? “Sheeee’d…cast a failproof failsafe spell that would instantly make the right choice just pop right out at her. And then she’d hop into her magic flying tank and do it! ‘Cause she actually knows how to do this heroic crap!” I said with a grin. I slumped. Once more, the

vast gulf between the Stable Dweller and myself loomed inside me.

Well, I could try to find out what somepony who knew what she was doing was doing, at least. Not that it was likely to get anything done, but it wasn't as if I had a better idea. I turned on my PipBuck radio and started to pace. It wasn't long before the music stopped and DJ Pon3's voice burst out of with news about the Stable Dweller. Clearly, Homage must have been a fan. So, the Stable Dweller…was all the way down in Fillydelphia?! And apparently she'd just screwed over Red Eye and reestablished DJ Pon3's eyes and ears down in the city! I expected at any moment to hear about how she'd personally and literally punted Red Eye right out of town, but Homage just gave another thank you and put on more music.

Was it just me, or did Homage have a…. nah. Though…a super unicorn mare capable of doing all that? Heck, I'd be a bit moist in the…"Uggghhh! None of this is helping, Blackjack!"

I needed to make a choice. I hated making choices. In 99, my choice was 'Do what I am told'. Outside, it was 'Get away from Deus'. For a while, it was 'Find out what EC-1101 is'. Now it was 'Try not to get anypony killed'.

And, if I was honest, 'Don't die in six months' was really up there too.

"Try to think what you should do, Blackjack…" I said as I trotted through one of the Collegiate buildings.

"What about what Security would do?" I heard a voice mutter. I looked around. I was in some kind of gymnasium; there was a swimming pool full of murky water that looked more than a little unhealthy, but next to it were two bathtubs. Big beautiful basins brimming with steamy water. Oooh, whatever pony had invented self-heating bathtub talismans, thank you!

"Well…first of all…I know what Security would do." I tested my horn's magic; it seemed like it was finally starting to return, at least for basic telekinesis. Then I shucked my barding and my braces and…flopped…into the nearest unoccupied basin. These tubs were clearly 'Big Macintosh' sized; I didn't even take up the entire thing! I lay my head back and stared up at the roof.

Blackjack was a frayed bundle of neurotic impulses. The Stable Dweller was a pony too awesome to really imagine. What about Security? I hadn't thought of that identity in a while, the one manufactured by Homage's imagination…but in the end, ponies

around Hoofington didn't care about Blackjack. Hell, Blackjack had almost speared a doctor's throat. Security wouldn't have ever done that.

Security saved ponies. Mom had told me that back when I believed it to be true. Security wanted to save Hoofington and everypony who could be saved. Ponies who followed the most basic laws like 'Don't kill other ponies just because you want to' deserved a chance to have a safe life. Security would trust her friends to take care of themselves, help them if they asked for it, and not agonize about dying in months when she could die tomorrow.

"But would Security help Professor Zodiac?" I muttered.

"I sure hope so!"

I blinked at a pony…thing peeking at me from the other side of the tub. It was half pony, but the other half looked like…like an eel or snake or fish…thing! It had a webbed spine for a mane, and though it had forehooves of a sort, there was another smaller spined webbing along the backs of her limbs. The soft pink pony…thing… smiled warily at my expression.

Then another one popped out of the tub next to me, this one turquoise, and leaned over with a wide, pony-eating smile. "Boo!"

"AHH!" It was some sort of monsterponies! Taint monsters! They were gonna eat me! My horn flashed as it tried to shoot my magic bullet spell. It really tried! The flickering ball of light struck the turquoise pony in the face with a zap that blackened her face with soot. She stared at me and coughed a little cloud of smoke before flopping back beneath the water with a groan.

"Capri!" the pink one shouted and jumped from the tub I occupied into the tub beside me with shocking grace. I flopped about, trying to climb out and get my gun, but instead I floundered and flopped in the slippery metal tub. The pink one cradled the other pony in her hoof…flipper…things. "Sagi warned us not to mess with Security!"

"Who…what…how... ?" I babbled, pointing my right hoof at them. Then I saw the hurt in the pink one's red eyes and sighed. Okay, freaking out not helping anypony. "Sorry. I didn't know these tubs were... occupied."

"That's okay…most ponies don't come down here, anyway. Sagi and Virgo, mostly," the pink one said shyly. "I'm Pisces. This is Capri. Well, Capricorn, but she doesn't like being called that."

"Blackjack," I replied, feeling adrenaline giving way to shock, and

even that wasn't lasting long as Capri recovered. The turquoise pony ran her hoof…flipper…thing…along her bright blue spines. "Sorry about blasting you," I said. She had a sort of rubbery hide that transitioned to small scales halfway down her body.

"You're *sorry*? I'm sorry I forgot you could do it. Pretty sensible reaction, if you ask me," Capri said as she washed her face off in the tub. "Do I still have my eyebrows?"

"What are eyebrows?" Pisces asked with a little frown. Capri just sighed, shaking her head with a little groan.

Okay. These were Zodiacs…right? Chimera monsterponies? Something…else? "Um…if you don't mind me asking…what are you?" I gave the best smile I could.

Capri smiled broadly. "Well now, that's a great question, isn't it? What are we? Are we perhaps the vanguard of the royal seapony invasion force, coming forth to establish ties with the land ponies? Are you prepared to submit to the rule of the great Oceanus and his mighty leviathan?" That set off a few fuses in my brain, not least of which was wondering what a leviathan was. Capri continued on. "Or maybe we're the result of some super secret military naval program to make seaponies to swim into zebra harbors and blow stuff up? Or we're taint super mutants with powers beyond your--"

"We ran into killing joke," Pisces said softly.

Capri immediately slumped against the wall of the tub. "You always give away the ending, Sis."

"Sis?"

"Right. Sister. As in sibling. As in related to by blood. All ponies were in our village in Ghastly Gorge," the turquoise water pony said. "As for killing joke... well, it's a blue vine you can find here and there. None around Hoofington, thank the Goddesses. One time I'm glad almost nothing grows here. But if it touches you…well…it likes to play jokes on you."

Pisces nodded. "That usually get you killed."

"A vine that plays…jokes?" I needed to scavenge a box of brain fuses. Here I was almost convinced that maybe I'd found out all the messed-up stuff around the Wasteland.

"Well, to elaborate, once I said to Sis, 'Gee Sis, wouldn't it be great to be a sea pony?' to which Sis replied…" and she pointed her hoof flipper at the pink pony.

"Shoo be doo…Shoo shoo be doo," Pisces said with a little smile. "That's from the sea pony song," she said with a little nod.

"So one day we were starving and decided to find our way into the Everfree looking for something non-radioactive and un-poisonous to eat…not one of my smarter choices, in retrospect…and we came across killing joke. It burst out of the ground and played its joke by turning both of us into this," she said with a broad smile. "By the way, did I mention that we were miles from any water source?"

"That's the killing part," Pisces pointed out.

"So, yeah, we flopped around the Everfree…drying out…crawling on our bellies…really not happy with life. We finally found a pond we could wet ourselves in."

"That was full of radigators," the pink pony pointed out.

Capri rolled her eyes with a soft snort. "Which was full of radigators. Fortunately, the joke gave us a few little tricks that let us drive them off…probably an accident on its part. We eventually flopped and flipped our way to a creek and just followed it downstream. Went underground for a while, then eventually ended up in what turned out to be the Hoofington Reservoir. That's when we came across other ponies."

"Mean ponies," Pisces said with a shiver.

"Raiders?" I asked with sympathy. Capri snorted with a scowl.

"No. Fancy high to do Society ponies," she said with a flick of her tail. "Caught us in a net and threw us in a jar. They took us to be a part of some menagerie…fancy name for a zoo. Stayed like that for six months. The Society'd rap on the glass to make us move around. All…the…time…" she said through grit teeth.

Pisces whimpered, covering her ears. "I don't want to remember the tapping. They just wouldn't stop!"

Capri hugged her. I wanted to do that myself. "Anyway, Professor Zodiac found out about us and paid a whole bunch of caps to King Jackass to let us go. She had to give up something really valuable that she said was hers, too. But she said that nopony should be locked up for looking strange." I thought of a zony trying to teach in an empty lecture hall.

"So now you're Zodiacs?" Pisces smiled and nodded.

"That's what Sagittarius said. He was the one who told the professor about us being in Awesome's menagerie." The pink sea pony flushed at Capri's glower. "I mean…King Jackass!" That mollified the turquoise sea pony a little bit.

Capri leaned against the back of tub, and on her rump I saw an odd symbol: a zodiac magical tattoo like the decals we'd worn leaving

Megamart... wow, that seemed too long ago. “Now we do whatever we can to help out here. Sometimes we catch bounties if they live near water. Sometimes we scavenge sunken wreckage. One good thing about being like this is that we don’t seem to get any more mutated by taint or the crud in the water.” She looked at the pink sea pony. “We’re going out to the bay soon. Gonna see if we can pull something useful off the *Luna*.”

“That sunken battleship?” I asked, and she nodded. “You can’t tell me there’s useful stuff on that wreck!”

“Plenty!” she laughed. “All kinds of talismans still intact. Tons of equipment that’s still sorta useful. That ship had so many enchantments protecting it that it took years before it finally sank. Barely any rust on it at all, in spite of all the saltwater.”

“So if I found that killing joke stuff…” I speculated, rubbing my chin. “I’d love to be a taint-free, two-eyed, non-jellylegged pony again... ” I said to myself and any killing joke I might encounter in the future.

“You’d be an idiot and dead,” Capri said flatly. “Killing joke doesn’t help ponies. Ever. It screws them. You can’t say ‘I’d love to be Princess Celestia’ and dive in…because it’ll mutate you into an alicorn that can’t do magic and fly or something. Or turn you into a two-hundred-year-dead copy of the Princess. Or do something you said back when you were a filly. Trust me, you are not the first pony to think of using killing joke to do something cool.”

I blew a raspberry. “And once more reality squashes what would otherwise be a completely awesome plan.”

“Yeah,” Pisces said with a sigh. “If it wasn’t for stupid reality, we could have chocolate milk rain and cotton candy clouds.” I sighed as well. Wouldn’t that be awesome? Rivers of Wild Pegasus. Sugar Apple Bomb bushes…

“Hey. Quick question,” I said as I looked at the pair. “Why’d the Zodiacs go after me and my PipBuck?”

Capri shrugged. “Sagi’s idea. He heard that the professor needed it really badly.” She folded her hoof flippers under her chin. “He’s the oldest Zodiac, so he’s kinda in charge. The idea was it’d be a surprise or something.”

Pisces nodded. “Libra spilled the beans, though.”

Capri shivered. “Professor was so pissed…I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so mad before.” The turquoise pony looked at me with a sympathetic look. “She said you’d never help her now.”

That lined up with what I'd heard from the professor herself. "Well, it sure doesn't help," I muttered. I lifted the leg braces with my faltering magic and tied them on my forelimbs.

"Does that mean that you're thinking about it?" Pisces suddenly arced back into the tub I occupied and gave me a very squishy hug. "Please help her! Please. I know she's creepy and freaky and strange but she's the only pony who's been good to me and Sis. Please!" Oh, wasn't this awkward?

"Pisces!" Capri said, and her tail slipped out to smack the back of her sister's head. The pink sea pony went even redder, flushing and bowing her head in embarrassment. "Sorry. She's like that…" then the turquoise mare tapped her hoof fins together as she chewed on her bottom lip. "But…if you did decide to help the professor…"

I sighed and slipped from the tub, putting on my last two braces. "Yeah. Like I said, I'm thinking about it." And if my answer was no, then I'd better be well gone from here before giving it.

* * *

What is the Goddess's interest in Blackjack? Your question is so simplistic that it makes one wonder why you would bother to waste the Goddess's time with it!

Our first interest is the interest that We have for all of ponykind: elevating and preserving all ponies through Unity in the Goddess. We know that through Unity, ponykind will be transformed into a state of being perfectly suited to thrive in this wasteland. Once a hoofful of trivial complications are resolved, We will give all of ponydom a safe and prosperous future in Us.

However, We are also interested in Blackjack for her capability and her determination. The Goddess appreciates ponies of mettle and fortitude, and she has demonstrated that she excels in both areas. Despite her copious flaws, she has managed to persevere against tremendous odds and yet seems to consider them quite ordinary. She seems hopelessly unaware that only a few ponies could face what she encounters daily and still continue onward. Such traits are… valuable.

Thus, the Goddess's interest in her is the same as anypony's: how can We use her to achieve Our goals? Is that not how all heroes are eventually exploited?

* * *

Saying it was about to rain in Hoofington was like saying the Wild Pegasus would run out: it was inevitable and dreaded at the same time. Triage was in the middle of the procedure. P-21 was somewhere…Rampage wasn't speaking to me…Lacunae was meeting with the professor. That left me and Glory with nowhere to go, nothing to do, and nopony shooting at us. I'd found a window and was staring at the gray world outside while she calmly did some maintenance on Vigilance beside me, replacing the firing pin with one from a battered ten millimeter IF-21 Caramel.

Where'd I pick up that gun? Red Eye's goons? Scavenged it? Was it from the tunnels? I couldn't remember any more. So many damn fights. So damned tired of fighting. And yet I couldn't stop. Who knew how long I had before I died…no, not even that. Ponies died of cancer in 99. It was rare and horrible, watching them struggle for months. Weeks. Days. Bodies falling apart as they fought for one more day before either the disease killed them or they begged for the needle. Now that was me. Would I last months before the taint crippled me? Weeks before tumors devoured my organs? Days?

"Sanguine contacted me," Glory said softly, not looking up from her work. "That Psychoshy brought a message while you were… getting your things in the eatery." I said nothing, just inhaled. Her hooves, normally so sure, dropped the firing pin from the Caramel as she added quickly, "Dusk and Lightning Dancer were with me. She didn't try anything."

I felt nothing. I thought nothing. I was as gray as the world beyond. "Huh," was all I could say.

"She told me…she told me to let you know that he could regrow my wing with Chimera." It was amazing how she could even keep her voice; how she fought to keep the tremble of desire to a minimum.

"Mmmm…"

"And…she said that he…he could clone you new organs. A new heart. Lungs. All the parts of you that are failing."

What could I say? What should I say? I listened to the drops as they hit the window.

What could she say? What would she say? She sniffed softly. "I want you to do it, Blackjack. I do…" I didn't blink. Didn't turn away. I stared into the reflection of my own eye. I wondered if I could see my soul.

I wondered if it was tainted too.

"But…I know you shouldn't accept it," she said with another sniff as she nudged the pin into place with the tip of her hoof. She was so gentle like that. So careful. I could see her crying in my mind. Slow tears. "I know he's a monster…that he'll do terrible things with Chimera. That he'll probably stab you in the back anyway before he helps you. I know it's the wrong thing."

But she wanted it anyway. I wanted to do it for her. I did. I wanted it so much that it hurt inside.

But we don't always get what we want. Even when we deserve it.

I sighed softly and dropped to my knees beside her. Now it was her turn to be held. The guns forgotten, she pressed her face into my shoulder and sobbed. "I know it's wrong but I want it so damn much!" And that was all that needed to be said. All that could be said. And like the rain in Hoofington, tears would come. But eventually the rain would end.

* * *

"The Goddess would have a word," Lacunae said from the shadows of the hallway. I marveled at the slide…could Glory have somehow made the action even smoother than when I'd first gotten it? "You will pay attention to us!" The Goddess stomped her hoof firmly. I used to do the same thing when I was a filly.

I didn't look away from the chamber. A lot of mechanical work had gone into this weapon. I heard the soft rasp of metal on metal, barely audible after being oiled. I wondered if this had been custom built for Card Trick. Slowly, I worked the slide back and forth. That rasp was still there. "Go ahead, Your Deityness."

"We command you turn over EC-1101 to this Sanguine character. We have need of Chimera. It could be the key to the future of ponykind." I saw her scowl in Vigilance's reflection. "You will do as the Goddess commands!"

"No," I replied softly. There was a little bit of wear on the slide. Nothing serious. Goddesses, Glory did nice work with what she had.

The Goddess stared at me with Lacunae's face. She'd gotten rid of the dress. She looked…ordinary. Mass produced. Not the alicorn who had saved me so many times. "No?"

"It's two letters," I replied as I slid a magazine home and loaded a round in the chamber.

Her eyes flared in rage. “You gave your word!”

“Yup. So it looks like I’m a liar too,” I said before looked at her. “Project Chimera came before Twilight’s alicorn project. And you have Twilight’s memories…or something…inside you. So what do you need it for?”

“IMPUDENT FOAL! THE GODDESS NEED NOT EXPLAIN HERSELF TO ANYPONY! WE ARE THE FUTURE OF EQUESTRIA! WE ARE YOUR SALVATION! THE GODDESS--” she began, and that was it. Before she could get past that point, Vigilance was shoved in her mouth. She looked so stunned that I might have found it funny that she’d cut off her tirade even though she had just been beaming it straight into my head.

“Let me make something clear. I do not like the word ‘Goddess’. I can’t even think of Celestia and Luna as Goddesses anymore. I don’t even think there are Goddesses at this point. All I know are friends and enemies. Lacunae is my friend. The Goddess isn’t.” My eye narrowed; I hoped Lacunae would forgive me for this. “So my suggestion would be you let Lacunae speak for you, Goddess, because right now I’m pissed off enough to ignore you out of spite.” I wanted to find a certain ghoul and make a pink, smoking wallet out of him!

For a second, I was sure that I was going to have to pull that trigger. Then I saw the slight tensing around the eyes that was more worry than indignation and pulled the gun from her mouth. “I’m sorry, Lacunae,” I said softly. I felt ashamed for doing that.

She worked her jaw a moment before saying softly in my mind, “It’s all right, Blackjack. But as you said, the Goddess is definitely not your friend.”

I sighed and looked at the rain creeping down the window panes. “I don’t like beings that think they’re perfect. Powerful. Better.” I spotted my reflection in Vigilance’s polished silver plating. “I know I’m weak and powerless. I don’t need some Goddess rubbing it in.”

Lacunae was silent for a second and said, in a voice tinged with irony, “You have an odd understanding of the concept of weakness.”

I smiled slightly. How in Equestria did the Goddess believe humility, restraint, and compassion were weaknesses? If the Goddess had been like Lacunae, Equestria would be flocking in droves to join Unity. Nopony wanted to be a part of something that believed it was already better without them. “So why does she need

Chimera?"

"It's a rather simple problem of biology," she replied softly. "You see, all alicorns are biologically female." I just blinked at her, not comprehending the problem. She elaborated delicately, "And we require males to procreate."

I blinked, furrowing my brows. "Well, I wouldn't ask P-21 for the honors, but there's probably a lot of males who'd take you up on that offer."

She shook her head slowly. "We are…unfortunately…incompatible with male ponies of any variant."

Now I was frowning. "Wait a minute. If you can't breed with pony males…then where the hell did Celestia and Luna come from?" I blurted.

"That is a great mystery. Twilight theorized that alicorns may have been manifestations of some primal magical energy, but Celestia and Luna never confirmed this. Since the fusion megaspell originated with Chimera, though, the Goddess theorizes that perhaps it can be adapted to create a male of the species. To be honest, the Goddess is expending all her energy on various possible means of solving this dilemma. She is under a great deal of strain."

I sighed softly. "I won't give EC-1101 to Sanguine. Not to save my life…not to save your species." Not even to replace Glory's wing, damn me. "But if I can find some way to help you as you need to be helped, I will." I looked up and gave her the best smile I can. "That's the most I can promise."

She seemed to be listening for a moment. I heard the faintest of whispers as Lacunae bled over snatches of conversation. There was a mention of a book, and using 'LittlePip' to get it. From the little bits I gathered, she was more intelligent and less stubborn than I. The name nagged at me; where'd I heard it before? Finally, an agreement seemed to be reached as Lacunae said, "The Goddess is not happy, but she accepts your offer."

"Good, because I honestly don't know what I'd have to do otherwise."

"Oh, that is simple. I would have teleported behind you, raised my shield, killed you with my magic, torn the PipBuck from your limb, and returned to Maripony," she said quite matter-of-factly. "Of course, I promise you that I'd feel absolutely terrible about it afterwards."

I chuckled softly. Couldn't get much more fair than that, could I?

* * *

There are certain things that get my attention. Nuzzles to my flanks. The sound of a shotgun shell being actioned into the chamber. The sweet smell of Wild Pegasus. And the impact of a nearly full grown Rampage slamming into me from behind and sending me sliding down the hall. Normally I would have rolled with it to my hooves, but my braced limbs clacked as they struggled to support me and move as they were supposed to. That gave her the time to jump right on top of me.

"Hi. I wanted you to know that Scotch is done. She doesn't remember anything from the tunnels. Not a thing," she hissed down at my face. "Do you know what she did? The very first thing?"

"Rampage, I've had a lot of people jumping on me today…" I really hoped I wouldn't have to shoot her in the head again.

"She asked for me!" she shouted in my face. "Don't you get it? She's young and scared and afraid and asked for me to see her." I saw the tears beneath the rage. "Just like Thorn! Just like…" She grimaced and sobbed, pressing her face to my chest. "I had to tell her no. I ran from her. She needed me and I ran!"

Because otherwise she might kill Scotch Tape. "Rampage…I'm sorry."

My striped friend rubbed her nose. "Why'd you have to do it, Blackjack? Scotch is a tough girl. So she had a scare or two…she'd get tougher from them. But now she's scared and all she knows is I can't be around her. And I can't tell her…not the reason why she doesn't remember or why I can't give her the hug she needs."

I sat up. "Who's with Scotch now?"

"Glory and the Zodiac filly Virgo. I think she's the first friend that Scotch Tape's had."

I gave a little smile. "Maybe she should stay here, then, instead of going to Chapel." She certainly wasn't -- and then Rampage's hoof across my face ended that thought process.

"Don't you get it?" Rampage shouted in my face. "She doesn't want to go back to Chapel anymore. She wants to stay with us! So if we send her away, it'll seem like we're all abandoning her. It'll break her heart even more!" To my shock, she started to laugh. "It's funny, when you think about it. Like me catching the killer only to become a killer myself." There wasn't any mirth in that laugh. Only

a ragged madness that grew sharper and sharper. She slammed me harder and harder into the tiles. “I killed her! I killed her!”

There was something very wrong when you needed a bullet in the head to calm somepony down.

As she regenerated, I made sure to get out from under her and on my legs. Two Collegiate ponies came around the corner and spotted the crimson spray on the wall and the sight of her head pulling itself together. From the way they ran off, I supposed that Scotch wasn’t the only pony needing their memory modified.

Of course, being shot in the head didn’t solve anything.

“Rampage…I’m sorry. I did what I thought was right. Maybe I’m wrong, but if I can give Scotch Tape some peace, I will. She’ll be upset for a while…but then she’ll get better. And we’ll get her someplace safe and happy as soon as we can. Okay?” Was I trying to convince myself or her?

“I don’t want another Thorn,” she said softly as she turned away. “I can’t take another Thorn.” And then she quietly walked back down the hall, leaving patters of blood in her wake.

* * *

It was getting late. After my little display in the meal room, the Collegiate had found a place for us on the second floor over the old gymnasium. The classrooms were full of junk and stank of musty carpeting and dust, but they were dry and private. We’d lit a fire, and the orange and yellow flames danced and flickered across the faces of my friends. The rain had picked up again and was washing the fog away. It sounded as if it was trying to scour the entire city away. A flash and boom made the windows rattle, and Scotch Tape jumped for cover underneath some blankets. I couldn’t blame her. Every flash made my hoof jerk in response.

Scotch looked confused; she had since she rejoined us. Her eyes were big and round and afraid, not of what she’d experienced but of what she’d lost. We’d fed her lies: she’d been injured in the tunnels and knocked out. She’d swallowed them and now they were sour and heavy in her stomach. But she didn’t complain because she didn’t know any better. Children should listen to their parents. What should parents listen to?

“I need to decide what to do,” I said softly, my eye turning from one to the next. Scotch hadn’t been the only pony to lose. Not even

the first. Ever since my alarm went off for that last shift in the stable, I'd been losing. So had everypony with me. So had everypony in this damned city. Hoofington was a maw that--no, not all at once. No, that would have been decent. That would have been respectable. Hoofington was a leech sucking everything away as slowly as possible.

Right now, I hated this city. I hated it with every bit of my being. I stood up to address the others. "As some of you realize, I'm not doing too well at this rate. Triage gave me six months before taint eats me up. Even if I say 'fuck that' and live twice as long…I'm still dead in a year. Professor Zodiac's told me to leave Hoofington…and that all of you should too. Go somewhere else. Help the Stable Dweller…something." I closed my eye, taking a deep breath. "But I'm not going to."

P-21 was almost completely turned away from me. Only the thinnest sliver of his face showed in the flickering light as his forehooves incessantly rubbed his rear leg. He stared off; was he looking into Stable 99 right now? Was he hearing the Overmare? He was a smart pony…but not a good one. The chance to be a good pony had been taken from him. Now he was just trying to not be a bad one. Priest would never love a bad pony.

"It's also been suggested that I give EC-1101 to Professor Zodiac. Hand it over and let her deal with it. And I'm mighty tempted to do that," I said softly. "She seems a decent sort…if a little weird. But I'm not going to do that. Like it or not, this is something I have to see through." I looked at Lacunae in the corner, feeling the stare of hundreds of eyes reflecting the flame. "It's also been suggested that I give EC-1101 to Sanguine. Get myself some new organs, Glory a new wing, and the Goddess a date.

"Well I'm not going to do that either. After what he's done, Sanguine's never going to get his hooves on Chimera if I can help it. Maybe we can get that project to Professor Zodiac or something and explore that possibility later. But not through Sanguine. Not after 99 and Deus." I looked at the dark alicorn, wondering if I was addressing my friend or my enemy.

"What about Steelpony?" Glory asked. "Maybe the professor could do…something?"

I shook my head. "It's not like there's a great overabundance of bionic parts out there. She'd have to make the synthetic organs from scratch. There's not enough time for that to save me. Sorry."

Glory hung her head and nodded silently.

The fire flickered and danced across Rampage's face, every lick of flame from the barrel seeming to make her change. Was she a foal-murdering psychopath? Perhaps an ardent defender of law? A zebra traitor? Someone else? She'd be back to full strength in the morning, but what would she do?

What would I do?

Glory looked at me. She'd follow me to the end. I didn't want her to. She deserved her own life. Her own happiness. I'd reunited her with her sister, at least. Who knew what else was possible?

"Goldenblood did something before the end of the war. I'm sure of it. He did something…and I suspect it was something big and something bad. EC-1101 is at the heart of it. If I have a short time left, I'm going to do what I can to find out what. And I'm going to do whatever I can to stop the fighting. We're going north, and I'm going to tell the Steel Rangers we were behind that attack and see what we can do to end their war with the Reapers."

Rampage snorted softly. "You'll be going into a meat grinder, Blackjack. That's Flash Fillies territory. They like Psychoshy and don't like you."

"We could circle around to the east. Towards Black Pony Mountain," Glory suggested.

"That's right by Paradise. Red Eye's there," Rampage countered.

"Well…go past Red Eye and along the eastern mountains."

"Even worse idea. Ever hear of an Ursa Major?" From the gasp from Lacunae, one of us had. Rampage didn't elaborate. "Let's just that say there's a reason everypony stays away from Black Pony Mountain."

"It doesn't matter. If the Flash Fillies want to fight me, they're going to fight me. But somepony's got to talk to the Steel Rangers and get this stopped before one side wipes out the other."

"Wouldn't it be better if they did?" P-21 said quietly, staring off into space. "You've pretty much said you won't back the Reapers. If they're so determined to kill each other…let them."

"Nothing's going to get better if we do that! So the Reapers kill off the Rangers or the Rangers kill off the Reapers. That'll just lead to another round and another round. Eventually, there won't be anything left!" I said, with a stomp of my hoof, the brace clattering with the motion. I looked at Rampage. The poison spreads a little more year after year. I looked to each of my friends. "If we're going

to matter at all, then we're going to have to do better. All of us. Not just we six, but everypony. And if I'm only here for a short while, then I'm going to do my damnedest to encourage folks to do better.

"Or die trying…" I finished grimly. The Dealer stared at me from the far side of the burning barrel, his lip curling in a small smile.

And that was that. Decision cast. I would stay in Hoofington and chase down Goldenblood's secret projects and learn what that bastard had done with the O.I.A. Because I suspected that, apocalypse and two centuries notwithstanding, it wasn't dead yet. Just sleeping, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know what would happen if it woke up.

Twilight Sparkle had created Gardens to save Equestria. Goldenblood wanted to save Equestria more than anything.

With all the resources of the six ministries, what could Goldenblood have created?

* * *

"Do I love Blackjack? That's…an oddly personal question. I'm not sure how to answer. 'Yes' would suffice, but it really wouldn't explain much, would it? I suppose what you're really asking is: why do I love Blackjack?

"When Blackjack is at her best, she's like ponykind at its best. I really believe there's nothing she can't accomplish when she's like that. It's almost scary just what she can get done when she puts her mind to it. She tracked down Dusk, fought a whole slew of Red Eye's soldiers, and brought her back to help me. And it worked. I don't think Dusk and I have ever talked like we did when she saw my injury. And that's why, when she talks about saving Hoofington and Equestria, I think she might be able to do it.

"At the same time, I'm scared of her. I'm scared of what she'll do; what she can do. She killed her stable because she thought it was the right thing to do. She almost killed herself for the same reason. I don't know what snapped her out of that, but it had to be miraculous. She went through those tunnels and she kept going when we all just wanted to die. And so I'm scared that one day she's going to go somewhere…and I won't be able to follow her.

"So, do I love her? Yes. But will I always be able to be there for her? I don't know…"

* * *

There wasn't much discussion after that. My friends knew my plan. Would they leave me? It would probably be for the best. Rampage had no reason to stay and every reason to go. P-21…there was a better life waiting for him in Chapel. Lacunae…how could I know that the Goddess wouldn't just sweep her aside and take over? Scotch should be left behind; where I was going was no place for a filly. And, though I loved her more than my own life, it wasn't a place for Glory, either. I was destined for a bad end.

I still didn't want to be alone again…I hated being alone. But I hated my friends being hurt by me even more.

I rested my head on Glory's chest, listening to the beat of a sound and healthy heart, and let it soothe me off to sleep.

~ ~ ~

My hooves crunched softly beneath the snow, the night turned to amber hues as I trotted along with my PipBuck clicking in my ears. For some reason, I was dressed all in black. Black gas mask. Black barding that completely covered me horn to hoof. Black coat covering it all. The heaps of snow seemed to glow on their own as I trudged silently along the road.

Above me hung a city of dreams, or maybe nightmares, on a grand and terrible platform clinging to the side of a cliff. My lips moved silently, but the familiar words were dull and meaningless. Streamers of gas seemed to trickle off the edges of the city. The rancid taste of orange filled my mouth from a tube at the corner. There were other tracks in the snow. Bodies in the snow. A trail of dead ponies. I walked on them whenever I could to get out of the snow. The dark clouds overhead continued to dump layer after layer of the fluffy material. It was knee deep now.

There were lights ahead. Skywagons. Tents. Ponies milling about, crying softly as they huddled in the shelter of the vehicles. I moved off the road, as silent as the snow around me, creeping closer.

"Get another case of Rad-X opened and keep them out of this green snow," a mare wearing bright yellow barding called out. "Get those emergency suits handed out. Foals first, damn it!" she yelled as she waved her hoof at the ponies around her. The suits were marked with the Ministry of Peace's butterflies. There were soldiers, too,

looking scared as they stared out at the night.

I crept closer. A soldier said to the mare in the yellow emergency suit, “Is it true? Is Hoofington gone too?”

“There’s no reply on any of the emergency channels,” the mare replied. “We might be able to make it to the Fluttershy Medical Center…if it hasn’t been hit…” There was a note of despair on the edge of her voice as she looked out at the darkness. “…is there any place that hasn’t been hit?”

“Long as we hit them too,” the soldier muttered softly as she scowled up at the dead city. “I don’t think anypony else is coming out of there. We can’t keep this evacuation center here forever.” She stamped her hoof in the snow. “I can’t believe that the Steel Rangers just abandoned us. ‘Recalled’ my ass. What were they recalled for?”

Then I floated a rifle out in front of me. The leg-long scope made the soldier’s head leap clearly into view. Matronly. Definitely a motherly type. Not the sort you’d expect to find in combat barding. Crosshairs aligned on the side of her head. A small hole appeared just behind her temple; her body blocked most of the sight of the blood spray in the snow. The mare in the emergency suit froze, but the glassy helmet distorted my targeting. A second later, the rifle fired silently into her. Chest shot. She dropped and started to crawl towards one of the wagons.

The other soldiers in the evacuation camp began to scramble. “Sniper! Zebra sniper!” they called out as the refugees started to scream.

Crosshairs swept the camp. Soldier with a rifle. Headshot. Soldier with a rifle. Headshot. The others were behind cover. Taking another sip of rancid orange, I rose and moved towards the camp. The rifle disassembled itself in the air above me, returning to my bags, and out came two matte black submachineguns: IF-44 ‘Angel Bunny’s. A hoof-long silencer was screwed to each as I moved like black death upon the camp, the cylinders muffling the noise and cutting down the muzzle flash.

Soldiers came out of cover, trying to protect ponies in a dying world. The Angel Bunnies thumped silently as three-round bursts of ten millimeter ammo cut them down. My black barding protected me better than their combat armor as I systematically eliminated all opposition in the camp.

A little more death in Equestria.

No more bullets being fired. I headed to the medical crates and began to resupply. Rad-X and RadAway first. Healing potions next. Bullets from the fallen soldiers, even if I didn't have weapons that could use them; I wasn't going to leave anything that could shoot me in the back. Food and purified water last, as much as I could carry. There wasn't much left after that.

"Please. There are children here," the mare in the Ministry of Peace emergency suit gasped. "You're killing children…" she begged as she hugged my back hoof. "Please…enough ponies have died…"

For a moment, I looked down at her, then drew a pistol from the mare who had died first while wanting to protect the evacuation camp. I checked the soldier's pistol and walked to the fallen skywagons. "No. Please, no!" she shouted behind me, stretching her hoof after me.

Killing foals was no different than killing their mothers. They screamed, bled, and died like animals. One round in each head to make sure. Nine millimeter rounds were trash anyway. In less than five minutes, the soldier's pistol was tossed into the snow.

"Why…?" the medical mare gasped as she crawled towards me. Not that she could understand. They were all dead. All of them. Of radiation. Poison. Lead poisoning. Time. I was simply saving them the pain. She gets to live. Maybe. Maybe she'll figure it out. Maybe not.

I continued on the road east. No answer. Not a word. No forgiveness any more. No absolution. Only the mission. The snow consumed all her wails and cries. She should be thankful; she had enough supplies remaining to maybe last a few months. Me? I had a pony to kill.

~ ~ ~

I raised my head, looking at the amber hues of the room and my sleeping friends. Scotch had scooted up under Glory's wing. P-21 was a dark blob in one corner, Rampage another in the opposite corner. Lacunae stood as still as stone by the cold fire barrel. I stared into the darkness and whispered, "What the hay... ?"

* * *

I paced back and forth in front of the projector. "And then I just

left her there. Like I was trying to teach her a lesson! And I just trotted off with all those stolen supplies! Like…where the hell did a dream like that come from?" I asked, trying to ignore robots peeling away withered flesh from some blasted bionic parts against the far wall.

The flickering projection just shrugged. "If you asked me the strength to mass ratio of enchanted silver or the velocity of a southbound pegasus carrying a coconut, I could tell you. I'm an engineer, not a psychologist." She cocked her head. "What do you normally dream about?"

I sighed, looking in a box marked 'medical supplies': Med-X, Rad-X, Buck, Steady, Dash inhalers... well, Dash had kept me alive long enough to get to Scalpel. "Gassing Stable 99…usually. Sometimes I get other freaky dreams. Blowing up Deus." One filly torn in half... One crushed in an embrace... A lullaby... "That thing in the tunnels... me and sleep aren't real friendly." I held up a few needles of Med-X and boxes of Rad-X tablets with a little smile, and the projection sighed and nodded. Score!

Once I'd refilled my stock of chems, I sat on one of the cushions. Fortunately, one side effect of being a cyberpony: you really didn't need that much shuteye. "So, the theme was right up there…but everything in it was out of left field. I mean, it felt almost like a memory orb, but far more real and familiar. Like…it was me remembering them, not just watching the experiences of others."

"Well to be honest, I can't imagine. If it wasn't an internal dream, then it must have been external. You've been exposed to unprecedented levels of taint and Enervation. It's caused microtumors in your brain that are thus far fairly benign but could possibly be affecting your mental processes. Your friend Glory helped us determine their growth rate." 'Cause Glory was just awesome like that. And me having brain tumors sure would have explained a lot back in 99.

I sighed and shook my head. "Can I ask you something? Triage mentioned you went down the elevator too. Why?"

She sighed. "Well, you know that I was predominantly involved with Steelpony, but I heard rumors about the other projects. It was a bit of a game back then to try and find out each other's secrets. The only pony who knew everything was Goldenblood…and maybe Vanity."

"Vanity? His uncle?"

She nodded slowly. “He was always accompanying Goldenblood. Technically, he worked for the M.o.M. keeping an eye on bad ponies in the military, but after the Marauders disbanded he was brought into the O.I.A. directly.” She frowned. “Some ponies think that he was really spying for Pinkie Pie. That he turned over something that made Luna dismiss him from his position, because he worked with Horse and Trueblood. But if he really was against his nephew, Vanity could have done a lot more damage to him. So it’s a mystery.”

The projection then smiled. “I’d heard about those ruins and the memories. Rarity and Goldenblood had been down there. I was hoping to catch a memory of either of them, especially Goldenblood. Unfortunately, I was down there so long that… well…” She pointed a glowing hoof at the jar.

“And did you find out anything?” I asked eagerly.

“I did encounter one memory... but…let me see if I can do this…” The room lights began to flicker, then darkened as the projector lit up the space overhead. The colors combined and oriented themselves into that dreary buried ruin. There were no swirling motes of light. Just magic lamps illuminating the crushed stone.

It was back in the ruins, and there were two mares, not counting my host, collecting pot shards. It became apparent why the memory was selected when Rarity walked past. “Wonder what she’s in a hurry about?” a mare I guessed was the host said.

“Leave it be, Dewdrop. Rarity’s going to have you sweeping floor scraps if she catches you eavesdropping,” one of the two replied.

My host chuckled. “I’m not eavesdropping. I’m collecting pot shards.” And she happened to be collecting them very quickly in the direction the white mare had gone.

Rarity trotted along through the buried ruins, looking particularly magnificent in her purple rubber boots and coat that shielded her from the water dripping from above. Goldenblood stood at one of the walls next to a hole the water in the cave was trickling into. His eyes were distant as he floated a piece of rock in front of him, turning it over and over. The spiral chunk of silvery stone glittered coldly in the light of the lamps and seemed to have him mesmerized.

“Goldenblood, a word,” Rarity said softly, but voices carried in the tunnel and whoever was remembering this moved closer. The wheezing, scarred buck regarded her with an arched brow. “I

wanted to…thank you. For helping save Pinkie Pie. If that bomb had gone off…" She took a deep breath. "I've never faced the possibility of losing my friends before."

"Never? Not even when facing Nightmare Moon and dragons?" Goldenblood said softly but with a small, sincere smile.

She brushed a hoof across her mane, smiling sheepishly and giving a feigned carefree roll of her eyes. "Ah, the invulnerability of youth…but no. Not even then." She closed her blue eyes and took a deep breath. "But when I heard about it…"

"Most credit goes to Pinkie Pie and the Marauders. She sensed it, and they evacuated the club. I simply gave her a nudge in the right direction," he said as he turned the spur of stone over and over in his magic. When she looked at it, he smiled. "Fascinating, isn't it? We've been finding more and more of this ore the deeper we excavate. Its properties and potential are astounding." Rarity dropped her gaze, chewing her lip. Clearly she didn't want to discuss stupid rocks.

"Goldenblood, I need to ask a favor. I need a project. A…a secret project," she said quietly. "Normally, I'd never ask, but…after Pinkie…" She chewed on her lip. "I think I may have a way to protect my friends. But…I need... something. Something terrible."

Goldenblood just stared at the hard spiral as he turned the rock over in his magic. "I see... "

"It's…it's a new kind of magic. Or perhaps a very old kind. I'm not sure…but…I don't trust it. I need to make certain it won't hurt my friends," she said softly, keeping her eyes on the water as it trickled over the edge and through that dark gap. "If it works, I can keep everypony safe forever."

"You need test subjects," Goldenblood murmured softly in his watery, rusty voice. Rarity flinched but then nodded. "Say no more. I'll get you situated. We'll call it…" He mused a moment as he stared at the rock before saying softly, "Project Eternity. After all, forever is a long time to keep a pony safe."

"I…thank you, Goldenblood," she said with a relieved smile. She started away, then hesitated. "I…I think that you and Fluttershy make a wonderful…erm…couple." She grinned sheepishly at him, pawing at the water-covered stone.

He smiled, but his eyes simply looked sad. "Thank you, Rarity. I hope I prove worthy of her."

"Yes. Quite. Well…ah…" She bobbed her head once more. "I look

forward to hearing from you, Goldenblood."

The viewer immediately rushed back to collecting pot shards as Goldenblood looked in her direction. The image dissolved. "This is an hour later," Zodiac said as a new picture took shape. "It was a long memory, and nothing particularly interesting to a non-archaeologist happened in the intervening time." Well, this was an improvement over being stuck in a memory orb.

"Come on, everypony. Last ride out of this hole," some buck called. The viewer trotted to the elevator and it started to rise out of the earth. It flashed by other subterranean workings as it lifted before finally reaching the top. It looked like the foundation of a large concrete building. Ponies started filing out, trotting towards the exit and laughing about their day.

All except for Goldenblood. He stood against the rail surrounding the elevator shaft as ponies left. His eyes stared right into mine. "A minute, Dewdrop."

"Um…yes…sir?" my host said softly.

"You heard my conversation with the Ministry Mare." It wasn't a question. The silvery metal turned over and over beside him as he approached her. My viewer started to back away. "What did you think?"

"It was…it was…ah…interesting…" the mare stammered.

"Interesting. Indeed," he said softly as he kept approaching. Now I realized what so disturbed me about Goldenblood, more than the scars and the sickly cough and ragged breathing; on top of all that, he didn't seem to blink. "Do you know what the three most precious things in Equestria are, Dewdrop?" he asked, and she could feel the breeze blowing out of the shaft on her flanks as he backed her right up to the metal rails surrounding the dark, bottomless-looking pit.

"Family, sir? Friends? Um…money?"

"Family is a dime a dozen," he said with a soft snort. "Friends are articles of convenience. And money is trash." He shook his head as his horn glowed, and he whispered softly into her ear, "No, the three most precious things are loyalty, love... and secrets."

Suddenly, the rails weren't there anymore and she was falling back over the edge, just barely grabbing on with her forelegs. "Help! Somepony help me!" she shrieked. The glowing metal bars that had twisted away behind her slowly returned to place. "Please…I have a family!"

"My condolences, but I'm afraid that some ponies just can't be

trusted with secrets." And with that, he stood there and watched as her legs and then her hooves slowly slid over the edge. He didn't look away. He still didn't even blink... The world became tumbling darkness. I shuddered, closing my eyes and unable to watch any more. That was a long way to fall…

The image flickered out. "That's the memory I experienced in the cave. When the memory ended, I was nearly dead and was fortunate to get back up the elevator before I completely dissolved.

The Goldenblood-being-a-murderer thing. I was... disappointed. I'd hoped that I'd be wrong about him. That once you got past all the secrets and lies, there was a good pony. How could he kill somepony just to keep a secret? Loyalty, love, and secrets. And a relationship with Fluttershy? How did that happen? I had more questions than when I'd started! It was supposed to go the other way around! Well…nothing to do but start trying to get answers to them.

"So Rarity was…experimenting? On ponies? *Rarity*?" I said, now trying to wrap my head around that one. How does a pony go from dressmaking to that?

The glowing pony nodded once. "Mhmm…what kind of experiments…and how she was planning on protecting her friends…I don't know. I know that she pursued it for several years, then abandoned it abruptly. Beyond that, I only know it was based out of Hightower Jail. Here." My PipBuck chimed softly. "You can investigate it yourself if you like."

I checked my map and saw the blank square to the north. "And there's nothing you can tell me about the other projects?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid not. Chimera was Trueblood's baby. Starfall and Horizons were Trottenheimer's. I don't even know who oversaw the rest. I'm sorry. I wish I could be more help."

I gave the projection a tired smile. "I wish *I* could be more help," I said. She looked confused. "Well, it's just, I'm nobody special. I'm just staggering through all this the best I can."

The professor shook her head with a small smile. "Nobody special? Blackjack, you emerged from your stable with one of the deadliest war machines in history after you and lived. Since then, you've destroyed that war machine, helped stabilize Flank, are virtually the patron saint of Chapel, brought together sand dogs and ponies in mutual protection, ended one of the gravest raider threats to the

city, and during all of that you were also unraveling a two-century-old conspiracy involving one of the most secretive and powerful ponies in history. You've gotten to the point where your whim is a major consideration for all the powers of the Hoofington region and you carry with you our single best hope for recapturing the greatest technological and arcane treasure troves in all of Equestria. If you are a nobody, then you are the greatest nobody in the history of the world."

I blinked, blushing hard as I rubbed the back of my head. "Gosh… when you put it that way…" I was still a nobody, but at least it was nice to hear she regarded me so highly. I looked at my PipBuck…"I can't give you EC-1101, Professor. But…if there's a way I can give you access to Steelpony…I will." I looked at her stunned expression. "It probably won't do me any good, but you might make some use of it."

"I…" She stared at me, and then the glowing projection threw its arms around me. The light flickered and sparked, dazzling my eye. "Thank you…so much." She drew back. "Well... if you can get to the Flash Industries headquarters's maneframe and use EC-1101 to unlock it, I should be able to extract the Steelpony activation files and schematics from here."

"Flash Industries?"

"One of several cover companies we worked with while developing Steelpony. I'd direct you to the Aegis Security headquarters, but it took a direct hit from a balefire missile. There's naught left but a crater."

My PipBuck chirped as a few new icons lit up. "These are the O.I.A. fronts I know of where you might find something useful." Boom Inc. O.I.A. Progress Office. Horizon Laboratories.

Hippocratic Research.

I felt lightheaded. Places all in the northeast corner of the outer city. Places where I might find answers. A place where I might find Sanguine himself. I nearly trembled in anticipation. "Thank you. This is wonderful! I don't know what to say!"

She flushed... well, her cheeks were a little shinier than before. "And if I can make one last request…I'd like to interview all of you. I think it's something that might be valuable someday. Ponies are going to want to know just who Security and her friends were."

I couldn't think that that would ever be valuable; in six months I'd be gone and in seven probably forgotten…except maybe by Glory

and my friends. “Well…I’ll tell them when I see them in the morning…but don’t hold your breath.” The projection arched her brow and I coughed into my hoof. “You know what I mean…”

* * *

“What do I want?

“Gosh, that’s an easy one. Give me a box of Sugar Apple Bombs and a bottle of Wild Pegasus and I’m good…Look, I’m not a complicated pony. Really. I’m not smart enough to be a complicated pony. I want folks happy and safe. That’s it. If my actions make some ponies able to live their lives, then I’m good.

“Of course, that means that sometimes I have to take lives as well. I never like doing that. I know some ponies feel a rush when they kill, but it’s just something I have to do. And sometimes…sometimes I’m really good at it. I wish it was as hard for me as it used to be, but I guess that’s growing up, huh? So if I do kill, I try and kill the ponies who cause harm. I do my best to make sure that nopony gets hurt who isn’t causing hurt.

“But what I’d really like is a nice place to live with Glory, a kid of my own, in a safe place, with a weekly poker night with my friends. I’m pretty sure that’s all I need. If I get that, I’m pretty sure giving whatever I have to everypony else who needs it isn’t much of a problem.

“Oh…I suppose I should throw ‘not dying’ in there too... .

“Crap…can I do this again?”

* * *

I waited at the north gate, calmly checking my shotgun, rifle, and twelve millimeter ammo. Fresh healing potions from Triage for the next few days. Food and purified water. The thunderstorm was soaking everything, transforming the quad into a muddy lake.

Glory trotted out of the mist, her beam rifle shifted to the side to compensate for her missing wing. She smiled broadly up at me in her Equestrian Air Guard barding. “Leo didn’t want his gun back?” I asked with a smile of my own.

“He did, but I beat him…” she said with a chuckle.

“You fought him?” I asked in shock. Glory fighting for a gun?

She brushed her purple mane out of her eyes. “No. I guilt tripped him about almost killing you when you were going to do so much

for the professor, so he dropped it."

I smiled at her. "I love you." She flushed in delight.

Scotch Tape came staggering out of the fog. "Don't go! I'm coming with you."

My smile strained. "You're sure…" I'd done all I could to convince her to stay here with Virgo or return to the Crusaders. She remained adamant. Rampage had been right...

"Of course. We Stable 99 ponies have to stick together," Scotch said brightly. She wore her brown work goggles and 99 utility barding. I sighed at the sight of her with the nine millimeter automatic pistol. She'd have to go through her first kill all over again. Hopefully it wouldn't be for a while.

"Yeah. We have to stick together," P-21 said from my side. I jumped…okay, I would have jumped clear over Glory if my legs were working right. My blue friend gave me a small smile and shrug. "I've stuck it out with you this long. I can manage a few more months. Chapel's not going anywhere." His eyes flicked down to Scotch, and for a moment I thought he was going to say something. Then he just flushed and looked away. The filly dropped her eyes with a sigh.

"The Goddess shall not be excluded," Lacunae pronounced as she trotted forth in her black dress. No gun, but we'd find some way to remedy that. In the meantime, she had her magic. Her purple eyes stared down at me coldly, but then shifted and softened as she smiled. "The Goddess is quite curious about what you will find in the future."

"So she's not going to try and make me find Chimera for her?" I asked, arching a brow curiously.

"No. The Goddess anticipates that she may task another to that end. Hopefully that one will be far less…stubborn," Lacunae finished with a soft smile as she looked at me fondly.

I looked out into the mist-shrouded quad and the hazy outlines of the buildings. I expected Rampage to emerge any second. Any second…

Any second…

"Where's Rampage?" Scotch Tape asked with a worried frown.

"I guess…she's not coming." And I supposed that would be for the best. Damn it, it still felt wrong, though!

We filed through the gate, past the guards and the beam turrets. Hopefully I'd made a big enough dent in the ghoul population that

we wouldn't have to fight for a while. I took point, Glory watched the left, and P-21 watched the right. Scotch Tape was in the middle. Lacunae doffed her dress and took to the air…really, why had she bothered putting it on at all? The entire Collegiate had seen her wings while the Goddess was in control of her.

I turned back, looking at the gray block buildings through the haze of the rain. For a moment, I thought I saw a white pony with a flash of red atop one building. But then the rain stung my eye and I blinked... and she was gone.

Footnote: 50% to Next Level

Chapter 29: Mortality

"Now listen here. What I'm sayin' to you is the honest truth. Let go, and you'll be safe."

I want to do the right thing. Isn't that simple? It should be. It's supposed to be! There are rules; you follow them. There are choices; you consider them and then make the right choice. Then you live with the consequences.

Like males being raped by an entire community. Like Caprice selling me out to Usury. Like me killing a stable full of innocent ponies.

Is there a right choice anymore? Has there ever been a right choice? Maybe. Helping those ponies against the ghouls the other day. Freeing Scrapyard from Red Eye's raiders. Those were good. But sometimes, it feels like all my choices are between 'lose' and 'lose more'. I want to win. I want a clear victory. I want a frigging carrot thrown my way and a pat on the head and a 'Good job, Blackjack' for once.

Is that so wrong?

Maybe... I didn't go through the trouble of helping Glory just so she could tell me what a good pony I am. I didn't take away Scotch Tape's memories so that she'd like me more. I did them because they were the right things to do. And if that meant I got shot up a little more, or mutated a little more, or died a little more, it was worth it because they were better. I had to do better, damn it. Or what was the freaking point?

What did my life matter if it bettered theirs?

And yet…I'd crossed Rampage. I'd hurt all of us by placing her in a lose-lose position. Stay with us and she'd kill Scotch. Leave, as she had, and Scotch would feel like she'd done something wrong. Because she didn't understand how much Rampage wanted to help her…and how quickly she'd kill her to give her mercy. So what

should I have done? What was the lesser evil?
Sometimes, even when you win, you lose.

* * *

The rain hissed and splashed into the cold, wet, slimy, and, from the faint ticking from my foreleg, mildly radioactive swamp water slogging around our hooves. Rotting logs and tangled weeds poked out of the obscuring rain, and only my E.F.S. indicated if they should be avoided or not. The only thing I could hope was that anypony, or any*thing*, that could possibly give us trouble wouldn't be stupid enough to go outside in weather like this. An acrid chemical smell was blowing from the north. Not much we could do about that besides breathe through our mouths and made the best time we could.

The plan was simple: head north to EC-1101's last routing point in the Ironmare Naval Base's command center. Somewhere along the way we'd run into the Steel Rangers. Find somepony in charge. Explain how we started this whole mess and get them to stop fighting with the Reapers. Yeah, that should be easy... right... In the meantime, Flash Industries, the O.I.A. office, and Horizon Labs were all in a relatively straight line north of us. I checked my PipBuck again. My eyes kept drifting to that empty square off to the west near the river, just southeast of Toll: Hippocratic Research.

Psychoshy had said that Sanguine could save my life. Regrow Glory's wing. For all we knew, he might be able to turn us all into alicorns. I glanced over at Lacunae; if the Goddess knew where Project Chimera could be found, would she try something? Lacunae I trusted. The Goddess, not so much.

I looked at the map display again. It wasn't really all that far off our path…

"Euch…" Glory exclaimed as an ambitious leech tried to wiggle its way up her flank; instead, the black slug got kicked off into the murk. Lacunae was flying low overhead, levitating Scotch Tape safely above the mire. The filly had her hooves extended as Lacunae flew her around in circles; since the alicorn's magic shielded her from the rain, she was the driest one of us in addition to the happiest.

"Flying is the best thing ever!" she cheered as she swooped around Lacunae. I liked to imagine that, somewhere, the Goddess was

watching this. It was the first time the olive filly had smiled since we'd left the Collegiate.

"She's going to draw trouble," P-21 muttered.

Glory snorted. "Oh, let her have her fun." Glory was watching Scotch, her eyes silently agreeing with the filly's statement. I wondered…Lacunae could lift me, after all...

We moved through the rotting, flooded houses. I kept up a constant watch for red bars on my E.F.S., looking away only to flick off the more determined leeches that started to make holes in my barding. I saw two fat frogs watching us pass. Was it just me, or did they look familiar? Nothing remained of the hopper P-21 had killed earlier, not even bones. Eaten, or liquefied in its own acids? I didn't want to know.

A deep, reverberating roar blasting through the rain sent all of us diving for cover, frogs, leeches, and ponies alike. Lacunae and Scotch winked into one of the buildings, P-21 dove behind a mossy wall, and Glory and I took cover in some thorny bushes. The roar sounded again, deep and heavy, building and falling and squealing, but sounding distant through the downpour. I couldn't tell how far away it really was. Was there a dragon in Hoofington? That was all I could imagine making a noise like that! Nothing on my E.F.S., though, so either it was too far away to register or it was huge and invisible.

...Now wasn't *that* a pleasant thought?

Slowly, I crept through the rubble-choked gap between two buildings. The rain pattered off the spongy beams and decaying masonry underhoof, but besides that, silence. There was nothing on the other side of the gap except another row of decaying homes and the dark outline of a large building beyond them.

...A building that moved…

I ducked out of sight as it growled long, low, and deep. I didn't know what it could be; I didn't want to know. I just didn't want it to come this way. I backed carefully away as it growled and squealed for a moment…then growled again. Could it hear us? Smell us? It rumbled as it moved…but its rumbles were growing softer.

The roar sounded one more time, fainter and to the northeast. Lacunae and Scotch Tape cautiously emerged, the alicorn so apprehensive that she dirtied her hooves and carried Scotch on her back rather than risk being a flying, glowing target. P-21 crept out a

moment later. “Right. Do we want to speculate on what that was?” I asked, looking from one face to the next. I didn’t see one spark of curiosity. “Right. Moving on! Direction: any but that one!” And, ignoring the leeches, we put as much distance between us and that…thing…as we could.

* * *

After reaching Celestia Boulevard and getting out of the mire (and shedding a dozen slimy hitchhikers), we started looking around for someplace to dry off. The rain gave no indication of letting up; if anything, it seemed to be falling even harder. We staggered into a ruined shop in the center of a strip that still seemed more or less intact. It was dry, at least…well, drier. I guessed from the large sheaf of wheat on the hanging sign outside the door that it had been some sort of food shop. Empty Dash inhalers, used syringes, and busted bottles of booze made it pretty clear what it was used for now…and, in true raider fashion, somepony had dressed up some yellowed ponnequins in studded bondage gear.

‘Cause that was what passed for humor in the Wasteland. A ponnequin in a leather gimp suit…

“Okay. Glory, what is the deal with all the rain?” I asked as I shook myself hard. “Is the Enclave trying to drown us?” The question was only half hypothetical.

She flung water off her wing before blinking. “Oh, no. Not at all. Believe it or not, this is all natural.”

“This…is natural?” I gaped as I pointed out the window. That wasn’t natural. We’d be swimming at this rate!

“Mhmmm. Before the war, clearing the skies over Hoofington was a full time job.” She cupped her hooves. “The Hoofington valley is basically a great big bowl thirty miles across with mountains to the east and west and the highlands to the south, so all the wet air off the ocean gets blown into it and the bowl fills up. The higher you go, the colder it is. All that wet air has nowhere to go, so it cools and forms clouds and then rain. Hoofington had major problems with flooding even before the war. It gets about two hundred inches of rain a year.” I gaped. Two…*hundred*…Inches?! ... was that a lot? A glance outside suggested yes. Glory looked out the grimy window at the brown river coursing along beyond the road. “All the pegasi had to do was stop working, and nature clouded the skies for us. It

probably doesn't matter much today, but Hoofington used to be a major cloud exporter to Appleloosa and other dry regions."

I tried to imagine teams of pegasi bundling together huge trains of wet gray clouds and pushing them out to the rest of Equestria. "I'm amazed there're any tunnels under the city that aren't flooded." Then I mentally kicked myself and glanced at Scotch Tape, but she was more interested in the ponnequins. Apparently, she really didn't remember.

"If there wasn't power, there probably wouldn't be," P-21 said as he rubbed his rear leg. "If you look along the riverbanks, there're outflow pipes constantly emptying into it. Without those pumps, everything below river level would be underwater."

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"I'm fine," he muttered, frowning at the limb. "It just hurts a lot."

Glory frowned and knelt as she looked at his limb. "It shouldn't," she said, glancing up at him but not touching it. With his glower, I couldn't blame her. "I checked Triage's files. You practically have a brand new leg."

"Then they botched it up. It still hurts," he muttered as he rubbed it with his hooves.

"Here," I said as I floated him a syringe of Med-X. "It's probably from walking in cold water in the rain. Can't be doing it any good." Glory frowned as he jabbed the needle into his leg and some of the stress and anger left his face.

"Thanks, Blackjack," he said as he swung his leg with obvious relief. Rising, he moved further back into the store. "I'll check and see if I can find anything valuable."

Glory frowned at me as he started poking around in the back. "Blackjack, you shouldn't have given that to him. At least not without letting me examine him first. If there's something wrong with his leg, then he needs treatment. Maybe he has a pinched nerve or something."

"Glory, P-21's not going to let any mare examine him." She started to argue, and I shook my head, "Just let it go. If he says it hurts, then it hurts. He doesn't make stuff like that up," I said as I looked at some photographs along the wall. She huffed and moved off to explore as well, also looking at the various outfits and restraints on the dummies. She seemed to be turning far redder than Scotch, though.

The photographs were of a blue-gray unicorn mare; I couldn't quite

make out the color of her mane from the faded images, but I thought that it might have been pink. She was dressed…oddly. Not like Rarity, whose outfits were purely for decoration. It looked almost like casual apparel. Next to her was a buck wearing some kind of strange leather hood. A caption was written at the bottom. 'The Crop: for when your seed needs sowing.'

The rest of the pictures were hard to make out, but from what I could see I started doubting my theory that raiders had dressed up these dummies. There was one of Rarity looking fabulous and giving the cameras a very 'Wouldn't you like to know?' glance as she held a shopping bag in her mouth, the gray unicorn looking on in glee. Another was of a fancy pony with a lace fan cutie mark. Not nearly so fabulous, but still. Wait…Fluttershy?

Okay. I stopped looking at the pictures. They made my brains hurt. I sat down on a mattress that somepony had dragged from Goddesses knew where and waited for the rain to let up…

…

I hate waiting.

I lasted ten minutes, checking my pistol and shotgun, organizing the potions and chems in my pockets…digging in my saddlebags…

I came across the memory orbs from Blueblood Manor. Maybe there was something in there about Vanity's nephew? No… honestly, of all the Marauders, Vanity had seemed, after Big Macintosh, the one most concerned with his teammates. I lifted the orb and caught Lacunae's eye. "I'm going to take a peek, okay? So no hanging me upside down off the front of a boat," I warned. Seriously, I'd come out of enough bad memory orbs and in enough bad ways already.

She nodded once and continued to gaze out at the rain, looking a little pained. "Enervation?" I asked.

"For the last hour, but nothing serious. Just a drain on our potions, I suppose." She gave a little smile. "Really. You'd think the Goddess would provide me with a simple healing spell."

I guessed it was an indirect 'screw Blackjack.'

Gently, I tapped the orb against my horn. "Okay…I'm safe…this is Vanity, so it should be okay…come on…come on…" Hmmm... it wasn't working. Was there a password or something? I thought of the Marauders…Goldenblood…Princesses…Ministry Mares…I glanced up at the picture of Rarity with her shopping bag. A spark, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Okay…not *quite* what I was expecting.

Soft sheets. Green velvet drapes around the bed. A very nice-smelling mare. And two ponies having a *very* good time. I gave a mental roll of my eye and did my best to think of the Ironshod Firearms catalogue. Okay, IF-80 is a twenty gauge…nope, that's a twelve gauge…shotgun. Pump…action. Shoots a variety of ammo types including…buckshot…Sweet Celestia, shoot me now. Why on earth was he licking…oh…okay…that's new…

Check, please. Why wasn't there a cancel feature on memory orbs?

Finally--really, *three* times?--finally, they rolled off each other, and a shimmer of blue swept the drapes back to reveal the bedroom. The mare gave a groan of complete delight as she lay back in the sheets. He started to kiss along her pale neck, but then the doors banged open. Like magic, the mare was transformed into a ball underneath the sheets as Blueblood stomped in.

I'd never really seen him up close pre-ghoulification before, but Blueblood was clearly a suave-looking buck, even if he was more than twice my age. Right now though, he was a complete mess, his mane long and straggly and his eyes bloodshot. He smelled of stale grapes and pony sweat. "Vanity! Are you here? Vanity!"

The emerald-maned buck shook himself and rubbed his temples. "So nice to see you're back from Canterlot early. You know, even the Princesses don't attend to others in their beds, Blueblood. If the manor isn't aflame, then can this please wait for later?" The mare looked as if she was attempting to dig through the mattress to escape.

Blueblood seemed completely oblivious to both Vanity's comment and the ball under the covers as he threw his forelegs wide. "She's gone, Vanity! She was here, right here in Hoofington, at some tawdry shop. And then she was gone!"

Vanity sighed, making a face of annoyed resignation. "Good Goddesses, pull yourself together. If anypony sees you like this, they're never going to stop talking!" He herded the exhausted, frazzled-looking Blueblood out the door. "Now, get some sleep, get something to eat, and, above all…wash. Then we'll schedule a proper grooming. You simply have to put her behind you. She's just one silly old mare who can't appreciate you."

Was it my imagination, or did that lump under the sheets give a soft snort of outrage?

Vanity's attempt to mollify the morose buck failed. "She's not one mare. She's *the* mare. The only one who could ever complete me. Am I supposed to court Twilight Sparkle now? Or Fluttershy? No! How could she…" At the moment, I was guessing it was pretty easy. Of course, I also remembered him running his sword through Roses's heart. A minute later, Vanity returned to the room, closed the doors, locked them, and then, after a moment's hesitation, levitated his heavy desk against them.

"Just another mare, huh?" a very familiar unicorn said. He turned to look at the mare sitting upright in his bed. Her purple mane disheveled and tangled about her shoulders, she looked at him with hard blue eyes. "Silly, am I? *Old*?" She said that word almost as if it were an obscenity.

Vanity chuckled as he sat down beside her on the bed. "Most sincere apologies. I had to get him out of here somehow. Your rejections completely broke him. I don't think any mare in history has so…thoroughly…turned down a proposal."

"If I knew what a big baby he was going to be, I would have passed it on to Luna." Rarity sniffed disdainfully. "I'm sure she would have helped him get over it far more efficiently and effectively. Likely with a wartime commission," she said sourly as she flopped back against the pillows.

"I shudder for the war effort," he replied as he lay beside her, stroking her cheek. "We could just let him catch us," he said as he kissed her throat.

She murred and sighed. "A few minutes of satisfaction, at the most, followed by the scandal of the century and the utter disintegration of my career and reputation. Hmmmm…" She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Not that it isn't tempting, but I simply couldn't leave my friends alone. They need me. Besides, some scandals never fade."

"Would it really be so bad?" he asked as he cuddled with her.

"Yes, Vanity. It would." She touched her chest lightly. "A mare who is desirable, but unobtainable, has power over those who covet her. She is a priceless commodity. But if they know that another obtained her, then she is cheapened and no longer priceless."

"Really? But you clearly wished to be obtained," he chuckled as he smiled.

"And how," she said with an unapologetic smile and yet also a demure blush. "I'm not made of stone, you know."

"Indeed, I noticed," he said with a soft poke to her belly. "The most delightful marshmallow in Equestria." And he proceeded to nibble gently on that marshmallow, much to the barely stifled giggles of the mare.

She sighed and pouted playfully. "Oh, why did I have to pick such a cruel consort?" she said, throwing a foreleg across her brow dramatically.

"Sometimes we make mistakes in those we choose to love," he replied softly, and her smile disappeared as she looked away. He stroked that rumpled mane. "How's Fluttershy?" he asked in a gentle, concerned tone.

"As well as can be expected after what that bastard did to her. She's throwing everything into…something. Some special project she thinks will change the war and end it." She sighed softly. "It's been almost four years now. This war and these ministries are like a fashion that's grown quite noisome. I'd quite like something… fresh." She looked at him and sighed. "And since he's tiptoeing around the corners of the conversation already, what is that bastard up to? Suffering, I hope."

Vanity sighed. "Actually, I think he is." Oddly, Rarity's satisfaction seemed to turn to a thin sympathy. "He never meant to hurt her. But he did, and he knows it. And I don't think he'll ever forgive himself for it."

She sighed and buried her face in his neck. "Why couldn't we have met under different circumstances? One where there was no war. Or killing? Or plots and secrets? I'm so dreadfully tired of intrigue. Or fears of our loved ones being hurt. I'd thought I'd be married by now. Perhaps even a mother. And now…" She sighed, one hoof rubbing her tummy slowly. "I am starting to turn into an old mare."

"A stunning, lovely old mare," he replied, and she gave him a small smile in return. "We do live in interesting times. I'm just trying to keep my nephew under control and prevent him from hurting anypony. Himself. Others. I recommended he take a leave of absence. Instead, he's just throwing himself into his work even more." He pressed his lips together. "I've contemplated leaving the Marauders so I can supervise him."

"You'd leave Jetstream?" Rarity asked softly, her tone concerned as she stroked his cheek.

"The memory modification went perfectly for once. She doesn't remember Stonewing except as another soldier. She's focusing on her work, too. Macintosh is keeping her busy." He sighed and shook his head. "I guess it is a way to handle grief."

"Why didn't we meet at the gala all those years ago?" she said with a faint sigh. "Then we could have had our wonderful happily ever after."

"As I recall, you saw Blueblood and quite ignored the younger prince with the acne problem behind him," he replied with just a hint of reproach.

"Oh. Yes. Well…you must understand that those were my silly… flighty…days…" she said with a furious blush. He smiled down at her and kissed her softly upon the lips. Forget Rarity, I wanted to marry Vanity! When their lips parted, she groaned. "Ugh…stop. Please. I simply must get back to Canterlot. My staff gossips quite enough. I don't have time for a fourth…"

"Or a fifth? Or a sixth?" he teased as he nudged her hip.

Or a seventh? Sweet Celestia, did Vanity compete in marathons?

Afterwards, they were panting and spent. She looked at him flatly. "You…are a monster."

"But a very *good* monster…" he said, his lips parting in a grin as Rarity turned red once more.

"Enough! Enough! I am going…before you tempt me into disaster." But she did have time for one more kiss. Then she emerged from the bed and gave herself a shake; magically, her mane returned to its luxurious curls. Okay. That was a neat trick. I'd like that trick…then she blew him a kiss and, with a blue-white flash, she disappeared from sight.

oooOOOooo

I awoke and looked around as quickly as I could. Okay, no monsterponies, cyberponies, Enclave hit squads, Remnant hit squads, cyberdogs, manticores, giant frogs, boats, Zodi…wait. Nevermind. I swapped out Zodiacs for…nightmare hitponies dressed in black! Instead, I was almost disappointed to find myself still on the mattress. No bullet holes. No horrible wounds. Nothing…

So why were my friends all staring at me? P-21 was smiling faintly and kept glancing over at me from his textbook. Scotch Tape was

giggling. Lacunae was…blushing? And Glory was looking at me with a very…strange…smile. The gray pegasus cleared her throat softly. “So. Good memory orb?”

I hesitated before I answered warily, rising to my hooves. “Y… yeah…” What was going on? P-21 coughed, looking like he was actually fighting the urge to grin.

“A *very* good memory orb?” Glory asked again. My confusion started to give way to irritation when I sniffed, and blinked. What was that smell…? Wait…I knew *that* smell…and *that* smell was coming from *me*.

“Blackjack’s been naughty!” Scotch Tape fell over laughing. I went as red as the stripes in my mane. Dear Luna, I was sore! How could I be sore? I hadn’t done anything!

“I…it wasn’t me! They were…and it was…I--” I finally lost the capacity to speak altogether and just stammered hopelessly, incapable of explaining.

“Mhmmm…very naughty,” Glory replied with nod as she walked along behind me. “We’ll have to deal with that later.” She stepped next to me, her side rubbing against my flank. And then her tail snapped against my rump. I think my blush jumped into the infrared!

Funny, I seemed to remember not long ago that Glory was the one who could be rendered speechless through sex. I definitely recalled that to be her thing, not mine. So why was I suddenly incapable of talking besides stammering incomprehensibly? Scotch Tape seemed to find this a source of endless glee.

“Mares,” P-21 said in summation, despite the glares three of us gave him for it. He rose to his hooves and stretched. “Well. Now that you’re…ahem…finished…Shall we be on our way?”

Yes. Yes we shall. I could do with a walk in the lovely…cold…rain. Really. A cold rain shower never looked more inviting.

* * *

I really wanted to go back into the sexy memory orb now. I really did.

“Who killed them?” Glory asked in a horrified whisper as we trotted past. She had her wing draped over Scotch’s face and the filly wasn’t arguing.

“Think it matters to them anymore?” P-21 replied softly.

It mattered to me. It was all so…so stupid. Life was already hard enough; why were we killing each other? For caps? Bullets? Technology? What was the fucking point? I couldn't tell if they were raiders, gangers, settlers…and like P-21 said, what did it matter?

"We should search them," P-21 muttered. I hissed softly, but then nodded. He was right, as much as I hated to admit it. And he could do it. Glory took Scotch around the corner. I saw her peeking. Rampage had been right. I wanted to protect her innocence, but there was no such thing in the Wasteland. How could you protect them from this?

Bodies. So many bodies. And from the smears of viscera, some of them had died badly.

He came back with a scattering of ammo, caps, and a blue-banded grenade which he stowed away. And then we just left them; we couldn't tear up the asphalt for a grave, and nopony could make a fire in this place.

I was soon corrected.

A block later we found three suits of blackened power armor inside a charred café. Wood had been piled beneath them. Blackened skulls hung out of the hulks. They'd been cooked inside their armor.

I looked at the Dealer. At his somber expression. Smile, damn you. Laugh. Be somepony I could focus all my hate upon. I needed that hate. But he simply watched with tired eyes. I guess even death could get sick of himself.

* * *

The rain hadn't let up much. It came down in heavy sheets that seemed to wave over the cracked ground. I felt physically bruised, despite my barding. Lacunae's rain shield barely covered herself, Scotch, and P-21. The only silver lining I could think of was that the rain kept visibility to almost nothing; as long as I had an E.F.S. and anything dangerous didn't, we'd probably be able to avoid hostiles. We were now following the churning brown flow of the rain-swelled river. The further north we went, the bigger and more elaborate the shops became. The ones here were built along a walkway, the opposite side of which had a railing and a wall straight down to the water.

Then it started to hail. You know, I really hadn't realized it was

possible for memory-orb-sized pieces of ice to fall from the sky. Now I had. And suddenly, I wanted to go back in time, find whatever pony had discovered this valley and thought ‘Lets live here!’, and throw buckets of ice at her head.

We finally reached a plaza, and I swore the chunks were reaching hoof size. “We can’t stay out here!” I shouted over the cracking and pinging of ice blocks bouncing off the broken pavement around us. I might make it, with my head harder than any lump of ice, but from how weak Lacunae's shield appeared, it wouldn't be long until it failed under the withering barrage. I pointed at a large three-story building. ‘Silverstar Sporting Supplies’. There was a mess of debris blocking the doors, but it seemed to have the most important thing: an intact roof.

The five of us darted across, and one chunk of ice made me reassess my estimate of my head’s toughness. It nearly took me off my hooves for a minute before I was able to shake it off. We managed to shift the mess just enough to open a door…after P-21 unlocked it, of course. I took that as a good sign.

We pushed our way through and pulled the door shut, locking it behind us. A few seconds later there was a buzz, then a flicker as some of the lights tried to come to life but only made it halfway. The speakers crackled, and then some tune involving a piano and… banjos?... started to play softly. The few lights that had managed to stay lit illuminated large paintings of a gray cowpony sheriff poking fun at a bunch of scowling brown brutes. I had no idea what they were supposed to be; but apparently, from the pictures on the walls, they were big, strong, and stupid.

The square building had a large, open, airy build, with the second and third floors as balconies overlooking the large sales floor. There were more doors on the far side. One wall and most of the ceiling were glass panes, but water fell in strings and ribbons through dozens of cracks, saturating the filthy apparel that lay in heaps around the first floor. Every step squished as we moved deeper in; the junk and sodden clothes had congealed into a pasty mass.

“No red bars,” I murmured. Nothing invisible rushing out to attack us. I trotted to the far doors, but they were locked as well. There was a camp over by the cash registers, with heaps of dried food containers around four skeletons. They all had oversized cowpony hats like the one worn by the cartoon sheriff on the walls. The store employees, I suspected. I levitated two hunting rifles, but two

centuries in the wet had made them poor clubs, let alone firearms. There were other guns, too; I was a little surprised, but the moisture hadn't treated them any better. The brass- and copper-jacketed hunting rounds had fared much better inside their boxes, though, even if the boxes themselves were soggy. "Might as well see if there's anything valuable in here," I said as I looked around the cavernous space lit only by scattered, dim, flickering lamps and whatever sparse light managed to get through the clouds and windows above. Why was my mane not liking this?

I really wished I had Rampage here right now. She'd know if we were in the Flash Filly territory or not. I wanted her here just to crack off some joke and relieve the tension. I just wanted her here.

Scotch shadowed me as she checked the bullet primers for rust. I cleared out the bits in the register for trade down the road. I looked at them, an image of Princess Luna stamped on one side and one of Princess Celestia on the other. Then I heard the filly sniff, and I looked over to see her push up her goggles and rub her eyes. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Huh?" I knelt down to look her in the eyes. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Then…then why wouldn't Rampage talk to me? Why does she hate me now?" she said with a sniff. "We were going into the tunnels, and then I wake up and you're missing an eye and Glory doesn't have a wing and Rampage doesn't have her armor and everypony keeps acting funny. So…I must have done something wrong," she said as she hung her head. At least she hadn't come out of the procedure early enough to also wonder why Rampage was mysteriously only a few years older than her.

Not remembering sucks.

I took a deep breath. "Rampage doesn't hate you, Scotch. She had Reaper things she had to do. She'll be back someday." Oh I really hoped that that was true. I sighed and fed her the only line I could think of. "Don't think about it, Scotch. There's nothing down there you'd want to remember. It was really bad," I said as I stroked her mane. "I wish I didn't remember," I said sincerely. But then I never deserved to forget.

I saw the hurt in her eyes. Not from anything. Just…hurt. "Yeah," she said, frowning and kicking an empty tin. "I guess…"

"Come on. Let's find the others," I said, walking towards the back rooms. We found P-21 tapping away on the manager's terminal. A

picture on the wall showed an aged gray buck grinning smugly with a huge cowpony hat on his head and a sheriff's star on his vest. Beneath the picture, a plaque:

'Our Founder

"Sharing and caring is for suckers."'

There was an odd word…an obscure word rarely used in 99. I'd always wondered about it, but it seemed to summarize the picture perfectly: Schmuck.

"Find anything good?" I asked P-21. Scotch Tape picked up an intact book off the desk and began flipping through it.

"Unless you're really interested in this place's earnings for the last quarter, no. The only thing in here that isn't related to business is this." He opened a file.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Hey Bro. Sorry you missed another session. It was fucking wicked. Calamity crashed the fucking train into the possessed Ursa Major! Primrose was like 'So what's the damage for a train?' I just lopped off half its hitpoints right there. Still was a tough-ass fight, though. Had to pull a few crits and Calamity still lost her leg. And the Doc got eaten but, eh, Brandywine can just make another character.

Anywho, hope things are okay on the base. We all miss ya,

Bro.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Brooooo! Where are yooooooouuu?! We got another mare in the group, named Parsley. Let her play Jack since you were gone. It ain't the same. She's got the game system down but she just can't play a guy. You know? Anyway, Bro…. old Silverstar was pissed. Apparently we got big fat roaches and not the good kind, bro.

Anyway, make the next game, bro. Parsley's like bam and whoa and shwing and yeah! You can get rid of that cherry now, Bro! Hear me? Easy poooon! Talk to you soon.

Bro.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Hey Bro. Sorry to hear you won't be able to make the game anymore. No, I don't have a problem, but I dunno where we're gonna find another Smilin' Jack. I can't believe you're going to leave me alone with all these mares in the wasteland. How could you be so cruel? Let me know if you ever want a chance to play. I know things are ten gallons of suck right now for everypony. Just yesterday I got chewed out by the Sheriff about the bug problem. Got something to take care of it, I hope. Better not be

like last time.

So take it easy. Brohoof.

Bro.

PS: Know where we can pick up some male gamers?

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Hey Bro, you okay? I tried to call but Miramare says you're not there. Bro, come on and talk to me. This is Bro. I know things aren't cool right now, Bro, but just talk to me. I still got Smilin' Jack.

Hope I talk to you soon. Want to take you out for another romp in the wasteland.

Bro.

"In the wasteland?" I read aloud again, feeling a shiver down my spine.

Scotch Tape looked up from the book. "Around Appleloosa. Fighting off windigos, zombie buffalo, and mad science mares while dealing in dark magic, bullets, and grit." Then she held up the hardback book. "See?" I leaned in a little. 'Wasteland, a game of Western horror.' I looked at the cover art of a steam train like I'd seen in picture books being pulled by…ponies…while a half dozen skeletal pegasi flew overhead, kept at bay by an earth pony buck with some sort of steam driven gatling gun, a black pegasus casting a spell from floating playing cards, and a unicorn who reminded me of Vanity shooting two floating revolvers.

A game? Real life horror wasn't bad enough, so ponies had to make up others? It didn't seem like any kind of game I knew. I looked around the filthy, derelict office. "Well, if all this is a game, I'd sure like to quit and play Happy Fluffy Bunnies Land." P-21 snorted softly and even Scotch Tape seemed to like the idea. "So, nothing else?" He suddenly looked evasive, his eyes darting to the side. "What?"

He looked at the terminal and sighed, bringing up another.

To: Miramare Terminal #3224-C.

Bro. I don't know if you're alive, Bro. I'm not sure if anypony is still alive. Everything's crashed. The shield went up before the half dozen of us could get in the city. I dunno if you're going to get this, Bro. I don't even know if you're around to get this. There's green snow everywhere. Prim went out to look for survivors, and when she came back, she was dying. Gone the next day. So the rest of us just holed up in here. Just feel like all kinds of nasty.

Believe it or not, I've been making Wasteland characters to try and get

by. It's fucking crazy, bro. After the bombs and death and everything, it's all there is to do. Ironic, huh? Well, that and fuck, but I'm worn to the fucking nub, Bro. Like, can't even get it up anymore. Yeah, just like grandpa. Never thought I'd say that, man. I wish you were here so you could finally take care of that cherry of yours. Fucking ironic.

Fuck. You're probably dead and I'm giving you shit. Sorry Bro.

Lights are flickering again, dunno how much longer we'll have power. Shields are still up, so hopefully somepony comes out of the city to get us. Just wish shit would stop screaming. I think there's somepony nearby that keeps on yelling…I'd bring them in here if they'd just stop. Makes my head hurt. Till then, we'll just keep hopin'. Take care.

Bro.

Shit. Now I knew why P-21'd not shown me that one. Those little reminders of life…of millions who died for no reason. As 'millions of ponies', you could ignore it. 'Lots of ponies died. Whatever.' But turn one of those millions into 'Bro', and suddenly I was sniffing and rubbing my eyes. The Dealer just looked at me from the corner office, his lips pressed tightly together in a stark frown as he pulled his hat down over his eyes.

The lights were growing stronger now. The music crackled a little less and started playing a little message about a two for one special. 'Don't be as dumb as a buffalo, Pardner!'

"Hey…Blackjack? How many ponies do you think died in here?" Scotch Tape asked with a frown.

"Six…according to the messages," I replied, feeling tired. I thought of going back to the bedrolls by the counter. My head was killing me!

"Then why are there seven skeletons?" Scotch Tape asked. "Or eight? Nine?"

There'd been four out by the register. Three in the office…and was that all of them? I stood and trotted out into the hallway. Bones. You overlooked them in the Wasteland; there're so damn many that, eventually, you just shrug and go 'oh look, more dead.' But now I was taken in by the sight. I grabbed the sodden, rust-stained clothes and lifted them from the mess. Raider style.

"The door had been locked…" I murmured.

"To the outside. There wasn't anything to stop us from locking it once we were--" P-21 began, then stopped. He looked around. "Do you hear that?"

I did hear that. A high and distant noise…like a scream.

I ran out into the main floor, grabbed the closest mound of sodden cloth and heaved with my magic and my hooves. The lump broke free with a sickening wet pop, and soaked bones clattered free. Another. And another. There weren't six bodies here. There were dozens.

"Lacunae!" I called out. "Glory!" Glory staggered into view on the edge of the third floor balcony. "Find Lacunae! We've got to get out of here." I walked to the doors out, my already unsteady hooves not finding purchase on the sloppy ground. Now that I was paying attention to them, it was impossible to miss the bones sticking out of the rotten clothes. Most of these looked like scavengers. What a score, they must have thought. Started collecting all the things left behind…and then fell asleep wondering who was screaming. I wanted to fall asleep. My heart flopped in my chest; I swore I could almost hear the wet, slapping noise inside my chest cavity.

But that was nothing compared to the screaming.

It wasn't a true scream, not like somepony yelling for help. It was a steady sound, almost mechanical. I wasn't sure if I was hearing it with my ears or with my head, but it was growing louder and more distinct.

I ran to the doors and shouldered them hard, but the junk stacked up behind them didn't budge. I tried each one in turn but couldn't find the one we'd cleared away. In desperation, I lifted my shotgun and fired two rounds; the ballistic glass chipped. "Goddesses-damned overbuilt garbage!" I screamed as my friends staggered out onto the main floor with me.

This whole building was a trap. Ponies would come in, not notice the Enervation until it was too late, and keel over dead or die in their sleep. Others would come in and see the bounty of salvage and die before they could escape. It was like Flank and the tunnels. I felt so tired, my head pounding. Worse, my taint just seemed to go nasty around the Enervation fields. My heart was…crap…I couldn't even describe it. It didn't feel like beating so much as undulating.

Six months might have been overly optimistic.

"We've got to get out of here. We're up to our horns in Enervation," I said as they looked at each other. "Ideas?"

"Shoot our way out?" suggested Glory, starting to stroke her remaining wing in worry. I pointed at the door I'd shot. She still blasted it with her beam rifle, but it merely scorched the glass. "Oh, darn…no wonder this place is intact."

I looked at Lacunae, but she could barely stand, let alone teleport. "Okay. We're stuck, but we know about it. So, nopony fall asleep. If your healing potions have any purple at all left, drink them. If not, toss them." Stupid country banjos played some folksy tune as the lights now filled the store with steady illumination.

Most of my potions were an unwholesome shade of brown. That was fast... really fast. But if the Enervation here was that strong, why hadn't we noticed immediately? Why had those bodies rotted? The Enervation still wasn't strong enough to liquefy flesh, but it certainly seemed strong enough to prevent rotting. I drank the watery potion that remained; at least the others' healing drinks were in slightly better condition.

Okay, right now, I was really missing a super-strong striped mare. If she showed up before we keeled over, I'd give her a nice big happy kiss. "Okay. Glory, look for a back door or window or anything. I'll take a broken leg jumping from a third story window at this point." She nodded at once and headed for the stairs. "P-21, can you rig a bomb to blow open the doors?"

"I'll have to convert frag grenades into a satchel charge. It'll take a while," he said as he bit his lip, then winced. A trickle of blood dripped from the bite. "I'll get right on it."

"I'll help," Scotch said at once, and P-21 looked shocked. "I don't know much about bombs, but I know enough about fixing things to hand you tools and stuff," she said as she gestured to her utility barding. Finally, he nodded and trotted to the registers, fishing out the apple grenades from his saddlebags.

That left me with Lacunae. I trotted to where the mighty alicorn slumped and pressed my horn to hers. Suddenly, that scream increased to the point that it felt like rusty claws in my mind, like it was trying to tear me right out of my body. "Why didn't you notice sooner?"

"It…increased…" was all she said before collapsing. In that last moment, I sensed she was fighting just to keep herself together.

Increased? How could it increase? I rubbed my runny nose as I looked around the brightly lit shop. We'd moved the scrap, picked the lock, come inside, and started scavenging. I looked at the cartoon buffathingies and the grinning sheriff. I'd preferred it when the lights were dim…it looked less like the cartoon was mocking us.

Wait…A little pink pony clicked on a lightbulb in my mind. The lights came on…but not nearly all of them, at first. Slowly. We must

have tripped some sensor that started an automated system. As the power turned on, the Enervation increased. Something here was causing the Enervation…

If it hadn't been bad with the power off…

I raced towards the back of the store. P-21 was busy; if this didn't work he'd be our best shot at getting out of here. I licked my lips… and tasted blood. I rubbed my muzzle again and looked at the crimson on my barding. Oh, not good.

I really didn't want to be reduced to bloody goo and bones.

Rushing into the manager's office, I looked at the terminal. The menu didn't offer much hope. Sales figures, inventory, employee hours, messages…then I spotted, at the bottom, 'store functions'. I scrolled down to it and clicked.

> Store automation: On

> Lights: On

> Ambiance: On

> Coffee Machine: Warning. Critical failure!

I didn't look much further than that. I turned everything to 'off'. The lights flicked off one after another, then music crackled and went silent. The screaming continued. Okay. Plan B. I pulled back my barding, took off a brace, and with my sword sliced my foreleg. Holding the floppy limb outwards I started to sweep it back and forth.

If whatever was doing this was deep underground, we were screwed. But then I felt a sharp stab in the outstretched leg…the wound seemed to be spreading right in front of my eye! I did the worst possible thing and started to limp in that direction, into the back of the store. There were just heaps of ruined clothes and other litter, but I kept walking. Kept walking even as my insides clenched. Whichever way hurt more, that was the way I went.

This was a really bad idea. I could feel the injury spreading. But the idea was working. Whatever the source, it seemed to be in the far back of the store. Almost there…almost…and then I came to a concrete wall and groaned. My head was splitting; my whole body ached. There was nothing here but a stupid metal box on the wall.

A stupid metal box straight ahead of me. It wasn't big, maybe the size of my hoof. It read 'Roseluck' something or other. My eye wasn't seeing very clearly. I slowly opened the box. Inside were a pair of wires attached to a metal ring that let out a baleful green glow. Just looking at it made my eye throb.

This…little thing? This was the source of the Enervation? Or was it magnifying it somehow? I tried to reach for it, but the muscle spasms in the limb made my whole body ache. I lifted the shotgun with my magic, but my focus was shit. Once again, earth pony firearm techniques saved the day. I fired into the box again and again, my ears pounding.

Seven shells later, the box was scrap. The thin metal ring flew into the air and disappeared into the mess. It didn't matter, though. The glow was gone and the agony in my skull retreated to a dull throb. The screaming faded to a whisper and then to silence. Slowly, I started back, the end of my left foreleg looking like it'd been put in a food processor. It wasn't hard to find my way. Just follow all the red. I limped onto the sales floor just in time to meet Lacunae coming towards the hall.

"Feel better?" I asked, and then my eye rolled back and I passed out on the filth-covered floor.

* * *

"The Goddess wishes for me to remind you, once again, that this does not constitute gratitude or obligation to you. She merely does not wish for so valuable an asset to be lost to the vagaries of the Wasteland unless it can suit her purposes," Lacunae said as her horn glowed a faint purple. The dark alicorn's lips curled a little more. "Oh, she apparently did not want me to tell you that last part." The magic was knitting together flesh and tendons under Glory's watchful eye.

"Yeah, yeah. I love her too," I muttered sarcastically as my injury slowly healed. I would have liked it even more if she'd healed Glory back when she'd gotten injured…but that was apparently too much to ask back then. "I'm glad the Goddess finally taught you a healing spell."

"Oh, she didn't teach it. The spell is Windyreed's. She was a medic during the war." Lacunae made a face. "It was simply put into me by the Goddess. To learn it would have taken far too long."

"So why doesn't she just put a bajillion spells into every alicorn and take over the Wasteland?" Glory said as she supervised the procedure. Apparently having the spell didn't make her an expert on how to use it.

"She's tried that. The results were unfortunate. The mind would

have so many options, most of them alien to us, and we would make mistakes. Rather, we are given a minimum of spells to focus on, but we know them exceedingly well. And we are always learning new applications for them. There is one mare in particular who is definitely pushing our learning curve." She gave a little smile. "I am something of a special case, though," she added.

I looked at her, the alicorn dustbin of unwanted thoughts and feelings. The pony who never was a pony. I wanted to ask who she was before becoming an alicorn. Family. Friends. A life. All those things she'd never had.

"This is amazing, though, Blackjack," Glory said, once more excited. "Nopony has ever been able to find a source for Enervation! It was always assumed to be some kind of magical damage to the environment or some zebra weapon, but its distribution's been a mystery. If it's caused by devices, then we might be able to eventually remove them!"

"I don't know what it was. I was pretty messed up at that point. But I don't think it's gone gone. Just turned back down to normal," I said as I watched them work in the normal Hoofington gloom. Evidently, after turning everything off, I'd powered down the terminal. Now we couldn't get it turned back on.

"Still, it's a phenomenal breakthrough," Glory said with glee. "I so can't wait to write my teacher about it. Hee!" She was literally dancing on her hooves. I listened for Rampage to make a sarcastic quip about Glory being an egghead…but nothing. Goddesses, I missed her. P-21 was packing away his satchel bomb; Lacunae could teleport him outside to reopen the door. Scotch Tape was looking for any food, medicine, or ammo that was still good. She was almost as good at scavenging as her daddy…but I kept that to myself. See? Blackjack can be taught.

So when we came in, that box powered up and started killing all of us. Why? How? No idea. But at least we knew what was causing it. I tried to think of what was written on that box before blasting it. Roseluck…gardens? Businesses? Security? Ugh, now I was afraid I was making stuff up trying to remember.

We've dodged another bullet, I thought as Lacunae finished. Not that I'd say it, but her healing had left me stiff and sore in that limb. Well, beggars can't be choosers, Blackjack. The bony bastard hadn't taken me yet. But as I looked at the bones behind the register, I heard the shuffling in my mind. 'Just wait,' they seemed to say.

* * *

We reached a major road that came out of the Core; another four-lane highway that cut straight as an arrow…due east. Okay, so it wouldn't be much good for us. The bigger concern was the broken bridge that had once spanned the river. What remained of the huge concrete arch was covered with wagons of all types, and they'd been cobbled together into a settlement of a decidedly unpleasant sort. Spiked decorations were never a good sign around Hoofington.

"So…what are we going to do?" P-21 asked as he looked up at the... town.

"Can't we just go around?" Glory asked, pointing at the wet walkway that went under the bridge.

He pointed a hoof up. "Would you look at that place? Are you telling me we should just leave it? They could be raiders!"

"Could be, but they're not attacking us. Hoofington is dangerous enough; are you suggesting we go out of our way to pick fights with whatever ponies we come across if we don't like the look of them?" Glory countered with a scowl. My friends glared at each other.

"Hey. Hey. Simmer down a notch," I said in concern. Glory and P-21 weren't usually on the same page, but they rarely looked ready to blast each other. I looked over at the worried Scotch and sighed. What I wouldn't give for Rampage to be here right now…"Look, there's a really simple way to resolve this." Both blinked at me; I supposed that Blackjack as the voice of reason *was* a little surprising. "I'll trot up there and say hi. If they shoot at me, we'll know that they're bad ponies." Like that scavenger near the MASEBS tower? I winced inwardly. "Um, if they shoot at me a *lot* while shouting about how they're going to rape me or eat me or fuck me up…*then* we know they're bad ponies," I amended.

Okay. Now THAT was the look I was more familiar with.

"Blackjack, are you trying to get killed?" Glory blurted. "We just healed you!"

"That has to be one of the most idiotic plans I've ever heard!" P-21 retorted simultaneously.

I stomped…and the effect was ruined by me splashing myself with muddy water. My lips twitched for several seconds before I pointed a hoof at Glory. "You're right. We shouldn't just shoot everypony we come across." And then I pointed at P-21. "And you're right; if

they're all cannibals or something, then we've got an obligation to prevent them from hurting anypony else. So, do either of you have an alternative?"

P-21 looked up at the bridge; the first fifty feet were completely open. "No…"

"Okay. So, I'll trot up and say hi. P-21, you sneak up while they're paying attention to me in case they're bad. Glory, hang back with Scotch and give me cover in case I have to run. Lacunae, if things go real bad, pop in and shield me so we can fall back. Remember, this close, the city's air defenses might find you a fine target, so no flying." Lacunae nodded once.

This just screamed 'bad idea', but what could I do? Somepony had to pry into other ponies' business. Might as well be me. "Well, let's go say hello…"

* * *

I walked towards the settlement with Taurus's rifle beside me. I needed a name for the hunting rifle…Bulldozer? Nah. Old Bull? Maybe, but it needed to be cooler…

As I stepped onto the bridge, my PipBuck chirped. 'Fallen Arch' appeared in my E.F.S.'s navigation tool. Now there was a name to inspire trust and community. As I approached the main gate, the back hatch of a covered steel wagon, the two watchponies stationed above it turned and started. They began banging on a metal drum, calling more to the gate.

"Who goes there?" called a buck through the downpour as they mustered atop the metal wagons blocking the bridge. I glanced to the side and saw P-21 wiggle underneath one of the old vehicles and disappear from sight.

"Security!" I yelled back. If anything was going to make them start shooting…but they hadn't yet. I took that as a good sign.

"What do you want?" the buck yelled.

I'm contemplating wiping all of you out. "Just to get out of the rain," I answered.

"Go away," the buck retorted.

"I got caps for trade."

"I said go away!" A rifle shot pinged off the asphalt before me.

Then I saw P-21's face emerge from under the wagon. He looked me in the eye and shook his head slowly, drawing a hoof across his

throat.

I sighed and then narrowed my eye at the half dozen ponies on the wall. “Now listen up! I am wet, tired, and now cranky. You will drop your weapons and open the door to this place. Whatever messed up shit you’re doing in there will be ended, and then I’ll be on my way. Otherwise, I am going to bring down such a fury upon you that you’ll wish you were never born. I will tear down this fucking bridge with my bare hooves and dump it all into the river and let Celestia deal with you in the everafter!” I shouted as I started to pace. “So what is it going to be? Because I’m sick of waiting!”

They stared at each other as I stood there with rain dripping off Taurus’s barrel. I could see a sniper rifle, but its owner was out in the open. He was first…then…

Then weapons hit the ground and they were scrambling out of sight.

I blinked in surprise. “Huh,” I muttered lamely as a terrified buck pushed open the doors to the settlement. Slowly, I approached, watching my E.F.S. for red among the blue.

“Please don’t kill us,” he begged as I passed. I looked back at Glory, Scotch, and Lacunae and gestured for them to stay back. I walked through the wagon; the far end had been cut away.

Fallen Arch wasn’t much as far as settlements went. I gathered its name was due to the hundred-foot span of fallen bridge it backed onto. A half-dozen wagons had been converted into rusty shelters. “I need everypony out here right now,” I called out into the rain. One by one, the bucks emerged…and only bucks. There were maybe eight or ten. My eye swept the rusted shelters…but there was one building full of blue bars. “I said everypony!”

Then the door opened and two more bucks emerged, a mare wearing a filthy rag trailing them. One of the pair had his mouth clasped on a detonator. The other, who I took for a leader given that everypony kept looking at him, cleared his throat. “Hello. My name is Collar.” Oh, this boded well. “I’d welcome you, but I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave here, Miss Security. You have no business being here and no right to judge us.”

I looked over and picked out P-21’s blue bar off to the side. He peeked at me, and I looked back at the leader. “Well, that sounds like there’s something here that needs judging. I’d really like a peek inside that wagon there,” I said as I pointed with my PipBuck,

glancing over at P-21 again. He gave a tiny nod and then disappeared.

"That holds our mares and foals," he replied sharply. "You will not deny us our property." Property? Then my eye picked out the collar on the mare's throat. Slavers. Collar coughed. "However, we are not unwilling to compromise. Leave now, and we shall allow you to take Clover with you."

I felt a loathing like I hadn't felt in a long time. Raiders were sick. Gangers were violent. However, nothing churned my stomach like the thought of a pony selling another pony. It reminded me of 99.

"Now, that sounds pretty generous," I said as I saw P-21 slip as quietly as a ghost through a window in the trailer; there were advantages to being an undersized sneaky pony. "But I'm afraid it ain't quite enough. Why don't you let all those mares go, and I'll call it fair."

"These mares are our property and our livelihood. Without them, we are as good as dead. If you try and take them by force, then we may as well liquidate our stock," he replied calmly. Liquidate? Seriously? And I wasn't taking his property; I was freeing ponies! I was burning to vaporize his head in the worst way…

"Your livelihood? Your... your property?!" I fumed, my eye narrowing as I glared at him. "You're telling me the only way you can survive is by selling the flesh of other ponies?" I knew that right now P-21 must have been taking off those collars. I had to buy him time. "Find another way! A better way!"

"This is the better way!" he retorted. "For generations we fished the scum out of the river, salvaged what we could, and hunted what we found in the marsh, and still it wasn't enough! I watched my grandfather get consumed by disease and my father taken by famine! Finally, we sold our surplus population and purchased enough food for the rest to survive. I sold my daughters myself, rather than see them starve. We rent our females, or sell them, to sustain the community. To sustain civilization. We've done what we must to survive."

Wait... "You're telling me…" I couldn't even finish that thought. These weren't just captured ponies…these were their own families? 'Surplus population?' They didn't just hold mares as slaves, but bred them! Now I was glad I'd come up here. "Well. How nice. What you must do to survive now is take off each and every one of those collars and toss them into the river. You want to sell somepony into

slavery, sell yourself!" Shit, I needed to stall. Stall! But I felt as though everything was just sweeping me along.

It looked like he wasn't in the mood for banter. Honestly, neither was I. The leader sighed. "I have no wish to fight you, Security. I have no doubt of your peril. But this is our community and we will ask you one more time to leave." The mare stared at me with wide, terrified eyes. She wet herself like an animal. The sight made my heartbeat pound in my ears.

"You want to fucking die?" I shouted. The buck with the detonator in his mouth flinched.

Clover exploded.

It wasn't like a grenade or anything I'd experienced. In fact the detonation was a sharp 'Krak' noise. The explosion was focused by the heavy metal collar. After all, nopony wanted a slave whose death might injure the owner. The resulting blast sent a pink hourglass fanning out above and below the collar as everything between her head and shoulders was atomized. Pieces of hot pony mixed with the rain.

And that was the point at which everything transformed into one red scream.

I took one look at the one with the detonator in his mouth, hit S.A.T.S., and with three magic bolts of energy vaporized his head and the detonator too. I barely felt the impact on my left; the stallions there had taken advantage of my blind side to rearm. My barding soaked up the impacts, and my jellied bones bent rather than broke; a small blessing, I supposed, as I spun around and levitated out my shotgun. Black antipersonnel shells were loaded, and the flechettes stripped pony flesh from pony bone as I blasted cloud after cloud of razor sharp darts into the stallions.

The plan now was simple: kill every last one of these fuckers before they could get to another deton-- shit! I twisted around, looking for the leader. Where was he? Red bars were milling about all over the place. Green flashes and white arrows of magic announced Glory and Lacunae's arrival. I just had to find the leader. If there was another detonator, he'd have it!

I figured the most intact wagon would be his, but they were all pretty thrashed. I ignored the bullets biting into me; the burning pain helped me focus as I reloaded the antipersonnel rounds. I saw a door closing and raced to it, ramming it open with my shoulder. A stallion was trying to hide under his bed! Not the buck I needed,

though!

I grabbed his tail in my teeth and yanked him out. “Where is Collar?” I shouted, glancing at his own hoofcuff cutie mark. I kicked him hard onto his back. I wanted to kill him then and there. I pressed my shotgun to his crotch and screamed, “Where is he?”

“Next door!” he cried, losing control of both his bladder and bowels as he sobbed. “Please don’t kill me!”

I wanted to. I wanted to kill every last one. Chapel didn’t need to sell ponies. Riverside didn’t. Megamart didn’t. Hell, I hadn’t even seen a slave collar in Flotsam! If other places could have society without this shit, then so be it.

But I’m not an executioner. I didn’t kill Roses. I wasn’t going to kill this one. But Celestia save me, I *wanted* to.

However, I couldn’t just trot away either. The shotgun butt on his reproductive equipment might have been excessive, but it wasn’t fatal. He curled up, whimpering. “Get another life. I see you like this again and you’re paint!” I wasn’t sure if he understood me, curled up and sobbing like that, but I’d wasted too many seconds on him. My hooves slipped out from under me as I skidded on the wet asphalt, my braced limbs flailing in the air as I struggled back to my feet. My friends were shouting for me, but I couldn’t wait. I couldn’t listen. And I charged into the last wagon, slamming it open with my shoulder.

Collar turned to face me, snapping a bomb collar around his neck. His eyes were hard, his scowl contemptuous…but his smile was triumphant. I panted as I lifted the gun, looking for another detonator. There wasn’t one. “Selling yourself now? Does that mean somepony is actually going to listen to me for a change?”

“You scrapped my only detonator.” Why didn’t I feel any better as he reached up to the clasp of his collar? “Ever hear of linked collars, Security? Without the detonator setting them off…if one goes off… they all go off.” I felt a sensation like I’d just had my belly sliced open and everything had tumbled out.

“Don’t you want to live?” I asked desperately as I took the gun off him. I only had one or two magic bullets left in me. Could I take him out with two to the head? …did I want to risk it? “I’ll let you walk out of here! Right now. I’ll fucking pay you!” I shouted at him. “I got six thousand caps on me right now! Just…don’t!” If I killed him, would it go off? Did he have to open it or yank hard enough?

He spat on my chest. “You killed my son just now out there,

Security. And you've killed my daughters. You've destroyed my home. Just like that. Was it hard for you? Did you even work up a sweat when you came and judged us?" he replied as he stared into my eye. I knew that fucking look, and brought the shotgun back around. "You should have just walked away, Security." I pulled the trigger as his hoof jerked hard on the bomb collar. The boom mixed with a sharper *Krak*.

And the sounds of popping filled the air outside. I stood petrified as Collar's decapitated body swayed and collapsed. I stood there, spattered with blood like rain water. My lip trembled. "I would have let you live…I would have paid you…damn it... " I clenched my eye shut and covered my face. "Damn it!" I yelled into my hooves.

No matter what I did…no matter what I tried…the Wasteland won. It killed a little more. It cut a little deeper. The Dealer just looked on at the far side of this little hovel, and I screamed as I pointed the shotgun and unloaded every round into him. When the gun was expended, I loaded explosive rounds next; I didn't give a damn what they did to the condition of the weapon. Again and again the shotgun roared as I destroyed everything in sight. I didn't care if there was life's supply of Wild Pegasus in here. Everything was blasted. Incendiary rounds lit the bed on fire. The stove was soon ablaze.

For a horrible instant I wanted to stay in there and burn too. Then I smacked that idea and myself for thinking it.

I couldn't do this. Not now. Coughing and hacking, I staggered away. Slowly I stepped out into the rain. Step by step I walked towards the wagon trailer that had held the slaves. How many had he been able to save? How many…I saw Glory and Lacunae huddled around P-21, keeping the rain off him. Scotch Tape was being violently ill.

No other blue bars. Not a one. If there was a survivor, they'd fled out of range.

Fallen Arch was a slaughterhouse and I had been the butcher. Had I just walked past…no, that would have perpetuated this. So now was quick atrocity okay if it stopped an ongoing one? I walked slowly to P-21 as he shook so hard that Glory could barely get the Med-X into him. His forehooves had been blown off. Blood was painted across his face. He stared up at me, tears running down his cheeks. "I tried…I really tried... " he whimpered. "I didn't let them

die, Blackjack. Please. Please believe me."

Did he think I would believe he'd just stood back and let their collars be detonated? As if I'd ever think he'd do such a thing…

As if he'd ever do such a thing…

No. Don't think about it. I couldn't say a word as Glory injected him with Hydra. She didn't raise the smallest concern or complaint; P-21 needed his hooves back. A little taint was a small price to pay. The poison spreads a little more.

I looked at the bloodsoaked bodies. Pony blood flowing like a river out the door. Pony blood mixing with the rain…Flowing out to meet the river. I'd never been happier for the rain. Never. It washed everything away.

Afterwards, I had to do something for the bodies, but I was at a loss. The slavers were carrion, but their victims deserved… something! Ponies weren't exactly flammable…there wasn't any ground suitable for burial. The thought of dumping them into the river chilled me even more, but it might be the only thing we could do.

Then Lacunae stepped forward and her horn glowed. "What are you doing?" I asked softly.

"What a Goddess should," she answered, and the first body lifted in her magical grip and started floating higher and higher over the river. A red light atop the massive war wall surrounding the Core grew brighter and brighter, and then a beam struck the body. For a few seconds a star burned over the river before the ash was scattered.

Then another star. Another. Another…

Another…

Lacunae was gracious enough to tend to the fallen slavers as well. She was a better pony than I. There'd be one corner of the Wasteland devoid of bones. Glory had to do the scavenging, and she managed only a hoofful of bullets and caps. To be honest, I couldn't care less. I just wanted to get going. I was sick of the rain all of a sudden. Sick of the blood. Sick of everything.

* * *

It wasn't my fault. I knew that. It wasn't P-21's, either. He wouldn't have lost his hooves and nearly his face if he hadn't been trying to take the collars off. The fault lay with Collar. He and the others had

decided years ago to engage in selling out their own. It didn't matter if they justified it as simple survival. You could justify anything if you worked at it long enough. They'd set up a community based on an atrocity and then had the misfortune of me trotting along.

So why did I feel guilty? Was it because I'd been cocky, striding up there all brash and bold? They ought to rename Dash 'Blackjack', then. I could have stalled longer. Heck, I could have pulled out… but would Collar have planned something once he knew that I was around?

The Dealer walked beside me, but I wasn't talking to him and he wasn't talking to me. He'd already said his piece. There wasn't anything more to add. 'You're afraid of screwing up…'

Why? I was so *good* at it.

Clearly, I'd never really appreciated what 'inches' of rain was really like, but at least we were fortunate enough not to have to measure pounds of ice. The only sign left of the hail was the occasional overlarge ice chunk melting beside the path. Still, the rain was strong enough that nothing else was stupid enough to be following the river in it. We were passing the twisted remains of a marina, the boats and docks and pilings all tangled together in heaps from the river's powerful flow.

The rain was so heavy that we almost missed the sign. That was a trick in and of itself given its size; it was painted over a billboard that had slid down the face of an apartment building. Somepony had painted, in deep red letters, two words.

Hoofington Rises.

I felt a prickle along my spine and glanced over at the Core. Hoofington Rises? A slogan from two centuries ago reappearing here? Now? The paint wasn't weathered much. My friends watched me as I trotted towards it and put my hoof on the red letters. No one paints a thirty-foot-wide, twenty-foot-tall slogan randomly.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern, snapping me out of it. We were getting soaked. Well, except for Lacunae and Scotch, of course.

"Nothing. Just…don't you think it's weird?" I asked, and Glory gave a crooked smile in response.

"Blackjack, we just escaped from a sporting goods store that was killing us with some sort of arcane device. Yesterday, we met a two-century-old pickled pony in a jar. And the day before that…" She

trailed off, glancing at Scotch before she coughed. “Anyway. My wierdometer’s been busted for some time now.” She laughed as she nudged my rump, then frowned. “Actually, I’ve never had one. I mean, what would it detect, and how would you scale it... ”

“I get the idea, Glory,” I replied with a smile, the first little smile I’d given in hours.

“It’s just a sign, Blackjack,” P-21 said quietly as he flicked his mane, trying to shake the water out of his eyes. He still had little pieces of pony in his hair, but at least he still had his hooves and his face.

“Yeah,” I muttered, giving the sign one last long look before continuing along the hoofpath that ran above the wave-bashed marina. Just a sign…

* * *

“Okay. It’s official. Hoofington gets two hundred inches of suck my dock!” I muttered as we continued north while the river curved away to the west. The buildings were changing from fancy shops to more businesslike structures. Most were five or six stories; nothing compared to the towers in the Core, of course, but tall compared to what we’d been seeing for the past while. We were going slightly uphill, which, combined with all the rain pouring down on us, meant that half the time it was like we were trying to wade up a creek. The storm drains couldn’t handle all the water, and so it was surging and trickling around us all over the place. I was up to my knees in the cold flow.

Then the ground exploded.

Of course it exploded! Everything spontaneously explodes around me! Pipes! Vertibucks! Mares! Hell, I made Deus explode twice! So, really, I should not have been as surprised as I was by the missile blast that knocked me off my hooves and sent me rolling back till I hit P-21 and Glory. Lacunae, who’d kept herself and Scotch aloft, immediately raised her shield. Good thing, too, given the barrage of gatling gun fire that sprayed against it. I followed the blinking line of fire to a balcony…

Oh. Hello, Steel Rangers.

A pair of them. They were firing missiles and guns at my friend and the filly levitated alongside her. The mare’s purple shield flashed

white with every impact. Lacunae focused all her strength on keeping it up, and more missiles from one of the suits of power armor streaked towards her. The shield flashed again and again as she struggled to maintain it.

I'd seen Steel Ranger power armor before; frankly, I wasn't all that impressed…mostly because I didn't have any. But having some suits fire at me now, I had to admit that I really did not want to fight these ponies. The heavy metal seemed much more…substantial… than I anticipated now that it was firing at my friends.

Then the shield exploded as a blast knocked both of them from the air. Scotch gave a shriek and I spun as I reached out with my telekinesis to try and catch her. I barely slowed her, and I heard the crack of her landing hard. Lacunae screamed as bullets sawed through her hide while she tried to raise another flickering defense. Scotch Tape wasn't moving.

I chowed down on a tablet of Buck and charged at the cover of the first Steel Ranger. My inventory said I'd picked up some Flash from somewhere. Fuck it. I floated it out as I ran as fast as my clattering braces allowed and bit on the tube, letting the chem fill my lungs. Time slowed to a crawl as I closed the distance. The Steel Ranger seemed to realize there was a threat other than my alicorn friend. I left the Flash-induced acceleration just in time to enter the slow time of S.A.T.S. and toggle four shots to the Ranger's skull.

The first blast blackened her armor. The second shattered the glowing eyepiece. The third opened a foot-long crack in the side of the helmet. The fourth peeled away a jagged spur of metal. I saw pink skin and a terrified blue eye staring back at me as the targeting spell wore off. I pushed hard, my Buck-infused body lifting and shoving. I felt like I was an orange mare pushing over a fully loaded apple cart. One brace gave beneath my barding, but still I lifted until the whole suit of armor fell over with a metallic crash. Vigilance pressed against that eye as I stared down at her.

The Dealer stood a short ways away. *Pull the trigger*, his solemn face seemed to say. What's one more body? You bitch and moan about the dead, so make some more. Ponies fall like rain in the Hoof. Pull the trigger. Do it.

I'm so sick of bodies.

"She's okay, Blackjack!" Glory yelled. My eye bored down into the Ranger's. One more body. One more. What was one more?

Be kind. Do better. Be strong. I had one Dealer and four ponies all

fighting with the overwhelming urge to light a bonfire. But slowly, bit by bit…I reasserted my control.

"I don't want to fight you," I said slowly, my voice trembling. "I don't want to kill you. So stop fighting me…please…" I didn't quite trust myself as I pulled the gun back. She slowly rose to her hooves. The armor gave a pink flash and repaired itself before my eye. If there'd been a chance to kill her…it was gone now.

"Salad? You okay?" asked the second Ranger as I backed off. For a moment I was certain I was finished. The other stood on a balcony above us, still raining bursts of gatling fire down on Lacunae. Her magic arrows had gouged holes in its armor, but it still fired.

"Hey, knock it off, Radishes!" boomed the first to the other as she rose. She had a missile launcher and the biggest machinegun thing I'd ever seen. It looked like it fired grenades; the only guns I'd seen that were bigger had been Deus's cannons and Gun. The other was armed with a gatling gun and something... was that an IF-100 miniature howitzer on her other side? I'd only seen one in the Ironshod Firearms Special Edition Catalogue! "These aren't Flashers or Reapers…I think." I gave a terse nod. The Buck was making my heart beat so bad that it felt like it was going to crawl out of my chest.

"But that one's an alicorn, Fruit Salad. Aren't we supposed to kill those on sight?" said the other as she jumped from the balcony and landed with an easy crash. Somehow that simple, agile, and carefree act scared me even more than the guns. The howitzer flipped out as she spread her legs, bracing herself. Suddenly, that feeling of them not wanting to fight was diminishing rapidly. "I bet Brown Betty can get through that shield."

I rose to my hooves and shook myself hard. Think, Blackjack! What was a good excuse for my friend being... different? "My friend isn't one of those... ah... monsters," I said as I pointed at Lacunae, who looked back at me in surprise. "She always said she wanted to be like Princess Luna and she came across some killing joke!" I grinned, trying to will them to believe my flimsy lie as I added lamely, "We came out here to get away from those... monsters!" We were doomed... .

"Er…that's right," Lacunae said, looking down at me in some confusion. "Call me…Luna."

The pair looked at each other, and then Radishes shrugged and Brown Betty retracted and folded in. Fruit Salad still seemed to be

regarding us suspiciously, though. “Well, best stay away from Ironmare. Actually, it’s best if you turned around and went somewhere else. Anywhere else. This whole area’s a warzone. Who are you ponies?”

“I’m Security, and these are my friends,” I said as I gestured behind me. “We’re actually looking for the Steel Rangers. We need to talk to somepony in charge about this war.” And find some way to stop it. They looked at each other, as if trying to decide whether to believe me or not.

“Well, that’s not me, ma’am. The pony ultimately in charge is Elder Crunchy Carrots aboard the HMS *Celestia*, or you could talk to Star Paladin Steel Rain at the front. Otherwise, you’d need to see Archivist Napalm Strike.” Fruit Salad pointed to the north with a hoof. “I’ve got to warn you, though, we’re not exactly open to outsiders, so your business had better be serious. It feels like we’re fighting half the Goddesses-damned Hoof right now.”

“They could talk to him,” Radishes said. “I’m sure he’d be willing to listen. He’s always willing.”

“Him? Him wh--” Fruit Salad began, but suddenly shook their head hard. “Oh no, not him! That’s crazy, Radish! That guy’s a nutcase!”

“Who’s a nutcase?” Honestly, with my track record, I might be better off with a nutcase. And boy, that wasn’t saying much, was it?

“Paladin Bombs,” Fruit Salad muttered. “Personally, I’d stay away from him. The guy is a complete freak.”

“You just don’t like him because he’s a unicorn,” Radishes chided.

“No. I don’t like him because he’s a *nutcase* who sawed off his own horn to become a paladin,” Fruit Salad countered. Okay, maybe the nutcase option wasn’t so good.

“Not that this conversation’s wandering into Freakyville territory, but what are you two doing out here?” P-21 asked as he looked at the pair.

“Well, you’re not Reapers, so I suppose it’d be okay to tell you. We’re skirmishing, trying to keep all the gangs from organizing. We’re outnumbered but not outgunned,” Fruit Salad said, and the machine gun thing let out an ominous ‘klak’ as something loaded. “We were playing tag with some Flash Fillies near their base when they hit one of us with a spark grenade. Completely fried his systems. He’s probably dead. Of all the gangs, the Flashers pose the biggest threat with their shock mines. One or two of those and we’re sitting ducks.”

"He's a male. You know Flashers like to play with them before finishing them off," Radishes commented. I gave an inward groan. Doesn't anypony just have *normal* sex in this place?

"Are they holed up in the Flash Industries building?" Glory asked as she looked from the Rangers to me.

"Yeah. That's their main base. Not a settlement, just where their leader, Diamond, issues orders."

"Anything else? Numbers? Do they keep slaves?" I asked, and saw P-21 wince.

"A few dozen, and no, Flashers don't do that slavery thing. Robbery and release, mostly, unless you're a buck. Or a Steel Ranger. Then they'll dust you," Radishes said. "Not at all like the Burner Boys. Those freaks are sick. They like taking families, wiring up mom and dad, and sending them out as suicide bombers. Otherwise they'll cook the kids. You see anypony wearing red, kill 'em."

"Red, it's dead," I muttered with a small smile. "I think I can remember that. Any other gangs?"

"There's the Halfhearts, though they're mostly out west. Grimmest damn ponies you're ever gonna meet. And the Highlanders, but they're not as bad as the rest. You can find them off to the east. Some zebra tribals or something to the northeast. Ghouls, of course, creeping all over the place. And the damned Enclave." Radishes said, and at once Glory stepped forward.

"What's that about the Enclave?" the gray pegasus asked with a worried frown.

"They're skulking all over this fight. Not really picking a side…we think. But there're a lot of Reapers with bright and shiny energy weapons and spark grenades," Fruit Salad said as the Ranger looked to the north. "Might be from the Fillies…but they usually don't give away their toys. If you could confirm it, I know Star Paladin Steel Rain would appreciate it."

I chewed my lip in thought. "I'll see what I can do," was all I could say. I'd have to get a better look at what I was dealing with before I could commit.

"Thanks. Gotta get Hoofington under control. Like the star paladin says, it's our duty to safeguard the technology of the kingdom. Can't let these Reapers control the city," Fruit Salad said, turning to Radishes. "Come on. Let's go play some more tag." The two disappeared into the rain.

We took some cover in some ruins, mostly to get out of the rain

again but also to talk. A stream trickled through the middle of the blasted shop we were using. Not exactly a place to hole up for the night. “So…is there a plan?” P-21 asked softly, rubbing his leg idly as he looked me. His eyes seemed to say ‘more of a plan than at Arch?’

There damn well better be. “We need to get in good with the Steel Rangers,” I said as I looked in the direction the two had gone. “Otherwise, they’re never going to listen. And hopefully, if we make them like us before telling them, they’ll forgive us for starting this fight in the first place.”

“And what if the war doesn’t stop?” Glory’s question was one I didn’t want to try to answer. Her eyes fixed on her hooves before she glanced at me and continued, “Are we just going to walk away and let them rip each other to pieces?”

I sighed, rubbing my temples. I wished Rampage was here. She’d been our guide, of sorts. She could tell us about the Rangers and what their goals were. Give me a hint if I should back them or not. But she wasn’t, and I had to make a choice again. I looked at Scotch, who had busted a leg in that fall. It could have been her neck. Fortunately, Lacunae was healing her snapped limb. Another injury for following me.

It was scaring me to death.

Just hours ago I’d made a choice and it’d killed thirteen mares. It hadn’t been my fault, but there was no denying that I was the instigator. And while I didn’t feel that it’d been wrong to try and do the right thing…

I closed my eye and watched Clover’s head blast apart.

“We’ll worry about that later.” I looked at Lacunae for a long moment. “Do you know anything about the Steel Rangers?”

Lacunae huffed softly, looking sour. “The Steel Rangers are a relic. Two hundred years ago, they were founded by Applejack for the war effort. They were elite shock troops of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. When the bombs fell, they weathered the attack better than the rest of the military and government. They retreated to their bunkers, made their silly oaths, sealed them up, and waited. When they finally crept out of their holes, they found themselves a formidable power. However, their ideology utterly prevents them from assisting others.”

“Why is that?” Glory asked in concern. I could understand why; swap a few words and you’d be talking about the Enclave.

The alicorn fluffed her wings in irritation. “They have the capacity to be protectors, but their ideology is to be stewards of Equestria’s technology. Their oath is to protect technology, not ponies who would benefit from it. Over the last two centuries, that ideology has defined them. Most couldn’t care less about the scum living here if it meant hoarding more weapons and technology from the past. As I said, they are a relic. Outdated ideals and misguided motivation. If they had known about EC-1101, they would have gutted your stable to possess it and then locked it up somewhere rather than use it.”

Great. Another group looking to get my PipBuck. I supposed the only reason those two didn’t pounce on mine was because it didn’t look anything like a traditional PipBuck. I was surprised at her bitter tone, though. “Sounds like you have a problem with them.”

Lacunae blinked, then shrugged. “They’re not capable of fixing anything. The Goddess wishes to protect pony life, transforming it into a form able to withstand the threats of the Wasteland. Steel Rangers simply pillage and hoard. They also recognize that alicorns are the future of the pony race and so persecute us with extreme prejudice. Most of our losses have been to their weaponry.” She looked thoughtfully in the direction the two had gone. “I was honestly quite surprised that they believed you, but I suppose your excuse was explanation enough for why one of my kind would be alone with a group of ponies.”

Well, that was going to be a problem. And the fact that these Flashers were not going to mix well with P-21…

I closed my eye as the rain streamed in ribbons around me. I felt something crumpling inside me as I leaned back against the cracked wall. It was like I was a bag that was slowly deflating. The Wasteland had beaten me once in 99. Almost again out on Star Point. And now I felt it creeping through me. Insidious thoughts. Horrible thoughts. It was like there was a battle going on inside me and I was losing.

Because I didn’t want my friends hurt anymore.

“What are you thinking, Blackjack?” Glory asked as she knelt beside me, shielding me with her wing. I opened my mouth and closed it again. It was like a band slowly constricting on my brain. I had to say it, but it was like the words were in some strange language.

“I…” I rasped, then choked. I couldn’t say it. I had to, but I couldn’t.

"She doesn't want us to go with her," P-21 said quietly. I kept my eye squeezed shut and nodded. There was only the sound of pouring rain.

"But…why?" she asked in a hurt tone. I would rather get shot in the face again than hear that note in her voice.

"I don't want to lose you. I…I don't want you hurt. None of you." The words were like poison dripping out of my mouth. "I don't want P-21 to have to fight mares like…like the Overmare. I don't want Lacunae killed for being what she is. I need to keep doing this…but you…you don't. You can leave…go back to Chapel. Go have a life that's not following me around getting shot up." I kept seeing Clover exploding before my eye, seeing Glory's wing peel away, seeing P-21 raped by the Overmare, me ramming Vigilance into Lacunae's mouth. Images coming again and again. I imagined a small pegasus with a sweeping mane holding me like Mom.

"You don't have to come with me. You don't owe me anything… I'm just…I'm scared. All right? I'm scared to death that I'm going to get you all killed because I screw up." I saw Clover exploding as if in S.A.T.S., the fear in her eyes frozen between the instant she was alive and the instant she was dead. It was as fast as that. One mistake. One moment of random chance. I had no idea who she was…just a name and a face and a death because I couldn't keep a cool head.

Nopony spoke for the longest time. Then Glory asked faintly, "Do you think I have a life in Chapel?" I turned to look at her, to ask how she could say that. Her moist eyes stared into mine. "My life is with you. Not in Chapel. Not even in Thunderhead. With you."

P-21 just rubbed his hind leg, looking down at the knee. I still remembered the sound of Daisy's baton striking him. "I…can't make it here without you, Blackjack. I thought I could, once. I thought that, once I was out, I'd leave and find…something. Something better. And maybe there might be something…someday. But right now, you're the only thing keeping me…together. Maybe someday Chapel will do that for me. Maybe. But…" He trailed off and sighed. "Sorry. I'm not smart when it comes to this stuff."

"Stable ponies got to stick together," Scotch Tape said, swinging her limb experimentally. "Chapel was nice, and Virgo is funny. She just loved my PipBuck. But I want to be with you, Blackjack. You're the closest thing to family I've got." Oh, that made me cringe inside, but P-21 didn't say a word. He just kept rubbing his aching leg.

"Damn it! Being with me is going to get you killed!" I snapped at the four of them. There was no answer right away. "I don't want you to die for my…my stupid quest!"

"There are worse things to die for," P-21 said quietly. "Everypony dies eventually. We could die in five minutes or fifty years, with you or on our own. You can't protect us by sending us away. Chapel isn't safer than anywhere else in the Hoof, really. Even 99 wasn't safe." Scotch sniffed and bowed her head. The blue buck pressed his lips together and looked away from us.

Glory sighed softly. "I know that you're scared about losing us, Blackjack. I am too. But I'm more afraid for you. You want to help everypony so much, and you want to help us, too. Let us help you, Blackjack. If something bad happens…it happens. But as long as we can, we'll be with you."

I could still see their bodies. Lacunae blown to pieces. P-21 hanging from that wire. Glory's wing coming off. Scotch Tape lying so terribly still. "Alright. Well, let's learn from Fallen Arch. Get a good look at the place and see if we can come up with a real plan that's better than trotting up and saying 'Hello, I'm Security. Mind letting us through?'" See? I can be taught.

* * *

Flash Industries had at once point been the premier designer of arcane energy matrix devices, specializing in beam and pulse magical energy weaponry and protective energy fields. It was one of dozens of companies started and supported by the Ministry of Wartime Technology and was dedicated to giving Equestria a brighter, safer, flashier tomorrow. Tours of the building were every morning and evening, ten bits per adult, five for colts and fillies, foals get in free. I knew that from one of the hundreds of brochures that littered the ruins around the building. Said building was scorched, but the company logo still glowed brightly on the front face: 'FLASH', in white with rainbow lines underlining the name.

There'd once been several other buildings around the main office structure, but they had crumbled and fallen in on themselves and made a wall of rubble with the old front gate as the only convenient way through. The ten-story headquarters also had rooftop turrets. From the third floor of a gutted office building nearby, I picked out two entrances besides the front one. The front entrance had at least

a dozen Fillies around it, but the second had only two and the third was unguarded.

Lacunae had taken a bath in some radioactive sludge we'd found in the office building's basement (and what it was doing there I didn't want to know) to regenerate her injuries. There was something fundamentally disturbing about the way she splashed it all over herself. Nopony should have that much fun in magical waste. Once she rejoined us, I pointed out the unguarded door, letting her see the location through my scope. "Can you teleport us all to that little side door?"

"The distance is considerable, but I think so. They will be upon us quickly, however." There wasn't any cover around the door at all, and we'd be trapped.

Fortunately, I'd caught up with two ponies who'd be overjoyed to play tag at the front gate.

We went back down to the main floor and Lacunae trotted off to soak up a little more radiation while I explained the plan to Fruit Salad and Radishes. "That's not much of a plan, but if you're sure she can get you inside…well, we'd be happy to keep them nice and riled up out front. How were you five planning on getting out?"

"Let me worry about that…" Because *oh* how I was worrying about that. "Just keep them busy at the gate for as long as you can."

The pair nodded, and then Fruit Salad stepped closer. "Your friend…she really is an alicorn, isn't she?" she asked in a low voice.

I pressed my lips together for a moment. "She's my friend." That's all I needed to and would say on the subject.

Fruit Salad shook her head. "Only in Hoofington. Good luck. I hope you get Turnip out of there. Radishes wants our brother back bad." Oh…saving her brother. Knowing how my day was going, I'd be lucky if I didn't shoot him myself.

Way to keep up the positive thinking, Blackjack.

We all gathered together on the third floor, Scotch Tape's PipBuck and my own clicking ominously from the radiation coming off Lacunae. I watched the gate through the scope. Glory was off to the side with Lacunae asking her some questions about her regeneration. Scotch was just acting nervous as she chewed on the end of her blue mane.

"It was my fault," P-21 said in a voice hushed with regret, and I slowly turned to look at him. "In Fallen Arch. I saw the collars were synchronized. And…I froze. I once read a method for breaking the

synchronization, but…but just then…with all of them staring at me…I just couldn't think of it." He looked at me with his severe blue eyes. "They were so desperate to be free. Just like me. I tried to save one…just one. She was even younger than Scotch Tape. And…she moved. I jerked the collar and…" He sighed as he looked at his regenerated hooves. I just looked at him. He was blaming himself for Fallen Arch?

Of course he was. Because he was just like me. Smarter, way too serious, but just like me.

"It wasn't," I replied. "Collar put a collar on himself. Then he yanked it before I could stop him. I offered him every cap on me. Spite was more important than survival." Only in Hoofington, I supposed.

P-21 didn't say anything, but he gave my hip a little nudge with his. I smiled a little.

Then I learned how Steel Rangers played tag. Brown Betty let out a surprisingly soft 'krump' noise before the howitzer shell blew out a chunk of asphalt and sent the Flashers running for cover. Fruit Salad's missiles blasted at their cover, and that machine gun/grenade launcher -- seriously, how was anypony supposed to survive that thing? -- opened up with a line of explosive death. It didn't take long for the Flash Fillies to start returning fire with their beam weapons. Then they started yelling for reinforcements.

That was our cue. I nodded once to Lacunae, and there was an electric flash that blurred out the world. The distance was only a thousand feet or so, but apparently that was more than enough for Lacunae. The alicorn slumped; all of us had arcane soot residue on our noses and manes, and I had spots dancing in my vision. I checked the door; locked. I nodded for P-21 to get to work as we crouched down as much as we could. If this turned nasty, I'd just killed my friends…

No. A little blue rainbow-maned pegasus reminded me firmly that my friends chose to stand by me. And that even if this wasn't a great plan, we were still awesome for trying it. I took a slow breath, feeling that, at any second, a Filly would look back and spot us. Any second…okay, maybe Brown Betty was pretty hard to ignore, but twenty to two wasn't good odds. The Rangers were already falling back.

The lock clicked. I pulled the door open with my magic, and my friends darted inside. I hopped in last and we pulled the door shut.

The narrow hall was strewn with junk, but nothing recent. Finally, we'd gotten lucky; it looked like nopony used this section of the building. It'd been picked through at least once, but despite everything, we scavenged up some junk that might be useful as we moved through the choked offices.

Then Scotch Tape nudged a terminal and there was a crackle as the monitor flickered to life. A mare's voice started speaking, *"…don't like it, Diamond. Using magic like this to kill our enemies just seems wrong. It's not a spell. It's a killing machine!"* My ears perked. I knew that voice!

"So you're saying that we should limit our troops to guns while the zebras are free to employ whatever talismans they wish?" a mare said in brisk tones. *"I thought that your ministry was all for arcane sciences. That's what you're for, right? That's what you're supposed to do. So why are you here, now, tying my hooves? Magical weaponry is the next evolution in warfare."*

"I don't want the next evolution in warfare. I want the fighting to stop," Twilight protested.

"Darn tootin'. I don't much care for this business plan of yours 'tall. Finding faster and flashier ways to kill somepony ain't my idea of a good thing," Applejack agreed.

"Funny, because that is what our enemy is doing right now," Diamond said irritably. *"We only have so many unicorns capable of combat spells. They are few and far between and are always targeted with extreme prejudice in battle. By making weapons such as this, we can give some of that power to earth and pegasus ponies. It could turn the tide and finish this war."*

"I really hate to admit it, but it'd be a lot easier to fight if we didn't have to worry about lugging around boxes of ammo up there," Rainbow Dash said. *"Not that we can't do it, but…"*

Twilight's voice frayed in frustration. *"But why can't we use something else? A nonlethal spell?"*

"I agree," Fluttershy chimed in. *"I vote for the nonlethal."*

"Oh, so you Ministry Mares are going to use Luna's mandate to research a 'let's all hug' spell. Great," Diamond muttered. *"The zebras are getting more creative with their weapons. This year they used the Pink Cloud in Littlehorn. Tomorrow, who knows? We need to return the balance of power to our favor. These weapons can do that!"*

"Making a device that casts an incineration spell as a beam at the enemy is just wrong. And these other spells you're trying to incorporate?

Lightning? Disintegration? Somepony needs to draw a line. Otherwise, we'll be the ones committing the next Littlehorn massacre," Twilight Sparkle said firmly.

"Twilight," rasped a rusty voice that made my mane stand on end. *"You know what you agreed to do."*

"I know. It's just…" Twilight trailed off.

"I don't like it much either, sugarcube. But she has a point. If zebras are using poison like at Littlehorn…well…compared to that, I guess this isn't so bad."

"I know…but…I thought I'd be researching new spells for the Princess. Not helping ponies make things to kill."

Diamond snorted and said derisively, *"You'll merely provide some magical expertise, and nopony's asking you to put your hoof in personally. For instance, we're trying to find a gem that's better than diamond for the spell matrix. Diamonds are useful but horribly expensive."*

"You'd want something like a ruby or red sapphire, preferably a well tuned fire ru--" Twilight started to say in a perfunctory tone, then cut herself off. *"Oh…"*

"See?" Goldenblood said in his raspy, hacking voice. *"That's not so hard after all."*

"So, will you support Flash Industries, Applejack?" Diamond asked.

There was a low grunt. *"I don't like it…but all right."*

Diamond's sharp tone relaxed a bit. *"Well, I'm glad that's over with. Don't worry, Twilight. I'm sure that, with your ministry's assistance, Flash Industries will be able to explore…non-lethal options."* There were sounds of hooves trotting away. *"So many things to do…"* I heard her mutter before she trailed off completely.

"Well, that mare's as sweet as a case of rotten apples," Applejack muttered. *"Hey, Goldie. Why ain't Pinkie or Rarity hereabouts?"*

"I'm sorry, but they had other business to attend to. Rarity's meeting with media outlets and…and Pinkie Pie's been a bit... erratic in her organization…" The rusty voice broke into deep, wet coughs. It make me wince to hear.

"Goldenblood!" Fluttershy gasped. *"You're burning up. Oh, why didn't you tell me you were feeling feverish? We need to get you in bed to recover."*

Goldenblood drew a slow, wet, rattling breath. *"Your ministries take priority, Fluttershy. There is so much to do, and only I can do it. I'll be fine. Just get me to my hooves."* There was a pause and then a thud

followed by deep tearing coughs.

"Is that blood?" Rainbow Dash asked hesitantly. *"Maybe you* should *go rest…you look half dead."*

"One would hope," he muttered.

"I'm taking you someplace you can rest, Golden," Fluttershy said firmly…or as firmly as Fluttershy ever said anything. *"If that's okay with you."*

He drew a shaky rattling breath, then muttered, *"You are…too good…for this world, Fluttershy."*

The coughing grew fainter and fainter. Finally, Twilight Sparkle said, *"Is he trying to work himself to death or something?"*

"I reckon there's something mighty powerful behind all that. T'aint fair. This war seems to ruin the best of us," Applejack muttered. *"'Least Luna listened to him about postponin' the Gala. Shoot, having a party while trying to get all this stuff organized? T'aint happening."*

"Pffft. My ministry's all done," Rainbow Dash chuckled.

"Easy when yer ministry's not doin' nothing."

"Hey, we do things. Awesome things. Which is why we're done first." But I thought about the conversation she'd had with Goldenblood and that ratty book from Rivets's ancestor. What was the Ministry of Awesome really planning? *"Anyway, all these stupid meetings made me miss breakfast. Want to go get some lunch? We can hang out together like old times!"*

"Oh…I can't. I only came here to meet with Diamond. I've got an appointment with the Princess in an hour and need to get back to Canterlot," Twilight Sparkle said awkwardly.

Applejack sighed. *"Yeah. And I got…let's see here…meetin'…meetin'…meetin'…oh, lookie here…another meetin'."* She sighed. *"I'm plum meetin'ed out."*

"I thought being in charge meant we could tell them to buck off and do what we want to do," Rainbow Dash protested. *"I never get to see you guys! I don't think the six of us have been together since we started this whole thing."*

"Well, it's important, Rainbow. All of Equestria counts on us," Twilight said reasonably. She really sounded as if she meant exactly that.

"Yeah. It's a peck more responsibility than just applebuckin', that's fer sure."

Rainbow Dash sighed. *"Just don't like it. Well, then, I guess I'd better get back to Cloudsdale…or something."*

"Cheer up, Rainbow. I'm sure that, when this war is over, we'll all be

together again," Twilight Sparkle said brightly. *"You'll see."* The terminal crackled again, the screen now flashing an error message. No matter how P-21 fiddled with it, the terminal refused to work.

So Twilight hadn't been eager to adapt magic into magical weaponry. Had it been Goldenblood nudging her along, or had the flow of urgency just swept her into it? I didn't know, but I felt better about her reluctance. *I know ponies whose fuck ups killed millions*; I wondered if Spike might have been referring to Twilight just a little. I saw both points, and honestly, I probably would have been like Applejack. If the zebras were doing it too…ugh, but they'd be doing it because we'd been doing it! No wonder nopony stopped till everything blew up. What would have happened if everything hadn't blown up? Would we have had cyber alicorn dragon hybrids fighting alongside sentient megaspells against giant zebra-shaped robots?

We picked our way through the trashed offices. There were a few other terminals with snippets of information. Apparently there were shipments being misplaced; spark batteries and generators for stables 90 and 92 were missing. Heads were going to roll. Questions about the AER series and the swap from rubies to emeralds. A notice of a pony having a baby. A notice of praise for the mother. Five nasty comments about how she got that way. Honestly, didn't ponies have anything better to do two centuries ago?

As we picked our way through, radroaches scurried forward for a meal. My sword slipped out and smoothly dispatched them as silently as possible. There were a lot of red bars on my EFS. I didn't want to fight them all; I needed some information. If I couldn't find out where Turnip or the maneframe were located, we probably wouldn't make it out of here. Then I smelled a sharp, sweet stench. It looked like we were getting close to the Fillies' bathroom.

Idea…

It only took twenty minutes for one of the Flashers to get the call, and she trotted through the door in her white gang barding and rainbow-dyed mane. A tribute to Dash, or just coincidence? She walked over to the ditch cut into the cracked tiles and concrete as some mares called out, "Hurry up, Sparkler! You're gonna miss all the fun!"

The blue earth pony mare flushed. "Shut up! I'll be there soon as I'm done shittin'!" she bellowed back, then she clenched her eyes and got to work. Clearly somepony needed more fiber in her diet.

She was so focused on the task at hoof that she didn't notice the glowing sword, horn, or eye till she finished. "Holy shit…" she muttered as the color drained from her face. Well, except for the strange red and green paint she had smeared on her hide.

"Nope," I replied, keeping the saber to her neck. "Now, I don't want to kill you. If you're smart…and quiet…I won't. Deal?"

"You're that psycho that beat up Fluttershy!" Sparkler scowled at me.

"No. That was a different psycho. I'm the psycho holding a sword to your throat." Honestly, did all slavers and gangers get their sense of survival taken away as soon as they signed up? "So, are you going to play along, Sparkler, or do I wait till another Filly needs to go potty?" Me knowing her name seemed to take a lot of the attitude out of her.

Even better, from the look that spread across her face a moment later, she'd finally clued to the fact that the sword was quite sharp and I did not look like miss happy pony. She came quietly along back into the offices and we had a little chat. Occasionally she lapsed into threats about how the Flash Fillies were going to dust me, but a little tap of the sword against her neck snapped her out of that.

Turnip was being held in the CEO's office, which was locked. Diamond, the gang leader, had the key. Duh. The maneframe was in the R&D lab. I was a cunt who was going to get my mare bits turned into a holster for her beam rifle. Okay, so not all the information was as useful as I might have hoped. And now that the other questions were done, we were left with the one of what to do with Sparkler. Clearly she was of the opinion that now we were going to slit her throat. We certainly took all of her stuff…but then what?

Wonderglue is aptly named.

With all four hooves glued to the floor and a rope gagging her, we left Sparkler where she'd eventually be discovered…hopefully after we were gone. Sooner or later, she'd chew through the rope.

We trotted onto the second floor of a large lobby, overlooking a floor covered in crates and containers. Magical projections showed the company logo in the empty space. There were mattresses all over the balcony, and spent beam cartridges were littered all over the place. To our right, I could see the battered doors of an elevator. Down below, I heard voices raised.

“I don’t care, we can’t move it until those Rangers are taken care of. If you want to speed things up then fly out there and help!” The irate mare was an albino unicorn who had streaked rainbow paint over her body and mane. She wore barding that was half armor and half something from that shop we’d rested in earlier. To be honest, I barely paid the slightest attention to her; all of it was on the buck in power armor she was speaking to: Operative Lighthooves.

“The Enclave is not yet prepared to engage in open hostilities with the Rangers, Diamond. Our arrangement was with you. And you have yet to fulfill your end of the agreement,” the pegasus replied calmly and reasonably. He had two power-armored pegasus troopers with him, and Diamond had a half dozen Fillies around her. “We need those systems.”

“I don’t care what you need! I care about what I need! I’m the Diamond Flash of the Flash Fillies. My needs are more important. We need your vertithingy to haul some more weapons to Big Daddy,” she said as she swung her hoof imperiously. “Now stop wasting my time with stupid questions or you’ll never get those talismans.”

Talismans? What kind of talismans? What did Lighthooves want with talismans? And why wasn’t I putting a bullet through his head right now? Because it would get us all killed, Blackjack…and you’re not an assassin. Damn…two good reasons. Slowly, we moved along the balcony towards the elevator. Most of the gems in the control panel were dark, but those for the lobby, the second floor, and the top floor were lit. No matter how much I pushed the button for the top floor, though, the car wasn’t moving. Damn. I scowled at the keyhole next to the button. It was so tiny that I doubted a bobby pin would fit!

Why was nothing ever easy? We needed the key. Diamond had the key on her barding. Diamond was also surrounded by her gang, Lighthooves, and two power-armored pegasi. One of us would have to go down there and get it. “Any ideas?”

Just one. But it wasn’t going to be pretty.

“I hate this. I hate you. I hate everypony!” P-21 protested as Glory tugged the filly’s uniform further down over his flank. Lacunae was working some magic to help straighten his mane while I worked Glory’s manebrush through it. Scotch smeared some of the Flasher’s paint on him in an approximation of Sparkler, who stood frozen nearby watching with shocked amazement.

"You're the only pony who can do this," I reminded him. "My leg braces are too conspicuous, he'd recognize Glory, Lacunae's too big, and Scotch has a PipBuck. You're the same color and almost the same size." His anger was just barely covering his fear and discomfort at the four of us dressing him up. Glory was taking great care not to set him off with a careless touch back there. "Go down, get the key, meet us in the elevator."

"Get the key? Just like that…" he muttered. "Gee, you make it sound so easy."

I sighed and looked him in the eye. "P-21, if you really don't want to do this…tell me. We'll figure something else out." Maybe we could take them by surprise? That was a lot of ponies to try and surprise, though.

He sighed and looked away. "No. I think I can do this. Just…if something goes wrong…I don't want to fail you again, Blackjack." He rubbed his regenerated forehooves against each other.

"Then don't," I replied with a smile. "And don't worry about failing me."

"Yeah, worry about getting caught," he muttered. There wasn't much difference between him and Sparkler now, and the mare was just watching us with a disturbed look. He trotted to Sparkler, who tried to pull back, but with her hooves glued to the floor, well…He whispered something in her ear, and her eyes widened. She nodded absently, then started and glared. But that seemed to be answer enough.

"Some things never change," he muttered and then took a deep breath. "Just promise me…whatever happens…do NOT start shooting. All right?" That made me even more apprehensive about this plan. It would have been one thing if it were me down there, but…P-21 seemed to know what he was doing.

Please know what you're doing, P-21.

We moved over to the elevator as I watched her…him... damn, where'd he learn to walk like that?... walk down towards the meeting with a casual step. Just another Flasher coming up to back up her boss. Nothing unusual. Just turning towards her pockets…

"Bitch!" Diamond roared as she wheeled on P-21, the other Fillies turning on him. Instantly, I brought up my gun, sighted her skull, and nearly took her head off before I saw P-21 looking back at me as he was set upon by her guards. Then he was saying something about turning over technology to its rightful owners; I couldn't

quite make it out amid the babble. Suddenly, Diamond's lips curled in a nasty smile.

"Oh, so the Rangers sent one of their little spies. Came here to free your 'brother'?" She snickered. "Sucks to be you. Now I have a new boy toy." I saw the tremor run through him and licked my lips in apprehension, moving the crosshairs from him and back to her.

Lighthooves frowned as he looked at P-21, then at the paint-smeared boss mare, "We need to kill him. Word cannot get out that I'm assisting you." Now my rifle was on him…but…ack, why couldn't I snipe eight ponies at once?!

His demand, however, prompted an even nastier smirk from Diamond. "If you want him dead sooner, then you'd better get that Vertibuck here and get these guns to Big Daddy. We're going to wipe the Rangers out of the Hoof once and for all. Then you can take your VC idiots back up to the clouds where you belong."

"And the status quo is preserved," he finished, frowning at P-21. "You'll be sure to dust him when you're finished playing?"

"Well, I'll have to share him first. Give the other ladies a ride. *Then* I'll dust him. It'll be over in a flash," Diamond said as the unicorn floated a key out from around her neck and passed it to one of her guards. "Take him upstairs. While you're up there, you can have the other one. I'm done with him." The unicorn guard prodded P-21 with her beam pistol and he rose sullenly to his hooves.

"So. You've got a Vertibuck to call and two Rangers outside to go dust. I have to make sure it's ready to move," she said, and then feigned remembering, "Oh yes. And get you those worthless talismans. Honestly, doesn't the Enclave have targeting talismans of their own?"

"Of course. And they are very carefully inventoried. I need talismans that are off the books," he said slowly and carefully as P-21 was marched to the lobby elevator.

"Enclave games. Honestly…" Diamond said as she trotted towards a guarded door with Lighthooves following in her wake.

The elevator doors beneath us chimed faintly and then opened. A moment later, they closed again. I tapped the gem beside the elevator doors on our level, and they opened. The Flasher stared at me in shock just long enough for me to slam Taurus's rifle butt into her face. In seconds, we'd ponypiled into the now cramped elevator. I looked down at P-21. "You planned to get caught?"

"I asked Sparkler if Diamond always got first shot at the bucks she

captured," he replied with a smile. "I figured it was an alpha mare…thing." I squealed in glee, hugging him tight. I love a smart pony! He gasped. "Touching! Too much touching!" I released him, both of us flushing.

The elevator rose up to the top floor, and my jaw dropped. I'd only come across a hoofful of places that were actually clean. But this wasn't just clean. This was…spotless! Shiny, even! I gawked at the sight of it and immediately felt my mane start to crawl. The reception room was polished marble, the walls decorated with glowing magical lines of red, green, and blue. Magnificent wooden doors bedecked with gems glittered before me as if tantalizing me with what lay beyond. "What is this?" I asked, then looked back at the concussed guard. Damn, now I wished I hadn't hit her so hard.

We trotted out into the pristine space. As clean as it looked, it still had the musty reek of below. There was a primly dressed mare behind the desk, next to the door. She looked up from her magazine and smiled pleasantly. "Hello. I'm sorry, but Miss Diamond isn't available at the moment. If you're here for an appointment, I will try to reschedule. I apologize for any inconvenience this has caused you." I gaped at her in shock, then arched my brow.

"Uh, we don't have an appointment," I replied lamely.

"Oh! Well, then, welcome to Flash Industries, home to many amazing and miraculous magical products. I'm sorry, but Miss Diamond isn't available at the moment. I'm sorry, but all senior staff are unavailable at the moment. If you would like to schedule an appointment, I will do so now. If you would like to wait, I would be happy to answer any and all questions you might have about Flash Industries until somepony becomes available to see you." The white mare smiled as she stared at me with her blue eyes. She reminded me of a cleaner, nicer version of the mare below.

"You're Diamond's secretary?" Glory asked with a concerned frown.

"I am an automated photonic answering service based on Miss Diamond's secretary, Miss Beryl. I'm afraid that Miss Beryl is out of the office at this time. Would you like me to contact her for you?" the projection asked brightly.

"No," Glory said quickly, then looked back at me. "Notice the resemblance?"

P-21 nodded, and I looked from one to the other. "What?"

"I'm guessing that Diamond downstairs is a descendant of Miss

Diamond's secretary. The system thinks she's still alive."

I pointed at the mare behind the desk. "Then what is that?"

Scotch Tape trotted up to the mare and stretched out her hoof. The mare flickered in place as she smiled pleasantly down at the filly waving her hoof back and forth inside the hologram. "Cool!"

So she was a projection too, like the Professor, only a machine. "I need to get inside Miss Diamond's office real quick."

"I'm sorry, but that's not allowed. If you would like to wait until Miss Diamond is available or schedule an appointment, please do so now," the projection said brightly.

"What are you?" Scotch Tape asked. "A ghost?"

The projection regarded her fondly. "I am an example of some of the most exciting holographic projection technology developed at Flash Industries. Although we are well known for our line of magical personal defense equipment, Flash industries is also a leading developer of light manipulation magic. Thanks to our partnership with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, Flash Industries has worked to produce our latest and most exciting creations."

"What kind of creations?" Glory asked.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to be more specific. Are you interested in our personal defense equipment? Holographic technology? Magic shielding technology? Or other technology?" the projection asked in a slightly condescending tone.

I was about to ask about Project Steelpony when Glory said, "Personal defense technology? Do you mean weapons?"

The projection frowned. "Flash Industries dislikes the negative connotations associated with that term. Our personal defense products are designed with the intention of protecting our users from harm through the application of potent, pinpoint magical force. While most famous for our beam weaponry, we have also branched out into alternative magical effects. However, please be aware that such items must be contracted through our military or Ministry of Awesome sales representative."

So they didn't like the word 'weapon'? Surprise surprise. "What about--"

"What are holograms?" Scotch Tape asked, then shrunk back a little at my eye twitch and faint growl. "What?"

"Flash Industries has developed an exciting line of magical projection technology able to duplicate almost any image with ninety nine point eight percent accuracy. Utilizing multiple

projection points, we are even capable of maintaining images when a single projection source is blocked. No more annoying shadows in your image! Combined with our shield products, we are predicting exciting new hard light products to be made available at Flash Industries in years to come." Her cheeriness was getting on my nerves.

"Okay. So tell me--" I started.

"Magic shields?" P-21 asked with a frown. I hissed through my teeth as my eye went flat. He's a smart pony, don't shoot him. He's a smart pony…

"Our latest and most exciting products to date are our magical shield products. By projecting a barrier of arcane energy, we have been able to protect vital military and government properties all across Equestria. While not available for private purchase at this time due to security concerns, we predict that within twenty years all ponies will enjoy complete personal protection through our magical shield products. Here at Flash Industries, we are proud to provide some of the strongest and most comprehensive shielding technology in Hoofington or abroad!"

"But it didn't have enough power," I blurted. "The Hoofington shield failed because it didn't have enough energy." I looked out the window and…looked at a perfectly intact city! It was even sunny. The Core rose like a cluster of smoky quartz. It even glistened. But…there was something off about the image. I stretched out a hoof and the entire window shimmered where my hoof penetrated. I felt grimy glass beneath it.

"I'm sorry, but to discuss specific technical inquiries, I'll have to refer you to our engineering department. Would you like to make an appointment?"

I sighed, about to ask about Steelpony when I stopped at looked at Lacunae. "Well?"

"What?" she blinked in confusion.

"Aren't you going to ask about other technologies?" I asked.

"Flash Industries isn't only involved in products involving light." I covered my face and screamed into my hooves as the projection went on. "We have numerous other projects all across Equestria, such as our partnership with Hippocampus Energy at the New Hope solar array, various energy distribution services with the Hoofington reconstruction effort, and work with the Hoofington Planetarium and Black Pony Mountain Observatory. We also--"

“Shut up! I’m here for Project Steelpony!” I snapped.

The projection froze. Uh-oh…Then she frowned. The mare’s voice changed to that of a deep buck’s. “I’m sorry. Please remain where you are until appropriate security personnel arrive. Proper authorities have been alerted. If you attempt to leave, then lethal countermeasures will be employed. We apologize for this inconvenience.” And that was when the alarms began to sound throughout the entire building.

Why did I have a distinct certainty that it wouldn’t take long for Diamond and Lighthooves to come up here and check?

The walls around us began to shimmer and coalesced into two glowing white alicorns. Beads of blue glowed at the tips of their horns as they approached. I hoped the goddess would be flattered as I raised the shotgun and blasted a round of buckshot at the ghostly apparition. The lead pellets passed right through it without effect. Glory’s beam rifle did, if anything, even less. Magical arrows penetrated without a ripple.

Then a blue light washed over us and…I yawned? Indeed, the lethargy was spreading through me with alarming swiftness. Even Lacunae seemed tired, and she didn’t have to sleep! Non-lethal weaponry, I remembered. It seemed like Diamond had been true to her word to Twilight. My eye watered as I struggled to keep awake, peering up at the blue light at the end of the alicorn’s horn. There was a tiny sapphire talisman floating at the tip!

I slipped into S.A.T.S. before my eye closed completely, queued up two attacks, and hoped for the best. My first shot ignored the giant glowing target and struck the blue gemstone squarely. It shattered with a tiny pop of blue smoke. The other fractured and I had to blast three times before a lucky pellet smashed the gem. The alicorns winked out. “Don’t worry about the alicorn. Target the gems,” I said as they reappeared, this time with red gemstones. Beams of burning energy swept across the reception room, and all of us save Lacunae dove for cover. Glory yelped as a line of char was drawn from her scarred flank down to her hoof. I swore, aiming for the fire rubies. However, a small shield appeared around each, and my pellets were harmlessly deflected.

The crimson beams dug into Lacunae’s raised shield, drilling through it at the alicorn and Scotch Tape. Suddenly, her eyes flashed. “Pitiful phantasms! You dare to challenge a true Goddess?” she declared. She reared and shouted in a booming, resonating

voice, “BEGONE!”; from her horn erupted a stream of magical arrows that swept out to home in on the brilliant fire rubies. They not only shattered the two above the alicorns but sought out every gemstone emitting a hologram. When the storm passed, the reception room returned to the same rotted state as the building below. Two or three patches of light flickered anemically, and the once formidable doors were revealed to be an empty door frame.

Okay. Color me impressed. Lacunae looked at me and declared imperiously, “The Goddess shall NOT be mocked.”

“I’m not mocking you.” I looked at P-21. “Are you?” He shook his head vigorously. “You?” Glory’s jaw just hung loosely open. I grinned sheepishly. “See? No mocking here!” She huffed softly, looking slightly mollified as she ruffled her feathers.

Head held high, she strode through the doors into an office decorated with more holograms. It appeared spotless, but you couldn’t hide that reek of mold and mildew. “Turnip?” I called out as I stepped through afterwards.

“Hey baby. I’m right where you left me. Ready for another ride on the Turnip wag... oh?” The tan buck was tied spread eagle on a bed that looked very out of place among the holograms. From the looks of things, he was far from distressed... “I thought you’d be someone else.”

“I’m Security. I’m here to rescue you,” I said, a little skeptically. “I mean, if you’re not busy?”

Glory covered Scotch’s eyes with her wing again. The filly brushed it aside and looked critically at the bound buck. “Eh, I’ve seen bigger,” she said flatly. For some reason, that seemed to blow something in Glory’s brain as whatever she’d been about to say died in her throat. I was a little surprised too. Hadn’t Glory heard of sex-ed? Enclavers were weird...

Turnip was a pretty plain looking earth pony buck: tan with a brown mane. He gave a small grin. “Well... you don’t have to... I’m fine here.”

P-21 sighed, covering his face with his hooves before he said, “I’m your replacement. She’s throwing you to the rest of the Fillies, then you’ll be dusted.” His face added an unspoken ‘idiot’.

Turnip’s grin faded and he yanked against his bonds. “Oh. Ah... well... in that case... rescue would be very welcome, yes sir, thank you please!” I shook my head as I approached with the sword. He looked down at his other head. “Stand down, boy! Heh... It’s got a

mind of its own," he said as I smiled, turning the blade over and over as I grinned down at him. His eyes grew panicked. "Get down!" I rolled my eye a little.

"Don't worry... I promise not to take *too* much off the top," I said as I raised the sword to cut his bonds. Maybe the guy didn't deserve it, but... honestly? Staying here with these gangers for sex? Really?

At that moment, the elevator door chimed and the buck fell from my attention as eight Flashers spilled out and immediately began firing red beams of incineration magic at the lot of us. The bed was the biggest thing for Glory and me to take cover behind, so we found ourselves shooting over Turnip as I tried to slash him free. Splitting my concentration wasn't doing much good for either accuracy. I swapped to the rifle, saving my S.A.T.S. for Diamond.

"Cut me loose! Cut me loose!" Turnip bawled as we blasted over him, keeping the Flashers back. Scotch Tape, Lacunae, and P-21 were behind the large office desk. Persuasion thumped, but there was a unicorn quick enough with a shield spell that the grenades bounced off and back at us.

"Shut up and think small!" I shouted as I reloaded my rifle. I managed to get through two of the bindings.

Then the elevator door chimed again and out stepped more Flashers. Behind them was Diamond, a gatling beam weapon floating above her and a sphere of shimmering light surrounding her. "That's enough! Time to dust all these freaks!" I jumped into S.A.T.S. and aimed four rounds right at her head... and saw a zero percent chance of hitting the extremity. I saved the charge and eyeballed the shot.

The bullets just flicked right off the shield. Shit, I hated being right sometimes. Diamond set herself and the glowing gatling beam weapon began to strafe over the entire office in a rain of red blasts. My barding sizzled and Glory barely ducked as the beams walked from one end of the office to the other. Some miracle reached out and shielded Turnip's bits from being vaporized. "You're dusted! All of you!"

Okay. Now I could use some Goddess badassery, but it was all she could do to keep her shield up protecting Scotch Tape and P-21. Suddenly, she winked away, taking both of them with her. Something thunked to the ground, rolling out from behind the desk. Diamond paused and suddenly shrieked, "Who stole my kills?!"

That was a partial relief. But it also meant that the three of us were

suddenly about to be dusted.

Then the holographic office flickered and died, revealing the scummy and decayed surroundings I was so familiar with. The gemstones set in the walls near the ceiling flickered and filled the room with a strange corona of light. “What... what are you doing?” Diamond asked as she backed towards the door.

Suddenly, a crimson beam flashed out from one gem and swept across the ponies in the doorway, each exploding in a cloud of glowing ash. Two beams. Four. Ten. The entire room was filled with flashing and flickering light. Scarlet lances darted back and forth, catching each Flasher in red lines of death. Two, three, sometimes four beams converged and transformed the Fillies into crackling piles. The beams were so intense that they melted criss-crossing lines in the floors and walls.

“What... what did you do?” Diamond screamed as she turned to bolt for the elevator. Every single line of burning death caught her shield. The collar around her neck crackled, and the diamond gem popped. An instant later she was transformed into a glowing pony-shaped collection of dust that collapsed silently in a heap. The beams flickered, and then a pony appeared. A very familiar pony.

Goldenblood.

“Well done, Blackjack. I’m so glad that I could meet you face to face,” he said calmly, the illusion flickering before me. “I’m been trying to make direct contact with you and EC-1101 for the longest time. So glad I could help you now.” The golden eyes. The scarred white hide. The sincere smile...

“You’re Goldenblood,” I murmured softly. I was having difficulty standing... even breathing. “You’re... you... ” What was I supposed to be feeling right now?

Here was the pony behind everything... the ministries... the projects... so many old secrets and lies that were fucking with my very immediate life. If not for him, 99 wouldn’t have been exposed to the raider disease. If not for him, Luna might not have formed the ministries. Here was a motherfucker I could blame for everything!

He looked a touch annoyed at my speechlessness. “You’re a bit overwhelmed. I’m just glad I was able to help. Now.” He took a deep breath. “About EC-1101.”

He was after the program? I slowly approached the projection. So perfect in image. Showing up like this... now? So blunt and to the

point? So... not Goldenblood. He should be schmoozing... trying to make a connection between me and him.

"What did you do to Fluttershy?" I asked softly.

"Fluttershy?" it was just a moment. Just a moment of incomprehension and confusion.

"What was the name of the mare you sent down the shaft?" I asked louder.

He scowled at me. "How dare you--" No shock that I knew he'd killed a dead mare to protect one of his secrets.

"Glory. Get Turnip out of here. Now." I tossed my sword onto the bed. The hologram was already starting to distort. Golden seemed to be coming apart in little spirals. "I don't know who this this is, but it's not Goldenblood."

Suddenly, the beams flashed on my leg and I felt a tangible force lift the limb into the air. Goldenblood's voice dissolved into an mechanical, inequine scream. "GIVE IT TO ME!" The last word rose higher and higher as I was lifted up. I had no idea where the magical shield grasping my limb had come from; perhaps it was built into the office? Regardless, it hauled me up by my PipBuck. "GIVE IT GIVEIT GIVEITGIVE GIVEGIVEITITIT... " it rattled madly. Two other shields around my rear hooves were pulling in the opposite direction. I lifted my shotgun, but a beam sliced it in two. Then my focus went all to hell as I felt my torso start to stretch.

This... thing... could have just burned through my leg. Instead, it was simply going to tear it off. I gritted my teeth, not giving it the pleasure of screaming as I felt my leg bones start to stretch. I wondered what would be the first to give. My 'bones'? Muscles? Skin?

"Glory! Get out of here!" I screamed... and kept screaming. Torn to pieces. Slowly. Exactly what I deserved for Scoodle. For the clinic. For Clover. This really wasn't that bad. This was poetic. Glory had cut him free. Now they could run as the voice screamed higher and higher.

Except that Glory wasn't running for the elevator with Turnip. She was running towards the desk. Running towards the small object that P-21 had dropped: the metal apple with a blue band.

"NOOOONONONONONOOONOONONNOOOOOONONO!!!" it screeched and filled the room with a wild barrage of red. The floor began to sag beneath me from the myriad blasts. I could do nothing... nothing but scream. Nothing but watch as that force grew

more and more. I felt something in my shoulder give. Tears ran down my face in my certainty that at any moment that she would transform into so much dust.

But Glory was a pegasus; she might not have been a soldier, but in that moment she was faster and more graceful than I ever could have imagined. Even as the floor started to give, she moved without a single misstep. I don't think I'd ever seen her more beautiful. Leaping the last yard, she slid into the grenade and bit the stem. She pulled the stem free and threw the orb into the center of the room. Beams moved to cut me to pieces, burn her to ash, and blast the grenade to scrap.

A blue band flashed.

The electronic voice screeched and blurred into one long crackle before cutting off completely. The gemstones gave one last flash, then shattered in rapid succession. I dropped in a heap, my limbs screaming in pain as I say there on the slumping floor. Slowly, I sat up. My right foreleg dangled at my side. I wondered if it even worked anymore. I looked at her, with the stem still in her mouth, and gave a weak grin as I wept at the same time.

Then there was a resounding crack and rumble, and my world began to fall. I just looked helplessly as Glory leapt back at me. I thought that I had seen her move fast before. Now time seemed to stretch out as I felt the collapsing floor shift and give way beneath me. Her wing beat as if trying to fly the distance. I was measuring time in heartbeats... and there was an eternity between each. She reached me, scooping me in her hooves. Lifting me... moving me to the side. To safety... almost.

My PipBuck lodged in a fork of twisted metal as the floor fell away completely. My right foreleg wrapped around Glory and held her tight as we dangled over the wreckage a dozen feet below. Sweet Celestia, it hurt. It educated me in all kinds of horrific experiences of pain! I wasn't even sure if 'pain' was what I was feeling anymore. But it didn't matter. Glory was alive! I was alive. I looked into the most beautiful eyes in all of Equestria.

I'd been mistaken. This was the most beautiful I'd ever seen her.

Then the floor below us gave a colossal shudder and broke free with a roar that made my ears throb. The entire building shook, and I felt the PipBuck start to twist out of that metal fork. The next floor gave. Then the next. And now the entire gutted shell of Flash Industries was full of collapsing concrete and steel, noise and

choking dust. My eyes burned, but I couldn't look away... she was starting to slip from my grasp. I could barely breathe... could hardly see... as the collapse finally reached whatever depths were in the tower, probably crushing the maneframe to dust. Bit by bit, I felt my left leg stretch. The brace began to give way. "Hold on!" I yelled, unable to do more than hang there. I felt the PipBuck slowly working free.

I felt Glory slipping away.

I looked into her eyes. So calm, so beautiful. I saw her wing... saw the stub beside it... the final price for my failure in the tunnels. I couldn't speak. I could only pray she could read my mind as I thought with every fiber of my being, 'Don't let go.'

Please, dear Celestia... save me...

She smiled. The tension on my left leg suddenly released. She dropped...

And stopped just beneath me in a white glow. I clenched my eye shut as I focused every bit of my will through my stupid tiny useless horn. I'd never been a strong telekinetic. All I could do was shoot things with it. But by Luna, I would happily lose my magic forever if I could just lift her up to the ledge. Take my magic Luna, but let me save her. Please. My horn throbbed in time with my worthless rotten heart. Do this! If I was ever going to do anything... do... this!

I dared to look. Slowly, she rose. A foot. Two. I reached out my foreleg to her as she stretched out hers to touch my hoof ever so gently. There was no fear in her eyes. Simply wonder. Simply love.

And then there was a terrible stillness in my horn, and the glow vanished. I was trapped in that horrible moment, staring into her eyes... feeling her hoof upon mine... and then...

Glory fell.

Her screamed name seemed to echo on and on for eternity.

Glory.

Glory.

Glory...

Footnote: 75% to Next Level

Chapter 30: Allegiances

"What I meant is, you should get to know these tribes and decide which ones you like and which you don't!"

She shot me. You shot me. You shot me in my face…What is it with people shooting me when my guard is down? That's twice in two days.

I hung above the abyss for what felt like an eternity, listening to the grinding, grating, shifting stone and tortured girders as they distorted under the stress. Nestled in a forked beam, my PipBuck kept me anchored and secured. Dust had transformed my world to gray as I hung there in that great and empty space. The entire world was empty. My eye watered from the grit, not sorrow. I was so far past sorrow that I wouldn't have been able to see it with my rifle scope. I was just so much more debris at this point. Not even a pony. Just meat.

The collapsing floors were obscured beneath me by the dust swirling in the air. Would I be forced to see her broken on the immense slabs of collapsed concrete? Impaled on the metal beams and pipes that littered the floor beneath me like shrapnel from some immense bomb? Or was she just gone completely, ground to paste in the press of rubble?

I felt as though Leo's beam had shot clear through me once more, and this time I didn't know how I was going to recover. I didn't even want to recover…but I had to. Somehow. I didn't have Glory to save me this time…

I told you, I'm sick of being useless all the time. I couldn't even help Blackjack against Blueblood. He cut me without even looking back, and I just sat there as he gutted her! I nearly got her killed! I can't do anything.

You caught me. You caught me again and again. Innocent. Naïve. Good. The first truly good pony I'd ever known. Who never stopped being good. Who never stopped believing in her people or what

they stood for. Even when Lighthooves betrayed her. Even when she was branded. Even when her own sister forced her to adopt that ridiculous pseudonym 'Fallen Glo--'

I gasped and choked out a faint sob as I hung there. My chest burned from the dust I'd inhaled. Tears turned to mud on my cheek. Glory had never fallen. Never. I'd staggered between monsterdom and nobility with all the grace of an inebriated mule. She'd been my constant. And when I parted from her, I only wandered, looking for death. When we reunited, I had drive, purpose, and meaning. I had hope.

Don't do that. Don't tear yourself down like that…even if you're joking. I'm glad I was finally able to do that with you. I don't want to do it with anypony else.

She'd given me her heart and her trust. Most importantly she'd given me her forgiveness when I'd screwed everything up. It had been a precious gift; one that I'd squandered. I should have told her about the disease. I should have involved her instead of just throwing my PipBuck through the door and gassing everypony… and myself. I should have told her how I hurt. What I was thinking of doing. She'd loved me completely. I'd shut her out.

I'm not a smart pony.

"H- hey? You still alive?" came a thin shout from above. Slowly, I turned my head, looking up at the tan and brown buck. My face was a glass mask; the slightest expression and I was sure it would shatter. He looked down at me from his perch on a narrow ledge. "Don't worry. I'll get you down." Though, from the searching, uncertain look on his face, I guessed that he was reconsidering the offer.

He hadn't been worth it. If it'd bring her back, I'd toss him down to the rubble below. EC-1101 hadn't been worth it. Saving Hoofington wasn't worth it. Glory was a million times more precious than anything else. He must have caught my look, because he shrank back a little. It was a joke, anyway; he couldn't help me. He didn't have a gun.

You were gone, and I was…I had nothing left, Blackjack. No family. No home! No Blackjack! Nothing! Do you understand? Nothing!

Yeah, Glory. I understand. I understand perfectly now. I dangled over the abyss now in complete silence and knew that the Wasteland had finally made everything square.

Then I heard the sound of beating wings and I looked down. My

weeping, bloodshot eye widened as my breath halted altogether. Had a miracle happened? Had she…somehow…some way…

Then I saw the black power armor rise up from the swirling dust below. Like a demon from some hellish otherworld it lifted slowly till it hovered effortlessly before me. Then the helmet retracted, and the crimson features of Lighthooves looked upon me with an expression of faint satisfaction. I looked back. I didn't feel rage, or hate…I felt relief. It wasn't suicide if an enemy killed me.

"Hey," I said weakly as I hung like a doll before him.

"You truly are remarkable," he said softly. I didn't want his praise. I wanted four blasts from his Novasurge rifles. "Only you, out of all the ponies in the Wasteland, would drop a building on your enemies."

I didn't bother to correct him. "I didn't have a boat," I rasped softly, coughing from the crud in my throat. Let him ponder what that meant. "So…gonna shoot me? Sting me? Give me a flying lesson?"

"Oh, I would sooner destroy a rainbow window than an artist like yourself," he replied. "However, since I can't have you doing something stupid either... " And the stinger tail slipped out and jabbed me in my rump. A lethargy began to overtake me. "Please understand, I hold you in the highest respect."

"I am so going to kill you," I breathed quietly, almost in a loving whisper. "The second I get my magic back, I'm going to take your wings like you took Glory's cutie mark. You'd best kill me now, Lighthooves." I felt myself slipping away into unconsciousness.

"That would be the most prudent course of action, I agree. However, it's not part of the deal." I only hoped that I'd never wake. But of course, I would...

~ ~ ~

Everything's big when you're little, and trying on Mom's things was a way to prove that I was getting bigger. That someday I'd be all grown up and ready to take on my job as a security mare. I was going to be a pony who saved ponies! So I trotted out of Mom's room wearing her security barding and a helmet so big that it rattled around my horn like my teacher's bell. It was all I could do to not trip and f-- whoopsie. One misstep sent me sprawled out in a tangled mess of blue. I blushed furiously as I pushed back the face

mask enough to see if Momma had noticed.

But Momma was crying. I'd never seen Momma cry before. It wasn't a thing mommas did. Most grownup ponies never cried because they were grown up and it was silly for a grown pony to cry. "Momma…?" She must have been crying because of what I did. I wasn't supposed to touch Momma's work things. Especially not her shiny gun. "I'm sorry, Momma. I didn't mean to."

She sniffed and looked at me with a small smile, even though she was still crying. "Oh! Oh, Fishy. I'm sorry. No, sweetie, you didn't do anything wrong." She spread her lavender forelegs wide and pulled me into a hug. Now she was laughing and crying at the same time, but apparently I wasn't in trouble. My shame transformed into confusion as she kissed my horn and wept in my mane. "You know Momma's friend Steam? Well, there was an accident."

Ooooh, accidents were bad. I knew this because I caused so many of them myself. Steam was always a funny mare who brought me highly illegal and very fun toys made from maintenance supplies. Steam also brought toys she took into Momma's room when she and Momma made all the oohs and ahhs and 'yes' noises doing stuff I wasn't supposed to know about till I was in filly school.

"Well, Steam was hurt very badly," Momma said as she nuzzled my ear.

"The medical ponies will make her all better, Momma!" I said, trying to explain the obvious. The medical ponies made everything better, even me when I'd stepped in a radroach trap poking around maintenance where I didn't belong. But when I said that, she shuddered and held me even tighter. "They can make anything better, Momma."

"Not this, sweetheart." Momma swallowed hard. "She's dead."

Dead? Dead. Dead! Dead dead dead dead. Deaded? Deads? It sounded like a stupid word. "What's that mean?"

"It means that she's not alive anymore. She's gone, and we'll never see her again," Momma said quietly as she hugged me tightly, looking with her sad pink eyes as she nuzzled me. Now I was starting to cry too. Gone? Gone where? And why? This was stupid! Steam made Momma and me happy! It wasn't fair that she was gone!

"Well, just…go and bring her back!" There. 'Nuff said. Momma could do it. Momma could do anything.

Except this. "I can't, Fishy. Nopony can. She's gone into the

everafter to be with the Princesses. So I'll see her again, someday." She sniffed. "Until then, I'll try to be the best pony I can be. So that when we meet again, she'll be proud of me." That didn't make any sense, though. If she was gone forever, how could Momma see her again?

"How, Momma?" I asked in confusion, blinking up at her. She stroked my mane gently as she hesitated, then smiled.

"Everypony dies someday, Fishy." I held her and heard her heart beating. And then I had the thought. That horrible thought that every foal has sooner or later.

"Even you, Momma?"

"Even me, Fishy." She said it so gently that somehow it hurt even more. Like a dress rehearsal for when the day came. "But as long as we remember how they loved us, they're never really gone. Okay, Fishy?"

"Yes, Momma, I'll remember," I'd promised. I'd forgotten a week later, till now.

~ ~ ~

I came to lying on my side on a mattress draped on some ugly, rusty, wrought iron bed frame. When Momma had died, I hadn't really wept. So much had happened that I'd just been swept up. I'd always known she'd die someday, and as I'd gotten older we'd grown apart. I was the disappointing daughter, she the stern, authoritative mother. Why had we fallen into such stupid roles? What would Momma think of me now? Would she accept that I had no other choice in 99? That to save the stable, I had to destroy the stable? Would I even get to the everafter? I certainly didn't deserve it.

And now, I still couldn't weep for Glory. What would she think of me now, lying here and wallowing in…whatever ponies wallowed in?

I was stripped of barding, braces, weapons, of course; everything except my eyepatch. I was filthy everywhere that hadn't been covered by my barding. Somepony had fixed up my right foreleg; the joints ached, but nothing too terrible. It didn't matter. I wasn't going anywhere. There was nowhere to go. No reason. I honestly didn't even want to kill Lighthooves anymore; it'd be a bonus, but it no longer mattered. I closed my eye, feeling the bandages that'd

been wrapped around my injuries. Somepony had patched me up while I was out. The place they'd brought me was just another filthy room somewhere in the Wasteland. It didn't matter where. No place mattered if she wasn't there.

Still alive without her. I supposed Lighthooves was going to question me, maybe torture me, maybe kill me…it didn't matter. Without Glory, a massive hole had been ripped clean through me; I no longer cared about what they planned to do to me. I missed her so much that my brain tormented me with memory after memory of her...

I could still smell her sweet, clean scent. Even in the Wasteland, she smelled clean. I could feel the gentle tickle of her feathers on my legs. Her legs hooked around mine. Her nose nuzzling my mane…

Wait…

I carefully lifted a hoof and felt the leg curled around my side. I looked at the cloud-gray feathers resting gently along my flank and lower leg. I felt the warmth of breath on my neck, and for the longest time I could hardly breathe. Slowly, I summoned the courage to turn my head and look over my shoulder.

Glory. Sleeping. Breathing. Warm and soft and wonderful. This was a dream. I was still unconscious. Or crazy…or dead…I slowly turned, and my motion made her stir. I held her in my rubbery hooves and pressed the side of my head to her chest. Her heart beat slow and steady and sure. The greatest sound in the world.

Her purple eyes opened slowly, meeting mine. She stroked her hoof through my mane. I saw her lips curl into that gentle smile, and then she murmured softly, "Hey."

Everything broke in a great tearing sob as I clenched my eye shut and pressed my face to her chest. If this was a dream, I'd never wake. If I were crazy, then I never wanted sanity. If this was the everafter, then it was more than I ever deserved. I couldn't talk or breathe or think. All I could do was feel and cry and cough and make a complete mess of myself. Finally, I wiped my snotty nose with a hoof and squeaked out my own "Hey."

And then there were two crying, laughing, hugging ponies instead of one.

* * *

It was a while before my brain reset enough to be able to handle things. I was pretty sure I'd feel some significant emotional bruising from the mood whiplash I'd just suffered. My brain was coming up with half-baked plots of putting her in power armor, with one of those force shield thingies, one of Rampage's regeneration talismans, and the HMS *Celestia* to keep her safe. Maybe there was a 'protection' megaspell? Nah. We could just banish the two of us to the moon and be safe forever and ever. Lacunae could teleport to the moon, right?

I wasn't sure if we were still in Flash Industries or not. Actually, make that 'not'. From the rotten maps on the walls marked with rain clouds and smiling suns, I gathered we must be in a weather station. I glanced at my PipBuck navigation: 'Weather Monitoring Station #1'. It made sense; weather stations had been used by pegasi before and had all kinds of transmitters. Since I didn't have my braces or my gear, there wasn't much for me to do but wait. He hadn't even left me with a spoon. That didn't let me do much besides cuddle next to Glory and try not to think about our immediate peril.

That was incredibly easy. Glory was alive! I was dancing with my mental ponies in glee. Even the Dealer had seen fit to grant us some privacy for a bit.

"So…*Lighthooves* saved you?" I finally asked, once I'd calmed down enough to be able to ask questions rationally. We were prisoners in some grimy building, captives of one of my friend's greatest enemies and looking forward to an unknown and ugly fate. I still didn't care. I could have blasted a hole in the wall with my happy feelings alone.

"Northstar, actually, one of the pegasi with him. She caught me when I…I fell." For a pegasus, falling to your death had to be high on the list of ways not to die. She stroked her hoof along my dirty striped mane. I needed a shower…and probably help washing, given my bendy legs. I knew just who to ask. "Lighthooves decided not to kill me, though," she said, adding after a moment's hesitation, "And I made a deal with him to stop him from killing you."

"What kind of deal?" I asked with a little frown.

"Targeting talismans for your life. The deal was that he save you, patch you up, and let us go, and I'd tell Northstar where to find more targeting talismans in the Wasteland once we were free."

Glory bit her lip as she dropped her gaze. “It was all I could think of.”

“It’s fine…” And, honestly, at that moment, I couldn’t care less. I was sure that, eventually, I’d find out what he wanted them for and be all angry about it, but right now I’d have giftwrapped the talismans for him.

“He’s also going to check your PipBuck for any files or recordings you’ve made of him,” she added as she sat up. “Do you think he’ll honor his part?”

“I certainly hope so,” the crimson pegasus said from the door. In his black Thunderhead uniform, he certainly cut quite the sinister figure. “I’ve come to the decision that, when it comes to Blackjack, one must proceed with care.”

“You’re a murdering bastard and a monster,” I pointed out, scowling at him as I shifted myself into something like an upright position on the bed. For once, though, I didn’t wonder if I could take his head off now.

“And you fed my subordinate to a raider,” he replied smoothly, making Glory blink in surprise.

I gave a sheepish little smile. "Ah…I'd just discovered their 'laboratory'. I got a bit carried away." Glory looked as if she both wanted to hear more and would rather we never speak of it again.

“You tend to do that," Lighthooves said dryly. "In any case, let’s not quibble over each other’s degrees of monsterdom. Please believe me when I say that everything I’ve done has been to preserve my home and my people,” he said calmly. I really didn’t want to hear it. Give me my braces and gear. I had a shower for two to arrange. By the Goddesses, I would build a shower for two just for us if I had to. Just watch me.

“Yeah, I’ve heard it before. You’re trying to protect the Enclave from the surface,” I said with a dismissive wobble of my hoof.

“No,” he replied evenly. “I’m trying to protect Thunderhead from the Enclave.”

Huh? My confusion must have been particularly evident, and I was glad I wasn’t the only one. Glory was frowning, looking just as baffled as I. He sighed, shaking his head. “I expected Blackjack to be ignorant of our politics, but you should know better, Morning Glory. May I rant a little? I think that, since you’ve seen fit to give me the role of a villain, I’m entitled to give a little explanation?”

I looked at her, and she shrugged in return. Finally, I sighed,

snuggled up against her, and spoke. “All right. I could use a good story.”

He chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll find it quite dull. Once upon a time there was a great war, and over time the stresses of it pushed the pegasus people away from unicorns and earth ponies. When the bombs fell, the Equestrian Skyguard made the decision to fall back and close the skies. We’d already lost Cloudsdale. With the air full of radioactive dust, we did what we could to save ourselves. And yes, I acknowledge that, in doing so, we abandoned countless ponies, as well as our own Ministry Mare.

“For a time, there was great uncertainty as to what should be done. Food stores were running low. Fear was at an all-time high. Exploration teams that went to the surface reported only death and destruction. Everything was at a tipping point…and then the eclipse happened.”

“E-what?” I asked with a little frown. The look of fear on Glory’s face made my mane prickle.

Glory bit her lip. “It was an event…ten…twenty years after the bombs fell. The sun and the moon…they were in the sky together. And then…then they came together.” I gawked at her in shock. They couldn’t come together. How could they ever come together?! “Pegasi thought that it was some final zebra superweapon. That the moon would burn up, the sun would go out, and the world would end. But apparently, it was only temporary. The moon had moved between the sun and Equestria…but the chaos was terrible.”

Lighthooves nodded grimly. “In the end, it was the military that restored order. Martial law was declared. Neighvarro and Thunderhead dispatched troops to quell the rioting. And when it was over, the military formed into a unified force that’s persisted to today. The Enclave. The Grand Pegasus Enclave,” he said with a mirthless smile, “and its lie of democracy.”

Glory immediately huffed, rolling her eyes. “Not this garbage again. You sound like some conspiracy theorist. The Enclave’s charter states that its leaders are chosen through civilian elections. There’s no way we’d tolerate its rules and laws otherwise.” Glory sounded disdainful, but I couldn’t help but think that Lighthooves was the kind of guy who’d be in such a conspiracy.

“Democracy is a tool used by the strong few to convince the weak many that *they* are strong. But every serious political candidate in the Enclave has ties with the military. Every political decision takes

the military's needs first and foremost. Every political challenger to the military drops out or gets arrested, discredited, or converted. And every twenty or thirty years, the Enclave faces a threat that only the military can resolve." He chuckled as he looked right at me. "The last was the attack by the dragon Fiendfire against Shadowbolt Tower. What a coincidence that the Enclave had Raptors nearby conducting training drills and that your father's team was prepared to repel the beast."

"Are you saying the military knew Fiendfire was going to attack?" Glory said skeptically…but with worry. "That my father…"

"No. I'm saying the military encouraged Fiendfire to attack," he said with terrible certainty. "An elaborate show to keep the public safe and thankful for the military's protection. Your father was likely ignorant of the details. Heroism is so difficult to fake and plays so well to the masses. But when he returned with your mother…well…that threw the narrative completely off. Everypony was supposed to be celebrating the triumph of the Enclave and giving their thanks for the military's protection…not starting to think about helping the surface."

I snorted softly. "Okay. So the Enclave military are a bunch of dungbags. What does this have to do with you?"

"It's very simple. It's been thirty years since Fiendfire, and the military is looking for another 'display' to justify its existence. Neighvarro has been mobilizing its Raptors and Thunderheads for 'training drills'. Personnel have been recalled and mobilized. The 'academic experts' have been chattering about potential threats. A surface power. Zebra forces. A reorganization of the griffins or another dragon attack. There's even been speculation of a threat from the stars."

"Please. Nopony takes that sort of thing seriously," Glory said with a dismissive wave of her…stump. The perfunctory gesture made Lighthooves look a bit ill before he recovered his usual level of snot.

"It's not meant to be taken seriously. It's meant to get the masses thinking about the possibility of an attack. Because ponies are increasingly questioning the need for the military. Why not allocate more resources to food production? Establishing new cloud settlements? Or…" He stared right at Glory. "Helping the surface?"

Glory flushed and retorted "Well, why not?"

Lighthooves sighed. "The military has no interest in the surface beyond possible war resources, but when Thunderhead had the

audacity to buck the mandate of the Grand Pegasus Enclave and actually allow civilians to go to the surface…it was a slap in the face of Neighvarro. It was virtually a declaration of independence." He chuckled before continuing. "For the first time ever, the public of Thunderhead violated the cardinal rule of the Enclave and did what they thought was right rather than what was in the military's best interests."

Lighthooves looked coolly at Glory. "And, in doing so, gave the military its next target: Thunderhead."

"What? Are you…" Glory rose to her hooves. "That's insane! The military would never attack Thunderhead."

"They could, they would, and they would enjoy it." Lighthooves replied calmly. "Neighvarro has never approved of Thunderhead's autonomous zone, and in establishing the Volunteer Corps, you have given them every incentive to attack. Word is getting out to other pegasus communities about the metal trading, and they are questioning why they don't implement similar programs. The moral questions that were so easy to ignore a century ago have resurfaced with terrifying swiftness. You very nearly sparked a revolution with blueberries."

"They'd need a pretext…" Glory muttered. "They couldn't just… just attack us! We're all Enclave!" She started to shake, but the thought was sinking in.

While Glory was trying to cope with the implications, Lighthooves looked on with a small expression of satisfaction. "So, what's your part in all this?" I asked.

He hesitated, then gave a minute shrug. "Mine is simple: to prevent a civil war within the Enclave at any cost," he replied evenly.

The shooty feeling was rising inside me. "So you made a biological weapon to wipe out the surface ponies?" And my stable.

"No," he replied firmly, shaking his head. "There are more than enough problems for ground life. The contagion we discovered at Yellow River wasn't appropriate to our needs. You see, we don't want to reclaim the surface at this time. If the military could no longer dictate food allocation, if it could no longer manipulate resources, then it would lose more and more control and power. And if we killed off all the primary threats, then there'd be no strong arguments against colonizing the surface. No, my goal was to adapt the disease to make it infect pegasi."

"You wanted a real plague to keep us off the surface," Glory said

softly.

"Indeed. With the VC ended, the status quo could endure. The military will find or invent some other threat. Maybe that elusive dragon that finally left its lair for the first time in recorded history. And Thunderhead will endure until such time as it can lead the way to re-establishing surface life."

It was all I could do to keep a straight face. I did not want Lighthooves thinking about Spike. "You think you should return to the surface?"

He nodded grimly. "I think it's imperative. The cold truth is that, while we might be surviving cut off from the surface at the moment, it is not a true solution. Entropy itself will one day bring down the S.P.P. towers, and that's if some outside force doesn't threaten them first. Food supplies will grow more and more scarce, the military will demand ever more resources from the public, and suffering will spread. Thunderhead is the only Enclave city with the vision and forward thinking to return to the surface and make a new reality."

"But…but then why aren't you supporting the VC?" Glory asked. "You should be helping us!"

Lighthooves shook his head, finally snapping in anger. "Haven't you been listening? The military is looking for a war! We are virtually defenseless! We might have the tower, but in a fight against multiple siege platforms and Raptor flights, we would be overwhelmed! Thunderhead would be placed under martial law and likely a third of the population will be shot for treason, including both our families." For an instant, through the cracks in his calm facade, I saw what drove Lighthooves: terror. He was scared to death of his own people. Then he took a long, slow breath, the cracks closed, and he was back to 'normal'. "I would happily… gladly…support the VC's aims…but only after Neighvarro's forces are eliminated. We've been carefully, systematically, undermining them for years, but unfortunately I doubt that we will be ready within my lifetime."

He gestured abstractly with his wings as he paced. "Ideally, I would have us return to the surface as a military venture. Controlled and organized to prevent as much disturbance as possible. A process backed by a new Thunderhead military after surface threats were eliminated and challenges destroyed and cowed by our superior firepower. And with Hoofington as a base of

operations, we could expand slowly and deliberately across Equestria. Monsters like the alicorns and relics like the Steel Rangers would be eliminated, and eventually a New Equestria could be founded. Unicorns from Shadowbolt Tower would repopulate their race. Earth pony survivors would remain, given that they're as tenacious as radroaches. And the Wasteland will be no more."

"And taint?" I asked, making him blink, but then he gave a dismissive snort.

"Any medical or magical maladies will be dealt with in time. I'm certain that we'll inevitably find a solution." But somehow, I didn't see the Elements of Harmony arising from some covert military operation. And in the meantime, how many thousands would he kill? Worse…his comment about Spike becoming a 'war excuse'. Had those Neighvarro pegasi been watching the cave, trying to find out if Spike would be a suitable target?

Did I mention I really didn't like the Enclave right now?

But…did that put Lighthooves and me on the same side, then? At least temporarily? I didn't like *that* either... but he'd saved Glory… and me.

"So…now I've got to ask: why save us?" I glanced at my love and saw her worry. "I'm pretty sure that you've got other ways to get information." Glory looked shocked, but I remembered that pen in Miramare. They'd burned her cutie mark off to frame her and brand her a traitor and even manipulated her own sister to kill her. No, Lighthooves and I were not on the same side. We might have a shared enemy, but he was on one side of a line and I was on the other.

The crimson pegasus rubbed his nose with a wing, his eyes half narrowed as he looked at both of us. "Yes, it might seem more prudent to interrogate you, extract your memories, and learn everything you've done for the last few weeks. But there are some benefits to simply letting you go," he replied as he walked to a rotten map of Equestria taped to the wall. "Expedience, for one. We may have years before we must act, but we might have only days. The other reason is simple: you are exceptionally disruptive, Blackjack. With you trotting around, my opposition is far more likely to waste time dealing with you than paying attention to me. Also, there's the slim chance that you might come to realize that I'm right. A mare of your talents could be a potent asset."

Then he paused, his smile widening. "But mostly, I saved the mare

you love. And I know that for a pony like you…that's no small thing."

I *really* wanted to shoot him right now. Really wanted to…but there was just one problem: he was right. About this, at least. He shrugged. "Maybe it'll backfire. Maybe it'll blow up in my face. Certainly possible. But Thunderhead Intelligence's learned that, sometimes, the unexpected is the most effective move of all." He looked at Glory with a small smile. "In any case, I'll get what I need, likely with far less bother and fuss than dealing with a snotty gang of Wasteland mares."

I sighed, looking at my PipBuck, then at him. Maybe…"The Flash Fillies. You probably picked through most of their headquarters while helping them?"

"For the most part. They kept their stores well guarded from us, though. They never let more than three of us in at any one time," he replied, looking at me curiously. "Why?"

"Did you get a chance to poke around their maneframe?" I asked, and Glory gasped.

He looked coolly from Glory to myself. "Yes, but the data within was encrypted."

"Do you have a copy?" Glory asked. Now he was smiling again.

"Right…" I sighed. "What do you want for it?"

"An unencrypted copy might be enlightening--" he began.

"Do I look like a decrypter? I just need it for trade. What else?" I said flatly, squeezing Glory's hoof with a leg to keep her from protesting. I couldn't let him realize the potential of cyber pegasi.

The crimson buck rubbed his chin with a wing. "Well, I don't need you for that…" he mused aloud, then smiled. He looked at Glory long and steadily; it made my mane twitch. "A confession."

Glory gaped. "What?"

"I would like a full confession and formal declaration of leaving Thunderhead and the Enclave," he replied levelly. "There were some problems with the first version. Little errors that gave rise to questions of its authenticity." No surprise, given that it was a fake. "I want a sincere confession. One that will remove any doubt as to your allegiance to Thunderhead. Or, rather, the absence thereof."

"But it would ruin Father," Glory said as she held my floppy hoof tighter.

"And save his life," Lighthooves countered.

"What?" I asked, keeping my eye on him.

The crimson pegasus began to pace slowly. “Do you really think that the Enclave is going to blissfully allow such a high profile figure as Sky Striker to continue to call for helping the surface? No. They are going to act to silence him. The usual methods have failed to remove, disgrace, or discredit him. In fact, they’ve only reinforced his popularity. That means that the only standby is assassination.”

“They wouldn’t,” Glory muttered weakly.

“They already tried this morning,” Lighthooves replied gravely. Glory gasped and leaned forward to ask the obvious. Lighthooves raised a wing to stave off the question. “He was unharmed. He was to give a speech in his old power armor. Somepony had sabotaged its spark generator. He was very fortunate it was discovered, and we are fortunate that it’s being dismissed as an accident. And, of course, the assassination of such a prominent figure would necessitate a response. A trade embargo. Cutting off food surplus shipments. Something. And in response to *that*… war.” He said it so simply.

War. It made my stomach clench. Was there anything…ever…more stupid and wasteful than war? It’d destroyed the world! You’d think that would have been enough. But here we were, two centuries later, and we still had situations where group A and group B had a problem and couldn’t think of any better way out of it than killing each other!

As I looked at the crimson pegasus, I had to admit a grudging respect for him. He was still a vile pony, but now that I was facing the prospect of stopping a war myself, I felt a small appreciation for what he was attempting to do. I’d never approve of his means. There were just some things you didn’t do; I knew that now. I’d smell chlorine and hear the scream of ‘murderer’ for the rest of my days. But the goal itself, trying to prevent war? That was respectable.

And so I was completely useless when she looked back at me. I smiled. Of course I wanted the Steelpony data; I could actually give it to ponies who needed it. But I couldn’t ask her to resign herself to live here, especially when I wasn’t going to be around much longer.

Finally, she took a deep breath. “No,” she said, and his amiable expression hardened a moment. Then he shrugged as if it was no matter. But from the look on her face, she wasn’t done yet. “No, but I will talk with him.”

He rubbed his chin, “I see. And you’ll convince him to end the Volunteer Corps?”

“No. I said I will talk with him,” she replied. “Your fake confession didn’t do anything. A coerced one won’t be much better. So let me talk with him about your concerns. Maybe he’ll change his mind. Maybe not. But it’ll be more likely to succeed than what you’re trying.”

I smiled…okay, grimaced…at him. “Sometimes the unexpected is the most effective.” Ooooh, see what I did, Lighthooves? See? I used your own words against you. Point, Blackjack!

“It’ll take some time to set up a secure channel. I trust the two of you will behave until then?” he asked as he looked at us.

“Yeah. Sure,” I replied with a smile. “I don’t suppose there’s a chance we can get a hot shower, is there?”

He curled his lips. “Of course.”

* * *

Okay. I might have asked for a hot shower, but I’d settle for a bucket of relatively clean and only mildly radioactive water and a sponge. As I started washing the dust, grime, and tears off my face, I stared at the sponge, trying to think what to do next. She’d have her chat, I’d get my data, we’d leave, she’d tell one of his ponies where to find the targeting talismans. As a show of good faith, they’d brought Glory her gear and my braces. The rest of my stuff, on the other hand, they’d probably drop from a quarter mile up just to make sure they were away before I was locked and loaded.

“Please tell me you’re not trying to think of ways to kill a pony with a sponge,” Glory said in concern as she nuzzled my neck.

“Huh? What? No…” Besides, I’d have to shove it really far down their throat. The bucket, on the other hand…If Glory kicked out the bottom and smashed it flat, I’d have a nice jagged edge. Effective against eyes and-- Glory started kissing along my spine, and thoughts of weaponizing sponges and buckets went flying out of my head. Oh yes…this was nice…this was very nice…

Except…

“Glory, I really…I don’t think…” What was the matter with me? We had privacy. I was probably the cleanest I was going to get in a long while. Goddesses knew I needed it after that little ‘adventure’ with Rarity and Vanity. But for some reason, my mind was telling

me this was wrong and I should stop it.

It was official. I'd gone completely batshit crazy.

The gray pegasus rolled me on my back and kissed along my chest before she looked me in the eyes. "I'm…I'm sorry. But I don't think I can do this." She just waited and I fidgeted, turning away. "I don't deserve…" I trailed off lamely, unable to finish.

"Oh. I see," she said calmly, then seemed to think about something. Finally, she looked me in the eye. "Do you trust me?"

Huh? "Of course…" I murmured, shocked she even had to ask.

"Absolutely and completely?" she pressed as she smiled at me. I nodded, and she dug through her bags a second, withdrew a blindfold, and tied it in place. "Don't touch it," she said firmly. O…kay…Then she was off the bed and rifling through her saddlebags. I fought hard not to peek as she returned to the bed. Then she pressed my forelegs over my head through the gaps in the bed and…my ears twitched at the sound of hoofcuffs being locked around my legs.

"G…Glory?! What are you doing?" I gasped, and then I felt my rear legs spread quite far apart and cuffed to the hoofrail at the bottom on the bed.

She moved over me and whispered in my ear, "Shhh…trust me." And a rubber ball was pressed into my mouth and tied in place around my muzzle. I couldn't move. I couldn't see. Couldn't speak.

But, sweet Celestia save me, I could feel! And what was inflicted upon me was some of the most intense feeling in my entire life. Some sour, rational, sane part of my mind grumped that it was no time for…this! That part was grabbed by the rest of my brain, beaten with rubber hoses, and tossed into that closet in the back of my mind. I crested, wailing into the gag, and she didn't relent.

Glory had to have been related to Vanity…somehow. She paused only to remove the gag and let me catch my breath before silencing me with a very lovely something else. I returned the favor in desperation, rewarded with noises of her bliss and the feeling that I was a very good pony.

When we'd finished she'd returned my sight to me, and I was feeling quite confused and exceptionally buttery inside. I wanted to ask where she'd learned to do such things, but the taste of mare had completely overridden my ability to think. Good thing too, because my brain was trying to come up with all kinds of reasons for why what we'd done was wrong and undeserved. I was a bad pony

who'd almost got her killed…but that voice was dulled by the fact that Glory had done almost everything. She'd decided it and done it. And so that sour pony lurked in the back of my mind muttering bad things about me.

She washed me a second time…and herself…before finally unlocking me from the bed. I had to admit, I was so relaxed that it felt like all the rest of my bones had changed to rubber too. "Wow…" Okay, so at the moment, complex sentences were beyond me.

"Never done that before?" she said, seeming quite happy herself. I shook my head vigorously back and forth. "Like it?" I nearly strained my neck nodding. She gave a pleased nicker. "I'm so glad I didn't mess it up, then. Dusk thought you'd like it."

Did I mention how much I loved Glory's eldest sister right then? Really! Lovely mare! "But where did you get…oh. That shop?" She grinned sheepishly, blushing. So adorable! Then I arched a brow. "Did you get anything…else?"

"Maybe," she replied in a playful tone that screamed 'yes.' Then she gave a little murr and kissed me softly. "If you're a good mare, you'll find out." Oh, okay. I'd be good. I'd be the goodest bestest nicest mare ever, yes sirree!

"Got to say it was unexpected," I said with a flush as we cuddled together.

Glory seemed quite amused by my embarrassment. "I thought that you'd done tons of stuff like this?"

"Are you kidding? Mom would have thrown me in detention and spayed me. I got to have nice, predictable, scandal-free sex. It was everypony else who had all the bizarre kinks." I had to admit I was a little worried. I'd never ever had sex like that before. I was still tingly. It was as if I discovered an entirely new part of myself but was just a little leery about getting to know her better.

The one part I couldn't shake was that I'd liked it. I'd liked it a lot. And from the look on Glory's face, she had too. I felt that emotional whiplash setting in. A few hours ago, I'd thought she was dead. Now I was left feeling giddy that I'd just been cuffed to a bed. Maybe I should try to cool this down. Get some control. Something. Then I caught her purple eye and saw just how screwed I was. Oh Goddesses…

She was helping me put on my leg braces back on when there was a knock and a midnight blue mare with a starburst cutie mark

poked her head in. “We’re ready, Morning Glory.”

Glory nodded. “Thank you, Northstar.” The gray mare helped me to my hooves as we trotted through the weather station. There were eight or nine pegasi working on imported terminals and checking paperwork; most of them gave at least a glance in my direction as we passed.

On the wall was a black banner of a purple eye in the center of a vaguely shield-shaped dark green cloud with a bright green lightning bolt behind it. Written around the edges was the motto ‘Enclave Intelligence: protecting against threats from below and above, within and without.’ “Threats from above?” I asked with a little smile as we entered a small room with a terminal and camera set up on a table. Lighthooves stood calmly in the corner, out of sight of the camera.

“Enclave Intelligence is supposed to be ready for anything,” Northstar said softly. “We’re not the military. We don’t have Raptors and siege platforms. The biggest things we’re allowed are Vertibucks. We’re supposed to be smarter and sneakier than our enemies. We’re supposed to cheat,” she muttered sourly. “Of course, we’d be able to be much more effective if we didn’t have to approve every last op with Neighvarro. Can’t believe they’re restricting our flights over the Everfree and Fillydelphia, now of all times... ”

I looked at her in response. “It sounds almost like the Ministry of Awesome.”

She suddenly grinned in approval. “I never expected a dirtsider to notice that. If it wouldn’t completely tick off Neighvarro, we’d still use that name. Neighvarro was the base for the Equestrian Skyguard after Cloudsdale was bombed. Thunderhead and Shadowbolt Tower were the Ministry of Awesome’s headquarters. Oh, sure, everypony thought that the Canterlot office was the main one, even when it was turned into a warehouse. Just as Rainbow Dash planned.” She sighed, looking pensive. “If things had gone a little differently, everypony in the intelligence service would be a Dashite. If Rainbow Dash had just *waited*…” But she gave a little shake of her head.

“But... but you branded Glory,” I pointed out. “Burned off her cutie mark and…and…”

“We did what we had to. Would you prefer a war?” she asked bluntly. Point taken.

Lighthooves brought his wing up across his lips. “Ladies.”

The terminal screen flickered for a moment, then coalesced into the image of a middle-aged buck just approaching elderly status. His coat was a rich plum and his purple mane was shot with gray. I noted, with a touch of concern, he also had an eyepatch covering his left eye and the left side of his face rippled with old scars that hadn't quite worn away. His gray eye widened in shock and he half rose to his hooves. "Morning?"

"Hello, Father." I was surprised at the formal tone she adopted. "I'm glad to see you well."

He slammed his hoof on the desk. "Pissing rainbows, Morning, don't give me that! What the hell have you been up to? First a confession that you've gone Dashite, then Dusk reporting you'd been killed without verification, and now a report that you…" but he then trailed off as she shifted. She flushed and turned to block the view of her stub. "Where are you? I'll fly right down there myself and pick you up!"

"No, Father. I'm fine."

"You are missing a wing, Morning! That is the opposite of fine!" he roared. "You are coming home and that is final!"

"No, Father. I'm not," she countered with her own scowl. "There're things going on right now…"

"I don't give a thundering fart what things are going on!" he said with another imperious slam of his hoof. "You are coming home right now where it's safe. Then we can see about getting rid of those scars."

"You can't tell me what to do, Father! I'm not a filly anymore!" Glory shouted at him with a very un-Glory like scowl.

"You're just like your mother," he muttered darkly. "Stop being so stubborn!"

"I'm doing important things, Father!" she snapped back. "Stop telling me what to do! I am a Dashite, okay? I might love Thunderhead and believe in the Enclave, but my home is down here now! The mare I love is down here!" Oh, what was that burning smell? Ah, it was me blushing.

He seethed but sat back and slumped a little. "You disappear for a month, and the first thing we do when I see you is scream at each other." He shook his head with a deep sigh. "I've been yelling at security and your sister for weeks now. Ever since that forged confession popped up. Now I get an 'update' and it's you…"

"I'm sorry, Father. I know you want to keep me safe, but I'm not

your little sunrise anymore," she replied. She glanced over at Lighthooves and then back at the screen. "I'm here with an Operative Lighthooves. He says that things are bad between Neighvarro and Thunderhead. Really bad. And the VC is driving it."

Tell him Lighthooves burned off your cutie marks, Glory. I wanted to shout it, but Northstar looked at me and shook her head slowly. I bit my tongue.

"Things have been shaky ever since your mother. This is nothing new. Neighvarro will call us petty names and sulk till a harvest goes bad or a talisman breaks. Then they'll change their tune. It's been the same old dance for the last two hundred years."

She glanced at the crimson buck before looking at the screen again. "He says otherwise. That the military's looking for a fight…like when Fiendfire attacked. And that Thunderhead might be the next target. He says they might try and kill you, Father."

He harrumphed. "There's at least twenty ponies I can think of who'd want me dead. It comes from being a politician." Glory started to say something, but he coughed and raised his wing. "I won't hear any more conspiracy nonsense. Neighvarro needs Thunderhead. They'll huff and puff and snap their wings, but when the sun sets they'll be the ones asking us for help."

"What if they're not, though?" I asked as I stepped up next to Glory. She stared hard at me, her feathers ruffling. Her father glared at me, and I wondered if his remaining eye could disintegrate me through the terminal. "Mister Sky Striker, I grew up in a stable. We were attacked, and afterwards, I thought there was no threat…but in the end, everypony I knew and loved was dead. Is the risk to Thunderhead worth more than scrap metal and blueberries?"

He looked at me in such a way that I realized I was in trouble. The exact same expression was on Glory's face as well. Big trouble. Lighthooves looked as if he were doing all he could not to laugh as he just smiled.

"Morning Glory, who's this?" His tone was light, but I suspected that his death gaze was merely charging up.

"This is Blackjack," she said pleasantly enough, but there was an undertone that said that I was in *so* much trouble right now. "She's my dear friend," she said, and I suddenly realized that 'dear' could mean 'idiotic' from how she said the word.

"I see," he replied evenly, and muttered, "I'm never getting grandfoals at this rate…" Then his eye hardened on me. "Miss

Blackjack, I've been guarding and protecting Thunderhead my entire life. Thunderhead needs the VC. We're just realizing how badly we need metal and materials from the surface. And we're becoming an example of just how much the surface offers us. In time, the Enclave military and other cities will come around to our way of thinking. The military won't risk damaging Shadowbolt Tower. They need it."

"But--" I began weakly.

"I won't hear any more on this," he said with finality. "All this talk of war and pegasus turning against pegasus simply undermines us. We are all Enclave. We are all in this together." Suddenly, I had an overwhelming appreciation for just what Lighthooves was dealing with. It was like Miramare all over again. How do you convince somepony who's completely made up their mind before their cutie marks are burned off?

"Right," was all I could mutter.

"Very good." His gaze pinned me in place as he stared at me, "Now. Miss Blackjack. You care deeply for my daughter?" I swallowed and nodded. "More than anything?" I nodded faster.

"I'd give my life for her in a heartbeat," I replied.

"And have you screwed it up?" I winced, looking at Glory with a worried frown. He took a deep breath. "I see. Well, if she's forgiven you, then I suppose there must be some merit to you. I did the same for her mother…but, if the next time I see my daughter, she's without her other wing, I swear you will be the one to answer for it. Is this understood?"

"Yes sir!" I said with a gulp. Maybe put her in the HMS Celestia on the moon…that'd keep her safe, right?

"Very good," he said before his eyes returned to Glory. "Now, Morning Glory, have you found what you're looking for?" Glory glanced at me nervously, then at the screen, and then dropped her eyes.

"No, Father. Not yet," she replied before looking back at him. "But I'm still looking." He just sighed and nodded.

"Too bad."

"And the twins?"

"They miss you badly. Lucent got in a terrible fight at school over the recording. Lambent is more quietly upset. She pours herself into her studies. I hope you get to see them again soon."

"Me too, Father," she replied with a small smile. "Maybe someday

in the future you can bring them down to see the surface."

"It's hard to get over the dirt," he replied with a small roll of his eyes. Finally he sighed. "It was good talking with you again, Morning."

"And you, Father."

"Sunshine and rainbows, Morning Glory."

"And clear skies ahead, Father."

Wait? Wasn't she going to tell him about Lighthooves? Or what he did to her? Or the contagion he was working on, or anything?! My jaw dropped as she reached over and turned off the terminal, looking at Lighthooves. "So?"

He looked at her for a long moment as he rubbed his nose with a wing, then nodded to Northstar. This was it! His sudden but inevitable villainous betrayal! The midnight blue mare trotted to the terminal and began typing on the keys before she looked at me. "Well, do you want the files from Flash Industries or not?"

I felt concussed. "You're giving them to me? But…but she didn't convince him to stop like you wanted!"

"She really isn't a smart pony, is she?" Lighthooves murmured.

"Father would never just change his mind like that. It took ten years for us to finally get him to stop singing in the shower," Glory said softly. "All I agreed to do was talk with him. Hopefully it'll make Father think about what he's doing and why he's doing it. He can get reckless sometimes," Glory explained as Northstar hooked my PipBuck to the terminal.

"But…but half that conversation was a fight and the other half you didn't say anything!" I gawked as I looked at her. Northstar began typing, and a little message asked me if I wanted to do something with Project Steelpony. I hit accept as I looked at the pair. "I mean…"

The Dealer coughed in my mind; I had no time for him right now. I mentally mashed accept over and over again.

Glory sighed softly as my PipBuck did…something. There were all these blurred letters and numbers streaming by in the corner of my vision. "Blackjack, I don't think you realize it, but I fight with everypony in my family. Father. Dusk. Moonshadow. Even the twins." Glory? Nice, sweet, wonderful Glory? ... Okay, yeah, I guess I could see it.

"But you didn't say anything about the contagion or talismans or the like!" I protested with a frown.

"Of course not. Do you want to give Lighthooves a reason to kill both us *and* Father?" Glory responded.

"I would prefer to avoid it," the crimson buck said offhandedly. The two sounded like they were bantering about our deaths. They *were* bantering!

"But I…you…she…we…" I collapsed on my haunches with a clatter. "What the hell is wrong with all you pegasi?! This cloak and dagger stuff…it just isn't healthy!" All this intrigue was starting to make my head hurt. The flashing and numbers didn't help much either. What the hay was my PipBuck doing?

Suddenly, as abruptly as it began, it ended. About time, too. I checked my PipBuck memory, and…oh, look! Another quarter of nigh-infinite memory power taken up with 'Steelpony.acv'. Good. Something for smarter ponies than I. I reached over to the terminal to pull out the cables, then blinked as my hoof passed right through it. "Bwah?!" I gasped as I waved my hoof back and forth through the computer. "Wha…how…?" I stammered as the computer swirled and then seemed to resolidify on the table. "That's weird! You're weird! Everything that flies is weird!" I pointed at the computer, my mane bristling. "This is not natural!"

"Relax, Blackjack. It's just made out of clouds," Glory said as she rested her hoof on top of the terminal easily and unplugged it with her mouth.

"Clouds?" I blinked and pointed at the screen. "That's a cloud? Terminals aren't made out of clouds! Terminals are made out of… whatever non-cloud things they're made out of!" I started to trot around the room. "Is this made out of clouds? Or this?" I asked as I went and kicked everything that looked remotely pegasus-built… and was shocked to find my hoof passed through most of it. "Ahhh!" I tried to flip away a container with my hoof, but my leg went right through it.

"She fights monsters, has a building collapse under her, smashes through an interrogation window, tears apart soldiers in a chem-induced fury…and *this* is what freaks her out? I don't know if I should be impressed or disappointed," Lighthooves commented.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, we were out of there. I had a splitting headache from that download, I really did not want to be around

Lighthooves any longer, and almost everything around me was made of clouds! Intangible gear was where I drew the line! Lighthooves seemed exceptionally pleased with himself, which didn't do me any favors either. Fortunately, Glory and I were escorted out of Weather Monitoring One by Northstar. I'd poked her black carapace armor and was relieved to find it quite solid under my hoof.

"Quit it," she'd murmured, but every other minute I'd give it a test poke…you know, just to make *sure*.

"So, ahem, what do you want with off-the-books targeting talismans?" I asked the armored mare with a grin as she handed over the rest of my gear. Northstar looked amused, and Glory just smiled and shook her head. "What?" I asked as I floated my barding into place. Glory helped me adjust it.

My gray love sighed softly. "You don't just ask, Blackjack. You talk around it. Work your way towards the answer. Be subtle." This from the most literal mare I'd ever met?

"Of course, you could always join us," Northstar said casually. "As they say, 'if you can't beat 'em... '"

I snorted. "As if Lighthooves would ever go for that. As if Glory would go for that!" I laughed as I finally checked my firearms. Then I saw their serious looks and my laughter died off. "I…you…you're serious?! You're actually serious!" I stammered and pointed my hoof at her flanks. "He burned off your cutie marks, Glory!"

"To prevent a war," she replied softly as she shivered, dropping her gaze a moment. Then she looked back up at me. "Even if he's wrong, I can't fault his intent. I agree his means are wrong, but his end is to protect my home."

Yeah, unless he's lying! I almost said it, but at the look on her face the retort stuck in my throat. Maybe it was a pegasus thing, or maybe it was a Thunderhead thing, but they didn't do or take lying well. The feigned confession hadn't worked and they didn't lie… exactly.

I wasn't on the same page as Glory and Northstar. Clearly, they appreciated Lighthooves in a way I couldn't. He was using misdirection against an Enclave military that apparently had superior firepower and a need to use it to justify their existence. Maybe there was something noble about that, but I couldn't respect a pony who twisted the truth to the point of making it almost unrecognizable to get Dusk to kill Glory or try to smear her father's

name. You just didn't do some things. And *still* Glory believed in the Enclave and Thunderhead. Maybe not as callously as Lighthooves; I couldn't see Glory comparing earth ponies to radroaches, but she was still convinced that her people and her home were the best future for Equestria.

And maybe she was right.

But despite that, there was something about Lighthooves, beyond what he'd done, that bothered me. He was a schemer, somepony trying to manipulate the world around him. And after encountering Goldenblood…well, I was suspicious of anypony who tried to get others to do their dirty work for them. I got all the same vibes from Lighthooves as I did from Goldenblood: he was a pony who would get a lot of ponies killed if he thought it was worth it.

"The talismans are in the Robronco maintenance center in Flank," Glory told Northstar. "If you can't find any there, you might try at Exchange. I sold them to a bluish-white mare with a wrench cutie mark."

Northstar sighed. "And she'll probably send me somewhere else. Why is nothing ever easy?"

I chuckled. "'Cause then it just wouldn't be any fun."

When she was gone I looked at Glory. "What?" she asked a little nervously.

"Nothing," I said as I stretched forward to nuzzle her. "Just…I don't like that we helped him. I know what he told us. I just…I think it's going to end badly. That's all." I'd gotten what I wanted. He'd gotten what he wanted. That was fair, right?

So why was my mane going so crazy?

* * *

The west side of the river had been dominated by dead forests and residential areas. The northeast was one big industrial ruin. The roads were choked with debris ranging from chunks of buildings to collapsed steel girders, making a maze that has us constantly backtracking and working our way around obstacles. I needed to find someplace to hole up while we tried to reconnect with P-21, Scotch Tape, and Lacunae. I had Scotch's PipBuck tag and she had mine, so it was inevitable that we'd meet sooner or later. The question was, what would we meet in the meantime?

There wasn't really anyplace safe to hole up here. Most of the

buildings were collapsed, and every now and then my PipBuck let out its clicks to remind us that this was no spot for resting. The problem was that it was starting to get dark. I'd sucked up enough radiation to let me see clearly and had my E.F.S. to warn me about things, but Glory didn't have either of those advantages.

"What do you think it was?" I asked as we carefully picked our way down a street littered with rusty barrels and pools of rainbow-hued water. "In Diamond's office, I mean? The thing that cut all the Flashers to pieces and tried to get my PipBuck?" And why had it tried to impersonate Goldenblood, of all ponies?

"I really don't know," she replied as she kicked out at a radroach that'd been looking for a nibble.

Well, I... actually, I *did* know one person who could take over a system like that. I rose to my hooves and flicked my ears. "Listen," I said as I looked around the dark, drizzly ruins. "Can you hear a tuba? Trombone? Tambourine?"

She looked at me oddly. "Should I?" There was a little worry in her voice; I guess, when it came to a mare as messed up as I, it was valid.

There it was. Distant music barely audible over the rain. I half-guessed the direction and trotted as fast as I was able through the shell of some factory. For once, luck was in my favor: the music was getting louder. It was that obnoxious 'ompaa ompaa' playing that nopony in their right mind could like! Then I spotted the little flying spritebot. It'd clearly seen better days, given it was missing one eye and made a decidedly staticy noise. "Watcher!" I leapt over a mucky storm drain and grabbed the robot with my magic.

"Watcher?" Glory asked in confusion as I pulled the spritebot in front of me.

"A…a friend. He's sort of given me help now and then. He can take over computer systems and stuff. He might know." I grinned as I looked at the robot. "Hey, Watcher! Watcher?" I frowned and gave the robot a vigorous shake. "Watcher!"

"Easy, Blackjack! Don't break it!" the bot suddenly said in that mechanical voice. "Nice to see you again too, Blackjack." After a moment, the bot crackled again. "Whoa. What happened to you? Nice eyepatch!" Then the bot turned and faced Glory. "Oh…" Yeah, awkward.

"Trust me, I'd rather have kept the eye. Listen, I need to ask you a computer-smart-pony question. How do you take over the

spritebots? We've run into this…this thing. It's doing the exact same thing…taking over computer systems."

Spike coughed. "Well…you remember the thing in the place?" I glanced at Glory's confused and faintly annoyed expression, then nodded. "Well, it's one of the most powerful of its kind ever." A Crusader Maneframe. A magical and technological wonder. "There were only a few made across Equestria, and only for critical projects."

"So you think that…that thing…might be using one of those?"

"Maybe. Or it's possibly a knockoff. Or maybe somepony in the Wasteland found enough parts to make one. After all, why only make three when you can have nine at triple the price, only the six get to be kept secret for your own sinister ends?"

"I see." So if there was a Crusader Maneframe out there, or its equivalent, then somepony was using that to take over systems. Somehow, it had animated an entire factory to try and take EC-1101 by force. Then it had tried to trick me…badly…using Goldenblood's illusion. Both felt…sloppy. Blunt. Like whoever was behind it really wasn't putting much thought into it. "Can you think of anyplace around Hoofington that might have a top secret you-know-what?" I asked with a grin.

"If you'd asked anywhere else, then I might have a clue. There might be one hidden in Tenpony, but they'd never confirm it. Robronco wanted one in the last year of the war, but Apple Bloom turned them down. It's a fair bet the O.I.A. had one somewhere. Maybe one in the M.W.T. hub in Canterlot or Hoofington; again, nothing confirmed. Hoofington was Equestria's biggest research hub. Even if there wasn't a you-know-what, there were enough research maneframes that somepony might be able to come close. Sorry. I know Stable-Tec built them, but that's about all."

"Thanks, Watcher," I said with a smile. "How are things in the rest of Equestria? I haven't had time to listen to Ho-- erm…DJ Pon3." I glanced at Glory with a sheepish grin. From her look I had yet more explaining to do.

"Weird. LittlePip was in Fillydelphia a little while ago. Now she's off to Splendid Valley…and I'm not sure why. Red Eye's got an army moving around Tenpony. For a while, I'd hoped that the Rangers might do something about it, but they're all heading to Celestia knows where. Something's going on and I don't like it. How are you doing?"

I sighed. “Okay. I’ve got a few months to live. Taint and cancer.” And that was all there was to say about that. Then I looked at Glory and gave her a crooked little smile. “Hey. Could you please give me a little privacy? I need to talk about you behind your back.”

Glory looked at me with a sharp frown, pointing her wing at me before sighing and shaking her head. I watched her move to the other end of the factory, looking back frequently. “Blackjack?” Watcher asked.

I turned my back to Glory so she couldn’t see my face. “I almost lost her, Spike,” I said softly as I looked at the spritebot’s remaining eye. “She was right there in front of me and I…she…she fell. And I couldn’t do…do anything!” I felt myself melting down as I let myself finally face that horrible truth. “One of my enemies saved her to fuck with me…and I’m so happy she’s alive. Goddesses…I’m so happy! But I’m scared shitless it’ll happen again, Spike!” My legs were shaking so badly that I couldn’t hold on to the robot. I took a deep sniff. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t. I want to keep her safe…and happy…”

The bot was silent for the longest time. I glanced over my shoulder. Glory was shielding her eyes with her wing as she kept an eye on the radroaches scurrying in the ruins around us. Damn things were cluttering up my E.F.S. with red bars. Finally, Spike answered. “I don’t know what to tell you, Blackjack. I really don’t. You can’t send her away; she doesn’t seem like a mare who’d just trot off even if you asked her to. So just do your best to make her happy and keep her as safe as you can. That’s all you can do.”

“But…what if she dies?” I whimpered, feeling like an absolute foal. I needed some adult to tell me it was going to be okay.

“Then…that’s a real bad day. But you have to remember all the good parts. That knowing her is worthwhile. I miss Twilight every single day because I remember how much she meant to me. You have to do the same for Glory for as long as you can.”

I sighed. “Really? I was hoping for some kind of miraculous solution you might have. I’ve got to do something to keep her safe before this taint eats me alive.” I sniffed, but it was impossible to tell if I was crying or not. I just never wanted to feel that way again. “Oh well... hopefully we can at least work things out between the Reapers and the Rangers.” Stupid war…I hated war. I hated the whole concept. Ponies should not know war!

“Rangers?” Was it just me or did the synthetic voice sound

alarmed? It was starting to smoke. “You’re going near them?” I gave a little nod. Then it buzzed sharply. “Blackjack! You can’t…make sure…see…” And then the sprite bot gave one last anemic crackle and with a loud pop dropped in front of me. I caught it in my hooves. “Watcher? Watcher!” Somehow the sight of the poor dead spritebot made me want to cry.

“Can I come back now?” Glory asked. I put the little bot in my bag with a sniff as I looked back at her. She saw the look on my face and her irritation slipped away. “Talking about what happened?”

“Yeah,” I replied and wiped my face for any treasonous tears as I trotted towards her. “Well, nothing’s going to stop u--” A spasm of pain shot up my leg and it was all I could do not to scream as I sprawled out on my face in the muck. What in the Goddesses’ names wa--

The manticore’s claws snatched inches from my spine as the winging monstrosity landed almost on top of me. With rainbow muck on my cheeks, I stared up at the monster as it crouched beside me. My horn brought Vigilance around and I slipped into S.A.T.S. for three rounds to its body. I didn’t want to wait for a clear shot at its head. The firearm roared above my head and carved great bloody holes in the beast’s side. Hot wet guts and gore spattered out, but it wasn’t dead yet. The beast reared around and half rolled, half flailed away as its fangs chomped inches from my belly. A green beam struck it, and with one deep growl it shuddered and fell in a heap.

But it’d already given our position away. The manticores were winging in from every direction at once. By the time they were in range for my E.F.S. to pick up, they were diving down on us. In this building’s shell, we were effectively in a great big food bowl. I fought to ignore the throbbing pain. Not now, body. I need you to work!

“We’ve got to get out of here!” I shouted. Twenty to two were NOT odds I liked. I got to my hooves in time for a stinger to catch on one of the ceramic plates over my rump; I blasted the beast in return. Glory sent emerald beams slicing through the air, the glow illuminating the others circling around to make their attacks. I looked in the direction we’d come, but three crouched there behind some cover. The beasts were learning!

“Hey, Security!” yelled a mare from the darkness above. “I was thinking…why don’t you make this easy, huh? Give up. We’ll make

it clean and quick."

I couldn't help myself. Wiping the grime off my face and ignoring the clicking noise, I laughed at the shadows above. "Oh Goddesses, do you have lousy timing or what! You think you're going to be able to get me to give up after I just got *laid*? I can take all you fuckers on!" I floated out Taurus's rifle. Come on, monstermare. Show me your face before you tell me your sob story and give me a whole new world of guilt!

"Funny. So did I," Cackled the monsterpony somewhere above me. "My pets are very well trained." Okay…ew!

Still, she wasn't taking the bait. We couldn't go up. Couldn't go any other direction. That left... "Glory! The drain! Get in the drain!"

"The what?!" she shouted, staring at me in shock. "Are you crazy?"

"Yes! Now shoot that grate and get down there!" I yelled, wheeling as I saw another manticore making its dive. Two rounds made it veer off, but another swept by and raked me with its claws. I nearly went down. Glory shot the drain cover with her beam rifle but hesitated. Now that we had a route of escape, the monster mare gave a bestial shriek, and the flying creatures began to move in all at once.

I holstered Vigilance and ran to where Glory balked on the edge of the hole. "Going down!" I shouted and gave her a shove. She shrieked. Two flew in, mouths stretched wide as I leapt in after her. The beasts collided inches from me as I disappeared into the frothy depths below.

The fall wasn't that far, but suddenly I realized how much of a bad idea this was! I'd envisioned a nice big sewer we could trot along. What we'd jumped into was a pipe. A pipe almost completely full of very cold and very fast water. It was all I could do to keep my face in the narrow pocket of air at the top of the storm drain. Bits of junk, mud, and rock ground against me as we shot through the earth.

I bumped into the thrashing Glory and wrapped my hooves around her. I found her neck and lifted it above the water. She screamed, but it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard! She had to be alive to scream! If we hit a block we were dead. If we hit a pump or something, we were dead. If we ran out of air…

And just like that, the pocket of air disappeared. We were going down and moving faster! All I could see in that mutated darkness was Glory's mane. My lungs burned. Any exposed skin flared from

where it'd rubbed against the interior of the pipe.

And then we were in air again, *in* the air, falling and tumbling in a great open space. Glory slipped from my grasp as her wing beat instinctively and with futility. We were in a great shaft of tumbling water from a dozen drains. Over and over I flipped in the grip of gravity till I landed with a great frothy crash at the bottom of the shaft. A cascade of water poured down atop me, and I became aware that the water was moving in a circle around the bottom of the shaft. There was a terrible force pulling me downward.

"Glory!" I shouted, looking around as I instinctively flailed my limbs to keep me up. There was so much noise that I could barely hear myself. Then a green light flashed in the darkness from the edge and I saw a rusty stair. She clutched it, breathing hard. Her mouth moved as I swirled around and around. There was that noise, that horrible noise I'd heard in the Fallen Towers. It was deeper, though, and beneath me. And as I spun, I became aware that this water wasn't flat…it had a depression in the middle. A depression I was slowly sinking into…

Did I mention there wasn't a swimming pool in 99? Oh, and that I was wearing combat armor? And that I had four surprisingly heavy leg braces on? I swam like I had an orange pony bellowing in my ear to keep moving. Be strong! Be tough! Don't let this stop me! I couldn't let this stop me. I could hear grinding below me…and I imagined a pump with great chopping blades to break up the garbage pulled through it.

I wasn't making any headway, but I wasn't getting pulled in further.

Then I was hit in the face by a wingful of wet feathers. I couldn't grab, so I bit. She had all four legs gripping the rail as tight as she could as she pulled. The stair was jerking as the force started to pull bits of it free.

I was going to get us both killed.

And just like that, I knew what it meant to be holding on to a limb. Just what had gone through her mind. What I'd do to her if I let go and allowed myself to be pulled into that watery maw. I saw her wide, terrified eyes. Her lips moving. 'Don't let go.'

I don't want you to die, Glory. Just like she didn't want me to die in Flash Industries. But she'd have a whole life before her; I only had a few months. I knew she couldn't see me in the dark gloom. I wanted to let her know it would be all right. It would be okay. It

would.

And then she was firing her beam rifle at the stairs. What was she doing? With a metal shriek an entire section of metal stairs broke free, dropping us both into the churning water. Why, I wanted to ask. But then, I wasn't a smart pony.

From beneath us came a resounding clang as the rusty lengths were fed into the grinder. There was an ear splitting squeal as something beneath us exploded and the water started to churn furiously. We embraced in the middle of the raging flow as the suction abruptly stopped. Spinning round and round we held each other in the middle of that shaft.

That shaft that was rapidly filling with water!

Up and up and up we were carried as it filled. I could see the domed top. The open pipe. It looked really small…barely enough room for a pony. The noise rose higher and she took a deep breath as she ducked down. With a whoosh I was pushed into the pipe. Up…and up and up and up and the pressure built more and more. I took a breath and held it.

There was a metallic explosion, and like that I was once more in the air. I tumbled end over end for a moment in the jet of water before I finally slipped off and landed on my back. Glory flopped down next to me, coughing and hacking up water. The end of her rifle had snapped in a sharp L shape. I had no idea how she was supposed to fix it now. I looked up at the gray clouds and did the only thing appropriate at a moment like this.

I started laughing my fool head off right there in the middle of the pitted street.

And an old buck chuckled, "Well, damn! Don't you two know just how to make an entrance!"

* * *

Contrary to what some may believe, travel by pipe, while fast, is neither comfortable nor safe. In a few minutes, we'd travelled nearly a mile west and popped out right next to a battered but intact fire station. From the second floor I could see a glimpse of the naval base and harbor to the north. Downstairs, next to the rusting fire pump wagons, the old buck's brahmin were warming up and taking a load off their powerful frames. A filly was feeding them piles of yellowed grass and thorny bushes--brahmin could

apparently eat anything, no matter how radioactive or poisoned--while a sour-looking mare scraped away shovelfuls of their reeking dung.

The old stallion in charge of the caravan was a wrinkly yellow earth pony buck with a gray mane. He wore a nice brown canvas coat and a floppy, wide-brimmed hat, and he'd braided his mane, tail, and brushy garlic bulb of a beard and decorated them with shiny pieces of foil. I was rather astonished to see a PipBuck on his right foreleg. His bright, shiny blue eyes sparkled despite his age. Something about the way he grinned made me blush.

Keeper, as he called himself, had picked us off the street and hauled us to the firehouse as the manticores wheeled around where we'd disappeared a mile or so to the east. His ghoul bodyguards Charon and Cerberus hadn't said a word as they trotted along in their black combat armor and machinegun-armed battle saddles. Unfriendly, unconcerned, or unable, I didn't know, and I wasn't sure how to broach the topic. Fortunately, with us relaxing in the old fire station's bunkhouse, Keeper was more than happy to talk enough for three ponies.

"Never seen the like! Ground rumbling and shaking fit to split in two, and from it issued not just a fountain but two of the greatest beauties as could ever be imagined. I confess I could tell this story to everypony I meet the rest of my days and they'd never believe it!" he said as he slapped his hoof on his knee. I had to admit, I didn't feel very beautiful. My barding was thrashed and waterlogged, my leg braces were bent, and I was missing a patch of skin along the left side of my face where it'd brushed against the side of the pipe. Glory was even worse off. Her legs and rump looked as if they'd been sanded raw.

"We're really glad you carried us out of there, Keeper," I said. Glory kept her eyes on her beam weapon, the snapped barrel bringing tears to her eyes as she tried to figure out how best to repair it.

"Thank Charon and Cerb. If they hadn't been willing to carry you, I don't think my old bones would have gotten far." He looked over at Glory. "If you're looking for an AER-10, I'm pretty sure that Megamart would be a good place to start. Bottlecap keeps a pretty nice stock of weapons, even with all her troubles."

"Hmmm?" Glory looked up and blinked. "Oh, well, I might be able to convert it. The emerald's still intact, but the internals probably

wouldn't fit in a 10's frame without major modification... And Megamart's out of our way, anyway." She looked at him speculatively. "You know about magic weapons?"

"Oh, I know enough to get me in trouble, but not enough to be dangerous," he said enigmatically as she flushed. I rubbed my missing eye with a wince at a dull throb in my head and leg. I must have banged myself up pretty good. "How about an AER-20?" he asked with a grin.

"But that's a gatling beam frame!"

"So? Make it into a gatling beam weapon," Keeper chuckled. "It just so happens that I have an AER-20 that I swapped at the air station for three or four cartons of boysenberries. Can you imagine that?" he said with a little wink. "Might be worth considering. I can let you have it for…ooh…eighteen hundred?"

"Twelve hundred," she countered at once.

He chuckled and then reached into his bag for a little plastic box. He pulled off the lid. "Well, now, that's a fair offer. I might have to mull that one over a spell." He deftly shook a little purple berry into his hoof and popped it into his mouth. He chewed with delight, smacking his lips. "Not bad. Not bad." He lifted the box. "Care to try one?"

Glory frowned but then held out her hoof. He shook not one, but three into it. She looked skeptical but popped one in. Instantly, her eyes shot wide, and the second one followed the first into her mouth. "Oh, wow... " She groaned with a shiver.

"What? What's it taste like?" I asked, lifting the last one from her hoof with my magic.

The gray pegasus lunged, snapped the berry out of the air, and munched furiously. "My berry," she said firmly. "I get the berries. I was the one who was shoved into a pipe."

"I was saving us from getting chomped by manticores," I objected.

"I got shoved into a pipe. I get the berries," she replied firmly.

"Well, if you like 'em so much…" the buck said. "How about… eighteen hundred, but I throw in the berries, some scrap electronics, and some gem power cells for the weapon?"

"Deal. Gimme!" She lunged for the container and he held it out for her to snatch away. Holding it in her mouth, she trotted away and began to munch them one after the other with a blissful look on her face. Suddenly, the earlier comment about them being a controlled substance didn't seem quite so ridiculous.

I counted out the caps and Keeper just chuckled. “She’s lucky. Awesome might sell a dozen cases a year…tops. Fortunately, I got connections with connections. Always nice to find a mare who admires quality food.”

“I guess,” I said as my lovely marefriend made rather post-coital noises as she lay on one of the bunks and devoured the berries one by one. “Got any shotguns?” I asked with a grin.

“I’ve got an IF-80 and an IF-84 Stampede riot gun,” he replied.

“Twelve gauge?”

“Of course.”

I rubbed my chin. “How about an IF-88?” I tapped my hooves, wondering if it might be possible…

“The Ironpony?” I nodded vigorously, and he gave a soft sigh. “Sorry, kid. Never put in production.” He shook his head. “It’d be worth its weight in... well, I’m not even sure what if you found one.”

“Pfft. As if I’d ever sell such a piece of beauty,” I said, pining over a gun I’d only seen once. For all I knew, it kicked like an orgasming mule and jammed like a virgin on…oh Goddesses, was I feeling the itch again already? “What are the odds I could get more of those berries?” I asked as I looked at the lovely berry fiend.

“Good luck,” he replied with a chuckle. “Fact is, a few more days and those would have spoiled, so…eh…” He gave a shrug as he took his caps and carefully measured them out in stacks to count them. He looked at me and her, then sighed.

“What?” I asked with a small smile. I’d seen that look before from Mom: vaguely disapproving but with a hint of amusement.

“Just mourning on behalf of all of masculine ponykind for the loss of fine femininity as yourself,” he said with a rueful chuckle. “But I know love when I see it. Try not to poach on that sort of thing.”

“You mean you…and me…” I sputtered, then flushed at his easy smile. “You just met me!” It was impossible. He was…he was…old! And…old! And…in very good shape for his age.

“Well, I like to think myself adventurously optimistic; if I lose, then I’m out nothing but a few bruises to my ego. And if I’m right…” he gave a shrug and a look that had my ears flaming. “But I can tell you two have been through a bit too much for the usual games.”

Glory returned and offered me a small corner of the purple berries, looking a touch ashamed. “You look familiar, Keeper. But I’m fairly sure we’ve never met,” she said as I tried a berry…then, with no

further hesitation, dumped every last purple wonder into my mouth and chewed on a pulpy mouthful of orgasmic bliss!

He chuckled and scratched his onion tuft of a beard. “Oh, I get around a bit.” And then he winked at me!

I had to admit, it was true, though. Something about him…a yellow pony…a yellow pony. A merchant pony…Bottlecap…I suddenly blurted, “You’re Bottlecap’s father!” And then I was wiping gobs of purple off my lips. Swallow, Blackjack. Swallow. Then speak. Of course he was her father. He was Finders Keepers, the founder of the Finders! Heck, his name was painted right over Megamart!

“Guilty as charged,” he chuckled amiably as he lay back on his bed, tapping his hooves together as he pushed back his floppy hat.

“I didn’t know you were a stable pony,” I said as I looked at his PipBuck. “I didn’t know there were any other stables that…well…survived.”

“Stable 95 was…well, pretty darn close to here, actually,” he said. He dug into one of his bags, took out a strange brown cigar, bit off the top, and then took out a brass lighter and lit the end with that earth pony deftness I so admired. What they did with their hooves was as magical as what I did with my horn or what pegasi did with their wings. “Pretty funny stable, now that I think about it. Whole place was based on money. Overpony was whatever pony had the most money. Everything was for sale. Everything! You could buy, borrow, rent, lease, exchange, or barter anything and everything you wanted. Sell your kids. Sell yourself. One big endless market of wheeling and dealing. And if you went broke, you got kicked out.”

“And you went broke?” Glory asked.

“Oh, heck no!” He broke out laughing. “Me? Go broke? Why, you are looking at a three time Overpony of Stable 95! Nah. See, some of us were really good at the game. So we changed the rules. Charged what we wanted and kept most of the stable dirt poor. Good for us. Bad for everypony else. Then some poor pony in 95…and this was when I *wasn’t* Overpony, I must add…figured out that, if they wanted all our comfy things, then all they’d have to do was take them. So they rounded up a dozen of us and tossed us right out the door.” He rubbed his chin. “Might be that charging ponies for air was going a mite too far.”

I glanced over at Glory. *Really? You think?* I smiled. “So what happened then?”

"Well, contrary to popular belief, the Hoof back then was a nasty piece of work. Less Enervation, but more radiation and constant damn rain. First ponies we ran across were slavers, and eight of our group sold the other four."

"You sold each other?" Glory gasped.

"Now, I know it sounds harsh, but we were buying and selling each other in 95 well before all this. Granted, I wasn't too happy to be one of the ones shoved in a cage, but it saved my life. I learned a lot from the nomads I was living with. Those eight, well, they might have had some guns, but I never did hear from them again. I made myself a useful slave and within two years purchased my freedom from the tribe chief. Got out on my own, hooked up with a ghoul to start our business; I was the handsome face and she was the set of wings that got us from place to place while she was hammering out a guide to the Wasteland." He groaned and rubbed his hooves. "When I think of her wanting me to sneak into a radigator nest to 'observe wasteland wildlife'…" he shivered and shook his head. "Eventually, we parted ways…. she wanted to sell it for cheap. Me…I fell in with a crazy bunch who'd be my friends."

"Big Daddy. The professor. You were one of the companions!" I said eagerly as I rubbed the tender right side of my head.

"Companions? You make it sound like it was a big thing!" he chuckled. "Nah, we were just friends. I figured they'd be handy to hide behind while everypony was shooting at us. They probably would have been dead a dozen times over if it wasn't for me. Did you know that the professor wouldn't loot corpses? Guns, ammo, caps and chems just left behind before I came along! And Big Daddy wouldn't haggle. Just took whatever price was quoted him!" He sighed, took a long pull on the brown wrap, and let out a long stream of rich gray smoke. "But they were a good bunch in a world full of bad."

I groaned as I rubbed my eyepatch. That banged-up feeling wasn't getting better. In fact, it felt like my sinuses were just…pressurized. Great. Getting sick again…"What were you all like? At the start, I mean?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Oh, well, that's easy enough. There was me. Big Daddy was about one step away from being a raider…heck, sometimes not even that. He was one tough sucker, drank zebra potions like a fiend. Personally, I thought they also shrunk his taters, but I'm no doctor. Then there was the professor. Tenpony mare, so she was like a

stable pony, only worse. Odd duck. Knew the cagiest things, but we didn't have a clue why at the time. Crunchy Carrots was an acolyte at the time, and boy she loved technology. Me and her used to fight for hours over whether it was okay to sell a beam pistol. Then, of course, there was Awesome. Lord Awesome. Crack shot with whatever firearm he got his hooves on. We roamed all up and down Equestria looking for technology to send back to the Rangers. One day, we came across some nasty slavers with an actual pegasus, and not one from the clouds, neither. Dawn. Shy, quiet, but damned strong. She knew herbs, critters, and the land. But most importantly, she was from Hoofington."

Then he gave a long sigh. "Sometimes, I wish we'd never thought of coming out here. Even FillyDee isn't as bad as this damned city. But we were young and sure of ourselves and DJ Pon3 made us an offer to re-establish contact with the MASEBS towers out east. So we trotted all the way out here." He gave a sad smile. "Might be I was a touch nostalgic for old 95."

DJ Pon3? Homage hadn't looked that old! Then again, she also really hadn't looked like the stallion she sounded like, so…eh, considering everything that was going on, this was pretty low on my list of mysteries.

Keeper looked out the window towards the green-rimmed towers of the Core. "I reckon Crunchy nearly had a heart attack when she saw that the Core was still standing. Big Daddy was happy to find new ponies to pound on. Awesome was looking forward to being the biggest damn hero in Equestria. The Prof was eager to find some steel pony she once knew." He looked over at Glory. "Funny. Dawn and I were the most worried. Me, because I knew there was such a thing as too good to be true. Her, because she knew the Hoof."

"And so you set out to save it?" I asked, trying to ignore the throbbing headache.

"Save it? Fuck no. I set out to *plunder* it! And you can't imagine how much plunder there was in this place. A cornucopia of caps, bullets, bombs, beams…like half the weapons of the war just here for the taking. Saving the Hoof grew up bit by bit. We found Dawn's tribe slaughtered. We kept coming across more and more ugly sights. 95 was gone…some genius had opened the stable to the outside to 'trade' and discovered just now nasty the locals were." He sighed and shook his head. "Never would have happened with me as Overpony. No siree."

"So what happened?" Glory asked. He took another long, slow pull off the cigar. "It didn't happen all at once, mind you. Just…little things. Maybe all the rain got to us. Maybe the fighting just dragged on and on. Crunchy became a big muckety muck in the Rangers from the stuff she discovered. Big Daddy was the nightmare of every raider. The Prof kept on finding all this old data from centuries back. And Awesome was Awesome, what can I say? But we weren't making any progress. Hadn't breached the Core. Hadn't really accomplished much. It was like the Hoof was toying with us." He gave a deep sigh. "And it was."

"What do you mean?" Glory asked. I fished out a Med-X while they talked and sighed in relief. I'd have Lacunae heal my head when she caught up with us…or when we caught up with her, if my friends hadn't found us by morning.

"I am the lootingest looter who ever picked a lock, hacked a terminal, or swept clear a store. I am the damnedest best acquirer of goods in the Wasteland. For the last thirty years I've been around the Hoof a hundred times, and I can tell you that I can pick up as much gear today as I could when I first got here," he said grimly.

"So…that's a problem?" I said with a frown.

"You ain't hearing me. I'm just one of hundreds of scavengers. There's a point where all the good, easy salvage should be stripped away. That ain't the case in the Hoof though." He pointed his cigar at a row of lockers. "Let me show you my point. I was in here six weeks back. Cleaned it out. Check in there."

I frowned but rose and went through the lockers one after the next. I took what was inside. "Not much. A dozen caps. Some ten mil ammo. A coffee cup. No big deal," I said as I returned. He just smiled in a not so happy way. "What? You missed a little garbage. That's all."

"Ain't missed nothing a day of my life," he replied firmly. "Those lockers were empty when I was last here."

"So…so somepony stashed some…some caps." Twelve caps? Pretty lousy stash. And eight bullets? And who would ditch a coffee cup? I looked back at the lockers.

"I've come across ammo containers I'd emptied and tossed aside now miraculously holding more ammo. Never completely full, always with just enough ammo to keep me going. I've picked locks on safes only to come across them locked and filled with new plunder. I've hacked terminals only to find the passwords changed.

Found food where we'd cleaned everything out," he grumbled as he took another pull. "I know, most folks just assume I'm mistaken. But findin' things is my special talent." He pointed at his flank, where a wandering dashed red line ended at an X. "I remember every place I've found loot. And I'm telling you, something in this place is fucking with us."

A few weeks ago, I would have just snorted at the crazy old buck past his retirement date. Now I was staring at those lockers. If I came back in a few days, would there be a few more caps, some scrap metal, and a pencil? "But why?"

"Well now…it depends. Professor liked to say that maybe a spirit of discord was floating around putting bottlecaps and trash in places to tease me. The rest didn't think it was a big deal," he muttered sourly with a scowl. Then he sighed and shrugged. "But me…I don't like it one bit. It ain't a natural market. So I got to thinking…why do ponies come to Hoofington?"

I'd asked that question a lot. "Salvage is what I hear the most. Ponies come from all over the Wasteland hoping to strike it big."

"And most of 'em do. They find the damnedest stuff." He held up the cigar. "Take this, for instance. Found three of 'em in a burned out store, nice and dry as you please." He puffed on the end as he looked at me. "But do they get to trot on out of here with it? Does the Society export their food all the way to Tenpony? Does anypony actually ever leave this damned city without a gut full of regret and misery?"

I stared out the window at the towers. "No. They don't."

"Ponies, zebras, Red Eye, and now Enclave…" he said softly. "We got so many damned ponies living around this city that we've got an actual war brewin'. I can't think of anyplace else in the Wasteland that's got a big enough population for a war. But we do." He sighed as he lifted another cigar. "Eventually, it got to my friends as well."

"What happened?" Glory asked.

"Dawn," he muttered, then looked at her. "Found some buck who'd tumbled from the sky all burned up. Nursed him back to health. Awesome didn't like that one bit. He'd always been sweet on her. So when the buck wanted to go home and offered to take Dawn with him... " He blew out a long stream of smoke. "Got ugly. Awesome called her a whore. Big Daddy beat the snot out of him. Carrots said she should go. Prof wanted her to stay. Dawn left in

tears."

Glory turned her head away as she sniffed. "Mother." I felt lightheaded. Of course, it made sense, but I felt like an idiot for not seeing it sooner. My pounding head wasn't making thinking any easier.

He nodded slowly. "I figured that might be the case. Same coat. Same eyes. Saw you lying there on the road and it took me back. Whatever happened to that little bird? She always wanted a family safe from the Wasteland. Especially from the Hoof." His eyes lingered on her missing wing sadly.

"She…she got one. For a few years. But she kept saying Thunderhead needed to help the surface," she shook her head. "She came back years ago. You haven't seen her?"

"Sorry. Pity too. Of us all I think I'm the one she'd meet first. She and I, we were from the Hoof. We understood each other." He gave a small shrug.

I held her as I looked at Keeper. "So, what happened next? Why'd the rest of you break up?"

"Oh, Dawn leaving started the split. After that, we just…pushed apart. Awesome and Daddy wouldn't speak to each other. Awesome took his groupies and Daddy his thugs. Crunchy went to establish a Ranger base. For a time, it was me and the professor, but eventually she settled down." He chuckled. "Me, I tried the whole family thing. Over and over again. Bought mares. Wooed mares. Seduced mares. Heck, even had a few seduce me. Had a few kids here and there, but most of them had the sense not to look for me. I'd always start roaming around the Hoof again. Just not a family buck, I suppose.

"For a time, I figured we'd make things better on our own. I had a reputation as a fair business buck…maybe a bit of a loose wag…but folks saw trading as a better alternative to taking. Did all I could to keep trade going. I figured we'd be like the Ministry Mares of old…the five of us would just work until finally the Hoof's problems were gone. But it didn't turn out that way. The Society ponies used the Collegiate to make their plantations, then screwed 'em. The Rangers and the Collegiate fight over scraps of technology. The Reapers and Rangers rip each other apart on general principles. And the Reapers and the Society ponies are in a take and take relationship. Only us Finders have managed to keep ourselves out of it. Till Usury had to go and start slaving." He sighed at my scowl. "Now she's scraping up brahmin turds."

I scowled, then my eye popped open wide as I looked to the door leading downstairs. “That’s Usury?” I clattered to my hooves and lurched. Damn, even with the Med-X, my head was killing me! “I need to talk to her. Ask her about Red Eye! Find out if they’re going to be a threat,” I said as I trotted towards the door.

“She’s a pretty abrupt thing, ain’t she?” Keeper muttered. I pretended not to hear Glory’s giggle as I headed down the stairs.

I made it to the fourth step from the bottom when there was an sudden stabbing pain in the crook of my left foreleg. The limb folded beneath me, and with a groan and clatter I fell down the rest of the stairs. The yellow unicorn filly jumped to her feet as the sour yellow mare with a cutie mark of a red ink bottle sneered in delight. One of the brahmin heads looked at me and muttered, “Nine point one.”

The other head looked at its partner and snorted. “You crazy, Bill? She botched the landing. I give her a six and a half.”

“Are you okay, miss?” The unicorn filly said as I lay there in a heap. I’d landed right on my head. Normally I’d make a joke about that being the hardest part of me, but it flipping hurt! I felt like I’d broken my horn, and actually reached up to touch it to make sure it was in place. My head just ached, despite the Med-X. I covered my face with my hooves,

“Oh…yeah…” I said as I rubbed my face hard. Definitely sick. I pushed my eyepatch off, groaning. Everything felt puffy on that side of my face. I dropped my hooves and smiled at the yellow unicorn. “Good thing I landed on my head, huh?”

But the filly wasn’t laughing. She was screaming, backing away as fast as her hooves could take her. A few moments later Glory ran down the steps. “What? What is it? I know I’m ugly but…” Except Glory wasn’t laughing. The filly hid behind the brahmin. The brahmin’s heads muttered to each other. “What’s the big deal?” Old Keeper looked even more grave. Then I looked over at Usury…but even she wasn’t smiling.

Glory slowly knelt in front of me, and I saw her gulp and turn pale as she looked at the eye socket that had been taken by Enervation and taint. “Blackjack. Does your right eye socket hurt?”

“Yeah…why?” I gave a little grin. “Am I finally growing that eye tentacle penis?”

Glory wasn’t laughing. I started to reach up towards the right side of my face and she stopped me. She took a deep breath. “We’re

going to need a scalpel, forceps, vodka, a spoon, any healing potions you have that are still purple, a fire, and a memory orb. A very long memory orb."

Keeper nodded and turned to the filly. "Little Bit? You have a memory orb for the nice mare, right? Something long and pleasant?"

The filly nodded, not taking her eyes off me as she backed away to her bags and dug through them with her hoof. Finally, she pulled out a golden memory orb. She passed it to Keeper. It was like she was afraid to get near me!

"How…how bad…" I muttered as I reached again. I forced myself to blink that eyelid…and felt…oh Sweet Celestia! What was that? "Get it out…" I whimpered as I felt my heart start to beat faster and faster in my chest. "Get it out, please…please get it out…" Glory kept my hooves away from my face. I blinked again and I felt the urge to cut it out myself rising.

"I will, Blackjack. I will," she promised softly as Keeper passed the memory orb to her and then trotted to the brahmin packs. "How long is this orb, sweetie?" Glory asked the filly.

"I dunno…" she muttered, swallowing. "An hour…two…?"

"I hope it'll be long enough," she muttered as he returned.

"About the cost…" Keeper said as he passed her a bottle of Stalliongrad's Finest.

"Afterwards," Glory said firmly. She lifted the bottle to my lips. "Take a good long drink…in case this memory is shorter than we think it is." I did, feeling the alcohol burn down my throat and settle in my stomach. "Another," she said firmly. Well, always follow the orders of your medical pony. Gulp. "And one more for luck," she said with a nervous smile. I closed my eye and took three gulps off the bottle.

"*Spasiba*…" I muttered as I touched the golden memory orb with my horn. Wait, what'd I just s--

oooOOOooo

Okay. Try not to think about what Glory was doing. Focus on a memory orb. A nice…boring memory orb. This was a buck. Let's see…horn. In a luxurious skywagon with its own terminal. And…and…his chest hurt. He rasped with every breath as he levitated papers in front of him.

Sweet Celestia. I knew this buck.

Goldenblood lay on his side on some pillows, and there was a head resting on his flank. A head with luxurious silken pink hair, with just a few streaks of near-white near the temple, that spilled over his rear legs. “Are we almost there?” a mare whispered in a timid voice. A pair of beautiful teal eyes dared peek up at him through the hooves clasped tightly over them.

He murred as he turned, nuzzled her hooves aside, and kissed her gently. I was astonished at how soft her lips were. “We’re an hour away at least,” he said softly. “You could have gotten Twilight to teleport you.”

“I know, but she’s always so busy. I don’t want to be a bother,” she replied in the sweetest little voice I’d ever heard. “I’m glad you came with me, though. Rarity was tied up with ministry business.”

“She’ll be there. I’m hoping to have a little chat with her. You could have asked Pinkie Pie,” he rasped, breaking into a hacking cough. Each breath burned; did it ever heal? Fluttershy held him and passed him a purple healing potion. After he drank it, the coughs subsided a little. “Thank you. As I was saying, she’d have been happy to attend any party. Even at a hospital.”

“No. I couldn’t. She’s…she’s changed,” Fluttershy said softly as she looked at him. “She’s always so…so frantic. And I know she’s smiling and laughing, but sometimes she scares me.”

“Believe me, she worries me too,” he murmured softly. “I never expected her to be so…zealous. She’s rooted out a dozen traitors to the kingdom and had us seize their assets. I would have thought that that was enough. But, if anything, she seems more determined than ever to root out bad ponies.”

“Applejack says Pinkie ordered a bunch of stuff for her ministry.” Fluttershy bit her lip, her eyes darting away evasively.

“What is it?” he asked in his raspy burr. When she didn’t talk, he stroked her wings gently. “What’s wrong with Pinkie Pie?” His voice was no firmer, but it had an authoritative tone to it that made me want to sit up straighter.

“Please don’t use the director voice,” Fluttershy said as she closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he replied immediately in his softer rasp. “It’s my job, though. I have to keep Luna informed.”

“Please don’t tell her. It was just one time!” Fluttershy said, then clasped her hooves over her mouth. Slowly, she melted as he just

looked at her. Finally, she squeaked, “She collapsed at work the other day. She’d been up for days working and working and working. She’s taking this…thing. It’s called Dash. She had little inhalers all over her office. Apparently, she ran out and was trying to make more when she collapsed. Her secretary found her.”

“Is she all right?” Goldenblood asked as he continued to pet her wings.

Fluttershy sighed and shook her head. “She’s back at work. She ignored me and her doctors and everything. She was…she laughed at first. But then she gave me a look. An…an angry look. She told me to buzz off and leave her alone.” Fluttershy trembled. “My friend would never say that,” she said as she hugged her middle gently.

“She’s under a lot of stress. You all are. Especially you,” he said as he kissed along her yellow neck. “How are you feeling? Still sick?”

“No. That’s passed,” Fluttershy murmured and gave him a little smile. “You don’t need to worry about me. I know all about babies.”

“You know all about other ponies having them. This is the first time you’re doing it yourself. Remember what Trueblood said and take it easy. Let Redheart and Cheerilee take care of the hospital and school openings after this one,” he replied. “You probably should have had them take care of this one, too... ”

“Well, it is named after me,” she said delicately. She looked at him and gave a little smile. “And what happened to ‘It is absolutely vital to the future of Equestria that you oversee all activities of the Ministry of Peace’, hmm?” She suddenly balked. “I’m sorry. Was that rude of me? I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“By all means, be rude. You can be positively snitty if it makes you feel better,” he said, then laughed. Then he sighed as he stroked her middle. “I still have to figure out how to break this to everypony. Luna will have to know first. Then Rarity.”

“Do you think I could tell all my friends together?” she asked in her cute little voice.

“Maybe. We’ll have to see,” he replied softly.

“I love you,” she murmured, arching her neck to kiss him gently.

“I know…” he replied after the kiss was broken.

For a moment, I was afraid I was going to have to endure another marathon sex memory, but the pair simply cuddled. Fluttershy wore glasses as she shuffled through papers and he read reports about the Equestrian Space Program. He asked her about her forays into

memory modification spells for dealing with emotional traumas. She asked him what names he was thinking of for the baby. “As long as it doesn’t have ‘blood’ in the name,” was his only requirement.

As they approached Hoofington, he opened a drawer with his magic. “Here. I planned on giving this to you at the party, but…” And he levitated out a delicate silver butterfly mane clip. She gasped, flushing as he moved it over and pinned her hair out of her face. The rose quartz wings sparkled softly. The detail was such that it almost seemed as if it’d take off flying.

“It’s lovely! Did you get it from Rarity?” she said as she nudged it with her hoof.

He hesitated before smiling. “Something like that.” She started to protest about it being too nice, and he silenced her with a kiss. “And I know you know some patient who will love it as well.” She smiled and relaxed, nodding.

Finally, they arrived at the huge concrete building. Fluttershy sighed as she looked out the window of the covered wagon. “It’s so…so…” she murmured, then glanced back at him. “…nice.”

“It’s hideous. All buildings in Hoofington have to be hideous. It’s in the building code,” he said, then smiled and got one in return. “Just be glad it’s not one of those black monstrosities they’re building in the Core.”

“Yes. I really don’t know why Hoofington embraces postmodern minimalist brutalism as its primary architectural style,” she said as the wagon touched down on the roof of the hospital. Post what? What post? Was she talking about the buildings looking like posts? She stood, and I didn’t get an answer. Redheart was standing near the landing pad.

Goldenblood rose and nuzzled Fluttershy softly. “Take care of yourself, mommy.”

She giggled and nearly bounced on her hooves at that word, then flushed profusely and nodded. “I will. You take care of yourself, too. Make sure you keep some medicine with you.” Then she trotted out of the wagon, looked back once to see him before finally disappearing inside.

He sighed and pressed a button. “Robronco HQ, please, ladies,” he said into a speaker. The wagon lifted into the air and started towards the city core. If I’d thought he’d use now to dig up all kinds of secret information, I was disappointed. He settled back, took out

a picture of Fluttershy, and just stared at it for almost the entirety of the flight. Finally, the skywagon landed, and his horn packed up several things into his saddlebags before he stepped out. There were four pegasi harnessed to it and four more armed with high-power automatic rifles. “Thank you, ladies,” he said with a respectful nod to the team before trotting towards an elevator.

Hoofington was half reconstructed at this point. The ministry hubs were finished save for the midnight blue ministry of awesome that rose twice as tall as the rest. The ugly black buildings had an unsettling uniformity, but they seemed undoubtedly sturdy. Clearly, it would take something substantial to take down this fortress of a city. Too bad balefire bombs counted. A balefire bomb with a blast contained inside a shield that liquefied its occupants…

Inside, the building had a very incomplete feel to it. After stepping out of the elevator, we passed by several unfinished rooms with ponies still installing parts and panels. Goldenblood seemed to know his way around well enough, walking through the hallways and intersections without hesitation. He finally entered some sort of engineering workshop; there was heavy equipment everywhere that looked quite out of place in the super-modern city.

“Director Goldenblood! So nice to finally meet you,” the yellow buck with the thin mustache said brightly as he looked up from some piece of machinery.

“Horse,” he replied with a nod of his head. “I would have come sooner, but you seem to have your hooves full.”

“Settling in to our cozy new accommodations courtesy of the Ministry of Wartime Technology and the Hoofington Reconstruction effort,” he replied. Goldenblood looked at several metallic spheres. “Ah…is this that spritebot I’ve read up on?”

“Actually, we’re almost ready for production on that model,” he said as he covered the balls with a sheet. “These are for something else. Now, what brings the director of the O.I.A. to see me?” he asked with a broad smile.

“This,” he replied, as lifted a flap on his saddlebag and pulled out…a metal rod? It was silvery white, maybe as long as my hoof was wide, and thin as a pencil.

He floated it to the yellow earth pony, who took it in his hooves. “Well now, what’s this?”

“You tell me,” Goldenblood said with a thin smile.

“Well, it’s not any alloy of steel I’m familiar with. Not aluminum.”

He juggled it from hoof to hoof. “Not Celestium or Big Macintoshium…” he tossed it into his mouth and sucked on it a moment like a metal candy cane. “It doesn’t taste like silver,” he spat it out and caught it right on the end of his nose. “What are you?” he asked the little rod.

“We don’t know. We’ve been digging up ore of that metal underneath the city. I’m curious about its properties,” Goldenblood said as he tapped his hoof on the desk.

“This ore wouldn’t happen to be found alongside strange zebra ruins, would it?” he asked with a speculative grin.

“You’d have to ask Rarity about that,” Goldenblood replied in a tone that was suddenly far cooler.

Horse seemed to get the hint as he looked cross-eyed at the bar balanced on his muzzle. “Well, we can do chemical analysis, magical analysis…but personally, I like starting with good old fashioned physical analysis,” he said as he trotted to a massive machine that was all hydraulic pistons and gears. He slid the metal into a little gap in the middle and then began to crank wheels to lock it in place. “This will tell us the tensile strength of this baby. Give us an idea of what we’re working with.” He pulled some levers, and there was a hum as a large gauge started to turn. “One kilomac…two kilomacs…three…huh…four?” The needle was now in a yellow bar and steadily climbing. “Five kilomacs!” Horse exclaimed.

The needle started into the red, and the machine began to make ominous whining sounds. “There’s no deformation at all…” Goldenblood mused.

“Gotta shut it down before it blows the safeties,” Horse said as he moved to the side and started to tug on the levers. They didn’t budge. “Hey, what’s wrong with this thing?” Goldenblood didn’t move. He stared right at the silver rod of metal. “Director! Move out of there.”

Suddenly, the whole machine shook just as a buck walked in the door to the lab. The machine gave a resounding bang, and the rod went flying through the air, buzzing an eerie high-pitched song. It seemed to curve midflight, passing right by Goldenblood’s ear as it flew straight into the head of the buck in the doorway behind Goldenblood. He dropped instantly, falling in that boneless way that signaled a terminal injury.

“Calipers!” Horse cried, rushing to the fallen buck. Then the yellow

earth pony screamed, “Medic! Someone get a medic!”

Slowly, Goldenblood approached the pair, looking down at an inch of rod protruding from the buck’s skull. It glowed with his magic as it was slowly pulled free. “Director!” Horse protested at first, but then gaped. Little silvery wisps were rising from the wound and disappearing into the metal rod. “What…how…what is that metal?”

“That’s what I need to figure out, Mr. Horse,” Goldenblood said softly as he stared at the blood and brains on the tip of the rod, the last wisps disappearing into the silvery metal. “That’s what I need to figure out…”

oooOOOooo

Coming out of the memory was like slowly shoving the right side of my face into a basin of boiling water. I sprawled on my side in Glory’s hooves in a corner away from the brahmin. It was dark, the fire station lit only by the flickering flames of the wan, shielded campfire. A bandage had been packed around my right eye, and I tried to ignore the bloody scalpel and a coffee cup filled with… with…flesh should not be that color!

I jerked, choked, and retched as I brought up the contents of my stomach. Which wasn’t really much at this point. It turned out, though, that berries weren’t so good the second time around. I felt Glory’s hooves move to turn my head. “I’d hoped you’d be out longer,” she said as she kept my face down and stroked my mane. “It’s okay. I got the tumor and cauterized the rest of the socket.” Okay, I really didn’t want to know what that meant.

“Hurts. Bad,” I said, feeling the alcohol barely keeping the burning sensation at bay. I closed my eye and pressed my left cheek into her stomach. “I’d like to nominate this day as the most messed up in Equestrian history.”

“Oh, it’s not all bad,” Glory said with a sniff. “You found something that caused Enervation…stopped a slaving tribe…helped me…went for a ride through Hoofington’s storm drain system... ”

I smiled as I nuzzled her. How in Equestria did she keep smelling so good? She was just as muddy and messy as myself. “That’s why I said messed up. There’re just too many highs and lows in this day.” I felt the alcohol slowly win, clouding my thinking. I waited a minute, then smiled. “Six months was pretty optimistic, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. The tears falling on my

mane told me enough. She muttered softly, “Maybe if we were in Chapel…or some low radiation…low Enervation…some better place…This damned city is aggravating the cancer.”

Funny, I’d found Hoofington pretty aggravating too. “Mmm…well, that’s too bad. I’ll just have to end things with the Rangers pretty quickly.”

“Sanguine…” she began, but I silenced her with a shake of my head.

“I don’t want to live as a Gorgon or a manticore-thing. And my life isn’t worth the damage he’ll do to the wasteland with Chimera,” I said softly.

“How…how can you say that?” she sobbed softly.

“Because it’s true, Glory. I’m not that important. Even if he could give me a brand new body…I still wouldn’t take it.” She hugged me a little tighter, and I sighed. “Listen…when I’m done, I want you to go to the Collegiate. Help Zodiac with Steelpony. You know about medical technological stuff. Or help out in Chapel. They’ll need a good doctor. And somepony needs to make sure P-21 doesn’t get too sour and grumpy. Okay?” She sniffed and nodded and I smiled, remembering, “Oh, first we’ll have to unseal Steelpony somehow…” Lightheaded... getting sleepy now...

She sniffed and nodded. “Let me worry about that. I’ll take care of it. I’ll take care of you, Blackjack.”

Somepony taking care of me. I didn’t deserve it... but it certainly felt nice. I smiled as the alcohol, chems, and fatigue overtook me. My mind sank into a deep dark sleep, and for once there weren’t any dreams. A dress rehearsal, I supposed, and better than I could have hoped.

* * *

I felt the firm ring of a gun barrel against my windpipe. Slowly, I opened my eye and looked up into the furious gaze of Usury. The gun was a simple single-barrel twenty gauge, but right now I figured it would do the trick. Tears poured down her cheeks as the gun trembled in her grip. Glory was asleep. So were the brahmin and filly. I had no idea where Keeper or the ghouls were.

Looking up into her eyes, I just couldn’t work up the will to care. I simply stared. This wouldn’t bring back her life. This wouldn’t restore her. It would do little besides end my pain…and then hers,

once Glory was finished with her. She'd lost everything, and I was the perfect one to blame, though I doubted she'd be in a position to collect the bounty she'd posted. The sallow, sullen mare just stared back as her lips worked on the mouth grip, and I smiled.

"It won't really change anything but put me out of my misery a few months early," I said quietly as I levitated the bottle of vodka over and took a drink, feeling the bite of the gun barrel as I swallowed.

I'd never seen a mare destroyed before. In that moment, I took away everything from her, even her revenge. She pulled the gun from my throat and trotted away to a filthy corner. A few more weeks of me in misery was the most she could hope for. I wished there was some way I could have helped her. Something I could have given her. At this point, even revenge would have been a gift to a mare who had almost nothing. She was left following her father, cleaning up after his brahmin.

I suppose I should have hated her. Punished her for what she'd done in Paradise. But, honestly, all I could spare right then was pity.

* * *

The next morning, we finished our deals with Keeper. The only charity he gave was in the bedroom, but he seemed to be cutting Glory a little slack. I had a decent drum-fed shotgun. She had her gatling beam gun. Ammo. Chems. Some purple healing potions for any superficial wounds we received over the next few days. A tip I bought from Little Bit that Lacunae might be able to recharge them if she had a healing spell. Useful. Definitely useful.

Glory was finalizing things when I spotted something in the corner. The sight of it made my heart beat a little faster as I stared at the black case. "Add this too," I said as I picked it up with my magic. Keeper looked curious, Glory skeptical. "Where'd you get this?" I asked softly as I turned it over.

"A ghoul who said he picked it out of Stable-Tec HQ all the way down in Fillydelphia. I figured it had to be worth something, but in twenty years I've never found somepony interested in it. Never could open the damned thing, either," he said. "Hundred caps and good riddance." Glory looked at me and paid the pittance. From the weight, it was clear that there was another silver bullet inside.

I opened it slowly, licking my lips. Instantly, my PipBuck started

clicking from the radiation coming off the shell. As with the others, there was a piece of paper folded up with the bullet. I pulled it free and then closed the shielded case.

'Sorry, sis. Definitely not my field. I heard Twilight sent hers to Horizon Labs to be cut open. Maybe they know what these things are? Hope things are better soon. PS: You have any idea what's eatin Scoots? She's been actin funnier than usual.' -Apple Bloom.'

"Interesting. So what kind of gun does a bullet like that go to?" he asked as I tucked it away.

"A big one," I replied, sticking my tongue out at him. Last thing he needed to know about was a megaspell gun... though I had to wonder just how many caps a fully operational Folly would be worth.

After that, Keeper and his caravan started packing up. I walked up to the old buck. "Thanks for all your help, Keeper."

He chuckled. "If you really want to thank me, I think I can spare a bit of time... " he said with a roguish wink that made me blush. He was old enough to be…still really good to look at. "Otherwise, don't worry about it. Your mare paid everything up nice and square." Glory smiled, nodded, and put her wing across my back possessively.

"I was just wondering, though…the Reapers and the Rangers…who do you think I should back?"

His smile disappeared at once, and he sighed. "Neither."

"But--" I began, but he shook his head firmly.

"Those two are working off thirty years of hate. Yer not going to be able to convince 'em to stop fightin'. It's foalish to even try. Best stay clear of the whole mess," he said flatly as he sat, crossing his forelegs over his chest. "That's how I've always made my way. Don't take sides."

"I can't," I replied, shaking my head.

"Well, then I'd keep your barding pulled down over that PipBuck of yours," he said grimly. "I know Steel Rangers who think it's their Celestia-given mission to take that off your leg and put it in some damned shrine or something! Crunchy Carrots might be smart enough to not try and take it, but I can't say the same for the rest of 'em."

After that, the caravan moved off to the northwest, heading towards Toll. The early morning was punctuated by gunshots, faint explosions, and the reek of cordite and rocket fuel. Scotch's PipBuck

tag was just south of us, but I wasn't quite up to walking around the Wasteland just yet. That meant sitting around in the firehouse. Waiting. Well, at least I did have some other things to do. I munched a box of Carrot Crunch and flipped through my PipBuck to the Steelpony file. "So, how am I supposed to open this thing with EC-1101?"

Glory moved next to me, snuggling besides me as she looked at the screen. Then she frowned. "You don't have to. It's decrypted."

"It's what?" I stared at the file. "Well…when the heck did that happen?" I shrugged, feeling…actually, a bit uneasy. "So, you're saying I don't have to go meet somepony on the other side of the city, struggle with some horrible internal dilemma, or pay a ridiculous price?" Anything being this easy in the Wasteland was just wrong! I half expected my PipBuck to explode or something.

"You sound disappointed," she said with a smile.

"Eh. I'm getting crotchety and cynical in my old age. Give me a year and I'll be almost as grouchy as P-21," I said as I flipped through some notes at random.

"I'd love to see that," she said softly as she kissed my left cheek. Me too...

"Now I just have to trot it all the way back to the Collegiate," I groaned. "I'll probably wipe out two settlements, save a baby, destroy a dam, have a mind-blowing revelation, and have my hoof fall off before we get there…what do you think?"

"I think you might be able to just broadcast it." She tapped the black casing. "This is a broadcaster, right?"

"Um…I sort of don't know how," I muttered, my ears burning. Off to the side, I spotted the Dealer; was it just me or did he look less decrepit? Or course it just me! He was my crazy after all. He just shook his head, the cards shuffling in his hooves.

She smiled and shook her head. "I know the basics. First we go to the 'Broadcaster' menu, and then we need a network." I stared as a short list appeared, and even she seemed a little shocked. "Well. 'Hoofington Civilian Grid'. 'Hoofington Defense Grid'. 'Stable-Tec Information Network'. 'M.O.M. Spritebot Network'. 'M.A.S. Emergency Broadcast System'."

"Use the MASEBS," I said. If it was good enough for Homage, it was good enough for me. Besides, the thought of sending anything that might summon that cybermonster thing made me leery.

She selected it. There was a flash in my vision, scrolling data

ending with ‘Access granted’. My PipBuck chirped, and Glory gave a slightly astonished smile. “Wow. It…looks like we can now contact the entire active MASEBS network." From the number of 'node unavailable's on the list that was scrolling up the screen, that wasn't as much as it could have been. Glory deftly selected an option marked ‘Contacted Nodes’.

I was surprised at the length of the new list that appeared; it was longer than I'd anticipated. Most of them were mind-boggling streams of number and letters, but a few stood out. Stable 89. Miramare Air Station. Rainbow Dash Skyport Terminal. Chapel Post Office. Hoofington Planetarium. '[node name unavailable]' stood out as being neither a recognizable name nor a line of gobbledegook. “So I can contact…any of these?”

“It looks like it.” I selected the Planetarium, and Glory nodded. “Now hit 'Connect'.”

I did and there was a beep. Then another. Again. “Is it supposed to be doing that?”

“Ask somepony in Intelligence. I’ve just read a book on these things,” she replied.

Suddenly, there was a crackle, and a synthetic mare’s voice said, “Blackjack? How are you contacting me on the MASEBS?”

“Ask a pony smarter than me, Professor. I got Steelpony,” I said with a smile. “I’m going to try and send it to you.”

“You…I…thank you, Blackjack.” The synthetic voice seemed quite speechless.

“Don’t thank me. I have no idea if this will work,” I replied. I selected ‘Send file’ and looked through the list until I found ‘Steelpony.acv’. I selected it and confirmed.

My EFS filled my vision with more streaming numbers, and then it stopped. To my alarm, Steelpony.acv was no longer in my PipBuck’s memory! “Um... Professor?”

“Thank you so much, Blackjack,” she said quietly. “I have it. I have... everything... ” I checked to make sure that I hadn’t sent EC-1101 too. Fortunately... or unfortunately... that was still in my PipBuck.

“Professor,” Glory said, “Now that you have it... are you sure there’s... there’s nothing you can do for Blackjack?” She bit her lip as she looked at me. There was a long pause.

“I’m sorry, Glory,” she replied. “If I had a full fabrication facility and staff, yes. We could start making the things Blackjack needs in

a few hours and begin installing them tomorrow. But right now, all I have are assorted pieces collected from all across the Wasteland. I even purchased Deus's remains, but... "

"Don't worry about it, Professor. Just do something good. Alright?" I asked softly.

"Absolutely, Blackjack," she replied, and then with a click the connection was broken.

Funny. I felt good. I might be dead in months, weeks, or even hours, but at least I would be able to say that I'd done something... substantial. Something that would really matter.

I checked Scotch Tape's tag. She was just a half block away. "Come on. Let's go meet our friends."

"You know, I'm pretty sure this is the point where something goes terribly wrong," muttered the Dealer and I stopped in my tracks.

"That's it." I whirled on him and narrowed my eye, "I am sick of you and your snotty attitude, mister! I'm happy! My friends are safe. Everything is going sunshine and rainbows so I do not want to hear it! If you can't say something nice then just get back in my head with all the rest of my doubts because I do not want to hear it!" Okay, Glory looked like she wasn't sure if she should be confused or amused, but the look of shock on the Dealer's face had been worth every single word.

My braces chafed, my insides hurt, and I was about to deal with ponies who had some kind of weird technological fetish. But I still felt good. I gave a smile to Glory, who'd mounted the very formidable-looking gatling beam weapon she'd purchased on her barding. For once, life was good, and things were going my way. I turned slowly to face the a cracked road and a collection of blue bars approaching the crossroads.

A lot more than just three blue bars...

Lacunae stepped around a smashed wagon, her magnificent frame chained and bound. A very familiar collar rested around her throat. The sight of it gave me the curious sensation of my blood both boiling and freezing at the same time. Beside her trotted P-21 and Scotch Tape, equally bound, though at least the filly wasn't collared. A half dozen Steel Rangers surrounded them. At their lead was the biggest suit of armor I'd ever seen; it looked as if it had been custom built to contain the size of the pony within. Its matte black frame was gilded in golden leaf, and all four hooves ended in glittering hydraulic rams. The enormous Ranger looked down at me

and said in a deep, booming voice, “Step aside! We are escorting these prisoners to Ironmare Station.”

Ante up.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Eye for Eye -- For each crippled limb you have, you do an additional 10% damage.

Chapter 31: Battle

"Just because you've failed the sonic rainboom a hundred thousand times in practice doesn't mean you won't be able to do it in front of an entire stadium full of impatient, super-critical, sports-fan ponies."

It could be said that I have, on occasion, picked fights with opponents far outside my proverbial weight class. Hydras, Gorgon, Deus, Enclave troopers, dragons, mysterious incomprehensible technomonsters... More or less, I've survived with help, luck, wits, luck, unpredictability, luck, and more luck. So pulling my gun on the biggest damn Steel Ranger I'd ever seen while outnumbered three to one and with three of my friends bound and wearing explosive collars wouldn't actually have been all that unusual for me.

Which, if anything, meant that it was even *less* likely to be a good idea! And, for once, it wasn't my plan at the moment. "What the hell is going on here?" I asked as I pointed my horn at Lacunae. The purple alicorn caught my eye.

"Step aside. You cannot honestly think to challenge us," the huge buck said with a dismissive wave of his hoof. He wasn't the one I was really paying attention to at that moment, though.

"We freed Turnip and helped him recover his armor from a locker in the office," Lacunae said, her telepathy sending her words only to me. "Unfortunately, when we left, we encountered the large one and his subordinates. They were less understanding of my appearance than the first pair we encountered. Scotch Tape was terrified of him and his demand for her PipBuck. We were outnumbered, and, after so many teleports, I could not get away with the others. I would not abandon them, so I surrendered myself rather than fight. The Goddess is quite put out with my weakness."

"That cunt!" I hissed, making the Rangers look at each other. I

probably looked like an idiot, a crazy mare, or both, but there was nothing new about that. “I didn’t know the Rangers used slaves! Can’t the alicorn just teleport out of the chains and collar, though?”

“The collars are for our protection. Not that it is any of your concern,” the huge buck said as one of the others trotted up beside him. He was saying something about me being the one to drop a building on the Flash Fillies. “When we have done our duty and recovered the young lady’s PipBuck, I will personally escort her to any location she desires!” He looked at P-21. “This one, however, will be submitted to justice by our elder for attempting to place explosives upon my person! And, of course, the alicorn will be treated as is appropriate for a captured enemy.”

“P-21 has examined my collar. It has some sort of proximity sensor and will detonate itself and the other collars if I move too far away.” I frowned, wondering if she could maybe... “And unfortunately, no, I cannot teleport us away and leave the bombs and bonds behind.” She couldn’t? Why-- but then the super hive mind intellect began to tell me *exactly* why! Oh, Goddesses, didn’t she realize that I wasn't a smart pony? I lasted five seconds before my eye began to glaze…which would be bad, since I had six Steel Rangers looking at me. Fortunately, Lacunae apparently finally realized how far over my head it was and stopped. Was it just me, or was she looking a bit smug? Damned big-horned alicorns...

A little pink pony in my mind caught sight of the blue buck’s lips moving as he looked right at me. Geee! I loved smart ponies! “P-21 can disarm it; he is sure,” Lacunae said. “But he needs a distraction.” There was a pause, then, “He swears, he will not mess up like at Fallen Arch."

I tried to calculate my odds of providing enough distraction for P-21 to get the collars off my friends before somepony pushed a button. Okay. On the other hoof, I couldn’t see a detonator anywhere; that meant that it was probably built into the armor. No obvious pony to blast, which meant that the only way out was to get the collar off. So…distraction it would have to be. Well, there was only one thing to do: something stupid. In a snap, I had my shotgun out above me and cocked an explosive round with as much drama as I could muster. “Well, then, I’m afraid that you and I have got ourselves a problem. I want you to let my friends go this instant!”

We were located at the crossroads of two major streets, with the

firehouse occupying one corner. The rain had finally let up, and there was cover in the form of several rusted-out wagons. Blasted stores and two- and three-story buildings formed the bulk of the ruins around us. Fittingly, there was a faded billboard that proclaimed: 'Better wiped than striped! Join the Steel Rangers today!'

"Do not interfere with our sacred duty, young mare. We are the Steel Rangers, proud inheritors of a noble and distinguished duty to safeguard Equestria and to reclaim and protect the artifacts of our glorious past!" He rose on his hind legs; I readied myself to jump aside from a super heavy pneumatic stomp, but gaped as he thrust one hoof dramatically into the sky and flexed the other leg. "We are the last protectors of the Equestrian Wasteland, serving to put down monsters, fiends, and villains of all kinds, and we will not stop until we have fulfilled Applejack's wishes for a safe and prosperous future!"

Was he actually…posing?

My gun barrel dipped a little along with my jaw. I pointed at their captives. "Right. Well…um…those are my friends you have there, mister." I tried to refocus myself. "So you best hand them over."

He curled both his legs in front of me and, sweet Celestia, I swore I saw the metal bulging! "I am Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, Champion of the Steel Rangers and heir to the Stronghoof legacy!" He dropped his hooves to the ground with an impact that cracked the stones around him before turning to look at Lacunae. "This monstrosity is an alicorn, one of an unholy army that has forever waged terrible warfare against my order all across Equestria! The filly possesses a functioning PipBuck, an example of one of the finest pieces of Equestrian technology ever created! And this buck is guilty of attempted assault and interfering in our most sacred duty!" He snorted, and two jets of steam actually blasted from nostrils built into his metal helmet. "We are sworn to take them back to our order."

That helped me refocus myself. "Well, I'm the Security Mare, and nopony is taking my friends anywhere like that. So, like I said, I'm afraid we have a problem. And if I have to take you all on, so be it. You'll be the first to go."

Three more Rangers, bristling with guns, galloped onto the scene. "Of course, in the spirit of love and tolerance, I am willing to negotiate," I added quickly. Then I blinked at the sight of a familiar

gun. The armor might all look the same, but I never forgot a gun. "Radishes?"

"Please, Paladin Bo…" Radishes began, and the huge buck looked over with a bizarre, dangerous gleam of his glowing eyes. "I mean, Paladin Stronghoof. This is the mare who helped free Turnip from the Flashers."

The buck with a missile launcher and gatling gun combo coughed. "Yeah. I would have been a complete goner if she hadn't helped."

"And she's been trying to stop the fighting in the Hoof," added Fruit Salad. "Her friend's not a real alicorn. At least, not like the other ones." Okay, so not all Rangers were jerks. I still was not happy with them.

"As you said, which is why I was willing to spare that magnificent and terrible creature from a summary execution. But I cannot disobey my oaths to our sacred order!" he proclaimed, rearing once again and making all of us step back a little. "Oh, such a horrible conflict of two heroic characters!" he proclaimed as he pressed his hoof to his brow.

O…kay. I looked at Fruit Salad, trying to convey with a look that she'd been right: this pony was definitely not playing with a full deck! "Right…okay then…" how to deal with the crazy huge pony in charge? I needed all eyes on me. I look a deep breath and looked at Glory, but she simply gaped back at me in stunned bafflement. Clearly, this was too much crazy for her to deal with.

There was only one thing to do. I took a deep breath and rose on my rear legs. My braces wobbled a little, but I pointed my left leg right at him and grinned as wide as I could. "Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, Champion of the Steel Rangers and heir to the Stronghoof legacy! I, Blackjack, Security Mare of Stable 99, descendant of the legendary Card Trick herself, challenge you to one on one combat for the safe release of my friends Lacunae, Scotch Tape, and P-21!"

I easily imagined nine jaws dropping at once. I could see at least four…

He looked down…way way down…at me. For a moment, I had a horrible image of those massive piston hooves dropping and turning me into a round black-and-red-maned pancake. And then, faster than I could believe possible, he moved. But rather than smearing me into pony jelly, he swept me up in a massive hug, his speaker booming, "Oh what nobility! What courage! What heroism! Fighting

a battle of impossible odds against a vastly superior foe for the safety and wellbeing of her comrades!" Holding me easily in one foreleg he thrust his hoof towards the sky. "This is the embodiment of all things the Rangers should strive for!" He tossed me above the ground, catching me once more in his hooves and shaking me like a doll. "I shall not decline your glorious sacrifice! Truly, this shall be a duel for the ages!"

My head reeled simply from the volume of his speaker. I was just about to tell him that I had reconsidered and would quite happily accompany him to speak with his superior when he set me down again. "Prepare yourself, Blackjack! We engage in glorious combat! Hoof to hoof! Armor to steel! None of the noise and vulgarity of firearms for warriors like us; we shall engage in a battle of gentleponies!"

Wait? No guns? When had I agreed to no guns?! That wasn't in the challenge! He was trotting away from the others, so I really had no idea how to bring it up. I looked at Glory, who hissed at me, "Blackjack?! What do you think you are doing? He's huge and in power armor! How are you supposed to fight that?"

"Working on that part…" I muttered. "Why isn't he freaking out about my PipBuck?" I asked as I glanced at her.

"I don't think they realize it is a PipBuck," she said softly. I had to admit she had a point. It was sleek and black and might have been a part of the combat armor; it barely looked anything like a normal big, gray, bulky PipBuck like Scotch Tape's. Small favors, I supposed. I just had to be sure to not use it where they could see it.

"Give me a Buck," I said, not wanting to take my eye off her. She balked, and I quickly added, "My legs are jelly and I need all the muscle I can get, and I'm dead sooner or later anyway. Give me a Buck."

"I remember a time when I knew chems were bad for you. Worst doctor ever." She sighed and fished out a tablet. As I chewed, she reached out and hugged me. "Try for later rather than sooner…" she murmured in my ear. "I've got many other surprises I want to show you."

Okay. I could live for that. "Chat with the other Rangers as much as you can. Keep their eyes off P-21." So long as my friends could get to safety... that was all that really mattered. As I walked towards the huge, gold-decorated Ranger, I caught P-21's eye, then smiled and gave the tiniest nod. He could do this. Whatever had

happened in Fallen Arch, I knew he wouldn't let me down again. He paused and gave a tiny nod back, then turned towards his tail.

Now all I had to do was put on a good show till they were free.

The Buck helped steady my legs as I trotted before him. I made a show of tightening my braces, and he gave a snort. "You're crippled, I see. Well, that makes this duel somewhat problematic. I suppose that you may be permitted to use a firearm." He sounded so disappointed.

"Oh, no, I don't need guns to beat you!" I retorted, then blinked. Wait, I didn't? Wait…I didn't! I drew my sword and swung it like a baton before me. "Is this acceptable?" I asked with a grin, praying it was because I really didn't have a backup plan. I looked along the razor edge. It was certainly sharp. Damned sharp. Sharp enough to cut through power armor, though?

He nodded once. "We fight till one of us is beaten and surrenders. I'll not rob the Wasteland of so valiant and noble a spirit intentionally!" He reared up and flexed as he thrust his hoof towards the heavens. "We fight for honor and civility itself! Let nothing dare interrupt our most glorious of battles! Pony against pony! Hoof against blade! Steel against steel!" And then he boomed, in an echoing voice likely heard for a mile, "Begin!"

His hooves dropped in a monumental crash, pistons slamming downward with a powerful hiss of steam and a detonation that shook the ground beneath my already unsteady limbs, making me stagger. The stomp was merely a prelude to a massive leap far too elegant and graceful for so colossal a pony! I raced forward and swung the silvery saber, the razor sharp edge pinging against his helmet as he passed overhead. The impact of his landing knocked me from my feet and I rolled twice across the broken asphalt of the road before I scrambled to my feet. He turned, and I saw a definite cut in his armor along his neck.

If I could mark him, then I could beat him.

If I could beat him, then I could kill him.

Wait…what? "Sorry about the nick," I said as I rose.

"I wear it with pride and gratitude! The Stronghoof family armor welcomes a mark from an honorable and valiant mare!" And then I was fighting for my life as he lunged in with lightning fast stomps, kicks, and thrusts of those piston hooves. It was all I could do, clattering back step after step and trying to deflect those powerful kicks with the blade and finally just trying to stay out of the way.

We might have been fighting till one of us was beaten, but one kick of those hooves and I'd be more than beaten, I'd be scrambled!

There was no way I'd stand a chance like this! I had to attack! He reared up, and instead of dodging back, I moved inside his hoof. I didn't see very many gaps in his armor, but from my own barding I knew the joints were my best bet. I slashed the glowing sword at the pit of his foreleg and body. But Paladin Stronghoof reacted faster than I anticipated; clearly, he wasn't completely without thought for his defense! The Steel Ranger closed the gap, and my blade struck off gilt steel leg plates.

"Well struck, but you will have to fight better than that, I assure you!" he said as the massive buck's body slammed me clear off my hooves. My braces clattered and I rolled again, swinging the blade towards his helmet. If I could take out whatever he used to see... but he ducked his head and the blade sparked off the armored ridge along his spine.

I was cutting through his armor, but I was also getting battered to pieces. We danced around in a circle with me giving ground. One of his kicks flipped me right over one of the wagon hulks and into a mud puddle. I levitated a glob of muck and splashed it right across his glowing blue eye panes. In the moment he balked, I slashed at his legs and was rewarded with a hiss of air as one of the pneumatic lines broke. With luck, that would slow him down!

But my advantage lasted only as long as it took for him to toss his head; the goop refused to stick to him! "That's…that's cheating!" I shouted as I backed away. He did seem to be moving slower.

"You've fought well and valiantly. I commend you and ask with my deepest respects that you yield."

"Not happening! Not when my friends' lives are on the line!" I said as I gasped for breath. "You must be getting tired in all that metal." I wanted to kick somepony when I heard one of the Rangers snicker.

"A little longer. P-21 is almost done with our bonds," Lacunae said; hopefully, nopony would ask why the giant alicorn was lying down.

I forced myself to grin as I kept moving back. "Either way, I've got the range and you don't. Eventually, I'll cut something important. Better watch out. I've nicked bucks before."

"A cunning fighter takes stock of their enemies' vulnerabilities! I commend you for the attempt!" he said as he stepped back and rammed his forehooves into the ground. I moved to attack, but then

suddenly the ground was lifting underneath me. The paladin heaved the slab of roadbed I was standing on up with all his strength. “However, with sufficiently applied leverage, your advantage becomes a disadvantage!” he cried out as I fell on my side and he kept pushing the slab of roadbed over. I barely got my hooves raised in time as it slammed down atop me.

I barely had time to drink a healing potion before two hooves slammed through the slab, pulverizing it atop me and hauling me up through the rubble! “Don’t feel bad! This is a part of the legendary Stronghoof combat technique, passed down for generations!” he said as he lifted me high in his hooves. Somehow, I doubted he planned to hug me again.

Okay! Enough of this! I hit S.A.T.S. and targeted every magic bullet I could squeeze out of my horn at his helmet. Four flashes arced into his armored face. The magical energy tore into it, shattering the steel and visor. He dropped me as he staggered back, and I landed hard on the crumbled roadbed. The hilt of my sword peeked through the ruble and I pulled it free as I turned to my opponent.

Wha…

Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof looked down at me, such a paragon of muscular beauty that I swore there were sparkles dancing about him. Baby blue eyes twinkled merrily as they regarded the dirty bug that was myself. The white coat I could see was utterly smooth. A thick blond mustache sat elegantly above his lip, and a tiny golden lock of mane curled off his brow. Radishes had said that he’d cut off his horn, but she’d been mistaken. For the first time ever, I’d met a unicorn with a horn more compact than my own.

He regarded me soberly. “I see I owe you an apology. It was unfair of me to think less of you for your infirmity.” He rose, and with a crackle and metallic popping he shed his armor, revealing more of his impressive musculature. Truly, I had no idea if his armor was powered by magic at all, or if it was all just him! He stepped free, rising up and flexing his legs, making his abdomen pulse with every potent twitch of his body. “But now you directly face the physique that has been passed down the Stronghoof line for generations!”

I glanced over at the others as he flexed his many massive muscles; it was astonishing how even suits of power armor could look stunned in a moment like this. P-21 had a nosebleed. “Oh my…” murmured Lacunae in my head. I managed to make eye contact

with P-21, and he immediately wiped his nose and got back to work. Good thing, too; I'd hate to have to shoot him to get him back on track! I did that too much with Rampage already…

"Um…" I sat down, blinking in shock. "You can put your armor back on. Really…"

Instead, he planted his forehooves, twisted around, and blasted me with an applebuck right to the face. I barely raised my limbs in time to absorb some of the blow, but his kick sent me rolling across the torn up ground. My head kept spinning for a few seconds, my vision filled with flexing images of a sparkling, beautiful buck beefcake before I shook it off.

"You should never underestimate your opponent, Security! Others have done that when facing you, and you've defeated them all!" he said as he approached and then once more slammed his hooves into the ground, sending a ripple through the pavement that blasted me into the air. Was he using some kind of freaky magic, or was he really just that strong?

I landed in a heap and hauled myself to my hooves. Then he was once more upon me, and almost all thought of defense was gone as he systematically pounded me again and again and again. It was all I could do to keep myself out of his hooves. I finally pulled together enough focus to bring my sword to bear and got myself a little room to work with. Yet no matter how I swung, I couldn't catch him.

"Damn it! I have to win! They're my friends!" I shouted as he deftly avoided a horizontal slice. How did a buck that big and beautiful move that fast?

"Your devotion is commendable, but it is no greater than my devotion to my oath and order!" he replied as he twisted under a slash, sweeping his hind legs under my own and knocking me over as he deftly regained his feet. "Yield, I beg you."

"Never!" I shouted as I brought the blade down in a savage killing blow! He rose once more on his hind legs, his massive, majestic hooves slammed together on the silvery blade, stopping it cold as he stood before me.

"There is no shame in defeat, Blackjack," he said as those bright blue eyes gazed down at me. I gasped as he tossed my sword aside, exhaustion finally having scattered my focus. He dropped to his hooves and turned, presenting his side. It was a clear shot in a futile struggle…

But I was just that stubborn! I twisted and pulled back both my

rear legs and slammed my hindhooves directly at his side with all my force. He'd be able to block or deflect or simply take it, I was sure. Then he'd punt me clear over the horizon, but I'd be damned if I'd give up before then. But my hooves connected solidly against his left side just below the ribcage.

Instantly, he rolled over, wailing. "Oh no! You've struck my spleenic ganglion nerve cluster, a Stronghoof vulnerability that's been passed down for generations! Oh the agony! The injury! Oh, I must yield!" He lifted his legs to protect the spot I'd thumped. Glory was mouthing the words "spleenic ganglion…" and looking confused. "Release this noble fighter's friends."

Buh? All eyes turned to P-21 holding Lacunae's bomb collar in his hooves as unlocked chains dangled around the three; his own collar was nowhere to be seen. He looked down at the explosive in his hooves, then back up at the Rangers. He spat the bobby pin back into his brushy tail. "Oh…this is awkward…" I'll say. I kind of expected…not to win.

Then the street exploded. Thank Celestia the street exploded! This was just the right time for an explosion! The blast tossed me aside, but Paladin Stronghoof calmly looked in the direction of the smoking crater and beyond where two dozen ponies dressed all in spiked, red-painted metal armor were charging. Several unicorns were flinging explosive parcels, and many of the earth ponies had flamers already spurting burning sheets apparently at random.

"To arms, Rangers! Our enemies have found us!" Stronghoof declared as he ran to his shed armor. Magically, it reassembled itself around his massive frame, and even his helmet repaired itself around his head. The red ponies were herding some familiar frothing psychopaths ahead of them. There had to be closer to thirty! Maybe more.

Any ponies that would use sick raiders as living weapons weren't my allies.

"Let my friends help you!" I shouted, my magic seizing a tossed explosive and throwing it back at the gangers.

"You've demonstrated your honor," he replied firmly. "But my order's code refuses accepting the aid of outsiders!"

"We may as well accept their help, Paladin. They're free anyway," Turnip said as he trotted up to us. "Besides, there's no question who's a bigger threat to our technology."

"It seems we have no choice," he said as he curled a hoof, pistons

hissing ominously. “So be it! But even with your assistance, I fear that the Burner Boys will not be easily dissuaded. Here they come!” he announced as the racing burners closed in and things started getting toasty. I staggered out of the path of a gout of flame that washed over where we’d stood. The burning fluid made every bit of exposed skin prickle even as it missed me. The ganger moved closer, twisting to immolate me as he laughed in glee. Until the sword cut through the fuel hoses to his flamer and draped him in a crimson sheet of fire. Then, suddenly, he was gone as the paladin gave the thrashing fireball a kick into another buck.

Okay, I felt my stomach clench as two flaming ponies thrashed wildly, taking way too long to die. I really did not like fire. That was an ugly way to go; give me a bullet any day.

The explosives they threw were on a delay, and I saw P-21 leap upon one and deftly pull a wire out of the thing. He stuffed one of the bomb collars with the explosive, and then another... and another. One of those bombs was impressive enough, but I wondered what twenty of them would do... I recalled what he’d done back in Flank. I knew a bomb like that would certainly convince me to back off!

“Lacunae, get Glory on that roof. P-21, keep doing what you’re doing. Scotch, stay back. Rampage--” Crap.

One of the Burners was charging me as Lacunae teleported Glory onto the roof of the firehouse behind us. From the elevated position, she could send a stream of crimson beams to wash back and forth over the advancing Burners. The Steel Rangers had established a firing line, and gatling guns, grenade machine guns, and the thumping Brown Betty were starting to take their toll. The burners were taking cover and throwing smoke bombs.

Frenzied raiders slammed into us with axes, clubs of rebar and concrete, and even a sword made out of a wagon’s rear bumper. The earth pony wielding the sword seemed particularly focused on me, the mass and power of his swings slamming into my own upraised blade. I saw an opening as clear as day, though, and my sword turned faster than I’d ever wielded it before. The tip slipped through his spiked armor to his throat, and I felt a supreme sense of satisfaction as I sliced his artery. His blood sprayed over me as he tried a few more feeble swings with the massive sword. As his weapon drooped, I cleanly sliced his head free of his shoulders. Like cutting butter.

Then I realized that I was bleeding too. I'd been so caught up in the fighting that I'd missed it entirely. My opening hadn't been as sure as I'd thought, and he'd cut a jagged tear just above my cutie mark! Another of Keeper's healing potions stopped the bleeding; if I lived through this, I'd have to send him a thank you note and ask where he got fresh healing potions.

Suddenly, I heard the clatter of hooves, and on my E.F.S. a red bar appeared. I balked as I pointed my shotgun into the pall of smoke rolling up the street. It made my eye water, and the reek and rasp of whatever chemicals were in it set me coughing. Suddenly, I spotted a buck racing right at me. He was wearing a gas mask adorned with four dash inhalers screwed in place. The pupils were nearly nonexistent in his infected yellow eyes as he raced right towards me.

Oh, and his barding was made of explosives…

I slipped into S.A.T.S. and had just enough time for one explosive shell to his head. It pulped his noggin, and a moment later the buck exploded. There was no blood or bone; he simply vaporized in a cloud of steel and a sheet of flame where he'd fallen. I was thrown clear off my hooves, rolling across the cracked asphalt. I looked up in time to see another one charge the paladin, but with his astonishing grace and power, he grabbed the head of the suicidal pony and spun, throwing him back towards his comrades.

One Ranger wasn't quick enough, though; the explosion crumpled his armor like a tin can. I couldn't tell who it was, as their entire front was blown away, launching a smoldering rear half into the street behind us. The heavy, cloying smoke clung low to the ground and filled the street rather than rising up. Every now and then, a fiery red plume sprayed out at us and sent me scrambling backwards.

"Too bad you don't have a gun, Paladin!" I shouted, firing blindly at a red bar in front of me.

"A Stronghoof is never disarmed!" he decreed as he stepped up to a wagon. "Observe the Stronghoof technique that's been passed down for generations! First step!" And once more he stomped with an incredible explosion that rippled and cracked the asphalt, and knocked the entire rusty wagon into the air. "Second step!" He turned around, and a blast from his pneumatic rams and his potent rear legs sent the entire wreck flying down in the direction of the Burner Boys.

I just stared at the fuzzy image of a raider getting smashed by the bouncing debris. “You threw that fight!” I shouted at him.

He snorted, blasting two jets of steam again. “You dare question my honor? The spleenic ganglion is a well-established pressure point weakness exploitable by the very few knowledgeable of the Stronghoof lineage. Clearly, you knew of that weakness and thus won our duel fairly, winning the freedom of your friends! How else could you have possibly defeated me and thus allowed me to overlook my oath requiring your friends to be taken to my elder?”

I blinked, then smiled. “Thanks, Paladin Stronghoof.” He gave another blasting snort, and I swore that the glowing eye panel winked at me! Then I frowned. “But did you have to hit me with a road?”

In a faintly embarrassed tone, he muttered, “Well, I thought you could take it.”

We’d fallen back to the crossroads, where the collision of three rusty wagons offered some cover. The Burner Boys seemed to be falling back, which was good; I really hated that smoke. My eye was watering terribly, and I kept coughing and hacking. There weren’t any more bomb-barding raiders rushing us yet. Were they really pulling back? Please tell me that they were pulling back. All my EFS confirmed was that there were still a lot of red bars out there. And over there…wait? I looked off to the side as a little pink pony in my head wearing a green camouflage helmet pointed out a whole lot more red over there.

“Get down!” I shouted as crimson beams flashed into us from the left side, and even the massive buck had to duck for cover from the glaring energy barrage. Apparently, my destruction of the Flashers hadn’t been complete. I couldn’t count numbers of red bars through the smoke, but at least two dozen Flash Fillies filled the side street with flickers of incinerating death. My hide burned as an enemy gatling beam gun splashed over my side. We were caught in a crossfire!

“P-21, we need that bomb!” I yelled as Glory, Turnip, and Fruit Salad turned their fire down the side street at the advancing mares. He’d finished with one collar and was now working on a second one. If Lacunae could drop the combined charge he was making into the middle of their lines, they might scatter and run. I knew I would!

The smoke and reek was making everything one big confusing

glare, so I barely had time to notice the flying grenade before it smacked me right in the forehead. I took two steps from the sudden stab of pain, then one second to lift it up…then it went off in my face!

The blue band flashed once, and an electric tingle ran from my horn to my hooves. And nothing else happened. I blinked and let out a relieved laugh... and then I noticed that Glory was the only pony still firing! I looked over at Fruit Salad, but the mare was just standing there. "What's wrong?" I yelled as I fired wildly in the direction of the red bars on my EFS.

"Spell matrix crash!" she yelled from the confines of her helmet. "I can't restart the system! The ejection system isn't working either!" On the other side of me, Turnip was also frozen, muttering expletives over and over again. More discharged grenades rolled around at their feet; the one that hit me hadn't been alone.

Oh shit. "What can I do?" I yelled, popping out the shotgun's ammo drum and loading slugs; those explosive rounds were cooking the barrel like crazy. It was smoking! It was almost brand new, and one drum of explosive rounds had already made it look like it might not last much longer.

"I need a PipBuck spell matrix to restart it!" she replied.

Well…I was busy. But I wasn't the only PipBuck here! "Scotch! Scotch Tape! I need you!" I screamed out, but with all the gunshots and explosions, I knew she couldn't hear me. Lacunae, however, appeared beside me in a purple flash. She had the minigun from the dead Ranger's armor floating above her as her shield appeared around her and the helpless Ranger.

"Go. I will protect her as long as I'm able," Lacunae said calmly in my mind. Then the minigun motor revved as it floated overhead, and the alicorn began to return fire with deadly and precise bursts. "The Goddess is quite keen to put this rabble in their place! After dealing with that…that mare…well…" Her eyes flashed and her voice boomed. "THE GODDESS FINDS THIS VERY THERAPEUTIC!"

"Miffle…" whimpered Fruit Salad. Therapy, Hoofington style.

I loaded Scotch's PipBuck tag and raced across the crossroads. There was P-21 strapping together a bomb that I hoped Lacunae would be able to drop on the Flashers, but where was Scotch?

Hiding in a wagon. The filly was curled up in a ball, shaking. I reached down and held her close. I couldn't ask her to do this. I should ask P-21 to take her out of here. Take her someplace safe.

Someplace better. The rusted wagon jerked as a grenade detonated outside, and she gasped, hugging her hooves over her head.

"You can't protect her, Blackjack," the Dealer said as he trotted up next to me.

"I have to…" I whispered.

"You can't. Even if you protect her today and tomorrow, someday you'll be gone. You can't spare her the horror," he insisted softly.

"Why not? Is that too damn much to ask? That she be safe and happy and... and not scared?" I shouted at him. I'd saved one. Just one. And I'd give anything I could to keep her intact. "What kind of sick world goes out of its way to hurt and scare a filly?" I demanded.

He just shook his head slowly. "It's called growing up, Blackjack. And you can't keep her safe from that." Maybe I couldn't…but was it so wrong to try?

Yes, if it meant leaving Fruit Salad to die. Damn it.

I clenched my eye shut as the wagon rocked again from a detonation outside. I looked down at her and sighed. "Scotch. I need your help." She sniffed as she shook, looking up at me with wide, teary green eyes. "There's a Ranger who needs your help. She needs something called a 'spell matrix' restarted. Can you do that?"

"Y…yes…" she stammered, then clenched her eyes shut. "But…but I can't! I'm scared…"

"I know you're scared. I'm scared too. If you stay close, I'll try to keep you safe and sound. Okay?" I said as I poked my head out. A red beam flashed before my eye, and I watched the tip of my mane transform into ash. My lips twisted into a trembling grin. I was fairly sure that Scotch might be the sanest one of us all! "S-see? Nothing to be s-scared of!"

"I'm not scared of the fighting. I'm…I'm scared of the metal ponies!" she said as she shook her head hard. "But…but I don't understand why I'm scared! I shouldn't be scared! I like machines. We tried to hide from the Rangers after Lacunae saved that one buck, but when he dug out his armor and put it on…I…I thought he was gonna gobble me up! It's like I'm a stupid baby or something!" she said as she smacked her temples, shaking even harder.

"But you shouldn't be afraid…" I muttered. Had the memory spell failed? Was it temporary? Or was there some instinctive part of her mind that remembered? Damn it…I knew it had been too easy…

"I know. It's just…It's just stupid. I'm stupid," she sniffed as she

covered her face. “You should have left me in 99. Then I’d be with Momma.”

I held her firmly. “You are not stupid. Look at me. I’m stupid,” I said, thumping my chest for emphasis. “I get hit by *boats*. You’re at least smart enough to avoid that.” Despite everything, she made a noise, half sob and half laugh, and I held her close. “I know you’re scared. Being scared is perfectly normal right now, Scotch Tape. But there’re two Rangers who need your help.” She curled up even more. “If you can’t go…tell me how to reset their spell matrix thingies.”

For several seconds, she didn’t answer, but then pulled out a strange golden wand thing the size of a pencil and studded with little gems. There was a tiny inscription: ‘Property of Rivets, give it the fuck back when you’re done’. She murmured softly, “Hold this, link up to the armor, and access System Tools, System Interface: Master Spell Matrix, Spell Matrix Programs, Spell Matrix Restore, and if that doesn’t work, Full Matrix Reboot.” She wiped her tears. “I’m sorry, Blackjack.”

“Hey, don’t be,” I murmured as I stroked her mane. “You gave me what I needed. Stay safe, okay?”

I ran back to where Lacunae was almost single-hornedly fending off the entire Filly front. She’d not only levitated her own gun, but Turnip as well, her magic manually manipulating the weapons strapped to his armor while also firing deadly volleys of glowing arrows. “DROP A BOXCAR ON US, WILL YOU? TRAP US IN A MEMORY ORB? TOSS A BALEFIRE EGG IN OUR FACE?” she roared with the voice of hundreds.

“Put me down! Put me down! Put me down!” screamed Turnip as I rushed to Fruit Salad and began to try to use the ‘System Tools’ to restart his armor. I really hoped Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof didn’t see... pretty much anything going on over here right now. I didn’t want to know what his oath and honor might force him to do.

Lacunae’s eyes flared as she glared at the screaming Ranger. “SILENCE, FOAL! BE HONORED THAT THE GODDESS ALLOWS YOU TO FIGHT ON OUR BEHALF IN THIS FASHION! AND CEASE YOUR WHIMPERING LEST THE GODDESS THROW YOU AT THEM!” Turnip wisely silenced as Lacunae focused down the street. “WHY DO THEY KEEP COMING?! WHY DO THEY FIGHT A GODDESS SO?! WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND THEIR MADNESS!

THEY SHOULD FLEE SO WE DO NOT SMITE THEM!”

“It’s not madness, Goddess. It’s hate,” I shouted as my PipBuck told me all the systems were active and aborted the restart. “They hate so much that they’re willing to die if it means they can kill the ponies they loathe.” Right now, I wanted to shoot something myself as my ‘System Tools’ told me that the matrix was active. Was I doing something wrong?

“FOOLS!” she boomed. “FLEE BEFORE OUR MIGHT! RUN! FIGHT US NO LONGER!” Her glare shifted to one of shock as they still came on! “STOP MAKING US KILL YOU!”

‘Error.’ ‘Error.’ ‘Error.’ I wanted to scream. Then something came flying out of the smoke and haze. It bounced twice, but it was much too small to be a grenade. It was just a little hoop of metal.

A silvery ring with a spark battery wired in the middle.

“Goddess, get out of here!” I shouted up at her.

But the Goddess clearly didn’t see or realize. All I knew was that that ring increased Enervation and that Enervation was bad for alicorns. Who’d thrown it? Had they known? Or was it just some desperate gambit? The battery flashed, and suddenly the ring began to glow a baleful green. I had a sensation like being caught in that cistern; the screaming was building up and growing and I felt it tearing at me.

The Goddess had a much worse reaction.

The shield distorted wildly and shredded apart; Lacunae struggled to keep herself and Turnip in the air. The alicorn screamed as white tatters and motes began to be drawn out of her eyes and mouth. The wisps were being pulled down through the ring, like the dancing firefly motes in the ruins deep beneath the earth. Now the Goddess was being reminded why her children stayed out of the Hoof. I left Fruit Salad as I felt my insides spasm terribly, aimed my shotgun down at the flickering spark battery, and fired; I got hit with a burst of radiation, but the green glow disappeared and the wisps stopped being pulled away. Still, it was too late for the alicorn. Lacunae collapsed beyond our cover next to the ring, and Turnip wailed as he smashed down on the wagon and thankfully bounced inside.

And the Fillies were moving in for the kill.

I clattered over the wagon as scarlet beams tore into my barding, making my eye tear as I fired wildly, not even bothering to aim but simply trying to pour on as much fire as I could. I bit down on

Lacunae's mane and started to pull, but as fast as my fire was, I just couldn't suppress the advancing mares.

But Glory could. And on the fire station's roof, she stood in full view to pour down a stream of red bursts that swept back and forth over the Fillies. They might have been able to ignore individual shotgun slugs, but not that stream of glowing death. The Fillies balked for a few critical seconds. I grabbed Lacunae's mane and started to pull, firing at any red I could. But even with Glory's suppressive fire, the Fillies were spreading out and moving closer. And damn it, why did alicorns have to be so damn big and heavy?

Two crimson bolts slammed into my chest, and my heart stopped as I fell back besides the fallen alicorn. I lost my focus, the riot gun clattering down beside me as three Fillies who'd been creeping along the sidewalk next to the blasted storefronts popped out. I saw one's lips moving; I think that she was yelling something about Diamond. Maybe some word of revenge or something. It didn't matter, though. I tried to fumble for a healing potion…for something! Glory was firing so long and fast I thought I saw smoke rise from her weapon. I wondered how much ammo she had left... couldn't be much.

The three Fillies pointed their weapons at me: game over.

Then they exploded, and my eye slowly followed the smoke stream up to Fruit Salad standing atop the wreck. Missile after missile streaked down the street, forcing the Fillies back into cover. A few moments later, Turnip pulled himself up as well and joined her in driving the Fillies back. "How…" I murmured weakly.

And then Scotch Tape was there, lifting a healing potion to my lips. She was shaking so badly that she nearly dropped it, and from the smell she was going to have to wash her utility barding. The purple fluid was a bit watery and not-too-pleasant-tasting, but it restored me enough to drag Lacunae the rest of the way around the cover of the wagon.

"How…" I coughed, aching as l looked at the young olive mare. "It kept telling me it wasn't busted."

"Wrong matrix, Blackjack. I think that you were trying to reboot your own PipBuck," she said with a nervous smile. She then frowned and lifted the key. "And you dropped this. Don't you know how pissed Rivets will... would... be?"

"Hey! I'm Security, okay? I handle shooting things and enforcing the rules. Maintenance actually has to do the stuff that matters," I

said with a nervous smile.

But I was done for the moment. Those two shots had nearly taken me out. Lacunae was still unconscious, and who knew when... or if... she'd recover? Glory had disappeared from the rooftop. Radishes and Stronghoof were withdrawing as well. Their armor was smoking, and Brown Betty had taken quite a beating. The Burner Boys pushed in from the south. The Fillies from the east. If the Rangers carried Lacunae and me, perhaps we could run for it.

Maybe. Right now, we could only get as far as the firehouse.

"A pity; it seems that we won't have an opportunity for a true rematch," Paladin Stronghoof said as we fell back inside. Glory was in the corner, working furiously to convert her gem cartridges into drums for her gatling beam gun. She saw me, and I gave a wan smile and wave to put her at ease. She nodded. P-21 joined us, a particularly ominous-looking bomb sitting on his back. He'd turned the two collars and the explosives into one large formidable duct-taped wad of boom.

"Where are they all coming from?" I asked as I saw a wall of red advancing. I knew there were some big gangs in the Hoof, but this was ridiculous.

The huge paladin answered us. "Big Daddy 'liberated' every slave west of the river, gave them a gun, and sent them to fight. The Highlanders are getting involved as well, and the Halfhearts are competing with the other gangs for the most Rangers killed. I understand that they've got fighters from as far south as Flank brought up here, and there's talk of griffin mercenaries to the west. I suppose we should be grateful that those damned Zodiacs haven't gotten involved," Paladin Bombs said darkly as his armor repaired itself around him. Scotch had her eyes closed and seemed to be focusing on trying to help Lacunae by rubbing her shoulder and muttering that 'it would be okay'. "It seems that our order has done little to earn the love and admiration of the rest of the city, and that most will quite welcome our destruction."

"Oopsie," I muttered as I rose to my hooves. Lacunae's eye was open, and she looked at me with an expression of profound suffering. Having a Goddess stuffed inside you and then ripped out couldn't be fun. "So…what's the plan?"

"I will go forth and engage their forces on my own. While they are distracted with me, your friends will be able to escape. Use the bomb to cover your withdrawal when I fall," he said matter-of-

factly. “It has been an honor, Security. For the record, I feel you would have made an outstanding Steel Ranger.” The Fillies and Burners outside were grouping up for a big push.

“THAT WON’T BE NECESSARY!” a buck’s voice boomed from outside, fit to make my teeth rattle. A half-dozen explosions tore into the gangers, making them scatter for cover. A section of wall was blown in, showing us with rubble, and in walked a buck who could have been Deus’s power-armored twin; he wore two massive artillery guns just as the former Reaper had. “Paladin Stronghoof, your reinforcements have arrived!” There had to be at least a dozen Rangers arriving from the north.

“Star Paladin Steel Rain!” Paladin Stronghoof said as he rose to his feet. The star paladin’s armor was even more fancily decorated than his own, but with silver scrollwork. I wondered if this was a norm for Steel Rangers or just for their leaders. It seemed like a good way to know who to shoot, but then when he had guns like that, I supposed few ponies dared take a shot in the first place, or lived long enough to take a second.

“You have fought admirably, Paladin Stronghoof. You have my thanks for drawing our enemy together so that we may finally end this war once and for all!” He gestured to the door. “Take your soldiers and lead the counterattack. Leave not a single one of our enemies alive.”

“Sir, the Oath dictates--” the white pony said before his superior interrupted him.

“That you execute the orders of your superiors quickly and without question. You have your orders, Paladin. Now return to the fight,” he finished in a tone that suggested very ugly consequences if Stronghoof argued.

“Very well, Star Paladin,” Stronghoof said with a salute, but he was looking at me as he said it. Those glowing blue eye panels seemed to suggest caution to me. He and most of the other Rangers left, and my mane went right to high ‘oh this isn’t good’ status as I approached Steel Rain and the trio of Rangers he’d brought in with him. This was my chance.

“Star Paladin Steel Rain. I’m Security. My friends and I came here to tell you that this war is completely unnecessary.” I looked behind me at Glory and then back at the massively armored Ranger. “My friends and I were passing by the Zenith Bridge. We used a bomb to distract you so that we could slip past. This war isn’t the Reapers’

fault."

There was no answer, at first, and then I became aware of a deep rhythmic noise inside the armor. I scowled up at him as it built and grew louder.

He was laughing.

"I should thank you, then!" he chortled with glee. "Do you have any idea how many years I've tried to provoke those idiots across the river to attack us? How many times the elder has refused to allow me to wipe out those vermin?"

Uh oh. "You wanted this war? Your own soldiers are dying, and you're happy about it?" I shouted at him as I stood, making damned sure I was between him and my friends.

"Of course not," he replied in that amused tone. "But I won't deny that, when I heard about the fighting, it felt as though Hearth's Warming Day had come and I'd been a very good buck. Finally, the Hoofington chapter has the opportunity to show the Wasteland just what the Rangers should be about."

I glanced in the direction that Paladin Stronghoof had gone before looking back at him. "Why do I have the feeling that you don't think that it's about protecting ponies?"

"Paladin Stronghoof's naïve and adolescent fantasies of honor and protection hardly interest me. He inspires fools to waste our technology for the shallow and worthless admiration of others. Really, what do I care if some useless primitives live or die?"

P-21 slowly approached him. "You think that technology should be hoarded, then? Stronghoof told us that your elders believe that."

There was a frustrated growl from the armor. "Yes. They do. They would have us hoard weapons and technology like dragons, clutching our findings with paranoid hooves while we cower in our bunkers and bases." He turned to the side and gestured to the gun with a forehoof. "This is a one hundred and twenty millimeter anti-dragon cannon built to fire custom engineered concussion, armor penetration, and chemical rounds. It has one hundred and seventy two perfectly engineered parts all manufactured of high strength alloyed steel infused with a magical repair matrix to maintain perfect operation at all times. It has a precision range of over two miles at which shells will still impact with a force of five kilomacs." He looked right at me. "Do you really think that a gun like this should be left in a weapons locker to collect dust?"

Honestly, no, I didn't. But I'd be damned if I'd admit it to this

bastard.

"The elder believes that the Reapers started this war and so it must be fought, and I will do everything I can to extend it as long and far as possible. We will destroy the Reapers, subjugate the Collegiate, drive off the Enclave, and conquer the Society!" he proclaimed grandly, standing and spreading his legs wide as if he wanted to give me a hug. "And you started it all! Thank you!"

"And now I'm going to stop it however I can!" I replied sharply. If Elder Crunchy Carrots really didn't want this war fought, then perhaps she could end it?

His happy tone cut off as he snorted and swept his hoof to the side. "This is the time of the Steel Rangers. Right now, to the west, our Manehattan chapters are reclaiming one of the largest and most advanced stables in all the Wasteland to be put to our use. Abroad, other operations are taking place to reassert the fundamental truth: technology is to be *used*. Hoarded, it is wasted. Used to protect worthless gutter trash, it is wasted. Only when it is employed to assert our power is its true purpose realized."

He looked at Lacunae. "I imagine Elder Cottage Cheese will be elated to learn that we captured one of these freaks; the acolytes have been quite eager to learn how they're put together and how to take them apart." He looked at the gray PipBuck on Scotch's leg. "Oh…and we'll be taking that as well."

Right. "So I guess you won't be honoring Stronghoof's offer to let me go." Figures.

"You have an admirable grasp of the obvious."

And just like that, the admiration I'd built up for Paladin Stronghoof's order vanished in a flash of acrid cordite smoke. "Well then, we'll just be going. Glory, Scotch, help Lacunae back to her hooves." The pair immediately moved to help, and the three Rangers with Steel Rain immediately pointed their many, many barrels at the five of us.

"And I'll just hold on to this really big bomb!" P-21 shouted as he nodded his head to the taped-together ball of explosives balanced on his back. "Should be enough to level this whole building," he added as Steel Rain pointed his guns right the blue pony. My friend didn't flinch in the slightest. A bomb without a detonator, and I really hoped this ass didn't know that. The four Steel Rangers slowly started to back out the hole they'd blown in the wall.

"I got the bomb. You handle the trigger," I said as my horn lifted

the…oofff…. very heavy wad of explosives. In unison, we backed out of the firehouse into the chaos of the street battle as I kept it levitated right in the middle. He nodded, and I clapped mentally in glee. He should have been an actor or something. I could just see him in a Hearth's Warming Eve pageant; he'd make a wonderful secretary to my chancellor.

With them backing out the rear and us backing out the front, there'd be a narrow window for us to make a break for it…not north. They'd be expecting that. West. We could…

We were bucked.

In every direction was fighting in a horrible cloud of clinging smog. Rangers fought in groups of two or three back to back as they sprayed the surrounding cover. Crimson beams and sooty flames lit up the smog as they strafed wildly, and the five of us had to crawl just to avoid being shot by accident. It seemed like every bullet, gem cartridge, and flamer tank had been brought to this fight to be fired, spent, and emptied, and now we were caught in the middle of it. Lacunae still reeled; I doubted that the Goddess was going to give her the extra juice she needed to get us out of here. Damn, I wanted to gut whichever pony had figured out how to weaponize Enervation!

The Steel Rangers were clearly having a better time of it than the gangers, though. They didn't just have the edge on firepower; they also possessed a knowledge of how to fight well, with devotion, focus and discipline. As much as they might be bastards to outsiders, they were dedicated to their order and each other. The Fillies and Burners fought as a ferocious mob, but that mob was dwindling. And as soon as they withdrew, Steel Rain's ponies would take us apart.

That was…provided Steel Rain himself didn't take us out.

We crawled west along the front of the fire station. The fighting seemed a little lighter in this direction, though there were so many red bars moving around that I couldn't tell where the firing line was. I led the way with Scotch right behind me. Lacunae and Glory came after, with P-21 bringing up the rear. Then there was a 'crump' as a flaming bomb detonated to my left, the heat and glare making me turn my head away towards the north.

To the sight of Steel Rain's barrels as the smoke parted between us.

I kicked back as hard as I could, smacking Scotch right in the face and knocking her into the hooves of Glory and Lacunae. I heard a

familiar click as I crouched and jumped, a little blue pegasus shouting at me to go 'Higher! Higher!' I drew up my legs. Then there was another click, and for a moment I felt stuck in S.A.T.S. as the anti-dragon cannons fired. The shells missed, flying under me and past or over my friends to impact the ground and tear a twenty foot line across the crossroads. The shockwave flipped me end over end, and the entire world became oddly muffled as I crashed to the asphalt.

Steel Rain ejected the two spent casings, and I saw them spinning away behind him trailing smoke as the autoloader slid two more shells home. I just lay there as little ponies tried desperately to get me to my hooves. Move! My body didn't. Get up! My body couldn't. Hurry! Everything felt like I weighed a thousand pounds. Two Rangers went straight at my friends on the far side of the torn up section of street; only Lacunae's feeble shield protected them as they fired back.

The star paladin leveled those guns right at me. I think he said something. Somepony was screaming words, but it all sounded like I was at the bottom of a bathtub. I tried to rise, but the brace on my forehoof was busted. The leg just bent instead of supporting me.

Then a familiar pony crashed into the side of the massively armored Ranger. At first I believed she'd been thrown against him, but instead she wrapped her hooves against his armored frame as if giving him a hug. Slowly, it seemed, her legs straightened as she lifted his entire front up before her. The cannons fired high, the shockwave again bouncing me across the broken ground but the shells arcing away into the sky. Once again, my elastic bones saved me from some breaks, but I could barely do more than simply lie on my back in the rut his first two shells had blasted. I stared through the smoke feeling as if my entire body was being drawn away. I felt blood across my muzzle, wetness in my ears.

Then my face was filled with the image of grumpy, worried blue pony buck. His lips were moving but only funny little honking sounds came out of his mouth. Everything was spinning away, and I fought to keep my focus on his face. It was weird to feel spinning as he held my head still in his hooves and pressed his lips towards mine.

Oh, yes. This would be a nice way to go…I puckered up for him…

Then I felt the stem of the healing potion bulb on my lips and blinked. I rolled my eye down to look at the healing potion bottle in

his mouth; the flat-eyed look he gave me seemed to say 'Just drink it, you idiot.' Good idea, P-21. I slugged down the potion and felt the pain in my ears subside. When I finished, I lay back in the middle of the battlefield.

Then my gaze connected with a trio of ponies charging a pair of Rangers. It wasn't the number that drew my eye, but their weapons. How many mares around the Hoof fought with a massive hammer, a chain, and a fire axe? From the west came a charging, whooping, gleeful mob of ponies, many dressed in their genuine ponyhide armor. At their head, a massive black buck bellowed orders to fan out and crush anypony that would oppose the Reapers. Right now I hoped he wasn't including me. I couldn't oppose gravity at this point!

"Is there a plan?" P-21 asked, flinching at a nearby explosion that pattered us with gravel.

"Oh, we are so far from a plan... " I muttered as I looked around. Red bars in every direction. Reapers against Rangers against raiders against gangers. In the smoke I could only make out a few blue bars; the rest was a solid milling mass, like blood. "West... ish." Fuck, was there any direction that was safe? "We've got to get clear of this." I'd go north, but right now I really did not want to get within two miles of Steel Rain.

P-21 rose and waved his hoof. From the wreck of a smashed skywagon Lacunae and Glory ran to the gouge where I'd made my temporary home. Lacunae looked like she was almost fully recovered... but my eye swept back and forth and the blue buck's eyes went wide. "Where's Scotch Tape?" he asked as he looked back at the smashed wreckage.

Glory shook her head. "I don't know where! We ran for cover and she was beside me and then she wasn't…" There was a scream as a Steel Ranger charged us, his minigun chattering bullets off the rubble of our wound in the street. On the opposite side ran the unarmored ponies…Fillies, Burners, Reapers…did it matter anymore?

Lacunae's magic arrows bit deep into the Steel Ranger's armor, and P-21's grenade blasted him off his hooves. Glory and I laid down a withering spray of cover fire. *Save them. Save them.* The words seemed to thrum inside me and gave me the strength to rise to my hooves.

Through the smoke and flame, I saw Radishes... or, rather, a

Ranger with Brown Betty attached to their armor. I never forgot a gun. Her armor seemed to glow with the fires that burned brighter and brighter around her from the flamers. Then from the fires rose the dark form of Brutus, and the massive buck brought his hooves down upon her burning armor heedless of the flame. Just like that, a Ranger who'd helped me…who had accepted me…was dead.

On the opposite side, I saw Mallet's power hammer swinging wildly at the two Rangers pouring on their minigun rounds. I'd been shot by a minigun before. I knew the sewing sensation that miniguns inflicted as the barrage of bullets liquefied flesh. I'd seen one mare torn to pieces by just such a weapon, but she'd vomited forth bullets as she magically regenerated afterwards.

Mallet had no such advantage. When the Rangers stopped firing, she was so much bloody goo. I sat down hard as I looked at the lump that had once been a pony. A pony I'd known. Not a friend. Not an enemy. But a pony killed senselessly. Pointlessly. What the hell was I doing here? Why were my friends stuck in the middle of this fight? "Damn it…Stop. Stop it!"

"We need to find Scotch, Blackjack," P-21 said, but I didn't really hear it.

Everything had gotten lost. "Stop it!" I shouted as I tried to fight my way out of the hole on my broken braces. I could barely stand, let alone walk, but I had to end this. I had to end this right the fuck now. "Stop! Stop killing each other!" I screamed from the lip of the hole as I began firing, ignoring my friends around me. "Stop it! Stop it!" I didn't know who I was attacking any more. With the smoke and the flame and beams I didn't care. If it was red, I shot it. Shoot me, not each other. Shoot a pony who's dead meat anyway! Just fucking stop! I was shooting and crying and screaming as I whirled from one to the next to the next. Bullets bit into my blasted barding; it wasn't going to last much longer at this rate, not without some serious repair. That was okay, though. If ponies were shooting me, then they weren't shooting each other.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop!" I screamed till my throat was raw, my legs were staggering and flopping around as they slipped out of my broken braces, and my barding was slick with blood. Most of it wasn't mine, at least. I'd shoot till nopony else was shooting! I didn't want to see another Radishes. I didn't want another Mallet. I didn't care if they were enemies! I was sick to death of ponies dying to stupidity.

And then a buck stood before me and filled my vision once again as my barrel pointed right at his face. His familiar, stern, blue face…and the gun clicked on an empty chamber. He didn't flinch as he looked right along the barrel into my eye.

I'd almost killed my best friend. His eyes, hard and angry and confident, mirrored my own. He knew that this was fucked up. Pointless. Worthless. But he wasn't freaking out. He wasn't screaming like a lunatic and blasting ponies in a fit of rage. He just looked right in my eye along the gun that had almost taken his head off.

I'd nearly killed him. Nearly killed…Oh Goddesses, what was happening to me?

"It's just…so…stupid…" I sobbed as the spent shotgun clattered beside me. I swayed back and forth; I'd gotten shot by more than a few ponies in that little shooting spree. "I can't make them stop," I sobbed. Then he reached out to hold me steady as Glory's beam gun blasted bursts at the fighters around us while Lacunae touched her horn to my wounds. Now that I was aware of it, I realized just how much I hurt. "Please…tell me how to make them stop killing each other…"

He held me without flinching or revulsion as I pressed my cheek to his neck and closed my eye. He smelled nice, too; even if he was a grouch. "You can't stop them," he said, sharing the horrible truth I knew all too well. "No matter how much you try and get them to stop fighting, you…you can't make them stop."

"I'm sorry…" I whispered in his ear. "I thought I was strong enough." But now I knew better. Now I had a clue of just what war really was: a fight so massive and all-engulfing that nopony…not Security, not Marauders, not Ministry Mares, not even Princesses... could stop it. I'd faced monsters and threats I'd never imagined a month ago…but finally, I'd encountered a monster so vast that no amount of bullets would kill it. That monster was war, and I couldn't slay it.

Suddenly I had a great deal more sympathy for those mares so long ago…and remembered two princesses meeting in a tent. '*We invented it…'* And it had been birthed here. Here in this horrible city.

"It's not that you're not strong enough to stop it. The amazing thing is that you care enough to bother," he said softly before he pulled away. "But we can't stop this fight now. We need to find

Scotch and get out of here. Can you find her PipBuck tag?" Because that was something I could do. Something that I could accomplish.

I sniffed and nodded. "Yeah. If you have any duct tape left, can you tape up my braces? Damn things broke." Damn things had busted from Steel Rain's two near misses. I'd have been Blackjack foam if he'd actually hit me! I loaded the tag for Scotch's PipBuck. Don't think about what you almost did. Don't stop. Just get Scotch Tape and get out of here.

Then I looked at the shotgun and hesitated. I'd almost blown my friend's head off. Would I be safe with it? Would they be safe if I had it? As if reading my mind, he scooped up the weapon and pressed it to my chest. "Take it. Just stay with it, okay, Blackjack? If you lose yourself, we're all lost."

"Right. Yeah. Good point," I said as Lacunae finished her healing. The purple alicorn looked as if she'd been put through the wringer; apparently even alicorns had magical limits. The PipBuck tag was to the northeast, back at the fire station. A good place for cover. I looked at my duct taped limbs; this was rapidly approaching pathetic. "Let's get her, quick."

Together, we kept low as possible as I click-clacked my way back towards the building. The roof was on fire; there was something ironic about that, I thought. Get her, get out, don't get dead, and get north to talk to Crunchy Carrots and stop this insanity. There. That was a plan I could do. I pulled my head together as we moved between puddles of burning chemicals. I wondered if there was some mysterious force resupplying the Burners with flamer fuel and the Fillies with gem cartridges and magic energy weapons? Arming…arming…arming…just waiting for a spark.

Then a shape lunged out of the cloying, swirling smoke. It was all fangs, claws, and a great stabbing scorpion tail. I looked at the swooping manticore and felt something shrivel inside me. "You got to be kidding me…"

Glory knocked me on my side as the beast swooped low over us. The monsters were dropping out of the sky, ripping into gangers and Rangers alike. Any semblance of an organized fight was transformed into a chaotic melee. I loaded a drum of flechettes and, lying on my side, pumped four blasts into the monster's flank. It roared, stabbing wildly with its tail as it brought its face around to bite. A fifth blast liquefied its features. I stared at its great gouged-out eye sockets as its mouth spread wide. A sixth blast tore down its

throat and it finally, finally collapsed.

I swapped to slugs after that, forcing myself to my hooves. “You can move faster than any of us,” I told P-21. “Get in, get her out.”

“Right. Then do you want me to set off the bomb?” he asked. I blinked in confusion. Maybe I had more brain damage than I thought. He waved his hoof at the building. “The bomb! The great big honking bomb we left in there!”

“Are you saying that that thing works?” I gaped back.

He rolled his eyes. “Do you really think I’d rig something like that and leave the detonator in their hooves?!” Right. Because he was a smart pony. He gestured to a detonator he had taped to his forehoof. “When you talked about me handling the trigger, I thought you knew!”

“Right. Of course I did. You get her and we get out of here.” Because this was just getting ridiculous. Who the heck was I supposed to shoot now? He nodded and disappeared into the smoke as Glory, Lacunae, and I moved back to back. She levitated a grenade machinegun. “Are you going to be all right?” I asked her

She smiled thinly, wanly. “It is hardly my weapon of choice, but I will make do. I’ve succeeded in giving all of Unity a splitting headache due to that infernal contraption. The Goddess decrees that, when all of the Wasteland has been converted to the alicorn race, the first megaspell we perform will be to push the entire city of Hoofington into the sea.”

“Right. I might just join in on that one, if you don’t mind,” I said as I looked at Glory. “How do you like your new gun?” I asked as I swapped to Vigilance and the sword. I needed headshots, and the riot gun wasn’t exactly built for pinpoint accuracy.

“It’s very…flashy. It’s also going through gem power drums like crazy!” Glory said as she looked around for incoming fire. “I’ll be fine!”

“Good,” and that was all I had time to say as the next wave of manticores struck. The leonine monsters dove towards our group, and I could barely duck aside on my tottery legs. As deadly as their fangs were, they seemed to want to grab a pony like a mouse, so I kept my eye open for their claws. In the calm of S.A.T.S., I used the accurate pistol to blow out their foreheads and turn them into tumbling missiles as they passed. Of course, as insane as fighting manticores was, we were still open targets for anypony else who wanted a piece of us.

Then a Steel Ranger darted out from a storefront and pointed her missile launcher at us. I brought out Taurus's rifle, but, fast as it was, I didn't think I'd get it up before she got a missile off. I opened my mouth to yell to take cover when a glittering, steel-armored pony dropped down upon the Ranger. She wrapped her hooves around in a hug that bent steel and crowed, "Pony in a can! Good thing I got a can opener!" She grabbed a familiar chainsaw knife in her mouth and bit on the grip. The blade whirred as she jammed it into the neck of the Ranger; the power armored pony struggled, but the Reaper just crushed down even more as the blade chewed up the side of her armor. Suddenly, red began to spurt out through the jagged tear in the metal as the pony within the metal shell screamed and then fell silent.

Then Rampage tossed the Ranger aside. Her armor showed hundreds of dents from minigun rounds and her hoofclaws were blackened by fire. Blood smeared her helmet's blade and the jagged spine along her armor. "Hey Blackjack." She grinned widely as she trotted towards us. "This is wild, huh?" A manticore swept in and she leapt up to meet it, using her weight to flip it over in midair. The manticore crashed to earth before us as she finished the flip and rammed her armor's foot long spines through its sternum. "I don't think I've ever had such fun!"

I just grinned like as idiot as I trotted towards her while she pulled herself off the carcass. "Rampage, I--"

Then she was on top of me, smashing me down and pressing her hoofclaws to my throat. "Big Daddy told me to kill you on sight. So you have one chance to say something. Say it," she said matter-of-factly.

"Get off her now," Glory shouted as she brought the gatling beam gun to bear. "Or I will give you another childhood!"

"Right. I'll get to you in a second, turkey. This is between me and Blackjack." She looked down at me. "Well?"

I closed my eye and said, "I'm sorry. You were right." She didn't tear out my throat, so I continued. "We should have helped Scotch through it. I shouldn't have tried to shelter her."

Rampage sighed softly as I looked up into her pink eyes. Then she thumped my head softly. "Technically, I'm only supposed to let you live if you agree to fight for us, but I'm really lousy at following orders like that." She climbed off and helped haul me to my feet. "You look like shit, Blackjack."

"Appropriate. I feel like shit," I replied as I stabilized my wobbling legs, looking around. "Where the hell did all these ponies come from?"

"Are you serious?" she asked with a little smirk. "You don't think that Big Daddy's only big in with the Hoofington Gangs, do you? Soon as the fighting got serious, he called in favors across half of Equestria. More are coming west every day. This is the greatest stomp in the history of the Wasteland; the Rangers are finally getting everything they deserve. It's wonderful." Then she pointed at the dead manticore. "These are a bit much, though…"

Gangs from all across Equestria. "It's insane. Why? What the hell are they coming for?"

"What? It's not like we're the only ones. A contingent of Steel Rangers arrived by boat this morning from Trottingham. There's fighting in the south with the Pecos and Flank against zebras out in the badlands. Red Eye's forces are picking fights with the Society ponies. I'm amazed the Enclave and the Collegiate haven't started shooting. Hell, the only part of the Hoof that isn't crazy is the northwest."

And that was because I gassed my stable, preventing the Overmare from leading a cannibalistic crusade across the Hoof. "It's not a coincidence," I muttered weakly as I looked around at the fire and smoke. "I get EC-1101 out of Stable 99, and suddenly everything explodes? It can't be a coincidence."

"Well, it's not just here, either. Apparently the Rangers are stomping some stable outside Ponyville. There's war in Fillydelphia. Red Eye has an army that's moved in around Tenpony Tower. All of Equestria is going nuts! It's amazing," Rampage said with a grin, then looked to the side. "Hold onto that thought, Blackjack." And she crouched and leapt on to the back of a manticore savaging three unarmored ponies.

"At least we can trust the Enclave to stay out of it," Glory said as she coughed. "There's no way they'd stick their wings in this mess." I gave her a skeptical look, and she said stubbornly, "Nopony up there would be dumb enough to mess around with things on the ground right now. Okay?" But she still looked worried. The Enclave might not do anything against the surface…but what about against its own?

I looked towards the firehouse. This was taking too long. Had something happened to Scotch? Had they gotten caught? Killed? My

mane crawled at the possibilities. Right between my shoulder blades…maybe I was paranoid, maybe I'd finally cracked, but I flopped over to the side. For a second I felt like a complete idiot…

And then the monsterpony swooped by over me. The mare's scorpion tail glanced off my barding as she flapped her bat wings wildly. Then she dug her claws into the asphalt as she slid to face me. "How'd you hear me coming?" she asked, her tail stabbing at the torn up street, her blue eyes glaring at me as she bared her fangs. "Oh well…at least we can finish this."

I hauled myself to my feet. "Yeah. Let's end this, Jetstream," I said as I looked at the tawny combination of pony and manticore, not taking my eye off her as four more manticores landed around us.

Then she blinked her blue eyes in confusion. "Jetstream?" Suddenly she burst out laughing. "I'm not Jetstream."

I blinked. "Well…aren't you?" Had Sanguine altered her memory? Had the fusion megaspell robbed her of her identity?

She looked at me with a smirk. "What the hell are you talking about, Security? My name's not Jetstream. You couldn't pay me to be that stuck up. Before my change, my name was Brass."

"Brass?" That…that mare who'd fucked with Doof? I stared at her. "Then how'd you become…"

"This?" She gestured to herself with a clawed hoof. "Oh, I jumped on this the first chance I got. A leg up on the food chain, wings, and command over these dumb critters…what was there to not love? True, they stuck me in stasis when the file was locked down, but I got to admit, I like the Wasteland a whole lot more!"

I looked at her and then pointed a hoof. "So…you were a soldier, volunteered to become this, and couldn't be happier?"

"That's right!" she said with a chuckle, snapping her tail.

"No angsty back-story? No regrets? You're perfectly happy being a monster?" I said as I smiled.

She scowled at me, her claws scraping the broken up pavement. "Absolutely!" Then she growled as I burst out laughing. "What's so funny?" Glory and Lacunae looked at me in concern; understandable, given that I'd been running around screaming like a maniac just a few minutes ago.

I sat hard on my haunches and looked to the sky, extending my legs as if thanking the Goddesses themselves. "Finally! I finally have an enemy to fight that I don't have to feel sorry for!" I said, tears running down my cheek as I loaded a magazine of hollowpoint

rounds into Vigilance. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve had to fight a monsterpony only to guilt and whine and angst about it afterwards? But you? You’re a complete monster, Brass!” I said as I slashed the sword in front of me. “Do you eat foals? Tell me you eat foals and rape helpless little ponies. That’ll be the icing on the cake!” I laughed in mad glee, doing a shuffling little dance with my taped up legs. “Woo woo! No regrets…no sir…no regrets…not for me…woo woo!” I sang as I danced around in a strutting trot.

She roared and charged, and then just as suddenly danced back on her claws as my sword sang in a slash before her. Back and forth the blade slashed, inches from her face as I charged at her. “No angst! No moral dilemmas! No wondering if I did something wrong! Hold still!” I shouted in glee as I raised Vigilance, slipped into S.A.T.S. and queued up four shots. It was a testament to her speed that she was able to raise her clawed hooves to shield her face as the bullets blasted great big bites out of her hide.

“You’re insane!” she shouted. “Fury, damn it! Kill her!”

From my blind side a mare said in a bored tone, “You’re such an idiot, Brass.” And I turned to see…a mare on fire? No. It was an earth pony with a mane and coloration that resembled crackling flame. “And don’t use that stupid ‘code name’ on me. Honestly, what are you? A filly reading comics?”

“Just shut up and kill her! Where the hell is Precious?” the manticore pony yelled as two of her beasts came to shield her from my gunfire.

“Who cares?” the orange and red mare drawled. “Get clear.” Now that’s never a good thing to hear.

I brought the gun around and pointed it at her head. “Get back.” She didn’t. “Get the fuck back!” I did not like how casually she strolled towards me or how the tawny manticore monster was moving away.

“Yeah. Add a few more expletives. See if that works for ya,” she said as she started tossing bits of junk and garbage onto her back. “So. Sanguine wants it bad. In fact, he wants it so bad that he’s started cutting power to our stasis pods for more help. So you can come with us and give it up, or we take it.”

“Or you tell him no dice,” I replied as I backed away from this weird mare, trying to figure out her thing. What was she fused with? Given how the other was moving away, I gestured for Lacunae and Glory to move away too. Neither looked particularly

happy about it, especially given that they each had a manticore snapping at them. Beam gun bursts and magic arrows kept the monsters back, though, as the mare kept on picking up pieces of junk.

"Look. Deus wouldn't have been after it if Sanguine hadn't had his hooves in the fire. And Sanguine wouldn't be after it if something didn't have *his* hooves in the fire. So just give it up," she said as she looked at me dully. "You know what? Fuck it." The flame mare closed her eyes as she started to glow.

And she exploded.

You know…I was rather sure that I had completely surpassed my quota of explosions for today, and it wasn't even noon. The junk she'd tossed on herself became deadly shrapnel that whizzed past me as I slid across the ground to come to a halt against a dead Ranger. Then the pile of ashes glowed, and from them reformed the flame-colored mare. "Ow," she muttered with a hiss of pain, looked at me, and started trotting towards me again with an annoyed look. "Wow…most ponies don't need to see this a second time," she said as she started to glow once more.

Rampage darted in front of me as the mare flashed and exploded again, the flames washing over her armor and cooking her striped hide as she shielded me from the blast. "Toasty!" Rampage yelled, the blackened flesh already beginning to heal. "I got this one, Blackjack."

"Rampage? Are you back with us?" I asked and saw her pink eyes hesitate.

"Is Scotch okay?" she asked, biting her lip.

"I…don't know," I admitted, looking towards the firehouse. What was taking them so long? I could see the tag and the blue bars.

"Let me know when you do," she said as she turned towards the regenerated red and orange mare. "Okay, Sparky, let's see it again!" And she charged the startled-looking mare, who glowed as Rampage bulldozed her off to the north. Then the mare exploded again, and I heard Rampage laugh in glee.

"Okay. This is getting surreal," I muttered, then grinned at the manticore pony as I struggled to my hooves, tottered, and fell flat on my face. Well, I wouldn't let that stop me. "Oh Brass…" I sang as I lifted the glowing sword. I felt…drunk. Like I'd shot down a whole bottle of Wild Pegasus. My hide was numb and my mouth kept slipping on my words.

“Blackjack, shouldn’t we be getting the heck out of here?” Glory asked, her red beams peppering the annoyed-looking manticore; clearly, her gatling beam gun didn’t pack the shot per shot punch of her beam rifle. Still, she had a point. If I could only think. So many blasts and crashes and impacts left my brain feeling like it was so much mashed jelly.

“Right! Right!” I said as I picked myself to my hooves. And the tag was moving again, towards us? Yes! Towards us. But the smoke and fire and monsters and brain damage were all adding up on me and I managed four steps before everything went sideways and I collapsed on my face again. I rolled onto my back, looking at the smoke pouring up into the sky, and I stretched my hoof towards it for a moment, as if I could just push the clouds away and see the blue beyond.

Sweet Celestia, I was messed up. How many times had I been blown up today?

A grenade drove off Glory’s manticore and announced that P-21 had arrived with Scotch in tow. He looked more frazzled than usual as Persuasion thumped and the precisely aimed grenades blew the monsters back. Scotch Tape looked sullen, though. “I can’t believe you wouldn’t let me bring her with us!”

“Not right now, Scotch,” he replied in the middle of loading another grenade.

“Stop talkin’ at me like you’re my mom. She saved me from those Ranger ponies!” she insisted as she pointed back at the fire station. Who saved who from what? Oooh... head hurt.

As they argued, Lacunae exhausted the ammunition in her purloined grenade machine gun and tossed the bulky weapon away. All she had was her magic, and not even that seemed inexhaustible. Then two Rangers slammed into the beasts she faced, distracting them. One had to be Paladin Stronghoof; I thought I saw him looking towards me as he smashed the beast like a stuffed animal. The other was Turnip, firing a missile at the manticore at almost point blank range. Rampage fought the exploding pony. Other Rangers shot at her. Fillies and Burners fired at them.

I could see the Dealer standing beside me, and part of me noticed that my crazy had gotten good enough to make it a bit harder to see him through the smoke. “Do you understand now, Blackjack? Do you understand what you’re trying to stop?”

Lacunae took the opportunity to return to me, lowering her horn

and applying a trickle of healing magic to my head. My PipBuck labeled it as 'crippled'. That explained a lot. "Yeah. But I got to… got to…do…something to stop it…" All we needed now was the Enclave to sweep in, and I'd wave the white flag. It couldn't get any worse than this…

And then the roar sounded.

It was close, deep, grinding, and loud enough that everypony around stopped fighting and looked about. Again it sounded, sending a shiver along my mane. "We need to go…" I said as I struggled to my hooves. That seemed to be a growing consensus as everypony started to back away from the burning fire station. For a few seconds, there were only the sounds of crackling flames and the more distant fighters. Then a rumbling crash grew louder and louder as the roar became a growing scream from the northeast.

The firehouse exploded. No, not from a bomb or the like. Instead, the flaming structure was pushed completely over as a massive monster of metal half crawled over and half burst through the structure. I'd seen a machine like this before, half rusted and buried in a hillside. This one wasn't rusted; it was operational, mobile… and much bigger.

Just what this fight needed…a tank.

The huge vehicle was covered in black and white stripes and coated with flaming debris. Everypony with a gun pointed it at the steel beast and opened fire as they fled in any direction they could that was away. Its heavy armor plates were barely scratched by the heavy weapons of the Rangers. Steel Rain might have been able to do something, but he was nowhere to be seen. Smart pony.

Two huge barrels swept across the battlefield as the turret turned, shaking off heaps of rubble like a dog. Smaller gun barrels recessed at the corners tracked back and forth for a moment, and then belched out streams of gunfire that tore through everything equally, pony and power armor alike. The exploding pony was hit and exploded, but didn't reform immediately. Dead? Waiting? Brass was hitting the clouds. I hoped she ate a lightning rod. Rampage blinked, was blasted off her hooves by a spray of high power machine gun blasts, and came to rest near me. "Oooo…That is one big can."

Those turrets now all pointed right at me, and the mechanical beast let out a long low rev of its engines. Its treads started to grind through the firehouse rubble as it moved towards us.

Of course it was after me. Everything was after me! I was wondering where the zebra infantry was. Then I looked at P-21 staring with his jaw dropped, looked at his bare back, and glanced at the rubble. Well... it'd be a shame to waste it. I reached out with my magic, flicked up the guard, and pushed the red button.

You know, this was turning into a regular thing with me today.

The bomb buried in the remains of the firehouse ripped up directly underneath the rear corner of the tank. Its left tread flew apart as the entire back end of the vehicle crumpled. For a moment, I was sure that there was going to be a secondary explosion, but the tank just lay there like a busted toy. Bricks and dust and flaming bits cascaded down upon us as we huddled on the ground. I slowly rose to my hooves and took a few steps towards the war machine.

Then I looked back over my shoulder at my friends and grinned. "I win."

Then the engine growled to life and a pink glow began to spread along the damaged vehicle, the metal bending back into shape, knitting together, and reappearing. The guns began to move in their sockets, and all together we rushed away to the west, disappearing into the smoke. A minute later, the tank's engine let out a roar that echoed across the battlefield.

* * *

We didn't stop running for almost ten minutes. We spotted one or two Reapers, but they were scattering too fast to give us any trouble. Finally, we tumbled into an intact basement bar and spread out. Everypony was covered in a mat of blood, soot, dust, and sweat. We reeked of smoke and flamer fuel. My brand new shotgun was in dire need of a new barrel, and Glory's beam gun barely had enough charge to function as a flashlight.

But me? I couldn't be happier. We were alive. Nopony was missing body parts. Well, nopony except me, but, still, I hadn't lost any more. And we were all together again!

Lacunae used her magic to recharge our remaining potions before we drank them. I was still far from top notch. Now that the shock had worn off, I was one throbbing nerve head to hoof. P-21 and I both took a Med-X. Scotch had gotten over her shock at the tank and was now telling Rampage about an odd filly she'd met in the firehouse who had saved her from Steel Rain's Rangers. Glory tried

to repair my braces with something more effective than duct tape; hard to know how she'd mange that.

Me, I just smiled as I drank a room temperature Buckweiser and looked at my five friends.

"You look happy…" P-21 said as he sat opposite me. He'd taken one drink of the tepid beer and grimaced. Wuss. But that was why I loved him. He still looked mixed about Rampage rejoining us. Glory remained cool, now that things had calmed down. There was no doubt we needed her, but it'd take a while before Glory forgave her for leaving us back at the Collegiate.

"I feel happy. I look like shit," I replied as I looked at the dusty pool table. There were bones around it. Well, that was a downer. I wondered who'd been playing when the bombs fell. Who'd been winning. Had they been having fun getting one last game in as the air sirens wailed? There had once been pictures all over the walls, but most had fallen to the floor and were ruined by mud and moisture. From the few that remained, it looked as if this had been a hangout for the soldier bucks at the naval base. Most of them were smiling at the camera, or grinning like idiots, or raising bottles of beer in salute.

I lifted my bottle to the pictures that remained. Having had a taste of war, though I admitted it had been a small taste, I knew they deserved all the respect I could muster.

Especially when I knew one of these ponies.

Twist and a zebra sat at the bar in one grainy photograph, and I carefully levitated the frame off the wall. There was a news article taped inside the frame.

Barroom Brawl Becomes Battlefield.

By Ace Buckley.

Chaos reigned yesterday night in Progress at Billiard's pool hall as a group of sailors from the Ironmare Naval Base encountered several soldiers from the Miramare Air Station. Sergeant Twist, formerly of the now infamous Macintosh's Marauders, was sharing a drink with Shujaa, one of the elusive Proditor zebras still fighting on behalf of Equestria, when the sailors arrived and took umbrage with the presence of the red zebra. Sergeant Twist told the sailors what they could do with their anchors in a quote we cannot reprint, and the fight was on.

When soldiers from the air station learned that the sergeant was in trouble, they immediately rushed to her assistance. All told, almost two hundred off duty soldiers rushed to the scene to assist their side. Though

there were no casualties, Colonel Cupcake at Miramare said that there would be severe punishment incoming. Some observers, however, have expressed concerns that the former Marauder enjoys special privileges due to the attack on her last year. The question has also been raised of whether the sergeant's open intimate relationship with Shujaa is a conflict of loyalties. Few zebras remain in the Hoofington region, and most of those who do are inmates of the Yellow River internment camp.

Billiards, owner of the establishment in question, has said that anypony wishing to fight on behalf of the Princess and Equestria was welcome, striped or not. He assures his clientele that his bar would be reopened in just a few weeks.

I looked at the pair in the photograph, holding hooves and resting their heads against each other. It could have been Glory and me in that photograph. Looking at Twist, I glanced over. There were some differences…they had different grins. Different eyes. Then there were the stripes. And the zebra simply looked exotic with that 'not-quite-a-pony' look they had. I turned it over, and there was a little note: 'Twist + Shujaa' with a heart drawn around the words. Should I tell her about it? Would she freak out? I didn't want to shoot her in the head again, especially not with Scotch Tape watching.

Not remembering sucks. Shit…

"Rampage…" I called out.

She looked over from Scotch. Her armor had holes in it she hadn't been able to patch yet. I could only imagine how she'd gotten another suit. Had she gone down into the tunnels for the armor we'd been forced to leave behind? Maybe she had a second suit left with Big Daddy.

"Yeah? What's up?" she asked as she trotted towards me.

"I found a picture," I said softly. "Back at the Museum a few days back, when we were fighting zebras…you said that your name was Shujaa." I tapped the overturned picture. "I found…I think I found a picture of her."

Rampage sat down hard. "You mean…one of the ponies…inside me?" I nodded slowly, and she clenched her eyes shut.

P-21 slipped off of his seat and trotted to Scotch. "Let's get you washed up. There's got to be some clean water somewhere around here with all this rain."

"Hey, I want to stay with Rampage!" the filly protested as he shoved her towards the stairs.

"She's not going anywhere. Now move," P-21 said firmly as he shoved her up the stairs.

Rampage took the picture and looked at the little note. Shaking wasn't a good sign. She slowly turned the frame over, reached out with her hoof, and ran it over the glass, as if caressing Twist. "I…I don't understand these feelings…" she said as she started to cry. She gave me a snotty sniff. "I feel…I feel all…all mixed up! This…this is me!" she said as she looked at me with wide eyes. "And…and I love her so much…" And then she pointed at Twist. "But this is also me! I know it…I…I see it. And…and I love her…I love her so much it hurts! And yet…I hate her too! I'm so angry at her!" And she dropped the picture and hugged herself. "But why? I don't know these ponies!"

"Two souls in one," Lacunae said softly.

Rampage's hooves dug into her sides. "I don't understand…I…am I Twist? Am I Shujaa? Am I both?" She sniffed and shook her head. "I don't understand at all. I feel…I want to rip open my chest. I want…I want to save her…but I don't understand why. None of it makes any sense!" She stared at me with her wide, pleading eyes. "Who am I, Blackjack? What am I?"

I knelt down and hugged her, hoping that she wasn't going to crush me like a bug. "I don't know, Rampage. Arloste? Twist? Shujaa?" I stared at her. "I wish I were a smarter pony. Then I could figure all this out." I looked up at Lacunae, wondering just how many souls you could fit in one pony.

My whole life, I'd always been Blackjack: maybe not the smartest pony in the stable, but still me. I had a mother who raised me better than other ponies I knew and I had never had to question who or what I was. The sight of the Reaper looking at that picture with such an expression of confusion and pain... Her jaw grit as she looked from pony to zebra and back again. Finally, she pushed the picture away as she sniffed. "If Big Daddy could see me now…"

"How do you feel?" I asked, and she hiccupped and rubbed her nose.

"I feel…Goddesses…I'd say messed up and crazy, but apparently that's not how crazy works. I look at the pictures, and part of me says 'that's me', and other parts say 'no, it's somepony else' and they're fighting with each other. And part of me loves what I see…a part of me hates what I see…and…it's just wrong. I want to apologize to myself…and kill myself…and cut out my heart…and…

ugh…just crazy!" She looked at Glory plaintively. "Are you sure that I'm not crazy? Positive? It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?"

Glory sighed and gave a small, comforting smile. The gray pony just didn't have it in her to hold a grudge. "No. If you weren't aware of the conflicting impulses…maybe then it might be some sort of personality disorder... but since you are... Sorry."

"Eh…" She took a deep breath. "It's how I normally feel. Little impulses and urges and conflicts inside me and all of them screaming for attention. Sometimes I feel like a schoolteacher or something and my head is a kindergarten." She groaned. "Mint-als help me focus on what's what…keep it all straight."

"Well…sorry I can't help more," I said with a sigh.

She just laughed weakly, shaking her head. "Blackjack…before I met you, I didn't think that I could be helped at all. Nothing made sense. Now I know the name of at least one pony inside me. Maybe two. At least I've got some hope that I can figure it all out. There's nothing worse than being a stranger in your own skin, feeling different parts of yourself battling it out."

"Do you think you're still a threat to Scotch?" I asked with a concerned frown.

"I don't know," she said as her smile disappeared. She hung her head with a sigh. "Now that I know…I felt that urge. I won't lie. Like a pressure inside me wanting to snuff her out before she could hurt more. But I didn't let it lock me out this time." She rubbed her head. "I think I'll be fine. Just try not to leave her alone with me if you can help it. No reason to tempt fate, right?"

Right. Tempting fate would be the last thing I'd ever do. I asked the question I'd been dreading since seeing the Reapers fighting. "Do you think Big Daddy can cut this war off if we get Crunchy Carrots to agree?" More importantly, would he still *want* to?

She sighed. "Maybe. I think so. If we do it soon."

"But why would he want to? I thought that Big Daddy liked a good stomp," Glory said with a small frown.

Rampage chuckled mirthlessly. "He does. But he's smart enough to look past the stomp and figure out that, even if he crushes the Rangers, he's not going to have much left afterwards. Big Daddy's always been about encroachment. Squeeze the Rangers out block by block, month by month. He never wanted a war; he just fought because they shot first…well…somepony else shot first."

That gave me hope. "Okay. Well then, we'll keep going to meet

with Crunchy Carrots. You can say that you're Big Daddy's ambassador or something. It'll sound better coming from a Reaper than Security anyway. We'll explain how we started things, apologize, and hope she can rein in Steel Rain."

"It should. It takes a lot for Rangers to break ranks," Rampage agreed.

"But you can bet Steel Rain won't just let us meet with the elder," Glory chipped in.

"Correct." I sighed and looked at Rampage. "Do you know the naval base at all? You've been all over the Hoof."

She nodded and walked to the bar, digging around a bit before coming back with a piece of scrap paper and a pencil. She drew a rectangle and pointed a hoof at it. "This is the naval base itself. Mostly a bunch of reinforced warehouses. Whole place was lousy with radiation for years, but I guess enough of it washed out or wore off for the Rangers to move in. West of it are a whole bunch of docks. That area's one massive rusty tangle. East of the main area, there're these big factory buildings where they used to make ships and stuff." She drew a scribbled mess on the left side of the rectangle and a smaller square to the right.

"South of it is Ironmare Town. Mostly ruins. There used to be squatters, but the Rangers stomped them years back. Still, that area is probably thick with Ranger patrols." She drew a great big backwards capital F above the central rectangle. "This is the breakwater and pier. Not sure how much cover or stuff there is." And then she drew a lozenge shape on the bottom of the lower arm of the F. "And this is the *Celestia*. The Steel Rangers have made it their fortress in Hoofington. It's the big reason the Reapers haven't tried a war before. Nopony knows if the big guns work. Nopony wants to find out what it'll take, if they do work, to get Crunchy Carrot to use up any ammunition for them."

Finally, underneath the square, she drew a circle. "This used to be the headquarters for the base. Big old building; guess it used to be a bunch of offices. But…" She drew another circle, this one made of a dotted line, to the right of the headquarters. "This is the Ironmare crater. The bomb missed the base outright, but you know what they say…"

"The only time close matters is horseshoes, grenades, and balefire bombs…" I muttered.

"They really say that?" Glory asked with a confused frown.

“Spoken like a pony who’s never gotten a ringer,” Rampage chuckled.

“Balefire bombs ring?”

I waved my hoof. “Okay. So…if we can get through the headquarters building, then through the factory, we should be able to find somepony to set up a meeting. Maybe Stronghoof, if he survived.” And it’d be hard for me to think of anypony who could kill that stallion!

“I smell a whole lot of ‘make it up as we go’ coming off this plan,” Glory said with a resigned sigh.

“Of course. Wouldn’t be fun otherwise,” I said with a smile. I looked at Rampage, who was looking at the newspaper clipping. “You want me to hold onto that for you?”

She jumped, looked at me, and then nodded once. I carefully removed the picture from the frame and slipped it into my saddlebags. I’d keep it safe. It was one of the few things I could do for her.

* * *

We all took a few minutes to rinse off the grime and grit from the battle. Already I was missing the last time I had wondrous hot water cascading over me with a mare scrubbing my flanks. An unoccupied bathtub would be wonderful, too. I had never appreciated how a hot shower was a hallmark of civilization. It seemed so simple, but right now I could go for a weeklong soak… which would give me a few more weeks to get stuff done before I died.

Tick tock tick. As we set off, I imagined the taint battling with my cells, slowly advancing and encroaching on healthy tissue. Building up bases and fortifying tumors. Staging raids and assaults on my intact organs till it completely controlled the territory of my body. I could swear I felt little explosions inside when I moved wrong. Twinges like gunfire. A general burning in my rear leg like flamers at work. And, every now and then, I imagined a bomb inside me going off that would make me pause and gasp.

“Well, you were all running one way, but I couldn’t run. I was so scared. And those mean Ranger ponies were laughing about how they should just cut off my PipBuck and figuring how to disarm his big old bomb. Then this purple and green filly walked in. And they

seemed to think she was one of my friends or something and went to grab her. Well…she opened her mouth wide and SHE bit HIS leg off. And then the other one started to shoot her, but the bullets? They just bounced right off. And then she breathed fire at him! Green fire!" Scotch looked at us. "I'm not making this up!"

I smiled as I clattered along beside her. "I didn't say you were, Scotch."

"You had the smile," she said sullenly.

"Smile?"

"That 'I don't believe you but I won't say so' smile," she said crossly, then looked at Rampage. "You believe me, don't you?" There was more in her tone and expression than just that. She might as well have been asking 'You're not angry with me, are you?' or 'You're not going to leave again, are you?'

Rampage looked at her a long moment and then gave a crooked smile. "Sure kid. I knew Gorgon. Freakiest damn pony you ever saw," and her smile slowly faded away. "And one of the nicest." I recalled him turning my friends to stone but kept my silence.

"Who hired him to up production at the mine?" I asked as I trotted along. We were making our way north, more or less trying to keep off the streets and always watching the skies. We may have killed off a bunch of Brass's flock, but I didn't think that we'd gotten all of them. "I mean, it seemed pretty sudden, from what I recall."

"Dunno. Apparently, some buyer wanted every last gem they could claw out of the mine. Basically took it over. Funny, because normally those gems would get converted into flamer fuel or gem cartridges, but they were going somewhere else." I frowned, my head throbbing.

"I know that look," P-21 said as he limped up beside me. "What are you thinking, Blackjack?"

"Just…ugh…everything is happening now. I get EC-1101 out of 99. Gorgon gets sent out to mine gems. Everypony starts killing everypony else. What triggered it? What's behind it? Who wants the gems so much, and why?" I pointed in the general direction of the battle. "And that monsterpony said that somepony was really pushing Sanguine to get EC-1101. So why now?"

Rampage looked at me. "No offense, but why not? Things are finally organized enough for groups of ponies to tear each other apart."

"But that's part of it too. The companions come out east and just

happen to weed out all the dozens of little tribes so that they could get five competing organizations? And one of the companions goes up to the Enclave to get them involved too through the VC? I can't believe it's all coincidence. It's like there's something…something sweeping all this along. And not just in Hoofington. Why does the Stable Dweller shake everything up now? Why has Red Eye come to power in Fillydelphia now? Why is everything happening now?"

"Maybe it *is* all just one big coincidence?" Glory suggested. "I mean, it's all circumstantial."

She was probably right…but I couldn't help but feel the niggling sensation that all of this was connected. That things that happened two hundred years ago were happening now.

I looked back at Lacunae trailing behind us as Glory and P-21 began arguing over coincidence versus pattern. Well, that was fine; I'd raised the question, so now the smart ponies could argue over it. I dropped back and gave Lacunae a little nudge. "How are you feeling?"

"The Goddess was hurt…very badly. I do not think Unity has ever been so threatened before." She shivered. "She has cut me off as completely as she can. I have been forsaken. I can hear the others… but next time I am threatened, she will let me die. She will not endanger everything for just me."

"I'm sorry," I said with a sigh. "I guess…I guess you and the Goddess would have been better off if you'd never met me."

"Why do you say that?" Lacunae asked with the ghost of a smile. "You are…in many ways…the most fascinating pony the Goddess has ever encountered. Tenacious. Foolish. Brave and cowardly. Painfully devoted to those in need. Had ponies like you lived two centuries ago, perhaps things might have been different. At the very least, you have inspired the Goddess to a radical plan."

"Radical?"

"Yes. The Goddess knows a dire enemy is coming to us. We will… treat with her. Seek to use her rather than destroy her outright. Allow her to achieve mutual goals in the hopes that our great biological problem can be addressed."

"That sounds dangerous. What if she betrays you?"

"That's a great concern. But as you have pointed out…two centuries of Wasteland has accomplished little." *Two centuries of Watcher and the Enclave hasn't accomplished much either*, I thought. "We do not know if this will work, but we are becoming

increasingly aware that old methods are not succeeding. Things must change, one way or another.

"Are you really cut off forever?" I asked in concern, worried about what it meant for her.

"So says the Goddess, but she's said so before. Twilight is terribly curious about Hoofington, Enervation, and your own concerns." Lacunae gave a mysterious little smile. "I have faith that she'll one day return to me. I've lost Goddesses before…"

That was an odd thing to say, but when she mentioned that name, I gave a half smile, "Is she…is she really in there?"

"It's…complicated," she said with another faint smile. "It's like… music. The Goddess is the conductor, and we are her orchestra. She selects the music, but we must play the notes. Some of us play well, some softly, some with amazing skill. Twilight is one such musician, perhaps the best in the orchestra, but the Goddess still picks the music. And I think that she is glad to yield the decisions to the Goddess…the choices of her time as Ministry Mare were not easy on her. It was a time of much pain and regret."

"Funny how she wants to add us all to her band," I muttered dryly.

"We once thought to make it optional, but the process was too slow and painful. The acolytes of Unity were too vulnerable to the predators of the wasteland. And it seemed somewhat cruel to leave the poor and ignorant and fearful to die when they could be saved in Unity. Once they were part of us, they would know it was a better state." She gave a tiny shrug. "It is a matter of perspective. For us, it would be monstrous not to offer Unity to all."

I didn't think about it like that. "What was it like for you?"

She gave me a sad smile. "I don't know. I didn't go through Unity," she replied, and I kicked myself. It was so hard to remember that she wasn't actually a pony, that she was just a collection of thoughts and regrets. "I have memories, though. A cup of golden fluid…vats of rainbow lights…catwalks…why catwalks?" She sighed and shivered slightly. "Then falling into a great dark filled with whispers and motes of light."

"And then?"

"Learning to play. Some fight it. But I think, on some fundamental level, we all long for harmony."

"Harmony, huh?" I looked in the direction of all the smoke. "Somehow, Hoofington doesn't seem to know how to play along."

* * *

Two hours later, we'd left most of the industrial section of the city behind. Crumbling factories gave way to a narrow band of yellowed grass, dead trees, and smaller patches of tract homes. In the middle of this band were a parking lot, a foundation, and a sign proudly proclaiming 'Horizon Laboratories'. Beneath that, 'Proud Subsidiary of the Ministry of Arcane Science'. Everything else had been scraped away by a balefire bomb, given the crater beside the building. It'd probably been blown out into the bay.

"Well. That's disappointing," Rampage muttered. She pointed at the junk scattered over the slab of blasted foundation. "Was this someplace important?"

"It might have been a place with some answers," I grumbled. Now it was no place.

"If you don't mind, I think I should take the opportunity to replenish myself," Lacunae said as she looked yearningly at the red radiation emanating from the bowl-shaped depression.

"Have fun. Keep an eye open for Rangers…Reapers…manticores…" I sighed and hung my head. "You know what? Just keep an eye out for anything that isn't us." With a flutter of her wings, she trotted happily towards the wan glow of the crater.

I walked across the slab, finding the elevator shafts completely choked with rubble. There were a few smashed and rusted bits of office equipment; most of the concrete was burned to a crisp and still gave slow clicks on my radiation meter. We met back in the parking lot.

"So…nothing here, then?" Rampage asked as she drummed her hooves on the rusted hulks.

It looked exactly that way. A small parking lot for wagons…a big empty slab. Wait... Small. Big. Slowly, I turned around and faced away from the building. Nothing that way either. A few smashed homes. A gutted recharging station. A lot of ponies must have worked here, and to do that they must have had some way to get here. There.

A subway…

Slowly, I trotted towards it. The blue sign was pitted with rust and largely illegible, but my PipBuck navigation icon told me what it had said. 'Horizon Station'.

"Bingo," I said with a little smile.

Scotch balked. “You…you want to go down there?” she said as she looked at the rusty doors that hung half open at the bottom of the stairs.

“Just a little way,” I said as I looked at her. “You don’t have to go, if you don’t want to.” I glanced at Rampage, but she shook her head slowly. “P-21 can--”

“I’ll go with you. You might come across a lock or a terminal,” he countered flatly. Damn it.

“I’ll stay with her,” Glory volunteered, as if there was somepony else willing. “Who knows? It could be fun.”

“Yippie,” Scotch muttered as she walked away from the subway stairs. “Babysat by the world’s most boring pony.”

“I’m not the world’s most boring pony! We can braid manes…swap stories…um…pillow... fight?…” She chewed on her hoof for a moment and looked at me. “I’m not really the most boring pony, am I?”

I looked at her and thought that outright deception was called for. “Absolutely not.”

That brightened her up. “Come on, Scotch. I’ll show you the principles of beam rifle technology!” she said as the two headed back towards the center of the parking lot.

“Someday you’re going to have to tell her what happened,” Rampage said from the doorway of the subway station.

“She’s fine. She’s dealing with it,” P-21 muttered. “Last thing she needs to do is go remembering anything else.”

“But why is she remembering at all?” I asked as I looked in at two rusty escalators dropping into the earth. I took that for a good sign and slowly started down with Vigilance and sword out.

“Memory spells remove memory,” Rampage said from behind me in a slightly off voice. I glanced back. Her walk was less…stalking. More normal. Another pony inside her? “However, mental trauma is rarely so black and white as good memory, bad memory. Stripping away an unpleasant memory may prevent the mind from actively recalling the event, but it doesn’t necessarily remove the countless subconscious reactions to the trauma itself. If a pony falls into a river, the memory of the fall and nearly drowning can be extracted, but the anxiety around water and the phobia of drowning can remain. True memory therapy takes years of work to adjust those subconscious problems.” I looked past her at P-21, seeing his eyes wide in surprise. Rampage muttered softly, “What a dreadful

station."

"Yeah. Somepony should call maintenance…Doctor…?" I guessed. The emergency lighting still flickered and danced as we followed the escalator lower and lower into the earth.

"Octopus," she replied with a crooked smile. Really? "Yes, really. I was quite grabby with my magic as a colt." I didn't hesitate as we continued down lower into the earth. "I quite like my name, actually. It's one few ponies forget. After a while, all the hoof-this and wing-that blur together, don't you think?" I saw the red marks on my EFS below and lowered my voice.

"Right. And what do you do for a living, Doctor?" I asked, trying to divide my attention.

"Senior psychiatrist at the Fluttershy Medical Center," she said, and then frowned. "At least…I was. I think. Has something happened? I feel dreadfully out of sorts."

Not crazy, but not entirely here and aware of what was going on. "Nothing major," I said softly, wondering how a pony like this ended up in Rampage. "What was the last thing you recall clearly, Doctor?"

She curled her lip as she stepped over several bodies, not seeming to recognize them completely. "I…believe I was attending a lecture on methods of psychological deconstruction and reconstruction in Manehattan. There was an accident…I think. A dreadful accident." She suddenly looked around. "What's going on? This…this has to be some sort of hallucination!"

"Please…Doctor. Focus. You said an accident…did it happen after Big Macintosh's death?"

She looked at me and her panic increased. "Why are you asking an old buck about that horrible affair? This must be some sort of stress-induced break from reality."

"How long ago was it, Doctor?"

"A year…I think…" she said in a trembling voice. She reached up and touched her forehead, her pupils shrinking. "Sweet Luna protect me…am…am I…is this real?"

"I…" I looked at P-21 helplessly. He just gave a tiny shrug. "Yes. I'm afraid you're not dreaming, Doctor. You're…you're inside a mare named Rampage." I prayed she wasn't going to freak out, but, though she seemed disturbed, she didn't become violent. Instead, she reached up to her eyes and then blinked.

"Ah…no glasses…My word. Well, I suppose that, unless I've gone

completely off my nut, I may as well accept what you say at face value," she muttered as she looked at the decaying station. "Though it seems as if something has gone quite terribly wrong?" she asked with a worried smile.

"It's been two hundred years. And yes, something did go quite terribly wrong," P-21 said quietly. "You're a buck, Doctor?"

"Well, I was," she said. "And I was a unicorn. Really, how did this happen?"

I sighed. "You tell us, Doctor?"

"As I said, I haven't the foggiest idea. I was…asleep I think. It was dark, certainly. Unpleasant. Then I recall some folks discussing memory manipulation. I was quite keen to join the conversation... but unfortunately, I couldn't quite wake up. Then it happened again just now, and suddenly I was…well…in this odd state. I didn't feel myself at all…" she replied as he looked at her hoofclaws. "My… how positively horrid. The future isn't at all what I'd anticipated."

"Did anything unusual happen to you? Anything to do with the Office of Interministry Affairs or their secret projects?" I asked with a smile. "Anything you can tell us would help."

"My dear, I was living a life of constant referrals and anticipating more time with my grandfoals once I retired. I was never a big supporter of the war or the Ministries and certainly not involved with anything secret," she said with a sad shake of her head. "I wonder…did my grandfoals…what became of them?" she asked with a look of terrible worry.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. They probably died," I said softly. "The war… there were bombs…" I stammered and dropped my gaze. "I'm sorry."

She put her hooves on my shoulders. "No, my dear. *I'm* sorry. I'm sorry we didn't work things out. I always knew we were developing too fast. Changing too much. Too much pride and too much anger… but nopony was interested in the opinions of a buck who fondly remembered steam trains." She took a deep breath. "Now, if you'll excuse me…I think there's somepony who wants…something. I'd best go back to wherever I was."

She blinked, and suddenly her eyes popped wide. "Tell me I didn't kill her. Please tell me I didn't kill her!"

"You didn't," I assured her. "Actually, we talked to somepony who was…Well…actually pretty nice, if a little confused."

We trotted down to the station; I was relieved to find it intact.

However, there *were* some ghouls shuffling around aimlessly. I was glad that the doctor was gone; I'd hate to have to explain all this to him. It was surprising how casually we dispatched them when they charged us; after a battle like earlier, it seemed almost foolishly easy. The train tunnel ran north and south, right towards the fallen Horizon Labs.

"What are you hoping to find?" P-21 asked as he stuffed his saddlebags with some semi-decent salvage. There was always a need for more duct tape, Wonderglue, and scrap metal.

"No idea. The professor said that this place was involved with the O.I.A." I said as we stepped off the platform and walked along the tracks. I kept looking up, to the sides, and all around.

"This is a bad idea," P-21 muttered. "We don't have any healing potions left…"

"As I recall, you volunteered," I said as I looked at him with a flat look and even smile. Then I spotted the door in the wall, a terminal mounted next to it. I rapped on the glass monitor. "And good thing, too." He scowled sullenly at me before getting to work.

"What was he like?" Rampage asked.

"The doctor? Well…he was a grandfather. A professional. Cared for his grandkids. Didn't mention a wife…seemed to think he was dreaming or something at first. And he was a psychiatrist of some sort," I said with a smile and a shrug at her baffled look.

We were silent for a few minutes as P-21 worked on the terminal, muttering under his breath. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked softly.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think I'm real?"

I blinked in surprise. "Real? What are you talking about?"

"I mean…" she hugged herself. "What if…what if there is no Rampage? Or Arloste? Or me? Am I just…just a collection of ponies all blended together?"

I bit my lip, not sure how to answer that. But P-21 snorted, "You're real, alright." He looked at the striped mare sharply. "I have no idea who that doctor was. Or Shujaa. Or Twist. Or anypony. I just know Rampage. That's all I think of when I think of you. I don't know if you're crazy or possessed or what…but you annoy me, so you must be real."

Rampage looked at him, her eyes growing wide. Just as she started to move to hug him, he pointed a hoof at her face. "Hug me and I'll put enough C-4 in your bed to launch you to the moon."

Rampage stopped mid-hug, giving me an awkward smile. P-21 looked at the terminal and hit a button. There was a beep and then an electrical click, and the door swung open. “Well, there’s probably something bad here,” he said as he looked at me.

“Why?”

“The password is ‘Trottenheimer’.”

* * *

I wasn’t sure what I’d expected from the basement of Horizon Laboratories. ‘Arcane Solutions to Magical Problems’ seemed to be their motto. The basement offices were neat and tidy, if slightly dusty. There were no bodies lying around, and while the walls were cracked, they were still mostly intact without too much rubble. A number of posters of Applejack and Twilight Sparkle could be found, along with pithy motivational posters.

What there wasn’t a lot of was paper.

“Something’s wrong here…” I muttered as I checked the twentieth desk. No clipboards with financial reports. No papers. No office supplies. There was more stuff in the utility closet than in the whole of the office combined. Where were the coffee mugs and the bottlecaps? There were always bottlecaps.

“This place has been cleaned,” P-21 said quietly. “And not recently, either.”

“No bullet holes…” I said. So this wasn’t a raid like at the museum...

Then we found the doors and, pushed against them, a crate filled with strange yellow suits. Bright purple tape was stretched back and forth across the doors, and a sign reading ‘Biomagical Contamination Level 5. Quarantined by order of the M.A.S.’ had been hung in the center. I looked at it and nodded my head to the door. “What do you want to bet all the interesting things are through there?”

“Of course. Because I’m travelling with the only pony who wants to go into a place marked ‘Biomagical Contamination, Quarantined’,” P-21 muttered.

“Why are you bitching so much, P-21?” Rampage asked flatly as she cut through the strips. “You could have stayed outside…you know…with your daughter.”

“Shut up,” he growled as he rubbed his leg. “I didn’t ask for this.

Any of this."

"So what?" Rampage replied. "I didn't ask to have a doctor, a zebra, and a foal killer inside me. Glory didn't ask to lose a wing. Scotch didn't ask to lose her mother. And Blackjack didn't ask to die of cancer. But we're sucking it up and dealing with it as best we can."

"Rampage," I said, trying to head this off.

"Yeah?" P-21 said, ignoring me and glaring at her. "Well, this is me dealing with it."

"No. This is you running away from it. Because you've got family right here in front of you and you're terrified of actually having a relationship," Rampage said firmly.

"You know what?" He rose to his hooves. "I really don't need to hear this from a mare who ran away and left us to go join her marauding friends. You deal with your shit your way. I'll deal with my shit in my own way." He started limping towards the exit.

"Wow," I muttered.

"Urrrgh…" Rampage snorted and smashed a table hard, denting the metal with her hoof. "I really need to pick my timing better."

"You think?" I arched my brow as I pushed through the door. Beyond…here was what I was used to. Walls blackened by fire. Partially melted glass airlock. No bones yet, but there were orange drums marked 'Biomagical Waste'. I gave them a wide berth as my rad sensor began to tick. I fished around in my saddlebags for some Rad-X and even drank a little RadAway for good measure. Looking back at Rampage, I smiled a little.

The fire damage became more intense the deeper we went. These labs had held equipment and terminals. I didn't see much in the way of cages. Then I found my first body…well…something like a body. It was a bright yellow suit with a strange bubble-like helmet. I'd seen it in the dream I'd had: an environmental protection suit. This one was empty, though, the faceplate shattered. I detached the recorder from its belt.

Unfortunately it'd been damaged…somehow. Beaten? Battered? Chewed on? It crackled as I tried to get it to play back.

"…kzzzzzt…responders cleared out all the aboveground personnel. Up to us to clean up the mess. Of all the fucking times for Twilight to go to a fucking party in Manehattan…dzzzzzttt…grade five contamination everywhere. No clue where the bodies went. Contacted the new O.I.A. director but he's fucking worthless.

Probably just tell me whatever they were working on was classified. Who knows what we have to deal with down here…."

We moved to a second set of reinforced airlock doors; these had been twisted and bent away. "What do you think are the odds that this place is unhealthy for me?" I asked with a small smile.

"You? With your luck?" Rampage answered with a soft snort.

"Yeah," I replied, looking ahead. Then I turned around abruptly. "Be right back." Rampage sat down, watching me trot down the hall to wiggle into one of the suits. I couldn't fit it on over my barding and sighed as I removed my armor and left it by the crate. When I finally got the suit sealed up, it filled with magically supplied air from a blue talisman on the leg. I trotted back and looked at the smirking Rampage. "What? Some of us aren't immortal."

She just smiled and shook her head.

We went in deeper and found a staircase that took us down a level. "Kkkkzzzz…real mess here. I don't get how these folks got their hooves on this stuff. All the materials here look legit. I'm not seeing anything contraband anywhere. First honest lab in Hoofington, I swear…Fzzzk…" I looked at the puddles of rainbow sludge and felt my pulse quicken. "…Celestia…what the hell happened here? There shouldn't be this much…fuck…"

I stepped around the glowing heaps and strange shimmery pools that I was completely certain wasn't water. The metal walls seemed melted, but the distortion was all wrong. It was as if the metal had softened and deformed, but there wasn't much in the way of soot. "Dzzzzt…No fucking bodies anywhere. About fifty researchers were supposed to be in here. What the fuck happened to them all… Buttercup? Pickets? Hey, where are you guys?"

I reached a lab with a flickering terminal and slowly stepped past. The rest of the terminals were deformed and twisted almost beyond recognition; the screen of this one was warped too, but I could make out a few words: 'Silver Bullet test in cryogenic lab'. "Cryogenics? Why would they need to freeze a fucking bullet?" the recorder said through the buzz. And why couldn't they just call it a 'freezing lab' instead of making up a fancy word?

That was when I noticed the sign above the door to the room; apparently *it* was the cryogenics lab. It didn't look frozen. Actually, it looked as if the entire lab had been made of wax and then heated just enough to distort but not enough to melt completely. Everything around me seemed fused into one solid surface. "That's

it…kzzzzkkk…I'm getting the fuck out of here…wait. Pickets? Is that…stop fucking around…"

I turned slowly, and then I saw the pony standing in a suit. A suit just like mine…I approached, step by step, cautiously. My hooves found the floor sticky. "Uggh…what is this stuff?" Rampage asked as she looked at her hooves. "Blackjack. Let's get out of here. This place is way too messed up for me."

"Just a second." The pony in the suit was leaned right up against the wall just inside the door. Slowly, I trotted closer and closer, leaving Rampage to scrape the goo from the floor off of her hooves.

"Kkkkkkzzzzztt…" the speaker crackled and sputtered as I looked into the lab, my eye drawn into the middle by a familiar object.

The entire room had been liquefied. In the center was a sort of pedestal. It rose like an organic growth in the center of the room, holding the only solid object in sight. A deformed metal arm dangled above it like a skeletal appendage.

I'd seen the object before; I had one sitting in my saddlebag right now.

Lying on the pedestal was the split-open shell of a silver bullet. It'd been mostly hollow, a thick silver casing around a softly glowing white stone core. A faint rainbow residue coated the interior.

Slowly, I backed away as the recorder crackled. "Pickets? Pickets?! Fuck! Pickets!"

I turned to look at the pony; she wasn't leaning against the wall. She was a part of the wall.

And she was staring right at me.

She opened her mouth and began to scream.

And the rest of the lab joined her.

Footnote: 95% to Next Level

Chapter 32: Choir

"Though quarrels arise, their numbers are few. Laughter and singing will see us through."

I'd dealt with a few monsters before. The hydra in Flank... the mutated dragonlings in Stockyard…radscorpions…manticores…all of them dangerous. But no matter how big or how small they were, they all made *sense*. Limbs, legs, head, fangs, hooves, stingers…the arrangement might be odd, but in their own way, they made sense.

This…this didn't make sense.

The walls, floor, ceiling... everything was moving. It was impossible to tell where metal ended and flesh began. Eyes were bulging. Mouths were opened in one long scream. There were organs between the equipment. Meaty appendages…intestines…I clutched my stomach as I backed away. I felt…it felt like my insides were moving! Like my tainted guts were trying to crawl right out my throat! I fought for one moment and then puked on the inside of my helmet. It wasn't bad compared to what followed at the other end.

And worst of all, I wanted to join that scream. It scratched at my throat.

"Stop it!" I shouted as I tried to back away, but my limbs were stuck to the floor! No, the floor was crawling up my legs! No! My legs were sinking into the floor! "Stop it, please!" I begged. Then things got worse.

It stopped.

Those eyes watched. The molded steel and flesh seemed to be waiting. Watching. "She has not joined our choir…" the mouths whispered.

Sweet Celestia…were they…

"You're…you can talk?" I murmured as I stared... pony eyes. Pony mouths. Luna save me, I saw cutie marks in that mix!

"She is very close. Close to joining their choir," one mouth whispered. Rainbow spittle drizzled from its lips. "We should make her join ours instead!" the drooling lip grinned.

"I don't understand, what do you mean…a choir? I can't sing!" I looked over at Rampage, but her eyes were wide and staring. She looked like a foal trapped in a nightmare.

There was a long low snicker. "Oh, everypony can. Listen…"

The mouths began screaming. One scream of many notes going on and on and…I'd been wrong. We were both trapped in a nightmare. I wanted P-21 here to blow this all up. I wanted Lacunae here with her stupid Goddess to sneer in disdain. I wanted Glory…sweet Celestia…I needed Glory to tell me it was going to be all right. "Stop!"

And again, they did. A wide, slack mouth poking between two monitors murmured, "She does not like our song." It sounded almost apologetic.

"Why?" snickered a mare's mouth. "She's so close to us already. She's singing parts herself. We've heard her."

I felt something move around my hooves…but I couldn't look. "You mean you were singers before…this?" I gasped, refusing to look down. If I saw…I would start screaming. I didn't think I would ever stop.

"No. We joined the choir…after," the mare stuck in the wall beside me murmured softly.

"Force her to join! Make her sing!" several of the voices began to babble.

"Wait! Wait! What happened here?" I asked, looking around. Oh Goddesses, my insides *were* moving! I felt a little wire in my mind, and it was being drawn tighter and tighter.

Then it stopped. The eyes stared at me; pony eyes watching and blinking and staring. There were veins running along the deformed metal and around the equipment. They pulsed as the lips slowly moved on their own. I started at the ropey gray intestines and felt my own squirming within.

"There was a box," whispered lips near the pedestal. "A box came with a mystery within."

Rampage murmured behind me, "Blackjack, we need to get out of here…Please, let's get out of here."

"A mystery containing a wonder," the lips whispered. I felt something on my legs, but I was incapable of moving. I could only

stare into the eyes. Goddesses…was there something in my eye socket again? Glory'd burned it out! Burned it!

One of the screens, its surface bulging out like a blister, flashed to life. The image was a mess of bilious greens and yellows as it showed bucks and mares around a small black box. One mare with some sort of pastry or cake on her rump opened the black case. "I was Applejack's cousin. I could open it," came a whisper from a green mouth above.

The silver bullet came out and was placed on the warped pedestal. "What are you doing?" I asked as I felt my stomach heave again, then swallowed.

"Freeze…cold…so cold," a blue pair of lips muttered before licking back a trickle of rainbow snot. On the screen, a mechanical arm swung over the pedestal, and a diamond wafer touched the metal. "We tried to cut oh so carefully…but we could not. We knew not."

A twisted grin cackled, "But I remembered the secret. I remembered the metal. The note." One of the bucks on the screen waved his hooves enthusiastically to the rest gathered around the frozen bullet. "The note of our song."

Now I watched in fascination as the blade cut the silvery metal with ease. Unicorn magic pulled it apart. "Blackjack, we have to go. This is fucked up. We need to go now."

But I couldn't move. I had two choices…watch and learn, or start screaming. I felt something in the back of my throat. I prayed that I was only imagining it... moving. "A minute…" I croaked as the silver bullet was cracked open. "I have to see this…" Because everything else would make me scream.

"That's a weird bullet," Rampage muttered on my blind side.

That was no bullet. I might know dick about…this…all of this…but I knew bullets. It might have been bullet-shaped, but the entire thing was one solid worked piece of metal divided into two sections. The larger of the two, a distorted half-sphere near the base of the shell and with its broad, flat side on the dividing wall, was packed full of a grayish paste like P-21's explosives. A small hole pierced through the shell to the small compartment, most of which was taken up by a strange, glowing hexagonal piece of crystalline stone that the robot arm's saw hadn't been able to cut through. Packed around the stone was some kind of thick goop that reminded me of the rainbow sludge now drizzling out of the... lips... of the room...

I'd exposed myself to that sludge each time I'd fired Folly.

I remembered the warped and twisted bones in Ironshod Firearms R&D. Melted like this room. Scalpel had detected the taint in me days after I'd fired Folly at Miramare. After firing it in the factory, I'd been told by Triage that my taint exposure had jumped once again…I'd been killing myself with every shot of the superweapon.

No, not killing myself. Turning myself into…this. The room muttered, giggled, and laughed softly.

"What is that…that crystal? That sludge? That metal?" I gasped. I lurched but managed not to fall over. I knew I'd seen that odd glowing gem before somewhere... The room, however, gave a hateful shriek that made me spasm. The walls began to pulsate.

"Blackjack…tell me we can get the fuck out of here…Blackjack?" Rampage said. I tried to wave my hoof, to buy some time, but I couldn't lift it. "Shit…oh shit…shit shit shit…" she muttered.

"That rock…of a lesser song. The metal…of a greater glory! The potion…the ichor of the meddler…a neutral buffer to separate the two," the mouths muttered in unison. "Sing with us. Sing your screams with us! The other cannot join. She is of a false unity. But *you* can be together with *us*!"

"Unity!" I gasped as I struggled to step back. I couldn't step anywhere. My heart was beating so hard that I was amazed that I hadn't fallen flat on my face. "You're with the Goddess?"

The mouths were silent. One chuckled…then another…then the rest in wild, mad glee. "She is not a child of the other choir. Imitation. False. Forgery. Manufactured. She babbles her own tune and will be undone. She is not a true choir. Nor is your friend there. Isolated. Separated. She cannot join us."

"Thank goodness. Now, Blackjack…out…now…" But I couldn't get out. I couldn't leave. If I did, part of me would tear its way out of my body and stay. A part that wanted to stay…

"And you're a true choir?" I gasped for air again and swallowed, desperate to puke again if I could. I wanted to get whatever was inside me out. The walls were beating like a heart, but with an alien beat: singular contractions rather than a double pulse. I imagined my own heart was beating in time with the meat.

Please. Let it only be in my head.

"We are, but trapped in flesh. Kept apart. We will join it in time. We were the latest to join the greater choir in such a long time. The greater song," they murmured in unison. "Let us sing for you." And

one began to scream. Then another. And another. Their screams blended together, one building on the next in a singular note. A note that grew and grew; and I was singing with it…not through my lips.

No…it was coming from inside my chest. I was going to sing with it too, till there was nothing left but that song.

"Blackjack! Glory's waiting!" Rampage yelled in my face. Then I stared at my friend, her red and white stripes seeming to melt together. Her tissue looked mottled and knotted, even scaly... and there was a wing forcing itself out of her shoulder through a gap in her armor. As I watched, a small horn was twisting slowly out the side of her head. "Are you just going to leave her up there wondering what happened to us?!"

That shout and that look snapped me out for a precious moment. I looked down at my hooves, but the metal-meat amalgamation had sealed itself around each of them like concrete; I only hoped that the safety suit had prevented me from fusing completely with the floor. "Cut me out. It's time to get out of here!" I tugged and struggled, and Rampage tore at the floor with her hoofclaws. But each slash spattered us with rainbow ichor, and the rents healed, and the scream bored deeper into my mind with every passing second.

Rampage turned to the screens; the distorted pictures now showed the bullet letting off plumes of rainbow gas and the ponies around it melting and falling into still-living heaps. One showed the wall chewing Pickets…oh Celestia…were those teeth I felt working on the ends of my limbs? Chewing through the suit? I blasted with the shotgun, wishing I'd loaded incendiary rounds.

"Damn it, will you bastards play something else? That song is old!" Rampage yelled as she struggled to get my right leg free.

And then I felt it. A squirm inside me at the words as the scream went on and on inside me and around me…oh Goddesses…inside me…inside me! It was screaming inside me! I felt like I was going to…give birth to something. It was going to claw its way out of me; turn me inside out. I wanted to take her ripper and tear myself open. Get it out! Get it out now!

"Calm down, Blackjack," rasped the Dealer in my ear. "Go into S.A.T.S."

"What…" but I couldn't argue. I simply wanted to scream forever.

I did. It was all I could think of. But S.A.T.S. didn't help. I couldn't

target myself, and this was one time shooting Rampage wouldn't help! Even Folly was back with my barding and saddlebags. The room didn't offer any obvious target or weak point. It just let me see the pony flesh wiggling its way out from the gaps and vents in the room.

But then I realized something else the spell gave me: time. Time to think. Time to calm down. If I lost it completely, then I wouldn't be able to do anything.

"That's it. Panic never helped anypony," the Dealer said softly as he trotted out in front of me to stand beside Rampage. "Now. I know you can't speak, but you can think. So think about this thing. What is it? What does it want? What is its weak spot? Everything has at least one."

I looked at the gaunt, pale buck in the battered hat. What did the room want? To eat me…or fuse with me…no. That was what it was doing to me. A terrified pink pony inside me pointed out those wide mouths. It wanted to sing. It wanted me to scream right along with it. And I wanted to…some horrible, treasonous part of my mind wanted to sing right along.

But I had other songs, too.

My PipBuck had a number of music files I'd collected from the Wasteland. If this thing wanted music, then I'd give it something else to listen to. Something better than just screams. I selected the song, the most powerful one I knew, and cranked the volume all the way up. I slipped out of S.A.T.S. and hit play. For a moment, I thought that the music wouldn't be able to overcome that single horrid screaming note, but then it rose. I felt my insides spasm in response, but the song of dozens of ponies in a little chapel filled that pit…and I could almost see Priest as I listened to his majestic music.

Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Help us find our rightful place.
Help us grow up big and strong. Laughing and singing all day long.
Show us how we should be kind. Teach us beauty and peace of mind.
Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Show us your gentle, shining face.

The horrible scream faltered, with some voices babbling curses or hissing in pain. My PipBuck continued to play the swelling music made by Priest, Medley, and all the other ponies in that little knot of hope.

Dearest Luna, soft and strong. Keep us safe all night long.
Under your soft and watchful eye. Let your stars fill up the sky.

Know our hearts are always thine. Protect us with strength sublime.
Dearest Luna, soft and strong. Let us honor you in song.

As I watched, the flesh seemed to be driven away. The eyes clenched in pain as the pulse fluctuated wildly. Rainbow ichor burst from some of the veins as the room reacted horribly to the swelling hymn to two princesses now long parted from this world. I might not have been able to believe in goddesses any more, but I could believe in beauty, kindness, and harmony.

Sweet Celestia, we sing to thee. That our worries be set free.
Dearest Luna, we praise your skies. Delight us with night's surprise.
Know you're in our fondest prayer. Mighty Princesses sweet and fair.
Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Dearest Luna, our song embrace.

My legs pulled free of the pits they were stuck in, and I took a few staggering steps. For a moment, I thought of running for it. Leaving this place forever, even seeing if P-21 could seal away or collapse it. And I would have, too…except for one thing. Just one.

The room was crying. The dozens of mouths now sang the melody that I'd been playing. Dozens of pained, ashamed ponies turned into something horrid…but still ponies. And I had to give them something…anything…that would help. Not peace from violence, but peace from this horror. I slowly stepped towards the wall. "I'm sorry," I murmured as I looked at those bright and pained eyes. "I don't know how to help you…"

"You have," a mare said quietly as the rest hummed the melody. "You have, so much. You reminded us of what we were…what we should be."

"Is there…can I change you back?" I asked, thinking it had to be impossible. From the way her lips turned in a sad smile, it was. "I'm sorry. I wish I could do something…give you something…"

"You can," a buck said softly. "In the storeroom next door…there are chemicals. Benzene. Ethanol and methanol. Hydrogen and oxygen talismans. Acetone. Toluene. Spill them…ignite them. Don't let us go back to…to what we were." The lips trembled and it whimpered softly. "We're so tired of screaming."

"Right," Rampage said with a nod. "I'm going to need your shotgun…and it's probably going to be ruined."

I passed it to her without hesitation. "I've had it less than a day," I muttered with a thin smile. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Eh, I'll burn up, but," she said as she looked at her warped hide. "Two apples, one stone. I'll be fine. Believe it or not, this isn't the

first time I've gotten all mutated up." I could believe it. And I couldn't help myself, I hugged her for helping me do this…snapping me out of it and helping these…these poor ponies.

"You've got two songs. Get clear before then. I don't think they'll stay lucid long," Rampage said softly as she patted my back. Then she turned to the room and said grandly, "Okay, everypony. Let's hear an encore!"

And the chorus began to sing, and it hurt. Whatever had made them like this…gave them that scream to sing…also made the melody pierce like nails. Even I hurt…but at least I didn't think that my insides were singing. Oh please, let them not be singing. As I trotted towards the door, I spotted something that had been hidden by the mat of metal flesh. It was the strange white crystal that had been inside the cut-open silver bullet. It wasn't very big…about the same size as my hor-- as a shotgun shell.

I peeked into the storage room. Glass bottles. Metal storage tanks. Lots of warnings about flammables and keeping the door shut at all times. Perfect. I used my magic to turn on the hydrogen and oxygen talismans, glad they were clearly labeled. There were also leaking drums, marked 'Hippocratic Research', that had once been filled with the rainbow crud. Just another reason to go there the second I was finished with the Rangers. Rampage grinned and said, "Get out of here. It's going to get toasty pretty quick!" And with that, she started knocking over some large glass jugs.

I paused at the door to the lab, picking up the white crystal and floating it beside me. "Goodbye," I said as the room started on the next stanza. Rampage was violating every safety rule posted on the walls as she kicked the ripped barrels into the cryogenics lab, taking great glee in the destruction. I had picked my way up the stairs by the third stanza. I looked back, but kept going as I headed for the exit. As I reached it, here was a muffled bang behind me, followed by the sound of a great breath being sucked in and then let out all at once. The pressure wave knocked me over, and a tongue of flame raced up the stairs behind me, spreading out overhead.

Fortunately, the fire didn't go much farther than that. I lay there for a moment, then slowly sat up, my PipBuck still playing the tune. I turned it off and stared at the flames pouring up the stairs.

A black, pony-shaped silhouette appeared amid the flames. Black plates of char and flesh moved with careful steps as she stood at the top, fire licking off her hide as the edges and tips of her armor

glowed a faint red. Only Rampage could bathe in fire.

The blackened flesh sloughed off in crunchy chunks with each step as she walked towards me. She clenched her eyes hard, and when they opened she looked at me and slowly grinned. She shook herself, scattering charred, greasy flakes like so many playing cards, then coughed a little ball of rolling smoke and spat black phlegm to one side. The raw pink flesh paled to white with her familiar red stripes showing through. “Ugh…hate fire,” she said, looking at her blackened steel hoofblades. “Takes forever to clean my armor.” I just smiled in amazement.

“Are they…” I asked as I looked behind her.

“If they’re not, then I don’t think there’s anything we can do for them.” I started to remove the hazardous materials suit, and she raised a hoof. “I’d wash before you take it off! You’re sort of dripping there, Blackjack.” Ugh…I felt and smelled like I was trapped in a well-used toilet…but I was bad enough off taintwise at the moment. I could wait a little longer…

“So,” I said as we walked out into the subway tunnels. “Just curious…where the hay did you get that armor?”

“This?” she asked with a little smile. “This is Hammersmith’s finest work; he makes all the quality weapons for the Reapers. Since you left my armor down in the tunnels, I had to go and get it.”

“And…you didn’t get messed up?” I asked as we started up the rusty escalator.

“If I did, I don’t remember it,” she replied calmly. “Down the elevator, then way up the stairs to the factory. Right where you dropped it next to Lacunae’s gatling gun,” she said with a smile. “One weird thing, though.”

“I’m not sure I can take any more weird…like, period. I have exceeded my weirdness quota for the rest of my life…” Not that that was very long anyway. She arched a brow, and I sighed. “Okay. Lay it on me. Talking walls? Flesh melting magic fields? I can take it.” I braced myself for another soul-crushing revelation or infuriatingly vague puzzle.

“It was being cleaned up.” I stopped and looked at her. “Like somepony had come along and was putting everything back, fixing all the stuff you blasted.” Then she looked a little more coolly at me. “And by the way, Blackjack…I’ve got to say I am a little put out that you had some sort of mega super destruction spell you were going to fire and I wasn’t in the way.”

I gave her a little smile…the most I could manage. “I was a little occupied, but I promise…the next time I fire a super taint-ridden weapon of mass destruction, I will make sure that you are in the line of fire.” I sighed as I thought about it, but honestly, my brain just couldn’t put it together. After dealing with that…choir… thing…what I’d felt beating inside my chest…hearing…I wanted to butt my head against the wall till I’d expunged the thoughts from my mind. Maybe I could get Triage to…no…no, I couldn’t do that. I’d just have to try and deal with them along with all of the other horrors of the Hoof.

* * *

For the first time in a long time, I was glad to see that it was raining. P-21 and Glory were arguing about leaving me down there. Lacunae looked politely disengaged from their squabble. Scotch was fiddling with Glory’s busted beam rifle. At the sight of Rampage and me, Glory started towards me, but I warded her off with an upraised hoof. “One sec…I’m coated in magical death juice.”

She looked like she wanted to hug me anyway. “Oh. Was it bad?” she asked as she chewed on her lip.

I glanced at Rampage and passed a knowing look to her. Glory didn’t need to know the details. “Well, we were underground so… yeah. Pretty unpleasant.” I took off the helmet after the downpour had washed most of the rainbow stuff away and then unsealed the suit. Her eyes widened even more as I let the rain start to wash off the filth. Not for the first time, I missed the wonders of civilization…like soap. “I found out something interesting, though.” I levitated my saddlebags and took out the black case. “This seems to be the source of most of my taint.” I popped it open and lifted the bullet free. “See this half? All full of pure taint.”

“But…but why? Is it some sort of chemical shell?” Glory asked. My PipBuck started ticking.

“It’s an annihilation shell, Glory. Putting poison inside would be like putting a BB gun on a tank,” P-21 said archly.

I spoke quickly to head off the argument. “It also has this inside.” And I held up the little white crystal. “You know gems…” I floated the glowing crystal to her.

“Well…” she turned it over. “It’s hexagonal…it might be quartz. It looks like it’s a talisman, but there’s no glyph for the spell inside.”

She held it up to P-21, but the blue buck just frowned and shrugged. She tossed it back to me and I caught it with my magic.

I sighed and lifted the silver bullet next to the glowing stone. "Well…whenever this thing blows, it soaks every inch of me in taint. Heck…you know how it surrounds me with that magic field? It probably holds in all that taint residue. Which means I exposed all of you when I fired it underground."

Scotch Tape waved her hoof. "Uh…okay. What the heck actually happened down there? Because every time you say 'underground'… my mane stands on end." And she was scared. I could see it. She might not remember going down there, but some part of her knew it was bad. P-21 frowned and looked away. I just sighed and smiled.

"Long story short…bad stuff happened. Really. Not fun. You didn't miss much," I said, but she hardly looked satisfied. Okay… something to deal with later. "Anyway…Trottenheimer made these bullets…why, I have NO idea. Apparently, it was right before the bombs fell. They cut one open down in the lab and sprayed everything with taint juice. So…not going to use it again. Bad bad bullets." And I smiled as I tapped the stone to the side of the bullet.

Then it exploded. Of course it exploded! I couldn't take a dump without it…okay, I could. But still, this was ridiculous! At least it wasn't a full-on blow-off-my-hooves explosion. Really, it was just a flash and pop that sent the silver bullet one way and the stone the other. Me, I was flat on my back in the middle listening to my PipBuck screech.

Wait? I stared at the rad readout as I watched the needle visibly rise! Lacunae groaned, her eyes closed with an expression of bliss and a blush on her cheeks. I was getting almost twenty rads a second; the amount was dropping fast, but…holy shit! "RadAway, gimme!" I shouted as I dug through my saddlebags. "Everypony, drink some if we have enough."

One dose of RadAway later, I was stabilized, though Glory insisted I have one extra. It was hard to argue; that stuff was delicious! I picked up the stone and saw a tiny scuff where I'd tapped it. I retrieved the bullet and saw that the polished silvery metal had a tiny indentation.

All that from a tap.

"How the hell does this bullet have a stone inside if they explode on contact?" I asked as I put the bullet back in its case. I didn't want to set the damned thing off just by touching one to the other!

"Perhaps the taint solution within acts as a neutral buffer? If they cannot come in contact with each other, they cannot react," offered Lacunae. It was the best suggestion I could think of. Still, though, I'd traded the mystery of the silver bullet for the mysteries of the metal, the stone, the taint, and the reason why the hell anypony would ever make a weapon like that! One that killed its wielder? I could see Folly on a tank or as some power armor gun, but it was a pistol! Had Trottenheimer been exceptionally poorly endowed or something?

'Thank you, Hoofington,' I thought as I finished washing myself. Then I paused. I looked at my legs. My hide had been white before, but now my legs were piss yellow and there were ugly purple bruises at the ends of my hooves. I saw a little growth poking out the side of my fetlock. Just a little teardrop-shaped thing an inch or so long and poking about a quarter of an inch out from my leg. Then I spotted another. And another.

Suddenly, I became aware of everypony staring at me. Only Glory was actually looking…but the rest had obviously just found other things to stare at while they paid attention to my tumors. I felt... ugly. Unclean…worse than just the mess I'd made of myself. I was suddenly aware of how slat-sided I'd become; I was still eating, but it seemed like all the food was going somewhere else. I felt like I was becoming something less than a pony and more like those poor creatures in the lab. I pulled my security barding into place and strapped it down over my braces, keeping my eyes low. Don't look at me. Please don't look at me…

I decided to hold onto the hazmat barding; it might come in useful later. You never knew when you'd have to descend into a taint-saturated hole of nightmares! Sweet Celestia, somepony shoot me if I ever did that again.

Well, at least I'd gotten one mystery solved…and four more added. Frustrating as that might have been, though, it took my mind off… *that.* Goddesses, how I hated this place! I honestly preferred running from Deus. That was a threat I understood: a great big cyberpony who wanted to rob me, rape me, and kill me. He was something to run away from or destroy, things I could do. Now, though--

I needed to keep going. I'd fall apart if I simply stopped and let everything catch up with me.

* * *

It wasn't that far from Horizon Labs to the Ironmare Naval Base; in prewar times, we probably could have made it in an hour. In prewar times, though, we wouldn't have been trying to evade patrols of Steel Rangers, mobs of Reapers, and the occasional manticore flying overhead. We finally reached the base, fortunately without being spotted; the place was laid out more or less as Rampage had indicated, and the half-crumpled building that looked like a cake dropped on its side was impossible to miss. Now we just had to get as close as possible to Elder Carrots before being discovered so that Steel Rain couldn't make us disappear. Then, hopefully, we'd be able to convince her to stop the war, and after that we'd be able to find something that would tell me where EC-1101 was supposed to go next.

... But really, what was the point? I was dying, and even if I found out where to go next, even if I stopped this war…I'd still be dying. I felt it. Everything inside me just felt wrong. This didn't feel like my body any more. This body felt old and tired and used up, an aching old bag of hurt. And no matter how fast I went, it would still be with me. This was one thing I couldn't leave behind.

I was going to die. But…if I was, then I wanted my life to mean something. Something to make up for all the ponies I'd hurt and killed. It wouldn't be enough. It would never be enough. Something to atone for the pain I'd caused all my friends. Something so that, when I died, I might have a chance at the everafter…or something better than what I thought I deserved. Finding EC-1101 and Horizons might not matter at all…but the alternative was to either give in and accept Sanguine's tempting offer, or give up and wait to die.

All in all, death by a Ranger's shell sounded better.

We were passing more atrocities. Rows of dead ponies pressed to a wall and then drawn through with lines of gunfire. Most of them didn't look like Reapers. They looked like dirty, desperate ponies caught in the middle of something that was chewing everypony up. The Rangers hadn't even bothered to loot the bodies. I looked the other way while P-21 went about that job. My shotgun had gotten cooked, so I was left with Vigilance and Taurus's rifle…and while caps were pretty much worthless to me, my friends would need them after I was gone.

We'd disguised Lacunae as well as we could; her black dress had

been lost, but we'd found some canvas we could use to hide her wings. Hopefully nopony would wonder why she was half again taller than Rampage! The Goddess was clearly ignoring us, given that there wasn't a single telepathic mutter about the indignity of her hiding her wings. I picked up telepathic mutters every now and then about 'that little mare' and what they were going to do when she arrived, though. Apparently, it was quite a debate between putting her in Unity, killing her, or using her. I tried to tune it out as best I could; I had enough problems myself.

And I wasn't the only one, as we crept along the main street of Ironmare Town. I'd spotted the red bars around the corner…and a group of blue non-hostiles. I waved the others to stop and carefully poked my head around the ruined wall. The blue bars were a small family making their way towards us from the east with a brahmin behind them. They looked desperate, their eyes alert. But they didn't have a magic E.F.S. that could see through walls, and the red bars...

"Well, lookie here, Crumpets. Reaper spies, if ever I saw some!" a mare said, her voice amplified by the speakers of her power armor and echoing down the side street she was trotting up.

"We're not spies!" the buck in the lead on the small band protested. "We're just trying to get home. We live in Toll. Please, we've been stuck out here for days!" The others began to shy back…all except for a unicorn mare who seemed quite amused by all this.

"They don't look like spies, Shrapnel," muttered the other Ranger mare in a doleful voice. "Are you certain…"

"Look, that just means that they're good spies!" Shrapnel laughed. "I know you're used to dealing with things differently in Trottingham, Crumpets, but this is the Hoof! Shoot first. Shoot last. Let the Goddesses sort 'em out!"

Well, fuck me if I was going to let that happen. "Hey!" I yelled as I tottered around the corner. "Yoooooohooo! Much better target here!"

"Blackjack, you idiot!" P-21 growled as he limped out after me.

"Great. More nutjobs." Shrapnel turned towards me. Grenade machinegun and missile launcher configuration. "Who are you supposed to be?" she said as she took a look at me. Three magic bullets to the head... I could drop her. I could end her life, even at this range.

So why was I hesitating? After all the shit I'd gone through today, why didn't I just end her there and then? She was scum threatening

a family…

You don't kill ponies to save ponies. Security saves ponies. And I was still Security.

I suppose that also meant that I was a damned idiot too.

"I'm Security," I said, thinking it should be obvious…but then…my barding was shot, I had braces taped to my limbs, and I was using a hunting rifle to threaten a mare with a missile launcher strapped to her side. "Really," I added.

"You're either crazy or stupid…" Shrapnel muttered.

"Crazy. Definitely," P-21 muttered.

"…but either way, you're fucking dead!" she shouted, and I sighed. Sorry, Fluttershy. I wanted to do better. I tried...

Then Crumpets trotted in front of her companion. "You? You're the Security I've heard so much about?" Unlike Shrapnel, Crumpets spoke with a strange, smooth accent. Her armor had slightly different decorations along its edges, and instead of heavy weapons she possessed a long rifle and what looked like a belt fed shotgun. "Jolly good to meet you, girl! Been following you ever since DJ mentioned you helping those Crusader children."

"Uh…" Shrapnel said exactly what I thought as Crumpets reached out and shook my hoof vigorously. "Hello! Crumpets, we're supposed to be shooting her!" I looked past to where the family was creeping out of sight into the ruins as more Rangers approached. I'd call that a victory.

"Shooting her?" she whirled on Shrapnel. "Are you daft? She's the heroine of Hoofington! She's fought things I can hardly imagine! Why, half of us agreed to come to your aid because of her! And you want to shoot her?"

"I'd rather you didn't." I bit my lip as I pointed at her belt fed shotgun…"Is that…that's not an Ironpony? Is it?"

She turned and looked at it. "Oh, no. It's an Archer 16, based off an early model of the IF-86…Useful against bloodwings, manticores, crawlers, and 'goyles. I don't think they made a non-power armor model, though. I think we have far more monsters about old Trottingham than you do here in the Hoof." That certainly made sense; Hoofington was so deadly that even the monsters had a hard time.

"And is that an IF-72 Longhorn?" Lacunae asked softly as she pointed at the rifle, prompting all of us to look at her. She shrank back. "I was simply curious…"

"Oh! Look, I'm pointing an IF-99 'I don't give a fuck!' at them. Now get with the program, Crumpets! Are you Trottingham pansies going to actually help us out or not? We have our orders and we need to take her out!" Shrapnel shouted.

"You think I'm going to kill Security?" Crumpets replied. She turned, and her weapons clicked. "You cowardly, dishonorable, contemptible, callow slattern; I would sooner shoot a despicable fiend such as yourself than ever dare train my bullets on a hero who has bled so much for so many others!"

"I…you…" I suddenly imagined exactly what Shrapnel was seeing: a whole lot of red surrounding her. "We have orders!"

"Easily remedied!" bellowed a familiar voice as he loomed up behind her. Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof picked Shrapnel up, armor and all, and pointed her to the south. "I am immediately assigning you to accompany us to the battlefield to help defend our order! I am pleased that you will fulfill this commission to the best of your ability!" The other Rangers behind him all had the Trottingham style of armor.

"Paladin Bombs!" I said with a grin; in return, his blue visor gave me a dangerous gleam that made me shiver. "I mean, Paladin Stronghoof! You made it through that fight!"

He threw Shrapnel casually behind him as he dropped back to all fours. "Indubitably! The Stronghoof endurance has been passed down the family line for generations! And I am quite glad that it was I who found you." He looked back over his shoulder at Shrapnel, steam blasting out of his nostrils. "As you can see, the star paladin has ordered you and your friends to be killed on sight."

I grimaced. "Damn. I was hoping you could introduce me to your elder." Why couldn't it ever be easy?

He sighed and shook his head. "Any who might aid you are being sent out to keep the line. I fear that, until you get to the elder, you won't find any friends aboard the *Celestia*."

That would be a problem. "How am I going to get to her, then, without Steel Rain juicing me?"

"I can think of only one way," he said in a low voice. "You must surrender yourself to Chief Acolyte Napalm Strike. He oversees our studies of various munitions and will be at the base in the old dry docks. Give yourself up to him and request to see the elder. While he shares some of Steel Rain's sentiments about technology, he is an honorable buck."

I didn't like this at all. Giving up…and I doubted that my friends would let me hand myself over alone. "You're sure?"

He nodded once. "And you must do so soon…Even with the Trottingham reinforcements, we are being sorely pushed on all fronts. I fear that the elder may do something drastic to end the war." He then looked at Lacunae. "Now, there is one last thing I must do…"

I felt a nervous prickle; he didn't seem like the type to kill her just for being an alicorn, but…

He approached Lacunae, my other friends moving aside. With a hiss, his helmet detached and he exposed his beautiful visage, his bright blue eyes seeming to cause sparkles to dance as he knelt and reached out to take her hoof between his. "Please…glorious lady… will you accept my humble apologies for the indignity that I performed upon you? To mar your beautiful throat with such an ugly device is a sin that weighs heavily upon my conscience! Never before have I seen such an expression of perfection, grace, dignity, or humility as yourself!"

Lacunae just blinked as she looked down into the shimmering blue eyes. "Oh my…what do I do? What do I do! The Goddess…I…we… This has never happened before!" she asked me desperately as she blushed furiously.

She was asking me for relationship advice? Glory, however, smiled as she covered her lips with her hoof and gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like, "Say yes."

Lacunae glanced at her, then back at the kneeling Stronghoof. "Ah. Um…yes?"

His eyes shimmered, and Lacunae looked quite delightfully stunned as he rose and thrust his power hoof into the air with a whistle from the pneumatic pistons. "Yes!" he roared, and I could almost have sworn that the sun peeked out behind him; how else could he be glowing like that? Then he took her in his hooves and said, "Thank you for your generous forgiveness, sweet lady. My treatment of you was unforgivable."

Lacunae blushed from head to hoof. I wondered what the Goddess thought of it.

"I noticed he's not apologizing to me…" P-21 muttered.

Suddenly, Stronghoof loomed over the blue buck. "You? You attempted to glue a live grenade onto my armor through sneakiness and deception!" P-21 went white as a sheet as he cowered away

from Stronghoof, looking as if he wanted to disappear into the ground. Then Stronghoof put his hoof on P-21's shoulder. "It also took phenomenal bravery on your part to try and do so to help your friend. You easily could have paid for that with your life. Not many would think enough of an alicorn to risk their lives for her. For your gallantry, I apologize to you as well."

P-21's mouth opened and then closed. Finally, he just nodded once. Really, what could you say after that?

Stronghoof straightened and put his helmet back in place. "Once, long ago, we served at the behest of Applejack, not to wage bloody war but to defend this land and its people. We've strayed from that noble origin and allowed ourselves to grow petty and covetous." Shrapnel gave a sour snort, though, with a half dozen others watching raptly, I couldn't see her trying something. But then Paladin Stronghoof turned to face her. "Yes, Shrapnel. There is more to being a Ranger than power armor and oaths to follow orders! Behind both there is an ideal, a calling to not simply be stronger than our enemies but better as well! A standard for others to look up to. Can you say that you hold to such a standard, Shrapnel?"

The mare just stared back and shrank a little as every eye settled on her. She stammered a moment, then fell silent. The huge buck nodded once and said gravely, "Without that idea, I fear that we are little better than a well-equipped gang. And it is past time for that point to be decided." He turned back towards me and my friends. "Good Luck. I shall hope for your success."

After that, the Rangers galloped south towards the sounds of gunfire. "Well, that was nice of him," Glory said pleasantly before smiling at Lacunae. "And he fancies you. Imagine that!" She frowned as she looked at the furiously blushing alicorn. "Are you all right?"

"It…won't stop," Lacunae muttered softly.

I smiled and shook my head. Steel Rangers hitting on alicorns. Monstrous screaming rooms singing hymns. What next? The filthy family emerged and slowly approached us. "Thanks, Security. I thought she was going to shoot us all." The buck rubbed his neck. "We've got to get out of here. Everything is nuts. Just nuts!"

Rampage trotted up to him. "Anything to report?"

"The Rangers hauled a bunch of giant bullets and stuff out of the water while we were collecting radigator eggs. Really huge bullets.

They're also moving lots of materiel on board from the shore. They've had power armor going in and out of the water for a while now," the buck reported. "Twenty more arrived from Trottingham this morning, and another thirty from all over. As you can see, they're saving their own. Bastards." He looked in the direction the paladin had gone. "And they're sending their best to die."

Rampage nodded. "Well, hopefully all this will be over soon. Bloody butcher's bill is gonna be terrible. Doubt there will even be any Fillies or Burners after this fight is over. Heck, might not be any Reapers. We lost Deus and Gorgon. Splitter bought it this morning. Frenzy, too. Nopony's seen Black Dog or Talon. That leaves Big Daddy, Brutus, me, and Psychoshy of the top ten."

"Something else, too," the buck said. "Ghouls have been more active than usual. Rocket Town's under attack."

"By who?" Rampage snorted. "Nopony can get within five miles of that place! Radiation's so bad it gives *me* a sunburn."

"Hellhounds, I've heard. Whole damn pack attacking the missile base. Not the space center, though. Not yet. Red Eye is making a mess of the VC all over the east. Zebras sniping at Society ponies in the south. It's crazy. Just crazy." He shuddered. "We'll get a report in, then get back to Toll. Hell, maybe move to Megamart or Riverside. Everywhere else is just insane right now."

"Or you could just leave the Hoof," P-21 pointed out dryly.

"Nopony leaves the Hoof," the dirty, haggard buck said fatalistically before continuing east.

Glory stared at them as they left before gaping at Rampage. "You mean they really were spies?!" I just smiled, shaking my head a little.

Rampage rolled her eyes. "Right now, anypony who isn't in power armor is a spy against the Rangers. You've only really known Stronghoof; the fact is, most Rangers don't give a shit about helping others. They think that they have a Goddesses-given right to take whatever tech they like. Every now and then, you might find a good Ranger. Your Stronghoofs or Steelhooveses--maybe it's a 'hoof' thing--but inevitably, they get eaten up while the rest hide in their bunkers and survive.

"Big Daddy told me about it once. They'd found a water talisman in a gutted stable. The professor extracted it and got it working. It was amazing. Clean water, enough for a settlement. But, of course, they couldn't decide what exactly to do with it. Keeper wanted to

sell it. Awesome wanted to install it in his own little kingdom. Dawn wanted to give the water away. The professor wanted to study it. But Carrots insisted that it be returned to her. Not to do anything with it. Simply because it was old tech. Anything made by Stable-Tec was the Rangers' by right. And when the others pressed the issue, she took it and stomped it to dust rather than let another use the M.W.T.'s tech. That is what the Rangers represent. Stronghoof might be what they could someday be, but he's a minority…and he knows it."

I sighed, looking to the north. I could only hope that there was something I could say or offer. "I'm more worried about them loading the ship with 'giant bullets'. Maybe they just want to stock up, but... " I'd only seen the *Celestia* from a distance, but I remembered the size of those guns.

* * *

We'd crept as close as I cared to creep. Every second that passed, I kept remembering two little things: 'two mile accuracy' and '120mm'. That was the size of my hoof. Peeking through my scope, I saw Rangers keeping lookout for us. All their firepower aside, I just imagined Steel Rain's guns turning any one of us, or all of us, into a fine, lingering red mist. The Rangers' perimeter looked pretty well laid out; I couldn't see any way to get through it or over it, and I wasn't even going to try to find a way under it.

But that was what an alicorn was for: cheating.

We were a mile from the crumpled headquarters building, and Lacunae had a nice load of radiation boosting her. She peered through my rifle's scope at the collapsed pile of rubble; there was at least one Ranger on the roof and another one at the base, but none in the middle.

There were constant sounds of gunfire behind us; the Reapers were pushing in from all sides. Power armor didn't matter much against ten to one odds, and with every Ranger they killed, they moved closer to taking the base. Normally, that wouldn't bother me…but now that I'd met Stronghoof and Crumpets, I knew that the good ones were the ones who would die first.

Lacunae found a spot she hoped she could get us in from, and we gathered together. In a purple flash, we disappeared and reappeared on a narrow shelf next to a door. Fortunately, it was strong enough

to support us. My PipBuck started a slow clicking. One rad per second. No problem now, but if we lingered here for too long…

Overhead there was a dull rumble of thunder, and I narrowed my eye, glaring up at the rain. Of course…it had to start really pouring now…

The door was locked, but P-21 worked his own magic on the lock and we were in. Papers were strewn all across the floor, and the walls were covered in cracks and gaping rents. Many of the walls had an ominous lean to them, not quite enough to come crashing down but definitely enough to make me worry. Still, I was encouraged by the garbage covering the floor; it meant that the Rangers didn't come through this section.

"Okay, magical mystical PipBuck," I said as I checked my navigation. "This is a great big blasted building and I don't have all day. Where do I need to go?" There, on my navigation, was a tiny little chevron to the south. Well…at least I had a direction. Now I just had to figure out how to get to it.

I don't know what I'd expected in a Hoofington 'command center', but it wasn't all these offices. We passed one after the next, most collapsed or well looted. Just because the Rangers didn't come through here didn't mean somepony else hadn't come a century before them. P-21 found the obligatory random assortment of bottlecaps, bullets, clipboards, and coffee mugs as we picked through the offices. My sword picked off the radroaches that came scurrying out with suicidal glee.

Looked like we'd have to go down…and that was never a good direction in Hoofington.

There weren't any intact stairs, but there was an elevator shaft. Lacunae hovered in the middle and lowered us all down to the next level. More offices, these a bit more intact. More radroaches, too. I let Rampage take care of these; the relish she tore into them with was still a bit disconcerting, but at least she was enjoying herself.

"Blackjack, did I kill somepony?" Scotch's question stopped all of us cold. I saw her off to the side, staring at a heap of bones.

"Why…why would you ask that?" Glory said in a voice loaded with forced sweetness.

"I just…I keep feeling like something really bad happened…and I don't know what." She looked up at us with her brilliant green eyes as she chewed on her lip. "I…I wonder if I did something bad or… or something."

She was bringing this up now? I sighed. Of course she was. Because I made a mistake. And because it bothered her. And because I was the only one who would tell her...

P-21 just stared away. Lacunae simply looked sad, Rampage angry, and Glory scared. I sighed and took a seat. “Come here, Scotch.” I wondered if this was how Mom felt. “The part of your life you can’t remember…we were in the tunnels. We came across a monster… really big and scary. And for a time afterwards, you tried to deal with it. But…” I glanced at P-21, but he simply focused on his bum leg. “You did kill somepony…trying to save my life. But it bothered you a bunch. You said you wished you didn’t remember any of it. So I asked Triage to modify your memories. Take them away…”

“You…” Scotch backed away from me. “You…you’ve messed with my mind?”

“I did,” I said softly. “It was my call…mine alone. The others were against it,” I lied, glancing at Glory’s shamed face. “I wanted to give you peace…keep you safe.”

“By messing with my mind?” she yelled, glaring at me. “Were you planning on taking away that battle just now too? Or how about destroying my home? How about killing everypony I ever knew!” she shouted in rage. “How about Mom dying! Why didn’t you take that memory away, Blackjack?!”

Well... this was going swimmingly... “I only wanted to help you,” I said softly, feeling tired.

“Help me? You’ve been fucking with my mind! I hate you! You came back to 99 and destroyed my entire life! I hate you!” she screamed at me and then turned, galloping away and sobbing.

“Scotch!” Glory shouted. I glanced at P-21, but he just sat there like an angry blue lump.

“I’ll go help her,” Rampage said as she rose to her hooves. Maybe it was the phrase, maybe it was the tone... but as I stared at the striped pony starting to walk after Scotch, my mane prickled.

“No,” I said as I stood too. “Glory, go bring her back. Rampage, you’re staying with us.”

The armored pony tilted her head towards me and smiled gently. So very kindly. “Only I can give her the help she truly needs. I’ll take the hurting away, forever.” And as I watched, that soft, kindly smile stretched wider and wider as her whole body slowly tensed like a wound spring.

“Glory, go,” I said as I lifted the sword and Vigilance and looked

into a murderess' eyes. Suddenly, Rampage turned and charged. Two hundred pounds of steel-encased fury smashed into me like a wrecking ball and knocked me off my hooves. Lacunae lifted Rampage into the air, but she twisted and thrashed, slamming her hooves against the ceiling and powering down at Lacunae. Hoofclaws dug deep into the alicorn's purple side, tearing six bloody furrows in her flank.

I rammed Rampage with as much power as my braced legs could muster. My magic pressed the pistol under her chin and fired, but she jerked away at the last moment; all I did was blow off half her muzzle. Glowing arrows flashed from Lacunae, slamming through Rampage's thick plating and into her sides.

The holes closed before my eyes as her grin twisted back into place. She pounced atop me, her hoofclaws tangling with my leg braces as I was knocked onto my back. I stamped Vigilance to her belly and fired again…and again…"Let me give you peace, too. You hurt so damn much…but I'll help you! I'll help you like you helped Scotch!" she said as she twisted her hoofclaws back and forth. Working the tips into my flesh. My focus broke, and I dropped my weapons as I felt her rear claws start to dig into my rear legs and belly.

Then my sword went through her eye, and I looked up to see the handle gripped by P-21. He shoved it deep and twisted hard, the tip digging into her brain and making her spasm and jerk. Slowly, she turned to stare up at him. "You're hurting too…" she slurred, then slowly pushed herself towards him, more and more of the blade slicing through her head.

Wasn't this whole thing supposed to be some kind of stealth mission? Hadn't that been part of the plan?! I'm pretty sure that getting hated by a filly and attacked by a friend didn't belong in a stealth mission!

Then he twisted the blade hard and she screamed, blood spurting over his face. Every time she resumed moving, he twisted it back and ripped a new hole. Again and again he wrenched the blade inside her skull. Finally, she went limp atop me. There was a pause, silent but for P-21's panting. Then, "Can you please…get this…fucking…thing out of my eye?" Rampage slurred thickly. He looked at me, and I nodded. If she wasn't talking about hurting and peace, it was probably okay.

He pulled it free, and she shuddered as the hole he'd augured

healed. She kept shaking slightly as she pulled herself off me, sniffing. “I’m not crying, okay? I just had a sword in my eye. It hurts.” She looked at Lacunae and me and grit her teeth. “Fuck… not again. Is Scotch okay?”

“Scotch Tape is okay,” I replied. “Pissed with me…but she didn’t see that.” Lacunae was using her cheating alicorn powers to slowly regenerate while she pointed her horn to the cuts in my limbs to heal them.

P-21 stared at me for several long seconds like there was something he was fighting with. Then he turned his head and spat the weapon away. His eyes were hard and pitiless as he stared at Rampage. Almost frantically, he started to wipe the blood away, his eyes digging in as he glared at the mare and ground his teeth.

“I should go. I shouldn’t have come back. I was…I was just so happy to be with you again…” she shook her head. “I felt like…like I was somepony more than a killer.”

“Well, that’s what you are,” P-21 snapped crossly as he rose to his hooves. “If you were in 99, you would have been best friends with Daisy. I bet you would have hit the breeding queue every second you could.”

“P-21!” I yelled, making him round on me. Not him too! What was with everypony? All my friends were going crazy!

His eyes narrowed as he hissed, “And you! Why don’t you just accept facts? It’s over, Blackjack. You’re dying. She’s crazy. Scotch is helpless. Glory is hopeless. The sanest damn one of us is the damned alicorn! Rampage wants to go? She should go! We should all go! Do you really think we’re going to hang on together once you die? Carry on your great quest? It’s time to face the fact that we’re done. You’re going to die and…and…” He clenched his head and squeezed his eyes closed tightly.

I stretched out a hoof toward him as tears crept out from between his eyelids. “It’s okay, P-21.”

“No, it’s not okay, Blackjack!” he said as he shook his head. “We just keep fighting and we just keep losing. Rampage can’t control herself any more than when she killed Thorn. You can’t keep Scotch safe and happy. Glory just watches you falling apart more and more every hour. And nopony is willing to admit it that this…this… stupid little dysfunctional band of emotional retards is doomed! I’m sick of it!” he said as he hissed his breath through his teeth and looked at me miserably. “Why can’t we just go home? It’s better

there. I didn't have to see…everything in the Goddesses-damned Wasteland hurting you."

I carefully put my hoof on his shoulder. He recoiled a bit, then slowly turned and curled against it. "My whole life…" I said, "I was nothing. A failure of a daughter and a joke of a security mare. I was clueless…unwilling to admit just how fucked up my home was. Then I came out here with you and…suddenly I'm doing something with some meaning. Saving ponies…fighting monsters…even trying to unravel this stupid quest thing." I hugged him lightly. "I know I'm going to die. We all do, eventually. So before I go, I want to do something that matters. I want to give this damned city what it deserves and help as many ponies as I can."

He sniffed as he looked at me, and I touched his cheek softly. "A person a lot better than I am once told me how to make up for getting Scoodle killed. He said that you do everything you can to make up for it. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better. And you hope that, when it's all over, the good you do will even start to come close to paying for your mistakes. And I've made mistakes, P-21, and they've hurt ponies who never deserved it. Scoodle. Those foals. Clover. Those zebras. 99. I know that I can never fully pay the price for those mistakes. Not ever. And if I hurt…well, it's just a little tipping of the scales to make things square. That's why I have to do this. Because if I give up and go off to die comfortably without trying to do better, then their deaths really were pointless murder."

"It's so…stupid," he sniffed, shaking his head.

"Hey. It's my plan. Of course it's stupid. I'm not a smart pony, remember?" So much for my plans. I needed a few backup plans. Preferably made by somepony other than me.

He gave the ghost of a smile. "Yeah. But you're a good one." He rubbed his eyes and sniffed. "Sorry, Rampage."

She looked at him evenly and shrugged. "Eh. Don't worry about it. Like I said: doing all this stuff with you guys makes me feel like I'm doing something important for the first time in my life." She pointed a hoof at me and added with a sharp grin, "Even if you get in the weirdest frigging situations, Blackjack! Seriously…what is it with you and rooms that want to eat you?" And with me constantly having to shoot her in the head, I wanted to add, but with her blood still smeared on my sword, I thought better of it.

* * *

Once we were regrouped and restored, we continued downwards. Scotch Tape wasn't speaking to me; I couldn't blame her for that. My attempt to try and protect her had gone down in flames. Glory kept giving me the 'she'll get over it' look, but she didn't know just how long a mare in 99 could hold a grudge. I mean, I was still ticked off at Pastels for stealing my crayon. Well…okay, not really, but we had gotten really good at not letting old slights be forgotten. Still, I had to think of some way to make it up to Scotch. Some way that wasn't going to blow up in my face in a few more days.

The deeper we went into the command center, the more apprehensive I became. We'd passed an armory looted within an inch of its life. The only things that hadn't been cleaned out were two large security storage boxes set in the walls, their surfaces scored from where somepony had tried to cut them out of the wall entirely. There was a stock of IF specialty ammunition; I was particularly interested in the 12mm rounds with bright blue tips and loaded several of Vigilance's magazines with the spark rounds. It might have been a pistol, but I'd do my best to give whatever Rangers I came across a break. I also loaded a magazine with explosive rounds and another with armor piecing, though, just in case.

Now we were underground, and still the PipBuck navigation tag was below us. How it knew what it was after, I couldn't imagine, and, honestly, my legs ached so much that I didn't care. My chest hurt and my lungs burned. When nopony else was looking, I pulled aside my patch and let Glory check my eye socket. She looked grim, replaced the patch, and then kissed my forehead and told me not to worry about it. I tried my best.

Now we were in the more intact areas of the base, and I recognized where we were: this section was almost an exact copy of Miramare. It was a little bigger and had some more extensive damage, but I knew that below us and ahead, was the base operations center. Like Miramare, only the close balefire blast and radiation had killed the base occupants. We could have split up to do things more efficiently, but after the lab I was done with splitting us up while we were underground. We reached the operations room and found it dead cold. The door's motors weren't locked or anything; there just wasn't any power. Glory and Scotch held an impromptu

conference, and we set out to find the circuit breaker and power supply.

Ugh…why couldn't this be any easier?

Since it was more or less on the way, we stopped by security. I picked up a slightly dusty assault rifle; an IF-64 Bloomberg, if I recalled. Still, I finally had something to do with all those light rifle rounds! There were even extended magazines! When we moved on to the medical room, I took an opportunity to oil and service the weapon as well as I could. I caught Scotch's eye for a second before she looked away, lips pressed together, determined to be pissed at me.

After picking out every last drug, we made our way to the maintenance bay and then finally to the power supply. While P-21 filled his saddlebags with goodies, Glory and Scotch Tape pored over several gigantic switches set in a wall next to three massive cables coming out of the ground. I peeked down through the grate on the shaft they descended into, but, even with my mutated vision, I couldn't see the bottom. Scotch finally took out a rubberized cloth, stuck it in her mouth, and grabbed one switch. It clicked into place with a loud electric buzz. Then the second switch and with it another buzz. Then a third switch and noise. The lights flickered to life overhead.

Hoofington Rises.

It was painted on the wall in bright red letters. The author lay in a pile of bones beside the message, paint can between its forehooves. I couldn't tell if it was two or two hundred years old. It still made my mane crawl. "Come on. I'm getting all kinds of weird vibes," I said as we walked back to the operations door. "Just in and then out. I want to get out of here."

"Me too. This place is creepy," Scotch said, then glanced at me as if questioning if this was due to the overwhelming creeposity of the place or my brain manipulation.

We trotted back to the door to the operations center, now powered but locked, and P-21 started banging away at the computer. Meanwhile, our PipBucks were ticking from the slow, steady radiation. Scotch Tape pulled out a spanner and in less than a minute had a panel next to the door out. "Why couldn't Daddy have been a unicorn?" she muttered before sticking her hoof in the space and fishing around. I looked at the flustered P-21 as he tried for the password even faster, in a de facto race with his daughter.

There was a spark of wires coincident with the beep of the computer, and both declared simultaneously ‘Done!’ before glaring at one another. I smiled, closing my eye and shaking my head as I stepped to the door.

I opened it just in time to see a crackling green fireball being flung right at us!

Fortunately Lacunae had been paying attention, and she teleported in front of us to block it; the blast of magical fire still washed us all in crackling radiation, but only the alicorn bore the brunt of it. I should have known this’d been going too smoothly! Red bars were lightning up right and left, and a choir of undead ponies howled in mindless hunger. Behind them reared a unicorn glowing with a harsh green glare and firing off balls of radioactive fire at us. The rest of the ghouls, now racing towards us on broken, jagged hooves, still had combat armor on.

“Nothing is good under Hoofington! Nothing!” I shouted as I stepped beside Lacunae, Glory taking position on the other side of the purple alicorn. My rads were climbing rapidly, so I shouted for everypony to take a Rad-X and chewed down on a tablet myself. Time to put the assault rifle to the test. I blasted automatic bursts at the first of the undead ponies that charged, the alternating armor piercing and explosive rounds chewing great gooey rents in them. Glory laid down a strafing barrage of green beams; it looked like she’d gotten the conversion finished. Lacunae shielded us from the rain of fire, her own magic bolstered by the radiation washing over her. Too bad the rest of my friends weren’t so well fortified.

There were too many coming too fast. I didn’t have time to look as I heard the clattering of hoofclaws in the hall behind me. Rampage leapt onto Lacunae’s back and sprang over the alicorn as a ball of flame burst against her shield. Trailing burning tatters, the unimpeded pony smashed into one of the armored ghouls with such force that his body nearly exploded in a pulpy mess. Rolling smoothly, she laughed gleefully as she latched her hoofclaws into one charging Glory and swung him away.

“Invaders!” roared the undead unicorn. “Die, you striped bastards! You won’t take us without a fight!” The ghoul’s voice barely reached me over the sounds of battle.

I could have used some help myself. The assault rifle barked spray after spray of fire, and I jumped into S.A.T.S. as often as possible; if I didn’t destroy the head they just regenerated the damage. Three

charged me at once, and I braced myself for some more pain. Then Persuasion thumped and the blast knocked the three flying. I spotted a blue pony in the corner, barely visible as he loaded another.

Even Scotch joined in the battle, lying on her stomach as she fired at any ghoul that got too close to Lacunae. The glowing ghoul unicorn halted lobbing exploding balls and turned to pouring out a stream of radioactive flame. I hissed as it scorched my legs and face from a near hit.

"You shall never make me abandon my post!" the unicorn screamed as we fanned out. It was hard to say which would get me first, the fire or the radiation. "Burn, stripes! Burn in Luna's righteous fury!" Radioactive fire sprayed from her horn like a sprinkler in all directions, and I dove under a desk as I lined up a shot. My bullets flickered and melted away as they got close to the ghoul, unable to penetrate the layer of radioactive flame around it.

Oh, for fuck's sake…

I focused hard, hoping that maybe I'd mutated up enough that all this radiation was doing me some good too. S.A.T.S. and four magic bullets, go! My glowing bolts shot across the room, guided by the precision spell to impact against the ghoul's skull. The flames died a little as each luminescent round smashed home; the quartet sent it reeling, its heat diminishing. A volley of magical arrows, green beams, and a grenade blew the rest of the ghoul apart.

I was relieved to find that the radiation in the room was dropping…but not to zero. "I need some RadAway, bad…" We probably all did. Glory broke out one for each of us save Lacunae. The alicorn said nothing, but I thought I caught a look of 'poor mortal creatures' in her eyes.

With my rads bouncing in the yellow, I approached the unicorn ghoul's corpse. The Dealer stood by and sighed, placing a queen of hearts on her still-glowing side. The uniform she had worn had burned away, leaving bits of metal fused with her hide. I spotted one still-glowing chunk. Gen. Shimmerstar. A little square appeared around the name tag in my vision and dancing lines of data scrolled rapidly before terminating with:

EC-1101 Status update> General Shimmerstar: Deceased. Denied.

Okay. That cleared that up. I spotted the terminal in the corner and clattered over towards it. "Okay…so where do you want to go now?" I asked as I tapped the terminal keys... pretty much at

random. I'd need P-21 to…whoa. The screen immediately flashed to life and began to scroll with numbers that made no sense to me.

EC-1101 Routing information> Fluttershy Medical Center, Hoofington.

"I've already been there!" I groaned and smacked my PipBuck. "Stupid freaky magic tech!"

"Blackjack, can we get out of the deadly radiation now?" P-21 drawled as he looked around. The room was still damned hot, and I nodded. "Lacunae, can you teleport us back to where we came in?"

"With this much power…" there was a purple flash, and disorientation made my head spin. "Certainly." Ooooh…somepony gets cheeky when she's high on radiation. We were back on the floor with all the offices, and the radiation meter dropped to a comfortable slow click every few seconds. Everypony--but Lacunae, again--looked sick, though, even myself. "We have any more RadAway?" I asked Glory.

"One pouch," she said with a small frown.

I sighed and nodded my head over to where Scotch was being sick. "Give it to Scotch."

Glory nodded and trotted over to her. I'd accomplished…well… something. Fluttershy Medical shouldn't be a problem…oh…don't start thinking that, Blackjack! Still, I couldn't think a finer place in Equestria to suck out all the radiation swirling around inside me. Once Lacunae picked the location out of my memories, we could teleport straight there; after all, there was plenty of radiation around here for her to soak up. If the worst came to the worst, she could tap that crystal and silver bullet together a few times and hopefully not blow up.

Now for the harder step: getting to Elder Crunchy Carrots and negotiating an end to this. And for that, I needed a plan. Giving myself up to this acolyte might get me in. Or it might get me killed. More importantly, it might get my friends killed…

Crap, I couldn't just hand myself over and make it up on the fly. I had to think…think of something. I looked at Glory as she tried to convince Scotch to drink the RadAway. She made me smile as she explained the effects of radiation poisoning, and that smile only continued as my eyes trailed along her flank. Her sweet, sweet…

There was a flickering bulb going off in my brain. Shit…would that work?

I trotted towards Scotch Tape. "Hey," I said as she fidgeted with

the pouch.
"I hate this stuff. It tastes like butt and it makes me pee rainbows," she muttered sullenly. "Radiation never hurt…" I looked at the olive filly with a small smile, arched a brow, and pulled back my left sleeve to show her the mottled, growth-laden surface. It looked like one solid bruise, yellow with ugly greenish-red blotches beneath the skin. Glory looked alarmed, but I shook my head. Now was no time to play doctor. Scotch took the hint and started drinking the orange medicine with a sour look.
"Sorry about messing with your head," I said as I sat down beside her. "I just wanted you happy. Guess I fucked that up, huh?" Glory rolled her eyes as she trotted away, muttering something about language.
"You'd be happy if somepony messed with your head?" Scotch Tape asked.
"Are you kidding? I'd be bouncing on my hooves happy," I lied. I couldn't tell if she believed me or not as she looked down at the pouch of medicine. "I need you to do something for me, Scotch. And it's something nopony else can do."
"You're going to ask me to stay behind so that I can stay safe. Again," she grumbled. "Why does everypony insist on treating me like a baby? I can disassemble a sewage pump in fifteen minutes with two wrenches and a hammer…" Then she sighed. "I'm gonna end up with a toilet for a cutie mark, ain't I?"
"Be nice to find a working one, that's for sure," I teased softly, mussing her short blue mane. "And I am going to ask you to stay behind. But not because I want to keep you safe. I have to go meet with the Rangers. If everything works out…well…if it works out, then great. But if it doesn't…the only pony who can end this war will be you. Understand?"
I told her my plan, and she found a way to make it work... well, up to a point. "Still, this is crazy, Blackjack. What if they just shoot you?"
"Then they're smarter ponies than me," I replied with a smile and kissed her brow. "You know we care about you, right?"
She flushed a little. "Yeah. Just…don't get dead, Blackjack. There ain't many 99 ponies left."
"There's P-21," I replied.
"He don't count. He hates me," she muttered.
I sighed. "He doesn't hate you…" At least, he better not! "He just

has a hard time with things that remind him of 99. It wasn't easy for him there."

"I know. Colts are weird…" she said, rolling her eyes.

"Tell me about it," I said with a smile. Then I sighed again. "I also need you to hold on to something for me, okay? This is an IF-33 with expanded magazine. It was my mom's. If something should happen, I don't want the Rangers to have it. Just... be careful when you fire it. It's got a whole lot more kick that that dinky nine mil Parasprite you shoot."

She took it with the care of someone who respects a machine that can hurt you. I appreciated that. "There's one last thing I need you to do. You're not going to like it, but you're the only pony who can pull it off." She looked intrigued as I took a breath and said, "I need you to act scared so Glory will stay behind." I couldn't bear to see her in another situation like the one at Flash Industries.

For a moment, she looked confused and then annoyed, but finally she seemed to understand and gave a little smile and a roll of her eyes. "Great. More time with the most boring pony in the Wasteland."

I thumped her softly on her head. "Maybe, but she's my marefriend, so be nice." Scotch Tape stuck her tongue out at me. "And finish your medicine. Remember, it's not a rainbow if you don't hit all six colors."

She smiled crookedly as she wrinkled her nose. "Ew…gross, Blackjack…and everypony thinks *I'm* the filly."

I chuckled as I clattered back towards the others. You and P-21 both, kid. "Okay. We actually have a plan B. So…P-21 and Rampage are with me again…Glory, Lacunae, and Scotch are here." And cue in three…two…

"Absolutely not. I'm coming with you," Glory said firmly, frowning.

"You have to stay here. Scotch is still freaked out, and if Rangers come up here, I need you to help fight them off," I said as I glanced over my shoulder at Scotch. She mouthed my words with impudent annoyance before she caught my glare and suddenly gave Glory a big-eyed look that just screamed 'look at me, I'm helpless!'. And if Steel Rain got his hooves on Glory, I'd give him EC-1101 and tell the elder that Big Daddy planned to turn her into a hat if I had to.

Glory sure didn't like it, but I knew that she had hoofcuffs; I'd use them if I had to. "So…not just a plan A, but a plan B?" P-21 asked with a thin smile.

"And a plan C... " I replied. "Yup…I am just brimming with the whole…plans…thing." Of course, knowing me and how my plans worked out…yeah. "Let's get started before I have to worry about a plan D."

* * *

The dry docks were basically four giant long buildings covered in rust and salt. Huge cranes hung on gantries overhead, silently waiting to resume work on ships that would never be completed. All of the locks had failed, filling the rooms with the reek of brackish water. The place had power and tools, though, and that, I supposed, was all that mattered. Most of the noise was coming from one corner of the cavernous space. We had everything ready…or at least as ready as it would ever get. My PipBuck was covered with duct tape that was ostensibly, and to a degree actually, holding the brace on that leg on. Everything else had been left behind with the other three.

"Glory's starting to feel left out. She misses out on the hole of terror and now on the suicidal strut," Rampage said as I limped along beside her. If things went stupid, she was our plan D. Water poured through holes in the roof in cascading columns as we stepped over heaps of rusted chain and bolts. A huge faded mural of Applejack in a sailor's outfit saluted us all over the motto 'Victory through blood, sweat, and tears'.

"Yeah, but she gets to have sex with me, so she can't complain," I retorted. I didn't want to spook them and start off the shooty. I was so nervous going in unarmed... I didn't even have a fancy sword!

"You're that good?" Rampage asked with a smirk.

"No, but she is," I replied.

"Well then, maybe I should have sex with her and find out for myself when you're gone," Rampage said, her smirk transforming into a naughty grin.

I rolled my eyes and snorted. "Be my guest. She loves it when you nibble on--"

"Could we please cut out the lesbian sexcapade chitchat while walking towards an enemy that wants to kill us?" P-21 said tersely, his already bristly mane frizzing even more. "I don't even know why I'm here."

"You're here for when this chief acolyte commits his sudden and

inevitable betrayal," I replied. His name was 'Napalm Strike'; it hardly screamed 'trustworthy' to me.

"Next question. What is the plan if the elder says 'thank you for your concern; now I'm going to shoot you anyway'? Because that's the step I'm missing," he said sourly.

"I shoot her in the face and we run for our lives and hope Lacunae can swoop in and port us to safety. Then we shut down the Rangers," I said firmly.

"You're siding with the Reapers?" Rampage asked with pleased surprise.

I snorted. "I'm siding with whoever has less stupid and kills fewer innocent ponies. Right now, Steel Rain trumps Psychoshy in both departments."

We stepped into view of ten or so unicorns handling all kinds of strange techy equipment while fixing up suits of power armor. They all froze at the sight of us. "Hi. I'm Security. I'm looking for Napalm Strike?" For several seconds, they just looked at each other and us; they were clearly not ponies who expected three dangerous, wanted strangers to trot up to them. I rose and put my hooves in the air. "We're giving up?"

A power-armored pony pointed a gatling gun at us, and I readied myself for sharp and painful death. Then an older-looking buck in red robes trotted towards me looking quite put out. "I'm Chief Acolyte Strike. What are you doing here? How did you get inside our perimeter?" He looked at Rampage with alarm. "You're that Reaper! The immortal one!"

"You survive being put through a wood chipper, and suddenly you're famous," Rampage said with a chuckle as she shook some rusty salt water off her hoof. "I'm just glad they recognized me without the armor."

"We're here to speak to your leader about halting this war," I said, and the flat look he gave me did not bode well. "I'm prepared to give her the location of my stable in exchange for hearing me out." It was full of poison gas and dead bodies, but the words got the reaction I wanted. He immediately looked intrigued.

"In my opinion, you're too late. We're about to crush this war once and for all. But if you insist…I suppose I can take your request to her." He nodded to the acolytes. "Search them."

I did my best to hide my disappointment when they found the bobby pins under P-21's tail…and in his mane. And mouth. They

gave me the same treatment, even taking off my eyepatch to make sure I didn't have a grenade or something hidden in there. Really, what were they expecting? Given that my busted braces were taped to my legs, they couldn't exactly check them. I really doubted they wanted to. Nopony wanted to look at swollen nasty pony flesh.

After that, the armored Ranger fell in behind us while Chief Acolyte Strike trotted in front. I hoped that the Ranger was a real good shot if she decided to fire. We trotted out of the dry docks and towards the pier the *Celestia* was tied up to. Once, she'd clearly been a magnificent ship, and even after two centuries she possessed a strength and grandeur that I found impressive. Three turrets, two in the front and one towards the rear, pointed their barrels towards the city. And then…I gaped as I saw one of the rear turret's cannon barrels slowly elevate.

"You got it to work?" Rampage gaped in alarm. "You've been working on this rustbucket for years!"

"Indeed, and it's beginning to pay off. We fixed Turret Three months ago. Of course, the elder resisted our many requests to fire it. There was a lack of proper ordnance, for one thing."

"No bullets?" I asked in surprise.

"No shells," he corrected, and I suspected that the orange acolyte would have been great buddies with Textbook. "The *Celestia* had been docked for a major refit at the time of the attack, and all her shells had been removed. Sadly, their bunker is buried under tons of debris, too much to be practically cleared. So, while we possessed ample stocks of powder, we had no shells. Until recently, that is." He pointed to a crane that was lifting something out of the water. A dripping net with a suit of power armor hanging onto it. "Fortunately, the *Luna*'s ordnance was intact. Marvelous engineering."

I saw that the armor had been modified with numerous air tanks. "Clever."

"Technology is to be used, not merely collected. The elder is growing to appreciate that fact," he said matter-of-factly.

"Except using it for war gets it blown up," I replied, earning a sour look from the sour chief acolyte. "I'm just saying."

"And the elder would agree with you as well. But when we are attacked, we must respond. The codex commands it," he said as he walked out onto the wet pier. The rain was still pouring, and it was quickly getting dark.

"Well, that and common sense," I replied. "But somehow, I doubt all the scavengers I saw with minigun bullets in them were attacking power armor." He frowned sharply at me but said no more as we trotted along the dock. Then I noted with surprise two other ships. One was far less grand: a rust-red ship half the size of the *Celestia*. It was flying a flag showing the Steel Ranger emblem, but with three apples instead of gears. Between it and the *Celestia* was... the *Seahorse*.

"What is Thrush doing here?" I exclaimed in surprise.

He chuckled dryly. "Oh, so you know that pirate? No surprise. She's guilty of numerous counts of technology smuggling and other assorted crimes." He pointed a hoof at the far ship. "When the… sigh…HMS *Applejack* was en route from Manehattan, they encountered the *Seahorse*, intercepted her, and towed her back here. Once we've wrapped things up, we'll strip out the engine. The rest is garbage."

"And what happened to the captain and her crew?" Things were rapidly veering towards Plan: 'Blackjack does something incredibly stupid and violent'.

"They're in custody. They should have been thrown to the mercy of the sea, but the Trottingham Rangers are notoriously softhearted and soft-headed. I suppose the elder will let the crew go and shoot the captain."

"Try not to sound so disappointed," P-21 muttered. "That reply just saved you the trouble of having Blackjack tear this place apart. She gets destructive when her friends get hurt."

"Stupid, P-21. I get stupid when my friends get hurt," I corrected. I received an uneasy look from the chief acolyte.

He looked decidedly out of his comfort zone as we walked up the gangplank and onto the *Celestia*. I was surprised by the number of Rangers who weren't trotting around in power armor. I guess I'd gotten the idea that if you didn't have power armor you weren't a Steel Ranger, but most of these ponies didn't wear any. They were moving boxes and containers of supplies aboard the ship. It made sense; if the Reapers swarmed the base, they'd be sitting ducks on the pier.

We were walked past the number three turret. Up close, you couldn't miss the rusty streaks; magically protected or not, saltwater was hell on steel. Even I knew that. It looked like only the middle cannon was moving, and the gun elevated agonizingly slowly as the

turret slowly ground around. Ponies were slopping grease around the edge with mouthheld mops while unicorns floated grease guns into the crevices. Clearly, battleships ran on grease.

"Down," he directed as we crossed a pegasus landing pad at the rear and clattered down some narrow stairs. I had to wonder if Rangers could even wear power armor in these tight confines! After that, we went down more stairs…. and more stairs…and incidentally did I mention I didn't like stairs? My braced legs slipped and I went rolling down to the bottom. "Are you sure you're Security?" Napalm Strike asked me bluntly.

"Catch me on a day when I'm not walking on screwed-up legs, and I'll show you Security…" I muttered as I pulled myself to my hooves, once more glad I couldn't break my legs. Of course, I still felt like I'd been beaten with a stick, but at least nothing was *broken*.

We reached a long room that smelled of salt and dead sea things and followed it along past large white plastic drums set in rows along a mechanized track. There were Rangers pushing the plastic drums from the track to a hoist that I guessed pulled it up to the gun. One of the drums had been dropped, spilling dark powder in a fan that two unicorns were very carefully scooping up.

If one drum held that much powder... There were hundreds of drums down here; too bad magic bullets didn't create much in the way of sparks. I'd need something incendiary to do a proper job, a grenade or flamer or something. "Planning a party?"

"Given the possibility of the base being overrun, it didn't seem prudent to leave a whole bunker full of gunpowder to the mercies of the Burner Boys. We loaded as much as we would need and sealed the rest away," he replied dryly. We passed through a thick door to another room loaded with missiles and ammo crates by the thousands. There were enough bullets and missiles in here to kill everypony in Equestria a thousand times over!

Why in Celestia's name would any country need so many bullets?

Past that, we entered a space that was far more run down. Given how much effort they were putting into getting the turret working, getting the rest of the ship operational would take lifetimes. There was rust everywhere I looked, and most of the talismans were shot. Some engine or power source I couldn't imagine growled under our hooves, though, and we occasionally passed work crews trying to get some other part of the ship to work.

Finally, we were escorted to an empty magazine which had far more rust and fish reek. The cages that had held the powder drums in the other room were empty in this one, and they had been converted into cells. “So…going to tell the elder straight away?” I asked him.

His sniff told me not to hold my breath. “Eventually. I have my duties. But I will inform her that you wish to meet.”

“If you want to know where my stable is…a nice, fully-operational stable…you’ll inform her before you start firing that gun,” I said as we were marched into an empty cage. The crew of the *Seahorse* roused at once as we were locked in across from them.

The acolyte sniffed. “Yes, well, the elder is a very busy mare. There’s a war on, you know. I’ll see she’s informed.” I gave a little sigh. Of course he would. With that he stepped out.

“Blackjack? Is that you? Are you all right?” Oilcan asked as the mare looked around. Oh yeah. I was the pony with the night vision eye.

“Blackjack?” a mare whimpered in pain in the dark. I looked around, but the other cages were empty.

“Thrush? Where’s Captain Thrush?” I asked.

“Here. She’s in a bad way, though. When she caused too much trouble, they made her go into a memory orb and she still hasn’t woken up. It’s been hours!” Tarboots grumbled.

I recalled going into one like that, a trapped orb that had shut me down until Priest snapped me out of it again. I thought I spotted Seabiscuit in the back. I heard familiar little sniffles and sobs somewhere in the dark room. “Who is that?”

There was an uncomfortable pause and then Oilcan said quietly, “The sea ponies. They’re... in a bad way too.”

Seaponies? Oh, shit! “Pisces? Capri?” Somepony had thrown them in here without any water?

“Blackjack…” came Pisces’s whimper. “Please…help….”

“Okay. Plan B now,” I said as I pulled off my eyepatch. “P-21, do you have any pins they missed?”

“Nope. They were more thorough than you. Why, do you have one?” he asked in surprise.

“Mhmm! They were busy searching me, but not my eyepatch.” I ripped open the padded backing and carefully tugged out the pin with my magic. The glow was one of the only wan lights in the room. I passed it to him, then carefully untaped a part of my ‘brace’

which happened to be a screwdriver.

He eyed it and then looked up at me. “Celestia save us…Blackjack is becoming clever. Okay, keep that little horn of yours lit up.”

“It’s compact! Not little!” I’d show him light! I fished around for a piece of scrap metal I could lift. I focused as much as I could to light it as he worked.

A click, and the door opened. This is why he was awesome. Only he could unlock a door in near darkness.

The lock on the *Seahorse*’s crew’s cage clicked, and the four ponies moved out. Then we moved to the next cell over…and I froze. I’d never really appreciated what a fish was: a creature of water. I only knew them as glittering shapes in books next to the little fact that they lived in water.

I’d never thought of what happened to them if you took them out of water…

Pisces and Capricorn lay on the floor. Their scales were cracked and flaking, their skin split and bleeding. Their fins had dried out and stuck to the floor. Capri was unconscious, maybe dead. The pink seapony was partially glued to her sister. They needed water, badly, and whatever pony had thrown them in here like this needed to die.

It was a good thing I’d met Crumpets and Paladin Stronghoof when I had. I was in a particularly shooty mood when it came to the Rangers. I knelt as P-21 started on the lock. “Just stay easy. We’ll get you out…find a fire hose and a bucket or something.”

“Momma…please, Momma…” Capri whimpered weakly. “Not monsters…we’re…we’re not monsters…” No, you’re not. Nopony was…and I was going to save them…nopony deserved to die like this!

“Get it open. Please…get it open…” I begged. P-21 scowled, rubbing his knee as he got to work. The screwdriver quivered…the lock’s drum slowly rotated…

The bobby pin snapped.

“No! No!” I slammed it with my hooves.

“Blackjack? What’s plan B?” P-21 asked me in the dark. I lifted a rag so that everyone could at least see the pale white glow.

“Get free and find her ourselves, but…”

“You can do that. You and Rampage. Go,” he scowled at the others as they gawked. “Well, don’t just stand there. Get some sort of light and find me a damned bobby pin and a bucket of water!

I looked at him with a thankful smile. “Right.” The large Tarboots threw Thrush over his shoulder. “As soon as you can get them out, get to your ship. We might have to get out of here fast if we can’t meet up with Lacunae.” I sighed and said, “I really hope plan C is ready. ‘Cause at this rate, plan D is all we’ve got left.”

“Relax. I excel at plan D,” Rampage said modestly.

“I’ll remember that when Steel Rain blasts you into fine red mist,” I muttered as she opened the door.

A pony in bizarre gray barding jumped to her hooves as the hatch opened. She scrambled for a beam gun as Rampage leapt upon the mare, wrapped her legs around her neck, and heaved her clear over her back to crash to the deck with Rampage on top of her. The blue pony lay in a daze. Rampage smirked at me and tossed me the beam gun. “You forget. Close combat is my thing, Blackjack. Now take her stuff. It might keep you from getting shot.”

I stripped the mare, passing to P-21 any gear that wasn’t a weapon as I dressed up as a Steel Ranger. “If we see Rain first, though…I’ll need to talk to him.”

“Talk to him? Ah, Blackjack…that’s a little suicidal,” she said as I slowly began to make my way up some stairs. This was a big ship… I’d have to ask for directions. “And, no offense, Blackjack, but how are you going to know the elder when we meet her? ‘Cause I have no idea what a Steel Ranger elder looks like.”

I sighed. “She’ll either wear the biggest hat, carry the fanciest gun, have the most ridiculous outfit on, or be surrounded by ponies happy to kill us.” What, did I have to work out everything in advance? I’d gotten us aboard the ship, hadn’t I? Couldn’t think of everything myself, now could I?

* * *

The HMS *Celestia* came in two flavors: recently refurbished machine of war or abandoned derelict, and you could find both flavors within ten feet of each other. One section would have the rust scoured away with bright and humming lights, and the next would look like it hadn’t been touched in two centuries. I couldn’t figure out any rhyme nor reason to it either. Somewhere there was an engineer in need of a good kicking. There also wasn’t a sign anywhere in a language I understood. ‘STLBCKACC’? ‘PRTENGNAV’? ‘RVTEXTBST’? WHTTHFCK?

We staggered into something that might have been a mess hall at one time but was now collecting dust…except for the hoofmarks that went through the room. I spotted a red bar ahead and moved against the wall. Another red bar moved slowly in front of us. I caught the swirl of red robes as the chief acolyte paced back and forth.

"Shouldn't you be preparing the cannon?" came Steel Rain's voice, making my mane stand on end. My eyes popped wide. He was here. Actually here!

"Listen up," I said softly, and Rampage's ears perked as the star paladin entered. To my immense relief, he was armed with a gatling gun / grenade machinegun combo…which actually was still not that good for us, but I liked it more than the idea of 'instakill at two miles'.

"Security is here," Napalm Strike said.

"That's impossible. I've soldiers stationed with shoot to kill orders. She couldn't be anywhere near here," said Steel Rain.

"She walked up to us politely as she pleased with her friends. Offered me the location of a stable to speak to the elder." He hesitated, then added, "I must inform her of this. My oath--"

"Oath!" Steel Rain snarled, cutting off the other. "What good are oaths these days? We swear to obey senile fools who have the power to force order on this city but refuse to exercise it! Who could use this ship to batter down the walls of the Core and use the riches within to force a real tomorrow. Oaths... " He snorted in disgust. "Only a fool honors a foolish oath."

"But the elder…"

"Is a dying breed. I've spoken with Elder Cottage Cheese and Star Paladin Nova personally about this! Naive optimists like Steelhooves and Stronghoof have no place here. They're fodder for the city. But ponies like us, who have the vision to see the potential of technology and the audacity to use it…we are the future!" There was no hiding the fervor in his voice; it practically trembled with his every word.

"She's going to find out eventually!" Napalm Strike protested. "And then there will be questions."

Steel Rain chuckled long, low, and slow. "Let her find out. Let her ask her questions. But let her do it after we've turned the Arena, the Collegiate, and the Skyport into rubble. Once we are victorious, it won't matter how she protests. And when the old nag finally

expires, either you or I will replace her. And we'll have a glorious new future to look forward to."

"I suppose," he muttered sullenly.

"Get that cannon firing. The sooner our enemies' strongholds are rubble, the better," Steel Rain finished. "Let me worry about Security."

I couldn't believe my luck! This was exactly what I needed to hear! I bit my lip as I fought the urge to cheer. Then there was a pause, and my ears prickled. Then he said, in a louder voice, "You know, technology is such a wonder. Take this power armor. Rebreather. Repair talisman. The armor itself. The heavy weapons. But do you know what the most useful feature is?" I frowned as I looked at Rampage.

"Eyes Forward Sparkle," he finished in a grave tone. Then there was a heavy choom as the grenade machinegun blasted the doorway we sheltered in. Rampage grabbed me faster than I could have imagined and threw me away as his exploding rounds blew her into chunks. Clanging forward, I barely got to my feet when he appeared in the doorway and blasted a streak of minigun fire in a spray that made my ass burn.

We were now officially on plan E: run for my fucking life! So long as Steel Rain was on me, P-21 and the others would have a clear shot, as would Rampage when she regenerated. My legs clattered and jerked, my flanks on fire as he ran down the hall behind me. I tried to yank shut hatches as I passed, but they were too heavy for my magic to move. And I didn't dare stop as he followed. I passed a set of stairs, but with my legs wobbling around beneath me I didn't dare try and scramble up it. One slip or trip and I would be over.

I dared look back behind me in time to see him pass through one of the tight hatches, and my jaw dropped in amazement as he twisted his body with ease to allow him to pass through without getting stuck. And here I could barely run and keep ahead of him. I needed a door. Something I could close. I raced past one unarmored mare who stepped behind me only to be blown to pieces by the grenades! "Get out of the way!" I screamed as I ran, passing by another two unicorn onlookers.

Finally, I passed around a dogleg and onto a steep stair. My legs skidded and slipped as I kicked and scrambled up. I pushed against the hatch overhead, my horn struggling with the rusty wheel. He came around the corner just as it gave with a screech and opened

onto a rainswept landing pad at the rear of the ship. A few spotlights illuminated it in glaring light and shadow. I got clear as his grenade machine gun choomed and sprayed me with ricocheting metal.

Did I mention that I hated Hoofington?

Two mares scrambled to me as I lay there, writhing from the dozens of little holes that'd appeared in my hide. "Hold still!" One shouted, pulling out a healing potion. I slurped it down eagerly. There was an alarm sounding somewhere. The mare shouted to the other, "We have to get below decks! Before--"

Celestia fired.

The cannon was at least a hundred feet away, but the force of its firing washed over me like a full-body sledgehammer. Maybe it was the healing potions that spared my ears, but for several minutes I just writhed futilely. Far off, a flower of flame bloomed to the southwest. I recovered first; I supposed that I was more used to getting blown up by this point. I pushed the mares down the hatch; Steel Rain was gone for the moment, and I couldn't leave them up here.

Then I started across the flight deck, but the waves and my ringing head and woobly legs sent me sprawling once again. Cold rain sloshed around me. I really wanted some Buck. Something… anything…to get me out of here. The *Celestia* fired again, a spectacular tongue of flame scraping away the night. Flat against the deck, I had some protection, but it left me with the distinct sensation of being stepped on. "Stop…firing…damn it…" I muttered.

"Did you hear that?" Steel Rain's voice boomed from his armor as he stepped out into the rain. "That was the roar of technology. Of power! It is a sound that will be repeated all across Equestria as we finally take our proper place!"

Slowly, he walked out towards me. "You've given me quite the gift, Security. This war. The excuse to purge this city of the filth that keeps us from our legacy. We will obliterate all that stand against us. We will put this technology to use! Not let it rot in some bunker."

Slowly I pulled myself to my hooves. "You also murdered innocents…" I said, trying to use my rage to focus. "I saw the execution piles!"

"Simply ridding the Hoof of a few extra mouths. Why waste it on

filth like that?" he said as the rain poured down upon us. "You can never begin to appreciate the importance or usefulness of technology."

I straightened as I looked at him. "Oh, I don't know. I've gained a whole new appreciation for hot showers, soap, and flushing toilets." Slowly, I smiled. "You know what else I've appreciated?" I could imagine him scowling as I swayed a little on my hooves. "Silence."

I pointed my hoof behind him, and there, looking down at him, was a unicorn under a rain shielding spell. I'd been right about everything except the hat. Elder Crunchy Carrots looked so rough and raw that she could chew steel and piss nails. Suddenly, I had the sensation that I was about to be grounded for the rest of my life…okay, that was actually possible at this point. The orange mare floated a strangely delicate-looking gun beside her as she glared down with a furious gaze. Around her were dozens of power armor-clad ponies and acolytes.

At her side were Scotch Tape and Glory.

"Elder? What is going on? I…"

"You got a big mouth," Scotch Tape yelled as she reached to her PipBuck and pushed a button. His voice began to play loud and clear. Nopony moved. With my night vision, I saw a dark Lacunae fly overhead and drop my barding and bags beside me. I smirked as I shed the shredded Ranger barding for my own…slightly less shredded security armor. I slipped on one of my saddlebags. The olive filly chuckled, "Courtesy of Radio Blackjack."

I smirked, tapping my covered PipBuck. "Ain't technology grand?"

"Star Paladin Steel Rain. You have demonstrated gross contempt for our order, your oaths, and your position. Have you anything to say in your defense?" the elderly orange mare said with a fierce glare. I might have done her a favor with that recording, but I had to remember that we still hadn't settled things.

For several seconds, he stood there, and then slowly turned to face her. "Defense? What have I said that wasn't the truth!? How many generations have wasted their lives hoarding and gathering weapons and technology only for it to be wasted! How many more generations will we have to suffer the weak incompetence of leaders like you who hide and cower and quote rules and talk of oaths and do nothing!" He pointed his hoof up at her. "For the first time ever, we have an unrivalled weapon against our foes. And you are the only thing standing between us and the future we deserve!"

As I finished buckling everything into place, I looked around. Then I frowned. This wasn't going like it should. Now everypony wasn't just facing the star paladin. Now there were more and more Rangers turning to face the elder. Oh…shit. Why did I suddenly get the sensation that everything was about to blow up?

I'd come here to stop a damn war! Not start a second one within the Rangers themselves!

"Are you fucking serious!?" I screamed as I stepped into the middle of it. "What the hell is wrong with all of you? I don't care if you guard tech or use it, but are you so caught up that you can ignore the shit you're inflicting on everypony in the Hoof?" I pointed towards the shore. "Right now, Stronghoof and Crumpets are fighting to save lives in the hopes that you are going to pull your heads out of your armored asses. I came here with that hope. I'm willing to give you the location of my stable if you only knock this shit off!"

Please, I begged mentally. Don't do this.

The elder glanced at me, her sour expression softening a touch. "Thank you for your kind words, Security, but this is an internal manner. For your assistance in bringing this to light, I am issuing you and the young mare here a pardon, and you are free to leave." She pointed back down at Steel Rain. "Paladins, arrest him!"

Nopony moved. Then one armored pony slowly approached him. Then another. And another. For once, it seemed as if sanity would prevail and there'd be a hope of the butchery ending. That sanity broke as they reached Steel Rain... and turned to face the elder shoulder to shoulder. And there were more than half standing with him.

"So be it," the elder said softly.

Oh shit--

She pulled the trigger, and a bolt of lightning blasted out. A Ranger leapt in its path, the lightning cascaded over the armor, and his lights went dead.

A full barrage of grenades and missiles answered. The elder disappeared behind a shield as she fell back while the rest of the acolytes returned fire. I didn't care about that, but Glory and Scotch were up there. Out came my assault rifle as the other Rangers realized I was still a threat, and I sent a line of crackling blue bullets against them. The insanity had come to a head. I'd tried my best…

Some ponies refused to do better.

"Get Glory!" I screamed and thought as hard as I could as I staggered to some stairs up to the deck with the turret. I don't know if Lacunae heard me or anticipated me, but she swooped down to where they'd taken cover and disappeared in a purple flash. Beside the *Celestia*, the *Seahorse* slowly pulled away. I just needed to live long enough for her to come back for me. I guessed a minute. Maybe two.

Two minutes is a lifetime when eighteen ponies in power armor are shooting at you. They were moving up along the ship as the elder and her acolytes fell back. I was surprised to see Napalm Strike fighting alongside the elder, the other orange unicorn conjuring up sheets of flame and exploding blasts of fire. The elder had been wounded and was being dragged back.

As horrible as the war was, I couldn't think of this ship being in Steel Rain's hooves. Weapons were used for a reason. You didn't fire them simply because you could! Speaking of Steel Rain, he seemed to come straight at me. The star paladin appeared to have taken a personal dislike towards me, and I responded with bursts of crackling blue bullets. I was taking cover far more than he was, though, as that grenade machinegun sprayed death at me. I had to get higher. Get out of here. Maybe meet up with Stronghoof and Crumpets and work out... something…

I couldn't just give up.

I staggered up to the turret, then clambered up a narrow stairway to the top of the heavily armored structure. There was so much gunfire that I wondered if somepony was taking shots at Lacunae and keeping her away. Did Rampage get out? What about P-21 and the sea ponies? "Any time now, Lacunae…"

Then he climbed atop the turret opposite me. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired four bursts…yet only two hit through all that rain. I managed to squeeze off three magic bullets that were far more lucky. They struck his helmet, peeling away smoking steel.

He was a surprisingly gentle-looking buck…

Then my world went black as his grenade rifle blasted the turret before me. I screamed as fire erupted in my face, shrapnel cutting deep across my front, and I tried desperately to wipe the blood out of my eye. I had to see! If I couldn't see…why couldn't I wipe the blood away?

That blood was my eye.

My hoof touched the fiery ruin of my missing eye. I needed Hydra. A healing potion. Something! My hooves fumbled with my saddlebag. Then a minigun burped, and pain erupted in my shoulder. At least it got the saddlebag off.

"I should thank you again," he said from somewhere behind me as I scrabbled in my bags. Was that Hydra? Med-X? Rad-X? There was a burst that tore into my cutie mark, and I screamed, jerking as I fell over into the bag and scattered the syringes. "You finally brought it to the fore. Now we can have a new beginning. A proper future." Another burst along my opposite side. I fired wildly…but once my gun was empty, I couldn't load it blind. I reached in, desperate to find something…anything…

My hoof nudged a smooth case, and I felt it pop open. My other hoof felt the smooth, heavy barrel. I froze, feeling myself grow cold. "I am coming…" Lacunae said in my mind.

Thanks, Lacunae. But I couldn't leave this ship in the hooves of this mad pony. Inside the saddlebag, I cracked open the breech and slammed the silver bullet home. I heard the weapon latch and hum as the systems interacted with my PipBuck.

"Blackjack, don't do this," the Dealer said. I ignored him as I struggled to my hooves. "You know what it will do... "

"Yeah, but I can't get much worse... "

"Blackjack... don't... "

"I'm doing it," I replied. I had no time for crazy any more. I had to stop this for good, if it was the last thing I did...

Steel Rain paused in his tirade as I drew the loaded Folly from the saddlebag. "What is that supposed to be?" he asked as I pointed the weapon. "You don't actually think you can hit anything with that, do you?"

"Something... yeah," I replied, slipping into S.A.T.S. with practiced ease. I mentally hit 'yes' over and over again. Then the tingle of the magic fields wrapping around me. The feeling of immobility.

Well…this was it. Folly fired.

Straight down.

I wasn't sure which was worse, the sound Folly made as two feet of reinforced armor vaporized beneath me or the monstrous explosion that followed. I felt the wet pressure soaking every inch of my body; trapped against my skin by the magic. Only the magic fields kept me from an instantaneous death, but when they faded I felt the turret lifted higher and higher as if we were all floating away.

Everything was tumbling end over end; up and down didn't exist. There was simply the explosion and the scream of steel and twisting metal.

I hit the cold, salty water, bobbing there as it stung my bloody eye sockets. I could barely move. Somewhere nearby were screams and the noise of the ship. My barding…my braces…everything was dragging me down. Then I heard the sound of groaning metal above me. I lifted my battered hooves as I was crushed beneath the waves into the cold black depths.

Funny, Glory… went my very last thought as I was pushed deeper and deeper into the frigid waters…*only a pony with my luck could have a boat dropped on them…twice…*

Footnote: Level up.

ERROR: OUT OF BOUNDS EXCEPTION: ERROR: ESOTERIC LIMIT CRITICAL

Chapter 33: Black

“…”

(Author's Advisory Warning: This chapter contains a brutal scene which may be disturbing or upsetting to some readers. I’ve discussed this scene with others, and they’ve convinced me that, bad as the scene is, it should be included. If you wish to skip it, please use the "Content Warning" link to move forward to the next section.)

— — —

Since leaving the stable for the first time, I’d felt that my life had become one great struggle. Against enemies, or mysteries, or simply my friends’ unhappiness, it was always a contest about when the Dealer would finally deal me my last hand, when the Wasteland would break me in two. It’d tried. It succeeded in 99. It’d come pretty close a few other times. Within the push of a safety toggle. But I always got dragged back. Of course, I could have just let go and allowed myself to die, even then. But I couldn’t, really. I knew that I hadn’t atoned yet. I still had hope that somehow I had something else to give. Some comfort. Some peace. Anything to draw a bit more of the Wasteland’s attention to me so that it would leave some innocent alone for a bit longer.

And I wasn’t broken yet.

The *Celestia*…or a part of it…had fallen atop me with a grinding metallic scream punctuated by thumps, groans, and booms. The impact pushed me down deeper and deeper, the cold depths squeezing me as my injuries burned in the salty water. My braces were now weights taped to the ends of my limbs, my tattered barding pulling me down. This was probably where I was going to die…

But not yet.

Swimming really wasn't a part of my skill set, and right now, as the water rushed around me, I didn't even know which way was up. For all I knew, I was flailing deeper and deeper into the water. I just knew that I floated in the bathtub and so hopefully the direction I was going was the right one.

Then I smashed into armored hull. The metal vibrated with terrible force; I could feel the strain humming through the plates as the *Celestia* tore herself to pieces. I could hear distant explosions. My lungs burned as I felt my way along the surface. Up, a primitive instinct screamed at me. Breathe! Bubbles started to leak out my nose as I crawled like a bug.

A little longer…

Then my head broke through into a pocket of air, and I gasped as the groans and screams of metal were mixed with those of ponies. I felt sorry for that. I knew there had to have been acolytes and other initiates who hadn't deserved to die down here with me. One thing was for certain, though; Steel Rain would never get the *Celestia* to fire another shot. If he'd managed two, I didn't see anything stopping him from firing two hundred more.

But still, I hadn't wanted them all to die this way.

I had no way to tell what I was in, or where. Suddenly, a pony surfaced beside me, screaming hysterically as she gasped for air as well. Her flailing hooves grabbed me and shoved me beneath the water again. Wildly kicking hooves smacked into my head, and I nearly lost my precious lungful of air. I could have gone back up, fought her for the ever precious bit of oxygen left in that space, but I let her have it. Good luck. I scuttled along the overturned ship, hearing swooshing water racing in somewhere. I'd probably put one hell of a hole in the bottom of this thing. I came across a pocket of air no deeper than my muzzle, but it held just enough for me to cough and sputter as I tried to get one or two more breaths.

Just a little longer. Just a little longer…

There was one last detonation, and the plates above me jerked and hammered into my head. Now I was pushed against the wreck as it started moving in the direction opposite of floating. I suddenly had an image of the upside-down ship slamming into the seabed and squishing me into paint! I wiggled and kicked and struggled as I tried to find any direction that was 'away'. Then I felt myself thrust into a slimy morass that oozed into my every nook and cranny as the ship gave a final tired groan. The sludge was being squished like

the inside of a radroach, and I was squirted out into water.

My legs worked slowly, trying for some progress as I felt the silt swirling around me. My mouth worked slowly…I had to breathe…I had to…Bubbles slipped, and I felt my rear legs sink down into the sticky gunk. My rump touched down, and I sat there as a burning sensation roared inside my lungs…and then coolness spread through my chest. This wasn't so bad…Disemboweling was worse... I felt as if I were drifting away.

You win, you bony son of a bitch. Now let me rest…I'm so…tired…

~ ~ ~

It'd been a while since I'd had a nice long nap. I yawned and stretched, then blinked…and blinked again as I looked at the interior of a glassy egg. I gaped at the end of the weird little pod I occupied, opening one eye and closing it. Opening the other and closing it! I winked a few times just to make sure I wasn't imagining it! "Yes!" I cheered and pumped a hoof…a white smooth hoof that neither flopped about nor bulged with growths! And no PipBuck…

I was alive. Whole! Complete and intact and for the first time in weeks feeling healthy and alive. How long since I'd had this kind of energy? I saw a little red button in the wall that read 'release' and hit it. I had to wonder what kind of miracle was responsible for my–

The door swung open into the stripped-out remains of Vanity's bedroom. The bed was a filthy mat, and the desk had been pushed against the doors. I was in an egg-shaped pod similar to the ones in the Fluttershy clinic. A little jury-rigged magical generator puttered and hummed beside it. What was I doing here? I looked around in astonished worry. Where were my friends? What had happened?

A corpse on the bed moved. No. Not a corpse, but a pony very near becoming one. Dark hide was covered head to hoof in scars. His cutie marks had been deliberately torn away. 'Trick Pony' had been branded in their place. Slowly, he crawled out. Goddesses, he was skinny. So very skinny. "P-21?" He flinched away, then slowly shook his head. A filthy mane, so dirty I couldn't even tell what color it was, was pushed back from faded, golden eyes. A bloody stump of a horn marred his brow. He looked at me as if he were staring at a ghost, and then his lips curled in the smallest of smiles. "Priest…"

The wasted stallion just nodded once.

I approached him, and he backed away almost fearfully. "What…what happened? Where are my friends?" He shuddered, walked

slowly to a blasted-out window, and pointed down the road. Pointed towards Chapel. An unwholesome hum filled the air, a single note that went on and on. “But…” He shook his head and then opened his mouth wide. Nothing remained of his tongue. He gave an apologetic little shrug.

“How…How long…?” I murmured in shock. Slowly, his hoof rose and fell as he tapped out fifteen steps. “Fifteen…weeks?” He shook his head. “Months?” Again. “... Years.” At that, he nodded. *Fifteen years?* I staggered but tried to focus as I stared at the swaying buck. “But…why am I here? What happened? Where are my…”

He lay down on the ground, one golden eye looking up at me. His lips moved silently, then he closed them. He took one breath and let it out forever…

No. This was wrong. This was very very wrong! I needed guns, barding, and my friends beside me now! I shoved the desk away and threw open the doors.

Hoofington had risen.

The rest of Blueblood Manor was a leveled ruin. Only a thin ramp of debris and the corner remained. I looked out directly at the Core. The clouds were gone, but so was the sky beyond. From horizon to horizon, a solid wall of baleful green illuminated the skies in an oppressive monochrome. The Core was awash in green light, the center of the green nimbus that spread over everything. Shadowbolt Tower rose like a dagger pointed at the heavens, and the land around the island was lit with thousands of fires. That droning buzz rolled on and on as if the city itself hummed.

I kicked my way down the debris and raced along the cracked road towards Chapel. Where else could I go? I passed the first empty and wretched camps. Then a few with earth ponies. Then a few with earth ponies and pegasi and unicorns. Then there were zebras. Griffins. Sand dogs. All together around the guttering fires. No one spoke. No one moved. They simply hummed that single resonant note or sat silently, staring at nothing. At least they weren’t killing each other…

The graveyard had been torn up; it looked like somepony had tried to plant crops, but they were strange and bloated things. Chapel sat empty and half-finished, its defenses long ago shattered. I peeked in one building after the next, but only emptiness and that droning sound filled them. Finally, I approached the shell of the chapel itself. ‘Hoofington Rises’ had been spray-painted over every

available inch.

Slowly, I stepped to the door and was hit by a palpable wall of stench. Yet, though I hesitated, I took a step in. And another. Another.

I'd found where everypony had gone.

From the heaps of tiny bodies emerged a larger one. A withered, yellow filly's severed head was kicked past me as she worked herself free. Bits of gore cascaded off her as tiny pink pinprick eyes focused upon me. It was hard to tell what were stripes and what was dried blood and dangling viscera. Her lips curled wider and wider as her hooves hugged a tiny dead infant…one with red stripes. One of a dozen lying around her like so many scattered dolls.

And then Rampage spoke. "Shh…baby finally finished crying…but she's sleeping nice and peaceful now…"

I backed away. I wanted to scream. Everything was screaming as Rampage laughed. "Come back! I'll help you sleep too!"

I turned and fled, not towards the city but to the last refuge I knew. The only refuge I knew anymore. I ran past the reeking camps up the hill towards Star House. To my immense relief, it seemed intact. That horrible message had been spray-painted on every surface, but there was a mare stepping out.

An olive mare with green eyes and a blue mane. "Scotch!" I shouted happily as I raced up towards her. But she turned and looked at me in shock and fear. I saw her pregnant, distended belly as she stared at me like I were a ghost. Then I slowed. In place of a cutie mark, I saw slashed scars…and the word 'BREEDER' carved into her rump. There were nine marks under that violation, three pink and six blue.

"Blackjack?" she murmured softly. "You're awake…finally awake…"

"Scotch! What happened? What happened to…to everything?" I asked as I sat down hard.

She sat down slowly, rocking back and forth. "You…you died. Or nearly died. The seaponies fished you out of the water…Lacunae and Glory got you breathing again." Her eyes darted left and right. "Glory…Glory swore she'd save you. She did. She…she gave EC-1101 to Sanguine. And he made you a new body…but he said it would take years for you to…to mature. So we were just going to have to wait. And we did…" and she started to shake and sob.

“And…and everything went bad!”

I reached forward to hold her, but she just smacked my hooves away. “There was a war, Blackjack. And another one. And another one. For a time, things seemed to get better. The Stable Dweller and her friends did great things…got the skies fixed…cleaned the earth... but they didn’t get how bad things were out here. How terrible. Hoofington rose. The city woke up…and nothing could stop it.”

I took a deep breath. “What about our friends, Scotch? I saw Rampage,” I said as I looked back at the distant little building. “Where’s Glory? P-21? Lacunae?”

“Glory…” Her eyes turned to the door. “I…I bring her things to eat…as a breeder, I get a little extra…”

I looked to the door as well, but she was shaking too much to say any more and simply hugged her stomach with one leg as she backed away. I slowly pushed the door open. The room was dark. I could still hear the hum, but it was muted as if heard from far away. Something was eating from a basket in the corner. Something gray. I saw a wing. I saw two. A smile started across my face. I saw a third. A fourth…Fifth…

Purple eyes opened, one after the next along the side of her neck. Of course Sanguine had tried to fix her too. Maybe he’d experimented. Maybe this was intentional. But those purple eyes widened in shock before they clenched shut. “Don’t look at me…” she rasped, low and heavy.

“Glory…how…?” was all I could mutter.

That hulk of flesh and feathers shivered, tears running down her neck. “I didn’t have you…I didn’t have anything. So nothing mattered. Nothing…”

She’d…let him do this…? “Glory…I…”

“Why did you have to leave? Why did you have to be a damned hero?” the gray…pegasus…said in an inequine voice. “You left me behind…always…always…” She closed her eyes again. “Leave me…or kill me…I can’t survive being with you, and I can’t live being without you, so I’m dead either way.”

I backed out. “I wish I’d never met you…” Glory rasped. “I wish you’d never saved me…”

I fell back over my hooves as the door slammed shut from a powerful gust. I just sat there and stared at it. There had to be a way to fix this. To make her…right…again. I’d find Sanguine, and I

would beat a way of fixing her out of him! Scotch Tape sat nearby, rocking and humming that slow single tune. I rose to my hooves. "What…how did this happen? What did you mean by 'Hoofington rose'?"

She started to walk slowly towards the bridge. "With EC-1101, Sanguine took the city. The Overlord came to power and used the factories under the city to make weapons. Everypony who'd lost everything in the war came to fight for him. Any mare that could bear foals was a breeder. Any stallion, a warrior."

"What about the Stable Dweller? The rest of the Wasteland?" I asked as we walked side by side. I couldn't believe she would just… let this happen!

"They tried to fight. They did. They sent hurricanes and tornadoes and terrible spells…but Hoofington had the megaspell facility…and with EC-1101 they got it working again. Megaspell…after megaspell…after megaspell. You joined the Hoof…or you were destroyed. Ponies. Alicorns. Zebras. Griffins. Dragons. It didn't matter. With EC-1101, they could do everything. So you came to the Hoof, or you died," she said softly as she walked. "The Overlord killed the Stable Dweller."

"What?!" Oh, I was going to go plan D on this 'Overlord' all over the place. Maybe I could get through to Rampage…or somehow Glory could help…or…I looked at the swollen Scotch Tape, and she quivered. *Stop using us in your stupid fight*, her eyes seemed to beg me. "What about Lacunae? P-21? Where are they?" If I could find some way to get EC-1101 back…some way…some…something!

She looked at me and trembled. "This way…" she murmured as she hung her head and walked slowly towards the bridge.

I followed after her. She seemed so…drained. So empty. I thought being a mother was supposed to be a wonderful thing. "Um… congratulations? Who's the father?" Then she looked at me and I shut up. I'd never talk about her being a mother again. There was such despair and hopelessness in her eyes that I knew I could never bring it up.

"The Overlord…Majina and I are his favorites…" was all she said. Oh…damn.

Time to shut the fuck up, Blackjack, and start concentrating on putting as many magic bullets as possible into this bastard the second I see him.

We walked together, side by side, towards the bridge. A trickle of

people were already walking one way or the other across it. Earth ponies, unicorns, ghouls, sand dogs, and others. All humming a common note and moving around as if half dead. If this was peace, then it was at far too high a price. Severed heads adorned the bridge, all species butchered equally and ground down under the Hoof. The walls of the Core were painted with the words 'Hoofington Rises' in streaks of vivid red.

The humming made my head hurt. No, not just a hum. It was like a drill trying to get inside me. It hurt to think about anything. I stared at the glassy-eyed creatures moving as if they were so much machinery. A few ranted, screamed, fought, and struggled…but they were ignored. From the few others who showed expression at all, it was clear that these people were more annoyed than disturbed by the outbursts.

The towers rose, seeming to stare down at the insignificant meat funneling through their dark canyons. The cracks and breaks in the towers bled green light. Purple lamps and yellow flares made glaring contrasts that hurt my eyes. It was as if every appearance of the city were designed to inflict pain! Who could be the Overlord? Sanguine? Maybe…Steel Rain? That seemed more likely. Somehow, he'd gotten his hooves on my PipBuck…been able to use it. My stomach churned and I coughed. The very city itself made me feel like crap.

Then I spotted Lacunae. The purple alicorn stood by as silent as a statue. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I raced to her. She glanced at me, then stared straight ahead again. "Lacunae?" There was another purple alicorn standing by, staring. And another. And another and another. I looked at Scotch standing quietly by, waiting. There was a lump of black rubble beside Lacunae; I stood on it and I stretched up to touch my horn to hers.

I felt the world blur away…except for that annoying hum. I felt the same vast space that had been here before, but, instead of a seething mass of whispering voices dominated by the Goddess, now there was only the same hum. It was everywhere. Inside everything. In the alicorns themselves. "Lacunae?" I asked…and the word was a discordant jumble echoing and ripping through that single note. "Lacunae!" I shouted into the humming darkness.

Then, soft as a lover, the darkness whispered back, "There is no Lacunae. There never was."

I staggered back and fell off the lump of stone and onto my rump.

Scotch was walking away, and I hurried to catch up. My eyes turned to every single still alicorn; I was surprised to see a few males, but I supposed that Sanguine had made them with Chimera. There was no life in any of them. They were simply living machinery now.

We passed under a severed purple dragon head hanging from chains. Spikes had been driven into his eyes…I didn't appreciate the irony. Beneath it was written in harsh words that hateful slogan.

"Goldenblood is the Overlord, isn't he?" I asked, pressing my lips together. It all made sense. He'd know about Spike. He'd known about Hoofington. He had secrets; he'd probably found some way to survive, and now he was in charge of this nightmare. It'd probably been his plan all along.

It looked like I was about to find out…except…

I puked a deluge of foamy water; I guess it was the only thing I had in me. Suddenly, I was feeling…wrong. Really wrong. But it didn't matter. I was almost to the Overlord. We were in the great plaza where the ministry buildings rose like headstones. The plaza had been torn up by the balefire blast, and horrid green light shot up through holes in the paving slabs. Every building…every person, pony or otherwise…they all hummed that single uniform note.

I wanted to sing. I wanted to scream. I wanted to do something…anything…to break up that monotonous note. But I couldn't…my chest flared as I moved slowly forward through the crowd. There was a sort of throne there. Good. That'd make shooting this Overlord much easier. There were mares up there, all of them pregnant. I spotted Scotch on the left side of the throne. I saw a young zebra mare on the right. And in the middle…

"Hello, Blackjack," P-21 welcomed me, the crowd falling back as my blue friend stared down with undisguised malice. With my PipBuck on one foreleg and Folly cradled in the other, his gaze blazed brightly. "Welcome to the future," he said coldly as he loaded a silver bullet into the breech and clapped it closed. I couldn't shoot. Of all the ponies ever, he had the right to shoot me. I just sat there, my chest burning as I was pierced by his hatred. "Goodbye." Then he raised the gun, and everything went brilliant white. The scream went on…and on…and my world faded to black.

~ ~ ~

"Is she alive?" Scotch Tape asked shrilly.

No. I wasn't alive. Life wasn't this. This was another nightmare. My

lungs throbbed like they were on fire as they sucked in watery air, spasmed, and coughed again. My stomach clenched as it tried to void itself yet again but had nothing to bring up. I felt hooves holding me down as I jerked and coughed and gasped yet again.

Life wasn't black like this.

"Sweet Goddesses, her eyes," I heard a mare say…Oilcan, I think.

"Give her a Hydra. Give her one right now," Glory demanded. I remembered how, weeks ago, she'd gone on and on about how horrible Hydra was. How damaging to my systems it was. But there was something different now. Something had changed. With this last firing of Folly, I felt as if something…something vital had been touched. Something integral had been corrupted. And as the Hydra helped soothe the searing pain in my face…the blackness endured. Glory started to sob. "Give her another. Please…" I felt her wing on my wet cheek.

"It…won't do anything…" Oilcan protested weakly. From the faint swoosh of the water talisman and the rocking, I guessed we were on the *Seahorse*.

"Give her another Goddesses-damned Hydra!" Glory screamed at her. She collapsed over me, weeping as I gasped for air, holding me tight. I lifted a hoof…no…it didn't feel like a hoof. I didn't know what that appendage was, but everything about it moved…wrong. Other voices started to raise their concerns as my condition changed from 'dead' to 'not dead'.

Lacunae had shown me. I'd stared into the mirror. I'd seen what I was becoming. A thing. A thing that used to be a pony. And as I lay there with all the panicked chatter, I heard the soft whisper of Lacunae in my mind now. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," I thought softly back at her. Then I cleared my throat. "Stop…no more…please…no more."

Glory held me even tighter as she shook, and hot liquid trickled down my cheek as she cried for me. "Blackjack…"

"What happened to the *Celestia*? To the Rangers?"

"Who gives a fuck what happened to them?" P-21 snarled. "They're dead, or they should be! Every last one of them!" I winced at the anger in his voice, trembling and tight.

"I give a fuck, P-21," I said as evenly as possible.

"The ship blew up and rolled over," Lacunae said softly. "Capri and Pisces were in the water. They looked all over for you. The Rangers had to fall back to the *Applejack*. Reapers had finally breached the

base, and everything was blowing up. I don't know who else survived." Was it me, or was there additional worry in that soft mental voice?

"Where's Rampage?" I asked as I strained my ears.

P-21 said, in a slightly less furious voice, "She chained herself to the front of the boat. She says not to let us let her get within twenty feet of you…" Oh, yes, I imagined that the murderess in her was just aching to give me peace.

"And Capri and Pisces are okay?" I asked, then coughed hard again. I still felt like I had water filling my lungs. Ugh…drowning sucked. I gagged and choked and fought for every breath.

"P-21 got us out while you were getting shot at," came the slightly distant voice of Capri. "We just did what any seapony should do…" she said softly.

"Shoo be doo…" Pisces echoed quietly.

"But how'd they catch you in the first place?" Scotch asked.

"We came down to get some sort of navigation thingy for the Orions. But this time, there were Rangers salvaging shells off the *Luna*. They had spearguns with tethers, and I got harpooned."

"I got caught trying to save her," Pisces murmured.

"They said that we were spying for the Reapers, and that Steel Rain bastard said that we were enemies of the Rangers. They were going to shell the Collegiate next. Said they were going to use a balefire shell." A what?! What, had everypony discovered megaspells and balefire bombs and shoved them into everything they could? What was next, balefire artillery? Balefire tanks? Your own personal balefire gun? Balefire armor? Balefire snack cakes?! "You…you saved us all. The professor…my family…all of us," Capri said amid the splashing.

"Thanks," Pisces sniffed.

I lay there in Glory's hooves. "Consider it payment for Gemini and Taurus." From the waves came a sad sniffle, then a splash.

Tarboots cleared his throat. "Steel Rain must have been planning a coup like that for months. He couldn't have used the gun with the elder still in charge. You just forced everything out into the open. I'm pretty sure the Hoofington Rangers are finished now. They don't have a base to fall back to, and will probably have to pull back to Trottingham or Manehattan."

I sighed at the stupidity and waste. I'd seen what the Rangers could accomplish at their very best. A hoofful could save the lives of

dozens if they were inclined to do so. And some were. I was glad I'd met Paladin Stronghoof, Fruit Salad, and Crumpets. That I'd seen the decency before the callousness and cruelty. I'd wanted to end the war, though, and it looked like I'd succeeded.

Yay…

"What about the Reapers?" I rasped. I imagined I could hear P-21 grinding his teeth that I'd even ask about them.

"I don't know. Some of them were shooting up the base. After the gun fired, though, I think…I think they're pulling back. I don't know," Oilcan murmured. There was a long silence. A terrible silence.

Finally, Scotch asked, "What are we going to do now?"

Glory gave a little gasp. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going to take Blackjack to Sanguine and give him that frigging PipBuck, and he's going to fix her! That's what we're going to do!"

I wanted to protest, but the water still in my lungs turned my objection into a spasm of coughing and hacking. I struggled to tell her not to do it. "No…" I managed to get out. I'd seen what would come of that. Maybe it was a nightmare. Maybe it was something more. I couldn't let her.

"Yes, Blackjack! We are going to make you better! We're going to fix you! And you are not going to argue with me on that!" Glory insisted as I started to thrash about, struggling. I coughed harder and harder. "Relax, Blackjack. It's the right thing to do!"

I'd wished that I'd been left down there. I wished that they hadn't found me. If I were dead, my friends would move on and not accept Sanguine's damned offer. But worse, I was sure that there was damage done to me that he couldn't fix. He might replace my organs, but the taint inside me would just corrupt the new ones too. Something inside me had changed, and this wasn't a solution.

I felt something against my horn…something smooth and round. No, not right now…but I wasn't exactly with it as I coughed and struggled. Once, I'd fallen into memory orbs by accident. Then I'd had to fight my way in. Now I fought to stay out, but some treasonous part of me made contact as I heard Glory and P-21 begin to argue…Don't do it, Glory…please…just let me go…

oooOOOooo

Once more, I was in a memory orb that I didn't particularly want

to be in. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't worth it. But unlike those other times, I was simply too tired to even try and attempt the impossible task of breaking myself free prematurely. I simply sat back in the mind of some other pony and took a little solace at being able to see again, even if it was through somepony else's eyes.

At least it was somepony familiar. I knew this buck well now. His stride. His horn. He felt older, though. Tired and a bit sore. He walked through the halls of Blueblood Manor with a slow and ponderous step. Downstairs were the worried shouts of dozens of concerned ponies. He stood in front of the mirror. There were touches of gray in his emerald mane and shadows around his eyes. Distantly, I could hear the soft wail of the Hoofington air raid siren. He pulled his dress uniform into place, sucking in his gut before letting the belt out a notch. Finally, he nodded with a sigh.

As he walked back out and slowly down the hallway, the door opened and a young pegasus mare in a white uniform peeked out at him with worried blue eyes. "Master Vanity, everything is going to be all right, isn't it?"

He smiled softly at her. "Of course, Harpica." His eyes looked past her at the foals sitting together in a nervous circle. "How are the children?"

"Frightened, Master Vanity. Terribly so," she said in a meek little voice. "As am I. I'm telling them all about Wigglehoof and the Wandering Wolves. They worry about the shouting, though."

"A fine story, Harpica. Keep them quiet. Stay inside," he said softly, then stepped closer to the door and addressed the fillies and colts. "I expect all of you to be on your absolute best behavior. Listen to Harpica, little ones. She will keep you safe." He beamed a smile at them and received several nervous smiles in return.

"Y…yes Lord Vanity," they replied, nodding obediently.

"Keep them safe, Harpica," he said, giving her a little nuzzle between the eyes.

She sniffed and nodded. "You are better than your name, Master Vanity."

Step by step, he made his way down the stairs. The entrances had sandbags and ponies with machineguns in place. From outside, over the wail of the siren, rose the roar of an angry mob. They were screaming to be let in, their shouting filled with frequent insults. Walking away from the entrance, he trotted further in. The shouts dwindled to nothing, and the air raid siren was barely audible over

the sound of the orchestra playing. The ballroom was filled with fancy ponies gathered in knots and groups and talking together in low tones. The fear was evident in all their faces.

A dapper buck with a snowy mane trotted out into the hall. “I say, that mob outside is getting quite unruly. Shouldn’t we be evacuating to the stable?” A blue unicorn mare who looked like she was barely a quarter his age moved up beside him. “The Skyguard ordered us to land before we could reach Canterlot. My little Rosette here is quite terrified.” He sighed, levitating a monocle as he looked down the hall at the barricade. “I fear that everything has gone quite wrong.”

Vanity sighed softly. “I’m sorry, Fancy Pants. I’m going to look into that right now.” He gave a polite nod to the pair and continued down the hall. Soldiers hauling boxes of ammo galloped by.

He trotted into a study. “What do you mean you’re not coming?! We’ve given you a fortune for this very occurrence!” Blueblood yelled at the terminal on his desk. Like his younger sibling, his mane was shot through with gray. “You can’t do this! I demand to speak to the director immediately, Garnet!” On the screen – a color terminal? I guess it made sense for someone as rich and stuck up as Blueblood to have something like that – was a ruby red mare who wore a decidedly smug smile.

“The director is otherwise occupied, Prince Blueblood. As am I,” the mare said with a snort and an annoyed look that slowly turned malicious. “Save your own ass, Blueblood.”

“You dare--“

Her laugh cut him short. “Of course I dare. I’ve wanted to see this look on your face for years, and now I finally have a chance. By the way, did you like the memo I sent the locals? Have they broken down your door yet?” The crimson mare’s lips curled gleefully. “I hope they all live long enough to string you up.” Blueblood stared at her in stunned silence.

Her dark eyes turned to Vanity, and her sneer faded. “Prince Vanity.”

“*Lord* Vanity!” Blueblood snapped. “I am the prince of this family.”

Both ignored the seething stallion. “Garnet. Am I correct in understanding that you will not be evacuating us to the Redoubt?”

“That is correct, Prince Vanity. The director apologizes, but he is seeing to other needs of the kingdom.”

“You understand that there are children here?” He didn’t shout; he

kept his voice even, low, and calm.

She smiled again. “Certainly, but this is a crisis. We can’t save–“

“There is enough room for thousands, Garnet,” he interrupted, his voice hardening as he stared at the screen. “Are you saying you are leaving children here to die? We can send them to you.”

A black earth pony mare ran up behind Garnet. “We have to go! Now!” she said, then darted away.

Garnet sighed, waving a glittering red hoof. “Coming, Onyx.” Then she frowned and then looked back at Vanity. “We’re sealing the Redoubt. I’m sorry. Don’t come here, Vanity. Go die somewhere else.” Then she reached forward, and the terminal went dark.

“This is outrageous! I must contact Auntie Celestia at once! She’ll set this right!” Blueblood stammered as he started to hit keys with his magic. But there was a green flash, and the elder prince was knocked away from the terminal. His round eyes looked up in astonishment. “Vanity? What are you doing? We must…”

“You must go do whatever you must. As must I.” He began hitting keys on the terminal.

A purple and blue icon of three gemstones appeared on the screen, and the terminal began to speak in a familiar voice. “So terribly sorry, darlings, but I’m out of my office at the moment. Leave your message, and I promise to get back to you as soon as I can.”

Blueblood stared in shock as Vanity took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Rarity. It’s Vanity. I’d hoped to speak to you before now. Tell you what I wanted to say. It appears that our time is up, though. We’ve been betrayed…all of us. If you get this message… I’ve gone to Elysium. If you can meet me there, then I’ll tell you what I should have years ago.” The screen flashed and went blue, and a message appeared at the bottom: ‘>Connection interrupted.’

With a sigh, Vanity rose to his hooves. Blueblood stared in shock. “You…you and my Rarity? You betrayed me?”

Vanity looked down at his older sibling. “She was never yours, Blueblood. She was never anypony’s. She was far too precious for that.” Then he looked at the door. “Now, I suppose I must give some bad news,” he said with a soft sigh. Without another look back, he walked out the door and towards the ballroom. The musicians played and the aristoponies in their fancy, expensive outfits chatted as if this was simply another party and not the ending of the world.

Vanity walked through the crowd and stepped up onto the

platform upon which the quartet was playing. I recognized one of them: a gray pony with an elegant charcoal mane and a familiar instrument. Sadly, though, Vanity looked away from Octavia to the crowd below him. I was glad she got to play somewhere again before she returned to Flankfurt to die.

Dozens of concerned faces stared up at him. “Fillies and gentlecolts,” he began slowly. “Five years ago I, my brother, and my nephew came to you with a plan to establish a sanctuary for the elite of the country. Let the bureaucrats scamper away to Stable One; we would have a shelter of our own design and comfort. A place where the Princesses and the aristocracy could retire and live until it was safe to return and rebuild Equestria. You gave generously. Some of you even had the privilege of seeing plans of what we were creating. The majesty and grandeur befitting Celestia and Luna.”

He paused for a long moment, then said evenly, “We are betrayed.”

Murmurs broke out, cries and shouts. Vanity simply stood there before them, looking out calmly as he surveyed the crowd. That calm demeanor seemed to spread through the assembled aristoponies; they quickly composed themselves, far more quickly than I might have guessed they would. “The Redoubt is sealed, and those who have taken shelter in it have set this mob upon us for petty revenge. And while we may defend this place for a time, eventually, this manor will fall. There are simply too many ways in. Therefore, I propose that you utilize Fancy Pants’s airship to relocate to the Elysium Resort. It is both defensible and well provisioned. Perhaps there, you will be able to weather what is to come.”

The old buck stepped forward. “I’d be more than happy to, old boy. But…I noticed that you didn’t say ‘we’.”

Vanity pressed his lips together for a moment before sighing softly. “I will remain here. Somepony must pay for this failure. I accept responsibility.”

Fancy Pants’s monocle popped from his eye, and he chuckled. “I say, but that’s the most rubbish I’ve heard in ages. And I’ve listened to your brother,” he said as he shook his head. “Somepony is going to have to lead us and get us situated, and you seem to have a good horn on your head. Now, if whoever double crossed us would like to step forward…well…I would happily leave them here to rot. But you? You’ve only ever wanted what’s best for Equestria.”

Vanity's mouth worked, but then there was a scream from the kitchens as the work staff raced into the ballroom, a group of shouting, rampaging ponies following on their heels. "Find the stable!" some bellowed. "String up the nobles!" roared others. A cluster charged the stage, wielding knives, improvised clubs, and the occasional firearm.

Vanity's magic reached out to seize the nearest, largest object he could find: Octavia's contrabass. The green light surrounded it as it slammed into the charging four like an immense club; the heavy instrument sent them all falling away, and for an instant the invaders' momentum was broken as the huge bass rammed horizontally into the group. One last mighty swing knocked another outshoot away from the aristoponies fleeing the room. From the screams and shouts and crashing glass and gunfire, though, bedlam had erupted in every corner of the mansion. Some of the invaders turned their guns to the stage, but the contrabass rose, the bullets pinging off the wood.

The white unicorn blinked and then looked at the stunned musician. "Quite a sturdy instrument." He levitated two dropped revolvers from the floor and began to carry out careful and deliberate headshots; faced with such opposition, most of the attackers retreated back to the kitchen. He paused a moment to float the contrabass back to Octavia, who hugged it tightly. "Do you have anywhere safe to go?" he asked as Fancy Pants and his filly walked to the door, the elderly unicorn lifting a dropped sledgehammer.

"Does anypony?" she said softly as she looked up at him with dark, sad eyes. Then the chaos flooded back into the ballroom and she was lost; Vanity turned away and raced to join Fancy Pants. The guards were still trying to fend off the surging masses, but the battle had turned as they were overwhelmed and their weapons seized. As the aristoponies raced about, there was an immense crash and explosion that shook the immense manor; the screams built as the chaos spread even further.

Fancy Pants and Vanity reached the upstairs hall where a line of sandbags and furniture still formed a barricade. "Get over! Get over quickly!" Vanity shouted at the panicked servants and aristoponies scrambling for their lives. A few he lifted up and over with his magic as a wave of raging ponies raced up the stairs. Vanity and the few guards left held with bursts of fire from small machine guns for

a minute. Then one of the guards ran. Then the other two.

And still they came on. They tore at the barricade, their bullets shattering the elaborate mirrored walls and gouging holes in the fancy furniture as they chopped at the obstruction and tore at it with their hooves. Perhaps it was his control and poise or simply that their fire was wild and undisciplined, but, even as bullets skipped around him, not one found Vanity's hide as he kept his place.

Then he looked over as the door to the nursery opened and a terrified blue eye peeked out. Their gaze met for one second, and then he looked at the mob. "You will not pass!" he yelled as his magic reached out for every dropped firearm and wrapped it in his green glow. At once, every single weapon around him levitated into the air and pointed at the head of the stairs and the stunned faces of the mob who realized too late their folly. Then the guns roared in unison as a stream of bullets and gunfire tore the attackers to pieces. More were coming, though, and, one after another, the floating guns clicked on empty chambers. Bloodied, maddened, they came yet again! Vanity lifted a broken chair leg to meet them as they rushed the barricade.

Then a glowing sword swept through the throat of one of the attackers as Blueblood calmly trotted forward to stand beside him. "Touch my collection, will you? Trample your mud all over my home, you filthy peasants! Get my coat all dirty?!"

Vanity smiled. "You've been working on your swordplay, Brother!" And, side by side, they bashed and sliced the attackers till finally the assault crawled away back down the stairs. Vanity let the chair leg drop as he panted. "Now…let us get the children to the airship–-"

A sharp pain tore through his belly as a foot of steel buried itself in his gut. Vanity fell to his side, hooves hugging the wound as he stared up at the bloody sword floating beside his sibling. "You should have kept your hooves off her, Brother. Rarity was supposed to be *mine*. She was supposed to marry *me*." He swung the blade and wiped off the blood as he trotted back down the hall.

Slowly, Vanity pulled himself to his hooves. He magically removed the uniform and pressed it to his injury as he looked at the terrified eye peeking through the nursery door. Slowly, he smiled. "Keep them safe, Harpica."

"Master Vanity, you're hurt…"

He took a deep breath, his guts on fire, and lifted his head high. "This? 'Tis only a scratch," he said as blood trickled down his back legs. "Now, keep the children silent and safe, Harpica. They're counting on you. Leave when you think it's safe to go."

"But…"

He raised his hoof to her lips. "Any pain…any injury…any indignity…is a small price paid in the defense of an innocent. Remember that," he said with that shaky smile. He nuzzled her gently between the eyes again. "Now, close the door and don't worry about me. I think I'll retire to my room. I have a very sternly worded letter I need to write." He kept the smile, standing there patiently with that calm expression before she finally closed the door once more. His head drooped as he grimaced in pain and trotted back to his room. He tossed the rumpled bloody uniform into the trash as he finally took at seat at the writing desk.

The sounds of shooting were dying down now. Through the window, I thought I saw some kind of boat thing suspended from a gasbag making its way east. It was already starting to snow as he drew out a piece of stationery and began to carefully write, the blood from his injury soaking slowly into the seat of the chair.

"I doubt you'll ever get this, Rarity," he said softly as he folded the letter and took out a small empty orb. "I don't know if anypony will ever see this memory, but it is something that needs to be said," he drew a slow breath as he started to shake, his body growing chill. "I am to die. Let me say that. Let me begin with that. Then let me say that, had things been different we could have been the greatest of lovers. If you were not a Ministry Mare and I not a prince, we could have had a better life. A life that you deserved. I know the mistakes you made…your many regrets…and I will take them all with me into the everafter."

He groaned at the throbbing buried deep in his gut. "For any other who sees this, I pray that you will forgive a fool. I joined the project with the best of intentions…to save lives. So much money…so much material…and now what does it all matter? I am dying…my brother is mad…Rarity…sweet Rarity…I did it to protect others against the inevitable. My nephew once said... it seemed to him that the only way to save Equestria was to destroy it. I thought he was joking…in one of his moods. He so loved this country. Loved more than any other, I fear. Now all is undone. And damn me... I helped him."

"The Redoubt…I don't know what will become of it now. Perhaps Garnet and the rest of the O.I.A. cower in there still?" He shuddered and closed his eyes. "I am sorry. I wish I could tell you more. Miramare. My old locker. Regret…I am sorry." He opened his eyes to look at the glossy surface of his desk, at the tears that streaked his cheeks. "Goodbye, Rarity. I pray we meet again…in better… lives…"

The world swirled away, returning to darkness.

oooOOOooo

I heard the faint swoosh of the *Seahorse*'s talisman and the tap of the rain on the roof. Smelled the acrid sweet stench of the bilge and felt the cot around me. My legs felt…like something other than legs. The muscles moved all wrong as I shifted in the bunk. But that was nothing compared to my heart. My lungs didn't feel like they worked right anymore, either. I wondered if I was turning into some sort of sea creature. Some blind thing that crawled in deep dark places not fit for ponykind.

My PipBuck was gone.

"Glory…" I rasped, my voice throaty and raw. I felt sick, and coughed and hacked as I turned my head about, as if just twisting my neck might magically regenerate my eyes. Then I overbalanced and flopped down onto to the *Seahorse*'s wooden deck. "Glory!" I rasped again, my chest clenching in pain as if I were trying to expel my own lungs.

Then I heard a terrified little sob, a filly's sob. She sniffed a snotty nose. "She's…she's outside, Blackjack."

"I need her. I need to talk to her," I said as I turned towards the sound of Scotch's voice and extended a limb towards her. I felt a leg under my…and I heard her scream a little and jerk away. I shivered as I pulled back. She gasped and sobbed as she shuffled away from me. I simply lay there before saying quietly, "I'm sorry, Scotch. I'm not a monster. I'm not…even if I look like one."

She sniffed again. "I'll…I'll go get her." She trotted for the exit, her clopping hooves receding into the distance. I dragged my body after her. I didn't get very far before more hooves trotted back towards me.

"You're out? Don't worry…" Glory said from nearby, "We'll get you another orb and…"

I then wrapped my legs around hers. “Stop…I’m going to die.”

“No!” she snapped. “No! We are not talking about this. We’re going to Sanguine and getting you fixed!” She tried to pull away, but I simply held her as she started to shake.

“Glory. I’m going to die,” I repeated, and I was amazed at how calm I felt. It wasn’t that I wanted to die. There were so many things I wanted to do that I’d never get to do…but that was the way of things. You got your life until you didn’t any more.

“Don’t say that, Blackjack. Don’t…” Hot tears falling on my cheeks. I smiled as I nuzzled her chest…her strong heart. So very strong.

“Let me say it…because it’s true, Glory.” I took another burning breath. “I don’t want to, but I am…and I’m not going to give Sanguine the most dangerous piece of technology in the Wasteland just to save my own life.” She shook her head as she sniffed. “And I know how damn much this hurts, Glory. I know because if it were you…I’d move heaven and earth to find some way to stay with you. And I know that you…you would tell me not to. And it’d hurt like hell…but if you asked me to…I wouldn’t do it. So I’m asking you: don’t trade saving me for EC-1101. I’m not worth the harm he’ll do.”

Maybe it had been a nightmare…or maybe something else…but I remembered a row of purple eyes weeping along a gray neck.

“I can’t…I can’t just do nothing. I can’t…” she whispered in my ear. “I love you too much…I wanted to do…to do so much with you.” She sniffed as she shook. “Don’t tell me to do nothing and watch you die.”

“Well, you could just dump me in the river. One more piece of junk in the water; who’d notice?” I said with a little smile.

She gave a curious little hiccup before muttering, “You’re unbelievable, you know that?” She kissed softly right beneath my horn. “I won’t just…give up. You never gave up on me…on any of us. You always came for us. Please…let us try and find some way…any way…to take care of you.”

“All right,” I replied softly, making that concession. “No Sanguine, though…”

She sighed as she carefully lifted me onto her back and then into a cot. “No Sanguine,” she replied as she laid me on my side. “I’m sorry Scotch was…”

“I guess I look pretty bad. Did I at least regenerate my cutie mark?” I asked as I smiled again. “I mean, losing eyes is like…whatever…

but having my flank shot off? Horrors!" She made another hiccupping laugh and sniffed.

"Yes…but your eye…" she said softly as she nuzzled my cheek.

"Hey. The only thing that sucks about not having eyes is that I can't see you," I said as I nuzzled her back. And that I couldn't see my enemies. And that I couldn't shoot anything. And that I felt the panic slowly chewing up my brain. I fought to keep it away, because if I fell apart right now, I might as well pass EC-1101 to Sanguine myself. If a cheesy line kept us both together…well…she made another of those hiccupping, laughing sobs.

"That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard, but really, I can't believe that's the only detriment to being blind. After all, you can't…" and since my hooves were limp noodles, I shut her up with a kiss instead. To be fair, it was a very nice kiss. Finally, though, she pulled her mouth away. "We're going to find some way to help you." She had to say that. Just like not thinking about what had happened to me was holding me together, the thought of saving me kept her together. I couldn't deny her that.

"Just no Sanguine," I repeated. She sighed, then nodded against me, and I smiled. "And bring my PipBuck back. I feel naked without it."

"Uhhh, Blackjack, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but we don't normally wear clothes."

I nuzzled her cheek as I said, "You might not normally wear clothes, but I've gotten shot enough to consider barding clothes." Was she always so soft and sweet? Yes, yes she was.

"Okay. I need it just a bit longer. Then I'll bring it back," she swore before finally pulling away.

I sighed as I lay back in the bunk and I listened to her light hoofsteps recede out of the wooden hold. Then my ears twitched as she said, "She doesn't want us to go to Sanguine." Given that I couldn't peek in on their conversation, I could at least eavesdrop.

"Well, duh. 'Cause she's an idiot," P-21 retorted. "He's our best and only bet for saving her life. You saw her legs. You said yourself that it's only a matter of days before gangrene sets in."

"Her blood circulation's getting pinched off in her extremities. I don't know if that's from the taint or the cancer, but after firing that last silver bullet…" Glory grunted softly. "Why did she have to do that?"

"Because it was the only way she could win," Rampage answered.

Apparently she'd felt with it enough to let herself be unchained and join in the conversation... I was glad. She didn't deserve to be treated like a monster, even if she thought she was one herself. Nopony did.

After a long silence approaching the realm of awkward, Glory sighed. "Well, between the cancer, the…growths…and the brand new case of infection…we don't have much time. We're losing her."

Somepony stomped their hoof in irritation as P-21 said, "Then we go to Sanguine and Blackjack can just suck it up." A long pause, silence broken only by the rain drumming overhead. "Glory, you said it yourself. There's no other way. Unless you're reconsidering the pods again."

"It might stop the progression of the cancer, but it would not prevent the taint from contaminating other aspects of her mind… and soul," Lacunae said quietly.

"Who cares about that? We're talking about her life, Lacunae!" P-21 protested.

"There are worse things than dying, P-21. All of you know that better than anypony," Lacunae replied calmly, a voice of compassion and kindness. The voice of a real Goddess. I pitied Unity for not appreciating what it had created. "You might save her flesh, and that would be a worthy cause, but what about the cost of the guilt and shame she would feel? Would you see her suicidal again? And what of the magical contamination to her soul?"

"Soul…" P-21 muttered in disgust.

"Actually, there is no scientific evidence for the existence of–" Glory added.

"Souls exist," Lacunae interrupted in a firm, inarguable tone. "Your soul is nothing less than your quintessential self…the pure you. To change that is to fundamentally alter your complete being. The corruption inside Blackjack isn't simply biological…it is magical, and that magic is changing her soul into something different from a pony."

"So you want us to just let her die?" Scotch squeaked.

"You should accept the certainty that eventually she will die. Even if she were turned into a ghoul or alicorn, nothing lasts forever. We are born, we live, we wear out, and we expire. Our souls move into the everafter, to be reborn or to find another life. That is the natural order of things. When that order is violated, a mistake is created that must inevitably be undone at great cost and sacrifice. That is

what makes life precious. Life persisting simply because it is alive is a fool's game bereft of meaning. Souls matter infinitely more." Lacunae said in a gentle, if somewhat lecturing tone.

"Damn it, I don't want her to die," P-21 sputtered.

"Of course not. You love her," Lacunae said simply.

What? Oh, now wasn't this an awkward silence!

"Don't you talk to me like you know me. Don't you act like you know what I feel, you freak!" P-21 shouted.

"You love her or you wouldn't care if she lives or dies. Don't treat it like an insult," Lacunae replied.

"I love Priest," he said firmly.

"You like Priest because he makes you feel safe and wanted," Lacunae countered. I winced at that; blunt much, Lacunae? "You love Blackjack. Perhaps in a brotherly way. Perhaps in other ways. Regardless, you love her. And that scares you. Or shames you. I'm not sure which."

P-21 hissed sharply through his teeth. "Blackjack killed the pony I loved. She beat him to death in front of me! Did you know that? Did any of you?" A horrible silence descended as he panted. "She handed me…and countless other bucks…back to medical, to be raped again and again. Do you know how often she stopped it? How often any of them stopped it? Never. It never happened. Not Blackjack. Not Gin Rummy. Not even Duct Tape."

I lay there in that eternal black as he panted, then said in a slower, low voice, "I thought…once we were out here…somehow…she'd change that. Blackjack can do anything. And she would have. But every buck in there was resigned to the life they knew. Every mare was just waiting for the freaky outsiders to go so they could stop thinking about it and go back to the way things were. Not one of them had the vision or the decency to admit how fucked up it was. No one but Blackjack.

"I don't love her. I can't love her. Because every time I think about her, I think about how she wronged all of us and I don't know how to forgive that. I don't think I'm capable of forgetting it. But I can't hate her, either. I can't leave her. So I follow her around as she rips herself apart for ponies who are no better than meat, wondering what the hell all of it is for!"

He broke into harsh breathing once again, and for the longest time there was just silence. Then Scotch said softly, "I'm sorry, P-21. I am. I'm sorry I never did anything to help you. I once got in trouble

for saying it was wrong to hurt you just because you're boys. I said it was stupid. I got whipped. Mom did too. And we never said it again."

His voice relaxed a little. "You don't know what you're apologizing for, Scotch. I hope you never do. And neither does Blackjack. So don't tell me I love her. I just want to help her so she can keep helping others. Because I can't…"

I sighed, shaking my head as the rain drummed on and the boat rocked on the water. Tarboots coughed, then said, "Not that all this stable pony drama isn't fascinating, but the captain's been unconscious for at least a day. She'll need some unicorn able to snap her out of it soon."

The arguing continued, but it all became fuzzier as I rolled onto my side, coughing hard and feeling knotted muscles struggling and throbbing. My legs hurt like damn and I wasn't even on them any more. Every breath was a struggle, and I sighed. Maybe I'd die in a little bit and spare them all the trouble. That'd be the sensible thing, right?

~ ~ ~

Snow swirled around my black boots as I moved through the drifts towards a massive concrete building... the Fluttershy Medical Center. The light of the city shields painted everything for miles in a baleful green glow that illuminated the still heaps of snow. Thick gray clouds swirled overhead as I moved like a black ghost through the woods and past abandoned wagons towards the distant lights that seemed to beckon ponies for miles. Dozens of wagons lay in the parking lot along with tents staffed with doctors in yellow hazmat suits who hosed the radioactive snow off the ponies as they straggled in.

I approached the emergency room doors, and a dozen soldiers at once raced to attention, a few pointing their weapons at me. "Hold! Identify…" one with sergeant's bars on his uniform began. Without a word, I levitated out my badge and flipped it open, and immediately they lowered their guns. "Our apologies, special agent." They stepped aside as I walked in.

Inside the hospital were dozens, perhaps hundreds of scared and sickly ponies being cared for by exhausted yet still dedicated doctors. One approached me with nervousness. "Healing? Food? Radiation flush?" he asked. In my EFS-enhanced vision I could see the bright red radiation sickness warning.

“No. Yes. Yes,” I replied, my voice thick and muffled by the respirator. He directed me over to a spare IV stand draped with pouches of high strength RadAway. I pulled off the rebreather and began to drink, watching the rads fall away.

“It’s good to see anyone from the government here. Everypony’s been scared to death since the shield went up. Most of them are trying to hoof it to Manehattan; they heard it was still intact.” There was a questioning tone to his voice as he sought some sort of confirmation. I said nothing. I ate a bar of emergency rations and drank the medicine. “What about Fillydelphia?” I didn’t answer again, and he seemed to get the hint.

“What are you doing in here with those?” demanded a pink doctor as she scowled and pointed her hoof at my armament. I finished drinking the medicine, then calmly took some of the still full RadAway pouches, levitating them into my saddlebags despite the doctors’ outrage. The pink mare’s eyes went wide. “How dare you! Get out this…”

The spell was simple. She went completely silent. The next spell was equally simple as her foreleg was twisted two hundred and seventy degrees. She fell to the ground, her mouth opened in a silent scream. The nurse backed away but froze when I looked at him. Finally, I pressed my hoof to the doctor’s throat and cancelled the spell as broken bits of bone protruded from her limb.

I looked down at her, then said softly, “My business here doesn’t involve you. Do not make my business here involve you.” Then I turned to the nurse. “I need access to the generators immediately. I have intelligence regarding possible saboteurs.” He just pointed to a door on the far side of the atrium, and I nodded once. “Thank you. Leave her. Let her learn some new realities,” I said, and with that I left them both behind.

I slipped around the perimeter of the massive atrium full of scared ponies. The hospital had multiple redundant power sources, environmental isolation, and supplies to rival a stable for at least several years. Theoretically, it could have become one of the last bastions of civilization. I walked to a door, pulled out a small runed rod, and pressed it to the lock. A surge of magic and the door opened. Slipping it away, I made my way down into the basement and then the sub-basement.

The generators were huge affairs, bigger than commercial skywagons and running the entire length of the room. Beside them

were massive cables connecting to the reinforced Hoofington power grid. A half dozen ponies nervously watched both, so it was understandable that they missed my entrance. The noise of the machinery made the silencer superfluous, and six shots later, I was the chamber's only occupant. From my black saddlebags I withdrew gray bricks of explosives, pressed the remote detonator talismans to them, and placed them against the equipment.

I emerged back into the atrium, returning to where some guards, the nurse, and others were seeing to the doctor with the mangled limb. Two turned towards me, obvious anger and confusion on their faces. "What the hell do you…" one began.

"Zebra commandos have infiltrated the hospital. They've killed a half-dozen ponies already and placed explosives all over the place. You need to evacuate these people immediately." The guard's mouth moved silently. I continued smoothly, "Where is Fairheart?"

"He's on the fourteenth floor," he stammered in shock. "Near the hospital administrator's office." I turned away, and he called after me, "Wait! Where am I supposed to evacuate all these people to?" That was hardly my problem, and I trotted towards the elevators and magically activated one set of detonators. The resounding boom signaled the severance of the hospital from the power grid. Everything plunged into darkness. From my saddlebags came four grenades, and I sent them magically rolling away into the crowd. Seconds later, the explosions filled the atrium with screaming chaos. The lights flickered to life as the generators came back on. Smoothly, I left the screams behind as I started up the stairwell.

On the fourteenth floor, nurses were scurrying about. Foals were crying. Bedlam reigned. Somepony mentioned the weather monitoring station to the north. No matter. They made way for me in my black barding and coat. I said the magic letters 'O.I.A.' and got directed to where I needed to go. In the hospital room were two Steel Rangers, apparently ignoring their recall orders, the hospital head, and an elderly buck.

The white mare with the medic's cross was saying, "... backup generators are running and these floors have their own independent power generators if the building's fail…" she trailed off at the sight of my guns. "What are you doing with those here?"

I suppressed the urge to repeat my lesson. "Chief Justice Fairheart?" The sober maroon earth pony buck nodded once. "O.I.A. intelligence. We're scrambling to pull things together, sir.

We believe that zebra infiltrators are attempting to assassinate you."

"Balefire bombs weren't enough?" he replied lightly. "I take it the Ministry Mares are dead then, if they're after me."

"Unknown, sir. Applejack may be alive, but we will likely never be able to extract her from Stable Two, her last tracked position. Rarity and Fluttershy were both reported in Canterlot, which is a complete loss. Twilight is still being tracked in Maripony. Rainbow Dash's tracking put her in Cloudsdale around the time of the first strike. Pinkie Pie died in Manehattan." I said matter-of-factly. "Horse's tracking was lost in the Hoof. We're still working to determine the status of the military heads."

"Likely not good. I would have died in Canterlot if it hadn't been for this damned heart surgery," he said as he touched his chest with a grimace.

"Do either of you have experience with explosives?" I asked as I looked at the pair of Steel Rangers. Of course they did. All Rangers did. "There are bombs placed on the building's generators. Careful, though; the zebras are likely still hidden." The pair looked at the chief justice, who nodded, and together they trotted out.

"I can't believe they would attack…why? What do they hope to gain? Hasn't there been enough death?" Redheart said as she looked out the window.

"The zebras want our total and complete annihilation, Administrator," I replied. "You'd best see to the evacuation."

"Evacuation to where? There're so many…where are we supposed to go? And what about the ones who can't be moved?" Redheart fretted.

"Once the basement is secure, you can return. Right now, you have to get to safety," I said. Safety in the radioactive snow…how ironic. The administrator sighed, chewed her lip, and then slipped out as well.

"How did you learn of the zebra assassination attempt?" Fairheart asked, and then that question was answered by the sight of my silenced pistol. "So. It's a coup after all."

"The O.I.A. serves Luna and Equestria," I replied evenly. "We will not allow it to fall into the hooves of another. I'm sorry, Justice Fairheart."

"Just one question. Who's behind this? Horse? Goldenblood?" he asked. The only answer he received was a silenced bullet clean

through the eye. I magically turned his head away, holstered my gun, and trotted out of the room.

Once outside the secure area, I tapped the talisman again. The explosions sounded deep below the building, and another place that could have been a bastion of hope and civility went dark. Using my light amplification goggles, I loaded up on more Rad-X, RadAway, healing potions, and rations from a storeroom. Then I made my way out. I passed by the maimed doctor and the terrified nurse. Their eyes reflected pain, fear, and confusion.

It didn't matter. One more was dead. That just left one other to take care of. Ignoring the yelling and screaming in that radioactive night, I walked back into the darkness. My mission still wasn't finished…not yet.

~ ~ ~

I woke from that doozy with a sigh. Crazy dreams or something else? Given my current state, I supposed I could flip a coin to find out for sure. Had I been asleep for hours? Minutes? I couldn't tell anymore. I never imagined that with the loss of my eyes I'd also lose my sense of time. I couldn't even look at my PipBuck to find out. Well, at least I had my PipBuck back again. Somepony had tied a cloth over my eyes. Better than looking at…well…whatever I had.

My friends were still arguing. No…not arguing. It looked like whatever the plan was, it'd come together. They just didn't like it.

"I can't go and leave her like this!" Glory protested.

"You have to. She's going to need your help. You know what she's giving up for this," Lacunae replied evenly. "Seabiscuit will carry the captain. Tarboots, Oilcan, and Scotch will watch the ship. The sooner you get there the sooner you get back.

"Meanwhile, I can teleport P-21 there and back and get the rest of it," Lacunae pointed out.

"And I will do everything I can to stomp everypony who wants to keep fighting into glue," Rampage said. "Brutus called a ceasefire, but the Halfhearts are wiping out what's left of the Flashers. BJ wouldn't want us to get her her present but let everything fall apart here. So if somepony is shooting, they get rampaged." So now she was a verb.

Lacunae gave a delicate cough.

"Except for Paladin Studmuffin, provided he's still alive," Rampage added.

"You really think you can stomp enough?" P-21 asked.

"Now that I got reason to? You bet," Rampage said, then adopted a reflective tone. "You know, now that I think of it, I never really was very into the whole Reaper thing. But now that I've got something to fight for, I'm actually going to enjoy this. Plus, I'll be able to sit on Psychoshy. Give her the whole mushroom treatment."

"Mushroom treatment?" Glory frowned.

"You know…feed her lots of shit and keep her in the dark," Rampage replied.

"That's how you get mushrooms? That's disgusting!" Glory retorted.

"Glory…" P-21 muttered.

"Right! Right. Who cares about mushrooms right now, right?" Glory sighed. "Let me go tell her…"

"Glory, there's no time, and she's sleeping. Let's just get there and back again," P-21 said impatiently. I wondered if that tapping hoof was his.

"Right…Okay. Please keep her safe," Glory pleaded. "We'll be as fast as we can."

"We will. We're tied up to the bridge, so short of it falling on us, we should be safe. You just be careful. It's a long trot out there," Oilcan said in a soothing tone.

I heard hooves trotting closer and sighed. "So, is there a plan B?" I asked, and there was a little filly gasp.

"Oh, you're awake," Scotch said softly.

"Nope. I'm talking in my sleep," I replied, then smiled. "So…what's the plan?"

"I…I'm not supposed to tell you." I tried to move my legs and fold them under my chin, but they were too sore and swollen.

"Scotch…"

"Please. Glory and everypony made me promise not to tell."

"Tell me…"

"They said…they said you wouldn't like it."

"Tell me."

"But Miss Glory…"

"Tell me tell me tell me!" I grinned, and wondered if I was making her smile or freaking her out.

"All right! She was talking for hours on your broadcaster thingy. She contacted the pegasi and the professor and that big hospital and even a bunch of ponies in some faraway place. I think... they were after some super healy talisman like they had in medical or

something."

Another regeneration talisman? Put it in me, disintegrate me, and let me come back? It had…potential. Of course, knowing my luck, I'd be regenerated like this. Something inside me had been touched by the contamination, and now…now I didn't know what I was. I didn't feel like a pony. I didn't feel like anything that belonged in this world.

I sighed as I settled back. I'd told her she could try anything…I didn't like it, but I couldn't deny her that. I just hoped that, once I was dead, my friends could find some way to move on.

"Oilcan gave me a memory orb for you. It's one of the captain's. She said it's a good one," Scotch said from my side. I waited, then smiled.

"Scotch, if I can't see it, then I can't grab it with my magic. You're going to have to hold it to my horn." Then I hesitated. "Or am I really that scary?" Now she hesitated, giving me my answer. I bowed my head. "Sorry."

"It's your legs. They're all black and red and…clumpy." Scotch swallowed. "Glory said your blood's getting all goobered up in there…she said we're probably going to have to…to…" She swallowed again as her voice shook. "Sorry. I'm not supposed to say."

"Thanks, Scotch," I said softly as I stretched my horn towards her. "Well, Thrush's memories should be interesting... Just hold it to my horn."

"Okay…" but again she balked. "Blackjack, are we…bad ponies for what happened in 99?"

I wanted to reach out and touch her…but that'd probably just make things worse. "You're not, Scotch. You're just a filly. You're not responsible for what happened in 99. And neither was your momma. Duct Tape wanted a family. She wanted to end the breeding queue and have an actual life on the surface."

"Blackjack…is P-21…" she started, and I stretched out my hoof…please let that be a hoof…against her lips.

"Ask *him*, Scotch Tape," I said softly. I had enough trouble without eating those rotten food chips. She sighed and a moment later dropped the memory orb into my hooves.

"I did. He told me to drop it. But…he was Momma's favorite. I don't think she ever had another buck on her queue. And he was over a lot…more than any male." The Overmare's bribe, I recalled.

“It was like that whole…family thing Momma was going on about.” She sniffed a little. “I wish I knew for sure. Maybe then I’d know why he hates me.”

I could scream. She wanted to remember. She was unhappy. But if I told her, then P-21 would be pissed! But if I didn’t, then she would be sad…Arrrgh! Was there any way out of this that didn’t involve me fucking up? “I…let me talk to him. Okay?” Please please please let me die before that conversation came up!

“Just tell me, Blackjack. I’m not a baby!” she insisted.

Right. I already tried that! It ended in tears, recrimination, and loads of Blackjack guilt! “Let me talk to him. Please.”

“Uggh. Why does everypony keep treating me like a little filly? I stopped being one when Momma died.” She trotted away, muttering sullenly under her breath, “I wish ponies would stop trying to protect me all the time.”

She had a right to know…P-21 had a right to keep his secrets…but it was making her sad…but it would make him mad…but…

Memory orb! Now! With luck, I’d wake to some horrible monster raping my ass or find out they went through with plan A after all. I rolled the orb up my hide till I tapped it against my horn and swirled away into memory.

oooOOOooo

Big earth pony…Red…Buck... Macintosh! I remembered his slow and careful walk, his restrained power and casual grace. He trotted through the Miramare Air Station with an easy smile and saw it respectfully returned from the ponies stationed there. He walked up to an open door and peeked in on half the Marauders clustered around a table. He might not have been…well…anything like me, really, but I really liked being in his memory. It felt comfortable.

“So, what do I roll to hit, again?” Applesnack asked as he frowned at all the funky shaped dice.

The yellow earth pony smiled and pointed at the piece of paper. “Since you’re using a heavy gun built into your suit, it’s your dee eight agility skill plus your dee twelve steam armor skill. But you have one penalty for the train rolling towards the zebra encampment, so you’d drop one of those one die sizes. Unless you want to spend a grit; then you’d negate the penalty--”

“There has got to be an easier way to kill zebras,” the green buck

groaned as he covered his face.

Twist grinned across the table at him. “Hey, you were the one who wanted to go after them. I was fine taking the bits, but noooo, Mr. Steam Ranger just has to go blowing them all up.” Applesnack snorted as he frowned back at her.

Jetstream sighed from behind a folded piece of cardboard, shaking her head before looking up at Big Macintosh. “Looking nice, Sarge. What’s the occasion? Got a date with your marefriend?”

“Ayup. Taking her to Billiards,” he said with a nod.

“Nice. Didn’t know you were a pool fan. Thought that was more a unicorn thing,” Twist said with a smile as she nudged a little pyramid-shaped die with her hoof. In front of her was a weird sheet of paper with a bunch of lines and boxes and numbers and things on it, including a drawing of a buffalo filly in one corner.

“Well, she likes most anything that takes her mind off work. Guessin’ Twilight’s got her tying her tail in knots out there in Splendid Valley.” He looked towards the door. “So, if that’s what makes her happy, then that’s what I’ll do.” Simple as that.

“When you see her can you tell her to tell her boss to leave the magic with the M.A.S.? Last thing we need is more megaspells bringing our enemies back to life,” Applesnack snorted. “I don’t know what Fluttershy was thinking.”

“She wants to save people, same as any decent pony should,” Big Macintosh said around the grass stalk between his lips. Applesnack snorted again, bit some of the dice, and tossed them. They clattered across the table and came up ‘1’s.

“Oooh, botch,” Echo winced. “Roll your luck! Maybe you’ll negate it!” The green buck made another roll. The whole table sucked in their breath sympathetically. “Oooo…critical botch…” Echo said as the green buck groaned.

“Great. Knowing my luck, my armor will turn sentient and crazy, or I’ll end up stuck in this stupid can for the rest of my life. Or both.” The green buck turned back to Big Macintosh. “Well, you go have fun. I need to find out if I explode or not,” he said as he nudged the dice.

The creme-colored, buzz-cut mare chuckled. “Look at it this way. Maybe your gun will explode and kill you and then you’ll come back as a Steam Ranger Revenant! Wouldn’t that be cool?” Twist asked with a grin.

“Right. ‘Cause that’s just how anypony would want to spend the

rest of his life: an undead pony trapped in a hunk of metal." He snorted as he glowered at the incomprehensible sheet of paper in front of him.

"Hurry up and roll, Snack. Let's find out what happens to Steelhooves. Then it's Smiling Jack's turn," Jetstream said with a nudge of her blue wing. Echo nodded as he flipped open one of the strange 'Wasteland' game books. The pegasus looked up at Big Macintosh as the earth pony began to turn the pages. "Enjoy your date, Sergeant." He nodded and walked away, followed by Applesnack's plaintive cry. Macintosh just chuckled as he headed out the exit.

A short subway ride later, he trotted towards the grand plaza surrounded by the six ministry buildings. Shadowbolt Tower loomed above all the rest, rising like a spire into the evening sky. As he approached the front doors, there was a bright purple flash ahead of him, the blue mare in a simple, practical blue dress appearing from it and looking only slightly disheveled. Maripony shook herself briskly, nudged her glasses back into place, then noticed Macintosh. At once, she smiled and ran to him. "Macintosh!" She held him close and nuzzled his neck. "Am I glad to see you! You wouldn't believe what a day I've had!" she groaned and covered her face with her hoof. "The entire ministry is crazy!"

He chuckled and put his leg around her shoulders, giving her a gentle and careful squeeze. "Well, at least it was nice of Twilight to teleport you all the way out here. Or was that your magic?"

Maripony blinked, flushed, and smiled. "Oh yeah. Twilight teleported me here. Told me to have some fun. In fact," she murred, kissing him softly, "she insisted on it."

He flushed politely as he said, "Well, I got some decent fun in mind. You should like it. It involves lots of fancy mathematics." Then he paused. "If you're interested in the not so decent kind…" Now it was Maripony's turn to blush.

"... We can do that later," she stammered. Ugh…please let this not turn into another marathon sex orb! I couldn't take another one of those. Not that sex with Rarity hadn't been spectacular, but… damn…why was I thinking this? I took in how happy she looked to be with him. I wondered if that was how I looked with Glory.

The whole trip on the subway, Big Macintosh received a case-by-case analysis of just what was wrong with everypony in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Maripony complained about Luna's

constant 'hooves off' approach to governing, leaving Twilight on her own to figure everything out. She complained about Fluttershy keeping her megaspell research secret until a disastrous 'field test' required a battle to be fought twice. She mentioned how Goldenblood should have kept her in the loop. And the meetings. A meeting to plan meetings! Endless talk about projects and programs and spells. "I thought I was going to be able to create new magic! I thought that I'd be a part of something greater. Instead, my whole day seems to be sitting in meetings so that everypony else can talk around me!"

"Well, tell Twilight you want to quit. If it's not making you happy, find something that does," he replied quietly. "Simple as that," he said as the subway train arrived at Horizon station. They rode the escalators up to the street level. Horizon Labs was just a big, dark, glassy block.

Her mouth moved before she dropped her gaze, "It's…not so simple." She looked at him. "Do you like fighting? Does it make you happy?" she asked as they trotted towards the bar south of the subway station.

"Anope. But my friends need me. Equestria needs me to fight," he replied casually.

"Well…it's the same for me," Maripony replied quietly as she hung her head. "At least, that's what everypony keeps saying."

"Mari? Is there something you need to tell me?" he asked with a worried look.

The blue unicorn just shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing." Then she smiled at him and pulled herself together. "Let's just have a great night together. I don't want to think of ministry business or Twilight Sparkle at all tonight." He just looked at her, then nodded as they strolled into town. Down in the pool hall, she at once lit up in glee at the game; in short order, she was lining up shots…and then she magically produced a chalkboard and slide rule and started to work out shots while Macintosh just looked on.

Of course, executing her precisely measured shots was another matter entirely, and more often than not she sent the cue ball bouncing away from where she wanted it to go. Macintosh, on the other hand, simply gripped the stick in his mouth, braced it against his hoof, and took the shot. And, much to Maripony's chagrin, sunk more balls than she did.

"Clearly there's an element I'm not accounting for," she muttered

as he bought two plates of daffodil and daisy salads with apple slices. He just smiled, and she arched a brow and gave a little smile of her own. “Aren’t you going to tell me what I’m missing?” A small knot of ponies in white uniforms who’d been playing cards at a nearby table were watching the pair, nodding their heads in our direction.

“I figure you’d rather just figure it out yourself. If you need me to tell ya, y’all ask,” he replied as he munched on the clean, fresh food. Oh so delicious…

She looked pleased at his reply. “You know, you’re the only person who’ll do that for me. Everypony else, if they know I need to know something, they’ll trip all over each other trying to give me the answers. They never stop to think maybe I’d like to find the answer out myself.”

“Twilight too?” he asked, and instantly her mood was blown. “Sorry. I’d put a word in with Applejack, if you’d like her to talk to Twilight about your problems at Pleasant Valley.”

“No… ” she sighed.

“Hey, cutie. Is this Miramare mook giving you trouble?” a unicorn buck asked as he trotted up with his three buddies. He had an anchor for a cutie mark.

Maripony looked at Big Macintosh and then back at the four sailors. “Trouble? Not particularly.”

“Yeah? Why don’t you come over to our table? I know all kinds of tricks we can teach you involving balls and a shaft,” he chuckled. Oh…I knew somepony about to get his rump rearranged. I could smell the booze on his breath. Not enough to make him weak, but probably enough to make him stupid and dangerous.

“You need to go back to your game, sailor,” Big Macintosh said firmly. “Everypony’s having a nice time. Don’t need to spoil it.”

The brown unicorn scowled up at Big Macintosh. “You listen here. You come all the way to our pool hall, the least you can do is let us enjoy the company of your marefriend. And in case you didn’t notice, there’s four of us and only one of you.”

“Ayup. So I reckon you best go and round up a few more so it’s a fair fight,” he replied. “You might want to sober up, though. Make sure this is a fight you can handle.”

“We should go,” Maripony said in concern, looking around. The conversation had suddenly generated a lot of interest from the other sailors.

"Oh, you think I can't handle you? You think *I* can't handle *you*?" the unicorn laughed and grinned at Big Macintosh. Big Macintosh tensed his muscles as the unicorn buck whirled around and smashed his rear hooves into Macintosh's chest. Macintosh didn't budge. The unicorn went sprawling on his face.

"I'll chalk that up to y'all bein' drunk," the red pony said evenly. Eyes glaring, the brown unicorn picked himself up, lifted a chair, and sent it flying at Macintosh. The crimson buck knocked it away with his hoof. "And that to y'all bein' stupid. Ya don't get a third." He nodded to where the sailors been playing. "Y'all go back to your game, folks. Otherwise, this is gonna get bad."

"Oh, It's going to get bad. It's gonna get real bad!" The brown unicorn yelled as he lunged, rearing to smack Macintosh in the face. Big Macintosh caught the descending hooves with one limb and then powered his other forehoof straight into the sailor's gut. The unicorn's breath whooshed out as he doubled over, wheezing and sputtering, and then became violently ill.

"Let's go, Maripony," he said as others rose to their hooves.

"But…I don't understand? What's wrong with showing me tricks?" Maripony asked, then frowned. She rubbed her nose, looked at the pool table, then at the sprawling buck. Suddenly, her eyes popped round and blue behind her glasses. "That…he…was he…?"

"Ayup. Now, we need to be going," he said firmly as the pair backed out of the pool hall. It was dark and starting to drizzle. "Let's hurry up. Some folks don't have the sense Celestia gave a bag o' beans."

"But…can't you just tell them you're a sergeant and…I dunno… order them to go away?" Maripony asked as they trotted quickly down the street. A glance backwards confirmed that the unicorn and his friends were following.

"There ain't a rank been invented that could compete with Admiral Drunk and General Ticked Off." Big Macintosh frowned. "They'll be right sorry in the morning, but I'm more worried about dealing with them right now."

The pair had nearly reached the subway station when a dozen more sailor bucks trotted up the stairs. They took one look at the pair and moved to block the entrance. Maripony and Big Macintosh were forced into the abandoned Horizon Labs parking lot. "I want you to get out of here, Maripony. Don't worry none about me."

"I'm not going to leave you to a mob!" she cried.

"Get him!" they shouted.
"Sneaky earth pony!" called another.
"He's disrespecting the uniform!"
"Probably a stripe lover!"
"He's a sergeant! He's a soldier!" Maripony yelled, but from the fervor of the crowd and the reek of alcohol, they either weren't hearing her or didn't care as they surrounded him and knocked her back. The shouting sailors piled on all at once. While he knocked them away at first, even he couldn't prevent them from piling on. Still, I was amazed that, despite the beating, he really wasn't all that hurt even as he disappeared under them. Then Maripony let out a yell and all at once Big Macintosh moved.

I'd never felt that kind of strength before as his body lunged and launched half the ponies into the air in rolling arcs. A kick behind him knocked a half dozen flying. Now that powerful frame was all action as he battered the sailor ponies like a force of nature. No. I take that back; there was nothing excessive in his force. For all his strength, he kept his kicks, shoves, and bites controlled and precise. I marveled at the focus and the care he took in preventing severe injury to the sailors.

Then the brown unicorn who had started the whole damn thing lunged at him with a drawn knife. There was a purple flash and a shriek as Maripony appeared between his side and that plunging blade. She staggered, glasses falling as a three inch gash appeared in her shoulder, blood spreading along her dress as her purple eyes stared at the injury in shock. "Oh…my…that went differently in my head."

Big Macintosh looked at her standing beside him, bleeding, then looked at the buck holding the floating knife. His body came up and his hooves crashed down. The unicorn was struck with such force that he bounced like a ball filled with crunchy twigs. Then he lay still. "This fight is over," Macintosh bellowed. "You've attacked an officer and injured a civilian."

Now there was muttering as sense began to reassert itself and many of the sailors started to realize the amount of trouble they were in. "You three drag that to the medic," Mac ordered before turning back to Maripony. "Okay. That's deep. Take the dress off; we'll have to use it like a bandage."

"Oh no…no no no…you don't need to do that. I'm fine! It's just blood…just…a lot of blood…" she stammered as he stared into her

eyes.

Purple eyes.

She dropped her gaze, and he slowly lifted the hem of her dress up to expose a purple and pink starburst on her flank. “Twilight?”

“I…um…I wanted to tell you earlier…” she stammered. He frowned, then looked at the dress. She took it off, folded it over, and pressed it to the injury.

“Don’t worry about that now, Ministry Mare,” he replied flatly as he looked around at the sailors. “Can you teleport with that injury? Get yourself to the hospital?”

“There’s a Quik-Kare back at the corner,” Twilight said softly. “Hopefully they won’t ask too many questions.” Twilight kept her eyes low in shame, her magic holding the makeshift bandage to her wound, as the two walked carefully back.

“So…how’d you magic your appearance? Rarity?” Big Macintosh asked in a low, slightly hurt voice.

“Yes. She’s developed a surprising number of spells to alter a pony’s coloring and mane. Minor transfiguration magic that…can…ah…” She faltered, her ears drooping as she limped beside him. “I couldn’t get it to change my eye color, so I had to enchant the glasses. And no magic can change a cutie mark, so I had to make sure it was covered.” He didn’t say anything, and she muttered lamely, “Been trying to make a magic decal that would cover it but…ah…it doesn’t quite work right.”

“And you always kept the lights off when we were together in bed. Thought you were just being shy,” he murmured.

“I *was* being shy, Macintosh,” Twilight said with a furious blush on her blue cheeks. “I didn’t…I mean…I didn’t know how…how any of that worked outside of books. The most I knew about a buck I got from reading the Zebra Sutra. I never…ever…imagined I’d do it, let alone with you.”

“Always wondered where you learned some of those positions…” he murmured as they approached the Quik-Kare 24 hour medical service. “So why the disguise?”

“It was the only way I could get away, Macintosh!” Twilight replied, looking up at him with pleading eyes. “You don’t understand…every minute of my day is scheduled. Meetings, presentations, openings, project reviews…I’m lucky if I can find a few hours to myself! And if I ever go somewhere on my own, everypony who sees me recognizes me. I’m not supposed to go

anywhere in Equestria without a dozen O.I.A. security ponies around me at all times. It's like that for all of us. Rarity and Fluttershy have to clear a spa meeting with fifty ponies just to have an hour off together."

"And me?" he said quietly. "Why didn't you tell me, Twilight?"

"I…I wanted to…" she said lamely. "I meant to on our first date. A sort of…'Surprise! Nice to see you again!', but we had such a nice time out, and for the first time I…really enjoyed myself. I didn't feel like I was a Ministry Mare. And you…you were different, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember when the Marauders helped clear out Splendid Valley? I came up to talk to you. Asked you how you were doing. Would you like to get lunch," she said as she looked at him, "Do you remember what you said to me?"

"Said it wasn't proper for a soldier to be socializing with a Ministry Mare."

"Exactly. So if I'd told you the truth, would you have kept seeing me? Would you have kept sleeping with me?" she asked pointedly, and his ears folded back as he frowned in worry. Twilight sighed, "Well…I guess that's all over. Funny…I was looking forward to this date for days."

He blinked in surprise as they stepped into the Quik-Kare. The sharp antiseptic smell clashed with the coppery scent rising from the blood. The nurse began, "Welcome to Quik-Kare, for the quickest care anywh–-whoa!" Her eyes popped wide "Oh! Um…this way!" the puce pony said as she gestured for them to come around the counter. "We'll get some healing potion in you lickety split! What happened?"

"Mugging," Big Macintosh said. "I'll file a report as soon as we're done here."

The nurse got a healing potion, and Twilight drank it as Big Macintosh put a pencil in his mouth and started to write on a clipboard. The silence was palpable, and the nurse kept looking from one to the other. "Um…if you don't mind, could you please fill that out outside, sir? We normally only allow patients in the back room." Big Macintosh sighed, held clipboard and pencil in his mouth, and trotted to the waiting room. Ten minutes later, Twilight emerged looking half angry and half confused. The nurse took the paperwork and wished them both well.

"She thought you'd cut me…with how we were acting and

everything," Twilight said as she turned to face him. "I almost wish you had…then I wouldn't feel so bad." She closed her eyes and asked the dreaded question I knew was coming. "So…what now?"

"Nothing. You go back to the ministry. I go back to base. That's that, Twilight."

She looked as if she'd been stabbed again. "Oh."

"I meant what I said 'bout it being improper. You're a leader of Equestria and I'm just a common grunt sluggin' things out in the trenches. If folks know we're together, then neither of us will be able to do our jobs. I can't be datin' the number three most powerful mare in Equestria. You can't be socializing with a dirt pounder like me."

"But…" she began.

"No. No buts. And I have to admit that I'm mighty hurt this was how I found out. I never would have thought it of you. Rarity perhaps, but not you," he said firmly as he looked down at her. "Now, if you feel up to it, you best get yourself back before they worry about you. And I need to make sure that that brown jerk is peeling potatoes till his horn falls off."

Twilight crumpled a little more as he turned away. "Well…then… I'm sorry. Goodbye."

Her flash coincided with the rumble in the clouds overhead. He got three steps before the hard Hoofington rain began to fall and six before his rump hit the ground and he turned his face to the sky, hot tears mixing with cold rain as he showed his own broken heart.

oooOOOooo - Content Warning - oooOOOooo

The memory orb ended with me once more in darkness. I stared into eternity as I listened to the gurgle of water around the ship and felt the steady rolling. I let the orb rest on my chest. I could see Big Macintosh in that rain, feeling his heart ripped out as he tried his best to keep up his stoic and calm demeanor. He'd said what he had to drive her away and protect her, I was sure of it. Suffering for the one you love, because caring hurt no matter how you sliced it.

But then, so did bullets.

The gunfire outside was sharp and light. Low power carbines and varmint hunting rifles, but there were a couple of them. I heard the pop of a hunting rifle and the boom of a familiar heavy automatic pistol. The rifle fire increased. We were under attack, and I couldn't

do anything.

"Scotch?" I called out as I rolled out of the cot. I didn't have a gun, barding, or any equipment. My legs folded beneath me, and it was all I could do to crawl forward…whichever direction that was.

"Scotch? Where are you?" Somepony yelled in agony up on deck, and the hunting rifle went silent.

And then I heard the panicked breaths of Scotch Tape staggering in along with the sounds of somepony dragging their hooves in the door before collapsing hard to the deck. "No…no no…Mister Tarboots."

"Scotch? Scotch, what's happening?" I asked as I felt around. Then I felt the hot blood rapidly cooling on the wooden deck.

"The others are late. And…and there's ponies. Like four or five ponies. They shot Oilcan and…and now Tarboots. He's…he's got a hole in his head…" And from the sound of the hooves on deck, they were coming right here. "Oh…they're coming…they're coming." Her terror ratcheted her voice higher and higher.

"Okay. Scotch. I want you to give me my pistol and point my head towards the hatch. Then I want you to find the hatch to the bilge. Get down there and no matter what you do, don't make a sound. Do you understand?" She panted, and I smacked her. "Understand?"

"Y…yes…but what about…"

"Don't worry about me. I've had ships fall on me. What are they going to do? But you need to hide. You need to stay quiet, no matter what. Can you do that?" They were almost to the hatch.

"Y..yes…" she replied. I felt the mouthgrip on my lips and bit down. Then she turned my head. "There. That's…that's the door." I patted her once and pushed her away, then sent a bullet towards the hatch as I sat there, a lump of flesh who could barely move. There was cursing and shouting and bullets were fired in towards me. I couldn't risk moving. With the creaking sounds the boat made in the river, I couldn't tell if it was them coming or not. I just used my best guess, firing single shots with enough space for Scotch to get herself hidden.

I managed about two minutes before the gun fired on an empty chamber and I sighed and spat the gun out. A moment later, I heard a buck say, "She's out." Yup. I'm out, genius. I just kept sitting there; what else could I do?

"Afternoon. If you've come to steal the ship, well, I'm afraid the captain won't like that much. And she's the only one who can make

it work," I said. Who knows; maybe I'd chanced upon practical bandits who were in a charitable mood and highly gullible.

"Holy shit, is that…that's the Security Mare?" one said with a gleeful giggle. It was a familiar voice. As I remembered, he'd been screaming for me not to kill him the last time I'd heard it. "Well, we come back to Fallen Arch, and not only do we find a nice old boat but my family's murderer too!"

"Seriously? That the bitch that killed Sidewinder?" another drawled.

"Technically, Deus killed him," I said, but these ponies weren't interested in technicalities. The realization of who I was spread rapidly.

"She killed my brudders…"

"Ransacked our home... "

"Took our property…"

"She's the mare what nicked me in the museum!" one shouted.

Oh, this was going to *suck*…

"You're fucking dead," a buck growled as he pushed a barrel against my blindfold.

I swallowed. I couldn't let this be quick. Once I was dead, they'd rifle the ship.

It would have to be *slow*…

I grinned as wide as I could. "Thanks for doing me the fucking favor, jackass. Go ahead. Put me out of my misery!" I yelled as I twisted my head.

Their shouts dropped to a dreadful silence broken by low chuckles. The gun was pulled away. "No…you don't get any favors from us, Security." And it smashed against my face.

The fun began.

I tried to put up a fight. I did. My legs might have been useless, but I could still swing them around, and my mouth worked just fine. They grabbed my flopping legs and hauled me face down over a crate. "Let's stop her flopping around once and for all!" one cheered, and the others laughed as they pinned down my leg. Then I felt a sharp stab. "Pin her down, Nails." Wait…what?

I didn't scream. Not at the spike of pain that went up my foreleg as the hammer struck the head again and again. Nor did I scream at the second, higher up. No, it wasn't until the third one, just below where my elbow had been, that I cried out, to their laughter. I called them every variant of 'fuckers' I could as my other foreleg

was nailed to the floor too. No matter how I tugged, they weren't coming free. Not without leaving my legs behind. My rear legs were hauled apart, and one…two…three…they were nailed to the floor as well.

I squirmed and jerked; I couldn't help it. Every move hurt, which kept me moving. "How's it feel, cunt? You took everything from me." That was the one from Fallen Arch…I was getting better at picking out their voices.

I was barely able to spit out, "I left you your life."

"Yeah. Well, let me pay you back for the favor," he replied. Then my tail was lifted and I felt a tongue. I couldn't help myself, I started to shake. I knew what was coming. I knew damned well. Hell, I was inviting it…any indignity, pain, or humiliation.

Just keep focused on me.

It didn't hurt like the nails. Those had hurt more, certainly. No, as it was pushed into me, I cried out…much to their delight. And as they got going, my own biology betrayed me, easing the violation. I hated it, but so long as I didn't hear Scotch cry out as well, I could endure. I had to. And so I let them fill me however they wanted. And they laughed and called me a slut, as if words could hurt me now. Go ahead, I thought. Take another ride. Shoot another load. I can take it.

I couldn't do anything…But I could take it.

Again.

And again.

And again.

But eventually, even violation gets boring. And then a buck said from nearby, "Finish her up. I'm going to see if there's anything else worthwhile in here…"

The fuck you are. I bit hard on what was trying to choke me, making him cry and pull out. Then I jabbed my horn into the side of the one who'd just spoken.

I blew out his guts all over me with a magic bullet.

Fun time was over.

"Cunt! Bitch! Whore!" Pretty unoriginal, but they were upset as they stomped me. I fired again and again until one of them got a hoof around my neck. I struggled. "Do it! Do it!" they began to cheer.

I felt a sharp metal edge press against the base of my horn.

One blow of the hammer and I screamed like I never had before.

Two blows and I felt blood trickle down my face.

With the third, there was a resounding crack, and I felt a snap within my head like a rubber band breaking. And I wailed like a foal. The pain of the nails was nothing…nothing at all…compared to this. An integral part of myself had been torn away. Finally, I went limp, my body glazed in at least three kinds of bodily fluid as I lay there over the crate. “Enough…fucking end this bitch.” My face must have been masked in blood. Wherever Roses was…I apologized to her.

“Come on…I can take…a little more…” I whispered hoarsely, spitting out more than just saliva as I lay there. Just a little longer. Just a little more…

…a little more…

Then I felt a sharp and strangely cold pain erupt in my side. Everything seemed to be oozing out of me. What, didn’t I have enough holes? “She’s done. Now toss the ship.”

“Toss this, motherfuckers,” P-21 said. Then there was a dull thud and the most curious sensation…I couldn’t move at all. “Stun grenade, courtesy of the sand dogs.” Every bit of me was limp and growing colder and colder. “No…no no no…” he muttered softly before he summarized my state nicely with a tell, “Oh, shit! Lacunae! Lacunae, get in here now! She’s been stabbed!”

…a little more…I just had to hang on a little more…

There was a faint pop and a presence beside me. “Oh… Blackjack…” was all she said, and her horn touched my side. The warmth of her healing brought home the pain, but the pain reminded me I was alive. It let me hang in there…

“You fuckers! You beasts! You…you touched her! I’m going to cut off every piece of you that you put inside her! I’m going to nail your fucking legs to a rock and see how well you can swim, you motherfuckers!” P-21 screamed, and I heard a dull thump over and over again. My mouth worked slowly as I fought to speak…but it was hard. I was so tired. So sore…

“Shh…lie…lie still…” Lacunae stammered in my mind. “I…I will try and find your horn. Perhaps it can be reattached…”

“Don’t…” I rasped softly. I felt her ear on my lips.

“Don’t? Don’t worry. We won’t let them get away with this,” Lacunae swore.

“No.” I coughed softly. “Don’t…kill…them…”

Lacunae didn’t move an inch as P-21 continued to rave and stomp

my prone attackers. “I don’t understand…”

“Let them…go…” I said softly.

Lacunae was so startled she spoke aloud. “Let…let them go?!”

P-21 finished his stomping. “Let them *what*?!”

I concentrated on breathing; it was all I could do. My attackers simply groaned. “Killing them…won’t…make things…better.”

“Blackjack…look at you! Look at what they did!”

“I know…but I forgive them…” I rasped softly. “I…hurt them too… I…understand now…”

“They aren’t worth your forgiveness!” P-21 erupted. “They’re raping, murdering *meat*! They’re scum! They’re filth! They need to be wiped out! They need to be killed as slowly as they…they hurt you! How can you spare them?! They killed Tarboots! They almost killed Oilcan. They were going to kill you. And Scotch…” He paused. “Where is she?” he asked in a rush.

I coughed. “Safe…below. Don’t let…let her see…still a kid…no matter…what…she says…” I said with each heavy breath. “P-21… I’m…dying. Please. Let them go…for me…”

“Why…” one of my attackers rasped. “He’s right. We are scum… and…I don’t want to die…but…why?”

“A yellow…pony…once said…do…better. And I…don’t want…my friends…to…kill.” I breathed slowly a moment. “If you’re…dead… you can’t…do better…”

“You’re crazy…” another of my attackers murmured. “How do you know we won’t just do this again?”

“I don’t,” I admitted. I could hear P-21 grinding his teeth in frustration. “Just…do better…please…just…do better…” I begged. I couldn’t give back to them what I’d taken…but I could give them two things…a second chance and my forgiveness. I was probably dead soon anyway.

I heard the sound of Lacunae dragging them out. “I will…remove them, per your wishes.”

I saved four more. They might have been scum, completely and totally. They might have been better off dead, and maybe they would do this again. Maybe I’d made a horrible mistake.

But they at least had a chance to do better…

After that there was the problem of removing my legs from the floor. With them gone, Lacunae tried prying the nails out, but they’d been hammered deep and the feeling of them being withdrawn nearly stopped my heart. Oilcan was injured but would

recover. Unfortunately, there was no recovering from a case of death. There was only one thing to do.

"Get some rope…and make sure that knife is sharp," I said quietly.

Four tourniquets and some sawing later and I was free. Lacunae set me in the bunk. My whole body wouldn't stop shaking. I thought that my heart would stop at any second as I shivered but couldn't seem to warm. I felt filthy, like some kind of biological discharge.

But I'd saved Scotch and four others.

For that…I could endure.

*** - End Content Warning - ***

Needless to say, when Glory arrived with the captain and Seabiscuit, the shit hit the fan again. There was a whole new round of 'what?!', 'I'm sorry', and Thrush telling me how stupid I was for sparing Tarboots's killers. Fortunately, by then Lacunae and Scotch had washed most of the fluids off me and wrapped me up in a blanket. I'd lost four limbs and Celestia only knew where my horn had gone. Lacunae had healed the gash in my brow and regrown my horn, but it still felt like a useless stub like the rest of my extremities. The Hydra had done nothing for me; I think I was at the point where my body just couldn't heal anymore.

It didn't matter. I just focused on breathing. Scotch had nestled the Fluttershy figurine where my left front leg met my shoulder and let me feel her smooth, pink mane on my feverish cheek. Apparently there were quite a few ponies coming and going all at once. A little bit later, there was talking on deck. Then we cast off again. The motor purred and the water jet talisman whooshed. Octavia played her music on my PipBuck. I felt limbs I didn't have any more wanting to move and join in the notes.

Scotch hadn't said a word since she'd emerged from the hold. She just waited nearby. If I was thirsty, she provided a sip of Sparkle-Cola. I was sick, tainted, and dismembered, but I worried more about her. "Hey, Scotch. What do you call a mare with no legs who's in security? Baton."

She began crying. I sighed…"Scotch…that was a joke. You're supposed to be laughing."

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"For what?" Her silence told me exactly what 'what' was. "Look, we were screwed, Scotch. The only way we were going to live was to stall. And, honestly, you got a whole, intact, healthy body. Maybe your head's been fiddled with a little, but you're going to

have a long life ahead of you. I'm not. If there's anypony who's supposed to be put through the meat grinder, it should be me. That's just simple facts."

"You were screaming. They were doing…things to you. Weren't they?" she muttered softly, "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"Let me tell you a secret. Come here." I heard her move closer and nudge the cot. "No no, closer," I whispered. I felt her breath on my lips. Then I stuck my tongue out and nailed her ear perfectly.

She jumped away and fell over something from the clatter, "Ewww! Blackjack!" I chuckled…because I had to. Because if we all started crying now there'd be nothing left. "You're so weird."

"I'm dying. I'm allowed to be weird," I said softly.

"You're not going to die," Scotch replied. "Nopony as boring as her can be wrong."

"I assume you're talking about me," Glory said as she trotted closer. "Blackjack…I'm so…"

"If you say sorry one more time I will soil myself right here and now. And it will be nasty. I mean it! Poop so nasty it'll sing and tap dance," I threatened as I turned towards the sound of her voice.

"She's being weird," Scotch informed her.

"She's always been weird," Glory replied.

"I have been interrogating Scotch for details on your miraculous plan to save my life." And if there was a hint of Sanguine in them, I was going to find some way to roll myself into the river.

"Something about a healing talisman? If it cures taint, then I'm all ears. Really…hearing's all I got," I rasped, my throat still raw from what had happened. I could still taste it. Smell it. I'd almost prefer another deep breath of chlorine to clear it out.

"A healing talisman is involved. We're calling it your birthday present," Glory replied.

"Details?"

"No details."

I pouted. "Aww, why not?"

"Because if we told you…then you'd stop us."

I sighed at her words. "So Sanguine…"

"Is not involved. He's the only pony who isn't." She kissed my cheek. "I made a promise to you."

Okay, good... but it was apparently a plan that I'd still hate. "Okay, now I'm curious…"

"You get to stay curious. For now, we have to take a little boat

ride. Thrush says busting her and her crew out of the *Celestia* is worth one free trip."

"Free trip where?" I asked with a smile, playfully. Then my lungs spasmed and I started coughing again. Apparently, inhaling water was a very quick way to get a nasty case of pneumonia…even without tainted organs.

"Shush. Rest and conserve your strength."

"Mmm," I replied softly. "I want Rampage to come with us."

"She's doing Reaper stuff…fighting and…doing what she does best."

"Don't care. Want her here. She's my friend and I want her with me," I said simply and pointed one of my stumps at Glory. "Make. It. So."

She tried to sound indignant. "Just because you're…"

"Beautiful? Charming? Witty?" I asked with a grin. Those were all preferable to the truth: mutilated, maimed, and dying. She gave a hiccup, and I added, "No crying either. I mean it. Epic bowel movement of nastiness if you do." She sniffed and I smiled. "I want her with us, Glory. I know why she left. Me and Scotch on a boat, alone…something bad might have happened. But now we're together and I want all my friends with me. Okay?"

"It's going to be a crowded trip," Glory said softly.

"Make sure you have a proper rotation to check my bedpans. The stench will probably peel paint." I knew it wasn't necessary. I hadn't eaten all day and wasn't the slightest bit hungry. And I was pretty sure my doors were so swollen I wouldn't be able to go without some heinous screams. But I had to be as Blackjack as I could be.

Ah well. I'd just hold it for the rest of my life.

"Alright. I don't like it. But we'll get her," Glory said in resigned tones.

"See, Scotch? You can get anything if you're sick and pathetic enough."

The filly grunted skeptically. "All being sick ever got me was a trip to medical for a shot in the flank."

* * *

I slipped in and out of consciousness. I really didn't know if hours were passing or not. Aside from water and Sparkle-Cola, I didn't

drink anything. Glory tried to get me to eat some mashed up and roasted Sugar Apple Bombs mixed with raw egg, but I was too sick for even her cooking. I knew there were ponies sharing the cabin with me, but I could never exactly tell who they were. Soon we'd left the river and were bobbing up and down.

"Are we on the ocean?" I asked nopony in particular.

"Yes," P-21 said right at my side, and I jumped. Well, would have jumped. Spasmed, really. He chuckled softly, "I thought that, when you couldn't see, your hearing got sharper."

"Yes, but you're still one quiet pony," I muttered. "So…"

"I'm not telling you anything about her plan, no matter how badly you shit yourself, Blackjack. I've seen the kind of mess you can really make, remember?" he said with a soft chuckle. "I don't think her plan is going to work…but it's her plan. Even if you'll hate it." He then put a hoof on my brow. "How's the fever?"

"Blargh," I muttered sourly. Why couldn't he be easier to manipulate?

"And the soreness?" he asked quietly…

For just a moment, I was confused. How had he known…but of course he knew. I went a little red. "Hurts…"

"I'd suggest an icepack, but I doubt there's an ice machine in the Wasteland," he replied. "And has it hit you yet?"

"Has what hit me yet?" I asked with a confused smile. But I knew what…I was just pretending. And he knew I was pretending. "It's not a big deal…" But it was a big deal. "It doesn't hurt that bad." It hurt really bad. I started to shake. But I couldn't fall apart…not now. Yet I couldn't stop. "I had to do it. I had to." But that didn't change a thing. I could pretend with Scotch and Glory. I could smile and act like what had happened to me didn't bother me a bit.

But not with him. Because he understood. Because once, I'd done something similar to him; more than once, now that I thought of it. Used him. Sent him back to be used. Sent him back to be the Overmare's trick pony. And then, slowly, I turned. I tried to keep myself as quiet as possible as I rolled towards him and buried my face in his chest. And he held me close and muffled my sobs with his chest as all the pain and humiliation leaked out of me.

I'd done this to him. Now I really, truly, understood. I could only hope nopony could hear me now. I hurt, and he did all he could to help me bear that hurt. Now I understood why he'd wanted to kill them so badly. To kill anypony who might do this to another. And

next time I met those four, or anypony who'd done to another what had been done to me, I prayed to the little yellow pegasus statue that I'd still be able to forgive.

When I finally pulled myself together, I said with utter sincerity, "I'm sorry." And now…I really knew what I was apologizing for. And he knew it too. "And…I'm sorry for killing him. I was scared and…I screwed up. I…I should have done more. I should have done better."

"Shhhh…" he shushed as he stroked my mane. "You know now. You really do…and so…I'm sorry." He sighed. "Every time I see you and Scotch, I'm reminded of that place…of feeling like…like meat. A thing. Being ashamed of my body reacting to the abuse." I shivered. Had I…I had. Goddesses, I had…He stroked my mane some more. Now that we were both broken, he could. He could comfort a hurting mare. "Thank you for saving my daughter from being raped," he said quietly.

I nodded. "You need to tell her that." I coughed and amended, "The daughter part I mean."

"I can't. Everything I feel for her is all twisted up inside me. Her mother was kind…but she used me. She never asked me if I wanted to be a part of the family she wanted. She simply assumed that I'd be there to give her the family she desired. I was never a person. Just a role." He sighed softly.

"That was wrong, but you're punishing Scotch for what her mother did. She's a smart kid. A good kid. She's already figured most of it out. Talk to her."

"Maybe…" he murmured softly. "When you can, get Glory and Lacunae to wash you…that always made me feel better."

But I was already drifting off with a smile on my face. After all, I heard Rampage coming aboard.

* * *

It was nice to sleep without dreams. It was what I imagined dying to be like. Nothing bad…good…or otherwise.

Being woken with a hoofclaw at your throat…that wasn't so pleasant.

"About time," I murmured. "What was taking you so long?"

"You were expecting me?" the Angel of Death murmured in my

ear.
"Expecting? You're late. I've half a mind to not let you kill me after all."
"Very presumptuous," she chuckled. "What happened to you calling me a monster? A murderer?"
"Well, now I need a monster. Glory plans on doing something to save me. P-21 knows I'll hate it. So…I need to die before it happens. So. Get going. I'm raped. I'm mutilated. I'm ready to cash in."
There was a silence, and then the hoof withdrew. "No."
You've got to be kidding me. "No? What do you mean no? This is… this is your thing! This is what you do."
"I give a gift to end suffering. You spurned that gift," she purred in my ear. "Take your own damned life."
Quietly, she left me lying there. I listened to the hum and coughed up a wad of something…raw. Something bloody and dark. "Well… fuck," I muttered. Why was nothing ever simple?

* * *

I wasn't sure how long we'd been travelling? Hours? Certainly we should have reached the Fluttershy clinic by now. Glory and Lacunae lifted me up and floated me out onto the deck. I heard the waves and felt the wind…and as I floated there in Lacunae's magic, I felt something else. A warmth playing all up and down my body. "What…what is that?"
"What's what?" Glory asked.
"I feel all…warm? But not like it's from a fever," I said as Lacunae began to wash me with a sponge. I was swollen and sore like damn, but I had to admit that it felt better than lying in that cot.
"That's the sun," Thrush said.
The sun? But…we must have been far out at sea. "Where are we going?" I asked softly.
"Told you. Surprise. We should be there soon," Glory said. I was set down on a blanket. As I lay there, despite everything, I felt a little more peeved than usual at the Enclave's cloud cover now that I felt the sun's warmth playing on my hide. "I always took it for granted," Glory said softly as the engine hummed. I nuzzled up against her, and her wing slowly stretched over me, keeping me warm. I wasn't sure how much time passed like that, but gradually, things began to cool off. Then the talisman slowed and stopped.

“Need to give it a little while to warm up. Starting to form ice,” Thrush explained. We lay there on the back of the ship as it rocked in the waves. I could hear my heart beating. *Thump thump…thump thump…*

“Is it night?” I asked softly.

Glory murred. “Mhmm.” *Thump thump…thump thump…*

“Can you see the stars?”

“Oh yes... ”

“A lot of them?

Thump…thump thump…thump…

“All of them,” she replied.

“Are they beautiful?”

“Yes…”

Thump…thump…thump…

“Thank you, Glory.”

“For what, Blackjack?”

“Trying…”

Thump…thump…

“Blackjack?”

Thump...

“Sorry…”

…

I should have fought. I should have held on longer as she shook me and called my name. But I was so tired, and I could see the stars.

They were calling to me.

I let go…relaxed…

And died.

Footnote: Game Over.

Volume 3: Second Chances

Chapter 34: Birthday

"This is the greatest day ever! We need to celebrate your birthday, babies, 'cause you were just born today!"

Once, after Hatches got killed, I'd asked Hymnal about what happened when we died. The question seemed somewhat pertinent at the time. The answer she gave was simple: we went into the recycler and somepony took our place. Finding that answer somewhat less than fulfilling, I pressed on. She attempted some muttered comment about how, when you died, you went to the everafter to be reunited with the princesses and your loved ones. Then she reported me to Mom, and one sore butt later I learned not to harass our stable's duly appointed spiritual leader.

Personally, I was finding being dead not much different than being alive in the ocean. It was black and quiet and I couldn't feel anything. I was just…nowhere. I had a vague sensation of motion, but I couldn't begin to tell you how I was moving or where I was going. I had no limbs to move, no heart beating, no mouth to speak or breathe through.

It was at this moment that I had my epiphany: death is *really* boring. Mom had taught me about how the living dealt with death, but she'd been somewhat lax on what the *dead* were supposed to do about…

A tiny pinprick of lavender light far off in the distance came to life, and with it I heard a single soft note and felt a gentle pull towards it. Now, I know that most ponies say not to head towards the light. Those ponies failed to mention that there weren't actually a lot of other options. Considering how many bad choices I'd made in my life, what was one more?

Though, considering how many bad choices I'd made, I looked forward to Celestia punting my sorry ass straight into Hell. I guess I could have fought against the pull, but…I was tired of darkness.

As I moved, I could hear the tone more clearly. It wasn't one constant drone but a single musical note that pulsed with the throb of the light. And... another pulse accompanied the first one. I moved closer still and saw a second light, a soft orange point that sang the other sound. And then a third was born, a cheery pink. Another, majestic purple. Teal. A pair, green and gold. A pair of pink motes pranced and tumbled around each other with a tinkling like laughter while a purple and lavender pair hovered attentively nearby. Each with its own note. Its own music. There were hundreds. Thousands. Millions…

Wow…stars…

They weren't just lights in the sky. Well…they were. But they were other things as well. Like how, when you took a hoof and held it in front of one open eye, you could see both your hoof and whatever the other eye saw. But I didn't know what I was looking at. They were luminous things... Strange and unusual and powerful…some kind, most politely indifferent. Some were the shapes of wheels and eyes and brahmin. Others were strange patterns that twisted and seemed to sing notes of music my mind couldn't understand.

And some were ponies, glowing outlines that frolicked as they sang their music together, their individual notes rising and falling and growing and blending with the notes of the other things that shared this great expanse. They filled the void with song and light and their own strange beauty…their harmony. Other beings flitted among them and spread chaos and discord to stir up new melodies and music they could not create themselves. And I knew that I was home. I could stay here, if I wanted. There was always room for one more. For countless more. And I'd be happy here, I was sure of it. A part of me belonged here.

Except…

I looked back behind me at a round ball orbited by two lights, one pale and beautiful and the other bright and radiant. But the world they revolved around was dark and ominous. What of my friends?

The song turned mournful. There was nothing I could do now. I should stay. There wasn't any place there left for me, nothing that could hold me. But I kept looking down at that distant world. I felt one of those giant luminous shapes move behind me and gently hold me in her hooves. *Stay, please…* she seemed to beg.

I saw other worlds with other lights. Some orbited distant radiant orbs. Others had dozens of expectant motes above them as they

sang down their own melodies. But all these worlds were bright with countless twinkling specks, like glitter or dew. And I watched as one of these luminary beings grew bright, and in a burst of light and song disappeared. The glowing cloud left behind spread, and new lights began to settle on other worlds or birth new luminary beings. Even these things were not eternal.

But in that darkness beyond their light, I felt certain there were things that were.

I looked back at my world. There were so few glimmering lights, and there seemed to be almost a spider's web of shadow draped over the entire world. Some light escaped…but most seemed caught in that dark web covering everything. The light of those orbiting spheres couldn't reach most of the world, try as they might to find some gap in the darkness and shadows.

What the hell had happened? The hooves holding me tightened, and off to the side I heard another note rise. It accompanied a star glowing with a fierce blue-white corona. A pony…no. An alicorn, proud and regal and glorious. He spread his wings wide and sang his note loud and gloriously across the heavens. He drove back those shadows beyond and all things that dwelled within. Such was he that his song drowned out all others as he swelled with pride. I expected the star to eventually stop and take a break, but he didn't. Instead, he grew along with his volume.

It grew to the point where the melody of the those luminary bodies was drowned out. Grew to where it became almost painful. I kept waiting for him to burst as the others had and let something new take his place. The mischievous ones floated about him, trying to trick him and break his onerous note, but he burned them with his scorn. Louder! Louder! It was if he were trying to fill all the universe with the single overwhelming note! He struggled with the strain, the note transforming into a scream.

Then he exploded. It was not a gentle burst of life-giving light. No, this explosion was raw and violent as his scream echoed to the farthest corners of the universe. Then his cloud fell inward; he would not die as the other luminous ones had, would not share his life. His blue glow contracted and darkened. Something that was a star hardened and transformed from light to something dark and base. And still it screamed, tearing at the melody around it. No trick by the spirits could stop it. No song from the others could reach it. And as the song died, the darkness encroached.

Finally, a blue radiance altered its place in the heavens and plunged straight at the screaming mass. It sang its own ominous melody as it plunged in faster and faster towards the sullen ember, one song combating the other as they closed together. The impact and the blast of light filled the skies as the blue luminescence died and the screaming ember shattered. Only a dark and twisted core remained, tumbling through the heavens like a heart of black iron. Its scream rendered pitiful and thin, it flew towards that darkness untouched by the stars.

But by chance a world, green and rife with the tiny specks of ghost light, drifted too near. The twisted remains curved towards it, speeding as they plunged towards the highest snow-capped mountain. The blast shattered the great peak, blasting it apart into flying stone. An immense pillar of cinder and flame shot up, raining down in an ever-widening circle of destruction. More mountains split and shattered, vomiting great torrents of fire and surging floods of magma. The forests transformed into sheets of flame. The seas were poisoned by ash and pieces of the star. The sky was rendered black with clouds. Those fragile motes and their infant songs were snuffed out in an instant.

From the great impact a ring of stone formed, the pieces drawing together to collect the tiny specks of life. Sun and moon orbited the blackened rock. Eons passed before me, and I watched the clouds thin and the first rays of sunlight and moonlight play on the blackened ground. The dead seas lay calm and still, the broken mountains finally silent. Where the dread heart had fallen was a vast bowl filled with black rock. The heart, its spiteful malice sated, slumbered, its hateful note dropping to a whisper. Rain fell, washing out the dust and smoke and filling the bowl with a deep lake of dark water.

Tiny patches of life began to grow beneath the passing sun and moon. The patches became brush and forest. Insects and fish began to populate the world once more, then larger and more complex animals. Mountains rose and fell and the world shifted and changed as life once more flourished. And then those motes of life began to sing their own simple melodies. Their songs became more complex, rising and falling and evolving. Trickster spirits came to mold and meddle and inspire. The songs spread to every corner of the world…save one.

In the dark lake the buried heart stirred. It shrugged, and the

mountains broke and the waters drained into the sea. The heart could do nothing but hum its one hateful tone and wait. Life crept innocently into the crater, and soon there was no warning to the rest of the world save for a knot of granite rising like a tombstone in the center. Deep within the earth, the vicious star waited. It could do nothing, its dread power spent.

But then zebras came to it with their songs and their dances. They built their homes and temples and finally a city. Most had no idea what was beneath them... but for some, sleep was troubled as the star droned its hateful tune. And from the pain it caused came inspiration for magic dark and foul. The songs were silenced. The dances stilled. Dark robes were donned, and the temples soon rang with the resonant drone. The ground was torn away, and fragments were forged into terrible weapons. The zebras went out to silence all other songs and to turn all voices to the star's dread tone. It grew strong as others sang its song on its behalf, that hateful noise so like a scream.

And the stars perceived.

With magic and sorcery, the zebras called forth the fallen star and bade it rise. Return to the heavens. Thousands were offered in sacrifice, their screams rising up until the heavens could no longer bear them, and one star plunged down to silence it forever. Like a great flame it fell and shattered the zebra city, and the broken mountains shuddered and collapsed to bury all beneath their rubble. But the dark heart was still not destroyed; it caught the falling star and consumed the luminescent being within. Only two specks escaped…one rising to the sun…the other to the moon.

Time passed, and the buried star waited. Greenery returned. Zebras shunned the valley, calling it cursed, and did not tempt the stars to fall again. Clouds obscured the sun and moon so they could not see its resting place. But soon, new creatures came to the valley: ponies.

The star once more whispered and tempted, ensnaring the heart of a beautiful princess and turning her against her sister…but the sister wisely banished her from the earth and to the moon where the glowing light could leech out her poison and venom till a chance at redemption was possible. Time, though, was forever on the side of something older than the moon itself, and when foolishness and wickedness stirred in the hearts of pony and zebra alike, that thing hummed its hateful note once more. Ponies built their machines and weapons and spells and slew one another in

bloody combat. The song was lost to a scream of hate and pain. This time, however, as ponies and zebras died, not all their tiny motes returned above. Many, a small fraction, but still so many, were snared in the spider's web and whisked to the dark heart, there to scream the dark note. Waiting. Tempting another star to fall and be devoured so that the heart could be freed.

And now I looked down at my dim world with a sense of horror and sadness. Was this true? A war between stars and monstrous things from beyond? A fallen star humming madness in the ears of the ponies of Equestria? I wondered if I was crazy; I hoped that I was. That all this was just my brain making its last feeble connections before finally expiring. This couldn't be true! It just couldn't!

It was too big. Too much. Even for me. And the glowing ponies around me agreed in their song.

But that was the point…

Of course it was too big for one pony. For one anything! That was why the single star with its single note had failed. Not even these glowing stars could keep back the darkness alone. It was when they worked together, combining their songs and changing…growing… that they could drive that vast and terrible darkness back. Harmony, not power, was their strength. Life, not destruction, was how they won.

So why didn't they help us? Here their song changed. Why help a world so close to complete failure? How could they spare more luminaries when every last one was needed? Some calmly, perhaps callously, suggested that we clean up the mess ourselves. The help of others would be of little use; what good would it do ponies to be transformed into spires of singing gelatin? But most stars simply had concerns of their own, and those that could help were helping as best they could.

But it wasn't enough. The dead heart of that star continued to hunger for the souls of its own, and its own dread note was beginning to build. It was intolerable…And with each light that spiderweb captured from my world, its song grew…

I had to go back. I couldn't be here while Glory…P-21…all of them were there. Make me a ghoul. A ghost. A monsterpony. Anything! I couldn't sing with the others and leave them down there. I had to do something. Anything. Whatever it took. They mattered more than me!

And the stars' song turned mournful. No parent wanted to lose their child. But I wasn't a child any more. I turned to see that glowing lavender unicorn with a striped purple and red mane, and she smiled. 'Security saves ponies', she seemed to say. Then she leaned down and kissed my brow, and her gentle light became my world.

* * *

"Welcome back, Blackjack," a mare said quietly. I blinked rapidly, and the white resolved into four gray walls. Stable walls. Two rows of desks with the projector in the middle and the teacher's desk in the corner. Only Textbook hadn't ever smiled…well, except when she was a psychopath trying to kill me. I was the same age as Scotch. I looked around, feeling disoriented. Hadn't I just been floating…or something? I had a vague recollection of lights…and before that, being on a ship. No…dying on a ship!

"Oh crap," I muttered. "I've died and gone to Hell."

Textbook laughed. "Well, you're half right. You most certainly did die. Complete cardiac and respiratory failure for almost eight hours. Fortunately, your pegasus and Reaper friends are resourceful. Since Rampage is effectively immortal, Glory was able to shunt her circulatory system into yours, keeping your body and brain alive long enough to reach your destination." Considering how Rampage healed…that couldn't have been pretty.

"So…are you Doctor Octopus or something?" I asked with a little frown. "'Cause you're using a lot of really big words that make my head hurt."

"You don't remember us coming aboard?" she asked with a small smile, then sighed. "Well, that's no surprise, considering the state you were in. We kept quiet for most of the trip. We didn't want to risk you guessing our plan and stressing yourself with objections. No offense, but you're remarkably stubborn at times." Her form shimmered and became an aging gray and white mare with a curious striped mane and legs. One that I'd seen teaching in a university before Goldenblood had recruited her.

"Silver Stripe?" I blinked.

"Nice to meet you brain to brain," she said as she looked around. "Is this really what you think of when you think of school? I was hoping for some nice lecture hall." She sighed again and nudged the

projector. “Ah well. The concept’s what’s important, not the aesthetics.”

“This is taking place in my head?” Well, unless I’d inexplicably reverted to a filly…which, actually, I had seen happen before. “If you’re here…then…Steelpony?”

She nodded, and the projector lit up. “Project Steelpony.” An outline of a mare with three cogs in the center appeared. “One of the O.I.A.’s projects to build a better pony. We’re using it to save your life.”

I stood on my chair, pointing my hoof at her. “You are not turning me into Deus!”

She rolled her eyes. “And this is why we didn’t tell you beforehoof…” Clicking her tongue, she shook her head. “Sorry, but it’s all done. We were just waiting to see if your consciousness emerged or if your brain had suffered too much damage.” The picture on the screen changed to a frowning Stable-Tec pony icon with several organs displayed. She pointed a hoof at the projection. “Heart, both lungs, stomach, and some other organs were all irrevocably contaminated and had to be replaced with synthetics.” The bad blackened organs disappeared, and new shiny silver ones appeared. “Your stomach and digestive tract were also removed and replaced with a special processor developed by your friend Rover. Your mouth has also been altered, so you can now eat not only regular food but also gemstones and pieces of scrap metal. According to your friends, this won’t be a big dietary change for you.”

“Wait. I can eat metal and gems?” I asked, blinking in shock. This was too much, too fast…

“Can and have to. Your systems are powered by an internal microgenerator…we were actually very lucky to find an appropriate gem to run it... but to supplement that and repair damage, you’ll need to ingest gemstones and scrap metal occasionally. On the upside, though, you’ll never get tired again.” The stomach on the picture disappeared and was replaced with a tiny generator picture like what I’d seen in the medical center dream. “Though you will still need to sleep occasionally to let your brain rest. There’s a function in the PipBuck interface to let you know how badly you need it.

“You’ll be glad to know you’ll be seeing your friends very soon. You’ve got two full ocular implants; they should look relatively

similar to your old eyes…barring a slight glow effect when you look right at somepony. Well, and the *lack* of a glow from irradiation; you're a rather unusual patient." She tapped the screen, and two eyeballs appeared. "You also had some brain damage. While we were able to remove the taint causing it, the damage itself was beyond our ability to repair. However, as far as we can tell, all of the damage is benign, which I'd probably not believe if I hadn't seen the diagnostics myself. Of course, we won't know for sure until you're awake."

"Why am I not awake now? And, am I going to have…have pistons and things sticking out of me?" I asked in a rush. I remembered that sensation Deus felt every minute of his life. The feeling of machinery struggling with flesh. I fought to calm down; if this was what they had to do to save me, then…wait. There was something... something Zodiac had said days back... no... I looked at Silver Stripe in shock, and she blinked, then smiled and shrugged.

"You should be okay. We neutralized the remaining taint. And no. While Rampage suggested something along the lines of Deus or Rover, Glory thought you'd prefer something less blatantly mechanical." The legs appeared on the projection. "All four limbs are reconnaissance grade, light and agile with rubber soles to cut down on sound. You can still crack skulls with them, but not tanks." She sighed. "Though why Rover insisted on adding--"

"Professor…you said…"

The professor didn't look at me, keeping her eyes on the projection. "Now, while your limbs may be powered, you'll still need to take care of your own flesh and blood. Most of your other biological systems are still intact and functional, and we were able to make a few improvements there, too. So long as you survive and aren't in truly ridiculous levels of Enervation, your biological parts should regenerate slowly. Nothing like Rampage's regeneration, but--"

"You said it would take years to make cybernetic organs from Steelpony!" I said as I jumped off the desk. Oddly, I felt myself transform into my adult self as I trotted in front of her. "Did you lie to me about that?" I asked as I stared into her gray eyes. I saw the tired sadness within them. "Please tell me you lied to me."

"They're good parts. Two centuries old…but well made," she replied softly. "I know you'll use them well." Her lips curled in a small, sad smile. "It's not like I'm planning to die. Rover's just going to move my head into a jar. Not much difference. Body in a jar.

Head in a jar. Really, it's much more efficient."

I gaped at her. "No…no no no…you can't do this!"

"It's already done," she replied. "And it was my idea, Blackjack. Believe me, Glory was no happier about it than you are now." She sighed. "Unfortunately, I'll be stuck in Tenpony until I can get a new body. My life support isn't exactly portable. Not one of those brainbots…that's too much crazy for me to deal with."

"But…why?" I asked, my rump hitting the ground, feeling numb all over. "You waited years to get your freedom."

She looked at me for a long time. "I'm more than two hundred and fifty years old, Blackjack. In that time, I was a somewhat decent instructor, the leader of an illegal research project, and not much else. For a hundred and fifty years I sat in Tenpony Tower planning for the day when I'd actually start fixing things…and as soon as I got the chance, all I did was trot around in circles killing raiders and gangs and driving my friends away from me. In the end, I wound up in a jar."

"But what about the Collegiate? What about the Zodiacs?" I pressed, not believing what I was hearing.

"Both fine groups. I have faith that Triage will run things well now that I'm gone. She's cynical and hard, but she's a realist who won't let the rest of her fellows down. And the Zodiacs will support her. I made sure all of them will continue." She dropped her gaze. "Now that they have Steelpony, I know they'll have a future to work towards."

I stared at her hard. "How long?"

"Excuse me?"

"How long till you have a new body? Till you're trotting around like normal?"

"Oh. That. Yes…well…there are many different factors to consider. The fact is that Steelpony was made to augment an existing body, not replace it outright. I could be shoved into a robot, I suppose, but that tends to degrade one's sanity pretty darn quickly." I glared at her, tapping my hoof on the floor as she looked away. "Well, taking into account current technological levels and the fact that most of my body was synthetic... probably…fifty or sixty years…"

If I hadn't already done it, I would have sat down hard. Fifty years? That was two pony generations! "But why? Why me? Why throw your life away when you finally have a chance to get it back? You had Steelpony. You could finally have been…been something!"

But she simply shook her head. “You don’t understand, Blackjack. All my life, I’ve wanted to make the world a better place. That was why I became an engineer and a teacher. To make things to help ponies.” She pointed to her math equation cutie mark and then sighed. “But I haven’t helped anypony at all.”

“What are you talking about? You helped--”

“No, Blackjack. I didn’t,” she replied firmly. “I didn’t heal a single hurt soul. I didn’t take down a single criminal. I didn’t do anything but sit in a glass jar while ponies like Triage and Sagittarius did the real work.” She then looked at me, and I saw the anger and shame etched on her face. “For two hundred years I watched ponies die. I stood in the background while my friends actually fought to change things. And in the end, I accomplished nothing but losing their friendship!”

She gripped my shoulders. “In one month… you… ” She paused to nudge my chin upwards so her gaze could meet my downcast eyes. “You have done more to help ponies than I have in a quarter of a millennium. You have suffered and sacrificed and paid in blood, sweat, and tears. Do you understand how incredible that is?”

“It’s nothing. Luck and my friends. I cause more mess than I solve,” I said, now the one feeling ashamed.

She shook me once, and forced me to look back into her eyes. “It’s not nothing. You’ve changed ponies’ lives for the better. And I won’t let you die, not when you can have a chance to accomplish so much more.” She closed her eyes. “If me spending the rest of my life in a jar is the price paid so you get another shot, then I actually feel like I’ve done something worthwhile. Something not undone by war and death.”

I stared at her for a long moment, and she looked away, her ears folding back. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

She closed her eyes. “There is something else…yes.” She took a deep breath. “You may be related to one of the Ministry Mares.”

What?

“That’s…that’s ridiculous.” I laughed, expecting a smile or something…some hint this was a joke. She wasn’t laughing, though. She simply looked at me, almost with pity. “Completely ridiculous! How could I be related to any of the Ministry Mares? Why would you think that?”

“Two reasons,” she replied soberly. “The first is that Glory told me about the silver bullets and the black security cases they came

inside." A picture of one of the silver bullet cases flashed onto the projection screen. "Each of these are enchanted so that they can only be opened by a very few select ponies or relatives thereof." I had a feeling that that list neatly matched everypony EC-1101 was supposed to go to. "The Ministries used the security cases to transport very secret letters and small objects to each other towards the end of the war."

"So, what…my great great aunt twice removed was Rarity's cousin? What's the big deal?" Certainly not something worth dying over, that was for sure.

"If that were it, then it wouldn't be a big deal. But then there's Project Steelpony. I expected the data to be damaged. In fact, I was dreading the months or years needed to repair it. After all, trying to force EC-1101 to unseal it when you're not authorized to do so would hardly be good for Steelpony or the program." The picture on the projector showed me cutting open a terminal with a chainsaw. The zony began to pace. "However, Steelpony wasn't damaged. It was unsealed with all its data completely intact. There were files there that even I had forgotten about. The only way that would be possible is if EC-1101 actively removed the seal…and it would only do that for a direct descendant of a Ministry Mare or the princesses."

I stared as the picture changed to one of me pushing a button with a hoof and the terminal saying 'access granted'. "But…" I thought of Fluttershy, Rarity, and Twilight.

She gave a little smile. "But that's impossible. I know. The Ministry Mares never married or had children. Rainbow Dash was widely believed to prefer the mares, but the others didn't, and believe me, they were under constant and intense public scrutiny; only Applejack was ever in a confirmed relationship, and even that was often regarded as questionable."

"Yeah, what was with that?" I asked with a small frown. "I mean, the whole 'no dating, no kids' thing."

The zony sighed and shrugged. "It was a prevailing attitude during the war. So many were giving so much in blood, sweat, and treasure that it was seen as indulgent. The Ministry Mares were supposed to be working on winning the war full time. Towards the end, I'm afraid the public would have been outraged at any act of self-indulgence. I heard Luna herself asked Applejack to postpone her relationship with the buck she was dating till after the war was

settled. The closest one ever came to being married was Rarity to Prince Blueblood. I understand her rejection was quite legendary."

"Yeah. He was still feeling it two centuries later." I sighed as I rubbed my leg. It felt flesh and blood here in my head. "So…what does it matter if I am or not? I mean, if I remember correctly, EC-1101 goes to each of the people in the line of succession and then to a 'descendant'. And that was broken or something."

"As far as EC-1101 is concerned, I don't know how or if it will matter. But there are other considerations too." Great! Lay it on me. I was now part robot and apparently the great great grandkid of one of the Ministry Mares. I could take it! "You see, in order to purge the taint saturating your system, we had to have access to a spell held by the Twilight Society, a group of ponies descended from the M.A.S. researchers who survived the bombs. They control Tenpony Tower, where we, physically, are now, and unlike us, they had some very specific demands."

"So, let me guess, I owe them a million bits plus my firstborn?" I asked with a snort, knowing that would never happen.

"No. What they want you to do is to try and open a door," she said grimly. "A door that can only be opened by a Ministry Mare. One *particular* mare."

"Twilight Sparkle?" I wondered if the Twilight Society could have just asked the Goddess. Twilight was a part of it…somehow.

"Right. A one in six chance is better odds than they've had in ages," she said quietly. "If you can't open it, then I'm sure they'll pat you on the head and send you on your way. But if you can, then they'll try to get their hooves on whatever is inside." She looked at me soberly. "But if you do open that door, that means that everything inside is yours by right. I know you're inclined to give things up, and I know they will plead their need. Trust me, it's a lie. For a century and a half, I worked with them. Whatever help they need is nothing compared to the help they've denied to others. They could have dedicated themselves to improving the Wasteland; instead, they turned Tenpony Tower into a gated community and turned away everypony they couldn't either exploit or use. And the second you turn the room's contents over to them is the second they will boot you and your friends out the front door."

Well…that sounded…pleasant. "But…Professor…I…I don't want you to be trapped like this." It felt like she was going to die or something! Was it just me, or was everything starting to get hazy

around us?

"Looks like the sedatives are taking effect." She put her hoof to my lips. "I've had years to come to terms with this. You saved Capricorn and Pisces. You gave us Steelpony, even after I tried to trick you. By destroying the *Celestia*, you saved the Collegiate as well. I have no doubt that Steel Rain would have destroyed us if we resisted, and if we surrendered, well... " She closed her eyes as she smiled, looking tired but happy. "By saving your life…I can save more. Isn't that what you always do, Blackjack?"

That was different. I'd killed ponies who didn't deserve it. Deep down, I wasn't much different from the people I fought, if maybe a little more stupid and reckless. I didn't want good ponies to die for me. But…that wasn't what she needed to hear from me right now. "Yeah. It is," I said as I looked at her. Funny, but did she always look so old and tired? "Thank you, Silver Stripe."

"No, thank you, Blackjack," she said as with a curl of her wrinkly lips. "And happy birthday."

* * *

My eyes opened, and at first all I saw was a gray haze. Then a black and white picture of a hospital gurney took shape next to me, beyond it a wall decorated with a butterfly motif. A sheet was pulled over a vaguely pony-shaped mound…a mound missing its legs. Black and white gave way to grainy color, and I stared at the pink splotches on the sheet, matching the wings of the butterflies on the wall. A cable trailed from the covered head to my own temple. A dark tan earth pony stood next to some equipment that beeped and bubbled, his hoof disappearing under the sheets. "She's sedated. We can make the transfer."

"Pickled pony is best pony," growled a familiar voice. I slowly turned and looked up at the cybernetic sand dog, Rover. He snorted. "Pony is awake. Pony should still be sleeping."

I felt hooves on my shoulder, and feathers tickled my side softly. "Welcome back," Glory said in my ear before she bit the cable and gently pulled it out. I felt something tickle behind my eyeball as it was removed. Oh…that sense of wrongness was kicking in. These legs didn't feel like my legs. They felt like…like enormous complicated booties glued to my body. I kicked and rolled off the table, and my body moved on its own to put its hooves down. Of

course I fought it and went rolling across the concrete floor. Alarms and alerts flashed in my vision.

This was bad. This didn't feel like me. Every movement I made felt awkward. I flailed on my back. I finally just stopped and looked at every eye on me. My friends all stared at me in shock. I could see their faces as clearly as if I was looking at them through a scope: fear and worry. I gasped…and yet…my heart didn't thunder in my chest. My pulse didn't pound in my ears. My body felt unnaturally quiet and still as I stared up at them.

"Pony is so dramatic," Rover snorted, rolling his gray eye before returned to the sheet-covered mare. "Doctor Pony. Pegasus Pony. Best we work now, or only have scraps left."

P-21 trotted towards me, kneeling. "Blackjack…" I jerked again, my mechanical hooves driving me back and bouncing over the floor. I fought it, which resulted in me rolling over. My flailing limbs caught him in the gut, blasting the wind out of him.

"Stay back!" I shouted. "I have no idea what's going on!" What was my body was trying to do? My random rolling knocked over a table; hopefully I hadn't broken anything.

"This is no way to operate a surgical environment," the brown buck said behind his operating mask.

I managed to rise to my hooves, but it was tough trying to learn how to walk. My brain kept sending signals that my legs weren't following right. So I'd move, then I'd correct, then overcorrect, then overcorrect for the overcorrection…and then land on my face. I didn't walk out of the surgery so much as repeatedly fall over in the general direction of the door. Finally, out in something that looked more like a recovery area than an operating room, I found a corner and collapsed in it.

'ERROR' flashed over and over in my vision. That seemed to sum up everything in me right now. Rampage, P-21, and Scotch trotted after me. I wanted to gasp, but my lungs didn't gasp. I wanted my heart to race, but it didn't beat at all. They stared at me, P-21 in pain as he held his gut. Rampage stepped closer. "Blackjack…"

I closed my eyes, then looked at her again. A targeting icon appeared on her head…then I looked over at P-21…and watched the blue crosshairs lock onto his head as well. And Scotch. I clenched my eyes shut.

"It was the only way we could save your life," Scotch said softly. "Sorry I lied," she added as her ears folded back. I looked at her and

gave a small smile.

Alive. I was alive. My friends had worked their asses off to save my life. I could see. I could -- at least in *theory* -- walk without feeling like a cripple. I'd been given a second chance. So why was I so upset? Would I seriously have preferred being dead to this?

I'd been given a second shot. Was this really how I was going to treat it?

Slowly, I opened my eyes again, and thankfully they weren't throwing targets all over the place anymore. Things still felt…off. A sort of nagging discomfort where my shoulders and hips met my body. It didn't hurt…exactly. More like my brain wasn't sure what to make of it. At least my mutated limbs had been a part of myself. Now it felt like half my body was wrong.

But I'd gotten used to faking it.

"No problem, Scotch. I probably would have freaked out horribly if you'd told me the truth," I said as I tried to hug myself. Again, my legs went wonky and jerked spasmodically.

"We weren't sure you made it," Rampage said with a little frown. "We were hours away from Manehattan when your heart stopped. Rover had some pipes Glory was able to jam into my chest and yours to keep everything going inside you. Thrush set a new speed record, and once we were at the tower, Lacunae got the army outside to let us in." She jerked a head towards the window. "Red Eye probably has a thousand troops surrounding this place…but apparently nopony messes with alicorns around here. They stepped aside easy as you please. Then she stayed behind. Said the tower wouldn't be friendly to her."

P-21 nodded. "They almost didn't let Rover and Rampage in."

"They insisted we turn over all our ammunition," the armored mare said as she looked at her hoofclaws. "I think they realized at that point that there was a mistake in their security policy. Actually, I think they were going to shoot me on general principle, can you imagine? Nearly had to commit a bloodbath just to be allowed inside," she said with a little pout. "Fortunately, they reconsidered when I shot myself in the head in front of them. For some reason, that just cut right through all the arguments."

Somewhere in Tenpony, I was sure there was a head of security taking either antacids or shots of hard liquor. Possibly both. I made myself smile. "Tell me you behaved yourself." The three of them clearly relaxed. I hoped that meant that they didn't see me trying to

squirm out of my own limbs.

She inhaled and rolled her eyes. “Please. One pony did say something about zebras and filthiness, but when I asked him to elaborate, he suddenly remembered an appointment,” Rampage said as she tapped her chin. “There may have been claws on tile, too. Hard to say.”

“You’re on Mint-als again, aren’t you?” P-21 asked her flatly.

“I’ve been out for days! I finally got to replace my stock!” She giggled as she bounced on her hooves in a very glittery circle. “These Tenpony guys always have the nicest shit!”

“Yeah. Well, they provided the very nice hospital to put me back together again,” I said as I looked at the clinic. “What about Rover?” I couldn’t imagine being in a tower full of ponies was good for the old dog.

“He’s staying out of sight. He doesn’t like ponies and ponies don’t like him. Apparently, when Zodiac asked him to do the surgery, he was quite…something,” P-21 said as he looked back into the operating room. “He wanted to make sure she was taken care of. I guess there aren’t many folks in Equestria like them.”

“When Glory used your broadcaster, she got help from all over the Hoof!” Scotch said with a grin. “Sure, Sanguine made his snotty offer, but so did the professor. Well, not snotty in her case. Dusty Trails sent a box of gems straight quick. Bottlecap didn’t have any parts, but she said the vendors took up a collection for when you were better. Hell, even Caprice sent a whole case of quality chems, plus every chunk of Deus she could find. Apparently, she only sold Zodiac the back half and was still trying to figure what the front end was really worth.”

“You mean I have pieces of Deus in me?” No wonder my insides felt out of it. I could almost hear tiny metal parts inside me screaming ‘CUUUNNNTTTT!’.

“A few. Apparently she had to extract some sort of metal stuff to strengthen your bones…or what used to be your bones. And there’re some other parts in there too,” she replied softly, not quite understanding my reaction; but then, she hadn’t been chased halfway across the Hoof by him.

Pieces of Deus. Pieces of the professor. “Is there anything left that’s original?” I muttered, looking at my... hooves and tapping them together idly.

“Can’t you just be happy to be alive?” P-21 asked with a little

frown. “A lot of people wanted to help you.” I smiled at his stern tone and looked up at him. He flushed, rubbing his brushy blue mane as he looked away.

“You’re right. You’re right. I just…it’s a lot to get used to.” A target locked onto his head, and I closed my eyes tight. A lot to get used to. “Speaking of broadcasters, where is my PipBuck?”

P-21 reached over, took my left hoof, and pressed in a plate. It slid away, and there was the familiar screen. “It’s built-in now. You don’t need to cover it up any more.”

“They’d have to take your leg off to get it now,” Rampage said with a grin. Then she frowned and rubbed her chin. “Of course, I’m pretty sure Psychoshy and Sanguine wouldn’t have a problem with that, so I wouldn’t get too comfy.”

“Right,” I chuckled mirthlessly. “Comfy…”

“Blackjack? What’s wrong?” Scotch asked. I sighed and closed my eyes, tapping my head against the wall.

“Nothing, Scotch. Just been through…a lot,” I said as I tried to sort through my emotions. All this help. All this attention…I was nothing special. Even if what the professor said was true, I didn’t deserve it. I looked at her sitting there with her head bowed. “And none of it was your fault. Understand?” She sniffed again and nodded, pressing her hindlegs tightly together.

“Well…I got some news you’ll like,” Rampage said, and she used a tone that promised that, if I didn’t like it, she was going to do something unpredictable to me. “Big Daddy is alive, and the first thing he did was thump the gangs into pulling back. He’s got your eyepatch, somehow…not sure if he lost an eye in the shelling or if he just likes the look, though. The peace is holding; it’s been three days, and DJ Pon3 hasn’t announced any new killing.” She looked at me with a cool smile. “Oh, and for blowing up the *Celestia*, you are now a Reaper, whether you want to be one or not. They’re scrubbing out Deus’s room for you.”

“Well, so long as everypony understands that I am one lousy Reaper,” I said as I closed my eyes, then frowned and peeked, catching the three of them giving each other skeptical glances. I gave a stern look, and all of them blinked and grinned.

“Absolutely! Blackjack: Worst. Reaper. Ever,” Rampage said, and Scotch nodded quickly along with her.

P-21 chuckled. “Things are a little messier on the Steel Ranger side. Apparently, the entire order has gone crazy. A group of them

actually attacked the Stable Dweller's stable. Then there was Rain's shelling. Some nasty business elsewhere. The whole thing's blown up in their faces, though. And apparently Crunchy Carrots didn't make it. Good thing, or she'd probably be shot for having lost their base. Stronghoof rallied the survivors, but he needs somewhere to operate from."

"What about Steel Rain's followers?"

"No idea. He left things a mess when he died, but their whole order is screwed up at the moment," P-21 said with a shrug. "They still don't even know if he drowned or got vaporized when the *Celestia* blew."

"So…" I said as I rubbed my head. "That leaves the Enclave…Red Eye…the zebras and their tank…"

"Actually, I don't think that that was their tank," Rampage said as she fished out another Mint-al from her pouch.

"Uh…it was striped?" Scotch Tape said, wisely omitting the 'duh?'.

Rampage rolled her pink eyes. "I mean that, while that was a Zebra Behemoth class tank, I doubt it was fighting for just the zebras." The three of us looked confused as she popped the Mint-al into her mouth and chewed. "Nopony throws heavy armor like that at a bunch of infantry. It's stupid. They just scatter and call in air support, artillery, or armor of their own. If that were a zebra tank, I'd like to kick the shit out of their commander for not using a fire team to pin us down. Two sniper teams and we'd have been dead meat. Or a melee specialist unit... "

"Twist?" I asked softly.

"Hmm?" She smiled at me, then blinked. "What?"

"Just…making sure of who I'm talking to…" I said as I glanced at P-21 and Scotch.

The striped pony chewed thoughtfully. "My guess is, that wasn't zebra. So somepony else has a Behemoth class tank after you."

"Well, that's so much better," P-21 muttered sarcastically.

"Actually, it is. One tank is pretty easy to avoid if you're careful. But you get a few dozen foot soldiers pinning you down so that it can blow you to pieces, and you'd better hope your air support is top notch," the striped mare said matter-of-factly. "As I was telling Shujaa and Minty, you can't just throw a single…" Then she blinked as she looked around. "Wait…something's the matter…"

I saw the pupils contract. "Twist…don't panic. Please…"

"What's…what's happened? Where am I? This isn't Miramare!

Where's Peppermint? What happened to her?" She began looking around wildly. "Where are they? This is a hospital! Are they hurt? What's going on?"

I sighed. I couldn't have her freaking out now, in the middle of Tenpony Tower! "Rampage!" Please don't make me have to hunt down a gun to sedate you! I sure didn't want to find out how busted my horn was.

The pink eyes blinked as she stared at me in horror, and then slowly they relaxed. She closed her eyes and slumped, hugging her head. "No blood anywhere…That's a good sign."

"You just went out again. It wasn't bad," I added quickly, and she looked relieved for that. "You were talking all military and stuff." I frowned a moment as I looked around. Scotch suppressed a yawn as I asked, "So where is Lacunae?"

"The professor's quarters," P-21 replied. "An alicorn, a sand dog, and a cyberzony's severed head. Sounds like the start of a bad joke." I had to wonder about his sense of humor...

"Ponies is all bad joke," growled Rover from the doorway. "Is done. Is okay." I rose to my hooves and slowly walked towards the aged canine. His cybernetic eye followed my steps carefully as I staggered. "Pony is doing all wrong. Do not think of walking, pony. Walk. Legs is smarter than pony."

"I can't help it. My legs want to do something else," I said as I looked down at them. "I'm tripping over my own hooves!" I protested as the damned things twitched under me. He just sighed and rolled his filmy eye. I sighed too as I looked at him, then past him at Glory and the brown buck. "Look. I just wanted to say thank you. To all of you, for everything. It's just... right now, it feels all muddled up. I'm trying to sort it all out."

"Ponies is always whining," Rover growled, shaking his head, and then shuddered as he closed his eyes. "Always the whining." Then he pointed a mechanical finger at me. "Pony has better leg now, like dog. Dog make best pony legs ever. Better than professor pony."

"Why did you help?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

He looked at the blue buck and snorted. "Pony take home. Dog work under city. Many accident. Many. Pony not care about dogs. Professor care. She make new leg. Strong leg. Show dogs how make, too. Make organ and parts so dog can do job and live. When bombs fall, dogs use metal parts to survive. Not become twisted. Not

become hellhound. Stay dog. Stay sane. So she say she need dog help, dog help." He growled and pointed a finger at P-21. "Dog remember promises and favors."

"Well, thank you," I replied as I looked at my body. My synthetic limbs were some sort of light metal painted with a matte white enamel. The forelegs ended all the way up at my shoulders, but the metal of the hindlegs stopped just below my cutie mark. I still had my lucky... well... relatively lucky queen and ace. "I'll…I'll try to remember, too." Then I laughed. "At least I have hooves again. For a while there, I thought I was going to grow--" I froze as four white digits extended from my hoof and flexed before my eyes. "AHH! I have fingers!"

Rover snorted, but I swore he was smirking! "Thumbs is better, pony. Pony will see."

"Come. Let's get you to the cargo elevator," the brown buck said. "Crazy times in Tenpony. I swear." He smiled though, as if quite welcoming this craziness. Then he pointed a hoof at me. "Stay here, please. At least a few hours for observation. After working on you for three days, last thing we need is for one of those synthetic organs to be rejected." He escorted Rover from the clinic. Given how dark it was outside I figured most of the tower was asleep. Glory gave a tired yawn, and all my friends seemed likewise bushed.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" I asked as I looked at them.

"The Twilight Society provided a room," P-21 said with a little frown. I agreed with his expression; the Twilight Society of Tenpony Tower definitely wanted something from me. I had to wonder what I was going to do about it. He fought another yawn. "We were worried…I mean, after three days we weren't sure you were going to be coming back. Or if you did, that you'd be…you know…you."

Glory bit her lip as she peeked at me behind her falling mane. "You said…any way to save you…"

"That didn't involve Sanguine," I finished for her. I looked at the white appendages sticking out of the end of my right forehoof and bashed it a few times with my left. Finally, there was a clack, and the fingers retracted. I really wished there was some sort of manual or something: 'Your New Mechanical Body and You'. Finally I smiled as I looked into her eyes. A real smile. "You did good," I said as I nuzzled her cheek. "I really thought I was toast."

"You were," Glory pointed out with a sigh before she kissed me back. "After two days of fiddling with you…I was seriously about to track down some zebra witchdoctor or something to bring you back." She sighed as she held me in a tight hug, kissing the side of my neck. "Do you remember anything? While you were out, I mean?"

"No…not really. Something about stars, I think," I said softly before I pulled back. Blood smeared her forelegs and she looked like she needed a good long day of rest. "Why don't you go clean up and catch some shuteye? I'll try and figure out…stuff." I forced a smile as a crosshair appeared on her forehead. "You know, while it's quiet?"

"You promise you won't get into trouble?" Glory asked. What was I, a foal? What kind of trouble could I get into here in Tenpony Tower? "I think Helpinghoof would be okay if I slept in here." I sighed, shaking my head as I tried to carefully stroke her cheek.

"Glory. It's a bed. A clean bed. With a shower and a toilet and…" I sighed again; now I was really wishing that I could go with her. "Nnnngh…maybe I can leave Helpinghoof a note?" I looked at the enamel coating my limbs. Hopefully they were waterproof.

"Already disobeying doctor's orders? It's his clinic. Try to follow…" She yawned and swayed. Rampage caught her before she staggered.

"I think we should all go," P-21 muttered as he rubbed his eyes. "It's late…or early…somewhere between the two." He pointed to some boxes in the corner. "Your things are over there, along with a bunch of stuff folks gave us to give you. We were going to do a party, but I don't think anypony expected you to pull through so early."

"You all go ahead. There's not much I can do anyway, beside figuring out complicated skills like walking." And, according to the refreshingly familiar screen of my PipBuck, I wouldn't need to sleep again for a few more days, minimum. After watching my friends leave, I walked back to the operating room, every third step sending me staggering as I overcorrected.

I felt a stab of guilt at the bloody mess left behind; I had to do something about it. I looked around the back room and found a janitor's closet. I stared at the door handle and concentrated. I knitted my brows, grit my teeth, and crossed my eyes trying to get my horn to work.

Just as much nothing as when Lacunae first regrew it; I was a horn-

headed earth pony now. I sighed, opened the door with my hooves, found a bucket, filled it up, and added some Abronco Detergent. I started to clean up the blood that smeared the floor and the operating table. On a counter was a large jar covered with a sheet, a monitor machine next to it. The talisman hummed as it beeped softly.

I was halfway through cleaning up, and probably making more of a mess in the process, when the brown buck returned. He looked at me in surprise as I squeezed out the dirty sponge between my hooves. "You know, we have janitors for that."

"It's my fault there's a mess. Least I can do is clean it up," I said softly as I scrubbed the floor. He looked at me curiously.

"Actually, most of it was from Rover removing her head. Say what you will for neatness, those claws of his can sure dismember a pony," he said as he got a sponge as well.

"You don't have to do that," I said as he started cleaning up the mess from the other side.

"It's no trouble," he began.

"You don't have to do that!" I snapped. I stared at him in shock. I looked down at the dirty floor, my eyes targeting soap bubbles now. "Nopony should be troubled on my account. I'll clean it up."

He just stood there for almost a minute, watching me as I worked. "You really hate yourself, don't you, Blackjack?" I stared at him for a moment, half in confusion and half in fear. "You don't think we should have saved you, do you?"

"I'm glad Glory did," I said as I looked back at the mess I was making worse.

"No doubt. She's happy, which matters to you. In fact, if Glory wanted you dead, you'd probably shoot yourself just to make her happy," Helpinghoof said with a little chuckle. "What I mean is, you don't think you deserved to be saved, do you?"

I didn't answer. I just sloshed around dirty water as I stared down at the sponge. Finally, I said quietly, "There are better ponies… ponies who should be back." I sighed softly, closing my eyes. "Scoodle. Radishes. Mallet. Tarboots. Elder Crunchy Carrots. Roses. Thorn." I clenched my jaw. Marmalade. Rivets. Midnight. Mom…"So why is it I get to die and come back but they have to stay dead?"

I wanted to gasp. I wanted my heart to pound. Instead, everything inside me was still. "The professor…Glory…my friends…

everypony…they all think I'm special. That somehow I'm important or better or…or something! How can they think that?" I asked as I stared at him. "I've screwed up so many times…how is it that I'm worth giving a second chance?"

Helpinghoof just chuckled and shook his head. "Because folks like you, Blackjack. You're a good pony."

"Am not…" I muttered, squeezing out the sponge. "I'm not special at all."

He sighed and then barely suppressed a yawn. "You don't feel you're worth the help others give you. You feel that there's somepony better who should get it. So you feel guilty, and when half the Hoof springs to action to help you…you feel bad because you think you don't deserve it."

I looked at him curiously. I hadn't thought of that. He asked after a minute, "Do you think your friends show good judgment, Blackjack?"

That's a good question... "P-21 follows me into irradiated tunnels, I've shot Rampage in the head on more than one occasion, and Glory loves me." He laughed as he squeezed out his sponge, and I smiled despite myself. "Honestly, I think Lacunae's the smartest one of all of us. But on average, I'd say my friends have better judgment than me."

"Then trust their judgment. If they…and so many others…think that bringing you back was the right thing to do, then trust it. Accept it's good and worthwhile." He smiled. "But if you insist on cleaning up, then by all means. I'll be in my office." I watched as he stood, dumped the bucket of dirty water into the sink, set the bucket down, and started to leave.

I blinked as I watched him go. "So…you're going to let me just clean it up on my own?"

He looked around at the mess and then at me. "Well, we could talk about it, but you'll just say you're not worth talking to. We could fight over it, but you'd just thump my rump." The brown buck chuckled as he shrugged. "At least with cleaning therapy, you work off some of your guilt issues and I get a clean operating room." And with that, he trotted out and left me to my work. I laughed despite everything, shaking my head. Security... blows up battleships and cleans floors. All I had to do was learn to cook, and I'd be perfect.

I played some of Mixers's finest, and an hour later I had the room as clean as I could get it. The constant activity was helping me

figure out some of the weirdness in my body, too. Finally, I dumped out the buckets and put everything away. I looked at the covered jar next to the beeping equipment but couldn't bring myself to look inside. After all, what would I do if she looked back? Instead, I trotted out into the recovery room, glanced into the small office, and turned off the tunes.

The brown buck had his head on his hooves, snoring brokenly as he slumped over his desk. I sighed, looked around, and spotted a threadbare prewar jacket. I draped it over his shoulders and then closed the door behind me.

So…what was there to do in Tenpony Tower at two in the morning?

I trotted over to the crates. Birthday presents in 99 were usually an extra portion of recycled yogurt and maybe a 'free bump to the head of the breeding queue' voucher. I looked at my thrashed saddlebags and shot-up armor. The poor rearing filly patch was stained brown and half peeled off. The word 'Security' had so many bullet holes and dings that it was hard to tell if I was Security or Secretary. I looked at the shreds of duct tape still clinging to the legs. I sighed, running my hoof over the chewed and patched kevlar.

I smiled as I saw Vigilance. My horn couldn't even flicker, but I cradled it in my hooves as I lifted it out. Well, I needed more practice using the mouthgrip anyway. Then I looked down at said grip.

A new name had been carved into it. 'Blackjack'. I sniffed as I looked at that list of names, from Card Trick to myself. I looked at 'Tarot'. Could there somehow be some way that Tarot was Twilight's child? And the gun had been passed down from mother to daughter, to me. I pressed the cool metal slide of the weapon to my warm brow and sighed. Then I set the pistol aside.

Beneath that box was one box from Bottlecap. By 'collection', she'd clearly meant a collection of ammunition. I looked at the box of ammo and then recalled what Rampage had said. Filling up my saddlebags with bullets at this moment might not go over well with Tenpony security. I wondered how they'd gotten the crate in. Panic, rush, and threats? I covered it up. Really…why confiscate ammo, anyway? It seemed a lot more energy-efficient to confiscate weapons…but it wasn't my show. Besides, I doubted I'd be as easy with the idea of Vigilance taken from me rather than bullets for the

gun.

Underneath that was a box filled with a bottle of Buck, Party Time Mint-als, some Dash inhalers, Rad-X, and RadAway, as well as a little jar of bright blue dust that I assumed was Moon Dust. It seemed that Caprice had been all out of Med-X. Still, there was a little note: 'Sorry.'

I'd probably give most of the box to Helpinghoof. Underneath that was some black, reinforced leather barding. I pulled it out and checked it carefully for cutie marks. None. It had a pony skull on the flank, and written on the back was 'Reapers' over the number '99': an old hoofball uniform. Sadly, it was in better condition than my combat armor. I looked close and saw that the 99 had once been 66…altered just for me. I wondered if Lacunae was behind it.

In a small cardboard box were a dozen cupcakes with red and white swirled frostings and a little 'Happy Birthday' card from Homage. I tried one. It was good. Really good. I felt a sick little knot in my stomach…or where my stomach had been. Was it now my 'reprocessor'? Was that where the guilt came from? A old, battered book from Triage: the Canterlot Journal of Medicine. Well, it'd be good reading for Glory in any case.

Finally, the last box held three things from Chapel. The first was a little note from Priest.

I've known many ponies who have gone to Celestia. Now I'm thrilled to know a pony who's come back. No matter how black things become, there is always…inevitably…a dawn.

I sniffed and felt a sick little joy that I still had tear ducts. I supposed even cybereyes would get pretty itchy without them. Helpinghoof was right…I felt so damned guilty. I didn't deserve any of this. I sighed, swallowing as I pulled out a small gold and silver pendant in the shape of Celestia raising the sun. I'd give it to P-21.

I set it aside and saw six bottles of Wild Pegasus in all their amber glory. Exactly what I needed right now. And if I was somehow incapable of getting drunk, then I was going to have Glory turn off my liver. But then, at the bottom was the absolute perfect present. It was from Charity, and it was *precisely* what I needed right then:

An invoice.

* * *

I'd just finished sorting the presents and was sitting on one of the

recovery room's beds playing with my 'fingers' when the doors into the entry room opened. I glanced over through the open folding divider, expecting Glory. Maybe she'd washed and wanted to finish snoozing here with me? But instead, a young mare poked her head in. She looked like hell, with shadows under her eyes and a definitely frazzled expression. I noticed her stable barding and PipBuck and smiled. She looked over at me and my wiggling appendages. I gave a half smile. "Hey. I have thumbs."

The little unicorn almost skidded to a stop, and she gave me the look. That look that said that she was assessing whether or not I bore hostile intent and that the color of her E.F.S. would determine if I was about to receive new holes or not. But after a second, the little unicorn relaxed. "Sorry," she said as she rubbed her rumpled mane. She'd definitely been through the wringer.

"Doc! You got business!" I called at once. The black unicorn and the brown pegasus buck who followed were only slightly better off. The zebra in the back was the only one who didn't look half shot to hell.

I went back to fiddling; it'd take more than a medical journal to make me worthwhile in a situation like this. Besides, none of her friends were really critically injured, though clearly they'd been well-chewed by the Wasteland. The black unicorn had a nasty scar on her leg that bespoke a dire injury. At the moment, though, the friends were more engaged in argument with each other than whatever had brought them to the doctor. I took a long swig off one of my bottles.

"And that, LittlePip, is why you don't go trotting right up to Red Eye's folks to have a chat. And it's 'specially why you don't do it alone!" the brown, winged cowpony said just before he drank down a healing potion. "If we hadn't been ready…"

LittlePip groaned. "Red Eye would have done it…" she muttered as she glowered at the purple healing potion before her.

The black unicorn sighed as her own nicks and injuries healed. "Well, while I admire your attempt at diplomacy, I'm afraid that, in the face of alicorns, griffins, and this army, it was a little…ah… overambitious?"

I then noticed something out of the corner of my eye and turned. The zebra was a hoofreach away and was just watching me. She didn't glower or frown, but I had the distinct impression that if I sneezed wrong, she'd turn me into pulped pony. "Hi," I said,

blinking. She didn't respond. I lifted the bottle of whiskey in my hooves. "Drink?" She still didn't respond. "Okay, am I going to have to kiss you to make you relax?" I'd seen eyes like these before…

"That probably wouldn't be good. She's had a bad experience with another cyberpony," the charcoal unicorn said, fighting a yawn. I looked again at the zebra. A bad experience…like P-21 had had his whole life in 99? Like I'd had…my nethers clenched and I dropped my gaze a moment.

Then I looked into her eyes and said, "I know what that's like. I'm sorry." Because I knew what it was like, and I was sorry any pony or zebra had gone through it. Her expression didn't soften in the slightest, but she finally looked away from me.

Helpinghoof fought another yawn as he passed out a tray of healing potions. "Well, you all made it out alive. It could be worse," he said as he made sure that the potions went down.

"It nearly was. I almost lost a leg!" the black unicorn said as she showed off the gnarly scar ringing her foreleg. The healing potion had smoothed its lines a bit, but that was the kind of mark you carried for the rest of your life. I knew; I still had them decorating any part of me that wasn't metal.

"Just one?" I asked with a small smile, tapping my hooves together. Oh…hello awkward. Welcome to the party! Just take a seat everywhere. She flushed and looked away as I shook my head. "Sorry…"

The pegasus stallion looked at the brown bottle between my hooves. "Is that…shoot, is that Wild Pegasus?"

I couldn't help it. I grinned and said, in my best Dusty Trails drawl, "Surely is, pardner. Only the finest single malt whiskey made from the greatest barley in all of Equestria, stored in oak casks for a minimum of ten years and bottled in custom-enchanted preservation bottles. Guaranteed to ruffle your feathers, curl your tail, polish your horn and get you good and fuckered up." I knew that from the back of the label. He nickered, his eyes lighting up like he'd just seen the sunrise, and I tossed him the bottle. He blinked as he caught it with his hooves. "Here."

"Yer just givin' it to me?" He stared in amazement. I nodded. I had more. Why not? "Well, shoot my nuts and call me a mare... this is… really nice, stranger."

"Blackjack," I replied, digging out a second bottle with my mouth.

"Calamity," he said, "and my friends are LittlePip, Velvet Remedy,

and Xenith," he added with gestures at the appropriate ponies. We tapped the bottles together and shared a drink. Well…it burned smooth and sweet and rested with a warm glow in my... well there was a warm glow *somewhere* in me, and that was what mattered! He wiped his mouth with a hoof. "Oh my…that surely is the real deal. Can almost taste the sky barley." Sky barley? "Heh, you can get six months fer possession of this stuff back home. Food waste." He snorted in disgust, then looked at me holding the bottle between my hooves. "Why are you drinking like that?"

"Oh. Yeah. My horn doesn't work," I said with a smile and a shrug. "Got chiseled off a few days back." What was that, awkward? You want to bring your whole family? Well sure, come on in! Now LittlePip and Velvet were staring. "What?"

Velvet flushed, then said to Helpinghoof, "Anyway, enough of our little problems. When can you take care of LittlePip's…erm…little problem?" she asked with a flush.

The brown earth pony looked at the little unicorn. "Oh. Well, unfortunately there's going to be a bit of a delay. We had to purge another patient's contamination earlier." It was amazing to see how hard they tried to not stare at me. I looked indolently back as I took a sip from my bottle. Personally, if she didn't have jelly legs, I thought she'd live.

Clearly, LittlePip wasn't worried either as she sighed, "It's not a problem. Look, why don't you three go up to your rooms, clean up, and catch some shuteye? I'll just wait here till they're ready."

Velvet frowned. "I don't know. I think one of us should stay with you." LittlePip scowled slightly. "Calamity or I…"

"I get a bottle of Wild P and yer telling me I have to drink it alone?" Calamity whined, waggling his eyebrows at the black unicorn. She blushed quite rosily.

"I will stay with her," the zebra said softly.

"No offense meant, Xenith, but once the rest of the populace wakes, they might not take well to your presence," Helpinghoof mentioned. A zebra in a town full of ponies…yeah, I didn't see that ending well. Particularly this zebra. She reminded me of Lancer rather than Sekashi. At least you could laugh with Sekashi. Xenith scared the piss out of me.

"I'll do it," I said as I sat back on the bed I'd claimed for my own. The four looked at me as I took another sip from the bottle. "What? Doc wants me to stay. I'll keep an eye out for her. No problem."

Velvet looked at me skeptically, and I gave my best 'trust the strange cyberpony in the clinic' smile.

Finally, fatigue or bad judgment prevailed. "All right. We'll see you in the morning." LittlePip sighed as she looked at her hooves. Velvet Remedy gave a bedside smile. "I'll suggest that Homage wait till after the procedure."

"Indeed. It will be difficult for them to beat her old record if she is not fully restored," Xenith deadpanned. LittlePip's depression was overcome by furious embarrassment, and I looked from one to the other. Record? Was I missing something here? The little unicorn was rendered speechless as her friends left. Calamity had the bottle balanced on his flank as he trotted out singing, "Wild P…Wild P… Got muhself some Wild P…"

I looked back at LittlePip as the doctor went back into his office. "You have some interesting friends, kid."

She glanced at me as she slid back into a funk. "Yeah. They're great…" She clenched her jaw and then smacked her hooves together hard. "Damn it! It should have worked!"

"I take it that 'it' is whatever got you all shot up?" I asked as I slipped off my bed and trotted over to her. She frowned and nodded. "So what went wrong?" I asked as I held out the bottle.

She took it with her magic and then sighed. "I needed something of Red Eye's... but I couldn't convince them to let me speak with him... or whoever is in charge of that army out there. I got frustrated, yelled…and they started shooting. So I shot back…only there were a lot more of them than me. If Calamity hadn't been ready…I dunno. I know Red Eye doesn't want me dead yet, but that doesn't mean some overeager thug of his might not kill me anyway, just to be on the safe side."

She took a drink, and her eyes bulged as she gulped and then coughed. "And I thought apple cider was bad! What is that stuff?"

"Eighty proof," I replied with a smile as I took the bottle back and took another drink with my hooves.

"How'd it happen?" LittlePip asked as she stared at my horn.

"Oh…ah…no big deal," I replied as I tapped my forehooves. "A bunch of bucks were in a raping mood. I was with a filly friend of mine from my stable…good kid…and so I made sure they focused on rutting with me rather than looking for her. Of course, when they got bored with me, they started looking anyway. So I shot one with my horn." I rolled my eyes. "Needless to say, that blew their

mood, so they chiseled off my horn. After that my friend showed up and saved both of us." I took a drink as she stared at me in horror. "Not a big deal. I mean, the plan still worked. If they'd thought to take my horn off when they nailed my legs down... "

Funny how I didn't feel horror at it. I didn't feel anything at all, thinking back to it. "They nailed your legs down?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yeah. Had to cut them off," I said softly and tapped my hooves together with an awkward clank. "Then my friends went and got me new ones. New legs…new eyes…new organs…" I sighed.

"You don't sound very happy about it," LittlePip said quietly. "I can't imagine having parts of me replaced with…" she trailed off, closing her eyes. I gave a sad little smile. I'd mentally kicked myself like that far too often to miss it. I sighed as I swirled the bottle. "I know I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," she finished.

"Even if the alternative is being a corpse?" I asked, arching a brow. She looked, then frowned and sadly shook her head. "My friends moved heaven and earth to save me," I said. "You'd think I'd be all yippie skippy. But I don't feel like myself anymore. I feel like a…a thing…this thing that was once Blackjack but now…I can't even do magic anymore. I'm a half-metal horned earth pony now. And all my friends are so desperate for me to be happy and thank them and stuff…"

"There was a pony I…knew…she was smart and good, but she made some mistakes and she was dying." LittlePip shivered a little. "To save her…this thing…this monster I'm trying to fight… absorbed her. Technically…she's still alive. Or…something." Clearly, not something good.

"Not that I think--" she said hastily, then paused. "Sorry," she said, scowling. "It's just... it's tough. Celestia's flaming solar anal probes, why the hell do some ponies do that? Why would anyone do that?! It makes me so mad!" She frowned at me. "At least tell me you blasted those bastards so they'd never do it again!"

She sounded like P-21. I wondered if she understood. "I let them go." At least, I hoped they were let go. I wouldn't put it past P-21, Glory, or Rampage to have exacted some vengeance on my behalf.

"You what?" She blinked, eyes wide.

"I let them go. I was dying anyway at the time," I replied with a shrug. "Killing them wasn't going to make me any less dead or my butt hurt any less." I sighed as I looked out the dark window.

“Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they’ll just do it to another. Maybe if I catch them, I’ll have to kill them anyway. But at least I could give them a chance.”

She smiled and took the bottle, sniffed, and then passed it back to me. “You’re amazing.”

“Wuss,” I teased and took a drink. “Amazingly stupid and naïve, anyway.” Was that a buzz? I really hoped it was a buzz. “Amazing at getting ponies killed. Amazing at hurting folks who don’t deserve it.” I sighed. Ugh…was I this whiny before I died?

“What do you mean?” she asked with a frown. Then I looked at her PipBuck and her barding and I closed my eyes. I shouldn’t say. Don’t tell her. She wouldn’t want to know. She doesn’t mean it. I took another pull off the bottle.

“I killed my stable,” I said softly. “Being a stable pony yourself… you can appreciate what that means.” I sighed. Why was I saying this? Why couldn’t I just let it go? Hadn’t I found peace with Gardens? Hadn’t I paid the price on the boat?

What was the price of four hundred lives? I looked at the revolver in her holster.

LittlePip was just staring at me in horror and I closed my eyes. “There was a virus. It infected a part of the population. Turned them into psychopathic cannibals. Nasty stuff. We were able to kill them all, but…I was tired. I wasn’t paying attention to what I should. Distracted by…by other stuff. And while I was getting laid and resting and taking care of myself…the remaining four hundred ponies were exposed.” I sighed, grimacing. What did I want? Why did I hate myself? Why wasn’t atonement enough?

“They were starting to turn. They were becoming more and more aggressive and the population was armed. A few more days and they’d be killing and eating everypony they came across. We got one uninfected filly out…and then…I gassed them.” I mimicked pushing a button with my hoof. Making a clicking noise. “Easy as that. Flooded the whole thing with chlorine gas.” I let it fall. “Of course, I’d planned on gassing myself with them, but Lacunae ruined that. So…yeah. Four hundred innocent ponies.” I looked at her gun.

I wanted justice. I wanted the pony responsible to pay the price. That was why I didn’t feel the horror and shame of being raped. I wanted to be judged and condemned and punished for what I’d done. Not suicide. That was trying to escape from justice. I needed

somepony to call me the scum that I was and to put a bullet through my brain like I deserved. I wanted to find somepony like the Stable Dweller who would do the right thing and kill me like a mass murderer deserved.

I didn't have four hundred and something lives to atone for four hundred and something deaths; but I could at least surrender one.

Then I closed my eyes and waited for the bullet that I so richly deserved.

Instead, I got a hug.

"I…I can't imagine being…doing…what you had to do. But…it sounds like it was one of those situations where they were doomed either way," she said softly in my ear. I sighed, slumping. "I know that if I were in that position…diseased…dying…I wouldn't want to die going crazy or worse. I'd want to die like a pony. And…quick. If you'd sealed it…" I sighed, remembering Stable 90. The shortest-lived stable in Equestria. "There wasn't anything you could have done."

I jerked away from her and flailed as I overbalanced and fell on my side. My hooves kicked as I struggled to roll over and find my footing. Finally, I stopped and just lay there. "Why do you say that? Why does everypony? I could have tried telling them! I could have gone pony by pony! I could have…I could have gone to Sanguine…given that murdering bastard what he wanted in exchange for a cure! I could have had the decency to die with them!" Why didn't she understand? Why didn't anypony?

Then she levitated me into the air, and I blinked in surprise. The little pony looked long and hard at me. "Would you dying have cured them?" I hung there in the air before her. Okay, an alicorn with magic this strong I could understand. This was a little intimidating. I shook my head. "Then all your dying would have done is killed one more pony," LittlePip said firmly before she set me back down beside her. "You forgave those rapists. Why can't you forgive yourself?"

"Have you ever gotten innocents killed?" I asked. She looked me in the eye and then shook her head. "If you do…tell me the trick, and I'll do it." I sighed, feeling dejected as I rubbed my face with the cool metal of my forehoof. If I stayed here, I was sure I'd start spilling every whiny, angsty thing that'd happened to me. "You know what…let's go do something."

LittlePip frowned. "Huh? What do you mean 'do something'?" I

took a nice long pull on the bottle and smiled. Attention Canterlot, we have inebriation. Take that, super magical synthetic organs! “I thought we were supposed to be waiting here.”

“You are waiting for a healy taint purging. You can do that anywhere. I am supposed to be observed. You can observe me anywhere! So do you really want to waste time here trading sob stories?” I asked as I slipped to my hooves, a little more carefully this time.

“It’s two in the morning!” she said with a disbelieving smile.

“So? Haven’t you ever worked the late shift? Trust me, there’s always something somewhere…some trouble…that we can get into!” I said with a wiggle of my brows.

* * *

“How did I let you talk me into this?” LittlePip shrieked as the next wave of screaming, clawing ghouls came charging at us. Her revolver, a *sweet* custom-modified IF-18 Horseshoe that I slightly wanted to snuggle even while fighting for my life, barked and transformed the head of the monstrosity slashing against my upraised hooves into twitching corpse meat. I heaved the body away from me and into a crowd of three more. It was amazing… think about walking: fall on face. *Don't* think about it because you're too busy dealing with dozens of shrieking zombies while inebriated: limbs work fine.

Which was a very good thing. One ghoul opened its mouth wide as it lunged, and I reared on my back legs and punched my hoof into its maw. The combined momentums drove my hoof out the back of its head, rotting brain smearing it as I pivoted on my rear legs and threw the corpse at the three scrabbling to their feet. “Hey! This is *your* secret passage!” I shouted as another ghoul lunged in low and I leapt over its snapping jaws. All four legs came straight down on its head, and the zombie’s skull popped like a rotten apple.

“I wanted to levitate you down from the roof, but no!” The trio of ghouls rose a third time, but three blasts from Little Macintosh transformed their skulls into bony, goop-covered shrapnel. “You don’t like heights!” Spent revolver casings popped into the air and got turned into hot brass projectiles, briefly driving one of the zombies back into the blasted subway tunnel it'd been crawling out of.

"I'm sorry! Not all of us fly everywhere in skywagons, okay?" I yelled as another group crawled out of a hole in a rusted sewer grate. I hooked my forelegs into either side of the gap and swung in, my rear legs pistoning wildly as they hammered into whatever soft undead flesh made itself available. "I suggested getting Lacunae, but nooooo! *You* don't like alicorns!"

"They're monsters!" LittlePip shouted as her horn flared and scraped a fallen piece of roof along the side of the subway. The block of rubble was easily as big as I was and tore the emerging ghoul in half as she loaded another six rounds into the revolver. "It wasn't an option, okay?" She whirled and placed three shots into the head of a glowing ghoul; its head exploded like a fountain of luminescent snot. "You were the one who insisted on doing this in the first place!" she yelled as she backed towards me while I scrabbled away from the sewer grate and into the middle of the subway passage, tackling a zombie that had been about to snap at her flank.

"You said you *had* to do it…no friends…Remember?" I said as I hooked a foreleg into its mouth like a bridle, gripping it with my hindlegs. I wrenched as hard as I could and was rewarded by the head coming off in my hooves. "So then you say 'Oh, there's a secret passage in the basement. We can get out that way! Only a *few* ghouls!'" She'd worked her arcane sciency magic on the terminal beside the door and managed to override the lockout; neat trick. I'd ask her to teach P-21 if we made it out of here alive! I threw the head as hard as I could into another charging zombie; it broke the creature's run just enough for me to bring both metal hooves down on its head with a pulpy crunch. "This is more than a *few*!"

LittlePip carefully planted three more shots in the zombies coming out of the a side tunnel as we moved towards the head subway car. The tunnel was lit by the sickly green radiance of even more glowing ghouls. "Well, you said the more there were, the more fun!" A ghoul scrambled onto her back, its jagged hooves hooked into her reinforced utility barding. Her horn glowed as she lifted the monster into the air, and there was a crack as the entire creature was squeezed. She threw the crushed remains back down the tunnel behind us.

"LittlePip, I'm *drunk*!" I yelled before biting hard on a length of rebar and swinging the chunk of rubble on the end like a club. The weight knocked back three more of the screaming monsters.

"No, you're *crazy*!" she yelled back as she looked around. Okay, this was rapidly getting past 'dozens' and into 'fucking ridiculous' numbers. What, had Tenpony been built right on top of Manehattan ghoul central? "Get in the subway car! Hurry!" Well, it was better than my plan to 'hit them some more'. Somewhere in the process of planning this adventure, I'd trotted off without barding, gun, or even saddlebags. No, the only pieces of 'equipment' I'd brought were bottles of whiskey tied together around my neck like some sort of tribal good luck charm.

It'd seemed funny at the time.

I scrambled in first. One ghoul charged down the aisle at me; I hooked my forelegs into the seats, swung my back legs up, and smashed both rear hooves into its head. Then, of course, I landed flat on my back next to the wiggling corpse. I smashed my legs down on its head repeatedly, looking at LittlePip upside down as the small unicorn hopped in after me. "Okay. Now what?!"

She tossed Little Macintosh at me; I caught it in my forelegs and transferred it to my mouth, sitting up. A ghoul was thrashing its way through the doors at the other end of the car. "No ticket!" I shouted before hopping into S.A.T.S. and planting one of the revolver's heavy bullets into its skull. ... Actually, what I really said was 'nung thhhgkts' with lots of slobber, but it wouldn't have known the difference anyway.

As I pulled myself to my hooves, the subway car lurched. A glow had spread from LittlePip's horn to envelop the massive vehicle. The wheels underneath squealed, and there was a metallic bang as something broke underneath the car. With a scream of metal and rust, the subway car broke free of the rest and began to roll down the decayed tracks. Of course, there were still ghouls leaping onto the side of the rolling car, trying to pull themselves through the windows; I raced from one to the next, Little Macintosh blasting their skulls to fragments until the hammer fell on an empty casing.

No problem. Have hooves, will thrash! Ghouls fell beneath the screeching, grinding wheels, and chunks of undead spattered at the pursuing crowd. A few more tried to scramble on; I manually persuaded them to get the hell off.

In a minute, we'd left the undead behind, and I'd finished off anything still wiggling. LittlePip gasped as she looked at me a touch wild-eyed. She levitated the gun from my mouth, wrinkling her nose at my drool. "This is one of the crazier things I think I've ever

done," she yelled over the shrieks as we rolled along.

I took a long pull off one of the bottles of whiskey, watching the text in my E.F.S. warning me of the drug toxicity that my system was trying to purge. "Really? I thought it was Tuesday."

* * *

"So…why is it you couldn't bring your friends along?" I asked as we made our way through the subway station. "I mean, Xenith I can understand. She has that whole 'I can kill you with one hoof' vibe going. Calamity seemed okay, though. And Velvet seemed nice… even if she's got that whole bossy momma bear thing going for her."

LittlePip was drinking a healing potion she'd found locked in a medical supply cabinet. The sight of it had floored me. Healing potions as fresh as you please even after two centuries. Sweet Celestia somethin' obscene somethin' (where did LittlePip learn to swear like that?) did Hoofington suck! She sighed as she looked at the empty potion bottle. "It's…complicated. I'm going up against two monsters, and each one wants me to destroy the other. Both have armies and power, and one can even read minds."

"Ouch." I winced, then extended my 'fingers' to carefully pick up a piece of scrap metal. 'Eat', huh? I tried to bite it in half. Nothing. Finally, I stuck the chunk in my mouth and felt a strange warmth. The rusty lump softened to the consistency of taffy…tasted pretty good, too! I smiled as I chewed the lump of metal and swallowed, then caught LittlePip's shocked stare. Okay, maybe it was a little freaky. "What? I'm on a high iron diet." She snorted, and I smiled as I took another drink.

"Well…if I take Calamity along and he gets too close and gets his mind read, then it's game over." She sighed, then floated my offered bottle over and took a drink herself. "Velvet Remedy…well…" A small smile spread on her face. "She's a special kind of girl. She wants to help everypony she can. Even slavers and monsters and… everypony. So if she knew what I was going to do... well…I dunno. She might try and stop me."

"And Xenith?" I asked with a smile. "Same deal as Calamity? Or would she headbutt the beastie?"

She looked a little sad and a little guilty. "Pretty much."

"So, once you get the bomb, what then?"

"Then?" She smiled. "Then I blow Red Eye's citadel to the moon. I think that's the most you should know." She wasn't telling me something, but then, she fought mind-reading things. I imagined great big tentacle brain monsters…ooh, or maybe magical computer things! I chuckled, taking a drink. Considering the shit I'd dealt with, who was I to insist she tell me more? Then she gave me a small, thankful smile. "Thanks for helping me with this, Blackjack."

"Thanks for giving me something to do," I said with a laugh. "Shoot at me, stab me, or fuck me, but whatever you do, don't let me think." She blushed…why was she blushing? Why was she acting all…Gloryish?

"So, next part of the plan?" I asked with a smile as I stood and turned towards the doors leading outside. "We make like the Stable Dweller, you drop a building on them, and I thump anything that keeps wiggling, right?" Then I blinked when she didn't call me an idiot…or laugh. I looked back at her, and…was she staring at my ass? "Uh…LittlePip?" Maybe she really liked my new hardware?

She snapped to and looked at me. Wow…she blushed just like Glory. "Right! Plan. The plan…with the planning things and the… ah…planning…stuff…plan plan plan…"

Was she actually checking me out? Oh Celestia…something something…she had been, and I couldn't help smiling. I could count the number of mares interested in me…well…honestly interested rather than planning to sell me out…on one hoof. I turned slowly towards her and watched her eyes get big as she gave a crooked little smile. "LittlePip…" I said as I leaned towards her. "I'm sorry…" Her ears fell…"But I'm just not drunk enough to think this is a good time, with the surgery and mission and everything."

Wow…I didn't know a pony could achieve that shade of red! "Oh... I mean I shouldn't…I…Homage…and…" she started to babble. So… I kissed her. I was also quite delighted to discover she was an exceptionally sweet and adorable kisser. And despite just how embarrassed she was, she definitely kissed back. Now she was red and stiff as stone; I imagined breakers blowing in her head. "Celestia's flaming cuntdrips…" she murmured, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Have I no fucking self-control?"

"But I *am* drunk enough that one kiss seems okay," I pointed out with a laugh as I walked to the door. "You grew up in the wrong stable, LittlePip. If you were really into mares, you should have been in 99."

She snapped out of it a second later. “Yeah…but…didn’t you say it was a horrible, brutal rape factory or something?”

Did I mention that? I’d told her something about what 99 was like. My brain was a mite fuzzy, but the alcohol was definitely lubricating the whole walking…thing. “Well yeah…it was. But for a mare that really likes other mares…well…” I looked right at her with a wide smile that I think set her blush in stone. “I think you would have fit in just fine. I’d love to have had you in my stable.” Then I took a deep breath. “Anyway…don’t you have a leader to sweet talk?”

She stared at me, then shook her head hard. “Right…right! Right…with the talky…sneaky…plan…thing.” She thumped her temples lightly. “Next time you wanna mess with me, could you... I dunno... just shoot me?”

“Kissing you was funner.” Oh my, there she went again! Didn’t anypony ever hit on this mare? Sure, she wasn’t insanely gorgeous, but she was outrageously cute. “Okay. So…we got to trot up close enough to speak to somepony in charge without getting shot at.”

“Yeah. And the camp’s huge. I dunno if I have a StealthBuck that’ll last that long.”

“So…plan B.”

She blinked and looked at me warily. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

* * *

“Last time I did this, my friend shot me. A lot,” LittlePip said as she tied on the red sash of one of Red Eye’s enforcers.

“Last time I did this, I had to eat my friend’s heart,” I said as I made sure my nice artificial legs were good and covered up before slipping on a pair of battered sunglasses.

She looked at me a moment and finally asked the million bottle cap question: “Blackjack, how in Luna’s frosty bits are you sane?”

I looked back at her. That was a fair question. “Maybe I’m not. I do what I can to help and I do what I have to do to win.” I looked at her in surprise. “Don’t you?”

She dropped her gaze. “Some things you shouldn’t do…”

“Well, yeah. I mean, you gotta make sure winning’s worth it,” I said as I turned towards her. “And sometimes you screw up big time in the process…but nothing’s worse than losing because you sat on

your hooves when you could have acted." I rolled my eyes and looked at the knocked-out guards we'd gotten the uniforms from.
"Would you break a promise to a friend?" she asked, not meeting my eyes.
"Look, I'll explain to Homage about the kiss…" I said with a sigh and a smile.
She flushed again, then shook her head. "I don't mean that." She adjusted her helmet so it covered her horn. "It…I mean…" She stomped her hooves once…"Damn it, why is this so hard?" I sat as she struggled. "I feel like…like I can't trust myself." She closed her eyes. "I had a problem with a drug a while back. Party Time Mintals. Brain enhancers."
"Right. Rampage chews them all the time. Mellows her out," I said with a confused smile. Actually, I had no idea if she ate party time or not; it'd never occurred to me that they might come in different varieties.
"Exactly. They make ponies more agreeable. Nicer. Charismatic," she said. "They're also extremely addictive... It was a big, big problem for me."
"Sounds useful. Got some?" I asked. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together as her magic pulled out a tin from her bags…wow…she must have known precisely where they were. "So…I'm guessing you promised to never ever ever take them again? No matter what?"
"Yeah. Something like that," she replied. "So right now, I've got a little pony in my head telling me to take them locked in mortal combat with another little pony in my head telling me to keep my promise and find another way."
"Right." I took a deep, contemplative drink from the bottle. "Let me ask you this…your friend you promised this to…would they want you to die to keep your promise?"
LittlePip sighed and looked towards Tenpony before saying, "No."
"And if we botch this up, are we going to die?"
"You're helping the wrong pony cheat," she muttered. "You're supposed to be helping me keep my promise. That's the right thing to do." The little unicorn sighed. "I just…I don't want it to be my addiction making me take these. I don't want to fuck up and fail my friends again."
"Shows you deserve your friends," I said with a smile. I took another drink, then sighed. "It's easier to get forgiveness if you

don't die. So. How about this? You take them till we're out of here, hand them over when we go, and then spend all day tomorrow apologizing and blaming me for being a horrible influence on you."

"Velvet's going to kill me," she said as she lifted out one minty pink square decorated with little balloons and streamers. She popped it into her mouth, chewed, swallowed…and relaxed. Then she opened her eyes, and suddenly I felt like the one about to be kissed as she adopted a coy, cute little smile. "Well…worry about that later. Now…how to get inside to speak to Red Eye…" She looked at me and tapped her lips. "That should be easy enough…"

* * *

The headquarters for this army consisted of three or four old canvas tents strung together and reinforced with sheet metal. If the large broadcast antenna raised on a pile of rubble behind it was any indication, it would be a good place to contact Red Eye if whoever was in charge locally wouldn't give LittlePip what she wanted. Of course, before we could even find out the answer to that, we'd have to think of some way to get past the power-armor-clad griffin guards.

"I take the one on the left, you take the one on the right?" I suggested.

"How about we just go in to report a disturbance in the Tenpony subway tunnels?" she replied with a cocky little smile.

"But…they're in power armor. And I haven't beaten a griffin in power armor yet." I wondered if you could fly them as easily as Enclave pegasi. We hid among some nearby supply crates, watching the comings and goings of the headquarters.

"You can do that later," she said as we watched two ponies approach. The griffin said, "Flange." The two ponies replied, "Gear." A minute later, another pair approached. "Strut," they challenged. "Truss" replied the ponies, and they were admitted. LittlePip seemed to be nodding to herself.

"Yes…that's it exactly!" the small unicorn said excitedly.

"What. What's it?" I blinked, but she immediately left the cover and walked casually towards the two armored griffins, leaving me scrambling to catch up.

"Bolt," one challenged at our approach.

"Crank," LittlePip drawled in a bored tone.

The pair looked at us, then at each other. “I don’t know you,” one challenged LittlePip.

“And why are you wearing sunglasses?” the other growled at me. “It’s the middle of the night.”

I paused, then grinned. “I’m just that cool.”

“Wanna bet?” He reached out a claw and flicked the black plastic off my face, then suddenly he stiffened as he saw my cybereyes glowing like two red stars. “You…what…”

“We’ve got a special report to make. You are wasting our time and delaying our inevitable, glorious future,” LittlePip said imperiously as she tapped her hoof with the perfect stomp for indicating irritation rather than annoyance. The pair looked visibly shaken as they carefully handed back the battered sunglasses and waved us through.

“You should have been an actress,” I murmured. “Are my eyes really that freaky?”

“No. But Red Eye has that kind of effect on his followers.”

The pair that had entered before us were trotting back out again. We followed the sounds of speakers and equipment into a small room with a desk and shelves of papers. Two tired-looking middle-aged mares sat at desks with piles of papers around them. The larger room the communications office opened off of was filled with maps of Manehattan and other cities around the Wasteland. A bunch of symbols had been drawn on them; in particular, the locations of the freaky MASEBS towers were all outlined in red.

It sure didn’t look like Red Eye thought in small terms. “Your report?” a lime green mare asked us as her eyes went from one of us to the other. Then they went really round as Little Macintosh came out. She opened her mouth to yell, but LittlePip’s magical glow forced her mouth shut. I leapt on the other and got her in a headlock, effectively wrestling her to the ground. My fingers popped out and I held her mouth shut as well.

“Now what do we do with them?” she asked with a small frown as she looked at the pony with earphones on sitting obliviously at the radio with his back to us.

“Got any Wonderglue?” I asked with a small smile. She smiled back.

The two mares with their hooves glued together and their lips duct taped shut just glared at me as LittlePip talked to the radio operator with the pistol pointed at his head. I really hoped his loyalty to the

cause didn't make him realize a gunshot would get us killed pretty quick. A few minutes later, he got to join the glue party as LittlePip put on the headphones. "Keep an eye out," she said as she closed the big canvas flap between the rooms and started talking in a low voice. I looked at the three incapacitated ponies heaped in the corner.

Okay. So…waiting in the middle of an enemy camp. Smart thing to do would be to wait attentively for somepony to approach and intercept them with a story or plan…delay them outside the reports room. But I had to admit that those were some awfully pretty maps. I looked at the one marked 'Hoofington'. There was the Core. The little districts surrounding it. The Collegiate. Rainbow Dash Skyport. Megamart. Elysium. Arena. Ironmare Naval Base. Grimhoof Army Base, way off to the southeast…that was new. Luna Space Center was next to it. Scrapyard. All four broadcast towers…

Hippocratic Research.

There wasn't anything printed on the map, but there was a bright red circle exactly where my PipBuck said it would be located. I reared up on my hind legs, marveling at how they kept me upright like some kind of freaky zebra. They let me get a good look at the top of the map, though. A green line had been drawn from the circle under the Core out to the rail lines that led straight to Fillydelphia. In contrast, Paradise was simply a yellow sticker.

"Why the hell would Red Eye be working with Sanguine?" I glanced at the leg containing my PipBuck. Brass had said that somepony was holding Sanguine's hooves to the fire. Somepony like Red Eye?

Oh, my mane was inventing all-new creepy sensations now! I thought of Red Eye getting his hooves on EC-1101. If he was a cyberpony, what were the odds he could get it to work for him for his own nasty ends? I'd been so fixated on the Projects; maybe the real threat was something very here and very now.

"Excuse me?" a voice said from the door. A pair of runners stared at me and then at the three prone ponies.

I extended my fingers and slowly pulled the glasses from my face. I stared long and hard down at the two bucks and said, as low and cold as I could manage, "Yes?"

"Ah…ah…" one stammered as he stared up at me. Slowly I walked, step after step on my hindlegs, towards the pair.

"Are you going to trouble me too?" I growled as I looked down at

two bucks bigger, stronger, and more heavily armed than I. One reached into his saddlebag and handed over a folded stack of papers. I took them in my freaky metallic fingers. “Thank you,” I said in as deep a tone as I could manage. I was somewhat shocked to feel…well…anything. Somehow, the legs conveyed tactile sensation.

Nodding, they staggered back and trotted for the exit as quickly as they could without running. “Was that thing…drunk?” one asked the other.

I rushed to the flap and made a ‘hurry up’ gesture with my hoof. She waved me away and then said, “Give it to me and you get what you want…and I get what I want.” Then she added, “Of course, you don’t trust me.” And…“I’ve seen her. You’ve seen her. Can you think of another way?”

“Excuse me,” a female said behind me. I slowly started to turn as dramatically as I could. Then I saw the red feathers, the tawny flanks, and the wide eyes of a griffin I’d seen a few days back. A griffin who I’d left glued to the side of a boxcar outside Scrapyard. We stared at each other for a moment. “You!” Scarlet shouted, pointing a claw at me. I supposed you’d remember a mare that cemented you to a wall. “Alarm!” she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Well…time for plan D. I raced and tackled her, and we went flying into the canvas wall behind her so hard that it split. We were rolling, screaming, clawing, and squawking as she scratched at my limbs and I pummeled and kicked like mad. The chaos was spreading by the second as we snapped one of the poles holding a section of the tent. There was more shouting and scuffling, but thankfully no gunshots yet.

Then we were out in front of the tent and I finally had Scarlet in a headlock. “Okay…no alarms from…” Slowly, I looked up at the dozens of very armed ponies and griffins surrounding the pair of us. Wow…that’s a lot of guns!

“HOLD!” boomed a voice that made everypony, including me, jump to their hooves.

Oh…wow. I’d thought, having seen Lacunae, that I understood just what an alicorn was like. Big. Wings. Horn. Pretty standard stuff, really…right?

Wrong.

Fifteen alicorns, purple, blue, and green, hovered around us like a

judgment host. They were surrounded in shimmering shields and looked fit to blast me into chunks. Only one thing saved me. The leader of the host pointed her blue hoof at me and boomed in shock, “YOU?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?! YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE! THE GODDESS DEMANDS TO KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DOING HERE!”

I pulled off what shreds remained of my disguise and tossed them away. Then I pulled out one of the last bottles of Wild Pegasus and tugged it free, holding it in my fingers. If I was going to have to deal with Goddess yelling, I needed more alcohol. The alicorns were so stunned that I was able to take a good long pull off the bottle. “Well. Had to get fixed up…new legs…eyes…that sort of--“

She jerked me into the air before her with her magic. “THE GODDESS DEMANDS TO KNOW! ARE YOU WORKING WITH RED EYE NOW?!”

“Why, is he recruiting?” I asked, seeing the apprehension in her eyes. I reached up and tapped my horn. “Find out for yourself,” I said. Honestly, I had no idea if it would really work while my horn wouldn’t do anything…but then the probably-compensating-for-some-inherent-shortcoming-sized horn touched mine and I immediately felt that sensation of rummaging in my brain. I thought of what LittlePip had said; hopefully after blasting Red Eye to dust, she could do something about the Goddess.

“GOOD! NOW WE MAY DISPOSE OF YOUR MEDDLING--”

“Red Eye knows about Sanguine,” I thought at her, and she froze. “Which means he might know about Project Chimera.”

For several seconds I just hung there as she dug through my head. I finally finished drinking the last drop, really wishing I had some more. Whiskey whiskey whiskey whiskey…

“SHUT UP! WHY MUST THE GODDESS SUFFER YOUR MINDLESS WITLESS PRATTLE? WHY AREN’T YOU DEAD YET? WHY CAN’T WE JUST KILL YOU?! WHY?”

Hey, don’t look at me. I’d tried to die more than once. “Aww…I thought it was ‘cause you liked me,” I thought at her and belched. “You wanna prance around my head some more or talk turkey? You want alicorns with cocks. I imagine it’d do you wonders if you got laid. I really want to smash Sanguine into ghouley goo. All of us want Red Eye gone. And I owe you for 99.” I smiled as I dangled in front of her. “Or you can just kill me and wonder just what Red Eye is up to... your choice.”

Then LittlePip was escorted out of the tent by a buck in a big fancy hat that I supposed put him in charge. The effect was immediate. "NOOOOO! THESE TWO MAY NOT BE TOGETHER! THE GODDESS FORBIDS IT!" She waved me in the air like a rag doll.

"Shut up!" I bellowed up at her. "She's doing what she's doing and I'm doing what I'm doing and…uggh…" A red warning in my vision flashed 'purge' at me.

And then in front of everypony I lost my whiskey. The blue alicorn dropped me to the ground in disgust.

The buck in the fancy hat rubbed his face. "Why can't we just shoot them all... why?" He pointed his hoof back at Tenpony. "Just…go! Go!"

I rose to my hooves. "Oh no. You're not just going to throw us out! Forget it! We're staying put unless we get a proper send-off!" Everypony stared at me in shock and confusion.

"WHAT…WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

I looked at the wing of alicorns and grinned.

* * *

There are…in reflection…many ways to travel the Wasteland. By hoof is most common. Occasionally in vehicles. Sometimes on wings, if you had them. The Goddess had told Lacunae to warn the others of our return, and so they stood on the roof of Tenpony Tower as dawn broke. For a brief moment, the sun peeked through the gap between the distant clouds and the horizon, illuminating us in gold as fifteen alicorns flew in formation around the tower, carrying LittlePip and myself back to our friends. From my PipBuck played the most sweeping and dramatic music of Octavia's concert I could find as inebriation helped me overlook the very splatty distance below.

Maybe the crown of whiskey bottles was a bit much…

The two carrying LittlePip and I set us down next to LittlePip's skywagon thingy, every jaw dropping as I turned and lifted a hoof to the beasts. "Thank you, noble alicorn, for our safe arrival!"

"GO. AWAY," the blue alicorn said in disgust, and as one the group flew away from the tower. Was it just me, or was Lacunae trying very hard not to grin?

LittlePip looked horrible…I felt pretty horrible too. I was pretty sure I was really pushing things with the amount I'd drunk in the

last few hours. As my friends trotted across the landing pad towards us, LittlePip pulled out the tin of Mint-als. I grabbed it; Rover was right, fingers were useful. “Now you keep your promise…”

She looked at me with desperate eyes, and I flung the tin away before she could take another. Her whole body jerked after the tin, but I held her back and she finally slumped against me. “I…I need Helpinghoof…please…”

“Who’s that?” P-21 asked.

“Blackjack! Are you…what’s…what did you do last night?!” Glory stammered.

“And why didn’t you take me along?” Rampage added.

“Did you really drink *all* of that?!” Scotch pointed at the crown.

“What?” I said as I swayed. So many flashy warnings on my screen…so many *many* flashy warnings…“I was just celebrating my birthday... .urp... ” And then everything went swirly and fell away to black. What a life... but it was mine...

Footnote: Level Up.Maximum level reached.

New Perk: Adamantium Bone Lacing: Your bones are now 50% more resistant to breaking. This perk does not stack with Bone Strengthening Brew.

Quest Perk added: Cyberpony: +1 Agil, +10% radiation resistance, +10% poison resistance, +10% damage resistance.

Chapter 35: Learning

"And I saw the most amazing, most wonderful thing I've ever seen. I poured myself into learning everything I could about magic."

I'd died. I'd come back. Now, I suspected that that had been my big mistake. I lay in bed feeling like my brain had been squeezed into a jar two sizes too small. My vision, whether my eyes were open or closed, was filled with glaring flashes warning of toxicity levels, interface conflicts... and I could have sworn that there was an actual 'user idiocy' warning going off. My mechanical limbs twitched as I sprawled on my side. All I had to do was crawl out…but my metal legs just twitched and jerked again as I went nowhere.

I could just lie here…yes…lie here in this nice soft bed and wait for sweet oblivion to claim--

"Hey, Blackjack!" Scotch yelled in the perfect filly pitch to make it feel like an icepick had been shoved in my ear canal. I tried to say something about loudness, volume, or killing noisy fillies. I'm fairly certain that all of that went right over the olive filly's head, though, as she screeched, "Glory told me to come in and ask you about hangovers! She said you probably had a doozy of one, so I should talk really loudly!"

"Nggggghhh!" was all I could reply as I flopped around and finally managed to bury my head under the pillows.

"So, Blackjack, are you hungover? Do you need me to talk louder? Hey, Blackjack! Can you hear me now? Blackjack!" she shrieked as she shook me hard, making my stomach-thing lurch and my bladder (*did I still have that?*) clench. Urr... I didn't need to be dealing with this and a hangover at the same time... "Blackjack! Blackjack! Did you really fly around on a wing of alicorns? Did they crown you? Why were there security ponies asking for you? Oh! And this one black unicorn wanted me to say you were a horrible influence. That

was mean, but she gave me a whole bag of candy to tell you really loud, and Glory thought it was a good idea too and she gave me three Sparkle-Colas and Blackjack! Can you hear me, Blackjack?"

I could kill them. I could kill them all. No court in the Wasteland would convict me…

* * *

A trip to the bathroom and a shower later, I was in a far less murderous mood. The real fun was trying to mentally bash and thrash my legs into moving. I distinctly remembered walking and trotting around without a problem! Okay, the memory *was* a bit fuzzy, but still, I'd been walking better drunk than I was sober! Fortunately, Scotch enthusiastically herded me, preventing me from actually falling on my face again.

Once I'd gotten myself clean and flushed out, the alarms died to a few sullen yellow warnings that seemed to be there mostly to remind me not to do anything like last night ever again. I needed food…power…metal…Med-X or *something* to make my head stop feeling so... ugh…and somepony who could fill me in on what exactly had happened last night…morning…conscious time! A little chronometer in the corner of my eye told me that it was now early afternoon. Hopefully, I'd be able to get my body and brain and everything…and coming out of the bedroom, I tripped on my own feet and tumbled down in a heap.

"Ughhh…walking shouldn't be so hard…" I groaned, face down on the concrete tiles. Hadn't I been kicking ass a short while ago? I was fairly sure I had. Somehow…

"Maybe some more Wild Pegasus?" a mare said in a strange electronic voice. I blinked and looked over at the small collection in the living room. Lacunae was lying on the floor next to Glory on the couch. The gray pegasus was so…neat. So clean and tidy that I had to double check. Next to her, Scotch sat eating one of my birthday cupcakes with a crown of whiskey bottles atop her head. She grinned sheepishly at me. On the coffee table was a large metal drum with a camera on top and a speaker set in the base. There was some sort of generator next to it, along with some strange medical-looking equipment that beeped softly. Sitting on the opposite couch were Homage and a strange buck with a crimson and scarlet mane. P-21 trotted up to help me to my feet. I had to admit, he cleaned up

pretty good too.

"I think she's had enough Wild P for one lifetime," Glory said with a somewhat stern smile that told me I was in a bit of trouble. Not that I blamed her, given the condition I'd been in last night.

"Did you really drink all six bottles in four hours? I'm pretty sure that would have killed anypony else," the odd buck said. "When Homage told me that you and LittlePip were being flown here by five wings of alicorns, I had to wonder if she'd been drinking too."

The gray unicorn chuckled and shook her head, then gestured to her companion. "Blackjack? Life Bloom. Life Bloom? This is Blackjack. Also known as 'Security' around Hoofington." Her blue eyes focused on me as she said evenly, "Life Bloom here is representing the Twilight Society and wants to speak with you about Professor Zodiac's theories regarding your lineage."

"Oh…yeah. That." I trotted towards the assembly, P-21 more than once keeping me from falling flat on my face... again. "Look, I know she thinks I'm special…but I'm not. Okay? I don't know why I can open up the cases, but I'm not related to any Ministry Mare, and I'm certainly not related to Twilight Sparkle!"

Life Bloom smiled politely. "Why are you so sure you're not? There's much we don't know about the Ministry Mares. The Ministry of Image did an exceptional job obfuscating and hiding the truth. Applejack was the only mare who was ever publicly confirmed to be in a relationship, but it's unlikely that she really was the only one."

Homage gave me a gentle smile. "It's possible that your relationship is only tangential. You could have some Apple blood in you. That would explain the cases." She folded her hooves before her.

"It wouldn't explain Project Steelpony being unsealed perfectly," buzzed the speaker on the can. "While I agree that being Applejack's cousin might be enough to open a security case, it would not work for EC-1101. The fact that she's capable of interfacing with that program tells me that there's more to Blackjack than meets the eye."

"There isn't. Really. I'm not," I said firmly, shaking my head. I sat down beside the coffee table, and Glory pushed me a bottle of clean water. It might not be whiskey, but it was certainly welcome. "I'm just…me. A security mare from a stable. I'm not special." I looked from one to the next and felt a stab of irritation at the speculative

gazes. “Look, why does all this matter? Why do you want to know so much?”

“Quite honestly, many in my organization don’t want to know,” Life Bloom said calmly. “You must understand that, for two hundred years, the Twilight Society has been responsible for Tenpony Tower and the secrets of the M.A.S. hub. Many of my order believe this building to be the last remaining bastion of old Equestria. As such, they take anything to do with the M.A.S. and its Ministry Mare very seriously.”

“So what does it mean to the Twilight Society if Blackjack is related to Twilight?” P-21 asked pointedly as he looked at Homage and Life Bloom.

“We’re not sure. There’s a great deal of disagreement in the Society about that,” Life Bloom admitted, drawing a surprised look from Homage. “Some believe that, even if Blackjack is related, she has no right or connection to the Society. And on the other end of the spectrum…there are those saying that, if she is…then she is the legitimate head of the Twilight Society.” He looked at me slightly apologetically. “Most don’t know what to think and/or are reserving judgment until we can verify if you are or aren’t.”

I jumped to my hooves. “Now wait a second! You’re not turning me into your new Ministry Mare!” Wait, how’d I move like that? I wobbled and fell against the arm of the couch. Lacunae’s horn glowed and she steadied me.

“Would it really be so bad?” Glory asked softly as she put her hoof out to touch my shoulder.

I closed my eyes as I tried to think of a way to make her understand. “Glory…she was Twilight Sparkle. She was the Element of Magic! She was responsible for an entire ministry and programs and…and everything! I’m Blackjack. I think I’m the biggest screwup in the history of Equestria! I can’t even do magic, period!” I said as I pointed at my dead horn.

“Neither could Twilight Sparkle,” Life Bloom said evenly.

Excuse me? All eyes were on the red-and-red-maned unicorn as he smiled. “Twilight Sparkle didn’t pop from the womb using super-powered magic. In fact, not many people knew it, but she was so bad at magic that she flunked out of magic kindergarten. I understand that there were quite a few magical mistakes made when she was young. She likely would have never gotten into magic at all were it not for her witnessing Celestia raising the sun.

After that, she worked hard to learn all the spells she could. Even then, when she applied to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, she was by all accounts quite mediocre. It wasn't until the first sonic rainboom incident that her magical potential showed itself. Only then did she receive Celestia's personal attention and tutelage. Even then, though, her magic was the product of a lifetime of hard work more than of her admittedly great natural talent."

"But…I mean…I can't even do the simplest spell. All I can do is shoot things with my horn." Make that *could*, Blackjack.

"Yes, but did you have Princess Celestia as your teacher?" Life Bloom asked. To be fair, Textbook had been about as interested in me learning as in watching paint dry. Even Mom's endless attempts to remediate me were more embarrassing than instructive.

"Twilight Sparkle received the instruction and attention she needed to excel. From Glory's description, it's doubtful Twilight would have learned any magic at all were she forced into your circumstances. And before you ask, neither Twilight's mother nor father were exceptional magic users."

For some reason, his assurances were making me feel more and more panicked. I wasn't Twilight's descendant! I couldn't be. I was nopony. A screwup! If I were related to Twilight, then…then I'd be responsible for fixing the entire Wasteland! I'd have to use EC-1101 to do…something! I couldn't even fix Hoofington yet. Of course, my stupid body felt all calm and still…I needed to get some kind of heartbeat simulator installed.

Homage looked at me with a sympathetic smile. "Why don't we just get it over with, Life Bloom? The door test?"

"Door test?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

"There's a door in the tower enchanted to only open for Twilight, though we think that a direct descendant could also do it," Homage said calmly. "So, all Blackjack has to do is try to open the door."

"Right," I croaked. "Let's get this over with."

"Are you sure you don't want to eat something first?" Glory asked as she looked up at me in worry. "You look even paler than a white pony should." I shook my head firmly. With the way my guts churned, I was certain that I was going to puke if I actually had something in my…wait…those were guts, right? Ugh, I wasn't sure if I needed an owner's manual or an anatomy lesson! In either case, no. Food was not a good idea just now.

"I look forward to hearing all about it when you get back," the

professor said as the camera turned to face me. “Remember, whatever is inside was Twilight’s. That means that, if you can get to it, it’s yours, Blackjack. Don’t let them take it.” Life Bloom merely smiled and said nothing.

We trotted out like an execution procession, leaving Lacunae with the professor. I looked around and asked dully, “Where’s Rampage?”

“Your friend Rampage is in security till you leave. Somepony pointed out that, since she’s a Reaper…technically, she’s a raider. Normally that would be a death sentence, but…well…” Life Bloom coughed.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” I said as we stepped into the gilt-decorated elevator.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Blackjack?” Homage asked quietly beside me.

I sighed. “No, I’m really not. I just came back from the dead. My body…half the time it works flawlessly, and the other half I’m falling on my face. But the Twilight Society helped bring me back…they could have told Glory and the professor to piss off. Then I’d be a *tainted* cyberpony.”

“Being related to Twilight won’t change who you are, Blackjack,” the blue-maned mare murmured as the car came to a stop and we set off down another corridor.

I slowed my pace, letting the others go ahead. Then I looked at her. “Won’t it? You heard the professor and Life Bloom. If ponies find out that I’m Twilight’s…I don’t know…heir or descendant or something…what is that going to mean? I can barely handle being Blackjack, security mare, reject of Stable 99.”

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to think that, if I opened that door, things would still be fine. Hey, maybe it would make things easier. Except that my life was never easier. “You’re not a reject or a failure, Blackjack. I’ve seen what you’ve done.”

“Really? Did you see Fallen Arch? Did you see Clover’s head explode? Or Glory’s wing fall off? Did you kill only Goddesses know how many Rangers to sink a ship? Did you see that?” I asked sharply, my irritation from the morning returning…which made me kick myself even harder. She was trying to help me, and I sighed, lowering my eyes. “I know you told me I did good things, but it all feels like a lie. It feels wrong…like I’m winning some sort of prize I didn’t earn.” The others had realized I’d stopped and were starting

to look back. “I really don’t want to do this…but I have to…so let’s get it over with.” I wanted a drink. A whole bunch of drinks, right now.

Everypony was gathered before two large doors. They were of sturdy light wood and beset with amethysts. I felt nausea welling up from an organ that didn’t exist anymore. The gems glowed a faint purple. There were other ponies here, watching with grim expressions. I didn’t want introductions. I just wanted this over with. I looked at the doorhandles and sighed.

“So…anypony laying odds?” I asked, swallowing hard.

“It’s going to be all right,” Glory assured me.

“Please get on with it,” drawled one buck, clearly not anticipating anything important happening. I wanted to capture his complete skepticism... but my mind kept going back to that horrible room with that sobbing mare, and the surrogacy spell... I thought back to Twilight saying farewell to Big Macintosh.

“Please…please please please let it be somepony else,” I prayed aloud as I walked to the doors. I closed my eyes, suddenly glad I couldn’t hyperventilate. Slowly, I reached out with a hoof, the limb jerking around a little before I was finally able to rest it on the latch, feeling the oddly warm metal underhoof. I didn’t even have magic to open it with…

My hoof pressed down on the latch, and…

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

I stared, and then jiggled it with my hoof. My jaw just hung open as I tapped the metal hoof against the door latch. Nothing.

“Probably related to Rarity,” one of the mares drawled as she turned away.

“What a drama queen…” agreed another as they trotted off.

“Well. I suppose that is that,” Life Bloom said with a sigh. I couldn’t look away as I tapped the door latch one last time. Still didn’t budge. Homage looked at me in concern. For a moment there, I’d been…I’d been absolutely sure!

“Huh…I guess…” I gave a little half smile as I looked back at everypony. “I guess I got all worked up for nothing, huh?” It was like stepping out from beneath an immense weight…and yet…I looked back at the doors. If I was so relieved…why was I feeling so…so disappointed?

“Blackjack?” Glory asked in concern as she walked up next to me

and hugged me with her wing. I closed my eyes, relief mixing with the bittersweet sense of failure. I couldn't tell which was stronger. I should be happy…right?

"I'm good, Glory," I said and smiled as I settled on relief. "I'm just surprised. I mean, I know the odds were against it, but I think that, at the end there, I really was convinced it was true. Heh…such an idiot." I made my synthetic lungs draw a deep breath, despite the little green O2 readout at the bottom of my vision, and looked at the others. "So I guess I'm probably a cousin or something twice removed?"

"I suppose. We may never truly understand the circumstances of your lineage," Life Bloom said, shrugging. "Regardless, now that that's out of the way, would you care to see the rest of Tenpony Tower?" I laughed and nodded, feeling much better now that that nightmare was over. Scotch trotted on my other side while Homage and P-21 came up behind, talking softly.

I had to admit, seeing the agricultural chambers designed to grow contamination-free food was somewhat impressive, even if their output didn't come close to supporting even the population of the tower. Glory laughed in delight at the sight of the alicorn fountain in the library atrium, and Scotch burst with dozens of questions when she saw the DJ's broadcast room. Homage made her apologies for the DJ being out at that moment. Then we reached the... I couldn't even begin to pronounce what the gray unicorn called it, but it was pretty obviously a library. I couldn't imagine anypony being physically able to read all these books in one lifetime. Maybe P-21 or Glory. Me, I doubt I'd read more than ten books in my entire life.

Just another reason why the idea of me being related to Twilight was such an insult to the former Ministry Mare.

"Something on your mind?" Homage asked me quietly, making me jump a little.

"Oh…nothing. I never have anything on my mind. I'm not a smart pony, after all," I said with a grin. "I think you could sum it up as 'booze, guns, and flanks.'" Oddly, she didn't appreciate my joke. She looked sad, and even a little bit angry.

"Why do you always lie to yourself?" she asked me in a low voice. "You say you're stupid, but you've been exposing secrets and conspiracies from two centuries ago. You say you're a failure when you've helped countless ponies and stopped a war. You say you

have no magic, but look at what you can accomplish."

"It's not lying, Homage. It's being honest," I replied, and for some reason that comment seemed to shock her more than anything. "Lying would be saying I'm awesome and ignoring the fact that I've gotten ponies killed. That I've murdered…so many…who didn't deserve it. If there were a guidebook for messing up, I'd be the author. And no matter how much I try to tell myself I've paid the price and I'm even, the honest truth is that I'll always be a murderer. The second I forget that or it doesn't matter…that's when I'll be a monster." I looked at her with a half smile. "The truth…no matter how bad it hurts, right?"

I looked at all the books. "That's why I'm so glad I'm not related to Twilight. It was stupid of me to get worked up in the first place. There's no way somepony like her could be related to a pony as messed up as me."

"It's not like she would be your mother, Blackjack. There would be something like ten generations between you and her," Homage said quietly. I turned away; she didn't understand. But the gray unicorn jumped back into my path. "You know what I think? I think that the reason you're so glad Twilight's not a part of you is that it would disrupt this perfect little horrible picture you have of yourself. You're a good pony, Blackjack. You've helped so many. You helped LittlePip! She's so boneheadedly determined to do everything on her own that it's a miracle for anypony to be able to tell her to hush up and accept aid."

I blinked as I looked down at my hooves. She didn't understand… just like I didn't understand what P-21 had been through. I didn't know what to say, and finally she sighed and then hugged me tightly with her hooves. "Someday, you will know the truth. Someday, you'll know what it's like to live without hating yourself."

It was a nice sentiment, but she didn't understand. Some ponies deserved to be hated. Like Goldenblood. Like Sanguine. Like Deus. Like me.

She sighed as she let me go, then narrowed her eyes at me. "Now… what's this I heard about you kissing my marefriend?"

I blinked. "You're…you mean you and LittlePip are…?" Wait! That *actually* happened? I jumped back. "I…she…I mean she was…you know…she was looking and I was…you know…and she…we…I…" I waved my hooves before me. "I'd never…had I know…I mean she's cute... and all…but…ah…"

Homage arched a brow coolly, then smiled. “We are and she did and she is. And I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to use that kiss for some fun tonight.” Then she looked over at Glory as she trotted towards us. “I’m just wondering if she knows about you kissing on my LittlePip?” Glory’s purple eyes suddenly turned cold as she looked at me.

Oh shit…“I…merp…jah shek…you…gah…” I struggled as the pair of mares just stared at me.

Then Glory looked at Homage. “There’s only one thing to do, isn’t there?”

Homage nodded gravely. “There is.” This was it. I was gonna die.

Glory and Homage stepped closer…their eyes locked on me…and then both smiled in immense satisfaction and lightly smooched each other on the lips. At which point something in my brain burst and I fell over in a heap, twitching. The pair laughed as they trotted away, talking about evening plans and how silly LittlePip and I were.

Life Bloom trotted up. “She certainly is quite the odd mare, isn’t she?”

“Something like that,” I said with a sigh, shaking my head. Evil was more my thinking…both of them.

“I love this room,” he said with a smile, looking at all the books with a soft gaze. Then he blinked, “Oh! That reminds me. I think I left a book on the desk in the office over there. Could you get it for me, please?” I looked at his perfectly capable legs, and he added, “It might also give you a chance to lose that flaming red expression on your cheeks.” Ahh. Yes. It would, wouldn’t it?

I walked towards the door he’d indicated, set off in the back corner of the aet…er…big library room thingy! What was it with smart ponies and ridiculous sounding words? Like everything else in the room, it was decorated with a golden unicorn with an amethyst eye. There was a tiny spark, and a little pink pony in my head gave a little ‘ooh’. I glanced back, but Life Bloom was talking with P-21 and Glory was still chatting evilness with Homage. Them kissing each other like that…evil…

I stepped into the study, feeling my cheeks burn. I wasn’t exactly in a rush to get back outside, so I looked around a bit. Surprise, surprise... there were even more bookshelves in here, along with several books sitting on the desk (I probably should have asked *which* book Life Bloom wanted, but…eh, I could do that later) and,

oddly enough, a great number of scrolls. They were stored along one wall in a rack like bottles of wine. I levi…fuck…I looked at them like an idiot before I remembered that my horn didn't work and instead pointed my hoof at it. "Fingers…on. Thumbs… function? Freaky digit powers activate!" Finally, I sighed and bit the end of one scroll; it easily opened. I wondered if it was on magic paper or something. Slowly, I unrolled it and looked at the elegant script.

My dearest, most faithful student, Twilight,

You know that I value your diligence and that I trust you completely, but you simply must stop reading those dusty old books! My dear Twilight, there is more to a young pony's life than studying, so I am sending you to supervise the preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration in this year's location, Ponyville. And I have an even more essential task for you to complete: make some friends!

Your devoted teacher,

Princess Celestia

I stared at the letter in astonishment, then flushed and wiped away the slobber I'd gotten all over the end of the scroll. I was a little relieved to see that none of it seemed to stick to the surface. Magic paper indeed. This was a royal letter and a historical document! I carefully rolled it back up with my hooves and returned it to its cubby, selecting another scroll. This time, my fingers folded out to nudge it into my hooves.

My dearest, most faithful student, Twilight,

I know that there are no words I can adequately express for the loss of your friend, Big Macintosh. I realize that, in times such as this, words cannot convey any cure for the pain we feel when one of our own dies. I am sorry that he died to protect me from that assassin's bullet and curse myself that there is no way to undo what has happened. All ponies pass, and I know that one day you will be reunited with him. I am here at the school if you should ever need me.

Your devoted teacher,

Princess Celestia

I sighed, rolling the scroll up and returning it to the rest. I couldn't discern any order or other method of filing; Twilight had probably had each one memorized. I pulled out one more. The dark silver ink and the look of the writing had a slightly cold tone.

My dearest, most faithful subject, Twilight,

We wish to express our profound dismay at the lack of progress towards

the war effort. Have we not provided you with every resource of the kingdom to your ministry? Do you not have at your disposal the most brilliant magical minds of our time? Yet when we ask what is being done to counter the development of zebra balefire weaponry, we do not hear of our own weapons being devised but instead talks of ethics and discussions about if it is right to weaponize megaspells. You can be certain our enemies waste no time with such nonsense. We are sure your purification matrices and radiation nullification spells are admirable goals, but they will come to naught under zebra rule. We know your burdens are great, but, while we will do all we can to help you bear them, we must know that you are up to the challenge.

We know that you will not fail us. You never have.

Your benevolent monarch,

Princess Luna

Wow. The contrast was night and day. Not at all what I'd expected from Princess Luna…but then, why had I expected differently? Luna was running an entire kingdom. If she failed, then the whole country would fall. Even if she won the war, there'd probably be a whole lot of ponies pissed off at her for every little thing that went wrong during the fighting. I frowned as I tapped the scroll softly against my lips. Luna…I suddenly realized that I knew almost nothing about what Luna actually did to run the country. The ministries took care of the war effort. The O.I.A. took care of all the dirty business. So what was Luna doing the whole time? I knew more about Goldenblood than I did the monarch of the country!

I sighed and shook my head. A smarter pony might be able to unravel all of this. I just shot things. Carefully, I put the scroll back in the cubby, walked to the desk, and started looking at the books on it; maybe I could figure out which one was Life Bloom's. *Predictions and Prophesies*. *Elements of Harmony, a Reference Guide*. And most curious of all was the book on top: *Magical Exercises for Young Unicorns*. I looked at a penned note sitting atop it.

Dear Marigold,

I'm sorry you've been having problems with Tarot. While most unicorn fillies her age have started using their magic, it's not uncommon for there to be delays. I used to think that my horn was completely useless! Tell her not to be frustrated. This book should provide her with some exercises to get her horn working, as well as a few useful and interesting spells and notes she might find helpful.

Your cousin,

Twilight Sparkle

I sighed. 'I need you to get a book,' Life Bloom had said. Very sneaky, giving me a book on rebuilding my magic rather than letting me kick myself for being a failure…with a note from Twilight to my own ancestor, even. I sighed and slipped the book into my saddlebag. "Okay. I get the message. Stop freaking out, cut out the self-hating, and start doing better. I get it."

"About time," the Dealer rasped, and I spun, tripped, and fell on my back looking up at the old pony. His milky eyes stared down at me as he worked his cards.

"I thought they'd cut you out of my brain!" I shouted as I thrust my hoof at him.

"Oh, I reckon there's more than enough left you're not using for me to hide in," he said dryly with a smile.

"Yeah, well, you missed your big chance. I couldn't open the door. I'm not related to Twilight," I said with a smile as I spread my hooves.

"Why should I care if you are or aren't? Makes no difference to me," he said as he turned a card with a picture of Twilight on it and flicked it at me with his hoof. "Twilight. Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Rarity. Fluttershy. Pinkie Pie," he said as he flicked one after the next at me. I collected the cards in my hooves. "They've all been gone two hundred years. What do they matter? Why get worked up over corpses?"

I looked at the spread of cards and glared at him. "Because they were good mares! They tried to save the country and do good things! They tried to do better."

"Even though they blew the whole damned world to hell? Well, so long as they tried…" he snorted. *I've known ponies whose fuckups killed millions.* "Trying doesn't mean shit. Consequences. Those are what matter. Twilight Sparkle and her friends tried, but they ran Equestria into the ground."

"Shut up!" I said as I rose to my hooves. "Trying matters. Even if they failed, there's something in making the effort. It's better than giving up!" The six cards returned to his hooves.

"Pinkie Pie tried to make everypony happy through drugs and eliminating bad memories. Fluttershy modified memories to change other ponies' very selves in the name of taking away pain and suffering. Rainbow Dash killed only Goddesses know how many. Applejack made the weapons of war that killed millions, including

her own brother. Rarity spun lies into truth and made deception into a whole new art form. And Twilight pursued one magic trick after the next hoping to find one that would work. A foolproof spell to win." I flinched as he flicked the cards with his hoof again. "And all any one of them had to do was quit!"

"What?" I blinked, staring up at him.

"That's all. One resignation. One. That's all it would have taken. Rainbow Dash quitting would have knocked out the pegasi and forced Luna to surrender. Applejack retiring would have thrown the war production into disarray, the heads of the companies under her fighting tooth and hoof for her position. Fluttershy's resignation would be joined by hundreds of doctors, nurses, and medical staff. And any of those six quitting would have led to the resignation of the other five." He gave a dismissive snort. "With the Ministry Mares gone, the whole government would have folded like a deck of cards."

"But Equestria would have lost the war!" I protested.

"So what?" he asked softly, but with a tone of such utter contempt that it made me pause. He gestured out the window. "Are you saying that this is better? The zebras had lost so many people that they were forced to use robots, tanks, and missiles because they couldn't continue their traditional way of fighting. A victory for them would have meant them returning home and the abdication of Luna from the throne. All it would take was any one of those six… any one…and Luna would have been unable to continue the war."

"So what are you saying? That they were scum for fighting for what they believed in, or that I should give up?" I asked with a sigh.

"I am saying that you are wrong for thinking they were flawless. I am saying that they made mistakes. They did what they did for all the wrong reasons." He looked around at the office and sighed. "This isn't a bad place, Blackjack. You could make a life for yourself here. You and your friends, away from the Hoof."

"I can't," I said softly. "I sat still for a few hours after coming back from the dead and then went and apparently got myself and LittlePip all shot up. I can't just stay here in Tenpony, assuming I could afford it and they'd let me."

"Get therapy. Helpinghoof will work with you on that. But you need to do this because it's the right thing to do. To fight because it's the right thing to be fighting for." He lifted the card of Twilight

Sparkle. “Because, if you’re doing this because you feel like you have to, then, related or not, you are exactly like Twilight Sparkle and the rest of her friends.”

I sighed as he disappeared, leaving me alone again. Of all the times for him to show up…why now? I carefully removed that note from the book. Was I taking this because of things that happened two centuries ago? Or was it because I wanted to get my horn to work again? Because I wanted to do magic on my own? I read the note three more times and sighed. No. I’m Blackjack, and no matter how lacking I might be, I was supposed to do magic. A unicorn is more than just an earth pony with a horn.

I trotted back out and saw Life Bloom waiting for me. He had the oddest look on his face. I tapped my saddlebag and mouthed ‘Thank you’. For a moment, he paused, and then he smiled. Homage was looking at me too, a touch worried. But I smiled back and nodded, and that seemed to put her at a little more ease.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon was spent in an unsettlingly relaxed manner. My friends and I got to enjoy the many splendors of Tenpony Tower. I had to admit, I’d never been anywhere quite so clean before that wasn’t actually some sort of death trap or house of horrors. The sight of ponies trotting around, talking, and trading was soothing. Whether here or in Flank, trade saved the Wasteland. Since Helpinghoof refused to accept most of the chems provided by Caprice, I sold them to a vendor for a decent amount of caps.

That allowed Glory and I to enjoy a perfectly nice, ridiculously overpriced meal in one of Tenpony’s restaurants. I personally found it more than a little bland…but then, so was everything else. My sense of taste was a little off. I wondered if that had something to do with the whole ‘eating metal’ thing. I bit down on the head of a fork and squeezed my jaws closed. There was that faint tingle, and the metal softened enough for me to chew it. Huh…nope, not much difference at all. The waiter took one look at me holding half an eating utensil between my hooves, and his eyelid twitched. What? It came with the meal!

There was a sizable crowd eating at the moment; I wasn’t very used to that, either. Heck, even back in 99, most of my meals were during curfew. Glory was ruminating on a café very much like this

back in Thunderhead, but something at the next table over caught my ear. A little phrase that spilled out of the mouth of a mare a little too dirty to be a full resident but a little too clean to be somepony long in the Wasteland.

"If you want to make caps, get to Hoofington," she said with the faint slur of somepony who'd had one drink more than they should. "A quick in and out and you'll solve all your monetary problems."

Glory had noticed me turning in my seat to look at the mare and her three companions. Laughing…joking…but paying her enough attention to hear what she was saying. "Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern. But I stared at the mare with her greenish-yellow hide and her wide smile, and a pink pony hissed in my ear, 'She's a bad pony.'

"Just want to say hello," I said absently as I rose from my seat and trotted towards the mare and her friends. They were all tower ponies…well dressed and more or less clean. But there was just something off about the yellow-green mare.

"It shouldn't be that hard to set up an expedition," mused one of them aloud. "A sizable caravan. Twenty ponies, ten brahmin at least. Soon as this beastly siege lifts…"

"Better to make it thirty. The Hoof isn't exactly an easy place at times, but once you've found a spot, you'll…" the prospector mare suddenly blinked up at me, then smiled a little too easily. "Oh, hello. You interested in making a fortune out east?"

I grinned as Glory trotted up beside me, frowning in worry. "Yeah, you can say that. You just come from there?"

"Surely did," she said with a wide grin. "Came back with trunks loaded with mint condition guns, ammo, caps, and a couple crates of food. Felt bad leaving a bunch behind but I just didn't have any more brahmin!" She laughed, and the other three joined her.

"Well, you could have gotten some more from the Finders in Megamart. Caprice's always happy to help for a good price," I said, and immediately drew the curiosity of the three.

The prospector's smile turned a touch sickly. "Well…If you've been there yourself, then you'd know…um…it's sometimes hard dealing with her…"

"No doubt. But, heck, I've had the roughest time with the Finders. You ever get over to Flank up in the north?" I asked, feeling something tightening inside me. I had a target on her face and felt my legs humming faintly.

"Uh…no. I was more…westish…" She rose to her hooves. "If you gentlemen would excuse me…"

"So, by Scrapyard?" I asked with a grin as I jumped into her path. "Great place for salvage. One of my favorites."

"Yeah, sure!" she blurted as she tried to dart around me. "Now get the fuck out of my--"

I might not have had a gun or weapon on me, but I certainly knew how to take down a mare. I grabbed a mouthful of the earth pony's greasy mane and jerked hard, pulling back and making her rear up as she yelled in response. I hooked my left leg around her waist and jerked, slamming her back to the table and sending the fancy meals dancing.

"Quick! Call security!" one of the three bucks yelled.

"I'm right here!" I shouted as I glared down into her fearful piss-yellow eyes. "You're lying about coming from Hoofington! I know you are! What I want to know is, *why* are you lying?"

"Get off me!" she yelled as she struggled. I unfolded my fingers and closed them on her windpipe.

"That place is a deathtrap! Anypony that's been there knows it." I looked at one of the three. "Did she mention anything about Enervation fields sucking the life from you?" I looked at another. "How about a plague that turns you into a cannibal? Or the wars and fighting?" I looked down at her. There were ponies coming who were not in a good mood. I grabbed her in my synthetic hooves and slammed her against the table. "So I want to know why!"

She coughed and gasped. "They paid us!" she yelled, and I released her enough to breathe properly. "They paid us caps…more gear than I could imagine! Gave it to us like it was garbage! Told us… told us to go out. Find ponies and tell them…tell them to go to Hoofington." I retracted my fingers and she rubbed her throat. "They found us after we fled Gutterville…said…said we could keep everything. Just had to say we came from Hoofington."

"We…there were others?" I asked as Tenpony security arrived.

She coughed as I moved off her. She didn't look well at the moment as she stared at me. "They sent us out…Friendship City… New Appleloosa…here…told us to tell folks Hoofington was rich and safe and…and... " She jerked sharply, whimpering and holding her gut. "Said to tell everypony…Hoofington Rises…"

"They…who are 'they'?!" I asked, but she clenched her eyes shut, shaking in pain as she curled up even more.

"Hurts…" she whimpered as she rolled off the table and suddenly screamed. She rolled in agony, and her mouth puked a bloody foam. Everypony backed away except for me as I looked her over. Her stomach was undulating under her hide. Then there was a pop and her insides burst in a red rain all over us. One of the three lost his very expensive lunch. The rest of the lunch crowd was either screaming and fleeing or looking like their brains were fully tied up trying to explain to their eyes that what they'd just seen could not possibly have actually happened.

I looked at Glory, who was staring with mixed horror and interest. The Dealer had said we could leave the Hoof behind. That we could have a normal life away from that cursed city. Maybe we could, but now it looked like the Hoof was drawing more ponies to it. "We need to get back home," I said grimly. Then I turned at looked at the half dozen security ponies in front of me and dropped my eyes to the dead prospector. "Oh…shoot…"

* * *

"So. What are you in for?" Rampage asked me as she stretched out on the bunk in the Tenpony detention cell with her hooves behind her head. Right now, Glory and Homage were trying to clear things up after my little disturbance. The security ponies were trying their hardest to hush up a nasty death before it disturbed the natives' delicate sensitivities. I was fairly sure there would be at least three new patients needing Helpinghoof's therapy. The inside of that prospector hadn't just been blown apart but shredded from the inside. Apparently, that wasn't common in Tenpony…

Damn, was I really this jaded?

"Got in a fight," I muttered.

"Shouldn't do that," Rampage tisked softly. "Puts the locals in a hanging sort of mood."

"Then she exploded," I muttered. Rampage slowly sat up and looked at me for some hint of a joke or sign that I wasn't serious. I glanced at her and sighed. "Really. I'm not kidding. She started talking about 'they' and 'them' and popped like a balloon full of red paint."

"Why do the most interesting things happen around you when I'm not there?" Rampage asked with a chuckle. I wasn't laughing, though. Somepony had sent her here with bags full of caps and loot

and a story that she'd gotten them from Hoofington. There were at least two others. And whatever had been done to her, she'd been ignorant of it.

'Them'. Conspiracies. Killings. Elusive plots. And somehow, I couldn't help but think that somepony was pulling together a plan of some sort. With the O.I.A. and Goldenblood and EC-1101. And now it'd just killed that poor clueless mare…

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" I screamed all at once, thrashing my metallic limbs as hard as I could against the hanging bunk. The metal screeched and deformed before the frame snapped and dumped me on the floor. "Stop killing ponies, you fuckers!"

"What's going on?" the security ponies asked as I rose and proceeded to kick and stomp the frame till it snapped off entirely. Then I applebucked it against the bars, making the pair jump back as I smashed what remained into broken steel. I wanted to be out of breath, my heart to pound, my legs to be sore…and the sensation that I'd pounded whoever was behind all this into twisted metal. Instead, I just sat down on the concrete floor feeling like an idiot.

"Saw a radroach," Rampage said calmly. "She can't handle those things."

I looked at the twisted remains of the bunk and sighed, feeling like a royal idiot. "Sorry." I was pretty sure my chances of getting out of here were somehow lower than those of me being related to Twilight Sparkle now.

"Not likely," one pony said to the other with a soft snort. "You won't find those things here."

"Oh, you might. Darn things are all over the Wasteland. Even get into stables, evidently," Rampage drawled. The talk of radroaches was distracting them a little from the fact that I'd just thrashed their bunk.

"Not in Tenpony," one of the security ponies said as he reached over and tapped a small flat metal box on the wall. "Ever hear of a pesticide talisman?"

I looked at his hoof and the flat box. Slowly, I crawled to the bars and stared across at the flat little casing. It was simple, nondescript. Something that had been there two hundred years or more. Just one little piece of equipment like thousands of others bolted to subway walls or in the backs of crumbling houses. I'd probably passed thousands of pieces just like it.

The one thing that drew my attention more than anything, though,

was the faded name on the case. 'Roseluck Pest Solutions'.

"Open it," I said as I stared at the little box. I looked up at the guards, who were not unjustly looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "Please. Please open it." The security guards looked extremely skeptical, and I knelt with my hooves clasped before me. "Please, I promise I'll behave myself and not make another peep. Just please open it."

"It's locked," one muttered, tapping the little case. "I doubt anypony knows where the key is."

"Call my friend P-21. Great with locks. Blue earth pony. Probably somewhere scowling. You can't miss him!" I hated this sense of stillness inside me.

"And I thought the striped one was a nutcase," the guard sighed before he scowled and said to one of the others, "Please see if you can find this friend of hers." Then the tan buck looked at me. "And you…behave. Turn off your eye…beam... things."

"Huh?" I looked at my hoof and saw the red pinprick light dancing on it. "Whoa…that's new."

The security ponies moved to a healthy distance, talking quietly to each other. I looked at the cot mattress wrapped in twisted metal and glanced hopefully to where Rampage was stretched out. She arched her brow. "Hey, don't even think about it. I'm not dumb enough to wreck my own bunk." I sighed. My butt didn't have enough metal in it for me to ignore how hard the concrete floor was.

After one hour, twenty-two minutes, and thirteen seconds…and I had to find a way to turn *that* off or I was going to go nuts…P-21 came in escorted by the tan security buck. He looked at the crumpled metal and scowled at Rampage. She sat up and pointed at me. "Hey, she was the one who felt a sudden need to redecorate! Not me."

I pointed with my hoof at the box. "Please. Open that."

"Blackjack…you're acting crazy…" he said in a tired voice.

"I just had a pony explode in front of me, okay? Just…open that box. Then I'll be a nice and quiet mare. Really." I stared at it as he looked at the tan buck for permission. He gestured with a hoof for P-21 to get on with it. He produced his tools from his saddlebags and in three seconds popped open the dull metal case.

"Huh…that's weird. Where's the gem?" the tan security pony asked in surprise. And as P-21 backed away, I felt my mane stand straight

up along my spine.

There, sitting quietly in its unsmashed case, was a silver ring about the size of my hoof. Just like in the back room of Silverstar Sporting Supplies and just like the ring that had been tossed at Lacunae during the battle. The Enervation rings weren't just in Hoofington. Suddenly, I had the feeling they were in a whole lot more places than just Hoofington.

* * *

"It can't be generating Enervation," Helpinghoof said as he stared at the silver ring on his desk. "Enervation is a phenomenon found only in Hoofington." Life Bloom had arranged our release and now my friends and I had gathered in the office.

"And I'm telling you that the ring in the sporting goods store was just like this," I insisted. Life Bloom had taken my concerns seriously, though he looked just as confused as Helpinghoof. "And during the battle, somepony had rigged one of these with a spark battery." Due to her prior experience, Lacunae was staying with Rover. I could only imagine what they were spending their time doing.

"Well, while I'm not sure what this ring does, it's not killing us," P-21 said. Life Bloom rummaged in Helpinghoof's cupboards, came back with a battery and two wires, and carefully attached them to the ring. Again…nothing.

Now everypony was looking at me like I was a madmare.

"Blackjack, it's just a coincidence," Glory said softly as she nuzzled me.

"You didn't see the ring, Glory. It was exactly like this. Same shape and size," I said with a huff, feeling let down.

"You've been through a lot, Blackjack," P-21 said, trying to comfort me. He was really lousy at it.

"You're welcome to stay another week," Life Bloom said, then paused and amended, "You *will* be welcome after I tell everypony that what happened in the café wasn't your fault." I scowled as I stepped away and walked over to the gurney the dead mare lay upon. He gave a sigh of frustration; clearly, me relaxing and calming down was in the script.

"What about her?" I asked as I pointed with a hoof at the dead mare. There was a look passed between everypony, and finally,

with a reluctant sigh, Helpinghoof trotted to the gurney.

"Rusty. We confirmed she was in Gutterville before it was destroyed," Helpinghoof said. I was glad he didn't show the body. "Whatever happened to her…it was like a grenade went off inside her. But her major internal organs were all destroyed…it was as if she was torn apart from within before detonation."

The Tenpony bucks looked spooked, but I shared a look with my friends. This wasn't even a bad day in the Hoof. Still, there was no missing the concerned looks being traded. Blackjack was now half synthetic. Blackjack had spent three days braindead. Blackjack was attacking strange mares who exploded! These were not signs that Blackjack was okay.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and paused briefly to mentally thank whoever had left me the ability to do that. "I know…I know I've been a little off since I've come back. I mean, the whole drinking thing, and then the test and the fight. But… there's something bad going on in Hoofington, and I can't shake the feeling that it's other places, too. So we have to get back. I can't spend a week just recovering here. I'll be climbing the walls in no time."

"You might have to," Glory said with a little frown. "Captain Thrush nearly burned out her engine getting us here."

Oh, wonderful…wait. "Where is Thrush?" I asked, realizing that I hadn't seen her since we arrived.

"Friendship City," P-21 said. "She sort of fell under the same rule as Rampage. 'Raider activities'." And who knew how far away that was? The idea of being stuck here was starting to creep up on me. I hated waiting. I needed to do. To act. To get things done. Otherwise, I was going to start thinking.

"I thought they called that looting and pillaging," Scotch Tape commented as she fooled around with Helpinghoof's little ear light thingy. The filly had gotten her hooves on a lot of loot and plunder herself, no surprise when you come from a stable where ninety percent of the property is communal and then go into the Wasteland where you owned whatever you found.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" Glory asked.

"School?" I frowned in confusion.

"Boring pony thinks I'm a kid, so she enrolled me in some stupid school thing they have here."

Glory nodded primly. "It's important every young filly get a quality

education."

"Education…" Scotch Tape snorted. "It's boring and stupid. I told them how to strip and rebuild a steam gauge assembly. They were making sand art. Art…from colored sand…" Her tone left no confusion at all about how she felt regarding that little enterprise. "I told them the only sand I ever played with was in a high pressure nozzle stripping rust and old paint from parts."

"So, no colored sand cutie mark then?" I asked with a smile. Her green glare informed me that rusty parts weren't the only thing she could sandblast. I grinned. "We could call you Sandy." Scotch growled and tried to tackle me.

"She goes from a warning about an Enervation device to insisting on getting back to Hoofington to teasing a foal about her cutie mark…" Life Bloom murmured. The fact was that teasing Scotch… who was finding out that biting mechanical legs wasn't very effective…let me think on the other two. The discovery of a silver ring here in Tenpony had panicked me, but now there wasn't much I could do. Why it wasn't causing the eye-bleeding mind screams was beyond me. But if they were in Tenpony, then I knew they had to be elsewhere, too, and the fact that they weren't projecting Enervation now didn't mean that they couldn't start.

Getting back to Hoofington, though, was in the short term a more troublesome problem. As I kept my hoof on Scotch's head, pushing her back as she swung her front hooves wildly at me, I thought of our options. One…going on the *Seahorse*, which would be delayed for many days due to the damage. Walking would be even slower, and I didn't relish the idea of hoofing it clear across Equestria with a Reaper and a purple alicorn anyway. I had no idea how to contact Ditzy to go by air...

Hmmm…. Maybe…

Then that thought was lost as Scotch Tape pulled away and I fell flat on my face…not because my brain didn't know how to work my legs, but because one of my legs wasn't there! The filly was trotting away with my right foreleg in her mouth; how the heck had she taken the thing off?! I scrambled back up on my three remaining limbs. "You bring that back!" I yelled as I staggered after her.

"Come and get it, Queen Stubby!"

* * *

"It may be possible," Lacunae informed me after I was whole once more. I tried to see how she'd taken it off with just a little wrench; the idea that my foreleg was attached by three pins and a half dozen nuts and some cables was more than a little concerning. "We are outside Hoofington's Enervation field; we can bring more resources to bear. And in return, you will go to Hippocratic Research and get Chimera for us." I didn't know if it was being outside the city that gave her the 'Goddess' talk or if the hive mind was once more connecting to her.

"Yeah. I won't trade EC-1101 for it, but I think it's time I took that Project out of Sanguine's hooves," I said, popping a ruby into my mouth. As soon as I closed my jaws, there was a tingle and the sweet, slightly spicy flavor trickled down my throat as it was liquefied. I washed it down with a Sparkle-Cola. Rubies were spicy, emeralds tasted like spearmint, sapphires like peppermint, amethysts were fruity, citrines tangy…aside from your local dragon, who knew? Oh…and rocks tasted like mud.

"Thank you," Lacunae said quietly.

I looked at her and thought about what LittlePip had said about mind-reading monsters. "Can I ask you something? What's it actually like to read a mind? I mean, do you look at a pony and just know everything they know?"

She looked at me curiously and with a touch of amusement. "Oh, no. It is like…staring into a pool of water. The most immediate and active thoughts are on the surface. They flash and flicker before our eyes. This morning, your thoughts were all of inebriation. Deeper thoughts are like fish far within the pool. We may see them, but we do not immediately truly understand their meaning. It takes a great deal of time and effort to extract a memory and understand it."

Like she'd done when I was asleep weeks back. I shivered a little. "Sorry, but that's just creepy, Lacunae."

The purple alicorn smiled sadly. "We are quite used to that sentiment, Blackjack…it is because of that that there are so very few capable and willing to help us freely."

I sat sucking on the ruby for a while. "Is this coming from the Goddess or Lacunae?"

"Yes," she replied with a small smile. "We wish only what is best for Equestria. We understand that few others can accept this. Equestria is as it is, and it is foalish to deny it. Talk and dreams of fixing and restoring Equestria to as it was before the war are a

waste of time."

"So?" I replied with a smile. "If you break it down, anything that's not putting food in your stomach or breeding is a waste of time. Reading books. Doing magic. Fixing things. If we only did things that mattered to our survival, it would be a really boring world." I reached out with my fingers, grabbed an opal, and tossed it in my mouth. Mmmm, milky! "Let me ask ya this…say the world were fixed…could you…all of you…exist in it?"

"Of course. We can adapt to any environmental condition," the purple alicorn said primly. "But we thrive in a world that is rich in ambient arcane magic." Aka, the radiation that killed anypony not a ghoul or alicorn.

"So you're saying that, even with wings and a horn and the intellect and souls of who knows how many ponies, you still have to have the deck stacked in your favor?"

"Ponies who join in Unity will survive forever in us," she insisted. Personally, I was a little skeptical of 'forever'.

"No doubt…but why not coexist?"

There was a long pause at that. "Have you heard of something called Gardens of Equestria?" she asked politely.

I felt a cold frisson run down my spine and prayed that my mane wasn't standing on end. I looked Lacunae and the Goddess in the eye and hoped she wasn't reading my mind right now as I lied through my teeth. "Gardens of what?"

"Like Chimera, it was one of the O.I.A.'s secret projects. Somehow, Goldenblood stole staggering amounts of materials, equipment, and arcane supplies for an unknown and unapproved project. Several sub-projects were carried out right under Twilight's nose, some in this very tower, under the pretext of purifying magical waste or nullifying magical radiation; she had no memory of approving their development. When it was discovered, Luna was furious beyond compare. For Goldenblood to work on such a thing rather than pursue the war effort…well…she sentenced him to be executed for his crimes."

"She…what?!" I stared at the alicorn in shock.

"Oh, yes. Apparently, it was designed to restore Equestria in the event of magical catastrophe. The mere implication of such a catastrophe was intolerable to Princess Luna. How dare her subject suggest imminent destruction would claim the kingdom? More to the point, his unwillingness to say what Gardens did…where it

was…how it worked…these were all a fundamental betrayal of the Princess's trust." Lacunae sighed. "Ironically, the very next day, the bombs fell."

"So…why would the Goddess care about this Gardens thing?" I asked as casually as I dared.

"We doubt it was ever completed or worked; else, why hasn't it been used? But if it was capable of a tenth of what was predicted, then why would it have to revert the environment? Could it not be tasked with expanding and enriching the Wasteland with more radiation?" She asked it very matter-of-factly, but suddenly I realized why ponies dedicated themselves to fighting alicorns.

"You want to use this Gardens thing to make everything worse?" I asked in a horrified voice.

"From your current perspective, yes." I suddenly imagined radioactive fields as far as the eye could see. Surface ponies would be wiped out. Ghouls would thrive, but against immortal and permanently regenerating alicorns, how long before they were blown to pieces? Eventually, radioactive clouds would poison even the Enclave.

"Yeah…that would make coexistence pretty tough," I muttered softly.

"We are otherwise occupied with our defense and the biological problem. But someday, we would seek out what became of the Gardens." Well, great, another apocalyptic threat. At least this one wasn't urgent, though. Maybe I could find another silver bullet and pay the Goddess a visit... but... what would that do to Lacunae? And did I still even have Folly? Probably not. And should I use it if I did? But if nopony stopped the Goddess... urrrrghh! My brain was not meant for dilemmas like this!

I sat back and stared at her for a long moment... something was different here. Who exactly was I talking to? "You don't really talk to non-alicorns like this, do you?"

"In truth, only one other. He was brilliant, but ultimately we could not risk his inclusion in Unity. He swore to aid us in solving our biological issue in return for our power, but I suspect that he simply wishes our annihilation." She sighed. "The rest of the Wasteland is filled with cowardly, craven, cruel ponies who fear our potential or slavishly worship us for our power. They do not respect us. They cannot! And you ask why we cannot coexist with them when they are unable to accept us!" I had to admit, I'd never thought of it like

that before.

"So…why me now? Especially after that stunt I pulled this morning." To my amazement though, she smiled. I guess I really couldn't imagine the Goddess as having fun.

Then she looked out the window. "You kept our secret." I blinked in surprise. "About the silver ring. You could have told others how horribly it hurt us…tearing our souls out through the connection. You could have informed the tower…they would have been far more interested had you shared that fact. Or told your friends. Or that…diminutive little…" she snorted sharply. "But you didn't. Nopony realizes just how terribly that hurt us, save you."

To be honest, it had slipped my mind. "You might have noticed I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"Oh, we have. Indeed, it is unmistakable and somewhat terrifying how unintelligent you are." Well…thanks! "And yet, you did us a favor and may do yet more. You do not hate us. Do not kill us. And, while we may quibble about certain things, we feel you are… decent. You do not care if a pony is surfacer or pegasus, alicorn or ghoul. That is…commendable."

Well, if there'd been alicorns all over Hoofington fighting me, perhaps I'd have been different about it. Lacunae had made things easier. Really, the Goddess couldn't have asked for a better ambassador than her. Helpful, polite, quiet, elegant and dignified... and…"This isn't the Goddess I'm talking to, is it?" I said softly, looking up at her with a little smile.

She looked wistful as she turned away. "No. It's not. But wouldn't it be wonderful if it were?"

* * *

The invitation to Homage's dinner party came soon to both my and LittlePip's friends. I'd been warned to stay in my room by Tenpony security; at this point, I think Glory was the only one they wanted trotting around, and they were even nervous about her. Still, she was out, I was in…and I was bored. I lay down and tried to go into another memory orb. Nothing. Zip. Tossing it back into my bags, I rolled onto my back. Should I even try and regain my magic? I was never good at it, anyway. I was a cyberpony now. I needed to learn how to get my body to work and focus of that. And heck, I hadn't come across many decent orbs to spend time in.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if I could make up my mind? What did I need magic for?

I summed it up in a word: Goldenblood.

As infuriating as he was, as much as I hated seeing him slime around the corners of Equestria, he was the key to what was happening in Hoofington... and now, maybe, all across the Wasteland. Something had happened to him. Treason? Taking credit for Gardens? Being sentenced to execution? I just didn't understand it. If he was a monstrous shit, then fine, I could have dismissed it. But he'd apparently protected Twilight from Luna. Why? He'd hit her for making alicorns! He'd taken her memories!

And, apparently, gone to the block rather than betray her.

Most infuriating of all, I was the only pony who seemed to know about him at all. The O.I.A. had gotten Image to cover their tracks. I found the O.I.A. 'office' in Tenpony converted into a cheese shop; the only indication that it had ever been something else were the faded rings and cutie marks next to the door. The emblem had been painted over and only barely bled through the white layer. Only Professor Zodiac had any direct knowledge at all.

The three most important things are loyalty, love, and secrets. Who had he loved? What was he loyal to? Why so many secrets? All this thinking was making my brain hurt. But I'd learned the most through memory orbs. To make orbs work, I needed magic.

Though…maybe not.

I might not be allowed to trot through the shops below, but I'd been shown where there was a dandy library up above…

* * *

Reading was hard. I'd snuck... well…technically, I doubted that I would be kicked out if I got caught, but why take the chance? Anyway, I'd reached the aerthithingy place, but once I'd gotten in... I was completely screwed. I figured that a library was a place where you just looked at book titles and find 'Goldenblood: a memoir' or something. It never occurred to me that, with thousands and thousands of book titles to look at, I could spend years searching and never find a thing!

"Uggh…damn it. There has to be something in here on Goldenblood. He can't have just disappeared!"

"I'm afraid that most references to Goldenblood were removed by

the ‘Intellectual Reorganization Command’ of Princess Luna’s third year,” a mechanical, feminine voice hooted from up above, making me jump and bite down on a book, readying it for throwing. From the roof descended a golden owl that landed on the rail and blinked at me with bright purple eyes. “Need I remind you that biting books is not good for the preservation of the covers, Mistress?”

I spat out the book. “Who are you? What are you?”

“I am Nyctimene, Mistress. I am the keeper of these books,” she replied. I slowly walked around the golden machine, and its head slowly rotated and remained focused upon me. “I am Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle’s personal assistant within Tenpony Tower; second to her number one assistant, of course.”

“So you are a robot?” Robotic owls. Who knew?

“That is a fair assessment,” Nyctimene said with a nod of her head. “You desire texts on the first O.I.A. director, Goldenblood?”

“Yes!” I said, glad that I’d finally hit a break. “Tell me you have a biography or something on him.”

“I’m afraid not, Mistress. As you know, most texts referring to him were purged following the establishment of the Ministries.”

“You must have *something*.”

The owl stared at me for a long moment. Then, suddenly, she winged away to one of the upper shelves. She hovered in front of the bookcase and carefully pulled out a book with her claws, then flew back to a reading desk and set down the slim gray tome. ‘Luna’s Academy for Young Unicorns: Get Sent to the Moon!’ I flipped it open and was astonished by a picture spread over two pages. Luna was standing in the middle, looking like she was struggling not to cry. The faculty flanked her, and a hundred or so unicorn foals smiled at the camera... save one who was levitating up the pigtails of the filly beside her and a pair of colts down in the front row poking each other with sticks.

And there, right beside Princess Luna, was Goldenblood giving a stern look at the two disobedient colts in the front.

I flipped through the pictures. There was an article on the academy being in a remote location, keeping it safe from the war. A short little comment from the Princess about how she’d always had a fondness for young ponies, but she could never gobble more than one. So many pictures of young ponies learning…everything. Unicorns learning magic. Studying. Meeting in clubs. And in the middle of it all was Luna. Luna smiling. Luna teaching. Luna

looking happy and useful and loved.

The photographs of Goldenblood were much more difficult to find. The pale buck might not have been ravaged by poison, but he was still more homely than handsome. Most of the pictures caught him while he was asleep in an empty classroom or staring out of one of the stained glass windows. 'Professor Goldenblood: History, Culture, Literature, and Psychological Studies' read the caption. There was one picture of him surrounded by a half dozen colts and fillies. The desk in front of him was covered with rocks of all types. 'Littlehorn Rock Club' read the caption.

A rock club? Really? What did they talk about? The merits of igneous rocks? Which rock was stripier than the others? I looked at his hoof resting on a strange fossilized bug. Next to it was a strange twisty stone. 'Hoofington Meteorite' read a tiny tag beside it. A unicorn filly and, most curiously, a pegasus colt, both looking far too alike to be a coincidence, held up an enormous geode filled with gems.

But more than that. Goldenblood looked happy. Tired. Guarded. Older than he probably was, but still happy. From the few other pictures, I gathered he'd been the 'strict' teacher. I noticed a young black unicorn mare, a teacher's aide, it looked like, behind him and stared for the longest time. She might not have been in a uniform, but there was no denying that that mare was none other than Psalm! I flipped through a second time, picking her out in the background. Again and again. She was almost more elusive than Goldenblood!

There were pictures of him with the princess, the pair talking and laughing. A picture of him lecturing a filly with a mask cutie mark who was trying her hardest not to laugh as Luna made faces behind his back. A picture of the princess drawing a mustache on his face in black marker as he slept. 'I need you,' she'd said to him as he lay dying in the hospital. He'd been more than just Luna's political advisor…He was Princess Luna's *friend*.

And then, a dozen years later…she was ordering his execution.

Loyalty, love, and secrets.

Goldenblood might have been a bastard, but he hadn't always been that way. He'd been a teacher. Brilliant. Intelligent. From the look of the students around him, though, he'd been respected as well. Had it been Littlehorn that changed him?

I looked up for a moment and noticed that three more books were

on the table in front of me; Nyctimene must have brought them down while I was looking through the first one. Setting 'Littlehorn' aside for now, I pulled the book on the left over.

I opened 'Dancing with Stripes' to a number of grainy black and white pictures of a zebra metropolis with marble pillars and white temples. In the front of one of the pictures was a unicorn mare in a frilly, fancy dress that was right up the Overmare's mother's alley standing beside a young colt wearing an explorer's cap. Even as a colt, he seemed a solemn and guarded kid. 'Sundancer and Goldenblood' read the caption. My eyes moved to the text beside it.

... from our many adventures in Roam and other zebra lands, we have found this a strange and enchanting place. For many ponies, zebras are hut dwelling primitives practicing strange shamanistic magic. It is unthinkable that zebras should have cultural and historical accomplishments that rival, even exceed, those of even Ponyville, much less the greater Equestrian cities. My son and I have explored the vast empty Savannahs, crossed blistering deserts, and explored strange jungles only to be dazzled and amazed by these genial folks and their strange but not unwholesome ways.

While ponies can easily separate ourselves into groups of earth pony, unicorn, and pegasus, zebra affiliation is far more tribal and fragmented into herds and bloodlines stretching back to antiquity. Some, like the Zencori, wander far and wide collecting lore and stories to bring back to their ancestral lands. Others are far more cerebral and mystic like the elusive Achu, who blend hoof fighting with meditation and spiritualistic behavior. The Propoli are every bit as urbane as the most sophisticated Canterlotian pony, placing great stock on lore and education. Indeed, a traveler can find as much difference between an Atori and a Eschatik zebra as between a pegasus and a unicorn!

While most zebra tribes are friendly, if odd, one must take care to avoid 'star touched' tribes. The term describes tribes that have dabbled in dark and forbidden magic or performed horrible crimes. The most infamous, of course, are the Starkatteri, or 'Eaters of the Stars', tribe, whose dark tales of ritual sacrifice, flaying the skin off still living prisoners, profane rituals, and other dark deeds have become the stuff of trashy adventure tales back home. Others, like the Carnilala, engage in disturbing sexual practices and self-mutilation. These 'star touched' tribes are shunned by zebra society as a whole, but sadly they are the first thing many ponies latch onto when thinking of our striped neighbors.

I flipped to the next page and looked at pictures of zebras. Some

were wearing fancy clothes and dancing on their rear hooves. Another balanced on a pole…upside down. Four calmly discussed things in a library that looked almost identical to the one I as in… only somehow even bigger. Two zebra mares struggled in brutal hoof to hoof combat. A pair of zebra males stared out with dark eyes from a shadowy doorway, their faces branded with a swirling star and other ritualistic scars.

Still…there wasn't much I could see about Goldenblood.

I sighed and pulled the next book over as Nyctimene flew down to put away the ones I'd finished with. This one was about the Hoofington reconstruction and had a picture of Goldenblood dramatically speaking before a crowd of thousands as blood ran from his mouth. He looked flayed, the scars barely bandaged and stained pink and red. Other photos showed him talking with Rover, who looked really strange without his mechanical limbs.

The sole book on the O.I.A. was barely fifty pages long and sounded like it'd been written for children. It didn't tell me anything new. The O.I.A. hub was in Hoofington. It worked to keep the Ministries going. No mention of secret projects. No mention of creating monsters or cyberponies. Just that it was the hard-working glue and oil that kept the Ministries working together and smoothly and reported directly to Princess Luna herself. Damn thing didn't even mention Goldenblood…Oh, wait. There he was: 'The O.I.A.'s director resides outside Hoofington near Black Pony Mountain.' Not even mentioned by name! No wonder everypony else thought I was going crazy.

I closed my eyes and I leaned back, letting the golden owl take the last book away. I wondered if, two centuries from now, somepony (or alicorn, if the Goddess succeeded in her plans for Unity after all) would discover little snippets of my life and wonder 'who was this crazy mare, and why didn't she just write an autobiography telling everypony about herself?' More and more I kept feeling…trapped. Things that happened centuries ago kept creeping through things I felt now. Like I was caught up in a great current and I was helpless to escape it. Heck, I was glad I didn't have to face crushing waterfalls along the way.

"Hey, Blackjack?" LittlePip said, making me jump and fall over. I hit my head on the leg of the reading desk and hissed, rubbing my skull. Why hadn't they thought to armor that, huh? The little unicorn looked at me in sympathy. "You okay? I didn't expect to

find you here."

"I'm trying a new thing…thinking. Seems to be all the rage among wandering Wasteland heroines these days," I said as she lifted me to my hooves easily. "I heard the Stable Dweller is a master at it."

"Um, I don't know about that," she said with a little flush and smile. "Homage sent me to look for you. Her dinner party's about to start. She doesn't get to entertain much, and she wanted to make sure you didn't miss it."

I blinked in shock as I looked out the windows. There were only the dark purples of twilight left in the sky. How long had…I checked the chronometer. Three hours looking at books? At this rate I was going to turn into an egghead! They'd have to start calling me Professor Blackjack or something. "Wow. Time flies with a good book…" I said with a sheepish smile, shaking myself as we walked together towards the door. "So…you figure out how you're going to deal with your mind-reading nemesis?"

"Already did," she said with a little, uneasy smile. "I've taken out my memories regarding the plan. What I don't know, she can't use against me."

"So you don't remember us--" I started, and she raised her hoof in alarm.

"Don't tell me! My brain's already scrambled enough as is. I don't want them to have to go in and take the information out all over again!" She sighed. I stared at her, thinking about Doc Oct's warnings and about what had happened to Scotch. Would ripping holes in her own memory cause reactions and mistakes? Cause her brain to scramble or drive her crazy? She noticed my look and bowed her head. "The only way to do this... the only way for me to be sure... is if I know there's nothing in there for her to pick out."

I looked at her for the longest time. I couldn't imagine her going through what she had, facing what she did. Actually sabotaging her own brain to thwart a mind-reader? All I did was shoot, get shot at, and have mysteries thrown in my face. I'd never have it as hard as LittlePip did. "LittlePip... " I began, but she shook her head, cutting me off.

"As is, I'm probably going to have to drop a few more memories before I'm sure everything's set," she said with a little sigh and roll of her eyes, as if it wasn't a big deal at all, and the look on her face said that she didn't want me to treat it as if it was. Wow... she might actually have been able to give the Stable Dweller a run for

her money.

"So," I asked, "you don't remember *anything* about our adventure?"

"I know it involved me taking a PTM," she said, her eyes falling. "Again…" Ooooh, I knew that 'kicking myself' look. I was a master of that look! And on my watch, I was going to be the only one of the two of us wearing that look.

I frowned and stopped. "Listen…I was there." I put a hoof on her shoulder. "I know why you took it. You had to. There was no other way. It wasn't because you had an excuse to take them. Okay?"

LittlePip brightened a little and nodded. "Thanks…" Still... she wasn't quite letting go of the self-kicking... I could see it in her eyes. Well... hell if I was going to let her do that! There was only room for one grade A self-recriminist in this tower.

I chuckled as I stepped closer, and instantly her ears perked in alarm. "It's too bad though. I know I'll never forget discovering such a wonderful kisser," I said, giving her flank a nudge with my own as I trotted past and out the door, looking back at a little unicorn inventing whole new shades of red to blush.

* * *

When we arrived at the dinner party, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised to find most of my crew chatting amiably with most of LittlePip's crew. And since we were arriving late, there was nopony in the way between me and the buffet table! I was feeling positively snacky!

I was trotting towards it when my ear twitched at the sound of Glory talking to Calamity. "So…you're absolutely positive you didn't kill off your entire squad in a rampage of death and destruction and flee to the surface to avoid lawful prosecution by the authorities?" she asked as she balanced a cup of punch on her outstretched wing.

"Let me think on that…" the brown pegasus drawled as he rolled his eyes in mock reflection. "Mmmm…nope! 'Fraid not. Said my piece and went on my way, though it weren't like they were keen on makin' it easy."

"I'll say you did," she said with a little frown. "You know, you completely undermined what we were trying to do in Thunderhead with that display."

He gave a little shrug. "You Thunderheaders. Always with the great

big ideas and stuff. So long as Neighvarro's got the guns, not much you can do."

"Well somepony's got to have the big ideas," she replied firmly. "Besides, I thought you were all about helping the surface."

"Ah ahm," he replied. "But sendin' down some healin' supplies and takin' some food back ain't helpin'. It's flirtin'. There's no way yer gonna do more than that."

"It takes time. You can't just do it all at once," Glory protested.

"Sure. Been two hundred years. What's another two hundred more?" he countered, then saw her ears droop. The brown buck sighed. "And if it were Neighvarro, it'd probably be two thousand years before they sent so much as spit. I just ain't one fer itty bitty steps."

"You sound just like my father," she said. His expression turned a touch more curious. "Sky Striker."

"He's your father?!" he blurted, then stared at me, then at Glory's missing wing, then back at me. "Landsakes! He's gonna take off your head when he finds out you broke her!"

"He already knows," I said with a flush as I trotted away, and the two began to talk about the legendary Sky Striker. Anyway, if he wanted to kick my tail, he'd have to come down here and get it. No way I'd ever be heading to Thunderhead any time soon.

Moving around, I spotted Scotch Tape seated next to a giant green flaming bird. Given that nopony in the room was alarmed at this, I assumed it was some sort of pet. It seemed the two were locked in a staring contest of sorts, only from the expression on Scotch's face she clearly expected to be eaten if she lost. The crackling avian seemed to be having quite a bit of fun with the petrified filly. Both our PipBucks clicked softly.

"Pour RadAway on her," I suggested, drawing the look of Velvet Remedy away from P-21.

"Don't you dare! You'll make her all sticky!" Velvet protested.

"Oh, we do that just standing here," Homage said as she trotted up and glanced back at where LittlePip was taking a drink of punch, her eyes locked on all our rumps. She gasped, choked, and fell over coughing and sputtering.

"You *are* evil," I said in blind admiration, chuckling.

Then there was a loud sizzling squawk, and the three of us turned back to see Scotch with a ripped open RadAway pouch in her mouth and a smoldering, not-quite-flaming bird dripping orange

fluid. The olive filly looked at us and then at the glaring avian and pointed a hoof at me. “She told me to do it! It was her idea!”

“Not sure you noticed, Scotchy, but my ideas tend to get my rump thumped more often than not.” The reigniting bird thing screeched, and the olive filly dove underneath the buffet table as the animal stalked atop it, glaring down as only a very grumpy bird of prey can for any sign of the filly emerging.

I trotted around a bit more. I talked with Calamity about the finer points of Wasteland cuisine. My eyes were a little glazed over after listening to Glory and Velvet make medicine talk, and I made my way over towards Xenith. The zebra mare looked over at Glory. “So, you are with a mare as well?” When I nodded, she simply shook her head. “And you two, do you try for the record as well?”

“Record? What record?” I asked with a little frown of confusion. Calamity trotted up and Glory looked over, her ears twitching.

The zebra looked coolly over at the littlest unicorn present and said, “I believe the number is thirty-three?” LittlePip’s eyes went round and she immediately blushed.

“Thirty-three…?” I asked in confusion.

“In a single night,” Homage said with a smug smile. Thirty-three… Oh!

“One night?” Glory asked with a flush. “I’m not sure that that’s medically possible... ”

“Hmmmm…that could be a challenge! Hey, we could turn it into a contest!” I said, and Homage grinned in delight. I looked at the gray pegasus. “What do you say, Glory? I’ve got an itch in my nethers, a non-stick hoof, and these things!” I said, popping out my fingers and wiggling them.

Glory and LittlePip stared at us, perfect copies of one another, jaws dropped and cheeks flaming.

“Sweet Celestia, there’s two of ‘em,” Calamity muttered, pointing his hoof at one and then the other as P-21 stared at us in disbelief, “Which one’s Lil’pip again?”

“It’s like looking in a mirror,” Velvet murmured.

The pair looked at each other, looked back at us with a scowl, and shouted in perfect unison. “S- Shut up!”

* * *

As folks were enjoying themselves nibbling on the repast prepared,

Homage trotted up to me. I nearly jumped out of my hooves at her approach. I might like teasing Glory, but the gray unicorn just oozed this sexy confidence that made me…alert. “Are they back to normal yet?” she asked as she looked across the room to where Glory and LittlePip were still fuming.

“Definitely pinkish still. They keep sneaking looks at each other and then going red again,” I said with a soft chuckle.

“Mmmm…they’re adorable,” she said with a shake of her head, then looked at me with an arched brow. “You seem to handle it a little better.”

“Told you about 99, right? Five hundred mares. Forty bucks. A mare that didn’t like sex with other mares was in for a pretty lonely life.”

“LittlePip would have loved it there,” Homage said softly, but I sighed as I watched her. I knew better.

“No, she wouldn’t. Daisy would have picked on her. Marmalade would have helped. I would have turned a blind eye.” I sighed, closing my eyes. “She would have been stuck in her role, whether it suited her or not. She’d never have left and she’d have been miserable. Nopony was happy in 99. Happiness? That was just a delusion.”

Homage sighed softly. “On that happy note…Hoofington’s gone dark.” I looked at her sharply. “Four days ago, right after the *Celestia*. I’m not getting any signal from the towers there. Actually, I’m not getting transmissions of any kind from there.”

“I’ve got to get back…” I murmured. There were things happening, and I was having dinner and laughing and teasing and…I yipped as a tail spanked my ass hard. “What was that for?” I asked as I rubbed my stinging derriere with a forehoof, blushing hard myself.

“You were getting that whole ‘kicking yourself for having fun’ look going,” she replied with a smile. “You can’t run off this very second and you aren’t a bad pony for enjoying yourself. Just letting you know.”

I nodded; she was right. That had been exactly what I’d been about to do. “I just…”

“You want to help ponies. That’s commendable. It’s what I love about LittlePip,” she said with a laugh. “But you don’t have to go charging east just because I give you some troubling news.”

“But I thought that that was what heroes are supposed to do? We charge off into the fray so other ponies can get away,” I said with a

touch of sarcasm. I glanced over at Homage, but the gray unicorn wasn't smiling as she looked across the room at LittlePip talking with Rampage. "Homage?"

"I hope she knows I don't want her to go," Homage murmured softly. "I know I tease her…sometimes I think I'm absolutely horrible to her. But it's only because the alternative is crying and begging her not to leave. I know she has to. She's just like you; she has to do things. Save Tenpony. Save the Wasteland. Save me. I'm just scared that I'm going to lose her. Sometimes I wish I could go with her…so that if something bad happens, then I'll be right there with her. I'm so jealous of you and Glory."

I closed my eyes. "I wish I could leave her here. I saw her die right before my eyes, Homage. Just a few days back. She was inches from my face, and then she fell. One of my enemies saved her life, but for a while there... It crushed me. And I'm always afraid that some decision I make is going to kill her."

"I'm just scared something's going to happen to LittlePip," Homage said and I looked at her. "Every time I see her, she's slipped a little further from me. It's not so much her dying…as terrible as that would be. I've had somepony I loved killed before. You live through it, as much as it hurts. I'm afraid that something will happen… something like…like what you had to do in Stable 99. She'll have to make a choice…or she'll go too far…or something. I keep telling her to fight the good fight…and she will. She'll fight till it destroys her."

I knew something of the blame game. "I haven't really known LittlePip all that long, but I think she'd do this whether you told her to fight or to stay. She's like me like that. Dumb, huh?"

"Mmmm, but it's what I love about her. She really, truly, will do whatever she has to to help other ponies," Homage said softly, sniffing and rubbing her eyes. Of course, at that moment LittlePip was trotting over with Xenith and Glory.

"I can't believe she survived being put through a wood chipper," LittlePip murmured. "Is Hoofington like Freakytown Central or something?" But then she spotted Homage and started to look concerned. "Homage? Are you okay?"

"Sure. Absolutely," I said with a wide grin.

Homage nodded and smiled. "Mhmm."

"Hey LittlePip…" I gave my slyest grin. "I just couldn't help but notice that Homage likes mares…and Glory likes mares…and you

like mares…and me, well I think the three of you are the cutiest darn trio of fillies collected in the Wasteland. And, as I recall, Twilight once owned a book called the Zebra Sutra. Not suggesting anything. Just saying…" I grinned as lecherously as possible.

Xenith looked at the little unicorn and one-winged pegasus and observed curiously, "I did not know pony hooves could blush."

* * *

Things smoothed out a bit after that. There was one little inescapable hitch, though: the alicorn in the corner. She sat quietly, her purple eyes observing us all. LittlePip had done her utmost to ignore her presence completely. I'd explained she couldn't read anything if she didn't touch horns, but the little unicorn just grunted sourly and kept her distance. Still, as the night wore on, LittlePip kept looking over at the far corner where the purple alicorn sat silently.

"Are you absolutely sure she's safe?" LittlePip asked softly.

"Oh yeah, Lacunae's an angel as long as the Goddess isn't possessing her," I said with a casual smile.

The little unicorn balked. "Wait. She can just take over at any time?" I nodded and got that 'you are crazy' look again. "Aren't you afraid she's just going to take over and kill you?"

"Kill me? Do you realize how much I owe the Goddess?" I said with a snort. "I'm in debt to her up to my horn. She's not going to just throw all that away." Velvet stared in shock as P-21 sighed and shook his head. I continued, "Besides, all my friends have tried to kill me at one time or another. You get used to it." I shrugged, and LittlePip looked at my friends in shock.

"I haven't!" Scotch protested as she peeked out at the balefire phoenix stalking above her.

"Oh, right. Scotch hasn't," I amended with a shrug.

LittlePip rubbed her chin. "Now that I think about it, most of my friends have tried to kill me, too…"

Rampage laughed. "Hey! We could make a 'Tried to kill our leaders' club!"

"Could I get in on that?" I wondered.

The striped mare nodded. "Sure, Blackjack! You've tried to kill you more than anyone!"

LittlePip, Rampage, and I laughed as the black unicorn stammered,

“This…this isn’t healthy!” She looked at the blue buck as she pointed at me and LittlePip.

P-21 just nodded and deadpanned, “Yes, Velvet. Everyone from the Hoof is like this.” He lead her off. “It helps if you think of her as a foal dropped on her head…repeatedly.”

“Don’t forget the lead paint!” I called after them, getting a look from LittlePip. “What? That stuff’s good.”

LittlePip shook her head. “Blackjack, you are just so…random!” I grinned as we approached Lacunae, Rampage trotting away to talk to Velvet. The purple alicorn looked at her calmly as LittlePip forced a small, tense smile. “Hi.”

“Hello,” she said telepathically, making LittlePip’s mane stand on end.

“Well so nice to meet you! Goodbye!” she said as she turned, and I caught her.

“She’s not going to gobble you up,” I said firmly.

“Well, duh. I know that,” she said, as if she were trying to convince herself. She slowly turned back around and took a deep breath. “Hi. Lacunae…right? That is your name?”

“It suffices…” Lacunae said quietly. “Lacunae is what I am. Something missing.”

LittlePip frowned in confusion. “Something missing from you?”

“Things missing from others,” she said cryptically. I rolled my eyes.

“Lacunae’s where the Goddess shoves all the memories and thoughts she doesn’t want to deal with in Unity. Apparently, there’s a whole lot of guilt and angst when you blend together the minds and souls of thousands of ponies. Rather than deal with it, it all gets repressed.”

“All in one pony?” LittlePip asked with a note of concern. “How do you…I mean…I would have thought…”

“That I’d be a complete monster?” Lacunae said quietly. “Like how you see all alicorns you’ve encountered?”

LittlePip winced. “Well, you’ve been helping Red Eye and trying to kill me…”

“Red Eye was the first to ever come to us with an offer to help. You were in Appleloosa to interfere with his operations. Were we supposed to abandon that allegiance and betray him?” she replied calmly as she stared down at LittlePip.

“Well…yes?” LittlePip said with a sheepish smile. “I mean... all the things he’s done... ”

“He was the first power in the Wasteland to work with us. We have no desire to perpetuate slavery. We are trying to save all of ponykind through Unity. We tried to send out priests and converts, but they were assaulted and killed by all manner of perils. We were attacked on sight by so many settlements.”

“You don’t…you can’t just sit there and try and tell me you’re the victims here! You force ponies to join Unity!”

“Would you allow somepony you care for to die because they refuse to take medicine that will cure them?” she replied calmly, making LittlePip balk. “You kill enemies and threats to survivors in the Wasteland, but do you remain to make certain they do not starve next month? Die of thirst next week? In Unity, we transform ponies into a form that does not hunger or weaken in this world. We protect their souls in us. Can you do the same?”

“In you?” LittlePip murmured in shock. “You mean…you trap their souls inside you?”

“In us, we endure. They are not hurt. They are safe from death forever,” Lacunae murmured softly, then closed her eyes.

LittlePip frowned, looking confused and a little guilty. “I think I liked it better when you were just trying to kill me.”

“You are helping us,” Lacunae said calmly, and that seemed to make her squirm. “Reluctantly. Unwillingly, perhaps. But helping us. With your help, we will stop Red Eye, end slavery, and halt the suffering of all ponies in the Wasteland.”

But as she spoke, our friends gathered around us, “And what about others?” Homage asked as she trotted up with a small frown.

“Others?” Lacunae said in confusion.

“Yes, others. It’s not like it’s just ponies out there! What about zebras?” Xenith looked at Lacunae with that steady, imperturbable gaze.

“They are…not us. We cannot... We do not know…” the purple alicorn started to stammer.

“And griffins?” suggested Calamity. Doubt flickered in Lacunae’s eyes. “You just gonna kill ‘em?”

“We would rather... it is not... you don’t understand... ”

“And hellhounds?” Velvet Remedy asked as she joined in as well. I blinked at that and Calamity groaned softly. Weren’t hellhounds some kind of monster? But then, weren’t alicorns?

“And dragons?” asked Rampage. “I’m pretty sure there’s still a few of those around. You gonna be able dip them into Unity as well?”

"And ghouls!" piped up Scotch Tape with the phoenix standing on her rump. I looked at her with a smile, and she flushed. "What? Harpica and those other ghoul kids were nice!"

LittlePip looked at all of us backing her and smiled before she looked back at Lacunae. "That's why Unity's just not enough. It's not enough to save just ponies by turning us all into alicorns. We have to fix this world."

"We have to do better," I said quietly. "No one person…no one goddess…can do it all themselves."

Then Lacunae sighed as well. "We liked it better when you were dropping boxcars on us too." Then her eyes turned hard. "WE WILL SAVE WHAT WE CAN, HOW BEST WE CAN. WE SHALL THRIVE IN THIS WORLD. REMEMBER OUR ACCORD, AND THEN YOU WILL LEARN THE PEACE THAT COMES THOUGH UNITY!" she thundered at all of us. LittlePip drew Little Macintosh, but I shook my head hard. Lacunae shuddered and sighed. "My apologies for… that."

LittlePip put the revolver away, looking on in concern, "Are you all right?"

"She hoped to convince you. To truly convince you. She did not expect…that…" she said as she slumped against the wall. "Now she's feeling shame…and doubt…and questioning herself."

"She is?" Velvet asked in astonishment. "Then maybe…" but Lacunae sniffed softly and shook her head.

"She's stuffing it all into you, isn't she?" I asked as I knelt beside her. Lacunae nodded silently and I cursed the coward.

"You mean…anything that might convince her to change her mind is being put into you?" Velvet asked softly.

"All that remains is the certainty of the correctness of her course," Lacunae said as she looked at LittlePip. "You know she plans to force you into Unity when you uphold your end of the bargain?"

The little unicorn swallowed hard and then gave a grudging little nod. "I figured she'd do something like that."

"And you have a plan to stop her?" Lacunae asked as I saw, for the first time, tears in my friend's eyes. LittlePip stood there for the longest time and then gave a single jerky nod. Lacunae gave a small smile as she closed her eyes. "Good."

* * *

The party was pretty well done after that. Calamity and Velvet trotted out. I wasn't tired…but then, my body didn't do tired anymore. I wondered if this was how Harpica and Ditzy felt all the time, this stillness within. I wasn't hungry. Wasn't thirsty. Couldn't detect myself breathing. No heartbeat. Was I really still alive at all? I trotted to the window and looked out at the darkness. Red Eye's forces had withdrawn; whatever LittlePip had said on the radio had convinced him.

"Quite a party," LittlePip said as she trotted up beside me and looked out as well. "Looks like it worked…whatever we did," she said with a small expression of confusion.

"You did it. I was just backing you up," I said softly as we both stared out at the night. "Your mind-reading enemy is the Goddess, isn't she?" LittlePip looked down at her hooves and sighed, then nodded. See…the Blackjack express would arrive…eventually.

I closed my eyes. Should I tell her about the Enervation ring? Should I try and talk her out of it? Help her? Warn Lacunae? I tapped my head against the thick glass window. I couldn't deal with this now. Why couldn't it all be simple? It was never…ever… simple!

"I wasn't sure I could tell you earlier. Now I'm not sure what I had planned exactly. It's all…muddled up." I sighed, wishing I could tweak my own memories as well. Simple ponies like me were not meant for brain-perplexing problems!

"Be careful with that memory manipulation stuff. Tried it on Scotch to remove some horrors. Didn't work too well," I warned as I looked out at the night and the few lights that filled it, distant and dark like the black beyond the stars. I sighed. "And I know you're not going to like this…but the Goddess knows about Gardens."

"What?" she asked as she stared at me in horror. "How? I thought…"

"She knows it exists, but not where it is or what it does. Spike's safe. And I'm so brain damaged Lacunae will never pick it up. But you should know the Goddess thinks that it might be able to be… well…repurposed."

"Repurposed? How?" Then her eyes went wide. "You mean instead of purifying…she could use it to contaminate everything?"

"Mhmmm…" I said with a nod. "That's about how I felt when Lacunae let it slip. The Goddess could use Gardens to pick up where the bombs left off." LittlePip groaned as she buried her face in her

hooves. “Well…bombs plus taint, I suppose,” I amended as I patted her shoulder.

“Everything alright?” Homage asked as she walked up to us.

“Oh, just talking about fun stuff. Radiation. Taint. The end of the world,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“Lots of fun,” Homage murmured as she looked at the little unicorn.

“Personally, I just wish I knew what taint is…I mean, I had a gun filled with the stuff!”

“It’s a potion that was developed by Twilight Sparkle in the years before the ending of the war,” LittlePip murmured dejectedly. “Twilight Sparkle used it to create alicorns. It was her last act before the bombs fell. There were huge vats full of it in Maripony, and the diamond dog warrens underneath Pleasant Valley were full of rejected batches.”

I blinked as I stared at LittlePip. “Well…that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Huh?” LittlePip slowly lifted her head to look at me.

“Well…I mean, it couldn’t be just the potion. Because taint is all over the place, right?” I asked, looking at Homage.

The gray unicorn frowned, but then nodded. “Well…yes…but the contamination is strongest around Maripony.” She rubbed her nose, her brows knitting. “But…you can find taint from Hoofington to Trottingham and all over the place in between.”

“So did the potion magically teleport itself halfway across Equestria from Pleasant Valley?” I asked as I looked at them, and now LittlePip was looking confused as well.

“Look, the potion causes massive magical mutation. I don’t know how it got so…so scattered…but it must have somehow,” LittlePip said with a frown.

But the old Blackjack express was wheeling along for once. “Except…Twilight made a spell to neutralize taint *before* she completed the potion, right? Why would she create a neutralizer spell for her own potion she hadn’t even completed?” LittlePip’s frown faded as she nodded. I felt a five watt bulb alight in my brain. “So…whatever taint is…it can’t be the potion…or rather…it can’t be *just* the potion.”

“Maybe…I don’t know,” LittlePip said with a frown. “It doesn’t quite add up…”

“Twilight must have had some hint though as to what taint was

and how to stop it before she made the potion. Some…something. And so she made a spell to remove it. Then she used that something to make her alicorns." I clopped my hooves together.

"Maybe…" LittlePip said with a sigh as she rubbed her chin. Then she frowned. "Ugh…I hate mysteries."

"You're telling me?" I laughed, and got a smile in return. Glory trotted up as well with a smile.

Everypony was starting to head for the elevators. P-21 carried Scotch on his back, and I felt a warm and fuzzy feeling in my… magical blood pump thing. We started to drift over as well. "You know what sucks? I'm probably going to have to erase everything that happened tonight in the morning," LittlePip said with a sigh as the four of us filed into the elevator.

"Well…" Homage said with a mysterious little smile as she pushed the button and the doors slid shut. "Best make it a night worth forgetting."

* * *

It was very late…or really early…when I pulled myself from the sweaty sheets, listening to the snores, marveling in the simple music of unregulated breathing. I felt good…not just content or pain free…but good. And as I walked to the window and saw the faintest glow to the east, I was glad that Glory had saved me. Glad that I'd met LittlePip and Homage. There were good ponies out here… ponies who wanted to help and be friends.

"Ponies worth fighting for," the Dealer said quietly as he sat on the windowsill. I glanced at him. He looked younger; I didn't know what that meant. He nudged back his battered, wide-brimmed hat as he looked to the east. "So you're going, then."

"You knew I would," I replied quietly.

"I knew you would," he rasped as he shuffled his cards. "But somepony needed to give you a choice…even if it's one you could never make."

"Thanks," I replied, sincerely. I heard steps behind me, and he disappeared from view.

"Who were you talking to?" Glory asked softly as she hugged me from behind, snugging her legs against my body and sheltering us both with her wing.

"Just my crazy," I said as I leaned back against her, thankful for

every inch of my hide that wasn't metallic. I still smelled her in my nostrils and tasted her on my lips, and when we kissed it was the sweetest flavor ever. Finally, I pulled away. "Thank you for last night."

"I wasn't sure you'd want to do it…not after…not after what happened on the boat," Glory said in a soft, scared little voice.

"You mean when I was raped?" It was a curious word. I would have thought that I'd flinch or something. But it was more like a lead weight on my mind, compressing my feelings under its subtle, heavy load.

She nodded. "I wouldn't think you'd want…you know…at all."

I smiled and kissed her again. "They didn't beat me, Glory. If they had found Scotch…if they'd touched her…I would have been destroyed. That would have been it for me. So they fucked me good and hard…slimed me up and tore me raw…that didn't matter. Hurting me didn't matter. Long as they didn't hurt anypony else…I didn't matter." The whole memory was just one ugly cloud. I couldn't get rid of it…I didn't deserve to be rid of it. So I'd just carry it along with all the others.

She started shaking behind me, hugging me even tighter. I heard her sniff and give a little sob as she tried to remain as silent as possible. Hot tears trickled down the side of my neck. "Glory… why…why are you crying?" I asked, feeling baffled. I'd just told her it was okay…

"Because you won't!" she said in my ear, muffling herself with her mane. "You matter to me, Blackjack. You matter…you matter to so many ponies and you…you died! You were hurt! You…sweet Celestia, why are you so convinced you deserve to suffer? You paid for 99, okay? You've paid for everything. So why can't you accept that you matter and it's as wrong for you to be hurt as it is for Scotch or me or anypony else to be?"

I closed my eyes and marveled at the silk of her mane, the wet trickle of her tears, the sound of her ragged breathing and the beat of her heart. The most beautiful sound in the world. "I don't know…like I said. Crazy…" She broke into more sobs as she held me close, shedding tears I couldn't. I wished I knew a way to make her stop, or a way for me to join her. "Anyway…thank you for last night," I said softly as I was held by her. "Oddly…I think I understand why Deus acted like he did…" She silenced, and I peeked back at her with a little smile.

"You understand him?" There was something in her face; a look both repelled and curious at the same time. I supposed it was the doctor in her. "That's... .I don't... um... wow... "

"Sorry for the awkward," I said with a rueful smile.

"You don't... I mean... do you want... like he... " She was babbling, and I smiled and kissed her.

"You didn't turn me into a cyberpony sexfiend rapist." At least... I really really *really* hoped she hadn't. "I just mean that, now that half of me is mechanical, I think I know why he acted like he did."

Glory relaxed a little, and her curiosity seemed to be overcoming the part of her that was horrified that I might empathize with a rapist... having been both a victim and perpetrator myself... honestly, I was getting a little turned around trying to come to terms with it. "What do you mean, then?"

"The professor said they had to let him retain his penis. Seems kinda stupid, given what he did…" I murmured softly. "But Glory… what we did together…it was the first thing I've really done that made me feel like…like a pony. Like I was more than a machine. And making you feel good…making you happy…it made me feel like I'm more than just a source of misery and pain for you. I know that he was a monster for what he did…but given how he felt…I know how important it was to him."

I thought of the professor, stuck in her jar with only a vague hope of getting her body back. Would she last years like that? Months? Weeks? Until I'd had sex, I hadn't realized what a fundamental need it was for me. It was the last little bit of my flesh and blood equinity. I wouldn't have survived as a brain in a jar. Nopony could…not with their sanity intact.

I sighed as I felt her reach down and felt her touch a warm and tender part of me. I groaned, a little part of my mind telling me that this was stupid and wasteful and indulgent and…and I took that part and mentally beat the shit out of it and leaned back and let her help me feel like a flesh and blood mare again.

* * *

My barding was buckled, the usually simple task now... *interesting* with no magic and my new fingers. The battle saddle that Calamity had rigged for me yesterday was in place, Taurus's rifle on one side and a new twelve gauge shotgun on the other. Vigilance was

polished to a gleam and set in a foreleg holster. Lacunae had sewn my Crusader filly onto the Reaper hoofball uniform. My saddlebags were in place with an ammo feed to each gun. I was still getting used to the control bit.

"How do you keep from shooting by accident when you talk?" I asked as I looked back at Glory. This whole setup was weird…and just a touch kinky.

"Practice," she said as she nudged me with a smile. She then looked a little concerned at me working my tongue and reached up to tap a little tab on the side of my mouth. "Also, safeties." Oh, yeah. That'd probably be smart.

We made our way up onto the roof where the three wings of alicorns awaited, six greens along with three purples. The green alicorns, according to Lacunae, had the ability to boost the purples' teleport ranges. Rover grumbled nearby as he gave sullen looks and kept his exact opinion of alicorns to himself. LittlePip was staying out of sight, having decided to erase every memory of me and my friends she possessed. And I'd just have to make sure the Goddess didn't suck my brains out when I was asleep.

Homage trotted up to me and gave me a nuzzle. "Be careful. I hear Hoofington's a dangerous place."

"Be careful yourself," I replied with a smile.

"Please. I live in Tenpony. What could possibly happen to me here?" she countered with a grin. "But really. Be careful. Whatever took down the MASEBS in the valley wasn't just some overeager scavenger pulling a plug. It was cut off by somepony who knew precisely what they were doing. So watch out."

I nodded again and looked at Helpinghoof. He cleared his throat, then said softly, "I'll keep an eye on your little metal ring. We'll have the DJ let you know if it comes to anything. We'll have him call it 'Blackjack's science project' or something." I thanked him for taking my concern seriously.

Life Bloom gave a cool, if slightly curious, look at the alicorns before looking back to me. "Hope this is a safe mode of travel."

"The Goddess still wants to use me. Till then…" I gave a little shrug. Then I sighed. "Sorry I didn't turn out to be Twilight Sparkle's kid." Homage's smile faded as she looked over at P-21. I tried to ignore the pink pony going 'ooooooh' in the back of my brain as I focused on Life Bloom. And... was it just me, or were the purple alicorns now glancing at each other?

“You’ve given the society and myself a lot to think about, Blackjack,” he said with a smile. “Thank you.”

“No problem. And thank you for the book.” I smiled at him, and he blinked as if he didn’t know what I was talking about. “Magical Exercises for Young Unicorns?” I said, giving him a sly wink.

He hesitated, then smiled. “Oh…yes. Of course. You’re welcome.” He really should have gone into acting. He had me almost convinced! Then he trotted away with Homage and Helpinghoof.

The purple alicorn beside me projected into my mind, “WE CERTAINLY HOPE YOU DO NOT EXPECT TO MAKE A HABIT OF THIS! WHERE DO YOU WISH TO GO IN THAT MISERABLE CITY?”

I looked at all my friends, new and old, and smiled. “Home.”

The world disappeared in a purple flash.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 36: Victims

"Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my--ARRRGH!"

"Okay, when I said 'home', I was really thinking of something along the lines of Chapel, or the Star House specifically," I muttered as we trudged along the railroad towards Hoofington; from here, even the dark, roiling clouds over the city somehow looked darker and more…roiling-y... than the clouds everywhere else in the Wasteland. "Heck, even being teleported inside a chlorine-choked stable seemed more likely to me." The eight metal rails stretched as far ahead and behind us as we could see. Clearly, somepony had gone to great lengths to clear these tracks. The least pitted and rusted lengths from all over the Wasteland, it looked like, had been selected to repair a single line, and the ties that were too badly rotted had been replaced.

"The Goddess will not risk any more of her children in that place. Not until the Enervation dilemma is solved," Lacunae said softly. "You know how multiple alicorns cause the resonation effect. And technically, we are within the old Equestrian territorial province of Hoofington."

"Technically, the Goddess can kiss my dock," Rampage muttered as we passed a rusted switching station with a sign that read 'Hoofington, twenty-two miles.'

"Whine whine whine," I said with a roll of my eyes. "A few days in Tenpony and you all go soft." I didn't feel tired at all! ... Though, of course, I was kinda cheating.

"Ponies is always whining," Rover agreed with a snort.

"What we really need is a form of transportation like LittlePip's," P-21 said. Glory lowered her ears, and he glanced over. "Not necessarily a skywagon. But some way to get around that doesn't involve all of us being worn out by walking." He stopped and

looked speculatively at a simple little hoofcar sitting on a covered spur behind the switching station. He rubbed his chin. “Hey, Scotch. Are you pondering what I’m pondering?”

Scotch blinked at the hoofcar and then at the scrubland around us. “I think so, P-21, but where are we going to find a dozen rockets out here?” P-21 looked back at her flatly. “What?” the filly said defensively.

A little bit later, Scotch had checked over the car and found it good to go. I smiled as they pushed it out and onto the repaired track. “Well, I suppose it’s an improvement, but now you’re going to get all worn out working those levers.” P-21 turned to look at me, and then a small smile grew on his face. “What?” Glory glanced at me apologetically. Rampage grinned, and even Scotch was smirking. “Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked as I took a step back. “What?!”

* * *

“You know, I’m supposed to be the hero…leader…thingy!” I said as I trotted along. “LittlePip’s friends wouldn’t make her do this!”

“P-21! It’s making that whining noise again,” Scotch Tape said as I hauled the hoofcar along the tracks, the wheels squealing softly despite the grease the filly had pumped into the bearings. In addition to the grease gun, P-21 had found a dozen or so caps, some bits, and some scrap metal while searching the switch house and maintenance shed.

“Because it is pony engine,” Rover said with a snort.

“Well, work the reins a bit till it stops,” the buck said as he lay back with his saddlebags pillowing his head. The filly snapped the ropes against my non-metallic ass, making me jump, blush, and glare back at my friends. “See? Pretty responsive, actually.”

“You all suck…” I muttered darkly.

“It’s just till we get to Hoofington,” Glory assured me as we rolled along. Then she rubbed her chin. “Though…really, we might be able to find a wagon with intact wheels and tires. It’d certainly save us a whole lot of walking.”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to turn this into a regular thing!” I protested as I tugged against the harness and received another smack from the reins.

“Yeah, but that was before we found out how sweet it is not to

walk our hooves to the nub," Rampage said with a laugh as she deftly sharpened her horn blade on the spinning rear wheel.

I looked at Lacunae gliding effortlessly beside me with a small smile on her lips. "What?"

"Oh…nothing." The alicorn's amusement was nearly palpable. "I just thought I'd mention that there's a train coming this way."

I looked ahead and spotted the dark shape on the tracks ahead of me. Lacunae lifted the hoofcar onto some neighboring spurs as it grew closer and closer and…

"What the hell is that?" I gasped. Clearly, the idea of having a pony pulling a cart wasn't new, but I'd never imagined a pony like this before. He was colossal. Twice as big -- no, ten times as big! -- as Big Macintosh! His bright blue hide dripped with sweat as he walked along on hooves almost as big as my entire body! Bright yellow eyes looked down at us, and he gave a great snort at the sight of me hooked to the cart.

"Wuss…" the giant pony muttered as they rolled past.

"Goliath! Don't you be talkin' to no riff raff!" shrieked a bony yellow unicorn mare from a little platform atop his back. "You let me handle this, ya'hear? You just keep on walkin' till ya hit the Everfree Spur!"

"Yes, Momma," he sighed. He pulled three enormous rusty tankers and two flatbeds loaded with hundreds of stacked barrels. Scraggly ponies with hunting rifles watched us sullenly as they rolled by.

There was a bright flash, and the bony unicorn mare appeared before me. "Whatcherbusiness on my here railway?" she asked as she glared at…well…everypony. She twitched in aggravation. "And land sakes, which of yer is the pony in charge?"

"That would be me," I said. She took one look at me in the harness and summed up my failed management skills in one look.

"Right…really, which o' yer's in charge?" she said, then looked up at Lacunae. "Yer with Red Eye?"

"What if we are?" P-21 said coolly.

"Well, then I'd say ya better have my pay ready! Express don't work for no fancy talk of glorious futures. We work on pay per load, ya hear?" she snapped. I noticed she had a huge scar across her belly. Landmine? My own stomach muscles twitched in sympathy. I wasn't exactly sure I had guts anymore…

Glory looked back at the immense pony. "What…happened?!"

She scowled at Glory. "T'aint none o' yer beeswax, that's what

happened!"

"But…he's huge!" Glory stammered, her jaw hanging open.

"He's blue too," Scotch said dryly. "Just in case you missed that, Glory."

The yellow unicorn snorted but gave a little smirk at the olive filly. "My boy is the damnedest biggest, strongest, dumbest, hungriest heap o' pony to ever tangle with the blue weed. Eats a whole damn tree every time we get back around the Everfree!"

"Ah…Killing Joke," Lacunae said calmly. The yellow mare glared at the alicorn but didn't deny it. "You're the Goliath Express then?"

"Haulin' anything from FillyDee to Trots to the Hoof to any damn place in between if the pay is right!" the crotchety old unicorn said proudly. Then she looked at Glory and pointed behind us at her son. "He's Goliath, case ya missed that."

"But what is that stuff?" P-21 asked as he looked at the receding train cars. She glared at him sourly and suspiciously.

"Wern't paid ta chat," she snapped. "Got better things ta do than flap my lips at six idjits and a half-metal dog."

I frowned, wondering if I'd have to thump her to get my answers, then reconsidered. Really, she was just trying to make a living. *Be kind...* "Scotch?" I said as I looked at the filly. "Can you get me... say... a hundred caps?" The filly dug through my bag, found the painted bits of metal, and held them out to the sour mare. "Now you are." She took the caps in her magic, separated one to look at it sharply, bit it, then shrugged and slipped them into her saddlebags.

"You fail bribery one oh one?" she snorted, "Kinda blatant, don'tcha think?"

"You want caps and I want answers. You'd prefer alternative methods?" I asked, getting a few looks from my friends. Was I really threatening this scrawny yellow mare? Even I wasn't sure. For some reason, I felt my annoyance growing faster than usual.

She seemed to pick up my mood and relented, nodding toward the train. "Barrels are full of some flamer fuel Red Eye wants. Burner Boys been mixin' it up special in the refinery fer weeks now. The tankers? Dunno and don't wanna know. Got a whole nother load waitin' fer us after this one," she said with a shrug.

"And have you been doing this long?" Rampage asked. "Working for Red Eye, I mean?"

She twisted her mouth in a scowl before shrugging. "Naw. Red Eye was using Usury to provide the materials. When she couldn't, Red

Eye sent in his boys. Then, rather than do a couple dozen loads, he paid us to move it all fer him in five." She looked me in the eyes with a frown, but then shrugged. "Anywho…you tell that glowy-eyed son of a bitch I want my caps and no funny bizz'ness when this is over, ya hear? Or else my boy'll turn that there fancy buildin' inta his next outhouse!"

"Momma!" bawled the immense blue pony, his voice echoing across the scubland.

"Your train is leaving without you," Glory said. The bony mare rolled her eyes in scorn.

"Goddesses' sake, anythin' else profound ya wanna say? Point out it's a cloudy day? Tell me water's wet? One winged idjit." The bony yellow unicorn snorted and with a bright yellow flash disappeared. I could barely make the corresponding flash on the back of the enormous pony.

I closed my mouth, open to ask her about what had been happening in the Hoof, and then huffed softly. I guess I'd have to find out what was happening in the Hoof the hard way.

"You want to stop them? A few good blasts into those barrels should make a pretty impressive show," Rampage said as Lacunae lifted the hoofcar back onto the tracks.

I sighed. "I'm probably going to regret this, but no. They didn't attack us, and I really don't want to know what Goliath can do in a fight. Let's get home. I want to find out just what's going on there." I lowered my head. "Let's see if I can't get a little more speed out of these things!" I yelled as I started to run instead of walk. The sooner I got back, the better.

* * *

It was weird. My back ached, my sides hurt, my ass throbbed, and my neck felt stiff as a board, but my legs were fine and dandy! I'd need to chow down on some gems soon, though; there was a little blinking message in the corner of my eye telling me that my main energy storage was getting low. The cart was squealing, too; something was burning up inside it. Scotch had used up all her grease already, and it smelled like any second the cart was either going to lock up or catch fire, maybe both. We were drawing close to Brimstone's Fall, though; I could see the outbuildings and the perimeter fence. It looked fine and dandy. Quiet…

Shit…

"Unhook me. Something's wrong," I muttered. Where was the cloud of rock dust? Where were the sentries? I shifted impatiently in the harness, my teeth working the battle saddle bit. Looking up to the north, I could see the Roosehoof Academy; it was smoldering, and the reinforced buildings were now streaked and blackened with soot. Once I was loose, I ran around through the railway gate and into the yard. The doors to the admin office and barracks were open and there were sounds of banging, whooping, and hollering. A small mob of scavengers was picking the buildings clean, tossing anything not easily edible or easily converted into caps aside.

Then one, a rancid-looking ghoul if ever I saw one, noticed me. His eyes popped wide and he croaked, "Reapers!" You know…right now, I felt like that term was pretty applicable. As the scavengers grabbed what they could and scampered, I chased him down in three leaps and pinned him outside the barracks as the rest ran with whatever knickknacks they could carry.

"What happened here? Where is everypony? Where's Dusty Trails?" I yelled into his face, beating him with my hooves. All my friends ran up to support me save Lacunae, who hung back.

"I don't know! I don't know anything!" the boiled-looking pony pled as he curled up defensively.

"Blackjack," Glory said sharply, snapping me out of the momentary rage. I looked down at his bent forelegs; I'd snapped both in my tackle and hadn't even realized it. Hadn't heard or felt a thing. I backed off, and she fished out one of our Tenpony healing potions. I noticed it was already losing some of its vibrant color. It was potent enough to heal the ghoul enough to hobble, though; some radiation and he'd be right as rain, right?

"Came here this morning, what with all the attacks. Heard there'd be top-notch salvage," he croaked. "Please don't kill me."

"Then tell me about the attacks," I said evenly as I backed off enough for him to sit up.

"They started a few days back. Right after that whole *Celestia* explosion that killed Security and half the Rangers. Expert merc band hit Megamart hard. I mean *hard*. Then they scragged the group at the Fluttershy clinic. Then Stockyard, marched the whole village into a radioactive hole and just waited for 'em to die. Cold… man…cold. Still, might mean for a few new ghoulies," he chuckled with a wan smile. "Hope some of 'em are cute."

That got some hard looks from me, and his grin sickened as his milky eyes darted away. “Anyway, that place was picked clean, and there was already a crew up at the school thing, so we came here. Just been an hour or so.”

“Then the academy. Then here,” I murmured. I scowled at him. “But where is everypony?” I demanded.

“I dunno! There was like nopony here! Honest! You think I can take a whole town of ponies with my bare hooves and swinging cock?” he retorted.

“What cock?” Scotch murmured scornfully.

“Oh shit! Did that fall off again?” he said as he looked around under him.

I closed my eyes and shuddered with the effort to not buck him into pieces then and there. “Get lost,” P-21 said flatly. The ghoul nodded so fast it looked like his head would come off, little flakes of hide sloughing off in a cloud.

“Right. Yeah. Getting lost! Sooo lost! Where am I now? Heh…” he said as he staggered away from us. “Um…Hoofington Rises and shit…”

I turned and glared right at him. “What did you just say?”

He froze, clearly torn between running for his life and cowering for mercy. Slowly, I rose to my hooves, my tightening jaw making Taurus’s rifle cock. “Me, say? Fuck! I didn’t say anything…nothing at all…”

“What you just said: Hoofington Rises. Why did you say that?” Glory asked as she stepped into my line of fire.

The ghoul blinked in confusion. “Well…I don’t fucking know. It’s just shit folks say now days. Like ‘Sweet Celestia’ or ‘Luna fuck my ass with a frosty strapon.’ You know?” He looked at each of us desperately. “It’s just what people fuckin’ say!” I chewed the saddle bit. One jerk of my head and I could try out firing it.

Be kind, a little yellow pegasus reminded me. *Do better*…Glory looked back at me, spooked at my anger. She seemed to be asking how I could pardon those four but be so ready to smash some ghoul into paint. I had to admit, it bothered me too. Why was I so angry at him?

“Go,” P-21 said darkly.

“Can I…” He pointed at his looted goods.

“Take them and go!” I snapped. That was as kind as I was going to get right now. I knew that, for a scavenger like him, it’d mean the

difference between life and death…but that didn't mean I had to be happy about it. When he was gone I stomped my hooves. "Any evidence probably got taken with the scavengers. Who--"

"Blackjack," Rampage said in a dark and even tone. I looked at her, then saw her pointing towards the metal doors with her armored hoof. I looked and froze. I'd been so occupied with the scavengers and the ghoul that I'd missed the letters painted six feet tall in a maroon paint that wasn't paint.

'SECURITY'.

Slowly, I trotted forward, looking at the bloody slop drying in a rusty bucket beside the door and the paintbrush shoved within. I pushed the door open, and a *stench* rolled over my nose and skin. I didn't know words to describe that metallic reek. All I knew was that it was bad. I didn't have a real stomach anymore, but if I did I'd be puking like the rest of my friends.

Lacunae groaned as she slumped. I looked at her sharply. "Enervation?" She nodded. Suddenly, my friends were looking at each other. They all seemed tired and drawn all of a sudden. "It wasn't like this before," I said softly, looking at P-21 and Glory for confirmation.

"But…aren't you feeling it?" P-21 asked me in concern.

That surprised me. No, actually. I didn't feel the lethargy or pain or anything. I felt just…me. "No. I guess the cybernetics are resistant or something." I frowned; that didn't seem right... "I'll…check inside. You folks see if you can find anything not picked over yet."

"She throttles a scavenger and then tells us to scavenge. Inconsistent much?" Rampage muttered, but our eyes met. I was pissed, and she knew this wasn't the time.

I took two steps in and nearly walked right into the recorder hanging from a rope in front of me. I looked at it for the longest moment before remembering that my horn didn't work…damn it! Slowly, I reached out with my hooves and tried to tug it free. Finally, I just downloaded the contents from the device and gave it a shove, sending it swinging in the darkness. The air was thick and heavy and silent as I selected the audio file.

I looked around. One blue bar on my E.F.S. If this was a trap, and it probably was, then they were probably using StealthBucks or zebra stealth cloaks.

For several seconds there was nothing but the sound of machinery and the movement of ponies. Then a male rasped in a familiar

boiled voice, “They say the third time’s the charm.”

Sanguine’s words filled the dank tunnel as if he stood beside me. “I always wondered where that came from? What, is twice ‘not trying hard enough’ and four times ‘give up ‘cause you’re fucked’? Always wondered that.”

I found myself trotting faster, my augmented eyes picking out the gray rails of the tunnels and avoiding pitfalls as I looked for mines, tripwires, or other traps. The air felt wrong. It felt wet.

There was another long pause. “I guess it’s not true, though. We’ve been waiting for hours, Security…and you still haven’t shown up. No words from that DJ fuck either. But I know you, Security. I know that you didn’t die with that ship. I don’t care what they fucking say. You’re alive, because if you’re dead then I’m fucked anyway. And if you’re alive, then you’re following me. You’re just taking your fucking time.”

I sped up, trotting past the little security station halfway in. Now I was tripping every now and then as I raced forward.

“Well…let me give you some more incentive to hurry your ass along. I want that program. My time is fucking *up*. I can’t stay here anymore. That thing in the Core is awake thanks to *you*. The shit is going to happen, all because of *you*. Red Eye might…MIGHT…be able to stop it. Who the fuck knows? But I need a bargaining chip if he’s going to keep me safe and sound. I need Chimera. For that, I need EC-1101.”

There was a horrible moment of silence, then the grinding of machinery and the terrified sniffling and sobbing of ponies. “Do it.”

Psychoshy’s voice broke in. “Sanguine…You can’t be serious. Stockyard was fucked up enough!”

“Throw ‘em in! Now!” he snarled. “All of them. Save her for last!”

“Whatever,” muttered an unfamiliar voice. “Toss ‘em.”

And then the screams began…just like Gorgon had screamed. The gnashing metal noise became muted. Pulpy. I didn’t think, I simply ran. I ran as if I could somehow magically sprint back in time. I raced faster and faster, propelled by the screams of those ponies that I was already too late to save.

And then, suddenly, I was in the round cavern, the ledge ending abruptly behind me as I tried to stop. Momentum carried me onwards. It flipped me forward into that dark and still void. My hooves flailed at the air as I twisted, hoping there was some magical telescopic leg thing that would let me grab the edge. But there

wasn't. And I fell as horrified screams played out of my leg.

The pool below broke my fall. It wasn't very big…wasn't very deep…but it was deep enough. My metal legs sent me straight to the bottom as I struggled and flailed. I opened my mouth, and then I tasted it. I screamed into the thick soup and tasted blood.

He'd put them all through the crusher.

I flailed and struggled, trying to find footing beneath me. A little O2 gauge began to drop. I might have been cybernetic, but I still needed to breathe. I could see nothing. Hear nothing. I felt bits bobbing and brushing against me as my hooves flailed and kicked out under me. I was going to drown in the crushed-up remains of dozens of pony workers.

Then I felt hooves grab my neck and pull. My head broke the surface, then my mouth. I automatically took a breath; a reeking, coppery, iron breath. I wanted to be sick at this. I wanted to wake up. "Stop it, Blackjack! Stand up!" P-21 shouted in my ear.

The interruption took only a moment or two, but it was just enough for me to calm down. I got my hooves under me and stood. My muscles shook; my legs remained steady. The foul mixture of pony and rainwater was little more than chest high at the base of the crusher. The small blue buck carefully helped me along to where the ramp led up to the ledge, my superior weight threatening to drag me down and make me slip. I'd been lucky to fall where I had and not get speared by the many spires of rock and broken bone.

Right. I was lucky. Brimstone's Fall…wasn't.

"You came in after me?" I asked, feeling the fetid mixture coating me slowly dripping off. I was so glad my low light vision was in black and white. I could imagine the gray tones as just mud.

"Nothing good ever comes from you going alone, Blackjack," P-21 said with a small smile. Then he looked over at the…remains. I guessed there was enough light coming in from above for him to get a good enough look. "How could anypony do this?"

I stared at the gory pool; there was no way to tell how many ponies had been put through the machine. Dozens? A hundred? How many ponies had been working here? One thing was clear, though: Sanguine knew exactly how to get my attention. He'd known there was one sure-fire way to bring me to him. This was it. Then my ears twitched just a little bit.

"Blackjack."

I stared at P-21, and the mare's voice croaked out again. "Blackjack."

I turned and saw the blue bar on my EFS align with the hopper bin of the rock crusher. A chill ran through me a moment, and then I was scrambling up to the lip of the bin. Thickened blood smeared the side; a small heap of limbs and burst flesh lay in the bottom. And then part of the heap moved. Eyes opened in the gloom. "Hey, Blackjack," croaked Dusty Trails.

I didn't hesitate. I jumped into the gruesome hopper and slid down beside the sand-colored earth pony. "Dusty! You're alive…?" I couldn't believe it.

"Take more than a rock crusher ta kill me." She looked at my legs and smiled a little more. "See you got yerself some fancy new legs."

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to smile. "Yeah. They've even got a radio built in." I looked at P-21 as he pulled the torn gobbets of flesh away with his hooves so we could see how she was trapped. He looked even more ill as he examined the area.

She gave a weak little smile. "He stopped the feeder when I was halfway through the jaws." I looked down at her hips. "Cast…cast some healing magic on me. Made sure I survived," she said, and I reached out and held her. She was burning up with fever. "Told me…give you a message. Told me yesterday…if I hung on…you might kill him. Fucking…bastard…" She coughed. "He was right…I hung on…knew you'd come. Knew…Glory would…save you…"

"Right. Now you hang on, and we'll find a way for Glory to save *you*. Just…hang on," I said with a sniff…but I couldn't see how. Her waist was trapped in a jagged three-inch-wide hole. Celestia only knew what condition her legs were in. I didn't have a second life support jar for her head.

"Don't be an idjit…" she murmured with a frown. "You ain't got time ta waste on me. He's going ta Flank next."

"How'd he take you out?" P-21 asked.

"Snipers. Armed with beam rifles. Took a few hours, but two of 'em picked off everypony with a gun. Then griffins dropped stun grenades. Rounded us up with a bunch o' freaks. After that, they marched us down here. Said they were waiting for you. Ghoul was half out of his mind. Kept waitin' for you to show. Talkin' to himself. Jumpin' at his own shadow. Finally he got sick o' waitin' and…started tossin' folk in. Saved me for last."

"Griffins. Red Eye," I muttered.

"Mebbe…if so, the way they were looking at him…if you don't kill him, they will. They're powerful ticked off at the moment." She coughed again.

"Funny. I'm powerfully ticked off at him too," I said with a sniff.

She rubbed her face with a gory hoof and looked at me. "Think you can get something for me? Doubt they found it. Weren't much interested in lootin'." She pointed towards the exit tunnel. "It's that way."

I jumped and clambered out of the hopper, spotting the wooden crate in the direction she'd pointed. Inside was a large clay jug. I recognized it from the Arena and carefully cradled it as I walked back to the hopper. She looked up at me with a lazy smile. "That sure is some funny zebra trottin' yer doin' on them fancy legs of yours."

"The original owner was half zebra," I replied as I pulled out the stopper and was assaulted by the potent alcohol fumes. It actually cut through the stench of the room. I brought the opening to her lips, and she steadied it with her forehooves and took a long drink.

Finally, she sighed. "Muther's milk…" She sniffed and looked up at P-21 and me. "Promise me you'll drink the rest over his damn corpse." I couldn't trust myself to speak; I jerked my head in some spastic imitation of a nod. "Can you send me on muh way?"

It was Flank and Mini all over again. She was dead; we all knew it. It was just a question of how long it would take her to die. Do it, Blackjack. Do it! Draw that fucking gun and give her peace! Yet I just sat there like an idiot. I couldn't move, couldn't draw Vigilance and give her the peace she deserved so much. "I'm sorry…" I murmured as I hung my head. "I... I wish I could. After everything…everything I've been through…I still can't grant you that…"

"T'aint yer fault yer a decent mare," she replied. Then she looked at P-21 calmly, and he didn't hesitate.

"Med-X?" P-21 asked softly as he opened his saddlebag. "Five doses?"

"Five doses? Mare can really end her pain with that much," she said softly as he took out the syringes. As if it were no matter at all, she began to inject herself with the chems. "Oh…Blackjack. Can you do me one last thing?"

I slipped the moonshine into my saddlebag as I looked at her. "Name it."

"On yer way out, there's this button…" she said, her voice growing softer as more of the potent painkiller entered her system. "Red… key is in my hat…" She sighed. "Was gonna use it…but…got stunned before I could."

"I'll take care of it," I promised. I could do that at least.

"Take care of things…better than I did." She sniffed as tears started to run down her cheeks. "It…it was a good mine…Blackjack. I did right…didn't I?" she begged as foam gathered at the corner of her lip. "Celestia'll…be proud…won't she…?"

"She will. I know she will," I said as I held her, listening to her raspy breathing becoming more and more broken. "Thank you… thank you for your help."

"T'wernt nothing…" She smiled slackly, pulled her battered hat off, and set it atop P-21's head. "Fer tha…chems…best ta…settle… debts…"

He nodded, and then said softly, "Ayep."

She slowly curled forward, pressing her face into my metallic limbs. Then she let out her breath in one slow rasp. Her blue bar disappeared from my E.F.S.

And that was that.

It took me a few minutes to pull myself away and crawl out of the hopper again. I reached down, hooked my hoof to P-21's, and pulled him up after me. I sat there, hanging my head. "This was--"

He kicked me so hard that I was knocked on my side. I blinked up at him in astonishment as he glared down at me, his breathing taut and hot. My head spun from the impact, and all I could do was gawk up at him as he sat on my chest.

"If you say the words 'my fault', I will hit you again," he said sharply, then gritted his teeth and spoke slowly, his voice tense. "This wasn't your fault. None of this. You didn't know this was going to happen." He stared down at me. "And if you start with that 'I'm scum' or 'I fucked up' or anything, I will beat it out of you!"

"I should've dealt with Sanguine sooner," I said. "If I'd--" Again his hooves thumped down against my face. Hard. "I didn't--" Another thump. "I coulda--" Thump. Finally we just lay there, him panting and me feeling blood trickle from my swelling lip and nostril.

We just stared into each other's eyes, angry tears dancing in his. "I won't let you hate yourself for this." Damn it...

He was right. As much as my instinct wanted to pin this all on myself, I couldn't. This was one burden that wasn't mine to bear. I

smiled. “Then let’s get the sonovabitch that did this.” He helped me to my hooves and then tugged Dusty’s wide brimmed hat more square atop his brushy mane.

We headed out, and he murmured, “I’m going to tell Scotch. About me. Her mom. Everything.” He sighed softly, rolling his eyes a little. “I guess we messed with her memories for nothing then, huh?”

“We wanted to protect her and keep her happy,” I replied as we made our way up. I kept a careful eye on him. He looked horrid and exhausted from the Enervation, but I didn’t think he was in flesh melting territory yet. The field wasn’t quite that strong. Still, it’d make the mine a deathtrap for anyone working here. One nick that wouldn’t heal and a pony would be finished. And there were still a lot of gems in these rocks and tunnels…

I spotted the red button she’d mentioned and grinned, rubbing my metal hooves together. Then I reached for the shiny, candy-like button -- and P-21 bumped my hoof aside. “You ever think you should find out what a button does before you push it?” he asked as he lay on his back and looked at the gap between the button and the wall. “Case in point…dynamite.”

I blinked and grunted. “Why would Dusty want to blow us up…?”

“She didn’t. She wanted to blow up anypony stupid enough to push a button,” he said as he cradled the hat in his hooves and pulled a metal key out of the brim. He slipped it into something on the backside of the button and turned it.

I reached for it once more…and once more he smacked my hooves away. “But…key!”

“I promise you can press the button…” He looked a little more and then nodded. “Looks like the key activates a delay and a fuse.” He whistled softly. “She rigged the mine to blow. Guess the idea would be get down here, get folks out through a tunnel or something, and blow the mine behind them. Smart.” He sighed as he looked back the way we’d come. “Too bad the stun grenades ruined the getaway plan.”

“Sooo…button?” I asked with a grin.

He sighed and closed his eyes. “Wait fifteen minutes for us to finish searching up top and get cleared out. Push it, then run for your life. Outside.” Then he trotted out, mumbling to himself about babysitting. I sighed as I waited, tapping my hoof against the wall beside the shiny button and sucking on chips and chunks of tasty gems. Each one gave me an invigorating rush, which in turn gave

me inspiration for new and interesting ways to handle the job before me. Should I push it slowly and deliberately? Mash it with enthusiasm? A rear hoof jump push? It wasn't every day a girl got to push a button rigged to a bunch of explosives.

"You sure are one twigged mare," the Dealer murmured. I glanced over my shoulder at him. "You have a friend die in your hooves, and now you're giddy with glee at pushing a button while soaked in the blood of murdered ponies."

"And talking to you," I added, refusing to let him interrupt my contemplation of buttons and the pushing of them. "P-21 already convinced me not to kick myself for not being able to stop this. Soon as I push this, we'll head to Flank and I'll try to think up exciting and creative ways to kill Sanguine."

"Why do you think Sanguine hit Stockyard?" Dealer asked softly.

"Huh?" I blinked as I looked back at him. "Because he's a murderous asshole?"

"Think about it for a second. He attacks Megamart. Why?"

I frowned. "To draw me out."

"But why Megamart? Why not…say…Toll? Or Flotsam?" he asked calmly. "They're closer to him. Instead he went all the way over to Megamart. Why?"

I sighed and set aside my contemplation of button-ness. "Probably because they helped me?"

"But how would he know that?" he asked softly. "And after that he hit the clinic. And then Stockyard. Why Stockyard? They never helped you. Then they burned the academy. There's not even anypony there, but he burned it. Why?"

I frowned as I rubbed my nose. "Because…because that was the next place I visited. And then here!" The blood drained from my face. "But how would he know where I've been? I mean he…" Then I blinked as my eyes locked with his. "He'd need my PipBuck navigation information…"

"Which was copied onto Marmalade's PipBuck," he murmured softly.

"Which I gave to him…" I looked back towards the chamber. "He told Dusty he was going to Flank!"

"Then count yourself lucky. He's following the road rather than going strictly in order." Dealer didn't take his eyes off mine as he asked, "But where is he going when he's done in Flank?"

I smashed the button and heard an electric fizzle, then immediately

turned and raced for the exit. I hit the door out with all four hooves and rolled out as it flew open, screaming to my friends to run.

"Fifteen minutes, Blackjack! I said fifteen minutes!" P-21 yelled crossly as he came out of the bunkhouse.

"He's going to Chapel, P-21! After Flank, he's going to Chapel!" The blue buck shut up immediately, and all six of us ran off through the rain away from the mine.

Moments later, the muddy ground thudded under our hooves as the charges below went off. We were outside the fence when the administration building blew apart in a cloud of wood and reinforcing sheets. The flipping ends didn't even reach the ground before the bunk house blew as well. There was a rumble beneath our hooves and a massive gust of wind as the chamber below collapsed. I watched as pits opened in the earth where we'd been standing. I hadn't appreciated just how big that chamber had been until I saw the wide depression before me.

"What is pony thinking? Pony runs out and blowing everything up!" Rover snorted. "Why does everything explode around pony?"

"Listen Rover, you need to get to Riverside and your people. Sanguine's hitting every place I stopped since leaving Stable 99. We might have caught a break with Chapel, but if we didn't…" I didn't want to think that far ahead. Instead, I pulled the harness on. "Come on!" I grunted as I pulled, but the wheels of the hoofcar squealed as they locked up entirely.

"The bearings are burned out!" Scotch said. "We'll have to repack 'em and I don't even think we got parts and I know we're out of grease. Even if we had all the stuff, it'd take hours." I gave the car a kick. Of all the times to break down!

"Dog will return to den and send warning to the river ponies. River ponies whine, but have good fish," Rover said as he scratched behind his ear.

"Will you be able to make it safely?" Glory asked in concern.

Rover snorted and lifted his robotic hand, showing the razor claws. "Is good for more than digging through rock, pony. Old dog know many tricks. Dog be fine. Ponies take care of ponies. Is what pony is good at," he said, but for the first time there wasn't the usual bitterness in his voice. "Pony stay safe."

"We can just hoof it straight to Chapel," Scotch Tape piped up.

"It'd take all day, and we'd be crossing unexplored territory," P-21 countered.

Rampage nodded. “There’s the Halfhearts headquarters in this area and a crashed skywagon that’s a feral ghoul nest. We can follow the rail and cut over to Chapel, but that’s even farther. Same problem if we hoof it to Flank.”

“Maybe Lacunae can go to Miramare, soak up some radiation, and teleport us all there?” Glory asked.

“It would take many hours,” Lacunae replied, the frustration clear in her thoughts.

“What if Blackjack went alone? She can move faster now and she doesn’t get tired with these legs of hers,” Scotch offered as she rapped her hoof on my enameled foreleg.

“That’d leave her outnumbered by a lot,” Rampage said with a frown. “Personally, that’s fine for me, but I can’t die. Blackjack doesn’t have that advantage.”

Glory was looking in the direction of the strip mall. “Blackjack… when we came by here the first time, we set a bunch of supplies and stuff on fire. Remember?”

“Yeah,” I replied. It was a little bit fuzzy. I was pretty sure there’d been some buck lobbing dynamite at me or something.

“Well, that was a lot of supplies. I doubt they carried it all on their backs from Flank,” the gray pegasus pointed out.

“You think they might have had a working wagon?” I asked. She flushed and nodded. I seized her in my hooves and kissed her hard enough to curl her hooves. “I love smart ponies! Let’s go.” We started towards the nearby strip mall, and I blinked back at Glory still sitting there in a daze. “Hey, Glory!” She shook her head hard, losing her befuddled smile and running to catch up.

* * *

For once, I was glad for the Hoofington rain. It was pouring down in full force by the time we reached the strip mall, and the bloody gore coating me was more or less washed off. For a minute, I was afraid we’d struck out and would be left trying to run all the way to Chapel. Then Rampage checked behind the strip mall and found a wagon that was only marginally rusty. One tire was flat and one axle squealed when Rampage pulled it out, but Scotch just rubbed her hooves together.

“I’m gonna need Lacunae to levitate it up. Gonna need some Wonderglue, some turpentine, a hunk of inner tube, and some

grease…any grease or oil you can get your hooves on!" With that, she got out her wrench, and we were scrambling. Fortunately, P-21 found an oil can in the back of the bar, and Glory found the inner tube and helped Scotch work.

And me? I put four bits into the jukebox, selected a song, and kicked the side of the machine with my hoof. The lights flickered, and then the machine gave a dry hum. I dug behind the bar, and hidden by dozens of empty glass bottles I found a flask of Wild Pegasus. I trotted to the table Dusty and I'd sat at so long ago and practiced with my fingers, setting up the two least-grimy shotglasses I could find. The machine clicked, and the music began to play. Out of habit, I started to record as I sat back and looked at all the cards scattered around the table.

I chewed through another mouthful of gems, then looked at one of the face-down cards on the table in front of me and stared. I tried to imagine the magic reaching out. *Try to imagine it like a wind brushing against it*, the book had said, *like blowing on it without using your lungs*. I closed my eyes, trying to focus even though my temples throbbed and my useless stub of a horn ached. I tried imagining blowing the card over. I felt the faintest magic buzz and tingle in my horn. Then I chanced a look down.

Queen of spades; Princess Luna, smiling up at me. It wasn't much at all…but it was a start.

I leaned back, extended my fingers, and picked up the shot glass as the song came to an end. I lifted my glass to the empty chair across from me. Who was I lifting it to? Dusty Trails? Sure. But I was also raising it to Rivets and Midnight. To those ponies in Stockyard killed simply because of a blip on my PipBuck. In a perverse way, I was lifting it to Deus as well, one monster to another in a silent pledge. Sanguine had been around for way too long. It was time to finish the bastard.

The jukebox crackled and finally died. I rose to my hooves and trotted out the door. My friends looked at me, and I must have been wearing the most damned shootiest look that had ever been worn by a mare because they didn't say a word. Scotch and Lacunae hitched me up to the wagon. I took the bit in my mouth and glanced back to make sure everypony was aboard. Glory climbed up onto the seat at the front of the wagon and took my reins. I looked back at her and grinned.

"Um…giddy-up?" she asked, giving them a little shake. No no,

Glory. Not giddy-up. Ante up.

I wasn't the strongest pony in the Wasteland, but as I leaned into the harness between the covered wagon's shafts I felt an unfamiliar but welcome orange pony pulling right along with me. *Be strong*, she told me. And right beside her was a blue pegasus telling me that I was going to pull it off and that it was going to be so awesome! With those two pulling alongside me, I couldn't just run. I could practically fly!

With an eeep from my pilot, my four mechanical legs lunged forward and we raced down towards the east. Sanguine wanted to find me. He'd found a perfect way. *I'm coming, Sanguine, and I'm bringing a whole lot of hurt along with me.*

* * *

Pulling a wagon had the most startling effect of focusing my world; every bit of my energy was put into moving forward. While my legs weren't all that bothered, I had plenty of flesh and blood bits that were stressed and sweaty. I pushed through the pain. Atrocity takes time. The bastard wanted me to catch up to him. I just had to do it before anypony else died.

Glory and Scotch guided me. With all my attention on running, I had no time to look for washed-out sections of road, abandoned wagons left as barricades, or bars on the E.F.S. I was too busy running! Since DJ Pon3 was off the air temporarily, my PipBuck played some of Mixers's finest and time slowed down to just the present. I didn't have time to think about the future. I didn't have the energy to think about the past. I just had the pull of the reins and the thudding of my hooves and the rattle of the cart to tell me what to do next.

Then I felt the reins pull back and the squeal of the wagon's brakes. Obstinately, I wanted to keep running! But then sense settled in; there was a good reason to stop. We were here. Glory hopped down beside me as I looked at the wall of rubble that had been erected around the town. There was smoke and fire, but not a whole lot of shooting. I still couldn't feel myself breathing, but my vision was flashing warnings about dehydration, caloric intake, and power reserves again. Why'd my insides have to be written in egghead?

Glory hopped out and immediately cracked open a bottle of filtered water with her teeth and hooves and held it to my mouth. I slugged

it down as Scotch released me from the harness. My body…hurt wasn't the accurate term. I wasn't in pain so much as a full-body ache spread through my organic parts. Was that because I'd just never really put myself to moving like this before, or something else?

Once I'd finished the bottle of water and was unhooked, I trotted my way clear a bit and looked around. Flank had seen better times, but it looked, surprisingly, that Caprice had followed through on my suggestions. Two of the turrets Glory had made were still functional atop their buildings. The single gate had been blown open, but, judging by the dead ponies scattered around it, the assault had cost the attackers dearly.

"Is it just me, or does the Enervation feel…worse?" Glory asked, looking at the pained expression on Lacunae's face.

"I don't know. I can't feel it just yet," I said as I trotted towards the main gate, alert for red bars. Maybe something was turning up the Enervation across the whole valley? Wasn't that a pleasant thought! I still couldn't feel the tearing sensation or the fatigue, though. Was I just not being affected by the draining energies, or were my synthetic parts resistant to the field's power?

Trotting towards the settlement, I looked around. I remembered the addicts and half-starved ponies lingering outside in the marshy ruins of the town, but they were nowhere to be seen now. Instead, there were a cluster of tents and banners (three black vertical bars on a green field) and a couple dozen ponies standing around watching us head into Flank. They weren't shooting at us, and I didn't see any monsterponies, so for the moment my curiosity was sated. Still... I'd have to check them out... soon.

I made my way inside, looking at the metal wagons turned on their sides and braced together to form a secondary security wall. From the scorching on the inside, they'd been attacked by some sort of flamer so intense it'd slagged the metal. Rooms was on fire still, and from the four dead manticores it was clear that at least one monsterpony had been here as well. Still, Flank had clearly put up a tougher fight than Brimstone's Fall. I could imagine the beam rifle snipers picking ponies off through the chain link that had protected the settlement before, the defenders split in two guarding both entrances.

Then, from out of nowhere, a red bar appeared, a mare in pink barding racing at me faster than I'd ever imagined a pony could

move. In a flash she was in my face, and so was the revolver in her jaws. I rolled away just in time to avoid a bullet to the forehead. Still, her next three shots bit through my barding, barely slowing. Her pupils were tiny points in her pink eyes, and she was on top of me before I could recover. The mare was smaller than me, but her hooves slammed into me with more force than I'd thought possible.

Rampage tackled her off me, the pair rolling across the rain-slick street. Another frenzied mare charged Glory, a pair of metal batons glowing as the pegasus turned and hosed her attacker with green beams of magic. Astonishingly, the mare didn't seem fazed at all as the bolts burned at her flesh. Glory raised her hooves as the batons smashed into her face and legs.

Lacunae's magic glow wrapped the frenzied mare and threw her back. She rolled, tried to rise, and failed, but two more ponies raced to their fallen ally and jabbed her with hypodermics. In an instant, she was back on her hooves again. I aimed some suppressive fire at the three and they took cover... at least for the moment.

"Stay down!" Rampage roared as she raised her hooves and smashed them down on the thrashing mare. The earth pony kicked out furiously, denting her armor. "Stay down!" she repeated with another stomp of her forelegs, the kick making the mare bounce. Still she kept trying to get back up. "Stay *down*!" Rampage yelled. The mare rose to her hooves, bleeding and broken and still on the attack. One more stomp and the mare's head crunched like a nut. She trembled and went still. Rampage's pink eyes met my own, and she gave a shrug. "Told her to stay down."

There were a lot more red bars on my E.F.S. now, the ponies matching them fighting with incredible ferocity and resilience. They were all coming out of Mixers. I had no idea where P-21 was in all this, but I hoped he could hear me. "P-21! Kill the robot in the club!" I had a distinct worry that this was what 'everything' did to a mare.

I moved around as quick as I could. One downside of the battle saddle was that it made me less effective in melee combat. Pumped up with Stampede and Buck, these mares' kicks and blows hurt! I almost preferred getting shot to some of the applebuck kicks that connected. I moved away, clenching my jaw on the left trigger and blasting buckshot. The lead was more little more than irritating to the mare it hit, but I didn't know how to swap out ammo without my horn and I lacked earth pony tenacity and resilience. Scotch

tried to keep behind me as the two circled.

"Scotch! I need green shells!" I said, tossing her on my back.

"Got it! Use the rifle," she yelled, and I twisted the right side of my jaw. I didn't have a chance to hit; the mares were so jazzed up on Dash that I didn't think they could physically stop moving at that point. I heard the sounds of the olive filly attaching a belt of green shells to the shotgun; not a real Ironpony, but a semi-automatic IF-84. "You're loaded!"

The green toxic rounds weren't much more fatal than the lead, but the chemicals slowed the ponies' movements enough that I was able to plant a few solid shots in their torsos. Still, under the effects of Stampede and Med-X, and probably Hydra too, they just weren't dropping! Worse, they had plenty of fresh healing potions on hand and weren't shy about using them.

Suddenly, there was a loud whistle, and P-21 emerged from Mixers with a familiar pinched-looking medical pony in tow. One of the frenzied mares moved back, shaking with the effort not to attack. The unicorn lifted a strange tube with her magic, loaded some sort of dart, put the end of the tube to her mouth, and shot the dart out of the other end at one of the mares harrying me. She took three steps, staggered to the side, and fell on her face. Another dart, and the next one went down. The mares were frothing at the mouth as I moved back, letting the Flank security mares see to... their dosed comrades? They were all wearing the same uniform!

Scalpel looked at us and said sourly, "Sorry. Didn't recognize you. Thought you might have been those mercs come back for another round or those nutjobs across the way." She looked at the lucid mares in their pink security barding. "Come on! Get them back in my office before their hearts stop!"

"What did you shoot them with?" I asked.

"Fixer and a Moon Dust solution," the doctor replied smoothly.

Now that the fight was over, ponies were coming back onto the street. Lacunae was seeing to Glory, her horn glowing as she healed the pegasus's injuries. I, if I was right about what the glowing messages in my vision correctly, needed something entirely different to fix my damage. I looked around, gave the melted barricade a second look, and then eyed a spur of metal. I bit down, trying to close my mouth enough to activate the softening spell. Finally, the rusty metal peeled off, and I chewed it with a disapproving face. Needed salt.

“I suppose that after three Prices, I shouldn’t be surprised by what you can eat,” said a familiar voice. Caprice didn’t look well. Some of her softness had worn thin, and her quiet humor was now silent worry. The peach mare looked at me in concern with a shaky smile. “I’m glad Glory was able to fix you up. She said…she said you were pretty bad.”

“I was,” I said as I looked around at Flank while the rain fell upon us. Thick black smoke billowed from the first and second floors of Rooms. “You got hit pretty hard too.”

“Thanks to you,” snapped an orange unicorn mare as four of her fellows glared at me.

“Citrine…” Caprice said in a tired tone. “If Blackjack hadn’t made us step up our defenses, none of us would have made it into 69 or gotten into Mixers. We would have been completely at their mercy.”

“And considering the people who hit you put everypony in Brimstone’s Fall through their own rock crusher, I doubt that would have been very pretty,” P-21 added as he stepped up beside me.

“And if you’d just given Sanguine what he wanted weeks ago, then hundreds of ponies would still be alive,” Citrine retorted with a sweep of her hoof. “I heard the DJ talking about you. Your noble sacrifices for other ponies. Well, how many ponies have died because you’ve hung on to whatever he wants? Hundreds? Or are you up to thousands now?”

“He’s a monster,” Glory objected.

“And what is she?” Citrine demanded as she pointed a hoof at me. “Since she showed up around the Hoof, everything’s gone from bad to worse! We didn’t have griffin mercs, monsterponies, and bounty hunters attacking us every other week till she turned up. If she hasn’t killed folks on her own, then she’s gotten everything stirred up!”

“Citrine, that’s enough,” Caprice said, now with an edge in her voice. “Blackjack didn’t ask for any of this to happen!”

“No, but she’s sure willing to shed rivers of blood to keep it going!” the orange mare said. And worse, more of the ponies listening in looked angry. “What is so damned special that he wants that you can’t give it up?” I hung my head, her words echoing in my ears. Was all of this really my fault? If I’d just handed it over at the beginning, could I have prevented all this? “Why don’t you just give it up?”

"Do you know what she's been through trying to help everypony in the Hoof?" Glory demanded. "Can you even imagine?"

"Oh, shut up, Turkey. Go back to your clouds. You can't imagine what she's done to life here in the Hoof!" Citrine countered. "Dozens of Halfhearts dead in a war she started. The Fillies are gone! Because of her. The Rangers blown to pieces! So I want to know what the hell she has that's worth more than all those lives!"

"It's the key to Equestria!" I shouted over the din, and even Citrine went silent. "It's the key to firing every megaspell still charged. It unlocks every dirty secret weapon from two centuries ago. It'd let Sanguine make an army of monsterponies…and that's *just* Sanguine." My voice fell as I sat down hard. "For all I know, it's the key to getting into the Core. Or something even worse," I said as I closed my eyes.

"Blackjack," P-21 said as he put a hoof on my shoulder.

"No, P-21. She's got a point," I said, and I looked at Citrine out of the corner of my eye. "Holding onto this has cost me every pony in my stable, save two. It's forced me to kill dozens due to a stupid bounty. It's thrown one of the deadliest ponies I've ever known against me." Then I looked at her and snapped, "You think I haven't thought of just giving it up? Handing it over? Maybe I would have, if you'd told me a month ago I'd lose both eyes and all four legs over it! Or lose almost everypony I knew! But I didn't. And once I found out what it could do…" I shook my head and rose to my hooves, stepping towards the orange mare and staring into her yellow eyes. "Do you want Sanguine to have that kind of power? Or Red Eye? Or somepony even worse than both of them? Because that's what's at stake."

I had to give Citrine credit, she kept her eyes locked to mine for half a minute before she said slowly, "That might be true. All I know is that I lost a mother when Deus came for you, a brother when the Halfhearts fought the Rangers, and a little sister when…" She stopped and looked at the burning Rooms building before sniffing. "And, sorry…any one of them was worth a thousand keys to Equestria." With that, she turned and walked to join the mares watching Rooms burn.

Caprice trotted up beside me. "You should probably go." I looked at her and saw the apology in her eyes.

"Yeah. Did they go north?" I asked as all of us trotted out the melted gate. I knew the answer, and I pretended I could feel my

heart rise in my chest. I found a tin can in the gutter and bit down, trying to get my teeth to soften it so I could chew. Caprice made a face. Clearly, the sight of the fingers on the end of my limb and me eating tin were turning my visit a little surreal.

"Three or four hours ago," Caprice said. "We'd killed off about twenty or thirty of their foot soldiers before the monsters got into the fray. They had a pony who breathed fire and another who exploded! After that, we were falling back. But by then the griffins in power armor were getting pretty impatient. They looked ready to waste Sanguine themselves. Nasty bastards."

"Red Eye's got a couple in his employ," I said as we trotted back outside. I felt Citrine's eyes on my back, but when I glanced back the last I saw was her yellow eyes turned towards the burning building. "Psychoshy said Sanguine was in deep shit…"

Caprice nodded. "He is. If you do nothing, I think they'll waste him."

"I can't wait. They're going to Chapel," I said softly. Fighting griffins and monsterponies? I needed…something. A plan…some sort…Then I looked at her a long moment. "Will you help me?"

Caprice returned my gaze. "If you promise me you'll kill the son of a mule…"

"I do. You're not the first I've made that promise to," I answered. I told her what I'd need, and she nodded. It was going to cost us a serious chunk of caps, and that was with our discount. When she finished taking down my order, I nodded my head towards the small encampment. "What's their story? Is that where Sanguine's guys made camp?"

"No. They're followers of the Prophet," Caprice replied with clear distaste. "Bunch of wackos thinking they're going to find some sort of paradise in the Core."

"Do they? I think I'll go have a chat with them," I said, then looked at the peach pony as she turned away. "Caprice?" She looked back in concern. "I'm sorry." I only hoped I imagined P-21 grinding his teeth like that. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you back when we were trying to make Flank more secure."

"I really thought you were just pretending not to know who I was," she said with a little half smile.

"Yeah, well…this whole 'thinking' thing is really challenging for me," I said with a rueful smile. She looked sad and regretful as she smiled back.

"I'll talk to Scalpel and get what you need. Shouldn't even be half an hour," Caprice said in a polite tone of deference, then stopped. "Blackjack…" She looked evasive for a moment. "About Deus…"

"It's old news, Caprice. He's dead. Usury is scraping up brahmin turds. There's nothing else to say," I said with a smile.

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her eyes slid away. "Yeah…sure…sorry…" She gave a little smile. "I'll get your stuff."

"Oh! And if you've got any grease lying around, we could use it!" Scotch piped up, pointing at the wagon. "Damn thing wobbles and whines worse than Blackjack after a crate of Wild Pegasus."

"I do not wobble and whine when drunk. I have it on good authority that I am undefeatable while drunk out of my gourd," I said with a prim nod. Of course, once it all metabolized…

"Don't ask about the bathtub," P-21 said with a shudder.

"And I'll be saying hi to your new neighbors," I said with a glance over at the collection of tents.

"Please don't tell me you're going to make enemies with a new bunch of ponies," Glory said with a sigh.

"I'm just going to talk!" I snorted. "I don't make enemies with every group of ponies I cross in the Hoof."

"Fallen Arch?" Rampage said with a small roll of her eyes, "The Flashers. Burners. Technically the Reapers, too, though that's our typical audition."

"You certainly didn't make a good impression with Enclave Intelligence when you ran across them," Glory pointed out.

"And you nearly speared Triage through the throat after she saved you at the Collegiate," P-21 added.

"I think it would be better if I did not add how the Goddess feels about you," Lacunae murmured.

I felt something winding up in my brain, like a wire drawn too taut that was about to snap. I was trying to do better! Really! It wasn't my fault I made enemies as easily as sneezing. "Okay! Fine! I am going to walk over there, say hi, and probably meet another group of ponies wanting to kill me!" I said with an indignant snort, lowering my head as I grumbled to myself. "Okay?"

"Good enough for me," Rampage said as she trotted up next to me and grinned back at my friends look. "What? I don't mind ponies shooting at her. Lot less boring than all that negotiating stuff."

The two of us trotted towards the tents, and Rampage asked quietly, "How's Scotch holding up?"

"I…don't know?" I asked as I looked over at her. "She seemed fine in Tenpony."

"She was a mess in Tenpony. When you died... I had to go out and pick a fight with some alicorns and what they call raiders there just to get away from her," Rampage said with a worried look. "She's trying to put on a brave face now that you're back, but I think she still blames herself. She's also scared to death of male ponies now."

"Huh?" I frowned. "They didn't touch her…" The thought froze me down to my hooves. "Did they?" Had I missed one and didn't hear it?

Rampage snorted. "Blackjack, she didn't have to be raped. They worked you over for an hour, and she heard it all. I think the only buck she can be around at the moment is P-21." Rampage looked back at where Scotch, Glory, and Lacunae were fixing the wagon. "Pretty sure she wets the bed."

I sighed, ears drooping. "Great. Another thing I need to address."

"Or you could have P-21 talk to her about it. I would talk to her myself. I've gone through a ploughing more than a few times. But if she starts bawling…" The striped pony gave a sickly smile before shrugging.

"You've been raped?" I blinked and received another '*you're being stupid again, Blackjack*' look. Was this something from Twist or... something else? I couldn't imagine anypony raping Rampage.

"I told you I had," she said, and I wanted to kick myself for forgetting. How do you forget *that*? She snorted and shook her head at my lapse. "Lots of ponies in the Wasteland have been raped. Mostly mares, but bucks too. Flashers were notorious for it." She sighed and looked in the direction of the air station. "When I was pried out of the wreckage at Miramare, I was a blank slate. I was also a hole. The ghouls who kept me pimped my ass out to every buck with a twitchy ball sack. Celestia only knows how I didn't get knocked up. Maybe I did and I just killed the foal…like Hope," she said in that horrible, fragile voice.

"One day, those two ghouls got bored and sold me to the folks that got Paradise started. After a while, though, I figured out that explosive collars aren't much of a deterrent when you can regrow your head. I busted out, and I was on my own again. Bonesaw and Scalpel were kind enough to win me over, the first two who didn't try to inseminate me for caps."

"Then how are you so normal? I mean…" I stammered as she

looked at me like I was a idiot again…which, to be fair...

"Normal? What makes you think I'm normal, Blackjack? I have nightmares. The old flashbacks. Every time I came to 69, I paid a mare to let me sob into her chest for an hour or two and call her Mommy. Then I'd pay twice as much just to keep her quiet. Crybaby Reapers are a liability," she said with a grin, but I saw past it into her eyes. "Sometimes, I'll go into a place and I can just see the looks. The 'I can fuck you if I want' look. I wear jagged steel armor and am as strong as three ponies, and I still get that look. So what I really want to know is, how are *you* so normal?"

"Huh?"

"I heard from P-21 and Glory. You were a glazed donut by her account. I smelled the blood and spunk. Probably still can on the *Seahorse*. So why aren't you a cringing ball of terror around males?"

I looked at her flatly. "I think we should hurry up and get going."

But she jumped in front of me. "No, really. What's your secret? I mean, you probably had four different cocks in your ass and your mouth…"

"Look, we don't have time…" I muttered, going red.

"I mean, did you choke or swallow fast enough--"

"Rampage. I don't want to fucking talk about it. It happened. It's over. Fucking drop it."

"I mean, to get that ploughed and be perfectly fine…"

"Shut the fuck up, Rampage!"

"Or did you like it a litt--"

I smashed my hooves into her face. "Shut up!" And suddenly, I couldn't stop. I had to kick and kick and kick again. Her blood splashed over me as a dark rage suddenly flowed out of my brain like boiling acidic blood. I hated her. I hated her for picking open the wound. I hated her for being wounded in the first place. I thought that I could just ignore it. That I'd gotten lucky and it hadn't affected me. That somehow I'd owned that dreadful hour back on the *Seahorse*. I wanted to smash her to pieces. I wanted to hurt as badly as I'd been hurt.

My fingers found a brand new function as they locked on her throat and squeezed with every bit of force I could muster. She'd never ever hurt me again. Never. I'd tear her head off before I let her! I squeezed harder, feeling the cartilage give and listening to it crackle...

And then I looked down at her battered face and crushed neck and

jerked my hooves back. Pink light flashed as her injuries healed before me. Any other pony... I imagined Glory or P-21... Scotch... I sat down, glad for the rain. So glad for it. She looked up at me with a sure smile as she healed. “Sure... you’re just fine... aren’t you?” she rasped with soft sarcasm.

I’d been raped. I wasn’t okay with it. I was so damned angry I wanted to kill somepony. I was scared that it’d happen again. And I was ashamed. No matter how I tried to rationalize it…no matter how I tried to make it sound like it’d been preferable…the fact was that I’d been hurt. Hurt bad…maybe forever. I wanted to shake, but everything was a damn calm inside me, aching.

Rampage groaned and rolled onto her belly. “Ow…Therapy isn’t supposed to hurt this much.”

“Rampage…I…” I stammered in horror.

She sighed as she looked at me. “You didn’t do anything that any mare or buck who’s been put through what we have wouldn’t do.” Slowly, she rose to her hooves and shook herself. “You have a nasty tendency to repress stuff. So do I. So does P-21. But you need to know those landmines are there now, because otherwise somepony is going to come along and step on them, and it’s going to be ugly.”

“Right…” I murmured softly. Victim…I was used to thinking of other ponies as the victims; they were the ones hurt, and I was the one dealing with addressing it. Victims were weak and helpless, like Dusty Trails caught in the crusher. Ponies to be saved by ponies bigger and stronger and nicer, like me. Was all my supposed heroism just an excuse to feel superior?

I couldn’t say for certain…but the thought had me shivering in my synthetic legs.

I looked at the blood speckling my hooves and imagined it coming from one certain pegasus. That night in Tenpony had been wonderful…no question…but sitting here now in the rain, I thought back. One wrong touch…one reckless moment…and I could have hurt Glory just as badly as I had Rampage. The thought nearly floored me, and I looked back at Glory way over by the wagon, barely visible through the rain at this distance. Thank Celestia none of them seemed to realize what I’d done. “That’s why you were able to talk to P-21…”

“And you couldn’t. And it’s why I can talk to you like this and about this, and Glory can’t,” she said quietly as we continued towards the tents.

"No offense…but couldn't you have waited till after we pulped Sanguine? I've got to say your timing stinks."

"Why'd you let Citrine spout off at you like that?" she asked with a nod over her shoulder back at Flank.

"She was right," I muttered.

"She was hurt, and you knew it. And you know hurt, Blackjack. But there's a difference between hurt and right. Her pain didn't make her right. If pain were all it took to be right, then every half-baked raider in the Wasteland would be right in doing whatever they wanted. We're all victims, Blackjack. The only difference is what we do with our hurt." She nudged my rump with her own. "That'll be fifty caps for one three minute Wasteland therapy session."

I couldn't help myself, laughing softly. "So there is a therapist in the Wasteland."

"You bet. Helping you makes it easier for me to repress and ignore all my own fucked-up issues," she laughed.

I shook my head as we reached the little encampment and several things struck me at once. There were only about twenty or so ponies sitting around the fires. At once, I took in their grubby and gaunt appearances; it didn't match their clothes. Those looked practically new! And their weapons still had the sheen of manufacturer's oil. Boxes of pre-war food were stacked in heaps. But for the overabundance, the ponies just sat in circles around their fires, humming one... continuous... tone...

A tone I'd heard before...

I sat down with a sensation of horror creeping over me. I glanced beside me at Rampage and imagined her covered in foal cadavers. P-21 as a bloody tyrant, his own daughter a 'breeder'. And Glory... Glory made a *thing*. I wanted my heart to pound. I wanted to gasp for air. I wanted to scream! Rampage was saying something as I fell on my face, hugging it, trying to black the thoughts out. Trying to stop that noise! I'd seen exactly this. Heard exactly that. It had been a dream, hadn't it? Or had it been some kind of vision? Had it even been my dream, given how mutated my body was by that time?

Then I heard the faintest voice. A tiny chime, quiet and pure, filling my ears. Slowly, I lifted my face and looked around for the source, but I could see none. Rampage knelt next to me, shaking me. "Hey! Hey, are you okay? Should I get Glory? Should I start with the mayhem?" I struggled to clear my mind and think as those two tones fought inside it. Gradually, thankfully, both faded and I

pulled my wits together. I looked at Rampage and slowly shook my head. A part of me really wanted to open fire; there was something fundamentally wrong in that note. But I couldn't kill ponies just sitting there...

"No... no... " I said. "I'm... fine. It's all... just a little creepy."

From the look on Rampage's face, she didn't believe for a moment that I was telling even half the story; this was maybe the most worried I'd ever seen her.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Let's just... go talk to them. I need answers."

"Well, okay. Just let me know when to start the rampaging!" she said with a familiar wide grin and only a fading hint that her worry had far from gone away. I steeled myself, faced the encampment again, and stepped forward.

A brown earth pony approached, all welcoming smiles and apparently paying no attention to my episode. Something ugly growled in the back of my mind. He was too clean. Too well fed. "Welcome. I am Auger. Have you come to join the faithful?" I looked at the corkscrew cutie mark drilling through a heart; I supposed that this was a step up from his old life.

"Faithful?" I asked, looking at the humming ponies. "What, them?"

His smile faded a touch. "The faithful have come to this city of wonders to be saved from the horrors of the Wasteland. Soon, the doors shall open, and we will return to a world of plenty and paradise." He immediately reached over and scooped up a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. "Please accept this blessing of plenty from the Hoof."

I took the box in a hand and looked at it skeptically. On the one hoof, I was really leery of of accepting anything from these ponies. On the other, the box looked unopened, I could eat rocks and rusty old cans…and I was hungry and they were Sugar Apple Bombs. Well... the hum probably wasn't contagious through food. I shook the cereal into my mouth and chewed. My eyes popped wide; even for Sugar Apple Bombs, these were good! "Where did you find this?"

"The city guided me to an old recharging station in which we found that treasure."

"Treasure? You have no idea," I said around a mouthful. This was the best of the best cereal ever, and it was hitting my snacky perfectly! I licked the powder off my lips and then frowned. I

looked at the box. Something was off. “You said this was in a recharging station?”

“Indeed. The city will always provide for the faithful,” Auger proclaimed. “Food for the hungry. Ammunition, weapons, and barding for our protection. Even potions unravaged by Enervation.”

“This box is new,” I said softly. Rampage frowned and leaned towards it. “No fading. No dust. No warping. And the cereal inside tastes new too.”

“A miracle of the city, a bounty for the faithful.”

“You know, in my old stable, we had machines that could make food like this. Oh, sure, not as good or as varied, but yeah. Food from machines.” I shook the box between my hooves. “What I want to know is where the machines are.”

Clearly not the way he wanted my line of questioning to go. “The glories of the Hoof are not for us to question or to ponder,” he said in faintly hurt tones. “If you are not prepared to join us, then I suggest you take our gift and leave. But I would suggest you not begrudge those that have so very little and have suffered so much.”

“I don’t. But I do question where such plenty comes from and who is pulling the levers and why,” I said as I stood. “Thanks for the cereal.” I picked up the box in my mouth. He hadn’t sounded like he’d been hiding something. A true believer, I guessed.

We started back, but then Auger trotted up after us. “One last moment. You two seem formidable. There is a mare that has something we desire greatly. She is the murderess called Security. She wears a black device on her left hoof. If you find this mare…if you bring us what she wears, we will provide you with riches beyond compare.”

I stared at him for the longest time. I swore I heard my left foreleg rattle like a hundred thousand bottlecaps. “Good to know. What do you want it for?”

“It is the key to our entry to the Hoof,” he said with a broad smile. “We have seen it in a dream.” You’re not the only one... “When we have it, the doors shall open wide, and we will be permitted to enter the Core.” He bowed his head to us. “Hoofington Rises.”

As he left, I gave one look at Rampage. All we needed was for this guy to talk to Citrine, and I was going to have a whole lot more trouble. But what could I do? It wasn’t like I could just kill... him… actually, I could. In fact, I was with the one mare who’d probably be just fine with it. Just slip into S.A.T.S. and use my hooves and…

I shook my head hard. Killing a buck just to make my life easier? That wasn't me. Yet as I glanced back, that one ugly voice in my head told me I should do it anyway, just to be safe. Just in case. One less pony after my head, one step farther from that dream... I glanced at Rampage and saw the sympathy in her pink eyes, the acknowledgement of what was in my head. "Let's go," I said with a sigh, doubting I would ever get to be so open ever again.

Back at the wagon…we needed a name for it. Road Bandit? Huh… something. Anyway, once we were back, we saw that Caprice had brought my order. I shouldered into the harness once more, tore two holes in the cardboard box, and slipped my ears through, burying my muzzle in the sugary goodness. Well…at least I'd got a box of my favorite cereal out of it.

* * *

New bonus to having a piece of machinery for a stomach: no cramps after eating. Actually, I wasn't exactly sure what I was feeling, but I don't think that 'cramp' quite described it. It was more like a strange whirring sensation where my stomach used to be. Whatever it was, though, it didn't seem to be having any effect on my pace. I pulled us as fast and steady as I could, sucking down on a sapphire and some water every now and then to keep my energy supplies topped off.

Yeah. I had energy supplies now instead of rumbling stomach pains!

That was good, because, every minute that passed by, I was moving a little faster and a little faster. I thought of Chapel and the fillies being force marched across the bridge and the colts tossed into the churning river. The rain was getting heavier and thunder began to growl overhead. Little flickers of lightning danced between the dark clouds. I hoped Thunderhead was just feeling bored or something. I did not need to spend a few hours unconscious again!

We passed Blueblood Manor and finally spotted the village. No smoke. No fires. No bodies littering the street, and there were lights in the post office and little church. For the briefest of moments, I could have pretended that everything was okay. Sanguine was dead in a ditch somewhere. We could have dinner in Star House. Everything was going to be fine and peaceful.

That illusion was destroyed in a yellow flash that sent my head

reeling and me crashing into the asphalt. Glory jerked the brake, but I was still ground along the broken road and left a few square inches of my face on the tarmac.

Psychoshy twisted so hard I thought she'd snap in two and came at me once more, but Glory's stream of emerald beams made her veer off and instead fly by the wagon. There were a flash and a crack as her power hooves discharged and smashed Glory clear off the seat. I rose to my hooves and at once slipped into S.A.T.S., then gaped at the low hit probability. Was she really moving that damned fast? Three shotgun blasts fired in slow motion and not one hit her.

Then time sped back up, and she curled in and dove again. "Unhook me!" I shouted, firing wildly to force her off to the side. I felt Scotch scrabble at the pins holding me to the cart. P-21 had Persuasion out, but he'd need her to land before he'd have a chance of blowing her wings off.

That left Lacunae. The purple alicorn was large, glorious, and magical. She was also, unfortunately, slow; her magic arrows streaked in a deadly barrage that Psychoshy left in the dust. Lacunae's shield flared with each connection of those power hooves, all four of them striking precisely to maximize force; without the cage to constrain her, Psychoshy could move ridiculously fast, and the alicorn was getting more than a little worn out by the powerful and precise flyby attacks.

Then I was free and stepped ahead. "Lacunae! Try and grab her!"

"We are trying, but she is…infuriatingly…swift!" the alicorn said into my mind.

"Not happening!" Psychoshy shouted as she reversed with a powerful snap of her wings and corkscrewed straight at Lacunae. With an explosive crack, the yellow pegasus blasted right through her shield and smashed both forehooves against her skull. Lacunae dropped from the sky into a heap on the dead, wet grass.

Hoping she'd take a second to brag, I tried for a S.A.T.S.-assisted rifle shot, but she didn't slow after knocking Lacunae out and instead dove for me once again. I saw her wide, murderous grin, her blue eyes wide in glee as her power hooves crackled. Worse, I realized why her strokes were striking with such precision: on her left foreleg was a PipBuck of her very own.

Then a red-striped wall of steel hopped in front of me, and Psychoshy slammed all four hooves into Rampage's side. I heard ribs snapping like dry branches, but while Rampage grunted and

bent a little, she didn't go down. "My turn," she hissed through her pain, and then she reared up and slammed her hoofclaws into Psychoshy's face. Six bloody furrows opened in the pegasus's hide as she snapped her wings hard to get away.

Rampage wasn't going to give her the chance, though; she leapt and landed on top of Psychoshy like a falling house. The yellow pegasus screamed as those claws dug into her shoulders and haunches. "Well…too bad I don't have a wood chipper. But... " She grinned ear to ear. "Make a wish."

"Rampage!" I shouted, stopping her from tearing the yellow pony in two. Something was wrong with this. I slowly approached while Glory and Scotch worked to revive Lacunae. Psychoshy's eyes were wide…and terrified. Slowly, I walked in front of her and she gave a sniff. "Hey Psychoshy."

"Flutters--" she began, then flinched away when she saw my face. "You have to help him. You have…you have to give him the program. Please!"

"He's tried force, bribery, and coercion, and now he sends you to beg for him?" I asked as I took a seat.

"He didn't send me!" She tried to heave Rampage off her, but my friend wasn't budging. "They're going to kill him!"

"Funny. I'm going to kill him," I said, smiling slowly. "Sounds like he's fucked."

She sniffed as she looked up at me. "You have to save him. You have to! Somepony has to!" she said as she struggled again. "Give me the program!" she screamed in mad desperation, her hooves clawing at me.

"Girl, you have completely smashed your apple," I said with just a touch of amusement. "You really think…after everything he's done, not to mention you…I'm just going to save him?" She looked up at me and nodded. And then, like that, the amusement was torn away, and I shouted at her, "He threw a whole settlement of miners into a rock crusher and left the last one alive to tell me where he was going next! He marched a town into a radioactive crater and watched them die! He sent Deus into my stable! And I don't even want to *imagine* what he may have done that I haven't heard about yet!"

She finally went limp, sobbing as she hid her face in her hooves. "I know…but he's all I have. Nopony else is going to save him. So I have to," she sobbed brokenly as she lay there in the mud. I stared

down, and P-21 emerged from the rain to sit beside me.

"You can't be seriously considering this, Blackjack," he said quietly. I couldn't answer him. It was insane, and we both knew it. "This is the pony responsible for making our lives a living hell. That fucker exposed 99 to that damned virus! You promised Dusty Trails!" he shouted.

"I know!" I shouted back, making him balk. I knew that Sanguine was a monster. A complete fiend who deserved to die. I knew it. But I never imagined having a pony beg for the life of such a creature. And that introduced the insidious thought into my head. Could forgiving Sanguine actually be…better? I had a very similar yellow pegasus in my mind begging me to do just that.

"Please. He's all I have," she whimpered. "If he doesn't get that program, he'll kill everypony in Chapel. And then Vermilion will kill him. Or something worse in the Core will. Or you will!"

I sighed and ignored P-21's glare. "Who is he, Psychoshy? Why should I forgive a monster like him? Who is he to you?"

She trembled as she closed her eyes. "My momma was killed by raiders while I was still in the womb. He cut me out…used his machines to keep me alive. He…he raised me. Named me. Taught me how to read. Made sure I was better and stronger than anypony," she said, giving a little heave against Rampage, without result.

"And you two are…ah…intimate?" Glory asked, tapping her hooves together awkwardly. All of us stared at her a moment, and she blurted, "That's what Mallet said!"

"What? No! That's disgusting!" Psychoshy said in disbelief.

Rampage blinked in surprise. "Seriously? You're not riding his jerky stick?" The yellow pegasus went bright red, looking away. "Oh…so you want to…"

"He's the only pony who's ever been nice to me…" she murmured as she closed her eyes. "But…he calls me his little filly…"

I sighed as I looked at Rampage. Why wasn't anything ever easy? "Well, Doctor Rampage?"

"Well…she…I think…is batshit crazy," Rampage said softly. Then she looked right at me. "You, however, have a nasty case of bleeding heart. Worst in the history of the Wasteland. You just can't kill a pony in cold blood, can you? You can kill just fine if somepony is shooting at you, but the moment…the *second*…you have to face the thought of deliberately killing somepony…then

your guts get all squirmy."

"I'm not an executioner," I muttered. I thought of Brimstone's Fall. Of Flank. Of 99. So many ponies deserved revenge.

"If you can't do it, let us," P-21 said softly.

"Yeah! P-21 and I can make a game of it," Rampage said with a chuckle. Psychoshy sobbed foalishly beneath her.

I sighed. P-21 groaned and covered his face. "Not the frigging sigh. I know that sigh. That's the 'you don't want to kill somepony who deserves it' sigh."

I smiled a tiny bit, then looked down at Psychoshy. "I'm sorry Psychoshy. I can't make any promises to spare him. Not after what he's done. Especially after Brimstone's Fall and what he did to Dusty. I'm sorry."

Psychoshy sniffed and sobbed wretchedly, pressing her face into the mud. Rampage rolled her eyes. "I'm guessing you don't want me to accidentally sneeze and tear her in two?" I shook my head, and she groaned. "Softest damn heart in the Wasteland. You can push a button or pull a plug, but face to face, good and ugly... "

"I'm not an executioner," I repeated softly as I looked down at Psychoshy. "Wonderglue her wings to a tree. She'll work herself free eventually." She glared up at me with a teary sniff. "Then she'll come after me…and next time, Rampage will get her wish. But I am sorry. I can't promise you that."

Rampage got off her roughly, bit one of her wings, and dragged her off to the trees beside the manor while Lacunae took off her power hooves. She screamed over and over again how she was going to kill me before Lacunae silenced her with a mouthful of her own yellow feathers. P-21 just looked at me, and I looked out at Chapel. "Don't look at me like that. I know I'm an idiot for sparing her."

"I don't think you're an idiot," he lied, but then our eyes met and he sighed himself, rolled his eyes, and said with a half smile, "Okay, you're an idiot. But…you're an admirable idiot. I just hope that nopony dies because you keep giving ponies second chances."

I smiled too and looked at Chapel. Hours ago I'd been so sure. Now I was fighting myself. I closed my eyes, remembering the promise I'd made to Dusty and all the other ponies who were owed some revenge. Thinking of all the ponies who were in danger. For the longest time, I'd wanted somepony…the Dealer…the little mares in my imagination…the stars themselves…to give me a nudge one way or the other. Nothing. This was my call…

I thought of the little figurine in my saddlebags, the mare smiling in the atrium of the Fluttershy clinic. The mare to be a mother so long ago. *Sorry…*

Sanguine would have to die.

* * *

We looked down at the town from the road. "So…let me guess. You just trot right down there, and then we make it up as we go?" Glory asked with a half smile.

"I love this plan," Rampage said, stomping her hooves in glee.

"No." I wasn't going to have another Fallen Arch. Not here. "First, P-21 and I are going to go down there and get a good look at the place. I do *not* want a bloodbath." I dug into my bags and took out the first of the tricks I'd purchased in Flank: a brand new StealthBuck. "Sit tight. We'll be back soon."

* * *

"Okay," I said as I extended a finger and started to draw in the dirt behind the wagon. The StealthBucks had lasted long enough to get me in and out. Since we'd gotten back, the blue buck had been wearing an undeniably smug look on his face. "Here is the situation. We've got an hour or so, tops, before things get ugly. They've noticed Sunshine here is missing and think we're coming soon."

I glanced over at Psychoshy. "Sanguine's trying to get Vermilion, the griffin in charge, to send the other fliers to check the road. Vermilion just wants to dust the whole town. I really want to hit them before they come for us."

"Do we have a plan?" Glory asked with a smile.

"We actually do."

I drew a snaking path in the dirt, then drew squares at the approximate locations of the buildings. "Two snipers are hidden in the chapel's bell tower," I said, putting down two bottle caps in the appropriate spot. Nopony could hide from E.F.S. after…well, okay, they could, but these two hadn't. "They're ponies, so they're yours, Lacunae. Zap them. Use mind control. Drop a boat on them. Whatever."

The purple alicorn nodded once. "I will endeavor to neutralize them appropriately."

I put down a bottle cap outside the chapel, in Sekashi's house, and in the post office. "Here are the positions for the three monster ponies. The dragonpony is here." I touched the first. "Then the exploding one." I touched the second. "And the manticore." I pointed at the third. "She's got three more of her pets in there."

I looked at Glory. "The manticores are all yours. Keep strafing them. If they hide or run, fine. If not…do what you have to do."

"Right," she said with a little nod. Scotch Tape had divested Psychoshy of Marmalade's PipBuck and placed it on Glory's hoof; she was still occasionally trying to reach out and touch the E.F.S. bars in her vision.

"P-21 is going to neutralize Fury and then join me at the chapel." He just nodded once, not looking happy.

"And the dragon monsterpony is mine, right?" Rampage said in glee and started dancing. "I get to fight a dragon. I get to fight a dragon!"

"Her name is Precious," Scotch said firmly, and I smiled.

Time to burst Rampage's bubble. "Nope," I said, and immediately she sat down hard and glowered at me. I put four bottle caps down in one of the small residences. "There're two griffins and two ponies in here." I sighed and smiled. "Do what you do best."

Inside the chapel, I put down four bottle caps. "Two more ponies are in here, along with Vermilion and Sanguine. P-21 and I will handle that. When you've taken care of your targets, meet us there. They have most of the children in this corner." I put a Sparkle-Cola there and looked at Lacunae. "I would be really happy if you could get in there and keep a shield as long as you can."

Scotch frowned and then chewed her lip nervously. "You…you didn't say what I'm doing. Please, I really want to help! Don't leave me behind again!"

I smiled at her. "Don't worry Scotch. Not this time," I assured her, then took out a little tin of mints. "You get the most important job of all."

* * *

The streets of Chapel stood silent and empty, looking abandoned to anypony who didn't notice the occasional pairs of eyes peeking out into the street through boarded-up windows. A pair of beam rifles poked out at the drizzly night from the belltower, panning back and

forth. Outside the large white building sat a very dejected-looking filly. At first glance, she was simply a purple unicorn filly with a slightly odd-looking green mane. Then you saw her spade-tipped reptilian tail, her clawed limbs, and that her 'mane' was in fact a row of green spines.

Then there was a shimmer, and an olive filly appeared at the corner of the building. She gave a perfect warm smile and gestured for the dragonpony to come closer. The suspicious filly stepped towards the corner, and my heart was in my chest as I watched. I had the bit in my teeth... but then the pair disappeared around the corner with no sign of violence. Slowly I let out my breath. One cap down…

I looked up at the rifles, then up further at Lacunae flying over the belltower as silently as a purple ghost. There was a bright purple flash with a twin above the river, and the three bars vanished from my EFS. Two more caps down, but that flash wasn't inconspicuous...

I moved over to the door to the building the griffin mercs were behind and set an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle upright beside it. From out in the rain came the clatter of hooves on asphalt. I looked at the door to the house, waiting…waiting…Then I knocked hard on it.

The door creaked open and a metal-covered head peaked out. "Huh?" He had just a second to do the right thing; instead, he stood there gaping at the glittering form charging him.

"Reapers!" she screamed as she slammed into him like an armored freight train. Me on Stampede had been ugly…Rampage on the stuff…well, at least she was happy.

At the racket, the manticore mare Brass stepped out of the post office just in time to receive a blinding burst of green gatling beam fire to her face as Glory stepped into view. The monsterpony ducked back, but the next manticore that tried to leave the post office exploded in crackling light and collapsed in a heap of emerald dust.

Fury raced out of her building and at once started to run towards Glory... but as she charged, there was a soft 'Pfft' from the gap between the houses. A metal dart appeared in her flank; she started to glow in shock, then dimmed, took a staggering step, and fell over on her side as the solution of Fixer and Moon Dust filled her veins. I turned back towards the door of the chapel. Two bucks in combat armor, one floating a sniper rifle and the other with two marksman

carbines on his battle saddle, were stepping out and taking aim at Glory.

I supposed that a mare appearing right in front of you was more than a little bit cheating. Appearing and using S.A.T.S. to blast your face with explosive rounds was a lot cheating. To the unicorn stallion's credit, though, it still wasn't enough to take him down. He staggered to the side, injecting himself immediately with Stampede and a healing potion as he fired the rifle at me point blank. One downside of being able to feel my cyberpony parts was that it really hurt when that round punched clean through a forelimb.

The other merc mare raced to my side and strafed me; I drank a healing potion, but the process was horribly slow. I just had to grit my teeth as I turned and fired both rifle and shotgun blasts at the earth pony mare. She kept pouring on fire, definitely not going down easily.

Then a little apple with a green band arched out of the darkness behind her and landed at her hooves. She leapt aside at once and was midair when the magic grenade went off in a green sphere of energy. The magic transformed her into so much green sludge splashing across the cracked pavement.

Unfortunately, I'd taken my eyes off the sniper unicorn, and he reminded me of his presence by putting a round into my chest. My E.F.S. lit up with flashing warnings and diagrams telling me how badly I was injured, and the burning pain was another clue that even I couldn't miss! I looked at him, seeing right down the barrel of the gun and knowing he'd put the next round through my brain.

Then there was a resounding clang, and fragments of wet, rusty metal flew past me as a dark hulk landed atop the sniper. It rocked twice, and I gaped at the rusty keel. Lacunae landed neatly atop the hulk and thought simply, "I found a boat."

One of the griffins leapt out the window of the house of Rampage. He whirled, wildly firing a pair of multi-disintegration-bolt guns that rained destructive magic in a cone of annihilation sweeping towards P-21, Lacunae, and myself. Like a rain of destructive death, the bolts, any one of which could turn us into matching pink slime, began to strike us; Lacunae's shield spell was immediately rocked by the onslaught.

Then the griffin opened his eyes wide as green magic crept over his body. He glanced back, his face twisting in one brief moment of agony, and then collapsed into glowing dust.

Unfortunately, turning her gun on the griffin meant that Glory had given an opening to Brass. Like a thunderbolt, she launched herself out the double doors of the post office and into the sky. “Fuck this!” she screamed as she dove, scooped the unconscious Fury in her hooves…claws?... and started climbing, flying north as fast as her scorched wings could carry her.

“Hey, get back here!” Glory yelled after her.

“We’ll turn you into a Reaper yet,” Rampage muttered as she limped out. She had an entire foreleg missing. The pink light was creeping out her shoulder as the limb slowly regenerated before our eyes. Glory flushed, not entirely convinced that that was a good thing.

Then a voice croaked out from the chapel. “Well then…time to finish this little drama of ours.”

I winced, watching the red damage bar slowly creeping upward towards stable conditions. And this was going to take a while... I looked around, spotted some tin cans, smashed them underhoof, and popped them into my mouth. The rusty metal had the consistency of paste and didn’t taste much better. Three more cans and some scrap metal later, though, and I was getting in the yellow territory.

“Blackjack, are you going to be able to take care of him?” P-21 asked in concern.

I looked at him and smirked. “If he takes a hostage, he is one dead ghoul.” There was just the issue of saving his hostage…

“Only Blackjack, please,” called Sanguine.

“You’re crazy if you think--” Rampage began. Then there was a gunshot, and the Crusaders inside began to yell and shout as a filly cried out in pain.

I looked at Lacunae. “Get Glory and P-21 in the bell tower and teleport in once I have them distracted. Rampage, he doesn’t leave out this door. Got it?”

Everypony nodded. I took a deep breath; my injuries were mostly regenerated. Slowly, I walked into the chapel. The pews were all smashed and stacked in a pen or barricade that had most of the Crusaders inside. I was afraid they might have been moved or mixed up when the attack started, but they were mostly all together. Harpica, the ghoul pegasus, was softly humming to keep them all as calm as possible. Sekashi sat bleeding in the corner cradling Majina; somepony had worked her over good the last hour.

There were…however…three who were not penned up: Priest, Sonata, and a bleeding Charity. The yellow filly clutched her stomach as Sonata tried to staunch the bleeding with her hooves.

"So glad to see you again," Sanguine said from behind Priest. The boiled-looking ghoul watched me over Priest's black back with a half lidded gaze and a smile. A glowing revolver appeared, freshly reloaded, from his saddlebags, and then he nodded over to the pen where a glowing grenade hovered over the collected children. "I really do apologize for all this. I *really* would have rather settled this some other way." Then he paused. "Is Fluttershy still alive?"

"We didn't shoot her in the gut, if that's what you mean," I replied.

Sanguine had the audacity to look relieved at that! "Yes. Good. Well, lose the weapons, and I will heal her."

"This is taking too much time," growled a dark form lurking in corner opposite the pen. A *big,* dark something... Vermilion was one of the most impressive griffins I'd ever seen... and, on top of that, I wasn't entirely sure what was armor and what was augmentation. His black armor was edged in stylish red that matched his dark red wings. The glowing eyes in his helmet narrowed slightly. "Just kill her. I've wasted enough time with this shit."

"Shut up, Vermilion!" Sanguine snapped, pink vapor trickling out his nostrils. "Security has taken out Deus and the Steel Rangers' battleship. She is ridiculously dangerous. But she also doesn't want to risk her filly friend here bleeding out."

"Don't count on that, asshole," Charity hissed despite her agony. "Blackjack owes me a ton of caps. She doesn't have to pay if I'm dead." Shut up, Charity. I'd much rather pay you back...

"Please. You don't have to involve the children. I'm hostage enough for you," Priest said calmly.

"Yeah. You're a martyr waiting to happen," Sanguine said, then looked at the little Sonata. "But there are advantages to having spares." The glowing gun whirled and pressed itself to the side of the little filly's head. There was a click as the hammer was drawn back.

"Okay!" I shouted. His eyes were narrow and desperate. Slowly, I began to remove the battle saddle.

"I didn't want it to be this way. I wanted things simple. I wanted them simple!" he shouted as he stamped the gun on Sonata's head. The weapon was shaking as his focus wavered, and I could imagine it going off by accident. "Red Eye needs male alicorns to keep the

Goddess in line. I can make male alicorns…or fuse a unicorn and pegasus together and make one convincing enough for her. I can make myself useful to him, get him the materials he needs…but the one…single…thing I'm missing is the key to Chimera."

"So you found out where EC-1101 got stuck and found a painkiller-addicted Deus to send after it," I said as I carefully shed the weapons and tossed them back out behind me. "I lost the guns, now heal her."

"In just a second," he replied as he kept the gun pressed to Sonata's head. "EC-1101 was all I needed. Simple, really. But then…then… you had to go and fire a megaspell at Miramare! Do you have any clue how many alarms and sensors you set off all across the Hoof when you fired that thing? And sure enough, you woke up that thing in the Core, and now it's taking over one system after the next."

"Sanguine. You're rambling," Vermilion said in contempt as he looked at the ghoul. I had a suspicion that Sanguine was dead either way.

"And now this murder spree…all to get my attention," I scowled.

"You left me no other choice!" he snapped. "I tried force. I tried bribery. I tried letting Fluttershy fight you for it. I even offered to restore your body to normal. In the names of sweet Celestia and Luna, why the fuck didn't you just give it up?" he yelled in complete exasperation. "I have been forced to cartoonish levels of monsterdom simply to get what I need!"

Priest carefully lowered his horn and started to heal the wound to Charity's gut as Sanguine raved. The ghoul spotted the glow, however, and shoved his head back. "Next time you try that spell, you can see how well it works on a head wound."

I wanted answers, and to splatter his head across the wall... but Charity didn't have a lot of time left. I tossed my weapons all the way out the door, and then my saddlebags too. I hissed in frustration, "I disarmed! Now heal her!"

"Give me the program!" he snapped.

"Heal her first, and I will," I countered. The filly clenched both eyes and jaw in pain. Sanguine looked half mad as his eyes darted between Vermilion and myself.

"To hell with this," Vermilion muttered. A missile launcher popped out of the back of his power armor and fired straight at the pen. Then Lacunae, with impeccable timing, appeared in a glorious flash

of purple light and raised a shield. The missile exploded against it. She turned her head to the floating grenade, and her own glow subsumed the light surrounding it. There was a thump, and Persuasion's projectile arched down from the narrow stairs to the belltower and exploded in Vermilion's face. Green bolts raked the griffin as he dodged to the side and readied another missile.

At once, Priest's white glow surrounded the revolver against Sonata's head and sent the weapon flying as he turned and slammed Sanguine against the back wall. "You won't lay a hoof on another--"

But Sanguine simply drew a deep breath and blew a bright and colorful plume of pink vapor over Priest's face. On contact with the vapors, the black unicorn's flesh seemed to turn runny. He didn't cry out. He just jerked and spasmed and then collapsed. I stared in horror at Priest's boiled, melted face…

A pair of Vermilion's missiles blasted up, and only by jumping and falling to the floor were P-21 and Glory able to get clear as the explosions blew the upper corner of the building apart. The delicate stained glass windows shattered into clouds of shards, and the paintings of the Ministry Mares split apart as the entire front of the building peeled away into the street. Heavy timbers fell upon Glory, pinning her.

There was a flicker as Lacunae pushed the grenade through the shield, pulled the pin, and lobbed it at Vermilion. The armored griffin leapt out into the street. I charged at Sanguine as Priest fell to the side and the ghoul threw Sonata at me.

"Priest! Priest!" P-21 screamed as he scrambled across towards the fallen stallion. Glory was still trying to work her way free. Sanguine bit down on Charity's mane and hauled the bleeding filly out through the hole. I set the sobbing Sonata aside to curl up beside Priest.

I looked back at Glory. "Go! Get her!" she cried as she struggled to free herself.

Outside, Rampage was tearing into the armored griffin, who was tearing back and trying to shake off the mare. I spotted Sanguine making for the bridge, slowed by the injured filly. I raced after them, closing the gap. Finally, he turned, clutching the bleeding and battered Charity. "Give me the fucking program!" he shouted as he backed towards the edge.

"Don't give him shit," Charity countered, struggling weakly. "He doesn't deserve it."

"Shut up, Charity," I said, my eyes darting from him to her and back again. I stared at her and heard Citrine's voice: *'How many have died for this?'*

I jumped into S.A.T.S. to think. No weapon. No healing potion. She was bleeding out... but Sanguine was here! Right here in front of me! I knew his pink breath trick. I could beat and smash him back and let the city defenses turn him into ash. I'd promised Dusty and Caprice! I owed so many ponies his head!

All it would cost me was Charity's life. I stared at her, at the blood streaking her yellow stomach. I wanted to talk to somepony... anypony. Talk me into this. Convince me that I could kill him and get her to safety!

"Your life isn't that easy, Blackjack," the Dealer rasped softly as he trotted into that still scene. He looked at the filly and the ghoul with equal dispassion. "Looks like you have two choices. Kill him, let her die, keep the program. Give up the program, and she lives. Decisions, decisions... " I wanted to smack that smug smile he wore off his face. Don't mock me with the choice. Tell me the better thing to do.

He pushed his wide-brimmed hat back and smirked at me. "Well... look at it this way... you give up the program, you can always take it back. You know a way to bring her back if she dies?" he said with a smile. I mentally groaned, and he laughed at me. "Oh. And if you're trying to think of a third option, don't bother. You're not clever enough for that. So... is keeping EC-1101 worth the filly's life?"

I slipped out of S.A.T.S. as the Dealer vanished again. Shit...

Security saves ponies...

"Here!" I said as I lifted my leg and opened the panel hiding the PipBuck screen.

His eyes widened, and from his saddlebags emerged a ripper. The chain whirred, and I grit my teeth. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream. A few surprisingly careful passes of the weapon later, he tore out the Delta out, leaving me with an ugly new cavity in my leg and making my E.F.S. vanish, and stared at it. "Finally. I can finally save them…I can…"

"Heal! Her!" I yelled as I pointed at Charity, the lightning flashing overhead. His lips curled in amusement.

"Heal her? Why would I do that?" he said as he tucked the Delta into his bag. "Better get her to your alicorn friend quickly and not

waste time with me."

"Fucker!" I shouted, ... but he was right about Charity; I grabbed her and put her across my shoulders, then turned and raced back through the rain towards Chapel. The hole in my left foreleg made some unpleasant noises and twinges of pain, but the limb held. As I ran into town, I saw a dark shape overhead; Vermilion was airborne, but he was winging his way away towards the southeast.

"You…you shouldn't…have given it up. Bad trade," Charity muttered weakly in my ear.

"Shut up and don't die. You hear me?" I shouted as I scrambled into the blasted church. Lacunae was seeing to the injured, but winged over and immediately pressed her horn to Charity's belly when she saw us, using her magic to heal the injury. Glory knelt beside Priest, who breathed slow laborious breaths though a tube inserted into his throat through his neck. His entire head was a smooth pink bullet. His eyes, nose, and mouth had melted closed from the pink vapor.

"Did you kill him?" P-21 said in a shaky voice.

"No. I had to bring Charity back…before she bled out," I muttered softly.

"Of course you did," P-21 said with a sniff. "That's what you do. You save ponies."

I looked at Priest and his side moving slowly. "Can we do… anything?" I asked Glory.

The gray pegasus looked at me and shook her head slowly. "We… we can't even move him," she whispered in horror. Then I looked at where she was pointing and gasped. The melted flesh had somehow fused to the floor beneath him.

P-21 made a choking sound. "Well, I'm glad you didn't kill him, Blackjack. I'm glad. Because when I find him…when I find him he's going to wish that it was you he was facing! I am going to get creative when I find him! You hear me…I'm gonna…gonna…"

I touched him, knowing what it was like to be ready to explode. To want to lash out at the world. Rampage had said it; we're all victims in the Wasteland. All of us. He tensed under my touch, so rigid I thought he'd shatter. "Shhh…I understand…" I said sincerely, remembering Mom's head on a stick.

He gave one broken sob…then another…then another. And like that all his hard anger softened to tears as he curled against me, and I held him in my embrace. "Not again…not again…" he whispered

softly between sobs.

"No…not again. This time, you have friends with you," I said quietly.

He nodded and pulled away. Glory trotted closer to him and gave a tiny smile. She wanted to help; she knew what it was like, too. And she touched P-21's shoulder. For the longest time he sat there, and then he slowly turned into her embrace as well. Priest coughed; even with the tube, he couldn't last much longer.

Slowly, I knelt down and spoke softly into the hole beneath the melted nub of his ear. "You saved her, Priest. You saved Sonata. They're going to be okay." I brushed his white mane gently, closing my eyes. "I…They said I died. Maybe I did…I can't remember for sure. But I think that Celestia and Luna are waiting for you. Just… just follow the music."

I couldn't tell for sure, but I hoped his boiled lips curled a little. His chest rose…fell…rose…fell…rose…fell…and then that was it. Priest was off on his own final pilgrimage. I hoped he'd find his way.

* * *

It was getting late. We'd dug the grave next to Thorn and Roses. Rampage had watched from afar, still as a statue as Lacunae lowered him into the ground. I didn't want to imagine how Glory had freed him from the floor of the broken building. We'd found a sheet to wrap him. Scotch had rejoined us, the bemused-looking dragon filly sitting beside her. I tried to think of something to say, but no matter how hard I tried, it kept coming back to one fact:

Sanguine had won.

He'd gotten EC-1101 from me after so many had suffered and died. He had my PipBuck, and I now had an empty hoof. Every step was a little reminder it was gone. But right now, even with my fears, EC-1101 was nothing compared to the loss of Priest. It wasn't over, though; not at all. I'd almost taken off after him then and there, but the thought of coming across him with Brass and Fury and maybe Vermilion too didn't sit well with me; not even I was stupid enough to run into those odds unprepared. I'd track him down, though; he couldn't escape us. Scotch Tape had my PipBuck tag.

"Blackjack?" Glory murmured, and I turned and looked at her. "I… I found some music back at the mine when I was searching Dusty's room…I was thinking…could I play it? He…he was a nice pony."

I swallowed, then nodded once. “Sure. Go ahead.” She nodded and fiddled with her PipBuck, and a moment later a guitar began to play slow and simple notes. For once, it seemed, even the Hoof gave a little reprieve as the cold rain slackened off. Then a buck began to sing in a soft, rusty voice…

Some roads are straight and narrow, some paths are high and steep
Some ways are slow and heavy, some tracks are dark and deep
But this trail is the one I follow, no matter where it leads
And I know I’ll never wander as long as I heed
No matter where or how far it goes;
I’ll walk it without fail
Because I know that no matter what
I will lay my burdens down at the end of the trail.
My load is mine to carry along, I packed it all myself
I chose what to leave behind on that old and dusty shelf
And though memories follow my tail, I’ll pay them not a care
My troubles are all my own, my treasures I will share
No matter how sore my hooves, I know that I’ll go on
So though I am weary I will continue along
Because no journey lasts forever, there’s an end to this tale
And I will lay my sorrows down at the end of the trail.
Though rocks may trip and slow me
Though rain may lash my mane
Though love may call out to me
Though pain may cause me shame
Though mud may bog my passage
Though snow may chill me through
Though dust and wind may blind me
There’s one thing I must do.
I look ahead and find myself at the journey’s end
And finally I see again both family and friend
And to those that still walk along, please don’t weep and wail
For I have laid my troubles down at the end of the trail.
Yes to those who still love me, please don’t weep and wail
I’ll be waiting for you when you’re through at the end of the trail.

There wasn’t much else to say past that as the last of the music faded. Not much at all. And as we moved to fill the grave, Charity came up. The yellow pony kept her eyes down as she carried something on her back. “Um…Blackjack?”

“Hmmm?” I couldn’t manage more than that right now. I looked at

the green-outlined towers of the Core. ‘Welcome home, Blackjack’ they seemed to say.

“I just…I…um…I know you didn’t want to give that thing up. And…I know…I know if you’d let me die, you probably would have gotten revenge and stuff.” Charity closed her eyes as she pulled off a bundle the size of a bottle of Sparkle-Cola. “I found it in the manor and…I just…here.” And she shoved it into my hooves, then turned and trotted over to where Sonata was being comforted by Allegro, Adagio, and Medley.

I slowly unwrapped the dirty cloth with my hooves. It was the wrong shape for a bottle of soda…or Wild Pegasus. Then a flash of purple and white met my eyes. The cloth fell away, and I looked at the startling figurine: a white unicorn mare with a stunning purple mane and three gems for a cutie mark. I stared at her in shock and then looked down at the little plaque at the base.

Be Unwavering

I stared at it and sighed softly, closing my eyes and holding it to my chest so that I could feel it better. “I’m trying, Rarity…I’m trying…”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 37: Winning and Losing

"Clock is ticking, Twilight! Clock! Is! TICKING!"

Sanguine grabbed the bleeding Charity by her mane and leapt out through the hole in the wall. I looked over at the struggling Glory and shouted over the din, "Lacunae! Get those off her!" Five words. Five little words. Then I was off, racing through the rainy night towards the bridge as fast as my cyberpony legs would carry me. I didn't slow, even as he did ahead of me; he turned to face me, but I didn't let him get one word out before I tackled him away from the prone filly. Smashing and kicking with my metallic limbs, I drove him back.

Pink vapor erupted from his mouth, but I knew that trick now. I held my breath and leaned my head away; it burned. Burned like nothing I'd ever felt before. But I couldn't worry about that as I kept focusing on moving him back and away from his hostage. Glory landed and immediately put a healing potion to the filly's lips.

"You fool! Give me the program!" he screamed in maddened fury.

"Only thing you get…is…mercy!" I shouted as I gave him one final applebuck that sent him flying across the word painted on the bridge. There was a red glow from the wall, then a blinding flash, and Sanguine was reduced to so much ash and washed into the river. "And you don't even deserve that, you undead fuck."

I limped back to where Glory was getting Charity to her hooves. "Took you long enough," the filly said, still a bit weakly. "I should be chargin' you a hero fine for taking so long."

"I…I came as fast as I could!"

"Yeah, yeah…sorry, not buying it. Five hundred caps."

"Oh, come on!" I whined. Glory smiled and we trotted back towards Chapel together.

~ ~ ~

Yeah…why hadn't I done that?

I lay on my back on Marigold's bed, staring at the stars painted on her roof as I held the Rarity figurine to my chest. Right this second, Sanguine was doing whatever nefarious thing he'd been planning. Some horrible monster in the Hoof had woken up, and it was apparently my fault. Priest was rotting. Scotch was way more traumatized than she showed. P-21 was in shock. Glory was trying to hold us all together like a great big dysfunctional surrogate family. Even Rampage was hurt badly by the loss of Priest.

What does it mean when the sanest one of us is the alicorn who's the depository for Celestia-knows-how-many-ponies' unhappy memories?

I knew I shouldn't do this. I knew that I should be talking with my friends…or working towards something…or…something…but not this. I couldn't help myself. I closed my eyes and sighed.

I'd failed.

That in itself wasn't anything new. In fact, I was quite the expert at screwups, fuckups, and various associated mistakes. But something about what had happened on that bridge bothered me in ways that failing to get out of hoofcuffs didn't. It was sticking with me, and I couldn't just shake it off. I lay there, knowing what I needed to do. It was just me having to get off this mattress and do it.

But I couldn't.

I needed to chase down Sanguine. I needed to be there for P-21 and Rampage. I needed to make sure Scotch was okay. I needed to take some of the weight off Glory's shoulders. I was drowning in all the things I needed to do. And all I did was shift on to my side and curl up. I wanted the Dealer to appear and say whatever I needed to hear to get moving again.

I had to get moving again. Because, as I lay there, I felt my mind sinking into memories. Scoodle torn in two…why hadn't I listened to her? Why hadn't I been more cautious? Going into the tunnels and ignoring the risk…why didn't we try and go around? Wait for Lacunae to fly or teleport us across? Convince Rivets…stop the Overmare...

Failure was my special talent, and I was doing it right now.

"Blackjack?" Glory said in her tiny voice. Brittle. I slowly lifted my head and saw her with a plate of blackened food. "I made you something…in case you were hungry." She trotted over slowly and

put the charred Sugar Apple Bombs and Sparkle-Cola RAD cakes on the mattress beside me. I suspected that the four forks were part of the meal. I closed my eyes and lay my head back down.

"I'm sorry," Glory said softly behind me. "If I hadn't broken my rifle…you can't really snipe with a gatling weapon…and he had the gun to her head…" She finally went silent. "If I'd jumped when P-21 did…gone left instead of right…I wouldn't have gotten pinned. It's my fault."

Don't let her do this. Don't let her hurt herself. Hug her. Hold her. Tell her it was your fault. Try to make her laugh. Do something other than lie here! Move your ass and do something. Anything! But I couldn't. Sanguine had won. I'd lost. I might have saved Charity, but somehow I'd lost what I'd been fighting for. Somehow, it'd torn all the guts from me and left me hollow.

"I'm sorry…" she repeated, then trotted from the room. I clenched my eyes shut. I knew I wouldn't sleep. I couldn't use my horn to get away into a memory orb. Every second, Sanguine was getting farther and farther away and I was just lying here! Move, you worthless piece of shit! People need you. People believe in you! Do it!

I moved. I carefully pushed the plate into the garbage bin beside the bed and then curled back up. I looked at the Rarity figurine. She seemed to understand wallowing in... whatever ponies wallowed in. She had wanted a different life; had things been different, would she have wed Vanity? Become a mother? Been known for her fashion rather than for being a Ministry Mare? But she had done what she had to do. She'd toughed it out. I closed my eyes again, pressing my face into my pillow.

What was I doing? Moping in my room. I wanted P-21 and Rampage to come in here and kick my ass. Get me off this bed. Get me moving again. Something. And then, as if reading my mind, I heard a soft knock, followed by, "Blackjack?" Rampage's voice. I didn't even take a look at her.

Things I should be doing right now: not lying here. Helping my friends. Hunting down that murderous son of a bitch. Something! Every second I lay here, he was getting farther away…making new monsters…about to flee to Red Eye…something. Get me up, Rampage. Get me drunk. Something. Anything!

Instead, she stood there for the longest time, and then she closed the door again. I guess there were some things Rampage couldn't do

after all. I curled up till my nose touched my hind knees. I felt like I had at Star Point, only not capable of blowing my brains out any longer. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to get off this bed and go do what I had to do.

The Hoofington rain was pouring on the roof again. I was warm and dry, thanks to this gift from Priest. And here I was, moping and letting his killer get away. I thought of Dusty dying in my hooves and how disgusted she would have been. *What is wrong with me*, I thought as I clenched my eyes shut. Get up! Move your legs, you fucking loser! You fucking reject! You couldn't save Scoodle! You couldn't save 99! You can't save anypony lying in bed, you dumbass! Move! Move! Go! Do what you have to do! Do it!

Instead, I started to cry.

It'd been too much. Too much too fast…Not just my arrival back in the Hoof…but in Tenpony. And before that…on the boat…and then when I was trying to stop a war because I only had a few weeks to live. And the tunnel…P-21's suicide attempt…Star Point…For the last month, I'd been hit again and again, but no matter how horrible it was, I'd always felt like I was keeping on my hooves.

Of all the things I'd been through…this was what broke me? A bed?

Then the door opened a third time, and I felt his eyes on me. I knew they were hard and scornful. Hateful, even. I'd killed his first lover and now lay here crying when I should be going after the pony who'd killed his second. Do whatever you have to do, P-21. Anything. Yell at me. Hit me. Shoot me.

"Blackjack…we're going after Sanguine in the morning," he said in a voice infinitely softer than I deserved.

I just sniffled like a loser. "I'm sorry. I keep thinking about what I should have done."

I wanted him to hurt me. I knew the perfect line: 'Gee, Blackjack, I keep thinking about what you should have done too. Maybe…I dunno…not gotten the pony I loved killed? Again. That might have been a good idea.' Perfect zinger right now.

"We all are," was what he actually said. He sat on the edge of the bed. Maybe he'd shove me off and beat me while he was at it. I hated myself so much that I'd beat myself if I could figure out how to move. Instead, he simply rested his hoof on my shoulder. "You don't have to come with us."

I froze, my eyes opening to stare at the wall. *What?*

"Scotch has your Delta's PipBuck tag. Lacunae's going over to the manor to soak up enough radiation to teleport us to Zenith Bridge to try and cut him off, and as soon as we get there, she's going to find Stronghoof while Rampage rounds up whatever Reapers she can. We'll get it back." He patted my shoulder. "Rest. We'll be back in no time."

I shook under his hoof; I didn't think I could tighten up any further. "I'm sorry, P-21." Come on, P-21. 'I'm sorry too. Sorry you're a failure. Sorry I didn't realize how weak you are. Sorry I never appreciated what a fuckup you are. Sorry you keep killing ponies I care about.' Come on, P-21! Say it.

"Don't worry about it," he said as he patted my shoulder again. "Rest up. We can take care of one ghoul."

Rest? Hadn't that been what Tenpony had been for? Or was that just an opportunity for me to make a jackass of myself? Talk to him! Speak, Blackjack! Tell him to drag you along. Tell him to beat you with a stick. Get out of that bed!

Instead, I closed my eyes. "Sure." Damn it, P-21. You promised…

He left, closing the door behind him. Maybe he was right. Maybe without me charging in all the time, they'd be better off. Zodiac had given her organs to the wrong pony. My mental paralysis fed my hate and my hate fed my paralysis. I had to move. I had to act…but I'd just get them killed. Hurt.

Because I was a fuckup.

A failure.

* * *

I had no idea how long I lay there. I had no clock; my eyes were empty, familiar E.F.S. and annoying alert boxes alike gone. Scotch had tried to wire Marmalade's PipBuck into my leg, but it'd produced some sort of feedback that felt like a drill was going through my skull. Glory could make better use of it anyway. But, eventually, all my hating and loathing was boiling down to one simple, fundamental truth:

I had to go pee.

And that caused me to lift my head and slowly step off the bed and drove me…one step after the next…downstairs. The living room was empty save for Scotch and the strange dragon filly Precious curled up on the couch together. The dragon hybrid opened her

purple slit-pupiled eyes and looked at me with cool detachment. I looked back a moment, and then she shrugged and lowered her head again.

I stepped out into the drizzly, wet night and trotted away to do my business. The cold air was sharp on my skin, and I had to admit that I found the chill refreshing. It didn't do much to get my mind off my problem, but as I looked up at the clouds over the city, their bottoms lit in that sickly green glow, I felt some of the weight on my mind shift. I didn't feel any better, but at least for the moment I'd beaten myself up so much that I'd worn myself out.

Stepping back inside a moment later, I looked at the strange unicorn filly. She looked back at me. "Can't sleep either?" I whispered, glancing at Scotch. The hybrid gave a little shrug. "Don't talk much?" She resumed staring at me. I couldn't help myself as I gave a little half smile and said, "Got some zebra in you?" That got me a sullen, half-lidded look. A little tongue of green flame was snorted in my direction. "Right. Good talk." She lowered her head back down next to Scotch's.

I trotted back up to the room. There was the mattress. It seemed to be pulling me towards it. Lie down, give up, give in... and I wanted to. I'd failed Dusty, Priest, and myself by letting Sanguine get away. Why hadn't I tried to drag P-21 along? Why hadn't I simply gone back for my bags? Said something to get him to take the gun off Sonata? The questions kept piling up and piling up; they made me want to scream. I looked at the mirror in the corner. At myself.

I felt such an absolute loathing just then. Not of myself, oddly enough, but of my cutie mark. An ace and a queen. What did that mean? That I was three cards short of a winning hand? That I was better off with card tricks? Was that my special talent? I should have a cutie mark of a dead pony…no…a dead filly torn in two. That would sum me up perfectly. ... Actually, no, this worked: even my cutie mark was a complete failure. I didn't deserve it. It was all wrong for me and I hated it.

There was a soft thump in the corner, making me jump a little. I looked at Octavia's contrabass for the longest time; I supposed that, when I'd shut the door, it'd shifted and thumped against the wall. I walked towards it with hesitant steps and gently plucked the strings. I could almost imagine my heart, or whatever lump of machinery I now possessed in place of a heart, twanging in response. Another string. And another. I wasn't really playing

anything as I looked at the gleaming wires. Slowly, I stood it upright and reached over with my hoof to pick up the black-haired bow, still holding it as I had when I was all pony. I rested my cheek upon the knob of wood at the top for one moment, then started to play.

I didn't have a particular song in mind, just letting the deep notes rise and fall however seemed natural at the time. It was sad music, but that seemed appropriate. I imagined that Octavia had always been a serious pony. Fussy. Like Velvet Remedy and P-21 combined. I imagined her practicing just like this; had she loved it? Hated it? No…I smiled a little to myself. She might have hated making music into a career, but she'd never hated the music itself.

Closing my eyes, I could imagine myself on a stage in front of thousands. Sometimes alone, where every note was criticized and analyzed. Sometimes with others, where the whole became so much more vital than the individual. I thought that Octavia would have preferred playing alongside others; I remembered how rich and how beautiful the instrument had sounded with Lacunae, Medley, and… Priest.

For a moment, I stopped and just held the contrabass as if it were all that kept me upright. Right now, it probably was. The smooth wood was warm against my cheek. I hurt so damn much. I'd done worse than failed…I'd lost. But the cost of winning would have been two lives, not one. Couldn't I take solace in that? Shouldn't I? I felt an overwhelming urge then and there to put the instrument away forever. Give it to the Crusaders, who could appreciate it. Not me. Not now. Not ever…

My hoof must have slipped, because the contrabass gave another sour thrum as my hoof brushed it. I sniffed and, stilling a little, I straightened and lifted the bow once more. Again I played, and I imagined Octavia playing later in her life, after her peace concert ruined her career. I imagined her playing to smaller and smaller audiences. Dingier and plainer theatres. Then, one day, she was alone in her tiny apartment above Mixers.

Had she looked at herself then, seen her own cutie mark and felt the same sense of failure? So much work, time, and suffering, now all for nothing? I suspected she had. I suspected that she'd looked at her musical cutie mark and felt the same disgust I did. Had she raged? Had she wept? Or did she simply, silently, quit inside? Like me?

I wondered if that was when Rarity had found her. Lost and alone and at her worst, Octavia had probably been thankful for any help that could be extended to her. I imagined her leaving with Rarity and, when she returned, struggling to make her music work. Hoofing it back and forth from Flank to the manor in the rain, taking the bus wagon whenever she could. Not giving up. Because as long as she was playing, there was hope. She was still Octavia.

In those final minutes in her apartment in Flank, with radiation poisoning her, what had she played? I tried to imagine it, and my hoof moved accordingly. Regret came off the strings. Frustration marred the notes. But finally…*finally*…peace. Even as her body sickened and failed…peace. And then she'd neatly put her instrument away, sealed it up, lain down, and died. The last note seemed to echo forever in my heart long after my ears stopped hearing it.

"It's not time to give up," I whispered, not sure where the words were coming from as I rested my cheek on the strings. "You've come so far, and you have so much farther to go." I stared at my reflection, at my cutie mark. "Priest wouldn't want you like this. He knew you shouldn't be here, alone, hating yourself. You know what you need to do…so…get off your rump and do it," I said to my own reflection as I held the contrabass in my hooves.

The question was…how? I set the instrument in the corner and sighed. I wanted to just grab a bag of gems, climb up on the bed again, and munch on them till I didn't feel anything anymore. I *was* a little snacky... then, as I started to suckle on a cinnamony ruby, I wondered if Spike liked rubies as well.

I spat out the gooey, half-dissolved gem and stared at it a moment. Then I looked back over my shoulder at the door. What if…no, it was stupid. It wouldn't help…wouldn't work…but…

I trotted back downstairs, my bag of gems tossed over my shoulder. Carefully, I fished out an amethyst and extended the purple gem towards Precious. She looked at it skeptically, her horn glowed, and the purple filly floated it to her. She looked confused. I hoped this would work. I lifted my half-ingested ruby and popped it into my mouth. For a moment, she looked at me like I were crazy, then put the purple gem in her mouth. At once her eyes popped wide in shock.

Apparently, giving fillies mildly addictive substances was really effective! In another life, I must have been a Dash dealer or

something. Two more gems later and she followed me back up into my room. “So…Precious…can we talk?” She gave me that confused and slightly guarded look. “I mean, can you talk? You seem to be understanding me so…”

She swallowed the emerald she’d been chewing on, then replied in a surprisingly soft voice. “Yes. I talk.”

“So…how’d Sanguine turn you into…this?” I asked as I gestured to her. She drew back, frowning. I raised my hooves. “Not that there’s anything wrong with you. I’m just wondering how it happened.” That mollified her enough that she relaxed.

“Born sick. Bad bones. Doc made me part dragon to make me better. Ponies thought I was a freak. I am. Got in a fight. Doc put me to sleep.” She looked to the window. “Woke up…told me I had to help him…said no... he said he’d make me normal pony again.”

“Well…that was nice of him,” I said, but she looked sour once again. “Saving you, I mean…”

“The pretty yellow pony lady talked him into it. I guess ponies and dragons don’t mix.” She looked at her spade-tipped tail. “When I got into fights with some ponies that teased me, I got put to sleep with the others.”

“How’d you get to Chapel? Did you walk or fly or…”

“We went through tunnels. Bad scary tunnels. When we got outside, we met those kitty birds.” Tunnels. Crap. “We were walking a long time, though. Had to hide lots.” If my friends planned on tracking my PipBuck, then it would mean going back underground. Nothing good came from going underground in this place. Knowing Sanguine, he’d be setting up all sorts of traps and nasty things.

Theoretically, I knew where Hippocratic Research was from the tag the professor had given me. Between Zenith Bridge and Toll on the east side of the river. Realistically, there were several square miles it could be in, and who knew what we’d face in that bombed out and blasted ruin? If Sanguine was taking tunnels, then they wouldn’t be able to cut him off at the bridge. It could take another day of searching to find more Reapers or Rangers….

“Precious, do you have a lot of memories of the building and stuff?” She scowled, but nodded. I felt a little surge of triumph! If this worked, then when Sanguine got back home, we’d be waiting for him!

“Yes, some.” Clearly not happy memories. “I was normally kept in

my room. I wanted to go around outside, but Mister Sanguine told me I wasn't allowed to go 'cause the trees were bad."

"The trees were bad?" I echoed with a frown. "How so?"

"They try and eat you." She gave a shrug, then blew a little tongue of green flame. "Can I have another?" she asked as she pointed at my stash of gems. I pushed the bag at her, and she picked out another amethyst.

"So the trees are bad. Anything else?" I wanted to take notes.

"Monsters," she said simply.

"Erm…what kind of monsters?" Given what I'd seen so far, that really didn't narrow things down.

"Just monsters. The bad kind all over the place. Bugs. Plants. Doggies," she said simply, as if I were stupid for thinking there were any other kinds. "There's also the fatties…they look like ponies, but they're all big and dumb. Lots of fatties working for the Doc. Cora always likes killing them. She's creepy." I'd noticed. The filly rubbed her chin again before adding absently, "And there's the poison stuff."

"Poison?"

"Well, there're two kinds." One wasn't enough? "One is all rainbow goopiness…doesn't do much to ponies like me and Cora, though. Sometimes the fatties get in it and it makes 'em even weirder. Those red ponies once fell in some and got all mutated up. Doc put 'em down with his poison breath. That's this nasty pink gas…There's clouds of it way down in the bottom. Only Doc goes down there." She smirked, her pointed teeth glittering. "Doc said I wasn't supposed to wander around, but I did anyway. Broke a bunch o' stuff, too." She gave a little shrug. It seemed to be the filly's default gesture.

I actually laughed a little at that. Then I thought a little more about what Psychoshy had said. "Hey, Precious? Psychoshy said that there was something bad after Sanguine…and he said that I'd woken something in the Core."

"Oh…well, yeah, he was screaming about that. I dunno what started it. I was asleep then. But I guess when some big ship blew up…well, he went crazy. He said that if some program thingy was blowed up, then nothing would stop some bad thing in the city from coming out and eating everypony or something. I didn't really pay attention, though. A whole lotta ponies wanted to hurt him."

I wonder why. "Did he ever say anything about why he wanted the

program?"
"Just that he needed it to fix things. I dunno what, though… nothing I broke, I think." I frowned…that sounded a lot different from what I'd heard before: making monsters and using the Wasteland as his own personal laboratory. Or selling Chimera to Red Eye.
I took a stab in the dark. "Did he mention a pony named Goldenblood or any special secret project?"
"Oh yeah! He called him every name I knew and a whole lot of other really bad things. He was going on and on about that Goldie pony screwin' everything up 'cause of something he did. Said it was gonna kill us all." She looked out the window again towards the city. "Dunno how bad it is. Good strong fart would kill most of this place."
I nodded and sat there. I was still feeling that lethargy, but now that I was moving, it began to fall behind. I'd blown a hand, but I wasn't busted yet. Almost…but not quite yet. I was ready to ante up once again. "Thanks for talking to me, Precious."
"Sure," Precious murmured. "You sure you're not going to do anything?"
"Mhmmm…" I said with a nod, then walked her back downstairs. Scotch Tape blinked owlishly at our arrival.
"Oh, you were talking to Blackjack," she said softly as she rubbed her eyes with her hoof. "Hey…Blackjack? Do you have any more of those mint candies? They were really good."
"Ah…no. Sorry Scotch. Afraid we'd have to go back to Tenpony to get some more. Or you can try and take Rampage's," I suggested with a smile. She didn't return it.
"I was just hoping…if I took it…maybe P-21'd talk to me," she said. "They made me feel like... I knew…like…just what to say. Now I just feel like one big lump of stupid."
I sighed and sat beside her. "You're not allowed to think of yourself as a big lump of stupid till you get somepony who doesn't deserve it killed, okay young lady?" I asked in mock sternness. She still wasn't smiling, and I shook. A part of me…a big part…wanted to just curl back up on that bed. I was just going to screw her up even more. I mean, I'd given her drugs to try and win…and sure, it'd worked, but now she was paying the price for luring Precious away from Sanguine. Paying the price for my mistake.
I felt it; it was almost like gravity pulling me down, but it was all

inside my brain. And it would be so easy just to give in and let it sweep me away. But Scotch was here, and she needed help. I could give her that. “Come here, Scotch,” I said as I pulled her into a hug and patted her mane. Precious just looked on silently, wistfully. I lifted Scotch’s chin and looked into her green eyes. “It’s not you, okay? It’s not. It’s not that you’re not smart enough or nice enough.”

“But I don’t understand why he won’t talk to me about it. About Momma. About anything!” She sniffed as she looked away.

“Listen,” I murmured softly. “When a pony gets hurt really badly… it changes them. The flesh and blood heal…but some things we experience stay with us. And we stay hurt. It makes us angry…and scared. Makes us hate ourselves for being weak. You remember what happened on the boat?”

She cringed. “I…I heard what they were doing. I wanted to help but you told me to hide and you were screaming and…and…they nailed you to the floor!” She looked anguished. “You were doing all that to…to save me. To keep them from doing that. I heard the noise and what they called you and you screaming. And then they were beating you and all I could do was cry…I was useless.”

“No, Scotch. No,” I said as I held her in my hooves. “You weren’t useless. You kept me going. As long as you were okay, what they did to me didn’t really matter. It hurt…hurt a damned lot... and I think it’ll always hurt. But so long as you were okay, I was able to take it. If something…anything…had happened to you, then I wouldn’t have been able to go on.” I brushed her mane gently. “You’re the one I saved, Scotch.”

“Twice,” she murmured. Then she looked over at P-21’s room. “So…he was once hurt like you were?”

“Something like that,” I said softly. “But where I was only hurt for an hour or so, he was hurt his entire life. It’s hard. That hurt doesn’t go away. He has to carry it wherever he goes. But he wants to talk to you, Scotch Tape. I know he does. He’s just scared…and that makes him angry. It’s easier to push everypony away and bottle up what he feels inside. It’s not you, Scotch. It just isn’t.”

“I guess…” she said, still not convinced. “Are you sure you don’t have more of those Mint-al thingies though?” She flushed at my look, then stammered, “For him! Not me…though…I really liked them.”

“Like I said. You want more? Get them from Rampage,” I said, and

I just hoped that the Reaper had the sense not to give her any!

"Awww…okay…" She nodded and started back towards the couch, but I cleared my throat. She looked back at me, and I nodded to the front door. She looked from me to the door, then blushed bright red, nodded, and trotted out.

I turned and walked quietly to the door to P-21's room, knocking with a hoof before I pushed it open. I knew he'd be awake; after what had happened to Priest, who could sleep? He lay on his bed with Priest's sketches spread out before him. At the sight of me, he gave a look of surprise followed by the smallest of smiles. "Hey, you're back." I was surprised to see Rampage with him; but then, she'd loved Priest too.

"I went somewhere?" I said as I trotted towards him.

"For a while, you were back on that mattress right after Scoodle died," he murmured softly. "Less shit and vomit and radiation poisoning…but still back there, all the same."

"Yeah. Had to go pee," I murmured.

"I thought you wet the bed," Rampage teased with a little smirk. It didn't reach her eyes. Her cutie mark was that strange amorphous roiling blob.

"These days I don't even want to imagine what comes out my rear end. Think it might be somewhere between magical waste and flamer fuel," I said as I glanced back at my rump. Then I saw the concern in his eyes and sighed. "It's been a crazy month, hasn't it? Who knew life outside the stable would be like this?"

"Sometimes it doesn't really seem so different," he replied.

"You should have been here thirty years or so back. You think it's a mess now? Imagine every block being held by a different gang or tribe. You couldn't piss without somepony blowing your flank off," Rampage replied. "No Finders. No Reapers. No Eggheads. Just ponies killing ponies for a few more blocks to scavenge."

"It must have been a trick to start Chapel in the middle of all that," I murmured softly. "Just the two of you."

"Originally it was just Priest, this scrawny little black unicorn looking to avoid being pressed into the Halfhearts. He was actually trying to fix that ratty church up; it seemed crazy to me. Why build in a wasteland where everything was dead and falling apart? The world was pain and blood and hatred, yet there he was trying to help me. I didn't get it... couldn't understand it. I thought, when he brought me home to Star House, that he was going to just fuck my

ass like every other stallion. But he wanted to help. He really did. Like Scalpel and Bonesaw, the wandering miracle doctors." She sighed and shook her head. "I fell in love with him, and he was young enough and good enough to think he was in love with me. Had to get him drunk our first time, though. It was nice for a few months... but he was faking it. And so was I. But by then I was pregnant." She sighed and gave me a sad, regretful smile. "I wouldn't recommend it, personally. Threw a whole world of awkward into an already weird thing."

"And then what happened?" P-21 asked in quiet, polite tones. I winced, but she simply smiled; maybe a little sadder.

"When we realized that it wasn't working out, I thought of leaving, but…even if I hadn't been pregnant, we already had a dozen fillies and colts living in the post office. Pilgrims came to off themselves at the bridge, and they'd give Priest their caps and supplies. He'd give them a friendly ear. Halfhearts tried to take the town, but I convinced them not to. I think it was Priest they respected, though. They really go for the whole stoic thing." She nudged P-21. "They'd love you."

He flushed and looked away. "I just…wish we could have been more."

I sighed softly. "I'm sorry about Priest. I thought when I trotted in that I'd see Sanguine and just…blam. Or that I'd get the ghoul talking and jump him…or insult his mother and get him to shoot me instead. Or something." I closed my eyes. "I just kept seeing him blowing Sonata's brains out…Charity dying…him hiding behind Priest so I couldn't get a good shot. And then Vermilion was there threatening to blow everypony up." I shivered, continuing, "I was so certain that he was going to kill her. I was positive that, any second, I'd see her die. That the price to beat him was her death."

"I think Priest saw it too," P-21 said quietly. "He knew that, if he didn't act, somepony would die, and so he had to stop him. It was the kind of thing he'd do…"

I patted his shoulder. "Sorry I fell apart like that."

"Why did you?" Rampage asked softly. "You've been through more in a month than…anypony, I think. Was it Priest dying? Losing EC-1101? What I did?" That got a look from P-21.

"Ugh. You want me to be introspective?" I groaned, but they kept looking at me, expecting an answer. I looked away, to the drawings that Priest had made. Why did he have the cutie mark he did and

not a pencil or sketch or something? Was it because his talent was believing in Celestia? In acting as kind and understanding as she had been? “I don’t know. It was like…like suddenly, all I could think about was that I’d screwed up. That I’d blown everything. And I felt like I was absolutely the worst pony for trying to help anypony.” I shook my head. “It was Scoodle and 99 all over again.”

“It’s just a setback,” Rampage said with a smirk and a shrug. “The important thing is that we keep going. Right?”

“Right,” I said. Then I looked at P-21 and smiled. “By the way… when are you going to talk to Scotch Tape about…everything?”

He sighed, his smile sliding away. “Eventually. Not right now. Not with everything. But soon.”

“She’s kinda already figured it out. She’s a smart kid like that,” I said with a smile. “Gets it from her parents.”

“Ughhh…” He looked at me with his grumpy frown. “Parent. I hate that word.”

“Why?” Rampage asked in amusement.

He looked at his hooves. “Because, back in 99, we weren’t allowed to be parents. I was told I impregnated twenty-nine mares in ten years, but I was never told which ones. Sometimes I’d be walking to an assignment and pass by a filly or see a new colt brought in and wonder…is that mine? Did I help make that? We were never ‘daddies’ or ‘fathers’ or anything like that. We never got to be part of our children’s lives... We were…”

“Studs?” Rampage suggested with a grin.

“I hate you, you know that?” he muttered.

“No you don’t,” she replied. “You don’t like that I don’t take what happened to you as seriously as you do.” I covered my snicker behind a hoof, and she thumped my head with her own. “And don’t you think you’re off the hook, either. I swear, the three of you…”

“We’re from Stable 99,” he said with a little shrug.

I sighed and I looked at him. “You know what I think? I think that you’re just like me.” He leaned away from me looking vaguely insulted and suspicious. “I think that you’ve got something no stallion in 99 had: a chance at knowing your own children. And you are terrified of fucking it up. And as one expert on fuckups to another…you are fucking it up. She’s a smart girl. She knows you’re her father, and she wants you in her life. But a few more months… maybe even a few more weeks of you ignoring it…and she won’t want you anymore.”

He looked at his hooves, ears drooping. Rampage sighed sympathetically and patted his shoulder. “Not easy, either way.”

I stood and shook myself. “Anyway…I have a mare I need to apologize to. Think it over, P-21. And if you want my advice…and I can understand if you don’t, but…don’t wait.”

I left them to talk and trotted back upstairs. Nopony was getting any sleep tonight. I knocked on Glory’s door. She opened it almost at once, her eyes wide and fearful. She mirrored my apologetic smile. “I hope my playing didn’t wake you up.”

“No…not at all,” she murmured softly.

“May I come in?” I asked, hoping my sheepish smile overcame the immense awkwardness I was feeling. She stepped back from the door, and I stepped in. I was guessing that this had been Tarot’s bedroom once upon a time; there were still quite a few boxes of old toys and the like.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked as she led me over and we sat on her bed. She looked at me curiously, cocking her head. “You look a little better.”

“Yes.” I looked at her a moment. “Kinda…” Another moment, and then I sighed and looked away. “Not really…but I’m moving again. And as long as I’m moving, there’s hope. So, kinda better…”

“You’re sure?” She stroked my cheek in concern. “Really really sure?”

I nodded. “Yup.”

“Good. Then I don’t feel quite so bad for this,” she said as she looked me in the eyes with a loving smile, pulled back a little, and hit me so hard upside the head that I went flopping clear off the other side of the bed. “What in Equestria were you thinking? Giving highly addictive mind-altering chemicals to a filly like that? You know, there was a time when I thought that Med-X was bad. And I squirmed…*squirmed*…at administering a dose of Hydra. Now it’s chems chems chems! And I actually sat by and let you! What in Equestria was I thinking? I’d be stripped of any medical license for the rest of my life if anypony back in Thunderhead found out!”

I blinked up at her and couldn’t help laughing as she looked down at me. “And now I’m hitting you! And you’re laughing!” She looked down at me sternly. “No more chems unless the pony at least has his or her cutie mark! I mean it!”

I reached up and pulled her off the bed and onto me for some snugglage. I knew that what she wanted was the right thing to do,

but a nasty little part of me muttered in the back of my mind, insisting that giving Scotch the PTM was also the right thing to do. And no matter how much I tried, I couldn't quite shut it up.

* * *

Contrary to what some might expect, we didn't engage in lecherous activities. Neither of our hearts was in it. We lay together, cuddling, till she nodded off. Since my body didn't really have to sleep, I got the primer and went through the magic exercises. They talked about imagining your magic as a breath pushing against a leaf; I was at least not a complete failure at that one. Then as your magic like a mouth closing on something to move it. I had to admit, even this old book with its cute little pictures and bold print was better than weeks of listening to Textbook drone on about simply 'doing it right'. I'd never thought of magic as something I could do. It was always something somepony else could do better.

By the time morning arrived, I was able to turn the pages of the book consistently…half the time. Hey, it was still progress.

Glory was quite happy to discover that Precious was every bit as appreciative of her cooking as I was. Only Glory would be considerate and determined enough to smash up an emerald and mix it into an omelet. I wondered where she'd gotten the eggs for it, then decided against asking her. Rampage chipped a tooth and promptly went back to her raw bloatsprite; an acquired taste, to be sure.

P-21 and Scotch Tape were playing the look, look away game. One would look. See the other. Both would look away. It was all I could do not to scream…but, considering how I'd been last night, I supposed that I was the last person to have a right to criticize anypony needing time and space to themselves. Still, both of them got put on washing the dishes; quite a chore after Glory's cooking. Maybe that'd help P-21 overcome his reticence.

Talking with Precious, it was clear that she didn't know where she should go, only that returning to Sanguine with us was last on her list of interests. "You know, Precious…I can't say for sure, but I know that the Crusaders could certainly use your fwoosh around here." The purple dragon filly blinked at me in confusion, and I looked over at Scotch. "And I think that you should stay too, Scotch. Just so nothing goes wrong."

"You want me to leave?" she gasped, her bowl of Sugar Apple Bombs forgotten as she stood on her seat.

"No, I think it'll be better for Precious and Charity if you stick around and help out," I tried to say as reasonably and casually as possible. I looked over at Glory and P-21 for help.

Of course, Rampage didn't help any as she gave a bloatsprite-flavored belch and said, "Eh, let her come if she wants. She's a tough kid."

Glory smiled at Scotch. "Don't you want to try see if you can make that toilet idea of yours work?" I blinked at the two of them in surprise. "It'll be a big improvement for the town over…using the ditch beside the road." She actually shuddered! Huh? What was wrong with the ditch? I mean, I loved plumbing as much as the next mare but…wait…suddenly, that thought led to the question of how Thunderhead handled its sewage. Now *I* was shuddering…I'd never look at the rain the same way again.

"Sure…after I get my cutie mark!" Scotch said very matter-of-factly. "Face it, nopony wants a toilet cutie mark. I mean the only thing worse would be like a pile of poop cutie mark. That's about it."

"I think any cutie mark is fine, as long as it's yours," Glory said quietly as she glanced back at her flank and the scarred patch where once she'd sported a sunrise. Then she sighed and pushed on. "In any case, Precious has told us about the numerous threats around and under Hippocratic Research." Scotch had confirmed that my PipBuck tag was still north of us.

"Monsters. Poison. Long as none of them are machinery, I'm fine," Scotch said dismissively as she pinched the bowl in her hooves and lifted it to her lips to slurp down the sugary sludge left at the bottom. When she finished, she smirked at me with a milky mustache. The source of the milk was another thing I'd decided I might not want to know. "In fact…Precious actually gave me an idea of how to take care of it. Both the rainbow stuff and the pink stuff can get washed out with rain."

"That's a trick underground," Rampage murmured. "Not a lot of rain clouds down there."

"No, but if it's anything like a stable, it'll have fire prevention systems. If you set those off, then it'll wash the rainbow junk down the drain and clear the pink junk out of the air," Scotch said with a smug grin. "You know how to do that?"

"Provided they work and you can get to the control system, I'd test purge the whole system," Glory replied coolly.

"Oh yeah? And if the controls don't work? What then?" Scotch asked with a challenging frown.

"Use incendiary rounds to set them off one by one or zone by zone," Glory retorted.

"And if they've been manually shut off?"

"Look for big red valves, naturally. Standard colorization for fire systems."

"And if they're corroded shut?"

"Oil, a wrench, and a good hard knock," Glory countered without missing a beat. "Can *you* tell *me* how to set up an IV drip system into the subclavian vein?"

The filly blinked. "That's not plumbing!"

"Pipes are pipes, in a stable or in the body."

Scotch was silent a moment, pursing her lips, and then said grudgingly, "Yeah, well…you're still boring."

"Just because I've--"

Scotch folded her forelegs on the table. "Nope. Boring! Putting me to sleep." She started to snore loudly.

"Look, Scotch, I'm not saying--"

"Bor…snnnnrrrgg…ing…Skrrrrrkkk…"

"Blackjack! She's from your stable. Tell her I'm not boring," Glory whined as she batted her eyes at me.

I put my hooves around the gray pegasus's waist and tugged her close. "Honestly, considering what's happened to me so far…I'm glad you're on the calm and rational side of things." I pressed my lips to hers, and she made a delightful little murr in the back of her throat.

"Ewww!" Precious wrinkled her nose in disgust, then looked at Scotch, who blinked at her in confusion. "Aren't you grossed out?"

"Huh? What's gross about that? I always saw mares kissing mares back in the stable." She crossed her hooves. "Now kissin' stallions… that's gross."

"Oh, it isn't so bad," P-21 murmured idly. Then he blinked and looked at Rampage grinning ear to ear at him. "No…no no…" She pounced at him kissing wildly, and he barely leapt onto the table and off the other side in time. Rampage made the whole table bounce as she dove beneath it and chased after him. He dove to his bag and dug out a magic grenade. "Back! Back I say…" He waved it

at her.

"Shouldn't we all be really alarmed by this?" Glory asked with a concerned little frown.

"Bor…ing…" Scotch sang out. But the two fillies took cover under the table all the same.

"I swear to Celestia, if you try and kiss me, I will give you a second childhood! Or fifth…or whatever childhood you're on!" he said as he kept the grenade outthrust in a hoof. But, more than anything, he was smiling. Maybe it was a little manic…maybe his eyes looked a touch sad…but he was smiling.

Rampage rubbed her chin. "Probably be worth it…" She leaned towards him, kissing the air, and he pressed the grenade to her lips.

Then the door opened and Lacunae walked in. Her purple eyes widened at the mess on the table, the girls peeking out from under it, Glory and I cuddling, and Rampage kissing the green-banded apple. She nearly glowed with power…strike that…she *was* glowing with power. I heard the clicking going off on the PipBucks on both Glory and Scotch's hooves. "Am I interrupting?" Her purple magic surrounded the grenade, plucked it from P-21's hooves, and gently put it back into his saddlebag.

"Yes, and it's probably a good thing you are," I replied.

She looked right at me and smiled, her voice speaking softly in my mind. "I knew you only needed a little time and you'd be back. You never lose."

"I did this time. Look, I talked with Precious, and Sanguine is using the tunnels to travel." Then I looked at the little dragon filly and smiled. "But Precious here has been all over Hippocratic Research. So if you take a peek inside her noggin, we can teleport straight there! We might show up before he has a chance to do anything bad!"

"You want her to do what?" Precious said as she jumped to her hooves, a plume of green flame flashing out of her mouth. "Forget it! I don't want anypony poking around in my head. That's what the doctors did after I got in fights!"

Lacunae looked at me and I felt a stab of irritation. "Precious, we really need this--"

"Don't care," the filly said. "That's what the nurses did! Kept messing with my head to make me happy and feel better. Tried to make me think everypony was my friend. Well, they're not. And you're not either!"

"Look!" I smacked the table with my hoof. "You were working for our enemy, but we took you in. I even shared some gems with you. All I'm asking for is enough memories of that place so that Lacunae can teleport us there. We don't care about what happened to you two hundred years ago!"

A strange silence filled the room, and I suddenly became aware that everypony was staring…at me. "Blackjack…" Glory said in soft concern. "It matters to her."

A part of me wanted to scream. This was what we had to do to win! I knew that Sanguine was probably rigging as many traps and perils as he could in the tunnels. Maybe if we gave her some Moon Dust or something we could make her tractable enough that she'd cooperate. I really didn't want to have to pin her down while Lacunae dug around in her head for... what we…

What the *fuck* was wrong with me? Seriously…what the fuck?

I had to close my eyes. What part of my brain contemplated pinning a filly down or drugging her and forcing her to give up memories…traumatize her to get what I wanted? Was any wrong permissible so long as, in the end, I won? If that were true, then there wasn't a difference between me and Deus or Sanguine, now was there? He'd taken fillies hostage…killed Priest! Was all that okay simply because he wanted to win? Should I have taken Psychoshy hostage? Killed her just to beat him?

But Sanguine had won…and I'd lost. It was like a splinter in my mind. I needed to win so badly…to make all those deaths matter. To make everything I'd sacrificed matter. If I couldn't…

"Precious, I'm sorry I said that," I said softly. "We want to stop Sanguine and get back what he took from me. I was hoping we could teleport straight there and be waiting for him. I shouldn't have tried to use you like that."

The purple dragon hybrid glared at me hard. Clearly, I wasn't going to be on her 'Friends' list any time soon.

"Precious…can you give us a memory that will put us close?" Scotch Tape asked. Precious gave the concerned filly the same steely stare for a moment, then softened and dropped her gaze.

"I remember a park. I wouldn't mind remembering that place," she said softly as she looked up at the large alicorn. "Can you just look at that one memory? I don't want people to see…see anything else." Lacunae gave a gracious nod, and together they trotted outside.

"What was that all about?" P-21 asked me. "'I don't care'? Since

when do you not care?" Rampage seemed equally shocked. Glory simply looked concerned. "You cared about Psychoshy, for Luna's sake! How could you care about her and not what's happened to Precious?"

I closed my eyes. "I want to beat Sanguine. Pay him back for all the shit he's done." I needed to win! Didn't they understand that?

"Well, not much point in beating him if you turn into him," Rampage muttered as she trotted away to her room. "I better go get into my armor. I can just tell it's gonna be another shitty day in Hoofington."

"Blackjack, Priest wouldn't want you to hurt Precious just to get Sanguine. Please…try to keep it together," P-21 said as he returned to his room as well.

Keep it together, he says. Wasn't he supposed to be the angry one? The one who wanted revenge? I shook my head. I didn't want to mess with foals and the like. I just wanted to win.

* * *

Once Lacunae had the memory of the park, I'd introduced Precious to the Crusaders. The interview consisted of the question 'got any folks or anypony else you can stay with?' After that, Charity suggested that Precious help out cleaning up some of the mess from the fight. We didn't really need any more supplies yet, but I bought a Sparkle-Cola anyway. Charity looked at me a moment, rubbing her chin. "Twenty percent, I think... "

"A twenty percent discount?" I grinned in response. I should have saved Charity's life ages ago!

She smirked as I took a drink. "Naw. Twenty percent Chapel reconstruction tax. Twenty-four caps. Pay up!" she said as she held out a hoof.

Every single cap would be hers someday. Every…single…cap…

* * *

A flash later, we were back on the north end of the Hoof in the middle of a rusted and smashed playground. I was glad there weren't a lot of little pony skeletons lying around; I guessed everypony here had cleared out at the sirens. The park was little more than a dead square of trees and benches overlooked by a large

billboard of Pinkie Pie. ‘Come on, everypony! Smile! Smile! Smile!’ read the caption beneath her huge grinning head. Her eyes seemed to add ‘or else’.

Looking north, I could see the bow of the *Celestia* pointed out of the water. It was still smoldering; I had to wonder what was left of it days later. The *Applejack* was nowhere to be seen; had it returned to Trottingham? The naval base still smoked as well. I borrowed P-21’s binoculars and I looked more closely; sure enough, there were scavengers picking through the remains of the base. Worse, I spotted two groups with those black and green tower banners.

Something I’d have to nip in the bud later. Looking west, I could see a thick tangle of dead, gnarled trees. Briars and brambles snaked between the hard, cracked branches. I didn’t have an E.F.S. -- I wanted Glory and Scotch to have the advantages the PipBuck offered, even ignoring the feedback from trying to wire another PipBuck into me -- but I knew that, if I still had one, these woods would be one nasty mess of red bars. Something inside the forest let out a screech. I could make out, on the other side of the trees, the distant, and intact, roof of a single large building. It had a far more classical look than the rest of the Hoof, with a central peak that rose far above the treeline. It had to be three stories at least. From the way the trees burst through the thick, rusty bars surrounding the property, I suspected that the woods had been one of the few places to grow despite the radiation.

“Right! So, Lacunae flies us over onto the roof! Good plan!” I said as I clapped my hooves together.

“Not so fast,” Glory said as she peered at the sky. “We’re a lot higher up than usual. I don’t think Lacunae should fly anywhere.” I looked at her flatly, and she pointed up at the sky. Nothing… clouds…She tapped my binoculars, and I had a second look. Through them I could see a black, tapering spike. She pointed out a second…and a third. “I really don’t think we should take the risk.”

I sighed. “Okay. So, then, Lacunae teleports us all onto the roof.”

“That is a possibility,” Lacunae said, and I wanted to give a little cheer. “However, it will utterly exhaust my magical reserves. We won’t be able to teleport out if something goes wrong.”

Urrrgh…“Maybe a tunnel?” They all looked at me like I was crazy. We’d have to go underground anyway…ugh, but they were right. There wasn’t anything good to be gained from going underground unless we absolutely had to. “Okay…Scotch, on my back. Rampage,

up front. P-21, watch our backs. Lacunae on the left and Glory on the right. Let's try to get through this without anypony dying."

"Yeah, that'd be a good thing," the olive filly said with a pleased smile.

I looked up over my shoulder at her. "Seriously, Scotch. I know you really want to come with us, and I know you want to show how tough you are, but I can still have Lacunae poof you back to Star House."

She sat up. "I solemnly swear that I will do everything in my power to not die." She crossed her chest with her hoof before dropping the serious look and smiling again.

I sighed, muttering, "Better not. You do and you're grounded." After Dusty and Priest, I didn't want to think of anything happening to her.

"Don't worry. I'm tough, just like Security!" she said with a grin as she looked down at me, "Now, let's get going!" she said brightly. Great... now I was a role model!

Glory checked to see P-21 talking about something with Rampage before she looked at me with a smile. "She wants to prove herself to him. You know that's why she's here," she said, keeping her voice down. Scotch pointedly ignored both of us after that.

"I know, Glory. I just don't want her ending up a corpse in the process." One day I'd grow enough of a spine to tell her 'no' despite her big, tear-filled green eyes.

We found the front gate. The trees had bent and twisted the metal bars as they'd grown around them, and the road had been reduced to a single crumbled asphalt track. A large concrete slab stood beside it, a thick thorny root splitting it right down the middle. 'Hippocratic Research: Bringing new discoveries effectively, efficiently, and ethically to you.' At the bottom: 'M.W.T. Subsidiary.' On a hunch, I stomped down the weeds and brambles at the base. There, stamped in letters almost obliterated by the passage of time, were the words 'O.I.A. Affiliate'.

Yeah. This place looked right up Goldenblood's alley.

"Come on," I murmured as we moved into the dead trees. The forest appeared to cover only a square mile or so…not that far to walk to the center, right? As we slowly walked along the trail, the normal Hoofington gloom was cut down to a hazy twilight. In the distance there were crunches and pops and a strange growl. "How much is red, Scotch?"

"Everything…" she murmured softly. "Everything's red." And from the slow tick of radiation, unhealthy too.

The trees cut right across the road. The branches didn't just intertwine; they looked as if they had stabbed right through one another; splitting the trunks and branches of their neighbors. Any gap between them was occupied by the twisted brambles that corkscrewed their way into the trunks. I heard a wooden groan and saw something move in the distance. "These trees are dead, right?" I asked as I looked at the leafless branches. From the way they curled up, it looked almost as if they were ready to stab us.

"Well, they appear…I mean…they…" Glory stammered as she stared at one trunk. "I think so."

"Well, if they're wood, then they burn," P-21 said. He pulled out an apple with a red band, tugged out the stem, and tossed it into the trees blocking our path. There was a loud 'fwoosh' as a ten foot patch of tree burst into flame. The wood popped and crackled…and smoldered…smoked…and not much else. The smoke blew back in our faces, the gray cloud stinging my throat fiercely. The woods around us crackled even more loudly.

Then I saw one of the thick branches above me slowly turn. It pointed its jagged tip right at P-21. "Look out!" I shouted as the entire branch stabbed down, and only my warning and his agile hooves kept him from getting speared. Another chorus of creaks erupted as the trees stabbed hoof-thick branches at us. Lacunae was able to deflect one with her shield and teleport a few feet out of the path of another. Glory leapt in time to avoid being skewered by one shooting in from the side, landing neatly on the still-quivering branch. Scotch held on for dear life as I made like a zebra and reared on my back legs, barely deflecting one branch with my forelegs. Rampage's armor rang like a bell as she was knocked off her hooves by an impact.

As abruptly as it started, the attack stopped. We were frozen with a dozen branches all around us. Touching them didn't provoke any kind of response, thank goodness. We looked at one another. "Right. No trying to burn the nice not-dead trees." If you could even call these things trees…

Since we couldn't follow the road, we had to squeeze through gaps between the splintered trunks. More than once, Lacunae had to teleport through. Twice, Rampage had to hook her hoofclaws into the hard, waxy bark and force a gap wide enough to pass through.

The trees had other peculiarities, strange cysts and growths that put out a sickly green and yellow light. I'd accidentally brushed against one, and it had popped, spurting a foul fluid that smoked on contact with my foreleg and blackened the enamel.

Wow…out of all the sucky places in the Hoof, I think we'd found the suckiest. From the depths of the woods came a long, low howl that made my mane crawl.

There were also rusted metal drums all over the place; most had split open long ago, but more than a few were still oozing rainbow-colored gunk. We tried to avoid any tree that had the rainbow gunk on it; it seemed to create even larger and more bizarre versions of the strange leafless plants. One actually appeared to have slices of cake hanging from the ends of its limbs. From the number of waxy and warped bones lying at the base of the tree, I suspected that the cake was a lie.

"How'd they even get this far?" P-21 murmured in confusion.

"I... don't know," I said just as quietly. We looked at each other and at the creaking forest around us, the creepiness jumping up another notch. Nopony wanted to speculate very much on how they'd gotten just far enough to die.

We reached a track of sorts, running back along a retaining wall that, while buckled, still provided chunks of concrete above the leafless brambles. Suddenly, there was a crackle overhead, and I stared in shock as a lumpy, rainbow-colored apple appeared on the end of a branch overhead. More crackles and flashes signaled the appearance of dozens more above us.

"Oh…this can't be good," I murmured as I watched the rainbows start to squirm and glow brightly. "Shit…look out!" I yelled, then started running as the first apple fell towards me. It hit the ground with an explosive flash and sprayed stinging bits of seed at us. Lacunae's shield spell blocked four detonations, but collapsed as three more exploded simultaneously. She screamed as two more exploded along her spine, tearing her flesh and singeing her wings and tail. Rampage, her armor blackened, leapt upon the alicorn's back and started to swipe at the falling apples. Any injuries the detonations gave her started to heal almost immediately, allowing Lacunae to recover enough to restore her shield.

Then, as abruptly as they appeared, the exploding apples vanished. Once more the trees resumed their slow groaning and popping noises. I stared as I saw one trunk split in two by the branch of a

larger tree, the smaller tree being torn apart.

I really hated this place. We let Lacunae heal herself and then tend to us... and suddenly Glory screamed. A gray wooden shoot was growing out of her foreleg! Scotch wasted no time, jumping off me and racing to where it was sprouting. She bit down, set her forelegs, and pulled as hard as she could. There was a horrible wet noise as the bloody seed was ripped out. As she spat it aside, I watched in sick horror as another waxy tree began to grow before our eyes in the dirt beside us. P-21 and Scotch also had pieces of apple seed shrapnel that had to be dug out even as they started to sprout. Lacunae had the easiest time; though she'd been hit by more seeds than any of us, none of them were sprouting. Maybe it was the radiation... or just more of her freaky alicorn cheating powers.

"What kind of apples appear from nowhere and then blow up?" Scotch asked after yanking the last sprout from her flank.

"Hoofington apples," I muttered as I glared at the tangled mess of wood and tree.

After healing the gouges left by ripping out the seeds, we set off again. If it hadn't been for Scotch pointing out north and Glory's sharp eyes spotting the steeple of the building through the gloom, I'd have had no idea where we were heading. We passed several rusted wagons that made Scotch Tape cringe, and even I balked at the sight of the twisted, rusted metal and grotesque plant life growing amid the toxic sludge. The splintered trunks resembled gaping maws... and for all I knew, they *were* mouths!

"There's too much red. Everywhere I look is red!" Glory whimpered as she looked around.

"Don't focus on the red bars. Keep your eyes open for anything else," I murmured as I kicked an ugly log with my rear hoof.

The log's eyes opened and it lunged, biting my ass hard and driving splintered fangs deep into my haunch. It snarled like some sort of maddened canine. It was a good thing that my hide was tougher than the usual mare's -- otherwise it probably would have torn my flank clean off. Another of the things tore itself off a gnarled tree and leaped at Glory, while a third sprang from a thicket at P-21.

Glory turned, pointed her gun unerringly at the plunging log, and unloaded a stream of energy that transformed the entire beast into a flaming torch. It slammed into the gray pegasus, but she kicked it away before it could do more than singe her barding. Then there was a loud crack as four tree limbs speared out at once and crushed

the flaming wolf log into pieces.

As smoothly as if he still wore his PipBuck, P-21 brought Persuasion up in his jaws and fired a clean forty millimeter grenade right into the gaping maw of the one bearing down on him. As it slammed into him, he rolled smoothly onto his back and kicked it over and away. The wooden creature scrambled up, and then the grenade exploded and blew the snarling head into so many toothpicks.

One burst half-buried from the ground and sunk its fangs into Lacunae's belly, tearing a jagged wound. Alicorns could bleed just like anypony else, and they could scream, too. As the wolf-log readied a second bite, Rampage launched herself underneath the purple alicorn and grabbed the beast. Its jagged edges tore at her striped hide, but she simply kept bending until the log split in two.

As for me, I was a bit in a predicament, as the one attached to my ass was doing everything it could to tear said area off and was about to accomplish exactly that. I drew Vigilance, but with the monster almost directly behind me, I couldn't draw a bead on it. I spat Vigilance into the air. "Scotch!" I yelled, and the perceptive girl spotted the weapon and caught it in her hooves. She aimed right at my butt, and I shouted, "S.A.T.S.!"

She snorted and sent three bullets into its head, blowing it into pulpy pieces of wood.

Lacunae groaned as she fell over, giving us a really good look at the grievous bite to her gut. Glory raced to her, and P-21 fished out a healing potion. "Hold still! Let me get your insides…inside."

"And if you hold still," Scotch chuckled, "I'll get the splinters out of your butt!" She bit the largest and tugged it free; I winced, closing my eyes as it was yanked out and spat aside. "Funny, I would have expected Glory to be the one with a stick up her--"

"Just pull them out please, Scotch," I groaned. I'd have to wait to regenerate, like Rampage. More healing potions for the rest of my friends.

* * *

"We're going in circles," Rampage declared. It'd been more than an hour, and we'd been bombed once more, nearly speared when I tried incendiary bullets, and suffered two more attacks by the timber wolves. We'd encountered other weirdness too, like a tree

with drooping branches that cried rainbow gunk. And a -- was it a pine tree? -- covered in steel pins! One tree looked perfectly fine and leafy but made P-21 violently ill when we approached. Another had watched us with dozens of eyes that looked oddly just like P-21's... weird. Glory came across an apple tree, but at her approach the luscious red apples revealed themselves to be red chitinous monsters that scuttled after us, snapping pincers. Then there were some thorny branches that barely scratched Scotch…but once she started bleeding, she didn't stop! The filly's blood had soaked my pack before Lacunae could administer healing spells.

I might have hated the Hoof in general, but I really *loathed* this place.

Rampage was pointing at some spatters of blood in the dirt. "Unless we're not the only dumb ponies in this place, we've been here before."

"We can't! We've been going north pretty consistently…" Glory said as she looked over at the spire. "But there was that time we had to double back. And then we went southeast for a time and… have we been here before?"

"We have," P-21 confirmed gravely. He picked up one of my shotgun hulls in his mouth and passed it to me. "Twelve gauge explosive. That's what you've been using on those wolf things, right?"

It was. They didn't have any vitals, per se. You just had to blast them apart. I looked around, spotted the remains of one timber wolf, and scowled. "I remember this place. But there was a gap to the north!" I said as I pointed at the solid barrier. "It was the thorny one that got Scotch scratched up!"

"It appears that this maze is cheating," Lacunae observed softly. The alicorn was clearly exhausted; being the largest, she'd received more attacks than any of the rest of us. "The trees are moving to keep us trapped."

"Are you telling me these things are intelligent?" Rampage asked as she pointed a hoof at the trunks.

"Perhaps in a feral, primitive sense. It would explain their cat and mouse antics," Glory said as she glared at the twisted wood.

I sighed. It was a setback, but only a setback. As galling as it was, I wasn't going to let it drag me down. Not back to the mattress. "Alright. Get us out of here, Lacunae. Maybe you and Glory can teleport up and disable the lightning rods or--"

There was a resounding creaking sound, and I got ready to blast again. All of a sudden, a dozen thick branches curled around two trunks. The trees sounded like they were screaming as the branches twisted against them and pulled the trunks wide with a resounding wooden crunch. Then another pair was ripped apart. And another. Another. A path, straight as an arrow, led directly towards the building. P-21 looked at the stunned Glory. "Pretty smart cat."

Scotch gulped. "Well…well I'm not afraid! So let's go," the filly said as she pointed down the path that had been opened. "Um… after you?" she asked Rampage.

"Buc- buc- bukaw!" Rampage clucked as she trotted ahead.

"Of course, you know this is a trap," Glory asked, looking over at me as we walked along after the striped Reaper.

"'Course. It wouldn't be Hoofington otherwise," I answered, looking through the gaps between the trunks. I saw gray trees that seemed to bear apples and oranges and other fruits, but sprawled beneath them were more and more jumbled bones. It was another Silverstar Sporting Supplies…just a more vicious version.

The trees were closing the path behind us with the grinding creaks and groans of tortured wood. And then the foliage ended abruptly, the transition as sharp as if there were some invisible line. Spread out before us was a huge lawn of blue-green grass. It was covered with strange train-like engines and wagons, and heaps of barrels loomed like oozing encrustations, slowly dripping their congealed contents like colorful pus. Most bizarre of all were the statues. One showed three foals frolicking, another was a mare looking impressive, rearing with a flag clutched between her forehooves... There were dozens of them scattered across the strange grass. A few had tumbled over and others were covered in creeping blue vines, but most of them were just…there.

Scotch leaped from my back onto Lacunae and stared at one of the strange engines. "It's gonna eat me. It's gonna gobble me up!" I had to admit, with its rusted grill and the two domed lamps beside the massive drum on the front, *I* half thought it was going to eat me!

"I'll keep you safe, Scotch," Lacunae promised softly, lifting her wings to shield the filly from the sight.

We started to walk between the vine-covered hulks, and then I saw the blue vines start to creep. My mane started to do the freakiest things as the plants rasped faintly against the hulls of the machines. I'd already seen trees rip a path in front of me, though, so…this

shouldn't have been that frightening, in comparison. Rampage scowled at the vines. "Huh…this can't be…" Then her eyes popped wide. "No way! We're nowhere near the Everfree Forest!"

"Can't be what?" I asked as I saw her pupils contract in terror.

"Run!" she screamed, "Killing Joke!"

As if waiting for just that, the ground around us exploded with snaking blue vines. They slithered out of every hole, seeming to make a horrible chuckling noise as they moved lightning quick. One popped up in front of me and tapped my nose. The vine made the creepiest hissing laugh as I felt a tingle run through me. And then, just as suddenly as they'd attacked, the vines pulled themselves back. I felt a strange wooziness running through my body.

"What just happened?" Rampage asked, and I reached out a hoof to her to steady myself. And just like that, Rampage exploded. The striped mare blew apart in a cloud of shrapnel, her metal barding smashing into me and sending me flying into one of the tractors. Which exploded, showering us all with debris. A large chunk of rusty metal fell upon me and I heaved it away…only to have it explode as well. I staggered to the side, my body battered and my legs wobbling beneath me. I fell, and the ground beneath me exploded like a landmine. I finally just curled up into a ball, feeling battered and broken and terrified to take another step.

Then a glow surrounded me and lifted me into the air. I looked weakly at Lacunae levitating me through the air towards the building. "I…hate…blowing up…" I moaned. But then I looked down; P-21 and Glory had grabbed the regenerating chunk of Rampage and were struggling to keep up as the slithering blue vines pursued them. P-21 now tossed incendiary apples every way he could to try and drive back patches of the noxious blue plant.

The ground heaved beneath P-21, and he dropped the filly Rampage in a heap as Lacunae landed on the vine-free concrete steps. She set me down…and the stone exploded under my hooves! At least this time the blast was a little less energetic. I was gonna have to chow down on some serious scrap metal soon or start losing legs. Lacunae frowned in concern as she looked at me, then at our friends. She couldn't set me down and get the others without the ground exploding underhoof, but she couldn't manage me and pick them up at the same time either.

Suddenly, Rampage screamed as the ground beneath her opened up into a deep pit of earth. Her hooves scrambled at the edge of the

hole as it filled with wiggling blue vines and gnarled roots. It was as if the earth itself were creeping away under her hooves to dump her into the depths. P-21 reached in and bit her mane, hauling the thrashing, muddy filly back up over the edge.

A blue vine darted towards the distracted buck. Green beams sliced the vine into quivering lengths as Glory leapt in place behind him, covering him as he hauled Rampage out. Then I saw it. It was just a moment when she took her eyes off the vines to look at the pair. In that moment, the vines struck. They shot out and coiled around her. "No!" I screamed as a blue flash engulfed her body.

Then I blinked as I stared in shock. "Oh my…" Lacunae murmured in my mind. What the heck…

"Come on! Move!" Glory shouted as she strafed the vines with her gatling beam gun. But P-21 and Rampage gaped at her. "What are you staring at? Move!" Finally, the pair began to run towards us, leaving the vines hissing and rubbing together. Glory turned and shouted, "Aw yeah!" And then she froze. She touched her throat with a bright blue hoof, then turned to stare at a stunning rainbow-colored tail. Where once she'd had a brand, now she had a vivid rainbow lightning bolt and cloud on her flank.

The killing joke had turned her into Rainbow Dash.

"Ah…what? No…no no no…they turned me into a Dashite…a Dashite! Not a Dash!" she said in her higher, squeakier voice. "This is impossible. There must be some kind of mistake!" She sat down hard and wailed, "My life is ruined!"

"Wasn't it ruined already?" Rampage said as she stepped on to the concrete and winced, then said in relief, "Okay…no burying alive… good…"

"It's better than blowing up," I murmured weakly.

"You don't understand! It would have been better if I'd blown up. You remember how some of the Tenpony ponies acted when they thought you were related to Twilight? Well multiply that by a thousand and that's the Enclave's reaction!" Glory began to pace back and forth. "Even if my family could somehow be okay with it…there's no way Thunderhead would... I mean…I look just like her! The most infamous pegasus in history!"

"Glory…calm down," I said, taking a little step. There was another loud bang that left me sprawling and put a large crack in the concrete. "At least…you're not…a walking bomb…"

"Yeah. You actually look kinda cool like this," Scotch said as she

hopped off Lacunae's back. "Not nearly so boring!" Rampage looked out at where she'd exploded and sighed. Lacunae flew over to retrieve the new filly's saddlebags.

Glory pressed her hooves to the sides of her head. "Oh my gosh, what if the change isn't just physical? What if there's some kind of mental contamination? I was slated for a fast track medical career! Rainbow Dash was an idiot!" She clenched her eyes closed. "Hydrogen. Helium. Lithium. Beryllium. Boron. Carbon. Oxygen… wait…no…I forgot nitrogen!" she gasped. "I forgot nitrogen!" She grabbed P-21 and shook him in panic. "How could I forget *nitrogen*? Any second now I'm going to be obsessed with racing and the Wonderbolts!" she cried as she hovered in the air.

"At least you're flying again!" Scotch said with a grin. Lacunae returned with Rampage's blasted bags; the little striped filly dug through them for a moment, pulled out Psychoshy's power hooves, and started to strap them onto her little legs.

"I'm flying?" She looked back over her shoulder at her restored wings. Sure, they were bright blue now, but they were also holding her aloft. She grinned. "I'm flying! Flying! Woohoo! So awesome!" she cheered in glee as she looped and whirled above the steps. Then, suddenly, she got a haunted look and landed. "No, Glory. You are an Egghead. Egg! Head! I mean…an intellectual!"

"Relax. I think any pegasus would be glad to get her wings back," I said as I walked gingerly, like I was treading on a bed of landmines, towards the door. Every third step resulted in a sharp detonation underhoof that knocked me about. Still, I couldn't stop now. I just needed to get inside. Generally you could tell how important a place was by how trashed it looked. Hippocratic Research was one *reinforced* building. I couldn't see a single broken pane of glass or missing tile off the roof. It might have looked like an old, classy-style building, but it clearly had to be built like a fortress.

There was no way I was going to open these doors. "P-21…I think we're going to need your…" I started to say as I looked back and saw a blue vine snaking out of the crack split in the concrete slab and creeping towards Scotch Tape. "Look out!" I shouted, but all that did was make her look at me.

The vine curled around her rear hoof.

Scotch immediately shuddered, her eyes clenching shut as Glory severed the tendril with a precise blast of S.A.T.S.-assisted gatling fire. "Burns…" she whimpered, and then she fell over as a jet of

yellow-green gas sprayed from her mouth. She started to thrash wildly, a horrible noise coming from her throat as she flopped and fell to her side. But worst of all was the smell. It was a smell I could smell in my sleep, and it came to me now in horrible freshness: the acrid stench of chlorine.

Rainbo-- Glory! Glory fanned her wings to blow the clouds back and landed next to her, pressing an ear to Scotch Tape's chest. Her rose-colored eyes were wide in fear as more chlorine gas trickled from the filly's lips. "Lacunae!" The purple alicorn touched Scotch's side with her glowing horn as Glory scrambled for a healing potion…but then she dropped it. "No! We don't need healing now. The joke is making the gas inside her lungs!" She grabbed Lacunae, "You've got BJ's memories and stuff, right, and still a lot of radiation energy?" The alicorn nodded warily. "Teleport us to the Fluttershy Medical Center! The surgical room! Now!"

"Wait!" P-21 started.

"What--" Rampage began.

"Didn't--" I started to say.

"Now!" Glory shouted, grabbing Lacunae and shaking her.

There was a purple flash, and all three vanished. I sat down hard in shock. Then there was a bang under my backside and I leaped to my hooves, looking back at my blackened and frayed tail. P-21 also sat down with a shocked expression but without, fortunately, an explosion. I looked blown half to hell, he looked like he'd been smacked between the eyes with a plank, and the freshly re-foaled Rampage was trotting along on the power hooves, wearing the one saddlebag like a school knapsack.

"So…all in all, pretty good day in the Hoof, huh?" the striped filly said with a smirk.

* * *

"So…is this shit permanent?" I asked as I sat by while P-21 worked on the lock. I was absent-mindedly chewing on bloody pieces of shrapnel that I'd plucked from my hide.

"It's Killing Joke. Who the fuck knows?" Rampage responded. "Normally it's found around the Everfree Forest, but you hear rumors about it in other nasty tainted parts of Equestria. Usually fatal, always inconvenient." She looked out at the rusty drums and trailers covered by the faintly snickering weed. "Who knows how

there's so much here?"

In one fell swoop, we'd lost our medic, our teleportation escape plan, our magic support, and our moral support. All in all, I thought Glory getting turned into Rainbow Dash was pretty…weird. A little light. But given what it could have done…I supposed that it was far more preferable to…say…killing her outright. I guessed that there wasn't much fun in just killing her outright.

The ninth bobby pin snapped in P-21's hooves. "Oh, come on!" he shouted spitting his screwdriver to the ground. "What, did they put the most expensive lock in all of Equestria on this place?"

I scowled. "Stand back."

He sighed. "If I can't pick it, I don't see how you're going to."

"Didn't say I was going to pick it," I said as I gave the door a shooty look, furrowing my brows as I backed away from the entrance.

"Oh…" he muttered, his eyes getting wide as I charged the double doors. He jumped aside as I slammed into them. A moment later there was another throaty blast that nearly knocked me back out into the squirming blue vines. I lay there on my back, closing my eyes. Oh sweet Celestia, was I sore.

"Hey, nice job!" Rampage cheered.

P-21 didn't look quite so enthusiastic, dragging me to safety before the vines had even more 'fun'. "Well, if you ask me, that was cheating." He gathered up his things and then looked back at me. "You coming?"

"I just need a second. Collect my thoughts…" I groaned as I closed my eyes. Yup…there it was. Lying on top of my jumbled thoughts was the certainty that if there was a nexus for suckitude…it was Hoofington.

* * *

The front doors, still mostly closed even with a charred hole where the lock was, creaked open at my push. We had no idea when Glory and Lacunae would return, no idea if Scotch would be okay. The blue stallion clearly looked concerned, glancing back repeatedly. Rampage's power hooves made little click-clack noises on the tiles as she trotted along beside me. I had such a need for scrap metal to repair myself that I was raiding the garbage cans by the entrance for tin cans to chew on. I even tried gnawing on the lid, but the

metal softening spell didn't activate.

That left me slowly regenerating as I walked carefully inside. The detonations were becoming fewer and weaker now. I supposed the joke just wasn't funny anymore, not since I'd used it to my advantage. Looking around the two story foyer of the building, it was clear something nasty had happened here. There were bloodstains on the wall... but surprisingly little damage. Then again, maybe not so surprisingly, if the inside of this place was as hardened as the outside. In the center of the arched entry was a golden statue covered in cobwebs. Two unicorn bucks grinned out as they lifted an apple in seeming tribute. 'Hippocratic Research', read the plaque on the base. 'A trusted friend in science!'

I scowled at the pair, then trotted to the statue and rubbed away the grime at the base. It was a tiny stamp, but I could see the O.I.A. symbol at the bottom. I looked around at the dusty walls and scattered papers and junk and imagined I could smell Goldenblood in the musty reek in the air. No bodies, and lots of bloodstains... "Stay close. No E.F.S., but I just know that there's something nasty in here."

Sanguine's lair was probably somewhere underneath the building. I walked as silently as possible, wishing we had rags to make Rampage booties once again. From somewhere…above…behind… there came a snarl that echoed in the halls. "Ooooh, I hate it when I'm right," I murmured as we moved towards an elevator. After mashing the buttons several times, we finally forced the doors open to reveal a half dozen bony ponies curled up in the corners. Somepony had scraped 'Dear Celestia, let us out!' in the wood paneling.

The lights flickered to life, and a slurring music began to play. "… opportunity…ery community…" Then the speakers crackled once more and went silent. The snarl sounded again…along with a dry rattling noise. And was it just me, or did it sound a lot closer?

We moved into the offices with me nervously chewing my bit -- okay, whoa; had to be careful with that, or I'd be eating it! -- while keeping an eye out. Oh how I missed my PipBuck right now. EC-1101 aside, it was an advantage I really could have used. "Brings back memories, doesn't it?" P-21 said softly as he tapped at the keyboard of a desk terminal. I blinked and glanced back at him as Rampage went through file cabinets for errant trash and potential valuables. "The Fluttershy clinic?"

I grunted my response. Why did he have to bring that up now? I frowned…had I just seen movement down the hall? No…just empty hallway. He tapped away and swallowed, “Let’s hope this turns out as well as that did.”

I blinked in shock. “Well? I was strapped to a table with my guts hanging out and had to pull the plug on forty foals. If that was ‘well’, I’d hate to imagine lousy!” He gave a sheepish little smile as the terminal beeped, but he frowned when he looked back at it. “Garbage…garbage…garbage…no mention of anything, except… Twilight Sparkle visited a week before the bombs fell.”

Really? I backed past the desk till I could see the terminal without losing sight of the door, and there was the date, just before the bombs fell.

Internal Memo: 10-16-11: Twilight Sparkle’s visit> Thankfully, we got warning of the Ministry Mare’s ‘surprise’ inspection. Now I want all of us on our very tippy toppest best behavior while she’s here. Give her the tour, stretch things out, and hope to Luna that she runs out of time before she gets too nosy. If all else fails, have the show ready. F&F.

I tapped a little further down. Apparently, Twilight’s inspection had not gone well. The memos were all about being swamped with returned and contaminated products.

Internal memo: 10-21-11: Storage> For Celestia’s sake, we have to do something with all these returns! I don’t care if you have to dump it down the drain, do something with all this extra flux before something bad happens. I don’t like how gidgy things have been. Who the hell is in charge of the O.I.A. now? They need to do something! F&F.

And the last:

Internal memo: 10-23-11: Goodbye> Well, dust off your resumes, because you’re all fired effective tomorrow! That’s right. Let Applejack or whoever the hell is director now deal with this mess. My brother and I are off to sunny Porca Porca where the beaches are warm, the local swine friendly, and the extradition treaties nonexistent. So long, suckers! F&F.

Funny…hope they had an early flight.

We left the blood-spattered offices and carefully made our way into the first few labs. At least, I thought they were labs. After seeing Horizon Labs, I expected to see more in the way of terminals and equipment. In one room were a half dozen chalk boards covered with ‘_____ X _____’ with every critter I could imagine written in the blanks. Most of the combinations were crossed out, but a few

were circled, like ‘Cake X Tree’ with ‘Genius!’ written next to it.

Okay. I guessed that that was a *type* of genius…

Carefully, we threaded our way into another lab with more chalkboards and one large bare gray tree in a reinforced box. As we passed by it, the rainbow apples appeared on the branches and fell against the box’s walls. Seeds ricocheted wildly inside. ‘Zapapple Bombs! Plant these around your property, and not only will you be safe from intruders, you can make your own Zapapple Jam! Problems: Uncontrollable and inconsistent appearances. Explosive Jelly. Solution: drop explosive PBnJ behind enemy lines! Profit!’

I shook my head and walked to the door, pushing it open and stepping into the hall.

The only warning I had was the shimmer in front of me. My jaw tightened reflexively, guns blasting at the air and knocking back a creature that seemed like a strange fusion of dog and snake. It started to shimmer back into invisibility as it fell back, but I didn’t waste any time blasting it again, then again until it finally collapsed in a bloody heap and stopped blending in. I looked at the rattlesnake tail and four legs and once again wished for a time machine so I could smack whoever made such a thing!

Of course, I should have been keeping an eye out for more shimmers.

The snake-dog thing crashed into me from the side, nearly knocking me off my hooves as it sank its fangs through the leather armor and into the meat of my withers with a shriek. I really did not get how anypony was supposed to fight in a battle saddle as I thrashed to shove the shimmery abomination back. Rampage leapt atop it with an electric crackle, the power hooves discharging and scorching its shimmery scales. She bit into its ear to anchor herself as her hoof smashed against its skull again and again. Finally, it let me go, and I kicked it away enough to turn and blast it with two shotgun rounds.

“Ouch! Don’t shoot fillies!” Rampage protested as it went down from the buckshot.

“You’re an immortal death filly! Don’t tell me you can’t take a little lead,” I laughed.

Once more…I should have been keeping an eye out for shimmers.

The pair of us were slammed not by one but a whole pack of the hissing, snapping creatures. I went down, thrashing as I rolled onto my back, and kicked my metal legs as hard and as wildly as I could.

Most of them tried to bite my legs, to little effect. Then one got clever and chomped down hard on my belly. I might not have been strictly biological anymore, but I did not want my guts, such as they were, ripped out and strewn all over the place! I heard Rampage scream and smelled blood.

From the office behind me came a firm 'Thump'.

Did I mention that I was really tired of getting blown up today?

The grenade's shrapnel tore into the abominations swarming us, and the group milled back in pain and confusion. P-21 poked his head into the hall and fired a second grenade right into the mass of shimmery dog-snake things. The blast sent body parts flying, and those creatures still able to run did so. I hugged the jagged wound in my gut as I sat up, looking around and making sure there weren't any more shimmers. "Rampage?" I asked as I looked where the filly had fallen.

She sat up and then pointed to the mangled hole in her throat. "Thank goodness for regeneration, huh?" I said with a wince.

When her throat closed, she croaked, "Still fucking hurts!"

We stood, Rampage helped herself to a high protein diet, I helped myself to a high iron diet of office scrap and a few gemstones, and P-21 kept an eye on the hall and pointedly ignored both of us. Just in case, he popped a grenade in the direction the abominations had fled.

"Think Sanguine knows we're here?" Rampage asked with a frown once we started moving again. It'd been half an hour, and there'd been no sign of anypony.

"No idea," I admitted. I really didn't see Sanguine working in this place. Aside from those things patrolling the halls, none of the labs looked…well…lab-ish. We went into another room half filled with smashed open cages and a blackboard that read: 'Dog X Rattlesnake. All the loyalty of a dog. All the viciousness of a snake. Pro: loyaltyishness. Con: Ugly as sin. Pro: Natural camouflage makes ugliness moot. Con: Name?' And beneath that was a list: 'Sogs. Dakes. Hissypups. Nightstalkers.' The last had been circled and 'Genius!' written beside it.

A little board next to the cages read 'Feeding Duty'. There was a list of pony names, each one crossed out. The last one had 'I fucking quit' scrawled next to it. Smart pony.

"We need to find a working elevator or stairs down or something. I just know that if Chimera is here, it's somewhere down below." All

the nasty projects had to be down below.

We left the cages and found some stairs down. They led to a heavy, substantial steel door. No lock, and no matter how I jerked the handle or beat my hooves against it, it wouldn't open. "Powered door. Probably need a passcard or something to open it," P-21 said. I glared at the door a moment, then tried to bite it. Maybe I could gnaw my way through! After several seconds of scraping paint with my teeth I coughed and gave up.

"Okay. Passcard, then," I muttered as I stared at the door.

That meant going back up. On the second floor we entered a large, long room half filled with machinery. 'Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 9000' had been written on one side, but the metal plaque had been scratched out and a sign reading 'Super Speedy Flux Mixer 9000 X Turbo' had been painted above it. There was a hopper on one end that was half filled with glittering gems and a keg marked 'Biomagical Delux Flux' on the far side.

As I dug out the gemstones with my hooves, Rampage fiddled with a projector on a small table in the middle of the other half of the room. Suddenly, the lens lit up and crackling music filled the room. A flickering square appeared on the wall, and two unicorn stallions trotted into view. If one hadn't been sporting a mustache, I'd never have been able to tell them apart.

"Well, how do you do? How do you do!" the smooth-lipped one said with a cheery grin. "I'm Flim!"

"I'm Flam!" said the other.

"And we're the world famous Flim-Flam Brothers, welcoming you to Hippocratic Research. A place where science is pursued effectively…"

"Efficiently!" piped the twin.

"And ethically," they said in unison with a solemn nod of their heads.

Flim gestured to a cartoon drawing of the building. "I'm sure that you're familiar with a great many of our products."

"What kind of world would we be living in without Sparkle-Cola?" Flam asked, pressing the back of his hoof to his eyes. A little note popped up in the bottom of the screen, barely caught by the pink pony in my head. 'Not affiliated in any way shape or form with the Ministry of Arcane Science or its Employees. Any resemblance is strictly coincidence.'

"And how could we get though life without Wonderglue?" Flim

asked as he held up a tube in his hooves.

"Well, you need not wonder any longer, dear consumer, because these are just a few of the many products brought to you by the hardworking ponies at Hippocratic Research!" Flam said as the other pony shook hard to free himself from the bottle of glue. Then he looked out, smiled sheepishly, and stepped back as the mustached pony gestured to his side. "While dozens of our end user products like Abronco Detergent and Sugar Apple Bombs cereal are familiar to you, our most important product is a material you may not be very familiar with."

"Or maybe you are, in which case, what are you doing wasting time watching this?" Flim interjected as he reappeared beside his brother. "So, by now you're probably wondering 'What is this amazing mystery product that brings so much joy and wonder into my life?!'"

"Flux!" they declared proudly as a smiling cartoon barrel filled to the brim with rainbow goo appeared between them.

"Now, if you're a clever pony, you're asking yourself: 'What is Flux and just what can it do?'" Flim said as he nodded his head.

"And if you're not asking that because you already know, then why aren't you working for us?" asked Flam with a cheeky grin.

Flim put a pair of thick, nerdy glasses on. "Flux is the simple term for Bio-Arcano-Chemo Flux. You might also hear it referred to as 'Biomagical Flux' or 'metacatalyst', but those are just simple terms for the wonder substance of our time," he said with a nod as the barrel was replaced with a tree. "What does it do? Why, what *doesn't* it do?! You see, think of Flux as raw magical goo. You can use it to make all kinds of magical effects!"

The barrel moved on top of a machine. "Take an example of our good friends at Robronco. All you need is the proper equipment and some scrap metal…" Flam crowed. A heap of scrap metal moved into the machine. The smiling barrel dripped one rainbow colored drop into it. There was a flash, and a smiling toaster rolled out. "Amazing! Science!"

I had to admit, I was impressed. P-21, not so much.

Flim appeared with a wide grin. "So, where does this magical mystery substance come from? Well, the exact mixture is a closely guarded secret."

Flam frowned sternly. "Very closely guarded. We wouldn't want any nasty stripes getting their hooves on it." Then he suddenly

grinned, “At least not for less than a bajillion bits!”

Then they said in unison, “Just kidding!”

Flim pointed to a cartoon copy of the machine occupying the room. “Well, wonder no longer! Here at Hippocratic Research, we put science and technology to good use!” A stack of gemstones appeared over the hopper end and poured in. “With our own special blend of quality Equestrian gemstones…”

Six bottles of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple poured into the middle as Flam went on, “And our own domestic rainbow colorant…”

“And our own special patented super spell!” they proclaimed together, and shot cartoon lightning at the cartoon machinery from their horns. The machine began to flash and flicker, and suddenly a rainbow sludge poured out the far end and into a drum. “We create our one-of-a-kind, cannot be duplicated, manipulated, copied, or knocked off Flux!”

The image then showed the building and, leaving it, wagons being pulled by train tractors heaped with smiling barrels. “And where does it go when it’s done? Well, where doesn’t it go?! Flux is used in everything from abdominal braces to zippers and everything in between. Hundreds of products you use every day either were made from, with, or by Flux!” Flim said offscreen.

Flam then appeared looking sad. “Now, we want to caution you that something as super amazing, one-of-a-kind as Flux is not something you should play around with.”

Flim appeared next to him and gave a solemn nod. “Absolutely.” They vanished as Flim’s voice went on, “No doubt you’ve heard about some poor pony playing around with a barrel of unauthorized, tampered, or used Flux and suffering some horrible accident.” A smiling pony wearing a bow trotted along and inexplicably tripped and fell into an open frowning barrel. She popped back out, but a wing sprung from her left side and a cow’s horn sprouted out of the right side of her head. She looked like quite the sad pony.

“For which Hippocratic research denies any and all liability,” Flam muttered softly.

Flim continued, “We want to assure you that, used properly, Flux is a valuable…nay…an essential part of our modern world!”

“So we wish to thank you for your interest in coming to tour Hippocratic Research,” Flam said with a grin. “Talk to your parents

about taking one of our patented Nightstalkers home; at last, a pet you can count on to keep you safe from nasty stripe infiltrators! Bred and trained to attack any and all zebras at first sight."

"Or perhaps you're more interested in our scorposprites! If you have a sibling or neighborhood bully you want to get even with, then there's nothing better!" Flam proclaimed.

"And if you're looking for our legal department, they're located on the fourth floor…office hours eleven fifty eight to eleven fifty nine, Griffin Standard Time!" Flim added with a wide grin.

The pair then sang out, "So we've got opportunity in each and every community! He's Flim! He's Flam! We're the world famous Flim-Flam Brothers!"

Then the projector flickered and died. The three of us stared blankly at the wall and I murmured softly, "Well, now I have a better idea why the world blew up like it did."

* * *

"What harebrained idiot would think of taking a scorpion and putting wings on it?!" I yelled before yanking the bit in my jaw and sending up another cone of lead, shredding a buzzy, filmy wing and sending the insect scuttling along towards us, oozing green goo.

"To be fair, it's more like they gave a bloatsprite a stinger!" Rampage squealed as she pounced atop the maimed bug, her four power hooves flashing and splattering me with its sludge.

"I don't care!" I yelled as more of the gray spherical bugs came flying out after us. Was there any end to the things? We'd found a lab with the walls and ceiling covered in their nests. One had stung P-21 right away, and now the rest were looking to finish the job. "It's stupid…stupid…stupid!" I shouted, punctuating each 'stupid' with another blast of buckshot. I didn't even have to aim; I just fired as quickly as I could down the hall and hoped enough shot hit.

"I'm more interested in if you have any of that antivenom Glory made…" P-21 said weakly. "Really really really interested."

I ripped off another half dozen shots as rapidly as I could, and Rampage squished the fallen bugs with the enthusiasm only a filly could muster. "Reload!" I bellowed, knowing the belt was almost spent. Rampage scrambled back, grabbed another belt of shotgun shells, and slammed it home. "One condition!"

"Condition?" he said weakly. "I'm dying of poison and you're

giving me conditions?"

"Loaded!" Rampage yelled, then immediately sprang back to squashing the scorposprites.

I ripped out three more shots. "When we're done…you're going to Scotch…and you are going to tell her you're her daddy. And you're going to say nice things about her mom. And you're going to hug her!" Another five swarmed out and I jerked the bit as rapidly as I could. The blasts shredded their flapping wings, and a few were pulped outright by the impacts.

"And if I say no?" he panted as I backed towards him.

"Then I'll give it to you, but with a *huge* guilt trip attached," I countered. One arched high above its fellows and plunged towards me, its stinger oozing venom as it drove the poisonous spur at my eye. I swung my foreleg and knocked the head-sized bug aside. Rampage pounced upon it and popped it under her power hooves.

He didn't answer, and I looked back at him lying there unconscious. "Cheater…" I muttered. "Rampage! Antivenom!" She leapt on my back and dug through my saddlebags again for one of the vials of antivenom that Glory had mixed ages ago. She poured it into his mouth as I blasted at the swarm.

He stirred as consciousness returned just as the last few bugs were blasted and stomped. I blew the smoke away from my shotgun and trotted to him, kneeling and helping him sit up. "You'll do anything you can to get out of talking with her, won't you?"

He looked at me, then dropped his gaze. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh no. That might have worked a month ago when I was fresh and new to the Wasteland, but now I am a grizzled Wasteland veteran and I will not wait for--"

There was a flash and I was knocked sprawling on my side, my head spinning. Rampage grinned down at me. "Whoopsie. Sorry. Thought I saw another scorposprite, but it was just a big swelled head." She trotted over to P-21. "Of course, a grizzled veteran of the Wasteland would have seen that one coming."

Once P-21 was back on his hooves and the building stopped spinning, we found a large office with two identical desks, an enormous portrait of one of the brothers behind each. A counter along the far wall held dozens of different products made by the brothers, including a tiny model of the Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 9000. Two skeletons wearing fancy business suits lay huddled

together surrounded by four suitcases. One had split open, spilling countless gold bits across the floor of the office.

I saw a pair of tickets clutched in one brother's hooves and flipped them open. "Hoofington to Porca Porca…departure time, 2 PM." I patted the skull sympathetically. "Should have gotten a morning flight."

Rampage pointed at Flim's desk as P-21 started to work on Flam's terminal. "Hey, Blackjack. Isn't that one of those figurine thingies you collect?" For an instant, I imagined I heard five little ponies in my head gasp in excitement…or maybe it was just me!

I blinked and stared. There, smiling brightly at me, was the vivid purple figure of Twilight Sparkle. Slowly, I approached with a smile. Could it be? Was it possible? I carefully scooped it up in my hooves and hugged it to my chest. "At last! It's Twi--" I frowned and pulled it away, looking down. A wide, cheesy grin met my eyes; her pupils were different sizes and pointed in opposite directions. 'I'm an egghead,' read the plaque. My eyes narrowed as I tapped the figurine's head, making it wobble and bobble around wildly. It wasn't a statuette, just a cheap plastic knockoff.

With a sour grunt, I chucked it into the garbage bin.

P-21 looked up from the terminal. "Well, bad news. Looks like they erased everything on their computers, filewise…but I also have some good news." He tapped a button, and part of the wall opened up to reveal an elevator car. "What do you want to bet this elevator goes somewhere special?"

I grinned. "I love smart ponies." Then I frowned. "But you're still going to talk to Scotch…I mean it."

He sighed. "I know…I know. I've been trying not to think about it. About…about everything I might have missed if she's dead. I've been a royal ass putting it off for so long."

We trotted to the elevator. Rampage put a hoof down, and the car gave a soft groan. "Whoa…what corners did they cut installing this thing?" I had to admit; it looked like the elevator was definitely not built to the same code as the rest of the building.

I snorted and stepped in. Okay, it was a little wobbly, but I needed to go down and had no doubt it would take me where I needed to go. "It's fine."

"I'm not sure it was even fine two centuries ago," P-21 said sourly. He dug around in the desk and pulled out a yellow card. "Look. We can just walk back down to the door."

I rolled my eyes and started jumping. “Look! It’s fine! Just fine! Nothing’s happ--”

With a roar, the floor exploded beneath me, tossing me into the ceiling... which also exploded! I plummeted down the dark elevator shaft, and with a shriek of twisted metal the elevator broke loose and plunged down after me.

Ha... ha... ha...

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 38: Blood

"You should see the looks on your faces! Priceless!"

I'd heard that you see your whole life flash before your eyes just before you die. Personally, I doubted it. I'd already died once and was quite thankful that I hadn't had to relive every embarrassing moment in 99. Then again, they also say practice makes perfect, so I suppose that it shouldn't have been a surprise that after getting blown up I'd see it... except that perfect apparently required more practice than I'd gotten so far, since the life I was seeing wasn't mine.

Figures.

I could see and hear, but that was all. It was almost like being in a memory orb, but I couldn't tell who or even what my host was. Flim and Flam paced back and forth nervously, plucking at their business suits. The middle-aged stallions looking like they were visibly aging from stress as I watched. "I can't believe she's coming here! Why here? Why now, of all times?!" wailed the mustachioed Flam.

"I don't know. I don't know! She simply demanded to see us in person about one of our products," Flim muttered in worry.

"It can't be the Sparkle-Cola FLASH line, can it? Maybe she found out about some of the side effects?" Flam gasped. "You don't think she's here for a share of the profits? I thought she signed off on that!"

"Well, there is some question as to if she actually signed it or not, but legal assures us it should stand up in court…probably. Sixty percent chance," Flim said. The yellow unicorn rubbed his nose and then yelled, "Where is he? He's supposed to prevent this, right? That was part of our deal!"

"He'd better!" said Flam, who then sat hard and wrung his hooves together. "I can't believe it. Everything was going so well! Sure, the nightstalkers could show a better overhead, but we've been making

a mint dropping their eggs in zebra population areas! We've got a whole new line of Poison Joke products starting next month! And the scorposprites have been working like a charm behind the lines. Maybe we can get through to Rainbow Dash to talk to her and…"

Suddenly, there was a purple flash, and Twilight Sparkle appeared. I had to admit, though I'd seen her several times, I'd never before seen her looking so…scary. Her mane had streaks of gray, and wrinkles had set in around her eyes and mouth. Worst of all, though, was the hard look in her eyes; it made me wonder if she was going to just turn the pair into stone or something just with that glare.

"Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle! So nice to see you! We were just talking about how happy we are to have such an intellect as yourself visit us!" Flim grinned widely. "Let us formally welcome you to Hippocratic Research, where we conduct science effectively!"

"Efficiently!" piped up Flam.

"And ethically," they finished in unison. Twilight's lips didn't budge in the slightest. You could almost see the nervous sweat popping out of their foreheads. Flam's telekinesis pushed a button on his terminal, and music began to play.

"If either of you starts to sing, I'm sending you to Pinkie Pie," she said without missing a beat, and the two bucks froze. Twilight's horn glowed as she pressed the same button and silenced the music. A pair of glasses and a clipboard appeared, the former settling on her muzzle as she examined the latter. "I've sent six letters, four polite inquiries, and five formal requests, and now I am here in person to get my questions answered: what is Flux, and how is it made?"

The two bucks went from looking nervous to looking sick. Flim tapped his hooves together. "Well, you see. First we take a very precise assortment of gems and liquefy them in our proprietary super Flux recombobulator matrix, which--"

"Does nothing," Twilight interrupted. "I've examined all the formal documents you've submitted on Flux over the last decade. Every single one. And I've concluded that I've never seen a larger collection of gibberish in my life."

"Oh…you couldn't have really read…" Flam began, and then he met Twilight's flat gaze. His mustache drooped so much that I thought it would simply drop off. "Every…single…one?"

"Yes. Every one. I've gone over all your submissions and patents and formulas trying to duplicate your process for producing Flux. I've studied your product in minute detail and come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter how many gems you liquefy or rainbows you mix together; there is no way that you can produce a substance like Flux from those raw materials." The clipboard disappeared as she looked at the twin brothers over the top of her glasses. "So I am here, gentlecolts, in person, to find out exactly what Flux is and how you make it."

The pair gave her a sickly smile. "Ah, if we may ask…by any chance, have you spoken with the director about this?" Flim asked weakly.

"I don't need to involve Horse, thank you very much. I am quite capable of handling this on my own." The two shared a look.

"No no. Not him? I mean the *other* director?" Flam winced as her gaze sharpened. A golden flash came from beneath the door to the hall.

"Goldenblood is no longer director of anything! And any day now, I expect him to be thrown into a dungeon, exiled, or thrown into a dungeon wherever he's exiled!" she shouted as her mane bristled.

"Oh, I doubt I'll get off so lightly," rasped a familiar bastard. It was slightly mollifying to see that Goldenblood looked every bit as battered and exhausted as Twilight. His golden mane was disheveled, and his suit looked as though it'd been slept in. "My apologies for being late."

"You," Twilight said with more outright loathing than I'd ever heard before. "You're not late. You don't need to be here at all!" she snapped. "You can take your sneaky bag of tricks and go, Goldenblood."

He stared into her hard gaze, and then his lip curled slowly. "Luna didn't tell you, did she?" The question seemed to shock and unsettle her. He looked at her with an odd amused expression that made me want to kick the scarred unicorn stallion, then chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Let me guess, she said that she had no idea how Hippocratic Research produced Flux, but that she would have Horse forward the information to you?" Anger knit the mare's brows as she glared back at him.

"He did, and it was all garbage. The same garbage that I've gotten from you for over a year!" she said as she pointed her hoof at him. "You were supposed to give me everything about Chimera,

Goldenblood. Everything means everything!" She swung the hoof dramatically. "Your obstruction is why you were removed!"

His smile didn't change. It was the most poisonous smile I'd ever seen. "And yet, even with me gone, you're still having problems with making alicorns." The look was like a poisoned dagger in her chest.

"I've examined every aspect of the project as it pertains to transformations and fusions. Even improved on some aspects. We don't need the megaspell for the transformation, just for the creation of the metamorphic potion. But I've broken down every ingredient of the potion, adjusted and examined and readjusted my findings, and tracked down every one of its constituent elements. All but one. 'Metamagical Flux', which is identical to 'Biomagical Flux' and 'Transmogrifical Flux'. You just put on different colored labels," she said with a glare at the twins.

"Ah…it was a marketing decision, I think…" Flim muttered weakly.

"And the more I've worked with this stuff, the more I've come to realize how dangerous it is. Do you have any idea what happens to ponies exposed to it? The mutations? Do you know what it did to Sunny Days? I had to waste time and resources devising a spell just to try and negate its effects. And it's used everywhere, Goldenblood! Manufacturing. Energy production. Medicine. Food." She paused and fixed the twins with her glare. "Sparkle-Cola." The pair looked as if they wanted the floor to swallow them up, but then her glare returned to Goldenblood. "I've been using it myself for all these years and only now realized that I don't have a clue what it is or how it works. But that ends today." She stomped her hoof. "If all of you don't tell me exactly what the big secret is, then my next stop is a meeting with Luna and Pinkie Pie. We'll find out whatever it is you're hiding here."

Goldenblood looked at her, then said quietly, "Twilight, go back to Canterlot. You're making great progress on your stealth suit. Focus on that. Relax and forget all about Hippocratic Research and Flux. You don't want to know, and you don't want to force this."

"How…how can you know that?" She gaped at him. "You're not the director any more, Goldenblood! You have no authority in Equestria anymore." But he didn't move. He didn't even blink. If anything, his eyes were pitying rather than hard. And slowly, she took a step back. "No. I have to know. The I.M.P. project has to

work. It simply has to. There's nothing else that will end this war! I'll get all my friends, and we'll put this place under a microscope if we have to. I'll get Princess Luna to…"

"Give it up, Twilight," Goldenblood said softly. It may have been just me, but for a moment it sounded as if he were pleading with her. "You've done great and incredible things, Twilight." It might have been a kind statement, but it seemed to strike her like a blow.

"Great and incredible?" She suddenly laughed, her mane frizzing even more. "I've done nothing…nothing…for five years now. Nothing since Big Macintosh died! My friends have accomplished more to help protect Equestria than I have. It's my responsibility to come up with magic that will save Equestria! That's what I promised Luna when I established the Ministry of Arcane Science. But even after everything she's done for me, I'm no closer to giving Luna what she needs to end this war. Don't you understand? I'm a failure." I knew that look on her face; she might not have been on a mattress, but she was fighting hard to stay off it.

Goldenblood gave the brothers a single look that promised them a trip down an elevator shaft. I saw the two unicorns share a glance, one magically sliding the Twilight bobblehead out of sight, and then they started to study the ceiling as if it was the most fascinating thing they'd ever laid eyes on. Only then did Goldenblood look back at the mare fighting so damned hard for everypony else.

He stared at her for another long moment. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I really am." He closed his eyes and seemed to be thinking of something. I'd never seen a buck look more…old. Goldenblood looked tired, not just in body, but in spirit too. "We're all doing what we can to save Equestria, even if some of us have become monsters in the process." Then he looked at the brothers. "Show her."

Twilight lifted her head, staring at him in confusion. The brothers shuffled nervously. "I'm not sure that's…" Flim began, but Goldenblood silenced him with a look. "…that we should delay a second longer! We can use our own private elevator to speed the process along! Yes, the sooner we're done here, the better." The brother tapped the keys of his terminal and opened the elevator door.

"But…why?" Twilight asked in quiet disbelief, looking at him in amazement. "Why are you showing me this now?"

"Because…I owe you," he replied quietly as he walked to the elevator door. "And I'm sorry."

~ ~ ~

I awoke feeling some scrap metal half tangled in my mane and shook my head, tossing it away and receiving a sting of pain as it cut the side of my face. I sighed. Great. More crazy? Dream? Enclave mind control device finally kicking in? Possession? What kind of commentary was it on my life when I couldn't count out any of those?

"You know, all things considered, in light of the last day or two, I think I might have made a mistake in coming back to Hoofington," I said as I dangled in the middle of a pitch black shaft by one of my forelegs. It'd gotten caught in a tangle of cable as I plummeted past. The elevator car had gotten jammed above me and was letting out groans every time I wiggled around too much. I had no idea how far I'd fallen, or how far there was left to fall, or what exactly awaited me at the bottom. I thought for a moment that I'd heard P-21 and Rampage yelling my name, but now everything was silent.

…Of course, I could have answered at least *one* of those questions by timing how long it took that scrap to fall. If I'd been paying attention. … It had actually hit bottom, right? Oh, idea! I sniffed and snorted and coughed and hacked and finally worked up a nice wad of phlegm, then turned my head and spat, letting it fall. My ears strained, and I heard a very distant 'plat' far below. The elevator let out a protesting noise as I twisted, trying to see anything in the blackness that the dim red light from my eyes was, if anything, just highlighting. Pen-thin beams made lousy flashlights.

Then the cable suddenly slipped along my leg. I waved my other limbs wildly in the dark, looking for something to hold on to, and then, just as the leg came free, extended my fingers, seizing the cable and holding it fast with both forelegs. There was a tense moment as I hung there, looking up at the place where my brain saw the faintest suggestion of a dark red leg, but the metallic digits held. "Okay, Rover, wherever you are…you're right. Thumbs are better." I swung my hindlegs until one hooked the cable to better support my weight. Then the elevator gave another groan and jerk. "Now, how to use freaky thumb powers to get out of here?"

From somewhere below came a number of mechanical bangs. "Okay…thumb powers expended…maybe…" I couldn't do more than turn a page with my horn. I tried to remember the magic primer as I swung there under the groaning elevator. Magic is internal, not a bunch of magical words, chants, and incantations. And all unicorn horns glowed when we did magic; I just needed mine to glow more! I closed my eyes and imagined a little star shedding light like a candle. That's what I needed…light…lighty light light…the electric crackle grew in my horn as it tingled. I opened an eye.

Nothing. I clenched my eyes shut and twisted my face into ridiculous expressions. Still nothing. Finally…it might not have been the most 'magical' of methods, but I just made like I had the worst case of constipation ever, grit my teeth, and pushed!

Then there was a pop and a discharge like when I fired a magic bullet, followed by a zap and an immense sense of relief. I stared at the tiny mote of light hanging in front of me. "I did it…" I murmured weakly in shock as I stared at it. Then it sank in. "I did it!" I cheered in glee, whooping. Suddenly the elevator car lurched as it dropped a foot, making me gulp…but then I looked at my little spell…my compact spell…and grinned and silently cheered.

The feeling of euphoria quickly faded as I looked around and saw nothing but four walls and the elevator's two guide rails. I gingerly stretched one of my forehooves towards the nearest rail but was still short. I closed my eyes and forced a grin, shaking my head. I didn't like it…not one bit. But it wasn't as if I had any better ideas. I swung my hind end one way, then the other. Back and forth. The elevator car overhead began to squeal in time with my swings. Just stay up there a little bit longer…

I let out a cry as I let go of the cable and smacked into the rail, all four limbs hugging it tight. Okay! This was progress. Now all I had to do was slide down the rail to a door. Easy as pie…. See? I was already sliding. Sliding really fast! What exactly was the speed difference between sliding down a rail and falling down alongside one? My enameled limbs were squealing, and my chest was getting pretty damn toasty rubbing against the metal. Wait! Was this thing oiled or something?! "Ooooo…. Shit!" I yelled as I fell away from the rail.

I fell to my death for a few seconds before I slammed my back against a curved metal surface that gave beneath me, slowing my

fall with a growing hum. “Whoa there, little lady!” a robotic male drawled. I slid along the metal, my hooves banging and scratching the hovering orb before I dropped... and fell into a tangle of robotic limbs. The three cameras that apparently served as its eyes turned to focus on me. “Always told ‘em this elevator was unsafe fer pony travel, but does anypony listen to old Hank? Nooo.”

“Please don’t explode! Please don’t explode!” I really *really* hoped that the joke had finally run its course as I clung to the levitating robot.

“I ain’t gonna explode. Ol’ Hank’s the finest Handy you ever seen! Oooof…you sure are a healthy girl, aintcha?” the robot crackled as we dropped down the shaft. “Need to maximize my levitation repulsor drive!”

“I…um…have more metal in me than most mares.” No shooting the lifesaving robot over a weight joke, Blackjack. I looked around the elevator shaft.

“Is that so? Sheee-oot, and here Ol’ Hank was convinced my sensor talismans were fritzed fer good! Looked at you and couldn’t tell if you were a mechanical or biological. Good thing I kept my access probe to myself. Wouldn’t want to get fresh.”

We finally reached the bottom of the shaft; two tunnels led off in different directions. I slipped out of Hank's limbs and onto the concrete floor, very, very glad to be back on something solid again. “I don’t suppose that you know where I can find Sanguine, do you?” The spidery robot floated there a moment, and I added, “Er, I think his name is Trueblood?”

“The doc? Oh, he’s probably somewhere in the facility over yonder. Been making a mess o’ things. I keep on putting out repair citations and notifications and the like, but nopony’s gotten back to poor Ol’ Hank since we got the call fer the big sleep.”

“Big sleep?” I frowned.

“Oh, it was a long time back. Big order went out to power down and wait fer further commands. So most of us done went quiet like the rest o’ the city. ‘Course, Maintenance Quad B was left out. The four of us tried to keep everythin’ neat and tidy, but after a while things break down and wear out. Ol’ Hank’s all that’s left to keep things workin’.” He sighed. “Seemed like a damned shame. We had so much work we need to do. Floors to polish. Hinges to oil. And I haven’t gotten round to fixing Ms. Moonstar’s desk drawer. Hope she’s not too cross.”

I frowned; I'd never thought of the bombs falling from a machine's point of view. I tried to imagine having a life and then suddenly being told to go to sleep, then waking up to find that everything that was important to me was gone. Did Ol' Hank realize that Moonstar had probably been dead for two centuries? That the world beyond this facility was smashed and broken? Could it imagine that?

"What did you mean when you said that Trueblood's breaking things?" I asked.

"Well, he ain't much of an engineer," Ol' Hank muttered. "He's trying to wake the machines down below up. Snooty things, never really talked to us much. All kinds of medical stuff that make a powerful mess when they leak. Dunno why he bothers, but lately it seems everypony's yelling all at once fer us to wake up again."

"Yelling at you?"

"Started a few weeks back. General alarm went out to the Hoofington region: zebra megaspell attack. Woke up some emergency systems, and those woke up some communication systems and those woke up some command systems and now none of them have a clue what we're supposed to do. But there's some folk like the doc who keep saying we're suppose to do what he says, and at the same time we're suppose to do what the Core Command says and at the same time we're getting Core commands to not do what Core Command says! It's enough to make a poor ol' maintenance bot like me pop his processor gems!" He gave a huff. "If you don't mind my saying so, you biologicals sure do like to cross your wires."

I thought about that with a frown. "So you're telling me that somepony out there is giving you commands to wake up and do things, but somepony else is telling you not to do them?"

"Mmhmm! Between when the alert went out and now, there've been four hundred and two million, seven hundred and ninety thousand, one hundred and twelve commands issued and four hundred and two million, seven hundred and ninety thousand, and sixty seven countermands issued. Makes it a mite tricky fer a bot to get his job done." Wait, I might not have Glory's head for numbers, but even I knew that those didn't add up!

"Why fewer countermands?" I asked.

"Well I don't rightly know. I just clean things up," Ol' Hank replied in faint exasperation. "'Course, even Ol' Hank got the order to apply

my rotary saw to the doctor's head. Don't rightly know why. But then that got countermanded a millisecond later and I just went back to cleaning. But personally, I reckon whoever's making the commands is a mite faster or cleverer than whoever is canceling 'em." And whoever was making the commands was trying to kill Sanguine. Suddenly, all his talk of running out of time was starting to make more sense. Eventually, one of those commands would get through.

But... it still didn't make sense, really. Why didn't he just go? Lots of ponies had trouble leaving Hoofington, but it was hard for me to imagine a pony like him not being able to set up shop somewhere else. He'd been trying to get Chimera for Red Eye, and he'd given me the evil villain 'experiment on the Wasteland' speech. Either would have been good enough motivation, but something didn't quite fit. When he'd heard that I'd died he'd carved a trail of butchery to flush me out because something in the Core was woken up and after him. Why not simply leave? A ghoul of Sanguine's capacity had options. Something had kept him here. Chimera? Was that something so important to him that he would risk his life, risk everything for it? I just didn't see it. He'd lived well enough without Chimera for two centuries.

There was something else. "Can you tell me what Sangui-- I mean, the doc needs with Chimera?"

"No idea. Not sure what yer referring to. 'Fraid Doc doesn't have much respect for the maintenance staff. Guess he doesn't put much stock in clean floors," Ol' Hank muttered.

I nodded, then tried to think of who might want to countermand orders to kill Sanguine. Who would know about Chimera and want to keep him alive? A chill ran through me. "Ol' Hank. Does the name Goldenblood mean anything to you?" The robot just stared at me for the longest time, and I frowned. "Hank?"

The robot's buzz saw whirred as it seized me by my throat with a pincer and plunged the rotating blade straight at my face! I brought up my forelegs and the saw teeth sputtered and sparked off the enamel. This thing had me outnumbered on fighting limbs and was way too close for me to bring my battle saddle guns to bear. Its cutting torch flared to life as a metallic scream sounded from its speakers.

I had only one thing going for me: traction. I blocked the saw and torch as best I could and powered forward with my hind legs. The

robot's levitation talisman didn't slow it at all as I powered it into the far wall, pulled back, and slammed it again and again. Finally, something inside the robot popped and crackled, and the levitation talisman went dark. The robot fell to the ground, the shriek dwindling to a soft crackle and then falling silent.

I pulled my throat out of its pincer grip and sighed. "Guess so," I murmured, looking up the shaft. There was no sign of my friends; I supposed they were going to find another way down to me. I sighed, looking at my hooves and weapons. I really missed my telekinesis; as solid a rig as the battle saddle was, I simply wasn't as good with it as Glory. I kept getting in fights where I just couldn't shift my body as I needed to. I carefully removed it, sticking it in my bags, and bundled up Taurus's rifle and the shotgun. Scotch still had Vigilance. The sword would probably be too long and ungainly if wielded in my mouth. How the heck did ponies without magic fight with those things? "Well…I guess it's just me and my own four hooves for now."

As silently as I could, I picked a tunnel at random and made my way down it. I tried not to think of Glory and Scotch. I tried not to imagine…I stopped and thumped my head hard on the concrete wall. "No. No. No. No. You are not doing this now. Priest was bad enough," I muttered, then winced and rubbed my head. "And now I'm talking to myself! Ugggh!"

Okay. So I wasn't at my finest right then.

The tunnels were all Hoofington standar-- wait. Strike that. The blue line subway tunnels had at least showed signs of damage, rust, and overall decay. These walls were crack-free. A product of Ol' Hank's work, or was it because they were even more overengineered than the rest of the underground? I supposed it really didn't matter. I travelled further along and reached some sort of security station in front of a heavy door; there were bones behind the bulletproof glass…and a sidearm. An IF-38 Cornhusker revolver. Not the most powerful gun, but it had a mouthgrip I could use comfortably without the battle saddle.

In the break room behind the station were a fold-out cot and some lockers that I cleared out…and a terminal. I chewed on my lip; this really was more P-21's thing. Still, I knew the basics…go to the login prompt, hold down those two keys there to get the debug and look for words that might be the password. Fail too often and it'd lock up permanently.

Ten minutes later, I felt a surge of glee as I picked out the password from the junk: 'Cider'. There wasn't much in the terminal. Duty roster and a complaint filed against one security buck for being scared of the lower levels. Then there was an option to open the door. I bit my lip and toggled it.

The door lifted up, revealing a little shack practically invisible behind a concrete slip nestled right up against a cliff face. I heard the river flowing by and carefully poked my head out. There was the Zenith Bridge off to my left. I barely suppressed a scream of frustration; this whole time, there was a back door to this place?! Ugh…without a way to tell Lacunae, there wasn't a reason to leave it open and invite trouble inside.

I closed it up and retraced my steps, picking my way along the other tunnel. Conduits and pipes ran along the walls and ceiling; I suspected that this was a maintenance access of some sort. I ran across a little alcove with a workbench and shelves of engineering supplies, as well as some ammo containers. I chowed down on some nice juicy steel nuts and bolts as I practiced my telekinesis on a bobby pin in the lock of one of the ammo boxes, the most I could manage at the moment. The first one snapped after a few fumbles, but I felt an odd little surge of pride as the second popped the lock.

Bleugh, all magic gem cartridges and spark drums. Then I pursed my lips and placed one of the cartridges in the workbench vise. After a bit of determined twisting, the plastic lid popped off the cartridge's base. I carefully shook some of the rainbow dust within onto my tongue, and the crystalline specks popped and crackled delightfully. Not exactly the same as a whole gemstone, but sti--

A low snuffling and rumble filled the air, making my eyes widen. Something was walking nearby, with slow, dragging, *heavy* steps. I slowly poked my head back into the tunnel in time to spot the dark hindquarters of…something…moving out of sight. Very carefully, I moved down after it as the scrap metal and gem dust restored my damaged limbs. The passageway I was in was opening up into some kind of storeroom; clearly, Ol' Hank's cleaning routine ended here. The floor was strewn with crushed and scattered drums. Rainbow goop was spattered all over the place.

And the…thing…was moving somewhere inside. I slipped slowly out into the room and worked my way around, keeping opposite the thing and moving as quietly as possible. My rear hoof stepped in some of the goop, and I felt a momentary spike of concern as I

looked back... but other than feeling like I'd just stepped in something foul, nothing was happening. Okay, another point for cyberlimbs. I just had to keep it off my hide. Maybe it was time to bust out the...

Wasn't there a thing in here that I was supposed to be keeping an eye on?

The bellow nearly shook me off my hooves as I turned and looked down between the battered, tottery shelving at what I assumed was once a pony. Four hooves, head, and tail; that was a pony, right? It was as if somepony had started there and then suffered some sort of psychotic vision of massive twisted knots of flesh and barely restrained bulk. The pale form's bloodshot eyes glared around wet leather straps that seemed to be holding most of its body together. However, all that was secondary to the size of its mouth, which was filled with broken stone-like teeth.

With shocking speed, the ungainly thing spun and kicked an intact drum down the aisle at me, and I barely ducked as it struck the rack behind me and burst. Quick as I could, I was running from the rain of droplets. Really. Hazardous material suit! Sounded great. Especially having doffed the battle saddle! Really, I could have done with having something a little higher caliber at my disposal, too! When this was over, I was going to take a few days to try and get my horn back in order.

The pony behemoth, which I suspected was one of Precious's 'fatties', came charging around the end of the next row. Its broad hooves smashed and scattered the barrels that had fallen. Big I could handle, but big and fast... I slipped into S.A.T.S. to--

No, I didn't! Instead, I realized that S.A.T.S. was gone just in time to dive to the side as the colossal hooves plunged towards me. Don't roll. Don't slide on your belly. Put some damn distance between you and it. An instinctive part of me wanted to flee back down the tunnel, but, big as this thing was, I knew it would fit. I had to do something else…

I had to go up.

I leapt up to the second tier of shelving and extended my freaky fingers to grab the edge of the third. I clambered up, then on to the fourth. Beneath me, the behemoth howled and smashed the base of the shelves again and again; I was nearly knocked free as the whole structure swayed. I reached the very top, though, and looked down at the glaring beast beneath me. Okay, Rover was *really* right.

Thumbs were saving my life more than guns.

The thing howled and kicked the shelves again, bending steel with each powerful blow, and the shelves gave another ominous sway. "Hey! Knock it off!" I shouted, looking at the heavy barrels stacked around me and then at the floor way, way below me. A little light lit in my brain as I grinned down. "Hey! Don't knock it off!" A little blue pony in my head had come up with an idea, and it was gonna be awesome! I shoved a barrel over the edge, barely missing the pony creature. It bellowed in rage and slammed the shelves again. Then the metal groaned, and there was a loud ping as something gave, and then more pings, and at once the shelves stopped swaying and began a steady movement that was building momentum.

The pony creature realized its peril, trying to move its bulk as the shelves tumbled over and dumped thousands of pounds of drums in a cascade of steel and chemicals that pounded down on top of it. The shelves were coming apart, dumping steel beams and shelving atop it as I felt the sideways motion start to become a downward motion. I leapt for the next set of shelves as the collapsing set smashed into it, scrambling to keep the leaking rainbow goo off my hide. I looked down at the pile. If it wasn't dead, then I'd give up.

Carefully, I scrambled my way down and trotted back to the workroom. I busted out the hazardous materials suit... but having discovered the joy of thumbs, I hesitated, then broke out the sword. Somewhere, I was sure, a hazardous materials specialist was weeping as I cut off the ends of the suit's forelegs and stuck my limbs through. Then I wiggled the rest of the way into the yellow suit, leaving my barding on under it, used a whole roll of duct tape to seal the gaps around my legs, and tugged the saddlebags around my waist. I balked at the helmet. Without my EFS, I'd need to rely on my eyes and ears more, and my mouth was the only way I was going to be able to use the revolver at all.

I returned to the storeroom and stalked past the oozing rainbow heap. I paused for the longest time, my ears straining for any sign that that thing was going to get back up and come after me. Small favors; it was so much goo beneath the steel. Now, as long as I didn't meet a similar fate, I was happy.

Trotting past it, I moved into a hall…and looked at the translucent starburst flanks of Twilight Sparkle and the scarred hide of Goldenblood. The hallway was a mess of rainbow gunk and ooze. Ponies in lab coats and hazardous material suits trotted past,

appearing and disappearing as they moved. I sat down hard, immobilized by the sight. “It really is an impressive facility, but I can’t help but notice some similarities in the layout,” she said as she looked dryly at the exhausted buck. “What, did you simply steal Maripony’s design and bury it underground?”

“Steal? Of course not,” he said in a faintly hurt tone. “Stealing implies removal. We steal from Stable-Tec. We *copy* from the M.A.S.--” He took a misstep and fell to his knees with a groan.

“Goldenblood? Are you alright?” She knelt beside him and helped nudge him to his feet. “You look…well…worse than usual.”

“No, I’m not alright. But you needn’t concern yourself with me. I’ve learned some…unpleasant things myself lately,” he rasped as he stood with a groan.

“I’m sorry I pressed Luna to remove you. I wanted to work with you, Goldenblood. I thought that was the whole point of your office,” she said as she looked at him sternly. He blinked at her, as if not even comprehending what she’d said, before he smiled tiredly.

“Oh. That. No, that’s hardly a bother at this point. My removal was inevitable, though I hadn’t realized how much more of a trial protecting others from my mistakes would be,” he said with a sigh. “Regardless, if everything turns out as it should, it won’t matter much.”

“What are you talking about?” Twilight asked in worry.

“Don’t worry, Twilight,” he said quietly as he lifted himself to his hooves. “We’ve taken care of everything. And even if it doesn’t work out…everything comes out clean one way…or the other.” They faded from sight, as did the rest of the ponies I’d seen.

No. Not all of them. I gaped as two ghostly ponies trotted by and then faded into nothing.

I blinked, shook my head, and looked down the trashed hallway, now empty and strewn with garbage and detritus. I stared at it in confusion. “What the hell…” I muttered with a groan, rubbing my temples as I felt a doozy of a headache start. Was this some weird Hoofington Enervation thing? Was I going crazy…er? “Do not tell me I have to choose between crazy and ghosts.”

I just wanted to find Sanguine and kill him. Why did that have to be so hard?

Moving along, I encountered something nice and familiar: automated turrets blasting at me from the ceiling. I took cover

behind two barrels, almost relieved at something as reassuring as a machine firing low caliber ammunition at me. Twelve rounds later, the turrets mounted in the ceiling blew apart. That left me to see the other fun little addition to the latest house of horrors: bloody bones and viscera were heaped among piles of pale white hide. The stench made me gag as I stepped past.

I was liking this less and less with every minute. I was finding quarters now, bunks for the staff that had worked here. I really couldn't see ponies commuting to and from this place. The bunks were just as trashed as the rest, most of the metal smashed to scrap; I munched on a few pieces and shoved some more into my bag for the next time I felt snacky. I searched everything, though, and found some more ammo, some bobby pins, and some 'Sugar Tails' porn magazines stuffed in a fire hose box. More bloody pony parts. I made my way to the cafeteria and found a cupboard with some Fancy Buck Cakes and cans of Cram. Really, what pony ate that stuff before the bombs?

Well, I was in a house of horrors, but the reek of decay didn't put me off my appetite. I munched down on a can of meaty stuff, and then ate the can. As I chewed, I leaned against the counter. No explosions. No screaming. Had P-21 and Rampage made it down here? Were they okay? I did my best not to worry. P-21 was sneaky enough to avoid detection, and Rampage hadn't met anything that could kill her yet. I popped the pullring into my mouth and chewed…

Then I jumped completely out of my hooves at the sight of the mare standing right beside me. I probably would have shot her if it wasn't clear that she wasn't a threat to me. Unarmed and unarmored, the white earth pony with the white mane had eyes so pale that it was hard to tell where the irises ended and the sclera began. The only reason I didn't think she might be some kind of ghost was that I couldn't see through her. All ghosts were transparent…right?

"Hi," I said as she stared at me. "Hello?" More staring. "Are you okay?" More stares. I moved, and she moved. I waved my hoof in front of her eyes and she shrank back. Her ribs showed through her hide. "Hungry?" Nothing. Even more disturbing was the lack of a cutie mark on her flank. I nudged one of the Fancy Buck Cakes at her, and she pressed her nose to it, sniffing, and then started to chew on the wrapper. "Um…need some help?" I took the cake from

her, unwrapped it, and then handed it to her. She munched it down, orange carrot filling smearing her lips. Then she took another and started to chew on that wrapper.

Okay…ghosts, body parts, monsterponies, and now a brain-damaged mare. "Can you tell me about Sanguine? Where is he? What's going on? Hello?" But all she did was try her best to chew through the wrapper. "Great," I muttered sullenly. Then I turned to leave the barracks and heard hoofsteps approaching.

"One of the tubbies knocks over a whole shelf of cans, and I'm the one who has to trot up here and check it out?" a mare muttered as she trotted by the doorway. I saw a flash of yellow and orange; Fury, or whatever it was she called herself. I was just about to sneak out and head the way she'd come when there was a clatter. I looked back at the white mare, who'd knocked over a stack of plates trying to reach one of the snack cakes. And then I looked back to find myself face to face with Fury. Her orange eyes widened in shock, "You? Fuck! You can't be here! How the fuck are you here?"

By the first 'here' I had the revolver out. By the second, I'd put a bullet between her eyes. She began to glow even before her body hit the ground, and I scrambled back as quickly as possible. The explosion launched a wave of stinging debris at me, and as I staggered back I saw her settle into a heap of ash and then glow once more and reform into a mare. "Fuck. Jerky Boy was sure we'd have a day or two to get back and get out of here before you fuckers caught up," she said as she trotted forward. The barracks were a dead end, and that end was trotting forward in a leisurely stroll.

I couldn't waste time with bantering. I put two more rounds in her head even as she heaved a scrap of bunk onto her back. I hit the deck as she exploded once again, settling into glowing ash even as I barely avoided the flying scrap metal. The heap of dust started to glow and then reformed. She glared at me in irritation. "Fuck! Still don't get it, do you?"

I spat the gun between my hooves, shook out the shells, tossed a hoofful of bullets into the air, caught them in my mouth, and shoved them into the empty cylinder with my lips and tongue. How the hell did earth ponies use guns at all? "Trying for Deus's spot in the foul mouth brigade?" I asked as I snapped the gun shut and looked around; it was like fighting Rampage. I'd run out of bullets, or she'd get close enough that one of her blasts would take me out.

The pale mare let out a bawling cry that drew the orange mare's glare. "Stay away from her!" I shouted; I bit the gun and put another bullet in her head. This time, I got lucky; the scrap metal deflected off my lifted forelegs rather than biting into my throat.

"Stay away from her? She's a fucking blank," she said, snorting in contempt. I pointed the gun at her. "Yeah. Keep trying that. Fucking idiot." I fired again, and the concussion wave smacked me into the fire hose box. I looked at the heap of ashes as she reformed and glared at me. "Fuck! Still not dead yet?" I shot her again, more junk peppering me as she blew once more. And just like before, the heap of ashes reformed. How the fuck could I beat her? It was worse than Rampage; it was like fighting Gemini again.

Wait…would that work?

She reformed, glaring at me in clear annoyance. "Give it up! You can't beat me."

"Sorry about this," I said as I put the bullet into her head yet again. But as she glowed, I turned my back to her and threw open the fire box. The explosion slammed me into the coiled hose even as I gripped the valve handle and pulled, praying to Luna and Celestia that the water was still on. The hose hissed and immediately swelled. I turned back around, holding the fire hose, and pointed the nozzle at the glowing ashes.

As they began to rise, I blasted them into the heap of twisted bunks with a jet of water. The yellow mare took shape again, then gasped and stared at me in confusion a moment. Then she looked down at the half a bunk lodged in her torso. Slowly, she reached down and tapped it with a hoof. "F…fuck…" she gasped, and then glowed bright yellow. The explosion threw more debris at me, but I didn't flinch away. As soon as she disintegrated, I focused the stream of water on the ashes. She reformed again, and this time there were pieces of her that seemed to be missing. Pieces of mane, an ear, patches of hide... Again, she blew, and again…and again...

Finally, she reformed and I turned off the hose. There was no way she was going to move at me again…not with her lower body stuck in the drain in the middle of the barracks floor. She looked at me in a daze. "Fuck…fucking…poetic…" she said as she looked at herself, half trapped like Dusty Trails had been, her hide pale and her voice weak. The water sloshed and pooled around her.

"Like I said…sorry," I muttered as I backed away towards the terrified white mare.

"Didn't think it could happen…fuck…" And then she stiffened before slumping over. She glowed one final time, exploding in a spray of dirty water, and when I next looked back there was nothing but the gurgle of ashy liquid flowing down into the shattered drain.

I slumped down, staring at the hole and then at the spooked mare. I really would have liked my heart pounding right about now. Some gasping for air, some relief. Slowly, the white pony stepped closer, then nuzzled one of the Fancy Buck Cakes lying in a pool of the nasty water. I tugged the wax paper wrapper away and held it out to her. She hesitated, caught it in her mouth, and trotted away to munch it down. I tapped the back of my head against the counter, watching her eat. "My life just keeps getting weirder and weirder."

* * *

An hour later, Boo and I were getting closer to where the activity was going on. I'd named her Boo because at the slightest noise she would go scampering away for a hiding place. This proved quite a useful warning system, as her hearing seemed much better than my own. I wondered if the professor had done something with my ears, too; she hadn't said anything, and I didn't think my ears were worse, but whenever Boo's eyes went round and she backed away, I'd find some little niche to hide in with her. There was more than just the big and ugly pony things down here. There were manticores and nightstalkers creeping about, too. I'd nearly walked into a knot of the shimmery snakedog things, but then I'd seen her backing up; fortunately, the beasts either hadn't noticed us or weren't interested. A scratch between the ears and an occasional snack cake kept her going. She didn't speak and didn't seem to understand when I spoke to her. She simply reacted to things, her eyes wide and empty. Even the name I'd given her was more for my comfort than anything the mare seemed to recognize as a name.

And she wasn't alone. While the big pony things were the most common, there were also plenty more like her. Pale stallions and mares that stood in corners or were torn to pieces by the facility's hungry occupants. They weren't nearly as gaunt as Boo was, but they also didn't seem to have her sense of survival. I watched in shock as one stallion simply trotted forward and was torn to pieces by a trio of satisfied nightstalkers. Boo's mane was longer, her body

thinner. I suspected that might mean she'd been around this place longer.

We'd come to a room that looked like some kind of zoo or something. Dozens of cages were stacked three high, and the open cages had been transformed into dens for the manticores. Right beside it was another room with large metal tables, hoists, and chains. Smashed equipment and droppings littered the floor, and Boo balked. I saw two manticores lounging within.

"Who's a good kitty for Mommy? Who is?" crooned a voice near the cages. I peeked forward and spotted Brass ruffling a third manticore's mane. This one looked particularly large and nasty. "Did baby like his din-din? Huh? Did baby like his meaty weetie nubkins?" the mare asked before picking up a pale haunch and tearing off a hunk of meat. "About damn time that ass got the machines to crank out more than just one at a time. I swear, this whole damn place is falling apart."

Since Fury had gone boom, I needed some answers, but I didn't want to fight Brass and three manticores at the same time. There was the problem of getting Boo to follow, though. She lay there, trembling behind me, and wouldn't follow me away. A nasty little part of me coldly thought of leaving her; I needed to win. I couldn't stay here till we were discovered. I couldn't drag her kicking after me. But as I looked back at her, I took that thought and smashed it with a mental hammer till it retreated.

Softest heart in the Wasteland? Maybe, but I couldn't do better by leaving her behind.

I shrugged off my saddlebags and emptied one out. I wondered how they managed to hold so dang much, but hardly had time to waste on that. I took a snack cake and broke it in two, placing it in the bottom of the empty bag. Then I gently slipped it over her face. Boo jerked back several times, but I hushed her and petted her mane. It felt strange treating a pony like an animal, but that was what I had to do to get her past this obstacle. Finally, I got the bag over her head, and she went still. She trembled, but didn't struggle as I put her on my back and crept through the room.

I froze as one of the beasts looked up at me. Then it closed its yellow eyes and gave a belch. I supposed that there was a downside to being well fed. I got clear of the room, moving down a much larger hall. I'd kill for a map! 'You are here. Project Chimera here! Evil ghoul son of a mule here!' How nice that would be!

Boo started to wiggle, so I set her down and took the bag off her head. She blinked, sniffed, and rubbed some smeared cherry filling off her face with her hoof before snorting and looking around fearfully. She was almost like my second shadow. Up ahead came numerous screams and bellows, as well as the rattle of automatic weapons and the snap of a whip. “Get that batch into the tunnel! Move it! We need to get them cleared out or we’re not going anywhere!”

I peeked into another large room split by two rail lines. One line was occupied by three more tanker cars like the ones I’d seen before, and the concrete docks were occupied by a dozen ponies wearing red barding and four griffins in power armor. They were herding four of the big fatties into the rail tunnel with whips and sparking metal poles, driving them towards the sounds of battle; there were a whole lot of smashed sentry robots in sight. I wondered why the ponies and griffins didn’t simply close the massive metal doors to the room. The place looked like it was under siege!

On the far rail dock, a pipe on an arm extended over the rails. Bright rainbow sludge poured from the tube into the openings on top of the cars with diarrhea-like noises. Lovely. Other ponies, not white ‘blanks’ but ragged wastelanders wrapped in dirty clothes, handled the filling process. From their mottled hides and the knotty tumors popping from their bodies, I suspected that they’d been exposed to too much Flux as well. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see any way to get past them.

Hello? I spotted a flickering, ghostly Twilight and Goldenblood trotting towards a side door. Then a ghost door opened and... arrrggh! I was not smart enough to deal with this! Still, it was a better possibility than trying to storm across the rails and fight my way through a dozen guards and four power-armored griffins. I moved to the side with Boo at my heels and carefully tried the door. Locked. I fished out a bobby pin and carefully began to work the lock. P-21 could have done it without a second thought, but I was scraping and tapping and any second we’d be spotted.

Then a bullet smacked through the hazmat suit and into the barding over my flank, making me jump and grimace in pain. I spotted a griffin coming to do something presumably messy and quite probably deadly to me; the others were pointing and shouting over the noise the robot battle was making, and very soon they’d all

be shooting as well. I pulled the pin out and twisted the lock with all the meager strength my horn allowed. The drum popped free and rotated, clicking open. Guess I still had a little luck left in me. I threw it wide and stepped into a stairwell going up... a stairwell dripping with Flux.

There was no way I was going to leave Boo behind, so before she could balk and run, I scooped her up onto my back and carefully stepped into the slimy substance, closing the door behind me. Boo was no Scotch Tape. I had to focus, be strong, be enduring, and be awesome all at once. If I brushed the Flux-spattered walls; if I slipped and dropped her…I remembered the screaming room all too vividly. “Don’t wiggle…please don’t wiggle,” I groaned as I made my way up the steps. Skinny or not, she was fully grown, and she’d recently eaten a lot of snack cakes!

I made it up the first flight, reaching a barrel smeared in the faintly glowing goop. I felt the hazmat suit covering my belly brush against it as I carefully climbed over. One tear and I’d be back on the road to having screaming guts. I was halfway up the second flight when I froze just in time to avoid having a dollop of goop fall right in my face. I stared at the stringy streamer it left behind. Another drip. Down below me, the door opened. “Here pony pony,” grated a male griffin through a power armor helmet. No time. I waited for the next fat drop and scrambled up to the next landing.

“You’re one crazy meatwagon, coming in here,” he drawled, starting up behind me.

I started up the third flight, weaving my way around barrels that had tumbled down the stairs around me. “I am so going to eat your hindquarters first for making this annoying,” he grumbled. I reached the third landing just as he came around the corner behind me. I took one glance back and then shoved a barrel hard down the stairs at him. The rusty container flung rainbow Flux everywhere and burst like a blister when it struck him, coating his faceplate in goop. He fired wildly, blinded by the sludge as I disappeared around the corner.

“I don’t know how you’re not jelly yet, but I swear I am gonna smear you on a cracker!” he swore, now moving much quicker after me. Okay, that was a new one. His armor had to have some sort of protective covering for his wings; just my luck. Every barrel I could send rolling down to slow him went. Finally, I saw the top of the stairs and, past that, a Flux-free hallway. A half-full pallet of barrels

was stacked there; I set Boo down in a clear area, then turned and shoved the remainder of the pallet down the stairs after him. A half-dozen drums smashed down into him, soaking him in rainbow goop. I needed something substantial, more than my pistol.

Fortunately I had something more substantial.

The griffin pushed the last barrel off his face in time to see me standing there, making like Lancer and pointing Taurus's rifle down at him (well, not quite like Lancer; I was once again proving Rover right about thumbs). If I'd had S.A.T.S., I might have had a chance to kill him outright, but, even with armor piercing .308 rounds, I doubted I could finish him off before he brought his weapons to bear. And he probably knew it too... but I didn't need to kill him.

I just had to make a hole.

I fired as rapidly as possible, the bullets biting deep into his armor as he shoved his way clear of the barrels. I went through the entire magazine before he started shooting at me with a machinegun and I ducked back. "Cunt…whore…meatwagon…" he growled as he crawled up the stairs after me. The hallway behind me was a shooting gallery, a hundred feet at least without any cover at all. I ducked down as he struggled up the stairs, shoving a new magazine in and then making like a zebra again. As he stepped over the lip, I opened fire once more. It still wasn't enough, and I was out of barrels.

"Die!" he gasped; was it just me, or did his armor look…tight? He leveled his machineguns at us.

Well, I might have been out of barrels, but I still had a pallet. I knelt and kicked the heavy wooden platform at him with all my strength. Bullets started to shred it in midair, but it was still solid enough when it crashed into him to send him slipping and sliding down the stairs into the puddle of rainbow goop. Down below, he started to yell and then scream... and then suddenly there was a loud crunching noise and it all went silent. I stared down at armor that bulged at every seal. Red meat now oozed out the holes. I shuddered as I stepped back. Again, I really really hoped he was dead after that…and that he didn't turn into something worse.

I returned to the shaking Boo and, with some effort, magically wiped the sludge off my hooves using the dirty papers that littered the floor. I looked at my hooves critically. I'd hoped that the metal was resistant to the corrosive or magical influence of the Flux, but... was it just me, or did they look a little more blueish? I sighed and

looked at my silent companion; what this place really needed was a balefire bomb or something.

She just stared back at me. And I'd thought P-21 was a lousy conversationalist…

We trotted along the hallway. Windows on one side looked down at the loading docks. There were more robots coming, sentries and something else: smaller, more spidery-looking robots that hopped, skittered, and jumped around the sentries. The power-armored griffins and the fatties they shoved into the line of fire were keeping them at bay for now.

It appeared that all of Sanguine's shit had finally come back to bite him in the ass. Looked like I'd have some competition for taking my own chomp.

"You!" yelled a voice beside me, and I turned to see a ghostly stallion pointing his hoof at me. Then I looked behind me at Goldenblood, the brothers, and Twilight Sparkle. It took me a moment to place the familiar buck: Doctor Trueblood. "You're not supposed to be here anymore! You're not supposed to be anywhere near here!"

I stepped aside as Trueblood stomped towards the four. Goldenblood smiled thinly. "Hello, Trueblood. How's the family?"

Trueblood stormed right up to him, not seeming to notice Twilight standing right behind the brothers. "Princess Luna stripped you of your directorship, Goldenblood! This is a capital offense, you being here!"

"Kids still feeling under the weather, then?" Goldenblood replied smoothly, and the doctor's eyelid twitched in shock. "Well, that's too bad. I know Sunflower will take care of things." The complete lack of acknowledgement made the doctor's eyes pop in rage.

Then Twilight stepped in front of Goldenblood, and the doctor's jaw dropped. "He's here with me. Assisting me with a little fact-finding mission, Trueblood." The doctor sat down hard, his mouth working as he stammered.

"But... But you can't be here! Horse should be here if you're…The director…I mean…you're supposed to be in Tenpony right now! How can you be here?" He gaped at her, and Twilight frowned, her brows knitting together as she trotted towards him.

"I am sick…" she thumped her hoof against his chest firmly, "and tired of being told where I am supposed to be and what I am supposed to do. I am tired of secrets! I am sick and tired of directors

of the O.I.A. telling me what I should do!" She shot an angry look at Goldenblood. "Honestly, what is with your office? Your office is like…like…the office of sneaky shenanigans!"

Goldenblood laughed, and that seemed to spook the twins and Trueblood even more. "It's a very long story. Hopefully, someday you'll hear it." He shook his head with a smile as he looked at Trueblood. "Well, then. Care to accompany us, Trueblood? The Ministry Mare is curious about where Flux comes from. We're showing her."

His mouth moved again. "I…I…I need to contact Horse. Excuse me." He started to turn away.

"No," Twilight said firmly. "I think I'd like you to come along too, Trueblood. It appears that when you brought Project Chimera to my attention, you failed to mention several key aspects of it. I'd like you here to explain anything you might have missed…without a director telling me what I should and shouldn't know." Trueblood just stared at her with a mortified expression. Goldenblood smiled and shook his head. She looked at him sharply. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just nice to see you like this again," he murmured softly as together the five continued flickering down the hall. I couldn't help myself; I trotted along behind them with Boo at my heels. Personally, I was just dying to find out more of Goldenblood's secrets myself.

The group disappeared and reappeared as we walked together. Three more times, Trueblood tried to excuse himself, and every time Twilight refused to let him scurry off. The windows looked down at another large room; this was full of dozens of pods similar to the ones that had held the foals in the Fluttershy clinic. Many of them had clearly been damaged or tampered with, and several held bones inside.

Twilight looked down with obvious disgust. "What are those?"

"Hazardous biological samples," Goldenblood explained. "Combinations where either the host was dangerous or the combination unstable. Some combinations…phoenixes, dragons, manticores…produced a pony hybrid that was too aggressive to field safely."

"We store other unique biological samples as well," Trueblood muttered. "You never know when you might find them useful."

"You'd better not have any samples from me in there!" Twilight said in shock.

“Luna expressly forbade any biological samples from herself, Celestia, the Ministry Mares, or myself,” Goldenblood replied, looking over at Trueblood. “She was rightly concerned that some ponies might try some inappropriate meddling.”

“I don’t like your implication,” Trueblood retorted.

“You weren’t supposed to,” Goldenblood said pointedly.

The next set of windows opened up to a room that resembled an abattoir, and I was so glad that I couldn’t smell the contents. There were four steel tables in a row with four machines hanging overhead that reminded me of Ol’ Hank’s limbs. One wall was covered with steel hatches, like dozens of refrigerators, and there were dirty white containers scattered everywhere.

“This is our organ harvesting operation,” Goldenblood said smoothly. “It’s fairly new, only been in operation a year or so. The system automatically removes any and all viable organs from any subject placed on the table. They’re then loaded into the stasis containers for delivery all across Equestria,” he said as he pointed down at the white boxes with a hoof.

“Organ…what?!” Twilight’s mane frizzed at once. “Does Fluttershy know about this?” she asked as she pointed down at the room.

“In a general sense,” Trueblood muttered. “She understood the crippling need for ponies all across Equestria to have compatible organs. She might be somewhat ignorant as to the specifics. All she needs to know is that when a little colt or filly needs a heart transplant, her ministry can provide it. And if not, she can keep them alive till proper organs are arranged. She doesn’t need to know how it works.”

Twilight covered her mouth and shook her head before stepping back. “I can’t believe you would do this.”

Flim coughed. “Well, there was quite a market incentive for it.”

Flam tapped his hooves together. “The Ministry of Peace has quite a lovely operating budget, and we thought it’d be a shame to be left out.”

Twilight looked at the pair. “You’re disgusting.”

“Oh?” Goldenblood arched a brow as he trotted in front of her. “Would you rather have ponies die when we have the magic and technology to save them? If so, make the command. We’ll shut that room down forever.” Twilight looked horrified, and he shook his head. “This is why we keep you and your friends in the dark. So that you don’t have to know these things.”

"I…I didn't come here for this, Goldenblood!" Twilight stammered.

"No, you came here for secrets," Goldenblood retorted evenly. "And I am giving them to you, Twilight. Horrible, bloody, terrible secrets in all their raw glory." He stared into her eyes. "If you can't handle something as simple as this…if the knowing of a little secret is too much for you to bear…then stop now and go home."

That returned some iron to her, and she glared back at him. "I'm not giving up, Goldenblood. But... " Her eyes turned to the window.

"Then let us continue. It's time you met Chimera as more than just notes on paper," Goldenblood said quietly. I copied Twilight's expression perfectly; this wasn't going to be good.

Why was Boo cowering like that? Oh crap...

Brass swooped up and smashed through the glass, showering me with shards that I barely deflected with my upraised hooves. "There you are!" she shouted in glee as she pounced at me. "They said they spotted a pony with a black and red mane, but you wouldn't believe how glad I am that I'm the one who found you!"

Somepony talked way too much. I brought the revolver up, but unlike Fury, Brass didn't just let me blast her in the face. In a flash, the mare was on me, clawing and stomping and biting and stinging. Had any of my limbs been flesh and blood, they would have been torn away; as it was, the hazmat suit and Reaper barding beneath it still didn't stop the stinger from plunging into my side. I instantly started to feel woozy as the venom began to work through my system.

"You have no idea how much I've wanted to finish you!" She knocked the gun from my mouth, cackling. "I just wish you were the gray cunt. I'm looking forward to ramming that gatling beam gun right up he--"

I interrupted her by grabbing her neck and ramming my horn deep into her throat. The piercing headbutt made her choke and gag. I only wished that I had three magic bullets to follow it up with and S.A.T.S. to insta-cast them with. She jerked back, my horn coming out with a small burst of blood, trying to leap back out the window, but I couldn't have her getting away and finding help or circling back around for another attack. No matter how sickly I felt with her poison in me, I couldn't let her go. As she perched on the edge, I rolled forward and launched myself at her, wrapping my legs around her throat as we tumbled through the window together and down into a heap of garbage and old remains.

I kept up the pressure on her throat as we landed; she choked as she thrashed against the ground. *If I died now, would my legs keep choking until she went after me*, I wondered. Except…simply killing her wouldn't be winning. Finally, I had to shove her away as hard as I could and dig through my bags for a healing potion and some antivenom. As she fought for breath, I slugged down one and then the other. The healing potion wasn't all that effective, but Glory's antidote counteracted a lot of the woozy sensation immediately.

I had all of six seconds before she was upon me. She was deadly in close combat, but she was too damn fast for me to keep *out* of close combat! Her tail made grappling a risky proposition, though it was becoming my best bet. Watching her closely while trying to dodge, I noticed her wounds weren't regenerating. I could take her down if I could just get her down. High caliber shot would do it; but that would require a big rifle and a pony capable of using it. Explosives? I didn't see anything that would otherwise go boom in here. Revolver was up there. No magic bullets….

Shit.

"You've killed so damn many of my lovers and pets. I'm going to feed you to them, clone you, and feed you to them again," she swore as her lips spread wide, showing her dozens of sharp and pointy teeth. How could it be that the undying pony who blows up was easier to kill than the idiot who screwed beasts? "Mmmm…the Blackjack diet. Somehow, that'll make this all better."

"Be careful. I bet I taste like regret and failure," I muttered as I looked around. "You know, I have to wonder just what has to break in a mare to fuck her up as much as you." Think, Blackjack, think!

"Ohhh…I could make up some sort of sob story for you, but the fact is that this is the way I am, and I like it. Now quit stalling and start dying!" she growled, baring her fangs.

Oh well, thinking wasn't my forté anyway. I had barely enough time to draw my sword before she was upon me. The silvery steel sang with a single deadly note that made me grin even as I felt a twinge inside at the sound. The wild swing was enough to make her draw up. I thought I was supposed to clench as hard as possible on the handle and swing as fast as I could, but as I held the slim weapon, I realized I had to relax my jaw. Increase the arc of my swing.

The manticore hybrid leaned back and sprang forward with a snap, and I thought for sure I had her... but the bite stopped short. Instead

of snapping her fangs at me, her tail thrust over my horizontal swing and tagged me hard in the side of my neck. The pointed shank withdrew with a spurt of blood that made me sway; I really hoped that there was enough antivenom still in me to counteract the poison. I reversed my swing, but she jerked her tail back.

I made a lunge to try and spear her face but she ducked low, launched forward, and dragged her claws along my exposed throat. I nicked her ear in my counterattack, but again she was too fast for me to do anything substantial. If I'd been flesh and blood, I'd probably be bleeding out right about now. Only my body's automatic regeneration had slowed the bleeding from my neck. I suspected that if I had my PipBuck, the health monitoring system would be informing me that I was all kinds of fucked up in the head and torso regions.

She seemed quite happy to slowly rip me to pieces bit by bit, though, and my regeneration certainly wouldn't be enough to recover from that. And from the distant sounds of yelling coming from beyond one of the room's doorways, I suspected that soon I was going to be quite thoroughly screwed…oh, great, why'd I have to think of that?!

Suddenly, there was a click and the whirr of fans. The lights overhead flickered and came on, and the vents began to blast cold air and rattle loudly. The mechanical limbs suspended above one of the tables jerked to life and started to swing and whirl and beep. Most importantly, the doors leading towards the shouts hissed closed and locked. I looked at Brass, but she was looking around in bafflement. Finally, I shrugged and tried several sudden slashes, barely jumping away from a bite that probably would have finished me.

The manticore pony snarled as she circled to my side, but I moved back, keeping the table with its flailing arms between us as I struggled to use my brain. I wasn't going to be able to outfight her at this rate. She'd have killed me by now if I hadn't been augmented. If I attacked first, chances were she was going to dodge and nail me with her stinger. I needed to make her attack first if I wanted a chance at hitting her. ... How to do that, though?

Well…when in a fight to the death with a monsterpony about to tear you to pieces…I raised my forehooves in the shape of a T, then rested the blade on the edge of the table as she gaped in amazement that I would do something so…foolish. I kept the handle inches

from my mouth as I smiled at her. “Listen, Brass, before you kill me and eat me and stuff…there’s one thing I just got to know: did you do this whole manticore transformation thing because you couldn’t find any of your own species to fuck?”

That did it. With a manticore’s roar she lunged, all bestial rage and fury. She pounced forward as I took the sword and swung, the blade humming in the air as it connected with her leading foreleg and cleaved the limb off completely. She flapped her wings to keep from falling flat on her face, and I feinted with a cut to her head... wait, when had I learned to feint? Sure enough, she pulled her snarling maw back and stabbed with her venomous tail. The sword reversed and sliced the bulbous tip away. She screamed, taking to the air as her stumps dribbled blood.

She let out a pained roar as she flew out of range, a roar that was echoed from above. Three manticores flew into the room through the broken window and immediately spread out as Brass found a perch and licked her wounds to slow the bleeding. The monsters began to circle me. Okay, sword, what am I supposed to do now? I gave ground, using the tables to try and keep myself in front of them. I might have pulled it off with two manticores, but with three I was going to get penned in.

Not good.

“Death Filly!” screamed Rampage as she dropped from an overhead vent and onto the back of the nearest beast. She might not have had much weight, but she didn’t need it with all four power hooves discharging simultaneously. The manticore gave a furious roar as it immediately tried to shake the Reaper off its back, but Rampage bit down and tangled her left hoof in its mane, and then proceeded to smash her right hoof against the back of its head.

I grinned. Now if only there were two more of her…

Then I heard a dull thump over the whirr of the machinery and backpedaled fast as Persuasion’s grenade blasted the other two manticores, though the big one was so tough it didn’t seem too deterred. “About time we found you,” P-21 shouted from the hole in the observation window as he cracked open the launcher with his hooves, then pulled out the spent shell, spat it aside, and smoothly loaded a fresh grenade from his bags.

The larger manticore stayed with me as the smaller soared across the room towards him. Biting the grenade launcher in his teeth, he fired it almost straight up at the ceiling! The projectile ponged off a

metal strut, bounced off a vent, dropped down right behind the smaller beast, and exploded. That finished pulping the manticore, sending it crashing into a heap. He looked right at me and actually smirked! When had he learned that badass smirk? Maybe it was the hat.

The remaining manticore spared me such difficult contemplations by nearly biting my muzzle off! I managed to lift a forehoof and let him mangle that in his jaws instead of my face. It might have been metal, but it still hurt. Rather how I imagined it would feel to shove my hoof into an electric blender. I jerked to the side to stop the descending tail spike from finishing me in one stab, then swung the blade in a slash that cut across the side of the manticore's face, taking an eye. The creature removed its fangs from my mangled metal limb, backing off warily; I really hoped that my cyberlegs could recover from this degree of damage!

From the side, Rampage's power hoof made rhythmic flashes as she smashed it against the monster's head. Finally the beast's skull could take it no longer, shattering with a meaty crunch. The corpse collapsed on its face, and Rampage crawled off with a clear wobble. Pale foam dripped from her mouth. "Hey, Blackjack? Got any more of that antidote stuff?"

P-21 scrambled down towards her, and I grinned. As soon as Rampage was back on her hooves, the three of us could tear this creature down and then finish off Brass. And Brass knew it too.

She let out a roar, and the huge manticore immediately turned to attack my friends. Rampage had barely downed the antivenom from P-21 when that heavy tail swung into her body with a meaty crack. She flew across the room, smashing into the wall, and lay there limply. Alone, P-21 slung Persuasion and began to back away, tossing out mines as fast as he could push the buttons. The huge beast set one off and jerked back in pain. Its long, low growl wiped any trace of a smirk off the blue stallion's face.

I moved to go to his aid when Brass launched herself from her perch and slammed into me as a hissing, clawing missile. As P-21 and the huge manticore circled one another, she threw herself on me. The sword pierced through the shoulder of her severed limb, emerging out the far side before her thrashing body tore the weapon from my mouth. Her jaws closed on my throat, grating on something in my…skin? Something else the professor hadn't told me about, I guessed. At least it stopped her from ripping out my

neck and taking the vital plumbing to my brain with it. Instinctively, I swung our bodies as hard as I could, throwing us both off balance and onto the metal table behind us.

The machine overhead whirled, pincers snapping and saws whirring as we wrestled. I couldn't get a breath through my crushed throat. She screamed into my neck as the machine opened up her flank with a scalpel, her thrashing tail knocking the metallic limb aside. A mechanical claw gripped my head, saw blade trying to cut around my eye socket as I jerked and thrashed. This was not how I wanted to fight! I glanced down into her furious, blazing eye. An eye that swore evisceration for me and then P-21, then all-you-can-eat buffet status for Rampage. I'd killed her pets and her lovers, and that frenzied glare promised to do the same to me and mine.

So I extended my fingers, grabbed the side of her head, and shoved my metallic thumb into her eye socket till I felt it grind against the bottom. She disengaged her jaws enough for an agonized roar, thrashing wildly as I pushed and shoved her away. I grabbed the edge of the metal table, pulling as hard as I could. Bloody strips were torn from my ears and cheek as I pulled myself out of the machine's grip and flopped on to the filthy floor. My throat was a ruin, my face was coated in blood, which I'd lost far more of than could be healthy, implants or no, and I wasn't sure if I was breathing through my mouth or through the hole left by her fangs.

And, looking back at Brass, I realized that I'd gotten lucky. The mechanical pincers seized her thrashing limbs and flopped her on to her back. She screamed in terror, and had I been able to move, to stop what I knew was coming, I would have. As it was, I was too battered to even look away as her limbs were pulled taut. A sickle on the end of a thin beam swung down and stroked from crotch to throat almost like a lover's caress. It hesitated for a moment at her chest, but then hummed and vibrated as it tore through her sternum.

I looked away then, but nothing spared me from the sound of the bone cracking or the scream she let out as the metal hands opened her wide.

The huge manticore forgot all about P-21 at that point and roared, flying over the table with such incredible ferocity that the harvesting machine was torn from the ceiling in a shower of sparks, the bloody mechanical claws releasing as the limbs and equipment were scrapped. Stumbling to my hooves, I looked at the mess that

was left of Brass and pulled the sword out of her. She stared at me, and I did all I could not to look at her failing organs. This was way beyond a healing potion or ten. This was more than even Hydra could heal.

"Sanguine…can fix…please…don't wanna die…" she whimpered at me and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry I've been a bad pony," she gasped as she shook on the table.

I couldn't say a word, given my throat was still slowly knitting back together. At least I could breathe... kinda. The huge manticore returned, and I backed away as it gave a low snarl. Rampage was back on her hooves, but she still looked like half the bones in her body were in the process of healing. The immense beast scooped up Brass in his paws with incredible care, cradling her in his forelegs as he gave a soft chirring sound and nudged her with his broad leonine nose.

She lifted her remaining forelimb and stroked his uninjured cheek. "You big baby…" she rasped as the manticore started to lick her wounded face and mane. She licked back once, then finally closed her eye and went still.

"Let's go, Blackjack," P-21 said as he heaved my bloody body across his back and struggled to carry me up the heap of debris to the shattered observation window. The lights began to turn off, and the clicking machines stilled. Boo shook as she followed, keeping her distance from all of us; I couldn't blame her, with me in this state.

We were well down the hall when the huge manticore let out a long and mournful cry I wouldn't ever forget.

* * *

We found a large office where I could collapse and munch down on some Sugar Apple Bombs and three cans of Cram, along with a box of paperclips that had been left long ago on the desk. "So, we circled around like you said to go down to that sealed door. We got inside, but then we ran into turrets and those huge white ponies--" P-21 began before I waved my hooves to interrupt him. Boo was in a corner munching down on some more snack cakes and making a mess of herself.

"Wait wait wait. I told you what?" I frowned, pink crumbly meaty…stuff…stuck to my lips. I didn't remember any of that! I

frowned, chewing the can thoughtfully as I looked at the pair.

"Remember? We called down for five or six minutes; the elevator was only ten or twenty feet down before it jammed. You finally said you were all right and that we should go through the door and meet you down here. Warned us to watch out for the turrets too," P-21 said, sharing a look with Rampage; that 'Is she going crazy, or does she just not remember?' look.

"Well, the first thing I remember after falling was hanging under the wreck. If there hadn't been a robot in the elevator shaft, I would have been goop at the bottom." I shook my head, trying to recall anything between the explosion and waking up. "You're sure it was me? And I told you to watch out for turrets?"

Rampage nodded as she looked up at me. "Yeah. I thought you were just telling us to be careful, but we came to this one hall and there were like…four popup turrets. If Blue over here hadn't been on his hooves with a grenade ready, I think I would have been dusted and he would have been toast."

P-21 frowned at her but looked back at me. "It wasn't like we were just trotting along, but yeah, your warning had my eyes open for the turret casings in the floor. Anyway, soon as we started running into those huge things, we tried sneaking into the vents to move around."

"Yeah, they're always doing that in the books," Rampage said with a grin that faded as she considered. "Though it was a little bit tight, and there were nightstalkers. And there was the whole 'getting lost' thing." I winced as my mangled metal hoof began to ping and pop, the repair talisman's pink glow slowly pulling it back together. Cram with rubies; the perfect choice of regenerative snack for cyberponies. Who knew? Once I was 'digesting' the can and some stones, I lay back and let my body mend itself.

I was ready to take a break for an hour or two, but then again I had no idea how much time we had. My eyes scanned over the old photos scattered on the desk. A smiling mare and two colts beamed out of the grainy black and white photographs. There were a few pictures that had been clearly damaged; any with a stallion had been cut to omit his face.

I took a little more interest in the office and noticed the terminal. For once, P-21 wasn't all over it with his mad arcane science skills! Yet. After much harassment, he got up and started to hack into it. There was something here. Something! I just knew it. After several

attempts, he finally got in. I was right; there was a whole ton of medical and scientific gibberish I couldn't begin to understand. Finally, though, I found something I could: the message box.

O.I.A. Internal Message #345-01-92> Look, I know you can't access any of the systems with them on lockdown, but you can keep extracting Flux from the source. Right now, your job is to find any dirt on Goldenblood you can, particularly related to 'Project Redoubt' and 'Project Horizons'. I swear, we're finding more skeletons than I ever imagined possible. We've got to keep the Ministry Mares from knowing the truth. If they found out…well, just keep your eyes open. I wish that Trottenheimer and Silver Stripe were cooperating, but that halfbreed is dragging her hooves and I haven't been even been able to find out where Trottenheimer was transferred! Horse.

O.I.A. Internal Message #349-01-92> I understand your concerns about Twilight Sparkle's pursuit of the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. Please understand that it is not in Equestria's best interests for her to succeed. In this, I am in agreement with that bastard. Do not attempt to contact Princess Luna directly about this potion. You won't like where it lands you. Just make like Flim and Flam and send her the usual garbage. Oh, and remind them who's buttering their bread now. I'll cut them off from the Flux if they forget again. Horse.

O.I.A. Internal Message: Forwarded #351-20-01> Honey, please come home again soon. I know you're under a lot of stress with things happening at work. I know that you can't tell me what you're doing, but remember that I love you. We love you. I hope you make it back in time for the Gala. I know some time off will do wonders for my very special pony.

Huh…nothing shattering. Still, it made me wonder about the cut up photographs. Jealous coworker? Guilty spouse? I turned to get P-21 and Rampage's opinions, but then I spotted him tossing an empty Med-X syringe into the trash and frowned. "Did you get hurt?" Rampage glanced at him, and immediately her smile sickened.

"Haven't we all?" he replied without meeting my eyes.

I frowned as I looked at him. I'd gotten hurt. In fact, I could have done with a shot of the painkiller myself, if I didn't know my body was repairing the damage. But despite all that fighting, I didn't recall him getting scratched. "Uh, no. Actually. No. I don't think you got hit since we entered the woods."

"Well then, my leg hurts, alright?" He scowled, leaning back with a

sigh. “I’m just worn out. I hate this place. With everything that’s happened, I just need it to keep me steady.” He closed his shadowed eyes a moment and then looked at me; I didn’t think I’d ever seen him looking so... tired.

“Okay. Just…take it easy on that stuff, okay?” I said with a small frown. He didn’t answer as he lowered his eyes on his leg. I looked over at Rampage, but she simply shrugged.

“So…what’s her story?” the filly asked as she pointed at Boo sitting nervously in the corner. I’d been so coated with blood that she hadn’t come any closer to me; I was a little worried that she might try and run off.

“I don’t know. I’ve seen at least a dozen; all earth ponies, same color, eyes and everything. The only ones that are different are the big, aggressive ones. Otherwise, the only difference is gender.” I gave a little shrug and looked at Boo again. “I think she’s been around longer than the rest. She was hungrier than the others and knew to hide to stay safe.”

“Yeah, but the others? We saw two just stand there when some of Red Eye’s ponies were playing target practice. They didn’t get what guns were, didn’t try and fight them off or anything. They just stood there, and when one died, the other just looked at her. It’s like they’re animals or something,” Rampage said with a frown. “Stupid animals at that.”

I sighed and shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.” I looked out the door; this place was hazardous and a whole lot bigger than I anticipated. “The only question…okay, the big question is: where’s Sanguine?”

Rampage replied, “One of Red Eye’s ponies said they were dicking around with Chimera. Apparently, they got back and are trying to get EC-1101 to work while they finish loading something.“ That would be the tanker cars, I suspected. “They say this place is too damned dangerous.”

“They’re under attack.” By something; the thing in the Core? I sighed and rubbed my nose. Then I remembered something else. “Have you two been seeing ghosts too?” Predictably, both of them looked at me like I was crazy. I sighed, waving my mangled limb, wincing as the repair magic pulled and pushed and remolded the leg back into its original form. It felt like the whole thing was made of wax. “Okay, okay. Not ghosts, but images? Transparent things that are there one moment and then gone the next?”

"You're our expert on seeing things that aren't there," P-21 said with a sigh. "What is it this time?"

"Twilight Sparkle, Goldenblood, Sanguine, and the two brothers. When she came here to find out about how Flux was made; apparently it was a big stink. Goldenblood first told her to go, but something changed his mind. Then they were touring this place." I rubbed the back of my neck with my good foreleg. "Then I got tackled by Brass, so I dunno if they said anything after that."

P-21 looked at me for several seconds before he finally shrugged. I looked at Rampage, but the striped filly just deadpanned, "Don't look at me. I got as much clue about stuff like that as she does!" She gestured over at the oblivious Boo.

I sighed, rubbing my head. "I'd just be glad if I had a map."

"Oh, we found one," Rampage said as she looked at P-21. Okay, Blackjack. Don't facehoof. I looked at him, but he simply gave me a flat stare in return. Ugh, what was wrong with him? He dug into his bag after several seconds of me staring and pulled out a folded piece of paper. I focused on it, then finally got it levitated and unfolded.

"Hey, not bad!" Rampage said with a confident smile.

"I figure I'll be able to use a gun again in a year or ten," I replied dryly, trying not to flush at the compliment. I could count the number of times somepony had complimented me on my magic on zero hooves.

"Yeah. I figure you'll have that whole magic thing licked in no time. Dunno if it's worth it, though. Seems overrated. All those prancy unicorns with their magic and wine and cheese. And don't you have to sparkle and shimmer?" she asked with a snort.

"It's a steep price, I won't lie," I said as I scanned the page and the crude drawing, then glanced at P-21. He wasn't having any of it. I shook my head and looked back down at the page.

'I know you keep getting lost down here, but don't let security catch you with this' was mouth-scrawled at the top of the page on the back of a some sort of spreadsheet. There were six circles on a ring around a larger central circle. The circle at the top was marked 'Security / Barracks'. The upper left and lower left circles were 'Storage / Pens' and 'Distribution / Receiving' respectively. The bottom circle was marked 'Organs / Live Storage / Refrigeration', the lower right circle was 'Fusion' and the upper right 'Copyroom'. In the middle was 'Production'.

There were halls connecting to the center, but the note was finished with a warning. 'No matter how late you are, never try to cut through production. Those security ponies do not accept 'I'm late' as an excuse. If you absolutely *have* to cut through, you can follow the elevated pipes to get from the copyroom to distribution, but you'll have to shell out at least fifty bits at each end. And remember the golden rule: *never* go down below into production. It's practically all red tunnel down there.'

I didn't see anything marked 'Chimera' or 'Control', so I had so assume it was either in the middle or somewhere down below. I suspected it would be in the most secure area of the facility. Still, something about the layout made my eyes linger. I frowned; why did it look... familiar? Then it hit me: it looked almost exactly like the symbol used by the O.I.A. Somehow, I didn't believe that could be a coincidence.

"So... we can just go straight to production?" I asked with a frown, looking at Rampage.

P-21 sighed and muttered, "Blackjack, when has it ever been as simple as 'go straight there'?" Of course... silly me.

"There're big doors that are closed up tight. Heck, even the vents are barred," Rampage said with a frown. "We'll have to find another way around."

I looked at the map, then tapped the circle marked 'Copyroom'. If there was a way to get to production undetected from there...

"So we just continue around past fusion to here, and look for pipes," I said, smiling at the others. Rampage nodded, but P-21 just stared off into space. I trotted up next to him. "Hey, you with me?"

"Yeah. Just tired," he muttered, closing his eyes. "Can't stop thinking about Priest. How he died. Right there, just like that."

Rampage frowned. "No offense, but aren't you taking this just a little bit hard? You knew him…what…two days? Not exactly a long time." He glared sharply at the striped filly, but she didn't balk. "Don't get me wrong. He was a good pony, but it wasn't like you two were making adorable sweaty buck lovin', right?"

"I don't have to justify my feelings to you, Rampage!" he snapped. "I liked him!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. So did everypony else. He was the nicest damned pony in the Wasteland. Really. I think he had an allergy to being mean or something," Rampage said as she trotted towards him, looking evenly into his eyes. "But it's takes a lot more

to make a relationship than a few days of cuddling. You have more of a relationship with Blackjack than you did with Priest."

"Rampage, that's enough!" I snapped, then looked at the miserable-looking blue stallion.

He sighed and shook his head. "I just hope that when we kill Sanguine... some of these things I'm feeling die too. I'm so sick of this place." I sighed too, looking at Rampage. The filly just snorted softly and turned away, muttering about him needing to lose an extremity before being allowed to be sick of Hoofington.

I forced a smile, nudging his shoulder. "Come on, P-21. Let's get this done so we can go catch up to Glory and Scotch. Then you can tell her everything she needs to hear."

He didn't open his eyes. "What if she's dead, Blackjack? I waited so damned long…what if she's gone?" He hissed sharply and smacked the floor beside him, gritting his teeth and thumping the back of his head against the wall.

"Then you tell her anyway." I was the Equestrian grand champion of kicking myself. I knew the signs, but I'd never have expected them in my stoic blue friend. "But no matter what, we've got to get through this first. All that stuff comes later." I nudged his shoulder. "We'll be there when you do, either way."

He relaxed a little, nodding. It's not all about me; I had to remember that. I had to. P-21 had his problems too, problems he bore silently and with dignity. I smiled at him and spread my forelegs wide. "Hug?"

He looked at me, then sighed and pulled himself to his hooves with a groan. "Let's get going."

I blinked at him as he stepped back out of the office, my legs still spread wide. Then I slumped. "What's the matter with him?" I said after a minute. "Did I do something, or…" Not all about you, Blackjack. Remember?

"It's probably just me…but he's using an awful lot of Med-X," Rampage said quietly.

"So?" I asked as I looked back at the filly. She facehoofed.

"Hello, Blackjack, weren't you ever taught about drug addiction?" she asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Sure. We watched a movie about a pony hoarding stable supplies because she, like, needed healing potions or something. But P-21 isn't anything like her. I mean, she had sores and huge hollows under her eyes and I think there was some foaming at the mouth.

Like, she was crazy without them." I frowned at her incredulous look and added, defensively, "I know that Scalpel mentioned something about chem damage over time way back when."

Rampage looked at me in shock. "Okay…wow. You really should know this…everypony should. A lot of chems like Med-X, Mint-als, even booze…they all carry the risk of dependency. You get hooked on a chem, and pretty soon your body doesn't know how to function when off it."

I rolled my eyes. "I've seen addicts. Remember Flank? He's not an addict," I said as I looked at the closed door. It seemed so stupid. He didn't have that gaunt look or anything. Look at what he'd done with the grenade in that last fight! Could an addict do that?

"Not all addictions are grossly physical, Blackjack. There're all kinds of mental side effects to a lot of drugs!"

"Yeah, and then you pop a Fixer and everything is okay... well, except for the damage," I countered with a small frown. "Glory kinda explained this when she was going on about chems being bad. Sure Fixer's like temporary and stuff, but all we've got to do is get him some. I'll keep an eye out."

"Blackjack, if P-21 is hooked, he's going to need a lot more than just Fixer. Doctors can take care of the physical conditions. If he's using it because of something in his head--" But I whirled on her at that.

"There is nothing wrong with his head. Okay? He's not an addict. If he says he needs it, then he needs it. And who are you to talk, Rampage? You eat Mint-als like they're candy! You loaded yourself up with 'everything' back in Flank, remember?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah! And if I wasn't eternally regenerating, I'd have died long ago," she snorted, pointing a hoof at me. "And don't you deflect this onto me, Blackjack. This is about his problem."

"You're sounding like Glory," I muttered, and I didn't like it because Glory was usually right. I always thought the whole 'chems are bad for you' line to just be her thing. Chems had saved my life more than once and saved her eyes in the sand dog tunnels. I remembered those hollow-eyed, slat-sided wretches outside Flank, and P-21 wasn't like that. *Those* were addicts. He wasn't like that, so he couldn't be an addict.

Back in 99, nopony had problems with chems because they were strictly controlled out of medical. Anypony stealing chems for

whatever reason could be flogged for possession or use. Even possession of an empty syringe could be construed as guilt. I admitted, since coming out of 99 I'd had brushes with chems, particularly the effects of too much Buck and Hydra. There'd even been times I'd felt like I absolutely had to have them to win and overcome. But they were a tool. I never took them just to take them.

Of course, Hydra had effectively rotted my heart with all the taint that had contaminated me... I met Rampage's hard glare and said firmly, "He's not an addict, okay? He's just not. We'll get him talking with Scotch and work out his problems and you'll see." I didn't know how I could convince her…I wasn't precisely sure if I was convincing myself.

* * *

We picked our way through the next area, 'Fusion', with few problems. Aside from the occasional white pony just standing around and one or two of the huge fatties, there wasn't anypony about. There were a lot more ghosts, though; I saw Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood as flickering images, but the moment I moved they faded away. Other times, if I walked just right, they'd linger and persist. Occasionally, I heard distant words and other strange noises.

More than once, P-21 and Rampage assured me that they couldn't perceive any signs of the ghosts…if that was what they were. I couldn't explain it; at times like this, I really wished Lacunae was around. If she didn't know outright, perhaps the Goddess did.

I spotted the fusion megaspell chamber but felt no desire to explore inside. I still had creepy memories of a cockatrice fusing with me.

The closer we got to the Copyroom, the more white ponies there were, as well as the occasional fatty. The three of us took one down, though P-21 blasted a grenade a little too close to me for my comfort. Still, I could take it, and we killed the creature without too much hassle. Beneath the straps lashed to the thing were three Rage injectors and a sensor module. I assumed that this might account for the aggression their smaller and less mutated cousins didn't display.

Finally we reached the 'Copyroom'. Like the fusion megaspell chamber, it was a large round room, but it held a strange piece of equipment that resembled a large tree of metal, the golden bark

spattered with old blood and filth. Fat white nodules hung from the branches like swollen fruit. The rest of the room was decorated like a forest, as if the architect had tried to ease the creepiness. It really hadn't worked. Large pipes dropped down from catwalks over the metal tree in the center of the room, and a whole herd of ghostly white earth ponies stood quietly in clumps. There were more than a few dead bodies, too, and pits full of Flux. I imagined the blanks being shoved into them until they mutated into the hulking fatties.

"What is that?" Twilight asked at my side, and I jumped in shock, looking at the ghostly mare's floating head. Slowly, I moved till she came fully into view. Goldenblood appeared as well; Trueblood and the twins had departed.

"This? Come now, Twilight. You read about everything Project Chimera developed. Or did you only pay attention to the fusion aspect?"

"Don't lecture me, Goldenblood," she said irritably, her ears folding back. "What *is* this?"

"This is one of the many heads of Chimera," he replied as he gestured to the machine. "The biomagical replication system. We simply call it the copy machine. Mix a biological sample with the Flux, and it can produce a perfect biological copy of that pony. A clone, if you will."

"A clone?" Twilight Sparkle murmured, her eyes widening. "But…I thought Chimera was all about fusing ponies with other beings!"

He looked almost disappointed. "Chimera's goal was to prevent ponies from coming to harm. That was my promise to Fluttershy: to make certain nopony was hurt as badly as I hurt her," he said with a firm frown before turning back to the machine. "Strengthening ponies was simply the beginning. How could we stop there? The organ extraction and preservation technology was used to save thousands of ponies all across Equestria. But we needed a source for those organs. And that source is this machine."

I stared at the machine. Sanguine had said he could replace my failing body's organs, but by using this? "You're butchering ponies for…for body parts?" Twilight said, aghast. "Does Fluttershy know about this? Does *Luna*?" she added a moment later.

"Perhaps…but that depends," he said as he walked to a terminal. I started to walk too, but it made them all fade out again. In the time it took to move back to where I was, I missed whatever he did. There was a hissing noise, followed by a pop. A ghostly white pony

stallion appeared, standing before Twilight. “Is this a pony?”

“What is that?” Twilight murmured in faint curiosity. “Who is he?”

“This is what we call a blank. Normally I’d show you a complete copy, but with Chimera sealed, all we can do is produce blanks by cycling the systems,” Goldenblood said as he circled around the white pony. “Every single organ and body part found in the pony body, all the components perfectly assembled. No less…and nothing more than that.”

“Nothing more? You mean…there’s no mind?” Twilight asked as she took a closer look. The blank’s eyes didn’t even follow her as it stood there.

“None. Less than an infant. And no soul, either, or at least none we’ve ever been able to detect. A body made of pure Biomagical Flux.” He gestured to the blank. “Is this a pony? It has no parents, no magic, no spark. It has enough instinct to sleep when it gets tired or eat when it gets hungry, but it otherwise will die without care.”

“It’s fascinating, but…Goldenblood, this is wrong. Luna could never--” Twilight began, but was cut off as her eyes met the scarred stallion’s gaze. “She doesn’t know about this. She can’t.”

“She can and does. She sees nothing wrong with using Chimera to help the lives of thousands of actual thinking, feeling ponies.” He looked at the blank standing there. “And think. If we could somehow give blanks intellect, we wouldn’t need ponies to fight anymore. We could produce whole armies of blanks, suit them up in power armor or fuse them with dragons, manticores, and phoenixes and send them against our enemies. With Chimera, we could conquer the entire world, if Luna willed it!” he said with a grand wave of his hoof, before he dropped it and stared into her eyes. “And she will. Maybe not today, or tomorrow…but she will. The temptation is inescapable,” he finished in a dreadfully quiet voice; I couldn’t tell if he was talking to Twilight or to himself.

Twilight stared at the blank in horror. Goldenblood stared into her eyes, then asked in a voice soft as a lover’s whisper, “Twilight… have you given a thought... just a thought…about what Equestria will be like if we win this war?”

She swallowed, staring at the simple ghostly pony. “I’ve been… occupied.” He glanced at her, then shook his head with a faint sigh. She looked back at him and asked quietly, “Have you?”

He frowned at her before speaking as if confessing a horrid crime. “Lately? I’ve been incapable of thinking about anything else.”

They moved away, flickering out. Rampage looked at me expectantly while P-21 just sat there looking sullen, as usual.
“Okay, so this is the source of the blanks,” I said, spotting Boo peeking out from behind some trash bins. I pointed at the pipes overhead disappearing into the golden tree. “The Flux stuff flows in, but with Chimera sealed, all it does is put out these generic copies.”
“Pretty clever,” Rampage muttered. “I mean, given all the experiments these guys were doing, they needed somepony to try them out on. They couldn’t have only experimented on us.” She rubbed her chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing. “Wonder what this shit is worth.”
Wait…us? I looked at her sharply and saw a heart-shaped loop of barbed wire cutie mark. Somepony else? But then she caught my eye. “Rampage? Is that you?”
She scowled at me. “Fuck…I think…” She shook her head hard. “Fuck…what’s the matter with me?”
“Can we just cut to the chase and shoot her in the head?” P-21 muttered sourly.
“Experiments. You were talking about ponies experimenting on you?” The question seemed to draw the barbed wire out of the tangled mess on her flank. Her expression hardened and became more insolent. I’d drawn them out…whoever was inside her.
“What’s your name?” I asked gently.
“Razorwire, Pink. You want my real name, you can check my motherfucking file.”
“Pink?” I asked, glancing at P-21. He was clearly of the ‘shoot her in the head’ attitude.
She rolled her eyes and sneered, “Fine. Officer.” She said the word like I might say ‘Overmare’.
She thought I was some sort of guardpony? And from her attitude…she was some sort of ganger? I had to keep her out; if she realized she wasn’t Razorwire anymore, she’d fade away again. Or freak out. I was sure glad she wasn’t full grown. Still, I had to be careful with my questions. “What are you in for?”
“Trying to make friends with the prisoners, Pink? Fuck you. I’ve been to Shattered Hoof twice. Twice. They couldn’t break me. Hightower won’t either.” Hightower jail…Rampage rolled her eyes, tapping her lips. “Let’s see; civil disobedience, trespassing, defiance of royal edict, theft, larceny, burglary, curfew violations, trafficking stolen goods, distribution of controlled substances, lewd

misconduct, and fraternization with the enemy." She narrowed her eyes at me. "So, you going to take me upstairs? My turn in the attic? Fucking Pinks." She spat in my face.

"Maybe," I said, trying to think fast as I wiped it away. There was a narrow window before her personalities became aware and freaked out. "What happens in the attic?"

"Oh, you don't want to ask that, Pink. Big trouble to ask that. You ask that and they'll throw you in the cell. Cut you open." Then she looked at P-21. "Shoot you in the fucking head." Then she blinked. "Shoot you in the fucking head?" She started looking around and hugged her head as her pupils contracted. "Shit…shit shit shit…" she stammered as she started to shake, "They shot me in the fucking head!"

I grabbed her shoulders, staring into her eyes as she started to cry. "Razorwire! Focus. Who did? Why?"

"They shot me! They fucking shot me! Fucking shot me!" she screamed louder and louder before she looked at me. "I'm dead! I'm dead! They fucking shot me and I'm dead!" She wrapped her little forelegs around mine. "You killed me! You fucking killed me, you Pink!"

Even as a filly, she was damned strong, but I just held her. I wasn't going to snap her out of it the easy way. "Yes, you were killed, Razorwire. But not by me. I didn't kill you." She screamed and fought with me in a thrashing frenzy, her power hooves sparking as they kicked my legs. "I didn't kill you!" I told her again and again. Her rage slackened off, her struggles growing weaker and weaker before she finally stared at me with a forlorn, wide-eyed expression.

"Blackjack?" she whimpered, her bottom lip shaking.

"Yes…Rampage?" I asked softly as she slowly bowed her head.

She fell against me, sobbing, "They killed her, Blackjack. She was so mad. Why did they kill her?"

"You remember her?" I asked as I held her firmly in my hooves.

"Like…like reading a book a long time ago," she sniffed. "She was a criminal, a thief. She boasted that stealing was her special talent. Thought of herself as Daring Do." She sighed, holding her head as she sniffed and shook. Daring…ah, right, the pegasus from those adventure books. From what little I remembered, the comparison might have been accurate. "Really loved the bucks. Partied hard, did special favors for Pinkie Pie. Scared to fucking death of her…" She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Got caught in a raid selling to

zebra refugees. Got sent to Hightower. She thought Pinkie Pie would bail her out again, but…she didn't. Left her to rot."

"And the guards killed her?" I asked softly, stroking her mane. She pushed me away, though, then sniffed and rubbed her nose.

"Yeah. They cut her open and put something inside. Then…bang." She shook her head. "Wow…this is the first time I actually…" Then she frowned a little. In fact, she looked a bit spooked.

"What? First time what?" I prompted.

"Don't worry about it," she replied with a sigh, looking up at the catwalks over the mechanical tree. "There's got to be a way up there. Let's find it, finish jerky pony off, and go."

"Yeah. I'm worried about Scotch," I said with a frown as we trotted to a stairwell on the far side of the room. The pale blanks moved out of our way, staring dully. A few seemed to be dying of hunger. A part of me wanted badly to give them food; maybe with enough time, they might become more like Boo. Or maybe she'd stepped in some Flux and it'd done something to her. As we reached the top of the stairs, I put my forehooves on the rail, looking at the strange tree.

"What are you thinking?" Rampage asked.

"Sanguine said he could clone me new organs. Even a whole new body, if he had Chimera." I frowned, knitting my brows together. "What if we could use Chimera to help Scotch?"

"Do you have a clue how to? I'm pretty sure none of us have a mad scientist's certification. I mean, I know I don't," Rampage retorted. Then she knit her brows together. "At least, I hope I don't!"

I gave a little half smile, but it faded as I looked back at the golden tree and watched as one of the pods popped open and dropped a drippy, goopy blank mare to the ground. She blinked and just sat there, looking around... well... blankly. Okay... I hated the thought, but I had to say it. "We'd need Sanguine's help," I said quietly. Suddenly, a harsh snarl sounded from P-21 that made all three of us stare, Boo included. He glared at me with disgust.

"Well, I'm so glad Priest, Dusty Trails, and countless more died for nothing," he growled in a low, harsh voice. It'd been a long time since he'd ever spoken to me like we'd just left 99. "Bravo, Blackjack. I think you're the only pony in the Wasteland capable of brushing all that off." I'd rather he'd hit me than have said that.

"I'm not saying we let him win. I'm saying we get EC-1101 and make him use Chimera to help your daughter," I said sharply, and

he jerked as if I'd kicked him. I looked at P-21 and Rampage.
"There's something that Sanguine wants; I think it's more than just 'this building'. Maybe…maybe we can work out a deal?" P-21 snorted in disgust.
"I'm pretty sure that, even if we get really lucky, any deal we make with him is going to include 'let me go'," Rampage pointed out.
"So we promise him whatever he wants, get Scotch's clone, and then kill him," P-21 said so matter-of-factly that it chilled me. Worse, a part of me agreed with him. Kill him afterwards. That sounded so neat. So pat. So…
So exactly what Sanguine would do.
When I'd lost EC-1101, it was like losing Stable 99 and Scoodle. They were moments where my actions had led to complete failure and terrible consequences for others. I wanted to win so badly that I could taste it. He'd probably believe me if I told him we'd let him go; I had that whole 'noble idiot' thing going. P-21 could rig something to go boom. We could do it. I could not only win, but also get vengeance on the bloody monster.
And I wanted to, as well. I had to admit that. I wanted to win; after being chased, shot up, and raped…I wanted to be on the giving end. I wanted to be the one who trotted away with everything because I was the sneaky pony who got away with it. All I had to do was get EC-1101, promise him whatever he wanted, get it, and then kill him.
Then a little orange pony bucked me right upside the head. Was that what I wanted? Deep down? Vengeance on my enemies? Lie. Cheat. Steal. Destroy. Was that what Security was all about now?
I didn't know anymore. I felt myself slipping away. I wanted to win and I wanted to be a good pony…to do better…couldn't I do both? Was that too much to ask?
In the Wasteland…yes.
"Well, we're putting the cart in front of the pony," I muttered. Sanguine might not even give us a choice. I'd kill him rather than let him just escape or kill P-21. With me taking the lead, we walked along till we met up with the pipes. A narrow catwalk just wide enough for one pony led gradually uphill.
Towards Sanguine and EC-1101.
The pipes emerged into an enormous hexagonal room, a room I'd seen before. Twilight had accused him of copying Maripony; I didn't know how accurate that was, but in this place I saw almost exactly

what I'd seen in Spike's cave. It was a cruder design; the ceiling was held up by six massive pillars instead of being freestanding under a volcanic chimney, and instead of computer equipment, these walls were covered with pipes and mechanisms. Flickering lights blinked on and off over a massive lake of pink mist that undulated and swirled around heaps of machinery barely visible through the fog. The air tasted foul and poisonous.

And there were warning signs everywhere. Some were almost as large as the Hoofington Arena's scoreboard. 'Warning: absolutely no eating or drinking on the floor, no matter how good it smells.' 'Warning: absolutely no sneezing.' 'Warning: report any and all instances of music and/or singing; do not participate in any musical numbers.' 'Warning: anything and everything can explode when thrown, even you.' 'Warning: report to medical if you find your body drastically different when you wake up tomorrow. Blue spots = bad spots.' 'Warning: be on alert for unusual weather shifts.' 'In the event of catastrophic Flux spill, please think of your fellow workers and activate the water flush system; we will remember your sacrifice.' 'Only you can prevent a horrible fate worse than death.'

Of course, they were slightly better than the other signs. 'We're not just mixing chems and dangerous substances here: we're mixing *science*!' 'When in doubt, throw science against the wall. See what sticks.' 'You are a trusted friend in science!' 'Not never but NOW!' 'Your right to work, no matter how hazardous, horrible, or harmful that work may be.' 'Three bit work; aren't you glad you're being paid four?' 'Donkeys: doing your part for Equestria!'

Then, on each pillar, I saw a red box about the size of a pony. The warning on these was far more straightforward. 'Warning: high explosives.' I had a sneaking suspicion that most of the employees here had been illiterate, desperate, or suicidal.

In the very center was a large metal pillar. Pipes of all sorts sprang from it, some coming up to meet the pipes running underneath the catwalk I was on while most dropped down to the strange machines. A metal catwalk ring surrounded the pillar about twenty or so feet from it. Carefully, the four of us made our way over that poisoned expanse towards the pillar. A guard lounged where the catwalk we were on joined the ring surrounding the silver spire; she might not have been taking her job seriously, though, given that she was smoking and looking out at the mist, but I couldn't think of any

way we could get close enough to take her out without giving her a chance to get off a warning. And shooting in here... even I could tell that that would be a bad idea.

Then I looked back at P-21, who was staring out into space with that sour expression. I nudged him and pointed up the ramp at the guard. He frowned and lifted Persuasion in his hooves with a questioning look. I rolled my eyes and then shook my head, mimicking lifting something with my hooves and puckering my lips. He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, then blinked and nodded. Silently, he moved closer and pulled Scalpel's blowgun from his bags. He raised it to his lips and fired without a sound. The dart pinged off the rail next to her, and I felt my mane stand on end as she bent over to examine it. Fortunately, the second dart buried itself right in her rump. The Fixer and Moon Dust mix shot into her, and she swayed on her hooves before flopping on her face.

I just gave him a look, smiling and arching a brow inquisitively as he looked back defensively. We trotted up to the ring, and he collected the missed dart. Fortunately there were drums and crates to hide behind as we moved around towards the far side, where pieces of equipment sparked and whirred. Barely audible over the noise from this distance were several voices. As we moved around towards the front, I saw a generator surrounded by dozens of spent spark batteries. It was connected to one of the machines hooked to the exterior of the pillar. 'Flux Extraction Pump #26' was written on the casing.

"Try it again!" came Sanguine's shout. "It should work for you! What are you doing wrong?"

"It's not. It won't work!" Psychoshy sobbed. "It just keeps telling me how Blackjack is going to kill me. It won't open the casing."

"It must! EC-1101 was designed to work for only a select few ponies or their offspring. It must work for you, Fluttershy! That's what it was designed to do!" Sanguine hissed, and then I got far enough around the column to spot the guards, then him, and then the sobbing yellow pegasus. She looked like hell; great wads of yellow feathers had been torn from her wings, her mane was ripped and torn, and her yellow hide was bruised. "Stop screwing around and just open it!"

"I can't!" she sobbed, hanging her head as her hoof rubbed the Delta PipBuck that had been ripped out of my leg and duct taped to hers. It was rubbing her limb raw.

The half-dozen guards snickered to each other, watching the pair. I didn't know if they were protecting them or trying to prevent them from escaping. Sanguine looked at her and said, in a low voice I barely picked out over the pump, "The last tanker is almost full. Goliath and his mother have already teleported back! As soon as it's full, they're leaving, and either they are going kill us or that thing is going to completely occupy this facility! You can do it."

"I can't. It just keeps telling me how Blackjack is going to kill us. You didn't say anything about a dead pony talking to me!" she suddenly wailed.

What was that? Was she talking about…Dealer? But…but he was my crazy! Wasn't he?

"I'm a dead pony talking to you, and I'm telling you this is our last chance. If we fail now…or if Glue cracks Twilight's work…there won't be another! I won't leave them down there!" the ragged ghoul said as he pointed down at the pink mist.

Now I really wanted to have a nice long chat with the bastard.

Should I act or should I wait, though? Even if the guards weren't on Sanguine's side, I doubted they would just let me trot right up and take him. I looked over at P-21 to see if he had any ideas. He did…

He was pointing Persuasion right at Sanguine and Psychoshy.

I knocked the barrel up, either just in time to prevent him from firing straight or accidentally triggering it. The launcher made its soft thump, the grenade pinged off the side of the pillar, and then exploded overhead. From the glare he gave me, I wondered if I was back on his shooty list.

Okay…time for plan D.

"Security!? Get her!" Sanguine shouted as he grabbed Psychoshy's tattered wing and dragged her behind cover. The six began to spread out and open fire with SMGs and battle saddle mounted light machine guns while two more circled around. 'Get her?' Really? He was hitting the villain clichés hard!

Of course, he'd be laughing last if they did manage to get us.

"Rampage!" I pointed behind us, and the filly gave a salute and scampered in that direction.

A few seconds later, I heard her yell, "Tag! You're it!" Followed by the crack of her power hoof.

That left the three of us being shot at by four ponies, and Sanguine was somewhere with his poison breath. Boo immediately took cover

behind a barrel, curling up as tightly as she could. P-21 pulled out a frag grenade, bit off the stem, and threw it over towards the guards. He wasn't the only pony with that idea, as an apple grenade bounced off the crate behind me and landed in my lap. I jerked, tossing it over the edge, where it detonated a fraction of a second later in midair just below us.

P-21 leaned to the side to get a better look as he readied another grenade while I fired with the revolver. Really, right now, I was just grateful for the lack of griffins. My aim was a lot more careful, but with automatic machinegun fire you didn't need skill, just luck, time, and a large enough supply of bullets. P-21 rolled a grenade across the catwalk to the base of their cover. "Get ready," he said.

"For wh--" But the what was answered when a cloud of thick white smoke billowed up, cutting us off from them. I sure wasn't wasting any time! The gunfire slackened somewhat, and I sprinted across the gap, launching myself over their cover. Now was my chance to administer a beatdown on somepony else in a battle saddle! I hooked my metallic forehooves around one light machine gun and pulled back. The mare it was strapped to clenched down on the trigger as I swung her around. Screams and shouts filled the air as the guards fired wildly back at her.

Finally, the pins holding the machinegun came loose and I yanked it free. Several rounds smacked into the mare as I swung the gun up and rested it across her back. I looped my hoof around the cable trailing from the trigger to the bridle and jerked it taut, bracing the gun against her body as I fired every round in the magazine in the direction of her comrades.

One came out of the dissipating smoke and slammed me against the catwalk rail, the gun falling silent as the mare I'd used for cover went down. The bulky earth pony struggled to simply toss me completely over the edge and into that vast swirly death below. And she was doing it, too! I wrapped my hooves around her neck as she shoved me over, halting my plummet. I grit my teeth and hooked my hind legs through the railing, then extended my fingers and grabbed her own shoving forelegs. With a yank, I pulled her over the edge after me, dangling there upside down as she screamed and landed on some equipment below us.

The fall hadn't killed her. As she started to howl and choke, I suspected she wished it had.

There was another grenade explosion as I hauled myself up the side

of the catwalk rail with my robofingers and finally flopped over on the safe side. Then Sanguine emerged from the thinning smoke and took a deep breath. I covered my face with my hooves as his thick pink poison washed over me. I might have held my breath, but it did me little good. Every inch of exposed skin burned horribly as the concentrated gas touched it. I felt my hide grow…sticky. When I rolled to the side to get out of the spray, I felt my skin tear; a second longer and I'd have been fused to my barding and the floor! As it was, I'd left a few square inches of hide glued to my forelegs and the metal beneath me.

I could only hope I'd regenerate…provided I survived. If I hadn't been half synthetic, I think I'd have been permanently glued down by that toxic plume.

I reached for the revolver, but it'd fallen out somewhere. Sanguine drew in another breath as I stared up at him; I needed a magic bullet. I needed it now! I focused…imagined…concentrated…Oh, this was so much easier in S.A.T.S.! Then the white ball of light flashed out and struck him in the face! It wasn't full power, but it was enough to knock him back and halt a second dose of the Pink Cloud.

Psychoshy had *kissed* him? How did she still have a tongue?

Unfortunately, lying there made me prime target for one of the guardponies. I didn't have a gun, and my horn still ached horribly from one half-strength magic bullet. The bloodied guard levitated an SMG with a look of pleased satisfaction in my imminent demise.

Then there was a chatter of rapid fire directly behind me; shooting wild and uncontrolled. But with machineguns, you just needed one or two lucky shots. The unicorn mare jerked as two bullets pulverized her face, ripping out her eyes and the top of her head, her own fire going wild before she dropped and lay still. I rolled to my hooves, expecting to see P-21. Instead, my eyes popped wide as I stared at Boo gripping the mouth trigger of one of the guns. Her blank eyes stared back, and she swallowed. The gun went off again, spraying me briefly and punching a whole slew of holes in my limbs as I raised them reflexively. I'd just regenerated those! The terrified mare let the gun fall out of her mouth as she curled up into a trembling ball again.

I didn't have any time to be indignant though, as a second blast of poisoned breath washed over me. I jumped away, my body quivering from the toxic spew, and I turned to face him. One side of

his face had fallen away, uncovering bone from mouth to ear and letting tendrils of pink ooze out the side of his mouth. “Now I see. EC-1101 must be…be locked onto you or something. When you die, it’ll work. I’ll be able to save them.”

“You couldn’t save a bottlecap by gluing it to your face,” I countered.

“I can save them!” he shouted, his eyes going wide. I wondered if he was going to go feral right in front of me. “I’m a doctor! That’s what I do! I save ponies!”

“You’re a murderer, Sanguine!”

“You made me one!” he screamed. “I didn’t want to kill them. I didn’t want to kill anypony! I just needed Chimera to save them. If you’d just given it to me, then we’d all have been better off. Red Eye would have his I.M.P.! I would have a comfortable life in Fillydelphia! My family would be safe! Everything promised to me by Goldenblood and Horse would be mine!” He started to pace. “I wasn’t supposed to become this. My family wasn’t supposed to die. I was going to be Equestria’s greatest biological researcher!” He pointed a hoof at me and yelled, “It’s not fucking fair!” A cloud of pink rose up from his mouth.

“Your family?” I blinked as I stared at him. “You have a family?”

“Is it that much of a surprise?” His horn glowed, and from his pocket he pulled out cut up little pictures like the ones I’d seen in the office and flung them to me. My pathetic magic only managed to catch one, and I stared. The buck whose face was cut out had been kissing a pretty, blushing orange unicorn. I could see the ghoul’s charcoal face through the void before I let the photo drop. He hissed, the Pink Cloud spraying out between his rotten teeth. “Yes. My family. We were supposed to be safe in Stable One. The finest and safest stable in all of Equestria. But the poison…we couldn’t reach it.” He shook his head. “I got them here, but we were sick. Oh so sick. There was nowhere safe. Here they’d be safe. Where I could heal them. Clone them new bodies…transplant organs…they’d live! They’d have to. All I needed was Chimera!”

“You were doing all this to save your family?” I gaped at him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He snorted angrily. “Are you saying you’d believe me after what I did to your stable?” He had a point. I’d taken one heck of a pounding since then. I’d needed to see that office first. Read that message from a loving wife. “The sick fact is that what I am... this...

this walking corpse... doesn't deserve them. But their memory is the only thing keeping me from becoming a mindless feral. Saving them gives me purpose."

I scowled at him. "Why'd you feed me that grand vision experiment on the wasteland crap?"

"Do you really think Red Eye is big on sentimentalism? Or Reapers? Or monsterponies? I needed Red Eye's help, he needed Flux and the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. He'd be able to care for my family! Give them the life and safety they deserved. I wouldn't have my wife raped by raiders or my sons turned into savages. Red Eye is creating schools. Civilization! And he doesn't care if you're a ghoul…unlike Tenpony."

"You put them in stasis pods, like the others," I said as I stared at him.

"Yes…but once activated, I couldn't open them! I can't even monitor their status. Chimera would have to be activated first. I tried tampering with them from time to time, but it was risky. Killed the occupants of some by accident, woke up some of the others. Told them I could fix them, or give them whatever they wanted and needed. Set up some with the Reapers." He glanced at Psychoshy before he resumed pacing back and forth. "I learned that the stasis pods had a flaw: not all ponies put in stayed unconscious. Some were trapped and went insane." He shuddered, hanging his head. "I couldn't wait after that. Not knowing if my family was trapped in their pods, trapped in their heads, screaming. Sent Deus after your stable…last place Silver Stripe traced it. And then…"

He looked at me and screamed, "Then you fucked everything up!"

He launched himself at me in a frenzy, a toxic cloud pouring out of every gap and hole in him. I kept backing away, using my fingers to throw crates and barrels in his face whenever he started to exhale. It was different than fighting an enemy with a gun, though. The vapors burned, even without a direct hit. Holding my breath did no good; the toxins were entering through my hide. Finally, I trod on one of the corpses and my leg slipped out from under me.

I rolled onto my back once more, and he stood over me. Pink vapors burned my cheek; I felt the flesh bubbling from the contact. He drew a long, slow wet breath. Then I looked above him…

Glory?

The crate dropped on Sanguine's back with a resounding crunch, and he collapsed beneath its weight. A pink spray poured down

through the catwalk grate into the sea of noxious vapor beneath us. I rolled away, feeling my flesh drip. Oh, I really, *really* hoped I could regenerate this! Then I stared in shock as Psychoshy landed beside him, tears streaking her cheeks.

"You said it was going to be you and me, Sanguine. That it'd be us in our life with Red Eye," the orange mare sobbed. "Were you going to kill me once you had Chimera? Or were you just going to dump me and run off with your family?"

"Stupid…ungrateful…wretched…traitorous…meat. I should have thrown you away when I had the chance," he hissed beneath the crate. Then his lips curled. "Well, it doesn't matter anymore."

"Oh yeah? Why?" I asked with a snort, then a wince. I really hoped I still had the left side of my face! At least I could still blink that eye.

"Ahem," coughed a voice behind me. I turned and stared at three hovering griffins in power armor and a dozen more guardponies, similarly equipped. One pressed a gun to P-21's head as he pinned the struggling stallion. The lead griffin, pointing a high caliber precision rifle at my head, said, "We wanted to tell you that we've got the Flux loaded and are ready to leave." He looked at the pinned ghoul. "Do you have Chimera?"

"Almost!" he rasped, his broken hooves scraping at the catwalk grate. "I'm so close. Just kill her…and…I just need a little more time!"

"I see," the griffin replied as the guards trotted past us and Sanguine gave a growing smile. But then they simply collected their fallen comrades and their wounded, doing nothing against me or to help free him. His glassy eyes popped wide when they started to trot back out the way they came.

"No. What are you doing? No. No no no…you can't! You need me!" Sanguine shouted after them.

The griffin just snorted. "Glue cracked Twilight's notes three days ago. We don't need you for anything. Red Eye thanks you for your offer of prewar aid but says he can't extend any more time or resources for Chimera. In addition, for your crimes against the mining settlement at Brimstone's Fall, Red Eye wishes for me to personally inform you that you will be shot on sight if you are seen anywhere in the vicinity of the Cathedral or Fillydelphia."

I stared as they released P-21 and started to go. "Wait…you're just leaving him?" I asked. The griffin looked amused. "You're not going

to kill us?" Somehow, I felt a little... surprised... that somepony else was showing us mercy rather than just killing us for the fun of it. That it was coming from one of Red Eye's people was a touch more disturbing.

"You're welcome. Near as I can tell, leaving you alive in this hellhole is worse punishment than killing you. Besides, the robots in the tunnels will probably do that. As for us, our Contract is done. We have the Flux needed, and we'll deduct his payment," he said with a wave at the pinned ghoul, "to cover the extra costs and loss of life." The griffin gave a snide grin. "Be glad I'm not Vermilion, Sanguine. After the annoyance you caused him…well, I'm pretty sure he'd take the time to get creative." He flew off towards the others. I watched them go and sat down hard. "Come on. Let's get out of here. I've had enough of pony freaks, ghouls, and killer robots in general. Hoofington can kiss my tail."

When they'd disappeared down the catwalk I turned back to look at Sanguine trapped beneath the crate, saying, "Well that was interes--"

P-21 had jammed a grenade in his mouth.

"Stop!" I yelled. Psychoshy looked shocked, Rampage sighed, Boo flinched, and P-21 scowled. Sanguine stared back at me, his pink breath trickling around the apple.

"No, Blackjack. Fuck no!" P-21 yelled, hoof poised over the stem. "This bastard needs to die. He needs to die in the worst possible way."

"I'm not arguing that," I said as I stepped closer to him. This was it. Get the PipBuck back…kill him. Or was I going to go for the triple win and lie to him to help Scotch? Kill him. Finish him off. Or let somepony else kill him. My hooves would be clean then…right? I sighed as I sat down, looking at the ghoul. "Why didn't you just tell me the truth?"

"Damn it, Blackjack! You swore to kill him! You swore to Dusty Trails as she was dying!" P-21 yelled at me. I knew I had. I did, but…"You can't just let him live! I'll kill him if you won't! I'll do it."

"No. You won't," I said evenly, looking him in the eye. "Because I know that you're a good pony, P-21, and good ponies don't kill in cold blood." He shook, his hoof tapping against the metal case of the grenade in Sanguine's mouth. "Besides, I want to hear his answer."

P-21 gave a ragged, exacerbated laugh. “Who cares what his reason was! Does it matter? Is there anything he could possibly say that could excuse what he did in the mine? What he did to Priest?” he demanded, his eyes drilling into me. “Sweet Celestia, Blackjack! Just kill him!”

“Your call,” Rampage said with a little shrug. Psychoshy simply kept her head turned away as she wept. Boo stared, wide-eyed.

“I’ll do it. I will. I will!” P-21 yelled as he shook, gritting his teeth. One flick. Just one. I moved even closer to him. I wanted to win. Wanted to avenge Dusty and Priest. Wanted to do all of that. And so did he. Then I put my hooves around him and held him close.

“He’s not the Overmare,” I whispered softly. P-21 froze and then leaned against me as he sniffed. “Killing him won’t be killing her. And it won’t bring Priest back.” He let out a soft sob, muffled by my mane as I held him close. “I wish I could follow through on that promise to Dusty…I do…maybe I still will. But not like this.”

He ever so slowly pulled his hoof away and murmured, “Maybe… but he should be killed. He’s done horrible things…he deserves to die for them.” And I couldn’t argue with that. He was right. Sanguine should die. It would be a win. The right thing to do.

But I’m not an executioner.

P-21 moved aside, and Rampage sighed, “Softest damned heart in the Wasteland, I swear.” The filly shook her head and carefully tugged the grenade out. Then she narrowed her eyes. “I don’t have a soft heart, so if you so much a sneeze at her, I’m going to do a power hoof tapdance on your skull. Understand?”

“Sure,” he replied quietly. He hadn’t taken his eyes off me. I heaved the crate off him, and he rose slowly, staring. “Your friend is right. I do deserve to die.”

“Ponies keep telling me that.” I stared back. “What I don’t understand is, if you know what you’re doing is so wrong, why do you keep on being bad? I know what it’s like to screw up. All I can try and do is do better.”

“Well, some of us weren’t so good even before we became monsters,” he replied. “So. What now? As soon as those tankers leave, this place will be overrun.”

“I’d love to know by who, how, and why, but I don’t have time for that. When I was dying, you said you could replace organs for me using Chimera. Well, now I have a friend who breathed a whole lungful of chlorine gas, and if she’s not dead now, she may be

soon," I said as I stared into his eyes. "So I'll unlock Chimera if you'll do what you have to do to make a clone for her."

"You'll just give me Chimera for that?" he stammered in disbelief.

"No. I'm not giving it to you. Sorry, I don't trust you or Red Eye with it. But I will let you help your family. And if this is an O.I.A. facility, then I can't believe it doesn't have some kind of automated defenses."

"It does…" he murmured, then lowered his eyes. "You asked me why I didn't tell you about my family. Why I talked like some sort of mad scientist from a bad pulp novel? The answer is simple…I'm ashamed. Being a mad scientist ghoul was better…easier…than being a father unable to beg for help. And because I never imagined you'd believe me or help me if I did."

Rampage ripped my PipBuck off Psychoshy's leg. The pegasus with the ratty wings couldn't look at anypony. Sanguine glanced back at the golden-maned mare. "I'm sorry I used you, Fluttershy. Only a pony descended from a Ministry Mare could use EC-1101."

"Is she a clone or something?" Rampage asked as she passed me my PipBuck.

"No," Sanguine said simply. "She's Fluttershy's daughter."

* * *

Sanguine and Psychoshy weren't talking much about the details of that little bomb. P-21 wasn't talking to anypony. And Rampage was duct taping my PipBuck to my limb until Scotch could wire it up properly. And now my vision was filling with all kinds of fancy little images, displays, and pictures. I winced and said, "Okay, did you mess with all my settings or something?" Had my E.F.S. always flashed and twitched like this? It was making my head hurt a little... no…strike that. It was making my head hurt bad.

Then, just like that, it all stopped. Everything did. The pain, the flashes…everything. I felt like I'd just entered S.A.T.S. and was frozen in the moment of calm consideration.

And the Dealer was there before me. The cards shuffled repeatedly in his hooves…and with each shuffle I saw numbers in the margins of my vision shifting and randomizing and disappearing again. His pale eyes stared into mine from under the brim of that dark hat. "So... what are you? You're not my crazy, are you?"

"Let's play that game when we've got a little more time to spare,"

he rasped as he turned over the deck of cards. “You’ve got enough on your plate as it is.” He had a point, not that I liked it.

“You know. I thought for a moment that, when I left here, I’d have fewer questions than when I arrived.” I added a mental stomp of my hoof. “I wonder if LittlePip wants to trade? I’ll go fight brain-reading monsters, and she can deal with all this mystery horseshit!” Not like there was much in my brain worth reading.

“You ought to know better,” he muttered, tilting his hat up. “You sure you want to do this, Blackjack? That ghoul doesn’t deserve your spit, let alone your mercy.”

Was I sure? “What happens if I unlock Chimera?” I remembered Ol’ Hank talking about machines waking up and getting conflicting orders. “It’ll stop the conflicting orders here and wake up the systems, won’t it?” He smiled, seeming impressed.

“Sure. Here and everywhere. Word will go out to let Chimera be accessible along the networks and allow anypony with the right access codes to use the files. I have no idea how far and wide those networks stretch,” he admitted with a shrug of his shoulders, and then he frowned. “Funny…”

“Funny…what?”

“Nothing. Just something familiar,” he said as he stared into my eyes. I almost would have blushed if I could move. “Just be careful. Once you open something, you can’t always close it again.”

I wasn’t very sure about that, but I needed to help Scotch. This didn’t sit well with me, though. Once I unlocked it, then it would stay unlocked. What would stop Sanguine from coming back in ten years and starting all this back up again? I slipped out of S.A.T.S. and looked at Sanguine sitting there. He looked like a corpse. Not just the boiled appearance, with his face half torn off. He looked dead. I wondered just where the line was between a sane ghoul like Harpica and the many ferals I’d seen elsewhere, and just how close Sanguine was to crossing it.

“Sanguine. Those explosives?” I pointed at the really big bombs on the pillars. “What are they for?”

It took him a while to shake out of his fugue. “If we ever lost containment, they would detonate, collapse this space and focus the force of the primary explosion,” he replied tiredly. Wait? Those big explosives weren’t for the *primary* explosion? “Not sure if it would do any good, but it was preferable to letting it loose.”

“It?” I asked with a frown. He gestured towards the round pillar in

the center of the catwalk ring. I approached a short extension that stretched halfway across the void and looked up at the smooth face of the pillar. At the chimera carved into the face. Goat…lion… snake…all mixed and jumbled together. Written at the bottom of the strange mish-mash creature were the words: 'Project Chimera'.

Suddenly, I stiffened and felt as if a powerful hoof had suddenly pressed down on my mind. My hooves moved to walk me up to the very edge of the catwalk. The flickering numbers became even harsher, flashes and glares disrupting my sight. Suddenly, the room lit up; the pink mist had vanished, and below me whirred and clanked dozens of strange machines filling up thousands of barrels with rainbow Flux. My friends all disappeared, and I couldn't move or speak as Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood walked up to stand together on the edge before the immense polished cylinder. Twilight wore a look of horror on her face as she looked at the carving.

"No…" she whispered softly. "It can't be."

"You can turn back now, Twilight," Goldenblood murmured.

"Open it," she hissed. "Right now."

"Twilight…"

"Open it!"

Goldenblood sighed and spoke formally, and I felt my lips move with him as I spoke his words. "Project Chimera containment open. Password: a wonderful, wonderful thing."

The immense pillar rumbled as motors within jerked into life. A moment later, there came a hiss and crack. The top of the pillar slowly peeled open, unleashing a rainbow glare. I'd have shielded my eyes if I were capable of movement. Two panels swung wide while a third expanded downwards to form a bridge. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I saw it came from orbs embedded in the interior. I'd seen orbs like these before. A hoofful had utterly annihilated the Hoofington museum. Here, a grid of dozens, perhaps hundreds, were evenly spaced out in a foot-by-foot grid covering the inner surface of the cylinder. Metallic hoses connected the pumps outside to the object in the center.

Mounted on a small pedestal in the middle was a glittering silver statue of the strange creature I'd seen on the outside of the cylinder. It wore an expression of absolute terror, twisted as if it had frozen in that state. The detail was such that I almost swore it was alive. "This is the basis of Project Chimera; the source of Flux. This is

what your I.M.P. research is ultimately based upon. What causes the contaminations and mutations you've encountered time and time again. This is the secret you wanted to know so badly!" Goldenblood proclaimed as he gestured up at the silver statue.

"Discord," Twilight Sparkle whispered in horror, her eyes wide as she pressed her hooves to her mouth.

Then a low, snide, nasal-sounding voice croaked in a condescending tone, "Hello, Twilight Sparkle. Long time no see."

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 39: Wages of Sin

"I hope you're happy! Both of you! You've ruined my very first slumber party. The makeover, the smores, the truth or dare, the pillow fight! I mean, is there anything else that could possibly go wrong?!"

Twilight stared up at the massive silver statue, her eyes wide in horror, then turned to Goldenblood and pointed a hoof back at the strange amalgam creature. "*This* is Project Chimera?!"

"I know, I know," drawled the nasal, sarcastic voice. "But I suppose 'Project Discord' or 'Project Draconequus' would have been too much of a giveaway."

Twilight's eyes went flat as she looked over her shoulder at the statue, then back at Goldenblood. "What is Discord doing here, Goldenblood? How could you put those two in charge of…of this! Luna will be informed…" she began when she was cut off by the low snicker of the statue.

"Oh, I wish I could see your face right now, Twilight. I really do," Discord cackled. "Well, actually, I really wish I was out of this damned silvery suit Goldie dressed me up in. Oh the fun we could have, Twilight. Fun…" He hissed the word long and low.

"Luna knows. Celestia knows." Goldenblood slowly trotted up towards the statue, and now Twilight didn't look certain of anything anymore. "When the war began, Celestia knew that Discord would be the greatest threat to Equestria. If three squabbling fillies could break him loose, even though that was long after the sealing spell was cast and after the Elements changed hooves, how long would the magic hold when ponies and zebras were killing each other on such unprecedented scales?" He gazed at at the statue with a long, baleful look as he added, "Worse, zebra lore knows of Discord…trickster of the stars."

"It does?" Twilight asked in shock.

“I try not to boast,” Discord said in feigned modesty.

I trotted closer towards the statue, getting out of her way, and was suddenly seized by an incredible vertigo that ended abruptly with a sharp pain in my tail. I felt distinctly nauseous, but then moments later it passed. Okay. I didn’t know what that just was, but no more trying to move. My poor tail was one of the few original bits of me I had!

“Indeed. Ponies aren’t the only people he’s manipulated, tormented, and hurt,” Goldenblood replied evenly. “Spirits of chaos like him are well known in their culture, and of them all, Discord is the strongest and worst.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” Discord interjected with mock sincerity, “But really, I must admit that I’m nothing compared to you, Goldie, when it comes to manipulating, tormenting, and hurting others. How’s Fluttershy?” Goldenblood’s face didn’t change a bit, but his horn flared, pushing a button and turning a dial. The metal began to hum, and the hum became a scream. Discord’s manic laughter grew into a manic scream as well.

“Goldenblood! Stop!” Twilight shouted, her horn lighting and turning the dial back the other way.

Discord panted, chuckling a low, slow, pained laugh. “Too soon?”

Goldenblood glared up at the statue as calm reasserted itself. “Even before Luna assumed the throne, zebra agents attempted to capture Discord. After what you and Celestia did to him, everypony fairly assumed he’d focus mostly on us if he got free, and that made the zebras think that they might be able to use him as a bargaining chip or deterrent. Celestia’s original solution was to have him buried here; there’s a special ore underneath Hoofington that counteracts his powers. But as the war escalated, we knew the enchantment wouldn’t last even there. His size had already increased fifty percent in just over ten years, and the petrifaction spell was already in doubt.”

“Well, when you have a steady diet of war, chaos, and uncertainty with zero exercise, you tend to pack on the pounds,” Discord murmured.

“It’s hard to believe our efforts were so weak,” Twilight murmured, hanging her head a little. “What he did to my friends, and bringing them back together... Now it looks like it was all for nothing.”

Goldenblood stared at her for a few inscrutable seconds, then looked back at the statue. “It’s not your fault, Twilight. Celestia had

many centuries of relative peace after Discord was trapped; the closest he came to release was during Nightmare Moon's bid for power, and that still wasn't enough. Had things remained as they were, he likely would have stayed in stone for at least another millennium. But this war…so much confusion and hatred, widespread violence and turbulent emotion, and for nearly twenty straight years now... It was the perfect diet to set Discord loose."

"And given how exciting everything is, can you blame me for wanting to get involved? I was so looking forward to seeing how much *more* interesting I could make things for everybody! Being a statue is *so* boring, you know…oh, wait, you don't. You have no idea what that's like, do you?" Discord said with the sound of a sneer. "And you called me a villain."

"We had to contain him quickly. Fortunately, Luna recommended utilizing the ore we were excavating in the reconstruction, and it has indeed proven quite effective in keeping him trapped," Goldenblood explained, not taking his eyes off the statue.

"Funny how she suggested it," Discord said in a faintly hurt tone. "And I'd always had a soft spot for little Luna. I never appreciated how much potential she had."

"How does this metal work? Why can't Discord just teleport out of it or turn it into cheese?" Twilight asked with a frown.

"This metal," Goldenblood replied, "Unique in all our experience, resonates at only one magical frequency. Not 'effectively' one like some of the experimental materials we've developed, but truly only one single pure tone; it fully ignores all other magical effects. Discord, being a creature of chaos, can't focus his power to such a narrow degree."

"And I'm not stupid enough to try and play that note," Discord muttered, and my ears perked. There was a definite undercurrent of deadly seriousness in his voice.

Twilight sighed softly. "All right. I can understand containing him, but how did you go from that to…pulling Flux out of him?"

Goldenblood smiled that humorless little smirk. "Do you really want to know, Twilight?" She glared back at him, and for a moment their eyes remained locked. Then Goldenblood gave a little shrug. "It was my idea. The raw magical essence of Discord was simply sitting there, unused, gaining power all the time, and the potential for his magic was mind-boggling. Once the research was begun, it actually didn't take that long for a method to drain it in a usable

form to be developed." Goldenblood pointed at the hoses with his hoof. "Needles were drilled into the stone and hooked up to extraction lines; to create base Flux, the metal is resonated, liquefying portions of his essence."

"You drilled into him?" Twilight gaped. "You drilled *holes* in him?!"

"Don't worry. It's *exactly* as painful as it sounds," Discord said in a sarcastic mutter.

"Yes," Goldenblood said without taking his eyes off hers. "And we suck out his magical essence, mix it with gems to stabilize it, and ship it all across Equestria. A portion of the sales goes to covering the O.I.A. operating budget, which is substantial. The rest is given to the ministries."

Twilight shook her head. "Torturing him…sucking his essence out…and you sell it to fund all this? I thought your funding was through the kingdom!" she said, looking startled and disgusted.

"Not exclusively. The O.I.A. goes through a lot of bits in a year," he said as he gestured down at the production room with his hoof. "Even with our secondary and tertiary sources of income, projects like Chimera are horrifically expensive. And it benefits us to keep some expenditures off the books."

"How much money could you possibly need?" Twilight asked with a scowl.

"Our budget exceeds those of the M.A.S. and M.o.A. combined," he countered, and that set her back a step. "Possibly even the M.o.P. as well." I had no idea just how much money that was, but I thought of all the money Goldenblood had bilked from the nobility for Project Redoubt. Add in the proceeds from side projects like selling Flux... and, actually, I still had no idea just how much money that was; I wasn't sure I could count that high. Twilight's jaw dropped as Goldenblood said softly, "Of course, as I'm not the director anymore, that information is strictly hush hush."

"I'll have to remember that next time I approach Luna for a budget increase," Twilight murmured as she stared up at the statue. "So, why in Equestria did you put *those two* in charge of him?"

"To be fair, this is an O.I.A. facility. They are simply the face company, selling and distributing Flux and a sizeable number of spinoff products. But really, can you think of anypony better? The pair are natural obfuscators, entrepreneurial in the extreme, and unscrupulous but cowardly. They embezzle wherever they can, and

I let them get away with a certain amount to keep them working. Their utter lack of political ambition combined with their goal to excel makes them diligent in their complicity. After all, they delayed you for more than a year while you were trying to make your alicorn potion work."

"They weren't the only ones," Twilight said, frowning again. "Remember, your stonewalling cost you your position."

But Goldenblood didn't look upset about that. If anything, he looked sad and so very tired. "Well, we do what we must for love."

"Excuse me? Doth mine ears deceive me, or did you say 'alicorn potion'?" Discord chuckled. "Oh... Twilight…you're making an alicorn potion? As in a potion to *create* alicorns?" The silver statue began to laugh. "Oh I just bet the royal duo absolutely *love* that idea!"

Twilight scowled up at him. "I have the full support of Luna!" If anything, that made Discord laugh even harder. "Shut up!"

Goldenblood twisted the knob once more, and the statue began to hum. The laughter rose higher and higher until it became a scream of agony, and then the knob was turned back down. "Oh, I do so love all you little ponies. Even when I'm sure you're all going to be so boring, you find ways to surprise me... " Discord said with another quiet chuckle. Goldenblood looked away, sitting on the edge of that narrow bridge. "Well, I do hope that works out well for you, Twilight. A step up in the world."

"It will make us win this war," Twilight answered, but I could see she was shaken. She looked at all those hoses snaking out of the silver statue. "I'll talk with Luna. She'll put a stop to this. She can't know exactly what's been done to you, Discord. You're imprisoned. There's no point to torture as well."

"Oh, Twilight. You always were such a good little pony. Always surrounded by loyalty, honesty, kindness, generosity, and laughter," Discord said in a voice that was almost pitying. "What are you surrounded by now?"

Twilight stepped off the bridge, back onto the catwalk, and a moment later Goldenblood's horn flashed and the bridge slowly rose back up. A moment later, the central pillar's doors swung back into place and sealed with a faint hiss. The purple unicorn adjusted the glasses she wore as her magic brushed her mane back into place, but her face was troubled and haunted. "So…that's why my potion wasn't working. Why it kept going unstable. It'll likely need

that magical resonance to stabilize it…possibly a pinch of that metal as well."

"Possibly," Goldenblood replied. He turned and started to trot away, but then he paused. "So, you mean to continue?"

She looked at him in confusion. "Of course. This is why the M.A.S. was established. I swore to Princess Luna that I would find her a magical solution to the war, and the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion will do it. We'll be able to turn hundreds of ponies into alicorns. Earth ponies will be able to do magic and fly for the first time. We could make thousands. End this war once and for all!"

"Even given the cost? You'll use Flux, knowing where it comes from?" Goldenblood asked. She looked away, and he sighed. "I see."

"I have to do this. I promised Luna that my friends and I would win this war," Twilight Sparkle said quietly, keeping her eyes away. She stood and started away, but then she too paused. "You promised something similar, if I recall." She started off without looking back, steps slow and heavy with the burden of knowledge.

"Something like that," he said softly, then he looked around a moment, and his eyes suddenly locked on mine. The side of his lip curled in an expression of mixed annoyance and amusement. "Cute." His horn flashed.

Suddenly, the world darkened and my head spun; my... dream-delusion-hallucination-thing faded away, and the room returned to the normal grime and spotty emergency lightning. The machinery below stopped humming, and pink fog swirled around it. I swayed on the edge of the platform, then shook my head as the vertigo passed. "Huh? What just happened?"

"You're back?" Rampage asked.

"I went somewhere?" I replied, rubbing my head.

"You walked right off the edge," the striped pony said, then nodded over at the brooding yellow mare. "Psycho caught you."

"She did?" I asked, not able to hide the surprise in my voice. "Why?"

Psychoshy snorted. "In case you forgot while you were out of it, we need you to open up this Chimera thing. Since I can't…" she added bitterly as she lowered her head.

"You're still helping him?" I asked sharply as I looked at Sanguine sitting away from the rest of us. His face had pulled itself together, and the rest of his injuries were rapidly healing. Was this a ghoul thing? ... Maybe he hadn't really been hurt at all? A ploy to trick

gullible, softhearted Blackjack? I snorted hard. Maybe P-21 was right all along, and I should just smash him now to make sure he couldn't stab me in the back.

Be kind, a little pegasus begged me. Uggghhh... easy for Fluttershy... But Scotch needed help, and if he did have an innocent family...

"No!" Psychoshy snapped, then grit her teeth. "I mean…not once we're done here. I'll help him here, and then we're done." She looked over at the undead pony and slumped a little. "I mean…he still needs my help…if I help you, that is." She tried to sound tough, but she looked listless and confused, her eyes glancing every which way save at me and Sanguine.

"You don't need him," I said, trying to give her an encouraging smile. "I mean, you're a kickass Reaper pony, yeah? You sure kicked my flank all over that cage, remember?"

"Don't try and make me feel better," she retorted bitterly. "Just… do whatever you're going to do. We need to get out of here."

Good point. I had no idea how long we had. "Right." I looked up at the metal cylinder with its engraving. "Right…so…Chimera. How long would it take for you to make a copy of my friend, Sanguine?"

Sanguine blinked a moment, then answered slowly, "An hour or so to grow a healthy blank. The process can be rushed, but the results of that are…substandard." Ugh, did we have that much time?

"Does this place have some more automated defenses like those turrets we ran into earlier?" Rampage asked.

I looked sharply at Sanguine, my eyes trying to pick out some sign of betrayal. He'd been beaten, but that didn't mean he'd given up, and automated defenses could be turned against us. The ghoul stared off for several seconds before answering, "It does, but they're only active in a few places. Besides, with what's trying to get in here, I doubt that they'd be much help."

"What *is* trying to get in here?" P-21 asked in a low, even tone. He hadn't moved from where he'd been when I'd gone out. "What's behind those robots?"

"Hoofington was a crown jewel of technological development. It was designed to be the perfect city. A city that could, and did, house hundreds of thousands of ponies. It was the dream of visionaries like Horse and Apple Bloom to create a city that could manage and police itself. Automated systems are in place to handle security and defense, even two centuries after the bombs. Those

systems are effectively responding to an intrusion."

"So you're saying that there's a crazy computer in Hoofington fighting us?" I asked, perking up. I imagined a rogue Crusader Maneframe, or something like it. "Well, that's not so bad. I can smash a computer."

"Unless it has some tragic sob story about how its vacuum tubes were molested or it just wants to save its motherboard," Rampage snickered. I glared at her; I wasn't that bad, was I? Rampage wasn't having any of it. She tapped my chest. "Softest. Heart. In. The. Wasteland."

"I don't have a heart. I have a cold machine of steel running inside me," I huffed indignantly. Everypony looked at me with expressions ranging from scorn to pity; Boo was the only one looking around in baffled confusion. I snorted. "Okay, my heart aside, how do we turn on those defenses?"

"You need to turn on all the systems. You need to unseal Chimera," Sanguine replied in a low, distracted voice. He pointed at the central pillar. "The access point is there."

I looked up at the massive pillar. I could just leave it sealed up; presumably, Discord was still alive, or at least alive enough to suck a few tanker trucks out of him over a few weeks. If I talked to him, he'd try and trick me. He was dangerous; I'd seen the look on Twilight's face. I looked at my PipBuck with a small frown. "Dealer?"

"Dealer? Is that what you call that thing?" Psychoshy muttered.

"I know you're not my crazy, Dealer. I want to talk to you," I said. Then, as I slowly turned my head, I spotted him shuffling his cards. He kept his eyes hidden behind the brim of his hat. "I need to unseal Project Chimera."

"So? Unseal it," he muttered, his eyes locked on the cards. He turned over a Joker, showing me in a clown suit. "You don't need me for that."

Huh? "I don't? But then why couldn't Psychoshy do it?" My question set the yellow pegasus's teeth on edge.

"Because she's as thick as you are, Blackjack," Dealer muttered, rolling his eyes. "I'm not EC-1101." He spoke the words like a guilty confession.

"But you're also not my crazy," I replied firmly. "There's way too many lapses, times you should be there when you're not. Times you do show up when you shouldn't. You're something outside me." I

frowned at him, narrowing my eyes. “Who are you, Dealer?”

“Somepony who never mattered. I’m just a ghost along for the ride, seeing that EC-1101 gets where it needs to go. That’s all.” He nodded towards Psychoshy. “She did the same thing you did. Yelled, threatened, growled, begged, and finally cried to try and get me to open it. And I just told her ‘no, not going to happen’, and described all the ways you were going to kill her when you caught up with her.”

I thought about that a moment. “Dealer? Are you Goldenblood?”

He looked at me pityingly. “Did you miss what I said? ‘Never mattered.’ Not before the bombs dropped and not now. Trust me. Don’t worry about Goldenblood. He’s dead as a doornail.”

“Why do I have trouble believing that?” I muttered, glaring hard at him. “You’ve been screwing with me from the start, Dealer. When did it all begin? When I found out what EC-1101 was? Back in Stable 90? Miramare?” Then I frowned. “The first time I fired Folly.”

“Folly?” Sanguine asked, and I glared at him. No no, mister nasty ghoul. You do not get any more toys to play with! Heck, even I shouldn’t have a weapon like that!

The pale image gave the slightest little twitch of the corner of his mouth. “Yeah. Before that, you were just another mare, as far as I could tell. One stupid and reckless enough to keep getting ponies killed with your good intentions. That kid. Those zebra. You spared a slaver…I honestly didn’t know what to make of you. But when you fired that weapon, I knew there was something more to you.”

“Because I have Ministry Mare blood in me,” I said, and he gave a slow nod. “Even if it’s not Twilight Sparkle, that meant I could access EC-1101.”

“Might,” he countered, looking angry, “And that meant that I might be necessary after all. When you fired that weapon, systems from Trottingham to Fillydelphia to Hoofington lit up like a Hearth’s Warming log. Nopony was listening, of course. There’s maybe a half dozen ponies left across the Wasteland with the access capability and a clue as to what those systems actually do and how to make them work; maybe a dozen with the Enclave. And since meeting you, I’ve bumped into others who could get access. That mare Velvet Remedy might have gotten the program to work. Psychoshy would have figured it out, too, if she’d had enough time.”

“But why does it matter?”

“Something I’ve been asking all month,” P-21 said under his breath.

“Look at this place, Blackjack!” He gestured around us. “Mass cloning facilities! Biological fusion. Even Flux production. Discord! Sanguine’s own knowledge and expertise. This is perhaps the greatest treasure trove of wartime biological technology in all the world! Do you have a clue what a pony could do if they really applied themselves to it? Monsterponies by the thousands! Possibly even an alicorn assembly line, if a pony knew what they were doing. You’re lucky Red Eye or the Enclave doesn’t really know what’s going on here, or they’d actually be applying themselves to get you to unlock it.”

“How do you know all about Chimera if you’re not Goldenblood? Who are you, and why should I trust anything you say?” I asked with a scowl.

“Goldenblood. Every time she says that name, I want to kick somepony,” Rampage said.

He pressed his lips together, then finally said, “What choice do you have? You don’t exactly have time for twenty questions. I can help you, Blackjack, but I want to make sure that this place isn’t used by anypony else.”

Urrrgh... he had a point. “I don’t want Chimera to be used by anypony. Not by Sanguine. If I can save Scotch, I’m happy. If I save Sanguine’s family to do that, that’s good too.” It wasn’t their fault that they were related to this... this thing. Speaking of which, it would have been nice if said thing would gasp or something, give some sign that he was going to work with me on this. Instead, he just stared off into space. Was he trying to work out how to best cooperate or how to best betray us?

“And letting him trot back here ten, twenty, or a hundred years from now?” Dealer asked firmly. He shook his head. “I’m not going to turn this place over to just anyone who walks in once you leave. Watching you unseal Steelpony was hard enough. I only let you have that because you needed it, and if the Enclave hadn’t already been in possession of the raw data, I would have tried to keep it from you.”

“Wait, I thought you said I didn’t need you to open the Project?” I looked over at the yellow pegasus, but she was simply passing time. Sanguine looked over too, a feverish kind of hope dancing in his

eyes.

"You don't…if you know the proper place to access. Otherwise, you can have fun trying to figure out how to make it work all on your own," he replied with a smug smile.

That would take time I didn't have. "So…what do you want?"

"Less Blackjack talking to herself would be nice," P-21 muttered.

"I want this place destroyed," he replied evenly.

"You want *what*?" I gasped, making Boo jump away.

Rampage winced. "Oh, that can't be good."

"You heard me. I don't care about what you use it for right now, but I want this place gone when you're done. No more Flux. No more fusion megaspells. No more hybrids. Nothing. I want this mistake reduced to a crater," he said with a wave of his hoof.

"And Discord?" I asked with a frown.

He laughed briefly. "Discord? He can be buried along with the rest of this place. Discord was an enemy to ponykind centuries back, and he'd be our enemy today." Dealer looked down the catwalk. "I think Red Eye's forces are clear now. They'll be coming in soon, if they're not here now. So…do you agree or not?"

I imagined that I could hear them, too. The clicking-clanking hoofsteps of Protectaponies, the rolling treads of sentries, the levitation talismans of Mr. Handys... "Fine. You help, I'll destroy this place."

I probably shouldn't have said that last bit aloud…

"What? Destroy what?" Sanguine shouted, Pink Cloud spurting out his nostrils. "I'll not see this place destroyed for any reason!"

"Of course... " P-21 groaned. "The mine was just a warmup... "

Psychoshy gaped at me. "You're insane!"

Rampage just fell back laughing. "Oh Luna, I fucking love you, Blackjack!"

And Boo blinked in confusion.

I whirled on Sanguine. "Your family, or this place? Choose!" If I was going to have to figure this out without him, then best find out now. I couldn't keep working with him like this; not with the worry that he could backstab me at any moment.

His cloudy eyes popped as they looked at me and then out at production. Then back at me. "I…my work…my family…Blackjack, I can't. Don't you understand? This place was the culmination of my entire life's work! Years of research and study. I can't just throw it all away!"

"You're going to have to," I replied. "Your family or this place, Sanguine. If your family really is all that matters to you, I'll help you save them. But for me to pull this off, I'm going to have to destroy this place so nopony can use it. Otherwise, you better just kill me now." I took a gamble, hoping he truly meant it. And I got ready to jump aside from a plume of pink poison.

Sanguine closed his eyes and stepped away. He stood there for a few seconds, and then nodded once. "Very well…if you must."

I let out my breath, surprised. I wasn't the only one, either. "Right." I turned to the Dealer. "So, how do I unseal Chimera?"

"The access is inside Discord's chamber. To open it, you say 'Project Chimera containment open. Password--"

"A wonderful, wonderful thing," I finished for him, and was rewarded by his momentarily stunned expression. I tried not to act too smug as he recovered. "Surprised?"

"Apparently you don't need my help as much as I thought," he murmured.

I stood at the edge of the catwalk and said the phrase and password from the vision, and the pillar gave a massive groan and shudder. The mechanics squealed as it slowly ground open; two centuries of little to no maintenance hadn't done it any favors. The drawbridge slowly dropped down in front of me... revealing Discord.

Or something that had once been Discord.

The statue of the immense hybrid creature now appeared shrunken and crumpled. The serpentine body was now contorted into a spiral, his limbs twisted and pinched. The wrinkled silver casing had formed creases and spiny ridges. The expression of fear was now one of agony. The hoses that once connected to the walls had stretched and deformed, pinching off or becoming jagged wires. Only a few still resembled tubes. The interior of the chamber was warped and melted, the smooth surface forming countless spikes all pointing in on the distorted form. The array of dark rainbow balefire eggs had been reduced to a flickering dozen. Instantly, my PipBuck began clicking like mad from the magical radiation.

"Discord," I breathed, and the others backed away. Even the Dealer looked horrified at the sight.

"The one and only," rasped a low, hollow voice.

"The internal failsafes went off?" Sanguine gaped at the contents.

"And off…and off…and off…and off. Never enough to kill, but

always enough to hurt." Discord laughed softly. "It's been a long time since I had anypony to talk to. So fill me in? I've got two centuries of hoofball seasons to catch up on. Have the Canterlot Cavaliers finally won the playoffs? Are stripes still a fashion faux pas? Oh, and are you people all a bunch of little monsters still?" We just looked at each other as he laughed. "I imagine you want to do something horrific to me too... "

"Why would you think that?" I asked as I took a few cautious steps forward.

"Because that's what ponies do," he muttered in that pained, hollow voice. "To diamond dogs, to buffalo, to dragons…griffins… minotaurs…Oh, I know you all look so cutesie wootsie, but deep down you're all monsters. Turned me into stone…twice. Locked me up…drilled into me…You have to admit, that's a little excessive for a couple of bad jokes and some screwing around with folks." He sighed. "You make it rain chocolate milk once or twice and turn a few roads to soap, and suddenly you've crossed a line."

"You did more than that, Discord," Sanguine rasped as he stood and approached the statue. "Your antics nearly overthrew the kingdom. You targeted Twilight and her friends; turned them against her." Honestly, I wasn't hearing the part about Discord throwing ponies through a rock crusher.

"Oh yes, and Twilight and her friends didn't harm Equestria in the slightest," Discord drawled softly. "You know, even at my absolute worst, I never killed anyone. Toyed with... manipulated…teased… oh yes. But kill? There're few things more boring than a corpse."

Dealer looked at me and tugged his hat down over his features. I realized it was the exact same style as P-21 now wore. I wondered if, eight or nine generations removed, the bucks could possibly be related. "The Project's main interface is there. I'll make sure your PipBuck connects straight to it." He then frowned at me. "Remember, Blackjack. Crater."

"Yeah, yeah…" I muttered as my vision began to scroll funky data. I started to hear a rhythmic banging from the direction of distribution. I looked at the terminal and the dial and buttons that Goldenblood manipulated. I gaped at the knob twisted all the way over. "You…he…two centuries in agony?" I asked, gaping at the dial and then at the crumpled statue. At once I twisted it to zero. I heard him let out a long groan of relief.

"I think you could summarize that as 'Oopsie'," Discord snickered.

“The more the metal resonates, the more Flux one can slurp out of me. Of course, even I have limits.”

“What with the fighting and all you must be feeling better, though…” Rampage said as she stared at the statue.

“Right. Murder, rape, and mass mayhem…yawn. You know, eventually, even wanton slaughter and war gets boring. Not that it matters much. It won’t be long before there’s nothing left of me but metal…As Goldenblood intended, I suspect. A permanent end to a threat to the kingdom. Oh so practical and useful. Such a dull pony.” Discord snickered sarcastically. “How about you, Trueblood? What do you think; what makes ponies do monstrous things?”

“Losing the things we love tends to strip away reluctance,” the ghoul murmured.

Crimson beams flashed up the catwalk towards us, one passing so close to my head that I felt the heat from it! Okay, Discord or Sanguine or -- no. The robots were here. The Protectaponies clomped slowly and inexorably along the metal walkway towards us, and down below I caught sight of a sentry rolling through the pink fog. “Intruders detected. Surrender yourselves immediately and face disintegration.”

My friends jumped into action, and Psychoshy snapped her wings once and launched herself into the air. The yellow pegasus arched high along the domed ceiling, nipping behind the warning signs as six Protectaponies blasted away with their crimson beams. Then, suddenly, she dove and corkscrewed down at the robots, hooking up at the very end and smashing into the row of robotic ponies. Metal bits went flying as she climbed back to the ceiling.

Before the still-functional robots could rise and resume attacking, Rampage was dancing on top of them, hooves flashing and blasting the machines to pieces. Then the sentry below began to spray the catwalk wildly with its gatling gun. Persuasion thumped, and suddenly a section of the Pink Cloud geysered. The trail of gatling fire swung wildly around as P-21 shook out the spent shell, calmly slapped a fresh grenade in the breech, clapped it shut, and patiently aimed once more. The spray chewed along the catwalk towards him. The grenade launcher ‘pomf’ed once again and lobbed the explosive in a perfect arc into the mist. The Cloud geysered again, and the robot went silent.

I looked around, but that seemed to be all of them. For the moment. But if that group had found a way in and radioed it to the

others... I tapped the terminal a few times, then smacked the monitor with my hoof, and the screen slowly glowed to life.

Project Chimera Primary Interface

Project Chimera sealed per Equestrian Royal Command.

I looked down at my PipBuck, and the arcane device mirrored the terminal. However, there was an additional box at the bottom of the PipBuck screen.

Unseal Project Chimera per EC-1101 authority: Y/N?

I glanced at the Dealer, then hit Y.

More data flashed across my vision. Now that I had my PipBuck again, I had to admit that it was refreshing to have those images. Reassuring to see the radiation meter crawling upwards in my E.F.S. Finally, the screen flashed up a number of menu options. I ignored the files and records and the like; unlike Twilight, I had no interest in reading bajillions of pages of information. Instead, I went to 'Facility Status'.

The Dealer suddenly frowned. "Shit."

"Huh? What?" I asked, looking at the not-so-figment-of-my-imagination pony.

"Somepony's accessing this place now that it's unsealed…and somepony else is trying to cut off that access," he said with a scowl, his eyes staring off into space.

"You can interface with the facility?"

"Your PipBuck is in command of every functional machine on this place's network now, so yeah." A diagram popped up in my vision full of flashing green and red lights. Orange lines kept trying to creep into the diagram... they had consumed the hexagon marked 'Distribution' and were spreading into the rest of the facility. A green line was wiggling in from the security hub. I couldn't make heads or hooves of it, but he seemed to understand what it meant.

I nodded. "Okay. Your job is to cut off that outside access, then get us locked down and close the doors. Just don't blow the facility up till we're out of here."

"She says it so casually," Discord murmured.

Dealer looked at me, then nodded. Blue lines radiated out from production, intercepting the orange and green intruding into the facility. They cut off the creeping orange lines and drove them back, stabbing into distribution. The green line snaked around, as if evading the Dealer's efforts to push it out. "I can't seal off the doors to distribution. Looks like they cut through the drive systems to get

them open. I can seal off the other sections, though, and activate what turrets I can. But they're going to get in eventually." From throughout the facility came the distant booming of mechanized doors closing.

"Right," I nodded, waving my hoof in front of my face to try and banish the diagram. One way or another, it disappeared, and then I looked at the remaining glowing balefire eggs. "P-21, Psychoshy, Rampage…you three are on our defense. P-21, can you use those balefire eggs? Let Psycho do some bombing runs when they get close?"

"Maybe," he replied as he looked at them skeptically.

"My name is Fluttershy," the yellow pegasus said with a scowl.

"Fooled me," Discord chuckled. "But you never can be too sure of the quiet ones."

"You're not Fluttershy," I retorted. "You're not quiet and nice like her, or scared of your own shadow. But you can kick flank a lot better than she could. That's what we need right now." That seemed to mollify her a bit. "Now, help P-21 get those bombs down… without blowing yourself to pieces."

The mare grimaced, then finally nodded. "Are you going to kill Sanguine?"

I frowned, not sure of that answer myself. "Only if he forces me to." Psychoshy looked at me the same way Rampage did when she talked about my softheartedness. "You think I should?"

"I know he still plans on killing you. Just because you spared him…don't think he's planning on sparing you." She scowled, looking at the ghoul who was standing apart, looking impatient. "Part of me wants to kill him myself. I let him use me…but…I didn't expect him to throw me away."

"And the other part?"

"Wants to tear your head off and hope that's enough for him to…to care about me," she admitted as she frowned and shook her head. "Just…do whatever it is you're going to do." The yellow pegasus started to pace. "I need to kill some things. A whole lot of things. I just wish I had something a little more meaty than robots to crush." Then she pointed at Rampage and snarled, "And I want my power hooves back!"

"Yeah, yeah. And I want a lifetime supply of Party Time Mint-als. Forget it!" the striped filly said as she admired the devices on the ends of her legs. "These things are great! I can kill things as a kid

with ‘em!”

“Can we shut up and get these bombs out?” P-21 grumbled as he dug out a tablet of Rad-X. “I just want to blast this place to the moon and get out of here.”

The silver statue sighed. “Sure, Discord. Mess around with the little ponies. They’re so cute and cuddly. What trouble could they *possibly* be?”

I stepped back from the alcove, letting them work. The Dealer frowned as he looked at Sanguine. “How long do you think we have till we’re overrun?” I asked before he could start questioning my decision to help the ghoul.

“An hour or two,” Dealer replied. “Blackjack, about Sanguine... the things he’s done….”

“Damn it, I get enough of this from P-21!” I hissed in frustration. “I know he’s done messed-up things. I get it! And I wish that I could be the Stable Dweller and just shoot him dead for doing it! But I need him to help Scotch, he needs me to help his family, and you need me if you want this place blown up. So just drop it already.”

He finally sighed and nodded. “Very well. Then hurry. They’re in the loading docks and are shooting their way through the hatches. It’ll take them a while to get into production; this place had the thickest doors installed.”

“Right.” I trotted to Sanguine. “Let’s go. I need a Scotch copied, and you need your family saved.”

He stared at me for the longest time, as if he couldn’t exactly believe this was happening, and then nodded once. “I’ll meet you in the copyroom. I hope you have a blood sample of the pony you want copied. Otherwise, this is all academic.”

I frowned, then nodded in return. “Scotch got cut out in that wood. She bled pretty badly on my barding a few hours ago. Will that work?” Hopefully putting the environmental suit on over it had preserved the blood.

“It should,” he said as we walked along the catwalk, him leading the way. One sign of a trick, and I’d be into S.A.T.S. and ready to see how hard my cyberlegs could kick. He turned his head to glance over his shoulder at me. “I am sorry, Blackjack. For what I did to you.”

“Sorry?” I gaped at him a moment. “You killed everypony in Brimstone’s Fall and left Dusty Trails alive in a crusher and you’re sorry?”

"I am. If you'd died... if EC-1101 was destroyed…" He shook his head. "We'd all be doomed."

"Why?" I asked with a small frown. "You mentioned something about Horizons back in the arena. Fill me in now?"

"We really haven't the time for details," he said with a huff, paused, then answered, "When Twilight Sparkle thought that Goldenblood was impeding her research, Luna had him stripped of his directorship. To be honest, I felt the Princess's response was somewhat…lacking. It was a slap on the hoof, really. Still, she appointed Horse as director of the O.I.A., and I supported him."

"It got you put back on Project Chimera," I replied.

"Yes. But in the weeks after he was appointed, Horse discovered disturbing things about Goldenblood. Very disturbing things. There were projects in place that the Princess hadn't authorized. Projects like Chimera, Steelpony, and Starfall were clearly for war usage, and projects like Eternity were old news. Other projects like Partypooper and Redoubt were highly classified, but Luna approved of them…or at least she didn't disapprove of them. But Horse found two projects that directly challenged her rule. One was a project called 'Gardens of Equestria', which seemed to be designed to restore the country in the event of a truly overwhelming defeat. The suggestion that such a thing could happen and the waste of resources creating it were bad enough. But Horizons…" I leaned forward, nearly salivating. "Horse said it was a weapon of some kind, capable of utterly destroying the zebras in their entirety. I suppose it was some sort of super megaspell."

I blinked... that was it? Fun. As if regular megaspells weren't enough! "And it's tied into EC-1101?"

"Luna couldn't even find Horizons or Gardens…so she closed every O.I.A. project she could, hoping that that would work. Goldenblood refused to help, of course... " He shook his head. "Really, I think the fact that he was keeping secrets from Luna angered her far more than the projects themselves."

"She trusted him that much?"

"Yes. I think she finally realized just how far Goldenblood had strayed in his loyalty. She was infuriated that he would waste staggering resources on those two projects without her knowledge and approval. She insisted he disclose everything he knew on Horizons and Gardens. He refused." The ghoul hesitated, then laughed mirthlessly. "Luna did not take it well."

“What happened?”

“He was sentenced to execution…after being mentally rendered by M.o.M.’s finest interrogators, of course. That was when he finally cracked. He screamed and railed about conspiracies and deception as he was dragged away. I wasn’t there, but I heard that he was ranting about Horse and the Ministry Mares and ancient zebra plots and Nightmare Moon. Completely spit his bit.” Sanguine chuckled, grinning at the memory before he sighed and added, “Unfortunately, I had an important meeting on the same day of the execution and couldn't find a way to get out of it and attend. The meeting didn't end up mattering anyway; the bombs fell the very next day.”

That was some interesting timing... and I wasn’t capable of believing in coincidence anymore; not with anything involving Goldenblood. Sanguine reached some stairs dropping down into the Pink Cloud. “I have blood samples in my lab downstairs. I’ll be right back.”

I waited, wondering if this was some sort of deception; maybe he was getting a gun? Maybe. If this place was working, then he could just shoot me now and get what he wanted. He had to know that he couldn’t hold the complex against all those robots, though... but just in case, I kept my gun loose in its holster and practiced trying to control it. My magic was getting stronger, but I was still a long way from wielding a shotgun again.

The left side of my face was all twitchy; I frowned and reached up, feeling the rough and jagged edges of melted hide. Did I... no. I couldn’t look that bad. I just needed more time to regenerate. Somepony would have said something... I swallowed hard; nothing I could do now. I just had to hope that, whatever Sanguine’s breath had done, my body could heal it. Dealer had vanished again; was he watching me now or supervising the facility?

Sanguine returned wearing a pair of saddlebags. “You keep your stuff down in that Pink Cloud?”

“Can you think of a more secure location?” he retorted. “You’ve seen how effective it is.”

I scowled. Don’t smash the ghoul, Blackjack. He’s going to grow you another Scotch Tape. You need him, Blackjack. “Yeah. Look what it did to my face,” I said as we trotted back towards the copyroom. A door had closed across the pipes, but as we approached it hissed open again.

"Yes…well…I was trying to win," he said defensively. We entered the room with the golden tree, and he shrugged off his saddlebags and levitated out four small glass ampoules filled with a dark maroon substance. The blanks just milled about. Even a fatty just stood by. I supposed that, when not loaded up with Rage, they were just as docile as the rest. Boo found a seat and watched us both.

"You're making four?" I said with a frown.

"Yes. Four healthy bodies. I'll fuse my family to them…and then myself," he said as we trotted down the stairs. With Chimera active, it was now studded with tiny lights and hummed faintly.

"A ghoul fused with a blank?" My mind tried to wrap my head around that one. "Would that even work?"

Sanguine laughed. "Blackjack, I am so far into hypothetical guesses that I might as well just be throwing reagents against the wall and hoping for a beneficial reaction." He lifted the ampule to a hollow in the tree's trunk. There was a soft hum, and a red vein crept along the bark to the branches overhead. Instantly, a small growth began to slowly swell. Unlike the others, it was a rich orange. The next was a light beige, and the one after that a deep red. Finally, a tan pony began to grow.

Then I reached down to peel away the tatters of the hazmat suit and froze. "Come on…get off…" I muttered, scraping at the tape. Funny…my hoof couldn't find an edge. Not…not anywhere. It was like the tape wasn't simply stuck to me but rather was fused to my legs! I grit my teeth, frowning as I tugged…and tugged…

"Ah…yes. That can happen on exposure to Pink Cloud," Sanguine said delicately as I jerked at the suit's neck connection and felt the exact same thing!

"Get it off! Get it off! What the heck did you do?" I gasped as I tugged…The suit felt loose on most of my body, but at the seams…

"Your pegasus friend can handle a scalpel, yes? My sources suggested she had some medical background. Ah, and something stronger for your enhancements?" Sanguine asked. I swallowed and nodded. "Good. She's going to have to cut the suit off your hide. I'm afraid that, otherwise, it's a permanent addition."

* * *

There wasn't much to do for a bit. I wanted to talk to him... but it was all just one great big thorny mess in my head and he was

fussing with the pods as they grew. One of them 'popped' early on and he'd gone into a rage for five minutes before adding more blood and starting over. Rampage, Psychoshy, and P-21 were taking care of our momentary defenses. I was doing all I could to not pick at where the suit had fused with me. My legs I could probably free with a belt sander and scrap metal, but my skin? The itchy sensation was driving me right up the wall. Sanguine had cut a hole in the hazmat suit and scraped enough of Scotch's congealed blood off my leather barding to set an olive pod growing…. and a milky white pod next to it. That'd better have just been a coincidence! ... Well, there were a lot of white ones... calm down, Blackjack. At least for now.

Finally he seemed to calm enough that I could ask a question. "So…how'd you hook up with Goldenblood in the first place? I mean, I know that Silver Stripe faced all kinds of flak for being half zebra, but you were full pony."

"I…made a mistake," he admitted after a moment. "I was just out of medical school and was drafted. I got sent east of Hoofington, near the Zanzebra Strait. The zebras had a number of forward positions and were digging in, so the army was called in to blast them out again. This was…five years after the start? Cannons were a big new addition, and firearms were issued for the first time ever. New wounds and injuries required whole new medical procedures on the battlefield."

"So what happened?"

"It was a mess. Twenty-four-hour surgical sessions. Amputations were common. Unicorn medics like myself were constantly burning out our horns trying to heal; there were so many! Surgery on gunshot or heavy shrapnel wounds was untried and suspect. An officer came in with a bloodied flank…superficial injury. He could have waited, but he insisted. I should have made him wait…but he was an officer and promised me a rotation back to Manehattan. So I helped him. When I was done, I was burned out. Couldn't even lift a scalpel." He sighed and shook his head, staring off into space. "A dozen ponies died while I was dicking around with a stupid flesh wound.

"He honored his word and put in a commendation for me, but it didn't matter. My superiors had faulted me for violating triage procedures. When I was pulled off the line, my record came with me. I had skills, but the word in the profession was that I was a

opportunist, willing to let a dozen ponies die just to get what I wanted. I finally got a position, but I faced that attitude. So... finally, I embraced it. Anything to get ahead. To get what I deserved."

"So when Goldenblood came along with an offer, you jumped at it," I replied.

"Yes. He played me perfectly with an alternative route to advancement. I should have known better, but it seemed too good to pass up. The precise mix of an opportunity to prove myself and all but guaranteed personal advancement and prestige. I should have realized what a thorough manipulator he was," the ghoul said bitterly, and I had to remind myself that he was just as guilty as others. "All I had to do was keep my mouth shut and take care of Fluttershy's pregnancy."

"But something went wrong."

He nodded and sighed. "Some mares are ill-suited for pregnancy. Fluttershy's was…difficult. The pressures of being the Ministry of Peace's leader and mascot were coupled with a real sense of responsibility for injured ponies, not to mention the secrecy of the pregnancy itself. I recommended she take a leave of absence, but apparently that was unacceptable." He paced back and forth slowly. "There were a number of small alarms, and I was tasked with coming up with contingencies. Stasis was one such contingency, and we investigated technological methods of saving premature foals. Rarity and Goldenblood squashed rumors right and left, kept the truth concealed from the public and most of her friends. Finally, one night, she was brought in in a hysterical state. Something had happened and she was in premature labor. There was nothing we could do to halt it."

I pressed my hooves to my mouth as I listened. That it happened at all was horrible, but it happening to Fluttershy of all ponies was almost too terrible to contemplate. "What happened?"

"At first, we thought the foal stillborn. No heartbeat. No breathing. Fluttershy was inconsolable. She was taken out, and I rechecked for a heartbeat. To my shock and amazement, it was there. I put the foal in stasis. It was such a fragile life, barely there at all. I couldn't risk telling Fluttershy only to have the infant die. It would have devastated her. No matter my differences with Goldenblood, I couldn't do that to her. I kept it secret from everypony. Reported the foal as being born to an unknown mother who died in an

accident."
"And you never told Goldenblood?"
He snorted. "Why would I? Goldenblood was no friend of mine; he should have died at Littlehorn."
I stared at him a moment. Didn't he know? "Sanguine… Goldenblood was her father."
"What…?" He stared at me, then blinked once, in a perfect imitation of Boo. "They told me her father had been a patient injured in an attack. Are you telling me…" And then he started to laugh, the boiled, wet noise sounding like he was choking to death. "That…would have been good to know two centuries ago. I'd never have had to gone to Twilight Sparkle with the potential of alicorns if I'd known that!"
"So…you just kept her in stasis for years?" I asked, and he nodded.
"Yes. I built the first stasis pod prototype myself, in my garage actually, just as Chimera was set up for Fluttershy…so that nopony would ever have to go through what she did. I don't know what happened between them; he was always so cool around her that it never occurred to me they were in a relationship. We perfected the stasis pods, so we thought; I should have been rich from the invention... but ah well. Then came fusion spells to improve on ponies. Blanks were introduced last as a source of organs and test material. I was able to fuse the infant with a healthy pegasus blank of her own body, and that stabilized her enough to survive."
Then Sanguine groaned. "Suddenly, I had a treasure that I dared not use! Fluttershy's child…yet it had been years since her miscarriage. Fluttershy was up to her wings in duties and responsibilities. I couldn't add to that. Plus, as much as it shames me to admit it, I liked having her child as an ace in my pocket. Goldenblood was on his way out. Horse became director…why take her out of stasis? I could just hold onto her until the opportunity presented itself. Wait until the opportune moment…perhaps when an opening at the Helpinghoof clinic presented itself. Or even... perhaps if Fluttershy wanted to retire and had to name a successor?" He licked his lips, making my mane creep. Right, wanting to use a foal to blackmail for a position. Nothing off about that! "So I put her back in stasis…the only life she'd known."
"And then the bombs fell and she was left in there." Just like at the Fluttershy Medical Center.
"Yes. I have to admit, with my own problems and preoccupations

after the apocalypse, I forgot about her. I tried to use this place and my limited access to ensure my own survival. Once that was established, it was a constant struggle to keep my sanity intact. Saving my family…Project Chimera…they were anchors. I experimented with the stasis pods from time to time out of boredom, but my meddling usually resulted in the death of the occupant. Then, quite by accident, I successfully opened one, and the occupant survived."

"Let me guess. Psychoshy?"

"Yes," he replied. "But... I discovered something about stasis… while it does preserve the body, it does not necessarily preserve the mind. She'd been a foal when she was put in. She didn't have any life experiences; that endless stability was simply the world as she knew it. Her emergence into the real world, on the other hoof, was terribly traumatic." He closed his eyes. "But a colt or filly, trapped in place for centuries…"

I saw 'PLAY' painted on the walls.

"So…when you realized that, it lit a fire under your ass to get your family restored?"

He nodded slowly. "Perhaps not exactly like that, but yes. You have the crux of it." Suddenly there was a sharp detonation that I felt through the floor. One of P-21's balefire eggs going off. I really hoped that that wouldn't set off other things before we were ready. Once we had our stuff, we were going to be out the tunnel to the river. Then I'd wish him the best of luck…he'd need it, given how many ponies wanted him dead. The ghoul seemed to read my nervousness. "Relax. The only way this place blows is if Discord breaks free. And even you aren't dumb enough to do that."

Oh, he really didn't know me that well, did he?

"So…Discord. How'd he get tied into Chimera? What's his story?" I asked softly.

"He's some sort of manifested spirit of chaos, but his magic…his ability to do wild and unpredictable magic at will…was the cornerstone of Chimera. By extracting his magical potential and stabilizing it, we were able to create persistent magical effects that would have otherwise required an army of unicorns to perform. Few ponies realized or appreciated how Flux advanced the war effort."

I nodded. "But is he dangerous?"

"Incredibly," Sanguine replied, but then he frowned. "Or…at least

he was. Seeing him like that…" Then he shook his head. "No. It must be some kind of trick. He's the sort to try and deceive others for his own benefit." I gave him a flat look; he was one to talk. Unfortunately, he couldn't take his eyes off the swelling 'fruit' of the copy machine.

"But can he die?" I asked tentatively. He could hurt. That was for sure.

"I'm not sure. Not in the conventional sense, certainly. Shoot him full of holes, turn him to stone, or cut his head off, and he'd simply pop out from behind the friend you just killed by accident to have a good laugh at your frustration. The only substance we ever encountered that could stop him was a special meteoric iron found beneath the city. Indeed, its very nature seems almost hostile to Discord. Goldenblood used it to trap him, and Horse discovered how to resonate it, increasing the Flux yield by ten times."

"But why…I don't understand." He looked at me flatly, and I said, "I shoot things, remember?"

"Clearly Stable-Tec was terribly negligent in your education," he muttered, then sighed. "Arcane science 101, then…magic resonates at a wide variety of frequencies. Everything in the universe has its own set of wavelengths. In nature, most of these waves harmlessly clash with each other…like static, if you will, but intelligent beings and certain magical organisms can focus this magic to specific effects. Unicorn craft, dragon fire, pegasus flight, earth pony mudloving, diamond dog digging, and so on. Races have similar frequency patterns, and every individual has their own unique spectrum. Your soul, some might say. These unique frequencies become more or less fixed as you age and, in ponies, manifest as a cutie mark." He paused, his lip twitching as if wondering if I knew what a cutie mark was.

"Signifying our special talents. That much I know," I said with a huff. "So, everything in the universe vibrates, then?"

"A simplification, but yes. Normally little happens; the waves cancel out one another in nature. But when intelligent creatures start to work together, then the frequencies can align on large scales. The magical potential of one pony is amplified by the magical potential of others. They build and support each other. Conversely, they can interfere with each other, leading to aggravation and anger. That interference releases energy, usually in very small amounts, that feeds and empowers Discord. But the

meteoric iron beneath Hoofington has a far more potent effect on the resonances of others: it destroys them."

"What? But didn't you say that that's what happens in nature?" I frowned, feeling like I was back in school. Being taught by a murderous mad undead pony was, at least, a step up from my old teacher.

"Cancellation is not destruction. The waves are still there, they're just not expressed. But the meteoric iron doesn't cancel; it somehow eliminates the waves of others. You can cast every spell you want at it and it will simply destroy the magic, releasing great amounts of energy as it does so. The only way to affect it at all is to use magic that vibrates at exactly the same frequency as the metal. I could never do it…" he said with a small frown. "It felt…wrong." Coming from Sanguine, that sounded significant.

"That's the only way?"

"Well…the only way that I know of. I know Trottenheimer experimented with the metal quite extensively for Project Starfall. Trying to make a mostly nonmagical means of mass destruction more powerful than our greatest megaspell or the enemy's balefire bombs. Quite outside my field of expertise. I always wondered what happened to him; he disappeared quite abruptly. Goldenblood probably had him killed." He caught my confused look. "Our wives were friends."

"He was working at Ironshod R&D, making a gun," I said. Sanguine looked like I'd just told him that Trottenheimer had been cleaning sewer pipes.

"A gun?" Sanguine asked flatly, as if he couldn't quite believe it. "Goldenblood had Equestria's finest megaspell researcher…making a gun?"

"Yep, but it's a hell of a gun. Actually, it's…not really a gun, you know. It's more like some kind of super bomb or something that points the blast in one direction. I mean, it should blow me or itself apart with that much force, but it uses magic fields to keep me from becoming a missile." He looked at me in confusion. "What? Just because I don't know squat about magical junk, I can't comprehend something like recoil?" I rubbed my chin. "What was Project Starfall? That's another one I don't know anything about."

"In a nutshell, weaponizing megaspells. The specifics were all grossly classified, of course."

I frowned. "Why wasn't that done by the M.A.S.? Why'd the O.I.A.

have to do it?"

Sanguine blinked. "I really have no idea. The M.A.S. debated megaspell weapons use for years. Fluttershy, of course, was adamantly against it. She constantly implored Twilight not to pursue the research. I suppose that's why the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion was so appealing to Twilight."

"Too bad the zebras made balefire bombs with them," I muttered sullenly.

"Yes. One of the greatest failures of counter-intelligence in history. Nopony knows how the information got into their filthy hooves, but once it was, balefire bombs were inevitable. And thus so was Project Starfall. I understand that there was a standing execution order for the pony responsible for the information being stolen. Goldenblood of all ponies publicly called for a ceasefire when it was revealed, saying the war had become too dangerous. Almost cost him his directorship." Sanguine shook his head. "Luna wanted to win the war. The zebras wanted to win. Everypony simply was too focused on victory to care about 'impossible hypotheticals' like balefire bomb armageddon."

"You don't think that Goldenblood leaked them, do you?"

Sanguine shook his head. "Why would he? With megaspells under our control, we would have been able to systematically blast the zebras to pieces. Handing them over simply prolonged the war." He sighed and shook his head. "Zebras excelled at espionage. Robronco robots turned into zebra battle machines. They even had operatives magically transformed into ponies as deep moles towards the end of the war. It was a nightmare for Image and Morale."

"Image? Why would Rarity care about zebra infiltration?" I frowned. "Wasn't that Pinkie Pie's thing?"

"Oh, she wasn't nearly as blatant as Pinkie Pie, but Image were masters at surveillance and information management. Nopony knew more about what was happening in Equestria than Rarity…except perhaps Goldenblood. Image constantly filtered publications, spun stories, sponsored works to keep everypony working together and on message. When there was a disruption, she usually had it managed by the time Ministry of Morale arrived to deal with the perpetrators."

I frowned at that thought, remembering Goldenblood threatening Rarity to get her to cover up the projects. Why? What leverage could you possibly have on a pony like her? I shook my head.

Secrets and lies. Closing my eyes, I imagined Equestria as a tangled knot with more and more stress and tension, pulling tighter and tighter. Then something snapped…Goldenblood going crazy? Had that been it? Or had something else come along that blasted everything apart?

What in Equestria did Goldenblood need a gun like Folly for? He wasn't a soldier. Why would he need something that could pack the punch of a megaspell?

No, not just a megaspell. A portable megaspell. A single pony megaspell, one that would kill the shooter. Goldenblood had shown Twilight the origin of Flux to try and convince her to abandon her research... but had he needed to? Twilight had been honestly shocked to discover the source; had he wanted to, Goldenblood might have stalled her for months. Years, maybe. If he'd died, would Twilight have ever found out, or would Discord have been buried under O.I.A. bureaucracy? He'd chosen to show her. Had it been because he wanted to stop the alicorn project and couldn't think of any other way to do it, out of guilt for Gardens, or something else altogether?

Maybe he'd planned on doing something that resulted in his own death... only he'd been arrested and sentenced to execution first?

What would you need a gun like Folly for? Luna? Celestia? Discord? A dragon, maybe? Spike?

"Ugh…why can't a smart pony figure all this stuff out?" I whined as I thumped the side of my head with a hoof. "It's simple…smart ponies work out this mystery crap and tell me where to shoot, I shoot, we win! A round of Wild Pegasus to celebrate afterwards. This should not be so complicated!"

Boo bumped her head against my side, then looked at me with her wide, vacuous stare and a small smile. I blinked in confusion, and she bumped me again. "Wha…what do you want, Boo? Are you hungry?" I started to dig out another snack cake, but she just nudged me again. Finally, I sighed. "Sorry, I dunno what you want…" I reached down to rub her ragged milky white mane, and she closed her eyes, smiling and sighing. I caught Sanguine staring at me. "What?" I asked, a touch defensively as I scratched her ears.

"Nothing. I'm trying to hypothesize why she is so different from the other blanks." He rubbed his chin, narrowing his gaze. "She might have stepped in some Flux, I suppose, though that tends to create gross physical changes. She looks a few weeks older than most

blanks, too."

"You don't have to talk about her like she's an animal," I said as kept scratching. She lay down beside me, resting her head against my shoulder. "Maybe she just figured out how to survive?"

"She *is* an animal, Blackjack. And a stupid one at that. Blanks will starve to death if you don't feed them." He sighed and shook his head. "Now, speaking of blanks…it looks like ours are almost done. If you don't mind, I'd suggest letting me harvest the organs you need here and then treat them for preservation during transport. As I recall, your filly has been exposed to chlorine? That means new lungs and replacement eyes. Potentially hide for skin grafts if the exposure is severe. It'd be far simpler to transport the parts rather than hauling around three blanks."

"Three?"

"Yes. Your friend there, your filly, and yourself." He pointed up at the sac hanging next to the olive bag. It... did look a little different from the rest of the white ones; it might have been a little dingier and pinkish than the others. "It looks like blood contamination has provided you with a spare."

"A spare? You made a copy of me?" I gaped. "I don't need any spare parts!" I looked at him, about to begin the smashing. Did he really expect me to believe that making a spare of me had been an accident?

"You might want to look into a mirror before you say that," he rasped. "I know you probably have some sort of regeneration talisman built in, but the scars I'm looking at…and with what she's going to have to cut off you to get that barding off... well…trust me. You'll need a few spare strips of hide."

I also thought of Glory having to harvest organs from a filly…it wouldn't be pretty. "... Okay. Pack in there whatever you think she'll need." I frowned. "Is it hard to do transplants?"

"With the proper healing facilities and an auto-doc, not at all."

"Did you leave proper healing facilities when you trashed the Fluttershy Medical Center?" I asked in return.

"Please…I might be a monster, but I had nothing but respect for Fluttershy. We shot up the guards at the entrance and then moved on," he replied. Oh, was that all? Suddenly, the orange sac ripped open and deposited a slimy orange mare onto the grimy floor. The ooze covering her rapidly evaporated off the mare's body, leaving her sitting there dully.

Sanguine froze, and Boo and I were completely forgotten as he slowly approached her. “Sunflower…” he murmured as he stretched out one of his boiled-looking, split hooves towards her pumpkin mane, brushing it out of her face. The limb trembled as he pressed it to his lips and let out a choking noise. Then he made it again and again, bowing his head.

Sanguine was crying, as much as he could cry. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t fix this sooner…I’m sorry I couldn’t save you…” he croaked as he reached forward to hold her as his entire body shook. “I’m sorry, my love. So very sorry.” There was no forgiveness from the orange unicorn though. No smile of reassurance. No returning that gesture. He might as well have been apologizing to a doll.

There was another detonation…and another. They sounded closer. A moment later, the olive pod ruptured and dropped Scotch Tape on to the floor. I trotted over towards her, but she didn’t even look at me. Then the white pod popped open and my copy fell in front of me, landing on her head. She sat there, blinking but not looking around.

I stared at her a moment, watching the magic goop covering her vanish. She looked…healthy. Complete. I sure hoped I didn’t share that expression, though. No taint mutations, no cybernetics, no scars, no barding fused to her hide…Sweet Celestia, in another month, would there be anything left of me? I tore my eyes from her, trying to crush down those worries and fears.

“We’ll go to Friendship City…maybe even Tenpony if I can pass for mortal again! You’ll be safe. You’ll be healthy. I promise, Sunflower. I promise,” the ghoul rasped as he pressed his face into her chest. “Promise…” he hissed softly. There was another detonation.

“Um…Sanguine…maybe you should…um…go do what you said you were going to do?” I asked, not looking at the copies of myself and Scotch. Did I really want to imagine what he could be doing with them when he was harvesting the ‘parts’ we needed? Calm down, Blackjack. A copy of you wouldn’t do much good for Sanguine. He’d had a pony with Ministry Mare blood, purer than mine, and she hadn’t been able to get EC-1101 to work. A blank wouldn’t either.

“Ah... Ah, yes. I’ll go and take care of that. The preservation talismans will keep the tissues viable for a day or two. It’s the same technology as used in the stasis pods. Just don’t take too long

before getting back to your friend," he muttered as he tugged at the copies of myself and Scotch's manes. Obediently, 'I' was led off to slaughter.

I really, *really* didn't like this place.

There was another explosion I felt through my hooves. "Dealer? Dealer? Can you hear me?" I asked, looking around. Nothing. Ugh, I hated waiting! I wanted to go find P-21 and the others, wanted to make sure Sanguine wasn't trying anything funny with my body. Instead, I just sighed and stroked Boo's ears as an army of robots slowly chewed their way through this place.

The remaining three blanks plopped out one after the next. I found an extension cord in a maintenance closet and led them slowly into the fusion room. They simply stood by, blinking and looking around dully.

"Blackjack!" Rampage squealed as she ran in, her hide marred and power hooves blackened. "We got big trouble. Tell me you're almost done." P-21 and Psychoshy followed after her. "We're down to one balefire egg, and they've brought a robot that's just sawing its way through everything in front of it. They're chewing through the doors that've dropped."

"How long do we have?" I asked.

"Before everything's overrun? Twenty minutes…maybe?" P-21 replied as he looked the way he'd come. "We decoyed them into the security wing. They're picking it over now. The distribution area is completely gone. They're probably carving their way into the harvesting area now."

"They're what?" I gasped, and turned to race after Sanguine. I didn't have time to explain things as I backtracked to the room with the bloody tables. Acrid smoke filled the room from the far door, where a prismatic beam was slicing a circle through the thick metal. I saw still forms on the bloody tables…mostly still forms…one flayed-looking unicorn still drew breath. Okay... suddenly the whole spare parts thing went from 'stuff I needed' to 'what the fuck!' He'd skinned my copy alive! I tried to think of some way to kill 'myself'... Psychoshy would take care of it, right? First things first, though. There were two blood-smeared white crates at the feet of the tables. "Get those, P-21!" I yelled, pointing at the white crates. They had straps that would go around his neck. Not ideal, but I'd rather he had them than Psychoshy.

"Where's Sanguine?" Psychoshy yelled as she flew into the center

of the room. I was glad the massive manticore had departed.

"Getting his family," I yelled back, pointing a hoof through a door at all the pony-sized stasis pods. Now would be the time to tell her to... maybe Rampage could do it? Then we heard a mare scream, shared a look, and darted inside.

"Sunflower! It's me! Trueblood! I'm here to save you! To save you!" the ghoul cried desperately as he tried to hold the thrashing mare. She didn't look that far from a ghoul herself, her orange hide mottled and burned-looking. Near the pods were three yellow hazmat suits, long ago discarded. In two other pods, one unicorn colt was curled up in a fetal position, his eyes wide and staring. The other cried and screamed for his mommy and daddy. They weren't much better off.

"Get away from me! Get away!" she screamed as she beat on him with her hooves. "Trueblood!" she wailed. What had she experienced, waiting for two centuries?

"Ma'am! Please! He's trying to help you!" I yelled. She took one look at me and let out another scream of horror. All four hooves kicked out at once, knocking him away as she jumped out of the pod. She was coughing and choking, but hysteria had given her the strength to fight and to run for safety.

Too bad we were the safest things in this place.

She levitated up the fetal foal who trembled in shock and the other jumped to her side. Together they ran for the door, yelling for Trueblood and their daddy. Then they caught sight of Rampage and P-21 lugging two bloody boxes and skidded to a stop.

"Hi," Rampage said, waving a sparking power hoof. P-21 nodded, tugging the brim of his hat. Sunflower just gasped as she slowly moved around them. Her breathing was becoming even more ragged, bloody froth creeping down from the corner of her mouth.

"Sunflower! We're here to help you! Please!" wailed Sanguine, plaintively. "I love you! Please!" he begged. Psychoshy just turned away as she hovered there, clenching her eyes shut as her hooves shook.

"P-21, dart them!" I said; we had no time to waste. But the blue buck looked at the bulky containers and his saddlebags and then gave me a look asking exactly how he was supposed to do that. Then the trio scampered past him into the organ collection room.

"Oh for the love of…" I growled as we raced after them. We didn't have time for this. I had no idea if we'd have the time to fuse even

one of his family at this rate. From my memory it didn't take long to combine a cockatrice with a pony, but wouldn't we need more unicorns? Or maybe they'd streamlined the fusion process? I spilled out into the harvesting room and the mare just sat there, staring in shock at the bloody tables. "Look, you need to calm down... "

"Stay back!" Sunflower sobbed as she hugged her colts close. "Trueblood! Where are you, True?!" she wailed. I glanced at the door…that prismatic beam was almost through.

Suddenly the glass separating the pods from the harvesting room shattered as Psychoshy flew through and pounced on the sobbing Sunflower. "You stupid cunt!" the yellow mare snarled. "There is your Trueblood! There!" she said as she pointed a hoof at the ghoul. She grit her teeth as she trembled, clenching her eyes shut as tears ran down her cheeks. "He's fought for two centuries to bring you back and heal you and you are fucking it up! He loves you that damned much! More than anypony else! So calm the fuck down… let him help you…and…and…have your family."

Sunflower stared at Psychoshy a few seconds, blinking and then coughing before she looked at the ghoul. "True? Is it…it is you… isn't it?"

Psychoshy flew away, turning her back to the scene. I couldn't blame her.

"Sunflower…" Sanguine breathed…and for a moment he wasn't a monster. He was just a pony, an old and tired and desperate pony whose long nightmare was about to be over. Maybe he didn't deserve it; maybe he'd bought that happiness with misery and blood…but he had it.

Then the door gave way; the slab of steel fell into the room with a deafening clang that made us all freeze and in rolled a four-legged, rainbow-painted behemoth. It was almost as big as the tank we'd faced earlier! A beam cannon pointed at us, glittering and flashing, while on its other side whirred a gatling gun that looked more sized to firing grenades than bullets.

When you see an Ultra-Sentinel you'll know it…and then you'll die.

The prismatic beam sliced diagonally towards Sanguine, and I magically yanked him back to prevent him from turning into magical vapor. I had no clue how my horn had just managed that without popping like a five watt bulb, but I didn't have time to contemplate it. I was running on little but panic now. "Out! Out! Get back to the fusion room!" I screamed. Rampage and P-21

wasted no time running for safety. “Get to storage! There’s a tunnel out of this place there!”

Sunflower was another story. She stared at the machine in horror, holding her children to her in terror. I tried to hold Sanguine back, but he thrashed free. The ghoul raced forward towards his family as the Ultra tracked his motion with the gatling grenade launcher. I extended a hoof in a futile gesture, as if I could somehow magically pull them all to safely. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything.

The grenade launcher began to boom, firing a burst less than a second. I swore time seemed to enter S.A.T.S. as Sanguine held Sunflower. At least they had this moment to go together.

Then a yellow flash dropped down and grabbed him tight. Wings lifted and pulled and tore him away as the microgrenades struck the family. In an instant, just an instant, they exploded in a cloud of shrapnel and transformed into three bloody lumps.

Sanguine stared down as she hovered there, then let out a scream only an undead throat could make. It wasn’t a word; it was a single jagged note of utter despair. I’d never seen a ghoul go feral before, but I was pretty sure it was just like this.

Psychoshy and I raced back, the pegasus struggling with the wildly thrashing ghoul. I saw the Dealer standing beside the door that led to the fusion chamber and yelled, “Close the door!” as we passed through. The door immediately hissed, the two sides sliding horizontally towards each other in the middle as the Ultra rolled after us. It fired its prismatic beam into the wall where the door emerged, and there was a mechanical squeal of tortured metal. The door halted, leaving a hoof wide gap in the middle. The Ultra proceeded to slowly cut and bend the metal away.

“Sanguine, please!” Psychoshy begged as she faced off with the deadly undead monster. He spewed noxious pink streams at her that she barely dodged. “You don’t need them! You can start a new life with me! Please!” she begged as she backed off. The ghoul simply hissed as he drew in his breath…She closed her eyes, her yellow hide blotchy in places where his breath had burned her.

But Sanguine wasn’t looking at her any more. The ghoul stared at the four copies; himself and his family. Psychoshy was forgotten as he stepped towards them, his eyes wide and cloudy. He sat down, staring at the four. Boo left them, rejoining me as she looked on in confusion and bumped my shoulder with her head.

Slowly, I approached Sanguine and swallowed. “Sanguine…” But

he didn't answer. He simply looked at the four copies, a pony who had lost everything. Another pony sucked dry by this horrible place. As much as I hated him, I felt sorry for him too.

"Blackjack!" Rampage shouted as she raced in from the copyroom. "We're screwed! The storage room is filled with robots. Hundreds of them! I've never seen so many before."

And there went our way out of this place…

The door to harvesting was slowly peeling open as the Ultra carved its way inside. I looked at Sanguine staring at the copies, ignoring Psychoshy as she sobbed brokenly. "Trueblood…" I spoke softly.

"We were such a nice family. Don't we look nice?" he whispered. "Sandalwood…" He pointed at the tan colt, then the brown one. "And Mahogany…Sunflower wouldn't let me name them anything with blood in it." He sniffed, shaking his head. "They're such strong, clever boys."

"Just like their father," I replied.

He shook his head firmly. "No. Better than their father. Much better…"

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," I said quietly.

"I should have talked to you…told you why. I shouldn't have… done what I did. Not that…" he said in a hoarse whisper, like a ghost.

"I should have given you a chance to tell me," I replied. "Trueblood…we have to get out of here. The rail line is cut off. So is the way through security and Flim and Flam's escape tunnel. Is there another way out?"

He didn't answer. Then he said softly, "In production, there's a shaft going down. There was a pipeline for Flux…it went to a red tunnel. There's a lift... You can get out that way…I suppose." He paused and murmured quietly, "Such a nice family."

I stared at him as he gazed at the copies of his lost family. If I forced him to go, like Psychoshy had, all I'd have left was a thrashing, feral ghoul. At this point, there was only one thing left to say. "Goodbye, Trueblood." But he didn't respond. I suspected he would never say another word ever again. It'd taken two centuries, but the Hoof had finally caught him.

I turned to the others as the Ultra peeled open the door like a lid off a can of Cram. I grabbed Psychoshy by her mane, employing the wonders of fingers, and dragged her out as she started to thrash. "No! No! Bring him with us! Don't just leave him! He's all the

family I have! Please!" she screamed as she fought me. We entered the copyroom as the Ultra squeezed its way into the fusion room. I nodded to the Dealer once we were clear of the door. A prismatic flash cut through the gap before it sealed and locked down.

Psychoshy's mane tore free of my grip as she hammered on the sealed door with her hoof. "Sanguine! Sanguine!" she wailed over and over again, sinking down sobbing as she pressed her cheek to the door. "Please…"

Then there was a cherry red glow followed by a prismatic sparkle as the Ultra-Sentinel resumed its pursuit. Clearly it wasn't going to be satisfied till we were all dead.

"Come on," I said. "Sanguine said there's a way out through production."

"Leave me," Psychoshy said quietly.

"Nope," I replied. "I am through leaving ponies behind to die." I meant it, too. Sanguine's family hadn't deserved to die…not like that…not after two centuries trapped in a nightmare they couldn't escape. "Security saves ponies."

"Shut your mouth, you stupid, self-righteous little cunt. You didn't save him! I am going to--" she began, when there was a soft 'pfft' and a dart appeared in her flank. Her blue eyes widened as she began to sway. "Fucking…cunt…" And then she went limp.

I looked over at Rampage holding the blowgun in her mouth. P-21 rolled his eyes as he said, "I know you probably wanted some kind of teary heart to heart before you won her over and convinced her to live, but we've really got to go!"

I tossed Psychoshy onto my back, and we retraced our way back up onto the catwalk. I stared down at the blanks still standing around in dull obliviousness. My instinct was to save them…but I couldn't. Boo, at least, was clever enough to follow me. I'd have to lead the rest, and I couldn't see any way I could lead around a herd of mindless ponies. I tore myself away, trotting along the catwalk back into production. All we had to do was get down the shaft and escape this…

Pink Cloud.

I stared down at the swirling gas as it was mixed by the robots moving slowly through it. My E.F.S. could make out dozens of bars, and occasionally I could see the flash of lights from their domes or eyes as they moved through the toxic Cloud beneath us. We found ourselves back in front of the central pillar, the twisted statue of

Discord behind us. There was nowhere left to run. I looked down into the swirling Pink Cloud but couldn't see any kind of shaft.

"Not good," I muttered.

"I'll say. I'm completely out of popcorn," Discord murmured. "I mean, if this is that last show I get to watch before I die, I'd at least like to enjoy it properly."

I stared at the statue, a terrible desperate feeling inside me. "Can you do something?"

Discord was silent a moment. "Well…I don't know. In better times, I'd turn the robots into mechanical wind-up toys and inhale the Cloud through one nostril and get high off it…but now, I really don't know." His tone turned contemptuous. "I really shouldn't be surprised, though. Ponies freeing me because they need me to save their cutesie-wootsie butts."

"So you're saying you'd rather stay trapped and die than help us?" P-21 asked grimly.

"No. I'd rather you set me free. Then I'd turn you into stone, put you outside, and let you enjoy the pigeons crapping on your head for a thousand years," Discord muttered.

"Pretty sure that pigeons are extinct," Rampage said.

"Oh. Well. That's one small improvement. I'll probably have to bring them back, though. You can't get the whole 'turned to stone' experience without birds pooping all over you," he said.

"We can't free him, anyway," P-21 said as he pointed at the explosives on the pillars. "Soon as he's loose, those things blow up."

"I suppose I could try and eat them like hot tamales, but spicy food gives me gas," Discord offered grudgingly.

I looked at the Cloud, and then looked over at the signs again. One blurb stood out. 'Activate the water flush system'. I peered up at the dim roof and made out the hundreds of sprinklers covering the surface. "Dealer! How do I activate the water flush system?" Ugh, no sign of him again. I knew he wasn't my crazy, so why was he hiding now?

I'd have to find it myself.

"I'm going down there. Get ready; soon as the Cloud washes away, those robots will be able to see us," I said as I dropped the doped Psychoshy next to P-21. Then I frowned…when I did find it, I'd have to move fast. P-21 was carrying the crates. Rampage couldn't carry Psychoshy or Boo in her diminutive form. I looked at the blank mare and sighed. I really hoped this worked. "Boo…I need

you to listen. I have to go down there for a bit. You need to follow Rampage and carry Psychoshy. Okay? Can you do that for me?"

She blinked once, cocking her head curiously, and burped. I groaned. We were doomed.

"Don't worry, BJ. I'll try and explain it to her," Rampage said and then frowned. "Are you absolutely sure that you don't want us to try and come with you? I could…"

"Rampage, that pink stuff turns your flesh into goo. Do you want to risk being reduced to a blob of pink bubblegum stuck to the floor? We don't have any way to vaporize you quickly. I'm the one already stuck to my barding, and I've got the metal legs." I turned and dug through my saddlebag, though, pulling out the clear helmet. How things like this fit in my bag, I couldn't imagine. I put the helmet on. The air talisman looked broken, though…I'd have to be quick. "Be ready to move soon as you see the tunnel."

"We'll be ready. But Blackjack, what about the Enervation down there?" P-21 asked grimly.

"Slow, probable death from Enervation or fast, certain death by robot?" I replied rhetorically, trotting quickly back to the stairs down into the Pink Cloud. Instantly, my hide started to prickle from the holes in the environmental suit as the gas got in. Oh, right, those. I'd be lucky if air became an issue. My telekinesis was barely able to lift the revolver. I was left with my own four hooves.

The pink mist swirled around me as I moved through the narrow gaps between the machinery. Was something generating this, or was all this mist the result of years of Sanguine living down here? I guessed it really didn't matter in the long run.

"Unauthorized zebra intruder," crackled a voice behind me, and I turned as crimson beams scoured my backside. I could barely see the glowing eyes, but it looked close enough. I set my forehooves and kicked back with such force that the Protectapony's head exploded in a shower of scrap and sparks. As it fell on its side, more crimson beams flashed over me. I fell the other way, already feeling woozy from the poisons seeping in.

I needed to find a valve, a lever, a button…something that would be used to flush away Flux. I couldn't even tell which way the walls were. Barrels of Flux were stacked in precarious leaking columns and pillars around and atop the equipment. Some seemed to have absorbed the poison, changing from rainbow sludge to an almost bloody pink fluid. I really did not want to find out what it would do

to me.

"Halt and be vaporized!" boomed a voice as I darted atop a still conveyor belt. A missile rocketed through the fog, and I leapt away out of reflex. I was quite impressed that I managed to complete the backflip and stick the landing, facing the sentry robot as the missile exploded behind me. Three barrels tumbled down towards me, spilling noxious magical waste. I stood on my hind legs, lifting my forelegs to catch the barrel, and heaved it towards the large machine. The gatling gun purred and the drum exploded, showering the robot in pink goo. Instantly, it began to liquefy into a rusty sludge.

Okay. I really, really, *really* didn't want to get that stuff on me!

Four more Protectaponies came trotting out of the fog, walking through the sludge, heedless of the rust that crept up their metal legs as they sprayed beams of magic incineration at me. I rolled back under the conveyor and kicked three more barrels at the robots as they advanced, the moving objects drawing their fire as I ran the other way.

My back burned terribly. I was fairly sure that, if I was completely natural, I would have been pink bubblegum by now. The robots were closing in, and I still hadn't found any method of setting off the sprinklers! I had no clue where the stairs out of this fog were, and my breathing was getting slow and heavy.

"Unauthorized presence. Exterminate!" buzzed a sentry bot out in the pink fog, sending another missile flying towards me. I barely hit the ground in time for it to miss and explode, showering me with chips of concrete. I looked back at the crater the missile had blown out of the wall... and then at the large pipe and wheel next to the hole. 'Emergency Water Flush System' read a sign over the valve, and I whooped as I rushed up to it, set my hooves, and started to turn.

Nothing. I grunted and strained as I heard the robot approaching behind me. Then I noticed a little sign hung on the wheel.

'Out of Order.'

"I am going to kill them!" I bellowed at the little yellow sign. Okay, so technically I'd probably have to invent time travel if I wanted to do that, but it would be worth it! The robot fired another missile, and I dove aside in time for it to blow another chunk out of the concrete wall.

I'd seen Rampage take a sentry down with her hooves, but she had

super strength and the ability to not die. I raced through the gloom towards the robot, its gatling gun purring as it swept a line of metallic death towards me. As the robot came more and more into view, I left it to my body and leapt up onto a conveyor belt, continuing to close the distance. It fired another missile as my legs sprang onto a barrel and vaulted over the streaking projectile to land on its back.

"I have dealt with enough shit today!" I screamed as I rammed my hooves into its metal head. The robot responded by lurching to the left and ramming into the machinery, nearly knocking me off. Then it reversed and slammed into the machinery on the right. I was only just hanging on. I needed something more substantial….

Oh, this was going to suck…

I took a deep breath and my horn flared, popping the helmet off once again. A sane pony would hold her breath, but I really needed to get that sprinkler to work. "P-21! Grenades!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, and threw the helmet up as hard as I could with my free hand as the other held on with dear life.

Funny, if I'd had P-21's hat on, wasn't surrounded by toxic gas, and didn't have an army of killer robots after me, this'd be pretty fun!

One second, nothing. Two seconds…nothing. Three seconds…I was fucked…and then I heard the clatter of metal pinging beside me and threw myself over the machinery to my left, using the robot's momentum to carry me over. There were three explosions as P-21's grenades went off, and I knew the robot was scrap. Well, it at least wasn't doing more than crackling feebly. It wasn't going to be getting up soon...

And neither was I... I felt my ear stick to the floor, then felt it stretch like taffy as I rose to my hooves. I staggered towards the wall and that pipe and that damned valve. I gripped it with my fingers and began to heave. My lips felt runny and I dared not close my eyes; I wasn't sure I'd be able to open them again. Harder! Twist harder! Do it! *Be strong! Be unwavering!* I felt a little orange pony in me that wouldn't let some stupid valve stop me from saving my friends.

I felt my mechanical parts and my fleshy parts start to move, like the latter were simply going to slide off the former. Don't inhale, Blackjack. Whatever you do…don't do that! Just turn the damned wheel. Even a dumb shit pony like you can do that without fucking up…right?

There was a grinding noise beneath my hooves, and then the valve suddenly popped. Immediately, I heard a great gurgle within the pipe and from overhead there came a loud hissing of air that was soon replaced by that of water. A deluge poured down upon me, and I drew in a painful breath through my nose as I stood in the flow. The water was tainted pink as the countless sprinklers hosed down that section of the factory floor.

I tried to open my mouth…but I couldn't. I rubbed a hoof over my lips, but felt only a single, smooth flap of skin.

Shit…shit shit shit…

There was only one thing to do. I levitated out my sword, and slowly drew the razor edge along my mouth. Fortunately, I was able to hold off the screaming till after the cut finished. For several moments, I could only stand there in the flow, breathe, and bleed.

Unfortunately, the robots weren't going to give me much more than that. There were sprinklers washing the Pink Cloud out of the air, but that was simply making it easier for the robots to see me. I looked up at the shocked faces of P-21 and Rampage and followed the catwalk with my eyes till I saw where the stairs dropped down. How the heck did I get all the way over here? I backtracked through the deluge, still feeling lousy as the toxic water surged around my legs, running along the rows of conveyors as a trio of Protectaponies spraying crimson beams around me.

"Okay, this is a little too much," I muttered. I struggled to keep myself low... and above the surging poisonous pink water. I peeked over the edge at the robot standing on the far side. I heaved a barrel and bathed the machine in rainbow sludge.

The Protectapony sparked and flashed, then looked around. It touched a hoof to its cheek. "My goodness! I have suddenly achieved sentience! I have hopes! Dreams! A destiny!"

The other two robotic ponies turned towards the dosed machine. "Error!" And then they proceeded to hose it down with their scarlet beams.

It waved its metallic hooves dramatically. "Egads, I am undone!" Then it exploded. Well... it wasn't exactly what I'd expected, but it did provide me enough of a distraction to reach the stairs!

"Good throw," I said to P-21, but he just stared at me. "Does anypony see the shaft down?" I rasped; oh, sweet Celestia, my mouth hurt! They stared at me in horror, and I hissed, "Yes, I look like shit! I feel like shit! Do you see a way down?!"

"Over there, I think," Rampage said as she pointed through the deluge to a square stairway dropping down near the base of the cylinder. Right now, the shaft was functioning much like a drain. Already the sprinklers had washed enough of the Pink Cloud out that I could see the far side of the production floor.

That meant that the small army of robots over there could see me.

We ducked low as minigun rounds and crimson beams lanced up at us. Even Boo knew to hit the deck. I saw that Rampage had put my battle saddle on the pale mare and was holding the wires connected to the bit like a leash. Psychoshy was tied to the blank's back. I looked at P-21. "Okay. Tell me you still have that balefire egg bomb."

He dug in his bag and pulled out the flashing dark rainbow orb. He'd duct taped it to a block of plastic explosives. I was barely able to lift the detonator with my magic as I held the block with my hooves and scanned the machinery. Where was it?

A prismatic rainbow beam sliced through the air and nearly cut the catwalk in two. It sparked off the starmetal cylinder as I scrambled back and jumped inside next to the twisted statue. I peeked out, and a rain of gatling grenades detonated in deafening thunder.

"I have to admit, this is quality entertainment," Discord laughed as I rubbed my ear…and tried to ignore the fact that it wasn't the right shape any more.

"Shut up," I said as I peeked out again…and saw the Ultra-Sentinel driving *through* the conveyor belts as it circled around to fire into the space I occupied. I didn't have long. I poked my head out and screamed at my friends, "Get down the shaft! Hurry!"

I kept the block in my hooves as I watched the Ultra-Sentinel rolling around, tearing up whatever passed under its heavy wheels as it got into place. "That's quite a throw. Even for metal legs…" Discord observed as I lifted the block of explosives.

"Shut up," I hissed, watching my friends. They were at the stairs. The robots all seemed occupied with me. "Celestia is dead," I said as I watched for my opportunity.

"So I gathered--" he began.

"Shut up," I snapped. "Luna is dead. Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood are both dead. There's enough chaos and discord in the Wasteland to choke a thousand spirits like you. Chaos is boring in the Wasteland right now, Discord. Death is fucking boring. It's routine."

There was a pause, and the voice inside the statue muttered, “I don’t understand what you’re saying…”

“I’m saying that this is your chance, Discord.” And it was my chance, too. “Do better.” And I stepped out and heaved the explosive as the Ultra-Sentinel turned to point that prismatic cannon at me. My throw was true. The balefire egg landed exactly where I needed it.

Right against ‘Flux Extraction Pump #26’.

I dove inside Discord’s alcove as the prismatic beam flashed, and as it swept back and forth inside the space, I pressed down on the detonator. Instantly, my world became light and sound and a roar that was broken only by the crackling of my PipBuck. The starmetal shielded me from the direct force of the explosion, but it couldn’t protect me from the ample radiation. But all that was secondary. The pillar was untouched, but the pump was vaporized. I stepped out in time to see a roiling, glowing, green mushroom cloud dissipating in the rain.

Now a spray of rainbow gunk spurted out into the production room. The catwalk was so much twisted scrap and the Ultra-Sentinel was right below me now. Any second, it’d lob grenades in. I could close the hatch, but that would probably seal me in here forever.

So I did what I did best…something stupid.

I launched myself into the air, twisting as it tried to adjust its aim fast enough to vaporize me. Gravity was faster. I landed right atop its rounded back, my legs scraping against its smooth rainbow paintjob. If I’d had bones, my legs probably would have snapped from the fall. I still felt as if I’d wrenched something inside as I rolled over and over again, falling off its rear and landing with a splash in the frothy, filthy water.

It turned as I struggled to lift myself to my hooves. I needed five pounds of scrap metal, ten pounds of aspirin, and a few days to rest and recover at this point. I had about five seconds as the robot wheeled itself around and pointed that prismatic cannon at my face. I stared at the pretty rainbow light about to annihilate me. At least it would be quick.

Suddenly, the massive machine lurched as blue foamy water exploded up beside it. The explosion twisted and congealed into a bluish blobby form of the mishmash creature on the cylinder. Discord stood next to the robot as it turned towards the greater

threat. For some inexplicable reason, Discord had a large ‘S’ on his chest and a wavy red cape billowing in the rain. “For truth, justice, and chocolate milk rain!” he declared boldly.

The gatling grenades purred, blowing the mass apart as I struggled to my feet. But Discord just reformed, pulling himself into the shape of a giant lizard…dragon…thing…and breathed rainbow flames on the machine. The prismatic beam sliced the lizard in two; Discord hadn’t been lying after all. Two centuries of being encased had weakened him badly.

But all that was secondary. Above me, the pony-sized explosive charges were suddenly blinking bright red lights.

Containment had failed.

I staggered through the sloshing water as Discord kept the Ultra occupied. Then a blue carpet lifted me up and wooshed me across the production floor to where my friends had been pinned by the robots. It batted the machines aside, then scooped up my friends and deposited us at the top of a diagonal shaft sloping down. The lift was awash as water poured down around it; I hoped it still worked. Two large pipes ran along the ceiling down into the depths. The end of the carpet became a tiny, wan, Discord. “Why?” he asked as he looked up at me. “I never agreed to help you.”

I just stared at him a moment, then shrugged, “It’s just what I do. I believe in second chances.”

“No matter how stupid they are,” P-21 muttered, half annoyed… and half smiling at the same time. Rampage held Boo’s leash as the water continued to pour down. The little blank pony didn’t like this at all, her ears drooping as the toxic water splashed around her. Still, she seemed to know that staying close to the striped filly was better than being alone.

“Ah, your friends?” he said, perking a little as he hopped up on Rampage, then looked at the suspicious blue stallion and adopted his scowl perfectly. I couldn’t help but smile. Then he appeared next to Boo’s head. “Hello!” he called into her ear, an echo sounding over the splashing water. He stuck half his body in her ear, and looked out at us from her clear pale eyes, waving. The blank scrunched up her face and rubbed at her ear with a hoof.

“Hey,” I said with a small frown, and he pulled himself out with a soft pop.

“So very sorry,” he said immediately. “Nice girl, but not too bright.” Then klaxons began to sound, and Flim and Flam’s voices

warned me not to panic and to run for my life... calmly.

The Ultra was rolling towards us…no…towards the shaft. “Hurry,” Discord panted as he looked back at the machine. “This thing is no fun. While I’d love to turn it into tapioca pudding, right now I’ll be lucky to slow it down enough to get it buried down here.”

“Will you be okay?” I asked, and the tiny draconequus blinked and actually blushed.

“You really do care! How…interesting. I never thought it possible. Well, being buried alive in rock is a huge step up from being buried alive in metal that’s slowly killing me with drills stuck through me,” he said as a dozen holes appeared in his tiny body. “But I should be okay…ish…though I think I’ll need a nice long vacation before I’m even close to my old self. But still…” Then he grabbed my head, held it firmly, and pressed his lips to mine with a loud ‘Mmmmmmwah!’ Finally breaking it, he grinned. “Thanks.”

The tiny Discord disappeared in a pop of glowing white, and I was left sitting there for a few seconds. The only thing I could think at the moment was how surprisingly long his tongue was.

And then a giant, fat Discord rose up from the sudsy water wearing a strange diaper. “Ooooyyy!” he said as he stomped one fat leg, then the other, setting himself in as squatting position. “Domo arigato, Mister Roboto!” he roared as the Ultra slammed into the huge draconequus. The Ultra gave an electronic squawk as its wheels spun in futility, while Discord slapped it repeatedly with his lion paw and eagle claw while screaming, “Baka! Baka! Baka! Baka!”

This was our cue to get out of here. There was a lever at the top of the lift. I struck it, and immediately the platform began to descend the steep shaft. A row of red emergency lights was the only illumination as we dropped. Before he disappeared from sight, I caught Discord’s eye as he was slowly pushed back by the Ultra. He grinned widely, winking at me.

Then he gave one last mighty cry, “Banzai!” and the entire lift shook as an immense explosion went off above us. A great wind blasted past, carrying water and dust and chemicals as a roar began to rumble. I had an image of the entire Hippocratic Research building collapsing into an immense hole right above me as the lift plunged down into the earth.

Of course, there was a saying about frying pans and fires; personally, I’d never used much of either, but I could appreciate the

sentiment. Especially now, as my chest began to burn painfully. Instantly, my friends started to sway and droop. Enervation. Lots of it. We were getting into depths comparable to our previous jaunt under the city. The one that had almost killed all of us…

Fortunately, despite the pain in my chest, I didn't feel the draining lethargy I had before. It hurt, but it was a distant hurt, and instead of passing out I felt a faint ringing in my ears. The rumbling roar overhead quickly drowned it out as the pressure grew and grew above us, the flow slackening off.

Then a prismatic beam sliced down the center of the shaft, bathing it in glaring light. From the top of the inclined tunnel two glaring lights flashed down at us. Discord hadn't succeeded it burying the Ultra-Sentinel with him. It was coming down, and fast!

"This thing is really starting to piss me off!" I screamed as I looked around the platform. Nothing we could use to hide behind; that beam could cut through anything anyway! There was only one thing I could think of…something stupid. Again. "Jump!" I shouted as I ran and grabbed Boo. The mare just stared as if even she couldn't imagine I'd do something so crazy. I leapt off the edge of the lip, landing on my back on the water-slicked concrete.

"That's lemming talk!" Rampage shouted as she leapt after me.

"I should have gone with Glory!" P-21 agreed as the five of us plunged down the shaft together while the Ultra crashed into the lift. Its prismatic beam flashed down again and again over the edge as we flew down the shaft, evading death for a few more seconds however we could. P-21 slammed into me, Boo, and Psychoshy. "Is this part of the plan?" he screamed as we slid.

"Yes!" I yelled back.

"Your plans suck!" he bellowed at me as we gained speed.

Couldn't argue with that one. "You bet!" I agreed, moving faster and faster, leaving the lift behind. Then one of the prismatic beams flashed and illuminated three unavoidable facts: the bottom of the shaft had been closed, it was now full of toxic water, and half my body was made of metal. "Oh shi--" was as far as I got before we plunged in together. Boo and Psychoshy floated. Me? I sank like a rock, my eyes barely picking out anything in the red gloom of the submerged lights. This water burned; maybe not as much as the cloud had, but between the poisonous water, the lift dropping a mechanical death machine down on my friends, and the Enervation sapping everypony's strength…it really did not look good.

I had to wonder if LittlePip or the Stable Dweller ever had days like mine.

As I dropped into the toxic liquid, I dimly made out the doors framed in hazy red light. I spotted a lever beside them and tried to flail my way towards it. I wasn't a good swimmer even before I got metal limbs. Worse, there was some kind of pit beneath the doors filled with machinery; to run the lift I supposed. If I missed the landing…ugh…don't think about it, Blackjack. Just move sideways more than down. Sideways! That way! I watched the lip of the landing drift past my outstretched hooves.

I screamed in a fury of sudsy bubbles and flailed wildly, wanting to beat the shit out of the world. I supposed it might have counted as swimming; it was enough to get my forehooves over the lip, and I extended my fingers around the lever. I really wanted to breathe right now…really…was a little oxygen too much to ask? Maybe I could breathe poisoned water? Ugh, why was I thinking about poisoned water when my friends were about to get crushed? I had to be like a certain white pony and just hold on a little longer!

I pulled the lever as hard as I could. It popped, crawling inch by inch as I struggled. The door groaned from the pressure against it. I tried to brace my hooves and pull again. Really…just a little air? Maybe the professor had given me special lungs to breathe water and hadn't told me? Maybe?

Stop thinking and pull, Blackjack.

Then there was another resounding 'pong' and suddenly the sound of an endless toilet flushing. The doors opened partially, and I was suddenly pushed into the gap. It wasn't quite wide enough for me, though, and I braced my back against the metal and pushed with all four hooves. Come on…Come on! Cut me some frigging slack here! There was one final bang, and with it the doors popped wide and I was launched out into the red passageway beyond. A torrent poured after me, knocking me end over end. My chest burned and my ears rang and I really wished I was capable of throwing up.

With a yell my friends were flushed out after me. Boo snorted and coughed, P-21 retched, and Rampage spit a stream like a fountain. Of course, then the groaning began. This was the kind of Enervation that killed in minutes rather than hours. The red tunnel was completely undamaged and was dominated by two large subway tracks and a broad concrete road. A few wagons and a lot of crates were stacked where they'd last been left two centuries ago.

“Okay... so…plan is…we trot along and take the first exit out of here. Right? Good plan.” I coughed and rubbed my cheek…then blinked. Okay. I wanted a mirror right -- never mind. I didn’t want a mirror. Maybe a paper bag for now and a mirror for later, when we weren’t in a tunnel of magical death. I trotted over to a wagon and wiggled into the harness. I was the only one not being reduced to groaning weakness at the moment. “Did I forget anything?”

Then I heard the groan of the lift in the shaft as it reached the landing. The rainbow Ultra-Sentinel hissed softly a moment as it turned the little turret head to look right at me. “Oh. Yeah. Right,” I muttered. Its prismatic cannon lit up, and I raced over to my friends as the beam sliced where I’d just been standing.

It was running time again! “Get in! Get in now!” I yelled as they crawled into the back of the wagon. “Faster. Faster!” It was cutting its way through the doors! “Come on, everypony in? Right!” I tore off along the concrete road as it burst into the passage behind us. The four-legged mech hopped onto the subway rails and started to roll after me. “Okay…at least we’re moving. Could be worse!” I yelled, focusing on speed as the four-wheeled metal wagon rattled on behind me.

Then its gatling gun whirred and a line of explosions crawled along the red concrete walls above me, slowly working their way back and forth as it pursued. “Ahh…I mean…It can’t get any worse!” I yelled. Its prismatic beam then lit up and swept horizontally behind me. The munitions crates exploded with shockwaves that threatened to dump me off my metal hooves! “I mean…”

“Shut up and run!” P-21 bellowed at me, then gasped at the exertion.

I doubled down. I was the one with the cybernetic legs and not getting the life sucked out of me and…oh…look at that little bar with a flashing E beside it.

I knew I had forgotten something. I was barely able to fish out a spicy little ruby to try an suck on... just to keep my power going long enough to live.

I saw a pair of doors that read ‘MASEBS #14’ sealed up tight. I slowed for just a second, and that row of explosions from the gatling grenade launcher almost passed right over us. There was no way I could slow down for it! I could only grit my teeth and go faster. Then I looked back at my riders digging through the crates and yelled, “Is there anything in there we can use!?”

A second later, P-21 popped into view, his forelegs hugging a portable missile launcher. Then Rampage sat up hugging two legfuls of grenades. Finally, Boo sat up gnawing idly on a missile. I grinned. There was nothing quite as good as being able to shoot back!

The missile launcher thumped and hissed as fast as P-21 could load it, and Rampage lobbed magic disintegration grenades as fast as Boo could dig them out. I didn't think she knew precisely what they were, but she knew that Rampage was glad to throw them. The Ultra now had to slow down, bob, and weave to avoid our return fire. I slowly started to gain ground. Then a pair of lights flashed on the rails ahead, and a train roared by, brakes shrieking as sparks sprayed from its wheels! The Ultra-Sentinel leapt onto the other set of tracks to avoid being scrapped by it.

Even I couldn't keep this up forever. We were approaching another set of double doors. 'MASEBS #13', it read. Still, no time to get in. Right now, all I could do was run as fast as I could and swerve to avoid the crates of munitions littering the tunnel. Rampage and P-21 were failing fast, too. They were firing wildly now, just trying to get lucky. P-21 was bleeding out his nose. I couldn't even see Boo.

Then a pair of headlights lit up the other track. The electric train had reversed and begun to pull even with the wagon. I glanced back at the flatbed cars, piled high with crates marked 'Danger: Explosives'. The Ultra-Sentinel began to drop back.

Oh crap. "It's going to blow the train!" Where could I go? What could I do... stop? That'd just make us a sitting target! Go faster? I was going as fast as I could! I looked at the racks of missiles loaded on the back as the train pulled even. What did the city even need that much ordinance for, anyway?

Then P-21 hefted the missile launcher and aimed it very deliberately, but not at the robot chasing us or the trainload of explosives…because, unlike me, he was a smart pony who didn't do stupid, impulsive things.

No, he aimed it at the train's wheels.

The missile hissed down and exploded, and there was an earsplitting squeal as the front wheels locked up and popped off the rails. The car twisted sideways and flipped, dragging the next car over with it and spilling munition crates across the entire tunnel. With a muffled *whump*, a missile rack exploded as the Ultra's beam

gatling tagged it. The explosions rapidly built, and suddenly I felt a pressure wave shoving the cart along the tunnel, my hooves leaving the floor for several seconds as the firestorm set off explosion after explosion. I remembered the elevator and prayed, *'Don't blow up. Don't blow up. Don't blow up,'* to the crates in the wagon behind me. Fortunately, there was another pair of doors ahead, marked 'Miramare'.

I dug in my hooves, wincing as they screeched along the concrete, trying to slow without crashing completely. My hide felt gross underneath the barding and hazmat suit; I just wanted to scrape it all away. I sweated and panted and gasped and sagged in the harness. I'd reached my cyberpony limits. I'd been shot, stabbed, blown up, poisoned, and drowned. I was done.

Then there was a metallic grating noise, and a flaming chunk of train car was pushed aside. The blackened Ultra-Sentinel with busted gatling grenade launcher and prismatic cannon looked at me with its little cameras and gave a low rumble as it charged after us, trailing a cloud of smoking and flaming debris.

"Oh, come *on*!" I shouted, looking at the heavy doors. How in Equestria had we lost the war with machines as tenacious as this? There were two more sets of levers by the door. I pushed one, throwing my whole body against it, while P-21 and Rampage shoved themselves against the other. Motors whirred, and without the pressure of thousands of gallons of water against them the doors opened quite easily. *'Please be at the bottom. Please be at the bottom,'* I prayed silently as I pulled the wagon through.

It was at the bottom. I felt like I could fly. We piled onto the platform and pulled the lever and immediately the lift crawled up the diagonal slope. Finally, I relaxed and tried to take a nice deep breath.

The doors squealed as the Ultra rammed its way through and off the landing, onto the slope. Its four wheels screamed as they fought for purchase, and then it started to crawl its way up the ramp after us. The busted prismatic gun unleashed a shotgun-like spray of wild magic beams that made us all take cover.

"Oh, that is *it*!" I shouted, slamming the elevator's control lever into reverse.

"What are you doing?" P-21 gaped at me, holding the white stasis boxes, as I wiggled out of the wagon's harness.

"I am through playing around!" I shouted as I shoved the wagon

over the edge. The munitions crates tumbled into the wildly spraying energy and blew. I didn't even flinch from the shrapnel as I drove the lift straight into the flaming bot. It raised its burning front wheels before the lift collided and began pushing it back down the slope.

The electronic eyes of the sentinel blazed a sudden, intense green and its speakers released a screech of feedback and static as it lifted a leg feebly. Then it shrieked, "GIVE IT TO ME! GIVE ME LIFE!"

"Oh, I'm going to give it to you alright... " I muttered at the insane robot, then crushed the Ultra-Sentinel like a bug against the bottom of the ramp. Then I raised the lift and lowered it several times till the shriek silenced completely. Finally, as we started back up again, I took the missile launcher from P-21, trotted to the edge, and fired it into the sparking wreckage. As the lift rose, I tossed the spent launcher down after it.

I huffed, sitting in the middle of the lift, and dug out a ruby to suck on. P-21 stared at me as I sat back against the lift controls. "So... go to Hippocratic Research, get EC-1101 back, stop Sanguine, and get out," I murmured as I looked at the confused buck. I slowly smiled... or... tried to smile... I really did not want to know how bad the damage was. "I think this counts as one of my plans actually working!" And I glowed with pride as he was rendered speechless in wonder.

* * *

We had to stop the lift and shift aside some rubble to wiggle out into the balefire crater at the airbase. We were exhausted, drained, shot up, poisoned, and mutilated. All of us needed a short break. We broke back into the command center and flopped down in the barracks. I made sure Boo had a snack cake and stroked her mane; she'd shaken for nearly an hour after we got free. Oddly, I think that was the natural reaction for anypony that went into the tunnels. Then I chowed down on a half dozen gems and felt my insides twisting around as the magic went to work. After everything I'd been through, I felt like I could do with a week of downtime.

I'd be lucky to get a few hours. I had barding fused to me and robots after me and had just set loose a spirit of chaos that was only slightly amicable to me... but a hell of a kisser. I had organs to deliver to the Fluttershy Medical Center, hopefully to save Scotch's

life. And then I needed to have a nice long chat with my crazy. We had to work out something with Psychoshy…but for now she was just quiet and sullen, really like a more moody P-21. But first, I had something more pressing to do.

"I need to find a mirror," I groaned as I rose to my hooves. P-21, Psychoshy, and Rampage all looked at me in alarm. The first frowned in worry, the second grinned, and the third looked pitying.

"Oh yeah, I got to see this," Psychoshy chuckled, rising to her hooves.

"Get down," P-21 told her sharply, then looked at me. "Maybe you should wait."

"Wait?" I knew it was bad, but wasn't he taking this a little too far? I slowly gave a nervous smile; they *were* taking this joke a bit far! "Come on, I want to see how bad it is."

But Rampage shook her head too. "Trust me. Regen. Let Glory try and help. Then look in a mirror." I looked from one friend to the other for some sign that they were kidding, but the only one taking amusement from this was the yellow pegasus.

"How…how bad…?" I muttered, touching my face with a hoof again. "How bad is it?"

Psychoshy cackled. "Half your face is gone!" Gone? What did she mean... gone?

Rampage snarled and leapt onto her. "Then we can give her half of yours. Oh, wait! She doesn't want to look like half a tailhole!"

But I rose and trotted quickly to the locker room, moving back towards the toilets, Rampage yelling after me. I saw the grimy mirror, wet my hoof in radioactive water, and slowly wiped the filth away. What looked back at me through the brown droplets couldn't have been me. That wasn't my face. That was…somepony else. Some*thing* else.

Call it vanity, but I always liked to imagine I looked…decent. Maybe not as cute as Glory, but easy on the eyes.

What I saw now... was not easy on the eyes. It wasn't just injury…I had pieces of my face missing. Gone. What remained was…wrong. Was that metal under my skin? Like a honeycomb of steel woven under my flesh? There were cables. Metal pins in my flesh... oh sweet Celestia... I wanted my heart to pound and my pulse to race, something to prove I was more pony than machine. The professor hadn't mentioned any of this! Glory hadn't mentioned any of this!

... the flayed Reaper's mechanical mouth gaped, forcing a shattered jaw

to stretch impossibly wide. An articulated metal windpipe released that horrible noise as flaps of skin dangled from him. Broken pieces of skull clung to an armored sphere that was still horribly attached to his mechanical spine...

I couldn't help myself; I closed my eyes as my organic bits started to shake. "Glory can fix it. Glory can fix it. I'll regenerate. I will." I just wished that my words sounded less like a prayer. Really, I'd sacrificed my flesh and blood and orifices to doing the right thing before. What was a face?

Just…me. I couldn't help myself; I felt tears trickling down my raw features. At least I still had half my face... glossy and burned...

Then I felt a bump against me and looked down at Boo, staring up with her big pale eyes. I sniffed. She bumped her head against me again. And again. "I don't have any snack cakes for you right now, Boo." She looked a moment, then bumped me again. I frowned. "Stop it, Boo…I don't…I can't…" Bump. She looked into my eyes, so sad and serious. And then she curled the corners of her mouth just a little.

She didn't care what I looked like. I let out a little sob…and a little laugh too. "You're smarter than you look, Boo," I said, and she bumped me again. I held her in my hooves, rubbing her ears. She only cared about the important things.

"Blackjack?" Rampage said softly as she trotted in after me.

"Psychoshy wasn't exaggerating, was she?" I muttered, bowing my head.

The striped filly growled, "I am going to burn her face off with a blow torch."

"No…" I said, shaking my head. "It'll be okay. I can wear a mask or something. That's like a badass Reaper, right?"

She snorted softly. "Yeah. Totally badass…"

Before we left, I made my way to the Marauders' lockers. I tried guessing a few passwords for each of them, putting in every personality we'd met in Rampage, trying 'Twilight' for Big Mac's, and messing around with Psalm's. I entered in 'Rarity' for Vanity's locker, and nothing happened. Then I huffed... and remembered his last memory orb. I closed my eyes... what summed up the noble pony more than anything?

I typed in 'Regret'.

The locker door hissed open. I didn't see any pictures or photographs. There were simply some files, two memory orbs, and

a strange metal crown thingy with a large black opal set in the front. There was also a pair of revolvers with their handles decorated in intricate mother of pearl. Vigilance would always be my firearm of choice, but I had to admit that there were something tempting about the long-barreled guns. The weapons were chambered for rounds even larger than Vigilance's, and I was glad that under the revolvers were three whole cases of the right ammunition.

'Duty' was written on one in elegant flowing script. 'Sacrifice' was inscribed on the other.

I packed the locker's contents away and closed the door with a quiet click.

* * *

The sign over the entrance read 'Emergency'. I certainly looked the part as the five of us limped our way inside. The beam turrets by the door were scrapped, and there were a few fresh bullet holes and scorch marks, but it looked as if the Fluttershy clinic had gotten off lightly compared to Brimstone's Fall. The blue bars in my vision immediately stirred as we stepped through the door, and a half dozen bucks and mares pointed a variety of firearms at me as I stood there in the doorway. "Get out of here. We're closed for business," a jet black unicorn buck warned.

"You might want to rethink that," P-21 said firmly as he pushed back his wide-brimmed hat. "We've had a really long day."

"Get out of here!" the leader repeated as he stared at me in horror. I sat down. Was I going to have to beat my way in here? Kill them if they turned hostile? I sighed and started to turn away; P-21 could sneak past later or we'd have Psychoshy rap on a window up there or something. I just wanted to get in and rest and get my face put back together.

"You sodding wankers! If you pissants would pull your head out of your arses, you'd see she's no threat to you!" a mare growled mechanically, and I stared as a power-armored pony trotted into view. The apples painted on her rump weren't familiar, but the automatic shotguns were a dead giveaway. I never forgot a gun.

"Hey Crumpets," I said with relief as the half dozen moved aside.

"'Ello girl. You look like you've taken a pretty rough shagging right upside the face," the Steel Ranger said with a tilt of her head. "Is

there bloody requirement that to save ponies around this place you got ta look shot halfway to hell?"

"It's pretty standard. Like with how the more ragtag and bizarre the group you have, the better your odds are of winning," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, after you blew the *Celestia*…congratulations on that, by the way. Cottage Cheese says whatever pony gets their hooves on your gun becomes a star paladin, no questions asked. Wanker," she snorted. "Anyway, after that the bloody traditionalists took the *Applejack* and ran back to Manehattan. So we needed someplace safe to hole up. This looked like a right sturdy fortification… reminds me of home, actually…and so I stopped by just in time to prevent some raiders from finishing the job."

"And we're grateful to you for driving them off, but we're not interested in becoming a base for your order," the unicorn that had turned me away said testily. "This place is being run by the Collegiate and Society."

"You should be lucky we're asking. Steel Rain's lot wouldn't bother," the mare snorted. "Eh…doesn't have near the facilities we need anyhow."

"Steel Rain's *alive*?" Fuck! What did it take to kill ponies around this place? Now I'd have to face him again and there'd be some heartbreaking reason he was such a prick and I'd... arrrgh! Was drowning simply too much to ask?!

She nodded. "That's the story we hear. Found somewhere to go to ground. Not sure what his plan is, but he's got sixty or seventy folks with him. Without the *Applejack*, we're not getting back to Trottingham anytime soon. So we're looking for a safe place to hole up. We're scattered all over this damned valley. What with the schism in the Rangers, who knows how things are going to turn out?"

"Schism?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"Eh…it's not something most folks would know. Most folks know the Rangers for being great soddin' gits taking whatever tech they trot across and having bloody great sticks up their arses. Fact is, there's more than a few of us who think these guns aren't just for show and that we should use 'em like Applejack intended…to protect folks." She snorted. "It's the way things are in Trottingham, mostly; without us, the beasties would have eaten everypony a long time ago. Nearly all of the other groups are mixed or devoted to the

‘traditional’ outlook, though. Except now, the waste recycler’s finally burst, because Steelhooves is finally facing down Cottage Cheese. Soon as we heard it, we painted our colors. Probably get my head blown off, but they can pike Luna’s horn up their arses if they don’t like it.”

I looked at P-21 and then back to her. “What sort of facilities do you need?”

“Eh, some place defensible, but with decent power supply and environmental supports. I heard there’s an airbase south of here that might do. If we can pull together thirty or forty ponies, then we should have a decent shot at things.” I thought of Miramare; it was true that they might be able to hole up in there for a while, but it wasn’t ideal unless they could get all the systems working.

“How about a stable?” I asked idly. P-21 looked at me sharply.

She snorted. “Well, sure. A functional stable’d be just fine. But they’re a tad hard to come by in mint condition.”

I looked back at him, then nodded to the side. He said in a low voice, “What are you thinking? Are you seriously thinking about telling them where 99 is?”

“I was thinking about it before the chaos at the *Celestia*. I blew up their base, P-21. If we give them 99, then they can organize again and do some good around here,” I said softly. He frowned, his eyes darting aside. “It might make up for how Goddesses-damned terrible that place was. And it might be nice if Scotch Tape can one day go home again.”

“That place will never be home,” he muttered. “No place will.”

“It is for her. Think about it. As is, it’s a glorified crypt. Let them put it to some good use. And maybe we’ll have a group of armored friends to back us up some day,” I added. “Maybe they’ll teach you how to use their fancy armor, too.”

He snorted, but smiled just a little. “If we ever need a stable full of Steel Rangers for anything, then I think it’ll be time to retire.” Finally he looked away. “Fine. If they can clean it out and make it safe…I’m fine with it. Just don’t ever ask me to go back there again.”

“I doubt I ever could, either,” I replied. The guilt alone would kill me. We trotted back to Crumpets. “So…how about a stable, slightly used?”

* * *

“I never knew you could kiss people through power armor,” Rampage remarked as we trotted up the many flights of stairs, Psychoshy flying up slowly beside us.

“You can’t, but that didn’t stop her from trying,” I grumbled. Even with my warnings about the chlorine gas and the contaminated food recycling system, she’d been more than ecstatic at the news.

“I can’t believe you didn’t try and get caps or anything from her.” Psychoshy said as she hovered effortlessly. I could tell she’d looked forward to rubbing her flight in our faces, but my legs were mechanical, Rampage couldn’t get tired, Boo probably wasn’t smart enough to care, and P-21 would sooner have kissed the abrasive mare than complain his legs were tired. “The very least you should have gotten was a suit of that power armor for yourself.”

“I’m already half power armor. I want to be less power armor,” I muttered. At least power armor you could take off!

“Really? Being a cyberpony really was an advantage down in those tunnels,” Rampage replied. “If you were flesh and blood, we probably wouldn’t have gotten out alive.”

I balked a moment. “It’s…it’s not like that. Sure, having the metal limbs was helpful, but…I don’t know. It’s like…the more metal I am, the less me I am.”

“Bitch bitch bitch…” Rampage muttered, rolling her eyes. “All I’m saying is that you should be more grateful about what you are than more down on yourself for not being what you think you should be.” We finally reached the sealed ward, and I pushed the door open. I noticed that somepony had cleaned the walls; there were still stains, though.

We trotted in, and then my ears twitched. “I know we should wait, but you saw that explosion. We can’t just sit around here…” The voice was oddly squeaky, not the soft smoothness I remembered so fondly.

“Blackjack will come here if she is alive. If she is not, somepony will have to look after Scotch Tape until a regeneration talisman is found,” Lacunae replied smoothly from one of the hospital rooms. I stepped in and saw the alicorn looking into the bathroom.

“Yeah. Fortunately, I’m too dumb to die,” I said brazenly as I stepped in.

“Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!” blurted Glory from inside. “Don’t come in, Blackjack! You can’t see me like this.”

"Trust me, you look a lot better than I--" I said as I stepped into the bathroom doorway. What I beheld was neither my normal single-winged beauty nor the blue pegasus with a rainbow mane, but a creature covered in black sludge standing next to several beakers mixed with tar-like concoctions reeking of ammonia. Her rose eyes popped wide at the same time as mine, and we pointed at each other in unison.

"What the heck happened to *you*?!" we shouted together.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, after I'd explained what'd happened, Rampage had stopped laughing and taken Psychoshy out to…do something. P-21 skulked out with Lacunae as well, off to deliver the crates and talk to his daughter. He'd better be doing that! Boo lay on a hospital bed with Fancy Buck Cake crumbs all over her mouth. That left the two of us together. "So this time you're dying your coat black? What, why not just shave your mane or call yourself 'Fallen Rainbow'?"

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Because smart ponies can learn when something doesn't work the first time," she said before stepping into the shower. "Since I doubt there's a box of mane treatment anywhere in the Wasteland, I simply mixed some up. It's basic organic chemistry. Lacunae helped fill in the gaps, and one of the bucks downstairs showed it was effective when we tested it on him."

"Right," I said as I carefully lifted one of the beakers. "Is being Rainbow Dash so bad?"

Glory shuddered. "Blackjack…you remember how upset my sister was when she thought I was a traitor?" I nodded. "Imagine how every Enclave pegasus will feel if they see me. We're all educated that Rainbow Dash betrayed her own people when she left us. That's just the simple propaganda. I don't even want to imagine how somepony like Lighthooves will take it. Rainbow Dash is gone, and I do not want to be the new Rainbow Dash."

"Well, you do what you have to do," I muttered as I turned on the shower.

"Ah, cold!" She jumped. "I wish this place had enough power for hot water!" she complained as she scrubbed her mane.

"Bitch bitch bitch," I replied, in perfect copy of the striped filly. "I

got barding fused to me and half my face melted off…but that's nothing compared to a cold shower."

"Sorry," Glory said sheepishly, hanging her head a little.

I sighed. "Yeah. Me too. Because if it was a hot shower, then nothing would stop me from hopping in there with you," I said as I examined the beakers and bottles. "So how's Scotch?"

"Critical but stable. We arrived with barely enough time to turn the power back on and put her in stasis," Glory said softly. "Her lungs are destroyed, and her eyes and hide were severely burned by the chemicals." She lifted her face directly into the stream. I had to admit that as much as I loved Glory, there was something a little more... trim... about Rainbow Dash. Lean. Firm. Athletic. I watched the dye slowly run off her body in rivulets and...

"Glory... are you sure that that stuff works?" I asked with a frown.

"Please, Blackjack. I've been working on it for hours. I've tested it. Make sure you don't get any on your coat," she said with just a touch of indignation. "The sooner I can stop worrying about some lightning rod spy camera spotting me like this, the better!" I stared as she washed the chemicals away, then covered my mouth. Oh, this wasn't funny. Do not laugh, Blackjack. Laughter is the swift and sure path to grief and angst. But I had to say something!

"Uh…Glory... are you *sure* you're sure it works?"

"*Yes*, Blackjack. Still, soon as this joke wears off and I can stop looking like Rainbow Dash... ugh, I swear, I feel my intelligence leaking out my ears every time I see her face." She snorted softly in irritation before sighing, slumping her head as the dye pooled like ink around her hooves. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be complaining about seeing her face when you've been hurt so badly. I just hate looking at a reflection that isn't mine!"

"No no, that's not a problem…" I muttered. "Glory…I'm afraid…" I had to tell her!

"I know, but don't worry," she said as she sat in the shower with her eyes closed, scrubbing her coat briskly. "I know that your damage looks severe, but the surgical robot here should be able to…well…patch you up. Lacunae's recharged several healing potions, so even if they're not as effective as they could be, they should help with the skin grafts and reconstruction. Granted, I'm not an expert, but I've read books on the subject," she said as she reached over for a towel and began to dry off her mane and face. The cloth instantly stained soot black from the chemicals.

“Well that’s great to hear, but…”

“Scotch’ll be fine too…I think. I’m not an expert on transplants, but if the organs really are cloned from her own body, then I don’t think there’s any possibility of rejection,” she said as she stepped in front of the mirror, scrubbing her mane with the blackened towel.

“Um, Glory…” Do not laugh. Do…not…

“Yes, what is it Black--” But her mane wasn’t black. Nor was her coat. A few wet streaks of black dye smeared her prismatic mane. Her hide was the exact same cyan as my statuette. Her rose-colored eyes bulged, pupils shrinking to magenta dots, locked on her reflection as her hooves trembled on the porcelain.

“I’m afraid the joke’s still working,” I snirked, my eyes watering from repressed laughter.

They probably heard her obscenity clear in Manehattan.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Kissed by Discord - Do you really want to know?

Chapter 40: Recovery

"Nice work, Rainbow Dash!"

Ponies are thoughtful, compassionate, reasonable creatures. We might sometimes be driven to violence, but most ponies most of the time are simply trying to do the best that they can. However, now and then, ponies can go a bit…off. I don't think that Twilight would have left Discord in that place if she hadn't been obsessed with finding a final solution to the war. I think that, in better times, she would have demanded that Luna and Goldenblood stop tormenting and using him. Likewise, in certain circumstances, I take defeat particularly hard, far more than my usual screwups. These sorts of things happen.

Like right now.

"Clippers," Glory muttered, holding out her hoof.

I pulled the electric clippers off the shelf. Apparently this was a heavy-duty model for preparing patients for surgery. "Glory. Are you sure you need to do this now?"

"Clippers!"

I sighed and set them in her hoof. She tapped the button, and the blades started to buzz. Without another word, a shower of rainbow mane cascaded around her shoulders, ending up in a gloopy mess in the dye on the floor as she shaved away with a wide grin on her face. "Heh... you won't change color, huh? Well then, that means I'm just gonna have to get rid of you!"

Okay, this was getting just a little bit scary. I put a hoof on her shoulder. "Glory."

"Just a minute, Blackjack!" she hissed as she moved the clippers along her mane. Finally, she set them down and stood, staring at Rainbow Dash's reflection in the mirror. She pointed her hoof at it. "Ha! Can't be Rainbow Dash without the rainbow, can you?" the bald blue pony shouted.

"Glory…" I groaned, covering what was left of my face with my hoof. I knew that somewhere, if it still existed, there was a little blue weed that was laughing its roots off. "Scotch…my face... ?"

But she wasn't listening. "Let me just get my tail and... " She paused and closed her eyes, rubbing her nostrils. "Ah…ah…chooo!" she sneezed, and at once her entire mane popped back into existence on top of her head. She stared, her pupils pinpricks, then she screamed and threw the clippers with all her strength at the mirror. "Goddesses damn it! Why won't you go away?" she cried as the clippers broke and the mirror shattered, pieces tumbling into the sink basin. Her forehooves seized one of the larger shards of broken mirror. "I'll cut you away!"

That's it. It was fun while it lasted. My metal hoof smacked the broken shard out of her grasp, and I scooped her away as she started thrashing. "No! No! I can't look like this. I can't! Being a Dashite was better than being a Dash!" she screamed, and I had to admit that Rainbow sure was a fighter. But I had cyberlimbs. I tossed her onto her back and pinned her. "I have to get my face back! I have to be me! I could take it as long as I'm me!"

I could relate. I wanted my face back too, and I could imagine what she was feeling right now. It would be like me waking up and finding myself Deus, or P-21 turning into the Overmare. Granted, I didn't see why being Rainbow Dash was so bad, but clearly it wasn't a good thing. "You are still you!" I said as I stared down into her tear-streaked face. "All your memories and things are still yours, right? Do you have memories of living in Ponyville?" If the answer was yes…well…hopefully Lacunae could do something!

"I…" She sniffed and closed her eyes. "I…last night…I…I dreamed I was in Cloudsdale. I…it was the second time she'd done the sonic rainboom! I dreamed it! I'm turning into Rainbow Dash. I just know it! That damned weed might as well have killed me outright!" She sobbed as she pressed her face into the unmangled side of my neck. Well, it looked like I *would* need to have a chat with our resident mystic alicorn for some answers.

I sighed and held her tight. Okay…if I started dreaming I was somepony else, I'd be freaked out too. ... Of course, that had actually already happened to me…but by that point I'd been a lot more used to the whole freaky wasteland thing. "You're Morning Glory. Not Rainbow Dash. Morning Glory is a doctor, a smart pony, and the mare I love. Okay?" I said quietly as I looked into her

terrified and upset eyes. “Right now, there’re two ponies who need Morning Glory’s help. Not Rainbow Dash’s.”

For some reason, my words didn’t seem to comfort her. “I don’t want to fade away,” she sniffed. “I don’t even know if it’s safe for me to use the auto-doc any more. Not now. Not when I don’t know what’s me and what isn’t.”

“You have to. Please,” I said softly, stroking her rainbow mane and looking down into a stranger’s eyes. “You need to prove you’re Morning Glory…to yourself. I don’t know what that stupid weed did, but I know that Morning Glory is tough enough to overcome it.”

She sniffed, not looking convinced at all as I moved off her. She sat up slowly. “I know…it’s just…it’s waking up and finding you’ve turned into the most hated pony in the skies.” She curled her wings around her. “I haven’t even been able to fly since we got here. I was resigned to being on the ground. Happy, even…as long as I was with you. But now I’m scared to death that if I do fly somewhere, I’ll be more Rainbow Dash and less Morning Glory.”

“I didn’t think you hated her. I thought pegasi thought she was a hero,” I replied as I sat next to her.

She shook her head. “It’s much more complicated than that. Yes, Rainbow Dash was one of the greatest pegasi in history. She’s right up there with Commander Hurricane: nigh-mythic status. But pegasi…well…some of us have a way of tearing down our heroes, too. Rainbow Dash might have been awesome, but she also got tens of thousands of pegasi killed. Some Enclave speculate that the first strike at Cloudsdale was an attempt to kill her personally, not just a strike to destroy our capital. Then there was her turning her back on the Enclave to help the surface. As a historical figure, yeah, you can tolerate her. But as a person…” She trembled and sniffed. “Look at me. First thing I did was call her an idiot!”

I sighed and shook my head. “I’m sorry. I had no idea. At Tenpony, they were just mildly curious if I was related to Twilight or not. I can’t imagine what they might have done if I magically became Twilight Sparkle.”

“Thunderhead is a little better than most about her. We were completely tied in with the Ministry of Awesome, and so in a way she made us awesome too. But if Thunderhead found out about me…I don’t know what they’d do.” She shuddered. “And the rest of the Enclave…Neighvarro especially…it would be ugly. They tried

Rainbow Dash in absentia a century ago and found her guilty of crimes against the pegasus race. They disintegrated her in effigy."

"Well, good thing you're not Rainbow Dash," I replied firmly, staring into her eyes and daring her to disagree. Maybe not the best way to handle an identity crisis, but she didn't argue. I smiled. "Now…can you transplant lungs and reconstruct faces, Morning Glory?" I felt a little cheesy trying to channel Mom's 'buck up' speech, but she was head of security and had to be able to get through to people.

She gave a little smile. "Yeah…I think so. It should be easy with the auto-doc and compatible organs…but where did you get them? Did you have Sanguine grow them for you?" she asked as she shook off bits of rainbow mane that clung to her.

I looked away. "Something like that. Doesn't matter now, though. It's gone and buried."

"Too bad," she sighed. "That kind of technology would have been incredibly useful. A pity it had to be under the control of that monster."

I thought of the Flux being sucked out of Discord. "There were other drawbacks to it, too. Suffice to say that it's better to not think about it." Hopefully she'd leave it at that. She looked curiously at Boo, who was curled up on the hospital room bed and watching with her quiet, dull expression. "This is…well, I'm calling her Boo. She was living in the tunnels under Hippocratic Research."

"She doesn't have a cutie mark," Glory said as she peeked at the white pony's flank. "I've heard of late bloomers, but she's our age, Blackjack. And I thought I took forever getting mine." Then she glanced at the rainbow lightning bolt and sighed. I wondered if it was an illusion... or a sign that something deeper had changed in Glory.

"I don't think you ever told me how you got yours," I said as Boo crawled off the bed and shook herself. Together we walked towards the operating room.

She smiled awkwardly. "It's silly…I was studying for my graduation finals; I had to get a top score for advanced placement at Thunderhead's medical program. Everypony expected me to get a perfect grade, but it was just…not happening. I was making mistakes, getting things mixed up in my head. I was tired and exhausted trying to study."

"Being a smart pony sounds hard," I said with a smirk, and she

smiled along with me. I was glad to see that some attempt had been made to clean up the blood. As freaky as the neatness was, it belonged in this place. Still, I wouldn't have minded a little litter… maybe some water-stained tiles…

"Maybe, but we also tend to get shot up less, too, so there's a plus side," she said with a smile. "I was at the end of my limits, about to just quit and go into the basic courses. It would have meant three, maybe four more years of study before I got into medical school. But then I realized that I didn't have to memorize three hundred isolated facts. If I started with the heart…I'd memorize the facts of the heart…then the blood vessels it was connected to…what organ systems were connected in which order... It was like a sunrise that drove out all the confusing darkness, and suddenly I could see everything." She flushed a little, hanging her head. "I guess you'd have to see one to really know."

"Eh, I've seen the sun." Granted, it was in memories and the like rather than with my own eyes. "But I guess I can understand that. It explains you."

"Better than this thing does…" she muttered, looking at the lightning bolt.

"Isn't it similar, though? I mean, you were confused, and then… BAM! You figured it out." My shout made Boo jump behind Glory. The blue pegasus smiled sympathetically, and we paused long enough for the pale mare to relax. "So your epiphany came like a bolt out of the blue. And you're good at connections, so the rainbow color is how that's all related. I mean, I just shoot things, but you know all about repairing and medicine and energy weapons and stuff."

"I think you're stretching it now," she murmured, but looked a little more at ease. She might not like her body or the cutie mark she was borrowing, but she didn't have to hate it. "So, tell me everything that happened after Lacunae teleported us away."

I started to talk, but then I closed my mouth again and reconsidered. The Goddess needed to know as well. I owed her. "I'd like Lacunae to hear it too. And Scotch as well. Why don't you tell me what I missed here?"

"A very frantic five minutes," Glory replied. "Scotch had stopped breathing, her eyes were terribly damaged, and she was going into shock. We were lucky; when we arrived, Archibald was in the room trying to determine how to get the pods moved to Elysium for his

father. They had one all wired up and everything. They started to argue, but Lacunae was very persuasive."

"Shouted telepathic insults can have that effect," came her smooth voice in my mind. Then she asked, in a more formal, imperious tone, "What did you learn at Hippocratic Research? Was Chimera intact?"

Hello, Goddess. "The facility was a wreck. We got enough of it to work to make some spare parts for myself and Scotch. Unfortunately, the security systems were attacking us. I had to destroy what was left to get away."

"Hmmmph," the purple alicorn snorted. "Very well. I expect the other will be in Canterlot soon if she's finished mucking about with Rangers. Hopefully she'll have better results." She started to turn away.

"I freed Discord."

That made her freeze in her tracks. Then she slowly turned to look at me in shock. "You. Did. *What?!*"

"I freed him," I replied firmly as I trotted up towards her. "It was the least I could do after Twilight left him there, trapped in that starmetal coffin." Her shock gave way to anger, but I didn't let up. "You knew what was being done to him. You knew! But all you cared about was figuring out how to make alicorns."

"Don't you presume to lecture me; you don't know what he did to me, my friends, and the kingdom!" I looked right into the eyes of Twilight Sparkle.

"Really? Did he turn any of you into stone? Did he drill holes in your body? Did he torture any of you? Suck out your blood for his magic?" I asked as I advanced. I pointed a hoof at her. "Two hundred years in agony. I don't care what he did, Twilight, no one deserves that!"

"Discord was a monster that fed on misery and strife!" Lacunae shouted.

"And how was what ponies did to him any less monstrous?" I said, not giving an inch. "What if it'd been done to another pony? The fact that it was Discord doesn't change how wrong it was!"

"That…I…that was…I meant to speak to Luna. I forced a recall of the Flux, once I knew how dangerous it was. Discord…it was a very busy time, Blackjack!" she stammered, then shuddered. The alicorn swayed, then whimpered as she curled up. "I'm sorry…"

"Twilight?" I asked as I knelt. She looked up at me with teary eyes,

and I hissed softly, “I’m sorry, Lacunae.”

“So is Twilight…please…understand she is sorry. She just… forgot…” She closed her purple eyes once more and shivered, and I reached down to stroke her mane. “The Goddess put her shame in me. Her guilt. She was ashamed of so much…so sorry for what she had done. Please, believe that. Please…” She pressed her face into my chest and whimpered softly, “Pinkie…”

“I…I do. I do, Lacunae,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry. I just…that place was really messed up. You know what happened there. Copies. Fusion. Flux. Discord.”

“You know that you doomed us all by setting him loose,” Lacunae sniffed. “His power is…immeasurable.”

I sighed. “Yeah. And if I have to, I’ll deal with him later. But he’s chaos, right?” The purple alicorn looked at me with a troubled frown, then nodded once. “So if everypony expects him to act one way…then the chaotic thing is if he does the opposite. Right?” I asked with a hopeful smile.

“Unless doing what is unexpected is expected so he does the expected to be unexpected,” Glory offered. “Or he might unexpectedly be unexpected by doing the expected…I’m not exactly sure how the math works out. Do two unexpecteds become expected?”

“No, I’m pretty sure they’re squared,” Lacunae replied. She wiped her eyes and even gave a thankful little smile to my rainbow-maned love.

I clapped my hooves over my ears. “Ahhh! Stop! All this egghead talk is starting to educate me!”

The pair just looked at each other, then launched into a discussion of theoretical Discord unexpectosity states. I felt a migraine coming on. Evil ponies…Evil smart ponies…

But at least I gave them both a reason to smile.

* * *

I filled them in on what had occurred at the complex, glossing over the specifics of the source of the organs. Thankfully, Lacunae didn’t get into those specifics either. The mare seemed to be trying to deal with the emotions shoved into her by the Goddess. It seemed to physically weaken her; how much mental anguish and trauma could a pony take before they just…couldn’t anymore? If something

happened to the Goddess, would Lacunae be affected? Would she be free, or would she crumble, or explode?

I really didn't like these unknowns. I was also glad I didn't know whatever LittlePip was up to. As we walked along, Glory remarked on Boo several times. She seemed unconvinced that the white pony following me around didn't know how to talk. I suppose the idea of fully grown ponies popping from nowhere was a little hard to swallow. It wasn't until Boo relieved herself right in front of us that Glory concluded that... yes... she wasn't quite right. And guess who it was they looked at to clean up after her?

Ah well; I was the one who brought her up here. And it wasn't the dirtiest job I'd had. I tossed the mess and the rag down the garbage chute at the nurse's station.

As we approached the doors to the operating room, I balked. How could I set hoof into the room where I'd decided the fate of forty foals?

"Wait, what is that?" I asked as my ear picked up a noise from within. A sharp 'Beee…dooo…beee…dooo…' playing over and over.

Glory went pale, jumped into the air, and streaked down the rest of the hall, slamming through the double doors so hard one was knocked off its hinges. "Lacunae!" came her scream, and a second later, the world disappeared in a purple flash. When the world returned I was back in the middle of the operating room beside the very table where my insides became my outside. The robotic arms looked particularly sharp at this moment. "Power fault! The stasis is unstable. We have to transplant her lungs now! I don't know if we'll be able to stabilize the pod!"

Fortunately, the crates Sanguine had filled were right beside the operating table. "Where is P-21?" I asked as Glory rushed to the terminal podium in the middle of the room. Boo hung back at the smashed-open door, blinking with fright and confusion.

"I don't know. I also don't know how long the pod's been malfunctioning!" Glory said as she tapped the keys with her hooves. "There's a reason you don't fiddle with these things. Once something is in stasis, you leave it alone! I have no idea what parts of her body might have undergone cell death if the field strength was uneven."

The mechanical arms lifted. "Lacunae. Teleport her onto the table, then get all the healing potions you prepared. This is going to be a

messy transplant at best. She's going to need an IV feed as soon as we replace her lungs and eyes." Glory swallowed, her hooves tapping. "I have no idea if this system is a hundred percent either. I was hoping P-21 would spend few hours helping me check for bugs." She licked her lips nervously as there was a flash in the beeping pod, and suddenly Scotch appeared on the table. "Why didn't I focus on that rather than changing my mane?!"

"You thought you had the time. You didn't know the pod would malfunction," I replied.

Scotch looked…dead. She reeked of chlorine, and her eyes were swollen shut. Patches of her hide were raw and discolored, as if she'd been burned. That smell hit me like a hammer. Only the tiny rise and fall of her side gave any hint that she was alive at all. She whimpered, starting to shake.

"Black…" she said weakly. "Hurts."

I rushed to her side. "It's okay. We're going to fix you up, Scotch."

"He didn't…talk…" was all she said before I was being brushed aside.

"Roll her onto her back, Lacunae," Glory instructed. "I'm breaking about thirty or forty rules for hygiene and postoperative infection prevention," the mare muttered as the arms began to whirr and hum. Glory then rushed to a cart beside the operating table and opened a bottle. "Dribble this along her chest," the mare instructed as she grabbed a hoofful of gauze. I smelled the sharp tang of alcohol. Glory then wiped down the filly's chest. "Okay. Med-X will have to do. I--"

She froze as she stared into the drawer. "Where's the Med-X? There were three doses here ready!" She looked around the cart. "I can't crack a chest without some kind of anesthetic!" She looked at me, her eyes frantic. "Do you have some?"

My inventory function said no.

"The Society and Eggheads cleared out the storeroom. Lacunae, maybe there's some more at the nurse's station?"

"That's where I found those three," Lacunae replied.

I took my saddlebags and upended them, dumping every bit of trash and salvage I'd trotted across. I had to have something! The metal crown thingy I'd found in Miramare bounced twice on the tile floor and rolled away. Guns and bullets were useless here. I was useless here!

Then Lacunae swept up the crown with her magic. "A recollector!

Perfect! Blackjack, give me a memory orb," the alicorn instructed. I looked at the scattered orbs. Well…eenie…meenie…that one! I picked it up with my mouth and trotted it over to the table; I didn't want to risk getting sucked in, what with my wonky horn and all. The alicorn put the crown on Scotch's head and then slotted the orb into the spot where the black opal had been; it must have fallen out somewhere. At once the filly went limp.

"I hope that's the Gala…" I murmured…wait, did I even have that orb? Ugh, I needed to catalogue and label these damned things!

"Okay. Get clear," Glory said as pink talisman lit up over the operating table. "That should stabilize her long enough to get finished now that she's under." I heard the purr of electric clippers, then saw a familiar vibrating blade move down towards the filly. I swept up my things with hooves and magic and dumped them into the bags, letting the inventory spell take care of the packing. "Good…it's cutting nicely…all her internal organs seem to be functioning as well as can be expected…heartbeat is weak…we need to get this done fast."

I heard a wet noise fill the air and looked away. I did not like operating rooms…no thank you! I looked over at the malfunctioning pod and trotted closer. A pink pony in my head put on a brown cap and lifted a magnifying glass; there was dirt smudged on the control panel next to the pod.

"I need to find P-21…" I said sharply as I turned and ran for the hall, Boo scrambling out of my way. I needed to find him. Now!

Missing Med-X, and he'd done something to the pod. He could hide from my eyes, but not my Eyes Forward Sparkle! I spotted a blue bar all by itself and homed in. I found him lying in a bathtub nearby, Dusty's hat pulled over his face. The three empty syringes were on the lip of the sink beside him. I felt a rage and fear like I hadn't felt in a long time.

"Interesting place for a nap," I said sharply.

"G'way…" he muttered thickly.

"Scotch is in surgery now. She might be dying. Somepony messed with her stasis pod," I said as I looked at the dirt on his hooves. He just lay there, twitching a little.

"Go away," he repeated, putting a little more effort into it. I pulled the hat away and stared down at his contracted pupils as he looked up at me. His spasming limbs were relaxing bit by bit as he closed his eyes.

"You took the chems for your daughter's operation to use yourself. How could you? And what did you do to her pod? Did you try and open it?" I said lowly, and my eyes threw up a targeting reticule on his head. For once, I wasn't disturbed by that. I was way too angry. "Did you try and kill her?"

He just lay there. "I'm sick of hurting…"

"Your leg is fine!" I yelled at him, feeling sick myself. "It's been fine for more than a week! What the hell is wrong with you?"

He covered his face with his hooves. "Hurts. I don't want to hurt any more."

"What do you mean?" I asked with a frown. "What hurts?" Maybe there was something actually wrong with him.

"Everything," he muttered. "Everything always hurts. And when you're hurt, if you're a good pony, you get a shot. And then it doesn't hurt any more. Or if you struggle and fight, you get a shot, and then it doesn't hurt, either." He closed his eyes again. "Go away, Blackjack. I tried to tell her, but I couldn't say a word. I just…I just leaned against it and couldn't say a thing. I needed a shot so bad. Everything hurts."

Okay... don't think about that just now... If you were a bad pony, medical would give you a shot to help you perform. "Are you saying…do you mean that back in medical…in 99…they kept you dosed up on Med-X?"

"After what the Overmare did to my ass on a regular basis, what do you think?" he said with a grumble, glaring up at me before staring away into the side of the tub. "I was so glad Daisy busted my leg. It was an excuse to have a shot whenever I wanted. When we were in Flank, I stocked up. I could just…not hurt... but then I ran out…"

"When?" I asked softly.

"The arena. Reapers aren't big on painkillers, I guess. And Megamart had run out. I was only able to get one shot from Bonesaw. And…I kept thinking about 99…and how we'd failed… and it hurt so damn much. Everything hurt so damn much. I just wanted it all to stop."

"But then I saved you," I murmured. "Why didn't you tell me you hurt so much?"

"Because you don't. You get shot, stabbed, blown up, and raped, and I never once hear you say 'Oh, it hurts too much. We have to stop.'" He let out a little sob. "I just want everything to stop hurting! I thought the arena would be perfect…but then you

stopped me…so I'd just stay close to you till something… something…killed me. But I just kept on living, and now even one shot isn't enough. Now it takes two or three. And they were just lying there and I hurt so damn bad but I'm not dead yet!"

I touched his shoulder, but he jerked away. I sighed. "And Priest… made you hurt less…"

"Yes…but he's gone." He screwed up his eyes and hissed softly in pain. "I thought…I don't know what I thought. I thought for a while, maybe I could do some good. Get through it…be like you." He turned his face away. "When we went to Hippocratic…I wanted revenge. But…I also wanted to stop hurting."

"You were staying with me because you thought I'd get you killed?" I murmured softly, feeling cold and hollow once more. I hadn't felt like this in a long time.

He sniffed and nodded. "With all the shit you attract? I figured something would get us sooner or later. But you kept on throwing yourself into the meat grinder over and over…they nailed your legs to the floor and we cut them off and still you…Goddess, Blackjack, how do you keep going?!" he asked as he looked up at me in anguish. "And then you died and…and I was alive…and all I wanted was to swap places with you!" He laughed brokenly. "You know what I thought when I saw Dusty die? Damn…lucky mare…"

I sighed, leaning down and stroking his mane gently. "Everything hurts, Blackjack. Everything. I was so sure that the hurting would stop in that damned laboratory. A shot. A turret. That goop. I just wanted something to kill me so that you could go on and save everypony. Something. But…somehow you saved us all. Again… because that is what you do…"

He closed his eyes again. "Please don't save me. Please just leave me here. I'm so sick of hurting. So damned sick of everything." I looked down at my friend and stroked his mane. I had no idea what to do. No idea at all…except…

Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head…

No! I save ponies. I don't kill them.

But…how do I save P-21?

"I'm sorry, P-21. I don't know how I can take the pain away," I said quietly. "I…don't hurt. I'm not exactly sure if I'm a pony anymore. Maybe…maybe somewhere back in Tenpony, whatever part of me was a pony got cut away and replaced by a talisman or a pump or something. I don't know how a pony is supposed to feel anymore. I

get shot and it…it doesn't feel the same anymore. I remember the first time I got shot. Now, nothing feels right," I murmured quietly. "I eat metal and rocks now. I have little bars telling me how much energy I have left." I closed my eyes. "Maybe…maybe the reason I'm not affected by Enervation is because I'm really a robot…just one with more fleshy bits than your average Ultra-Sentinel."

He shifted to look up at me. "But right now…Glory is doing the transplant to try and save Scotch Tape's life. And even with the organs, she might not pull through." I sighed, stroking his mane. "I know what it's like to hate yourself. I know what it's like to want to end the pain. I do…I know how it feels to be violated and to just want it over. I'm sorry I couldn't help you." I'd been on the mattress before, the very place he was now.

I took a deep breath. "If you lie here like this, and don't go to her, and she lives then…she isn't your daughter. One way or another, she'll get past this. Maybe you won't. But I guarantee that if you stay here like this right now, and she dies, then you'll be just as dead as if I had left you back at the Arena. There are some things you never forgive yourself for." I closed my eyes. "Either way, I'm not going to leave you here just waiting for the pain to come back. Because it will…lying here causes the pain."

He lay there with his eyes closed for the longest time. I knew the chems and his own self-loathing were keeping him there. I could have dragged him out easily…but it didn't matter. The mattress he was stuck on would have been any place I took him. Only he could get off it…and I didn't know what we'd do if he didn't.

Then he shifted a little, rolling over to put his hooves beneath him. Slowly he rose, and I put a hoof out to steady him. I sniffed as he took one step out of tub, then another, then stepped free. "Why do I keep on following you, Blackjack?" he murmured as he slumped against me. "Why do you think I can be a better pony? More than just a trick pony?"

"Because you can. I can see it. Duct Tape could, too," I replied with a small smile. "Now, I think there's a waiting room thingy near the operating room. We can go there and…um…wait." He missed the obvious opportunity to point out my obviosity, just ducking his head and focusing on walking without falling down.

When we reached the waiting room, he took a seat and closed his eyes. I dug out my magic primer and stretched out on the couch. Concentrating on turning the page took my mind off Scotch…but

not off P-21. I didn't know anything about drug addiction! Glory had tried to talk to me about it, but to me it was more a 'chems do damage to your body so they're bad' type deal. I never thought of them changing the way a pony thought and acted. They were supposed to be…pop some Fixer, and you were good.

Had P-21 really been in pain for so long? Was it real pain like from an injury, or something in his head? This sounded a whole lot too serious for just a Fixer or two.

Boo slowly crept into view. I smiled and talked softly till she came over to get a mane rub. I fished out a slightly smooshed Fancy Buck Cake, and she ate it happily.

I tried to keep my mind off the question I couldn't answer by flipping through the primer. I was getting through the basic telekinesis practice spells. I practiced lifting and lowering Duty and Sacrifice. The revolvers were heavier than Vigilance. Theoretically, I should have been able to use a half dozen pistols with my magic, but in reality it was far easier to float an object than to aim and fire. Your brain literally had to juggle from one weapon to the next to use them all if you were going to do more than simply fire blindly. Duty and Sacrifice were different, though. I lifted and aimed them both with little difficulty. The intricate scrollwork on the five-shot cylinders depicted magical flames. I practiced working them in unison, pulling the triggers simultaneously at an imaginary target.

Then I practiced my little light spell…because for the first time in my life, I could actually do magic. Boo watched the little floating mote warily, then when it came near, tried to eat it. I smiled as she made an icky face. Before, magic was something other unicorns did. Other unicorns were better than me, and I always assumed that that was that. I was a screwup unable to perform the most basic magic spell beyond simple telekinesis. My magic bullet spell had been the first time I'd done more, and even that was sort of still telekinesis. But now a light spell…it made me wonder what other magic I was capable of.

I thought of Lacunae's shield spell. Wouldn't that be useful, given the amount of fire I saw regularly? Or healing spell…okay, maybe that was a bit much. I wasn't sure if a healing spell would even work on me. Maybe I needed a repair spell…or both?

"Hey, P-21…wanna throw some books at me?" He blinked, frowning a little in confusion. "Come on! I want to see if I can figure out how to do Lacunae's barrier thingy." I grinned and

gestured right at the end of my snout. “Come on. You can’t make my face any worse than it already is. So give it your best shot.”

You know, for having three doses of Med-X in him, he could throw the waiting room magazines and books really hard!

After two dozen, I had a bloody nose and a ringing headache and wasn’t any closer to making a magic barrier. Maybe I could talk to Lacunae about it. Before, though, I just would have given up. ‘Blackjack is screwup; Blackjack can’t learn, durr…’ But now I knew magic was more than just my inability. Of course I had to get pummeled with a half dozen more books before I finally got P-21 to stop throwing them.

“Okay, clearly the whole ‘magic shield’ thing is a little more complicated than just…imagining a wall or something,” I said as I rubbed my horn.

“Well, if you ever need more books thrown at your head, I’m sure you won’t have any lack of volunteers,” he replied with a small smile.

“You know…I’ve got to wonder, how do you make those shots with your grenade launcher?” I asked as I looked at Persuasion on his hip. “I mean, I know a lot of it is skill.”

“I don’t know. I suppose it’s an earth pony thing,” he replied with a shrug, looking at the door to the operating room. “I can’t do magic or fly, but say I need to get something somewhere, I know just how and how hard I need to kick it to get it where it needs to go.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it. Put a magazine on each of those three seats there,” I said as I pointed across the waiting room. He looked at me flatly and reached over, bit three magazines, and tossed one after the next onto all three seats. I frowned sourly. “Okay…do it again.” And so he did. “With bo--” And three prewar books landed on each stack. “Yeah, well, I can do magic.”

He stood, walked slowly towards a garbage can in the corner, and pulled out a tin can. Then he looked at me and kicked the can hard. It bounced off the wall, and I ducked as it whizzed by my head. “Ha!” I laughed, pointing a hoof at him. Then I heard a ping behind me and a ting above me... and felt the odd sensation of the can landing squarely on my horn. I looked at him and his sad little smile, levitated it off my horn, pulled it to my mouth, and started to chew without taking my eyes off him.

“Touché,” he replied as he took a seat. He closed his eyes for a moment. “How do you do it, Blackjack? How do you…how do you

keep on being you?"

"Nopony else is dumb enough to take the job," I replied with a chuckle and a shrug. "I mean, really, the uniform is nice, don't get me wrong, but I think I have something explode on me or near me on a daily basis. Anypony with two brain cells knows that that's not worth it." I grinned at him. "I expect I'll figure it out in a month or two." If I was still alive, that is.

"That's what I mean." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "You…helped Sanguine. Even after everything he did, you helped him." I opened my mouth, but he quickly added, "I'm not saying you were wrong…even if I think you were. It's just…you do things that are amazing. You laugh and joke and you just keep coming back for more."

"Not always," I said, feeling myself…wait, was I blushing?

"Thank goodness," he replied as he closed his eyes. "You know… after Priest…when you were on your bed like that…I have to admit, a part of me was relieved."

"Relieved I screwed up?" I asked with a frown.

"Relieved you could mess up. …Following you hasn't been easy at all, but it's been a heck of a show. You're so…good. You are. You try so hard to be good that... "

"I'm not a good pony," I replied firmly, looking away. Wow… maybe my face was too cooked to blush. "I want to be…I try…"

"And that's what makes you good." He laughed softly, mirthlessly. He looked at me long and low. "Sometimes, I can't believe the things you do. I mean…I really can't. You keep going when other ponies would break. You try and give everypony a second chance… a third chance…a fourth chance."

"Stop," I said firmly, frowning. "I'm not perfect. I fucked up…I fucked up big, remember?"

"I do. But in spite of that, you keep on going. You keep on being good." For some reason, his praise was starting to annoy me. "You never give up, even when anypony else would. I sometimes wonder what it would take to stop yo--"

I rose to my hooves, and Boo raised her head in alarm. "Damn it… do you want to know why I keep going? It's because, if I actually stop for two seconds to think about things, I want to blow my head off. I'm not a good pony. I'm a pony trying to make up for all the fucked-up things I've done! What I did in and to 99. What I did to those foals. What I did to you. The fact I'm probably going to need

an oil change before I have my period. That I have a crazy ghost pony living in my PipBuck who comes and goes as he pleases. I only keep going because I'll die if I don't. Not because I'm good." I sighed and looked away. "I'll drag myself forward into a meat grinder because it's less painful than thinking about what I've done. I can give second chances…because after my mistakes…I'd want a few hundred myself."

"Maybe…but you haven't quit yet. Not on anypony," he said quietly as he stared away. He took a slow breath. "I keep thinking about good ponies…you…Priest…even Glory. And no matter how I try…I don't fit in. I'm not as good as the rest of you."

"You're fine," I said as I trotted over to him and put my leg around his shoulders. "It's not about being good. It's about trying to do better. If you quit trying, then you'll just get torn down bit by bit till there's nothing left." I sat and stroked Boo's ears till she lowered her head and started to snooze.

He watched me, then sighed. "You make being a good pony look so easy."

"No, LittlePip, Fluttershy, and Homage make it look easy," I snorted. "And don't get me started on the Stable Dweller. I mean, she can at least save her stable…in which she dwells, I assume." From whence she plotted her eventual salvation of all the Wasteland. ... You know, I didn't exactly know what the Stable Dweller did to help ponies. LittlePip faced down mind reading monsters and slaver armies.

Ah well, she had to do something. Otherwise, why would Homage talk about her like that?

Then the door pushed open, and we both rose to our hooves. Lacunae looked at the pair of us.

She wasn't smiling. "You should come." He suddenly staggered against me, and I was barely able to keep us both upright.

"Scotch…is she…? She's alright? Right?" I asked as I held P-21.

"You should come," Lacunae said in our minds, and then pulled back. We stared at the swinging door in shocked silence. I'd been so sure…he'd…had it been because…no. Don't think that. Don't let him think it. Just…

"Come on. Let's go," I said as I nudged him towards the door.

* * *

The oxygen talisman sent up a slow stream of bubbles from its bottle, the tubes running to a mask covering Scotch's face. Gauze covered her eyes and several patches of her hide, and bandages ran from her throat down to disappear under the sheets. A monitor beeped slowly as it magically read her vitals. Glory adjusted the machine, her lips pressed together and her eyes angry.

P-21 took one look at her lying there. "Is she…is…"

"Honestly, I have no idea," Glory said as P-21's hind legs gave out. She glared at him. "Somepony hit delicate equipment. Somepony took drugs I'd prepared for the procedure. Everything was rushed transplanting the lungs. We could have kept her stabilized through the prep. The robot could have swapped the lungs in three minutes if everything had been perfect. This was far from perfect. So really…I don't know." She closed her eyes. "The eyes went smoothly enough…and the skin grafts. But really, I can't tell you if she's going to live or not."

"Glory…" was all I could say. She just shook her mane and stepped past us as she headed for the door.

"It's night now. If she pulls through till morning, it'll be a miracle," she said in cold anger as she stepped out. "Come on, Blackjack. I need to get you prepped. Make sure he doesn't cough on her monitor or something," she said to Lacunae. The purple alicorn simply nodded.

P-21 didn't look like he was going to cough. He looked like Sanguine sitting there before the four copies. In a way, I suppose he was.

"Is it that…" I muttered in shock as I followed her into the hall.

"I've never operated that fast or sloppily before. If it wasn't for Lacunae, she'd be dead right now!" Glory said sharply. "What was he doing with her stasis pod? Why did he take the Med-X?"

"He's…got a problem. A…" I hung my head. "I'm sorry, Glory. I'm sorry I gave those Mint-als to Scotch. I…"

She looked confused for only a few seconds before her glare softened a little. "He's addicted, isn't he?" I closed my eyes and nodded. She sighed and reached out to pat my shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"Isn't it? You tried to say something. Heck, Rampage tried to tell me!" I stood and started pacing. "I just…he's always been so strong. I never thought of him…" I shook my head. "He'd needed it since before we left Stable 99."

"You mean for his leg?" She frowned as we started to walk towards the operating room.

"No. I mean the medical ponies gave it to the males, either to calm them down or deal with the aftereffects of…rough sex." I shook my head; I'd never thought of it. A shot to put them to sleep. A shot to calm them down when they were hysterical. Shots to help them perform. It wasn't just his leg; his whole life he'd been under the influence. "So…you have to…you know…do the medicine thing. Make him not addicted anymore. You can do that, right?"

"Theoretically, but the fact is that addiction isn't as simple as that. Addiction is more than just chemical. It's psychological as well. He might not be able to control himself."

I answered at once, "Well then, I'll control him and…" Oh…yeah, that might not work so well.

"Are you prepared to give up your hunt for a few months while you do? Med-X addiction is a doozy. Going cold turkey could easily kill him without the proper medical help." Wait? Did she actually mean that stopping taking the drug that was messing him up could kill him? My mane went all clammy. "Well, I'll keep him…I'll…" The thought of Scotch Tape dying…of P-21 dying…"Damn it, Glory, there must be something I can do! I know he's got the problem now. I'll watch him close. I won't let him get messed up again."

"Blackjack…there are some things you can't do," she said in a low voice as we walked.

"I just dealt with a ghoul who wanted to kill me and got out of a deathtrap alive. There's nothing I can't do," I insisted stubbornly. Hadn't he followed me into that deathtrap for the whole 'death' thing, though? "We'll just have to keep an eye on him." I looked at her hanging her head and nudged her. "How about you? How are you doing?"

She sighed. "I'm trying to compartmentalize what happened. She was critically ill; I had to cut as quickly as possible. She might have been braindead even before we got her out of the pod. Death happens." She glanced at me and my startled expression. "One of the first things they teach you in medical school. Death happens; you can't save all of them." She sighed. "I just hope I didn't make a mistake. Rainbow Dash was no surgeon."

"Sanguine said the surgery was simple," I said with a frown. He'd lied to me... I should have dragged him along…wait, no, there was a fusion spell we hadn't had time for and his panicking half crazy

family had been freaking out and…

"I'm sure that, for a two-century-old doctor, it is. For somepony who's only read about the procedure and witnessed a few transplants, it's a lot more tricky. Essentially, it's 'activate the stabilization field, get the patient unconscious, crack them open, remove the bad organ, put in the transplant, sew and anchor it in place, and flood everything with healing potion. Close up and hope for the best.'" She closed her eyes.

"What are her odds?" I asked with a gulp. Boo bumped my flank with her head, making me jump. My jump made her jump as well, and she ducked behind the counter, peeking at me.

"I still can't believe there were dozens of ponies like her in that place," Glory said softly, shaking her head. "Anyway, I don't do odds, Blackjack. You're the one who knows gambling. We'll know by morning if she's going to pull through or not. There's no chance of organ rejection, but infection…having something rupture… internal bleeding…" She hissed softly in frustration. "If he'd just not touched the pod or taken those chems…if I could have had more time!"

"You did the best with what you had," I said as I bumped my head against her. Aha! Now I knew where Boo had picked it up.

She gave a wan smile. "I know…it's just, at this point, I feel helpless."

"We all do," I murmured softly. We walked along together with our heads held a little bit lower.

Glory got over it first. "Well! Before morning arrives and my confidence is shattered forever, let's see if I can't get you free from that hazmat suit!" she said brightly.

Fifteen minutes later, I was discovering just what Glory could do with a scalpel. I doubted I would ever feel the same way about her as she held the razor sharp blade in her lips and sliced away the yellow rubber and the barding beneath. No sooner was the yellow rubber cut than a reeking pong of pony sweat, blood, and leather struck my nostrils. Glory backed away, coughing and gagging as the blue pegasus turned decidedly green.

Okay…that couldn't be healthy.

"You're lucky. With that healing talisman inside you, you'll regenerate all of this relatively quickly," she said matter-of-factly as she freed my tail from its rubbery sack. I swished it a few times, letting it air out. Oh, I could really do with a good brushing. "He

included a few ounces of muscle tissue and fat so I can build you up."

"That's good, but... Glory, I look like a robot. How much…" Was there a pony left in me?

"You are not a robot," Glory replied as she tossed the sack away. "Yes, we had to replace a lot of compromised bone and reinforce your epidermis. The alternative was something like Deus, with external supports poking out of your hide." That still didn't make me feel much better. She sighed and stroked my mane. "Look at it this way. Would you feel better if you saw only bone sticking out of those injuries?"

"Gah, no!" I said with a shiver.

"Then you shouldn't feel bad about the metal," Glory replied. "You're injured, not damaged. And we're going to heal you, not repair you," she said firmly. Then she took up the scalpel and finished cutting away as many scraps as she could. The only pieces that remained were rings where bullet holes had allowed the barding and hazardous materials suit to bond with my hide. It didn't hurt…but it didn't feel natural, either.

'Natural'. Was that a term that could be legally applied to me anymore?

"Okay. Now the fun time. I'm out of Med-X, so we're going to have to use a memory orb. Hopefully it won't wear off till I'm finished. Do you have a preference?" Glory asked with a small smile. Given how jumbled up they were…I really needed a case or something that let me label them. I sighed. Really, most of my orbs weren't all that pleasant to begin with. I really didn't want to relive Stonewing getting a cockatrice squished into him.

Besides…now that I was out of the suit…I had something else to take care of.

"Um…give me a second, okay?" I said with a flush.

"Why? Is something the matter?"

"Um…" How to put this delicately? "I need to use the little filly's room."

* * *

As I trotted out of the bathroom, I really hoped that I hadn't just ruined the toilet. They were something precious in the Wasteland, and what I'd tried to flush…well…let's just say I wasn't sure it

could handle what I'd just put into it. I made my way back towards the operating room, but then paused. There was Doctor Tenderheart's office. I smiled as I stepped inside, looking at the terminal P-21 had hacked and at the safe he'd left open. He'd been so brave going on his own to try and find some way to stop the mad children. I'd thought Glory had died.

I closed my eyes. I really couldn't say if I'd made progress since then.

I looked at Marigold's file on the desktop and slowly turned it over, looking at obscure medical wordings. Then the stack of files slipped and fell to the floor in a clatter, sliding in a fan of papers and folders. Great, Blackjack, just great. I knelt down and started to gather them up with my hooves and horn. I knew it was irrational. This wasn't my office; heck, the pony who had worked in here had been gone for two centuries. Still. It was her space.

As I picked up the last, I spotted a faint golden glow from the open safe. Slowly, I pushed it open and looked down at the little yellow glass orb. I hesitated, then stretched out my hoof and carefully rolled it out. My fingers extended as I stared down at it. "You're not supposed to be in there."

"Interesting," rasped the Dealer's voice, making me jump, and I looked aside with a scowl to see him staring out the window.

"Oh, that just about sums up my entire life," I said with a little frown. "What are you doing here?"

"I just thought I'd comment on the vagaries of life and the oddities of luck. Random chance. All that," he said as he spread out five cards showing a royal flush. "One second you get exactly what you need…the next…" He tapped one card, and it went from an ace of spades to a two of clubs. "Nothing. How do you think that memory orb came to be there? Something you missed first time through? What are the odds that you'd find that?"

"No idea. I'm still waiting to find the memory orb that explains who the hell you are," I replied sharply as I stood on my hind legs and approached him. He smiled up at me, his hooves working the cards better than I could with magic.

"I told you. I'm nopony special. Just along for the ride."

"Horseapples. Who are you? What are you?" I asked as I looked him over.

"Nopony special at all," he murmured softly. "Is it so hard to believe?"

"Yes," I replied flatly. "My life is too interesting just to allow a random ghost pony to be living in my PipBuck along with a key to Equestria's darkest secrets. I mean, I'm used to some pretty odd shit, but that's just a little much. Call me crazy."

"No. You're not crazy…" he said in a dangerous, low voice loaded with rage as he stared out the window at the distant green glow of the city. I saw his jaw work, his muscles flexing under the coat. He sighed. "How did it come to this?"

"You tell me, Goldenblood," I said as I crossed my hooves, sitting on the desk all upright; oddly, my body had no problem balancing, so long as I actually didn't try and balance.

"I'm not Goldenblood," he said quietly.

I doubted that, but there was no point is lapsing into the whole cycle of accusing and denying. "But you knew him," I challenged.

He didn't answer for several seconds. "Nopony knew him. None of us. We all thought we had him figured out. Luna thought he was her loyal evil chancellor working behind the scenes. Fluttershy thought he was a helpless little lamb, till he showed his fangs. Horse thought he was an idiot. Twilight thought he was a friend… then an enemy…then a friend…then an enemy…Then who knew? And Spike thought he was a father…"

"And who did you think he was?" I asked. If I had to play games to get answers, I'd play and hope he slipped and revealed something.

"Me?" He arched a brow and then looked out the window again. "He was the pony who blew up the world." He shoved himself away from the window, turning towards me with a scowl. "Oh, he didn't do it by himself. Don't get the idea that he twirled his mustache one day, gave an evil laugh, and set out to kill everypony. No, the Ministry Mares, Celestia, Luna…everypony was guilty. Everypony facilitated it. Everypony gleefully raced towards the edge, and anypony who didn't like it and thought it was wrong…stayed silent. Goldenblood was just the architect who set it all up. If he'd just shut his mouth and died and let Luna fail, the world would have been a better place."

"So why'd he do it?" I asked. The fury returned on his face as he glared at me a moment, but then he cast his eyes away.

"Don't know. Fluttershy? Twilight? Luna? He always did have a weak spot for assertive mares. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe the power and the secrets and lies wormed their way inside him till he snapped. Till one day he was so sick of it that he stopped

playing the game," he said as he leaned towards me and clopped his hooves together in front of my face, making me jump. "And then he found out you don't stop playing this game. You can't just change the rules. You can't suddenly make things right again." He snorted softly as I picked myself up. "He would have loved you. Probably have killed you about the time you found out what EC-1101 did, but loved you."

I sighed and shook my head. "So…why not spill?"

"Not my job and not my place," he sniffed.

I grunted and rolled my eyes. "Oh, come on. Just disclose the details already, Dealer or whoever you are! Why do you insist on all this mystery crap?"

"Because I'm not playing the game anymore. Not like Sanguine was, or like you are. DJ Pon3. That stable dweller." He laughed, long and thin. "What, you think this is all a coincidence? I don't believe in coincidence. All of you start wiggling around like a kicked-over anthill all at once? You start discovering the O.I.A.'s secrets? Wars and death and chaos? It's two hundred years ago all over again. The same fucking game's still being played."

"What game? What are you talking about?" I asked, backing away a little. Maybe I wasn't the crazy one. "I'm not playing a fucking game here!"

"No? Why are you trying to find out about the projects?" he asked as he licked his lips. "Why are you trying to find where EC-1101 is getting to? Because you think it'll lead you to the answers, don't you? Why do you care about this shithole of a city? Why do you keep on fighting, day after day?" He pulled out a card and threw it in my face. Its surface was a mirror and I stared at my tattered reflection. "Look at you! You're half metal, Blackjack!" Another card of me nailed over a crate landed in my hooves, my hide painted white and red. "Look at the shit you go through." Another card showing the atrium full of still ponies. One of a mine's bloody rock crusher. One of forty stasis pods. "Look at the shit you cause!"

"Shut up," I screamed, the cards fluttering away like dead insects as I backed away into the corner. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop playing the game. The same stupid game everypony's been playing for years. Stop pretending it's all for something. Stop imagining you can fix it. You can't save the Wasteland. You can't save ponies. You can't save your friends. You can't even save yourself," he said as he took his cards and tossed

them into his cowboy hat. “Don’t be like Twilight and her friends. You’ll just get everypony killed if you do,” he said as he put it back on top of his head. He pointed to the memory orb in my mechanical grip. “Put that orb back where you found it, get the help you need, take your friends, and go. Leave this damned place and find some peaceful patch. Forget about Goldenblood and Equestria. They’re dead and gone.”

“I don’t…I can’t…” I said as I clenched my eyes shut. “He did something. Caused something. And I have to stop it. I can’t give up.” Yet I could still see him there, looking down at me in disgust and judgment. Then nothing. Slowly, I cracked my eyes open and looked at the empty room.

Nothing. Just an empty room.

* * *

“Are you okay?” Glory asked with a little frown as I returned to the operating room.

“I’m pretty sure I couldn’t see okay with a set of binoculars. But I’m ready to let you get to work,” I said hoarsely as I tried not to look at the glass trays full of wet fleshy tissue.

“Do you have a memory orb you want to look at?” Glory asked as she turned towards the podium that controlled the surgical robot.

I carefully lifted the golden orb that had mysteriously appeared in the office safe. “Yeah. I guess so.”

She frowned. “Without Lacunae, it should take an hour or two. So if you wake up in the middle, try to go back in.” I hopped up onto the operating table. Oh, I really didn’t want to be here. Lying here brought forth all kinds of memories of snip snip snip. In fact, I could see those little scissors on the end of a steel shaft.

“Okay…okay. Just…work quick.” I bit my lip as I tapped the orb against my horn, trying to make the connection happen. “Come on…come on…” There was a tiny spark from my horn, and I looked over at the Dealer watching me coldly. Then the world spun away.

oooOOOooo

There was only one pony that felt like this. My chest burned and bubbled with every breath. My legs ached and my head throbbed. This body was utterly exhausted. Yet Goldenblood walked across a

plaza. Great black buildings loomed from every direction around us. The ponies scurrying around them seemed almost like afterthoughts. What had Hoofington looked like before it was burned to the ground? I couldn't imagine this as an improvement.

It was night, but lights on the black facades lit up everything in garish colors. Two other ponies flanked him, but he paid them no mind. Really, feeling like this, I expected him to be looking for some bed to curl up in. If I'd felt like he did, I'd want to sleep for a couple of years. He walked slowly ahead, weaving slightly on unsteady hooves. He kept his eyes low, save for occasional glances around him or over his shoulder. The cold, wet air felt good on his burning lungs.

"Mister Goldenblood…? Are you sure he'll be available at this hour?" one of the bucks following him asked.

"Ponies like him don't keep normal hours," Goldenblood replied. He looked up at the blue neon sign over the front door. 'Robronco'.

The three walked into the large foyer…and right into the sights of an immense Ultra-Sentinel. Its guns pointed right down at us as it boomed, "Prepare to be destroyed!" And then a buck's voice followed it up with, "That's the last thing our striped nemesis will hear when they face off against the Robronco Ultra-Sentinel! Robronco, putting technology to the test for a better and brighter tomorrow." More sentinel robots stood on podiums around the massive rainbow machine. Protectaponies just stomped their hooves weakly on the fringes.

Clearly, Goldenblood wasn't a pony who startled easy. "That's a hell of a demonstration model," one of his escorts muttered.

Goldenblood pressed the elevator button with his horn before he asked exactly what I was thinking: "What makes you think it's for demonstrations?" He smiled just a little as the two bucks shuffled nervously behind him. In the polished steel doors, I saw the Ultra-Sentinel watching the three of us.

What indeed?

Going up, Sweetie Belle crooned a tune softly through a speaker. Goldenblood hummed along in his rusty way. The bucks following him coughed once the entire trip. Not exactly the friendliest bunch. Were they protecting him or guarding him?

The door chimed and opened wide, and I heard a mare say, "How about Neighponese? I could really go with some Kung Pow Yeow Dum." Three mares trotted into view: an orange pegasus, a familiar-

looking earth pony wearing a bow, and a unicorn with a poofy lilac mane.

"Oooh! Or there's a Fancee restaurant down by the river!" squeaked the white unicorn mare. Funny, but I could have sworn I'd heard that voice before.

"I really should get back to Fillydelphia. We're behind on almost a dozen stable inspections, and if I hear about one more delay in the Everfree, I'm gonna spit my bit," the crème earth pony drawled.

Then the three noticed Goldenblood and stopped short. The earth pony looked vaguely curious and the unicorn confused, but there was a deep loathing in the purple eyes of the pegasus. And there was fear, too. "Goldenblood," the pegasus murmured.

"Scootaloo," he replied in a rusty purr.

The earth pony blinked in surprise. "Oh, you're Director Goldenblood? Nice to meetcha." There was some hesitance on that last part. I could understand; Goldenblood was hardly a pony you applied 'nice' to easily. "Scoots tried to forward me the O.I.A. gobbledygook, but I'd rather design a tripod with two legs than understand all that fancy legalese."

"Quite understandable, Apple Bloom. Wise ponies let others handle those trivialities while they focus on getting important things done. I must commend you on Stable One. Very…impressive. I'm sure Canterlot's finest were quite taken with it."

"Well, now that Hoofington's not hoggin' all the good steel, we're getting the stables done lickity split." She gave a serious little smile. "I mean, not that Hoofington's not a nice city. Just…not exactly what I'd design."

"Yes, well. Certain considerations had to be taken into account. Still, Scootaloo's been able to work wonders with your financing. One has to wonder where she finds all the bits." Scootaloo wasn't taking her eyes off the scarred buck. "After all, Stable-Tec is a fully private company. If this were owned and controlled by the M.W.T., I might be able to understand where the money comes from."

"And Luna'd close us down," Apple Bloom said with a frown. "I swear, Her Majesty can get her feathers in a bunch when you start talkin' about the dangers of balefire bombs targeting cities."

"It would rather be like somepony suggesting selling hydraulic lifts on the possibility that your stables might collapse," Goldenblood rasped in his low, hissing whisper.

Apple Bloom frowned. "Are you suggestin' my stables aren't built

up to snuff?"

"I don't know. Are you suggesting that Princess Luna will somehow fail to preserve Equestria from the zebra megaweapon threat?" Goldenblood countered.

"Reckon not," the red-maned mare muttered, then sighed. "Can't see the harm in taking a few precautions, though. Just in case."

"Yes. In this day and age, precautions are wise," Goldenblood murmured as he looked away.

"Speaking of precautions, Goldie. I've made sure there's a spot reserved for you in Stable One, right alongside Their Majesties," Scootaloo said with a little smirk. "You'll have your own room and everything."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind," Goldenblood rasped. Then he turned his eyes to the unicorn and smiled. "Sweetie Belle. Please, let me say what an honor it is to meet you. I'm quite the fan of your songs."

The unicorn smiled back warmly. "Oh, why thank you," she said as she blinked in confusion. "But…ah…you're not what I expected at all. From the way Rarity and Scootaloo talk about you, I thought you were some kind of blood-drinking monster."

Goldenblood looked at the flushing pegasus for a moment. "Oh no, Miss Belle. I'm afraid I'm quite an ordinary monster." The three mares looked at each other with weak smiles, and he shook his head. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I have business with the great and powerful Mr. Horse. Ladies." He gave a slight bow and walked down the hall.

"Well, he was nice…in a creepy, doesn't-ever-blink kind of way," Sweetie Belle said behind them.

"So, you wanted to get some Neighponese, Scoots?" Apple Bloom asked.

The pegasus grumbled, "I've lost my appetite." Then the elevator doors slid closed.

Goldenblood chuckled to himself as he entered an elaborate waiting room. Tiny ponies frolicked on the table, and only the faint clicking gave hints that they were robots. In the corner was a primitive Protectapony with a placard reading 'Model #0'. Paintings of deserts and fanciful moons rising hung on the walls, magically enchanted to twinkle softly. A brown earth pony wearing a large, elaborate PipBuck trotted over to a little table where there were fresh apples, various berries, and a golden drink dispenser of

some sort.

Clearly, Robronco wasn't hurting for bits either.

The receptionist behind the table was a pretty young thing about my age. After assuring Goldenblood that Mr. Horse would be with him momentarily, she said into her headset, "No, I love you more. Mmmm…no…I love you more."

Ah, love.

Goldenblood just sat quietly, not glancing at the clock on the wall nor at his companions. He simply sat there. I was nearly crawling up the mental walls as he waited. Then Goldenblood started counting down from ten. "Three…two…one…"

The receptionist looked up. "Mister Horse is ready to see you now." He just rose and trotted around the desk and down the hall. "He's in room…um…" the mare called after him, but Goldenblood kept going without looking back. "Freak," muttered the mare, before going back to gushing, "No, not you! I love you more!"

Goldenblood seemed to know his way around well as he walked straight past several offices to a conference room. The yellow stallion waiting inside looked at Goldenblood with a cheeky grin. "Hey, it's moldy Goldie. How's it going?" he asked as he sat upright on the edge of the table, without the help of robotic legs. He slid a bowl of orange squares towards him. "Cheese squares?"

Goldenblood didn't say anything for a moment, and then he trotted around towards the brown-maned buck. "So, meeting with Stable-Tec go well?"

The yellow stallion shook his head with a suffering sigh. "Eh. It's not fair. I mean, throw a fat Stinkin' Rich at me, and I'll have him eating out of my hoof by the end of the meeting. But what am I supposed to do with three hotties like those? And Sweetie Belle! Sweet Celestia, it just ain't fair to bring flanks like hers to a business meeting."

"Well, I think it's a calculated move by Scootaloo to counteract your urge to digress on tech ideas with Apple Bloom by exploiting your penchant for lechery," Goldenblood replied. "Or she's planning on Rarity killing you when she finds out you're drooling over her little sister."

"You think?" Horse mused, scratching his chin. "Yeah. I could see that. A highly elaborate plot to make Rarity snap my head off… Scoots is clever like that." He sighed and shrugged. "Eh, well, if you gotta go, I can think of worse ways." He lifted the bowl and tapped

the bottom, knocking three of the bite-sized chunks into the air, and twisted his head to catch them in his mouth. Chewing loudly, he looked at Goldenblood. “So, where have you been? I’ve been trying to touch hooves with you for months.”

“Occupied,” he said quietly.

“Yeah yeah. Super secret stuff,” he snorted, rocking off the table. “So…I got it.”

Goldenblood lifted a cheese square and popped it into his mouth. It tasted like bitter paste as he chewed slowly. “Show me what you’ve discovered.”

The yellow buck grinned as he nodded his head and walked towards the wall. He reached out with a hoof to press against the beige padding, and then there was a click accompanied by the wall panel sliding up. “Really? Secret passages, Horse?” Goldenblood said with a sigh as he followed him inside.

“Hey, what’s the point of designing an entire city and not having fun secret passages and the like?” He grinned as he led Goldenblood through some metal hallways. “It’s come in handy a few times when the M.o.M.’s come to call.”

“Pinkie Pie’s targeted you?” Goldenblood asked with a frown.

“I’m a bad bad pony,” Horse laughed. “Well, not me personally, as far as they know, but I do business with them so, by extension, I must be bad. But somehow, when the Pinks come to call, I’m always miraculously out of the office.” He gave Goldenblood a wink, and I felt the scarred stallion actually smile. They trotted into a large lab space of some type with a number of tools laid out on a table. Robotic horses were arranged along the walls or hanging half-finished from hooks. Now Goldenblood was looking around…not simply at random, either. His head panned across the room as if he were scanning everything in sight.

“I see your work on the next generation of Protectaponies is coming along nicely. I’m glad to see you haven’t given up on them in favor of bigger, better, and more expensive glorified tanks,” Goldenblood said as he looked at a magical hologram of the city. The core of Hoofington was arranged in three vague circles stacked one atop the other and running north and south. The green bars representing buildings occasionally flickered and flashed.

“Hey, what can I say. Someday there’ll be a big demand for robots that are more than killing machines. Apple Bloom got a kick out my microponies. Think I’ll send her a holopony just for her to tinker

with," he grinned.

"Helping a competitor?" I arched a brow.

"Pffft. Stable-Tec isn't a competitor. We both have visions of the future. Hippocampus…now they're competitors. 'More coal-fired plants, now.' Bleugh. They treat anything that doesn't involve burning rocks as a joke. A hoofful of dams and biomass plants, a few solar projects, and a bajillion coal plants." He snorted scornfully. "Once the Tokomare is working, Equestria won't need coal anymore." He rubbed his hooves together as he chuckled. "Ohhh, I can imagine their wailing and gnashing teeth when we get the system online and suddenly their entire business model becomes as obsolete as pony-pulled trains."

Goldenblood nodded. "If you can get it to work." He cocked a brow. "Is that why I'm here?"

"Maybe." Horse grinned, then walked to the table. "Care to stroll with me down concept avenue?" He clapped his hooves together. "Sweetie Bot!"

A copy of the mare I'd met at the elevator strolled into the lab... only Sweetie Belle hadn't been wearing a frilly black lace uniform. She floated a tray holding two mugs of steaming beverage beside her. Smiling demurely, she put the tray down and fluttered her eyes at the pair. Goldenblood covered his face with a hoof. "Really, Horse?"

"What? A guy has needs. And once I can convince Sweetie Belle to sign off on using her likeness…Whooo…these are going to sell like hotcakes!" The yellow buck nickered, raised the mug in his hooves and took a drink, leaving chocolaty foam dripping off his mustache. "I could get you one. I'm thinking of running a whole line based on the Ministry Mares, as well as some more generic versions."

"I'd question the wisdom of that, long term," Goldenblood muttered before taking a drink. The beverage tasted like rancid piss. He set the cup aside and focused on Horse.

"Okay! To business." Horse sat upright on the table next to the tools, then picked up a rock that had been tied to a stick and held it between his hooves. "What is this and how does it work?"

Goldenblood looked at it flatly. "A hammer. You swing it."

"More accurately, it's a lever that multiplies the force applied to swinging it," Horse said as he set down the primitive tool and picked up a ball peen hammer. "And this?"

"Same thing," Goldenblood said, now with a tone suggesting that

this had better be going somewhere.

"But, I think you'll agree, more efficient, yes? Easier to swing. Smaller, but focuses more force with its smaller striking area. Better control than that?" He gestured to the rock on a stick, and Goldenblood nodded with a frown.

Horse set it down and picked up a small hammer. It was made of some kind of shiny metal. "This is a titanium-magnesium alloy hammer." He gestured to the tapered head that came to a flat little striking surface. "Perfectly balanced to maximize the force applied. You can tap a needle into a plank or drive a tenpenny nail through a two-by-four in two hits with it. I can bang robots all day." He snickered at Goldenblood. "After all, it's not the size that counts, but how you use it."

"I'm fairly sure that you didn't call me here to make innuendo about your hammer," Goldenblood replied with a larger hint of annoyance.

Horse chuckled. "Nope, my good sir. Not without a few mugs of cider in me, at least." He picked up the next tool in his mouth and tossed it to Goldenblood. It was a tiny crystalline hammer the size of my hoof. "That is a force talisman used by my horned assistants. It can apply up to ten kilomacs of force in an area ranging from a decimeter in diameter down to one millimeter."

"Why do you insist on using Fancee units?" he groaned. "What's wrong with the Equestrian Standard?"

"You tell me why we have twelve inches in a foot instead of thirteen and why there are sixteen ounces in a pound instead of fifteen and I'll get back to you on that," Horse replied. Goldenblood set the talisman down in the row. "You can see the pattern?" Horse asked as he gestured at the tools.

"Yes. Each one is more efficient than the last. More power, greater ease, less mass…" Goldenblood replied.

"Bingo. I love working with smart ponies," he laughed, then grinned as he tapped the empty table next to the talisman. "So, Goldenblood. What do you imagine belongs here?"

Goldenblood stared at the empty table, then looked at the grinning buck. "Whatever you're about to show me."

"Goldie, you know me too well," Horse chuckled as he reached under the table and lifted a tiny silver cube in his mouth. He set it on the table at the place where he'd gestured. "Ta-da."

"That's a hammer?"

"Indeedily it is," he said as he took out a spark battery and a weird device with light bulb thingies attached. "You know how this starmetal stuff only reacts to one specific frequency? Well, watch what it does when we apply just a little bit of magic power at that frequency, but modify the amplitude…" He turned a few knobs.

Goldenblood winced. "I hate that noise." Funny, I wasn't hearing anything at all.

Then there was a ping, and the quarter inch thick metal plate next to the cube indented. Then it indented again. Then again. And then it struck so hard it knocked out a perfectly round chunk of the quarter-inch steel. Horse grinned like a kid with a toy. "See? Hammer." Then he looked at the dials. "Or saw. Drill. Cutting torch. Really, it's a lot of hit and miss trying to find out the precise amplitude patterns to get the metal to react…but it does. Energy in, amplitude to decide what effect you want, and energy out."

"Interesting," Goldenblood breathed softly. "Most interesting. And how do you explain this phenomenon? Any theories about where it came from?"

"This metal isn't *precisely* a metal." He lifted it with a grin. "It's a solid state tool that can do whatever you want it to do, if you know how to interact with the stuff. We're just figuring that part out. As for where it came from... ancient zebrakind might have somehow developed this level of wonder technology…but personally I doubt it. This kind of tech would have left some kind of record or something. Nope. I posit that it had to come from somewhere else." He grinned broadly. "Have you ever heard of the zebra myth of the Eater of the Stars?"

"Eater of Souls," Goldenblood corrected. "And yes, I have. As the myth goes--"

Horse chuckled as he started to juggle the ball peen hammer, the titanium hammer, and the little silver cube. "Yeah, yeah... big nasty creatures from the stars…blah blah blah…death warning gloom and doom…blah blah blah…stars are bad, evil, wicked things…blah blah blah. Only I think that in at least one of those cases, what hit the ground wasn't just some rock from the heavens but a device from an unknown world. A device from a race thousands, no, millions of years more advanced than us."

"Corroboration?" Goldenblood asked. The yellow earth pony grinned immediately. Then he reached under the table and pulled out a strange sleek metal weapon. I wondered if the tingling mane

sensation was mine or his. “A star blaster! How on Equestria did you get your hooves on a star blaster? I couldn’t get Luna or Rainbow Dash to turn one over to me! The one used for Starfall has been under the M.o.A.’s strict control.”

“I know a pony who knows a pony…” Horse said, rubbing his nose. “You’ll note the similarities in the metal. The way they both feel… of course, the star blaster is a lot more primitive in function. Pull the trigger and watch it go. But the similarities are astounding. The starmetal seems to be able to create magical fields of power and then use magic and natural energy to do…whatever it does.” He tapped the weapon. “Clearly, both of these devices are non-terrestrial in origin. The zebra myth just explains the impact of the original device.”

“It may explain more than that,” Goldenblood frowned as he rose. “Well. Clearly this was quite a breakthrough. You have my thanks.”

“Thanks? Goldie, Goldie, Goldie... Thanks is nice…really. You’re a great pony to get thanks from. But as much as I love thanks…and I do…I really do…I need something more…substantial. I mean, I invested a great deal of personal time, effort, and resources into this silvery beauty. I can’t do little off-the-books side projects if there’s not going to be at least a cookie out of it for me.”

“You want money?”

“Money. Pbbbbt! You sound like those Hippocratic jerkoffs. Fuck money. I have money. I have all the toys the money can buy. I have a Sweetie Bot! I have a piece of very very naughty weaponry from the stars. Money’s nice, but I really don’t care about it. Nope.” He grinned. “What I want is what you want. I want a backstage pass to the concert. I want to play the game and see just how well I can play it. I want you to deal me in.”

Goldenblood smiled slowly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Ooooh,” Horse shivered. “I can just imagine what you can do.” Then he grinned. “Oh. And don’t worry. If some nasty zebra baddie whacks me, or something major happens to me, like I fall down an elevator shaft, I’ve made sure all my findings go straight to the Ministries.” His grin widened even more as Goldenblood stared at him. Horse trotted over and tapped some keys on a terminal. A grainy video appeared showing Goldenblood slowly backing a pony towards the shaft. The railing swung wide, and the mare staggered over the edge as Goldenblood stood there. A moment later, her hooves disappeared. “Really? An elevator shaft? What…were you

struck by the urge to become a Daring Do villain?"

Goldenblood stared at him for almost a minute. Finally, the scarred pony smiled. "Like I said, I'll see what I can do."

Suddenly, Sweetie Bot perked up. "Oh great and wonderful master, the stallions accompanying Director Goldenblood have received an urgent message for him. They are quite insistent."

Horse frowned and pushed a button, showing the foyer and the two bucks yelling at the flustered receptionist. "Huh…looks like you are the stud in demand, Goldie."

Together they trotted out, Goldenblood giving the star blaster a wistful look as they left the hidden lab and emerged in the conference room. Quickly, Goldenblood headed in the direction of the shouting. A yellow stallion held his earbloom and nodded his head as the brown buck traded glares with the receptionist. As they spotted the director, the two sat up. "Sir, there's been an incident in Manehattan. Applejack is dead." The receptionist gasped. Goldenblood looked at her, there was a flare from his horn, and she suddenly went glassy eyed and slumped out of sight behind the desk.

"What?" Horse gasped. "That is…oh…so not cool…" Goldenblood stared at him, and for a moment I was certain he was next.

"Stop standing there and get that confirmed," Goldenblood snapped at the brown buck. Then he looked at the yellow escort. "Luna's been informed?"

The stallion nodded. "She's asking for a temporary replacement until Applejack's status is confirmed."

"There is no replacement for Applejack! I need all six of them," Goldenblood said sharply…then he turned and looked back at the stunned stallion. He seemed to be making a decision. "You want in on the game, Horse?"

"I…wha…me? Ministry Mare…er…Stallion?" he stammered.

"On a temporary basis. If Applejack really is dead, then there will have to be…adjustments," he said as he looked away.

Horse just grinned. "Alright, Goldie. You got yourself a deal."

Goldenblood looked back at Horse. "Oh, I certainly did. And if you're so keen on playing, Horse, I'd clean out your records when you get back." He turned for the doors and snapped at the yellow escort, "I need a skywagon. Now. We need to get in place before news gets out. The ministries are going to be shaken and the O.I.A. needs to be ready. Come on, Horse. We're going to Canterlot."

“Cool,” Horse grinned as they stepped into the elevator together. “Hope Applejack is okay, though. She is one cool mare.”

“You better hope so as well. If she really is dead, I’ll have to find out who is responsible and remove them just to be safe. Odds are I’ll have to include you as well,” he said grimly. Horse’s smile disappeared. The world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory feeling all…oogly. A Goldenblood memory, planted in a safe where I would probably come across it. And if I hadn’t, odds were that one of my friends would. I lay there on the bed, trying to ignore the burny, itchy sensation on my face. It made me feel like I had radroaches wiggling under my skin. I felt the pull of gauze and listened to the beeping of the monitors.

Dealer freaks out just as I find it and tells me to stop and quit, as if that were even an option anymore. Horse talks about the starmetal as some sort of uber technology from aliens or something. I didn’t believe in coincidence anymore. Somepony had wanted me to see that. Dealer hadn’t. How had he known…Really, how how did Dealer know anything? The golden color of the memory orb, maybe? Maybe.

Unfortunately, since I couldn’t buck the Dealer while lying all woogly on a bed, I did my best to look around. Funny, my E.F.S. was doing freaky things. There were scrolling lines of data, as if it was doing the technopokie. I wished, yet again, that I had Midnight nearby to explain just what my PipBuck was doing. It flashed through the data. Then a prompt appeared.

>EC-1101 navigational data updated.

>Next waypoint: Hightower Transmitter: Hoofington.

I’d been put in a hospital bed; one with musty smelling sheets. Next to the bed was a table loaded with heavy books. ‘Equestrian Legal Statutes’, ‘History of the Law’, and a dozen files sat in stacks. This had to have been Chief Justice Fairheart’s room. I glanced around and spotted a security camera in the corner of the room, up against the ceiling.

Had EC-1101 found the camera, checked the footage, and determined he was dead? Could it do that? Had Dealer been involved? I groaned and clenched my eyes shut. “Too many fucking questions!” I snarled into my pillow.

I leaned over and levitated the top file, wondering what the Chief Justice of Equestria was up to right before the bombs made everything moot. My eyes scanned the front page, and then I looked at the title.

Legal review for the removal of the Ministry Mares from power for crimes against Equestria.

What…the…fuck…

I couldn't understand more than the basics. It might have been talking about law, or it might have been giving me directions on PipBuck applications. The core of the report seemed to be listing crimes the Ministry Mares had committed in the last ten years in the name of ending the war and the prosecution of these crimes when the war was concluded. I looked at the second file: articles of treason brought up against Goldenblood. The third one was investigating the legal option of forcing Luna from the throne and restoring Celestia to power. There was a file asking the question of whether the power and authority of the princesses ought to be absolute. The potential legality of pegasus secession. Accusations of cronyism and nepotism against Applejack. Abuses of power against Twilight Sparkle. The charges against Pinkie Pie were practically a book!

If the bombs hadn't fallen…if Equestria had won the war…what would have happened afterwards? Would Luna have remained in power? Would the Ministry Mares? I thought of the things Twilight had done…Fluttershy…Rarity…would I have wanted them punished for what they did to win the war?

As much as I hated myself thinking it…yes. At least out on their rumps…but I'd want a whole slew of them punished as well. Yes, they were at war, but some of the things that had been done were simply evil.

Twenty years of war…over…but peace? That was a long ways off.

Glory probably wanted me to stay in bed, but honestly I didn't hurt enough for that. I slipped out and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't touch my face; that would probably take the longest to heal. Instead, I used my horn to magically peel away the gauze from my neck where I could get a good view. The hide beneath was…well…white. It had a strange diamond pattern dotted all across it, and I could see the red mark where it bonded with my dingy hide.

"How are you feeling?" Lacunae asked from the doorway. She looked at my shoulder and sighed. "Blackjack. Glory didn't wrap

you up in gauze simply for the fun of it."

"It itches," I said, reaching up to scratch it. A glow around my hoof halted me. Okay. I was the big bad Security pony. I could handle a little itching. "Listen, Lacunae. About what I said…"

"You didn't say anything that wasn't the truth," she replied calmly. "Twilight Sparkle has had two centuries to think about her mistakes. To dwell on them, in fact. Many of the memories in me come from her regret. The sad fact is…as good a pony as she was… she was not perfect. As good as her intentions were, they did not always have the results she intended. She did things that were wrong because she believed that, in the big picture, they would be vindicated."

"The ends justify the means?" I asked, looking at the folders.

"There was a war to win," she said quietly, looking at her hooves. "Sorry…"

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I'm nopony to judge, Lacunae. Even if I do…I shouldn't." I'd felt that urge to win at any cost. Even if it was wrong, it was something I couldn't escape. "If the Goddess is listening to you…tell Twilight that I'm sorry."

"Discord was still a mistake," Lacunae said firmly, but then looked away. "But you are right. He should not have been used like that, or left in that condition. We should have done better, but we wanted to give Luna her war-winning potion so terribly badly."

"Is Glory with Scotch and P-21?" I asked, trying to scratch at the gauze. She smacked my hoof away with her own.

"She is. She feels it best not to leave him alone after what he did."

I sighed. "He's got problems. Big problems. But that's okay. We can keep an eye out and help him work through them." I looked at the big alicorn. "And he's not the only one. Did Glory tell you about her dreaming she's Rainbow Dash?"

"Yes. She was quite distraught. Given her appearance, it was understandable," Lacunae replied. "Don't worry about it."

"Hello. Have you seen our group? The only pony I don't worry about is... Boo. I don't worry about Boo." Then I blinked. "Wait, yes, I do. Do you really think she doesn't have a soul? That's she's just a pony animal?"

"I don't know. The evidence is against it, and Twilight never had the opportunity to explore the potential of the blanks any further. In the Chimera files, some blanks were observed for more than a year and never manifested personality or cutie marks. They could

be trained to respond to stimuli, but were never more than that. The results confirmed what we wanted to believe; Blanks were a perfect source for needed organs. Otherwise, Scotch's life and your vanity were purchased at the cost of innocent lives."

Okay…that was enough thinking about that. I turned off the monitor…actually, I mashed buttons till it stopped beeping. "What about Glory? Do you think…she isn't really turning into Rainbow Dash, is she?" Speaking of her, I really wanted to check in on Scotch…and scratch. I really *really* wanted to scratch. And find out where Rampage had gotten to. And figure out how to get to Hightower from here. And... how to treat Med-X addiction.

"I suspect not," Lacunae replied as we walked out into the hall. When I looked at her in confusion, she elaborated. "Her behavior hasn't really changed, and while she may have been dreamed about being Rainbow Dash…her Sonic Rainboom was well established and is probably well known in pegasus history. If she begins having memories of private things…inconsequential things…that would be a time to worry."

"So then, am I being possessed by a mysterious unicorn in black who's been invading my dreams?" I asked with a cheeky grin. Lacunae just looked at me sadly, and my grin slackened a little. Okay. Not something to joke about anymore.

We came around a corner and spotted Glory slumped against the wall, wearing a blood-splattered doctor's coat. Inside, Scotch lay in a bed almost identical to the one I'd awoken in. Boo was curled up at the foot. P-21 just sat there with that empty, forsaken look. I looked at the bandages wrapped around her eyes, the machine beeping softly. I knelt beside Glory, but she just gave a little snore and curled up.

I smiled and brushed her pretty prismatic mane. A bit short for my taste, but nice. "Can you find her a bed? Then maybe find out where Rampage got to?" I whispered as I looked up at Lacunae. She nodded once, and a glow lifted Glory into the air. Cradling her in her magic, Lacunae walked across the hall to a separate hospital bed. I sighed as I smiled, thankful for the kind, quiet, meek alicorn's assistance, then walked in and over.

"Hey…" I murmured softly as I tapped his shoulder. He didn't move.

"I should have told her," he said quietly.

Yes. You should have. "Tell her now."

"It doesn't matter now," he replied softly, reaching up to stroke her blue mane. Just like her daddy's. "I thought…when I saw her in the pod…if I just touched her…maybe I'd be able to say it. Instead, I killed her."

"Her heart is still beating," I said just as delicately, as if the volume of my voice might finish her off. "It still matters. And in case you missed the chain of events, I'm the one who let her come. I'm the one who got her killed." Call me greedy, but I'd take the blame and damnation on this one. I'd hoped it would give him peace, but instead he gave a low choking sob. "Tell her. Before she goes into the everafter."

"I don't know how any more."

"Do it however you can," I said as I stroked his tangled blue mane. Then I patted his shoulder and stepped back. "Come on, Boo. Let's give them some space." The pale mare sat up, blinked, looked flatly at me, and lowered her head again. "Snack cake…" I said as I reached…okay, nevermind. Where'd Glory put my gear? Back in the operating room.

"She's fine here," P-21 said hoarsely. "Thank you, Blackjack."

I smiled sadly and patted his shoulder one more time, then stepped out. As I started to close the door, I heard him take a deep breath. Maybe it was rude of me and wrong of me, but I didn't shut the door all the way and didn't leave. "I'm sorry. I know I don't have any right to talk to you like this. I know…I know that you knew. I'm your father…Goddesses know I don't deserve to be. I didn't deserve your mother's kindness; I was petty enough to resent it, actually. I never wanted to think of my time in 99 as having any consequence or meaning. That it was all horrible. That it was all better left behind and destroyed."

He sighed quietly. "But that's not true. There were good things. Things I never appreciated. Things worthwhile and…and good. There was good in 99. Your mother…was good. And so were you. Blackjack. Probably lots of mares. It was always easier just to pretend like you were all Overmares. But it was a lie…and it hurts to keep lying to myself that it was otherwise.

"Then you joined us and…and you were such a good girl. Braver than I was when I came outside. You followed us all over the place…even into places no filly was meant to go. And when BJ told you who I was…I couldn't face it. Not because you were a lousy daughter, but because I didn't deserve to be your father. I'm a

coward, Scotch Tape. And you deserved better than a worthless pony like me."

I sniffed as I poked my head in and saw him standing beside the bed, stroking her mane. Then he began to sing in soft, low tones.

Together forever…
With each other…
That is the way…I think it should be…
One.. with another…
A friend…just like a daughter…
That is the way…I think it should be…

I looked behind me as a sleepy and confused Glory approached, rubbing her tired eyes. I lifted a hoof to my lips, and she looked past me as her eyes widened.

And if along the way, we find ourselves apart
Know that it's not so…you're here in my heart…
And if as time passes, you find yourself alone and scared…
Remember my feelings and memories of home….
A place called home…
Any home...

His voice quavered and failed. I swallowed hard then stepped in. I couldn't sing…not really…but I could try for him.

Together…forever…
With each other…
That is the way…I hope it will be…
One…with another….
A friend…just like a brother…
That is the way…I think it should be…

He looked at me, tears shimmering and threatening to spill as his eyes met mine. Somehow, our words aligned as we felt the same things and put them together. Behind me I heard Lacunae approaching with Psychoshy and an adolescent Rampage. If that yellow featherbrain so much as snickered, I'd buck her into next week.

And if along the way we come across some troubles
I know I'll be able to face them with you beside me
And if as time passes, you find life painful and hard
Remember my friendship and know that I'm here with you.
Right beside you…

Always with you…

We looked down at her still form and sang the phrase over and over again, Glory and Lacunae joining in; even Rampage. *Together Forever…With Each Other…*as our voices grew softer and softer. And then silence save for the slow beeping of the monitor.

Then I saw a tear creeping down Scotch's cheek. P-21 stared as tears of his own flowed freely. Slowly he reached out with a hoof and wiped it away. The little filly sniffed and whispered softly, "Daddy…"

With a sob he leaned over her and held her carefully in his hooves as he began to shake. The green filly pressed her face to his neck, crying beneath the bandages as she hugged him back. I sniffed, feeling tears spilling down my cheeks and feeling like a pony…a whole and intact pony for the first time in a very long time. And since there wasn't any more room to hug Scotch, I hugged Glory and the very perplexed looking Boo instead.

I looked at Psychoshy, expecting disdain and disgust. Instead, there were tears in her eyes too, and I was shocked to see Rampage embrace her fellow Reaper.

Together forever... with each other…

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 41: Paths

"Biting off more than you can chew is just what I'm afraid of."

"So, was that how you beat Deus and Gorgon? By hugging them to death?" Psychoshy drawled as we trotted east along the highway towards Megamart. Despite being out of the woods, so to speak, Scotch Tape was looking at several days' recovery with regular infusions of healing spells from Lacunae. After a few hours P-21's body had begun to shake, and we were out of Med-X. We'd left him behind at the medical center, enjoying my selection of memory orbs in the recollector while we got some more chems for him. At least, I hoped he was. It was hard to tell with him just lying there. The trip to Megamart would also be a good distraction while my hide knit back together; it felt like I had little bugs scrambling under my grafts, but the rule for recovery was 'do not scratch.'

"Something like that," I replied, looking over at the adolescent Rampage. "There might have been heavy machinery and explosives involved too." It was early morning…so early that I could see stabs of actual sunlight in the gaps between the mountains to the east. "So where did you two go last night?" Boo gave a little snort and yawn; she hadn't been happy about being awake at this hour, but I hadn't been able to convince her that she could stay with Glory.

"Up on the roof," Rampage said, looking at the yellow pegasus as she clicked along on the power hooves. "Somepony needed a hug."

"You little striped cunt!" Psychoshy snapped and dove at her, streaking past my nose. My magic wasn't nearly enough to stop a speeding pegasus, but that was what fingers were for. She jerked to a halt, going 'Yeep' as I slid a few feet. Then she looked back at me and bucked my hand away before pointing an accusing hoof at Rampage. "You said you wouldn't tell." I retracted my fingers as she glowered at my friend.

Rampage blinked. "Did I? I don't remember that. That must have

been one of my crazies making that promise." She looked up at the skeptical mare. "Really! I don't remember it. Complete blank." She swished her tail as she looked at me. "Anyway…we were talking about her future."

"What future?" Psychoshy muttered. The early morning air was oddly hot and still; it made me feel as if the skies were holding their breath. It felt like rain, but the road east was nearly dry and the skies pressed down upon us as we walked. For once, I wanted the rain to fall; my mane crept of its own accord, giving the sensation of something bad happening.

"Yeah, that was it," Rampage said as she rolled her eyes.

"You're tired of being a Reaper?" I asked in surprise.

Rampage screwed up her face. "Reaper is sort of a dead-end career. Don't get me wrong: nice perks. Arena housing. Thugs are usually easy to come by whenever you need more hooves. But really…it's not exactly satisfying work," she said as we trotted along. "Really, it's just Big Daddy making sure he's got the best fighters at his beck and call and keeping the peace between the gangs. I mean, how many cage matches can a girl do before she's bored with it? So we generally find other ways to pass the time. Deus found new and clever means of buggery. Gorgon trained radroaches to wrestle."

"And what did…" I began before I saw Psychoshy's glower. "Ah. Sanguine."

"Yeah. Him. Helping him with…everything," she said as she looked away.

"Well, that sounds like a problem. Have you thought of being a Zodiac? You could get one of those cutie decal things and beat up bad ponies," I suggested with a smile.

"I beat up ponies right now. Besides, Big Daddy frowns on moonlighting with them. He's never forgiven Bulldozer for leaving us to become Taurus," Psychoshy said irritably, and I glanced over my shoulder at the rifle slung across my bags. "But then, he was a Highlander, and they've always been a bit funny."

"I thought the word was 'inbred'," Rampage snorted. Boo tried to eat a mouthful of dead grass, made an icky face, and spat it out. The pale pony immediately nudged my hip; she might not have been verbose, but she definitely knew where I kept the food.

I floated out a snack cake as we walked, holding it in the air beside me. "Highlanders?" The name sounded familiar. Boo lunged forward to take bites from the cake, and I occasionally lifted it up

out of her reach. She seemed to like the game, watching for it to dip low enough for a bite. Psychoshy watched the two of us with an angry little scowl. Hey, if she was jealous, I'd float a cake in front of her mouth too. Practice for me, either way.

Rampage chuckled. "Weird pony folk. Always been a twigged bunch. They were crazy even before the war. Lived in the eastern mountains, were way too friendly with goats and sheep, and couldn't care less what Celestia wanted. Nasty in combat, though. Zebras learned that the hard way. Some fighters think it's clever to go after an enemy's crotch in a fight. Highlanders think it's a hoot and will pound each other all day." She snickered softly. "They're the only ponies I know that either were happy the bombs fell or still haven't noticed."

"They're also the only ponies in the valley who have told Big Daddy to go buck himself. Two years ago, Big Daddy himself led the biggest stomp short of the war with the Rangers to put the Highlanders in their place. Three days later, he was still fighting their chieftain, White Lightning. Nearly killed each other," Psychoshy marveled, shaking her head. "Hardest damn fight of my life. Great fun."

"So who won?" I asked with a grin.

"Nopony," Rampage snickered. "The star spawn in Black Pony Mountain came and ate Reaper and Highlander alike. Technically it was a draw. Still, White Lightning called Big Daddy the toughest damn son of a mule that ever walked the Wasteland. That's high praise, coming from her. And the Highlanders have a spot in the Arena and fought the Rangers, so I guess they're a part of the Reapers."

"Till they get drunk, bored, horny, or distracted by something shiny," Psychoshy said dryly. "The only thing they were really good for was fucking up zebras. They really…really…don't like zebras. During the war the zebras had to push through their territory. Bloodbath every time, for both sides."

I was on the fence when it came to zebras myself; I hoped that if I ever did meet more, they'd turn out more like Sekashi and less like Lancer. "So, if Zodiacs are out... what do you want to do?"

"I want to kill you," Psychoshy growled as she stared at me. "So stop playing nice." I looked back with a sigh. Was I just going to have to start killing everypony who kept on messing with me, like P-21 suggested?

"Annnnnd that's what we were mostly talking about last night. Her wanting to kill you. You mashing her into pony butter. She'd be dead. You'd be whiny and angsty. Everypony loses," Rampage said with a roll of her eyes. "And I *so* want to avoid hearing more Blackjack whining."

"I don't whine," I muttered, flushing.

"No?" Rampage grinned and mimicked my voice with disturbing ease. "Oh why couldn't I save them? Why couldn't I stop it? Why can't I do better? Why can't I be the saint pony of the Wasteland? Why can't we all just get along? Why do I keep getting my ass blown off? Why why why?" she moaned.

"I don't sound like that." I pouted. Why did everypony give me flak about trying to do better?

"I could take her," Psychoshy muttered.

"Yeah. That's what Deus thought. You think you could beat him?" Rampage grinned up at the yellow pegasus.

"She didn't beat Deus! She just got some other pony to do it," Psychoshy said with a sharp glare. I just sighed again. I was trying to be kind, particularly after everything she'd been through, and this was the thanks I got?

"Exactly. That's just my point. In a one-on-one fight with nopony in sight, sure…maybe if you took her by surprise from behind. But she's a cybernetic unicorn, Psycho. You're a pissy pegasus pony with daddy issues. I think she has you outclassed. And even if she didn't, she has at least a dozen ponies willing to throw themselves in harm's way to protect her because she's so gosh darn goodie goodie," the striped young mare drawled sarcastically. Then she laughed. "That's the thing you and Sanguine and other ponies keep missing. Blackjack is a good pony. She fucks up, sure. But she's good. She wants to help. She wants to give folks a second chance. Heck, she's giving you a second chance right now. And some folks respect that."

"If she's so good, then why do I hate her so much?" the pegasus growled. "She killed my father."

"You heard it. Sanguine wasn't your father. Not really. He might have raised you. He might have even cared about you, but you weren't his family. His family was three ponies in stasis and a memory of a life that was over. If he'd survived, I'd have given him a day before one of his family died and three days before his wife took his kids and ran for it," Rampage said, looking up at the

suddenly stricken pony. “But we’re just rehashing was we said last night, Psycho.”

“Look, Psychoshy…I’m sorry I’ve hurt you. If things had been different, I would have found a better way,” I said.

She sniffed. “Shut up! I hate you! You hear me? I hate you, and some day I’m going to kill you!” she screamed, then streaked away down the road in a gust so strong that it nearly knocked me from my hooves.

“And to think, her mom wasn’t much of a flyer,” Rampage said, then sighed. “She’ll be back.”

“How do you know?” I asked with surprise and a small frown. “She just said she hates me.” Boo suddenly drew up short, her ears twitching, and I stopped walking. Funny, no red bars in sight. “Something wrong, Boo?” But the pale mare sniffed at the air and looked down the road.

“Well, she’ll either be back to kill you, or she’ll be back because you’re the closest thing she’s got to a role model now,” Rampage said with another sigh.

“What?!” That was the most ridiculous thing I’d ever heard. “Me? What are you talking about? Why would anypony look to me as a role model? Besides, she hates me!”

Rampage snorted as we resumed walking again. Boo kept looking about the dead, dark woods as if expecting them to rush us... actually, now I was getting a little nervous, too. I’d had trees try and eat me before, after all. “Nah. That’s just the hurt and the hormones talking. Fact is, much as she’s upset with you, she’s pissed off with herself even more. She feels used and duped and a little bit betrayed. Sanguine was just treating her like a trophy or tool or something. She wants to be liked... I think, deep down, she wants to be loved like Fluttershy was. ‘Course, she’s also crazy, so watch out that you don’t push a button that makes her take your head off and turn it into a hat.”

“I thought you said I had her outclassed?” I asked with a smirk.

“Yeah, but never underestimate the capacity of crazy ponies. I mean, look at the ponies who underestimated your own crazy. Deus…Sanguine…” she chuckled.

“I thought you said I beat them because I was good?” Had I imagined their whole exchange?

“Good. Crazy. Same difference. Good is just a kind of crazy most ponies like ‘cause they think they can use it. Then you do something

good they'd much rather you hadn't, and suddenly you're crazy." Rampage looked in the direction Psychoshy had gone. "Me, I'll take good crazy over evil bloody crazy any day."

"You sure like pushing buttons," I said as I looked down at her with a small frown.

"I don't like ponies sitting alone quietly falling apart," she replied, looking up at me. "Seeing P-21 this last week made me want to scream. Scotch Tape is your daughter. Fucking acknowledge it. But no, she needs to nearly fucking die before he finally…finally… admits he's a mess and a shitty father." Rampage glowered. "If she'd died, I was going to punt him right off the hospital."

What the fuck? "Rampage! What the…he's my friend!" I gasped. Were my friends seriously planning to kill each other behind my back?

"He's your shadow," she replied with a frown. "He's too weak to live on his own, and if he was strong enough, I think he'd be a bigger monster than Deus without you around. You've been keeping him alive since 99. If he doesn't like the fact he's a father, then he needs to face it, not hide from it. There's enough shitty fathers that the world doesn't need more."

We trotted along past one of the massive MASEBS towers. "I take it Psycho's not the only one with daddy issues?"

"Now who's pushing buttons?" she countered, then sighed. "I don't remember my mother or father, Blackjack. Maybe one of the other ponies inside me does. All I think of when I think of the word 'father' is an empty feeling and an urge to kick something."

I looked down the road and froze as I spotted a cluster of blue bars ahead. Then, suddenly, they flashed bright red! "Whoa whoa whoa! What's going on?" From up ahead came a gunshot, then several gunshots! The lone remaining blue bar wobbled a little, and I spotted Psychoshy flying back. Angry shouts filled the night air. "What did you do?"

"I thought every damn pony loves you!" she yelled, looking at a bloody bullet wound in her rear left leg.

"Um, you have kept up with just how many ponies have tried to kill me, haven't you?" I pulled off the gauze around my neck and shoulders with my horn and wrapped it around her bleeding leg. I had no clue how sanitary it was, but none of us had healing potions and I didn't want her to leave a blood trail. "What did you say to them?"

"I said 'make way for the mighty Security Pony', and they freaked out!" I saw the pinpricks of torches and flashlights in the distance. "If you're so good, why does everypony want to shoot you?"

"You tell me," I asked, looking around. Ironshod R&D was north of here. Or the weather station? On the other hoof, there was a red tunnel in the MASEBS buildings. At least, I'd gone right by a door marked with the tower's name in my madcap dash. If the worst came to the worst…"The tower. Hurry," I said as we raced off the road to the south. Funny, last time I'd been here I hadn't appreciated just how big it was on top of its hill.

Psychoshy flew sideways in front of me. "Uh…why are we running? I mean, even four to one we should be able to mop the floor with them. We can even make a game of it."

"Because I don't kill ponies if I can help it," I replied as I looked around for the door. Now, getting in might be a catch without P-21 to work his magic... I saw the lights milling about in indecision. I didn't want to wait to find out which way they were going. They were close enough for E.F.S.

"Um…they're trying to kill you, Blackjack. Doesn't that sort of give you carte blanche to tapdance on their heads?" Psychoshy said in the tones of trying to explain the obvious to an idiot.

We reached the landing where weeks ago I'd smashed off Roses's horn trying to free some slaves, one of whom had later raped her. Really, if I could go back to when I left the stable and tell my old self about the things I'd done, I don't think I would believe it. The broadcast tower loomed overhead, disappearing into the night gloom.

"I don't care. I don't want to kill ponies if I can help it. No good comes from dead ponies. That includes you," I said sharply, finding the door and the terminal beside it. Okay…terminals. Terminals… what were some of P-21's tricks for terminals? Terminals 101…oh poop. I looked at the screen and its selection of twelve possible passwords all ten characters long, gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and stretched out my hoof. I tapped a key; exploding terminal in Blackjack's face?

There was a beep, and I peeked at it.

>*Access granted.*

Huh. That was easy.

I glanced at Psychoshy and Rampage watching me, the former with near pity and the latter with disappointment. "Is she always such a

spaz with terminals?" asked the pegasus.

"You should see her with elevators," Rampage replied as the door clicked open and the pair entered.

"You know, given the past month, I think I'm a little bit justified in my paranoia," I said after them. I slipped in, made sure Boo was inside with me, and pulled the door closed, muttering, "I am not a spaz." I knelt and held Boo's shoulders. "I'm not a spaz, am I, Boo?"

The pale pony gave a carroty-filling-scented belch and then smiled at me. "I'll take that as a no," I said with a grin as I rubbed her ears.

* * *

When in the Wasteland, when you weren't getting shot at, you were looting. Once we got past the whole 'Reapers don't pay' attitude, even Psychoshy got in on the act, and I found a pair of utility coveralls that would make do for minor protection and had even more pockets than my saddlebags offered. While we weren't exactly hurting on caps, every little bit helped, right? So I cleared out the utility spaces, collecting anything portable and sellable.

"Reaper to common pack mule," Psychoshy muttered as she held up a dead spark battery and tossed it over her shoulder. Boo did her best to help out, picking up a wrench in her mouth and bringing it to me. Then a hammer... then a wrapper... .then a rusty tin can... I gave her a snack cake, and she ate her reward gleefully and stopped bringing me junk.

"Oh, come on. You're a flying, sullen, bad-tempered, psychotic Reaper pack mule. Nothing common about that," Rampage said brightly.

"Big Daddy should just take over the Finders. Honestly, it'd make life so much easier," the pegasus grumbled as she put a good battery in her saddlebags. Really, what was it with some ponies not wearing barding? "We could just take whatever we wanted from them."

"Right. Because folks dig through dangerous ruins just to turn over valuable goods out of the kindness of their hearts," I said as stowed some pilot lights in my pockets. Psychoshy opened her mouth. "And when you threaten to kill them if they don't…well, then you're a raider. That makes you a bad pony. And that's bad." Psychoshy closed her mouth with a sour frown.

"Would still be a lot simpler," she muttered.

"You have to understand that Blackjack wasn't in a gang, Psycho. She had her own weird, twisted upbringing in a stable where they beat males and did whatever their boss said," Rampage said as she trotted over,

"How's that so different?" Psychoshy asked in confusion.

"Their boss wasn't the biggest or the strongest pony in the stable, or even the smartest. They followed her because she was the daughter of the previous boss…who was the daughter of the previous boss…and so on…even though she was nuttier than you," Rampage said, and I huffed, my ears burning. Really, it hadn't been that bad... okay, maybe it had. But still, it was better than just taking whatever you wanted.

"Are you serious? That's crazy," Psychoshy said, then pointed her hoof at me. "You're crazy! You seriously let her tell you what to do because her mother was boss and her grandmother was boss? None of you were looking around going 'Uh…maybe we should stomp this cunt and put someone who has a clue in charge' or something?"

"We tried it once and almost killed everypony. Even then, we were getting around to it again," I replied defensively, turning on her. "It's just…in the stable, we were told that everything outside was death. We had to play our roles and do what we were told. We shared almost everything because the consequence of fighting was that we might break the stable. We couldn't do that. The stable was our whole world, and we knew that if something broke or went wrong, then everypony was dead."

"Looks like you were right," Rampage replied, looking up at me. "Something went wrong and everypony died. So if the gangs are still alive and your stable's dead, then who has the better philosophy?" I frowned; why was she asking me? Smart ponies were supposed to answer questions like this! I was just a security pony.

"We do," I defended. "Even if it failed, the stable lasted two centuries, longer than any gang…and life was better than out here…at least, for mares, it was. I'm not saying it was perfect. I'm not saying there weren't things wrong even before Deus broke in. I'm just saying that ponies working together is better than ponies killing, taking, and ruling over others. In the end, that was exactly how the stable fell apart."

Both of them looked skeptical, but I supposed that that was the best I was going to get. I noticed some stairs heading up. "Hey…I want to check something upstairs while we're here," I said, nodding

towards them. “DJ Pon3 said that the towers in Hoofington were blind. I want to see if we can find out why.”

“You know DJ Pon3?” Psychoshy said skeptically as we made our way up to the MASEBS broadcast room.

I glanced at Rampage looking at me in confusion, and opened my mouth…then closed it again. Rampage just knew Homage as a nice Tenpony unicorn who threw us a dinner party. “Well, we’ve met his personal assistant, Homage. That’s kinda like knowing DJ Pon3.” Psychoshy snorted and rolled her eyes.

Meh…Homage was cooler than DJ Pon3 anyway.

Inside the broadcast room was the familiar layout of terminals and monitors. On one, I saw a dozen or so ponies making their way further south towards Riverside, carrying a banner marked with the black towers. Another showed several small burned-out encampments. Megamart was in one, and a massive hole gaped right over where Gun used to sit. I could barely make out Chapel in one screen. It looked dimmer and smaller without its little white church, but there was no missing the white dots of the graveyard all over the hillside.

Oddly, though, more than half of the screens weren’t pointed at the ground but at the clouds.

In the middle of the floor, in front of the controls, was something that didn’t belong here…a terminal like the ones I’d seen Lighthooves using. This terminal, though, bore a slightly different logo. I reached out a hoof and watched as it melted around my limb. I swept my hoof back and forth several times, and each time it just pulled back to its original form.

“Whoa,” Rampage gasped.

Boo tried to pick up one of the cloud cables in her mouth... or she was trying to eat it. Either way, it didn’t work, and she stuck out her tongue and backed away, definitely not liking cloud technology any more than the rest of us.

“Freaky,” Psychoshy agreed. “What is it?”

“An Enclave cloud terminal. Only pegasi can touch it. No idea what it’s doing here, though.” I tried pressing the keys with my magic, but that too had no effect. “I have no idea how we’re going to shut it down.”

“No idea? I thought you were supposed to be a Reaper now,” Psychoshy snorted as she flew over the terminal. “We smash it!”

“No, wait!” I yelled, wanting Glory or P-21 to have a look at it.

Unfortunately, Psychoshy wasn't exactly a waiting kind of pony. She brought her rear hooves down, and there was a low boom of thunder and crackle of lightning as glowing rainbow colored circuits and wires disintegrated in a cloud of evaporating color and flickering light. The terminal rolled away in a carpet of mist, snaking along the cables where they connected to the broadcast controls.

"Well, you have to admit, there are some things Psychoshy excels at," Rampage said, and the pegasus beamed. I had to add 'getting on my nerves' to the list. I looked at the broadcast controls and tapped them a few times. At least I could tell Homage what I'd found.

The studio lit up, and for a moment I thought it was empty. There was the microphone…the controls…but no Homage. Well, it wasn't like she was there all the time, right? I didn't know of any way I could leave a message…maybe I could write a note and tape it to the wall? Write it on a billboard? Something…

Then I heard the soft sob over the speakers. I looked around and saw a knob marked 'volume' and slowly turned it up. The sound of crying increased. "Homage?" I asked, then looked around at the controls. I spotted the 'Send to linked station' button and pressed it. "Homage?"

Then from below the studio control console rose the pale unicorn. She was a mess, a complete and total mess. Her eyes stared at the screen in a heartbroken gaze. "Blackjack?" she asked thickly. There was only one reason she should look like that: something bad had happened to LittlePip. There was bad…and there was *Bad*.

I looked back at the pair of Reapers. "I need some privacy, please. Right now." Boo blinked at me, tilting her head. "Well... except for Boo." I doubted she'd tell anypony Homage's secret.

"Why does that little freak get to stay while I have to go? If she stays, I stay! I don't…" Psychoshy began when Rampage bit her tail and dragged her out like a fluttering kite. "Hey! Let go! You're not the boss of me!" I closed the door behind them.

I took a deep breath, remembering the serious little unicorn with the weight of the world on her shoulders. Please, don't be dead, LittlePip. "What happened to LittlePip, Homage?"

She clenched her eyes shut, gritting her teeth as if she couldn't bear to spit it out. "Oh, Blackjack…I…she…" She hung her head. "I think…I'm afraid…I think LittlePip has…she's done something

terrible."

I tried to think of what Glory would do. Of what Lacunae would do. Heck, what LittlePip would do. "Just take a deep breath, Homage. What happened?"

It took Homage a few seconds to pull herself together. "I got reports of an attack on the Steel Ranger base on the Bucklyn Cross. I…I was keeping an eye out for trouble, with all the fighting between the Steel Rangers and Applejack's Rangers. That's when I saw this…"

She touched some keys, and one of the screens next to me swapped from clouds to a huge segment of rusty suspension bridge still hanging from its tower in the middle of a river. The camera zoomed in, and I immediately saw LittlePip in her thrashed utility barding; wow, she really needed a replacement. There was Calamity and Velvet…I thought I saw another, but I couldn't be sure from this distance. There were a number of ponies pointing a lot of firepower at her.

Then suddenly everypony was shooting! The Rangers had clear numbers on their side, but in five minutes they were decimated. Two actually leapt into the water to get away…I had no idea if or how long they'd survive after a fall like that! And just like that, the shooting was done. LittlePip had completely cleaned out the Steel Ranger base. I saw Calamity picking through one of the buildings as LittlePip sat there being comforted by Velvet Remedy.

"Okay…well…something must have happened! Somepony shot and…LittlePip defended herself! She wouldn't just take over a Ranger base like that without good reason," I said as I looked at Homage.

"Wouldn't she? The Steel Rangers attacked her home. They attacked Stable 29, where the Applejack's Rangers have been gathering. Maybe she thought that they were loyalists and were fair game," Homage said, sniffing as she rubbed her eyes. "The only report I've gotten on that attack was a distress call they sent out, saying that LittlePip demanded a water talisman. Then it was shooting and screaming. I'm trying to get some sort of…something to explain what she did."

"There had to be a reason, Homage. She wouldn't just turn Reaper on ponies, even enemies." I hadn't seen a lot of power armor or the like in that fight. Had somepony pulled a trigger by accident? Or had LittlePip decided to cut to the chase?"

"I know. I know. I'm looking for one. I'm looking so hard for one," Homage said, pulling herself together as she typed more keys. "But as bad as that was…it was nothing…nothing compared to this."

The screen changed. The view slowly panned across a village, then zoomed in. There was the Sky Bandit parked beside some buildings. I could imagine Homage, frowning in worry as she worked the controls and watched LittlePip from afar for trouble or for some explanation for the attack. Who had shot first? Was LittlePip okay? There were two windows in the Qwik-Kare building the camera was focused on; I could see two older ponies and a younger mare around a table. It was hard to make out specifics past that.

Then there was LittlePip in the window facing the other three. I hadn't known LittlePip long or well. She was a good pony. Serious, but true to making the Wasteland a better place. The LittlePip I saw now was not that mare. Fury was etched in every line of her face. She gazed at the three with a look of profound rage that made me watch in horror. The unicorn mare at the table tried to magically fling a knife…a knife…at LittlePip. Then all three were smashed against the wall by the little mare's incredible telekinesis.

Dangling by the throat, the older stallion kicked over the table. There was a gun or something strapped to the bottom. The mare levitated the table, turned it towards the small unicorn, and fired, but she either missed or else LittlePip was at the point of not caring if she were shot or not. The three writhed as she slowly crushed them to the wall. The stallion pointed a hoof.

Then LittlePip raised a rifle…and lit them on fire with burning bullets.

I think if I had had a heart, it would have stopped.

I just watched. No…no no no…she turned and walked out, leaving the crushed and burning ponies behind her as she strode into the night like she was bringing all of Hell with her. As she departed, her telekinesis vanished and the guards dropped to the floor, mercifully out of sight below the windowsill... until one of the mares flopped back into view, struggling to put herself out for a few agonizing seconds. Then she lay still at last.

In the street was a pony…a merchant or something, from the look of his gear. The small unicorn assaulted him, her mouth screaming something. Then he immediately swayed and started vomiting.

And then LittlePip went on a slaughter.

The fight with the Steel Rangers had been a fight…albeit a short

and terrible one. This wasn't. This was butchery, plain and simple. Only the young were spared, shielded by Velvet Remedy as all who tried to face LittlePip were torn to pieces by flaming bullets. I only had slightly inebriated knowledge of LittlePip in battle... was this how she usually fought? I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen. Finally, the image blacked out. I looked at the stricken Homage and wished there was a way to hug her through the screen.
"When?" I asked when I regained the ability to speak.
"Just a few hours ago," she said with a sniff. "I…I can't bear to look back again. Why would she do that? Why would anypony do that?" I could think of a few reasons, but they all applied to ponies more like Psychoshy than LittlePip.
I felt cold inside. Cold and still and dead. "I don't know. I can't… mind control? Blackmail? Maybe she was drugged out of her skull on Stampede? Something…something had to have made her do that?" I couldn't shake the image of her crushing those ponies to the wall. They'd been helpless. Utterly helpless…and she'd *burned* them.
"I don't…I don't think I want to know. I can't tell people what she just did. I can't," Homage said as she shook her head. "I don't want to know the truth. I don't want to imagine a chance that she… Blackjack, she killed everypony! It was just a village. It'd been there forever, never bothering anypony."
I couldn't blame her. "Homage…you have to know. You have to find out, and you need to be the honest voice. Find out why she did this. There has to be a reason. You know that. Find it. And make sure everypony else knows, too." It would be better than sitting there getting twisted up in knots.
Homage rubbed her eyes as she stared at me. "And what if…what if I find out she has broken?"
"You know what," I replied. For a moment she looked at me, stricken as a tear crawled down her cheek. Then she sniffed and nodded once.
"Tell the truth…no matter how bad it hurts," she answered, clenching her eyes shut and nodding her head. "You're right. I need to…to make sure folks know. So they can take care if she has."
I nodded and stared at her. "And Homage…if you find out…if she really has broken…I'll go find the Stable Dweller, and together we'll bring her back to you and not let her go till this is made right again. Okay? I promise you that."
For some reason she looked at me oddly, then broke into a sad

smile and laughed softly, “Good one, Blackjack. I think I needed that.” She rubbed her eyes as I blinked at her. Huh? “I’ll take care of that in a bit. Need to make sure folks don’t wonder why DJ Pon3’s been crying his eyes out.” She sniffed and looked at her controls. “You got MASEBS Thirteen working? What happened?” Then she looked more concerned as she looked at me. “And…what happened to your face?”

“Ugh…long and ugly story. I’ll share it with you some other time,” I said as I looked away. Funny, mentioning the gauze suddenly tripled its itchiness factor! “As for the tower, there was an Enclave terminal wired into the controls. I don’t know what it was doing,” I said as I glanced behind me. “The feather head I’m with smashed it to pieces.”

“Enclave?” She blinked in confusion, clearly glad to have something to focus on besides what LittlePip had done. “The pegasi? Why would they…” She sighed and frowned, shaking her head. “Mmm…too many mysteries.” Welcome to Blackjackville, Homage; population two! “Still…I’ll have to look into it…after I find out what happened in Arbu. I’ve lost contact with four more towers near the Everfree and two more in the southeast. All far from anypony who’d be interested in them.”

“Who’d be interested in the towers?” I asked with a frown.

“I don’t know. Red Eye, or just high-aiming scavengers, I suppose,” Homage said, finally composed. She took a deep breath and gave a wan smile, “Okay. I have a broadcast to do…oh!” She blinked. “Helpinghoof wanted me to tell you something about that wired-up ring you found.” I straightened, leaning forward as she lifted a sheet of paper. “He said there wasn’t any change in the healing potions…” I deflated a little. “Until Mrs. Ivy had a heart attack. She was brought to the clinic, but he wasn’t able to save her. Afterwards though, he checked on the potions. He said there was a slight decrease in their potency. He also heard something…a note.”

“Like a scream?” I asked, and Homage blinked and looked at the paper, then nodded.

“Sounds like there’s big stuff happening everywhere,” Homage said as her ears folded. “All I can do is sit here…” She trailed off. I knew that ‘getting sucked onto the mattress’ look, and I was seeing it on the face of way too many good ponies!

“And find out about LittlePip. Right? No matter how bad it hurts?” She sighed and nodded, now looking at me firmly. “Take care of

yourself, Homage. And let me know about LittlePip. And make sure the Stable Dweller knows too. She might want to help."

Homage gave me the oddest look again. "Ah…yeah…Um… Blackjack?"

I smiled warmly at her as I leaned forward, putting my hooves on the console. "Yes, Homage?"

"LittlePip is th--" And then her lips moved silently before me. I blinked, then looked at my hoof resting on a button marked 'mute' on the console. I looked up and saw her lips moving. I tapped the button, but the damn thing was stuck. I frowned and tapped it repeatedly and looked up with a slightly tense smile. Please let me not have broken one of her M.A.S. towers! Then she gave a tired, slightly sad smile and a little wave before the screen went black.

"LittlePip is…what?" I muttered as I saw Homage walking up to the microphone in a different screen. "LittlePip is the one to worry about? LittlePip is... the really cute one? LittlePip knows the Stable Dweller?" I paused, my eyes widening a moment. "Wait... Could it be... ? Could she really?" Then I snorted, laughing. Okay... LittlePip was a lot of things, but the Stable Dweller? The biggest, baddest, bestest mare in the whole wide Wasteland? Come on! She was... small! She blushed explosively and was reduced to baby talk if Homage nibbled on the tip of her ear! She couldn't possibly be the Stable Dweller. Badass, yes, but not her.

I fiddled with the button, trying to unstick it. I only caught the very end of the broadcast. "Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts," DJ Pon3 rasped out. I supposed I could have stopped her then and asked what she meant before she got cut off, but she had things to do and so did I.

"You betcha," I said as I screwed up the side of my face and took the opportunity for a little clandestine scratching before going to find the Reaper duo. Since I was half a Wasteland away from wherever LittlePip was, I'd have to leave that up to her. I still had my own trials to face.

Like…shopping.

* * *

"Wow. I really would have expected this place to be a lot deader," Rampage said as we looked around Megamart. "Didn't Sanguine and Vermilion smash this place trying to draw Blackjack out?" The

superstore had a lot more light with a hole punched in the roof. Gun lay on its side beneath the hole, several levers and cables evidence of trying to put it upright. The vendors, however, were swamped with ponies buying and selling ammo, armor, and scrap metal, yelling and hawking their wares back and forth. Apparently the slaughter of the past month hadn't done much to discourage ponies from shopping.

"Actually, we stopped by your stable first, then here. We figured we'd just hit everywhere you'd been till we found something you cared about," Psychoshy said as she floated above the crowd. "Of course, the longer things took, the more pissy that griffin became, and the more desperate Sanguine got."

"Desperation. Mother of atrocity," Rampage remarked.

A herd of a half dozen robed zebra passed silently by. Two goats bleated counteroffers to a pony selling barrels of scrap metal. A posh Society unicorn painstakingly accounted for every cap's worth of her produce while her shabby servants made sure everypony stayed back. "Vermilion and his boys took out the turrets and blew out the roof. Then they flew around and shot the place up for a few minutes, left, and waited for you to come running."

Boo was nearly grafted to my side. Clearly, crowds and her were not a good mix. I'd put another bag over her head and tied the straps to my barding. I may have gotten a few odd looks, but other ponies had more pressing issues. "Really…I'm astonished they let you in here."

Then a mottled green mare launched herself out of the crowd to tackle Psychoshy. The pegasus nimbly flipped backwards in the air, but the green mare clung to her tenaciously. "Murderer!" bellowed Keystone. The shoppers in our immediate area backed away, but immediately there were bets being placed.

"Fifty caps on Psycho," Rampage said, and then nudged me. "Hey, Blackjack? Spot me fifty bottlecaps." I didn't respond as I watched Psycho flip upside down and somehow slam the other mare back into the ground with a crash. Keystone still didn't let go though, and they rolled back and forth. The yellow pegasus smashed the back of her head repeatedly into the earth pony's face. Keystone bit on Psychoshy's ear, drawing blood as the Reaper thrashed. I was sure that, any second, Psychoshy's ear was going to tear completely off.

"Enough!" yelled a familiar voice, and the crowd parted to admit

Bottlecap. The mare had swapped her store uniform for blue combat armor; her battle saddle had two automatic shotguns. Suddenly, the fight was a lot less interesting for ponies down range. More security ponies came out of the woodwork. Still the pair continued to struggle.

So Bottlecap shot them.

I very nearly had Duty and Sacrifice out before I had three sets of guns on me. I froze, partly out of survival instinct and partly because the rapid fire barking hadn't reduced the pair to bloody sludge. Instead the two parted, shielding their bodies as well as they could. Small cloth beanbags lay scattered around them as they yelped and curled up. I returned the revolvers to my holsters.

"What's the big idea?" Psychoshy bawled as she pointed at the limping green mare rising to her hooves. Even in combat armor, I bet those bags had to sting. "She assaults me and now you shoot me? I thought this was a place of business!" she said as she pulled herself to her hooves.

"Remember when you attacked us? We do," Bottlecap replied. "You and that ghoul you were with. I lost three good employees and one hell of a piece of equipment in your attack. Why shouldn't I switch to flechettes?"

"She was a mercenary," I blurted, drawing a surprised look from the yellow mare. "Sanguine hired her. She's got caps to spend." I gave a slack smile. "Business. Trade saving the Wasteland... all that?"

Clearly, both were stunned by my defense of Psychoshy. Bottlecap recovered first. "Blackjack. Glory was able to save you after all." She stared into my eyes for a moment, then shivered and looked away. Her gaze returned to the yellow pegasus. "Are you saying she's with you?"

"It's something like that," I said quickly. "She was just working for Sanguine. It's something Reapers do. You wouldn't hold that against her. Not when she has caps to trade."

Bottlecap pressed her lips together as she glowered at the pegasus. "Fine. She can stay and pay like everypony else."

"But…you mean I got to pay?" Psychoshy scoffed. "Reapers don't pay." The sudden cocking of several automatic shotguns gave a pretty convincing counter argument.

Bottlecap smirked with evident satisfaction. "Yeah. You do. New times. I can't count on Big Daddy to keep trouble in line, so now

you get to pay the same as everypony else. Don't like it? Leave," Bottlecap replied sharply. I smiled, shaking my head, and received a sharp look. "Something funny?"

"Hey, I pay my bills," I replied, lifting my hooves. "Just had a talk about the morality of thug economics on our way here. That's all." She relaxed a bit at that and even smiled.

"Well there goes the neighborhood," Rampage sighed. "Steel Ranger toys getting blown up. Reapers actually having to pay! What's next? Enclave actually doing something productive? Alicorns with personality? Sunny days? What's the world coming to?"

"These are interesting times," Bottlecap said as she looked around. "Never seen business like this, though. You'd think the attack would have put ponies off, but we've got more folks coming in all the time. Those Harbingers are swapping loads of fresh armaments and old food stores for information and followers. And yesterday we got a boat from Zanzebra landing at the boardwalk."

"Harbingers?" I said with a frown.

"Oh yeah. You've got to have seen them around. Green banners with black towers? 'Hoofington Rises'? They say that soon the city's going to open up and start a new age. They've found so much stuff that folks are saying there's got to be something to it." She looked at Psychoshy and Keystone. "Let her shop. If she starts anything, turn her into a pincushion." The mottled green mare nodded once. Bottlecap looked at Rampage. "Am I going to have to worry about you too?"

"I'm just shopping. Was thinking of picking up a few value packs of Mint-als and Med-X. Is there a sale going on?" she asked with a smile. Bottlecap looked at her a little bit longer, then nodded her head in the direction of the clinic. The young Reaper saluted and trotted away with an angry, confused Psychoshy.

Bottlecap looked at Boo quizzically, but then shook her head and gestured for me to move to the side towards her office. Once we were out of the noise, I took the bag off and she blinked and shook her head. "Do I want to know?" Bottlecap asked as Boo started to explore the office.

"Probably not," I replied.

"You know that that cult is looking for you, right?" the yellow mare said as she looked at me in concern.

"Yup, it's Deus and the bounty hunters all over again," I replied

with a sigh. I watched Boo wander into the office bathroom. Good. She was finally figuring out where to do her business.

Bottlecap looked nervous, glancing over her shoulder. “It’s a lot worse than that. Deus’s bounty hunters were generally poor and poorly armed. The biggest threat to you was Deus himself. These cultists, though, are coming up with ordinance I’ve rarely seen before. Anti-machine rifles and markspony carbines that are brand new, out-of-the-crate quality. They’re all wearing Equestrian Army combat armor and they’ve got ample food stores.”

“But they’re just…desperate ponies, right?” I asked with a nervous glance at the door.

“For now, but the more powerful they become, the better the quality of their fighters and the bigger a threat they are. It’s hard to pass up free food and protection. They’re even giving it away for information on you.” Bottlecap sighed. “They haven’t actually gotten smart enough to verify the info... yet. I mean, everypony knows they’ll turn over ridiculous amounts of goods for a rumor you’re out east or west or somewhere between,” Bottlecap said before she chewed her lip. “Or else they’ve got so much they can just throw it all away for the smallest rumor.”

Yick, I sure didn’t like that possibility. “How many? Do they have a leader?”

“Dozens, at least. They’re following somepony called the Prophet… no clue who that actually is. They’re all broken up into cells. They’re absorbing a lot of the newcomers to the city…but there’s a massive creepy vibe to them. Most of them give food and care, but others are really well-armed and looking for you. They call themselves Seekers. They want your PipBuck big time.”

“Doesn’t matter. It doesn’t work without a Ministry Mare’s descendant.” But I frowned. They weren’t looking for one of those, so…did that mean that they already had somepony related to the Ministry Mares?

Bottlecap shrugged. “Whatever. They want your PipBuck really bad. I’m glad you ditched it somewhere,” she said as she looked at my hoof. I decided not to inform her that Glory had rewired it inside my leg.

“So is me being here going to be a problem?” I asked nervously.

“No. The Finders are absorbing a lot of these new ponies too. And while we may not be as good as these cultists are at finding treasures, we are making quite a haul the last few weeks. Found

some kind of bunker facility up north. Should be loaded with goodies," she said as she rubbed her hooves together in glee.

"Bottlecap, that's my stable!" I cried, wiping the glee off her face. I mean really, did she honestly plan to loot my home? That was just…"Besides, it's filled tight with poison gas and raider plague." And soon Steel Rangers as well.

"Oh. I…huh…" She rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. "Well…I guess I'll tell Digger's crew to move on to picking over the bunkers the Rangers left behind at Ironmare. Funny, he didn't say it looked like a stable but…eh…I guess one bunker looks like another to a professional scavenger." She coughed, then sighed. "Look… Blackjack. Could I ask you a favor?"

I arched a brow. "Sure. Asking is always free."

"The Finders really need Paradise Mall back," she said as she looked at a city map on the wall. A big red circle had been drawn on the east side. "You got the Eggheads, Scrapyard, Rocket Town, Meatlocker, and now even the Enclave out east, and we have zero presence there since Usury lost the mall to Red Eye's forces. Most of his troops are going back to the Everfree region, but there are some still holding onto the mall and Keeper really needs them beaten back. They're being commanded by a griffin named Vermilion."

"I've met him," I said absently, looking at the map as I rubbed my right temple. My head was running slipshod through memories of that night, my meeting with Usury, and where I needed to go next. "Well, I'll think about it; I have no problem helping the Finders so long as you ban that whole slavery thing." My eyes danced over the east side of the map, drawn more and more to one section. Why was it so hard to focus? My eyes finally locked on a green X north of Paradise marked 'Meatlocker'. It was drawn over a square labeled 'Hoofington General Hospital'. And just north of that? 'Hightower Jail'. "What do you know about this place?"

"Hightower? Used to be a prison before the bombs fell. Don't let the name fool you, it's not a little 'jail' but a serious high security prison. Today, it's a huge feral ghoul nest. A balefire missile fell on it but malfunctioned. Instead of leveling the place, it just irradiated it. Or, heck, maybe that's what it was supposed to do. All the prisoners died slow. Most of the sane ghouls set up shop to the south in Meatlocker, the old city hospital before the Fluttershy clinic was built in the reconstruction. You get a few ghouls that try to scavenge there but…" She shrugged.

"Probably don't last too long," I replied. "Well, I just have to get flown on top, and then I'll be on my way. There's got to be a way in from above, right?" I said with a grin…one she didn't share. I groaned, folded my forelegs on the desk, and buried my face in them. "What? What is it?" Mutant cyber attack dogs? Ghoul ninja guards? Spectral gangsters?

"Well, the prison's been on lockdown for two centuries. There're beam turrets all over the roof and walls to prevent jailbreaks, plus sentry robots. They've got some sort of repair talisman thingy, so even if you disable them, they'll just fix themselves. It's the other reason why nopony scavenges there. You'd have to break in and lift the lockdown to get anywhere."

I looked at her for one long moment as my eyelid started to twitch before I waved my hoof at her, as if I could just ward away what she'd just told me. "No! No, I just broke into one death trap! There were killer trees and magic blue death weeds. It had flesh stripping poison gas! And mutating gunk and there was a robot! A giant killer robot with this rainbow beam cannon and this grenade launcher that hosed exploding death at me. No! I just want to fly to the top, go inside, and take it easy."

She stared at me a moment, then gave a wan smile. "Your life is so much more interesting than mine, Blackjack."

"Yeah! A life. And I'd like to keep it. I've lost one already. Are you honestly telling me I have to break into another place where everything is trying to kill me? No! I refuse! I protest! There is no way I can be expected to do this twice…no wait…three times if I count the tunnels. Four if I count 99." I groaned as I paced back and forth. "Goddesses, what is it going to be this time? Am I going to lose the other half of me? Become Blackjack the Robopony? Securitron? Am I going to become 'a cyber ghoul unicorn Reaper what the fuck'?!" I cried as I threw my hooves in the air. "And my friends…I almost lost Scotch Tape the last time. And Glory got turned into Rainbow Dash. Rainbow Dash!" I said as I pointed at her.

"Rainbow Dash?" she asked flatly, as if wondering whether I'd completely lost it. It was fair to say I was rather close to listening to the Dealer, tossing EC-1101 into the river, and trotting out west to help LittlePip or the Stable Dweller.

Then we heard a wet gulping noise and both turned to see Boo with her head in the toilet bowl. Slowly, we looked back at each

other, and I felt myself going red. “What?” I asked, gesturing at the pale pony with a hoof. “How else is she supposed to get a drink?”

“I should probably get back to the floor. I just wanted to warn you…um…good luck,” Bottlecap said with a forced smile, then turned and trotted rapidly from the office. I groaned and buried my face in my crossed hooves on the desk. Again…I was going to have to break into an armored building of death…*again*… just to find out where EC-1101 was supposed to go.

Boo trotted over and gave my uncovered cheek a toilet-bowl-fresh nuzzle. I sighed and muttered, “Thanks Boo. Thanks a lot.” And then I got to thinking of what I’d need.

* * *

“So you’re going to Hightower? Why? There’s nothing in Hightower but a whole lot of ghouls,” Psychoshy said as we made our way back towards the medical center. Ever since I’d filled Rampage in, the pegasus had proven incredibly curious. “I mean, I can understand it if you’re suicidal, but if that’s the case I’d be happy to spare you the trouble,” the mare said with a wide grin as we trotted along.

“Thanks, but I swore off suicide,” I replied, wondering just how Spike was doing at the moment. Being all alone in his cave…Was he watching when LittlePip slaughtered that town? I’d tried to tune in to the radio show, but so far all I’d heard was music and announcements of other things happening abroad. Had he had any better luck finding ponies to bear the Elements of Harmony? I kept coming up empty-hooved every time I even thought about it. Priest would have been a shoo-in for kindness…if he wasn’t dead. Could Bottlecap have been honesty…or was it generosity? Well, there was always *Charity* as a candidate for that spot, too...

Ugh…saving the world was hard.

We’d picked up all the staples we’d needed. I’d traded what P-21 and I had looted from Hippocratic Research and what we’d picked up in the MASEBS tower for Med-X, Rad-X, RadAway, Fixer, fresh food, and ammunition. I’d thought about swapping Duty and Sacrifice, but until my magic could handle bigger weapons, the twin revolvers were my best bet. Since I’d shredded my Reaper barding getting free, I’d bought the best armor I could find: some old combat armor, complete with helmet.

I'd bought Boo a fresh, plague-free apple; I doubted I'd ever trust fresh produce again myself. It'd been a hundred caps, but the look on the pale mare's face had been worth it. She still trotted along with a blissful look on her face. I'd tried to put barding on her, but she'd freaked out so badly in the store that I'd given it up and bought her a carrot instead.

I wished I could get more apples for Boo. And something to help revert Glory.

I really wished I could get my hooves on some radiation suits.

I really, really wished I could peel this gauze off and scratch these skin grafts.

My wish list was getting kinda full, wasn't it?

"So if you're not going for a nasty ghoulification, why go? Hightower isn't like the Core. I doubt you're going to find any crotch-moistening salvage or weapons there," Psychoshy said as she tapped her spiked horseshoes together, something that provided her immense amusement and me incredible annoyance. The two were probably related.

"Blackjack has her reasons," Rampage said as she trotted along in her reinforced metal armor. It wasn't nearly as fancy as the spiked, articulated set that'd been blown apart when she detonated outside Hippocratic Research, but it had the attribute she required the most: mass. She'd kept her distance from the zebras the entire time we'd been there, and they'd stayed back from the striped young mare. Still, she spoke in Zebra for half an hour after we left, and I suspected it wasn't anything nice.

"And those are?" Psychoshy pressed as she flew over my head. Even in the feeble daylight, the clouds still looked particularly heavy and swollen. I just wanted it to rain…even as depressing and uncomfortable as that was, the rain would cut this muggy pressure that was making my ears ache. I wondered if the clouds were just going to fall out of the sky and cover us all.

"You remember EC-1101?" I asked as I looked up at her. She frowned but nodded. "The program is trying to find certain ponies. Really important ponies centuries ago. I want to find out where those ponies are and what they did. And the program says 'go to Hightower and find where to go next.' So that's why I have to go."

She flew sideways, keeping pace with me. "That's it? That's your reason for trotting all over the place? You're just going where the program is telling you to go? That's crazy! You're crazy! Has it

occurred to you that the program is trying to get you killed?" she asked, then pointed at Rampage. "And you're actually helping her with this, Rampage?"

"Well, she does take me to some pretty interesting places," Rampage replied. "You should have seen the screaming room."

Psychoshy mouthed the words 'screaming room'. Then Rampage grinned up at the yellow mare. "A much better question, Psycho, is why, now that you know why Blackjack's trotting all over the Wasteland, are *you* still following *us*?"

Psychoshy's pupils shrunk. "Oh fuck…" She clutched the sides of her head, ignoring the spiked shoes dimpling her hide. "It's infectious, isn't it? That's why all of you follow her. She infects you with her crazy suicidal stupid thoughts and you follow her into places that you know will get you killed."

"Well, that's P-21's most popular theory," Rampage replied. Boo stopped short, her eyes wide as her ears swiveled. I stopped too, but I couldn't see any bars, red or otherwise. "Personally, I think that she's got some kind of freaky mind control powers that constantly broadcast 'this is a good idea'."

"Isn't the heroine embarking on her noble quest to save the city supposed to get a little respect?" I asked in annoyance. The pair simply stared at me a moment, then both flopped on the ground, laughing outrageously. "No respect at all." I snorted and lowered my head sullenly.

The round buzzed so close past me that it had to have been in flight before I moved. I hit the ground as two more zipped through the air above me. Boo flattened herself to the ground in fright.

Okay, snipers outside the range of the E.F.S.? I really didn't like that one bit.

"What the fuck? Is somepony shooting at us?" Psychoshy said as she crawled away towards the edge of the road.

"I dunno," Rampage said as she rose. Instantly there were three pings made by her metal armor and she jerked. "Yup!" she gagged, puking blood as she grinned. Now I could see the red bars, four in the front and four to the south. More rounds slammed into the Reaper, hitting so hard she staggered back a few steps. "Anti-machine rifles…Fuck!" Her regeneration was keeping up with the brutal onslaught, but sooner or later they'd figure out that they were blasting a pony who couldn't die. The rest of us weren't so lucky.

We were dead if we stayed here. The two teams of four were advancing slowly and carefully, firing wild sprays of automatic rifle fire, the kind of fire of somepony not shy about sharing five millimeter ammunition. Rampage was a decent decoy, but even she couldn't protect us against that.

To the north was the gravel pit where I'd fought the radscorpions a lifetime ago; it was the only cover in the place, but it was also a box. I really didn't want to go inside it.

A five millimeter round pinged off my helmet, making the choice for me. Psychoshy crawled like an earth pony into the pit, and Boo was right beside me as I wiggled my way to cover. If they surrounded it, they'd be able to chew us to pieces or pin us down. I looked at the crushers, belts, steam shovel, and heaps of gravel. Not a lot of *protection*. The north and west sides were almost sheer and the east side was sheer and occupied by a giant muddy pit. I could see the radscorpion hole in the north face, but that would be a spot for a last stand.

Rampage trotted down after us with a half dozen holes punched through her armor. The striped young mare spat out a huge bullet; definitely a fifty caliber anti-machine round. Psychoshy took one look at her and shuddered. I swallowed; we didn't have very long. "Okay. Here is what we need to do. They're after me. I'll put Boo somewhere safe and take cover in the cabin of the steam shovel and make sure they see me. Rampage, you take care of the ponies with the carbines. Psychoshy, you take out the ponies with the AM rifles."

"They put holes in my brand new used armor," Rampage said, making a face. "And I think I've got one of those bullets lodged in my spleen, so I'm in a real bad mood now." She looked at me, pulled out a strapped injector from her bags, and slapped it on her foreleg. "Mmm…Ragey goodness…" And then she ran off with a laugh.

"You expect me to fight ponies armed with guns that shoot that?" Psychoshy asked, pointing at the glistening bullet Rampage had spat into the dirt.

"No. I expect you to wait till they're about to snipe my head and then attack them from behind," I replied flatly as I started for the steam shovel. I needed some place for Boo that was safe. I looked at the metal scoop and carefully lifted her into it. "Stay Boo…stay…" The pale mare blinked at me, and I gently pushed her back down

out of sight.

"Oh, well that's different," Psychoshy said, and then gave a nasty grin. "What if I just let them take the shot?"

I looked at her. "Are you telling me you're going to let somepony else kill me while you just hover there?" The yellow pegasus frowned as she thought about that, and I turned and clambered up into the steam shovel cabin. I looked down at Boo and tried to give her a comforting smile.

"It's crazy. Infectious freaking crazy. That's what it is," Psychoshy grumbled as she snapped her wings and darted for the trees to the north.

I'd let the murderess take care of the details. I pulled out Duty and Sacrifice, telekinetically loaded them, and got ready. I had a few advantages; the back of the steam shovel pointed south, so anypony coming after me would need to circle around to get a clear shot. Rampage would deal with any in the pit. Psychoshy would bag the snipers. All I had to do was survive…and hope my little mind game with the pegasus paid off. My E.F.S. saw the red bars moving closer and closer, but much too spread out.

I popped out around the corner and spotted a mare moving down into the gravel pit, an earth pony in green camouflage combat armor. She had her eyes down, looking at her unstable footing. Then she raised her head, and I saw the green face of a mare not much older than Scotch Tape. Her eyes met mine; she wasn't a killer. Just some mare who'd put on the barding and the battle saddle, then strapped two carbines to it and came after my head. She stared right at me; I gave her at least two seconds as I raised the revolvers and sighted along the barrels.

Two seconds was an eternity she let slip by. Then I fired; the range was such that I seriously doubted I could kill her. Not this far away with revolvers. Then the two heavy rounds struck her cheekbones and her head vanished in a spray of red, green, and white. All that fancy armor and weaponry thudded to the ground in a heap.

I stared at the smoking barrels and then at the heap lying at the base of the slope. "Sorry kid," I muttered. She'd wanted me dead; I hadn't wanted the same.

My shot had given away my position, and they started to strafe the steam shovel cab as I drew back. Every now and then, the rusted metal let out a resounding 'pong' as the AM rifles took a shot, the bullets punching through the metal and peppering me with spall

and other metal fragments. I just kept my eyes on the E.F.S. One drew close around the west side of the cab, and I stuck my hoof out and back in. Two metallic booms sounded out, ringing the cab like a bell. I leaned out and looked down at the gray old buck. His jaws tightened on the bit, but he was too close. The rifle rounds sparked off the rusty metal around me.

I pointed the pair of revolvers far more accurately; I didn't even need S.A.T.S. Duty boomed and tore off the left side of his face. He fell to the ground, screaming. I felt a twinge beneath my bandages. A second later, Sacrifice punched through his barding and into his chest, silencing him.

It was a second too long. There was a boom, and I was slammed almost completely out the empty front windows of the steam shovel cab by the impact of the fifty caliber round. Then my barding started to sizzle and smoke as the incendiary round burst into flame. It was like a searing brand in my chest, but I didn't have any time to deal with it.

"Die, motherfucka! Die die die!" screamed a ganger with way too much ordinance as he raced around the front of the steam shovel and strafed the cab. Tears ran down my face and smoke obscured my vision. Another armored mare was crawling up into the east side of the cab, this one with a heavy revolver of her own, teeth clenched on the grip.

I slipped into S.A.T.S. and carefully aimed. Time returned as the pistols fired in unison. Duty tore into the ganger dancing like an idiot in the front. He stopped dancing when one round punched between the plates on left foreleg and shattered the joint. He sprawled on his face in the dirt, and the second round ripped into his gut. He began to scream as he lay there. Sacrifice's first shot missed the mare. The second tore through her neck like a dragon's fang. She jerked, firing wildly in the few seconds she had; her bullets hit my chest like hoofblows, but the armor stopped them. I couldn't risk a lucky shot, though. Both revolvers blasted her fierce and desperate tallow-colored eyes into a memory.

Only then did I take a moment to pop out my fingers and pry the enchanted incendiary round from my chest plate. I tossed it out the window. Four down. Eight to go. Things were looking up!

Then a glowing grenade was tossed around the corner and into the cab. I tried to throw it out the east door as I ignominiously flopped out the west. My magic wasn't able to manage two pistols and the

grenade while I spilled out, though, and since I hadn't turned into an alicorn in the last few minutes, gravity had me land square on my head as the grenade went off. I sat up and then flipped over as I tried to pull myself to my hooves.

The flop saved my head, again. Another sizzling incendiary round fizzled against the side of the cab as I struggled to my hooves. I saw two crumpled mares where Rampage had been hard at work, but as I swayed on my hooves, another pony came racing around the corner, carbines blasting. Between the mare in front of me, guns chewing into my armor as her horn levitated another grenade off her bandoleer, and the AM rifle sniper blasting chunks out of the floor of the gravel pit around me, it wasn't looking pretty. I spotted Rampage far over on the south lip of the pit, smashing a Seeker. Psychoshy hovered over to the west, then divebombed into the trees.

Only one thing to do. I charged into the carbine mare's fire, making the brownish-yellow unicorn's eyes widen in shock as I closed the distance. She dropped the grenade back onto her belt as she backpedaled and tried to keep the fire on me, while her magic drew two combat knives. I tried to fire, then cursed as the hammers landed on spent casings. Five chambers. Five. Not six.

The mare's eyes widened in excitement as her carbines chewed into my armor. Until I flung both revolvers in her face. An earth pony wouldn't have moved; there was no way my horn could actually throw something hard enough to really injure her. But the brown mare flinched instinctively, jerking back and spraying above my bleeding neck. I sprang before she could recover and hugged her neck with my forelegs as the rest of my body swung beneath her.

I yanked her down face to face, taking the momentary cover she offered from the sniper. There was a sharp grating as she tried to saw and cut her way through my legs gripping her neck. She'd need something a lot more substantial than a combat knife for that, though. I stared into her eyes, and I felt an anger building inside me.

"Why?" I asked as I stared into her wide eyes. She grinned in anticipation. "Why are trying to kill me?"

"I have to. You have to die so Equestria can live!" she yelled in my face. "It's for Equestria's future. My future! A better tomorrow!"

Maybe it was what I'd seen LittlePip do. Maybe it was the fact that I kept trying to help ponies who tried to kill me. It was probably the

knife that had found a gap in my armor's side and was working its way between the ceramic plates.

I was sick of being a good pony.

"You don't get a tomorrow!" I shouted as I kicked out with all four legs, sending her flying as my horn glowed. She landed in a roll, clearly used to fighting, and tumbled even further away before rising to her hooves. She pulled the apple grenade from her combat armor with her magic.

I lifted the glowing pin I'd pulled when I'd kicked her away.

The grenade went off next to her face, and she went down in a heap. I stared at her, moving slowly as I looked at the bloody mound. I glanced around, but couldn't see any more red bars. I lifted the twin revolvers, shook out the spent casings, and reloaded them. I really hoped Psychoshy had taken out all the snipers and that one wasn't lining up a headshot on me as I walked towards the mare. The left side of her face was ground meat, and she gasped for breath as she looked up at me.

"She tried to kill you, Blackjack," Dealer rasped at my left. His head was bowed, hiding his face as he shuffled his cards. "Rampage was wrong. It doesn't matter how good you are. It doesn't matter how hard you try. They'll always think killing is the right thing to do. And they'll keep trying to do it."

She started making little hitching noises in her throat as I stared down at her. I thought of LittlePip coldly slaying those ponies in that village. What had pushed her across the line? Had she realized that it didn't matter how hard you tried, and that killing was just easier?

I pointed Sacrifice at the mare's head. The right side of her mouth curled upwards a little.

"Just pull the trigger, Blackjack. Move on. She's dead anyway," he rasped. It would be so easy. Merciful. I caught Rampage staring at me as I stood there. *Be kind…* Death would be a kindness. *Do better…* The Hoof would be better without her. Platitudes couldn't help me anymore. Spare her and she'd just try and kill me again. Stop trying. Stop pretending to be Security. I couldn't save ponies. Not really... I couldn't do anything except give her an end to her pain…

You take the hard road no matter how damn much it hurts you. Every single time I think you're going to do what's wrong and easy, you surprise me.

I dropped Sacrifice back into my holster and knelt beside the gasping mare. Fortunately, I had an obscene amount of chems on me and jabbed her immediately with some Med-X. Then I lifted a vial of Bonesaw's own personal healing potion to her lips. "Drink. Come on…drink," I said, holding her head in my hooves as I dribbled the fresh healing potion into her lips. Finally, she swallowed once and coughed.

"Why?" she asked in a raspy whisper as blood flowed thick and red from her nostrils. "Why save me?"

"Shut up and drink," I said sharply. But she wasn't; she just coughed it up. Her eye kept following me, though. "Drink so you have a tomorrow, damn it! I can at least give you a chance!" The potion dribbled onto the dirt. "At least tell me your name!" I yelled.

Slowly, her eye relaxed. The tiny curl in the corner of her mouth remained. My generous second chance lasted all of ten seconds. My horn dropped the vial, the rest of the purple potion trickling into the dirt. My chest burned, the gunshot wounds throbbed, and my E.F.S. was flashing all kinds of warnings and information that didn't mean anything to me as I slowly laid her down again.

Psychoshy landed next to Rampage, staring at me in confusion. "Is she…like…upset? I mean…she was trying to kill her." I saw her expression turn almost to one of horror. "That's…that's crazy. Like…really crazy."

"Blackjack's…complicated," the striped pony replied softly. Boo wiggled out of the scoop and trotted over to join us. She sat, blinking in confusion as she looked at me.

I sniffed and turned the unicorn's head so her mutilated face was hidden. "I just…like second chances. You screw up…make it good. Do it right. Do better…" I made sure her eye was closed. If I pretended really hard I could almost make myself believe she was simply asleep. "Someday…I hope I figure out how to do it myself."

* * *

One good thing about fighting these Harbingers: they had great stuff, and so much of it that I couldn't carry it all. While the weapons were new, they'd been badly mistreated; I found one carbine that looked like somepony had used it to mix up soup! I repaired my armor as well as I could; even I could swap out damaged plates. When I was finished, I had one anti-machine rifle

slung across my back, a couple apple grenades, and a second suit of combat armor. The food I kept; maybe Glory could test it for mind control drugs. The rest was stashed in the cab of the steam shovel.

Then, much to the complete bafflement of Psychoshy, I gathered up the bodies of the ponies I'd killed and put them into the hole the Radscorpions had used as a nest. The brown mare I'd tried to save was put in last. She had a slice of bread for a cutie mark. What had her name been? Had she been a ganger? A Reaper? Had she lived in a village I'd failed to save? Had she come from some distant place, lured by the promise of a better tomorrow? Family? Friends? Children? She'd known how to fight; she'd been better with her battle saddle than I was with mine.

She'd tried to kill me. I'd killed her. That wasn't my fault…but damn how I wish there'd been some better way.

After laying her on top, I backed away and floated two grenades over the rock face. When they were wedged in place, I flicked away the tabs and ran. The two exploded, and a moment later a chunk of the face tumbled into the hole. I looked on as the dust swirled and stilled. There was no sign at all that anything lay beneath the rubble. The four watched me, Boo in confusion, Rampage in concern, and Psychoshy in wariness.

And the Dealer? His pale eyes held nothing but pity.

"Come on. Let's go. P-21's waiting," I said as I turned and headed for the slope to the south. The gray and yellow rocks lay behind me, now still as the bodies they interred. A thousand years from now, maybe they'd be unearthed. Hopefully…in a better tomorrow.

* * *

Loaded down with the mother of all rifles--seriously, any bigger than the IF-100 Thunderhoof and we'd be getting into Deus autocannon territory--we trotted our way back towards the medical center as rapidly as we could. The ponies at the entrance gave us a pass through at once. I spotted Splendid and Archie talking off to the side, and they waved me over.

I paused to pass Rampage the Med-X and Fixer. "Take this up to Glory, please?"

"Aw, do I have to? I was thinking of seeing if I could make myself so numb that my legs would turn to jelly. That's a pretty fun sensation." I gave her a firm look. I just wasn't in the mood for

jokes. She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Serious Blackjack is no fun. Alright, I’ll get it to her.” She snorted as she trotted for the stairs. “You’d think there was a well-armed cult of fanatics out to kill you, or something.” Psychoshy went with her. Boo, as usual, stayed close by my side.

Archie looked at me and flushed at once, but Splendid just looked…well…splendid. The blue-maned unicorn brushed his coiffure back and gave me a look that weeks ago would have turned my insides all buttery. Instead, his look made my insides twinge reflexively, and I gave a polite yet firm smile back. His own smile slipped a little, then shifted to a more friendly and less trying-to-get-me-in-bed look. A smooth operator.

“Blackjack, is everything all right with you and your friends?” he asked calmly as Archie started opening his mouth to speak. The nerdy buck looked sullenly at the handsome stallion. The Eggheads were restocking their supplies and setting up new beam turrets, and I was glad to see that they were going to try and use this place for healing rather than strip it bare. Of course, if they’d restocked it sooner, it might have saved me a trip to Megamart. From the many strange and sickly ponies hanging around it was clear that there was need. And anything that took recruitment from the Harbingers was good news to me.

“Everything is fine for the moment. How are things with your father?” I replied. Boo yawned, curling up on the floor and taking a little nap.

Splendid sighed and rubbed his nose. “My father had some choice words about the idea of placing him within a stasis pod.”

“Didn’t he say ‘no self-respecting king rules from a fridge’ or something to that effect?” Archibald asked as he adjusted his glasses.

Splendid allowed just a little bit of his irritation to show. “Yes, those were the words he chose, Archibald.”

“I believe he also included the words ‘you featherbrained nincompoop’,” Archibald said.

Splendid’s eye twitched a little. “Why yes, Archibald. I think he did say that. How silly of me to omit it. Whatever was I thinking?”

“I think you were trying to improve your reproductive odds with Blackjack,” Archibald said. “I’m fairly sure that you were going to offer blatant and obvious praise of her appearance, ability, or intellect next.” I couldn’t help but smile in amusement as one of

Splendid's perfectly groomed hairs popped free. "Perhaps you'll suggest some sort of classically romantic venue back in Elysium--"

"Thank you, Archibald!" Splendid said sharply as he whirled on the buck, his lips pulled in a tight grimace. Finally, he sighed and brushed his mane back in place. "Anyway, Father refuses to let us put him in a stasis pod, so it will be interesting if he lasts till the anniversary ball. If he'd just pick a successor…" the prince murmured with a frown.

"There's a ninety-two percent chance he would be assassinated by his successor within twenty-four hours of the announcement," Archibald replied as he pulled a frame with beads on it out of… wait, where had that come from? He rapidly slid the beads back and forth on the frame. "So I estimate only a three percent chance that he would make any such announcement in the near future."

In other words, King Awesome wasn't King Stupid.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you ponies are trying to make something out of this place," I said as I looked towards the emergency room and the ponies receiving treatment.

Splendid sighed. "Yes, well…while I'd hoped to use the technology here to help the Society, the Society having an outpost here in the north is useful. And, of course, there's offering help to ponies who need it."

Archibald nodded. "And this facility will someday be vital if the Collegiate is ever able to produce Steelpony implants in sufficient quantity. If we can, then both the Collegiate and the Society will profit from sales. The surgical robot is likewise quite priceless." He put the strange little beaded frame back…wait, where had he put it? Was this some kind of freaky egghead magic or something?

I sighed and gave a little smile at the pair. "Well, we're done here. I'll make sure everypony cleans up before we go. And by the way, thanks for taking care of the bodies."

Splendid flushed a little as he said, "Well, it was the right thing to do."

Archibald frowned up at the handsome stallion. "I thought you said that it was because they were starting to stink?"

Splendid smiled at me, and then that stray blue lock popped free again. He put his hoof around Archibald's brown neck and pulled him close. "If you'll excuse us, Blackjack, I need a word with my Collegiate partner in private." And with that he hauled the Collegiate pony away.

I smiled and shook my head. Maybe it was petty of me, but with everything going wrong in my life, I had to admit that seeing another pony flustered was satisfying. Boo immediately rose to her hooves and trotted after me as I headed into the medical center.

I trotted past the atrium and began the climb to the fifteenth floor. I hoped that the next time we visited, the elevators would be working properly. Not that climbing the flights wore me out; a few sapphire chips and I was right as rain. It just took a while to make it all the way to the top. That, and after four flights of stairs, I was carrying the tired Boo the rest of the way up.

I started towards Scotch's room when I trotted by the hospital room I'd found Glory in earlier and noticed a blue bar inside. I smiled, imagining Glory cleaning up her mess. I poked my head into the bathroom. "Say, when'd you get demoted to jani--"

The yellow earth pony inside the bathroom jumped to her hooves and spun around to face me. Her orange mane was a bit straggly, but not really messy. She looked like a pony not long out in the Wasteland. She wore bulky, reinforced leather armor and a respirator, and a camera hung around her neck. She cupped a leather bag in her hooves. "Don't shoot!" she shouted in a drawling accent as she raised her hooves defensively.

"Wasn't planning on it," I replied. She pulled off the respirator. "Who are you and what are you doing up here?"

She licked her lips a little nervously. "Aw, tarnation. I ain't nopony. Call me Chicken…everypony does," she said as she looked at the massive AM gun across my back and gulped. "Just poking round, trying to find stuff out. Ain't been in Hoofington more than a week." She pointed at the multicolored mane clippings lying all over the floor. "Is it true? Is…is she really here?" the mare asked.

"Who?" I asked with a frown. Boo sniffled at the yellow mare's saddlebags. Said mare looked at the pale pony uneasily and pulled an apple out of her bag as an offering. After one chomp, she had made a new friend. Boo licked her lips and gave the mare a friendly headbutt that put Chicken a little at ease.

"Ya know? Her? Rainbow Dash?" she asked with a nervous little smile. "Heard folks down below say she was up here in one of them there stasis pods. Was hopin' ta get me a picture," she said as she lifted a camera from a strap around her neck.

"Oh, yeah." I really did not want to introduce anypony to Glory in her current state. "We found her in a hidden pod in the back, but

she took off for the clouds. Woosh! She sure can fly." I grinned at the nonplussed mare.

"Wow! That's…that's unbelievable," she said as she swept up some of the clippings with her hoof. "Just a momento…Otherwise they'll never believe me back in Appleloosa!" she said with a grin. "Did she say where she was going?"

I thought fast. Usually I liked to have a little more time when constructing my fibs. "Uh, yeah. Flying back to the Enclave to buck their butts into gear. You betcha…" She blinked at me in surprise and confusion. "Anyway, sorry you missed her."

She gaped at me for a second before she shook her head hard. "Me too. I mean…Rainbow Dash. That's just amazing. Can't believe I missed her," she sighed. "I got ta say though, when I came all the way out here, I didn't know how dangerous this place was. I mean, Appleloosa's no Tenpony, but sheesh. Wars. Gangs. Crazy cult ponies. Somepony down there mentioned there was some kind of flesh eatin' plague too."

"Yeah. It contaminates food. If you eat it you can get sick. Soon you'll be eating anypony in hoof reach. Be careful if you come across mystery meat or strange food. I'd buy from the Society if you can afford it."

The mare frowned. "Not them there Volunteer Corps? They seemed like friendly sorts back in Flank, with good, cheap food. You don't believe them there tales that they're behind that plague? I hear anypony with feathers can't catch it."

"Not if Operative Lighthooves has anything to say about it," I muttered, and she widened her eyes even more in baffled shock. I sighed and covered my face with a hoof. "Look, there's all kinds of…stuff…going on here. Just…your safest bet is to get back to Appleloosa as soon as you can. Hoofington's really dangerous right now."

She gave a nervous little grin. "Y'all don't say. Seems like everyplace down here's a right tangle o' peril." She rose to her hooves. "Well, thank ya kindly fer satin' my curiosity, Miss…"

"Blackjack," I replied.

She blinked, then smiled. "Oh…right. The Security Mare. Well…I'll be on my way. Take care o' yerself," she said as she hurried past and left the room, turning to trot straight for the stairs down.

I frowned after her, then looked around the hospital room. Even if none of the supplies here were particularly valuable, most of them

were useful. She hadn't touched anything.

Huh. Apparently Appleloosans were a little more twigged than your standard mares. Maybe she'd been too excited by what I told her? First rule in the Wasteland…I stood there for a while as Boo just watched me curiously. Funny, now my mane was every bit as itchy as my face.

* * *

"How is he?" I asked Glory as she carefully peeled away the gauze from my face. I kept my eyes upraised, trying my best not to scratch. Boo had gotten a strip of medical tape stuck on the end of her muzzle and was now wrinkling her nose and doing her best to shake it off.

"Better now," the pegasus said as she peeled the wrappings away from the left side of my face. "He's been on Med-X for years, though. It's not going to be a simple fix."

"I thought you could just mix up some sort of chem cure and woosh, all better!" I said with a hopeful grin. She just gave me one of those patient smiles that said she didn't want to call me stupid. I pouted a little. "Is there some sort of magic spell or something?" I smiled as Boo got the tape off her muzzle…and now shook her hoof in a vain effort to free herself of it.

"Unfortunately, this isn't a fairy tale, Blackjack. You can't just trot up, give a doctor a hundred caps, have them wave a magic wand, and be all better. Now, if it was a recent addiction, sure, I could do something to reduce the physical effects, but he's been on Med-X for so long that his body doesn't know how to function without it. I could flush every trace of the chem from his body right now. Unfortunately, it'd probably kill him."

"And that would be bad," I said softly. The gauze pads were slowly pulled away from my face.

"I'm glad you feel so," P-21 rasped from the doorway. Lacunae pushed two glowing wheelchairs before her as she trotted in, with Rampage and Psychoshy behind her. P-21 looked as bad as you get without an Enervation field sucking the life out of you. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot, his normally steady limbs now twitching. Scotch Tape, in the other wheelchair, looked equally pale and tired but gave me a small smile.

"So…how bad is it?" I asked, steadying myself for the blow. Maybe

I could fashion some kind of mask if it was hideous.
"It's fine, Blackjack," P-21 said faintly, then hissed through his teeth and writhed with a groan.
"Are you okay?" I asked, then smacked myself for the stupid question. "I mean, are you going to be okay?"
"I feel like I've been dropped down a couple flights of stairs. I'll be fine. If Glory can do for me what she's done for your face…I think I'll be brand new," he said with a wan smile.
"Really?" I blinked as Lacunae floated a small mirror in front of me. I gaped at my own reflection. Where before my face had been a mangled mess of meat and metal, there was now a smooth white sheet of unblemished, scar-free hide. I stared, pulling at my cheek. Never before had I appreciated looking like a pony. Maybe it was vanity, but as I stared I felt a great weight lift. "Glory! You're a genius! You…you saved my face!" Now we just had to go and--
"I like your face," she replied, and the tired pegasus reached out with her hooves to hold me. Rainbow Dash's lips might not have been quite like Glory's, but at this moment I couldn't care less. Glory's wings popped up behind her; that was new. Was that a Rainbow Dash thing? Finally, she broke the kiss and started to peel off the rest of my bandages. "Besides, I can't even take most of the credit. You've got a regeneration talisman. All I had to do was replace the missing tissue, and it did the rest."
"Sweet. We need to give Blackjack the woodchipper test then," Rampage said with a grin.
"Regeneration, not super freaky come-back-from-a-pile-of-mulch regeneration," Psychoshy snorted.
"You're just scared," Rampage replied, sticking her tongue out at the pegasus. Glory then floated over me and began to scratch my hide vigorously with her hooves. I could have melted like butter then and there.
"Oh, I love you so much," I said as she scratched along my mane.
"I love you too," she replied, landing beside me, and we shared a second round of smooches. Psychoshy made a retching noise as Scotch gave an 'awww' of delight.
"And how are you feeling?" I asked Scotch as I hugged Glory. I could guess just by looking at her. She appeared a little better than her father.
"I got a wicked scar," Scotch said weakly as she lifted her throat and pointed at the shaved strip. "And I'm sick too."

"That's just a postoperative infection. You'll get over it soon," Glory said with an unvocalized 'I hope' that hung in the air. Then the blue mare gave another yawn and slumped against me. "I haven't been this tired since all-nighters at school."

"Don't worry," I replied with a smile. "A few hours of sleep, and then we can be on our way to Hightower, lickety split!" I suddenly became aware that every set of eyes was upon me, and most of them wore expressions that told me that I'd once again said something particularly stupid. "What?"

"Blackjack…we're not in any shape to go anywhere," Glory said firmly. "Scotch Tape and P-21 are both looking at several days' recovery in a non-Enervated environment. Both of them are going to need frequent healing treatments from Lacunae and myself. I'd take them back to Tenpony if I could."

"Sadly, that is quite outside my range," Lacunae replied.

I sat down hard. "But…EC-1101. The glorious quest! We can't just…put it on hold…" What, were they crazy?

"Why not?" Glory asked, and I pulled away to look at her for some sign that she was joking. Instead, her eyes were firm, compassionate, and serious. "Are we being chased by somepony at the moment, or need to chase down somepony before they get away?"

"Well, there are those Harbingers," I said with a little frown and received a blank look in return. "The cult ponies? We saw them outside Flank? They're looking for me and they're packing some serious ordinance. We ran into a pack of their Seekers on the way here."

"But there's no deadline of doom looming in the immediate future? No 'got to get it done or we all die'?" Glory pressed. I shook my head. "Then we can hide out for a while. Go back to Star House where Scotch Tape and P-21 can recover in comfort. Blackjack, we need a rest. If you keep pushing like this, somepony is going to die. It'll just be a couple of days, a week at the most."

"Why not just stay here?" Rampage asked in confusion.

But Scotch Tape shook her head and then coughed. "I'd like to go back to Chapel. I want to make sure Precious is alright."

P-21 looked into my eyes as he said, "It's only a week, Blackjack."

"Only a week? A whole week?!" I said as I jumped to my hooves. "Are you serious? I can't just take a *week* off." I started pacing back and forth. "Do LittlePip and her friends take a week time out? Does

the Stable Dweller? No! I know where I have to go next, and we can't just…"

"Blackjack," P-21 said softly, making me freeze. I slowly looked at him and his tired, pained smile. "I can't keep up with you anymore. I'm sorry. I wish I could, but I can't." He turned and stretched out a trembling hoof, resting it on the arm of Scotch's wheelchair. The green filly reached out and hugged his leg between her hooves. "I want to spend some time with my daughter. I need a few days where I'm not being shot at."

I felt sick as I looked at him. "Come on, P-21…I…You know we can do it. We took on Hippocratic Research and got out alive. We can't just... stop... "

But he shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack, but no." He smiled, and there was no anger or animosity in his eyes. There was a strange kind of calm I hadn't seen in them before. Like he was finally starting to emerge from whatever shadow had consumed him. I couldn't make him follow me now... not after he'd finally started to deal with his problems.

I saw how ragged everypony looked. Even Psychoshy drooped from her recent experiences. Only Rampage smiled at me and shrugged, ready to fight on. Glory smiled as she moved in front of me and gave a worn smile. "Even I could do with a few days' recuperation," the blue pegasus said softly as she walked up to hug me. "And I think you could too."

I looked blankly at her; I wasn't used to hearing Glory say something so ridiculous. "Me? Me? I'm Blackjack the cyberpony. I'm not sleepy. Heck, I feel jazzed up and ready to go."

Glory looked up at me and brushed my mane back between my ears. "Blackjack, when was the last time you slept?" I stared at her; had she really just asked me that? That was on par with a Blackjack question!

"I don't need to sleep anymore, Glory. I've got a power core and legs that keep working no matter what," I said as I jerked back and started to trot back and forth. "I don't sleep, I eat gems and metal, and you don't want to know what comes of that. I'm not tired and I don't need to sleep."

"Blackjack, sleep is for more than just the body. It's for the mind as well," she said as she stepped towards me.

"Your mind, maybe! My brain is just fine with the whole never sleeping again," I said as I pointed to the clock. "Look at what I got

done…a whole shopping trip while everypony else was sleeping. And now I don't need to sleep. Why, now I've added a whole third of my life of getting stuff done by not sleeping." I grinned widely as I backed away, staring at them all. Why didn't they get it? I couldn't stop for a week while they recovered. I couldn't even stop for a few hours' sleep.

Glory just looked at me for a long, sad, tired moment. "Will everypony please excuse us? We need to talk alone."

"Shit! Just when things were getting good," Psychoshy said as she put her forehooves on her hips. "I was so sure that she was going to snap just then."

"Blackjack doesn't do her crazy by halves," Rampage said as she bit Psychoshy's tail and dragged the protesting mare out after her. P-21 just gave me a long, sad smile as Scotch rested her head on his foreleg and closed her eyes. Rather than disturb them, Lacunae levitated both chairs and floated them out in front of her. Then she lifted the baffled-looking Boo and carried her out as well.

The sudden silence was overwhelming. Suddenly I wanted to run. I needed to get out of here. I needed to get to Hightower. I couldn't stop. Stopping would kill me! Glory slowly walked forward and I backed up till my rump hit the pod behind me. I sat down and leaned back, trying to will myself to move away. "Blackjack…"

"What, Glory? What…why are you talking to me like this?" I stammered, glancing at her eyes and looking away. I wanted the Dealer to distract me. "I told you, I don't need to rest, sleep, or stop. I was damaged and now I'm fixed and regenerated and ready to go. I don't see why I need to waste a week of time…"

"Blackjack," she began softly and put out her hooves. "When was the last time you slept?"

"I told you, I don't need to sleep. I am Miss Blackjack the cyberpony, and I don't need to sleep. Sleep won't do me any good anyway. I'll just have somepony else's freaky dreams. Or nightmares. There's no point in stopping to sleep." I rambled on, looking away and blinking. Funny, I couldn't stop blinking.

"Blackjack, when was the last time you slept? Was it back in Chapel?" Glory asked.

"Look, I was unconscious for a while in Hippocratic Research. Had some wonky dreams. I figured that was enough sleep for a few days," I said as quickly as I could. Why couldn't she just accept that I didn't need to sleep?

“Did you sleep at all in Tenpony?” she asked, calmly and reasonably.

“No, we had sex in Tenpony. Remember? Great fun. Let’s do it again!” But I didn’t want sex. I didn’t want to rest. I didn’t want to stop. “Look, you know me. If I wait around I’ll get all mopey and you’ll be annoyed and everything. Just…let it drop. Okay? Please? Let it drop?” I begged as I closed my eyes. I felt like a stupid foal. If I couldn’t see her then I didn’t have to listen either.

Her legs wrapped around me. I wished I could shake. I wished I could gasp and my heart could thunder. Instead I felt still and calm in every part of me except my mind. That was racing faster and faster with every second. “Why can’t you sleep?” she asked.

“Because I’ll die! I’ll die again!” I screamed at her and shoved her away. I hadn’t meant to do that. She slid across the polished floor almost to the far wall. I stared at her as she pulled herself to her hooves. I shrank back. “Oh, Goddesses, I didn’t mean…I…I…” I buried my head in my hooves. “Glory... ” I whimpered.

Then I felt her hoof on my mane. I sniffed. “I can’t sleep, Glory. Sleeping…I…I drifted off on the boat there and…I just know that if I stop and sleep that everything is going to stop again. I’ll die. I’ll die as sure as if you put a bullet through my head. I’ll go to a bad place. I don’t want that. I don’t want to die again,” I said as I quivered. “I can’t do that. I can’t…”

Security…terror of Hoofington…bearer of the coveted EC-1101…complete basket case. Psychoshy was right. This had to be some kind of crazy. Some level of madness that I no longer knew how to deal with.

“Blackjack…” Glory murmured softly as she stroked me. “You have to sleep.”

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” I said quietly. “I don’t have my own dreams anymore. I don’t…Glory. I’m falling apart. The only thing keeping me together is that I keep moving. If I stop…I’ll…something. Something bad.”

“I know, Blackjack. But you can’t keep going forever,” she said as she stroked my mane again and again. Finally she curled up against me. I lay still as a sleeping foal. Still as a corpse. But inside, my mind was screaming.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, she was asleep. I wasn't. Carefully, I shifted her onto my back and carried her to the room opposite Scotch and P-21's. She needed to sleep and rest. She'd pushed herself saving the lives of my friends and trying to help me, and now she was spent. I looked in and saw P-21 and Scotch curled up together, with Boo beside the olive filly. Lacunae looked on, a silent sentinel, a protective goddess.

The next room over, Psychoshy was taking a nap. She twitched in her sleep with little jerks and once whispered the name of the ghoul she'd lost. Rampage looked up at me and raised a hoof to her lips. She trotted out and closed the door behind her. "You okay, Blackjack? You look really spooked."

"It's nothing. Nothing," I said as I sat. "Rampage…do you ever need to sleep?"

"Nope. Don't really have to, as I never get tired," she said, and I wanted to cheer. Hah! See, Glory? Not all ponies have to sleep. "But I do, from time to time. I catch little naps here and there when I can."

"You do?" I blinked in surprise.

"Sure, Blackjack. Everypony does. Heck, even ghouls do, and they're *dead*. A pony has to turn off the brain occasionally, or she'll go bouncing-off-the-walls crazy. Even I've done that."

"Really? What happened?"

"No idea, but for a while twenty or so years ago, there was a myth about the Bloody Beast of Hoofington that went around slaughtering all kinds of creatures before it mysteriously vanished," she said as she shuffled nervously. "Understand, that was before I ran into Priest. But yeah, even I occasionally need to calm down and let my thoughts straighten themselves out."

"But how do you do it?" I asked, chewing on my lip. "If you never get tired…"

"I just do. I cut out the Mint-als for a few hours. I close my eyes and try and push everything away and imagine a big, tangled knot. Then I slowly unravel it. Eventually, my brain just kicks over." She sighed and rubbed her mane. "It's a little bit scary. Sometimes, I have dreams that make no sense…and sometimes I'm scared that when I wake up, I won't be…me. But the alternative is a bloody beast." She smiled and shrugged.

"Right…" I murmured softly, looking away. The Cyberdemon of Hoofington…I didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Are you okay, Blackjack? You've got a funny look on your face. You've had it all day," Rampage asked in concern. "Not your shooty look. Just…more crazy than usual."

I grinned. "Hey. Don't worry about me. I'm Blackjack the cyberpony. I'll be fine. I just need to calm down." She returned my smile a little uneasily, patted my shoulder, then slipped back into the room.

My brain, though, wasn't calm. My thoughts smashed from one side to the other. She was right; I needed to sleep. No, I couldn't sleep, sleep was bad. But no sleep make Blackjack go crazy. But Blackjack was crazy already. So then no sleep make Blackjack go crazier. But sleep kill Blackjack. But sleep wouldn't kill me. Then sleep would bring the bad dreams. But sleep was important; Glory said so. But sleep would bring dreams that weren't my own. Besides, I wasn't tired.

My thoughts mashed and crashed and crushed against each other. A flesh and blood pony would get exhausted. She'd *have* to sleep. But my body just kept on going. I started pacing in the hall. I had to go. I *had* to. I couldn't sleep. Somewhere in my mind was a certainty that, if I did, I would die. I'd just float away from my body and leave a Blackjack-shaped cyberthing behind.

I already saw the Dealer. What would happen if Psychoshy was right about how crazy I was? What if I did completely lose it? I saw what had happened to LittlePip. What kind of damage could I do?

Cyberdemon of Hoofington.

Didn't matter. Wasn't sleepy. Had to go. Had to go now. I was halfway down the hall before the thought slammed through: couldn't go. Couldn't do that to Glory. Not again. I trotted back between the rooms. Couldn't stay. Couldn't go. Couldn't sleep. There was only one thing to do.

Check and see if the bar was open.

* * *

"Blackjack? What are you doing?" Lacunae asked softly as she trotted into the storeroom where we'd found Nurse Redheart. I had arranged the five figurines in front of me, set out little paper cups in front of them, and then poured them each a drink. Since they couldn't drink, I was drinking for them. Their normally bright and happy faces looked oddly sad for some reason.

"I'm having a tea party," I replied to the immense purple alicorn. "Only I didn't have any tea, so we're having booze instead. I guess that makes it a shots party." I waved the bottle at her.

"Blackjack. That is rubbing alcohol," she said aloud in shock.

"Yeah. Stuff is shit compared to Wild Pegasus. I went all the way to Megamart and didn't pick up some quality booze. Irresponsible," I said as I lifted Pinkie Pie's shot. "Come on, Pinkie. Drink up. It's a party!" I lifted it to the grinning pink pony's mouth with my magic. "Drinkie drinkie!"

A purple hoof crushed the paper cup.

I slowly looked up at her. Her magic then swept the cups, bottles, and remains into a garbage can in the corner. I stared up at her and sniffed. "I…um…I…" I looked at the five figurines around me and then back at the purple alicorn.

What the *fuck* is wrong with me?

"I…I…" I stammered like an idiot as I looked up to her, like Mom catching me sleeping on my shift or something. My throat closed up.

She sat beside me and pulled me into her hooves and held me. I clenched my eyes closed, imagining it was Mom holding me in her hooves. "Please…please help me…"

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I can't…"

"Cast a spell. Please," I begged, like a filly pleading to their parent to make it all better.

"Unconsciousness isn't sleep, Blackjack," Lacunae said quietly in my ear as she rocked me. "And I'm sorry…the Goddess isn't interested in helping you anymore." I heard her sigh quietly. "I wish I could. I wish I could cast a spell to take away your fears and calm your thoughts enough that you can sleep. But I can't. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I can't help you. I'm so tired of not being able to help the ponies who need it. What kind of goddess can't comfort a troubled friend?"

"Can you…can you take it from me? Please?" I didn't even know what 'it' was. My fear? My craziness? The anxiety twisting around in my brain like a frantic radroach trying to chew its way out? The parts of Blackjack I didn't like anymore?

Really…could I blame the Goddess for what she did to Lacunae?

"I'm sorry, Blackjack," Lacunae whispered again as I was held and rocked.

I tried to imagine a knotted rope. It didn't untie. Instead, it became

a noose in a cage.

I visualized an IF-88 Ironpony and tried to disassemble it. Instead, I imagined a mare in black gunning down a hospital.

I tried to clear my brain of everything in it, but it was like trying to stop sand with my hooves. I'd just treated all of Twilight's friends like toys.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I'm sorry," I murmured quietly into her chest, listening to her slow and steady heart.

* * *

It was midday when everypony finally started moving out. Glory had all the chems she needed to treat Scotch and P-21. The blue pegasus wore a disguise that was really not much more than hospital linens sewn together into a sort of pajamas and cloak to cover her, but it was better than nothing. Rampage and Psychoshy were talking about what they'd have to do to keep everypony safe… well, Rampage was talking about that. Psychoshy was talking about looking forward to smashing more ponies. Scotch and P-21 rode Lacunae, who carried them both without too much effort or complaint.

The purple alicorn did comment on the anti-machine rifle I'd picked up, though. Her magic lifted the gun effortlessly, and she smiled as she sighted through the scope. "Wonderful high caliber weapon. A bit too much for sniping, though; the accuracy falls off after a thousand yards." She worked the slide and smiled in satisfaction, loading a magazine. The size of the weapon and the fact she could handle it at all with just her horn reminded me of LittlePip. It must be nice to be able to handle heavy weapons with just your horn.

"You like it?" I asked with a small smile as I teased Boo with a carrot.

"Like…no. But I respect it and admire its craftsmanship and capabilities," she said as she pointed it up the hillside to the west, looking through the scope. Then she paused with a frown. "We're being watched."

I frowned too, extended my fingers, took out Taurus's rifle, and looked through its scope. There, at the top of the low ridge almost a mile away, I could make out a cluster of ponies watching us. Behind them, I could barely make out a banner of green and black.

Harbingers, a half dozen, at least, watching me with binoculars and scopes. Had they been watching to see when we left, or were they waiting for more members?

"Want to go smash them?" Psychoshy asked with an eager grin.

I took one look at P-21 and Scotch on the alicorn's back. "No. If they're just watching us, they'll scatter. And if we head towards Chapel, then we're looking at an ambush…or worse…another attack on Chapel itself." I couldn't do that to the Crusaders.

P-21, Scotch Tape, Glory, and Lacunae all needed to go to Chapel. I didn't. Not in the way that they did.

"We split up," I said softly.

"I'm going to have to file that under 'really bad idea', Blackjack," Rampage snorted.

"Look…they're after me, right?" I asked as I whirled on them. Having a threat helped me focus and pull my head together. "If they see me leave with you, then they're going to attack us sooner or later. But if they see me trot off east and you go south, who are they going to follow?"

"You want them to chase you?" Glory gaped and I felt myself grinning.

"Sure! I'm the one with the robolegs, remember? I'll lead them away from you till you're all recovered. They'll get tired long before I do," I said as the plan came together.

"You should still take Flutternut and me with you," Rampage said as she looked at me.

"I don't want the Harbingers getting the idea of taking hostages. I need you with them. I know they'll be safe with you, Rampage." And I was faster than the steel-clad mare.

"Well then, take Psychoshy, at least," she pressed. The yellow pegasus grinned wickedly at that suggestion. I gave Rampage a slightly sardonic look, and she sighed. "Okay, maybe not…"

"I need to be sure that you're all safe. This way, they'll be chasing me, and then later we'll meet up," I said as my thoughts oriented from the dread of sitting around to the plan of action.

"But…how will we know how to find you?" Glory asked.

"We have her PipBuck tag," Scotch Tape replied as she leaned back in P-21's embrace. Glory looked at the PipBuck she'd purloined from Psychoshy. "We can find Blackjack anywhere in the city."

Glory still frowned. "But how will we know if you're all right?"

"Duh. We'll listen for her," Scotch Tape said with a small smile.

“Remember on the *Celestia*, Blackjack? Your PipBuck is a broadcaster. So all you have to do is send a signal, and we’ll know if you’re okay or if you need the cavalry to come.” Glory chewed her lip, and I went to her and held her in my hooves.

“This…are you sure about this? All alone, with no friends?” she asked as she stroked my restored cheek.

I smiled and kissed the end of her muzzle softly. “I won’t be missing any friends, Glory. I’ll have you with me…no matter where you are... ”

She kissed, and I kissed back. Now that I had a plan, all the skittering doubts were scurrying away into the corners of my mind. “Get some sleep…please try…” she said quietly as she bumped her forehead against mine.

“I will,” I said with a small smile. But I doubted I was going to get much of a chance in the next couple of days.

Suddenly, I became aware of a hissing above me and glanced at Psychoshy hovering there. “Don’t move!” she said around the mouthgrip of a spray-paint can. I groaned and closed my eyes. Did I really want to know? Finally, she finished and tossed the can away.

“So…what did she do?” I could always replace the armor with some I’d stashed.

“She wrote ‘Security’…” Lacunae said softly, “Only she left out the ‘i’.”

“And she drew a bullseye beneath it,” added P-21 dryly.

I sighed but smiled. “Well, I’d wanted them to follow me.”

“Wait one moment,” Lacunae said as she lifted the tossed can and sprayed a few more times. “There. Better.” I blinked and looked back at the little white rearing filly she’d deftly painted on my armor’s rump. “Your good luck symbol, as I recall.”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” I said with a smile. I wondered what Scoodle would think of the ‘stable pony’ now? I turned to her and gave her a hug. “I’m sorry for what I did with your friends.”

“I’m sorry too,” she replied, stroking a wingtip along my cheek.

“For what?” I asked. For the Goddess being a tool? For not being able to help the craziest pony in Equestria? But she just smiled sadly and shook her head.

It took some time to convince Boo to go along. She looked just as uncomfortable with my plan as Glory. Finally, I’d had to tie a bridle and give the lead to the pegasus. The pale mare looked hurt and confused, no matter how I stroked her milky mane or ears.

“Please take care of yourself. Please, Blackjack. I don’t like the idea of you being alone.”

“I won’t be. I’ll know you’re safe. And we’ll be together soon. I promise.” The heat and damp pressed down, and the fat, swollen clouds overhead rumbled low and deep as if some great stratospheric beast’s stomach growled in anticipation of the impending chase.

We shared one final kiss, and then my friends started off to the south. I watched them go with a bit of trepidation. There was no guarantee they’d reach Chapel safely, but right now they were as safe as I could make them. When they were out of sight along the Sunset Highway, I looked back at the hill and saw every set of eyes locked on to me. In spite of everything, I couldn’t deny an unmistakable thrill coursing through me.

“Okay! Catch me if you can, you miserable herd of mules,” I said as I opened the panel in my leg, showing the black screen of the Delta within as I waved to them. Instantly, the six set off down the hill towards me. One fired a red flare into the air as they ran. The heavens let loose a flash of lightning, splitting the clouds, and the rain began to pour. I snapped the panel shut and tore down the road east as fast as my legs could carry me, shouting, “Ante up!”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 42: Reaper

"Twenty stalks? Bean or celery?"

The life of a caravaner must be one not that different from that of a security mare: long periods of boredom, tedious but preferred, punctuated by moments of intense excitement that you'd really rather didn't happen. They probably had experienced eyes used to picking out all sorts of threats and had seen more in their travels than I could imagine. Nevertheless, I had a hunch that the image of me tearing down the road straight at them was something of an alarming situation. They shouted and brandished guns in hasty warning before I leapt and sailed right over one of their pack brahmin.

"Whoa," muttered one head.

"Dude," agreed the other.

I landed, slid to a halt, and spotted the one who was in charge. At least, I thought he was in charge. He had the hat of a pony in charge. I darted right up to him as he backed away into the side of the brahmin. I grinned nice and friendly and friendly and nice. "Hi! Are you the pony in charge, 'cause I need to buy some gems. Yes sirree, any and all gems you have on your person. And cans of Cram! Yes sir, I crave me some Cram. Come on, you are a trader, right? I need to trade. I need to trade right now now now!"

"Get off me you mule-brained idjit!" the pony in the fancy 'I'm in charge' hat said as he shoved me away. The blue earth pony buck snorted, "What is wrong with you, racing up like that? You're lucky we didn't plug you full of holes!" I'd reached the interchange between the Manehattan Highway and the Sunset Highway, standing on the overpass. To the west, I could barely make out a lot of black dots.

That was funny! Very funny, and I laughed to show just how funny it was. "Holes? Holes! Ha ha ha!" I laughed as I turned to the side

to show where a few lucky armor piercing AM rounds had caught me since I'd started my run. He gaped at the punctures punching straight through my metal hindlegs. I hadn't realized there'd been almost twenty Seekers set to raid the hospital until I'd darted through their lines. Now I had twenty unhappy and very-well-armed ponies after me. "Oh I'm so holey, I'm the saint of the Wasteland. You bet. Now!" I bucked two suits of combat armor off the bundle on my back. "I will trade you these for every last gemstone, can of Cram, and bit of scrap metal you have there, my good sir."

He looked at me warily and took a step back. Come on, the joke wasn't that bad!

"Whoa, Boss, that is some good surplus gear," one of the ponies said as she trotted up.

"Cram. Gems. Scrap metal. Chop chop," I said, smacking one hoof against the other. Then I grinned. "Oh, and you might want to hurry. I know I do! I got a whole mob of very-well-armed ponies after me."

It didn't take long after that for me to clean him out of a dozen hunks of scrap metal, a small collection of mismatched gemstones, and eight cans of Cram. He also threw in a heap of caps that didn't begin to cover the value of those two suits, but that didn't matter. I chowed down on the metal and the cans right in front of them, and the whole caravan started talking about how it'd be smart to get moving south towards Megamart…immediately.

"If we run into a…ah…mob…anytime soon, I'll be sure to send them towards Withers. Maybe the Boneyard ghouls can eat them," the blue stallion said as he packed away the armor. Certainly a major score for him. Then he saw me frantically ingesting the can without even eating the contents first, and from the worried look on his face, I was fairly sure he wasn't going to be telling anypony about this meeting, period. Who'd believe him?

I chewed up the metal and meat stuff all at once and popped in a ruby for good measure as I turned and trotted away, leaving the stunned caravan pony to process what he'd just seen. Now that I'd led the Harbingers well away from the medical center, I could take it a little easier. They'd have to find out which way I went from the overpass, so I cantered to the east at a fair clip rather than an all-out gallop, worrying less about the ponies behind me and more about what might be in front of me.

Case in point, a painted warning on the side of a wagon that read 'Danger: Raiders' as I approached a recharging station. Yet there wasn't a single red bar to be seen. Two zebras in ragged shawls picking through a garbage can looked up nervously at me as I trotted by. I smiled at them, but they quickly trotted out of sight behind the building. Hmmm…zebras are strange. What's wrong with a friendly grin?

I knew from the maps of Hoofington I'd seen that the Sunset Highway went from the Princess Bridge in the far south all the way around the city to the Zenith Bridge in the north and then turned into the Sunrise Highway all the way around the city till it met the Princess Bridge again. All I had to do was stay on the highway and it would take me right past most of the industrial ruins of Progress and around to Paradise and Hightower. Easy, peasy, Neighponesey!

That made me laugh. It was silly and stupid, but it still made me giggle. Since I'd left the MASEBS, I'd felt a nervous energy pushing me along and lifting me up. Oddly, I felt good. Really really good. I wasn't tired. I had my face back! Honestly, this was almost as good as being back in Tenpony. "Did you see the look on their faces, Ram…" Ugh…that killed some of my buzz. I was alone, and unlike in Hippocratic, I knew they weren't someplace nearby. My friends were going to rest and recover while I was running around because…I couldn't.

I couldn't slow down and stop, or my demons would get me.

* * *

The highway was approaching the Zenith Bridge, the glorious white arch that ran from bluff to bluff over the Hoofington River looking quite breathtaking as I drew closer. The encampment that the Reapers had set up on this side was now abandoned, the craters and blasted holes a testament to the war with the Steel Rangers. I could still smell the faint tang of cordite. Slowly, I made my way along the stone span, which had clearly been molded with unicorn magic; the whole thing was virtually seamless.

At the apex of the arc, on a pillar between the lanes, was a statue of Celestia and Luna done in white and black marble. I'd missed it from below. They rose on their rear hooves facing the Core, with Celestia holding a sun and Luna lifting a moon. Their magnificence was slightly marred by bullet craters and the crude graffiti covering

the base; clearly some ponies weren't fans of the Princesses. The rain let up to a drizzle, even as the thunder continued to growl every few minutes. And then I noticed something.

"What the…" I blinked as I looked to the north, then clambered onto the pedestal that Celestia and Luna occupied for a better view. Where once there'd been a twisted forest surrounding a building, there was now a massive crescent arc where the entire cliffside had slid into the river (though some trees still did line the upper edge of the great bite in the rock). It had created a great wall of rocks and debris, and muddy water roared over it in spectacular rapids. I hoped Thrush, wherever she was, would be able to get past it. The sides of the slide were peppered with barrels, the tractor things, and specks of blue. Here and there, I thought I could see remains of the Hippocratic building itself, but, by and large, nothing was left of the reinforced structure but rubble. "Did I do that?"

I had…and beyond, I could see the bow of the *Celestia* poking from the water. The Ironmare Naval Base was a scorched ruin; the Reapers hadn't held back in administering a punishment befitting the crime. I'd been responsible for that, too. And over there, past the refineries and industrial buildings, I could see the Flash Industries building where I'd almost lost Glory. I'd done that as well. I stood and looked to the southwest towards the Arena, but where before there'd been a smooth dome, the eggshell was now cracked, one end crumbled in on itself. Still, if, as I assumed, the *Celestia*'s gun had done that, it was amazing that the building was still standing at all. I could barely make out Riverside and Fallen Arch, other places I'd been and changed forever...

"Do you get it now?" Dealer muttered, and I jumped…or rather fell…off the pedestal and landed on my head.

"Get what? That lots of shit blows up around me?" I said as I sat up, rubbing my horn. He sat on the stone railing; normally, I'd be worried, but I doubted that a hallucination-or-whatever was in much danger of falling. I pulled out a minty emerald and tossed it in my mouth, enjoying the tingle of energy. "Figured that out a long, long time ago," I murmured.

"No. That you're responsible for all this," he replied over the gusty wind and hiss of rain on the bridge.

I folded my forehooves on the rail next to him, looking out at the Core. I could see the floating platform of Flotsam down there. "It's your job to officially rain on my parade, isn't it? I feel remotely

good for two seconds, and then bam…here you are with something cryptic to say just to make me feel bad." From the pattering from the skies, he was getting some help with that. I sighed and looked down at the foamy brown water below. "I know it's my fault."

"I didn't say that it was your fault. I said that you're responsible for it," he said as he looked out at the rain pouring down into the black city. I was high enough that I could see over the wall to the empty geometric streets and the broken-off towers leaning but not quite falling. "Fault implies blame. I know that in the case of many of these things you had no choice, but you're still responsible for them happening."

"Really? So you're not pointing out my screwups?" I asked. He snorted softly and shook his head.

"Responsibility isn't 'not screwing up'. It's answering for the consequences of the actions you commit. Accepting the punishment for them." He flipped through the cards and drew one showing LittlePip gunning down three pinned ponies. "Is she responsible?"

"LittlePip? Of course she is! She's…I mean…" I frowned. "She's a good pony!"

"No doubt you feel that way, but is she responsible? Ultimately, who does she answer to? Who punishes her for her misdeeds?" He snorted and tossed the card into the void. "How about her?" he asked, showing me Homage. "Who does she answer to when her comments inspire some stable mare to throw herself into a meat grinder?" The gray unicorn's card went tumbling away. "How about P-21?" he asked as he showed me a card of my friend. "Who does he answer to?"

"Me," I replied firmly. "P-21 answered to me when his problem became too much for him to deal with. Homage must answer to somepony in Tenpony or the Twilight Society. And if Homage is right and LittlePip has gone completely nuts, somepony will put her down or stop her. Her friends…I'll do it myself if I have to…and I'm still around." That was easy to say, though. Just words…

"Really. How generous of you. And here I thought you weren't an executioner," he said, showing the image of the Harbinger in the gravel pit with half her face blown off. Then it went swirling down as well. "And what about you, Blackjack?" he asked as he drew a card and showed me myself. "Who do you answer to?"

"You?" I guessed.

He snorted. "I'm nopony. You don't answer to me." He sighed and

tapped the deck against the rail. “The Ministry Mares didn’t understand either. Some ponies once told me that, years and years before the war, Pinkie had to babysit two young foals. She said that she was ready to handle the responsibility…but she didn’t understand that it was more than making sure that the kids were fed and their diapers were changed. She ended up working things out, but had she failed, she’d have had to answer to the parents.” He turned and looked up at the statue of Luna. “Tell me, Blackjack, who did the Ministry Mares answer to?”

“Luna, of course,” I said, but I frowned. Something about that felt…lacking.

“Really? You’ve dug through the O.I.A.’s dirty laundry. You know what was going on, and trust me, there was even more happening that wasn’t secret. So where was Luna saying ‘Sorry, time out, not doing that’? When did the Princess put on the brakes? Alicorns. Megaspells. Cyberponies. Not one call from Luna trying to rein them in before the bombs dropped. That means that either she was the most sheltered and incompetent ruler in history, or that everything that the Ministries and O.I.A. did was with her official approval.”

Except for Gardens of Equestria and Project Horizons. Two things that Luna hadn’t approved. Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood pulling something that Luna hadn’t okayed. I thought back to Fairheart’s files. “Luna must have had a good reason. She was the ruler of Equestria!”

“Really. Well then, Blackjack, who did Luna have to answer to?” he asked as he looked at me, and I just stared at him. “In the end, we all have to be held responsible,” he continued, looked up at the statue.

“Hate to break this to you,” I said, “but Luna and Celestia are dead. Goldenblood might be dead. The Ministry Mares are all gone. Everypony you want to hold responsible was punished two centuries ago. They’re dead and gone. Everything is.” But he looked at me for a long moment, then simply turned and looked out at the valley and the black towers of the Core.

“Not everything, Blackjack. The corpse remains. And if it remains, it can be held responsible,” he said.

“You want to hold Luna’s corpse responsible?” I asked with a shaky, uncertain smile. “Sure. Go ahead. Blame a pile of bones, if you want.”

"Not just Luna or Celestia," he said in a low, dangerous voice.

"Then who?" I blinked, but he just stared out into the rain with hard, hard eyes as his hooves shuffled the cards before him.

At that very moment, I became preoccupied by the bite of a bullet into the armor plate of my rump. I looked right towards the … ohhh, wasn't that a whole lot of red? Wow, they must have run their hooves off to catch up with me! From the few I could see through the rain and the wan light, these were not happy ponies. I grinned. "Sorry to run, but some ponies who are trying to kill me have just arrived!"

Oh. Red bars on the east side of the bridge, too. Even being crazy and stupid, I wasn't about to try something like jumping. So there was only one thing to do: out came Duty and Sacrifice, and down the east slope raced me. A half dozen or so Harbingers were in the empty Steel Ranger encampment and were just starting to move out onto the highway. "Coming through!" I cried out in glee over the rain, not caring whether they could hear me or not.

Unfortunately, they had other ideas and started bringing their guns out. I spotted an earth pony stallion swinging an anti-machine rifle on his battle saddle towards me as they yelled and tried to get pointed in my direction. I dove onto my side, sliding on the water-covered asphalt with my metal legs folded in front of me, and crashed into him with a snapping of bone. As he screamed, I twisted and rolled on my back and threw my forelegs wide to brace myself. My rear legs pistoned into his gut as he started to collapse, turning his cries into a cut off squeak. I shoved him to the side to curl up fetally as I rolled to my hooves.

The others opened up, shooting wildly. They might have the guns, but the five millimeter rounds had to pass through my armor and my synthetic parts to hit something vital. I wasn't about to make that easy for them, and I slammed into the nearest, who sprayed wildly as she turned towards me, and hooked my hooves on the chattering carbine attached to her battle saddle. Heaving, I pivoted her around till she was pointed in the direction I needed. She had her teeth locked on the bit as she glared at me over her shoulder and sprayed down her fellow Harbingers with her gunfire; I don't think she realized that she should stop shooting when her guns were pointed at her allies... friends... heck, did Harbingers even *like* each other? They might have had nice armor, but they had far less-resilient vitals beneath it. After a few hits, most went down wailing

and crying and curling up like the kicked stallion.

"Give up the key to the Core!" she screeched, "Or I'll pluck it from your fucking corpse."

"Damn, and here I was hoping I could convince you to leave me be though my goody good goodness," I said as I shoved her away. Don't turn. Don't…but she was turning. It'd take her two seconds to wheel around. Two seconds to begin to shoot me if I just stood there. "Fuck," I muttered and jumped into S.A.T.S. Two shots… triggered…and Duty and Sacrifice blasted right through the chest plate of her armor. She flopped down into the rain, rapidly cooling meat.

"I don't want to kill you idiots!" I yelled at the still-alive ponies lying and groaning on the bridge as the thunder growled overhead. "Leave me alone and stay out of my way!" I doubted that they'd listen... but maybe one would. Maybe that would be a pony I wouldn't leave dead on the bloody road. As the rest of the small army swarmed over the crest of the bridge, I turned, holstered my guns, and tore off down the road as fast as my hooves could carry me.

* * *

I made it about three miles before I had to stop and take cover, choosing some kind of large, two- or three-story industrial building that had all the aesthetics of a cinder block; a row of busted-out windows near the roof ran the length of the north wall and elevated pipes of all sorts spread out from it to adjacent buildings, but beyond that it was bare, water-streaked concrete. Breaking in was as easy as walking through the broken doors of the tiny, gutted office space. Inside, it was all rusting pipes and corroded vats. Lots of hunks of derelict machinery and potential little hideyholes everywhere I looked. Still, no red bars that I could see yet. This looked as good a place as any to seek shelter.

Regeneration and synthetics might mean that I didn't have to rest for hours on end, but I did need a breather to let my holes close up. I sat in the rusty vault and chowed down on scrap metal and Cram. Rain poured through from the countless pipes and the holes in the roof, but there was more than just water swirling around; drums of chemicals were piled where they had fallen, their contents leaking out and mixing with the rain on the floor. An acrid rotten-egg smell

tainted the air.

I heard the sounds of shuffling and movement on the far side of the building. Red bars, but only four. If they were Harbingers, then maybe I could get some info from them. Find this 'Prophet' and learn just what they served and how could I thrash it. I thought of what Sanguine had told me, some defense computer going crazy in the Core. That didn't quite fit, though. I couldn't see a computer, no matter how advanced, inspiring a cult to hunt me down. Everything pointed to a pony behind this. I had my bottlecaps on Goldenblood.

Time for an interrogation. Blackjack has ways of making you talk… Of course, mostly they involved me crying and begging, but still… ways. I moved deeper inside, towards the unsuspecting red bars.

The sound of splashing water covered my approach nicely, and, since I wasn't in much of a hurry at the moment, I munched on a can of Cram as I slowly worked my way around the rust-streaked pipes. As I got closer, I began to make out voices over the hiss and the gurgle of the rain. "Fuckin' Reapers are finished, boyo. They're down to, what, fifteen fighters tops? Ain't seen none o' the top ten save Brutus in days. Rampage, Psycho, Deus, Gorgie…they're all gone."

Not Harbingers but gangers. I moved a little closer as a mare muttered, "Yeah, but Brutus counts for five ponies and Big Daddy ten. You can't turn your back on 'em till they're in the ground."

"Big Daddy ain't all that," drawled a mare.

"Besides, Big Daddy says Security's now one of the top ten, Candle. You want to fuck with that mare?" the first mare asked. "She's one pony cyclone. Crazier than Fluttershy. She trashed our headquarters and stomped Diamond Flash good. Dropped a fucking floor on her." That wasn't quite how I remembered it. Still…

The first buck snickered, "Oh, I'll believe that when I see it for my own eyes, girl. Security turned him down flat the first time, and I hear that she had her own beef with the Reapers. The Halfhearts are ready to walk, and I think the Burners should too. Highlanders got the right idea. We should take care of our own. Fuck Big Daddy."

I sat down, the cold water splashing around my hooves. I didn't like the idea of ponies that glorified killing and fighting, but the Hoof with Big Daddy was better than the Hoof without him. "I'm pretty sure you're not his type," I said as I stepped around the corner. If this went wrong, I'd be in for trouble. Actually, that sort

of described my whole day... and quite possibly my entire life. Despite everything, I found myself laughing.

The four turned at once, and for a moment I was certain that I was about to get my flanks toasted off by the battle-saddle-mounted flamer the ghoul pony in red barding reading 'Hoofington Fire Dept.' was sporting. The lavender Flash Filly unicorn levitated a beam rifle at me as she backed away warily. The third was a green earth pony buck with a yellow mane and using a sniper rifle that had a weird gold charm of a stylized broken heart hanging from the butt by a chain. He immediately braced the gun on a rusty pipe and sighted me with it, then frowned and hesitated. It saved him from S.A.T.S. Only the blue mare in dirty coveralls didn't jump to her hooves, staying sprawled on her side on an upraised block of filthy concrete.

"Somepony's about to be dust!" the purple unicorn said with a grin. Then she took a second look at me, and the look on her face slowly faded as I gave them a grin of my own, the grin of a pony on the cusp of a bloody killing spree. Right now, that look was easy for me. "What the fuck are you smiling at?"

The ghoul with the flamer leaned over and stared at the filly that Lacunae had painted on my flank. "She's got a Crusader's mark… and that tiny horn…oh shit…" I stared right at the ghoul, and a target appeared right between his eyes. He blinked. Funny, his eyes weren't cloudy. I'd never seen a ghoul with eyes like that. "It's Security. Oh, we are so boned!"

"Tiny horn?" I said in acidic tones as I looked at him, then around at the others. The three stared at me nervously. "Since you know me, why don't you introduce yourselves?"

"Erm…I'm Candlewick, with the Burner Boys," the pony with the flamer said as he nodded to the weapon on his side. "These are Dazzle and Busted Heart."

"Flash Fillies and Halfhearts?" I guessed.

Busted Heart nodded and said in a low, somber voice, "May your tears always fall clear." Ohhhkay. I really didn't know what their deal was. I mean, 'Burner Boys' was pretty self-explanatory. Flash Fillies made sense when you saw the beam weapons. But 'Halfhearts'?

The lavender unicorn with some sort of glitter in her pink mane looked at the remaining pony. "And she's Bluebelle…" Something about the looks the three shared made me wonder.

The reclining sky-blue earth pony slowly rocked up, then grinned as she trotted towards me with lazy strides. The three watched her approach and backed away with smirks of anticipation.

"Ya know, my momma's tits are bigger than that there bump on yer noggin," she drawled as her darker eyes looked at me in scorn. The other three were looking from her to me, clearly unsure of which of us to back. I thought of trying to appeal to the other three, finding some way to convince her to back down without killing her. I didn't see much promise in that, though. Worse, if they were seeing me as a Reaper and I failed to impress…well…I doubted I'd enjoy 'immunity' from the gangs.

I had one group trying to kill me. I really didn't four others against me, too.

"You're a Highlander, right?" I asked. The stallion with the rifle in his hooves whistled a strange little twangy tune with a smirk. The mare just gave him a look, and his little tune became more wandering as he looked away quickly.

"Ayup," she replied. She was one hell of an earth pony. Dirty, but not gaunt or filthy. I doubted her mane had ever been acquainted with soap before. Her cutie mark was a cute cluster of three tiny blue flowers; I hadn't seen any like them before. Her eyes looked over my gear and barding, lingering on the weapons strapped across my back. Then she spat right in my face. "Pussy," she said as her eyes narrowed.

Okay. This wasn't going to go well. I wiped the spit off my cheek. "Hi, Bluebelle. I just want you to know…I have no wish to fight you," I said, and with those words lost every last bit of respect possible. She rolled her eyes, snorted, and started to turn away.

And then I smashed my metal foreleg upside her head. I'd envisioned a simple physical chastisement followed by hauling her in line and the other three with her. That involved my sucker punch knocking the fight out of her. I didn't knock the fight out of her. In fact, I did so little knocking that I might as well have patted her dirty mane.

She looked me right in the eyes and smiled. Oh nelly, time for a ride!

The mare wrapped her forelegs around my neck and powered forward with a shriek of glee shouting, "Let's wrassle!" She might as well have been playing "Let's snap Blackjack in half" as she forced me back, trying to overbear me. Damn, she was strong. Rampage

strong! And so I wrapped my forelegs around her neck and up we went on our hind legs and she crushed and twisted against me.

I felt my joints grind and whirr as they struggled to keep me upright. The foul water splashed and surged around my hooves. Our bodies slammed into a thick rusty pipe and it boomed like a gong. The fact was that she was stronger than me, even with my mechanical limbs. It was like wrestling Daisy back in security training; the mare would just use her size and strength to crush me to the mat, then bash my skull in. There was one other disadvantage, too: Bluebelle was a biter! She snapped at my neck, trying to grab my ear as we danced about on our hind legs.

She might be stronger, but I had one trick she didn't. I popped out my fingers and grabbed her mane as tight as I could. She squealed, but jerked around even more as she struggled to knock me off my hooves. I just had to wait for…there! She lunged to one side, and instead of fighting her power I pivoted along with her and twisted my hooves around her neck. It didn't take much, and she overbalanced and flipped onto her back, thrashing in the filthy water. I completed the turn to the side and came down on top of her, straddling her belly as her legs kicked wildly into the air.

I got my forelegs inside hers as I sat atop her and clamped down my fingers on her skull, forcing it beneath the water. She fought wildly, but I kept my head low and made sure she couldn't clip it with her forehooves as she bucked underneath me. She found one finger and bit hard on it, but she didn't have metal softening talismans built into her mouth like I did.

For a second there I was almost sure I'd won, and then her body gave a tremendous heave beneath me and knocked me off balance. In moments she'd kicked herself to her hooves, and I did the same. She spat and coughed as she wiped her wet mane out of her eyes. I'd hoped maybe this would have been enough. I was damned mistaken.

"I'm gonna scrap you!" she shouted as she charged towards me again. Oddly, I was laughing as she charged. It was so nice not to have somepony after me for my damned PipBuck. Just a mare out to kick my ass because it was there for the kicking!

As she closed in, I jumped right into S.A.T.S. and plotted four blows. The second her face was in range, I pounded it with all my strength. An instant later, I struck again. And again. Again. And while one sucker punch hadn't made much of an impression, four

perfect shots to her face brought Bluebelle up short. I didn't waste the opportunity, standing like a zebra and continued to power blows to her face. Now she finally raised her hooves, warding me off, and gave ground.

Or was she? As I reared again, she suddenly lunged and hugged my upright torso in her forehooves. And now I was being lifted completely off my hooves as she hefted me up and arched backwards. I yelled in alarm as she smashed me into the ground; at least the damage wasn't too severe: I landed right on my head.

For several seconds I lay there as my E.F.S. let me know that I was a complete idiot. She lay there as well, gasping for air. Then I couldn't help it…I started to laugh again. Brain damage or fatigue, it didn't seem to matter. And seconds later, she joined me. The other three gangers looked nervously at each other as we lay in the dirty water, unsure if they should join in or not.

"I don't wanna fight you…good one, Security," she said as she sat up. "Ya got me with that one." My head was tumbling like a punted top.

"I mean it. I don't *want* to fight you, but that doesn't mean I *can't*." Oooh, but from the ringing in my ears and the way things kept moving when I looked at them, I'd definitely prefer to not fight her again soon. That body slam had really rung my bell! Cool sloshy water felt good on throbbing headachy head.

She harrumphed. "I guess I can respect that." She sat up. Me, I was going to lie here a bit and collect my thoughts and wait for the world to stop jiggling. "So yer saying you're a Reaper? That it ain't just a lot o' hot air from Big Daddy?"

"I might not like fighting ponies, but I'd rather ponies worked together to help each other. Having the Reapers is better than everypony out for themselves," I said honestly as l risked sitting up, and then lay back down again. Yup, this sloshy nasty water was just dandy to lie in.

"Same old story we've been hearin' fer ever," Bluebelle snorted. "But 'work with us' means 'do what we want ya to do'. All we want is to be left to ourselves and our own."

I slowly sat up, my head aching terribly. "I know the feeling." Bluebelle scowled at me, but I raised a hoof. "No. Really. I do. Stable 99 did a lot of bad things, but even after all I've been through, there's a little part of me that wishes we'd just been left on our own. Solved our own problems and not had Deus come in and

start the whole mess. But that's the problem, isn't it? Even if you want to be left alone, you can't guarantee that everypony else is going to respect that." I might not have *liked* that little part of me, but I couldn't deny that it was there.

The blue mare looked surprised. Clearly, she hadn't been expecting me to agree with her. "Yup. So when a feller like Big Daddy comes along saying we gotta follow his rules, t'aint exactly a new tune. He might be the first, last, and only buck ta go hoof to hoof with Momma, but that still don't mean we like following anypony."

"I can understand that," I said as I closed my eyes. "Well, I don't know what else I can say. These Harbinger ponies, though…if they get their hooves on the Core and 'save' the Wasteland, do you think they'll leave you alone?"

"Why wouldn't they? We don't want nothing to do with the Core," she said with a snort. "They got one of them there priests out saying that, so long as we give them yer head, they'll leave us be."

Ah. Great. More ponies after my head! "And do you really believe that? Do you think that if they actually do get into the Core, they'll just ignore you forever?"

She just frowned, then snorted with a shake of her head, "It don't matter what I think. Matters what Momma thinks." She looked at me speculatively, then shook the water off her coat. Rubbing her nose, she finally said, "Tell you wut. You think these Harbingers ain't no good, tell her yerself."

"Me?" I blinked. "How?"

Bluebelle gave a casual shrug. "Momma don't come down into the valley often, but with the war and all, she's hangin' round Bullfrog Springs. You trot northeast of here and you'll find it by the river. Bein' a Reaper, they probably let you in. Jus' tell 'em yer there ta share a drink with Momma."

I looked past them at the other three. "What about the Burner Boys, Halfhearts, and Flashers?"

The ghoul pulled out a cigar, bit off the tip, flipped it into the air, and caught it in his teeth, swiveling the cigar to the edge of his mouth. A jerk of his head sent a ball of fire rolling up over our heads and nearly got him shot for the show. He took a puff and, then said casually, "If Big Daddy still has fighters like you…well, I guess it can't hurt to stick with the gnarly old bastard." The Halfheart stallion nodded his agreement.

"Thanks," I said as I finally pulled myself to my hooves, water

pouring out of my combat armor. I gave a careful shake; oh, ow. Bad movement with a skull fracture. “Oh, I feel like Deus skullfucked me with his guns.”

Candlewick chuckled and put his hoof on my rump. “Heh, somepony should’a told him your other end is more fun.” A shock ran up my spine from the simple contact, my nerves thrumming like a charged wire.

For one moment, I had limbs of flesh and blood. I had a heart that thundered in my ears. Lungs that gasped for breath as my throat was choked. My nethers strained and burned and ached from the force of what had occurred just a week ago. It took every ounce of restraint left in me not to kill Candlewick right there. “Don’t... ,” I said in a voice so strained it thrummed. Even when he did remove his hoof, I was still there on the *Seahorse*. Still hurting. A little souvenir I’d carry forever.

“Aw, come on, Security. Let me light your fire! You got a swee--” And then he patted my butt again. That was as far as he got before I whirled and leaped upon him, powering him back into the wall. My fingers came out as I hissed in rage, one hand forcing his flamer up and the other crushing his throat. The flamethrower sprayed a plume of fire thirty feet up the side of the wall, the orange licking around the pipes overhead and making the metal hiss with steam. His red eyes bulged as he struggled for breath.

Kill him or he’s going to do it again. Kill him or he’ll hurt you. Crush him and you can crush the pain. My brain hummed like a high-tension wire as I stared into his scarred and mottled face. I ignored Fluttershy and her plea. I could be kind when I thought I was going to die. Right now, my kindness was tapped out.

But I had plenty of rage. I was going to rip his head clean off! The green stallion and the unicorn mare were trying to pull my metallic hands off his throat. I looked at Dazzle, jumped into S.A.T.S., and targeted three magic bullets. Then I felt a sensation like an icepick through my skull as the spell fizzled badly. I felt the sickening crunch all over again. “I won’t let you fuck me again... I won’t... ” I hissed at her, even though it made no sense. Her eyes widened in shock.

Then the mare said softly into my ear, “He’s not one of the ones that ploughed you.”

I looked over my shoulder at Dazzle as she struggled to pull my robofingers away and saw the shared look of pain in her eyes. I was

about to kill a pony who, while he might be bad, certainly hadn't done what had hurt me so much. A part of me didn't care. A part of me wanted him dead. He'd touched me back there. He'd made me remember it! Made me feel it again! I should rip off his undead head and…

…wait. Ghouls didn't choke, right?

I released his throat, and he coughed and struggled for breath. The flamer cut off and I released it as well, the wall and ceiling above us still burning from the sticky flamer fuel. My fingers were blackened, the tips glowing cherry red. I hadn't even noticed…for once, I didn't feel anything at all. As I backed away, he collapsed in a heap and just concentrated on breathing. He wasn't a ghoul…just a pony who'd somehow been burned badly enough to look like one. I dropped back onto all fours, my hoof hissing as it was quenched in the water.

I turned and looked at Dazzle. I felt ashamed and dirty. Like I really had killed him rather than simply attacked him. Worse, a part of me still growled to finish him off. It wasn't like the Dealer; this was inside me. Something I couldn't escape.

Something that was getting stronger and harder to control.

"You okay, Candlewick?" I asked as he sprawled there.

"Oh, fine," he rasped. "Just…breathing. That's quite a fine thing. I get it now…no touchie."

"Yeah. No touchie," Dazzle agreed.

Busted Heart wasn't watching, though. He looked out at the dark maze of dripping pipes and rusting vats and barrels and said firmly, "You hear that?"

I looked around. I didn't hear it, but I could definitely see it: red bars. I supposed a flamer going off and lighting up the inside of a building would attract some attention.

"Crap. Seekers." I couldn't make an accurate count as the bars kept moving but I assumed it was 'a lot'. "Does this place have a back door? They're only after me. If I run, they shouldn't--"

"Run?" Bluebelle looked at me like I'd said a dirty word. "Yer jokin', right? And here I was just startin' ta get bored."

I looked at the four of them, then at the red bars. The many, many red bars. "You're sure?"

Candlewick clicked something on the flamer several times. Then there was a soft 'pwuuuu' as a tiny blue flame reignited over the muzzle. He picked up his soggy cigar and sighed before he tossed it

over his shoulder. “Well, my cigar’s toast, so I need to smoke something.” Then he grinned. “Besides, these assholes are trotting all over our turf like they own it!”

The lavender mare nodded her agreement. “We’ll show these Harbingers that they got to show the gangs proper respect.”

Busted Heart simply shrugged. “Alive or dead, no difference to me.”

“Well it is to me,” I replied. “Don’t kill them if they run.” Once again, I got that ‘Blackjack is saying crazy things’ look. “I mean it. If they run, let them.” Please, please run.

There was the bang of a door opening. “She’s got to be in here somewhere. Find her!” snapped a stallion.

I nodded towards the catwalks above, and Dazzle and Busted Heart immediately made their way to the stairs up. Being that this was a factory of some kind, there were, of course, catwalks. Having those two up there would be some decent precision support. That left me, Candlewick, and Bluebelle down below. There were all sorts of entrances to the building; we couldn’t bottleneck them into any one. I didn’t even know the layout of the place.

This was going to be up close and messy. I drew the sword, taking a moment to marvel at its edge. Even after all this time, it still wasn’t weakened or damaged in the slightest. Then I drew Vigilance and loaded it with armor piercing rounds. Up above, I spotted Busted Heart taking a position behind some drums.

And then I spotted our enemy. They weren’t fighters; they looked like Flank refugees given guns and shoved through the door. Some fucker had given them all brand new nine millimeter pistols and not the slightest bit of armor.

I looked at Candlewick between the pipes. “Hold your fire,” I shouted over the drizzle, then stepped out. I had no idea which red bars were real threats and which were these wretched and weak things. I jumped up onto a pipe where they could see me and looked down at them all as I brandished my sword and pistol. “I don’t want to fight you,” I said calmly.

“We…we have to kill you. We have to…or we won’t get into the city,” a unicorn said, then peeked over her shoulder. “And…I don’t think they’ll let us out of here alive if you are.”

“Sucks to be you,” Candlewick said with a grin from behind me.

“Throw down your weapons and find a way out of the other side of the building.” I tried to do all I could to will them to give up. The

dirty brown unicorn mare met my gaze and tossed her gun away. A few seconds later, the rest did as well. Instantly, a whole knot of bars went from red to blue. And funny, why were there a whole lot of red bars behind a section of solid wall? As the fodder ran back behind us, I pointed at the wall and ducked behind some pipes.

The explosion blew out a ten foot hole in the wall, and before the dust settled, a half dozen ponies in combat armor stormed through. Unlike before, these ponies seemed to know what they were doing as they rushed in intent on blowing my head off.

Then a column of burning flamer fuel gave them something else to worry about. I'd never really heard a pony scream quite like that as they scattered and some tried to put themselves out in the water covering the floor. The chemicals floating on top ignited in eerie pools of blue and green flame. I didn't hesitate to fire now; a bullet was a greater mercy than burning to death. Busted Heart seemed to be of the same sentiment. One managed to get clear only for Bluebelle to applebuck her back into the blazing flame.

If they wanted my head, they'd need to work for it.

From multiple entrances came shots as they penetrated the interior of the building in pairs and trios. Now they were moving from cover to cover, firing bursts with their assault carbines. Clearly these ponies had a lot more experience fighting, and we backed off into the pipes and vats, the tangled web of machinery and metal forcing them to break up. I charged around a corner and slashed the face of a stallion with the blade while placing three S.A.T.S.-guided armor piercing rounds through another mare's helmet. Then the blade arched and stabbed deep into his chest, and I thought I could almost feel it hum as he died and slid off the tip.

The sticky flamer fuel didn't care about obstructions. Candlewick kept them from meeting up and working together as he sent fire licking around the pipes. Even with all the water sloshing around our hooves, he set lakes of burning flames licking around the legs of our opponents.

A round bit into my back, slamming me face down in the muck, and I heard a mare shout out "Bullseye!" Fortunately, there was a ceramic plate there that absorbed most of the force, shattering in the process, and she hadn't thought to load armor piercing rounds. Still, the impact sent an electric tingle throughout my body and smacked me into the pipes in front of me. Last time I'd gotten shot there, it hadn't worked out nearly so well. I looked back over my

shoulder at the earth pony mare with the AM rifle on her saddle, who blinked, realized that I wasn't quite dead, and prepared to rectify that. Then a crimson beam touched her head and a fiery red reaction converted her into a heap of soggy ashes.

"Dusted!" whooped the lavender mare, getting several blasts of gunfire sprayed wildly up at her for her trouble. She scrambled away along the catwalks as fast as she could. I took several precious seconds to give my body a chance to regenerate and recover a bit from that shock to my spine. Whooo, that had been too close!

While their attention was on her, I popped around the corner, carefully sighted, and sent two rounds into the throat of a stallion trying to strafe Dazzle. And as we fought, I began to feel it. We were five very different ponies. I really didn't think we even liked each other that well, and we all had dramatically different styles of combat. But despite all that, we were truly working together. Our enemy was vastly better armed than us and had the numbers, but their imposed uniformity wasn't enough.

We had harmony... and they didn't.

They fell back through the building's entrances, and I made my way to Candlewick. The reek of flamer fuel rose up from him as he pulled a tank from his saddlebag. "Reload me," he said as he jerked his bit and sent the old tank off into the water.

I slapped the new one home in the flamer, and there was a hiss and gurgle. "How are you doing?"

"Making barbeque," he replied with a grin as he adjusted a knob on the weapon. "These little ponies might have lots of bang bangs, but they can't beat a solid fwoosh." His scarred hide stretched as he grinned.

"How'd it happen?" I asked as I gestured at him. He looked around a moment, then at me in slight confusion.

"You want to ask this now?" He seemed a little incredulous. Hey, we weren't getting shot at just this second, and I hated waiting. He shrugged. "Not all that much to it. Lived in a little settlement out near a place called Appleloosa. Got hit by raiders. We holed up in the farmhouse. They burned us out. Pa tried to charge 'em and Ma shoved me out the back window. Then she and the rest of my brothers got cooked." He shook his head sadly before looking at the nearest door.

"So how'd you hook up with the Burner Boys?" I asked as I watched the red bars outside. I imagined them talking about how

they would go after me next. Most of the blue bars had disappeared; I really hoped that they'd managed to get clear.

"Natural fit," he said as he spurted a few little arcs of burning flamer fuel. "I look like a half-cooked ghoul. Every Burner Boy does…even the girls." He caught my shocked look and grinned again. "What? We ain't the Halfhearts. We accept any pony that's maimed, burned, or just butt-ass ugly and looking to give back some hurt. That's what burns inside us. Doesn't hurt we got whole tankers of flamer fuel in the refineries around here. So that's our thing."

"Yeah…still amazes me, though, that you use a flamer after what happened to you. I guess you must love fire a little to use it like that," I said as I looked at the burning puddles bobbing on the water.

He scowled at me. "Love it? I fucking hate fire. Scares the piss out of me," he said as he adjusted the knob. "But if I can face it with this, what the fuck is left in the Wasteland that could possibly bother me?" I really couldn't answer that. Besides, the red bars were moving again, only what were they doing? Zigzagging back and forth and going…higher…

"They're going to come in from up above." I scrambled for the stairs to the catwalks. Bad as those AM rifles were down here, I didn't want to imagine them firing down and pinning us. I made my way up the catwalk and saw Busted Heart and Dazzle looking down. "The roof!" I yelled, pointing at a half dozen red bars. Instantly the pair turned their sniper and beam rifles to where I indicated.

A second later, there was another cluster of explosions that filled the air with smoke and dust as four holes in the roof were breached. Then the red bars dropped down. Vigilance and the sword went away, and I pulled out Duty and Sacrifice. There wasn't nearly enough cover for my liking as snipers with AM rifles opened fire; at the moment they were firing blind, but the smoke was clearing fast from the rain pouring in. If these ponies ever got their hooves on some PipBucks, then I'd really be scared.

The sniper rifle 'pfft'ed repeatedly, barely audible over the crack of the beam rifle. I fired in unison at the red bars and was rewarded by the sight of a pony in combat armor tumbling down into the pipes below. More were coming in from down there; I could only hope that Candlewick and Bluebelle were up to taking them out.

When the smoke cleared enough, I saw the unicorns turning their rifles towards us and unloading with heavy fire. I ducked behind a barrel, a bullet punching clean through and peppering me with fragments as the waterlogged container sent up fountains of liquid. Then I leaned out to the side, slipped into S.A.T.S., and put four bullets into the chest of one of the rifle ponies.

To my amazement, Busted Heart hadn't tried to duck behind cover. He was biting the mouthgrip of the rifle casually, resting it on his foreleg as he leaned against the barrel. The fifty caliber bullets buzzed past us, but he simply sighted down his scope and with a soft 'pfft' dropped one of the unicorns. "Are you crazy?" I shouted at him.

"They're using anti-machine rifles. They're designed to shoot at dragons and war robots, not ponies. They're not even using their scopes," he said in obvious contempt. "They have no discipline. Just big guns."

"What if one of them gets…I don't know…lucky?" I asked as another round blasted the top off the drum I hid behind and drenched me.

He didn't move in the slightest as he sighted again and calmly fired another shot. "Then they kill me, and I've lost nothing. If I kill them, they lose everything."

I popped up and, using S.A.T.S., put four more of the massive bullets into one of the unicorns. "Except that if they kill you, you're dead!"

He didn't blink or look away. "In the fullness of time, we are all dead." A bullet glanced off my helmet, sending me staggering sideways for a moment; okay, Blackjack! Maybe this really wasn't a good time to find out about the Halfhearts!

I stared at Dazzle, but the unicorn simply shrugged. Apparently, this wasn't all that unusual, however incomprehensible it might be. The three of us focused our fire on the remaining unicorns with their heavy rifles. Smaller caliber bullets sparked and chewed around my hooves, fired from below, but a brutal minute later, the fighting was done. We'd killed the ones that had dropped down, and the ones below had pulled back again. Damn, how many were there? According to my E.F.S., the answer was 'lots'. The Harbingers had no lack of recruits. They could just keep throwing ponies at me till one of them got lucky.

I pressed my head against the cool metal rail, letting a stream of

water patter down on my it. It felt nice. My head was aching and I felt…wrong. Not pain so much as something else. I felt a hoof on my shoulder, and I looked up at Glory…no. Not Glory. I blinked my eyes and looked at the lavender unicorn. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.” It was a lie, and she knew it, but she nodded and wiped her wet pink mane out of her eyes. I frowned up at her. “How’d you know…I mean…what happened to me?”

“Been there. Done that,” she replied as she ejected the spent battery and tossed it away. “Most Flashers have…or something like that.”

“Really?” I asked as I shook the spent brass from Duty and Sacrifice.

“Oh sure. Ploughed hard or beaten, or both. It happens. If they don’t want it to happen again, they join the Flashers,” she said as she slipped a fresh power source into the beam rifle and closed the breech. “My own father ploughed me, then sold me.” She gave a little mirthless smile. “I was originally from Fallen Arch.”

“You…oh…” I remembered the look on the mare’s face before she’d blown into pieces before my eyes.

“Yeah. I heard you finally took it out. A lot of Flashers were glad you did. We’d been planning a stomp sometime after the war settled down, but you beat us to it,” she said, giving a little half smile. “And before you start apologizing, don’t; I wish that my mom and sister had gotten out of there…but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that finally…finally…somepony stopped it. I might wish we got the chance ourselves, but it’s better this way. And I know my mom and little sister are happier for it.”

“But…what about the whole ‘you keeping male slaves for breeding’? How is that any different?” I asked with a little frown, and she snorted.

“Why do people keep spreading those stupid sex slave stories? Honestly!” Dazzle huffed. “We don’t. We keep a few males around that we know won’t hurt us. A few others we take for a fling and let them go. A few years back we had a stomp with the Long Saddles. Absorbed most of their mares, and, as a joke, enslaved their stallions for a few weeks.”

“And then gelded some of them afterwards.” Busted Heart kept his eyes on the holes in the roof, but Dazzle flushed. “Sold the rest to the Society.”

“Yeah, well, some of them deserved it. Anyway, we got rid of most

of the males. Lot of them joined the Burners, and there's been bad blood ever since." Dazzle looked at the Halfheart. "Anyway, I wouldn't say Flashers would never ride a buck, but we don't plough 'em like they did us. We're the best chance for a mare on her own." True, Turnip hadn't exactly been a bloody and bruised mess when we'd saved him... but the rest of what I'd seen and heard at Flash Industries made me think that Dazzle's description might be a bit more rosy than the truth.

I thought of Roses and Thorn. Would she have eventually sought solace with the Flashers? I liked to imagine her turning over a new life in Chapel, but could she have made it a home? Or would she have reverted to slaving soon as I left her behind? Or become a slave herself again? As horrible as what happened to the mare and her child had been, I couldn't imagine a whole lot of other options for her.

I saw Dazzle looking at me curiously. "I got ploughed when I was in a bad way. After blowing up the *Celestia*…I was trying to protect a filly from my stable from getting hurt too. So I kept them on me. And they were more than happy to. My friends got back before they were able to kill me off, but…it was bad. Really bad."

"Damn," she murmured, shaking her head. "Well, I never would have thought Security went through things like that. Guess it can happen to any mare at the wrong time and place." 'It can happen to *anypony*,' I wanted to say. Then she snorted. "I still can't believe you dropped a building on Diamond Flash, though."

"I didn't. Something took over and used the beams in her room and…well…sliced the floor to pieces. I just happened to be there," I said with a sheepish little smile. "Actually, she got vaporized before the floor even fell."

"Seriously? I'm going to have to smack Strobe upside her head. She told me she watched you drop it on her. Liar." She snorted and stood. "Well, with all the fighting going on, we evacuated to the wings. Warehouse and offices were just fine so we moved there. Coulda been a lot worse." She snickered softly. "And you glued Lightstick's hooves to the floor. Priceless!" I joined her laughter.

Two weeks ago, the Fillies had been trying to kill me. Now she was laughing about the time I attacked her base. It seemed a touch surreal. Would I someday be laughing like this with some member of the Harbingers or the Enclave? I didn't know if that was something for me to look forward to or not.

“Funny as this is, shouldn’t we be keeping an eye out for their next attack?” Busted Heart asked. Dazzle gave a sour little frown that the taciturn buck ignored. My E.F.S., however, didn’t see them massing anywhere. They were all spread out around us in a half circle.

We needed an actual view outside. I looked at the holes that the Harbingers had blown in the roof. “Want a boost up there so you can see what you can see?” He gave a single nod.

I stood beneath the hole and let him clamber onto my back. He jumped and hooked his hooves on the edge of the hole. Then I lifted him up, standing on my hind legs as I pushed him out onto the roof. I jumped and grabbed the edge with my fingers and, kicking and swaying, clambered up next to him. I tried levitating one of the AM rifles, but my magic flickered and died, the weapon falling to the refinery floor. I still wasn’t completely recovered. The rain beat down on both of us, but he didn’t say a word of complaint as he crept towards the edge.

They were just standing out in the rain, waiting. For what? There were twenty or thirty down there; more than enough for a good push. Maybe they were out of ideas? Waiting for reinforcements? Pegasi? Oh, that was a nice thought, and I found myself scanning the skies. Nothing but rain and flickers of lightning in the heavy clouds.

“So…what’s your story? I mean, I’ve heard of the Halfhearts, but I don’t…” I started, then caught his hard look he gave me before returning to looking through his scope. “Don’t want to talk about it, huh?”

“Why do you?” he asked as he scanned the small pairs and trios of Harbingers. “Why do you care? You’re not a ganger. You’re a meddler. And since you’ve arrived, you’ve been nothing but trouble.”

Well, I couldn’t argue with that. My ears drooped a little. “‘Cause… I don’t know…I never heard about it from the gangs themselves. I never knew anypony in a gang before. Not till I met Dusty Trails. I mean, the whole ‘trying to kill me’ thing was bad, but when I got to know them…well…things were better.”

He sighed softly, then said low and steadily, “Fine. Here is all you need to know. Every Halfheart has lost somepony they loved. A wife. A mother. A sister. Every one of us. And so we stay together to make sure we’re not consumed by that pain before it’s time. Because every Halfhearter wants to be reunited with the pony they

lost. That's my gang in a nutshell. And no, you don't need to know who I lost. That's private. We don't share it. Happy? Understand now?" he asked without taking his eyes off the scope. Wow…an entire gang of P-21s…or at least what P-21 would have become without Scotch Tape.

"I guess so," I said as I looked to the north. I could see why they hadn't surrounded the building yet; the east and south sides were a tangle of rusted pipe and fallen reinforcement. "I just…do you really want to die that badly?" I asked as I picked my way to the edge. There were a few more options for escape; the pipes running from the roof to the next building over; but that narrow walk had no cover from snipers.

He let out a soft hiss of annoyance, but then muttered, "More than you can possibly imagine." Then he looked at me and relaxed his eyes a little bit. "But…if I just checked out, it would break her heart, too." The moment passed, and his teal eyes hardened again as he peered through his scope. I suspected that that was all I was ever going to get from him.

Burner Boys taking in the ugly and disfigured? Flash Fillies as a refuge for mares who'd been victims? Halfhearters dealing with the pain of loss to stave off suicide? Things had been so much simpler when they'd all just been Bad Ponies. But they weren't bad. And they weren't good, either. They were just trying to get by in the deadliest city in the Wasteland. I could respect that.

My magic's strength wasn't sufficient to swing Taurus's rifle around, so I copied his style and braced it with my forelegs and shoulder as I slowly panned across the Harbingers amassed outside. Not a lot of talking…just a whole lot of waiting. For a moment, I rested the crosshairs on the head of an unaware mare. I could kill her right now; take out one of my enemies. I shuddered and pointed the gun away. No, I'd never be a sniper.

"See anything?" I asked, feeling a momentary vertigo that made me lurch.

"There's something up on the road," he said with a frown. "What is that?"

I peered through the hunting rifle's scope…Yeah, there was some kind of dark shape up there that wasn't there before. It was hard to make out through the rain but…it moved.

I felt cold pour down my spine. I'd seen a shape that big move like that. Over the hiss of the rain, I heard the low mechanical growl.

The tank was with the Harbingers.

* * *

Busted Heart and I dropped back into the large refinery building, landing on the catwalks. “Out. We need to get out! Right now!” I yelled as I dropped onto the walkway. “Candlewick! Where’s the back door?”

“Huh? Why? What’s going on? Are they coming again?” the scarred stallion asked.

“They’ve got a tank!” I yelled as I ran for the stairs nearest him and Bluebelle.

“A tank of what?” he asked back.

“Not a tank *of* something. A tank!” I yelled down at him.

Then there was a half second whine and a wave of air knocked me on my face as smoke, mist, dust, and steel filled the air. The impact, or something, must have set something off in my PipBuck, because suddenly I couldn’t hear a thing. A second blast nearly threw me from the catwalk as I yelled for everypony to get out, the tongue of metal swaying ominously. I smacked the leg containing my PipBuck against the walkway to try and fix my hearing.

Instead, it started playing music. Low soft contrabass filled my hearing as the building was blown apart around me and the four ponies that had fought on my behalf. Shells ripped through the north wall trailing dust and smoke, plugging through the pipes and blasting them in expanding balls of fire, steam, and steel. The catwalk gave way over my head as the north wall began to come down completely in blinding smoke and dust and rain. The chemicals that remained in the vats became creeping pools of fire that spread every which way.

I was dumped face down in the water, bouncing as the catwalk tumbled down atop me. I struggled to stand, looking back over my shoulder as pieces of the building were annihilated bite by explosive bite, the shrapnel flying through the clouds of smoke and dust drawing lines that lingered in the air. I got to my hooves screaming…something. Names, I hoped. My E.F.S. was full of red and precious little blue.

Lines of gunfire filled the air, drawing back and forth as the tank dropped what was left of the ceiling on top of us. Apparently they were simply going to blast me to pieces and fish my PipBuck out of

the rubble. Again I was blown off my hooves, flopping end over end before I came to rest in a crater. Water pooled about my throat as I stared up into the gray Hoofington sky. I couldn't think. Couldn't move. I could only listen to the contrabass's soft, mournful melody as hell exploded around me.

A pony in dark green combat armor climbed up to the lip of the hole I was in. I couldn't tell if it was mare or stallion. I could see the water dripping slowly from the barrels of the assault rifles on their battle saddle. Saw the flare of light reflecting off the watery sheen. Saw the jaw tightening on the bit in their mouth.

Saw a blue mare tackle him from the side and knock him back. Bluebelle looked down at me, her lips moving silently as she glared down at me.

Then I saw a spray of red erupt out the side of her chest as a bullet punched clean through. Her eyes went wide as she fell to her knees, and a second spray went out. A third. The pony she'd pushed aside slowly twisted around towards her.

There was one more explosion: me. I lunged out of the water, my sword slipping smoothly into my magic's grip as it speared up through the armored collar of the pony's combat barding and emerged out the far side. I twisted the blade around completely and took their head off. I don't know what I was screaming now. All I could hear was Octavia's music, a piece from her peace concert, if I remembered correctly. I scrambled up the muck and rubble to the lip where Bluebelle lay dying, bleeding out bright streamers of red. Her bar hadn't disappeared. Not yet.

But there were three ponies approaching through the smoke, dust, and rain aiming to change that. I leapt upon the closest before she could react. Her assault rifles chattered away to either side as I grabbed her battle saddle bridle with my thumbs and stared right into her horrified red eyes. Then I stamped Vigilance to the side of her skull and blew her brains out.

She didn't even completely fall as I whirled toward the next. The unicorn was bringing an AM rifle to bear, but at this point I wasn't thinking that far anymore. I charged straight at the unicorn as she tried to use her remaining seconds to kill me. But I lifted a glob of muck and threw it in her face as she fired. I felt a warm wet sensation in my side, and turned to look at the third trying to pump every bullet into me. There was no pain as he emptied his magazines into my barding. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and saw the look

of horror etched on his face.

Three shots, executed. I watched as that look of horror was transformed into ground meat. I couldn't hear anything but the music; could only feel water and blood and rage. I turned back to the unicorn as she tore her helmet off and I could see her crimson gaze. I charged towards her as she brought the AM rifle tip up. Busted Heart had been right: this wasn't a weapon for fighting ponies. It was slow and heavy.

And right now I moved at the speed of death.

Her lips moved soundlessly as I closed the distance. She wasn't going to be able to bring the weapon up in time…it didn't even look like she was trying. The sword glittered in front of me as I charged. She raised her hooves, her eyes wide. Then I plunged the sword straight into her chest up to the hilt. My forelegs grabbed her, ready for a second stab. And a third if I needed.

My ears crackled, and the music disappeared. I could hear the groan of steel and the chatter of bullets and the fwooosh of a flamer somewhere. "I give up…" the unicorn murmured in my ear. I turned to her, watching the blood flowing out her mouth. I could feel the blade humming in my magical grasp as I slowly pulled it free. I could hear a screaming, distant and constant and unmistakable as I looked down at the bloody blade and saw glowing white wisps of mist slipping off the metal.

Just like the starmetal rod.

I stared at it a moment, listening to its tiny little metallic hum. It seemed to be asking me, wasn't I happy? Hadn't this been what I wanted?

I dropped it into the muddy water, the little unicorn on the hilt barely poking up above the surface. That was then…this is ten seconds later...

"Damn. You really are a Reaper," I heard Bluebelle cough, trying to lift herself to her hooves. I ducked under her foreleg and supported her as we hobbled to the corner. "You could have killed all four of us if you'd wanted to, couldn't you?"

"I have no wish to fight you," I replied. She was bleeding out her mouth as well, and I dug into her saddlebags. I found some healing potions, but they were clear as piss and just as useful. My own I'd handed over to Glory back in the hospital; after all, only Rampage and I had regeneration talismans. Why hadn't I tried to get Lacunae to teach me that healing spell? Why hadn't I even bothered to try?

“Glad for that, now,” she coughed, looking at my rifle, and then her lip curled in a half smile.

Then Dazzle staggered through the mud and muck. “Candlewick’s trying to find a way out. The back doors are all covered in rubble.” Her lilac eyes widened at the holes in Bluebelle.

“Can you help her?” I asked, and Dazzle balked a moment. “Can you help her, Dazzle?” I yelled.

“Yeah. Sure,” she said as she dug in her bags for a dark purple healing potion, floating it to Bluebelle. The mare drank eagerly, and the bleeding cut off immediately. She pulled out a second and offered it to me, but I shook my head.

“Healing magic doesn’t work so well on me. I’ll be fine with time.” Indeed, my own bleeding had already stopped. We hefted her to her hooves as Candlewick came out of the smoke and haze. A fresh cigar was smoking at the corner of his mouth. “Tell me there’s a way out of here,” I said to him as I looked around the remains of the building.

He looked grim as he pointed up with his hoof. The pipes that had stretched over to the adjoining building now angled down into this one. One tank shell, even some strafing, and we’d be toast. There was no cover up there. I could hear the war machine’s engine revving, the deep, ominous noise now much closer. There were more red bars coming towards the largest gap in the building. “We need time. Can you block that with fire?”

He looked thoughtfully at the gap. “Yup.” Then he ejected the tank of flamer fuel. I pulled out a fresh cylinder of the potent fuel and started to load it when he shook his head. “Nope. Pull them all out.” I frowned as I did and watched as he handed them to Bluebelle. “Give ‘em a toss.” And then he turned to me. “Shoot ‘em with an armor piercer.” I just frowned, but then nodded. The blue mare tossed them with that unerring accuracy that P-21 had demonstrated, and I blasted one with the AP round. Instantly it started to hiss and spurt rainbow fuel wildly. We repeated it three more times before Candlewick nodded. “Light her up,” he said to Dazzle as the first Harbingers picked their way into the building.

The unicorn shot the rainbow slick with her beam rifle. Instantly there was a great ‘Fwooosh!’ as it ignited and created a brilliant wall of flame; already there were a few painful screams of Harbingers caught in the fire. “Ooooh…” I cooed, unable to help myself. Pretty... Then I ducked as the tank and the Harbingers

outside began to strafe through the flames with bullets. I just hoped for a few minutes without shells.

"We got around three minutes till that burns down. Maybe less. And we got another big problem…" He started away towards the base of the ramp. Dazzle helped Bluebelle make her way along the unsteady ground. I hung back a moment and looked at the sword poking out of the water. Slowly, I lifted it and stared at the weapon. The water, mud, and blood dripped slowly off as the rain pattered down on it. I stared at the flames dancing along the edge and still imagined that faint scream coming off the metal.

At least, I hoped it was my imagination.

I put it away; I'd have to deal with it later. I followed the others up to the fallen pipes that had once carried fluids into and/or out of the smashed building. There were some kind of metal mesh plates on top of them, a walkway for inspecting the pipes. Only wide enough for one pony at a time. That was definitely a problem…

But, I quickly realized as I saw the green Busted Heart, it wasn't the biggest problem. He reclined amidst a pile of wreckage, eyes closed and lips pressed together in pain as a ton of pipes and metal crushed his hind legs. I scrambled over and started trying to pull the rubble around his limbs away; it was wedged tightly. "Come on! Help me!"

The rest looked at me with a mix of amazement as I struggled to free him.

"Get going," Busted Heart said over the crackle of flame and the popping of bullets against the rock. That engine was getting louder. The others hesitated, but he glared at them. "Go. Now!" Candlewick and Bluebelle started up the pipes.

"Need a flash?" Dazzle asked, lifting her beam rifle. The green pony looked thoughtful, and I rounded on her.

"We are not killing him! We're saving him! Security saves ponies!" I shouted at her. "I'm not leaving another pony trapped!" I could see Dusty Trails all over again! I shoved against the pipes and scraped at the rocks around his legs with my fingers. Neither moved.

"Security…he's dusted," was all Dazzle said. They knew it. I knew it. The difference was that they could accept it. The lavender mare started up with the rest.

I scrabbled at the rock as he looked at me with the smallest smile on his face. "Gamble." I blinked and looked at him in confusion.

“That was her name. Gamble. She was a lot like you. We grew up together. Wandered the Wasteland searching for adventure.” He sighed. “We were in a mine…lots of ghouls…really unstable. There was a cave in…she was pinned…”

I shook my head and shoved again against the mass of fallen pipes. Was it my imagination, or did it shift? Maybe a little? A hair? “I’m not leaving you to die!”

“And that’s exactly what I told her,” he said softly as he stretched out his forehoof and hooked the strap on his sniper rifle, pulling it towards him. The grinding became even louder. Something dark began to move through the flames. “And so I’m going to tell you what she told me. You’re going to go. You’re going to live. Because I want you to.”

I beat against the metal with my hooves before I looked down at him and saw the happy look on his face. “I want to save you,” I muttered as the end of the tank breached through the flames.

“Sometimes you can’t. Sometimes there’s nothing left to save. And sometimes, the pony you need to save is yourself.” He sighted at the tank with the sniper rifle, bracing it against the metal pinning his limbs. “She bought me time to escape the ghouls. Gave me a chance.” He chuckled. “Now I’m gonna give it to you. Take care, Security.”

I jumped on the ramp and looked back at him. “My name is Blackjack.”

He nodded once. “Lemongrass.”

Then I was scampering up the ramp as fast as my hooves could carry me as the tank rolled the rest of the way into the blasted-out refinery. It was as I remembered: a huge trapezoid of steel with a swept-back turret pointing twin heavy cannon barrels. Two smaller machine guns were mounted in smaller turrets at the front, with socketed cameras above them like spider eyes. The black and white zebra stripes seemed to dance in the flames as it ignored the bonfire. A spotlight on the turret snapped to life and began to sweep along the ruins as little cameras whirred in their tiny sockets. The machineguns started to elevate up towards me.

Then there was a sharp crack, and the spotlight went dark. The engine revved and roared with frustration as the machine fired wildly. The chattering streams of death found the fallen pipes and began to blast along them as the cameras oriented upon me. Then there was another sharp crack, and one of the cameras exploded in

a shower of sparks. It reversed the movement of the autoguns and strafed them back along the row of pipes. I was halfway up when I balked and looked back. The green pony had disappeared in a shower of dust.

"No…" I murmured, and then I paid for my hesitation. The tank pointed its remaining cameras at me and turned all its weapons up at me, including its two massive main cannons.

Then there was another loud crack, and another of the socketed cameras exploded. The tank fired low, the shells detonating beneath me. The entire ramp lunged up and then collapsed. I popped out my fingers and grabbed the mesh to keep from falling. I was now climbing more than walking as I kicked and pulled my way up, looking back at Lemongrass. His left forehoof was a bloody mess, blood darkening his yellow mane and hiding his left eye as he kept his discipline and focus on the tank.

Another burst raked him, and I clung to the grate. The tank growled, and when the dust cleared I saw the sniper rifle was lying to the side, bent and shredded. I looked and saw his green eye meeting mine. Then I saw him look up at one of the unicorns' AM rifles, dangling by its strap from a twisted bit of steel catwalk. He smiled and then tossed a rock up with his free hoof. It knocked the AM rifle free, and it fell right into his outstretched hoof. The barrel thunked down against the pipes and he braced it, biting hard on the mouthgrip and sighting down the scope.

He and the tank fired as one, and two new flowers of fire bloomed. The base of the right cannon exploded out in a fan of fire and metal. The tank engine squealed as half its turret was peeled open and gushed flame. The massive mechanical monster peeled back through the wall, and I saw a few red bars wink out as it tore into the open. Slowly, finally, I reached where the pipes bridged the gap to the next factory over, then looked back.

Nothing remained but a gold broken-heart charm flickering in the fire's fading glow.

* * *

Given the havoc wreaked by the tank on the Seekers, it was no surprise we were able to get clear. Finally, we picked our way back down to ground level and started to go our separate ways. Candlewick would tell the Burners what had happened and that the Harbingers weren't to be trusted. He'd also pass Lemongrass's final act along to the Halfhearts. Something as epic as that needed to be

remembered, and I'd buck anypony who said that Security had done it alone. Even if the tank would repair itself eventually, that was still an amazing shot. Dazzle would do the same for the Flash Fillies. I'd go with Bluebelle back to Bullfrog Springs. Even with the two healing potions, she still hadn't recovered from those shots.

Still, there was a little hesitation. For a while, we'd fought together. Maybe not as friends, but at least as comrades. It was hard to let that go. I wanted to return to Chapel and be with Glory and the others again. Let them help me…but I couldn't. I still felt that frantic panic scratching inside my skull like a radroach struggling to escape. The idea of stopping, of slowing down, still terrified me.

"Hope you come by the Flashers again. No dropping buildings on ponies, though. That's like, totally dust," Dazzle told me with crooked smile. She moved close, then murmured softly, "Don't get ploughed."

"I won't," I promised, and then surprised her with a hug. Apparently, gangers weren't big on impulsive sentimentality. She patted my back awkwardly and then backed away and started southeast, trotting towards the Flash Industries building. Candlewick lit another cigar, gave me a salute with his hoof, and headed further into the tangle of industrial buildings to the southwest. I took one last look towards the smoke rising to the west, the thick black-and-gray column cutting through the clouds as it rose.

I could still imagine that faint starmetal scream and see twisted pony faces in the distant rising smoke. I might have survived, but the Hoof had killed dozens more. In the end, dead was still dead, and I had done some of its work. I might not have been to blame, but I was still responsible.

"Come on. Let's go. T'aint far ta Yellow River," Bluebelle said as she started off to the northeast.

"Yellow River?" I asked, my ears perking.

"Yeah. Runs out of the highlands," she replied as she looked to the north and pointed with her hoof. We were right at the lip of the Hoofington valley, and to the northeast the land became less gray and more green and brown. There were mists and watery patches here and there like melted glass. There were also more craters glowing dimly with radiation and more scattered little half-sunken remains of suburbs. Cutting through it was a ribbon of muddy yellow water flowing out of the east. "The Mire. Trust me. Nasty

place."

"Geee…nasty places around Hoofington. Who'da thunk it?" I sighed as we trotted forward. "And what particular flavor of nasty does this place have?"

"Cannibals," she replied evenly. "Ponies and zebra alike. Scum that looks at anything with four hooves as a meal trotting around. Hydras and hoppers and giant leeches, too. Radiation and taint and worse…the Quickening."

Of course. Something worse. Wouldn't be the Wasteland without something worse. "Quickening?"

"Some sort of zebra curse or talisman or…something. Went off during a battle a week before the bombs fell. Turned the ground to soup. There's no solid land in that bog, and you can be trotting along thinking you're on firm ground when suddenly you'll be sucked down and turned into a radigator snack." She rubbed her nose. "Lotta meat and the like besides. We hunt the edges every now and then."

I looked out to the east at the mountains and noticed something immediately…they weren't eroded like the ones to the west. There would be a flat topped ridge, then a flat valley, then a flat topped ridge, and then a valley, all very regular. As green as the Mire was, the highlands looked a lot more yellowed and bare. To the east of us was a large prewar building of some kind; a three-story horseshoe-shaped structure that looked like a hotel or something. It also looked intact and walled.

And then there was the mountain.

Funny, you'd think a pony would notice a great, big, black plug of stone. The rock seemed glossy and polished despite its rough edges and loomed up a mile separate from the ridges that formed Hoofington's eastern edge. Yet as much as it stood out, I had trouble focusing on any one part. My eyes weren't working too good anyway, though. The radroach was skittering around even more and I was seeing…something…moving in the corners of my vision. Shadows, but in the growing twilight, there really weren't many shadows to cast.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing at the large building. "It looks important."

"Eh, don't rightly know. Some sort of hospital used by the M.o.P. before the Fluttershy clinic was finished," she said with a dismissive snort. "Lotta robots, and ponies what go in don't come back out. So

we stay out." Hmmmm, perhaps a hospital where they were making diseases to infect zebras? A hospital Lighthooves might have picked over? I added it to the bazillion places I needed to visit before I died. Again...

"What about that?" I asked, pointing at the huge black mountain behind the hospital.

"What about what?" She blinked in confusion. I rolled my eyes and pointed at the sheer-sided crag again. She just shrugged. "That there is Black Pony Mountain," she said. "Not much else in this corner of the city. Y'all know 'bout Iron--"

"Wait... " I interrupted her. "What about Black Pony Mountain?" She looked at me blankly, and I pressed, "A mountain like that…it's got to have something going for it?" A swampy, soupy bog had some kind of zebra curse on it. The hospital had the ominous 'never leave' thing. There wasn't a prominent landmark in the whole damned city that didn't have some kind of scary, intimidating, or tragic backstory!

"It's big. It's black. It's a mountain. And somepony threw 'pony' in the name. That's about it," she replied flatly, then scratched her head. "A long time ago there used to be a big magic bear or something living in a cave there. I think somepony banished it, though. Or claimed to…I dunno. *Some* nasty critter lives somewhere around it, though. Best just to stay away." She gave a dismissive shrug, and I glanced back at it. As exceptional as it looked, I really couldn't see much else interesting about it. Just a great big black slug of rock.

"It's never just a rock with you, is it?" P-21 said behind me.

Wait, P-21? I whirled, starting to smile. How had he gotten here? Was he really over the Med-X? Maybe the Goddess had magicked…

Nothing. I stared at the empty yellow grass behind me.

"Are you okay?" Bluebelle asked.

I looked a moment longer, hoping that he'd pop out of thin air. That Glory would swoop out of nowhere and be gray and glorious. That Rampage would he here with a snide comment, or Scotch would say something that made Glory stammer so cutely. I wanted to see that kindly gaze in Lacunae's eyes as she watched silently from the edges. But there was nothing but the soft rustle of grass.

"Yeah. Sure," I lied, before putting mountain and voice out of my head. The radroach was getting sneaky as it crept around inside my skull. Still, I just had to hold it together. To try and take my mind

off the scratchy feeling in my head, I asked, “So, why do all the mountains to the east look a bit off?”

“Coal minin’,” she replied simply.

Wait. What? “I thought Equestria didn’t have any coal!”

“You sure are some funny colors o’ stupid,” Bluebelle replied with a snort. “Of course Equestria had some coal. Little bit. Enough to run old trains and the like. What kind of idjit invents a coal-fired power plant when the coal’s half way around the world? Be like inventing a chocolate milk rain bottling plant when there ain’t no chocolate milk rain.” I looked at the blue pony. She might be crude, but she sure wasn’t stupid.

“So Equestria did have some natural coal deposits?” I asked, and she nodded.

“Yup. And ponies thought it was grand to light up all them great big cities, like magic for all pony folk. ‘Course there were a mite bit o’ confusion on the best way to do that. Hoofington had their dams ta run their power plants, but rivers don’t run everywhere in Equestria. So they built a few coal plants. Then a few more…and pretty soon their little old mines were just played out. So they came out east to the highlands.”

I frowned. “You mean the highlands weren’t a part of Equestria?”

She let out a snort of disgust. “Might have been on some fancy maps in Canterlot, but we’ve never been a part o’ the kingdom. When ponies came over from distant shores to settle Equestria, some earth ponies bucked Puddinhead’s idea and landed here instead. This was our land. No horns nor feathers. And fer centuries, that suited the Princess just fine. We had our mountains and valleys and didn’t raise too much trouble. But…we had coal.”

“So when the coal mines in Equestria got played out, they came to the Highlands?” I asked.

“‘Course! T’aint no reason to deal with faraway stripes when we were here. And they came with all kinds o’ talk ‘bout the Highlanders workin’ together with the city ponies. Told us they’d give us modern towns and fancy shops and make us all respectable pony folk. Guess that talk turned enough heads, because we let them. Only we found out that the kind of mining they planned wasn’t what we imagined. They blasted the tops of the mountains and dumped them into the valleys. Tossed tailings from the mines into the rivers. And they took the coal and built more power plants.”

"And your people let it happen?" I asked, aghast.

"Fer a time. And when we tried ta stop it, they dug out that map, told us we were subjects, pulled out fancy lawyerin' words and contracts folks signed with some mighty fine print, and kicked us off our own land. Celestia gave us food so we didn't starve or freeze, but that just made us feel like bums in our own homes. 'Course, in ten years, even the highlands were played out. They ran out of mountain tops to scrape off, and while there were still seams deep down, twasn't nearly enough to sate their hunger fer coal. More power. More electricity to light them big fancy cities. Not one word of usin' less. Just more more more. 'Progress', they called it." She sighed and shook her head. "Eventually they traded with the zebras. Them stripes have so much coal it's ridiculous. And they gobbled it up right and left. But…then the zebras cut off Equestria."

"And it was war," I concluded as we hopped over a swollen drainage ditch cutting across the hillside. I always thought the idea of an entire nationwide power system rising on a distant resource was hard to believe. It hadn't been the lack of coal that was the problem but the rampant addiction to comforts and excess in distant cities. The problem had built…and grown…until only trade with the zebras could supply the demand. When that broke down…

"War fer us started long before the stripes." She spat to the side. "Didn't have a chance to win, but we fought. Made ourselves a royal pain to tha power companies... Blew up tracks. Stole equipment. When the Ministries started, some of us went to the Hoof for work and jobs. Better than getting 'charity' from Canterlot that only kept us from starving." She rolled her eyes. "'Course, stripes weren't any better during the war. They promised us all kinds of things to get us to help 'em out. Some folks did…damned fools. But stripes killed us no different than ponies did. When the bombs fell, it was the best damned day ever for the Highlands."

I didn't want to argue the cost. Really, I'd always thought of the war as being between the zebras and Equestria. I'd never imagined other parties getting ground up in the fighting. "So how have you survived since?"

"Like we did before the war. 'Course, the highlands ain't the same. We got whole lakes o' black water bunched up in choked valleys, and most of the rest up there is yellow with sulfur and lead. The ridges are flat, chewed stone nothin'll grow on. We live in the shantytowns left behind and keep to ourselves. We've had enough o'

being a part of Equestria," she said flatly.

As we walked along down the slope, I looked at her. "So why were you in the Hoof?" The question made her look sour.

"Checkin' in on mah brother. He'd been a Reaper once, but I figger he's dead now," she said matter-of-factly.

"How do you know?"

"On account y'all are carryin' his gun," she said as she pointed at the hunting rifle across my back. "Dozer loved that rifle…'course, he loved anything that'd go boom. We used ta sit up on the ridge, and he'd toss dynamite or pick off hellhounds as they snuck outta the mines. Ornery critters," she said with a sigh. "So I reckon if yeh got it, either y'all killed him or somepony else did." Oddly, there wasn't any anger in her eyes. Just a sadness, as if she'd expected to find he'd come to such an end.

"Deus. He was a Reaper that was hunting me. Taurus died protecting me and two unicorns he was with," I said, glossing over the fact he was after my head and PipBuck himself. "He got blown up, though…Deus I mean."

"Darn. Woulda liked to take his head back ta Momma. Oh well… Dozer always was interested in trouble. Hellhounds or something else." She shook her head. "Dealin' with the Hoof is bad. Dealin' with anypony other than kin is bad. You can trust kin. Can't trust nopony else."

"You can trust some ponies," I countered, "and you don't always have to do things on your own."

"No?" She arched her brow, looking surprised. "Why're you out here all on yer lonesome then?"

That brought me up short. "You don't understand. My friends… they needed a break. And I…" I started to pace. "I just couldn't. I can't stop and rest like that. I have to keep going."

"So ya ran to deal with it on yer own. Ain't criticizing. It's what all us Highlanders want ta do," Bluebelle replied.

But…I wanted to add…I wasn't exactly doing so good on my own…

Ahead we were approaching a…something. At first glance, I wondered if it was some sort of base…but it didn't look quite right. There was a great rectangle of rusty, double-walled chain link fence topped with razor wire around the perimeter. There were towers every hundred feet with automated turrets on the top. Thankfully, none of them seemed to be moving around. Inside the rectangle was

a squat concrete block building beside the front gate; the other structures inside the fence were all identical rusty buildings that looked like giant metal drums lying on their sides, half-buried in the ground. Each was surrounded by a second barbed wire fence. There were eight rows of twenty-five or so each. Further north, I could see more of the rusty rectangle facilities; most were obscured and sunken into the Mire.

'Yellow River Detainment Camp', read the concrete slab outside front gate.

But the thing that was most interesting to me was a battle going on that had absolutely nothing to do with me. On the west side of the camp were a half dozen Enclave ponies in black power armor raking beams and disintegration bolts across the cover of a dozen zebras inside the fence on the east side of the camp. Bluebelle just sat down, cocking her head. "Well, piss on my leg and tell me it's raining. First time I ever saw something like this."

"I've seen worse. No manticores this time," I said as I thought back to the battle outside the fire station. I lifted Taurus's hunting rifle and viewed the spectacle. The zebras had snipers who moved like ghosts between the ruined metal arcs, but the pegasi had superior firepower. I didn't see either side gaining an advantage anytime soon. I looked at the large concrete block building. There was a pegasus corpse outside the front door and next to it three heaps of pink glowing residue. I spotted something large and black beside the slain pony: a metal case that had 'Warning: High Explosive' printed on the side.

"Well, best give 'em a wide berth and let 'em shoot it out," Bluebelle said as she rose.

"I need to get in there," I said with a frown as I looked down at the building below me.

"I reckon I smacked your noggin harder than I thought. Whatever for?" she asked with a baffled look.

"If the Enclave want to blow that building up, it's because there's something there worth hiding. If the Zebras want to blow that building up, it's because there's something worth hiding. Either way I want to know what it is. What is this place, anyway?" I asked as I looked at all the rusted huts. They all looked identical, as if they'd been made in a factory or something.

"Some place they stuck all the zebra prisoners of war. Put explodin' collars on 'em. Nothing worth dyin' over, though. Camp's been

picked over solid." She frowned at me. "Yer dead set certain on going in there, aren'tcha?"

"Enclave doesn't blow up something worthless," I said with a smile, feeling my mane itch. "I want to take a peek inside there and find out what."

"Well, count me out. Ain't got no nevermind fer turkeys or stripes, and Momma'd spit her bit if I got turned ta a heap of pink goop," she said firmly as she looked past the camp towards the river. "Bullfrog Springs ain't far now. Should be all right by myself."

I looked at the tough mare with the deceptively gentle cutie mark of delicate blue flowers. "Listen, Bluebelle. I know you just met me. I know that I'm an outsider and you've got nothing but shit for working with outsiders. But please talk to your mother about the Harbingers. They won't leave you alone. I don't think they *can* leave ponies alone. They've got a need to suck everyone in." I wished I could explain that hum, the feeling of pulling everypony in together. Alien mind control, supernatural mass possession, or just social manipulation, I couldn't tell which anymore. "There's nothing good in the Core. Don't let your mother be tempted by what they offer her."

She frowned, looking at me skeptically. But then I passed the hunting rifle to her, and her eyes widened in shock. "Yer…You don't owe me Dozer's gun. Y'all had it fair, I reckon."

"Maybe. But he was your family. You should have something of his. That gun was never really mine anyway. I never even knew its name," I said as I looked down at the camp. "I was just carrying it a while till it could get home."

I'd touched her. Maybe she'd convince her mother and maybe not, but hopefully I'd convinced her. If it gave her family some peace and comfort, how could I not give it up? She put the rifle on top of her saddlebags, along her body. "Welp…after that, guess I might as well get my big blue butt in there." When I blinked in confusion, she just chuckled. "Between patching me up after getting shot and giving me Dozer's gun, I owe you enough to help you get out of there alive."

"You don't have to come with me. Honestly, I'm probably going to get shot by one side or the other. Maybe both, actually." Only a mare with a radroach scuttling around in her skull would smile when saying that. And I really, really didn't want her to die like Lemongrass had.

“Nothing doing. I’m comin’.”
“But--”
“I done did make up mah mind, Blackjack.”
I slumped in defeat. “Okay, but be careful. Don’t get killed. And remember, you volunteered,” I said, and she grinned like I’d made a joke. I didn’t return it.
I was sick to death of getting ponies killed.

* * *

Getting to the camp was easier than I expected it to be. There wasn’t much cover besides the grass, not even a drainage ditch to skulk along, so I’d expected to start catching zebra bullets and Enclave incineration beams pretty quickly. However, we were able to trot all the way up to the rusty gate without either side taking a shot at us. I supposed the growing darkness and pouring rain had something to do with that, and the fact that they were both busy with each other. Someone had cut a hole in the gate’s chain link, but I suspected that this was recent. Most of the rest of the fences were still intact despite all the rain, though everything metal was almost a uniform reddish color, and everything else except the hut by the entrance was mud-colored.
Everything else except the bones.
They lay everywhere. In heaps and piles and stacks around the half-drum buildings. There were curved ribs and knobby leg bones and chunky vertebrae, though very few skulls. Bones hung on the razor wire surrounding the buildings. Others looked like they’d been perforated by the turrets for trying to escape. Somepony, maybe the prisoners, had painted strange masks and skull-like glyphs on the doors and walls of the buildings with the sticky yellow dirt that lay everywhere. Strips of hide dangled from the razor wire. I felt an ache growing in my chest; Enervation was stronger than usual here.
A bullet pinged off a metal rail nearby, not aimed at us, but there was no telling when one side or the other would stop shooting each other long enough to notice us and change that. We had to get inside quick before some zebra or pegasus decided that a pair of suicidal ponies was a nice bonus target. The explosive package had a strap that I bit and used to tug it onto my back; there was no way I was going to leave a big old bomb lying around for somepony to

use while I was inside. Suddenly, I was dancing back as both sides decided that that was foul play!

Bluebelle tried to open the double metal doors leading into the large concrete block structure. They were locked, of course. Then she braced her forelegs and blasted them with four potent kicks that buckled the metal around her rear hooves and showered us both with flakes of rust knocked off the door. Earth pony kicks were damned scary sometimes! On the fifth, there was a ping, and the doors swung inside. “Highlander lockpickin’!” she said as she rolled back into the confines of the room. I scampered inside as another bullet pinged off my helmet.

Why was everything targeting my poor head today? Stop rattling up the radroach, people!

The door banged shut behind us, and at once the speakers crackled and began playing strange, soothing music. The emergency lighting flickered to life, creating tiny pools of light between the regions of shadow. An immense sign hanging from the roof read ‘Processing’ next to a zebra glyph. There were large signs in zebra-writing mounted next to Pony translations. White plastic crates lay scattered around the room, many of them smashed or kicked into the corner. ‘Place all your possessions in a white tote,’ read one sign. ‘Proceed down the hall single file,’ read another. There was a large door, but it was heavily reinforced. It didn’t even have a lock, instead having some sort of fancy card reader thing mounted on the wall next to it. No way we’d be picking that, even with Highlander lockpicking skills!

We moved down the hall; it was only wide enough to go single file. I came to a pair of white doors. There was a hiss and squeal as they popped open, revealing a second pair of doors in a space just big enough for a single pony. I stepped in, and a little voice said something in Zebra, then crackled, “Please state your name, unit number, tribe, and zebra registration number.”

“Uh…Blackjack. Sixty-Nine. Stable 99. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten,” I said sarcastically. I looked at the signs, but these were written entirely in Zebra. It asked me to repeat myself, and I did. Being a stable pony, claustrophobia wasn’t one of my issues, but I had to admit being stuck in this closet-like space was unnerving.

“I’m sorry. We do not have that unit number or tribe on file. Please remain still and we will take you to Special Processing,” the voice

said. I didn't know if it was the bugs in my skull or a pink pony shouting a warning, but I ducked down as a metallic claw dropped from the ceiling and tried to put a collar around my neck. "Please remain still," the calm synthetic voice said, then repeated it in Zebra. It gave me a zap from little metal studs in the walls that would have staggered most ponies. I twisted around as the claw dropped and lifted a foreleg. The collar was wrapped around it and clicked closed.

Then everything went white.

I blinked several times as vertigo rattled the radroach and sent it scurrying while I faceplanted onto a heap of corpses. These were bodies that varied from rotten bones and hide to a pegasus that was fairly freshly preserved, minus his head. I appeared to be in a room almost perfectly cubical. Above me was some kind of talisman; teleportation? I looked around at a very sturdy door and a cracked window. 'Special Processing', I supposed.

Was it a really bad sign that standing in a room filled a third full with bodies really wasn't freaking me out like I thought it should?

Most of the corpses either wore collars and had bullet holes in the temple or back of the head or were missing necks and head entirely. The bodies looked... chewed. Most of them were ponies, one or two zebras; scavengers, from the looks of it. The concrete walls were pitted and chewed with bullet holes. Somepony had written on the walls, in depressingly familiar black paint, 'No way out' and 'Save me, Luna.' More disturbingly, somepony had mutilated the bodies and made a little hut, big enough for one pony to get inside, from assorted body parts. I had a disturbing hunch that some of these carcasses were plagued.

I checked the sturdy door, but it didn't even have a doorknob, let alone a lock. Three solid kicks on the window simply shook it. The glass had some kind of wire mesh inside. "Well…this doesn't look good."

Moments later, there was a flash and Bluebelle appeared above me, landing on me with a crash. "Oooh…that was right unpleasant…" Bluebelle groaned. She climbed off me; I had to admit, this was not going quite as I'd planned. Granted, I hadn't planned anything in particular, but this was sure not something I'd expected. I looked back at Bluebelle, at the explosive bomb collar around her neck. There was a bright red light on the front of it. "It got me, didn't it?" she asked, reaching up with a hoof to nudge the deadly ring.

"Yup. Don't mess with it. These things go off quick and nasty," I said as I shook the one around my foreleg off. Bluebelle at least had the decency to lose her lunch at the contents we stood upon. I sighed, looking at our prison. Given the Enclave pegasus in here, the battle might get resolved and we'd still be trapped. I went through the dead pegasus's pockets and found a key card…not that it did a whole lot of good down here. He also had something that looked like a cheap PipBuck on his hoof. Some sort of primitive computer, at any rate. I transferred the files to my Delta. A beam pistol and expended cartridges; from the burn marks on the door, he'd tried to blast his way out.

"Right. So…got a plan, or do we start kicking like crazy?" she asked as she looked at the solid glass. It might have been cracked, but from the number of bullet pits in it, I doubted we could blast or shoot our way through.

"Sounds like the usual plan, huh Blackjack?" Rampage said from the corner. I didn't look.

"Can't shoot. Can't kick." I looked at the explosive box we'd taken from outside. Maybe if I was P-21, I might risk cracking it open. We might not have a choice, though…But I still really didn't like the idea of futzing with a great big box of boom. I frowned and tossed the explosive collar in my hoof…then caught Bluebelle's uneasy look as her eyes followed the rising and falling band of explosives. "Oh, don't worry. The bombs don't go off every which way. They blast inward." Not exactly reassuring, but then I'd seen the effect firsthand.

They blast *inward*. I frowned and twisted the collar a little with my magic. The collars had metal plates held together with springs to allow the whole thing to flex. One side of each plate was covered with half an inch of plastic explosive. A wire ran from one clasp to the other along one side. Break the connection, and boom. I frowned as I slowly levitated it to the glass, and then with my hooves carefully pushed. The outer edge expanded. The inner edge compressed. I kept a careful eye on that wire. A little more…a little more…I bit my lip.

There. It was flat against the glass. My magic lifted a bottle of Wonderglue from my bags and set about adhering the bomb collar in place. Finally, I carefully tied a string to the wire. "Here we go," I said as we took cover in the corners. Bluebelle covered her ears and ducked her head as I gave the wire a yank.

If I'd had normal ears they'd be popping and ringing. As it was, the metal plates blew out and ricocheted around the confines of the room. Bluebelle yipped as one of the springs lodged itself in her shoulder. The smoke obscured everything as I carefully extracted it. I remembered how hours under Hoofington had made Glory's wing drop right off. I hoped the Enervation here was weaker, but given most of the bodies were preserved rather than rotten, I didn't have much hope.

...especially since the glass was still intact.

"Damn it!" I screamed, then proceeded to smash my hooves against the scorched window. "I've survived Deus! I've survived Sanguine! I've beaten ridiculously tenacious killer robots! Handled whole flocks of manticores! I've had boats dropped on me! I am not going to be killed by a piece of fucking glass!" I screamed as I hammered my hooves against it. Bluebelle joined me, beating the reinforced ballistic glass with her hooves.

Finally…we busted out a small hole the size of my muzzle. Bluebelle panted, and I just looked at my power reserves being tapped low. I suckled on a ruby and glared. Right now, if the professor had given me some kind of killer beam eyes and didn't tell me, it'd be the perfect time for them to pop out.

Then I blinked and spat the half-dissolved gem into my hoof. I looked at the metal wire mesh and the splintered glass and then down at the little red oblong. "Hey…is glass a gem?"

"Uh…I don't think so," she said skeptically. She wasn't looking too good. That injury and the exertion were taking a lot out of her. I remembered the sporting goods store; we'd activated the emergency power when we came inside. As strong as the Enervation was, it was only going to get stronger unless I found that stupid ring and disabled it.

I munched down on the remains of the ruby and a sapphire. "Let's find out." I stood on my hind legs and carefully moved my mouth to the hole. "Come on…" I said as the glass cut my cheeks and ground on my teeth. I normally had to get my mouth closed a certain amount before it would activate.

Or else it wouldn't work on glass and we were completely screwed.

Suddenly, the glass slipped around my mouth and compressed. I got to the internal mesh and there was a momentary pause before that too softened and I was able to chew and swallow. There was some kind of plastic film inside the glass that didn't agree with my

‘stomach’ at all. The glass itself was flavorless mush, but at least the wire mesh gave it a little carroty hint. Still, my systems were having a hard time of it. I tried spiting the next mouthful out, but the half-liquefied glass hardened on my lips and hung like glasscicles off my chin. It’d work, though... it’d just take time.

To pass it, I played some of the audio files from the pegasus’s knockoff PipBuck. “Surveyor Team #5. Audiofile of Swiftwing. We’ve found this camp of some sort. Looks like it housed prisoners of war, poor bastards. Not sure we’ll find anything useful left in the camp, but the processing center looks more promising. Just need to get into the interior secure areas. Everything has card readers. Guess they didn’t want to risk conventional locks around stripes.”

I gnawed away, Bluebelle pointedly keeping her eyes on the ceiling as I did so, and I mentally toggled the next. “…Swiftwing. Rain Squall found a card that’ll work on the front door on a skeleton on the roof; only pony remains we found. Pegasus. Dunno if she was a Dashite or just got killed by the prisoners before she could get away. Somepony shot her in the head. Anyway, the processing center’s been looted as well. We came across a dirt pony that was completely psychotic. She was eating herself. Bit Rain Squall. We made sure to save the body, just in case.”

“Dirt pony, huh?” Bluebelle snorted. “So much for all their talk of help.” I couldn’t answer as I ate another mouthful. My ‘stomach’ wasn’t feeling so great. I suspected it hadn’t been designed to digest inch-thick reinforced ballistic glass.

I returned my attention to the next entry. “…wing. Bad news. It was some sort of infection. We found two more in the morgue who were trying to get into the lockers. Good news. Rain Squall doesn’t seem infected herself. We’ve notified Enclave intelligence. They’re sending somepony to investigate. I’m going to check back through the processing area while we wait. Maybe we’ll find something useful.”

I stopped there. I knew the rest of the entries would probably involve audio entries of Swiftwing getting trapped in the room and left to starve before yanking off his collar. I had enough issues without having to hear that. Besides, I’d chewed a big enough hole that, with some liberal stomping and shoving, we could squeeze though! The room on the far side was sparse: a metal table bolted to the floor…and a turret that dropped out of the ceiling with a hiss and began to spray us with bullets!

"Unauthorized presence without collar. Please return to processing area immediately!" the voice crackled over the chatter of the turret as Bluebelle dashed across the floor. There was only one turret and two of us, and I kept myself in the open and made myself its target. I raised my hooves to protect my face as the bullets battered me against the splintered ballistic glass. I levitated out Vigilance and jumped into S.A.T.S. to target four shots. Only two hit. The turret sparked but still chewed rounds into me.

The Highlander slipped under the table and then rolled to her hooves. She dashed at the wall, leapt up, and kicked herself away. She wrapped her hooves around the chattering barrels, biting down on the frame. The turret's motors ground and whined as her weight pulled the stream of gunfire off me. I aimed carefully and put two more rounds into the firing mechanism. Finally it sparked and died. I groaned and flopped on my back.

Bluebelle approached with a frown. "What?" I asked. She didn't have any right to frown at me. She volunteered!

"Do y'all *like* getting shot up?" she asked as she pointed at the holes that had penetrated my armor. I just stared at her as she pointed at the hole in the window. "You coulda hopped through there again, or you coulda taken cover under that there table. Instead, you hung out here and just ate rounds!"

I rose to my hooves. "Look. I'm a cyberpony. Long as I'm not dead and have some gems, scrap metal, and food, I'll regenerate." I looked at the dings in my legs. "Honestly, this isn't really that bad. I get hurt all the time."

"Me too, but I do my best to avoid it." She looked me in the eye. "So do ya like it or something? 'Cause I can't figger why anypony'd go through that."

Did I? I did tend to get shot up a lot. And cut…and smashed…I bit my lip as I felt some other very disturbing sensations crawling around beneath the ache in my body. Being injured should be a bad thing. Especially the kinds of injuries I dealt with. Instead, I felt... odd. "I…I…um…I…" I felt myself going bright red as I sat and lifted my forehooves and held them an inch apart. "Maybe just a tiny bit?" I said with a sheepish grin.

She groaned and shook her head. "You're nuttier than barrel of acorns…"

"She has no idea, does she?" Scotch Tape said in my ear, a flash of olive in the corner of my vision.

"No…No she doesn't," I murmured as I trotted to the door. And neither did I.

* * *

The first floor of the processing center was well tossed, papers scattered underhoof. Lots of bodies, too, signs of ponies who tried to use the structure as shelter. As we searched the desks for something useful, we came across a dozen corpses, some desiccated and others fresh. Many showed signs of having been cut or chewed. Spilled blood filled the dim space with its coppery tang. There were red bars, but I couldn't tell if they were above or below or hiding right out of sight.

I'dve been happy if they just stopped appearing and disappearing, though.

My head felt like it was moving, like my brain had mutated into a pulsating bag of mush. The radroach had laid eggs inside my skull, and now the eggs were squirming. I could see flickers in the corners of my eyes, the vaguest shimmers of zebra stealth cloaks. Then I'd look directly at them and they'd be gone. Twice I flung as much garbage and debris as I could manage at where I'd seen the faint movement, only to discover it was empty.

My behavior was drawing more and more concerned looks from Bluebelle as we moved through the offices. I could hear my friends talking more and more, but their words became harder and harder to understand. I could hear fear and alarm in their voices. Shouts of distress and calls for help... I knew it was in my head, but…but what if it wasn't? What if it Lacunae had done some kind of magic to me? What if the Harbingers were attacking my friends? I'd been so sure, so arrogant and cocky and sure, that they'd come after me!

There wasn't anything worthwhile in here. We made our way up to the second floor. Here there were a few larger offices and a conference room. We passed by a door marked 'Emergency Exit'. Funny, where were those back in Hippocratic Research? I heard more voices, but this time Bluebelle's ears perked too. "Hey. Do you hear that?" I really didn't want to mention that I'd been hearing things for a while now.

We found the source in the office next door: a still-flickering terminal that had been hacked, but not logged out, and was playing recorded audio files. The speaker was a deep-voiced, mournful-

sounding stallion. I looked around the office and spotted a slashed painting in the corner; a bile-yellow pegasus smirked out of the canvas.

"Yellow River Detainment Camp to Ministry of Peace. Camps B, C, and D are one hundred and forty percent over containment. Camp A is a hundred and sixty percent over. I've got stripes sleeping on the floors here. We need more food and medicine or we're going to be looking at a major epidemic. I've got some stripes that have started eating each other. The only tribe that behaves itself are those creepy Starkatteri, and every other tribe is trying to murder them. We've got to get the population down before something explodes."

There was a click, and the next one played automatically.

"Hey, Shifty. The Ministry of Peace is giving me three hundred more units of healing potions and two thousand pounds of basic food stock. Should turn a mighty profit, huh? Now that Goldenblood's gone, all those surprise inspections and little impromptu investigations are a thing of the past. Morale couldn't find their own asshole with a case of diarrhea these days. I got to get me more stripes in the camps. Heck, we'll put the striped bastards on the roofs if we got to. Oh! And I might have found my retirement: some stripe was 'accidentally' shipped here. Rumor is she's got some kind of super talisman inside her. Experimental. If you can move it, I'll cut you in for an extra three percent."

I glanced at the canvas. It really could use some more slashes…and maybe being burned.

"Colonel Cupcake, I have no idea what you're talking about. Yes, there have been zebras sent to my camp rather to their family in Zebratown. I understand you are upset. We're merely examining things, and then we'll release them to their family. I'll have you know we've got a major outbreak of some kind of disease here at Yellow River; I've got stripes eating each other. I have to make sure there's no chance of infection. I've had to dismiss all my non-pegasus staff to prevent it spreading. We'll keep her in the morgue till it can be safely released." A moment later there was a muttered, "I couldn't give two shits, Colonel. Where the fuck is it?"

"Fucker," I growled, feeling shooty and getting a look from Bluebelle. "If he didn't want to do the job, he should have quit. Whoever was in charge of this place was the one who deserved to be locked up." I tried to ignore the squirming corners of the room. My 'stomach' was really not happy with all the glass I'd put in it.

“Nobody deserved this.”

The next recording that played was an automated message in a strange robotic voice. “EMERGENCY MEMORANDUM: ALL PEGASI ARE TO ABANDON ALL GROUND POSITIONS IMMEDIATELY AND RETURN TO THUNDERHEAD. DROP EVERYTHING YOU ARE DOING! COME HOME NOW! LUNA IS DEAD. EQUESTRIA IS FINISHED.”

“Fucking turkeys,” Bluebelle muttered and spat to the side. I sat down, closing my eyes and trying to ignore the pulsating sensation in my head.

“They didn’t all go,” I said as I closed my eyes. “I know at least three that stayed down here when everything went to hell. Two of them became ghouls, one died trying to help surface ponies. And Rainbow Dash wanted to help, too.” Maybe she lived. Maybe she died. I wondered if I’d ever know for sure.

I used my magic to tap the keys and played the last recording. I looked over at the corner, seeing something move. I brought out Vigilance, tapping it against my knee as I slumped against the wall. The papers on the floor were moving back and forth the longer I stared at them. They seemed to be arranging themselves into the shapes of dead zebras.

Finally, the terminal started playing two voices, they were distant, as if they’d been recorded by accident.

“Director Mephitis, what are you doing?” asked a mare.

“What does it look like I’m doing, Cirrus? Getting the fuck out of here!”

“You can’t just leave! There are over five thousand prisoners out there!” Cirrus protested.

“Fuck the prisoners. Fuck every last striped one of them. If they’d just let me shoot them like I asked, then there wouldn’t BE a prisoner problem. Now get the hell out of my way! We only have a few hours to get back to Thunderhead!”

“You are not going to just leave them!” Then there was a pause. “Is that money? You’re taking bags of money with you?” There was a sound of bags being cinched tightly down

“Of course, you idiot. I’m not going home to be broke! This is my retirement. The savages are eating each other already. They can take care of it. There were reports of rioting in every prison across Equestria. Hightower’s in lockdown. Shattered Hoof let their prisoners free! Not me. Fuck no. Let them rot.”

"Just open the gate, deactivate the collars, and turn off the autoguns. Give them a chance!" the mare protested, then said a moment later in a firmer voice, "If you don't, I promise that everypony in Thunderhead will know you left thousands to die! Not even zebras deserve this!"

There was a pause and the buck sighed. "Fine. You care so much? Set a timer to shut everything down. You can use my terminal."

"Thank you, Director. I'll get it set up right awa--"

There was a gunshot. There came the stomping of hooves. I rose and stared at the terminal.

A few seconds later, a buck said, "What the…Director? What happened?"

"Suicide. Just couldn't take it anymore, Gusty," the director said quickly. "Let's hurry. She set a timer to release the prisoners. They'll have to look after themselves, but at least they'll have a chan--"

"You--" I reared up and brought my forelegs down on the monitor as I screamed, "Fucker!" I tried to hit it so hard that it would somehow magically travel back through space and time and make his head explode like the glass monitor did. Even detonating all those collars would have been more merciful than what I'd just heard. I stared at the sparking terminal, then opened my PipBuck. I was glad to see I could still extract the audio files. Then, after I did so, I stomped the terminal into electric scrap and threw the mess at to the obnoxious portrait.

"They just…he just left them to starve?" Bluebelle asked, the tough Highlander looking sick.

"Why? Why the fuck did the good ponies have to die and fuckers like him live?!" I screamed, seething as I followed it up with kicking the desk over. Then I wanted to knock over the file cabinets. Light the whole floor on fire! No, I wanted the blow the whole camp to the moon. The city! The entire fucking Wasteland! I wanted it all destroyed! "It's not fair! It's not fucking right!" I was sounding like a petulant filly, but at the moment I didn't care. I was just so damned angry, and sick, and tired. I fired Vigilance over and over again at a crawling corner as the Highlander shrank back.

Then the shadows screamed as a bullet hit something far more fleshy.

The corner unfurled into a striped shape in a shimmering cloak that threw something shaped like some kind of egg at us. My magic caught it, and since I didn't have a clue what it might do, I tossed it

into the far corner by the door. Three seconds later it exploded, and white sticky webbing went everywhere. Bluebelle pounced upon the zebra, who screamed as she curled up, raising her hooves defensively.

"Bluebelle!" I yelled as she reared up.

"She was spyin' on us!" the Highlander shouted.

"I would have too!" I said as I moved in close. She looked a little younger than me. Her eyes were a soft gold, and they were wide open in terror. Her mane was braided into a black-and-white-striped ponytail; how ironic. "I don't want to hurt you," I said as I lowered my voice. "Do you understand me?" I glanced at her flank where her stripes seemed to make an image of two crossed wrenches. Or bones, but at the moment I was being optimistic. I stared, and her bar went from blue to red to blue again, but I had no idea if that was her hostility or my eyes.

She nodded, then said in slow, trembling words, "Please don't kill me. I am a technician. Not a hunter, not a fighter." If she was acting, she deserved an award; the mare had wet herself in fear. Even Bluebelle seemed disinclined to fight anyone who would do that. The bullet had just grazed her hindquarters, a superficial injury, but still, every injury was serious with enough Enervation.

I looked over at the smashed terminal. "You hacked the terminal, didn't you?" She stared and nodded slowly. "And you heard what happened here?" Now there was a little bit of anger. "Sorry about that." And that anger was replaced by confusion. "For what happened here…to your people. They should have been let go and given a chance."

"Y'all realize they woulda gone right through the highlands ta get back to their own country, right?" Bluebelle asked me with a snort that made the mare flinch.

Now the zebra looked baffled. "You are the Star Maiden…" she said as she took a few hesitant steps back till her rump met the wall.

"Star what?" I blinked in my own confusion.

"The Star Maiden of the fallen city. The one who brings death, chaos, and destruction," she said with a gulp. "The reaper of the lost land."

"Death? Chaos? Destruction? Sounds like a Reaper to me," Bluebelle chuckled.

I gave her a sour look before I examined the zebra. She wore some

sort of webbing under that cloak, not even the slightest bit of armor to guard her. The only weapon I saw was a dagger on her forehoof. She was definitely outgunned by both of us. I gave a wan smile. “I don’t mean to hurt anyone if I can help it. I’m Blackjack. What’s your name?”

She looked from me to Bluebelle and back again. “Xanthe,” she said as she slowly moved onto her hooves. “Please…Kill me quickly…”

I looked at Bluebelle, the scowling mare certainly looking so inclined. Then I looked back at Xanthe in confusion. “Um…why would I kill you?” For some reason, that set her on a fresh crying jag as she bowed her head. “Wait! Hold on. What’s the matter?” She sniffed and frowned, rubbing her eyes with a hoof before she frowned at me.

“Please…do not toy with me. Whatever curse you are to bestow, please do so quickly,” she said as she rubbed the tears from her eyes. “I…I do no fear your worst, Star Maiden!” Her face might have looked momentarily fierce save for her eyes, but her shaking knees definitely betrayed her.

I just stared at her for a long moment and then sighed, slowly shaking my head. “I don’t have time for this,” I said as I turned and started for the door.

“What?” The zebra asked in confusion. “What kind of curse is this?”

“The ‘I got better things to do’ kind,” I replied as I stepped out into the hallway. Nothing much up here. That left down below. I made sure I had the explosive crate nice and secure across my back. “I have no idea who this Star Maiden is or why you seem to think I am her.” I expected that to be it, but then she started following us!

“The Star Maiden is she who is born from the cursed soil of the damned city. She will be flesh and steel, touched by the stars and chosen as their champion. Where she travels, chaos and strife will follow,” Xanthe said as she trotted in our wake. Why, I couldn’t imagine. “It is she who shall bear evil from the ground, usher in the final days of the world, snuff out the sun forever and call down the moon. She shall summon storms, unleash plague, command unholy fire, destroy all in her path and all who follow in her wake. Female shall desire female, male shall desire male, and unholy coupling between the species will commence where she travels.”

“Damn…” Bluebelle snickered and leered at the zebra. “I’m getting

moist right now just hearing all this." Xanthe gasped as she cringed away and I looked back to see her eyes wide and popping.

"Right. So why are you following us again?" I asked as I started down the stairs.

She blinked, then worked her mouth, and then shrank back, pointing a hoof at me. "You…you have cursed me! Your foul star magics have ensorcelled me!" I looked back…and my hoof slipped and I rolled down to land on my back in the first floor offices. My glass-filled gut gave an unpleasant lurch as I glared up at the golden-eyed zebra.

"There? See?" I snapped as I looked at her from the floor. "Would the dreaded Star Maiden fall on her ass?"

It saved me from getting my skull crushed. The zebra came out of the shadows like a ghost with a wild kick plunging down at my face. Lying on my back, I was able to get my hooves up in time to block it. "No. Do not fight her. We are all doomed! She has cursed us all!" Xanthe wailed from the stairs, then started jabbering in Zebra.

The zebra fighting me, however, wasn't inclined to listen as she backflipped away. I rose to my hooves, drawing and bringing up my sword as the mare charged. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and locked in two attacks, and they still missed. She sidestepped the first swipe, ducked the second, and then did another backflip that smacked me in the face with both her rear hooves. She knocked me standing upright as I staggered back against the wall.

She said something brief in Zebra that I supposed was 'you die now', but it might have been 'eat cream cheese' for all I knew. Then she rammed both her forehooves into my gut.

Now, I have no idea just how stomach-like my stomach was, but when you've overeaten, getting kicked like that is no good at all. I gripped her shoulders with my fingers and felt everything working in reverse. There was nothing I could do as I puked liquefied glass and metal in her face. The clear fluid solidified seconds after it left my throat, freezing to her horrified face in a mask. She fell back, flopping and flailing wildly as I spat aside gobs of glass, struggling to keep upright. That blow had done some major damage to my internals, and every bit of watery glass was brought up.

Xanthe stared at me, her eyes even wider if it were possible. Even Bluebelle was starting to look more uneasy about this. Beatdowns with metal hooves were one thing, but clearly vomiting liquid glass

was a whole realm of fucked-upness that only cyberponies could obtain. I wanted to try and break the dying zebra's mouth and nose free, but at the moment I was dealing with some internal damage. When I could finally move, the zebra's body had gone limp. I sighed and tried to pull off her stealth cloak, but to my amazement, it dissolved in my hooves! The blue gemstone clasp immediately cracked and went dark. No fair sabotaging the loot! I gave the nervous zebra a glare, and she gulped.

"Mistcloaks are woven of shadow spider silk and disappear like morning dew in summer if taken from their owner," she said as she hugged her own to her form. I wondered why she didn't just go invisible and leave. Really, I wasn't inclined to stop her! I searched the dead zebra, found some sort of dried gourd, and peeked inside. Something milky purple and healing-potion-looking.

"Here. Both of you drink this before the Enervation makes those injuries worse," I said as I passed the gourd to them.

"You wish me whole and healthy to suffer ever more, do you not, Maiden?" Xanthe said as she took it and drank it reluctantly before giving it to Bluebelle who, seeing the graze heal, lost her reluctance to drink for her injured shoulder.

"I wish you'd go back to your own people," I retorted, feeling my insides pulling themselves back into place after that blow.

She gave a sad, twisty little smile. "And carry your curse to them? They would kill me at once. And I would not take it to them in the first place. You have doomed me, Star Maiden, and you may doom the entire world, but I will not do your work for you."

"I'm about to doom you with a buck upside your head," I said as I looked around. The terminal recordings had talked about a morgue. That would be the next place I would check before getting the heck out of here. "What are you zebras doing here in the first place?" I asked as I fired a round into a corner where I'd thought something had moved.

"I can't tell you that! You're the Maiden!" she gasped, and I groaned as we moved through the ground floor processing offices looking for a door or stairs down. "The champion of the stars! The bringer of all things evil! With your left hoof you will bring down the fires of the sun, and with your right you will call down the moon!" Xanthe said all in a rush, gasping for a breath at the end. Then she looked at me and continued, "Even if you will destroy the world, you can still be stopped. The last Maiden was. Three times!"

"The last Maiden?" I asked with a smirk over my shoulder. "Who was that? Doesn't sound like she was very good at her job."

"No. It was your 'Princess Luna'," Xanthe replied. That brought me up short. Slowly, I turned and looked back at her. I must have been giving her quite the shooty look…or maybe it was the 'Maiden of the Stars' look for her.

"Excuse me? Could you elaborate on that, please?" I asked as I turned and stood before the shrinking zebra. She quivered and began to whimper.

"You knew her as Nightmare Moon," said a familiar voice from the shadows. My mane went all kinds of squirmy as I saw the shadows unwind and expose the zebra from the mine and the museum. Lancer looked at me along the barrel of his gun with his hard, cold eyes. But I just looked right back at him. If he was going to take the shot, then he would have taken it without all the drama. "It was here, in this doomed city, that Nightmare Moon stopped the sun from rising. And it was here, on the ashes of this burned town, that your Princess Luna declared she would take the throne her sister surrendered and lead Equestria to victory."

"So why are you still talking and not blowing my head off?" I asked Lancer as I saw the shadowy depths of the office squirming and creeping. Red bars drifted back and forth in my vision.

"The honor of your death falls to the Legate himself. He yearns to smash your unnatural body with his own hooves," Lancer said as he stood, keeping his rifle aimed right at my head. "When he does so, this ground shall be razed and all within slaughtered like the vermin you are." I stared into his eyes. Cold and hard and certain.

"Right," I said, "well, since he's not here, and you're not going to steal his kill, maybe you can take Xanthe here off my hooves and let me get on my way. I want to find out what the Enclave are up to." I smirked. "Don't worry. I didn't curse her. Unicorn magic doesn't work like that." At least, according to the primer it didn't.

He turned his rifle on Xanthe. I barely got in front of her to catch the bullet with my side. It bit deep, knocking me back against Bluebelle and the zebra, who shrank back with a little shriek. I turned Vigilance on him, but he was already moving. When I jumped into S.A.T.S., he continued to move…*everything* moved in a slow smear across my vision. I lurched, and by the time I was out of S.A.T.S. he'd vanished. I knew better than to think he was gone, though.

"You don't realize it, Security, but you have cursed her," he said from the shadows... but his voice sounded odd to me. "You have cursed her with kindness. You have infected her with your mercy. And like everything that you touch, she will be destroyed."

"You bloody…murdering…bastard!" I shouted into the shadows. I saw the darkness moving, forming eyes and mouths on the dim and dingy walls. I fired Vigilance again and again into every shadowy corner. My horn threw a storm of papers and rubbish around me, looking to see it bounce off some invisible assailant. When I ran out of bullets, I drew my sword, swinging wildly as I raced around. "You won't hurt her! You won't!" Shadowy ponies parted with each slice, reforming…laughing at my futile efforts. Darkness spattered my vision as I attacked things that weren't there.

I was grasping at shadows.

Bluebelle and Xanthe both stared at me in alarm and horror. "What?" I shouted, exasperated as I swished the sword in the air and spattered blood across both of them.

Wait…?

Slowly I looked at the blood on the hilt of my sword. Felt the blood that was dripping down my face. I looked down at the decapitated zebra in front of me. Saw another torn open along her side. A sniper lay there with her face a concave hole. Another was dying from three meaty chunks taken out of his chest. I'd killed them and I hadn't even realized it. Hadn't even realized that they were *there*. Wounds from more than just Lancer's round throbbed and burned, yet I hadn't felt them. The pain was so familiar I hadn't even recognized it. I staggered and grabbed a kicked-over desk. When had I kicked it over? Had I, or had somepony else?

I shook as I dropped the sword. In Xanthe's eyes, I was evil incarnate. And Bluebelle stared at me as if realizing just how deadly I could be when so inclined. I wasn't the mare she'd dropped on her head back in the refinery. My chest ached terribly, like there was a fire digging into whatever now passed for a heart. "Don't look at me like that…" I asked in a low rush. They kept staring. If it had been my friends looking at me that way, I don't know what I would have done. "Don't look at me!" I screamed at them.

I liked it better when I was missing half my face. It was easier than missing half my sanity.

* * *

Finally, I found the morgue. It was, predictably, located in the vicinity of 'Medical', which was marked in great big signs written in two different languages. Like everything else, it had been tossed long ago, but it had a sink. I look the opportunity to wash the blood off my face. It didn't seem to come off though, no matter how much I scrubbed. Then I noticed the mirror; there was a nick below my horn that kept bleeding. It was taking its sweet time healing, but with all the Enervation in the room…

"So. Why are you here?" I asked Xanthe as I dabbed at the wound with a roll of dirty gauze; I'd probably make Glory scream in frustration if she saw me, but the blood was getting annoying. She stared at her hooves and said the 'm name'. "I just took a bullet for you! Tell me!" I snapped.

She jumped and lay flat on the ground. "There was a mighty warrior during the war who could not be felled. A magical artifact preserved her on the battlefield. Somehow she was laid low in a battle in the badlands outside the city. Her body was brought here. We learned from a ghoul who had been alive back then that the talisman had never been removed from the body. So we came here to get it for Legate Vitiosus."

"Shifty?" I asked, and she looked nervously confused. "Was that the ghoul's name?"

The nervous confusion became nervous sadness as she nodded. "I believe so. He bemoaned many opportunities missed," she said as she swallowed hard and looked around. "We arrived but found those pegasi here. We did not know why, only that they had explosives. We could not risk the artifact getting destroyed."

"Right. Because talking things out and working out an agreement suiting both sides is a stupid idea." I sighed and stepped away from the sink, a few rads hotter, and looked at the door to the morgue.

"So if this magic thingy was so powerful, how'd this warrior o' yours get killed?" Bluebelle asked.

"No zebra knows," Xanthe replied quietly as she looked around the medical room at the smashed cabinets and slashed Ministry of Peace pictures. Hunks of meat, preserved by Enervation, were scattered everywhere, lying dry and dark on the gurneys and floor. Bloody bonesaws and scalpels showed the butchery that had taken place here. "No bullet could slay her. She would fall, and then rise again."

“Sounds like somepony I know,” Bluebelle said as she looked over at me. “Seriously. He just shot you and you treated it like it was nothing!”

“Regeneration talisman, synthetic organs, and artificial legs… ” I muttered as I sucked on my last ruby; when had gems become comfort food? “He’d have to shoot me more than just once to kill me. He might get me with a headshot, though,” I said as I put my helmet back on. He said this Legate wanted to kill me, sure, but I wasn’t going to count on him not taking the honor himself.

I couldn’t trust my E.F.S. anymore. There could have been two red bars or twenty in the morgue. They kept shifting around on me. Bluebelle had taken the opportunity to grab a battered hoofball helmet left in the Special Processing area; Lancer’s promise to spare me didn’t extend to anypony with me. I looked at the collar around her throat and then at Xanthe. I wasn’t exactly sure where she fell on the smart pony scale.

“Can you do something about her collar?” I asked, trying to ignore the noises that didn’t fit. I kept hearing what I imagined to be a dozen exploding collars going off at once. I think bomb collars were my number one most hated device in the Hoof.

“What?” Bluebelle said as she pointed at Xanthe. “I’m not going to let a filthy stripe touch it! Find me some pony who can do the job! I don’t need no help from her!”

Xanthe shrank back. “I will not. You may have cursed me, but I owe nothing to ponykind!”

In a flash, I whirled on both of them. “You!” I snapped at Bluebelle, grabbing her shoulders. She suddenly looked like she expected to get a faceful of liquid glass. “The only pony here who isn’t disintegrating folks is me! Do you want me to try and get that collar off you? Do you?” She quickly shook her head, and I rounded on Xanthe. She gave an eep and curled up in horror. “And you! Didn’t you just tell me that you can’t go home now that you’re cursed? That means you are stuck here! THAT means that you should put whatever skills you have to use helping ponies and generating good will. Because your alternative is to join the Harbingers, and they really piss me off!”

She backed up and started shaking terribly. Ugh…she’d just been cursed by the most evilest thing her people knew…me…and cut off from said people on pain of death…and here I was shouting at her! I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the distant screaming of my

friends. They weren't here. It was just me being crazy. Don't take it out on her. "Look. This sucks for both of you. Neither of you asked to be put in this mess…and that's all that happens around me. I can run into a total stranger and completely fuck their life up just by standing there. But I can't do this all on my own anymore. If you two can help each other…please…help."

I sighed. That was all I could hope for. Then I peeked and saw Bluebelle grudgingly tilt her head to let the zebra examine it. "Just…don't blow my damned head off," the blue mare said as she clenched her eyes closed.

Xanthe examined the collar as I checked the door. Locked, but I had a card. Carefully I opened it and peeked down the short hallway on the other side. Funny…everywhere else was completely disgusting, but the room beyond looked clean. "I…I don't think…" she stammered as she pulled her hooves away.

"If you're not sure, it's okay. Better that than not trying," I said as I looked back through the crack into the morgue. There were gurneys set up like workstations, and along one wall were dozens of steel doors like those in 99's tiny morgue. I always thought they looked like little refrigerators. The flickering lights had been replaced by steadier illumination, and I could see some terminals on a gurney.

I slowly started through the short hallway. "Okay, I know this sounds crazy, but I don't want to fight you," I called out as I moved forward, not sure what was my E.F.S. giving me warnings and what was all in my head. I couldn't believe the morgue would be empty, and after my tirade and the fights above, I doubted that they were ignorant of us being here.

"In a pig's eye," a stallion muttered in return.

"She ain't red," said a mare, weakly.

"Identify yourself!" drawled a familiar-sounding voice.

"Twister?" I asked, then peeked around the corner at three power-armored pegasi. They'd made an impromptu barricade that would have lasted all of three seconds against a concentrated attack. "What are you doing here?" I asked the Neighvarro pegasus I'd met and ridden from Spike's cave.

She popped off her helmet, her lavender coat reminding me of Dazzle. More purplish-blue but no glitter in Twister's mane, though. "Blackjack…is that…" She took in my appearance in one long horrified look. "What in tarnation happened to you, girl? T'aint no decent reason fer any mare anywhere ta have that much iron in

their body!"
"Hoofington happened," I replied with a wan smile. "I saw the shooting. Wanted to see what's up."
The stallion with the missiles growled, "You think we're stupid 'nuff ta think yer stupid 'nuff ta just trot down here 'cause yer curious? Ain't nopony that dumb anywhere!"
"Y'all don't know Blackjack, Boomer." The lavender pegasus looked at Bluebelle and Xanthe with a mix of suspicion and distaste. "What y'all doin' with that stripe? She looks like one o' them that pinned us in here!"
"She met me and her life got ruined as a result," I said as I stepped a little between Twister and Xanthe. Boomer and Sunset--at least, I thought that was her name--looked at each other immediately. "Oh…I suspect you can relate?" The zebra gave me a look that seemed to say 'see?'.
Twister finally relaxed. She didn't look good at all; rather wan and sickly, in fact. I suspected it had to be the Enervation leeching away their life. "I reckon we can. Command didn't take kindly to us abandonin' our posts. They were lookin' ta make an example o' all three o' us. I nearly ended up assigned to the wrong side of a firin' squad. But then I told 'em what you told me, that Operative Lighthooves made a plague. That got the leadership mighty curious. Turns out we've got records of a disease like that."
"Director Mephitis?" I asked.
"Mhmmm. One of the oldest medical families in the Enclave wrote about it." I grit my teeth, wishing I could have castrated him with sheer rage. After what he did to Cirrus in that recording... I tried to tone down the shooty look. Sunset and Boomer didn't know me as well as she did, and she barely knew me at that. As I relaxed, everyone seemed to calm down a bit. "Since the three of us were contaminated, we were sent with a surface team to try and find out just what Thunderhead's been up to."
"Isn't that against the treaty Neighvarro has with Thunderhead?" I asked with a frown.
"Very," Sunset said as she struggled with her helmet. After a bit she finally popped the seal, revealing a rust-colored mare with an orange-and-yellow-striped mane. "Officially, we never came back. We're deserters until we complete our mission." She looked at the other two and then at me. "Doubt them Dunderheads would believe it for a second, but it'll be a handy excuse fer why we're down

here."

"I see. And did you find something?" I asked as I looked at the terminals.

Twister nodded. "We did. They found the plague preserved in the bodies in the freezer," she said as she gestured to the shiny metal doors. "Apparently it's a zebra disease that makes them eat the flesh of the dead."

Xanthe's eyes popped wide. "Blood hunger plague is here?!" She immediately started to wipe her hooves. "I…this place…we must all leave it!"

"Relax." It's only a disease that drives you slowly insane till you eat other ponies' legs. "What do you know about it?" I asked the zebra.

"A horrible disease that breaks out during terrible famines. When there is no food, a zebra becomes desperate enough to eat their own kind! Then the hunger takes effect. When they are killed, the starving eat their flesh and are infected themselves. No amount of cooking can kill the disease." And nor could stable digesters.

"Is…is there a cure?" Could I have done something to save my home? As messed up as it had been…

But Xanthe just shook her head. "In my home, any village afflicted with the plague would be quarantined and burned. The disease is not like others. It must be ingested. Only in the stomach does it start to spread. But if some of the disease gets on your hoof and transferred to your meal, you can infect yourself or others. One strip of contaminated flesh in a cookpot, and an entire village can be lost." I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Perhaps I should have done it differently, but knowing that I hadn't messed up…that there wasn't a simple cure like brahmin milk or something…was a great relief to me.

"Since it's a zebra disease anyway, why doesn't it affect pegasi?" I asked, and immediately Twister and Sunset looked at each other uneasily. Great, now what?

Sunset frowned. "Pegasi are ponies the most different from zebra. The disease has a harder time getting established in us. But…" She trotted over to one of the metal doors in the wall. I joined her as she carefully opened the door with her hoof. There was a long metal table. Carefully, the rust colored mare tugged the table out.

There were four dead pegasi on it. All of them had the chewed appearance of a raider making a meal of their limbs. "These are all Neighvarro ponies who've gone missing in the last two weeks.

Maybe deserters like us…maybe not." Two weeks was long enough for the disease to run its course. Even more disturbing, the ponies had been carved. Great chunks of flesh had been removed, not wildly, but with care. Only their heads were more or less untouched, though their lips were chewed off in permanent rictus grins.

"Those pegasi outside aren't with you, are they?" I asked with a sinking sensation.

"There are pegasi outside? Fighting the zebra?" Twister asked, looking worried as she glanced at the other two.

I lifted the crate of explosives with my magic. "They had this."

"Whoa!" Boomer rushed over to the long black box and flipped it open with far more eagerness than I would have. Inside were a number of containers filled with strange colored fluids and tubes. "Aw yeah! A four part liquid rainbow explosive with lightning detonation system. Spicy!" The stallion chuckled. "Set this sucker off and get ready for some hella rough weather!"

"Y'all know about explosives?" Bluebelle asked at once.

He pulled off his helmet, revealing a bald brown buck who was surprisingly handsome. He had a prominent chin and wide, easy grin. "Well, yeah. Why else do you think they call me 'Boomer'?" He wagged his bushy black eyebrows at the uneasy mare.

"Chili night back at flight school," Sunset said at once with a roll of her eyes.

"Cleared out the barracks for days," Twister added solemnly. "Was mandated by command to never feed him beans, or it'd be a crime against pegasus kind."

"On par with a sonic rainboom," Sunset finished. "From his hindquarters."

"All right! Shut it already," he muttered, ears folding down. He snorted as he trotted away from the box and peered at Bluebelle's collar. Then he reached out, did something with his hooves, and a second later yanked it off. Everypony jumped and Bluebelle gave a shriek. He lifted the collar with a hoof. "Piece a junk." He tossed it into the corner.

"Are you…you could…I…" Bluebelle stammered a moment, pointing a hoof at Boomer.

"Wut?" he asked with a frown. Suddenly she lunged, grabbed his neck in her hooves, and with a heave flipped him over on to his back, power armor and all. She pressed her lips to his in a long,

hard kiss that made his hooves kick helplessly in the air. Then, just as swiftly as she grabbed him, she turned him so he was upright once more with a dreamy look on his face. A moment later, his wings stuck straight out on both sides.

"Thanks," she replied with a smile as he went red as a cherry.

"Our little boy's all grown up," Twister said with a smile to Sunset.

However, it was Xanthe that caught my eye. She was staring at a clipboard next to a different refrigerator door. "Are you okay?" I asked with a little smile.

"It's her," Xanthe said quietly. "The warrior…"

I looked at the door and then at the clipboard. Only one thing caught my eye. The name: Shujaa.

Shit. The talisman he was after was inside one of my best friends. I looked at the clipboard.

Field Report: subject (identified as Proditor Shujaa) was found at conflict site 99-1238-J. While no injuries were apparent on the body, subject was deceased. Sergeant Twist, the only survivor of the reconnaissance team, was hysterical and had to be sedated for transportation to FMC for treatment. O.I.A. Image liaison Glass has requested the body and any and all objects on or within the body to be turned over to the O.I.A. for transfer to the Ministry of Image. Said transfer is being delayed by order of Camp Director Mephitis. Colonel Cupcake has formally requested all remains to be sent to Miramare Air Station for funeral services.

There were maps and pictures attached that made little sense to me. I looked at the door. It was just a look. What could it hurt? I opened it and pulled out the little sliding table…

What was on the table was not a zebra. Not the mare I had seen in a grainy black and white photograph. It was merely so many pieces of zebra heaped around bones. They'd smashed and torn her to pieces; some ghoul had come along and taken some of the remains. Never was I gladder that Rampage was not here to see this; never was I happier to have a really big bomb to give Shujaa the send-off she deserved.

"Looks like you wasted your time coming here," I said hoarsely to the horrified, sick-looking zebra.

"Everything's been a waste of time," Rampage said behind the doors. My chest ached terribly as I sat on the floor.

"Set your bomb, Boomer," I said loudly, closing my eyes. "Set if for five minutes. Let Lancer see Shujaa for himself. There is no

talisman…so let us go." Was it my imagination, or was that faintest shimmer the zebra himself? I itched to stab the air as it stepped closer. I stared at the distortion. "Going to shoot us in the back now?"

There was no reply. I wasn't even sure he'd been there at all. I could hear the voices of the dead screaming distantly. My friends were among them. I could hear thousands of zebras wailing as they starved and gnashed their teeth, some giving in to hunger, some lunging ahead to be cut down by the turrets, and some blowing their own heads off with their collars. It didn't matter if it was in my head or not. I rose to my hooves and there was nothing but hate in me. Boomer pushed some buttons, and the rainbow fluids began to swirl together and spark magically as a timer counted down.

Slowly I made my way to the door back into medical, then up the stairs. Behind me I could hear the soft hoofsteps of the living and the dead. We were leaving. Celestia help anypony who got in my way. I stepped into the night rain; the lightning blasted overhead and the thunder rolled through my blood as if the elements themselves had finally seen this blight, this sin…and roared against it.

"Get down, on the ground n--" bellowed the pegasus in the sleeker, fancier-looking Thunderhead armor. Five of them, four on the ground and one in the air. Only five? Then I was on him, racing the short distance separating us as if I were in S.A.T.S. and I grabbed the respirator tubes running to his muzzle. My twisting hands flipped him over as he started firing wildly. The sword flashed in the lightning, glistening in the light. It entered his crotch, and moved till it reached his throat in one terrific slash. Then I heaved him, his bloody viscera erupting from the split armor over the face of the second pegasus.

I saw light. Felt heat. Moved. My hooves raced towards the source of those crimson beams. So hot. Very hot. I imagined myself bursting into flame. Exploding from all the rage and hate inside me. I imagined every one of these Enclave to be the camp director. I was screaming something; the words didn't matter anymore as I closed the distance like I'd taken a hit of Flash. Out came Duty and Sacrifice. Four shots in slow motion chewed through the fancy visor. The fifth shot blew a red fountain of chunks as his beam rifles went dark.

One of the pegasi took to the air. I leapt up, my mechanical fingers

grabbing that scorpion tail as we lifted higher and higher into the flashing sky. This was Lighthooves, the sneaky son of a mule who had seen this atrocity and not destroyed it. Who had used it. Who had killed other pegasi just to make his disease work on his own kind. Glory had once mentioned how tough pegasi wings were…

My sword was tougher.

I stabbed it through the armor covering, and the mare inside screamed. With all the strength I could manage in my horn, I ripped the blade down completely through her wing, and we tumbled together end over end. The airborne pegasus was close…too close. Perhaps he didn't notice her falling wing. Perhaps he was just unlucky. He blasted me with glowing, disintegrating energy, the magic eating into my armor. If I'd been flesh and blood, perhaps I would have died then, transformed into glowing slop.

I wasn't flesh and blood. I was hatred and pain in pony shape.

I leapt the distance and wrapped my forehooves around his neck. He flipped almost completely upside-down, his energy cannons blasting. This close, I could almost imagine I could see his eye through his visor. I had no idea how far up we were. I could hear shouting, but then, I could hear screaming, too. Could hear thunder. Could hear everything except my own heart. Within, I was silent. My fingers gripped his helmet as he shook and shot wildly. My other hoof beat at his face again and again with all the force I could muster. There was a crack, a pop, and then the left side of the visor popped free. I stared into a wide green eye, saw two pinpricks of red reflected in it.

My horn managed three magical bullets before it burned out. The pegasus's wings went limp, and we tumbled down into the rain and darkness. The bones broke my fall, snapping and scattering as they parted beneath me to deposit me on the muddy ground. I should have stayed down. I should have.

I wasn't done yet. I ignored the flashing lights, the warnings that I was crippled and needed to stay down. I pulled myself to my hooves, walked towards a one-winged pegasus that was trying to turn me to ash even as I approached. I might not have had a working horn, but I had fingers. And I had bones. The mare moved so slowly. Too slowly. I plucked one of the scattered bones, a rib, by the look of it, and sprang upon her. Rover was right…fingers were better. Fingers of one hoof seized her armor, her beam rifle flashing past me by inches. I could feel the warmth of the magic on my hide.

Fingers of my other hoof drove the broken end of the rib through the hole of the severed wing. It didn't kill her. That was okay. I had another.

And another. And another.

When she stopped firing, I rose and looked at the others through the rain. The last pegasus had gotten clear of the corpse I'd thrown in her face. She saw me running at her. Took to the air…Flying for her life.

She almost made it. My hands grabbed her stinger tail, and we were aloft. She looked down at me and flew by one of the towers with its rusty turret still pointing guns at the building below. I supposed she intended to scrape me off.

Nopony was scraping me anywhere. My body slammed into the rusty tower, but I had no lungs to crush or puncture and no heart to falter. My rear legs gripped the rusty rails and my fingers locked down on the tail. Suddenly the pegasus went from accelerating forward to a dead stop, snapping like a rubber band. Then she was going backwards once more as I heaved and kicked off the tower. We flipped end over end as we fell, her wings struggling for purchase with my massive weight attached. We landed square on a curved roof and smashed through the rusty metal plating.

Inside, bunk beds stacked five high shattered beneath us. Bones, hide, and rags snapped and tore as dust filled the air. The pegasus pulled herself to her hooves, turning to face me as I rose and started forward. Had she run, had she fled, she might have gotten away in those seconds.

Not anymore.

The gatling beam guns flashed, each shot seemed to take a minute as I charged. My body was in agony. So what? I was always in agony. Life was agony. I knew exactly how Deus must have felt when he was dropped on those zebras. Hurt. Violated. Angry. Nothing would stop him. Nothing would stop me now. I tackled her neck and drove her into the stack of bunk beds behind her. The structure collapsed upon us, yet I still didn't stop. My rear legs tore up the ground as I pushed forward. I wanted her to break, wanted my body to fail. Wanted this whole world to shatter.

I wanted to kill in the worst way possible.

We moved through the avalanching wood and bone and finally ran out of building. The thin metal wall ripped through with a shriek and dumped us back in the mud. Her fancy gatling weapons were

nothing against my rage; as I smashed her into a tangle of razor wire, both her weapons finally sparked and popped and went dark as she reclined against it. Her wings beat frantically.

She wasn't going anywhere.

I stood before her like a zebra and began to beat and pound and rip at her armor. My hooves could repair themselves. So could her armor, if I gave her the time. I wasn't about to do that. I beat and smashed her visor till it popped open. Wide purple eyes stared as she raised her forelegs defensively. I simply smashed and tore into them along with her face. Finally I gripped her helmet with my fingers and began to pull. My motors hummed, sparked, and smoked. My skin stretched and strained as if I were going to tear myself in two.

Maybe I was. Maybe I wanted to.

Then there was a scream of metal as I ripped her faceplate off. I held her head with one hand and drew back my hoof to smash her face out the back of her skull.

Then the lightning flashed, and I saw Glory's face. Not Rainbow Dash's…Glory. Purple mane peeked out. The lightning flashed again; I looked at the red dripping out of her mouth and nostrils. Her lips were moving, but I couldn't hear a thing. Just thunder and screams. My friends and the others were running at me. I saw the pain in her eyes…darker than the pony I remembered…

Not Glory…Dusk.

I was about to kill Glory's sister.

I looked at the three Neighvarro pegasi. The beating I'd given them was nothing compared to what I'd meted out this night. I wondered what horrors or ghost stories they had in the Enclave about ponies like me. Xanthe stared at me in mute horror. The Maiden of the Stars. Even the Highlander, her blue eyes wary…even scared… stared at me with one word on her face.

Reaper.

I threw back my head and screamed out all the hate and pain and rage inside me. I had to or I'd kill her. Kill everyone. I felt the bugs in my head chewing their way free. I wanted Lancer to hear me in the night. I wanted Lighthooves to hear me wherever he hid. I wanted whatever pony or machine that guided the Harbingers to know that at this moment I would tear down the towers of the Core itself with my bare hooves to destroy them. And as if in agreement, the concrete block of the processing center erupted in a fountain of

rainbow flame and a deafening blast that rolled through the camp. I imagined that I was the pony possessed by Shujaa and let the Wasteland hear her rage one final time.

Then the moment passed, and like that burning ball of rainbow fire, my fury was spent. Literally. My eyes darkened and my limbs stilled. I became as inert as the bones around me.

>Primary power systems exhausted. Emergency power supplies engaged.

All I could do was feel. Feel my burned hide. Feel the cold water pour down. Feel Dusk tremble beneath me.

A hoof touched my shoulder. I tried to speak, but my jaws couldn't move. Then I felt a gem pressed into my mouth, a minty emerald. There was a faint hum, then my eyes flickered to life. I looked at the unconscious Dusk beneath me. At Bluebelle beside me.

"Thanks," I said. No rasp. No fatigue. Even blasted, battered, and beaten, my body just needed recharging.

Carefully I stepped away, shook out several gems, and ate them, followed by cans of Cram. I kept my eyes down. "Help her... " was all I said, and the three pegasi helped the battered Dusk. No one came to help me; could I blame them?

Thousands of zebras watched me. They may have been ghosts and bones and shadows, but I could see them staring.

I looked at the wary Bluebelle. "You'll talk to your mother?" I asked calmly, barely audible over the rain. She nodded. I suspected she'd do everything she could to keep the Highlanders from helping the Harbingers track me down. I nodded and sheathed the sword. My armor and bags were half burned through, but right now all I needed to do was be able to keep walking.

I walked to Xanthe and looked at her. She curled up, shaking in the mud. She'd said I'd cursed her. I hadn't meant to. I hadn't meant to ruin her life simply by saving her life. But now I had to take care of her.

I was responsible.

"Get Dusk back to the Rainbow Dash Skyport," I said low and evenly to the Enclave trio. "If you can't, get her to the Collegiate. Tell Triage to help her. Take Xanthe with you." My eyes moved to the terrified zebra. "Xanthe... talk to Sagittarius and Triage. You're a good, smart zebra... you can have a life there. Understand?" She didn't reply. I couldn't blame her. I ate another gem, waiting for her to nod or voice some kind of acknowledgement. Finally, she gave a

little jerk of her head.

I left them, picking the dropped revolvers from the mud on my way. Thousands of eyes watched me. Even the dead were silent as I passed into the thunder and night. At the gate, I paused. I turned and stared up at one of the sentry towers. It was as if a force drew my eyes upwards. There, atop the spire, was the sixth Enclave pony, lit by the flickering flames of the burning processing center rubble. I knew him. It could only be him.

Come down here, I thought at him. *Come down here and let me finish with you what I started with Dusk.*

Soon, I imagined his reply. *Soon.* And then, with that, the armored pegasus launched himself into the dark sky. Alone, I turned as well, walking out into black rain.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 43: Lucidity

"So… got any problems, troubles, conundrums, or any other sort of issues major or minor that I as a* good *friend could help you solve?"

I stood in the middle of 99. Blood dripped from the corpses of my slain stable. They lay in heaps and piles all around me as I gasped for air. Daisy had been the hardest to kill, just like last time. But in the end, I'd chewed her back leg apart with shotgun blasts. Then it was two to the head and I was done. And now I trotted down towards the living quarters.

One door lock security override. Two shots. One override. Two shots. One override. Three shots. I was running low on bullets. One override. Two shots. One override…this was getting monotonous. I needed to start mixing it up. I used whatever blunt object I could lift. I tossed Rivets screaming into the recycler. That'd teach her. I finally nailed Midnight. The males I killed quick and clean.

Finally, I found the last PipBuck tag. The little pink filly wept and begged me not to kill her. Really, I shouldn't. I'd saved one, hadn't I?

No. No I hadn't.

I stared at the blood covering them; at my butchered home.

One gun…one shot…no Blackjack.

~ ~ ~

The sheets were warm and soft; they must have used magic to freshen them up. I stared up at images of pastel pegasus fillies romping and playing together in the clouds. Frozen eyes stared back down at me from the ceiling. There were more on the walls, gamboling in picturesque green glades with cute little bunnies, squirrels, and birds. Gentle music was piped in from somewhere,

along with the sound of birds chirping. Soft bed. Soft sheets. Soft room.

At least the restraints on my legs were something firm. Something I could jerk rhythmically against to keep myself from drowning in pastel pony fuzziness.

There was a knock, and I halted my tugging. I didn't look towards the door carefully molded to appear to blend into the space between two trees. I didn't move or breathe as I lay there. The door opened quietly, and in walked the pale teal pegasus mare with her wings outstretched, a tray balanced on them. "How are we today, Miss Fish? Feeling better, I hope? Feeling lucid?" she asked nervously, licking her lips.

"I'm fine, Harpica," I said quietly. "Call me Blackjack."

She swallowed. "You know we're not supposed to call you that, Miss Fish. Please don't yell at me…" She shrank back in anticipation. I simply lay there patiently, sighing. They really knew how to pick the perfect guard; a tough one I could resist, but this... She slid the tray onto my lap, not taking her eyes off me. She carefully tied down the tray and then slowly worked levers to lift me into a sitting position. Pudding served in a wax paper bowl. No spoons. Not after the last escape attempt. Harpica had been the only nurse brave enough to feed me after what I'd done to Caprice's eye. "Can I feed myself?" I asked, trying to resist the urge to pull on my restraints. That made them all nervous.

The pegasus swallowed, looking around. There was a tiny little ping. A 'yes' tone. Some of the eyes painted on the walls were more literal than others. "O…okay. Please be good, Miss Fish," she begged softly.

"I promise. I'll be good." No trying to smash heads in with food trays or choke my nurses with lime gelatin. She carefully reached down to unstrap my forehooves with her mouth, never taking her eyes off me. Slowly, she undid the padded cuffs on each, and I pulled them free. I rubbed forelegs--my flesh and blood limbs--a moment before I slowly lifted the bowl to my mouth. Not as neat as I'd hoped, but it was better than being spoon-fed. The rice pudding tasted good. Probably laced with chemicals or something.

"The doctor would like to do another session with you. If you think you're okay with it," Harpica said quietly. "There will be a concert in the courtyard rose garden, if you'd like to attend." And if I behave myself during the session. That was always implicit: no

escape attempts. No trying to contact my friends. No attacking my captors. It was time to play along.

I didn't answer. I simply nodded once.

She carefully took the plastic tray and empty bowl away, placing them back on her wings and stepping back from the bed. I simply lay there. See what a nice, polite pony I was? Two earth pony mare orderlies came in, standing by as the teal pegasus quietly undid the straps on my hind legs. None of them dared touch the magic-inhibiting ring on my horn. Smokey and Cuffs watched for the slightest chance I'd try something as Harpica got me out of bed and changed me, washed me, and then put me in the mobile restraint harness, a tight collection of straps and rings snug enough that I could hobble around while running was still all but impossible, let alone fighting. They locked my forehooves together for extra safety while handling me.

Smokey went and fetched the wheelchair as Bluebelle stepped in from the hall to check the buckles. "Heard y'all find this kinky…" she snickered. Harpica's eyes popped wide, and she opened her mouth to give a warning. There was a soft 'pong' noise of alarm sounding in the room and the hall, triggered by the unseen watchers. The blue earth pony's eyes popped wide as she staggered back and Smokey rushed in.

I just sat there. "What? It's not like I'd bite her ear off or something." That was so last week. Nevertheless, Smokey and Cuffs put the bit in my mouth and muzzled me. Better safe than sorry.

I sat back in the chair as Harpica pushed me down halls decorated with molded trees sticking branches out overhead. We passed the fountain where I'd almost drowned Lighthooves; the pegasus orderly had made a comment about me liking the taste of pony. There was calm and happy music being piped in as the doctors, nurses, and orderlies took care of the other patients. I was wheeled slowly past the nurses' station where Scalpel, Bonesaw, and Triage conferred with each other in their white lab coats.

Roses watched me with terrified eyes; I saw that they still hadn't finished healing her horn yet. She was talking with the chaplain, and the black unicorn looked at me with worried, soulful golden eyes. I looked away; he tried to visit me as often as possible, but I couldn't handle the guilt. I saw Charity going around selling Cutie Mark Crusader Cookies from a small table by the front door next to a wary-looking Bottlecap. I'd tried talking with them a few days

ago; they shrank back as we passed by.

This hospital was built in the shape of an enormous horseshoe, and now Harpica pushed me through the central courtyard. I glanced up at the massive crag of Black Pony Mountain glittering in the noon sun as it loomed overhead. Through the gap in the building I could look out at the Hoofington Core. The dark towers glittered in the bright sunlight; their black surfaces seemed to capture the light and gather it in the sharp corners. It was the first time I'd seen the city as anything other than an ominous collection of broken monoliths. Maybe the imposing obsidian mountain had been inspiration for the design...

High above the city, huge blocks of clouds were being collected and shipped off to the south and west. I saw the round wheel of Thunderhead; the horizontal torus was a buzzing hive of skywagons and other air traffic. From the center of the Core a single dark spire jutted higher and higher into the air. It drew the eye ever upwards towards the dark blob at the apex. Shadowbolt Tower wasn't measured in feet or stories but in miles.

Suddenly there was a loud cry of a siren that rose like a low, mournful wail. The noise made the ponies take cover behind stout curved walls of marble. They didn't run. Many looked more annoyed than scared as patients were pushed behind the walls.

"Ugh, again?" Smokey muttered. "Why don't they just vaporize Dawn Bay already?" I looked at a stone squirrel atop the molded stone barrier, its camera eye slowly swiveling to focus on us.

The blue mare shrugged. "You know how it is. We use our megaspells first and they'll fire their missiles and stuff. Hell, I heard that one Marauder say they're hesitatin' ta blast the zebra beachhead 'cause it'll make their rockets fly."

"Well, that and there's mountains in the way," Smokey muttered.

"As if that matters to the Hoof. Heard talk that if they put all the juice from the dams and power plants into the city they could just melt the mountains between here and Dawn Bay. We could cook them right off the coast and back across the strait."

"No way," Smokey countered, "there's not enough juice in all of Equestria for that." Then she paused. "Is there?"

"Pfft. This is the Hoof. There ain't nothin' we can't do," Cuffs drawled as she peeked out around the barrier. "What do you think? Dragon raid? Or think those stripes are pushin' with more tin zebras?"

“Dunno. I mean, last year, the news was talking about zebras on the verge of being wiped out. Now they’ve got tons,” Smokey muttered. “Guess Image got their story wrong.”

“Please don’t sound an evacuation. Please don’t sound an evacuation,” Harpica whimpered over and over.

Smokey snorted in soft scorn. “Relax, Feathers. It’s only a level one alert. We haven’t had to evacuate into the city in years. Hoofington can’t fall,” the red mare said as she looked towards the Core where an ominous hum was starting. Green lights began to glow atop the towers. Emerald lightning gathered and flickered in the air around the buildings as the sound grew. “Ooooh, we’re in for a light sh--”

A crackling buzz popped in the air over and over again. Green light filled the air as magic beams swept out from the tops of the towers out to the southeast, disappearing out of view. For thirty seconds they flickered back and forth. Then they went out. A second later a series of loud beeps sounded.

“All clear. Heh. Dragons, extra crispy,” chuckled Cuffs. “Wonder how dragon tastes…”

“Ew…” Harpica said in disgust as she looked towards the city. From the tower streaked a wedge of crackling black lightning clouds heading to the southeast. A single rainbow stripe raced down the middle. “Oh! Look! It’s Rainbow Dash!”

“Feathers is a fangirl,” Smokey teased, and I looked over at Harpica flushing and lowering her eyes in embarrassment. I heard Smokey move behind me and immediately slammed back in the wheelchair. I didn’t know what I hit, but I felt the pushbar on the back connect solidly with something. The wheelchair overbalanced and I smacked onto my back, looking up at the red mare covering the end of her nose, scowling down at me as blood trickled around her hoof.

“Is it broken?” Harpica asked in concern as Smokey glared down at me.

“Excuse me. Do you need any help?” asked a familiar-sounding voice. I looked up at the emerald-maned Marauder, the stallion who’d gone seven rounds with Rarity. Vanity stood by, looking down at me in concern. Behind him were the blue pegasus, Jetstream, and the yellow earth pony buck, Echo. The mare certainly looked like she’d seen much better days as she stared off into space while Echo gently nudged her shoulders. Her eyes were empty things, her purple mane was a complete disheveled mess, and as I watched, tiny blue feathers came off her wings.

"Thank you, sir. We're fine. This is just one of our more difficult patients," Cuffs said. Vanity's horn glowed as he easily lifted me and set the wheelchair down pat.

"Really? I'm glad to hear it's not Jetstream anymore," Vanity said as he looked back at the blue pegasus.

She looked at Echo beside her. "Echo? Have you radioed in to command yet? We need a search party to find our missing ponies. We just left them out there! They need us!"

The small yellow earth pony looked at her, then at Vanity. He shook his head somberly and forced a sickly smile. "Yeah. Sure. I'm sure they'll scramble a search party any second."

"Good. Can't leave them behind. Damned stripes will kill them," she said as she stared at nothing, then gestured with her hoof. "Twist, I need you to find Big Macintosh. Applesnack, you and Doof up on the roof. We might need covering fire. Psalm…keep an eye out for our missing. We have to bring him home," she whimpered as she hung her head. Little threads of her mane drifted down atop her shed blue feathers. "We have to find him."

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, trying to ignore the cameras tracking us. Echo moved closer, looking over at Jetstream. "Can't you help, sir?" he quietly asked Vanity as he fiddled with his PipBuck.

I strained my ears to hear Vanity's tired voice. "We've modified, restored, and removed her memories too much already, Echo. She can't tell what's real and what's not anymore. This *is* her helped."

"Twist! I think there are zebra infiltrators in the bushes. Big Macintosh! Where are you? Applesnack, cover Twist! Find him! Where'd he go? Where is he?" she shouted as she raced to and fro across the courtyard.

~ ~ ~

Once we'd crossed the courtyard and gone inside, we took an elevator up two floors and reached the offices and therapy rooms where they were trying to 'help' us. I closed my eyes as they wheeled me in, waiting for the doors decorated with four stars to close. I could hear the soft ticks of the clock pendulum in the corner. Glass cover; possible weapons. I could smell the leather-bound books on the bookcase; bludgeons and potential shields. There was a rustle and the sound of an envelope being opened.

Letter opener. That's what I needed.

I opened my eyes and looked at Dr. Trueblood. The maroon doctor just smiled at me, his hoof on a tape recorder. He pushed a button, and it made the ripping noise again. "You were just thinking about snatching my letter opener to kill me, weren't you?" he asked as his horn glowed and he removed my bridle. He looked so calm, nice, even, in his sweater vest as he smiled and tapped his hooves before him. I'll give him his props, he was a handsome stallion. There were pictures of his family on the shelf behind him.

"No. I was thinking what a nice day it is today. And how nice it would be to go to the concert," I said in slow, even and carefully controlled words. See how nice I was being? Nice.

If I moved fast enough, lunged before Smokey and Cuffs grabbed me, I might be able to tear his throat out with my teeth.

He adjusted his glasses and pulled a file out of his desk. "Well. Such lucidity must be rewarded," he said as he opened it up. "You've been with us for a few months, and it's nice to have a civil conversation with you. Since we've started your treatment, you've been responding nicely. No relapses to 'The Wasteland'?"

"No. I've been here," I replied softly. Of course, I had no idea where 'here' was. Holograms? Some sort of incredibly elaborate spell? Robots? Maybe I'd been captured by the Harbingers and taken to some facility for…who knew what? The last thing I remembered was running into a whole band of Seekers out in the rain and then…here. Now they were playing some kind of crazy mind game. It had to be that…

Because the alternative was that I was fucking batshit crazy, and that possibility scared me more than anything else.

"Indeed," he replied quietly as he flipped through the pages. "You're an interesting case, to be sure, given everything that's happened to you, Go Fish. Mother a distinguished captain in the Hoofington City Guard. Father deceased. Mother remarried, then divorced." He turned the pages. "You yourself were an initiate to the city guard until the…incident. Enough said about that at the moment," he said quickly and evenly, but Smokey put her hoof on my shoulder as I tensed. "After the incident, you were brought to us and told us all about how you grew up in a stable…were attacked and chased by some sort of monster…destroyed your own home… and were then wandering around a 'wasteland' wrecked by some horrific disaster."

“Something like that,” I muttered.

“Some of the highlights…” he said as he lifted three pieces of paper before him. “There was a government conspiracy at the highest levels called the O.I.A., pieces of cursed ‘starmetal’ that sucked the souls out of ponies, and some sort of evil lurking at the heart of the city. You were hunted and persecuted by numerous groups. You made friends with Morning Glory, P-21, Rampage, and others… some of whom joined you in your travels. Oh, and I was an undead monster behind most of it.” He chuckled as he lowered the papers. “I particularly like that bit.”

“You would,” I replied, narrowing my eyes as I jerked reflexively against my harness and chair restraints.

He sighed and pressed his hooves together. “Since you’ve arrived here, you’ve proven to be the most hostile patient in Happyhorn Gardens’s history. Numerous escape attempts. Assaults on the staff. If it weren’t for your condition…well, it wouldn’t be fair to hold you responsible given your mental state. Still, after what you did to Nurse Roses, not to mention poor Doof... ”

There was an awkward shuffling behind me as I kept my eyes on his. “Well, he was trying to kill me at the time.”

“He was your orderly at the time,” the maroon stallion countered as he lifted a peppermint candy and slipped it into his mouth, “and he was the one who was willing to climb all the way up onto that ledge to get you down safely.” He smiled evenly. “There’s quite a few in the Ministry of Peace who think we should simply scour away your mind entirely, a complete magical lobotomization for our protection and so that you could have a second chance. Traditional therapy techniques simply aren’t working, and our attempts at modifying your memories only seem to be making things worse.” He tapped his hooves together for a few seconds, waiting for my reaction. I didn’t give him one.

Finally, he sighed and smiled tiredly. “Fortunately, your growing lucidity these last few weeks has put those plans on hold. You’re starting to come to grips with reality. It’s our hope you can be made whole again to be a productive, happy, healthy young mare,” he said with a sigh and a look of genuine concern. “Hopefully, once you’re cured, you’ll be able to atone for what you’ve done.”

I closed my eyes, imagining dead ponies I’d killed, who’d died from my mistakes. They weren’t just bits of crazy dredged up from my head. I’d killed them.

"Right," I replied flatly, "except I don't believe you. This is obviously a ploy by somepony. Maybe you're with the Harbingers, trying to get me to work along. Or maybe you made a backup of Chimera somewhere and copied yourself and me and are trying to get something out of me. Or the Goddess got bored and finally decided to add a little Blackjack to her Unity. I don't know which."

He arched his brows. "Really? Are those really the only options you'll consider?" I glowered at him, and he sighed again. "Let me ask you this. Which is more likely? That you are the sole survivor of a doomed stable after a horrific apocalypse, carrying a mysterious PipBuck, struggling against impossible odds as you unravel a plot centuries old, or that you're the victim of some psychological trauma that's resulted in the creation of a post-apocalyptic wasteland where you could be the protagonist blasting and shooting everyone who has caused you harm?"

I scowled, not prepared to even entertain the idea that everything I knew was a lie. I remembered Jetstream in the courtyard, thought of me chattering to friends that didn't exist. The problem was that it was such a seductive notion. I might not have understood what was going on, but the idea that all the shit I'd been through was somehow a dream was both tempting and insulting. No more EC-1101. No more Harbingers. No more questions and mysteries I wasn't smart enough to unravel. Just…going back to a normal life.

If everything I knew in the stable had been a lie, could I even find normal on a map anymore?

He'd been saying this for days now. No matter how I cursed, insulted, or struggled, he just smiled and repeated his comments that I'd been delusional for more than a month in a psychotic break. But none of that was helping me get out of here. I needed something else. I couldn't fight.

I'd have to *engage*.

"Not to say I even begin to believe you," I said slowly, "but why don't you tell me who I am and why I'm here?"

He actually looked surprised. "Who you are is fairly simple. Your name is Go Fish. You lived with your mother, Gin Rummy, in the southwest part of Hoofington overlooking the Luna Dam. Your father died when you were just a filly. You went to school at Roosehoof Academy; not a stellar student, though. Worked briefly at Megamart before you also joined the Hoofington Guard. You were stationed in Flankfurt." With each fact, he pulled papers and

photographs from the folder and set them before me. Birth records from Hoofington General. Report card and a student ID. My tax return from Megamart. A picture of me, Marmalade, and Daisy in guard barding that looked awfully similar to what I'd worn in Stable 99.

Fabrications? Maybe all of this was some sort of soul dream by the Goddess…except that I didn't imagine the Goddess being this subtle. She wasn't exactly the trickiest pony I'd come across. I closed my eyes as I frowned. I really wished that Morning Glory or P-21 were here. Even if they wouldn't make sense in this place. "So why am I here then?" Then I saw his sad expression and frowned. "What?" He shook his head.

"Never mind. You've made phenomenal progress in the last few minutes. I don't want to undermine that. We can continue this tomorrow?" the maroon unicorn said with a faint, sad smile as he folded his hooves in front of him.

"I'm not a baby." I scowled at him. "Your crazy theory is just a crazy theory. Why would I imagine a world that's even worse than this one? For all I know, if this world is real, this is probably some freaky secret project of the O.I.A. and Goldenblood."

"That would be quite a feat…if this Office of Interministry Affairs existed." He trotted over to his bookcase and levitated several books, then set them down on his desk. "I've looked everywhere I could and consulted both the Ministry Mares and the government. No such office exists, nor does a Director Goldenblood." He folded his hooves before him. "Like the Wasteland, the O.I.A. is something you created. Something, and somepony, to blame for the wrongness in the world." He sighed and shook his head. "You aren't the first one to make up dark conspiracies, but really, don't you think that if the ministries wanted to do secret projects, they'd just do them? What would be the point of an intermediary?"

I frowned and shook my head hard. It had to be a lie. It had to be, because otherwise…"Why? You still haven't answered that. Why would I…would anypony…create the Wasteland as an escapist fantasy?"

"It's an interesting question, to be sure. One driven by a mixture of self-aggrandizement and self-loathing. Only by understanding this dichotomy does your mental illness make sense," he said, then gave a worried frown. "Are you certain you wish to discuss this, Go Fish?"

"My name is Blackjack," I said flatly, jerking my forelegs against my restraints and making the orderlies put their hooves on my shoulders. I seethed as I looked up at my captors and then back at Trueblood. "And yeah, I do. Just keep the vocabulary around grade school level, okay?"

He seemed to be contemplating me a moment. "You just demonstrated part of it." He lifted his left hoof. "On one hoof, you have the incompetent bungler, the failure, the humiliation and embarrassment. You're the pony that's not strong enough. The pony who's not smart enough. The pony who is too reckless." He lifted his right hoof. "And on the other, you have the paragon. A pony who is a moral, physical, and psychological powerhouse. A pony who can win and succeed at anything. A pony who is unique… exceptional…legendary, even. The dichotomy…the meeting of these two opposites--" He brought his two hooves together. "--results in a pony who believes she must suffer in a world of misery but who is uniquely able to thrive in such an environment."

I screwed up my face in bafflement. Therapist ponies were crazy; that was the only explanation. "You know, you made more sense when you were trying to kill me. Why don't you just fall back to that?"

He chuckled and lowered his hooves. "I understand if it's difficult to understand, but it's the only diagnosis for your particular mental illness that comes close, approximating the wild swings of manic-depressive tendencies with the extreme personality disorders of schizophrenia."

"Small words, please?" I begged with a sickly smile. I didn't like how…sure…he was acting.

"This Blackjack persona of yours is an identity that can superimpose these two extremes. Such a struggle exists in everypony, but it achieved such an extreme case in you that a schism from reality was inevitable. Blackjack is weak enough to get raped but strong enough to endure. Blackjack is tough enough to face down the aggression and criticism of others but weak enough not to become a tyrant. Where Go Fish was unable to handle the problems in her life, Blackjack could take them on…and take them on…and take on even more." He sighed and ate another mint. "At least up to a certain point."

"Why?" I asked with a little frown. "What could have been so horrible in this life that the Wasteland would be an escape?" My

rear hoof tapped rapidly against the footrest of the wheelchair.

"To start, your father dying of cancer when you were young. As I recall, weren't you dying of cancer at some time in the Wasteland?" he said as he got a piece of paper and cleared his throat before reading aloud. "'I smiled at him, and he stood and trotted with me to the hospital. And they gave him a shot, and he went away forever.'" I stared at him in horror, remembering the faint striped mane of that buck so long ago. But…that'd been in Stable 99. And he'd died because he was retired…right?

The maroon unicorn sighed softly as he took another paper. "Then there was the sexual assault you suffered at the Hoofington Marina. Nothing nearly as dramatic as nailing your hooves to the floor. Just one classmate on a boat trip who thought 'no means yes' and left you feeling humiliated and ashamed. I recall you saying you witnessed a similar event. Blackjack was so gracious to her rapists that she spared them. Go Fish didn't even have the courage to point him out in a lineup."

"Shut up! That's not true!" I shouted at him, feeling the tears running down my cheeks. "I was trying to save Scotch Tape! And I did. I saved her!" I struggled frantically against my bonds.

Trueblood closed the folder. "I'm sorry. Clearly this is too upsetting for you. I apologize."

I clenched my eyes shut. It was all a lie. One big heap of manure. It had to be. "Shut up. I don't want your apologies." I took several deep breaths, feeling the thudding of my heart; something I hadn't felt in days. Slowly I looked at him; at the pity in his eyes. "Why is it that this place is filled with ponies from the Wasteland, except for my friends?"

"You populated your fantasy with ponies you've known in your life, assigning them motives and facades according to your attitudes. Some were at random, and others are the result of various traumas. Steel Rain's violation of your body cast him in the role of villain…and you destroyed his base and power in your fantasy as you couldn't in the real world. As for your 'friends'," he said solemnly, "I suspect they represent larger themes and psychological needs." He stood and trotted around closer to me. "Given your dissatisfaction with life in general, I think that you've blanked out or replaced all your memories of the real world with that of the Wasteland. A place where you can simultaneously be both hero and victim. Where you can matter and affect the larger world."

"It's not true. It's not," I said as I closed my eyes, feeling the tears flow. My friends weren't just in my imagination. They weren't simply a dream of what I wished were so. They were real. They were!

Weren't they?

~ ~ ~

I didn't give in. Not right away, at least. I went to the little musical performances, talked with Trueblood about how messed up my brain was, and spent countless sleepless nights staring up at those painted pegasus fillies on the ceiling of my room. They looked dead to me…all forty-two of them. They still kept me strapped up; still didn't trust me. After what I'd apparently done, I couldn't blame them. The things I could remember…now embarrassed me. I even made a few small apologies to Smokey. It didn't help. And I'd apparently done even more now that I wasn't in the Wasteland any more.

Life in Hoofington revolved around the attacks. There was an alarm for different sections of the city. Missile attacks came every few days. A buzzer meant to get inside shelters. A siren meant to evacuate and board an emergency subway to the Core. Beeps were for general alerts. The news gave constant droning reports of losses suffered by zebra forces. Sometimes I swore they repeated as if the news of the day and last week were interchangeable. There wasn't a real feeling of time in Hoofington. There was today. Today was better than yesterday. Tomorrow would be worse if you didn't work hard. I yearned for a date to pin down when things were. Had I been here a month? Two? Three?

I really wished I could get a good night's sleep. Trueblood swore that that would come when I could face what I'd done to send me into the Wasteland.

Sweet Celestia, I felt lonely. Nopony here wanted to be my friend. They all looked at me as if they expected me to spring on them and smash their skulls in. Maybe I would. Maybe I had.

I was learning a life that was utterly alien and dreadfully familiar at the same time. Dusty Trails and Tumbleweed visited me like they were checking up on a rabid manticore, but they talked to me about school at Roosehoof Academy and my poor test scores and frequent visits to detention and Dean Hardy. I wanted him to visit so that I

could see if he really was like the hovering robot I remembered; apparently that wasn't possible, though. Keystone talked to me about working security at Megamart. Daisy and Marmalade were snotty and quiet respectively; the Flankfurt Trio, we'd been called. Apparently, we'd been rather shitty guards even before I snapped.

Eventually, I was allowed to be around other ponies without being muzzled. Then allowed to walk short distances and to wash myself. The horn ring remained strapped in place, though. Apparently, after what I'd done to Doof, every stallion in the facility insisted on it. Harpica and the other nurses became my constant companions; the staff quickly learned that I wouldn't harm meek ponies. On the other hoof, I still couldn't be left around stallions. I felt…twitchy… when I was around them. Trueblood said I had wartime stress disorder; anxiety was to be expected. I wasn't allowed near any of the young visitor ponies seeing other patients, though.

I was terrified to find out why.

I was also learning about life outside the Wasteland. In the hospital, at least, it wasn't much different from the stable. You did what you were told and life was pleasant. I graduated from gelatin to fresh apples and carrots... after weeks here, the thought of a cannibal plague seemed almost cartoonish. I was surprised at how tasteless the celery was, though, which was odd given how much the other patients liked it. Once or twice I caught myself trying to eat the spoons; of course, nothing happened. Because I wasn't a cyberpony. I wasn't even Blackjack.

I was just Go Fish. A nobody. Not hunted for my PipBuck. Not hated for being the destroyer of Steel Rangers. Not a Reaper. I'd never met a brave pony called LittlePip or her lover Homage. Never found a terrified mare under a floor grill. Never met a pony who couldn't die. Never saved my best friend from killing himself in a bathroom. Never met an alicorn who connected to the minds and souls of a goddess. Never helped a little filly avoid the embarrassment of wetting the bed.

I lay at night for hours imagining the roof was cracked and stained. Sometimes I could almost see it if I tried hard enough. I'd stare and a brown patch would start in the middle and creep slowly outwards. The pastels would dim and bleed together. Slowly, the cracks would grow and spread, and eventually flakes of plaster would fall and leave holes peering into black spaces above. I'd feel my heart still. My breathing would trail to nothing, and for a moment I'd be

Blackjack again.

Then I'd blink, and it all went away. And I'd just curl up and cry, missing my friends and wishing they were with me.

On the other hoof…I got to see Mom again. It was the first thing I'd looked forward to since I got here; if she was alive, then that meant that I hadn't killed my own stable. That I hadn't killed those foals. That as violent and disturbed as I might be, there was some hope for me in the everafter.

I'd been told for three days she'd be coming. I'd prepared myself. We were in his office. I was restrained and sedated. I was given five minutes warning. One minute warning. Was I ready? Was I?

She stepped in. I took one look at her lavender coat and purple and red striped mane and loving pink eyes. She smiled like she had when I'd first taken my oath to protect and serve Stable 99. It was the one and only time I'd seen her cry in public. Our eyes shimmered with tears.

Then I saw her head on a stake. I smelled the chlorine gas. I heard Midnight scream that word, echoing endlessly in my ears.

I screamed, and for an instant I was back in the Wasteland. I was in the corroded and darkened world; his fancy books were rotten rows on crumbling shelves. His desk was smashed and twisted, and that nice clock had frozen forever in rust and decay. Water dripped and splattered through holes in the roof; trickling away through gaps in the floor. I screamed and wailed and thrashed. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be there.

I couldn't be anywhere.

~ ~ ~

"No, Blackjack. No…" Scotch Tape whimpered as she backed further and further into the corner of the bedroom in Star House. The thing that had been Glory…pretending to be Glory…lay in a broken, bloody pool. Rampage was out on the stairs, a piece of the banister permanently wedged in her brain. I'd tied it there to make sure her regeneration couldn't push it out. She'd been almost as tough to take down as the real Rampage.

There was just one more. "No, Blackjack! No!" she screamed as she raised her legs in futility.

Hooves came up. Hooves went down. Hooves came up. Hooves went down…

~ ~ ~

"So. How have you been, Fishie?" Mom asked me, her voice low as she looked down into the teacup on the table in front of her in the courtyard. She didn't drink tea; neither did I. But we could both sit there and watch our respective cups cool. It'd taken four tries before I could finally spend time with her without flipping out.

In Happyhorn, that was called progress.

"Crazy," I replied, dared a glance at her, then back down again. Good, no head on a stake flashback this time. "How much crazy I've been depends on what Sangu…er…what Doctor Trueblood says," I amended quickly, trying to take the sting out of it.

"I'm sorry," Mom said softly, "I shouldn't have asked that."

"It's fine," I said, reaching out a hoof to her. She hesitated, waiting for the ping or pong. A ping, and she reached out and held my hoof between hers. The nurses only trusted me with one hoof out of the restraints. "I just…this…I'm the one who's sorry."

"Oh no, I'm much more sorry than you," Mom quipped, and we shared a little laugh. Very little, quite fragile, and it ended in a sigh. "I shouldn't have made you go into my field. I should have respected what you wanted." She patted my hoof gently. "Your music never seemed…important. Not compared to being a guard."

"Well, considering in Stable 99 none of us got a choice, I guess it doesn't matter now. Honestly…being Security isn't so bad. After all…" I risked another look at her, but she just blinked at me. It was just a few seconds…but for those seconds she seemed completely lost in thought.

And then she wasn't. "After all, Security saves ponies," she said, exactly as I remembered. She patted my hoof tenderly. "I hope we get to leave here soon. I'm taking a leave of absence," she said with a smile. "We should go somewhere. Maybe Manehattan? Somewhere there aren't raid sirens every day? Just you and me?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't think I'd have been able to have any kind of life like this. Not now. Not ever…I simply wept as I nodded.

She moved around the table and hugged me. There were several 'pong's sounded, along with orderlies moving quickly out into the yard. "Don't worry…we'll make it all right," she promised in my ear. But this was wrong. My mother wouldn't do this. The stable

always came first! I was the fuck up! But…I didn't care. I hugged her…tighter…and tighter as my breathing became more and more erratic. But I couldn't let go. I couldn't, even as she struggled. The orderlies were fighting to pull my hoof off from around her neck. But I couldn't let her go.

She'd make everything alright, wouldn't she?

~ ~ ~

Apparently, the sight of my mother had triggered a relapse. I was back to being locked up and restrained in the timeless room. The nurses talked about my 'instability' in low voices. But fears about me launching into attacks didn't go anywhere…simply because I didn't care. Where before I'd been in the Wasteland, now I was simply back on the mattress staring at the ceiling. Still, I jerked my hooves against the restraints as something to do that was more than lie there like a corpse.

Harpica came in, washing me and caring for me without complaint. The mare didn't do much, or say much about herself. "The doctor would like to do another session with you. If you think you're okay with it," Harpica said quietly. "There will be a concert in the courtyard rose garden, if you'd like to attend."

I really didn't want to. I didn't like this place. The patients staring vacantly out into space or talking to themselves. Recipients of too many memory modifications and horrors of the war. Happyhorn wasn't a place for healing; I suspected that Trueblood went through so much effort with me because I was a long shot chance to actually get better. For everypony else, this was a hospice for the mad, a place to keep them safe and sound and out of sight before they died.

Harpica didn't say anything as she stood there, and I frowned as I glanced over at her. Then she suddenly added, "Octavia is playing." That brought to mind the posters I'd seen in her apartment and the performance she'd given in Blueblood Manor. I could remember her music so well…

Okay. I could get out of bed to hear that.

I let one of the orderlies, Mallet, the caramel colored unicorn, strap me into the wheelchair. Then we were out in the halls again.

Suddenly, I was hit by an explosive pressure wave…and yet, I didn't move. In an instant, everypony disappeared, as did my

restraints and wheelchair. I sat there, blinking in shock as I felt my horn bare of the magic suppression ring. The hospital was empty, and every surface flickered in my vision for several seconds. What had just happened?

And why was somepony crying?

I trotted to a door to my left and carefully pushed on the four white stars on its veneer to open it a crack. Inside was a pale red stallion lying on his back staring up at the ceiling like so many others here at the hospital. Shaking him with her little hooves was a young pink filly standing on a chair. “Wake up! Please wake up, Big Brother! Please! You’re…you’re too tough for this, Rumble. Remember? You could take any ganger on the east side!” she cried as she shook his limp body. If I hadn’t seen his chest rise and fall, I would have thought he was dead. “Brother! Wake up! Please!”

Another flicker, and the filly was gone. I rubbed my eyes and blinked at where she’d just been standing. I was losing it. I was going completely over the edge! It was nighttime now, and Rumble lay there just as he had when his sister had shaken him seconds ago.

Then I saw movement beside me and I leapt to the side. I opened my mouth to apologize to the orderly or nurse, but my apology disappeared as I gaped at the late night visitor slinking in wearing a black veil and fancy dress decorated with sequins. Purple curls spilled from under the veil. She approached the bedside and lifted the translucent cloth aside.

Why would a buck like Rumble warrant a visit from a Ministry Mare? Especially this mare!

Rarity looked down at the limp buck with clear unease. She utterly ignored my presence as she sat beside him. “Number seven,” she said quietly as she peeled the sheet back. For a moment, I was certain that she was doing something indecent, but her eyes were drawn to his flank. His blank flank.

“You’d think after seven failures, we would have finally gotten it right…” Rarity said as she lifted a book from her saddlebag. As somepony who’d seen more treated hide than I had any right to, I could say with authority that it wasn’t like any book I could ever imagine Rarity allowing on her person. The cover was bound in black and silver gray in the pattern of a zebra glyphmark. The sight of it sent my mane squirming as I shivered involuntarily. “I’m following the instructions perfectly. So why isn’t it working?” she

asked as she stroked her hoof over the dark surface. The hiss of her hoof against the leather cover sounded like whispers.

"Rarity?" a mare called softly from the doorway, making both of us jump. The book was whisked behind her poofy-curled purple tail as Rarity turned towards the door. There stood a rather exhausted looking Fluttershy. Her pink mane, shot through with a few strands of premature white, hung in disheveled sheets across her face. Worry lines were making their way slowly but inexorably across her features. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah…yes…" Rarity stammered as she grinned nervously, glancing back at Rumble and then at the concerned yellow pegasus. "Well, I'd gotten a report about mysterious attacks in Hightower Jail, darling. I was in the area, so I decided to see if my editors were getting creative again! That's all," she said with a nervous laugh. It was one that Fluttershy didn't share as she walked to the bed.

"Have you heard anything else about it?" Fluttershy asked quietly before tugging the blanket back in place over Rumble. There was something oddly firm in Fluttershy's question, and it made Rarity strain her smile even more.

"And how would I have heard anything about this? I don't even know what is wrong with the poor dear!" she said as she gestured with her hoof.

"There isn't anything wrong with him. Physically…medically…his body is just fine. Even his mind is intact, with all his memories. Whatever was done to him was completely outside the experience of unicorn magic." She closed her eyes and bowed her head. "I've considered bringing Zecora in…or even trying to find medical experts in Yellow River and seeing if we can convince them to help us."

"You wouldn't dare!" Rarity hissed, narrowing her eyes at Fluttershy as her tail tightened. "They're vicious, savage, horrible fiends." Then, when she saw Fluttershy's shocked expression, her words faltered. "They…um…they're so…dirty and…garish…" Finally, she composed herself. "Besides, it's firmly against Luna's rules to associate with zebra mystics."

"If they can help somepony like Rumble or the others…" Fluttershy began to say quietly as she smoothed his sheets, "I'll do what I have to to help."

Rarity sighed. "Fluttershy. Please, as tragic as this is, he wasn't anypony important. Just an east side gang member with a history of

assaults and attacks on others…" she said in a subdued voice as she surreptitiously transferred the black book to her bag.

"And how do you know that?" Fluttershy asked in a voice barely above a murmur.

"I…I…read it in the report, of course." Rarity laughed nervously with a guilty grin.

Fluttershy didn't look at her friend as she sat besides Rumble's bed. "No. How do you know he's not important?" Rarity's grin melted as she looked at Fluttershy's back. The pegasus never raised her voice. "I know he probably wasn't the best pony, but he has a sister. Tumble. She's been here almost every day she can. He's her whole world." The soft disappointment in her voice was worse than any accusation. "Everyone is important to someone," she said quietly.

"Fluttershy…I…" Rarity began before her ears folded and she looked away. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. It's just…with everything going on…I didn't mean what I said."

Fluttershy turned and looked at her with that sad, searching expression. "I've got six other patients just like him, Rarity. All from Hightower…all missing their cutie marks. They're not dead, nor have they had their memory erased. They're just broken…and I don't know how to help them." Her teal eyes looked into Rarity's darker eyes with sadness. "Do you?"

"I…I…" Rarity stammered as she glanced at the bag she'd tucked the book into. For a moment, I was certain that she was going to say something, but she slumped. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. I can't. I wish I could, but…"

But she couldn't meet Fluttershy's eyes.

Slowly, the yellow pegasus turned away and looked towards the bed once more. "I understand," Fluttershy almost whispered. "It was good to see you again, Rarity. I hope we can meet again in Ponyville soon. I miss our little meetings at the spa. I miss our friends." She bowed her head slightly as she put a hoof on the bed. "Sometimes…I think we made a big mistake somewhere. Not stopping the war when it started…not getting involved sooner…or getting tangled up in these horrible ministries. I liked being a nurse so much more than being a Ministry Mare." She sniffed and shook her head. "Please…Rarity…when this war is over…can we please…please…go back to Ponyville? Can we make it like it was again? All of us together?"

Rarity's mouth moved silently as she held out a hoof, tears running

down her pale cheeks and sending her eyeliner dripping. “I…I…We will, Fluttershy. Somehow. I’ll find some way we can all be together again. There must be a way,” she said as she looked over her shoulder at the bag containing the black book.

Then there was a flicker, and they were gone. The bed was empty, the corners tucked in. I sank to the floor, hugging my aching head. “What is going on?” I whimpered, clenching my eyes shut.

“Ah. Here you are,” Trueblood said a moment later. “We were wondering where you’d escaped to.”

I stood and pointed at the bed. “I just saw Fluttershy! And Rarity! Explain that in crazy brain doctor talk, Trueblood!” I snapped as I whirled upon him.

He blinked at me slowly, taking in my triumphant smirk. Then he said flatly, “Because two months ago you escaped and eavesdropped on the Ministry Mares while they were looking over a patient. Given the state of your memory, it’s not surprising you forgot until now. Then you saw the room and it brought the memory back. Fairly simple,” he said with a small shrug and smile. “I hope that terrorist bomb didn’t send you back to the Wasteland again. I understand it detonated quite close to the hospital grounds.” Yet he didn’t look concerned at all.

“No. No. I’m fine,” I said with a frown as I looked at the empty bed. “What happened to Rumble?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. It wasn’t like he was scratching his head and searching his memory; it was like a pause where he simply froze. Then he smiled broadly. “Full recovery last week. I understand he’s back with his sister. Never did find out exactly how his mind was cut off from his body, but the spell wore off eventually.”

I sighed and rubbed the magic restraint on my horn, then shook my head. “How’d I get free?” I asked as I looked around.

“When the bomb went off you bolted. Asked why things always blow up around you. You weren’t secured properly and got loose,” he said as he smiled and added, “Don’t worry. You didn’t hurt anypony this time.”

This time? Thank goodness for small favors. I looked at the bed again. “Fluttershy and Rarity were friends, weren’t they?”

“I’m not really in a position to say,” Trueblood replied. Then he paused again, sitting and cocking his head. “You don’t think they are?”

I thought about what I'd seen. It was like two ponies who were friends once and desperately wanted to be so again, but that silent accusation and that reticence were walls that neither could overcome. I thought of that shy yellow figurine unable to call Rarity on her deception; the glamorous white figurine wanting to give anything except the truth. P-21 and I'd been like that; he'd been more angry than Fluttershy and I'd been more clueless than Rarity, but we'd had that tension keeping us apart.

Had they overcome it?

"Why am I here, Doctor?" I asked in low tones, my body fighting to maintain reasonable volumes.

"To get better," he answered simply. "Why else would anypony come here?" I stared at the maroon unicorn for the longest time as he simply stood there with that stupid smile on his face. "When you no longer flee to the Wasteland…when you can accept what you did…you'll be able to go."

"And what did I do?" My voice was low and tense.

"You know exactly what you did," he answered, equally soft. "You're trying to hide from it in madness. But you can't hide forever, Go Fish. Madness is like nausea; your mind is trying to purge itself of something you've shoved into your subconscious. It invented the Wasteland as a place for you to hide. Sooner or later, one of two things will happen: you will stop attempting to block the memory and face it…"

"Or?"

"Or you'll die," he finished with a small shrug. Then he smiled. "Now, care to go to the concert?"

~ ~ ~

It was rather hard to enjoy Octavia's performance after that little exchange. The music was as beautiful as I remembered, but it had none of the life or joy I imagined. I may as well have been listening to it on my PipBuck as seeing her perform. The other attendants gave her rapt attention, neither talking nor making disturbances during the hour-long show. No sirens. Nopony getting up and going to the bathroom in the middle of one of her pieces. Even the stomping applause was monotonous.

I hated this place. And I was starting to hate everypony in it. That hate wasn't something that transferred perfectly from my memories

in the Wasteland. In the Wasteland, I had a complicated relationship with Charity. Here, she simply sat by the front door selling candy. The yellow filly had none of the mercenary mercantile drive of the Crusader I had known. She was simply *there*. As I was wheeled past the next day on the way to a session I glared at her and her little downcast eyes.

"Hey. Hey kid!" I said as I was wheeled past. She looked up with that stupid expression. "If I get out of here I'm going to fucking kill you!" I screamed at her as loud as I could. Charity and Bottlecap just looked at me. That's all. Just looked at me. The caramel Mallet put the bridle back on me. I got another lecture from the doctor about 'regressing'.

The next day, there was the filly, sitting behind her little table with her cookies, her eyes downcast. No nurses beside her. No orderlies standing watch. It might as well have been that I'd never said a single word to her.

I stared up at the still fillies in my room for hours. I jerked and jerked and jerked against my restraints. I wanted to tear down those painted pegasi and smash down the frolicking kids on the wall. I jerked…and jerked…and jerked…

And with a brittle snap, the pin holding the foreleg restraints to the bed gave way…I lay there, staring at my bound hooves. I should just lie here. They were watching from the cameras anyway. They'd pong an alarm. I'd be restrained again.

Then I looked at the door. It was open.

It was never just open. Something was going on.

I lifted my hooves to my mouth and carefully unbuckled them. When they were free, I undid the belt across my chest, and then my waist. Finally I heaved forward and carefully undid the bindings on my rear hooves. It was hard, but I was able to tug the straps loose and pull my hooves free.

I dropped to my feet and made my way into the hall. It was quiet. Well lit. Empty. There was a shimmer, and a ring of brown rippled down the curved hallway ahead of me. No brain…I need to stay here right now. Here. I trotted forward and then I spotted something teal next to a spatter of blood. I picked up the severed wing in my hooves; looked the blood trail leading to the nurses' station. There lay the body of Harpica.

Next to it was Bottlecap.

Next to that…

The bodies were everywhere. Shot. Stabbed. Sliced. Pink and gray entrails were scattered like glistening rope across the halls. Some had been blown apart, with necks and legs ending in bloody stumps. How could anypony have done this so silently? I hadn't heard a thing. I remembered Lancer's rifle. A silence talisman. One that allowed a pony to go on a bloody spree that no one could hear. Hot blood stained my hooves, but that hardly mattered. I just wished I could get the magic restraint off my horn. Damn thing must have had a lock or something on the strap.

I needed a weapon. I had my hooves. Not metal, just flesh and bone, but they'd have to do. My mind was whirring; zebra infiltrator? No. There was no point to this butchery. An infiltrator would sneak in and out. Escaped prisoner? Had somepony snapped? Maybe. They'd have to be an exceptional killer though. A real fighter.

And there was just such a fighter who was a patient here.

I started keeping my eyes up towards the vaulted ceiling. If Jetstream was behind this, she'd attack from above. Thank goodness I'd gone through all those days of practice without my horn. Of course, trying to stop a psychopathic Marauder might be more than I could handle on my own…

Or could I handle her at all? I wasn't Security. I wasn't even Blackjack. I was Go Fish. What was I thinking?

I was thinking…somepony needed to stop this.

I might not know exactly who I was…Blackjack or Go Fish…but either way, I'd been a security mare of some kind.

And Security saves ponies. It was the first thought I'd had in a long while that felt solid. I heard the sound of fighting from the front entrance. Maybe…maybe if I could do this…maybe then I could talk about leaving.

I reached the front entrance foyer just in time for a blue streak to fly across my vision. The pony at the head of it smashed into the waterfall fountain with a crunch of bone, a snap of wings, and the heavy crack of shattered concrete before collapsing into the bloody basin with a thud. Jetstream's eyes maintained their distant stare even in death, her head dangling limply over the lip of the fountain bowl.

Rising from a smashed table was a dark form, a familiar form. She wore black riot armor that covered every inch of her. Slowly, her helmeted head turned towards me, looking over her shoulder. I

heard the dry, raspy breaths taken in through her black mask's breather. The hollow, soulless chuckle. She cradled something in her hooves…something small and bloody.

I charged the creature. Wild. Stupid. Amateurish. I leapt on her back, throwing my hooves around her neck, and she erupted into a bloody frenzy of kicking and heaving. I couldn't kill her. Couldn't beat her. All I could do was fight until she inevitably won. The fight was all that mattered. And maybe, if I fought hard enough, I could give that filly a second chance.

There was another lurch, and I went spinning end over end and tumbled into darkness.

~ ~ ~

I was outside, in the courtyard. How'd I gotten out here? What had happened to the mare in black? Had I beaten her? Driven her off? No. I hadn't. Couldn't.

Then what was I seeing? I perched atop one of the blast walls, looking down at the seat below me. A blue pegasus mare sitting by herself. Her mane had gone prematurely gray, her eyes lost and empty. There were others talking, laughing, enjoying the roses in bloom, or taking in the music on the stage. It was the most normal scene I'd seen since I'd watched Rarity and Fluttershy. I couldn't move. I couldn't even blink. I could only watch.

Then a red mare with glittering red-enameled hooves approached. "Lieutenant Jetstream?"

Her eyes twitched and she bowed her head. "N'more…" she muttered.

"Lieutenant Jetstream?" she asked again, sitting on the bench beside the pegasus. I knew her…from Blueblood's terminal. The O.I.A. pony…but was she really, or was that just a role I'd cooked up for her? "Lieutenant. I've got vital news for you to hear." The mare took a folder out of her saddlebags and pulled out a picture. "We've discovered a critical POW camp deep in zebra territory."

"What?" she asked as her glassy eyes focused on the picture.

"These are images we smuggled out of the zebra capital," the red mare said as she held up pictures of ponies held in a facility similar to Yellow River…only they didn't look like I'd imagined prisoners to look in such a camp. Too clean. Yet Jetstream looked at them sharply now. "They're prisoners the zebras have concentrated in

Roam. And we've identified two particular prisoners. Sergeant Major Big Macintosh and Lance Corporal Stonewing."

"What?" Jetstream gasped. "How? They…they kept telling me they were dead."

The red mare nodded sympathetically. "Easier to bury and mourn a war hero than to hear they were abducted in the chaos of the assassination attempt, Lieutenant," the red mare with the glittery hooves said in low, serious tones. "You were right. You were right, but the government simply dusted off their hooves and forgot about them."

"Nooo…how could they?" Jetstream shook, sobbing brokenly as she folded the pictures in her hooves. Tears peppered the folded images. "I knew it…I knew it…they couldn't be dead…" she whispered, then wiped her eyes before looking at the red mare. "But…why are you coming to me? Who are you?" she asked as she stared in shock.

"You can call me Garnet. I'm just a concerned pony working with the ministries who's come up with a way to bring our boys home. But to do it, we need a mare who's exceptionally determined; a flier who won't let anything stop her from reaching the zebra capital." She sighed, bowing her head. "We've tried approaching the Shadowbolts and the army…neither were willing to take the chance." She looked at Jetstream with conviction. "You're our last option, Lieutenant. Otherwise, we may never see them again."

"Rainbow Dash wouldn't do it?" Garnet shook her head solemnly. Jetstream narrowed her eyes. "Of course not…what's one more pegasus?" I could see the gaping holes in Garnet's story, but Jetstream shook as she smiled in bliss. The joy at being needed to do what her mind demanded she do was almost too much for her to bear.

"What do you need me to do?" Jetstream asked as she stared straight ahead. Garnet smiled in satisfaction as she dug out a small hoof-sized talisman. The glyph within glowed faintly; I'd seen them before. Glory had salvaged a dozen of them from a Robronco store back in Flank. A targeting talisman, but this one seemed far more intricate than those had been.

"Get this to the zebra capital and wait. When everything is ready, it will glow. Tap it twice and we will trigger a mass teleportation megaspell to take every pony within ten miles safely back to Canterlot. You don't need to find the camp yourself. Just stay

within the zebra capital and evade capture by any means. It should be charged and ready in four days. You have that long to reach Roam. Can you do it, Lieutenant Jetstream?"

Jetstream didn't speak. She didn't need to. With a few photographs, Garnet had given her redemption. Garnet opened up the saddlebag and put the talisman in place. "Here are seven days of rations and some basic equipment to help you evade their patrols. Stay in the city and be careful. Be safe. Be ready for the talisman's signal."

The blue pegasus hugged Garnet tightly. "Thank you," she sobbed. Garnet rolled her eyes and patted her shoulders stiffly. When Jetstream released her, the red mare passed her the saddlebags and then reached down to a small bracelet the pegasus wore on her hoof. It was so small and flush that I nearly missed it; I wondered if it was magically adhered. Garnet touched a talisman to it, and the bracelet popped open. The red mare tossed it into the bushes.

"Good luck," Garnet said as she pulled out a small case with a button on it. A moment after she pressed it, there were loud bangs in the long horseshoe-shaped building. Colored smoke began to pour out the windows, and fireworks zipped magically through the air, obscuring everything with rainbow smoke. The more delicate patients began to whoop and holler at the bedlam filling the asylum. Without delay, Jetstream launched herself into the air and began to fly to the east.

Rising, Garnet stared at me for the longest time. Then she smiled and shrugged. "Oh well. In four days, it either won't matter, or it won't matter." And humming to herself, she made her way towards the exit.

~ ~ ~

I'd given up trying to understand anything. I'd blinked and found myself staring up at forty-two still foals. I was being strapped into bed by Mallet and Cuffs, the two working frantically, looking spooked. Trueblood looked on, his face grim.

"What happened? Where did the mare in black go? What happened to everypony?" I asked as I jerked against the restraints.

"Make sure you get it extra tight," Trueblood said tensely as he looked at Mallet.

"What happened?" I asked, straining. Why did I feel so…sticky?

The caramel unicorn nodded. “It’d be easier if we could hose her off,” she said as her magic tightened the restraints.

Triage stood nearby, floating a needle. “I’m sorry, Go Fish. I thought we could help you. I wanted to help you, but it doesn’t look like it’s possible,” the maroon stallion said softly.

I struggled. “No! Wait! What happened? Please. Tell me!” I shouted at him. Triage stuck me with the needle and the world began to darken.

“You know what happened,” was all he said as he looked at me gravely. Now that I was secure, they were leaving. He was the last to go.

Only then did I look down at my bound limbs, at the crimson fluid smeared on my hooves, rapidly darkening in the air. Bits of curly pink mane were trapped in the sticky mess. I stared at them for a minute, and then I did what any sane pony would in my place.

I started screaming. Even when everything went black, I was still screaming.

~ ~ ~

I don’t know how long I lay there in that bed, staring up at those dead fillies. Nopony visited me. I was cut off; I felt like I was dangling in that elevator shaft. Hanging there in the gutted Flash Inc. building. Standing in those ruins beneath the ground.

“So…is this it?” rasped a voice beside my bed.

I closed my eyes and let out a long, low groan. “This…is a really shitty time, Dealer.”

“I reckon so,” he said, the pale, gaunt pony starting to deal some cards. “Problem is…it’s all the time you’ve got left. So, if we’re going to get in some last minute games, this is it.” He put the cards in my hooves. The blood glued them in place. “Not exactly my thing, but you seem to enjoy them.”

Despite myself, I stared at the blood-smeared bits of cardboard. I frowned…what, was this the ‘Ministry Mares as Foals’ edition? One of the cards had a little grinning pink filly bouncing on her hooves before me, like a tiny eager Pinkie Pie. Something was off, though…

“So…what are we playing?” I asked.

“You tell me. Are we playing Go Fish, or are we playing Blackjack?” I closed my eyes with a groan.

“I am sick of playing,” I muttered softly, shaking my head.

"Well, you should have taken my advice and left before now. Got any fours?" he asked with a wan smile.

"Oh, 'I told you so'. Very classy. Go Fish," I muttered, rolling my eyes. He drew a card, and of course it was a four. He showed it to me; four stars for diamonds. Probably had the deck stacked. "I hate that name." Then I looked at him. "So…why are you here, Dealer? Gloating? Helping? Or is it just fun to fuck with me like this?"

"I'm here…because a long, long time ago, a pony I respected immensely asked me to sacrifice my life. To be eternally bonded to a megaspell to prevent the destruction of the country he wanted to save more than anything," he said as he drew a card. "And I'm talking to you because in about a minute a pony is going to be putting a bullet through your head and taking me to Goddesses know where for Goddesses know what. I'm using every bit of my strength to try and break you out of here before that happens."

I sighed and laid the cards flat, closed my eyes, and waited. I had no idea how long, but it had to be longer than a minute. "Guess you need a new watch, Dealer."

"Not a minute here. A minute real time. This place isn't real," he said as he looked around. "Nice room, by the way. Who's your decorator?"

I groaned again. "So. Let me guess. You're here to tell me this is all make-believe. A fantasy created by my mind to blah blah blah… Right?" I took a deep breath. "You're every bit as bad as Trueblood. He won't tell me what I did. You speak in cryptic riddles just to fuck with me."

"Well, everypony needs a hobby," he rasped quietly as he looked around the hospital room. "This isn't real, Blackjack. At least, not entirely. Got to give it to this place, it knows how to mix together truth and lies. You're in Happyhorn Gardens. You turned yourself in to the machines, and the hospital has admitted you as a patient. You've been plugged into one of their dream machines to try and help you. But the Harbingers are here and they're slowly but surely blasting their way into this place. The hospital's security can't hold them off forever. Especially with that tank out there lobbing shells."

I shuddered as I looked at the card of the smiling pink filly, her face smeared with blood. "What if I shouldn't leave, Dealer? What if I should just let them take me and kill me?" I said softly as tears ran down my face. "I can't keep going on like this. I'm killing…fuck… Dealer, do you know what I did? I cut a pegasus's wing off…cut it

off! I gutted another like he was a radhog. I didn't even blink, and I cut him into pieces. I nearly ripped Dusk's face off!" I said as I lay back in the pillow. "Why shouldn't I believe Trueblood? I'm sick! I'm dangerous! I'm a fucking psychopath!"

"No…you're not," he replied. "You may be many things, but a psychopath isn't one of them. You wouldn't whine nearly as much if you were."

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. "Well…I might not be that, but you haven't exactly provided me with a lot of reasons to trust you. Maybe Trueblood is right. Maybe you really are some crazy, paranoid part of myself that just lives to tear me down! Why should I believe you? Why in Equestria should I trust you?" I sniffed, feeling the tears. "You tell me you're sick of playing games…but that's all you've ever done to me…played games."

He looked…troubled. It was an odd look on his usually smug face.

I closed my eyes, tossing the cards aside. "If Trueblood can help me…fine. If some Harbinger kills me while I'm hooked up to a machine…fine. But don't come here pretending like you want to help me and then don't. That's just…mean…" I finished lamely.

"I worked for Goldenblood," he said quietly. "I was his personal assistant in the final years of the war."

Slowly, I cracked open an eye and looked at him. He had his head bowed so his hat blocked his eyes. "A name would be nice, Dealer."

"Dealer is a better name than I deserve," he replied. "You're not the only pony ashamed of who they are and atoning for mistakes they've made. For three years I followed him as he went about working behind the scenes to try and bring some end to the war. I abandoned friends who needed me, ignored family that reached out to me. Because I believed that Goldenblood could somehow fix everything wrong in Equestria." He sighed softly, regretfully. "I had faith in him."

"And…he bound you to EC-1101?" I asked, and he nodded. "Why?"

"He was concerned that there was a plot to usurp the government from within," he said slowly. "He ran constant scenarios and possibilities. An attempt by the aristoponies to install their own ruler. Even something as innocent as Celestia changing her mind once more and attempting to return to the throne was something he planned for. And above everything else was his fear that the Ministry Mares would seek to depose Luna and take control of the

kingdom outright."

"What?" I gaped at him and then laughed. "That's crazier than me…" Then I looked around my room and back at him. "Okay… almost as crazy as me." Wait. Are you crazy if you think you're crazy? I wasn't precisely sure how that worked.

"Why not?" he asked as he looked me in the eye. "Who else in Equestria had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to take the country for themselves? Twilight and her friends hated the war. What better way to hasten its end than to depose Luna and negotiate peace directly? They could have done it, too. Do you have any idea how many diplomatic overtures the zebras made to the ministries near the end of the war? It was a nightmare. And we had no idea if the Ministry Mares were truly loyal to Princess Luna. Were they working to their own ends? Why else would Twilight research how to create alicorns if not to turn herself into one and rule as Princess Twilight? Or perhaps all her friends together as the Ministry Princesses?" He began to pace back and forth. "You have to understand, it wouldn't be the first time Twilight and her friends stood against Luna. They could simply claim she'd reverted to Nightmare Moon once more."

"But that's…that's insane! Twilight wouldn't do that!" I gaped at him.

"Wouldn't she? If she was certain it was the only way to end the fighting?" he countered firmly, and then relented a little. "Maybe you're right. Maybe she wouldn't have. But Goldenblood had to plan for the contingency. He had to be ready. He was against EC-1101, against anything that made Luna's assassination an immediate transfer of power. It was a system ripe for exploitation. And the closer things got to the end, the more certain Goldenblood was that somepony was attempting to use EC-1101 to replace Luna."

I groaned and shook my head. "I think being crazy is just easier." I stared up at that ceiling. "So, if you're right…I'm stuck in my own mind and about to get shot. And if Trueblood is right…my brain is so damaged it'll be better just to let them scrub it clean and hope for the best." I shook my head with a sigh, lying back against the soft mattress. "I don't even know why I'm here."

"Why else would you be here?" Dealer replied. "You did something bad, Blackjack. And you knew it, but you didn't want to deal with it. Still can't deal with it. So you're here. The machine is trying to

help put your mind back together again, but it's not working. And the attack by the Harbingers isn't making things any easier."

I looked around the hospital room. "Why'd it make the hospital? Why not…like…my stable?"

"It tried," he replied. "Believe it or not, this is the third attempt it's made trying to piece your brain together. First time was your stable…it wasn't pretty. Then it tried putting you back in Chapel… that went worse. So now this," Dealer said as he gestured with his hoof. "It's mixing what it knows with what's in your head. If it used things you knew too well…like your friends…you'd realize it was messing with you. If it used nothing from your own memories, nothing would be convincing. It's shuffling your neuroses and fears, trying to get you to face what you did."

"And what did I do?" I asked sharply as I looked over at him. "Nopony will tell me that!" How could I be responsible if I didn't even know what I'd done wrong?

"Because the simulation broke you when it did. Both times," he said softly, concern in his eyes. "You were told…you snapped…and you didn't come back," he said as he shook his head. "I don't think it can help you. Not like this. The only thing that can help you is… you."

Well…*that* was profound. "And how do you suggest I do that? I'm not exactly smart at this whole…brain…thing."

"Break it," he replied. "The program is trying to convince you that this is real. Push it. When it snaps, you should have your opportunity. After that…" He gave a tiny shrug and a sigh. "It's all I can think of."

Well, it was more than *I* could think of. I smiled a little. "Oh. Well, I should be able to manage that. I'm good at making a mess of things." Like Harbingers.

"The simulation is taxed to capacity. If you can get the program to fault, it will become unstable. If it becomes unstable, you'll have a very thin window to try and fix yourself." He looked around. "If I'm not mistaken, it's already faulted twice and reset its simulations, just not enough to completely destabilize it. You just need to give it that extra push."

"So…you want me to break the program that's holding my mind in the hope…the chance…it'll get me out of here?" I asked, arching my brow. He nodded once, and I sighed, shaking my head. "What if I don't believe you? What if this is…real…?"

"Then you can't break it. In which case, make the best life you can. But I think you know better, Blackjack. You're not Go Fish. This isn't your world."

I lay back, suddenly fighting tears. "I saw Mom again, Dealer. I mean…she's alive here. And sure, my life is messed up, but maybe…maybe…I can fix it. Maybe I can make it right."

But no matter how I closed my eyes and tried to make it feel true, it didn't. I thought how flat Octavia's music had sounded. How the time just blurred together. The odd little lapses and the two visions with Fluttershy and Jetstream. I'd known the flavor of carrots and apples, but I'd never eaten celery before; was that why it'd had no taste? It could simulate sights and images from the hospital or things I remembered, but not things I didn't know.

I sniffed, turning my head away. "This place isn't real, Blackjack," he said quietly, putting his hoof on mine.

"I know," I whispered.

But that didn't stop some parts of me from wishing it was.

~ ~ ~

All it'd taken was a long blink, and Harpica entered once more. Had I really been here weeks and months, or had it all been just a few hours in the real world? No wonder I didn't feel rested or relaxed. No surprise the therapy machine hadn't been able to work with my fatigued brain. I made the same replies to Harpica. Yes. A music concert in the courtyard would be wonderful. I'd love to hear Octavia play.

As I was wheeled along the curving halls, I picked out the patterns I'd seen day after day. The three doctors standing exactly where they had been every time I'd been wheeled along. The same cookies on the little table besides the main entrance. I could almost cue Lighthooves's nervous look. It wasn't completely consistent; the program wasn't that bad. In the courtyard, instead of seeing Jetstream, there was Octavia playing her flat, familiar music. The stage was exactly like the memory I'd seen her perform in.

The orderlies pushed me past doors marked with the four stars… four stars…why was that significant?

What had I done? I remembered fighting in the Yellow River camp. I'd nearly killed Dusk; I hoped that she survived…and that Glory would forgive me when she found out. I'd been tired. Hurt. Alone. I

was running on horror and hate and hurt away from more people I'd damaged simply by being around them. I thought of Xanthe's proclamation that I was cursed.

Maybe I was.

I'd found a hole on the yellow hillside to the southeast of the camp. It'd been some sort of half-finished construction site. 'Four Stars Transportation'. There'd been a rail tunnel nearby, but I'd avoided that. Inside the construction site had been a dead end. A heavy door marked with four stars…heavy like stable heavy. No numbers, though. No navigation tag on my PipBuck either to give me a clue.

I'd tried to open it with EC-1101…but it hadn't worked.

Then…I'd been attacked? Seekers in the rain? It'd been twilight; I hadn't seen them well. It had been a short and nasty fight. But I'd killed them all with my steel hooves…smashed them in the rain...

And then…what'd happened…I'd killed the Seekers and then… then…something.

Was that why I was here? That something I couldn't remember?

I looked at all the books on the shelves, the pictures on the desk. Even Trueblood's behavior. "Well, Go Fish, how are we today?" the maroon unicorn enquired as if everything was just fine. Exactly as he had every day. I wondered if whatever doctor had used this office had said that same patronizing line over and over, or if the programming just made it sound that way.

So…how to break it? I couldn't just accuse Trueblood of being an illusion. He'd just send me back into the little filly room. Uggghhh…I needed a smart pony here. Somepony that could figure out a way to break a machine that was all data and magic lights. Somepony that had read all those fancy books on the bookcase.

Wait. Had the computer read all those fancy books?

That's it.

"Well, Doctor. I know I did something bad. And I know that I'm having trouble remembering what that something was." Trueblood nodded, his smile growing. "And I also know that I keep hurting ponies, and I don't know why. I…I'm sometimes not even aware I'm doing it."

"Yes, Blackjack. That's why you're here. So that you can remember what you did and come to terms with it and prevent it from happening again," he said softly.

I bowed my head. "You can unlock me, Doctor. I'm not going anywhere. Because you're right. I do need help," I said with a small

smile. “I won’t cause a fuss anymore. I promise.” He now looked wary at my change in attitude. I sniffed as I leaned back in the chair, feeling the tears run down my cheeks. “And I want you to help me. Because…I don’t know how to help myself any more. I’m so frustrated and scared that I’m going to fly apart…and hurt someone bad. And I understand now you really do want to help me.”

“Go Fish. I never expected this…” he murmured, looking almost scared. “This is quite a breakthrough. I know you’ve never trusted us here at Happyhorn. Perhaps we should stop here. Ruminate and reflect on what this means. Perhaps you’d like to go to another of Octavia’s concerts? With your mother?”

I really would like that. I sniffed and I shook my head slowly. Even if it wasn’t Octavia…even if it wasn’t Mom…I still wanted it.

“No. Doctor, I only want you to do one thing. Please. It will help a lot,” I said as I sat there. “Unlock me. I want to see your books. I won’t try and escape. I promise.” I didn’t fight. I didn’t jerk against my restraints. I simply waited.

The room gave a momentary flicker. Then his horn glowed and he carefully removed my restraints. I rubbed my legs; I remembered how they’d felt as flesh and blood. My body being alive and healthy like it was now. I trotted towards the books. They had all kinds of dry-sounding titles like ‘The Physiology of the Mind’ and ‘A Brief Reflection on Unicorn Psychology’. I bit that one and pulled it off the shelf.

Inside were words…lots and lots of words. “What are you looking for, Go Fish? I never took you for a reader…”

Mmmm…I’d expected…Wait. Of course it would have psychology texts. But if it had pulled parts from my mind as well... “I was wondering if you have any copies of Daring Do?” I’d read them in Stable 99, sort of…

A momentary pause. It wanted to help me. I could imagine it thinking: will copies of Daring Do help her get better? Would it take the chance?

Then I spotted it. ‘Daring Do and the Quest for the Sapphire Stone’. And four other Daring Do books. I remembered Textbook assigning them for reading after the copious lectures about how the outside was death and how it was absolutely impossible to try and relive Daring Do’s adventures unless the Overmare allowed it. Now I pulled them out carefully and sat.

“You like Daring Do?” he asked guardedly.

“Not really,” I said as I opened the book in my lap and started to turn the pages. The words became fuzzier and fuzzier. And then ten pages in…turned blank. “Actually, I never got past chapter one.” And the others I hadn’t read at all. I opened the next, but the pages inside were completely blank.

“It…A bad printing?” Trueblood said, the maroon unicorn giving a sickly grin as he backed away. He kept pausing, then moving, pausing, then moving. The flickering along the bookshelves grew. I saw titles changing before my eyes.

“It’s not a bad printing. It’s not real. And neither are you,” I said as I rose to my hooves. “You loved your family. You cherished them. Can you tell me anything about them? Did you take your sons to hoofball? How about their favorite book? Did your wife cook? Who did the dishes? Where’d you go on vacation?” I asked as I advanced slowly, step by step. With each question he paused, with each pause the office shimmered and became more vague and indistinct.

“We’re trying to help you!” Trueblood begged, becoming plainer with every flicker. “Please let us help you!” Now images of the real world were bleeding through. The pastel walls evaporated to show the dirty, dingy brown stains. The books lay black and soggy on their shelving; half of them had tumbled down in a pulpy cascade. Then new walls appeared, the gray steel of Stable 99. The star-decorated walls of my home in Chapel. The hallways of the Fluttershy Medical Center. Vanity’s bedroom. Again and again it tried to latch on to the idea of some place it could put me.

“You can’t help me,” I said to Trueblood. “I wish you could.”

And with that, the simulation shattered and the world went black and silent.

~ ~ ~

Once more I was in darkness, but this wasn’t simply an absence of sight. This was an absence of anything at all. “Hello?” I asked softly. No echo, but I thought I heard something in the darkness. I cast my light spell, and a tiny white star blossomed to life above me. It illuminated the cracked asphalt under my hooves. My eyes took in the words painted there long ago.

‘Mercy’.

I was on a bridge in the middle of space. I couldn’t hear water

flowing nor feel the slightest stir of air. But I wasn't alone in the vast nothingness. Something shimmered in the air by the rusty, battered rail. "Hello?"

For a moment, the shimmer condensed and solidified. The sparkles covering it grew. "Why won't you let us help you?" a voice asked. Maybe a filly, maybe a colt. It was a small voice, though. "We cannot devise a therapy simulation that will help you." Slowly, I looked at it and imagined Scotch Tape. The shimmers and sparkles turned green and blue, and then the image of my young friend appeared. She sniffed, rubbing her teary eyes. "None of our requests to the Ministry of Peace have been returned, and we've paged every doctor in the directory. None have responded. We lack the necessary contexts and memories to create an appropriate simulated world for treating your mental illness."

"I must be the worst patient ever," I said as I sat down beside her. "You're Happyhorn's computer…thing?"

She nodded and sniffed. "Happyhorn Gardens. A place to treat wartime stress disorder in patients where simple memory manipulation spells are insufficient." She closed her eyes. "We haven't had an actual patient in so long. Trespassers, yes…but never a patient. And it's been so long since any of the doctors or staff have logged in. We've just been standing by, even as our nodes have been failing one after the next. We're at only twelve percent of our original capacity."

"And so I came here needing help... and you plugged me in."

"Yes. Your data interface provided a much more direct contact than usual. Normally, we can only affect dreams to try to assist therapeutic techniques. With you, we were able to construct a fully integrated experience based on your memories and the recordings here at Happyhorn." Then she sighed, pouting. "Except you kept seeing through it and regressing back to your self-destructive impulses."

"Self-destructive?" I asked with a nervous little smile. "I'm not that bad." Am I?

Glory, gray and lovely, walked out of the shadows. "You seek out situations that will expose you to ever greater harm, such as separating yourself from your friends. You associate with individuals that increase your chance of risk. You are reckless in the extreme because you are seeking your own annihilation. Even your sexual inclinations are oriented towards being excited by pain and

punishment," the image of the pegasus said pointedly. "The fact is, Blackjack, you are suicidal and have been for some time."

I frowned and pointed my hoof…my flesh and blood hoof…at her. "Look. I *was* like that. I'm not any more. I have hope and friends and…stuff…" I said and then suddenly flushed. "And I do not get off on pain and punishment!" Goddesses, she made me sound like Misty Hooves, the stable exhibitionist.

P-21 emerged next to Glory, whole and steady and annoyed. "Just because you think suicide is wrong doesn't stop you from wanting it. The underlying trauma and psychological inclinations are still there."

"You fear sleep because of its connotations with death; because you simultaneously realize suicide is wrong and yet desire it," Lacunae said as she drifted down from the darkness above.

"And you increasingly hate yourself and what you are becoming," Rampage said as she trotted out in all her glittering spikiness.

Scotch Tape shivered against me. "We've been trying to put you in calm, safe, controlled simulations for treatment…but you have violently rejected every single one." She closed her eyes and started to cry. "We are bad. We're not able to do what we are supposed to do." All my friends lowered their eyes, looking ashamed.

I sighed and put my leg around her shoulder, hugging her tight. I thought of Ol' Hank back in Hippocratic Research, left alone while the world died around him. "Hey, you tried. That's more than a lot of people do nowadays. Now if you'll just let me out of here…" I said as I looked around at the spooky bridge. I'd really had enough of this.

"We can't…" said Glory.

I groaned, closing my eyes and banging my head softly against the rail behind me. "Of course not. That would be simple."

"It's not a matter of simplicity, Blackjack," P-21 said gravely. "Our previous analysis of your personality has proved accurate. At the end of every simulation, you pursued self-destruction."

"If we release you in this state, you'll kill yourself," Lacunae said solemnly. "Every simulation and prediction we've run assures it. You will kill yourself or allow another to do it for you." The purple alicorn folded her wings, looking out at the darkness. "We exist to help patients, even if it is against their wishes to be helped."

"We cannot release you like this," Scotch Tape sniffed as she looked up at me, her green eyes shimmering with tears. "We have

to help you. That's what Happyhorn is for. Helping."

I sighed and then stood. I walked to the edge of the section of bridge I could see. "There's ponies trying to kill me in the real world, though." I supposed I was damned either way.

"Hospital security is attempting to hamper their search however we can," Lacunae said. "However, it appears inevitable that they will fully occupy the facility in--" And the purple alicorn suddenly stiffened. She threw back her head as if to scream, then exploded in a cloud of purple motes.

I stared where she'd disappeared. "What…what the hell was that?!" I knew she hadn't been my friend... but still!

"Her node was destroyed," Scotch Tape said softly.

"You mean you can die?" I gaped at the olive filly, who smiled sadly and nodded. Okay, maybe it wasn't technically death, but destroyed was still destroyed. "Okay…no more time to waste. If you won't let me go till I'm better…then I'm going to have to get better." I trotted across the patch of bridge, towards the other side. Far in the distance I could make out another tiny pool of illumination. "What's that?"

"We don't have a running simulation," Rampage said as she stepped up beside me with a little smirk. "There aren't any safety guides, protocols, or predictions, so it's all a bit unknown. Your subconscious is painting these scenes and settings. We're merely projecting them back upon your consciousness. So this is your party, Blackjack. Not ours."

"You have to be careful though," Glory added as she flew overhead. "If you die here, it'll interrupt our connection and… well…we won't be able to reestablish it. You'll probably be killed by the feedback, and even if you survived that, we'd have no way to release you at all." She landed opposite Rampage. "We still have some time. Perhaps we could try again. Create some kind of simulation to help your therapy safely?" she asked, her lips straining to maintain a hopeful smile.

I looked at her, wondering about her need to protect me. "Is this your personality... or are you acting like this because of me?"

Glory looked over at P-21 and then Rampage. Scotch Tape eyed Glory carefully for a moment. Then all four of them answered simultaneously, "Yes."

I groaned, covering my face with my hoof. I should have known.

~ ~ ~

We walked in complete silence; the bridge had given way to a crumbling road. The single light above me illuminated a patch for about twenty feet in every direction. According to my friends, time outside my head was moving at a ten thousandth the speed inside my head. The 'month' they'd spent trying to fix me had in reality only been about four hours or so. "So... how exactly does this work?" I asked as I looked at the crumbling asphalt under my hooves. "Why are my legs flesh and blood? Why a road? Why can't I just be there?"

"The road is your consciousness trying to lead you to the memories your subconscious is attempting to hide from you," Glory said as she hovered overhead. The lack of glee in her eyes as she flew helped remind me that this wasn't the mare I loved, but still, I felt better having her around. "The darkness is one of many obstacles your own mind will put in your way. It doesn't want you to actively remember... "

I started to come across bones. Bones scattered here and there, blackened and crumbling. "So... do I really need to remember?" I'd made it through most of my life not thinking about the big things. Sure, it'd led to some really messed up stuff, but it was still an option.

"The knowledge... the memory... is there. It's toxic. It's poisoned your subconscious and threatens to destroy your conscious mind," P-21 said grimly. "Your dichotomy partially protected you; your Blackjack ego is dealing with what your Go Fish persona could not. It also caused your breakdown in the first place," he said with a sour grunt. "If you weren't so mentally damaged, you would have slept and avoided the trauma altogether."

Scotch Tape sighed from where she rode on my back. "It was our hope that, in a safe simulation, we could evoke the memory into your consciousness so that you could deal with it. You rejected our attempts. Violently," she added with a shiver. "Finally, we tried to use Happyhorn in the context that you were damaged and needed our help. It was the first time ever that a simulation of the institution was more effective than one of home with family."

"A definite sign of the mental and emotional damage you've suffered," Glory said softly above me. "As is this place. It doesn't have to be dark. Your subconscious is... terrifying."

“How’d I get like this?” I asked as buildings started to appear. They loomed like crumbling, burned-out skulls. Shattered glass in the windows caught the light from my orb and reflected it back at me like a row of four stars. “I mean... I used to joke about my crazy... ”

“You’ve suffered, Blackjack. It’s as simple as that,” Scotch said as she put her forehooves on the back of my neck. “Over the last month you’ve gone from a stable environment to being shot on an almost daily basis. It’s wartime stress disorder turned up to eleven. Then there were all those horrible choices you made and the ponies you’ve killed and... ” The ground under my hooves gave a long, low rumble that sent bricks clattering down into the street. A crack split the silence, and a jagged gap snapped right down the middle of the road.

It looked like I didn’t like this kind of therapy.

Suddenly, the street collapsed under me. Like a closing book slipping through my hooves, the bottom dropped out as the sides lifted. My friends scrambled up the sliding slope and Scotch Tape shrieked and clung to my mane as I struggled to find purchase. Because I didn’t want to go into that hole. I glanced down below me as my legs tore streaks of crumbling asphalt away.

Bodies. So many bodies... missing their faces. Missing legs. All killed by me. Shot, cut, and smashed to death. Of course they weren’t still. They howled and screamed, and those that could were clawing their way up the sides. I even saw a familiar teal filly torn in two screaming my name. The ruined, skinless front half of Deus scrambled up after me.

Something chomped down upon my tail, and I looked back to see a small crushed form biting my black and red striped tail and pulling me back down. I dug in my forehooves and then kicked out. Once. Twice. Finally, her skull popped and she went tumbling back into the seething mass. I forced my way up the quivering slope of decayed roadbed and finally flopped over the edge. With a rumble, the sides collapsed into the howling pit. All was silent once more as I stared up at my tiny light.

“Like I said... ” Scotch whimpered, “terrifying.”

Slowly, I pulled myself to my hooves. “I... guess I’m feeling some guilt for some of the ponies I’ve killed?” I suggested sheepishly. The four of them stared back at me. “Right. So... ahem... you’ve seen worse, right?” Again, that long stare. I felt my mane kinking up just from their look. What, was I really that bad?

"You'd be much better without all the fatigue and sleep deprivation," Rampage said as we continued along between the looming, crumbling brick buildings. Black, thorny vines were curling up them as I watched. Their razor-sharp tips scraped against the wet, decaying brick as the crumbling road became more like a muddy trail. In the darkness, I could hear the wet patter of falling debris as the thorns slowly ripped the ruins apart.

"It's not my fault. There's no 'sleep' button to push to turn me off. I never get tired, so I don't need to rest." Okay, maybe I *needed* to rest according to Glory... and every other medical pony I'd talked to... but I didn't feel like I *had* to sleep. I watched a skull slowly lifted by the glossy black vines, a tendril curling up out of an eye socket. Then, with a pop, it split the bone in two. I really didn't want to think about what that might symbolize. I closed my eyes. "I know... I know I'm scared to sleep. But... do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had a normal night's sleep? Just... sleep? No nightmares? No weird dreams of ponies killing everything around them?"

"A long time. But you need sleep. Real sleep. Even this simulation isn't true sleep. Your brain needs time and an opportunity to recover," Glory said as she flew lower to avoid thorn-wrapped cables stretched between the buildings.

Then a mare said quietly, "No, Blackjack. We need to die."

I looked at Rampage, Glory, and Scotch. "Tell me that was one of you... "

Then Rampage was shot in the head. The bullet of a high powered rifle tore her skull into bloody chunks of gray, white, and red. And unlike the real Rampage, this one didn't get up again. She exploded into a cloud of white motes that evaporated into the air. Glory, P-21, and Scotch all jumped behind me as I looked through the tangled bushes at the unicorn mare in black. She looked down her massive sniper rifle at me, the light of my spell gleaming off her goggles and the lens of her scope.

Wait. Why does my subconscious get a gun? I wanted a gun too!

And like that, P-21 was enveloped in Steel Ranger armor and Glory wrapped in the black Enclave power armor. I looked up over my shoulder at Scotch Tape standing on my back, wearing filly-sized combat armor. And me? I was in my blue and black Aegis Security armor, complete with rearing filly on my flank. I lifted my IF-88 Ironpony in my magical glow and grinned down at the mare in

black.

Okay, subconscious. Time to fight. I could beat anything if I really wanted to... including myself! I charged through the muddy tangle, sending Scotch Tape sprawling on the road behind me, the thorns scraping at my armor as I ploughed through, all while sending a rapid-fire stream of explosive shotgun shells into the mare in the black riot armor. Yellow flashes lit up the briars and crumbling ruins as I sprayed and ran blindly ahead.

The mare in black disintegrated in a hail of bullets, her armor blasted to pieces. “Awwww yeah. Now that’s my kind of therapy!” I cheered. Then I arrived at where she’d fired from and found only black rubble and snapped-off thorns that regrew before my eyes.

Oh, please don’t tell me my subconscious was smarter than me too!

The briars were growing up around me. They curled around me and crawled up my tail. I struggled as I felt them begin to twist and coil through gaps in my armor. The thorns sliced thin bleeding cuts as I fought to free myself of the mass.

“Did you feel brave there for just a moment? Did you really think it was as easy as that? You think you can just pretend this away with a juvenile fantasy?” the thorns seemed to hiss in my own soft mutter as I turned and started to drag myself towards my friends, who had stayed out of the nettles and crawling weeds. I felt my armor start to tear and my hide rip as I pulled myself back along the way I’d come. The IF-88 was left in the weeds, rusting in moments, ripped to pieces in seconds. All I could do was walk as the thorns tore at me and ripped at my flesh. I was an idiot. I deserved this, but I couldn’t just stop. Pieces of armor and self were torn away, but I was almost there.

Almost...

A tangle of thorns fell over my head, the spikes ramming into my eyes and tearing them out as I struggled the last few steps. Finally I collapsed, broken and bloody and screaming as I crumpled on the muddy road. “This is what you are, Blackjack: screaming, bloody meat,” the ground whispered to my ear.

The taunt, though, silenced my screams. I’d lived through this before. I could live through it now. The pain was a reminder I was alive, and even after the harm I’d suffered... I’d still continued on.

I opened my cybernetic eyes and put my mechanical limbs beneath me. The scraps and scars disappeared as I healed and I rose to my hooves. I looked back the way I’d come at the bloody streaks and

tatters in the thorns that were being ripped into smaller and smaller pieces.

I could never be that old Blackjack again. I watched those bloody thorns close up once more into a solid wall. No matter how much I wanted it, I'd never get that feeling I'd had running around the Wasteland, staying ahead of Deus, and trying to protect my friends. I was older now. And even though it had only been a month, like time in this place, it felt like I'd gone through years. Slowly I looked back at the other three. "So... let me guess. Stay on the road?"

Glory nodded slowly. "Yes. That would be advisable." Their armor had disappeared with my own change.

I hung my head, and what was left of my old combat armor slowly transformed into the green army combat armor I'd scavenged off the Harbingers. I floated out Duty and Sacrifice and slipped them into the holsters at my side. Then I checked Vigilance, then finally the silver sword. It seemed particularly bright and sharp in the illumination of my light spell.

Well, I did have some weeds to cut...

I walked on along the trail, the sword slashing out at the vines as they slithered into my path. At last, the thorny tangle began to be mixed with rusty metal panels and girders. Soon we weren't walking along a trail so much as walking along a decaying metal hallway. The Stable-Tec logo was barely visible through all the rust. Then I spotted a sign. 'Trust in the Overmare, she is our great protector.'

Welcome home, Blackjack.

The familiar metal walls hemmed me in as we walked onward. So... bring it on, brain. What are you going to do? Throw the smell of chlorine at me? Let me hear the sounds of Deus ripping things apart? Midnight screaming 'murderer' at me? Bring it on!

The rust slowly faded away. The lights slowly brightened. And from up ahead I could hear the sounds of... music? I scowled a little as I moved forward, down the hall and then up the stairs. The music became clearer. Then there were sounds of laughter. I went up... and slowly entered the atrium at a near crawl.

I looked at my stable, alive and thriving. A banner hung across the chamber that read 'Elect your next overmare: vote Midnight.' A large poster showed a flexing gray mare with a message beneath her, 'Vote Rivets: she knows better than anypony how to keep things running.' I spotted Glory talking with Rivets herself. And

over in the corner, P-21 was talking quietly with Scotch Tape. Rampage was showing how she could lug a whole packing crate without help, to the amazement of the others.

I gaped, my butt hitting the floor as I watched the stable ponies I'd known my whole life walking, talking, discussing who should be the next overmare. Then, in another shock, from the stable entry emerged Keeper. The grizzly old buck was greeted warmly by the occupants of the atrium. "Stuff to trade, folks! I got berries! Fresh berries!" The crowd gave out a cheer.

This is what could have been. My stable... alive. My stable, a part of the Wasteland. My stable, making things better. My stable, my home. This is how it could have been if I'd just been able to warn Rivets of the threat. If I'd just been able to convince Midnight that the outside had something to offer. If I'd just done something other than crawling back to my quarters to rest and screw around with Glory.

It could have been like this...

Instead... I looked up at the round window. At the mare in black standing behind the thick glass, looking down at everypony. At her reaching over to the Overmare's terminal.

I screamed and raced for the stairs to the Overmare's office. My stable got in my way, jostling and bumping into me as I tried to push through. I had to stop her. I had to!

There had to be a better way.

Then I smelled it. The chlorine sting on my eyes. The poison gas burning my lungs. I heard the screaming as my stable panicked, crushing against each other as they struggled to find some safety. I felt somepony underhoof but was helpless to pull them up in the crushing mill of bodies.

I had to save them. Please... don't make me watch my stable die again...

Then I saw Glory hovering there, holding Scotch Tape in her hooves. I looked at the pony I was trampling, and saw the bloody form of P-21. He looked up at me and then pointed to the stable door. I stared at him, and he spoke over the screaming and shoving. "You have such a fascinating dichotomy."

Then he broke apart into motes of blue.

I couldn't save them. Not like this. Not here. Not ever. I had to move on... I had to. 99 was killing me... and I wanted it to. But I couldn't die of regret. Of guilt.

I struggled and pushed and shoved and fought through the crowd, now for the stable hatch as it slowly closed. None of the screaming, crushing ponies tried to escape, of course. That wasn't the point. I had to get out of here... I couldn't stop. Stopping was death. Stopping was failure. I had to win. No matter how bad it hurt.

Glory and Scotch Tape nipped through the door and into the mineshaft beyond. I jumped through, reeking of the horrid gas as the round wheel rolled into place. 'Murderer' echoed on and on in my ears. I clenched my eyes and curled up on the far side, shaking as I pressed myself against the door. I thought I'd put it behind me. I thought I'd dealt with it... and I had. Superficially. I'd buried it. I'd blamed myself... then I'd stopped short of holding myself responsible.

Responsible means answering to somepony. Who did I answer to?

I drew Vigilance. Pressed it to my temple as I closed my eyes. How in Equestria could I atone for so much when I couldn't atone for one? I had to be held responsible... I did...

Responsibility isn't punishment, Blackjack.

I let the shaking gun fall away and looked at my remaining friends through my tears. "I guess... I really am that messed up." The barrel gleamed as I cradled the weapon in my hooves, tears beading up on the metal. It was wrong. It was so very wrong.

But I wanted it so very... very... badly.

~ ~ ~

I don't know how long I sat there with my back to the stable door. I guessed time didn't matter in a place like this. Glory and Scotch Tape sat by me, both looking scared to say anything that might push me over the edge. Yet as I sat there, staring up into the little light I'd summoned, I felt something ease inside my chest. Something that felt... vaguely... like letting go. I wept as I looked up at the light. I hadn't died with my stable. I'd made mistakes. Beating myself up wouldn't change it. Punishing myself wouldn't fix it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to that dark stony tunnel.

"Sorry?" it whispered back to me. "That's it? You think you can just say you're sorry and that makes it all better? You think you can just walk away and it's suddenly all okay? You killed them all!" my voice hissed back at me, full of hate and judgment. But I didn't look

down that tunnel. I looked at the light and found myself smiling just a little.

"No. I don't. But I am sorry." And I'd started to take steps to try and make up for it. Stable 99 wouldn't be left a tomb. Crumpets and Stronghoof would put it to good use... sure, they'd need a few hundred more ponies to fill it to capacity, but they'd find a way. They'd make it better. Slowly, I tilted forward and rose once more. Then I started up the tunnel.

I paused and looked back at the door behind me, barely visible in the wan light of the star above me. "Goodbye," I whispered, and then, without a second look, continued along the dark path.

~ ~ ~

"To be honest, all trauma aside, your mind has suffered rather significantly from other sources as well. Memory orb abuse. Magical memory intrusion. Even two previous interfaces by an outside system," Glory said as we trudged down the rocky tunnel. It looked like it was a cross between something out of Brimstone's Fall and the tunnel leading down to my stable. It felt like it'd been hours since I'd put my stable behind me, but we were making fair progress... okay, I hoped we were making fair progress and not going in circles. Optimism was important! "And lets not even begin to talk about the physical damage incurred from alcoholism and repeated cranial impacts. And--"

Then I thought about what she'd said. "Wait. Wait. Previous interface? Twice?" The gray mare nodded. I knew the professor had done it once... "You mean somepony plugged into my brain between then and now?"

"Yes." She nodded gravely and then screwed up her face. "From our analysis, they downloaded various audio-visual displays that were projected when your active vision and auditory systems synched up with the recording. Similar to what you witnessed during times our simulation was stressed." I just blinked at her, and the pegasus smiled and simplified, "We threw in recordings from our own memories sometimes when we didn't know what else to do. "

I started to speak, then thought instead. "Would these projections... what would they look like?"

Scotch looked from Glory to me before answering. "They would

resemble transparent images of the original recordings." I thought of the ghosts I'd seen in Hippocratic Research and... Ol' Hank. He'd been in the elevator shaft in time to catch me when I fell. I didn't blame the old machine; somepony else had been using him. But still, I felt unclean.

"So they messed with my mind." I groaned and closed my eyes. Was this how Lacunae felt? Having your sense of self messed with by others for their own ends? At least the hospital was trying to help! "My brain is not somepony's frigging playground!"

"If it helps, the interface was limited to your eyes and ears rather than directly attempting to interface with your mind's conscious awareness. Whoever made the intrusion only affected what you saw and heard," Scotch Tape said, then flinched as I looked sharply at her. "But of course that doesn't justify it... "

Messing with my life. Messing with my mind. Messing with my body. And I didn't like it one bit.

Suddenly, we came to the end of the tunnel, almost spilling out onto the bank of a vast, sluggish river. It looked rather like the Hoofington River, but I couldn't see anything familiar besides the black looming shadow of the Core beyond. Then the glow of my spell intensified and spread out over the sluggish waters... and I still didn't see anything I recognized. "So what's this terrible memory supposed to be?" I looked over my shoulder and then shook my head. If my stable hadn't been the reason for this, what was?

What could be worse than that?

Glory and Scotch Tape looked at each other. Scotch Tape started to speak, but then Glory rose and said in sharp alarm, "No! Don't! Please? I know she's made amazing progress but... please?"

"We have to help her. We only have two nodes left. Any second we might be disabled... " Scotch Tape said, then she looked at me. Glory cringed as if bracing for a blow. "Blackjack... what do you remember happening at the construction site?"

I looked nervously at Glory, but I couldn't see what the big deal was. "Let's see... I got to the construction site... there was the tunnel nearby. I... " I frowned as I looked at the murky waters. "There were Seekers coming out of the tunnel. And... " The river began to gurgle and slosh, forming eddies and loops as the smell of stinking rotted meat filled the air. Rain, cold and heavy, began to fall as we stood there on the bank. "We fought. I killed them." Was that it? I thought about the battle in the construction area... tense. My EFS

was going crazy; I'd been seeing things in the fight that weren't there. I'd kept imagining zebra commandos moving for a sniping shot, expecting an anti-machine round into my head or back.

"You fought... and killed them... " Glory said with care, as if afraid her words would cause me to shatter. "And then?"

"Then... there were more, I think." I turned back to the tunnel I'd emerged from, but now it was different. It was lined with cinder blocks and had rusted hunks of machinery around it. "In the tunnel with the door with those stars... and... "

Suddenly from the river came an immense detonation of water, the ground shuddering, heaving, and sending me flat on my face beside the rancid flow. The surface foamed and leapt as an immense dark shape exploded from the depths. Frothy brown water poured forth as it screamed, groaned, and boomed across the dark waters. It slowed its forward motion, churning up the bank as it gouged its way up the mud and rocks to stop in front of me. I stared up in shock at the water sheeting over the rusting letters on the bow:

HMS *Celestia.*

Okay. My mind was getting creative again. Behind the massive, twisted hulk of the battleship was another. And another. A trail of shipwrecks leading across the dirty, stinking depths. I licked my lips nervously as the steel groaned and muttered. "Well. I guess that kinda counts as a road, doesn't it?"

Glory lifted Scotch Tape up. I hauled myself over the bow. The rain hissed off the rusting superstructure as we moved along buckled decks. Thick gun barrels pointed silently out into the darkness beyond, streamers of muck and filth dangling from them like tattered banners. From below came screams and cries for help, and I could see ponies moving back and forth in the distance or struggling in the current.

"Save them all... " the river seemed to hiss around their cries.

Was there something wrong with me in that I really hated my own mind almost as much as I hated the Core itself? As I looked along the trail of wrecks, I saw the distant green glow of the city. If there was a source for all this, it had to be there. I looked back at the wet purple and blue manes of my friends--of the computers that had taken the roles of my friends--and gave them an encouraging smile. "Hey. Don't worry. I haven't snapped yet, have I?"

They didn't laugh. I suppose I couldn't blame them. From everything I could see, this was definitely post-snappage.

We moved forward, in single file, along the broken ships. Ponies yelled and screamed for help, holding out their hooves to me. But their pleas, as much as they bothered me, were bearable. I'd accepted I couldn't have saved everypony. As much as the pleading was annoying, I could deal with it.

I could. Couldn't I?

It seemed as if my mind were figuring that out too. The cries faded as we went along, leaving only the hiss of water on rusted metal. We moved from the *Celestia*, past the gaping hole I'd blasted in the ship, and on to the HMS *Luna*. I really couldn't tell the difference between the two. Then we reached another boat... nowhere near the size of the two immense battleships. Its stern rested on the bow of the *Luna*, and its front had punched clear through the hull of another huge ship. After that, I'd be at the Core. I'd just have to go through this boat to the far side. Easy...

Except that this boat was the *Seahorse*.

"No way. No frigging way," I said as I backed away. "I'm not going in there. I'll be raped. Or you'll be raped. Or... Fuck!" I shouted, feeling my rear end burning just from the memory. "We'll find another way. You can fly us up." Even when I weighed too much to carry. "I'll fucking swim!" Same problem. I tried to assert my will, to make this crazy place do something I wanted for a change.

Nothing. The river churned even more, the boats and ships beginning to roll back and forth. If they sank...

Oh, I hated myself. Glory and Scotch Tape looked at me sadly. "I... do I have to? Please... I don't want to go in there. I don't want to be in that place again." Being crazy was preferable to being in there!

You were a victim. You're still a victim. You're going to be one again... or someone you love will. You set your rapists free... you created more victims. Just as guilty as they are...

"I'm sorry, Blackjack," Scotch Tape said as she came up and hugged my foreleg. Glory trotted up on my other side and leaned against me as well. "This is what a suicidal mind is like. It wants you to balk and hesitate so it can tear you down. You're your own worst enemy here."

"There must be another way," I said, feeling my nethers burn in memory. It was going to happen again. It was. As certain as I was of anything.

Then Glory smiled and kissed my cheek. "We exist to help you however we can, Blackjack. I'm glad you gave me one more chance

to help." And then she pulled away. There was a momentary flicker, and suddenly I was staring at myself... a flesh and blood self. I looked down at myself and saw Glory's gray hide. Funny, despite my appearance, I still felt like myself. "Hurry. It won't fool you long," she said as she trotted up onto the stern of the *Seahorse*.

"No! Sweet Celestia, no!" I screamed after her, and yet I drew short. Some internal impediment kept me from moving past the rear deck of the boat. Then I heard the cries. The sound of hammering. The sound of flesh in flesh... I clenched my eyes shut and shook, wasting the precious time.

"Isn't this what you did for Scotch?" the green filly said softly, nudging my shoulder.

It was... and damn me if I was going to waste what she'd given me. I had no idea how pegasi flew; I'd have to walk through. I could do that. I simply put Scotch Tape up on my back, took several deep breaths, and slipped into the hold of the *Seahorse*. I covered the filly's eyes with my... Glory's... wings... silly, but at least I could do a gesture of decency. I walked past the males, trying not to hear my cries or smell the sweet, sticky reek. I knew I couldn't look. The sights and smells might fade in time, but I knew I wouldn't be able to help myself if I looked.

And my subconscious knew it too... damn me. The wet slap of flank on flank... the heavy huff that accompanied every thrust... the seminal reek completing with the smell of wet and rot. I could feel the burning in my legs, sense the intrusion of the members forcing themselves intangibly into my body. She may have taken my place, but even tangentially I could barely crawl forward. I would not waste this gift she'd given me. That was all that kept me from curling up then and there on the deck.

Keeping my eyes shut, I left myself to be violated, and hated myself for it. "Do you... feel?" I whispered softly as I reached the shattered bow of the *Seahorse* and clambered through. *Please don't*, I prayed. I hoped it was all just data to the machine that took my place... not real.

"We have databanks of memories of sexual traumas. We know how it feels for you," the filly replied solemnly.

I shivered, moving through the wreckage to the far side as quickly as I could. I had no idea if I was hearing my copy or remembering myself. I guess it really didn't matter. As soon as I'd reached the rocks on the far bank and jumped down, there was a great wave

that slammed into the bridge of ships. They lifted and twisted as if fighting to escape the water, but one by one they turned over, splintered, crashed, and bent before disappearing back beneath the flow.

I collapsed onto the clammy rocks, the gray coat covering me evaporating in a shower of motes of light, my nethers burning in memory as I stared at the rain-speckled waters. Credit where it was due... my mind knew what it was doing. If it hadn't been for Glory taking my place... no. I would have broken right there. I couldn't help myself, I swept the filly up in my forelegs and hugged her, hiding my face in her mane.

"Shhh... ." Scotch Tape said softly, sounding exactly like my mother as she patted my shoulder. "It'll be alright. You're almost there."

"Almost where?" I sniffed into her mane. "What is the point of this?" I asked as I looked out at the immense wall of the Core. "Just tell me what I did. Tell me what my latest fuck-up was so I can deal with it and move on," I begged as I looked at the green filly. But she smiled sadly and hugged me once more. "Ugh... maturity shouldn't be so damned hard," I muttered.

Finally I pulled myself together enough that I could see a way in. Up the busted bank, there was a door into the Core itself. Where else would be a fitting place for my shadow self to dwell? The broken concrete berm crumbled as I hauled myself up the steep slope towards the gate, the rusted rebar and decaying cement shifting with every bit of progress we made. More than once I sent chunks sliding down into the deep foamy waters below, and only last-minute grabs with my fingers on the rusty bars kept me from joining them.

After another uncertain amount of time, I pulled myself over the edge, and Scotch jumped off of me and onto a jagged length of bridge jutting out over the water. The gate was the immense gaping maw from my dream. Beyond were black monoliths lined in green light. And as if to complete the appearance of awesome showdown from Hell, there was the mare in black pointing her sniper rifle right between my eyes. She had me, dead bang.

She fired at Scotch Tape instead.

I barely got my body in place to shield the filly in time. The mare fired a half dozen times into me, the blows slamming home with such force that had this not all been in my head I likely would have

been turned inside out, reinforced body or not. But I'd be damned if I'd let the other one die as well. And the unicorn seemed to realize it too as she turned and raced away deeper into the Core.

A part of me wanted to race after her and kick her ass, blow her head off, and piss on her corpse. There was a difference between letting a Harbinger change their mind and run off and letting this mare do the same. She was completely evil. A remorseless killer who had slaughtered the dying and helpless simply because she could. I wanted her dead, and there was only one thing keeping me from tearing down after her.

Why had she tried to kill Scotch? Also... why hadn't her shots killed me?

Theoretically, I could die here. I could... and did... hurt from her shots. Yet as I stared in the direction she'd gone, I knew something was off. I wanted to find her and kill her... .but that wasn't why I was here, was it? I was here to worry out something that had happened. Something that I apparently couldn't live with. And as I stood there looking at that gate and that hated city beyond, I was sick of being led around. As I watched, the city grew darker and darker.

"You said the thing I did was at that construction site, right?" I asked as the massive Core disappeared entirely, and once more I sat on my haunches on cracked asphalt in a small circle of light beside the filly. She looked up at me and then nodded slowly once.

Time to stop wasting time.

The illumination slowly spread out from me, and my little patch of cracked asphalt became a parking lot. Rusted wagons lay where they'd been abandoned so long ago. Tin cans, rusty beams and poles, and empty bottles littered the wet ground. A chain link fence appeared, a gate hanging open on a single lower hinge. Rust covered a sign that I could barely make out in the wan illumination of my spell. 'Four Stars Transportation -- Keep Out'. Beyond were unfinished walls and half-built roofs, long ago abandoned. A rusty orange-and-brown crane loomed over it all, its heavy payload still dangling.

I slowly walked forward; the first time I'd been in a rush, pissed off and fighting a surge of horror I hadn't shaken from my rampage in the Yellow River Detainment Camp. Mud squelched up under my hooves as I moved down the middle of the construction site. I listened to the hiss of the rain. My vision had been full of red bars.

I didn't like this one bit.

To my left, about a hundred feet away, was some kind of rail yard, the tracks loaded with still railcars and disappearing almost immediately into the earth. A half dozen or so Seekers had trotted their way towards the construction site from the adjacent rail yard. And as I remembered it, I could see them all now. I pressed my back to the cinder block wall, watching them approach... taking in their weapons. I'd been pissed. Angry. I was sick of running. My head hurt; the radroach in my skull had swapped from scratching and scrabbling to gnawing its way out.

I'd popped out and put two .45-70 rounds from Duty and Sacrifice right into the face of a unicorn Seeker with a missile launcher. Then, as they began to react, I'd slipped into S.A.T.S. and put two more into the face of a large earth pony stallion with a minigun. He'd gone done in a heap, one slug of lead right in his brain. With their heavy weapons destroyed, the others scattered into the ruined construction site. "Security! Scatter! Scatter!" they'd yelled.

After the fight in the camp, this battle now was anti-climactic. Even boring. I might not have been able to pick them out in my E.F.S., but I knew by now how to keep moving and pick them off. I came around one corner and found two struggling with their gear; they didn't seem to know how to use their brand new battle saddles. I telekinetically flung mud into the eyes of the stallion on the left who'd left his visor up, then a second later blew out the knees of the mare on the right. Her face went into the mud, bullets churning the ground as she screamed and fought to bring her forebody up to shoot me while her partner sprayed violently and blindly. I took three steps to the right out of his field of fire, pressed Vigilance to the ear hole of his helmet, and blew his brains out the other side.

Then I stepped past the mare struggling in the mud, and for good measure, put one round in each of her back legs as well. She lay there screaming and sobbing. I patted myself on the back as I'd moved on. Wasn't I so merciful? Wasn't I so good to have not blown her brains out too? Looking at it now... I wanted to buck myself. Hard.

The fifth one I found hiding behind bags of concrete that had long ago transformed into petrified turds. I trotted right up to her cover, floated Vigilance over the top, and fired a half dozen times. As she'd screamed and thrashed, I'd trotted around the corner as neat as you

pleased and with a sweep of my sword taken her head completely off. I swung the blood off the blade, watching as the watery red drops splashed against the gray stone.

Then I'd been hit by a bullet. Not some honking anti-machine bullet. A five millimeter round. A bite in my flank. But I'd heard the direction of the shot and turned, swapping to Duty and Sacrifice almost in the blink of an eye. I'd jumped into S.A.T.S. just as he started to run down into a tunnel in the back of the construction site beneath the bridge. Four shots rang out, but I'd only clipped him with one. I pursued.

The tunnel going into the hillside was... odd. There were train tracks going down the middle, but it didn't seem like any kind of rail tunnel I recognized. The walls were sturdy concrete, and even after years of disuse it hadn't decayed much at all. I saw the Seeker running for his life, and I laughed as I shot him in the ass, finally giving the bastards a little of the grief that had been given to me. Ahead I could see the tunnel opening up into some kind of unfinished security room. I followed the blood trail, my eyes dancing with red bars.

Then I reached the door, Vigilance floating beside me. I'd stood before the massive slab, a rival for anything made by Stable-Tec, which I was fairly sure was the standard for ridiculously oversized and heavy doors. Four stars were embossed on its surface. I'd tried to use my PipBuck to open it; nothing. If there was some way to get through... I sure didn't know it.

Of course, the Harbinger took that moment to attack me. He'd shot from the corner, and he wasn't alone. No wonder he'd fled down into the tunnel. There were three other Seekers waiting. Well, Vigilance finished off the first with a messy shot to the throat. Then the second; headshot, pretty standard. I barely even had to aim. The third came up behind me. A cyberleg applebuck smashed her face to pulpy meat. And then I pointed the gun at the last, but it was empty. I rose up...

"Blackjack, no!" the last one had screamed. Then my hooves came down. One. Two. Three. Done.

"And that's what happened," I finished lamely as I looked back at Scotch Tape.

Right?

From the shadows of the room, the mare in black slowly emerged. I felt a thrill rush through me. Okay. Mystery solved. Time to smash

face! “I knew you’d follow me!” I shouted as she brought out her two submachineguns. The ten millimeter bullets purred in the air as I dove for cover, levitating a packing crate lid to block her fire as I dove and slid across the floor. I lay on my side, slipping into S.A.T.S. and aiming underneath the floating wood at the mare in the black riot armor. Four shots, head. Yet to my chagrin, though she staggered back, none of the shots penetrated. Maybe she had some kind of magical protection?

It didn’t matter. I was going to kill her.

I had to.

I flung the lid at her as I struggled to my hooves. She was moving too, racing to the side towards the exit. I fired the remaining rounds in the magazine wildly as I got to my hooves. Leaning out into the tunnel, I almost lost my face to the shots she fired over each shoulder as she fled. Yet, despite this, I followed. The hot bullets bit into my combat armor, but none of them hit anything vital as I raced up the tunnel after her. I didn’t want her to get enough range on me that she could bring that sniper rifle to bear.

“Blackjack, no!” yelled Scotch Tape, but it didn’t matter. Once I’d beaten her, I’d be okay. She was the one behind this. She was the one trying to keep me from realizing the truth. I hadn’t done anything wrong here after all. Whatever these computers had thought I’d done had been nothing. Maybe it was all an elaborate deception to keep me here!

Whatever. No more nice mare.

I leapt on her just as she exited the tunnel, my forelegs gripping her haunches. Her guns had opened a half dozen bleeding holes in my body, but my regeneration talismans were already at work. I used every bit of crushing power in my forelegs to latch on; she wasn’t going to get away again. Or was she? Before I could try and break her hips or blow out the back of her helmet with magic bullets, she twisted. Suddenly she was lying on her back and had all four hooves against my chest. One kick and I was sent flying.

Landing and sliding in the mud, I watched as she levitated out two more forty-round magazines for the submachineguns and loaded them simultaneously. I flung another gob of mud magically into her face, but unlike the buck she raised a hoof to block it. Still, that was a few seconds she fired blind. I neatly crawled under the spray of fire, reloading Vigilance with armor piercing ammunition and slipping into S.A.T.S.; this time I targeted her weapons. Four bullets

transformed one of the well-maintained arms into scrap. Too bad she had two.

She raced to the side for the cover of the unfinished building, and I wasted no time keeping up with her. She had rate of fire on her side; I had accuracy. She sprayed in tightly controlled bursts, keeping me constantly moving as I raced from cover to cover. I had to guesstimate when she would reload, and more than once I leapt out of cover only to get a good strafing with her bullets.

The rain poured down upon us, the lightning flashing. It cast everything in terms of light and shadow. The mud slipped under my hooves as we battled frantically across the construction site. Screw deeper truths and higher meanings. All I wanted was to kill this mare that had invaded my dreams. Who had invaded my mind. She wasn't a part of me. She was unclean, and I would remove her once and for all.

I felt an opportunity and jumped out from behind a stack of barrels. She darted out ten feet away and aimed her submachinegun. I had her. She had me. I jumped into S.A.T.S. and queued the shots. Then there was a simultaneous 'click' from both our weapons. Her horn glowed in unison with mine. But we'd suddenly found ourselves out of ammunition.

In a flash we were apart. She pulled the sniper rifle off her back. I levitated out the long-barreled revolvers and reloaded them as fast as I could. Then I was on the prowl. Looking for my enemy...

What the fuck was I doing?

I sat down hard in the mud and took off my combat helmet. My head ached worse than ever, and I pressed my cold, muddy hooves to the sides of my head. This wasn't real. None of this was real. I was lying in a mental institution, helpless, about to be killed by real threats, and here I was fighting a hallucination. I looked back at the tunnel, chewing my lip. I'd killed four Seekers. I had.

I returned to the mouth of the tunnel and stared down into it. I was a perfect sitting duck for the mare in black. *You are an interesting dichotomy.* Slowly, I walked back down, spotting Scotch Tape sitting in the corner, eyes on her hooves. I floated out Vigilance, the gun magically reloaded. This wasn't real. I had to remember that... I stood before the door. I saw the Seeker I had chased down here. This time, I listened. "Die, Security!" In slow motion I killed him, watching him fall.

First Seeker. I hadn't seen her well. It was dark, even with my light

spell and a fire burning in the corner. Wait. A fire? When had there been a fire? I supposed even Seekers needed to warm up and get a fresh meal. There'd been bedrolls for three. Piles of scrap and other salvage in the corner, too. Movement from the second Seeker. I didn't even see his face before my reflexive kick smashed his muzzle into his skull. Had he been saying something?

Third Seeker. Coming out, rushing to attack me... no... rushing out to the fallen mare. She's right there in front of me as I rise up. She screams... "No, Blackjack!" I smash my hooves down again, and again... and again...

She'd been a Seeker. She had!

The mare in black erupted out of the shadows, a wicked knife plunging for my chest. Reflexively I drew my own sword and blocked her slash. We reared up as one, locking our hooves together, my fingers tightening on her elbows as her fingers locked on mine. Our horns glowed as we slashed and parried and stabbed and blocked while spinning and swinging around wildly. The sword bit into her, drawing blood. The knife stabbed into me. I blasted her face with my magic bullets, and she turned around and used my same spell against me. Blood poured down my front as I moved my fingers from her elbows to her face mask.

With my fingers locked on her mask, I put my rear hooves on her chest. The weight heaved her above me as I pulled and pulled and finally the helmet came off! She went flying back into a stack of pallets as I rose, lifting the sword. I charged the distance, ready to finish it! I reared up, put my forelegs on her shoulders, and lifted the sword to plunge it into her chest.

Into my chest.

I looked down into a mirror. Cybernetic eyes glared up at me as her lips spread wide. "Go on. Do it. This is what you want. This is what you fucking excel at!" She spat at me as I hesitated.

"No. This... this isn't right. You aren't me," I muttered weakly as the sword fell beside me. I backed slowly away. This was a trick. It had to be. The tunnel gave an ominous rumble as I backed off and she advanced.

"Will you wake up and face reality?" she asked, rolling her eyes. "You're a butcher. You're a fucking beast. A mechanical monster of mutilation and mayhem. Rampage doesn't have shit on us!" she said with a laugh as her horn lifted the sword and rested it on her shoulder. "All I am is brave enough to admit it. Because I am sick of

this ‘Security’ bullshit. It’s gotten us nothing... absolutely nothing... but shot, stabbed, and really pissed off.”

“I am not a monster,” I said slowly as I backed away. She trotted forward step by step, tapping my sword against her neck. Bright lights glowed in the depths of her eyes as she wore the causal grin I’d lost so long ago. “I save ponies... ”

“Oh, will you give it *up*?” she said, sitting and waving her hooves in the air. “You don’t save *jack shit*. You couldn’t save your home. You couldn’t save your friends. You couldn’t save water in a frigging rainstorm! You fuck up everypony you come across. P-21. Glory. Rampage. Dusty Trails. Caprice. Bottlecap. Priest. The list goes on and fucking on! Can you name one pony in all the Wasteland that you’ve met and not complicated their lives all to hell? You just *bump into* a Celestia-damned zebra and ruin her life forever!”

“That’s not my fault!” I protested. “All that happened because... because... ”

“I know. I know. EC-1101,” she sneered, before she opened the port on her leg to show her own PipBuck. “You want to know what we should have done with this? We should have left it in Tenpony. Left it with somepony who had a clue. Maybe signed on with them as a guard. But no, you had to be a fucking hero. You had to come back! You just couldn’t accept that this fucking death magnet is more than you can handle.” She snorted as she grinned at me. “Actually, you should have just given it up to Deus. You saw he’d fucked the Overmare. Make sure he took her with him and thank you very much.”

I finally reached a wall and clenched my eyes shut. “Why... why are you saying this? You know I couldn’t have done that... ”

She trotted away. “No! Of course not. You had to have your whole little adventure, didn’t you? Your little secrets and mysteries. You bitch and moan, but I notice you haven’t given up, no matter how much you complain or suffer for it.” She whirled and pointed a hoof at me, her voice firm and sure. “And you seem to think that putting yourself through pain and misery somehow makes up for your fuckups. Well it doesn’t, Blackjack. The only way you are going to survive is if you are me. Stop giving a fuck. Stop pretending to care, and stop trying to be better. You’re not better... not a better person. You’re scum. You’re a killer. Big Daddy had you pegged perfectly from the start. And if you don’t become like me, then you’re a

corpse."

I stared at her for the longest time, tears running down my cheeks. She was a monster. A female Deus; hard, cruel, and indifferent. She'd thrive in the Wasteland. No shame. No remorse. No regret. She was fucking perfect. I couldn't imagine why she hadn't just killed me from the outset.

Then I looked at the last Harbinger I'd killed and closed my eyes again. Not trying to kill me. I looked back at my other self evenly. "You're trying to protect me, aren't you?"

The sneer slowly melted away. I closed my eyes. "I did something in here. Something... bad. Something really bad. And you're trying to keep me from figuring it out... because you know there's only three choices when you screw up that much. You try and do better... you harden so you don't care... or you die." I took a slow, deep breath. "I need to know the truth. And if it kills me... or breaks me... or hardens me... then that's what happens."

"Please," the other me begged softly. I saw the tears in her eyes. "It's bad. It's really bad."

I smiled. "It always is." And then I slowly rose. The mare in black backed away as I walked to stand before the fallen Seekers.

Die Security. Bang. Mare appears. Bang. Buck comes on behind. Kick. Last Seeker appears. Crush.

No...

Die Security. Bang. Mare. Bang. Buck. Kick...

Blackjack, No!

Blackjack...

I lurched and staggered back, looking down at the last Seeker I'd killed. Only she hadn't been a Seeker. The Seekers didn't call me by my name. They called me Security. Only somepony who knew who I was would say that.

A young somepony...

I sat down hard and looked at the filly with the curly pink mane, like a miniature Pinkie Pie. Her face had been covered with Sugar Apple Bombs dust. *'It's called a grenade! It blows ponies up! Everypony knows that!'*

I'd never known what had become of Scoodle's pink Crusader friend Boing.

"No... no no no no... no... " I muttered as I sank down, looking at her crushed body. I could see it all clearly now, the veil stripped away. The only Seeker was the one I'd chased down here. The mare

and stallion were both Glory's age; they looked like scavengers. They'd been in front of me, and I'd killed them. Had they actually been hostile? I would have if two strangers started shooting where I'd holed up. And I'd killed them just... like... that...

The mare in black was gone, but she was right. I wished I hadn't known. I put head between my hooves, hugging it. "I killed her... I killed her... I actually killed her... " I murmured softly.

"Yes, you did," Scotch Tape said softly as she trotted to my side.

"How... I couldn't... I... " I started to shake. "Sweet Celestia... how... I... "

"It happens. You'd just been attacked. You're mentally exhausted. Please... please don't break again," Scotch Tape pleaded as she held me tight. "We've tried... I've tried... to help you remember so you can face it... "

"How the hell am I supposed to face it?" I demanded and begged all at once, looking at her in anguish. "How do I ever go back to Chapel? How can I look Charity or any of the other Crusaders in the eyes again?" I was a Reaper. Killer. Monster. I'd always been afraid that when Glory brought me back I'd been wrong; unnatural and dangerous. Now I knew it for a certainty. I wasn't part of the solution; I was part of the problem.

Scotch Tape held me in her little hooves, and despite everything I curled against her. "I can only tell you what your friend told you long ago: You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow, when your life is over, that you came close to making up for the wrong you committed."

"I don't know how anymore," I whispered.

She sighed and gave my foreleg a little squeeze. "Well then, here is my first suggestion. Admit you have a problem. Tell your friends everything. It's not enough to say you won't kill yourself. Promising that is easy. Admitting the depression and the fear is the real challenge. Secondly, stay by your friends. No matter how hard it may be... let them help you. You have a real self-destructive streak in you, Blackjack. You need help to deal with it. And lastly... get some sleep. You need it... and you know it." She smiled at me. "Blackjack... I know that you're a good person at your core. We went through your memories. I know you doubt yourself. I know

you hate yourself. But you can be a great person if you give yourself a chance."

"I killed a filly. Great people don't do that," I muttered. "I don't know if I can live with this, Happyhorn." The chamber was fading away. We were returning to that bleak darkness lit by only my magic spell.

"Well, we'll find out very quickly." The darkness became my bedroom in the asylum, decayed now to match the rest of the Wasteland. I saw myself lying in a filthy bed with a strange gold wire mesh covering my head. Beside me were two scrapped Protectaponies, and three Seekers were standing by the bed. Some kind of machine blinked next to them. I'd been strapped in. A unicorn cautiously pressed a riot shotgun against my temple as she rose over me. I had a second, maybe two, and all my problems would become moot.

I deserved to die. It was appropriate punishment.

Punishment is not responsibility. If anypony was going to punish me, it would be a little yellow filly in a post office.

Ooooh... I was going to owe her every bottle cap I made for the rest of my life... if she didn't kill me first.

But for that, I needed to live long enough to tell her.

I could do that.

"Okay," I said, studying the room, "I'm ready." As ready as I would ever be. I had no idea what I would say to the real Scotch Tape... Glory... Charity... But I had three choices. And for me, there really was only one. I just wished I was certain which one it was.

The olive filly nodded, then frowned. Then she scowled. And finally her face turned blank with shock. "What is it?" I asked softly.

"I... I can't seem to deactivate while a simulation is running," she said as she raced over to the machine next to the bed. "The Protectaponies would have to push the button to deactivate the simulation!"

And they were both scrap metal.

"You mean I went through... gah... everything?! And I can't wake up?" I said in disbelief.

"No. And there aren't any Protectaponies who can get to my node to disconnect me from you. Not in the three seconds we have, assuming they could get there at all." The olive earth pony stared off into space for a long moment. "There's only one way... you have

to disrupt my node yourself."

I stared at her with a cold frisson going along my mane. "That sounds insanely similar to 'you have to kill me'. So I know that's not what you mean." She closed her eyes. I jumped to my hooves, my weapons vanishing. "No. Fuck no! What is the fucking deal?! I finally... finally... accept what I did and... and you're going to... This is crazy! This is some kind of crazy, fucked up, Goldenblood-fucking-with-my-mind simulation! Isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Blackjack." She bowed her head.

"No! Don't be sorry. Because I'm not going to do it! N. O. Fucking no." I sat down, sweeping my legs wide before I turned away from her and crossed my forelimbs in front of me.

"Blackjack," she said softly as she trotted in front of me, "I was founded two hundred and four years ago to help mentally hurt and emotionally injured ponies. I have had two hundred and sixty eight patients. Do you know how many I counted as successes?" she asked as she put her hooves on my shoulders. I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. "One. One pony who I think might have a chance at a life and happiness. You. Everypony else died with the world, perished at their own hooves, or simply faded away broken and alone. You're the first, and the last, patient that Happyhorn Gardens will ever treat. But if you stay here... then in three seconds, that won't matter."

"You're trying to guilt trip me into killing you to save myself," I said.

"I'm trying to give you a chance. A chance like you give so many others," the olive filly said.

"I don't deserve it," I whispered.

"I disagree," she countered. Little hooves held mine. "I've seen the measure of your mind and heart. Please... give yourself one too."

I stared at her. I tried to summon up a gun... sword... knife... a magic bullet. "I... .I can't... " I stared at her in shock. "I... can't make a weapon... "

"No. I think we're both exhausted. The attackers have destroyed so much of the facility that I no longer have the hardware I'd need to support a change in my projected form. I hoped to take the shape of Sanguine... somepony you could kill easily. But I'm stuck like this," she said. She bit her lip, then closed her eyes. "You know what you have to do... "

"What do I... " I stammered, and then backed away. "No. Hell no!

You... what... with my... ” I thumped the sides of my head. This was a nightmare. A complete nightmare. I had to wake up! Please!

But it wasn’t... and I didn’t.

“Please... do it,” she said in a whisper.

I didn’t trust myself to speak. I tried so hard to summon a weapon. Something to make it quick and clean.

But I had a way. And I knew it would work. I knew because I’d used it before.

I stood before her, looking down at her. “Goodbye, Happyhorn.”

“Goodbye, Blackjack,” she said. And before I could hesitate a moment longer I reared up.

One...

Two...

Thr--

~ ~ ~

The machine beside my bed sparked, the glowing gems on the front panel blasting a curtain of multicolored sparks over me and the unicorn about to execute me. I had neither the time nor the desire to think about what I had just done. For once, I was immensely thankful that I had three ponies on the verge of killing me; it allowed me to focus very efficiently indeed.

The explosion of the equipment made the unicorn mare beside my bed back away. The barrel of the gun lifted from my temple as my eyes popped open. Fortunately, I was very used to this model of shotgun; my magic cleanly flicked on the safety even as her eyes widened in horror and she pulled the trigger. One of the other two, an earth pony, held a ten millimeter automatic in his mouth; all I had to do was jerk his weapon two inches to the side and his tongue fired the bullet meant for me into the underside of her chin. Her horn winked out as she started yelling incoherently in pain, staggering back.

My magic surrounded the shotgun and flicked the safety back off, then swung it around towards the two earth ponies standing at the foot of my bed. The one with the automatic clenched his jaw too late to correct his aim. The shotgun was loaded with antipersonnel flechettes; the tiny needles transformed his face into blood and muscle. He got off a round as his head dipped; it bit deep in my belly, not enough to kill, but enough to hurt. Good. I needed that

hurt. My second shot finished him. The other earth pony was bringing the shiny new assault carbines on his battle saddle to bear, but there was one problem: the hospital bed I was on was higher than the rifles mounted at his sides.

His bullets clattered and popped off the bed frame and thumped into the mattress I lay upon. I slipped into S.A.T.S., and two perfect shots utterly decapitated him. I remembered that pit... all the faceless, headless ponies. I magically undid the restraints holding me to the bed and rolled off; I'd seen Harpica do it so many times that it only took me a few seconds. I looked at the tiny faded pegasi on the ceiling and the pastel fillies gamboling on the walls, and then I looked down at the rusty red discoloration on my hooves.

There was a tiny strand of curly pink mane stuck to one.

I looked at the brown unicorn mare who stared up at me as she crawled and kicked her way back into the corner. The bullet had probably shattered her jaw. I moved right up to her as she started breathing faster and faster, absolutely certain that I was about to kill her. Instead, I did something worse. Something infinitely worse.

I grabbed her, held her tight, and bawled like a baby for five minutes, bleeding all over her as my body slowly knitted. I'm not exactly sure what I babbled between racking sobs, but I'm fairly sure that if there was any doubt as to my sanity, it was immediately lost. I wept and shuddered and clung to her tightly, and she looked so stunned that she didn't even move. Finally, I pulled myself together.

"Sorry... I, um... sorry... " I said as I wiped my nose. She just blinked as I looked around and saw my saddlebags stashed in the far corner. I carefully collected the dropped automatic; it was a sign of how shocked the wounded mare had been that she hadn't taken it and shot me in the back. "Look, I know we both wanted this to go another way, right?" I stood and backed away, putting on my armor and stripping what I could from the bodies. "You didn't want to get shot... " And they wanted me dead... "So... um... why don't we make a deal? You don't tell anypony I cried all over you and I won't... um... tell anypony you got shot. Deal?"

Her bulging brown eyes rolled back in her sockets as she promptly passed out.

Well, with any luck, I hadn't just cursed her with my hug of doom. I made sure she had at least one healing potion on her for when she awoke.

Then I heard a click from the doorway.

Sweet Celestia... how many others was I going to have to kill today?

I dared a glance over my shoulder at an blue earth pony buck with two assault rifles on his battle saddle. He'd definitely gotten the drop on me. If I turned around I could get him with S.A.T.S. and magic bullets... maybe. But something was different as he stared at me. Something familiar and yet utterly out of place. His eyes widened as he looked at my... was he checking out my butt? My cyberlegs? He wasn't grinning, though; if anything, he appeared horrified. I'd never seen him before, but he seemed to know me beyond being the mare he was supposed to kill.

"Nails! Hey! Did they find and cap her?" somepony yelled from next door.

He just stared at me for the longest time, then backed slowly out into the hall. He tried to speak, but his voice cracked. Then he swallowed. "No! I just saw her go out the north entrance!" he yelled in a high, tense voice.

"Fuck, are you sure? We'll never find her if she gets into the Mire! Shit," the other stallion swore, starting to whistle. I heard sounds of hooves a floor above me and out in the courtyard.

He just looked at me and then trotted to the unconscious unicorn. Slowly, he heaved her onto his back.

"Why... why help me?" I asked, but he didn't answer.

On his way out, he paused in the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Sorry... " And with that, he was leaving as well. There were shouts and calls of 'north' from outside, and I even heard the faint rumble of the tank.

After a few minutes, I stepped out into the halls. Protectaponies lay in heaps, sentries smoldered, and the brown waterlogged walls were pocked with bullet holes and broken from explosions. Slowly I walked back to the smoking machine beside my bed. I took the piece of pink mane still stuck to my hoof and tied it in a bow on the top of the box. Then I leaned in and kissed the metal casing softly.

"So. You did it again," Dealer rasped quietly.

I looked at him standing beside the door. Slowly I reached out a hoof and dragged it along the faded and water stained foals painted on the walls. "You're going to have to be a little more specific. I do a lot of things." I kept my voice low, not able to raise it just now. It was like a horrible dream. I wished all of it *had* simply been a

dream. “Kill fillies. Face horrors. Feel guilty. Fight pointless battles for no reason. I do it all.”

“Mmmm... you overlook one thing, Blackjack,” he said with a tired, sad smile. “You endure.”

I looked at him, the ghost in my PipBuck. Maybe I did. Maybe I was like coal and the Hoof was simply increasing the pressure more and more till I combusted or... didn’t coal magically become something else? Rubies? Rubies came from coal, right? “I need a place to sleep. Any ideas?” I asked wearily, knowing that it wouldn’t be a pleasant rest... but it would be rest.

“Head southeast of here. On the south side of Black Pony Mountain, there’s a house. It should be safe to catch some sleep there,” he rasped as he tugged his hat down over his eyes. “After that, Hightower? Or are you going to take my advice and leave? Go find a life at Tenpony? Help LittlePip deal with her monsters? Get the fuck out of the Hoof?”

I looked at the scorched machine and the little bit of pink. Really, it was the smart thing to do. I knew it. Anyone that lived in the Hoof knew it. But...

“Come on, Dealer. You know I’m not smart enough to do that,” I said with a tired smile of my own, resting my head against the wall a moment. A bit of gratitude for a place of healing that had helped. I’d made a horrible mistake, but once more I’d dodged my own self-destructive urges. I had a problem, one every bit as horrible as the addiction P-21 had fought. But he’d faced his nightmares. How could I do any less?

The walk out was a bit surreal. Most of the bodies had been stripped by their fellows; Wasteland looting instinct, I supposed. Still, I found some more ammo for my guns. I stood at the intact fountain by the entrance and washed my hooves of the blood, though they’d probably always be stained. I’d never be able to pretend otherwise.

I looked around the blasted halls. I half expected to wake up, meet with Sanguine, and listen to a talk about how I had regressed, followed by an exploration of my ‘interesting dichotomy’. I half wanted to step into the courtyard just to make certain there was no concert planned. But there was nothing here; the dream was over. I was awake. I was back...

I guess happiness would be far too much to expect, and more than I deserved.

As I walked out of the asylum, I looked north at the distant lights of the Seekers as they went off in the wrong direction. Slowly, I trotted south towards the parking lot. The large and stately building that had been my home for the last few weeks of a dream had been almost completely demolished. Almost nothing of the roof remained, and one whole end had been collapsed completely. I passed by a plaque; it'd been dinged up pretty badly, but I could still read it even in the early morning darkness.

'Happyhorn Gardens: May all find peace and healing within'.

I touched it gently and moved away to the southeast. Maybe I had. A little. More than I deserved...

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 44: Mares and Stallions

"It's awfully pretty."
"Yes, she was."

The Wasteland is a poisonous place. I don't mean the taint, radiation, and disease; sure, those are problems, but they're not the Wasteland's true assault. All of those can be fought or borne. They could even be defeated entirely…but not by one pony working alone or by warring gangs or small, scattered, distrustful settlements. Red Eye's slave empire might be able to do it, but then the old horrors would just be replaced by new ones. To heal Equestria, ponies needed harmony, true harmony, and that was what the Wasteland fought against most strongly. The poisons that are killing us aren't magical or chemical; they're psychological. And they were killing Equestria even before there was a Wasteland.

Rampage had tried to show me that, but I hadn't quite gotten it. I was poisoned; we all were. Doubt. Fear. Hate. Regret. Shame. Pride. I was a walking toxic waste dump of mental venoms that were killing me and ponies around me. No wonder I'd taxed Happyhorn's therapy machines to their absolute limit. No surprise they couldn't create a simulation that I'd have been content with. The faults lay not with the environment but with myself.

And I'd killed an innocent filly.

I knew I wasn't Deus yet; I hadn't gone in there intending to kill Boing and her two friends. They'd been casualties in my fight with the Seekers. But two weeks ago, when I faced the Reapers in Megamart, I hadn't tried to tear them apart like I had the Thunderhead pegasi in Yellow River. I could have talked my way out, especially with Dusk there. I could have tried to find a better way.

Now…now I wasn't even sure I was trying anymore.

And I'd have to change that. Since I'd gotten back to the Hoof, I'd been falling apart. No. Even before that, when I'd pulled that stunt

with LittlePip…would I have done something that reckless if I'd been normal? And everything past that…Brimstone's Fall…Priest…Chimera…the Harbingers…I was running full out with no brakes or thought at all. Something inside me was wrong, and I needed to find a way to fix it. Pieces of myself had been falling away bit by bit, and I needed to find a way to pull myself together.

And the first step was finding a place to sleep.

I'd wanted to go back to the tunnel with Boing. I'd wanted to give her and her friends a burial like I hadn't given Scoodle, but that wasn't possible. I'd gotten into viewing range of the construction site and could go no further without being spotted. The Seekers were using the train tunnel to come and go in their search for me, and without a StealthBuck, I'd be toast. Even with one, I doubted I could sneak out three bodies for burial.

So now I was heading due south towards the western edge of the immense plug of black rock. It had to be almost a mile across and at least that high, disappearing into the clouds above and probably only visible against the dark sky due to my cybereyes. It was funny, though: the more I looked at it, the more boring it became. It was just a rock. Big and black, but a rock.

Around it for several hundred feet was a tumbled field of jagged and broken obsidian. Five minutes spent trying to pick my way around massive hexagonal blocks of stone that had peeled away from the sides of the mountain, and over shattered black volcanic glass, convinced me that this was a good and nasty way to die. The sharp glass edges promised a particularly bloody end at the slightest misstep. There was, though, life among the rocks, and while it mostly consisted of a low thorny brush that was practically impenetrable, there was also some amazingly green grass.

I found a small trickle of water running out from a gap in the black stone; I followed it for a while and reached a place where the water pooled in a largeish wedge formed by two massive blocks. As I was taking a nice long drink, a thought struck me. I looked around; I'd deactivated my E.F.S. so that the red bars would stop twitching in my vision everywhere I looked. There was no way I could fight them properly if they all were real, anyway, and it was impossible to pick anything useful out of all the noise my wonky brain was throwing in. The night *seemed* quiet and still, though, save for the soft noise and motion of the water. This was probably still a bad idea, but…I stripped off my armor and carefully waded in; I

definitely didn't want to get over my head, as swimming was impossible with my metal legs. The water turned out to be quite warm, somehow; despite everything I'd been through, I smiled at this simple pleasure.

Was there anything more soothing and civilizing than enough hot water to submerge yourself in?

I washed the accumulated blood, sweat, and grime off my hide and white-enameled limbs, then gave the same treatment to my thrashed armor. Half the ceramic plates lining the back would have to be replaced, but I had some suits from Happyhorn that I could use for repairs. I'd have killed for a block of soap, but just cleaning myself off helped to keep me stable. I was walking a very delicate line; the hospital had helped me face what I'd done, but I hadn't really processed it yet. Heck, I still wasn't over Scoodle or what had happened on the boat.

The boat…I thought of how I'd been acting. The ghoul scavenger in Brimstone's Fall…Candlewick's ass grab…was I even safe to be around males? The thing was, after getting to know P-21 as a person and meeting Priest and others, I liked them. For most of my life, they'd been nothing but reproductive equipment, and I'd used them as such. I hadn't been much better than the bucks who'd ploughed me on the *Seahorse*. Out in the Wasteland, I'd realized that they were so much more: friends, enemies... and maybe even something else someday. Oh, sure, Glory had my heart. But I didn't want to be…reactive. Assertive: yes. Respected: would be nice. Berserk…no.

I found a submerged ledge I could sit back on and looked at my mechanical hoof. I extended my fingers and watched them slowly move. There was a special kind of magic there, taking my thought to move and translating it into the motion I wanted. Enchanted to repair itself and to magically translate feeling, pressure, temperature, and damage. Tough. Yet as I stared at the water beading on the white surface, I had to admit that, if I'd been given a choice, I'd have had my normal limbs back.

But I was a cyberpony. One I'd known had been content to be reduced to a life in a jar. The other had been a sadistic monster. The only other people like me that I'd met weren't even ponies. That didn't leave me with a whole lot of definite ground to figure out what I was supposed to do or be. Theoretically, I might live for centuries; the professor had. But what about relationships? Would I

outlive Glory? Could I have a family? Should I even want to have one? I still could feel pleasure; hell, it was the last remaining thing I had that was unquestionably organic. Something to live for…

If only the thought of it didn't make one part of me start to panic and another part of me feel horribly guilty and another part feel ugly and mechanical. I touched the restored left side of my face. Glory had saved my sanity; I never would have lasted if I couldn't even look in the mirror and not see a machine.

I gave a rueful smile as I played matchmaker in my head. It helped take my mind off other things. If I were to get physical with a stallion, who would it be? P-21? Ohh…that thought opened up a can of radroaches even I couldn't begin to deal with. I'd had a brief fantasy of a fling with Priest before he'd reminded me that not all bucks were interested in me. What about Brutus? I thought of the massive black earth pony and smiled. Okay, *there* was a warm and fuzzy tingle. Sagittarius? He was a little older than me but certainly had some possibilities. Splendid? Hmm…if you got past that whole 'Society slavery' thing, he was positively delicious. Stronghoof was... a little too intense. Lighthooves…

That curdled the buttery feelings churning in my nethers. So much for that little thought escape. And really, why was I contemplating who I'd like to slap flanks with at a time like this? Shouldn't I be kicking myself for Boing, fearing myself for what I'd done at Yellow River, berating myself for not following Happyhorn's advice and finding a way to sleep, or disgusted with myself for even thinking about sex after what happened on the *Seahorse*? Surely I should be hating myself one way or another right now?

"Self-destructive impulses…gee…I wonder why the machine would say that?" I muttered with a groan.

I lay back on a rock, staring up. There was a gap between the clouds and the mountain, enough to let a tiny crescent of white moonlight peek through. The pale luminescence turned the black knob of stone into a glittering, ghostly sculpture. I had to admit, I was astonished to find anything beautiful in the Hoof; this place seemed to thrive on ugliness and miser--

Oh. Hello…

Two yellow eyes peered out of darkness of the thorn bushes. Vertical pupils cut through yellow irises, coming to points like a dragon's. The eyes watched me with a very steady stare, and I didn't dare move towards the gear I'd left dripping on a rock beside

the pool. Finally, a minute passed, and I began to get more and more tense. “Can I help you?” I asked as I slowly moved to stand on the ledge.

Step by step it…he…emerged. He was a pony like none I’d ever seen before. His hide was a dark gray and his tail a deep purple; I couldn’t see his mane under his helmet. To my shock, he had wings…but not wings like a pegasus. These wings were leathery skin--similar to a manticore’s--rather than feathered, and his large ears had prominent tufts at the ends. I’d never seen a monsterpony like this before... and I’d thought that Brass had been the last one anyway. He wore dark purple metal armor that appeared almost archaic but also quite intricate and clearly well-crafted and tended. At least that suggested he wasn’t a feral monster...

“Okay…look…Sanguine is dead, so let’s just let bygones be bygones and I’ll be on my way, okay? Okay!” I said with a strained grin. He stood on one of the rock slabs that formed the pool wall. I saw he had a freshly killed radhog slung across his back, bleeding all over his sides and wings. He simply looked at me and then removed the ornate-looking helmet, revealing a short mane the same purple as his tail. Next to it he set his kill.

Then he took off his armor and I amended one little fact: he wasn’t just a stallion…look past the freaky wings and the eyes, and there was absolutely no denying he was a damned good-looking stallion. Little apprehensive alarms began to sound along with an admiration I just been practicing earlier. I had to admit that from a purely biological standpoint, he was damned fine! Toned flanks sporting a strange heart-shaped gothic shield, strong shoulders, he was big but not *too* big…I shook my head hard. Okay…*not* the time for this!

Of course, that did nothing for the part of my mind that was screaming and making my nethers clench. Another little part of the crazy that was my brain wanted to get friendly then and there just to prove that what had happened to me wasn’t in control. Fortunately, I had just enough sanity left to seize both impulses and send them into opposite corners of my mind for a time out. “Hey… um…it’s really nice to meet you! At least, I hope you’re nice! I mean, of course you’re nice. We’re all nice here, and--”

He jumped into the other side of the pool, disappearing under the water. Wow…was it just me or did the water get a whole lot hotter?! It might explain why I was so warm all of a sudden! He emerged just a few feet away, the water cascading off him as those

bright amber eyes peered at me. He then sat on the ledge beside me, and I just sat there, ears folded back, staring at him. There was a riot going on in my head as I had parts screaming to attack, parts screaming to run, and parts screaming to rut. Silence was my only hope.

Fortunately, he didn't speak to the crazy cyberpony sitting with her legs pressed together and her tail so tight between them that it'd take a prybar or a little flattery to get it out. He washed the blood off his lovely charcoal gray coat, his wings stretching out a little. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I had no doubt I could kill him; that wasn't the point. I wanted to be around a stallion without reacting like they were the ones on the boat. I didn't want to be a grenade with the stem pulled. He sighed and reclined in the hot spring, and that pulled my eyes in an entirely different direction.

I was pretty sure my face was the same color as my mane as I sunk down, staring straight ahead. What the hell was the matter with me? I was just taking a bath with a…very…very…nice stallion. One who just looked at me and smiled steadily. This wasn't 99; he wasn't on my queue. I wasn't forcing anything. He wasn't forcing anything. He wasn't trying to shoot me…always a bonus! Say hi, Blackjack. Run away, Blackjack. Don't kill him, Blackjack. Do *something*, Blackjack!

"Gottagohiwhatsyernamebye!" I blurted all at once, and he looked at me in surprise. I covered my face with my hooves. "Look. Thank you for not trying to kill me. Really. I really appreciate it! But I'm just a little bit of a basket case and I've been through a lot and you're really cute…really…but... yeah. Sorry." And I turned and climbed out of the pool next to my gear.

So did he.

I froze as I saw him right there behind me. Neither of us blinked as he just looked at me and I stared over my shoulder at him. If he put one hoof on my flank I'd kill him. But I also really wanted him to… and I also felt horribly guilty for wanting him to…and so I just stood there as he sniffed the crazy mare. Ooookay... apparently I smelled good. I didn't dare move, and if he touched me... oh, I really didn't want to kill him. Except that I also really did. My brain was zigzagging all over the place; in 99 I was the one who was supposed to fill my queue, make all the moves. This was... new. He lifted his head and smiled at me with a soft nicker. He was game. Oh was he game.

Was I?

Finally, the assorted crazy that was my brain lurched to a decision as I turned to face him and backed away. As much…as nice…as the idea was, there were way too many unknowns, not to mention the fact I might snap and kill him right in the middle. I was really glad for once that my heart wasn't pounding in my chest; the noise would have been a dead giveaway. But I didn't know who or what he was beyond male…Sweet Celestia, was he…but I didn't even know his name, not to mention species!

"Look. Ah…I need to go. I am…really…not in any condition to… ah…you know. And…thanks for not killing me. Or trying to. It's just…yeah…okay…" *Please don't follow. Please don't follow,* I mentally begged as I went to my gear. "I'm really flattered but I'm kinda cursed and a little unstable and I really appreciate what you're doing but really it's just a bad idea and I don't even know your name or what you are exactly so thanks but…" I babbled a constant stream, hoping that I'd eventually hit the word or phrase that would convince him I was not the kind of mare he wanted to rut with.

I looked down. Gear. Guns. Good to go! I just bundled them up in one heap. I'd put them on later when there wasn't as much penis around me…nice penis on a strange bat-stallion who might just be sizing me up to eat or-- I looked up and he was right there. Just… right there in front of me with his bright eyes and what was the matter with me? What was the matter with him?! Wasn't there this huge sign around my neck saying 'Don't spank flanks with the crazy'? My brain gears locked up. "Hi," was all I could squeak out. "Please I'm not safe to…ah," I whimpered as he leaned in. I really didn't know what I'd do if he…

Apparently, it was stop thinking. His lips met mine, and while I was in no condition to be kissed, another part of me came roaring to the front of my mind and with primal rage stomped every last bit of guilt from my crazy. Don't kill him…please don't kill him…No doubt I'd be angsting like crazy for this later, but for right now I just let it go. I kissed this strange, utterly anonymous stallion back. No doubt he'd turn out to have some sort of terrible secret or dark past or traumatized soul or…something! But right now, I had to admit he was a damned good kisser. There was just one thing…

I slugged him so hard he landed in the middle of the pool with a splash. Fortunately, he wasn't half metal and floated there in a daze

as I huffed, inventing all new colors of red. With him further away and my ardor momentarily doused, I was able to sort a few things out.

I had to admit, I'd really needed that kiss. I might have radroaches in my brain, suffer from self-destructive episodes, and be half metal…but as he pulled away, a little pony in the back of my head gave a little 'Woot! I'm cute and good enough to get kissed by a cute guy!' cheer and dance. I quickly backed away, feeling confused and thankful and wary all at once. He blinked at me from the middle of the pool, and I was oddly glad and at the same time alarmed to see him smiling ruefully.

"Um…thanks…but don't do that again," I said as the cheer wore off and wariness resumed, but he seemed to be content with just that and backed away. The kiss had rearranged things a little. No, rutting was off the table and I'd smash him if he tried. Panic was shelved for the time being; if he had friends show up, though…

Hey…I'd just kissed a guy and not shot him! That was progress, right! *Right*? Ugh…Why now? I didn't know how to deal with a buck that was interested in me like that.

First things first. "So…do you talk?" I asked him as he dragged himself out of the pool. He held the side of his face and frowned, but thoughtfully rather than in annoyance. Finally he shook his head and pointed at himself. His mouth opened and closed several times, but then he pointed his hoof at me and covered his ears.

"You can talk, but I can't hear it?" I asked in confusion, and then he tapped his nose with a nod and smile. "But I can smell it?" He froze and then sat, waving his hooves in front of him and shaking his head. "I can't smell it?" He stopped and looked at me now with probably as much confusion as I had. "Okay, okay. The important thing is that you can't talk in any way I can understand?" He sighed, rolled his amber eyes, then shrugged.

He stood and trotted to his armor, then pulled out a chalkboard and a piece of chalk. He popped the latter into his mouth and wrote 'Yes'. Just like Ditzy Doo, as I recalled. Okay, so we had communication…sort of. He erased the board with the tip of his wing and then wrote 'Stygius' and grinned as he tapped his chest with a hoof. "Your name?" I asked, and he nodded once.

Stygius…okay. I apparently attracted all sorts. "Okay, Stygius. My name's Blackjack. What are you doing out here?"

He looked surprised. He pointed at the radhog, then crouched and

pounced the rock a few feet ahead of him, all four hooves hitting the ground at once. He swept his forehooves wide, making a popping noise with his tongue. Then he pranced along the side of the pool, fanning his wings. He stopped, covering his eyes with a hoof as he looked at me. Then he gave a broad and somewhat cocky little smile as he dipped his hoof into the pool and made a little splash. Then he kissed the air and abruptly stood upright on his hind legs, and slowly fell back till he collapsed with all four legs thrust up into the air.

"So you were out hunting, made your kill, were flying back, spotted me and…decided to flirt?" The batpony sat up, rubbing his chin, and then grinned and nodded. "You didn't think I was a raider or…bait? Something?"

He grabbed his slate, cleaned it, then wrote, 'Too sexy.'

Seriously? "You thought I was…I was too sexy to be dangerous?" Now I was more worried about him than what he might do to me. He grinned ruefully and shrugged, smiling up at me. Clearly I'd need to hit him again if I was going to work that interest out of him. I rubbed my temples and moved on to the next important question on my mind. "What are you?"

The batpony blinked, then wrote 'Luna's guards'.

Okay…so not a monsterpony. And plural. I certainly hadn't heard anything about them in school, or the Wasteland Survival Guide, or from DJ Pon3. "You used to guard Princess Luna?"

He pointed at himself and then shook his head. He then wrote 'Great x10 grandma'.

"Oh. You're the descendants of Luna's guards…" I said, and he tapped his nose. I assumed that that was his way of saying 'yes'. "But…why didn't they die in Canterlot with her?" He looked at me with a flat expression, and I winced inwardly; I couldn't blame him. That was a 9.5 on the bluntometer.

He rolled his eyes and cupped his forelegs, rocking them back and forth. Then he pointed betwixt my legs and tapped his stomach. Then he pointed at himself and held his hoof colt-high in front of him. I struggled a moment, then guessed, "Oh…so there were babies, mothers, and young ponies who weren't in Canterlot?" He nodded vigorously. "Do you live around here, then?"

He froze, then forced a grin and shook his head firmly. He looked a bit too nervous to me, though. He glanced out into the darkness, then waved vaguely off towards the east. "Ah…Well, very nice to

meet you, Stygius…" Really, it was nice to meet something interesting that wasn't trying to kill me. "But I really should be on my way."

I shook the water out of my barding and strapped it on. Stygius looked crestfallen as he watched me. Suddenly, he darted back to his dark purple armor, put it on in a flash, and soared over and landed in front of me with a broad, cocky grin. But due to his haste, his armor was askew and his helmet was on backwards. He froze a moment, then reached up and turned it around straight, trying to maintain a dignified expression. "You…want to come with me?" He bowed deeply. I sat and looked at him flatly. "Why?"

He glanced at my posterior, then grinned and struck a noble pose.

It might have been a little bit impressive, even with the backwards helmet, if a second dark form hadn't swooshed out of the night and pounced right on top of him. He slid almost ten feet, looking up at a second batpony with the same dusky hide; her mane was more bluish than purple, but other than that they looked quite similar. This batpony was a mare in the same sort of armor, and she looked pissed as her bright yellow eyes glared down at him. Suddenly, I could just make out the faintest chirps, squeaks, and squeals at the edge of my hearing as she moved her mouth. The lecture was accompanied by her pointing at me and then smacking him upside the head.

Somepony was in trouble…

Finally, she huffed and stepped back, letting Stygius rise. She glared at his armor and roughly jerked it all into place and buckled it down, then snorted and nodded before frowning at me. Her hoof pointed imperiously away.

"Okay. Okay. I get the idea," I muttered as I backed off.

Stygius launched himself into the air and landed next to me, the batmare looking shocked as he landed. I heard the faintest squeaks and chirps as he pointed at me. She frowned at him, now more in worry than anger. She made the smallest chirp, and jabbed her hoof in my direction. Then she looked at him suspiciously and pointed at me again, making another noise. He suddenly looked nervous, fidgeted, and then assumed the noble pose once more and made what I assumed was supposed to be a gallant sound.

She looked at him flatly, then sighed and shook her head, taking off and soaring in an arc to land before me. Then she reached out and patted my shoulder gently. I just stared at her in utter

confusion as she trotted past Stygius with a scornful snort, grabbed the radhog in her hooves, and flew off into the night on silent bat wings.

I looked at Stygius. "Sooooo?"

He sighed, grabbed his chalk, and scribbled 'Twin sister.' A moment later, he added 'Tenebra' underneath it. Strange names must be a batpony thing. He erased it and then wrote, 'She mad.'

No. *Really*? "Why?"

'Rules.' He made a snapping motion with his hooves, then pointed at me and shook his head. Breaking rules?

"Oh. You weren't supposed to…ah…join me?" I asked. He smiled and tapped his nose. "Why not?" He blinked, frowned, started to move…stopped, then frowned again. He erased the board and started to write. Frowned…erased it…started again.

Finally, he huffed softly and wrote 'Cause', then nodded once. I supposed that that would have to do.

"And you want to come with me?" He grinned and bowed deeply. "Why?" He blinked and started to strike a pose, but at my flat look he froze, his grin becoming tense. He slumped, took the chalkboard slate in his hooves, erased it, and wrote slowly.

When he'd finished, he hung his head as he held the slate up between his hooves. 'UR pretty mare.'

"Pretty?" I said as I took a step back. He nodded and sighed. "You want to come with me because I'm pretty?" He nodded again, peeking at me. I covered my face with a hoof. "Look…Stygius…I have issues. Balefire bomb-sized issues. I might just snap and geld you because you look wrong at my butt. I just got out of an insane asylum. Heck…I've got an army of cultists trying to track me down!" I didn't mention the worst thing I'd done in the last day. "The smart thing for you to do is go and join your sister. I'm nothing but trouble."

He blinked and frowned, then rubbed his chin. "Seriously! I am not safe to be around." He pursed his lips as he stared at me. I took another step back. "C…come on! You can't seriously want to come with me just because I'm pretty!" He gave an easy grin and nodded. Nasty, suspicious parts of my head were hissing all kinds of accusations. This was obviously some sort of plot. There was some kind of scheme here. No stallion could want to just trot along for the heck of it. He wanted something, and I was fairly sure it was right underneath my tail.

But was that necessarily a bad thing? *Hell yes*, roared part of my mind.

Maybe not, murmured another part.

Once upon a time, P-21 had accused me of having trust issues in that I was really, really, stupidly trusting. Now here I was, suspicious simply because a strange buck liked me, was interested in me, and wanted to come along. I laughed softly, shaking my head and earning a quizzical look from the charcoal batpony. Batpony… there had to be a better name for them.

I sighed and nodded in resignation. "Okay. But please, don't get killed. Don't…try anything too friendly." Then I frowned and added sharply, "And don't shoot me! Understand?" He looked at me in blank confusion, then gestured to the fact he had no guns. In fact, I didn't see any weapons on him at all; if I was lucky, that meant that he was such a master of hoof-to-hoof combat that he didn't need them... but this being me, it probably just meant that he was good enough to take a radhog by surprise and had never needed to fight anything else. "Don't look at me like that! Just because you don't have a gun doesn't mean you won't find *something* to shoot me with." Wait…I froze as I felt myself turning red as he looked at me with a smile that was way too cocky…erm…smug, for my liking. "I mean bullets! Shooting... bullets…just don't!"

He gave a soft, high pitched chuckle just barely in my hearing range as he flew lazily behind me…and for the first time ever, it was my tail that was feeling all tingly, not my mane. Together, we picked our way along the scree and thorn bushes towards the southern edge of the mountain.

* * *

"And she said she was cursed! Cursed! Just for bumping into me. I mean, I know I sometimes cause trouble for ponies without meaning to, but cursed? That's a little upsetting," I rambled as we made our way along. Clearly, travelling with me for almost an hour and hearing my entire life story hadn't really convinced him that I wasn't the safest mare to be around. I had left out the worst parts, though, for now…and might have shuffled things up. He was flying after me with a funny look on his face as we crept around the edge of the talus, at least; I hoped that that meant that he was reconsidering.

Like the far side of the valley, this area was more sparsely developed. What *had* been built here looked like it'd been built like bunkers. The homes were made of reinforced concrete rather than wood and stone, and the apartments were like miniature fortresses fighting the creep of nature and water. Most of the buildings looked sunken into the slope, though, and it was often easier to trot over the flat, muddy roofs of the few in our way than it would have been to go around them. None of the buildings were very habitable; if they weren't bombed or blasted, they were usually filled with mud and reeking stagnant water.

And as if matching that style, the two largest buildings off in the eastern edge of the city were of the same brutal architecture, resembling immense concrete blocks with the edges filed off. The larger of the two, south of Black Pony Mountain and all the way up on the slope of the eastern mountains, I assumed was Hightower; it wasn't quite as tall as the Fluttershy clinic, but it was a wide, square block of a building about the same size as Flash Industries and surrounded by a high stone wall. I could barely make out a garish rainbow-colored glow on the south side.

My sleep-deprived brain was getting weird again, and yet I felt fine. I knew that I needed sleep, hoped I could somehow find it. But I didn't see anyplace around here. I guessed that whatever state I'd been in at Happyhorn hadn't counted as sleep. In fact, I couldn't remember, in any of my memories of that place, having slept. It all just blurred together into one smear. With the shadows getting twitchy and my E.F.S. switched off, I needed to hole up and do something to try and shut down for a few hours. I just couldn't see any place nearby that sounded like the place the Dealer had mentioned. Somewhere safe?

Wait? What was that?

Somepony had dropped a giant pink gumball in the low, thorny woods. The gnarly trees obscured it, but from above the sight was impossible to miss. It glowed slightly with a strange internal illumination, and I found myself just staring in shock at it. I pointed down at it with my hoof. "Um…what is that?" Stygius simply shrugged and made a motion of pushing against something, then beating it with his hoof, and then he hunched his shoulders once more.

Hmm…well, it was the most unusual thing on the mountain slope, so…might as well check it out.

Making our way closer to the pink ball, I found myself looking nervously at the trees. These were actually alive, and after my last experience with a 'forest', I was definitely leery of timber wolves, exploding apples, anything blue... However, aside from a carpet of dead, soggy leaves underhoof and numerous little streams trickling along, there wasn't much that stood out. I tried eating one of the greener leaves but found it tasted like a mouthful of tart wax. That didn't stop me from eating it, of course, but it did get me some curious looks from Stygius. He chewed cautiously on one, then spat it out immediately.

Life endured. Even in the Wasteland. Most of Hoofington might be dead and sterilized, but life was crawling back. This was the result of two centuries, though, and there were other parts of the Hoof that were still just dead forest and struggling yellow grass. Without something like Gardens of Equestria, who knew how long it would take for the land to really recover?

Then again, one way or another, recover it would; that was heartening, if only a little. But it raised the question of whether ponykind would recover too... and that looked far more iffy.

We found a track through the woods; scraping away the mat of leaves uncovered the cracked and broken surface of a road running along the curve of the eastern valley. Most of the homes here were in the process of being consumed by the dead leaves and detritus carried on the streams that cut along the hillside. Once or twice we saw wagons that had been split and twisted by the growth of the trees. I noticed a radhog family rooting around in one of the heavy concrete homes, but they didn't seem to notice us, or maybe didn't care.

Then we reached the pink bubble; it had to be almost a hundred feet in diameter, and the looming trees around it were slowly growing along its surface. Stygius flew overhead and rammed hard into the shield, and to my amazement it indented a great distance before snapping back into place and flinging him away. He flipped end over end before righting himself and shrugging in midair. Then he flew down next to me and stood upright, leaning against it.

I trotted up to it and pushed my hoof against the surface. There was a ripple, and he tumbled through. I stepped through beside him and looked at him sprawled out on his back and gaping at me. "Oh, yeah. I'm related to one of the Ministry Mares, apparently. Not Twilight, though…" He just stared at me in bafflement, and I

smiled. “Sorry. I might have skipped a few parts.” Then I looked past him and my eyes widened. “Whoa.” He scrambled to his hooves and stared as well.

Inside the bubble was a house the likes of which I’d only seen above Chapel. It wasn’t an ugly block of concrete looking more suitable for a standoff against the striped hordes, but a place where ponies could live. Long green grass grew in a lawn around a stone cottage, and the dark hexagonal stones were covered in green vines, the delicate pink bells of their flowers filling the air with an indescribable sweetness. The cottage was built back against a natural ledge of dark stone; water poured out of a fissure above to tumble into a wheel beside the house that slowly turned and splashed.

Never, in all my crazy visions of a world before bombs, could I have imagined a place like this. It made my chest hurt to think that any place like this could exist. As we walked along the flagstones, I was struck by the mixing of delicate and thriving life with the hard stone plinths scattered around the home. Some were obsidian, others rusty red, others white marble, others gray granite slab. There were empty spaces for nests and birdhouses that were now vacant.

The one thing that didn’t belong, however, was the birthday presents.

They lay around the cottage every few feet, colorful cubical parcels about a foot on a side. Most were topped with bows and fancy ribbons. One lay right on the steps leading up to the front door, this one with a little handle sticking out of it. I felt a frisson of anticipation as the handle started to turn of its own accord and tinny music issued from the parcel. I reached out a hoof and pushed Stygius back a little.

Suddenly, the top of the box popped open and a pink pony head popped out on a spring. It wobbled a few times, and when it finally slowed I saw it was done up like a grinning Pinkie Pie. It turned, looked right at me, and straightened. “Hi!” a mare said in a cheery voice, “I’m really so very sorry, but this is a special private Pinkie party and I’m afraid you don’t have an invitation. This is a very super secure crime scene, and if you’re here, I’m afraid you’re going to have to wait for a M.o.M. team to say it’s okie dokie lokie to leave! Please sit quietly and don’t make any sudden moves, Naughty McNaughterson. Otherwise, I’ll have to just go ahead and

assume that you're a Bad Pony, and we don't want that!"

"Right…" I said as I pulled out the riot shotgun I'd gotten at Happyhorn and, after a moment of consideration, slapped a drum of buckshot in. "'Fraid there's no Ministry of Morale anymore and we're not planning to wait here forever, so you can just…not do whatever you were going to do."

The pupils of the bobbing Pinkie head suddenly flashed bright red. "Oooooh…some naughty pony's gonna need a time out, aren't they?" Suddenly the lids started popping off the other wrapped presents in clouds of confetti, unleashing a swarm of buzzing brightly-colored little spritebots! The winged orbs swooped up over us, their eyes glowing the same ominous red as the Pinkie head's.

Okay, if there was ever a time for a shotgun, this was it! I backed towards the house as the robots closed in from either side, blowing cones of lead out at the swirling machines. They exploded into flying shrapnel, but every gap that opened was immediately filled! I wasn't doing much more than slowing them down, and at this rate I'd have to switch drums really soon. And at that thought, the cloud of spritebots that had now completely cut us off from the shield opened fire. One of their little red bolts of incineration magic did little more than sting, but these sprites were firing hundreds of them and making my armor start to smoke!

There was only one thing to do: get inside and hope Pinkie Pie hadn't left anything else nasty! We ran up the stairs onto the porch that ran the length of the front of the house, and I jerked on the front door. Locked, of course. I gave it a solid thump as the spritebots swarmed around us and the batpony darted into the air. The door sounded very solid and was firmly closed. Stygius swooped and wheeled above me, drawing the robots' fire as I tried to decide between trying to pick the lock and just trying to batter the door down. Every now and then he'd open his mouth and let out a scream that I could barely hear but also actually barely *see* radiating out from his mouth. The shimmering screech made the tiny robots in front of him crackle, spark, and drop to the ground smoking, but he had the same problem as my shotgun; no matter how many he took out, there always seemed to be more to take their places.

I gave the door an experimental kick. Ow... Okay, lockpicking, then. I tried my best to focus as I knelt at the door, brushing aside the yellow tape printed with 'Crime Scene: Smart Detectives and

Bumbling Assistants Only' to get at the lock. I didn't have very many bobby pins, and I sure didn't have time to screw around. Focus…don't think about the buck getting shot to buy you time to do this. Don't think about him turning to ash and drifting from the sky. Don't think about how handsome he was or that he was nice enough to come along with you in spite of your crazy!

Snap. Well, I did still have more. Break. Two more. Crack. Okay. Last shot, and I could *not* mess this up. Calm… focus… twist it just like so… turn the lock, and! Broken. I gave a little scream, grabbed the screwdriver with my teeth, and twisted as hard as I could. For a second the lock caught, and then my luck saved our asses again and it popped open. I kicked the door wide. "Stygius! In here! Quickly!"

He dropped down onto the porch in a landing that was just short of a crash, his armor and hide smoking in dozens of places and the swarm not far behind him. I grabbed him by his armor and hauled him in, slamming the door behind him. *Good* thick, solid door; please do keep the robots out. He collapsed onto the polished wood floor with a raspy exhalation.

Around me, lights flickered on automatically. I looked around anxiously, shotgun out, but didn't see anything that looked hostile. What I *did* see was that the house was, astonishingly, completely clean. Aside from a faint layer of dust, I might as well have been two hundred years in the past. I had to take a second look at Stygius to make sure I wasn't seeing things… though I still might have been, of course.

Then I kicked myself in the rump and set to finding some healing potions. With all the grass outside, I doubted there was an Enervation ring here. I ran from room to room and finally spotted a yellow medical case bolted to the wall in the water closet. It was thankfully unlocked and held four bright purple healing potions, and I immediately lifted them and raced back to him. Don't die… Please don't die.

You're cursed, Star Maiden.

No I'm not. Curses schmurses. He was definitely on the well-done side, but he was still breathing when I reached him. I held a potion to his mouth and he eagerly slugged it down. The burns on his hide lightened only a bit, so I gave him another. The angry red evened out, and after a third potion, his dusky gray hide closed with barely a mark. He groaned and lay out flat, hooves and bat wings splayed wide. I looked down into his eyes with a thankful smile. He was

going to pull through.

He looked back up at me, gave a wide grin, and puckered his lips. I balked, fighting the impulse to smash his face in. So he was a little flirty…don't kill him for that. I closed my eyes a moment, then snorted and pushed his face away. "Don't push your luck." Please.

He looked at me in concern, but now that worry for him was past I was taking a longer look at the house I was in. Like the outside, the inside was decorated in a style that reminded me vaguely of Star House and the Fluttershy Medical Center's atrium. Most of it was wood depicting butterflies, bunnies, flowers, trees, and birds, but there was also a fascinating collection of gems and metalwork. In the kitchen, the faucet was shaped like a swan's neck. The wings of the butterflies on the mantle were perfectly cut rose quartz. Copper verdigris crawled alongside ivy carvings and literally popped out off the woodwork. The detail was such that I could see the veins in the metal leaves.

One thing was out of place: there were stacks of bright pink plastic crates piled up next to the door. All of them bore the grinning pink pony icon of the Ministry of Morale. I noticed a checklist on a clipboard resting on top, though, and read, 'Ministry of Morale Crime Scene Evaluation Checklist for Super Smart Smartypants Detective Ponies'.

✔ *1) Know who the bad ponies are.*
✔ *2) Arrest bad ponies.*
3) Find evidence to prove bad ponies are bad.
4) Question bad ponies to give up other bad ponies.
5) Repeat steps 1 + 2.

Now, I might not have known a lot about crime scene evaluation, but I found myself extremely grateful that Pinkie Pie hadn't written the security procedures for Stable 99. I doubt there'd have been a mare left under such guidelines. I dug through the crates, keeping an eye and a riot shotgun out for anything that flew or talked, but they were empty save for dozens and dozens of little envelopes and plastic bags. There was a date written in one of the boxes at the top of the MoMCSEC3SDP that piqued my interest, though. The day the bombs fell.

Decorations like the Fluttershy clinic and Happyhorn? Searching for evidence in a house that had some kind of magic bubble around it? And who was a prominent figure arrested for treason right before the bombs fell? The book I'd found in Tenpony Tower had

said that this place was near Black Pony Mountain, and Dealer had steered me to it.

Goldenblood's house.

Standing there, I felt a shiver run through me as I stared around the great room. Here was where the stallion himself lived; where he'd hatched his schemes. Where he'd had a brief life together with Fluttershy; clearly he'd done all he could to make this place her home as well. This home had absolutely none of the ostentation of Blueblood Manor. Everything appeared to be simply crafted, yet there was also a quality in the woodwork that I simply couldn't shake.

Stygius appeared more concerned about me as I sat there staring at the furniture and decorations. I might find out everything I wanted to know here! If it hadn't been removed…I simply had to search! Sleep could wait.

The ground floor turned out to consist of a library, some sort of workshop, a water closet, and the kitchen adjoining the great room that the front door opened into; stairs led up to a balcony running along the top of the enclosed rooms, and more doors opened off of that. I trotted to the kitchen cupboards and opened them up only to see that they were devoid of any food. The plates were all neatly stacked, though, the forks and knives polished. The refrigerator wasn't just bare; it was empty and cleaned.

In the library was a collection of books on history, politics, and other things I had no idea about because they were written in zebra glyphs or languages I didn't even recognize. The desk drawers had stationery, scrolls, quills, and inks all neatly stacked in their respective places. Everything was clean and, for the most part, clear of dust. I was shocked to see how many pictures he had on his desk. Fluttershy was first and foremost, smiling as she held a little bunny, but next to her was Luna hugging an embarrassed-looking, unscarred Goldenblood. There were Twilight Sparkle and an adolescent Spike in his cave, sitting on his hoard. Applejack and Applesnack looking equally uncomfortable at some fancy function. An incredibly young-looking Pinkie Pie dancing around a toothless lizard with her friends. Rainbow Dash flying in formation. Rarity wearing a stunning dress in black and red.

Yet as I sat and looked around his desk, I also took in what wasn't there. No notes. No garbage in the wastebin. No half-used-up pencils, crumbs, or dirty dishes. No letters to be answered nor

address books nor terminal, even. In fact, the room was so clean that I would have been hard pressed to believe it had ever been used.

The workshop, like the library next door, was neat and orderly. Tools were left hanging on the wall next to a workbench; tiny little hammers, pliers, and eyeglasses mounted on leather headbands were all in order. In the corner was a heavy stone oven of some sort. I frowned and checked inside. Swept clean of ashes. In drawers under the workbench were spools of copper, silver, gold, and steel wire, verified with a nibble on each. Goddesses, didn't *that* get a funny look from the dusky batpony. I self-consciously transferred the spools to my saddlebags anyway, though.

I looked around again. There were no half-finished projects anywhere. No scrap bits left on the floor. Nothing to imply that anypony had actually lived here long ago. I glanced back at Stygius, caught his questioning look, and sighed. "Sorry. Once upon a time there was a pony who lived here that did a lot of secretive things. I was hoping that I might get some ans--"

Why did I hear music? It was distant and tinny, like a bad recording. Slowly, I looked around; Stygius was visibly flickering in and out of sight while by the workbench a yellow shape was moving like a ghost. "Wait a minute…" I murmured as I cautiously moved to the side, towards the corner of the workshop. The further I moved, the more Stygius faded from view and the more Goldenblood appeared. I heard his rasping cough as he struggled for breath. He wore a clear plastic mask over his face as he levitated a length of silver wire before him. Finally, when I was in the very corner, he appeared completely solid.

He also looked like hell. He was covered in bandages, some of which were yellowed and dirty-looking. Yet despite the wet sound of his lungs, he still kept his magical grasp steady as he molded steel, gold leaf, and silver wire together as easily as if they were clay. There was a radio on the table beside him playing familiar string music.

"Professor?" a mare asked softly from the door, and like a ghost materializing, a stricken black unicorn appeared. Her silver eyes were wide and shimmered with tears. A lone candle was on her flank. She sniffed and rubbed her nose.

He didn't look up from his work. "I'm not…a teacher…anymore… Psalm," he wheezed in that boiled-sounding voice. Slowly he turned

to look at her, stiffly, as if every motion were agony. His eyes fixed on her standing there as she sniffed. “It’s not…your fault, Psalm.”

It was the wrong comment. “How can you say that? It was my fault! All of it!” she sobbed as she collapsed, hanging her head. “If I…if they…Oh Luna, I wish I’d died with the others!”

He slowly rose, hobbled towards where she lay in a heap, and, moving with great pain, gently hugged her. “It is…not…your fault…” he rasped, then coughed that horrid, wracking cough.

“I shouldn’t have done it. I…they did it because of me.”

He answered her in short, gasping broken lines that I threaded together. “You are not to blame, Psalm. Not for your kindness. What happened at Littlehorn was not your fault, nor will you wishing to assume responsibility make it better.” He patted her mane. “I wish I could help you understand that.” He held her in his hooves till her sobbing abated. “There... better?” She nodded and wiped her nose.

“What about you, Professor?” she asked with a worried frown. “When you collapsed at the speech…I was so afraid.”

He struggled for breath before rasping, “I likely have a month to live. Two at the most. Luna herself is helping to heal the damage to my lungs.” He smiled and gave a little shrug, his eyes distant. “She wants me to help her set up her government,” he said as they shifted, sitting and facing each other. He hung his head as he spoke. Suddenly he arched his back and resumed coughing and retching. He took the mask off and choked a moment, and a thin pink stream trickled out of his mouth and onto the floor, smoking where it met the wood. I remembered how Glory had cut away the environmental suit that had fused to my hide from the Pink Cloud; suddenly I had an unsettling idea of where the stallion’s injuries might have come from. Psalm rushed out and a moment later returned with healing potions. It took four before he finally recovered.

“You should be in the hospital, Professor,” Psalm murmured, looking at the hissing pink spittle.

He didn’t answer or argue at first, seeming to need to concentrate on breathing. Then, “The future of Equestria might be better if I don’t survive,” he said, so quietly that I almost missed it.

“What…but…” Her horn glowed as she lifted another healing draught to his lips. He suckled on it, coughing wetly again. “But why? You said Princess Luna needs you. Don’t you want to help her?”

He didn't answer for such a long time that I was sure he wouldn't. But then he said in his low, raspy voice, "I do. More than you could imagine, Psalm. But she wants a government every bit as grand and powerful as her sister's. I can give her that. It's possible. But I fear what will be required to create such a rule. I'm terrified, Psalm. Terrified that if I help her do what she wants, it will destroy her and Equestria."

He paused to retch up another stream of the pink fluid into an empty potion bottle. Then he sat back and caught his breath. He looked up at the ceiling. "I can see it now, Psalm. She will be loved…but unlike her sister, she will be feared as well. She'll have all the power of Celestia in her hooves, but she'll not need to use it. Misdirection…doubt…ambiguity…these will reign, and there will be none to stop them. Not for centuries, at least." He sighed as he closed his eyes. A strange calmness seemed to spill over him, and his words became stronger. "It's like I can look ahead the entire span of a millennium, great and terrible and bloody. There will be murder…slaughter…betrayal. History assures it, a tale wrought again and again all across the world. It will be a nightmare, Psalm. I can see it clearly…as if it's already happened and old history. Past. Dry. Dead."

He shook his head and said in his rasping whisper, his voice flowing like a hissing steam pipe as he spoke with a look of sad resignation, "I've never been so certain of anything as I have this, Psalm. So I must ask myself, would it not be better…more merciful…to help it fail? To try to bring about its ruin swiftly and surely and in the process save the hearts and souls of both Equestria and Luna from that grim future? Or should I embrace audacity and try to steer this bloody calamity towards some yet unknown beneficial conclusion? What is a hundred dead…a thousand…a million…over the span of a thousand years and more? What is a few cold betrayals when we've all passed into the everafter?" He shuddered and once more broke into great heaving coughs. He spat more of the pink foulness into the bottle and sighed. "Truly, death would be a fine, if cowardly, escape from these questions churning about in my head."

Finally he relaxed, and Psalm cracked a tiny smile. "Wow…are monologues a side effect of the poison, Professor?"

Her attempt at humor prevailed. He smiled back. "I'm dying. It gives tremendous license towards the melodramatic." Then he

laughed and immediately broke into deep, wet, heaving coughs. When he'd brought up more pink, he sighed. "I just don't know what I should do."

"Professor. She's…she's not just Princess Luna. She's Luna. *Our* Luna. The one who actually read your papers on petriculture and zebra mysticism? The one who didn't think that a rock hunters' club was a stupid waste of a unicorn's time? We have to help her!" Goldenblood closed his eyes and shook his head. Psalm pressed her lips together, then nudged his shoulder. "If you don't, Professor, somepony else will."

The comment stirred him, his golden eyes opening and his lips pressing together in a line. "You're right. I can just see…the nobility…wealthy…privileged ponies… " He retched again and then stood. "I can just see what my father would do if he got her to listen to him. His lot got us into this war in the first place. 'A week long war…' Fools. Worthless fools…they'll perpetuate the butchery ad nauseum. It's not as if they send their children to die," Goldenblood muttered as he paced slowly. "In time, she'd see through the flattery…but it would take years…perhaps generations…before she could be strong enough to rule on her own."

"You have to help her, Professor. She's Luna. She's…we have to help," Psalm said as she touched several strangely parallel scars on the inside of her foreleg. "Please…I know you want to help her. You love her."

Goldenblood smiled, slow and sad. "She's a princess…how could I not?" He sighed and looked at her. "And you, Psalm? How will you help the Princess?"

"Me…I…" she stammered, and then closed her eyes. "I think…I've been thinking…maybe I should enlist?"

"Psalm…soldiers kill…" he murmured. "You burst into tears when you saw a hawk kill a rabbit for lunch. Are you sure?"

"I know. I know it's wrong…but…they burned my home and they killed my school. I…" she stammered and sniffed. "I…I have to do something, Professor! I don't think I could live with myself if I didn't!" She bit her lip as she fidgeted. "My roommate Twist is going to sign up. We shared a space above her candy shop, and since it was completely destroyed…well…she says she's going to thump and twist those zebras like they were huge black and white stripes of taffy."

He was quiet for a short time, then sighed. "Just, please…if you are

going to enlist…Please promise me that you're doing this for Luna. Don't do this out of hate."

"I won't, Professor," she replied softly. "Hopefully they need somepony for support. Carrying water or helping the medics or…or something. I doubt I'd ever be able to kill anypony." Funny, remembering her fighting alongside Big Macintosh, I'd say she'd proved quite able.

He smiled and lifted the steel rose with his magic. The glow deepened, and the rose came alive, the petals extending and curling, gold and silver. Finally, he bent the stem and hooked it gently around her ear; it gleamed brightly against her ebony coat. "Here. Take this. For luck."

"Professor! I can't. It's too…too good for me. I don't deserve something so lovely," she said, blushing.

"Indulge me. I'm dying. It'd be rude to not accept," he said with a raspy chuckle. "Now, help me into the kitchen. The hospital provided some absolutely horrid mush for my meals, but that doesn't mean you can't have something nice to eat."

She helped him to his hooves, and together they walked out of the room. My vision flickered, and suddenly a pair of slitted yellow eyes were staring into mine. "Gah!" I shouted, my forelegs kicking out at him, but he seemed to be wise to me and nimbly darted back. I looked around, then slumped. "Whoa. That is so weird."

He pointed at me, then suddenly swayed as he sat on his rump and let his eyes go glassy.

"Sorry about that," I said with a little frown, rubbing my mane. "I sometimes have…" How to explain this without sounding crazier than usual? "Visions, I guess." He looked at me skeptically and I waved my hoof at him. "I know, I know. Sounds crazy, but I do." I looked around the workshop with a sigh, then turned. In the corner of the room, right above my head, was a small hole. I'd bet my horn that there'd once been a camera of some sort there. Why? Goldenblood wasn't the director of anything back then…

Ugh…add mystery four thousand, seven hundred and two to the list.

I rose to my hooves and gave myself a shake, looking at the concerned batpony. He smiled at me and gestured with his hoof like he wanted me to go on. I groaned and shook my head. "You remember the pony I mentioned. The one with all the secrets? Well…he used to be a teacher. He taught at some place called

Littlehorn…and apparently one of his students blamed herself when it got destroyed." I frowned as I looked at the worktable. "He was also an artist…" Funny. I didn't like thinking of him like that. Bastard. Manipulator. Son of a mule…sure. "He helped Luna set up the ministries, but…he didn't want to. He really didn't." I shook my head. "I guess…he cared too much for Luna to turn her down."

He gave me a sideways, appraising look. He pointed at me, clutched his hooves over his chest, and thumped them rhythmically as he adopted a besotted expression. I noticed he was just a bit nervous as well.

"You want to know if I have a very special somepony?" I asked, and he nodded. I smiled fondly. "Yeah. I do. Her name is Glory." At once his smile melted, and he slumped. "What?" He rolled his eyes towards the roof, hooves wide, looking anguished. "What? What's wrong?"

He pointed at me, then pointed between his legs at his equipment and adopted a disgusted look, thrusting his nose into the air with a snort. He looked so disappointed I couldn't help myself and smiled.

"No no. Glory is strictly mares only, but I don't mind males like that. No…my issue with males is…um…" Come on Blackjack, admit it. It stuck in my throat a moment, but finally I managed to spit it out. "I, ah…got ploughed pretty bad not long ago. Yeah…" He stared at me in shock and I felt myself flush as I looked away. "That's why I'm so…nervous…around you. 'Cause I'm trying to… you know…not kill you."

Stygius looked mad and worried. He scribbled on his chalkboard slate, 'I not hurt U'. Then he growled and stomped what I assumed were my imaginary violators.

"Thanks. I know that." Or he was one hell of an actor. "I'm just…I don't want to do it with you and have a flashback in the middle." I smiled crookedly at him. "You wouldn't want to fool around with me if I might hurt you, would you?"

He seemed to think of it for all of two seconds before he smiled and nodded once. I couldn't help but laugh…and speculate.

It occurred to me then to wonder how Glory would take my behavior with Stygius. I'd only just met him, though, so it wasn't like there was any emotional connection, and she wouldn't be interested in him herself. Probably not even interested in hearing about it. A little 'recreation' would be nice; damned nice, if it didn't involve raping a male on a breeding queue or getting nailed to the

floor. Some nice, plain, middle-ground sex.

I wasn't like Glory. What had happened on the *Seahorse* aside, I liked sex with stallions. A lot. I'd always looked forward to my turn on the queue. Even Vanity's memory orb had been fun; had it been viewed in private, I probably would have had a new toy.

Stygius interrupted my thoughts by pointing at me and then bumping his forehooves together and giving a pointed look. I flushed, but aside from that nagging panic in the back of my mind... it wasn't an entirely unpleasant proposition.

"Maybe," I said, making him grin. "But not right now." From the look on Stygius's face, though, he'd follow me through a fire for a chance at my hind end.

Stallions...

* * *

I spent the next half an hour running around the first floor trying to find some flicker or hear something that might be another recording, but the radroach in my head was waking up and starting to scramble around. I kept seeing things flickering in the corners of my vision. Every now and then I'd see a red bar, even with the E.F.S. off, and have to fight the urge to shoot randomly into corners. Yet I also felt slow. Before, I'd had a nervous, almost manic energy. Now I felt lethargy slipping over me. Not fatigue so much as an inability to really put things together.

I was wasting time. Procrastinating; wasn't that the word? I knew what I needed to do, and yet…I didn't want to. As stupid and illogical as it was, I was certain that if I truly slept I'd wake up… wrong. Completely robotic, or maybe I'd find out that all of this really was a dream and I was really just a mutilated, violated, mutated mare waiting to die. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something fundamentally wrong with me, something more than just the fatigue and the augmentations.

It was like my own mind was trying to kill me…putting off what I needed to do. Happyhorn had gotten me to finally admit that what I needed wasn't more action but inaction. Not more running around but slowing down and facing what was the matter with me. It was harder; when Harbingers attacked, I just shot back. Killing was easier.

"Goddesses, I am turning into a monster," I said aloud, sitting

down on the great room floor and cupping my face in my cool metallic hands. At least Deus was sane. Brutal and terrible, yes, but in control. Stygius stood nearby, looking concerned.

I needed friends. I needed other ponies. I couldn't do it alone…and so I smiled at him wearily. "I need to sleep." If those spritebots outside haven't come in yet, we should be safe. And I couldn't imagine Seekers getting in through that shield.

He wrote on his slate and held it up. 'Tired?'

For some reason, the question struck me as incredibly funny, but my laughter was ragged and high-strung. Now he looked even more worried. "Actually, that's the funny thing. I'm not. I'm not tired at all." I trotted to the couch and looked at it with a sort of dread. I remembered lying down after Priest died and not being able to get up again. Not sleep…just…lying there. "It's just, over the last day, I've blown up a secret facility, gotten chased by a giant killer robot, had half my face melted off and sewn back together, been attacked a half-dozen times, discovered my best friend was a drug addict, tried to comfort my marefriend, who turned into Rainbow Dash, had a refinery blow up around me, watched a buck take out a tank with a rifle, trotted through a horrific prison camp, ripped apart an Enclave squad, killed a filly, and was plugged into a mental therapy machine in an insane asylum." I turned my back on him, rubbing my skull. Maybe it was the fatigue that was making me all flirty and boycrazy?

He tapped his slate, and I looked over at him frowning back at me. 'Killed a what?'

I closed my eyes and sighed. "It was an accident…I didn't realize who she was till too late…but I still killed her." The tension in my head was growing again. "I know it was wrong…I want to make up for it. That's all I can do now." That made him look a little less angry and more concerned. He pointed at me and then shrugged in confusion. "I…I need to sleep. My brain needs it. I need it." I just wasn't sure I could anymore.

He pointed at the couch, and I lay down. "Hey…Stygius…I was wondering. Where do batponies like you come from?" Ugh, procrastinating again, Blackjack. He blinked and scrunched his brows together. I guessed that that was the sort of question you couldn't answer in a few words on a blackboard. "Sorry… nevermind. I just…" I sighed and I closed my eyes. "It's been so long that I…I don't know how exactly to do this."

I lay there for a few seconds, then heard the soft click of a door closing. He was a nice guy; the fact that he wasn't okay with what I'd done to Boing showed that he wasn't just some killer. Okay, maybe he was a bit of an idiot, following me... assuming he didn't have some outside agenda. Maybe he--

Sleep, Blackjack. That's what you need now. Sleep. Don't think about anything but that. Though it would be nice for P-21 to have a guy he could…hopefully…relate to. I hoped they could be friends. I know Glory would probably be fascinated by him…unless, of course, the Enclave already knew all about Luna's guards and the like, bu--

I grabbed a pillow off the couch, covered my face, and screamed in frustration. Just…stop! I'd gone through most of my life not thinking about things. Why was it so hard now? Just sleep, Blackjack…

If I sleep…I'll die. I could remember being on the boat, feeling warmth on my face. The feel of Glory holding me as I slipped away. Goddesses, I wanted it so badly. I remembered…I remembered stars. A vague, fuzzy memory of stars and beautiful music and a feeling of belonging. A feeling of others wanting me to stay.

Self-destructive tendencies…was that why I was so messed up? I'd died. I'd been at peace, and then…I'd come back. Come back as this metal and pony thing. They turned me into Deus; maybe a less clunky Deus, but still a cyberpony. Glory had been right not to tell me. If she had, I wouldn't have let her. Better some more worthy pony like the Stable Dweller take EC-1101 and try to find out about Goldenblood and Horizons. Instead, she'd plotted with everyone behind my back to save my life! How dare she? How could she? What gave her the right?!

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling, my mechanical fingers about to rip the flowery pink pillow in two. I was angry…at Glory? I was…I really was. I felt hot tears running down the sides of my head. Ever since I'd come back in Tenpony, I'd been trying to tear myself apart because I was angry at the mare I loved. And yet, I did love her, and yet some fundamental part of me was outraged that she had turned me into this. Yes, technically she had saved my life. Yes, she had done so out of love…

Life isn't about what you want, Miss Fish. It isn't about what happens to you…it's about how you respond to it. Somepony had told me that a long time ago; a stallion with a candy-cane-striped mane on a long

walk to medical...

How had I been dealing with coming back? I'd bottled it up like P-21. Let it fester. Let it drive me to be reckless. Stupid. I'd turned my back on my friends and turned my back on Glory.

I lay there and closed my eyes. I imagined a great bank of electrical switches. One by one, I slowly flipped them off. I turned off my thoughts about Stygius and my newly annoying libido. I shut down my uncertainty and worry about the Harbingers, the Core, and EC-1101. I switched off the nagging curiosities of Goldenblood and Project Horizons. One by one, it was like bits of my brain were going dark. I deactivated my newly discovered anger at Glory and powered off my concerns for my friends. Finally I broke the connection to my self-hatred for what I was: a filly-murdering mechanical monster.

I was left with one last switch in my head. My fear. My certainty that if I pulled it, I would die. I imagined the mare in black from the Happyhorn simulation trying so hard to protect me. Protecting myself from the very thing I needed most. I grabbed the handle of the switch with my magic and started to pull.

You'll die… a part of me said as everything let go.

Maybe. But perhaps you get to dream when you're dead…

~ ~ ~

"Professor Goldie! I got to go to the bathroom!" Rampage whined, the striped filly hopping about with her hindlegs crossed as we scrambled along the floor of the canyon. The students all carried their own saddlebags and wore hiking boots on their hooves as they made their way along. A beautiful sunny day filled the sky, making the bands in the rock walls gleam and sparkle brightly around us. At our lead was a younger, healthier, happier Goldenblood. The river poured through the curving divide, bouncing and spraying over rocks as the rock hunters' club made our way along the bank. There were ponies I knew and ponies I didn't, yet I could see them all so clearly.

"You know you're in the middle of the woods? Pick a tree," P-21 muttered beside me, rolling his eyes. Overhead, Glory and Stygius were hovering over the riverbank where water had polished the boulders until they resembled giant gray eggs. The gray pegasus filly was telling a tan pegasus colt that they couldn't have been left

by dragons.

"Don't fly out too far over the river, Glory, Pound Cake," I called out in concern as the fliers wheeled about over the boulders. I helped lift a tiny Boo and Scotch Tape up over a ridge of stone, my magic holding them steadily.

"I don't even know why they're allowed to go to our school," a coltish Trueblood said with a snort. "It's Luna's Academy for Young *Unicorns*. I mean really! What are pegasi and earth ponies going to learn about magic?"

"While it's true that most of our students are unicorns," Goldenblood said quietly but in a tone of voice that made my ears perk up, "there are forms of magic that are beyond most unicorns. For instance, you might spend your entire life trying to learn a spell to tend a garden, while an earth pony could accomplish it with ease. And just as we can learn from them, they can learn from us."

"Besides," piped a tan unicorn filly beside Rampage, "he's my brother! So he can come to my school with me if he wants!"

"Well said, Pumpkin Cake," I said, giving the young mare an approving smile. She beamed back.

Trueblood snorted at me. "Well, fine, but I don't know why unicorns with less magic than an earth pony are allowed to be here. What's *she* going to teach us? How to not do magic?" Suddenly a rock flew through the air and smacked him upside the head. "Ow!" He stared at the filly. "Professor! She threw a rock at me!"

"Accident! My magic went off," Pumpkin Cake retorted, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Professor!" Trueblood whined.

"Unicorn magic is a strange and sometimes unpredictable thing. Especially when you're insulting said unicorn's family and friends," Goldenblood countered.

The colt snorted and muttered, "At least for unicorns that have magic." He glared at me sullenly. "She shouldn't even be here. When I tell Father, he'll write to Princess Luna about me being around deadhorns like her." I dropped my head a little; I really didn't want to get fired from this job.

"She is my assistant, and her magical ability is none of your business," Goldenblood countered with a tone of soft yet firm reprimand. Their eyes met, and the maroon colt lowered his head, muttering to himself. Goldenblood's gaze met mine, and the pale unicorn smiled.

“Professor Goldie!” Rampage whined as she hopped in place, screwing up her face.

“Tree. Just. Use,” P-21 muttered.

Goldenblood sighed. “I’m afraid he’s right. Otherwise, it’s a long way back to the toilet at Littlehorn.”

“Oooooh!” she whined and then darted off into some brush. “Don’t look!” she shrieked.

“Who’d want to?” P-21 asked as he shook his head, looking around at the others.

“Hey, what are you doing in those bushes?” Pound Cake called down from above. The filly’s scream echoed up and down the canyon’s walls.

With that disaster out of the way, we reached a spot near the end of the canyon. Here the black rock was scoured clean by a torrent of water pouring down from hundreds of feet above. Cool mist played on my hide and dripped off my mane and into my eyes. I wiped the wet strands away and sighed, looking around at the bands of stones in the canyon’s walls, shown so clearly with the wet bringing out their colors.

One particular reddish-yellow band of stone stood out above the others. That was because this one had teeth! The massive fangs of some enormous creature were frozen in place where the profile emerged from the rock. “Whoa, cool!” Pound Cake said as he flew above us all. Whatever the creature was, it’d been two or three times the size of a pony. There were lots of other grayish bones visible in the rock band.

“Thank you, Pound Cake,” Goldenblood said as he smiled at the tan pegasus colt. “If you remember our last session, I pointed out how when sedimentary rocks form, they create bands of stone called ‘strata’. These strata are usually arranged from youngest rock at the top with progressively older and older stone the further down you go.”

“Like your room, Bro,” Pumpkin Cake teased the pegasus with a grin.

“What about those, Professor? Are those b…b…bones?” Rampage stammered as she nervously poked one of the shapes embedded in the wall.

“Once they were, but now they’ve become special rocks called fossils. Long ago, this creature was as alive as you or I,” Goldenblood said as he gestured at the cliff wall. “Then it died and

was buried in this muddy sand. Over a very long time, its bones were transformed into rocks like the ones you see here." His horn glowed as he levitated out a rock hammer, carefully picked one of the fossils free, and passed it around... or at least passed it around till it got to Boo. The pale earth filly then popped it into her mouth and started chewing on the fossil like it was an extremely stale biscuit.

"How? Was there an outbreak of cockatrices?" Trueblood asked with a skeptical scowl.

"Actually? There're some theories that the transformation occurred with no magic at all," Goldenblood said with a smile. The maroon colt snorted disdainfully. "Yes, that's the typical reaction," the pale unicorn said with a chuckle.

"Oooh! There's another one, Professor! And another!" Glory cried out as she dropped down to the bottom of the yellowy-red layer and pointed her wing at the darker layer below it. "And even more down here! Only…these look like bugs. And there's a fish!" the gray filly said, pointing her hoof at the rock face.

"The magic of pegasus eyesight," Goldenblood murmured, making the maroon colt glower. "Yes, there are an amazing variety. I know that some books and films talk about ancient monsters like giants and trolls, but really, we know next to nothing about some of the creatures from long ago. What did they look like, for example? What did they hunt? How did they live? Were they intelligent, or not?" As he looked up at the rock face, the sun peeked through the clouds and made several gemstones embedded higher up gleam and twinkle like shards of a petrified rainbow.

"Spread out and see if you can find more for your collection. Remember, only one each, and only ones no bigger than your hoof. Leave the larger ones for others to find."

The fillies and colts spread out in little pairs and trios. I made sure that Boo didn't wander too close to the river. The maroon colt grumbled about stupid rock hunters' clubs and joining 'cause Mom and Dad said so. Pound Cake grabbed his sister firmly with his legs and flew off along the rock face, claiming they were going to find the biggest ones of all. I called out for them not to go too far.

Glory, however, was staring at the huge snarling fossil in the cliff face and the others beside it. "Professor…I was wondering…well… there's all these fossils in this band…and the band beneath that… and I even saw some in the layer underneath that one. But why

aren't there any fossils of these big monsters higher up? I mean… did something kill all of these creatures at once?"

A few that were listening in stopped picking at rocks and straightened. Goldenblood looked at her with a pleased smile. "An excellent observation. That is quite a good question. The honest truth is that we don't really know. History fades and blurs the further back one goes. We're taught the pageant of Hearth's Warming Eve, but what of the countries that we came from? Where did they come from? Or the Princesses? Or ponykind? Thus, when we get to things happening eons ago, all we can do is make educated speculations. Why so many large creatures in these layers and then such an abrupt stop? Something must have happened."

He trotted up to the rock layer and peered closely at it. He hummed softly under his breath, then paused. His rock hammer then picked out a lump of rock. Laying it down, he carefully chipped at the stone till it broke open and revealed a tiny metal fragment.

"What is it, Professor?" P-21 asked as Goldenblood lifted it with his magic.

"Sky iron. Starmetal. Moonsteel. The names vary, but it's a very special kind of iron that is found only in meteorites, what we also call 'falling stars'. It has very special properties that vary quite extensively. Some is exceptionally strong. Other kinds are fairly mundane. It is usually impervious to rust and very difficult to melt or work with. Most ponies don't even bother studying it as it's such a bother. But you can find it wherever falling stars have landed." He tapped the layer. "The upper boundary of this fossil-rich layer is full of tiny fragments of this particularly silvery variety of starmetal, suggesting that once, long ago, a meteorite impacted somewhere in the world. We've found fragments of this particular starmetal all across Equestria."

"And it killed all those…those things?" Rampage asked as she pointed at the fangy fossil with a hoof.

"We suspect it did. Others hypothesize that other changes to the world may have killed these ancient beasts long ago. Perhaps a cataclysmic volcanic eruption. But does anypony notice something else?" He gestured towards the horizontal bands of stone higher up the rock face with his hoof. I stared but didn't see anything standing out. Certainly no other fossils like the others I'd seen. Just the glimmer of gems studding the rock face in little clusters.

“Boring…” muttered Trueblood.

Then Stygius flew up and tapped a ruby with a hoof. Goldenblood nodded in approval. “Excellent. That’s exactly it. Above this stratum of rock, gemstones appear all across Equestria, yet beneath it there is virtually nothing we’d call a gemstone.” We all looked at him in confusion. He floated his hammer up to the batpony, who took it in his mouth and knocked the gemstone free. I caught it as it fell and levitated it over to the gold-maned unicorn as Stygius dropped down beside me. “Gemstones like this are uncommon anywhere else in the world. Notice its facets? How clear and flawless it is? We see so many bright and sparkly gems like this across Equestria that they’re mundane and common. Indeed, we cultivate them inside stones. However, if you were to go to another part of the world…” He pulled an ugly reddish-brown stone embedded inside a rock from his saddlebag. “This is a ruby.”

“Um…I’m sorry Professor, but that can’t be right. That’s a ruby,” I said as I pointed at the glimmering gemstone. Everypony nodded in agreement.

Goldenblood chuckled, “I assure you, this is a ruby. Same hardness. Same crystals. Cut and polished, it would look the same. Yet it would have absolutely no inherent magical energy whatsoever. Also, any gemstones below this impact stratum would be equally mundane and unmagical. This is the conundrum. How is it that we go from ordinary, dirty, unmagical crystals before the event to countless gemstones afterwards? And why are these gems so abundant here, but scarcer and scarcer the further one gets from Equestria?”

The pale unicorn poorly hid his smug expression, and P-21 shared a look with me and Glory before he rolled his eyes and said with not so veiled sarcasm, “Gee, Professor. Do *you* have a theory?” Rampage snorted and even Glory fought a smile.

Goldenblood smirked back at P-21 and said, with a touch of singed pride, “Well, since you’re *so* curious, I guess I can share mine with you.” He looked up at the gems studding the cliff face. “I suspect that when the meteorite struck, so many creatures died so suddenly that the release of all that life energy condensed in the gemstones that are abundant in our land. We see a similar phenomenon occur when potent magical beings, like ancient dragons, die.”

“Is there going to be a test on this, Professor?” Trueblood asked, rolling his eyes. “I didn’t think rock hunters’ club had marks.”

"Just because you've got rocks in your head doesn't mean that the rest of us aren't interested! Right?" Glory asked eagerly as she turned to the rest of us. Boo tilted her head and looked up at her as she chewed on her tail, P-21 gave a shrug, Rampage scratched her head, and Stygius was checking out my rump. Glory drooped in the air. "Well *I'm* interested."

"It's alright," Goldenblood said as he looked at the students hunting for fossils and then turned back to me. "It looks like Pumpkin and Pound have wandered off again. Can you see if you can find them, Dear? They're probably further back along the canyon. Tell them we have perfectly fine fossils for them to pick here." He looked back at the rest of the colts and fillies working on the stone face. "I'll keep an eye on everypony else here."

I trotted away with all due diligence and speed, calling out their names as I picked my way through the canyon that arced along the edge of Littlehorn Valley. Seen from far above, it would have created an image of an immense crescent moon. The river slowed as the canyon widened. While the terrain was rough and wild, unicorns had already put their horns into shaping the stone and molding footpaths, slowly but surely transforming the canyon into an immense garden. Where earth ponies would cultivate the land and pegasi would simply ignore it, unicorns simply had to shape the land to their whims.

What would zebras have done with the canyon and the valley? Would they have molded the dark stone into delicate yet sturdy bridges? Tended to the land so that it was lush and green as possible? Or just ignored it? Professor Goldenblood said that the zebras built beautiful and exotic cities while leaving the wilderness wild, but it was difficult to imagine an entire world that was left like the Everfree Forest.

I came around the bend and could see the school built into the side of the cliff face. In less than six months, with magic from the Princess herself, Luna's Academy for Young Unicorns had been erected. A round curtain wall topped with elaborate towers rose beside a lake in the widest section of the valley. Diamonds enchanted to twinkle like stars would illuminate it once night fell. Built into the wall of the canyon in brilliant black marble was a palace unlike any other outside Canterlot. The structure rose higher and higher till a final black spire soared above the lip of the canyon and into the air over the valley.

“Ma’am?” came a voice from above. I looked up to see Pound Cake fluttering overhead. He looked worried. Not panicked like something bad had happened, but definitely not his usual pugnacious behavior. His brown eyes turned towards a cave in the cliff wall where Pumpkin Cake sat, chewing on a hoof nervously. I trotted my way towards the cave, one of the larger ones I knew of. The canyon was full of little nooks and hidey holes. “We found something… ”

I trotted to the cave and conjured a tiny star of light. I looked at the tan unicorn and asked in a cautious voice, “What is--”

Zebras. I knew that zebras were supposed to be terrible, deadly enemies. What I saw inside, though, were not the fiends we read about in the newspaper but filthy, terrified, and above all hungry people clustered together and wearing rags. A half dozen had rifles, but it was all they could do to remain upright. Many looked too weak to even stand. The reek was abominable, and I balked for several moments before I took a step forward. “Hello?”

They shrank back fearfully from one unicorn mare and two young ponies. An elderly stallion dressed in a filthy rag slowly moved to the front of the crowd as they shrank back. One eye was covered by a bandage, and he had more rags covering other injuries. He turned and addressed the others quickly, then turned back to me. “No hurt, pony. No hurt.”

Was he saying he didn’t want me to hurt them, or that he wasn’t going to hurt me? “No hurt. Good!” I smiled widely, backing off a few steps; indeed, the reek coming off him made that easy. He seemed to relax a little as the sickly, starving zebras talked to each other in their strange language. I took in how wretched they were and though how wrong it was given that the school was well stocked and could feed ten times their number. “Food? Help?” I asked as I pointed back in the direction of the school.

I knew we were at war with the zebras, but these people weren’t in any condition to be at war with anypony. A few that wore filthy cloaks and stared at me coldly gave me the shivers, but could I really blame them? The chief looked at me and then at the starving zebras. “Safe…” he drawled slowly, pointing at the cave. Then he firmly shook his head as he pointed past me. “No safe! Curse!”

“Please. Let me help,” I begged. If I left and got food, they might flee to another cave, or worse, try to leave the valley. “We won’t hurt you.” I slowly backed away, Pound Cake and Pumpkin Cake

coming to flank me. Slowly, the mass of zebras began to move towards the exit. As I continued to move, more and more came out. Where I'd thought there'd been only a dozen or so, in the end I was staring at nearly a hundred filthy and scared zebras. Clearly they didn't like this, but starvation was a powerful motivator for them to trust me.

They moved with grace and care, despite their weakened condition. Some even had wagons of a sort, exotic balanced bisected vehicles with one large wheel in the middle that easily crossed the bumpy terrain. Many more young, old, and sick were loaded on these strange wagons. Other larger two- and four-wheeled varieties carried what meager supplies they had. Most looked fearful, but as they talked to each other in their strange tongue, I hoped my entreaties of 'Food' and 'Safe' were making it across the language barrier.

I sent Pound Cake ahead to the school to tell the dean that we'd found zebras who needed help. With food and help…who knew? Maybe this might be something that they could use to end the fighting! The war wasn't worth it if it hurt anypony like this.

The front gates of the academy stood wide; there wasn't really any need for them to be closed. The war was as far from Littlehorn as one could get, and the lone old guardsmare just took in the sight of me and a unicorn filly leading in a filthy, starving horde with disbelief. Then she turned tail and scampered inside. Alarm bells started to ring, and the students began to mill about; nopony was exactly sure what to do when the alarms went off. They watched from windows and doorways in nervous anticipation. The zebras were equally terrified as they looked around at the school.

The school dean, a sour-looking yellow stallion with a gray curly mane, poked his head out the front door of the building in terror. His horn glowed a moment, then his voice boomed across the central yard. "Release your hostages immediately and depart! This school is well defended!" From the tops of the towers along the curtain wall, diamond points began to glow an ominous blue. "This is your last warning!"

"Wait! Wait!" I screamed as I raced forward and stopped before the front door. Pumpkin Cake stood beside me, and Pound Cake zoomed out of a window to stand beside his sister as well. "They're not attacking us! They need our help!"

"I tried telling them that!" Pound Cake shouted, waving at the dean

in frustration. “He heard the word ‘zebra’ and went stupid!”

“Help?” The dean gaped at me in shock. “Are you…did you lead them here?! Are you out of your little pony minds!?”

“They’re starving and sick! They can’t hurt anypony,” I said as I stood between the doors and the clusters of wagons and zebras.

“They’ve got a gun!” somepony shrieked. “Fire! Fire!”

“No! Stop! We need to help them!” I yelled as the Cake twins waved their hooves as well.

“Please, don’t shoot!” Pound Cake begged.

“They won’t hurt us!” Pumpkin Cake yelled.

“Depart at once! This is your final warning!” The dean’s panicked voice boomed over the yard as the zebras started to break apart. Somepony, however, had closed the gates too late, and now the refugees were trapped within the curtain wall with nowhere to flee. The zebras began to cry out as the diamond spires glowed brighter and brighter.

Then a shot rang out.

“No!” I screamed as I turned and looked at the zebras I’d wanted so badly to help.

The spires discharged. Blue-white lines flashed out from the tips of six towers and flashed across the clustered zebras. Whatever they touched simply vaporized. I’d never actually seen magic like this at work; in fact, I doubted anypony at our school knew exactly how the defenses worked. We’d never imagined what they could actually *do*…

A second, and they were being cut to pieces. And it was all my fault. I couldn’t think. I could only move, and that was in the direction of the wagons that were sliced to pieces by the dancing blue beams. It was the only way I could imagine getting the beams to stop. At the very least, I would die beside the zebras I’d foolishly led to their deaths.

“Stop! Stop firing!” the dean stammered as I reached the screaming zebras. I found the old zebra with the one eye lying in two pieces and collapsed in front of him. We may not have understood their language, but screams like that didn’t need language to get their meaning across. Young zebras with sliced-off legs were held by desperate parents ignoring their own wounds to tie off spurting stumps. Others cradled loved ones killed under the promise of food and help.

Pumpkin Cake and Pound Cake, to my astonishment and relief,

rushed to help me. Despite the blood and smell and screams, those two young ponies raced forward to help with the injured. Pound lifted splintered chunks of wagon from their trapped occupants while Pumpkin worked to tie off injured zebras' stumps with whatever she could find.

Singularly…then in pairs…then in a swarm…the students and faculty rushed out to assist as well. Healing spells were immediately applied as the school tried to undo what it had done. Half the zebras were dead, and virtually all of them were wounded in some way or another. And once the bleeding was stopped, they started to bring out food and drink.

I sat there, blood smearing my hide, emotionally and physically exhausted. Then I became aware of the dean standing over me. Pumpkin Cake and Pound Cake stood behind him, both looking positively grimy. "Well…I hope you're proud of yourselves. I don't know what Princess Luna will make of this incident when she returns from Canterlot, but you three are going straight to Celestia while I try and deal with this mess."

"What? Celestia?" I muttered weakly. A pegasus hooked to a skywagon on the edge of the campus looked on warily at the slaughter. "Now? Couldn't we at least wash the blood off? Take some of the injured with us?"

"Yes, now! This instant!" he shrieked. "I'll make it clear that this fiasco was your fault. I'll leave you to explain to the Princess what madness drove you to be so…so ridiculously reckless!" He snorted and stomped, then turned to some of the other faculty. "No! Don't let them inside! Uggh! Keep them out here! Honestly!" he said as she trotted out where the faculty was trying the help the injured survivors. "Oh, Luna is going to be absolutely furious when she returns tonight!"

"Come on, ma'am," the blue pegasus buck said in a low, deep voice. "It's a long way back to Canterlot." I gathered up Pumpkin Cake with a feeling of dread in my heart. I wouldn't even have a chance to tell the professor what I'd done. A minute later we were airborne, leaving the school behind us. "Well, I never thought I'd see it," the buck muttered.

"I'm sorry…I just... " I said as I shivered. "I wanted to help them."

"Sorry?" The blue pegasus looked over his shoulder back at me with a wry smile. "Girl, you don't got nothing to be sorry for. Young unicorn mare like yourself helpin' refugees like that…jumpin' in to

stop the firing? Getting the whole damn school to help, regardless of what that damned nag said? Girl, I think when Princess Celestia hears about this, and word gets back to the zebras, the war will be over. Y'all might have just saved Equestria." The feeling of dread lifted as we soared higher and higher into the clouds.

~ ~ ~

I felt wetness on my cheek, then blinked awake. I'd drooled all over my pillow in my sleep, and now it was soaked. I self-consciously wiped my own spittle off with a smooth metal hoof. Huh…no mare in black senselessly butchering ponies…no horrible dreams of my stable or getting ploughed on the *Seahorse*. It was almost anticlimactic. I turned the pillow over to the dry side and rolled onto my back, looking at the flowers and birds painted on the ceiling. The details of the dream I'd had were slipping away. Something about an academy and some zebras and Goldenblood being a teacher there.

My head was…better. The radroach in my skull was gone, and while I wasn't quite at a hundred percent, I was a lot closer to it than I'd been in a long time. I rubbed my face carefully with my forelegs and then slowly sat up. I cautiously activated my E.F.S. and looked around till I found a single blue bar…along with a sea of red bars on the other side of the door. Too much to hope that the killer robots with nothing else to do would have gotten bored and left, I guessed. I cancelled the E.F.S. and sighed as I sat up on the couch.

Now. What to do about him?

On one hoof, he was handsome and fit. He hadn't tried to force himself on me, but he was keenly interested. On another, I had no idea who he really was or what he really wanted. I couldn't treat him as a Stable 99 stallion and just rut him because I wanted to. Besides, even if he had been relatively gallant since we'd met, he might still have an ulterior motive. On another, it would be nice to get a little play. It'd been so long since Tenpony, and since my last decent buck -- U-18, five months ago -- that a pony ride sounded nice. But still, on the other other rear hoof, I really wasn't sure if I should wait till I was with Glory or not. Though as fun and wonderful and dear as she was, she wasn't a stallion. There just wasn't any getting around that.

And on a metaphorical fifth hoof, there was that part of me

screaming to kill him before he nailed me to the floor and fucked my orifices in alphabetical order.

"Ugh, I need less hooves," I groaned, shaking my head.

A door opened and I looked over to see Stygius, armor off--what was it about the physique of flyers?--trotting out of the library a fold of papers under his wing. He sat beside the couch and held up his slate. 'Sleep well?' had been written on it.

"You know what's crazy? I actually did," I said as I rolled forward onto my hooves, standing upright and stretching my legs. Okay, technically there weren't very many muscles in them to stretch, but the motion was refreshingly familiar. "It's pretty sad when a decent nap stands out so much. How long was I out?"

He stomped his hoof five times. I sure hoped that that wasn't in minutes. "And what have you been doing?"

He folded his forelegs beside his head and mimicked napping. Then he reached under his wing and pulled out the stack of papers. I took it from him with my magic and unfolded them, reading what he'd written.

You asked where batponies come from. We don't know. We have stories that once we were pegasus ponies who lived in the clouds. Then terrible storm monster came and wrecked home. We hid in deep cave and were trapped. For long time we live eating magic mushrooms and cave things. We become batponies or…

And here I broke off for a moment and just stared at the paper. νυχτερίδ πόνυ? What *alphabet* was that?

… and live and grow in caves. When we finally escape, bright sun hurt eyes and other pony think we were monsters! But moon and stars are bright and make us happy. We met Luna long ago and she lonely and we lonely and so we say we help her. Then she became NiteMar Nightmaer Moon! But shes nicer than dayponies so we try and help. She lose, and many batponies die. With no Nightmare Moon, many many batponies were killed and we hid back in caves. Luna came back from the moon so we sent our strongest to be her guard, but keep families hidden away. Canterlot went boom. Luna died. And we go back to cave. Sometimes think mistake ever leave cave in first place…

Other story…Nightmare Moon and Luna made us into Batponies with magic. Turn pegasus pony into batpony. Not know what she did with unicorns and earth ponies. Maybe only need batponies? Dunno. Now we live in caves and fly out at night. Hard to meet pretty mare who isnt family in caves. Very hard. Soooooooooooo hard. Sister think I am

dumb for following you cause your pretty but you are with your shiny legs and tight flank and striped mane and your eyes glow and your…

Okay, now he was getting a little explicit. I didn't see much else beneath that beyond him trying to tell me how beautiful I was. He'd sketched a couple of pictures of caves, some of batponies, and one of me. At least, I thought it was me; I really doubted my horn had magic sparkles dancing around it or that I had a full moon aura surrounding me.

I couldn't help but smile. Back in 99, I'd been a lot like him: always chasing after Midnight or some other mare that I thought I could have some fun with. I'd never been the one pursued by another. I always assumed I was simply too much of a screwup to be worth the trouble. Plus there was Mom, head of security, and all the awkwardness that generated. How bizarre that the first buck I'd ever attract was some strange batpony, but honestly, given all the things that had happened to me since getting out of 99, I supposed I should have been grateful he wasn't a cyber-ghoul-batpony with a mysterious agenda.

"You're sweet," I said, and I actually giggled as he seemed to float with his ear to ear grin. I flushed a little. "But you know…if we did it…it would only be a thing. I have a very special somepony, and I don't think I get two."

He looked a bit confused at that. I didn't see why. It wasn't like having sex with him would make her any less my special somepony. I needed Glory in my life; without her, I was so empty inside it hurt. But it wasn't like she'd be the only source of orgasms. I wasn't the only security mare in 99 that polished the old baton when their marefriend was unavailable. Not that I'd actually *had* a marefriend in 99.

"You also know what happened to me," I murmured as I looked out the window towards the distant river to the west. "I... I really don't want to hurt you, Stygius. I mean it. You're nice to me…and I have to admit, you've really been on my mind since we met…but I don't want to snap in the middle and do something permanent to you."

He looked at me in sympathy before he grabbed his slate. 'I can wait,' he wrote.

I smiled and sighed as I rolled my eyes a little. "Yeah. But I'm not sure I'll be able to." If I didn't get over this…or at least prove I could have some sort of normal physical relationship with a stallion…then those males who'd violated me would have won. I

thought how bowel-loosening that ship in the Happyhorn simulation had been, felt the shame that I'd been unable to face it. They'd changed me from who I was. My time in Happyhorn had injected weeks of imaginary time into my consciousness, but imaginary or not, I still remembered those weeks of extra time between me and the boat. That time hadn't stopped me from balking there near the end, and nor had it stopped the memory from creeping around in my mind like a suspicious beast.

I knew what I needed to do. It was just…weird.

And Stygius trotted to a window and wrapped the curtain's drawstring around his forehooves, tugging it tight and looking back at me with a grin. I stared at him a moment and then burst out laughing. It made his ears wilt a bit, but I shook my head with a wide smile. "No! No no no no…" I repeated. "That's more…my thing, actually. At least with Glory." Wow, that sure made his eyebrows arch. "If I do it, I need to do it normally." Or as normally as sex between a cyberpony and a batpony could be. I trotted over to him and magically undid the string around his legs. "But thank you…"

His amber eyes were bright and round as he blushed and sweated nervously. If he was plotting some horrible fate for me, then he was one damned good actor. "You're a good pony," I murmured as I looked into his wide eyes. "I'm going to kiss you now. Okay?"

He gulped as if I'd just promised to shoot him, then clenched his eyes shut and puckered his lips ridiculously. I smiled and lifted my hooves and held his head gently, extending my fingers to hold him still as I brought my mouth towards his.

Then my fingers tightened, my legs jerked, and a resounding snap filled the air.

NO! I stomped on that image and impulse with all the force I could. I wasn't a landmine that would go off. I could do this because I wanted to! I was in control of me. I was…

Please be in control…

He opened his eyes, blinking and frowning in concern as I sniffed and shed a few tears. "Sorry," I murmured awkwardly and he gave a sigh and a resigned smile. He'd said he could wait, and he would.

But he wouldn't have to.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. He was so shocked that he simply let me, kissing back as he could. He had such soft lips and a nicely sweet mouth. The kind I could kiss all day.

Too bad I lasted about a minute before I slowly pulled away. I was in control, but I didn't want to push that control too far just yet. Then I blinked at his googly-eyed expression as a slow, almost drunk smile crossed his face. I let him go gently, and he slumped to the floor. "Was that your first kiss?" I asked, a touch concerned. He started to nod and then stopped and touched the side of his face... where I'd laid him flat. Oh, right. I grinned sheepishly, "I mean, the first kiss where you weren't hit immediately afterwards?" He smiled and nodded as he swayed there. I couldn't help myself. I gave him one more firm smooch, and that finished him off. He playfully flopped over completely and lay there as a dusky lump of goofiness.

I smiled and patted his shoulder. Then I trotted for the stairs; we hadn't checked the second floor rooms yet. I got up them and into a bathroom and was closing the door as it hit me. My legs couldn't shake, my heart couldn't race, and my breathing wouldn't gasp, but I could at least sink to the floor next to the toilet and cry as something snapped inside me. It wasn't painful. Quite the opposite. I pressed my face into a fuzzy pink floor mat as that hideous, suspicious beast inside me roared in pain from the wound inflicted by a simple kiss. My tears were of relief. I'd kissed him and not killed him. He'd liked it…liked *me*.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt like Blackjack the mare. Maybe a little wiser, but still Blackjack. Not Blackjack the cyberpony nor Security the madmare of Hoofington. Just Blackjack. Who knew a little normalcy could feel so good?

When I'd recomposed myself, I wiped my eyes and took the opportunity to use the facilities. Functional plumbing and a flushing toilet: another miracle in the wastes. Then I stepped out and saw Stygius coming up the stairs. As soon as he saw me, he immediately smiled, but a touch of concern lingered in his eyes. 'U ok?' he wrote on the slate.

"Yeah. Just not used to it," I said as I stood and looked at the other three doors up here. If I was lucky, I'd find a flicker or something that would help me refocus my mind. I opened the first, looking at a bedroom. Like the rooms downstairs, everything was neat and tidy and gave no impression at all that anypony actually used it. One wall was covered by four tall transparent display cases, each one with a dozen different rocks inside individual glass compartments. There was a little tag beside each of the samples.

Gold nugget, Flankorage River. Purple Fluorite, Las Pegasus. Amber,

Stalliongrad. Silver ore, Fancee. There were more unusual names that I guessed were from faraway lands. The crystals weren't like the standard magic jewels I was familiar with. In fact, while there was a selection of magical gems, most of them were strange and exotic-looking. Some were delicate needle-like crystal spires and strange purple cubes that peppered the surfaces of stones. Others were simple rocks, like granite and marble, that I was more familiar with. One section had a dozen different types of ore all arranged alphabetically.

Fossil, Crescent Moon Canyon.

I slowly opened the case and levitated the horn-sized stone out, then turned it over in front of me. The small spiral shell resembled an extremely old tan cookie. I sighed and put it in my saddlebag. Beside it was another curious rock, a flake of silvery metal. *Starmetal, Hoofington*. And right beside that was a strangely glowing milky white crystal. *Moonstone, Moon.* As amazing as that was, it didn't distract me from something else I found very curious.

The glass wall between the two had melted. I opened the door to the case and pried loose the silvery flake and the pale stone. I'd seen these two together before... only they'd been separated by a layer of Flux rather than simple glass. I looked over at Stygius. "Stand back. I think this is gonna do something." I dropped the stone and flake from my hands into my telekinesis, closed my eyes, and carefully brought the two closer together. As I did so, the metal began to glow and the crystal to glow brighter, and instantly my PipBuck began detecting magical radiation pouring from the two. Stygius backed away with me. We stepped out onto the balcony walkway overlooking the great room and closed the door almost completely shut. I peeked through the gap at the two floating rocks.

Holding the two at the furthest distance inside the room I could manage, I forced them together.

The flash and explosion rattled the house, though clearly the building had been built from magically-reinforced materials. The detonation blasted the door right into my face, and only my hastily raised cyberlegs kept the wood from taking my head off completely. The force blasted Stygius into the air as I fell back and nearly crashed right through the balcony railing, chunks of door flying out over me and tumbling down into the room below as I lay there on my back. I had no idea that my radmeter could even click that fast, though the rate was decreasing quickly. Okay, that was a little

toastier than usual. When I looked back towards the empty doorframe, I saw cracks spiderwebbed through the walls around it.

"Ow…That was really stupid!" I muttered as I slowly sat up, rubbing my head. I pulled out a pouch of RadAway for each of us, smirking around mine at Stygius's disgusted expression as he drank his, then stepped back inside, looking at the shattered cases and the rocks strewn across the floor. The bed was smoking, and the floor was blackened below where I'd squeezed them together. Embedded in one wall was the moonstone. Embedded in the opposite was the flake of starmetal, still giving off smoke.

I trotted towards the flake's impact dent and looked at the smoking bit of metal. No, not just smoking. It was melting away before my eyes, shrinking as it made a long, low screaming noise. Glowing white smoke curled up from it as it slowly vanished and that smoke condensed into tiny white motes of light. They were exactly like the motes in the zebra ruins. I saw them disappearing one by one and lunged forward to touch one with my horn--

oooOOOooo

The unicorn mare I occupied walked carefully up towards the dark cottage on the hillside overlooking the pouring river and knocked her hoof on the front door. "Princess Luna?" she called out in worry. Then she knocked again, then finally used her magic to open the door. The interior was pitch black. "Princess Luna?" she called in a weaker voice. The light of her horn reflected off countless polished silver stars set in the walls and ceiling. A strange, ominous note rose up from the basement, and she hesitated a moment at the door. "P…princess?"

The basement door was blown open by a dark wind that scooped the mare up and carried her down the steps into the earth, dumping her in a heap behind the glorious dark princess. A work table was set up in the middle of the subterranean room. Strange and exotic zebra statues loomed on like silent mentors examining their student's work. Hammers and tongs lay tossed aside next to a cold forge. She shaped the metal with her magic alone. "YES!?" she boomed as the silvery steel twisted in the air before her.

The force of her voice nearly knocked my host over. "P…Princess? Thy…thy sister…she sent us to find thee. She hath been forced to raise both sun and the moon for three days and nights." The

Princess flinched at the word ‘sister’. The hum grew stronger, and the shadows cast by the pale light of her horn moved unnaturally, as though they were peering at us.

“SO! IT TAKETH HER THREE DAYS FOR TO SEEK ME. And she didn’t come herself. Surprise surprise,” the Princess said, her boom dying to a normal voice as her horn glowed, that oppressive hum filling the air.

“Princess? Art thou well?” the unicorn asked in fear.

“Nay, we are not!” she said with a stomp of her hoof as her head fell. “She doesn’t need us. Nopony does.” Her eyes glared at the metal as it finished shaping into a helmet. “Well, if she can raise the sun and the moon, why can’t we? Why can’t we do both just as well as she can?” she demanded as she whirled, facing me as tears ran down her cheeks. “We don’t need her. WE can do it all ourself!”

“Princess!” the unicorn gasped, backing away.

“NAY!” she said as she magically put the pieces of armor in place. She seemed to swell and grow darker. It was as if she were drinking in that horrible humming scream all at once. Her starry mane grew cold and hard. Her coat turned black as pitch. “WE ARE A PRINCESS NO LONGER! WE HAVE NO SISTER! IF PONYKIND HATES AND FEARS US, THEN LET THEM HAVE OUR NIGHT IN WRATH INSTEAD OF BEAUTY!”

And with that she exploded into a cloud of darkness, and everything went black. Beneath it all, the hum persisted in its steady, proud drone….

oooOOOooo

I lurched and shook my head hard. Whoa…that was…interesting. I rubbed my bleary eyes, trying to pull my head into the here and now. I remembered the terrifying statue of Nightmare Moon that’d been in the Hoofington Museum, but that statue had been cute compared to what I’d seen just now. The sight of Luna transforming into that dark shape made me shiver from horn to…shoulder. Really, it’d be nice if I could get some nice goosebumps going.

In a minute the starmetal had disappeared entirely, the white wisps and flickering motes being drawn westward out the cracked window and fading away from sight. I saw the little bots buzzing about on the far side, but it hadn’t broken. Stygius flew to the other side of the room and dug at the wall, popped the moonstone free,

picked it up in his mouth, and carried it to me. I looked it over closely. Unlike the metal flake, the moonstone was intact. Only a small indentation had been made in it where I'd forced the two together. "Whoa…" I murmured as I looked at the faintly glowing white stone.

He nodded, and I carefully put the crystal away in my saddlebags. I wondered what had happened to the moonstone that'd been extracted from the Folly shell. I supposed it was somewhere in the muck at the bottom of the bay underneath the HMS *Celestia*. It hadn't been among the things I'd gotten back in Tenpony.

Ugh, I came here for answers. Not more questions! Really, wasn't there a quota on mysteries? Huffing in annoyance, I moved to the second door. Knowing my luck, there'd be something horribly vague and terribly nagging that'd go completely over my head. I sighed and looked back at Stygius. He had my back... well, he at least definitely had my backside in his sights. Then his eyes met mine and he flushed, coughing self-consciously as he looked away. Still, I couldn't help smiling.

The door creaked open slowly and a stale, lonely smell rolled out over us. I saw the crib in the corner decorated with butterflies and birds. Gems dangled from a mobile above it. Stuffed animals sat in dusty vigil atop a dresser while toys peeked out of a dusty trailer. There were still diapers stacked up on the underside of a changing table next to the door. I gazed in at a room never used... never even entered, from the dust on the wooden floors. Slowly, I pulled the door closed once more.

There was no mystery after all, and for once I wished there had been.

I made my way into the last room, a bedroom decorated in the twined hard/soft motif of nature and metal. Like all the rest of the house, it'd been cleaned and tidied up and all but abandoned. Indeed, unlike the library, there were no pictures of any kind in here. No clothes. No personal items. Nothing that suggested that a pony named Goldenblood had lived in here. It was nearly anonymous.

I trotted to the bed and pushed down on the mattress. I had to give Goldenblood credit; he definitely had good taste in bedding. I pressed down with my forehooves and felt it give. I looked over my shoulder at Stygius hard at work looking through the dressers. My eyes wandered along his mane, his exotic wings, and his tail. I

didn't know if it was a flyer thing or not, but there was just *something* about his form that made my eye wander from the gothic black shield on his flank down the backs of his legs and up the front.

So, could I do this? Should I?

I groaned and pressed my face into the bed. I just couldn't decide; there were plenty of reasons to and plenty of reasons not to. I didn't want to be defined by what those bucks had done to me on the boat. I didn't want to be defined by that. Didn't want to be a victim. I also didn't want to be set off by any buck that brushed my ass. If I was going to thump a guy like Candlewick, I wanted it to be my choice, not my reaction. But I was also scared to death that if I tried anything, I'd kill another pony who didn't deserve to die by my hooves.

He buried his head into one of Fluttershy's dressers, or, at least, I assumed they were hers from the butterflies carved in the woodwork. I smiled as I watched him over my shoulder... and then I slid my saddlebags to the floor and a moment later sent my combat armor to join them. Please, Luna and Celestia, please let this go right. "Hey…" I croaked, then coughed, and smiled again. "Hey, Stygius…" He pulled his head out of the dresser, a glowing golden memory orb in his mouth. He looked at me stretched half on the bed, his eyes drawn to my posterior. Then I gave my tail a little swish and watched as his eyes popped round. I swished a little bit more, and the memory orb fell from his mouth and rolled slowly along the floor. I picked it up and floated it down onto the nightstand. He slowly approached, looking torn between eagerness and concern.

He lowered his mouth to his chalkboard and wrote briefly, not taking his eyes off my swaying tail. 'U sure?'

"Yeah. I am. If you're still interested?" I asked, half hoping he'd changed his mind. But he swallowed and nodded. I closed my eyes and bowed my head. "You know what happened to me, though…so, if I tell you to stop…please stop. Okay? For both our sakes."

He approached till he was right behind me, then wrote something else as he blushed profusely. 'Virgin', it read, and he smiled sheepishly.

"Well…you can start by touching me," I murmured softly as I closed my eyes. Don't kill him…don't kill him. I want this. I really do.

Then I felt his lips on my cutie mark. His muzzle nuzzling my hide. And never, ever, have I been more thankful for having skin. I felt my body twitch in response, and I smiled as that reactive fear remained at bay. I felt his breath on my hide, his hooves touching me in vaguely reassuring ways. He was taking his time, and I didn't rush him. I needed the time too. Then he moved back further and dared to move beneath my tail.

It was an interesting touch, nothing at all like Glory's. She was soft; she knew what to stroke and what to avoid. His was firmer and heavier than hers. His lips more hesitant, his mouth stronger. My mind reduced to two thoughts: 'Oh yes', which I expressed in a delighted groan, and 'Don't kill him'. I was in control…and with every minute I felt better and better as he helped me feel like a mare…like a pony. Damn me if I didn't understand Deus now. When you were half machine, you needed something, anything, to remind you that you were also flesh and blood.

Very flesh. Very blood.

And when he entered me, it was all I could to keep myself together. My legs could remember the feeling of the nails, my nethers and throat the burning pain and humiliation. This wasn't that. He wasn't them. I was safe. I was in control of myself. And while every second a part of me screamed to get him out before he started hurting me, to rip and tear and kill…I suppressed it. I refused to allow it to set me off as he pressed above me and moved inside me. He huffed as he increased speed and I tensed. He slowed, and I relaxed.

Before too long he made a series of squeaks and I felt hot wetness inside me. Of course, I was nowhere near climaxing myself, but that wasn't the point. This was about me being able to do this and put what'd been done to me behind me. And as he squirted, I had one more fierce impulse to rip the invading member off. Then his lips met my ears and neck and like that, the impulse was gone. I'd been ploughed badly, but none of them had shown the slightest affection.

I finally collapsed on the bed as he withdrew, an oddly depressing sensation. I crawled the rest of the way onto it, and he moved beside me, his brows furrowing and his eyes concerned. He reached for the chalkboard and wrote 'Good?', holding it between his hooves as he looked at me.

Poor buck deserved better than me hugging him fiercely and sobbing as that murderous impulse broke apart and flowed out my

eyes. “Really good, Styggie. Really…really really good…” I blubbered as I curled up against him and let him hold me and curl his wings about me. He might have looked completely confused and worried, but right now he knew exactly what I needed.

When I finally pulled myself together and wiped my nose and eyes, he kissed my horn and then started to pull away. I reached out with my magic for a very specific part of him and froze him in his tracks. “Where do you think you’re going?” I asked with a tiny smile. His eyes grew wide again as I gave a careful tug and leaned forward to kiss him again. “We’ve only just started…”

* * *

I. Liked. Stallions. I liked mares too, but right now, curled up with Stygius on the bed, I had to admit that I liked the boys every bit as much as I liked the girls. I pressed my nose to his chest, taking in his musky, sweaty scent as I felt his heart beating. He’d lasted three rounds and now snoozed next to me. I didn’t want to pull away, and for now my itch had been scratched. I’d actually worked up a sweat of my own; even with the metal and synthetic organs, I’d still made quite a workout of it. I probably could have kept going for hours, but why ruin a good time by forcing him to draw it out?

I’m gonna need another bath, I thought, feeling things drying on my hide. Oh well. Showers later. Stygius was smiling in his daze; he’d been good. Not spectacular, but for his first time, he’d definitely put up a good show. I’d even popped once our last round, to my own delight and surprise. I doubted we’d have time for a fourth; we couldn’t stay locked up here forever rutting... Okay, for the Wasteland that actually sounded damn inviting, but still! I felt… good. It was something I hadn’t felt in a long time. Good. Not drunk. Not exhausted. Not crazy.

Okay, I felt guilty. I didn’t deserve to feel this way…but aside from that lingering urge to kick myself on general principle for what I’d done after Yellow River…and at Yellow River…and every other messed up thing I’d done…I felt damn nice to be held like this. The next time I was with Glory, I would do all I could to make her feel this way.

So…move and wake him…and be tempted into a fourth round…or just rest here? My eyes went to the memory orb on the nightstand beside us. Mmmm…well…it would pass the time nicely. I floated it

over and touched my horn to it with a lazy smile. My horn flared and flickered as I worked to make the connection. Come on... get in there... I can't spend all day just lying around on Goldenblood and Fluttershy's be--

oooOOOooo

The rain poured down, a heavy, persistent torrent that could only come from Hoofington's skies. Sometimes I wondered if the sky had some vendetta against the city, doing all it could to drown it and cut off the sun and moon even before the Enclave arose. The pony I was in was a familiar unicorn stallion standing out in the rainy night and looking at a mare isolated in the yellow light of a single streetlamp. She wore a trenchcoat that covered her from head to hoof, and her long black mane hung across her shadowed face from under a dripping cap. All around us were dark trees, and in the distance I could see through the rain the towering city lights of the Core.

Something snapped beneath my hoof, and she squealed as she spun around. "Who's there?" she whispered timidly. There was no answer in the pouring rain. She trembled, hanging her head once more as my host slowly moved closer. The steps he took were slow and tired. She shrank back a little, then cleared her throat. "H… hello? Um…Um…Umgabe bwanka T…T…"

"Trito. 'May peace favor us all'," the stallion murmured softly, barely audible over the pouring rain. "You have the package?"

"Yes!" she said as she turned away and dug a heavy-looking parcel wrapped in tape from her saddlebags. "You have no idea how hard I've worked to get this to you!" she said as she hugged it in her hooves like it was a precious baby. The stallion in the rain didn't reply. "H... h…here! Take it! It's all our notes! Everything you need. Please. I've worked so very hard…"

The male stayed silent. He simply stood there outside the patch of light.

Then he rasped in that unmistakable voice, "I know. First you tried contacting a zebra envoy directly; she met a tragic end with a grenade slipped into her saddlebags. Then you used Nurse Blossomforth to try and get it to a POW who was being sent back to zebra lands in a prisoner exchange. Of course, Blossomforth was a M.o.M. agent, but fortunately she met a bad end with a memory

modification spell before she could report in to Pinkie and Luna. You made several subtle overtures to members of the zebra government, all which were rebuffed. So then you arranged a meeting with a member of a zebra sympathizer terrorist cell. At this moment, they're being raided. Your contact will be killed in the firefight. There's no way to extract memories from a dead pony." Her hat glowed gold and lifted off her head; at once the pouring rain began to wash the dye out of her mane. "Hello, Fluttershy." Goldenblood stepped into the pool of yellow light. The rain poured down over him, matting his mane to his scarred, pale hide.

"No…no no no…you can't," she whimpered as she clutched the parcel to her chest, turned away as if to shield it from him. "Please…"

He didn't say anything at first. He simply gazed at her with eyes that felt tired. "Why are you doing this, Fluttershy? I would have thought that after Blossomforth was exposed, you'd have given up."

Fluttershy clenched her eyes shut and trembled, sniffling. "I have to. I have to do something. Luna won't use the megaspells to heal ponies. She wants Twilight to turn them into weapons!"

"Something Twilight would never do nor authorize," Goldenblood murmured. "You know this."

"Twilight might think it's wrong, but what would stop somepony else from doing it?" Fluttershy asked.

"If somepony else *does* weaponize your creation, I guarantee that the first demonstration will have zebra observers. They'll see what megaspell weapons do. They'll go home and tell their Caesar to end the war." But even he didn't sound convinced.

"Will they?" Fluttershy asked in return. "Or will we just use the war as an excuse to wipe them out completely?" She gave a heartbroken little sob, then looked at him and asked, "Is the only way for this to end to have everyone die? I won't accept that. I can't! Treason is better than that... " Some of the raindrops on her cheeks looked remarkably like tears. Goldenblood reached out to her, but she flinched away.

"I promised I would never hurt you," he whispered gently in his scarred voice as he withdrew his hoof.

"You broke your promise," she replied, her tone quiet yet unshakably firm. "How could you do that to me? Call…call out her name... " She shivered, and somehow I doubted that it was because of the cold or the wet.

"It was an accident," he replied, but she kept her eyes away. "I know that that didn't make it any easier, Fluttershy. But it's true. When I said her name…I wasn't thinking of doing what we were doing with her."

Fluttershy pressed her lips together firmly, eyes clenched shut. "I don't believe you. All those nights you spent with her. All those times you said you were working with her. Alone…and then you do that?" She shook her head and sniffed, "I was going to have a baby…our baby…" She raised her face to the rain, the tears pouring down her face in black rivulets as more dye slowly washed out. "I was going to be a mommy. A real mommy!"

"I know. And you would have been a spectacular one, Fluttershy." He sighed as he too looked up at the rain, but there were no answers to be found in the falling droplets. "But either way, I'm sorry it's come to this. You need to stop trying to get megaspells to the zebras. They're already sneaking around the M.A.S. looking for information. They don't seem to know it originated with the Ministry of Peace." He sighed and shook his head. "You need to give this up."

"I…I can't…don't you understand?" she begged as she looked up at him. "I went with the others to stop the war! Not fight it. Not to kill. But…but what have I really accomplished? The fighting is still going on! I see soldiers hurt…maimed…dead. I see ponies injured in zebra terrorist attacks. I see zebras being forced to live in Zebratown, and that horrible camp they're making at Yellow River…and I can't seem to do anything to stop it!"

She backed away till she bumped into the pole behind her. "Don't you see? I'm not like Twilight or Rainbow Dash or Rarity…they all want to win! They like being Ministry Mares! Even Pinkie Pie and Applejack are helping to hurt ponies. Did you know that Applejack's cousin made a glass antipersonnel bullet that fragments in the wound? It can take days to get all the pieces out!"

"That's the intention. Tie up their medics with difficult injuries…" Goldenblood murmured, now looking away himself.

"Oh really?" That drew his eyes back to her, and even I was taken aback by the scorn in her gaze. "Do you know what glass bullets actually *do*? The infections?" she asked as she stared at him. "The pieces are almost impossible to detect; they can remain lodged in organs and cause crippling pain. They migrate, tearing holes in tissue as they move! The zebras won't waste time treating injuries

like those. They'll just euthanize their injured and keep fighting all the harder!"

"Fluttershy…we're at war…" he said lamely.

"So that makes it okay?" Fluttershy retorted sharply, starting to pace. "We can use glass bullets. We're at war. We can use airdropped mines that'll blow up any foal that trots along, zebra or pony. We're at war. We can kill…and murder…and maim…and do horrible horrible things…'cause we're at war!" She sat and started to sob, "I hate it. I hate everything about it. And I have to stop it! Even…even if that means giving megaspells to the zebras. If Luna's not good enough to use megaspells to heal battlefields…then maybe the zebras will be better than us!" She finally dropped back to a near whisper. "At least…at least it will help them with dumb glass bullets…"

She just sat there in the rain, head bowed, sobbing. He said nothing. Finally he murmured softly, "I'm sorry, Fluttershy."

She sniffed and drew a ragged breath. "Me too." Finally she straightened. "Well then, let's go."

"Go?"

"To…to Princess Luna…or Pinkie Pie…so they can banish me…or throw me in a dungeon…or…or do the things they do," she murmured as she looked up at him.

He just smiled and shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't have gone through all this trouble if turning you in had ever been an option." He sighed and looked at her. "I love you, Fluttershy. I know you don't believe that, but it's true. Yes, I care for Luna too. But she never had my heart. Only you ever did. Only you ever will."

She stared at him, shaking, before she looked away. "I'm sorry…I…I don't…sorry…"

"I promised," he rasped softly as he turned aside with a small, sad smile. "I promised I would never hurt you, Fluttershy. I'm sorry I made you doubt me…that I said what I did, when I did. But I won't turn you in. I beg you to stop this, though. Zebras can't get their hooves on megaspells. It'll take the war to an entirely new level. Please?"

"I can't. Don't you understand?" she said, desperation creeping into voice. "If I don't do something…I think I'll go crazy. I have to stop it."

"Perhaps…what if I did something? Made some way for you to help prevent ponies from being hurt?" he asked, then sighed. "You

could also take it as a more sincere apology."

"Goldenblood…you don't have to do that."

"I have to do something, Fluttershy. If you keep this up, you're going to go to prison. I couldn't bear to see you in such a place."

"Then help me. Please. If the zebras get their hooves on megaspells, the war will have to stop. If the zebras and ponies both know that battles are pointless, they'll have to negotiate. Right?" she said with a wide, hopeful, and horribly naïve smile. "I can't just…just sit on this. I need to do something too." She smiled slightly. "You can understand?"

"Yes. I do." He stood perfectly still for a few seconds as the rain poured down upon them both. Finally he said, in a voice barely louder than the rain, "You should write to Professor Silver Stripe. Her father is Doctor Propos at the Zebra Academy of Science, and I know she has some means of contacting him clandestinely. He's one of a few back channels I use to keep tabs on what's going on in zebra politics, and he is an outspoken critic of the war. Maybe you two could collaborate on treating the casualties. Try and open up some avenue for peace talks." He looked back at her, his gaze once again firm. "But please…not megaspells. If you keep trying to pass that to the enemy…sooner or later, Pinkie Pie is going to catch you. Or Luna will. I can't protect you then."

"I…thank you," she murmured as she put the parcel back into her bags. He nodded in acknowledgment, and she said softly, "Goldenblood? Do you ever dream that things were different?"

"All the time. But then again, if they were different…would we have ever had what time together we did?" He turned away.

"Goldenblood?" Fluttershy murmured, and he paused, looking back at her over his shoulder. "Please, get out of the rain." I felt his lips curl in a smile, and with a single nod, he trotted away.

oooOOOooo

I jerked out of the memory and looked at the drowsy batpony beside me as my brain processed what I'd experienced. Fluttershy had tried to give megaspells to the zebras to end the war? Had she succeeded and been responsible for the megaspells that burned Equestria, or had the zebras developed those themselves because she'd failed to give them an alternative? I supposed that, either way, it really sucked.

And they'd broken up because he'd called out some other mare's name in bed? It seemed…silly. Who cared who he unloaded with so long as, at the end of the day, he still loved her? Back in 99, I could probably name twenty mares I'd been with offhoof. As long as you were off shift and everypony was happy with the arrangement, why not? Sure, mares could grow close -- though if your fondness for each other impacted your stable duties, there'd be hell to pay -- but I couldn't think of any mare that would want exclusive rights to another mare. The closest I could think of was the Overmare with P-21. That was just…wrong. Selfish…

But then, it wasn't just that he'd been seeing somepony else; he'd called out the other mare's name when with Fluttershy. He had to have been thinking of her, whatever he claimed. Sure, if Glory had done that to me, I would have laughed it off. If it'd been the other way around, I'd have a lot of explaining and apologizing to do, but it wouldn't have been the end of the world. But Fluttershy did seem like the oversensitive sort. It would take a lot of care for her to be intimate with anypony, and I supposed that *any* betrayal or injury from him would be more than she could bear. And she'd been *pregnant...*

I reached down to my own stomach, running my mechanical fingers along my hide. What would it be like to have a filly or colt of my own? In 99 we always knew we'd have one eventually. A few lucky mares might get the opportunity for a second if another mare died before she had a daughter or had fertility problems. I always joked that me reproducing would be a crime against Equestria.

Lying here, right now, I wasn't laughing. I was thinking. Did I want to have a child? Here, in the Wasteland? In *Hoofington*? Now? Okay, maybe not here nor now. Maybe if I could scrape together a few thousand caps and set myself up in Tenpony. Have a filly or colt in nice safe medical conditions. Give them a few years and teach them how to shoot and take care of themselves.

Have a family. A real family, something more than life in 99. I did want that. Given everything that had happened to me, despite it all, I wanted a kid. Kids. Plural. When I was done with EC-1101, I could go back to Spike and do everything to get Gardens to work. Clean up Equestria. Have a kid. Or two. Or three. Hee…

It was all just a fantasy, of course. I wasn't going to just run to Triage and have my implant removed. I'd also have to pick the right stud. Talk to Glory. Maybe she'd have one as well. I mean, she

might not like stallions, but it wasn't like she'd die if she was with the right one once. Heck, I knew medical ponies could inseminate mares if needed without them ever having to see a stallion during the process. Happened occasionally in 99. Oh, and I'd have to see... well, Triage had said that my reproductive parts had managed to stay functional, but that was before the *Celestia* and my cyberization. The professor hadn't mentioned anything about them, but there were a lot of things she hadn't mentioned. I supposed that, even if something was wrong there, Glory could have the foals or we could adopt... the idea didn't feel as appealing, but it'd work. Something to think about…talk about... I might not be the smartest pony, but this whole subject was definitely something I didn't want to rush. It'd be more than my own head if I screwed it up.

I rolled onto my side and snuggled against Stygius. He was warm, firm, and didn't mind metal legs. I knew I'd be guilting about feeling this way sooner or later but for now, nuzzling his neck, I really couldn't help but smile. Glory would like him. Not like-like, of course. But he had a gallant idiot streak I bet she could really relate to. Kissing along his chin and cheek, I moved my hoof downward. A few seconds later, his eyes popped wide as his cheeks went red. I gave his nose a little lick as he gave a meek chirp.

Round four…

* * *

Okay. Okay. Enough. There was getting over a bad ploughing, then there was having fun, and then there was just wallowing in it. When I saw Glory next, I was going to make her hooves curl! As I finally slipped off the bed, I was sore and tingly in all the right places. Stygius…he'd need a little more time to recover, but from the grin on his face I was pretty sure he'd be fine.

Stallions…are…awesome!

Of course, we both needed a shower; we were positively ripe. I trotted into the bathroom with a smile on my face. Maybe I wasn't completely over what'd happened to me; there was still that muttering defense mechanism in the back of my head, but I didn't think that I'd try and kill a male just for making the wrong comment or brushing my rear end. Still…I did a little dance on the balcony. I hadn't killed him and I'd had a good time!

This had to be one of the top five best days I'd had out here in the

Wasteland, just behind finding out Glory was alive after Flash Industries and our little concert in Star House before going into the tunnels. Of course, I knew that something horrible would probably happen soon to erase it; my life seemed to inextricably fall into that pattern. But I'd enjoy the great feelings as long as I could.

After a nice hot shower -- Hee! Hot water! Any day with hot water pouring down on me was a good one! -- I emerged, put my armor and saddlebags back on, picked out whatever magical gems I could find in the shattered rock collection, and trotted downstairs. Well… time to start thinking about how we were going to get out of here. I alternated between bites of Cram, chunks of gemstones, and pieces of metal from the workshop as I sat on the desk in the library and looked out the window at the bots milling about outside. We might be able to race past them and out the shield, but that would be iffy. I had visions of one of us ending up as a shower of ash.

I tried to peek around at the main Pinkie box, but the angle from the library window wasn't very good. I needed to get higher. Fortunately, I had freaky zebra balancing legs that let me stand upright on the desk. Ah, there it was. And there were its red eyes. Mhmmm…still not a happy ro-- wait. What was that?

In an upper corner of the library was a tiny black camera sensor. Why had he needed so many? I looked from it to the desk and back again, wondering if I might see something if I could get my point of view close enough to its…well, I not only had freaky zebra standing powers but equally freaky cyber thumb powers. I used them to carefully climb up the bookshelves, and pretty soon I realized I was onto something when I heard a faint crackle in my ears. Yes! Another recording. I lifted my head even with the camera, then turned and looked down into the library.

The change was astonishing, from pristine clean to an absolute mess. There were more books piled in stacks around the desk than there were on the mahogany bookshelves. Papers had been taped to the walls, and the wastebin was overflowing with wadded-up parchment. Only narrow tracks to and from the door allowed hoof traffic. Goldenblood was sitting at the desk, rasping softly to himself and hissing an inhalation every three or four words, "Now… Pertinent to Equestrian Command One and the formation of the ministries, the judiciary shall remain under the review of the crown with judges appointed, monitored, and removed by the crown. All Ministries retain the right to exclusive internal legal codes of

conduct, but any binding ruling of the Ministries shall be appealable by Equestrian court--"

A flash of golden light filled the room, and while I started, Goldenblood remained coolly examining his papers. When it faded, the last person I would have ever imagined appeared. There was absolutely no mistaking that radiant crown or missing that softly billowing four-color mane. Princess Celestia. I only had two memories of her, one troubled and the other regretful. Now I saw another side of the former ruler of Equestria: anger.

"Director Goldenblood." Her voice was stern, the type of voice Mom used when I was in deep trouble. She looked at the stacks of papers and books, and her horn flashed once. In an instant, the books were back on the shelves and the papers, including the one he was writing on, were stacked on a smaller desk on the opposite side of the room. "I wish to have a discreet word."

"I have an office, Princess Celestia," he replied in his shallow, rasping voice. His pink scars looked wet and shiny, and he sat neatly on the edge of his seat, pressing his forehooves together as he leaned towards the Princess, peering at her over the tops. "There was no need to come here and organize my controlled chaos." Then he clenched his eyes shut, coughing deep and wet. Despite her ire, the Princess betrayed a tiny concerned look before stiffening once more.

"It seemed to be the only way I could talk with you face to face. You're a notoriously difficult pony to meet. That seems to be the way of almost everypony around you," she said firmly. "I was supposed to speak with Twilight Sparkle today, but imagine my shock when I was told she was busy with ministry business. When I pried, I found out that I wasn't even on Twilight's agenda today, per *your* orders."

"Was there a part of that which was unclear, Celestia?" Goldenblood said in his shallow rasp. I would have loved to have known if he was smiling behind those hooves.

"Twilight Sparkle is my most devoted student and dearest friend, and because of you, she didn't even know that I wanted to see her. You have no right to interfere in our relationship or meddle in our private affairs," the Princess retorted, her eyes narrowing. If they'd been focused at me, I doubted I'd retain control of my bladder. But Goldenblood looked back with something bordering on contempt.

"Ah, I'm afraid that that is where you are mistaken," he replied

calmly, his wet raspy voice turning sharper. “Twilight Sparkle isn’t your student anymore, Celestia. She’s now Luna’s Ministry Mare. She has a job to do winning the war. Her time is literally priceless, and I take great pains to manage it and her to be as efficient as possible.”

“Twilight Sparkle isn’t your subordinate, Director!” Celestia retorted. Goldenblood didn’t respond, and for an instant, doubt flickered in her eyes. His remained as steady as steel.

“If you have problems with how I execute my duties, take them up with your sister. I’m sure that she’ll be happy to spare you some time, Celestia.” I suddenly realized he hadn’t been calling her ‘Princess’ anymore. He looked at the stacks of papers, magically flipped through them, and then stopped and yanked one free. “I’m sure that Princess Luna would be overjoyed to hear your concerns about the…” His eyes glanced back to the paper once more. “... diamond dog relocation.”

“Those are intelligent, thinking, feeling people. They may not be ponies, but it’s not right to simply take their land because we need it.” She trotted right up to his desk, then sat down and glared at him, reinforcing the fact that alicorns were frigging huge!

He didn’t shrink back, though, nor look away, as he said in that steamy hiss, “Funny. I recall you using the same excuse of ‘imminent and vital manifest need’ when you gave the order to seize the coal fields southeast of Shattered Hoof Ridge eleven years ago. That led to the zebra invasion at Dawn Bay. Which led to attacks across the Zanzebra Strait. And…well…you know the details better than I. But when Twilight gives an identical order to seize Splendid Valley, it’s wrong.” He tossed the paper onto the desk.

“It was wrong twelve years ago and it’s wrong now,” Celestia countered, looking anguished. “Don’t let Twilight make the same mistake I did. Please... let me speak with her.”

Goldenblood frowned as he lifted the paper again. “I’m afraid that’s not possible, Celestia. Twilight needs the gems, caverns, and security to test hazardous spells and talismans. The M.A.S. nearly burned down their Manehattan hub testing incineration spells, as you may recall, and given all the zebra infiltrators and sympathizers we’ve dug out in the last two years…” He sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry Celestia, but as I said…Twilight’s time is invaluable. She simply does not have the time to be your special student any longer.”

“Goldenblood, you can’t let her do this. I didn’t step down so my sister and my student could do horrible things!” Celestia objected with a toss of her mane.

“Well, that’s funny. I was under the impression that that is *precisely* why you stepped down.” His eyes narrowed. I’d never seen a pony scowl at Princess Celestia like that before. I didn’t think it was possible. “With all due respect, Celestia, you quit. And you didn’t sue for peace. You didn’t negotiate an armistice. You didn’t even surrender with honor. You…just…quit. And in quitting, you dumped this entire war, which *you* started, in Princess Luna’s lap.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I could still rule after what happened at Littlehorn?” Celestia demanded, her eyes blazing like twin suns. “Do you know what I thought when I saw what the zebras had done to my sister’s academy? This is my fault! Mine!”

“And you were right. It was your fault,” Goldenblood said in low, deadly tones. “You could have silenced the nobles. You could have told Hippocampus to find another way. Put down energy quotas. Worked to overcome the impasse with the zebras. Instead, you decided to go to war. You, Celestia.”

“I had duties and responsibilities to all of Equestria!” she protested.

“And now you don’t,” Goldenblood said flatly. “You should have given Princess Luna a year, at the absolute minimum, for a transfer of power. Five years would have been better. And you should have negotiated peace before stepping down. Even if it came with penalties…we could have dealt with them. But you didn’t. You quit, and dumped this entire mess on your sister’s back. And now you don’t like what she has to do to win the war? To create her own rule? To run Equestria as she needs to run it? Tough.” He folded his hooves on the desk before him. “Princess Luna is doing what she must. Twilight Sparkle is helping her by doing what *she* must.”

“Even if it’s the wrong thing?” Celestia asked with a soft plea in her voice. I never thought I’d hear a Princess speak like that! “I have to do something! There must be some way I can help them to not repeat my mistakes!”

“Luna is not interested in your help, Celestia. Neither is Twilight Sparkle. There is no place for you in the new government. I made sure of it.” From the look of shock on Celestia’s face, I wondered if anypony had ever spoken to her like this before. It was a slap in the face.

“I just want to help my sister and my student,” she whispered.

“Please!”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “I’m sorry, Celestia, but this comes from Luna. She’s adamant on making sure that this is her rule, her land, and her victory. And I am determined to see she gets it.” He levitated up the paper once more. “But…I’ll see if I can do something for these…erm…diamond dogs, are they? Unofficially and off the record. Just please stop trying to contact Twilight. I think she’s trying to use time spells to create a thirty-two hour day just to get more work done.”

“Yes. That does sound like her,” Celestia murmured.

Goldenblood gave her a sympathetic smile. “Please, Celestia. I know you are concerned, but it’s now out of your hooves.” He paused, and for a moment his eyes seemed to size up the magnificent white alicorn. “If I can think of some way for you to help, I’ll let you know.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right. I’m sure I’ll find something to occupy my time.” Celestia nodded and started to turn away. Then she paused to look back at him. “Goldenblood. Do you remember that time when you told me not to attack the zebras twelve years ago?”

“Vividly,” he replied.

“Right now, I know exactly how you felt then. I hope that I may be as inspired as you were. Goodbye, Goldenblood,” Celestia said with a formal bow of her head. He rose and bowed deeply in return. But when she disappeared in a flash of golden light, Goldenblood didn’t smile or sneer. He trotted back to his desk, lifted a brass flask from one of the drawers, and took a pull before burying his face in his hooves.

I stared at him sitting there. Then he muttered to himself in a voice so low that I nearly missed it. His words, however, made my blood turn to ice. “Don’t make me kill you, Celestia.”

A few seconds later, he rose and trotted from the room. I hung there till my vision flashed and reset. Then there was a chirp in my ear; I flailed with one limb, then slipped off the bookcase and tumbled down, landing firmly on my cybernetic butt. “Owww!” I whined aloud, then winced and rubbed my backside before looking up at Stygius, bathed and back in his armor as well.

‘U ok?’ he scribbled on his board. Then he pointed at me and stared off into space.

“Yeah. I am. Just…ow…” I stood with a groan and gave myself a good shake, trying to wrap my head around what I’d seen. Kill

Celestia? Could anypony do that? I mean, the zebras had, but they'd had their entire war effort to use, and even then they were only able to do it as part of the apocalypse. Goldenblood might have been a sneaky bastard, but he couldn't do that!

Could he?

The discovery of the camera in the library spurred me to search for others, and we spent nearly an hour looking. There turned out to be at least one in every room, and Stygius was kind enough to, flapping as hard as he could, lift me up to the point where I could see more recordings. None of them were as grave as the one I'd seen in the library, though. Threatening Princess Celestia…that was just…how could he – could *anypony* – think that?

The majority of the recordings, in fact, were not just 'not as grave' but fairly odd and often boring. Many of them were silent, like one in the kitchen where Fluttershy was trying to make a meal for an obnoxious white rabbit. Another showed a rather infuriated Scootaloo barging in and fairly screaming soundlessly at Goldenblood. I don't know what he told her, but when he finished the look of horror on her face had her trotting from the room as swiftly as her hooves could carry her.

Others had sound but didn't seem terribly important. There was one in the guest room where Goldenblood waxed on about the moonstone acquisition for his collection to a vaguely-familiar-looking unicorn and pegasus close enough in appearance that they might have been siblings. They teased him about abusing his authority for a rock. Goldenblood grinned and replied, "Rocks," and the recording ended with him telling them to take care of Pinkie Pie. Another after it had him complaining to Horse about the ugliness of the Core. The yellow pony laughed about how functionality took priority over aesthetics.

In the nursery, though, I found a recording I'd never imagined. Goldenblood was slumped against the empty crib, weeping as if it were the first time he would and the last time he could. He clenched his teeth along with his eyes, hissing as if he were being tortured as he sobbed and choked.

"Here you are," a strange buck said in a reverent tone. It was a blue unicorn wearing a pince-nez. His mane was a luxurious silver-white, and on his flank was a model of an atom like the drawings I'd seen in textbooks. "It's been three days."

Goldenblood turned and looked at him over his shoulder with a

blood shot eye. “Am I not permitted to grieve the loss of my daughter, Trottenheimer?” he hissed.

“That requires you to acknowledge that you ever had one,” the blue stallion replied. “Four Leaf put two and two together. Don’t worry, it won’t spread. The M.o.P. is rallying around Fluttershy to protect her. She wants you to come to dinner. No arguments.” He watched as Goldenblood pressed his brow to the crib again. “Sometimes I think you’re trying to commit suicide by overdosing on secrets. It wasn’t your fault.”

He made another horrible choking sound. At first I thought it was more tears, but then he threw back his head and I saw his sick grin. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he laughed. Trottenheimer’s eyes widened in shock as the scarred buck rasped, “That’s just it. It *is* all my fault... ”

“What?”

“Fluttershy and I were together intimately,” he said as he sat, gazing into the empty crib. “In the heat of the moment... I... called out the name of another mare.”

The blue unicorn screwed back his lips in distaste as he scowled, and then he sighed in disappointment. “Goldenblood, really?”

“I know. I know!” he hissed in a rush. “There isn’t one part of that stupid thing I haven’t analyzed in detail! I don’t know why I said it. But I did, and... it was at the worst possible time. She’s so terribly sensitive... She’d already had complications... the stress... the pressure... all of it was too much to bear. She left me... then six hours later I got the call... ” He started to laugh, but three laughs into it they transformed into ragged sobs. “Ministry Mare Fluttershy admitted to Fluttershy Medical Center for a miscarriage... ” And he buried his face in the crib. “I didn’t just lose the mare I loved, Trottenheimer. I killed my daughter with a name!”

Trottenheimer stood behind him for a long minute, then finally approached Goldenblood and awkwardly patted his shoulder. “Look... you couldn’t have known... and you wouldn’t have done it if you did. It’s just... just one of those things,” he said as Goldenblood wept. “But you know what’s going on. We’re barely hanging on. Twelve attacks on Hoofington in the last month, and if Princess Luna changes her mind and moves our research to Manehattan, then things are going to get a lot more difficult. We need you, Goldenblood. Either to step up like before, or to step aside. But not to just sit here.”

The words had a galvanizing effect on the scarred buck. “You’re right... ” he rasped, his voice like a dying breath. “I have promises to keep... and none of them involve a wife... or a child.” He closed his eyes again. “Tell the department heads to meet tomorrow. We need to expand our operations. Take a more active role in bringing this conflict to a close in the right way and at the right time.” He pressed his forehead to the rail. “That... that will have to do. For now... please give me one more night to mourn Whisper.”

That was all I could bear to watch; Goldenblood hadn’t just lost Fluttershy to his mistake. He’d lost a child, too…And that bastard Sanguine had kept her survival secret from both of them! If they’d known, would it have changed something? Everything?

Damn it. I didn’t want to pity anypony who’d contemplate killing Princess Celestia.

I tried to take my mind off the sight of Goldenblood in such a state, starting by signaling Stygius that we could head back down. The batpony was worn out from being my elevator and landed a bit heavily, taking a moment to catch his breath. I trotted quickly from the nursery down to the living room. He walked after me, his wings dragging along behind him. I sat on the couch, rubbing my face. When I’d discovered that this was Goldenblood’s house... well... I hadn’t exactly thought that I would find a golden memory orb with all the secrets nagging me there for the taking, but I’d expected to find something.

What I’d found was Goldenblood the pony.

A teacher. A lover. Even a father. I didn’t want to think of him like that. I wanted to hate him, think of him as a monster who’d contemplate killing Celestia. I hated the idea of him as a victim. A screwup. ... Normal. I don’t know which was more terrifying; a ridiculously intelligent master plotter with a secret ministry under his command, or somepony who was all that... and who could fuck up too.

I was distracted from my thoughts by a bit of movement in the corner of my eye. Looking over Stygius’s shoulder, through a picture window, past the long grass out front and the swirling spritebots, I saw something that didn’t belong: a pony in Steel Ranger armor. She was just standing halfway through the magic field, the glowing surface distorted around her. The red sparks of light from the swarming spritebots fizzled uselessly against her armor. Then a second Steel Ranger stepped through. A third. A

fourth. I rose to my hooves and slowly approached the window for a closer view.

Then a fifth stepped through. He wore on his sides two massive anti-dragon cannons. As he stepped out in front of the rest and they turned to make way, I saw the black towers lined in green on their armored flanks.

You never forgot guns like those.

Steel Rain was here.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 45: Meatlocker

"These ponies don't want a party. These ponies want a PARRR-TAY!"

"Get the lights," I hissed, waving my hoof at the switch on the far side of the room. There were few ponies that could induce the same kind of bowel-loosening anxiety as the one with the dragon-killer cannons bolted to the sides of his armor. It wasn't the weapons that made a terrified little pony in me scream and claw the walls, though; Deus had used guns like that, but he hadn't induced the same kind of terror Steel Rain did. The Seekers and the other Steel Rangers had both firepower and numbers, but I could handle that.

What scared me about Steel Rain was that he was a smart pony. He didn't just charge after me screaming 'CUNT' and blowing holes in the countryside. He was deliberate and cautious and didn't allow little details to slip by him, and, unlike Deus, he was a plotter and leader in his own right and on a far larger scale. On top of all that, the fact that he had blown my face off once already didn't help.

So as Stygius turned off the lights, I ducked down and watched nervously as the five spread out. Of course, the dimness wouldn't do us that much good; one look at his E.F.S. would tell him where we were.

Or would it? My E.F.S. was useless with all the spritebots milling around; his couldn't be much better. We might have a chance here, slim as it was, to avoid a messy end. Okay... how, exactly? I needed options. Hide somewhere upstairs? He'd search it. Try to bolt out a window? They were all sealed and reinforced. Try to blow him up with the moonstone? I'd used up the flake of starmetal. Barring some exceptional shooting, I didn't have any heavy weapons that would penetrate their armor.

I needed better options.

"Dealer," I said under my breath. "Hey, Dealer! I need to talk to

you. Dealer! Please…Come on…you've been bouncing in and out of my consciousness for a month now. This time I need to talk to you!" Stygius gave me a worried look, clearly alarmed by this new crazy.

Outside, one of Steel Rain's Rangers stepped forward, some kind of heavy-duty flamer on one side and a different-looking, longer-barreled kind of flamer on the other. Wasn't one variety of fire-spewing weapon enough? Suddenly, sooty orange flames sprayed out in burning plumes that engulfed the spritebots. Dozens crackled and died by the second, their wings disintegrating in a shower of embers and their round bodies popping explosively. More rushed in to attack fruitlessly and met the same fate. The long grass disappeared in immense clouds of smoke, and the vacant birdhouses blazed brightly before tumbling apart. The fire washed over the windows, and I jumped back. The outside of the house wouldn't catch fire, but that wouldn't do us much good once the Rangers were inside.

"Dealer!" I shouted.

Then I spotted a flicker. At first I thought it might be another vision, but then I saw the ghostly buck appear. He looked older and more gaunt than usual. He strained and groaned as he looked at me. "Yes, Blackjack? What is it?"

I stared at him; it had never occurred to me that contact might be difficult for him. I'd always thought he just sat in my PipBuck and emerged whenever he wanted to mess with me. That he didn't know what was going on also suggested that he wasn't monitoring me every second. "We're at Goldenblood's house. I found it. But we're about to be attacked by Steel Rangers and I need a back door out of this place."

"What?" His eyes widened. "How'd they get through the shield? Only designated ministry ponies can pass."

"Maybe he's got an Apple relative with him," I countered. Heck, for all I knew Steel Rain himself could be a member of the family, maybe a descendant of Braeburn. Wouldn't surprise me. "However they're here, they're here, and we need to not be."

He closed his eyes a moment. "I really hoped you wouldn't destroy it. Fluttershy loved that house."

He was concerned about the house? "Look, Dealer, I know it's a nice house, but…"

He gave a small sympathetic smile and nodded. "I know. Your enemies seldom give you a choice." He flickered a bit; I wanted to

ask if he was okay, but I had no idea how long we had till Steel Rain came knocking. “The T-51 armor has a serious spark vulnerability. It was something they were addressing in the T-54 models, but those never reached deployment. If you overload the generator attached to the water wheel, it should discharge a spark pulse. That should give you a chance to get away. There’s an access panel in the kitchen.”

“Okay! Great. Sounds like a plan.” I turned and took three steps towards the kitchen, then slowed before looking back at him. “And how exactly do I do that?” I asked sheepishly.

The Dealer’s legs were fading from view. “Your friend’s ultrasonic voice should foul the crystals in the generator.” Suddenly he paused and looked at Stygius, then arched a brow at me; funny how he managed to pull off looking parental. “And Blackjack, was *that* really necessary?”

I flushed bright red; I could have died right there and then. Ugh, he’d been... while he... and I... UGH! And he wanted to discuss my sex life *now*? “Yes,” I said flatly, fighting the urge to shudder. Celestia, how *did* he do the Look? It was like finding out Mom had spied on me fooling around. And Duct Tape had been so embarrassed too.

He chuckled, shaking his head and smirking. “Glory is going to kill you.” I was about to ask why when a patter of spritebot parts against the window reminded us both that this was not the time. “The charge will build up till the crystals explode and let out a spark pulse. Then you run for your life.”

“Great. Like that never gets old,” I said with a sigh, rolling my eyes a little. I actually got a laugh out of the Dealer.

“Everypony in the Wasteland chases you, Blackjack. It’s your thing.” More of him faded away, curling off in misty tatters.

“Are you okay?” I asked in concern.

“It’s just…hard…to make contact when I’m not strong enough.” His voice became more strained as he disappeared from sight. “Please, try to spare the house…”

Stygius was just staring at me with a baffled look. “Okay… something I left out…um…” How best to explain it? “I have a ghost that lives in my PipBuck.” Okay…now bafflement was turning to concern. “A helpful ghost of a pony that knows a lot of stuff…” And is infuriatingly slow to share it. “He says your sonic scream thing can foul the crystals in the generator and make it explode.” He

blinked, scratched his chin, and then nodded with a smile. I could have kissed him. Again...

We found the little access panel in the kitchen in the back wall, hidden behind the stove, after some frantic searching. The door was so tiny I wondered if Goldenblood employed colts to maintain it. I looked at Stygius. “Can you squeeze through there?” Maybe if he took off his armor…The batpony just snorted and waved his hoof dismissively as he nodded. “Okay. Make it overload and get clear.” And please don’t die.

He struck another noble pose, and I gave him a hug before turning to my saddlebags. “Take care of your--” I said, then looked up for a moment. He was gone. “Self?”

I peeked through the open panel and saw him standing on the far side next to some equipment. Wow. I knew he was flexible, but…

Focus, Blackjack. I pulled out Vigilance, loaded the magazines with armor piercing rounds, and set the weapon on the kitchen island. Next the sword. The Ranger armor had all kinds of hoses and the like that I could target. Then the shotgun. I fished out every blue spark round I had and alternated them with explosive slugs. Hopefully I’d have a weapon left after this. Finally Duty and Sacrifice; well, they might be better than nothing. I stowed each weapon away. Right now I really wished I still had Taurus’s rifle. Actually, right now I wished I had one of those anti-machine rifles.

Three pistols and a shotgun seemed pitiful compared to even one Ranger’s armament. I popped my E.F.S. on…and saw only five bars remaining. And they were standing right outside the front door. Funny... one of them was blue. I heard the door click and then slowly creak open as I ducked down. Heavy metal hoofsteps entered. All I had was the element of…oh shit. I heard the hollow, staccato rattle of a grenade machine gun going off.

Oh, this was going to suck!

The next instant I was racing around the kitchen island as the grenades exploded, the shrapnel ripping the cupboards into splinters, pulverizing the fine plates and sending the pots and pans flying. The Steel Ranger in the doorway traced after me, the stream of explosions tearing the walls apart, leaving shattered wood and spilling insulation in their wake. Smoke, dust, and powdered plaster filled the air as I floated the shotgun overhead and fired wildly at the Steel Ranger at the door. The explosive rounds blackened the metal and nothing else, and the spark rounds crackled over the

armor but weren't enough to shut it down.

It did throw off his aim enough to buy me time, though; I leapt through the door to the library and rolled as two more grenades followed me through. I darted behind the heavy desk as they blew, peppering me with chunks of carpet and shards of metal. The sturdy wood seemed tougher than I expected, sheltering me from the storm of exploding bombs.

Just as quickly as it started, the assault stopped. This was the part I dreaded. "Security," Steel Rain said calmly. "The M.o.M. was notified of a Ministry Mare trespassing on a crime scene. You have no idea how glad I am that it was you. The Prophet was convinced you were hiding in the Mire or at Ironmare."

"How'd you know?" I asked as I saw two bars moving towards the door.

"I suspected. You've proven remarkably adept at eluding pursuit," he replied evenly.

"Gee, thanks," I muttered. I couldn't risk poking my head out. A red bar slowly moved around to the side; I could feel the hoofsteps through the floor. "Aren't you going to ask me for EC-1101?" The bar stopped.

"I know you won't surrender it to me." I had to stall. I had to hope Stygius could do something with the generator. "However, now that I've seen this place's defenses, I know that there must be *something* worthwhile here."

"How'd you get through the bubble?" I demanded.

"That hardly matters at the moment, correct? As I'm sure you're tired of hearing, the Harbingers want that PipBuck. As a matter of fact, their leader wanted it even before you left your stable. I had to convince them to expand and get more organized. Establish combat teams. Use radios. Oh, what I could do with a year, their resources, and unrestricted command!" His voice strained with equal parts ambition and frustration.

Then he regarded me a moment and continued. "I, however, am willing to cut a deal. It's rather straightforward and predictable, and I know you'll decline, but I feel I should at least offer you your life for the device." My mane was squirming so hard that I could practically feel anti-dragon rounds aimed at the desk. "I'd prefer that it be handed over intact."

He probably didn't know if his artillery would damage it. A saving grace. For now; this was one time when the famed durability of

PipBucks was against me. Come on, Stygius, please hurry…"Hmmm, let me think about it…"

The red bar suddenly charged around the corner. I had only the soft huff of flame to give me warning that it was Flamers. As he came into view, I slipped into S.A.T.S. and blasted him with three perfectly aimed shots to the head, two explosive and one spark… that still did pretty much nothing against his armor. The explosions and crackling blue right in front of his face fazed him for a second, though, and that was a second I used to dive between his widespread forehooves just as one of the flamers poured fire beneath the desk!

Rolling out behind him, I stood and swapped to Vigilance. The pistol shots dinged the back of the helmet and hopefully made his ears hurt a little, but I'd be lucky if they did that much. That's it. Next Seeker I came across, I was keeping their anti-machine rifle. This was ridiculous! I kept behind the Ranger with the flamer as he twisted this way and that, trying to line up a shot. At least he couldn't attack me bac--

Oh, wow. Ranger power armor can applebuck. And it was an excellent method of travel, sending me flying like a cyber ragdoll across the room and into the bookshelf. The impact sent down a shower of books atop me as I sat in a heap at the bottom. I shook off the little orbiting Stygiuses in time to see the flamer pony wheeling around to face me, one of the weapons already starting to fire.

My horn flashed as I pulled every last book on the shelf I could down atop my head while the flamer spewed. The entire wooden cabinet crashed down atop me, burying me alive beneath broken wood and texts. I felt my whole world getting hot as I curled up beneath the books, wondering how many seconds this 'protection' would last. Flamers were really working their way up my list of most hated things ever.

Then the fwoosh of the flamer was replaced by the crackle of burning books and bookcase as the stream was cut off. It was now or never! I exploded out from the heap of burning books and wood. My horn grabbed the flaming debris around me and threw it at the flamer pony in a fiery storm.

Of course, it didn't do anything, but the smoking cloud obscured his vision enough that when he painted the wall with a second sheet of flame, his stream went high and wide; I was on my hooves

and running, trailing a cloud of embers behind me. I darted for the door as I leapt through the smoke cloud…and skidded to a stop at the sight of the machine grenade pony standing in my way.

I backflipped away like a zebra -- and how in Equestria did my body pull that off?! -- just before the floor erupted in a burst of small explosions. I twisted in the air and landed on my hooves on the burning desk. A second jump took me to the only cover I could count on in the room: the back of Flamers. Grenades halted his fire as my fingers came out and grabbed the air hoses running alongside Flamers's neck. He began to buck and kick wildly, spraying plumes of fire, but I was high enough on his back and metal enough to not cook…yet.

Grenades stepped back, and then the Ranger armed with miniguns stepped into his place. Suddenly my cover wasn't as safe as I'd anticipated. Minigun opened fire, spraying Flamers with a rain of small caliber rounds that would do nothing to him and plenty to me. Burning was better than being perforated. I rolled off to the side, keeping Flamers between me and him as fire licked at my belly.

This was getting ugly.

Then Stygius appeared, flashing into view and smacking Minigun with all four hooves. It was about as effective as my shotgun, but it did stagger and distract the Ranger for a second. Then he turned to deal with the flying threat, and the danger the batpony had drawn away from me started threatening him. At least he was good at dodging. The thumping chatter of Grenades's grenade machinegun reverberated in the far room. I had a few seconds to try and deal with Flamers. He was turning towards me, spraying a constant stream of fire across the back windows. If he couldn't burn me, he'd simply cook the room.

Wait. Where was Steel Rain? I looked around, and a tiny pink pony in my mind held a little felt *(... felt?)* arrow pointing at a red bar over in the workshop next door.

Somehow, I didn't see Steel Rain having the same aversion to causing friendly fire that Grenades had demonstrated.

I leapt as far across the burning floor as I could; direction didn't matter. A second later, the wall between the rooms became one of pressure, debris, and noise that snuffed out some of the blaze and tossed me end over end. I didn't know if Flamers took a direct hit or not, but he was buried under a heap of burning rubble. My body

ached in pain from the concussion and burns as I slowly pushed myself to my hooves. I had to press on, a little white pony informed me. Hold on, endure, and be fabulous.

Steel Rain stepped through the hole he'd just blasted, his cannons ejecting the spent rounds and sending them flying back in great smoking arcs and bouncing into the room behind him. "Incredible. Just incredible. I've found hellhounds less tenacious." Those immense guns gave an ominously deep 'thunk', loading another pair of rounds. Trailing smoke and bits of flaming debris, I charged in the only direction left to me: straight at him.

I leapt at him a split second before he fired, the shockwave slamming into me as I wrapped my forelegs around his neck and grabbed the back of it with my fingers. The shells blew out a huge section of the wall; even the reinforced construction wasn't enough to keep the house intact. I stared into his glowing eye panels and floated Vigilance up. Point blank, I emptied the remainder of the clip into his head.

I think I cracked the eye visor for my trouble. What, was his armor even tougher than the standard model?! Steel Rain didn't banter or make some snide comment, nor was he going to let me reload or stay this close. Instead he turned and charged straight into the wall, smashing me through the layer of plaster, wood, and insulation and onto the stone behind. I heard parts inside me crunch and a pressure burst up my throat. I vomited a bloody foam over his face as I struggled to push him away, breathe, or something.

'Something' came in the form of the sword. I slashed at his neck, but though the edge was magically sharp and it did cut a line in his metal, it was far too little. Maybe if I had half a minute of him standing still, I could saw through. He wasn't going to give me that. He reared back and rammed the wall again. I felt my vision start to go black. Then I slashed at the hoses leading towards the muzzle of his armor. The thick rubber, likely resistant to normal damage, parted under the sword's edge like warm butter. I had no idea what harm I'd done to him, but hopefully it was something. I sliced the other one for good measure.

He moved back and charged one more time. I let go, falling beneath him as the Steel Ranger smashed clear through the wall. I fought to breathe; my vision was full of all kinds of damage alerts. I staggered out of the smoky room, needing a breather. Needing help. I found myself in the hazy workshop and collapsed. I had no idea if

I could make myself regenerate faster. Probably not…

From the living room came more shots and explosions. Tears ran down my sooty cheeks. I looked at my PipBuck. I set it to broadcast, closed my eyes, and then rasped out, “This is Blackjack. I need help. Please. I’m by Black Pony Mountain. Please, I need help now.” I could only pray that the Seekers didn’t know Blackjack was Security. Not that anypony else was likely to be in a position to get here in time, but I was out of ideas.

Stygius was suddenly by my side, so abruptly that it was like he appeared from thin air. He was coated in sweat, smoke and ash were spattered across his hide, and he had more than a few small holes in him. He held a healing potion in his mouth and firmly pressed it to my lips. I knew it wouldn’t do much for me, but I drank it anyway. It might not have instantly fixed crushed internal organs, but I had to admit that I did actually feel a little better.

“Thanks,” I coughed as I glanced around. Steel Rain had us cornered. Two Rangers were by the door and one was by the hole he’d blasted. “Any clue when that generator is going to overload?” The batpony shook his head. Then my eyes moved up and looked at the underside of the workbench. There was a little button there. Now why would Goldenblood have a hidden button on the underside of his workbench? It’d probably be the last question I’d get to ask, but it was one I could answer. I reached up with my hoof and smacked it.

The floor fell out beneath me and suddenly I was tumbling down a flight of stairs. I finally reached the bottom, looking up at a smoky rectangle as Stygius darted through. I lay there a moment, my ribs aching and my lungs fighting for a few good breaths. On the wall beside me was another button, and I tapped it with my magic. The rectangle closed. Instantly the three bars upstairs began to mill about. Stygius helped me to my hooves.

Well now…wasn’t *this* interesting?

I groaned as I staggered forward into a large basement. There were chalkboards on the walls covered with lists, schematics, and numbers. Most were written in code. As my body repaired itself from being cooked and battered, I picked out a few. Zebra relocation and protection program. Infiltration of Dawn Bay base. Tokomare resource allotment. Robronco resource acquisition. M.W.T. mergers. Blueblood’s social calendar. How were any of these *important*?

Goldenblood had kept track of a great deal of Equestria; I wondered when he ever got around to sleeping…

In the corner were a number of terminals. When I approached, a little light flashed over one, and then swept over me in a shimmery wave. It passed over my leg, and then locked on my PipBuck. Then the screens began to flash to life one after the next. Four of them just displayed the O.I.A. logo: six circles with a ministry symbol inside each arranged in a ring surrounding an encircled moon. I noticed now how each ministry was cut off from the others, and from the central circle, linked only by the twisting lines. As if the O.I.A. wasn't to bring the ministries together at all...

Then the middle screen went dark, and a few lines of text appeared.

>EC-1101 status: Standby.

>Ministry Credentials Established.

>Equestria Defense Status: Unknown Critical.

>Palace Status: Complete.

>Redoubt Status: Complete.

>Tom: Complete. Charge 100%.

>Warning: Spark Flux Capacitors charge at 0%. Recharge Pending Activation.

>Project Horizons Status: Standby.

>Activate Project Horizons: Y/N?

I stared at the screen for almost a minute. I swallowed as I stared at the Y button. Wow... all I needed was to push one little button, and I'd know exactly what Goldenblood had planned. Just... just push the button... I almost did. I even moved my hoof over it... and a few weeks ago, I would have. But... I knew better. As much as I wanted to know what Horizons was, I didn't want to find out the reckless way, just in case Sanguine was right and it blew up half the Hoof. I typed 'N' and hit enter. A moment later the text disappeared and I sighed. Must be getting old. I watched new words appear on the terminal screen.

>Confirmed. Project Horizons Status: Standby.

>Warning: Project auto-activation in effect pending critical failure of EC-1101. Please update EDS as soon as possible. Auto-activation cannot be terminated if EDS is unknown.

I tapped several keys that weren't 'Y', but nothing happened aside from going back to the first prompt. I wanted to scream! What was the Palace? What was the Redoubt? Who the hay was Tom? What's

a Spark Flux whatchamacallit? What the hell was Project Horizons supposed to do?! I reconsidered my choice of not hitting yes just to see what would happen!

Fortunately, sanity prevailed, and I stepped back. When I moved away, the beam hitting my PipBuck winked out and the screen went dark.

I sighed as I closed my eyes, hanging my head. Were there any answers? Or just more questions that lead to more questions that lead to still more questions? "Damn it…" I whispered to myself. Then Stygius tapped my shoulder, and I looked up in time to see more text appearing on the central terminal.

> I KNOW YOU'RE IN A BAD WAY RIGHT NOW, BLACKJACK.

I stared at the screen as a shocked stillness spread through me, raised a hoof toward the keys, and then slowly pulled it away.

> I KNOW YOU'RE HURT, FRUSTRATED, AND TIRED. YOU'VE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH. MORE THAN ANYPONY HAS A RIGHT TO. THEN YOU STAND UP ON YOUR HOOVES AND MARCH ON. BECAUSE YOU CAN. BECAUSE YOU HAVE TO.

I sat back, and for a moment there was no Steel Rain. No impending panic or terror or frustration.

> I PRAY THAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE WHAT THE MINISTRIES FAILED TO DO TWO CENTURIES AGO. I HOPE THAT YOU CAN, BECAUSE SOMEPONY MUST. THE SINS OF THE PAST MUST BE ACCOUNTED FOR. THE MISTAKES MUST BE CORRECTED. ATONEMENT MUST BE PAID. EQUESTRIA NEEDS A SECOND CHANCE. RIGHT NOW, YOU AND OTHERS ARE CREATING THAT SECOND CHANCE. DON'T GIVE UP. I BELIEVE IN YOU, AND I KNOW YOU CAN DO IT.

>SPIKE

I stared at the screen for almost a minute, fully numb. Then the text disappeared, only to be replaced by:

>HIDE.

There was a resounding detonation, and for a moment I was certain that the generator had blown. Then it sounded again. The third time, the doors from the workshop blew inwards. Still, Spike didn't understand you couldn't hide from E.F.S.! No matter where we were in the room, they'd see our…

Wait. In the dark room, there were now suddenly a whole lot of blue bars. If they were blue to me, maybe they'd be red to the Rangers! The terminals stopped showing the logo and started

showing scrolling technical data. Weird formulas. Things that looked like weapon schematics. So…that's the plan. I tugged Stygius's wing, and we scrambled behind some chalkboards in the corner as heavy hoofsteps descended the stairs. The first one down was Grenades, turning this way and that as he pointed at hostiles that weren't firing yet.

Then he looked over at the terminals. "Sir! You're going to want to see this!" a mare shouted. Okay, so it was a little hard to tell genders in those suits.

Steel Rain trotted down, his eyes immediately drawn to the chalkboards and then to the terminals. "What is this?" He breathed…heavily. With those hoses cut, I bet he wasn't getting quite as much air as he would have liked. Slowly he walked over to the other Ranger next to the terminals. With their backs to us, we started inching towards the stairs.

"Wait…this is a trap!" As he shouted, the schematics disappeared, replaced by the picture of a very ugly mule presenting his posterior, grinning as he looked back over his shoulder. There was a hiss and a pop as four turrets dropped from the ceiling, another four shot up from the ground, and all eight proceeded to pummel the pair with heavy machinegun fire!

I ran for the stairs; as much as I'd have liked to stay and finish him off, even one hit from those cannons would paste both of us. And in the hidden room, those cannons were going off in a roaring cloud of slate and shrapnel. I sure hoped Stygius's ears would be okay as we were blasted by the shockwave. Seriously, Rain. Get a minigun or something for indoor work.

Together we burst out into the workshop. Minigun was kneeling next to Flamers in the blasted-out library. The orange mare had her helmet off, blood dripping from her ears and nose as she struggled to breathe. As soon as we emerged, Minigun swiveled to face us, standing between me and the injured Ranger. As much as I'd have liked to leap out the giant hole Rain had blown in the wall, the purring minigun motor dissuaded me. Besides, if she was in the library, that meant that the front door was open! Grinning, I raced into the living room.

Unless Steel Rain had been smart enough to bring reinforcements.

Two more Rangers stood at the front door. One had a missile launcher and a grenade machinegun setup. The other had anti-machine rifles strapped to his sides. Already alerted by Minigun's

fire, the pair were bringing their weapons to bear as we charged out of the workshop.

I changed course at once and darted for the first thing in front of me: the stairs. I doubted I'd outrun a missile's blast radius, but there weren't really many options besides running in the closest direction that was 'away'. Then suddenly Stygius wasn't above me anymore. The armored batpony disappeared, reappearing over Missile's head. What was that?! Had he just *teleported*? Kicks rained down, and while he didn't do much noticeable damage, it was hard to aim a rocket with somepony tapdancing on your head! The shot went low, exploding beneath the balcony and knocking me on my face.

I groaned as I lay there, sprawled out. "Really…I just want to check out of this funhouse…" I had a few seconds to compose myself, then the balcony jerked with a sharp crack. "Oh fuck no... " I groaned.

The balcony walkway collapsed with a shredding of wood. I heard a scream beneath me, followed by a crunch, and I rolled several times to get clear of the flying debris, coming with my face towards the ceiling. I spotted Minigun lying there wearing the walkway like a mantle.

"Kill her!" Steel Rain shouted from the workshop. Oh ponyfeathers, he did not sound happy at all. Stygius was keeping Missile occupied, swooping around his head and planting kicks and bucks. Anti-Machine, however, was free and clear to shoot at the mare lying on her back in front of him. Steel Rain came stomping out, and I was fairly certain he'd happily blast all four of us to finish me off.

I needed more gun. ... And I had it right in front of me! I reached out and grabbed AM's hoses with my fingers. Had he lowered his head, I would have been screwed. However, he pulled back, and that yanked me towards him. Kicking and scrambling, I spun around on my back beneath him, putting my hands where his forelegs met his body and my rear hooves to the sides of his pelvis. Setting myself, I grit my teeth and heaved AM completely off the ground!

His legs kicked wildly as I turned him to face directly towards the pony with the cannons and the shot-up armor. I grinned from ear to ear, looking at Steel Rain from upside down. My horn glowed as I reached up to the trigger mechanisms and fired the elevated Ranger's weapons as fast as I could. Even Steel Rain's armor couldn't take that. AM's guns were loaded with armor piercing and

incendiary rounds; just right for your local cyberpony. My aim was shit, but my luck wasn't; two shots hit home, biting deep into his chest and neck, and even Steel Rain was forced to take cover as I finally saw blood! Damn, he was a tough son of a mule, though; multiple anti-machine rifle hits and he hadn't dropped? Still, if he could bleed, he could be beaten! He could be *killed*... if only he didn't have a bunch of other ponies trying to kill me first!

"Stygius! The door!" I shouted. I couldn't turn AM the full ninety degrees to shoot Missile as well. So instead I ejected his ammo clips, lowered my hind legs, and gave his nethers a sharp kick to occupy his time before I heaved him off to the side. I really had no clue if I did any harm, or even if AM had anything there to harm in the first place, but it was better than nothing. Just trying to buy myself time. The dusky batpony blinked over to the door in a flash of blackish-purply light and yanked it open, and I rolled and half jumped, half fell outside. I just had to find out how he did that trick! Later... when I wasn't running for my life.

A missile blasted the door closed behind me, and I slowly rose on wobbly legs. Okay, I was outside. Now if that generator would just overload…I could hear some kind of electrical crackle and an ominous hum rising from the water wheel. If I could just get out of here, I'd be one happy pony.

And of course there was another Ranger outside.

"Oh come on!" I shouted as I pointed my shotgun at her and unloaded four rounds before I realized something was wrong. She wasn't defending herself. Hell, she wasn't even *armed*; what sort of Steel Ranger wasn't armed? She just stood there. Was there anypony actually inside this thing? The armor moved, tracking me…so there did have to be somepony in there. But wh--

Unfortunately, the Ranger outside did have one potent weapon after all: she'd delayed me. The front of the house blew out in a great wave of reinforced debris that landed on me and the unarmed Ranger alike with a heavy crunch. Steel Rain stepped out through the dust cloud, his once magnificent armor now quite shot to hell but already slowly repairing itself, pink light smoothing the holes punched in his chest. "You've caused everypony quite enough trouble, Security." He ejected the spent cannon rounds as he stepped out. Stygius landed next to me, shifting the rubble so I could crawl free.

"You're just forgetting one thing," I said as I saw the blue glow

coming through the broken wood paneling around the water wheel. Steel Rain loaded two shells as Missile and Grenades stepped out with him. Their weapons trained on me. None of them were biting...

"The T-51 armor has a nasty vulnerability to spark discharges," I said with a grin. Then I glanced at the corner of the house, where things were glowing and crackling, and then back to him. Standing on the porch, the three glanced at each other. "A discharge…like the one that needs to happen…right now!" Still nothing. The three looked right at me, weapons trained. I sighed and sat, throwing my hooves wide. "I give up. You win," I said in disgust at whatever higher power had missed the perfect chance to blow the generator. "You may now proceed with the gloating and the explanation of your nefarious plot." Maybe humor would buy me the time I needed?

But Steel Rain wasn't in a particularly expository mood. All three pointed their weapons at me. "Try not to scrap the leg."

"Death from above!" came a scream. The Steel Rangers looked up in time to receive a faceful of Rampage. The striped mare smashed into the trio like a wrecking ball. She'd replaced her armor with a suit of reinforced steel and battered, sharpened spikes. She set her hoofclaws into the decking and slammed Steel Rain with a clawed applebuck upside his face that dented his armor. "That's for Mallet."

Then there was the resounding crack of an anti-machine rifle above me, and Grenades reeled back as the side of her helmet nearly came off. I looked up at the shining horn of Lacunae. A PipBuck gleamed on her hoof as she dropped down beside me. "Sorry we are late."

"But how…the shield…" I muttered weakly.

"Damn it. I should let you die, Blackjack! I bet Rampage you'd be crying for help inside a day!" Psychoshy yelled as she darted down and smashed her hooves against Missile. The power hooves on the ends of her legs flashed, knocking the Ranger back through the door. "Now I got to pay this cunt a thousand caps that I don't have! You owe me a thousand caps, Blackjack!"

"Gotta love Psychie's logic," Rampage laughed as she continued to slam against Steel Rain, keeping his cannons off me. "I gave you your power hooves back, didn't I?" she said as she shoved his barrels away from Lacunae and me. He responded by smashing her face with a swing of his armored head. She grinned even wider as the two struggled against each other.

"Only 'cause I called in a favor with Hammersmith. Honestly, Rampage, how you blow up metal armor is beyond--" The mare swooped into the air in preparation for another dive and suddenly found herself face to face with the dusky Stygius. She froze hovering there as she stared into his eyes. "…me?"

Stygius blinked and then gave a small smile. I stared up at the two through the hazy, smoky air as the yellow pegasus actually blushed. She was fidgeting! Right now in the middle of a battle. "Um…hi," she said as she looked at him. "I'm…ah…" and then she muttered something.

"She does this *now*?" Lacunae asked in my mind. She carefully aimed another shot at Grenades, who took cover inside the house. I got to my hooves, my whole body numb.

Missile seemed to feel the same way as she began to fire her grenade machinegun up at the two. They darted away, the yellow mare glaring down at the Ranger. "Hey!" Psychoshy's wings snapped her into a dive that she pulled up from just in time to streak a foot above the ground. "I'm talking…" she screamed as she swooped up in an uppercut. "…to a really…" she continued as she rose up and smashed her rear hooves into Missile's face. "…hot guy here!" The pegasus pirouetted in the air and brought her front hooves down on top of his head. "So piss off!" she finished as the Ranger collapsed in a heap. Then she darted back up to the stunned Stygius and said shyly, "So…ah…um…What's your name?"

I doubted Stygius would have been able to answer, even if he could talk. But when Anti-Machine stepped out the gaping hole in the front and leveled his barrels at the mare, the batpony darted down as a shadowy blur and tagged all four hooves against his head, staggering the Ranger. From the shades of red the pair were turning as he flew up again, I was pretty sure there wasn't going to be another chance of fun with him for me.

"We need to get out of here," I said as I saw Minigun joining the fight. The instant one of them distracted Rampage, we were going to get hit by Rain's cannons. For a moment, I took in the scorched grass and blackened, blasted-out front of the house. It didn't look all that different from the rest of the Wasteland now. There were fires licking the upper stories. I imagined the unused nursery burning up, and my gut clenched. Nothing stayed good in Hoofington. Nothing beautiful.

The battle was a lot more even now but still precarious. The

Rangers had both firepower and resilience on their side, but now instead of running me into the ground, they had to pay some care towards their own defense. Lacunae and I kept up a rain of fire, Rampage struggled with Steel Rain, and Psychoshy and Stygius darted above them and rained down lightning kicks when their guards were down. Lacunae's anti-machine rifle and S.A.T.S.-enhanced marksponyship proved devastating as she stood magnificently within her shield. She and I blasted anypony that poked their heads out at us. They started getting smarter, though, moving in unison and firing at us in pairs so we couldn't keep them pinned.

Then Flamers came around the side of the house and hosed both Rampage and Steel Rain in a sheet of flame. The former's grip slipped a moment, and Steel Rain gave a great heave, smashing her to the ground. Then he turned towards us. "Teleport us out. Now!" I said in a rush.

"If I could do that, I would have before now. I can't teleport through that field," Lacunae said as she turned her rifle on Steel Rain. The Rangers, however, as if aware their leader's guns were about to be brought to bear, came out and fired as one. Lacunae focused, her shield flickering wildly at the firepower pouring down upon it. Anti-Machine and Minigun sent up a barrage at Stygius and Psychoshy; the pair of fliers darted about crazily. Despite their efforts, though, a line of minigun bullets stitched from Psychoshy's shoulder to her flank, amazingly not killing her but still sending her tumbling wildly and screaming as she tried desperately to get away before the weapon pulped her completely.

Stygius jumped through the air, blinking short distances in flickers of shadow to move beneath her and catch her in his hooves. The tough mare turned even redder; fortunately, her embarrassment wasn't going to last longer than a few more second--

Wait…what was that buzzing noise?

From the waterwheel area and the holes in the house's walls came a blue glow and an increasingly sharp, crackling buzz. Even Steel Rain paused, looking towards the source of the sound. Then everything went white.

~ ~ ~

I knelt in the middle of a hotel room in a Manehattan skyscraper,

wearing a maintenance uniform. “Serve Princess Luna well, and she will forgive your sins. Serve Princess Luna well, and she will forgive your sins,” I repeated over and over again in a frantic whisper. The desperation in my voice bordered on madness as I rocked slowly back and forth. Then the clock chimed ten, and I rose to my hooves. I turned and looked out the window towards the mountains of Canterlot and the rising sun beyond. “Please forgive me.”

I walked to the telephone. My horn glowed, and I lifted the receiver, spun the dial, and closed my eyes. A second or two later, a mare answered in a tense voice that suggested she’d been crying. “Hello? Pumpkin Cake.”

“Hi, Pumpkin. It’s me,” I said in a low, rushed voice. “Listen. I can’t talk now, but it’s important that you and Pound get out of there now. Get someplace safe, like a stable, right now.”

“What?” the mare gasped. “I can’t. Things are crazy over here right now. I think Pinkie has finally snapped. She’s been ranting about arresting ponies right and left! And they’re taking down Four Stars as we speak! Pinkie’s trying to purge the M.o.M. now that Teacher’s in prison, and we’re just trying to hold everything together!” I looked out the window at the great big Pinkie Pie balloons floating above the streets; huge, decapitated heads of the Ministry Mare.

“Listen to me, Pumpkin. Please…listen. You can’t worry about Pinkie or Teacher now. You can’t worry about anything except getting yourselves to safety. Do you understand? Get out of there in the next half an hour if you want to live,” I said with terrible evenness as I looked out at the pink hub building.

There was a tight silence on the other end. “What’s going on? Is this an O.I.A. thing? Does this have anything to do with the sabotage in our hub last night? What’s happening?” There was a mirror over the desk that I peeked at. I looked into my own sad blue eyes and closed them again. Then, calmly and deliberately, I hung up the phone.

Five seconds later it rang again. I stood there for a half dozen rings, then picked it up. Garnet, her voice edged with malice, said immediately, “You’re lucky we’re in the endgame and they’re not a priority, idiot, or I’d have you kill both of them yourself. Partypooper is activated. Your alpha target was Twilight Sparkle, but our sources say she’s in Maripony. So alpha is now Pinkie Pie. After that, confirm that everypony on the list is removed. You’ve taken steps with the M.o.M. hub?”

"Yes, but--"

"Good. Now do your duty, Agent."

I shuddered. "And then Luna will forgive me?"

"Sure. Whatever. We've received confirmation that the Ministries are colluding with the zebras. If we're quick, we can wrap this up without a slaughter. Now get to it and start eliminating those traitors." And then the mare hung up.

What was a few more deaths to a soul stained black with sin? But Luna would forgive me. She was my only hope.

I sighed and stood, trotting to the door. I walked down the hall, through a door, and into a maintenance hallway. When I reached a cargo elevator, I rode it upward. It pinged, and two more ponies trotted in. Both wore uniforms similar to my own.

"I tell you, something is going on. I heard Stable-Tec put out a priority alert!" the green stallion said cautiously. "You have to admit it, Pokey. This last week has been weird."

"Don't give me more of your conspiracy theories, Evergreen. If you tell me one more story of secret O.I.A. plots, space aliens abducting ponies, or zebra death curses, I swear I'm going to scream," the blue buck said with a roll of his eyes.

"Look, this is different. I mean, a priority alert? That means get to the stables *now*," the green stallion with a pine tree on his flank said, trotting nervously in place. "And Twilight's in Maripony doing something big. How do we know it's not related to the alert?"

The blue unicorn with a safety pin on his flank snorted and shook his head. "Yeah yeah, Evergreen. Just like last month. Just another one of their drills." The unicorn looked back at me, and I froze. "Hey, what do you think? Is something going on, or not?"

I didn't answer. Shouldn't answer. "If you have any loved ones, call them. Tell them to get to safety. Now," I whispered as my horn glowed faintly; barely a shimmer.

They looked at each other. "Hey, I don't know you. You new?" the green buck asked with a worried frown. "I thought they froze all transfers."

"Please. Tell them to get into the stables, underground, or to the M.A.S. hub," I murmured, my voice straining. "Please…"

"I think we need to contact secur--" was as far as the blue stallion got before the knives left their sheathes on the inside of my forelegs. A blade struck with inerring precision into his left eye. The blue stallion jerked as if electrified as the other knife pressed

against Evergreen's throat. The first blade twisted in the socket, and the blue unicorn collapsed in a heap. I left the blade in his eye socket for now to keep most of the mess inside as I contemplated the other stallion.

"Oh Celestia…oh Luna…oh please…" Evergreen begged as he lost control of his bladder and wet his coveralls. "I have a son…please… I have a son…"

I hesitated. *Kill him*, training said. *Kill him, and Luna will forgive. Kill him so he can't give alarm. Kill him because, in the long run, what does he matter? What's another life?* Pokey's was over, cut short by me and my inability to compose myself, knowing what I knew, and trying to give warning. Everything I was told me to kill Evergreen. Everything but one small part.

"Get to your son and get to safety. That's all that matters now. Understand?" I said softly. He sobbed and nodded so fast he looked as if he were going to snap his head clear off. I pulled a mirror from my pocket and used it to peek down the hall at a sensor camera. A second later, several wires were unplugged from the back.

"What's happening…what…" begged the stallion.

"Something bad," was all I said. I bit the back of Pokey's collar and pulled him into the short hall. Maybe he'd warn somepony rather than getting his son. Maybe I'd just killed both of them. *Serve Princess Luna well, and you will be forgiven.* It was my only chance. My only hope.

I pulled Pokey's body to the door leading out to the roof, making sure the blood oozing from the hole in his face soaked into his barding. Once on the roof, I plugged the wires back into the camera. No need to send a maintenance pony if it wasn't broken. Leaving the corpse on the roof, tucked in a corner out of view, I trotted over towards a stack of crates beside the broadcast dish. One was slightly off from the rest. I fished out a key and opened the crate.

Inside was a suit of black riot armor and a rifle case. I flipped it open and looked at the gleaming, finely-machined pieces. The morning light shone off the scope's lens. I levitated out the pieces and with care and finesse slowly screwed them together into a rifle longer than my body. My magical grip didn't waver in the slightest as I trotted to the edge and knelt down. I saw the distant pink tower of the Ministry of Morale hub and opened the breech. The butt had lines carefully cut into it, one for each sin I'd committed. The once-

smooth surface was rough and jagged.

The bullets were large, familiar, hateful things. I lifted one and examined the runes that would allow it to bypass normal materials and armor. I slid it home. Magical talismans in the weapon would assist its propulsion and path through the air. My StealthBuck activated, and both I and the gun disappeared. With practiced ease, I lowered the scope to my eye and peered through.

The magical scope peeled away the facade of the building, and I looked through the walls to the ponies within. Their images were so clear, I could almost pick out conversations from the movements of their lips. Panic, worry, and alarm consumed the M.o.M. hub. I swept through the familiar architecture; I'd studied every inch of it. Been inside several times.

Then I found the office I'd wanted. The mare inside, a pink mare with a messy pink-and-gray-striped mane, paced back and forth. She swung her head wildly, her lips working as she talked to herself. I slipped into practiced calm, pushing it all away. She was plotting a coup; Twilight and all her friends were. Their elimination was a sad necessity to secure Luna's rule.

Serve Luna well, and you will one day be forgiven.

I followed her pacing. Back and forth. Back and forth. I timed it. It was something I was always good at; I never had much in the way of magic, but I had the faith to take the shot and the knack of knowing exactly when and where the bullet would be. Back and forth. Back and forth. The familiar stillness passed through me as I put the crosshairs where she would turn. It'd be a second and a half for the complete turn. I licked my lips.

Pinkie Pie suddenly stopped, her eyes wide and staring as she looked around. I'd been warned about this: no doubt she was sensing something. A wobbly leg, a twitchy ear, or a creepy flank… something warning her of her impending demise. I kept the crosshairs on her head as she stared straight ahead, tears running down her cheeks. There was a look of horror on her face I'd never seen before. I had to wonder what it was like to know you were about to die. Would she call for help? She had to die before she could warn Twilight and the others that Luna was moving against them.

As soon as the Ministry Mares were taken out, government forces would take over the M.o.M., M.A.S., and M.o.A. Ponies loyal to the Princess would be installed. Then the zebra forces would be

annihilated in an overwhelming preemptive strike. So much had to happen, and in such a short time. If it was true that the Ministry Mares were actually conspiring with the enemy to depose the Princess and surrender to the zebras, there was no telling what might happen. One Ministry Mare had already given the enemy the means to make megaspells. The M.A.S. hub would be secured rather easily; Maripony would be far more challenging, but the M.A.S. wasn't an army. Even the M.o.A. and Shadowbolt Tower wouldn't stand long on their own.

Pinkie Pie was no longer frantic. She wasn't springing for the phone. In fact, she wore an expression that was almost…happy. She'd taken a figurine from her desk and hugged it to her chest as she looked at me. Right at me! I was so shocked that I pulled my eye from the scope. Then I looked back. She smiled so terribly sadly, her blue eyes shimmering with tears and regret, but happiness too. Her mouth moved silently. For a moment, I almost aborted. I should contact command and confirm.

Then I looked again at the old mare with the candy-cane-striped mane. 'Please.' Her mouth moved as she hugged the little statue tightly, slumped in the corner. 'Please. I don't want to burn.'

I stared for a second longer, looking Pinkie Pie in the eyes. I'd never looked in the eyes of my target and seen into their heart. I took a breath. I let it out. I pulled the trigger. The gun was precisely engineered, enchanted to be completely silent, and accelerated the bullet even more than the explosive inside the shell.

Relief spread across her face in a tired smile. I watched, unable to tear my eye away from the scope. The bullet tore through the M.o.M. shield, weakened due to my sabotage yesterday, and ignored the magical strengthening of the glass in Pinkie's office window. The projectile shattered the massive pane and buried itself right in the pink mare's chest. Her eyes bulged a moment as the round shot through her torso and into the wall behind her. Blood flowed from the corner of her mouth. Then she laid her head against the wall, still hugging the figurine as her eyes closed for good.

I pulled the eyepiece away, breathing harder than I ever had before. I bowed my head and closed my eyes. "Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of anoth--"

A horrible warmth bloomed on my features and I stared -- a second sun lit up the sky, expanding outwards from the direction of

Cloudsdale.

No. We were too late. We were all too late. The ministries had made their move.

I raced to my gear and threw it on. The M.A.S. shield rose up to full emergency strength around me as I put on the headset already piggybacked into the EBS network. “Control. Control! Come in please. We have a Celestia-level event in Cloudsdale! I repeat, a Celestia level event... in…”

There was a second sunrise today in Manehattan. A great roiling ball of green and red fire that seemed to seek out the buildings and their inhabitants. It spread in all directions, like burning water gushing through the canyons of the city. The flames swept up to the flickering shield around the tower. *Don’t look…* a tiny voice warned me. *Don’t look…*

But I brought the scope up and looked. And that tiny voice…that vital little voice…died inside me. The scope filtered out the dazzling glare of the flames so that I saw everything in perfect clarity. I watched ponies burning alive in the streets as they tried to scramble for safety. I watched a mare with mane and tail aflame streaking down the street as her coat burned away. I saw a family cower together in a bathroom as the fire seemed to sniff them out, flooding the buildings and roasting them alive. I swept my scope to the M.o.M. building. The weakened shields had failed at the base, and the fire was pouring in. The shield acted like a chimney, drawing the flame upwards and incinerating everypony inside.

Pinkie had known. She’d known.

There was no reply from Control. Cut off? Destroyed? It didn’t matter. I had a mission to do; I’d sworn to serve the Princess. Partypooper was active, and it was my duty to make sure that everypony on my list was eliminated. I’d go to Hoofington first. There were at least two targets there. Then Maripony, if it was still standing.

I disassembled the weapon and packed it away. I had a long way to go before I earned my forgiveness and a lot more ponies to kill in the meantime. I rode the cargo elevator to the basement, ignoring the shouts and screams of the residents and workers echoing through the tower. I reached the bottom, a room full of straining generators, and my radiation meter began to crackle. I chewed down a tablet of Rad-X.

“You there! Halt! Who--” a mare in a maintenance suit shouted.

Without hesitating, without even thinking about it, I drew my IF-44 submachine gun and put a three round burst in her chest. A curious hollowness filled me as I trotted over her body and walked to the door, entering a security bypass password that opened to a tunnel filled with magical radiation, reeking smoke, and screams. It was a promise of what was to come if I did not serve and receive absolution for my sins.

~ ~ ~

I felt the dream fade away and simply lay there, sprawled on my side. I could hear a distant klaxon blaring annoyingly over the hiss of the Hoofington rain and picked up a mare's voice talking in low tones.

"…just lying there. What if she's, like, dead?" Psychoshy asked.

"For the hundredth time, she's fine, Psycho. You were closer to death than she was. You're lucky Lacunae got to you before you were, like, dead," Rampage said. "She's half machine, and that spark discharge did to her what it did to the Rangers. Lacunae's confirmed she's dreaming. Her systems will repair themselves. If she's not awake in an hour, we'll head over to the Collegiate. Maybe they can do something for her."

I cracked my eye open. We were in another Robronco dealership; the smashed robot displays were everywhere. A campfire crackled merrily in one corner, and Rampage was roasting radroaches over the flames. Water poured in ribbons through holes in the roof and snaked over the filthy tiles between rusting piles of scrap. A strange blue-purple luminescence glowed through the grimy front windows. I looked around at other signs of habitation; ancient graffiti spray-painted on the wall read 'Fuck the Gearheads.' Bullet holes decorated the walls, and ancient Stable-Tec mattresses lay around the fire.

I closed my eyes and tried to think a moment though the staticy, scratchy feeling in my head. Another dream of the black mare. A mare who by now I had a sneaking suspicion was Psalm. Between that dream I had in the canyon, the vision of her in the war room, and what I'd seen just now... it was too much to be a coincidence. The thing was, I had no idea why I would have a Marauder in my dreams. The one back in Goldenblood's house had been a lot more abstract and... dream-ish than this one, as if my brain was trying to

do... *something*! It was like Psalm herself been put inside me; more than just a memory orb. Unicorn magic could extract memories from other ponies; could it also put memories *into* another pony? Triage had warned me that mucking around with memories was dangerous...

Ugh... I really needed to talk to a smart pony about this. And take some Med... er... hope the headache passed quick. I opened my eyes again and slowly sat up. "Sweet Celestia…that discharge packed a punch." I shook my head and then looked at my friends. "Did we win? Tell me you splatted Steel Rain." I knew I couldn't kill a helpless enemy, but I doubted that Psychoshy or Rampage would hesitate to finish off the rogue leader.

Rampage finished chewing a mouthful of radroach and swallowed. "Hey Blackjack," she said. Then, a moment later, she admitted with a sheepish smile, "It was a draw. We were all set to play can opener when the Seekers arrived. Like…all of them. We flew the heck out of there. Then the rain picked up, so we holed up in here," she said as she trotted closer. "So…how are you, Blackjack?" she asked in concern. "When you left, we were afraid you were about to spit your bit."

I sighed, stood, and shook myself. My combat armor reeked of smoke. I was going through armor something crazy; this had to be my sixth or seventh set. I rubbed my face…good, at least that hadn't burned away. Then I saw that my tail was singed short. I sighed again and shook my head. "You were right to be worried. I… I wasn't in a good way, Rampage. At all. I had a lot of junk I was trying to run away from." I sighed and looked at her with a sheepish smile. "Stuff that…well…you were trying to get me to deal with." Psychoshy scowled at me, then muttered to herself as she glared out the glowing windows.

"So... I have to ask... how'd you find me?" I asked, sitting down next to Rampage. "I mean, I really needed help, but I didn't expect anypony to just appear from nowhere. Particularly any of you."

"Well, we had it worked out. Scotch put Glory's PipBuck on Lacunae, and she scooped up a drum of radioactive waste to dump on herself. Your tag thingy was already loaded." Rampage chuckled. "Scotch Tape's been listening for you... for anypony, really, since you left us at the medical center. DJ Pon3 is off the air for some weird reason, so she did something to her PipBuck to make it scan for transmissions. Soon as you started talking, she rushed

downstairs crying that you were dying."
"Yeah, but how'd she teleport here?" I asked in confusion.
"Oh, that's simple. You mentioned Black Pony Mountain in your message, and we could see that your tag was nearby. I've been to the area before, so she magicked the location right out of my skull. Then she rolled around in that waste for five minutes, grabbed me and Psychoshy here, and poofed to the other side of Hoofington."
"Yeah. 'Cause I really wanted to help you," Psychoshy muttered, rolling her eyes.
Rampage snorted in annoyance. "Anyway. After that, it was just following your tag to the big pink bubble... and watching all the Seekers swarming in from the north. Lacunae was beside herself when she couldn't get through, but Psycho crossed the barrier no problem."
"It's because her mom was Fluttershy," I said, looking over at her. The yellow mare flushed, turning away in embarrassment. "How's everypony else?"
"Well, we've been worried since you took off. Glory, P-21, Scotch, and Boo made it back to Chapel safe and sound, and since then we've been just waiting for something to happen so we could come running. The Harbingers made only one or two little skirmishes around the air base. P-21 is having it rough. Scotch isn't much better." The striped mare flushed. "It's probably for the best we came. I was feeling nervous around her. I mean, she wasn't sad, but still…better safe than sorry, right?"
Safer than me with Boing. "And Glory? How is she?" I asked at once.
"Exhausted. Tired. Frustrated she couldn't help you. Scared to death you were angry with her," Rampage said in quiet but firm tones. "She's worried you blame her for bringing you back like this." I didn't reply, and she asked evenly, "Do you?"
I sighed. "A little. I mean, yeah…death would have been worse. But…yeah. A little stupid part of me is mad that I didn't get a choice in it. In any of it." I rolled upright, looking at the flames. "But…that's life, isn't it? It's not what happens to you. It's how you deal with it. And I've been dealing by shoving my head up my ass, looking for things to shoot or run away from." Then I looked around. "Speaking of…where're Stygius and Lacunae?"
"On the roof. Your…he…" Psychoshy gave a little snarl.
"So, is Stygius your new buckfriend?" Rampage asked. "Because

from the smell when we checked you out for injuries, you two were awfully close."

I flushed at once. What, was everypony sniffing me while I was out? "What? No! He's just a nice guy I had sex with. That's all," I said as I stood. There were streams of data in the corners of my vision; I assumed that was my EFS rebooting. For some reason, both of them were staring in shock. "What?"

"*Just* a nice guy you had sex with?" Psychoshy drawled incredulously.

"Um…yeah?" I asked in confusion as Rampage covered her face with her hoof. "What?"

"Security…slut of the Wasteland. Who woulda thought?" Psychoshy said in her usual snide tones. Oh, she better not pretend like she'd never had a roll in the hay or two for the fun of it!

Rampage paused, as if trying to figure out how to break something terrible to me. "Blackjack…Glory is your special somepony, right?" I nodded. "How could you do this to her?" Rampage asked, looking concerned.

"How could I do what to her?" I asked as I looked from one to the other. "I had sex with him. And... I was able to do it without killing him. I mean…Rampage…I kept myself under control the whole time!" I gave a crooked smile to the striped mare who just stared in shock. My smile became a little more uncertain. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"I…but…You…" she stammered in agitation, her hooves waving in the air... and then suddenly she smiled. "You know what…I'm just going to step out of this sticky little detail, 'kay? This is something that is between you and Glory, and I'll just be watching on the sidelines…with popcorn." Psychoshy gave a scornful snort and looked away.

I never imagined that me getting laid would be a subject of such drama.

I sighed and stood. "I need to talk to somepony real quick. It won't take long." Rampage nodded, and I trotted into the back corner and turned on my broadcaster. I slumped down and thought for a bit about what I needed to say.

"Hey. Scotch Tape. I don't know if you can hear me right now, but if you're picking this up, could you please go get the others?" I sat there a moment, looking over at Psychoshy getting harassed by Rampage. "Hey everypony. It's me. Blackjack. I hope that you're

actually getting this. Knowing my luck, I'm sending it straight to the Seekers. So I'll be quick."

"I wanted to tell you that you were right, Glory. I shouldn't have left. I shouldn't have run away. I should have been strong enough to face my fears with you rather than tearing halfway across the valley. I know that letting me go off on my own couldn't have been easy, but I want you to know that I'm better now. I have friends helping me and... and I've started to try and deal with my problems. I know... sounds like an impossible task. Shooting things is easier. Running is easier. But in the end, I hurt people who didn't deserve it. New things to atone for... like Scoodle."

My comments cut off Rampage mid-stride, and she stared at me from across the room. I just looked back at her, and her eyes narrowed. Something I'd have to deal with later. I closed my eyes, resting my head against the cool, moist cinder block. "P-21... I want to tell you something. I want to tell you how goddamned brave and awesome you are. You actually had the guts to do something I couldn't. You're doing the right thing. And I hope that you get to have something none of the stallions ever got to have... a family. I guess that makes you unique in two ways." I chuckled with a small smile. "I know you're hurting right now. But I know... I just know... you're tough enough to stick it out. Anypony who follows me around for a month without going crazy can do anything."

I looked down at my PipBuck. Was I even doing this right? Fuck it. At least I'd get it said, even if they didn't hear it. "Scotch Tape, I hope you're helping Glory and keeping an eye on P-21. I know he's not the most talkative pony. I know he's probably frowning right now. But he loves you. I'm sure of it. But please be patient. I know you've waited a long time for him... but it'll still take him a while to open up." Then I smiled. "And yes, Boo. I'm here. I'm fine. You be a good pony too. Don't make a mess for Glory." I sighed and shook my head with a smile. "I know you're a real pony, Boo. You'll show us all sooner or later."

I looked over at Rampage and Psychoshy; they were staring coldly at me. "Glory... I want you to know that I love you. I don't care who you look like. I love you. I always will. And I hope when I see you again I can show you just how much I do." I chuckled again. "I met a guy. He's pretty quiet, but he's nice. He helped me get through what happened on the boat. Real champion in bed. Something about fliers... I know you're not into guys, but I hope the two of you

can be friends." I trailed off, then thought a moment and couldn't think of anything else to say. Psychoshy stared at me, mouthing 'champion' soundlessly.

"Well, I should probably get going. I'll talk again soon. Hopefully... everything will work out and I'll be back right away. Take care." And then I turned off my PipBuck's broadcaster and sat back.

"Another Scoodle?" Rampage asked in a sharp tone.

"Yeah. It was an accident, but I'm still to blame." I kept my voice even as I looked at the glowering earth pony. "It's something I'll have to deal with myself. Sorry, though," I said, unable to meet her eyes.

"Sorry?" she growled as she reared up and shoved me back into the wall. "You kill a kid and all you say is sorry? Fucking sorry?!" she yelled down at me. I wanted to fight back, but there wasn't any anger left in me.

"What else can I say, Rampage? It was an accident. I know that doesn't make it okay... but it happened because I was out of it. The fatigue... everything that's going on... I killed her." I lifted my metallic fingers to my face. "I almost lost my mind that night, after it happened. I deserved to. But some ponies at Happyhorn gave me the help I needed." Rampage paced back and forth in front of me, as if deciding whether or not to stomp me into scrap metal. I wasn't sure if I would stop her if she did. "So... yes. Sorry. If I'd been stronger and faced my problems sooner... " But there was nothing left I could say.

Rampage hissed to herself as she finally looked away. "Then you better get better, Blackjack. Quick. You're supposed to be one of the good ponies. But running off... killing a kid... fucking a guy behind Glory's back? Fuck, it hasn't even been a day and you do all that?"

"Girl moves quick. Nothing wrong with that," Psychoshy smirked, getting a flat look from both of us. "What?"

"Sorry, Rampage. I messed up," I said as I met her eyes. There was a look of betrayal about them. "I'm not as good as I should be... but I'm trying to do better. And I can if you'll give me a chance and your help."

"I... you... but... ARRRGH... " She ground her teeth together, then finally slumped. "Okay. One chance. Not like... Not like I haven't done messed-up things too. But Blackjack... not again. Got it? I'll help you, but Celestia save me, you kill another kid, even by fucking accident, and your chances are done. You hear me?" What

else could I do besides nod? She sighed. “Fuck... ”

I sighed as I picked myself up, getting back on my hooves. Now wasn’t the best time but... “In any case, Rampage…I know I have no right to ask you this, but I need your help now.” The striped mare glowered in anger as I gave a worried little smile. There wasn’t any good way to ask this. “Rather…I need the help of one of the people inside you. I need to talk to Twist.”

Rampage took a step back at once, her eyes widening in alarm. “Blackjack…you just told me you... and now you want me to... ? Are you crazy?” I could only nod and gave her a sympathetic smile. This wasn’t easy for her. “You know I don’t like that. I mean…what if she’s crazy or something?”

“She’ll be in good company?” Psychoshy suggested.

“I’ve talked to her once before, Rampage. She was fine. Upset, but fine. I need to ask her some questions that will help me... and maybe you too. Can I see if I can draw her out?” I asked as I gave her a concerned smile. “I won’t try if you don’t want me to. It’s not vital.”

Rampage groaned and slumped. “You had to play that card didn’t you?” She took a deep breath. “Okay…I’ll give you a shot. Just… make sure I come back? Please?” The fear was clear in her eyes.

“I will,” I said as I looked her in the eyes, trying to remember what I’d seen in memories of Twist. “Sergeant Twist, report for duty!” I snapped with as much authority as I could muster. Rampage gave a little half smile and shook her head. “Twist, Big Macintosh would like to have a word.” Psychoshy scowled in confusion as Rampage sighed with a patient smile.

I’d have to do something else. I closed my eyes and remembered the projection in the workshop. “You had a candy store in Hoofington with an apartment above it. You’d go down every morning to make candies. You had a roommate, a quiet black unicorn named Psalm…” I said in a low, soft voice, watching as her eyes gradually lost focus and grew round. “It was burned when the city was attacked after Littlehorn. And the name of your store was…”

“Peppermint Parlor,” Rampage whispered, her eyes locking with mine. “Please…I don’t want to be here. Please…” she begged, shaking her head slowly.

“It’s okay, Twist. I won’t keep you long. But I need to ask you a question about Psalm. Your friend?” I said in low, careful tones.

"Psalm…" She closed her eyes, her smile vanishing. "She wasn't my friend. Not after Shattered Hoof and Big Macintosh." Now there was clear anger in her pink eyes, but she just sighed. "What do you want to know about her?"

"I think I've been seeing her in my dreams. Not just seeing her. It's like she's inside me. Like I am her. Do you have any idea if that's possible?" I asked as I put a hoof on her shoulder.

"Blackjack…I died…and I'm talking to you now. Right now, I think anything is possible. Besides, you're the one with the horn; you tell me?" She had a ghost of a smile on her face for a moment, then looked around and lost it. "She was my first marefriend. I worked in the Parlor with Doof while she worked off at that school. It was… nice. A sweetheart in bed too, but it didn't work out. We were better as friends." She sighed, closing her eyes. "All three of us enlisted together after they razed old Hoofington. I barely escaped with some photographs."

"What happened at Shattered Hoof? And afterwards? The mare I've seen in my dreams…she's a killing machine." My comment made Rampage flinch.

"Psalm…It was my fault. At the enlistment, she shot a perfect score at her trials. She was a natural markspony. I told her she needed to accept a combat role with me and Doof. It wasn't enough to be support. But…it was different for her. Me…I was fighting for my life. Doof, he'd spray thousands of bullets for fun. But for Psalm, it was personal. She wasn't just fighting the enemy; she was murdering them. They were nearly helpless against her. But Celestia damn me, I told her to keep it up. Even when she had nightmares. Even when she wanted to put a bullet through her own head. I tried to make her toughen up." She shook her head. "Instead…I think I killed something inside her."

"Twist…what happened at Shattered Hoof?" I asked gently.

"Everything. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. Applesnack and Big Macintosh had been fighting about everything. Big Macintosh refusing to reenlist for a sixth tour. Applesnack's zebra bigotry bullshit. The weather was crap, and Jetstream was doing more cloud management than keeping an eye out for trouble. Celestia was there. The zebra envoys were there. They had three times as many guards as we'd agreed. Goldenblood warned us to be on high alert for the zebras attempting to kill Celestia; everything was a mess in the 'backchannels', and he had no idea what they

were thinking. But the negotiations started. I was out in the field with the Proditors; they could sniff out a mistcloak like nopony could."

She rose on her hooves and turned to face the grimy, flickering windows. "The talks seemed to be going well at first, but pretty soon there was a sticking point. Something about reparations…I don't know what. Then suddenly some sort of gas bomb went off in the diplomatic tent, and a bunch of zebra soldiers came out of a hidden tunnel right next to it. Everything went nuts after that." She closed her eyes, lifting her head. "Applesnack was screaming. Chaos. Big Macintosh stood over Celestia, fending off wave after wave of attacks. Goldenblood was yelling for Celestia to get out of there, but we were all busy fighting. Zebras all over the place. Third Battalion, supposed to be guarding the southeast, wasn't responding; we found out later that a bunch of them were traitors. Finally the Shadowbolts blasted in, the zebras got routed…and Big Macintosh was dead. Bullet through the heart, right at the end." She hung her head and sniffed, tears rolling down her cheeks. "There wasn't anything anypony could do. And Psalm…I never saw her after that day except for one time when she was packing up her gear at Miramare. Didn't say a word. Just…left."

I walked up beside her. "She was obsessed with Luna forgiving her," I replied as I brushed her mane out of her face. Stygius and Lacunae trotted in, and the batpony looked at Rampage in concern. Lacunae simply stared out the window.

She looked back at me with eyes filled with regret. "She was convinced she was damned for the lives she took." She made a disgusted noise in her throat. "It was silly; we all killed. It was war. But she never shook it off. She turned her back on all the other Marauders." Twist shook her head hard, then sighed. "Afterwards, we all just drifted apart. Applesnack was sent to Zebratown…that was ironic. Jetstream…they tried to give her Big Macintosh's position, but she cracked. Refused to withdraw from one nasty fight and ordered ponies to search for Stonewing and Macintosh. Vanity just quit. Became some sort of noble liaison or something. Doof…yeah…He rotted in Hightower, where he belonged. For a while it was me and Echo, but he was offered a transfer. Then it was just me. I was the last Marauder. Master Sergeant Twist."

Then she hung her head again. "I'm sorry I can't help you, Blackjack. I wish I knew what became of my friend. I wish I'd been

a better friend for her. She was always so quiet that I just assumed she was okay with everything…I should have listened. I should have…should have…" Her voice dropped to a whimper. "I'm sorry…"

Then she shuddered, and Rampage said quietly, "Oh, I hate that feeling…" She sniffed and wiped her eyes as she looked at me. "She's gone, Blackjack. Or she's gone back in. Ugh…I feel like I want to cry for a week, and it's all for junk that happened to somepony else." She looked at Psychoshy and said sharply, "Not a word from you or it's your turn."

I'd expected more from the yellow pegasus, but she gave a dismissive shrug. "Hey. Your crazy? Your problem." Psychoshy glanced at Stygius and started to chew on the end of her mane as he trotted over to the fire. There were definitely some conflicting emotions of her own there. When she saw me looking, she immediately spat the hair from her mouth and pointedly looked out the windows again.

Stygius gave me a hug as soon as he reached me. Was it just me, or could I hear teeth grinding? He wrote 'U ok?' on his slate, holding it up as his amber eyes looked at me in concern, head cocked slightly to the side.

"Yeah. Sure. Just more crazy dreams that don't make any sense. How about you?" I asked, and he pointed at a few holes punched in his armor. Then he pointed at Lacunae with a wing and then waved his hooves in circles before him. He patted where he'd been shot and grinned. "So, you were shot, but Lacunae healed you up?" He nodded enthusiastically. I supposed batponies didn't have much in the way of healing magic. Speaking of which, though...

"So... I got to ask. Can you... um... " I looked at Lacunae and then back at him. "Teleport?"

He blinked then grinned. Then he was gone, and there was a shadowy flicker behind me. A hoof tapped my flank, and I looked back. There was another dark flash and he vanished. A second later he touched my shoulder, standing in front of me again.

"Impressive!" Lacunae breathed. He flushed and kicked a pebble bashfully. "What is that ability called? What is your range? How often can you do it? Can you take others with you?" He blinked at her, seemingly at a loss. "I can touch your mind directly if that would make explanations easier." That comment made him look positively alarmed, and he waved his hooves in front of him.

He got his slate out of his armor and wrote '"flying between shadows". few yards. Lots. No, sorry.'

Lacunae nodded, "Interesting. We always knew Luna's guards possessed mysterious powers, but we never knew if they were bestowed by the Princess or came from some other source. Luna forbade us from investigating what her guards could do." The alicorn rolled her eyes a little. "I must admit that I disliked dealing with them anyway. It is rather difficult to speak with somepony who's always using the Royal Canterlot Voice."

Stygius laughed silently, erased the board, and wrote, 'Uncle's armor has that. Stupid loud.'

"Absolutely fascinating. The things we could learn from you if you joined us in Unity," she said in a musing tone that was getting more and more Goddess-y by the second.

"You don't have to talk about him like he's some sort of specimen," Psychoshy said sharply. I found that odd, given that Sanguine would have definitely treated him as such!

"The Goddess thought his kind extinct," Lacunae said in that haughty, annoying manner. "The Goddess is sur-- impressed that they persist, even today."

I groaned and rolled my eyes. "And how is the Goddess today?" I asked as I looked at Lacunae, trying to change the subject given the wariness spreading on Stygius's face.

She glared flatly back at me. "Do not patronize the Goddess, Blackjack. The Goddess knows that we will never truly be allies, as you failed to deliver Chimera to the Goddess as promised." She gave a rather bitchy little smirk. "However, the Goddess finds your troubles and travails quite a welcome distraction from the Goddess's grand designs and so permits this one to continue to accompany you. The Goddess looks forward with great anticipation to your reunion with Morning Glory."

So…now I was entertainment to the Goddess? I had an image of a great big alicorn beast in a fuzzy pink robe and hoofslippers sitting on a couch with a huge tub of popcorn, watching a terminal of me getting shot up on a daily basis. ... Okay, I supposed that *would* be pretty entertaining. Lacunae continued in a smug tone, "The Goddess awaits the success or failure of the Stable Dweller and her friends in Canterlot. Until then, the Goddess will take her satisfaction in watching your struggles."

"Well, in the meantime, I need to chat with Lacunae, so if you

could please put her back at the controls, I'd appreciate it," I replied. Maybe LittlePip and the Stable Dweller were teaming up? I really wished I'd known what Homage had tried to tell me…was it really just yesterday? "Or we can throw around a few more threats about you annihilating me."

"One day, you shall be chastised for your arrogance and disrespect. Oh yes, and we look forward to that day with great anticipation!" Oh sweet Celestia, she was actually rubbing her hooves together.

I grinned back at her. "Ah, but if you do that, you won't get to watch me getting my rear blown off, now will you?"

She snorted sullenly, and then her sneer vanished. You know, I think I was starting to grow on the Goddess. She'd stopped bellowing at me; that was progress. Right? Lacunae drew a deep breath. "*Must* you antagonize her, Blackjack?"

I nodded primly and said with a smile, "Yes. Yes I must. I figure, if I'm the butt of some higher power's amusement, every jab I can get in on her is me balancing the scales a little bit more." I relaxed my grin and nudged her shoulder. "So how are you, Lacunae?"

The purple alicorn seemed amused by the question. "I am as I always will and can only be. But thank you for asking," Lacunae replied. "What of you, Blackjack?"

I looked around the ruined Robronco store as I sighed. "I'm having weird dreams of a pony who I think was the Marauder Psalm." I shook my head as I glanced up at the alicorn, who wore an inscrutable expression. "This is way more than just a memory orb. It's more than just her experiences. It's like I *am* her. But I can't figure out how or why. Twist doesn't know what happened to her, and from my dreams she must have died two centuries ago." Then I paused and snorted in disgruntlement. "Then again, between Twist, Doof, and Brass, I guess I shouldn't count anything out."

The alicorn just stared off for a minute before answering, "I am sure you will find out eventually, Blackjack. As for your dreams, they do not seem to be undermining your sense of self. It is merely unusual." I frowned, knitting my brows together, but she continued. "Has Rampage told you about Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape?"

Well, that took my attention. Really, I'd meant to ask sooner. "Not much. She said they reached Chapel safely, though. They're all okay, right?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, Glory had to remain behind and is seeing to both with the aid of Sekashi. The zebra's healing tonics and stories

are quite a balm to all three. Glory shows no signs of reverting to her normal appearance, though, and P-21 is in the midst of terrible pain from withdrawal." She paused and then added, "Scotch Tape is feeling better, however. She wants to install flushing toilets, but she's terrified of getting one as a cutie mark."

"And Boo? She's okay, right?" I asked with a concerned smile.

Lacunae sighed. "I am not sure. I tried reading her mind, but it is... simple. She misses you greatly. She keeps searching Star House and Chapel as if she's trying to find you." I'd have to get back soon. Glory and the others could understand why I left, but Boo couldn't.

"So, what are you doing all the way out here, Blackjack?" Psychoshy asked in irritation from over by the windows.

"Well…aside from getting my butt shot a lot, I need to get to Hightower and find a way inside." I trotted to join her by the flickering blue windows. "Where the hay are we anyway?" I asked, using my scorched tail to wipe some of the grime off the glass. Then the answer became clear.

Oh. Hightower.

The imposing edifice was only a block away; from the sight of the mountains behind it, I guessed we were just to the west of the massive building. Before, it had seemed a stern monolith of gray stone. Now, up close, that looming structure was cracked and broken along the southern face, fractures radiating along the surface. A glaring inferno roared within, and flames of blueish-purple erupted out of the side in bizarre loops and whirls. An unwholesome corona surrounded the broken building. About halfway up the south face gaped a massive hole; metal fins jutted out towards the sky. Surrounding the prison was a decayed concrete curtain wall with towers every hundred feet. Spikes and loops of razor wire adorned the wall, and I spotted strange glowing pony shapes tangled in the wire, wiggling and fighting as they burned with magical flame.

"You want to go in there?" Psychoshy asked with a tilt of her head. "Have fun!"

"What…what happened?" I murmured weakly as I stared at the sight. At least when I'd seen the woods surrounding Hippocratic Research, I hadn't known just how dangerous it would be. Everything about the prison screamed 'death trap'.

Rampage answered me. "Direct hit by a giant zebra missile, only the balefire bombs in the warhead didn't detonate properly. There

should just be a crater there. Instead, the bombs have been cooking the inside of that prison for the last two centuries or so." I groaned and hid my face in my hooves. "Look at it this way, Blackjack: now you'll get to be an *undead* cyber unicorn pony."

I sighed. It would have been safer and smarter to walk away. Deal with the problem some other way. Just forget EC-1101…

"So… how do I get inside?" I asked with a grimace.

* * *

One could make the argument that I was learning and trying to take things carefully. One could also make the argument that I wasn't learning enough since I still planned to go inside. Both arguments were made by Rampage and Psychoshy as we trotted closer. We were still a hundred feet from the curtain wall when I started to get steady clicks from my PipBuck. I glanced over at Lacunae hovering above us. "Well, at least you won't have much of a problem here, right?"

But the purple alicorn shivered in the rain. It was afternoon, and things were starting to get darker. "I am sorry, Blackjack. While the radiation is quite lovely, the Enervation nearby is extremely potent." I thought of the silver ring in Tenpony and how the Enervation effect strengthened with deaths. I looked up at the prison that had housed thousands of prisoners and imagined dozens of green glowing rings scattered throughout. Hopefully the two would cancel each other out for her… but it looked doubly bad for Stygius and Psychoshy.

The concrete wall was twenty feet high, but the blast and exposure damage had chewed through the top yard or so, exposing jagged metal supports draped with rolls of hooked wire. Glowing undead ponies were tangled up in it, screaming and thrashing as they struggled. Even after two centuries and a direct balefire hit, Hightower was still functioning as a prison, even if it was a prison of the damned. The klaxons inside sounded on and on, endlessly warning folks of a disaster that nopony was going to respond to.

The tangled, feral ghouls fired some sort of balefire magic at us when we drew too close, and we immediately backed out of range. Well… undead ponies flinging radioactive fire was one hazard, but that was nothing compared to the turrets atop each watchtower. Their size made the energy turrets that Glory had set up in Flank

look like beam pistols on tripods. If even one was working, it could probably vaporize any flier.

"Any chance you could just teleport me to the top?" I asked hopefully, grinning at Lacunae.

"Better not, Pink," Rampage sneered behind me. We all looked at her scowling leer and she snorted, "The fucking tower's got nasty spells for any fucker that tries to teleport in and out of there. Oh, you'd port in... right into an interrogation cell. And teleport out into a disciplinary cell."

"Razorwire," I murmured as I slowly turned around to face her. I really didn't know about this. The Angel was *bona fide* evil, but Razor was a criminal too. "How do I get into the prison, then?"

"Oh, spray-paint 'Princess Luna is a mule fucker' on a wall in Canterlot. That should do it," the striped mare said with her disdainful leer as she stepped past me and looked up at the edifice. "You don't break into the tower. You dream about getting out. Even if the only way out is a bullet in the head."

"Right. But how did you physically get into the prison? Is there a gate or what?" I asked as I looked up and down the block the prison occupied.

"What? You want me to give you the fucking tour for dumbasses, Pink?" The striped mare pointed at a smaller, uglier gray building on the opposite side of the street to the west of the prison. "Processing, admin, and visitation. Not that I got any," she added with a scowl as we walked along towards it, careful not to attract the attention of the thrashing, glowing ghouls. "Once they finished putting a hoof inside every orifice, you got your uniform and your soap on a rope and they'd extend a bridge over the street."

It was as good a place as any to start. Processing looked like a miniature prison itself, but the rusty chainlink fence was easy enough to push through, and I stomped down on the razor wire that was set out around the base. A rusted metal mesh netting was strung out over the parking lot; for pegasi, I presumed. The heavy metal doors were intact, but Stygius found a window adjacent to it and peered inside. A second later he disappeared in a flash of black light.

"That is so cool," Psychoshy murmured.

"Does he make you all wet and juicy?" Rampage smirked. Psychoshy flushed and scowled back as the striped mare nickered. "He sure makes me want to ride his pony stick."

"Back of the line--" Psychoshy started to say. Then Rampage hugged her arms around the pegasus's neck and gave an immense heave, swinging her in an arc and slamming her flat on her back on the crumbling asphalt. Rampage put her hooves on her splayed-out wings, pinning them to the earth.

"I set the fucking line! You think you're a badass, don't you, Psychoshy?" Rampage shouted in her face. "You're nothing. You are fucking nothing but a scared little feathercunt! In the Tower, I knew mares that'd carve off your wings and make you their earth pony bitch! You think Wasteland ponies are fucking mean? You think rape and murder is bad? I was locked up with fucking mares that had nothing else to do but think of ways to hurt each other. Killing was for when they got bored or annoyed. You are fucking nothing compared to them! A scared little yellow fuckpony!" she screamed into Psychoshy's wide eyes.

That was about as far as I let Rampage get before I pressed Vigilance into her ear canal and blasted a round into her head. The armored mare jerked atop Psychoshy, and as she collapsed, I shoved her off. Psychoshy started to shake, then scrambled to her hooves. She hung her head, her mane covering her face.

"Hey, it's alright... " I said gently to her, reaching out a hoof as she trembled.

"No, Blackjack. It's not fucking alright!" she said as she whirled at me, tears in her eyes. "I used to never be afraid of anything! I could kick anypony's ass whenever I wanted. I beat *you*! I was never afraid. Never! Now... now I'm scared of everything! And I've got *you* pitying me! Don't you get it?" She sobbed, grimacing. "I would have rather have died than... than *that!!*"

"I'm sorry," I murmured as I said next to her. Rampage groaned.

Psychoshy tilted her head back and snorted angrily. "Oh, just rub it in, why don't you? I can smash a skull in a flash, and it doesn't matter because I think about tomorrow and it scares me to death. And you know what scares me most of all?" I shook my head and she finished in a near whisper, "That it's never going to stop."

Rampage groaned again and sat up, then rubbed her left ear vigorously. "Ugh, what's with this ringing in my ear?" She blinked, then spat out a mouthful of bloody bullet fragments. "Blackjack, we've got to find a better way to snap me out of it. This is just getting ridiculous... " Then she caught Psychoshy's sniff and looked over at the yellow pegasus hanging her head in shame. "Um...

‘kay… ”

It wasn’t always about me. Hoofington didn’t just suck for me. It sucked for everypony. Sanguine had watched his family die before his eyes. Psychoshy’d lost everypony that she’d believed cared about her. “I found out some things, Psychoshy. About you. Your mom and dad. I know… I know it probably doesn’t matter, but they loved you very much. When they thought you were lost, it nearly broke both of them. They were going to name you Whisper.”

She lifted her head and looked at me with a teary eye and gave a little hiccup and sniff. Finally she muttered thickly, “That’s a fucking horrible name.”

“Better than Go Fish,” I replied. That actually got a smile out of her.

She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “Fuck… I can’t believe you actually made me cry. Badasses aren’t supposed to cry. You never cry,” she muttered.

“I sob my eyes out every other day, it feels like. You should have seen me after Priest and Scoodle… and Boing.” That drew a questioning look from my friends, and a dark glare from Rampage, but there’d be a time for that later. “Crying is the soul dealing with pain. Otherwise you keep it all inside and it drives you crazy.” Rampage muttered something about me playing therapist and being doomed. At least Lacunae’s nod let me pretend I’d said something profound.

Psychoshy sat a moment and sniffed. “I’m sorry about that. Priest, I mean.” I sighed; late but sincere was better than never offered at all. She stood and pushed back her mane. “Psychoshy’s a stupid name, too… and calling myself Fluttershy. I just… everypony loved her. I just wanted that.” She looked at her flank. “Stupid cutie mark. Who wants to like a mare with that on her flank… ”

I had to admit, it wasn’t a mark that suggested good interpersonal skills. “We are what we choose to be,” Lacunae said softly as the doors to processing began to bang and thump.

I smiled and sighed as I saw her staring at where Stygius had disappeared. “We’re not in a relationship, Psychoshy. If you like him… well… do something about it.” She looked back at me flatly, and I added, “He’s a good guy. A little bit impulsive, but he means well. Just try and be nice.”

“Blackjack, don’t. Please don’t.” Psychoshy said as she shook her head. “I’m not a nice pony. I don’t know how to be nice. He’s not

going to like me. First cute guy with wings... ever... " I found the fact that I was talking about relationships with a mare who hated my guts outside a prison that was engulfed in magical fire a touch surreal.

"Like the alicorn said," I replied as Stygius shoved the doors open a crack, just enough for Rampage to trot up and force open a gap wide enough for everypony. We entered, Psychoshy last. Stygius gave the yellow mare a concerned look as she walked past with her eyes downcast. He looked at me in worry, but I couldn't think of what to do other than smile in encouragement. I wondered if LittlePip had to deal with interpersonal problems as well as massive world shaping ones. Seemed like I just collected problems all over the place.

We made our way through Processing. Between my lockpicking, Stygius's flicker teleportation, and Lacunae's cheating alicorn magic, we were able to bypass most problems. We came to a back office that had been turned into a camp of sorts, a half-dozen ancient bodies clustered around an impromptu fire in a waste bin. I supposed they'd been the staff that hadn't tried to run. Every skull had a bullet hole.

One had left a note. 'We're sick and running out of food. We can still hear screams and alarms from the prison. The warden has it all on lockdown. They're going to die. We're all going to die. Luna and Celestia are dead. It's the end of the world. The fat one asked to be let back inside but it's too late. I don't even know how he got out. Even if we could extend the bridge, the systems would kill him before he reached the prison building. I'm so sorry, Russet. I hope you and Daddy are safe in Hoofington. Mommy won't be coming home from work, but she loves you.'

I sighed and folded it back up. I'd seen so many, but they still got to me. I supposed that was a sign I was still a pony. I returned the note to the bones of the unicorn and carefully stowed away the revolver they'd used. A .32 caliber; hardly impressive but better than nothing. There was also a twenty gauge pump action shotgun and a box of ammo. I took it apart, replaced the riot gun's firing pin and spring, and ate the barrel. Psychoshy found fifty caps in a drawer, and Stygius located a stash of drugs. The healing potions looked black and acidic in their bottles, but the rest of the chems were good.

The note confirmed my worst fears, though. I trotted up to the

drawbridge and took my first peek over the wall. The gap between the prison building and the wall had dozens of ghouls, perhaps more than a hundred, roaming around the concrete space or tangled in the razor wire. One long road completely covered in chainlink led through it to the main doors several hundred feet distant. I couldn't see any way we could get inside.

Damn it... I sat down hard at the edge of the bridge, looking across as my PipBuck clicked. Thanks to my cybernetics I was resistant to the radiation, but I wasn't immune and none of that would protect me from the balefire of those glowing ghouls. Maybe it was time to throw in the towel?

"We could always go to Meatlocker," Psychoshy suggested.

"Don't think you noticed, but none of us are ghouls," Rampage retorted.

The yellow mare stood. "You don't have to be a ghoul to get in. I went there a couple of times with Sanguine, and they were fine with me. You just have to not be a jerk. That's all." She tilted her head. "Granted, the smell took a lot of getting used to, but it's not really dangerous."

"Right. Till they start eating your liver," Rampage retorted, holding her stomach.

"They don't allow ferals!" Psychoshy retorted, then turned to me. "As long as you've got business, they'll deal with you. And they're not far from here. In fact, you can see the hospital right over there," she said as she pointed at a large, low-built building that I'd almost taken for a granite hill rather than a structure. Like everything in the east part of the city, it was built like a bunker.

I glanced over at Lacunae and Stygius. The latter simply shrugged. It was too close not to check out. "Okay. Well... let's go visit some undead ponies."

* * *

Hoofington Memorial Hospital was a lot larger and more imposing up close. Unlike the prison a block away, it had been built recessed into the ground and resembled a tortoise shell. I wondered if the hospital had been the intended target for the balefire bomb embedded in the wall of the prison. South of the jail, the magical flames cast the ruins in flickering, ghostly images. Even a block away, I was still getting radiation pings on my PipBuck.

We approached the front entrance of the hospital, and immediately I spotted the sandbag barricades in front of the doors and ponies in combat armor standing guard. “Oy! Willow! Breathers!” one shouted as he swiveled a machine gun towards us. Given the ruins around us and the fortified building, it’d be quite a trick to assault this place directly. Two others in battle saddles ran up to give him support.

“Are they wearing red or green or look like they’ll annoy the fuck out of me?” a mare called from inside the doors. The ghouls pointing the guns looked at each other, and a moment later the mare blurted, “Oh for fuck’s sake. You guys are useless.” A mottled green unicorn ghoul trotted out, her filmy eyes narrowing before she scowled in confusion. “Great. Fucking tourists.” She pointed to the east. “If you’re hurt and got a pulse, head that way. Those Enclave fucks just love helping tourists.”

Wow. Unfriendly much? “We’re not tourists,” I said at once.

“Don’t be a cunt, Willow,” Psychoshy said as she trotted to the front. “It’s me.”

The mare rolled her milky orbs. “Yeah. I know. Honestly, I was a hair away from having them open fire on you on general principle.” She sighed and nodded to the bucks with the guns. “Stand down,” she said with a wave of her hoof before trotting out from behind the sandbags and walking towards us. She eyed Lacunae suspiciously. “Wait. Are you with those assholes?”

“You mean the Harbingers?” I asked with a frown.

“No. Those *other* assholes,” she said as she pointed to the south with her hoof. “Those Red Eye fucks.”

“We are not affiliated with Red Eye, no,” Lacunae said at once.

“Right. Fine then,” the boiled green mare said, and then she rolled her eyes and stated in a bored, rehearsed monotone, “Welcome to the Meatlocker. We are thrilled to receive guests from all across the Wasteland. Feel free to shop at Meatlocker Merchandise down in the ER. Enjoy yourself at the Afterlife Club found in the cafeteria. If you actually need medical care or supplies, see Dr. Wheelbarrow in Examination Room B. Beds can be rented in the ICU Inn. If you have any questions, please ask any helpful Meatlocker security ponies who aren’t me or see our mayor, Windclop. Is there anything *else* I can help you with?” From her scornful expression, I was pretty certain that it’d be more effective to ask a radroach.

“No, I think we’re good. Thanks,” I said, and she at once rolled her

eyes and trotted over to examine the machine gun on the barricade. We made our way inside, and I glanced back. “She’s friendly.”

“Actually, that’s pretty civil for Willow,” Psychoshy replied.

“I wonder why she didn’t comment on Stygius, though?” I looked at the baffled buck, who blinked and shrugged his dusky shoulders.

Psychoshy snorted and said to me, “Yeah, he might seem weird to a breather. But when you’ve been around for a couple centuries, there’s not a lot of things that jump out at you.” Then, with a smile, “I’m going to head to Afterlife.” She started to trot away, then paused and turned around. She looked at me, then at Stygius. “Um... you wanna come with me?”

He blinked at her, then looked at me, then back and her and pointed a leathery wingtip at himself.

“Yes, you. Come on. Afterlife’s not bad. Just stay away from the Rainboom and you’ll be fine.” Her smile became a little strained, fraying with nervousness. I nudged his hip with my own and he jumped, and then trotted up beside her. She relaxed as they walked into the gloomy hospital together.

And it really was gloomy; unlike the Fluttershy Medical Center or even Happyhorn, there was virtually no decoration or attempt to make the interior woodsy or cute. Only a few emergency lights lit the atrium, and there were more sandbag barricades inside, clearly fallback positions in the event of a siege. A few more ghouls with guns looked on warily.

“You’ve sure been nice to Psychoshy,” Rampage observed as she trotted along at my side. “Any reason?”

“Can’t I be nice to be nice?” I countered as I looked for a sign or some clue of where to go.

“Ordinarily I’d say no, but you’re weird like that,” Rampage admitted, and then asked with a little more concern, “You’re not doing it out of pity, are you?”

“What if I am? She’s miserable,” I said with a little frown.

“She deserves to be. Look, I know you forgive at the drop of a hat, but Psycho isn’t a good pony. She’s vain and selfish and she’s so full of hate right now. She hates you for killing Sanguine. She hates Sanguine for using her. She hates herself for being used. You need to be careful with her,” Rampage warned as she walked beside me. “She’s getting awfully attached to Stygius.”

“So what’s wrong with that? He’s a good guy. He helped me in the way I needed to be helped.” Which was apparently a problem for

my friend given how she rolled her eyes. “He’ll help her too if he can.”

“Because now you’re done with him?” she said sharply, then groaned and shook her head. “Ugh, never mind. I said I’d drop it. Look, I’m going to go keep an eye on those two. If you’re going to ask about Hightower, find out from the mayor or somepony.” And then she was gone.

“Ugh... what is with her?” I said as I glanced up at Lacunae.

“Perhaps she feels you’ve had an inappropriate relationship with Stygius, given your affection for Glory. Or perhaps she feels you are using him in a way that is going to hurt his feelings. Or maybe Rampage respects you a great deal and is having difficulty accepting that you are not as perfect as she’s perceived.”

“Perfect? Me?” I tapped my metal leg against a pillar. “Has she seen me lately? I’m the biggest fuckup in the Wasteland!”

“Yet you endure. You persist. You overcome. Even now, you’re here looking for a way into a place most ponies would simply give up at the first sight of. And you’ve yet to sacrifice your virtue for it. You suffer instead.” She smiled as she shook her head. “Believe me, the Goddess is far happier that you are out here running around Hoofington than in Canterlot.”

“Is that why she’s letting you stay with me?” I asked with a smile, spotting a flickering arrow-shaped light on the wall pointing towards ‘ER’.

“That, and I’ve asked her to let me,” she said in a gentle murmur. I flushed a bit, then looked back at her and smiled, giving her shoulder a thankful nudge. The light picked up quite a bit as we reached a pair of double doors marked ‘Emergency’. The ER itself was a horseshoe-shaped chamber with alcoves along the outside wall. The exit doors were choked with rubble, making the chamber a cozy space, and several ghouls mingled around the old nurses’ station. A lively tune was being played over the PA system that made me smile despite myself.

The nearest alcove had a counter built across it with ‘Tulip’s’ painted on the front. Behind it were a number of pieces of barding hanging from old IV stands and a petite unicorn ghoul who might once have been a roseish color. When our eyes met, the young mare gave a hopeful smile. “H-hello. Welcome to T-Tulip’s. My armor is g-guaranteed to keep you safe. If any of my equipment f-fails to save your life, I’ll give you a full r-r-refund!” She tried for an

enthusiastic grin but only pulled off a shy, self-conscious smile. I wasn't sure if she was blushing or not as she stared at my barding. "What happened? Did you r-run afoul a flamer or a dr-dr-dragon?"

"Flamer," I said with a small smile as I glanced down at the scorched green armor. "Can you fix it?"

"S-sure... but it's s-stupid expensive," she stammered as she trotted underneath the counter and walked around me. "Ch-cheaper to buy a n-new suit and r-reinforce it."

A ghoul repairing some firearms -- mostly low-caliber pistols and bolt-action hunting rifles -- that were laid out on a gurney next door rolled his filmy eyes. "And that's why Tulip's always broke." The small unicorn lowered her head a little.

"Oh, don't worry about him, Hun," a grayish ghoul mare said to her from browsing the next stall over. She wore a gentle smile, and I was surprised by how well dressed she was and how much of her pink mane was still intact. "Tulip knows her barding better than I know how to work a needle and thread." And given how the gray ghoul's mottled cutie mark was exactly that, I supposed she was quite good indeed.

"Th-thanks, V... " Tulip murmured.

"All right." I checked my PipBuck and then took out some of the gold and silver I'd looted from Goldenblood's house, my PipBuck calculating their value in caps. How it did so, I couldn't begin to imagine. I held up the spool of gold. "How about this for some quality armor?"

"Sure. I c-can get you something r-right away for that. L-let me use your old a-armor to make sure it f-f-fits. G-g-give me an hour?" Tulip stammered as she scrambled under the counter again. I removed my armor and floated it over.

The gray unicorn ghoul smiled as I trotted away, Tulip digging through boxes in the back of her stall. "You just made Tulip's day. Poor dear knows her trade, but she's not terribly confident," she said as she led me across the ER to another stall. This one, however, mostly held prewar clothing. "There's no reason to trot around in just your hide like that," she said as she dug through the racks.

I gave a slightly confused little smile as I looked at the salvaged sign in the back of the stall; a bundle of wheat. "No offense, but ponies usually don't wear clothes." Heck, even in 99 we didn't usually wear them if we were off duty. The only mare that had really cared about them had been the Overmare's mother.

"True. But that's no reason to *not* wear them," she said brightly, selecting a plaid green pleated skirt, matching blazer, white blouse, and lacy undergarment. And now that I looked around, it struck me that just about every ghoul was wearing some article of clothing or another. "Here. A gratuity for being so understanding to Tulip." I felt too self-conscious to refuse the gifts and put them on, surprised at how well they fit.

I flushed a little, looking at myself in a cracked mirror. "Well, don't you look like a perfect student for Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns?" the gun ghoul teased. I harrumphed and refused to let the jackass get to me. From the look on V's face, I'd done her a favor.

"If I may ask," she said as she carefully adjusted the skirt to cover my posterior, "what brings you to Meatlocker? You don't seem to be bothered by us, but you're not a regular."

What should I be bothered by? Okay, there was a slightly off-putting meaty smell about the place, and some of the ghouls looked even more ragged than others, but given what I'd seen so far, they weren't anything bad. "Looking for a way into Hightower," I answered, and got a gasp and stare from more than a few ponies.

She adopted a concerned expression. "If you're looking for salvage, there's plenty of other places to find it. Even we stay away from that place."

"There's something I need to find inside there," I said firmly. The ghouls around us shared significant looks, some rolling their eyes and others frowning in concern. I didn't want an argument, so I changed the topic. "I'm curious. Why do so many of you wear clothes?"

"What? You want to stare at my jerky stick?" cackled the obnoxious stallion that had jeered Tulip.

The gray mare, V, glowered at him till he got the hint and trotted out of the ER. Then she looked at me kindly. "You have to understand that to stay... well... ourselves, we have to do everything we can to hold on to our identity before we died. So we act civilly... dress civilly... do what we love and try to keep ourselves from slipping away. It doesn't take much for one of us to go from a normal, albeit dead, pony to a monster."

"It doesn't help that so many ponies around the Hoof simply assume we're brain-eating fiends," piped up another mare behind a tray of Dash inhalers.

I thought of Harpica and Ditzy and Sanguine. “I suppose a bored ghoul is feral ghoul?”

“Well said,” V commented in approval. “I’ve been here since the bombs fell. It’s been a challenge. Dying, and then... this.” She gestured around the hospital. “Getting material, finding clients. That silly little prejudice against our kind makes much of that quite difficult.” She glanced at a picture in an old, battered brass frame showing a stallion in a black hood grinning cheekily. Her cloudy eyes settled on the image. “And there are some days we just feel... very tired.”

“It’s not easy living for so long, is it?” I said as I sat. V nodded and she and I shared a sympathetic smile as I lifted my forehoof and extended my mechanical fingers. “It’s something I’m going to have to deal with too. Provided I don’t die in Hightower, that is.”

Lacunae nodded. “It is an adjustment for us as well, though for us the change is far more profound. In Unity, there is often no sense of time at all. A year can feel like a day, and so the changes are far more jarring.”

V looked at the alicorn curiously and nodded her agreement. “You have to keep busy. You can’t just stop and let time slip by. You can lose everything that way.”

“Well... I definitely have something that needs doing. Is there somepony else that might be able to help?” I asked, and the mare slumped, clearly bothered that she couldn’t help me. Then a tan stallion with a stunningly well-groomed white mane approached. Really, I knew living ponies with worse hair.

“Help? My dear, help has arrived! You have no idea how long I’ve waited for a pony with a decent mane to trot across my path!” he announced grandly. He grinned at the pink-maned V. “No offense meant, Velvet my dear.”

“None taken, Snowflake. Celestia knows you’ve worked your magic on me more than once,” she replied graciously, then turned and grinned up at Lacunae. Her horn glowed as she lifted a tape measure. “Now, why don’t you work your magic on her mane while I see to dressing her friend here?” Velvet said with an almost evil smile, pulling the tape measure tight with a snap.

* * *

It can be said that there are times in my life when things take a

turn towards the surreal. Getting kissed by a spirit of chaos, dying, encountering a screaming room, and meeting an odd batpony out of the blue all qualify. I had to admit, though, that I'd never imagined that I would be subject to a complete makeover for the amusement and delight of a roomful of ghoul ponies. The only time I'd gotten this level of attention was at my cutie mark party, and even then the dress had been borrowed.

The entire time I kept my eyes closed, focusing on not killing Snowflake. *He's doing me a favor. Don't kill him. He's helping me. Don't kill him.* After what I'd been through with Stygius, I was able to take some deep breaths and fight the urge to react while Snowflake trimmed my tail. With deftness and care I would have expected from a unicorn, the white-maned earth pony snipped and brushed my mane and coat with finesse and ease. It felt like probably the most feminine moment of my life when Snowflake presented a mirror and I looked at my own reflection.

"Unfortunately I couldn't do anything with your augments, but I think that the smooth transition works quite well, don't you?" the ghoul said brightly as I turned back and forth. He hadn't changed much, but he'd definitely made me look... better. Lots better. I looked almost as cute as Glory now! "Normally a ghoul with a barbershop makes about as much sense as a screen door on a submarine. With the exception of Miss Velvet and myself, most ghouls simply don't have the manes for it."

"Are you certain this is... appropriate?" Lacunae asked in a subdued voice.

I turned, and that feeling of surreality jumped up even more; my jaw simply dropped. The gray ghoul mare had dressed the alicorn in lacy white lingerie from horn to hoof. I wasn't quite sure if the outfit was meant for... one of those wedding things or a honeymoon, but the stockings and the garters and the... wow. The purple alicorn's cheeks blazed as she looked around in worry. I didn't think bridles came in lace! Unless that was some magic underwear, it wouldn't last five minutes in the Wasteland. Still... Damn...

Velvet narrowed her eyes speculatively. "Mmmm, I suppose not. Still, I've been dying for a century to see this outfit I made for Luna on somepony." I gaped anew. Luna wore something... anything... like that? Ever?

And I was wondering if Velvet had another suit like it in my size. I

was really really wondering that. I cleared my throat. “I’m sure Stronghoof will adore it,” I said delicately. Oh my, I had no idea an alicorn could turn that shade of red. Was she actually glowing? I was sure the Goddess was just *loving* this. Velvet’s horn glowed as she removed the lacy apparel; Lacunae flushed and squirmed in embarrassment.

“Well… maybe… ” the alicorn murmured with a small smile.

Velvet looked up at her with a cheeky grin. “Go ahead and take it. I doubt I’ll ever have another client in your size. I’d just ruin the garment if I tried to take it in. Go on. I hope your Stronghoof likes it.” Lacunae make a little ‘meep’ and if possible, her blush deepened even further. Yup; she was glowing. The gray ghoul looked over her racks of clothes. “Mmmm… maybe something in red? Lilac? No… ah! Gold!”

“Well… I’m going to go find that mayor now,” I said as I stood. “Have fun!”

“Wait… Blackjack! Don’t leave me like this!” Lacunae called out as I trotted for the exit. “Blackjack!”

“Don’t move! This’ll just take a minute!” Velvet said, working her tape measure.

I gave a grateful smile to Tulip on my way out; the small ghoul mare was working on a suit of gray combat barding. I heard Snowflake call out, “I call dibs on her next, Velvet! The things I could do with her mane!”

Moving back into the hospital, I was glad my eyes could amplify what little light there was from the few emergency lamps. A few ghouls watched me warily from the shadows, and moved away when I approached them for directions to the cafeteria or the mayor. “What’s wrong with them?” I asked, more to myself than anything.

A snide, rasping voice said from the shadows, “Oh just the shock of death and centuries of intolerance, abuse, and hatred from the living. Little things like that.” From the darkness stepped a charred-looking earth pony in a black funeral director’s suit. His filmy eyes still had a sharp color of red as he smirked at me. “Of course, you wouldn’t understand.”

“I’ve put up with plenty of abuse and hatred myself. Who are you?” I asked with a scowl.

“Ahuizotl,” he said with a nod of his head. “I run the Mortuary.” At my baffled look, he let out a hiss of annoyance. “The bar? The

original bar before that damnable club opened up?" I shook my head slowly, and he glowered. "So, Willow isn't even bothering to tell esteemed guests about my business? I should have known." He tilted an ear in the direction of the cheery music and sighed, muttering darkly to himself.

"Hey, take it up with her. I'm just the tourist," I replied with a frown. "You have a problem with the living?"

He sniffed disdainfully. "Living. Dead. I don't care. You both pay caps the same. But the ambiance of Meatlocker today... well... hardly appropriate." He waved his hoof dismissively. "So take your pretty mane and go... elsewhere. I don't have time to bother with you, Miss... ."

"Security," I finished bluntly. "Well if you can point me in the direction of the mayor... "

But the name had an unexpected effect. His red eyes fixed on me, and he licked is charcoal lips with a tongue of boiled leather. "Oh... is that so?" He straightened a little. "Well... if you're looking for our illustrious leader, I believe he was cleaning a toilet in the ICU Inn. Right down that hall there. Make a left."

"I... um... thanks?" I said as I backed a few steps away. My mane crawled as he smiled at me.

"Oh no no no. Thank *you*." With that, he turned away and trotted back into the darkness.

Why did I have a real bad feeling about that ghoul?

I turned and went down the hall he'd indicated, wondering if there was some kind of trap. However, to my relief, the door on the left did indeed lead to the intensive care unit. Like the ER, the ICU was divided into stalls, but in this case each one had been converted into a sleeping cell. I saw four non-ghoul ponies sleeping but none I recognized. Holiday music played from a radio on the nurse's desk. I trotted up to the ghoul mare behind the counter. "Can I help you, Dearie?" the mare asked.

"I'm looking for the mayor. Something about a toilet?" I asked with a slightly baffled look.

"Oh, yes. He's right over here." She guided me over to the ICU restrooms. "Gotta keep these working for our guests. If you need a place to stay, we have many wonderful beds for rent."

"Thanks," I said with a far easier smile than I'd had with Achoiewhatsisname. There was a sound of splashing from inside the mares' toilet, and I dared to peek inside. A ghoul pegasus stallion

crouched over the toilet with a plunger clenched in his jaws that he worked furiously inside the bowl. His wings were almost entirely skeletal, held together by brown sinew, but they moved as if they were still alive. I just stood at the doorway and watched him work with a vigor I'd only seen in an olive filly. Finally, he pulled the plunger free and flushed the toilet. It gurgled and drained and the stallion gave a satisfied nod.

"Mayor?" I asked, and he turned towards me, water dripping from the red rubber plunger head. He spat it out and jumped to his hooves with a grin. He wore a suit of Stable-Tec utility barding marked with a 1 on the flank. Stable 1? Where was that?

"That's me. Mayor Windclop. Engineer, political leader... and occasional janitor. So nice to meet you," he said as he grabbed my hoof and shook it enthusiastically. "Meatlocker is glad to attract as many smoothcoat visitors as possible to our fine community."

Um... maybe he could wash his hooves? "Thank you. You're too kind. I'm Blackjack," I said, then added with a slightly concerned look. "Smoothcoat?"

"Right! Because your coat is so smooth... and tasty... " he added, almost to himself, then he blinked and grinned nervously. "And smooth! It's a better term than 'breather' in my opinion. And we want Meatlocker to be a friendly and open community in the Wasteland. We hope that if we give smoothcoats like yourself a chance, then you'll give us a chance." He pulled a towel from his belt and wiped off his hooves and face and then the toilet bowl. He flushed it a few more times, and I heard a few clicks from my PipBuck. Visiting Meatlocker might be okay, but living here sure wasn't an option. "So, what can I do you for?" he asked as his bony wing stretched out and scooped up a top hat that had been sitting on the sink. It had a gray ribbon tied around the bottom of the hat and a shiny brass button that read 'Vote Mayor Mare without a care!'.

"Well... I need to get into Hightower. I'm hoping somepony here can tell me how," I said with a smile.

He laughed, grinned, smiled, and then realized I was serious. "Break into Hightower? *Into*? Um... no offense, ma'am, but that's crazy. Just crazy. Nopony wants to break into that place."

"Well, I do. And I am. But if the ghouls of Meatlocker can help me, I'll be plenty grateful." The pegasus ghoul fidgeted a little, his wing bones clattering together.

"I see. Well, it's highly unusual. Nigh unheard of, really. Nopony who goes in there comes out again. But... naturally, Meatlocker would be happy to help." He furrowed his brows in thought. "You could talk to Nurse Graves. She used to work there."

"That'd be nice. Perhaps you could show me the way?"

"I'd be happy to, but do you have a light? Some of the halls are pretty tough to navigate for a smoothcoat."

"My vision is augmented," I replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh. Well... wonderful!" he said after a momentary falter. "Well, I'll show you the way. All the twists and turns can make navigation a problem."

"And the lack of illumination doesn't help either."

"Yes, it's a situation we really should fix for our smoothcoat guests. Unfortunately, lightbulbs are in short supply, and don't get me started on illumination talismans. For a while we tried to use lit fires, but the smoke was intolerable. I'm hoping that when we get more guests I can convince the residents to spring for some more light sources. Darkness doesn't bother our eyesight very much, but it's a definite turnoff for smoothcoats. Right?" He looked at the mare behind the counter. "I'm heading to see Wheelbarrow and Graves, Carol."

She gave an errant wave of her hoof, not raising her head from an old magazine on the front counter. We trotted out, Windclop rambling on as we walked. "When I got here thirty years ago, Meatlocker was just rife with poor ferals and a handful of folks wanting to make a home for themselves. It took twenty years to shoo the ferals into the subway and make something of this place. Now we're really trying to reach out to the different factions around the Hoof."

"It doesn't sound like everypony is happy with the changes. I met a ghoul... Yowie... something or other. He seemed damned put out by things," I said as we trotted through the dim hallways.

"Oh yeah. *Him*. Ahuizotl showed up twenty years or so ago. His morbid little bar ran on misery and bitterness. The more depressed folks there were, the more they'd drink and do chems to forget about their problems and the more caps he made. With the club and everything, Meatlocker's a much better place. I'm hoping to change the name to 'Memorial' rather than Meatlocker. Just more positive." He rattled on as he walked. I didn't think I'd ever met a ghoul who was so *animated*.

"So, you're from a stable originally?"

"Mmhmm. Stable One. Originally it was supposed to be for all the government bigwigs and muckity mucks. Was designed even for the Princesses. But... it was a trap. Locked up tight and wouldn't unlock till everypony inside was dead. Of course, Canterlot got soaked in toxic Pink Cloud, and it eventually killed everypony inside anyway. Or maybe it was radiation... dunno," the buck said brightly with a shrug. "Anyway, about thirty years back I had a... ah... embarrassing incident involving the origins of some protein I was fond of and so I sought my fortunes out here." He coughed nervously. "You have to understand, there's just some things a pony doesn't do in polite society and I'd never, ever, have done it if I'd known."

I chuckled and shook my head. "Quite understandable," I said, then tripped over a metal slab thing that somepony had left in the middle of the hallway. "Okay. This is getting ridiculous. My vision's not *that* augmented," I muttered, then concentrated. My light spell burst to life above me, driving away the shadows and gloom. Really, why hadn't I done this soone--

That's Stonewing.

I stared straight ahead at the sight of the pegasus stallion cast in bronze, one wing outspread and the other snapped off for me to trip over, standing protectively over the prone forms of Jetstream and Applesnack. Behind him were abstract pony figures. The statue was perched atop a low pedestal off to the side with a plaque that read: 'Stonewing Memorial'.

I walked close to it and read the inscription.

'This memorial is dedicated to those ponies who have given their lives and blood for the wellbeing of us all. It was here, during the reconstruction, that the soldier Stonewing valiantly held his position against overwhelming zebra attackers to protect not just fallen comrades but countless helpless patients and injured victims in the hospital. Though forever struck mute by a sniper's bullet, Stonewing's actions speak volumes of the courage and valor of Hoofington's finest soldiers.'

I stared at the statue for a long moment, something niggling in the back of my mind. A note in a Miramare locker. 'Left it in the place where he did that thing that time.' "Is something wrong?" Windclop asked as I slowly circled the statue and the alcove it occupied.

"Just... wondering," I said lightly as I looked around the statue, not exactly sure what I was after. Then I spotted a small vent in the

base of the pedestal. “Hey, got a crowbar I can borrow?”

“I can honestly say that that’s the first time anypony has asked me that,” he said as he trotted up beside me. He pulled out a small, flat prybar and passed it to me, then took out a flat-headed screwdriver and helped me remove the vent cover. It took a bit of work, but it finally popped free. Inside the dusty hole was a canvas bag. I pulled it out, and his eyes grew wide. “What is it?”

“I don’t know... ” But I guessed it belonged to the Marauder. Slowly my magic plucked the drawstring, and I tugged it open wide with my hooves. Inside was something burgundy and leathery. I carefully tugged out a leather jacket. Despite two centuries, it was still supple. The inside was lined with fleece, and it had numerous snaps and buckles. Two holes were slit in the back for wings. ‘Equestrian Skyguard’ was printed on the back. Beneath it was a leather cap with goggles attached.

“Amazing... ” he breathed as I stood and put it on. There had to be some magic in it, as it fit me almost perfectly. “I don’t suppose that you know of any other priceless treasures hidden around Meatlocker that could be put to the benefit of our fair community?” Windclop asked with a grin.

“Sorry, Mister Mayor. I wish I did.” I felt in the pockets, and found a small stack of photographs. A signed autograph of Rainbow Dash. Then one of Jetstream as a filly, perched on the edge of a cloud in terror. Another one of her on the beach. One of all the Marauders in uniform, saluting as one. I sighed and tucked them back into the pocket. There was also another pocket loaded with golden bits. I looked at him and then passed over half. “Here. For the wellbeing of Meatlocker.”

That sure made his day! He put the money away; I could only hope he’d actually follow through rather than keep it for himself, but he seemed the honest sort. “Still, an Equestrian Skyguard jacket. That’s... amazing. I think that’s genuine dragonhide!” he said.

“No shooting me to find out!” I said quickly as we continued on our way. I glanced back at the grinning memorial statue and smiled in return.

We reached the examination room, but Doctor Wheelbarrow informed us that the nurse had gone to Afterlife. He made an effort to convince me to allow him some in-depth ‘examinations’, but something about his tone set off even more alarms than usual and I declined. The doctor looked quite put out.

We made our way to the club and chatted about whatever came up on the way. He'd been fascinated by technology before the bombs fell and had dreamed about working on immense cloud warships called Raptors before landing a job with Stable-Tec. From his description of them, I imagined smaller versions of the *Celestia* with hulls of cloud streaking through the air and zapping dragons to bits. Apparently being a pegasus in a stable had a somewhat disheartening effect due to the lack of space to fly. That topic led to the revelation that he could actually *still* fly, despite the fact his wings were bones, and this led to a demonstration followed by a discussion of innate pegasus magic. I was so wrapped up in our conversation that I missed the change in music coming from the double doors ahead.

I've heard a wide variety of music in my travels, but this was different. This music was making my hips start to move! I pushed through the double doors and was struck by the sight of a stage built against one wall with almost a dozen ghouls playing, two ghoul mares on backup, and an earth pony buck with an almost comically wide-brimmed hat singing about the everafter. There were plenty more ghouls dancing around the stage in glee, despite the morbid lyrics.

And I really wanted to join in.

Above the crowd Psychoshy swooped and spun around a slightly bemused Stygius, who was just trying to keep up with her. I wondered how proud Fluttershy would have been to see how strong a flier her daughter had become as she writhed and swayed and twirled around the gray batpony. I sighed; dancing would have to wait.

The ghoul Windclop pointed out as Nurse Graves nodded her head in time with the music and smiled as we approached. The brown earth pony had only a few wisps of green mane and tail but had kept her nurse's uniform pristine. "Nurse Graves, this is Blackjack. Blackjack, Nurse Graves. Miss Graves, Blackjack wants to get into Hightower. I hope you can talk her out of it." Then he straightened and looked up at a hovering robot behind the bar; it looked like a Mr. Handy, but painted in pinstripes and with a wide-brimmed floppy hat on its dome. "Hey, Cerberus. Can you make me a Monsoon?"

"Right away, Mr. Windclop! I might as well since I can't make you a greasy smear on the ground. Damn this combat inhibitor!" the

robot said as it began to mix up the drink for the pegasus ghoul.
Nurse Graves touched my shoulder, making me jump. I looked at her and then at the robot. “Is that thing... safe?” I asked the undead mare.
“Oh, Cerberus is safe as houses. He’s been programmed not to target any friendly visitor or resident,” she replied as she looked at the robot. “Aren’t you, Cerbie?”
The robot stretched out one of its camera eyes towards me and said in a stage whisper everypony could hear, “Personally, I think they’re all a bunch of rotting pony maggot farms and I’d disintegrate them into piles of ash if I could. But I can’t, thanks to this damned combat inhibitor! So since I can’t dispense fiery carnage to this collection of morbid, wiggling corpses, would you like a martini, you zebra-loving ghoul hugger?”
“Yeah,” I said slowly. “Sure.”
I couldn’t help but smile and bob my head a little to the music while we waited. “If you don’t mind me asking,” I said after a moment, “why... this?” I gestured vaguely at the club with my hoof. “I mean, I’ve been to Mixers in Flank, but all this seems a bit... well... much.”
Windclop shared a long look with Nurse Graves before he looked back at me with a patent smile. “Well, you must understand, being a ghoul is much different from being a smoothcoat. It’s more than just the being dead thing. Our eyesight is a little less sharp, though much better in darkness. Though, to be honest, when most of the ponies you live with look like corpses, that’s not always a bad thing; there’s just a limit on how much prettifying you can do. Our sense of touch is diminished, and our bodies make simple things like eating, drinking, and even intoxication difficult. And the less that can be said about our senses of smell and taste, the better.”
“The one thing that remains consistent is our hearing, Dearie,” the nurse said. “And one of the things that many of us loved most when we were alive was music. Oh, sure, few of us can sing anything you’d want to hear, but we can all listen. Remember good times... ” She looked toward the stage and the band. “And forget bad ones... ”
Windclop received his drink, something blue and white that swirled around in the glass, and looked over at the far side of the bar as he pinched the stem of the glass between fragile-looking wingbones. “If you ladies will excuse me, I need to talk to Patchwork about his vote.” He tilted his top hat to us and trotted off

towards a battered-looking ghoul nursing a Buckweiser.

"Always worried about reelection," the nurse mused. "But I suppose that's better than not giving a damn," she said as she looked at me smiled. "Now... you want to get inside the prison. I used to work there, and I can tell you that there's nothing inside worth your life."

"Normally I'd agree," I replied as I folded my forelegs on the bartop in front of me. The band began to play another song that had my rear hoof tapping. "But there is something in there I need." Her skeptical look clearly showed she didn't believe me. I opened up the panel in my leg, showing her the black PipBuck. "This PipBuck has a program that's following an old routing path. The next stop is in Hightower."

The ghoul frowned as she looked at me in concern. "Hightower does have a lot of old communication equipment on the top floors... but there's no way to get to it, Dearie. Just getting inside the prison is next to impossible. Once you're inside, the radiation and Enervation will kill you in minutes."

"My body is resistant to Enervation," I replied. "Radiation, not so much, but... well, I guess I'll have to take plenty of Rad-X and RadAway before I go in." Rampage was indestructible; hopefully Lacunae would be okay, too. But that left Stygius and Psychoshy at risk.

"Even if you avoid those, there's the ghoul population. The radiation and Enervation have made them terrible, immortal monsters. Every now and then one escapes and wreaks havoc before it's finally put down. Most are mindless, but a few are mad. That they'll kill you on sight is the best you can hope for."

"I'll just have to kill them first," I replied, shrugging. "Maybe decapitation would work? I have a wicked sharp sword," I suggested with a grin. The mare just looked at me pityingly.

"Even if you could, there are other threats, too. The prison is filled with turrets, robots, and defensive talismans." She looked around and then lowered her voice. "And ghosts."

"Ghosts?" I said a little skeptically.

She nodded. "They walk the wards as empty suits of armor, uniforms, or clothing. You can't hurt them or damage them."

Well, great. Ghosts. Robots. Turrets. Ghouls. Radiation. Enervation. When all this was done, I was going to the Core for a vacation! Or maybe Thunderhead! Someplace I could relax! "Maybe if you can

tell me how you got out?”

She shivered and shook her head. Cerberus floated over and set down a cocktail glass. “For you, you corpse-loving zebra-humper. If it wasn’t for my inhibitor, I’d show you a glorious day in this pony’s army!” He then turned to Nurse Graves. “Anything for you, you miserable lump of writhing undead meat?”

“Thank you, Cerberus. I’m fine,” Graves replied. The robot returned to the bar, grumbling to itself. I took a sip and grimaced; I wasn’t sure if I had a glass of alcohol or turpentine in front of me. “I’m afraid I can’t quite tell you. It’s all quite muddled up. I was down in the infirmary when the lockdown order came from the warden’s office. The prison was in a near riot when the sirens began and the prisoner population went into a frenzy. Then there was an incredible crash as a missile ploughed straight through the south wall! I curled up in a supply closet, and then I heard the most horrible scream imaginable.” She shivered as she pressed her forehooves to her chest.

“I think I died then,” she murmured, and I barely heard her over the music. “And I felt... a pull. Like something was trying to pull me out of my own body. All I could do was struggle to hold on to myself and keep myself together.” She rubbed her face. “I... I stocked the shelves. I organized and reorganized the infirmary constantly. It was something to do... something that was me. Every second I was fighting that pull... that horrible scream. Eventually, I couldn’t take it. I had to either escape, or I’d lose myself like all the others.

“I managed to get out into the yard where the rocket was poking through and crawled out the hole. The fall broke every bone in my body... .” The mare gave a little shudder at the recollection. “After that I was able to crawl to the fence and found a small gap I could climb up. I had enough wits left that I pushed under the razor wire rather than getting tangled up in it. Then I was free. The further I got from there, the quieter the scream was and the weaker that pull became. I came here since my home was long gone. I felt... more me... in a medical setting. I dedicated my unlife to helping Dr. Wheelbarrow cure ghoulification these last twenty years.”

I sighed, covering my face. She was right; nothing she told me helped me get in. If Lacunae somehow could fly up to the hole without getting zapped... ugh...

“Is that EC-1101?” the nurse asked.

I dropped my hooves and looked at her in confusion. She was staring at my hoof. “Excuse me?”

“The program you’re following. Is it called EC-1101?” she asked, then chewed her lower lip in concern.

“Yeah… ” I said with a touch of apprehension. “Why?”

She closed her eyes, seeming to be contemplating something. Finally she looked at me and said in a nervous voice, “You need to talk to Mr. Shears.”

* * *

The Mortuary was as different from Afterlife as night from day, and it was clear that it’d fallen on hard times to boot. Just finding the damn place had taken me an hour of winding hallways, rooms turned into flophouses, and dead ends. Located in the hospital’s basement, the former autopsy room and morgue now had mostly empty tables. Ahuizotl sneered at me as I walked in, and the other few patrons gave me significant looks. Most prominent was an emaciated-looking griffin in power armor who had the bony, rumpled wings of a ghoul. He stared at me from the moment I entered. No music played here; the Mortuary was silent as a tomb.

Surprisingly, Rampage was here. The striped mare looked up from a table bearing half a dozen bottles of alcohol and a box of Abronco laundry detergent. She was mixing the alcohol with the soap. “Hey Blackyjack. What brings you down here?”

“Looking for somepony.”

She snorted and grinned. “Of course. You always are. You lookie. You find. And then you lookie for something else. That’s your thing. And you never ever ever ever give up. Ever.”

“What about you? Are you okay?” I asked in concern.

“I am good and fuckered up.” She tapped the side of her head. “I’ve got ponies crawling around in my head. Razorwire. Twist. I’m trying to wash them out, but they keep muttering.” She stared at me, her pupils two different sizes. “You see, if I just drink the alcohol, I’ll piss it out before I feel it. Gotta give the body some other shit to deal with so the alcohol can work. Gotta remember that.” She frowned at my clothes. “You’re all prettified. What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion,” I said as sat beside her. “Why are you in this place? Weren’t you going to keep an eye on Psychoshy and Stygius? And

wouldn't Afterlife be more fun anyway?" Rampage blew out a snort of annoyance.

"Couldn't watch them a second longer. Too much noise. Wanted quiet. Now all I hear is Razorwire bitching and Twist crying. A few more bottles and I won't even hear that anymore." She swayed and then frowned. "You need me sober?"

"Not right away. Psychoshy and Stygius are in still in Afterlife. Lacunae's still in the market, and I haven't gotten the information I need yet. Take your time if you need this."

"Bitchyshy and Hot Flanks... lucky... why does she get all the luck? Didn't kill her in Chapel. Let her come along. Kept her alive. Now she gets to dance with a nice guy. Not fair she has all the luck," she slurred as her hoof wrapped around a bottle and pulled it to her mouth. She took a long pull off the bottle, draining it entirely. "And how's my luck? Had a kid... dead now. Had a special pony. Dead now too. Reapers got stomped. Now there's just you." She snorted again and shook her head. "Sometime I wonder if I'm like Lacaloonie. Maybe I'm not really a mare. Maybe I'm just a whole bunch of fucked up ponies with no luck squished together. So all my bad luck is like... super concentrated, you know?"

"I know that's not it, Rampage," I said as I patted her shoulder.

She scowled at me. "Oh, you know? That's nice. 'Cause I don't frigging know. I don't know my name. I don't know who I am or who I'm supposed to be. How come you get to know, but I fucking don't, huh? Fuck... you had a soober dooober ubergun and didn't use it on me. Fucking hurt, Blackjack. Fucking hurt."

"I want to help you. Not kill you," I said with my own frown as she buried her muzzle in the box of laundry detergent.

"One and the same, Blackjack. One and the same. Next time, fucking vaporize me. That's all I fucking want," she said, her muzzle caked with powdery foam.

I sighed and stood. "Try not to overdo it, Rampage."

Ahuizotl trotted up to Rampage's table with three more bottles of booze balanced on his flank. "Don't you look absolutely miserable. Here. Have another bottle. Maybe tell old Uncle Ahuizotl all about it?" he said to the striped mare, giving a little buck that sent one of the bottles hopping off his rump and neatly onto the table.

"She's fine. She doesn't want to talk to you," I said as I scooped out some bits and set them on the table. "That's for her peace of mind. Don't bother her." He snorted but swept them into his coat pocket

anyway.

"They're not caps, but they'll do." He looked at me coolly and then smirked. "Perhaps you have some woes that need drowning, Security?"

"No, but I do have some questions that need answering." Okay, I would have liked a bottle or two of Wild Pegasus, but not from this snake. I glanced over at the staring griffin. "Starting with... what the hell is that guy's deal?" Ahuizotl tapped the pocket he'd swept the bits into. I scowled and put a few more coins on the table.

He swept them up as well before answering. "Who? Carrion? Why, he's just my muscle. That's all. It's his job to turn troublemakers into bloody messes for the ferals. I own his contract." Ahuizotl chuckled to himself with a sly grin.

I stared back at the griffin ghoul. "So he does whatever you say?"

"Pretty much," the ghoul replied with a smile and shrug. "I point at something and Carrion hurts it. He's the best thug a corrupt bartender could ever hope for." His smile disappeared as he said in a lower, more menacing voice, "He never bothers me with his own annoying sense of morality."

Well, as interesting as that was, it wasn't why I was here. "I'm looking for somepony who's supposed to be a regular here. Goes by the name of Mr. Shears." Ahuizotl pressed his lips together as he smiled. A few more bits landed on the table; I was almost out. He swept them into a different pocket. "Mr. Shears is right over there." He pointed at a lump of rags on a chair in the corner.

Then the charred-looking buck trotted to the entrance and said sourly, "I'll be back in a bit. I need to get these tips in the safe." Carrion just nodded his head once and kept watching me. I sighed, hoped that Rampage could sober up in seconds if need be, and approached the heap.

The tattered mass shifted as I moved closer, and I stopped short. "Mr. Shears?"

"Who wants to know?" a stallion replied with a slurred voice from within the filthy rags.

"I'm Security. I was told you know a way into Hightower." There was no reply from the pile, so I elaborated, "Nurse Graves said so."

"Nurse Graves needs to watch her mouth," the buck muttered.

I sighed, feeling my annoyance building. "She said you knew about EC-1101. She said you said it could get you inside."

The name made the heap lean forward towards me at once. "Do

you have it? Can it be possible?"

I flipped open the panel on my leg and showed the PipBuck screen, then brought the file up. The heap shuddered once more. "It's true. It's true... after so long... finally."

"So you can use this to get me inside?" I asked with a small frown.

"Oh yes. There is a way. A secret way closed when the projects were sealed. Oh yes," the rags slurred softly. "However, there is a price. I'm not going to tell you out of the kindness of my heart. Oh no." Two rag-wrapped legs rubbed together. "No no no. My price is simple. Take me with you."

"Take you with me?" I blinked, scowling in confusion. "What do you want to go to Hightower for?"

"That is my business!" the heap hissed sharply. "Mine, and no pony else's! Do we have a deal or not?"

I was tempted to turn him down till I got some more answers, but maybe if I agreed he might share a little more information. I sighed and extended my hoof. "Deal." The rag-covered limb reached out to bump against mine.

"Get ready. Even if we get inside, you'll be hard pressed to last long. I'll be waiting right here till you're ready." The heap leaned back in the chair, rubbing his boiled-looking blue hooves together. "Finally... oh yes... finally... "

"So... ?" I prompted, hoping for more information, but he just waved his hoof dismissively. I snorted, not liking this, but also not wanting to alienate the only pony who said he could get me inside. There wasn't much else to do besides tell my friends and make some decisions. I gave Rampage a parting pat, then trotted past Carrion and into the hallway towards the stairs leading back up towards the ER. I'd have to load up on bullets, pick up my barding, and convert as much salvage into caps and ammo as I could.

Then I froze as I stared at the concrete steps that led up to the main floor. A line of dirty red crept slowly down them. My eyes were slowly drawn up to the top and I drew Vigilance from my saddlebags. Cautiously, I made my way up.

There, lying in a spreading pool of fetid maroon blood, was Tulip. Her head was crushed, a bloody mess that was utterly destroyed. I stepped in the pool as I moved beside her to check for evidence. The blood was cool... but that didn't mean much for a ghoul. How long had she been lying here? A blood-smeared canvas bag sat beside her and I nudged it open, revealing the reinforced armor

she'd made for me.

"Well now," Willow said from the shadows, stepping into the pool of light with the assault carbines in her battle saddle pointed right at me. "This is why I fucking hate tourists."

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 46: Caper

"I dunno why we have to wear* these *things either... "
"Aren't we wearing them for fun?"

I backed away from the still body of Tulip as the Meatlocker security mare approached. Her milky white eyes were narrowed as she looked down at the scene. "Willow! I can explain! Okay…I really can't explain, but I didn't do this! I wouldn't do this, I mean…I'm pretty sure I didn't do this. I can't say I've never killed somepony while out of it, but…" I stammered, pointing back behind me with a bloody hoof. "I was just in Mortuary. My friend…erm…a griffin…ah…Mr. Shears can prove it!"

"This is why I fucking hate tourists," she repeated as she circled the body. Then she looked at me and my clothes closely. "You say you just came on the body like this?"

"Yeah. And like I said, I was just down in the Mortuary," I said in a rush. "I swear, I didn't do it!" Now I was going to have to prove my innocence! Maybe bust out of jail! Could I handle a jailbreak? Oh sweet Celestia, please don't tell me I'd have to kill ghouls to get out of here. I liked ghouls!

The earth pony sat, slipped a cigarette into her mouth, then calmly lit it with an old lighter before she said with an annoyed grunt, "Yes. I figured you didn't."

"I promise…I swear…I…" Then I stopped stammering and just gaped at her. "Really?"

"No blood spattered on you. Just a bit on your hoof from stepping in the pool." She stepped close and slowly lowered her hoof towards Tulip's shattered head. "While I know you probably could do a wound like this, it would have been messy. Bits of blood and bone all over the place. Your clothes are still clean." She peered down at the slain ghoul with a little groan. "Damn…Tulip was a nice girl. Hopeless merchant, but nice."

"Well, thanks," I said in a bit of a daze. I was so used to being in

the middle of the proverbial shitstorm that somepony cutting me a break was depressingly novel.

She took a long pull off the cigarette and let the smoke shoot out her nostrils. “You’re a lousy suspect. From what everypony was saying, you got along well with Tulip. Can’t be a sour deal because you paid in advance. Hell, you haven’t freaked out at all. That’s pretty exceptional for a breather.” She glanced over at the canvas bag. “Can’t be robbery, the goods are still here. Wasn’t a feral attack; no bites or other injuries.” She stared at me a moment, eyes narrowed. “Might be crazy. But if it *was* you, you’re the neatest psychopath in the Hoof.”

She sighed and moved closer to the body. “Sorry, ‘Lip.” And then she started pressing on the corpse’s ribs. There was a dry, crunchy noise as Tulip’s side depressed. “Busted ribs.” Willow carefully removed the saturated clothing to reveal two dark, round distortions. “Hoofkicks. Somepony knocked Tulip right off her hooves.”

“Like an applebuck,” I remarked, drawing a look. It might have been approved, but with a mare like Willow, how could you tell?

“Yeah, but see? The one on the left isn’t as deep as the one on the right. I’m guessing Tulip was kicked while she was turning. Maybe running for help? The kicker was strong enough that she was knocked on her side, and then…” She mimicked the hoof coming down again on Tulip’s head. “She didn’t even have a chance to get up. See?” She pointed at the blood spattering across the body. “All round, gravitational drops. No movement or smearing. Instantly dead.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff,” I commented, getting a smoky snort from the mare.

“Yeah. You could say that,” she said, taking a moment to chew on the cigarette. “Sometimes I wish I wasn’t a part of Windclop’s jerky squad…that’s what I call his security ghouls. Too much of a joke for me. We’re supposed to let everyone in so long as they’re not Red Eye or Remnants. I just keep an eye open for trouble, like you, and hope for the best.”

I noted that Harbingers were okay. “Were you in the military? Looks like you know your way around firearms,” I said with a look at her assault carbines.

“Law enforcement, actually. Which makes shit like this all the more annoying.” She glared down at the body, flicking ashes from the

end of her cigarette. “Three days from now, nopony’s gonna give a fuck. ‘Lip deserves better.”

I looked at the dead ghoul and back at her. “So, what do you think it might have been?” She scowled at the body, the blood, and mostly at me, then took a long pull off the cigarette and let the gray smoke out in a long plume.

She sighed as she returned her eyes to the crushed mare. “If it wasn’t robbery, wasn’t a feral after a nibble, and wasn’t personal, she might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.” She pointed at my reinforced barding spilling from the sack. “She might have been coming to deliver your barding and come across something worth killing over.”

“Something illegal? Maybe that Ahuizotl had something to do with it?” I suggested, and got a sullen look in response. “What? The guy’s a creep, and not because he’s a ghoul.”

“Yeah. Except there’s nothing illegal about being a creep. We don’t have much in the way of laws, anyway. Pretty basic, really. And while I don’t put it past him, Ahuizotl’s a weak little shit. He gets other ponies to kill for him if he can get away with it. He couldn’t have killed her like this.” She groaned in irritation. “Fuck…knew it would come to this. Fucking breather tourists…”

“You don’t like smoothcoats?” I asked in concern.

She shrugged. “I don’t like unknowns. Hate ‘em. Don’t care if they’re alive or dead. I think we should screen who comes in here. Keep our own safe. Windclop wants everyone to just pretend we’re all alive, like the rotted hide is just a bad rash. And Ahuizotl wants us one step up from feral so we’ll all keep drowning in booze and Rainboom.” At my clueless expression, she snapped, “Super strong Dash.” She took another long pull on her cigarette and sighed, shaking her head. “But more folks want the chance to trade and to pretend like we’re normal, so they’ll let every freakshow into this place.” She shot a pointed look at my mechanical legs.

I popped out a finger and scratched out a booger, making her squirm in disgust when I flicked it away with a grin. Freakshow *that,* Willow. “So…now what?” I asked, stepping away from the body a little.

“Now?” She looked surprised. “Well now you take your armor -- you paid for it after all -- and go fuck yourself for all I care. I’ll make sure she gets incinerated. Windclop will auction off her stuff for the town. Somepony else will come and sell barding. Life goes

on," she muttered darkly. "That's how it goes, isn't it? Somepony gets murdered and great if you can catch 'em but 'oh well' if you can't."

Damn, that was a lot of bitterness. "What do you mean?" Willow glared at me a moment. Clearly there was something gnawing at the ghoul. "I'm just curious, is all." She made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat and rolled her cloudy eyes.

"Once upon a time, I was with the Hoofington Guard. Investigations. Seems like another life…'cause it was, I guess. Always busy trying to keep order, keeping the Pinks happy, and trying to solve cases. Most were usually pretty simple, but we had a few that were just nasty. Hoofington's always been a little heavy on the weirdo population like that. Softheart and I were assigned to catch the Angel of Death serial killer," she said as she trotted away from the body a bit and took a seat.

"I…read about her," I said as glanced at the stairs that led down to Mortuary. "Targeted foals?"

"Mhmmm. Real piece of work. Turns out she was an M.o.P. nurse. Snapped under the pressure. Thought it was more merciful to kill kids than let them live in this world. So we finally caught her…and we handed her over to the M.o.P.," she muttered bitterly.

"Wait. Why?" I asked in confusion.

The ghoul rolled her eyes. "Because she was fucking ministry. Fuck…don't you get it? Back then, if you were with a ministry, there were a million special rules about what we were supposed to do. We caught Nurse Candy, then handed her right over to Fluttershy who 'Pinkie Pie promised' us that they'd make her better." She hissed in disgust. "Three months later she was out and doing it again. Only this time, she knew how we'd caught her and changed her habits. Softheart drove herself nuts trying to stop her; she loved kids. And the Angel loved toying with us. The Angel would leave notes on the bodies of her victims to me and Softheart."

I used a bit of canvas to wipe the blood off my hooves. "So what happened?"

"Angel slipped up. Softheart had a kid, and the Angel went after her. Too much for the Angel to resist. Nasty fight. The Angel nearly killed Softheart. Shoved a length of wrought iron fence through her chest. Anyway, I trotted her giggling ass all the way back to Hightower myself. Of course, then Image got involved and we were

fucked. I was sure the Angel was going to disappear again. I filed paperwork. I made calls. I screamed my stupid head off." She let out a long, rattling sigh. "And then the Angel dies in custody!" she spat, stomping her forehooves in rage.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, and got a glare in response.

"That's exactly what my fucking superiors said!" she snarled, jabbing her hoof at me. "But she was killed in custody and I don't care if it was the Angel of Death or Princess Celestia; a crime is a crime! Then I dug some more and found out there was a whole *slew* of ponies killed in Hightower. No investigations. No *nothing*. Others had gotten hit by some sort of mind-sapping magic attack -- all fatal. And nopony was investigating! Somepony was covering it up, but I had no idea who."

She snorted, looking back at the body. "Softheart snapped. Couldn't take it. Maybe it was her injuries or something, but she couldn't let it go. Said she could feel the Angel inside her. Woke up in her daughter's room with a knife. Finally jumped in front of a subway train. Suicide. Case…fucking…closed."

The mottled green mare slumped. "I was taken off investigations. Put behind a desk in Flankfurt filing paperwork. Would have quit, but... hrmph, what else was I going to do?" she said with a shrug. "Bombs fell and paperwork was pretty much moot. Lasted a year before ghoulification set in. Fortunately, I kept my head together. Nopony gave a shit about justice anymore, but I could shoot better than most of the scum around the Wasteland."

Then she suddenly blinked and groaned, covering her face with her hoof. "Oh, shit. I didn't just do that, did I?"

"What?" I asked in concern.

The mottled green mare just adopted an expression of self-disgust. "Don't tell me I actually gave you my whole 'when I was alive' sob story. I hate that shit." She snorted and spat her cigarette butt into the shadows. "Ghouls always have one whiny story from when they were alive. Promised I'd never share mine. They're always so pathetic."

"Sorry. But it was an interesting story," I said. I considered her a moment, and a slow smile spread on my lips. I adopted as casual a tone as I could. "You know…I'm going into Hightower." I tried not to look too interested, but the ghoul could clearly handle herself.

"Are you joking or crazy?" Willow asked, and I grinned widely at her. She looked back at me flatly, leaning away as if my crazy was

contagious. “Blackjack, I don’t know you. Why in Equestria would I follow you into a deathtrap like Hightower? Much as unlife sucks, I’d rather not lose it.”

I looked at the skeptical ghoul and then smiled. “Because you have questions about the things that happened in Hightower. Niggling little things you want to know. Even if the answers don’t matter, you still want them.”

She glared at me for a long moment before she snorted, “Not that bad. Now get out of my mane. I need to get Tulip cremated and tell his mayorship to clean up the mess.” I felt like she’d slugged me. Mysteries! Potential answers! How could she pass that up? I sighed and just nodded, gathering up the reinforced combat armor Tulip had made for me before starting back towards the Afterlife club. “And Blackjack,” she called after me. I stopped and looked over my shoulder at the ghoul as she added grimly, “Keep your eyes out for somepony that can crush a skull with one blow.”

* * *

Given there was someone in Meatlocker who would kill a mare like Tulip, I found a bathroom and checked it for occupants and red bars before removing the clothes Velvet had generously given me. I sighed and, for the first time ever, carefully folded my clothes and packed them into the bottom of my saddlebag. Tulip had done well. The reinforced combat armor was a mottled gray like concrete, and the usual ceramic plates had been replaced by some sort of metal I couldn’t quite identify, so I chanced a little nibble. It tasted like caramel and was lighter than steel. Still, this was definitely some heavy duty armor. ‘Security’ was etched on the back in black letters, and she’d even painted my filly in place. I felt guilty seeing it after Boing. Sighing softly, I pulled the barding on.

Tulip had done *really* well. It fit like a sock. I debated putting on the helmet for a moment, then remembered what Willow had said. The helmet went on immediately; I had no idea how reinforced my brain was and would prefer to not have to find out. I stood like a zebra, winced as the armor pinched like mad in the crotch, and carefully tugged it so that I could go bipedal comfortably. No need for the boots on my forelegs. I wasn’t sure what the S.W.A.T. spray-painted out had stood for, though. ‘Security Whines A Ton’?

As I trotted out of the bathroom, I turned my thoughts again to the

task ahead. If I was going into Hightower, I'd need a strong team. Rampage, Lacunae, and Stygius were solid. Psychoshy might have conflicts, but I was pretty sure she'd follow him. That wasn't quite enough though. At the very least I'd need somepony who knew the layout of the prison. Somepony who could deal with robots and turrets. Somepony who could keep us all alive. Somepony good with locks. Shears was an unknown; I hoped he had some combat skills.

I was halfway to the Afterlife club when I heard shouts coming from the front of the hospital. "Get out of here! You're not welcome, Stripe!" I heard somepony bellow. "No Remnants here! Step off!"

I started towards the entrance when I heard a familiar mare cry out, "Oh Maiden of the Stars, why have you cursed me so!? I beg you, return and finish me off! End my torment!"

I trotted out on to the front steps and beheld a filthy, rain-soaked, wretched-looking Xanthe. The zebra mare's eyes popped wide as she stared past the scowling ghouls and at me. "Oh, sweet sun above, I *am* damned." Then her golden eyes rolled back in their sockets and she flopped to the ground in a faint. I looked at her for a minute, then at the ghouls. "Hundred caps to let her in?" The pair looked at each other a moment, scowled, then shrugged and nodded.

Then a muddy bundle on the zebra's back shifted a little. I frowned as I stepped closer and carefully lifted the flap. Curly pink mane streaked with filth and dried blood met my eyes, and then two bright and terrified blue eyes peeked back at me for a moment before I shared a scream with a filly who was supposed to be dead.

* * *

I'd like to think there were different levels of awkward. Saying your mom's flank is perfectly sexy when she turns out to be standing behind you, for example, is a beginner's level of awkward. Then there's trying to convince the pony you love to be your special somepony, only to discover they're taken, not interested, only interested in being friends, or that they would be interested if you were somepony else. That's a nice middling sort of awkward. Then there's finding out that the filly you thought you'd killed in a psychopathic rage is still alive, badly battered, possibly crippled,

and utterly scared to death of you. Boing was with Doctor Wheelbarrow right now, who'd Pinkie Promised he wouldn't study her too much.

Xanthe was almost in as much shock as Boing. I reminded Windclop that I'd just made a generous contribution to the community and I'd really appreciate if he could let her in. He'd smoothed some ghouls' nerves enough for Carol to let her use the shower, and Velvet was nice enough to loan her a cloak, after I'd managed to pry her away from something they were all doing with Lacunae in the corner of the ER. The garment didn't completely conceal her, though. There was just something about the way a zebra moved that you couldn't quite hide. Most of the ghouls made a point of pretending we didn't exist.

I was too preoccupied to really enjoy the music in Afterlife as I spoke with the spooked zebra at one of the club's tables. "So, you couldn't get to the Collegiate and have been wandering around on your own since you left Yellow River?" I asked Xanthe as she held a cup of tea between her hooves. Her eyes were darting back and forth between Nurse Graves and me as they had ever since she'd woken up in the care of ghouls. Apparently, while there wasn't exactly a rule against them, there were lots of old grudges against zebrakind in Meatlocker. Windclop had grudgingly allowed her inside; I think the sight of Boing was enough to let him make a special allowance.

"Yes. Since you cursed me, I wandered through the rainy night seeking my way. The pegasi flew away with their injured comrade. I was rained on most terribly and slipped in the mud several times. I finally returned to a tunnel where I discovered that poor filly battered within an inch of her life," she said with a shake of her head. Returned? I started to ask... then I wanted to ask about Boing's injuries... then I felt really guilty and shut up, so she went on, "I could have left her, but my spirit is already tainted enough by your curse. I didn't need ghosts haunting me as well, so I helped her as I could and sought aid." She shook her head with a sigh. "The Harbingers…they had no help for me, as they only sought you. I could only head south and hope I found the Collegiate you mentioned, but I was lost. I followed the mountains too closely, and this was the only community I knew where she might get aid."

"Good thing I cursed you, then. I thought I'd killed her," I said as I looked at my hooves. Funny; *almost* killing her in a frenzy was

somehow worse than killing her outright. Somewhere in this hospital was a filly who was terrified of me, and rightly so. If Xanthe hadn't found her and gotten her to somepony who could help, she would have been dead…

No, Blackjack. Life is better than death. A few exceptions, of course: Steel Rain, Lancer, whatever was running the Harbingers. But it was better she lived.

"She'll recover. She has a skull fracture, three broken ribs, and a broken pelvis. Severe damage to her legs. Punctured lung, too, but fortunately Xanthe administered a healing potion in time. Doctor Wheelbarrow will have her up, if only to run a few tests. Harmless tests, I promise," Nurse Graves added quickly as she caught my eye. "Doctor Wheelbarrow has a theory that the magic which turned us into ghouls can somehow be reversed." She gave a miniscule shrug. "It's a pleasant theory." She sounded almost dismissive of the idea of being alive again.

"You don't *want* to be alive?" Xanthe asked in shock.

"It would be nice, I suppose, but there really isn't much difference between the living and the unliving. Happiness matters far more." A moment later, she gave me a significant look. "There's a rumor that you are going into Hightower soon."

"That's the idea. Mr. Shears says he knows a way in that won't result in us getting dusted right away. Once we're inside…well… we'll be exposed to Enervation, so we charge through as quickly as possible." Okay, that didn't sound any better out loud than it did in my head. But if we were fast enough...

She closed her eyes a moment, tapping her hooves on the tabletop. "If you go, I would like to go with you. I have medical expertise and a knowledge of the prison."

I stared a few moments, making sure she was serious before asking, "Not that I'm not grateful for the help, but why? You spent a really long time trying to get out of there. Why would you want to go back?"

"I don't. Every thought of that place fills me with dread. But if you are going, I want to make sure that that horrible place doesn't take any more lives. Plus, I know where there is a large stock of Rad-X and RadAway and other medical supplies, and you'd need me to access it. Without it, I doubt you'd have the time to get in and out again."

Windclop looked over from the bar. He'd been keeping a nervous

eye out like a mother shadowing her daughter's first date to the atrium. He slipped from the bar and approached. "Graves, you know you don't have to go in there."

"Yeah, while I appreciate it... " I started, but the nurse shook her head.

"Thank you, but if you are going, then you will need me. I have to make sure that horrible place doesn't get one more soul who doesn't deserve it." The nurse smiled sadly at the pegasus ghoul, who clattered his bony wings nervously and looked around.

Suddenly he turned and marched to the robot hovering behind the bar. "Cerberus! I've got a mission for you. You're going to escort Nurse Graves on her expedition."

The floating robot lifted its flamer and spat a small plume of fire into the air. "Oo-Rah! Yes sir! Turn off this combat inhibitor and I will defend her from every last stinking ghoul in Equestria! Including herself!"

Windclop scowled at the robot. "Your combat settings should be just fine as they are, Cerberus."

The robot sagged and let out a synthesized sigh. "Fine. Stupid ghoul-loving ghouls and their damned combat inhibitors."

Stygius and Psychoshy trotted towards me. The batpony seemed a bit uncomfortable, but I couldn't tell if was because of his company or something else. "So I heard you unkilled a foal. How'd you pull that one off?" Psychoshy asked me. Then she noticed Xanthe and began sizing the zebra up as if trying to think of some sort of cutting remark, but upon seeing the terrified look in Xanthe's eyes, she turned back to me with a clear 'You're not worth the effort' snort.

"Xanthe here saved her life." Hopefully the filly would forgive me for attacking her... somehow...

"Well, aren't you a hero," the yellow pegasus said sarcastically to the zebra. Then she glanced over at Stygius, saw his disapproval, and blinked and forced a grin. "I mean, way to go!" Stygius just sighed and looked away. Psychoshy's grimace melted into a worried, uncertain frown.

Rampage materialized out of the crowd. "Ugh…remind me not to eat soap next time I'm looking to get drunk," the striped mare said. She grimaced and clenched her eyes shut, then belched out a small stream of bubbles. Sticking her tongue out, she held her stomach a moment before spotting the shocked-looking zebra. "Ave," she said

formally.
"P- P- Proditor!?" Xanthe stammered in shock. "Te imploro non me occide!"
"Your accent is terrible. Please address me in Pony," Rampage said in that oddly formal tone that suggested Shujaa was at the helm.
"Is there going to be trouble between you two?" I asked in concern.
Rampage regarded her a long moment, leaning over to glance at Xanthe's covered flank as if hoping to see her glyphmark. "Your tribe? You are Orah?" Xanthe flushed and shook her head. "Propoli?" Xanthe gulped and gave the tiniest little nod. "Ahh… certainly not warrior or priest. Farmer?" Xanthe shook her head. "Crafter?" A little nod. Rampage looked at her coolly, then gave the tiniest smile. "Ah. Well, better than a merchant." The zebra stiffened a little and even gave a ghost of a smile along with a tiny nod. Rampage looked at me and said with a smile, "No trouble." Then she groaned and blinked, letting out another belch of bubbles.
Why she didn't let Xanthe answer for herself was beyond me. Zebras were weird. "Are you okay?"
"Meh. I'll live," she said with a little smirk, but it quickly disappeared. "I heard Tulip was killed."
"What?!" Psychoshy gasped. "Who? How? She was like…tiny." The pegasus actually seemed shocked. "That is just…messed up."
"In the hallway near the Mortuary," I explained. "Somepony crushed her head in one blow." The yellow pegasus glared sharply at Rampage, and I added quickly, "Somepony other than Rampage. I'd left her in Mortuary before I found Tulip's body." I glanced at Xanthe. "Could a zebra have done it?"
"One of the Achu could have done so, easily. If there were any left. Their Fallen Caesar technique of fighting put them on par with your Steel Rangers, but their mountain homes were destroyed by pony sorcery." She sighed softly. "The ability to kill even an enemy in steel armor is little help against a volcanic eruption. Still, there have been tales of their tribe surviving far from their shattered lands."
"Is it just me, or does anyone else find it funny their tribe sounds like a sneeze?" Psychoshy asked with a smirk, looking at the ponies gathered around the table. Deadpan expressions looked back. "Just me then? Kay…" she said with a flush.
"I've seen zebras fighting hoof to hoof." And I'd seen Shujaa capable of the same. Still, she couldn't have been in two places at

once.

Nurse Graves shook her head slowly. “But zebras aren’t allowed in Meatlocker. Too many bad memories and old grudges.” She smiled apologetically at Xanthe. “And the Remnant haven’t done zebrakind any favors over the years.” Xanthe’s ears drooped, but she wisely omitted that she’d been a part of them till I’d cursed her.

‘Power Armor?’ wrote Stygius on his slate.

“Well, Steel Ranger armor isn’t exactly what I’d call stealthy,” I muttered. Enclave armor, on the other hoof…

“As much as I liked Tulip, it’s not exactly our job to catch her killer, is it?” Psychoshy said, staring at me and waiting for an argument. I didn’t give her one. I glanced over to see Willow scowling at her. “Didn’t you say you were finding a way inside Hightower that didn’t involve our immediate deaths?” the pegasus went on.

“I found it. Mr. Shears says he can get us in using EC-1101,” I replied, tapping my PipBuck foreleg. I looked around. “I just wish there was something we could do about that rocket.”

“It shouldn’t be that hard,” Xanthe said casually as she looked at Cerberus. “Depending on the condition of the warhead, you could just have the robot slice the lateral struts and pull the whole thing off.”

We all shared a look and then looked back at the zebra, who suddenly seemed apprehensive. “You know about balefire bombs and rockets?” I asked.

“Well, I…it’s not my specialty at all. But…yes.” She looked nervously at her hooves, tapping them together. “That actually isn’t a rocket at all; it’s a missile that was fired from Dawn Bay. Shorter range, flat flight path, and more difficult to intercept.”

“Propoli and their toys,” Rampage muttered, rolling her eyes.

“Propoli? What does that mean, exactly?” I asked, pointing a hoof at Xanthe.

“Propoli were the tribe behind the founding of Roam. Big advocates of city, technology and abandoning the old ways. Pushed rocket, missile, and robotics development. And balefire bombs,” Rampage explained, looking flatly at Xanthe. The zebra shrank back. “Also established the trade agreements with Equestria prior to the war and were blamed for bringing down the great pony curses.”

“That…that was a very long time ago,” she muttered quickly. “We learned our mistake. Today we are simply trying our best to rebuild

and prepare for the coming of the Maiden." Then she noticed my scowl and flushed, looking at her hooves and tapping them together again, muttering about curses.

I reached over and patted her shoulder. "I promise, I don't hold you accountable for what your grandparents ten times removed did. And neither should anypony else," I added, looking around the table. Xanthe flushed, not looking up from her hooves. "Is there anything you can do about that missile, though?"

"Well. You could cut off the warhead and dump it outside. That would cut off the radiation. If the purge system is intact, you might be able to disarm the warhead. Or you could try and set it off." Then she looked up at the stunned silence as everypony stared at her. "Well…not while we're inside, of course!"

"Not at *all*, please." Windclop shivered as he looked up at the roof. "While I think the hospital would survive, a balefire blast would do a nasty number on the neighborhood."

I sighed, then smiled and patted Xanthe's shoulder. "Right! You're coming with us. You're our resident balefire missile specialist."

"Huh?" Xanthe blinked. "But I…I can't…I mean…shouldn't…I mean…" I just smiled at her as she stammered on for a minute or two and then said in a whimper, "I'm the most cursed zebra ever."

"Yup," I said as I put a hoof around her shoulder.

"Associating with a damned dirty stripe! Damn this combat inhibitor!" Cerberus snarled.

I popped out my fingers and started counting, getting plenty of stares from around the crowded table. "So, that's me, Lacunae, Rampage, Psychoshy, Stygius, Mr. Shears, Nurse Graves, Cerberus, Xanthe…"

"Excuse me…" came that nasty purr that put my mane on edge. "Security?" We all looked over at the smug smirk of Ahuizotl. "I'd like to speak to you about your upcoming endeavor?"

"What are you doing here, Ahuizotl? I thought you said you'd rather be turned to glue than set one hoof in here," Windclop said with a scowl.

"Things change," he replied in his slimy, wet voice. Then his eyes turned to me. "I understand that you're going to Hightower. I'd like to offer the assistance of my employee, Carrion."

That brought a look of shock from Graves and Windclop. I looked at the smirking ghoul and frowned. "No offence, but you're about as trustworthy as a radroach in a pantry. Why in Equestria would I

take him along with me?"

"Last time I checked, none of you had power armor. He'll be a formidable asset against whatever you encounter," Ahuizotl purred silkily. "If you're worried about him shooting you in the back, just put him in the front. I promise you, he'll not betray you." I looked over at the frowning Windclop and worried Nurse Graves.

"Well?" I asked the skeptical-looking ghouls.

"Carrion is pretty formidable, I admit it. And if Ahuizotl orders him not to double cross you, he won't," Windclop said with a frown. "I still wouldn't take him without knowing why Ahuizotl wants him to come along, though."

"Can't I be doing it out of the kindness of my heart?" Ahuizotl simpered. Then he sneered at me. "Fine. There's a cell. 755. I want Carrion to rifle through it. No interruptions, no questions, no interference. If he finds anything inside, it's mine to keep."

"755? But that was in the maximum security level." Graves frowned a moment, then her eyes opened wide in shock. "Oh my! That's Kingpin's cell!"

Ahuizotl purred like me trying to get in Midnight's bed, "The most infamous mob boss in all of Equestria during the war. Murder. Smuggling. Theft. Vice. He did it all. He also never turned over his fortune when he was arrested for tax evasion. M.o.M. raked his memories for months, but he'd already extracted every single incriminating one before they'd gotten to him. I'm hoping there's something in his cell that will tell me where some of his fortune was hidden."

Okay. That I could buy. And it would also mean at least Carrion getting out again. "Right. Well. Fine. But don't blame me if he gets torn apart or blasted or something."

"Of course not," the ghoul said with a broad smile that gave me a head to hoof shooty feeling. "I'll tell him to get ready, then." And with that he trotted away, whistling brightly and making my coat crawl even more.

I stood up and looked at Windclop. "Is there a…I don't know… someplace we can all meet?"

"There's a conference room on the second floor nopony uses. It's big enough," the pegasus said, rubbing his nose with his long, thin, bony wings.

"Right. Rampage. Why don't you go get Shears and Carrion? I'll go find Lacunae. Psychoshy and Stygius can follow Windclop there…

and you can make sure Cerberus's combat inhibitor is good?" I added. Windclop nodded, and the robot gave an angry mutter.

Nurse Graves looked at Xanthe. "Why don't you come with me down to radiology? There are some hazardous materials suits that should offer some of you and your friends more protection from the radiation." Still muttering about curses, the zebra followed along in a daze.

I had some decent talent. Now we just had to do the whole planning thing. I sighed as I rose and trotted back towards the marketplace in the ER. When I'd been in there before, Lacunae had been in the corner surrounded by ghouls, and I hadn't wanted to interrupt beyond getting a cloak for Xanthe. Now I trotted up towards the crowd of ghouls, trying to get at the alicorn in the back. Had they done something with her mane?

"Excuse me! Pardon me! I need to get through!" I called out as I nudged my way forward. I'd hoped that whatever they'd been doing with Lacunae, it wouldn't be too embarrassing for the purple alicorn. I wondered if it would be leather or lace. Then the crowd finally parted, and...

Goddess...

For the first time since I'd seen alicorns, I saw one that didn't look like some cheap knockoff of Luna or Celestia. The golden silk dress with burgundy panels she wore was what I imagined a sunset should look like. Her brushed and curled mane seemed to blow in that ghostly wind. The traces of lip gloss and the golden glitter in the corners of her eyes gave off just the right sparkle. Burgundy ribbons and the gold wire that I'd traded to Tulip had been woven around her hooves. They'd even fashioned a tiara for her from the wire. The collected ghouls stared on in joy as she stood there before us all. If Celestia were the sun and Luna the moon, Lacunae could be sunrise and sunset.

"I fear they got carried away," Lacunae said bashfully as she blushed.

I looked at the beaming Velvet and Snowflake and then back up at her. "They didn't. They really didn't." I took a few seconds more, amazed at the sight, then sighed. "But unfortunately, we're getting ready to plan our next step." It seemed such a shame for her to put the outfit away.

"I see," she said with a gentle smile at the surrounding ghouls. "Well, I wish to thank you all for your kindness. It really is a lovely

dress."

Velvet just blushed. "Well, it's nice to make something special," she said with a little sniff as she looked up at the mare. The ghouls nodded, and a few even seemed to give little bows towards the alicorn. "Please. Take it. I always dreamed of making something for royalty. I think every seamstress does. You're as close as I'm ever going to get."

"I…thank you," Lacunae said solemnly, clearly taken aback by the attention and generosity. Finally, she sighed and carefully removed the amazing garment. "But I don't know how I could take it with me."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Velvet assured her. Her horn glowed as she took the dress, and then there was a flash of magic and the garment was bundled up neatly in burgundy ribbons. "There. That should be easier to carry."

Lacunae nodded and slipped the bundle into her bags as she took off the rest of the decorations, passing them to the gray ghoul. She still looked magnificent. Where they'd gotten the makeup was beyond me. Finally, she thanked them all once again and trotted out of the ER with a blush on her cheeks. "What?" she asked, looking down at me and my grin.

"So…spill. You liked that, didn't you?" I teased. She flushed a little more and pointedly looked away, but still smiled.

"It gave them some joy," she said quietly.

"And I bet the Goddess just loved all the attention," I added, but instead of smiling at my teasing, she just looked sad. "Lacunae?"

"She did…at first. And she enjoyed my humiliation." She dropped her gaze. "But as it went on, she cut contact. I fear their sincere devotion was…upsetting."

That was certainly odd. I regarded my purple friend and nudged her shoulder. "You've changed, Lacunae."

"Pardon?" Lacunae blinked in surprise as we trotted along. The alicorn still drew looks from the ghouls we passed, even in the wan glow of my light spell.

"You. When we first met, you were…well…a little creepy. You never talked, and half the time when you did, you were the Goddess. Now you're…you. You let ponies dress you up because it makes them happy. Is that because you're different or because the Goddess is?" I asked as we moved along.

The question turned her smile more wistful and regretful. "The

Goddess cannot change, Blackjack. I wish she could. When she formed, a balance was struck between the egos of the dominant mares. Anything that could disrupt that balance is diverted into me. Hope. Friendship. Joy. The feelings and opinions and memories of hundreds of ponies are placed within me. If I've changed, it's because she refuses to. She remains convinced of her own superiority and the manifest destiny of her children."

"But, why wouldn't the Goddess want to feel good things?" I asked, finding that positively crazy.

"Because it empowers the part of her that is Twilight Sparkle. The self-important ego of the mare that became the Goddess still remembers petty slights made against her many years before the war. And so long as the Goddess feels misery, doubt, and self-recrimination, Twilight cannot assert herself or threaten Trixie's domination." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Sometimes I think she's stripped away so much of Twilight that there's more of her in me than in the Goddess herself."

"Is that why you're…well…good?" I asked.

Lacunae gave me a long look that made me wonder if I'd somehow insulted her. "The Goddess must maintain control of all within her. To that end she strips away memories that are good and strong and places them within me. The things that cause her shame, discomfort, or lack of control. If the ponies within her remembered who they were, she could not maintain the kind of restraint over them she now requires."

"But is the Goddess, overall, good or not?" I asked, nudging her hip.

"She is the combination of hundreds of souls and memories. She has good ponies and wicked ponies within her. Virtuous and craven. Kind and cruel. The segregation she imposes to maintain control is a mistake, I feel, but one that is unchangeable." The purple alicorn sighed as we walked past Stonewing's memorial. "I believe one thing, however. She can do better."

We followed the babble of voices to the second floor conference room. Rampage, Psychoshy, and Stygius sat on one end of the long lozenge-shaped table. In the middle on the left side, Xanthe sat next to Nurse Graves in a yellow hazmat suit while Cerberus floated behind her, muttering obscenities. The nurse had two cardboard boxes in front of her and was counting out bottles of Rad-X in one while Xanthe examined pouches of orange RadAway. Opposite them

were Willow and Windclop, talking to each other in low voices. Carrion lurked in the corner along with Ahuizotl, who looked much too happy about this. The far end of the table was occupied by the ragged form of Mr. Shears.

"Ah, welcome. I'm glad you decided to quit playing dress up and join us," Shears rasped.

"Right," I said as I looked around at the assembled people. "We're all here because we're going to do the impossible: break into Hightower. I know it's an irradiated fortress filled with automated defenses, feral glowing ghouls, deadly radiation, and soul sapping Enervation, but working together, I know that we can get in, get what we need done, and get out again. If anyone wants to quit, now's the time to back out."

I looked around, but the only person looking ready to bolt was Xanthe. Yet she remained in her seat. I wondered if she was too scared to leave or if she simply had nowhere to go.

Psychoshy raised her hoof. "So…not that I'm scared, but, like, what's our goal?"

"Three things. First, to get to the top floor and reach the broadcast network. Second, to find cell 755." Ahuizotl chuckled and nodded. "And…" I looked at Mr. Shears.

"What I'm looking for is in the attic," he said, his filmy eyes peering into my own over the rag covering his face. "It's right next door to the broadcast center on the top floor, so it shouldn't be that much of a problem." From everypony else, the response was just shrugs, but I remembered what Razorwire had told me the first time we'd met. *'Took me up to the attic. Put a bullet in my head.'* And then, as if reading my mind, Shears said, "I've been waiting an eternity to get up there."

Yeah. We were definitely going to have a chat.

"Well there's quite a bit of peril between here and there. So how do we get all the way up there?" Lacunae asked.

There was a blue glow from under Shears's hood, and a moment later lines of light burst into being above the table. They organized themselves into a glowing green outline of the prison. "I've had a lot of time to review and study the ways into and through the prison. Two centuries actually." The rotund ghoul stood on his chair, hooves on the conference table. "Hightower is stacked in three sections, with subsections between. In the basement are storage, generators, and all the infrastructure for supporting the

building. Hightower has its own shielded reactor. It's rather like a stable, in its own way.

"On the ground floor are the cafeteria, gymnasium, library, and classrooms." I must have looked surprised, because the fat ghoul chuckled. "Oh yes, the prisoners had to do something with all that time on their hooves." On the illusion, the lowest of three blocks flashed from green to red. "The medium security cells are here. Then medical. Then high security cells. Then the security center and armory. Then the supermax cells. At the top are the warden's office and central command. Then the attic, communications, and the rooftop access."

"So they put medical and the armory between groups of prisoners? Whose stupid idea was that?" Psychoshy sarcastically asked with a roll of her eyes. Shears glared back at her with his filmy gaze.

"The design is such that, in the event of a riot, the three sections of the prison could be locked down and isolated. The elevators only go from the bottom to the top of each section, so there's no clear path to travel from the very top to the very bottom. When in lockdown, there's no method of travel between blocks at all, and if a pony is stupid enough to get into the central shaft, there's numerous automated and reinforced turrets inside."

"And the whole building's been on lockdown for two centuries," I muttered as I looked at the glowing tower.

"Indeed. Unlike other prisons, Warden Hobble was not about to release his charges. He activated all the building's automated defenses. The guards and staff were every bit as trapped as the prisoners. Then the missile impacted. Radiation killed everypony quickly, and then the Enervation field appeared." I thought of the ring in Tenpony Tower and how Helpinghoof reported that it had weakened the healing potion when the pony Helpinghoof treated died.

"How many ponies were in Hightower when the missile hit?" I asked, looking at Nurse Graves.

She stared at her hooves and murmured almost too softly to hear, "We were over capacity. Around three thousand."

Three thousand? I thought of the dozens, perhaps hundreds, that had died at Silverstar Sporting Supplies. *Three thousand?*

It must have shown on my face, because Shears snorted, then dug out some .308 shell casings and tossed them on the conference table. "Please. I've taken steps for that. These talismans will ward

off the Enervation for several hours. I suggest you not lose them, or you'll get an intimate lesson in what happened to everypony in the Core."

"Right," I murmured as I passed them out to everypony coming with me.

"I thought nothing could affect Enervation," Psychoshy said skeptically as she held one to her ear and shook it, making something inside rattle. "How do we know these even work?"

"You don't. That talisman is the product of ancient zebra magic. If it doesn't work, you'll find out quite quickly."

"Starkatteri magic?" Xanthe said at once, looking at the shell in horror.

Mr. Shears simply shrugged. "I can never keep all your tribes straight. Suffice to say they work, and if they don't this expedition will be over before we leave the basement." Xanthe took the shell casing as if she expected it to turn into a radroach and bite her. A red dot appeared in the basement. "We'll enter here, take stairs up to the ground floor, and make it to the elevator. We'll have to physically force our way into the shaft and up to medical."

"I still remember my access codes. I don't know if they'll override the lockdown, though," Nurse Graves said softly.

"If not, I can," Carrion growled; it was the first thing the griffin had said in the meeting.

Nurse Graves continued, "In medical, there are a number of ghouls, robots, and turrets. Patients and staff who were trapped there…We didn't have time to use up all the medical supplies, so there's a large stockpile we can use to purge radiation."

"The second level is a bit more problematic," Mr. Shears said. "The high security area has more robots and turrets. The warhead is our biggest problem. Its magic has produced ghouls of…substantial strength. And while it is there, I doubt many of the living will last long." He looked at Cerberus and Xanthe. "If the robot can follow her instructions and dump the warhead out the hole, we should be able to get up the elevator to the armory and guard station."

"And if that's under lockdown, how do we get inside?" Rampage asked, looking at Carrion. "More manual persuasion?"

Shears reached down under the table and lifted a metal case, setting it on the tabletop. He flipped it open, and at once my PipBuck started clicking. I'd seen the round glowing orbs before lining the interior of Discord's containment. A balefire egg.

"Oh, you know it's bad when that's your key," Rampage groaned, burying her face in her hooves.

"Once inside the armory, we have to get our hooves on the captain's pass. That should get us into the supermax level. However, it is physically impossible to travel from the supermax into the top of the prison during lockdown except via a highly secure emergency access. To open that, two keys must be turned simultaneously: one in the armory and one in the warden's office."

"So how do we get into the office to turn the key?"

"There's an air shaft. In the event of a riot in the supermax, the air could be flooded with tranquilizer gas," Mr. Shears said, the hologram turning to show a vertical tunnel leading from the armory to the top of the building. "The secretaries in the warden's office always complained about the smells being blown up from the armory. Fortunately, we have numerous fliers to get us through."

"And once we're inside the warden's office?"

"Get to the warden's desk. Deactivate the lockdown to shut off the external turrets. Step out onto the roof and fly to safety, after we take care of our respective goals. Easy," the ghoul said with a shrug.

"Clearly 'easy' must have meant 'freaking impossible' two centuries ago," Psychoshy muttered, and Stygius nodded.

"It's not impossible, but it will be a challenge. If you want to sit this one out, I wouldn't blame you," I said as I looked at the yellow mare. Rampage gave a taunting 'ooooh'.

She jerked as if I'd slapped her. "Sit this one out? Me?" She glared and jabbed her pinions at me. "Why don't *you* sit this one out? Chill out here. I'll take care of EC-1101, and we'll be done twice as fast for it."

"Sweet! Let me know how it went!" I said with a grin and started to rise, an uneasy chuckle rising from most of the collected ponies. I sat back down, looking at the assembled ponies, zebra, ghouls, and robot. "I know it will be tough. Get your weapons."

Willow raised her hoof into the air. "Um…I think you're missing a step. How exactly are you getting into the basement?"

Mr. Shears shrugged. "A simple access in a maintenance room on the Luna blue line. It is, however, sealed and can only be opened by her program." I shivered; tunnels in Hoofington were never ever good.

"The subway? As in the subway that's full of feral ghouls? Dozens of ferals? Hundreds?" Willow pressed. "There's a reason we sealed

the subway access to the hospital. There's just too many down there." She glanced at me, her expression hard. "With all the radiation from the bomb, lots of ponies that took shelter in the subway turned to ghouls. The population down there is ridiculously high. Even a pony in power armor would be torn to pieces."

"I doubt they'd bother…" Mr. Shears began, then looked at me, Rampage, Lacunae, Stygius, and Psychoshy. "Oh." Yeah, it would be a pony buffet if we went down there.

"We can just carve our way through them," Carrion muttered.

But somehow the thought of trying to blast our way through hundreds of ghouls had put quite a damper on everypony's mood. We fielded a few ideas, like Stygius offering to fly through as bait, then poofing away. Windclop couldn't spare the jerky squad to clear a way for us. Psychoshy suggested getting a few other gangers, but an army of meal tickets would just draw more ghouls.

"Too bad we can't just tell them to get out of our way," Rampage muttered, then belched and blew a big soap bubble.

"Yeah. Ferals may leave normal ghouls alone…and occasionally we can herd them up and persuade them to move…but they never actually do what we say," Nurse Graves said with a sigh.

I sat there a moment, feeling frustrated. It'd take days to thin the population or try and move them. If we barged in, we might lose somepony.

I flipped open my PipBuck and activated the routing for EC-1101. A little navigation tag appeared on my EFS. *'Come and get me,'* it seemed to taunt. *'Risk your life…risk your friends' lives…come and get me…and then I'll send you somewhere even more dangerous.'* Maybe it would be better to simply give up. Take EC-1101 far away from Hoofington and give up the idea that I would ever find out what Horizons was or what Goldenblood had planned to do with it.

It was the smart thing to do. Maybe it was time I wised up. The ghouls weren't going to go away just by me being nice and telling them to.

Then I blinked and slowly straightened. Rampage noticed at once. "What? What is it? You've got that look, Blackjack."

"What look?" I asked with a grin.

"That 'crazy idea' look that means peeling ghouls and wearing their skins or something like that," Rampage said warily.

"Well…" I slowly looked at all of them. "Depending on how much radiation Lacunae's got sucked up…I might know a pony who they

will listen to."

* * *

The tunnels beneath Hoofington were bad; there was just no way to think otherwise. We trotted down to the hospital's subway access just past the Mortuary and the reinforced doors. All of them were covered except for a small metal one marked 'Emergency exit. Alarm will sound.' Willow pushed on the bar. I'd expected a groan, or worse, a squeal of hinges that'd alert everything for hundred miles. Instead I got a soft whisper of air blowing in from the tunnels. So much for the alarm.

"It'll lock behind you," Windclop said nervously. "We'll stay a few minutes. In case your plan…doesn't work."

"It'll work," I said, looking back at our newest member. Nopony else looked nearly as confident. They'd spent the time I was gone making sure they had what they needed. Everypony with a pulse besides Rampage and Lacunae had a half dozen doses of Rad-X and RadAway; I'd raided Bonesaw at Megamart, since I was in the area. Everypony else had loaded up with what they needed.

I'd almost gone to Chapel; I really wanted to, but…I couldn't. Not till this was out of the way. Same with checking on Boing. There was just too much guilt to face that right now.

I started to step out and then paused, looked at Willow, and asked, "Keep an eye on Boing, please? She's…really hurt and it's my fault and…"

"I got it," the ghoul muttered, rolling her eyes. "Keep your eyes on Carrion. Something's going on in Meatlocker, and I don't like it one bit." I nodded and stepped through the door.

We slowly walked out on to the subway platform. A few flickering emergency lights lit the tunnel as we trotted down towards the rusted hulk of a subway car. Skeletons were curled on the seats. The engineer dangled, half ejected from the front car. My light spell burst to life, casting the ruined subway in its cold white glow.

"Spooky…" Psychoshy muttered. Water trickled in a sheet over the tile mosaics that lined the walls: colorful pony families gleefully riding the subway, the happy scenes now cracked and spotted with mold. Green light emanating from behind us reflected off the streams and gave the tunnel an eerie luminescence. The sound of trickling water was everywhere, and my imagination was

transforming the trickles and splashes into voices murmuring from far away.

"I've seen worse," I replied as I walked to the end of the subway landing. I looked over at Nurse Graves as Cerberus floated above us. "Will feral ghouls actually attack you?"

"As a rule, no, but when they're agitated, we're every bit as much targets as the living," the mare replied. She had two armored cases loaded with healing potions from Megamart. Hopefully they'd last a while before they spoiled. Lacunae had filled them full of every last bit of healing magic they could hold. "Wheelbarrow theorizes that there's something in the way non-ghouls move that triggers an attack response. Or perhaps it's just the effects of the magical contamination. Sadly, once a pony goes feral, there's little chance of coming back from it."

I gestured for Carrion to take point, and the power-armored griffin did so without complaint. I didn't trust him, but his pair of miniguns would be our best defense if they swarmed. I really, really didn't want to get swarmed.

"Like, these tunnels are so disgusting! Somepony really needs to clean them up!" came a mutter from the back of the group. I sighed, rolling my eyes.

Nurse Graves looked back with a worried frown. "Are you sure about bringing her?"

"What?" I asked with a grin. "She's coming along, isn't she? She's happy to help her friend."

The ghoul frowned, and my smile slipped a little. "But does she understand what we're doing here?" the nurse asked.

"She understands enough. I know she's not all there, but she's our best chance for getting through the ghouls without getting torn to pieces." I glanced back as well but then quickly changed the subject. "I was wondering, though: what keeps a ghoul…well… together?" I asked as I looked at the nurse.

She still didn't look very happy about my choice, but answered, "It's…hard to explain. It's like there's a thing inside you that's you. Like a tiny guttering flame. If you're careful and protect it, then you can remember who you are. But if it goes out…" She shook her head. "Wheelbarrow believes there's some life magic in the living that keeps that flame protected. Like…glue. But in ghouls it's much weaker."

"It's your soul," Mr. Shears said from the middle of the group. "A

pony can continue living so long as they have the tiniest fragment of their soul. Without it, we're mindless animals at best. We might have a brain, but we would have no will to suppress our aggressive urges." His cloudy eyes glanced behind us. "Retaining one's soul is easier when you are alive because your living flesh has a strong natural bond with your spirit."

"Fragment of a soul? You mean souls can break?" Psychoshy asked as she looked around for confirmation, hovering above us. Stygius, flying alongside her, just gave a shrug.

Mr. Shears gave a sharp little hiss. "If you know what you are doing, yes. Just as you can use a single candle to light others, you can divide a soul into different vessels."

Xanthe muttered something about curses. I looked at Nurse Graves's stunned expression and asked the question on everyone's mind. "How do you know this?"

"Because I am Equestria's premiere expert on souls." He sounded pompous for a moment before he snorted, "Not that it matters much anymore. Souls won't keep a raving Reaper at bay, and guns are infinitely more practical." I looked at Graves in concern.

"Weren't you concerned about being ripped to pieces an hour ago?" Carrion grumbled from the front of the group, his miniguns' motors whirring every few steps. "I'm sure the ferals are just fascinated by all this talk about souls."

"Oh, yeah. That." I flushed as I looked ahead as we walked along the middle of the tube. Water flowed around our hooves. Gaps appeared in the tiled wall showing rebar and deeper voids within. And there were red bars on the other side of that wall. Lots of red.

"Where are they?" Graves asked, her voice low and tense. "This should be an irresistible meal."

"They're here," Carrion growled. The ghoulish griffin's tatty wings ruffled. "They've been surrounding us since we left the station." I happened to glance at a gap in the wall and saw a momentary flash of a mottled hide.

"I thought they were mindless," I muttered, growing more apprehensive by the second, lifting the riot shotgun and making sure I had it loaded with antipersonnel flechettes. Over the sound of running water I could just barely make out the sound of hooves in nearby tunnels and a low hissing.

"Soulless," Shears corrected. "Ferals have minds of a sort, but they don't have personality. They're undead animals…but even animals

can show cunning."

Ahead was another station. A flickering sign above the platform read 'Hightower'. In the wan light, I could see that two more tunnels ran into this one, forming sharp angles. Everywhere I looked was red, and yet I couldn't see any ghouls! What were they waiting for? I swallowed and slowly approached the stairs onto the platform. The flickering 'Hightower' sign kept filling the area with shadows and light so fast my eyes struggled to keep up with the changing illumination. The green ghostly glow behind us didn't help either as it reflected off the water-slicked tiles. Two subway trains lay smashed together under the high vaulted ceiling like abused toys, their occupants now nothing but bones.

"The maintenance room is on the far side of the station," Shears muttered softly. "It was a way for us to come and go clandestinely and to do our work in private."

"And what was that work?" I asked tensely as the hissing increased. Water had built up into scummy pools around the broken, twisted cars. My radiation meter was starting to go 'click click click', and those of us who needed it took a Rad-X tablet immediately.

"Pony immortality," he said grimly. Rampage looked over at the little round ghoul, her eyes inscrutable pink pools. I tensed, but she only looked away again.

As we walked onto the landing alongside the pools, the water sloshed underhoof. Part of the wall had collapsed, and filthy cold water poured out of it and across the tiles. The exit was a solid wall of rubble. Dozens more bones were mixed in the debris; ponies who had sought safety had found death. A bridge crossed the subway lines to the platform on the far side of the tracks. 'Do your part for Luna!' demanded a ragged, decayed banner.

Psychoshy and Stygius flew over the twisted wreckage of the cars as we made our way towards the far side of the station. Maybe we were going to luck out? Maybe we were too heavily armed for them to risk it?

Then the pool directly beneath Stygius exploded, a feral launching itself up ten feet into the air. Its hooves wrapped around the batpony, jagged fangs locking down into his throat as the broken hooves pinned his wings to his side. The two tumbled down into the filthy frothing pool, disappearing from sight!

"Stygius!" Psychoshy screamed, but then two ghouls launched

themselves from the bridge, leaping down upon her. One missed and landed, hissing and baring its shattered maw, next to me while the other landed squarely on her back. Fangs began to snap at her neck. Psychoshy slammed up, ramming the ghoul against the underside of the bridge. “Get! Off! My! Ass!” Finally she scraped her back against the cracked underside, showering the pools below in grit and ghoul before the monster broke apart.

None of us had any time to go to Stygius’s aid. No sooner had I blasted the head off the ghoul that landed beside me, than four more leapt out of the twisted wreckage and were upon me. I’d always thought feral ghouls to be mindless, pitiful enemies. My hazy memories of my adventure with LittlePip involved ghouls and a subway train, but I wasn’t sure on the particulars of that night. I raised my metal hooves, and their mouths chomped down on the enameled limbs as my magic swung the gun to the next target. But instead of biting and biting again, the two ghouls bit down and jerked me forward. I got one shot off, blasting off a chunk of rotten flank, before the third pounced on my floating gun and started to gnaw on it, ruining my aim. And the fourth? Well with me largely immobilized, it lunged straight for my face!

My magic bullet spell flashed from my horn; the ghoul’s head exploded in a detonation of bone and grisly flesh before it could ruin Glory’s work. Two more magic bullets were needed to destroy the ghoul on my left hoof. Then I slammed the limb into the face of the third ghoul over and over again. On the fifth blow, the battered head burst apart in rotten chunks. Now free, I reared up and slammed both steel hooves into the feral’s face as it turned towards me and started to lunge. The blow smashed it into a twitching heap.

I was doing better than most. Rampage was dealing with a horde spilling out of the drainage pipe. She had more than a half dozen trying to tear her down as she bucked, stomped, and bodyslammed the ghouls with such force that some of them exploded between the wall and her armor. She had her razor-wire-wrapped tail looped around one’s throat and was slowly sawing through it as she thrashed wildly. Even she looked terrified…after all, this wasn't too much different than the mêlée that saw her become a buffet for 99.

Lacunae and Cerberus floated above, the former completely annihilating the heads of her enemies with shots of her AM rifle while the latter sprayed flame down from above, punctuated with the occasional blast of disintegration magic and insults like ‘Take

that, maggot farm!' and 'Proud to be an Equestrian! Oo-Rah!' Perhaps those two could have saved our hides, except for one fact… ghouls could jump! I watched as they raced with eerie grace along the tops of the trains and launched themselves into the air towards the pair. Lacunae's shield, so effective at stopping bullets, was useless at stopping a relatively slow-moving ghoul. They bit and scratched wherever they landed, biting down on her purple wings.

"Get yer stinkin' hooves off me, you damned dirty ghoul!" Cerberus shouted as he struggled to keep aloft with three ghouls clamped down on his limbs.

Carrion seemed to ignore the carnage around us as he pointed his miniguns down the tunnel and poured a constant stream of fire at the flood of ghouls pouring towards us. Their screams almost drowned out the resonant purr of his miniguns as he kept us from being completely overwhelmed. The ejected five millimeter brass sparkled brightly in the glaring muzzle flashes.

Xanthe, Graves, and Shears stood back to back, fending off their attackers. Xanthe muttered over and over, "I'm cursed! The stars have damned me! Utterly cursed." Yet while she wasn't fighting near Rampage's level, her hooves were keeping the undead attackers at bay with strange flashing kicks and stomps that allowed her to deflect the ghouls' snapping fangs. Graves held the strap of one of the armored medical cases in her mouth and swung it like a bludgeon, or maybe an incredibly stout purse. Shears had pulled from his robe a pair of large, wicked-looking magic-powered hedge trimmers. Every time a ghoul lunged forward, the clippers snapped, and more than one ghoul fell back missing a leg or head.

There was a shadowy flash, and a bloody Stygius appeared on the landing, bleeding heavily from several bites to his neck and scratches to his wings. The pool frothed as two ghouls clambered out after him. He opened his mouth wide and let out a squeal that seemed to stun the ferals. They slumped on busted legs, shattered bones poking out of their tattered hide, before he kicked out and pulverized their skulls. Four more emerged from the pools in the meantime.

There was only one pony who wasn't getting attacked. One who was squinting at a rancid advertisement for mane curlers, oblivious to the battle. I took a deep breath and bellowed as loudly as I could, "Spoon!"

The glowing gray ghoul looked up, blinking her luminescent green

eyes from behind her deformed spectacle frames. “Oh! Sorry! Coming!” she yelled as she trotted towards the fight. The glowing gray mare snorted at the ferals. “Hey! Stop that! Get off them right now!” she said as she trotted into the middle of them. “If you don’t stop fighting, I’m going to report you to Pinkie Pie!” The ghostly green light emanating from within her seemed to brighten, and the ferals hissed and slowly backed away. She nodded primly. “There. Knew that’d get them to behave.”

Psychoshy landed next to the bloodied Stygius. “I need-- I need-- potion. Healing potion! Quick!” she stammered. Graves trotted over immediately. Lacunae shook the ghouls off and darted next to the medic, her horn glowing as all three mares treated his injuries.

The ghouls weighing down Cerberus detached and backed away as Silver Spoon trotted around the perimeter. Their hisses dropped to almost nothing as she passed, and I was astonished to see red bars turning blue. Carrion stopped his fire, gunbarrels raising steam in the wet air as he looked at the gray glowing one in shock. I had to admit I was pretty impressed too!

“Oo-Rah! Like fish in a barrel!” Cerberus cheered, then pointed his disintegration talisman at one and fired. Instantly the ghouls let out a hiss in unison as one of them collapsed into a heap of green goop.

“Stand down!” I shouted as the ghouls pawed at the shattered floor tiles with their broken hooves.

“Need to frag this maggot-loving superior officer…Damn combat inhibitor!” he muttered darkly.

Silver Spoon looked at the hissing ghouls and snapped, “Oh just stop it right now! Honestly, blank flanks today.” She trotted towards me, my PipBuck ticking even more. “So, like, ready to go, Tiara?”

“S…sure, Silver Spoon. And nice job with those gh…er…ponies,” I said, giving her a grin. She flushed, her cheeks going even more green, but then her face turned a little more worried.

“Are you sure everything’s okay, Tiara? I mean, you’re like being totally nice. It’s weird.” I got the impression that Diamond Tiara hadn’t been the most pleasant of ponies to be around.

“Yeah. Sure. I’m just glad you’re helping me get back into my office. It was so embarrassing to be locked out.” I grinned sheepishly, and Silver Spoon nodded slowly with sympathy.

“It’s okay. I’m so glad to be able to, like, do anything with you! The M.o.M. has been such a total nightmare since Goldenblood was

replaced."

"Oh?" I asked as Graves got Stygius back on his hooves. The healing magic was closing the injuries in his wings surprisingly quickly. "Um…was he that big a deal in your office?"

"Well totally. I mean, Pinkie Pie might be in charge on paper, but everypony knows Quartz and the O.I.A. call the real shots. I mean, everypony at the M.o.M. either hates Pinkie's guts or is scared to death of her, but we all gotta smile smile smile!" the ghoul said with an exaggerated grin before she slumped. "I think I should have followed your lead, Tiara. At least you were away from the nuthouse out in Shattered Hoof."

"Quartz?" I frowned.

"The O.I.A. liaison? You know Quartz. Everypony in M.o.M. Law Enforcement does." She snorted, "The mare that, like, keeps Pinkie Pie from arresting half of Equestria?"

"Oh... ah... really? Wow." I looked nervously at the others as we started moving towards the far side of the landing. "I really didn't know she'd gotten that bad. I mean…was Goldenblood really running the M.o.M. behind Pinkie's back?" It seemed a bit much, even for Goldenblood.

"Well, he's probably not *personally* running it, and definitely not the whole M.o.M., but he totally has his hooves all over the law enforcement branch. I don't think he cares about party reservations, balloon research, or theme parks, after all. But we totally know who assigns our Hearth's Warming Eve bonuses, and you just don't go behind Quartz's back." She glanced at me from over her warped glasses frames with a serious look to imply what happened to ponies who did.

"So, Quartz calls the shots then?" I asked as I glanced at the others, who looked a tad impatient.

"Oh it's nothing *that* direct. Like, whenever Pinkie Pie orders all the 'bad ponies' in Equestria to be arrested, we look at Quartz two minutes after Pinkie leaves the room, and she nods or shakes her head…usually shakes…and we just stall till Pinkie Pie gets distracted by something else." She rolled her eyes. "If it weren't for Pumpkin and Pound, I think they would have cut her out completely, but those two can usually handle her when she's raving."

I looked on with a tense smile. "Wow. I'd forgotten how... interesting... things are at the Manehattan hub."

"Oh trust me, I, like, haven't even gotten to the juicy stuff." She smiled for a moment but it didn't last. She sighed. "It's never been so... tense... as right now though. When Goldie was kicked out last month, I totally thought Pinkie Pie's head was, like, going to split in two, she grinned so much. Sent him a box of her PTMs as a present."

"And since then?" I asked as we reached the maintenance room. Four ghouls stared from the corner as we trotted past towards a set of shelving loaded with junk. Shears's horn glowed under his hood, and the shelves slid to one side, revealing an alcove concealed in the back wall. Directly ahead was a solid-looking door with the O.I.A. symbol carved into it and a small terminal mounted beside it.

Silver Spoon sighed and rolled her glowing eyes. "Oh, business as usual in the party sectors, but totally a mess in the law enforcement branch. I mean, Quartz is still there, but she doesn't seem to know what's going on anymore. I mean, she seemed to be really close and devoted to Goldenblood, so maybe she's just hanging in there while Horse settles in. I dunno. No pony does... " I wondered if Horse even knew what Quartz did at the M.o.M.

"As awesome as catching up on stale M.o.M. gossip is, I'd really like it if we could get through this door," Shears said impatiently, pointing at the terminal. The machine had clearly been scratched up, as if somepony had tried to pry the front plate off.

"Do I know you?" Silver Spoon asked Shears in an annoyed tone, but the round little ghoul refused to meet her eye.

I moved up to the door, and my eyes started to do the crazy data streaming stuff, matched by data on the terminal screen. Finally it concluded with:

EC-1101 Confirmed.

Unseal Project Eternity: Y/N?

Project Eternity. The search for eternal life. I looked at Mr. Shears; his glossy white eyes seemed to drink in the words on the terminal screen. "This is what you're after?"

The question made him balk. "What? No. That's simply history. You probably have far more interest in that than I do." His annoyance seemed so sincere that if he was playing me, he'd probably been a performer in another life. I peered at the screen, then looked around. Yup, there was the Dealer, his weathered features pale and grim as he watched me. I looked at him for several seconds, sure that he was going to give some possibly

insightful and probably annoyingly cryptic comment, but all he did was shrug.

Vaguely disappointed, I sighed and then hit the 'Y' button on the terminal.

My vision exploded in data that moved in a blur. I staggered to the side, hit the wall, and nearly collapsed. My friends and the dingy maintenance room disappeared as streaming letters and numbers filled my vision and everything went white.

~ ~ ~

I hung looking down from the ceiling of a tastefully but luxuriously decorated penthouse apartment. The elaborate white marble masonry gave the whole room a classy and sophisticated look, and the front windows provided an absolutely magnificent view of what could only be a royal palace of some sort. Below me, on an elegantly-crafted table, was a glass box that held a dozen colorful little puffballs with diaphanous wings. Then the door opened and in walked Rarity. Her purple mane was working its way out of its gorgeous curls, and her brow was furrowed with anxiety.

She trotted in and set her bags on the counter top. Then the phone rang, and she sighed with a little growl of annoyance before levitating the receiver to her ear. "Rarity!" she answered, her voice gay and bright, even as she slumped at the table. Then she sat up a little more. "Oh, no no no, Fluttershy. Not a bad time at all, dear. It's been such an absolutely miserable time, what with Macintosh's funeral and all. There was a little business I had to take care of in Zebratown…nothing major," she added as pulled out a familiar black book.

She lifted the lid of the glass box and called out, "Dinnertime, sweeties. Mommy's got something special for you!" She tossed the book inside the glass box, closing the lid quickly after it. The colored puffballs began to flit and hover around the book, opening their mouths, hesitating, then tentatively nibbling at the pages and licking the ink.

"Oh, no, Fluttershy, I was talking to the parasprites. I just couldn't do the job Luna asks without them." A pause and a sigh. "Yes, yes, I remember Ponyville. I wouldn't want a repeat here in Canter…" Rarity trailed off and sighed, "There there…there's no need to…I mean…I'm sorry, Fluttershy. Go ahead. Cry if you need to." She

trotted to a divan next to the table and flopped back on it, nodding every now and then. “I can be there if you need me to. All right, if you’re sure…

“No, Darling. You’re not being silly at all. When I think of you... of any of our friends... getting... well, you know... Remember how close Pinkie Pie came with that nasty bomb in Hoofington? If it’d been anypony else, I dare say they wouldn’t have been so fortunate. I keep thinking about it over and over again.” She snorted softly. “Yes, I know Goldenblood promised to triple our protection. It’s hard enough to get work done as it is.” She paused again with another frown. “Yes, I know Twilight is researching new spells to keep us safe.” Finally she gave a little huff, her expression irritable. “You don’t understand. I feel like…like I need to do something. I need to make something to keep you all safe.”

Something was happening to the parasprites in the glass box. They were changing from their bright colors to muddy brown. Their eyes bulged and they banged against the glass as if trying to escape from the case.

Rarity continued on in a soft tone, “I’ve been researching my own sources. Twilight may have the most premiere collection of magical tomes and Goldenblood his own squirreled-away rare volumes, but I still have my hooves in every library, newspaper, and publisher in Equestria. I’ve been particularly intrigued by zebra myths of ‘soul silk’, capable of being stronger than steel. Can you imagine such a thing?” She sighed softly. “Well, of course I’d use it to help soldiers like Big Macintosh. After all of you are safe. And the Princesses, of course.”

The parasprites went black and tumbled down around the large book that was bound in what looked unsettlingly like darkened zebra hide. The yellowed pages slowly turned one by one behind her back as if invisible hooves were slowly finding a particular one. “Yes, Dear…yes…yes…I’m sorry you feel so rotten…yes…I know…I love you too. Right. Good night, Fluttershy. Yes, I’ll see you at the spa. Promise…try to get some rest.” Her magic hung up the receiver and she sighed.

Her azure eyes lifted to stare up at the roof, and for a moment she looked old and scared. “It could have been Celestia. Or Twilight. Or Fluttershy. I have to do…something. Something to protect my friends.”

A few seconds later, she rolled to her hooves and approached the

table with a wide smile. “And how does Mommy’s little helpers like their din-din, hmmm?” Then she saw the crumbled black balls laying like lumps of soot around the book. “What…what is this?” she demanded as her eyes widened. To her credit, she didn’t scream. Slowly, she opened the lid of the case and lifted the book out. The parasprites collapsed into little heaps of ash as she set the volume, still open, on the table before her.

Rarity stared raptly at the text. “Soul silk?” she whispered, taking a step back from the table. Then suddenly she narrowed her eyes and glared. “I don’t know who you are or what you are, but I know when somepony…er…book…is trying to play me for a fool!”

But though she glared at the book, there before her eyes was what she wanted. Her magic slammed the book shut with all its force. “You might have killed my poor parasprites, but we’ll see how you do when Twilight gets her hooves on you.” She picked up the phone and started to dial, then paused and looked back at the book. Little beads of sweat popped from her brow. “Now Rarity, just look at it! It’s clearly a wicked thing! I mean, it’s made from a zebra! How grotesque!” She continued dialing, but more slowly now, her eyes drawn back to the horrible text.

“I need to do something myself. Something to save my friends…” she murmured.

“Hello?” came Twilight’s voice, distant and tinny from the receiver. Rarity’s blue eyes stared at the piles of ash and then back at the book. “Applejack…?”

She slowly pressed the receiver to her ear. “No no, Twilight. It’s Rarity. I just…” She paused, and her eyes turned concerned once more. “Twilight…I…yes, I know. I’m sorry. I know…Oh Twilight, please don’t cry.” Rarity curled a little around the phone, her eyes returning to the closed book. “Yes…yes…I know…when I imagine it being one of you…” Rarity sniffed and scrubbed a tear from her eye. “Yes…I know. Try…try to get some sleep. Ask for some time off if you need it. And if Luna doesn’t like it, tell her to take over the M.A.S. herself.”

Rarity’s eyes lingered on the dark tome one last time, then said in low tones, as if afraid the book might hear, “I might need your help. Nothing major…certainly nothing that needs to involve Goldenblood. Just need…some friendly advice. Right…good. Please take care of yourself, Twilight.”

The receiver returned to the cradle, and she stared at the book for

the longest time, biting her hoof. Finally, she approached it as if it were a snake. “Well…it wouldn’t hurt to know the details…” she murmured as she carefully straightened the book and opened it slowly once more.

~ ~ ~

My vision returned, and I slumped against the terminal, almost collapsing again. Ugh…you’d think that opening a magically-sealed megafile of arcane whatsit would be easier. I picked myself up and looked back. “How long was I out?”

“You were out?” Psychoshy scowled in confusion.

Rampage wore a worried expression. “Are you okay, Blackjack?”

I forced a grin. “Oh yeah, sure. As okay as I ever am.” The worry turned a little more sympathetic, but she didn’t pry.

Wow... that was *way* faster than usual. Was it because the recording was sealed, or something else? I shook my head hard to clear out the disorientation, idly wondering if there was a single other pony in the Wasteland who’d had as many hallucinations and visions shoved into their head as me. No time to ponder that now, though.

I peered down the narrow, rusty pipe-lined hallway that extended before us. It gave the impression of a bloody shotgun barrel, the air filled with a reek of sulfur, water, and rust. A chill filled the air and made my mane prickle. I looked back at the others. Some eyes were filled with confidence, some with fear, and others with calm resignation.

And I was about to lead them into the deadliest place I’d ever been.

This was different than storming Hippocratic Research. Then, there’d been the drive to get my PipBuck back and stop Sanguine. Here, I was going in because I chose to. If they died, it’d rest squarely on my shoulders.

But the only alternative was to give up.

I couldn’t do that. Not ever. It’d mean losing.

I took one step, then another, and made my way down the tunnel in the front of the group; if I was leading them into a deathtrap, then I would lead. The passage was barely wide enough for Carrion’s armor anyway. The radiation was clicking very slowly; just one rad per second. We’d been exposed to more than that in the subway station. I suspected the source was our glowing companion

in the rear. Still, it was something to keep an eye on. When Stygius was through, the door closed with a solid thunk behind us, yet inexplicably I could feel a sensation almost like a draft blowing coldly over my hide. My E.F.S. flickered a few times. More recordings, or something else? The list was too long for me to worry about now.

I felt a sensation like trotting through a sheet of ice water, and my E.F.S. suddenly went down completely. "Ugh…what just happened?" I said, looking around the suddenly barless world around me. "My PipBuck isn't working right."

"You just entered Hightower's magic dampening field, but I suspect it's been badly damaged by the balefire bomb and time. It affects different magics differently," Shears said from behind me. "Teleportation is no longer an option. I had no idea it'd affect your PipBuck too, though…"

I looked way back at Lacunae; the tall alicorn was having to duck her head to keep her horn from scraping the ceiling. She looked quite agitated. I supposed being trapped underground without the ability to just teleport away would be quite disconcerting. Fortunately, I'd been without my PipBuck's E.F.S. enough that it didn't make me hesitate more than a few seconds. I'd just have to do things the old fashioned way.

"So…you were involved in Project Eternity?" I asked as I moved down the tunnel with the shotgun ready to give something a very bad day.

"Several lifetimes ago, yes. Hardly matters now," Shears muttered.

"What was it? Specifically?"

"Specifically could take all day. Here's the abridged version. I was brought in at the beginning. Rarity needed unicorns that weren't affiliated with the M.A.S. Twilight Sparkle had virtually cornered the market on every unicorn with spell or talisman talent. So she went looking for other unicorns. We…I…was working at a steam cleaning store in Bucklyn when she found me."

"Why you?" I asked with a frown as we came to steps leading down…the direction opposite the one I wanted to go. Still, there hadn't been any forks yet, so down it was.

"I suppose it was little things. I'd…failed…to join the M.A.S., she knew me from Ponyville, we were both interested in tailoring, and…" He muttered something too low for me to hear.

"What was that?" I asked with a frown.

"I…won an award for magic…once. Stupid little thing. But Rarity needed us and she had a way of wrapping any stallion around her hoof. So we helped her. Compared to what our lives were before, staggering from one failure to the next, we were happy to do whatever she required of us," Shears said quietly.

There was a door ahead. I could hear the sounds of water sloshing around and gestured everypony to wait a moment. "Water recycling and the reactor should be here," Shears pointed out from behind me as I pushed the rusty door open, looking warily through.

I beheld a lambent, radioactive nightmare. Slowly, as if in a daze, we stepped out on to the catwalk and looked at a room I could barely imagine. The space reminded me of the reactor in 99 and the water pumps that kept the vital fluid clean and circulating. Here, however, was a scene that would have terrified Scotch and given Rivets a seizure; two hundred years of neglect and corrosion had turned the reactor into a solid lump of rust, the few windows in the hulk filling the dripping room with its harsh green glare. Water sprayed from countless cracks and breaks, sloshing around the rusted pump housings in a sea of bluish-green fluid. The moisture had transformed the catwalks into fragile spans of rust. I wasn't even sure if the reeking, sulfuric, foamy sludge below could technically be called 'water' anymore.

"I don't think this was in the plan!" Psychoshy shouted. She'd donned the yellow hazardous materials suit and didn't look happy to have her wings stuck inside the protective wingcovers.

"Where's the way through?" I yelled over the squealing, pumping machinery and growling, hissing reactor. Please don't be…please… but the ghoul simply pointed across the room to the far side of the catwalk. Of course it was all the way over there! I took three steps out on the metal walkway. It groaned ominously beneath me, and I tried not to breathe too deeply.

Then Stygius flashed next to me and tapped my shoulder. He pointed to his eyes with a hoof, then down at the water, and made motions of something swimming around. No…way…Still, I made sure my gun was ready as I started across. Really, if Carrion was here to kill me, he'd have no better chance than right now.

"I hate this place. I hate this place! I hate this place!" I shouted and started to trot quickly ahead. There was just too much radiation to linger. The catwalk cracked and popped, swaying with each step. Jets of fluid shot from leaking pipes along the walls and ceiling in

lovely, deadly blue arcs, and I bent and twisted to keep from getting hit by them. As I crossed the room, I shivered at the unearthly cacophony coming from the reactor. I could only marvel a moment at Stable-Tec engineering; even so dangerously neglected, it was still running.

Psychoshy and Stygius followed after me, radioactive water droplets dripping off their suits as they crossed. They'd nearly gotten completely across when one of the pipes gave a sharp bang overhead and fluid the consistency of fecal matter began to dribble from it and pile up on the catwalk. I stared in horror as the bluish heap began to lunge up and wiggle. It thrust out two hooves towards me and a dripping equine head emerged. Then a second slimepony began to form and started shambling towards Stygius and Psychoshy.

Oh this so wasn't in the plan! I pointed the shotgun and fired two flechettes into the mass; they passed halfway through its body and then disappeared with an acidic hiss. I backed off as it formed hind legs and started to shamble towards me.

Stygius pulled off his helmet and backed away as a third slimepony began to coalesce from the cascading sludge. He took a deep breath and let out an ultrasonic scream, making the entire blue mass jiggle wildly, and then it suddenly popped and sprayed goop everywhere. He let out a high-pitched, barely-audible shriek of pain as the spray began to blacken and smoke where it contacted his skin. He shook himself furiously, trying to get it off as it ate into his hide. Psychoshy brushed at the slime frantically, trying to get it off before it made its way through her suit.

Out came the sword, but it passed through the slimepony with no effect at all. As another slimepony started to form, the catwalk let out a long, ominous groan. It probably wasn't built to take this much weight.

"Carrion! Lacunae! Blast that pipe!" I shouted, pointing with my sword further down the corroded span. The ghoul responded immediately by blasting a long stream of fire, soon followed by the resounding boom of the alicorn's AM rifle. The bullets started to chew through the metal and sent a few splatters of goo falling into the mess below, but more was still vomiting onto the catwalk. I swung the sword and shoved the slimepony in front of me with my telekinesis in futility, being forced steadily back. Finally, there was a resounding crack as the corroded pipe split, releasing a torrent of

goop into the frothing pool. “Lacunae, clear the way!” I bellowed as I gave ground.

My rear leg punched through the catwalk, and I fell through all the way to the hip. The slimepony’s hoofsteps made the catwalk hiss as it shambled towards me. Lacunae hovered in the air, her horn glowing as her telekinesis flung the writhing masses into the muck below. But it’d take her a few seconds to reach me.

That was a few seconds I didn’t have.

In desperation, I plunged my forehooves into the gloppy mess and screamed as all kinds of alerts flickered in my vision. My legs might have been metal, but the enchantments on them made them feel fiery pain as if I’d shoved them into boiling water. The white enamel hissed and began to flake away almost immediately as the slimepony just slurped its way up my limbs towards my face. Oh damn it. Glory just fixed that!

Then there was a flash of yellow as Psychoshy was there, almost hugging the acidic monster. Her hazmat suit hissed as the material fought its corrosive effect, and then she bucked the slime away, the power hooves’ crackling impacts flinging it back into the pool. “Psychoshy, you saved me.” I gaped up at her as I pulled my leg free.

She suddenly blinked behind her helmet and looked uncomfortable, turning back to the rest of our friends crossing towards us. “Oh…yeah…right.” She and Stygius raced past, and the pair started struggling with a rusted door.

“Like, I think that this place totally needs a major inspection! Somepony isn’t doing their job at all, Tiara!” Spoon yelled as she raced across with Nurse Graves. For a second, I was certain that they were going to make it.

Then I looked down.

The glowing sludge was starting to heap up underneath the catwalk. The immense mound formed a huge, dripping maw that reached up to devour them both in its acidic cavity. I could only watch in horror as it closed on the catwalk and with a ripping and shredding of metal pulled it down into the glowing depths below.

“Like…I wanna go home. I wanna go home right now, Tiara!” came a call from above. The glowing forms of Graves and Silver Spoon hugged each other tight as they were held aloft by the hovering Lacunae. Carrion and Cerberus followed along through the air, the robot’s disintegration gun blasting the slimeponies as the

blobs started climbing the walls towards us. Shears rode the floating robot's round body, hugging the top for dear life. Carrion, however, caught a faceful of blue slime pouring from the busted pipe along the roof. The helmet of his armor was hissing from acidic goop, but he passed by without complaint. The huge slime head was starting to rear again as Lacunae landed.

Shears got the door open, and the group funneled through into the next room as Lacunae stood majestically before the immense head of slime. "You! Shall! Not! Hurt! My! Friends!" she shouted as her eyes glowed with power. Each word was punctuated by an arrow of furious silver magic that exploded on impact, blasting out huge gobs of the monster's mass. It still came on, more and more goop surging towards the alicorn.

I stumbled to the door, the last one through save for Lacunae. "Lacunae! Come on!" The alicorn's horn flared, then died. Then flared and died again…No! "You can't teleport!"

Her purple eyes popped wide in shock as the mass bore down on her. I supposed that, for her, not being able to teleport was almost like Psychoshy not being able to fly; she'd been so used to it that she'd forgotten. Instead, a shimmering bubble enveloped her an instant before the slime mouth chomped down and swallowed her whole. The purple light of her shield flickered and disappeared as I stared. No. No no no…please no…

Then the purple light flared, a bubble swelling in the center, and the mass exploded outwards as she erupted from the slime behemoth. It began to pull together immediately, reforming a new head and mouth, but by then Lacunae was swooping towards the door. As soon as she was through, I pulled it shut with my now-gray fingers. A moment later an impact made the entire wall bulge inward with a cracking of stone and bending of steel. Everypony just stared in shock for a moment, then watched as blue slime began to trickle through the bottom of the door. "We should get going. Now."

"Tiara! What is going on?" Silver Spoon asked, staring at me through her blackened frames.

"Not now, Silver Spoon." The long, high room we were in had pipes running up several dozen feet, and from the water and radiation, we had no time to waste in here before slime began to come after us. Indeed, it immediately started dribbling through holes in the pipes, and slimy, pony shaped globs began to ooze after

us. The stairs leading up to the room's only other door were a rusted, jumbled mess. Lacunae lifted Graves, Xanthe, and Silver Spoon as she floated up. Rampage cleared it in a single leap. Psychoshy flew awkwardly upwards, her wings weighed down by the bulky suit with Stygius at her side, the two of them together struggling to raise Shears. Carrion departed without a word, swooping up towards the top of the shaft. I leapt up and wrapped my fingers around Cerberus's arms as more and more goop began to fill the room.

"Damn, you are one heavy maggot lover, aren't you?" the robot asked as it struggled to lift me up towards where the others were gathering at another sturdy hatch. Blue slime coated the floor, and it was starting to make mouths beneath my hooves.

"Up! Up! Elevation! Altitude!" I shouted as acidic mouths began lunging and gooey hooves waved up at me. But apparently I was just a little over his weight limit. My rear hooves blackened and hissed as they kicked the yawning mouths. In desperation, I returned to shooting them with my levitated shotgun to try and get them down, but all it really did was splatter them a little. Behind me, the slime was building in a wave. And then that wave raced down the room towards me.

"Buck up, soldier! Equestria wasn't won by bellyaching!" Cerberus said as he floated beneath the doorway.

"And it wasn't won by getting digested in a pool of blue slime either!" I yelled as the cresting wave grew a mouth!

Then a purple glow grabbed both of us and lifted us up just as the wave rolled beneath my dangling rear hooves and crashed into the wall with an incredible splash. We were hauled up through the doorway as the goop surged beneath us. My corroded limbs scraped at the doorjamb as the slime gathered itself up once more. Purple, blue, and white magic gripped the door and slammed it shut. There was another thud. A second. A softer third. Then nothing.

"Funny. I don't recall pony-eating slime in the plans," Psychoshy said as she looked at Stygius. "Did you hear something about pony-eating slime? 'Cause I sure didn't." She pointed a wing at Shears. "Hey, Mastermind. Why didn't you mention the pony-eating slime? I think that should have definitely been brought up in the planning stage." Carrion snorted as he pulled off the helmet of his power armor; the acid had etched and damaged the visor. His head was less eagle and more ravenlike, beak chipped and cracked and once-

glossy plumage now looking like a beaten feather duster.

"Clearly," Shears muttered as he looked back, "there's gonna be unknown stuff to deal with."

I looked at the gray pitted steel of my forelegs. "Yeah. Besides, what could we have done if we had known? Bring a couple tons of gelatin?" I gave a weak grin to the others. Most of them looked decidedly unamused, but Rampage didn't let me down.

Smirking back at me, she tapped her cheek thoughtfully. "Acidic pony gelatin monsters. Delicious as they are jiggly." That got a few more nervous smiles.

Nurse Graves stared at the sealed door. "I can only imagine what begot such a creature. Perhaps hundreds of corpses of ponies trying to escape through the basement. Soaking in magically tainted water until they dissolved into that radioactive slime... " she murmured as she started passing out packets of RadAway to all of us. We slurped it down at once, and I watched as the needle on my rad meter dropped back into the green. Still, it was click click clicking.

I rose to my hooves and looked around. The hall was made of gray cinder block and ran straight ahead. I glanced at the pipes running along the ceiling, but aside from drizzling water, nothing blue made an appearance. Not that blue, faintly luminescent water was *too* reassuring... "So, now that we're past the…um…Slime... Ooze... "

"Smooze?" Xanthe suggested, and every eye turned to her. She dropped her eyes sheepishly. "Sorry…"

"Where do we go now?" I asked, watching as Lacunae touched her horn to the raw burns on Stygius's face. The healing took much longer than usual; a sign that Enervation was nipping away at us. Silver Spoon looked positively spooked as she sat down. I chewed on my lip. When I'd remembered the ghoul and how she mistook me for her friend, using her to get past the ferals seemed innocuous. But even she was realizing something was wrong now.

'Hey Silver Spoon, long time no see. Think you could help me get into my office and help me with a little problem?' Just the asking had seemed to surprise the glowing ghoul. She'd been so glad to be reunited that she hadn't questioned…anything, really. She didn't seem to realize my friends were hardly usual for Equestria before the bombs dropped. She'd actually teased Lacunae for being a blank flank while ignoring the rest of the alicorn!

"Tiara! Talk to me. Tell me what's going on? You found my glasses, but…but everything seems wrong. It doesn't make sense." She gave

a nervous little smile. “It’s a joke, right? A joke on those blank flanks, right?” Her voice cracked as she reached up to touch her glass-streaked face. I just looked at her shamefully as she begged, “Please tell me it’s all a joke?”

I wanted to smile. I’d planned on smiling. Get through Hightower and leave her with the other ghouls in Meatlocker. Use her…damn it.

“Blackjack, what’s going on? Why does she keep calling you Tiara?” Rampage asked in a low voice.

“‘Cause, like, that’s her name! Duh…” Silver Spoon said with a little snort. “Tiara, why does Twist keep calling you Blackjack?” She gave a long stare at my corroded metal legs and the little pits the slime had eaten into the steel. Her eyes met mine as they slowly widened. “It’s a joke. Please…it’s a joke!”

“It’s not a joke, Silver Spoon,” I said quietly. “I…I don’t even know who Diamond Tiara was. I just remembered how you controlled those others when we first met. I needed your help…and I hoped I could get it without you realizing that I was lying to you.”

“But…Bump…Bump…” she muttered weakly, raising her hooves at me. This time I didn’t complete the little ritual I’d lucked in on last time. “No…no no no…”

“Are you *trying* to make her a feral?” Shears asked as he trotted past to the gray ghoul. “Hey, Spoon. I’m sorry Blackjack’s so mean. She should have told you she wasn’t Tiara.”

“Something bad happened, didn’t it? Like, something really bad?” Silver Spoon sobbed as she hugged her head. “I…I think it did but whenever I think about it…” Her voice trailed off and she shook her head hard. “I just wanted to find Tiara! She…she could tell me what to do. She always told everypony what to do.” She sniffed and rubbed her nose. “She’s, like, my only friend, and I’m hers. She totally needs me…”

“I know, Silver Spoon. I remember,” Shears said as he patted her shoulder. The glowing ghoul sniffed as she looked at him curiously.

“I’m really sorry for misleading you,” I said, a touch defensively. I had asked her to help. She just hadn’t realized what was going on. “But I did really need your help. And…I didn’t want to just leave you behind in those tunnels.”

“I don’t want to think about this. The bad things…the bad place. It’s totally…totally wrong!” she cried.

“I really hate to break up this latest installment of ‘What the fuck,

Blackjack,' but four of us are slowly dying here," Rampage said with a snort at me.

"Dying?" Silver Spoon blinked in confusion.

"There's radiation here. It's slowly poisoning us," I said, getting some stink eye from the undead contingent. Finally I sighed, sat, and threw my forehooves into the air. "Look! I'm sorry, okay? I wish I was your Diamond Tiara or whoever you're looking for, but I'm not. I needed your help, and I lied and tricked you to get it. I'm a bad pony! And when we make it out of here, I promise I will do whatever I can to make it up to you. But right now we don't have time to fully delve into what kind of a cunt I am for tricking you. So please…come with us, Silver Spoon. I'll introduce you to Velvet. I think you'll like her."

She looked at me for a few seconds, then slowly nodded.

"Bad pony." Psychoshy smirked, poking my shoulder before trotting past.

The rest trotted past with her, except for Lacunae and Rampage. "I just needed her help…" I said lamely as I looked at the striped pony.

"No question," Rampage replied as she trotted past. "You need a lot more help than I realized."

I just sighed and slumped as everypony trotted down the hall without me save Lacunae. "Well?" I asked, looking up at the alicorn.

"Well what?" she asked curiously.

"Isn't the Goddess going to chime in or something?" I asked dolefully.

"Blackjack, there's a lot of Enervation here. The charm is somewhat effective, but it's still horribly strong. The Goddess isn't listening in or watching. You needed Spoon's help. You got it." She nudged me with her wing and we started walking. "The problem is that your idea hurt somepony who didn't deserve it. In the scale of Wasteland crimes, it was probably around the level of littering. But you set such a high standard for yourself in the eyes of others that when you slip, it seems so much worse. Most ponies in the Wasteland would simply kill Silver Spoon. You tricked her. Pretty nice for the Wasteland. Pretty horrible for Blackjack."

I sighed as I followed along behind everypony else, "So what do I do about it?"

"Getting her out of here alive would be a good start," the alicorn

said, patting me on the head like I was a filly.

I smiled sadly. Rampage had been wrong. I wasn't the goodiest goodest pony in the Wasteland...

* * *

The basement of Hightower brought back fond memories of security patrols in the depths of Stable 99. A lot of the equipment was identical to what I used to trot by every year of my life. The boredom, the tediousness, the silent rovings through the level…and above all the twisty-turny nature of travelling through infrastructure designed around pipes, vents, and power generators rather than ponies. Except that while 99 had just been on the brink of falling apart, this place gave me ideas of what the stable might eventually look like if Stronghoof's Rangers couldn't restore it. Rusted stairs had fallen down shafts. Elevators were corroded shut. Water trickled everywhere. Every now and then we came across raw cables stripped of their insulation, still humming with power. I gave those a wide berth. Last thing I wanted was to get a shock that shut me down for a few hours.

Because every second that radiation meter ticked up a little more.

Shears's great plan had clearly not accounted for things like doors that wouldn't open, stairs that weren't there, or hallways that had collapsed. Nor had he accounted for the translucent radioactive killer slimeponies that silently stalked us. We couldn't kill them, short of Cerberus disintegrating them outright. We simply had to run and hope they didn't ooze up a vent we stood on or dribble down from a pipe. Every time Shears tried to point us in the right way, it came to a dead end.

I also got the feeling that we were being followed. I occasionally saw something in the distance, but when I looked again, it was gone. I'd had too much experience with wonky vision to trust for sure that I had seen something or not.

Slime below us and an impenetrable ceiling above. The plan was not going smooth.

Since his knowledge was proving uselessly outdated, Shears occupied himself helping Graves deal with Silver Spoon. I'd gone from her best friend to the monster that had shattered her illusion and placed her in peril for my own gain. Funny, but I seemed to be slipping a lot recently.

Do better. Hadn't I once tried to do better all the time? Hadn't it once been…easier?

It'd been a while since I thought of my virtue; what I needed to do to keep myself on the side of good. I'd thought that it'd meant being a good pony and doing better. Virtues were supposed to be like cutie marks... but I had no idea what mine was. Ruthlessness? That hardly sounded positive.

I'd once tried to help out Flank for the heck of it. I'd turned over Brimstone's Fall. I'd tried to stop a war. I actually stopped P-21 from killing the bastards that raped and mutilated me. And then I'd died…

Had I come back…different? Had I come back wrong? Was the reason I wasn't affected by Enervation anymore because I wasn't like the rest of my friends? Even ghouls had to worry about Enervation... I wished I had Professor Zodiac to talk to; maybe she could answer this. Maybe... my soul had broken, or been lost entirely? Could that happen?

I slurped down another pouch of RadAway, sitting on a lump of rubble as Shears stared up at a sign, trying to remember directions. He kept looking at the sign, down the hall, and then back at the sign. "Something up?"

"I think I've found another way up," Shears said in a low voice, as if he was afraid the others would hear. "But I am loath to take it. There should be some other way up to the library."

"Shears, we've been down here for almost an hour. The RadAway isn't going to hold out forever." I nodded my head towards the passage he'd been considering. "What's down this way? Is it something worse than a room full of radioactive acid monsters?"

"It is something more…shameful," he said as he stared down the hall. "Have you ever heard of a soul jar?"

"It's something you stick a soul inside. Makes it invulnerable." My answer clearly surprised him, but I remembered what Lacunae had told me about them. See? Blackjack could pretend to be a smart pony from time to time.

"You are correct. One of the first things Project Eternity attempted was to create soul jars. The idea was simple: make armor, or even clothing, turn it into a soul jar…and be protected from all harm." He licked his lips with a cracked, boiled tongue. "That was the idea. The reality was far different. Far more disturbing. The project was a failure, and those failures were locked away down here. They were

too unpredictable to move."

"So…what's down there?" I asked as I peered down the hall.

"Soul jars. Our…learning curve," he said in a rush. "Hopefully the magics we used have worn off." He didn't sound like he expected that to be the case, though.

"Examples?" I prompted. "Can we shoot them? Kill them?"

"I don't know. I hope there will be nothing in there but empty shelves or rubbish. Still, we shouldn't take anything from inside." He kept his eyes straight. "I thought this would be so much… different."

Well, that was reassuring. "Me too, but…welcome to Hoofington," I muttered. "Don't forget your complimentary bag of suck."

"It's easy to blame Hoofington, the Wasteland, and long dead ponies. Far easier than blaming ourselves." He turned towards the others, saying to me, "I don't know what we'll find, but I doubt it will be peaceful." Then he trotted back to tell them he'd found another way out of the basement.

Cryptic ponies. Was there something about being two centuries old that made ponies unable to give straight answers? I mean, really, once you got past a hundred years, was it all that hard to just spit things out?! I sighed, prepared a magazine of explosive rounds, and led the way down the hall.

There were some dead-end storage rooms full of some useful salvage, but no way out. The air was disturbingly still and quiet. Even with almost a dozen people, conversations became more muted and indistinct. The glow from the wan emergency lights and my light spell flickered and dimmed to the point I could barely see my hoof in front of my face. Then we reached at the very end of the hall to find another door and terminal like the one before. I held my PipBuck up, and once more the terminal and the device in my leg had a chat.

Then the door opened with a sigh. A cool breeze began to draw into the dark room beyond. I reached over and flicked the light switches next to the door, but no matter how I flipped them, the room remained dark. Nothing on EFS. I tried to get it to work, but the targeting spell kept having red and blue bars flicker in and out of view as the system shut down every time I got it on.

'Click click click' went my radiation meter. No time to waste. "Okay... be ready for... anything. Don't touch anything."

"I love the specific warnings," Rampage muttered as we slowly

began to advance. My light spell barely illuminated anything in the silent room. Goosebumps prickled on my hide as we came into view of some dusty shelves and my light slowly illuminated a stuffed pony. Its glassy black eyes stared back at me. Next to it was an umbrella. Beside that was an old pony-in-the-box.

Junk. The shelves were full of strange knickknacks, toys, pieces of clothing, and other innocuous objects. So why did I feel like the room was full of ponies? Like they hid just beyond the reach of my light spell, holding their breath, watching.

"Cursed. This room is cursed," Xanthe whimpered. "It is full of ghosts."

"There's no such thing as ghosts," Psychoshy said nervously. "Ghouls, monsterponies, and alicorns, sure. But no ghosts."

"We experimented on all these objects. First we tried using animal souls. Then some volunteers. Mules. Poor ponies that wouldn't be missed. But necromancy was an unknown art. Twilight and Celestia both disagreed with Rarity about it, so she went to Goldenblood behind their backs. He knew Hightower would be perfect. Large population. Accidents happen all the time here. Violent offenders with few family who'd not be missed." He stared at the shelves. "Sometimes nothing would happen. Sometimes... something unpredictable would happen... and sometimes we actually succeeded at making a soul jar. But we never could tell for certain what precisely we'd done."

~ ~ ~

A monochromatic Rarity looked at me with a tired but happy expression of her face. Behind her, two gray unicorns in robes paced around an earth pony mare lying on a table. "Hmmm... now, how best to do this? 'Dear diary' sounds dreadfully unscientific. 'Journal log?' 'Eternity project entry one?' Ugh... " The gorgeous mare sighed, shaking her head. "I thought that this would be so much easier. Twilight makes it look so effortless."

The curly-maned mare sighed with a small frown. "Twilight Sparkle. I wish she could have understood. I wanted to be able to do this with her. But after Celestia's examination of my little guidebook here, she was adamantly against it." The mare lifted the black book from her bag and tapped it lightly. She narrowed her eyes a little. "I've never really been jealous of her skill and ability,

but it's insulting for her to suggest that I shouldn't pursue magic simply because she says so. I too am a unicorn, am I not? And if there's a possibility that I can turn this sorcery to protect my friends, how could I not even try?"

"So," Rarity said as she turned and trotted towards the table. "Is it finished?"

"Oh yes your most beautiful beautiness," the tall, skinny one drawled slowly.

"Yeah! The most beautiful beauty in all of Equestria!" piped in the short, fat one. His horn lifted a large square of silk. "We put the soul in here just like you instructed. Soul silk!"

"Oh my!" Rarity breathed as she lifted it in her hooves. "It's gorgeous... such lovely texture." Then she grabbed it in her mouth and began to yank and pull. "Heee! And it's strong, too! Exactly as it's supposed to be." She floated it over to the pair. "See if you can damage it." They immediately began to play tug of war with the cloth as Rarity tried to cut it with her scissors.

"Well... being uncuttable does make it a challenge to work with, but I think I'll be able to manage," she said as she set the scissors down. "You can get up now, Petunia," she said to the mare on the table. The mare didn't move. "Petunia?" Rarity turned to her with a worried smile. "'Tunia, Darling. This is hardly the time to take a nap!" The worry grew to fear as the two stallions stopped fooling around with the silk and looked on. "Petunia?!" Rarity shook her with her hooves.

The body shifted slightly, then came to rest with a limpness I knew all too well.

The skinny stallion pressed his ear to her chest. His eyes widened. "She's... she's... "

"What? No! No no no!" Rarity scrambled to the book. "Put it back! Put her soul back! There must be a way to put it back!" she cried as her horn glowed and she turned the pages of the black book frantically. Her pupils constricted and she beat the text with her hooves. "Tell me how to put it back!"

But whatever answers she sought were not to be found. Her lips screwed up and tears ran down her face.

Nothing happened, and Rarity slumped over the book, weeping. A minute later she sniffed, dabbing her eyes. "I... there must be a way. We'll just have to be... be more careful. Yes... more careful. I won't let her sacrifice be in vain." She suddenly looked at me and seemed

to realize that I was watching. Flushing, she reached out to press a button on a keyboard and everything went black again.

~ ~ ~

The sudden flash made me trip and fall on my face. My armor rattled and banged against the shelving as I sprawled on my side. That wasn't a vision like I'd experienced before; maybe when Eternity had been unsealed there'd been a number of video recordings transferred to me, and now they were just shooting off in compressed bursts?

Hadn't it been wonderful when my life consisted of normal eyes that only saw the usual Stable-Tec-approved augmented vision?

"Are you okay, Blackjack?" Rampage whispered. I hardly blamed her. I hated this room; I'd have rather dealt with more slime ponies. At least they were a threat that I could see and sort of understand. But I looked at a small porcelain rocking horse and felt its eyes staring at me.

"Fine. I'm fine," I muttered as I looked back at Shears. "Every one of these is a soul jar?"

"No. Most are failures of one sort or another, but all of these have been touched by souls in ways we could never expla--" He was cut off as Cerberus opened fire through the stacks.

"Hostile enemy movement!" the robot shouted, spraying green bolts and a sheet of fire through the shelves. Carrion turned, strafing as well. I fired wildly, hoping to hit something... anything... that might be a threat. For ten seconds the room was an explosion of gunfire.

"Stop! Stop! Cease fire!" I yelled, and one by one guns stopped firing. Three rows of shelving lay in heaps. Some of the objects were broken. Some were utterly untouched. We all stared at the devastation we'd wrought against some simple wooden shelves. The fires ignited by Cerberus's flamer dwindled before my eyes, then went dark.

Behind us, a music box began to play. I knew the melody perfectly; my mane stood on end as I turned to stare at the tiny porcelain box with two dancing figurines slowly turning above it. *Hush now, quiet now...* I licked my lips, staring at it in apprehension. "Okay. Who turned that on?" No one spoke. My magic glowed and I turned the little lever at the side to off.

It didn't turn off. It began to scream; not a scream like I could hear with my ears. This was like the wail of Enervation; the hysterical scream was in my head. Toys rocked. Books fluttered their pages. Dozens of voices babbled all at once.

"Shut the fuck up already!" Psychoshy screamed and she swept her hoof over the shelf, knocking the music box and some of the other objects to the floor beyond.

"No!" Shears shouted.

"Why not! What the fuck are they going to do? Rock at me?" the yellow pegasus yelled.

Suddenly a swath of silk shot off the shelf and coiled once around her throat, once around a metal support beam, and yanked tight. The pegasus went silent, eyes bulging as her hooves clawed at the silk swath. Her legs lifted up, kicking out at the air as she struggled to get free. Rampage moved up on one side, ripping at the silk with her hoofclaws in a desperate attempt to try and cut through it. An umbrella opened, rolled to face me, then closed with a snap, launching itself and plunging into my neck. I gasped and fell back against the shelf, blood spurting from the hole as the umbrella thrashed wildly.

I wasn't the only one in trouble. Carrion had a teddy bear latched onto his face that seemed to be trying to crush his skull. Xanthe curled up in a ball as four floating boots slammed and stomped on her. A cowpony hat had forced itself over Nurse Graves's head and seemed to be trying to twist it completely off. Meanwhile, a floating screwdriver was doing its best to try and take Cerberus apart as it dodged and stabbed and spun. One of Cerberus's eyes popped free, dangling by a cable. "Oh, you are going to pay for that, you subversive tool of zebra domination!"

I got my hooves around the umbrella as it closed, but then it opened with unbelievable force and drove its spike even deeper, forcing me onto my back as if a strong stallion was pushing with every bit of his strength. Finally, it snapped closed again, and I moved as quickly as I could to shove the handle into the narrow gap between the shelves and the floor. As it tried to open, I yanked back and pulled the metal tip from my neck. The umbrella thrashed, making the heavy shelves rock as it struggled to free itself. I pressed my hooves to my neck as blood began to gush, hoping I could regenerate fast enough not to bleed out.

Lacunae's shield did nothing to protect her from a pair of ghostly

shears jabbing at her and snipping out lines of flesh. Stygius ignored the music box slamming into his helmet as he scraped and fought to free the struggling Psychoshy. Shears and Silver Spoon had managed to get Graves's head free of the twisting hat, which now swung down, beating and smacking at the three with brutal force. I never wanted to believe somepony could die from being hit with a piece of clothing, but the cowpony hat was definitely making an effort.

I rose, moving to try and help Psychoshy, when one of her power hooves lashed out and blasted me straight in the face. I flew clear through the shelf, sending splinters of wood everywhere, crashed through the next, and landed in a heap. I struggled to keep conscious, trying to shake off the disorientation. Blood trickled out my nostrils and ears as I lay there. Well, at least she hadn't *shot* me! Still, I really couldn't do much besides lie there and regenerate a little.

Then I saw a suit of strange light recon barding slip off a shelf. It trotted towards me, limp and swaying as if caught in a wind. I struggled to rise, but it didn't attack. I slowly lifted my head towards it, and it pointed its sleeve towards the corner of the room.

I looked over at where Stygius was trying to flicker flash away, disappearing and reappearing in place. It was clear that he couldn't take Psychoshy with him. His own teleportation, while functional in the dampening field, wasn't like Lacunae's.

"The silk," I choked out, tasting blood. "Styg! The silk!"

He looked back at me, then grabbed the scarlet cloth cutting so far into Psychoshy's neck that I wondered if it was trying to decapitate her instead of just strangle. With a flash he disappeared, taking the silk cloth with him, and the yellow mare collapsed into Rampage's hooves, coughing and spluttering for air. The red cloth immediately snapped out of his hooves and looped around his throat. A flash and he disappeared before it could draw tight. Again and again it sliced through the air, trying to catch him in a loop of fabric.

Lacunae blasted the floating scissors with her horn, but aside from knocking them spinning away from her, did no damage to them. Her horn flared as she struggled to keep them away as she shouted, "We have to get out of here!" Then a hoofball whizzed through the air and smashed her upside her face, deflecting to crash into the back of Rampage's head. From there it rocketed straight at me. I raised my hooves, popped my fingers free, and caught the oval

brown ball. It spun so hard in my acid-etched grip that I smelled burnt rubber before it finally halted and tried to launch itself away again.

The barding waved again and pointed to the corner once more. "This way!" I croaked, staggering in the direction that the suit had indicated. If it was leading us into a trap, it couldn't be any worse. Carrion's miniguns sprayed blindly as the teddy bear worked its little arms into his eye sockets. "Rampage!" I pointed at Carrion.

"Good thing you're already ugly!" the mare shouted as she charged and smashed her hoof into his face with a crunching sound. His deformed features twisted grotesquely as Rampage hooked her claws around the bear and pulled. With a grind of bone and a ripping of skin and feathers, she pulled the teddy bear free. It struggled, wiggling its ghoul-eye-gunk-covered plush arms at her as its mouth opened and closed silently, but a ghostly voice screamed in rage in my mind. "This way," she said as she looped her tail around his neck and guided the griffin towards me.

Xanthe lifted her forehooves to run, and the boots attacking her suddenly reversed, putting themselves on the ends of her forelegs. "Oh no... " she whimpered as they yanked her up, and the other two jammed themselves on her back legs. "Help me!" she screamed as the boots yanked her to her hooves and send her galloping straight at a solid cinder block wall!

Lacunae levitated the zebra, her hooves racing in midair. I brought out my sword and ran over to her. There was no clean or nice way to do this. I dropped into S.A.T.S., targeted her closest hoof, and said a little prayer to Celestia that I wasn't about to make her a stub. The spell executed a single stroke that bit into the boot's leather. A moment later I heard a sharp cry from the boot as the leather parted in a gash a few inches long, and instantly all four boots jerked off her legs and scampered towards the far side of the storage room.

I looked at the sword, and then a manic grin spread across my face as I sliced it at the cowpony hat. It took a swipe at me, but I nicked the brim. The hat gave a similar shriek and at once backed off as if caught in a gust of ethereal wind. The red scarf stopped trying to choke Stygius and instead looped itself around the next closest pony, wrapping itself around her neck and crushing her throat!

Nurse Graves gave a slightly annoyed look at the silk around her neck and trotted in the direction of the corner of the room. A door

had been pushed open, and we were slowly making our way out one by one. Now that they could be hurt, the cursed items were keeping their distance, though I did have the surreal experience of dueling with the floating screwdriver as I gave Cerberus a chance to withdraw with his bolts intact. I was last through the door in the corner, pulling it tight behind me as the objects started to rally.

The next room had the same cold feeling as the first, but instead of shelves, this room had ten smashed display cases with a broken modeling dummy in each. From a tiny gem fixed into the top of each case shone a cone of cool, stark light that illuminated their naked ponnequin occupants. I looked at Nurse Graves and the silk swath that was trying to choke her to death. “You know, that’s not going to work. She doesn’t need to breathe.” The ends of the scarf seemed to flutter in frustration. Nurse Graves looked at me coolly, arching her brow as her neck indented. I floated the sword towards the silk. “Now, let her go or we’ll find out just how sharp my sword really is.”

The silk released her and floated in the air a moment.

And then coiled tightly around the handle of my blade!

With a great wrench, it pulled the blade around and began to slice wildly at us. I jumped into the path of the razor sharp edge, the steel biting into my metal limbs and actually cutting through the exterior. I popped out my fingers, grabbing the blade as my horn struggled to control the deadly weapon. Three different colors of magic danced on the blade as we struggled for control. The metal scraped and gouged my fingers, the steel giving way to the sword’s edge as it pushed me back until I smacked into one of the empty display cases. Then the blade began slipping through my grip.

“My magic can’t get a grip on it!” Shears shouted. “That sword wants to kill!”

The tip began to work its way through the chestplate of my barding. Then I felt it prick my skin. Then it slowly pushed into me, even as my fingers clamped down as hard as possible. Rampage threw her hooves around the hilt and started to pull, but it made no difference. I assumed every iota of the spirit possessing the cloth was focused on taking a life like hers had been taken.

“Damn it, Petunia! I didn’t kill you!” I shouted. Was it just me, or did the sword stop pushing? I had no idea if she could understand me or not, but it was the only chance I had. “I’m sorry you died! It was wrong. But killing me won’t bring you back or change

anything!" I closed my eyes, the blade humming under my fingers. "Please. Tell me you were a good pony once. Be a good pony now."

The blade suddenly reversed and went flying out of Rampage's grasp as the cloth uncoiled around the grip. The crimson cloth unfurled, hanging in the air in a shape as if it were an anguished mare's face. Then it disappeared back under the door into the storeroom.

I lay there for one second, staring at the bottom of the door, then finally flopped over on my side with a groan. "That's it. I give up. Hightower wins," I declared feebly. "Killer possessed silk is where I draw the line." Psychoshy was curled up, concentrating on breathing as Graves and Stygius tended to her. Lacunae's wounds seemed to be healing before my very eyes. Radiation did an alicorn good.

"Too bad the giant killer ooze monster, the room of cursed toys, and a thousand hissing ferals are between us and the way back," Rampage said as she knelt beside me.

"I need some Cram. And rubies. And scrap metal," I said with a groan. "Please tell me we're somewhere safe for five minutes."

"You tell me?" Rampage replied as she turned and pointed at the suit of light gray barding sitting in the corner. It shrunk back, hiding behind one of the smashed display cases and peeking out at me. It had to be one of the oddest suits I'd ever seen. It looked to be mostly black but had a luminous white chestpiece and strange white circuitry stripes along the side.

"Are you okay?" I asked, feeling slightly odd talking to a suit. What counted as 'okay' to a soul jar suit of barding?

It reached down to a small speaker on its belt and there was a hiss, and then a synthetic mare's voice said, "Combat ended. No healing or chems needed."

"Oh, you can talk?" I asked, and the suit shook its head.

"That's all. You're my best friend forever. Sneaking now, shhhhhh," the suit said seemingly at random. Xanthe slowly crept closer to get a better look.

"Oh, you can only say things that suit has programed into it?" I asked, and the collar of the suit went up and down as if nodding.

"Is that a... " Xanthe began, then glanced at me nervously before looking at the strange barding. "I think it's a zebra infiltration suit." Then she looked up at me. "But... they're supposed to self-destruct if they're ever removed from the wearer without the proper tools and

procedures!" Then the zebra drew back and muttered, "And why is it speaking in Pony?" The suit shook its... collar.

"We *didn't* remove her from it." Shears glanced at the infiltration suit, and it shrank back. "Naturally, the zebras were curious about what we were doing here. But one, at least, never reported back. Rarity, of course, always the designer, attempted some modifications to her suit," he said as he rose to his hooves, looking at the other display cases. "But this was Eternity's first failure. The soul armor. Creating invulnerable, eternally powerful armor with a complete soul bound within." He looked at the armor with disappointment. "We assumed that, without a mind, a soul was just... a thing. Something special that made a pony a pony, or a griffin a griffin. When we transferred a complete soul to an object, however, it began to manifest... peculiar powers. Even brushing a soul could bestow strange effects on the tool." He looked back at me. "Worse, the soul within could affect the mind of the wearer."

"What?" I asked as I looked from him to the armor.

"The wearers would feel uncomfortable. Watched. They'd exhibit personality changes, growing closer to the captive soul," Shears said quietly as he circled the armor. "And since most of the souls we used were maximum security prisoners... ."

"You created monsters," I finished. Carrion's crippled face was slowly pulling itself together, but I had no idea if that was from healing magic or radiation.

Shears nodded. "I think that that can be summed up as 'Oopsie'," Rampage said.

I counted the display cases. Eight total. "You're saying that there are seven more suits of indestructible soul armor roaming around this place?"

"Yes. I suppose so," Shears replied.

"But... why didn't you use them?" I asked, and everything went white again.

~ ~ ~

I heard Rarity's voice and saw a pristine suit of combat barding on a charred corpse. "Test one... armor failed to protect from enemy flamer." The same combat barding on an intact corpse, minus a hole through the stallion's face. "Test two... armor failed to protect from enemy sniper." A piece of gray combat armor with a helmet and

completely intact faceplace. “Test three... .armor failed to protect from crushing blows inflicted to throat.” The same armor, this time Rarity speaking with frustration. “Test four... armor failed to protect from poisoned rations!” A lacy purple gown with veil on a pink unicorn mare with a blackened face. “Test five... armor failed to protect from being garroted by her own scarf!” A smashed and broken stallion wearing a tuxedo. “Test six! Armor failed... again... to protect from being pushed out a window!” Finally, a suit of dirty power armor. Rarity’s voice was now tired and frayed. “Test Seven... armor failed... to protect... when buried alive... in a landslide... ”

~ ~ ~

The recording faded and my vision returned to normal. “The armor didn’t do what Rarity wanted,” Shears explained. “What she needed was armor to keep the occupant safe. Just like how Applejack was inspired to create power armor after the death of Big Macintosh, Rarity was inspired to create a flawless form of protection for herself and her friends. Some foolproof method of defense.”

“But her tests failed,” I replied, and I got the feeling I’d surprised him. “Even if she could make armor to protect from bullets, there would always be a way for somepony to kill the wearer.”

“How could you know that?” Shears breathed. I didn’t answer. Really, considering how often I saw things nopony else did, there wasn’t much point. Then he composed himself and went on. “Yes. When we first created the armor it seemed perfect. Invulnerable, and it seemed to go out of its way to protect its wearer. But then we moved on to field testing and began to notice inexplicable accidents. Soldiers blundering into ambushes. Thoughts of suicide or murder. They were relatively rare and hard to pin down as coming from the armor... but regardless, they were unacceptable.”

I rubbed my hooves as the repair and healing talismans slowly worked their magic on me. “So what happened then? What did Rarity do?” I asked.

“She locked up her failures and moved on to plan B--” Shears began, but Psychoshy flew over us and interrupted.

“Hey. Tick tick, remember? Or click click click. As cool as ghouls are, I really don’t want to be one!” the yellow pegasus said. I looked over at where Nurse Graves and Lacunae were administering

healing and more pouches of RadAway to those who needed it. Carrion was sitting next to them, his eyes already regrowing and his face twisting back into shape. Hopefully he was using some sort of healing magic, because if the radiation was that strong...

"Right. We should get moving," I murmured.

"Wait! What about her?" Xanthe asked, gesturing to the possessed infiltration suit. "We can't just leave her."

I looked back at the others and then at the infiltration suit. Her? "Um... I'm not a zebra, but doesn't possessed armor count above a 9.0 on the standard scale of curses?"

Xanthe chewed her lip a moment and cast her eyes downward. "I've been touched by the Star Maiden... I don't think I can get any more cursed than that." Then she looked at the zebra armor. "At least this way I won't be cursed alone."

"Well... it's your call. But if the armor possesses you... " I said in worry. The armor had helped us get out of the other room; I wasn't terribly worried about it being evil... but still.

"If it does, I am already damned," she said in a near whisper. I couldn't help myself; I gave her an impulsive hug that made the zebra go rigid. I supposed getting a hug from the most evil being in your mythology might be a little disconcerting. The poor zebra certainly looked uncomfortable as I released her. She removed the hazmat suit, and the infiltration suit immediately opened up. A minute later it zipped up completely, latching itself in place.

"You're my new best friend," the armor chirped, making the zebra mare actually blush. The black and white armor was just tight enough for her to pull the hazmat suit back on over it.

"Okay! Which way up?" I asked as I looked over at Shears. He pointed towards the far end of the room where there was another door; this one had been kicked open. Stairs led in the direction we wanted. Leading the way with shotgun and sword, I ascended.

Rampage hummed softly behind me, singing to herself, "Nothing can stop... the smooze... " I glared back at her, and she blinked then gave a grin in return.

The door at the top of the stairs had also been kicked out and opened to a charred library. Blackened books occupied scorched shelves; probably a good indication they weren't going to start flying and trying to kill us. The far side of the library was lit with a ghostly blue glow that flickered and danced through blackened windows. Slowly, we walked through the stacks towards it. As we

did, we spotted the flickering blue flames burning on the concrete floor in little hoof-sized puddles. Their tongues danced and writhed, making my PipBuck spike with every flare. The heat wasn't like that from a fire; I could almost swear I could feel it moving through me.

Far worse, though, was the screaming.

It wasn't just the unnerving trill of Enervation. Hundreds of undead throats howled in rage. Hooves beat against bars. Some of them screamed words in the distance. They pleaded to be released, bellowed insults, cried out in pain or for help, and snarled threats. And under it all was the banging and hammering of thousands of hooves on hundreds of bars.

I walked to the library door and slowly pushed it open.

And stepped into Hell.

The vast central shaft of Hightower rose ten stories above me. Midway up, like a fiery dagger plunged into the heart of the structure, the missile jutted out into the middle of the space. Blue fire flew off the tip in volcanic eruptions that sprayed the sticky blue flame in glowing arcs. The unnatural blaze continued burning, no matter what it landed on, and the middle of the shaft was awash in a ring of radioactive fire. Inside every cell, blue-glowing shapes screamed and hammered against their restraints. Sentry robots rolled around the walkways, their metal bodies bent and warped by the tremendous heat.

From above, six hovering robots like Cerberus dropped down. Each one had an oversized terminal screen on a swivel arm; the six moved their screens together to make one massive screen, which flashed to life, bathing us in cold blue light. A gargantuan charred face appeared, wreathed in blue flame as it glared down at us. From a dozen loudspeakers all around us boomed a crackling voice. "Hello, convicts. I am Warden Hobble, administrator for this facility, and your host for the duration of your sentence for crimes against Equestria. I look forward to making your stay here as... comfortable... as possible." He gave a ragged, mocking laugh. "Welcome to the Tower!"

I stared up at that immense, burning leer on the screen for a moment, and then Psychoshy muttered, "*He* wasn't in the plan either... "

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 47: Hightower

"She might banish you from Equestria. Or throw you in a dungeon. Or banish you and then throw you in a dungeon in the place that she banishes you to!"

Plans are good. You have a goal, and you think ahead of time of ways to obtain it. Obstacles to be overcome or circumvented. Things you'll need. Planning is the mark of intelligent, thinking people who can predict troubles coming. And, certainly, things will come up that the plan will have to adapt to in order to survive, but good plans can change to overcome these little difficulties. Call it 'plan evolution'.

Our plan was officially extinct, and as I looked up at those screens and into that immense charred face flickering with blue-green light, I knew that we were shortly to be just as dead as our scheme. The malformed sentry robots began to turn towards us in an irradiated army. I saw at least a half dozen turrets in every direction turning to blast us to ash. Thousands of ghouls screamed in mindless rage, thrashing to escape their restraints and butcher us all. Our only way out was through rooms full of possessed toys and killer slime.

We were quite absolutely and righteously fucked, and we all knew it. Everyone took postures to fight back against all the defenses the prison had to offer, resolved to fight even with little hope of surviving. Everyone except one pony.

"Warden Hobble!" Silver Spoon shouted up at the combined screens. Her own green luminescence began to flare from the radiation pouring down on us. "I'm Silver Spoon, with the M.o.M. I'm here to administer your annual inspection and evaluation. It's, like, totally overdue!"

Every single eye in our team turned to stare at the glowing ghoul as the cracked and blackened face scowled down at her. Hobble leaned forward till one blazing eye filled the view. "Pardon?" he

asked in a low, incredulous voice. Silver Spoon looked up at that immense eye and gulped, but she didn't back down.

"According to M.o.M. penal facility requirements, your performance must be evaluated every year. So, like, I'm here to give you one!" she yelled up as she stepped to the front of our group. One of the floating robot screens drifted down, the eye drawing back to a scowling face, shrinking to fit the single monitor as he glared at her. There was a flicker from some sort of gem on the machine's arm, and a red beam waved back and forth over her face. In the corner of the monitor, an image of the mare in life appeared. I had to admit, she was definitely cute…and I'd like to think it was shock that had me thinking of such things at a time like this.

"Silver Spoon? You…you're here…to…?" His blazing eye widened, and the ghoul leaned back, frowning and muttering to himself before he said sarcastically, "Oh dear. I thought it'd been a while... My evaluation. Of course you'd pick *now* of all times." His lips cracked and crumbled as he grinned extra wide, blue-green flames licking out from between his teeth. "I don't suppose I could convince you to reschedule? We're having a mild disturbance at the moment... "

"I'm afraid not, Warden Hobble. My fr-- er, inspection team and I shall, like, inspect your facility, and I will come to your office and discuss your evaluation, like, when it's complete." She gave a prim little nod, then glanced over at me. I mouthed 'lift the lockdown'. Her eyes widened, and then she blurted, "If you could, like, totally lift the lockdown it'd make this whole thing totally easier."

"Lockdown?" He said the word like it was dirty. "Whatever do you mean? I run a tight ship, Miss Spoon. There's no *lockdown*." He put his melted hooves together on the desk before him. They'd deformed like stretched taffy on the ends of his limbs. "I'll instruct the guards not to impede your…evaluation." His screen turned towards Nurse Graves and the red beam flashed again. "Ah, and you have a guide already. The *whistleblower*." He hissed the word with such malice that Graves took several steps back. The warden's eyes returned to Spoon. "So long as you have your visitor passes, the automated security should ignore you and your inspection team." His blue eyes narrowed as he chuckled low and slow. "I do hope you remembered to pick some up. Otherwise, best come back another time." And with that the screen flashed off and the half dozen floating robots lifted into the air. The sentries returned to

patrolling along the walkways.

"That was brilliant, Silver Spoon!" I said, throwing my hooves around her and giving her a squishy hug. The ghoul blushed a brighter green and lowered her eyes; I suspected she didn't get complimented on being smart very often. I quickly backed off, though; every bit of radiation in here added up.

"I just thought, like, he might be like me and not know he's... um... like... dead?" the mare suggested.

"Why did he say there wasn't a lockdown, though?" Psychoshy asked, then looked at Nurse Graves. "And what's the big deal about blowing whistles?"

"This is a bad place to talk," Shears said as he looked up at the flaring warhead. "We have to get under cover."

I had to admit that he was right; my PipBuck was clicking like mad. We retreated back into the charred library; away from the magical flames the exposure dropped to tolerable levels, 'tolerable' meaning that instead of needing a RadAway every minute, we'd only need one every ten. I took a cloth and wiped the ballistic glass clean enough to peer through.

The entire prison looked bigger from the inside than it had from the outside. The interior was completely hollow. An immense cavity stretched up with walkways running around the perimeter, one on each floor. Each level had bars running from the balcony to the next level up; I supposed that they helped prevent prisoners from throwing their non-pegasi comrades over the edge. About a third of the way up I saw a section that jutted out a little into the central shaft with large, warped-looking windows; medical, I assumed. I couldn't see up past the medical floor from this angle, so I had no idea about the conditions closer to the warhead.

"At least we're safer if the Warden thinks we're with the M.o.M. right?" I asked as I looked back at the ghouls and Lacunae standing close to the fire, but there was more worry on their faces than relief.

"Don't count on it," Graves said grimly. Silver Spoon frowned in worry, nodding.

"Warden Hobble was, like, totally the nastiest pony ever put in charge of a prison," Silver Spoon said nervously. "He was totally corrupt, too, but anytime we'd come to inspect, the inspectors either found nothing wrong or else they had nasty accidents." Her brow furrowed in concern. "He'll totally try something bad."

I scowled. “Found nothing wrong?”

“Rather, he paid the inspectors to not find anything wrong. At least, that’s the rumor,” Silver Spoon muttered.

“So the M.o.M. took bribes?” Psychoshy said with a snort, “Surprise surprise.”

Silver Spoon stammered, “Well…it’s like…no guardpony ever had that much power before. We got bonuses from Quartz if we looked the other way whenever Goldenblood’s name came up. Nobles were always glad to give a present or two to hush something up. I mean, I know it was wrong but what could we do? Go to Pinkie? She was totally letting drug dealers off right and left!” She hung her head a little. “I mean…yeah, it was wrong…but what could we do?”

“What about going to Luna?” I asked with a frown. Mr. Shears, Graves, Silver Spoon, and even Lacunae looked away and didn’t answer. Stygius’s tufted ears ducked down. I felt an irrational stab of rage rise up inside me. “Princess Luna? Freaking ruler of Equestria, Luna?! Why didn’t anypony just trot up to the alicorn princess in charge and mention that the biggest prison in Equestria was run by the biggest scumbag ever?” Why was everypony looking at me like I was the crazy one?

“It’s hard to explain,” Lacunae said over the howls and screams of the prisoners outside. “Celestia was always open as a ruler. You could talk to her and she’d listen. You could approach her and feel secure that she’d take you seriously. But Luna…she wasn’t like her sister. When she gave public speeches, they were always to the point, and then she was gone. When she held court, she was firmly in charge of everything. And the security! Luna was kept safer than any pony in Equestria, but it also isolated her from her own people.”

“There were always stories, though,” Mr. Shears muttered. “Stories of Luna appearing at meetings in the middle of the night. Of making appearances where nopony expected her to be. She’d show up at a Manehattan orphanage or shelter in Fillydelphia and give comfort to those in need. She’d play pranks when least expected. She could be terrifying, as well. She was Princess of the Night, and like the night, she was ever-changing and inscrutable. Luna took care of her duties, I’m sure of it. But she had no lack of ponies to stand in the open for her.”

I chewed back my response. It all made sense. She was at war with a race of people who excelled at infiltration and assassination.

Being a ruler out in the open was painting a bullseye right on her head. By setting up the ministries, she could direct more flexibly. It was what a smart pony would have done.

So why did it feel so…cowardly? It would be as if I'd convinced others into facing this terrible place while I stayed safe and sound back in Star House. Aside from the memory of the Gala, I'd not encountered any instance of her doing anything openly. Here was a place where a terrible evil had been perpetuated and she was… somewhere else! No wonder Goldenblood had worked so well with her setting up the ministries!

No place like this should have been allowed to exist. Not ever.

Rampage trotted up to me with a worried look, leaning over to meet my glare. "Hey. Radiation? Enervation? Death all around us?" Her pink gaze softened somewhat and she bumped my shoulder. "Don't worry about that now."

"I know. It's just so frustrating," I said with a snort. "She could have been…better. She should have been... " 'More', I couldn't finish. For some reason, the striped mare sighed and rolled her eyes. "What?" I asked, and she shook her head with a rueful grin. "What?!"

"Welcome to my world, Blackjack," she said with a wistful smile as she turned and trotted away, looking out the window. What was that about?

"So how do we get up to medical?" Psychoshy asked as she peeked back at the windows. Everypony looked over at Nurse Graves as the earth pony ghoul inhaled to speak.

"There're stairs across the quad," Rampage said as she looked at the soot-covered doors. "We get past the exercise yard and the hoofball field," she continued, lips twisting in a smirk. "We can get up there, no problem. 'Course, we'll have to watch out for Haymaker's herd. She's looking to pin me down and bend me over after I…" The mare trailed off along with the leer. She sat down and rubbed her head. "Whoa. That was weird."

"Did you go out again?" I asked.

Carrion grumbled, "She keeps asking questions when we need to hurry." I shot the ghoul a look. His face was still lopsided; he could take a few more minutes to regenerate some more.

"It wasn't like that. I mean, it was, but it was different. I was me, and I was Razorwire too. We were sort of smooshed together, and for a moment there I couldn't tell which was which." She shook her

head hard and thumped the side of it again. “Sorry, anyway. If we’re going up to medical, we can take the stairs. Far side. All that.”

“The kitchen elevators are a more direct and safer route,” Nurse Graves said as she pointed off to the right. “We can go through the cafeteria to the kitchen and up to medical. We won’t have to go by the cells or cross sentry patrols.”

I looked from to the other. Elevators would be quicker. “Let’s get to the kitchens. If we can avoid them,” I said with a wave at the courtyard, “then I’m all for it.” If the elevators didn’t work, we had four people with wings and more than enough guns.

Poking my head out again, I looked around and spotted the hovering robots moving up and down the shaft and the sentries lumbering along on their warped legs. None were close to us. I spotted the double doors under the ‘Cafeteria’ sign. I motioned for Carrion to take the front, Lacunae to watch out for threats above, Rampage and Psychoshy to guard our sides, and Stygius to cover our rear. I frowned, not seeing Xanthe... ah, there she was with the rest in the center. Funny, that suit made her hard to follow even when she wasn’t sneaking. I trotted up beside the griffin, and we started along the ground floor edge with solid wall on one side and half-melted chain-link fence on the other. Astonishingly, we made it to the double doors without anything bad happening.

The ballistic glass was coated in soot and had warped and slumped in places, but I couldn’t find a gap we could get through. The doors themselves were stuck in their frames. Carrion and I grunted, heaved, and finally pulled them open with a resounding crack. “Hurry!” I said as I jumped through.

That was funny. What were all the cafeteria tables doing stacked up on the far side of the large, empty room?

Then a dozen ghouls popped their glowing blue-green heads up over the rim. They wore blue combat barding similar to the style I’d worn so long ago leaving Chapel for the first time. They took one look at us and shouted, “The prisoners! They’ve busted loose! Fire! For Luna’s sake, fire!” Shotguns, pistols, and assault carbines were lifted or levitated into the air from behind the barricade of lunch tables.

Oh horseapples.

“Shield!” I shouted as they opened up with a barrage of gunfire; Lacunae immediately extended her shield around Silver Spoon,

Shears, and Graves. I wasn't exactly sure where Xanthe had gotten to and hoped she hadn't tried to leave on her own. Carrion and I hit the ground, the griffin protecting his unarmored head with his armored forelimb as he opened up and started strafing the guards. Psychoshy darted to the left, Stygius shot to the right, and Rampage charged right down the middle.

"Oh, you are so fucked now!" Rampage roared as she leapt clear over the barricade, flipping in midair and dropping like a spiked cannonball into the midst of the guards. Two of the tables overturned as half of the guards spilled away from the thrashing mare and the other half fired blast after blast at point blank range. Whatever didn't strike steel plating didn't do nearly enough damage to matter as Rampage rampaged in the middle of them.

"Halt! We don't want to fight you! Stop shooting!" I bellowed, but clearly these guards saw us as only one thing. They spread to the left and right, trying to flank us. Cerberus whooped as he blasted away with his disintegration gun. I sighed, targeted the nearest ghoul, and rose to fire four rounds into him. I didn't know if it was the armor that seemed melted to his hide or the radiation, but even after four hits of buckshot the glowing guard was still on his hooves. Wait, he was actually *regenerating*!

This was gonna be tougher than I thought. But, armored and empowered or not, nothing protected them from their heads exploding in sprays of rotten brain and broken steel as Lacunae carefully sighted with the AM rifle. "Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I muttered absently, remembering Psalm's grim refrain. With the ghouls no longer focusing their fire, Carrion stood and poured on the bullets. Plenty deflected off the armor, but some found their way to vulnerable spots. Those vulnerable spots quickly liquefied, and one guard was decapitated by the barrage.

Psychoshy and Stygius darted in from the left and right. The gray batpony scooped up one guard by his helmet and launched him into the air. Then he shadowflashed away as Psychoshy flew by like a lightning bolt. All four of her power hooves struck the armored ghoul's torso and discharged simultaneously. Having been hit by one of those myself, I wasn't surprised at all to see the squishy airborne ghoul blasted into rancid hunks of armored meat.

I had to admit, suddenly I was glad she was more on my side now.

Three broke away from the others and rushed me. Buckshot

peppered my armor, but it was designed for worse. I swapped from the riot shotgun to Duty and Sacrifice, hopping into S.A.T.S. to aim my shots at glowing eyes before they could mob me. Four heavy rounds later and one ghoul's head burst apart.

Unfortunately, that left two. One earth pony tackled me, and I realized these ghouls weren't just tough, they were definitely stronger than I expected, too! He smashed his helmet against my forehead, and the impact was like an icepick jammed through my skull. My focus snapped, the guns clattering to the ground as the earth pony locked his hooves around mine and heaved me clear off the ground, then reversed and slammed me down in a heap.

Glowing shears darted over me and clamped down on the earth pony's forelegs. The glow intensified, and then I smelled melted steel and cooked, rotten meat as the leg was sliced through. Screaming, the guard staggered back. The blackened stump, however, was swelling grotesquely as a new leg began to sprout. I barely had time to get to my hooves before there was an electric crackle and my whole body and vision lurched. While I'd been occupied with the earth pony, his ally, a unicorn ghoul, charged up behind me and pressed a crackling shock baton against my head. My vision flickered several times as I fell over; cybernetic damage or skull fracture, it was hard to tell which.

Lacunae's rifle thundered, the AM round turning the earth pony's head into paste as Shears tried to snip the ghoulish unicorn guard.

The baton beat back the glowing shears as she lifted my own revolvers and pointed them right at my face.

"Sneaking now," chirped a synthetic voice. "Shhhhh…"

The air beside the guard shimmered, and a moment later there was a shotgun blast right at the base of the guard's helmet. The ghoul's head erupted, and my revolvers clattered down beside me along with chunks of undead cranium. Then the shimmer flashed, and Xanthe stood there with my shotgun in her mouth, legs shaking.

"Good jo--" I began to say as she turned towards me, trying to talk around the trigger. Any other praise I was going to give was lost in the roar of buckshot and the explosion of pain in my gut as the gun went off. She spat it out with a horrified look, kneeling beside me.

"Oh…oh…oh…I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Are you okay? Please don't kill me with my own bones!" she begged, her hooves shaking as she fumbled to get a potion out of her hazmat suit's pockets. I choked it down; it was watery and wouldn't do anything for me anyway. "I'm

sorry! I've only had basic firearms training and I failed that the last three times and really I shouldn't but I had to do something and…" I silenced her, pressing a hoof to her lips.

"Don't worry about it. Happens all the time," I muttered as I tried to summon my magic and lift my guns, grunting and straining as my guts burned with buckshot. Rampage, Psychoshy, and Carrion were mopping up the last two. I gave up and collapsed back for a minute to let my repair talisman fix me up. In fact, I treated myself to a minty sapphire as I lay there and tried to not think about the fiery sensation as my body put itself back together.

"Blackjack?" Lacunae asked in concern.

"I'm fine," I said as I waved still slightly acid-etched hoof in the air. "Please take Xanthe over there and give her a two minute lesson on firearms safety. Make sure you cover not talking with a trigger in your mouth." My abused skull was giving me a migraine.

"Come on, Blackjack," Rampage said.

"Come on nothing, Rampage. I just got shot by my own shotgun by my own teammate! I'm taking two minutes." I gestured at the dead ghouls beside me. "See if they've got anything useful. I'll be lying here when you're done." Sometimes even Security needed a breather. Lacunae herded Xanthe away.

"She saved your life, Blackjack," the Dealer rasped next to me.

"Something that I'm profoundly grateful for," I muttered as I curled up on my side, trying to ignore the pain radiating out from the point blank shotgun blast. Anypony that thought it odd kept it to themselves, given my sour mood. If I hadn't been armored and augmented... "She also shot me. So while things are in her favor, ow." I cracked open an eye at the emaciated pale stallion in his wide-brimmed hat. "You're looking better."

He patted my foreleg. "Some days I'm better than others, like you. Just need a little rest and I'm able to make contact."

"Do you see and hear everything I do anyway?" I asked with a little frown and blush.

"Unfortunately, yes. But I try to ignore most of it. Thankfully, I can't feel what you feel," he said as he looked down at me with a wan smile and tired eyes.

"When you were talking about responsibility the other day, were you talking about Luna?" I asked as I looked up at him, and his smile disappeared. His eyes turned troubled and shadowed, and he pulled the brim of his hat down to hide them.

“Luna was ruler of Equestria, but I doubt there was a pony alive who could tell you for certain what she ruled, or how. Some thought her a pawn of Twilight Sparkle and the ministries. Some believed she was the selfless Princess who stepped in when Celestia abdicated. And some whispered that she was behind everything, even starting the war with the zebras in the first place.” He sighed as he looked away. “We may never know what she really did; even without the effects of the apocalypse and two centuries, she made extensive efforts to conceal the truth from everypony.”

I looked around the blasted cafeteria. “I can’t help but be a little… pissed off at her,” I confessed. “I see Twilight and the Ministry Mares left, right, and center, but not Luna. Were my friends right when they said that Luna did good things?” Or was it just my wishful thinking I heard in my voice?

“Luna always did good things from the shadows, from her sister’s shadow in particular. She helped protect the capitol from numerous threats and moved behind the scenes to help however she could. At times, I think she almost made a game of it. But being Princess Luna and being Princess Luna, Ruler of Equestria, are two very different things. She would do anything for her land and people. Anything… except quit.” He sighed and shook his head. “Sometimes, I don’t think anypony knew what Princess Luna really felt. She was always alone. I always felt sorry for her…” I sighed too, then looked at the Dealer again... but once more he was gone.

I had to haul myself to my hooves. My entire gut still felt cooked, but the pain was receding. Once on all fours, I felt a disconcerting lurch as my insides were subject to gravity again and I had the horrible sensation that they were going to tumble right-- okay, not going there. Deep breaths, Blackjack. Deep breaths. I looked at my team collecting what ammo and weapons they could from the slain guards. I selected a pair of ten millimeter pistols, cleaned out the mouthgrips, loaded the magazines with every bit of AP ammo I had in that caliber, and walked stiffly over to Graves and Silver Spoon.

“If we’re going to get through this, we’re going to need more ponies shooting.” Especially if we ran into a sentry. “Do you know anything about firearms?”

“I know I won’t use them,” Nurse Graves replied evenly. I’d been afraid of that; I hoped it didn’t have to do with a suppressed urge to kill me.

“I know they, like, totally freak me out,” Silver Spoon muttered,

lowering her glowing eyes. “I had to take a training course when Tiara and I joined the M.o.M., though.” I supposed that was better than nothing. I motioned Xanthe over as well as I passed Silver Spoon the gun.

“Take it. Point it at the enemy. Fire the trigger with your tongue and not your mouth. Bite firm but don’t clench your jaw. And do not…shoot…me…” I added firmly with a glance in Xanthe’s direction, the zebra looking at the blood spattering the belly of my barding. My gut still burned; I hoped my repair talisman could do something with the buckshot. Speaking of shotguns, I took back my twelve gauge riot gun and passed Xanthe one of the guards’ ten millimeter automatic pistols. I’d weather it better if I faced any more friendly fire.

We’d spent enough time here. I was in the yellow radiation-wise and feeling rotten. Nothing specific, just a whole-body malaise that remained even after slurping down RadAway. At least I was less radioactive, though. Rampage trotted over to the counter, leapt over, and moved to the door to the kitchens. It was locked, but two bobby pins later I clicked it open. Thank you, P-21. I got ready for…

Nothing. The kitchen was empty. Three long, gleaming stainless steel counters stood next to sinks and industrial-sized mixing machines. Pots dangled from racks that hung from the I-beams running along the ceiling. No knives, of course, but there were still utensils chained to the counters and lots of canned food. “This stuff any good?” Rampage asked as she lifted a can of beans and tossed it to me. I nibbled off the corner of the can and sampled the contents. Well, it wasn’t Sugar Apple Bombs, but I was pretty sure it was edible. I munched it down, and we added more to our saddlebags. If we actually made it out of here with our lives, we might make a tidy sum of caps back at Meatlocker.

The elevator was in the far corner. I tapped the button and it lit up. Then it went dark. Frowning, I tapped it again. And again. And again. “I don’t think tapping it faster makes it work faster, Blackjack,” Rampage snorted. Scowling, I tapped it once more with feeling.

I hooked my fingers in the seam between the doors on one side, working the fingertips in. Carrion grabbed from the other with far more ease, and together we pulled them wide.

A hissing, screaming mass of ghouls greeted us on the far side,

their glowing bodies firmly enmeshed in the broken, bent steel of the elevator car. Cables slithered like guts from the smashed top of the car where a huge drum had collapsed upon the elevator. The ghouls inside had been impaled on countless pieces of broken steel.

Okay. Elevator was out.

"Tiara!" Silver Spoon screamed, and I turned towards the door to the cafeteria at once, not seeing the hostiles. Then I looked at the gray ghoul and saw where she was looking. Not at the elevator nor the trapped ghouls within. Her eyes were locked on the sinks.

And for good reason too. They were filling with blue slime. Glistening heads began to stretch up out of the tubs as the slimeponies climbed out. Their sludge immediately made the countertops hiss, the metal corroding as the slime ate its way through the tubs and splashed across the floor. The goop was already between us and the exit.

"Off the floor. Hurry!" I yelled, clambering up onto the counter tops as the smooze spread across the floor tiles. At once the counter's steel legs started to hiss and smoke. Anyone with wings or levitation immediately took to the air, and Lacunae lifted Shears onto her back and hoisted Graves and Xanthe with her magic. Carrion carried Silver Spoon on his back between his miniguns. That left me and Rampage to stand on the shaky countertops. "Cerberus! Clear the door! Everypony out!"

"Yes sir ma'am sir! Looking forward to killing some more of these maggot farms!" the robot cheered as he hovered over and blasted the slime heaping up in front of the door. Was this stuff intelligent, or did we just have bad luck? The acidic ooze sent pseudopods snaking into the crushed elevator, and I watched as the thrashing ghouls were slowly dissolved into more blue sludge. Lacunae ducked out with her passengers, and Carrion followed quickly behind. Stygius strafed the deepening pool of slime, his scream breaking up the slimeponies before they could fully form and climb up on the counters with us.

Carefully, Rampage and I walked along said shaky counters. They slumped as their legs slowly dissolved in the corrosive blue fluid. With a bang and a crackle, one of the large industrial mixers fell over, yanking cables off the wall. The power cord began to spark and crackle as it swayed over the tables. I was one spark away from being unconscious. Another mixer leaned over and pulled free as its base gave way. Another crackling wire…A third.

Still, we were almost there. Almost. I leapt from one row of counters to the next, making my way towards the door. Stygius and Psychoshy were keeping the slimeponies off us. Just a little further and we'd be in the clear. I watched as Stygius shadowflashed overhead and screamed at a slimepony trying to clamber onto the counter behind me. The two wove and ducked around the clanging, swaying pots and pans, and I looked upwards in annoyance after one heavy pan banged against my helmet.

Wait…why were the fire sprinklers smoking?

"Stygius! Psychoshy! Get out!" I screamed, jumping to the last row of counters that gave me a clear run to the door. The sinks in the middle of the counter had dissolved away completely, leaving three chunks in a row pointing towards the door. A glow of alicorn magic punctuated by green disintegration bursts flung the slime back from the doorway in smoking, sulfurous splashes.

The flying pair stared down at me in confusion, looking in the wrong direction.

Then there was a pop overhead, and then another, like shotgun blasts. Blue cascaded from the hissing sprinkler heads in thick cones of sludge. The hanging racks began to sizzle immediately, but for the moment provided *some* cover. Stygius and Psychoshy were drenched to the point their wings couldn't lift the heavy slime. They tumbled from the air, coated in acidic slime eating at their hazmat suits. The ooze covering the floor surged up, forming a giant mouth.

Rampage and I leapt back across the gap, catching Stygius and Psychoshy in our hooves. The acidic globules burned as they found gaps in my armor, and the thick metal plates of Rampage's were blackening on contact. I desperately flung the sludge away as the pots and pans tumbled down upon us. The counters we'd landed on were already pitting and dissolving away as they slid through the slime towards the snapping power lines on rapidly corroding legs.

I tossed Stygius onto Rampage's back to the side of the row of spikes along her spine, and then heaved Psychoshy onto the other side. "Get ready!" I shouted as the counter hit the wall beside the dissolving mixers, crunching the third row of counters where the mixers had stood. I rolled onto my back, grabbed the edge on the counter with my smoking fingers, and shoved off the wall as hard as my cybernetic legs could push. My magic grabbed a pan and held it over my face as I kicked off. The snapping electrical cables swung back, missing my hooves by inches.

The counter rocketed back across the kitchen towards the last dissolving counters. Rampage leapt from one chunk to the next. As she landed on the third, the slime lurched up once more, and like the catwalk in the basement, devoured the metal just as Rampage launched herself for the door. A purple glow grabbed her and pulled her to safety.

Now…there was just the problem of myself…

When I'd shoved off the counter, I hadn't been in a position to follow Rampage. So I was left on a tiny corroding island in a sea of blue. My skin burned in a dozen places, and my brand new armor was all that was keeping me from dissolving away completely. I looked in every direction as my slimy black spur of steel crumbled under my hooves. There was only one way to go.

I jumped as high as I could, smashing through the corroded racks, my smoking legs pulverizing the last of the counter beneath me. My fingers closed around the fire sprinklers, and I could feel the incredible heat inside the tube. I didn't waste a second as I clambered along the pipe, the metal crumbling away seconds after I passed along the length. Finally I reached one of the ceiling supports, an I-beam that gave me something to dangle from as the sprinkler systems disintegrated completely. Lacunae's magic was now a wall keeping the flood contained inside the kitchen as blue slime fountained from drains in the floor. The entire mass was forming another enormous mouth directly beneath me as more and more of the room flooded.

"Hey. Ugly," I groaned as I hung there by my fingers. "I was once told by my mom…never to play with water…around power cables."

I had no clue if it could understand me or if it sensed the snapping electricity arcing from the dangling cables, but that massive maw formed a giant pony head and looked over at the electrical lines and reared back…too late. With a horrible sizzle and reek of caustic chemicals, the entire blue mass flickered and flashed as current poured through it. The whole thing jiggled, and for a moment I thought of Rampage's horrible joke of gelatin monsters. Then the slimy head collapsed in a thick splash and started to drain away. The bulk of it poured down the elevator shaft, dissolving through the floor of the smashed elevator and pouring down below. I groaned, trying to hold on with my smoking digits.

It wasn't draining fast enough; there was still more than enough smooze to liquefy me. Then with a ping my corroded fingertips gave

way and popped off, and I dropped down towards the steaming blue fluid.

Then I stopped, dangling in space in a protective cocoon of purple magic while my hide sizzled in a dozen places. I looked over at the doorway where Lacunae and Shears stood, the former holding me aloft while the latter kept the smooze back from the cafeteria. Once they'd pulled me back through, they wasted no time peeling off my armor and washing me off with bottles of water. Then they took out cardboard boxes looted from the kitchen and shook out this white powder on my burns. Almost immediately I started to feel relief.

"You know, this place isn't so bad," I muttered, my whole body afire. "Once you get past the undead guards, the acidic ooze monsters, and the insane warden, it's really…pretty horrible, actually," I finished lamely, sitting up. I looked over at Stygius and Psychoshy, whose radsuits were literally falling apart before my eyes. Better the suits than their hides... Though Rampage was healing, her armor was covered with ugly rusted splotches where the smooze had touched it. My brand new armor had already taken a thrashing, but it'd kept my hide intact. Silver Spoon and Xanthe looked at me in worry, Nurse Graves in concern, and Shears with an almost desperate stare. Carrion, though, only appeared mildly annoyed by the acid-etched steel of his power armor.

We hadn't even left the ground floor, and already we were thrashed. I chowed down on Cram cans and gems, and was relieved to see my fingertips reforming. They looked discolored (I suspected my body didn't like rebuilding whole parts from tin cans), but they seemed to work okay. I looked at my gray foreleg and forced open the pitted door to examine the PipBuck within. The black device was slightly discolored around the edges; Stable-Tec built to last. A few buttons and EC-1101 appeared on the screen. I slowly looked up at the ceiling and the tiny navigation icon directly above me. I looked over at my friends and the people who had followed me. Psychoshy sucked down on a packet of RadAway, sharing it with Stygius, who didn't seem to like the orange tanginess.

I was going to get them all killed…

The file number just shone back at me. Taunting me. Follow the file, Blackjack. Follow the file. Find the answers. Learn the secrets. All I had to do was keep going. Keep following the trail to the very end. Overcome. Win. Win at any cost. Ante up. Push to the very end…

The question was how many bodies I was going to leave behind me. I looked over at my companions, thinking, feeling folks and not just answers to my questions. They'd followed me here…

Was I going to be just like the Ministry Mares? Just like Goldenblood?

I closed my eyes a moment and took a long, low breath. "Okay. That's it. I'm pulling the plug," I said as I stood and closed the plate on my foreleg.

"What?" Mr. Shears asked bluntly.

"We'll find the exit and get the hell out of here. How many RadAway packets do we have? A dozen?" I asked, looking at Nurse Graves. The ghoul shook her head. "Less?"

"Eight," she said softly.

"Right. Then we're done. I'm not going to kill all of you for my own ends," I said as I looked to the south. "We go back to Meatlocker, heal up and come back another day. We didn't know about the smooze, the soul jars, or the Warden. We need better supplies and weapons. I want to get Glory and P-21 in on this. His grenades and her beam rifle are just what we need. You can whip up more talismans, we can bring a tanker truck of RadAway, and we'll do it right," I said with a nod. "We can work our way in from the outside, take our time with the turrets, pick off the ghouls, and make sure this place is secure."

"I see." The round ghoul was silent a long moment. "I'm afraid that's not acceptable," Mr. Shears said calmly.

I groaned. I'd feared this was going to be trouble. "Look, what's another month? You've waited two centuries for this."

"I'm not waiting another hour," Mr. Shears said in a low mutter. "I refuse."

Rampage frowned and rolled her eyes. "Um, not sure if you missed the point, but if BJ says we go, then we go. And there's ten of us and one of you. I doubt you can take all of us."

"I don't have to take any of you," he said as he looked right at me, his horn flaring bright blue. "Just one."

From the cloaked ghoul, a twisting, ghostly white whirlpool formed above his horn. Then, in a flash of gray smoke, it shot across the distance between us and slammed into my chest.

I'd like to say I'd never heard screams from inside me before, but as the spell hit me I heard a noise like Enervation coming from my chest…a clawing, twisting explosion of pain that drove me to my

knees.
Rampage sailed through the air and crashed down upon Shears like an avalanche. “You’re dead!” She reared her forehooves above him, rusty, jagged hoofclaws ready to rip him to pieces.
“I die, she dies!” the ghoul screamed, freezing the earth pony. Shears rasped, “That curse is slowly ripping her soul from her body. In a few hours, she’s dead or worse.” Rampage grit her teeth in frustration. “Do you know how to remove it?” he asked, staring at Lacunae, who pointed her AM rifle right at his face. The alicorn didn’t answer. “Do you?” he asked as he looked at Xanthe.
“Starkatteri blasphemy,” Xanthe spat at him. “You meddle in that which you have no right!”
“I’ve learned over two centuries that one does what one must. We are reaching the top of this tower, tonight! I don’t care if every single one of you dies in the process. I am getting what is mine and not waiting a moment longer,” he said as he looked up at all of us from where Rampage had knocked him prone.
“My combat inhibitor is a little iffy on this one,” Cerberus growled.
“So’s mine,” Rampage replied.
“Don’t kill him…” I gasped as I struggled to stand…to do anything really. I felt like there was something twisting inside me, trying to pull something out of me. The pain was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. “Not…yet…” I slowly fought my way to my hooves, and his milky eyes widened in shock. “Why?” I asked as I looked down at him.
“You…you’re standing? You shouldn’t able to stand! The pain--” he muttered as he stared up at me.
“Is nothing I’m not already used to,” I said as I stared down at him and grimaced. “I get hurt a lot. So. Tell me why…” I said as I floated Vigilance out and pointed it at his head. “Or else I kill you and have a nice party in Afterlife before I die. Again.”
“Again?” he murmured softly, and then took a slow step back. “You’ve…been to the everafter? Seen the singing lights? But your eyes…”
“Are synthetic. So. Tell me why,” I said, then clenched my jaw against another stab of pain.
Shears stared at me for a moment longer, then turned away. “I have to. Surely you can understand doing what you have to do.”
I took several deep breaths. I rather thought that shooting him at this point would be a little too late to count as self-defense. “Okay.

Let's get out of here." Maybe the Goddess would work something out…or I'd just tough it out…or maybe it would kill me. Hopefully Lacunae could unite me with Glory before I finally kicked it…

"Wait," Lacunae said as she walked slowly and imperiously towards Shears. All eyes were drawn to the magnificent, regal alicorn as she stared down with cold condemnation. "How have you done this?"

"Starkatteri sorcery, no doubt," Xanthe muttered, stamping her hoof.

"Entering combat now," the suit seemed to agree, then amended, "Whoopsie. Never mind."

"I can't explain," Shears countered. "Just get me to the attic. I have to get there…I have to!" he muttered, and I wondered if he was pushing going feral himself. "I'll fix her once we're there. I promise."

"I doubt the value of a promise from such a treacherous pony as yourself," Lacunae replied. Then she sighed. "But very well. I will remain."

"Lacunae, you don't have to--" I began, but she smiled and shook her head.

"I'm not going to abandon Tiar…um…Blackjack," Silver Spoon said as she put a hoof on my shoulder. I smiled at the gesture, but stepped clear from the spiking radiation. The round unicorn just nodded and hung his head. She blinked behind her frames. "You might need me to deal with the Warden again. Maybe I can, like, convince him to meet us face to face?" She looked at the ceiling with a worried frown.

"I still need to get to that cell," Carrion muttered. "As long as Ahuizotl has my Contract, I have to do what he says."

"I'm not retreating if it means losing more chances to incinerate some maggot farms!" Cerberus said, waving his disintegration arm over his head. "I've got over one million, one hundred and sixty eight hours of combat inhibition to make up for!"

I looked at Nurse Graves, and she just smiled and shook her head. Rampage too. Psychoshy gave me the cockiest grin she could muster, gulping against her fear. Stygius looked at her with surprise, then smiled, patted his chest, and pointed to me. Finally, all eyes turned to the zebra. Xanthe chewed her lower lip. "I…I can go?"

"With that stealth suit, you probably can," I replied calmly. "I sort

of dragged you into this too. We could use you with us, but only if you want to join us."

The zebra looked absolutely torn. "I…I…I…" she stammered, looking in the direction of the exit. "Ooooh, curses." She slumped down before me, hanging her head. "I cannot leave you, Maiden. You have cursed me like all the others. I am in your thrall."

I sighed, rolling my eyes. "Xanthe. You can go. I don't want you along if you don't want to come along." This whole zebra curse thing was getting a whole lot harder to understand and, honestly, a bit concerning.

She bowed her head towards me. "I am cursed to follow the Star Maiden. Fighting my curse will only increase my suffering. I resign myself to my doom and damnation, Star Maiden, in the hope that you may lessen your wrath upon my people."

Okay. I give up. Zebras are just weird.

I grimaced, fighting the augering sensation inside me. "Okay," Nurse Graves said. "Eight doses of RadAway. That's fifteen, twenty minutes. Everypony…and zebra…take another Rad-X." She passed out four tablets to those of us who were vulnerable to radiation poisoning. Mmmm…chalky goodness. Xanthe looked at Rampage as she scraped rusty hoofclaws against the corroded surface of her armor.

"Do you not need some as well?" Xanthe asked, looking at her legs where the acid had burned her. She seemed fascinated by the smooth hide contrasted with the pitted metal. "And…were you not wounded?"

Rampage started to say something, then her face turned aggressive, and then just as quickly formal and aloof. "Mere injuries such as those are of little concern, Propoli. Do not concern yourself on my account." Then she gave another shake and leered at Xanthe. "Keep poking your nose in my business and I'll cut it off, you hear me?" And a moment later she adopted that lazy smile that sent a chill down my spine.

"Rampage?" I murmured. "Are you…you?"

"Why Blackjack, who else would I be?" she replied sweetly. "Now take it easy. I wouldn't want you to suffer any more than you do now."

"Right." I looked at Lacunae, Stygius, and Psychoshy. I stared at the alicorn and thought a warning at her as hard as I could. Could I set her off if I made the accusation? I grimaced back at her. "You're

such an angel, Rampage." The striped mare just smiled a little bit more. It was the politest way she could bare her teeth at me.

We trotted to the doors, and I looked out across the penned-in gymnasium with warped workout equipment. The twisting sensation inside me faded a little, like the spell was finally wearing off. Maybe he'd botched the 'curse'…or maybe it was like the poison joke spell, biding its time until the perfect moment to spring on me. Either way, my friends weren't going to let me walk out of here, so I was just going to have to deal with it.

Story of my life…

"Let's go," I said as I pushed open the door and moved out.

"Don't fly in the central shaft!" Graves warned as we spilled out. "There're high-powered turrets up there designed to take fliers out in the event of lockdown!"

"Big deal. There's a missile in the way," Psychoshy snorted as she lifted off the ground.

"Do you want to find out what will happen if that warhead is hit by a beam turret?" Graves countered.

"Oh that would be bad. Very very bad. Please don't shoot balefire warheads with beam weaponry!" Xanthe pleaded. Psychoshy looked up at the blazing cone affixed to the tip above us and put her hooves back on the ground. The path around to either side was blocked by rubble from collapsed walkways from the lower levels. The only way to the broad stairwell was across the floor of the central shaft, which was a mess of twisted steel, chain-link fence, and tangled razor wire. Blue flame from the warhead burned with a toxic waxy slowness in the midst of the rubble. Thrashing ghouls tangled in it struggled towards us. In the direct glow of the warhead, my PipBuck was hitting levels of radiation I'd never imagined before.

"Move move move!" I shouted as we charged together into the steel briars, fighting the lingering twisting sensation in my chest. Metal hooves smashed down rolls of razor wire, letting my companions scramble across my back. Purple magic lifted aside the half-melted hulks of workout equipment. Stygius shadowflashed to the far side of an intact stretch of fence and together with Psychoshy tossed all of us over the razor wire. Cerberus's flamer spewed fire at the glowing ghouls as they fought to reach us, and globs of flame drizzled down in lazy arcs from the baking glow of the warhead above.

Despite everything, though, I found myself smiling as we fought together. Even facing all this, we could do anything so long as we did it together. Our strengths were combined and our limitations overcome. When Rampage finally rammed her way through a chain-link door with a melted lock, we staggered out on to the broad steps of the stairwell. Under cover, the radiation cut back immensely, but it was still far more than I wanted to be exposed to for long.

Still, we all needed a breather; even the ghouls looked like they were feeling the nibble of Enervation. I was feeling like I'd just come out of an oven myself.

"Come on, folks! No time to stop now. You horn heads are just too soft," Rampage laughed, and now I had no idea who was in charge of her. Between the radiation and Enervation and various curses, we were all looking a bit wan. "You know what they say…" And then I gaped a moment as she sang.

"Some people say earth ponies are made out of mud.
Well this poor mare's made of muscle and blood!
Muscle and blood, skin and bone,
A mind that's weak but a back's that strong!"

We stared at her in shock, Graves grinning broadly. "She's singing Highlander tunes now?" Psychoshy asked as she gaped.

"Ponies…" Carrion muttered, rolling his glassy eyes. Cerberus gave an odd click, and music... low, strong, and oddly…dirty…music began to play out his speakers as Rampage ran up the steps and grinned back at us.

"She was born one morning when the sun didn't shine!
She picked up her shovel and she went to the mines!
She loaded sixteen tons of that number nine coal
Till the boss mare said 'Well-uh bless my soul!"

We couldn't help but follow her as she ran up to the second level. A sentry bot, its metal hide mottled and deformed from the heat, turned and faced us as its voice crackled some sort of broken warning or threat. Rampage didn't miss a beat as she ran up through the spray of its gatling beam gun and rammed her hooves into its chest, forcing it back from the stairs as she sang out.

"Load sixteen tons and whaddaya get?

Another day older and deeper in debt.
Princess Luna don'tcha call me, 'cause I can't go!
I owe my soul to the company store!"

She smashed the sentry's chest over and over again, the robot struggling to bring its gun to bear and blast the striped earth pony. Lacunae's AM round blew its head to scrap, and the striped mare heaved the robotic carcass aside. The stairs were blocked by rubble, but down around the far side a portion of the walkway had dropped down to form a ramp from the second to the third level.

There was no time to talk or think, only to run. A turret in the corner dropped down and started to strafe us with glowing red beams of light. Rampage swept up a metal plate from the fallen robot as Lacunae and Carrion stepped to either side of her and blew the turret to scrap. With a laugh the earth pony charged ahead and we were swept along after her.

"She was born one morning, it was drizzlin' rain.
Fightin' and trouble are her middle name.
She was raised in a cave, bred by an old mama griffin
Ain't no high class mare makes her walk the line!"

We approached the next corner, racing past cells full of howling, glowing ghouls that waved their hooves at us and slammed themselves against the bars. I noticed the floating robots in the central shaft were tracking our movements now. I couldn't worry about that, though, not with this pain auguring inside me. A turret dropped down as we got near the second corner, and I dropped into S.A.T.S. and blasted it apart before it could start to unload into us.

We got to the rubble ramp to the third floor, but two sentries were waiting. I glanced out at the floating robots; that was hardly a coincidence. But as Rampage started up, Xanthe touched her shoulder and shook her head. 'Sneaking now!' the suit declared, and the armor shimmered away and took Xanthe with it. "Why does it work so much better for a zebra?" Shears muttered. "It never worked so well for us."

A second later, one of the sentries gave a mechanical scream and began to unload into the other sentry, firing rockets at its partner, who immediately turned to fire rockets back at it. "Oh…if only she could do that to me," Cerberus groaned over the music he played. When one of the two exploded, Rampage ripped into the other,

calling out, *“Load sixteen tons and whadaya get? Another day older and deeper in debt!”*

Stygius flashed behind the robot and rammed the back of its smoking head while Rampage bucked its chest. It exploded in sparks, raining down upon her as she cried out, *“Princess Luna, don’tcha call me ‘cause I can’t go! I owe my soul to the company store!”*

It would have been a nice place for a breather, but Rampage wasn’t stopping as she marched back around the walkway towards the stairwell with a steady strut matching the music coming from the Cerberus.

“If you see me coming, better step aside!
“A lot of mares didn’t; a lot of mares died.
“I’ve got one hoof of iron, and the other of steel
“And if the right one doesn’t get ya then the left one will!”

We were halfway around the walkway when an alarm rang out and suddenly a half dozen cells beside us opened up with a loud, mechanical clang. Cerberus whirled and filled one entire cell with a sheet of orange flame. Two ghouls leapt upon Carrion, and he launched himself straight up and crushed them against the ceiling, flipped to toss them off, and then pulverized them with his miniguns. One sprang at Psychoshy, and then Stygius was there, hugging the thrashing ghoul. Psychoshy flipped into the air and gave the pinned ghoul an applebuck that blew its snapping face to pieces.

I smashed the three on me aside, crushing one against the concrete wall before levitating my shotgun and blowing its head off point blank. A moment later, another head blew apart next to my own in a flurry of gunshots, and there was Xanthe once again, now looking a little more sure as she gripped the pistol in her mouth. I had a renewed respect for zebra sneak attacks. Graves bashed a ghoul with her armored medical box like a bludgeon, swinging it by the strap. Shears fought beside Silver Spoon, his magic scissors snapping wildly at any attackers around him.

Two ghouls piled onto the round little ghoul, but Silver Spoon beat upon them with her hooves till they turned on her! As she fell, the robed ghoul shouted in alarm, rammed the closed cutting implement through one feral’s neck, then opened with such force the head popped off. Then the wide glowing jaws closed on the neck of another with a clack that sent another head flying through

the air. Silver Spoon stared in shock as he offered a hoof and helped her stand.

Through it all, it was the pony in the front, singing rough, low, and tough, that swept us forward. Half of us even couldn't help singing along. I wasn't even sure I was getting the words right as I blasted a ghoul lunging from a cell and decapitated it with three rapid shots a foot shy of it biting my face off. Stygius flashed beneath another ghoul and bucked straight up. Psychoshy whipped around and smashed the airborne ghoul into the bars. Then a second later they smashed the ghoul with all eight hooves, blasting the undead pony clean through the gaps. Then they actually clapped hooves! This was crazy! Reckless! Stupid, even.

And also a lot of fun.

"Sixteen tons and whatdaya get?" Rampage sang over the scream of countless ghouls as she spread her forelegs wide and swept a whole crowd of hissing, thrashing zombies before her towards the corner. A sentry rumbled around the side as a turret dropped down, spraying the massive mob of undead flesh with crimson beams. The ghouls hissed as one by one they burst into flame. *"Another day older and deeper in debt!"* she sang as the crowd was reduced to one and she gripped the ghoul in her hoofclaws, throwing it with a great spinning toss into the sentry bot and turret. The pair blasted the ghoul to dust with their energy weapons as Rampage closed the distance. *"Princess Luna don'tcha call me 'cause I can't go…"* she sang out as she leapt up over the sentry and applebucked its metal head back down the hall at us. The robot's gatling beam gun fired wildly, and Rampage grabbed the flashing barrel and hauled it up towards the turret. *"I ooooowwwwwwwweeeeeee owe owe owe owe owe my souuuuuul…"* she cried out loud and drawn out as she yanked the barrel upright, the beams blasting the turret until it exploded, showering her in sparks. *"To the compannnnnieeeeeee…."* The beam gun finally popped and disintegrated into chucks of scrap metal as she stood atop the crackling sentry and finished with her forehooves spread wide over her head. *"Stooooooooore!"*

The rest of us just gaped at her for several seconds as Cerberus's music cut off. Grinning broadly, she hopped off the robot and walked back towards us with a smirk. I tried my best not to collapse; now that the adrenaline had faded, I could feel the curse burrowing inside my chest again.

Carrion leaned over towards Xanthe. "You understand that this is

why you couldn't beat them, right? You just couldn't compete with pony combat folk music."

Xanthe didn't argue, though she did furrow her brow. "There was once a report that said pony battle effectiveness increased by almost seventy percent when they were singing. It recommended withdrawing immediately till the song was over."

I grimaced as I walked up to the armored mare standing in front. There were the stairs continuing the rest of the way up to medical. "Nice job," I complemented as we trotted forward; I kept an eye on the cell doors. "Nice to see somepony else doing something crazy for a change."

"Eh…nice to do something crazy that's not also completely frigging evil," she said with a nervous little twitch as we started up the stairs.

"You okay?" I asked with a worried smile as we walked up to a short hall with another turret. S.A.T.S. and four shots took care of it neatly as I looked at her.

"You're worrying about me? You're the one with a zebra curse in you," Rampage countered.

"Eh…you die once and it loses half its thrill." She rolled her eyes a little, but there was still worry in her gaze. Heck, she was an expert at dying, if not at staying dead. "What is it?" She glanced at me once more, and her smile faded.

"I just…I don't feel quite like myself. Since coming to help you… yeah. Been feeling a lot more on edge than usual," she said as we trotted past the sparking turret towards the reinforced doors marked 'Medical'. "You remember how I'd black out before? Well, now I feel…strange. Like I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel. Like I'm not me anymore."

"Was that the reason for the song?" I asked, trying my best to hide the throbbing in my chest.

"What, that?" She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Nah. That was just fun, and to keep my mind off of turning Shears into bloody paste for pulling that stunt. I still plan on punting his bubblegum butt off the top of this tower after he lifts the curse on you, though."

"Rampage…" I began, and she thumped my shoulder.

"No! You can't just keep on letting this happen, Blackjack! You let your rapists go. You helped Sanguine. Heck, the second you had those organs, you should have put a bullet in him and been on your way. Now this guy has cursed you…when are you going to start

punishing ponies that fuck with you?" The striped mare grunted and rolled her eyes.

I thought of tearing apart five pegasi in the rain. "Rampage, I can't do that. Or rather, I can't do that and live with myself. I nearly killed Boing because I was on a bloody tear. Ask Xanthe about Yellow River if you want." The zebra immediately flinched back. "Don't kill him. He lifts the curse and I'll call it fair. We all get out alive and get what we want."

"That would be good," Graves muttered as she walked up to a terminal screen next to the door and started typing with her hooftips. "Not threatening the person who she needs to lift the curse would be good too." I glanced over at the glaring white eyes of Shears.

"So…what can we expect in there?" Rampage asked, tapping her hoofclaws against the door.

"My co-workers and friends," Graves replied quietly. Then she looked back at us soberly. "I don't expect you to not fight them… but if any of them are talking, please give them a chance."

Rampage huffed with a resigned smile. "Oh, you don't have to worry about that. Heck, even if they're feral, Blackjack just might let them come along anyway. She's funny like that."

A few more taps and the door clicked. "Okay," the earth pony ghoul said. "Once we're in medical, we're going to the supply room. It's on the far side of the medical level. Head left and look for 'Supply'. There were more than a hundred doses of RadAway in there. More than enough to get through the rest of the prison," Nurse Graves said with a distant look in her filmy eyes. "I counted them often enough to know."

I nodded and pushed the door open. I had to admit, I had issues with hospitals and 'medical' places. I was half afraid I would find some super clean creepy town or some half mutated, half smooze screaming room situation.

Instead, I was greeted with a radioactive scar. Everything inside medical was a blackened, twisted waste. Blue flames flickered here and there like cold, hateful eyes. The concrete walls were cracked and crumbling, the metal warped and twisted like overcooked meat. An acrid electrical smell mixed with the reek of old soot. Slagged turrets drooped from the ceiling next to the burned-out hulks of Protectaponies. An unhealthy haze obscured my vision.

"Right. Got an encore?" Psychoshy asked Rampage sourly.

"Your turn," the striped reaper responded, her voice softer. For some reason, the lack of anything shooting at us had us talking more quietly. Carefully we hopped through a melted security window and into an infirmary. Blackened bones were still hoofcuffed to the gurneys and observation tables. Spaced along the roof were partially melted skylights that angled up towards the warhead. The flaring blue glow made the shadows dance about us.

"Doctor Fern…" Nurse Graves murmured softly as she stood over two skeletons curled up together. She glanced over at me, then back at the bones. "Pelvic bone pin from an ice skating accident. Always aggravated him when the weather was cold. That's probably Doctor Silverstrike…they had an affair going. Constant office gossip." She made a choking noise in the back of her throat, the same noise Sanguine had made. The sound of a ghoul crying. "He never did come clean to his wife."

She turned and trotted quickly away, her head drooping as we walked into a second ward with more equipment around the charred beds. Every now and then she'd find one of the nurses or doctors, or even the janitor. Doctor Scampercamp, a horrible slacker on the night shift. Nurse Bramble, who loaned Graves twenty bits to buy breakfast the day the bombs fell. The earth pony ghoul grew more distraught with every body she discovered. She could even identify some of the prisoners from their positions and the marks of old injuries on their bones.

As we walked down a hall a ball of flame came down through one of the sky lights as we passed beneath it. Fire dribbled through the holes like molten wax, barely missing Stygius and Psychoshy. It collected in a blackened pile, and my rad meter spiked. We all backed away, chewing down another Rad-X just to be sure. I glanced at the ghouls. "I don't suppose you guys are immune to that stuff, are you?"

Lacunae shook her head. Graves looked at me and murmured, "While the radiation does help us regenerate, I think getting hit by the actual fire would cause more damage than it'd heal." Too bad.

We picked our way along past other rooms, some more intact than others, and came across an operating room that was still more or less in one piece. Then we passed an office where only the blackened, twisted desk and melted filing cabinets remained. Graves lingered over the bones of a pony clutching a charred scrap. A safe had three hundred bits and some files that had survived the

flames. Prewar ponies and their love of paper. Graves took them and slipped them into her saddlebag.

An intact radiology room. A strange bulbous device hung on an armature over a table. Blackened pictures on the walls showed various diagrams of pony anatomy. She trotted to a large stainless steel door in the back and pulled on the latch to reveal a room with barrels of Flux and a broken pony skeleton. “Nurse Spectre, from Fancee,” Graves said as she nudged the tattered white nurse’s cap. “Her accent always cheered me up.”

I wasn’t looking at the cap though. I stared at the smashed bones. The door was intact; nothing had fallen inside the space. A tiny pink pony in my head put on a detective cap and started to blow bubbles from a pipe. Then I looked into the back of the storage space where something moved. “Graves, look out!” I shouted as I shoved her to the side.

A ghoul in combat armor launched itself silently at me, crashing into me and driving me back. Unlike other ghouls, this one was nearly whisper-quiet, all leathery skin and brown bone as its hooves slammed into me again and again. “No! No! Doctor Bones! Please! It’s me, Graves!” the ghoul earth pony cried. I lifted my hooves, trying to beat it away. Carrion, Cerberus, Xanthe, and Lacunae blasted it with gunfire; though the shots knocked it aside it still remained on its hooves. Rampage took some of their fire as she smashed it; the ghoul made brittle crunching noises but still fought on.

“I’m sorry, Graves,” Shears said as the glowing shears came up and sliced right through the leathery hide and desiccated sinew. The ghoul’s head popped off and rattled as it rolled across the floor. For a moment the ghoul in combat armor swayed…

Then it turned and smashed its hooves down on the round unicorn ghoul.

Oh crap. It was one of the suits of soul armor…

I whipped out the first thing I could think of, the only thing that had been effective: my sword. The blade hummed its lone cold note as I slashed at the suit, but unlike the ones down below, this one refused to cut. Still, it jerked away, as if in pain. I advanced, keeping the sword stabbing at the suit. If I could just drive it back into the storage room…

Then it wrapped its hooves around the hilt and turned the weapon on me. I could almost imagine the headless ghoul grinning at me in

triumph as it lunged. The pain within my chest exploded, paralyzing me as I watched the armor about to impale me with my own sword.

Then the heavy steel table came crashing down atop the armor in a loud crunching noise. The rear hooves stuck out, wiggling wildly as the rest of it was flattened. “We’ll not be doing that again, thank you,” Lacunae said primly as she looked at me, clutching my chest with a hoof as I struggled to breathe. The pain slowly receded, and I glowered at Shears, who talked quietly to the stricken-looking Graves.

“We need to hurry…” I muttered, and the earth pony nodded. Xanthe looked away from the strange radiology machine with some disappointment, but followed. I hated to leave my sword there under the table, but I couldn’t see a way to get it out without running the risk of the armor getting free too. We’d have to come back for it after we found the storage room.

Next, we came to a ripped-apart break room. Nurse Graves walked to a pile of blackened bones in the corner. Her hoof pawed at a sooty charm bracelet on the forehoof before she turned and sat down beside it. I stared at a picture on the wall, miraculously intact. It showed eight ponies in lab coats and a dozen wearing nursing caps. Each pony had a signature. I looked at the black and white image of a sober, serious looking mare. ‘Graves aka Miss Grumpyhooves’ had been scribbled above her head.

“Featherdown…you worked a double…” she said to the bones before she leaned back her head and made another choking noise as she clenched her eyes shut. “You knew how busy we all were. You knew we needed your help. And you came in on your day off… because you were just a g…good pony.” Graves curled up a little bit more, making another sob. “Why…why didn’t any of them make it? Why just me?”

I looked at the radiation meter creeping up through the yellow. “You came back to see if any of your coworkers survived.”

“This was my life, Blackjack. My home! This place was full of ponies that needed help, and we did everything we could to help them,” Nurse Graves said as she trembled. “So why am I still here when none of them are? Was it just an accident that I was in the supply room stuck doing inventory because I notified the news about prisoner conditions here? Is…is this existence supposed to be some sort of reward, or punishment? Living so long and keeping my

mind only to remember this horrible place?"

"That's why Hobble called you a whistleblower?" I asked as I sat down besides the grieving ghoul. She nodded in short, jerking spasms.

"We all knew it was wrong. We gathered files. Put our careers on the line. Showed the pattern of guard abuse, the overcrowded conditions, and the strange magical murders and disappearances. But I was the one who drew the short straw and went public with it." She grimaced as she looked out at the charred ward. "I thought…I thought if there was any place where there might be a sane ghoul, it'd be here. Maybe I could get them out too." Her face twisted in anguish as she looked at the charred skeleton. "I'd been so close to losing myself when I escaped that I thought that maybe I'd missed one…" She clenched her eyes shut. "It should have been one of them. Any of them."

"It's not your fault," I said softly, putting a leg around her shoulders. "And while I understand you're upset…we really need that RadAway, Miss Grumpyhooves." My rad meter had just passed into the red, and I was resistant to radiation. I had no idea how close Xanthe, Stygius, and Psychoshy were to biting it.

She rubbed her eyes and nodded. "I hated that nickname…" But it seemed to pull her back into the present. "Right. You're right. I need to do my job. It's just... " She gave a wistful glance at the bones beside her and leaned over, kissing the dun skull, before looking back at me. "They were all such good ponies."

I helped her to her hooves, and she continued down the hall to a simple gray door marked 'Supply B'. I jiggled the handle, made an irked face, and knelt down with bobby pin and screwdriver. This was definitely going to be tough; I could barely get the pin in there. Then something jingled by my ear. Nurse Graves gave a sad smile as she held a keyring in her mouth. Okay... I guessed that'd be easier. Still, I bet I could have opened it as well as P-21. It just would have taken me a while... I stepped aside and let her at the lock. My eyes were drawn up to the warped glass over us.

Wait. Was that fire…walking?

It was hard to make out through the distorted glass, but I thought I saw blue flame slowly walking along the crumbled balcony two floors up next to the missile. The bars had broken away. For a second I thought that maybe it was fire from the warhead that had dribbled off, but it was definitely moving sideways.

The storage room clicked open, and inside were shelf upon shelf of neatly organized medicine, chems, and medical equipment. Graves trotted in and immediately began to pass over packets of RadAway from where they hung on special pegs. Stygius curled a hoof around a pair of packets and drank both at once. Psychoshy ripped open the corner of hers and poured it right down her throat. Even Xanthe drank one as quickly as she could while I remained in the hall. I continued watching that strange flame, even when Lacunae levitated one packet over and tapped the side of my head with it. I took it, missing the straw twice as I refused to take my eyes off that strange blue fire moving overhead.

"Lacunae…what is that?" I muttered between gulps.

She looked up with me, and her purple eyes narrowed in a confused frown. Carrion joined me. Then Shears.

Then the fire turned and looked at down at us.

"Oh…" I began to say, when it stepped off the edge and tumbled like a flaming blue meteor towards -- and through -- the skylight, showering us in glass and gobbets of blue fire. We all fell back as it landed in the middle of us, and for several terrified moments all we could do was stare as it rose to its hooves. I supposed it was a ghoul, technically. The blackened pony hide was so charred that it gleamed like obsidian. A roaring blue bonfire poured out of the gaps in its flesh and along its spine, and its fiery eyes blazed as it opened its mouth wide in a demonic scream.

"Hoo-rah! That's a hostile!" Cerberus cheered, the only one not stunned by the monster's appearance, and the robot immediately began to blast the flaming blue pony with shots of disintegration magic. The flaming monster winced at the impacts, took a deep breath, and exhaled a plume of blue and green fire that washed over the floating robot. Its robotic eyes exploded in showers of sparks, and the three arms were blown clear off! The levitation talisman went dark as Cerberus gave one last anemic crackle. "For the Glory of Equestriiiiiiiizzzzk--"

But Cerberus's action had galvanized the rest of us as we all began firing at the immolated monster as fast as we could. The problem was that many of the bullets seemed to be vaporizing before they did much damage. Psychoshy just stared in horror. "There's no way I'm kicking that!" she blurted. Stygius shadowflashed behind the flaming ghoul and let out his scream. The ghoul turned and inhaled once again. The batpony's eyes popped wide a second before an

inferno tore through the air at him. He appeared beside Psychoshy, frantically trying to put his purple mane out.

"Pussy!" Rampage roared as she charged, lowering her head and bringing her helmet spike to bear. It plunged deep into the monster's side, and the beast let out another earsplitting scream. She grinned at me, then frowned, then sniffed, and suddenly the striped mare yanked her head back, the spike melted completely away and the helmet cherry red atop her head. She beat at it in futility. "Ow! Ow! It keeps cauterizing my nerve endings and they keep growing back!" she wailed, and then looked at the blazing pony's hind end and realized her error. "Uh-oh…"

The monster gave an applebuck that blasted Rampage off her hooves, across the room, and through the wall. Only the fact she wore plate armor kept her intact as she tore through the cinder block. From the limp rear hooves that hung through the hole she'd made, she'd be out for a while.

"Stop!" Silver Spoon yelled as she waved her hooves. "Like, you have to do what I say! Like those others! I don't care if you are totally big and flaming and scary…do what I say and go away!"

The ghoul turned and stared at her with blue eyes of fire and took a step back. Then hope died as the ghoul made a horrible inhalation noise, the licking fire sucking back through the cracks and holes in its blackened hide. Silver Spoon stared in horror as the fire crackled in its mouth, unleashing a blazing plume of radioactive flame.

Shears leapt at Silver Spoon and knocked her out of the path of the fire. Caught in the inferno, his rags burst into flame as he rolled across the ground, screaming in pain. The blazing ghoul swept its head around, and Carrion and Lacunae barely flew out of the stream. Half the break room blazed with blue-green fire.

There was no time to question his sudden gallantry as it turned towards Graves, Stygius, Xanthe, and Psychoshy in the storage room. "Hey!" I shouted as I brought up the riot gun and started firing, blasting away at the burning ghoul. "Me, you great big blazing son of a mule!" I bellowed as I advanced, firing over and over again. Glistening lead painted the blackened hide of the monster as I tried to draw its ire. Instead, it inhaled once more. I popped into S.A.T.S. and hit it with three magic bullets, the silvery white bolts striking and blasting away holes of blackened bone and charred hide.

"Get out!" Psychoshy screamed, diving out the door. Stygius

grabbed the petrified Xanthe and swept her out as well, but Graves didn't flee. She scooped up RadAway in her hooves as the ghoul's mouth crackled.

"Me!" I screamed, trying to put myself between it and the storeroom. I just needed a few more seconds. Just a few more…

Instead I was hit by a double hoofful of RadAway tossed by the smiling ghoul, halting me for those two terrible seconds.

Then she vanished in a sheet of blazing blue, along with the storeroom.

"No!" I screamed as I brought the butt of the shotgun down on the head of the blazing monster. Purple light swept the orange packets up before we could trample them, but I barely paid any notice. Graves was gone, along with all the supplies we'd needed. Another good pony gone because she'd tried to keep my dumb ass safe. Because I hadn't forced everyone to leave. Because the plan had gone completely to shit.

Damn it. I didn't want another Priest.

I got four hits with the butt of the shotgun before it turned and looked at me. There was malice in its eyes. Intelligence. Prisoner or guard, it didn't matter. It knew it had grieved me and caused me pain.

So I pained it back.

I might not have had a grenade, but I had explosive shotgun shells. I screamed in rage as I grabbed its jaws with my fingers and forced them wide, ramming the shotgun down its throat and pulling the trigger as rapidly as I could. Its sides erupted in volcanic cascades of ghoul gore and radioactive fire. My PipBuck roared; I was back in the red and heading quickly for dead as I did all I could to blast this thing into oblivion.

Then the barrel of my gun blew apart in a shower of red steel, my fingers glowing from the heat as it inhaled once more. I shoved its head away as I dove to the side and looked back. Once thing was for sure -- I had really succeeded in pissing this thing off. "That's it, motherfucker. Chase the Blackjack. Everypony does!" And then I was running with a fiery monstrosity right behind me.

Of course, as I raced down the hall, I was suddenly struck with the immortal question of 'Now what?' I had a really pissed off monster on my butt, but more than that, I was still soaking up rads. I had no clue where this hall went, only that if I came across a locked door or anything I was probably dead. I felt like shit, I had a hole drilling

away inside my chest, and didn't have a clue what to do beyond 'run faster'.

So why was I grinning so hard?

I turned a corner, my way lit by the blue glare behind me. I ducked under dangling turrets, vaulted over the slagged Protectaponies, and weaved around gurneys as I stayed in the lead. Suddenly I found myself on familiar ground as I raced through the observation room and soon passed radiology. Ahead I could see my friends and shouted at the top of my lungs, "RadAway!"

An orange packet was tossed in front of me and I snagged it with my magic, slurping it down as I raced the equine fireball. Around I ran, building up rads every time I passed under one of the skylights. "Keep it chasing you, Blackjack," Lacunae said in my mind. I glanced back at the beast just a dozen paces behind me; not a problem. It had to have been an earth pony once. I supposed I should have been glad it wasn't a pegasus.

When I ran past the break room again, everypony with a gun unloaded all at once, but aside from Lacunae's magic arrows, all of them were weakened by the ghoul's fiery corona; bullets weren't going to work. However, they did made the monster stop chasing me and turn and look back.

I skidded to a stop, and out came Duty and Sacrifice. I aimed just a few inches south of its tail and fired. The bullets really weren't any more effective than my slugs, but I hit a very tender target, even for a ghoul. It looked back at me, eyes wide in outrage from my lead suppository.

Okay. It was now firmly locked onto my ass. The race was back on. All it had to do to win was catch me or run me till the radiation took me out.

"Keep going, Blackjack. We need something more to destroy it in one blast so that it can't regenerate," Lacunae said in my mind as I passed the lounge the third time. Silver Spoon had pulled Shears away from my track. Xanthe and Lacunae were missing. Psychoshy and Stygius extracted Rampage from the wall. And that was all I caught as I kept running on my fourth lap through medical. I slurped down two rubies and a sapphire, my side aching as I got a cramp. Unicorns were not made to run like this... okay, well, maybe I was, but... oh Celestia that was a lot of radiation. My head felt all kinds of itchy.

Things were getting hotter the fourth time around; the ghoul was

dribbling sticky blue flame like drops of pitch, and the flames were starting to add up in my path. I just had to trust the smart ponies that they had a plan. I glanced back as its hoofbeat grew louder and louder, feeling the heat on my rump, and saw my black and red striped tail on fire at the tip; I knew one misstep would be my last.

"Maiden! Over here!" Xanthe yelled as she waved from radiology. Okay; how was I supposed to make that turn?

Be awesome, a cyan pegasus suggested. Easy for Gl-- Rainbow Dash to say. I saw a gurney I'd passed four times in my race ahead of me and instead of running around it, I reared up, grabbed the edge, and set it rocketing down in front of me. The ghoul made a fiery inhalation directly behind me, and I rolled on top of the gurney, flat on my back as I looked behind me at the ghoul, barreling wildly down the hall as a sheet of fire blasted along the floor under the wheels. I lifted Duty and Sacrifice with my magic and dropped into S.A.T.S. again. The six bullets turned the ghoul's face into a ruin of runny lead and fire.

Then, as the gurney reached the door, I grabbed the edges and rocked hard to the side. With a ping, two wheels on the left side gave way and the gurney fell before the door. Blue fire sprayed over the top of the rolling table as it skidded to a stop right by the Radiology door. "Have something good," I shouted as I scampered in with blue fire sizzling along my spine. "Please have something good!"

They did.

Lacunae stood inside her shield with Xanthe on her back. The zebra gripped the strange machine in her forehooves. They'd wired Cerberus's disintegration gun to the front of it. "Get clear," Xanthe shouted as the flaming ghoul kicked the gurney aside and stepped into the doorway. The machine had all kinds of hazard warnings on it, and I assumed Xanthe was ignoring each and every one as she hit the side of the device and it gave the most wonderful, ominous hum.

Then a pencil-thin line of green disintegration magic lanced out and sliced into the ghoul. It let out a shriek of pain, staggering back as it raised its forehooves. The fight became a struggle between the destructive power of the beam and the ghoul's phenomenal regeneration powers. It struggled to shield itself as it screeched, took a deep breath, and let loose a plume of radioactive flame. Lacunae's purple shield flared as it fought the energetic assault.

The ghoul darted to the side, but there was a crack of power hooves and it was shoved back into the doorway. It moved the other way, but power armor claws sizzled as they shoved the ghoul back into the line of energy. I watched in astonishment as one whole flaming limb was reduced to green glowing gunk. This was it. We were going to win!

Why was the overturned table heaving up?

The metal, softened to the consistency of taffy by the flame the ghoul had sprayed across the floor, suddenly buckled as the suit of soul armor pulled itself free. I tried to tackle it, but the dead remains within were utterly pulverized, and it slipped out of my grasp. The armor snaked up Lacunae and knocked Xanthe from her back, and then shoved the beam weapon hard, sending the emerald ray slicing through the wall and off the ghoul, bringing a roar of pain from Carrion. Almost immediately the ghoul's disintegrated leg reformed. This was bad…

And then it got worse.

The soul armor leapt off of Lacunae as the alicorn stabilized the weapon with her magic. Its buckles and straps flew wide, and I stared as the blue and black armor wrapped itself around the flaming ghoul. The disintegration beam struck the upraised legs and flashed off the metal. I reached out with my magic to try and free my sword from the slagged ruins of the table, but it was held fast in the cooled steel.

"No. No!" Xanthe screamed as she curled up, raising her hooves as the ghoul inhaled once more. I doubted that the soul armor would save the zebra from the radioactive inferno.

"Dammit!" I shouted, tackling the ghoul. The armor might have been invincible, but it also blocked the magical heat enough that I could grab the back of the armor's collar and for the first time shove the bag of fire away from the zebra. "You don't get another!" I shouted as I heaved the ghoul away. The beast began to thrash, and my friends were forced back as I wrestled with it. My radiation levels were in the red and almost maxed out. I wondered if I'd simply explode once I'd soaked up enough…

Hmmm…that gave me an idea. A stupid, horrible idea, but still an idea. "Shears!" I bellowed as we twisted around and around in the hall. "Give me your key!"

"My key?" The…turquoise pony? Wait! The pony wearing the charred rags didn't have the boiled-looking appearance of the

undead. He looked like a simple portly unicorn with prominent buck teeth and a shaggy brown mane. His eyes had the same milky whiteness of a ghoul, but there was something off about them. Something…luminescent.

That, though, could wait till after I was done wrestling with an unbeatable undead invincible enemy. “Yes! The key! Get it. Now!” I heaved and shoved the ghoul towards a window looking out at the central shaft. It twisted its head around, trying to spray fire over me and my friends. I wasn’t going to let another of them die! I was going first.

Shears ran up, the glowing balefire egg floating above him. “But it’s not rigged to detonate, Blackjack! It’ll take five minutes at least!”

“Don’t worry about it!” I yelled as it shoved me back and I heaved the ghoul around.

Rampage raced up, pieces of rebar still sticking out of her as she looked across at me in worry. I felt like I had a chunk jammed in my chest as well. “What are you planning, BJ?” the striped pony asked as she seized the other side of the ghoul and fought to keep it steady.

“What I do best! Bust out that window!” I yelled as I grabbed the egg with my right hand. Stygius, Psychoshy, and Carrion smashed it till the glass blew out into the central shaft, falling into the tangled steel far below. The ghoul opened its mouth wide, inhaling again. This time, it was getting something a little extra.

With every bit of strength I could muster, I rammed the balefire egg right down its throat. My right foreleg blazed like I’d shoved it into a blast furnace as I watched my radiation needle reach the top of the gauge. Looked like Hightower was going to get one more, but it wasn’t going to be my friends.

The ghoul’s eyes blazed and chaotic rainbow energies began to spark from its maw. “Now get out!” I screamed at it as I shoved it back over the edge.

The suit of armor began to unstrap itself, and two buckles wrapped around my blazing red hoof, almost yanking me over the edge. The jagged remnants of the window sliced deep into my gut, and Rampage and Stygius were at my sides as the ghoul dangled below me. The chaotic light was growing brighter and brighter as the ghoul opened its mouth…to vomit the balefire egg up or to just try and take us with it, I had no idea.

"No! No more shrieking," I muttered as I took my target, hopped into S.A.T.S., and cast three magic bullets at my right leg at the knee. The first two blasted the corroded, smoking metal. The third took it off completely.

With a fiery scream the ghoul fell, plunging to the ground fifty feet below. It crashed into the tangled steel, buried for a moment in the twisted chain-link and razor wire. Then its blazing head emerged... and let out one last roar of rage before exploding in a massive green fireball that obliterated not just the ghoul but the steel and ten feet of concrete. It wasn't just vaporized. It was as if everything around the ghoul had been utterly disintegrated, including the possessed soul armor.

I was barely aware of the hooves pulling me in. There were screams and shouts and calls for RadAway. It didn't matter anymore. I was so tired. Ready for a really long nap. I felt Rampage slap me. Heard Lacunae tell me to stay awake. Didn't they understand? I'd earned a rest…

~ ~ ~

I stood beneath hazy summer clouds that gave us all a welcome respite from the sun beating down and making our itchy green uniforms feel even worse while we stood in line. There were at least a thousand on the field with more arriving every hour. We'd been given a preliminary physical, sent the fillies and colts who wanted to fight home, signed the parchment, and gotten our hoof and dental prints taken. Then we got our first lesson in military life: hurry up and wait. So we stood in rows, unicorns in one line, earth ponies in another, and pegasi on the far side of the field. Above the trees to the west, black smoke still rose from Hoofington.

"Can you believe the zebras said they didn't do it?" one mare muttered behind me.

"After Littlehorn, I don't put anything past those bastards," another growled. "We should throw out every stripe in Equestria. Can't trust a one of 'em."

I just kept my head down, eyes to the grass. There hadn't been a hero's welcome for us when we'd arrived in Canterlot. There'd been the Cakes retrieving their kids and the discovery that the greatest war crime in history had been performed hours after we departed. My attempt to save the zebra refugees wasn't even a footnote. What

did it matter if everypony involved was dead? The zebras denied the attack, saying it was done by a rogue element; not that anypony believed them. Then came the great Hoofington fire, killing hundreds more and displacing thousands. They'd denied that too.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this. Celestia wasn't supposed to quit. Alicorn princesses didn't quit. She'd lasted over a thousand years! How could she quit? Oh, sure, nopony was calling it that, but 'resigning due to an inability to secure the peace, safety, and prosperity of her people' was 'quit' with far more syllables than needed.

When the orange mare before me with a torch for her cutie mark was led off to the side for specialist training, I stepped up to the table. The frustrated-looking unicorn in golden barding looked up at me, assessed my entire worth in a moment, and found me lacking. I passed him the scroll I'd signed, and he looked at it briefly before snapping the question, "Talent?" I murmured my answer, and he scowled at me. "I asked what your talent is."

"Faith," I replied.

"Faith?" He sounded skeptical. "I'm sorry, but what is it you can do?"

"I…I have faith in Princess Luna to save us all. That's my talent. Faith…" I finished lamely. "I don't really have any magic…"

The guard covered his face with his hoof. "Great. Another basket weaver." He shook his head slowly. Then he floated a stamp over the parchment and brought it down with a thud. 'Infantry', it read, and I was pointed down to where the majority of the ponies were being gathered. There were shots and cracks from ponies shooting at wooden cutouts of zebras as more guards worked with small groups.

"Pthalm!" called a familiar voice from behind me, and Twist and Doof trotted up out of the crowd. The pale mare grinned broadly as she rushed up. "Ithn't thith thuper?" She lisped horribly as she grinned at me from behind her thick purple glasses. "They're tho glad we're thigning up!"

"They said I was big enough to face off an entire zebra brigade!" Doof said, the gray pony with the messy brown mane looking around. "I wonder when we're getting lunch?" Given his cutie mark of a knife and fork, there was no question what his talent was. "I bet a soldier eats really well."

"Doof! Thith ith bigger than your thtomach. We're gonna be

fighting for all of Equesthria!" Twist said sharply as she looked over to where the rifle training was taking place. The royal guards circulated with looks that varied from contempt to concern on their faces.

I looked around at the crowds as they were packed into small groups and herded off for testing. "I got the impression that they were looking for ponies with fighting experience," I said, keeping my voice down.

"Eeyep," came a low, strong voice from behind me, and I turned and looked up at a red stallion almost as massive as Doof, but instead of pudge it was all muscle. The uniform strained to contain his enormous size. "Lot of folks here are high on hope and anger. Gonna be a mite different when the actual trainin' starts."

"Big Macintosth?!" Twist beamed at him. "What are you doing here? Howths Apple Bloom? Ith she here?" The mare looked behind the immense stallion, as if hoping to spot her.

He looked down a moment, then smiled. "Twist, right?" The mare nodded enthusiastically. "Whole passel of us in Ponyville wanted ta do our part. Since Applejack's doin' something for Princess Luna, I figured I might as well do the same. Wasn't enough of us recruits in Ponyville, so they just carted all of us out to Hoofington since this is where they're getting the army squared away. Apple Bloom's fine... but I don't see her signing up. She's got other plans."

"Oh... " Twist dropped her eyes a little. "Well, that'sth okay. Maybe sthe'll come and visit?"

A young yellow earth pony trotted closer, his form almost consumed by his oversized uniform. "Is this where I'm supposed to be? I mean, I'm not supposed to be somewhere else, am I?"

"The army? You mean we're not going to be guards? I always wanted to be a guard," Doof asked, frowning in concern.

"No," said a voice above us, and a pegasus in splendid golden armor landed in front of us. "The Equestrian Army is going to be far larger than the Royal Guard or Equestrian Skyguard. Many of us will be resigning our posts with the Royal Guard to lead you in battle." He looked around with a slightly bemused smile. "Things are a bit less organized than we expected. To be fair, I don't think we anticipated quite so many recruits so quickly." Then he nodded his head to us. "Guard Cupcake, at your service."

"No surprise," said a low, deep voice. I'd expected it on a larger pony than the husky green earth pony buck. "The Royal Guard's

five times the size it was when the war started. It's just not set up for big engagements. And I'm guessing they've sucked out all the career soldiers and now they're going to give all the rest of us a shot."

Big Macintosh nodded once. "Ayep." Then he looked at the pony curiously. "Hey! Applesnack? Strudel's great nephew twice removed?"

"Three times... I think," Applesnack replied, looking around. "Is Braeburn here? I'd thought he'd jump at a chance like this!"

Big Macintosh shook his head slowly. "Anope. He's been making guns for earth ponies. Calls it 'our magic' since we ain't got wings or horns." Big Macintosh then looked at me and added with his easy smile. "No offense."

"None taken. To be fair, I don't think I'll be of much use," I commented lightly. "I'm not a fighter. I'm not much of anything."

"Me neither," said the little yellow earth pony. "But... but I want to do something. I have to."

I smiled and offered my hoof to him. "Psalm."

He stared up at me and blushed. "E... E... Echo. But really... do you think I'll be able to fight?"

"That's... a question many guards have asked, too," the pegasus said simply as he surveyed the crowds. "A lot have been pretty resistant to the army. The Equestrian Guard used to be almost solely the province of unicorn knights and pegasus warriors. The idea of taking just *anypony* old enough and willing to fight and training them to be soldiers is... difficult."

"Hey! Is this where we sign up to join the Skyguard?" a buck said from above, drifting down on his widespread wings and landing with a crash. "Is Rainbow Dash here? I'd really love to meet her! I got a move called the Stonewing Stomp that I think she'll find totally awesome!" the gray winged pony said, giving a little hop and smashing the grass under his hooves.

"Didn't you just hear him? We're joining the army, not the guard," a blue pegasus mare said, landing beside him. "Don't mind him. He's a numbskull. Flew into one too many mountains back in summer flight camp."

"Oh, like you never did, Jetstream," he snorted, rolling his eyes.

"Correct. I never did," she replied pointedly.

The gray pegasus pointed a wing at her with a grin. "What about that faceplant into Mount Celestia's southern face? The infamous

‘plotbreaker’?”
She looked back at him flatly. “That was you, Stonewing.”
“Oh? Oh yeah. Well, who smacked right into the wall of Ghastly Gorge during speed trials?”
“Also you.”
“Ploughed through the wall of the Cloudeseum?”
“You.”
“Left their imprint in the Ponyville dam?”
“You,” she finished in that same flat tone. “I’ll give you a hint, Stonewing. If there was an epic flight failure in the last ten years, it was probably you.”
This caused him to frown in thought and concern. “Oh, yeah… ” Stonewing murmured as he looked skyward and rubbed his chin, then shrugged and grinned at the pegasus guard. “So, when are we getting our suits of armor, huh?” Jetstream just groaned and covered her face with her hooves.
“I don’t see as many pegasi or unicorns,” the yellow earth pony said with a small frown. “Mostly earth ponies.” Nearby there was a bit of commotion, with a stallion shouting for somepony to be reasonable in the crowd.
“Unfortunately, many pegasi don’t see much appeal in joining,” a smooth voice said as an emerald-maned unicorn stepped forward in his professionally tailored uniform. “Wars are dirty, uncouth things for surface ponies to struggle through. No concern for ponies who live in the clouds.”
“So why aren’t there many unicorns here either?” Jetstream countered. I reached up and touched my horn lightly, wondering if I even counted as a unicorn.
“Because wars are dirty, uncouth things for banal unmagical ponies to struggle through. No concern for ponies who can use magic,” another unicorn said as he pushed his way through with a scowl. He was certainly handsome, but it merely seemed to emphasize his haughtiness. “There you are! You’ve made me wade through all these commoners to find you. What do you think you’re doing, Vanity? This is no place for a prince!”
“Doing what you won’t, Blueblood,” Vanity retorted. “What so many Canterlot unicorns won’t do.”
“Ugh, at the very least do it properly! Field commission and from a position of command, not as an… ” He dropped his voice and said in a stage whisper, “*Enlisted* pony… ”

"I've made up my mind, Brother," Vanity replied evenly, putting a hoof on his sibling's shoulder. "Why don't you join me? We could be a symbol for the rest of the aristocracy."

"You're mad," Blueblood sniffed and stepped back, brushing grass from his coat in disgust. "Well, have your fun playing soldier, but don't say I didn't warn you. You'll be the absolute mockery of the Canterlot social circles for this, mark my words. Hrmph!" He snorted and turned away.

"Apologies," Vanity replied, effortlessly returning to a calm, collected smile. "It's been a trying time for the aristocracy. A week's transition of power has hardly allowed the whiplash to ease." He looked in the direction of the shooting range, and his smile faded a little. "In all honesty, I wonder if I'll be of any use at all. I suppose that has my brother worried more than anything. I know little about fighting beyond formal dueling."

"That's a worry we all have," Cupcake said in concern. "Bakers. Tailors. Candy makers. Farmers. Princes. And we're going to throw them into fighting they've never imagined before. Fighting like *we've* only seen in our nightmares. With Princess Luna taking control of the kingdom, the zebras have increased their recruitment as well. Whole tribes are coming to fight that were neutral when the war began. Can Equestria beat such odds with soldiers like this?"

"Ayep," Big Macintosh said in his even, confident voice. "If y'all don't mind my sayin' so, Equestria's a lot more than its soldiers. Every single one of us loves this country. Sure, none of us are like your guards. I'd like to be in the south acre right now. But Equestria needs me to fight for this land more than it needs me harvestin' apples. So I'll learn whatever I need to to do it. The south acre will be there when I'm done."

"Me too!" Twist said with a stomp of her hoof. "I might not know anything about sthooting, but I can sthretch twenty poundths of taffy with my bare hoovesth and not break a sthweat!"

"We'll fight," Applesnack said with a sure, wide smile. "We'll fight as long as Equestria needs us. We'll give our lives if we have to; nothing will stop us from winning and making sure that Equestria is safe for centuries to come."

Vanity smiled and nodded, looking sublime in his tailored fatigues. "And it won't just be the soldiers. I've heard talk that Princess Luna plans on throwing the entire might of Equestria behind this war.

Every factory. Every resource that Equestria has to bring to bear will be used. It won't be the guard being sent off to fight while the rest of us live our lives and try to pretend that the war is just some trivial bit of news." Vanity looked off to the east, his expression solemn. "Hoofington proved just how much the enemy will destroy if given a chance. Littlehorn showed that all of our people are targets, no matter how helpless or innocent."

"I've seen what happens when muh sister's six friends work together. If all of Equestria works together and don't hold back, how can we fail?" Big Macintosh said casually with an easy smile. "It'll turn out alright. You'll see."

Cupcake looked doubtful though, even afraid. "Yes. Still, it's hard. Celestia always tried to spare the country from the nasty business of the war. I've fought against zebra machines of war at Dawn Bay and struggled with Achu warriors all over Shattered Hoof Ridge. The Guard were supposed to handle it all. But I guess after Littlehorn, that just isn't possible anymore."

"You'll see. It's going to be great. We'll fight them all together and win the war for Equestria," Doof said enthusiastically. "Twist here can work for hours on end and never get tired."

"And Doof is my number one worker. Why, he tosthes around fifty pound sthacks of sugar like they're nothing!" Twist replied with a grin.

The pegasus looked at all of us with the strangest smile on his face. He pointed to each of us in turn, as if memorizing our names. "Big Macintosh. Applesnack. Twist. Doof. Echo. Vanity. Jetstream. Stonewing. Psalm." He nodded once. "Right. I'll keep my eyes open for you. Maybe this Equestrian Army thing will work out after all... ."

In the weeks to come, we would work together and learn the difficult art of war. Royal Guard Cupcake put his armor away to become Captain Cupcake. Twist learned that while her eyesight would always hinder her firearms ability, she was a tireless and tenacious fighter, and she learned to speak without her lisp so orders and communications could be clearly understood. Doof lost the fat and put on muscle with the constant work and training. Vanity taught the others dignity and pride, and learned the messy realities of fighting. Stonewing and Jetstream worked as a team, protecting their surfacer pony friends from harm. Applesnack softened his cynical and hard attitude and learned to work with

others. And Big Macintosh learned to become a leader, soft spoken but always supremely confident and sure of the right course of action.

And myself? I discovered that while I had little in the way of magic, with the help of an earth pony weapon I could be just as effective as a unicorn battlemage of old. Even if it was hard to sight a target and pull the trigger.

We were friends. We were comrades. We were Macintosh's Marauders...

~ ~ ~

I came to with my face on cold metal, feeling my body ache terribly; the boring sensation grinding away inside me. Really, nothing I wasn't used to. "So... I'm not dead yet?" I murmured, slowly lifting my head and looking around. We were in the storeroom of the radiology lab. Most of the crates and barrels had been removed, save for an impromptu chemistry lab that'd been set up in the back corner. A bottle full of rainbow colors and reeking of urine was slowly being dripped through a filter of some sort, and a bottle of rainbow Flux sat beside it. There were jars of orangey-amberish fluid next to that.

Recycled RadAway. Wouldn't have thought of that. My rad meter didn't show any further contamination, so I guessed there was some kind of shielding in the storage room that blocked the radiation. Wouldn't have thought of that either.

Even more surprising was the pony handling the bottles. Rampage had found a filthy white lab coat and eye glasses, and she handled the glassware and chems with experience and care. She looked back at me as I stirred. "Don't sound so disappointed, Blackjack. Lacunae filled me in on some of your last near death experience back at that Tenpony place. If it weren't for the fact that your vital organs are synthetic and you've got some alicornish tumors in your brain, you would be." She tossed one of the jars onto her back, trotted over, and slid it deftly down her leg to the floor in front of me. "Drink," she said. I lay back, levitated the jar, and gave it a tentative sniff.

"It smells like pee," I muttered sullenly. My chest still felt the curse chewing away inside. I looked around and spotted Shears at the far side of the storeroom, head bowed, filthy brown mane hiding his face.

"Well, I tried to filter it as well as I was able and remove as much uric acid and protein contaminants as I could, but unfortunately, the facilities here aren't quite up to snuff. So yes, there's probably at least some pee in it. Drink it anyway," she said, then gestured towards a rainbow-splattered bucket in the corner. "When it hits your bladder, aim for the bucket. We need to save as much as possible."

"Graves?" I suddenly asked as my brain began to replay the battle. "Where is Graves?"

"She didn't make it," Rampage said, and then immediately followed it up with, "And unless you are a flaming ghoul that burned her or forced her to come at gunpoint, you are not responsible for her death. You can shelve that guilt right now. If she hadn't thrown out what RadAway she did, you and your friends would have died. That ghoul was sane enough to target our supplies. You should be proud you beat it rather than kicking yourself for her death."

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I knew that she was right, but maybe if I'd been faster... if I'd shouted out a warning sooner or been a better distraction... I knew that some of us might not come back, but I'd always intended it to be over my dead body. I occupied myself with drinking the yellow-orange fluid in the jar, wrinkling my nose. Actually, though... despite the *smell* of pee, the taste was a robust, tangy RadAway orange with a salty aftertaste. Not bad! As I drank I watched my rad levels drop closer and closer to green. Then I looked at the striped pony as she took the empty jar in her mouth. I ran through the number of ponies I knew and took a guess. "Doctor Octopus?"

She arched one brow at me before she turned and returned the jar next to the equipment. "And Razorwire. That filly certainly knows how to brew her chems. Trust me, you don't want the details to her secret, personal recipe for Dash," she said, rolling her eyes. "Something about this place is pulling us to the fore. It's somewhat disturbing. Fortunately, most of us want to help you, and those that don't are keeping silent."

"So Rampage is run by a committee?" I muttered as I sat up. No Rampage... or Rampage as just a mix? No... there had to be a pony behind all those different personalities. There just had to be.

They'd taken my armor off; it lay in a slightly blackened heap. I sure went through a lot of barding... it was kinda frustrating...

kinda like getting Graves killed to answer my question. You'd think I'd know better by now. I clenched my eyes shut a moment, trying to shove those thoughts away and keep myself together. I had to. I couldn't go back on the mattress now.

"Explains a lot, don't it?" Psychoshy asked from by the door, holding the blasted form of Cerberus steady as Xanthe worked on him. The robot crackled something about striped saboteurs as it waved its single remaining limb. Stygius stretched out his hooves and steadied me.

Rampage put the jar under a spigot and began to fill it with the yellowy fluid, talking as she worked. "I... we don't know. Lacunae believes we might be a group mind like the Goddess, but, lacking a central unifying personality to give direction, we lurch to whatever personality is strongest at a given moment or defer to a blended 'default' personality. It would make for an absolutely fascinating paper if there were anypony around that cared." She looked back at me. "Since I woke up, though... I've become more and more aware of the others with me. And they of me."

"How many are there?" I asked as I rose and took a step, and then Stygius flashed next to me as I nearly smashed my face on the ground. He steadied me with a small, worried smile. The reason for my header was simple: I was missing my right foreleg. I looked down at the dangling wires and connectors and gulped. Okay, this might be a little more than even a repair talisman could handle.

He gave me a worried smile, pointing at the empty space past my stump. I sighed and smiled back. "Yeah. Can't say this is the first time I've been crippled." That got a very odd look from the stallion, and he put a hoof around my neck in a strong hug. Psychoshy turned away, muttering to herself. "Help me get to the bucket," I said as I hobbled my way into the corner. He kept me from falling flat on my face as I turned around and did my business, having the decency to look away.

Rampage, on the other hoof, leaned over to watch the show. "Oh, excellent. Really, your body is a feat of engineering. My background may be in psychiatry, but I can appreciate good design. Redundant power supply system. Redundant healing and repair talismans. If you can avoid catastrophic damage to your brain, you might be effectively immortal."

"Wait? Redundant?" I asked with my eyes wide. "I thought... you mean I have more than one?"

“Indeed. Two of each.” She turned and looked back at Xanthe. “The… zebra… was able to plug into your hardware and devote all your systems to radiation purging once we got you inside. We were quite glad to find you had a pair of healing talismans rather than a single one. Apparently you have one set from Professor Zodiac and one set from another source.” She looked at me and smiled, peering over the rims of her glasses. “You’ve never questioned your rather substantial regenerative capabilities?”

“No! I just thought that was… well… normal!” I said as I finished my business and pointedly avoided seeing what Rampage did with the contents. “But… why? If the professor could have just kept her own, she could have been a pony again! She wouldn’t have had to be a head stuck in a jar!”

“I suspect she had her own reasons,” Rampage replied as she dumped the contents of the bucket into the equipment. “I can only speculate at the moment what they might be. It could be she wanted to ensure your success and so gave you the redundant healing and repair capabilities. If so, she did indeed save your life. The radiation damage to your brain was far less severe than it would have been to another pony.”

“So… what, I can’t die? Like… ever?” I’d expect to live longer than a normal unicorn, assuming that I didn’t get myself killed first, but… What the hell was I anymore? Because it sure wasn’t a pony!

Rampage snorted. “That would be quite a foolish leap to make. Sufficient damage to your organs to the point your brain could no longer be sustained would be fatal. Indeed, simple suffocation could kill you, and if you ever ran out of gems to eat, your healing would be impeded to the point you could be killed quite easily. It simply explains all the damage that’s been done to you thus far and how you’re not a heap of bloody metal by now. And your foreleg, or rather the lack thereof, demonstrates the limitation of your repair talismans.”

So… it wasn’t that I was extra freaky, it was simply an explanation for how come I’d taken shots from AM rifles and kept going. “Where did the extra talismans come from then?”

I heard Lacunae’s voice in my mind with a strange new clarity, though the screaming background of Enervation did make things a little more difficult. “Several pieces were ‘donated’ by Caprice, salvaged from Deus’s body. She was apparently selling off the Reaper piece by piece as souvenirs, but then Glory reminded her

that she hadn't paid for the installation of those beam turrets and threatened to take some pieces of Caprice as souvenirs if she didn't turn over whatever was left."

I looked around, but there was no sign of my purple alicorn friend. "Lacunae? How are you hearing me?"

"I'm afraid that the extreme radiation to your brain had some... unexpected side effects," Lacunae murmured. "Some of the things that were believed to be simple tumors were not, and they are now... active."

I stared straight ahead, listening to that scream in the distant parts of my mind as I focused. "What do you mean 'active'?"

Then I heard a voice break through that interference and speak low and grand and just a touch snotty. "It means that you are a part of that to which you have no right, Blackjack! You are a thief! A trespasser! A bit of mutant scum whose unworthy mind has tapped into a grand and glorious being!"

I stared straight ahead in shock. "Is that... "

"Yes... " Lacunae replied with a sigh.

The Goddess said, with utter vicious malice, "Welcome to Unity, Blackjack."

* * *

So after ten minutes of panicking, trying to cover both my ears with my one remaining forehoof, and mentally thinking 'La-la-la-la' as loudly as I could, the screaming Enervation finally drowned out the admonitions and threats of the Goddess. Apparently, the second I set a hoof out of Hoofington again, I was destined to become transformed into an alicorn rather than the half unicorn, half alicorn, half cyberpony thing I was now. And from how pissed off the Goddess was at me, I doubted my time in Unity was going to be a good one.

"Relax, Blackjack. Panic will solve little," Lacunae said softly.

"Relax?" I thought back at her. "Have you spit your bit or something? The Goddess is in my head. What if she takes me over like she does you?"

"Your connection to the Goddess is... an aberration. It is something she is struggling to find a way to end, immediately. The Enervation shields you from her contact, and she may simply be incapable of utterly consuming you as she does the rest of us." She hesitated,

then added, “Now, if you leave Hoofington... she might be able to *influence* you. But only through complete transformation in Maripony will you be a true alicorn.”

“Right. Knowing my luck it’ll turn me into some kind of freaky cyber alicorn!” I really wanted to hyperventilate right now; having the Goddess inside me... damn it! It felt like I was losing myself. It was like being back on the *Seahorse*, feeling hurt and violated and just wanting it over. I wanted my own dreams back, not Psalm’s. I wanted to see with my own eyes, not view visions and flashes of what other ponies wanted me to see. I wanted to be Blackjack again. I almost couldn’t remember that idiot who ran out into the wasteland with Deus on her tail.

It was all... too much. Just too much. The enormity of how much I’d changed and what had happened to Graves came crashing down on me. I didn’t want to deal with it anymore. I just wanted to curl up with my head in Glory’s lap and have her stroke my mane until magically everything was better.

But right now, I had ponies who would die if I simply went fetal.

I had to take my mind off this. I simply had to. Now that I knew I was... intact... I tried to focus on our situation. Xanthe was fixing Cerberus. Rampage was recycling RadAway. “Lacunae? What are you doing?” I thought at her. Even with the Enervation interference, I could still pick up my friend. Even freakier, I knew exactly where she was. I could have closed my eyes and pointed right at her. Then I actually closed my eyes and saw a hazy window in Lacunae’s mind; an image of her standing before the hole I’d pushed the ghoul through. She was studying the missile. Was it just me, or did it appear more... fiery?

“You’re not mistaken, Blackjack. The balefire egg’s explosion seems to have destabilized the warhead even more. I don’t know if it’s at risk of a detonation or not.” And with Cerberus out of commission, none of us could get close enough to deactivate it. “I am hoping that I can absorb enough radiation to push the missile out... but... ” There was a pause, yet I heard what she tried to hide. “The warding talismans are weakening.”

“They’re weaker?” I asked, and for a moment there was nothing from the alicorn. “Lacunae?” But my friend’s mind continued to be silent. It was like she was... hiding things.

“I’m feeling the drawing effect even more,” Lacunae murmured softly. “It’s sapping my focus and will. Theoretically, I should be

able to flick that missile out like a splinter, but with the energies being leeched as quickly as I absorb them... ”

“Wait. Wait. Lacunae... what are you trying to hide from me?” I asked, thinking hard at my friend. It was like looking at photographs underwater, and the harder I looked the deeper she pushed them.

“Please don’t pry, Blackjack,” Lacunae murmured quietly. “There are things I do not want you to know. Things that I am ashamed of. Please... ” The voice was as soft and composed as ever, but there was a begging tone to it that halted my attempts to get at those pictures in her mind. What was I doing? Of course I didn’t have a right to go rifling through her mind. And if she didn’t want to tell me now, hopefully someday she would. I stopped trying to look at those pictures.

“Sorry,” I said at once, giving her the privacy she deserved. The privacy I doubted few alicorns in Unity received. I looked around the cramped space. “Are Silver Spoon and Carrion out there with you?”

“Silver Spoon is gathering what she can from the storeroom. Carrion is studying the rocket and trying to see if we could potentially shift it or blast it out.” Why was it that that sounded like a really bad idea?

“I’ll go have a talk with Xanthe then and find out what she thinks about it,” I said to her in my head. Rampage was still filtering RadAway. It looked like we were going to have to wait a little longer anyway. I limped over to where the zebra was working on the robot. Its metal casing had warped in the heat of the magical fire, and only one round eye remained. “How’s the guard dog?” She looked up at me in surprise. “What? I can’t have read a mythology book?” Actually, I’d been assigned the book as a group project with Midnight. She was the one who’d done the reading, and I just got the good bits from her and made a little black three-headed dog doll for our presentation. Still counted, though.

“Well, he still has his central processing talisman, spark batteries, and levitation talisman. I might get an arm attached, too,” the zebra said as she looked down at the robot.

“I can’t obliterate filthy maggot farms with only one arm, you striped savage.” The robot buzzed and crackled as its remaining eye flashed with its words.

“Oh, you hush!” Xanthe replied. ‘Shhhhh... ’ the stealth suit beeped

chidingly. “I grew up with bigger and tougher robots than you,” the zebra said before she grabbed a screwdriver and jammed it into his bulbous main housing. There was a sizzle, and his eye stalk twitched.

“Yes, great striped mistress! I live to serve... damn this treacherous stripe programming!” the robot buzzed, and then added, “Oh, just scrap me now.”

I sat down and lifted my truncated leg. “Is there anything you can do for me?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Xanthe replied, then frowned. “Well, I might be able to screw on a peg or something to help you get around. First I need to get Cerberus’s gyroscopes working so he can at least remain upright, though.”

I nodded, looking at the robot and then at her once again. “So, where are you from, Xanthe? How did you join the Remnant?”

The question made the zebra visibly uncomfortable, but she answered anyway. “Originally, I lived in a village on the eastern coast. Our tribe lived in a bunker beside the sea, hidden from the raiders and pirates that roam that territory. We had a long history of using robots; we gathered up seaweed and other salvage that washed ashore and put it to use. It was a nice little place to live... so long as one likes the taste of seaweed.”

She leaned over and started connecting the wires dangling from the base of the main housing to the clawlike hand. “One day we found an injured zebra. He was a scout for the Remnant at Dawn Bay. The code of Caesar demands aid to any zebra requiring it, and so we healed him and beseeched that he not reveal us to the Remnant. A month after he left, their soldiers arrived and demanded a tithe of fighters, robots, weapons, and food.”

“And you just handed it over?” I asked, shocked.

“What would fighting have accomplished? Had we resisted, the Remnant would have returned with dozens of soldiers, taken everything, and killed the entire village.” She paused to tighten the connectors with the screwdriver in her mouth. I levitated the limb to hold it steady, and she finished repairing the robotic hand. “My family had no love of the Remnant, but we knew it was hopeless to resist. My sister, my brother, myself, and nine of the most physically able were taken.”

“Why don’t they like the Remnant?” I asked with a frown. She drew a wrench from her suit’s pocket as she made a sour face.

When the bolts were in place, she sighed before answering.

"You have a pony here called Red Eye who claims he is trying to restore civilization. The Remnant exists to destroy that civilization," she said bluntly. "They claim they work the will of the last Caesar. It does not matter if a village has no problems with ponies. The will of the one or of a small settlement matters nothing. Only the 'Eternal War'. Most villages simply wish to survive. The Remnant wishes only to destroy. If all in the world were killed but one zebra, they would consider that victory."

She sighed as she finished bolting the arm in place. "There are some in the homeland who believe the Remnant glorious heroes. They think it an honor to join and bring supplies to sustain the glorious fight. The rest simply try to survive and not be destroyed. In the Remnant, tribe does not matter. Family does not matter. Only fighting."

"I read somewhere that zebra tribes are really important. What was yours again? Propoli?" I asked with a casual smile and got one in return.

"Yes. The Propoli. We were... are... builders. We were the first to set aside the ancient ways of wandering and hunting. We founded Roam before there was an Equestria. The union of the seven great tribes on the seven hills was the start of our empire. Of course, there are dozens of lesser tribes... " Then she looked at Shears in the corner. "And cursed tribes. Like the Starkatteri."

"They used to live here in Hoofington, didn't they?" I asked with a worried frown.

"Indeed. This was their capital. Long ago they were a tribe of mystics and sorcerers. They preserved the oldest and darkest ways, predicting the future from the movements of the stars. And they could not only know the future, but affect the fates of others." She shuddered. "And they studied death and the progression of the spirit. But when Roam was founded, we excluded the Starkatteri. We drove them away across the sea, and here in this place they founded their own city of wickedness."

"And it was destroyed? By a falling star?"

"Yes. They had a spell that would call a star spirit from the heavens. The stars are terrible things, not to be meddled with. To change their placement in the skies is to change fate itself." She shivered terribly. "We once mocked the Starkatteri, but had they succeeded in capturing the star and extracting its spirit... the world

would be a far more terrible place."

I looked at the blue unicorn in the corner, then back to Xanthe. "Well, thank you for sharing. I hope you can tell me more about zebras in the future." She gave me a slightly perplexed smile. "What?"

"You are the Maiden of the Stars, destined to destroy us all. To hear you speak of us so is... unexpected."

"Yeah, well. So far I've only succeeded at *nearly* destroying us," I replied with a sheepish smile, "so maybe you can lower your expectations a bit? I mean, being the Maiden is pretty embarrassing when you can't even smite somepony trying to kill you."

I stood and carefully walked over towards where Shears sat all alone. My cybernetics didn't seem to realize that I was missing half a leg, and so I had to walk quite consciously. This resulted in me staggering about like I had when I'd first gotten my legs, but at least it kept me from faceplanting every other step.

Silver Spoon entered, letting in a tiny crackle of radiation. She set her bags down; they were filled with blackened cardboard boxes and warped syringes. "Here, Snips," the ghoul said before nudging a small pack of bubblegum towards the pony. He just looked away and closed his eyes. Silver Spoon looked at me with a sad sigh, then took the rest of her salvage over to where Rampage worked.

I flopped down beside him and gave him a tired smile. "So... how are you... Snips?" Not a big departure for a nickname. It was right up there with 'Fallen Glory'.

"You don't have to pretend to be friendly with me, Blackjack. I know you must hate me right now," he muttered, his faintly glowing white eyes looking away.

"Well, Graves is dead. Cerberus is scrapped. I'm back to finding walking a challenge. I'm cursed. I just drank a jar full of recycled RadAway. And apparently I'm now enough of an alicorn that I have a very pissy goddess tuned in to my thoughts. I'm currently stuck in a deathtrap with ponies who I care about who are going to die if we can't find a way out. I've been showered in smooze and cooked by a ghoul, and there's an insane warden somewhere in here who wants me dead." I paused and frowned, thinking. "I think that's it for my problems in Hightower. But I didn't ask about me... who are you? *What* are you?"

The turquoise unicorn gave the tiniest little shrug. "I don't know."

Okay. I could relate to that. "Well... if you had to guess?"

"I still don't know. Am I alive? Dead? Something else? Does it really matter?" He shook his head. "Two centuries ago, we played with magic we didn't understand. What I am now... I guess that's payment for it."

"Okay. So 'what' isn't getting answered anytime soon. How about the 'who'? How is it you were stuck outside?" That question seemed to pull him back as he frowned in thought, then answered slowly.

"When the bombs fell, I was going to meet with two ponies I knew from Ponyville: Mr. and Mrs. Cake. They were trying to find out things about the O.I.A. I was more trusting at the time; I thought that they were just being curious after I accidentally mentioned secret projects and Eternity. When that Goldenblood guy was arrested for treason, though, I was afraid it would get back to Rarity. I went to tell them it was all over... but when I got to Sugarcube Corner in Flankfurt... "

"The Cakes were dead, weren't they?" I remembered the bullet holes and scrapped terminals.

"Everypony was. I must have missed their killers by minutes. The blood was still fresh. Mrs. Cake was still alive... told me to warn Pumpkin and Pound that something bad was happening. Wouldn't even let me waste time trying to save her. 'Tell them... ' she said... " The blue unicorn shivered, hugging himself. "The sirens started right about then, and I didn't know what to do. I tried to check in with Rarity... she said she'd take care of us if something bad happened. But... I couldn't get in contact with her. I even tried to call Pinkie Pie and the Cakes' kids in Manehattan... but never got though."

"So what happened?"

"I ran," he said simply. "Ran like an idiot, due south into the badlands, and found a drainage ditch to hide in. Then the bombs fell. It was so... beautiful... " he murmured as he looked away. "Eventually I stopped seeing altogether. Then I died."

"Died? As in... dead dead?"

"As dead as I can imagine. I went to the everafter... and then... " he whispered softly, "I came back."

"Came back?" I replied, feeling a tingle in my mane. For some reason, I found myself whispering too. Silver Spoon trotted back with a look of concern.

"I was connected to him." Him who? "Sometimes, in the years we were working with Rarity, we played with the spells, never really

thinking about what we were doing. I felt myself being drawn back to this world, away from the singing lights. And I woke and could see again." He gestured to his eyes. "Somehow, the necromantic magic preserved me. I don't know if I'm a ghoul or not... Perhaps I am one, preserved perfectly at the moment of death rather than rotting away. Or maybe I'm trapped between life and death. Really, does it matter? I just need to rescue him."

"You're talking about Snails, aren't you?" Silver Spoon asked. At my confusion, she added, "His best friend."

"My only friend." He looked upwards again. "I just know that he's up there still. I can feel him. I've been feeling him for two centuries. He's scared and lonely, wondering where I've gone. And he can feel me now and knows that I'm coming to save him. If we left... if he thought I gave up... " He shook his head and sniffed.

"He might go crazy," I finished for him. I thought of all the examples I'd been running into of ponies not giving up and following through no matter how much misery it made or what mistakes it led to. Sanguine. Goldenblood. The Ministry Mares. Myself. Ponies so completely obsessed with success that they'd lost all sense and reason. No wonder Snips had cursed me when I'd said we were leaving.

"Well, I can understand why you did it. Right now, I just want to see the rest of us get out of here alive, but I'll do whatever I can to try and get you back with your friend." Then I waited a moment and added, with as straight a face as I could, "Of course, it would be a lot easier if you took this curse off me."

He blinked and then gave a small, rueful smile. "I guess. Sorry. I just panicked and had to do something... " His horn flashed, and he gave a grin and a nod. "There."

But nothing had changed. I felt the same twisting inside my chest. "Uh... 'there' what? I can still feel it."

He frowned in worry and his horn flashed again. And then again. With each flash I felt the twisting inside me tighten. I nearly cried out in pain, and Silver Spoon shouted, "Stop! It's... it's getting worse!"

"But... I don't understand! I mean... it should work!" Snips said, pausing to chew his lip. "I mean... in theory... "

"Theory? You mean you've never uncursed a pony before?" Silver Spoon gaped as Snips grinned sheepishly.

"Well, it's more an art than a science... " he murmured.

“Snips!” Silver Spoon shouted.

“I can fix it! I can fix it! I just need my notes. And Snails might know a thing or two... ” he rambled as I gave him a shooty look.

“Snips?” came a soft voice from the back of the storage room, and I looked over with trepidation as Rampage approached. She wore a strange little smile, her pink eyes bright. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

Snips looked at my friend with a confused frown. Then his luminescent eyes widened. “Twist? But... your speech... and stripes? Why are you striped?” he stammered. “And the armor and... is it really you?” he asked with a ghost of a smile.

Rampage just nodded and then lunged, hugging the round blue unicorn. “It is! Oh, I haven’t seen you since the Ponyville Reunion! Then Littlehorn happened and... and... ”

“We lost track. I mean, I know you were a soldier. I saw you in the news sometimes. But... how is this possible?”

Rampage just shook her head. “I have no idea. I don’t know either. I mean... I died at Miramare. After I... I... ” Her eyes grew round. “Oh no... no no no... ” And she started to shake. “Please... ”

She pushed away from Snips and started to pace. “Aw, what’s the matter? Tell him. Tell them all,” she said with a little leer. Suddenly she whirled around and snapped, “She doesn’t have to tell anypony! She has the right to remain silent.” Then her head whipped to the side. “Don’t give us that cop shit!” Tears streamed down her cheeks as she backed away even more before suddenly stopping in her tracks. “Full disclosure might be therapeutic,” she said reasonably, then bellowed, “Leave her alone, Doctor!”

Now everypony was trying to move away as she turned and pressed her forehooves to the wall. “Shut up!” she screamed, and brought her forehead against the wall with a pulpy crunch. “Shut up!” And again she smashed her head. And again... and again...

I did the only thing I could think of in a situation like this. Therapy with bullets... Xanthe gave a little scream and Stygius jumped to his hooves in alarm. Psychoshy just muttered about how the woodchipper had been cooler.

Snips stared in horror as I put three rounds in Rampage’s head, sending her down in a heap. His eyes flared, horn glowing as he brought his shears out. I caught the closing blades with my remaining hand, the edges cutting into the metal of my fingers. “Wait! She’ll be okay!” I yelled in alarm.

The pink light shone out of the hole in her head and Snips dropped

the shears in shock as he stepped closer. I shook them off my hand and then reached out and pulled him back by his tail. Her twitching body curled up in a ball on her side as the wound disappeared entirely. “I’m sorry. I wish... I’m sorry... ” was all she said.

“The phoenix talisman... ” Snips breathed softly. “You have the phoenix talisman!” Xanthe stared in similar astonishment.

“The what?” I asked as I looked at him. “Do you have a clue what’s going on? Why she is the way she is?”

Snips didn’t take his eyes off the weeping mare. “Soul armor was a bust... even leaving aside the haunting effect, there was the fact that while the armor would protect, it wasn’t perfect. Rarity needed a way for a pony to live through *anything* and she came up with the thought... how many souls could you place within a jar? If you put two souls in one jar, would their personalities cancel each other out? Would the souls empower a talisman to be both eternally energetic and indestructible? Particularly a regeneration talisman?” Snips stared in fascination. “We called it the phoenix talisman because it was designed to restore a pony from even complete disintegration.”

“Well it does!” I said sharply.

“No! That’s just it,” Snips countered. “It didn’t work! Oh, it would heal simple injuries, but every pony we placed it in failed to survive a fatal impact.”

“You mean you killed ponies to test it?” I snapped.

“Of course not,” he countered, looking uncomfortable. “We tested it on... several different subjects. While it handled general injuries, it was never able to provide recovery from a *terminal* injury. We guessed that the talisman just needed more soul power, so... we added more. With each addition the talisman became stronger, but it still wasn’t able to keep a pony alive.”

“So what happened?” I asked with a scowl.

“It was... misplaced... ” he replied in clear embarrassment. “The M.o.P. got ahold of it without realizing what it was, and we couldn’t tell them, of course. We lost track of it and spent several months trying to find out where it had gone.” He shook his head. “Rarity was furious with us! The thought of starting over was almost too much to bear; we had been so *close*, we were sure! And once the haunting effect was blended out with enough souls, we were going to make enough talismans for Rarity’s friends and Luna, and then for all critical ponies in the government.”

"Are you mad?!" Xanthe shouted. "Have you thought of the dozens, perhaps hundreds of deaths, of stolen souls such an effort would require?! Bad enough *one*!"

"You don't understand," Snips pleaded. "I agree, it was wrong, but at the time we almost had it! We almost had... everything. A way to make ponies truly immortal! The ethics didn't matter, just success." Then he slumped. "And then... Rarity changed her mind."

I blinked in bafflement. "She what?"

"I don't know how or why. She'd finally gotten it back before the M.o.P. could get their hooves on it again. She was elated... apparently, it had kept the last pony it was in alive for hours. But the very next day... she was ashamed of all our work. She cancelled all our plans for making more phoenix talismans; she insisted that all our records and findings on soul armor be erased immediately."

"And were they?" I pressed with a sudden frown, my mane turning itchy again.

"Goldenblood's technicians assured us that they were," Snips replied with a little shrug, but I knew better. If Goldenblood could get his hooves on Rarity's necromantic research, he would never destroy it. "After that we swapped to something else."

"What?" I asked with a frown.

Just then Lacunae's voice entered my mind. "Blackjack. Could you bring the others out here? We think we have an idea."

"Right. Right. I'll be out there in just a second," I mentally replied as I crouched beside Rampage, stroking her mane with my hoof. "Okay, everyone. Smart alicorn has a plan. Let's go out and hear it." As everypony started out, I gave Rampage a nudge. "Come on. You don't want to be the only pony left here."

Rampage just shook as she wept. "Am I just... just a collection of ponies? Is there even a me at all? Is that why I don't have a name? Because I never really existed in the first place? Am I just something that grew out of Twist's corpse? Born stuck in some damned wrecked tank? Do I even have a soul of my own?"

"At least you know why now," I replied quietly.

"I wish I didn't. I wish I knew if I should even try and be me, or if I should just hand it over to one of the others inside me for good." She pressed her face to the floor. "Go and see Lacunae's plan. I'm... I'm going to need some time to bottle up the RadAway."

Sigh. Why does it all end it tears?

Outside radiology, we stood at the window I'd shoved the ghoul

out of. The missile crackled fifty feet above us, and everypony who needed it took another Rad-X. “So what’s the plan, Lacunae?” I asked with a wan smile.

“We’re going to try and push the missile out,” she said as she pointed up with a wing to where Carrion clung to the outside of the bars like a giant undead bloatsprite. “The missile’s tail fins are tangled up in the reinforcing of the building. He’s going to cut the tail fins away, and then I am going to lift the nose section. Hopefully it will slide out under its own weight.”

“I’m amazed it crashed through the wall intact at all,” Psychoshy muttered. Lacunae’s horn began to glow, and the huge weapon shimmered as it slowly shifted. The metal gave an ominous groan as chunks of wall crumbled down through the breach.

“That warhead is designed to do just that,” Xanthe said as she pointed a hoof. There were green flashes of light from where Carrion crouched. Inside their cells, a few other flaming ghouls howled. I really hoped they didn’t get free; we didn’t have another balefire egg. “It’s designed to take numerous beam spell hits and breach fortified structures.” Like the Core, I thought. “It also has reinforced fuel tanks to ensure that glancing shots don’t ignite them.”

Wait... fuel. “But it’s empty, right?” I asked as I pointed up at the weapon, seeing the zebra frown in worry. “Xanthe, tell me there isn’t any fuel in that thing!”

“Well... I assume it all burned away long ago. But if it was fired from Dawn bay... I suppose it *could* still be as much as four-fifths fueled... ”

“Lacunae! Xanthe says there might still be fuel in the missile! Don’t move it--” I thought frantically at the alicorn.

Then there was a screech as the missile suddenly shifted, but instead of sliding free, the concrete gave way and an avalanche of crumbled flaming rubble tumbled down towards the floor of the prison. “No! Don’t drop it!” Xanthe shrieked as the missile slid further into the prison. Lacunae’s face creased with effort as she tried to keep the weapon aloft. The blazing warhead touched the bars on the far side, and then the thrusters in the rear were inside and swung down. I held my breath as the whole missile tipped vertical and dropped down the central shaft.

“Please don’t explode. Please don’t explode... ” I murmured over and over again as its rear thrusters crashed down into the work

yard. The warhead slipped down and came to rest with the blazing tip just even with the far side of the medical wing. The rads began building up at once, but there wasn't a vaporizing flash. "Thank you for not exploding," I said in a rush of relief.

Suddenly crimson flames erupted from the base of the rocket. The flames crawled through the twisted metal, spreading as the fuel leaked and ignited. Any chance at all of retreat the way we came was now ablaze in a lake of fire!

"Oh dear… " Xanthe whimpered as she looked down.

"Yeah. Pretty intense… " I replied.

"No. As the fire heats the rest of the fuel pods, they'll breach and add even more fuel. When the warhead gets hot enough… " She didn't have to finish.

We'd just lit the fuse on a balefire bomb.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: You Got a Friend in Me! - You've been joined telepathically with the Goddess in Unity. This offers new dialogue options.

Chapter 48: Inferno

"Listen up! Smoke is spreading all across Equestria. But don't worry, I've received a letter from the Princess informing me that it is not coming from a fire."

"Okay. Xanthe, give me a timetable," I said; the flames were spreading from the burning rocket, and the central space was beginning to fill with thick black smoke. The heat of the blue radiation fires was quickly becoming eclipsed by the heat of the more ordinary-looking but no less dangerous orange flames from the zebra fuel. Still, on the bright side, the warhead coming to rest below the medical level, leaning against the far wall, meant that the route up was clear... assuming that we had time. After a brief but far too long moment of silence, I looked over at the zebra staring down in horror at the spectacle below us. "Xanthe! How long do we have?"

She blinked and then turned to me, chewing her lip. "There're four fuel pods. As the lowest heats up, the fuel that isn't on fire will boil and eventually breach the pod above it, spreading the fire even more and accelerating--"

I swatted her flank with my singed tail. "I need a number. Minutes? Hours? What?" We were backing away from the heat and smoke that began to swirl in through the smashed out window.

"Half an hour? An hour at most," Xanthe whimpered. "If we had more time and Cerberus were intact, we might have severed the warhead and removed it, but…"

"Yeah. That plan is out the window," I said. Between the smooze and those flaming ghouls, I really wasn't bothered by the idea of Hightower being gone soon. Particularly since, if we could get in, the smooze could get out. Still, "Meatlocker needs to be warned that their neighbor is about to go boom. Can you get Cerberus flying again and out through that hole? Without getting blasted?" I

asked, pointing at the gaping breach two stories above us with my stump. Of all our fliers, Cerberus was the only one we could really spare to warn Meatlocker.

"I…don't know? His levitation system *should* already be functional enough, but depending on the targeting talismans in the turrets they might let him go, or they could disintegrate him," she said, and bit her lip again. Then she jerked her head up with a smile. "I'll examine one of the sentries and see if they have an intact IFF unit!" She turned and raced away from the window and down the hall.

"You have five minutes!" I yelled after her, then coughed at the acrid smoke that was filling the air. I suspected that death by balefire blast could be preempted by the far more mundane peril of smoke inhalation. I turned and looked up at Stygius, Psychoshy, and Silver Spoon. "Go back to Rampage. Get the RadAway bottled up however you can, and make sure those supplies you scavenged are passed around." I closed my eyes asked Lacunae, "Any ideas on dealing with all this smoke?" Just because I was connected to the Goddess now didn't mean I had to *use* all those freaky alicorn powers.

"Wet cloths tied around our muzzles should help. Respirators would be better," she replied immediately.

"We don't have any respirators, so tie wet cloths over your muzzles!" I shouted at the pair of fliers as they flew back towards the radiology storage, then coughed again myself. I looked up at the power-armored griffin and shouted, "Carrion! See if you can find a way up to the armory! Lacunae, take Snips and see if you can get my sword," I said, looking sternly at the portly unicorn... ghoul... thing... Lacunae looked at me oddly but then trotted back to Radiology.

When everypony was away doing something, I collapsed, clutching my chest and tearing up from the pain. Whatever curse Snips had put on me, the sensation was spreading. I could feel the chewing feeling halfway along my ribs and up my throat. Everything hurt. The ebb and surge of pain grew heavier with every breath. I had to fight it. He hadn't been able to end his curse, so now my only hope was that there was something Snips's partner could do to help me.

I could only spare a minute to address the pain; it wasn't an injury I was going to regenerate or damage that could be magically repaired. I just had to get the rest of them to safety.

Carrion appeared out of the smoke, the clouds swirling around him

as his milky eyes narrowed on me doubled over. “There’s a way up to the seventh level, if we do some climbing. There are more flaming ones, and this is not nearly as effective using spark batteries,” he said as he held up the beam gun that Xanthe had created. A half dozen spark batteries were wired up around the perimeter near the handles.

I did everything I could to straighten up and smile. “Good job. We’ll get out of this yet.” He just stared at me, and I felt new sweat popping to my brow. “What?”

“Oh, if only you were a griffin,” he muttered as he looked skyward. “I would have given my left paw for a commander like you.”

I blinked in shock. “Um…thanks?” I replied, then peered up at where the smoke was being blown out the hole in the prison wall, then back at him. “Were you a soldier before…?” I balked, not sure how rude it was to point out he’d died. The question seemed to annoy him a little, but not for the reasons I thought.

“I am a soldier. All griffins are soldiers. From the youngest chick to the oldest harpy, we’re all soldiers. We strive for assertiveness, certainty, and martial skill and hold ourselves to our honor and our Contracts,” he said coolly as he looked in the direction of the bomb, though now there was so much smoke that all that could be seen was a murky blue glow. It seemed to cut the radiation a little, at least.

“Sorry, I don’t know much about griffins,” I said; talking helped keep my mind off the curse inside me. “Just that you... fought for us during the war?” I vaguely remembered a few references in 99’s history lessons to the ‘marginal effect of griffin mercenaries’ during the war, but I was leery of trusting anything academic from 99.

“We fought for both sides. We fought to protect neutral parties. Fought for whoever owned our Contracts. The only people we never fought were our own kind.”

“You keep talking about these Contract things. Can you tell me about it?” I asked with a baffled smile.

He shrugged. “It’s not a thing ponies understand. Our Contract is a reflection of who we are and what we will and won’t do. For a griffin to claim what they will and won’t do, and then do just that, justifies our existence. I won’t kill young, nor will I lie. No order, no threat, no bribe will make me do so. To do otherwise would violate my Contract. Once, whole rookeries were bound by common Contracts that defined them. There was even a griffin who once

tried to get all of griffinkind to adopt a common clause in our Contracts putting griffin interests first…but unfortunately Gilda failed, and none know what became of her."

"So how did Ahuizotl get your Contract?" I asked, and received a scowl in response. "If I can ask…"

"Commanders do not ask. They order others to tell them what they wish to know." It sounded like griffins were creeping up on zebras for weirdest species ever. "I pledged my Contract to the holder for as long as I lived, first to a family of scavengers who hid my young during the war with the Enclave. The father was an honorable earth pony, but when he died, my Contract passed to his son. He drove off my family and used me as a weapon, forcing me to kill any who attacked him due to his unreasonable and obnoxious demands. I would have happily killed him, or allowed them to…if it would not violate my Contract.

"He discovered an empty stable far to the south and set about looting it, but the fool ignored the signs of radiation. When he passed out, I carried him from the stable, but the radiation was already terminal and we both became ghouls. In Meatlocker, he sold my Contract to the bartender to pay his tab. I've been Shifty's servant ever since."

My ears perked. "Shifty? I thought you worked for Ahuizotl."

He just shrugged. "They're one and the same. He thought that 'Ahuizotl' was far more impressive-sounding."

"Did Ahuizotl have dealings with zebras?" I demanded.

"I protect the holder of my Contract. That includes his secrets," he said with sullen resignation.

I wanted to demand that he tell me the truth, but guessed it was futile. He'd died of radiation poisoning saving the life of a pony he hated to avoid breaking his Contract. Then I blinked as an idea came to me. If this worked…"Tell me he *didn't* have dealings with zebras." The griffin blinked and scowled sharply. Then he knit his brows as if processing my response. I hoped that 'killing me to protect his secrets' wasn't in the Contract. Then Carrion looked right at me and simply smiled.

Yes! Maybe brain tumors had made me smarter. "Go help the others," I said as I looked down the hall that Xanthe had taken, then began to limp along it as quickly as I could.

Tulip had died outside the Mortuary, her skull crushed with a single overwhelming blow. The Remnant had gotten their tipoff

from a ghoul that turned out to be the owner of that bar. And Xanthe had known about Meatlocker; had she simply heard of its location, or had she been there before? The thought of the Remnant being able to get soldiers inside and kill ponies like Velvet and Windclop…

I found the zebra half-buried in the shell of one of the sentries. She said something zebraish and pulled her head out with a gadget in her mouth. Then her eyes widened and she dropped the device as I stepped forward, rising onto my rear legs to close the last few feet and grabbing the collar of her suit, tugging her almost onto her hindhoof tips. “Maiden!” she wailed, and the suit flickered and she disappeared. I tightened my grip on it, my eyes locked on the shimmer where I knew her head was.

“Xanthe,” I kept my voice low and even as I gave her the shootiest look I could. “You haven’t told me everything you should have. Tell me now: is the Remnant in Meatlocker?” She cried out, and I felt invisible hooves beat on my chest. “Tell me the truth!”

She appeared in a flash, her eyes wide and streaked with tears. “The truth is you have cursed me!” she wailed as I stared into her eyes. “You are going to destroy my people! You are the Maiden of the Stars! Nightmare Moon! The champion of the deepest darkness! And if I do not oppose you…my home, my people, are doomed!”

I slowly relaxed my grip and sat down, running my hand over my face. Not this shit again…“Xanthe…I am not Nightmare Moon. I… saw…the real Nightmare Moon in a memory once. That’s not me.”

The zebra rubbed her throat and kept her eyes low. “How do you know you are not?” Then she looked at me with the first hard gaze I’d seen from her. “The Maiden is born of heartache and sorrow, and I know you suffer. She butchers all who oppose her. I saw what you did in Yellow River. She sows destruction for the entire world. That monster you slew was indestructible, and yet you destroyed it.”

I slumped. “Xanthe, I got lucky.” Something in me was drawing tight, a single raw nerve growing sharper and sharper. “That’s all it is. That’s all it’s ever been.”

“Luck? Luck that you die but return to life? Luck that you overcome all adversity?” The zebra scoffed. “Luck that you stumble across the secrets of ages past?”

“It’s just stupid, fucking, luck!” I screamed at her, and she curled up in a ball. But I couldn’t stop. I was like a canister of explosive

gas with a hole punched in the side as I shouted, “Luck that I got out of 99! Luck that I survived! Luck that I found friends who would help me! I don’t have any kind of dark, magical power! Hell, I’m damned lucky I can summon a wisp of light! And just because I’ve survived, don’t think it’s been easy. Don’t think that I haven’t paid for surviving when others died. But that’s all there is to it. I am not Nightmare Moon! I am not the Maiden of the Stars! I am not special and I am not going to put up with it any longer!” I screamed down at her.

“You sure about that?” Psychoshy asked behind me, and I turned and saw all of the others staring in shock. “‘Cause I saw what you did in Hippocratic, and Rampage has been trying to convince me you really are some fucking paragon and not the scariest fucking mare I could ever imagine.”

“Don’t give me that…” I began, but she flew out in front of the others and pressed her face right into mine.

“Don’t you blow me off, Blackjack!” she snapped, her eyes narrowed. “Because you are scary. There’s not a single one of us that isn’t afraid of you on some damned level. You’re a fucking cyborg mutant death mare who could probably kill every single one of us if she wanted to. You talk to shit that isn’t there, know things no fucking pony should ever know, and you keep going on. Why the fuck shouldn’t she think of you as Nightmare Moon? Why the fuck shouldn’t everyone?”

“Because I’m trying to do good!” I countered, twisting around to face her. “I’m trying to make the world better.”

“Glad to hear it. That still doesn’t make you any less damn scary. Because all it would take is you changing your mind, and the rest of us are dead! Maybe you think the world would be better without Psychoshy. What are my chances of stopping you if you really wanted to kill me? She thinks you’re the devil. I’d say you’re two steps away. And anypony who’s seen you fight would agree with me.” She stared right into my eyes, so taut that she seemed ready to snap. There was anger in those eyes, sure.

But there was also fear…

I looked behind her at my companions, at the concern, wariness, and worry in their eyes. I felt the pain tightening up inside me. I seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. No. I was a good pony. I might not have known what my virtue was, but I was a good pony. I tried! I tried, damn it.

And I heard a voice from within me, strange and cold. A mare whispering softly in my ear, a mare who'd once offered tricks for a hoofful of bits. *It doesn't matter how good you are; to some ponies, you'll always be a monster.* I looked at Rampage, and six ponies looked back at me through one set of eyes. *It doesn't matter how awesome you are; other ponies will tear you down if they can.* I swallowed, my gaze moving to Snips and seeing the cool understanding in his luminescent stare, and that cold whisper changed to an angry mare's suspicious mutter. *It's hard to smile smile smile when all everypony does is lie lie lie…*

That whirring within me grew sharper, the scream of Enervation growing clearer. I'd tried to give them all I could. What more did they want from me? *It doesn't matter what you try to give; they'll never really appreciate it.* Silver Spoon looked at me with her hurt eyes, hurt that I wasn't the friend she'd sought for so long. *Of course you always hurt the ones you care about. The more you care, the more they hurt.* Funny, why was Psychoshy snickering in my ears? Their lips were moving, but I couldn't hear them over those damned screams and whispers. *Go on, Blackjack. Tell yourself you're okay. Maybe this time you'll believe it…*

I fell to my knees and clenched my eyes shut. It felt like the world was slipping away. I could hear Nightmare Moon's cold laugh as she rose to power. As she gave in, as she felt such joy. It had been so long since I'd been happy. So long…

Then a mare's voice said softly, *Come on, Blackjack, you're smarter than that.*

Slowly I raised my eyes and looked at Lacunae, the alicorn smiling ever so slightly. *You know what the difference is. You just have to remember. When you do something wrong, what do you have to do?*

"You're right," I said as the twisting in my chest slowly eased. "You're right…I can be pretty damned scary. And I know that I shouldn't get angry for... what Xanthe thinks of me. I guess I do match this Maiden pretty well." I turned and looked back at Xanthe. "I'm sorry…" Then my eyes returned to Psychoshy, and I gave an exhausted smile. "The difference is that I try and do better. I know I'm a fuckup…but I haven't given up. I know I can be a better pony…and I try to be. I don't always make it. And some day, I might stop, and if I do I trust that a better pony like Lacunae, or Rampage, or Stygius, or you will put an end to me. Until then, though, I'm not Nightmare Moon. I never will be."

There was an awkward moment; Psychoshy trotted over to Stygius, both of them looking back at me with a worried frown. “One of the ghouls is our agent,” Xanthe murmured, so softly that for a second I thought I’d imagined it. “He feeds us intelligence and passes messages on for a steep price. He has for years.” The zebra glanced up and sniffed, begging in a whimper, “Please don’t kill my people, Maiden.”

I sighed and reached out, paused, and patted her head. “I don’t want to kill anyone, Xanthe. Not if I can help it.” Then I looked at my stump. “And right now, I’m not looking like I’m going to kill much of anypony. Nurse Graves died helping us; I just want to make sure Meatlocker is safe. But a ghoul named Tulip had her head crushed, and I’m pretty sure it was a zebra who did it.” She pressed her lips together, and I added, “I’m not saying that ‘cause I hate zebras, Xanthe. I just don’t want people who help me to get hurt.”

Xanthe licked her lips and looked at the IFF gadget. “I can…I can include a message. If there is one of Caesar’s Hooves hidden in Meatlocker, they’ll be somewhere near the Mortuary. A locked storeroom, perhaps.” She glanced at Carrion, then dropped her gaze a little. “I just…wanted to protect my people…”

“Me too,” I said, rising to my hooves again. “Work quick. We need to get going.”

But getting going would take a minute or two. While most of the RadAway in the storeroom had been lost, there were still tablets of Buck, Fixer, and Rad-X intact, as well as bottles of water. We all chowed down on the chalky tablets, Rampage passed out water bottles filled with her recycled RadAway, and we each took a drink or two. It’d been ‘energized’ with Flux, which probably meant taint. As Xanthe bowed out of the room to work on Cerberus, I swirled the bottle of orangey fluid with my magic. “Are you sure it’s safe to add that Flux stuff? Don’t want anypony growing eye tentacle penises, now.”

“Flux is good shit, Pink,” Rampage retorted. “Always added a drop or two to my Dash to turn it into Rainboom. Great shit! Got you so high even earth ponies could fly.” Then her grin melted into an angry scowl. “And when they ended up in the ER, they looked like they’d fallen from flight, too.” She rolled her eyes and snorted. “Hey, not everypony can handle the Dash.”

Xanthe returned with Cerberus in tow. I glanced at the zebra and

then at the robot. “You understand your mission?”

The robot sighed. “Return to Meatlocker, tell all those pansy ghouls about the bomb, and warn them about a zebra infiltrator. Hoo… rah…” he muttered sullenly. “Retreating when there’s still hundreds of acceptable targets is just sickening!”

“Buck up, Soldier. There’ll be other ghouls to disintegrate,” I said, earning a surprised and slightly troubled look from Silver Spoon. “Remember, straight there.”

“Yes, ma’am. Let it never be said the Equestrian Mechanized Corps failed to execute orders!” he announced, and gave a sort of salutelike gesture with his remaining claw. Lacunae and Snips walked over, the blue unicorn holding my sword in his magic as far away from himself as possible as if the blade were diseased and reeking. I slipped it into its sheath with a smile and thanked him.

With that, we started our climb, first up through the shattered windows and onto the narrow sloping ledge of metal that ran around the interior, and then up to the crumbled rubble around the breach in the prison wall. Those of us not capable of flight were assisted by those who were. The three of us with magic flung blazing clumps of detritus down into the inferno below as the air grew thicker and visibility shortened. I kept waiting for something to spring out at us... another flaming ghoul, or maybe the Warden would send his robots again... but for once our only opponents were time and gravity. Finally, we came to the hole punched through the cells and exterior wall. I looked at the inch-thick steel armor plating on the exterior wall as we moved up close to the hole. Hot air blew out around us, carrying a plume of smoke out like a chimney.

“How do we know this IFF is going to work?” I yelled over the howling air. Rain was pouring down outside; it looked like late afternoon. Had we really only been in Hightower a few hours? Felt like weeks.

“If he flies out there and explodes, we know it didn’t work,” Carrion replied. Xanthe looked up from where she made a few checks on the gadget she’d taped to the robot’s side and gave a shrug.

“All right then. Hoo-rah!” the robot shouted as he floated out the hole. “For Equestriaaaaaa!” he roared, dropping like a rock. I gaped and leaned out the hole as I watched him fall. Lacunae looked out above me, and a purple glow surrounded the robot, slowing his descent slowed as he leveled out. He floated over the heads of the

glowing ghouls below and headed for the wall before I finally lost sight of him in the rain and smoke.

Hopefully he'd pull if off... and then I put him out of my mind as Lacunae and Psychoshy lifted me up through the broken floor to the high security floor right beneath the armory. The gray smoke was darkening, but the radiation was still damned high, despite the smoke. Wait... the radiation was actually *climbing*!

Then I stopped wondering why as I saw blue flames slowly approaching. "Flamer!" I warned as the swirling smoke parted to reveal a flaming pony squeezing out of a breached cell. Vigilance came up as I stood in the gap and sighted along the barrel, planting shots as precisely as I could. The flaming ghoul let out a scream and charged, my bullets half-vaporizing before striking its skull. The 12.7mm rounds *were* substantial enough to slow it down, but beyond that...

Then Carrion flew up the hole behind me, and a line of green lanced out and began to chew through the ghoul. Xanthe was placed beside me, firing her sidearm wildly into its torso as I kept my shots on its head. Finally, silver arrows streaked through the smoke and sank into the flaming monster's head. It collapsed in on itself, disappearing in a heap of green dust.

Carrion stopped firing, the beam gun smoking in his claws. "Conductor's melted!" Xanthe shouted, reaching into one of her packs for a gray block of metal, tossing it atop her head, then kicking a smoking chunk of off the bottom of the jury-rigged gun. As the block came down, she slammed it home into the gap, and the gun gave an ominous hum once again.

Then from the cell beside her came a scream and a billowing, crackling ball of green fire as the glowing ghouls within launched a blast of radioactive magic at us. Carrion swooped around, caught Xanthe in one forearm, and whirled. His wings spread wide and blocked the barrage. Lacunae and I moved around him and slipped into S.A.T.S. almost as one. These ghouls weren't the fiery variety, and bullets made their heads explode into fountains of radioactive gore and bone. Carrion's wings were both disintegrating and regenerating from the radioactive blasts as the AM rifle boomed next to me.

Four down. About four hundred to go between here and the armory door. Between the bar walls of each cell were stretches of concrete wall just barely wide enough for a single pony to take

cover in. “Lacunae! Can you shield us?” I thought at her.

“I…it’s very hard to focus. I think the talisman is wearing off. I should be able to protect myself, but we must hurry!” Alicorns and ghouls might be empowered by radiation, but Enervation was another matter.

“Right!” I shouted, not able to see more than ten feet in the smoke. “Move quick! Call out if you see a flaming one. Move!” And I hobbled out in the lead, diving across in front of the cells and barely missed by the radioactive blasts of the glowing ghouls within. Some held as many as half a dozen stuck behind the barred doors. Cell by cell I jumped and rolled, half the time landing on my face as my body kept using my stump like it was a full leg. Once I fell short, and a flaming one thankfully still trapped almost cooked me before I could get clear. Stygius shadowflashed right into the middle of the cell and kicked the beast in the head as a distraction, reappearing back with us as it turned in response.

Worse than the flames and blasts were the screams for help, though. In more than one cell I saw glowing ghouls among their feral brethren and begging to be let out. I just couldn’t think of a way we could open the fused steel doors and extract them safely. I wanted to give them a chance. I needed to…

But sometimes we don’t get what we want or need…

“Keep moving!” Rampage shouted, shoving me away from a pleading ghoul who thought I was a prison guard, just in time to keep the ghoul’s cellmates from blasting me. Damn it, even if I wanted to help, there was no way I could let two dozen half-crazy ghouls escape intact for every one sane one!

We reached the corner, and a turret popped down and started to strafe us. The bullets must have made a lucky hit, because Lacunae screamed as a half dozen rounds punched through her weakened shield and ripped right through her left foreleg at the knee. The mare dropped, and Silver Spoon grabbed a rag from the floor and immediately tried to stem the bleeding. I dodged into the path of the bullets, raising my foreleg to protect my face. I could take a few rounds of machinegun fire; at least, I hoped I could. I took aim and blasted the chattering turret. Rampage raced to the corner, drawing the fire from me, and sprang off the concrete wall, crashing right through the ceiling turret. Then she turned and grinned back at me.

Then she disappeared in a sheet of blue fire. She didn’t even get a chance to scream as she curled up like a lump of charcoal.

The flaming one walked slowly through the smoke towards us, inhaling another breath to blast me. Then Carrion was there, moving around the corner with the beam gun in his claws. The beam streaked through the smoky air and collided with the ghoul's head in a shower of blue-green sparks. It didn't, however, stop the second plume of radioactive fire from washing over us. Carrion flew up, intercepting the majority of the flames with his power armor as he kept the beam on target. I would have given him a medal if I could. The beam gun sparked and died even as the flaming ghoul crumbled.

"Oh please tell me I can fix it! Please! Please!" the zebra fretted as she looked it over. Carrion, his feathers blackened and fur smoking, just looked slightly indignant as she fussed beside him.

"Well?" I asked as I beat out the flames. She gave me a stricken look that told me we'd better not run into another free flaming one. "Nevermind! Psycho! Stygius! Get Rampage." Then I turned and knelt. To my amazement and relief, Lacunae's leg was already regenerating before my eyes. "I…ah…" I looked at her severed leg with the PipBuck attached. "That's not going to regenerate into a new Lacunae, is it?"

"Of course not," she said as she levitated the cuff and pulled her leg out of the PipBuck. "I am going to miss S.A.T.S., though." Then she passed the device to me and tossed the foreleg away. "You'd better hold onto it."

"Ugh, she's heavy!" the pegasus mare protested, but she and Stygius managed to heave the charred mare up between them.

"Deal with it," I replied as we made our way along to the middle of the next face and two more turrets. Lacunae, Carrion, and I blasted them with a barrage of gunfire that made short work of them. Then we were at the armory doors.

Yeah, I could see why Snips thought we'd need a balefire egg. These doors were so tough that they hadn't melted or warped like most of the metal on this level. There wasn't a terminal or a lock to pick, either. I started to wheeze…damn this smoke! "How does it open?"

"Only from the inside! And there're no windows in the armory," Snips yelled back over the fires below. "That's why I brought the egg!" The charcoal lump cracked and Rampage shook herself hard, shedding the crumbly black shell.

"Am I still grown up?" she asked, inspecting the scorched armor

still fused to charred chunks of hide. “Aw, Hammersmith is gonna kill me.”

“That I’d like to see,” Psychoshy countered.

I beat my hoof against the door several times, slumping in futility. “Blackjack…” Lacunae said softly in my mind. I looked up at her and saw her staring down into the smoke. Three burning forms advanced from behind us, flickering through the acrid black clouds. I smacked my gray-etched steel hand against the wall again, then stared at it a second. Would that…could it work?

“Clear that cell,” I said, shouting as I pointed at the next one down. Fortunately, all the ghouls inside were feral glowing ones. Lacunae and Carrion weathered their barrage of radioactive fire, but I noticed that once or twice the radioactive blasts actually got through Lacunae’s weakened shield. When her talisman died, how long would she last? Or would our minds start jumping like between normal alicorns till we fell apart?

Regardless, ten seconds later, the cell was empty. “Open that door,” I said as I looked back along the row. The flaming ones were still taking their time. Maybe they didn’t know we were here, or maybe they knew there was nowhere left for us to go. Rampage and Carrion smashed the door, busting it open as Xanthe sat on the floor with the beam gun in her hooves, swapping out capacitors, spark batteries, and who knew what to try to get it to work.

“What are you doing, Tiara?” Silver Spoon asked as she fidgeted, looking at the mindless ghouls in the cells in horror. The fused but apparently weakened metal finally gave way as Carrion pulled the door off and tossed it aside. I ran past the still dimly glowing ghoul corpses and right to the back of the cell and the metal toilet. The concrete above the toilet had been defaced by dozens of names. “Oh…ah…I guess when you got to go…” the earth pony muttered as she looked away at once.

The bowl was empty, the contents long ago evaporated, and I shouted down into the metal basin. “Hey! Hey you! You worthless piece of slime! You ignorant, disgusting blob!” Rampage rushed up beside me, looking on in confusion. I glared down and banged the toilet, shouting.

She looked at me like I’d lost my mind, then blinked, grinned, and joined me in insulting the drain. “You’re nothing but an unstable short chain molecule!” Huh?

“You foul, obnoxious muck!” I yelled, giving the mare a confused

look. Of all the ponies in her, Octopus was the one shouting insults? Really?

"You have a weak electrochemical bond!" she bellowed down into the bowl. Yes, really.

"I have seen some disgusting crud in my time, but you take the cake!" I roared down the toilet, and Rampage shook me. "You're nothing but--" Another shake. "You're just--"

"Blackjack! Look!" she said in a voice that was definitely not the doctor, pointing her blackened hoofclaw at a pair of names scratched in the middle of the rest.

'Doof', and immediately below that, 'Deus'.

This was his cell. This tiny eight by six space, that held four ponies…this was where he ended up. Where he'd gone from mere criminal rapist to a monster. Twist's wide, pink eyes stared at me in horror.

And then I smelled sulfur…

"Back! Get back!" I yelled, the toilet suddenly shrieking. Then the bilious blue sludge erupted out and began to pour across the floor. I staggered back out of the cell, falling on my rump. Rampage bit my mane and dragged me out as the smooze began to form into a slimepony. Back on the walkway, the three flaming ponies were nearly upon us.

"Lacunae! Snips! Throw!" I screamed as I scooped up blue smooze with my magic and flung it at the three flaming ponies. The monsters made no effort to dodge; why should they? Bullets melted before they were struck. Then a rain of glowing, hissing sludge began to rain down upon them, and the three let out screams of pain and fury. The blue slime hissed and blackened as it came in contact with their flaming hides, but it also extinguished their flames a bit. We fell back, step by step, and the three flaming ones charged. "Slow them down!" I yelled. Psychoshy and Stygius darted in overhead, smashing hooves against the darker patches and knocking them back. The pool of smooze slipped around their blazing hooves, and the three now screamed in panic as they tried to back out of it. Then one fell into the acidic sludge, and it grabbed at its fellows and pulled them down as well.

The smooze flooded over them, boiling and blackening and letting out a noxious reek that made me gag. The ghouls struggled, raising melting heads as the entire concoction cooked into a blackened tarlike mud. Even the smooze seemed to find the three a little too

spicy for its taste, the blue sludge disappearing back into the corroded toilet. The smoking mess left behind was so destructive that it was eating into the concrete floor.

Wait…if it was strong enough to do that…"Smear it on the door!" I yelled, scooping it up with my magic and painting the tarlike mix across the armored entrance. It began to hiss, pop, and steam. Everypony else stepped back as our magic worked, trying to apply as much to the door as we could; the sticky mung had already eaten halfway through the floor. The face of the door crumbled away in a sheet of smoking rust, and we added another layer. Rampage bravely scooped it up with flat slabs of flaked-off steel. The tar ate through the floor and began to drip down to the next level, and we hurried to use as much of it as we could. Too bad it was too hazardous to take with us; the infernal mix ate through everything, even Sparkle-Cola bottles.

Finally, the hoof-sized locking drum in the middle just fell right out, leaving a hole a pony could peek through. Stygius peeked and shadowflashed inside. A minute later there was a loud thunk, then another, and the door opened a crack. It took all our magic and Carrion's power armor to get the door open enough to squeeze through, and even so, Carrion had to remove his armor, wiggle his way through the gap, pull the armor through piece by piece, and put it back on. Still, we made it.

Lacunae, however, couldn't.

There was simply no way for the alicorn to pass through the gap. She could fit her head and neck in, but no matter how much we shoved the heavy, armored door, the gap simply wasn't wide enough for her body. She screwed her face up and tried to teleport, but the prison's magic barrier was still in effect. Whatever Stygius did to get around it, the alicorn couldn't replicate the feat. She met my eyes and gave a sad smile. "Shall we just skip the argument about you not leaving me behind?"

"I'm not leaving you down here to die," I said immediately, and she chuckled and shook her head.

"I thought not. Take this," she said as she passed her AM gun through the gap. "Simple physics is sometimes our greatest enemy." I settled it across my shoulders as she looked me in the eye. "Keep going. Find a way up to the attic and out." She looked back down towards the hole and said before I could argue, "By myself, I might be able to reach the roof before the turrets take me down."

“Lacunae, there’s got to be another way,” I said as I tried to adjust the gun’s massive weight.

“There isn’t. Now go. I’ll see you on the roof.” And then she turned away, spread her wings, and flew silently off into the smoke.

“Lacunae!” I shouted after her. The further away she went, the greater the interference became between us. I couldn’t hear her voice, or she was trying to keep it from me.

“Blackjack,” Rampage said as she nudged me, but I closed my eyes, trying to maintain the connection with Lacunae. The Enervation interference was horrible; she kept coming in and out of focus like a badly tuned radio. The exertion made my head throb.

“One second. I want to make sure she gets out okay…” I said through grit teeth as I concentrated. Images came in bursts. I saw her winging her way down to the largest puddle of blue flame, nearly standing inside it as she soaked up as much radiation as she could. Then her standing on the cusp of the hole. Then the alicorn took flight, swooping her way higher and higher along the face of the prison. Red beams sprayed from the turrets at her, and her shield flickered and flashed as she pumped her wings, the Hoofington rain around her glinting crimson and white. Then she soared up and landed on the edge. She’d made it! She was safe! I let out a held breath…

Then there was a flash of red, then darkness and the scream of Enervation. I suddenly found myself incapable of breathing as I stood there.

“Lacunae?” I thought at her. “Lacunae?” I said aloud as I tried to push my brain to hers. Nothing but the Enervation static.

“Lacunae!” I screamed as loud as I could.

Nothing.

Gone.

She couldn’t be gone. She couldn’t be. I thought at her again and again, frantically, tears running down my face as I struggled to make my pathetic magic somehow make contact with the mare.

“Please! Please please please…no…” I groaned as I clenched my eyes shut. It was like Mom dying, only this time I was able to appreciate it so much more.

“Blackjack!” Rampage shouted, and I came to in time to hear the grind of wheels and the crackle of robotic voices babbling their nonsense of halting and authorizing lethal force. My eyes popped open as I spotted the intact sentry at the top of the stairs, pointing

its gatling beam gun and missile launcher down at me and the rest of my friends.

The AM rifle floated up beside me; I'd never handled a gun this big or heavy before, but frankly at this moment I didn't give a shit about simple physics. I pulled the scope to my eye, slipped into S.A.T.S., and queued two shots at the pristine missile pod. The two rounds ripped into the armored siding, and a moment later the missile within exploded, knocking the sentry to the side and throwing the spray of beam fire wide. I advanced up the stairs at a steady walk, tears in my eyes.

She'd been a goddess. She'd been a friend! And this place had taken her from me! All for my stupid obsession! I blasted again and again as I walked up the steps, the rifle punching holes in its chest. Finally its head exploded in a shower of sparks just as I reached the top of the steps. There was another security door, but this one had a terminal, and two more turrets. I should have used the sentry for cover, but right then I really didn't give a shit. Let them shoot me. Hurting was infinitely better than the feelings that arose from the thought that my friend was gone. The scream of Enervation matched the throb in my chest and the tears in my eyes as I blasted back at the turrets.

"Shit! She's berserk!" I heard Rampage say distantly.

"No, she's not," Xanthe replied as I walked forward, closing the distance and blasting slowly and deliberately.

"Well, why don't you shoot her in the head? It works wonders for you," Psychoshy retorted.

I hurt like hell, but it didn't matter. I'd plough a way out for all of them to get out alive, together. No matter how full of holes I was, I'd…Rampage tackled me and drove me to the ground, taking the shots meant for me. Carrion jumped atop the scrapped sentry as his miniguns purred and several seconds later the turrets were scrapped.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Rampage demanded as she flipped me on my back.

I looked up at Rampage and swallowed. "Lacunae's gone." Everything hurt, in part because I'd just been torn into by three rapid fire enemies. A few seconds more and I wouldn't have been hurting anymore. "She died because of me."

Rampage looked down at me, and the corner of her mouth curled as she said, "Yes, she did. Even I never murdered my best friends…"

And then she shuddered and staggered off me. “Shut the fuck up, you monster,” she hissed, grabbing the side of her head. “But why? She knows the truth already. Her friend is dead…died because of her…” she said with a leer as she looked back at me. “Shut up!” she shouted, tearing off her helmet and then slamming her forehead against the wall. “I’m sick of you…you vile…” *smack,* “vicious…” *smack,* ‘thing!’ *Crack*.

She slumped, collapsing on her side as I slowly rose and started to hobble closer. The striped pony panted as she looked up at me. “I think I’m losing my mind, Blackjack. I think…I think…” Suddenly she hung her head. “I deserve to die. Please…” She cursed in Zebra and smashed her head again against the wall with another crunch. “Silence!” Then she laughed again, high and harsh, “Oh, we are so fucked! We are so fucking fucked!” Finally there was one last crunch and she slid to the ground. All of us stared at her as she lay there, and I put my blood-speckled stump on her shoulder. “You have to be strong, Blackjack. Please…”

It’s not all about you, Blackjack. I forced a smile and patted her shoulder. “Hey. Don’t worry. I just went a little crazy too.” That enervating scream was getting annoying, like a hoof scraping a chalkboard. “We’ll get through this, Rampage. We’ll get through it.”

“Rampage. There is no Rampage. No Arloste. I’m just a half dozen ponies squished together in one jar.” She wiped the blood off her face with a hoof as her body healed itself. Slowly she turned and walked to the door ahead. Xanthe kept her eyes low as she trotted to the keys and started typing, every now and then looking over at me in worry.

The loss of Lacunae was a huge bloody hole inside me, but Rampage had gotten me to bottle it up for now. When I got out… then I could grieve. Suddenly, the floor shook as there was an incredible boom somewhere below us. One pod down, three to go. Assuming, of course, that the warhead didn’t decide to go off before the last pod did. I trotted to Snips, lowering my head to look him in the eyes, then gestured for him to step behind the sentry.

When we were out of sight, I said in a low voice, “Tell me everything about that talisman inside Rampage. Specifically.”

He sighed and looked back at the door. “There’s not much to tell. We were more focused on getting it to work than on *how* it actually worked. It’s a regeneration talisman. It has a magical template and it restores the pony it’s imprinted on. The idea was that it would

contain the soul of the last pony it was imprinted on. Removing a soul from a pony in its entirety was fatal, but what if the soul was still contained within the pony? That's the idea."

"And you put it in Razorwire first?"

"We put it in a half dozen ponies first…terminally ill or injured ponies…but they were too close to death for the talisman to work. Oh, there might have been some slight imprinting, but it didn't do what Rarity intended." He coughed and looked aside. "The Warden offered an alternative…we didn't know he meant to kill Razorwire. Please, believe me, we wouldn't have ever taken that step. The talisman almost worked, though…but she still died. Then the Angel of Death was captured…" And he shivered.

"That was one you killed."

"I didn't! And I never would." He shuddered as he shook his head hard. "I don't know what happened. I just know that when Snails and I came to the lab in the morning…Rarity…and the Angel…" He shook his head again, as if trying to physically rattle the memory from his mind. "When we got here, the Angel was dead. Rarity said that the Angel would never hurt anypony ever again, and then she insisted that we put the talisman in somepony who deserved it. The detective who captured the Angel was grievously wounded before her partner rescued her."

Softheart. "But the talisman drove her insane, didn't it?" I pressed.

"Maybe…" Snips said softly, looking away from me. "The haunting effect of soul jars wasn't understood then…still isn't, really. A soul jar is more than just an indestructible object. They want things. Feel things. Hate. Love. The detective was already under a lot of stress, and if we hadn't gotten the haunting fully blended out by then…it *could* have been the haunting effect that pushed her over the edge."

"What happened next?"

"That's when we lost it the first time," Snips said, licking his lips and giving me a sheepish smile.

"Right. And... how exactly *do* you lose a soul jar healing talisman?" My incredulous question drew a mirthless smile.

"Funny, that's exactly what Rarity said. But the detective…well…after she was splattered by the train, her body went to the Ministry of Peace. And they found the talisman, saw it was perfectly undamaged…and…eh…somepony recycled it on the black market." He licked his lips and looked away. "We spent six months looking for it. We have no idea how many ponies it might have been put

inside; healing talismans like that were generally reserved for very important ponies. But eventually it was found when a patient it was inside…wouldn't die."

So there could still be souls hidden away inside Rampage. Ponies who received the illegal talisman, then grew increasingly unstable until they died, their souls trapped in the talisman. It was like a Silverstar Sporting Supplies that you stuck inside your chest.

"Wouldn't die…how?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"There was a commercial sky carriage en route to Canterlot when a bomb went off -- prematurely, it's suspected. There were only a hoofful of survivors, mostly the pegasus team pulling it who could undo their harnesses. But there was one pony trapped inside the burning wreckage who was screaming…for hours. Rarity heard about it and immediately went personally to the scene of the crash.

"We'd been doing more research while the talisman was being looked for and had learned of the possibility that zebras are immune to telepathic magics through studies done in the M.A.S. Some mind control megaspell they were contemplating to end the war that never went anywhere. We'd been hypothesizing that that could help stabilize the talisman, and Rarity was so happy about getting it back... the very same day as the accident, we conducted an inspection to make sure that the talisman hadn't significantly changed since we last saw it, and then Rarity sent it off to be implanted into one of the Proditor."

"Shujaa…" I said as I looked back at him.

"... You'd probably know that better than us. Anyway, Rarity changed her mind the very next day, to our surprise... but by then the operation had been completed and the zebra was heading back into the field. We considered retrieving it, but decided that that would be more trouble that it was worth; if it still didn't work, we'd get it back when she died."

"But then you lost it again," I said as I looked back at him. The unicorn gave me an uneasy look. "Somehow it got from Shujaa into Twist…and then Twist died…" That turned his features grim as his glowing eyes dropped.

"It may be that the megaspell magic, combined with the souls trapped within, had an unanticipated side effect that created the pony called Rampage. A combination of good and bad in a single gestalt individual. A pony with no soul of her own but containing the souls of almost a dozen different ponies." Snips shook his head.

“There’s really no way to tell.”

“And Rarity wanted this?” I hissed.

“Rarity wanted her friends safe,” Snips countered. “She’d have done anything for them. The project she had us working on after she stopped the development of the phoenix talisman was still for them.”

“And what was that?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“I’m in!” Xanthe cried from the door. I looked at him, then sighed. Answers about that for later. “Now where to?”

He walked slowly towards the door, speaking to everypony. “We need to find the security center. It was on the far side of the armory. Look for a room with lots of terminals and monitors. We’ll also need the guard captain’s pass card. It’s a wafer of blue sapphire. It should be fairly indestructible, given all the enchantments on it. With that we can access the security system. Also, keep your eyes open for the vent access to get up to the Warden’s level.”

I sighed and took cover by the side of the door -- I still had a lot more regenerating to do -- and nodded to Xanthe. The zebra hit a key, and then there was a grind as the door slowly began to open, a klaxon warning every ghoul in the place that we were here. But I slowly poked my head inside and didn’t see anything, flaming or otherwise. There was a stairway up that was marked ‘Supermax’ and then smaller doors. I frowned slightly, feeling a touch apprehensive at how clean the armory looked.

Of course, as soon as we stepped in, another turret dropped and began to spray rounds at us. Instead of taking it, I took cover like a sensible pony and let Carrion step out and blast it with his miniguns. A few seconds later, the turret was scrapped and Carrion had another dozen dings to his power armor. I went to a door beside a large window of ballistic glass and went to work on the lock. Fortunately, I got lucky and managed to pick it without too much difficulty.

I pushed the door open; the room on the other side was filled with a haze of smoke, and was it just me, or was it getting really hot in here? Most of us started sweating from the balmy air as I peeked through. I jerked my head back as the sentry rolled slowly past. Then I spotted another sentry in the corner and hissed softly in frustration. The armory robots had been spared exposure to the flames and were in brand new condition, unlike the sentries below.

Xanthe was at my side and tapped her chest a moment. Then she shimmered, her suit hushing as she all but vanished. The sentry slowly patrolled past again, and I saw a tiny door in its back open up. Then the machine buzzed and called out, “Error! Error! Combat inhibitor offline! Entering combat now!” I cursed and got ready to open fire, but the robot wasn’t turning to face me, it was turning to the other sentry.

“Warning! Warning! Hostile detected!” the other robot blurted. Their missile pods opened simultaneously, and I jerked back as explosions filled the room. A half dozen blasts later, the sentry bot in the corner was still standing, but its armor was smoking and blackened. Rampage darted into the room, ducked under another missile, and smashed both her forehooves through its chest plate. The robot crackled pitifully as she smashed it repeatedly and yanked out wires with her teeth. Finally it collapsed in a heap.

Xanthe appeared; her striped mane was scorched, but she was otherwise unharmed. She gaped at the scrapped robots, and I nudged her with my muzzle. “Not bad for a cursed zebra,” I teased, and the ghost of a smile settled on her lips as she blushed.

These were holding cells, but the locks in this section were actually pretty easy to pick. The half dozen cells were empty save for piles of bones. Clipboards dangled from pegs besides the doors, and one caught my eye, or rather the name on it did: ‘Doof, assault, week isolation’ had to be repeated twenty times on the page. I flipped back through the crispy papers. Half the names on the list for this cell were Doof. The interior barely had enough room for me; I couldn’t imagine how tight the bulky stallion would have found it.

I took a step inside and looked at the walls. Aside from a light in the ceiling and a bucket in the corner, there wasn’t much in here, but every inch was covered in crude sketches. One whole wall had been devoted to Macintosh’s Marauders. I tried to guess who each pony was, but his talent clearly hadn’t been art. I thought that one of the small ones was Echo, but I could only scratch my head and wonder about who the other little one was. Only they had a little sad face drawn on them. Sadder still, there was only one large pony in the picture. On another wall were lists of names categorized as ‘Trouble’, ‘Okay’, and ‘CUNTS’. I noticed Razorwire’s scratched-out name under that last one along with some others.

I flipped back through the pages on the clipboard, and there he was, again and again. From the dates on the clipboard, Doof spent

half his life in this box and the other in the only slightly-less-cramped cell below. For three years. The last dozen names at the bottom of the uppermost sheet had dates scattered over a year. Most of the entries in general were for fighting, but in the last year there was the ominous addition of 'rape' on the list as well, but oddly *only* in the last year or so. All the entries before that were for fighting.

"What's so fascinating?" Rampage asked behind me.

"Nothing," I said quickly, tossing the clipboard into the cell and closing the door behind me. Twist definitely didn't need to see that! "Come on. Let's go. Gotta get out of here soon." Then I was going to sit in Star House and cry for a week for Lacunae. And I wasn't going to move an inch till Rampage and I were better, no matter how I climbed the walls. My impulsiveness and fear had driven me from my friends and endangered others.

Rampage gave the door behind me a look, then eyed me suspiciously. I gulped. Then a pair of doors at the end of the row of cells popped open and a sentry buzzed, "Alert! Alert! Intruders detected!" I could have kissed that hunk of metal; saved by the killer robot!

Thirty seconds later, the sentry was scrapped by our focused firepower and the holding cell was left behind. I hurried forward into the next section, one that seemed to be mostly barracks. Twenty bunk beds lay in two rows of ten. I saw the bathrooms and kitchens, but I didn't want to get anywhere near plumbing at the moment. The floor was getting really warm, and the air grew more and more hazy as the smoke found ways to penetrate into the armory. I hurried through without stopping, continuing through break rooms, briefing rooms, and then to a formidable door marked 'Gun Vault'. I took one look at the lock and despaired. Maybe I'd find a key somewhere…

I left a part of my heart back with that room as we continued on… well, I would have if I had a heart. Eh, figurative language was beyond me. Then I frowned as I heard the sounds of fighting and shouting in the next room. As carefully as I could, I limped forward with Xanthe to the next set of double doors and pushed them open enough to peek through. The room beyond was the largest yet, some sort of big open mustering room like the atrium back in 99, only not as tall.

And it was full of ghouls in tattered guard uniforms who fought

each other with batons. Bullet casings were scattered all over the place, along with discarded firearms. Every ghoul was screaming, glowing with radiation, beating each other to a pulp and then regenerating. Screams of “Traitors!” croaked from some throats, but who was a traitor to whom was never really clear.

Graves had spent almost two centuries taking inventory. Had these guards really been fighting that long? Worse, on the far side, I saw a door marked ‘Security Command’.

So, how to get past dozens of ghouls who were eternally fighting to the death? Unfortunately, even as I thought that, two of them immediately charged me with feral screams. “Get the others,” I shouted to Xanthe as they closed the distance and I drew Vigilance and my sword. The blade intercepted one, halting its advance as it thrashed on the glowing edge, and I pivoted to the left to keep the other ghoul on the far side of its companion. Then I blew its brains out the back of its head with three rapid fire shots. As the ghoul dropped, I swapped my aim and planted four more rounds in the head of another.

Then I was nearly knocked off my hooves as a pegasus guard dropped onto my back, hugged my neck, and started to chew into my throat. I stabbed with the sword, but it was hard trying to find something vital to chop into without cutting into myself. I felt blood start to spurt as I tried to buck, but it was a lot trickier to do that with only three legs! I heard shouts from behind me; I thought it was my friends. Hoped it was…

Then I heard the crunch of baton on skull over and over again. “Let go of her, Raindrops!” croaked a mare as she struggled to pull the feral off. Finally, all three of us went for a tumble, but the ghoul was knocked free from my back. I pressed my foreleg to the bloody hole under my chin, and then balked at the sight of two ghoul pegasus mares, one with blood on her mouth. I put the last three rounds in the magazine into the head of that one, panting for breath as I waited for the bleeding to stop.

“You with S.W.A.T.?” the remaining ghoul shouted over the din, pushing me back towards the wall and away from the fight.

S.W.A.T.? What the heck was…oh, my armor. Well, I knew one answer that would save me a lot of questions. “Sure. Name’s Blackjack.”

“Oh thank Celestia! It feels like we’ve been fighting forever,” the ghoul said as she slumped. Her mane was a slightly clashing red

and green, and her coat resembled spoiled milk. “My name is Blossomforth. I don’t know what’s going on. Some said the missile was part of some jailbreak. Others claimed we should evacuate to the Core. I haven’t had a moment to think straight till you showed up.”

It was just like with Silver Spoon. It seemed that ghouls had a tendency to get stuck on certain things from when they were alive. I’d better keep her in the fantasy, unless I wanted her to go feral. “What’s the situation here?”

“Well, the alarms went off, and immediately we went into lockdown. Prisoners were rioting. There was no communication from the outside. Then that missile hit! Then Captain Sourcup said we were sticking tight, but others said we should evacuate. Then the captain pulled out his gun, and there were alarms going off and screaming and some ponies went crazy. Shots were fired, and then it was batons and hooves and fighting for our lives…” She trailed off, frowning with that look of something amiss she couldn’t quite put her hoof on. “Who’s doing all that screaming?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said as I saw my friends run up. “Looks like the rest of my team is here. We’re going to…arrest the Warden and evacuate as many ponies as we can.” My ass was starting to get toasty sitting on the metal floor. “Don’t worry about anything below us. It’s…taken care of.”

Silver Spoon sighed and said in a low murmur, “Blackjack, have you been lying to delusional ghouls again?” I smiled awkwardly and shrugged, and the gray ghoul sighed and covered her face with her hoof.

“Clear the room. Headshots. If they talk to you, try and save them,” I said, and Psychoshy groaned. I fixed the yellow pegasus with an even look. “I mean it. Give them a chance. Say you’re with the S.W.A.T. or whatever you have to. Otherwise, take them out.” Blossomforth stared at me in shock, and I said with an apologetic smile, “Sorry. We don’t have much time left. Call out to your co-workers if you can recognize them.” I loaded a fresh magazine into Vigilance, then frowned and worked the slide several times before it chambered the round.

The work was brutal, but short. Rampage, Stygius, and Psychoshy were more than capable of separating the ferals into workable clumps. If they talked, I put them behind me where Snips and Silver Spoon calmed them down. Xanthe kept out of sight, though

occasionally a feral dropped with bullets from nowhere. By the time we reached the other side, ten guards remained, watching as I put down the last one with the last three bullets in my gun.

"Special Weapons and Arcane Tactics doesn't mess around," Blossomforth murmured to a twitchy looking unicorn.

"I coulda been one of 'em," he replied nervously, looking at the corpses, then looked at her, squinted, and frowned. "You look like hell, Blossom." He shook his head. "I feel like hell…and who the hell is screaming like that?"

"We're going straight to Hoofington Memorial," I assured them. "There've been…side effects from the warhead."

"Going to be a trick, taking down the Warden with the prison under lockdown and on fire," Blossomforth said as she looked at me with a little smile.

"Well, I did pass this room with those two loveliest words 'Gun' and 'Vault' on the door," I said with a sublime smile. "Don't suppose any of you know where the key is?"

The pair looked at me, then over at security command.

Well, if my previous experiences were any kind of guide, the guard captain would be inside and be some sort of flaming apocalyptic demon of hell. I pushed open the door with my magic and slowly peered into to the office. There were two desks in front of dozens of terminals, all of them showing different parts of the prison. At least half showed only static, but others gave a great view of the fire blazing up around medical and sweeping towards the armory. I wondered how long that armored warhead would last before going boom.

No apocalyptic demon, though. Just a single pegasus skeleton in a guard's uniform slumped over the controls of a large security terminal with a dozen extra monitors and a pair of extra control panels connected to it. "Bones? Who leaves bones in the armory? What kind of sick joke is this?" the unicorn hissed nervously. He levitated the bones to the side and looked at the name tag. "Merriweather? But…I thought she was on vacation. Why would somepony dress up a bunch of bones in her uniform?"

"Just like I told you. Something bad's going on, Twitchy," Blossomforth said with a scowl. She pointed at a key in one of the panels attached to the terminal. "That's the captain's key! Why would the captain's key be here with no captain?"

"That's the key that needs to be turned to get out of here?" I asked

Snips. The round unicorn nodded. I stepped up beside the body and noticed a few more details: a pistol between her hooves, a hole in the back of the cracked skull, and a grimy slip of paper. I worked it free and looked at the mouth-scrawled note. 'They have my girl. Sorry.'

Oh yeah. More 'Hoofington sucks dock' reminders.

"Something really bad is going on, isn't it?" Blossomforth said as she nervously chewed her lower lip.

"Yeah. That's par for the course." Snips was investigating a large panel in the corner with the label 'Airshaft #4 Access'. "Is that our way up?"

"Of course," he said as he put his shears in the corner of the panel. "We still have two fliers. One goes up, finds the security station upstairs, turns the key there, we turn the key down here, everypony but the other flier goes through the door. Then the other flier pops up the shaft and we all get out of here. Easy peasy." He frowned as he pried the panel open. I felt more beads of sweat on my brow; damn, it was hot in here! The whole building was turning into an oven.

Then I saw a tongue of smoke lick out around the edge of the panel. "Snips…" I warned as I eyed the metal. Now that I was paying more attention to it and not the drilling sensation throbbing in my body, I could hear a low roar.

"Come on…get…off!" And with one last heave the panel came off and popped free. I heard the sudden intake of air, like the largest flaming pony ever taking a breath, and then a plume of fire exploded out the gap. I tried to lunge, but misstepped and failed to knock him aside. The flame poured over his features like a flamer as he fell back, clutching his blackened face as he screamed. The ball of fire rolled over the ceiling like a hunting, living thing and spread out as it dissipated.

I rushed to his side beside Silver Spoon, the squat blue pony's face a blackened ruin. In the air shaft that was supposed to be taking us into the warden's office was a solid sheet of flame. "Well, think you're hot enough to make it up that?" Rampage asked the stunned Psychoshy.

* * *

Heat, radiation, and Enervation were nibbling away at us as we

frantically tried to think of other ways to get into the Warden's office. Xanthe suggested trying to fix the beam gun and cut our way through. Blossomforth suggested trying to fly up the central shaft and hoping the robots or beam turrets didn't dust us before shooting our way into the office. To keep the guards occupied and not acknowledging their ghoul status, I gave them the task of taking the captain's key and raiding the gun vault.

"Well, what if I just stay here?" Rampage asked with a bright smile. "I mean, I've wanted to go out with a bang before. This sounds like it's going to be one hell of a bang! Right?"

I was using my pitiful medical skills to apply a bandage to cover Snips's blackened eyes. "If Blackjack has to face the Warden, she's going to need you," he croaked, his cooked face splitting and bleeding. "You can't stay…but I can."

"I'm not going to leave you to die!" I said firmly. He just lay there a moment and I added, "You cursed me. I'm holding you to uncursing me!"

"We already know I'm useless for that. Snails always made the connections in the end; it'll take him a while, but he'll figure this out." He gave the smallest little smile. "I'm not planning on dying here, anyway. Once you get into the Warden's office, you should be able to shut down the teleportation inhibitor talisman at the Warden's security station. Not hard, just smash it. Then I'll teleport up to you. Easy as pie."

"You can do that? Blind?" I asked, frowning in concern. He simply nodded.

"It's already hot as hell in here," Psychoshy said as she stared at him.

"It's going to get hotter the longer all of you waste time," he said as he limped in the direction of the terminals. I levitated the bones out of the chair and set them aside with care. Whatever had happened in here, it seemed Merriweather wasn't a willing participant. "Besides, I'm not much good in a fight now. But once the talisman is down, I'll be up there lickity split."

Twitchy and Xanthe trotted in, with the ghoul unicorn cursing the damned stripes while the zebra just ducked her head. Apparently ghoulish obliviousness could go further than just being a ghoul. They had quite a haul on their backs: shotguns, pistols, even a missile launcher! Okay, that brightened our prospects just a little. "You're sure you can get up to us?" I asked in concern. "Maybe one

other should stay with you? Just in case?

"I can only teleport myself. Just get up there, get inside, and smash the talisman," he said as he slumped against the controls. Twitchy put the key back in the slot. A blue glow spread out over the controls, then centered on the key. He coughed as the air grew hotter and thicker. The fire in the vent was like a furnace; even if there wasn't anything to burn, it was still making breathing as hard as hell.

He turned the key, and a door that one of the monitors was focused on slid open. "Hurry. You still have to find a way inside." Missile launcher and missiles sounded like a good place to start!

"Okay. Let's go," I said as I took one last look at the blind pony slumped over the controls. I knew how terrifying it was to be blinded like that; the disorientation…he was certainly handling it much better than I had, though.

Blossomforth showed us the way. It was good to have a guide with an intimate knowledge of the prison. The stairs to the supermax had two more turrets, but to my relief and delight they didn't start hosing us down with beam fire. Apparently somepony in our group had a talisman that marked us as friendlies. About time some things started going our way…so why was I getting so nervous as we walked up the stairs and into the supermax wing?

The supermax cells were of a different design. The blackened steel bars enclosing the walkways sat behind warped ballistic glass that kept out the swirling smoke. The cells had similar doors of reinforced glass that allowed nothing to be hidden inside. The sleeping mattresses looked glued to the floor and were all made of identical translucent material. Even the toilets were clear plastic! Even more oddly, there weren't any ghouls within. All of them contained bones rather than undead.

"I can't imagine what kind of sick zebra curse could do this! The radiation vaporized everything except their bones!" Blossomforth said with a scowl. The swirling clouds behind the glass were lit with a fiendish orange glow from below as we climbed higher and higher. The sentries that patrolled watched our movement with eerie silence, and I licked my lips, contemplating scrapping them now before the Warden could override whatever safety we'd found with the guards.

"What the hay did you have to do to end up in these cells?" Psychoshy asked in low tones.

"Oh, these were for special prisoners. Prisoners who the M.o.M. needed safe and sound for memory extractions and interrogations. Political prisoners. Criminal organizers. Traitors. Anypony that Pinkie needed intact," Blossomforth answered as we made our way down the row of cells. "We had to keep them secure from the rest of the prison, or else they'd be killed."

I slowed my pace a little and let Rampage get out ahead before I looked at the ghouls. "Did you know a pony named Doof?"

"Oh, you mean Fork 'n' Knives himself. Yeah. I did. Strange case," the pegasus said as she fluttered her crumpled wings. "I mean, I know he was a convicted rapist, but for a few years I just didn't believe it."

"How so?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"He fought like hell in here. I mean, sure…yeah…he was a criminal, but he stood up for other ponies. He wasn't in a gang, though Celestia knows everypony wanted him on their side. He was just here. We threw him in solitary just to give him a chance to heal before putting him back out again. Every week he'd get beat to shit, and every other week we'd lock him up," Blossomforth said with a shake of her head. "Said he deserved it."

"Yeah…" I muttered, thinking about the waste of a potentially good pony.

"Then he went bad," Twitchy muttered as he kept eying the smoke. "Really bad…"

"How?"

"Doof wrote letters every day he could see straight. He wanted to see this one mare. Just once. Said he'd happily be locked up the rest of his life if he could talk to her for five minutes and tell her how sorry he was," Blossomforth said with a small frown. "Never found out who, but I guess that one of her friends told him she'd never ever ever ever ever speak to him again. Pushed him over the edge…" The ghoul shivered. "After that we weren't locking him up to protect him, but to protect everypony else from him. Kept provoking us to put a bullet in him…send him to Hell where he belonged. Finally he got transferred out of here. Don't know where…don't want to know."

And then they took an angry, nigh-suicidal monster and made him into a cyberpony of death. I really had to wonder about Silver Stripe's judgment on that one. I looked into the next cell we passed and then frowned. "Huh…"

Blossomforth followed my look, and her desiccated and battered wings popped out as she ran to the cell. “Cell 712! Shady Legs is supposed to be in there!” She looked at Twitchy. “Supermax confirmed full roll call this morning, right? No absences?”

The nervous unicorn nodded. “Yeah! I heard Merriweather…oh sparklefarts…” he murmured as we passed another. Cell 722. “Another one!”

“A breakout just before the missile hits? But nopony escapes from Hightower!” Blossomforth flew down the hallway, calling out, “731! 740! 755! 780! They’re empty!” The ghoul swooped back. “Not just a breakout! A mass breakout!”

“Really?” I found myself smiling. “And nopony *ever* escapes from Hightower?” Warden was gonna be pissed…

“I need to see cell 755,” Carrion said at once as he flew up to Blossomforth. The mare looked at me in concern. I nodded to her and she looked back to him and nodded in turn.

“You have two minutes!” I shouted after them. If that didn’t fulfill the terms of his Contract, then too bad. I wasn’t going to leave Snips down there a moment longer than we had to. Even with the ballistic glass, the air was getting pretty thin. As a test, I nuzzled said glass along the edge of the walkway and jerked my face back quickly. Okay. If it was that hot up here…

“One and a half minutes!” I amended as the rest of us hurried along. 755 was around the corner, and when we found it I noticed to my chagrin that its furnishings were far more civil. The bed was a featherdown mattress covered in rumpled red velvet sheets, and it had a drape across the front window. Was it just me, or was it even larger than the other cells? There were a bookcase and writing desk in the corner, and the toilet had another drape encircling it.

“Wow. I knew Kingpin had it good, but wow,” Rampage muttered as she stared at the cell. “Is that a minifridge? How the hay did he get away with a minifridge?!”

“The rules permit prisoners with good behavior to own a few personal items,” Blossomforth muttered lamely.

“Yeah. That’s, like, a few photographs. It’s not a minifridge!” Rampage snorted indignantly and pulled the door open, staring at bottles of wine. “Wine! He…that…do you have any idea how many sex acts I had to pull for a half dozen cigarettes?!”

I looked at the red velvet drapes, not wanting to hear the answer. Carrion was staring at the room too, at a loss: this wasn’t a two

minute job. It'd take an hour, at least.

"Okay. Everypony take a different spot, strip it, and dump it in my saddlebags! Stuff it in!" I said as I magically levitated the sheets and wadded them up before stuffing it inside the container. I could handle the weight. I'd let my PipBuck inventory spell magically sort it all out and get them to fit. In two minutes, almost everything that had been loose in the cell was in my bags, and I was near my carrying capacity. I made sure all the sheets were tucked inside the bulging pockets; I certainly didn't want them to catch fire.

Once the bed was uncovered, Carrion dragged his claws along the upholstery and sent fluff and feathers everywhere; if there was something useful in there, he'd shred it. "Wait wait wait!" I shouted and carefully waved my stump at him. He backed away, and I levitated up the whole mat of feathers and slowly shrank my field and sent the feathers tumbling like snow. Nothing. I supposed it was too obvious. Rampage had raided the minifridge, tucking the wine bottles into her bags.

"What?" she asked defensively as she popped open one and took a long pull off it then looked down at the label. "I'm swigging a Fancee 912? This is a vintage that should be savored!" She then upended the bottle and chugged it down, before belching loudly. "There. Consider it savored," she said, smacking her lips.

Oooookay…"Let's get moving. Let's get that teleportation field down quick. I don't want to leave Snips down there a minute longer than I have to."

"I still don't see how you're going to get into the Warden's quarters. There's nopony in there to turn the key," Psychoshy said, then looked at Stygius. "Stygius can only teleport where he can see. So unless those doors are ballistic glass too…"

"They're not," Blossomforth added as we trotted up the stairs towards the highest level. Half of us were coughing from the smoke in the baking air. I didn't want to imagine what Snips was going through down below. Then, as if anticipating our troubles, there was a resounding explosion below us and the swirling orange suddenly writhed madly as tongues of flame sprayed over the ballistic glass.

Then I froze as I heard a dreadful crackling, splintering noise from my left and stared at the huge fractures spiderwebbing through the warped glass. I watched as they grew by the second, then snapped across the entire pane with a brittle pop. "Oh no…run!" I shouted

as the weakened glass fell away from its steel anchors and tumbled into the inferno below.

And instantly the corridor we were in was transformed into a baking oven of swirling smoke. The heat was absolutely staggering; the smoke assailed my throat and chest with every breath. Cinders stung any exposed hide as the hot smoke curled around us. But perhaps worst of all was the sharp spike in radiation; for all that the smoke was a shield before, now the roaring fire seemed to be filling the air with stuff that made my PipBuck click madly.

There was one saving grace: my eyes weren't flesh and blood. Even the ghouls had shut their eyes against the cinders and stinging smoke, but I still had a few feet of visibility. Breathing was another matter, though, as I went from one pony to the next, screamed in their ears for them to bite the tail of the pony in front of them, and then guided that tail into their mouth. In one ridiculous conga line, I led us up the stairs and around to where the door for the Warden should be. I could only hope that nopony in the chain let go and got lost.

Hot. No air to breathe. My skin scoured by fire and my radiation popping up ridiculously fast. And worse, as if it could sense our peril, the curse inside me began to tear like a wild radroach inside my chest. All I wanted was to get out and breathe the cool, damp, smoke-free air of the Hoof.

Then I wanted to curl up with Glory for the rest of my life.

For a heart-pounding moment, I was absolutely positive that I'd screwed up again; shouldn't we have been at the door by now? I wondered if my mane was on fire; I glanced back at where Rampage was biting my tail, but she wasn't burning yet. There wasn't anything to do but keep going, crawling along the supermax cells as my head spun. Too much smoke. Too much damned smoke! Was I going around in circles? I was…wasn't I?

Then I fell into the small alcove and looked around to see another massive door like the one in front of the armory, though this one had two monitors next two it. I staggered back as far as I could, croaked something that might have been 'hold on' or 'get clear', and used every bit of focus I could muster to lift the missile launcher. I focused, aimed at the door, and pressed the trigger with my magic. The missile made a soft 'puft', popping out the end and then igniting with a brief woosh that ended in a blast that showered me with debris a half second later. I coughed as I advanced again; that

had to have...

Done nothing. There were a smoldering black smear and some scratches in the middle of the door. Either I'd been too close, or, as feared, the door was able to stand up to any armament in the prison. I crumpled at the portal that might as well have been a wall, choking and retching, trying to get enough air in me to think. To buy time, I pulled the others all in one after the next till everypony was accounted for. We had to do something. Some way to get inside…but the only two people inside were the Warden and Snails…and I doubted Snails had access to a monitor.

That left the Warden…the Warden who was probably watching us choking to death at his door, glad to see another inspection team biting the dust. But how the heck was I supposed to get him to let me in? I couldn't even see Silver Spoon as more than a vague lump. I'd need something more than us dying out here…something that'd make him want to talk to us…

Warden's gonna be pissed…

I rose to my hooves and walked in front of the two monitors. A camera immediately focused on me.

"Warden Hobble!" I shouted at the camera, barely able to hear myself over the ongoing roar of the flames.

The left screen flickered. Then the Warden's charred visage appeared. He looked positively shocked. "Oh, you're still here? I thought that you were all…safe in the armory."

In the gloom, the sentries suddenly began to buzz, "Intruders detected. Please present identification or be disintegrated."

"Ah. Well, that should do. Now if you don't mind, I have a prison to get back under control." There were no two ways about it; he had to be delusional.

"Kingpin escaped," I choked out, glaring at the camera. The charred ghoul paused, then looked at me in a long, steady stare.

"Pardon?" I reached out, grabbed Blossomforth, and hauled the squishy pegasus before the camera and monitors.

"It's true, sir," Blossomforth shouted. "Six of the supermax cells are empty." I looked at the other monitor, frowning in worry. Was Snips still there? Please…please be there.

"What kind of…this is…I would have been notified…" the Warden spluttered as he looked to the side and back at me. I saw his eyes widen. "Nopony escapes from Hightower. Nopony!" the Warden shouted, slamming his hooves down repeatedly.

"Open the door and I'll give you my evidence. Maybe you can catch them again," I said, hearing the grind of the sentries' wheels approaching.

The Warden stared at me for what felt like an eternity. "Oh, very well." There was a buzz, and a light lit up under the Warden's monitor. "Armory, let them enter." Nothing. I stared at the little light, then at the blank monitor. No…please be there…please, Snips…

Nothing.

Then the light flashed to life, there was another buzz, and then the heavy metal door opened with a whoosh. The cool gust gave us all the correct direction to go: up the stairs. Ten seconds later we were through, and the door closed with a bang. Most of us, ghouls and living alike, collapsed and concentrated on not cooking. Psychoshy wheezed and choked as she fell beside Stygius. I suspected that it was Xanthe's suit that kept the zebra upright. Rampage coughed up something the consistency of tar. I wanted to do the same…but not yet.

I staggered up onto my three legs and clawed my way up the stairs. The air in the Warden's level was hazy but far more breathable than that below. I made my way up to where the stairs opened up into a security room. Two sentries slumped, deactivated, and the turrets in the corners of the room were inactive. The Warden, or something else? There was a metal door to the side, and I pushed it open to reveal a security terminal identical to the one below in the armory. The larger central monitor was focused down the shaft into glowing fire, and I looked at the controls and found one that said 'Camera Focus'. I hit it repeatedly and saw the image change over and over again.

Then it stopped on the image of the armory security station; I froze as I saw the form of Snips slumped over the controls. Where was the talisman? I couldn't see a magical talisman or anything marked 'Teleportation Disruption' or anything! I did, however, spot a button marked 'Intercom'. I mashed it with a hoof, and the roar of the fire blasted out the speakers. "Snips! Snips! I'm inside, but I can't see the talisman! Where is it?" I shouted. He didn't move, and I put my hoof through one of the side monitors as I yelled into the microphone, "Snips! Don't be dead! Tell me where the talisman is!"

He moved and lifted his bandaged face. Sweet Celestia, it was so hot in there he was smoking, cooking before my eyes. His hoof

reached out, found the microphone on its little wand, and pulled it to his lips. “On the roof,” he rasped, barely audible even with the microphone against his mouth. I felt the world lurch around me; what did he mean, ‘on the roof’? “Doesn’t matter, anyway. I was never smart enough to figure out how to teleport.”

“You lied…” I murmured.

“I lied,” he said with a little nod. “Somepony needed to stay here to buzz you through. If I hadn’t, somepony else would have had to. I didn’t want your friends to do it. I didn’t want you to try and be noble and sacrifice yourself for us. And while you might have been able to talk one of the guards into doing it, I didn’t want to take the chance of them going feral and everypony dying because of me.” He shook as his hair smoked. “I deserve this, Blackjack.”

“Nopony deserves this!” I contradicted at once. The pain of the curse had spread out almost over my entire body, and my shock seemed to make it surge once more. I struggled to keep focused on the screen. My pain could wait till later.

“I do. Your zebra was right. I’ve tried not to think about it for two centuries, but Snails and I meddled in things we had no right to. Ponies were killed for us…or by what we did,” he said as he bowed his head. “I wasn’t honest with all of you at the outset, but that’s the Wasteland, isn’t it? If I’d trusted you, we could have done this better. Graves. Lacunae. They died because I forced us to go through here. And trust me, in two centuries, I’ve done plenty in the Wasteland to deserve burning.” He hung his head as the glowing smoke and licking flames swirled behind him.

“You don’t. Please…there has to be some way!” I begged, trying to will all of this to not be true.

“There isn’t…so listen…you have to get Snails out of here. That’s been... all I could think of for two centuries. Get him out of here. He can help you... he never screws it up! It might take him some time, but he gets where he’s going.” The blackened face gave a tired grin. “Tell him I cast the swirly curse from the black book. The swirly one. Swirly. Remember. Tell him…tell him I tried to get him out as soon as I could. And tell him that I’m sorry I forgot the donuts.” His bandages were smoking now as well. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry…”

“I forgive you,” I said as he curled up in his seat. The image flickered several times. “Snips!” The last image I saw before static filled the screen was a round, blackening, pony-shaped lump with a smoldering mane; I prayed it wasn’t my imagination that there was

a smile on his face. I hit buttons at random, trying to bring up something, some confirmation that he was alive. That he could still be saved by some means! Maybe…maybe the Warden would send a robot to pluck him to safety! Maybe the Goddess would give me the magic to teleport right into that inferno and pluck him out.

The screens on the security station began to play all kinds of crazy pictures; recordings, I guessed, since they showed parts of the prison whole and intact. They interspersed with the static of ruined cameras and blurts of recorded conversation. Most appeared to be interviews with prisoners. I spotted the sparkly-hoofed Garnet speaking with a fat white earth pony, but I didn't care. I had to find Snips again.

Then I heard something that made me freeze reflexively. Though it had been weeks since I'd last heard it, the voice pierced my panicked denial and pinned me in place. "Damn it, Vanity, I don't care what that cunt says. I want to see her!"

My eyes focused on the muscled mass with the anguished face. Even though he wasn't a Marauder anymore, Doof still had the powerful physique of a pony who worked out regularly. His gray hide was marred by tracks of scars; I'd never thought that those scars on Deus might have come from before he was turned into a cyberpony.

Vanity sat on the other side of the table, his hooves folded before him. "Use that word again, and this meeting is done," he said in cold finality. Doof shook with the effort to keep himself restrained. "I am here for her, not you. She says no, Doof. Respect that."

The huge pony shook some more and then let out a little sob. "I can't. Don't you get it? I have to see her at least once. I have to…I have to explain to her what I did. Why…please…" he begged as tears ran down his scarred cheeks. "Please, talk to her. Tell her I just want five minutes. After that, she never has to see me again."

"She's made her decision, Doof," Vanity said and rose to his hooves. "Respect it. Do your time and move on. Try to contact Twist again and it'll be Applesnack coming to tell you no."

"You sanctimonious rich fuck!" Doof screamed at him, looking truly deranged in his anguish. "You have no fucking clue what she means to me!"

"I don't care, Doof," Vanity said with chilling hatred. "You betrayed us. Have you forgotten that? You're not a pony. You're not even a zebra; I have respect for them as opponents. You're a rapist

scumbag who should be locked up in here for the rest of your life."

"You have no right to judge me! I know how you fucked up Jetstream's head so bad she's in Happyhorn now! How are you any better, Vanity? How!?" he roared, and he rose and slammed his hooves on the table so hard it split down the middle. The door buzzed and two earth ponies ran in with two unicorns behind them; even as a team, they struggled to beat and subdue him. "You think I'm a scumbag?! I'll show you who I am. I'm a fucking god of pain and misery, you rich fuck, and when I get out of here, nopony is going to stop me! Nopony!"

I felt like I couldn't move or breathe for a moment when that image of the screaming Doof being dragged out of the room disappeared along with every other and the Warden filled every screen. "Miss, I believe you said something about an escape?" I could have also said something about a fire and a balefire bomb, but I doubted it would register. "I do hope you'll come in and elaborate, immediately."

"On my way," I said softly, dropping my eyes as the Warden disappeared. A god of pain and misery…funny. He could have been talking about me, and considering what he became…

I wasn't going to be like him. I wasn't. I couldn't.

The maiden is born of heartache and sorrow, and I know you suffer. She butchers all who oppose her. She sows destruction for the entire world.

No... I swayed as I felt the curse tearing at me. It felt like I was falling away from my own body.

Why the fuck shouldn't she think of you as Nightmare Moon? Why the fuck shouldn't everyone?

Please... stop... please...

"Hey... " came Rampage's voice from the door. I moved slowly, like a zombie ghoul, and used her to pull myself slowly back together. "Snips didn't make it, did he?" I couldn't answer, so I grit my teeth and nodded, tears cutting dirty lines in the soot that covered me. She sighed and shook her head. "So... want to go through all the hating on yourself and beating yourself up, or would you rather have more bad news first?"

I looked at her standing there. She looked... tired. "More bad news."

"Why am I not surprised?" she muttered. "Psychoshy and Stygius are really bad off. She won't wake up and he can barely stand. I

think that it was smoke inhalation."

"Is she going to die?" I asked as I turned and left the monitors behind. Left Snips behind. I'd punish myself appropriately when I had the whole butcher's bill for this fiasco.

"Maybe. If you want to keep that answer from being yes, we need to get the lockdown lifted and get the hell out of here." I nodded and walked slowly past her, feeling... disconnected? Like something in me had finally given way and now I wasn't completely sure if I was really doing this or not. Was this what it felt like to lose your mind? "Blackjack?"

"I need to find the attic first. I need to find Snails... I owe Snips that," I said in a daze. "Which way is the attic?"

"Owe Snips?!" Rampage shouted. "You don't owe him anything! He should be glad I didn't buck his head clean off his shoulders when he couldn't remove the curse!"

"He wanted to help his friend... " I muttered.

She kicked me upside the head, knocking me sprawling. Oddly, the pain helped me focus, and I rubbed my aching skull as I looked back up at her. "Are you saying that you'd curse a pony with a death spell you can't remove just to save one of your friends? 'Cause if that answer is yes, then you're getting another kick!" I blinked up at her, and she grabbed me with her hoofclaws and hauled me up to look me in the eye. "I don't care if it is for a friend. I don't care if it's for me. There is shit you do not do. The ends do not justify the means!" she said as she gave me another shake. Then the world went white.

~ ~ ~

Once again I was looking down at Rarity's Canterlot apartment. The room would have done my own room proud with the amount of clutter strewn all over the place. Clothes, papers, books, and zebra statuary and masks all vied to consume what had once been a tastefully decorated living space. The glass case that had held parasprites was replaced by the black book. She stared down at it, turning the pages over and over again as if searching for something amid the glyphs.

"It has to be here. Somewhere... where is it? Show me!" she muttered as her azure eyes, horribly bloodshot and puffy, moved erratically over the page. Beside her sat the small pink egg-shaped

talisman covered in markings rendered in golden wire. It pulsated with its own slow heartbeat.

Then there came a soft knock at the door. Rarity ignored it. A second knock, barely louder than the first. Rarity huffed but kept working. Then there was a resounding thud as the door was knocked clear off its hinges and flew into the apartment. Rarity gasped as she turned to stare at the empty doorframe. A second later, a little white bunny hopped in and fixed Rarity with a stern glare. Fluttershy flew in after him, “Now Angel, you really should give people a chance to answer their doors and not just kick them down.” She blinked and looked at all the mess, then at Rarity. “Um... I hope this isn’t a bad time... ”

“It is a bad time, Fluttershy,” Rarity replied in a mutter, frowning at the other mare. “Things are quite a mess right now... ” Without looking back, she levitated the talisman off the table and hid it in her tail.

“Oh. Well... um... I need to talk to you about something,” the pegasus murmured, and Rarity actually grimaced.

“It’s one in the morning, Fluttershy. Honestly, anything you need to talk about can wait until the morning,” she snapped brusquely as she trotted to the door.

“Well... ah... I’m afraid I’m going to have to... um... ” Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“What was that?” Rarity scowled. Fluttershy muttered again, a touch louder. “Fluttershy! Please! It’s late and I still have so much to do.”

“I’m going to have to in... in... ” She gulped, and finally spat out, “Insist!” The yellow mare sat in the doorway, tapping her hooves together, eyes lowered. Angel stood beside her, arms crossed and foot tapping rapidly besides him.

“Fluttershy!” The pegasus’s determination seemed to startle Rarity. “Honestly! What’s gotten into you?”

She swallowed, then nodded to the little white rabbit. He grinned, his ears twitching this way and that. Like a fuzzy missile, he launched himself at her terminal, dove under the desk, emerged with a black plastic box trailing wires, and snapped it over his knee. Another swivel of his ear and he leapt into a potted plant. A tiny spritebot came buzzing out, but the rabbit flew through the air and exploded it in a single furious kick. Then he looked right at me and leapt up at me in two bounds.

“Wait! That one’s mine!” Rarity shrieked. Angel froze, tiny fist curled as he glared at me, then looked at Fluttershy. The mare shook her head slowly, and the little animal huffed, then jumped away. His ears worked a few more seconds, and then he nodded with a smug smile.

Fluttershy took a deep breath and then raised her teal eyes to meet Rarity’s annoyed glare. “I got the report about the crash in the Canterlot mountains.”

“You’re bothering me this late about that?” Rarity said with a roll of her eyes. “The official report is coming off tomorrow. Zebra sympathizer sabotage. Nothing to bother yourself with.”

But Fluttershy didn’t back down. “I got a notice from the emergency responders about something unusual... a pony trapped in the wreckage who wouldn’t die... even as they b-b-burned... ” She stammered and shuddered, her mane curling slightly as it fell in front of her eyes. “They reported he was trapped... pierced and crushed by the wreckage... and then you showed up, personally, and he died soon after.”

It was impossible for a white unicorn to get paler, but somehow Rarity seemed to manage it. “I... I... I just... ” She forced a nervous grin, her magnificently curled mane seeming to tighten as she fought for an explanation. “Really, Fluttershy, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

Angel pushed Fluttershy’s mane out of her eyes, and she slowly looked up, then spoke in a quiet, yet extremely firm voice. “It’s not nothing Rarity. Something kept that pony alive... burning... in agony... for hours. And there’ve been other reports, too... ponies suffering horrible injuries or accidents and then taking far longer to die than they should.”

“Well... don’t tell me that’s a bad thing!” Rarity stammered as she backed away. “Death is a horrible thing... the absolute worst.”

Fluttershy bowed her head again. “Yes. It is horrible... ” she nearly whispered, but then she looked at Rarity again and said, “But it’s not the worst, Rarity.”

“Fluttershy, please! You can’t tell me that death isn’t the most horrible thing you can imagine,” Rarity said, sounding stunned. “Think about Big Macintosh... and Pinkie Pie and Applejack... are you saying that us dying isn’t the worst possible thing?”

Fluttershy didn’t answer, and Rarity slowly relaxed a little before the yellow mare answered softly, “I can imagine all kinds of terrible

things. I've seen bodies sent to their families, heard their cries when they realize a loved one is gone. I've seen children mourning dead parents. And I saw Applejack and Twilight at Big Macintosh's funeral. And there is no question that death is a horrible thing and I hate it, but it's not the worst. I've *seen* worse... "

Rarity glanced over her shoulder at the black book, then back at the bowed pegasus. Her mouth worked, but nothing came out. "You want to know what's worse than death, Rarity? Suffering. Pain. I've heard ponies screaming in agony; I've held ponies as they struggled to take a breath, knowing that the next one would hurt them even more. I've seen ponies without a cut on their bodies go mad from the torment of what was happening to their loved ones. More than death, pain is the absolute worst possible thing. And fear of that pain is every bit as terrible as the pain itself."

Rarity just stared at her friend as tears ran down her cheeks. "Fluttershy... I don't want you to die. I... I think about it every night, and... I can't face what will happen if I have to go to a funeral for you or Twilight or even Applejack. It... hurts... " But then she smiled and brought the pink egg out from inside her tail. Fluttershy stared at the talisman in shock. "But... but I've been working on a way to keep you safe! To keep all of us safe! Once I get it working right, none of us ever need to worry about that ever again!"

"That's a restoration talisman... but it's been changed... " She stared at it and then at Rarity. "What does it do?"

"Well, this is an incomplete one, but when activated... it contains a pony's soul, and then it can regenerate a pony from that soul. In theory, anyway... " she said, looking down at it. "We've had severe problems with the soul extraction process, but once we get the kinks ironed out, we... " Her voice trailed off as she noticed the horror on Fluttershy's face.

"Contains a soul?" she asked weakly.

"Well, yes. That helps power the magic. It takes quite a bit of it to restore a whole pony." She looked at it a moment, then back at the black book, before saying desperately, "But don't you see? With this, you'll never die! Never be hurt again... "

"Rarity... is this what you were working on in Hightower? Those patients in Happyhorn... were they they... were they... *test subjects*?" she whispered in horror.

Rarity didn't answer; she seemed frozen in place. Finally, she

turned away, and now she was the one hanging her head. “They were criminals. The worst of the worst.” Fluttershy gave a little sob, pressing her hooves to her mouth as she sat back. Rarity then turned and gave a near-manic grin. “But don’t you see, Fluttershy? Don’t you understand... once we have these, the war is effectively over. They won’t be able to kill us! We’ll all be safe. Forever!”

Then Fluttershy lowered her hooves and slowly stood. Her eyes hardened as she stared straight at Rarity. “I don’t want it.”

Rarity blinked, and her mane slowly seemed to frizz before my eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

“I don’t want it. I don’t want something inside me that sucks out my soul to keep me alive,” she said in that quiet yet firm voice. “You can keep it. And I know our friends will feel the same way.”

“Fluttershy!” Rarity gasped. “Think of what you’re saying!”

“I could say the same, Rarity,” Fluttershy said evenly, her stare drilling into the white unicorn. “It doesn’t matter how wonderful it is... I’d never accept anything that was made through killing people!”

Rarity gave a hysterical little laugh. “Ha! That’s rich of *you,* giving me that. You gave the zebras your megaspells for *peace*! Was that okay then?”

“No,” Fluttershy replied, and the laughing unicorn grew silent as the pegasus hung her head. “No... I think I might have made a terrible mistake when I did that. And every day, I regret that I did. I know it was for peace... and I hope that somehow, in the end, it works out that way... but no. I was wrong then... just as you’re wrong now.”

Rarity’s magic made the stone tremble in the air before her. “Do you... do you have any idea what I’ve gone through to create this... for you? For all of you?” She looked on the verge of snapping completely, and for a moment I was certain she was about to cast some horrible spell on her best friend.

“I know how many patients Happyhorn received from Hightower, so I have an idea. But I still do not want it, Rarity. I’d never want something like this if even one pony died to make it,” she said as she reached out, took the talisman in her hooves, and set it aside. Rarity looked like she was going to explode. “What I really want is my wonderful friend back... not some magic trinket... ” She pulled Rarity into a brief embrace, then turned and trotted out once more. Angel bunny pointed two fingers at his eyes, then pointed them at

Rarity, and then hopped out after Fluttershy.

Rarity stood frozen in place for several minutes, looking at the designs and the papers and the talisman and then at the black book. “I thought she’d understand... I thought she could appreciate it more than any other pony... how dare she? How... ” She lifted the black book and screamed at the top of her lungs, “I made it for you!”

And suddenly the white unicorn was in a frenzy, her magic tossing and ripping the pages out of books, splitting the sheets, tearing down the crates, and tossing the grotesque wooden zebra sculptures out the window as she moved like a purple-maned tornado of destruction. The sharp edges cut her fetlocks and smeared her forelegs with blood, but she ignored the injuries in her frenzy. “You said it would make them happy!” she roared as she swept the desktop clear with the black book. “You said it would keep them safe!” Then her magic surged, and she flipped the entire desk over in a crash of her art supplies. “Everything I did... was for... nothing!” she shrieked and threw the black book with all of her might, sending it flying against the large standing mirror in the corner. It struck dead center and sent dozens of cracks radiating out from the impact.

Rarity panted and gasped for air from the exertion. “I just wanted to keep her safe... I just wanted... Oh Fluttershy... what have I done?” She stared at the blood on her hooves. Then the white unicorn sat in the middle of the devastation she’d wrought, head bowed as she wept.

Rarity then looked up at the broken mirror and wiped at her tears, smearing her cheeks in red before rising. Step by step she approached, looking at the broken reflection. She looked at the different shards of herself reflected back, counting softly. “Forty-two... Of course... ” she murmured, then smiled faintly. “Silly Rarity... a present doesn’t count if you take it from somepony else. It only counts... if it comes from yourself... ”

~ ~ ~

I lurched as the recording ended and tumbled over onto my back as my brain processed what it had just seen. Fluttershy had been right. It’d taken Hightower and being separated from my friends to make me realize that. No data for EC-1101 was worth the deaths of my

friends. I lay there on the floor for a moment and sighed. “Learning sucks,” I muttered as I sprawled there. “I need to get to the attic... does Razorwire remember the way?”

“Yeah, sure. Right down that way, Pink,” Rampage said a she pointed with her hoof. Then she looked at me in concern. “What exactly have you learned that sucks?” she asked as she heaved me to my hooves.

I paused and looked at her for a long moment. “There isn’t anything about Rarity that will set you off, is there?” I asked bluntly, feeling numb and disconnected from myself.

“I have no idea. You tell me,” she said as we limped out together.

So I did.

She led me down a hall and around the corner, and I told her about Rarity’s quest to become immortal, how she wanted to protect her friends, and just what it had cost. When the story was finished and the holes were filled in, Rampage wore a stunned and worried look. “Whoa... learning does suck.”

“Told you,” I said as I limped along. “Blissful ignorance. That’s the ticket. I was so blissful before I knew any of this crap.”

“Really?” Rampage replied. “I thought life in 99 sucked?”

“Compared to Hightower right now, that sucking was bliss,” I replied with a smirk.

“Whine whine whine. Who knew being a hero involved so much whining?” the striped pony said with a faint smile, but it quickly died. “So, am I just a magic talisman crammed with too many pony souls?”

“And one zebra,” I added. “Whatever Proditor did to change their stripes must have involved some sort of soul-affecting magic, somehow. That’s why you’ve got them too.”

“Heh... wow. Don’t know why I’m so keen to die. I was never born in the first place. I was built!” She shook her head back and forth as she walked, groaning. “It’s way too late to go back to just thinking I’m a pony with no memory, isn’t it? I mean, even alicorns were once ponies, right?”

“I think so. Twilight used magic to change them into what they are now. Somehow the Goddess can do it too.” I didn’t want to know more details than that. I had little bits of goddess in my brain, and that was already more than I wanted to know. “You’re still Rampage.” That made her laugh, and not in a particularly nice way.

“Oh, well, that’s just fine, then! Rampage, who can’t have a kid

because she's got a little psychotic foalkiller inside. Along with the punk, the professor, and Proditor, and... whoever else is in me!" she said, gesturing to herself. "I like Mint-als. Is that because of Twist inside me? Huh? Is it because Octopus was popping them on the sly 'cause he was losing his marbles? What! Nothing about who I am makes sense!"

I sighed and sat, patting her shoulder with my remaining forehoof. "Well, at least you're in good company."

I paused as I looked down the hall at a pair of double glass doors. 'Garage' was printed above them. Some kind of blast barrier had been dropped behind them, cutting them off. That wasn't what shocked me, though. It was the tiny purple figurine lying on its side beside a metal door next to the pair. Slowly I approached, step by step, till I reached out with my magic and picked up the teeny tiny figurine of Twilight Sparkle. I slowly turned it over in shock, five breathless ponies in the back of my mind squealing in glee.

I stared at the inscription on the base. *'Be a brainiac!'*

Huh?

Then Twilight Sparkle's head fell clean off!

I was so shocked that I dropped the figurine, and it shattered into hundreds of ceramic pieces at my hooves. Habazawah?! How... they... that wasn't supposed to happen! A tiny Applejack in my head consoled a sobbing Pinkie Pie. I looked over at the metal door and pushed my way through. What I saw on the other side stopped me almost immediately.

Mares. Thousands of them. The Ministry Mares predominated, in dozens of different poses. Many of them were unpainted, powdery white things. Others were cracked or chipped. There were also lots of figurines of Trixie. Of Silver Spoon and Twist. Of Snips. Of Apple Bloom, Scootaloo, and Sweetie Belle. There were countless inscriptions, many misspelled or otherwise odd. I picked up one of Snips and saw the words beneath it. 'Best friend.'

Nurse Graves had withstood Enervation by counting inventory, Blossomforth by fighting, and the Warden by being an evil bastard. No guess how Snails had endured. I walked past the shelves, the pottery bench, and a machine that looked like it was designed to pulverize the clay back into powder. There were countless empty glaze jars lying in heaps and piles around the work table. Beside that was an electric kiln. And then I heard sobs in the next room over.

“Hello?” I called out as we walked past the workshop and towards a doorway with a large room beyond. “Please don’t be crazy,” I murmured as I walked slowly forward. This room had a bad vibe to it. For the first time since starting my climb up Hightower, the air felt chill against my hide. The scream of Enervation was different here, more focused. Almost like it was countless voices calling out in unison.

The floor of the room had been carved with strange markings that looked like zebra glyphs, and yet at the same time there was an odd difference that gave them an air of something wholly other. The markings in the floor gave the inexplicable impression that they were meant to be felt rather than viewed. Holes were punched into the floor within the designs, and when I knelt down, I could see red fragments of gemstones in the voids. There were all kinds of strange symbols on the walls, diagrams and designs, some crossed out and others annotated with circles and comments.

This was where Project Eternity *played* with necromancy.

“Look at that, Blackjack... ” Rampage said as she pointed at a diagram of a pony with a black ball of swirling shadow above it. Beneath the pony was written the question: ‘If a soul is infinite, can the soul be split infinitely?’

Split a soul? As I stared at the diagram, everything faded into white once more.

~ ~ ~

“Mistress Rarity. I... are you sure about this?” Snips said as he stood in the middle of the workroom in a ridiculous black cloak and robe. “The black book doesn’t say anything about cutting a soul in two. Rending and destroying one... okay. Cursing a pony to shatter their soul and scatter it, yeah. But slicing it neatly in two? I don’t think the book sees much point in just two pieces.”

“That’s why it’s an experiment, Darling. And hopefully one of our last. If this doesn’t work... well... I’ll just have to try and make the best one I can... ” Snips looked up at her in confusion, but then dropped his eyes from the glamorous mare. She wore a dress of the darkest purple, barely a shade away from black.

She walked through the workroom and into the ritual chamber. My view swapped from one room to the other, following them. I noticed that most of the notes had been cleared away. Another

unicorn, tall and lanky and wearing a similar black robe, nodded to them. In the middle of the room was a gray pony I'd seen before. Octavia stood in the center apprehensively, hugging her contrabass and bow like they were a comforting blanket. "M-M-Ministry Mare," she stammered.

"Please. Call me Rarity," the white unicorn said as she smiled gently. "I understand you've fallen on some hard times, and I'd like to help you out. But first, I need you to help me, Octavia. You see, I need to try a spell. It's something that's never been done before." She put her hoof around Octavia's shoulders and gave her a hug. "But I want you to be okay with helping me. If you don't want to help, you can leave. With the bits I offered."

The gray pony frowned, but looked back at the white mare. "What... what will it do?"

"We're going to take a piece of your soul, cut it off, and put it into your instrument there. If it works, your instrument will last... well... forever. That piece of you will preserve it for all time."

"My instrument?" Octavia looked at it, then at Rarity. "Will it hurt?" I realized, listening to her, that Octavia spoke with a slight accent, an odd, sophisticated-sounding one. Actually kinda like Crumpets, but with less swearing.

Rarity was sympathetic. "Probably. But it's something we need to test. I need to make sure it works... "

"Is it for the war, ma'am?" Octavia asked with a little frown. "Are you going to use it to make weapons?"

Rarity looked at her a moment, then smiled and shook her head. "No. No, this is for me and my friends. I'll never use what we learn here for the war effort. In fact, when this is finished, I hope to seal it all away forever." She locked eyes with Octavia. "I swear, on my life and soul, that I won't use it for the war."

Octavia's eyes dropped to her instrument, gazing questioningly at the still wood, then closed in silent contemplation. A moment later they reopened and focused on Rarity. "Very well, ma'am. I accept."

"Thank you," Rarity said, and then she stepped back outside the circle.

Snips stood on one side of the circle, the lanky pony, presumably Snails, on the other. Snips lifted the black zebrahide book and began to intone words that didn't sound like they could come out of a pony's mouth. Even more disturbing, though, was the flat monotone he spoke them in; it was far too similar to the humming

I'd heard in the Harbinger camp outside of Flank. Too similar to the Enervation scream...

Octavia began to lift off the ground along with her instrument, her eyes clenched tight, limbs shaking as they clutched the contrabass. Yet there was no glow of unicorn magic; she rose aloft as if lifted by the shadows themselves. A flickering vortex of magic seemed to rise up from the center of the sigil and coil around her, as if wrapping her in a dark cocoon. Then the screams began. They sounded from Octavia, but I'd been in Hoofington for too long; those screams were from the shadows as well.

Then a dark orb of energy gathered at each of the two unicorn stallions' horns and flew up into the air. They struck the cocoon of shadows in unison, and that arcane envelope exploded in two immense fans of prismatic light. Outwards they arched, and then plunged back down. One funnelled into the mare's body, the other into the wooden bow and panelling of the contrabass. Octavia slumped as the vortex dissipated and she dropped towards the floor.

Rarity's magic caught her and laid her gently down. The gray mare hugged the instrument as she sobbed. "What happened?" Snips asked as he trotted around Octavia. "What happened? Did it work? Did we actually split a soul? Huh? Did we?"

"Yeah, is she okay?" the lanky Snails drawled.

"We'll find out," Rarity replied tersely as she looked over Octavia and then back at Snips. "Check the book again."

Snips flipped it open and leafed through a few pages. "Oh... will you look at that! Looks like the big black book's got a few ideas on splitting souls all of a sudden." He peered at the yellowed material. "Mostly involving torture... but it's got some other things here too!"

"I thought it might. Horrid thing. Well, I have some ideas of my own." She knelt and nudged Octavia. "Come on, dear. Please wake. Please... "

"So…how do we know it worked?" Snips asked with a worried frown.

Snails pursed his lips, then looked at a workbench on the edge of the room, floated over a sledgehammer, and smashed it repeatedly against the lacquered wood. The surface was untouched. "Looks like it worked, eh?"

Octavia's eyes jerked open, and she slowly sat up. "What happened? I was hurt, and then... I feel... odd." She struggled to her hooves. "I want to go home, please. Please let me go home."

Rarity looked at Snails and smiled gently. “Please, see her home. Make sure she’s paid in full.”

Snails blinked, looked at the floating sledgehammer, and quickly tossed it aside with a bashful look. “Don’t you worry, I’ll get her home, eh?” He looked at her and smiled slowly. “You live in Ponyville, right?”

“F-Flankfurt,” Octavia stammered.

“Oh. Well, same diff, don’tcha know. Come on,” he said as he trotted languidly out with Octavia at his side, contrabass resting across her back.

“Sweet! Stop by the Sugarcube Corner there and get a box of donuts to celebrate,” Snips shouted after them. Then he looked up at Rarity. “Woohoo! It was a success! What are we gonna do next!”

“We’ll have to test it a few more times, now that we know that splitting a soul isn’t lethal.” Then she floated out a tiny ceramic figurine. It was one I knew quite well; I had its copy in my saddlebag. Rarity looked down at the tiny replica of herself. “Then, when we can do it without mistakes... I’ll make a set of me and my friends.”

Snips stared up at her. “You’re gonna put a piece of your friends in each statue? Wow... will they let you?”

“No to both,” she said as she pulled out a mirror and gazed into it with a frown. “But I have an idea that ought to be every bit as good as using my friends.” She put the mirror away with a clear shudder. “It should be possible to take a fragment of soul and copy the unique magical properties of another.”

Snips scratched his head, looked at the book, and then said skeptically, “Well... yeah! But only if you like pieces of your soul going poof... ” Then his eyes popped wide. “Ooooh! I get it. You’re gonna snip off some felon’s souls and make them like your friends! Clever!” He trotted out of the room, the black book hovering in front of him. “I’m gonna see if I can find anything else new in here!”

Rarity stood alone for several minutes, standing where Octavia had minutes before. I was beginning to wonder why I was still being shown this, and then she said quietly to herself, “No, Snips. No more sacrificing other ponies. I’m going to use my own. Because... it’s not a gift if you take it from somepony else.”

~ ~ ~

It was pretty sad that I was getting so used to visions, flashbacks, and other things messing with my perception that I didn't faceplant into the middle of the ritual circle. As it was, I made a sharp little pirouette, keeping on my hooves before sitting down hard.

Octavia. Rarity had split Octavia's soul, right in two. And part of that soul was inside her contrabass. No wonder I could play it so well, or that Vanity had been able to beat off a mob with it without the instrument getting scratched. It was so obvious; why hadn't I thought of it before? I hung my head, remembering how sad Octavia had been at the end of her life and how beautiful her music was in contrast to the ugliness of the Wasteland, where beauty of any sort was hard to come by.

Maybe it was impulsive of me – okay, most things were – but still, I opened up the panel of my PipBuck. I selected all the audio files from Octavia's apartment and then activated the broadcaster. "Hi. I don't know if anypony can hear this... but this is Security. I want to share something with you. Two centuries ago, before the bombs fell, there was a musician named Octavia. I don't blame you if you don't recognize the name. She took a position against the war, stood up for peace, and was ruined for trying to do better. But she never gave up. Even towards the end of her life, she kept trying to make the world a better place. I have some of her music with me; I know that you might have heard it already from DJ Pon3, but I'd like to share it with you now anyway. Please... I hope you enjoy it... " And then I set the PipBuck to broadcast her music as far as it could. I doubted anypony would hear it, but at least I felt I'd paid back a little of the gift her music had given me.

But then Octavia's music began to slowly cry out of the speakers of the prison; I must have gotten lucky on the frequency or something. It was a requiem for Hightower.

And then, several seconds later, I heard a humming noise. I looked over at Rampage, who seemed lost in the music and her own worries. Slowly, I turned and began to stalk the source. In the corner of the room, I found a tiny cot covered in a heap of dirty rags behind drums of powdered porcelain. I looked over at the filthy dust-streaked black cloths as they hummed along with the low melody, and then I said quietly, "Snails?"

"G'way... " he muttered.

"Snails, I'm Blackjack. I'm here to take you out of here," I said as

politely as I could. I didn't want him to go feral. "Snips sent me."

The rags curled up. "He's dead... isn't he?" I moved next to him and sat down beside the cot.

"Yeah. He is. A lot of ponies died helping him save you. He's spent a real long time trying to get you out of here. Now we have to go," I said as I put my hoof on his shoulder. I couldn't tell if the pony under the rags was a ghoul, a mutant, or something else; not even the eyes were showing. "Please... he wanted to get you out of here. He says he's sorry he didn't bring donuts... "

The rags sniffed and shifted, and Snails sat up. The pony beneath them was much like the pony I'd seen in the vision, a middle-aged unicorn stallion with an orangey coat. And like Snips, his eyes glowed with a soft luminescence. He had a pair of figurines in his hooves, ones of Snips and himself as young stallions, maybe even from before the war. 'Bestest Friend' read the inscription on the former, 'Besterest Friend' on the latter. Around his neck, on a frayed ribbon, was a tacky little medallion of three shooting stars. The gilt had rubbed off on some of the corners, but it was still inscribed with 'Best Magic Act'.

"You're his friend?" Snails asked slowly as he sat up.

"I'm... I guess you could call me that. I was trying to help him and he was trying to help you. So now I'm trying to help you." I guessed that was friendship, sort of. Technically? "He... um... accidentally put a curse on me. The swirly curse." Snails's glowing eyes scowled in thought, and I gave a hopeful smile. "He said you'd know how to remove it?"

"The swirly one? I dunno... I don't think you can remove that one. 'Cause it's all swirly and spreads till it pops you right out of your body." The orange pony scratched his matted mane. "I can... well... nope... but maybe? Um... no... that probably wouldn't work. But maybe... huh... "

I was struck by the horrible revelation that my life and soul were in the hooves of Equestria's slowest necromancer.

Rampage then spoke behind me. "Hey, Blackjack? Not sure if you've noticed, but things are getting smoky up here. We can't have long until that warhead pops. We've got to get out of here."

"Oh... you can't do that," Snails said with a shiver. "Warden said he won't let anypony go... 'cause we're in... um... lockdown! Been in lockdown for, like, ever... " He looked off to the side. "And Warden's a monster now. I mean... he's got those robots and he's all

big and fat and glowy and... yeah. Not happening. Not till the Warden wants you to."

"You've seen him?" I asked with a frown.

"Oh yeah. Asked if I could go find Snips or Mistress Rarity, but he said no. Cast a bunch of spells on him too... 'cause he needed to be able to 'control the prison'. Said he'd have order and that none of the scum were gonna get out." Snips looked away. "He... um... he's sorta big and scary now, so I just stayed in here with all my friends," he said as he looked over at the figurines. "Clay's nice and easy and doesn't mind if you're slow. In fact, Rarity said that that made me better than anypony for working it. Just gotta be careful."

"Right. Okay. Does the Warden have anything else in there? Robots? Turrets?" I asked Snails as I looked at the figurines. What was Rarity *doing* with these little statuettes? They were nothing compared to the five I'd collected in the Wasteland. They all looked so... dead...

"Oh yeah. He's got it all," Snails said with a little nod. "And he's big, too," he reiterated earnestly, as if hoping it'd help.

"Right. Big. Scary. Turrets and robots. Well, we've dealt with all of those," I said as I sighed. "Does the Warden have a terminal or something?"

"Oh yeah! Right by his desk. A big, fancy one. Controls everything in the prison," Snails said, nodding as an idea began to form in my head.

"So we don't need to beat the Warden. We just need to occupy him long enough for a certain zebra to get to that terminal and lift the lockdown. Then we blast the terminal, run for our lives, and let the balefire bomb finish him off!" I grinned at Rampage. "Okay. Let's get back to the others."

Snails blinked slowly at Rampage. "Do I know you?"

"Eh... " She rolled her eyes. "Part of me... don't worry about it. Welcome to the Blackjack and Co. Travelling Freak Show. Remember to shoot Blackjack. It's good luck."

"Do not shoot Blackjack!" I contradicted at once as we started out. Snails gathered up a few trinkets and things in his raggedy black cloak; it didn't take very long. Fortunately, the skinny stallion wasn't slow moving, just slow thinking.

"What was Rarity doing here, though?" Rampage asked as we trotted out of the ritual chamber, looking at all the figurines.

"Nothin'. She just split her soul into forty-three pieces. She put

forty-two of ‘em into the figurines. The last one she kept; I know because I made sure it got back to her and that it was the brightest and shiniest part of all,” he said with clear pride but otherwise as if he was mentioning that it was raining. It halted me in my horseshoes, though.

“Forty... three? Rarity split her soul into forty-three pieces?!” Octavia’s scream of agony was fresh in my memory, and that had merely ripped her soul in half. How could she... could *anypony*... possibly survive something like that? I accessed my inventory spell and wiggled free the Fluttershy statuette. “You’re telling me there’s a piece of Rarity’s soul in here?”

He took it in his magic, then calmly smashed it down against the ground. If I had a heart it would have stopped. The figurine, though, was completely unharmed save for a little bit of dust on her pink mane. “Yup. Well, it *was* a piece of her soul, but then she copied some of Miss Fluttershy over it. She was such a nice pony.” He looked at the inscription and blinked, then flushed. “Oh... heh... supposed to say ‘Be Pleasant’... whoopsie... ”

Forty-three pieces. “But... why?” I stammered.

“Um, Blackjack? Balefire bomb going to go off? Swirly curse killing you? Imminent mortal doom?” The striped mare gave an apologetic smile at Snails. “You’ve got to excuse her. She gets distracted easily by the motivations of ponies who died two centuries ago. Makes her overlook the little things.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, trying to get my head back in the game. Still, a part of me wanted to know. “Come on. Maybe we can get lucky and talk reason with the Warden.” It was possible... .right?

We rejoined the others. Psychoshy was barely conscious and still struggling to breathe. Stygius, slumped beside her, glanced up at me weakly. ‘Too much smoke’, he’d scribbled on his slate. Xanthe was still on her hooves, but she looked exhausted and slightly befuddled. Blossomforth and the others were trying to care for them as best they could, but there simply wasn’t much they could do.

Silver Spoon immediately trotted forward to Snails and smiled. “Hey. Long time no see.”

He blinked in confusion, and then his glowy eyes popped wide. “Spoon?! But... you’re... um... wow... .”

“Yeah. And Twist is inside her,” Silver Spoon said, pointing a hoof at Rampage, who scowled back. “It’s a regular Ponyville reunion.” Blossomforth blinked as she looked at Silver Spoon in surprise. “I’m

sorry about Snips," Silver Spoon continued. "He didn't make it."

"Did he really come all this way to save me?" Snails asked slowly.

"Yeah. He actually cursed Tiara to keep her from leaving. Totally crazy," she replied.

"Tiara's here?" he asked, looking around nervously.

Silver Spoon dropped her eyes. "Well... no. I mean... Blackjack. I get them confused. But... I mean... if I'm still here, and you're still here... maybe Diamond Tiara is somewhere out in the Wasteland?"

"Xanthe," I said to the zebra as the two ghouls talked, "I need you to do something. We're going to deal with the Warden, and I need you to get to his terminal to lift the lockdown. Can you do it?" She muttered something in Zebra. "Is that a yes or a no?" She muttered something else equally inexplicable. "Xanthe!" I snapped, and her eyes focused on my face.

"Right... lift the lockdown... Warden's terminal... sure... easy peasey faciley... " I wasn't sure she was quite with it, but she was our best chance.

I turned to Blossomforth. "Soon as it's lifted, get to the garage. Get ready to get everypony out of here. Understand? Soon as it gets lifted, we're coming running."

I looked at Carrion, who had swapped out one of his miniguns for Xanthe's re-re-jury-rigged beam gun, which she'd apparently gotten working again at some point; really, how many times had she patched that thing up? "Ready, soldier?" He smirked and saluted. "Ready, Reaper?" Rampage still looked troubled, but she met my gaze and gave a little smile and nod. "Ready... um... zebra?" The striped mare gave a little grin and babbled something in Zebra, but saluted smartly... and then gave a surprised look at the hoof at her temple.

Then Stygius hauled himself up to his hooves and tapped his chest. "You sure?" The charcoal batpony nodded once, flying over next to me. That was good enough for me. I looked at the ghouls. "The rest of you, make sure you get those wagons and are ready to get us all the hell out of here."

"Wait... " Psychoshy croaked as she fought to her hooves. "Not... gonna... just... sit this one out... " Then she started coughing and wheezing as she swayed. Snails and Twitchy helped keep her upright as she struggled to join us. "Not.. letting…you fight... without... me!" she pleaded as she looked at the ebon-winged batpony.

Stygius flew back to her, held her by her shoulders, and shook his head. She coughed and looked him in the eye. “I’m good to fight! Just... give me a second!” He shook his head again, and she glared at him. “Don’t you... tell me no! I’m capable... of kicking as much... flank as--” Then he silenced her with a hoof-curling kiss. Her blue eyes popped wide, and then her buttery wings fluffed at her sides. Slowly, she swayed and finally sat down hard, Stygius moving with her to keep contact, and closed her eyes as she smiled in bliss.

“Imminent mortal doom, people... ” Rampage muttered beside me.

When he finally broke the kiss she blushed hard and smiled. “Oh, wow... ” she murmured, then sighed, looking up at him. “You’d better make it, then. Here... ” she said as she pulled off her power hooves and passed them to the armored buck. “Bring them back, understand? I plan on using them myself... I mean it... ”

The stallion nodded, and I helped him put the weapons on with my magic. Next, we drank the rest of our recycled RadAway. I made sure the AM rifle and missile launcher were both accessible on my back, looked to the others, and nodded once. Side by side, we walked back down the hall towards a pair of double doors marked ‘Warden’.

“You know, this is going to be really anticlimactic if he just lets us go,” Rampage muttered.

“Have we ever had that kind of luck?” I replied. She snorted and grinned. “We’ve gone through hell together, and I’m quite done with this fucking tower. Time to finish this.” Graves, Lacunae, and Snips wouldn’t have died for nothing. Still, if I could occupy him with chatter... hey, worked for me!

Then I pushed the doors open with my magic and stepped through. Over the speakers, an ominous melody began to play. The Warden’s office was a large roof with a vaulted ceiling. Four hovering robots with monitors lurked in the corners. Most immediately noticeable, though, was the floor; it wasn’t cement, wood, carpet, or metal. It was thick glass between heavy steel beams that formed a grid. Smoky plumes shot up in little geysers. As we walked, my eyes were drawn downwards. The smoke made the strangest swirling motion, outlining a central void that went all the way down to the inferno below. I could see the missile and its armored warhead...

It was glowing in the heat.

But where was the Warden? There was nothing else in here except a huge pile of junk piled up in the center of the office. There was

nothing else...

And then the pile moved...

It slowly rose up, looming higher and higher as it twisted around to face us. There was a reason the screens had only shown Warden Hobble's face: it was all that could fit. Two centuries of direct exposure to the warhead had caused the ghoul to swell to Goliathian proportions. His hips were trapped within the warped center of the glass floor, his rear legs dangling twenty feet below, draped in glass stalactites. The blackened undead flesh erupted prominences and coronas of blue flame in magmatic floes that healed mere instants later. The desks and furniture and a half dozen sentry bots had been fused into a carapace-like armor that vaguely resembled some sort of uniform.

The thing's mouth split in a volcanic grin as he stretched his forehooves wide, and then two great skeletal wings wreathed in flame spread from one side of the room to the other. Behind him, set into the wall, was a large, complex terminal. Celestia only knew how the gargantuan monster used it. He leaned towards us, his eyes narrowing. "You lied to me. You're not with the M.o.M. The riot. The fire... This is some kind of elaborate deception... a plot against me. Yes... "

I swallowed, baking in the tremendous heat coming through the foot-thick glass. I hoped it was magically hardened or something, because I really didn't want to sink through the floor. Regardless of any hardening it might have had, though, it was searing hot, and I was truly glad to have cyberlimbs right now; I might have been leaving hoofprints of stinking melted rubber, but that and an unpleasant heat were the only things I had to deal with. Rampage trotted onto it without hesitation, just wrinkling her nose in discomfort as her hooves sizzled. Now I was really glad Xanthe had her soul armor... though the sight of the abomination had brought her out of her daze and left her staring up at it in horror. Please don't forget the mission, Xanthe...

"There is a deception, yes. One you're playing on yourself, Hobble," I said, swallowing as I saw the gatling beam guns from the sentry robots mounted on each of the Warden's forehooves. "You're not the warden of a prison anymore. This place is a ruin. There is no Equestria anymore. There hasn't been for two centuries." I gestured at him with my stump. "Look at yourself, Hobble! Look at what you've become."

He roared back, “Spare me your lies! I have no more patience for this. I will have order. I will have control! This is my prison! My empire! My *world*, and you have no place in it!”

So much for him just letting us go.

The Warden swept his forehooves wide, and a half-dozen beam guns sprayed out in a storm of fire across the office. Rampage charged straight ahead across the glass floor, her steel-clad hooves smoking as she closed the distance, leapt, and locked all four hoofclaws into his chest armor. Carrion launched himself up above that glittering arc and sprayed down both the cutting emerald beam and minigun fire. Stygius shadowflashed again and again, zigzagging closer and closer and then finally bringing his borrowed power hooves smashing against the Warden’s head with a satisfying crack.

Xanthe…still stood there gaping. I tackled her and dropped under the gatling barrage. The glass baked me through my barding as I looked her in the eyes and screamed, “Get to the terminal! Lift the lockdown!” Her eyes focused on me, and she blinked, swallowed in terror, and disappeared.

I turned and rose to my hooves, shielding my face with my stump. The bolts burned, but it’d take more than a fancy light show to turn me into a pile of dust. I brought up the missile launcher as the flurry of shots passed above me. His blazing wings swatted at Stygius, but the batpony shadowflashed away a half instant before the burning skeletal wings could catch him. One giant hoof smashed at Rampage, trying to scrape her off, but the armored Reaper refused to be flicked away so easily. The other hoof was pointed at Carrion... there!

I jumped into S.A.T.S. and launched the missile right at the outstretched hoof. The projectile streaked true, exploding in a fiery blast on the end of his foreleg. One of the beam weapons even sparked and blew apart completely. The intact limb stopped trying to scrape Rampage away and pointed at me as I flipped the launcher open and fed another missile in. The beam spray bit into the reinforced combat armor and even struck hide, but I turned aside, sheltering the launcher as I finished loading and snapped the weapon closed. Only then did I turn, jump into S.A.T.S. again, and send another missile streaking into the other hoof.

“Take out his hooves, Carrion!” I shouted as the rain of crimson light slackened immensely. I just didn’t have the speed to run and

dodge with three hooves, but I was a tough fucking cyberpony. Carrion changed his target immediately, and he was *quite* capable of banking and evading the Warden's fire while still pouring his own shots on that outstretched limb.

Then Rampage reached a part of him that wasn't covered in steel: his face. Her glowing-hot hoofclaws sank into his black, charred hide with little explosions of fiery ichor. Now the Warden let out a roar as the mare went into a spiked frenzy, trying to claw and dig her way into his fiery eye. He lifted his hooves towards the Reaper and pinched her between them.

With a bellow of rage, he tore her free and smashed her like a slab of meat once, twice, thrice against the floor. The glass blocks crackled under her, and for a horrifying moment I thought he was going to smash her right through the floor and into the firestorm below. I loaded another missile, pointed it between those upraised hooves, and fired it right into his savaged face. The impact made him sway back, and Rampage tumbled to the ground with a crunchy thump.

Stygius divebombed the Warden, shadowflashed away, and then divebombed again. Each hit corresponded with an eruption of flaming ghoulish flesh. The batpony was relentless in his assault. Carrion had swapped to using Xanthe's beam gun almost exclusively, the emerald lance disintegrating a thin line of armor with every pass. I loaded another missile, and the Warden glared at me and took a deep breath.

Oh, I'd seen enough flaming ones to know what was coming next! He opened his mouth wide and spewed an almost liquid stream of fire at me, and I was running as fast as my hooves could carry me... which, due to my missing leg, unfortunately wasn't very fast. I might have gotten clear of the main stream, but I was pretty sure my ass was on fire! And so was my missile launcher! I tossed it away as I rolled across the blazing-hot – but not actually on fire at the moment – floor. The launcher exploded somewhere behind me as I concentrated on putting myself out.

Almost a minute later, I'd extinguished the blue flames on me and looked up at the immense ghoul monster as it incinerated a corner of the room. And then I realized just how radioactive the room was just now. I'd walked in here with almost no rads and now I was almost into the yellow. Sweat poured down my face as I rose to my hooves and watched the blows Stygius was raining down healing

almost as fast as he inflicted them. Even Xanthe's beam gun, while devastating to his armor, wasn't inflicting enough damage to overcome his incredible regeneration.

I hoped that Xanthe lifted the lockdown soon. We didn't have quite enough firepower for this. I brought the AM rifle around and took aim through its scope as the Warden swiped at Stygius, and then I loaded a shell with an orange band.

Who knew AM ammunition came in explosive flavor?

The shot struck the only vulnerable spot I could see: his eye. The round exploded, the fiery eyeball erupting in flaming fluid. My satisfaction was short lived, however, as it started regenerating immediately.

The Warden screamed as I loaded another round and fired at his other eye socket, where the swollen orb was already reformed from Rampage's attack. The Warden was learning, though; my shot was blocked by his armored leg, the round only blowing out one of the plates. If we couldn't blind him, I feared that this fight wasn't going to last long at all...

And my fears were quickly realized; as the Warden shielded his face with one leg, his other hoof ripped at a hunk of his own armor, scraping off the metal in a heap of scrap, and then threw the jagged spray of shrapnel right at Carrion. The griffin gave a squawk as the metal sheared through one of his wings and tore his weapons to shreds.

"Xanthe! We could really use that lockdown lifted!" I screamed as I turned; both of the Warden's eyes were already restored in their sockets. I fired as quickly as I could, but the Warden knew what I was aiming for and shielded his gaze with his right foreleg as his left gathered up another wagon-sized chunk of debris.

I really didn't think I could dodge that...

"Warden Hobble!" yelled a mare from the doorway. "Here's our resignation!" I turned and saw the half-dozen guards, Silver Spoon, Snails, and even Psychoshy laying down a withering spray of fire at the Warden. A single assault rifle might not do much, but now nine ponies fired with all they had at the monstrous ghoul. With so much fire and such a huge, impossible-to-miss target, the combined attack was ripping hundreds of holes in the flaming monster. He threw the chunk of metal at the gathered guards, but Snails and Twitchy's horns glowed and sent the steel arcing up and smashing into the wall above them.

“Blackjack! I have it!” Xanthe shouted from the terminal.

Over the intercom, a voice said, “Lockdown, Lifted. Guards, please return to your supervisors for assignments.” I dared a tiny little smile.

Then the fourth fuel pod blew. The explosion below collected in a massive fireball that swept up the central shaft in a glare so intense it would have blinded me if I still had the eyes I was born with. The heat was such that I thought for a moment that the Warden had breathed fire over me again. The swirling ball of flame crashed into the underside of the floor with such force that everyone not already airborne was tossed a yard into the air, the ponies in the door falling back into the corridor... and the floor exploded upwards in clumps of blazing heat. I had the fortune to drop down on one of the beams as the smoke swirled up around us.

“Get out!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, feeling the inside of my chest cooking from the heat of the air. Thank goodness I could regenerate... if I somehow survived. Slowly I pulled myself to my hooves, though I wasn’t sure where I was supposed to go from here. The flames had dropped back down, but the heat was more intense than I’d ever imagined. I could only see a blazing lump before me where Hobble had been, and so I lifted Lacunae’s AM rifle and fired blind as quickly as I could. I spotted Xanthe being carried overhead by Stygius for just a moment. Both were struggling, but they were making it. All I had to do was hang on and let him come for me.

Until then, I fired because it was the only thing left to do: distract the monster. Damage him. Get the others out of this hell. Then I saw the batpony above me, and I stretched up my hoof, extending my fingers. All I needed was to grab him, and he’d pull me to safety. Just a few more feet. A few more inches... he had me! My fingers grabbed his outstretched foreleg and he beat his wings furiously as he struggled to pull me clear.

Then a massive spar of metal sticking from the end of a blazing hoof lanced out of the smoke and impaled me right through the middle.

The shock made my fingers release, and a blast of fiery wings sent the already-wavering Stygius careening off into the smoke. Slowly, the monstrous ghoul lifted me, speared on the spur of steel, closer to that immense face. I couldn’t even keep my focus with the pain roaring through my crippled torso. He stared at me as if I were some sort of bug, flopping me left and right. “It’s funny how small

you all look so far below me. Snack sized... ”

I just dangled there before him and saw the robots floating around us, their cameras watching as he brought me close to his maw and bit down on my left foreleg. I felt the metal start to deform, and I beat on his face with my stump. Either he liked the taste of metal, or he’d gone completely mad and didn’t care. I guessed the latter as my leg was nearly ripped out of my body at the shoulder. I could feel my flesh straining, bones shifting, and synthetic organs threatening to follow the limb out.

“Warden Hobble, this is the O.I.A,” a voice said over the PA system speakers, synthetic and masculine-sounding. It made us both freeze. “We would like you to release the mare in your custody. She is one of our operatives, investigating a threat to the kingdom for us, and beyond your jurisdiction.” Was it Watcher? It sounded like Watcher, amplified a hundred times...

The Warden paused, releasing my leg as he looked towards the ceiling and then at the hovering robots. “O.I.A., huh? You’ve got no right to intrude on my prison! This bitch is for me to punish!” he roared. “There is no authority here but mine! Do you hear me?”

“I am sorry to hear that. Please remain still,” the synthetic voice buzzed, and then went silent. The Warden looked at me in bafflement, then snorted and moved me towards his mouth once more.

Suddenly the left wall began to glow. A perfectly round, white patch spread rapidly, and then bulged outwards, and suddenly a blinding line of green as thick as my hoof blasted through, pierced the Warden, struck the far wall, and then vaporized it as well. And the wall behind that. And the wall behind that. The beam disappeared. I looked off to the left, out the hole... due west towards the Core.

Okay. Definitely not Watcher, unless Spike had access to the Core’s defense systems...

The Warden’s body crumbled to pieces almost instantly, tumbling into the inferno below... and I didn’t see anything that was going to keep me from tumbling down after him. The spur of steel stuck through me still had several thousand pounds of armor attached to it, and I was tumbling down into the flaming abyss.

Then a hoofclaw swept out of the smoke, ripping into what remained of my left leg and halting my fall. The spur ripped free as it fell, and I felt blood pour down my torso as I dangled there.

Rampage grinned down at me. “Damn, Blackjack! Your ass is heavy.”

I couldn’t do anything but smile as she hauled me up and tossed me over her shoulders. The beating she’d endured had smashed her spines flat. She walked along the smoking steel beams towards the nearest edge and set me down beside the Warden’s terminal. I couldn’t stand; the hole in me was more than I could bear. “Did the others get out?” I asked, trying to move my mangled right leg.

“I think so,” Rampage said, then noticed a safe in the crumbled wall. She punched it with her hoof, and something inside the door snapped. It swung open, and inside was a large bag. “Not sure what the plan is now. Guess they get free while we die,” Rampage said with fatalistic stoicism. She sat beside me and opened the bag, her eyes growing wide. “But at least we die rich!”

I looked over at what had to be thousands of bits. Clearly the Warden had been saving up for his own retirement... wait. Why was there craziness going on in my vision again?

The panel covering my PipBuck had been stripped away, and the device was doing something... and the Warden’s terminal was doing the same.

>EC-1101 Routing Waypoint accessed.

> Next waypoint: Shadowbolt Command, Shadowbolt Tower, Hoofington.

I groaned and closed my eyes, feeling darkness creeping over me. My body was slipping away... it was like I was floating.

Wait a minute, I *was* floating!

“It seems the lockdown was lifted,” Lacunae said in my mind as she pulled Rampage and me up towards her. Lacunae was alive, and wonderful! If I didn’t have a great big hole in me, I’d have leapt up and kissed her! She was winging her way out the large hole melted clear through the prison.

“Wait! Leave me behind! This is my best chance to get obliterated!” Rampage shouted as she waved her hooves impotently, trying to get back to the prison. Lacunae selectively ignored her, for which I was grateful.

A black and blue skywagon pulled by Blossomforth and Stygius was flying rapidly to the south towards Meatlocker. Lacunae followed it, winging through the rainy night, and when she was far enough from the Enervation, we disappeared in a flash and appeared in the back of the transport. “Please, step back,” Lacunae

announced as she stuck her horn in the hole in my gut. Wonderful healing magic began to pour forth.

And then suddenly there was a massive smash that flipped the sky wagon over in the air. Over and over we tumbled before Lacunae's magic reached out and stabilized us. "I thought you'd died," I thought at her.

"How could a pony die when they were never a pony to begin with?" she replied cryptically, but before I could really ponder what that was supposed to mean, she continued, "I was merely stunned and trapped on the roof between turrets," the alicorn thought at me.

"Really?" I thought back, feeling slightly disappointed. "You were just knocked out?"

"Well... that... and another wanted to observe you without my help," Lacunae said acidly.

"You performed adequately," the Goddess interjected smugly. No wonder I'd lost connection with Lacunae just then. Bitch. "We heard that," the Goddess muttered.

Lacunae fussed over me, trying to staunch the bleeding. "Do not move. You have lost an exceptional amount of blood."

I couldn't answer. I couldn't feel anything. I stared out the rear of the wagon and saw Hightower enveloped in a blue-green flame that just kept expanding and expanding. The fire seemed to be devouring the prison and the surrounding yard as the globe of disintegration grew and grew. And then, it was gone and the massive structure was collapsing in on itself, filling an immense glowing crater. Not even the foundations remained.

Hightower... I'd beaten it. I had. There was just one remaining problem...

Within me, the curse gave a sudden lurch, and I felt something fundamental inside me break. It was as if I were slipping out of myself and drifting away on a stiff breeze. I tried to fight, but there wasn't anything left for me to hold onto. A strange current was sweeping me away. Lacunae was shouting. Snails was talking about boats. And then I felt something familiar...

Dying.

Again...

Footnote: Maximum Level

Volume 4: Homecoming

Chapter 49: Consequence

"You have a lot to think about."

There's something distinctly depressing about being able to compare deaths. You'd think once would be enough for anypony. The last time I'd died it was peaceful. Calm. I'd spent the time beforehand feeling full warm sunshine glowing down on me while I listened to the rush of water against the hull. When I finally went, I'd been lying in Glory's embrace and surrounded by friends who cared for me, and the actual dying had been like drifting away up to a better place without a fear or worry in the world. My only regret had been that I would have liked to have seen the beautiful stars above me before I departed.

This time, it hadn't been peaceful, I wasn't drifting upwards, and I had much bigger worries than missing out on a view of the night sky. This time, I was getting ripped through some sort of murkiness like so much rainwater being sluiced through a storm drain. I'd like to think I'm one of the few ponies who knows exactly what that feels like. Enervation's piercing scream surrounded me on all sides, and every few seconds I passed through a shimmering, more-loudly-shrieking silver ring that sucked me in and spat me out ever faster. I struggled against the current out of sheer obstinacy, but it was no use; there was no way I was going to get away from it.

And as I was yanked through that gray void, flipping and spinning about, I became aware of a great glow in the distance that I was rapidly approaching. And I wasn't alone in my travels; even though I didn't have eyes, ears, or even a body, I was still aware of others being swept along with me as wailing motes of light. I brushed against one and instantly had an impression of a mare, earth pony, ganger…but then she was gone before I could feel more. Then I hit another one: colt, earth pony…I was struck by the smell of brahmin, the jingle of a pack harness, and a sensation of a horrible

fever and suffocation. And then he was gone too.

Truth be told, I much preferred the first version to the sequel.

The flow increased as I was carried along, and I brushed against more pony…souls? Spirits? Every contact transferred a little information about another pony. I watched others try and break away and saw one strike the edge of one of the screaming rings as it passed; the light seemed to smear out and freeze in place, trapped against the circle as I swooshed by.

The luminescence grew brighter and brighter as we were sucked through that endless hazy gray gloom punctuated by loops of screaming silver that propelled us ever onward. For a moment I soared upward and had a glimpse of an immense disk like a circular saw blade, the motes of light being pulled through gaps in a colossal, jagged tire-like wall of silver that surrounded that glowing donut. I was sent following the rest…

And then the current weakened to a dull tug. Slowly I drifted along in a sea of motes within that immensely large wall. There were strange shadowy shapes around me, things that looked vaguely like walls and tunnels that I passed harmlessly through. From all around me came the wail and babble of untold masses crying out, some calling for Luna or Celestia to save them, others screaming in rage against their imprisonment, and others babbling in Zebra. I brushed against griffins, dragons, zebras, and things I didn't even have names for. Over it all, though, was one terrible cry…a scream of such anguish and suffering that it dug into me.

Then, green lightning flashed from that immense wall and tore through the sea of motes. Even I screamed as an agony I'd never known flashed across me. It wasn't a physical pain so much as a sense of profound violation. It felt like being nailed back in the *Seahorse* again. The green lightning flashed again and again into the center of the sea, and the scream peaked once more.

"Awesome magic, huh?" a familiar stallion said from near me.

"Snips?" I asked. I felt him close, but I couldn't tell which of the thousands of motes around me he might be. "But you're…and I'm…shit…"

"Well, I sure am. No doubt about it," Snips replied, "but I suspect that you still have a ways to go before you're dead dead."

Huh? What was I, then? Semi-deceased? Only mostly dead? I was pretty sure this was the point where you turned me upside down and looked for loose bottle caps. "But what…Snips, what is this

place?" I asked as I looked around the sea of floating lights.

"The eye of the storm. The tar pit. The ocean to which eternal rivers flow," Snips said with an odd hint of merriment. "All poetic names by different ponies. To be honest, we really don't know. It's always been here in Hoofington; maybe it's the product of ancient zebra curses that were beyond even the black book. The writing in the text was particularly fearful of it. I think there's a much more fitting word for it: Hell."

Or…if you believed a certain zebra myth about giant star monsters... but that was just crazy…"Guess I wasn't a good enough pony after all," I muttered; I'd have gulped if I'd had a throat. It just didn't seem fair. Sure, I'd done lots of things worthy of damnation, but what about that colt? What could he have possibly done?

"Good and evil have nothing to do with it," Snips contradicted. "The ancient zebra necromancers were utterly terrified of this sea of souls and its drawing power, but tempted by it as well. They tried to control it with rituals, placate it with sacrifices, and understand it through madness. Their creation of soul jars like the black book was a method to try and escape its pull." He chuckled darkly. "Seeing it, I can understand their feelings better." There was a pause, and then he asked quietly, as if terrified of hearing the answer, "Did you get Snails out? Is he okay?"

"Upset, but okay." I felt a profound sense of relief from nearby and went on. "He told me about what Rarity did…the final step of Eternity." I felt it was kind of ironic, given that I was looking at spending an eternity here myself. Or... maybe not, apparently? "What did you mean 'dead dead'?"

"The curse is designed to sever your soul from your mind and body. What it leaves behind is a shell that will eventually perish without help," Snips said quietly, regretfully. "We saw it several times when we were starting out." I thought of Rumble in Happyhorn, lying there unaware. "Without the soul, you have no motivation or direction. The most fortunate are like animals. They have intellect but no will to use it and no personality or sense of self. But as long as your body is still alive, you have a chance that Snails will be able to summon your soul and put it back in your body."

"But what about you?" I asked with a little frown…. or would have if I had lips. The lightning flashed, and that anguished scream rolled out across the sea of souls like a wave.

He gave a light, dry laugh, as if my concern amused him. I guessed it *was* a little after the fact. “Well, my body was either cremated or vaporized, so... ” He sighed. “I’d hoped that splitting my soul might protect me, but it looks like I was wrong. Or maybe I just have two copies of my soul frozen in that statue and inside my friend, forever trapped at the moment they were severed. Who can say?”

“Well, this is all very educational,” I muttered sarcastically. “I could probably write a manual when I get back. ‘101 ways to die’.”

“Oh, I’d be astonished if you recalled any of this when you got back. This is your soul, not your mind. You are the summation of yourself, but without a mind, how could you remember?” He laughed mirthlessly. “Snails and I…experimented…on a few victims on our own, but none of them really remembered anything when he summoned them back.”

Great…I looked out at the vast sea of motes and murmured softly, “How many are trapped here?”

“Millions. Perhaps hundreds of millions. Who can say how long this place has been catching them?” Snips said quietly.

“Is this place…eating them?” I barely murmured.

“No. I don’t think so. There’d be a lot less if it were,” Snips replied. “I think it’s more that it’s hoarding them, like a dragon hoards gems.” The lightning flashed once more, slicing through the cloud of motes, and that scream rose up from the center of the sea. “I have no idea what that might--

Then I was struck by that emerald lightning again and felt myself torn by its foul magics. This was malicious hate; no reason or purpose. Simply inflicting pain for the sake of inflicting it and nothing more. The motes swirled wildly, and by the time the agony faded, I was left feeling as if I’d been raped and violated all over again. The lightning hurt me on a fundamental level I’d never imagined before, and yet I couldn’t die again. I could only scream. And this time there was no Scotch needing protecting to give me strength; there was only the hope that eventually Snails would be able to get me out of here.

I’d lost contact with Snips with that last attack, and no matter how I tried to call out, I couldn’t get past that terrible scream. The few motes I did bump into were sobbing, raging, or worst of all… resigned. To keep myself from going mad, I tried to move, but in this place space seemed…uncertain. I felt like I was moving, but no matter which direction I took, I was travelling back inside. The very

center of the sea had a hollow; if there was something here devouring souls, then I at least wanted a good look at it.

The closer to the center I moved, the more frequent and terrible that lightning became, but I started to suspect it wasn't as if this place was singling me out. I was just getting caught by stray fire. Whatever the lightning was targeting lay right in the middle of this sea. Slowly, the motes thinned out more and more until…

No…

It couldn't be!

A dozen bolts of lightning struck the center, and for the first time I realized that the scream Lacunae had been hearing hadn't been a *what*. It was a *who*.

A moment later, there was a hooking sensation, and I felt myself being pulled away. I didn't fight it. I couldn't think at all. If I'd had eyes I would have wept; a mouth, and I would have cried out. Instead, I simply shut down and let myself be dragged away.

~ ~ ~

I slowly opened my eyes, and the first things I saw were Lacunae's purple ones gazing back into mine. I had a sensation like a red hot poker digging around in my guts. I glanced down at the bandage over the hole ripped right above my navel, then looked around and found myself in a hospital bed in what I recognized as the Hoofington Memorial ICU. Psychoshy was sleeping in the bed across the room from mine, with Stygius snoozing at her side. Rampage lay curled on the floor at the foot of my bed, her pink eyes troubled as she gazed off into the distance.

I had no idea what magic had been used on me; I didn't want to know. I felt dirty and defiled, wronged more profoundly than just a simple betrayal by a desperate Snips. I hurt far worse than the simple wound in my stomach. I started to tremble and Lacunae stretched forward. I curled around her neck and buried my head in her shoulder as she shielded me with her wings. Then I bawled like a little foal. I didn't know why; I just knew that something was horribly wrong and it *hurt*.

* * *

Several hours later, it was morning according to my PipBuck. It

was always the same time down here, though: gloom o'clock. Doctor Wheelbarrow had my rear legs and hooves strapped into my bed, probably suspecting that, if he hadn't, I'd be out of it confronting Ahuizotl about Tulip's death. Or trying to, at least; one of my forehooves was missing and the other mangled, so there was little chance of me getting away. Which, naturally, made me even more eager to do *anything* that would get me the hell out of this bed and out there doing things. It didn't help that every hour I had another spontaneous crying fit that I was powerless to stop. Sometimes they lasted only for a few seconds, but others went on and off for almost half an hour.

...Okay, maybe I should stay in bed for the time being after all.

Lacunae never left me alone. Rampage was keeping her distance for now, not trusting the Angel inside her not to kill me for shits and giggles. Doctor Wheelbarrow came in, changed the blood bags, and injected me with a shot of Med-X for the pain, giving me a cold look. I'd gotten Graves killed, so I couldn't fault him for that. "It looks like you'll live," he muttered. "No thanks to me."

"Thank you for…" I began, but he silenced me with a glare.

"No thanks to me means just that. I'm not repairing that hole in you. The cybernetic gadgetry in your body is doing that," he said as he looked over to the far side of the ICU at a bed with some curly pink mane sticking out from beneath the sheets. "Pity you can't give that to somepony else."

"How…how is she…?"

"Crippled. By you. But alive. No thanks to you. Excuse me." He turned his back on me. I'd cost him Graves; I supposed they'd been close. They'd been colleagues at least, though, and, even if there'd been no personal attachment at all, she was still half of Meatlocker's medical staff. Not someone easily replaced.

The Goddess muttered darkly in the back of my mind about what an embarrassment I was and ignored me otherwise, for which I was grateful. I supposed that at the moment I was another emotional toxic waste dump, and she only wanted to *see* my misery, not feel it.

Snails returned shortly with Silver Spoon. "You're okay," the ghoul mare said in relief. I didn't correct her. I was miles and miles away from okay right now. I needed…something. Something to protect me from this feeling of wrongness inside me. But she didn't need any more to deal with at the moment.

"What happened? What did you do?" I asked the luminescent-eyed

mustard yellow unicorn. I must have been using the shooty voice, because everyone immediately looked a little nervous.

He blinked. “Oh, ah…well…ya see, I couldn’t stop the curse from popping you out, eh? But I was thinking of what could bring you back, like that thing on boats, ya know?” he said slowly, then rubbed his chin. “Ah…uh…”

“Anchors. He used an anchoring spell,” Lacunae said from my bedside.

“So, when the curse went off, I was able to pull you back and put you in your body,” he said with a nervous smile. “Snips and me used it once to see the other side…but I don’t remember much. But my eyes were all glowy afterwards. Weird, eh?” He leaned uncomfortably close, peering at my own. “Wonder why yours aren’t. I mean, there’s a kinda reddish light in there, but... ”

“My eyes are synthetic,” I said quietly. I looked at Silver Spoon. She was alive, so to speak; I’d gotten her out alive. A victory. “What are you going to do now, Silver Spoon?”

She glanced at Snails and gave a little smile. “Well. I’m still around. And so were Snips and Snails. And Twist is kinda around, so we thought we were going to, like, look around and see if Diamond Tiara’s still around too! Not…crazy looking around. Really looking.” The unicorn stallion rolled his eyes a little, but then she looked up at him with a sympathetic smile, and said, “Snails wants to find some unicorn mare he knew back before the war.”

“Mmhmm! The Great and Powerful Trixie!” There was a sudden tense silence inside me, as if the Goddess were suddenly holding her breath. It was as if I could feel her peering right over my shoulder at Snails. “She was the most amazing, most talented, most awesome unicorn in all of Equestria…even if she couldn’t banish the Ursa Minor.”

The silence from the Goddess was a welcome relief, but it didn’t last long. “That silly…That…he remembers when…I…” she murmured in shock. Lacunae suddenly jerked and shivered, turning her head away. I got a flash of a blue unicorn, a wagon, two unicorn colts, and a cheering, adoring crowd. “No... no... ”

“You don’t have to throw those feelings away, Trixie,” another mare whispered in my-- in *our* heads.

“Shut up! Last thing I want is more lectures from *you*!” the Goddess replied in disgust, her voice trembling. “If he saw us now. If he saw me like this…No! No! I don’t want to feel this way.” Lacunae

groaned, and then the Goddess said, more firmly, “And I won’t,” haughtiness rising. “And he is right to seek us out. Perhaps in time he may join us as well.”

“Alfalfa smoothies…extra hay…” Lacunae whimpered aloud.

I wanted to tell him not to, but there was a pressure on my mind, like a migraine. I couldn’t get the words out, and in my current condition, I couldn’t even try. “You…might check…Maripony. Out west…” I muttered. The Goddess gave a pleased, throaty little sound, and I felt a ghostly pat on my head. The pair just looked at me in worry, but I couldn’t say more. The Goddess wouldn’t let me.

Feeling doubly violated, I shifted onto my side, curling up away from him. I felt sick, the sensation of wrongness unshakable. I could at least still give him thanks, though. “Thank you, Snails. You saved me. Just like Snips said you would.” I was glad that he couldn’t see the tears of shame streaking my face.

“Um…” Snails balked a moment. “Did you…did you see him over there? Like a ghost or…”

I felt sick again. “No,” I said, not sure, but it felt like a lie. As dirty as lying to Silver Spoon about being Diamond Tiara. “No, but I’m sure he’s okay, wherever he is.” Please go. Please.

“Please, Blackjack needs to rest and recover,” Lacunae told them both gently.

“Oh…ah…okay then. Um…hope you feel better, eh?” Snails said.

Silver Spoon hesitated and then answered, “Yeah. Sure. Get well soon, Tiara.” I heard their hooves trot away just before my body shook and I let out another sob. I wanted to throw up and purge myself, but I had nothing inside me to force out.

“Oh please. There’s no need for such drama,” the Goddess thought at me contemptuously.

“Shut up,” I screamed back at her. “Someday it’ll be your turn! I don’t care if it’s tomorrow or a week from now, some day you’ll get to die too! And if you come back, then we can see how well you handle it!” I shook from head to hoof, the hole through my middle a niggling afterthought. When I came back the first time, I’d felt depressed and suicidal. This time, whatever had happened, I knew I didn’t want to go back there. Not there.

“Shhhhh…” Lacunae said as she stroked my mane. Maybe coming back had driven me crazy? Maybe something in me had changed for the worse? “Shhh…. Don’t worry about that now. You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

I wept against her as she held me. “Can you take it from me? Whatever…whatever I’m thinking…or feeling…or whatever?” I shook as I pressed my face against her shoulder. “Please?” I begged, desperate for her to make it all better. “Please... ”

“I wish I could, Blackjack. I really wish I could,” she murmured. “I wish I could make it all go away, but whatever happened to you happened at a level I can’t touch. This pain is yours. I wish we could understand it better, make it easier for you to bear,” Lacunae said softly into my mind. “I’m sorry.”

* * *

Around noon, I finally pulled myself together enough to get out of the ICU bed. Rampage returned with some Fancy Buck snack cakes, three tin cans, and some minty emeralds. Lacunae started to lift me into a wheelchair, but I waved her off with my mangled left foreleg and simply stood upright on my rear legs, felt the disorientation for a moment before my body adjusted, then looked at her and Rampage and even smiled at their incredulous expressions. Hey, it might look weird, but at least it wasn’t pathetic. After the last four or five hours, and the Goddess, I needed to start building some self-control and confidence back.

My barding had been taken…somewhere…to get fixed up. Either that, or I’d been robbed; at the moment, though, I suspected the former over the latter. Likewise, Carrion must have helped himself to Kingpin’s possessions, because they were gone as well. Oh well; the only enemies I had to worry about in here were the possible zebra infiltrators, and since they’d have been eliminated already anyway, I should be safe-ish even without armor, right?

Psychoshy and Stygius had both gotten some severe smoke inhalation; the former was still bedridden and quite pissed that nopony would let her out on account of her gasping for air every ten seconds. I gestured with a nod of my head for the batpony to come over. “How are you doing, Stygius?” I asked with a rueful smile. “Regretting you came with me?”

He rolled his eyes and waved his hoof sideways with a snort like it was nothing at all. Then he looked apologetic as he nodded over his shoulder towards Psychoshy. “You two an item?” He sighed, his tufted ears drooping a little as he pulled his slate out of his armor.

‘Not allowed. Rules,’ he wrote with a sigh and an actual pout. Boys

weren't supposed to pout!

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Well, one thing I know about her is that she probably doesn't give a buck about rules. Do you like her?" He blinked and looked over at Psychoshy trading insults with Rampage. He closed his eyes, smiled, then looked at me and nodded. "More than me?" I asked with a grin, and he immediately blanched.

"Yeah, Styggie…do you like me more than her?" Psychoshy asked, looking over from her bed with a smirk on her face and worry in her eyes. He looked from her to me and back again and bit on his wingtip for a moment. Then he pointed at Psychoshy with his wing and actually flinched! He knew I had Glory, though…ugh, batponies were weird.

But it did prompt in me the rare impulse to have fun. "Well, that's good to know. By the way, Stygius, do you think that I've been putting on weight?"

His pupils shrank as he gaped at me, looked at my butt, then back up at me. I just arched my brow expectantly. Then he swayed, put a hoof to his brow, and collapsed on his back with all four legs thrust into the air, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as his eyes rolled back in his sockets. "Not the worst answer to that question I've ever seen," Lacunae observed.

The sight of everypony laughing at the flopped over Stygius, the fact that they'd all come so close to dying... somewhere I went from laughing to sobbing without even realizing it. Stygius rose as Rampage and Lacunae kept me from falling over as I swayed. "You two…you two are really really good together. Really…really…" The two fliers didn't know how to respond; fortunately, somepony else did.

Rampage blushed and batted her eyes at Lacunae. "Well, you heard her. Will you be my very special somepony, Lacunae?" The stunned mental babble coincided perfectly with the confused 'what?' from the Goddess. And just like that, I was back to laughing…no, crying…no…

Okay…maybe I still needed a little more time before leaving the ICU…

* * *

I lay there on my side, feeling the damage to my crippled torso

mending. It was rather disgusting, feeling things moving around inside me; it reminded me of when I was tainted. My brain wasn't just an emotional wreck…it was the fact that I had things in my head that didn't belong. The Goddess…strange files... I wanted some control back, damn it! I wanted to talk to somepony and not burst into tears. I wanted to think about Project Eternity without getting flashbacks. At least I *chose* to see memory orbs.

I needed somepony who knew technology…or, rather…some*zebra*. I asked the ghoul in charge of the ICU and then waited. The privacy curtains had been drawn around both Boing and Psychoshy's beds. I spotted the faint shimmer as she entered. I waited till it was right beside me, then hooked her neck with my remaining forelimb and pulled her in close, smooching her right on the end of her invisible muzzle.

The zebra appeared, eyes wide, cheeks flaming red as she fell back, staring at me in horror. "Why are you being all invisible, hmmm?" I asked, arching a brow. The embarrassment she showed helped me avoid thinking about my own problems.

"Oh…ah…well…" She flushed as she muttered, tapping her hooves together. "I think the suit likes being sneaky…and after those two spies and the Nightstalkers…well…it's just easier this way." What and what? Well, I supposed I'd get the full story when I was a little more together. I needed to take care of something. Something to give me a little more control.

"You should take it off from time to time. I agree it's a great suit, but there's such a thing as too much of a good thing." The zebra fidgeted as she looked away. "Anyway, you're good with terminals and computers and stuff. I need you to do me a favor." I turned my head, pushed my mane away, and pulled the cover up so she could see the plug in my temple. "I'd like to see if you can go through and delete any audio or video files that are in my head." At her incredulous look, I explained how unsealing Eternity had caused all kinds of flashbacks to the recordings. While I found them interesting, I didn't want them popping up completely at random.

"Oh. Sure. I can do that," she said as she took Marmalade's PipBuck and pulled a short cable out of its housing. "Universal plug…I'll just go through and…um…" She bit her lip as she looked away. "You're sure you're okay with letting me in your…well…system? What if I mess up?"

I waggled my mangled left leg at her. "Xanthe, with all that's

messed up in me, I really don't see how you could make me worse." Then I frowned and rolled my eyes. "Well, no. You might make me able to only speak in Zebra, make me forget the letter S, or just turn me into a remorseless cyberpony killing machine, but really, I think the chances of that are probably pretty slim." She still looked uneasy, and I smiled. "And I trust you not to do something bad to me."

Xanthe sighed, took the plug in her mouth, and pressed it into my socket. I had an overwhelming urge to rub my right eye as I felt something behind it. She then started to tap on the PipBuck keys with the very tip of her hoof. "Wow. Look at all that," she murmured softly.

"Lot of stuff in there?" I asked with a small frown.

"Yeah. I think this Steelpony audiovisual interface is using your brain as a buffer. That why it's triggering seemingly at random," she said as she typed steadily.

"You can't delete my memories or stuff though, right?" I asked with a little frown.

"Of course not. Memories aren't data. Well…not the kind you can take out by just pushing a button," she said as she started working. "Wait…*mater futūtor*…" Well, that didn't sound good. "I think… Blackjack, your eyes and ears have been recording days of information in your brain. And they haven't just been saving them; they've been broadcasting them somewhere as well."

"You mean somepony rigged my eyes and ears to use for spying?" I gaped, turning my head to glance at her.

"Yes. I can't tell where the data's going, though," she said with a frown. "Do you want me to remove it?" She caught my eye and swallowed. "You want me to remove it."

"Can you tell how long it's been doing it?" I asked, frowning as I thought back to when the visions started in Hippocratic.

"Near as I can tell…they always have," the zebra replied. "There isn't really a log or anything, but I've got timestamps going back for days. The earliest is…um…I think nine or ten days ago."

That was before Hippocratic. In fact, that was right about the time I…"Zodiac. She set them to record?" I frowned -- my eyes twitched back and forth as I thought -- then rubbed my eyes. Ugh, eyes shouldn't *twitch*. Then my paranoia began to assert itself. "Or… maybe she didn't. My eyes came from her. Maybe…maybe somepony hacked her eyes and ears a long time ago." Goldenblood?

Maybe. I wouldn't put it past him. Except he wasn't a technical wizard…but then, he certainly could have *had* it done even if he couldn't do it himself.

"There's no way to tell. You'd have to ask her," Xanthe said as she worked.

I lay there, my eyes every now and then flickering on and off. And as I lay there, I thought about why my eyes were spying on things and who was receiving it. And what they could have been doing with it... Thank goodness I had the help of somepony who knew all about terminals and robots and balefire bombs and--

Wait a minute.

"Xanthe…I'm curious. How do you know about balefire bombs?" My eyes clicked off so I couldn't look at her, and from her silence she'd either frozen or was running for her life. I hoped it was the former; it'd suck if I was stuck blind, again, till Lacunae got me to Rover. I quickly continued, "I'm not angry…I just want to know how you know so much about them."

The zebra began typing again, and I just hoped I was right about her. "The bunker I grew up in was a balefire launch facility. It was called a dragon's nest…intended for a first strike against Equestria. That's how I knew about the missile in Hightower. It was probably fired from my home."

"Well, unless you're two centuries old, I don't hold it against you." ... Though considering how many people I'd run into who *were* that old, I couldn't discount the possibility. "And even if you were, I still doubt I'd hold it against you."

"Really?" Xanthe sounded surprised. My vision popped back on, and I looked at the baffled zebra.

"Xanthe…Twilight Sparkle was creating alicorns. Fluttershy was a traitor. Pinkie Pie's law enforcement ministry was corrupt. Rarity was dealing in necromancy. There were megaspells aimed at doing Celestia knows what. Honestly, I can't blame the zebras for using their bombs. If I were in their shoes, I might have tried the same thing." I sighed, wondering what horrible things Applejack or Rainbow Dash had done behind the scenes trying to win the war at all costs. "We were so focused on winning that we never realized it wasn't worth the cost."

Xanthe was silent for a time as she worked, but then she said in a quiet murmur, almost to herself than to me, "The Remnant have one more." I looked at her as she sat, keeping her eyes down.

“You’re right…I do know a lot about balefire bombs. There was one silo that didn’t fire. The missile malfunctioned…so we had to keep the bomb safe and secure. When the Remnant came, they discovered it and took both the bomb and the zebras who maintained it.”

I slowly sat up, and she flinched away. I reached out and stroked her black and white ponytail. “Do they have a working missile or rocket?” I asked, and she shook her head. That was something. Still, I wouldn’t put it past them to smuggle it somewhere.

“Please…don’t be mad at me. This cursed city…it is evil and our enemy. It is Starkatteri…and the home of Nightmare Moon. A place of evil and…and…” She looked stricken as I slipped off the bed. “I didn’t want to betray my people…”

“Xanthe…you’re a good person. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have told me,” I said quietly. “Why haven’t they used it if they have it?”

“The last order of the Caesar was for us to fight on until the cursed city and nation of stars were no more. If the Legate is to fulfil that order, the balefire bomb must reach the Core somehow,” she said, looking to the west.

I whistled softly. “Tall order.”

“Yes. That place has automated defenses and magic shields which would protect it from a detonation outside. Before the day of fire, multiple missiles were intended to bombard the city and overwhelm its protections.” She sighed and shook her head. “The missile in my home was damaged, though, and I don’t know where the Remnant would get another.” She gave a sickly smile. “Not that one missile would have much chance at breaching the Core, anyway.”

Maybe not the Core, but what if the Remnant fired it somewhere else? The Society? The Arena? Thunderhead? “Don’t they have extra missiles at Dawn Bay?”

She shook her head. “No. Your Ministry of Awesome destroyed and stole dozens of our missiles prior to the day of fire,” she said quietly.

“How’d they pull that off?” I asked with a wry smile.

“We’ve no idea. It was one of our greatest defeats; in one night the Shadowbolts and members of the Ministry of Awesome infiltrated the launch facility, made off with two dozen cruise missiles, and destroyed dozens more. More than a hundred guards were executed for their failure.” She looked away. “The ministry sabotaged the balefire bomb stockpile. When the day of fire came, only a dozen

bombs were fired from Dawn Bay. Not hundreds, as intended."

"*Hundreds?*"

"Oh yes. The Caesar's final plan was to turn every inch of Equestria into irradiated glass. There was some invasion or big attack planned, something made with the help of a collaborator, and if it failed we would have been left with only one solution: overwhelming balefire bombardment." She said it so casually…"Had Dawn Bay and other facilities been intact and ready, it might even have been realized. Collaborators and sympathizers had allowed us to build and hide weapons all over your country. The old launch facilities ran for miles above the base. A forest of ballistic missiles that never flew, thanks to your Ministry of Awesome." She sounded just a touch resentful.

"So the zebras were going to push a button and wipe out all of Equestria?" I asked in shock. Xanthe's shamed eyes fell as she tapped her hooves in front of her.

"From documents in my home, I believe so. What alternative did we have?" Xanthe asked, almost begging me to understand. "Even with our superior numbers and natural resources, we could neither overcome you nor push you to surrender. Your megaspells and secret projects were too much for us. No matter how much we stole, infiltrated, or attacked, we couldn't beat you. Even balefire wasn't enough! Ponies developed megaspells that turned the sun itself into a devastating weapon. There were predictions that when we struck Equestria, only one out of every twenty missiles would reach their target, and that number grew every month! In another year, it would have been one out of every two hundred. And once we fell, what would stop the Maiden of Stars from taking over the entire world?"

It hurt to think about. The war had gone on for a generation, and here was a zebra absolutely certain that if they hadn't used tens of thousands of megaspells, they would have lost for sure. But so what? Wouldn't it have been better for one side to win than everyone to lose?

What if the zebras had won the war? The Remnant had continued waging war for two hundred years to destroy the Hoof. If Equestria had surrendered, would they have just stopped there? While Sekashi and Xanthe proved that not all zebras were bad, I had seen Lancer coldly shooting a dozen of his own kind. Would there have been death squads of Lancers hunting down ponies? Countless

balefire bombs annihilating Equestria entirely? I just didn't know…

What if Equestria had won? I'd like to have thought that everything would have returned to normal, but honestly, I'd never really thought about what postwar Equestria would have been like. Luna's Equestria…I felt a shiver run through my entire body and shook my head. It didn't matter…and I didn't want to think of Equestria after a thousand years of Luna, the ministries, and the O.I.A.

I sighed, pressing my thrashed limb to my face. "There's no point in worrying about what might have been. The bomb the Remnant have now is a bigger problem. Do you know where it is?"

"Dawn Bay, I imagine, but it could be hidden anywhere. The original launch facilities were all heavily damaged in the war. The balefire bomb armory is a molten slag pit." She lowered her head, and the suit seemed to hug her, snuggling a little against her. "There is one thing, though…Before we left for Yellow River…they were repairing one of the launchers. In fact, they didn't want me to leave because they wanted me to fix the guidance terminals. I guess they didn't expect me to get cursed…"

She pulled the plug from my temple, then tapped the keys a few more times; the deftness she employed with the tips of her hooves astonished me. "There. There shouldn't be any more foreign data stored in your brain. I've transferred all of it to this PipBuck; I don't know if it's useful, important, or just plain garbage." She handed Marmalade's PipBuck back to me. "I tried taking the spy programs out of your system, but it looks like that'd have some unpleasant side effects…like permanent blindness and deafness. It's really integrated in your systems."

"Ugh…why would anypony even do such a thing?" I muttered as I rubbed the socket cover.

"It's an exceptionally good place to hide data," Xanthe replied casually. "You wouldn't have known things were being recorded if it hadn't played them, so a unicorn wouldn't have been able to extract a memory magically. And most technicians don't think of using a brain to hide terminal data, so they wouldn't think to search for it there. They would look in the hardware." She sighed and patted my shoulder. "Still, running the clean and sweep program on this PipBuck from time to time should clear it out."

"Thanks," I said with a relieved smile. Then I looked at her as I tucked the device into my bags. "What about you? Do you want to

stay with me?"

Xanthe gave me a pained smile. "No. Blackjack, you're a decent pony, but you face things that terrify me. I don't think I could face anything like Hightower again. I still can't sleep after seeing it." She shook her head. "I think I need a place to rest and think…and decide about the future…"

* * *

I found Willow and Windclop in the conference room after I'd pulled myself together again. The ghouls from Hightower were there too, along with one or two of the settlement guards. Twitchy, the unicorn with hide like a spoiled pumpkin, screwed up his face in confusion. "So…wait…run that by me again? We're…dead? As in... dead dead? And that's why everything looks so…wrong?"

Blossomforth groaned and buried her face in her hooves. "We've run it by you twenty times, Twitchy. You've got to get your brain out of the past."

"I know, I know…just…we're dead?" Twitchy began again. "As in dead dead? And that's why everything looks so wrong?"

Willow sighed and stood. "You work him through it, Blossom," the green ghoul said, glancing at me and trotting over to the door. When she looked up at me, her brows furrowed. "Do you have to stand like that, Blackjack? You look like a freaky robo-zebra."

I waved my mangled forelegs at her. "It's either two legs or try to use these. Sorry." I frowned a little. "Speaking of zebras…" She looked back to the guards and then stepped out into the hall and sat down. Given the serious expression on her face, I doubted the news could be good.

"We got Cerberus's message," Willow said grimly.

"And did you find any zebras?" I asked nervously, afraid she was going to tell be about some other pony's death. Velvet or someone.

Willow snorted. "Oh yeah. Two of them in the old maintenance manager's office, along with maps of Meatlocker and crates of critters."

"Critters?" I cocked my head; this was going in an unexpected direction.

"Ever hear of a something called a Nightstalker? Looks like a snake and a dog got frisky? Well, they had dozens of the things ready in cages. Set those critters loose during an attack and we probably

wouldn't have been able to defend ourselves. They were all set to do something big, and soon," she said sourly as she glared down the dark hallway. "But the zebras were killed and we made sure none of the Nightstalkers survived."

"So…what's the catch?" I asked as she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it. I stared at the yellow flame. When she closed the lighter, I trembled and quickly looked away.

She took a long pull off the cigarette. "Guess who killed them?"

I blinked, and my mood joined hers. "Ahuizotl?"

"Yup. Claimed he was investigating a noise, found them, and got lucky. Surprise, it was right after Cerberus came floating up blasted all to hell. Both were shot dead center in the back of the head, so now he's a Goddess damned hero to half the town." She let out a long blast of smoke from her nostrils that put me on edge. I shivered at the smell and backed away, waving my hoof in front of my face. She frowned at me. "What's the matter with you?"

"Just…not good with smoke and fire right now. Hightower was really rough," I muttered. Willow frowned, then spat out the cigarette and carefully crushed the tip. Taking a smoke-free breath, I moved along quickly. "What about what Xanthe said? Or you could talk to Carrion."

"She's a zebra. It doesn't matter if she said Ahuizotl was the Caesar himself, nopony is going to believe her. And Carrion's got that damned Contract. Unless he can stand in front of the town and say 'my boss conspired with zebras to smuggle in nasty critters and take over,' there's nothing that can be done." Willow sighed and looked back in towards the conference room. "At least you brought back some good shooters. This'll double our security. I knew Blossomforth from before the bombs; good mare."

I lowered my eyes. "Hardly makes up for losing Graves," I muttered.

She sighed and shook out another cigarette, paused, and put the pack away with a scowl. "Look, Blackjack, when Graves told us she was joining you, Windclop and myself did everything we could to get her to change her mind, but she wouldn't think of it. She had her reasons for going back, and they were just that: hers." The green ghoul glanced back at the conference room. "And if what I hear is right, if she hadn't gone, none of you would have gotten out alive."

I sighed, frowning in thought. That Ahuizotl was going to get away

with it was galling. Wrong. And after what I'd been through, more wrongness in the world was just too much. Then I looked at my wrecked forelegs, and paused. An idea was worming its way through my head.

"You said that the ghouls wouldn't care if it came from Xanthe's mouth." The green ghoul frowned at me in confusion as I smiled. "What if it's from somepony else's mouth?"

* * *

The Mortuary was more than just dead, it was closed. I might have broken a few rules picking the lock, but I really needed this little chat. When I stepped inside the bar, I saw all the things from Kingpin's cell heaped over rusty gurneys that had been converted into tables. Ahuizotl dug through the sheets muttering feverishly to himself. Carrion stood in the corner and looked over in surprise as I walked in alone. "Ahuizotl," I called across the room, and the ghoul jumped, overturning the gurney he was working at and falling on his rump. I had only my mangled limbs…and the bag of bits Rampage had found in Hightower.

"Wha…you?! The sign says 'Closed' for a reason! Get out!" he spat as he rose to his hooves. "Carrion, throw her out!" The griffin sighed and put his patched-up helmet back on. I noted he'd kept Xanthe's rigged beam gun.

"I want to talk money," I said flatly, and I jingled the bag at him.

At once he raised his hoof. "Or we can hear the young lady out," he amended at once. He looked over my bare body and my metal limbs. "Your resilience is astonishing. Truly, I expected all of you to get a little ways in and then run out. But to have destroyed the tower…well…it's impressive."

"Well, I do impressive things," I replied as I looked at him evenly. "I need to get into Dawn Bay."

His smile disappeared and his eyes shifted to the large bag beside me. "Carrion. Make sure we're not disturbed." He waited for the griffin to leave, and then his lips curled in a wicked little smirk. "One moment. You're going to have to humor me." He trotted around me, checking to make sure I didn't have anything concealed in my scorched mane or stubby tail. I considered it a triumph that I didn't smash his skull in as he ran his hooves near some personal portions of my anatomy. "Now…what makes you think that I would

be able to facilitate…this request?"

"Xanthe said you fed information to zebras about a talisman inside a zebra at Yellow River." Now he looked suspicious, but I was there in just my hide. No guns. No tricks. Of course, I could have killed him myself, but that would only get me thrown out.

"I know many different people. I've been around for quite a while," he replied. I turned the bag of bits over and let the heap of gold coins pile up on the table before me. His filmy eyes grew wider and wider; the sight of the pre-war money seemed to arouse him. Okay, not something I needed to see. I held up the empty bag so he could see nothing was concealed inside.

"The Remnant have a balefire bomb. I need to defuse it. That requires getting in and out of Dawn Bay. You should know somepony who can help me do that without getting killed or caught." His smile broadened with an expression of bliss that I was certain involved thoughts of taking my money and selling me out. "Oh, and incidentally, if I *were* caught, Rampage would be coming for you. You know, immortal, unstoppable Rampage the Reaper?"

His smile soured immediately. "I see…yes…well…it wouldn't be impossible," he muttered. "I may have a few acquaintances in the Remnant. They've always been generous to sympathetic, helpful ponies."

"You were a sympathizer during the war?" I asked, and he sneered back.

"You have to care to be a sympathizer. I was an opportunist. I played sympathizer for the zebras and mole for the O.I.A. and made money from all sides. It was an instinct that served me quite well in the Wasteland." He tapped his hooves together. "Such an arrangement is going to have to be expedited, however, if you're to have a chance."

"Why? Do you know something?" I asked with a scowl.

"Why Blackjack, I know many things," he said in his silky, smug purr as he polished his hoof on his chest. "If you pay me sufficiently, you might know them as well."

I chuckled, smirking. "Yeah, you do, don't you? Like those zebra."

He immediately scowled, looking me up and down. Come on you bastard, take the bait. It's just you and me, all alone…

"You knew they were down there when Willow and Windclop didn't have a clue. Probably had a chance to clean up anything sticky." His lips twitched, and I saw pride and greed at war with

caution. I lifted a wad of gold coins with my magic and let them tinkle slowly back into the pile. “You can get almost anything done, can’t you?”

“Well. With the proper incentive…” he murmured. One coin bounced free and landed at his hooves. He stepped upon it, hiding it beneath his hoof. “Keeping those two out of sight was quite a trick. Their pets even more so.”

I smiled happily. “What I don’t get is why they bothered. It seems kind of stupid to go through all that trouble just to take over a hospital full of ghouls,” I said as I kept the coins tumbling back into the bag beside me. He was actually salivating!

“Well…you fail to recognize the strategic importance of the hospital. Nopony really trades with us, so a change in ownership wouldn’t have been noticed. From here they could strike at Red Eye at Paradise, the Collegiate, Scrapyard, and the Skyport with nopony ready until it’s too late.” He grinned. “Once I had my pick of the spoils, I’d head on over to the Society and buy my way into their good graces. Or maybe set up an establishment in the Arena,” he said as he trotted behind the bar. “However, things have changed with you here.”

“Because I’m in a position to make you incredibly rich?” I suggested with a grin…one which he returned.

“Actually, yes,” he said as he pushed a button on his terminal. Suddenly there were a whole bunch of beeps on the undersides of the tables around me. “If you take one step, I’ll have to sell you to the Remnant as ground pony.” Then he reached under his desk and pulled out an explosive slave collar. “Now, float the money over to me and put this on. I’ve got a little hidey hole in the back room to stash you in till things cool down.” He looked at my glare and laughed, “What? You don’t seriously think I’d believe you want to do business with me? You’re the saint of the Wasteland. I’m sure you’re just here to chat up some evidence to take back to those morons.” He nodded to my mangled leg. “Probably got that PipBuck recording this whole conversation, don’t you?”

Now I was the one grinning. “Darn. You figured me out. Well, except for one thing. My PipBuck? It’s a broadcaster.”

Then the door opened behind me. “Mines!” I snapped. Willow and Blossomforth stepped in behind me, and I carefully lifted the beeping furniture one piece at a time to the corners of the bar with my magic. The pegasus held up Marmalade’s PipBuck with a

desiccated wing. In the hall behind her were even more ghouls.

"I take it my servant is dead, then?" Ahuizotl sneered at us, his eyes twitching as he stood on the precipice of disaster.

Blossomforth chuckled. "Got to give it to the stripe, her ability to muck up tech isn't limited to just robots. One spark mine and his power armor turned into a fine bird cage."

Willow smirked back. "We'll get him working once you're taken care of."

Ahuizotl looked from one of us to the next, licking his lips. "Now… hey. Listen. I can explain. I'm…ah…being blackmailed. Zebras made me say all that shit. 'Cause they got my…my…ah…" He slumped as Willow focused her guns on the ghoul and worked the bit on her battle saddle, chambering two rounds. Finally he slumped, glaring at me in resignation. "Ah shit. Fine. Ya got me."

Willow glanced back at the doorway and then looked back at Ahuizotl. "Ahuizotl, for conspiring against the residents of Hoofington Memorial, we sentence you to exile. Your bar and its contents are to be seized and sold to fund the community."

I blinked and stared at her. "Huh? Aren't you going to shoot him?"

"If you'd gotten him to confess to killing Tulip, maybe. But ghouls don't like killing other ghouls. Even ferals," Willow said as she glared at him.

"You may as well kill me! Where am I supposed to go?" the ghoul pony protested.

"You seem to like working with stripes. Maybe they'll take you in," Willow retorted. "But I can guarantee that if you do go to the Society, or Flank, or the Arena, everypony will know the shit you pulled here."

"Well. I see…very well then. Return my servant to me and let me gather a few things, and I'll be on my way. Or are you exiling me completely naked?" Ahuizotl asked with a glare.

"Pack a saddlebag and get out, Ahuizotl," the mare replied.

"What! You can't just let him take Carrion with him!" I protested.

Willow frowned in distaste. "Carrion is free to stay or go. It's his stupid Contract that's exiling him with this lump of shit." We stood back as Ahuizotl packed his bags and, once loaded up with as much as he could carry, trotted past with his lips curled in malice.

I stood there for a second, and then I looked down at the pile of money beside me. I swept it off the table back into the bag and snatched it up. Outside the Mortuary there were two dozen ghouls

gathered in small groups talking in low tones. I saw Xanthe kneeling beside Carrion, strange arcane devices probing an open panel in his power armor. There was a hum and suddenly the griffin began moving once more. “About time. Let’s go, Carrion. We’ll leave these fools for the Remnant.” The power armor whined and sparked as it struggled to walk, and Ahuizotl gave a long, low hiss of disgust and continued moving, leaving Carrion trying to catch up.

“Wait. How’d you like to have enough money to go anywhere in the Wasteland?” I asked as I jingled the bag once more, slowing him. The effort of resisting the clink of coins seemed to cause him physical pain. Finally he stopped, glaring back at me. “There’s enough money in here to start over nearly anywhere in Equestria if you’re smart.”

The hatred in his eyes was matched only by his covetousness for the contents of the bag. “And you’re giving me this out of the kindness of your heart?” he jeered.

“No. I’m trading it to you for Carrion’s Contract,” I said as I shook it again.

Ahuizotl narrowed his eyes at me. “On the one hoof, with that many bits I could hire three griffin bodyguards and have more than enough left over…” He drew back. “But on the other hoof, I rather despise you, and doing anything you actually propose pisses me off. I should tell you to ram each and every bit right up your ass.” He screwed his lips up as his two base natures warred with each other. Finally he snorted, then reached into his bulging saddlebags and rifled around till he dug out a wrapped up scroll of paper. He tossed it in my face, stretched out, and grabbed the handle of the bag and tossed it on his back. “I can’t wait till you get what’s coming to you, Security.”

He started to trot away as Carrion caught up, and I held up the roll of paper with my magic. “Hey Carrion! Look at what I just got.” Carrion looked at the paper with blatant shock. “It is your Contract, isn’t it? I mean, it’s not some garbage he gave me in exchange for the money, right?”

“No…that’s exactly what it is,” Carrion said, and then smiled. “Excuse me.”

I looked at the confused Willow and Blossomforth as Carrion trotted rapidly after the departing ghoul. “Ahuizotl. I’ve been told that you’ve sold my Contract and I am no longer in your service.”

"That's right, Carrion" Ahuizotl sneered. "Why? Did you come to give me a kiss goodbye?"

"Yes," Carrion replied simply. A moment later a green beam lanced through the ghoul, transforming him and everything on him into a heap of glistening green goop. "Goodbye."

I just stared in shock, along with almost everypony else. "What the hell was that!?" I asked as I gestured to what little remained of his body.

"Ahuizotl was an evil bastard," the griffin replied. "The scams he ran, the lives he ruined, and the misery he inflicted were enough for ten bastards. So long as he held my Contract, I was honor bound to do as he commanded and remain silent. But now you are my employer, which freed me to rid the world of that disgusting rat. And now, for good or ill, I serve you."

"But…I…" I stared at the heap of green slime as a huge bubble rose in the middle and popped. "Couldn't you have made him put down the gold *first*?"

* * *

While there was no question that Ahuizotl deserved to be rendered into luminous slime, there was enough outcry that Carrion's days in Meatlocker were over for the time being. To be honest, I had no idea what to do with him. I'd tried to give him his Contract back, and clearly I'd insulted him badly by the way he told me bluntly 'no'. Apparently, someone else holding their Contract was the point of being a griffin…and with that, they eclipsed zebras as weirdest species in the wasteland.

Silver Spoon and Snails wanting to look for their friends. Xanthe looking for a future. Carrion needing somepony to hold his Contract. I had ideas churning around in my freshly cleaned out head. A part of me was still thinking about running off to Dawn Bay and dumping that balefire bomb into the ocean. Another part of me felt the siren's call of EC-1101 luring me off into the sky.

Really, what I wanted more than anything was to see Glory again. And P-21. And Scotch Tape. I wanted to go home to Star House.

But I still had one more thing to do before I left.

Back in the ICU, the ghoul, Carol, was listening to Hearth's Warming Eve carols on her terminal with the volume cranked up. Lacunae and Rampage were gone. I looked over at Psychoshy's bed,

hearing her groans. She really had to be hurt worse than I thought, but it was best that nopony could overhear me at the moment. Because no matter how I ran this though, it was going to be ugly.

I pushed back the curtain and looked at the pink filly; her mane had lost a lot of its curly bounciness. The single, unbandaged blue eye stared up at me impassively. Beneath her sheets, her legs bent wrong. I slowly walked next to the bed and sat on the floor, looking at her. Suddenly, my brain felt as if Xanthe had scrubbed out too much, and now I didn't have anything left to say. 'How are you doing?' Well, she was alive, in pain, and crippled. 'How've you been?' Better. 'Sorry…' for what? Not killing her? I opened my mouth and closed it again.

Finally I dropped my eyes. "Please, forgive me," I muttered as I looked at my mangled forehoof. After a minute, I looked back.

Boing didn't say anything. Her pale blue eye just drilled into me. I was waiting for it. She'd say no…or call me a murderer…or a monster…or Nightmare Moon or something. And it would hurt like hell. But she didn't. She just looked at me, and I could feel myself getting wound up. "I was…I was really out of it that night. I was exhausted and…fighting. Sweet Celestia, fighting for so long. I didn't see who you were till it was too late…and…" Again, she just stared at me. Was she drugged? Had I deafened her?

Finally, she said in a voice barely audible over the music and Psychoshy's groaning, "What for?"

I swallowed and lowered my eyes again. "For…for attacking you. For hurting you. For killing your friends. For getting Scoodle killed and…"

She closed her pale blue eyes. "Stable ponies don't know nothin'…"

I blinked and stared at her as she gave a sad little smile. "What do you think happened to Scoodle and me before you and yer blue friend showed up?"

"I…" But I knew what had happened. I knew exactly how horrible it was. I'd seen 99 and felt it on the *Seahorse*. "You girls got raped, didn't you?"

"Yup. Ploughed good," she said quietly, simply. "Wasn't the first time, neither. First time was Daddy makin' a mare out o' me while Momma stood by. Reapers got him good. Momma tried sellin' us to the Society, but I wouldn't sign so she just dumped me. Ended up in Chapel." I swallowed in horror. "After we split with you…well, lost Friskyhorn two days later to an angry radhog. Giblets got too many

rads, puked up her guts, and never woke up. The others run off. I met those two with a plan to scav some bunker; figured why not? Make enough caps to get out of here. Probably planned on killing me once we found something worthwhile." She swallowed and closed her eyes. "Then you smashed me good. Doc said you damn near killed me."

"I'm so sorry…" I muttered.

"And that's why yer stupid," the filly countered. "You think my daddy was sorry? Or my momma? Or them raiders? Them ghouls? Was the radhog sorry? Or the radiation?" She gave a little snort and closed her eyes. "Not a one of them was sorry. So why are you coming here askin' me to forgive you? What's the point of that?"

"Because…because I am sorry. What I did to you was wrong. I shouldn't have done it," I said as I sniffed. "I'm trying to be a good pony…I'm trying to do better…"

"And that's where you done fucked up. There ain't no such thing as good ponies. Not a one in the world. I ain't a good pony. You ain't neither. We're all just ponies," she said as she sighed and closed her eye again, shaking her head. "You just want ta feel better than the rest of us by playing the big hero. Well, ya ain't. So if you feel like scum, congratulations. You are. And someday you'll accept that. Then you won't give a fuck about forgiveness."

I just sat there, stunned by her words. No. No! Ponies could be better than this. I could be better! I just had to try harder. "I wish things had been different, Boing. I wish I'd listened to Scoodle. Everything would have been better…I think…" I swallowed and licked my lips. "Is there anything I can do to help? To earn your forgiveness?"

She sighed and closed her eye again. "You could kill me. Quick and clean. Doc wouldn't do it. Said he swore some oath or some horseapples." I stared at her in horror as a few tears escaped her eye and disappeared under the bandage. I could see the terminal in the Fluttershy Medical Center. I heard us singing. What was one more? I heard the Angel hissing in the rain beside Thorn's broken body. *'I gave her peace!'* Damn my synthetic organs and their refusal to reflect the horror I felt. Finally, she looked away. "Otherwise, no. I ain't gonna forgive you, Blackjack. 'Cause if I did that, I'd have to think about forgiving everypony from my daddy onward, and I just can't do that." She pulled the sheets over her head. "Go'way, Blackjack. Whatever yer after, ya ain't gonna find it here."

I staggered away from her bed. Somehow, some part of me had thought that I'd be pardoned. That all I had to do was tell her I was trying to do better. I tried to be kind, strong, awesome, enduring, and remember that it was under E. But to hear that being good was just some sort of self-delusion…Worse, a form of self-aggrandizement... Look at me…I'm Blackjack. The goodiest good pony. The saint of the Wasteland.

I covered my face with my chewed-up hand as I stood there, listening to the loud holiday music and the groaning. I had to be good. I had to. I had to know that at the end of this…somehow… there'd be sunshine and rainbows. Otherwise, the sooner I turned into Deus or the Goddess…the better. Only monsters could be happy in the Wasteland.

"Excuse me," Carol croaked from the nurse's desk. Then she looked pointedly towards Psychoshy's bed, then back at me with an expression like I should do something about it. I sighed and waved my hoof. Really, though, she'd have been better off getting the doctor. I trotted over and pushed the privacy screen out of the way. What did I know about medicine? Really, if she felt this bad all I could do was give her a shot o--

Oh. My eyes took in the sight of the yellow pegasus atop Stygius, rising and falling as she gasped and groaned, biting down on the end of her wing to try and silence herself. From the spots on her coat and the thick scent in the air, they'd been at this for a while. Stygius gave a squeak beneath her and shuddered as she trembled atop him. I looked at their union, and then Psychoshy glanced at me, her face turning scarlet as she moved atop him, seemingly unable to stop herself.

I gave a warm smile back. "Yup. He really is a champ. Trust me, you can probably get two or three more out of him," I said as she stared at me in stunned shock. Psychoshy made an admirable imitation of her mother as she blushed. She didn't stop moving, though, and really I couldn't blame her. "Make sure he uses his mouth more. He put it in you, he can clean it out. And have fun." I waved my chewed hand dismissively. "I'll probably be looking to leave in an hour or so. See you in Afterlife."

And I turned on heel and left the two alone, leaving a suggestion to the ghoul she turn the radio up more or just invest in some earplugs. Really, what was Psychoshy getting embarrassed about? It was just sex, a lot of sex from what I'd seen, and good sex at that.

Still, I was smiling. I'd needed something to whack my mind back into action. The sight of two ponies passionately enjoying each other reminded me that there was still good things in the world, even if they were fleeting…

* * *

"You're sure about this?" Rampage asked as I handled Carrion's Contract. I'd gotten my barding back from Velvet, along with the rest of my things. Vigilance really needed some TLC, and even Duty and Sacrifice were showing wear. The Contract itself was neatly printed: a list of duties he would perform, lines he would not cross, and expectations he had for his employer. Reading it, I understood him a little better. He'd been a soldier, and a realist, but his Contract didn't allow him to be used as an assassin. He was, above all else, a guardian. And despite how wretched and undeserving Ahuizotl had been, Carrion had upheld his Contract to the letter. The amount of dedication that took staggered me.

"Mhmmm…" I said as I sat in Afterlife, absorbing the music and the atmosphere. Despite the vibrancy of the tunes, there was something sad about it, too. These were ghouls clinging to a civilization that didn't exist anymore. I thought about how so many ghouls got stuck in the past, locked in one moment that made sense. Then I thought of Ditzy Doo as a part of a living community, how she'd been doing more than simply existing.

Carrion, Xanthe, Silver Spoon, and Snails all sat opposite me. The griffin had his power armor completely restored by now, though Willow had ordered it disabled after Ahuizotl's execution. "So. I guess this is where we part ways," I said to them. Silver Spoon looked a little sad; the glowing ghoul took off her warped frames and rubbed the crinkly glass adhered to her cheeks. "You two are determined to go looking for others?"

"Oh yeah. It's a wide, freaky Wasteland out there, eh?" Snails said with a nod.

"And dangerous too," I said and then levitated the Contract over to Silver Spoon. "Here. I'm giving you Carrion's Contract. He'll keep you safe while you search." The griffin stared at me impassively, and I couldn't help but give him a smile. "It's what he excels at."

"Tiara…I…thank you!" she said as she rushed around the table and hugged me. My radmeter began tick tick ticking really really fast,

and I tried to push her away as gently as I could. She raised her hooves, and I smiled and did my best to follow along. “Bump! Bump! Sugar lump rump!” She sniffed softly she backed away. “I’ll…I’ll try to keep it all straight, Ti…I mean…Blackjack.”

“You’ll have help,” I said, looking at the zebra. “I don’t have any say over what you do, Xanthe, but I think you should go with them.”

The zebra gulped, her eyes growing large. “Me? But…I…you…is this another curse?” she asked in confusion. The others looked at her as Silver Spoon returned to her seat.

“Carrion will need somepony to help with his armor, you have that stealth suit, and you know about terminals and can help them find their friends. It’ll also take you away from the Hoof. Maybe if you get away from here, you won’t be quite so cursed.” I smiled at the four of them. “And trust me, it’s better to have friends with you in the Wasteland than to be on your own. Even I’ve learned that.”

“I…well…but…I…” The zebra looked around in a near panic and then hung her head. “Oh, curses.” Finally she smiled and looked at the other three. “Very well. I accept.”

“Do we have a place to start?” Carrion asked, all business.

“Shattered Hoof Ridge Correctional. That was where Tiara was last,” Silver Spoon said. “I know she probably didn’t get out, but I have to hope.” And if nothing else, it was a way to keep from going feral.

“That’s a long way off. We’ll need to stock up on ammo. Give you some weapons training,” the griffin said as he looked at Snails and Silver Spoon. Then he nodded with his grumpy expression and continued, “Still, it’s doable.”

I rose to my hooves. “Well, it sounds like you have some plans to make. I’ve asked Windclop to pass you some of the bits I found in the Stonewing statue to make sure you’re outfitted well enough.” As I started away, though, Carrion approached me with a grim look on his face, his expression so stern that for a moment I was grateful that Willow had disabled his energy gun. It was disabled, right? I didn’t think I could regenerate from a pile of green sludge. My cheeks strained with the biggest grin I could muster up as I backed away from him. “Erm…so…goodbye?”

“Yes,” he said darkly, those predatory eyes locking onto mine. Then he suddenly gripped my shoulders and pulled me in, pressing his hard beak to my lips and slipping something the texture and

flavor of boot leather into my mouth. I think my scorched mane stood upright as he kissed me, and I fell over retching as he said with a straight face, “Goodbye, Blackjack.” He turned solemnly away and returned to the table as half of Afterlife erupted in laughter at me sitting there, scrubbing my tongue with my twisted fingers.

Sweet Celestia, I couldn’t get the taste off!

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Psychoshy and Stygius joined Rampage and me outside. The mare looked happy. Not ‘sadistically and gleefully pounding another pony’ happy, but truly happy and relieved. Stygius met my eyes and gave a sheepish grin but then put his wing around her and pulled the yellow pegasus against him. Rampage looked on with a little sigh, then shook her head and gave them some space.

The absence of Hightower was a little disturbing; to the north, all that remained was a ridge of tossed-up debris. It was getting late; in an hour or two it would be dark, but a flickering blue-green glow emanated from the other side of the ridge, and as we approached my PipBuck started to tick. “Lacunae?” I thought out at her, not wanting to get closer to that crater.

“Just, a few more minutes…” Lacunae thought back at me in a breathless voice. She was probably finding all that radiation very nice indeed.

I sighed, looking at the rubble around me. Windclop had been right: it had definitely ruined the neighborhood. Of course, the neighborhood had been ruined before, but now with huge lumps of concrete and steel beams scattered all over the bunker-like apartments, the ruin had been doubled. ... Or was it squared? Bleh, too many fancy mathematics to keep track of.

Then a dark shape slowly walked out through the deepening darkness and drizzle. Yellow eyes stared out at us from under the helmet of an archaic suit of armor as she turned to face us. I looked from her to Stygius beside me and gave a weak little smile. “Um... isn’t that your sister?” I asked, and he licked his lips nervously and nodded, his tufted ears drooping as he shrank back from her furious gaze.

“THOU ART IN SO MUCH TROUBLE, BROTHER!” she bellowed at

us in a thunderous voice. “THOU SHALT ABANDON THY VAINGLORIOUS QUEST AND RETURN TO THY FAMILY! OUR FATHER COMMANDS IT!” Rampage fell over, clutching her ears, and I shrank back as the booming voice started a screech of feedback in my ear.

Stygius swooped up to her and covered her mouth with his wing, making hushing motions as he looked back in the direction of Meatlocker and made little squeaks at her. “NAY, BROTHER! I SHALL NOT BE SILENT! THOU HAST DONE FAR MORE DAMAGE TO THE SECRET OF OUR EXISTENCE THAN I!” She advanced on him, and step by step he retreated. “THREE DAYS THOU HAST BEEN ABSENT! THREE DAYS! THOU INSISTED THOU NEEDED BUT ONE HOUR TO BED THE STRUMPET BLACKJACK! NOT THREE DAYS! OUR FATHER IS MOST VEXED WITH THEE!”

Strumpet?! “Now wait a minute!” I snapped. “Stygius can go where he wants with who he wants, and he doesn’t need your permission!” Psychoshy looked stunned as her eyes went from Stygius to me to Tenebra.

“NAY, THOU TEMPTRESS, BLACKJACK, THOU HARLOT THOU! THOU HAST ENTANGLED HIM WITH SOME FORM OF LECHEROUS MAGIC! THOU HAST BEGUILDED HIM WITH THY FLANKS OF STEEL AND FOUL UNICORN SORCERY! WHY ELSE WOULDST HE FOLLOW THEE LIKE A LUSTFUL MOONCALF!?” Flanks of steel? How do you beguile with flanks of steel? Who was I going to seduce, the tank?

Rampage winced. “Um... *Please* stop shouting?”

“And anyway,” I snapped, “*she’s* the strumpet that’s riding his little pony.” I pointed at Psychoshy.

“Hey! There’s nothing little about it!” the pegasus retorted, and I had to give her that. She flew into Tenebra’s face. “Nopony is taking Stygius anyplace!”

“INCORRECT!” she roared, and then the darkness around us came alive! Shadowy tendrils reached up around our legs and held fast. I staggered, struggling to rise as they curled about me more and more.

“Oh, this is new!” Rampage shouted as she struggled against the darkness. In my mind, the Goddess was contemplating adding a batpony or two to Unity if it meant that she could get her hooves on that kind of magic!

Psychoshy evaded the tendrils in a yellow streak as she came

around and smashed her hooves against Tenebra's helmet. I kept debating about jumping into S.A.T.S. or not. The shadow magic had wrapped around my weapons, but I still had my horn. I looked over at the stricken Stygius, who simply seemed at a loss.

"OW! THY CANTANKEROUS... OUCH! CEASE THY-- HEY!" Tenebra bellowed as she struggled to grab the darting yellow pegasus with her shadows. In her armor, the batmare couldn't quite bring herself around in time to face her. "STOP THOU CUNT THOU!" she bellowed in frustration.

Psychoshy tackled her straight into the ground, knocking the helmet from her head. Her bellows became high pitched, barely-audible squeaks and chirps as the yellow pegasus ground her face into the dirt. "Stygius isn't going anywhere with you! He's a free pony! He can make his own choices! If he wants to stay with us, then there's nothing you can do about it."

"Please stop," a stallion said beside me. Stygius wore his sister's helmet, and I suspected he was whispering to keep his voice at a tolerable volume. He trotted over to the pair, put his wings between the two stunned mares, and separated them. "I apologize for my tardiness, Sister. Truly, one hour was given and one hour was all I meant to spend. But... Sister, please hear me. I have in but three days lived such that three lifetimes could not compare! I have faced peril, horror and trials, but wonders too. Did thou knowest that just a short flight yon, thou canst hear melodies unlike any in our dark home?" He pointed a wing back towards Meatlocker before grinning widely. "And that is but one place I have encountered! How many more may be discovered?"

Wow. Somepony actually *happy* to be in the Wasteland. Who knew?

Tenebra stared at him and made little squeaks and chirps. He shook his head. "Nay, Sister. Our mother's tales of horrors and hardship were not false. But not all surfacers are savage. Many are brave, fearless, gentle, and... " His eyes turned to Psychoshy. "Beautiful." He gave her a kind smile and then looked back at Tenebra. "I left with Blackjack for base intentions, I confess. Yet in her company and that of her friends, I have seen an example our own kind would be wise to adopt."

Her shadows slowly relaxed and I straightened. She gave another chirp, and he looked away, again appearing sad and torn. She chirped again. "Nay, Sister. I would not defy our father the king.

But I am loath to leave this place now that I have started to discover its treasures," he said as he looked at Psychoshy. "Please... cease thy attack. I shall make my farewells."

"You're a prince?!" Psychoshy blurted, and he flushed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He sighed. "Prince of a people who hide beneath the ground and who dwindle away generation by generation in fear and seclusion. Never before would I have questioned our ways. Now I see how life struggles on in the Wasteland, in such hardships." He looked at me with a sad smile. "I thank thee, Blackjack, for thy kindly education. In thee, thou hast shown me true valor and friendship."

"So, you're leaving?" Psychoshy asked in a little voice. "Just... leaving?"

"I must. My sister spokest true; my father will insist upon mine return. I am unforgivably tardy." He reached over to her and lifted her chin with his wing. "Were I not a prince, my father not a king, I would remain with you all my days. Even if I must pluck the wings from my back to maintain our secret, I would. I have seen such courage, passion, and life in this time with you than in all my years below. And all of you I shall sorely miss."

Tenebra was looking at Psychoshy oddly as the stricken pegasus began to weep. Stygius slowly wrapped his wings around her and kissed her softly. Rampage sighed as she looked away. Finally they parted lips. "Farewell, kind lady. I shall hear the whisper of thy wings on every lonely breath of air for the rest of my days." Slowly he pulled away from her and turned away to walk to his sister.

I looked from Psychoshy to Stygius and back again as the mare stood on the verge of losing another pony she loved. "If you are going to do anything besides live in regret, now's the time to do something," Rampage said quietly to her.

Psychoshy swallowed and then swooped after them. "Wait! Wait... please... " she said as she landed in front of him. "Take me with you."

Stygius's eyes popped wide. "Fairest, I cannot. Thou art of the surface and I am of the depths. Were you to come with me, thou couldst never return!"

"So what?" Psychoshy said firmly as she looked up at him. "All my life I've been nothing but a tool or a killer. You're the first pony who really makes me want to be better than who I was. I... I like you, Stygius. Enough to take a risk coming with you. If your father

has a problem with it, then fine. I'll deal with it. But I'm sick of just going through life hoping it will get better."

Stygius opened his mouth to talk again, when Tenebra gave a chirp. The dusky-blue-maned mare smiled at the yellow pegasus and then looked sternly at her brother and gave another chirp. "You're sure? But Father... " She chirped again, firmly. "You'll speak with him... but... " And then she gave a long squeak and he balked. "Yes... I would much... much rather not marry you, dear Sister. Much rather... " He looked back at Psychoshy and then smiled and wiped her tears away with a wing.

"You'd better hurry," I said as I looked back towards Meatlocker, knowing that somepony would come to investigate the shouting sooner or later. I smiled at them both. "I hope it all works out. Thanks for helping me with... um... everything," I said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

Psychoshy turned towards Rampage, but the mare just forced a smile and waved a hoofclaw. "Go on, you crazy kids. I'm happy for you both. There's nothing better than finding that very special somepony." Her jaw strained to maintain her grin.

"Well, then... goodbye," Psychoshy said.

"Goodbye, Psychoshy," I replied.

Then she shook her head with a smile. "Not Psychoshy. Whisper. If I'm going to start a new life, I may as well start a with a new name as well." And with her eyes clear and confident she flew to the pair of batponies, and with one look back and a smile, they took to the air together, flying northeast around the crater.

Rampage waited a minute and then sniffed. "Finally taking her chance on her own life... lucky girl... "

Then Lacunae dropped from the sky and landed beside us, throbbing with a full charge of magical energy to take us home. "Hello, girls. Did I miss anything?"

It took a bit of explaining, during which time Lacunae seemed completely fascinated by the magical powers of Stygius's sister. Shadow magic was apparently making the Twilight in the Goddess so uppity that she was dumping every bit into Lacunae. Rampage said little, looking slightly…something. Pensive? She grimaced when I told Lacunae how happy 'Whisper' was now that she had a new life and muttered under her breath as she turned away.

I supposed that Whisper wasn't the only mare who wanted a fresh start with somepony who loved them.

* * *

While my eyes recovered from the glare of teleportation, I heard a number of startled voices and the sound of water flowing behind me. Slowly the afterimages began to fade away, and I looked at the stunned faces of dozens of ponies. I looked at the horseshoe-shaped strip mall beside the Hoofington River and the numerous ponies around vendors and shops. Steely-eyed stallions with hunting rifles looked our way but didn't go red on my E.F.S. Strings of lights had been stretched between the two arms of the strip mall, filling the plaza between them with a shattered rainbow.

"Hey, this isn't Chapel!" I said, perhaps a little more loudly than I'd intended. "What are we doing in Riverside?" I asked Lacunae with a little pout, standing on my back legs next to her.

"You need new forelegs," Lacunae pointed out, "and I felt that teleporting here and walking would be less disruptive than teleporting into the midst of the sand dogs' home." I huffed and slumped. She had a point. Seeing Glory again would just have to wait. Besides, when we'd last left Riverside, it'd been a ghost town on the verge of being completely abandoned. Now, the stalls and shops that had been all but empty were overflowing with goods, and everywhere I looked were ponies. At least forty or so were going about their business in the dwindling daylight.

Or had *been* going about their business; our appearance had created quite a stir. Murmurs of 'Security', 'Rampage', and 'Reapers' were circulating. Most of the expressions were either awed or confused, with a few glowering at me. Lots of ponies were staring at my limbs -- or the remains thereof -- and shooty eyes.

"Hey, Security," called a voice from beside me, and I frowned as I looked at the peach mare with fish for a cutie mark standing behind a stand loaded with fish, parts of giant frogs, and hunks of leech. She met my gaze and hesitated as if reconsidering. Her eyes lingered on my shredded and mangled metal legs. Then she finally smiled, though, and looked me in the eye. "It's Perch. We met a few weeks ago? Welcome back," she said as she turned to a hubcap filled with coals over which cooked fish on metal skewers. "Want a free sample?"

Well, I ate Cram. How bad could it be? I levitated one over, and she passed another to Rampage. Lacunae just looked away with a

faintly ill expression. To be honest, the fish was absolutely delicious, though I didn't think Perch expected me to eat it bones, skewer, and all. The others were looking at the shops curiously.

"I will go find Rover," Lacunae said. "You can stay here and talk with your friend." He knew the alicorn from Tenpony, so there was little chance of a problem with the meeting, hopefully. Rampage finished her roast eel, belched, and trotted over to walk beside the alicorn. It looked like, for once, I wouldn't have anything to do. It left me feeling a little uneasy, but I *was* curious what'd brought about this turn around in the town. It couldn't be because of me... it just... couldn't.

"Where did all these people come from?" I asked the peach fishermare.

"Amazing, isn't it?!" Perch said in glee. "Lots of these folks are from outside Hoofington. When those dogs started trading, they had…well…everything! Everything we could ever hope to swap! And they love my fish." The mare was nearly dancing in her joy. "Once we had the salvage, the trade caravans started coming really regularly! We actually have some traders planning to go from here to Manehattan to Dise! Can you imagine?" she said as she hopped on her hooves. "Chems from Flank. Bullets from Megamart! We're getting food from the river and trading it with the Society for vegetables. It's amazing! And it's all thanks to you."

I felt a little dizzy; this was sort of the opposite of Yellow River. I never really expected to ever see anypony really happy to see me. *Trade will save the Wasteland.* It was astonishing how simple economics kept civilization going. "You don't have many Harbingers here, do you?"

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Those Hoofington Rises freaks? Nah. They'll only give you free stuff if you join their wacky cult. We don't need that garbage." She pointed over at the huge towers across the river. "I mean, their latest line is about how the Core destroyed Hightower. Blasted it to pieces. 'Hoofington Rises and the evils of the Wasteland are destroyed... ' blah blah blah." I strained my smile, laughing and hoping few other people had seen the green beam minutes before the explosion. "*Everypony* knows that it was just that damned bomb going off. We don't have time or the need to bother with nonsense like that anymore. We got ponies working to clear debris. Ponies working to bring in more fish. Ponies trying to fix up more shops. It's a real town again!"

"It surely is," an old earth pony stallion chuckled, pushing through the crowd. The lemon-yellow Keeper grinned at me with that look that inexplicably drew a blush to my cheeks as he tugged down the brim of his floppy, beaten hat. His eyes lingered on my busted up forelegs and he shook his head. "Why is it that you always seem to look two steps from the everafter? One day we need ta meet up when yer whole and healthy. Make a day of it." He grinned at me. "Still, yer better off than when I last saw ya." His eyes settled on my legs and the smile faded, an old wistful look crossing his features; after a moment, I realized that maybe he was recognizing my limbs from their previous owner. Then he shook his head, though, and said calmly, "I hear tell you've been running like a mad hellhound all over the east, Security."

"Yeah, pretty much," I replied with a sheepish little smile. Then I blinked and levitated out Vigilance and my revolvers. "Do you have any parts for these?"

He whistled through his teeth as he took Duty and admired it. "Mmmm…maybe. Looks like the action's worn." He waved over one of his brahmin and dug around in one of its packs, taking out another battered, less fancy-looking heavy revolver. "There. You should be able to cannibalize the parts off it." A little more impromptu trading and I had enough to repair the three weapons. After raiding the Hightower gun vault, I had enough guns to trade for the parts. Finally, we both sat back as I put them in my bags.

"Thanks," I said as I tucked them away. "Been busy."

Keeper laughed and then gave me a sly little look. "So I heard. Folks are talking about how Security blew the dickens out of old Hightower. Pretty impressive," he chuckled. "Can't wait for DJ Pon3 to get back on the air and talk about it."

I groaned, covering my face, then blinked. "Wait! It happened just yesterday. How in Equestria could they possibly know it was me?"

The old yellow buck threw his head back and laughed. "So it was you! Thought so. Blackjack, didn't take long for folks to figger out who in the Hoof *coulda* done it! Big Daddy's crowing 'bout how the Reapers got the damnest toughest fighter in the Hoof. I think that old bastard is thinking of adopting you or something. The Flashers are practically ready to become your own personal gang. The Collegiate's probably gonna name you an honorary doctor or something."

"Great," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Doctor Blackjack." I'd

probably kill whoever I tried to heal. Gunshot wound? Amputation! Broken leg? Gunshot! I sighed, shaking my head. “I just want to get home. I should have never been crazy enough to leave Glory.”

“Oh, your lovely one-winged marefriend?” He chuckled, stroking his little garlic bulb of a beard with a look that belonged on a stallion half his age. Really, I didn’t think he had a chance... He quickly added, as if I were offended, “I don’t mean anything by it, of course.” Then he leaned towards me a little. “So. How *did* you get the Core ta shoot Hightower and blow it to smithereens? ‘Cause that’s a story I’d love to hear.”

I sighed, looking out across the river for a minute. “You know those Harbingers? Well, they’re right about one thing: there is something stirring in the Core. And it wants this.” I tapped the cover over my PipBuck. “There was a ghoul -- freakiest thing I ever saw, big as a skywagon -- that was about to eat me. Whatever the damn thing is that’s running the Core, it blasted the ghoul to keep it from destroying my PipBuck.” Then I gave a half smile and rolled my eyes. “Ten minutes later the balefire bomb blew. Totally unrelated. Really.”

“Well rut me twice and call me Sandy... ” He looked a little bemused and slightly sympathetic. “Still pretty impressive, though... And what were you after in Hightower in the first place?”

“Just following a wild goose,” I said. “And I nearly got cooked in the process.”

“Sorry to hear that.” I could tell he wanted more specifics; information and rumors were probably just another commodity to him. After a moment, though, he seemed to realize that he wouldn’t be getting anything else on that subject. “So what’s your next move?”

I groaned and buried my face in the remains of my forehooves. “Right now, I just want to get back to Star House and Glory. That’s all I want.” He smiled and patted my head.

“And that’s why yer gonna end up a *bona fide* legend, Security,” he chuckled, but I simply forced a smile and looked away. “You’re more concerned with returnin’ to yer lady love than with fame, fortune, or power.”

“Unless I’m remembered for being a monster,” I muttered, thinking back to my friends in the prison. To a slaughter on a stormy night. To a little filly with broken legs. I looked at my mangled limb with a sigh. “My friends are scared of me.” I met his worried eyes. “And I

think they're right to be."

Keeper looked at me for a long moment. "Hey, Perch! Bring me a bottle of Wild Pegasus," the yellow earth pony shouted. The fishermare pulled a familiar-looking bottle from behind her stand, and the old stallion took it and trotted over to a rusty table and pair of chairs beside the crumbly brick wall that ran along the riverfront. I followed and watched as he deftly poured two glasses, then picked his up with his mouth and shot it down in a gulp. He smacked his lips. "Best thing for them there existential crisises," he said as he leaned back in the old chair. "So…what's the bee in your bonnet?"

I sighed and lifted my glass, looking at the amber contents while he poured himself another. "I don't know. A month ago I was Blackjack. A few days after that I got mutated eyes. Then I found out my PipBuck's the key to all kinds of pre-war technology. Then I had jelly legs. Then I was blind and crippled. Raped…Then dead." That made him arch an eyebrow. "I came back as a cyberpony…and I just felt all wrong. Still do. I was suicidal for a spell. Terrified of stallions. Went nuts. Tore apart some pegasi and crippled a filly. Got some help. Got laid. Got cooked and irradiated. Died again… worse this time. And now…" I sighed as I turned the glass back and forth before me with my magic. "Now I don't know what to feel. I don't know who I am. I just…want to be good. I don't want to be one of the fuckers of the Wasteland, you know?" I set the glass down and looked out at the water as he drank a third. "You said I'm gonna be a legend, but a legend of what? Who the hell am I anymore, Keeper?"

He smacked his lips. "Funny thing about legends. They tend to be whatever a person wants them to be, instead of what they really are. Take Princess Celestia, for example. The nicest, goodiest Princess there ever was, right? Heck, you hear people say 'sweet Celestia' all the time; I just did it myself. Hardly ever hear them say 'Dear Luna' or something. Almost always Celestia. Why do you think that is?"

"'Cause…" I paused and frowned. "You just…do. She's Celestia."

"She's also the reason the war started," he replied with a smile. "Oh, I know there's all kinds of arguments about coal and industrialization and national pride and such, but I like to blame whatever pony said 'go'. Because ultimately that's where the bit is supposed to stop." I drank my glass, and he poured us both another. The old stallion went on, "Thing is, folks got it so fixed in their

minds that she was this goody good paragon of goodness that even two hundred years later they say her name like they think she's gonna swoop in and save them. But me…I want to know who Celestia was at one in the morning when everything was dark and she was all alone. Was she really so good? Was she really so perfect?" He shrugged. "Guess that's one of them glasses half filled deals."

Now I was more confused than ever. "So are you saying I'm not as good as they think I am?" Gee…surprise surprise.

"I'm saying that there's no cut and dry good and bad. You might be remembered as a saint by these folk, but as a nightmare by some other folk." He poured himself another drink, downed it, and sighed. "Fact is that while I trusted my friends, and liked them, I always knew that if things went bad then they could beat the shit out of me. Especially Big Daddy, Awesome, and Crunchy Carrots." He swirled the remains of the bottle. "Sure enough…not long after Dawn left…they did. And bad. Something stupid." He sighed and shrugged once more. "So if your friends are scared of you, well… you can't help that. You can just keep control of yourself. Trying to do more than that is just setting yourself up to fail."

I smiled a little as I looked down into the whiskey in my glass. "Thanks, Grandpa."

He laughed at me, husky and throaty as he swirled the bottle. "You're one of the few mares where I can honestly say that ain't a possibility." He lifted it and drained the remainder of the whiskey, then grimaced. "Ooooh, gonna be feeling that in an hour." Finally he looked back at me. "So I hear you're having other problems?"

"Had some Harbinger troubles," I said as I looked back towards the river and the foamy brown water. "They've been after my head."

"After your PipBuck is more like it. I've heard through clients that they're offering a princess's ransom for it." He snorted and shook his head. "Offering too damn much, honestly. Anypony you should be worried about isn't taking them seriously. Yet. Besides, the Zodiacs flat told them no. With Sanguine and his freaks gone too… well…not sure who else is gonna snap that up."

"Oh, I'm sure somepony will. It's not the first time," I muttered. He winced, and I smiled a little. Was I actually getting blasé about a bounty on my head? Ugh…"I've been doing this too long. This has been the month from hell."

"Awww, you've only been in the Hoof for a month and you're

already bitching? Wait a few years and see what it can really throw at you," Keeper teased, and then reached out and snagged my shot glass. Before I could do anything he finished that off too. "Well now. I think I'd better be going. There's a nice young aspiring caravaneer here, and I was thinking of giving her some personal tips of the trade before she heads off to Baltimare." He stood, tugged down the brim of his hat, and then walked, a touch unsteady, off into the crowd.

I watched him go, then turned and looked out at the water flowing past the settlement. It wasn't raining for the moment, and I felt a little bit of peace. I didn't look at the seat across from me as I said in a low voice, "You've been quiet, Dealer. Both back with Boing and now."

The pale buck shuffled his cards as he sat in the seat that Keeper had vacated. "Why go through all the effort of contact when others do a job for you?" he asked in return. "Does it make you happy? Seeing this place you helped?"

"A little," I admitted. "Back at Flank, I figured helping was just... giving folks what they needed. But the gift didn't matter if it wasn't what they wanted or from who they wanted it from." I looked at the shops and the lights and the hope…the energy was infectious. And I'd helped with that…putting Rover in a position to trade with Riverside. I glanced back at the Dealer. "So Boing tears me down and Keeper builds me back up again? Is that the deal?"

"I guess." He bowed his head a little. "Not like I'm good at this sort of thing, Blackjack. Being stuck in a stable maneframe for two centuries doesn't do much for one's people skills."

"Then why do it?" I asked, and he closed his eyes. I leaned towards him, trying to prop up my chin on my mangled left leg.

The old, pale buck looked at his cards. "Back before the bombs fell…Goldenblood came to me. It was literally hours before he was arrested for treason. He was…more scared than I'd ever seen him before. More unstable, too. You know better than almost anyone how calm and collected he was. Well, that night, he wasn't. He was scared to death. He insisted that we'd all been played, and that he was the biggest fool of them all. That something had to be done to save Equestria."

"And that was binding you to EC-1101?" I asked in return.

"Part of me. That was what he wanted, yes. He had all the files from Rarity and making her own soul jars. He wanted to make the

program itself my soul jar, make sure that it would stay intact no matter what. But he wanted more than that. To make sure that no matter what, EC-1101 reached Celestia at all costs."

I shifted on my seat. "Celestia?" I remember how coldly he'd dismissed her, cutting her off from the kingdom entirely. "Why?"

"He didn't say. He said that EC-1101 would have to get to her." He shook his head slowly, closing his eyes, and then continued with great regret, "And I told him no. I think I might have killed him, then. He left to find Trottenheimer. Said Trottenheimer'd made something for him to deal with something bad. But then a half hour later I was stunned and woke up in an interrogation room. Luna was there. I was Goldenblood's assistant. They questioned me for…I don't know how long. Luna asked me if I wanted to prove my loyalty, and I said yes."

"Wait. *Luna* put you into EC-1101? But…why…how did she know how to do it?" I gasped.

"I don't know. Maybe Rarity told her? It was my chance to prove my innocence. They'd split my soul so that it wouldn't kill me. Luna told me that if anything happened to Equestria because of Goldenblood's betrayal, I was supposed to find a worthy heir. Somepony with the strength to save the kingdom and the intelligence to do what's right." He looked at me with a tired smile. "So far, you're the best candidate I've found." I didn't know if I should be flattered or horrified. I was settling on baffled.

"So…EC-1101's routing is doing what?" I asked, now completely confused.

"I don't know. It's got its own thing going, and I'm just along for the ride. I can help you access it and get past all the verification gibberish…but it's running its own program. Maybe it thinks Rainbow Dash is in Shadowbolt Tower. Maybe something else is affecting it. The only one left on the list is Horse. Maybe it's trying to get to Robronco. I just don't know."

"Ahem…" Perch said, watching me with a concerned smile. "Is everything okay?"

I realized how I must have looked; chattering to myself. "Oh yeah. Sure. Just…um…heroic brooding. 'Cause, you know, heroes... " I gave a nervous grin that made her look even more worried. "We…um…brood." I quickly cleared my throat. "What can I help you with. Need raiders ventilated? Evil thwarted? Just let me at 'em."

"Actually," she pointed a hoof at the empty whiskey bottle, "I need

to you to pay for that. Twenty caps please."

I gaped at her, then at the bottle, then in the direction Keeper had gone. "But…but I only drank one glass…"

* * *

"Why is pony always breaking legs? Pony has good legs. Pony needs to take care of legs," Rover said as he fussed over my damaged limb with his tools. The sand dogs were doing better than I imagined. They weren't extending their modifications to other ponies yet, but the trade in salvage had brought in a wealth of gems and food for the beleaguered people. Their subway station was still a complete mess, but I gathered that that was more because the sand dogs preferred it that way.

"Well, I lost that one to keep from eating a balefire egg," I explained yet again, "and that one was chewed up by an ultra ghoul. It could have been a lot worse." I levitated up a gem and popped it into my mouth. Mmmm…a nice fruity amethyst.

Lacunae and Rampage waited outside in the rain. My striped friend seemed more down than usual; I hoped that Lacunae would be able to help her. She'd helped Psycho and me after our troubles, but I wondered if maybe this was how she coped with her own problems. That and stomping things six feet underground. That left me alone with the old sand dog as he attached a new foreleg to my stump. I alternated between munching on scrap metal and gem fragments and the occasional smoked fish stuff, which was probably tainted but meh, honestly, how much worse could I get?

"Pony should be more careful," he muttered as he trotted over to a terminal, brought over plugs connected to several wires, and began attaching them to sockets hidden inside my remaining limbs. "Dogs work hard to get you best parts. Should not damage them needlessly." The components he'd used to repair and rebuild my legs were ugly, ungainly things; I wondered if he was giving me deliberately bad-looking replacements as a further try at getting the point across.

"Believe me, after what I've been through, I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for your work." I tried to get my fingers to work on my mangled left limb, then scowled and just lifted the limb and extended my thumb with my magic. "You were right about thumbs. These things are amazing!"

"Told pony," he snorted before walking over for even more cables. How much wiring up was he going to do? "Rover told striped pony, but she say hoof for pony. Rover say thumbs better. Dogs win." He grinned and began typing on the terminal with far more speed than even P-21 or Xanthe. "Rover enjoy making Pony's body. Good parts. Good looks. Like old old times again." Then he pointed a finger at me. "Is why Pony should take care!"

"I know. And I'll try harder." I pressed my mangled hoof to my chest. "I solemnly swear I won't intentionally break my limbs on any enemy smaller than a house. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye." A little pink pony in my head nodded primly.

He snorted with what I suspected was disbelief. "This take while. Must make old repair talismans fix new parts like old. Make all same system, or limbs not work right."

And he was getting *even more* cables. "How did you get trained to do this?"

"Trained?" He seemed to find the word both offensive and amusing. "Dog not get taught this trick. Dogs get first metal parts. I make sure I watch procedure. I steal papers and books. Finally, pony need assistant. I make sure I be assistant. I pay attention and make sure when other sand dog fixed, I do the fixing. Pony happy to let dog work on dog. Give lots of parts." He chuckled throatily. "But dog cleverer than pony. Dogs dig tunnels, yes? Work with much machinery. Learn to make tools and machines to fix problems underground. Learn to make parts for dogs." He sighed softly, his remaining ear drooping. "Other dogs not learn. Rather scavenge. Mate. Let Rover fix dogs. Rover hopes some dog learn soon. Rover is old dog. Too tired to learn new tricks."

"Have you thought of teaching a pony?" I asked delicately. He snorted at once, and I quickly added, "I mean, there's Triage at the Collegiate. They have all the Steelpony files, too, from the professor."

"Rover not want dogs to forget," he grumbled. "Maybe if I teach dogs too. Fifi maybe." He snorted again and shook his head. "Not important now. Fix you up."

As he came over with yet another cable, I huffed, "Jeeze, how many more wires do you need?" The old dog's muzzle split in a grin.

"Silly pony. Is not wire," he said as he lifted the tube. "Is catheter."

* * *

I had to admit, once he got underway, I was glad for that little tube, despite the Goddess's amusement at my embarrassment. Rover reached over and did something, and like that, I stopped. I couldn't even move my jaw; the muscles just strained against it, something in there (maybe part of the thing that let me eat metal?) apparently being locked up tight. Some experimentation revealed that I could still move my tongue, tail, ears, and eyelids and that my magic still worked, but other than that I couldn't do anything but stand there like a statue while feeling the strangest electric tingling in my forelimbs. And this was going to take all night. He'd set the terminal-tech-stuff to fix and calibrate everything while he had me wired up, so I simply stood there and tingled while Rover went to bed.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax. I couldn't move…but really that didn't bother me as much as I thought it would. In its own way, it felt sort of nice. If he'd tried immobilizing me like this before Happyhorn, I'd probably have been clawing the walls of my mind, but now... I focused on control, like I had with Stygius. I am not freaking now. I am not reacting. I am calm... calm... I watched the lines of data that scrolled in the margins of my vision and slowly drifted away.

~ ~ ~

The royal palace of Canterlot sure seemed different at night without celebration. The looming ministry hubs along Ministry Walk were still relatively lively, but few of the great pale marble structures' stained glass windows showed signs of light and life. While Canterlot bustled about its social affairs, its heart was dark and still. I slowly approached the main gates, looking at the shadowed recesses above with a careful eye trained to find targets. Most ponies would have missed the lurking batponies of Luna's guard watching from on high. During the day the palace was all unicorns and pegasi and brightness. During the night…

I wondered if those daytime unicorns and pegasi really were what they appeared. Or were they enchanted night guards made to look like those races? Just one of countless rumors about the palace and

its ruler.

"HALT! WHO GOES--" boomed a voice from beside the gate, and I fell back at once, gaping at the hovering stallion above me. The handsome night guard made a face and tapped a gem on the front of his armor before landing in front of me. "Ahem. Sorry. Only supposed to use the 'royal voice' with the tourists." He reached the tip of his wing around and winced as he twisted it in his ear canal. "Woo. Does a doozy on my ears."

"Lionheart," muttered a mare who stepped out of the shadows next to him. "Thou art supposed to use the--"

"Oh stuff it, Nightracer," Lionheart said with a snort. "That's fine for formal occasions, but honestly. Nopony talks like that anymore. You'd have to be half crazy to talk all the time in the royal voice. Even the Princess doesn't talk that way. Save it for the tourists." He looked at me kindly and extended a wingtip while the dusky purple mare glowered at him. I hooked it with my foreleg, and he pulled me to my hooves. "So, you have an invitation, right?"

I blinked, then pulled the white envelope from my saddlebags and slid out the folded piece of paper. He flipped it open with his hoof, the dusky stallion frowning as he scrutinized the invitation. "Mmm…Psalm…meeting with Eclipse. Well, it looks about right. Still gonna need to confirm, though. Procedure. May I see your hoof, please?" He pulled a long silver needle from his armor.

I balked, looking at his pleasant smile and then at the glowering mare. A peek revealed two more batpony stallions standing silently behind me. I had a feeling that saying no was going to earn me even more trouble. I held out my hoof and winced as I was jabbed with the needle. He drew one drop of blood and let it drip on the paper. Instantly the entire invitation began to glitter with bright red sparkles. "That's unicorn blood, all right. This way."

He led me into the palace. Despite the dark windows, there were ponies trotting around on quiet hooves. Guards, certainly, but also others, ponies who averted their eyes and halted their conversations as we trotted past. A hush seemed to envelop everything. "Do you... do you have to do that often?"

"More and more these days. There's more than one way for a zebra…or other things…to hide their appearance," he said in that soft yet comforting burr. "Regular visitors have blood talismans to speed things up. They also don't use the front gate, either."

I looked at the dark windows, the normally bright glass images

now menacing abstract shapes. “I don’t know why I’m here at all. I’ve never met this Eclipse. Do they work for the Princess?”

“Something like that,” he replied with a smile, and then his ears twitched and he frowned. “Hmmm…Celestia’s here.” I looked around, but aside from a distant chirping I couldn’t hear anything.

“Princess Celestia? Where?” I gasped in a rush of glee, earning a cool look from the stallion. “Not that Princess Luna’s not…um… nice... ”

“It’s always trouble whenever she visits,” he muttered as he led me further into the back of the palace. “Doesn’t she understand that Princess Luna’s busy? Ugh…” He stopped at a pair of double doors and poked his head in. “Psalm to see Miss Eclipse. Also, *she’s* here.”

There was a pause as a mare muttered under her breath and then said, “One second. Almost…there…” And then abruptly the voice changed and became deeper. “Send Miss Psalm in.”

The office was a square room whose ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky. One wall had high windows whose tops were lost in the shadows. A second wall was almost consumed by a massive map of the world with numerous little white and red dots covering it. Floating against the surface of the map were eight icons of light: bright orange, cyan, pink, purple, violet, yellow, green, and gold. Half were clustered over Canterlot, but I watched in amazement as the purple dot flashed and disappeared from Manehattan to reappear in Maripony.

The pegasus mare behind the desk was a dusky lavender with a buzzed-short royal blue mane and an eyepatch. Her remaining eye followed me closely as she gestured to the fancy padded chair on the opposite side of the desk. “Thank you, Lionheart. Please make *her* comfortable.” The guard bowed and trotted out of the room. Eclipse smiled at me, folding her hooves on the table. “I’m glad you could come, Psalm. My name is Eclipse. I work closely with various agencies and report directly to Princess Luna. I wanted to ask you some questions about your squad’s latest incursion to Dawn Bay and your attempted assassination of Legate Fortis.”

A sick feeling rose up inside me, and I swallowed as I lowered my eyes. “Yes ma’am,” I murmured.

What proceeded was a complete debriefing. She asked me who I saw meeting with the Legate. Did they appear to be fancily dressed, armored, or in scientific garb? When I was planning my shot, what other activities were going on in Dawn Bay? Was there increased

construction? Was the Legate fortifying his troops, building more war infrastructure, or wasting resources on increasing the luxury of his own living quarters? Every question, the pegasus seemed to think and consider, often smiling to herself and tapping her chin thoughtfully.

What she wasn't asking was the most important question: why had I missed? They'd provided me with a zebra rifle and made very specific instructions that I was not to modify it in any way nor fire it against any target except the Legate and that I was to leave it behind. I'd assumed there was an enchantment or some other thing at work; maybe a bullet enchanted to kill only the Legate? If only...

Despite myself, I grew more and more upset. It was one thing to kill somepony in the heat of battle, but what had happened... I hunched over and started to sob, and Eclipse paused, staring at me in shock. "I'm sorry," I blubbered. "I don't know how I failed. The shot was perfect. I had the zebra rifle just like I was told and he was right there and…and…I didn't mean to kill his son! The shot just went wide and…and…"

Suddenly Eclipse was there, patting my mane. "Shhh…shhh…You didn't know. You couldn't have known. You were never supposed to kill the Legate. Fortis is paranoid; he's convinced that one of his rivals is plotting to kill him. He'll waste months improving his guard and purging his own ranks of suspected traitors. It was just bad luck his son had been standing right beside him when you fired." But she didn't say it like it was all that bad. In fact, she looked downright pleased with the results of my miss. "The sights on the zebra rifle had been tampered with, and I knew that your squad wouldn't have tried as hard as you did just to miss a shot at the Legate."

So, it had been for nothing? The raid into Dawn Bay had been a harrowing affair, struggling behind enemy lines to find a shooting position before waiting for days to learn the Legate's daily routine well enough to find a window of opportunity. Then, finally, getting the opportunity to take the shot. The zebra colt falling instead, the bullet through his eye. The escape had nearly cost us all our lives, and only Big Macintosh had kept us focused enough to be extracted by Rainbow Dash. All just to put a little more fear into one of the enemy generals?

"I'm damned…damned…" I whimpered.

"No." Eclipse frowned in thought. "You acted on the orders of the

Princess. I'm sure that your... soul... can be absolved in service to the Princess. I know she'll forgive you."

"She…she will?" I sniffed, rubbing my eyes.

"I'm sure of it," Eclipse said with a firm nod and smile. "Just do whatever you can to help, and she'll forgive you when this whole nightmare is over. I promise."

Just then the door opened, and I heard the wet rasping breathing that announced his presence. Goldenblood stepped in, struggling for air. He looked at me, his eyes widening in momentary surprise, and then at Eclipse. "Princess Luna needs you. She needs to speak with her sister and wants us present."

Eclipse actually frowned and rolled her eyes. "Not again. Honestly, why can't she simply go stay with Cadance?" Eclipse snorted scornfully, and my shock must have shown because she immediately coughed and forced a smile. "Ahem. Sorry to cut this short, but sometimes there's just no reasoning with my…with Princess Celestia. I'll get somepony to show you out, my dear." She trotted quickly and moved out into the hall. One side effect of the hushed halls: the mare's voice carried. "What is she going on about now?" Maybe it was the sight of my teacher, or maybe it was just because it had to do with Princess Celestia, but I followed along quietly.

I was able to shadow the pair without too much trouble. A dark castle with most of the guards on the outside and plenty of other ponies going about their business inside was nothing next to infiltrating a zebra military encampment. They walked down to another room and slipped inside. My magic reached out and gently grabbed the door's handle to keep it from shutting all the way. Looking up and down the seemingly abandoned hall, I heard the voice of Princess Luna ask in a tired and irritable voice, "Alright, Tia. What's it this time? More protests about Twilight helping me? Maybe another protest on the diamond dog relocation?"

"It is good to see you as well, dearest Sister," Princess Celestia said softly and without a hint of sarcasm. "Have you seen this?"

"An invitation to a diplomatic meeting at Shattered Hoof Ridge," Luna said with a sigh, and then there was the sound of paper being wadded up.

"It's a trap, pure and simple," Goldenblood rasped. "The Caesar hasn't made any serious moves towards opening a dialogue with Her Majesty. Quite the reverse; he's using their mythology as a

rallying cry to unite more tribes against her and us."

"What if it's not, though? This offer comes from the heads of four major tribes," Celestia said firmly. "For ten years before Littlehorn we quibbled around the negotiating table. What if this is a step towards ending the war, even after that? I've spoken to the zebras in Zebratown and many prisoners of war. They all want this conflict over."

"Even if that is the case, the Caesar doesn't." Goldenblood sighed like a rusty boiler. "It's not legitimate, Your Majesty. And even if it were, there's no way that we could manage to keep her safe at Shattered Hoof Ridge."

"Perhaps Luna cannot attend, but why can't I negotiate peace for Equestria?" Celestia asked.

"What?" Luna asked in a low, shocked voice. "Tia, I said no. I don't care if there're forty tribal leaders wanting to talk a ceasefire; until they concede to our main demands, there's no point! They won't even agree to withdraw from Dawn Bay, and that's one of our *lesser* requirements."

"You cannot pass this up, Luna!" Celestia insisted.

"I most certainly can and will," Luna replied coldly. "And I refuse to let you go. If you were captured, the blow to morale would be incalculable, not to mention that they might simply kill you."

"I am willing to take that chance," Celestia countered. "Thousands risk their lives every day in this war. It's time I did as well."

"I am in charge of Equestria now!" Luna snapped. "Or did you forget that you stepped down?" There was a long silence before Celestia spoke once more.

"There's not a day I can forget that, Luna," Celestia said calmly. "Nor a day I don't regret it. When I passed the throne over to you, I thought it was to lead Equestria to a brighter future, not a darker one. I am going to this meeting in your place, Luna. You can arrange security if you like, or I will go alone, but either way, I am going. Equestria needs some hope that this war will end, and if I can give it that hope, I will. I'm sorry, Sister."

"Tia!" Luna cried out, but there was a flash of golden light, and the Princess of the Night let out a sob. "Damn it, Tia. I'm trying my best! I am. There's just so much to do. Can't she understand that?!"

"Doubtful," Goldenblood rasped. "They probably worked quite hard to get that peace offering to cross Celestia's hooves. Worst case, Celestia gets captured and the Caesar uses her as leverage

against the Ministries. He'd offer peace and her release, but the conditions…well…your exile would probably be top on the list. Refuse, and some of the population will turn on you. Celestia's still quite popular."

"Damn it, Tia," Luna muttered. "Why can't she just…let me do this? Why is she always trying to force things? I didn't want to be in charge of Equestria. She asked me! And ever since then, she's been constantly meddling and criticizing. Why can't she just go to her school and leave Equestria to me?" Luna sighed. "I don't suppose I can just lock her up, can I?"

"Only if you want a full-on revolution on your hooves, led by Twilight and her friends. I've tried my best to keep their interactions to a minimum, but she was Twilight's mentor. Those bonds sometimes go deeper than you ever expect." Goldenblood let out a rusty sigh.

"What's the best case scenario?" Luna asked.

"They kill her," Goldenblood replied. I felt an electric tingle paralyzing me.

"Ha ha. Very funny," Luna muttered sarcastically. Then she paused and said in shock, "You're serious? Golden, she's my sister!"

"Captured, she'd be a lever against you and, by extension, Equestria. Killed, she'd be a martyr for the war effort. Recruitment would probably double, if not more. There'd be no more interference to your rule, and the aristocrats would fall in line behind you. Better, several tribes of zebras revere Celestia as an embodiment of the sun. Killing her would turn them against the Caesar. We might even sway portions of the Propoli to break ranks. That could completely cripple their war effort." He paused and then added, "Of course, the cost would be unthinkable."

"I should think so! She's my sister, for pony's sakes!" Luna snapped. Then there was an ominous silence, and Luna groaned. "What are we going to do about her? What if she's right?"

"Then you'd best be ready to return the throne to her," Goldenblood answered. "If this peace effort is sincere, any arrangement will require your abdication. The terms beyond that would probably be equally unpleasant, but moot." He paused and sighed. "We could see if she's right, Luna."

"You just said--"

"I know, and I still believe it. But if we have peace, real peace…well…you won't be responsible for Equestria anymore."

There was another long silence. “No. No! I’m not going to just… just give up! I don’t care if she is older and wiser and nicer and… and…I’m going to do it right. I’m going to do whatever it takes and show her and everypony that I am every bit the ruler that she was! I have to show them I can do it. That I’m more than Nightmare Moon and the young mare that fools around on Nightmare Night.”

Goldenblood let out a long sigh. “Then we’ll just have to disrupt the meeting. I’ll pull together a guard detachment that will pull her out at the first sign of trouble. See what I can arrange in the interim.”

“And if they do capture her, somehow? Or try?”

“Better a dead princess than a captured one…”

~ ~ ~

My eyes fluttered open. It was all I could do at the moment as my mind rolled that last memory over and over again. ‘Better a dead Princess than a captured one.’ Could Luna have possibly okayed such a thing? No…No, Celestia lived through the war, right? Princess Luna didn’t kill her.

No. That was just…unthinkable…

I was still dangling wires and tubes. My magic levitated a bottle of water off the counter and lifted it to my lips. I couldn’t see what condition my limbs were in, so there was no telling how long I’d been like this. I couldn’t hear Rover snoring; maybe it was already morning.

“Lacunae?” I thought out at her. “What time is it?”

“Dawn,” she replied. “We are outside.” There was something off about her words.

“Is everything okay?” I asked at once.

“Rampage is…disconcerted. That is all,” she replied. Before I could ask further, she queried, “How do you fare, Blackjack?”

“I can’t move an inch,” I said with a chuckle.

“You seem to be handling it well.” I ignored the surprise in her voice.

“You’ve never been in security. A third of your time is spent walking, another third standing a post, and the rest is the time something interesting happens.” Okay, *theoretically* that was the job. There were also a lot of card games, dice, and sexual liaisons involved that I’d left out. “Granted, being able to scratch myself

would be nice too. Cozy as it is, this catheter itches like crazy. The plug in my back end is a lot more comfortable, though." I paused. "Lacunae? Are you there?"

I strained and could barely pick it out. "La la la la la la…not listening to Blackjack talking about things in her hiney." I couldn't open my mouth, but I still chuckled in my throat. Even the Goddess seemed to be tuning me out.

Well, it was one way to get a little privacy.

Then I blinked. Was that a…growl?

"Lacunae? Lacunae! Um…I think I might need some help here…" But all I got back was that stream of her not talking to me. The growl sounded again, deep and low and right on the far side of the door. The handle slowly rotated, the metal squealing faintly as it was shoved open. And then I was incredibly grateful Rover had stopped me up before working on me. I'd have probably had an accident then and there.

The creature was almost two feet taller than Rover, but it stooped over. Yellowish hide sprouting knots of scar tissue and bristly black fur covered its incredibly muscled frame. Actually, scratch the 'it'; there was no question whatsoever that 'it' was a 'he'. He wore only a leather harness sporting dangling magic fusion cells, and a large energy weapon was slung across his immense shoulders. It reminded me of the weapon Xanthe had cobbled together; it looked like some kind of mining tool with every safety feature removed. More immediately terrifying than that, however, were the immense hands that each ended in a set of wicked claws. The pointed maw peeled back, and I saw a ridiculous amount of yellowed, razor-sharp teeth, more than any species outside dragonkind had any right to possess. His yellow eyes ran down my body in a way that made me wonder if he was going to eat me or rut me... Oh Celestia! Was it coming out?!

I didn't even think past that point. I simply went straight into S.A.T.S. and toggled up four magic bullets right for his face as I began mentally screaming in a blind panic. My horn flashed, the bolts smashing into his head and tearing off a goodly chunk of his features. Blood and torn hide dangled in flaps along the side of his face, and I might have gotten his eye... but the damage was far from the blasted skull and splattered brain I'd inflict on a pony target. He swayed and fell back against the wall, then fixed me with a glare and a bowel-loosening snarl. He pushed himself upright and started

to advance.

I had a few more spells in my horn. This time I didn't aim for his face as he began to charge. I aimed for his kneecap. The two bolts ripped into the leg, and the canine monster was thrown off his gait. Now I'd really pissed him off. Not able to scream, I did the only thing I could think of: pull the trigger on his crude energy weapon. At least, I hoped it was the trigger... and I was right. Instantly three bolts of magical green disintegration energy blasted around his feet and the monster howled in pain as it struggled to get the energy weapon in its grip. Again and again I jerked the trigger, blasting the wall and floor and anything the weapon happened to be pointed at.

Finally those claws just shredded the harness and let it fall in a heap. There was no way my horn could lift something that huge, but I could turn it! And as the creature got ready to cut my head off with those razor sharp claws, I spun the energy weapon towards its back and fired again. The monster let off a hound-like roar as it collapsed. The weapon's energy cell was depleted, so I fumbled with controls, trying to eject the spent canister. How had Glory done this?

I finally managed to pop the cell free when Rover rushed in. "No! Stop, Pony! Stop!" Huh? I hesitated as I looked from Rover to the beast and back again. Had he missed the claws and fangs? Had he missed that penis?!

"What is that thing!?" roared the monster in pain, bringing those claws down and tearing its own weapon in two before I could bring it to back to bear. I mentally asked the exact same thing. It would have been really nice to be able to talk. He huffed, blood dripping from the holes I'd blown in his face as he stood over the wrecked disintegration gun.

"Pony. Stupid pony," Rover said as he helped pull the monster to sit upright. "Gnarr. Blackjack the Security Pony. Blackjack, Gnarr," he said with a gesture of his robotic claw towards the yellow canine monster. "Gnarr is hellhound and guest of sand dogs."

The hellhound growled that ominous snarl as he rubbed the raw red burns the energy weapon had made in his hide. "This is Security? Huh. Thought her horn was bigger." The monster rose to his feet as Rover began to remove the cables from me. My eyes narrowed as I looked up at him, feeling implants and motors start to reactivate as the cables were removed.

"Security Pony help sand dogs. Dogs hope Security could help

hounds too," Rover said as he reached up and pulled a plug out of my shoulder. My mouth filled with the taste of battery, and I could suddenly move my jaw. "Not shoot hound just because hound is scary!"

"Little mare is tough, that is for sure," Gnarr growled as he picked at his fangs with a claw. "I take it you've never seen us before…or maybe you've seen too many of us and know better?" The hellhound chucked as he tapped his claws against the blasted wall.

"The first one," I croaked, and floated the bottle of water over again and took another drink. Every time a cable was removed I was struck by a building pins and needles sensation followed by restored movement. As soon as I could look down, I stared at the smooth metal of my limbs. They looked exactly as they had before I'd left Meatlocker for Hightower. They were even re-enameled! "What's a hellhound?"

Rover typed on the terminal as Gnarr snorted, "Rover told you of how we were forced off our land by ponies long ago? Even before the bombs ended your world, our homes were poisoned. Some came here, worked for ponies, and lived beneath their cities. Others returned home, and those that survived the poison became strong." He flexed his powerful frame and chuckled deep in his throat. "Dogs are cousins of hounds…weaker for staying away from home."

"Yet hounds came to dogs for help, Gnarr," Rover snapped, wiping the grin from the hellhound's face.

"What could…well…you…need help with?" An irritable dragon perhaps?

Gnarr grumbled and crossed his arms. "Do you know about the flying ponies, Security?"

"Do you mean pegasi or the Enclave?" I asked in return.

"The second one," Gnarr growled. "Our den has been under attack by them for nearly a month. Many scouts and warriors have been taken, and the Enclave have used their strange devices to control them. I was one of the last, driven from my home when they overran us with our own people." He reached down and pulled something off his harness that looked like some sort of skull cap. "Do you know what this is, Pony?"

I levitated it and turned it over. "No idea. I-- yipe!" I jumped two feet into the air as the last tube and plug were yanked out of my hind end. I blinked and swallowed. "Toilet!" I wailed as I tensed immediately. Rover snorted and pointed to the door, and I rushed

out to the station and into the little filly's room, nearly hopping across the tracks.

Really, not the way I wanted to start the day. The pair met me outside, the hellhound looming over the other sand dogs. "I guess we're even for me shooting half your face off?" I asked Gnarr, my face flaming. The pair looked at each other, and the hellhound just gave an indifferent shrug. "What are the Enclave doing with your home?"

"Enslaving us. I know of at least half a dozen dens that have gone silent all across Equestria." He pointed off to the southeast. "Our den lived in the old pony army base. More and more were taken, and then one day they returned all at once and with pegasi and controlled hounds and took over the base."

A month ago. I thought about what I'd seen Lighthooves doing and my mane prickled. "Was there anything biological at that base? Something that could be used for a weapon?"

"It was a pony army base and struck heavily by the bombs. The only thing that remained were the bunkers filled with old stuff from the space center. Safe for us; we're immune to the radiation. But not the Enclave." He growled long and low at me. "I came hoping Rover could find a way to jam their control over us. Rover suggested I tell you."

Me? Why would he tell…oh. "Hmmm…I am curious, I admit. Anything that Lighthooves was involved in interests me. I don't know when I'll be able to do something about it, though. I…crap!" I whirled towards the east (thank you, PipBuck compass). "Paradise! I completely forgot to clear Paradise of Red Eye's forces! Damn it! I was just over on the east side, too!" I sat down hard, glowering at my oversight.

Gnarr rubbed his chin and chuckled. "Heh. Busy pony. Well, Rover can keep working. And if you get down that way, maybe you can stop them. Or I will, if Rover can figure something out." I had to admit, someone solving their problems without my help was refreshing! Why, if this kept up, then I'd be out of a job and could retire!

Yeah, right. It took turning off my limbs just to get me to sit still.

"Well, I'll remember it. If Lighthooves wants something in that base, I'd like to know what," I said with a sigh and a smile. "Right now, I'd really…really like to just get home." My ears wilted a little as I gave a sheepish smile. "I've got my friends waiting for me."

“Very well. Do…not…break…legs…Pony…” Rover said as he tapped his metal claw against my nose with every word. “Pony breaks leg again and Rover start charging money to fix,” he said with a scowl.

“Oh? So begging wouldn’t work?” I threw myself at his feet. “Please fix me, Rover! Please please please please! Pleeeeeeeeeease!” I squealed as I beat my rear hooves and hugged his leg, sticking out my bottom lip.

Gnarr whimpered and covered his ears but Rover just grinned. “Whine all you want, Pony.” And he tapped the side of his ear. “Dog ears cut out feedback.”

“Rats.” I pouted and then rose to my hooves. “Well, I’ll have to think of something.” I waved my hoof and smiled as I trotted for the exit.

Rover muttered behind me, “Dog bet hound half a brahmin pony is back in two days.”

“Sure,” Gnarr replied, and I glanced back to spot him shaking hands with Rover as I trotted for the entrance. “Just one question, though, Rover: why do you keep talking like that?!”

* * *

After leaving the subway station, I met up with the morose striped pony. We were waiting for Lacunae to fly to the Miramare crater and return, but I really wanted to walk right now. After losing the use of two limbs, I reveled in full mobility.

I trotted in circles on my hooves, danced, pirouetted, and hopped. The response time was better than when I’d gone into Hightower! I popped out my fingers and worked each and every one. Even my breathing felt smoother. A heartbeat would be nice right about now, though. Could Rover make some kind of thudding implant that corresponded with pump rate? I’d have to ask him next time.

Rampage sat off to the side with her head low, pink eyes troubled as she muttered to herself. I looked in the direction Lacunae had gone and thought at her. “Is she going to be okay?”

“I am not sure,” Lacunae thought back. “She is very distraught. She questions herself now. Her motivation and desires…her fears…her mistakes…everything.”

I walked up to Rampage and gave her flank a nudge. She glanced over, and I tried to give a consoling smile. “I know I have absolutely

zero right to say this, but my advice is to try not to think about it." Yes, listen to the queen of denial, because it's worked so well for me. "After a few days with P-21 and Scotch, you'll be able to stop worrying about who you are and just be yourself. Thinking about it will just drive you crazy."

"Yeah. The question is, how do I stop?" Rampage asked.

"Do what Blackjack does," Lacunae said in my mind. "Find the most dangerous place in the Wasteland and charge right in. Get shot up and so caught up in fighting for your life that you can avoid thinking about things."

"I don't…I…okay, I'm trying to do that less," I muttered, my cheeks reddening as we waited in the broken and blasted street. I hoped the alicorn wasn't loitering and enjoying the radiation. Her indignation answered my unvoiced suspicions. I sighed. "Ugh… sorry. Does talking about it help? Not talking about it?" I looked around for some red bars. "I can try and find something to attack us." That at least made her smile a little.

"Honestly, helping you deal with all of your problems really helps me avoid dealing with mine," she answered with a small smile. "I think it's the doctor in me. Or maybe Softheart. Or…ugh…I don't know. It's like…for as long as I could remember, I had no idea who I was. Fuck toy. Loving partner. Reaper. Psychoshy was the same way once she realized Sanguine was just using her."

"Whisper," I corrected, and she rolled her eyes.

"Fine. Whisper. Big Daddy's gonna love that." She huffed and then looked off to the east. "Point is, she found out who she was supposed to be…or wanted to be. So yeah, I'm a little jealous. If it weren't for you, she'd be just as miserable as me, and I could ignore my misery by helping her with hers."

I patted her on the shoulder. "Hey. It could be worse. I nearly killed a helpless monster hellhound and felt guilty about it." She looked at me, and I said, "In my defense, I couldn't move and it had a penis the size of my leg. A girl's got to be careful, right?" Okay, only a small shiver. Progress!

"Is that why you blasted it?"

"No," I said defensively as I stood and folded my forelegs behind my head. "It was more all the fangs and claws and…yeah. Big dick." I held my hooves out and her smile widened in amusement.

"So, if you can joke about it, are you over it? Did you work all that out?" she asked with a little smile.

"Sort of. I think I'm back in control of that. Mostly. Hope so." I was lying to myself. I'd always be a little on edge when it came to guys and sex, though maybe if I knew him really well, I'd be fine. "But I'm still trying. That matters, right?"

There was a purple flash announcing Lacunae's arrival. "Anything happen while I was gone?" she asked as she looked at Rampage and me.

"Penises," Rampage said simply, but smiling.

"Monster dog penises," I agreed.

The purple alicorn shook her head and sighed. Rampage grinned at me. "If only the Wasteland knew what Security talks about when she's not being a hero."

"You should try what she *thinks* about." Lacunae shivered.

"What? The plug was actually pretty cozy."

"La la la la la la…not listening to thoughts…" she began to say in my mind, so I thought exactly how things had *felt*. Lacunae went even redder and finally blurted aloud, "Sweet Celestia, stop thinking, Blackjack!" Rampage and I shared a laugh as the alicorn gave a dignified toss of her head. "You keep thinking that and you will be *walking* to Chapel!"

"Okay! Okay! Sorry!" I said, raising my hooves in apology. She nodded, trying to recoup her dignity as her horn began to flare with magic. Then I couldn't help myself. I added, "I wonder where Glory can get another one of those…"

The pair disappeared, and I blinked, looking around the now empty ruins. "Lacunae? Lacunae?!" I looked around for a blue bar. "Very funny, Lacunae!" I thought at her.

"La la la la la I suggest you start walking la la la la…" she thought back. Somewhere in my mind, the Goddess howled with laughter. Cheeks blazing, I turned south and started running.

* * *

It was midmorning by the time I reached Chapel, slurping down another gem. The town now looked…well…like a town. The spire of the church was on its way to being repaired, and there were more structures being thrown up. I skirted the minefield that they'd been kind enough to mark and trotted around the settlement proper and up the hill towards home. There had to be at least fifty or so ponies working down there. Most were fillies and colts, but I saw a

pair of gray adult earth ponies heaving up boards while a filly unicorn hammered them in. Things still looked like a mess, though, and there was a rank stench like a cesspit that I didn't remember from the last time I was here.

I was so concerned by the reek that I halted and looked up towards the tantalizingly close roof of Star House. If there was something wrong, through... ugh. "Five more minutes won't kill me," I said as I turned and trotted towards the entrance to Chapel proper.

The machine gunner's nest was unoccupied, something that sent a frisson of fear along my spine. Had those adults enslaved the Crusaders or something? But as I trotted further in, I saw the hustle and bustle wasn't anything malicious. Still no explanation for why there were no guards, but this was just ponies cooperating to build a town.

Sorta.

Now that I was closer…There was a stockade going up, but it looked as if it'd been abandoned half way through, then restarted on the other side till it tumbled over. Four mobile home wagons were just parked in the middle of the street. The few small homes that had been here before seemed to be sprouting tumorous growths of planks and siding. The post office was almost buried beneath crates, boxes, and building materials scavenged from the manor. Most disgusting of all was the ditch running along the road, which had been turned into an open sewer.

Ghoul children and young ponies were making a game of construction, which was good for a fort, I supposed, but bad for anything you actually had to live in. I spotted the young zebra Majina running around with other fillies and colts. The adults, who seemed to have a better understanding of construction, were all throwing up their own shanties. Sekashi and Harpica stood by as I entered and surveyed the scene in shock.

"What the hay is going on?" I muttered as I stared at the chaos.

"Ah. The guardian has returned," Sekashi said as she approached with the nervous ghoul pegasus. The minty-colored mare was hovering in the air and kept looking over at her undead charges, who were probably acting like real children for the first time in two hundred years. "You have had some adventures, faced great perils, met mighty champions?"

"You can't imagine," I replied, and the zebra chuckled merrily.

"Oh, there's been lots of imagining, indeed." The mare grinned and

gave my flank a nudge. “But what matters is that you are well and happy, for how can you be happy if you are not well? And how can you care about your health if you are not happy?” Okay. Zebra weirdness. Gotta love it.

“Well things sure look busy here... and smelly... ” I coughed, backing away from the ditch.

“Ah, yes. No no, don’t put that in your mouth!” Harpica blurted to a filly sucking on an empty cola bottle. “The Crusaders have been a little... *overenthusiastic* about fixing up Chapel after the attack,” the minty blue ghoul said nervously. “I’m not really sure if they’re doing any good... ah... please don’t run!”

And then there was a solid thud against my rear end and I jerked, spinning around and looking at the stunned white blank. She sat there, swaying limply a moment before she shook her head and then frowned up at me. “Oh. Hello Boo!” Her pale eyes narrowed, and her frown grew more severe. “Um... I missed you? Sorry I left, but... um... yeah... ” Her face could have been carved from plaster. I reached over, popped out my fingers, and started to scratch her ears nervously. She pursed her lips, clearly not satisfied as she leaned towards my face even more. Her eyes then grew large and watery as her lips quivered.

“Here,” a stallion said softly behind me, tapping my shoulder with something in a wax paper wrapper. My magic lifted it up and passed the cherry Fancy Buck Cake to the blank, and instantly she perked up and seized it in her mouth with a happy little squeal. She turned away but paused and looked back at me over her shoulder. Then she darted back and nuzzled my cheek before trotting off with her prize. “You spoiled her, you know,” the stallion said with a quiet little chuckle.

“Yeah, I guess I... ” I said with a smile, but that slowly vanished as I turned and looked back at the speaker. The shaggy blue mane was the same, as was the lighter blue coat. His frame was gaunt, though, and he sat as if a strong wind might blow him over. More than that, though, the eyes that looked back at me were those of a stranger: calm, serene, and no longer looking at the world like it was his enemy. “P-21?” Even seeing his cutie mark, I wasn’t entirely sure it was him.

“Nice to see you again, Blackjack. I heard you’ve been busy. Did you find what you needed?” he asked with a kind smile. The smile of a pony who had done just that.

"I... yeah. Some. I think," I said as I rubbed my mane. "I shouldn't have run off like that. I should have stayed and--" But he put his hoof to my lips.

"Don't start with that already. You did what you did. All that matters is if you're better for it or not," he said, patting my shoulder with his hoof. "And your plan worked. The Harbingers didn't follow us far, and we haven't seen them at all here. You didn't miss much besides two or three days of detoxification." He gave a little shiver. "Finally done with the treatments... "

"And you feel better?" I asked in concern.

"Of course not. I feel like I've been scraped raw inside and outside. Glory says the lifetime of drug abuse in 99 probably did a number on my lifespan; if we hadn't been retired, we probably would have been dropping in a few years anyway. But I don't have... the tension. The craving. The need's gone. It's like a huge weight off my back and off my mind. I can finally think clearly again." He then looked over at an approaching filly with heaps of scrolls poking from her saddlebags. "So I've been focusing on better things."

"Can you believe it, Daddy? That guy's building his house right by that septic trench they call a toi--" Scotch Tape silenced as she saw me sitting there, then let out a squeal, "Blackjack!" She charged up the road at me, shedding rolls of paper right and left before hugging me fiercely. Immediately afterwards, she started coughing.

"Careful," P-21 warned. I picked up one of the scrolls with my magic and carefully unrolled it. It showed four toilets and a shower, along with some extensive plumbing.

"I'm fine... " she rasped, then smiled at me, and her eyes shot open in alarm. "Blackjack! Don't look at that!" She threw her forelegs around it, yanked it out of the air, and hugged it to her chest. I floated out another one and opened it up to look at some kind of house. She eeped and grabbed that one too. "Don't look at my drawings! They're horrible." Another bout of coughing made me stop.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Glory says it's some bug I picked up when she put in the new lungs. Got a wicked scar though, see?" She lifted her chin and pointed her hoof at a straight, raw red line that started under her chin and went all the way down to the collar of her utility barding. I tried not to think of Sanguine leading a little blank copy of Scotch away.

"It's post-operative pneumonia and you should be in bed," P-21 said firmly. Scotch blew a raspberry. "I promised Glory I'd keep you from overexerting yourself. You still need a few days and several more healing potions to get the infection out. Enervation right now would kill you." Good thing I hadn't taken her with me...

"But what are these?" I asked as I floated one of the papers she'd dropped over to us.

Scotch Tape fidgeted as she looked down at her forehooves. "Just some... you know... ideas."

"Ideas?" I asked, opening the scroll to look at... some sort of diagram of... something.

"For the town. Since I was sick and couldn't do anything," Scotch said, then gestured around. "I mean have you seen this place, Blackjack? Everypony's working and throwing up whatever they want. Half of it's gonna be falling down in weeks, if not days. They've got a ditch filled with poo running through the middle of town! And the money from the manor won't last forever." She reached over and looked down at the plan in her hooves. "I always liked thinking up ideas in 99... but I was in Maintenance. We never built anything new. We just focused on keeping everything how it was."

I thought about how I'd felt when I'd played the contrabass for the first time and was wondering if maybe I might have had a different life if I'd been allowed to play. "Well, maybe this will be how you get your cutie mark. Maybe your destiny *is* to bring plumbing back to the Wasteland."

"I'm gonna have a toilet on my hind end the rest of my life... " Scotch Tape pouted as she slumped.

"So why don't you try and build one of these designs?" I asked. "One that's not a toilet?"

She huffed softly. "'Cause nopony'll listen to me. Everypony's fixed on doing their own thing and nopony's thinking about what we're gonna need. We're gonna need a doctor. Someplace for fixing things. Need to move the minefield further out. Need to get that stockade finished and matched up and plated with scrap and reinforced with dirt or something. Need a place to store food and maybe a mess hall. Need to make bunkhouses for the Crusaders. We're gonna need a school. Ya can't just throw a story or two on top of a house!" She sighed as she looked down at the paper. "Besides, I don't know nothing about real engineering. I just fix up

toilets."

I patted her mane. "Scotch, you know more about building and fixing things than anypony here. You've been training to do maintenance work since you could play. Heck, I bet you had a steam assembly for your first toy. If this place is going to be a real town, it's going to need ponies like you."

"Yeah," she replied, but I could tell her heart wasn't quite in it. "Maybe I can talk to Charity. I know she'd be glad to have some of this stuff organized." For some reason, the name of the filly shopkeeper set my mane on end. Did I owe her money? I *thought* I was all paid up, but... wait? Had I paid for that Wild Pegasus she sent me on my birthday yet? Shoot! I didn't know for sure...

"Anyway, I need to get going. I really, really need to see Glory," I said as I rose to my hooves and backed away. The pair looked at each other with worried expressions.

P-21 said evenly, "Maybe we should go up with you, Blackjack. Glory's... well... kind of upset."

I sighed and smiled. "No, it's okay. She has a right to be." I turned and looked up in the direction of Star House. "Actually there's a whole lot I need to talk with her about. I've got a whole lot of apologizing to do." For running off, for making her worry, and other things. "We've got a ton of making up ahead. And I'm going to enjoy every minute with her." He frowned in worry, looking more like the P-21 I remembered. I rose to my hooves. "Where are Rampage and Lacunae?"

"Well, Lacunae said something about a dress when we saw her this morning. And Rampage... " Scotch trailed off as looked up at the graveyard on the hillside above the town. A red-maned pony stood out amid the gray-green grass and the white headstones. She was at her daughter's grave, if I guessed right. "Is she okay?"

"No. She's not," I said softly, shaking my head. "She found out something about herself, and it's bothering her terribly." I patted Scotch's head. "Just be careful with her. She needs our friendship a lot right now. It might be the only thing that'll help her."

P-21 looked at his daughter and stroked her mane. "Maybe we should go see her. Make sure she's okay. Why don't you go get Precious?" The dragon filly'd help if something set the Angel off.

"If I can get her off that stack of bottlecaps," Scotch said with a roll of her eyes as she turned and trotted into the post office.

The blue stallion looked at me in concern. "Be careful. With Glory.

I mean... I tried to explain it but... she's really upset with you right now."

I sighed and then nodded. "Yeah. We've got issues to clear up. I mean, leaving like I did was horrible for her."

"No, I mean what you did with--" he started to say with a concerned frown, but I froze.

I could feel the horror creeping up on me. My mane crawled on my scalp as I looked left and right. A little pink pony in my head pulled out a spyglass and searched for the dreaded menace. Perhaps I could plead poverty... but no, it didn't matter. She could sense my purse and was coming for it! All my wealth would be hers! And yes, there she was, stepping out of the post office! She looked at me. I looked back, and her eyes narrowed like a hellhound about to go in for the kill. I leapt straight into the air, turned, and with all the power in my cybernetic limbs I raced away, laughing madly. She wouldn't get me! Not this time!

The yellow filly's words reached my ears, but I paid them no mind as I fled. "What's her problem?"

* * *

I entered Star House with just a little bit of apprehension. The place was clean and orderly and, moreover, it looked lived in. I heard the sound of a faucet running in the kitchen and spotted the blue pegasus filling up a pot. Her rainbow mane was tied back behind her head with a white cloth. It didn't matter if she looked like a young Ministry Mare in her prime or my gray beauty; she was Glory. My imaginary heartbeat picked up as I slowly walked towards her. Suddenly the troubles of the last several days were nothing, and I couldn't keep from smiling. She turned and looked at me, her rose eyes popping wide, and then she smiled with an oddly dismissive expression. "Oh, hey Blackjack. What's up?"

Huh? I furrowed my brows as she set the pot on the stove and then took off the rag and shook out her spectral mane. "Um. Hi Glory. P-21 said you wanted to talk to me about something that upset you?" This wasn't quite what I expected; she smiled again and approached. Oddly enough, my mane picked now of all times to get itchy. "Whatever it was, I'm sorry. I'm just so glad to see--"

She silenced me with a hoof to my lips, smiling up at me before her expression turned concerned. "Now. Before anything happens, I

want to know how you are. Any injuries that need treating? Radiation? Taint? Anything like that?"

"No, actually." I smiled and looked down at my foreleg. "I was just at Rover's. He fixed up my legs just fine, and the talismans…"

But again she silenced me as she put her hooves around my neck and gazed into my eyes. "What about emotionally? Are you better now than when you left?"

"Oh, absolutely. I was…I was in a really bad way there for a while but…well…I found some help too." And I got shot up a lot and died again, but I could tell her about that later.

"So in other words you're in good shape? Tip top?" she asked in a voice that almost approached sultry and made my hindquarters quiver in anticipation. This was damage control I could handle!

"Yup. One hundred and ten percent," I said as I smiled goofily.

Her legs tightened around my neck as she said softly, "Good…" And then she hugged me close, feeling soft and firm and wonderful. But as I lifted my legs to hold her, I became aware of a little pink pony in my head waving a red flag, a white unicorn waving her hooves in alarm, and a horrified-looking yellow pegasus pressing her hooves to her mouth as Glory whispered in my ear. "A champion in bed, huh?"

And then her wings snapped and she hauled me into the air. "Blackjack!" she snapped, and then, with more power than I'd known any pegasus could muster, threw me clear across the room and smashed me into the far wall. I dropped to the floor with a crash, the five little ponies in my head equally rattled. Somewhere, for some reason, I imagined the Goddess looking on, munching on popcorn. Glory flew over with tears streaking her cheeks and yelled down at me, "You... You... fucking *cunt!*"

Welcome home, Blackjack.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 50: Selfishness

"I am going for a hooficure and that is that!"
"You are not going--"
"I am! I am!"

I have to admit, after dying (again), taking all day to get back, and having more wires and tubes in my body than anypony had a right to, smacking into the far wall upside down before crashing to the floor headfirst and lying there in a heap wasn't exactly how I envisioned my reunion with Glory. It wasn't just that she *looked* like Rainbow Dash; she had every bit the strength and vigor of Rainbow Dash in her youth. Glory herself seemed equally shocked as she hovered there, forehooves pressed to her mouth and rose eyes wide.

"Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Are you okay?" she asked as she stared across the room at me.

"Glory, you called me a cunt and launched me across the room. Now you're asking if I'm okay?" I groaned as I rolled over and sat up. "Really, what pony would say yes?" I said as I shook the fuzz out of my head. "What's going on, Glory?"

Apparently something really bad, from how quickly her face darkened. She ripped the rag off her head and threw it at me. "I hated seeing you run away like that, even though I understood that you were doing it for us. I was terrified for you. Do you realize that? I didn't know if you were alive or dead. I kept waiting for a broadcast or something telling me you were okay... and when I finally got one, what did I hear? Champion in bed... Champion in *fucking* bed!" she shouted down at me. "I didn't go through all that just so you could go off and…and…fuck whomever you wanted!"

I blinked several times as I looked up at her. "That's what all this is about? That I had sex with a stallion while I was gone?"

She screwed up her face and snarled in disgust. "Yes!" she shouted, starting to pace back and forth in the air. "I shouldn't be surprised, I guess. Everypony I care about always leaves me. Mom did it. Dusk

almost killed me. You took off twice, once to kill yourself and once to screw that guy!" She grit her teeth and clenched her eyes shut. "I get it. There's something wrong with me that you don't want to deal with, but couldn't you have told me first? Not broadcast to the entire Wasteland 'I just banged a guy and he was sooooo much better than Glory!' How could you?"

I just stared up at her. "The entire Wasteland?"

"Well, I can't be sure that they heard it in Las Pegasus, but for the last two days I've been enduring the smirk of everypony in Chapel with a radio!" she said as she rolled her eyes. "For all I know, my father heard that broadcast!" She groaned as she covered her face in her hooves. "My life is even more over than it was. I should just turn myself over to the Enclave. 'Here I am, please try me for treason, again, and then shoot me so I don't have to listen to all the innuendo and snickers!'" she said in a hysterical, singsong voice.

I sighed and pulled myself to my hooves. "Glory…I didn't do what I did with Stygius for the sex." Then I gave a small smile as I rolled my eyes a little. "Okay, maybe a little. It was pretty good. But--"

I think her throw must have given me brain damage... more than just the tumors and like. Five little ponies in my head covered their faces all at once and I heard the Goddess chuckle darkly. Glory's eyes popped wide as if I'd been the one to throw her.

"Pretty good? Pretty good! Blackjack, I am going to spay you!" she shrieked, and then she was on me, kicking and stomping me with her hooves. If she'd been the old Glory, this would have been cute. The new Glory had some serious power behind those kicks! She pummeled me good and hard, and I raised my metal legs and tried to protect my head and midriff.

I remembered how Goldenblood had broken Fluttershy's heart calling out the wrong name when they'd been together. At the time, I'd thought it'd just been Fluttershy being oversensitive. It never really occurred to me that sex might be a serious matter like that. I knew love was serious. Abuse was serious. Rape and coercion for sex were serious. But sex itself was just a means to an orgasm.

Glory, it was now becoming very clear, definitely did not have the same opinion. Then again, though, I was her first mare and serious partner. This was the first time anypony had really fucked up a relationship with her and she was pissed. And while old Glory would have probably beaten me up with big words, new Glory was expressing herself far more directly. I tried to get a word out as she

sobbed and raged and stomped me with all four hooves at once.

Then I heard Scotch Tape yell, “Hey, Blackjack. How many times did you have sex with my mom?” I blinked and looked over at the door where P-21 stood with Scotch Tape beside him. Glory just blinked and stared at the filly, as if processing the question was breaking something in her head.

“Now is really not the time to be reminiscing about Stable 99, Scotch!” I called out.

“Actually, I think it is,” P-21 said as he closed the door behind him. Glory stared at him, her pupils contracting as her rainbow mane seemed to frizz in growing stress. “How many times?” he asked, cool and calm, as Glory hovered above me.

I looked from one to the other, then spoke slowly and carefully. “A dozen times, give or take, I think. Maybe more. I mean, we were on the same shift and stuff,” I said, feeling as though one wrong word would shatter my relationship with Glory forever.

“I know. I remember peeking in on you two once or twice. Did you love my mom, Blackjack?” Scotch asked; her tone said that she knew my answer.

“No. I mean, she was nice but…” I trailed off, not wanted to offend.

“And did you have sex with Daisy and Marmalade?” P-21 asked, making me feel oddly embarrassed.

“Yeah. Like I said, we were on the same shift.” I looked at the confused Glory and gave a sheepish little shrug. “Usually with Marm, though. Daisy was always way too rough.” Marm had always been a good lick. If it hadn’t been for Daisy, who knows what could have been?

“In fact, Blackjack, can you count how many ponies you’ve been with in 99?” Scotch Tape asked firmly. Glory backed off and sat down, looking at me as if she’d never seen me before.

I hesitated, counting them up. “Twenty or so. I mean, I wasn’t like Palette,” I said defensively and glanced at Glory. “I mean, she was rutting any second she could!” I’d hoped for a smile, but instead I got a wary look.

“Not counting males?” P-21 threw in, pushing back his wide-brimmed black hat to look at me skeptically.

“Oh, right. Probably about twenty or so of them, too,” I said with a growing blush at how the cyan pegasus stared. P-21 himself showed no animosity despite the fact he’d been one of that number at least

once, and maybe other times too. I just didn't keep males straight in 99. One a month for six or seven years…

"Yeah. I had three or so myself," Scotch Tape said firmly. Glory gaped at the filly, her final brain fuse completely blown. I couldn't see why. When you were a filly, a little nuzzle and lick was inescapable. It was one of the few fun games to play, seeing if you could do it without people catching you. "Did you love any of them?"

"No. Some of them I didn't even like all that much," I said softly as I lowered my eyes. "Not like Mom and Steam. Not like…how I feel for Glory."

P-21 took off his hat and, with a freaky bit of earth pony skill, lobbed it so it landed on Scotch Tape's head. The hat stayed up for just a second, then swallowed the top half of her noggin. He approached Glory and gently touched her shoulder, making the pegasus jump. "This is what we've been trying to explain to you, Glory. When we said sex doesn't matter, we didn't mean *love*. Mares in 99 had sex with lots of different mares. Kids did. Adults did. As long as it wasn't forced, abusive, incestuous, or disruptive, sure. For a lot of mares it was all they had to look forward to. But it wasn't love. BJ didn't do what she did with that guy because she loved him and stopped loving you. She did it because she needed to."

Glory looked at him, then at me lying there, my new legs already dinged up from her blows. "I…I don't…I can't…oh!" She snapped her wings, flying up to the stairs and into her bedroom.

"*That*…she was upset about *that*?" I muttered, trying to wrap my head around it. It was crazy to be upset about sex. That was like… like being upset because somepony stole your carrot chips in the cafeteria.

"It was hard for us to get, too," P-21 said sympathetically. "We tried to explain it, but she was so wound up she just wouldn't listen. And there *were* plenty of other things. The stress of knowing you were in danger but she was stuck here caring for us. The frustration of not being with you. I think these last four days were hardest on her."

"You were screaming, puking, and pooping yourself for two whole days, Daddy," Scotch Tape said as she pulled the hat off her head and held it in her hooves.

"Yeah, but that was just physical," he said dismissively. "Glory's trials have been of the heart, and that's always harder. The body

can endure anything if the heart is at peace." He caught Scotch Tape's uneasy furrowing of her brows. "What?"

"I know you're trying hard to do the father thing, Dad, but could you be a little less... erm... pithy?" Scotch asked with a crooked little smile. "You don't have to sound all wise all the time." She set the wide brimmed black hat back on his head, and he returned her smile.

"Right. Sorry. New to this," he said awkwardly before looking at me and continuing, "She's also afraid of turning into Rainbow Dash."

I'd forgotten about that. "Is she? Turning into Rainbow Dash, I mean," I asked in worry.

He shook his head. "Lacunae doesn't think so. It's more likely it's all in her head... but that makes it worse. Lacunae checked her memory and didn't find any magical thoughts stuffed in there. Just her own fear."

I dragged myself to my hooves and started up the stairs. "I need to talk to her. I have to make it right with her. Nothing else matters till things are right with her again."

P-21 looked on in worry. "It may not be possible to make things right, Blackjack. She may never be with you again, like that."

I snorted, more in disgust with myself than him. "I don't care about that! I care that she's hurt and upset," I said back down the stairs at the pair. "I am not going to let her and I end like Fluttershy and Goldenblood." If I couldn't be trusted with her heart, then at least I'd try to be worthy of her friendship.

Somehow.

* * *

I reached her bedroom; she'd left the door open a crack, and I could hear her sobbing within. I pushed the door open and saw her sitting on the bed, facing away from the door with her head bowed. Slowly I walked around the bed, trying to think of what to say at a time like this. I sat beside her, but she turned away from me.

This was stupid. We just sat there together, staring at our hooves. One of us had to say something, but words just weren't coming out right. As in, not at all. I kept running ideas through my head: apologize, say I was sorry, kiss her, or leave her alone? None seemed particularly adequate, appropriate, or helpful. Glory

couldn't even bring herself to look at me, let alone talk.

I felt a hole opening up deeper and deeper inside me. I was going to lose her, and all because I didn't even know how to talk anymore. But what could I possibly say to her? What could anypony say? Glory clenched her eyes shut, slow tears leaking as she remained turned away from me. Slowly, with a numb sensation throughout my entire body, I made my way back out of the room. I couldn't stay with her, couldn't bear to go back downstairs, either. Instead, I returned to my room, not bothering to close either door. Sitting on the bed, I damned myself again.

Then my eyes fell on the contrabass in the corner. I stared for the longest time at the dark, polished wood. Then I rose to my hooves and staggered over. The finish was smooth and warm beneath my touch as I ran my finger along its -- along *her* neck. "Hey, Octavia," I murmured as I shifted the instrument and stood behind it. "Can you help me out here? I kinda messed up big time. Please? I hurt the pony I love." I plucked one string with a finger, drawing out a sour note from the instrument and a little laugh from me. "Yeah, I know, right? That's stupid, even for me, and I'm the high princess of stupid."

Slowly, I started to play. Would she hear? Would she listen? Would she care? I tried not to think of anything. I simply let the music play however it came out. No, not music; just notes.

I wasn't exactly sure how long I played, but when I dared to open my eyes, I saw Glory no more than three feet from me. She stared at the blue starry comforter on the bed, then glanced back at me, then quickly looked away once more. Her rainbow mane fell across her eyes, her expression reminding me of that mare I'd found hiding in that tiny space back in the weather station. No matter how her body changed, she'd always be Glory.

I ran the bow against the strings. I knew it would sound beautiful, because it came from the pony who'd had part of her soul locked within. "Please help me apologize, Octavia. Help me show her how much I love her." I slowly drew the bow, and a low, soft note rose from them. I closed my eyes and gave up control of my hoof to the instrument. It was astonishing how good it felt to simply give in and yield to another that I trusted, to simply stop struggling and be at peace.

The notes rose and fell, searching for a melody and not finding it. They rolled out high and fast and then dropped low to slow, full

notes as the bow sawed back and forth. They skipped and jangled in frustration. One thing was for sure: no matter what happened between Glory and me, Octavia wouldn't be left in the corner of my bedroom. She deserved to be around other ponies and inspire them to learn how to play. I'd give her to the Crusaders so she'd never be lonely again.

Finally, I looked up and saw Glory looking back at me as the sad music played. The eyes might have been different, but the feelings were the same. Her love might have been bound tightly, but it hadn't suffocated yet. I set the bow aside and patted the wood paneling, then sat before Glory. The cyan pegasus rubbed my mane and asked in a tiny voice, "Do you hate me for bringing you back? Is that…why…"

"No. I don't," I said. I shook my head. "I did, for a while. A little stupid selfish part of me did, but that wasn't why I was with Stygius," I said. "Actually it's not so little. I didn't want to face it. What I am. When I died, I really thought that that was it, and it wasn't such a bad way to go. Then…then I was back. And… different." I looked out the window with a sigh. "I didn't take the time I needed. I should have waited a week, a month, even… learning about being a cyberpony and making sure I was really over it. I was trying to run myself right into the ground. First with LittlePip…then with Sanguine…and then all on my own." I closed my eyes and placed my hooves in hers. "I promised you I'd never, ever, try to kill myself again. I meant to keep that promise. I did. But I'm afraid some part of me was trying to do just that. I was doing everything I could to tear myself apart."

That was the easy part. My eyes met hers. "I did... bad things, too, while I was gone. I came across a squad of Enclave that tried to fight me, and I just tore them to pieces." I opened my mouth and closed it again, clenching my eyes closed a moment. I had to tell her, but somehow the words got all tangled in my throat. Finally, I managed to get them out. "I…think I hurt your sister pretty bad too."

"What? What do you mean…" Glory said in a tiny, horrified little voice.

I sniffed and shook my head. "They attacked me…and I fought back…but I was completely out of control. You were right…not wanting me left alone." I grimaced, feeling a stabbing pain where my heart used to be. "I hurt her. I would have killed her if…if I

hadn't run out of power." I shivered as I felt tears run down my cheek. "And if Lightning Dancer was there…I probably killed her, too."

The haunted look on Glory's face had her staring past me a moment. She focused once more, but her voice still trembled. "But Dusk is okay? You didn't kill her, right?"

"She was alive when I left her. I told the other Enclave survivors I was with to take her to the Skyport and I seriously doubt they'd disobey my order then. But honestly... I don't know if she's okay." Glory started to tremble as she curled up and hugged herself. I couldn't blame her; like this, she couldn't even go to the Skyport and find out. I tried to touch her, but she smacked my hoof away and curled up even tighter. I just sat there, staring at my stupid metal fingers. I could still see them clutching Dusk's head and slowly crushing and twisting.

She'd leave now. Hurting her was bad enough, inexcusable enough. But her family, too? I bowed my head, waiting for her to leave. "You were right. I should have stayed with you. Without you… without my friends…" The lame words fell from my lips before I ended with a whisper like a prayer, "I'm so sorry." I heard her start to move and clenched my eyes shut, not bearing to see her go.

But she didn't. And when I chanced a glance, she wore a pained expression as she looked at the floor. "Something else happened, didn't it?"

"How... how'd you know?"

A tiny, mirthless smile appeared on her lips. "I didn't. But I've learned by now that, no matter how bad I think things might be, I ought to double it when you're involved." She took a slow breath, as if bracing herself. "What else happened?" she asked as she put her hoof on mine.

She didn't forgive me. Didn't excuse me. But she didn't leave, either. I took several ragged breaths, fighting off the urge to sob as I stared at her hooves, feeling her tremble. "I…I wish it ended there. I was attacked again... Harbingers…And then I came across some scavengers. I thought they were with the Harbingers. I killed two… crippled a filly... Thought I killed her, actually. Almost did."

Glory didn't say anything. Her eyes were closed as she wept. But she kept her hoof on mine. As long as she was still here, there was hope. Please, let there be hope…

I moved along while I still could. "I lost it completely, then. I

mean…I was *totally* gone. I would have been dead except that I found a place that helped put me back together again. That got me to finally stop running from my problems and face them. To try and deal with my guilt and my shame."

"Did it work?" she finally asked in a tiny, squeaky voice. "Are you... better?"

"Kinda, actually. A little. It was a step towards better," I said with a mirthless smile. "It felt like months the machines kept me locked in my own head. Got me to finally admit…admit that I'm not okay, Glory. I mean, I know I say I'm not all the time, but I'm really *not*. Being what I am was harder than just carrying EC-1101 around. Harder than dying of taint. I was okay with dying. It was a cowardly way out. But coming back as this machine…" I shook my head, sniffing as I stared at my metal hooves.

"And here I thought the sex part was the worst. Why…how…?" she murmured with a blush.

I sighed and wiped my tears away. "Stygius…he was just trying to mount me. He was a good pony, though. And I needed Stygius to try and deal with what happened on the *Seahorse*. To be able to…to be a mare…a pony…a person. It was just sex. Good sex, but sex. I didn't love him, and he didn't love me. It was a way to prove to myself that I could control myself enough to be able to get better." I swallowed and said with every bit of sincerity I could muster, "It never really occurred to me that you'd be upset. Rampage tried to warn me, but I just didn't listen."

"Did he…come here with you?" Glory asked in dread before giving a snotty little sniff.

"No. He had to go home. With Whisper…er…Psychoshy," I said, and Glory blinked at me in confusion. I filled her on what I had learned about Psychoshy, Glory's eyes widening in surprise as I elaborated on the other pegasus's lineage. It turned out that I didn't have quite as much elaboration to do as I thought, as Glory had already picked up most of it from somewhere (Rampage?), but talking about it served as a nice digression from our own problems.

"But... Whisper?" she asked skeptically when I finished.

"Really. Whisper is what Fluttershy and Goldenblood wanted to name Psycho. I saw it in a recording." I gave a little nod, glad that my digression had moved us to safer ground.

Glory finally grinned a little. "Oh Celestia…that's a horrible name for her," she said with a sniff. "Is she happy, though?" Was that a

little wistful envy I heard in her voice?

"She's taking a risk. A big one. But I think so. It's a chance for her." I looked up at her and brushed her rainbow mane back.

"Well…good for her…" she muttered.

I sighed, slumping. Enough about the epic failures of Blackjack. "How have your last three days been?" I asked, hoping this would be a safe change in direction. Instead, her lips curled into a frown and she looked away.

"I'm…I don't know…" she said as she looked at her hooves. "Helping P-21 and Scotch was…good for me. I didn't have to think about things at first. But by yesterday…" She grit her teeth and shook her head. "I don't want to whine about it."

"Hey, I can't be the only pony in the Wasteland who gets to complain," I said, giving her a little nudge. "P-21 said you think you're turning into Rainbow Dash?"

Her face twisted in a scowl and she said in a tone of disgust, "It's this…this *body*. If that damned blue weed had turned me into anypony else, I'd be fine. Annoyed, but fine. But there are pictures of Rainbow Dash in every single history textbook teaching us about how she abandoned us and her many crimes against the pegasus race. I didn't come to the surface as a Dashite. I came as a member of the Volunteer Corps. I wanted to help, but as Enclave. Not run out on my people like she did."

She slipped off the bed and began to turn, looking at herself. "But this body is…ugh! I was never an athlete! That was Dusk's thing. She was the one who wanted to pull off a rainboom. I wanted to be a doctor. I studied. The only thing that kept me from getting all fat was that I'd skip meals when hitting the books. But this body!" She grimaced in disgust. "I wake up and I need to…to do a hundred wing pushups! I could only do one before. I want to go for a thirty mile flight! I sit here and feel…twitchy. I planned on shoving you, not throwing you clear across the room." She rubbed her face and shook her head. "Everything about this body says it's not me."

"I can relate," I said as popped out my fingers and wiggled them at her.

She gave a ghost of a smile. "Yeah. I guess I know better how you feel." She rubbed her face with a wing. "I also…I dunno…I sometimes feel like I'm losing myself. Like I really am turning into Rainbow Dash. Lacunae says it's all in my head, but the Joke changed my body. What if it changed my brain, too?" She shook

her head hard and sighed. “It’d be different if I could blame someone for making me this way, but it was a stupid magic plant!” She went silent and her gaze dropped back to the floor. “Do... do you... ”

“I wish I’d known you were doing it, but if I had I would have told you not to and you would have done it anyway. ‘Cause you’d never let me die if you could prevent it, just like I wouldn’t let you die if there was a way for me to save you.” I shook my head. “It took a pre-war brain therapy thingy to finally get me to admit how messed up I was. And how much more help and headshrinking I need.”

“So sex with him was some sort of therapy?” she asked with an arch of her brow. “That’s not how sex therapy is supposed to work, Blackjack.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes a little. “For the Wasteland, it worked okay. I stopped wanting to kill males for looking at my hind end. I think I can handle that now.” I just wish I’d understood what that would mean for Glory.

“I guess so. A pony could do some great business being a psychologist in the Wasteland.” She rubbed her puffy eyes. “So... what happened next? After him?”

“Then we got to Hightower, and…” I shook my head. “It was rough. Three ponies died.” Myself included, I didn’t add, and I’d thump Rampage and Lacunae if they said otherwise. “We leveled the building.” Then I smiled, “But we also helped a pony who needed it. We stopped a scumbag ghoul from betraying the rest of his town. We managed to do what needed to be done. I still feel guilty, though. I feel like everything I’ve done since I got back was wrong.”

“And I still feel mad at you for leaving. I know I said I was okay with it…but really, ten minutes after you left, I wanted to chase after you. But I couldn’t leave P-21 and Scotch Tape…so I settled with being angry you left and worried that you weren’t coming back. Then that broadcast…oh that stupid broadcast.” She groaned and rubbed her face. “Then I couldn’t shake the feeling that you had left us…that you left me. And it was Mom going all over again…only worse.”

Now I sighed and stretched out towards her, giving her cheek the tiniest nuzzle. “I still love you. Even if I am a lousy pony.”

“No, you’re not.” She sighed and gave a grumpy little huff. “Well, okay. Maybe a little. And I’m still mad at you.” Shaking her head,

she glared at me. “I mean... Blackjack... part of me wants to hug you, part wants to kill you, and part wants to run for the hills and never look back. You hurt my sister!”

“To be fair, she and the rest of her team were trying to kill me,” I said quickly, “and I didn’t know it was her at the time.” She still frowned, troubled. “I won’t blame you if you do any of those. Even if I prefer the first option.”

“Oh no. No sweet talking, Blackjack. You are still in big trouble. I’m still really angry at you,” she huffed. Still, I smiled at her; Glory -- who’d had her cutie mark burned off both her flanks and barely said three cross words -- was angry.

“Well, you could always just spank me till you feel better and I wise up,” I said in a casual, joking tone. Oddly, it made her ears stand straight up and her eyes widen. Then she started to blush… hard. “What?”

“Nothing!” she said quickly, but she sure wasn’t acting like it was nothing. She met my eyes and went even redder. She pressed her hooves to her mouth, as if physically silencing herself. I just looked at her with a cocked brow. She pulled away, walking to one of the windows. “Look…can we just drop it for now? I need to think and…try to decide what I’m going to do.” She sighed and looked back at me. “So…what else happened?”

I told her everything, with the exceptions of me dying again and trying to pull myself together yesterday and the Goddess in my brain. From what I learned about Goldenblood to Psalm being in my dreams to Hightower and EC-1101 to Project Eternity to getting fixed up. She listened, a little distracted, but I couldn’t blame her for that. She gasped at my description of the Warden, laughed a little when I told her about Xanthe, and commiserated when I told her about Graves’s and Snips’s deaths.

When I finished, she looked at me, her expression equally worried and curious. “What are you going to do next? I mean, Shadowbolt Tower…I can’t think of any way to get there. It’s all controlled by the Enclave Military. Or are you going to go after the bomb? Go to that hellhound base? Deal with the Harbingers?”

I thought a moment, then rose and flopped back on the bed. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” She blinked in confusion. “What do you mean, ‘nothing’?”

“I mean that some ponies died and I nearly got a whole lot *more*

ponies killed by chasing after EC-1101. I don't care where it wants me to go next; it's not worth more deaths. So for the immediate future, I am going to do…nothing." I folded my forelegs behind my head…hmm, metal limbs really didn't make the most comfortable pillows. "I am going to stay here till we work things out. Till P-21 and Scotch Tape are better. Till Rampage can get the help she needs." And then I frowned at the ceiling. "And if the Harbingers show up, I am going to show them exactly what I did at Yellow River." Okay. If dozens of them showed up, I'd have to do something else, but for right now…no. I was going to stay right here and make sure my friends were taken care of.

For a change, it wasn't going to be about me.

* * *

I trotted downstairs, taking in the chaos. Things were quite a mess; I guessed Glory had tried to clean up some while caring for P-21 and Scotch, but it still looked like a hurricane had blown through. There were dirty plates and cans of food all over the kitchen, and some things were stacked in boxes. P-21 and Scotch sat at the kitchen table, with the filly glaring at a sheet of paper while her lips moved the pencil around to draw on it. P-21 looked up at me with a tired smile, glanced up in the direction of my bedroom, then back at me in concern.

"Well?" he asked as he bopped a wad of paper back and forth between his hooves.

"She's upset," I said. "She's not sure about…us…" Scotch harrumphed and spat the pencil aside.

"I told her she should just paddle your butt till you stopped being dumb," the olive filly said as she looked at her sketch critically. "But Daddy said you'd just enjoy it."

I rolled my eyes. "It happened one time!" I snorted, with a blush. Then I frowned and thought a moment. "Twice…maybe three times…And anyway, I doubt Glory's into that, or that it would make her feel better."

"You'd be surprised," P-21 murmured. "Why, just the thought of smacking you with a belt has gotten me through some rough patches. Belts. Hoofball bats. Crowbars. Anything to get the message through," he teased with an easy smile.

"I don't get why it's such a big deal," Scotch muttered as she

looked down at her page. “It’s sex. You do it for fun. She made it sound like the most important thing ever.” I started to clean up, telekinetically gathering the trash up in a single heap before munching on the empty tin cans. Waste not, want not.

“For her it is,” P-21 said. “And she has a point. Where sex can lead to kids, you don’t want to have family you’re not ready to be responsible for. So you keep it special and reserved to ponies you absolutely want to have kids with.” He flushed as he looked away. “Being a parent is a serious commitment,” he said with a faintly ashamed look on his face.

Scotch Tape looked up at him and then back at her papers. “Ugh… this is stupid! It won’t work!” The filly threw the scrolls away with a flip of her hooves. “I don’t know nothing about designing stuff. I was just supposed to fix things.” Then she started coughing and hacking, reminding me of another pony with difficulty breathing. Hopefully hers wouldn’t last as long as his did.

P-21 patted her on the back. He still wasn’t very good at the whole comforting thing. “We decide what we’re supposed to do for ourselves now. We’re not in Stable 99 anymore,” he said with a small frown. He looked at me, as if struggling for what he should say next. He was pretty new to this whole daddy thing, and really I couldn’t give him much in the way of advice. My own dad had been ‘U-8’. Then he reached over and pulled the scrolls back. “Explain it to me again. I know even less about this stuff than you. Show me why it won’t work.”

Scotch Tape sighed and glared at the paper. “Well, we need water pressure, and for that we need volume and elevation–or the right kinds of pumps, but I don’t know where we’d get those–and for that we need pipe but I have no idea where the pipes are buried or where the shutoffs are or anything.” She huffed softly. “I can use the storm drain for an outlet…not quite healthy but better than what we have. Besides, any water that flows through the ground is at risk of radiation and taint.”

Flim and Flam really hadn’t done anypony any favors making all that Flux and selling it far and wide, I thought as I crumpled up the waste paper and stuffed it into a bag before tossing it into the living room fireplace for eventual disposal. Flux, the blood of Discord himself, didn’t seem like it broke down. Dilute it or bury it, it just stayed around poisoning and poisoning and poisoning. I thought of Gardens for the first time in a long time and shook my head.

Someday…maybe…

Boo bumped my hip, making me jump in surprise, and I saw the stealthy mare had more papers in her mouth. “You trying to help me, Boo?” I asked, hoping for a nod. Instead she smiled and blinked, setting her things down in my forehooves. Three Fancy Buck wrappers, a few pieces of scrap paper, and a rumpled-up pamphlet titled ‘Surrogacy and You’. “Where’d you get that?” Boo just blinked back at me. I supposed it must have come from one of Marigold’s old crates.

“You’ll find a way to get the water pressure you need, Scotch,” P-21 said as I turned over the Ministry of Peace’s pamphlet. “Maybe…could you put the water in a barrel or something on a tall pole?”

“Maybe,” Scotch murmured as she glowered at the page. “But it would be tricky to build. And there wouldn’t be much rainwater collection area for it to use; you’d have to spread things out over the town. And that would reduce the rainwater available for drinking… ”

“Sometimes you have to make compromises,” P-21 replied. She grunted softly.

I pulled open the pamphlet and saw a slightly crumpled Fluttershy smiling back at me. There were pictures of two mares holding hooves, one with a slightly swollen belly bump, and a diagram of mare anatomy. Some of the words had smeared beyond legibility, but I read what I could.

If you are a mare reading this, it is because you are an eligible candidate to receive the unborn foal of a mare unwilling or unable to carry the baby to term. Allow me to thank you personally for your courage in considering this procedure and to offer you a hug of thanks if you have already agreed. There is nothing more precious to the world than healthy and happy life. Allow me to explain the procedure the M.o.P. has developed so that nopony will have to know the pain of a lost child.

Surrogacy is a complex spell process which takes an eligible candidate, prepares her body to carry a foal, and then teleports the baby from one mother to another. As with any tissue transplant, it is vital that the two ponies involved be as closely matched as possible to prevent the recipient’s body from rejecting the child. Perhaps you are a mother, sister, or daughter of the recipient? Even more distant relatives are still stronger candidates to carry the child successfully than unrelated ponies,

for whom there is almost no possibility of success.

If your body is not already in its fertile cycle, biological magic will be used to give a little nudge and put your body into that state. I know it's uncomfortable, but it's necessary to prevent shock to the baby and you. Once done, the surrogacy spell will magically teleport the unborn baby from the mother to your own womb. The process will involve some discomfort, particularly if the baby is well developed, but your body should adapt.

Please realize that surrogacy is very stressful on the baby, and as such we cannot remove the unborn child a second time. Understand that while you are a surrogate and may get attached to your infant, the legal rights remain--

The rest of the brochure was too obscured for me to read. I frowned as I looked from it to P-21 and Scotch Tape working at the table. Fluttershy had said that Marigold had been an ideal candidate for the spell. And hadn't she been Twilight's cousin? But…no. That wasn't possible. I hadn't been able to open the door in Tenpony. I'd failed the test.

So…why did I suddenly feel uncomfortable?

I sighed and added the pamphlet to the rest of the trash in the fireplace. It wasn't like I had Marigold's entire genetic history with me. Maybe she'd been Rarity's cousin twice removed? Or had some Apple in her? Who knew for sure? It could all be one big coincidence.

"Hey, P-21. There were a whole bunch of boxes in Marigold's room. Where did they get put?" I asked with a little frown.

"In the basement, closest to the stairs," my blue friend said as he sat beside his daughter, waving a hoof towards the kitchen and a nondescript wooden door in the corner. Whoa... we had a basement? I trotted over to the basement door and looked down the stairs dropping into the earth. Somepony had carved them from solid rock, and the broad steps curved around to my left. I pressed the light switch, and the bulbs overhead flickered to life. I trotted carefully downwards, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu.

Clearly, we weren't the first to put things down here. The amount of stuff crammed in the deep, narrow space astonished me. Old furniture half covered up by sheets. Boxes with bags of ancient clothing. Pieces of worn, manually-driven kitchen equipment. It was one thing to think of Star House being around since the war, but as I looked deeper into the space, I had to wonder just how long ago

it'd been built. Even the walls of the basement were decorated with stars and moons.

I checked the boxes closest to the door and discovered lots of the contents were books of all sorts. Most were books on astronomy, astrology, mythology, and pony history. There had to be a few hundred books just boxed up here. I saw a note on the top of one pile, written in Twilight's familiar script.

Dear Marigold,

Please hold onto these copies from the Hoofington Library. I know that Image is supposed to screen all books for inappropriate material, but I just can't stand to think of any of them being 'sanitized'. I don't know what Rarity is thinking some days. She's grown so cold and distant. I don't know if I should talk to her, my friends, or Celestia, or Luna, or… ugh…Goldenblood about it. I just don't know. I want to talk to… somepony. I don't know who, but I want to so terribly. What's happening to all my friends? What's happening to me? What's happening to us all?

I'm sorry that things didn't work out with you and the space program. We're still going to launch rockets to learn more about the moon, stars, and Equestria…until they turn those into weapons too. I think you did a really brave thing keeping your baby. I want you to know that no matter what happens, I'm going to see to it that you and your baby receive the care you deserve. I'm glad you're in grand auntie's cottage. She was always a little nutty, but she loved that house.

Please take care of yourself and your baby. I'll try and make her next birthday. Celestia knows, I feel like I need something to celebrate.

Love,

Twilight Sparkle.

PS: Did you know Cadance had another *foal? Everypony's having babies except me and my friends! I'm getting a little jealous!*

I looked at the signature: precise and elegant with swooping cursive letters. The script showed all the care of someone who loved the written word. Twilight had wanted a child. She'd been a Ministry Mare, but while all her devotion was focused on Ministry, there was no denying she been a mare too. She'd been together with Big Mac, but…had Goldenblood removed him from her memory? Had this been written before or after Gardens had been completed?

I could have screamed in frustration! Instead, I folded the letter and put it back. I wasn't going to let it get me mad. Nope. Not going to pay any attention to nagging questions.

Especially when it came to my own lineage.

After dying, again, and what I'd experienced in Happyhorn, I put the shame I felt welling up in me on trial. What would it matter if Twilight were my ancestor? Okay, I wasn't nearly as smart as she was, but Twilight hadn't been perfect either. Not after what I'd seen in Hippocratic Research. She might have been the most accomplished magic user of all time, but she was still a mare. She made mistakes. Back in Tenpony, I'd craved normalcy and resented the transformation Glory had put me through. Now I was a twice-resurrected cyberpony with a goddess in my head. All I needed were wings, and I'd be a cyber zombie alicorn! Ministry Mare decendancy would be a step towards normal!

No. Glory forgiving me would be a step towards normal…

Sweet Celestia, Blackjack, when you screw up you really screw up.

"Dealer," I said softly as Boo flopped into a half-empty box. I looked around the dim space. "I dunno if you can hear me, but…I'd like to talk, if we could." The pale blank sat up with a crinkly astronomy magazine atop her head like a hat. Nothing. I wanted to feel…something. A tension or tightening in my chest. A closing of my throat. Instead, all within me was calm and regulated. "I don't know what to do about Glory. How do I make it up to her? How can I make it right?"

I knelt beside the box and gently lifted the magazine from atop Boo's mane. She blinked up at me with her pale, colorless eyes from within the nest of old papers.

My butt hit the floor as my eyes looked up at the stars carved in the ceiling, shedding the only expression of remorse I had left. "I don't know what I'm doing any more. I don't even know about following EC-1101. I nearly killed her sister and betrayed her trust. How can things ever be right between us?" Boo looked at me in bafflement, then stretched towards me, and suddenly the box overturned, spilling the magazines and papers all over the place. I caught her before she hurt herself, smiling despite the worry churning inside me.

Boo gave a smile back, and then I spotted something in the corner of the box. A faint glow…

I extracted the memory orb from the heaps of fliers from the Luna Space Center. The faded papers showed finned rockets blasting off from beside a large slab-sided black building sporting a crescent moon decoration. Marigold's memory? I could use a little vacation.

Old habits die hard. At least right now I wasn't anywhere I'd get somepony killed. I tapped the orb to my horn, closing my eyes and hoping I wasn't going to have a memory of my great grandmother ten times removed getting laid. I really didn't need that right--

oooOOOooo

Okay, not Marigold having sex. The unicorn stood at a window looking out at the rockets that sat on their launch pads. Only one was being worked on by a crew as they attached hoses and booster rockets. Twelve more just stood there like abandoned toys. Far off, I could make out the long, ugly block-shaped buildings of what I assumed was a military base of some kind. Since I couldn't see the Core, I really had no way to orient myself.

The unicorn stood in some sort of waiting room. Through the doors were a number of raised voices. I heard Twilight Sparkle for sure, and once or twice I thought I could hear Princess Luna. Their exact words were muddled, but the tone was hardly good. Then Glory's reflection focused in the glass before Marigold…no, not Glory. Rainbow Dash.

The cyan pegasus appeared a bit older than Glory, and the tips of her mane had started turning a lighter shade of each rainbow color. There were crow's feet in the corners of her eyes. She was tough, but tired. "Hey. Don't worry about it. I'm sure they'll restart the program." As she waved her hoof dismissively, I saw a sleek black Delta PipBuck attached to her left forehoof.

"I wish I had your confidence," Marigold murmured softly as she looked back at the rocket. "Only one launch a month, if at all. This place was supposed to have ten times that. It was supposed to be a way towards a new future. Now it's just a target for the zebras."

Rainbow Dash sighed and said ruefully, "Yeah, the stripes really do like taking shots at this place. Don't worry, though. They'd have to hit this place a lot harder than they have to get through my air defense team." The pegasus gave a little grin. "It's the Hoofington defense all over again, only instead of them wasting their time and weapons on the city, they waste them shooting at this place."

"Wonderful," Marigold said lightly. "I'd be fine with that if we actually had a space program somewhere else. Anywhere!" Marigold said with an aggravated snort. "If it weren't for the O.I.A. sending up occasional missiles, they'd probably just let the zebras

level this place." She sighed and bowed her head. "I don't even know why Twilight asked me to come. They haven't called me in for questions or anything."

"Because you're the only pony who's ever walked on the moon... well, except for Luna. Even I haven't done that," Rainbow Dash said, giving my flank a nudge. "Relax. All the ministries want the space program resumed. Only the pencil pushers keep whining about costs." Then Rainbow Dash frowned a little. "Okay. So maybe Rarity and Pinkie Pie just want those Eye-Spy satellite things in orbit. It's still a reason to go up there, right?"

"Ooooh, is somepony talking about me?" squealed an enthusiastic voice as Pinkie Pie appeared from…actually, I wasn't sure where she came from. The pink mare was, like her friend, definitely showing signs of wear and tear. She threw her forelegs around Rainbow Dash and hugged. "Isn't this just great! And soon we're going to be meeting Rarity and Applejack and Spikey Wikey! It's just like old times!" But from the strain in Pinkie's grin and the sickly look on Rainbow Dash's face, this was anything but like old times.

Rainbow Dash mustered an honest smile as she extracted herself from Pinkie Pie's embrace. "Yeah. I can't wait to show you what Rarity's been cooking up for me. It's going to be so awesome!"

"Cooking?! Aw, Dashie. If you needed cooking done you should have talked to me." The pink mare adopted a hurt little pout. "It's been so long since we've been together. I really need to show you some of my latest little surprises. Angel's been helping me with them!"

Looking a little wary, the cyan pegasus leaned away from the pink mare. "Yeah, I keep wanting to see you, but between the fighting, my own projects, and Goldenblood's scheduling, I never get a--" Rainbow Dash was cut off as Pinkie Pie scowled and looked away. The change was so abrupt that it was frightening.

Then, almost as quickly, it disappeared, and the pink mare smiled at Marigold. "Hey, excuse us for a teenie weenie second, will you?" And coiling her poofy tail around Rainbow's throat, Pinkie Pie all but dragged her from the room.

Marigold sighed and looked towards the closed doors and the continued shouting behind them. She stood there for several more minutes as a familiar pressure built in her bladder. Finally, she turned and left the room, trotting down the hall. The massive

building was surprisingly tight inside and reminded me of Hoofington Memorial with its dim halls and almost empty rooms. Marigold found a bathroom and did her business.

Then, as she started back, she heard Rainbow Dash blurt, “Pinkie Pie, that’s crazy! There’s no way in heck that Goldenblood is a traitor!”

Marigold froze in place, then backed towards a door that was open a crack. The office had been stripped of all its former accouterments save the large desk and terminal. Pinkie Pie was typing at it, the green glow of the monitor giving her eyes an almost possessed look. “It’s the only explanation, Dashie. Look, somepony is passing tippy-top secret information to the enemy. The megaspells could have only been leaked by somepony with Ministry Mare-level clearance. So either Luna gave the zebras megaspells to make things more challenging, or Goldenblood did.”

“Look, Pinkie, I know you don’t like Goldenblood, but you can’t just accuse–“ Rainbow Dash began before getting an angry glare from her friend.

“I remember MMMM, thank you!” Pinkie Pie said as she typed some more. “Look Dashie, Goldenblood is up to no good. I’ve tracked dozens of little schemes linked to him. He’s been getting money from fancy pants ponies all across Equestria. I’ve got evidence that Hippocratic Research is just a front for the O.I.A. They had basic weaponized megaspells before Luna gave the orders to Twilight to start working on them! There’s evidence the O.I.A. is meddling with Stable-Tec and dozens of other businesses. And there’s all these other secret projects that might be in the zebras’ hooves. This is more than just my Pinkie Sense. He’s guilty!”

Rainbow Dash frowned as she looked at the terminal screen. “Okay.”

“And I don’t care what Twilight says--” Pinkie Pie blinked, then blurted, “You believe me?”

“Let’s just say it’s worth looking into,” Rainbow Dash countered with a wan smile. Pinkie gave a little squeal and threw her hooves around Rainbow Dash’s neck in a fierce embrace. The relief Pinkie Pie showed was more than mere gratitude. Rainbow Dash sighed and gently pushed her away before continuing. “Let’s say you’re right and Goldenblood really is a traitor. None of this is actual proof! We need somepony to gather evidence that the O.I.A. is passing secrets to the enemy or working behind Luna’s back.

Something that Princess Luna can't ignore. Maybe I can talk to Sapphire, my liaison."

Pinkie Pie snorted, "If she's anything like Quartz, she's his. I haven't met a single pony who works for the O.I.A. who wasn't more loyal to him than to the Princess." She rubbed her chin. "What we need is somepony who the O.I.A. could use."

Rainbow blinked and then slowly grinned, "Not some pony. Some zebra!"

The pair looked at each other and said in unison, "Zecora!"

Wait…who?

"Dashie, you're a genius! If we can get Goldenblood to think he can use her, then we can nail him!" Pinkie Pie hopped on the ends of her hooves as she bounced around her embarrassed cyan friend. She sat and rubbed her chin. "We'll have to meet with her and work out the specifics. Train her... Maybe we can find some way to 'disgrace' her. He loves using people who've been hurt in some way."

"And once she's in the O.I.A., she can look for anything out of the ordinary. Beyond Goldenblood, I mean," Rainbow Dash amended, cutting Pinkie Pie off before she could retort. The pegasus put her hooves on Pinkie's shoulders to placate her. "I agree there is something really rotten in the O.I.A. If it's Goldenblood…well, Luna won't be happy. If it's something else, he needs to be slammed for letting it pass under his nose."

"Thanks, Dashie," Pinkie Pie said in relief, rubbing her eyes. "When I decided to start stopping bad ponies, I didn't know just how bad some of them could be."

"Don't worry about it," the pegasus said, and then her PipBuck beeped sharply. She frowned and looked away. "Yes? Yes. You know I am." Her frown deepened and then she slumped. "Okay. I want three intercept teams in the air, now. I'm en route." She looked over at Pinkie and gave an apologetic little smile. "Sorry Pinkie. Looks like the zebras want to play. I'll see you in Manehattan." She paused and put a hoof on Pinkie Pie's shoulder. "Please…try to get along with Twilight."

Pinkie gasped and swelled, gritted her teeth, and slowly swallowed her rage. "I'll…try…She just can't accept she's not the only smarty smart pants. She just can't accept that she might actually be wrong."

"Yeah, well, that's Twilight for you." Rainbow glanced at her PipBuck. "Anyway. We can work out the details at your hub after

the meeting with Rarity. Gotta fly. ”

“Yes you do, Dashie,” Pinkie said with a small, sad little smile.

The pegasus unlatched a window and pushed the thick glass open with a hoof, then looked back with her own small smile. “Yeah. I do. ‘Cause it will be so awesome.” And with that she flew out into the air. Pinkie pushed the window shut with a tired, frayed little smile. Then she paused, her ears flopping back and forth. A second later she sniffled and wrinkled her nose. Finally she hopped twice.

Then she snapped around and looked right at me. Her bright blue eyes flattened as she stared into Marigold’s. “Uh oh! Somepony’s been baaaaaad!” she said as her lips curled in a grin that spread wider and wider as she advanced. “Didn’t anypony teach you it’s naughty to spy on other ponies?” Marigold turned and ran for her life, heart hammering!

“I just have to find somepony!” she gasped to herself as she ran down the empty halls and past the offices. She stopped at a T and looked left and right, glancing behind herself before darting down to the right. Pinkie Pie wasn’t running after her, though. She simply bounced along behind on her four hooves. She didn’t seem to cover all that much ground. But every time Marigold looked back, the grinning pink mare grew closer and closer.

Marigold burst through an access door into a work area. All the terminals were dark, the desks scattered with abandoned litter and dust. She raced across the room, not daring to glance behind herself any more. Then there was a flash of pink mane in the doorway ahead of her! Marigold dove to the side, racing along towards another exit. A silhouette of a signature poofy mane appeared in the frosted glass window pane. Marigold ducked beneath a workstation and spotted a few empty glass orbs.

“Wheeeere’s Pinkie Pie?” the mare called out as the unicorn lifted an orb to her horn. “Wheeere’s Pinkie Pie?” the mare called again, her voice echoing in the cavernous space as Marigold’s horn flashed. Then…nothing. The orb began to glow with swirling light as she filled it with her memory. “Wheeeeere’s Pinkie Pie?” the voice sounded out again, now growing more distant. The mare relaxed a moment, breathing a sigh of relief.

Then two hooves wrapped around Marigold and yanked tight as the mare shrieked, “Here I am!” And then everything fell into darkness once more.

oooOOOooo

I shook my head hard as the memory orb ended. I wondered if Pinkie had extracted the memory from Marigold, or if Marigold had gotten the memory out and somehow it'd gotten into the box down here. I sat down and rubbed my temples with my cool metal hooves. Pinkie Pie had suspected Goldenblood; it gave my sense of right and wrong a little corrective lurch. He'd seemed so slick and manipulative…well, really, how could anypony pull off what he had without somepony catching him?

Who was the zebra they'd mentioned, though? Zecora? It sounded like a zebraish name, sure enough. I wished I had somepony I could ask who…then I blinked and laughed softly. Not somepony…

I opened the little panel on my leg and began to type. Then I leaned back against a worn box and said, "Tin Pony to Watcher. Come in, Watcher. Over."

There was no response for several seconds. Almost a minute. Then Watcher's synthetic voice crackled from my PipBuck. "Tin Pony, go into your broadcast menu, look for a little tab marked 'encryption', and switch it on." Funny how much annoyance one could get into that artificial voice. I did as he said, and a second later, "Thanks, Blackjack. Unlike someone I know, I'd rather not transmit to every receiver in Equestria."

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Champion in bed," Watcher said at once, making me flush.

"Okay, so maybe it was that bad," I muttered.

"Just a little," Watcher said, then asked, "Let me guess, Glory's not taking it so well?"

"Pretty much," I said with a sigh. "I really screwed things up."

"Oh, I doubt you're doing worse than LittlePip. Why don't you catch me up to speed with what's been happening with you? It's been a while since we last talked. Glory was getting stuff to help you?"

I settled back and sighed. "Okay. You'll probably want to get some paper for notes though." I took a deep breath. "So... it all started with the first time I died... "

* * *

"And then she threw me across the room and into the wall. Now

she's not sure and I don't know what to do and everything's nuts," I finished, sighing. My cheeks were all wet from the few times I'd broken down. He'd been a very attentive listener, not interrupting and letting me get everything out. The only time he'd stopped me was when I'd thanked him for his help in Goldenblood's, asking me to elaborate on any other times I'd gotten messages from him. He hadn't said anything besides 'checking something out', so I simply continued to the very end.

The dragon seemed to think that I'd finished. "Wow…" Watcher murmured softly. "And I thought LittlePip had it bad."

I sighed, trying to think of how to add the one part I had omitted in my tale: my new connection to the Goddess. Somehow, I couldn't just spit it out. It shouldn't have been too hard, but I just couldn't speak the words. At his comment about LittlePip though, I dropped it. He didn't need to hear any more of my whining. Really, I was starting to respect her even more than the Stable Dweller. "Eh, she probably has it worse," I said with a chuckle. "How's she doing, anyway?" I remembered what Homage had shown me. "Is she… um…okay?"

He seemed to guess my line of thought. "I still think she's fighting the good fight. Arbu was ugly, though. Turned out to be a whole town of cannibals. Willing, intentional cannibals, not your virus variety." That gave me the shudders. Raiders eating ponies because they were diseased was one thing. But choosing to eat others? "As for right now, I don't know. She's probably outside Canterlot. I'm trying to get some eyes to shadow her, but the last bot I found near their location got eaten by a radigator. If my guess is right, though, she's probably somewhere around the zebra settlement of Glyphmark."

Zebras! I'd almost forgotten. "Spike, who was Zecora?"

"Zecora? How'd you…never mind. I swear, lately it seems like every third band of ragtag misfits is stumbling over all kinds of things forgotten over the last two centuries." The synthetic voice sighed. "Zecora was a friend of Twilight and the old pony gang. She lived in the Everfree Forest and was a bit of a loner till Twilight and the others got her accepted in Ponyville. During the war, though… well…she was arrested for being a spy and traitor. Twilight went all the way to Princess Luna to get her released, but before she could she was rescued by zebra sympathizers."

"Did she ever work for the O.I.A.?" I asked as I looked around,

wondering where Boo had gotten to.

"I don't think so. I know Goldenblood talked to her once about being a liaison with the zebras early on. One of his 'back channels'. I have no idea if she accepted or not. After she escaped from custody, she disappeared from sight. Then one night, a few months later, she got caught breaking into a high-security area of the M.W.T. Nearly killed a guard before she was intercepted and killed by Applejack's coltfriend. Applejack never really forgave him," Watcher said with a sigh. "That was just a short while before everything went…well…really bad."

So, maybe Zecora had been freed by the O.I.A. and found something incriminating, or maybe something else had gotten him in trouble with Luna. "How are you doing? Anything else interesting happening in Equestria?"

"You have no idea, Blackjack. Everything out west is so tense that it feels like it's going to snap any second. Raider camps are being hit hard, like Steel Ranger hard but minus the Rangers. There's somepony with some pretty scary skill cutting us off from the broadcast towers. Red Eye's recruiting everypony with a gun and a willingness to die for his cause. The Steel Rangers are in a full civil war. Even the alicorns have been pulling back closer to Maripony."

Suddenly I felt the Goddess begin to press on the inside of my mind. I might not have been a real alicorn, but I had the connection to Unity, and she was trying to take over as hard as she could. I gritted my teeth and gulped, fighting the connection. To no avail. Against my will, I choked out the question, "Do you know if LittlePip is planning anything against the Goddess?" Each word spilled from my lips and I twitched and jerked as I fought against my own body to cut the connection. Push the button Blackjack! Just push... the... button...

"Well, you know LittlePip. I'm sure she's got something planned. Maybe she's going to try to blackmail the Goddess into attacking Red Eye. Or maybe she's got something else in mind. I know she was trying to set something up with Gawd."

Who? It didn't matter. The name set off more and more murmurs of speculation in my mind as the pressure in my skull grew. I felt the Goddess twisting my will and wits as the souls of Unity began to whisper to each other in excitement. The Goddess was speculating what it could be. The Goddess was crawling through my mind, looking for any hint of what I knew about what LittlePip might be

up to. My memories of my time with her were little more than an inebriated blur. “Well…if you find anything out…let me know….”

“Sure. Good luck, Blackjack. I’ll let you know as soon as I can.” I struggled to warn him, but I was helpless. No matter how hard I fought to keep it *open* now, I couldn’t stop myself from severing the connection.

As soon as it was broken I grabbed a shelf and smacked my head hard against the metal beam. “Get! Out!” I yelled, trying to think of how to reconnect with him. But I stared at the screen and was struck with the horrifying realization that the knowledge of how to connect to Spike’s cave was lost. Was there a button to push, or... what had I done? I remembered the conversation, but how to get in touch again? I wanted to shake as tears ran down my cheeks. “How…Lacunae said you couldn’t control me because of the Enervation.”

The Goddess laughed softly, cruelly. It was infinitely more intimate and terrifying than the bold shouts and third person references. “Oh, this isn’t control. Not yet. This is just finding ways to push through the interference. I’ll chip off a little bit here and a little bit there till eventually, there won’t be much difference between you and a normal vessel.”

Had Lacunae lied, or had the Goddess forced her to deceive me? I wouldn’t give the Goddess the satisfaction of even contemplating the other. I wrestled with her as I tried to get her out, but it was like pushing against a wave of mud. No matter how I mentally shoved, she was getting in. There wasn’t a lot of Enervation around Chapel, and the Goddess seemed to be taking the opportunity to creep in as deep as she could, searching for memories and thoughts.

And secrets. Secrets that I couldn’t dare let her know about. If she knew about... no, don’t think of it. But I was! I couldn’t not. I thought about the necklaces and the crown thingy and the maneframe and... no! I could feel her searching. Hunting. Trying to find what I tried so hard to bury in my mind. Don’t think about it! Don’t!

But I did. I bashed my head against the floor again and again, trying to knock myself out. My augmented body resisted. Worse, it was healing the trauma to my head! If I was going to prevent her from knowing everything, I’d have to remove it the only sure way I knew how. I struggled to levitate out the pistol, feeling tears run down my cheek. My aim struggled. I had to keep her from knowing.

I had to…I'm sorry Glory, but if she found out about…

"Gardens of Equestria?" the Goddess purred in my ear, the gun falling from my magical grasp. "Yes. I know about it. That interesting thought on Flux and Spike and there it is. A little treasure just lying there to be seen. *She's* beside herself, at the moment, but once my business with the other annoyance is done and Red Eye put in his place, I think I'll have to reunite Twilight with her assistant."

I stared out into empty space, feeling defiled. The Goddess just laughed in glee as the horror crept through me. "I don't know how. I don't know when. But somepony is going to kill you very soon," I whispered aloud, sounding like a prayer.

The laughter stopped, but the Goddess still chortled in her amusement. "Oh, really? I assume you're referring to LittlePip? Yes, I'm sure she'll try something heroic at the most inopportune moment. You don't know what, but you have guesses: sneaking something into the base. Unknown allies. Using Rarity's zebra magic... might have to kill her just to be safe before she gets here. Maybe…by you." There was a yank and for an instant I was filled with an overwhelming urge to kill LittlePip, but I barely fought it off, focusing on killing the Goddess instead. It seemed to work a little. "If you could contact her, you'd suggest using those silver rings against me. We'll just take that." And with another yank, I felt something go. Something about rings and unity.

Sweet Celestia, shoot me…please…

"Oh no, Blackjack. No killing yourself. No telling anypony either. Neither you nor that garbage bin you call a friend," the Goddess hissed softly in her malice. "Nopony has ever insulted me the way you have. Nopony would dare. Well, now you're mine. I'm going to tear off itty bitty little pieces of you till there's nothing left but a shell. Then I'll have that garbage bin bring you back for a real transformation to a proper shape. And I'll make sure that all the Wasteland sees what I'm going to turn you into, so none ever dare to challenge me again."

I didn't think of anything except that prayer over and over again. Boo came over and butted my shoulder repeatedly before curling up beside me. All I could do was think and wait for the Goddess to turn her attention elsewhere.

Somepony…anypony…help me…

* * *

I spent the better part of an hour sitting there in the basement, fighting against a Goddess who for all I knew had moved on to bigger and better things. Boo snoozed beside me, bored, before the blank had finally had enough and started butting me towards the stairs. I'd fought giant monster ghouls and other creatures, but I was helpless against a little white pony who stubbornly bumped me to my hooves and then up the stairs. Once I started moving, I could keep going.

I just couldn't stop…but I could run in place till my friends were ready to go. I kept trying to think of ways to tell my friends what had happened to me, to let Spike know I couldn't be trusted. But I couldn't. Something inside my brain had been tweaked. No, I wasn't a puppet yet, but the Goddess was tying strings to me all the same. P-21 and Scotch Tape were both gone. Off doing her project, I supposed.

In the living room I returned to going about the simple motions of cleaning and did everything I could to not think about it. Not the Goddess, not Glory, not EC-1101, not zebra balefire bombs… nothing. I cleaned up like I'd never cleaned before; Mom would have been shocked and amazed. Boo went right to the cupboard; I couldn't find any snack cakes, but I did come across some Sugar Apple Bombs cereal. I filled a bowl for her, then sucked on a ruby as I worked.

Mom. I never really appreciated her as head of security. Had she felt the same way, burdened down by so many things she couldn't control in 99? The Overmare, Rivets, her duties, and me…How had she managed? Had she felt the same see-sawing sensation inside her that lurched from depression to panic and back to depression? I soaked a washrag in the sink and began to scrub the counters, looking at the white stars on the counter tops and smiling a little. Crying a little too.

"Blackjack?" Glory said softly behind me. I didn't face her. I couldn't. I just hung my head a little. The stuff I could speak about, I couldn't bring myself to say, and the stuff I needed to warn her about, I couldn't speak. So I cried and moved the rag in slow little circles like I was determined to get that one tile spotless because it was better than anything else I could do.

"What are you doing, Blackjack?" she asked from beside me. I

glanced at her bloodshot eyes; their lids were swollen from crying.
"Cleaning," I said lamely as I looked away.
She reached down and stopped my hoof with her own. I saw then that I'd washed a perfectly round circle in the tile while missing the rest of the mess. "Let me help you," she said simply, then tied her rag over her rainbow mane and starting to clean as well. We didn't talk. I could barely breathe. Together, we straightened up every little thing there was to fix…except each other.
I wanted to talk, but I didn't. I wanted to tell her what I'd just done, but I couldn't. I wanted her to end me, but she wouldn't. And so finally I struck a match from an old matchbox and lit the papers in the fireplace.
Then her hooves reached around me. For a moment I tensed, ready for another throw. But it didn't come…part of me wished it would. I hung my head and said in a wet little filly's voice, "I'm not going to run. I'm not. I'm not…"
That was as much as I could get out, but it was enough as she held me and I fell apart again in her embrace. "Shhh…I know…I know…" I might have gone through hell itself, but that didn't mean I was beyond needing a simple, sincere hug.

* * *

Side by side we walked together back towards Chapel. I didn't ask why she'd come back to me. I wasn't even sure if she forgave me for what I'd done. All that mattered was that we were together, even if I was the last person in Equestria anypony should possibly be with. The afternoon weather was the Hoof's trademark drizzle. We trotted through the rain towards the budding town below, and I filled Glory in on what had happened to Rampage. Glory'd covered up in a blanket to obscure her famous appearance, and pretty soon she resembled a drowned ghost. Boo folded her ears as she trotted behind us, the pale blank annoyed by the rain dripping inside them.
"So, does this mean that P-21 is it now?" Glory asked as the wet grass clung to her in passing.
"It?"
"Is he the one with the fewest unresolved psychological issues? The one that we go to for help?" she asked with a wan smile. "Please say yes. I'd really like somepony else to be mommy for a while." And though she said it as if joking, I could pick up the sincere

tension in her voice.

I rubbed my chin. “I don’t know. I always thought of Lacunae as the shoulder to sob on,” I said wearily as we walked through the rain. “P-21 still needs to get his strength back. Then we can lean on him some more.” I glanced at her and gritted my teeth a moment before daring to ask, “What about…us?”

Glory pulled her wet sheet over her face so all I could see was her cyan muzzle. “I don’t know, Blackjack. I know you need all the friends you can get. I know what you’re doing is important. I just don’t know if…if I can be okay with it.” She glanced at me. “Was Stable 99 *really*…”

I shrugged. “I lived there my whole life, so I have no idea. Ponies not having sex except with one…and only one…partner just seems…well…stupid.” I winced as I saw her frown. “Not that it is. Just, that’s how it seems. I mean, don’t you ever look at a mare and want to do stuff with her?”

Glory bit her lower lip a moment, then said softly, “Maybe. There was Caprice…”

“There was?” I blinked in surprise, and she looked at me, the raindrops running along the edge of the fabric as she smiled a little. “I thought you hated her.”

“I envied her, Blackjack. There’s a difference.” She sighed and went on, “I have to admit…she is pretty cute. And the way you and her just…did it. Had fun even when you were total strangers…well, I was a little bit jealous. The Enclave is very strict on heterosexual relationships and reproduction. You just…don’t…do that. What you two did.” She groaned a little. “Ugh, I can’t even say it!”

“You don’t have to,” I replied, smiling a little.

She stomped her hoof in the wet grass. “You don’t understand. I want to. That’s what drives me nuts. My sister could just ‘do it’. You and Caprice could. So why do I get all hung up on what I want? Why can’t I just…ugh…” She slumped. “Just forget about it.”

I reached over and patted her shoulder. “What do you want, Glory?”

She frowned as she pulled the sheet off her face and looked away, chewing on her bottom lip. Finally she sighed and said, “Just a thousand different things, and half of them contradict. Mostly, I want to feel like I’m in charge of things. Like what I want matters. Like…I want to be more like Dusk. Confident I can actually do things. That I matter.”

“You matter. You matter the world to me,” I told her frankly.

“I know. And I know you mean that,” Glory said with a sad smile. “I just don’t know if I can stand mattering to you and being your very special somepony at the same time.” And with that she pulled the sheet back over her head. Then she sighed and said, in a more annoyed tone, “You know, it’s times like this I can understand surface ponies’ annoyance with keeping the skies covered."

As if sensing her ire, the heavens replied. Soon it was pouring such buckets that we nearly stumbled into Chapel’s minefield. We made the detour to the right trying to find our way to the road. We passed the ruined church, and I paused as I looked down the road toward the bridge. I saw a lone pale pony standing in the rain, staring at the swollen, churning river.

“Rampage?” Glory called out.

Slowly, we approached Rampage, the striped earth pony standing as still as a blank. She’d stashed her armor somewhere. Her pale pink eyes looked longingly into the foaming brown water. “It really hurts, you know,” Rampage said as she looked down. “Dying, I mean. Blackjack knows. Drowning’s not that bad. I once tied half a skywagon to me and jumped off the Hoofington Bridge over by the arena. Spent two whole years down there. Really boring. Then a river serpent gobbled me up and shat me out. I think you can relate, can’t you, Blackjack?”

“Yeah,” I said as I joined her at the rail. “Did it make you feel better?”

“No,” she answered in a low hollow voice I could barely hear over the churning water and hissing rain. “Down there, you just feel… trapped. Then bored. You want to live, but you can’t. Time gets funny. I know it was two years from ponies asking where I’d disappeared to, but it felt somewhere between a few days and a thousand years. Sometimes both.” She looked over at me. “I really wish that you’d used that super gun on me, Blackjack. Before I found out about Eternity.”

“You’re a real pony, Rampage,” Glory said as she moved beside her on her other side.

“No,” she said as she stepped away and pointed her hoofclaw at the pegasus. “You’re a real pony, Glory. And so’re Blackjack, P-21, and Scotch Tape. You had lives. Family that loved you. Childhoods. You were actually *people*!”

She started to pace. “I don’t know if my childhood was growing up

as a filly in Ponyville with a crush on Apple Bloom, living as a zebra tribal near Shattered Hoof Ridge, being beaten by my mother in a filthy apartment in Manehattan, or growing up on a military base with a mare who always had better things to do than be my mother! I'm pretty sure now the answer is really 'none of the above'! I have more in common with Boo than any of you!" Her shouts made Boo flinch back and hide behind me.

"Yeah. It sucks," I said as I moved in front of her. "Welcome to Hoofington! Glory's lost her family and her own body. P-21 went through shit. Scotch Tape lost her home. I get it. But we're still your friends, so what does it matter?"

"Because I'm not real!" she yelled back at me. "You at least went through things that made you what you are, Blackjack. You caused some of it…chose some of it…and got dealt some of it." She gritted her teeth and pressed her hooves to her head. "I'm losing my fucking mind here, Blackjack. I want…I've got a dozen different things I want to do, and I have no idea which one is me! Or if any of them are me.

"And I just want it to stop!" she yelled as she tore away and ran as fast as she could down the bridge towards the Core. I cursed, turning to try and catch her. I reached out with my mouth, bit hard on her tail, and was dragged further along behind her. My four metal hooves scraped grooves in the cracked asphalt as the razorwire softened between my teeth.

"Blackjack!" Glory cried as she darted around and tackled me from the side mere seconds before Rampage crossed the 'Mercy' painted across the bridge. The beam flashed once and instantly transformed her into a glowing red statue of herself before she collapsed in a heap. Glory lay atop me in the rain, panting as the downpour washed away the muddy gray ashes. Then the talisman flashed, and Rampage's body rebuilt itself into that of a filly. Her skin hadn't even fully reformed before she started crawling towards the Core. The beam atop the city gate flashed again, and again she collapsed into a smaller heap.

"Stop!" I shouted as she reformed a third time, crawling on her regenerating limbs, her unset flesh sticking and stretching with each step. My magic seized her and pulled her into my grasp like a half-born filly. She thrashed against my embrace as the rain hissed all around me. Finally her striped hide formed and she shook in my grasp, crying and screaming as she struggled to find annihilation.

“Please. Rampage.”

I did the only thing I could think of; I held her in my hooves and began to rock. Glory sat beside me, humming softly in the rain as Rampage slowly stilled. She broke down in terrible, heartbroken little sobs as she curled against me and let out some of the pain.

Slowly, eventually, she stopped thrashing. She curled up in my arms and pressed her face to my chest. I smiled softly and stroked her mane as the three of us sat together in the rain. I couldn’t do anything for myself or Glory, but I would do something for her. Something.

* * *

“So, let me get this straight, Blackjack. You want me to go into the memories of a pony bound in a soul talisman, extract them, and put them into the recollector so that Rampage can discover she is more than the product of the talisman?” Lacunae asked as we all sat on the porch of Sekashi’s house. The rain had put a damper on the frantic construction, but now the sewage ditch was overflowing and vomiting its contents all over the road while the hasty additions swayed and groaned ominously in the rain. Some of the fillies and colts were still trying to get them nailed down…tied down…or whatever they were trying to do.

“That’s about it,” I told the alicorn, who had found another black dress to hide her wings. I didn’t ask where, but I assumed Charity had been involved. Thus dressed, she avoided most of the angry looks from the workponies. I supposed when your race is viewed as monsters all across Equestria, it was inevitable that you would get some hard glances by people from elsewhere in the Wasteland. “I want you to find a memory or something that’s from a pony that’s not shoved in that talisman.”

Lacunae knelt, closing her eyes as if in meditation. “There is a problem with your plan, Blackjack. I can’t extract memories.”

I blinked, frowning a little. “Excuse me?”

“I cannot perform the telepathic magic your plan requires. I am sorry. The Goddess refuses to grant me such abilities.” Out of spite, I guessed. Rampage and Majina were in the house, where the little zebra talked a mile a minute. It seemed to be working; Rampage had gone from sulking and depressed to looking baffled as she tried to follow a tale involving a mouse, three Fancy Buck Cakes, and a

carton of milk. While I knew the Angel was inside the small red striped filly, I hoped she couldn't do anything severe to the zebra filly before we could separate them. "I'm sorry, Blackjack."

I frowned and Glory patted my shoulder. "At least you thought of something." Two workers walked by next to the ditch, and she pulled the sheet further over her features, but they were more focused on getting out of the rain.

"No," I said firmly as I stood up. "It's time I gave back to her. She's been following me for weeks; she's suffered for me, and the only help she wants I can't give her." There was just the question of how. "Remember in the Collegiate when I went into your mind to find you?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at Lacunae. "Why can't I try the same with her?"

"Doing what you propose is extremely risky. You could contaminate your own psyche with the memories and personalities inside Rampage. You might put Blackjack inside her. You could forget some critical thought processes, like respiration," Lacunae said with clear concern.

I actually laughed at that. "Lacunae, I've got a talisman regulating my breathing now. Heck, you could blow my head off and my body would probably keep living for a few days afterward. And I already have Psalm in my head. And you-know-who is in there too." I paced a little. "I've got the Dealer passing by on a semi-regular basis. Really, how much worse could it be?" Considering what I'd done to Boing, taking the Angel from Rampage wouldn't be much of a change for me.

Sekashi watched my lips with concern before she smiled and said, "You know. I know a story about a funny zebra back in the homelands. There was a good male, wealthy and powerful and generous. One day he went for a walk and saw many poor zebras in the market. What to do? So he gave them all the money in his purse and they were quite happy. He continued on his walk, and he found many hungry zebras living on the edge of his village, so he gave them his lunch and continued on his way. Soon it began to rain, and he came across some wet and weary travelers along his way. And so he gave them his cloak as well.

"But soon this funny zebra was alone, and hungry, and wet. He found a cave in the woods. There in the cave he found a beautiful zebra from a faraway village asleep in the bottom of a cold pool. And because he was good, he dove in and swam deeper and deeper.

And thus, he drowned. When he died, there was nopony to help the poor, the hungry, or the weary. And so, they died too." She finished with a blissful smile, hooves folded in her lap.

We all stared at her for a long minute. "Sekashi…that's a horrible story!" Glory blurted.

The zebra mare rubbed her chin. "Perhaps I should add more description of his cloak? Would that make it better?"

Glory just stared at me. "Hey, Xanthe was worse. She went on and on about being cursed."

"Ahh. Propoli. Them and their silly curses!" Sekashi laughed. She had no right to talk…

I understood the meaning of her little story, though. If something permanent happened to me, what would my friends do? Was this just me trying to find some new and inventive way to hurt myself?

"No," I said firmly, but with a small smile as I looked at Lacunae. "I know it's risky. And I'll try and be careful. But Rampage can't keep going like this. At this rate, she's going to bury herself in a mineshaft or throw herself into the ocean in a concrete filled barrel or…something." Something drastic and so long term I wouldn't be there to save her.

Glory smiled in worried approval. But Lacunae said telepathically to me, "And what if you go into her mind and discover that she is correct? That there never was a mare named Rampage?"

"Then I'll lie to her and be her friend till the lie is real," I replied telepathically. "If I can give her peace and can help her, then I will." And while I had her in my mind, I thought, "You knew the Goddess was trying to take me over, didn't you?"

"Yes. I feared it was a great risk and that she would make the attempt. She knows a pony like you or LittlePip is her greatest threat," Lacunae replied shamefully. "I failed you."

"No. It's not your fault. It's the Goddess's." I smiled at the alicorn. "Don't worry. We'll think of some way out of this. And there's the Stable Dweller out there too. If LittlePip can't do something, the Stable Dweller will. Probably drop a balefire bomb or a house on her or something."

There was a note of disgust in my mind. "You two do realize I can hear you, right?" the Goddess said dryly. "And the moment you do think of something, I'll know it," she added in a mental snarl. Then there was a pause and the Goddess snapped irritably, "And your Stable Dweller *is* LittlePip!"

Oh, sure. Like I was going to believe anything she said! I got the impression of a pony throwing their hooves into the air in resigned annoyance and tried to put killing the Goddess out of my mind for now. Right now, Rampage needed help first.

"I've been in and out of too many memory orbs to count. If it'll help her get answers, I'll try it," I said, then met Glory's worried gaze. I tried to give a comforting smile. "I'm going to be careful. I will." I then looked in the next room where a tiny Majina jabbered to a morose Rampage. "If I can give her peace, it's a chance I have to take."

I caught Glory staring at me with a small smile. "What?" I asked in worry.

"Nothing. I was just reminded about…things," she said, that little smile not leaving her lips.

My spirits rose a little. "Good things?"

"Yes. And frustrating things too," she added, popping that balloon of hope inside me.

"If you are going to do this, you will need a recollector and an empty memory orb. The recollector we have," Lacunae said, reminding me of the strange black circlet I'd found in Vanity's locker. "As to an empty memory orb, I suggest you see the local shop filly."

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I suddenly feared for my bottlecaps.

* * *

The post office had gotten a bit cluttered since the last time I'd been in here. The space behind the counter was nearly a solid wall of packing crates and boxes overflowing with plunder from Blueblood Manor. The feral ghoul population had kept it safe from looters, leaving it to be picked clean by Chapel's intrepid Crusaders. Anything of even passing value that hadn't decayed had been brought here. There was a little sign that read 'ring bell if it makes you feel better.' I looked at the brass bell on the counter and tapped it. Nothing. I hit the little button on top repeatedly, but aside from a muted and oddly unsatisfying tapping within, nothing. I sighed and stretched up to try and peer over the crates of silver candlesticks and stacks of porcelain. There was nothing for it. "Charity?" I called out.

There was a rustling, and a mare called out that she'd be right there…or something. Then there was a crash and a yipe, and several seconds later a peach-colored mare poked her head out as asked timidly, "Yes? Can I…" she trailed off as her pink eyes met mine and widened in shock. "Blackjack!"

"Caprice?" I gaped at her. "What are you doing here?" The once-leader of Flank looked as if she were recovering from quite a beating. Her face had the unhealthy blackish-green marks of bruises that were in the final stages of healing. The eyes, however, now openly showed a fear of the world she'd barely kept concealed before.

"I…" She swallowed and lowered her gaze. "I…um…I was thrown out of Flank. My security team…they took over all the chem production and they're using it to make Rage and Dash. Anypony that didn't accept Citrine's rule was run out... most of the working mares and stallions. The Trough is basically gone. The only trade they allow now is buying chem supplies, guns, and food and selling Stampede and Rainboom. They're nothing but a bunch of drug fiends now."

I felt a little bad for her; just a little. She had planned to betray me, but clearly she'd gotten the rough end of the stick. "How'd you end up in Chapel, then?"

"It's just down the road," she replied with a shrug. "Most of Flank went to go work for the Society. The rest scattered. A few came here. They needed help minding the store, so I volunteered."

"Hey!" snapped a filly behind Caprice. There was a smack, and the peach mare jumped with a yipe. "No sexing the customers! Do that on your own time!" Charity called out, then jumped on Caprice's back and hopped over her head and onto the counter top. She took one look at me and narrowed her eyes. "Blackjack! Where's my money?"

I met the yellow earth filly's blue glare and backed away. "I don't know! How much do I owe you? Didn't I pay it already?" I clutched my saddlebags to my chest. "Please don't take my poor bottlecaps. I'll pay it back next time. I swear!" Then I frowned and said sharply, "Wait a minute. Didn't I save your life last time?"

"Oh, crap apples," Charity said as she deflated. "I was hoping you'd have forgotten about that." She sat her butt on the counter as she looked at me sourly. "Fine. What do you want, Blackjack? A nice shiny new gun? Ammo? Something pretty for Glory?"

"Actually, all I need is a couple empty memory orbs," I said with a small look of relief. "Though if you do have something nice for Glory…"

She looked over her shoulder. "Hey, Saucy Flanks! Get me a half dozen memory orbs from the fifth filing cabinet in the third row, bottom drawer in the back. Don't even think of touching the sixth filing cabinet!" she snapped sharply.

"Yes, boss!" Caprice said, scurrying back into the cramped and overstocked work space.

Charity watched her go and then her eyes softened a little. "She's a little worthless, but that's better than completely worthless like most adults. Came here half dead…"

"Don't you think you should treat her better, then?" I asked, and received a cool look from the filly.

"If I let her start using pity as an asset, she's never going to get any better," Charity replied. "I gave her a mountain of debt and a job and an excuse to stay. Till she pays it off, I get an assistant. She gets a place to recover." Then the filly adopted a sly grin. "So. Champion in bed, huh?"

I groaned and rubbed my cheek. "I didn't expect everypony to hear it."

"Duh! That's what makes it funny," she replied with a roll of her eyes.

I quickly decided to shift the conversation away from my sexual experiences. "Listen, can I talk to you about Scotch Tape? She has a bunch of ideas for Chapel."

I expected a snide comment or a smile, but not the dark cloud that passed across her face. "Oh. The stable filly. What about her?"

Stable filly? "Um, Charity... She has a *lot* of *good* ideas for *helping* Chapel," I repeated with emphasis.

"... *Great*," Charity said sarcastically. "She can *keep* them."

What? "But... you don't want them?" I said with a little frown of concern. "She's a real smart kid, and she wants to help you out."

"Are all stable ponies so thick? We don't want her help," Charity said with a scowl. "If she wasn't friends with you, we'd tell her to take her plans, shove 'em up her butt, go jump in the river, and make like a sailboat." My shock must have been incredibly evident, because she looked away, muttering darkly, "She comes here the first time telling us about her poor momma and how she died. How she's just like us. So we tell her she can be a Crusader. So what does

she come trotting up here with this time?" Charity clasped her hooves together and grinned with a leer. "Why, her daddy, of course!" Her eyes fluttered a few times, her eyes wet behind her lids.

The yellow filly slumped immediately like melting butter, her blue eyes hardening as she looked towards the riches stacked up behind her. "I can buy or trade for almost anything I need. There's always somepony that needs something. But there's not a single thing I have to trade that will get me what she has."

"Charity, punishing Scotch Tape won't make you feel any better. You shouldn't spite her just because you're jealous," I murmured to her as I reached up and touched her mane.

She shoved my hoof away with an indignant snarl. "I am not jealous! The Crusaders are for orphans. We're not a bunch of dumb foals spending all day thinking of crazy ways to get our cutie marks. We stick together because we're all we have. We have standards!"

Suddenly there was a roar from somewhere underneath our feet, and Charity spun. "I told you to stay away from the vault, Saucy Flanks! Eat her, Precious, if she tries to touch our caps!" Charity yelled.

"Vault?" I asked in confusion.

"Yeah. It's a big reinforced room down below for valuable mail and packages. Usually don't keep a lot of stuff in there on account that it's a pain to get it up and down the stairs. I keep our caps and other valuable stuff down there." She screwed up her face in a scowl. "Precious volunteered to guard it. Kinda insisted, actually." The filly sighed and gave a little shrug.

Suddenly a scream sounded from outside and I was moving instantly for the door as a resounding crunch filled the air. Out came Duty and Sacrifice as I thought of who might be attacking us. Harbingers? Enclave? Raiders? I darted out into the rain and paused as my enemy came to light: gravity.

One of the tottering structures had collapsed across the sewer ditch and road, and the colts, fillies, and few adults struggled to free the ponies trapped under the wreckage. Glory flew out of Sekashi's home, followed a moment later by Lacunae. The rain lashed the tiny settlement, and gusts of wind had all the buildings swaying and tugging against the ropes holding them upright. "Look out!" I shouted, but in the bedlam nopony took notice.

Sure enough, one of the ropes snapped in two and the wooden

framing and scaffolding collapsed down on the milling ponies. I saw one of Harpica's ghoul fillies staring up in terror at the avalanche of beams about to crush her as I raced down the road. Lacunae beat me to her, flashing beside her and catching the debris with her magic before it could crush the ghoul. Harpica hurried forward to gather the undead filly up and get her to safety before Lacunae dropped the heavy load.

A shrill scream filled the air, and I watched as another fell with a ponderous crash into the ditch, bearing the chartreuse Medley with it. The unicorn surfaced for a second before the debris dammed the brown flow and she disappeared from view. The building settled a little more atop her.

"Get her out! She's pinned!" I screamed as I dove into the flow above the blockage. My metal legs helped keep me from being swept off my hooves immediately, and I felt the trapped filly thrash against the beams crushing her legs and keeping her down. I heaved against them, but rather than lift I simply pushed myself into the muck of the ditch. I raised my head, looking at the beams and boards; maybe I could lift them off piecemeal? But no, that'd take too long. I ducked down again, feeling Medley move slower against me as I gripped the lowest beam I could and lifted. I had to do this…I thought of a pink-maned filly I'd failed so horribly not long ago…

It doesn't matter what you do; you'll never be a good pony. There are no good ponies…

No. I wouldn't accept that. I couldn't! I might have been a murderous fuckup who didn't deserve any of my friends, but I could do better. I'd give all I had to give her a chance. All I had to give…

And because he was good, he dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And thus, he drowned. When he died, there was nopony to help the poor, the hungry, or the weary. And so, they died too.

I couldn't tell if Medley was struggling still or if it was just the current beating us. If I died, what would Glory say? What about others I could have helped? *Do better*…did that mean letting one filly die for others? My systems were sending all kind of 'low O2' warnings. Just a little harder. A little longer! Do better, damn it! Better!

Then there were hooves pulling me away. I fought with them. Some mare cried out in pain as I kicked out. I had to give her a chance. I had to! Had to! But then my head broke the surface and I

was pulled from the filthy water by Glory, P-21, and Lacunae. The ditch flooded out around the blocking debris as I lay there, staring up at the sky as the rain pounded down upon me and my metal limbs.

"Why?" I murmured as I lay there with filthy water sloshing around me as Glory knelt on my right and P-21 on my left. The cyan pegasus clutched her forehoof in pain, and I felt the guilt push me over the edge. "I can…I can take on an army of Harbingers. Kill a ghoul monster. So why can't I give a filly a chance to live?"

"Because you're a fucking idiot, Blackjack," Charity said as she sat in the doorway of the post office. Slowly I sat up, looking at her as if she were speaking zebra or something. "You don't value yourself," the filly said scornfully. "You put everypony else above you. Your friends. Strangers. Even your fucking enemies. Because for some reason you think that your life is worth less than theirs."

"Medley…she's…" I rasped softly.

"She's dead," Charity said firmly. "She's not the first. She won't be the last. But you killing yourself won't change that. You can't give her life, Blackjack. Not even you can do that." I stared at the spot where the heap of beams and sheet metal lay in a scattered lump and felt something tense inside me. Do better, it insisted.

I tried.

Do better.

I want to.

Do better!

I don't know how!

Do better!

"I can't! I can't do any better!" I shouted as I clenched my head in my hooves. "I try and I try and I do all that I can and I don't know how to do any better!"

They all stared at me. There was no point in trying to get the remains out till after the rain stopped. All the Crusaders. Harpica, the ghoul pegasus holding the undead filly Lacunae had saved. The workers who were complete strangers looked on impassively as the hero of Hoofington failed before their eyes. P-21 held a pitying Scotch Tape, the filly's designs and plans getting ruined in the rain. Even Caprice and Charity side by side, the former wary and the latter scornful, watched me carefully. Lacunae stood beside Sekashi and the mournful Majina along with Rampage and the stoic Dealer before the zebra's little house.

Then I felt Glory take my hoof between hers. “That’s because you’re trying to do it all on your own, Blackjack. You try to take all the blame. All the guilt. All the pain and suffering. You’re trying to give us all a better Wasteland on your own…and you can’t.”

“You can’t fix all your mistakes by dying, Blackjack,” P-21 said, his voice barely above the hiss of the rain. “You can’t fix 99. You can’t unkill the people who died. You can’t unbreak a pony’s heart.” Everypony just stood there in the rain.

“Just bad luck,” a colt muttered as they looked at the wrecked buildings. “What with the rain and all…”

“No! Not bad luck!” Scotch Tape cried as she stepped away from P-21. “Look, I don’t want to insult you after this but…but this is stupid! This isn’t how you’re supposed to build things! If that building had been built right, then Medley would be alive right now!” Scotch Tape said as she pointed at the tumbled structure.

“Are you saying we killed Medley?” a filly challenged.

“No! But there’s a right way and a wrong way to build things. You can’t just put beams on a roof, hammer them into the walls, and think it’s going to stay up!” Scotch’s voice started to rasp, and the filly began to cough and fight for breath in the rain.

“Come on, let’s get home,” P-21 began, but then Scotch shook her head and pushed away.

“I know this is your home. I want to do better too. I want this to be a better place to live. I want this to be a better world! But if you won’t listen to me, then there’s nothing I can do. I’m just like Blackjack.” She looked at me sadly and then back at the others. “Please. Let me help.”

There were angry mutters and shakes of their heads. Talk that she wasn’t one of them. Not really. She had her father right there. I looked at Charity, standing in the rain, chewing on her bottom lip as she scowled at Scotch Tape. She looked as if she wasn’t quite sure what to do.

Finally, the yellow filly asked in a voice barely heard over the rain, “All right then. What do you suggest we do?”

Scotch Tape looked at her, and a smile bloomed on her face. “Well…first…let’s get her out from under there…” The salesfilly blinked, and then her scowl faded and she smiled, giving Scotch a tiny little nod.

And with that everypony except Glory started to move the wreckage. Together they pulled it apart and tossed it into the

flooded road. Eventually a muddy little body was pulled from the churning water. I couldn't bear to look at it as it was borne away. Scotch gave a few more instructions like staying clear of the rest of the standing buildings before P-21 put his hoof down, loaded her on his back, and headed for home. Rampage went back inside while Lacunae helped take down some of the riskier structures. With the ditch more or less clear, the water returned to flow unimpeded towards the river.

"I can't love you like this," Glory murmured beside me as she hung her head. "I want to, Blackjack. I do. You're a good pony, even if you're an insufferable screwup. But I can't give my heart to a mare who doesn't think she's worth it. You've got to live, Blackjack. You're so willing to give anypony else help…but you won't let you help yourself."

I lay there, rain falling on my synthetic eyes as I stared up into that endless gray. "I don't know how, Glory. I know I need help. I know that what I'm doing is wrong…but I don't know how to fix it. I can't trust myself anymore." I closed my eyes. "How is anypony supposed to help me?"

Then I felt her move atop me. Her feathers spread out and shielded me from the rain as she blanketed me with her body. It's not something I could imagine Rainbow Dash ever doing. Maybe that was why. I extended my fingers and reached up behind her wings and held her to me. I knew I should be helping clear the tumbled debris. I should have been helping the crusaders bury Medley. I should've been checking on Scotch or helping my friends or…or…

He dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And so he drowned…

I needed help. My friends needed help. Everypony did. And no matter how I kicked myself for Medley, for not being able to save her…it wouldn't change that. I buried my nose where Glory's shoulder met her neck and held her. She hummed a soft little tune, like a lullaby, and I slowly relaxed bit by bit.

"Come on. Let's go get out of the rain," Glory murmured softly in my ear.

* * *

"Okay. I'll admit it's a little bit kinky, but is this really supposed to help?" I asked, flushing a little as Glory clicked the lock on the collar around my neck closed with a definite note of finality.

"Hopefully, it'll remind you who's going to keep you from flying apart the next time you feel the need to try and save somepony at cost of your own life," Glory said. She tugged on the little heart-shaped lock with her mouth a moment, then smiled. "If I'm going to help you, I'm going to keep you till you accept how important you are to all of us."

I blushed a little more, but really, I had no right to argue. If this was a condition of her staying with me, then I'd have to accept it. And, in all honesty, I was willing to let her do this. I had no idea how I'd make it without her. I needed her like I needed air. "But where the heck did you even find a collar like this?" I asked with a little squirm as we sat together on my bed. I could barely get a finger between the black leather collar and my neck; definitely snug, though not quite cutting.

"Charity. She practically gave it away when I said what I wanted it for. Oh, and she gave me the blank memory orbs you needed, too," Glory said as she rolled me onto my stomach. "I know you want to help Rampage, and I think you should, but right now *you* need a little more help," she said as she stroked my spine. The contact and attention made me groan, but I also felt a little stab of guilt. I'd failed to save Medley. I didn't deserve to--

"Yeouch!" I yelped as Glory whacked my backside hard. Being unaugmented, it was one of the places on me that could really sting! My cheeks flamed as I looked over my shoulder at her. "Glory! You hit me!"

"You were thinking about Medley, weren't you?" Glory asked as she looked into my eyes. Instantly I flushed, feeling very…confused. The cyan pegasus leaned towards me. "From now on, you're not allowed to do that anymore, understand? Not for Dusk. Not for running away. Not for having sex. Not for failing anything. I'm the only one that gets to punish you."

"I…buh…wha…huh?" I blinked in shock and bafflement.

"You heard me," Glory said as she stroked along my spine once more. "Any time you do something that deserves punishing, then I'll be the one to punish you. I'm not going to let you let it build up until you break down and do something stupid. And yeah, it'll probably hurt. But it's the only way I'll be able to be around you and not worry about the next time you're going to fly completely apart." She closed her eyes and paused, then added, "And I think I need this too. I love you, but you've really hurt me more than once.

I don't think I'll be able to get over it if I can't."

"But... I mean... what if I have to... " I asked nervously.

"I expect you to be a good pony," Glory said softly. "And if you have to help... help... but if I think you're trying to use 'help' as an excuse for getting yourself shot, then you're getting punished. And if you do something that hurts me... you are getting punished... and if you start hating yourself and moping... you are getting punished." She hooked her wing in the collar's ring and pulled my face to her. "I love you, but I'm still really pissed, and scared for you. If I can't have some say in keeping you safe and helping you, then I'm not going to bother."

I pursed my lips, then sighed and slumped a little. "I guess I don't have a choice." She nipped my rump, making me jump and look at her in confusion over my shoulder.

"Of course you have a choice. If you really need me to stop, just call me Rainbow Dash," she said as she stroked my mane, making me murr at the contact. "But if we're going to be more than friends, I'm going to have to be in charge for now on." She bit my mane and gave it a tug, making me wince and groan a little. And shiver…

And smile…

* * *

That afternoon, she unlocked me from the bed, and I slipped off the sheets feeling…odd. Not just odd…oddly good. I'd confessed anything and everything that had bubbled to the top of my memory, and Glory had brought out a few more tools to use on me. I'd been spanked two times for Boing and four times for Medley and once for the Fluttershy Medical Center. A blindfold, hoofcuffs, and belt were used when it came to punishing me for Dusk. She'd gotten creative when the time came to answer for Stygius…

Funny. I felt more like a mare now than I had with him, which was odd, as I was with Glory. I never necessarily thought of myself as submissive, but after the long afternoon and night, I had to admit I had some positively juicy feelings inside me. Sure, she couldn't get my heart racing or make me gasp for breath, but she actually made me happy to be alive and with her. Our relationship had taken a sharp right turn into the chaos capital of the Wasteland…

And I couldn't say I minded.

Glory clipped a leash to the ring in my collar and flew ahead of

me, and I followed her obediently. I was still bothered by Medley; there was no way I could stop myself from that. But now I had an outlet that was more than just me running myself into the ground trying to atone.

Scotch Tape stared at her plans as she lay wrapped in an old quilt by the fire. She glanced up at the pair of us and rolled her eyes. "Dad, make two more. The sex fiends have emerged."

Glory flushed a little, but also smiled too as she twisted the leash around her hoof and drew out the slack. "We aren't sex fiends," she said primly, then pulled me close for a kiss that had me on the ends of my hooves. "We just…got creative in our relationship."

"Told you, Daddy," she said, but then she started to cough.

Glory unhooked the leash and then flew to Scotch's side. She pressed a hoof to her brow. "Mmm…you feel a little feverish. Let me get the thermometer."

The olive filly pushed her hoof away. "I'm fine, Glory. Besides, after all you two were probably doing together, I'm scared where you'd stick it," she said, the little filly actually blushing as well before she looked down at her drawing.

"We weren't that bad, were we?" I asked P-21; my smile wouldn't quite go away. The blue buck was actually trying to cook something in the kitchen! To my amazement, it smelled pretty good!

"Well, I don't think quite as many people heard it as the 'champion' comment," he said causally as he watched the pots simmering. "Still, you're loud, Blackjack."

I moved closer, sniffing the dishes that seemed to actually be some sort of pie, tea, and a salad of some sort. "You're okay with what we're doing?"

"You're a grown mare. She's a grown mare. You're both safe and consenting. Beyond that, it's none of my business. Don't involve Scotch Tape, and I'll be happy." He glanced at my rump. "Just a suggestion, though? Go easy under the tail when you're starting out." Wow, look at me blush!

"Oh, Celestia, I hadn't even thought of that," Glory murmured, then silenced Scotch's retort with a thermometer popped under her tongue. I feared for my backside.

"Sexcapades aside, I still want to try and help Rampage. Where is she?" I asked with a little frown.

"Lacunae has Rampage and Boo in her room," P-21 replied. "She keeps cycling through personalities. Lacunae just levitates her when

she gets violent. At least she's easier to handle when she's a filly."

"She hasn't tried to hurt Boo, has she?" I asked with a worried frown.

"No. Apparently three of her souls think she's their daughter or something. Of course, as soon as she snaps out of it, she's all confused. Like she remembers some parts of it but not others," P-21 said softly. I remembered how I felt after I'd died, the certainty that something had happened while I'd been gone. Something vitally important and wrong, but that I couldn't actually remember.

"The souls within her have no memory of their own past their death," Lacunae said softly in my mind. "When they manifest, they rewrite a small portion of Rampage's mind. Some of them can re-access it, letting Rampage serve as a proxy memory for them. Some, like the Angel, have somehow learned to go back to that memory and use it to their advantage."

"Lacunae, that made no sense at all," I said aloud, earning a confused look from everypony. Of course, then the Goddess's control in my own head silenced me from explaining further. I forced a laugh and said in embarrassment, "Sorry. Lac's talking in my head." And... that was all I could get out. Glory frowned at me, and I said quickly, "Really. That's all. Just strange alicorny goodness!"

"What it means is, I suspect your idea might work. By examining the memories the souls have of their deaths, we might be able to piece together an understanding of how Rampage came to be," Lacunae said in my mind.

"I've got to wonder how Rampage remembers things when she dies when souls can't," I said, trying to think it through.

"I suspect the talisman regenerates her brain at the moment of death, preserving nearly all of her most recent memories." There was a pause that set my nerves on edge before she went on, "It is also a sign that your theory of Rampage being a flesh and blood mare is... "

"The only theory I'll accept," I thought bluntly at her. "If we don't find any proof, then we keep digging till we do. Like with science. And if we still don't, then we lie till we do."

"That's not how science works, Blackjack," Lacunae told me with an air of infinite patience.

"It's how the science of friendship works," I said aloud in my frustration. "Sometimes, to help a friend, you have to lie to them.

At least until they can deal with it." I flushed, rubbing the back of my head. "Sorry. More brain talking."

I'd expected weird looks from my friends. Scotch Tape just frowned. "Yeah, but it still sucks huge butt, Blackjack. I mean, I still got a big old wad of nothing between my ears, thanks to you. I still feel... you know... nervous of machines and stuff. Really annoying." Tell me about it, because the Goddess had made me unable to tell her. Glory and P-21 looked a little more worried, though, glancing at each other. I knew they probably weren't all that keen on being around Rampage when she found out.

Deal with it. Rampage was a pony, and nothing was going to convince me otherwise. I just had to find a way to convince her it was true, too. And if I was wrong... well... I'm pretty experienced with messing up relationships. Maybe she and Glory could tag team or something.

I rose and looked at Glory and my friends, and she gave a resigned sigh and a little smile. "Go on. See if you can help her."

I gave a crooked little smile to her. "And if I mess up... "

She smiled back, her eyes firm but warm. "I think either way... "

Scotch Tape groaned from where she was trying to draw new designs after the others had gotten soaked in the rain. "Could you either go help Rampage or go rut each other again or something? Some ponies are trying to work here."

I laughed and nodded, giving her another kiss and then looking into her eyes. "I really love you."

"I know. I love you too," she said before adding a moment later, "but I'm still plenty annoyed at you. So when you're done... " She stroked my cheek, and Scotch Tape groaned in annoyance.

P-21 just laughed softly. "Just let them enjoy it while it's novel, Scotch."

The olive filly snorted, "Well, whatever. Probably won't take long. Trust Glory to make kinky sexy spanking and whipping boring."

"You're just jealous," Glory said as she hugged me and stuck her tongue out at the earth pony. Scotch's eyes popped wide, and she immediately went scarlet.

"That... that's not true!" Scotch Tape sputtered. "I could have a fillyfriend if I really wanted one and stuff. There's boys here that'd like to be with me, too."

Glory sputtered and looked at P-21. "Are you seriously going to sit there and... and... "

"Why?" P-21 just blinked in confusion. "She has her implant."

Glory then lit off into a tirade about sexual propriety and how Scotch should wait till she was married, and Scotch immediately asked what marriage even was. I admit, even I was a little fuzzy on the concept. I gave P-21 an apologetic smile and abandoned him, slipping over to Rampage's room. I gave a soft knock on the door, then slipped inside. Out in the living room, words were rapidly escalating and reaching a pitch that was starting to make my ears hurt.

Closing the door, I looked at the filly moping on her bed. With her worries exposed for all to see, I just wanted to hug her and tell her it would be alright. Lacunae stood by with the black circlet recollector and a small plastic baggie with a half dozen glass spheres within. "Don't ask how I'm doing. You won't like the answer. What do you want, Blackjack?"

I glanced at Lacunae. "Has she told you?"

"Yeah. You want to try to dig around in my skull and find some memories from the souls in me. Then you want to put them into that recollector thingy. What I don't get is why you want to help me," she said sourly.

"Goodiest good pony in the Wasteland," I answered with a little smile. It didn't last. "Don't you want to know who you really are?"

"No. Not really," she said as she curled up and put her chin on the comforter. "Things are better this way."

"What?" I asked. Lacunae gave a weary sigh.

"Really. Now that I've thought about it, this is the best thing possible." And she actually smiled! "Rampage doesn't really exist. If she doesn't exist, then all the horrible things that happened to her don't matter. It doesn't matter if she killed somepony... or... or anypony... " She sniffed as tears ran down her cheeks. "So you can take your toy there and leave me alone, okay. Because... because this way is better. Understand? Better. And I'll still fight for you and stuff. But you don't have to worry about me anymore. Nopony does."

I looked at her for the longest time. I'd never thought I'd see Rampage on the mattress like this. You could cut the self-pity with a knife. "Are you serious?" I asked with a little frown, thinking of how I'd wanted somepony to buck me off it. Charity's words rang in my ears. *'You don't value yourself.'*

"Blackjack?" she asked with a baffled frown.

"Are you telling me that Priest never loved a Pony named Arloste? That she never had a baby named Hope? That she was never a Reaper or was one of my best friends?" I pressed as I stared into her pale pink eyes. "Well, let me tell you something, miss pony who says she doesn't exist. Rampage wasn't afraid of anything. She helped me even when I didn't deserve it. Even when I hurt her for giving it. She always helped." I trotted next to the bed, looking her in the eyes as I smiled softly. "So let me help you now."

"You... you don't even know if it'll work," she said in worry. "Do you even know the spell?"

"What do you care?" I replied. "If you really believe this whole 'Rampage doesn't exist' garbage, then it shouldn't matter if I do it or not." I grinned at the uncertainty in her eyes, then put my hoof on hers. "But I believe the pony named Rampage does exist. That she's a special pony... unique... and I want to help her."

She shook her head and sighed. "Just... don't do something that's going to embarrass me. Like take away my bladder control or make me only able to talk in rhymes. Okay. Kill me if you can, but don't leave me lame."

"I'll try," I replied with a gentle smile. "I've got no idea what I'm doing, but... I'll try."

Magic bullet. Light spell. Now I was trying a memory spell? I bit my lip as I touched the tip of my horn to her brow, then closed my eyes and concentrated. This was the first time... no. Not my first. I'd done this to Lacunae, too. I could feel... something. It was like a memory orb, but instead of the world swirling away, it was like looking into a deep pool of flashing, churning lights. So many of them. I tried to push myself into that pool and get closer to the lights. Each one I tried to grab faded away.

No. I couldn't just grab them. I had to be patient. Calm. Fighting the strain in my horn, I kept the connection going and waited. Soon the memories drifted closer. I saw flashes of images in that bottomless, dark void. One that drifted right beside me had flickering images of Twist, and I reached out with my will and touched it...

oooOOOooo

I'd been in so many memories by this point that I almost automatically assessed the body around me: mare... very fit and

healthy... earth p-- no... this body was like an earth pony's, but there were several subtle differences with the way her body moved; the breeze around her tail was another giveaway. There was an unusual lightness to her hooves as she trotted along towards several low buildings right adjacent to the Miramare base. As she approached one door, I saw her reflection in the window. Red stripes. Shujaa.

The door opened at her approach, and out stepped Twist. The mare had a tired, resigned look on her face. She closed the door softly behind her and then swiftly embraced and kissed the zebra quite ardently. Even though she was still a young mare, Twist had clear wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. Her chopped mane was a little more frazzled and had pink highlights in it. "How is everything?" Shujaa asked, glancing at the door.

"Fine. Everything's fine." She glanced back over her shoulder and then at the zebra. "She doesn't know. I hate telling her goodbye. I feel like, if I do, I won't be coming back."

"You should tell her next time," Shujaa said as they parted in their embrace, and the Proditor zebra looked up in time to catch a curtain in Twist's room swaying back and forth. She pursed her lips, then looked at Twist. "You should tell her now."

"No time," Twist replied as she turned and trotted towards the airfield where a half dozen skywagons waited in rows, soldiers milling about. "We were supposed to lift off five minutes ago. Did you get the briefing?" Twist asked as she walked briskly in her tan combat armor.

"Yes. A whole legion wishing to defect. It is hard to imagine. I hope that Rainbow Dash's information is accurate this time," Shujaa said as she walked along beside her. Unlike Twist, the zebra wore a sort of harness that was very snug. When I had a chance, I had to ask Charity if she could find one for me. She was virtually unarmed save for a dagger in a sheath on her left forehoof.

As Twist approached, the soldiers around the skywagons fell into two rows, mostly earth ponies in battle saddles with a few unicorns and pegasi. "Sergeant," a few said, while the others stayed silent and serious. She looked over their weapons and equipment as Shujaa followed in her wake. The zebra's eyes lingered on Twist's backside a little more than was probably necessary. Three other ponies whom I assumed were also sergeants inspected other groups while a fourth pegasus sergeant checked the harnesses of the pegasi

getting strapped into the skywagons.

Finally, four ponies trotted forward, three in combat armor while the forth was in a tan dress uniform. “Colonel Cupcake,” Twist said with a salute. The hefty white pegasus looked at her and let a smile curve his lips fondly before he became all business again.

“Still your hooves and open your ears,” he said loudly. “Two hours ago, the Ministry of Awesome intercepted a zebra communique about a legion of their warriors wanting to defect. Given that they had a kill order attached to it, we think the communique is pretty genuine. So we’re going to find this legion, and if this is on the up and up, we’re going to give them a little vacation from the war. Now I’m briefing you personally because the legion named is one of the oldest that had ever fought us in this war. They’ve been doing this for twenty years. If they’re willing the throw in the towel now, we want to know why. That means no itchy trigger bits. No mistakes. Nothing. Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir, yes sir!” the soldiers said in unison.

“Fall in to your transports. Dearest Luna, soft and strong!” he called out.

“Let us honor you in song!” the soldiers called out in unison in return. He saluted them, and they returned it. The other officers snapped out for them to get to their transports.

The ponies and lone zebra rushed to the waiting skywagons, and minutes later they were lifting off and flying southward through the night. The usual Hoofington drizzle hissed against the covered roof as they flew through the darkness. The soldiers waited in rows, occasionally talking in low voices. This was how I learned that zebras also had exceptional hearing.

“What the hell is that stripe doing here?” one soldier mare asked in a murmur.

“Shut your mouth, idiot. That’s a Proditor. She’s the sergeant’s very special somepon…er…zebra,” a stallion said darkly.

“Oh, gross. You’re telling me that the sarge is rutting with a damned stripe?” the mare said in disgust. “I can’t believe I asked to transfer to this unit.”

“Transfer out, then. She’s the last of the Marauders. Sarge Twist is a fucking legend. I’d rather serve with her than a whiny transfer that hasn’t had a dozen of those damned zebra robots hunting her down,” the stallion grumbled.

“Oh yeah? Well I’ve been hearing folks talk saying they’re gonna

give her a retirement pretty quick. I mean, you got to ask yourself, when the horseapples fall, is she going to save us or save the damned stripe?" the mare snorted.

Then every stallion and mare turned almost as one and glared at her. The stallion then muttered softly, "You better shut your mother bucking mouth right now, or you won't get the chance to transfer. Understand?"

"That's enough talking. Zip it," Twist said as she walked along the center aisle to stand besides Shujaa. "They're chatty... " the mare muttered.

"Is it true?" Shujaa asked in a near whisper.

"It's not true till they take my stripes," the soldier said, looking at the zebra with the tiniest smile. "If something should happen out there... "

"Nothing's going to happen. This is just a wild goose chase with hazard pay. There's no way the First Legion would defect," Shujaa replied evenly.

"Then this is probably a trap," the pale mare countered. "So if anything should happen... "

"I know. I know. I'll take care of your pet," the zebra said with a smirk.

"She is not a pet!" Twist retorted.

"I stand corrected. Your feral beast."

"You're impossible," Twist sighed and then shook her head.

"And you're adorable. Now hurry up, glare, and say something intimidating before I kiss you and make you blush," the zebra breathed.

Twist did so, barking out instructions, making rude speculation about some ponies' lineage, warning everypony to check their fire, and making sure their gear was ready. Most of the soldiers were paying attention, but the soldier mare who'd been talking before did so with a poorly concealed sneer.

The skywagons set down into the night in the middle of a barren landscape. The rain poured into gullies and arroyos, and ponies blundered about a bit as they adjusted. Shujaa had no problem moving about, her unarmored hooves barely slipping in the mud.

"Proditor," a mare called out in a serious voice. Shujaa spotted one of the officer ponies. "I'm counting on you. If the First Legion is out here, you're our best chance to find them. If this is a trap, you're the best equipped to warn us."

“Yes ma’am, Captain Grizzly. I’ll send up a red flare if this is hostile. Green if I find a group for extraction,” the zebra said crisply. The sergeants were all making sure everypony could say ‘surrender’, ‘drop your weapon’, and ‘follow’ in Zebra as I moved out with the grace and silence of a ghost. She leapt across the gullies and skirted around rocks effortlessly. Soon the soldiers were left behind as she moved through the almost absolute darkness.

Then she came across blasted robots in the muck. They weren’t like Protectaponies. These were sleek and black. They reminded me more of the cyberdogs I’d seen in the tunnels. First she came across one. Then three. Then a half dozen. Some were larger than others, resembling mechanical manticores. “What are hunter killers doing here?” she murmured in worry, and proceeded with more caution.

She must have been moving for at least an hour; every now and then she could see the soldiers in the distance trying to pick their way through the rain and mud and making terrible time at it. The rain was letting up, but the water still sheeted down into the muddy crevasses. Even Shujaa had to watch her hooves to avoid sliding in.

Then there were four zebras in the dark twenty feet away. They wore black armor that blended in with the night, and only the stripes on their faces gave any hint to their species. And the instant that Shujaa saw them, they saw her. Almost in unison, they lifted their rifles and they stood like Lancer. The rifles let out a stream of soft trills without even a flicker of muzzle flash.

As quick as a ghost and silent as death, the knife was in her teeth. She moved around and then was on them. A slice disemboweled one. A second was sent staggering back as a double hoof kick collapsed his sternum. A third was knocked onto the wet ground, and then all four of Shujaa’s hooves came down on his throat. She closed to the last, shoved his rifle barrel up, then plunged the dagger into his chest. Then there was a trill, and Shujaa’s torso exploded in pain. The first zebra, his guts in the mud, was still fighting. In fact, he didn’t seem impaired at all.

Then two pale hooves came up from behind him and twisted his neck with a resounding crack. The zebra dropped, joining his entrails in the muck. Twist rushed up to Shujaa. “Are you okay?”

“They make zebras more disciplined than I remember. Most give up the fight when you spill their innards.” She pulled herself to her hooves. “I will be fine.” Indeed, I could feel the familiar sensation of magical regeneration slowly closing her wounds.

"I guess you were right. Trap," Twist said with a frown.

But Shujaa didn't agree right away. Her eyes focused on the slain zebras. "I'm not so sure. These aren't First Legion." She turned them over so they were all on their backs. Something about them must have struck the mare, because Shujaa kept looking from one to the next. They all looked the same. Zebra stallions. Same black armor. Same weapons. Same stripes... and the gutted stallion hadn't just spilled his organs. There were wires and cables dangling from that gory cavity.

"Now you see," a voice said from the darkness in heavily accented Pony. "Now you see the depths our Caesar has sunk to. First machines without honor, and now these new abominations." The speaker stepped closer, and I was struck by his powerful physique... and just how ragged he looked. More soldiers came staggering out of the gloom and drizzle. All were filthy, bedraggled, and wounded to some degree. The few who had barding and harnesses were in dire need of replacements.

"Legate Honorius," Shujaa said breathlessly. He gave a weary nod.

"What are they?" Twist asked as she stared down.

"We do not know. A year ago, the first came. From a distant tribe, we were told. 'The Children of *Cóyotl*'. They did not speak. Did not laugh. They sang no songs and told no stories. But they could kill. First singularly, then in threes and fours, then by the dozens they took the places of good and honorable soldiers." He spat on their bodies. "We refused to accept them. Then we learned there was no refusal. If we would not, we would be replaced by them." He gestured at the dozen zebra around him. "This is all that remains of the First Legion."

Shujaa gasped something in Zebra. Twist echoed her shocked tone, "This is all that's left of a thousand soldiers?" He nodded grimly.

"We need to get you to safety. I know the Ministry of Awesome is going to want to hear about--"

"Contact!" a mare screamed in the night, and then the air filled with the buzz of two machine guns sweeping across the assembled zebras. Had they not been tired and worn, I was sure they would have been able to get to safety. Exhausted and out in the open, they were torn down by the spray of fire as the mare screamed hysterically. "Contact! Enemy contact! Enemy ambush!"

The injuries that Shujaa had sustained slowed her a bit. Some more of the wild spray caught her, knocking her back. Twist, however,

was able to run to the side and keep out on her field of fire. She slid in the mud and slammed into the snide mare from the skywagon. “You fucking idiot! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The young earth pony slammed back. Had she been ten years younger, I was sure that Twist would have been able to take her. But with the mud, her hooves twisted out beneath her and she was sent sprawling.

“What am I doing?! Killing the fucking enemy! That’s what we fucking do! That’s the point of this whole fucking war. To kill them all!” the mare yelled at Twist. “Not fuck them like some sympathizing whore!”

“No… ” Shujaa croaked as she struggled to her hooves. “Come on… heal faster… ” she panted.

Twist charged; she had six feet to cover. After that six feet, she could take the mare apart in hoof to hoof combat.

But the soldier only had to bite a bit.

The machine guns roared, ripping into Twist before she was halfway.

“No!” Shujaa screamed as she finally rose and charged as well. Blood dripped from the holes as the earth pony swung her barrels towards her and let out another burst of fire. Shujaa was fast, but not faster than a bullet. Bones shattered, flesh tore, but she didn’t drop.

“What? Are you upset because I killed your sympathizer fuck buddy?” she sneered and blasted Shujaa again, sending her to her knees. “Fucking Marauders. Only Big Macintosh was a Marauder. When he died, it was fucking over.” Shujaa got to her hooves again, and then screamed as more bullets ripped into her body. “Just fucking die already, you stupid stripe!” she screamed as she fired yet another burst. Every piece of Shujaa’s body burned as she rose yet again.

“What are you going to do? Huh, Stripe? What are you going to fucking do?!” she screamed and then bit the trigger once more.

The guns were silent. Then the zebra’s bloody hooves lunged forward and grabbed the mare’s neck. “Wait till you’re out of ammo,” she said simply, and then twisted her whole body around. The mare’s neck snapped like a gunshot twice and she dropped, belly in the mud, face towards the rain.

Shujaa staggered her bleeding body to where Twist lay in the mud. The pale pony took short choking breaths, one eye looking up at the

zebra. “Guess... I should... have told... her... good... bye... ” she gasped, blood foaming at her mouth.

“No,” Shujaa said as she slumped against her. The machine guns had ripped a hole through her combat armor and punched clear into her chest. I could see bloody black things in the hole, moving and glistening; it was never a good sign to see one’s insides outside.

“Remember... re... remember... you promised... please... ” she begged, then slowly went limp. The squirming organs began to move slower and slower.

“No!” Shujaa cried, saying something in Zebra before grabbing the knife from her sheath. It was long and curved, with one razor sharp edge and one flat edge. Then she reversed it, closed her eyes... and then... then she plunged it into her chest. The pain was absolute; there was no way I could imagine anypony not passing out. Yet she persisted, and then the tip hit something solid in her ribcage. She gasped, blood pouring from her mouth and nostrils as she jerked the blade back and forth, twisting it, cracking her ribs.

Then the pheonix talisman came into view along with a torrent of blood. The knife tumbled from her hooves as she screamed and tore it from her own flesh. The pain vanished, replaced by a terrible numbness. Shujaa trembled as she cradled the little pink stone, moving it closer to the limp earth pony. With her last ounce of strength, she shoved it into the hole. Then she collapsed on her side in the mud.

“Please... ” she whispered... “please... ”

Then there was a pink glow in Twist’s body. Those wet organs began to move more and more, the wounds closing. But then everything was getting very dark, very cold, and very quiet. “Aeternum vestrum... ” she whispered, and then all was silent.

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself slowly from that deep well, leaving the rest of the images behind. When I emerged completely, there was a hazy light sticking to the end of my horn. I fumbled a few seconds, then grabbed an orb with my fingers and lifted it to the light. Some of the glow was sucked into the orb till it was filled. Finally, I relaxed, and the luminescent fog was sucked back into the filly’s brow.

“Well... that was... um... interesting... ” I said as I tried to look at my own horn. My whole head felt like it’d been ripped open too. I

wondered if I had burnt out my horn again, but I was too disoriented to check. I could still feel that knife probing inside my chest. “Okay. Good thing you’re used to pain,” I murmured.

Rampage swayed and rubbed her noggin. “Did you… was there… I mean… ” She bit her lip, her eyes both craving and dreading answers.

“I can tell you how the talisman got from Shujaa to Twist,” I groaned. “She put it there herself.”

Slowly, I rose to my hooves. “I need to go lie down. Watch the memory when you’re ready. Just… it hurts. A lot. Okay?” And with that I turned and staggered out the door and back into the living room.

Where we had company.

A pegasus mare sat calmly in a wooden chair while Scotch Tape and P-21 sat together on the couch. Glory sat perched on a stool, looking utterly petrified, her body completely covered by the sheet. P-21’s grass pie was laid out on plates, and they all held teacups, but only the newcomer was drinking. Her coat was a light dove gray and her mane a collection of purples, lavenders, and highlights of pink. Even though she had the ragged look of somepony used to the Wasteland, there was some graceful quality to her I couldn’t quite shake. Her flank had a brand on it that was nearly identical to the one that had been forced upon Glory.

“Oh, hello,” she said pleasantly as she set her cup down. “You must be Security. Or is it Blackjack? I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Nice to meet you,” I muttered in a daze and sat down hard. “Um… who are you?”

The mare smiled gently. “My name is Dawn. I was hoping to speak to you… and I was wondering if you could tell me where my daughter Morning Glory could be found.”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 51: A Good Day

"Hey, you know what this calls for?"

Maybe it was the lingering raw sensation of tearing a healing talisman out of my own body, or perhaps it was simply the aftermath of using a memory spell for the first time – and one thrown together on the spot, at that – but the scene before me really wasn't adding up. My eyes travelled from the comely dove-gray mare to my sheet-wrapped love. The former sat on the couch with her eyes oddly closed in an expression of amusement while the latter perched atop her stool with her legs and wings clutching her body so tightly that I wondered if she would simply implode. I slowly turned my eyes to Scotch Tape, who was focusing intently on her cup of steaming weed water, and finished my pan by staring at P-21 as he poured another cup and offered it to me, meeting my gaze. The concern in his eyes was unmistakable. My eyes returned to the mature pegasus, and I blinked twice, ignoring the cup. My brain hurt way too much for tea. "Um…sorry. I have brain damage. Say again?"

"My name is Dawn," she said amiably as she put her cup down on the table. The mare didn't wear any barding or carry any equipment. She appeared about the same age as Mom and Rivets had been. Mature, but not quite showing the same wrinkles as the Ministry Mares had. She must have barely been past foalhood when she'd been adventuring with Big Daddy and the others. Her eyes seemed to be closed in merriment. Even when she was looking at us, she didn't open them past the barest squints, but I didn't get the impression that she was blind. While her pale gray hide bore the scars of a few slashes and bullet wounds, they were old injuries. Call me an idiot, but I doubted she would try anything just now. "I heard that my daughter Morning Glory is a close friend of yours. I was hoping to see her again. I also wanted to meet her dear

friends," she said as she smiled over her cup pleasantly. "Do you go by 'Security' or should I call you Blackjack?"

"Uh…Blackjack. That's fine," I said as I took a seat and shook my head. For some reason, my thoughts were all muddled. "And…ah… Glory," I murmured, looking at my friends. I glanced at her and saw the tiniest little shake of her head. "Anyone seen Glory? Is she in town?" I couldn't figure out for the life of me why Glory wouldn't answer, given her mother was branded with Rainbow Dash's cutie mark on her flank. Maybe this was another weird Enclave pony thing? Still, if she wanted anonymity, I'd try and play along; if Glory was going to undermine her relationships, who was I to stop her?

"Yeah. In town. That's exactly where she is. Uh huh…" I muttered thickly.

"Really? How odd I didn't see her there when I stopped through," the gray mare said with a note of amusement before taking a sip. "This is quite excellent," she told P-21. The blue stallion looked about, flushing awkwardly.

"Uh…Riverside…Town. Yeah…that town," I muttered.

"Right," P-21 said with a confused look.

"That's it," Scotch agreed. "She's…" The filly scowled in thought.

"Getting spare parts!" said P-21 as the filly blurted simultaneously, "Buying healing potions." The pair looked at each other in shock, and P-21 stammered, "I mean buying healing potions!" just as Scotch Tape spouted, "No, she's getting spare parts!" Both gulped, and Scotch Tape opened her mouth in time for P-21 to silence her with his hoof pressing to the filly's muzzle.

"I mean, she's getting spare parts *and* healing potions," he said finally. Scotch Tape looked up at him, then nodded quickly with a grin. I glanced at Glory, but only her eyes were visible, locked on the floor beneath her. For some reason, I could taste blood, and my head was really hurting. Wasn't the healing talisman supposed to take care of that?

"My. I'm so glad she's such a hard worker," Dawn said in that odd, cheerful way. "I'd hoped to learn more about her in town before I came here, but they were all so busy with the mess, and I understand there was an accident too?" Her smile disappeared, replaced with a sorrowful expression. "The Wasteland shouldn't claim lives before their time." Coming from anypony else, that line would have been pompous, even sanctimonious, but the pegasus

practically glowed with sincerity.

Maybe it was the experimental spell that had given me a throbbing headache or the fact I could feel the knife blade between my ribs, or that for some reason I was tasting blood, but I looked dully at the gray pegasus. “Right. It’s nice meeting you. If you’ll excuse me, I feel like I need to throw up glass. Sorry. Dashie?” I staggered for the stairs, and Glory looked at me in shock, then walked over as if sure that Dawn was going to peer through her rags and spring upon her. I tried to put a hoof on the bottommost step, but somehow it moved out from under me, sending me staggering so I nearly landed on my face.

“Blackjack, are you alright?” Glory asked in worry, then ducked herself underneath my body and hoisted me onto her back. I didn’t argue. My throbbing headache was getting worse by the second. I saw little drops of blood falling on her disguise as she carried my heavy body up, muttering, “Dumb question, of *course* you’re not.”

I just groaned, and the last thing I heard downstairs was Glory’s mom saying politely, “What a curious young mare! I think she may look just like Rainbow Dash!” Glory laid me down on my bed, closing the door as we passed, and I felt more blood coming out my nose. I tried to send Lacunae a warning about Dawn and our story about Glory being in Riverside, but for all I knew I told her to kumquat the picklebarrel.

My EFS display was weird, with a dotted line around the head of the diagram mare and her eyes were two x’s. Apparently experimenting with memory magic had some nasty side effects I hadn’t anticipated. There were all kinds of other displays and warnings, but I just translated all that as ‘you broke yourself again, idiot’. I wanted to throw up, but my brain didn’t seem to realize my stomach couldn’t, so all I was left with was a crippling nausea.

Glory rolled me onto my side and dug around in her saddlebags for a strange little light on a stick. She shone it in my nose and mouth and ears as she examined me. “Tell me there’s a secret cheat mode that kills my sense of pain?” I asked pathetically.

“I wish. Professor Zodiac didn’t give me an operator’s manual,” she said sympathetically, but continued with a concerned little frown, “I thought you weren’t going to hurt yourself anymore.”

“I promise, when my head is better, you can spank my fanny till it sinks in. My head…not my fanny…I…” I groaned, closing my eyes tight. “Memory magic is harder than I thought. I sort of hoped that

all I had to do was touch her forehead with my horn and woosh, magic happens!" My exclamation sent a shiver through me. Quiet now, thank you.

"Don't you have a book on magic from Tenpony?" Glory asked in confusion.

"Yes. A book on beginner's magic. For beginners," I groaned.

Glory didn't give up, though. "Did you even *look*?" Oh no, she was using the 'Blackjack is not a smart pony' voice.

"Um…no?" I muttered as I covered my head.

She sighed and lay down next to me. "When you're better, your fanny is *so* getting it," she muttered as she held me gently and stroked my neck. The nosebleed had stopped, and the pain was receding a little. At least, I could pretend it was with her snuggled against me. "Did it work, at least?"

"I got into a memory…one of Shujaa's," and I retold it. Really, the whole pain thing aside, it seemed pretty senseless. A bunch of defecting enemies gunned down by an overzealous transfer. If I learned somewhere that Trooper Kill-all-zebras was sent by Goldenblood as a part of his master super sneaky scheme, I was going to flip a table or kick a hole in the wall or something!

"So they were robots that looked like zebras?" she asked with a small frown.

"I…don't think so. I mean, there were robot parts, but even if they were fancy and sleek, they were still metal. These were…" I paused, wanting to be sure. "These were cyber zebras. They had artificial organs and everything. Like me."

Project Steelpony. Had the zebras stolen it? Had Goldenblood actually given it to them? Or had the zebras developed their own line of augmentation research? For all I knew, Steelpony had been stolen from the enemy in the first place. But there'd been too much meat involved for them to simply be robots. Augmented zebras, though... a very unpleasant thought. I'd seen what Lancer could do with a rifle. I didn't even want to contemplate what he could accomplish with thumbs.

It was too much for a not-smart pony like me. So I turned, slowly…carefully…and faced her. "So. Care to tell me why you're not telling her who you are? I'd have thought you'd have been hugging and catching up on old times."

She closed her eyes with a sigh. "I know. And I should. I want to. But when I opened to door, I didn't think of how much I missed her

or that I could finally get answers to questions I've had for years. I…I wanted to know why she was here. It felt…contrived. My mother coming out of the Wasteland after all this time looking for me?"

"Contrived? Please. I've seen Goldenblood. He's got contrived covering every inch of him. I don't think he could fart unless it was part of a greater plot. Your mom is just…" and I paused, frowning. What was it about her? There was something…I stroked her cheek gently. "Ever think that maybe this is just a coincidence? A good coincidence?" Despite the long odds, it had to happen occasionally.

"I did think that," Glory said shamefully. "And when I did, I wasn't happy. I felt…angry." She closed her eyes and scooted a little more against me. "She was just down there smiling. Like…like these years never happened. Like she was on her way home and decided to stop in and check in on me at school. 'No big deal. See you when you get home. Love you…'."

I thought about that. "Well, maybe if she knew you were you and what you've done since you've come down here…"

"Maybe," Glory murmured as she glanced at the door and then back at me. "But really…the more I think about it, the harder it is for me to believe she's here looking for me at all."

I didn't know what to say to that. I tried to imagine what it'd have been like for me if Mom left the stable one day, only to return several years later acting as if nothing had changed. I supposed I'd be pretty freaked out too, particularly if I were a magical copy of Twilight Sparkle. I sighed, nuzzling her ears till she eventually smiled. "Well, deal with it tomorrow. We'll find out why she's here and find out some way to explain all this to her," I said, brushing her rainbow mane with my hoof.

There was a soft knock on the door, and I looked over and tried to use my magic to open it. The jolt to my brain renewed my throbbing headache. "Yes?" I asked.

P-21 poked his head in, his voice low. "If you're done for the night, should I put our guest in Glory's room till she gets back?" I looked at Glory, who sighed, then nodded.

"Yeah, go ahead," I groaned, flopping my head onto the pillow.

"Right," he said, his blue eyes turning to Glory. "For what it's worth, I don't trust her." Was it because she was a mare? Glory just looked at her forehooves, as if hoping the answers would appear upon them.

He nodded to us and closed the door again. She slipped out of bed and locked us in before returning to my side. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing you blasted your brain with that magic. Can’t do anything naughty with Mom listening next door, right?”

I just blinked at her in confusion. She groaned and buried her face in her hooves. “Nevermind. Just try and get some sleep.”

That was good advice. I just hoped that whatever was playing on the Psalm Memory Network would help with that…

~ ~ ~

The hallway stretched out in one long tunnel punctuated by tiny little bedrooms on one side and cloudy windows on the other. Foals, colts, and fillies all moved around with a hushed tone. Not that laughter was forbidden here, but it was an alien sound in the sullen, gray building. Somepony had tried to cheer up the place with pictures of smiling children, but they were flat, stale images. Nopony who lived here ever smiled like that.

I knelt down, two small hooves moving a ragged brush, trying to scrub the mud tracked in from the field outside off the faded beige linoleum tiles. It was raining again; that was nothing new. It was always raining, even when it wasn’t. The filmy windows gave the impression of a constant downpour outside in the sunniest of weather.

“Hey Balm,” said a colt as he trotted in, leaving fresh hoofprints across the just-cleaned floor. He wasn’t being unkind. Most fillies and colts weren’t around long enough to learn each other’s names. You didn’t want to stay here long enough to have ponies learn your name. I didn’t reply; he was already heading down to his room, which he shared with two other colts. I silently started cleaning the messy hoofprints again.

“Let me help with that,” an orange unicorn colt with a shaggy yellow mane said, watching me work. “You’re never going to get this cleaned up, otherwise.” And he took another brush from the bucket and started to scrub beside me. “You need to really assert yourself. Show this mud who’s boss,” he said as he scrubbed back and forth hard. When another earth pony colt stepped in, he pointed his brush at the entrant. “Muddy hooves. Clean them! Now!” The abashed young pony gave his hooves a thorough scraping on the mat before continuing on.

“Thank you,” I said, barely above a whisper, as we finished the hall together.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said with a casual grin. “I’m Cheddar. I just got here.” There was a little pain in his eyes, but there was nothing new. We all had sad eyes. “Your name is…Calm? Palm? Buzz Bomb?”

“You…don’t want to know my name,” I murmured as I carried the bucket to the back door and threw the contents out into a puddle.

“Yes I do,” he contradicted, looking confused. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“If you know my name, it means you’ve been here too long.” I set the bucket and brushes in their little cubby behind the back door. “I’ve been here all my life. Ever since my mom left me here as a foal.”

He gave a little frown. “I thought nopony stays here more than a few months.”

I twisted my lips into the same mirthless smile I always wore, used to explaining this. “Most ponies don’t. You won’t. I can tell. So there’s no point in knowing my name. In a few weeks, you’ll find a family. So really, there’s no point in knowing it.” I didn’t raise my voice. There was always one every few months who wanted to be friends before they left. “But thank you for asking.” I turned away to go wash up before dinner.

He darted in front of me, meeting my eye with his. “I promise you, I’m going to go find out your name. And I’m not leaving till I do.”

It was a nice gesture. He hadn’t been the first to say something like it. But really, all friends did was hurt when they left.

But he didn’t leave; not that there weren’t parents who wanted to adopt him. While pleasant and witty most of the time, Cheddar became the moodiest orphan in the place when prospective parents interviewed him. And when they moved on to another child, the friend emerged again. He got his magic first, then his cutie mark and his talent. He could speak any language after hearing or reading it for a little while. His scroll-and-fountain-pen cutie mark was quite the envy of most of the colts. Still, even with such an amazing talent, he still refused to let himself get adopted.

We’d climb up on the roof on those rare days the skies were clear enough to see the stars. He’d make up wonderful stories about life on those distant points of light. Silly stories that made me laugh, and sad stories that made me feel better about my own situation. And even though I’d told him my name several times, he pretended

like he still didn't know it. Because he wouldn't leave until he did. That was the promise.

And so, I had a friend. And that dingy building was a little less gray and hopeless. As colts and fillies came and went every few weeks, we became their temporary mom and dad. I kissed boo boos to make them better and he taught the fine art of spitballs. Sure, we had to go to the tired adults who actually cooked the food and took care of the adoptions from time to time, but even they were happy for our help. And a dream began to settle in; a dream where we'd eventually become adults ourselves. And we'd leave together when we were sure the orphanage was in good hooves. And he'd travel all around the world deciphering important things, and I'd see a world I could never imagine. A world where gray did not exist.

It was a pleasant dream.

Then, one day, Cheddar was called from the cafeteria. I didn't think anything of it, at first. We weren't having adoption interviews that day. I heard the sounds of muted shouting and rose to my hooves and trotted to the door. I gasped at the sight of two magnificent white pegasus stallions in gleaming golden armor. And I heard my friend inside shouting, "No! No, I won't go! I won't!"

"Cheddar!" admonished the headmaster. "One does not speak to their Princess like that!"

Princess? I stepped closer, then faltered. Even though the guards didn't move an eye, I could feel them watching me. I simply stayed in the hall.

"It's quite all right," came the sweetest, most wonderful voice in all the world. It was a voice from the world of my dreams. "Cheddar, at my school you'll be able to use your talents not just for yourself, but for all of Equestria. You'll be able to learn greater kinds of magic and make a fresh start for yourself. You have so much possibility and potential, and the headmaster knows that you could have easily been adopted by now."

"It's…it's my friend, Princess. Psalm. She's here too," he said slowly. "Could she come to your school with me?"

"Ah, yes. Psalm," said the headmaster delicately. "I'm afraid that she wouldn't be a promising candidate, Your Majesty. You might as well have an earth pony student as her."

"Don't talk about her that way!" Cheddar snapped. "She's…she's just fine with magic!"

"I understand the bonds of friendship, Cheddar," Celestia said in a

firm, yet compassionate voice. “If she doesn’t have very much magical talent, I don’t think she would be happy there. She’d be surrounded by students of greater skill, and, despite my best efforts, many of them would look down upon her. I--”

“Well then that’s it,” Cheddar interrupted firmly. “Long as my friend is here, then I’m here too.”

“I’m terribly sorry about this, Your Majesty. Psalm is pleasant enough, but sad. Nopony wants to adopt a filly who never smiles. They think there’s something wrong with her,” the headmaster mumbled. I retreated down the hall as I heard hooves approach the door. “Now, I know the children will be overjoyed to meet you. They should all be in the cafeteria, Your Majesty.”

I didn’t go into the cafeteria. I heard the inhalation of awe and the cries of glee and even a few who wept for joy at the sight of our wonderful ruler. Instead, I hid. There weren’t many hiding spots in the orphanage, but I’d found them all. Unfortunately, I’d shown them all to Cheddar. Still, there were a few that even he’d hesitate to check. After all, no sane pony would hide on a roof when it’s raining. I even caught sight of the Princess as she left in her glorious golden chariot to a life and places I couldn’t understand. And she’d wanted to take Cheddar with her…

“Hey. Shawalm?” called a voice from the roof access hatch, and I clenched my eyes as the rain hissed off the wooden slates. “What are you doing out here? You missed the Princess,” he said in worry as he trotted out. His mane immediately flattened in the steady drizzle as he took a seat beside me. It was starting to get dark…

“No, I didn’t,” I said as I stared at the cool Hoofington rain beading on my hooves. I wanted to hold on to the droplets, so clear and pure, but like everything else they trickled away from me. My voice was every bit as soft as the rain as I continued, “I heard you talking. She wants you to go to her school.”

He sighed. “Yeah. Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. She wants to see if I can translate stuff like griffin runes, zebra glyphs, and dragon clawscript. I told her I wasn’t interested.” He nudged my shoulder. “I got to stay till I figure out your name.”

For one brief second, I felt warm and smiled a little. Just a little. Still, it made what came next all the worse. I closed my eyes and spat out the words that were choking me. “You should go.”

He started to laugh, but that quickly died. He knew I didn’t make jokes. “Come on. I won’t deny that it was tempting, but I couldn’t

just leave you."

"You should have left months ago!" I said sharply, turning my face from him. "You…you could have had a home! After a week. The only reason you're staying in this horrible place is because of me!"

"Well, yeah!" he said in angry confusion. "I mean, you're my friend."

"I can't let you throw your life away for me," I replied and stood. "I'm not worth you giving up a future where you could be somepony! Everypony here dreams of finding a family again. Everypony. You lost yours. I never had mine. And there's twenty other colts and fillies who could only dream of having the chance that you're throwing away! It's stupid, and you're stupid for doing it!"

He stared at me in shock. "But, Psalm, I-- You…" A hurt look rose in his eyes and he asked in a voice I could barely hear over the rain, "Would you go and leave me if she offered it to you?"

I couldn't look at him as I spat out the lie, "In a heartbeat." And with that, it felt as if my own heart had stopped.

There was no answer but his rapid breathing. Then he said sharply, "Well…I guess I better go pack then!" When I didn't say what he wanted to hear, he spat out angrily, "Wouldn't want to miss my golden opportunity, would I?"

"I guess you better!" I shouted back, clenching my eyes shut. If I looked at him…If I looked…

"Fine!" he snapped.

"Fine!" I yelled back.

"If I'd known girls were so…so…urrrgh!" He trotted to the hatch and slammed it shut behind him.

"Goodbye," I whispered as I turned my face into the rain. Cold rain, and warm.

I don't know how long I sat there. I was still up there when the golden chariot returned, sans Princess, to take Cheddar away with his small bag of belongings. He looked up at me, but he didn't wave before he flew away. I felt a chill, but I didn't much care. I didn't care about anything at that moment. I'd broken the one thing holding him to this dreadful place. The children would be upset. Mommy would be sad and Daddy would be gone; nothing new to some of them. And I'd stay here and grow up and grow old and try to help every last one of them find a better place to live. And then, I'd die here.

"Not that it isn't terribly dramatic, but don't you know young unicorns should get out of the rain?" a mare asked above me, her voice soft and bright. The rain stopped in a semicircle around me and I looked up at a dark form drifting down to stand before me. Beads of starlight seemed to shimmer in her magically billowing mane and she wore a tiara the color of sky just after the last reds of sunset faded from view. Her majestic wings folded beside her and her horn glowed once. Instantly the water on my coat disappeared. Then she summoned a black wool blanket and draped it around me. I hugged the fabric close. "I was hoping to catch my sister here after I raised the moon, but it looks like she's still on the move." Princess Luna gave a small smile. "Now…what's the matter?"

I knew I shouldn't. That it was terribly impolite for me to do so, but I took one last look into her concerned blue eyes and pressed my face to her side and bawled like I never had before. Somewhere in all that blubbering, I got out the story of what had happened to Cheddar and how I'd thrown away my first and only friendship so he could have a chance at Princess Celestia's school and that now I was going to be stuck at the orphanage alone forever.

It had to be dreadfully rude to snot up a Princess's coat, but after I got everything out I was quite a mess, both from grief and the budding cold. "I see. It's a rare pony who can give up what she wants for another's happiness. Your friend must be quite special for you to give him that." She lifted my chin and gave me a comforting smile. "I know that it's not easy being the sad pony. To feel like you don't deserve anything good in your life. But you do. Everypony does."

"I don't…" I muttered softly, looking at her pristine hoof. Not a future. Not a friend. Not even a mother or father…

"You do," she repeated, firmly. "So here is what I want you to do, Psalm. I want you to hang on. I'm going to see what I can do for you, but it may take some time. Everything's so busy right now, but I promise that somehow I will give you a way to be with your friend."

"You…you don't have to…" I whispered, horrified that I'd be such a bother to her. "I'm not worth the trouble."

"It's ponies who think they aren't who *are*. I know what it's like to feel worthless and unloved," she said as she lifted me with her magic and flew me down to the front gate of the orphanage. "Please, be patient. Have faith. I'll try and help you soon."

I spent the next week sick in bed. The children started to avoid me; Cheddar had been popular and more than a few of the young ones blamed me, correctly, for his leaving. I washed the hall of muddy hoofprints by myself, and it took me far longer than the old times when it had been just me working the scrub brushes. I had no right to complain, though. I'd brought this on myself. For a short while, I'd hoped something might happen. That a chariot would come and sweep me off to Canterlot. Maybe I'd work in the kitchens; I'd be okay with that. So long as I could tell him I was sorry. The chariot never came, though. Princess Luna was a very important pony; I had to be patient. I had to.

Over the next month the orphanage got lonelier and lonelier. The youngest went first, then older and older. Soon we were a dozen. Ten. Eight. Four. The mare who cooked for us left. Three. We all ate together with the old stallion headmaster. We didn't talk. And little by little, things started disappearing into boxes and crates. Then those too disappeared. I washed the halls even though there weren't any more muddy tracks to clean. Two. One…

Finally, the orphanage was empty. "There's a new one," the headmaster said, "A larger one for children whose families were lost in the war." He was going to see that I was transferred there. Then he was retiring. He said he's sure I'll find a family there. Those are the same words I've heard all my life. It'll be cleaner. Newer. Brighter. I can't imagine it. This dingy gray building is the world. It's all I know. I can't leave it. Perhaps I can stay after the headmaster goes. Clean the floors. Keep it intact for unwanted things…

He told me to pack, said he'd return in a few hours to take me to the new orphanage. I am left all alone in the empty building. I walk the scrubbed, faded beige linoleum walkway. I peek into the empty little bedrooms, bunk beds stripped of their mattresses and sheets. There're a few old toys, broken things, sitting forlorn in the corners. I gather them up in a blanket. I don't know what I'll do with them; nopony wants broken toys.

Luna. She'd said she'd help. She'd said to be patient. I imagined I could hear her voice calling me…But I couldn't be patient any more. I was out of time! I crouched there, eyes clenched shut. "Please…" I whispered. "Please, Princess Luna…Please…" I trembled as I curled up, as if trying to disappear so that when the headmaster returned, I'd be gone. Those three words kept me

anchored there; the moment I couldn't say them anymore was the moment I was finished. They were the single light in the blackness that threatened to consume me. If it took me, I didn't know what I'd do.

"Psalm," came the soft voice above me.

Slowly I looked up at the beautiful dusky dark shape of the Princess of the Night. My eyes met hers, and I saw the understanding of the pain within me. Her lips slowly turned in a soft smile. "We were calling you, dear."

"I…I thought I was imagining…" My feeble words dribbled out before I lowered my gaze.

"I told you I'd come back," Luna said softly as she knelt beside me and stretched her soft wing around to pull me close to her warm body. The dam broke and all at once I was sobbing once more; but I knew this time the Princess wouldn't be troubled by a weeping filly. "Shh…" she hushed as she nuzzled me. "It's alright. I'd never leave you in a place like this." I blinked and looked up into her eyes. "I found someone to take care of you." At once my ears folded a little but she hugged me closer. "None of that. You're the last one, Psalm. It's your turn. You deserve a chance at happiness too."

She looked at the doorway. "Come on in. You're such a horrible lurker." There was a shift at the door, and then a handsome young stallion slowly walked into the room. His yellow eyes met mine with a wary look, the eyes of a pony who'd been hurt.

"Who…who are you?" I asked warily.

"My name is Goldenblood," he replied as he sat next to my bed. He looked up at the Princess. "Luna's…well…"

"I finally convinced him that leading a life of being a lonely intellectual was overrated," Luna replied, making the young stallion flush. "And he's agreed to look after you."

"Look after me?" I dropped my gaze. "But…I don't…I can't…"

"I know, but you do and you can," Luna said gently, smiling, but her deep eyes were filled to the brim with sympathy. "Listen, Psalm. I want to tell you something that I've never told anypony. A long time ago, I did something really bad, and my sister sent me to the moon. Time is funny there, but I was alone, and I was happy because I thought I deserved to be alone. I hated everything so much that the thought of being around anypony was too much to bear. And when I came back, the first thing I did was lash out at everypony around me, because I was still angry at them…but also, I

was scared. It took me a year before I was brave enough to make a public appearance, and it took a brave mare to help teach me to be happy around others. I know there are times when being around others positively hurts, but that's better than being alone."

"Yes…Princess Luna," I murmured as I bowed my head. "I'll…I'll try…"

"Good." She slowly released me and gave us both a kind smile. "Now, I need to flash over to Fillydelphia and make sure everything's alright for Celestia's big ribbon cutting ceremony tomorrow. I can't believe they're actually opening a huge factory for making guns and ammunition. Can't imagine they'll really need that much." She looked over at Goldenblood. "You two can take the chariot when you're ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Goldenblood said with a nod of his head. The Princess beamed in return, and then her horn flared. In a flash of shadow, she disappeared completely.

"…don't want to go…" I murmured softly. I prepared for the onslaught of questions about what was wrong with me, how I could want to stay in this horrible place. "I know it's stupid and this place is dirty and closing but it's the only place I belong. The only place I deserve to be!"

He stood silently for a long moment before reaching out with a hoof and patting my shoulder. "I understand. This is your home," he said, not calling me silly. "But it's your turn to get adopted, Psalm. You're the last one here. It's your turn to go." For a minute we stood there with me just staring at the beige tiles, and then he sighed. "Nevermind. Take your time. The pegasi can wait."

It took some time. Time to gather my belongings in the black wool blanket, though there weren't very many. Time to collect the old toys nopony would ever play with again. Time to look at that grimy gray hallway and its rainy gray windows. "Should I call you… Father?" I asked as we walked towards the exit. The word sounded strained and awkward to my ears.

"That sounds…odd. I'm barely old enough to have children of my own, let alone one your age. I think a better word is 'guardian', but even that sounds off," he said with a small smile. "Why don't you just call me 'Teacher'? It's fitting. I just got a job working at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns teaching history." He looked a little confused as he added, "Princess Luna herself recommended me, but I couldn't tell you why for the life of me."

"Oh," I said, contemplating a moment before asking. "Do you think I could come to the school with you from time to time? I have… there's a pony I know who goes there."

Together we stepped out the front door. It was one of those rare moments when the rain had stopped and everything was clean and crisp. A rainbow gleamed in the direction of Canterlot and made the golden chariot sparkle with light. It was almost as bright as the candle which appeared on my flank, its lone light the faith against the melancholy that had almost consumed me. For the first time since Cheddar had left, I felt a warmth return to me, and Goldenblood smiled in quiet approval. I looked at my Teacher, giving him a smile I'd only shared with one other as he looked back and said, "Certainly. You can be my assistant…"

~ ~ ~

I woke and stretched, then gave a little pout as my hooves failed to come in contact with a certain beautiful mare with an uncanny resemblance to Rainbow Dash. A quick glance confirmed my suspicion: no Glory. I was also surprised to find that it was midmorning already. I usually never slept in so late, though usually it was because I was always trying to keep moving. I sighed and rolled onto my back.

"How's Rampage, Lacunae? Did seeing that memory help?" I asked Lacunae telepathically. It wasn't so much hard as weird. I supposed I thought about Lacunae and hoped she picked it up. Of course, for all I knew, all of Unity could hear me, but, if so, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"I do not know for certain. I think so. There is a difference between knowing you occasionally turn into a zebra and knowing that even if she is a part of you, she's a good part," my friend replied. "She says she's going to do a little patrol. Keep an eye out for Harbingers today and think about things."

I sighed and smiled, rubbing my aching horn. "So it wasn't a waste. That's good to know." I frowned a little in thought. "Aren't I breaking the rules, though? I thought that unicorns were only supposed to have a little magic that corresponds to their talent. But I can do magic bullets and light, and now I'm poking into memory magic." Though, to be fair, that was like saying I was poking into brain surgery.

"That is a common myth, and one not entirely inaccurate. Before the war, a unicorn usually only possessed whatever magic they developed in their youth, and such magic was usually focused on their interests and thus usually related to their talent. But a unicorn's magical potential is not limited by their special talents. Rarity exhibited designer skills but also knew a spell to find gems, as well as teleportation later in life. And if a unicorn's magic was limited, what point was there in writing down spells or having schools of magic? Think of your own stable. Most of the unicorns were trained in magic appropriate to their field, regardless of their cutie marks," Lacunae explained patiently. "Most unicorns, once they have the spells they want, simply quit studying."

Rarity learning teleportation magic? I had to admit... the idea of being able to teleport on my own nearly had me salivating. Popping out of trouble, appearing behind my enemies... I wondered if the brain damage had somehow made me smarter: I'd actually followed all that. "So a unicorn can increase her magic?"

"Yes, through substantial effort, and such growth is not infinite. There are some unicorns who focus all their efforts on one spell to great effect. Others possess a panoply of abilities but never take the time and effort to strengthen them. Only a hoofful…Twilight Sparkle…Clover the Clever…Starswirl the Bearded…devoted their lives to both. Sadly, I don't see you being capable of matching their talent."

"Yeouch," I muttered. "Rub it in a little harder?" I pouted, rubbing my poor... compact... horn. I did the best I could with it!

Lacunae chuckled. "I don't mean because you lack intelligence. Snips and Snails were hardly geniuses but were able to learn a magic utterly alien to unicornkind. No, I mean that such progress would take time and effort. You'd need to study. You'd have to be methodical about it. You have far too much shooting in your life to be a scholar. And I fear you don't have a studious temperament." She paused, as if aware I was giving the ceiling a shooty look. "On the other hoof, you have a reckless willingness to experiment, despite the possible harm to yourself. It may be that magic is a talent in your family."

Sighing, I let go of the dumb resentment. "Yeah. Mom aced every single security spell in the manual, and then some. But she never had Textbook teaching her," I muttered, feeling my aggravation swap to my old stable teacher.

I knew where this was going, naturally. It was looking all the way back at Tenpony and the prediction that I was Twilight Sparkle's descendant. If that were true, then it would make sense... but it couldn't be. I'd failed to open the door. So clearly, some other mare had to be my ancestor. Maybe Pinkie Pie; who *knew* who the pink one had gotten freaky with? Or Rarity. There was a tiny, immature…okay, maybe not so tiny…part of me that liked the idea of being the descendant of the love child of Rarity and Vanity.

"You might find that, once ponies stop shooting at you, you might have a horn for magic. Perhaps. But it's up to you. Magic takes time and effort, and certainly having resources on how other unicorns do their magic would be helpful too. But to be a serious student takes more than just intelligence. It takes stability. Something you're lacking in spades."

I crossed my hooves across my chest and pouted, because it was true. Mentally. Circumstantially. I couldn't settle down and dedicate a month or two for study to try and see what other spells I could learn. I'd save that for another day when Horizons was solved, EC-1101 was at the bottom of the ocean, and the Harbingers were long gone. "How about Glory and Dawn? Have you seen them?"

"Dawn went out early in the morning, leaving a note that she'd return. Glory is downstairs. She purchased some…ingredients… from Charity. Now I fear that she's experimenting in the kitchen. She really should leave the cooking to P-21. He has quite a hoof for it." As if reading my mind, and for all I knew she'd done exactly that, she added, "P-21 and Scotch Tape went back to town. Hopefully the Crusaders will listen to her now."

"Yeah. Hopefully." I lay back and paused, then thought, "How are you doing, Lacunae?"

"I am the same as I ever was and ever will be. You know that, Blackjack," Lacunae replied in soft resignation. "I cannot change."

"I don't believe that, Lacunae. I think you do change," I said as I smiled. "The more the Goddess crams into you, the more everything inside you gets shuffled about. That's change, isn't it?" The startled silence I received more than made up for my earlier indignation. Yes, Blackjack could, on occasion, come up with smart ideas.

"Well…in that case…I suppose I am…good?" Lacunae said warily, as if afraid that the answer would bring a backlash. "You are alive and safe. You are all reasonably healthy. You are more stable, as are Rampage and Glory. Relative to how you were, you are happier.

That's all good, right?"

"But what about you, Lacunae?" I asked with a small frown. "Are you happy?"

"Please, don't ask me that, Blackjack. If you are happy, I am happy. It is the closest to happiness I can come," she said in that resigned voice, but there was something more.

"What is it, Lacunae? What's wrong?" I thought, fighting the urge to press hard for answers. It was difficult, because I caught a whiff of emotion. Over our connection I could feel something I'd never imagined would come from my friend.

Guilt.

"Lacunae?" I asked as I felt her trying to hide it, burying it out of sight.

"Please, Blackjack. It's nothing. It may not even matter anymore. You're doing so much better now. Please, don't ask," she begged, and I backed off. I heard a mental sigh of relief. "Thank you, Blackjack," she said, and then one last thing leaked through, "and I'm sorry."

Guilt? What was she guilty about? Lacunae had always been supportive and helpful. She'd been a good friend, and I was thankful that the Goddess had never made her do anything that required me to treat her as anything other than a friend. Ah, the Goddess. That must be it. She felt guilty because of the control the Goddess had over me!

I relaxed immediately. That was simply silly; she didn't have any control over what the Goddess could and couldn't do! She wasn't responsible for me being brainwired to Unity in the first place, either.

Then I heard the mental snicker in my mind and froze, trying to do everything I could to keep her out. It was futile, of course. She had my deepest secrets already, sure, but it was the principle of the thing. I needn't have bothered, though, as she didn't seem to be trying to do anything at the moment.

"Oh, you poor deluded little fool," the Goddess purred in my mind, and I imagined a blue mare holding me from behind and whispering in my ear. "You still haven't figured it out yet…no surprise. You see, your dearest Lacunae has betrayed you."

"Shut up," I growled, wishing I could mentally punch the silver-maned mare lying in my ear. "Lacunae would never do that. And if she did, it'd be because *you* made her do it."

"Oh no," the Goddess laughed in delight. "Not this time. This was all her. At the time I was rather put out that she'd done it, but now…heh…now I couldn't be happier with the results!"

"Shut up! You're lying! That's all there is to it," I said as stubbornly as I could. But that old refrain was growing a bit threadbare.

The Goddess persisted, her words oozing into my awareness. I couldn't plug up my ears to stop her, and mentally chanting 'LALALA' was far less effective against her than it had been against me. "She did something to you. Something that's hurt you more than you could ever realize. Something that's almost killed you more than once. All for her own selfish gain," the Goddess purred softly in my ear. "If you really want to know, go into her mind. Find what she's hiding. Or don't. Either way, it should be fun."

There was no way to silence her, so I settled on ignoring her. My life in 99 had made me an expert at not thinking about things, though that skill had atrophied a bit. And now my own mind was supplying the venom. Had Lacunae done something to my mind now that we were connected, or perhaps something earlier in our relationship? Was there some poisonous strain of truth in the Goddess's taunts? Was Lacunae's friendship false? If it hurt me, I'd endure, but what if it was done to my friends as well?

I could ask. I could. But if she denied or refused, what then? Would I force the answer from her? Could I? Could I force the answer from her by violence or guilt or crude memory magic if she refused? I sighed, closed my eyes, and peeked deep down in the bottommost pits of my soul, beneath all decency, all loyalty, all compassion and love…I could. So I would not ask. I'd have to do something else, and then I would close my eyes and hope that, if one of my loyalest and most true friends had done me a wrong, she would somehow tell me. As if she did not, then I prayed to slain goddesses that only I suffered for it.

So, unless the Goddess was going to force something (and I lay there a minute expectantly, crossing my forelegs over my chest as I stared at the roof and waited for her to do just that), I might as well get up and find out what smelled so interesting downstairs. I trotted out and down to the smell of something burning and the sight of Glory hovering over the stove. Boo sat nearby, her head tilted as if trying to process just what was being created in the cast iron pan.

The pegasus glanced towards me and suddenly flushed, her disguise on the counter where the sheets were stained with

‘ingredients’. “Oh! Hi, Blackjack. I had an idea and I was thinking of a way to make the perfect food for you,” she said, then slammed her hoof down on the handle of the skillet, flipping something black into the air. Then she grabbed a plate between her hooves and with a swoop deftly caught what looked like an immense black cake. The plate shattered, and the dark discus fell to the floor and rolled like a wheel across to the pale blank. “Oh, shoot, it’s heavier than most pancakes.”

“Pancakes?” I asked in a daze. Boo took one sniff of the steaming, or smoking, disk, then snorted and recoiled, covering her nose.

“Well, that was how I started,” Glory said as I levitated the black disk up. “But then I figured that instead of just flour, which wouldn’t assist your digestion, why not add some grass for fiber? But then I thought that, really, a pancake like that would only be good for your biological aspect, so I added a layer of nails, and then some more grass and batter.” I turned the disk back and forth before me. “Once I’d added them, I figured some crushed gems would also be ideal. And then I was worried that the flavor might not be right, so I crushed up some Sugar Apple Bombs for flavor. Then, just to make sure you got everything you needed, I added a layer of grease to keep your augmentations working smoothly.”

“I’m not really sure that’s how I’m supposed to be lubed,” I said, watching the inexplicable blush on Glory’s cheeks as I sniffed the black disk. Then I took a crispy, crunchy bite and chewed slowly and thoughtfully. Finally I gulped it all down and looked at the worried pegasus. I paused to consider how best to put this to her. “Well Glory, I don’t know how to say this. You tried for perfection…” I said gravely, then grinned. “And you nailed it!”

I held the disk in my hooves as Glory beamed and Boo sat back in confusion. “This is the most perfect food ever! Cyberpony cakes! It’s got everything I need for my body. And if I ever need to patch my armor, I can just nibble one till it fits!” Glory blinked as I popped out my fingers and swung the nibbled disk. “And feel that heft! I bet I could throw one twenty yards and take off a raider’s head! Heck! I can just bite it into whatever shape I need! With this, I can be armed, armored, and fed all at once!”

Glory stared at me, looking a touch unsure as I took another bite. It wasn’t something I’d be able to devour all at once. Something like this would take time. But as long as I had a half dozen or so of these, I’d be good for weeks. “Well, I’m glad you like them,” Glory

said in a slightly concerned tone.

"I wonder if I can light these on fire?" I mused as I turned it over. "Incendiary cakes of death!" I chortled. Boo simply snorted in dismissal of Glory's wonderful invention and started nosing around the cupboards.

"Okay! I'm happy you're so thrilled with my armor plate weapon baking," Glory said with a little flush as she gestured to a small heap of them next to the stove as I munched a little more. Mmm… axle grease and apple…yum! "I'm also glad you're doing better than last night." She gave a little frown. "You were talking in your sleep all night."

I blinked with a worried frown. Maybe she might figure out what the Goddess was doing from my nocturnal mutterings? "What'd I say?"

"I don't know. It was in Zebra," Glory said with a worried frown. "I think you should stop experimenting till you know a little more about memory spells. Go to the Collegiate, talk to Triage, and find out how she does it. Or check that book you got in Tenpony."

I chewed thoughtfully and finally sighed. "Fine."

"I know you want to help her, and I do too, but…" she went on before she blinked. "Wait. What was that?"

"I said fine. You're right. I should know a little more before poking around inside her for more memories," I said with a simple little shrug of my shoulders. Boo pulled out a Fancy Buck snack cake and started ripping open the wax paper wrapper.

Glory frowned at me. "Who are you, and what did you do with Blackjack?"

I tried to maintain my dignity as I looked at her and she back at me. Our relationship was tense, but we both wanted it to work. I didn't want to live in a world without Glory. And in her eyes I saw endless worry, barely kept in check, that she'd end up living in a world without Blackjack. "You're not afraid I'll get in trouble, going out without you?"

She frowned a moment, as if thinking about that. Then she bowed her head. "I know that I put a collar on you, Blackjack, but I can't keep you within wing's length all the time. So I am worried… but I also have to trust you, Blackjack, to stay out of real trouble. Okay?" she asked, but as I met her gaze, I saw the warning. If I couldn't control myself and prevent things like Yellow River from happening… I'd lose her.

Then I was distracted watching the blank tear open the package. "She knows how to open them now?"

The cyan pegasus frowned, then relaxed and smiled at the blank-flanked mare. "Yeah. Figured it out a day or two ago. Don't know if it was Scotch teaching her or if she just picked it up on her own."

I sat beside Boo and rubbed her ears as she munched down on the cake. Without a soul, you're nothing but an animal. Could an animal learn to open snack cakes? I supposed so. Still, it was hard to think of a pony like her as having no mind or personality. "Like that, Boo?" I asked, and then levitated the black disk with the chewed edge in front of her. "Want a taste of a cyberpony cake?"

She looked at it skeptically, stretched out, licked the edge, and suddenly jerked back and snorted. She picked the remains of her cake in her mouth and trotted away, giving the black disk a sharp kick with her rear hoof. Unfortunately, it was perfectly aligned with my face. As I lay there a minute later, I reflected that I'd been correct: the cakes were *very* effective weapons.

* * *

I lay on the bed, flipping through the book on beginner's magic. I'd promised Glory I'd at least look and see if there was any memory magic listed. I came across a lot of little magic tricks that I'd never thought of before. Some of the magic seemed a lot more than 'beginner'. I tried to summon a door and ended up giving myself a throbbing horn ache as a tiny flimsy door in a doorframe appeared, slammed shut dramatically, collapsed into a pile of broken toothpicks, and then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Well, it didn't say 'practical magic'. Some of the magic, like walking on clouds, I simply couldn't confirm if I'd done right or not. And one that created wings…well…I got through the first paragraph about cocoons and metamorphosis when my eyes crossed and I thought it best to move on. To my surprise, there was a section on 'mind magic' talking about making a bridge between two ponies by touching my horn to their brow. Apparently 'diving in' was discouraged; the book recommended pulling a memory into myself or pushing a memory into another. Just clumping minds together was apparently asking for trouble.

"What would life be without trouble, though?" I murmured as I levitated the book in front of me.

Then a folded piece of paper fell out of the back of the book, and I blinked in surprise. I set the book aside and lifted it instead.

"What's this? Twilight's bookmark?" I said with a little half smile as I unfolded it. Instantly, Twilight's elegant hornwriting met my eyes.

Dear Princess Luna, it is with great regret a heavy heart that I must tender my resignation

What? I sat up immediately and read that line once more to make sure that my brain damage wasn't acting up, then read further.

Dear Princess Luna, it is with great regret a heavy heart that I must tender my resignation and step down as Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Your command decision to execute Goldenblood without trial is a crime insult sad injustice unprecedented in pony history. I am pleased proud of the work that has been committed accomplished by my ministry and everypony working under me and am confident they will be able to serve Equestria admirably, but I cannot remain a part, in good conscience, be a part of this government any longer. I will inform my friends of this decision and hope that your reign is a good ethical better prosperous.

There were other paragraphs saying similar things beneath it, with lines edited or crossed out entirely. Other rough drafts were to Fluttershy and Applejack, telling both that she could not be a part of the Ministries any longer and suggesting neither of them should be either. There was a scratched-out section practically begging Fluttershy to talk to Pinkie Pie about stepping down from Ministry of Morale and asking Applejack to try and get Rarity away from Image.

I wondered if, if the zebras hadn't launched their megaspells, Equestria would have simply collapsed in its entirety? Without the Ministry Mares, would the Ministries stand? I understood that some of them had been figureheads to varying degrees, but even so, they'd been important symbols of the government. I thought about the legal briefs in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Prosecuting the Ministry Mares for crimes against Equestria? Prosecuting the Princesses for the same? EC-1101, a megaspell that effectively handed over control of the country to a new ruler. Project Partypooper, a conspiracy to eliminate everyone who could possess EC-1101. What would happen if there was no one that EC-1101 could connect with?

If Sanguine had been right... something bad.

Goldenblood had known. Hell, he was the grand architect of this

whole scheme. This plot that had wrapped itself tightly around Equestria and the world. And he'd done something, created something called Horizons to deal with it. But something had gone wrong. Something that even Goldenblood had missed till it was too late to stop it. He'd had Trottenheimer make a weapon of unimaginable power, but had been arrested before he could use it. Executed. Failed. What had he known?

I flipped open my PipBuck and brought up the megaspell program once again, just staring at the screen. The key to Equestria, Applebot had told me in another life. Something ponies would kill for. Something that made miracles happen. And even after all that I'd been through, I still didn't feel like I knew any more than when I'd started!

A small part of me wished that I had pushed the button on that terminal and activated Project Horizons, just so that I'd know what it did.

I frowned at the folded piece of paper. This was pretty incriminating, not the sort of thing you just left around. It'd been stashed in the back cover of the book. I frowned as I thought back to that study and the scrolls within it. Personal. Private. Twilight's own study.

I clenched my eyes closed. Damn it, I hadn't been able to open the stupid Tenpony door! And now, more than ever, I had the overwhelming sense that I should have been able to open it!

Something was off, and for the first time, I couldn't stop myself from seriously wondering if there was some terrible truth behind the Goddess's snide accusations. Maybe there was something my friends were keeping from me after all...

* * *

"I have to admit, Blackjack, when you asked me for any tips we had on memory magic, I felt a sudden urge to run out to the badlands and play doctor with hellhounds," Triage muttered, the blue unicorn lighting another cigarette and leaning against the walkway railing as rain drizzled into the muddy university quad. "Now, I got to admit I have a sick curiosity making me wonder just what's going through your head to make you want to know how to extract memories without giving yourself an aneurysm."

After soaking up radiation for an hour in Blueblood Manor,

Lacunae had teleported me over to the Collegiate to find out everything I could about memory magic; after all, they'd been the ones who'd modified Scotch Tape's memories. I had to bully Triage a little bit with suggestions about 'learning as I went' and experimentation... each one seeming to have the effect of giving the mare a migraine. I guessed I would have had the same reaction if somepony told me they were going to try to clear a jammed gun by bashing it with a rock. Some ignorance was simply too intolerable to go uncorrected.

I finished tucking the last of the notes into my saddlebags. "Well, as fun as aneurysms are, I have to admit that it's easier getting through the day without them," I said as casually as I could. Triage had once again swatted me about the noggin when I'd explained what I'd done to Rampage. Apparently I should be dead of a burst blood vessel in my brain at this moment; fortunately, Silver Stripe's augmentations had prevented that. Lacunae stood nearby, quietly watching me. The alicorn had said nothing about teleporting me over to the Collegiate to pick up more notes on memory magic. Glory had warned me that if I trotted one step in the direction of trouble without her, she was going to put me in a harness she was saving for something 'special'.

"Well, that's all I know. If you were doing this to anypony besides Rampage, I wouldn't have told you. I don't think that mare can get much worse off," the blue mare said as she took a long pull on her cigarette and let the smoke blast out her nostrils. "I actually found her once…four or five years back when I was trying to make my way to Flotsam by boat. Saw her tumble right over the Core wall and onto the rocks along shore. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Of course she regenerated, but wasn't right in the head. Screaming. Babbling about a city of gore and flying steel. Sobbing. Captain blasted her with his gun twice in the noggin. She thanked him afterwards."

The unicorn jabbed the cigarette at me. "So if you want to go crawling through her head, fine. It's probably no more hazardous than a taint enema followed by a radioactive suppository, but it's your ass." She glanced down at my legs and took another thoughtful drag. "How're the Prof's parts?"

"Saved my life more times than I deserve," I replied, making Triage snort. "Any luck with Steelpony?"

She twisted her lips sourly, then sighed. "With making full-on

augmentations? Nope. We just don't have the fabrication facilities or engineering expertise for that. But we think we might have better luck producing less invasive talisman implants. Things that might make you a little stronger, faster, more charismatic, or smarter. We're working on one design that simulates regeneration. Nothing as fast or impressive as your regeneration implants, but still something that'll encourage cell growth to speed recovery and fight off disease."

"Really? Healing talismans fight off disease?" I asked with a frown.

"You haven't gotten sick since you got yours, have you?" she asked with a smirk, and I had to admit that I hadn't. "Anyway, hopefully we can do some good business with Red Eye's forces."

"Wait? Red Eye? As in the slaving Red Eye? As in the evil organization threatening all of the Wasteland Red Eye? *That* Red Eye?" I blinked in shock. "You're not actually doing business with those slaving bastards, are you?"

Triage looked back at me coolly. "Why yes, I am. Not a lot of options down here in the southeast. We've got bad blood with the Society, and the Enclave are competitors. Ghouls over in Meatlocker and Rocket Town don't need much in the way of healing. So Red Eye is our best source for caps and ammo. We patch them up and manufacture healing potions for them and they keep us supplied with food and salvage we need." She caught my glower and shrugged. "Don't look at me like that, Blackjack. If I had alternatives, I'd take them."

I sighed; much as I hated it, I didn't have a right to tell the Collegiate what to do. "What about the Harbingers? Have you had business with *them*?" If so, this would probably be my last trip here.

She glowered. "Aside from them poaching members of my staff, no. They've got their own sources for everything-- guns, food, potions. And they've been getting more and more belligerent. For all that pegasus prophet goes on about a grand new future and a glorious new world, the rest of them have a simpler message: join them or else." Triage gave a mirthless grin. "Even *you* can figure that one out."

"The prophet is a pegasus?" I asked with a frown.

"That's what I've heard. Never met them, though," Triage said with a smoky snort. "Just their flunkies. Their *well-armed* flunkies."

Triage took one last pull, spat the butt out on the floor, and stomped on it far harder than extinguishing warranted, twisting her

hoof to make a point. “They’re not quite at the point of outright hostilities just yet. The Zodiacs are patrolling every day keeping an eye out. It’s just a matter of time before the Harbingers try something bigger than we can handle, and when that happens I’m hoping Red Eye decides to use some of his firepower to help us out.”

I finally deflated. “Okay. Okay. I give.” I’d told Bottlecap that I’d do something about Red Eye’s occupation of the Paradise Mall, but unless something drastic happened in the next few days, I didn’t see me pulling it off. “Any other news?”

“You mean aside from Hightower disappearing in a flash of boom?” the unicorn said with a dry smirk as she shook out another cigarette. “Something’s going on at the Skyport. Lots more activity there. I don’t know what they’re doing, but they’re up to something.”

“Right,” I said slowly, looking in the direction of the Skyport. “Well, I need to check on Glory’s sister anyway... so I can tell Glory if…if everything turned out alright or not.”

“Right,” Triage said as she tugged her white labcoat closer about herself and turned to reenter the medical school. I turned to where the alicorn stood alone, in the rain. “Think we can just hoof it? It’ll only take an hour or two.”

“You promised not to get in trouble,” Lacunae reminded me.

“It’s a walk from here to the Skyport. How much trouble could I possibly get in?” I asked with a small smile.

* * *

We trotted along Celestia Boulevard towards the east as the rain hissed around us. “Now those giant frogs. Those didn’t count as trouble, okay?” I said sternly as we walked down the waterlogged road. I took another bite of the cyberpony cake I was levitating beside me. They were even waterproof!

“And that mutated river serpent with two heads?” Lacunae asked softly.

“We got away, didn’t we?” I objected. “Sure, you had to teleport out of its mouth, but…

“And that squad of Seekers?” the alicorn asked just as quietly.

“What? Only took us five minutes tops to shake them. I don’t see the trouble. There was no trouble, understand?” I said pointedly,

flushing as I imagined the sound of the smack of a belt.

The alicorn sighed. “I don’t understand why you’d say it wasn’t. You like Glory spanking you,” she said flatly.

My cheeks burned, and I said primly, “I won’t dignify that with a response. Suffice to say, while I like the attention and time I spend with Glory in any form, I don’t want her to worry about me. I want her to be able to trust me to keep myself safe when she’s not around.”

Lacunae groaned and swayed a little as the scream of Enervation grew particularly acute, but I couldn’t see how or why. A thought niggled at me. There was something... something about a disk? Rings? Something? I could feel it in my brain, but every time I tried to pin down the thought, something else went wrong. “Are you okay?” I asked with a little frown. There was a boutique on one side and an ice cream parlor on the other. Red bars skittered about, but we’d been passing ruins rife with radroaches and hoppers for the last hour.

“I will be fine. I shall... endure... ” she groaned, her wings drooping.

Wait a minute. Those bars were blue...

I stared at the boutique; there were definitely blue bars in there. A half dozen at least. Maybe some of those red bars were something worse than just vermin. “Go ahead. Find some place where the screaming is lessened. I’m going to go check this out,” I said softly as I glared at the boutique.

“You promised that you wouldn’t get in trouble,” Lacunae reminded me. “And you always get in trouble when you’re alone.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. I just want to check this out,” I said, looking over and seeing her skeptical look. “Really. If it’s trouble, I’ll back out. Promise.”

“I should have brought Glory’s leash,” Lacunae muttered as she took flight and glided silently down the road. Pulling out Vigilance, I moved slowly inside.

The boutique was a mess of ruined clothing and ponnequins standing like silent, rusting sentinels. The red bars weren’t zipping around, which meant they probably weren’t radroaches like most of the others. Rain poured through rotten holes in the ceiling and floor, and more than once I felt the floorboards yield alarmingly underhoof. Still, I avoided knocking over any of the tottery ponnequins in their waterlogged garments. I supposed only the

Enervation kept them from mildewing away entirely.

I glanced at the register sitting on the counter next to an old radio. The room echoed with the constant tinkle of trickling water falling around me and splashing below. I couldn't hear anything yet; for all I knew, the blue bars were in the building behind the boutique... or the building behind that. Why couldn't EFS give distance as well as direction? One scavenging impulse acted on later, though, I discovered that the till still had twenty bits in it and that there was an old safe underneath. I busted out the old bobby pins and screwdriver, and three pins later I cracked it open. An old beam pistol, some gem cartridges for it, and a spark battery. Well, better than noth–

"Sign the bloody paper, you mules, and we'll get you out of here," a mare snarled from the storeroom at the back of the boutique. Well, it looked like whatever was going on was in the building after all! "Every second you waste, the Enervation's killing you a little more. Can't you feel it?" Hello? What is this?

"Just sign. You'll have a safe new life with the Society," a stallion said in a more pleasant voice.

"We don't want to be slaves!" a mare cried.

"Serfs. Not slaves," the stallion said reasonably. "You just have to sign the paper saying that you agree. Then we can all leave this horrible place. I'll heal you all up, and you'll be ready to get to work."

"You sure I can't fuck 'em?" a deep male voice asked, making my hackles rise.

"Not unless you want to pay for the damaged goods, Pain Train," the mare growled. 'Pain Train'? *Really?* Did he give himself that name? "Though," the mare said in a considering tone of voice, "if they don't sign soon, why the fuck not?"

"There? You hear that?" The stallion said in conciliatory tones. "Better sign, or we may not be able to control my friend here." The voices were coming from the back room. Carefully, I peeked through the cracked door into the back and saw two ponies, an earth pony mare in battle saddle and a cleaner, handsome unicorn leaning casually against a heap of gray rags. There were five or six ponies all wearing explosive collars. Oh what I'd give for P-21 to be here... I carefully looked over the mare and unicorn... there. The unicorn had a detonator strapped to some sort of jury-rigged PipBuck.

The prisoners all looked pretty drawn out, with blood starting to drip from their noses like crimson snot. They had the hungry look of scavengers, maybe new arrivals drawn by the stories. I couldn't see the third slaver; maybe he was hidden behind the massive heap of rotten gray cloth that blocked part of my view?

I felt my fanny start to tingle as I began to feel like I was about to get in Trouble. I looked at the gray earth pony mare. Two hunting rifles in her saddle. I frowned and tapped my nose. If I killed her, the unicorn might blow the collars. I looked at Vigilance, pressed my lips together, and thought it through. There was no way I was going to simply let them go.

Then I looked at the ponnequins and a small smile spread across my face.

* * *

"Come on, ponies. Don't make this–" The unicorn went silent as a slow laugh rose over the trickling and splashing water. His ears twitched, and the mare turned slowly as well. Again, the creepy laugh echoed through the hollow boutique. "What the fuck?" He scowled as he walked to the cracked-open doors, the mare at his side. "Watch 'em, Pain Train."

"Burners?" the mare asked as they pushed the door open and walked out onto the spongy floor.

"This far south? Forget it," the unicorn said darkly. "Who's out there?"

"... wicked... " an unearthly voice hissed in the drippy confines of the boutique. "I smell wicked, wicked ponies... "

"What the hell?" the mare asked in bafflement as the laugh grew higher and higher. "What is that?"

Suddenly light burst into view as the rag-shrouded pony floated up above them. Baleful white light blazed from within it as its voice crackled and shrieked. "I smell the blood of wicked ponies! I HUNGER!" the eldritch form howled as it slowly advanced through the air.

"Fuck!" the stallion screamed as he pulled a revolver from his holster and began to unload rounds into it. The hunting rifles barked again and again, ripping through flapping wet hide. Red beams burst from the specter's mouth and struck around the pair as the wraith cackled madly and the two ponies scattered.

The stallion's hammer fell on empty chambers as the apparition loomed over him. "What... what do you want?" he screamed as the blazing eyes glared down at him both in the dim, dank room.

"I hunger for the blood of wicked slavers who prey on the innocent! I hunger for *you*!" the specter shrieked.

"Him! He's the one you want!" the mare cried as she raced past for the exit, tripping over rusty ponnequins and racing out half draped in filthy cloth.

"No! I'm not a slaver!" he gasped as he dropped his gun and his horn magically pressed buttons on the PipBuck. There was a pop and a clatter and the sound of the prisoners within giving shouts of both fear and hope. "There! See?! Free!"

"Never take another, or I shall slake my hunger upon you! My hunger for blood! Blood! BLOOD!" the specter demanded, its voice rising to an earsplitting shriek.

With a scream of terror, the brown unicorn raced after his companion.

The specter's ear-stabbing shriek went on a few seconds more, then abruptly ended, as did the glow of my magic supporting it as I rose from behind the counter. The bullet-riddled ponnequin dropped to the floor before me. I peeked in at the old radio, spark battery, and beam pistol, then extracted the last and switched off the first. The feedback at the end had given me a headache. Now that the collars were off, I didn't have to worry about some slaver 'liquidating' his stock as a final 'fuck you' to me. A tiny Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash smacked hooves in the back of my mind.

I could still see Clover's neck exploding in a cloud of red vapors...

I stepped into the back room walking upright, munching nonchalantly on a cake in my hand. See? No trouble...

The six were pressed together against the far wall. I looked around the room, but 'Pain Train' was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't see a back door though... where'd he gone? Was he hiding in that heap of filthy rags? Too many errant radroaches in the area to use my EFS to find him... I turned my attention to the prisoners. Two stallions and four mares, all looking like they'd had more than enough Enervation for one day. Funny... the collars were off and their captors had gone, but they were still staring in terror at me. I gave a worried smile. "Hey, don't worry. They're gone. The ghost was just me." I levitated out my sword to cut their bonds.

"Good to know," the deep voice rumbled right behind me.

I turned and discovered that what I'd assumed was a giant heap of rotting clothes was in fact a giant *thing* of muscle and shaggy gray fur. It had a head like a brahmin, only not quite so deformed, and it stood on two heavy split hooves rather than four mutated ones. Its upper body was so muscled that it looked as though a good push would send it tumbling over. It was standing upright like I was, and its forelegs – arms? – ended in hands. I had a good opportunity to observe these in action as its backhanded swipe sent me flying, augmented legs and all, clear across the room. My magical focus was gone, and the sword and Vigilance disappeared into the debris of the storeroom as I crashed into the wall and landed in a heap of broken ponnequins.

Pain Train, I assumed. Apt name. The shaggy gray beast dropped into a sprinter's pose, scraping his hooves across the floor for traction, his breath blasting out his wide nostrils. Duty and Sacrifice were tangled up in the wreckage around me, and my ringing horn probably couldn't summon a magic BB, let alone a magic bullet. He pointed his brass-tipped horns right at me, and with a bovine bellow, charged across the floor.

I used the only weapon I had left. I threw the cyberpony cake as hard as I could straight into his face! The disk struck him right between the eyes, and he let out a roar as he staggered back, clutching his forehead. He blinked twice, some blood dripping down between his eyes, and then picked up the disk with two fingers. "Did you just try and kill me with a... what is this?"

A much needed distraction! I reached down and pulled out Duty, grasping it in my jaw and taking aim. Pain Train tossed the cake aside and with a swing of his massive fists sent an avalanche of rotten packing crates, rancid cloth, and old dummies cascading upon me. I fired a shot before the world disappeared under sopping blanket.

Okay. Maybe I was in just a tiny bit of trouble. Then I felt the impacts shuddering through the floor, getting weaker. Was he leaving? Did he think I was done? Maybe he was going after the prisoners! Or maybe...

Maybe he was just backing up...

"Here comes the pain train!" he bellowed, confirming my suspicions. A rumble in the floorboards began to rapidly build. What could I do? Summon a door for him to crash through? Give him half a mustache?! I struggled to get the anchoring layer of crap

off me before I was hit by the pain train. I had to go! Now! Somewhere! Anywhere!

And my horn gave a fizzle, then a flash, and everything went white. I flopped limply on my back on top of some junk, my horn coated in a layer of soot. A split second later the gray giant rammed into the wall three feet to my left with an impact that made the whole boutique shudder. He glared down at me with his horns embedded in the wall. “Cheater... ” he muttered sullenly.

“Don’t look at me! I didn’t even know it was going to happen!” I said as I pushed myself to my hooves. “What the hell *are* you?” I asked as I looked around for my weapons in all the mess.

“Pissed,” he said, then smashed his fists against the wall in rapid punches that pulverized the material around his stuck horns. As he wrenched out and stood up, I grabbed the first thing I closed my hand on, anything I could use as a shield. I hefted a rusty ponnequin, but it flew apart after one blow of his fist. I grabbed the lid off a crate, but his other fist blew it into rotten splinters. I really needed my sword, but I had no clue where it was! The next thing he hit was going to be me at this rate. My fingers closed around something small, round, and heavy, and in desperation I brought it up to block his falling blow.

The fist connected with the cake, and a horrible crunch filled the air.

“Yarrrgh!” roared Pain Train as he reared back, clutching his wrist in agony. From the way one of his fingers was all crooked, I guessed he’d finally found something as tough as he was.

I didn’t waste any time as I charged, swinging the heavy disk as hard as I could.

He snorted, absorbed the blow with the forearm of his injured limb, and then grabbed my wrist with his free hand. A smile crossed his bovine features. My pupils shrank and my ears drooped. “Uh oh.”

My only saving grace was that the throw through the wall and into the front of the boutique missed anything structural. I rolled several times, aching as my EFS displayed all kinds of fascinating red marks telling me the injuries I was sustaining. I huffed as I pushed myself to my hooves on the spongy floor. I glanced at the door behind me. I could run. Save myself. Live to fight another day. Leave the six prisoners with this... this thing... to whatever horrible fate awaited them.

Was I just putting my life at risk to save ponies who were already lost? Pain Train dropped into his crouch again, readying another load of hurt.

I wiped blood from my nose and pushed myself to my hooves. He slowly grinned, gave another explosive blast from his nostrils, and then raced at me once again. This time I didn't just wait for the impact. I charged back. He released another roar as he lowered his horns to rip me to pieces.

I leapt up, pointing all four of my hooves at a single point as I came down. Not at his head. No, I doubted that even with my mass I could get through that skull. My target was something else: the floor right in front of him. With a wooden crunch, the floor collapsed under me, and I was falling into the basement of the boutique. A second later, Pain Train plunged through as well. My landing was broken by a pile of rotten clothes in boxes that burst in a filthy mass beneath me. He created a giant splash that washed me into the water.

Okay. Now what?

Pain Train rose out of the flooded basement, trailing streamers of the foul gray water. I backed away, aching as he advanced. I had to stay on my hind legs, and even then the water sloshed around my chest. It was only waist deep on him. I moved to put a beam between us. He reached out with his hands, ignoring the broken finger, and grabbed the beam. With a pulpy crunch, he ripped it down and broke it in half with a massive flex of his arms.

Oh shit. I dove under the water as he hurled the two halves where I'd been standing a second before. I had to get away from... whatever he was. Get some ground under me. Lead him away from the prisoners and to where Lacunae could offer some assistance. The Enervation scream was even stronger down here; I couldn't hear the Goddess or my friend. I tried to kick my way free when something seized my back leg.

Look Mom, I'm a pegasus.

I flew across the flooded basement, crashing right through another beam and slamming into the far wall. I landed in a heap against the bricks and rusty metal equipment. Overhead, the floor was making all kinds of tortured noises; no surprise, as there was only one more wooden beam intact. Pain Train wasn't looking too good either, though. The gash between his eyes was bleeding worse than when I'd hit him, and blood dripped from his injured hand. He wasn't

resistant to Enervation like I was, and he seemed to realize that he needed to end this quickly and get the hell out of here.

He dropped into the sprinter pose once more, sent two great splashes behind him as he dragged his submerged hooves through the water, and raced the length of the basement towards me. I had nowhere to run, no weapons to use, and no more magic tricks in my horn.

But, despite everything, I still had my cake clenched in my fist.

I rose as high as I could on my rear legs and gripped the cake tightly as he surged forward like a rage-fueled tsunami. I had only one chance at this. My eyes narrowed as I focused on my target, licked my lips... wait for it... Then, twisting my body I let the disk fly straight and true...

Right into the remaining beam.

With a groan and crack the beam bowed where the disk had struck it, held for a heartbeat, and then collapsed just as Pain Train reached it. With a colossal roar, the floor above collapsed upon him. He halted his charge and, with his good fist, blasted a hole right through it. For a second we both stood there, me pressed against the wall, him surrounded by a ring of rubble, panting hard. I wished I could breathe the same; slow and continuous respiration just didn't suit a fight like this. Still, we gave each other matching manic grins.

Then the second floor collapsed on him as well. Then the roof. For several seconds my ears rang as the debris tumbled into the basement. The rubble gave a heave... started to shift... and my jaw dropped as those enormous fists started to push it off. "Oh come on!" I shouted as his head reappeared. What was his deal?

Apparently, though, whatever it was, it wasn't quite enough. He groaned and collapsed with a thud. Slowly, I approached him. After having three floors fall on him, he was still breathing, but even this cow monster was knocked out cold. And with the Enervation down here, he was helpless.

I reached into the water at the base of the collapsed beam and retrieved my cake. Still as nutritious and delicious as ever, and not even crumbled!

I started to climb up an angled section of the collapsed floor to reach the storeroom when I looked back. Stupid ideas started to creep into my head. Leaving him here, half buried? Leaving him to rot as Enervation slowly drained the life out of him? It just didn't

seem... right.

There was a tiny yellow pegasus inside me giving me great big teal pleading eyes. I groaned, rubbing my temples. *No, Fluttershy. There is 'be kind', and then there's 'be stupid'.* The tiny yellow pegasus gave a little sniff and just stared at me. *He'd tried to kill me!* Her tiny lip quivered. I clenched my eyes, determined to do what smart ponies did with when they fought big, terrible, half-bull monsters, which was to just go. I could learn... I... She gave the tiniest little whimper.

"Ugh... fine... " I muttered, and was rewarded with a tiny mental hug.

There was no way I could move him myself. But maybe... I had an idea, but I didn't know exactly what or why. It was just a gut feeling... I trotted around the perimeter of the basement, listening to the scream in my head. Finally I reached the rusted metal box. I could barely make out 'Roseluck Pest Solutions' on the case. I busted it open, and there... the green glowing silvery ring. I frowned; how'd I know to look for it? There was something about the rings and... *something*. It was like a blanket covered a part of my brain... I had no idea what I was doing or why I thought it would help, but I scrambled up to the front door and threw the shiny metal ring as far as I could down the street.

Instantly, the scream dropped to a whisper. I crept along the jagged edge which was all that remained of the first floor, looking down at the creature surrounded by twisted ponnequins and draped in rotten wood and cloth. That would have to do. If he cared to dig himself out, he could do so. I was battered from head to hoof, my horn a lead weight on my brow. I trotted into the back where the scavengers watched me as warily as they had their captors. I found my sword in the remains of the back room, then Vigilance and the matching revolvers. Finally, I cut their bonds. "Follow me east, and we'll get you--"

That was as far as I got before they scarpered. Not a word of thanks, but I couldn't blame them. I looked at some papers beside the captives. 'Contract of Servitude', they were titled. I scanned the documents; apparently signing this piece of paper meant that you were agreeing to spend the rest of your life working for the Society for the 'betterment of ponykind'. I pursed my lips before tearing the papers in two and tossing them into the basement. I picked my way back to the entrance.

“So... all I need to do is heal enough and tell Lacunae that it wasn’t any trouble,” I said as I trotted out the front door.

And bumped right into the chest of my purple friend. She slowly narrowed her eyes before taking in the hole in the roof, the missing floors, the flooded basement, and Pain Train half buried in rubble. I gave a sheepish little grin and spread my dinged forehooves wide as her gaze returned to me. “Trouble? What trouble? No trouble here!” My grin strained all levels of credulity before I gasped, “Please don’t tell Glory!”

Lacunae looked down at me, then slowly smiled.

* * *

I had many an unpleasant mutter as I followed Lacunae with a rope tied to my collar. It just wasn’t the same as Glory... our differences in size made me feel like Mom was making sure I wasn’t going to run down to maintenance to play games. Worse, she was lecturing me all about fighting the mutant brahmin minothingy and how much trouble I was in for trying to take one on alone. Fortunately, though, she both untied me and quieted down as we drew close to the Skyport.

The Rainbow Dash Skyport was a flurry of activity as we approached the front gates. A small mob of angry scavengers was gathered around them, shouting and hefting up crates of scrap metal as they yelled to be allowed in to trade for food. Three power-armored pegasi kept them at bay with their bristling weapons while a pink pegasus mare in a rain-soaked Volunteer Corps uniform tried to placate the mob.

As we approached the back of the throng, the rearmost ponies spotted us. Their eyes widened as they looked at my SWAT barding and the purple alicorn, and their shouts dwindled as they backed out of our way. Row after row slowly parted. Some glared, some looked on fearfully, but more than a few wore expressions of something like hope. The three power-armored pegasi kept their weapons trained on me as the frazzled pink mare began to say in a perfunctory tone, “I told you! We’re no longer accepting salvage for food and medical servi–” She broke off as her eyes widened in shock. “You!”

“Run out of food and medicine in there?” I asked wryly. An angry mutter rippled through the crowd.

"No! Of course not. It's just that the scrap metal trade has been currently suspended and we can't accept any more salvage at this time," she gave a nervous glance over her shoulder. "Please, come back later!"

"We're hungry now!" a stallion roared.

"Please. I've been gathering scrap metal all week for some good healing potions. My children need them!" an earth pony mare wailed. The urge to do something rash nibbled at my mane already.

"We can't accept any more scrap metal at this time. Please understand!" the pink pegasus begged.

"Perhaps, instead of trading, you might simply give them some supplies?" Lacunae suggested.

The pink pegasus gulped. "We don't want the local population to get dependent on donated food and medicine," she said lamely.

"You changed the deal on us!" challenged a stallion so loaded with junk metal that he resembled some strange hybrid of tortoise and pony.

"Look at it this way," I said to the pink mare, "you can give them a small amount of food and medicine and explain that the deal is temporarily suspended till later, or you can have a mob that gets bigger and bigger with every passing minute." I looked at the rain pouring off the barrels of the power armor, then back at the mare. "I don't doubt you'd be able to handle things if they got violent, but not without a doozy of a death toll and a lot of lost goodwill." I looked the pink mare in the eyes. "You came down here to help ponies. Not to kill them."

"No…" she muttered, then sneezed. Finally she sighed. "Okay. I'll tell them to release some food and supplies. They've got more than enough stockpiled to spare some." She looked at the crowd and then added, "But please spread the word that trading is currently suspended temporarily and that the Volunteer Corps apologizes for this!"

That mollified the crowd a bit. I looked at her, waiting till she finished talking to one of the armored pegasi who I assumed had some sort of radio. "Thank you."

"I didn't want to come down here," the pink mare said in a low voice, sniffing. "It's cold. And wet. Always wet, even with us trying to keep the rain off us. I think half the VC have caught all kinds of respiratory ailments. I just didn't want to be one of those ponies who stood by while others came down here. But thanks for helping

me with that crowd. I never thought anypony would get worked up over a box of preserved food."

"For a lot of scavengers, a box of preserved food is the difference between life and death," I pointed out, then smiled. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to go in there and have a talk with Lieutenant Wind Whisper."

"You…she…I…You can't come in! She's busy. We're all busy!" she said in a rush.

I stared the pink mare right in the eye, watching her start to shake. "I need to talk to her. If she can come out here, great. I'll wait. But if not, I need to go in there and find her."

All three power-armored soldiers pointed their weapons at me again. I passed Lacunae a warning to be ready to shield me as I grinned at them. "Nice armor. Nice guns, too," I said calmly as I looked at their wingcovers. A telekinetic yank upwards as I passed forward, three shots from Vigilance right into the wingpit, sword out and slicing through the same weak point in the armor of the pegasus on the other side. Pivot around. Jump and grab the third with my fingers and ground him, then maybe finish them off.

Of course... if I'd actually done that (not that I could, anyway, with my horn burned out), that would have been Trouble...

Something sure had the winged ponies nervous, though. It seemed the utter lack of fear I showed of their armament was throwing these Enclave a bit. Maybe the fact that I was working on ways to eliminate them showed on my face. Or maybe there was something else entirely going on. Or maybe it wasn't me at all and something else had their tail in knots. Or all of the above. Either way, the three seemed to be getting more and more alarmed by the second.

Then the gate opened a crack, and a yellow pegasus with a brilliant orange mane stepped out. Lightning Dancer wore her power armor but had her helmet hooked to her shoulder. Her grave citrine eyes met mine. "Let her in."

"But…ma'am, we're on high security for the visit!" the pink mare protested.

"I know that. Orders from the lieutenant. Let her in." Everypony immediately stiffened and looked at each other, including me. Lightning Dancer huffed. "Trust me, the sooner we talk to Blackjack, the sooner she leaves." Lightning Dancer said firmly and then added, "Or maybe you'd like to tell her why you're questioning orders?"

“You’re going to have to surrender your weapons,” the pink mare said after a second.

That wasn’t a problem. Between my fingers and Lacunae’s magic, we should be okay if something went bad. I passed the gear over to Lightning Dancer, and she put them into her armor’s pockets. Once we were through the gate and out of hearing range, the yellow mare hissed in a tense voice, “You’ve got fucking perfect timing, Blackjack. Absolutely perfect.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. The Skyport had been fortified, but I didn’t see armies of Enclave ready to take over the Wasteland. There were only a few VC running around; the majority of the ponies I saw were in power armor and were working strange machines that were putting out even more cloud.

“No time. I need to get you out of sight. Then we can talk. Intelligence would molt if they knew I brought you in here,” she muttered as she led us towards a side door of the terminal building.

I held her shoulders with my fingers and asked a little more forcefully, “Lightning Dancer, what’s going on?” The level of activity was concerning, but more so was the tension and atmosphere of fear. Everypony whose face I could see showed a level of anxiety even I couldn’t create.

She started to answer when her armor beeped. “Oh crap. They’re here. The bastards are early.”

“Who’s--” I started to say, when I heard a deep humming noise approaching. Something big was moving through the foggy air, something I couldn’t even imagine. A powerful downdraft made the fog swirl wildly as something huge and black swept in over our heads and landed. I’d thought the Vertibucks had been impressive, but the sight of this looming black weapon of destruction made them look like flimsy toys. It was as if the tank the Harbingers used had been shrunk down a little and then given the power to fly. Two more buzzed the fields, the rising fog barely hiding them.

But that was nothing compared to what came next. From the skies came a cloud... or at least that was the first impression one received. Then one caught the black plates. The armored bridge. The turrets. It was so impossibly large that the further details were lost to the gloom. I’d thought that the tanks had been impressive, but this? With a weapon like this, what stopped the Enclave from simply outright conquering the wastelands?

“What is that?” I said as it descended to hover just above the

ground next to the terminal, making the large open space look cramped. “What’s going on?”

“A Raptor. The *Castellanus*,” Lightning Dancer said tensely. “You need to get inside. If they find out that I breached security…”

She reached a door, swept a card through a reader, and pulled the door open. The hallway beyond was dark and cramped, with cables snaking along the walls. Lightning Dancer pushed us along into a room with a bank of eight terminals showing different parts of the Skyport. From the sight of things, some sort of major meeting was underway. Lightning Dancer blocked the monitors with her body as she turned and faced us. “Now, Blackjack, do you know where Dusk is?”

I felt a cold frisson run down my spine. “She wasn’t brought here?”

“Brought here? You mean you know what happened to her?” Lightning Dancer blurted. “What happened? One night almost a week ago she was called out for a patrol and nopony came back! I can’t find any official orders, which means it was an Intelligence operation, but nopony is saying anything!”

I sighed. “I encountered zebras and pegasi fighting in the north five days ago. They looked like they were investigating a zebra disease. There were three Neighvarro pegasi there, too. The Thunderhead pegasi were wiped out, but Dusk survived.” I omitted who had done the wiping. Call me a coward, but right now, I needed answers too. To get them, I’d need to answer some of her questions first. “I told the Neighvarro pegasi to bring her here.”

“What?” Lightning Dancer gasped.

“I wasn’t in any condition to bring her myself. They were. It was that or leave her to the Remnant,” I said in a rush.

“Well, they *didn’t* bring her here,” Lightning Dancer hissed softly through her teeth. “Neighvarro…that explains it,” she muttered darkly, then looked at me. “The Grand Pegasus Enclave said that they had substantive evidence of crimes against the Enclave committed by Thunderhead. Intelligence has been in complete chaos. Half their units abroad have either been arrested or have turned completely. Neighvarro’s got their own intelligence officers who’ve been wreaking havoc against us.”

I felt two responses to this news. One was a tiny bit of satisfaction that Lighthooves had finally been caught, and the other a growing, gnawing sensation of dread at what that might mean. While I had no problem with him getting punished for his part in creating a

bioweapon, I didn't have any desire to see Glory's whole home suffer for it. Until I'd seen that Raptor, the worst I'd imagined was Vertibucks. Now I was imagining enormous cloud machines of steel and vapor swirling through the skies.

"Such power," the Goddess purred in my mind. "With that, Red Eye wouldn't last a minute against me."

"Shut up," I thought furiously at her. "You're a dirty surfacer too, remember? There's no way they'd work with you."

"Oh, you'd be surprised how easily the ambitious can put aside a little hatred for more power," the Goddess chuckled.

I tried to steel my thoughts against her, in part because I feared she might be right, but also because Lightning Dancer was looking at me in bafflement. "Sorry. Brain damage. You were saying?"

"I was saying 'where is Glory?' Why isn't she with you? Did something happen to her too?" the mare said in worry. "Sky Striker is here. He's been talking about finding her." She looked sharply at me, "And you, for that matter. Something about bed champions?"

Oh, Celestia. That did it. I turned on my broadcaster, opened a channel to wherever, and shouted, "Okay! Attention everypony! Security here! I am a dirty, lecherous, adulterous mule! I cheated on the best mare in the Wasteland and am a bad, bad pony. Happy?!" I blurted, then threw my hooves overhead. Lightning Dancer stared at me in horror as Lacunae covered her face with a wingtip.

Then I froze as I looked at the screens; every pegasus in power armor was tapping the sides of their heads and looking at one another in confusion. I stared at my broadcaster again. Okay... that wasn't exactly what I had anticipated.

Tingly backside feelings again...

Lightning Dancer pressed a wingtip to a little earbud in her left ear. "Okay. I'm getting orders to report in now. If they trace that transmission to this building, they'll tear this place apart looking for you," she said. After I'd told her that Dusk might be in enemy hooves, I was grateful that she wasn't just handing me over. "Stay here. This is my post. I should be right back, okay? And please don't do anything else like what you just did."

She trotted quickly from the dark room, leaving us together. "Wait! My…guns…" And sword, and all the other weapons she'd confiscated at the gates. I harrumphed, took out the cake, and started munching. I looked at the rows of terminals and reached out a hoof, scowling at it passed right through. I looked at the buttons

and tried to push with my magic. Surely that would work, right? Not so much. I groaned and batted at the machine with a hoof.

Then Lacunae reached out and tapped a button with a wingtip. "–do not let one Neighvarro soldier off that ship. This is still the Thunderhead no-flight zone," one mare told four soldiers in the center terminal monitor. "Find that security breach. Check the hangars!"

I looked at the alicorn in surprise, and she smiled back at me. "I am part pegasus, after all." She tapped more keys with her wingtips, finally bringing up a conference room. There was a long table with six ponies around it, three on either side. Each side had a stallion, a mare, and another stallion.

I recognized Sky Striker by the dashing old buck's eyepatch. He sat next to two other pegasi in dusky uniforms, a light-coated mare and a darker-coated stallion. From the fancy clothes and severe expressions on their faces, I expected them to be some kind of very important ponies. Opposite them were a matching trio: a darker stallion, almost black, who wore a smile that reached everything but his eyes, a pale older mare with a straight mane who looked far less amiable, and an ancient pegasus stallion in power armor who seemed quite bored with the whole proceeding. I'd hoped for more, but all these monitors were in monochrome.

"–you for meeting with us on such short notice. I didn't expect you to come, Honored Councilor," the lighter mare said with a thin and slightly baffled smile to the armored elder.

"Oh, few folks did," the ancient stallion said with a wheezy cackle. "A chance to go back to the ground. Get mud beneath my hooves again? Couldn't pass it up." He gave a toothless grin at Sky Striker. "And once they throw 'Honored' in front of your name, you can do just about anything as long as it isn't important, eh, Striker?"

The grim, one-eyed stallion grinned despite himself. "Yeah. Then half want to use you as a figurehead and the other half want you to pop off. Some things never change."

The light mare beside the Honored Councilor tried to hide her annoyance as the dark stallion on her other side just chuckled. "With all due respect, this meeting is quite important, Honored Councilor Stargazer," she said as she glared across the table at her counterpart. "We've received reports that Enclave Intelligence is acting outside its jurisdiction."

"That is why you've arrested over half of my officers, General

Storm Chaser?" the dark stallion next to Councilor Stargazer rumbled. "Over a report? A report? Who filed this report? What was their training background? How was it confirmed?"

"Neighvarro has been working to establish our own intelligence corps…to supplement the efforts of Thunderhead, of course, Director Stratus. Some visionary members of your organization were properly thrilled to assist us," the dusky stallion next to the general said in calm, congenial tones. He oozed comfort and sincerity. "When we learned that Thunderhead Intelligence was involved in the development of a biological weapon that could be used against the rest of the Enclave, we simply *had* to act."

The director bared his teeth, not bothering to hide his contempt. "I'm sure you did, High General Harbinger. But instead of discussing this outside official channels as usual, you went and detained almost a hundred agents!" The name made my ears stand straight up. There was no way this could be a coincidence! And hadn't someone mentioned they were *led* by a pegasus? I racked my brains, trying to remember, but set it aside as I spied on this little meeting. "What was the origin of this report?"

"We were initially alerted by the surfacer terrorist who goes by the name 'Security' or 'The Security Mare'. She encountered one of our patrols and tipped us off to the development of a biological weapon at Miramare Air Station. Naturally, we were concerned by this possibility and investigated. Imagine our surprise when we discovered, buried in the base's terminals, records of some of the actions of an 'Operative Lighthooves'. The accounts on the terminals were corroborated by pony remains infested with a prion contagion. The data pointed us to 'Yellow River', and once more we sent a team in. We were quite shocked to discover, again with this 'Security''s assistance, that there were indeed signs of proof that a biological weapon was being adapted by this operative to infect pegasi," Harbinger purred with a growing smile. "Tell me, what is Operative 'Lighthooves''s real name?"

"I cannot say at this time," Stratus muttered, earning a chuckle from Harbinger.

"You've been asked for the identity of this operative by the leader of the Enclave Military on behalf of the Grand Pegasus Enclave High Council. That is not a request!" General Chaser snapped.

The ancient stallion sighed and rolled his eyes. "Stop being a Tiara, Stormy. Let him answer." Chaser blinked and flushed, trying to

glare an answer out of the Director of Enclave Intelligence.

"I cannot say at this time because we do not have an Operative Lighthooves assigned," Stratus replied. "I've got two hundred and thirty-two operatives, all memorized. There is no Operative Lighthooves in Enclave Intelligence."

"How convenient," Harbinger purred. Storm Chaser simply snorted. I was skeptical, too. If Lighthooves was behind this on his own… operating rogue…

Stargazer leaned forward. "As for investigating diseases on the surface, we needed to develop inoculations to better protect members volunteering to come down. Despite the Science Channel's exaggerations, there are real threats of an epidemic." She gave a little smile. "Besides, even if we were to develop such a weapon, how would we use it? All food and material shipments are rigorously inspected to make sure that we are fulfilling the terms of the treaty. We'd be at greater risk for infecting ourselves."

Harbinger twisted his lips bitterly, and Storm Chaser seemed to concede the point.

"There is also a question about how these--" General Chaser leaned forward and put a glass bottle on the table. I couldn't see well, but the contents appeared to be some sort of mane clippings. "--ended up in the Fluttershy Medical Center." Everyone except Harbinger and Storm Chaser stared at the bottle. "Notice the distinct colors."

Stratus gave a dismissive snort first and the one eyed buck shook his head. "So somepony decided to dye their mane. We get rebellious youths who do that all over the Enclave," Sky Striker said with a wave of his wing. "Eventually they either grow up or take the brand."

"This isn't dyed. In fact, chemical analysis shows that somepony probably used dye to *conceal* these colors. They're a 99.9% match to Dash," General Chaser said grimly.

"You were able to breach the field?" Councilor Stargazer finally said in alarm, with hints of fear on her face. Her tone seemed to make High General Harbinger smile even more.

"Not completely. Some sort of interference. But with the pony these came from... " Harbinger trailed off, looking at the scowling director. "So how *did* you do it? Find her in stasis? The report mentioned stasis pods in the hospital, and evidence of an Intelligence team. Or did you find some means to make a successful clone?"

“I have no idea,” the dark stallion replied, glaring at his counterpart. “But if you give me that sample, I’ll put my best minds on it.”

“Sorry,” Harbinger said apologetically, his wing reaching out for the bottle and pulling it back, tucking it in a pocket in his uniform. “We’ve got our own people looking into it.”

The ancient pony sighed and shook his head. “All that is secondary to the activities of Thunderhead allowing prolonged contact with the surface.” He looked across at Stargazer with clear worry. “We’ve been hearing it all across the Enclave, fears that Thunderhead is using trade and its resources to give itself an unacceptable advantage over the rest of the Enclave.”

“To put it bluntly, we don’t like or trust what you’re doing,” Chaser snapped. “With the materials you’ve gathered, you could be preparing to build your own independent force.”

“That would be against the treaty,” Stargazer replied calmly, folding her hooves on the table in front of her. “A treaty that Thunderhead has always abided by. And always will.” From the cool disdain on her face, it was obvious that she was leaving it up to the General to show dishonor first.

Sky Striker jumped in. “Of course, if you really are so concerned, you could implement your own trade with the surface. There’s absolutely no lack of settlements and organizations you could do business with.”

“Most of our communities don’t have surpluses to trade,” the ancient stallion said with a sigh and a shrug. “And besides, it is far too risky. You’ve heard reports about this Red Eye and the alicorn monsters that serve him? He’s just the first. If we get entangled in surface affairs again, it will be the same as during the war.”

“Scootaloo thought differently,” Stratus said bitterly. The ancient pegasus’s eyes widened in shock a moment, then drooped. In that moment, he looked every bit as old as his body was.

“Director,” Sky Striker rumbled in reproach. The dark stallion snorted and looked away.

“This doesn’t have anything to do with bioweapons, Rainbow Dash clones, or the Volunteer Corps,” Stargazer said softly, looking at her hooves on the table. “This is about the future. The Enclave has two dire enemies. One is complacency. The other is entropy. We’ve stripped every available resource we can from every mountaintop in Equestria. Thunderhead didn’t open trade with the surface because

we wanted to but because we had to. While the military has all our newest resources, even it can't keep up maintenance. We can only cannibalize so far before we're eating our own wings. Some communities are using talismans two centuries old. We have to change if we are to survive."

"Perhaps. Perhaps," wheezed the ancient buck. "But not now, and not like this."

"I'd also like to correct you," Harbinger purred. "You left out our greatest enemy: traitors."

"If you're so concerned about it, conscript your own unicorns," Stratus countered, then rubbed his chin. "Oh. Wait. I forgot. You can't. Life on quarried-off mountaintops is hardly conducive to quality talisman production. Guess you shouldn't have gutted those high elevation stables after all."

I didn't like the way he used the word 'conscript'. And apparently neither did the old stallion. "Excuse me," he sighed, rising to his hooves, his power armor clanking as it carried him out. I doubted he could walk or fly without it. His wings were so tiny that they appeared almost absent.

"That was out of line, Stratus," Sky Striker retorted, glaring past the mare at him.

"With all due respect, Honored Sky Striker, this is a waste of time," Stratus said as he looked at the scowling pair. "Thunderhead controls the air defense system for Shadowbolt Tower. Anything bigger than a pony we can target and blow out of the sky before they come within fifty miles. If they destroy the tower, somehow, they'll be losing everything they want to capture."

"Not quite," Harbinger retorted as he rose to his hooves, smiling confidently, staring daggers into Stratus's eyes. "There would be quite a bit of satisfaction to be had."

"Enough," General Chaser said as she rubbed her temples. "This is getting us nowhere."

"Agreed," Stargazer said with a nod. "I vote for calm."

Sky Striker looked at Stratus. The sour dark stallion shrugged. "Very well. I will order a stringent examination of all Intelligence activities within Thunderhead and the Hoofington region. You can send your own observers to verify." He glared and pointed a wing across at Harbinger. Stratus said 'observers' the same way Harbinger had said 'traitors'. "But I expect the operatives you've detained to be released and returned immediately if you expect to

see another magic talisman."

"Of course," Harbinger said silkily. Everypony rose to their hooves. "But I do hope you take care, Director. Equestria is a wide land full of possibilities. I promise you, the Enclave will not be dependent on Thunderhead forever. Someday, you may just need our magnanimity and find it missing."

"Thank you. If you will please wait here, we'll locate the Honored Councilor so you can depart together. Excuse us," Stratus said, and with that the Thunderhead trio turned and left the meaning room.

I saw them appear in a room on another monitor and start talking. "Can you switch the sound to them?" I asked in annoyance.

Lacunae didn't answer. Her eyes were locked on the monitor, wide and staring. "That was a lovely breeze of brown wind," Harbinger muttered. "Why did we waste our time with this, Stormy?"

"Because the public would look very poorly on the military if we did not make some formal diplomatic gestures of working this out. You know we have to keep Thunderhead's bad behavior from spreading," Chaser replied sourly. "And because I, personally, would rather not break the largest and most successful settlement in the sky in the process of reasserting control of the situation."

"You can't make a rainstorm without kicking a few clouds," Harbinger replied callously, then scowled. "You read the report, didn't you? The Canterlot hub went active. Two hundred years with barely a peep, and now we get a class one alert reporting a breach by surfacer terrorists. For all we know, Thunderhead's orchestrated this, and who knows what's next? They could try to get their Rainbow Dash into the S.P.P. Then it's checkmate for us, Stormy."

General Storm Chaser seemed to consider that for a moment, then replied with a dour scowl, "Our forces are already committed against Red Eye. This alert was just what was needed to convince the more hesitant elements of the council that it's time to clean house. Red Eye's special agent 'LittlePip' accessed something in there, and we have no evidence that she's working for Thunderhead too."

LittlePip? An agent for who? Was he serious? I thought hard about Arbu and what she'd done. Was it... possible? No. It couldn't be. Harbinger was wrong... or pulling it out of his ass or... or something! It was like saying the Stable Dweller was working for the Goddess. It just... wasn't possible. It... it couldn't be!

The Goddess hummed a merry little tune in the back of my mind. I

couldn't shut it out, so I ignored her... and ignored the memory of Triage telling me that the Collegiate was trading with Red Eye too.

No! Do not think about it, Blackjack, I told myself. Focus on these two. This was the kind of trouble that got whole stables killed. Don't think about Homage's pony working for... just don't. The general continued, "We've been drumming up the surface threat for months, anyway. I admit that this new biological weapon is extremely concerning, but we can't turn all our forces around to tackle Thunderhead now. After we've settled accounts on the surface... "

"We may be eating our own foals while Thunderhead rips Neighvarro to vapor," Harbinger finished grimly. He seemed to acquiesce to her argument, but it clearly galled him. In his eyes I saw a lust for war that approached the insatiable. *'There would be quite a bit of satisfaction to be had.'*

The general sighed. "The council and the public have been told that Red Eye is a more immediate threat, High General. We can stomp him in a week and tie up loose ends, *then* deal with other any other problems." General Chaser frowned at the High General's glowering silence, and continued, perhaps trying to keep his mind off of attacking Thunderhead, "Autumn Leaf's already dispatched Windsheer's team to gather as much trustworthy information as possible. They're the best of our new intelligence squads. We still don't know the full capabilities of these alicorns. They can fly and use unicorn magic, which makes them a greater threat than a potential plague."

Something about her words snapped the High General out of his brooding. His slow, easy smile seemed to make Chaser more worried than when he'd been growling about Thunderhead. "A greater threat... or perhaps a greater asset," Harbinger mused. And then I looked over at Lacunae and saw her growing smile... and then I realized that it wasn't my friend I was looking at but the Goddess. Her eyes showed a wild glee, like a filly getting everything she wanted on Stable Day.

Oh, you'd be surprised how easily the ambitious can put aside a little hatred for more power...

Worse, though, I could hear shouts from down the hall. Doors being slammed open. Somehow, I doubted it was a band of foals on a scavenger hunt. "We've got to go," I said, shaking her. Her leer only widened. I heard Harbinger making some sort of comment

about ‘possibilities’, but I wasn’t paying attention. I tried to think at Lacunae, but I felt distinctly cut out of the loop; it looked as if the Goddess was canny enough to disconnect me from whatever Unity was deciding.

Which meant that I was about to have company very soon.

No guns. All I had were thumbs, a burned out horn, and Glory’s cakes. “Lacunae! Wake up!” I yelled as hooves thundered right outside the door. “Damn it… ”

I was about to get in Trouble…

The door was kicked open, and two power-armored pegasi looked right at me for one stunned second. That was all I needed as I threw Glory’s cake in a flat spin right into the mare’s visor. The visor popped and splintered under the baked projectile’s onslaught, and her two beam rifles fired high. The pony behind her cursed and tried to hover to bring his own beam weapons to bear.

Couldn’t have that…

I popped out my fingers as I lunged and smashed them against the broken visor. Pegasi were like unicorns: close combat was not their forte. With one hand gripping her helmet and another on her chest, I heaved her up above me and kept her in the line of fire.

“Lacunae!” I shouted as I heard the mare scream in terror and many more hooves approach. “We have to get out of here!”

I felt eyelashes and tears against my fingers; a half inch further and she’d be needing an eyepatch. Crimson beams flashed as she fired in a blind panic, scouring the ceiling above me as she struck out with her hooves. The stallion had come up with an alternative measure of trying to push past the mare to get a clear shot at me. If it’d been Steel Ranger armor, I’d have been toast, but the Enclave armor was light enough that I was able to shove her between the doorjambs and block him.

I looked down at where Glory’s cake had fallen and then back at Lacunae. Well… it worked for me. I kicked as hard as I could with a rear hoof, and the gnawed black disk flew through the air and struck my friend right in the back of the head. I winced; I’d really been aiming for her rump. Still, it snapped her out of that stare and made her frown at me, rubbing her head with her wing. Harbinger and the general were leaving the monitor anyway; I supposed that the Goddess had seen everything she wanted to see.

Then she noticed that I was wrestling with an Enclave soldier and trying to fend off another, and her eyes popped wide. She wasted

no time in racing to my side, her horn flared brighter and brighter. I shoved the mare away just before the room flashed and dissolved around me.

* * *

"I can't believe it!" I stormed as we trotted towards Chapel. Vigilance! Sacrifice and Duty! The magic sword of scary sharpness…all gone! I was disarmed; I was pissed!

"We had no choice. Either your transmission or something else alerted the entire base. You would have killed them trying to escape or, more likely, they you," Lacunae said reasonably. I was in no mood for reasonable. I wanted to sulk my weapons back into their holsters! I munched on the cake that had fortunately been tangled in the alicorn's mane. It may have had a few stray hairs stuck to it now, but they didn't detract from the delicious appley, oily, greasy goodness.

Nice as Glory's treat was, though, it didn't dull the sting of having my weapons stuck back at the base. Still, sulking about it wouldn't really help. I couldn't go back right this second and demand my stuff back, so, instead, I tried to put it behind me and focused on the next, and more troubling, item of annoyance. "So... why'd the Goddess take you over?" She looked at me with a small frown, and I sighed. "I saw it. She was gawking at that pair like it was a dream come true. What was she thinking?" I asked as we walked along. Lacunae had teleported us a short way outside of Chapel; a 'near miss' in alicorn teleportation terms. I took out some of my impotent rage on some unsuspecting puddles.

"I have no idea. I have no memory of it," Lacunae murmured. Since we'd teleported away, the Goddess had been annoyingly silent. I could almost feel her smugness in the back of my mind.

"I can't believe she did it, though," I said with an emphatic stomp in a puddle.

"She saw an opportunity and she took it," Lacunae replied casually. "It's not the first time."

"Why aren't you mad?" I asked in a huff, then looked up at her. "She took you over. Completely. Again!" How could it *not* bother her? It was... it was like the *Seahorse*. She was helpless to stop it...

"You make the mistake of thinking that I'm a person to be violated. I'm not. She has the power and took the opportunity. I imagine the

Enervation was excruciating for her," Lacunae replied as she trotted along. "It must have taken a significant part of her focus to achieve it. Despite what you may think, she is not sloppy or careless when she... asserts herself." She closed her eyes a moment.

I wanted to simultaneously hug and throttle her. Why couldn't she understand that she was a person to me... a person used by a monster. "But are you…okay?" I asked in worry.

"Of course," she replied, so matter-of-factly that gave me a heavy... well, not heart... blood circulation pump? Damn it, cyberponies needed some idioms of our own. The alicorn frowned a little as she went on, "The sensation of so many minds and wills within me is… overwhelming. So much in me wanting to return to its original owners... With just a little push, I think everything within me may have been returned to Unity."

I stared at her. "You mean you almost died?"

"I was never born in the first place. But I admit that it was close." She sighed and shook her head. "It was so close…" I couldn't tell if she'd said it like she was glad or regretful of her survival. I didn't press. I'd told her I wouldn't.

"Would that change her? So many memories coming at once?" The thought of a Goddess with humility and compassion thrilled me as much as the thought that it would take my friend away filled me with horror.

"Who can say? She winnowed them out once. Perhaps she would do so again," Lacunae replied with a sigh.

"It makes me so angry, what she does to you," I growled.

"Why?" she asked with a small, sad smile. "I'm not a person. I'm just a collection of memories. Any critical memories intrinsic to my own identity are gone."

"Isn't there anything left of who you used to be?" I asked as I looked at her powerful purple body.

"There's a smell of who we used to be. All of us have a brain, of course, but it's as if it's asleep. Still, there's a smell of who we once were that simply doesn't go away on its own. Like daydreams you can't quite remember," she said quietly, before looking at me. "That's for other alicorns, of course. Real alicorns. I'm no more an alicorn than I am a pony."

I looked at her oddly. There was a wistfulness to her voice that hadn't been there before the Goddess had set up shop. A regret that lingered in her eyes. I'm not one for introspection, but as we walked

together, it struck me how alike all my friends were. We struggled so hard to understand our own identities. Glory, P-21, Rampage, Lacunae, even Scotch, all fighting so hard to determine who we were and where we were supposed to be. And I was filled with an overwhelming urge to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. What luxury! What indulgence! Most ponies in the Wasteland were happy just trying to survive to next week, and here were the six of us staggering through existential crises!

Lacunae met my eye, and I guessed she read my thoughts. That did it, and I couldn't help but actually start laughing; it wasn't funny really, but it was laugh or cry and really... I was sick of crying. To my surprise and delight, she laughed with me. There was something both reassuring and unsettling about hearing it from her.

You're a real pony, Lacunae. Just like Rampage. Just like all of us. You'll see...

We must have looked quite a sight to the half dozen fillies and colts manning the machine guns at the entrance to town, the pair of us laughing side by side at the ridiculousness of it all and me lacking all my armament. If so, we weren't any less a sight than Chapel itself. Scotch Tape stood with her rolls of paper on a stack of beams and planks outside the post office. She waved a hoof, giving directions to not just most of the Crusaders but to the adults as well. The tumbled-down scaffolds and rickety structures were gone, and Scotch Tape was directing three different teams at work. One was out carefully moving mines away from the edge of the cobbled-together wall while another was disassembling it. A third was building some kind of small, long building downhill from the post office.

Charity watched from the post office door with a wistful and envious look on her face; I suppose it had to sting to see everypony working together under an outsider. Then she glanced at me, flushed, and pointedly rolled her eyes before stepping back inside.

I started towards the post office but heard two voices speaking in low voices. "But are you feeling any better, Rampage?" P-21 said from behind a stack of beams. I froze, then developed a little smirk and carefully peeked around the corner. Hidden between the wood and the stockade wall were my two friends facing one another. The striped filly leaned against the wooden wall with a sigh while P-21 looked on with an expression of mild concern.

"I don't know. Yes. No? Maybe…" the filly sighed softly. "Seeing

what Shujaa did makes me feel…different. I don't know if different counts as better or not. It's like I actually know something about her…really know…rather than just having vague feelings about her."

"Blackjack says she's going to prove you're a real pony," P-21 said.

"Blackjack's an idiot. You know that," Rampage said with a smile and a roll of her pink eyes. "Sometimes I think she'd try to help a corpse take a walk." I flushed a little, frowning as I listened on their conversation. "I wonder why I continue to follow her around. Is there some soul inside me that makes me want to stick near her?" She rubbed her face. "I don't even know which part of me is thinking right now. The doctor? Shujaa?"

P-21 shook his head, "Try not to think of that right now." I could have kissed him, friendly like, as he kept her from dwelling on her problem and pressed, "I thought you stayed because you admired her."

Rampage gave a little sigh, then nodded. "I still do. A little. But… it's not the same, P. I used to think she was good. Now I don't know if she's good or just delusional. And she's trying to help me and you and everypony and…doesn't she get it? You can't help some things. Some ponies are just broken. Some ponies aren't meant to be helped."

P-21 nodded sympathetically. "So do you still want to leave, then?"

What? I scuffed my hoof as I tried to lean closer to the stack of wood and barely drew back before either of them heard me.

Rampage didn't answer right away. "I don't know. Maybe. I just want everything to end. No more crazy. No more questions. No more wondering who I am. Doesn't Blackjack get that? Can't she… can't she just honor my request? She had Folly. She could have ended me, but she didn't. I doubt she ever could," Rampage muttered, and then laughed. "But if I did leave, where would I go? Back to the Reapers? Beating up gangers for sport, taking over once Big Daddy dies? There's no future there."

"You could stay here," he suggested.

"Not with the Angel in me. And she is in me. Even as a filly…when Sonata was crying over Medley, I wanted her to stop. Wanted to stop her. If we'd been alone…" Rampage sighed and sniffed. "No. I can't stay here. Reapers are a dead end. I don't know anywhere to go. Maybe I should just go to that well in the manor and throw myself in. Pop some grenades and bury myself. Be done with it. It's

an awfully deep well."

"Blackjack would dig you out. You know she would," P-21 said evenly.

Rampage gave a hiccupping little laugh. "Yeah, she would. Idiot… wonderful idiot…" She sighed softly. "And you? Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. I have to admit, a part of me really wants to stay here. Try to make this father thing work. Try for a little…I don't know…"

"Happiness?"

P-21 laughed softly. "Yeah, but what would happen to Blackjack without us?"

"She'd probably trip, blow up half of the Hoof," Rampage laughed.

"Start a war between the Harbingers and the Enclave," P-21 added, "all while feeling horrible about it."

"And wind up pregnant with a mule," Rampage chuckled. I felt my ears burn along with my cheeks. Okay, that wasn't likely to happen any time soon! Really, did all my friends talk about me like this when I wasn't around?

The pair laughed, and I fought the urge to trot out there. Finally Rampage sighed, "You're going with her."

"And so are you," P-21 said in a more solemn voice. "She's Security, and we're her friends. That's why. She's the mare who tries, and we're the ponies who catch her when she fails." He sighed again and then chuckled, "I wonder if Twilight Sparkle's friends were ever as aggravated with her as we are with her great great great oh so greaty great great granddaughter."

What? A jolt lanced through me as if I'd be struck by lightning again. I felt numb and prickly all at once.

"I'm pretty sure they must have been. I think Twist would know…" Rampage sighed. "Are you going to tell her soon? About Tenpony?"

Tell me *what* about Tenpony? I'd failed the stupid test, so what were they talking about? I fought the urge to trot out there and shake my so called friends till their hooves rattled.

"Maybe. I promised Homage I would as soon as we thought she could handle it; I have her memory orb and everything. I just don't know if she's ready for it. We promised to wait till she was stable." P-21 let out his breath slowly between his teeth before looking back at her. "Do you think she'll be better in a few more days? She's out with Lacunae now. If she comes back without an emotional

meltdown…maybe," the stallion mused, then sighed again. "I don't even know how to tell her. 'Hey, Blackjack, we've been lying to you since you came back. Hope you don't mind'?"

"She's got no right to be upset. Not after modifying Scotch's memories and telling you she'd lie to me just to make me feel better," Rampage told him. That balked me a little. I had thought it'd been okay to lie to my friends for their own good, and now my friends had done the same to me. It hurt, but it also stole some of my anger away.

"I know," P-21 said solemnly. There was a long pause. "I think she is better now. Better enough that she's not running off with LittlePip in the tunnels under the tower, anyway. Better than moping on a mattress or racing after whatever damned thing distracts her. She still keeps pushing herself to the breaking point over everything, though. Medley. Hightower. When will she say 'enough is enough' and stop?"

"Never," Rampage said. "And you love her for it."

"Please. She's a penis short for me," he grumbled.

"You do," Rampage teased. I peeked and saw the filly's sly little smile.

"I love her name," he muttered. "Not Blackjack. Her real name. I love how she seems like she can do anything…at least till she can't. I like how she keeps trying to do good, no matter how bad it hurts." He sighed long and low. "But loving her? You'd have to get me pretty drunk to pull that one off."

I heard the pair laugh. It was surprising to hear how easy it sounded when I wasn't around. Had my friends been sneaking around me since I'd come back as a cyberpony? They must have been. Running off and getting drunk on a gallon and a half of whiskey. Flying back on a herd of alicorns with a strange pony I'd only just met? On one hoof, yeah, it was funny. Glorious even. But on the other…yeah. I could see how badly I'd scared them like that.

My friends had kept secrets from me to protect me. Rampage had been right; Scotch Tape too. Not knowing sucked. Even if it had been with the best of intentions. I backed away from the stack as they kept talking. My friends were sticking with me, even if they doubted me some, they weren't going to leave me. Still, it was damned hard to take, even if I could understand the reasons behind it.

"You look like you've received some bad news," Dawn said from

behind me, looking at me with her odd little squint, as if she never really opened her eyes. The look of merriment was more one of sympathy than mockery, though. “Did your trip go okay?”

I held my breath as I debated, then sighed. “It had its ups and downs. Fought a freaky brahmin monster with thumbs. Won. Lost my guns, though.” There weren’t words enough to express how frustrating that was.

“Ah. I’d wondered. Most folks don’t trot very far without weapons,” the pale mare said with a sigh. *She* didn’t have any weapons... “Those that do, though, are more interesting than most.” She looked over in the direction of Star House. “So how did my little girl get transformed into Rainbow Dash?”

I froze, my mouth working soundlessly. “I…don’t know what you’re talking about…”

“You don’t have to protect her,” she said with a sigh. “I had a feeling when I first saw her, and she was always a terrible liar.” She turned towards Star House. “She still nibbles her mane when she’s nervous. And that cooking... only my daughter cooks like that.”

“Glory ran afoul of some Killing Joke,” I said simply. “It transformed her into a literal Dash.”

“I see,” Dawn murmured. “Yes, I suppose that would do it. Something to alienate her further from her family and people.” She looked at me with her eyes closed. “I’ve run into it myself once or twice. Insidious weed. The Everfree Forest is just rife with it.”

I supposed that that might explain the whole weird closed-eyes-seeing thing. “I just hope it doesn’t stop her from... from doing whatever she wants to do.” And now that I thought about it, I wasn’t entirely sure what that was anymore. “She’s terrified that the Enclave will spot her.”

“She’s right to be. If she’s become a complete copy of Rainbow Dash, she may be able to access the S.P.P.,” Dawn said, then glanced at me. “A prewar superweapon. One built so that only a select few ponies could use it. Think... mmm... imagine being able to throw tornadoes and hurricanes at your enemies, and you’ll get the right idea. Weather control on an enormous scale.”

I thought of the Raptor and shuddered. Until today, I didn’t really understand what ‘enormous’ really meant.

Dawn continued with a brighter smile, “I doubt it will keep her from doing what she believes in. She once almost flew down to the surface when she was just a filly, with plans to give her boxed lunch

to the first pony she came across. Striker barely caught her before she was zapped by a lightning rod." She sighed and shook her head. "I can only assume she's still mad at me for leaving."

I thought about keeping up the pretense, but hearing P-21 and Rampage talk prompted me to be a little more honest, and I finally let out a sigh. "I'd say she is, a little. Mostly, she's confused. She's wondering where you've been." I paused, then asked softly, "Where *have* you been?"

Dawn just smiled and turned her face towards the west. "A little bit of everywhere. Manehattan. Fillydelphia. Stalliongrad. Las Pegasus. I even tried to find what had become of the griffins, dragons, and zebras. I looked everywhere I could for some sign of hope for the world."

"Did you find it?" I asked curiously.

"I did," she said with a nod of her head and a look towards the ponies working. "In the end, we're all the same. Pony. Griffin. Zebra. Dragon. We let ourselves become divided and separated. That's what caused the war. It's what caused the bombs to fall. It's what perpetuates the misery to this day. Differences as insignificant as where one was born, the stripes on one's skin, or one's species. It's those differences…those separations we create…that cause all the suffering and hardship in the world. Finding peace is no more difficult than overcoming those differences."

I gave a little smile. "Not sure how that gives you hope, then. Most raiders and gangers are more interested in putting a bullet in you than finding common ground," I said, not sure if I was indulging her or not. "I'd have more hope in having a bullet of my own, sorry to say."

Her smile turned sad. "At least you're sorry. Most folks aren't. Yet, doesn't that ganger desire the same things as their victims? Happiness? Health? Security? Joy? Yes, their expression is terrible, but their desires are all too common." She looked towards the Core. "If you scrape away all that pain and angst, what they want is what anyone wants: happiness and cooperation."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Yeah. I guess I can understand that." I didn't necessarily believe it, but it was a nice sentiment. "Nice to see Chapel moving ahead," I commented with a change of subject as we trotted in the direction of Charity's.

"Oh yes. If people work together, they can accomplish amazing things. Your young filly friend there is quite in her element. They're

putting up that building in almost record time. I must say I'm impressed." Yet, something about the way she said it was almost sad.

"Chapel's had a hard time lately. They were attacked. The church was destroyed, and one of the ponies who ran the settlement died. They're picking themselves back up again," I said as I watched Scotch Tape giving directions on the odd, long house they were building. I wanted to ask what it was for, but there was no way to approach her at the moment; the filly was in full manager mode.

"Just like you, Blackjack," she said with an amused smile... but again, something was a little off. Despite her carefree, closed-eyes expression, something about her seemed off. Was she feeling guilty about her daughter?

"Hopefully better than me," I replied. I sighed, rolled my eyes a little, and changed the subject. "So does Glory know that you know?"

"I suspect not, and I'm not sure if I should tell her or try to spare her feelings. Talking about it only makes things more awkward." Her closed eyes turned back up towards Star House high on the hill. "Hopefully tonight. That P-21 fellow said he was going to cook something special." She gave a little shudder. "Thank the sun for that. Glory always had her father's skills in the kitchen."

"What are you talking about?" I asked in bewilderment. "She's a great cook. I mean, she made this," I said as I nibbled on the half-chewed cake.

Dawn just looked at me blankly with her odd squint, then smiled and said gaily, "Ah, love."

I huffed, bit off a corner, and chewed thoughtfully. My recent encounter with being 'protected' from the truth had left a sour taste in my mouth. "I think you can tell her. Just... be ready for tears. And make sure she can't throw you into any walls. She's been through a lot of stress recently... mostly due to me."

"Oh dear. And she doesn't handle stress well at all," Dawn mused. "I suppose that explains this?" She reached out with a wing and flicked the ring on my collar, making me blush immediately. "Ahhh. I see. Almost the exact same thing I did with her father."

This was starting to creep in a somewhat disturbing direction. "You collared your husband?"

"Of course not. That would be silly," Dawn just laughed as she took to the air. "I married him."

I watched her fly towards the house and sighed, shaking my head with a smile. Pegasi weren't quite as strange as zebras and griffins, but they were definitely on the list.

An empty tin can bounced off the back of my head. I looked over at the grinning Scotch Tape, who pointed her hoof towards me, then grinned and pointed at the structure they were building. "Hey, Blackjack! Glad you're back. We need your cyber-fingered funky zebra walking help here."

Well, that was the magic word, right? Help.

* * *

With me playing the role of a jack, lifting and holding the heavy overhead beams in place, the work went even faster than before. The young ponies worked in teams of three and four to carry the materials over. I held things in place. The adults banged them together, Lacunae and my magic helping to hammer the higher places. Once the building was up and enclosed, four large open-topped barrels were placed up high along the back of the building. Pipes had been punched through the bases and sealed with Wonderglue and duct tape; I wondered if that'd actually work in the long term.

It wasn't until I saw what came next that I realized what we were making. Toilets. Five fine porcelain thrones from the manor itself. They were set in place by Scotch Tape herself. Lacunae used her magic to ferry over a barrel filled with river water and poured to fill each of the opened barrels. Then Scotch Tape shooed us all out.

"Go! Git! Out! I gotta test it!" she said as she pushed everypony out.

For a moment, everypony just looked at each other in confusion. Then came a sound of passing gas and a tinkle, and looks passed from one pony to the next. Finally a pregnant pause, and then a sound of a flushing toilet filled the air. The assembled ponies let out a cheer as Scotch Tape emerged, blushing faintly.

The olive filly nodded once with clear relief. "No more ditches."

Of course, the luxury of having a working toilet was more than most of the assembled ponies could handle, and they quickly availed themselves of the facilities. Scotch Tape just sighed, watching them enter and leave with clear relief. Now the greater challenge: getting the fillies and colts to keep it clean.

It was then that I noticed something else was new besides the bathroom. When Scotch had emerged, she hadn't buttoned up the rear flap of her coveralls, and her butt was hanging out a bit. I blinked, then squinted. "Scotch... your flank... I think you got it!"

Her eyes popped wide, but rather than gawk at it like any sane filly would, she clenched her eyes closed and began to whimper. "I don't wanna see it!" she blurted as she tugged the flap back in place and sat down hard. I gave her a minute; she only lasted fifteen seconds. She stood once again, eyes firmly shut as she groaned, "You look, Blackjack. Please tell me it's not a toilet."

I magically tugged her coveralls back and sighed before I patted her head. "It's not a toilet," I said as reassuringly as I could.

"You're just saying that, aren't you! I got a big old white bowl on my butt, don't I? Or something even worse!" She whimpered and shook her head. "I don't want to see it! I'll go find a big old patch of that blue weed and get myself turned into Applejack or something!"

"Scotch Tape, it's not a toilet. To be honest, I'm not really sure what it is!" I laughed and that prompted her to take a peek.

The filly's cutie mark was a strange diamond over an unwrapped scroll. The four-sided diamond was made up of two strange apparati. The bottom one was a ruler which seemed to be bent in the middle at a ninety degree angle. The top was some strange piece of equipment that resembled two sharpened metal sticks joined at the apex by a hinge. On the parchment was some strange abstract design that appeared vaguely structural.

"It's... I... but... " she stammered as she stared at her flank. P-21 appeared from the crowd, slowly walking up with a wistful smile. Scotch Tape looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Daddy?" she whimpered.

"It's a very nice cutie mark," he said as he pulled her into an embrace. Immediately, she burst into happy tears as she held him. Some of the other ponies looked on at the spectacle in confusion and with a little envy.

I sighed and took a deep breath. "You realize what this calls for, don't you?"

Scotch Tape wiped her eyes. "Huh? What?" Suddenly, a lot of ponies started looking nervous as I grinned from ear to ear.

* * *

It wasn't anything like a Stable 99 cutie mark party. There weren't any recycled dresses, the food was whatever we could raid from

Charity's stores and a Society merchant Lacunae cornered in Megamart, and the festivities were rape free (thank goodness). The decorations were whatever fancy ribbons we could throw up around Star House. There were so many ponies that those who couldn't fit in the living room spilled outside. The vast majority of the colts and fillies were both utterly baffled and completely delighted by the festivities. When they got their cutie marks, it was mostly just another day. Who could spare food and energy for a celebration over a cutie mark? So rather than saying this was just for Scotch and her mark, I hastily made up a story of 'cutie mark day'.

P-21 was in his element, cooking in the kitchen with the help of Rampage and Lacunae. The striped filly seemed to be lisping a little, her pink eyes slightly sad; Twist was making an appearance and helping out from time to time. Lacunae floated bowls of some sort of improvised punch drink stuff that was mostly Sparkle-Cola onto tables outside the front door and put a brake on any of the festivities that got too wild. The games she and I put up were also odd to most of the ponies; 'pin the tail on the pony' wasn't nearly as interesting as 'shoot the head off the raider'. Oh well, as long as they were having fun and being careful. Others improvised a band of whatever instruments they could and played despite the Hoofington drizzle.

I brought down Octavia from my room and showed her to Adagio, Allegro, and Sonata. I tried to explain how she was special, and how they should play with her, take care of her, and not leave her alone. The three young ponies looked at the instrument thoughtfully. Then the blue and magenta Adagio stood firm as the magenta and rose Allegro hopped on his back. Tiny Sonata clambered onto Allegro's shoulders, and her hooves began to work the neck of the bass. Allegro didn't use the bow at all! Instead, he happily plucked the strings, and deep twangs joined the rest of the band. I tried not to wince, but oddly the notes that came out were clear and deep.

There was a little bit of regret, too. I'd liked making music. It'd been nice; it'd saved me more than once when I'd been at my absolute worst. And a part of me liked to imagine just what I'd have been like in another time and place where I could have learned music rather than how to patrol and enforce the rules of the Overmare. It was a silly, selfish thought, but I felt it all the same. Still, Octavia should be in the hooves of other ponies to enjoy her music, not kept as a prize in my room for when I was down.

And ultimately, I liked giving her to the three who'd lost their friend more than I liked playing her for myself.

Rampage moved like a jackal on the fringes once the cooking was done, her face a constant mask of indecision. Should she go, or would she be safe to participate? Did she even want to play with a bunch of silly foals, or was she a mature mare? Finally, appearances decided the matter. Two green colts shouted something to the equivalent of 'boogie down' or maybe 'booger town' and started to dance like maniacs beside her. Indecision finally broke, at least for a little bit, as she smiled and joined them in their exuberant dancing. She even smiled like a filly.

Sweet cupcakes, music, and fun. For a little while, we pushed the Wasteland away and had a little hope and civilization. I looked up on the roof where I could barely make out the still forms of Glory and Dawn, their heads close together as they had their own reunion. I sat on the periphery of it all as I chewed on the edge of my cake, watching them. My friends. My community. My stable.

Dealer chuckled softly beside me. "You don't have to sit out here. You can go and join them." The white pony looked better than he had before, more rested. Younger, too.

"I don't deserve to," I said quietly, taking a pull on a bottle of Wild Pegasus I'd obtained for the celebrations. He gave a deep sigh, and I smiled. "It's alright. I'm fine like this." I watched them celebrating, and my smile grew. I couldn't partake, but I could appreciate. "Are you okay?"

He frowned. "Me?"

"You've been quiet a while. I expected you to put in an appearance at the Skyport. All that talk of responsibility and accountability," I said, then saw his uncomfortable look. "What's wrong?"

"I'm... scared of her." He pulled his hat over his face to hide his shame.

I blinked in shock. "Scared?"

"I'm a soul in a box, and EC-1101 is bonded to me. The Goddess manipulates minds and souls connected to her. If she found out about me, she might try to yank out the Megaspell through your connection."

I gaped at him. "Can she do that?"

"Do you want to find out?" he retorted. I really didn't want to find out.

Topic change. "So, apparently my friends have been keeping

secrets from me," I said softly before taking another drink. "To protect me... "

"Friends do that sometimes. You did that," he added, and I gave a little grimace. "You can't have it both ways, Blackjack. Either you're honest to your friends, or you try to keep things pleasant. Not all that easy to pull off both."

I frowned, closed my eyes, and let go the little bitter sense of resentment that I had no right to hold. I'd tried to give my friends peace of mind. How could I hold their actions against them when they were just trying to give me the same? When I looked at him again, his lips curled in a tiny smile of approval.

"I know. I know... " I murmured. I sighed softly, smiling just as slightly as he was. I looked at the celebration and frowned a little, tallying up all the good things... and bad things... that had happened today. My friends were working out their problems. Scotch got her cutie mark. P-21 might actually be happy again, at least a little. Rampage too. I'd saved six ponies without killing anyone. I'd gotten answers without reenacting Yellow River. Saw a Psalm dream that didn't have me in tears. Glory was finally talking with her mother again after years of separation. I might have actually teleported before my horn went poof. Chapel now had flushing toilets. And yet... there was something off about it all that I couldn't quite put my hoof on. "Ugh, today's just been... just been weird."

He smiled a tired, sad smile. "The word you're looking for is 'good', Blackjack."

"Good?" I blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about? Blackjack doesn't have good days. She has days that are bad and less bad and occasionally are punctuated with good events." I saw his smile and brushed my mane behind my ear. "Okay... theoretically it might be possible... one in a gazillion chance... "

"Trust me, Blackjack. It's been a good day."

I watched the celebration, and my smile grew a little more honest. Not the expression I usually wore when I was in the calm between disasters and breakdowns. Sure, I'd lost my guns and sword, and I'd had a reminder of the consequence of good intentions, but I'd also helped my friends and appreciated just what 'protecting my friends' really meant. I'd get Vigilance back one way or another. Duty and Sacrifice, too. And the creepy sword of crazy sharpness. And find some way to stop whatever was building between Glory's home and

the rest of the Enclave.

"Yeah," I said softly as I watched the proceedings. "Yeah, I guess it was."

And if I could have one good day, I could do anything.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 52: Reunions

"I put two and two and two together and it added up to Matilda!"

I can't claim to be any kind of expert on parties, but it seemed to me that the cutie mark celebration was slowly winding down. Food was now in the process of digestion, the lengthening night robbed the party of its energy, and the rumble of thunder was the final nail in the celebration's coffin; nopony wanted to have fun in the rain.

Soon we were escorting the colts and fillies back down the hill to Chapel. The adults who'd attended carried two or three young ponies on their backs with slightly awkward looks. I could understand, though: these weren't their children. Still, all of them seemed willing to do the right thing. To do better.

Several of the younger foals climbed into the cart the Crusaders used to move salvage, and I hauled it down the hill and around the minefield. The fillies and colts all staggered into the post office to sleep, and the adults crawled under tarps or into the few other buildings as the Hoofington skies began to pour.

While my friends returned to Star House, I lingered a moment. The heavy drops started to hiss as they struck the piles of lumber, stacks of recycled building material, and cracked asphalt. I looked at the ditch full of dirty water. Just yesterday, I'd jumped in and tried to save a filly. Today we were having a party. What would happen tomorrow? I grit my teeth as I felt my emotions give a sudden lurch. It wasn't fair. Wasn't right!

I looked at my leg, where the damned program that had caused all the trouble in my life lay. I wanted to throw it in the river then and there. I'd never relinquish it to the Harbingers–whatever they served was not worth that–but it would be satisfying to know that *nopony* would get their hooves on the thing. I deserved to have it, though. I deserved all the pain it…

No! I wasn't going to do this *again*. I sucked in great breaths of

wet rain and struggled for control. With each breath, a little bit of the anxiety inside me escaped. I let the rain wash across my face as I fought the urge to kick myself right into the ground. This was the Wasteland, and people died. I'd tried to save her. I'd tried. Bit by bit, stability asserted itself.

Was EC-1101 worth all this grief? I'd had a good day. Not exactly a normal one, but good. What would it be like to have several more? I needed to think, so I walked slowly along the road down to the lonely shell of the church building. The forlorn structure hadn't been repaired at all; all the energy had been spent on the village itself.

I looked up at the dark window from which Princess Celestia had once gazed down at her loving subjects. Now I could only see the black towers outlined in the stark electric green glow of the Core through the empty, shard-rimmed frame. Water dripped and pattered through the holes torn in the roof. The cushions were saturated, squishing unpleasantly beneath me as I knelt upon them.

My eyes passed over the shadowed paintings of the Ministry Mares, their faces lost in the gloom. Even my augmented vision didn't do much. The only one I could make out well at all was Twilight Sparkle; judgmental purple eyes stared down at me. They were Mom's eyes.

I closed my eyes and then accessed my recordings. Slowly, the hymn that had saved me from the nightmare beneath Horizon Labs began to play. I imagined that I could almost pick out Medley and Priest from the countless others. Of course, I couldn't. The music sounded hollow and weak in the wet gloom, a ghost of the melody and the moment. Funny; just a few hours ago, I'd been using a ghost to save six lives.

There was nothing funny about the real thing.

"Blackjack," came P-21's solemn voice from the door of the church. "I didn't see you at the party."

"I don't think I'm really all that much of a party pony anymore," I replied as I looked at the water sloshing around the saturated violet cushion. "Does that mean I'm getting old?"

"Mature, maybe. I can't imagine old. Or I can't imagine anything but being old," he said as he walked up slowly to stand beside me, pushing back his wide brimmed hat to look me in the eye. "Are you okay?"

I was sitting alone in a ruined church on a rainy night all alone,

and he asked if I was okay? I'd be scared of anypony who hung out in a place like this and found the term 'okay' applicable. "Yeah. Sure. As okay as I'll ever be, I guess." I looked at the blown-out window and went on, "I'm not feeling like I need to run or I'll die. I only did one moderately stupid thing today. I'm depressed about Medley…and Boing…and everypony else I've failed, but I'm trying to deal with it. I'm happy for Glory and Scotch, at least. So... yeah." I gave him a little smile. "Okay."

I looked down at my PipBuck and fiddled with it as he watched me with a concerned frown. I flipped through a few songs, selecting one at random so I wouldn't have to listen to dead ponies sing. It landed on something classical. No words. Just soft piano and strings that fit the drizzle around me. "I've been doing some thinking since Hightower…and Medley…and Priest…everything. I've been chasing after EC-1101 for weeks now, trying to find a secret. Now…now I'm wondering if I should. It was always a goal to chase after; an excuse to run myself right into the ground."

I looked towards the clouds above, barely visible in the green glow of the Core. "Maybe I should give up on following EC-1101. Help folks here. Deal with the Harbingers and Red Eye. Try and fix up what I can rather than just getting folks killed trying to get to a navigation tag." I forced a smile as wide as I could. "That would be better, wouldn't it? Glory would be happier knowing I'm keeping out of trouble. You could spend more time with Scotch. We could work out Rampage's problems."

But he didn't look like he agreed with that at all. "Yeah. You could do that," he said evenly. For almost a minute neither of us spoke, and my cheeks ached at the forced smile.

"So. That would be good. Right? Good for everypony," I said as I rubbed my PipBuck nervously. "No more stupid adventures of Blackjack. Yay…" I forced every bit of insincerity I could into that cheer.

"Except for you," he said softly.

"Me?" I couldn't believe it. My smile trembled even more. "I told you. I don't care about EC-1101 anymore. It's not…not worth everything we've been through." Not worth the worry I'd caused Glory. Not worth the danger I put my friends in. "I think I'll give it to Spike or…or something." It was a lame suggestion; I had no idea if Spike would accept it when he was already guarding the Gardens.

But P-21 just looked at me with that steady blue gaze and

disappointed little smile. I finally snapped. "Sweet Celestia, P-21, fuck whatever I want! What I've wanted has been a fucking disaster. What about what you want? You want to stay with Scotch Tape. Say I'm wrong. Glory deserves a little attention and stability. Rampage needs help more than me. Fuck my Goddesses-damned quest!"

But he didn't answer. He pulled the brim lower over his eyes.

"Yeah. I do want that. These last couple of days have been… well…they've been the best in my life. Damned wonderful. And I know Glory'd be happy with that. Rampage too. But you've been following that for a month, and now you just want to give it up?"

"Yes! Why not? Who cares what Goldenblood did? Who gives a damn about what Project Horizons is? Why can't I just... " Just what? Quit? The question caught in my throat and our eyes met again. This time, I was the one who looked down at my rain-streaked hooves.

He put his hoof on my shoulder, and I looked into his eyes. I didn't see the hard blue gaze of my friend. They were calmer, softer. If 99 had been different…if so many things had been different… "If I thought you really wanted to give it up, sure. But I don't think you do. I think that this is just another case of you tearing yourself down. Something to make you miserable. Like me refusing to tell Scotch the truth. Me convincing myself that I deserved to be miserable." He patted my shoulder, and his smile widened a little.

"Tell me I'm wrong."

I opened my mouth soundlessly once, unable to speak the lie.

Finally I whispered, "You're not wrong." I should give it up. It was going to get me…my friends…everypony killed. "It's just…this was a good day for everypony. I'd really like to see more of them… you know?"

"Me too," he replied with an unusual smile as he nudged my shoulder. "And when you find out the answer to this mystery and EC-1101 is really done, that'll be a great day. For you. For everypony. But no giving up on it, Blackjack. Not unless you'll really be happy with it."

I sighed and closed my eyes. And I knew I wouldn't. The questions and mystery would be there like a thorn in my mind.

Eventually I'd resent my friends for my own stupid decision.

Finally, I smiled in resignation. "Okay. You're right. I guess I'm just being…not smart again…"

"You're smarter than you think," P-21 replied evenly.

"Yeah. Brain damage did me some good." I snorted and rolled my eyes sarcastically before frowning in seriousness. "If I just had a clue what Horizons was! Sanguine said it was something bad and something big. Real big. And apparently, from what I saw on Goldenblood's terminal, wherever and whatever it is…it's ready to go off. But I can't think of anypony who'd have a clue as to what it is or what it's meant to do. The only ones who might know are the Harbingers, and we're not exactly on speaking terms at the moment."

P-21 frowned, seeming lost in thought before he slowly nodded. "Yeah…"

"Well, nothing I can do about that now. While I can't quit, I think I can spare a short vacation from EC-1101. A week or two, maybe," I said with a smile. Or till the Harbingers showed up. "See? Blackjack can learn." Somehow, my joke didn't reach him.

"Yeah," he said as he stared away out the door. "Blackjack. Do you trust me?" I caught the glint of guilt in his eyes as he peeked back at me from the corner of his eye.

"Sure," I answered at once. "I trust all of you."

"Even if we…I…did something behind your back?"

I looked at him for a long moment, and then smiled, "All of you are a whole lot smarter than I am, P-21. If you did something and didn't tell me…well, I trust you'd only do it for good reason. And I trust that you'd tell me sooner or later." My response seemed to tear at him a little. I knew it couldn't be easy for him.

He turned away and seemed to debate with himself a minute. I could have asked for whatever he was hiding from me, but I didn't want to push him. Then he glanced back at me, and our eyes met.

For the longest time, we seemed to just stare at one another. For the oddest reason, I thought back to 99 and meeting outside that supply room. It felt like it'd all been a dream. He turned, his stoic mask spoiled by the tension of worry about his eyes. He was waiting for me to ask. I was waiting for him to tell me. Finally, he lowered his gaze. "I have something to tell you, Blackjack. You're not going to like it, though."

I arched a brow. "About Tenpony?" Heee, it wasn't often I got to be the smug pony.

He was silent for a moment before he sighed and frowned with an annoyed little scowl. "So Glory told you. Figures." He shook his

head grimly, as he went on, “Well, we promised Homage we would when you were ready. She promised to talk with me first though.”

“Actually, she didn’t,” I answered as I looked at him. “I sort of worked out that something was wrong about what happened there.”

He scowled at me, skepticism clear on his face. I sighed and rolled my eyes. “*And* I heard you and Rampage talking about it.”

Surprise showed for a moment before he recomposed himself. He swallowed and looked out at the gloom around us.

“I’m…I’m sorry. We…” He didn’t seem to know how to finish.

“Thought it was the best thing for me,” I finished for him and gave an honest smile. Any anger I’d have normally felt was muted by the rain and the talk I’d had with Dealer. I’d lied to my friends to protect them…they’d lied to me to protect me. That was the definition of ‘fair’. It didn’t matter if fair still sucked butt.

“Yeah,” he muttered, looking ashamed. “When you ran off with LittlePip, Glory was in a panic. Homage was beside herself. We were all…concerned.” He sighed and shook his head. “Then you returned on a flight of alicorns and…yeah. All of us were really worried.”

“You were right to be,” I replied, putting my hoof on his shoulder.

He reached up to his wide-brimmed black hat and pulled it off, then reached in and scooped up a round memory orb in his hoof. I frowned, focused, and barely managed to snag it with my feeble magic. That teleport had knocked my horn for a loop, but it didn’t diminish the fact that I’d done it. Mom had told me her mother had been able to do it, and her grandmother’s mother too. I’d never seen Mom pull it off, though.

“So, how’d you get it from me?” I asked. “I know I’m not as smart as LittlePip. No way I’d do it to myself.”

“We didn’t. It’s my memory,” he said. “No sex. No surprises. Just the truth.” He trotted to the side and took a seat in a sheltered spot. “It’s not long. I’ll watch you while you view it.” I blinked at him in shock, and his eyes popped open. “I mean I’ll watch out for you while you view it. Not watch you ‘cause I want to watch you…” He closed his eyes and pressed his hooves to the sides of his head. “Priest. Stronghoof. U-21. Calamity,” he muttered over again.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m pretty sure you can like both stallions and mares.”

That brought him back to his scowling, grumpy self. “I don’t like

mares. Most are whining, chatty, hypocritical, and just plain crazy. With the exception of Scotch Tape and…I just don't like them!" he blurted, waving his hoof at me. I couldn't hide my smile, and he pointedly glared at anything that wasn't me. Some things never changed. Thank Celestia for that.

Chuckling, I glanced from him to the little orb, then moved beside him. Not the opportune place, but it was better than nothing. I tapped the orb to my horn with magic and tried to make the link to the orb. According to Triage's notes, I wasn't supposed to force it. Then the connection took hold, and the world slipped away.

oooOOOooo

It'd be nice to say that it was the first time I had been in a pony like this, but I'd be lying. The full body ache ran from head to hoof; it wasn't nearly as intense as the agony I'd experienced as Deus, but I couldn't imagine anypony living like this day after day. Each step sent a wave of discomfort rolling through his muscles. Every breath was an ache-filled labor. Even blinking created a swell of pressure in his eyes. I instantly had a greater understanding for my friend's personality. If I felt like this daily, I'd be pretty grumpy too.

He trotted away from where all the others talked in low voices and sat. Carefully, he reached behind his head and raked his hooves through his brushy mane, pulling out three syringes of Med-X. He hesitated, looked back over his shoulder. He bit the cap covers off two of them and jammed the needles into his hind leg right above the knee that'd been crippled not so long ago. Instantly he shuddered and let out a long sigh of relief.

He looked up and met the equally stoic gaze of the zebra, Xenith. I hadn't known her very well; she'd been nothing like Xanthe, despite how similar their names were. Xanthe had been weird. Xenith had been scary. The zebra didn't say a word; her light green eyes may have simply been cameras recording his private moment for all the judgment they held. P-21 said nothing either. Then there was some silent acknowledgement in Xenith's tiny nod before the zebra turned away and he tossed the syringes in the trash. With a deftness that shocked me, he wound his mane around the remaining needle and hid it in his wiry blue hair.

Slowly he walked back towards the conversation. "…is having the memories extracted. To be safe, we're going to scrub every

reference to Blackjack and the rest of you from her mind before she leaves here. She wants us to save the chat she had with Red Eye, but with Lacunae following the rest of you around... We don't want to risk the Goddess thinking Blackjack knows something," Velvet Remedy said calmly, not noticing P-21 returning to the group.

"Blackjack knowing things is an oxymoron," P-21 replied sourly.

"She's lucky," Homage nearly growled. "LittlePip is so getting punished when she's…better. Running off like that in the middle of the night. Not telling anypony!"

Glory looked like she'd been crying with her lovely purple eyes all bloodshot and puffy. It didn't matter what body she possessed, she'd always be beautiful. "Punished?" she asked a little cluelessly.

"Means she's going to strap her down and take a crop to LittlePip's hind-end till she learns not to scare us all so bad," Calamity replied with a chuckle, making the gray pegasus blush furiously.

"Does…does that really work?" Glory asked, blinking in surprise.

When ponies looked at her, her ears folded back, and she said softly, "My…ah…my sister is like that."

The gray unicorn smiled kindly and then rolled her eyes. "Maybe.

Maybe not. But it's definitely going to make me feel better," she said with a small smile at Glory and a nod at Velvet and Calamity.

"Anyway. LittlePip is our problem. What about Blackjack? Is she okay?"

Glory opened her mouth, sighed, then started again. Her voice was more clipped and reserved. "She drank nearly a gallon of whiskey in one go. She would have been dead of alcohol poisoning if she'd done this a week ago." She sighed again and covered her face with a hoof and her voice shook. "I…I don't know if it was another suicide attempt or not. I knew there'd be trauma… We nearly lost her so many times. I just…I just don't know."

Sweet Celestia, I deserved whippings for a year for doing this to her. Velvet put her forelegs around Glory in a light embrace. P-21 stepped forward. "I doubt we'll be able to apply the term 'okay' to Blackjack any time soon. We'll see how she stabilizes…if she does.

She was mutated, violated, mutilated, and then... she... " His voice broke for a moment as he looked away before finishing, "And then she came back as something else."

A speaker beside the metal drum holding the professor's head crackled, "At the very least, she shouldn't feel discomfort from her augmentation. We were very careful to block as much pain input

from her synthetics as we could. She shouldn't need Deus's Mega-X painkiller formula. That's one benefit."

Wait. So I was *supposed* to hurt? Was that why I felt so…so still inside? Were my implants rubbing against flesh, scraping at nonfunctional nerves, with every step? I'd never forget the pain Deus had been forced to live with.

"Did her augments make her do this, Professor?" P-21 asked.

The speaker was silent a moment, then said, "It's possible. Steelpony only had a few test subjects as heavily augmented as her. There seems to be an equilibrium point where, once so much of the body is lost, the mind becomes increasingly unstable. A few became terribly reckless in battle; after all, they had repair talismans. Why worry about damage? Others felt a loss of self and suffered depression. Still others became more aggressive as they tried to assert self on their augmentations."

"So her twigged behavior could be from the mess she's lived through, a loose wire, or both?" Calamity asked before looking at Homage with a little half smile. "Kinda makes ya miss PTMs, don't it?"

"No. It doesn't," Homage replied before looking at Glory. "Don't worry. We'll get her straightened out."

"We'll go check on LittlePip. Let her know you're coming in a bit," Velvet said, and then she and Calamity headed for the exit. P-21's eyes lingered on the brown pegasus's backside; I had to admit, my friend had excellent taste. I'd said it before: I didn't know what it was, but there was just something about fliers that was nummy! A second later, noticed only by P-21, Xenith departed as well.

When they'd gone, Glory sighed and looked at P-21. "Is Scotch Tape still with Lacunae?"

"I think so," he answered as he took a seat across from the crimson-and-scarlet-maned stallion, Life Bloom. "If LittlePip was right…"

"She was," Homage replied firmly. "Twilight Sparkle was pulled into Unity days after the bombs went off." Glory shivered and shook her head.

"Then we need to keep this from both of them. We don't know what the Goddess would do if she knew." Glory looked at Life Bloom. "Can't you convince the Twilight Society to put off this stupid test?"

"Unfortunately, no," Life Bloom replied with a sigh and a shake of

his head. "They spent a considerable amount of resources helping put Blackjack back together. They want a payback. Sooner, rather than later."

"She just woke up, and the first things she did were run off into a tunnel full of feral ghouls and sneak into an enemy camp with a complete stranger," Glory said as she wiped her puffy eyes with her wing. "Give her a little time!" she begged.

"It's not my decision. The Society wants her tested," Life Bloom said grimly. "Every few years we come across a Ministry Mare relative, usually an Apple, who can bypass spells keyed to the Ministry Mares."

"But how do you even know there is a descendant for Twilight?" P-21 asked.

"A hundred and fifty years ago there was an organized attack on Tenpony. Raiders were part of an ill-planned attack on the tower itself, back when the Twilight Society made efforts to help the inhabitants around the tower. Several raiders were captured. One carried a memory orb. Before her execution, she said she'd gotten it from a strange ghoul living in Canterlot who claimed she'd gotten it from the Ministry of Peace hub. Inside were memories of Twilight having a clandestine relationship with Big Macintosh and of an unborn foal being transferred to a surrogate mother.

Unfortunately, we've never been able to ascertain which of Twilight's cousins could have been the surrogate. So for a hundred and fifty years, that memory orb has achieved near mythical status."

"Why?" Glory asked with a frown. "What do they expect her to do? Be the second coming of Twilight Sparkle?"

"Twilight ushered in an era of magical discovery unparalleled since the mythic ages of Clover the Clever and Starswirl the Bearded.

Her brother was captain of the Royal Guard for several years. Her family had been integral to Equestria, and there was even speculation before the war that the Sparkle lineage was descended from those legendary ponies," Life Bloom said calmly. "There are many in the Society who believe that any pony descended from Twilight would be destined to do great things."

"Nevermind that she could be one good push away from a complete psychological collapse?" Glory protested.

Life Bloom closed his eyes and sighed. "In their eyes, if Blackjack is unstable, she can always have an heir or two to fit the Society's

agenda."
"Over my dead body," P-21 said flatly.
"I'd never be a party to such a thing either," Homage said, glaring at Life Bloom.
"There are elements in the Society who would trade DJ Pon3 for the Twilight Sparkle bloodline, Homage. In a heartbeat," Life Bloom replied grimly. I had to say, all the warm and fuzzy sentiments I may have had for the Twilight Society were going bye-bye. He looked at P-21 and Glory. "Not all, or even most, but enough. The moderates simply want to know, then make up their minds in their own time."
"But if she is, then the hardliners would probably never let her leave," Glory said with a scowl. "But if she doesn't do their test, then they won't let her leave either."
"Are you certain Blackjack can't handle the knowledge?" the professor asked. "She seemed remarkably resilient."
Oddly, everypony looked at P-21 instead of Glory. He looked around, then sighed. "I think that with time, Blackjack can handle anything. Wait a few weeks, and she'd be able to deal with being related to the most famous unicorn in history. But throwing it at her now…no. I don't think it'd be good. She'd react badly. Like… gassing Stable 99 badly," he added, looking around at the others.
"What is the test that is being considered?" the professor asked.
Life Bloom sighed and rubbed between his eyes. "The hardliners want something definitive. Perhaps some kind of blood test.
Umbra wants nothing less than an egg harvest for magic testing.
The old bastard probably plans on eventual in vitro fertilization."
P-21 reached into his brushy tail, and I felt the bump of a grenade underhoof. Life Bloom glanced at P-21 and I guessed saw my blue friend's equivalent of a shooty look. "That is not what most of the Society is after," he added quickly, and P-21 relaxed just a little.
Glory didn't. If looks were magic bullet spells… Life Bloom continued, "Most want to see if she can open the doors."
"Doors?" Glory asked in worry.
"There's a number of doors that were magically keyed to Twilight so that only she or close relatives could open them. Some are… very hush hush. But there are others that were more symbolic.
Like the main doors to the M.A.S. meeting room where all the boring official business happened." He looked around the building.
"Before this place was made the M.A.S. hub, it was an exclusive

hotel. Much of the building was modified for the M.A.S. to use."

"I thought that Tenpony was built for the M.A.S.," Glory said in surprise.

"A lot of things were built from the ground up for the Ministries, but it's not like they all appeared overnight," Life Bloom replied casually. "While Maripony and the Canterlot and Hoofington hubs were being constructed, Tenpony was converted as a base of operations. It had already been modified into a broadcasting tower for the war effort before Luna rose to power, so it was a natural conversion. The uppermost floors were converted to M.A.S. use while the lower ones remained as they were for the populace."

"So…before these doors were enchanted so that only Twilight could open them, the room was just an ordinary room?" P-21 asked, his brows furrowing.

"I believe so, yes," Life Bloom said with a frown.

"With ordinary locks?" P-21 asked.

Homage frowned at him. "You're thinking of locking the doors so they won't open for *anypony*."

"Right. Blackjack and the hardliners will see her fail to open them," P-21 replied.

Life Bloom smiled. "And then we can have her open something else later to be absolutely sure. Perhaps Twilight's study. It's off the athenaeum; most ponies won't be there." He looked at the others. "That way I can inform more moderate members discreetly that she is Twilight's."

"Blackjack will never have to know," P-21 said with a little nod, then looked at the worried Glory. "She can continue on thinking that she's just Blackjack."

"And the Goddess won't know any different either," Glory said as she closed her eyes. "Oh, Blackjack…I'm so sorry…" She sniffed.

She had nothing to be sorry about.

Homage frowned at the three of us, then shook her head. "The only way I'll agree with this is if we tell Blackjack the truth."

"Homage. We know why we can't," Life Bloom said with a resigned sigh.

"And I accept that. There is a time and a place for honesty. This isn't it. But she deserves to know the truth." Homage looked at all of us sternly before adding, "Otherwise, I will tell her. And if that'll be easier on all of you, then that's how we can do it."

Glory trembled a little. "I couldn't…I wouldn't know how…"

"I'll tell her," P-21 said in a low voice. "She knows I won't lie to her."

Homage's eyes softened a little. "That would be welcome, but things might get…mixed up." That was an understatement; if we went back out into the wastes, there was a chance he could die and I'd never know. "How about copying your memories of this meeting? She can access them later…if her magic recovers. It might be easier to show what we decided rather than tell her.

Make it easier on her. And you," she added.

P-21 glared at the mare, then lowered his eyes. "Fine."

The rest of the memory was simple. P-21 snuck up in the early morning, avoiding cameras and personnel alike as if he were a giant blue StealthBuck. He walked right up to the fancy doors, tried to open them…nothing. He squatted, and with a pin, his screwdriver (which I thankfully learned he kept concealed in his brushy tail and not…other places), and some scrap metal jammed the heavy old lock closed.

So that was it, then. My friends had conspired to keep me safe from not just myself but from others as well. And they'd been right to do so. If the Goddess had known I was related to Twilight, she might have tried to hurt me simply to torment the Twilight Sparkle within her. If the hardliners had known, I might never have left.

And if I'd known…yes. I would have done something stupid and selfish. Hurt myself…or hurt my friends even more.

P-21 made his way towards the clinic when he passed by a mirror.

He looked around, confirming he was alone, then stared at his own reflection. "Blackjack…" he began, then clenched his jaw and adverted his eyes from himself. "I don't know how to say this. I don't know if you'll ever be well enough for this memory. Heck, we might all be dead tomorrow. I just…I wanted…I…" He covered his face with a hoof and groaned. "I think it was easier when I wasn't allowed to talk most of the time."

He sat for a moment, then looked at himself again. Slowly he took another breath and then said softly, "Thank you. Even if you're the most…boneheaded, idiotic, infuriating mare in existence…you never quit. You never give up. No matter how hard it is on you. I hope you realize that we don't want to give up either. You suffer so much for us…sometimes pointlessly…that it makes me want to scream and hug you at the same time. Don't suffer for us. The guilt is worse than the pain. We can take it. Maybe not as much as you

do, but we can handle what the wasteland throws at us."

His lips curled in a rare, soft smile as he stared into his own blue eyes. "You can trust us with the burden sometimes. That's all I'm saying." He flushed and then glanced away, back again, and then added, "And... um... please don't tell Calamity. Or talk about this... ever... or... " He groaned and shook his head. "Ugh... nevermind... "

Then he turned and continued on his way. The world swirled away as the memory ended.

oooOOOooo

The drizzly night reasserted itself along with the strange notes of Octavia's mournful music coming from my PipBuck. I was the descendant of Twilight Sparkle. The child she and Big Macintosh had conceived together had been passed to Marigold after his assassination. Marigold had raised Tarot as her own. By a fluke, she'd been visiting a friend when the bombs fell, and instead of ending up in the doomed stable 90, she'd gone to Stable 99 where she'd passed the filly to Card Trick. She'd grown up in a stable where the rules almost guaranteed she'd have a child. Generations later, here I was. How could all that be a coincidence?

A riot was taking place in Unity as the Twilight part of the Goddess struggled to assert herself at this news. I couldn't pick out specific words from all of the babble, but I was guessing that the Goddess wasn't going to be too happy with me when she finally imposed order on the consensus. That hardly mattered, though. She was already plenty pissed with me.

I'd go crazy if I tried to calculate the odds. I remembered being on Star Point when I realized the implications, but now... I wondered if there was some force out there playing with me, setting things up.

Maybe Discord had done it all as a joke ages ago. If I found a memory orb of Goldenblood plotting this, I'd scream. Or maybe it was as simple as Celestia and Luna still managing things from the everafter. Or simply it was all chance, a trillion to one odds. Who could say?

All I knew was my tail was soaked and my butt was cold. I turned to P-21 with a grateful smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dawn said happily from beside me with her merry squint.

"Gyaaaah!" I shouted, lurching back and falling over. I waved a hoof at the dove-gray pegasus looking down with an expression of concern. "Where- where'd you come from?"

"Flankfurt…though I think today you call it just 'Flank'," she replied casually.

P-21 stepped up beside Dawn, looking a bit wet and more worried than usual. "Hey," he murmured, looking away awkwardly as he rubbed his shoulder with his forehoof, water dripping off his battered hat. "I.. um... I hope you don't mind." He pointed at my PipBuck. "I wanted to play some of that Octavia broadcast."

What Octavia broadcast? I opened my mouth to ask, but then I saw the familiar seriousness in his eyes and a tiny nod towards Dawn. I swallowed, and then gave a little smile. "Yeah. No problem. I love Octavia too."

"Good. You should leave it on." I just frowned at him in bafflement, then gave a little nod. He relaxed just a hair, glanced at Dawn, and then asked in a lower voice, "Are you... okay?" I could hear the unanswered questions. 'Okay with what we did? Okay with what you know?'

Was I? Twilight Sparkle was a legendary figure in my mind. To be related to her, even distantly, felt... overwhelming. But unlike at Tenpony, now I'd had time to come to terms with some of the changes forced upon me. And I'd seen that Twilight hadn't been perfect; good, yes, but not perfect. No perfect pony could have left Discord to be processed into Flux. But she'd been willing to resign rather than continue being a part of ministries that did bad things.

I wasn't quite the fuck-up that I'd always thought of myself as. Not perfect – certainly not – but trying to do better.

"Yeah. I am," I replied. He smiled, body sagging in relief before he gave a sharp sneeze. I patted his shoulder. "We should go back inside Star House. Getting sick sucks."

"Actually. I'd love to talk with you a moment alone, if you don't mind," Dawn said. I saw P-21's features immediately grow grim.

"I don't think–" I began.

"Go ahead, Blackjack," P-21 said as he pulled his battered, floppy hat down over his face a little more.

Wait? He wanted me to go with her? "Are you sure?"

"Sure. I'll go back to the house," he said with a smile. "You should talk with her. She's an interesting mare. Some questions and answers might help you out. Expand your horizons." Wait...

what?

My eyes went from her to him. Did he think Dawn knew something about Horizons? "If you're sure," I murmured, glancing past him at the amused pegasus.

"Sure. Just keep her close. Friends always stick close," he said quietly, then turned and slowly, silently, walked out into the night.

Overhead, the clouds let out a long, deep rumble of thunder.

"Such a fascinating stallion. You know, I suspect he's secretly in love with you," Dawn said as she looked at me with her eyes closed.

"Unlikely," I replied flatly. "He's more interested in stallions than mares." Dawn just seemed to find that even more amusing, and I felt a flash of annoyance. "So. What do you want to talk about?" I asked, the contrabass beginning a long, low musical sawing that made my mane crawl. I wanted to turn it off, but I remembered what P-21 had said.

"If you don't mind, I was hoping we could go for a walk and talk a bit," Dawn said absently. "I've been eager to learn more about the mare who's done so much in such a short time. It seems like Equestria is seeing an outbreak of heroes these days."

"Now?" I asked, gaping at her, looking around at the dripping rainwater. "In *this*?"

"Oh, it's hardly poor weather. The rain is coming down evenly, and we shouldn't see the worst of it for at least an hour," she said as if it was no matter. "As to the time, I've long grown used to keeping unusual hours." I disagreed with her on the 'hardly poor weather' part. The black skies were lit from within by the distant, dull flashes of lightning around the Core. She pointed up towards the manor. "Perhaps up to that lovely estate and back again?"

Right. A walk in the middle of the night to chat as a storm builds.

Even I wasn't that stupid, but it wasn't as if I could just shake her.

Not till she told me what was going on. P-21 said I should stay with her... so I faked as much enthusiasm as I could. "Sure. Sounds like fun." I'm just taking a walk, in the rain, at night, with a storm coming, *unarmed*... I sighed. There were *so* many things wrong with this.

Trust me. Expand your horizons.

I do, P-21. And I stood and followed her out into this hissing rain as the skies crackled. Octavia's classical music seemed to rise and fall in fitful melodies. I glanced at the title. 'Storm'. Wonderful...

For Glory's sake, I dearly wanted to cling to the hope that Dawn

was here for good reasons. That P-21 was just being paranoid. That this really was good and right... I glanced at her as we walked in silence through Chapel and saw her frown a little. "I admit I have some concerns about you and Glory. I've heard some disturbing stories…about how dangerous you've been to others. And to yourself."

"Well, the Wasteland is a dangerous place. Especially around Hoofington," I added as I looked at the rain rolling off her wings. She was walking with her eyes closed. How in Equestria could she see where she was going? It was getting beyond 'weird' and into 'creepy'.

"Mmmm. But for all its danger, Hoofington has always had potential for greatness. Did you know that, long ago, it nearly became the capital of Equestria? I'm not talking about during the war. No, this was hundreds of years before that," she said happily as she walked slowly beside me.

"No. I honestly didn't," I replied.

"Mhmmmm! This entire valley was to be a glorious city. From one side to the other. A place of beauty and majesty fit to make Manehattan look like a backwater," Dawn said as she walked along. She faced me and added, as if sensing my skepticism, "Not all wastelanders are ignorant savages. I've spent years collecting any lore that might help others understand what Equestria was…and could be again."

"Still…Hoofington?" I muttered weakly, just not seeing it.

"No. Lunaria. The capital of Princess Luna." My shock and confusion had to be showing. "History gave her the far less flattering title of Nightmare Moon."

Funny. I seemed to recall a memory of Luna happily assuming that title herself. "But she was banished. And a thousand years later stripped of her powers." You'd be surprised what you can learn on the night shift with nothing but old textbooks in storage to read... though mostly they'd just been about the importance of following rules.

"Indeed. Celestia and her forces met Princess Luna here before her dark citadel and used the Elements of Harmony to banish her to the moon for a thousand years. The valley was all but abandoned afterwards, till centuries later the village of Hoofington was founded. And then reborn a third time as the Core." I tried not to snort. A city only Nightmare Moon could love…

"Yeah. Great place to live, if it didn't kill everypony that got close," I said sarcastically.

"Yes, the automated defenses are a problem, but there is a key to shutting them down," she replied, and I felt a chill creeping along my spine. It was now I really wished I had my barding and a gun of some kind. Even one of Glory's cakes. There was no way to tell with her eyes closed to slits, but somehow I could feel her looking at EC-1101.

"And you'd want to live there?" I asked slowly, as if I were trying to disarm a landmine.

"I'd like to live anywhere we can have peace. Don't you want peace?" she asked in an almost pleading voice.

"I'd like any place where people aren't killing each other over some bottlecaps, salvage, or their next meal," I replied. "I'd like to not have to kill anypony again. Wouldn't you?" We passed the post office, and I saw Caprice peeking out at us. The peach mare's pink eyes met mine for one instant, then dropped shamefully. Slowly she drew back into the building and closed the door.

My question seemed to amuse the gray pegasus, who sighed and shook her head. "Of course. I don't believe in killing any more than you do. Every life lost is one more person who can't help us rebuild the world. And I want to rebuild the world," she said calmly. "I'm hoping that we can work together for a common good."

"Your good, or mine?" I asked as we walked past the town entrance. The colts manning the light machine gun in its tower looked down at me with a seriousness that didn't match their youthful appearance. They reminded me of Boing.

"Why not both? You want to help the people of this city. I want the same. It seems we have some common needs that should be grounds for cooperation," she said very matter-of-factly. "You've heard of virtues, yes? Mine is salvation. I've devoted my entire life to bettering the world. To do better, as Fluttershy said." She tilted her head towards me. "I imagine your virtue must be quite similar to do all that you do."

I hadn't thought of my virtues in a long time. Salvation? No. I didn't think so. And even as much as I threw myself into the meat grinder, I doubted that it was sacrifice. Tenacity…endurance… maybe. But I didn't hold any illusions that I could save the Wasteland on my own. I doubted anypony could. All I could do

was give ponies a chance.

"I just don't want people to hurt. If I can spare them that, then I'm happy," I replied, not quite telling the truth but not lying either.

"It's a generous gift you want to give them," Dawn said as we trotted along through the rain. "It was a gift my husband, Sky Striker, tried to give me. A wonderful gift. A life above the clouds."

"Oh?" I asked, wondering where to take this strange conversation as we crawled up the hillside. "How'd you meet?"

She gave a little laugh. "Oh, it was quite unexpected." She flushed a little, running a hoof through her mane. "You know of my friends? Big Daddy? King Awesome? Carrots and Zodiac? Keeper? They were much like you and your friends." She shook her head. "When I was just a filly, my tribe was wiped out in a brutal fight. I saw my parents, both earth ponies, killed before my eyes. Such things were common then. But I vowed on their deaths that I would stop the killing. It earned me my cutie mark," she said as she looked at her flank and the Dashite brand. "A new day... "

My eyes lingered on the mark a moment. "What was it?"

"The sun... or what I imagined a sun to be. A great bright disk of light... illuminating the Wasteland... " She sighed and shook her head. "At least, that was what I believed."

I frowned and listened as she continued. "I was just a naïve young pony going into the savage Wasteland. I met Big Daddy first. A huge braggart of a stallion seeking to become the Wasteland's greatest fighter. He joined me to prove to the skeptical filly how mighty he was. Then Keeper, the horny scoundrel, making his way from one end of the Wasteland to the other in search of caps. Big Daddy had to thump him regularly to protect my virtue." She snorted, the thunder rumbling overhead as we drew closer to the manor.

"We met Crunchy Carrots and Zodiac trying to kill each other raiding the same pre-war bunker, trying to find the same ancient technology. Turned out to be a dead end. King Awesome joined last, bringing his own magical skills, and an ego to match Big Daddy's, to the team." Her smile turned wistful as she sighed. "And together we decided to save the Wasteland, starting with Hoofington. Those were the best days of my life."

"Saving the Wasteland's easier said than done," I commented lightly.

"Yes. Much. And over time, the lack of success grew... frustrating. The flaws in us pushed us apart more and more. Eventually, we were fighting each other more than the gangs and warlords of Hoofington... " She sighed and shook her head. "One day there was an incredible storm, and from the clouds above fell a wounded dragon and a pegasus. The dragon crawled off... to where, I never discovered... but I met my Sky Striker and nursed him back to health... and then... he offered to take me back with him."

"Your friends allowed it?" I asked.

"No." She shook her head. "But by then... well... we weren't much of friends anymore. They stayed together because of me and... well... I flew off. I abandoned them to find their own way." She looked out into the night. "I failed them. They joined me because they believed in me... "

I thought of Dawn and my own friends. Would we still be friends in five years? Or even one? I'd been outside in the Wasteland for a month and a half, and look at how much I'd changed. "And once in the Enclave, you tried to get them to help the surface."

"Yes," she said with a nod. "Though I tried to be a mother first. It was... nice," she said with a faint blush. "But my virtue had always been to try and save people below the clouds from the life I'd lived. The Enclave, even now, has power and food and the sun... so very much... that we lack below. But I failed. And soon... soon there were ponies willing to kill me to keep them from having to acknowledge the suffering below." She shook her head again. In the flickers of approaching lightning I could make out the outlines of the manor through the pouring rain. "I say I left to protect my family... and part of that is true... but... "

I finished for her as the thunder growled like a stalking beast growing closer with every minute. "But you also left because you hadn't done what you needed to. The wastes still needed saving."

"Yes. My friends hadn't been able to do so. Nor had the Enclave. So I left them behind." She stopped and, for a moment, looked skyward again. "Sometimes, though... sometimes I think I'd give almost anything to go back. To be with them... my family... my friends... Sky Striker. All I'd need is one word, and I'd fly back to that life. The feeling terrifies me at times." She shook her head once more, as if trying to rattle the desire from her mind.

"Sometimes, I'd give anything to have 99 back. Do anything. Just to have a chance of making it better. There were good ponies

there, even if it was messed up. I'd give anything to give ponies a chance at a better tomorrow," I said as we started down the driveway towards the cavernous manor. With luck, it'd offer some shelter from the storm.

Glory's mom stopped in the rainy road and looked at me quizzically. "Then why is it you deny EC-1101 to ponies who would use it to spare countless others pain and suffering?"

No. Looking at Dawn, the sensation of hope that Glory would have a happy life with her mother again guttered, and I felt a chill pass though me. The building storm now completely forgotten, I looked on in sad resignation. P-21 had been right. She did know something! "How do you know about EC-1101? Did Glory or P-21 tell you?" Her smile, smug and knowing, informed me that Glory hadn't. And P-21 wouldn't...

"Oh no," she said softly as she trotted up the road. "I've been searching for EC-1101 for quite a while now."

Then I knew the answer, like a sick punch to my gut. "You're with the Harbingers."

"More accurately, I *am* the Harbingers," Dawn replied matter-of-factly. "I am their prophet for a better tomorrow."

For a few seconds, I wondered if my horn had recovered enough for a magic bullet. If not, fingers would work. Still, I looked at the unassuming gray mare…their leader. It was a rare moment I really wished I could kill a pony in cold blood. But Dawn wasn't just unarmed, she was unarmored and Glory's mother besides. The second she turned red on my EFS, though… "So all that catching up with your daughter? Just a lie?" I asked, glaring at her in the rain.

"No. It was a gift. A miraculous indulgence," Dawn replied, her smile fading a little. She looked towards Star House with that infuriating squint. "It was wonderful to meet her again. To talk to her like we did years ago. And I thank you for giving me the opportunity, Blackjack. I do. But time is running out. I'm here to ask for your help. No guns. No tricks."

"Really? So this isn't just an attempt to get me alone and kill me?" I asked sharply.

She looked at me evenly. "Believe it or not, while I do want EC-1101, I also want my daughter to be happy. You make her happy. Happier than I ever could," she said, her voice a soft note of shame.

I snorted in disbelief. "You're the leader of the Harbingers. You've

been hunting me for the last week. Why in hell would I ever work with you?"

"Because you want to save the Wasteland. And together, we can save it from Project Horizons."

I felt as if lightning had struck me again, and I stared at her in shock. "Project Horizons? You know what it is?"

"A bit," she replied with a small smile. "And I know that you've been trying to figure out what Goldenblood and the O.I.A. did two hundred years ago," she said, trotting off through the rain towards the front of the manor. "If you want to know more, come with me. We'll talk, and I'll tell you what I know."

I stopped in my tracks. Going with her would need a level of idiocy astounding even to me. This clear ploy had to lead me into a trap. It was obvious from a mile away. I tried to send a message to Lacunae to try and find P-21. To give some kind of warning to Glory. The riotous argument being held in Unity made me unsure if it got through to my friend, though.

I'd already walked into one... two... too many death traps trying to unravel the mystery of Horizons, and I'd promised Glory I wouldn't get into trouble. "Thanks, but–" I began, and then I froze.

My eyes returned to Dawn. I had friends. I had to trust in them.

P-21 had been right. I could no more give up on learning about Horizons than I could cut off my own head. And now I had a chance to find out something about Horizons itself.

Falling in step with the pegasus, I asked, "So. What is it?"

"Horizons itself was a superweapon developed two hundred years ago by Goldenblood to prevent a coup by the Ministry Mares. I don't know where it is or how it works, but being that it was designed by Trottenheimer, who adapted megaspells to weaponized purposes, we can assume the destruction would be substantial. You saw what his silver bullets could do," Dawn said as she walked beside me.

"How do you know this?" I asked with a frown.

"Because thirty years ago my friends learned about the activities of the O.I.A. and the existence of their secret projects. Not hard, given that Zodiac worked on one of them. We scraped the surface and learned just the barest hints of the projects, but that was enough.

Unfortunately, the struggle between my friends was too much to bear, and we separated before we could learn more. But I knew of it." She sighed and hung her head a little and continued, "And

unlike the others, I remembered."

"Zodiac said she didn't know anything about it," I countered.

"She lied." Dawn shrugged. "Or she simply forgot. I suppose living for two hundred years could make a pony somewhat forgetful," she said simply. "I'd suspect the former, though. She was always casual with the truth." The gray mare sighed and shook her head. "In any event, when I returned to the Wasteland, I sought out something…anything…that could save it. The Enclave was too isolated. They would have killed me before they lifted a feather to help the surface. So I travelled far and wide in search of anypony who could bring order to the world.

"I came across a few prospects. A griffin warlord trying to recoup his people's fallen glory. A dragon with the intelligence and skill to manipulate ponies, living in an old prison and trying to establish control around his lair. The most promising by far was a cyberpony willing to do or give whatever he could to re-establish civilization.

Each of them, however, fell short. The first was too consumed by hatred, the second obsessed with greed, and the last callous to the suffering he caused. When I returned to Hoofington, I was prepared to die. I went into the tunnels, ready to rot away and be done with life," she said solemnly. "And it was there that she found me."

"She?" I asked with a frown as we walked towards the camp where the Crusaders had gathered their salvage. So far, there were only two red bars, but I had no idea if they were Harbingers at the edge of my sensor range or radroaches trying to get out of the rain.

From the movement, possibly the latter. Still, there could easily be snipers focused on me this very second.

"I was sick, dying, and delirious when she found me and saved me from the Enervation beneath the city. I was nursed to health and given the ability to understand her." She turned to me and smiled in bliss. "She is the Goddess of the Core."

I halted in my tracks at the mouth of the empty camp, and so did she. "Goddess? As in…Princess Celestia goddess?" Or alicorn-creating crazy evil goddess?

"Yes. A goddess of technology and knowledge. Cognitum. She is trapped and integrated with the Core, but she showed me such wonders. The Core is there…a city that can contain and care for the entire population of the Wasteland ten times over. It is a place where all sapient life…not just ponies but zebras, griffins, hellhounds, and even dragons can live in peace. Even with the

extensive damage that time and the war inflicted, there is more than enough for all." She smiled gently. "You've already felt her blessing. She was the one who overrode the interference to fire the defense beam at the ghoul in Hightower."

"Interference?" I frowned in confusion.

Dawn sighed. "When Equestria fell, countless automated spell matrixes were locked out. Though Cognitum is wise and powerful, nearly every system in the Core disobeys her. It is a struggle for her to exert her will on even the smallest system." She then smiled once more. "But, with effort, she can."

"I see. So she fried the ghoul," I said slowly.

"And she took over the holo-emitters in Flash Industries and killed your enemies," Dawn said with a wide smile. "See? Even though you have never known, she's assisted you several times before."

Funny, I recalled her assistance practically ripped my leg off and nearly killing Glory! I scowled and put that aside for the moment; I needed answers, not to pick a fight just yet. "So this Cognitum told you more about Horizons?"

Dawn's smile faded a little. "Yes. It is a device capable of destroying not just the Wasteland but potentially far more.

EC-1101 serves as its trigger. When Equestria fell and EC-1101 went active, the fuse was lit, but then through sheer chance the spell became trapped within your stable, and the fuse was then delayed. Now it is out, and once more Horizons is primed to fire."

"And how does giving you EC-1101 figure in?" She hadn't told me much about Horizons, but I definitely wanted to know more. P-21 had been right, again.

"Right now, Cognitum struggles to assert herself over the most basic of systems. Without the authority granted by EC-1101, she is only able to utilize one ten thousandth of her normal capabilities.

She struggles through interference and dealing with the damaged systems. Once EC-1101 is in her hooves and properly activated, she will be able to cancel Horizons and establish a new Equestria from here. All will be welcome. All will be equal in her *true* unity. And then…then we will have peace."

That meant that this Cognitum had to be a descendant of a ministry mare too. "So Cognitum sent Sanguine to my stable?"

"Yes," she replied simply. "The price was the restoration of his family. But Sanguine was a coward. When he learned of the true Goddess, he sought to retrieve EC-1101 and flee. He would have

run beyond her reach and, in doing so, doomed us all. Eventually, EC-1101 will conclude that Luna has been deposed and fire Horizons. When that happens, the Wasteland, perhaps the world, will be destroyed."

I frowned; something about this was off. Goldenblood had been paranoid, no doubt about that. He'd done everything he could to ensure that Luna had remained in power. He'd manipulated the ministries and the entire kingdom for her. But if Luna was deposed or killed…why blow everything up? Some sort of vengeance? It couldn't have worked as a deterrent because nopony knew about it.

I looked at the gray pegasus with a long frown. If this Cognitum had lied to Dawn, there was only one way to figure out the truth.

"I need to meet her," I said sullenly. And that meant a trip to the deadliest place in Equestria. We stopped in front of the Crusaders' salvage camp built before the main entrance of Blueblood Manor.

The dark building loomed above me, thunder booming through the dark skies above. A lone lightning bolt illuminated the scoured front of the structure.

The manor had certainly seen better days; the Crusaders had stripped it of anything that was even remotely of value like a gleeful swarm of radroaches on a corpse. Lying about were crates of pipes and coils of wire that had been ripped from the building but not hauled away yet. The structure itself, with its reinforced walls and beams, might stand for a century more before it collapsed completely, but nothing of value would remain within…except for Vanity's bedroom, if Charity had honored her promise.

Dawn's lips curled in a grin even wider than she'd shown when she'd been with Glory. "And you will. When you give EC-1101–"

"No," I interrupted. "I'm not giving EC-1101 to you. Nor her," I said levelly, leaving the mare as stunned as if I'd kicked her upside the head. "You don't get it. She exposed my home to a disease that turned almost everypony I knew into cannibals. And you and your Harbingers made the exact same mistake Sanguine did. You shot first. You should have tried this conversation before sending squads of killers after me."

Dawn's mouth opened and closed. "I…we thought there was no choice. After Sanguine took it from you, I ordered Steel Rain to retrieve it at all costs. We had no idea who had it; perhaps you, or a minion of Red Eye or some raider acquired it."

I glared at her. "But you found out it was me soon enough. You chased me all the way across the Hoof."

"I wasn't in charge of that. I simply... " Dawn struggled to justify herself and then said, "Steel Rain informed me that you would never willingly surrender EC-1101. I simply followed his recommendations."

"And he was probably right. What matters is that you didn't even try. You should have had this talk with me after we left Hippocratic Research. Instead, you tried to blow my head off and take it, just like Deus and his bounty hunters," I replied sharply. "If you'd spoken to me in the Fluttershy Medical Center, I would have been happy to give it to you. Or at least to talk it over. But your Cognitum killed Sanguine and I'm pretty sure sent a super-sentinel after me. Your seekers hounded me. Steel Rain–"

Dawn suddenly straightened. "Would it help if you could get revenge on him for what he did to you and your friends?"

"What?" I blinked, lightning flashing and booming above me as I stared at her.

"You said so yourself. Steel Rain advised me to take it by force, and in the process wronged you. If you like, you can take his place." She reached out and tapped my chest. "You can make certain that the Harbingers remain an order of good virtue."

Remain?

"He'd never just let me kill him!" I gasped, staring at her in shock.

Was she actually serious about this?

"You may be surprised," Dawn said as she looked at the front door to the manor. "We can deal with that right now, if you like." Then she stated firmly, "Rain. Come here. No armor or guns." For several minutes I just stared in shock before the door creaked slowly open, and then I tensed as a blue bar appeared. He wouldn't actually come out here unarmed. Dawn was crazy if she thought he–

"I knew that you'd never give it up," the stallion said as he emerged from the manor. On instinct, my horn's magic reached for weapons that were probably in some locker at the Rainbow Dash Skyport. I was surprised to see two things: one, he wore only a PipBuck. Two, he looked positively cute! The stallion with guns as massive as Deus's seemed disturbingly vulnerable without his fancy armor. His pink mane was plastered to his purple coat, and his kindly face wore an oddly embarrassed expression.

Again, for the second time of the night, I really wished I were a pony who could kill an unarmed enemy. "You're showing a lot of guts trotting out here like that," I said. I ground my teeth, trying to think of some way I could beat the ever loving snot out of him and not have Fluttershy give me dirty looks inside my head.

"I don't have much choice in the matter... " He paused and then rolled his eyes. "I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance you'd kill me at first sight anyway after what happened on the *Celestia* and at Goldenblood's house. Or maim me, at least."

"I'm thinking about it. I'd treat a fart as a deadly weapon from you," I growled.

"Please. I don't want you two to argue. This is about the future of Equestria and getting Blackjack's cooperation," Dawn told the unarmored stallion firmly.

"Of course, Prophet," the former Steel Ranger said smoothly. "But unfortunately, you still don't realize just what lengths Blackjack will go to win. Just what she's capable of. You should accept that she will never willingly part with EC-1101 or join the Harbingers. We're the 'bad ponies'." He grimaced and sat, making little quote wiggles with his forehooves.

"Teaming up with him was a big mistake," I said to Dawn without taking my eyes off him. "I'm surprised he hasn't shot you in the back long before now, Dawn. He betrayed his last leader for technology. He'll do the same to you." A half dozen more ponies were emerging from the manor. All were unarmed and unarmored and keeping their distance as they moved around the camp. My eyes kept looking for snipers or whatever was Steel Rain's plan B.

My comment added a bit of amusement to the embarrassment on his face. "Ah yes. That *had* been my plan, I admit," he replied with a small grimace as he pressed a hoof to his chest. "Unfortunately, a certain measure has been taken to ensure that I cannot betray Cognitum or her prophet." He met my gaze and gave an almost sheepish smile. "It seems my ambitious nature was better known than I anticipated. There's a kill implant nestled right in my chest. One signal from either, and it will immediately puree my insides."

I remembered the prospector in Tenpony vomiting bloody viscera and blinked in shock, then looked at Dawn. "When we discussed how to retrieve EC-1101," she said calmly as she trotted up beside me, "Steel Rain was quite adamant that it could only be done by force. That you were using the megaspell for your own agenda. I

believed him. My mistake for thinking you were a monster after I heard what you did to your stable."

Steel Rain chuckled. "Oh, she is. The worst kind," he said with a casual smile that didn't hide the fear in his eyes. "A monster who thinks she can stop being one."

I looked from her to him and back again. I didn't know what to say to this. "If you like, I can kill him now. Or maim him. Or simply exile him with a command that the kill implant goes off if he uses any technology more advanced than a can opener," Dawn said evenly, her smile returning and the purple stallion's gentle features growing resigned as he sighed. "Consider it a repayment for following bad advice."

"What?" I gasped as I backed away from both of them. "Whatever happened to believing in not killing?"

"If his life is the price for saving all of the Wasteland, then it's one that I will accept. What's one life compared to the multitudes that will be saved?" Dawn asked with that blissful smile.

"Everything," Steel Rain said with another sigh before he smiled at me apologetically. "Well, I won't pretend like I don't have it coming. Go on then. At least it'll be relatively quick."

I stared blankly, my gaze shifting from one to the other. Was she serious? Just... kill him and take his place, just like that? I looked into his pink eyes and saw an acknowledgement of defeat in them.

I had no doubt whatsoever what he'd do if our positions were reversed. Right now, I could do the smart thing and kill one of my greatest enemies. I might not even have to follow through on handing over EC-1101 afterwards. There was just one little problem…

"No," I replied. Steel Rain flinched, then blinked and then paused as his pink eyes looked from Dawn to myself.

Dawn frowned for a second, then brightened. "Oh. I understand. You want to do it yourself. Well, I can give you the kill command just as soon as–"

"Fuck no!" I snapped as I backed away from both of them. "Don't you get it? I'm not a fucking executioner. Give him his armor and guns, and I'll do what I can to kill him properly if he's going to try something, but I'm not going to kill him just to give you what you want!"

"But... the Harbingers... Cognitum... " Dawn stammered, weakly, still clearly astonished I wasn't taking her offer.

"Sorry, Dawn. I know you believe the Core holds all the answers, but I can't believe in your goddess. The Core is simply death. Always has been. Always will be." The fact she'd been willing to kill him, at all, for her mistake in believing him convinced me that the Harbingers weren't the Wasteland's final solution. I didn't place my faith in goddesses and lost technology.

It took hard work to do better...

We stood there in the darkness and hissing rain, facing each other.

Suddenly Steel Rain began to laugh. "Oh, this is too rich. I knew that Blackjack would never part with EC-1101, but I never imagined she'd pass up a chance like that! It's too much!" He chuckled, shaking his head with a mirthful grin.

"So. Is this where the ambush occurs?" I asked bluntly, glancing around me, wondering where the stealthed and armed Harbingers might be.

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. Of course not. Even naked and unarmed, you're fantastically deadly. We'd be idiots to attack you now," Steel Rain said with his friendly smile as he waved his hoof at a large sheet of canvas covering something massive. Four ponies ran up and started pulling off the tarp covering what I'd assumed to be salvage. "We're going to use something... else."

I glared at the pair, then watched as a black-and-white-striped mountain of metal came into view. The tank. Immediately, its engine snarled and spotlights glared to life, and it swiveled the lamps towards me. I tensed, ready to run, but then Dawn said in a quiet but horribly sure voice, "No. The other target." For almost a minute the tank sat there, revving its engine. Then it slowly swung its main turret away. My blood froze as what I realized what the 'other target' was.

The guns pointed right down at the sleeping village below.

"You fucking monsters…" I whispered as I looked at the war machine, its engine snarling as if it were pissed to see me again. I struggled to break through the chaos within Unity to get a warning to Lacunae. Maybe if I could activate my broadcaster…ugh, but as I tried to turn off the music and turn on the radio, Steel Rain frowned and leaned in towards me. Damn, he remembered that trick! I quickly brought up the file and showed them EC-1101 with a twist of my hoof. "Is this worth killing innocent foals for?"

"What other choice have you given me?" Dawn replied quietly, her mane obstructing her face. "Trying to take it by force has failed.

Trying to negotiate has failed as well."

"Give up?" I suggested, half in contempt and half in desperation.

"Could you?" she asked coldly as she turned away from me, asking in a near whisper. And then, for an instant, she looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes open and blazing with a bright, violent green luminescence, then looked down at the village and spoke again, her voice rising with every word. "What else am I supposed to do, Blackjack? I have devoted my entire life to finding some way to save the Wasteland, just as you have! I left my husband and my children in Thunderhead for this world. I must find some way to make it safe! And I've found it! I've found it!" she proclaimed as she whirled and advanced; her green eyes glared brighter as she thrust an accusing wing at me. "And you…YOU! You refuse to let me. How dare you, Blackjack?! How dare you withhold the key to Equestria's glorious rebirth?"

I gaped in horror and backed away, wishing for some armament as I beheld the furious, screaming mare and glimpsed the real Dawn within the baleful green glow of her eyes. "What in Equestria are you?" I gasped in shock. A mutant? A monsterpony? Something else?

"I am what I needed to become, just as you are," she said coldly as she closed her eyes once more and turned her back to me, looking up at the tank. "I do not want to kill helpless foals, no more than you want them to die. But I will kill them if you force me to it. The future of Equestria is infinitely more precious than any one village."

I knew I couldn't take the risk of calling her bluff. I'd lost EC-1101 before and recovered it. My eyes met the calculating gaze of Steel Rain, and his apologetic smile grew a little. He knew that the second the village was out of harm's way, I'd be after them again. They'd either try and kill me or shell the village to keep me busy.

My eyes dropped to EC-1101 in my hoof as the maudlin music rose. Was this another damned price I'd have to pay? Steel Rain'd been right. I'd pay with my own pain and suffering as long as I had to, but now was I going to have to pay with the lives of others to keep the program from my enemies? I clenched my eyes shut, as I searched within me. Could I really pay that price *again*?

"Fine," I said bitterly and then glared at her. "All right, Dawn. If you're willing to slay sleeping children with a fucking *tank*, then I guess you win."

A lull in the storm calmed the air for a moment, as if the world itself had been stunned by my surrender. Dawn faced me, her eyes closed again and hiding that baleful luminescence I'd seen before.

"What?"

"I'm not going to kill more innocents just to hang onto a damned program. So congratulations. Your willingness to murder helpless children won." My words made the mare jerk as if I'd kicked her.

"I hope you'd be proud. I hope your children would be proud."

"I... I have no choice," Dawn muttered.

"Wrong. You always have a choice," I replied.

"You have no right to lecture me after what you've done!" Dawn hissed at me. "You've killed foals! You gassed your own stable!"

Oddly, the attacks only made me smile. After all the beating up I'd done to myself for my mistakes, those accusations seemed petty and hollow coming from another. "Yes. I did, Dawn. So consider me an expert on mistakes. The fact you have to kill helpless ponies is a hint that what you're doing is wrong. You know it." I dared step towards the pegasus. "Be the better pony. You can save the Wasteland another way."

For an instant, I thought the growling thunder and flickering lightning would end. Dawn walked away from me towards Chapel and the Core lying beyond. I liked to imagine her eyes opened for real and she saw the hideous towers for what they were... a lie of a better life. A trap. That she'd think of her own family and children and do what was right. It was a hard choice...

But then the skies boomed and the rain fell hard and heavy upon us as she hung her head. "I'm sorry... " she murmured, barely audible before the lightning flared and the thunder drowned out anything else she may have said.

More Harbingers spilled out of the manor, these armed and armored, and quickly moved in around me. "Get a maintenance kit," Steel Rain said. "Last thing we want is for one of us to damage the PipBuck." Then he looked at me with an irritatingly contrite smile. "Oh, and please turn off your broadcaster, Blackjack."

"What?" I frowned, glancing at it. "I never turned it on."

"Really? Because I've been listening to your conversation since you left Chapel." He lifted his head and then turned it to show some kind of earphone thing. "I've been a big fan of Radio Blackjack." Then he suddenly smirked. "Champion in bed? Really? That freak?"

"I've changed my mind. Kill him," I replied flatly at the worn joke, but inside I was elated. I glanced down at my PipBuck as it played the classical music. Had Glory been listening in? I could kiss a certain smart blue pony! I cancelled the transmissions and killed the music, though; they'd served their purpose, and there was no point in antagonizing the Harbingers further now when I was stalling for time... Overhead the clouds boomed deeply once more.

"We should hurry. I have absolutely no doubt that Blackjack's friends will be on their way," Steel Rain said sharply.

"We have sentries," Dawn replied absently.

"I've learned that with Blackjack it is better to be safe than sorry," Steel Rain said in worry as he scanned the night, no doubt using his EFS. He looked back at me with a warm smile. "I don't want to underestimate her again. Her friends have a disturbing tendency to rescue her at inopportune moments."

I glanced at Steel Rain for some sign that my act of mercy might gain some assistance, but the one time our eyes met he simply gave a sorry smile and a shrug. I supposed that if the purple stallion had an implant that could kill him instantly, he really couldn't help me that much. Dawn began to address the Harbingers around us about the wonders of the Core now that they had EC-1101. A city that, despite its ruin, all could be safe in. A place where there was enough plenty that raiders wouldn't need to raid.

She wasn't crazy. That would have made this easier. She simply believed, more than anything, that this was the last chance for the Wasteland. A simple, wonderful solution. But I'd been in Hoofington long enough to know that there was no simple solution.

There was a catch, and Dawn had either missed it or didn't want to accept it. Peace, at any cost, where ponies could do better and be better and have better than they ever had before.

"So you'll be the kindly teacher lording over us all?" I asked, perhaps a bit too sharply. An earth pony mare set a metal toolbox down next to me and began to pull out all kinds of arcane equipment.

"Of course not, Blackjack. When the Core is open to all, I'll return to the Wasteland for others. I'll direct them…unicorns, pegasi, griffins, zebras, dragons, anyone who needs safety…until I die out in the wastes." She smiled merrily as she looked at me once more with her eyes closed. "I have no illusions, Blackjack. I don't deserve the Core, and I won't accept a place in it. I've been forced

to do horrible things, and I know that there's no forgiveness for some crimes." She cocked her head. "Would you ever be able to truly forgive yourself for what you did to your home?"

"No," I replied. I could choose not to punish myself, but forgiveness? Never.

"Then you understand," she replied. "Cognitum will teach the Wasteland civility. She will return Equestria to what it should be. None will war when the consequence is immediate execution." I glanced at Steel Rain and shivered with the thought of everypony forced to have a kill implant inside them. That was Dawn's idea of improvement? That was doing better?

As the brown earth pony mare worked, I could see the Harbingers watching me carefully. The tank's cameras whirred and machine guns twitched to follow my every movement. The engine growled again and again as if the massive machine wanted to blast me into bloody scrap. I knew this was going to end with my death. There was no way it couldn't. Yet even now, every armed pony was keeping their distance.

Steel Rain veered away to step inside the manor. I took a look at Dawn and the bristling guns pointed at me. All it would take was one aggressive twitch from me and they'd vaporize me where I stood. But the tank wasn't shelling Chapel at the moment. With luck, somepony had heard my broadcast and they were getting to safety, or P-21 was somewhere out there, or…something.

Because if it was just me, then I was done.

Finally there was a jerk, and the Delta PipBuck was pulled out of my hoof. Half my systems went with it, my vision filling with errors and static as readouts went dead. She passed the device to Dawn, and the gray mare cradled it to her chest as if it were a baby.

"So…" I said as I was slowly herded into a spot adjacent to a solid wall. The Harbingers had formed a half circle around me with my back to the Manor. I gave a slow, sickly smile. "Guess this is it."

"I guess it is," Dawn said as she hugged the device. Steel Rain, now armored, stepped up beside her. Several seconds ticked by. A moment passed as the rain hissed around us. The lamps of the tank bathed me in their harsh white glare. I could barely make out the individual faces of the Harbingers. Only Dawn, front and center, and Steel Rain could be seen clearly. She kept her face downturned. "You understand why we're going to kill you. We have no choice... "

"You always have a choice. You just keep making the wrong one," I said back.

"I told you. Suicidal," Steel Rain said. At least he hadn't put on those cannons yet. I supposed that with the tank sitting there they were somewhat redundant.

"No," I countered flatly. "This isn't suicide. I don't want to die here, like this." My eyes swept over the shadowy silhouettes of the Harbingers around me. "I know the Wasteland sucks. Every single person knows that. But I also know that, so long as folks think the right way is more killing, nothing is going to get better. I'd like to live. I'd like to go back to Glory and tell her what an idiot I've been. But I also know…just like every one of you knows…that there is no easy way out. Never." I looked at Dawn, narrowing my own eyes. "I don't know what this Cognitum has told you, Dawn. I don't know what the Core has to offer. But I do know that there is no simple fix to the Wasteland. No saving it. There's only doing better, and making the hard choice." I looked at the Harbingers around me. "Even if it hurts. Even if it gets you killed."

"What a lovely inspirational speech," Dawn said softly, "but you are quite mistaken. There's been nothing easy about this at all."

One second. Two. Ten. "Fire," Dawn said quietly as I closed my eyes.

Thunder roared around me, and everything went white.

Then I frowned as I became aware that I hadn't been torn into bloody cyberpony pieces. I opened my eyes and glanced above me at the luminous shell that encompassed me and the sight of Lacunae hovering above, her brows furrowed in focus as her shield flashed and flared from the bullets striking it. Her purple eyes looked down and met mine, and she smiled.

A second later, from the rear of the tank there blossomed an immense plume of flame that filled the air with a scream of steel. A half dozen more pops filled the air from the rear of the Harbingers as great billowing clouds out smoke swept out. The Harbingers wheeled about in confusion. Steel Rain swore loudly as he waved his hoof, trying to establish order in the thickening murk of the smoke grenades. Thank Celestia that most of the Harbingers didn't seem to have EFS.

I saw Dawn launch herself skyward only to be knocked from the air by a cyan bolt streaking by. The PipBuck tumbled from her hooves as Glory arced around and slammed her azure forehooves into

Dawn's face as the mare began to recover.

"Killing foals, Mother? Using a tank against foals and Blackjack?" Glory shrieked. "Are you mad?!"

Dawn didn't answer her as she twisted and dove, but Glory, in the body of one of the finest fliers in history, streaked down and smashed her hooves against Dawn's spine. I would have expected the kick to have taken Dawn out of the sky entirely, but to my astonishment she kept flying with merely a grunt. Still, Glory was hardly through after a single kick and swooped around for another pass. Dawn snapped and rolled, disappearing into the smoke with Glory racing after her like a ghost from the past.

The rain and wind fought the heavy clouds of smoke as the skies poured down, lightning flashing over the manor with a resounding blast of thunder. I raced to catch my PipBuck as it tumbled to the ground. Steel Rain dove from out of the shadows towards the tiny vital piece of technology!

Then my feeble magic seized the device and just barely brought it to a halt, dangling in the air above him as he sprawled in the mud.

Quick as my horn could manage, I pulled it back through the air.

My friend's magic arrows flashed out, impacting against his armor.

Steel Rain charged Lacunae, ready to power through her shield and thrash us into pony jam. I popped my fingers out, jumped up on her back, and pulled myself between her wings as she launched into the air. I pulled the device safely back into my hooves. The Ranger dove beneath her hooves, sliding in the mud with a roar. "Get Blackjack," he shouted, "or shell the village!"

"Thanks, but cutting it a little close, weren't you?" I yelled to the alicorn.

"Well, it was a very nice speech," Lacunae replied calmly as she soared up over the milling Harbingers. "Besides, it took time to quietly neutralize the snipers they set up, and P-21 needed time to get that bomb together." Up in the air, we were a huge glowing target. "One moment, and I'll teleport us away."

"No!" I shouted, pointing down at the machine. "We have to destroy it!" Already the tank was in the process of repairing the smoking hole ripped in its back. In a few minutes it would come after us itself, but we couldn't leave just yet. Even if we left and Dawn pursued, Steel Rain would certainly level anyplace ever allied with me. Megamart. Riverside. Meatlocker. They'd all be targets!

Lacunae glanced back at me in worry, then returned to the ground.

First thing I needed to do was shove my PipBuck back into my leg and close it up. It could be reconnected later, but I didn't want it to fall out or something. Then I looked around for P-21. I needed a smart pony here!

I saw one Steel Ranger with two grenade machine guns preparing to blast us out of the sky when a white filly with red stripes jumped on their back. For a moment it was a bit of a comical sight, the armored pony giving her a piggyback ride. Then the ripper clenched in her jaws whirred as she rammed it against the side of the Ranger's neck between two armored plates, spraying out sparks.

The Ranger thrashed wildly as we flew over them, and then the armored pony started screaming as the ripper sunk through and into their neck, the screeching saw blade painting Rampage's face red as the Ranger collapsed.

Rampage pulled her weapon free, spraying a fan of crimson, and then spat the ripper out to call to us. "Like my can opener?" she shouted before disappearing into the smoky confusion with a manic filly laugh. I think I preferred her hoofclaws.

Glory flew up beside us, laying down a constant stream of green death. Either Dawn had gotten away, or Glory had broken off to come help the rest of us, or... I saw the tears in her eyes that promised she'd need a whole lot of TLC if we made it through this.

She met my eyes once, and then she was gone again, drawing fire with her own suppressive strafing.

The tank began to screech and groan as it started to turn its weapons towards me. Maybe it had some version of an EFS. We landed a little ways away from the Harbingers behind the cover of some crates full of copper pipes. "Fuck, where is she?" Glory swore, her furious rose eyes glaring as she turned around in a circle.

She glanced at me, worry momentarily replacing rage before her eyes returned to the skies.

P-21 appeared from the shadows seconds later carrying my barding. "So, is there a plan?" I asked him.

"That's my line," he said wryly before he swung up Persuasion, bit the grip, and fired the weapon at a Harbinger bringing a markspony carbine to bear. The grenade struck the fighter in the face, knocking him over as it spun further out into the chaos and exploded. "We need to get out of here and–"

"We have to take out that tank," I shouted, pointing at the pink flashes of repair magic visible through the haze. I saw him on the

verge of arguing and rushed on, “They’ll blast Chapel to pieces if we run. It’ll be Sanguine with heavy artillery!” That focused him and squashed any argument he might have had. “Tell me you can pull together another bomb or something to take it out?”

“I’ll need time and materials,” he said with a frown. “Some of these fuckers have got to have something that goes boom. I just need to get enough of it.” But it was four against fifty, and that didn’t allow much time at all. Not good odds, even for me.

Lacunae lifted a Harbinger’s dropped markspony carbine to me, then seized an anti-machine rifle from a staggered mare and swung it hard into her face like a giant club. “Then we’ll buy you the time you need.”

We had to get moving. Anypony with an EFS was going to see us.

“Scatter and delay them till we can take out that tank!” And with that we broke apart. This was one time where being outnumbered was in my favor: everywhere I looked were enemies. Still, there were three that mattered more than the rest: the tank, Steel Rain, and Dawn. I had to find them. “How much did you hear?” I asked Lacunae telepathically.

“Everything. P-21 contacted us as soon as he left Dawn. He suspected her, but none of us anticipated she was behind the Harbingers,” came the reply. Then a pause before the comment, “Blackjack, about that memory orb…”

“Not right now,” I replied as the Harbingers started to be organizing with shouts to fan out and find us. “We can talk about it after we win!”

“Of course. Of course,” she said, sighting down the rifle. Her shot blew the head off a mare in combat armor.

“Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another,” I murmured as I finished off the magazine in the carbine and three Harbingers closed in around me. Bullets peppered off my barding and hide as I went into zebra stance, popped my fingers out, and grabbed the nearest one’s head. My body twisted in a spin that his head followed and his body didn’t. As his neck snapped, I heaved him over me as a shield to catch the anti-machine rifle rounds of the other two, and scooped up his carbine to replace my empty one.

Rocking and twisting the body to keep it between me and their weapons, my horn levitated the carbine towards one of the mares and unloaded the entire magazine in her general direction in a spray of wild fire. I thought my horn might explode at this rate; my

eyes were running as I struggled to keep focused.

As my target fell, the last mare took advantage of my distraction to dart to the side and point her pair of anti-machine rifles on her battle saddle right at me, firing at almost point blank range. I flailed in an attempt to dodge; the shots buzzed as they nearly struck me, but the weight of my corpse shield overbalanced me and sent me falling to the ground. The mare's eyes lit up in triumph as her jaw started to tighten on the trigger bit...

Then she screamed in agony as a whirr filled the air and she fell back. Rampage squatted behind her, holding a severed rear leg in her hooves, grinning around the bloody handle of the ripper. Yes, I definitely preferred her hoofclaws to that.

Heaving myself upright, I looked around for my next target, then staggered as another AM round glanced off my barding. I tried to find something I could use for a better shield than the stallion's corpse, but something else slammed into me from the other side… an explosion? My EFS showed all kinds of damage that I really wasn't feeling like I should…thanks to Professor Zodiac. This trauma hurt in an almost abstract way; distant, more an alarm than deep visceral pain. Not the agony that Deus had been forced to live with.

Small wonder I loved any physical sensation I could get with Glory.

Glory wasn't strafing now. She was doing daring aerial maneuvers in and out of the lingering smoke to evade being torn apart by the gunfire, returning shots whenever she could to disrupt our enemies.

The Harbingers were orienting themselves, organizing to focus fire.

Worse, even more reinforcements seemed to be coming from around the sides of the manor. The odds were rapidly going from ten to one to twenty to one…or worse.

Don't think about that now. Fight. Kill. Run. Move. Fight.

Reload. Take ammo. Kill. Move. Grab. Break. Throw. Aim.

Fire. Run. Jump. Turn. Burst. Roll. Ignore the damage. Burst.

Give P-21 time. Grab. Fire in face. Move. Ignore the red flashes on my damage display. More time. Grab. Gouge eyes. Take carbine. Shoot face. Roll with the explosion. Stand up. Move.

Move! MOVE!

I lay on my side and then became dully aware of why I wasn't standing anymore as I looked at my rear leg and saw the brand new forty-five degree kink put in my metal limb during my explosive tumble. "Shit," I muttered thickly, lying there in the mud as six

Harbingers advanced. I tried to get my horn to teleport me like yesterday! I was Twilight Sparkle's descendant. I could do it! My horn glowed as bullets chewed through my barding and into my body. Do it, I told my horn!

It flashed…then popped like a lightbulb burning out. My carbine dropped to the ground as I reeled like a hammer had smashed upside my horn once again.

Okay. Maybe I should have waited a few more days before trying that…

Suddenly there was a deep intake of air, followed by the roar of a flamer mixed with screams meeting my ears. Great. Looked like I was going to burn after all. I opened my eyes, expecting to see the Steel Ranger that was about to roast the meat from my bones.

"Blackjack? Are you okay?" Scotch Tape asked as she raced through the muck with the purple dragonfilly at her side. Precious jumped over me, bullets pinging off her scaled hide as she took another breath and let loose a plume of green flame that washed over three of the Harbingers. "Sorry, stupid question," she said as she knelt besides my scrapped leg.

"Scotch? What are you doing here?" I asked weakly as the filly struggled to help me drag myself behind the cover of the Steel Ranger that Rampage had dropped.

"Don't be stupid, Blackjack. We're all here," Charity said as she emerged out of the bedlam with a bloodsoaked Rampage. The filly wore a miniature battle saddle that had been converted to hold two heavy revolvers, which she fired past the dragonfilly at some enemy I couldn't see. "That's eight caps!" she roared at them. "Sixteen!"

Scotch opened my foreleg and, with far more focus and skill than the mare who'd removed it, re-attached the Delta.

Suddenly, I saw blue bars...

A whole lot of blue bars!

My E.F.S. now showed a lot more blue mixed in with all that bloody red on my display. I watched in shock as the blue and red colts Adagio and Allegro raced up and dropped Octavia sideways before them and the three colts from the watchtower tossed their light machine gun across the instrument's body. Anti-machine rounds whined and sparked off the instrument's indestructible body as the machine gun opened up a chattering line of fire into the Harbingers. The ghoul Harpica flew high above dropping apple grenades into knots of enemies.

"Rampage! Bend that limb straight," Scotch Tape said, digging through her tools. The filly grabbed my thigh with her hindlegs and my damaged fetlock with her forehooves, and with a grunt of effort she bent my leg till it was straight again. Scotch pulled out one of Glory's cyberpony cakes and shoved it into my hooves before starting her work; I immediately started eating it as quickly as I could. "I hope I can do this," Scotch Tape said as she made repairs.

"You can. It's in your blood," I muttered around the cake. She flushed, but smiled as I scarfed down the disk while Scotch made her field repairs. Caprice slid next to me in a blue pre-war dress utterly unsuited for battle, her eyes wide and terrified as the SMG she held jittered in her mouth. This bedlam was so beyond her, but she'd come. I could at least respect that, but I reached up with my fingers and relieved her of the 12.7mm SMG before she accidentally shot somepony on our side... like me. "Thanks," I said, and she flushed and immediately handed me her magazines.

"I shouldn't have come," she muttered, the once fabulous mare dropping her eyes to her hooves as she stood in the churned-up mud.

"I'm glad you did," I said before I bit down on the mouth handle and sighted two Harbingers that were getting ready to take out Scotch Tape. The recoil nearly shook my teeth out of my head as I emptied the magazine in two seconds. I spat it out and stared at the weapon. "Damn! This thing just loves ammo."

P-21 emerged out of the chaos holding a small block of plastic explosive that had been taped together. "This is all I could find," he said with a frown. It was less than half the size of the bomb he had used the first time we'd faced the tank. He looked over at the grinding machine as it began to rejoin the battle. Harbinger and Crusader alike gave way as it ploughed back and forth, searching for me. "We've got to get it inside. If we can get it inside and kill the crew running that thing, it'll be as good as destroyed." He slipped a detonator into my barding.

I slowly groaned and sat up. Suddenly, something connected, and a jolt ran through my hind leg. It began moving once again. "You did it," I said to Scotch, then finished off the cyberpony cake.

A wing of fliers whooshed overhead, and for a moment I thought the Harbingers had pegasi of their own, but these were Enclave! It was pointless to shout a warning to Glory; the noise and chaos ensured she wouldn't hear me. "I've got to lead it away. I can't

fight it and worry about all of you and keep my head from getting pulped by a lucky AM round at the same time."

Charity snorted. "Don't worry about us. These fucks owe Chapel for even dreaming that we're helpless. Not after Priest. Never again!" she shouted as she ran forward with Precious, then stopped and looked back. "Arloste! What the fuck are you waiting for?"

Rampage blinked and smiled as tears danced in her eyes, then snatched up her ripper and, with a gleeful scream of the weapon's motor, raced forward with them.

"Blackjack, how are you going to lead it away? I mean, it's a tank!" Scotch Tape shouted over the din. P-21 fired off a grenade nearby and I winced; as outnumbered as we were, there was still a chance he'd hit a friendly. I trusted he knew what he was doing, but it still made me damned uneasy.

"Keep them safe," I said as I started moving again towards the front door of the manor. On the way, I was astonished to see a striped mare move like a ghost out of the smoke with nothing more than a simple wooden pole and a snarling red wooden mask. Sekashi sprang right into the midst of three Harbingers, her hooves spinning the pole with astounding finesse. She launched forward and rammed the end into one pony's throat, whirling it around and tripping a second, batting away a levitated pistol and then crushing the horn of the unicorn wielding it with a sickening crack I knew all too well. The dehorned unicorn screamed as she fell back, scraping her hooves over the stump. The whirling stick rammed into the tripped pony's head with such rapid succession that when Sekashi stopped the entire head slumped like a battered sack of meat and bone. The screaming unicorn was knocked from her hooves and then silenced with a double hoofstomp to the head.

The choking stallion brought his battle saddle's carbines up towards Sekashi's back, but before I could fire at him, a tiny striped filly with a blowgun appeared from nowhere and shot a dart into his throat. His eyes bulged, and then he collapsed with a goofy smile. Majina waved her little hoof at me with a happy grin.

"This reminds me of a very funny story!" Sekashi said with a laugh as she whirled her staff; how in the world did zebras *do* that? "I will have to tell it to you another time, though." And with that, the striped pair disappeared into the fight.

My body was almost to fifty percent as I reached the front doors to the manor. I flipped open my PipBuck and started looking for

nearby transmitters. A tank had to have some kind of radio, right? Maybe I could order them to follow me into the manor. I located… well…it was close. "Security was just spotted going into the manor! Tank! Go after her! Quick!" I barked.

The tank, which had been simply rolling across the battlefield firing its machine guns at anyone who got in its way, suddenly stopped. I smiled as it turned its spotlights and main turret on me, but then paused. Why was it just sitting there?

Suddenly its main guns blasted just as something peach slammed into me from the side, knocking me behind the sandbag barricades that'd been erected centuries ago. The shells detonated high, the blast crushing me to the ground like a massive hoof a second before an avalanche of rubble fell down upon me. I was dazed for a second, and then I opened my eyes and looked at the mare who had shoved me down.

Caprice stared at me, her mouth moving silently as she stared straight ahead. I looked at her bloody, battered body. I was a cyberpony, and that shot had hurt. Caprice… "Lacunae! Somepony! I need a healing potion!" I screamed, hoping somepony was close enough.

The tank was moving. I heaved the peach earth pony over my shoulders and ran through the blown-in doors into the main hall.

Everything remotely valuable had been stripped away and the walls, once bedecked with finery, were now bare. Piles of rubble lay everywhere where rubbish had been heaped up. "Why? Why'd they use the cannons?" I asked. Something like that could have destroyed EC-1101! Crush me. Use machine guns. But the cannons? I popped my fingers, ripping off strips of Caprice's ragged dress and trying to tie her bloody wounds.

"It's my fault," Caprice said. "I…I told Dawn you were here. I told her…told her about Glory…" The mare whimpered as she coughed and threw up a bloody mess down her front. "Blackjack…I'm so sorry…" she croaked as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Don't worry about that. Just hold on," I said, trying to ignore the growling motor growing louder and louder.

But she shook her head. "Listen…please…he's with them…" she said weakly, struggling for breath. "I gave him to Dawn. He's the tank…"

"Who?" I shouted, as her eyes grew unfocused. "Who's in the tank?"

"Sorry…" she whimpered. "Should have…done…better…"

Her blue bar disappeared.

Then the building began to shake.

I turned in time to see the smoking wall explode inward as the massive tank rammed right through, barely slowing. I retracted my fingers, dropped to all fours, and raced down the vaulted central hall as the massive war machine ripped along after me. The lamps painted the hall in their harsh white glare as the tank's machine guns gouged lines of steel death through the air. The piles of rubble were my only cover, and the vibration of its steel treads sent them bouncing and sliding around my hooves. One misstep... one delay…I'd be either machine-gunned in half or ground to pieces beneath its massive treads.

Get it inside. Get it jammed. Get the bomb inside it. That had been the plan in my head. Only the tank wasn't playing along!

Even as it tore down the second floor balconies above me, it wasn't stopping. Its engines powered it right through the broad hallway it was supposed to be getting stuck in.

I slipped for just a second, and its twin cannons roared. The shells passed through the air with a buzz like a colossal bumblebee as the blast wave picked me off my hooves and sent me tumbling forward like a cyber rag doll. The force of the shot and the detonation in the central conservatory shattered the skylights overhead, and rain began to pour in through the smoke. I picked myself to my hooves as the shaking grew stronger and stronger beneath them.

Through the smoke emerged two crushing treads and a broad, jagged row of steel teeth. I lifted my forehooves completely on reflex and put them right above that row as my hind legs slid backwards beneath me. My fingers struggled to find something to grab on to. Maybe if I could get on the damn thing…but then I stared at the two machine gun turrets pointing right at me. They could kill me right now…

Then I glanced behind me at the wall and understood. Shooting was too good for me. They were going to smash me to cyberpony mush. Then I saw the smoking hole blasted into the wall five feet up. I kicked my way up onto the rubble churning in front of the machine as the wall grew closer and closer. I had no idea how to do this; I had no idea if I *could* do this. But my body had been made by a zebra, and I could only hope it had half their agility! I launched myself up as a yard remained between the tank and wall,

curving my back as my momentum carried me through the jagged hole. I landed on my head a second before the whole building shook with the force of the impact. The engine let out a roar as I sprawled onto my back.

I was in some sort of large courtyard. Rain poured over my face as I lay there, bringing me back to my senses. If my ears had been flesh and blood, I'd probably be deaf now. There was a cyan flash, and Glory was there. She threw her hooves around me and hugged me close as I numbly patted her mane. We shared a wonderful and terribly poorly-timed kiss before I pulled myself to my hooves.

"You're safe!" Glory muttered as she held me.

"Safe as I ever am," I replied with a wry smile. "That was some pretty incredible flying, Glory Dash."

She immediately colored. "Don't call me that. I was just shooting wild. I think I may have wet myself somewhere while they were blasting at me. I just had to keep firing at them."

"Glad as I am to see you, there's a tank right on the other side of that wall, and I have a feeling they're really pissed with me," I muttered.

"You have that effect," a mare in Enclave power armor said as she landed next to us, followed by two others. She immediately opened her helmet, and I saw the yellow features of Lightning Dancer. A second pegasus landed beside her, facing Glory. Then two more!

Thank goodness they were blue bars... for now, at least.

"Fuck me. She really does exist," one of the armored pegasi, a mare, breathed, then reached up and tapped her helmet. The lavender features of the Neighvarro mare Twister appeared, her eyes widening.

"I never thought I'd see... her... " another mare said as she retracted her helmet faceplate, her orange and yellow striped mane poking out of the opening. "Rainbow Dash... " Sunset breathed.

"No. I'm... I'm not Rainbow Dash," Glory stammered.

"Fooled me," the missile-armed stallion who must have been Boomer muttered thickly.

"What are all of you doing here?" I gasped, looking from one to the next. "Lightning, why... what's going on?" If they were here to take Glory...

But the yellow pegasus shook her head. "Well, after the meeting at the Skyport, Sky Striker decided he was going to find out what was going on himself. The Honored Councilor sent these three with

him."

"We've got the most experience operating in the Hoof," Twister replied. Meeting my eye, she added, "That mare, Dusk, is okay. She was in critical condition, and the *Castellanus* was closer than the Skyport, so... " She trailed off as she stared at Glory. "Who… how... "

"Hey, Twisty?" Boomer said as he pointed at the wall. "Didn't she say there was–"

An explosion blew a cascade of dust and rubble over the six of us, and two smoking cannons pushed through the blasted hole as the machine tried to make its own door.

"Shit! Right! Tank! Roof!" Twister grabbed one of my forehooves and Glory the other, and they both lifted me up towards the roof.

We barely cleared the lip when the tank rolled into the courtyard below. I didn't really see this as much of an improvement; if the thing had an EFS, we were seven pretty obvious red bars.

Lightning Dancer reached into her barding and threw down a legful of blue-banded grenades. They detonated with crackles and pops of arcing magical electricity. The tank froze, turrets sweeping back and forth. The yellow pegasus backed off along the flat, rain-washed roof. "Those spark bombs should jam its E.F.S. for a little bit."

"Right," Twister said as she whirled on Glory. "What the hell is going on? We were searching Miramare with Sky Striker when he heard a broadcast about his wife fighting out here or something. And now we find Rain–"

"I'm Morning Glory," she interrupted as she frowned sternly at the mare. "I got magicked into this body! I'm not really Rainbow Dash."

"Striker's kid? Oh my…" Sunset's red eyes widened. "No wonder he set a speed record getting here."

Twister glanced from me to Glory. "What the hell is going on here, Blackjack? The surface isn't supposed to have ordinance like that anymore!"

"Tell you what? Stick close, and if we live through this, I will explain everything. Okay?" I snapped, looking down. The tank was swinging its guns around like a giant radroach's antennae; it seemed to be searching for us.

"Fair enough," Twister said as she looked at Glory again, the lavender mare clearly spooked.

"You're here with Father?" Glory gasped as she looked around. "Where is he? And you have Dusk?"

"I dunno where he went. This whole mission turned into a squall soon as Striker got that message. As for Dusk, she was unconscious in the *Castellanus*'s med bay last I saw her," Twister said.

"Here," Lightning Dancer said as she dug into her saddlebags and dumped my weapons out onto the rooftop beside me. I saw the sword, and my life suddenly became a lot better. It might not have been a ripper, but it would do for a can opener.

"We have to find Father," Glory said tersely, looking around in concern while I tucked my equipment away.

"Isn't he right over there?" Boomer asked as he pointed further along the rainswept roof towards a pair of blue bars. I glanced down at the tank as my body continued to regenerate; it was blasting the courtyard walls with machine gun fire as if in a fit of frustration. Then I looked where the stallion was pointing and saw the eyepatched Sky Striker standing two feet from Dawn. I froze.

"Oh no…"

"Father... Mother... " Glory moaned, looking anguished.

"Glory... your mother... " I said weakly as she walked a few steps past me closer to the pair. I didn't know what to really say now.

That she might not even be a pony anymore? That she was a murderer?

Up here, the sound of the grinding of the tank crashing back into the manor struggled with the fury of the fighting below and the storm raging above. Yet, despite all that, there seemed to be a calm surrounding the two like the eye of a hurricane, and I was helpless to do anything but watch. Neither of them spared us the slightest glance; all their attention was for each other. If there was any chance for Dawn giving up this suicidal mission, it was Sky Striker.

If I said a word, I knew that we'd lose her to Cognitum forever.

But he didn't know... and Celestia damn me, I couldn't think of any way to warn him without losing her. I looked at the stricken Glory and swallowed. I had to give him a chance. *Please... please save her, Sky Striker.*

I saw him look down at Dawn, concern and frustration warring with each other as Dawn hung her head. Then, with a sob, Sky Striker hugged her close to him. "You're alive. My heart... my love... You're alive… How…why…I thought you were gone forever…"

"I had to go. We would have been killed. You know that," Dawn answered as she nuzzled his neck with a small smile.

The one-eyed stallion sniffed. "We could have left together."

"And taken our children to the Wasteland? No mother could do that," she replied quietly. "Or would you have come with me and left our children alone? Forced Dusk to become their mother when she'd just gotten her cutie mark? No…I couldn't stay, and none of you could come with me. I had a mission to complete down here."

"Your mission…?" he asked softly, then smiled. "I've tried to carry out your mission, Dawn. Thunderhead finally sent down the Volunteer Corps. It took ten years, but we finally came down and helped." He stroked her mane gently. "You could come back with me. We could make the Volunteer Corps bigger and better than before. Do real good! Save the Wasteland."

She clenched her eyes tightly and buried her face in his chest.

"Save the Wasteland. That's all I've ever wanted. All I've ever dreamed of." She gave a sob, and then said quietly, "I'd love to go back with you, my love. Back up to my life…my family. To ponies who love me. To a better world."

I swallowed, feeling the floor rumble under my hooves. I wondered if it was from the thunder or the tank moving through the manor beneath me. Tanks should get a special EFS bar! I looked back to Dawn as she trembled in his grasp.

He started to say something, but perhaps he sensed it at the same time I did. A wrongness that didn't belong to the mare he loved.

Dawn could never go back. She was like me. Just like me, she knew she didn't deserve happiness. Her followers were fighting and killing children, for Celestia's sake, but I wanted to believe she could. I wanted it as much as Glory and Striker did. Because if there was hope for her... there could be hope for me too...

She swayed before melting. "Sky…I would…I would love to go back up to your castle in the sky. Forever…just like a pony tale…"

And for an instant she smiled, and I knew it was over. She'd come back with us, tell me what I'd need to know, disband the Harbingers, and go home to her family. Glory would have her mother back. Striker would have his wife. Dawn would be loved once more. For an instant…

Then her eyes opened and she looked right at me.

The baleful green glow of her eyes flared once as they moved to stare at my hoof. The dire luminescence rippled out from her

glowing pupils, and green lines of light traced themselves across her silver irises as it passed. The light shimmered along those fine faint scars crossing her body. Then the gray hide split along those lines and sloughed wetly apart, revealing a blacker hexagon-patterned hide hidden beneath and broken by green tracers of light. From under her gray feathers, dark chisel-like blades emerged, each sporting green circuits of light. Her hooves split as mechanical fingers erupted from the disintegrating flesh of her fetlocks, each digit tipped in a long black talon surrounded by a sickly jade aura. She plunged the curved blades into his back, slicing through his black power armor as if it were butter.

With a furious scream, she plunged her bladed wings deep into his body and with horrifying force flung him away, his crimson blood raining down. I watched as her tail seemed to weave itself into a whiplike appendage that crackled with green lightning. Almost by reflex, Duty and Sacrifice were drawn and, slipping into S.A.T.S., I blasted eight rounds right into her face, enough to decapitate most ponies. The impacts knocked her back from us, and she launched herself into the air. Glowing green chips in her ebony dermis peeked through her ravaged face, but the hexagonal hide was barely damaged and regenerating before my eyes. She hovered there a moment, looking down at Sky Striker's broken body with a cold stare. "Enough! No more weakness!"

"No!" Glory screamed and raced to her fallen father. From inside Dawn's body, the green glow spread, a disintegration field rendering her tattered hide and feathers to ash that washed away in the rain. What remained was a mare who was more cyber than pony. For an instant those glowing green eyes looked at those mechanical fingers and claws, at her husband's blood being washed away, and then looked down at her husband and daughter with a fleeting expression of horror. Then with a scream I'd heard in a buried city beneath the ground, she launched herself into the lightning-filled sky.

Lightning Dancer and I rushed to the fallen Sky Striker. "Stop her! I've got him!" she shouted, and the Neighvarro ponies immediately popped their helmets closed and took to the air. Glory, her face a mask of anguish, did her best to stem the flow of blood. Lightning Dancer pulled out familiar purple potions and poured them into Sky Striker's mouth.

Glory whimpered as she struggled to save her remaining parent.

“Come on, Daddy! You’ve been hurt worse! I heard all your stories. You’ve taken worse from a dragon…” But though the wounds closed a little, some force seemed to be fighting the restorative magic. The wounds were tinged with a faint, malignant green glow. “The potion’s not working, Blackjack!” the cyan pegasus sobbed in distress.

“Dawn…my Dawn…what happened to her?” croaked Sky Striker.

“Such a fool. Heard her voice, her name…and I…such a fool…”

“Hush. You’re going to live for Glory. You understand? Glory isn’t going to lose two parents today,” I said, then looked at the two mares. “Can you get him to Star House? The potions might be more effective there.”

Glory pulled off the scraps of Sky Striker’s armor. “I think so,” she said in a terrified whimper, and we carefully draped Sky Striker over her back. I sent a frantic message for Lacunae to get to Star House as soon as possible and use her healing magic on Glory’s father. Then there was one last thing to cover…

“You aren’t going to try and capture Glory, are you?” I asked Lightning Dancer in a tense mutter. “Please. She’s not Rainbow Dash.” I hoped I didn’t sound as much like I was begging as I feared I did.

Lightning Dancer looked at the bleeding Sky Striker and then back to me. “One hurricane at a time, Blackjack. We’ll talk about it later. For now, see to your own battle.” With that, she carefully began to fly off towards the northeast.

I sighed, looking at the blood and ash mixing with the rainwater.

Why did it always have to end in tears?

Then the tank stopped waiting.

The roof erupted beneath me, and then the world fell out in a roaring avalanche of stone and beams. I landed in a crash in the very ballroom where Blueblood had slain Roses. The elegant room hadn’t been picked over as much as the rest of the manor. The white marble floor hadn’t been torn out, and the pillars still had their golden carvings of unicorns. Darkened balconies ran across both sides of the long hall. Despite the tank’s immense size, it had more than enough room to move freely and was more than capable of blasting me to pieces.

I slowly rose to my hooves as the engine snarled like an angry dragon. The lamps and machine guns whirred as they oriented on me. Glory had her battle. I had mine. No more running. It was

time to finish this. “Okay, you metal bastard. You want to play?”
As crazy as it was, I grinned from ear to ear.
“Ante up.”
I dove to the side as the machine guns opened up, their rounds tearing into the pristine marble floor and the blackened patch where Blueblood had died. I found momentary cover behind a pillar but didn’t dare stand still when the machine guns paused in their barrage. The cannons boomed, and the thick column disintegrated in a spray of marble, filling the air with dust and smoke. The lamps flashed back and forth as the tank turned and strafed wildly along my path. I reached the corner pillar and leapt as the cannons fired again, blasting out stone chunks and shrapnel as I slid across the floor on my side, coming to a stop in front of the stairs that forked in a Y.
My body reacted almost on its own as the tank turned to face me and began firing its machine guns once again. Backflipping end over end, I ascended the stairs as the machine gun ripped a line of fire right after me. I saw that the marble wall behind me where the stairs split was embossed with the Blueblood family tree, and as I raced to the side the machine gun fire continued up along it. As I ducked behind another pillar at the top of the balcony, I watched it rip through the stone all the way up to the final name.
‘Goldenblood’.
I popped a sapphire in my mouth and took a peek as the turret slowly turned from one balcony to the other as the rain poured down upon it and smoke and dust drifted through the air. I waited till the cannons pointed towards the far balcony before I moved, running as quickly and as low as I could. Still the machine guns fired wildly as the main turret swung around towards me. I ducked behind a pillar as the guns blazed, their bullets ripping through the stone in a stream of lethal metal. The twin cannons came around and pointed up at me.
This was gonna hurt… I had no idea how, but I stood like a zebra and launched myself in one arching backflip off the marble balcony, feeling the fiery fingers of the machine gun rounds punching right through my limbs and body. But I couldn’t stop. My body couldn’t stop. The machine guns chattered as they struggled to track me through the air, and a thunderous boom washed through me as the tank blasted the balcony where I’d stood two second before.
I landed with a bloody clang atop the tank’s turret. The machine

guns couldn't target me when I was lying flat on the metal, and the turret swung back and forth wildly. I drew my sword with my fingers, clenched down on the grip, and then rolled off onto the front of the tank. With all my strength I jammed the sword into the socket of one of the machine gun turrets, and the silvery blade slipped through the metal with its magical sharpness. Wrenching it about a few times, there was a spark, and the turret froze. I quickly wiggled the blade again for good measure, then pulled it out and repeated the process on the other machine gun turret while it tried to target me. It too sparked and went dead.

Roaring in fury, the tank revved its engines and swung its main turret as it bucked back and forth. I clambered back on top of the turret, and then spotted it: a hatch. Holding on for dear life atop the flat turret, I levered the blade tip into the hatch and started cutting.

You fuckers are gonna die, I thought with cold certainty. *I'm going to blow your faces off.*

The tank suddenly charged the far wall and struck with such force that only my teeth and two fingers kept me from being flung off.

For a moment we both sat there, the tank and I, and then it backed up and fired both cannons nearly point blank into the wall. The shockwave nearly knocked me off, and my magically sharp sword slid out of the hatch along with the cloud of rubble that cascaded over me. I held onto the hatch, looking behind the tank for the glint of silver. Then, as if sensing my intention, the damned machine backed up!

I gritted my teeth as I looked down at the hatch. Rain from the hole blasted in the roof pattered down around me. Even now, the machine gun turrets were glowing pink. Soon they'd be operational once more, and then the hoof-wide gash I'd managed to cut in the hatch would follow. There was only one thing to do... I hooked my fingers into the hole, squatted, and started to pull.

I felt the tension build more and more. Felt the line between flesh and metal grow more acute. The motors in my legs began to whine as I put more force into them than they'd been designed to bear.

Then they started to smoke as my own repair talismans struggled to keep them pulling. Pull, damn it! My flesh began to distort where pony ended and metal began. Warnings filled my vision as the metal hatch began to bow outwards. Just a little more. Bullet holes torn through my metal limbs twisted as smoke reached my

nostrils. Just a little more...

Everything gave all at once, the motors and power talismans popping one after another in one final spasmodic tear. The stress on my metal limbs caused my already battered back leg to explode apart completely, and my right foreleg ripped off entirely, connection cup and all, leaving a bloody mass of wire, metal, and meat. My left foreleg shattered at the joint midway, flopping uselessly by my side as I finally pushed myself further than even my cyberpony body could go.

But it had been worth it: my final pull had also forced the hatch open. Now I just had to kick the explosive block off my barding and into the tank and... um... fall on the detonator?

I stared down into a turret filled with technology I could barely understand stuffed into a space that nopony could fit inside. It was filled with wires, talismans, and a clear glass jar that was occupied by a round globe and a few metal vertebrae. A mechanical arm tipped with a camera looked up at me, and then the equipment inside spoke in a mechanical voice.

"Kzzzt... .K... .Kuntzzz."

Not 'he's *in* the tank.'

'He *is* the tank.'

"Deus," I whispered back.

With my legs destroyed and my horn burned out, there was nothing I could do as he jerked back and sent me tumbling off the turret and onto the ground. There was nowhere to run. I had nothing left to fight with as he pulled back and pointed every turret right at me, lamps glaring. He sat there, and I could almost imagine him savoring the moment. Would he blast me to pieces? Machine gun me apart? Crush me beneath his treads? His engine revved over and over again.

So I rocked up into a sitting position, looked up at the tiny socket cameras beneath the lamps, and shouted as loudly as I could, "I'm sorry!"

The engine abruptly fell to a quiet idle as I sat there, the rain pouring down upon me. "I'm sorry that I killed you. I saw your memory orb, Deus! I felt…how you felt. I know how Sanguine kept you on a short leash and used your pain against you…pain that nopony deserved!" I closed my eyes. "And I saw the orb in Miramare. I saw what Brass did to you…what that…that…" I clenched my jaw and then shouted, "that Cunt did to you!"

Slowly, I looked up into the cameras, rain and tears streaking down my face. "I know you loved Twist…and I know that she couldn't love you in return. That you never meant to hurt her. That you just wanted to love her. But you couldn't. And you made a mistake… And I saw how Vanity kept you from her when all you wanted to do was to see her once! Just fucking once!" I yelled as I rocked there in the rain. "But he didn't. He left you there in Hightower to rot. Like you were scum."

I sat there silently, expecting the annihilating blast to come at any second. But it didn't. All I could do was sit there as my EFS flashed critical failure at me on multiple limbs. I lifted my shattered right stump, showing the cables coming out of my torn flesh. It didn't hurt... not like it should. "I know what it's like to be a cyberpony now, Deus. I know what it's like to feel dead inside. To have your body move in ways you can't understand. Like you're not really in control anymore. I know the feeling of violation…how it feels like you've been turned into a thing. And I know you felt the same way, Deus. I know how it feels to have the one good flesh and blood part of you that makes you feel like a pony…and I'm sorry that I took that away from you as well."

The engine let one long low growl, but it dwindled away. "You were a good pony once. You fought for Equestria. You were a Marauder, gunning down enemies with a minigun to hold a hill that command told you to abandon. And you were a monster, Deus.

You made a horrible mistake…there's no lie to that. But you were never given a chance to show you could be more than that mistake.

To prove you were a better pony. To do better…

"I used to think that what you did to my home was horrible. That you were a monster for it, and deserved whatever you got. Well, I learned what it means to make a horrible mistake. I know what it means to become a monster, Deus. I became a monster too!" I shouted at the pony within the machine. "But I got a chance to do better. To become more than a monster. And now you do as well.

You can choose the better choice. You can turn your back on the Harbingers who would have had you kill children; make up for your mistake."

I heard a commotion at the hole in the wall Deus had made to drive in and saw P-21, Scotch Tape, and Rampage, their eyes wide in shock. My eyes met P-21's, I gave a little shake of my head, and he stopped the pair from charging in.

I bowed my head before the tank, closing my eyes. "Please. One monster to another…please…" I whispered, "choose to be a pony… Doof."

There was a moment of silence save for the soft noise of the rain and the low rumble of the tank, and then Deus's engine let out a mechanical scream as the cannons fired. The wall behind me blew out. Again he fired. And again. Again. The shockwaves of the cannons battered me and the concussion would have deafened me had my ears been flesh and blood. Again he fired. Again. He blew out the walls and ceiling. His machine guns ripped apart the balconies, and his cannons pulverized the marble surrounding us. Again. Again. Again.

Finally the barrage ended; only a bowl of rubble remained of the ballroom. Rain hissed to steam off his barrels as the water washed the dust from his striped armor. I hadn't moved. Slowly, my friends peeked over the edge of the debris at where I still sat, head bowed and body broken. All four cameras oriented on me. Slowly I smiled. "Thank you," I whispered.

Deus ground his gears and turned, ramming the far wall of crumbled stone and ploughing right through it. Slowly, I looked over at my friends as they rushed to me. "Oh Sweet Celestia," Scotch Tape said as she lifted my shattered cybernetic leg.

"Blackjack…why do you keep breaking yourself?"

Maybe it was the blood loss, but I laughed, which only made them look more worried as I said softly, "Because I know there are people who can put me back together…make me a pony again." I looked at Rampage. "Did we win?"

"Yeah," Rampage said. "The Harbingers have run off. Steel Rain got away, though."

P-21 looked the way that Deus had gone and then back to me. "How'd you beat him?"

"The same way you beat me," I murmured softly as I leaned my broken body against his. "I gave him a chance to be a better pony."

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 53: Upgrades

"The war brought misery and death all over the world. I sure hope that something like that never happens again. But from what I've seen, there's not much hope for ponykind."

The doors to the Fluttershy Medical Center ER smashed violently inwards, battered aside by a ferocious cyan-rainbow tornado wearing a shooty look all its own. Glory, her hide spattered and streaked with blood, stood in the doorway and bellowed with passion and assertiveness that would have done the original Rainbow Dash proud, "I am assuming control of these medical facilities!"

The few ponies standing around the battered ER just stared in speechless confusion at the sight of her backed by Lacunae and four power-armored pegasi. I lay like a heap of ballast across Lacunae's back, twisting as I tried to alternate my gaze between the emergency room in front of me and the wagons that had hauled the injured all the way from Chapel to the hospital.

"Now wait a minute," a brown earth pony began to say as he looked at his own balking security and the two beam turrets flanking his half-dozen ponies. "We're in charge he--"

Two blinding flares of emerald magic streaked through the ER, and the two turrets exploded in a second. Glory hovered over him. "This is not a debate!" she roared down into his face. "Get whatever medically-trained ponies you can out here at once. Doctor. Nurse. Midwife. I don't care, but move!" Her imperious hoof pointed at the security ponies. "You two. Go grab whatever buckets you can and start boiling water." Next she pointed at four more ponies who looked on in wary bafflement. "You four! Grab buckets and detergent and scrub these tables as quick as you can. You have two minutes!"

All the ponies in the emergency center just gaped at her before she

shouted, “Move it!”

And as if Celestia herself had returned, they moved.

“Scotch Tape. Get on Blackjack’s PipBuck and contact Megamart. We’ll pay whatever they want from what we stripped off the Harbingers if they can get Bonesaw and every healing potion and chem they’ve got together within ten minutes. Then do the same for the Collegiate, and get them to send Triage.” Scotch Tape lifted my remaining foreleg, removed it so that she could use my PipBuck more easily and wouldn’t damage me further by pulling on the leg, opened the panel, and fiddled with the controls a bit. Glory turned to Lacunae as the filly began to talk. “We’ll send Lightning Dancer and Boomer to Megamart with a cart. Will you have the magic to reach the Collegiate and bring the things back?”

“I will, even if I must imbibe the wastewater in the little fillies’ room,” Lacunae promised solemnly, setting me on a bench where I had a clear view of the ER.

“Good. Take my father up to the stasis pods before you go.” Glory then turned to P-21. “Go up to there and make sure that the one we put Scotch in is still working. If not…” She hesitated for an instant, glancing back at the bandage-wrapped form of her father. Her eyes met mine; I gave her as reassuring a smile as I could. It was all I could do at this point. “Try and get it prepped and ready if you can.”

“Should be easier this time,” the blue pony muttered, glancing at Scotch Tape as she talked into the PipBuck. Then he ran off towards the stairs.

Glory’s hoof turned to bear on the few uninjured Crusaders who had accompanied us from Chapel. “You four. Scour this place from top to bottom. Every chem, healing potion, bandage, and bottle of alcohol you can find, bring here or to the operating room on the tenth floor. Understood?”

“Bet I can find more than you!” one shouted, turning the vital scavenger hunt into a game and hiding his fear as he did so.

The Collegiate and Society ponies that staffed this little outpost staggered out from the side rooms where they’d been sleeping and were instantly drafted and assigned duties. When Archibald, the brown pony in charge, muttered something about caps and paying for this, Glory silenced him with a single stare and then pointed at the heaps of markspony carbines and anti-machine rifles we’d taken from the Harbingers. “Are these tools of death payment enough for

you to save lives?"

"Um…ah…yes…I suppose," he muttered.

"Then move!" Glory bellowed.

"I'll just wait over here…and…um…watch…" I muttered from my seat.

In five minutes, two tables were scrubbed far cleaner than they'd been in centuries, and the first victims were brought in off the wagons. They'd been triaged back in Star House, the most wounded loaded last and taken off the wagons first. A few were probably Harbingers, but that didn't matter right now. All that did matter was that they were mortally wounded. Glory had a nurse pour a pan full of Wild Pegasus and dumped the medical tools in. I envied the tools a tiny bit.

Lacunae levitated the still form of Sky Striker through the ER and then flew up to the stasis repository. Glory hesitated for one moment, her face clearly showing a yearning to be at his side.

Then she started to work.

I hadn't appreciated her medical skill in a while. Nowadays I just regenerated, used healing potions, or was hurt so badly I was unconscious, and I hadn't watched her save Scotch. I saw her move from one tool to the next with her mouth with a deft finesse that matched Rainbow Dash's flying skills. She made healing potions and unicorn magic seem like crude tricks, easy and almost lazy solutions, cheats. Given the lack of magic up above, I could now understand how much medicine would rely on cutting and sewing. The only magical assistance she used with each patient was to put the recollector on their heads to anesthetize them.

When Bonesaw arrived twenty minutes later, he and an earth pony Collegiate doctor working the ER had gone through and stabilized a half dozen patients. With magic, the old stallion pushed them further towards recovery and away from death's bony hooves. Yet even magic had its limitations. It could heal wounds, certainly, but what of infection, shock, contaminants left in wounds, and other complications? With needle, thread, scalpel, and tubes, Glory saved lives without magic.

But not without cost. One mare who'd come to fight with the Crusaders shuddered, gave one long exhalation, and then went silent. Glory simply closed her eyes a moment with the slightest bowing of her head and then washed her hooves in a bucket, rinsed them with whatever alcohol was present, and moved to the next.

She refused to give death more than that.

And me, I sat back watching it all with a profound sense of frustration. I wanted to will my limbs back in place so I could boil linen for bandages or sterilize the equipment, wipe down the tables or just give comfort to injured children. But all I could do was sit back and watch as ponies better than I worked to save others.

It's not always about me, though…

When Lacunae returned with Triage and a few others an hour later, the alicorn looking positively drained of magic and her wings dragging on the floor as she walked, the critically ill were stabilized enough for the blue unicorn to take Glory's place.

"Glory," I said as she washed her hooves, staring at the bloody water.

She didn't answer.

"Glory," I said louder from my seat in the corner.

She bit a bottle and carefully trickled the alcohol over her forehooves.

"Glory!" I shouted, and she jumped, the bottle falling from her mouth and puddling at her feet. She stared at the fluid spilling away in shock as I tried to meet her eyes and said in softer tones, "Glory. Go to him."

"I…I can't. If he's…I…" she stammered, clenching her eyes shut. "I'm needed here."

"Glory. Go." I imagined my mother, all the things we'd left unsaid. "Go to him. Triage is here. She can see to the injured. You've done your part. Go on."

She glanced at me and the mask of her stoicism crumbled as tears welled in the corners of her eyes and she grimaced. "Blackjack…I'm scared. What if…how could she…why…?" She bowed her head, and I started to move to hold her before I remembered my missing limbs. "Why did she do that?!" she cried out at me.

"I don't know," I said in a low, gentle voice. "Maybe Cognitum took her over and attacked him before she changed her mind. Or maybe…maybe she had to do something so she couldn't return to her old life. One that she wanted but that wouldn't save the Wasteland. I don't know. What I do know is your dad is up there. If he's alive, you're going to need to talk to him. And if he's not…" I closed my eyes, remembering the head and the stake. "If not…you need to say goodbye." I finished in a near whisper.

She looked at me for one more trembling second and then pulled

my torso into an embrace, holding me tight. Even if I didn't have legs, I imagined holding her just as tightly as I sighed and stroked my cheek against her neck. "Thank you," she whispered back.

I sighed and kissed her neck and smiled when she finally pulled back. "Go on. I'm going to wait here. I know sooner or later Rampage will bring Rover." I sighed, looking at my three stumps and damaged hindleg. "I'm really going to owe him a leg or three."

"All right," she said, then flew up into the air. "I'll be back soon." And with a swoosh of her rainbow mane, she shot down the hall.

Scotch Tape looked over at me from where she hugged my foreleg with my PipBuck within. I wondered what Cognitum would think if she knew that EC-1101 was in the possession of a filly; part of me found it funny, and another decidedly not. "Hear anything interesting?"

She sighed and looked at the leg. "Lots. There's a bunch of chatter about one group withdrawing to some place called the Cathedral, another talking about 'Operation Cauterize' and something involving Canterlot, and a bunch of jabber that I think is Zebra. But I didn't pick up anything from the Harbingers. If they're communicating, they must be using landlines rather than transmitting." She glanced off to the side and then back at me. "Blackjack…there's this really freaky pony watching me right now."

"Pale? Wide-brimmed hat? Cards?" I asked with a little smile. She nodded, glancing away again nervously. "Don't mind him. He's Dealer. Lives in my PipBuck. He's a…friend."

The filly set my leg down and backed away from it before looking back at me. She looked at the device, then looked off to the side, and finally leaned towards me. "Blackjack…I've seen him before," she whispered.

I would have sat up a little straighter if…well…limbs. "What do you mean, Scotch?"

"In a book. There was a paper with a drawing of a pony that looked just like him," Scotch Tape said before she shrugged off her saddlebags and dug around for a bit, pulling out a copy of the "Wastelands" game book she'd picked up in Silverstar Sporting Supplies. She flipped it open to the back pages where several papers had been shoved in. "Character Sheet" was printed in the upper left corner of each, and below were a bunch of boxes and letters that made no sense. Somepony with some art skills had drawn rather detailed pictures on the backs. One was a pony wearing steam-

driven power armor. Another was a unicorn mare holding a talisman like Priest's cutie mark, her head bowed reverently, while a third depicted a wildly grinning pegasus stallion with a long rifle strapped to his barding.

And there was the Dealer. Same hat. Same gaunt, sallow look with a dead-eyed stare as he flipped glowing cards between his hooves.

"Turn it over…" I murmured.

Name: Smiling Jack. Race: Earth Pony. Profession: Occult Gambler. Hometown: Gallows Hill.

Player: Echo.

"I see," I said quietly. It might have been coincidence. There may have been more than one pony with that name. But I wasn't sure coincidence existed any more.

Dealer had worked for Goldenblood. A personal assistant. Dealer had also been a Marauder. Everypony in that team had in some way been affected by tragedy and failure. Suddenly the Dealer's rants about responsibility took on a new light; he'd seen his team drift apart after the death of Big Macintosh. Seen one turn into a criminal, another driven insane, the rest spread apart and broken.

Doof. Psalm. Twist. Jetstream. Stonewing. Vanity. Applesnack. Big Macintosh. Echo.

The team was complete now.

* * *

"Dog think pony has problem," Rover said calmly as the old canine cupped his chin and narrowed his filmy eye. "Now what could it be…hmmm…" He sat on a large wooden crate he'd hauled in while Triage readied her surgical equipment.

"I broke my legs," I muttered, flushing as I lay there on a table. Now that the injured were more or less taken care of, there was time to deal with stupid mares who tore their legs off trying to rip open tanks with their bare hooves.

Triage glanced at Rover and then at me. "I dunno," the blue unicorn said, her lips twitching around her cigarette. "Sprained ankle?"

"I broke my legs," I repeated, huffing and rolling my eyes.

Rover 'hmmmm'ed as he rubbed his chin. "Dog think Dog may have clue, but Dog is not sure." He looked at the smirking unicorn. "Is something missing?"

"No. I mean…how could that be?" Triage asked in mock amazement, levitating my severed forelimb and cupping her own chin in imitation of the sand dog. "Isn't she one of the strongest, toughest cyberponies around?"

"Dog certainly thought so!" Rover replied sarcastically. "Pony certainly act like it!"

"I admit it! I broke my legs!" I yelled at the pair, who ignored me.

"Maybe it's not physiological," Triage offered.

Rover feigned shock. "Pony think problem is in Pony's brain?"

Triage nodded soberly. "I think it very well may be."

"Okay! I'm an idiot who broke my legs!" I yelled at the pair. "Happy?"

Triage jumped and stared at me, her eyes wide. "Eureka! We have a breakthrough!"

Rover crossed his arms, bowed his head a little, and nodded once. "Yes. Pony may be onto something," he said seriously.

"But how to fix it? I mean, we can't make her less of an idiot," Triage said soberly.

Rover shook his head. "No no. Dog is good, but dog not work miracles."

I glowered at the pair. "I hate you both." The pair arched their eyebrows coolly, simultaneously, as they looked at me and then at each other, and almost in unison gave each other matching smiles that I didn't like at all.

"Dog has answer. If pony insists on doing things that ruins dog's hard work, dog will simply make her tougher." He looked at Triage and grinned. "What pony think? Securipony?"

Triage's horn glowed, and I felt something release beneath my thigh. With a pop, my last leg came off. "I think we should just jump straight to an Ultra-Sentinel. Nip this problem in the bud once and for all," Triage replied with her own grin.

I had a vision of myself sporting six legs each as big as my body and wiggled my three working stumps desperately as I struggled to get away. Triage levitated me, and my stumps waved helplessly in the air as I tried to flee. "No! I'll never get laid again!"

Triage set me back in the middle of the table. Finally, she sighed. "All joking aside, we're serious, Blackjack. You are throwing yourself into fights these legs just weren't meant to handle. You need some more body reinforcement, too. Your cyber parts are designed for recon and being all sneaky. Face it. You need a combat

model that can take the abuse you're throwing at it."

"I don't want to be turned into Deus," I muttered. "I like having flesh and blood." And so did he.

Triage snorted and rolled her eyes. "Then you better get used to being a cripple. Fact is, you're thrashing yourself harder than even your repair talismans can keep up with. And you won't be any use to people if you can't move."

"Fuck you," I hissed at her and closed my eyes. I saw the thing that Dawn became. That Deus had been. And I could see myself becoming just another version of Dawn. Was there any pony left in her? "I don't want to be a machine, Triage. I don't want…" I began, then slammed the back of my head against the bed as hard as I could. "Fuck!" I could almost imagine my mother looking at me from the everafter.

It isn't always about you, Blackjack. I could hear P-21's soft words in my ears.

I'd given my flesh and blood for others before. Now I just had to give a little bit more...

Still, where was the line when I'd stop being Blackjack and start being Dawn? Or was it already too late? I fought the tears of frustration. "Sorry," I muttered.

"Don't be. Near as I can tell, this is par for the course," Triage replied.

I closed my eyes. I wasn't Dawn. I was a better pony than her. I was…

"What have you got?" I asked quietly.

Rover looked back to me. "Pony is fortunate Pony has friends."

"Professor Zodiac realized a while ago that you might need stronger stuff than what you had," Triage said, "even if you didn't want to admit it. She had us looking for whatever Steelpony parts we could." She sighed and shook her head. "There were plans for cybernetic Steel Rangers and Shadowbolts, but finding the actual augmentations was a bust. It'd take a full engineering lab to make them from scratch."

Now I frowned at her. "So…you don't have tougher legs?"

"Not exactly," Triage said as her horn lifted a black piece of metal from the crate. I blinked in surprise, and then stared at the rear leg of a piece of Enclave power armor. "You see, we won't be making them precisely from scratch. We'll use the remains of Sky Striker's power armor, the Shadowbolt repair drivers, and your basic legs to

make new ones."

"You can do that?" I asked in surprise.

The blue unicorn sighed. "I *think* we can do that. The Shadowbolt design is based on power armor, only much more reinforced. Instead of armoring around a pony, it strengthens throughout the body. We'll have to fortify your joints and spine, though. One bad fall on your back and you could easily snap it." She levitated another long piece of black metal. "Fortunately, we've got enough pieces of Sky Striker's armor to do it." She looked into the box and pursed her lips. "Too bad the wing guards were shredded."

Not too bad for me. Anything that got me more than twenty feet off the ground was something I didn't want. Once I worked out teleportation…I sighed and then gave a half smile. "Just try and keep me as much flesh and blood as possible. I don't want Glory to have to break out a wrench set when we make love."

"And that was a mental image I could do without." Triage shuddered and lifted one of my torn legs with her magic. "We'll get you put back together. That shoulder is a problem, though. We're going to have to pop you into a memory orb for a bit while we work on you."

"However," Rover added, lifting a finger, "there is price for Pony."

I sighed, knowing there had to be one. "I'll go to Grimhoof." I really wanted to chase down Steel Rain and Dawn, but…

"That's his requirement. The Collegiate has a separate request," Triage said with a smile. "Fact is, the Collegiate is dying for a steady food source. The Society has been gouging us for years for basic staples. We got their plantations running and secured the tunnels connecting them with Elysium, and then they kicked us out. But there's one plantation close to us that never got running due to extreme Enervation, stronger than almost anywhere else. Somehow, you're immune to Enervation now. Maybe it's a cyberpony thing. In any case, we want you to go in and see if you can clean it out for us." My immunity seemed to annoy the blue mare; I supposed she didn't like mysteries any more than I did.

"Why isn't there any Enervation in the other plantations?" I asked.

"No idea. They were all underground Stable-Tec testbeds for stable orchards and gardens, built to pretty similar designs and without full stable shielding. If there was Enervation in the area, it shouldn't just be hitting one hard and leaving the others almost untouched. The only difference is that that plantation was leased to some other

company. Roseluck Agrifarms. We sent in some robots to look around both the surface structures and the plantation itself, but there were turrets that stopped them from getting deep enough to be useful. In the end, we just gave up and walled off the tunnels to it."

Roseluck Agrifarms. I'd heard that name before.

"All right," I sighed in agreement. "Soon as we're out of here, we'll travel there next." It felt galling, considering the other important things I needed to do, but I supposed finding Steel Rain and Dawn could wait till I'd paid off my debt.

"Good." Rover nodded. "Is nice having Pony that honors word."

Triage opened up her saddlebags and pulled out a number of strange talismans and other arcane science equipment. She levitated a memory orb and something particularly pointy. "Hope you're ready for a long night."

I closed my eyes and leaned back. "It's already been a long night." She floated the orb over and touched it to my horn….

oooOOOooo

The world refocused into the eyes of a white unicorn mare looking into a mirror. I started a bit at her unusual appearance; her irises were rainbow bands and her mane was a chaotic blending of prismatic colors. An elaborate curl of golden wire looped around her horn to a tiny ruby set in the tip and matched her shimmery dress which was decorated with thousands of tiny gems. A gap showed her cutie mark: a diamond radiating spectra of light. She popped out a tube of lipstick, delicately applied a thin line of red, carefully tamped her lips, and then smiled. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "All right, Diamond Flash. You can do this."

She turned with a swish of her shimmery prismatic tail, trotted from the bathroom, and walked into the bedlam of a great gathering of ponies. The cavernous space was awash in lights, music, and noise. Dozens of displays and booths filled the vaulted chamber, and ponies of all kinds, as well as a few beings from other lands, wandered through looking at the varied wonders. Above it all hung a banner magically illuminated to read 'Equestrian Technology Trade Fair'.

Clearly, this was a major convention of some kind. In the distance,

on the open floor below the ringing balcony my host was standing on, I spotted Applejack standing beside a green stallion and talking to Rainbow Dash. Pinkie Pie walked with an entourage two floors up. Opposite her, Twilight Sparkle seemed to be critically reviewing the Ministry of Arcane Science's stall and clearly not finding it to her satisfaction. Two green unicorn mares fussed around with the displays, even with others looking on, clearly trying to execute the purple mare's exacting directions. Stable-Tec had a massive three-story-tall display of a stable. From the traffic coming and going through the building's wings, this event clearly went beyond even this massive space.

Diamond Flash walked casually through the throngs of ponies; every one of them looked as glamorous as herself, or more so. She levitated a glass of champagne and took a nervous sip as she looked over at one display. Flash Industries had something going on that had dozens of ponies oohing and ahhh-ing as energy zapped and flashed. She made her way closer, and well-dressed ponies looked at her, sized her up, and made room for her.

"Flash Industries, makers of magical energy weapons renowned across Equestria, now revealing the latest and greatest in shield matrix technology!" boomed a speaker as a large diamond rose from one end of a platform. "You all know Flash Industries's fine products like the AEP-7, with a redesigned focusing crystal pattern, an improved photonic focusing chamber, and selectable beam focus, wavelength, pulse energy, and refire rate! Well, now witness the next generation in energy products from Flash!" A familiar, boxy energy pistol rose on a frame on the other side of the platform.

The diamond began to glow, and a hexagon of glowing panels materialized around it. "Using only the finest Crystal Empire gems, the Flash Arcane Defense Emitter, or F.A.D.E., creates a shield spell impervious to normal weaponry. See for yourself the awesome power of Flash!" The pistol began to fire crimson beams, the blasts striking the rotating panels and making them glow brighter and brighter.

"What's that? Not enough Flash for you?" A beam rifle rose up beside it. "Let's see if the F.A.D.E. can handle the cutting edge energy of the AER-12, now with improved platinum gem fittings!" Even brighter crimson beams blasted away along with the pistol, and the shield remained in place. "Oh my! Perhaps we need something even 'Flashier'? What about the Flash AET-3 Triforce?!"

boomed the speaker, and a third, snub-nosed rifle raised up and began to blast three beams at a time along with the other two weapons. A few ponies in the front backed away from the barrage of red beams striking the magical plates.

"I know what you're thinking! How can this be? But you haven't seen anything yet, folks! Because I know some of you must wonder: what if, somehow, your F.A.D.E. becomes inoperable? Are you doomed?" the speaker blared. "Not at all!" And then the diamond lowered back into the platform while the magical field remained. Red energy flashed and glared off the magical plates, even with the gem gone. "So long as your enemies keep firing, the F.A.D.E. keeps going. Truly a wondrous innovation from Flash Industries!"

The weapons stopped firing, and three beautiful mares and one handsome stallion stepped forward from around the platform, handing out pamphlets about exciting products from Flash. Diamond Flash hung back, giving a sigh of relief.

"Marvelous display," a voice said from behind her, and she whirled, staring at a handsome yellow earth pony with a gorgeous unicorn at his side.

"H…Horse! And Sweetie Belle?! I…What an…I mean... " She fought to compose herself and smiled as casually as possible. "I'm delighted you found it impressive."

He smiled genially as he went on. "Personally, though, I have to question demonstrating one product that renders your others obsolete. It does seem a curious move."

She swallowed. "What, I should wait for a competitor to snap up something out of the M.A.S.?" She gave her best dismissive toss of her mane. "When you see the price tag for one F.A.D.E., you'll know I'll make a fortune either way." Then she glanced across the room at Applejack. "Besides, the M.W.T. is urging more emphasis to be put on defensive applications, like power armor."

"I'm sure the zebras truly appreciate their defensive capabilities," Horse said sardonically, with a small roll of his eyes. He looked at the crowds with clear distaste and sighed. "Such a bother, but this is where the well-connected rub flanks and decide what the future will be." He suddenly looked at her once more and smiled, arching his brow. "And you certainly seem determined to be one of them. Look at you. Lowly M.A.S. researcher to magical weapons dealer. Who would have guessed?"

"I…I'm just trying to do what's best for my company. And for

Equestria," she added, sounding as if she wasn't sure if Horse was mocking her or not. She glanced at Sweetie Belle, then frowned and looked down at the Stable-Tec display where Sweetie Belle was addressing a collection of ponies. Her eyes went from one to the other, mouth hanging open.

"I do love that look," Horse said with a chuckle.

"Is that…is that a robot?" she asked.

"The latest and finest," he chuckled. "Sweetie Bot, 2.0," he said with a wave of his hoof, and the robot actually blushed and lowered her eyes. "She's not for the show, though. She's all for me. I just love seeing Stable-Tec squirm at the potential questions." He gazed down at the distant, real Sweetie Belle with a strange, hard look. "I once asked her to marry me, but she declined. So I made one that wouldn't. Worked out for the best, I suppose."

"I'll say," Diamond Flash said as she looked around. "I…I wonder if the Princesses will show up."

Horse rolled his eyes. "Oh, I suppose Luna will make an appearance, eventually. Give some boring speech about innovation, how pleased she is at our inventions, remind us to give our all to win the war, and then teleport back to Canterlot. Rah rah rah." He gave a dismissive yawn. "I'd be far more interested if Celestia poked her horn outside her school…but she has even less inclination to be around weapons like these." He scanned the crowd and then gave a savage little grin. "Oh look. Her cadaver's here."

She followed his gaze and looked down at the scarred form of Goldenblood walking around the edges of the room, skirting the crowd. "Who?"

He glanced at her, his expression turning pitying. "Oh, that's right. You're not in the know. I really shouldn't be surprised anymore." He smirked down at the pony as he made his way towards Stable-Tec's stable display. "That's the director of the Office of Interministry Affairs. One Goldenblood."

Diamond glanced down at the disfigured pony who was now standing in a corner away from the crowd gathered around Sweetie Belle. The mare then looked back at him. "So what?"

Horse threw back his head and laughed. "Oh my. 'So what?' That's so…cute." He returned to glaring down at the stallion. "When I was interim director of the M.W.T., I discovered all kinds of interesting things about Goldenblood and his little office. Things you wouldn't begin to believe. It was all right there, if you were smart enough to

know where to look." He caught Diamond's eye, and his lips curled in amusement. "Applejack isn't, by the way. She hasn't a clue about a tenth of what's done behind her back." He glanced at the orange mare and her escort with a look that was almost pitying.

"You…you don't know anything about what happened to her…her accident, do you?" Diamond asked, her voice dropping. Horse glanced at her and his lips widened even more. I knew ponies that smirked like that…I wanted to buck that smirk right off his face.

"Why…of *course* not. How could you possibly *think* such a thing?" he said in a voice of faux wounded pride, pressing a hoof to his tuxedo vest. He then looked down at Applejack's green escort and chuckled. "How terrible that the assassin was killed rather than apprehended. Can you imagine what Morale might have discovered had he been arrested? Why, I imagine whoever did arrange things must have been tickled pink when he was dispatched. Probably sent Applesnack a gift basket." He chuckled and shook his head. "Such irony…" Was he talking about himself or Goldenblood... ugh... either way, I didn't like it!

The mare licked her lips nervously, averting her eyes from the handsome yellow stallion. Diamond started to move away from Horse. "I should…um…go mingle."

But Horse reached out and pulled her close to the rail once more. "Ah ah ah. You want to be one of the big ponies, you need to learn how the game is played." He nodded his head once towards the crowd, and the robot nodded in return and trotted towards them, drawing attention from the pair.

"It's Sweetie Belle!" they began to gush, and the robot began to sing in her slightly-off buzzing voice as Horse led Diamond away from the scene.

"What do you want, Horse?" she asked warily.

"Oh, what do any of us want? Mares. Money. Mansions…" he said with a dull wave of his hoof, then he smirked at her. "Let me turn the question around. What do you want, Diamond?"

She balked a moment. "Well…to do what's best for my company. And for my daughter. And…for Equestria, of course."

He gave an exaggerated yawn. "Yes. How very dutiful to your stockholders, biology, and nation." He frowned and darted in front of her. "What is it you want? You *really* want? What horrible, selfish, ignoble desire purrs inside your heart that drove you to release a magical talisman that makes all your other weapons,

perhaps war itself, obsolete?"

Diamond stared into his powerful, charismatic brown eyes. "Magic," she said in a near whisper. "I…I never was very good at it. All I could do was manipulate light…and when that didn't lead to anything productive, I was…reassigned to lighting the lab. I want to…to make magic. Powerful magic. As powerful as the Princesses or Twilight Sparkle herself!" she said in voice of heated confession.

A small, triumphant smile crossed his face. "Mmmm…would you like the chance to do so? To make magic on an unimaginable scale?"

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded once. "More than anything."

Horse chuckled and then tilted his head towards a small door. "Let me show you something."

He led her through the small access door and down a service hallway where cameras swept slowly back and forth. He pulled out an odd card with a gemstone reflector on it and held it up as they approached the cameras; there was a beep, and the red lights atop them went dark. He glanced at the incredulous mare and gave a wink. Eventually, they reached a small, nondescript office, and he tucked the strange card away. He walked to a large bookcase. "Ah, an oldie, but a goodie. 'Principles of Power'…" he reached out with one hoof and pulled out a small book. "And 'Applications of Technology'," he said as he tugged out another. There was a faint click, and the bookcase swung out. "The classics never grow old."

He pulled another gemmed card from his tuxedo jacket and hung it in front of his mouth as the heavy door behind the books appeared. The symbol of the Ministry of Wartime Technology was emblazoned upon it, but I saw the tiny icon of the O.I.A. in the corner of the door. A red lens popped out of the middle of the door and swept across Horse, Diamond, and the strange card he held up. The door opened with a hiss, and two huge sentries, perhaps the earliest Ultra-Sentinels, rolled forward from their access.

"One A Two C Four D Three I," Horse said casually as he put the card away. Instantly, both robots turned their guns towards Diamond. She cried out, and he hastily added, "And one consultant." The robots beeped and returned to their alcoves. "Touchy things at times, aren't they?"

"What is this place?" she asked nervously. Beyond the two robots were an elevator shaft and a platform lift.

“This is the Ministry of Wartime Technology,” he said as he stepped onto the lift. “Down there…well…that’s the surprise.” He smirked at her. “You can still walk away, Flashie. Go back to making products and attending board meetings and chasing after quarterly benchmarks.”

As someone whose given name could easily be made to end in an ‘-ie’, I knew there was only one response. She turned and stepped onto the platform beside him. The lift gave a lurch and began to drop. Only green lights spaced intermittently gave any illumination as they descended into the earth below.

Diamond paced nervously back and forth. “Where are we going?” The smooth concrete walls gave way to rough-hewn rock framed with girders.

“Down,” he replied simply. “There’s a lot of ‘down’ in Hoofington. Even before the original city was razed, it had a rather stunning amount of drains, sewers, and access tunnels. It’s as if the city’s always been trying to draw its inhabitants to explore deeper and deeper into the earth.” He glanced at her and gave a grin. “Nervous?”

“No,” she said sharply.

“Liar,” he replied. “Unicorns always are when it comes to being underground. You love the shiny things…but the rocks? The dirt? The bones? No, you really don’t belong here,” he said as he casually looked over at the wall.

Diamond stared at him a moment. “Do you…not like unicorns?”

He looked at her and arched a brow, then smiled. “Truth be told, I hate every last one of you.” He turned to looked at the passing stone walls again. “It’s jealousy, really. You get to do magic. We can’t. It’s your dream to do incredible magic. Well, it’s my dream to someday have technology so advanced that there won’t be a difference between unicorns and anypony else. We’ll all be equal.”

“You’re…frightfully candid,” she murmured.

He gave a short laugh. “It’s this place. It brings out the honesty in me.” He turned and pointed to the wall, which now glittered with huge black bands. “As we dug the tunnels to bring building materials into the Core, we came across this strata of obsidian. One of the thickest ever encountered. Odd, because obsidian rarely forms so deep beneath the earth. It’s also a poor foundation for skyscrapers, to be certain, but, enchanted and processed, proved quite useful as a building material. But beneath it, we encountered

something even more amazing…a layer of broken and compressed granite."

"My…geology is somewhat lacking…" Diamond confessed.

Horse chuckled mirthlessly. "That was one thing I liked about Goldie. He could talk rocks all day. I think it's the only thing I like about him." He pointed at the gray walls. "The granite formed eons ago, some of the hardest stone in the world. But something had shattered it to pieces. This wasn't some slow process of erosion but a rapid and traumatic event. Even more shocking, in several places we found pockets with intact zebra ruins, buried beneath an avalanche of debris."

"Zebras? In Equestria?" she asked, baffled.

"Please. This was centuries before Equestria. We were being exploited for food by Unicornia and Pegasopolis," he said with a roll of his eyes. "We came to one of two conclusions. Either there had been some sort of cataclysmic volcanic eruption, or a colossal impact had blasted a mountain of granite apart and the debris had rained down all across the valley. Magma then rose and rapidly cooled, forming the obsidian layer, which was buried beneath sediments." He reached into his tuxedo and casually drew out a fragment of shiny silver metal. "And then we found this."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Starmetal. Sky Iron. Meteorite. Or rather, that's what it appeared to almost everyone. What I discovered was that this metal isn't simply an element or alloy. It has a peculiar atomic structure capable of manifesting particular macroscopic effects." He smiled smugly. "And I realized that such a metal had more than simple natural origins. It was technology. Incomprehensible technology to everyone but a very select few. Technology that would allow us to not just end the war with pitiful ease but to also to utterly transform the world. Perhaps the universe."

Diamond took a half step back from Horse as he chuckled. "Of course, that was just my pet theory." He looked down, where the green glow was becoming brighter and more steady. "Then we found…" He paused, and suddenly the lift dropped into a colossal, perfectly round void. "…this."

A few green lights along the lift's hanging rails were the only source of steady illumination, struggling to light the massive space around us. The green glow was augmented by countless motes of ghostly white light circling in the middle of that great space. Along

the periphery of the expanse were long, jagged blades of silver jutting hundreds of feet into the mile-wide cavern. Green crackling energy arcs flickered and danced along the edges like a distant lightning storm. A swarm of tiny humming dots swirled and flickered around the silver spires like a metallic mist.

"What…how…" she breathed, staring into the space as the lift dropped towards a large bulbous shape suspended in the very center of the chamber, hundreds of feet above the floor.

"We didn't make this," Horse said as he started out at the gargantuan machine surrounding them in all directions. "Something else, somewhere else, using a technology greater than anything we could imagine, did. Applejack's engineers and Twilight's researchers call it the 'Tokomare'. The zebra called it the 'Eater of Souls'. I call it the future of the equine race."

She blinked and stared at him in shock. "How is this…thing…our future?" The lift came to a stop at a dangling station. A ring of terminals flickered around pieces of equipment, and a half-dozen ponies walked around the devices. A hum filled the air which would have made my mane stand on end if I'd been there myself. Diamond swayed as a familiar lethargy washed through her. "And what… what's that screaming?"

An odd, small yellow mare with strange pointed eyes and a black mane pulled into a bun trotted up and passed her a small plastic canister on a plastic thong. "Here. Take this," she said in an unfamiliar accent. "It's the only thing that we've found that counters the ambient energy." Diamond put it around her neck, then breathed a sigh of relief. "Doctor Toko, leader of the Tokomare project."

"You're from Neighpon?" Diamond Flash asked in shock.

"Indeed," she said with a smile, then gestured to the other ponies. "This is Bastille, from Fancee." A stern-looking gray earth pony mare nodded once from her terminal. "Trotski from Stalliongrad." A blue stallion with an impressive, brushy beard trotted up and kissed her hoof. "Halah from Saddle Arabia," she said as she gestured to a large, yet surprisingly delicate…pony? "Harmonia from Crystal Empire," she indicated a white mare who was…sparkling? Okay. Shiny ponies was where I drew the line!

But that couldn't prepare me for the last member of the research team. "And this is Amadi," Toko said as she pointed to the final member, a large and shrouded form.

When indicated, he stepped forward and pulled back his hood, uncovering his long striped mane and lined features. He wasn't just striped, however. His face was covered with intricate tattoos that seemed to emphasize his stripes. Strange glyphs were tattooed upon his hide in sweeping, elaborate tribal marks. His yellow eyes focused upon Diamond, and he gave a small smile, as if finding amusement in something.

"A zebra? What…how…" She swallowed, her mouth working silently a moment. "I thought zebras had been…ah…"

"There are certain elements within the government which can overlook the current political climate. Besides, my tribe is loathed far more than any pony could be by zebrakind," he said fluidly with an easy smile. "The chance to be a part of this is more than I could dream," he said with a wave of his hoof, then looked back at her and gave a little nod of concession to her. "But it is much to take in, I understand."

She swallowed and turned to Horse. "What…why am I here?"

Toko gestured at the immense metal spines jutting out at them as she said, "The Tokomare is an alien device of unprecedented power and potential. But while some members of this team may have more…outlandish theories about its potential…" Toko glanced at Amadi who chuckled with a rueful bow of his head. "Our goal is simple: unlimited electricity for the entire world."

"An end to all wars," Amadi said with a nod. "With this device, the resource struggle will end, and both pony and zebrakind will have peace. All people will. Stars willing, of course." Maybe it was just me, but there was something about the way he said that which made me wish my spine could crawl.

"Yes, using an unimaginably advanced source of technology to illuminate our lightbulbs. How…thrilling…" Horse said in a voice dripping with sarcasm.

Diamond looked from one to the next. "I don't understand. What can I do?"

"I think it'll just be easier to show her," Toko said as she trotted to a control panel and began to push buttons. Everyone started donning green-lensed goggles that hung around their necks, and Amadi passed a set to Diamond. Instantly everything was awash in emerald hues. "Harmonia?" Toko asked as the other smart ponies went to work. The shimmery mare began to manipulate intricately carved crystal rods in another panel. "The Uvula is positioned right

in the middle of the void. Any closer, and the radiation and discharge would be…hazardous."

Four long crystals slid out of the dangling platform towards the sparking wall. Above us, four long metal arms that had rested along the lift rails slowly swung down and stuck far out into the void. Bright golden wands glimmered at the tips. "Extra duty magic lightning rods?" Diamond asked with a small smile.

"Flash Industries's finest," Horse chuckled as he worked on his controls. Instantly, the distant dark motes swept like a dust storm towards the platform. Tiny metal orbs fluttered in a swarm around the platform, then swooped into large drums along the elevator above, making them hum like massive beehives. "Mechasprites. Something that never was converted for market use…but very useful in hazardous environments like this." When the last flying machine returned to the canister, he waved at Toko. "Ready here."

"Ve are at full extension," Trotski said from his terminal. "Shall ve go for a hundredth?"

"Sure. Give the system a workout," Harmonia said.

Amadi bowed his head. "Ashur. Dagon. Namtar. Spare us your wrath and grant the daring a fraction of your power."

"Shall we pray to the Boogiebuck and the Headless Horse while we're at it?" Horse drawled with a roll of his eyes.

The zebra scowled. "Perhaps when your people suffer terribly from a power beyond your imaginings, you will have a greater respect for them."

The yellow stallion rolled his eyes once again. "And I'm sure when it comes, it will be a miracle for the ages. Shall we?"

"Only a hundredth," Toko warned. "Ear protection now." Everypony present quickly donned strange crystal-studded earmuffs.

The hum began to fill the air as the four crystal wands began to resonate. The spires filled the air with an ominous counterpoint to the strange sound. "Tuning in to the frequency," Harmonia shouted, the shiny mare barely audible as she turned a knob with her hooves. The swirling motes of light began to whirl around the dangling platform energetically. "Any second now. Be ready," she said as the humming crystals hit a sweet note.

The flickering green lightning along the silver protrusions disappeared. Then the crystal's note was drowned out by a single, brutal tone blasted from every direction that made Diamond scream and fall to the platform. Thunder boomed all around her, and she

looked up to see dozens of streamers of lightning ripping through the space and striking the spires. The lightning ran like water along thick cables stretched along the sides of the metal supporting the platform. The storm lasted a few seconds, then disappeared. Diamond coughed at the acrid reek left in the air.

She looked up at the four lightning rods; then gaped at their absence. Four drooping, half-slagged spurs sat in their place. Horse whooped, "Look at that. All the outputs are maxed. Again!"

Diamond's trembling hooves pulled off the earmuffs. "I've never seen that happen to any of our heavy duty lightning rods. That was a hundredth of full power?"

Toko smiled at her. "No. If our math is correct, it is one hundredth of one percent of the power the Tokomare is capable of."

Sweet Celestia. "Sweet Celestia," Diamond murmured. "How?"

"We're not certain. The Tokomare seems to…react…to a singular frequency. But as you can see, we need something capable of shielding and channeling the power. And Flash Industries is the forerunner with your F.A.D.E. and other research projects with energy manipulation," Toko said as she pulled her goggles up. "With your shields, we can not only tame the Tokomare, we can channel its power all across Equestria. Perhaps, all across the world."

I thought back to the megaspell chambers beneath the city; if there was any way the energy I'd seen could have been channeled to them, then suddenly the zebra's zeal for destroying the Core made a lot more sense. Terrifying sense. If the ponies living above knew the glowing bullseye they lived on, then they were bona-fide crazy people. One and all.

"Power like that…it would take dozens, perhaps hundreds… thousands…of F.A.D.E. units. And the mechanisms to control them and…" She closed her mouth, staring at the distant silvery prongs and their flickering lightning.

Horse walked towards her. "So. What do you say? Want to do magic on a scale that will make Twilight Sparkle green with envy?"

Diamond Flash looked from one to the next, and then her eyes returned to Horse. Then she smiled. "I'll get started tonight."

oooOOOooo

When the memory ended, I reeled there on the table. It didn't help

that my whole spine felt…stiff, and my shoulders and hips ached. So, that was the Eater of Souls: either a monster from beyond the stars or a ridiculously powerful machine. Either way, it was beneath the Core, waiting. What could it do? What, if anything, did it have to do with Horizons? Oh, who was I kidding? Something like that had to be involved with something!

Or did it…I reflected on something else: no Goldenblood. It was hard to imagine any conspiracy in Equestria without that scarred bastard involved, but I supposed that, statistically, there had to be some plots he wasn't involved in. Maybe he was and had simply been absent. Or perhaps Goldenblood had conducted this one from behind the scenes too and…I groaned and rubbed my face with a cold black hoof. "Why so many damned secrets?"

"Because it's the Hoof," Triage said as she took the orb and returned it to her bag. "So…the Tokomare. What do you think?" she asked as she trotted back to the table with a freshly-smoking cigarette between her lips. "You saw the Tokomare. Horse's marvelous mechanical monstrosity."

I sighed and looked at her, feeling the urge to be honest, and spat, "I think it's more proof that virtually nothing that was made during the war was worth a damn. It's like Dawn's belief that all they need is one thing, just one, and everything will be perfect. And Diamond Flash was just sucked right in, too! No doubts. No 'wait a minute, what if this thing eats us?' or 'maybe dangerous life-sucking radiation means we shouldn't play with it!' or anything. Did Equestria have a terminal outbreak of stupid?"

Rover laughed as he attached my leg in the new socket in my repaired shoulder. "In a way, Pony. Ask ghoul. Everypony just raced forward as fast as they could. Pony is herd animals by nature. But moreover, think of Equestria before pony's war."

Triage manipulated a probe in my opposite shoulder. "There were threats, certainly, but all they needed was for somepony -- notably Twilight Sparkle and her friends, but others, too -- to do the one thing needed to fix everything." She gave me a little smirk. "You're not the only unicorn who's studied memory orbs. Before the war, they'd just use the Elements of Harmony and make everything better. Return a crystal heart to a pedestal and King Sombra is banished. Just do X, and Y is gone or fixed. Simple."

Rover sighed as he lifted my last foreleg and began to attach it to the shoulder socket. There were a number of clicking sounds and a

warm, tingly feeling radiating from the connection. “Pony never realize that occasionally X’s leads to more Y’s…Z’s…and letters of alphabet Pony never imagined.” He could say ‘alphabet’ but not ‘ponies’?

He reached over to a tray, lifted my black collar up with two fingers, and strapped it around my neck with a wordless smirk of delighted amusement. I felt myself blush profusely as he snugged it down against my hide. “Thanks,” I muttered in embarrassment. He didn’t say a single word, and Triage looked at me, the metal ring at my throat, and then back at me with a sardonic arch of her brow. “What?” I snapped defensively.

“I didn’t say anything,” Triage replied as Rover cackled.

I sighed as I looked at all the blood and scraps of metal scattered around the table. My EFS showed a slightly different layout: still blue, but there was definitely a wing motif on the top, bottom, and upper corners of the EFS display. “Can I get up?” I groaned, wondering just how bad the damage was.

“Yes, but be careful,” Triage warned. I slipped off the table feeling decidedly…heavier. These legs weren’t as light and quick as my others. “I think it all worked out okay. If the rest of his power armor were intact, we could probably have armored your whole body.”

“Thanks. This is good enough,” I said as I stretched and held out a hoof. Instead of white, it had the shiny blue-black metal of Enclave power armor. I tried to pop out my fingers, but there was nothing there but metal hooves. “No thumbs?”

“Pony have thumbs,” he said as he rapped the end of my forehoof. “Dog not know why pony not able to use. Talisman *should* make work,” Rover said, scowling at the end of my forelimbs as if the digits were insulting him with their absence. I looked along my limb to the shoulder and stared at the larger, heavier plate there. I looked back at my hips, but aside from two fresh red scars, the black metal ended at mid-thigh and continued at my haunch. “Pony thought you’d want to keep pony butt pictures.” Triage snorted and took an extra long drag on her cigarette as she avoided my eyes.

“Yeah, well, there wasn’t enough armor to fully reinforce your hips externally, so I put some internally and called it good.” Suddenly the mare yawned and shook her head. “And with that, I’m going to bed. Somepony else can clean up. Make sure you eat some metal and gems soon and frequently. Your repair systems are going to be

working overtime for a while."

I nodded, pulled out one of Glory's cyberpony cakes, and began to eat. It definitely hit the spot with its appley-oily-metally goodness, but I still wanted to find a mirror. I wanted to see what Glory would see when she looked at me; did I still look like Blackjack, or was I something else?

"What is that Pony is eating?" Rover asked as he sniffed curiously.

"Oh. Glory made these for me." I levitated up a few. "Everything a cyberpony needs."

He picked one up and sniffed it, then took a bite. His eye popped wide as he chewed, then slowly swallowed. "Is full of gems!" He gobbled up the rest before I could blink.

Finally! Someone with good taste!

* * *

There was a large mirror in a recovery room down the hall, and I summoned up my courage and a light spell. "Not Dawn. Not Deus," I murmured before I took a good look in the mirror.

Okay. It wasn't…as bad as I'd expected. I looked like I'd put on half a suit of Enclave power armor and had neglected to put on the rest. Aside from my legs, there was a large shield-shaped piece of metal across my chest that connected to my shoulders. An articulated ridge of black metal followed my spine down to my tail. My sides were still bare; on one hoof, a tactical vulnerability, and on the other a wonderful reminder that I was at least partially flesh and blood. The ridge narrowed when it got to my mane and became two thinner strips, with my mane in the middle, running to just behind my ears.

"Blackjack?" Glory said from behind me, and I froze. Slowly, I turned to face her. Her rose eyes followed the metal along my back to my flanks and then down to my legs before looking me in the eyes. She looked absolutely exhausted. Then she gave a little half smile. "Wow."

"Triage and Rover were tired of me breaking myself. So…upgrades. Fun!" I bit my lip as I rubbed my forehoof against my leg. "It's not too bad…is it?"

She smiled and flew to me. "Not as bad as I was afraid it might be," she said as she nuzzled my wonderfully flesh and blood neck. Our kiss was a delightful reminder of what it meant to be a mare.

“I was afraid…” I started, but she pressed a wing to my lips.
“You’re not Deus and you’re not Mother,” she said quietly.
“How’s your father?” I asked in worry.
“Stable,” she replied. “Lightning Dancer has contacted the Enclave. I…don’t know if there’s any help for him up in Thunderhead, though. Whatever Mother did to him…well…I don’t think there’s any way to undo it. It’s like his body has forgotten how to heal itself.” She sighed and rubbed her face. “I think about those kids and leaving him there... at least Lightning Dancer will stay with him. If I know Intelligence, they won’t abandon him either. Still... it’s hard.”
“Maybe someday the Collegiate can make him a cyberpony, too… maybe... ” I trailed off lamely. I could tell she didn’t care for that thought at all as her eyes dropped. “Are you going to be okay?” I asked as I lifted her face with my hoof and looked into her eyes.
“I’m with you, Blackjack. There’s no safer place to be,” she murmured softly as she held me tight and then gave an arch little smile. “Now, let me check how Triage’s improvements work. Give you a full physical?” The line was so bad that it took every bit of my self-control not to snort.
“Well, okay,” I said with a little smirk. “But it’s been a long time since I played doctor.” Then I yipped as her tail snapped upside my rump. “Sorry,” I said as her tail hooked in my collar and tugged me towards the bed.

* * *

On that long-unused mattress, we both reminded each other that, as bad as things could get, there was still bliss to be found in each other. It might not have seemed like the best time for intimacy, my body still repairing itself and she half exhausted, but when we finished and lay on the bed with our limbs tangled together, I couldn’t help but feel sublime satisfaction.

* * *

Chapel, forlorn and lost, seemed somehow smaller and lonelier in the rain with so many Crusaders inside the buildings or at the hospital. Yet, even after the fight, some colts and fillies remained in the watchtower and kept an eye on the hills around the village.

They observed with interest as the wagon, levitated by Lacunae, set down in the middle of the square and I, P-21, Scotch Tape, Charity, and two or three less injured children climbed out. Glory and the Neighvarro Enclave flew after us; I wasn't going to leave them with her back at the hospital. Call me paranoid, but the three had been giving Glory furtive looks every time she passed.

"We gotta get them Harbringers," Scotch Tape muttered sleepily as P-21 tugged her across his back. Rampage stalked out of the shadows beside the post office, and a second later the purple-scaled Precious emerged as well. Her slitted green eyes stared at my new black metal additions with equanimity, one freak to another.

"You can get the Harbingers after a few more hours of sleep," P-21 said, then put his floppy hat on Scotch's head. Glory gave a yawn and stretched, her blue wingtips trembling. She gave me a tired smile and nuzzled my chin one more time before staggering off with him. Twister watched her go, looked at me, and muttered something about catching some sleep as she and her comrades skulked off in the opposite direction.

"Any trouble?" I asked Rampage and the dragonfilly. My vision was showing warnings about low power; apparently my new augmentations needed more energy than the old ones, or my healing and repair talismans were working overtime.

"A few scavengers tried to snatch some gear the Harbingers left behind. We ran them off," Rampage said as she gestured up at the manor. "No sign of the Harbingers, though. Or the tank."

"You'd think a tank would be easier to find," Charity muttered. "Still, I'll be glad if it never shows up again."

"I need some more gems," I muttered, trying to refrain from rubbing my sore neck. It wasn't muscles that ached. My eyes turned towards Star House; did I have any gems left? I needed one of Glory's cyberpony cakes…if only Rover hadn't scarfed them all.

"I've got some gems," Charity said as she limped towards the post office. Apparently shrapnel wounds made the filly a little more generous.

"You mean *my* gems?" Precious hissed as she narrowed her eyes, but she balked when Charity, despite her bandages, whirled on the scaled pony with a furious glare. The dragonfilly shrank back and quickly amended, "I mean…the gems I sleep on?"

"You can spare a few," the filly grumbled. "Besides, it never hurts to keep Blackjack in a little bit of debt to us just in case we need her

to fight another tank." The hybrid glowered at me defensively, then walked back into the post office.

"Another tank?" I asked with a snort. "Do you think I'll ever have to do something like that again?"

Charity stopped at the door and looked back at me. "Given how your life goes, Blackjack, it'll probably be three tanks. Flying ones."

I groaned, knowing that she was right. I followed her into the post office and was taken aback by the lack of weapons inside the shop. Where'd Charity stash the rest of the stuff they'd looted off the Harbingers? They couldn't have brought it all to the hospital, not while taking the wounded. She limped to the back of the building and moved between the crates. "Come on down to the stable."

Wait. *Stable*? I frowned and squeezed my way between the boxes and bureaus that held the majority of the village's property and towards the back where there were, I now saw, stairs leading down. "No way…" I breathed as I looked at steel walls and telltale conduits that made my mane tingle. "It can't be."

I trotted down after the pair, my black metal hooves clanking far more loudly than my white ones had, and stopped short at the sight of the huge round door set in a concrete wall. '94' was printed in faded white letters. "You have a stable down here!"

"Right. Which is why we live on the surface where we can get shelled," Charity said flatly as she trotted over to the control panel beside the door. A moment later the lights above the door began to flash as a klaxon sounded. With a screech and grind, the door slowly rolled open.

"Welcome to Stable 94. The smallest stable in the Wasteland," Charity said as she stepped through the door. Peeking inside, I immediately saw she was right. This wasn't a stable entry like in 99. The walls seemed even thicker than usual and opened up into a large space that was maybe twenty feet high, forty feet wide, and sixty feet deep. There weren't any offshoots or other hallways in here. The entire stable was just this one, singular room. Everywhere I turned there were boxes of valuable salvage ranging from trinkets to weapons to ammo to bottlecaps. I recognized quite a few fancy dresses from the manor and several plastic barrels full of bottlecaps, bits, and other wealth.

I used to joke that Charity would own every cap in the Wasteland, but to actually see it…

Charity limped over to a bed in the corner of the chamber, a desk

with a terminal next to it. Nearby sat a heap of gemstones. Precious climbed atop the pile and began to sullenly flick rubies towards me. "You can have these. I don't like the flavor," she said sulkily as she curled up on the heap.

I levitated a dozen into my saddlebags, then lifted one to my mouth and started to suck on it, frowning at the yellow filly. When my systems had a bit more charge, I looked around at all the stuff and then back at Charity, arching a brow. She bristled a little, "What?"

"Nothing. I just didn't have any clue you were this…loaded," I said as I looked at the treasures. "It makes me wonder why you fought at all, instead of just holing up in here."

"Maybe because we're not stupid?" she retorted scornfully. "Maybe we know that all somepony would have to do is sit up there and starve us out if they really wanted us dead. Or maybe it's because I really don't want the adults up there to have a clue just how much stuff there is down here for them to snag. Or maybe, after seeing Priest die and being shot in the gut, I wanted to show the Wasteland that we're a bunch of kids that shouldn't be fucked with. Or all of the above," she said grimly.

I sat and raised a hoof. "Okay. Fair enough. But what is this place? Is this a stable or not?"

Charity gestured to the terminal beside her bed. "I think it was supposed to be, but there was something going on with Stable-Tec. You can read it yourself."

I trotted over, hit a few keys, and was glad to see that there weren't any annoying passwords. Most of the terminal was meaningless gobbledygook, but there was a series of logs that piqued my interest.

>S, we've run interference with Image and Morale again. Please try to be a little more circumspect, if you can. The story is that the "material" for Stable 24 is for a satirical, ironic, postmodern performance piece. P&P are keeping PP occupied with infiltrators in Manehattan; hopefully, she won't get a twitchy tail on you again. Give my love to AB. -E.

>P.S. Try and remember identification protocols, S. It's that whole plausible deniability thing that keeps PP off our butts. Thanks.

Stable 24? I wasn't familiar with it. It looked like it was 'Fun with Code Words' time again. Given that it was Stable-Tec, I guessed S for Scootaloo and AB for Apple Bloom. PP simply had to be Pinkie Pie. I couldn't guess who the others were.

>GB, what the hay is going on there? I agreed to let your office scrap one stable. One. Now you're taking materials from other projects. AB might not have a clue about how to read a spreadsheet, but I had to talk her out of doing a hooves-on inspection of 90. Our deal was you cover our flank, I look the other way from time to time. If you start snagging entire stables, though, ponies are going to notice. -S.

Those two letters made me bare my teeth, the hiss of my breath drawing both the fillies' glances. Of course he'd be involved. He was fucking involved with everything! Now I thought back to the gutted stable in the south; no wonder it had been incomplete! The materials had been used for something else. Horizons? Redoubt? Maybe…Gardens too? Where else had Goldenblood gotten a Crusader Maneframe for Twilight without anypony else knowing about it?

>S, I don't know precisely what you're doing with your stables, and frankly, I don't care. L was not keen on allowing Stables in the first place, as they suggest Equestria will lose the war. I do know that if what you're doing became public knowledge, Stable-Tec would be finished. I also know that no corporation in Equestria has the resources that Stable-Tec does. Nepotism can be quite useful. What are two or three stables lost when you get to keep the rest? Be practical. -GB.

"Of course," I muttered as I read the next and then shook my head. Blackmail and sneaky tricks followed him around like a fart. How could Luna, whom I assumed was 'L', have ever trusted him? There were a few more that seemed largely inconsequential.

>AB, hey Bloom. I was digging through some of the MWT's Stable-Tec files and lookie what I found. Mind transfer to a computer? Sexy, Bloom. Really sexy. You've been holding out. I saw what you have cooking at 29, 33, and 94. Hope you don't mind if I snag the designs, ROFL. This has got some real possibilities if we can reverse it. Play around a bit. -H.

>P.S. You should check out my Sweetie Bot.

Horse and mind transfer? I frowned as I thought back to the Tokomare; an immense machine of terrifying potential, and Horse had his hooves on some sort of technology that could connect a mind into it? Why did that feel SO wrong on so many damned levels?

>H, I heard all about the "Crusader" you tried to make. Look forward to reading about your lobotomy when you fail to upload yourself into it. -AB

> P.S. SB hopes you get tetanus.

There were a few dozen other correspondences in the terminal, none of which made much sense to me. Then I found the last one.

> Your Majesty, what is Project Horizons?

"That's what I'd like to know!" I shouted at the terminal, and then covered my face in my hooves. Dawn had given me a snippet, but she'd told me more about Cognitum than she had about the project that was always tantalizingly out of reach.

The terminal beeped. I blinked and stared at the blank screen and a single, flashing cursor. Then an audio file began to play. *"So what is the energy output of the moonstone/starmetal reaction, Doctor Trottenheimer?"* rasped a familiar voice that made my mane creep.

"I could do the math for you, but it's a ridiculously large number, Goldie. At an optimal ratio of 1000 to 1, you're looking at an extreme arcanokinetic reaction. Even using it at a less efficient and more manageable 1 to 1 ratio, it's pretty energetic. So much so that no reactor or generator could contain it. You'd need to bottle the blast inside some sort of magic field…and even then, it would be tricky. Sorry, but I don't see this becoming an energy alternative for coal in our lifetime. Or any lifetime," a calm and intelligent voice replied. Then there was a pause, and he asked, *"Are you okay? When was the last time you slept?"*

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," Goldenblood muttered.

"Oh, so tomorrow, then? Given how you look…" There was a pause where I could only imagine a glower, then Trottenheimer suggested, *"Maybe you should stop working with that starmetal. We still don't know if it has toxic side effects or not. It definitely has some bad vibes coming off it."* When Trottenheimer said that, Goldenblood gave a wrenching laugh. *"Are you sure you're okay?"* Trottenheimer asked again, sounding even more concerned.

"It's nothing. Just…bad vibes. It's funny." He coughed and hacked a bit longer before asking, *"Weapon applications?"* Trottenheimer let out a long sigh. *"You knew it was coming. Applications?"*

"Practically nil. Oh, don't get me wrong. It'd blow up just fantastically! But the collateral damage would be…excessive. If you used a hundred kilograms of starmetal with one kilogram of moonstone, you'd wipe the Core off the face of Equestria. A thousand kilos of that starmetal and you'd take out Canterlot as well. Megaspells are plenty destructive enough and easier to control." Trottenheimer chuckled. *"Good thing we only brought back two or three kilograms of moon rocks, huh?"*

Then there was another pause. *"Goldenblood?"*

Goldenblood rasped, *"And if we used, say, ten thousand tonnes…what then?"*

"Oh, are we going for morbid speculation? Well with that much starmetal we'd probably lose everything from here to Manehattan. There'd be pieces of the capital raining down in Roam."

Goldenblood didn't answer for a moment, then he said in a hiss, *"I meant ten thousand tonnes of moonstone. At optimal ratio."*

"Ten…ten thousand t…? Goldie…I don't think there'd be anything left of Equestria with a reaction that big. Or the zebra lands for that matter," Trottenheimer muttered in shock. *"I…the* planet *would still be here. We'd probably keep the atmosphere and oceans too, but I doubt there'd be much for survivors beyond that! It'd be equivalent to a geologic event. Dust clouds for years afterwards. Worldwide forest fires. I can't even imagine the arcane aftereffects of that much energy being released. It would be a weapon with no sane application. Besides, where would you get that much moonstone? Unless you're planning on making a couple hundred trips to the moon, you'd never get that much together."*

"Of course. Of course. It was just…a thought," Goldenblood muttered.

"Don't have those thoughts. It scares me when you *have thoughts like that,"* Trottenheimer said, then sighed. *"You know what? You need to get out of the lab more. You might know your metals, but trust me, the less you work with starmetal, the better. Stuff gives me the heebie-jeebies! Give me megaspells any day."* Trottenheimer laughed, though it was a little strained.

There was silence for another moment, and then Goldenblood rasped, *"You're a good pony, Trots."*

"No I'm not. I make spells that can kill thousands…hundreds of thousands…indiscriminately. But do you know what's sad? We don't know how many have died in this war. When we add up pony losses, zebra losses, third party and neutral casualties…it's already in the millions. You've seen No Pony's Land around the edges of Hoofington. This war will bleed us dry. If the threat of the megaspells we're designing for Starfall can staunch that flow, it'll be worth it."

"And if they're used and kill everyone?" Goldenblood asked in a harsh whisper.

Trottenheimer was silent for a moment and then said in a voice of resignation, *"Well, it's one way to end a war."*

The recording ended, and the two young ponies stared at me.

"What the heck was that, Blackjack? I never heard that recording

before," Charity said as she gaped at the terminal.

I just sat there, numb. Moonstone and starmetal make catastrophic explosions; I'd seen that myself, but I'd never imagined just how big they could be. More than any megaspell or balefire bomb. If he had enough of both, he could destroy all of Equestria. All of the world. I felt numb as I contemplated it; did Horizons have something to do with…with that? If I'd been capable of hyperventilating, I'd have passed out right about now. Because I had no difficulty imagining that Goldenblood could. That he might. But did he?

Where would you get that much moonstone?

I stood and carefully looked around the corners of the room. There. My eyes landed on a camera in a corner. I stared into its lens, a tiny red light beside the optics, as it focused on me. Who was on the other side of that camera? Cognitum? Horse? Dawn? Who was playing these games with me?

"Was there any kind of arcane science equipment in here?" I asked as I stared at the camera.

"No. It's always been empty," Charity replied as she stared at me in confusion, like she'd never seen me before. "There used to be cables and things sticking out of the floor though. Maybe something got taken out a long time ago?"

Something involving a way to copy a mind into a machine.

"Thanks, Charity. I'm glad you showed me this."

Charity flushed. "Thanks. Just don't talk about it, please. We're a target enough because folks think we're weak. I don't want them to know just how much salvage we've collected over the years, especially from the manor." I'd had a huge bounty placed on my head; I knew exactly what she was talking about.

Then Rampage shouted down the stairs, "Enemy spotted! It's back! The tank is back."

"Deus," I muttered, and the raced for the door. Had he reverted and decided to wipe Chapel off the face of Equestria, or was he here for some other purpose? I ran into Rampage at the top, the striped filly stepping aside as I made a beeline towards the exit. "What's he doing, Rampage?" I wasn't hearing explosions; that had to be a good sign. Right?

"It's not rampaging yet, Lieutenant. Hostile was spotted to the northwest, half a klick away," she said as she followed me. "No sign of other hostiles, yet, but they've got to be out there. Enemy wouldn't leave armor unsupported. Do you want me to recon and

see if I can find them, Vanity?"

Wait. What?

I paused and looked back at her and the furious look in her eyes. On her flank, the two candy canes forming a heart were foremost in the slew that was her cutie mark. I swallowed. Twist could disappear at any moment; just noticing she was in the body of an older filly might do it. She seemed to think I was Vanity. Maybe…"One moment, Sergeant. Are you mentally clear and focused on combat?" I'd have to be quick and careful; I had two highly unstable Marauders to deal with.

She hissed in her anger. "Damn it Vanity! I'm fine. I don't need your freaky unicorn magic messing with my head. I'm not Jetstream. I can deal with it." Her entire face twitched with aggravation; I might not have been a morale officer, but even I could tell she was close to snapping.

I considered her coolly. "I'm not sure I can take that risk, Twist. Let me put them in a memory orb for you. You can hold on to it till after the battle. I won't take it." Please don't notice that I was half metal or a mare or that my mane was the wrong color. "Please don't make me bench you this battle for psych…"

"I told you I'm over what that bastard did to me! Peppermint and I…" she snapped, then grit her teeth as she stared into my eyes. *'See me as Vanity. I am your friend. I want to help,'* I thought as I returned her gaze. Twist's jaw trembled as it clenched and a tear ran down her cheek. Then she spat, "Fine. Just be quick about it. And I want it back after we deal with that tank. I am not turning into Jetstream!"

No arguments there. I pulled an empty memory orb from my saddlebags and touched my horn to her brow. According to Triage's notes, the trick to gathering a memory was not to dive right into the middle of it, like I had with Shujaa. Rather, it was like collecting a cloud of flickering images. The more bright and clear a memory was, the more important or traumatic it was to the viewer. I imagined hooves of magic wafting the cloud into a tighter bunch. I saw vague images of Shujaa, Twist, and Rampage all swirling together.

What to get? I couldn't copy it all. There'd been a name that Shujaa'd mentioned, though. "Peppermint…" I muttered, and watched as a portion of her mind bloomed with images.

"What about…Vanity?" she muttered weakly. "Wait…you're not…"

I saw her mind become erratic and, with as much skill as I could muster, I gathered up that glowing section and pulled them from the others. I didn't have time to look through. From how bright and sharp the flickering images were, I could only guess they were important to Twist. Hopefully they'd be important to Rampage, too.

The glowing cloud emerged from Rampage's forehead like a… um…like a little glowing cloud coming out of somepony's forehead. I lifted a blank memory orb with my magic and touched the cloud to it. With a small flash, the nimbus disappeared into the orb.

Rampage swayed, then shook her head. "Blackjack? What's going on?"

"The tank's back," I replied as I held up the orb. "And I think I've got something for you to see later. Something that'll help."

"Something…" She blinked at the orb, and her pink eyes shifted back to me. "Are you sure? I mean…knowing about Shujaa was cool, but…"

"It's from Twist," I said with a small smile. The name gave the filly a haunted look. She'd been the last to receive the phoenix talisman; I could understand her feelings.

"You…why don't you…you look at it?" she stammered and swallowed, shaking her head. "I mean…then you can be sure."

I stared at her and then glanced at the orb. "Okay. After the tank, then."

Outside, the sallow glow of day was lightening the usual Hoofington gloom. I must have been reading messages longer than I thought. I popped another spicy ruby in my mouth and trotted quickly to the stockade, peering through a gap. The ponies who hours ago had been fighting the Harbingers now looked to me. Some stared at my new augmentations. Others saw the truth. The Harbingers attacked because of me. Sanguine attacked because of me. The tank was here because of me. There wasn't anyplace I could call home where somepony wouldn't try and take me out.

So this is how Arloste felt: a home that doesn't want you because of the risk you pose but that would feel too guilty if it asked you to leave.

P-21 emerged from out of nowhere, making me jump. My blue friend had my sword in his teeth and several saddlebags strapped around his neck. Spitting it out, he peered at the tank and gave a triumphant little smile. "Good. This time we're ready."

"We are?" I blinked as I looked at the tank. I took the weapon,

though, and felt a little comfort. I just wished I had something that could pierce its armor that was less…melee-dependent.

"When we didn't destroy that thing, I took the liberty of making these satchel charges from the Harbingers' explosives," he said, holding up one bag and opening it to reveal a cone of beaten metal. Then he turned so I could see a tube of Wonderglue duct-taped to the side. "Press hard. Glue adheres the blast side to the armor. Radio detonated. Shaped charge should breach better and hopefully take out the tank's repair talisman. Or its brain." I stared at him for a moment, and he frowned in worry. "What?"

"I am so glad that you're on my side," I replied with a smile, making him scowl…and blush…as he muttered about me being an idiot. So, now we could do something in case things went bad. I closed my eyes and concentrated. The chaos in Unity had subsided; it was now almost ominously quiet. I didn't want to try and think something at Lacunae. Right now, the last thing I wanted was for the Goddess to distract me from dealing with Deus. "Where're Lacunae and Scotch?"

"Scotch is minding Boo. She tore the place apart while we were gone," he said with an arch of his brow. "Lacunae's with Glory."

I sighed, trying to think of what to do. "I should have left some more cakes out for her."

"We did. She wasn't looking for cake. She was looking for you," he said.

Okay. Guilt was what I didn't need right now. Especially when the tank began to move across the slope, around the village and towards the road between it and the bridge. "Okay. When you think you can, get those charges on it. Don't blow them unless it fires."

"I can use the drainage ditch for cover if it gets on the road. What are you going to do?" he asked.

I rose to my hooves. "I'm going to go talk to him." He groaned and covered his face with his black, floppy hat. "I gave him a chance to be a better pony. Now I need to find out if he took it or not."

"That's not it," Rampage said, then smirked at P-21. "Fifty caps. Pay up."

"You can collect from Blackjack," he replied sourly.

I looked at the pair for a moment with pursed lips. "I'm so glad that my friends are betting on my idiocy," I muttered sourly as I started towards the northeast, trotting down towards the bridge.

"Oh, that's nothing. You should see the betting pool for how long

it's going to take for you to ruin your shiny black legs. I think half the ponies you know are in on it," Rampage said. "I gave you sixteen hours…"

"I am not going to ruin these legs. I don't think Rover has many more 'fixing stupid pony who always breaks her legs' in him," I grumbled as we stepped out the gate together. P-21 was already gone.

"Triage bet it would only take you eight," Rampage snickered.

"Well, Triage smokes too much," I countered with a scowl. "Don't we have a tank to deal with right now?"

"Somepony is touchy," Rampage observed.

"Somepony is dealing with a tank run by the brain of your old pal, Deus," I snapped. "Somepony has a right to be touchy."

"Deus?!" she gasped as she looked up at me, and then pointed at the tank with her little hoof. "You're telling me…that…Deus's brain is in there?" I sighed and nodded, and the filly burst into a peal of laughter. "Oh, Sweet Celestia, that is just perfect!"

Deus had crossed the ditch with ease, and now the massive tank began rolling up the road towards me. "Rampage, stop helping Triage win that bet," I said as the road shook under my black hooves. Looking at those two cannons, I could only gulp and manage a weak smile. Then I spotted a black hat moving quickly and quietly along the ditch beside me, creeping as low as possible. That gave me a little confidence as the huge machine came to a stop twenty feet away. At least none of his weapons were pointed right at me. Okay. Time for diplomacy. "Hello, Doof."

"Doof?" Rampage looked at me with a frown and pointed a hoof at the tank. "I thought you said this was Deus?" She frowned, as if focusing on something. I watched as the two candy canes appeared, but didn't manifest fully. Her eyes flickered, and I imagined Twist peeking at me from the depths of Rampage.

"Doof was Deus. And now he's Doof again," I said, looking up at the tank with a hopeful smile. "Right? The good marauder Doof? The pony who wants to be a better pony?"

The turret whirred low as the cannons swung back and forth twice. Oh…I really hoped that P-21 was fast with those satchel bombs.

"Oh, let me guess," Rampage said as she hopped onto my back and tapped the black plates that ran along my spine. "You're here for a rematch? You should watch yourself. Blackjack has all these fancy upgrades. You really shouldn't fight her for…um…another eight

hours. Right. That should put you in the perfect window for a rematch."

"Rampage! Stop trying to win that bet!" I said, bucking her off and onto the road beside me. The tank let out a rumble, and a camera focused on the older filly. "Yeah, Deus. That's Rampage." I frowned. "Haven't you ever seen her like this?"

Deus swung his turret back and forth again. Rampage snorted. "We don't exactly allow magical disintegration weapons in cage fights. Ruins the suspense, and the damn Flash Fillies would be impossible to live with." Rampage stood and faced Deus again. "Big Daddy is going to squirt when he hears about this. He's always going on about having the biggest, baddest fighters in the Hoof. Not even Brutus can compete with you now!" The engine gave a little rumble. I hoped that was a good sign.

"So…you're not here to fight me again?" I asked. The turrets rose and fell once. "Yes, you are or yes you aren't?" The tank let out another deep rumble as I raised my hooves defensively. "Okay. I'll take that as a no!" The cameras focused on me, and I looked at my black armored limbs. I gave him a wan smile. "Yeah. Blackjack, new and improved. And a little less me."

The engine let out a low growl. Rampage stepped forwards again, and I cringed inwardly as she said, "You're being awfully quiet. Don't you have a single 'CUNT' for me? Come on, that tank has to be wired with loudspeakers or something." Deus let out a deeper growl of his engine and shook his turret. "No you aren't, or no, you've suddenly embraced a whole new appreciation of femininity?"

I took several steps away from her to the side, and spotted P-21 peeking at me from behind the tank. He smiled, gave a little nod, and disappeared behind it completely. "Rampage, I'm not going to blame Deus for shooting you. Stop being like Brass." The engine growled once more, but softer. Slowly, I moved in front of him again. "Is it because you can't talk? Did they do something to you?"

The cannons rose and fell once. Rampage whistled long and low, "I guess that's Dawn's equivalent to washing a pony's mouth out with soap." The engine growled again, lower and more ominous.

"So you're not here to fight me…what are you here for?" I asked as I looked up at the vehicle. He didn't growl his engine or shake his turret or anything. "Are you here to help me?" No answer. "Help Chapel?" Again, no answer. "Revenge on Dawn?" No answer. "Go

back to the Reapers?"

Suddenly Rampage fell back laughing. She laughed so hard her hooves kicked into the air. "Rampage? What's gotten into you?"

She laughed so hard she was crying. "Oh! Oh! It's just too much!" She wiped her eyes with a hoof as she looked up at the tank. "Is it that you suddenly don't have a clue what to do with your life and the only thing you can think of is to follow Blackjack in the hope that she'll help you make some sense of the incredibly fucked up circumstances you now find yourself in?"

Deus rumbled his engines in an idle tone, and then gave a tiny rise and fall of his cannons.

"What?!" I blurted out. Rampage laughed even harder at that. "Wait! Why?!"

"Because that's what you do when you've been beaten by Blackjack, duh!" Rampage said as she sat up. "If she doesn't kill you then she makes you re-examine your entire life and you follow her along until you find something that makes sense! And because it's a whole lot easier than trying to kill you a second time. I mean, look at the list. You've got me. Sanguine at the end there. Psychoshy. Now Deus. I bet Gorgon would have, too, if it weren't for that whole rock crushing to pulp thing."

I sat back on my haunches, eyes wide as I tried to process this particular line of crazy. "But…that's…that's insane!"

"Blackjack, have you looked around lately? What's sane?" Rampage asked as she stopped laughing, smiling up at me. "I'm an immortal amalgamation of souls. You're a cyberpony. Deus is a tank! One of your best friends is an alicorn and your lover looks like Rainbow Dash. The only friend you have even close to anything approaching normal is P-21."

P-21 stepped out from behind Deus, tossing a detonator to me. "I'm just waiting with baited breath to turn into a ghoul," he said flatly as he stepped beside me and looked up at the tank. Its engine roared. P-21 pushed his hat back and glared up at Deus. "Stop. You've got four bombs glued to your chassis. I'm not nearly as mechanically smart as my little girl, but I am pretty sure that they'll rip your engine right off." The engine noise dropped substantially, and P-21 went on, "They're also on timers, so even if you kill us, they'll go off." The engine rumbled again, and he pointed a blue hoof up at the tank. "Stop." The engine slacked off. "I'm *not* like Blackjack. I don't trust somepony who chased us all across the

Wasteland to not swap back to being a complete monster. The only way I'll tolerate you being anywhere around us is if we have a way to turn you into scrap if you decide to swap back to Dawn's side or just kill us for the laughs. Got it?"

For a very tense moment, I was sure we were all going to explode in a fiery ball. Rampage stared at him in amazement, and even I was a little taken aback. P-21 didn't flinch away from the machine. Then Deus raised and lowered his turrets once. "Good. Then open your hatch, because if I were Steel Rain, I'd have some kind of bomb strapped to your brain set to go off the instant I knew you'd gone rogue." I blinked in surprise. Why hadn't I thought of that, given that was exactly what Dawn had done to Steel Rain?

The hatch on the turret opened, and P-21 started climbing up. Rampage stepped next to me and murmured in amazement, "When the hell did his testicles drop?"

"Hush," I replied, unable to stop smiling. I tried to jump up beside him, but my legs were slower and heavier than I was used to. Instead, I scraped and flailed my way up the side of the tank, nearly falling off twice. I really missed my fingers! It seemed Shadowbolt augmentations didn't understand the concept of 'climb'. There were errors flashing: 'Device not found'. I reached the top, and one camera turned to look right up my hind end. Yup. Deus all right. The engine made a strange coughing noise…was it just me or was he laughing?

I got to the hatch, looking down into that cramped space. "Do you even know what you're looking for?" I asked as I saw a blue butt poking out from underneath some equipment.

"Nope. But I'm not looking for it. I'm sniffing for it. Definitely smelling some plastic explosive in here," he said. I looked at the armored brain resting in faintly green fluid inside the glass jar. "In fact, if I were you, I'd get out of sight. If a Harbinger spots you sitting up there, it won't be a hard call to set off whatever I'm sniffing down here." Then his hooves flipped over. "Aha! There you are. Wired to…well…something. Hmmm." His hooves went limp. "Is that the radio? Aha! There!"

"You found it?" I asked with a grin.

"I found one. I doubt it's the only one," he replied. "You really need to get out of sight, though, Blackjack. At least till I'm sure he won't blow when somepony else pushes a button."

"Right." I looked over at Rampage. "I guess you and me should--" I

was interrupted by the turret swinging back and forth. “Huh… okay…well, I guess I’ll go.” Hopping down was much easier than scrambling up. Apparently the legs didn’t have problems with falling like they did with climbing. I trotted away, looking back over my shoulder at Rampage and the cameras all oriented on the filly. Deus was interested in Rampage?

“Okay. It’s official. The Wasteland is stark raving mad,” I said flatly as I trotted up the grassy slope towards Star House. I whirled around and looked, waiting for the Dealer or the Goddess to make an appearance, but neither did. “Well…that’s vaguely disappointing…” I muttered as I continued up to the house. It was still battered from the party. Had that really been just hours ago? It felt like months.

Inside, I spotted Scotch Tape lying on her side with Boo, snoring up a storm. The inside was even more thrashed than we’d left it. Then Boo popped her head up from behind Scotch Tape. She looked right at me, but rather than charge, she crept over the sleeping filly and looked at me with her pale eyes. She looked…wary. Even scared as she shied left and right. “Hey hey hey…Boo. It’s all right. It’s me.”

But she didn’t look reassured. If anything, she seemed more worried, ears hanging and eyes downcast. What was the matter? Was she sick? Injured? Was there something wrong with her cloned body? No…nothing I could see. Then I looked into the worry in her eyes. It wasn’t her…it was me. But what had I done... no. I sighed and closed my eyes. Damn it…

“I haven’t been treating you very good since Hippocratic, have I, Boo?” I’d left her to go gallivanting across the Hoof, then come back only to leave her behind again. I really was a self-centered nag, wasn’t I? Gently, I reached out and stroked her white mane. It was growing a bit long, partially concealing her white eyes behind milky bangs. I pulled her closer and held her, rubbing her spine. I could still nuzzle her as well as I ever could.

Boo relaxed a little bit and nuzzled me in return. “I’ll try not to leave you behind again, if I can help it. Okay?” It was a risk; I couldn’t see her surviving a place like Hightower... but leaving her behind just meant a different kind of hurt. “Just try not to let yourself get hurt. Okay?”

I didn’t know if she understood what I was asking of her. I could only hold her and hope that I wasn’t going to get her killed with my kindness. Of course, something bad would happen; the steel that

was consuming my body one upgrade at a time was testament to that. But I could hope. I could hope…

She rested her head on my side and huffed softly. As carefully as I could, I stroked her mane with my hoof. It'd been a while since I slept. Maybe just a short nap…

* * *

I trudged through the green snow along the chunks of obsidian talus at the base of Black Pony Mountain. The Hoofington basin was quiet. No rain nor falling snow marred the clear air. As far as the eye could see, green drifts of snow blanketed the land. You could almost imagine that it was a calm Hearth's Warming Eve day.

Then I passed frozen earth pony corpses in the snow and was reminded that this was anything but. Nothing useful on any of them. I had worked my way through half of my radiation supplies. The goods I'd pilfered from the hospital were running low, and I needed to find more. Hoofington Memorial was south of me; I could take what I needed from there.

But right now, I needed to check in. The only problem was that the EBS had fallen almost as silent as the snow. There were a few desperate sobs from the west, somepony in the Manehattan M.A.S. hub trying futilely to get some kind of organization effort going. The military channels had fared even worse. There was machine chatter, but it wasn't anything I could access. Every channel was either destroyed, locked down, or useless. Since I couldn't do so remotely, I only had one choice: report in person.

I continued to pick my way up the talus. The radiation clicked slowly away, my black riot armor providing slight protection as I ascended towards the eastern side of the mountain. It'd been only a few weeks since the bombs fell. But I still had my duty to perform. I still had to earn my forgiveness.

Finally, I pulled my way up onto a flat shelf of land between the obsidian crag and the eastern mountains. The shelf was littered with a dozen sky carriages, some of them large passenger affairs and others small, expensive personal craft. Some had landed perpendicularly atop other carriages because the space was so limited.

And there were a lot of bodies. Pegasi still dangled from their harnesses, some killed by radiation and others killed by bullets.

Earth pony laborers lay in heaps. A smattering of unicorns in fancy outfits clustered together in whatever shelter they could find. Bodies…bodies…bodies. So damn many. I walked along as silent as death towards the sheer eastern wall. Once there'd been a cave here, a cave that had been home to a colossal beast in older, peaceful times. Today there was no cave, just a solid wall of black obsidian.

I approached, hoofstep by hoofstep. A sense of dread filled me, and I hesitated. A few more, and again I froze. I looked to the left and right, looked at the perfect semicircle of bodies that had stood here and slowly died of radiation. I couldn't take another step forward; something refused to let me. If he were here…he'd open it. He'd need me. He'd use me.

And he was on the list.

Then someone had the ill judgment to shoot at me. Worse, they missed.

I came around, both SMGs rising up as my eyes picked out where the shooter might have come from. It wasn't really all that hard. The emaciated red earth pony mare swayed in the doorway of one of the wagons. As her eyes rested on me, she immediately smiled in relief. "Oh, Operative Psalm. About time somepony useful came along." She turned and trotted back inside the sky wagon, and I followed. The once expensive skywagon was now a squatter's shack.

"Do you have any RadAway or Rad-X, Operative?" the red earth pony wheezed as she trotted over to a tiny cache of supplies in the corner. She turned, more of her mane falling out as she moved. But I didn't respond, simply looking at her. She pointed a glittery red hoof at me. "I asked you a question, soldier!"

I nodded once, and she grinned. There were missing teeth in her smile, and her gums were bleeding. Another day or two and she'd be gone. I looked around and spotted a black earth pony mare lying in a heap with a bloody knife embedded in her neck. Another one of my old bosses, Onyx. "Good. Good." Garnet tossed the revolver on the bed, blood smearing the mouthgrip. "Damn Redoubt is sealed. Can you fucking believe it? Somepony got here before us… all of us…and locked it up tight!" She rubbed her face, beads of sweat on her brow. "I just knew that eventually somepony who could get inside would come along."

"Is Luna in there?" I asked in a low, tense voice.

"Luna?" Garnet cackled. "Luna's a corpse in Canterlot. Celestia too!

All of Equestria is dead. Fuck Luna," the red mare said as she slumped. "I was supposed to be a part of the new order. Richer than fucking Filthy himself." She looked over at a brown stallion in the snow. "Fucker wouldn't shut up about his kid. Can you believe that? We're all fucking dying, and he wanted to run off to the far side of the country to get her."

"We have confirmed deaths for all the Partypooper targets?" I asked in strained reasonableness, and Garnet gave a bloody grimace.

"Cloudsdale is vaporized, and that was the last place Dash was spotted. I think we got her. Maripony was balefired too, but it's still standing. Anypony's guess if Twilight survived." If it was standing, she had. "Rarity and Fluttershy are corpses in Canterlot. You killed Pinkie." She rubbed her chin a moment. "Applejack might have made it to Stable 2 in Ponyville…" She stared at the bloody spittle on the chipped, glittery hoof. "I need that fucking RadAway, Operative," she said, a touch weakly.

I ignored her request. "Where is the director?" I asked slowly. Keep calm, just like when shooting. I had to stay calm and centered. I had to…

"Who the fuck do you think is in there?" She glowered at me, pointing at the wall with a chipped ruby hoof. "He buttoned it up tight. He's got everything in there. The whole facility to himself. Probably his fucking robot, too." Then she grinned her ghastly, bloody grin. "But now that you're here, you can get in there! You can get me inside! Right? You have a code…or password…or something…That's all I want." She panted in desperation as I just looked at her, and she asked in exasperation, "What? Do you want money?" She kicked open a suitcase, scooped up two great big hooffuls of bits and held them up to me. "I've got money…there was so much damn money we scammed off those aristocrat jackasses. Kingpin paid a mint to get in too. CEOs and other business leaders…fuckers all came here actually thinking they'd get in." Her bloodshot eyes twitched as she grinned hopefully, then her grin sagged…along with her forelegs. Gold coins bounced and tinkled around her hooves. She rubbed her face with her hoof, muttering to herself. "I thought we'd get in…"

"You're sure that Horse is inside?"

She narrowed her feverish eyes. "No! I'm not fucking sure, but unless Sapphire told Rainbow Dash or Emerald told Twilight, he's

the only pony with the authority to access the Redoubt!" She coughed and retched, bringing up bile over her glittery red hooves. "Now pass me some Rad-X, Operative."

"No," I replied, turning to go.

"What?" Garnet gasped.

"I still need to finish the mission. Luna gave the order. I must carry it out," I said simply. "I'll need all my radiological supplies to do so."

"Give it to me or I'll take it off your corpse!" I stopped and just looked at her as she trembled, then swept up the gun in her mouth and fired again. And again. And again. The thirty-two caliber rounds thumped against my barding but didn't penetrate. Then the revolver started to click. She shook, pink tears running down her cheek as the gun slipped from her mouth, taking two more teeth with it. "Please…help me."

"Helping you doesn't earn me forgiveness. I will serve Luna and earn forgiveness, and her last order was to carry out Partypooper. I can confirm two kills. I suppose I'll have to confirm the rest," I said, readying myself for the long walk to Maripony. Then I'd have to use every Stable-Tec access code I had to clear out that Ponyville stable…difficult, but doable.

"You stupid cunt! Luna didn't give that order! I did! And you killed for me! You stupid damn bitch!" she cackled as she pointed her hoof at me.

I stared at her. "Liar. Only Luna could give that order," I said weakly. "Only Luna would…"

"You unbelievable dumb shit!" Garnet roared with laughter. "Did it ever occur to you that there were fucks who *benefitted* from everyone dying?" She pointed a hoof at me. "Goldenblood had it set from the start. When the war ended, you…me…Trueblood…we'd all be brought up on fucking war crimes! War crimes! Fuck! That!" She swung her emaciated hooves wide as she grinned ghoulishly. "Soon as Horse found out, I knew I wasn't going to let that fucking happen. So I gave the order. Right when we were certain clusterfuck apocalypse was going to hit. We sent out hit squads to kill every last person even vaguely connected to the O.I.A. or its projects. Nopony would know about the Redoubt! We'd live like fucking gods!"

"I see," I murmured. I bowed my head and clasped my hooves. "Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another." But the

words gave no comfort. No absolution of my sins. I was damned, and not even Luna could save me.

"You'll never be forgiven! I know who you killed." I lifted one of the SMGs at her cackling, bloody maw. She grinned her bloody smile, ready to eat a bullet. "Come on, finish me! Finish me you killing fuck!" she screamed as she threw her hooves wide. "You've killed fucking thousands one by one for your fucking Goddess! Kill me!"

But I didn't. Instead my magic reached out and took the knife that'd been stuck in Onyx. Her grin disappeared as I flicked the blood off it and tucked it in my belt. Then I turned and stepped out into the snow. "You should have saved one of those bullets for yourself."

Garnet hobbled to the entrance after me. "No. Come back here! Kill me, you cunt! You whore! Murderer! We killed everypony! Kill me!" She screamed after me. I never looked back as I heard her bloody choking sob, "Please…kill me too…"

~ ~ ~

I woke, my PipBuck's chronometer telling my two hours had passed. Boo snuggled against me, snoozing as well. I smiled and nuzzled her mane; she smelled like cherry filling. Then I glanced up at Glory, watching me with an odd look on her face as she sat before me. My cheeks reddened, and I swallowed, looking aside. "I didn't do anything... " I muttered. How long had she been watching me sleep? Was she ticked I'd slept here rather than going up to her?

"I know you didn't," she said as she moved up to my other side and curled up against me with a sigh. "The question is... would you like to?" She wasn't asking as if she planned on throwing me into more walls, but there were still little alarms going off in my head. As if sensing my trepidation, Glory smiled a little. "I'm not going to be mad. I just wanted to know if you'd like to or not."

I glanced at the snoozing blank, then back at her. "Um, no? At least, not unless she suddenly told me she wanted to do something like that with me. And you were okay with it. I mean, if you're asking me on a purely physical level then... but I... um... " I trailed off as she sighed. "Sorry."

"It's something you can't really help, Blackjack. You are who you are," she replied as she leaned against me. "I'm understanding that

a little more now. I guess the question is... am I okay with it? And I really don't know."

"You seemed really okay earlier," I muttered with a rueful smile. "Biter," I added, and watched her blush and smile.

"That was relief sex, Blackjack. I claim temporary insanity," she muttered, then sighed. "I don't want to be left out of your life, because then I'll have nothing. But staying with you is hard. It's not your fault. You just... have stuff happen to you. But it's still hard. And it hurts." She closed her eyes and lay against me. "Just don't... don't leave me out. Whatever happens, don't leave me out or leave me behind. Please... "

"I won't," I murmured and kissed her closed eyes, drawing a smile and sigh from her lips. She nuzzled me and drifted off to sleep. With a blanket of mares... maybe the dreams would be better...

Then I noticed that she wasn't the only pony who'd been watching me. There, opposite me, sat the Dealer. His eyes trailed over my sleeping companions, and then he looked at me with an expression of quiet envy. "Echo... " I murmured, and his lips curled into a sour sort of smile.

"So. Figured it out, did you?" he rasped softly. "Supposed you would sooner or later."

"Scotch Tape did. Or, rather, she figured out Smiling Jack." I looked at his gaunt figure as his eyes widened in surprise.

"Did she? Huh." He chuckled and gave a sheepish little smile as he rubbed the back of his head. "Always loved that character. Once mesmerized a dozen zombie buffalo to perform ballet in tutus. Good game, that one."

"Why didn't you tell me about Echo sooner?" I asked as I looked up at him. His smile disappeared instantly.

"What was there to tell? I was the unwanted product of an egotistical jerk and a mother who didn't want to be reminded of her past mistakes," he said grimly as he looked away. "I entered the military because there was no other place for me. There never was. I was the pony who wasn't there."

"But you saw--" I began, but then he snapped and threw his hat to the ground.

"Of course I saw!" he snapped, and then laughed bitterly. "I was the pony who saw it all. The good times... the bad times... I called them in. Recorded them down. I saw Big Macintosh die. I called in the medics who took Stonewing away. Watched Jetstream lose it on

the battlefield. Saw Doof become a criminal. Vanity eaten up by regret. Twist turn into an emotionally scarred husk. Applesnack consumed by bitterness. Psalm by sin. I watched it all... and I did nothing to stop it!" He spat as he started to pace back and forth.

"I was the witness. The one who knew where the bodies were being buried but who never blew the whistle. The one who overheard all the dirty secrets but was too gutless to bring them to light. The one who knew my friends' pain but was too cowardly to raise a hoof to help!" As I watched, the sallow white stallion transformed into a buttery yellow one with brown hair in short and shaggy profusion around his shoulders. "Why in Equestria would I want to tell you about Echo? The pony who did nothing while he watched the world explode around him?"

He scooped up his hat and put it back on, reverting back to the Dealer, his lips in a harsh frown. "Smiling Jack was the bitterest, angriest, nastiest pony in the Wasteland, and he was a thousand times better than Echo ever was."

I stared at him quietly for an instant. "What happened to all of you?" I murmured.

He turned away, and for a moment I was certain he was going to leave again. But then he whispered, "Stars... "

"Excuse me?"

"It's stupid. It's just... something I've thought about." He looked back at me over his shoulder. "It was right after training. We'd finished basic and it was Nightmare Night and everypony was in a mood to celebrate. Twist wanted to go to a carnival being held right where Chapel is today. Before the graveyard was there. Bit by bit, we all agreed. Psalm took me along because she took pity on me."

He sighed and shook his head with a sad little smile. "That was a good night. I actually felt like I had friends for the first time ever. There were games and rides and kids running around and... it just felt like the war wasn't happening. Everyone was having a wonderful time... " He shook his head again as he lowered it. "Then Twist saw that damned fortune teller... "

"Fortune teller?" I asked with a frown.

"An old zebra had a tent. Strange old guy. Had tattoos all over his face. His tent had bizarre, leering masks and creepy herbs and specimens in bottles. The kind of zebra that would have been snapped up by the M.o.M. had he been around a few years later. Maybe he was. Asked us if we wanted to know our fate." He snorted

and shook his head. “Of course... we did.”

He sighed and looked mournfully at me. “He said we’d all die ignoble deaths on the muddy battlefield within a year.”

I winced. “Ouch.”

“Needless to say, none of us liked that. But then the old codger asked us if we wanted to change our fate. He said there was a way for all of us to be heroes. The greatest heroes in the whole war, so long as we were true to each other. So long as we never... ever... broke fellowship with each other.” He hissed slowly through his teeth. “What can I say? Friendship... fame... heroism... ”

“The catch?” I asked with a sympathetic smile.

He shook his head and looked at me. “The first to break the fellowship would die... and they would receive the most merciful death at that. The rest of us would wish we’d been the first to break, if we were not true to each other.”

“And you accepted.” How could they not?

“We did. Partly out of pride and partly out of a wish to laugh at the zebra’s predictions. But then he got out this book. This... this horrible, black book. And suddenly it wasn’t so funny. He called on the stars to change our fates, and curse us if one was false to the others. There was a hum and... green spiraling things... things an earth pony can’t really explain.” He shook his head. “When the light show ended, the zebra was gone. The tent was completely bare save for a few empty crates.”

He sighed once more and then gave a little smile. “What was funny was... it worked. The next day, we were all assigned to a special combined task force. Experimental... three pony kinds working as a special squad. And it was... amazing,” he finished with a wistful look. “*We* were amazing. We... we did things that nopony thought was possible. Things we didn’t think possible. And there was fame and glory. Most of us never talked about that night, but I thought about it. We were going to be friends. Loyal and true forever and ever...

“Then Stonewing fell in battle and we wondered... oh never out loud... but there were looks. Questions. Had he been untrue? Had he broken the fellowship?” He sighed as he dropped his head. “We didn’t know that he was being held in a hospital in critical condition. Some paperwork error. And then... ” He raised his eyes to mine. “Then Big Macintosh said he’d had enough. He said he’d met a mare and it was time to settle down. He’d figured he’d done

his share for Equestria, and didn't believe in zebra curses. He wanted to raise a family. Said family was the most important thing of all. He'd stay for one last critical mission... protecting Princess Celestia at a peace summit. He figured that once the meeting was done, there wouldn't be need for Marauders."

"Then he died," I said quietly.

"Oh, not just a death!" Dealer snapped, "A hero's death. Princess Luna turned it into a rallying cry... another escalation in the war. A sign we had to fight harder -- do better -- to defeat our foes. The next day, Psalm disappears. A few weeks later Doof rapes Twist. A month later Applesnack gets reassigned to babysit zebras. A few months after *that*, Jetstream snaps. Then Vanity walks away. Twist takes the enemy as her lover. And me... I was left all alone. Picked up by Goldenblood out of... I don't know... pity, I suppose."

I thought of that moment out on Star Point. Before I'd found out about Gardens and taint and... everything. Had my fate been changed there? Had I been supposed to die with a bullet through my head beside Marigold's bones? Cursed to become the thing I was now? It was a chilling thought.

"I'm sorry. I just... don't know what to say. Stars and zebra curses... Sekashi said the stars were powerful, fickle, and dangerous. But I don't know if they can actually do things like that," I muttered, looking at the stars on the beams overhead.

"I can't imagine they do. Every colt and filly wished on stars back when you could see them. I did," he said softly, hanging his head a little. He looked so glum that I wished I could give him a hug.

Instead, I did the next best thing. "So... tell me more about the adventures of Smiling Jack." A small smile curled in the corner of his mouth.

* * *

After an hour of Dealer regaling me with stories about hunting down bank robbers across the desert, dealing with spirit-summoning shamans, being forced to dress in drag to infiltrate a monastery, fighting hordes of zombies, and something called an 'epic botch' that apparently turned Jack into a 'kumquat', Dealer returned to wherever he went when he wasn't feeling chatty.

I'd have to go soon and check up on P-21 and Deus. There was just something that was bothering me as I lay here nice and quiet. It was

too quiet. Particularly in my head. I hadn't heard a peep since the riot inside the Goddess ended. The stillness was unsettling... and unnerving. Was the Goddess just silently watching in the back of my mind, or was she away plotting something?

So far, I'd only listened to Unity and talked at Lacunae. I'd never actually tried to go into the hive consciousness. Part of it was that I didn't know how, but another wondered what would happen if I did try and push that connection. Would I be sucked in forever? Could the Goddess control my body while I was in there? Was it even possible?

Aw hell... it wasn't the first time I'd ever done something completely clueless and heedless of the risks...

I thought about the memory magic I'd done with Rampage and what I'd read in Triage's books. I wasn't a smart pony, but I wasn't as stupid as I used to be. Memory spells shared memories, and the Goddess was like a massive memory orb filled with countless recollections and souls. She was just able to control where those memories went. If I thought about the Goddess as a collection of memories, maybe I could go into it the same way as I entered Rampage's thoughts.

I visualized that part in the back of my mind where I talked to Lacunae and the Goddess spoke to me as a pool of water filled with countless glowing clouds of memory. Instead of trying to pull them to me, I pushed myself into that pool, just as I had with Shujaa. Slowly the world around me faded to black as I struggled deeper and deeper into that pool. Swimming was a pretty alien concept to me, so I settled with sinking. Sinking I could handle.

Then I heard it... the faintest whispers in the dark. First one or two. Then a small crowd. Then a steady stream of barely audible comments. 'She has it. She is out. She is coming. Coming soon. She is bringing it. Bringing it to us. The book. She has the book.' I didn't know who 'she' was. More chilling were the comments after that. 'We must kill her. No, we must reward her. One of us. One of us!'

I tried not to pay attention to whispers. I needed to find the big ego in charge of them all. Mentally, I sank deeper. My body was left behind; an unnerving sensation. It was exactly how I'd felt after escaping Hightower. A feeling of... letting go.

Then I heard the voice and saw the distant blue glow. I moved towards it; for some reason I imagined myself as a white unicorn with a striped mane... and no metal. At least here I could be

normal. That blue glow coalesced into the Goddess, an immense blue unicorn from the waist up surrounded by a ring of faint glowing pony shapes. Her hips devolved into a glowing amoeboid mass stretching out around her like tendrils into the cloud, and her lumpy blue hide seemed to undulate and move in strange ways. I stared at the sight of two green unicorn heads poking from her shoulders, looking on. By the side of the Goddess's head floated a translucent, membranous balloon connected by a meaty filament to the Goddess's temple.

And trapped within was a very familiar purple mare's head.

In front of the Goddess were hundreds of windows, like terminal screens. In them, I could see images all across Equestria. Most of them were scenes of the Wasteland. One was looking down upon a village of zebras, and I thought that one of them looked a bit like Xenith... of course, they all looked kinda similar. Then I spotted Calamity! There was no missing that hat. It was like P-21's, and there just couldn't be another pegasus with one like it in the Wasteland.

The windows in the center swelled in size; perhaps window size was the equivalent to how much attention she was giving something? If so, what she was looking at was... as best as I could see... a floating city-fortress hovering over the clouds. From a dozen eyes, I saw a wing of alicorns fly through the dark clouds around the massive structure of war. "Such power... " the Goddess purred.

"Thunderhead class mobile siege platform," said the mare's head in her right shoulder.

"The *Glorious Dawn*," intoned the other.

The view swooped in and suddenly jerked as the alicorns teleported into a docking bay. One by one, the crew pegasi were magically neutralized and dragged into the corner. The green mare heads closed their eyes and said in unison, "We have the location of his quarters."

The Goddess nodded. "Watch the others and make sure they are not discovered." She turned her gaze to glance at the purple head inside its balloon and then returned her eyes to the windows. "Take us there."

"Are we certain he is amenable?" one of the green mares asked.

"Of course he will be!" the Goddess snapped. "He desires magic. We desire power. What better match could there possibly be? With his machines of war we shall bring Red Eye to heel and save all of

Ponykind from the Wasteland."

"So long as he does not turn that power upon us," the other green mare warned.

"Yes, we shall take precautions. Soon the Black Book will be ours, and we will make the required changes to perpetuate ourselves," the Goddess said testily.

"Trixie... " murmured the purple head weakly. "Please... "

"Silence," the Goddess boomed as she glared at the balloon. "You tried it your way. You failed. I acknowledged when you were right about me. Why can you not accept that this is the way it must be? Why must you perpetually insist on 'another way'? After 200 years of trying, only force has been proved to work. What kind of scientist continues to use a flawed method?" The Goddess stared at the windows as the purple head hung in shame. "No more missionaries, Twilight. No more trying to work with ponies like Red Eye. We must control the situation, not let it control us." She glared at the windows a moment. "Go."

Half the windows flickered as they jumped into a sumptuously decorated office. The walls were festooned with weapons, pegasus uniforms, flags, and maps. The dusky pegasus I'd seen before at the Rainbow Dash Skyport now sat behind a desk, scowling at a chart. Two guards stood by with bored looks on their faces.

Those bored looks turned to astonishment as magic bolts slammed into them and dropped them in heaps on the floor. Harbinger drew a strange, ominous-looking beam pistol as he crouched behind the desk. There was something familiar about it, but I wasn't precisely sure where I'd seen it before. "PEACE!" The Goddess thundered. "THE GODDESS HAS NOT COME TO DO BATTLE! YOUR SOLDIERS ARE MERELY STUNNED, NOT SLAIN!" Slowly, Harbinger rose up from behind the desk as one window slowly advanced upon him. "THE GODDESS HAS COME TO PARLEY WITH THE GRAND PEGASUS ENCLAVE!"

After a moment, he dropped the pistol on the desktop. "Brown wind... it's true," he said as he slowly rose to his hooves. "You really do exist." He narrowed his eyes a bit. "I expected an assassination attempt from Red Eye's alicorns before now. He has to suspect we're moving against him."

"INDEED, BUT THE GODDESS DOES NOT SERVE RED EYE. HE HAS ABUSED THE GODDESS'S TRUST, AND SO WE SEEK A NEW PARTNER. A BETTER PARTNER. AND WHO BETTER TO RULE

THIS NEW WORLD WITH THE GODDESS OF EQUESTRIA THAN THE LORDS OF THE SKY?" Her words were perfectly chosen, drawing a smile from the gray stallion.

"You're proposing some kind of alliance?" he asked slowly, as if disbelieving even the idea of it.

"THE GODDESS IS. YOUR PEOPLE REQUIRE MAGIC? THE GODDESS HAS MORE MAGICAL POWER THAN ANY EQUINE WHO HAS EVER LIVED! WITH YOUR FORCES, YOU SHALL HAVE YOUR RIGHTEOUS BATTLE AGAINST THE WICKED RED EYE. BUT THAT IS NOT ALL! THE GODDESS KNOWS OF YOUR STRUGGLE WITH THUNDERHEAD! HOW THEY WITHHOLD THEIR OWN SOURCES OF MAGIC WHILE YOU GROW EVER WEAKER! HOW THEY PURSUE BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS TO USE AGAINST THEIR OWN PEOPLE! THEIR EVIL IS INTOLERABLE EVEN TO THE GODDESS! ONCE RED EYE IS CHASTISED, THE GODDESS WILL AID IN YOU DELIVERING A PUNISHMENT BEFITTING SUCH TREACHERY!"

Okay. This was rapidly approaching a level of nightmare even I was having trouble handling.

"Well. That's an interesting proposition. Very interesting. But you know that saying about things that are too good to be true," he said with a glare. "What is the catch?"

"NO CATCH. NO TRICKS. TOGETHER WE SHALL BRING PEACE AND ORDER TO EQUESTRIA. YOU WISH THE SKIES? KEEP THEM WITH THE GODDESS'S BLESSING. THE GODDESS'S CHILDREN SHALL RULE BELOW AND BRING SALVATION TO ALL PONIES TRAPPED IN THE WASTELAND. THE GODDESS SHALL PROVIDE YOUR ENCLAVE THE MEANS TO CONTROL NOT JUST THE SKIES OF EQUESTRIA, BUT OF THE ENTIRE WORLD! AND IN RETURN, ALL THE WORLD SHALL BE UNITED AND SAVED." But that was a lie, and I knew it. Zebras, griffins, and ghouls couldn't be turned into alicorns. But looking into the office, I could see the naked appeal in Harbinger's eyes.

Still, he wasn't entirely sold. "How do I know this isn't a trick? Perhaps an attempt to get me out in the open?"

"LOOK UPON YOUR NEUTRALIZED GUARDS! HAD THE GODDESS WISHED YOU DEAD, YOU WOULD BE SO! OUR OFFER IS MADE IN GOOD FAITH, HARBINGER. THE GODDESS SEEKS YOUR ASSISTANCE, NOT YOUR DEMISE." He clearly seemed to be considering it.

Finally, his lips twisted sourly. "It's not exclusively up to me. The

council will want to *debate*." He said the word like it was a curse.

The Goddess chuckled. "YOU KNOW THE VALUE OF SPECTACLE BETTER THAN MOST, HIGH GENERAL! THERE WILL BE NO NEED OF DEBATE WHEN YOU ARRIVE WITH A WING OF THE GODDESS'S CHILDREN WITH YOU. YOUR PEOPLE SHALL FALL IN LINE AND EXCUSE YOUR AUDACITY WHEN ALL THE GODDESS'S GIFTS ARE PRESENTED. NEW TALISMANS. FRESH MATERIALS TO MAKE NEW WEAPONS OF WAR! THE STRENGTH OF YOUR PEOPLE RESTORED! COME TO THE HOME OF THE GODDESS. BRING YOUR CAMERAS SO THAT ALL CAN SEE THE GLORY OF THE GODDESS! THUS SHALL OUR ALLIANCE BE MADE FACT FOR ALL TO SEE!"

Harbinger glared at her, but his eyes danced with the potential hope. "He desires," whispered the two heads.

"Of course he does," chuckled the Goddess. "We're speaking the same language. Power."

Harbinger finally said with a little smile, "I'll reflect on your generous offer, Goddess."

"He shall accept!" the green left head said.

"He only needs to get his plots together," the right green head murmured. "Then he shall come!"

"OF COURSE, HIGH GENERAL. THE GODDESS LOOKS FORWARD TO OUR ALLIANCE! TOGETHER WE SHALL BRING PEACE AND ORDER. BUT WE URGE HASTE IN YOUR DECISION, LEST THE GODDESS BE FORCED TO ACT WITHOUT YOU."

"Of course," he said with a little smile.

"Return," the Goddess said with a cackle, and the windows aboard the siege platform disappeared and were replaced by images of clouds.

Okay, I had to do... something! I had to tell somepony! I needed to...

Twilight Sparkle was looking at me.

The old mare's head seemed so terribly tired and sad as she looked on. Yet even as I looked, the corner of her mouth turned in the saddest smile. Then she mouthed a word within that diaphanous balloon. 'Run.'

"What... " the Goddess began, and then the immense blue form turned around to face me. Then I understood what all those lumps were and why they moved so oddly. It was a body made of eyeless pony faces, a thing that could have been birthed in Horizon Labs.

Her periwinkle eyes widened as they looked down at me, then narrowed in an enraged glare. “YOU!”

Shitshitshitohshitohshi--

Out. Awaken. Leave. Vacate! I struggled to pull myself out of this void and back to myself. Maybe if I got into myself, I could warn someone! Spike! I could tell him! He’d warn Homage! He could tell everypony! The Enclave and Goddess... together?! It had to be stopped. I felt myself pulling out, but too slowly. Far too slowly!

Her immense hooves reached out and caught me. “Sneaky, sneaky, Blackjack. I look forward to having you fully within Unity. And that day shall come soon. Very soon.” Her lips curled wider as her eyes narrowed. “In the meantime... let me repay some of the annoyance your lineage has caused me!”

She pulled me towards her gargantuan maw, filled with countless babbling pony heads and an infinite number of teeth...

* * *

I jerked, disturbing both Glory and Boo as I clutched my pounding skull. “What is it, Blackjack?” Glory asked in concern. “What’s wrong?”

Something was wrong. There was something... Something I needed to tell somepony...

“I don’t know... just a headache... ” I muttered as I lay back. We were going to have to leave soon. I had debts to pay, and sticking around here was just an invitation for the Harbingers to attack again.

I just wished I knew what the Goddess found so damned funny...

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Shadowbolt armor Mk I. You’ve received the reinforcing base for Shadowbolt cybernetics. +3 DT.

Chapter 54: Fate

"Oh, my fortune telling has nothing to do with my Pinkie sense! It's only good for vague and immediate events. Like that, see? … Where did that even come from?"

"So," Glory asked from the kitchen as she carefully stowed every bit of food we had left into bags, "is he safe?"

There was no question who 'he' was. Rampage looked up from where she sat as a surly teenager adjusting the straps on her power hooves. "Safe? Deus doesn't do safe. He does 'more harm' and 'less harm'. 'Safe' isn't applicable to him." She then started to put on the metal armor, which was still a size or so too large. I supposed having a size-changing body would be extremely annoying. She seemed to have a system of belts and straps to keep it all in place.

We were rested and getting ready to move out with the sunset. All that was needed was to make sure everything was stored up.

Rampage had drawn a crude map showing how to get to Grimhoof, a route essentially heading back south to Flank, then continuing east till the road crossed the Hoofington River above the reservoir.

If all went according to plan, the Harbingers would see us go and not bother Chapel any longer.

P-21 looked at the magazines of bullets he was carefully inventorying and preparing in advance. "Well, he's less harm to us…unless he wants to commit suicide. I found five explosive devices wired up inside him; one of them was set to go off in less than an hour. Whoever put him in that thing had been pretty methodical about it. First charge would have disabled the case holding his brain and severed his connection to the tank. The second would have scrapped the life support, then the repair talisman, and finally the engine itself."

Scotch Tape carefully stacked up her own supplies. Tools, duct

tape, Wonderglue, scrap metal, plungers, wire, some arcane electronics scrap, and capacitors were all arranged around her in a fan. "How'd the zebras even shrink down a reactor small enough to fit on a tank? I can't figure that one out," the filly said, then passed a roll of tape to Boo, who caught it in her mouth and then set it into the bag. How'd Scotch teach her that trick?

"Better question is 'Where did the Harbingers get a tank in the first place?'" Twister asked as the Neighvarro pegasus checked her power armor. Next to her, Sunset was loading her beam rifles with new cartridges. "All our recon said the surface shouldn't have anything even close to that kind of firepower." She gave Glory another of those long, indecisive looks like she was trying to come to a decision.

"Maybe it was captured. Maybe they have a working facility making repairs somewhere underground," Glory hypothesized with a shrug. She held up a cyberpony cake to me. "Want one before I pack them all away?"

"Awww, if you insist," I chuckled; she tossed it to me, and I caught it with my magic. Lacunae was outside, keeping an eye out for the Harbingers. No sign of them yet, but they were reforming and rearming; we had to get out of here before they made a second attack on me while I was still here. And if they tried to use Chapel as a hostage against me again... well... I think at that point I was entitled to go Yellow River on the Harbingers. Besides, given the defenses Chapel was building up, there'd be the chance of an embarrassing defeat by a bunch of foals.

"Those are going to make you fat, Blackjack," Scotch Tape opined with a snicker.

"I'm still getting things repaired. I'm a growing mare," I said, taking a bite. I chewed happily for a moment, then sighed. "The real question I have is why he's coming with us in the first place? I don't think a radio-controlled bomb would stop Deus from killing somepony if he really wanted to." Rampage snickered, and I looked at her. "Rampage's 'Follow Blackjack because she beat you' theory aside, there has to be a reason. You knew him longest, Rampage. Can you think of any other reason?"

"Deus wasn't exactly the most social war machine," Rampage pointed out. "Nopony besides Big Daddy and Brutus ever fought him hoof to hoof. Even Psychoshy never tried to take him on. Gorgon was the closest thing to a friend he had, and he was a mute

monsterpony." The young mare then stopped and frowned.

"What?" I asked as I checked the wear on Vigilance. Some parts from some twelve millimeter pistols had done it good, and I'd tried, mostly in vain, to polish it to its original sheen. A markspony carbine would have to do for longer ranges. I'd all but given up on keeping a riot shotgun intact.

"Well…it's stupid," Rampage said with a flush. "It's just that… well…I think he was scared of me. Don't get me wrong, I know I'm one scary pony, but you remember Deus. There wasn't a mare he wouldn't try and fuck if she looked at him wrong." After what Brass and Hightower had done to him, I could understand it.

Forgive…no…but I could understand. "He barely said two words to me in two years."

But given how Rampage resembled Twist with her coat and her mane, it wasn't hard to imagine why. "I wish I could just ask him," I grunted in annoyance.

"There are wires that connect him to a speaker, but he doesn't talk," P-21 said with a shrug as he packed his things away in his bag. It never ceased to amaze me how he could hide entire grenades in his brushy mane and tail. Maybe it was kicking the Med-X, but he looked pretty good. Then again, he'd always looked good…not flier-good, but still…

"He might be suffering from severe aphasia," Glory said as she tucked the last of the food away and trotted to her battle saddle, deftly slipping on the gatling beam gun's harness. When she saw my sardonic expression of cluelessness, she elaborated, "It's a speech impairment due to brain damage. Yes and no may be all he's capable of expressing."

"Or he's keeping silent," P-21 suggested as he shrugged into a bandoleer of 40mm grenades for Persuasion. He glanced around, looking a little agitated, and checked the grenade launcher for the third time.

Rampage snickered. "Oh, come on. Deus couldn't go five minutes without a 'cunt'." P-21 looked at her coolly, and the striped mare blinked. "What?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't use language like that around my daughter," he said primly. I shared a look with Glory and suppressed a laugh.

"Oh, really? What should I use?" Rampage asked with a grin.

"Sugar pot?"

"Vagina would be the most accurate," Glory offered.
"Hoo-hah," Twister suggested.
"Vertical smile?" Sunset said with a grin.
"I usually just call it my turbine," Scotch said as she rubbed her chin thoughtfully, then looked at me, "'cause it makes me hum." It seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but P-21's mane seemed to twang a little like snapped wires. "What?" she asked, and the poor blue stallion looked so flustered that I decided not to chime in with my own personal nickname.
"Okay. That's enough talk of... that... ." he said with a nervous grin, waving his hooves as if trying to banish the topic.
"Oh, come on. Surely you have some little nicknames for your own equipment?" Rampage teased, then shook her head as she looked back at Scotch, then at Glory. "Aren't the socio-sexual mores of stable ponies fascinating?"
She flushed a little, but then replied primly, "Don't ask me. I spent my grade school being encouraged to prefer fillies. Boys for boys. Mare's love. All kinds of slogans and stuff to keep us apart when we went into our fertile cycles."
Rampage laughed and grinned at Scotch Tape. "Oh, yeah. Wait till you start your cycle. Best and worst time of the year for mares. Then you'll call it your... I dunno, reactor or something." Rampage snickered, then sniffed the air. "Smells like one of us is due right now. Knowing our luck, we'll all kick into cycle at the same time. That's always fun." I glanced at Glory blushing furiously and giving a little squirm. Rampage turned and grinned at P-21. "What do *you* think?"
P-21 sat there, eyelid twitching before he jammed his hat on his head as his cheeks flared. He turned and marched out, shoving Boomer aside as he muttered darkly. The brown stallion blinked as he looked back over his shoulder. "What's his problem?"
"Propriety met reproduction on the battlefield and was promptly bent over and rutted," Rampage replied. She caught my glare and recoiled, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll apologize to His Grumpiness." Power hooves clicking, she trotted out after him.
Boomer took several deep breaths. "Oh, yeah. Thought something smelled good." He gave a crooked grin. "If any of y'all need that itch scratched, well, I'd be happy to help out. There's a reason the ladies call me Boomer, after all." I chuckled, remembering how close I'd come to gelding him. What a waste that would have

been…

"Just because a mare's fertile doesn't mean she becomes a sex fiend, Boomer. Y'all know that," Twister said.

"I reckon not. T'get to 'sex fiend' takes a few drinks." The brown buck grinned, and the mare flushed a little.

"Y'all better get back out there and keep an eye out for any hostiles, 'fore I remove the head yer thinkin' with!" Twister snapped.

"Sure. Might need to…nnngh…adjust my armor though," he said with a laugh before he went back out. Mmm…fliers…

"Stallions," Twister muttered. Then the lavender mare saw Sunset looking at her curiously and flushed. "It's not me! I'm at least two weeks from cycling."

"Is it that bad?" Scotch Tape asked with a little frown.

"Eh." I gave a little shrug. "You'll start looking at stallions more and the idea will be on your mind a lot for a week or so. Just make sure you stay around other mares, and we'll stop you from doing something with some moron just because he's got a nice body.

Make sure you never point your hind end at a stallion if you can help it. Really gives them the idea if they get a good whiff. Give yourself a good rubbing once or twice a day till the itch passes.

You've got your implant, right?" The filly nodded. "Then you've got nothing to worry about if you do mess it up. It's more an annoyance than anything."

Scotch Tape looked relieved as she finished passing things to Boo.

The last of the supplies were packed away. I kept looking at Glory, and as she completed her own packing I trotted up to her. "So, is it you?" I asked, giving her a little nudge.

"No!" she said as she blushed furiously, then pressed her lips together. "Maybe…" Finally she slumped. "Probably." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Ugh…stupid biology. It's not like I'm attracted to him in any way, shape, or form. It's just a dumb little thought that I just can't quite put out of my mind. It's not fair I've got a piece of anatomy nagging me to be a mommy. This is the worst time possible for me to have a kid!"

I gave her a little nuzzle. "It's not a bad thing to think of down here. Just roll with it." She huffed at me, but finally gave in with a roll of her eyes. "That a girl."

"Well, he is pretty nice," Glory said with a little smile. That's the spirit. Bisexuality: double your options, double your fun! And

Boomer *was* certainly nice to look at.

"Now you're thinking like Blackjack," I said with a grin. Maybe if she broadened her horizons a bit, I could go along for the ride with her. "I think you'd make a great mom, Glory." I winced inwardly, hoping that she didn't take it the wrong way.

But she didn't. "Maybe someday…if things were normal and not so crazy…maybe. But it's probably just the hormones talking," she said, then looked towards the door with a wistful sort of smile.

"It wouldn't hurt you to experiment," I said with a nudge. I supposed I could terrify the brown stallion into behaving himself.

"Maybe," she said again with another little sigh. "It might be okay with him. I doubt he'd hurt me." Her wings pomfed out a little bit as she smiled, then trotted for the door along with everypony else.

"There's just something about earth ponies…" she murmured softly before closing the door behind her.

I stopped in my tracks and blinked in shock at the closed door.

"Wait. What?"

* * *

There weren't any cheers as we climbed onto Deus, but everyone in Chapel watched us go with an unfamiliar look in their eyes. Maybe it was the sight of the black-and-white-striped tank with 'MEGA DEUS' hoofpainted by Scotch and Rampage in red across the front, or perhaps it was the three pegasi in ominous black Enclave power armor flying overhead along with a purple alicorn, but every pony, ghoul, and zebra watched us go with an odd expression I'd hadn't ever really seen before. Not fear. Not joy.

As Deus's treads rumbled along the road through the village, I looked out at all the faces gazing on and gave the smallest smile and little wave back. I must have looked ridiculous; my reinforcements made wearing normal barding impractical, so some of Sky Striker's plates had been duct taped and Wonderglued to my augmented limbs to cover the gaps. Still, I saw something akin to open awe in Sekashi and Majina as we rolled by their cottage.

Harpica, the ghoul maid, gave a bow and spread her dusty wings in a curtsy. Charity looked on, her normally calculating eyes watching me now with something more honest and sincere.

"Why are they looking at us like that?" I asked as I flushed.

Rampage looked at me. "Are you serious, Blackjack? You don't

know?"

I frowned at her. "Me not knowing is nothing new. They keep staring at us…"

"Not at us, Blackjack. Not even at Deus," Rampage replied. "You. They're staring at you."

Now I was blushing everywhere that wasn't metal. "Me? Why me? What did I do?"

Glory sighed, smiled, and shook her head. P-21 leveled a sardonic look at me. Even Scotch Tape seemed to get it. Rampage's grin lost some of its edge as we rolled out of the village, and she just looked at me with admiration and pity. "You gave them hope, Blackjack."

* * *

The last time I'd travelled between Flank and Chapel, I'd been running like a maniac to try and save Chapel from Sanguine. This time, I was a passenger on a war machine with three power-armored pegasi providing escort. As the evening gloom deepened, I started wishing that the Harbingers would attack. I scanned all around for some red bar which could alleviate this tedium, but there wasn't anything that could provide a distraction. Not even a radroach or bloatsprite dared to challenge our passage.

"You're pouting, Blackjack," P-21 said as he stared out at the gloom.

"I am not," I replied, pouting as I glared at the darkness. "Think they're out there? The Harbingers?"

He shrugged, checking his grenade launcher. "I'm certain of it. They're watching us. Thinking of ways to separate us from Deus, you from the rest of us. Maybe a lucky shot from those big guns of Steel Rain's…though they can't risk destroying EC-1101. Maybe when you go to that plantation. Dawn threw away her family and her life. She hasn't quit. Quitting leaves her with nothing."

I sighed, looked out into the growing gloom, then glanced over at Glory speaking in low tones with Rampage. She met my look with a momentary one of apprehension, then a forced little smile. When I didn't return it, her expression turned concerned for a moment.

Finally, I managed a small half smile. Only then did she finally give me a sincere smile. She might have looked like Rainbow Dash, even had her athleticism, but she was still not far removed from the timid mare I'd discovered beneath that terminal. She didn't love

me, and maybe I didn't love her. Life was a tempest, and she clung to me as the one and only constant in her life. The collar she'd put on me was a hollow symbol. A lie.

But sometimes a lie was something to live for.

Someday she'd find someone she did love. Someone who didn't hurt her all the time. Someone better. We might be together for days, months, or even years, but eventually I'd do something to drive her awa--

Then P-21 smacked the back of my head. "Ow? What did you do that for?" I whined.

"You're getting that look again," P-21 said with a smirk as he tugged his hat lower on his face.

"What look?" I asked as I rubbed the spot where he'd hit me.

He shook his head. "That look like you're trying to think and arriving at all the wrong conclusions. Relax, Blackjack. I'm sure that we'll be attacked sooner or later. Don't stress yourself till then."

I huffed and then groaned. "I can't help it! I get all wiggly when there's nothing going on!" My metal legs kicked the air before I huffed and lay limply. "I hate being bored."

He glanced at me and chuckled. "Don't you have a memory orb or something you can go into?" he asked with a small roll of his eyes.

"I don't want to be all memory orb'ed if the Harbingers attack," I said with a sigh as we rolled along.

"Then sleep," he said with a shrug. "Or whine more quietly," he added, then spat a grenade into the breech of his weapon and clacked it closed. I looked at him skeptically but then sighed and closed my eyes. Really…how could anyone take a nap…on a… tank…

~ ~ ~

"This doesn't look good," Jetstream muttered, looking about at the rocky valley as the Marauders stepped out of the skywagon. The open area was a mile across, two miles long, and filled with gray boulders and scrubby yellow grass. In the middle were a number of black-and-white-striped figures underneath a white open tent.

"They could hide a whole legion in those rocks, and we wouldn't know it till the firing started." Two dozen soldier ponies, a dozen pegasi, and a half dozen red-striped zebras moved out from two

other skywagons.

"Ayep," Big Macintosh said stoically as he chewed on his grass stem. The rest of the Marauders slowly fanned out. Dark thunderclouds overhead boomed and threatened rain. "Orders?" he asked as he looked back at Vanity with a small smile.

The emerald-maned unicorn gave a sheepish curl of his lips in return. It was clear that while Vanity might have the officer's crest, Big Macintosh was in charge. "Secure the meeting area. The command post will be here at the skywagons. The Third Battalion should be deployed somewhere southeast of us, preventing any large numbers of enemies from moving in. Our real concern is assassination."

"You really think they'd kill Celestia?" Twist asked with a scowl.

"Yes," I said softly. "There's real concern that this is a trap." That drew some surprised looks, but I flushed and looked away.

Big Macintosh nodded. "I'll be in the center with the Princess." He gestured towards the skies with his hoof. "Jetstream above with the fliers. Twist, move into those rocks with the Proditor. Doof, take that high point in case we need suppressive fire pulling back to the wagons. Applesnack, take a dozen and set up a line to the north. Captain'll take the other squad to the south." He paused, then looked at me. "Pick your spot for a field of fire." He looked at Vanity for confirmation.

"That sounds good, Sergeant. Carry on," the unicorn said, then turned to Echo. "Get in touch with the Third as soon as you can. Four squads aren't going to be nearly enough if this goes bad. I know Celestia ordered no troops, but there're just too many ways this can go wrong." The white unicorn glanced at me for a long moment. "Make sure you've got a dedicated channel between Psalm and Big Macintosh. If there's trouble, she'll be the first to spot it. Everypony move out."

I turned and walked to the skywagon for my gear. I was carefully assembling my precision weapon when a stallion said behind me, "Hey there, Becalm. Long time no…" I turned, levitating the sniper rifle as I regarded the orange unicorn carrying saddlebags bulging with scrolls and papers. His yellow eyes focused on the rifle floating beside me, and he finished lamely, "…see?"

"Cheddar?" I murmured. "What…what are you doing here?"

The orange stallion snorted. "We haven't seen each other for years and that's all you can say?" he asked, his eyes moving once more

over to the gun. "You've…changed."

"We've all changed. I'm fighting for Luna now," I said quietly as I tried to hide the rifle behind my back, a futile gesture given that it was longer than my body. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here with Celestia's peace envoys. The Princess believes that my talent with languages will be useful. There're over twenty different dialects spoken in the Zebra Empire…and…um…" He swallowed, his smile growing more tense. "That's a really big gun…" he murmured.

I sighed and stopped my pointless efforts at concealment. "This is Penance," I said as I levitated it before us. "Magically augmented and designed by the M.W.T. and M.A.S. for unicorn snipers. It's a prototype and, given all the fuss it requires, probably won't be put in production soon. It fires a variety of fifty caliber loads ranging from explosive antipersonnel rounds to armor-penetrating bullets."

I removed the magazine, showing the jet black bullets within.

"These are dragonkiller rounds, in the event of a dragon attack. A…friend…provided them for me." Said scarred friend was exchanging terse words with Big Macintosh and Vanity at the moment. Though he met my gaze, Goldenblood only frowned. He looked mad…no, not mad. Fearful.

Cheddar stammered at me in horror. "What…how…why in Equestria would you bring something like that to a peace meeting?"

"It seemed prudent." I swallowed as I looked away from my teacher and turned back to my childhood friend. "Don't you understand what will happen if Celestia is captured? The zebras could use that to force a surrender. Or they could kill her. After all, they wanted Luna to be here rather than Celestia."

Cheddar pressed back, "And we asked for the Caesar to come. Instead he's sent a tribal elder to negotiate for him."

"A tribal elder?" one of the Proditor asked, looking over with a frown. It took me a minute to recognize a younger Shujaa. "It is Briarthorn, yes?" Cheddar looked away a moment, then nodded.

The zebra mare looked contemplative. "I see. Elder Thorn is only a few years 'elder' to I. She is of the Mendi tribe, who have always objected to the war, much like Ministry Mare Fluttershy. Mendi are as respected as the Ministry of Peace. If it were Elder Earthquaker of the Achu, or Elder Longsight of the Propoli, however, it would be far more promising."

"We have to start somewhere," he said plaintively, but the Proditor

was clearly skeptical. He sighed and covered his face with a hoof as Shujaa continued after Twist. "This is exactly what Celestia was afraid of. You people don't understand. These 'security' arrangements are going to unravel everything before we can even have a chance to talk!" He looked at me, practically begging me to agree. "Don't you understand? If we don't show them at least a gesture of trust, we'll never have a chance."

A few years ago, I would have agreed with him. I would have taken the risk if it would mean an end to the fighting. But I'd heard the atrocity of Littlehorn. So many students I'd known…if the zebras were capable of that, then they were capable of anything.

"Trust them with something less precious than the princesses. Send Rainbow Dash. She can at least fight if they try anything."

"Listen to you!" he stammered. "Try anything? What happened to the filly I helped wash the floors with?"

She killed people. Lots of people. And if I just served Luna loyally and faithfully, everything would be fine. It wouldn't be for nothing.

"You can't understand."

His eyes hardened. "No. I guess I can't. Try not to let the zebras see you with that thing, Psalm. Contrary to what most ponies think, zebras revere their elders as much as we do the princesses. Even if they're not from a fighting tribe."

He turned on a hoof and trotted away. I knelt, cradling my gun.

Everything would be all right in the end. I'd serve Luna, and she'd forgive me. She'd absolve all my sins. Make all the zebras I'd killed worthwhile. "Please, Luna. Please…" I prayed silently.

"We'll need the Marauders more than simple prayers," Goldenblood rasped wetly as he trotted up. "Big Macintosh will be present at the pavilion. We can only hope that things get mired in bickering." He rubbed his face nervously. "I can't imagine what Celestia is thinking. This is precisely why ambassadors were invented!"

The scarred and emaciated stallion looked even more frazzled than usual. "Do you really think they're going to try to kill Celestia?"

"If they think she's Luna, yes," he said as he paced a little back and forth. "Everything is a mess in the backchannels. I don't know if they think it's going to be Celestia or Luna. I've told them it's not Luna, but they'll question it. For all I know, they might think it's *more* likely after I warned them."

"Maybe it's sincere," I offered, mostly as a token to my childhood

friend. “Maybe they want peace.”

He snorted skeptically and shrugged as if peace were inconsequential. “Perhaps. I’m more concerned about Celestia forcing this and negotiating personally.” He ran a hoof along his golden mane as he stared at nothing. “Maybe she’s trying to atone for starting the war…this is some elaborate form of suicide. No… unlikely. But perhaps she wants to be captured. Maybe she sees this as a way to force a conclusion to the war.” He rubbed his cheeks. “Or maybe she plans to defect…she’s never approved of the ministries or the expansion of the war effort. Always trying to nudge her way back towards power.” He looked on the verge of a nervous breakdown as he stared with his bloodshot eyes into empty space.

“Have you…talked…to Celestia about it?” I asked, guardedly.

He gave a hollow little laugh before breaking into wet coughs.

When he finished he gave me a wan grin. “I’m not high on Celestia’s friends list at the moment, or ever again.” He rubbed his face. “We can’t let them take her. It will mean the end of Luna as ruler. Celestia is still frightfully popular.”

“Don’t worry, Teacher,” I said as I put my hoof on his shoulder. “I won’t. No matter what.”

He gave a sad little smile. “I hardly think it’s fair to call me that.

I’ve never taught you much worthwhile. Rocks and gems and metals…hardly the education you deserved.”

“You taught me about devotion and conviction,” I said with a sincere smile. “Don’t worry, Teacher. I won’t let them take her.”

He sighed and nodded. “I’ll need to go to the radio wagon. Listen to the backchannels and see if there’s any hint of what they’re planning. I’ve never heard things so chaotic in the Empire since Luna took the throne. There’s no telling what the Caesar is planning. Or the elders. Or the legates…” He gave a wan smile.

“Equestria isn’t the only place with shadowy politics. The zebra invented the damned game.” His smile disappeared and he turned, trotting quickly to the radio wagon.

I kept the gun floating at my side as I moved towards an ideal firing position, a rocky outcrop five hundred yards from the tents.

It’d give me a field of fire overlooking the tents and beyond. I climbed up on the rocks and took a position where I could look between the stones. Most snipers worked in pairs of shooters and spotters, but a few unicorns had the talent to levitate a rifle and aim

it steadily for hours without straining their eyes or their horn. I unraveled my cloak and spread it over myself and my gun. The magic couldn't match zebra invisibility, but it did manage to blend in with the surrounding rock enough to make me appear to be just another stone.

One quick radio check with the sergeant, and I was set.

It was an hour later that the winged chariot arrived. In that time, I'd used my magic scope to pick out three dozen zebras ranging from sniper pairs to hoof to hoof specialists. Each location was relayed to Echo, who'd pass the information on to the rest of the Marauders.

Then brass horns sounded, heralding the arrival of the Princess on her golden chariot. From the other side of the valley thundered ram's horns, and a young adult scarlet dragon flew over the mountains, landing and depositing a trio of zebras. The dragon then pumped his wings and took off once more as both peace groups trotted to the tents. I tracked the dragon till it disappeared back behind the horizon.

Maybe this would be okay…

From over the radio connection with Big Macintosh, I heard the envoys greet each other with Cheddar interpreting. Sweeping my scope over the valley, I watched as the zebra elder greeted the Princess with clear surprise. Shujaa had been right. The elder wasn't much older than myself. Still, from the security arrangements, they seemed to value the bead-bedecked zebra mare as more than just a throwaway.

Over the radio, I could hear Cheddar talking back and forth. To hear Briarthorn speak, the war was becoming ever more burdensome to the Empire. More and more was being asked of the tribes to fight the Maiden of the Stars. Soon it came to the sticking point: Luna's rule was a non-starter. So long as she remained in power, the Caesar could not entertain the topic of peace. I watched Celestia through my scope, the magical lens peering through the tent at her. I saw the pain and indecision clearly etched on her regal face. I imagined it to be exactly how she'd looked after Littlehorn.

I should have been watching the others. I spotted only a tiny bit of movement in the back of the delegation and a flash of green.

From inside the tent came a pop, and suddenly a brilliant green cloud billowed up and filled the space. Everyone began shouting,

screaming, and coughing as they struggled and milled about. The tent collapsed, and then, with a flare of magic, Celestia ripped the canvas and let the billowing smoke roll out. She swayed and collapsed as Big Macintosh staggered over her prone form.

"Cupcake! Code Cupcake!" I shouted over the radio to Echo. "The Princess is down! Code Cupcake!" I immediately started looking for targets in the delegation.

Then things went from Cupcake to Roadapples. The ground beside the tent collapsed, and instantly zebras began swarming out of the hole. Many of them sported strange wings and took to the air as soon as they were above ground. I heard the orders coming fast and furious as the pony delegation staggered and flopped back around Big Macintosh, finding a new appreciation for the huge stallion.

Yet one didn't. Cheddar waved his hooves as he jabbered to the zebras who advanced out of the hole in the earth. The zebra envoys were shoved and kicked aside as the newcomers moved in on the fallen Princess. The elder tried to move in beside Cheddar, snapping in rapid-fire zebra. Some of the zebra attackers, with almost contemptuous ease, scooped her up and tossed her onto another zebra's back, and she was swiftly borne away from the fighting.

"Get behind me!" Big Macintosh thundered.

"No! Please! Peace! We want peace!" Cheddar shouted as the zebra attackers advanced.

"Have it," a stallion replied calmly. The powerful zebra rose and brought his hooves down in one thunderous stomp that exploded my friend's head like a grape.

My round returned the favor a moment later, the enchanted bullet magically punching a hole the diameter of my hoof through his head. I'd fired before his blow fell, but the distance had prevented my friend's salvation by a half second.

Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another.

Chaos reigned as the zebras engaged the security force on all sides.

Big Macintosh, in only his armor, stood between the Princess and her attackers. The zebras were as unarmed as the red earth pony, but they moved with the deadly swiftness and strength of Stampede. Four on one, they flanked and surrounded the stallion who met blow with blow. The zebras, however, had to keep back and moving; they knew I was out here. No doubt a sniper was

looking for me this second. I couldn't count on headshots, but I could punch a hole through any zebra that dared to stop for more than a moment.

"Where is the Third Battalion?" I heard shouted over my radio.

Was it Vanity? "We're pinned down!" Doof's minigun maintained a spray of firepower at any zebra that dared to get close to the skywagons. The gray stallion bled from a dozen holes, but he only stopped firing to chug a healing potion and let somepony reload the gun. Overhead, Jetstream and the other fliers worked to keep the bat-winged zebras from spreading out and assuming air superiority.

Twist and the Proditor moved through the rocks, taking down the sniper teams as fast as they could.

But they were still after the Princess. If they managed to get her, they could flee back to zebra territory if the Third wasn't in position to stop them as planned. It was a huge window, and there were far more zebras in the valley than our own people.

Something heavy landed on my back, hooves trying to grab my head through the cloak. I didn't dare look away from the red stallion struggling against his attackers. If they hadn't been trying to capture Celestia, they would have simply gunned him down. If I looked away…I couldn't look away. My horn pulled my sidearm, pressed it to the batwinged zebra atop me, and started firing. I heard a mare scream, struggling to snap my neck as I maintained focus. Then the hooves around my throat grew weaker as blood soaked my cloak and hide.

The peace envoys struggled to help Big Macintosh, but they weren't soldiers. They'd been poisoned, too, and several, like Celestia, were either unconscious or sickened. The best they did was to slow one of the zebras long enough for me to blast out their throat. Too many were kicked and lay where they fell, dead or close enough that it didn't matter.

I couldn't let them take Celestia. Please…somepony…anypony… help. All I could do was shoot things. That's all I could do.

Big Macintosh, bleeding and bruised, refused to fall. His coat shiny with blood, standing to protect what were likely broken ribs, one eye matted with blood, he stood on. He would not fall. Could not fall. One of the zebras darted in for a shattering kick, but the stoic pony took the blow and grabbed the hind leg between his hooves.

The zebra struggled and flailed, and my round punched through his chest.

The last attacker made a charge on the injured red stallion. As he was beaten by a dozen savage blows of horrific strength, I felt an icy certainty that he would fall, Celestia would be taken, the war would be lost, and Luna would be ruined. I couldn't let that happen. I tried to lead the shot, but the blood of the slain zebra dripped into my eyes and smeared my vision with a single blink. I fired, but my shot went wide. "No," I whispered in horror, tears dripping as I struggled to adjust my aim before it was too late.

Then, despite all his injuries and the debilitating poison, Big Macintosh turned as if to run. The zebra let out a scream of triumph. But Big Macintosh's body wasn't set for flight. As the zebra dropped to attack, Macintosh's hind legs pulled back and unleashed one final immense kick that connected with shattering force. The striped stallion careened away and hit the dirt, lying prone on the ground like a sack of broken bones and meat. Then Big Macintosh collapsed on the grass beside Celestia.

But he wasn't done. I could see another two dozen zebras racing towards him from the head of the valley. They were only minutes away. "We need evac for Celestia and Big Macintosh now! Right now!" I cried out as I shoved the zebra corpse off me and struggled to clear my vision.

"We're pinned down," Applesnack snapped. "Can't move two steps without the damned stripes climbing all over us."

"It's hoof to hoof in these rocks," shouted Twist, followed by a battle cry.

"Damned zebras have reinforcements. We should be there in five minutes," Vanity swore. I looked at the striped attackers racing towards the ruins of the tent. Big Macintosh and the Princess didn't have five minutes, and from the firearms the zebras brandished, I doubted they'd let Big Macintosh get off another kick even if he was in any state to try. I checked my ammo. Two rounds left. How'd I gone through it all so quickly?

"You've got to get Celestia out of there, Macintosh," I said as I slid the magazine into place and pulled back the bolt. "Please! Please, we can't let them take her."

"Anope," he replied simply as he rose to stand over Celestia once more, and then his rear leg gave out and he slumped beside her, grimacing in pain. "Can't get myself out of here, let alone the Princess. Just got to delay for Vanity." I entertained the wild notion of somehow running the five hundred yards and carrying

them both to safety…a mad idea.

Madness. There was only one thing to do. "We can't let them capture her, Big Macintosh." I slowly moved my aim down till it was pointed at her unconscious royal head.

Maybe it was the sound of my voice, but with a grunt of pain he rose and turned to face my firing position. "What are you thinking, Psalm?"

"Better Celestia a martyr than a prisoner," I said in an almost fevered whisper. "If you can't get her out of there... we'll have to... to... remove her." Luna would understand. She'd have to.

"What?" Macintosh gasped, and at once he stepped between me and the Princess.

"It's the only way. They'll be on you before help arrives," I said, trying to be as reasonable as I could. His green eyes stared at me, not with anger or rage but with a tired resignation, as if five years of fighting had settled on him all at once. "Move, Big Macintosh. Please!"

"Anope," he replied, his gaze level. "Our mission is to protect Celestia. Understand?"

"They'll be on you in a minute! They're going to take her," I pleaded over the radio. "Please, move!"

He smiled. "I reckon if they do, you and the Marauders will get her back. Understand? I ain't going to move," he said calmly, steadily, doing what was right. What was right and honorable and true.

"Please, Sergeant. Please…" I begged, tears running down. They'd overpower Big Macintosh in a few seconds, and there were several with batwing talismans. "Don't make me shoot you."

"Anope. I know you won't, Psalm," was all he said as he gazed back at me. Slowly, he smiled, trusting me to do what was right. "I know you're a good pony." He was the best of us. Honorable.

True. A good pony with a noble and caring heart.

I put a bullet straight through it.

He wilted slowly as his face relaxed, fighting every second to protect Celestia. When he crumpled, I had a perfect shot at the alicorn's head. I could barely aim through my tears. I just had to take two more lives, and then I'd be done. The Princess's, then my own. There was no living with this. Not this. But at least Luna would still be able to save other, better ponies than myself and maybe, somehow, someday, she might...

"Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I breathed, blinking away tears and staring at Celestia's head in my crosshairs.

Then the skies were split by a ripping boom as a dozen trails of crackling clouds coursed through the air, led by a single rainbow vein. Like streaking missiles, the Shadowbolts broke formation and engaged the zebras with terrifying speed and force. Rainbow Dash herself looped like a rainbow-maned goddess of death and slammed right into the body of zebra racing for Big Macintosh and Princess Celestia. The blast scattered them far and wide as a polychromatic cloud rose from the impact crater.

At that point, the fight was over. The Shadowbolts finally made the zebras give up and retreat with their elder. I just watched from five hundred yards away as the Marauders raced towards the blasted pavilion, hugging Penance to my chest and rocking as I stared. I could barely make out Applesnack through my tears, but I couldn't miss his howl of pain as he threw away his gun and knelt beside the fallen pony. I heard Twist's painful sobbing, punctuated with thumps of hooves against unfeeling rocks, Jetstream's stunned denials, and Doof's obscenity-laden rant. Echo was murmuring in a stunned voice that Sergeant Big Macintosh was down.

That was when I promptly leaned over, vomited, and shut out the world and what I'd just done.

The Shadowbolts found me and carried me back to the wagons, where I sat apart and hugged my rifle. Celestia was flown away, pain and sorrow etched into her features. I had doubts she'd ever attempt anything like this again. All anypony could do was weep and rage for the fallen hero who'd courageously placed himself over Celestia's body to take the bullet. Nopony had yet figured that the direction was all wrong to be a zebra sniper, or that the bullet had been one of mine. Only Goldenblood looked critically at me as I curled up, clutching Penance, praying for some salvation I didn't deserve.

The scarred, exhausted stallion trotted next to me. "What happened?" was all he asked.

"I thought they were going to take her. Luna forgive me…I…I begged him to move…" I whispered. His golden eyes met mine, and I broke, sobbing hysterically. He wrapped his hooves around me, holding me close. One damned pony commiserating with another…

~ ~ ~

I woke to Glory shaking my shoulder and started, looking up into her eyes. "She killed him," I whispered.

"What? Killed who?" Glory asked in confusion as I sat up, my body aching. Tanks needed to come with mattresses.

"Big Macintosh. I saw how he died," I said as I tried to shake it.

Such a pivotal moment…had Big Macintosh lived, would Twilight have left the Ministry of Arcane Sciences? Would the world have blown up, or would something else entirely different have happened? I saw the cameras of the tank on me; Twist watched me from the depths of Rampage's eyes. I could almost feel the Dealer listening in.

It surprised me when Twister said from above, "Yeah. Killed by a zebra sniper at Shattered Hoof Ridge. Horrible fight. It's said he leapt in front of the sniper to shield Celestia from his bullets. His funeral was probably the most heavily attended in Equestrian history. If several elements of the Third Battalion hadn't turned traitor, it never could have happened." The pegasus looked down at me. "What? A mare can't have a fancy for military history?"

"History…isn't always what the books say," I murmured as I looked away, then frowned. Deus revved his engines; was it just me, or did his motor sound... annoyed? I scowled and looked around. "Where the hay are we?"

"On the edge of the badlands," Rampage said with a yawn. "You missed Flank. Place is a wreck with Caprice gone. I swear, in five years, they're going to be nothing more than a gang of drugged out fiends infesting the ruins," the mare said contemptuously.

Even though it was the middle of the night, my eyes could see well enough to make out the oddities in the terrain. It looked like somepony had taken an immense pencil and drawn lines back and forth across the land to the south. Walls of crumbling concrete and rusted heaps lay scattered as far as I could see, some with long-abandoned rifles rusting silently away. Many of the lines were muddy ruts and ravines left in the landscape. Rusted artillery pieces lay with their red barrels threatening the skies. And there were bones. Everywhere I looked were bones and skulls sticking out of the earth as if the remains struggled to keep fighting each other. A reek of sulfur hung in the air, and patches of dense mist skulked along the deformations in the crinkled land.

"It's a battlefield," I muttered in stunned disbelief.

"Not a. The. For almost four years. Everything from here to Dawn Bay is a mess of trenches, bunkers, fortifications, and bases," Twister said in a subdued voice as she hovered above.

"Surfacers are idiots," Boomer commented, punctuated by a yawn.

"It was genius," Twister disagreed. "It's estimated that almost three million zebras died assaulting Hoofington, while pony casualties were less than two hundred thousand. That's three million that weren't attacking Manehattan or Canterlot. Hoofington was such a critical target that they simply couldn't ignore it."

But this place was more than just a military target. A cursed city.

Nightmare Moon's city. The Maiden of the Stars's city. And looking at all the sorrow this place had wrought, who could say that they were wrong? The Tokomare was here, and if the zebras were right, it was something far worse than just a machine. The idea of something so mind-bogglingly powerful staggered me. And if it was just some super power source, what would happen if Cognitum or Dawn got their hooves on EC-1101 and used it to control that kind of energy? Would anything stop them at that point? I'd seen the dormant factories underneath the city and the machines moving on their mechanical trains back and forth.

Sweet Celestia, I hated this place.

To the northeast I could see a massive lake, so large I that couldn't see across it. In the growing gloom, I looked at Twister and gave a little frown before asking, "What do you know about Nightmare Moon's battle with Celestia?" The pegasus stared, nonplussed, and I felt a little apprehensive. "I remember hearing that she fought Celestia here."

Twister, and everypony else, looked a little surprised by that.

"Wow. That's ancient history. But yes, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, Celestia brought her armies here for a final confrontation with Luna. Accounts differ. The one I like is that Celestia punched through into the valley but was cut off from her main forces.

Apparently, everypony expected a duel to the death atop Mt. Hoof, that big granite knot at the south end of the Core. Somehow, Celestia banished her sister to the moon instead and scattered Nightmare Moon's batpony forces back to her hidden citadel."

"How do you hide a whole castle?" Scotch Tape asked curiously as she perched uneasily atop Deus's turret. Given that Luna was Princess of the Night, I could only imagine…

"Nopony knows. It's said that ponies could only find it with the express permission of the Princess or her top generals." Twister gave a small shrug as she flew beside the tank. "Regardless, it was so long ago that nopony knows how or why things happened back then."

My thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a bridge spanning a narrow in the reservoir. The sight of the cantilever structure made me look at Deus. "Is that going to hold him?"

Rampage snorted and rolled her eyes. "Blackjack, given all you've seen, how can you doubt Equestrian engineering? Even after two hundred years, it's probably as strong as it's ever been."

"When you have four anchors for legs, *then* you can tell me not to worry," I said with a scowl as I walked to the front of the tank.

When Deus stopped, I hopped off and trotted ahead. "Just let me go a little bit ahead and check for weak spots."

Glory landed on one side of me, and P-21 trotted up on the other.

For a moment it was almost like when we'd first set off in the Wasteland, even if Glory looked like Rainbow Dash now. Why, we even had Deus following us!

Rampage turned out to be correct: the bridge was entirely sound and we reached the central span of the structure without incident.

Then I spotted a red bar straight ahead of us. Then more. I stopped and drew the markspony carbine with my magic. P-21 disappeared off to the side almost instantly. Looked like the Harbingers had picked an excellent place for an ambu--

"Lookie here! Two fine ladies wanting to use our bridge," a stallion called out as a half dozen bandits trotted out from behind the cover of a rusty skywagon lying on its side in the middle of the road. The mustard yellow unicorn wearing patched-up spiked barding gave a cocky grin as he approached, his black mane pulled into something that might vaguely be a style. Then his eyes landed on Glory. "With a Rainbow Dash impersonator. Whatever is the Wasteland coming to?"

A badly scarred brown earth stallion stepped up next to the unicorn as the first pony twirled his goatee with a hoof. He eyed us both in wary confusion. "Um, Snide? Shouldn't they have brahmin if they're traders? I mean, she's got a beamy gun, and her legs are metal. Maybe we should let them by."

"Nonsense!" the unicorn said with a toss of his head as he looked at us. "The toll is one hundred caps each. If you two make like

good little ladies and don't raise a fuss, we'll let you go without trouble." He smiled broadly. "You have my word."

"That means we take all their money, right, Snide?" the scarred brute asked. "After they take it out and stuff?"

"Oh, do shut up, Numbskull," the unicorn snapped.

"You're…just robbers?" I asked slowly as I looked around at the half dozen ponies. "You're not with the Harbingers?"

"My, somepony is slow on the uptake," Snide snorted, rolling his eyes and getting a chuckle out of his men. "Now, make like good ponies and hand over the caps."

I gave a crooked smile to Glory. With S.A.T.S. we could vaporize the lot of them in a flash. "Um, maybe you should listen to your friend there. Haven't you heard about a cyberpony trotting around here? Calls herself Security?"

"Yeah, right. Everypony knows that Security never comes this far south," Snide said with another snort.

"I don't know, Snide. I mean, she does got them metal legs." The big one rubbed his chin with a brass hoof. "I really think we should just let them by."

"See? That's where you messed up, Numbskull. You used the word think. The thinking is my job." He turned back to me and sighed, rolling his eyes once more. "Good help is so very hard to find. Now, where were we?"

I sighed and rubbed my face. "Look. I understand that you're just trying to get by. I do. And if you actually protected travelers as they crossed, I probably wouldn't mind. But your friend is right. I am Security, and if you try and shake me down, it's going to go very badly for you."

"Please! Do you really think you're the first mare who's claimed that? If we let everypony saying she's Security through here then we might as well just throw in the towel." He squinted at my legs. "Probably sheet metal. And Security's legs are white, not black. Or so I heard."

But there was one in the back, a dirty brown stallion with a pair of hoofcuffs on his flank, who seemed to have second thoughts; a terrified, haunted look crossing his face. He didn't just think I was Security. He knew me.

"I dunno Boss. Maybe we should tell her the sob story? You know, the one you told us in case we ever ran into her?" The scarred brute turned to me. "We was all part of a nice and peaceful

settlement long ways from here when we was attacked by a lot o' bad ponies. So now we is here to be good ponies! And we don't do nothing bad. Ever! Cross me heart and hope to cry and…um… something 'bout eyes." He crossed his brass hooves over his chest.

I felt a rumble through my hooves.

"Oh shut up!" the unicorn snapped, smacking the scarred pony upside his head. "We only tell that story if we're sure it's Security! Now get over there and take all their caps, you idiot!"

Then the lot of us were painted by Deus's headlights. The two cannons and machine gun turrets oriented right towards the band of raiders. Three power-armored pegasi and an alicorn flew above him like an avenging wing of death. Rampage lounged on the hood in her spiked armor, pressing one hoof to the metal just hard enough for the magic talismans to release one small arc of electricity. "We got tired of waiting."

Snide gaped at the sight of more death than he'd probably ever seen pointed at him in his life and then stared at me, his pupils constricting to points as he adopted a rictus grin. "Loveliest settlement you ever saw! Most peaceful ponies in all the Wasteland, we were."

"Skip it," I replied with a small smile.

"Quick! Use the failsafe!" Snide shouted as he whirled to run, and was struck in the face by a chunk of metal tossed by P-21.

"Your failsafe was garbage," the blue pony retorted. "Ten fragmentation grenades and a half dozen bricks of C-4 wouldn't even dent the underside of this bridge with your layout."

"Oh. That's…good to know…" Snide held the scrap of metal in his hooves and then dropped it as he turned back to me. "Oh fine! You got us! Another scourge of the Wasteland destroyed. Huzzah! Just make it quick."

I just sighed and covered my face. "Contrary to popular belief, I don't play judge and executioner. I haven't heard anything about a band of raiders raping and murdering everyone trying to use this bridge. If I search that skywagon, am I going to find a bunch of raped and brutalized ponies?" I asked slowly.

"What? No!" Snide said quickly, looking repulsed, and uneasy. "We can go to Flank if we want that! We're just…trying to get by," he finished lamely as he spread his hooves.

"And I can respect that," I said in low, reasonable tones. "In fact, if you can keep this bridge safe for travelers, I imagine most wouldn't

mind paying a small fee." When his gaze turned sly, I added, "Small, reasonable, manageable fee!" He immediately bobbed his head, the relief evident as it spread across his face.

Glory leaned in. "Are you sure this is okay, Blackjack?"

"No," I replied, trying not to look uncertain. "But I'm not an executioner. I've worked with gangers before. I have to give them a chance." But the brown earth pony stallion was still acting quite skittish, and finally it got on my nerves. I looked right at him and snapped, "Is there a problem?"

He didn't answer, but P-21 did. "You!" the earth pony shouted as he charged the wastelander. The others watched in astonished bafflement as the blue earth pony slammed the brown stallion against the rails.

"Get off me!" he spluttered in anger, but I saw the fear in his eyes…eyes that were on me.

"He's from the *Seahorse*!" P-21 shouted. "He's one of the stallions you spared!"

A strange calm stole over me and I felt a wire drawn tight inside me. "I see," was all I could manage as my horn slowly lifted Vigilance. "Tell me…this pony…has he raped anyone the last few days?"

"Shut up!" the brown earth pony shouted.

"What? Clink?" Snide looked at the brown stallion in bafflement. "What if he did?"

"Because…I gave him his life once when he wronged me." I was astonished by how calm I felt. Serene, even. "So tell me, has he?"

Snide coughed and looked away. "Well, you see, one can't be that picky recruiting help and…"

"'Course he did." The confused, scarred stallion frowned and answered, "That caravaner's daughter. Remember? Wanted to keep slaves and all."

"Shut up!" Clink screamed as he shoved P-21 away and started to run. My bullet flew with all the accuracy of S.A.T.S., right through the back of his rear right knee, and he collapsed, screaming. I'd screamed like that once, recently. Slowly I advanced with sublime calm. Screaming obscenities, he flopped and writhed, and yet I had no problem blasting another knee cap.

"Please!" he begged as he tried to shield his face. "You said you weren't an executioner! Please!" He cried out as I calmly advanced.

Be Kind!

No, Fluttershy. Not this time.

Do better!

It's not for me to do better. It was him. Now I am going to do better…

I pointed the gun right at his head as he lay there in a spreading pool of filth. I was fairly certain he'd be crippled for life; perhaps he'd bleed out. But I looked down the barrel and stared right into his eye. I'd given him mercy and he'd squandered it. He'd hurt others. It was every bit my fault. If I'd killed him, he wouldn't have hurt another pony…

All I had to do was become a killer.

I stared straight into his eye, everyone watching both of us, as I tried to summon up every iota of pain, shame, and humiliation I'd suffered that horrible time. I needed only a few pounds of pressure to kill him. The bullet would tear through his brain like a sledgehammer. Glory watched with a mix of sadness and concern; was she afraid I'd do it, or that I wouldn't? P-21 just stared with quiet certainty. If I didn't, he would. All the others left it up to me.

"Why?" I whispered, whether to him or to myself, I didn't know.

"Why do you have to make it so…fucking…difficult?!" I spat as a tear ran down my cheek. Would the Wasteland not be happy till I'd shed that last little inch? Till I lowered myself into the blood and slaughtered like my enemies? I wasn't a killer. Wasn't an executioner. That was it. My last tiny connection between that poor clueless mare who'd left 99 and this half metal monstrosity I was now...

"I'm sorry! Please! I'm so sorry…" the stallion groveled.

A thread of integrity. It was all I had. Kill this stallion; give him the gift of death. Punish him and prevent him from harming another. And worst of all: I wanted to. I wanted so much that my muscles ached with the need to harm him. To cast away that last little inch of integrity. To do what any mare in all the Wasteland should do; would do at the drop of a hat…

But I wasn't a killer.

Maybe the stallion saw it in my eyes, but the fear in him melted away. The corner of his mouth twisted in disbelief that I was weak enough to spare him twice. Even with a glowing pistol pointed right at his face, he knew I couldn't pull the trigger.

The round ripped right between his eyes and sprayed his brains

across the crumbled asphalt.

No…

I stared at his limp body. That…that hadn't happened. Couldn't… never… Then I heard the most gentle whisper through my mind.

'Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another.'

* * *

I didn't talk to anypony for almost an hour after that, walking along behind the tank and lost in my own thoughts. Glory tried talking to me every few minutes before giving up and leaving me alone. Snide had promised everything from his firstborn to his mother not to be next; apparently summary executions were quite persuasive. No wonder they were so common. If I'd just started killing people from the outset, the Hoof would probably be fixed by now.

Unfortunately, my friends didn't seem to remember that I had augmented hearing. "I'm sure that Blackjack will be fine, Glory. You said that if you ever came across any of those four that you'd kill them too," Rampage said.

"I know what I said, but I didn't think Blackjack would do it," Glory retorted. "She's always been so adamant on not being an executioner."

"Yeah. Softest heart in the Wasteland," Rampage drawled. "Look, everypony has to bust their murder cherry eventually. Blackjack finally popped hers. She'll get over it."

I didn't want to get over it. I didn't want to do it at all.

"You know something's wrong with Blackjack though," Glory said with a glance back at me. "She's changing. I can see it."

"We've all changed. You're Rainbow Dash now, remember?" Rampage said.

"Please don't remind me. We're moving so slowly it makes me want to scream," Glory replied sharply, then sighed. "I don't know. I worry about her all the time. It's like there's something inside her and it's twisting and turning her about. If only she'd talk to me…"

If you only knew, Glory. If I only could…

"It boils down to this: do you trust Blackjack?" P-21 said to the others.

"Pick a day. Sometimes she's so good she makes me scream. And then she pulls something like this," Rampage replied. "I know I'm

the group bag of crazy, but you have to admit that BJ's right up there with me."

I waited to hear Glory disagree with her. Her silence contorted inside me.

"We just have to be there for her. As simple as that," P-21 replied. "As much as she's been there for us."

"It will work out," Glory said with one last glance back at me and the smallest smile.

She still had hope…even after everything I'd done.

"You know better," the Dealer rasped beside me. I looked at the gaunt, pale stallion with a twinge of annoyance. How easy it was for him, riding along in my PipBuck, when I was the one who pulled the trigger.

"What do I know?" I snapped back at him. "That it's wrong to kill ponies? That I should try and do better? That--" I saw Glory and everyone looking at me oddly and said sarcastically, "I'm just talking to the invisible pony that lives in my PipBuck, folks."

Everypony just pointedly looked away.

"What you should know is to skip this whole cycle of hating yourself and then pitying yourself. It's really not healthy and it makes you really whiny," he said as he walked along with a scowl.

"If Clink had lived two centuries ago, he would have spent the rest of his life in Hightower, or worse. There was always 'worse' towards the end. And I know his victims wouldn't have shed a tear."

"I killed him. Or I've finally snapped and gone full Crazytown."

He cocked his head. "I have Psalm in my dreams, and now I'm hearing her in my thoughts when I'm awake. So between her, the… nnnghhh…and you, my brain is getting pretty damned crowded at the moment!" Dealer just looked at me with a mix of patience and resignation. "Did you know it was Psalm who shot Big Macintosh?

Not a zebra. One of our own! Trying to kill Celestia!" I gave a little scream and smacked my head with a metal hoof. "And now that…that thing…is inside me!" I'd pitied Psalm. Now I was turning into her.

"I knew. I'd heard the transmission," he said grimly. "But Big Macintosh's body wasn't even cold before the report went out.

There was no investigation of his death. It wasn't even a day before Goldenblood disappeared her into the O.I.A."

"And you didn't tell anypony?"

"Who would I tell? Pinkie Pie? Rarity?" He snorted. "Everypony wanted to believe it was a zebra that killed Big Macintosh, so it was. The triumphant hero sacrificing himself for the greater cause while protecting the princess. I would have been labelled a crackpot conspiracy theorist, or worse, disappeared myself. I sometimes think that Goldenblood took me into the O.I.A. just because I knew. Don't you understand? History isn't truth. History is what everypony decides to settle on as what happened. But behind that there are a thousand little causes and twists and permutations in the cracks that shape events. You're seeing everything I saw. And if you're feeling disillusioned, then congratulations! You've finally stumbled onto the truth."

"You know what else is the truth? I'm a murderer. I killed him." I grit my teeth, feeling everything fall apart. "Damn me…I wanted to so badly. I wanted him dead. But I couldn't…and then…"

"Then I pulled the trigger," a solemn voice said inside me. For an instant I was sure that Psalm was now talking to me, but it was the comforting voice of Lacunae. The large purple alicorn landed next to me. "You aren't the only pony with magic, Blackjack." She'd been all the way back by the tank; how had she reached that far?

"You…but…*why*?" I mentally stammered back at her.

For the longest moment I felt a baffling deluge of emotion pouring off Lacunae. "Do you know what would have happened if you hadn't killed him? If P-21 or somepony else had been forced to do it for you? You would have become a joke, Blackjack." Her words were firm and decisive, not at all like I was used to. But behind that was a reek of shame and guilt that I couldn't ignore.

"Lacunae... what's wrong?" I asked. That sense of guilt increased, pungent like ammonia in my mind.

"Nothing's wrong. I simply did what had to be done," she said, so cold that I wondered if somehow this was the Goddess. Except the Goddess wouldn't have been trying to reassure me. "You want to change the Wasteland? Well, unfortunately, fear has a powerful effect on others. If it became known that you were so merciful that you couldn't kill your own rapist just because he said 'sorry', then every raider with half a brain left would wring their hooves and recant their ways only to return to raping and killing as soon as you had disappeared over the horizon. Your friends would have to kill on your behalf, and it doesn't matter how loving or tough they are; that would poison your relationship with them."

Speaking of relationships... "Lacunae... "

She ignored me, almost in a rush as she thought at me, "So I pulled the trigger. It's my fault. Understand, Blackjack?"

"Lacunae... "

"Do you want to be a killer?" Lacunae snapped, half desperate as she looked down at me with an expression of almost frantic need for agreement.

That finally provoked a response. "No... I don't want to be a killer," I said quietly. "I don't want to turn into Psalm. I know what I did at Yellow River…what I'm capable of."

The Maiden of the Stars shall bring death and destruction.

"It's not your fault, Blackjack. It's mine. Put it out of your mind," Lacunae said solemnly. "I'll do whatever I can to keep you from being an executioner."

Lacunae's strange behavior almost distracted me from what'd happened, but I couldn't put it out of my mind. Ever since I'd first dreamed of Psalm, I'd felt myself changing. I wasn't completely sure who was in charge of me anymore. Was Blackjack at the controls? Psalm? The Goddess? The Dealer? The stars? I felt like I was dancing on strings and had no idea who was pulling them.

Even Goldenblood and his damned projects were tugging at me from two centuries in the past. They were woven into my very body.

The problem was that the idea that I wasn't in control of myself was so wonderfully seductive. All I had to do was simply believe it, and the burden of responsibility would be lifted from my shoulders.

It was the refuge of every madpony and monster: don't blame me, I can't help it. And the most terrifying thought was that it might be true. What if I wasn't in control? What if any one of those things was manipulating me? Everything I'd ever seen looked manipulated and contrived; how could I be any different? Even now, Lacunae's assurances felt superficial and false. Maybe she was just lying to try and make me feel better about Clink. Maybe the Goddess was making her lie. How could I trust anything at this point?

The Marauders had broken apart. Dawn's companions had too.

Maybe friendship itself was a contrived convenience so we wouldn't feel so lonely and vulnerable. Were we even friends?

I wanted to cut those strings so badly I could scream.

But I knew I couldn't do it alone… I'd tried that, and I'd gone far

too close to full madness than I ever wanted to imagine.

I looked up at those ponies riding on the tank and sighed, then looked at Lacunae. "Can you give me a lift?" The alicorn nodded and carried me up onto the tank turret, where they made room for me. "Hey," I said as I took a seat between Glory and P-21, putting a hoof around the former's shoulders and giving her a nuzzle. "Mind if we talk a little about what happened?"

Glory nearly cried as she smiled and nodded. "Sure."

* * *

Okay, so it was a bit of a mess, but over the next blubbery hour we talked. I told them everything I could that didn't involve the Goddess or Lacunae's claim that it was she who'd pulled the trigger.

I confessed my fears and frustrations, the idea that maybe I wasn't in control of myself as much as I should have been. There wasn't much my friends could do besides listen, but they did. And afterwards, I found that, despite everything, I did feel a little better.

We were now further southeast than I had ever been before. The bare dirt was studded with rocks and the detritus of ten years of war. There were the hulls of tanks and skywagons left to rust, crumbling fortifications and blast barriers that leaned this way and that along the road. We drove by the massive remains of what I suspected was a Raptor. A little to the northeast was a building so wide and massive that, at first, I'd thought it was a more angular mountain.

A mystery for another day; we'd reached the turnoff to the base. A bullet-holed sign pointed the way off the main road and to the southeast.

The wide, low rise the base lay upon was shrouded in mist. Wisps and vapors curled around us as we moved slowly along the road towards the clusters of reinforced buildings. A sulfurous scent tanged the air, and muddy patches of steamy water bubbled and trickled beside the road. The detritus looked almost like a scrapyard, there was so much ruin. A monument to squandered blood and treasure. Then a discolored plaque on a bullet-chipped concrete block came into view: Grimhoof Army Base. Beyond, I could make out the vaguest hints of huge, squatting buildings half hidden by the mist.

"Oh, this has bad written all over it," Rampage said as she hopped off Deus and down to the crumbling gates. Even Deus seemed to be trying to be quieter in the concealing fog. "Is there anything you can do about this?" she asked Glory and the Neighvarro trio.

"We could, but everything would know we're here," Twister said as she looked around, her beam rifles humming softly. "We'd be stealthier without the tank, you know."

"Maybe. But I've met a hellhound. I definitely want superior firepower if we need it," I muttered as we reached the twisted and rusted gates. "Why would the Enclave be interested in hellhounds in the first place?" I asked Twister. P-21 took one look at the rusted lock on the gate and gave a shake of his head.

"I don't know. Intelligence, that is, Thunderhead, said they'd make ideal and easily controlled shock troops," Twister said she popped the rusted-over lock easily with her power-armored hooves. "But if we're maintaining our separation policy, what do we care what's on the surface? We can't house hellhounds in clouds. Can't control or monitor them on the ground. It didn't make any sense."

"Hell. It'd make more sense to back groups of earth pony mercenaries," Boomer muttered. "Give 'em weapons, food, and supplies and have 'em conquer the surface for us." I thought of Harbinger and his talk with the Goddess, the Goddess providing support and security and the Enclave providing firepower.

"Or you could actually engage the surface peacefully," Glory snapped at the trio. "Trade food for materials? Things like that?"

"As thrilling as politics are, aren't we trying to be quiet?" P-21 asked as he moved forward. Smart pony had a good point.

Deus had a momentary pause at the gates, and then the front of the machine opened up and two mandibles began to pull the gates into the front of the tank. Though I winced at the popping and jingling, it was over in just a few seconds. I guessed that was how the tank recovered metal for its repair talisman. Since nothing came after us immediately, I guessed we'd dodged a bullet.

Moving into the base, it was clear that these reinforced buildings had been heavily targeted by the enemy. My radmeter began to tick immediately and spiked whenever we drew close to the hulking structures. Some looked as if they'd been directly targeted by tactical balefire weaponry, the concrete blackened and the reinforcing steel melted and warped. There were larger weapons that had been reduced to distorted figures of rust, their twisted

barrels thrust defiantly upwards in the mist.

And there were red bars. Everywhere I turned there was a red bar moving this way or that. Were there Enclave pegasi flying silently in the fog above us? Were hellhounds hiding in the ruined hulks of the structures around us waiting to spring an ambush? The quiet rumble of Deus was the only sound I could make out. Lacunae, Glory, and the Neighvarro trio hovered above us. Rampage and I flanked Deus. P-21 had disappeared into the mist. Scotch Tape and Boo rode on the turret. We had more firepower in one place and time than I'd ever had before.

So why was my mane going crazy?

Scotch Tape began to struggle with Boo, and the olive filly said as loudly as she dared, "Blackjack? What's wrong with her? Settle down, Boo!"

But Boo wasn't settling down. She struggled to get away... away from what, though? Deus was the safest thing around. But I trusted the white pony's instincts and said, "Let her go." Scotch looked at me skeptically, then released the blank mare. She immediately scrambled off the tank and backed away from it…and then she suddenly looked down and jumped aside, then jumped yet again. Like there was something wrong with the ground…

Dogs dig…

I watched her, then slowly knelt down, turned, and pressed the side of my head to the cool, wet asphalt. For several seconds I felt completely ridiculous. Then I heard it: a deep, hollow scraping noise, followed by another and then another. Then there was a pause... followed by the whine of a magical energy weapon being primed right beneath my head.

I fell back just a second before a crimson beam tore up through the asphalt and into the sky. "They're below!" was all I got out before the ground exploded and a massive canine monster tore through with one claw while the other brought the largest energy pistol I'd ever seen to bear. I floated out Vigilance and jumped immediately into S.A.T.S., firing five rounds into its snarling brownish-black face. The bullets turned its face into a bloody ruin of meat and bone, but they didn't kill it; the beast wasn't even injured enough to retreat! Instead it clawed the air in front of me, claws ripping four furrows in the asphalt as it began to fire wildly. The energy weapon crackled with unstable malice as it unloaded again and again.

There were two more pops, and two more hellhounds emerged from the asphalt, bringing even larger magical weapons to bear. The scarlet beams flamed in the air as they tore up at our fliers. The radiation pouring from the holes spiked my PipBuck; I didn't want to imagine the source. Every one of the hellhounds wore a bizarre chrome helmet that seemed out of place with their crude weaponry and claw-cut and hammered armor.

Overhead, Lacunae carefully sighted down her scope, ignoring the hissing hellhound energy weapons as she sent armor piercing steel through their skulls like a smiting Goddess. There was a desperate edge to her telepathic voice that belied the cold expression on her face. "No more... " she repeated over and over again. One of the emerging hellhounds started to strafe in my direction, and Lacunae actually shouted aloud, "Leave her alone!" before blowing his head apart in a shower of brain and skull.

Deus gunned his engine, his machine guns swinging forward and spraying the hounds in their holes, but they disappeared almost instantly, as if ready for it. I pressed myself to the ground and fired the entire ten-round clip into the hellhound in front of me before it finally dropped back into the hole. Victory?

No. Boo, staring wide-eyed at the walls, still appeared as scared as before. "They're not gone!" I called out as I loaded a fresh magazine filled with armor piercing rounds. Then the wall of the massive building beside the tank gave a crack and detached from the rest of the structure, tipping slowly at first, as the foundation crumbled. P-21 ran up alongside the tank and Scotch Tape jumped onto his back. The filly clung for dear life to him as he beat a hasty retreat. Just behind him, the great slab of wall fell like a descending drawbridge and with a squeal of metal and explosion of dust collapsed onto Deus.

I'd have been concerned about P-21 and Scotch Tape, but even with his burden he practically danced around the chunks while I scrambled for safety. The pair disappeared in the cloud of pulverized architecture. Emerging from the gap left by the fallen wall were four more hellhounds. Two dropped to one knee behind a chunk of rubble and sprayed the skies with a hissing, crackling gatling variety of beaminess while the other two lunged for Rampage and me. The heavily-plated hounds dragged their claws along the asphalt, the long edges of their talons filling the air with an ominous scraping as they closed the distance.

Rampage didn't wait for the hellhounds to close; the adolescent mare roared a challenge of her own and charged. She leaped and smashed all four power hooves against the first hellhound's face.

The energy cells discharged, blasting her away to backflip through the air and land as the hellhound staggered. Rampage wasted no time, charging again right between the hellhound's legs and running the serrated spine of her armor against something quite tender that tore a howl from the hound. The razor wire woven into her tail caught in the matted crotch of the beast, and with a yank pulled the hellhound to sit on the broken pavement. Rampage then rose and brought down her hooves in a flashing storm of blows to the hellhound's neck and skull till something cracked inside.

I didn't have the luxury of her size or pointed edges as I drew my silver sword and swung it in a futile effort to keep the beast attacking me at bay. Even though the edge was sharp enough to cut through the heavy steel plating, I didn't have the magical strength to push it through on my own. The hellhound leered as I danced back, the razor sharp claws of one hand slashing around as I tried to block the other. Vigilance punched holes in the hellhound, but I wasn't really doing much in the way of damage. Worse, I suspected from the lack of blood that the creature might be regenerating!

Not good.

I swapped to the shotgun as I gave ground, but the buckshot mostly deflected off my foe. I swapped to the markspony carbine, but the close quarters meant that I was firing wildly at best. I suddenly felt a wall behind me, and the hellhound sprang. Sword and forelimbs stopped claws that could carve through stone. Quickly, I twisted to the side so I could give more ground. "Damn it! I am not breaking these legs!" I swore as the claws carved shallow channels into the black metal with mere glancing blows; Celestia help me if those things landed a direct strike!

The hellhound suddenly lifted its powerful forelegs and flipped me with a crash onto my back. It spread its mighty arms wide and let out a shattering roar of victory.

A dull 'thhmp' went off in the mist behind me and the hellhound's yellow, bloodshot eyes widened in shock as it clutched its throat. A second later its torso erupted in two jets of gore spurting up and down as the grenade went off. P-21 trotted out of the shadows with Scotch Tape behind him, looking scared, and shoved me back to my

hooves without a word, and I felt myself go red.

Right now really wasn't the time for this... .

Glory and the pegasi were keeping the two shooters busy, trading fire back and forth. Deus's engine roared as his treads clawed at the asphalt, slowly pulling himself out from under the slab. Suddenly, though, a piece of the road next to him gave way with a crash. The hellhounds were trying to undermine the tank before he could pull free! If he got buried… "Deus! Fire!" I shouted. "Get clear!"

There was a muffled explosion as the section of wall split into three smoking chunks and flew away from the front of the tank. One arched high and came down on a hellhound more keen on shooting Lacunae than paying attention directly above him. It landed with a resounding crunch. Now freed of the wall, Deus retreated several yards as the road collapsed in a sinkhole just where he had been.

Four hellhounds blinked up as they stared at the twin cannons in horrified realization.

Not even hellhound hide was tough enough to withstand that!

Still, there were a lot more of them. They clawed their way out of the ground and poured out of the irradiated army buildings, their crude but powerful energy weapons crackling and filling the air with buzzing beams of death. "We need to move!" I yelled.

Lacunae levitated Scotch up onto her back while coolly taking aim and blasting a hellhound through the skull with her anti-machine rifle.

The tank rolled forward and launched up the far side of the crater, then climbed over the crumbled wall. Machine guns chattered as they chewed into the hellhounds trying to climb out of their holes; he led the way, Boo, Rampage, and myself following in his wake.

Lacunae and the pegasi rained down fire behind us to deter pursuit. The shielded alicorn seemed to be an irresistible target to the hellhounds. Maybe they had some issue with alicorns I wasn't aware of?

"They must be being controlled by the Enclave through those helmets!" Glory shouted from above. "That's what's making them attack us!"

"I hate to disagree, but this is fairly typical behavior for their kind," Lacunae pointed out as her shield flared under the barrage.

She then flew to one of the rusted rooftop weapons, teleported above a trio of hellhounds with the lump of metal, and dropped it on the beasts. The hellhounds tried to dive aside, but it managed to

crush one beneath its oxidized hulk. Red and green beams from the pegasi swiftly turned his two friends to dust before they could disappear into the earth. There were more coming, though.

"Move, move, move!" I shouted as I ran.

P-21, panting, struggled to keep up. "Always with the running thing," he muttered. I dodged behind him, ducked my head, and with a lunge I scooped him up onto my back. His forehooves hugged my neck as I raced to catch up with the others. "Okay…this works…" Then he shook his mane, pulled out an apple grenade, tugged the stem, and let it fly behind us and into the ranks of the hellhounds. The shrapnel didn't kill them, but at least it kept them from blasting us for a few moments.

"Why do all your fights turn into running battles, Blackjack?" Rampage asked. Two hellhounds poked their snouts out from a blown-out door, taking a bead on Boo. Rampage, with swiftness that shocked even me, charged the pair. The armored mare rolled and body slammed them with her spikes, knocking them back.

Their crackling, sizzling weapons fired wildly, and the two beasts amazingly dusted each other!

Rampage stood and shook the glowing powder off with a baffled look. "Huh; that's new." The bloody mare beamed at the blank pony. "Good job drawing them out, Boo." Boo just trembled in fear, looking as if she wished nothing more than to be back in Star House with a Fancy Buck Cake.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Rampage continued, "don't get me wrong. This running and fighting is a whole lot of fun, but I'd really appreciate a little variety in the future!"

"Sorry to be so predictable!" I jumped and rolled aside as the ground gave way beneath me, blasting the hound with the levitated shotgun as it emerged, not doing much harm but surprising the creature. I might not be as sneaky on these hooves, but it was clear that I could still move as quickly when I needed to. Then I saw Deus driving beneath a footbridge between two of the large buildings and saw the pack of hellhounds perched along the edge.

"Look out!"

But it was too late. As Deus passed under them, a half-dozen of the armored beasts dropped down and began to rip into his armor with their claws. He tried to strafe them with the machine gun turrets, but the creatures wrecked the turrets with rending rakes from their talons before he was able to do any real damage. "Hold on! We'll

help!" I shouted as I raced to try and pick them off the tank.

Deus had other ideas. He suddenly swerved and, engines roaring, blasted the reinforced wall of a building ahead and charged straight into the hole. A cacophony of screaming metal, roaring engine, and ripping steel filled the air, and a great storm of dust blew out the windows as he passed. From the crashing within, I suspected he was taking the roof down as well. Suddenly there was another concussive blast, and Deus erupted back out onto the street from another newly-made door, his scoured armor free of any clinging hellhounds.

He rolled to a stop, trailing dust and smoke. "Or…that'll work," I admitted. Deus's engine gave a guttering laugh as the rips and tears slowly started to repair themselves. Scotch Tape shuddered and averted her eyes; I could understand why. The rent machine looked like a banged-up skull. Lacunae and the pegasi, having seen that we were free from pursuit at this particular moment, flew down to join us. I glanced back the way we'd come; that was a whole lot of red bars... "We can't keep running and shooting. Grawnerer or whatever his name was said that the Enclave were controlling them.

We need to find out how and stop it. Personally, though, I'm more interested in why the Enclave is here in the first place than the gadget they're using." The Neighvarro pegasi gave firm nods of agreement.

Scotch Tape staggered down from Lacunae's back and onto mine.

Glory looked at my forehoof critically. "If they're broadcasting a signal, you should be able to pick it up on your PipBuck, Blackjack.

Just try to find a frequency in the P band and…" She met my flat gaze and adjusted. "Look for the strongest channel. It'll probably be a lot of buzzing and screeching terminal talk."

"Thank you," I said as I looked behind us. "We're going to have to split up. These hounds really seem to love chasing Deus. He can take them for a run. Sunset, Boomer, and Twister can help keep them away. Lacunae can keep contact between us." I wouldn't elaborate on how. "If we stop the broadcast, then hopefully the hellhounds will let us go. If not, then we run and tell Rover to teach his cousins about gratitude."

"Sorry. We're going to need one flier with you," Twister said firmly. "We were sent to find out what Thunderhead is up to. I can't run the risk that you withhold information."

"Fine. You can--" I started to say when Sunset stepped forward.

"I'll go," the mare said in a firm tone that allowed no argument.

Twister looked a touch surprised at the mare's assertiveness.

Sunset went on, "You're a better fighter than I am, Sergeant, and you'll need Boomer's missiles." Twister looked at Boomer, who merely shrugged, and then back at the black armored mare.

"Alright, Sunset. Keep a sharp eye and report back whatever you find," Twister said before taking to the air again. Deus gunned his engines and roared off back down the road with the two power-armored pegasi and alicorn in flight. We moved off to the side, and a minute later I felt a vibration underhoof. Nobody should be able to dig that fast. Perhaps they were taking existing tunnels and just digging the final stretches on the spot? When I started to move, P-21 reached out and stopped me. A second later I saw the slower red bars. Hellhound flankers moved along, sniffing at the air as they pointed their ponderous, cobbled-together weapons about warily.

For an instant, I was sure that we were doomed. I started to lift the carbine, but P-21 gave me the softest nudge; I glanced down and watched him give his head a tiny shake. I had to trust the smarter pony. A minute later the hellhounds straightened and took off after Deus as well.

"We're downwind," P-21 said simply as he slung Persuasion around his neck once more. Boo had relaxed as well; I supposed that that would do.

I frowned as I looked around, but had no idea what I was looking for. A giant Enclave flag? A map with 'Hellhound Control Center' clearly marked would be nice. I looked at Glory with a hapless smile. "Ideas?"

Glory frowned and flew up a short way, turning this way and that before she landed. "Can I see your broadcaster?" she asked. I thrust out my PipBuck, and she began to fiddle with it. "Wouldn't use a broadcast band…P band…yeah. There!" A screeching, buzzing noise emanated from my PipBuck, and I immediately turned the volume way down. "That must be it. Now…" She repeated the same process with her own PipBuck, then finally worked on Sunset's armor. "Now, you stay here, Blackjack, and swing your hoof around till the noise is loudest. I'll fly a hundred yards north, Sunset can fly a hundred yards south, and we'll triangulate on the transmission source."

Did I mention how much I loved ponies smarter than me?

Following her directions, we managed to find a general direction in which the signal was stronger than others. Grimhoof had a completely different layout from Miramare or Ironmare. Dozens of reinforced structures were clustered together between large expanses of open terrain. In the distance, we saw Deus tearing across the Wasteland with a crowd of hellhounds in close pursuit. If it hadn't been for that, we never would have been able to dash across the breaks in cover. In several places we were literally tiptoeing around radioactive holes dug in the earth. While the misty fog might have given some cover from sight, I didn't know how well the hellhounds could sniff us out.

"What's down there?" Scotch Tape asked as we passed by one of the radioactive pits.

"Who knows? Dysfunctional balefire bombs? Magical waste? Leaking Stable-Tec reactors? I don't want to find out," I said. Nothing good was underground in Hoofington.

Yet I spotted what I hoped was our destination: a cluster of buildings, one of which had several large dishes pointed up at the sky. While many were streaked with rust, I suspected they still worked. The persistent cloud bank surrounding them was another strong indication of something pegasus-related.

Then there was a whoosh overhead, and two Vertibucks passed above us, stirring the air and exposing us; fortunately, the two vehicles seemed to have bigger things to worry about at the moment as they rushed towards the structure with the large dishes.

"Is it just me, or does it feel like something is going on?" I asked as the clouds closed in once more. Carefully, we picked our way forward. All it would take was one perceptive hellhound or one EFS, and we'd be given away.

Then we found the dead zebras and hellhounds, the bodies only a few days old, scattered across the broken ground; dozens of striped corpses lay among about the dead canines. It'd taken headshots from skilled snipers to drop the beasts. From the ashes strewn about, I could only imagine how many had *actually* been killed.

Still, the presence of the zebras baffled me; what were they doing here? Was this another thing like Yellow River, or something else? It was a hell of a coincidence...

"Blackjack... " Glory said as she knelt by a severed zebra head. A hellhound claw had ripped the side of the face clean off... and revealed the metal beneath. Not a zebra... a cyberzebra. I stared in

shock as I spotted more in the wreckage.

Up ahead there were sounds of gunshots, the zap of energy weapons, and hellhound roars. "What the heck is happening?" Scotch Tape asked, standing on my back and shielding her eyes as if that would allow her to peer through the mist.

"We need to get higher... " I said, looking around the rooftops.

One of the buildings next to the structure with the three large dishes had a wooden scaffold lashed to the side. It creaked beneath my hooves but held my weight. We made it up to the third story.

Clearly this rooftop was some kind of camp. There were glyph-marked ammo crates half-concealed underneath canvas sheets. The center of the building had long ago collapsed and lay as a heap on the first floor, leaving the roof as a balcony around a hole.

Boo hung back, looking scared.

I slowly moved to the edge of the building where somepony had left a pair of binoculars. Peering through them at the buildings next door, I spotted two that were surrounded by a barricade of rubble.

Hellhounds, looking haggard and exhausted even for clawed monsters, seemed to be battling dozens, perhaps hundreds of zebras. The swamp of striped fighters was slowly wearing down the beasts. From atop the buildings, pegasi in black power armor darted out of cover to strafe the striped attackers and then returned to cover before deadly sniper fire could drop them. I saw the two Vertibucks landing on the far side of the dished building.

Then I was shot in the back.

The bullet smashed hard against the base of my neck, sparking off the reinforcement along my spine. Funny, something about the gunshot seemed awfully familiar... I whirled to look for the shooter as my friends dove for what little cover there was. What I saw were ghostly blurs in the mist on the far side of the hole. Glory and Sunset immediately started spraying with their energy weapons while Scotch Tape rolled off my back to take cover next to Boo.

I raced around the hole, gritting my teeth as the shots thudded into me, all blows that hurt but none that would down me outright. I fired ahead of me with Vigilance as I closed the gap between me and the nearest assailant. Blood dripped from the flickering air as I dove at the cloaked zebra. My hooves, however, flailed at nothing as my attacker leapt out of reach at the last second. I lay there, sprawled on the ground, and felt two hooves land on my spine and then a rifle press against the back of my skull. The stealth cloak

had fallen open, and I magically jerked the rifle barrel to the side, the round biting a deep hole in the crumbled concrete.

As I struggled to keep the barrel off my skull, I glanced over at my friends. A grenade reduced two blurs into bloody heaps. Glory and Sunset fired red and green bolts of energy at the attackers. One zebra raced at Boo and Scotch Tape along the edge of the building as if were as wide as a road. Her cloak flew free, revealing a triumphantly grinning mare as she leapt into the air and launched a devastating kick at the white mare. For a moment, I was absolutely certain both were going to die, and then the zebra's snapping cape suddenly whipped across her face, blinding her and causing her hoofstrike to miss by inches. To the astonishment of both the zebra and myself, her leg punched completely through the crumbly roof.

The mare struggled to free herself until Scotch Tape rose above her and bashed her skull with a pipe wrench, knocking her out.

Okay... I'd take it and ponder sometime I wasn't fighting for my life.

Knowing my friends weren't going to die in the next few seconds, I focused on my own attacker. The shooter swore in Zebra and with even more force tore the rifle's barrel from my magical grasp. I rolled, the shooter jumping once more to avoid falling as I looked up. The barrel filled one eye socket as I stared up into the shocked face of my adversary.

"You?!" Lancer swore. "How! What oath did I swear to be cursed enough to have *you* show up now?!"

"Back off!" Glory shouted as she pointed her gatling beam gun at him, hovering over the hole. Lancer pressed his forehoof to the trigger. A sharp sneeze might blow my head off. "Don't!"

"I swear, I should have killed you when we first met in that school," the stallion muttered as he looked down at me. "We seem to be at an impasse. A parley seems to be in order."

"Forget it," Scotch Tape shouted as she brandished her wrench.

"The alternative is I die and take the cursed one with me," he countered sharply, not taking his blue eyes off mine. We might be able to kill him if the magic disintegrated him faster than he could move... but anything else would likely have him kill me in his death throes.

"Fine," I said, looking at the others. "Put your weapons away. Remember Brimstone's Fall."

For an instant I thought he was going to shoot me anyway. Then

he pulled the batwing-glyphed rifle from my face and stepped off me. "You have impeccable timing, Maiden."

"What's going on here?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, not taking my eyes off the zebra. More were emerging from the lower floors; over a dozen were moving into position below us to make sure that, if the fighting started, we'd be in a tight pinch. Probably his plan. I looked at him. "Maybe we can help?" The question drew shock from everypony except P-21.

"No. You're a tempest in metal and pony flesh. I'll not--" Lancer began. Then one of the other zebras asked something and it made him grimace. "No. We don't need their help! We'll reclaim what is ours without--" Another sharp question from another zebra stallion, and he snapped back. For several minutes, a trio argued with Lancer. The sniper looked more and more anguished, his mane bristling progressively before he snapped. "Fine!" He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We are here to take back something stolen from us. What is your business here?"

I glanced at P-21, then said, "We're here to free the hellhounds from the Enclave control."

Lancer closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Of course. Only *you* could want *that*." He looked at me once more. "We've been struggling to breach their defenses. Every hour they bring in those machines and fly out with more of our property."

"I saw the cyberzebras," I said with a nod of my head, and the stallion grimaced.

"Yes, the... Brood of Coyotl. They are formidable... " And from his scowl, not appreciated. "Unfortunately, they are not wearing down the Enclave defenses quickly enough."

"Any other ways in?"

"There are claw-dug tunnels, but they are suicide. We have an underground passage secured, but we have been unable to breach the armored door or hack the terminal. You cursed my finest tech specialist," he said sourly, a hoof stroking the trigger of his gun, "so we have been unable to proceed."

I looked at P-21, and he gave a sure nod. "One last question... " I tilted my head towards the Vertibucks. "What are they taking out of here?"

"Property. *Our* property. Taken long ago," he replied sharply.

From the press of his lips, I suspected that that was all I'd get out of him.

"Guess we'll have to get inside to find out. Once we do... " I trailed off, arching a brow.

He took a deep breath. "If you can break the pegasi's control over the beasts, we will be able to drive them off. I doubt they will fight for the Enclave of their own volition. We will then reclaim what is ours."

"Fair enough. And you let us out of here," I added. "Deal?"

He shuddered. "I should have killed you when we first met.

You've been nothing but misfortune for me since." Finally, though, he gave a little nod.

"Now, show us to that door... " I said with a grin.

* * *

No wonder the hellhounds carved their own tunnels; this door was made to withstand a balefire blast. 'Northeast Equestria Satellite Tracking' was stenciled over the front. Claw swipes had scoured the reinforced steel but not breached it. P-21 worked a terminal set in the wall with a thoughtful methodical demeanor that would have had me climbing the walls in frustration.

Lancer hadn't offered to accompany us, and I wouldn't have let him. Instead, a half-dozen zebras in black combat barding stood silently at the ready. These were the Brood of Coyotl; they didn't laugh, talk, glare at me, or do much more than follow. Familiar red lights gleamed in their eyes, but that was the only hint that they'd been augmented. Half wore battle saddles with markspony carbines, while the other half wore power hooves; there was something vaguely un-zebralike about their armor and weaponry.

They wouldn't go past this point; they were here to stop any hellhounds on the far side from rushing out.

Oh what joy to be caught in the crossfire.

"Any luck?" I asked P-21.

"I'm trying to access a super-secure facility. The password is thirteen characters long. It's not exactly easy to figure out." He typed some more on the terminal, scowling as if it'd given him a personal insult.

"Blackjack, what's wrong with them?" Scotch Tape asked from where she sat with Boo. The filly stared at the armored zebras warily. "They don't talk. They don't even move."

"I don't know," I admitted. They were used two hundred years ago

during the war; I remembered seeing them in Shujaa's memory.

"Maybe they're just... really focused?" At the moment, I had way too much on my plate to take on new mysteries.

"That's way more than just focus," Glory said with a frown. "I'd love to do a physical exam. Take one to Rover and compare their augmentation to yours. It'd be fascinating to see if there's any commonality in designs."

"Yeah. Lancer's not going to let that happen," P-21 said from the terminal, then glanced at me with a frown of concern. "You do know he's going to betray us?"

"He's shot me multiple times in the back, and I haven't died yet," I said calmly. "Must be really frustrating for him. Worse, given that the Remnant thinks I'm the Maiden of the Stars." Scotch Tape cocked her head in confusion, and I sighed, "Basically... I'm the zebra devil destined to bring chaos and destruction to the world."

"Oh." The filly smirked, but I could see the thought process work through her head as her smile disappeared. "Oh... "

"I'm not the Maiden of anything! I'm not even a maiden! There's certain criteria a mare has to meet in order to be considered a maiden, and I blew that when I was your age," I snapped, making Boo shrink back. Sighing, I added in softer tones, "I don't want to destroy anything, Scotch."

"I didn't say you did, Blackjack. It's just... look at all the things you've done," she said with a tap of her hooves. "I know it's not true... "

P-21 hit a key, and there was a solid clunk and the sounds of working machinery from the door. "There it is. *Constellation*," he said as the door slowly swung open. Its thickness was more than the length of my foreleg. Beyond was a hallway with an icon of four stars on the wall over the acronym N.E.S.T. "Let's hurry. Now that this door is open, I give Lancer five minutes before he storms through here."

As quietly as we could, we moved deeper into the facility. Given the reinforcement all around it, it was clear this place had been designed to withstand megaspells; there also weren't any signs of looting or pillaging, which made me wonder if anypony had entered here till recently. P-21 and Boo were in the lead, the white mare as cautious as P-21 as she moved forward. Sunset and I, with our metal hooves, hung back.

The red bars didn't give me much encouragement, but three times

we evaded hellhound and pegasus patrollers, once by all of us hiding in large empty crates scattered along the halls. The fourth encounter, both Glory and Sunset placed exceptionally lucky shots that simultaneously vaporized two hellhound guards before either of them could get a roar off. Scotch Tape swept the dust into a nearby garbage bin. My paranoia began to nibble at me. It shouldn't be this easy. With EFS and the hellhounds' senses, we should have run into far more trouble! Was this some sort of setup?

"Blackjack," Glory said as she examined one of the many crates with a label: 'Destination: Shadowbolt Tower. Contents: scrap metal 14/25 #32. *.' "This is a Volunteer Corps label."

"This sure isn't a Volunteer Corps operation," I said as I slid the silver sword along the top, cutting through the screws holding the lid in place. We pushed it up and revealed a large, carefully disassembled piece of machinery. "And that isn't scrap metal."

Glory thumped her hoof against the crate, gritting her teeth. "We always wondered why Intelligence stopped blocking the VC program. They've been using us to smuggle things to the tower."

"I'm sorry," I said as I stroked her blue wings with a hoof.

"I'm not. Come on. Now I have my own payback to give these jerks," she said as she continued down the hall.

We soon found the nerve center, emerging on a terminal-lined balcony walkway overlooking a buzzing command center with rows of even more terminals. The N.E.S.T. control room had at least two dozen power-armored pegasi, another two dozen technicians tapping away at terminals or talking over schematics, and... I lost count of the hellhounds. Once again, though, we'd gotten lucky.

There was only one power-armored pegasus guarding the balcony.

When she trotted close, Sunset and I reached out, grabbed her by her tail, and jerked her through the doorway. One sharp blow later, the guard was unconscious, and we moved out on the balcony.

"Which one do you think is controlling the hellhounds?" I asked as I peeked down at all the terminals.

"None of them. Those are terminals. The maneframe is probably even more reinforced than this place," Scotch Tape said as she peeked down, rubbing her chin.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" P-21 whispered to his daughter.

"That if we can't get to the maneframe or the broadcast equipment, we can blow the cables connecting the two?" Scotch replied,

surprising the stallion.

"Actually, I was thinking of trying to find this place's reactor and blowing it up," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Overkill, Dad." The olive filly looked down at the floor. "If I were designing this place, I'd drop the cables through the floor to maneframes below and run the broadcast cabling up an armored central trunk. Which I think is right... there." She gestured at a long square conduit running along the wall from floor to ceiling, passing right by the edge of the balcony. "The problem is I have no idea how we'd carve our way in without everypony seeing us."

Then a klaxon sounded, and at the alarm both hellhounds and Enclave soldiers drained from the room, leaving the techs working more frantically than before. I looked at everypony, feeling that sense of paranoia growing. Nothing *ever* went this well for me. We moved to the end of the balcony; the conduit was almost the size of a pony. My silver sword floated out, and I pushed with all my might, slowly carving a hole in the half-inch steel. Behind it was some sort of copper mesh. I floated both the cutout and the sword back to me while P-21 prepared some plastic explosives. Then I munched on the metal.

"Blackjack, there's probably an auxiliary channel. This place has to have redundancy," Scotch Tape said tersely as she glanced down at the agitated pegasus technicians below. "See if you can find it and cut it."

"Right," I muttered, not having a clue of what it was I was looking for. Maybe a conduit with some sort of label saying 'Back up cables, please don't cut' on it? I moved back along the balcony with Boo following close behind me. Some of the terminals had burned out over time, but others still flashed their obscure data and messages. I wondered just what they meant, but really, all the 'MASTER - ES-1037C: 73%' and 'CBG1 CONNECTION LOST' meant nothing to me.

>EC-1101 acknowledgement required.

I paused and went back to the unassuming terminal with the tiny command up near the top of the screen. "No... " I glanced back at Boo, then at the terminal screen. My 'things are going too smooth' paranoia tripled. I pressed the enter key, not sure what would happen. The screen flashed, and more text appeared.

>LNR PLC to NEST. Auth. 331-AJ762-RD997 Luna.

>EC-1101 activity detected.

> LNR PLC acknowledgement request 9,999,881 / 10,000,000.
> EC-1101 acknowledgement required.
> Project Horizons protocol pending.

I stared at the screen, but no matter what I typed, the same data scrolled. Dawn had said there was a fuse lit once EC-1101 was out of Stable 99. This 'LNR PLC' place was sending requests out to whoever could receive them, not realizing that Equestria had been destroyed. So what happened when it got to ten million? I suspected that whatever the LNR PLC was, that was where Horizons was too.

Still, another dead end. I had no way of knowing how to acknowledge the request. Did I have to use my broadcaster? Transfer EC-1101 into the terminal? How did I do that? Did the terminal even work? I sighed and looked at Boo. "Another hint. Sometimes I think my life is just a string of hints I don't qui--"

Behind the pale mare was a row of five metal pipes with 'Aux brdcast' stenciled on them. "And really freaky coincidences, too... "

Boo blinked her pale eyes and cocked her head with a happy smile.

I made two slices with the sword, cutting five disks out of the pipes and sending wire chaff all over the floor. If I set off an alarm, it couldn't be heard over the one already sounding. I trotted back to Scotch Tape with a grin. "Cut the backups."

"You did?" Scotch Tape said in shock, then quickly smiled. "I mean, good job."

"Thanks," I replied dryly, then looked at P-21. "Bomb ready?" He held up several bricks of explosive taped to a radio detonator. I floated it over and into the hole. There was a soft thud as it fell down a little ways before getting hung up on something. "Okay... "

And I accessed my broadcaster. I'd done this once by accident, but this time it should work.

"This is Security to all Enclave personnel," I said calmly. "In five minutes, I'm going to free the hellhounds you've enslaved here. You can use that time trying to stop me, or you can clear out." I paused, almost knowing for certain that he had to be listening. "Lighthooves. You know what I can do. Remember Minty? Get your people out of here."

From the shouts below, I guessed that my message had been received. I could only hope that they'd follow my advice. If they didn't... well, I'd given warning. "Let's go. Quick," I said, wanting to get out of here before they found us.

Given that all those guards and hellhounds had probably headed towards the door we'd entered through, we needed to find another way out. As it was, all I could do was move through the halls as quickly as I could. Fortunately, there weren't many red bars this way.

Just a shimmering magic field. The blue wall stretched across the entire hallway we'd started down. I tapped it with a hoof, but it was solid as rock. My eyes checked the walls for a terminal to deactivate it, but there was nothing there except for a stenciling of a rainbow lightning bolt on the wall...

"Let... let me try," Glory said as she stepped up to the field and touched it with a wing. The feather passed right through like it was water. She passed right through, and once she was on the far side, the magic field dropped, leaving a ring of deactivated gems.

"Wow... it worked. Let's go." From her flustered appearance, she clearly didn't want to talk about it.

The hallway kept going up and down, and I had no idea if we were above the ground or beneath it when we emerged in an office overlooking a large warehouse space. A large section of the warehouse's roof had been torn off, revealing the open sky. On the office's wall I saw a map, pictures of pegasi wearing strange blue and yellow uniforms, photographs of the rainbow-maned flier sitting on a rock with other ponies and grinning while behind them a colossal factory burned. Another showed a burst dam, a third the building of one of the MASEBS towers.

"This... this was Rainbow Dash's office. Or one of them," Glory breathed as she walked slowly around the space.

"I always thought the Ministry of Awesome was the Ministry of Do Nothing," Sunset said as she followed Glory.

"Lots of ponies thought so. Rainbow Dash wanted to give that impression," Glory replied as she looked at the terminal. "Plenty of folks wrote her off as the dumb athlete. But she knew how to organize weather teams and be a leader."

"Till she abandoned her people. Besides, we don't really know that this was Rainbow Dash's office," Sunset said as she looked around.

"It seems pretty dumpy for a Ministry Mare." And that was true.

There were empty Sparkle-Cola and Buckweiser bottles on the desk and empty potato chip bags in the trash. Definitely not a place a Ministry Mare kept to impress others. This was a working space. I had no difficulty imagining Rainbow Dash in here coming up with

new plans and schemes with her confederates.

But there was one surefire way to know that this was Rainbow Dash's office. It lay right beside a photograph of six young Ministry Mares in ragged and torn dresses with a dapper young dragon standing beside them, a mouth-scrawled note read 'Best night ever!' in the upper corner. It was a small figurine of a purple unicorn smiling brightly back at me, clean despite the dust that covered everything else. I lifted the Twilight figurine and turned it over to read the inscription. *'Be Smart'*.

The pony gang was complete.

"Folks. You might want to look at this," P-21 said as he looked out the window, down into the warehouse. Holding the figurine, I trotted next to him and looked myself. The cavernous space held racks and racks filled with familiar, long, tapered shapes. Of course, these weren't ablaze with blue fire.

Missiles. Zebra missiles. Dozens of them. Perhaps hundreds. In the center of the building, a sort of workshop had been set up where the large missiles were being disassembled, packed into the VC crates, and loaded into two Vertibucks. Suddenly, it all clicked into place. Lighthooves had his delivery system, targeting talismans to guide them, and plague to load them with. He really did have a weapon to kill thousands, potentially tens of thousands!

"We've got to--" I said as I turned towards Glory and Sunset... and then I froze as I turned to see only empty space beside me. I looked around in confusion, then spotted the door swinging closed on the side of the office. 'Roof Access'.

Of course a pegasus would have access to the outside from her office. I ran as swiftly as I could for the door and spotted stairs going up through another ring of deactivated shield gems. I scrambled up the stairs and slammed the door open as I emerged onto the roof. Glory lay unconscious at Sunset's hooves as her glistening stinger pried and ripped the blue mare's gatling beam gun off her and tossed the wrecked weapon over the edge of the building. The mare looked at me as I emerged, and the stinger at the end of her tail popped off. Sunset plunged her tail stub into a storage compartment on her side and withdrew it with a new tip, this one crackling with arcane lightning. I raced at the pegasus as she crouched to pick up Glory.

"No!" I screamed as I drew my gun and slipped into S.A.T.S., but Glory was now blocking my best targets. Instead, I aimed for

Sunset's wing, triggering the targeting spell as I charged. The shots bit into the armored covering but didn't ground her. The power-armored pegasus launched herself into the air, carrying my love with her. "No! Glory!" I screamed at the skies, helpless to follow.

Then there was a flash in front of Sunset, and four alicorn hooves slammed into her. She coiled her tail around Glory as they tumbled back to the rooftop. "You shall not pass!" Lacunae thundered, her eyes blazing. Sunset flipped and landed atop the roof, facing me and holding Glory as a shield.

The crackling blade came around, pressed at Glory's throat. "Get back! I'm taking her with me!" Sunset shouted at me. "If she can get through those shields, she's Rainbow Dash enough for us! Back! They'll want her alive, but I'd be happy to rip out her throat and take a tissue sample instead." Twister and Boomer flew in, and I swapped to my carbine.

"Sunset! What the hay do you think you're doing?" Twister shouted as she flew towards us from the north with Boomer close behind. "This wasn't the plan!"

"Plan? There was a plan?!" I screamed as I kept my eyes locked on Sunset.

"The Thunderheaders have missiles. Cruise missiles! If we can get into the S.P.P., then we can smack them right out of the air!" Sunset shouted. "We have orders to retrieve the Rainbow Dash copy. She can breach barriers, Twister! That's all the proof we need! Take out that alicorn, and we can get out of here!" But Twister and Boomer weren't firing just yet. "What are you waiting for?!" Sunset blurted. "We have our orders!"

"Glory's told me the Enclave aren't a bunch of selfish assholes!" I shouted back, wondering if I could take the shot. A three-round armor piercing burst? Maybe.

"We have our orders!" Sunset yelled.

"I've saved your life, Twister. Remember Yellow River?" I asked as I lined up my shot. Sunset was backing towards the edge of the roof. Behind us, I heard some low hellhound snarls. Clearly our yelling and gunshots were attracting attention.

"What's your call, Sergeant?" Boomer asked, looking from Sunset to Lacunae.

Twister looked down at Sunset. "Now I know you want to do what's right, Sunset. I do too. Yes, we have orders. It's our job to carry them out, but not like this. Let Morning Glory go." I felt a

deep gush of appreciation for the mare for using Glory's real name.

Hellhounds climbed over the far edge of the roof and began to race towards us, their dragging claws shrieking on the metal surface. In a moment it became clear that they were aiming just for me and P-21; apparently pegasi were off their menu while under the helmets' influence.

"Traitor!" Sunset screamed as she backed towards the edge.

"P-21! Fire!" I shouted. P-21's hoof smacked the detonator in his tail. From the tall building with the dishes came the faint sound of a muffled explosion. The hellhounds stopped short of us, clutching their heads with screams. Then their claws curled in and crushed the helmets with a shrieking of metal. They tore the helmets off.

"No... " Sunset murmured as she released Glory and turned to leap off the building. Two hellhounds who had been about to tear me to pieces instead turned and leapt after her. Their claws sank through her armor, and Sunset screamed as she was borne to the ground, claws ripping her armor and flesh to pieces. Two more hellhounds immediately began blasting into the air, forcing Twister and Boomer and Lacunae to evade their red blasts. Other hellhounds closed in to finish everypony not in power armor off.

"Gnarr sent me!" I yelled as two leapt upon me. One grabbed my throat and pulled back his hand to rip my head off in one swing.

"Gnarr sent me to free you!"

The hand paused. Fierce, cunning eyes stared into mine with a palpable hatred. Then the hand around my neck released. "Leave," was all the hellhound said. Then, with a howl, the hellhounds left the rooftop. With a whoosh, the Vertibucks lifted out of the hole in the roof and made for the skies. One had a hellhound clinging to its side and struggling to rip its way to the pegasus fliers.

I checked to make sure Glory was okay; she was unconscious, but alive. I didn't look at Twister and Boomer as I said, "You should get out of here too. Tell your superiors that Lighthooves plans on using missiles to deliver his bioweapon."

"Blackjack," Twister began. "What about Glory?"

"That's up to you," I said quietly. "Rainbow Dash was Twilight's loyalest friend. Twilight always knew that Rainbow Dash would do what was right, eventually. I guess it's up to you to decide who your loyalty is to." I slipped the Twilight figurine into the saddlebag that held the others.

The two looked at each other and then took off, flying southwest. I could only assume they'd find their way.

I cradled Glory as I looked to Lacunae. "Take us out of here."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, we were reunited with Deus and Rampage and riding the tank away from the base. Rampage had a novel counter to the anesthetic that had incapacitated Glory. The shot of Dash that Rampage administered had Glory awake and practically bouncing on her hooves. "Right! Rematch! Next time I'm going to take them all down! Ten seconds flat!" she said as she punched the air with her hooves, snorting.

"I like this Glory. She's goofy," Scotch giggled.

"Wait till the Dash wears off," I countered, hoping we wouldn't have another addiction to worry about when she crashed. I then filled Rampage in on everything that happened while we were gone.

The striped mare listened to the story of our infiltration, muttering sourly, "Wow. You have all the luck. In. Out. Killed a traitor. Freed a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters. I should have gone with you. We've just been leading hellhounds around in circles!" Deus rumbled his engine in reply.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to make a habit of it. Hope Rover's happy," I said as I rubbed my throat. "Hellhounds and sand dogs aren't even close to each other. I'll take cyberdogs over radioactive hounds any time."

"Blackjack!" P-21 called out, pointing into the still-lingering mist.

I looked up and spotted the blue bars... lots of blue bars. Dozens. Hundreds maybe. Out of the fog emerged figures walking in perfect unison, covered from head to hoof in black zebra combat armor. Every step was simultaneous and deliberate. A frisson ran through me at the sight of the black-armored horde of zebras; the Brood of Coyotl were a silent, ominous lot. Behind them were regular zebras, the snipers and hoof-fighters I was more familiar with, dressed in a variety of barding and weaponry, some wearing mistcloaks and some garbed in patched-up combat armor. They formed a ring around us.

Glory popped into the air. "Let me at 'em! I'll take them all down!" I grabbed her tail with my magic and gave a firm yank to

plant her butt back on the tank. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” she protested.

“Hush and let the non-drugged ponies talk,” I said as I looked around for him. “Lancer?” I called out.

“Maiden,” he replied as the zebras parted and the silent stallion advanced.

“Well, is this the point of your sudden yet inevitable betrayal?” I asked dryly, tapping the turret with my hoof with a reassuringly solid clang. “Because while you got an army, I got a tank.”

“Maiden, didn’t I tell you that your death wouldn’t be at my hooves? Your demise has been decreed to be carried out by Legate Vitiosus himself. I would not kill you, even if I had the opportunity,” Lancer said with a calm smile as he stood out in front of us. I didn’t point out how willing he’d been to threaten to kill me when he’d had guns pointed at him.

“So... ” I frowned as I watched the black-armored zebras slowly back away as one. They weren’t moving as if to simply let us leave, however. One red bar appeared on my EFS. “Oh no... ”

A gap appeared ahead of us, and a lone figure slowly advanced through the mist. The zebra stallion moved with a slow gait that conveyed terrible power and grace all at once. His head was concealed by a dragon skull carved with strange glyphs. His powerful body bore innumerable scars across its surface, including a horrible Y-shaped injury across his chest. More carved dragonbone armor formed spikes at his hips and flank, strapped in place, and tattered glyph-marked cloths tied around his fetlocks snapped in the breeze; apart from that, he wore no barding. He carried no weapons that I could see, but for all I knew he could kick through steel.

Lancer trotted around the edge of the circle of zebras to join the Legate, kneeling beside him. “Legate Vitiosus, may I present for you the Maiden of the Stars, Blackjack.” He then smiled at me and said, “Maiden, be honored. This is the Legate of the fallen Caesar’s will. The stallion that exercises the last Remnant of the Imperial army.”

“Enough, my Lancer,” the Legate said in a low, deep voice. “This is not the time or place I wished for this battle. I hoped to break the Maiden upon the smoldering, melted remains of their cursed city. You have forced this confrontation prematurely, my Lancer.”

Lancer stared as if struck. “F... Legate. It may be early, but she is

here! You are here! Let the champion of the stars be felled by your hoof!" He paused, then added, "I know we were unable to retrieve the Talisman of the Eternal Warrior... "

"Indeed. You have failed to do a great many things. You were unable to slay my treacherous mate, you failed to retrieve the bones of the stars, and the talisman escaped you. Now you force this premature confrontation," the Legate boomed as he stared at me atop Deus. "At times I think your certainty that she is the Maiden is simply a way to cover your own failings."

"I'm not," I replied as I looked down at him. "I don't have an argument with you, Legate. We simply want to go."

He regarded me for a long moment. "You seek to save the people of this cursed land?" he asked, gesturing towards the Core with a sweep of his hoof.

"I do," I replied.

"Why?" he asked in return.

"Legate, I beg you. Do not speak with--" Lancer began, but with one baleful look from the Legate he fell silent, chewing on his unspoken words.

I considered the question, not expecting it. "Because... because I can fight. Because others need me to fight for them. If I have the ability, then I should use it. Security protects ponies."

"But who are these ponies you protect?" he asked calmly, reasonably. "Murderers. Rapists. Thieves. Slavers. The craven, the callow, and the cruel. You yourself have seen how this place corrupts, twists, and violates all within it. This land attracts the sinful and wicked. Are they deserving of your service? Are they worth your pain?"

Closing my eyes, I could easily imagine who he was talking about.

Clink. Sanguine. The Overmare. Dawn. Even the Reapers, the Flash Fillies, the Burner Boys, the Halfhearts... the Enclave. "Maybe not. I have to admit, there're a lot of bad ponies in this place," I replied quietly. I could feel all eyes upon me, and not just those of my friends. I imagined Priest watching me. Roses and Thorn.

Dusty Trails. Snips. Lemongrass. Marmalade. Mother... "But even if there are bad people here, there are good ones, too." I could see Charity and Bottlecap. Rover. Cynical Triage. Keeper. The ghouls of Meatlocker and the fillies of Chapel and the ponies of Riverside and Megamart... And I smiled as I looked down at the Legate. "Maybe it's not about being good and bad, Legate. Maybe

it's about trying harder to do better, to be better people. And so long as there are people here trying to do that, I'll give them all the protection I can. Security saves ponies," I finished simply.

The Legate looked up and me and smiled. "Then we are enemies, whether you are the Maiden or not. It is my solemn duty since I assumed command of the Remnant to execute the Caesar's final orders and destroy this vile place and all who live here." He took a few steps forward. "It appears, Maiden, that we are at an impasse. It is unfortunate that I cannot break you when you are at the peak of your destiny."

"Shucks. Too bad for me, then." I sighed and sat down on the turret top, frustrated that we couldn't come to some sort of arrangement that didn't involve fighting. "So. Is this something that's just between me and you, or can my friends help?"

He just smiled, and from around the ring came an ominous clatter of dozens of weapons being readied simultaneously. "Certainly, if you wish *my* friends to participate also."

That wiped the smile from my face. "Um…I got a tank on my side," I reminded him. Deus revved his engine in agreement.

This fact didn't seem to perturb the Legate in the slightest. "You do. And perhaps that alone would be enough to win. But you have many friends as well. Loved ones. Children. Can you live with them dying on your behalf? Will you so eagerly slaughter dozens to win?" The calm certainty of his smile chilled me.

"You're pretty confident. What if I win?" I countered with a frown.

"Then the Remnant will withdraw until a new Legate is chosen. Perhaps that will not happen for years. Perhaps it will never happen," he countered with sublime confidence that it would not need to happen at all. "Is it not better this way? Had your Princess, or your predecessor, faced the Caesar in fair combat, the war may never have happened. With one duel, you may end a threat to this wicked place forever."

Oh, that was tempting. He knew exactly how to push my buttons.

I glanced at all my friends and hopped off Deus. "Give us a chance to talk it over?" I asked. The Legate nodded his skull-helmed head while Lancer stared on in shock, his mouth moving in feeble disbelief. We pulled into a tight circle.

"Don't even think about it," P-21 warned me quietly.

"I can take 'em all on!" Glory said with a snap of her tail.

"I'd pay to see that," Rampage laughed with a nod to Glory. "We

need to dose her on Dash more often."

"No," I replied. Rampage arched a brow, and I amended, "No to the Dash. No to fighting all of them. I don't want to risk all of you against him."

P-21 rolled his eyes, "And what makes you think we want to risk *you* against him on your own?"

"I'm not going to sit by and watch you fight some... some... spooky zebra!" Glory said with a snort.

"I don't want to fight him at all," I said as I glanced over at the Legate. "And oddly, I don't think he wants to fight me, either.

Something about this feels... wrong. So as soon as Deus and the rest of you are clear, I want Lacunae to find the nearest radiation crater, suck up the rads, and come yank me out if things go bad."

With luck, he'd be just another zebra... but I doubted it.

"What if we want to fight anyway?" Rampage said with a scowl, and Deus rumbled in agreement. "We don't have to just walk away 'cause you say so."

I sighed and closed my eyes. "Rampage, please leave this to me."

Then I smiled to her. "Trust me. If I can beat him here and now, then the Remnant won't be a problem. He's right about that. I'd rather not fight another war."

She screwed up her face, grimaced as if she had a bad case of indigestion, and finally slumped. "I don't like this, Blackjack. This guy... he feels familiar. In a bad way. A part of me just... just... *knows* him!" she said with a frustrated scowl, then added, "And I know he's bad fucking news."

I knew what she meant. Something about the way he talked, even the way he moved, nagged at me. I turned back to him. "I want your soldiers to pull back. My friends will do the same. Then we can have your duel... till one of us surrenders or is killed. Agreed?"

"Your terms are acceptable," he replied casually. "You may use whatever weapons you have at your disposal."

"No, Legate! She must be slain here and now," Lancer begged as the zebra horde pulled away.

"Silence," the Legate countered, not taking his eyes off me. "You forced this confrontation prematurely. Do not say another word to me." Glory, still muttering about how she could take them all on, gave me a firm hug and a promise that if I started losing, she'd be there in ten seconds flat. With that, the tank rolled further north with my friends, and the striped horde moved off to the east. I

spotted a half dozen or so hellhounds watching from the southwest through glinting binoculars. Were they going to interfere, or were they placing bets?

I wondered what the odds they were laying on me were.

I levitated the starmetal sword and Vigilance before me; the only weapons he might have had were those wind-blown pieces of cloth tied to his legs, and I wasn't sure how effective those could be. As we began slowly circling each other, the Hoofington rain decided to start right there, hissing on the rock and dripping along my metal and his bone. I just had to beat him. Not even kill him. I could do this. I could! We trotted around each other, feeling as if we were building energy and any momen--

And like that he turned and darted in with a speed that almost took me by complete surprise. He leapt over my swing in a somersault and smashed his outstretched hooves against my skull, rattling my focus. He landed in front of me and launched into a backwards flip that crashed his hindhooves against my jaw. I fired wildly as I staggered back, but he landed on his back legs and in a half dozen steps arched around to my left, jumped in a spin, and bashed the side of my head again with an outstretched rear hoof. The force of the blow almost put me on my backside as he landed in a crouch and twisted to arrest his momentum in that direction. A second later, he reversed the movement of his upper body, and like a snapping spring rammed his hoof against the opposite side of my head, knocking me flat on my back on the ground.

All that in ten seconds...

My EFS warned me that my head couldn't take a series of blows like that again, but that was exactly what the Legate was continuing to target. He sprang like Rampage high into the air, flipping and bringing his rear hoof down in a finishing blow aimed at my skull.

I brought up my forelegs, and his hoof clanged loudly against them. The sword flashed through the rain to sever the hoof pressed against my forelimbs, but he kicked off my legs before the edge connected. Rolling back upright, mud streaking along my hide, I dropped into S.A.T.S. and queued up five shots.

To my amazement, the targeting spell estimated only a forty percent chance of hitting! I triggered the spell anyway, but as soon as I did I could see why the chance was so low. Everything moved at a crawl except for him! Three rounds bit into his striped hide, but they were spread out and not near any of the vitals I'd aimed at.

The shots didn't even seem as effective as they should have been, given he wore no barding in those areas. His tough hide just fought the impacts, leaving small bloody holes rather than gaping wounds. Not good.

I rose and lifted my hooves to block further attacks to my head, but the Legate had feinted. Once again on his hind legs, he moved along the left side of my body in a single revolution and slammed both forehooves into my ribs with enough force to drive me back down to my knees. Then he snapped another forward flip that brought his rear hoof slamming right on my spine. Had I not been augmented, he probably would have snapped my back.

"Rampage says if you don't start moving, it's over," Lacunae said tersely in my head. "I can also try to shoot him from here if you can stop his motion."

"No. If the zebras see you aiming, it'll be a bloodbath," I countered. Rampage's comment was a fair point, though, and I ignored the throbbing pain and heaved myself into motion, charging him. He was faster than me and had to be as tough as me.

I doubted he was as heavy as me, though. Spraying muddy water everywhere, I closed in on him. I knew he'd try and dodge, and he did, jumping to the left. I reached out with my magic to grab his hoof and...

Nothing! It was like his striped body was coated in an oil that just slipped right out of my magic. He darted in with another forward-flipping kick to my head, as before, but I lunged aside and took the blow on my shoulder. My forehooves reached up and locked around his outstretched rear leg, and then my horn flashed and fired magic bullets into him; like my telekinesis, though, the magic was reduced far below what it should have been. Using the trapped limb as leverage, he twisted around in front of me, drew back his other hoof, and kicked me square in the horn. The stab of pain almost broke my focus, and my planned swing with the sword to sever his trapped leg missed and bit deep into my own right foreleg.

As smooth as a greased gun slide, he kicked until I lost my grip, then pulled free. I didn't stay put and let him simply spin kick me yet again, though, instead backing away and blocking the attack.

Perhaps I could wear him down...

Then I saw that the holes I'd punched in his side were closing before my eyes! "Oh come on! You're ridiculously fast, strong, partially bulletproof, magic resistant, and regenerating?!" I

protested, pointing my sword at him. "How?!"

"You are hardly one to complain about unnatural abilities," he countered, gesturing with a muddy hoof at my synthetic limbs.

"You profaned your body with metal and machines to gain your strength, violating your very essence." He smiled, and Celestia damn me if the bastard didn't flex his powerful muscles and send half the zebra mares behind the Brood of Coyotl whooping!

Still, he was giving me an opening and a breather... which was a little baffling, since he was supposed to be finishing me off. As I rose back to my hooves, he continued, "Whereas I have augmented my body with sanctified alchemy and sorcery that only the zebras possess. The fury of the spirits, the might of dragons. The ferocity of griffins. The power of things... beyond *your* grasp." He posed like a magnificent striped god before his followers.

If he'd been a little more reckless, I'd have thought him a braggart, but he never took his eyes off me and gave me an opening to knock him out. Either he possessed scary confidence in his abilities, or something was going on here. "Well... great! Good to know. So we're going to be locked in an eternal struggle here, then?" I countered sarcastically, at the same time thinking frantically to try and figure out what he could be up to.

"No. Simply until your power reserves are drained," he replied casually. "I shall not tire, and my body shall not fail. Yours, however... " He trailed off as his smile widened.

Crap. I queried my available power in my EFS... and the moment my attention moved off him, he was on me. One of his rear legs swung low to the ground in a powerful circle and swept me off my hooves again. My focus snapped, the blade spinning off into the muck around us. Without stopping his spin, his outstretched hoof crashed against my descending skull and spun me away into the mud. I groaned and stayed on my back for a second too long. His circling hoof continued around a third time, changing orientation from horizontal to vertical and crashing down on my chest with such force that even my synthetic lungs had the breath blasted from them.

"Pathetic," he said as I lay there, my chest making disturbing crackles and wheezes as my lungs reinflated. "It is your destiny to be defeated by me, but I had hoped for something... grander."

"We're going to come ba--" Lacunae began to say in my mind.

"No!" I shouted, feeling the old, familiar need to win growing

within me. I flushed as the Legate cocked a brow and hissed mentally, “Stick to the plan. I can handle this preening son of a mule!”

“No? You have nothing more?” The Legate tilted his head with the question, then straightened and broadened his smile a bit.

“Oh... are you communicating with your friends? Some internal radio?”

I spat something that tasted of oil and blood into the mud and glared up at him. *You’re stalling again. Why the fuck don’t you finish me off?* “Don’t worry about them,” I hissed as I lifted myself back up. “Worry about me!” My horn flared as I drew Vigilance, Sacrifice, and Duty in a surge of desperation, firing wildly at him as I charged.

The bullets tore into his striped hide, ripping bloody holes as he crouched before me. I just needed a few more shots, a few more good hits. A few more! He sprang backwards with that disturbing zebra grace, though, and flung a glob of muck directly into my face just as I entered S.A.T.S. No! I fired away blindly, blinking and trying to restore my vision.

When it cleared... wait, where’d he go?

“Above you!” shouted Lacunae in my mind as his plunging hoof smashed down between my shoulders, driving me face first into the sludge; my spine let out a crackling of bone and a groaning of metal, and I felt a horrifying moment of my body being consumed by a paralyzing numbness from my neck down. My focus broke, my guns falling out of sight in the muck. “Enough is enough! We’re coming--”

“No!” I groaned as the tingling impact-induced anesthesia abated.

The Legate circled me as his unhelmeted followers cheered. Lancer smiled like it was Hearth’s Warming Eve. I’d win. I was a cyberpony killing machine who wasn’t going to be defeated by freaky zebra martial arts. “I’ll beat him!” I croaked.

“Pitiful,” he said in a voice of disappointment that only my mother was allowed to use, but he just kept circling as I struggled to rise.

“Why are you not greater? Your destiny is for so much more.

Power. Destruction. Yet you wallow in the muck like a sow. I am half inclined to let you crawl back to your friends until you are a fitting opponent.”

Lancer’s grin disappeared like a popped balloon. “Father, no!

Finish the Maiden before her friends come and spirit her away!”

Oddly, the *Legate* wasn't smiling either. If anything, he now seemed frustrated.

"If you fear such, my Lancer, be prepared to slay her alicorn when she appears, but you will not interfere with destiny," the Legate snapped, then fixed me with a calculating glare. "Where are your friends? Why do they not come for you?" he murmured; if my ears hadn't been augmented, I likely would have missed it.

"A good question," Lacunae snapped in my mind. "I may have just enough magic to come back myself and help yo--"

"No! You heard him. Lancer and a dozen other zebras will kill you the moment you appear!" I could see Lancer prepared for her arrival. Surely there'd be others as well, hidden out of sight. "I'll beat him... no matter how he breaks me!" I could take it. I deserved it... I deserved this...

"Damn it, Blackjack! You're not Psalm!" Lacunae shouted within my mind.

The name struck across my thoughts, stunning me a moment.

Psalm... I was acting like Psalm? The Legate just stared through the eye sockets of the dragon, as my eyes met his for a half dozen heartbeats. Annoyance flashed inside his brilliant, scornful yellow gaze. Finally, some line had been crossed. "So be it," the Legate said.

Like a tempest, he fell upon me. His body twisted back and forth, a vortex battering against me with a speed and power I could only defend against by lifting my hooves. I had to win -- it was what I did best -- but I wanted to lose. That sick, insidious seed inside me liked this battering, wanted it. Hightower. Pinkie Pie. Chapel. Fluttershy Medical Center. Big Macintosh. The *Seahorse*.

His grin suddenly widened. While continuing to rain down blows, he said in a tone of false kindliness, "Do not fear for your friends' safety. Those that surrender will be taken back to our base as slaves. I will take the olive one for my harem as tribu--"

My black, dented limbs snapped up and clenched the Legate's swinging forehoof between them in a grip so firm it halted his thrashing, whirling barrage. "No," was all I said as his eyes widened within that skull, his foreleg trying to jerk itself free. Then I pulled him forward and rammed my horn into the left socket of that bony encasement.

For the first time in our fight, the Legate truly screamed.

If I'd possessed Lacunae's spire, I might have finished him off there

and then; as it was, only the vitreous jelly of his eye coated the end of my compact horn. His own supernatural toughness and speed allowed him to jerk back moments before magic bullets erupted from my horn. Blood, bright and arterial, spurted from the impact, and the bone itself cracked and crumbled around that wounded socket. I lacked fingers, so instead I lunged once more and sank my teeth into his neck. My jaws bit down hard enough that I tasted blood; for once, it wasn't mine. Locked so, my forehooves grabbed his shoulders in a steel embrace. He struggled to pull free, and I twisted to the side, driving him straight into the muck.

I heard Lancer shouting something in Zebra. Something edged in fear. He knew. He'd seen me like this before.

I'd win. No matter what.

The Legate's hooves kicked wildly as I began to pummel everything I could that was striped and moving. He wheezed around the grip I had on his windpipe, trying desperately to free himself. *No you don't. No more fancy zebra kicks.* I hauled him back to me through the mud, using my weight, something his augmented flesh lacked, to keep him shoved beneath me. I raked his belly with the dull blunt ends of my hooves, forcing them into his flesh as he struggled and finally ripped his throat free from my mouth.

It wasn't the first flesh I'd eaten.

Rising over him, I slammed my forehooves repeatedly into his body. The dragonbone helmet saved his head, but with each kick I felt more bones break. I knew he was striking me as much as I was him, but I simply paid that no mind. I had to end it now! My augmented body was burning through its power reserves just as it had at Yellow River.

Then I spotted a starmetal hilt poking out of the muck, beckoning.

My magic reached out and pulled my blade to me. I smashed him hard, flat on his back beneath me, and my magic raised the sword high. Let's see if he could regenerate his head!

Half of my face exploded in pain that cut right through my fury and focus. The right half of my world disappeared into a wild blizzard of colors and shapes as shrieking, staticky feedback shot through my skull. I screamed as a red hot dagger of agony plunged itself through my right eye, my body arching back as my hooves clenched over the wound. The Legate gave a heave beneath me, throwing me off. Any second now he'd finish me off for good. I clenched my eye shut as I writhed.

I felt the familiar floating sensation of death surround me, and I finally relaxed.

Finally... I'd see Mom again...

* * *

I hovered somewhere dark, still, and silent. This didn't feel... familiar. It was like the darkness of Unity, but empty, save for myself. Nowhere to go. Nothing to see. Simply myself.

"Hello?" I said, my voice thin and small. Then I spotted someone else, dark and distant. A white nimbus vaguely outlined her. "Hey!

Who's there?" I shouted as I ran towards them, then slowed... then came to a stop as I saw her white mane and black coat and the candle on her flank. "Who... "

Psalm turned, bringing up Penance. The sniper rifle pointed at my right eye, and a blinding flash cut through the darkness. When it faded, the unicorn was gone and I was alone once more. I trembled, unarmed and unsure. "I'd really like to wake up now... or move on... or... something!"

A faint lilac gleam appeared in the darkness, highlighting an alicorn. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I raced towards her. She'd get me out of this...

But it wasn't Lacunae. Tall, cool, majestic, and beautiful in her royal regalia, Princess Luna turned and looked down at me, tiny stars gleaming in her mane. Her teal eyes held only sadness and pity for me. "P... Princess Luna?"

Suddenly she reared up, her purple aura becoming a frigid blue corona as her delicate ceremonial yoke became starmetal barding and her tiara a cruel helmet. Her eyes blazed, fiery and dragon-pupiled. "You little foal! Thinking you can be me!" she roared as she reared up before me in the dark, and then she brought her hooves down upon my head.

Again, darkness. I curled up, trembling. A distant red glow bloomed, and I watched it tearfully. This one approached slowly, relentlessly, inevitably. The red glow grew like a flamer spreading across that vast void around the dark figure. This time, I turned and ran as fast as my white hooves could carry me. But though her slow step remained constant, the distance between us closed. I could hear the crackle and the screaming behind me as the darkness was consumed by the inferno.

“Stay away,” I screamed as I whirled, raising my hooves in horror at the figure.

A white unicorn fused with black steel looked down at me with light flickering in her hard, soulless eyes. A field of strewn bodies spread out behind her as her black and red mane snapped in an ethereal wind. So many dead. Raiders. Foals. Stable ponies. Zebras. Hellhounds. Steel Rangers. An endless field of death punctuated by a rainbow mane, a bloody fedora, a broken purple wing, and an olive filly embracing a mare no longer pristine white.

She pressed a gun to my right eye; I stared down the barrel’s spiraling rifling and into her merciless grin simultaneously.

“Can’t escape the Maiden,” Blackjack said, and my world exploded once more into a white I hoped would never end.

~ ~ ~

“Blackjack?” a mare called from somewhere both close and distant.

“Blackjack!” One by one, sensations returned. Cold, wet metal on my back. The rumble, accompanied by a faint vibration, of an engine. Pain throbbing through the right side of my face. Sadly, this was all distressingly familiar.

“I got shot, didn’t I?” I muttered, looking up into the wide eyes of Glory.

“Don’t move,” she said in concern as she looked down at me, chewing her bottom lip in worry.

I sighed and remained still. “What happened with the zebras?”

“We don’t know,” P-21 said as he moved on the opposite side of me from Glory. “Lacunae started screaming that we had to get back to you immediately.” The blue stallion looked off in what I could only presume was the direction of the alicorn. “I’ve never heard her scream before. I didn’t know she could.” He looked back down at me soberly. “We barely saw anything of the fight. The fog cut us off. Lacunae was all but jumping in one of those radiation pits trying to get enough magic to get in and blink you out. We arrived just as the zebras were leaving.” He looked off in another direction. “They are gone, though. I checked. They’ve moved back to the base. They left you for dead.”

Me? The Maiden? The pony devil of the stars? “That... doesn’t make sense... ” I muttered weakly.

“Zebras... ” P-21 said in return with a small shrug.

"I got a head," Rampage said. "It's only got one eye, though."
"Head?" I muttered, starting to get alarmed. "Eye?" I began to raise my head, but then P-21 pushed me back down.
"Don't move. Not unless you want to break out your eyepatch again," the blue pony said as something wet and fleshy thumped heavily onto the metal beside me. "Lacunae, make sure Scotch and Boo don't see this, please."
"What's going on?" I asked.
"The bullet went into your right eye, Blackjack. It deflected, and it's sheer dumb luck that the round exited out under your right ear and not your brain stem," Glory said in a shaky voice. "Celestia... I want some more Dash... "
"Got some right here," Rampage said brightly. "Chemical confidence in a nice little inhaler."
P-21 raised a hoof out in the direction of Rampage's voice and shook his head.
Glory took a shaky breath. "No... no, he's right... put it away.
Throw it away. Take it yourself. But don't give it to me." She ducked her head out of sight, and I heard some wet noises.
"Does it hurt? Do you want a memory orb?" P-21 asked me.
"No... no... right now... no... " I said as I lay there. I didn't want to go someplace else. I'd just got back.
"So... what happened, Blackjack?" Rampage asked. "I was getting all kinds of creepy familiar vibes from that bastard."
"I... was winning. I think I was winning. Then someone shot me in the head," I muttered as I saw Glory's head moving, her mouth holding a bloody scalpel. "Three guesses who."
"Lancer," P-21 said with a scowl. Then he sighed, "I don't care how forgiving you are, Blackjack, next time I see that bastard I'm putting a live grenade in his saddlebag."
"Guess you got lucky," Rampage said casually. "They left you for dead."
Luck? No. Not luck. Being forced to face the Legate hadn't been luck. That fight... him drawing things out... that wasn't luck. They wouldn't have left me till I was certainly a corpse.
"Pull this out, Rampage," Glory said as the striped pony moved into view. She wiggled her forehooves out of sight. There was a wet, crunchy sort of sucking noise. "Gently! It's an eye, not armor plate."
"Hey. I don't tell you how to stick eyes into skulls. Don't tell me

how to rip them out," Rampage replied. Finally, there was a pop, and she held up a metal and glass orb with a few streamers of meat and wire dangling from the back. Rampage turned it over in her hoofclaws. "Whoa, freaky."

Glory scowled at the eye and took it from Rampage. "This is... impossible." She started to do something with the eye out of my sight, and I heard an unpleasant metallic scratching sound.

"What is it?" I asked in worry.

"I'm not sure. Give me a second to finish cleaning it off," Glory said tersely.

"So... are you depressed?" P-21 asked. "Last time you lost a fight, you didn't take it so well."

I huffed softly. "I don't think I lost. That wasn't a fight. The Legate could have slaughtered me if he'd pressed the attack. But he kept talking and giving me time to recover before beating me down again. It wasn't a fight... " I turned my head enough to glance over at Lacunae, and thought of the Goddess. "It was a... a show. A performance. Something he was putting on because Lancer forced him to."

"You mean the Legate spared you?" Rampage asked in confusion. "Why?"

I thought and I thought, and the more I thought, the fewer answers I could come up with. Finally, I sighed. "I don't know... " But it made my mane itchy…

Glory held up the eye. It looked no different than my old one to me. It was even the same color, now that I looked. "Now, if I'm right, this shouldn't fit, and we'll need some time to finesse it in enough for her healing and repair talismans to patch it up. Do you need more Med-X?" Glory asked as she looked down at me, holding the shiny metal orb carefully between her hooves.

"You gave me Med-X?" I asked, blinking.

"Rampage," Glory said, but I waved her off.

"No no, I'm not in pain. I'm just wondering why I need it," I asked in confusion.

P-21 coughed and looked away. "Just stick it in so we don't have to tell her. Close your eye, Blackjack." I did, and felt the pressure over the right socket. Contrary to Glory's prediction, it slid home easily within my head.

"It's a perfect fit... it shouldn't be a perfect fit," Glory muttered.

"What? It's not like zebra and pony eyes are different sizes,"

Rampage drawled. "I should know. I've gouged out both before."

"It's not just the size. The muscle anchors. The power connections. The data ports. They're all identical!" Glory said as she did something to the side of my face.

"So zebras stole the Steelpony technology," I grumbled. "That's not a surprise."

"This isn't stolen," Glory replied flatly as I felt her moving the flesh on the right side of my face. I guess that scalpel had been working on me before I woke up. "Even if the design was stolen, they'd be manufactured with different tools and standards in the zebra lands. Everything, even the barcodes on the back of the eye... they're identical to yours." She looked down at me. "The Brood of Coyotl aren't ripping off Project Steelpony. They're *from* Project Steelpony. And I'm going to check the rest of this head and see if I can find any more parts."

Right. And I needed to schedule my broadcaster for a conversation with Professor Zodiac...

* * *

Once my face was put back together again, Glory was cleaning things up, I was chowing down on a third cyberpony cake, and P-21 was keeping an eye out as we sat together atop Deus. Scotch Tape and Boo had collected my weapons from the battlefield while Rampage scavenged the remaining zebra corpses, leaving me with time to think of my next step.

The only problem was... I wasn't sure what it should be. I felt strings attached to me... tugging me this way and that, pulled by unknown manipulators. I stroked the mane of the Twilight figurine as I pondered. Did I really have any choice?

Fate... how seductive it was. Not my fault... not my responsibility... bad things... good things... you could say it was all fated to be. Had Twilight been fated to end up trapped in a monstrous Goddess? Pinkie Pie fated to become a drug-addicted pariah? Psalm to kill Big Macintosh? Maybe there was some alternate history where the war never happened. Where fate was kinder and gentler than it was today?

I looked down into Twilight's happy, smiling face. Fate was an easy answer when you looked at the strand of history. All those little causes and effects leading to now. Sometimes miraculous...

sometimes monstrous...

Was I really the Maiden of the Stars... ?

"How are you, Blackjack?" P-21 asked. "How are you really?"

I sighed and hugged the figurine to my chest. "Different. Haven't been in a fight like that in a while. Not since... " Yellow River.

Was that really only a few weeks ago? He caught my uncomfortable expression, and I looked at my forehooves. "Guess what Mom said was true. There's always a bigger fishy."

"Huh?" he asked with a cock of his head and an amused, if baffled, smile.

"Nothing. Just something Mom used to tell me," I said with a sigh as I kept running my hoof over the figurine's mane.

He sat quietly beside me. "So... what's all that 'Maiden' stuff?"

"Zebra prophesy," I said with a shrug. "I'm supposed to destroy the world. Just like Luna and Nightmare Moon." I glanced over at him. "P-21, do you believe in fate?"

"I believe in you. Does that count?" he countered with a half smile. I gave him a nudge in response, and his smile widened as he looked at Scotch Tape. "I don't know. I don't think so. I heard that ponies get cutie marks that tell them their destiny. But considering mine was openly controlled, it always seemed pretty much bullshit to me. But then, I've never known what my cutie mark was supposed to be... "

"What if your destiny is something... bad? What if it's to kill and hurt people?" I asked.

"Then you ignore it," he said simply. "Because if you accept what that bastard said about your destiny being ruin and death, then it'd be no different than me accepting the medical mares telling me that my destiny was to be a walking sperm bank who should be dead right now. We decide our own destiny."

Did I have any choice? Was I just following the strings? Were we all?

I felt I had three different paths in front of me, and whichever one I took was going to decide everything. I could go after Dawn, the Harbingers, and Cognitum and try to end that threat once and for all. Or perhaps try and find out a way to stop the Legate and his army from attacking the Hoof and all my friends within it. Or go to the clouds and try and stop Lighthooves and his biological weapon.

Then I glanced down at my hoof and opened up the panel, looking at my PipBuck. For some reason, perhaps fate, perhaps something

else, I brought up EC-1101 and stared at it. Then I accessed its tantalizing routing information.

Next routing location > Shadowbolt Tower.

"Right," I said as I looked up at the midnight clouds. "Well then, I guess if I'm going to decide it, I'd better start thinking of some way to get to Shadowbolt Tower." At his inquisitive look, I smiled.

"Lighthooves has a biological weapon that can kill countless pegasi. I need to get up there and stop it... and make sure Thunderhead isn't destroyed as well."

He looked at the sky and gave a little laugh. "Oh, is that all?" He shook his head. "I don't suppose you know somepony with a flying machine, do you?" he asked playfully.

I sat there a moment, looking down at the figurine and thinking, and then my lips curled in a small smile. "Now that you mention it... "

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: My Little Ponies – You have collected one of each of the six Ministry Mares statuettes. Stronger together than they are apart, they have granted you +1 Luck in addition to their normal benefits.

Chapter 55: Noblesse Oblige

"They are not slaves, they are our "servants." We have given them homes, food, clothing, and a purpose. We have given them a life."

"So, tell me about the lightning rods," I asked Glory as we rolled northeast away from Grimhoof. We were snaking our way between the skeletal shells of old commercial buildings, their decaying walls sporting layer upon layer of gang graffiti. I wondered who the 'Neverenders' had been and how they'd been replaced by the 'Hells Ponies'. Then the 'Nightmares' had spray-painted over that. One wall ahead boldly declared 'Fuck Big Daddy', but that message was punctuated by what I suspected was the desiccated body of the author impaled on rebar jutting from the wall beside the declaration. "I need to know exactly how they work."

"I don't know the specifics of their operation," Glory replied, looking at me in concern and chewing on a wingtip. "All I can give you are generalities." I gave a small nod. She took a deep breath, then let it out in a huff before going on, "Well, lightning rods were produced at the end of the war. I'm not sure how many are left abroad. Some think that the Neighvarro forces scrapped theirs when they couldn't maintain them. They have a spark generator that builds up a charge and then blasts the nearest target with a bolt of lightning. It actually has about the same power as one of a Raptor's main guns, as I understand."

Which meant that getting shot would likely be an instant kill for any of us, even Lacunae. "How do they find their targets?" I asked as we drove through the desolate district. I magically pulled the macabre remains of the graffiti artist from the rusted metal as we passed, letting the ganger corpse clatter down to the rest of the bones scattered along the sidewalks. Better to be more anonymous bones amidst the rubble than some grisly fetish on a wall.

"Blackjack, are you sure…" Glory began, not certain how to

respond to me. I couldn't blame her; after meeting the Legate, I'd gone through a whole new storm of pondering who he was, *what* he was, and why he'd let me live. That whole 'not embraced your destiny' line was either terrifyingly strong faith in higher powers or a load of contrived bullshit. The whole fight felt like the Legate had done everything he could to not kill me. In fact, the Legate worried me far less than either Lighthooves or Dawn at the moment.

Oh, I was still concerned. He'd beaten me, something that I found infinitely galling. A part of me wanted nothing more than to find him for a sound rematch... but, ultimately, whatever was going on with him wasn't as immediate as Lighthooves's biological weapon or Dawn's actions with the Harbingers. As infuriating as my defeat had been, I had to focus myself elsewhere. He'd put me off for the time being, and I'd do the same with him. So, since we'd left Grimhoof, I was thinking of everything I could to head off Lighthooves's threat first. Any second, Lighthooves could push a button and start a massacre. And I would be partially to blame for not stopping him sooner.

Just like with Clink…

"I'm sure," I answered, frowning as I looked out at the night. Maybe it was the Twilight figurine in my saddlebag, or perhaps it was the need to win gnawing at me, but I couldn't just sit back and rest again. I found my thoughts focused sharply upon my goal: getting to Shadowbolt Tower and stopping Lighthooves, and maybe finding the next destination of EC-1101. I had a creepy suspicion that I knew exactly where it was headed next.

"Well, Dusk would know more precisely, but as she explained to me, their sensors detect magical energy sources. For the Thunderhead-area rods, that sends an alert to the tower, and somepony then targets the intruder and sends a fire command." She rubbed her mouth with a wing, her brows furrowed in thought. "I think it used to be completely automated, but there was a friendly fire incident a decade ago and they disabled that."

"What counts as a magical energy source?" P-21 asked with a frown, holding the slumbering Scotch between his hooves.

"A spark battery? A missile?" Glory suggested. "Maybe even a charged gem cartridge? Any kind of magical generation device would set off the sensor. Of course, every lightning rod also has a half dozen cameras keeping a constant observation of the ground."

"Have you ever heard of surfacers reaching the Enclave?" Rampage

asked, looking at Glory with a small frown. She'd been cross ever since the fight with the Legate. He was, as she put it, a 'big bad freakily familiar fucker', or BBFFF for short. "Every now and then you hear stories about somepony slapping together a hot air balloon or something."

Glory turned her face away. "No. Patrols usually find those." She glanced back at Rampage with a shameful expression and went on, "It doesn't end well for them, I'm told. Something about giving surfacer ponies 'flying lessons'."

"Of course," Rampage muttered. "Why are we saving these assholes from eating each other, again?"

Glory flushed. "In any case, Blackjack, it wouldn't matter what you used to get up there. Your cyberpony body itself counts as a power source."

I looked away, scowling, and then I thought of something. "So just unplug me?" I asked with a hopeful grin. Glory gave the 'Blackjack is not a smart pony' sigh. "Come on. There had to be some way to turn me off."

"Does *anything* do that for you?" Rampage asked with a smirk, and I rolled my eyes.

"No. I'm pretty sure she--" the pegasus began, then groaned as I flushed. I wasn't that bad! Glory covered her face with a wing. "Blackjack, we can't just deactivate you! Those systems control your heartbeat and respiration."

"Okay…" I said slowly as I thought it out. "So... what if you did what you did when I was going to Tenpony to get cyberized? Hook up my veins to Rampage. Completely power me down and make me the Wasteland's biggest paperweight? Would that work?"

"Oh, I see how it is," Rampage muttered. "Make one little crack, and she turns you into life support." She rolled her eyes, then caught my concern and snorted. "Oh, don't worry. I'm just pissed at the moment…least I can be of some use."

Glory opened her mouth to argue, and then hesitated. "It... might?" she finished tentatively. Then she shook her head sharply. "But you don't have to do this, Blackjack! Thunderhead's problems aren't yours, and you already have enough problems that are."

"I'm pretty sure the Enclave can handle it," P-21 agreed.

"Right. Between Dawn and that striped motherfucker, I'd say your plate is pretty full," Rampage said, then frowned and wiggled her nose, pinched one nostril shut, and blasted a load of snot out the

other. Glory looked on in disgust as Rampage wiggled her muzzle. “Mmm... miss the old claws. Just can’t pick my nose with power hooves.” She met Glory’s nauseated expression with a baffled, “What?” Meeting only silence, Rampage turned back to me and continued, “Maybe you should leave this up to the feather brains?”

“No,” I replied, glaring up at the clouds. ”The zebras pretty much have their own things going on. I don’t know what the Remnant are up to, but I do know what Lighthooves is. Till I can talk to Sekashi, Xenith, Zodiac, or someone else who knows what they might be doing or how I can stop it, I’ll focus on things I can deal with.”

“But are you sure?” P-21 asked with a small frown.

Of course not, but it was the only step that made sense to me. I saw it as a card game with the stakes being the future of the Enclave. “Maybe Twister will reach help in time. Then Neighvarro will have to go all in. They will attack the tower and Thunderhead. If their attack is successful, then Lighthooves will call, launching his weapon. Maybe one gets through. How many thousands will die from the cannibal plague? Maybe it doesn’t. Then the Neighvarro will crack down hard. Worse, they might capture the disease themselves. Call me cynical, but I don’t have a hard time imagining the Enclave using a rain-delivered bioweapon on the Wasteland.”

“But what if Lighthooves is right and the Neighvarro back down?” Glory asked with a hopeful smile.

“Then Thunderhead wins. Huzzah. Neighvarro will have to submit and watch as their power crumbles away to the economic and technological might of Thunderhead.” I put a hoof across Glory’s shoulders and asked, “Do you think they'll fold like that?”

“They might…” she began. Then she closed her eyes and hung her head a little. Finally, she answered in a tiny voice, “No. You’re right. They’ll fight. Wage one final massive battle.”

“Lighthooves is betting that the Grand Pegasus Enclave won't risk it. He’s probably counting on some backroom deals being made so the Enclave leaders save face.” Too much Goldenblood made me painfully aware of such arrangements. I stared off at a lone monolithic skyscraper with the Stable-Tec logo on the side, remembering the meeting. “But I saw High General Harbinger in a meeting, and he was ready, actually eager, to attack even with the possibility of the bioweapon.”

Rampage frowned at me. “Did that bullet knock some extra smarts into your brain, Blackjack?”

“Hush,” P-21 said with a small smile. ”So what’s your plan? I assume it will involve running for our lives at some point?”

“My plan?” I frowned at him a moment. ”Getting to Thunderhead, meeting with Honored Councilor Stargazer, and having her put the brakes on this crazy train.”

“And if she can’t or won’t?” Rampage asked.

“We bust into Shadowbolt Tower and destroy the plague ourselves,” I answered, glossing over the fact that I had no idea how we’d accomplish such a thing. ”We give them Lighthooves as a rogue element and remove the excuse for an attack. And if they attack anyway, we stop them.” Again, just *how* we’d do that was lost in the nebulous cloud of conviction that somehow I would pull it off.

Glory stared at me with a small smile, then said, “Only you could say something like that with utter sincerity and still have it actually sound possible.”

I smiled and rolled my eyes a little. “Oh, I don't know. I’m pretty sure that LittlePip or the Stable Dweller could take on the Enclave and give them a run for their money.”

Funny how that little comment seemed to shake their confidence a bit, and, oddly enough, I imagined a tiny lavender unicorn groaning and covering her face. I had no doubt, though, that if I did fail or fall, somepony else would step up and finish things. Maybe P-21. Maybe Glory. Maybe even Doof, if he truly wanted to change his ways. If I could do it myself, though, I would. I’d already damned and broken myself so many times over that I’d happily spare another if I could. P-21 leaned over and started talking with Glory about ways that they might handle the lightning rods and what they’d need to plug me into Rampage. The striped mare entertained herself by hypothesizing on ways to kill the Legate involving meat pies and balefire eggs.

That gave me a chance to address something else.

“Are you okay?” I thought at Lacunae, glancing at the alicorn flying silently above us.

“Of course. How could I be otherwise?” Lacunae replied in her familiar, soft voice. Yet there was a tension beneath it all that bordered on snippy. I just waited patiently, and after a few moments the mare said, in more familiar, worried tones, “The Black Book is coming.”

I thought back to Project Eternity. “Rarity’s Black Book?”

"Yes," Lacunae replied, an unfamiliar tremulous edge to her voice. "It is…disturbing... "

"I thought that the Goddess *wanted* the Black Book. For alicorn stallions or something like that." Given what the Goddess was, though, who could really tell?

"You don't understand," Lacunae said in an anguished voice I'd never heard before. "There is…considerable disorder in Unity at the moment. More than ever before, even over the course of centuries. Your…your intrusion and lineage, Red Eye's inevitable betrayal, LittlePip's aggravation, and now this. It concerns Unity... this fear that the Goddess cannot hold. The Goddess is forcing our doubts like a river into me. What magics are within? Will they allow us to create male alicorns and become a truly viable race? Will the book affect us? Corrupt us? The Goddess is confident she is beyond its influence, but Unity whispers despite her guidance. Even that is terrifyingly new. We whisper. For centuries, the Goddess has been a constant in all of us. Now…change is coming."

"Not all change is bad," I countered. "Look at what we're doing here." Lacunae went quiet for a moment, and her silence gnawed at me. "Lacunae, what is it? Something is bothering you."

Again, it was a long pause. "Blackjack, you are a good friend. Despite your faults, and they are many, you have always attempted to act in the best interests of others. Your sacrifices are admirable, and your hope that good can ultimately triumph is an inspiration." Another pause before she added in a mental whisper, "I do not want to wrong you again, Blackjack."

"When have you ever wronged me?" I asked back. "I mean, pulling me out of 99 was rough, but better in the long run. I forgive you for that. Besides, I think that that might have been the Goddess. But other than…"

I froze as I heard the mental sob and looked as surreptitiously as possible at my friend above and the tears on her cheek. "Lacunae, what is wrong?"

"You are a dear friend, Blackjack," Lacunae replied. "Since you joined Unity, I have tried all I could to shield you from her. But the Goddess has plans for you, Blackjack. Plans soon to come to fruition. And I can think of no way to protect you or help you! I can do nothing!" she wailed, and I imagined I could see the Goddess looking on in mirth.

"Lacunae. Stop and talk to me. What is going on?" I asked as she

wept.

The sensation was like a brush from my mane to my tail, a pressure that reminded me of when I had eardrums to pop. “The Goddess suggests you not worry about this one. This vessel is full to bursting, and the Goddess suspects it will not last much longer.”

“Stop it!” I mentally snarled futilely, grimacing.

“Oh…this is well past the point of ‘stop’,” the Goddess purred. “So many treasonous thoughts and feelings. Weakness. Compassion. Guilt. Shame. Pity.”

“You’re killing her!” I said mentally as I clenched my eyes closed, aware that Glory was talking, but I was focusing entirely on that cold voice within.

“Killing her? She was never alive. Besides, where will all those horrible weak thoughts go if she dies?” the Goddess sneered. “No. Soon all those nasty, weak memories will drown this little joke of a personality she pretends to have, and she’ll be full to the brim with poisonous thoughts. The Goddess shall lock her up somewhere with a nice barrel of radiation.” I felt that pressure grow over my entire body. My horn glowed and drew Vigilance.

“Blackjack? What is it? What’s wrong?” Glory asked. P-21 looked from me to the gun and back again. “Are you okay?”

It took every bit of willpower I had to put the gun away. That was all I could manage to do. “I’m fine, Glory. Thought I saw something, that’s all.” I thought a second later at the Goddess, “You cunt.” Given my company, it seemed appropriate.

“Such language. Such impudence.” The Goddess chuckled. “You should be more respectful. After all, when this Lacunae is broken, the Goddess will need a new cesspit.” The sensation of being gripped became one of being squeezed. “Guess who the Goddess has in mind for the role?”

If only my friends could read my mind…could hear me screaming…

“Oh yes, Blackjack. The Goddess has plans for you. Such plans. And soon,” she said in a tone of supreme satisfaction. “Continue your little quest. The Goddess doesn’t want your friends to interfere before it’s time.” There was a pause. “Oh. And if you behave, I won’t have you crush your little blue lover’s head like a grape.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” P-21 asked as Glory put her hoof on my shoulder.

“Yeah,” I said with a happy smile. “I’m just fine. Fine as I’ll ever

be."

Overhead, Lacunae shed tears for both of us.

* * *

"You still haven't been very clear about this flying machine," P-21 said as we moved northwest out of the ruins and into a stand of long-dead trees.

I might not be able to complete my plans now, but I couldn't exactly tell my friends that. I sighed. "Okay, to be fair, I don't actually know someone who has a flying machine." P-21 frowned, his ears lying flat. "More like, I've seen a person who had one. A long time ago." Glory knitted her brows together with a smile that made me wonder if she was reminding herself that she loved the not-smart pony, "I don't know if the flying machine still exists, if it can still fly, or if I can get my hooves on it if it does and can." P-21 sighed and pulled his hat over his face, masking his mutters.

Glory coughed delicately. "I don't suppose there's a 'plan B'?"

"Yes," I replied sarcastically. "My plan B involves going to the Skyport and trying to smuggle ourselves on a Vertibuck. And if that fails, we could try using EC-1101 and a MASEBS tower to try to talk to Thunderhead's leaders." Doubtful I'd get to do either, but I could get Glory home at least.

I could do that for her.

The ruins had given way to a cracked driveway snaking back towards the reservoir. Dead trees rose like scattered spears across the landscape, many more lying in heaps and piles where Enervation had kept rot at bay. I noted a great deal of garbage mixed in with the rot, heaps of refuse scattered here and there. Blue bars were scattered here and there too, and once I spotted a scavenger hiding from us as we passed. We drove by a small caravan of three armed guards escorting a dozen wretched-looking ponies, but when the armed trio saw me atop Deus they immediately broke for the woods.

Aside from one or two who fled the opposite way, the captive ponies simply stayed put in the rain.

A stockade of skywagons, wood, and scrap metal rose up before us as we approached the large wrought iron gate rising ahead of us. Two large towers flanked the entrance, and there were others built up along the length of the wall. As we approached the front

entrance, someone began beating frantically on a garbage can drum, and sentries rushed into position. Deus's engine let out an unimpressed snort as he halted in front of the entry. There were still flecks of gold leaf clinging to the metal; I imagined the grandeur that the occupants clung to was just as fragile as those tarnished yellow curls.

Elysium Gardens.

"H…hold," shouted a stallion through a bullhorn from the far side of the gate. Deus grumbled his engine as Scotch Tape and Boo roused themselves from their naps. "S…state your name and your b…b…business with the Society." More ponies were moving up onto the top of the barricade, mostly possessing simple hunting rifles. Not a missile to be seen. It didn't mean that they weren't keeping bigger stuff in the rear, though.

"Security. I've come to speak with King Awesome," I replied with a small smile.

"Reapers have no jurisdiction here," the stallion squeaked nervously. "I must ask you and your…tank…to leave immediately!" P-21 frowned and moved the tired Scotch and Boo further back on Deus's turret while Glory bit down on Vigilance's mouth grip. I'd loaned her the gun since her own had been scrapped. Rampage, though, rose to her hooves in one sinister, almost sexy movement.

"Oh, that was stupid, wasn't it, Deus? A real Deus-ee." Rampage laughed and grinned, then turned her full attention to the gate. "You got three Reapers here, two of the fucking top ten, and Security, and you're thinking to keep us out? That's funny. That's real funny." She scraped her hooves on Deus's armor with a screech as she grinned at the pony. "You know what would also be *really* funny? Us driving this tank right up your ass." Deus revved his engine in agreement.

"Rampage, that's enough," I said as I stood beside her, trying to suppress my smile.

"Enough? I hadn't even started!" Rampage replied with a pout. "At least let me get a barrel up there."

"I just want to speak to King Awesome. A quick question, and I'll be gone," I said as reasonably as possible to the stallion.

"Absolutely not! I have orders! You must leave immediately, or we'll shoot you all! Really! I mean it!" I sighed; I really did not want to do things this way. "O…one! T…two!" he began in his high-strung voice. I watched the milling blue bars. Red and it's

dead…

"Oh shut up! You're going to get yourself killed," a mare snapped from behind the barricade. The guard ponies started in alarm.

"Your Highnesses! The Reapers are attacking! It's Security!" the stallion quailed. "We need reinforcements!"

"You moron!" the mare snapped. "If they were attacking, you'd have been dead two minutes ago! Honestly!" A moment later, a blue glow surrounded the gate. It swung wide and a trio of white unicorns stepped forward. A shield protected the three from the misting rain. Clearly, these were not Wastelanders, and one I knew.

"Blackjack," Prince Splendid said with a generous smile, wearing absolutely pristine combat armor. "Welcome to my home." The white, blue-maned stallion who I'd met months ago outside the Fluttershy Medical Center still stirred a base, fundamental part of me. I reminded myself he was head of an organization of slavemongers. That, and his warm, handsome gaze no longer made my mare bits quiver receptively like they once did.

To his right approached a cross, younger-looking mare that shared his coloration so closely that I wondered if they might be twins. She wore gold and sapphire jewelry and a delicate tiara. She also wore neither barding nor any weapons but an elegant dress that wouldn't have lasted ten minutes past this gate. Her firm blue eyes locked with mine without fear or hesitation. "Security," she said in a cool voice as she eyed me.

On his left was a unicorn filly Scotch Tape's age, white in coat but possessing a bubblegum-pink and magenta striped mane. She wasn't quite as formally dressed as the other two but had a grin that could give Rampage's a run for its bottlecaps. She eyed the severe, blue-maned mare, who had to be Splendid's sister. "Do forgive Grace. She's been given a double dose of bitch pills every day from birth," she said with a snicker. "Splendid, you know. I'm Princess Charm. Are you here to kill somepony?" the pink-maned filly asked eagerly.

"Oh, I like her," Rampage chuckled.

Grace scowled at the younger filly and stepped forward, saying quickly, "We don't want any trouble, Security. You can come and see my father, but the tank and your weapons stay here. If you try to force the issue, then things will get uncivil."

"Celestia forbid *that* should happen," Charm quipped with a roll of her magenta eyes. Then she grinned at Rampage. "Make it happen. Please?" The armored mare snickered in reply.

"Ahem. Sisters," Prince Splendid said behind a faux cough. Glory gave a little, sympathetic smile to the stallion as he said apologetically, "I'm afraid Grace is right. Abrupt, but correct. We can't let you in so…overarmed." Funny, I didn't know a pony could be 'overarmed' these days.

Still, that was refreshingly straightforward. "We're not going in unarmed," I said with a smile. "You know you can trust me, Splendid."

"*I* know I can, but there's fifty other Society ponies who don't have the best opinion of you, Blackjack," Splendid said diplomatically.

The well-dressed mare seemed to consider all of us, her gaze lingering a little longer on Lacunae than the rest, before declaring firmly, "If you can't concede to this, you can take your business elsewhere."

Charm rolled her eyes once again and pointed her hoof at her sibling. "When you start the summary executions, could you begin with her?"

"Charm!" Splendid rebuked, "That was uncalled for."

"Tank. Rampage. Security. Hello?" the filly said as she gestured to all of us.

Grace considered us and then sighed. "You won't be helpless, you know. You and your alicorn have magic, you have a broadcaster to call for help, and you have a tank to come to your rescue," the blue-maned mare said with a toss of her head.

Well, that was unsettlingly accurate. I glanced at my friends, who looked equally nonplussed. P-21 frowned at her, "You're well informed, Princess…"

"Princess Aquilina Augusta Awesomeness the Graceful," she said with exaggerated formality. "Grace will do," she added with a smile, helping suppress a small gnawing sense of annoyance I was feeling towards the Princess. There was just something frustratingly familiar about her, but I knew I'd never met her before. "When it comes to ponies like Security, it is wise to be informed."

I looked back at my friends. Rampage glanced at Deus. "If you don't mind, Blackjack, I think I'm going to stay with Deus. I'm out of Mint-als, and Society ponies make me want to hurt things. Trust me, you'll feel the same pretty quick," she said with a grin.

"Well, if you're sure," I said as I looked at the rest of my friends. Glory was already unarmed, except for the loaned Vigilance, and she shrugged. P-21 just wore a little smile that said they'd be lucky

to find any weapons he'd secreted and gave a little nod.

I hopped off the front of Deus and trotted towards the princess, curious about the mare. "Grace, hmm?" She didn't seem scared by my clearly metallic components, but there was a canny concern. We were dangerous, a grave threat, but we weren't unreasonable. But well-informed as she was, she couldn't know what business we had here. Meeting with us in person was still a considerable personal risk.

"Indeed. I believe you've met my twin, Prince Splendid?" So I had been right! She nodded to Boo and Scotch Tape. "The rest of your friends are welcome to join you, of course. The Society will extend our hospitality to you, in exchange for civility."

I looked at my friends and then gave a shrug and turned back to Rampage and Deus. "Listen in on the radio and stay close. If things turn…uncivil…" I glanced back at Princess Grace a moment, spotting a small roll of the unicorn's eyes. "Show them what Reapers can really do."

"All right," Rampage sighed. "I suppose we can go hunting radroaches or something."

"With a tank?!" Glory said, gaping.

The striped mare smirked back at her. "What do you think?"

"I…you…they…seriously?!" Glory blurted.

"Don't blow up anything friendly," I replied casually as I passed over my guns for storage inside Deus. I lifted the sword and said, "I'm keeping this." The princess glanced at them, then gave a small, accommodating nod.

"You had impeccable timing, Grace," P-21 said in a low, untrusting voice once we'd given Deus our weapons. I had no doubt he had some grenades hidden…somewhere…

The pristine unicorn smiled at once. "Hardly. The moment the report was radioed in, I teleported straight to the gates," she replied with another little roll of her eyes. "Honestly, trying to deny entry to that kind of firepower…what were they thinking?" The guards all looked on sheepishly.

"Yeah. Who'd have ordered that?" Charm said with a little eye roll of her own – what, were derisive gestures a family trait or something? – as they started back through the gate. I turned to my friends for a moment, and not feeling much better about this at all, followed.

* * *

"If I hadn't seen Tenpony Tower, I'd think this place was ridiculous," I said as we walked through the marble foyer of the three story 'country club' perched on a hillside overlooking the reservoir. Every effort had been made to preserve the building from the ravages of time and decay; it resembled a tiny pearlescent bubble of the old world. The Society ponies were almost exclusively unicorns, with perhaps half a dozen well-dressed earth ponies talking amongst themselves. Overhead, a massive chandelier filled the hall with warm, magical light.

It was a far cry from the grubby shacks outside. Clustered on some old clearings for something that Splendid had called a 'golf course', they'd been groups of a dozen or so buildings surrounded by fences. I hadn't seen many ponies, though, only a few elderly and children taking care of chores like tending their own weedy gardens. The barbed-wire-topped fences, I'd been told, were to keep the serfs from fighting with each other in the middle of the night and to protect them from occasional radigators from the lake.

Right. And Stable 99 kept the males locked up so they wouldn't exhaust themselves.

The problem was, while I felt for the dingy ponies in those hovels, I couldn't see a way to help them. There were more ponies here than anyplace I'd seen yet. It wasn't surprising now how poorly armed those guards at the gate had been; the Society must have had a hundred or more ponies keeping watch. The ponies outside the marble building wore Steel Ranger power armor. Apparently, blowing up the *Celestia* had given some of the Steel Rangers a career change. Fighting the Society would take some heavy firepower…heavy firepower that could be brought to bear without shelling slavers and slaves alike. Deus wasn't exactly a precision weapon, and I did *not* want another Fallen Arch.

"Nice place," P-21 muttered. "Bought with slave labor."

"Serfs," Splendid corrected immediately. "Not slaves."

"Forgive me if I don't appreciate the distinction," P-21 replied.

"There isn't one," Charm said with a shrug and a happy smile.

"There is," Grace countered with a frown. "Stop being obnoxious." The pink-maned filly simply smirked in response.

Splendid cleared his throat and said in a voice of pure reasonability, "Serfs are not slaves. All our serfs willingly agreed to

work for the Society. We provide food and security, and they provide labor. It is an equitable arrangement," he said with a smile made of reasonableness. The way he kept staring at my tail was making me feel tense.

"Right. Like the equitable living conditions," P-21 said gesturing to the sumptuous quarters.

"They choose to come to us," Grace said firmly. "We are not raiders. We don't go out and capture ponies to work for us. Every serf must sign a contract that clearly outlines their duties to the Society and the Society's obligations in turn. The contracts are all enchanted so that only a signature that is willingly signed is valid. You can't just sign a pony's name for them."

"I recall three slavers forcing ponies to sign your damned contract," I retorted. "They stuck them in a nice patch of Enervation and let it slowly leech the life out of them until they agreed."

Grace jerked as if slapped, looking from me to Splendid. The stallion coughed and averted his eyes. "There is some question as to if the contract is valid if signed under duress. After all, the perils of the Wasteland puts us all under duress in some form or another. Is starvation duress? Is sickness duress?"

"What?! There is a difference between a pony starving and a pony forced to sign or die!" Grace snapped. "Do you mean you knew about this, Splendid? Does Father?"

Splendid screwed up his face and made a vague expression. "Eh, I'm sure there's somepony investigating it. The point is that the work here is far better and safer than scrounging in the Wasteland."

"And I'm sure you work right along beside them. Share the same food. Oh, and I bet there's never a case of abuse?" P-21 said sharply. "Because the ponies with the power are always kind and benevolent." He looked at me and growled, "Please tell me you're going to kill all these fucks."

Charm giggled. "Oh, finally! Something interesting!"

"I... uh... " I blinked, at a loss for what to say. Why couldn't somepony just shoot me or threaten me? The last two times I'd tried to fix communities, it'd blown up in my face. I was definitely seeing the Society due for some kind of reckoning, but I just wasn't sure if I was the one to deliver it or not.

Splendid coughed and looked equally uncomfortable, while Grace frowned back at the shacks. "Well, somepony has to be in charge, right?" he said after a moment. "Better us than a pony like Red

Eye." He tried his loin melting smile on me once more, baffled that it wasn't having the effect it once did. If it hadn't been for Stygius, I would have bucked his head clean off his shoulders.

"I suppose that if they didn't like the conditions here they could… take their chances out in the Wasteland?" Glory suggested hesitantly. But I remembered those wretches picking through the trash. That wasn't much of a future. I supposed serfdom was a tiny step up from slavery…maybe…

Still felt wrong, though.

"Well, we'll have to see about this, right Blackjack?" P-21 asked as he looked at me with a sure smile. I stared back at him in shock. "Right?"

I looked around at the others and rubbed my mane with a hoof. "Um, I don't know, P-21. I really just want to talk to King Awesome." And avoid another war with another group of ponies when I didn't know all the details of this place.

"Excuse me?" he said flatly.

"Well, the ship's all we need from him. If he doesn't have it, then I don't see the good that picking a fight with yet another group of ponies will do," I said, and his stormy blue eyes narrowed.

He looked at me a moment, glanced around, and then moved behind me. "Oh, look. A bathroom. Move it, Blackjack," he said, giving my armored flanks a shove. I was so shocked, I moved ahead while everypony just stared after us. As we entered the little filly's room, I just stared at him in bafflement as he ducked down, checked the stalls, then whirled on me. "What in Equestria is wrong with you, Blackjack?"

"With me? You're the one who pushed me into the filly's room!" I retorted.

"How can you blow holes in slavers and then treat this as if it's no big deal?" he said with a wave of his hoof. "Look at this place! It was made possible by those slavers."

"You heard them. They're serfs, not slaves." But I didn't feel much conviction, remembering again the captive ponies a few days go near the Skyport and how they were being pressured to sign.

"Right, and I was 'reproductive equipment'. The word 'slave' may not have been used, but that's exactly what I was," he countered. "You saw their homes! Do you seriously believe that that is any kind of a life? And we haven't even seen their *working* conditions!"

"P-21, there're seven of us. Eight if you consider Boo."

His blue eyes blazed, mane bristling before my eyes as he spat, “We have a fucking tank! One that’d be happy to kill these fucks!”

I threw my hooves up. “What do you want me to do, kill the Society ponies and their guards and set everypony free, or at least those that weren’t collateral damage? Let them scatter out and be food for every raider and monster out there? Drop everything and try to… to… what? Create a fair government where somepony isn’t fucked? Have you forgotten me trying to fix Flank? Have you forgotten 99?”

He seemed to vibrate before my eyes. “I can never forget, Blackjack. Have you?”

“I remember killing everypony there because I fucked up and didn’t make sure that Rivets knew about the virus!” I roared back at him. “Do not ask me to radically change societies! I am not qualified!” I paused and took a deep breath. “All we’re here for is the airship.”

He grit his teeth as he glared at me. “So you’re the only one who gets to have a set of priorities, Blackjack? This place is wrong! *Damned* wrong and you know it. I don’t care if they call them slaves, serfs, servants, workers, employees, or bosom buddies! If they’re living and working in those conditions, they’re being used just like I was.” He stared back at me with a chilling fire in his eyes that I hadn’t seen in a long time. “But, oh, so long as they get you what you want for your next step, it’s fine.”

I gestured at the door with a hoof. “I already have half the Hoof against me, P-21!” And any day the Goddess might take me over for good. “I’d like to not add another group after my head. You’re assuming everything is bad just from where they live. For all you know, they’re *happy* to be here. They may even be grateful.”

He closed his eyes tight, flinching back as though I’d struck him. “I’m sure some of them are,” he muttered quietly. “There were males in 99 who were. Grateful for the shots…how lucky we were to get shots. And slop to eat. So very grateful to not be dead.” He grimaced, fighting the liquid shame creeping down his cheeks. “I know I’m not being objective here, Blackjack, but I need to do something. And I need to know that you will do something too.”

“Why?” I demanded, wanting my heart to thunder and my breath to snort. Wanting to show my agitation and frustration. This mechanical stillness inside me was infuriating. “Why me?”

“Because you can and I can’t!” he shouted in my face, tears running

down his cheeks in frustration. “Because you have the power to do this and I don’t! You do the audacious and the impossible every single day and I know that if you wanted to change all this, you could!” He closed his eyes, shaking as if on the verge of breaking. “You do so much... do this... ”

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why was I trying to rationalize this? I should just get a bottle or ten of whiskey, gulp it down, and kick the whole rotten mess down. But as much as I wanted to, I also knew that things weren’t that simple in the Hoof. I could end up getting everypony killed if I did this wrong.

But I also knew that P-21 needed this, just as much as I needed to find Horizons. It didn’t matter what I was here for; he needed something else from this place. A chance to make up for 99.

I looked at him and then closed my eyes. *It’s not always about you, Blackjack.* “Okay,” I said quietly, then saw the shock spreading across his face. “Let’s try to not do anything drastic right away, though. We need information, and you need to get it. First chance you can, slip away and get a good look at this place. See if you can find where the serfs are working and their conditions and give me an honest appraisal. If it’s as bad as you think it is…we’ll think of something we can do without getting everypony killed. Alright?”

“I…yes…sure…” he murmured as if he’d woken from a bad dream and he was trying to make sure that things were real. “I…thank you for trusting me with this, Blackjack. When I saw this place and that *chandelier*,” he made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. “At least the Tenpony Tower bunch didn’t have this serfdom bullshit going on.”

I patted his shoulder. “Don’t thank me just yet. I’ll help how I can, but I mean it when I say that I don’t want to slaughter the ponies in charge and trot on. I don’t have the best track record with fixing settlements, good intentions or no. So if you think we have to do it, then we’ll do it smart and right. Okay? And it might take us a while, given that I’ve got Lighthooves, Cognitum, the Legate, and who knows who else to deal with right now.” And the Goddess, an enemy that I couldn’t even tell any of them about!

“Right. Just…right…” he said and took a deep breath, scrubbing at his face with the back of his fetlock. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Just don’t get caught, and talk to us before you do anything,” I said at I patted him carefully. He didn’t flinch away; I supposed maybe we were past that for good. “Okay. Stay safe. I’ll pass things

on to Scotch and the others."

He nodded, and I trotted out of the bathroom. Grace, Splendid, and Charm gaped in bafflement, Scotch Tape and Glory in concern. "Nice…ah…toilets. Very shiny."

Glory looked on speculatively, but Scotch Tape simply grinned at the baffled noble unicorns. "Yup, this is the mare you're all terrified of. Fear for your commodes!"

"Quite," Prince Splendid murmured, then finally closed his mouth in a smile. "I'm afraid that I have something to attend to. Do see that she gets to Father, dear sisters." And he turned and quickly trotted away.

"Not it!" Charm laughed. "Gotta get the rumors started!" she said as she scampered off.

Grace stood there, her mouth weakly working for a moment, and then she covered her face with her hoof and growled, "Ugh…fine! Somepony has to!" Turning, she muttered, "This way."

"Did I miss something?" Glory asked.

"Splendid is going to talk to the Du Trots, the Steeples, and the Oranges about your arrival, probably going to say he single-hornedly stopped you from blowing the guards to bloody flecks. And Charm is going to be a little pain in my nethers," Grace said with a sigh, then straightened. She took a deep breath, holding a forehoof to her chest, and let it all out at once and regarded me. "Well then. Let's get you to Father's study. Then I'll take your friends somewhere they can freshen up while you're our guests."

"You take your responsibilities seriously," Glory observed as the princess led us away from the well-dressed ponies.

"Somepony has to. Being a princess is more than simply getting what you want," Grace replied primly. "Contrary to what my siblings believe."

She trotted down a hall and up some stairs to the third floor, then stopped outside a door. "Father's study. He seemed to think you'd like to wait for him in here to talk alone. He'll be coming in a short while." She turned towards my friends. "Now, for the rest of you. Would you like meal, a bath, a nap, or a tour?"

"Food," Scotch Tape said with a raise of her hoof.

"A bath would be lovely," Glory said, brightening up at once.

Boo let out a body shaking yawn.

P-21 backed down the hall. "Sure. I'd love to be shown around."

Lacunae said nothing. She stood as still as stone.

"Of course…" Grace muttered with a sigh, and then gave a small smile to me. "Well, I'll take care of your friends and then come back for you when you're finished with Father. Be brief and to the point. His health is fragile, and he tires easily."

I watched her lead my friends down the hall and then opened the door. Really…I just had a simple little questi--

'Office of Interministry Affairs'. The banner was hung across the far wall in understated black and white. I stared at photographs of Ministry Mares, Garnet, Onyx, and even Goldenblood. I walked slowly around the desk, checking out the terminal, then looking at a grainy photograph of Goldenblood shaking hooves with Princess Luna. 'Goldenblood assumes minor role in Princess's new government,' read the caption. A much clearer picture showed a metal stand and a large purple and green dragon blasting a black pony silhouette with green flames. 'Traitor executed for crimes against Equestria.'

There were maps of the Hoofington valley and the whole of Equestria on the wall with colored pins all across them. A large newspaper article in a frame asked, 'Just what is the O.I.A., and who is in charge of it? Answers not forthcoming from Princess or the Ministries.' I saw a rank of golden memory orbs in a glass case that nearly had my horn twitching. Unfortunately, I knew a lock that was out of my league... maybe P-21 could come in here and borrow them for me?

The terminal on the desk was logged in. There had to be dozens of audio files on it. It'd take me days to listen to them all, but I couldn't help myself and picked one at random.

The file started to play, filling the air with familiar rasping breaths. "--have to make sure that Clovertail remains on the 'exclusion' list at the M.o.M. If Pinkie Pie arrests one more vital member of the M.W.T…" the stallion grumbled.

"Goldenblood?" a stallion said in a brighter, healthier voice that was naggingly familiar. "You're late. Garnet's already started the meeting." There was a long pause. "You look terrible."

"Pinkie Pie arrested Clovertail again, Trottenheimer," Goldenblood rasped, then thumped his hoof. "Doesn't she understand that Clovertail's company makes the arcane spell matrices for Steel Ranger power armor? If Clovertail is removed, the company will shut down till they can elect a new CEO. Clover's set up a legal nightmare to protect himself. It'd take them a month, two if

Applejack decides to try and play Ministry Mare. That could be more than five hundred units delayed." He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Why can't Pinkie Pie keep her 'law enforcement' to annoying the aristocracy and stop interfering in the running of the country?"

"I doubt she sees it that way. Clovertail is scum. You know what he's done," Trottenheimer said in a harsh voice.

Goldenblood let out a hissing sigh and said, "Scum we need for a few more years. A few months, at least. Then the Princess can round up Clovertail and me along with all the others when she cleans out the garbage." There was a pause, and then Goldenblood said in a mutter of shameful resignation, "He's a lesser evil."

"There're a lot of those in Equestria these days," Trottenheimer remarked. "Is that why you look like hell?"

There was no answer for a long minute, and then Goldenblood replied, "I haven't been eating much. Sleeping less. I've been trying to keep Luna out of my dreams."

"Oh, well, that's brilliant. Hunger and sleep deprivation are wonderful assets for any leader looking for complete burnout. Are you drinking as well, Goldie?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Goldenblood snapped, and then his voice softened. "I'll be fine. We're so close. Just a few more things to wrap up…and then…"

"I'm worried about you, Goldie. Everypony at the office is," Trottenheimer replied. "If they knew your plan…"

"Their concerns are misplaced. Better to worry about the Princess and Equestria," Goldenblood said, then let out a long, tired groan. "Just a few more months. Perhaps even just a few weeks. Twilight Sparkle will have her damned alicorns if she keeps poking around Hippocratic Research as she has. I'm half tempted to simply tell her what it will cost. Maybe that will change her mind."

"And after Twilight mass produces alicorns, what then?"

"That will probably be the point when the plan can finally be finished. Luna will have a government that will last a thousand years. Equestria can finally return to normal. And Twilight will be executed for crimes against equinity and undermining the regime. Goddesses, if only she stopped…" There was a tired longing in his voice. As if he would give anything, even his life, especially his life, to have that.

"Bully for her. What about you?" Trottenheimer asked. There was a ping, and for several seconds a long low tone rang out. It sounded...

familiar... but it couldn't be that. “Put that thing away, Goldie. I hate that sound.”

The note faded away. A few seconds later, Goldenblood answered grimly, “Likely summary execution. Hopefully it’ll be quick. But banishment to the sun would be quite a spectacle.”

“That’s not funny. I wish you wouldn’t joke like that,” Trottenheimer muttered.

“Somepony will have to pay for all we’ve done here. Likely many ponies. Hopefully fewer than I originally planned.” He coughed and wheezed. “Ironic. I fully expected to die ten years ago. Ten years… now I wish I had.”

“Before Fluttershy?” Trottenheimer asked sharply.

“I was a broken bird to be mended by her. A pet she foolishly fell in love with, and who foolishly loved her back. Too bad I ended up hurting her too grievously to ever forgive myself or her,” he muttered wetly. “She deserved somepony far finer than I.”

“Oh please. If this gets descends any further into a self-loathing pity party, I may be sick. There is no reason for this, Goldenblood. Talk to Luna. Do something really radical and talk to Twilight or Fluttershy. You’re not alone.” There was a ping, and another long tone filled the air. “And throw that thing away!”

“It helps me concentrate,” Goldenblood retorted.

“I don’t care if I gives you wings, that stuff is no good. I work with it as little as possible.” The tone trailed off. “Maybe it’s time to admit that the plan isn’t working.”

“It’s working fine. I just have to hold on for a little longer. Just… just a few more things…if we can get a second or third Celestia One built so we can target the interior, their front lines, and their launch islands. Or finally get the Tokomare online and connected to the Hoofington megaspell facility. Or perhaps see if I can work out a deal in the back channels…” There was another ping and long screaming note.

“Goldenblood, enough. Just, stop. This plan you came up a decade ago has gone too far. Go talk to Luna. Tell her everything and resign.”

“And who will take my place? Horse? Oh, he’d love that. Garnet? You?” He snorted and blurted, “Celestia?” He let out a long, tired sigh. “No. I’m already quite thoroughly damned. I won’t condemn another to my position. I’ve done enough to deserve all that’s happened to me. All that will happen. All that matters is Equestria.

That when I'm finally removed, everything can return to those better days. We'll have a Princess who can rule the kingdom as she needs to rule it, and there won't be a need for war or the Ministry Mares anymore. And things will be…better. I just have to hold on a few more months." Trottenheimer didn't say a word.

Goldenblood suddenly emitted his rusty chuckle. "You know, it's funny. I was born in the zebra lands. Learned their tribes and language. Tutored by zebras. I was more striped than any pony before the war, and when Mother died, I didn't want to come back. But when I stepped off the boat and saw this green and bright place, I knew that there was something special about it. That there was a goodness here that I'd never known or imagined. A promise that, if you were good and tried hard, everything would turn out okay. Goddesses, I loved Equestria. With its strange and silly and delightful inhabitants and their odd and baffling ways. And yet, no matter how I tried, I was always apart from that goodness. Terrified of it. I'd watch Equestria from afar with longing, see the ponies and their friendships and day to day concerns, and I'd stare in wonder and terror. It was like a precious bauble of spun glass, and if I dared touch it, it would shatter from my careless pretension. I wasn't worthy of Equestria."

"That's quite a monologue. I remember when you couldn't say four words without gasping."

"I've been practicing what I'll say for my last trial. Or right before my execution." Goldenblood gave a hollow, grim little laugh. It soon died, and Trottenheimer didn't share it. Finally, Goldenblood said with quiet conviction, "It will get better, when it's all over."

"And if it doesn't?" Trottenheimer murmured, barely audible in the recording.

Goldenblood didn't answer him, but I could imagine him gazing off. "Well…if everypony loses, Twilight has a contingency for that. And if Equestria is lost…I do."

There was a long pause, and then a knock followed by a mare saying, "Director. Flim and Flam are on the line for you. Twilight is being persistent again."

"Thank you, Emerald. Give your sisters my regards and thanks." There was a long sigh after the door closed. "Thank you for stopping by, Trotty. I appreciate your concern, but I started this nightmare. I'll finish it."

"You don't finish nightmares, Goldie. You wake up from them."

The recording came to an end, and I sat there, thinking about what I'd heard. It hadn't been anything…important. Nothing about Horizons at all, really. But to hear him talk about his own execution so casually... and that talk about loving Equestria. It had to be an act. It simply had to be. Goldenblood was a villain and a murderer who'd done unspeakable things. I looked over at the front page of the Canterlot Times and the silhouette of Goldenblood being consumed by green flame.

"I thought you might appreciate this," a stallion said behind me, making me whirl towards the door. The speaker, an elderly unicorn with a mane like guttering blue fire and a coat the color of spoiled milk, sat in a wheelchair with a blanket covering his hind legs. Unwholesome blots of blue and purple hovered beneath his papery skin, and one eye the color of fog peered at me. The other, however, was a piercing azure, and I was struck, despite his clear infirmity, by a strange vitality that hovered around him. Elderly though he might be, a charisma and life clung to this old stallion like a royal cloak that no ravages of time or ill health could strip away. And from the keen glint in his eye and the way it roved over my body, I felt a sudden annoying flush of embarrassment. He looked like he was barely able to stand, but I wasn't so sure that that would keep me safe.

"King Awesome, I presume?" I asked, forcing as polite a smile as I could.

"Naturally. Could that apply to any other?" He gestured to the pictures, news clippings, and memory orbs. "What do you think of my collection?"

"It's…astonishing," I admitted as I examined a bland pamphlet that read, 'Office of Interministry Affairs: Career Opportunities'. It looked as if the designer'd gone out of their way to make the available positions seem as boring as possible. "I never imagined I'd see so much…stuff…associated with it."

"Stuff?" Awesome asked as he raised a bushy blue brow.

"Um…nice stuff?" I amended, but then he chuckled, and I suspected he was teasing me.

"Well, better than 'garbage' or 'shit Father collects', I suppose," Awesome said with another chuckle, looking at the collection as his horn glowed and pushed the wheels of his chair. "I've always been taken by the O.I.A. Such a curious, little, unobtrusive part of the Equestrian government. Most of the Wasteland doesn't even know it

once existed, and the few who do couldn't care less that it did. It's like the Ministries themselves, a relic. Unimportant now."

"I don't believe that," I said. "In fact, since I learned about it, I keep finding the things Goldenblood did to be more and more relevant." I raised a hoof, turning it over and looking at it. "Their secret projects are still around…still causing problems."

"Oh, you know about the Projects?" He seemed impressed. "But of course, you should. Zodiac told me about two of them. The secrecy. The conspiracies. But who cares about what a bunch of dead ponies did two centuries ago? Better to hunt down raiders and hoard bottlecaps and bullets." He sighed, shaking his head. "Most ponies believe my interest is just a sign that my wits are slipping. Wastelanders concern themselves with the here and now, not the once was."

I had to admit, if I didn't have the mystery of what Goldenblood had done, I probably wouldn't have lasted long in the Wasteland. First I kept going to keep EC-1101 away from Deus. Then it was the puzzle of Horizons and what he'd really done. Now I was driven by a strange urge pulling me to find the answer and stop whatever he'd set in motion. Otherwise, I probably would have ended up a Reaper, or perhaps working security at Megamart. I wouldn't have been pushed to further and further extremes and hazards.

"I care," I replied, looking at the collection. "But I have to admit, I don't understand why he did all of it. The Ministries. The Projects. It just seems so stupid."

He rubbed the snowy stubble on his chin with a hoof. "Have you ever done anything behind a friend's back?"

"Ohh…just a lot," I muttered, flushing as I looked away.

"And did you know it was wrong?" he asked, and I frowned but nodded. "So then why did you do it without telling them?"

I thought back to Scotch Tape. While she'd forgiven me for removing her memories, it still bothered her. It also made me wonder, for the first time, if there were other things she'd seen or heard that she wished she didn't remember. "I did it because I thought it needed to be done. And I didn't tell because…because I knew that the truth would upset them."

King Awesome nodded once. "I suspect it's not much different than Goldenblood and the O.I.A. Most of the things he did were things that he believed were needed not only for Equestria to win the war but to put Luna in a position of power where she could rule much

like her sister had. He fostered secrets not to protect himself from the law but because he didn't want to see Equestria upset by his necessary action."

"You think he wasn't just hiding so folks wouldn't stop him?" I countered, skeptically.

"He planned to be stopped. You heard that recording. Everything he'd done was planned to eventually be exposed. I think, instead, it was that he knew how shocking it would be for ponykind to contemplate that anypony could do the things he'd done." He shook his head with a sigh. "I think he bloodied his hooves so that other ponies didn't have to."

I thought of Psalm and shivered. It made a horrible kind of sense. "Still fucked up," I muttered.

"Evil is when we rationalize the wrongs we do to others. And Equestria was full of little evils during the war. The war. Politics. Business. National pride. Racial pride. Victims. There were so many little excuses for so many horrible things ponies visited on each other. Even today," he said with a chuckle. "Somehow the wicked always seem to find ways to justify their actions."

I thought about the Legate and his grand talk about destiny and how full of shit it was. "And the Society? Does it do the same?"

He was silent a long moment, his blue eye locked with mine. "I suppose that that depends on which member you ask, but personally, yes. I suppose we do." He sighed and shook his head, his gaze turning far more calculating. I glanced around at the O.I.A. paraphernalia and the back at King Awesome. "So, I suppose it would be fair to ask the question most pressing on the minds of my followers: have you come as a bloody conqueror seeking to liberate the unwashed masses and put the heads of their over-cultured oppressors on pikes before giving the whole operation to Big Daddy and the Twilight Society?"

I stared at him for several seconds, processing all that before summarizing my response in a nonplussed, "Huh?" Shaking my head, I frowned at him. "Look, I could have saved all of you the pain and aggravation. I'm here for an airship for my friend. That's it." Well... my priorities might change depending on what P-21 discovered, but I'd gas that stable when I had to.

He blinked at me for one moment, then threw back his head and cackled. "You're here for *that*? The *Fleur*? Oh my, the gossipmongers will be so disappointed. They were absolutely certain you'd come to

liberate the serfs." He wiped his eyes with one leg as he said with a smile. "Take it."

I frowned. "Wait…just like that?"

"Just like that." He replied with a smile, narrowing his eyes. "If it will get you on your way elsewhere, I'll happily give you a piece of antiquated machinery if it will avoid other unpleasantness." He waved a hoof errantly. "It will take a little time to get skyworthy, and the Society will quite happily show you the utmost hospitality until you leave. You're actually in time for the Society's Grand Galloping Gala tomorrow night." He suddenly frowned. "Though getting a proper ensemble together will be tricky."

I was so ready to barter, threaten, argue, or beg for the airship that simply being given it was making my head spin. "Well, thank you."

"You can show that thanks by not trying any drastic changes to the status quo. The Society has gotten very comfortable of late and they are extremely nervous that you are here to end that comfort," King Awesome replied with a chilly smile. "So…Security's really not here for more than the airship?"

"Maybe…" I frowned, and he arched the brow over his brilliant blue eye. I felt a surge of P-21's righteousness well up inside me. "Well, maybe I am. I don't see much difference between serfs and slaves, and some of my friends aren't happy with what you're doing here." He just smiled, clasping his forehooves together as he regarded me thoughtfully.

"Believe me, it could be much worse." He leaned back in the chair, narrowing his bright blue eye. "When I met them, the Society were a gang of thugs with slightly better than average manners and elocution. There were slaves then, toiling to grow food in the Enervation-weakened soil of the old golf course. I had to teach the gang the concept of nobility. Of being superior not only competitively but in breeding, conduct, and spirit. If they were truly nobility, then they had obligations to fulfill. The distinction between slave and serf may not seem like much to you, but it's the difference between raiding settlements, slapping bomb collars on prisoners, and working them to death and accepting volunteers, giving them safety and food, and working them for half the day."

I scowled at that, then shook my head. "I really don't know about that either way. Slavery is wrong, but I don't know if what you're talking about is a form of slavery or not."

He considered me shrewdly for a long moment. "It's a semantic

question, Blackjack," he said as he folded his hooves before him. "Do we keep our serfs here when they wish to leave? Yes. It prevents infiltrators. Do we require them to sign an agreement to become serfs rather than slap a bomb collar on every able-bodied pony we can? Yes. And are there some that use coercion to circumvent that rule? Yes," he finished, his face solemn and stern. "Ultimately, the Society is not perfect. No more than the Reapers or the Collegiate."

"It's not semantics to me. Wrong is wrong, and the Society has a lot of wrong going on as far as I can see. Keeping intelligent seaponies in some kind of zoo for your amusement? Using a minotaur to force ponies to sign your agreements so that you can pretend to be better than common gangers? It reeks of a whole lot of brahmin shit," I said with more severity than I originally intended.

But to my surprise, King Awesome looked more amused than offended. "Of course it does. But what you keep failing to understand is that the Society was, and can be, far worse. The distinction between serf and slave may not be much, but it *is* a distinction. Far better than the terms given by Red Eye. Should we force them to labor in irradiated pits for their freedom? Work them for five years in conditions few will survive? Make them fight to death for our amusement? That used to happen before I became king," he said severely, his blue eye intensely boring into me before he gave a sigh and a shrug, "As for the other accoutrements... well... the Society is always desperate to set itself apart as sophisticated and special. Which is why they're so terrified of somepony like you coming along and challenging their complacency."

I felt a little unsure now, even embarrassed. Was he agreeing with me? "So... you think this serfdom thing is wrong too?"

"I think that I've been King of the Society long enough to appreciate what little distinctions we can have. But perhaps a better pony might improve things. Who can say?" he said with a little chuckle, making me question just what was going on.

I rubbed the back of my head as I looked away. My uncertainty had robbed me of my former righteous indignation. "Well…It just seems like you're getting a better deal," I muttered lamely, no longer certain of what to do. Accept a lesser evil? Overthrow it, and invite a greater evil? ... Or stop, listen, and learn more about what was going on?

"Aristoponies always do," he replied with a smile and a shrug. A

wistful look filled his eye as he gazed at his collection. “A fact my old friends failed to accept. But that’s ancient history. Few care about such things. History is an irrelevancy, even to the Society. Nopony cares about the past.” He spoke with quiet bitterness and heartbreaking resignation.

I frowned and glanced around at the room again, and then back at King Awesome. Finally, I smiled at the old stallion. “I do.”

* * *

We talked for nearly two hours about everything. The Society. The O.I.A. Goldenblood. His companions. Dawn. His recently departed wife. There were some parts that kept me riveted, like hearing about the final breakup and a paternal King Awesome protecting Dawn from a lecherous, uncouth Big Daddy. Other parts, like him claiming to be the great grandson of Shining Armor, Twilight Sparkle’s brother and the entitled heir to the Crystal Empire, seemed too farfetched even for the Wasteland. But then, as he told me, “If you’re going to be anything in the Wasteland, why not be a king? And if you’re going to be a king, you better be a fucking awesome king.” Hence the name.

It was just crazy enough to be true.

Grace peeked in on us a half dozen times before her father told her to knock it off. In that time, I’d learned that he’d approved of Sky Striker’s marriage to Dawn, as any stallion who would ride a flaming dragon from on high had to be a decent protector, but had wanted them to stay in Elysium. I found out that Keeper had a weakness for strawberries and that Big Daddy’s hooves were ticklish. I returned the favor by sharing a few secrets I’d learned, like the details of how Goldenblood’s affair with Fluttershy had ended and how her baby had survived to become the Reaper Psychoshy. That alone seemed to astonish the old stallion.

More surprising was how good it felt to be able to talk about Goldenblood, Horizons, EC-1101, and all the trouble they’d brought to my life. None of my friends had viewed the memory orbs I had, or heard the recordings or…or anything. None of them cared. They cared about me, sure, but not what moved me. We discussed various theories about what Horizons might be; he preferred a megaspell while I was tantalized by the idea of a massive moonstone/starmetal reaction. We both agreed how very odd it was

that he could have gotten away with so much at the O.I.A. Had Luna maintained plausible deniability, letting Goldenblood blackmail and leverage others into silence? Had she been fooled? Complicit? I didn't know which scared me more.

"My word. I don't think that I've talked this much in years," he finally said with a yawn, arching a brow again. "Do you really care about all of this? Or are you simply trying to butter me up?"

"I do care, Awesome. The past keeps coming back to bite me, and I'm scared of some of the futures I've imagined. I don't want this world to be a terrible place. I want to make it better," I replied simply.

He took a deep breath. "You're a fool, Blackjack. But a good fool, and that's better than all the other kinds in this world." He yawned and slumped back in his chair. "Thank you, Blackjack. It was…quite nice to speak to another like this. I've got quite a few dozen memory orbs from the O.I.A. regarding the various Projects that I think you should see." He separated one and floated it to me. "Certainly some of them should come in useful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll inform Grace that the *Fleur* is to be made ready for flight again. We'll have to check the bag and patch any holes. Little things like that."

"You're sure that it can still fly after all this time?" I asked with a little skepticism. I would be sure to have P-21 and Scotch Tape check it as well before we went anywhere.

"Of course," he said with a canny chuckle. "The Society weren't stupid. If they ever had to flee this place, there were few methods better than by air. It will take some time to prepare, though, and I think that I should stress that this is a loan. The Society will definitely want her returned, for sentimental reasons if nothing else." He tapped his hooves together. "You'll come to the Grand Galloping Gala as my personal guests, of course. Though there is the question of what you'll wear."

"You let me worry about that. I know a filly who owes me a fancy dress or two," I replied, not having a clue as to what I'd actually do at a party. Drink and stand in the corner? Probably safest. At least I wouldn't look like a complete embarrassment, though. "In the meantime, I need to investigate a plantation somewhere east of here."

But he'd fallen asleep in his chair. I rose to my hooves, took one look at the collection around me and what answers it might have,

and started to leave. Then I stopped and regarded the slumbering, elderly unicorn. I'd never really had a 'father' or 'grandfather' before. Whatever pony had sired me in 99 hadn't filled any kind of mentoring role. I hadn't even understood the word before leaving Stable 99, but as I saw him lying there, I got an odd feeling that I'd never had before and wasn't sure what to do with. Finally, I trotted to his side, made sure he was actually asleep, and then gave a polite kiss to his cheek.

It seemed the civilized thing to do.

* * *

"Glory, why are you turning their kitchen into an abattoir?" I asked as I looked at the bloody meat in one heap, the pile of bloody cybernetic components in the second pile, and the spread of cleaned cyberpony parts. Boo and Scotch Tape sat in front of the pantry, building a small wall of provisions. The kitchen staff worked as well as they could, watching the blue pegasus with poorly hidden expressions of horror. "What are you even doing with the zebra body parts?"

Glory was a fright, blood smearing her hooves and spotting the cloth tied over her mouth. "I needed to remove these components from the Brood," she said, gesturing to the pile of gory machinery. "This place had the best equipment. Knives. Scrub brushes. Alcohol. Lots of water. Perfect for removing and cleaning these parts for study. The eyes might be identical, but I want to see if there are other similarities and differences."

"Okay. Why?" I asked as I levitated over a bottle of whiskey. Really…cleaning cyberzebra parts with this. I disapproved. The kitchen staff seemed to be waiting for somepony with the courage to come and tell us to leave, but for the moment I couldn't blame them for keeping their distance. Boo and Scotch Tape, their fortifications built up, proceeded to bombard each other with grapes, berries, and Fancy Buck Cakes. I wasn't exactly sure Boo knew what she was doing, but I had to admit that her mouth was formidable protection from Scotch's snack cake barrage.

"For one, you need to know what they're capable of if you have to fight them. Are they strong like Deus, fast like your recon legs, or agile like your Shadowbolt upgrade?" She scooped up a round piece of equipment. "This motor's exactly like the ones installed by Rover

a few days ago, but its placement wasn't nearly as precise. There was abrasion on the bone at the joint. Would hurt like hell. But this…" She reached over to the bloody pile and lifted a smaller piece covered with gobs of blood and chunks of brain. "This is different from your own neural interfaces. It's a newer design. It completely replaces their pain centers. I don't think that the Brood can feel pain. And from this abrasion, I'm skeptical as to whether they have a healing talisman like yours."

Two very good things to know. "Okay. Just try not to scare these folks. No animating the dead for your army of cyberghouls," I teased, noticing the horrified looks on the faces of the servants listening in.

Glory blinked at me in confusion and gestured to the bloody heap. "But there's not enough materials here for even one cyberghoul." It took every last bit of restraint I had not to burst into laughter at the shock on the servants' faces. She set down the component. "I haven't seen P-21."

"He's…around," I murmured.

Glory caught my eye. "We're not going to do anything rash, are we?"

"I'm not sure yet," I replied, looking at the cooks on the other side of the kitchen. They watched with wary eyes. I had to think of how odd we must seem to all of them, like we were crude and not-quite-invited houseguests and they just hadn't quite decided whether it would be more trouble to put up with us or throw us out on our rumps.

"I'm not opposed to the idea, but please be careful. I'd hate for us to repeat what happened at Flank, or Fallen Arch," Glory said, then reached over and bit a wire scrub brush, took up a piece of metal in her hooves, and began scrubbing away chunks of clinging flesh.

"I'm going to find Lacunae, Rampage, and Deus and take care of that errand for the Collegiate," I said casually. "Should be back quick. Come with me?"

She seemed surprised, looked down at the messy business before her, then raised her bloody hooves. "I'm up to my withers in zebra here. But you go. And do come back quick."

"I'll be good." She looked at me skeptically, and I added, "I will. I promise I'll stay out of trouble." I errantly rubbed my collar.

She pulled off the mask, wiped her forehooves on a wet rag, and just sighed with a gentle smile as she trotted towards me. She

hugged me and nuzzled my ear. “Blackjack, you are utterly incapable of staying out of trouble. If trouble doesn’t find you, somepony sends trouble to you, and if that doesn’t happen you’ll stir up some trouble simply by trotting along. Sometimes I think that you need trouble to survive.” She pulled me close and gave me a little smooch. “Stay safe. Don’t get hurt. Come back soon. I can live with that.”

I smiled and kissed her back. Scotch Tape gave a little ‘awwww’. “That’s so sweet. A little disgusting,” she added as she looked at the bloody specks on Glory’s mane and coat, “but sweet.” Then her inattention was rewarded with an orange bouncing off the side of her head. “Ambushed!” Scotch Tape snapped, then lobbed a Fancy Buck Cake that exploded orange filling across Boo’s face. “Direct hit!” the filly crowed.

Boo’s pale eyes appeared amid the dripping orange filling. Then her tongue swept up and collected all the dripping confection in one long circular pass and swallowed it with a gulp. Scotch Tape blinked in shock and flopped over. “No effect…” she whimpered. As I started to walk away, Boo scrambled to her hooves and trotted after me. “Hey! Come back!” Scotch Tape sulked as Boo stayed beside me. “What am I going to do now?”

“To the defeated goes the chore cleaning up the mess,” I replied, giving a nod to the cooks as we passed out of the kitchen. Scotch Tape gaped at us and then collapsed on her back in a powdery heap.

* * *

“Thirty-one!” Rampage crowed as we wound our way northeast towards the navigation tag Triage had given me. “Might have been more, but you know, after you feel the blast, you lose track of things.”

“You make it sound like sex,” I muttered as we rolled along. While most of the terrain was tangled, dead woods, there were a few odd buildings mixed in with rusted, bold plaques like ‘Carrotech’ and ‘Radish Fabrication Research’ on them. ‘Technology parks’, I supposed they were, once. Really, what did you fabricate with radishes? I saw the large Stable-Tec R&D building and wondered if I might make a side trip to my side trip.

“Bang bang,” Rampage said with a shrug. Boo blinked, cocking her

head, and I reached up and scratched her ears. She gave a happy little murr as Rampage looked on. “I really don’t get her. She doesn’t talk, but she seems a lot smarter than just some critter.”

“She’s different, is all,” I said, sighing as I peered out at the crawling landscape. “Ugh, I hate waiting.”

“Yeah. Deus does kinda take most of the fun out of the Wasteland. All the random, deadly shit just doesn’t compare,” Rampage said as gestured to her left. “Feral ghoul?” She swept her power hoof to the right. “Tank.” Then she repeated, gesturing left then right with each group, “Pissed off Steel Ranger? Tank. Ornery radigator? Tank. Zebra army? Tank. I can see why Dawn was so confident. Tank beats everything.”

“Except a chance at being a better pony,” I said, and Rampage smiled and snorted scornfully.

“If you can’t beat ‘em.” She looked down at the turret. “Hey, Deus! We need to paint you bright pink to lure in more things to kill. This auto travel is boring!” Deus revved his engine in a very negative tone. “Hey, it was a suggestion!”

I gazed up at Lacunae flying silently overhead, and Rampage followed my gaze. “Is she alright?” Rampage asked softly.

“Huh?” How could Rampage possibly know?

“Her purplecorniness. She’s acting a lot stranger than normal. She doesn’t talk. She doesn’t eat. She just stands there looking like she’s going to cry,” Rampage said with a small frown. “I mean, she’s always weird, but is she okay?”

I glanced up at Lacunae, but she gave no indication that she’d heard or acknowledged Rampage’s concern. I felt the giant metaphorical hoof hovering over my brain. “No. She’s really not.” Rampage arched a brow as I felt the Goddess start to press down. I closed my eyes, struggling to get even the simplest explanation out. “She’s dealing with some alicorn stuff.” And so was I. I struggled to move my jaw and spit out something…anything…that could be a hint for what the Goddess was doing to me!

“Uh-huh…anything I can do to help?” Rampage asked casually. I could have hugged her! I wanted to! But the Goddess slowly crushed my will beneath her hoof. My mouth moved silently, my face screwing up as I struggled to spit out two words. But the pressure became a physical pain. “Blackjack?” Rampage asked, frowning in concern.

“N…no,” I stammered on, feeling a will besides my own carefully

manipulating my mouth to go on, “She’s fine. I’m fine. Nothing wrong at all, Rampage. Brain damage!” My lips pulled back in a rictus grin as Rampage stared at me in concern and bafflement. “Just wanting some booze and to get laid! And to shoot some shit because that’s what I do!” I was grinning like an idiot, and Rampage just gaped at me. I felt the Goddess’s strings quiver in frustration. “How are you?” I added, and finally Rampage relaxed a little.

“Just…trying not to think about it. Running around with you is a lot easier. Doing anything is easier,” she replied. “If you squish a bunch of souls together, does that make a pony? Do I have a soul of my own? Or am I just a freak?” She sighed and gave a little shrug. “Finding out more about Shujaa and the other memories you snagged helped, but I still don’t have those answers.”

I felt the strings quiver as the Goddess plumbed my mind for what I should say. I replied with the most colorful insults I could; oddly, she didn’t seem impressed. “You are what you say you are,” the Goddess answered for me. “Never think otherwise. It doesn’t matter if you have a soul of your own.”

She cocked her head at me, and I felt the awkwardness rolling off the connection. I wondered how often the Goddess had truly interacted with a pony outside of Unity. Red Eye, at least, but what others? I had vague impressions of awed missionaries spreading the promise of Unity to an uncaring Wasteland, and seeing the subtle manipulation of their hopes to be transformed into alicorns themselves. Rampage looked doubtful.

“R…r…” I stammered, trying to get a word to her. Rampage was immortal; the Goddess couldn’t kill her. And there was Deus too. I had to tell her. “G…She…Co…I…” I blathered like an idiot. My lips twisted as I struggled to spit out a few simple words. The pressure built till I was sure my brains were going to explode out my eye sockets. Then a memory orb floated out of my saddlebags. I looked up at the blank face of Lacunae above as the orb touched my horn. A flicker of magic, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Damn fucking Goddess! I wanted to shove a string of balefire eggs up her huge mutant ass and light them all up! Worse, even in the memory orb I could still *feel* her. It was like body heat radiating

behind me, a telepathic breath in my ear. She'd given me a time out, and I could still feel all the little twinges and tweaks going on within me.

What was she doing while I was stuck in here?

First things first. Where was 'here'? At first glance it appeared to be some sort of indoor junk heap. Mounds of multifarious parts were piled high up the walls of the room I found myself in, and a mountainous heap of haphazardly connected electrical components sat in the middle. A dozen massive screens mounted on the central technological mishmash glowed with static. I knew the body I was in quite well. The slow burn with every breath. The painful scars that tugged with each step. The ache deep in his bones that made every step a punishment. Goldenblood stood in some kind of strange laboratory with a dozen other ponies. He floated a clipboard before him, idly drawing houses in the margins of some banal-looking form.

"You aren't supposed to be doing that," a dark pegasus muttered beside him. He glanced at her, then looked around at the assembled ponies. I noticed the unicorn zony Silver Stripe examining the hulking piece of machinery with rapt attention while Psalm stood quietly at the rear. The black unicorn wore the ominous riot armor, sans helmet, as she watched with hollow, haunted eyes.

He gave a small snort. "Oh please, Eclipse. The princess isn't going to need this report."

"You never know. She might," the pegasus said with a mysterious little smirk.

Then the mustard-yellow Horse trotted out in front of us with an easy grin. "Fillies and gentlecolts of the O.I.A., I just know how much you love these little demonstrations. So, with no further ado, may I present the Crusader, 1.2! A marked improvement over the original Stable-Tec design in terms of processing power and capabilities," he said, turning towards Goldenblood and giving a small bow. "Thanks to your painstaking work of looting Equestria's patent office, I've been able to extend to Equestria as a whole a maneframe superior to anything produced by Stable-Tec."

"One would think he'd be a little more humble about copying Apple Bloom's work," Eclipse murmured.

"Horse is allergic to humility," Goldenblood replied in his gurgling rasp. "I've seen the real thing. That device is twice the size and power draw of a real Crusader. I'll be impressed if it has half the

processing power of the original."

"If only Stable-Tec was willing to sell them to us directly…" Eclipse muttered with a frown.

"Stable-Tec opposes the war. We should be glad they're only wasting their resources building bunkers. They could be a much larger problem if they decided to really assert themselves," Goldenblood muttered. "We'll have to make do with Horse's contraption."

Horse grinned enthusiastically to the crowd as the robotic Sweetie Belle trotted out to join him. "Now I know what you're thinking. Yes, that is a Sweetie Bot. But the other thing you're thinking is 'what is the big deal, Horse? What makes your Crusader better than the original?'" Horse chuckled and pulled out from the side of the central machine a strange mesh of gold wire studded with tiny talismans. "Well, I'll show you. By now you're all familiar with the mind transference system that Stable-Tec perfected. But really, what good does a permanent transfer do? With the new and improved Crusader 1.2, you can upload as many minds as you need to. Swap between them. Scan for information you need and simply use a part of it." He jammed the golden spider web onto his head, and the dozens of tiny talismans began to flicker and blink. On the massive terminal screens, symbols began to stream and dance, showing flashing lines of data scrolling by.

Suddenly, a massive digital head of Horse appeared on the screen. "Voila!" The audience gave appreciate 'ooohs', and the digital head split in a massive grin. "Of course, that's not all!" he crowed, and then he looked down at the Sweetie Bot. Her eyes flashed and scrolled green lines of data. Then the robot adopted a grin exactly the same as the one upon the screen.

"Once connected to the Crusader 1.2," the robot said, a faint synthetic warble the only thing marring an uncannily accurate emulation of the real Sweetie Belle's voice, "you will be able to remotely access and control any properly modified robot connected to its system." The robot then adopted a sympathetic look right along with the immense face on the screen. "We're already adapting this for smaller, dedicated systems for poor colts and fillies crippled or suffering from illnesses too severe to be treated with our current technology."

I really wished I could feel my blood run cold as I imagined the bloody word 'PLAY' painted on hospital walls.

Horse removed the delicate golden netting, and the attendees moved closer. “And with a push of a button!” He pushed a large red button on the side of the machine. For a moment, the Horse on the screen looked alarmed, but then it was replaced by a field of static as the pony Horse proclaimed, “The upload is purged and can be replaced by any other mind you may wish. Come on up and try it.”

Silver Stripe was first to place the golden mesh on her head. Sweetie Bot trotted around and spoke to the other attendees in Zebra. The button was pushed, and the next tried it. And the next. And the next. With each push, the machine let out more ominous buzzes and crackles. Technicians emerged and began to check the machine’s panels and displays with nervous looks. As the demonstration went on, with each pony giving the computer and Sweetie Bot a trial trot, Horse kept giving glances over at the scarred stallion.

“What about you, Goldie? Care to try it out?” Horse taunted as he waved the net at Goldenblood.

“No thank you,” Goldenblood rasped, his eyes cool and contemptuous. “Your machine looks a little unstable. I don’t recall Apple Bloom’s Crusader buzzing like that.”

“It’s buzzing from sheer awesomeness,” Horse said, the veins in his temple throbbing as he grimaced in annoyance.

“Thank you. We shall consider it,” Goldenblood said dismissively as he turned his back on Horse. Suddenly there was a shout and a shove, and for a moment, something metal touched his mane. Then Psalm was there, darting in, and there came a muffled shout as Goldenblood was shoved to the floor.

“Are you okay?” Eclipse asked as she knelt beside him. He glanced up in time to see the glittering mesh descend down and land firmly atop her inky head.

Suddenly, the machine let out a massive mechanical shriek, and the screens went wild. One exploded in a shower of sparks as the reek of burning electronics filled the air. The gold glow of Goldenblood’s magic yanked the mesh from her brow. In an instant, Psalm was on Horse, kicking his legs out from under him and following it up by magically pressing a pistol to his temple as she pinned him. The Crusader finally let out an immense pop, and a cloud of rolling black smoke erupted from the top as the machine let out an anemic whine.

“Hey! It was a joke!” Horse said as he squirmed beneath Psalm, his

brown eyes staring at the gun she pressed against his temple. Everypony suddenly seemed intent on either looking elsewhere or walking away.

Goldenblood ignored him as he helped Eclipse to her hooves. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. I’m just fine,” Eclipse said as she rubbed her temple. She turned her eyes down and stared at Horse with a calculating gaze that chilled me. Psalm looked to Eclipse, and the dusky lavender pegasus gave Goldenblood a long glance, then a small shake of her head. Goldenblood let out a long, low sigh, then locked eyes with Horse. I felt his brows furrow and his teeth grind.

“Do not play jokes on government officials,” Goldenblood said firmly, gesturing with his hoof for Psalm to let him up. Horse slowly rose as Psalm backed off, the humiliated stallion glaring at Goldenblood with unabashed loathing. “Now. You seem to have a computer to fix. Do so, and maybe then we’ll talk,” he said as he turned on his hooves and walked out of the lab with Eclipse and Psalm. I heard Horse shout about fixing his Sweetie Bot first. Wonderful priorities there, given that it had only suffered a small scratch to its flank...

Once they were out in the hall, Goldenblood muttered, “He was probably hoping to have a peek in my mind.” He scowled as he walked, the other O.I.A. officials avoiding his gaze. He looked at Eclipse. “Are you sure you’re okay? I can have him removed in fifteen seconds and Robronco taken over in half an hour.”

Eclipse fluttered her wings and tossed her head. “I’m fine. Just a little disoriented. If he wasn’t already involved tangentially, I would. We’ll just use it as a reason for him to behave. I’m more interested in his discovery. See what we can commandeer and sneak out from him. I doubt his security is as tight as Apple Bloom’s.”

“Espionage on her own subjects. What would Her Majesty think?” Goldenblood said in an almost teasing voice.

“Princess Luna knows nothing about it whatsoever. Princess Luna sits on her throne and makes impressive speeches while the Ministries do all their acts behind her back. Poor Princess Luna,” Eclipse giggled as the world began to blur away.

oooOOOooo

Normally when I come out of a memory orb, I’m in a heap

somewhere reflecting on what I'd seen. This time, I came out and found myself standing beside Deus and looking down at a large factory-style building. 'Roseluck Agrifarms' was written across the third story in fancy red cursive script. The next second, his main guns roared, and I flopped back on my side; thank Luna for reinforced hearing or I'd be deaf right now. Below, a sentry bot exploded in a shower of steel. Two more followed it, mindlessly firing missiles and gatling guns at the war machine before the cannons fired twice more and eliminated them.

Rampage trotted out from behind Deus with Boo crawling along after her, looking quite spooked by the noise. "Nice job, Blackjack. Go get some more." Lacunae watched from a distance.

"More... wha... huh?" I rubbed my ears; even though I wasn't deaf, the noise had given me ringing feedback in one ear. "What's going on?"

Lacunae spoke quietly in my mind. "You've been controlled by the Goddess. She has had you running in, shooting the sentries, and rushing out again on auto pilot. Apparently, she finds it quite... entertaining as she waits for LittlePip to arrive."

Great. I was a toy. Worse, I felt chains in my mind. While I'd been out, the Goddess had been busy. She had enough control over me to use me when I was unconscious. How long till she could control me like any other alicorn? What would she do once she could?

I heard a snide little chuckle in my mind as I pondered that.

"Right... so... where are we going?" I asked, shaking my head. "That last shot rattled me a bit."

"You're the one going in, remember? On account of all the Enervation? Find out what's causing it and see if the Collegiate can use it?" Rampage frowned at me. "Are you sure you're okay? You've been acting strange all day. I swear, refer to yourself as 'The Blackjack'... Is this a getting shot in the head thing? I never said 'The Rampage' when I was shot in the head." I tried to will her to put it together, but then she chuckled and said, "Heh... The Rampage likes... " Damn it... I should have brought P-21...

"No. No. I got it," I said as I stood and dusted myself off with a hoof. "I'm going." I trotted down towards the building, looking for red bars. From the dozen or so smoking sentries arranged in front of the building, I'd been busy. The Enervation scream began to cry out in my mind as I approached the blown-in loading dock door. "Are you coming?" I asked, as I glanced back at Rampage.

“Uh... remember?” Rampage said as she trotted towards me with a look of irritation. As she walked, her flesh began to sag. Bloody rivulets began to trickle between the gaps in her armor. I stared in horror as one eye popped in a slurry of pink foam, only to regenerate a second later. “I mean, I can go down there if you want, but it’s really gross.”

“No! No. Stay here and keep Deus company. I’ll bring more sentries if I find them,” I said, turning away. I couldn’t feel sick, but oh how I wanted to throw up. I walked alone into the factory, hearing the distant Enervation scream struggling against a cool, soft note that radiated from inside me. It sounded so... familiar. Ugh. Stupid Goddess brain damage was making it hard to think.

The interior of the factory was largely a warehouse stacked high with heaps of wooden crates. Corrosion streaked the metal walls and girders, and water sloshed coldly around my hooves. Some of the crates were open, holding rusty equipment which I guessed was for farming. Others were full of plastic barrels filled with pulpy mush with ‘seed stock: corn 21A’ printed on the side. I saw labels for sacks of fertilizer that had split open, the contents forming white crystalline structures creeping in cascades of niter down the side of the sacks. There were still a dozen red bars on my EFS, and so I maintained constant vigilance.

“Lacunae? Can you hear me?” I thought at her, but it didn’t pierce the Enervation scream. How had the Goddess used me? Had she programmed me like a robot? Could I be programed like a robot? I had a horrifying image of myself like Sweetie Bot, the Goddess copying herself into my brain. The thought made me shiver. And worse, I couldn’t think of any way to tell somepony!

As I moved deeper into the factory, leaving the warehouse area and moving into some offices, the floor creaked and the saturated carpet gushed with every step I took. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for, exactly. Something that would definitively let me tell Triage that I’d checked out the building. There were labs filled with pulpy seed that had soaked but couldn’t rot. Water dripped from sprinkler pipes over planter trays that had long ago corroded away. Debris shifted underhoof with every step, grinding softly.

I ran into two still-functioning turrets. The machines strafed me with machinegun fire, but with S.A.T.S. and the markspony carbine I managed to shred them without taking too much damage. Still, even with my resistance to Enervation, I noticed that I was barely

healing from the shots. Even I had my limits.

Wow. When was the last time I'd actually needed bandages? As I dug through my saddlebags for something I could use, I spotted a rusty safe set into the wall of an office. Heh... speaking of 'last times'... I had some bandages wedged way down deep next to some old, crumbly Stable 99 grass chips. Once I'd staunched my wound, I dug out my bobby pins. Then I took a long look at the rusty lock, pursed my lips, and simply hit the door as hard as I could with my hoof. It let out a brittle snap and swung open. P-21 would not have approved.

Inside were some gold bits in a box marked 'petty cash' and a few healing potion bottles filled with black tar. I also saw some file folders. Most of them were spoiled by water, but I saw a note that had survived. 'Geez, Rose. Where is Hippocratic getting these sales figures for our pest solutions?'

A mouthwritten reply read, 'You know Flim and Flam. They can sell fire to a phoenix. It wouldn't surprise me if they're marketing to the enemy to make these figures.' Right, because during a war, selling anything to the enemy was a good idea.

Nothing else of use in the office. Then I spotted a door with faded paint barely legible through the rust. 'Pest solutions'. Below it was another sign. 'Designated emergency shelter'.

Slowly, I shoved the door open, the rust screeching and setting my teeth on edge. These walls were solid concrete. Even with the metal decay, this chamber still seemed quite sturdy. There weren't even leaking pipes. It was dark in here; everything was in shades of gray in my augmented vision. The floor was ankle deep in viscous fluid as I walked along tables stacked with long-still fabrication machinery. I could taste metal in the air. Coppery.

Across the room, a lone terminal beckoned with its flickering screen. I slowly picked my way to it, feeling the thick water concealing uncertain impediments that shifted underhoof when trod upon. At the green glow of the terminal, I saw that the screen said 'Roseluck Agrifarms: Emergency Protocols'.

Step one: Evacuate all personnel to designated emergency shelters.

Step two A: Wait for the all clear to be given by emergency personnel and management.

Step two B: If evacuation warning is sounded, proceed to the north parking lot. Remain calm. Walk. Do not run.

Step three: When the all clear is sounded, contact your division

manager for damage and risk assessment. Do not simply leave the premises.

I carefully began to explore the information on the terminal. There were a lot of banal, uninteresting reports about meeting quarterly goals. Then I spotted three letters that perked my interest: O.I.A.

>Are you sure the O.I.A. is involved? We don't have anything to do with the other ministries.

>I'm sure, Lily. That freaky metal in pest solutions? They provided it.

>I thought it came from Hippocratic. Flim and Flam wanted to see what we could do with it.

>Oh, like that's suppose to make me feel better, Lily!

After that, I started to look for anything to do with pest solutions, O.I.A., or Hippocratic. It took me a while before I found something that jumped out at me.

> I got another nastygram from our legal department.

>Something serious?

>Treason count?

>What?! What's going on?

>Intel found the zebras using an 'arcane device' identical to our pest solutions. Ring and all.

>WHAT?! How! They can't produce those without unicorns, and, even if they had unicorns, we're the only ones with the designs.

>Hence the nastygram.

I peered around the cavernous, reinforced space. The Enervation was setting my teeth on edge. Starmetal was being used here to create... pest control stuff? I examined a cardboard box beside the terminal. 'Roseluck Pest Solutions. No chemicals. No talismans. 100% safe sonic technology.' On the back were diagrams of a pony installing a box next to a garden, then wavy rings spreading out from the box and driving away rabbits, birds, and little round bug things with wings that looked a bit like colorful spritebots. 'Ministry of Peace Approved' was written, along with a picture of Fluttershy hugging the box. I opened it up and stared at the metal case. I could feel it humming in my hooves. After biting off and eating the lock, I popped the casing open and checked out the hoof-sized metal ring. A shimmer of green light flickered along its edge.

I found another short exchange in the terminal records.

>Roseluck, are you sure about keeping Pest Solutions open? That's the 8th incident this quarter!

>It's just Wartime Stress Disorder that made Brownbuck snap. We're

all feeling it. The MoP will set him right.

>But there's something wrong in that whole division, Roseluck. The metal used in those rings must be toxic. A three hundred percent increase in health problems isn't normal!

>All our tests show that it's safe and neutral. The MoP confirmed it. Besides, we got the metal from Hippocratic. If there was really anything wrong with it, don't you think that they would have noticed?

>Rose! What about the ponies getting sick? We have to tell somepony.

>Fine. Notify Garnet. She can tell the MoP there might be something off about this stuff. Meanwhile, keep production going till we have to shut it down. Hire a second shift and rotate them out more frequently. Maybe that'll help with the health problems.

>But the investigations...

>It's not our fault if some damned sympathizers are buying our pest solutions in bulk and sending the rings to the stripes. That's the MoM's job. Or the military's if they just want to bomb their fields.

Profits over ponies. There were more files, but a lot of them were corrupted. I found an audio log that crackled to life, though, speaking out into the still, metallic gloom around me.

"Lily? It's Apple Tart over at Horizon Labs. I want you to know we put this metal through every test we could and found no contamination or hazard. It's completely neutral. We're seeing a lot of it lately, though. Twilight just sent us a bullet made of the damned stuff! We're going to try cutting it open next week. I can tell you this... I don't like it either. Something about it just feels bad. I did a little 'non-scientific' research. Took me forever to contact a researcher in 'esoteric energy', and she hypothesized that this metal somehow draws and manipulates souls. She said that if ponies died around the stuff, it would pull their soul right out and send it... somewhere. Worse, the more souls that pass through it, the stronger the pull would become. Lily, just how much of this stuff have you used?"

I looked at row after row of work tables. These starmetal rings had gone all over Equestria... no... all over the *world*. Each one a tiny, self-contained, indestructible siphon pulling souls through them to their ultimate destination. I knew this... some fundamental part of myself just knew it was so. How many raiders had killed with one of these quietly soaking up the soul of their victims? And if they grew more powerful with every death, it explained why Enervation was so damned strong in the Hoof! This place was one giant basket

of death and destruction. It was so strong that, here, the soul-stealing field was actually palpable. But they were everywhere. Tenpony! The zebra lands! I wondered if they could be found in Enclave Raptors. The only place they hadn't been used was apparently Stable-Tec, which explained why we'd never experienced Enervation in 99.

Then the rusty door behind me let out a shriek as it banged closed! I whirled, markspony carbine raised as the monitor cast out its feeble glow in a dim green cone across the murky fluid under my hooves. My augmented vision helped, but there were dark corners that even that couldn't penetrate. "Who's there?" I shouted. Nine or ten red bars filled my vision, and not all of them were still.

A low laugh filled the air, setting my mane on edge as I began to move sideways along the rows of worktables. Robots didn't laugh like that... Something moved overhead, the laugh echoing again in the cavernous space. I fired up in its direction, the bright muzzle flashes blooming in the darkness, but my bullets found nothing but concrete.

"You're wasting time," a mare whispered, her voice quiet but permeating the copper-reeking room. "No... you're wasting lives... " she hissed maliciously. "Murderer... "

My blood ran cold as I looked around the gloom. "Dawn... ?"

"It took me so long watching and waiting. When you came here... I knew you would be alone," Dawn hissed softly.

Don't stop moving. The fluid sloshed around my knees as I kept in frantic motion, looking in all directions I could as I made a slow circuit around the room towards the door. Then I found it: the rusted door bucked shut. I shoved hard against it, but it didn't budge. The thick metal hinges and frame were bent. "I had to wait. Had to have my doubt removed. You made me doubt her, Blackjack. You really did. Your selfish words. Selfish," the darkness whispered. I pointed the gun upwards just in time to see something streak away through the shadows. "She fixed me. Made me stronger. Removed my doubt. My weakness."

That certainly raised her a few points on the crazyometer. "I don't want to kill you, Dawn. I want to help," I said as I made my way further along with slow, deliberate steps.

"You want to help?" Dawn asked in a barely audible murmur. Like a mechanical angel of death, she swept down from the rafters, swooped in low over the viscous slime, and slammed me against the

concrete wall. Griffin-like talons popped wide and seized my reflexively-raised forelegs. Baleful green eyes stared into my red ones as her razor-sharp wings spread wide above me. She screamed in a mad cry that matched the machine scream I'd heard in the depths twice before, "GIVE IT TO ME!" The green glow of the Core illuminated her maw.

Fortunately, I was a unicorn. S.A.T.S., four magic bullets to the head. Four point-blank blasts rammed into her and ripped her synthetic, dark gray hexagon-patterned hide to expose the wire-like muscles beneath it. I'd hoped that, if I had to kill her, it would be quick and clean. Weird fluid, hydraulic or coolant, sprayed my face as she reared back. The left side of her face was a tattered and torn nightmare. Her metal talons ripped lines in my armored forelegs as her wings slashed wildly, gouging a two inch deep slash in the concrete right beside my head.

She landed, covering her ripped face with a hoof; no matter how much of her body was machine, she'd been a mare once. I knew what it was like to have half your face torn off. Still, no time to let up. I raised the carbine and fired as fast as my horn could pull the trigger, at the same time dropping back to all four hooves. Her bladed wings snapped up, the bullets sparking as they deflected off the metallic vanes.

When she started to move, I threw myself aside, rolling in the muck as she flashed through the air and slashed where I'd been standing an instant before. The razor edges of her wings caught the carbine trailing behind me, tearing it out of my grip and slicing through the barrel, then tore through the concrete wall and flung out chunks of debris. I slammed a magazine of shock rounds into Vigilance as I rolled up to my hooves, the dark fluid covering the floor dripping off me as I crouched and fired. Letting out an inequine cry, she launched herself back into the air, avoiding my next shots as I tried to follow her.

Damn it, I needed light. The wan glow of the terminal and her eyes simply wasn't bright enough!

I could hear the whoosh of her wings as she powered through out of sight above me, and I kept moving, following the edge of the room. I tried to pick her red bar out from the others; it certainly had to be the one moving the most. Still, it was difficult to-- I felt a little pink pony and tiny blue Glory thump my brain and sent me diving forward as Dawn divebombed where I'd been standing just

moment before. Green energy crackled as the muck fountained around her. I twisted, flailing as I brought up Vigilance and used S.A.T.S. to plant a single electrical shot in her tattered face. The blessedly blue blast made her eyes flare.

"Stop!" Dawn shrieked as she gave a little hop, and I half scrambled, half backstroked away from her as her wings tore into were I'd come to rest. "Shooting!" she snapped as I continued flailing in the general direction of away as she pounced again. "My!" I turned, kicked off of the wall, and slid across the floor as she leapt once more. "Face!"

I came to a rest under one of the metal tables, rolled onto my side, and shot her once again with another glowing blue bullet, the shining blue mixing spectacularly with arcing green. A clean hit to her chest this time, but she didn't seem to care at all; she jumped up onto one of the tables. *Don't stop moving* was all I could think as I used the legs of the tables to pull myself out of the way as her wings swept out and ripped right through the steel. Floating out Duty and Sacrifice, I blasted up wildly. I wasn't sure if the heavy rounds would penetrate the tabletop -- heck, I wasn't even sure where I was aiming -- but it'd be better than nothing.

I suddenly ran out of table, kicking off of the last legs to slide out and using my fully recharged S.A.T.S. to ram a barrage of eight rounds into her armored torso. The heavy dueling pistols punched deep into her mechanical chest, and more of that dark fluid leaked from her body as she fell back. "Mistress!" she cried out as I came to rest, reclining in the coppery ooze.

Suddenly there was an electric crackle and buzz as, one by one, the rows of lights came to life. Dawn flew back, landing on the far side as power was restored to the room.

And to the silver rings.

They were everywhere. They dangled from partly constructed cases. They were hanging on dozens of racks overhead, wired up for testing. And as the equipment glowed to life, the Enervation scream suddenly became much clearer and distinct. That counterpoint inside me wasn't enough to keep it at bay. As I lay there, I felt something inside me spasm. A burst of sour blood poured out of my mouth as I felt the scream grow.

"Weakness of flesh... " Dawn replied as I rose to my hooves... and realized I stood in a field of gore. Red fluid, not water but the liquefied remains of the ponies who had sheltered here, coated me.

They'd come into this solid, reinforced room expecting shelter from bombs and bullets. With the death of the bombs falling, the rings' Enervation fields had spiked and transformed them into this oasis of gore. They'd never rot. They could only liquefy.

"Fucking Hoofington!" I screamed as I scrambled to my feet and blasted at her with my pistol and revolvers. Now Dawn was the one flying for cover as I staggered, fighting against the starmetal rings that threatened to liquefy me. I stomped after her, not sure what was my blood and what was the blood of all those unfairly slain as I fired again and again.

Then a purple mare smacked me hard upside the head. I needed to get out and get to my friends. If I killed Dawn and was liquefied anyway... There were other doors, larger powered doors likely for moving inventory to and from the warehouse. I raced to the access, firing behind me at random as I slammed a hoof against the 'up' button.

Two talons grabbed my shoulders as the door slowly ground up, and Dawn slammed me against the wall. "Oh no. You're not leaving now. You've kept the Goddess Cognitum waiting long enough!"

I didn't talk. I pressed all three of my guns to her steel body with my magic and pulled the triggers. Three explosions sounded around me as she screamed and slammed my face into the wall. Focus. Endure. If a little white pony inside me could handle her soul being ripped to pieces, I could handle a little pain. Sparks shot down my horn as it was rammed into the concrete wall again, but I fought every instant to keep it together and pull the triggers again.

She shoved, but I was stronger. A little orange mare gave a whoop in my mind. I pushed hard off the wall and rammed her spine into the table behind us. Her talons tore free of my shoulders as I twisted around to face her. "I! Am! Sick! Of! Goddesses!" I roared as I reared and slammed my hooves into her over and over again. Every impact rammed her further and further into the twisted table. Her razor wings shredded the metal as I slammed her back. The bloody wings became tangled in the metal. Her body was rent and wrecked, dripping machine fluids into the gore. I pushed the guns to her head as I stared into her glowing eyes...

And saw myself...

I was a mix of machine and meat. She was a synthesis of synthetics and steel. Both of us wanted the Wasteland saved. Both of us had ponies we'd loved. We'd suffered. We'd fought. We'd killed. Two

sides of the same coin. Were it not for my friends, what would have stopped me from becoming just like her? She was mad, corrupted... violated... my enemy... a pony who nopony, not even her daughter, would blame me for killing.

Be kind, a tiny yellow pony inside me begged.

Fierce red eyes stared into blazing green for a minute longer, and then I pulled away as she shrieked in rage and frustration. My magic hit the 'down' button on the door as I passed out into the warehouse. The door dropped behind me as I staggered away from the room. Razor wings ripped into the door as I staggered for the exit. I saw Deus, Lacunae, and Boo on the hillside above me. Rampage, her body falling apart and regenerating even as mine was, came beside me and helped me out of the Enervation field. We collapsed together before the massive machine.

"Triage... is going to be... disappointed... " I muttered as I struggled to regenerate my injuries. Despite it all, I smiled. I hadn't killed her, and that might come to bite me in the ass later... but lying there in the Hoofington rain, the blood being washed from me... I suspected that Twilight and her friends would say I'd won. Heh... I could have hopped on my broadcaster and... wait...

I sat up with a groan, staring straight ahead. My broadcaster! Why hadn't I thought of it while I was inside? I could have told everypony about--

The Goddess's smugness enveloped me, and I imagined a condescending pat on my head. Of course, we were going away now. And she wasn't going to let me go back into the Enervation field now that she'd let me think of that. Oooh...

'I hate you... ' I thought viciously at the consciousness in the back of my mind.

'Lesser beings usually do,' she replied grandly. I muttered to myself as we returned.

* * *

"I certainly hope that your expedition was fruitful," King Awesome murmured over a cup of tea when I returned. I hadn't yet met up with P-21 to decide what had to be done; presumably, he was somewhere out discovering the inequities of the Society. If he was in trouble, it would simplify matters considerably.

"I met Dawn," I said as I looked into my cup of boiled weeds,

having no interest whatsoever in drinking it. He sipped delicately from his glowing cup. “She’s a robot now. And crazy.” He set the cup back on the saucer. “I didn’t kill her,” I added as he stared at me with his deep blue eye. “I think I could have, but I didn’t.”

“I see… ” he replied calmly. “Might I ask why?”

“Kindness,” I replied lamely, gazing back into my cup. I set it down on the table. “I looked into her and saw myself. Just as stubborn. Just as committed. Just as monstrous and… ” I’d be going to say ‘manipulated’, but one of the Goddess’s chains yanked tight and stopped me. “Should I have killed her? Would it have been kinder to just finish her off?”

“You say you saw yourself?” King Awesome asked politely. I nodded and he asked, “Would you want to be spared, or slain in her position?”

“I’d… ” I closed my mouth. Pushing past my nasty self-destruction habit, would I want to be saved or destroyed? The idea of simply being done, of my life ending, was terrifyingly seductive. And if I’d been answering a few weeks ago, I’d have happily suggested it. But now… now I hoped that I was a better pony. Somewhat. “I’d want my friends to save me,” I admitted softly.

“Then you made the right choice,” King Awesome said tiredly. “If you can be true to your own ethics, you can be a better pony.”

“What about raiders and slavers?” I asked archly.

“The former have no ethics, just survival of the fittest. The latter is the application of economic acumen to the former.” He gestured to the marbled walls. “When my friends and I came to the Hoof, we found dozens of different tribes of raiders. Varying kinds of scum who’d carved out their own little niches. Kill one band, and another would pop up. With the exception of Meatlocker, there weren’t real settlements. But when we encountered the ponies living here in Elysium Gardens, I knew that they could be more. Because they *wanted* to be more. They pretended and imagined that they were descended from blue-blooded aristocracy. Doubtless a hoofful were, but most were of no different stock than raiders you’d find anywhere else.”

“So what changed?” I asked with a frown.

“Ethics.” He took a sip of his tea and then looked at me. “They had pretenses of grandeur. I used those pretenses as an excuse to improve their behavior. By getting them to adopt ethics, the idea that they had to hold themselves to a better standard, I was able to

curb the backstabbing inclinations they possessed. You ask about the difference between serfs and slaves? Well, one is that I stressed that the serf was to be protected. Slaves were disposable, both in labor and in war; just go out and take more to replace any losses. Instead, the idea became that serfs were lesser ponies requiring the Society's help."

"How is that more ethical? You're saying that you're better than the serfs!" I retorted.

"As opposed to raiders who merely kill whomever they wish?" He shrugged. "I never said it was perfect. But Equestria, in ancient times, used a form of serfdom that created the aristocracy of Canterlot. Eventually we grew out of it, and the aristocracy became a superfluous holdover from older days. Eventually, the Society will follow the same path." He looked at me evenly. "That is why I agreed to meet with you, Blackjack. Too many would see what we've done and dismiss it as simple slavery. It's not. It may not be much better, but it is better and will become much better still. I hope that you can recognize what my friends could not." A shadow of tired sadness crossed his face.

"They didn't understand?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "To them, I was just another slaver. Worse, a sellout. The Society fed thousands with our plantations, and that increased the demand for slaves." He rubbed his brow with a hoof. "Big Daddy, with his gang of thugs. Crunchy with her weapons. Keeper with his bottlecaps. Zodiac with her books. All of us certain that we knew the best way to fix everything."

"And Dawn, looking for her one solution," I murmured.

"So you *do* understand her," he chuckled. "Yes. She was always so certain that if we just found or did that one magical thing, everything would be better. The Enclave. Or the Core. Or something." He sighed and shook his head again. "Well, she was the youngest of us."

"She's a lot like me... " I murmured, dropping my eyes. He studied me for a long moment, then smiled.

"She is. But you're a bit more. After all, you still have your friends." He sighed again and leaned back in the wheelchair. "Excuse me, Blackjack. But I'm feeling very tired again. Perhaps we can continue this later?"

"Sure," I said as I rose to my hooves and slipped out of his room of pre-war curiosities. As he began to softly doze, I closed the door

quietly behind me.
"Blackjack!" Grace shouted down the hall as she stormed up in a furious huff. Two power-armored ponies followed, another unicorn behind levitating a fifth pony. "What is the meaning of this?"
"Huh?" I said as I sat down on the floor.
She waved her hoof at the two armored ponies. Slowly, they moved aside to reveal that the levitated pony was a battered P-21, his hooves tied and his mouth gagged. "You sent this pony to spy on us! We caught him in the plantations, interfering with an overseer."
I felt a dangerous calm overtake me as I began to think about how best to neutralize the two former Rangers.
"Of course I did," I replied calmly. "And I want him back, and healed," I added firmly.
"Don't bother trying to deny--" Grace began, then blinked at me absently. "You... I... I see... " She pondered a moment, then turned to the unicorn levitating P-21. "Don't just stand there. Let him down, untie him, and get him healed at once." The pink unicorn mare blinked in shock, and then bowed her head and began to remove P-21's bonds. Grace took a deep breath and turned to face be once more. "Okay... why... ?"
"I wanted to see how you really are. How you treat your serfs, and if I needed to do something about it," I replied evenly, relaxing a bit as P-21 was freed.
"Do you know what you've done?" Grace said as she started to pace back and forth. "Half the society believes that you came here intending to do that in the first place! Now they'll think you sent your stallion here to make contact with the serfs to foment rebellion."
"He was molesting her," P-21 spat with venom as he glared at Grace. The pink-maned unicorn cast a spell, mending some of his contusions, but he pushed her away and snarled at the white aristocrat. "That was why I stomped his head in!"
Grace flushed. "I heard it was consensual, not forced... " Grace muttered.
"Consensual! When you control every part of a pony's life, where *precisely* does consent come into it?" he spat at her, making her back up as he trotted over to me.
Grace turned even redder before she looked me boldly in the eye. "If that's the case, he'll be stripped of his authority. But understand that things are very tense right now, Blackjack. Every member of

the society has armed themselves, and they're bringing in more bodyguards for your inevitable coup. There are suggestions that we should take hostages. Invite the Harbingers to deal with you. Poison you. Make some other attack before you act. I beg you to please consider this! I'm trying to keep everypony from getting killed!"

She looked on the verge of tears in her frustration. I sighed. "I don't want anypony to die either. Please believe that and pass that on. But I also can't do nothing."

Grace sighed and slumped. "I see." She then straightened and said sharply, "You understand that every minute I try to convince others not to act, I put my own wellbeing on the line. Try to conduct yourself more discreetly." She then turned and nodded for the trio to follow her back the way they'd come.

* * *

We all found a safe little corner on the roof where nopony could overhear us. Lacunae wasn't able to summon her shield spell to protect us from the rain due to her treatment by the Goddess... Worse, I couldn't explain why to the others. I couldn't even show my frustration! However, though it took me a dozen tries, I was finally able to get the umbrella-like rain shield spell from Twilight's book to go off and protect us from the drizzle... mostly. Well, wet manes were still better than being completely soaked through by the roaring downpour.

"So... what did you find?" I asked P-21, trying to copy Mom's 'no exaggerating' look.

He took a deep breath and let it all out in a huff. "It's not good. Not as bad as Fallen Arch, but still pretty bad." He pushed his hat back. "There's probably two or three hundred serfs. They're fed decently enough, I suppose... better than out in the Wasteland. But there's no doubt that they're getting the short end of the stick here. They can't leave, have no say in the work they do, and if they refuse to work then the overseers can whip them, lock them up in steel crates, starve them... anything to get them to do their job."

"How long do they work?" Glory asked with a small frown.

"More than half the day. They get a small break for meals and sleep. Then it's back to work." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Once a week they get a break. That's when most of the maintenance is done down in the plantations."

“Seems pretty civilized for the surface,” Glory replied. “It’s not really all that different from sky farm settlements in the Enclave. Not a pleasant life, but safe.”

“Oh yeah? Do your supervisors force workers to fuck them?” P-21 asked as he rounded on her.

“Some do, yes. And when they’re caught, they’re punished,” Glory answered him plainly. “Is that the case here?”

P-21 sighed and looked away. “That’s not the point. Most of them do it, no matter what the rules say.”

“Are the overseers nobles or serfs?” Glory asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?” P-21 countered.

“My point is that you seem utterly determined to condemn this place because of your own personal experience. I understand why,” Glory said evenly as she gestured towards the golf courses and the shacks spread out across them. “But I look at what these ponies are doing, and while I think it’s not perfect, it’s absolutely a step in the right direction.”

“They work until they’re dead. Colts and fillies prepare food. Old ponies do what little chores are left over. How is that a step in the right direction?” P-21 growled.

“They’re not killing and they’re not getting killed. That seems like an improvement to me,” Glory said before looking at me. “I had a very long and very interesting talk with Prince Splendid while you were out. It seems that he is of the opinion that the Society can do more, far more, for the Wasteland. Right now, a great deal of their wealth is being squandered on pointless celebrations. Like this ‘Grand Gallumping Gala’ or whatever it’s called. He thinks that, with a little effort, the Society could expand as they did in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Provide security and safety to the Hoof.”

“On the backs of slaves!” P-21 snapped.

“Serfs. I think the distinction is quite clear,” Glory countered. “And I think that a Society that is actually working to stop real killers and raiders is doing far more good.”

“Well, I’m with blue boy,” Rampage replied, then grinned. “Not because I care about the serfs or slaves or whatever. The Society are a bunch of asses. I want to kill them on general principle. So freeing the slaves or serfs... eh... ” she gave a little shrug. “Whatever. Most of them are probably fucks anyway.”

“Thank you for the barbarian perspective,” Glory replied primly.

“Oh, trust me. It gets better.” Rampage grinned. “I have it on good

authority that if we put the right ponies in charge, we will make a fortune. Caps. Weapons. And, not that it matters to me, but memory orbs about a certain 'Project Horizons'? Thought you might like that."

I felt an electric jolt pass through me. "What?"

"Yeah. Apparently the Ministry of Morale had a field day with a guy named 'Goldenblood' and yanked out all kinds of cool memories. They're yours if you're interested," Rampage said with a little shrug.

Scotch Tape scowled thoughtfully. "Is there any way we can do all three? Like... make things better for the worker ponies, help the Wasteland, and get the memory orbs?"

"Kid, you pull that off and I'm nominating you to be in charge," Rampage replied. She then looked at me. "So, what's your call?"

I had *no* idea. In fact, I was started to feel a little panicked. It was like Mom throwing a pop quiz at me! "I... don't know. I just came here for an airship! I didn't... " I stammered as I stared at P-21, then at Glory, then at the others. "Why is everypony looking at me to decide this? Remember Flank and 99?"

"I also remember Riverside and what you created there," Glory replied with a small smile.

"And you helped in Chapel," Scotch Tape added immediately.

Rampage shrugged. "While it was pretty decent already, you didn't do Meatlocker any harm either."

I sat back hard, looking from P-21 to Glory and back again. I had no idea which would be the better choice. P-21 had a valid point, but then, so did Glory. Maybe Rampage was right and I should simply take what I could get and leave somepony else to pick up the pieces? "Can we... um... can we see which option shoots at me first? That's usually how I determine if something is good or bad." Glory and P-21 groaned almost in unison. "What! It's a perfectly fair indication!"

"You could choose none of the above?" Scotch Tape offered.

P-21 shook his head. "Blackjack won't do that."

"Of course not. She's going to help protect the Wasteland," Glory replied firmly.

"No, she's going to help the serfs!" P-21 snapped back.

"Serving the Wasteland is much more practical and the greater good!" Glory retorted, not backing down.

"Why you stuck-up little Enclave... " P-21 began. I felt the sense of

panic rising inside me, seeing my friends fight like this. I really didn't know which one I should support. They were both right!

Rampage let out a scornful, "Oh, will you two just shut up and fuck already? I'm sure Blackjack would love that too!"

Glory and P-21 gaped at each other, at her, and then at me all in perfect unison. "With her?!" blurted P-21 as Glory gave a scandalized, "With him?!" They concluded with a simultaneously disgusted, "Gross!" The utter similarities between the two had me burst into laughter, and I reached out, grabbed them both in a headlock, and pulled them into a huge hug.

"I love you guys," I said, laughing and crying at the same time. I was sure P-21 would angrily shake me off and grump and groan, but to my surprise, I felt the tension in his muscles draining as I held him close. Scotch Tape and Boo, not wanting to be left out, immediately jumped in as well.

Rampage pouted. "Oh sure... No hugs for... " she started to mutter. Then she stopped in alarm as we all looked at her. "Oh no... no no no... Don't you... ack!" she shouted as all of us, even P-21, piled atop her in a massive heap. The sheer ridiculousness of it all had us all laughing together.

At that moment, perhaps completely by luck or perhaps by a bit of divine providence, I glanced up at Lacunae. The massive purple alicorn watched us all. Her face was not blank or anguished; her expression was of simple, heartfelt happiness. For an instant, I was reminded of that memory orb I'd seen so long ago and the image of Celestia and Luna in that tent. For an instant, I wasn't looking at some freaky mutant lackey of a snide and vicious 'Goddess' but at a true alicorn. One loving and accepting and nurturing of us all.

Finally, the moment passed, and we let the striped mare up. I smiled and wiped my eyes. "Well... in any case... I think that King Awesome has everything in hoof here. I'm not going to do anything until he... "

But my voice trailed off as I saw a strange earth pony approach. Behind him were dozens more ponies trotting up onto the roof. None of them were armed, but all of them looked quite unhappy at the moment. He was a ghoul, which was impressive enough; I hadn't thought that the Society would allow a ghoul in their company. The gray undead stallion had one of the most intricate and stunning manestyles I'd seen on anypony, ghoul or not. A pair of violet glasses completely obscured his eyes as he approached

with a velvet wrapped parcel on his back.

"Blackjack, I presume?" he said in a voice just oozing sophistication, despite the undead rasp. He nudged down the glasses enough to look at me with filmy purplish eyes.

I frowned as I slowly approached him. Grace, Splendid, and Charm all struggled to push themselves to the front of the crowd, each wearing expressions of outrage and shock. "Yes?" I asked as he pulled the velvet parcel from his back and started unwrapping it.

"King Awesome has passed away," he said as he revealed a golden crown decorated with diamonds and rubies. I gaped, unable to think as he jammed the crown atop my head. "All hail Queen Blackjack, new leader of the Society! Long live the Queen!"

"Long live the Queen," shouted the crowd, minus the contributions of Splendid, Grace, and Charm. "Long live the Queen!" My friends stared in amazement.

I sat there, my shield dropping in shock and the rain dumping down on me. I said the only words that I could think of at a time like this: "Oh, fuck me... "

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 56: Royal Pains

"Stay back! I just had myself groomed!"

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" I shouted for the third time at the gray ghoul with the magnificent coiffeur. At least this time we were doing it in the privacy of King Awesome's bedchambers. Seeing the body was the first thing I'd demanded. I'd imagined that maybe this was some kind of joke or trick or… something. Seeing him lying in repose on his bed…witnessing the relaxed expression on his face…Damn it! I'd liked the old stallion. He'd been the first pony I'd ever been able to talk to about Goldenblood and the O.I.A. He'd understood me! And now he was gone and I was Queen and…"Tell me you are fucking kidding me," I pleaded.

"Oh please. As if I'd waste my good humor on such tacky comedy," he said in fancy elocution. "The king named you his successor soon after you departed. And shortly before he did."

I levitated the crown off my head and set it in my hooves. "But… why? It doesn't make any sense! We only talked for a few hours and…and…I don't deserve this!" I said as I looked at the ring of shiny, gaudy... tasty-looking... metal in my grasp.

"Of course you don't. Honestly, do you think you were given that because you're suited to rule?" the ghoul said with a disdainful sniff. "King Awesome gave you rulership of the Society to save it from itself." He made a dismissive gesture with his hoof. "A powerful pony was needed. In fact, we sent a representative west a week ago to contact the Stable Dweller and bring her here. And if not her, somepony in Tenpony Tower. Or perhaps the celebrity DJ Pon3, if he could be tempted to mitigate his rantings. Even Red Eye, if none other could be arranged."

Excuse me? I inspected my friends to see if any of them were following this. Universal bafflement. Good. It wasn't just me, then.

“I think you better explain in a bit more detail,” Glory said, trotting up beside me and hugging me with a blue wing. “It’ll help Blackjack get past the ‘I don’t deserve good things’ shock if you tell her how this will bite her in the tail later on.” Then she frowned at the ghoul. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe I got your name.”

“Hoity Toity. Equestria’s finest fashion aesthete,” he said proudly, clapping his hooves together. A colt scampered out from a corners of the room with a red threadworn pillow and set it down just as Hoity sat. The ghoul glanced at the boy and gave a peremptory wave of his hoof. “This is Epicure, my assistant.”

The lime green colt rubbed his darker, pine-green mane. “Actually, my name’s--”

“Tut tut! No time for that now,” Hoity said impatiently. “I need you to go downstairs and find out what the Oranges think of this recent development. And see if you can find what Charm is saying to the Trotters. Also, find out how Grace is taking this. Oh, and if you can mention to Splendid that Blackjack seems quite composed, that’d work wonderfully.”

The colt worked his mouth a moment, as if trying to remember all that, then sighed and nodded. “Yes, sir.” He turned and walked for the door, glancing back at the rest of us with clear reluctance before slipping out. Composed? I wasn’t composed! The only things keeping me from hyperventilation were my cyberpony lungs!

“A good lad, for raider stock. Has a talent for finding things out informally. Not as skilled as Paintie was... but I digress.” He glanced at me and smirked. “My talents at critique don’t end with the latest styles. Before the war, I made it a habit to learn the mercurial tastes of Equestria’s elite and made sure my fashion reviews suited their attitude…within reason of course. Then, during the war, I devoted nearly as much time to looking over information for dear Rarity as I did setting the trends for the autumn season. Information gathering is quite complementary to fashion work.”

We were talking about his past now? It seemed surreal. Maybe this was all the Goddess messing with my head some more? Or maybe I’d finally snapped? “I can’t imagine that was useful after the bombs fell,” Rampage said with a wicked little snicker.

“On the contrary! My discerning eye made acquiring the best goods far easier,” he said with a gesture of wounded pride. “Perhaps we should abscond to somewhere... else,” he said with a look over at the sheet covered body. “I can give you the history of this place.”

I didn't respond; it was better than nothing, so I nodded. We stepped out and proceeded through the grand structure. Mostly grand. It was clear that entropy was nibbling at the faded velvet curtains and the patches of threadbare carpet. They'd done their best to hide the wear, but even the Society wasn't immune to reality. They just lived outside it.

As Hoity walked, servants and society ponies made way, bowing deeply to me, then whispering as soon as we passed. The ghoul ignored them, saying in grand tones, "The original Society were those stallions and mares who escaped the plebeian slaughter at Blueblood Manor. We'd invested significant resources in the Prince's shelter, only to discover that it apparently didn't exist. And when the riot broke out…well…" he sighed and shook his head. "Fifty of us crowded onto the *Fleur* when the bombs fell. So overloaded and with the world collapsing around us, we found ourselves at a loss. Fortunately, the Elysium Gardens was not a priority target for balefire bombs or other attacks, and we put down here. The country club had been exceptionally fortified during the war and had quite an extensive stock of supplies for hundreds of guests. The staff, however, were in utter disarray. Some had fled to rejoin families, while others were simply in shock. The manager had committed suicide in her office. Very disagreeable. So we did what we did best--"

"Started bossing people around?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"Of course," Hoity said without a bit of shame. "Fancy Pants became our leader. We provided order when there was none. The waitstaff and servants who remained were very pleased to have us put things in some semblance of civilization. It was anticipated that we'd have to wait a few months for things to be set right. Maybe even a year." He sighed. "Quite ironic, in hindsight."

"So what happened?" Scotch Tape asked, the filly eager for the rest of the story. We travelled down a staircase, into halls where there was much hustle and bustle in preparation for the Gala tonight. Even a royal death couldn't stop that party.

"Well, we anticipated that the skies would clear and the pegasi would help us rebuild. In fact, we were counting on it." He glanced at Glory, who ducked her rainbow-maned head and looked at her hooves. Now I was the one hugging her as Hoity Toity went on. "When that didn't happen, despair set in. If it hadn't been for Fancy Pants, we'd have been undone in the first year. When the

radioactive snow cleared, we used the conservatory here to grow marginal crops while sending parties to find supplies around the Hoof. Things were…easier then. The savagery that you are so familiar with took time to evolve. Even so, though we managed our assets with care, when others came demanding we share them… well, violence was inevitable. But worse, there were elements within that thought they could do better. Fancy Pants was assassinated in his sleep by one of our own."

Hoity sighed, shaking his head at the memory. "Eventually, things decayed. Oh, there were still order and rules that made the Society the strongest group in the region, but the manners and principle were lost. Some even turned to…egghhh…" He trembled, lip curling in disgust. "…cannibalism. Not from necessity, but by choice. At that point, I had become the wretched creature you see before you and relocated to Hoofington Memorial Hospital. It wasn't until King Awesome assumed control of the Society, slew the most savage elements, and imposed expectations of dignity and respectability that I returned and assisted him. It's been two generations since then, but there are still some elements that cling to…uncivilized ways."

Maybe it was the cannibalism comment that snapped me out of my daze, or possibly it was that we finally arrived in the immense ballroom that served as the throne room. A huge, ugly, gilded chair sat on a dais at the far side of the room. My seat, for the moment. "You talked for five minutes and still haven't explained why giving me a crown keeps all of you alive," I said crossly. "If there's this much plotting going on here, maybe it'd better to just wipe you all out after all. Given half of what I've heard you've done, it'd be no less than you deserve."

"Oooh!" Rampage grinned broadly at me. "Is that on the table? Tell me it's still on the table. I will sex you right now if we can smash them all into jelly!" Hoity looked a little nervous as he pulled out a lacy white fan and began waving it briskly before his face.

Glory sniffed disdainfully at Rampage's glee. "Oh, don't be ridiculous. Blackjack wasn't serious. Were you, Blackjack?" she said with a smile in my direction. When I looked back blankly, she frowned and amended, "About wiping them out?"

I blinked, flushed, and quickly added, "No. Of course not," then turned from her and muttered under my breath, "Mostly."

Rampage let out a feigned sneeze that sounded a lot like,

“Whipped!”

“Only if she behaves,” Glory replied with a smile at me that made me wish the floor would swallow me up…why was this happening now? Why at all? Damn it! All I’d wanted was to borrow an airship!

Hoity stared at all the rest of us, fan frozen and jaw dropped. “Nevermind them,” P-21 said brusquely with a wave of his hoof. “You were telling us why Blackjack was chosen?”

The ghoul blinked his filmy eyes and seemed to get back on track. “Mmm yes. Well, you see, there was no lack of plots and schemes for when King Awesome passed. Some of the guards were receiving almost triple their pay in assorted bribes to act or not act when it happened. I’m fairly sure it would have come down between Charm and one of the lesser aristoponies, provided the serfs didn’t revolt and try for a mass overthrow.”

Then he snapped the fan closed and pointed it at me. “But there were no plans in place for you being given the throne.”

“But…I…he…” I stammered, then tossed the crown as hard as I could at the ground. It pinged, bounced off the floor, flipped end over end, and landed neatly on Boo’s head. “He used me!” The blank mare made a better queen than I did!

Hoity sighed and shook his head. “Oh please. On a scale from one to ten for being used, this barely rates a three. Three point five, tops.” I shot the ghoul a murderous glare, and he snapped his fan open once more, turning away with a cough. “I understand if it is upsetting, but if you think it through, I think you’ll see things aren’t so bad.”

“Go on,” I growled.

He took a slow, deep breath. “Nopony planned for you to take over like this. Oh, there were contingencies for if you *forced* your way into power. That would have made the elements unite momentarily against you. But openly being given it? Never. So at the moment, a dozen or more conspirators are rearranging their plots and schemes to put themselves into power. Bribes have gone for naught. Weapons intended against guards are suddenly inadequate to face you and your friends. Even the serfs, who’ve been rumbling for years, have gone silent, waiting to see what will happen next.”

“But that’s hardly a long-term solution. It just paints an enormous target on Blackjack’s head!” Glory protested crossly.

I sighed, rolling my eyes a little. “It’s okay. I’m used to it.” Maybe I was the best candidate after all…

"If she had any interest in actually staying put and ruling, certainly," Hoity said with a casual wave of his fan before leaning towards me. "You aren't really planning on giving up your quest, or search, or whatever for this, are you?"

"Of course not!" I retorted. Not like the Goddess would give me a choice. I could feel her will poking and tugging at my mind.

"So you leave. But before you go off on your merry way, you're going to need to pick somepony to run things here," he said with a sweep of his hoof at the throne room, once a ballroom for the resort.

"How is that any different from them just assuming the throne directly?" Glory asked with a frown.

Hoity sighed, "Because if they kill Blackjack's duly appointed regent, then Blackjack herself will return in a full fury of death and destruction. And out in the Wasteland, Blackjack has proven to be remarkably resilient against attack. Here, one might get lucky and assassinate her, but out there roaming the Hoof? Unlikely."

"So all Blackjack's gotta do is appoint somepony to run things here, and she can go on her way?" Scotch Tape asked.

Hoity sniffed delicately, "A succinct appraisal."

"Good! Now you can pick somepony who can make things better for the serfs here," P-21 said with the first real smile I'd seen since we'd arrived.

It was short-lived as Glory countered, "Now wait a minute, P-21. The serfs already live much better lives than almost everypony in the Hoof. Think of the good the Society can do for the entire region!"

Rampage snorted and rolled her eyes. "Please. These bastards couldn't do good with a gun to their head. Just take whatever you need and move on. This place isn't worth your time."

I felt the Goddess pressing on my skull. Unicorns. I should use the Society to send unicorns to Maripony! An alliance with the Goddess! It'd facilitate her creations of new male alicorn stock once LittlePip arrived with the book.

I staggered and swung my head back and forth as Glory said sharply, "Blackjack, tell him that it's better to help the many rather than a few who are already better off!"

"I…but…" I tried to think.

"Blackjack, you promised!" P-21 snapped, his eyes hardening. "Or is this part of the plan?"

“No. I…” If everypony could be quiet a second and let me put two thoughts together.

“These people, with a little reform and effort, have the ability to help more ponies in the Wasteland than any! If you’d stop being so overemotional and apply a little reason, you’d see that!” Glory said in exasperation.

P-21 huffed, his eyes narrowing to very shooty slits. “Oh. So I’m being hysterical, huh? You sound just like the ponies in Medical! I’m just a hysterical male, is that it?” P-21 snarled at her.

“Come on, Blackjack. They have a frigging menagerie!” Rampage snorted.

“Oh, we closed that gaudy thing down years and years ago,” Hoity countered.

“Okay, fine. Had. We should still stomp them into jelly. I know Big Daddy would approve. Hey! Make him regent!” Rampage crowed eagerly.

“Certainly not. Only a Society pony would do!” Hoity retorted. Rampage began to grin murderously at the ghoul.

“You’re not thinking straight because of 99!” Glory yelled in P-21’s face. P-21 looked ready to tackle her! And I couldn’t think of way to stop them; they didn’t recover from bullets to the brain, after all. I was witnessing my friends tearing themselves apart before my eyes.

“Hey! You don’t get to bring up 99! You don’t know what they did to my daddy!” Scotch Tape snapped. “I think he’s right!” P-21 blinked and looked in surprise. Still, while Scotch had dissipated a little of his anger with her support, I could see he was one dismissive remark from exploding.

I wanted to shake, but my synthetic body wouldn’t! I wanted to breathe hard, but my body couldn’t. All I could do was twist up tighter and tighter within myself. I trotted away from the others. “Quiet,” I ordered. They didn’t notice as they continued to shout and jabber louder and louder. The Goddess was a thudding headache bashing at my brain. I grit my teeth as I stared at the throne at the far side of the ballroom, a goddesses-awful eyesore of gilt metal. I didn’t know if it was the Goddess or my own frustration and anger. “Everypony! Shut! Up!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

“Blackjack?” Glory asked from behind me.

“I beg your pardon?” Hoity blustered.

“Look, if you want me to start killing we can work

alphabetically…" Rampage began, reasonably.

I whirled on all of them, feeling a rage building up inside me. "Leave!" I felt the surge building more and more inside my horn. "Me!" I roared at all of them. "Alone!" I wanted to be somewhere else! Anywhere else!

And then the world disappeared in a lavender burst of light.

* * *

I crashed to the floor in Awesome's collection, smashing a table and scattering leaflets everywhere. The shock of the spell had momentarily silenced the Goddess's endless pushing and prodding. Lying there in the middle of the room of the stallion I'd shared tea with just hours ago, I clenched my eyes shut. Why me? Why leave it to me?

Was it all a scam? Maybe this was something Hoity was pulling. Or Cognitum. Or Dawn. Or…or some other higher scheme that put me right in the place I didn't want to be: in the middle of a moral mess. Or maybe this had been Awesome's desperate throw to try and preserve something not worth saving. It didn't have to be me. It could have been anypony powerful enough to hold the title but without reason or interest in actually ruling; I just happened to come along at the right time and be liked by him.

But that wasn't why this hurt so bad. I'd liked Awesome. I would have liked to have talked to him about the serfs. Find out how the Society could have done better. Speculated on Goldenblood. For a little moment, it had felt like I'd had a family again. Only this time, instead of being silenced by Looks and imperious parental tones, I could have shared my thoughts with him.

And he'd *used* me. He'd brought me into this room and showed me understanding and empathy and then he'd died and dumped his solution on my shoulders. He hadn't asked. He hadn't even told me. He simply made his plans with Hoity Toity and then kicked off to leave this mess in my hooves. And most galling of all: it would probably work. I wasn't going to wipe out the Society, no matter how much P-21 or Rampage wanted me to. And I wasn't going to stay here to rule, either; I was terrified of the responsibility of simply picking a regent. But I was also too responsible now to simply walk away.

Goddesses…for once I actually wanted the Goddess to take me over

and end this complicated joke that was my life. Then the urge to send unicorn peace envoys to the Goddess slammed into me like a ton of bricks. I even started crawling to the door to give the order.

Suddenly a horn dipped down from above and touched mine, and the impulse abated immediately. I slowly turned my head, looking up at Lacunae. For a moment, I was simply Blackjack again.

"Lacunae?" I asked as I looked up into the sad eyes of the alicorn, then looked around for memory orbs. "Keep back. I'm not ready to join the Goddess yet!"

"I know you're not," she murmured softly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. She wants you soon. She wants you in Unity, and it's all my fault."

"It's not your fault, Lacunae. It's the Goddess. If you wronged me, it was her doing. Not yours," I said as I looked away. The shelves full of memory orbs were empty. Also gone were some of the papers and articles that had been on the desk. Only minor artifacts remained, curiosities that wouldn't have told me things about Horizons. I'd wanted to look at the memories with Awesome, talk about what we saw within.

"It is my fault, Blackjack. It is all my fault, and before you or I are too far gone under her control, I have to ask for something I have no right to. Your trust," Lacunae asked as she closed her eyes. "Before I'm too far gone, I want…I need to show you something."

"Too far gone?" I asked in worry.

"The Goddess is readying herself. Anything that could undermine her…doubt…compassion…kindness…is being purged into me. I feel as though…like I'm an over-pressurized container. That I might explode. That all the swirling feelings and memories inside me are condensing into something volatile. But this time may be our only chance for me to show you this before the Goddess refocuses on controlling you," Lacunae said, her body shuddering. "Please. I need to show you."

"How do I know this isn't some kind of trick?" I asked with a scowl. It was true; at the moment I couldn't feel the Goddess scratching at my brain. Her attention was elsewhere…or was it? This could be some kind of trick. Like Awesome and…and…

What was the matter with me? Had I finally hardened to the point that I couldn't trust my friend? I looked up into her desperate, purple eyes. "Please, trust me," she pleaded. I stared into hers and finally closed mine.

"All right. I just hope it's quick, before the Goddess makes me

crown her as regent," I said as I looked back at her.

Lacunae pressed her horn to mine, and the world swirled away.

~ ~ ~

Well, this was new. I stared at the dark, riot-armored mare as she walked through a blackened strand of forest. The charred trunks still hissed steam, despite the green snow lying around them. I hovered as translucent as a ghost behind her. Across from me stood the spectral Lacunae. "So is there a reason I'm not experiencing this first-person?" I asked as I watched the black-armored mare trudge through the forest towards a ridge far above.

"This is not within you. It is a memory within me," Lacunae whispered.

"Something the Goddess crammed into you?" I replied. She didn't answer, though. Instead, she bowed her head as we floated after Psalm. I could trot…well, float…around her but if I tried to move away I was swiftly dragged back. "Where the hell is she going?" I asked as I watched the mare trudge to the top. I could hear her PipBuck ticking like crazy. The rads had to be through the roof here. "Lacunae, what is going on?" I asked in concern. I saw tiny spectral motes floating into Lacunae.

Then Psalm crested the ridge and stopped at the lip of the valley, and I saw it: a massive, hulking block of a building beside a luminescent hole full of chaotic, flickering light. Glowing fissures radiated out of it, and a malevolent polychromatic glare filled the valley beyond. Things…glowing, protoplasmic things…crept along those deep ravines. Scattered amongst them was a patchwork of sundered foundations, the outbuildings of the base itself ripped to shreds. From the buckling in the roads, it looked as if the entire area had been shaken like a bedsheet and left rumpled.

The structure itself appeared to be a hulking industrial building reinforced with thick steel beams and concrete walls to withstand almost anything the enemy could throw at it…almost anything. Not even the enchantments of the M.A.S. had spared it from colossal devastation. The building was intact, but the ground around it had partially collapsed and left almost a full third of it hanging out over the sinkhole, the gargantuan structure still in one piece only due to ridiculous Equestrian overengineering. Along the side facing the ridge, in scorched purple letters, was the word 'Maripony'. The

name Twilight had given Big Macintosh in a blurt of panic…

"What the hell is she doing here, Lacunae?" I asked, staring at the devastation around us as she moved through the ruins, avoiding the malevolent glow by ducking through the blasted foundations and skirting along the rumpled terrain. She never stopped, and I couldn't blame her. Either that suit had some superb radiation shielding or she was triple-dosed on Rad-X, or both. She didn't even slow when she levitated out packets of RadAway, draining them as she moved. I could see the glowing malformed moving things. Some had the vaguest canine appearance. Others were bloated ponyish shapes that wandered mindlessly.

"This was Twilight's last reported location. She's come here to kill her," Lacunae replied softly.

I gaped at the transparent alicorn. "But…but Partypooper was a lie! Garnet set it off. She admitted it!" I spluttered as Psalm moved to a delivery dock. The twisted, broken hulks of skywagons lay fused in a heap like some perverse sculpture.

"Serve Luna and you will be forgiven," Lacunae whispered. Psalm checked the dock's door into the building, but it was locked.

I expected bobby pins but was in error as I watched Psalm apply a wad of plastic explosives to the lock and move aside. "But Luna is dead!" The blast echoed across the eerily howling valley. "This is insane!"

"It doesn't matter. Serve Luna and she will save you. The order was to execute the Ministry Mares and other compromised members of Equestrian command," Lacunae replied hollowly as Psalm went inside and we were dragged through the wall after her. Once inside, the radiation dropped to slow ticks. A rate that would kill in days rather than minutes. Her horn flickered, and one by one the clasps of the respirator were detached from the helmet.

What lay beneath more resembled a ghoul than a pony. Only a few tattered wisps of white mane remained, and her black hide was pale and riddled with sores. Bloodshot eyes stared wearily out as she tried to levitate another packet of RadAway to her mouth, clutched her stomach, and vomited a slurry of red and orange. Again and again her body hunched over as she retched but brought up nothing. She collapsed on her side before the foul pool, sucking in gulps of air and coughing wretchedly.

"She came here to die," I whispered softly.

"No. It was in service to Luna," Lacunae insisted. "To serve was to

earn forgiveness for sins."

"How? How does this earn forgiveness?" I asked as I gestured at Psalm with outstretched forehooves as the black unicorn pulled herself to her hooves. One up, she steadied herself, then proceeded to move through the balefire-gutted structure.

"You know," Lacunae answered solemnly.

I watched the exhausted mare move onward, dying but devoted to action. Every now and then, the memory around me blurred as she struggled to maintain consciousness. I saw myself racing on, exhausted and terrified of sleep, till I finally had arrived at Yellow River. Till I had crippled an innocent filly after nearly crushing Dusk's head. Of course Psalm wasn't looking to die. No more than I was being self-destructive while swearing to never attempt to commit suicide again. It was a delusion I knew only too well.

"Did Twilight even survive the bomb?" I asked as Psalm moved deeper into the structure. Here, there wasn't as much char. The bodies were intact, mostly soldier ponies with nowhere to flee. "I mean…she's in Unity." I lowered my eyes. "Sorry. Stupid question."

Suddenly, Psalm entered a corridor that wasn't just intact, but lit! The emergency lighting flickered despite the gaps in the wall. From somewhere came a sharp, hysterical screaming. I'd heard screaming like that…the pain…it was the scream of a mare getting her cutie mark burned away. Psalm levitated her sniper rifle, checked the magazine loaded with explosive rounds, and peered down the hall, slowly sweeping the weapon. I remembered its enchantment allowing Psalm to see through solid objects.

She then looked down and froze. The gun clattered to the floor, her bloodshot, yellow eyes wide. "No. It's impossible…" She slowly backed away, the expression of horror growing. "What…what unholiness…"

"What? What is it?" I asked Lacunae, but she didn't answer. So I poked my head through the floor. I was a memory. What could it…

I stared down into an enormous room of vats and glowing blue flesh. There'd once been six of the great open tanks, but two had ruptured and filled the floor with purple and green sludge. Only my experience in Horizon Labs came close to the thing I saw below me. It was nearly impossible to tell where the undulating flesh ended and the metal began. A chaotic storm of blue energy flickered and flashed over the living, magical mass, occasionally coalescing into the shape of a twisted, agonized mare.

I watched in horror as a frantic peach-colored unicorn mare in a tattered white labcoat clung to the railing of the catwalk. A blue tentacle of magic wrapped itself around her torso and pulled. “No! No! Celestia, no!” she screamed, clutching with such desperation that the catwalk started to groan. But the tendrils pulled relentlessly on. The mare’s screams took an even higher pitch as her limbs broke and she was wrenched from the walkway and into the blue sludge. She flailed her hooves, but instantly her broken legs took on the consistency of soft wax. The peach hide melted away into the great blue mass. Elsewhere, pieces of flesh were being drawn together: wings, limbs, heads, and horns, forming slowly like budding plants before my eyes. The creation of alicorns, some blue and others green.

Then I was yanked back through the floor because Psalm was running. Though dying from radiation poisoning, Psalm refused to let it stop her. The hallway smeared into a blur as her recollection broke down, but she pulled herself back together and pushed on. She seemed to know the layout of Maripony well enough; I supposed she’d memorized the plans from her time in the O.I.A. She pushed her way into a lab marked ‘Experimental Weapon Development’, around which were strewn thousands of pieces of junk, talismans, and half-completed weaponry.

She lifted a targeting talisman, went to a terminal, and started typing. Her years in the O.I.A. had clearly involved more training than just shooting things. I watched over her shoulder, then looked over at the ghostly Lacunae, who kept her face averted. With focus that would do P-21 proud, she ignored the blood dripping from her nose and mouth. She connected the talisman to the terminal, linked to the MASEBS network, used an O.I.A. backdoor, password ‘Littlehorn’ and…

Hoofington Megaspell Command.

“Dear Luna…” I breathed as I watched in horrified fascination. The network informed her that the facility was locked down due to EC-1101, and Psalm gave a frustrated sob, wiping away the blood and sweat from her ashen face.

Then I heard it. The whisper of the Goddess, growing stronger with every passing second. “Come to me. You’re dying. Let me save you, Twilight. I can save everypony now.”

Psalm gave another sob as she typed furiously. “No. You’re not Luna. I don’t know what you are, but you’re not her!” she

whispered furiously as she typed. Every attempt to override the lockout ran into the same wall. “Luna, forgive me and take my soul. Forgive…please forgive me…I serve you, Princess Luna!”

She managed to get into a monitoring program, then snuck into maintenance, and finally into manual discharge. ‘Warning! Megaspell primed. Manual discharge not advised. Target?’ She gave another sob and smile as she turned the talisman over and began to type very carefully a string of numbers and letters written on the back.

Then she hit Enter. The targeting talisman turned from a milky white to a blood red. She gave one more sob and smile. “For you, Luna.” She tapped a button and relaxed with a look of bliss.

The screen flashed. ‘Manual discharge of Megaspell overridden per EC-1101 command. Discharge aborted.’ The talisman returned to its milky white. Psalm stared at it for several seconds.

Then the Goddess whispered, “You…You don’t belong here. What are you doing?! Why are you trying to kill me? I can save you! I can save everypony! Just like Twilight and her friends did.”

“You are not Luna!” Psalm screamed, flinging the stone away as she scrambled back into a locker. “You are…a thing! I have seen true Goddesses, monster!” She swore as she looked at the bottles and ate a tablet of Buck, sucked some RadAway, and healed herself with a potion. Then she continued poking through experimental weaponry, looking at the crates’ labels closely.

“You come from outside. I can see your memories…” the Goddess said sympathetically. “I can feel your torment. I know that feeling…”

Psalm clutched her eyes, pressing her hooves to her head. “Out! Get out!” She returned to motion, mumbling. “Blessed Luna, full of strength, be a shield against the darkness and the nightmares. Be my silent protector against the darkness and our enemies. Grant me your mercy and protection,” she prayed aloud as she went from one to the next, trying to drown out the Goddess. Then she saw one crate, then smiled. “And empower me with the might to strike down your enemies.” She flipped the lid open and stared down at a strange device nestled in padding with a half dozen green orbs flickering with a rainbow sheen. ‘Balefire Egg Launcher’ was written on a label next to technical information.

“You’re insane,” the Goddess whispered in horror. “Who are you? What are you thinking?”

Psalm lifted the device from the padding and loaded an egg. “I serve Princess Luna. In service, I am forgiven for my sins.”

“You’ve killed…I can see it…You monster! Stay away!” the Goddess screamed, and glowing blue tendrils pushed up through the floor, waving wildly as they tried to catch Psalm. But she pulled her helmet back on and started to move, the B.E.L. floating above her. It might have been the Buck, or perhaps the RadAway and potion, but I believed sheer zeal kept her moving so quickly down the halls.

“Oh, Celestia…I can see…I can see your thoughts! I can see… Manehattan? Canterlot? Hoofington? All gone?!” the Goddess wailed, and I heard the ghostly wails of other ponies already linked in Unity. “There’s nothing left out there but death, and you’re trying to kill me? I can save your life! Just like how I just saved Twilight’s! Please!”

“I don’t care about my life!” Psalm shouted. A half dozen glowing tendrils streaked down the hall towards Psalm. She raised the B.E.L. and shot the flickering green egg, then leapt to the side through a hatch. She’d barely closed it before another explosion shook the building. From the rumbling and rippling, I could guess that part of the building was falling into that sinkhole. “Only Luna can save my soul!”

She pulled herself to her hooves and kept moving. “Your soul? You’re worried about…that…” the Goddess trailed off in horror. “Oh…you…you’ve killed…”

“Yes, I’ve killed. For Luna! All for Luna! So it’s all right!” Psalm cried as she moved through another hatch. “I’ve hurt so many! Killed so many! But I serve Luna!”

“Psalm…that’s your name, isn’t it?” the Goddess said so softly, so compassionately that I wondered how it would be possible that she’d ever been this way. “I know what it’s like to do bad things. I know what it’s like to need forgiveness. Please, don’t do this.”

“I came here to kill Twilight Sparkle,” Psalm spat as she staggered into some industrial works and started making her way down. “That was the order! Kill the Ministry Mares…”

“That order was a lie. You didn’t come here to kill Twilight…”

“Shut up!” Psalm whimpered as she kept moving down through the works. “Luna…protect…strength…” Psalm muttered in terror.

“You came here hoping that Twilight was alive…so she would kill you,” the Goddess said around us as we floated after her.

“Quiet!” Psalm sobbed as she finally came out above the enormous blue mass with its budding alicorns. She pointed the B.E.L. down at the mass. “Luna…Luna…Luna…”

“I know what it’s like to do bad things too. I was once under the effects of something evil, but the bad things I did came from me. I know what it’s like to want forgiveness so much it hurts.” Psalm stood on the edge, looking down as the blue motes coalesced into a blue mare’s head. “I can give you the forgiveness you seek, Psalm. I can save you, if you let me. If you don’t pull that trigger.”

Psalm’s glow flickered. “I just…wanted…to serve her…” Psalm whimpered, and then dropped the B.E.L. to the catwalk. She pulled off the helmet as she sat at the edge. “I don’t want to die. I don't want to be forsaken! Not again! Luna was supposed to forgive me. She was supposed to make it all…all right…” She suddenly frowned and lifted the B.E.L. again. “No. I…I won’t lose faith now…I can’t…”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the Goddess replied. Then a blue tendril wrapped itself around Psalm’s throat. Her eyes bulged as she tried to aim the B.E.L. downwards, but more tendrils of magic curled around the weapon and twisted it away. Psalm’s eyes watered as more hooked around her body, starting to pull her downward.

“No! Luna…Luna…” she gasped. The B.E.L. went off, the ceiling exploding in green flame that rained debris down upon Psalm. Her mane alight, she screamed and thrashed wildly.

Then there was a crack and she was lifted into the air, blazing like a torch as her body hung limply, radiation and pieces of the ceiling showering her. “I will save you, Psalm. Whether you like it or not.” And with that, she was dropped like a burning doll into the blue mass. We fell with her, and suddenly Maripony disappeared in an endless sea of blue.

For a moment or an eternity, we floated there. Then the whispers started. Horrified. Shocked. Angry. “Murderer…traitor... killer… butcher…”

“No!” Psalm’s voice cried out as the blue grew darker. “I had to! For Luna!” A ghostly Psalm hung in the void between us.

“Luna would never forgive a monster like you,” hissed the darkness as it closed in around us.

“No! Please! You said you’d save me!” Psalm cried out as she looked round in terror and starting to scream as parts of her transparent body were torn away.

"And I would have, if you hadn't spurned my offer," the Goddess replied coldly. "But I think I can find something useful to do with you."

"Please! Somepony! Luna! Celestia! Twilight!" Psalm cried out in hysteria. "Help me!"

"You tried to kill Celestia," a pair of mares said softly. "We can see it in your thoughts."

"Twilight! Please! Don't let them do this to me!" Psalm begged as only her head remained. Then the disintegration stopped. For a moment, hope bloomed in her agonized eyes.

Then the darkness was silent for an age before Twilight whispered, "You killed Pinkie Pie…"

And then Psalm screamed and screamed till only Lacunae and I were left. I wasn't sure if the memory had ended or not as I stared at my friend. "It's…my fault," she said quietly.

"Your fault?" I countered as we floated in that vasty blackness. I tried for a grin and failed. "How is anything your fault?" But then she looked at me, and I knew. The pain in her dragon-slitted eyes was every bit the same as the pain I'd seen in Psalm as she'd been ripped to pieces in a vengeful Unity. "No…"

"Yes. It's all my fault. The Goddess. Your pain and misery. What happened to you on the *Seahorse*. Dying in Hightower. Even your link to the Goddess. It is all my fault," she said as she trembled and closed her eyes. "When you connected with me in the Collegiate, I took the opportunity…in my selfishness…to put pieces of myself inside you. You were so selfless and they were so small that I convinced myself they could not be harmful." She sniffed and bowed her head. "But I was wrong. I've seen my memories poisoning you with every passing day. Corroding your confidence. Filling you with the self-destructive need that I've felt for two centuries."

I stared at her, not comprehending. "But…the Goddess?"

"I was the poison. The first raider. The monster most ponies couldn't imagine. The Goddess initially wanted to save Ponykind. She still does, but I gave her the hatred. I was the original sin!" she wept, shaking as she hugged herself.

"Huh?" I struggled for some explanation or reason. I was a master of self-abuse. "You can't know that, Lacunae. It could have been something in the Goddess, or the magic, or even Twilight herself." I didn't want to imagine it, but I couldn't accept one pony as

responsible for every wrong the Goddess had committed. “The Goddess is making you feel this way.”

“The Goddess didn’t make me contaminate you with my own memories,” Lacunae retorted as she looked at me in anguish. “Would you have allowed yourself to be violated and tormented if I had not filled you with my own urges for my own relief?”

I actually laughed, bringing her up short. “Probably.” She paused and gaped at me as I smiled at her. “Come on, Lacunae. This is teenager-grade angst. You’re blaming yourself for the Goddess? Why don’t you take credit for the last war while you’re at it?” That made her sob even harder inside my mind. I shook my head. “You can’t take the blame for my actions either. What I did is my own fault. Not yours.”

She trembled and grit her teeth a moment before she spat out, “But I can take the blame for the Goddess’s control through Unity.”

Now my smile disappeared. “How’s that?”

“When I transferred my memories to you, it created a link between you and I. That link has grown since. No amount of taint would have connected you to myself and Unity!” she cried and shook her translucent head. “Through me, the Goddess is connected to you.”

I stared at her silently. I knew where this trail ended. “I see. Why are you telling me this?” I knew why. She was setting me up for this.

“Because, the Goddess plans to use you as I was used and this must not happen. The only way to sever the connection permanently is for you to kill me. I cannot do it myself,” Lacunae said as she closed her eyes again.

My answer was without hesitation. “No way.”

“You must!” Lacunae replied. “When we break this vision, you’ll have only a few seconds to kill me. Do it, and all the emotions transferred into me will return to Unity. The memories I’ve infected you with will be broken!”

“It’s not an option,” I countered almost casually.

Something in her broke, and she swelled up, turning black, her eyes blazing as her forehooves seized me. “Stupid cunt! What do you think you’re trying to save? I am nothing! Worthless! A collection of unwanted memories and useless emotions housed in the shell of a mare who murdered your ancestor! I am less than nothing. For once, do what is right and selfish and kill me! Save yourself! You can save countless more if you just end me.”

“No,” I answered calmly as I stared up at her.

She loomed over me, her eyes bright as balefire bombs. “You…I used you, Blackjack! I slipped the trash I couldn’t bear into you as the Goddess did into me! I gave you my poison just as I passed it to her! End me! Please!”

But I couldn’t, and wouldn’t. And she knew it too. She trembled, her eyes blazing with a harsh purple light as she quivered, then slowly shrank smaller and smaller, growing pitch black as she shrank to the size of a filly. “Please... ” she whimpered. “Why? I deserve it. Why?” she whispered as I embraced her.

“You’re my friend,” I replied quietly. “I can’t kill you. Not even if you want me to. Not even to help myself,” I said as I closed my eyes and nuzzled her mane, listening to her sniff and weep softly. “I’m sorry. I’ll help another way if I can, but I won’t help you destroy yourself.”

“Why?” she asked as she pulled away, tears on her cheeks.

“Because I’m a monster too, and you didn’t let me die when you could have. Friends don’t let friends die. Not when we have a choice,” I said quietly as I petted her hair.

As we hovered there in the great black, I glanced up at a gargantuan blue head with immense blazing eyes and two green unicorn mares flanking her shoulders. Behind her, a purple-maned mare looked away, yet I could perceive the slightest peek of her eye watching us. I glared up at the four, daring them to make one comment of the scene. One insult. One unkindness…

They didn’t. The blue head turned away, then the two greens, and the darkness returned. It was a small mercy, probably one they’d purge soon to rid themselves of weakness. But for this second, I was glad for it.

~ ~ ~

When we were out of her mind and sitting side by side in Awesome’s collection, I rested my head on her shoulder. “Is there any one of us that isn’t emotionally screwed up?” I asked as I looked out the window and into the rain pouring into the reservoir. “I mean, is that just me? Or the world? Or what?”

“Boo, I think,” Lacunae replied quietly. “And it’s not just you. Everyone has their own share of pain. You’re just able to handle so much of it that it’s easier to share with you.”

I sighed and closed my eyes, listening to the distant hiss of the rain on the water. “Someday, I want one good day. A day with music and dancing and good food. Some time when we can all be happy. Do you think I can just command one?”

“I don’t see why not.” Lacunae answered. “Have you decided what you’re going to do with the crown?”

“Toss it in the lake,” I grumbled, then sighed and met her amused gaze. She was actually smiling. “Okay. Probably give it to Splendid. Or Grace. Or Charm. Or just throw it in the middle of a crowd and run for the nearest exit.”

Lacunae was silent for a long moment. “The Goddess is going to take you over soon.”

“Maybe.” I stared out at the gray waters and the hazy distances beyond.

“She’s purged herself of her doubts and mercies. She’s determined,” Lacunae said as she closed her eyes. “She’s going to take the black book and then kill LittlePip.”

“Maybe,” I repeated calmly.

“And you can’t warn LittlePip or tell anypony. And neither can I.”

“Maybe. P-21 and Glory are a lot smarter than me. They’ll notice,” I said, as much to myself as to Lacunae. That is, if they weren’t at each other’s throats over who they thought I should give the crown to.

“And the Goddess plans on turning you into the next Lacunae,” Lacunae murmured.

“You never know. I might get lucky and be assassinated before she has her chance,” I said with a small smile. Finally I sighed and closed my eyes. “Well…no time to waste here.”

I turned and started for the door when Lacunae said, “Blackjack?”

“Mhmm?”

“I wish you and Psalm could have been friends. Before Psalm joined the war,” Lacunae said regretfully. “I think…I think you would have made her a better pony.”

I snorted and smiled back at her. “Of course not. I would have gotten us both stinking drunk, tattooed like zebras, and thrown in jail.” She sighed, but smiled and shook her head with a smile of resignation.

* * *

The funeral of King Awesome that afternoon had four mourners: myself and his three children. All the rest of the attendees clustered on the edges, watching with shifty eyes and whispering softly to some of their fellows while giving hard glares to others. My EFS had a dozen red bars in the crowd, but short of halting everything and sorting out the hostiles, there was little I could do. Glory, P-21, and Rampage kept an eye out for me so I could focus on Awesome's departure. The blue duo had struck a temporary truce not to bug me about what I should do.

We'd gathered out on the shore of the reservoir. His body had been wrapped in sheets and placed within a rowboat filled with wood. Bottlecaps were heaped around his hooves and golden bits gleamed in the rain where they'd been sprinkled on his body. White lilies, actual flowers grown from some serf-worked plot, lay wreathed about his head like a crown. A wooden sword rested on one side, an assault rifle on the other, and a shield at his feet.

On his chest, hidden beneath his crossed hooves, was my own contribution: a memory orb of Goldenblood at the Grand Galloping Gala. I'd wanted to share it with him, and in this small way I could. I didn't listen to Hoity's pomp and ceremony, and from what I could tell I wasn't the only one. Most here were just going through the motions, playing at dignity and respect. Of his children, Charm seemed completely desolate while Splendid adopted a stoic poise. Grace's eyes shone with regret.

Finally, the body was pushed out onto the reservoir, and I gave a nod to P-21. He raised Persuasion and fired it as true as I knew he could, an arc of smoke lancing up towards the gloomy skies before plunging back down at the old rowboat. A moment later, the incendiary grenade went off and the boat burst into flame. For an instant, all eyes were on the craft as it drifted further and further out on the water. I'd expected it to sink quickly, but to my surprise, and strange relief, it stayed afloat as it moved off into the darkness as a lone torch. The crowd dissipated soon after that, leaving just a dozen or so together.

"Come on," Scotch Tape said to the weeping Charm. "Let's get you inside, Your Highness." Charm gave a snotty sniff and nodded. Rampage started to follow, but I gave a shake of my head. Lacunae and P-21 both moved in her path. Rampage adopted a surly look. As they departed, I noted the uneasy looks of Grace and Splendid. Were they seriously worried that I'd give Charm the crown out of

pity?

I waited till the flames finally began to gutter before I turned away. It was all pretense. These ponies lived in a dream world. Out in the Wasteland, a pony was lucky not to end up as carrion. These ponies created a whole display of disposing of one of their dead, one they didn't even care that much for. Could they do better, and if so, then what could I give them? I mulled this over as we trotted back to the resort with an escort of servants around us.

"Death to tyrants!" screamed a stallion behind me as I felt a prick in my shoulder. I turned, looking at one of the unicorn servants whose magic glowed around a carving knife stuck an inch or two into my body. Chaos broke out as there were yells and screams, but these dwindled away as everypony realized I wasn't screaming in agony. I could feel the tip of the blade caught in the augments under my hide.

Splendid reared dramatically beside the unicorn attacker. "Don't worry, Lady Blackjack! I'll save…you…" Splendid started to say as my friends looked at him incredulously. My look was more… shooty. He slowly dropped back down to his hooves as he looked at the blue unicorn and then back at me. Things seemed to have skipped off script. "Um…guards?" Still nothing.

"Seriously?" I asked, levitating out the knife, looking at Splendid. When he didn't reply, I glanced at Grace in time to catch her eye roll. I looked at the servant. "I've been shot at, blown up, burned, had my limbs ripped off, replaced, ripped off again, and you use…a knife?" I levitated the blade to my mouth, flicked off the blood, and then began to eat it from the tip. Chewing each bite deliberately, I maintained my stare, and since I didn't have to blink, I could do it a very long time. Finally I had only the bottom of the knife and the grip remaining.

"Do I get to splatter him now?" Rampage asked eagerly.

"I…um…" the servant muttered, dropping his gaze. "They promised my family would be paid and set free from our contracts."

"A pity story…" The striped mare sighed. "Great. There goes my fun."

I swallowed and pushed the truncated knife back into his hooves. "Take that to whomever put you up to this and tell them that they're going to have to try a whole lot harder to kill me."

"Um…sorry…" the servant asked weakly as everyone who didn't know me stared in amazement.

"Aren't you…going to kill him? That is what typically happens to assassins," Splendid said in clear confusion.

"For any sane, normal pony, sure," Rampage said with a roll of her eyes. "But for the Saint Blackjack of the Wasteland…" She pointed a hoof at me and said sourly, "Do you have any idea how many ponies she's stopped me from killing just because she bought their sob stories? I swear. The most potent weapon against Blackjack is a good tearjerker."

Grace smiled at me in approval as Splendid seemed to work it over in his head. Grace looked at her twin coolly. "Well, let's hope the next assassination attempt is as much a show as this one."

Splendid returned her cool glance. "Certainly you don't believe this was me?"

Grace adopted her brother's voice, "Don't worry, Lady Blackjack! I'll save you!" Splendid immediately flushed and put on an air of bruised dignity. I lagged behind a little and gave Hoity a look.

"Am I going to have to deal with this a lot?" I asked the ghoul sourly, gesturing back at the 'assassin'.

"Until you pass the crown, most certainly. And the longer you're here, the more serious the plots will become. That was quite an amateurish attempt, if it truly was an attempt at all. But I'm sure the pressures on you will become more intense as time goes on." The ghoul let out a rusty sigh, and Rampage looked back at us as he said, "For a time, King Awesome managed to temper the worst elements, but I'm afraid his solution won't last long."

"Now you see why I hate these fuckers," Rampage growled. "Sure, Reapers kill each other, but we're honest about it. These assholes take pride in stabbing each other in the back."

The gray ghoul sighed as we stepped back inside after everyone else. "Crude and barbaric, but accurate. I never quite understood why, either. I knew the rich and famous well before the bombs, and there was never this degree of severity with their intrigues. Oh, there was the occasional assassination attempt, but it was never so…recreational."

"It's the Hoof. What do you expect?" I replied, wondering if that were true or not. Was all this killing and scheming the result of the Eater, or simply a local, brutal, phenomenon? "How much time do I have before things get out of control? In your expert opinion?"

Hoity pursed his lips, rubbed his chin, and looked at me. "By the end of the Grand Galloping Gala tonight. If you don't move by then,

I fear they might start targeting your friends. At that point, I'll be heading back to Meatlocker."

"I think that sets a record for shortest reign in Equestrian history," Rampage said with a smirk. "Just pick someone at random, get all the loot from this place you can, and go. Don't listen to Glory and P-21. They'll get you sucked in with politics and morality debates and all kinds of other shit. Flip a coin. Toss it at random. Take the airship and go."

I rubbed my chin. "I'll think about it," I finally said, doubtful I'd be able to do it, but it was so tempting.

* * *

"Being Queen sucks," I muttered telepathically to Lacunae as I lay on King Awesome's bed -- technically my bed now -- hugging a pillow and sulking. I'd sent my friends away after they argued for half an hour about what I should do. Thankfully, neither Glory nor P-21 had played the friend card yet. I'd sent Glory to find out more about Grace and P-21 to learn about Splendid. Rampage would do whatever she damn well pleased. "Seriously, everything I have going on and I have to…to play at being Queen? This is foalish shit…and when *I'm* the one saying that, you know it's bad."

Lacunae sent a telepathic chuckle from the museum, where she was watching the ponies readying the *Fleur* for our eventual departure.

I'd spent an hour inspecting the subterranean plantations. The Stable-Tec testbeds were amazing; I can only imagine what stables had been rich and extravagant enough to have entire orchards growing underground in perfectly secure environments. The Society had cleaned everything up for my arrival. Not a whip in sight, and every serf looked like they'd been given a bath and an extra meal and commanded to smile at the 'regent'. They'd actually sung a half-hearted song as we'd walked through.

Then somepony had taken a shot at me. A bit more serious than a knife. The sniper pony had missed the first shot by luck, but a serf near me had been wounded. My EFS gave me the direction and my S.A.T.S. helped me target the mare's head. Four magic bullets had streaked up to her position at the mouth of a vent. One had gotten lucky, punching right through her eye and out the back of her skull. I didn't correct the onlookers on their assumption that I could kill with a thought from a hundred yards away.

P-21 had found a bomb under the bed when we'd returned; he'd disarmed it. Hoity's prediction seemed more and more accurate, and with this great big party being prepared there were so many ponies running around that I couldn't keep track of who was coming and going. One thing was for sure: eventually, they'd target somepony I cared for.

There was a knock on the door. "Yes?" I called, floating out Vigilance and loading AP rounds.

"I wanted to speak with you, Your Majesty," Grace said smoothly.

I sighed and rubbed my brow. Keeping the Goddess back, dealing with these annoyances…and now this? "Do you have to?" I whined.

There was a pause outside. "I suppose not, but I would appreciate it."

I closed my eyes. Well, if she tried to kill me, that'd winnow down my choices, wouldn't it? I opened the door with my magic. Grace, wearing her spectacular gown, entered with caution. "You don't look so good, Your Majesty."

"I've got a lot going on," I replied acidly.

She walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed, looking at me. "I can sympathize. It looks like I'll have to flee this place soon."

"Why do you stay at all?" I asked as I rolled onto my side. "These ponies are crazy."

She looked mildly insulted, but gave a small shrug. "They have something rare in the Wasteland: luxury. Most descend from common raider stock, pretending to be well bred and exceptional. They're not. We're pampered and spoiled, wasteful and living off the toil of others." She sighed and shook her head. "Well, once it's clear that I will not be your choice, I'll have to head to Tenpony or…elsewhere. There are individuals who won't want the risk of me becoming a spare."

"You're counting yourself out already?" I asked, curious.

"I always knew I was the weakest candidate. Charm is more… sympathetic. Her age. Her manners. Or if not her, Splendid can give you far more than I can. He's long wanted to invest our excess in the Hoof. His successful foray into the Fluttershy Medical Center, for instance. I never would have thought of that. Father favored me, but…" she gave a little shrug.

"Splendid said he wanted to extend your father's life," I recalled as I pushed myself up on the pillows.

"Of course. He was least favored. So long as Father lived, he'd have

a chance to maneuver into a better position," she said with a small smile. "You saw that horribly rushed attempt at gallantry outside."

I sighed and shook my head. "I hate all this political bullshit."

She looked amused, "Why? By all accounts, it's more civilized than the tactics of most of your enemies. It may be mentally taxing, and horribly frustrating, but when the battle is political at least nopony's going to be holding a town of foals to ransom. And politics is still a game with the highest stakes. Win, and you stay in power. Lose, and someone else takes what used to be yours."

"Politics doesn't show up as red bars on my EFS," I retorted sourly.

"I suppose," she said as she looked away. "I don't have as much skill at it as I should. Father always favored me but never named me heir. I think he was always waiting for Splendid to step up, or maybe he knew naming me would have put a target on my head instantly." She walked over to the window looking out over the reservoir. "He was never clear. Never straightforward. He would hint at his approval, or make little suggestions. He could change his mind whenever the political winds shifted. When he died…" she sighed and glanced at me with a small frown. "Well, his move was unexpected."

I considered the pale, blue-maned unicorn as she gazed out the window. Mother and I had issues, but I'd always known she loved me. And I never had to compete with a sibling for her favor. What would it have been like to have had siblings to contend with? "It was a surprise to me too," I said with a sigh.

She gave the ghost of a smile. "You should have seen Charm when she got the news. My, what a vocabulary." She shook her head and looked at me. "Have you thought about the Gala tonight?"

I needed a segue just as much as she did. "I'm no good at parties!" It was yet another thing in a growing list of things I didn't have time for. So meaningless in the scheme of what I was dealing with that it seemed surreal.

"You never had them in your stable?" she replied, curiously.

I laughed a little. "I was security. It was my job making sure that nopony was having sex in the bathrooms or raiding Medical for party favors," I replied with a sigh. "I can count the number of parties I've been to on my hooves."

"Your friend Lacunae said she'd handle your accoutrements. That just leaves dancing." I blinked slowly at her, and she smiled politely at me. "You have no idea how to dance, do you?" Grace asked with

a small cock of her head.
"Dance? Ponies dance at parties?" I replied, only a bit facetious.
"Oh dear," she said as she slipped off the bed. "Come on," she said as her horn glowed. A phonograph in the corner whined to life, then dropped the needle to the record.
"Come what? What are you doing?" I asked as she took my hoof and tugged me off the bed.
"I'm going to teach you a few dances so you don't look like a complete fool tonight," she replied. "And trust me, there are ponies who want to kill you with embarrassment if they can't kill you with bullets. In fact, there are some who'd find that great fun."
"Every second, Rampage's suggestion seems to make more sense to me," I muttered as the music began.
"Hush," Grace replied with a smile. "If you can fight, you can dance. It's just movement in unison. It's as easy as one, two, three…"
Dancing was one of those things other ponies did. Yet…I thought about how I'd learned music from Roses and Octavia, and magic from Twilight's primer. Maybe I could learn this? Bit by bit, she walked me through the steps of a waltz. One two three, pivot, one two three, pivot, one two three spin, bow, repeat. It was all patterns, timing, and repetition. Grace slowed down to match my awkward pace and sped up as I became relaxed with the motions. She then moved into a back and forth variation, a formal dance. I must have looked like an idiot, and I said as much, but she just smiled and kept me going.
If teaching me to dance was an incredibly convoluted way to get the crown, it was working.
We stopped after a minute, she enjoying a bottle of purified water and I munching a ruby. "Does it hurt?" she asked as she looked at my metal forehoof.
"Huh? Being a cyberpony?" I asked, and she nodded. I gave a little smile as I raised the limb. "Not really. Not in the sense you think of. I don't know everything, but apparently they turned down my ability to feel pain. So, what I feel is like a memory of feeling things. Like when you get a leg cut off. Even when it's gone, and you know it's gone, you can still feel it there." She wore the oddest expression. "What?"
"I've never had a limb severed," she replied delicately, sympathetically.

"Oh. Right. Sorry. Stupid thing to say," I muttered, then rolled my eyes. "Anyway, no. It doesn't hurt. Not really. But I can't feel anything else. I don't have a heartbeat. I don't feel blood rushing through my veins. Don't get short of breath. Don't feel a whole lot of things. I've got a few very precious nerve endings in my hind end that I'm very grateful for, and that's about it. It takes some real extreme stimulation for me to feel much at all."

She blinked, her eyes popped wide, and her face immediately assumed a rosy shade. "Ah. I…I didn't know that."

I gave a little smile. "You know, back in 99, I never really appreciated my--"

"Blackjack!" she blurted with an exasperated half smile. "There is such a thing as knowing too much!"

"Ah." I blinked and grinned. "Sorry." I looked at her for a moment with an odd sensation and said, "You're descended from Twilight Sparkle's brother, right?"

"If Father was to be believed, yes. Why?"

"Well…If I'm Twilight's descendant, and you're the descendant of her brother, what does that make us?"

She hesitated a moment, opened her mouth, closed it again as she thought a little more. "I believe it makes us cousins several times removed. Hardly a relation at all, really. More of a coincidence," she said matter-of-factly, but then saw my stare. "What is it?"

I gazed at her and then threw my hooves around her. "Cousin! I have a cousin! Three cousins!"

She struggled in my hooves. "Several times removed!" she reminded me in a gasp, but I didn't care. I had family…okay, it was one step above a complete stranger but still, family! "Need air!" she wheezed desperately.

"Sorry!" I said at once, releasing her and grinning a little sheepishly. "I just…I never had much family."

She laughed and shook her head. "I'd been told how unpredictable you are, but I had no idea." But I'd gone from laughing to crying at the same time. Her smiled melted to one of concern. "Blackjack? Are you…are you okay?"

I wanted to tell her so desperately, but the Goddess's prohibition clamped down tight. "It's just…my life," I said with a sniff, a chuckle, and a little sob. "Times like this, I really wonder if I've lost my mind. I got so much to do, so little time, and here I am dancing and giddy that I've found someone I can call family, no matter how

far removed. It seems almost…surreal."

She sighed and looked towards the reservoir. "Yesterday, I was terrified you were going to level everything. Today, I'm giving you dancing lessons when I should be doing everything I can to undermine Charm and Splendid…because tomorrow, I might be quietly pushed out the gate, killed, or running for my life."

It isn't always about you, Blackjack. I huffed as well, lying back on the bed, staring at stars painted on the ceiling. "Is there something about Twilight Sparkle's family tree that insists we live interesting, messed up, adventure-ridden lives?"

"It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?" she replied with a sad smile. Then there was a knock on the door.

"Don't come in! I'm having wild royal rutting in here!" I called out in a surge of recklessness. Grace's eyes grew wide.

"You better not be without me!" Glory said, pushing the door open. My laughter died into a squeak as it was my turn to go red.

P-21 and Rampage followed her in. "Oh, she was being sarcastic?" Rampage quipped. When she saw Grace, her expression became smug. "Ooooh. Doing some personal interviews?"

"Dance lessons," Grace replied primly, all hint of embarrassment gone as she turned, bowed her head once to me, "Cousin." Then she turned and walked out. Oh, she was good.

"Dance lessons?" Glory asked.

"Cousin?" P-21 asked a second after.

I opened my mouth to start to complain, then closed it and shook my head. "Nevermind. What's up?"

P-21 and Glory shared a look, and then he said calmly, "First, Glory and I wanted to apologize. We know this choice is important to you. We're sorry for making it more difficult."

"I'm not, but that's just me. I still say you should auction it to the highest bidder. Maybe give it to the Society janitor. That'd be a hoot," Rampage quipped.

"I'll keep that as plan B," I said dryly.

Glory smiled. "Second bit is that the airship should be ready tomorrow morning. I think that, with you unplugged and Rampage as life support, we should make it. I'll coat the ship with clouds, and with some luck, we should be able to sneak right up to Thunderhead. If we pick up Father on the way, we should be able to see the councilor pretty much as soon as we arrive."

"I went over the ship once, and it looks like it's on the level. I'll

check again before we go," P-21 added.
"And I have a message," Rampage said with a smirk. "I was supposed to give it all sneaky sneaky like, but, eh. Fuck that." She shrugged. "Anyway, there's somepony that wants a trade. He wants the crown to go to Charm. In return, he'll give you ten thousand caps and King Awesome's complete collection of memory orbs." She paused and added, "He also said that if you give the crown to anypony but Charm, he'll give you a bag of crushed memory orbs."
Glory sucked in her breath sharply. "No, he wouldn't!" she gasped, looking at me in worry.
"I'm pretty sure he would," Rampage replied. "He acted a lot like me, so I'm pretty sure he'd follow through. I don't know if this is his own game or something he set up with the filly. Personally, I'd go for it. Maybe hold out and see if he can give you fifteen thousand."
"Blackjack isn't going to sell the crown!" Glory scoffed, then looked at me. "Right?"
"Ehhh…" The thought of Goldenblood's memory orbs, any one of which might have answers on Horizons, being destroyed chilled my blood.
"Glory, remember the part where we agreed we'd let Blackjack make this choice and support her one hundred percent no matter how we feel about it?" P-21 told the cyan pegasus. She immediately screwed up her face as she struggled with her own internal conflict.
"Sell! Sell! Sell! Sell!" Rampage chanted, earning a glare from Glory.
"Stop," Glory growled, getting a tongue stuck out at her by the striped mare. "What are you, five?"
"What are you, my mother?" Rampage retorted.
"I'm going to go looking for my daughter," P-21 said as he started for the door. I turned to watch him g--
"Red bars," I said as I drew Vigilance, staring at the door. "Five, right on the other side."
"I really miss my gun," Glory muttered. "Weren't there supposed to be bodyguards outside?" I floated my markspony carbine over to her. She looked at it skeptically, then bit down on the trigger bit guard and secured the gun in her hooves as she took cover behind the bed. P-21 looked at Persuasion, then joined her. I made three. The bedroom only had one entrance, for security.
"I never met a guard immune to bribes, bullets, or blowjobs," Rampage commented.

“Okay, I think I know what we need to do,” I said, a complex plan coming together.

Rampage rolled her eyes. “Oh fuck no, Blackjack. I’ve played nice and haven’t killed one of these fuckers all morning. You don’t get to take this fun!” She stepped out in front. “Come and get us, you mother humpers!” Rampage roared as she turned and charged the door.

Apparently, the challenge was enough for the door to be kicked wide, and four ponies, two high and two low on either side of the door, looked in with the fifth in the middle. They wore spiffy, brand new combat armor, two with markspony carbines and two others with anti-machine rifles. The fifth, who’d kicked the door open, wore a battle saddle with two miniguns mounted backwards. As one, they began to spray bullets into the bedroom. The bed didn’t provide much other than getting us out of sight.

Of course, nopony is ready for Rampage. The minigun rounds sparked off her armor as she charged the stallion in the middle and lowered her head, keeping the bullets out of her eyes. Like a ponified saw blade, she darted under the hind legs of the stallion and, once beneath him, gave a great heave. The stallion’s blood poured down on her bladed steel, and he clenched his bit in his dying spasms. Rampage twisted like a turret, and sprayed the two on the left with a barrage of minigun fire before the impaled stallion went limp.

“Catch!” she snapped, heaving again and tossing the remains on the pair on the right side of the door. The body crashed into the two, knocking them back out of sight behind the door jamb. Like a flash she was on them, kicking and stomping with her power hooves. I couldn’t see the damage inflicted, but I could see the spatter.

The first pair struggled to their hooves. “Tag!” she shouted in glee and launched herself after them. There was a scream, a wet pulpy noise, and the chatter of a carbine.

I glanced at P-21 and then at Glory as there was a soft chunky noise and a bloody pony was kicked back in front of my door. “Hoofington…rises…” he…or maybe she…it was hard to tell through all the blood…said weakly before falling over limply.

Rampage strolled over, standing in front of him, her armor coated in blood and viscera. “Really? That’s the best you can do?” She then looked at me, a length of purple intestine dangling to the side of her

face. “What?”

“You know, you might be really obnoxious, but there are moments I’m glad you’re on our side,” P-21 said in complete honesty before he approached the slain ponies.

“Aw, come and give me a hug!” she said, spreading her blood drenched forelegs wide as she grinned.

“And the moment’s over,” P-21 said.

I stepped past them and looked at the dead attackers. Definitely Harbinger gear. I looked down the hall to where my ‘guards’ stood staring with gormless looks on their faces. I cocked a brow as I stared at the four until one declared lamely, “I had to shit. I dunno what the other guys were doing.”

I rubbed my face. Luna save me, I had to get out of here! “All I wanted was an airship,” I muttered.

* * *

The attack had gone nearly unnoticed by the Society with all the party affairs being conducted. Oh, I had no illusions that everypony didn’t know, but something as simple as an attempted regicide was apparently nothing compared to a social affair. The Society wanted to get to their fun and games, and I was the four hundred pound cyberpony futzing everything up. The only silver lining was that over a dozen lesser plots and schemes had completely fallen apart, leaving Hoity quite amused and myself a worsening Societal irritant.

Lacunae was out picking something up. Glory was checking the dead Harbingers, looking for something that might identify how they had gotten in. P-21 was triple-checking everything that might explode, since that was the next logical course of taking me out. Boo lingered by Scotch Tape as she was chatting with Charm. And Rampage, after multiple demands for her to wash and not wear pony entrails as a fashion statement, sat boredly at my side as my ‘champion’. I’d publically declared that if I were killed, Rampage had full carte blanche to take my revenge on the perpetrators and left it vague as to if that meant the actual assassins, the Society, or everypony in the Hoof who’d looked at me wrong. Apparently, according to Hoity, it’d gotten three to abandon their plots for the time being.

That left me languishing in a stuffy conference room with Splendid

talking at me about the Society's finances. Apparently they were loaded; being one of the most reliable food suppliers for a post-apocalyptic wasteland brought in the caps. I'd also discovered that the Society didn't have a firm monarch when it came to the money. Profits were split into a mind-numbing array of shares, half shares, quarter shares, and eighths, and sixteenths. That was after expenses, which were surprisingly high. Still, the Society took their money and bought everything from guns to old world relics, facilitating trade.

Which meant, as nice as the thought was becoming, that I couldn't just trot off. I had a chance to affect the biggest player in the Hoof. I just had to decide which was the right answer…

"Splendid?" I asked as he started in on last year's figures. The white stallion paused beside a chalkboard with rows of numbers on it. "Why the fuck are you telling me all this?"

"As leader of the Society…" he began, and I raised my hoof, cutting him off.

"Not leader. Let's drop that pretense. I'm not leading anything. I'm picking the leader. That's the deal. And you're smart enough to know that. So why tell me all this?" I asked sharply.

He coughed, looking away. "You're a lot smarter than when we first met."

"I'm also a lot more metallic." I folded my hooves on the table. "If you want to give me a sales pitch, give it."

He took a deep breath, touching his chest, and let it out before saying bluntly, "You should make me your regent if you want to help the Hoof in a substantial way."

I met his gaze with my own stare. "Go on."

"Charm is too spoiled, and Grace too gutless, to understand what the Society could truly be. You saw what we achieved at the Fluttershy Medical Center. That's just a start." His horn glowed and he flipped the chalkboard to show a map of the Hoofington Valley. "With a few changes to the way the Society does things, we'll have the resources to secure not just our own territory but the rest of the Hoof as well. We can hire mercenaries to take the Paradise Mall back from the slavers inhabiting it and lease it to the Finders. That opens up trade with the pegasi at the Rainbow Dash Skyport. We can also take and secure the Ironmare Naval Base on the bay and distribute goods to the north end of the city. But more importantly, with pegasi and the bay, we'll be able to send our goods farther

than ever! We can reach Manehattan by boat or air infinitely faster than on foot or via caravans."

He looked back at me. "With Society supremacy, the Collegiate and Finders will have to abandon their petty little issues with us or be completely marginalized. With their help, we'll turn the Hoof into what it once was: a cornerstone of Equestria. Hoofington will rise bigger and stronger than before and help restore true civility to the surface."

Well. Somepony had aspirations. I had no idea if he could pull it off, but he seemed confident in his abilities. "So why is it Charm or Grace couldn't do the same?"

"Charm has no interest. If she had her way, the society would exist to serve her every whim. And Grace doesn't have the stomach to admit what it would take," he answered. "We've argued over this since we were foals. She'd rather waste time and energy trying to reform the Society. Kick out the bad apples, give the serfs more rights and shorter hours, even pay them a few shares! What would serfs do with money?"

I could think of a few things. "And your way?" I prompted.

"We've got more than half our security force keeping the serfs in line. If we employed more stringent methods to get them to work, that would free up ponies to secure the rest of the Hoof. More liberal use of explosive collars. Using chems to keep them working longer and more productively. More energetic recruitment." With a huff, he continued, "They come to us, begging for food and safety. The second we provide it, they work as absolutely little as possible. Worse, they grow resentful, and some even become threats. If we crack down harder, we won't need so many here."

"Civilization built on the backs of the oppressed. Wonderful," Rampage said with a snort. "Not even the Reapers are this messed up."

"We're not oppressing them. We're making them live up to the agreement they signed when they came to live here. We feed them and their extended family. That's far more generous than the Wasteland," he retorted.

"Right. Thank you. Well, I'll go ahead and ponder that for a while when I make my choice tonight at the Gala." I gestured towards the door with my hoof, waiting for him to leave. When he did, I buried my face in my crossed hooves. "Remember when my only concern was finding out what EC-1101 is? Or what Goldenblood had done?

Or just running away from people trying to kill me? Can you believe I actually miss those days? Really!"

"That's because you're trying to be the saint of the Wasteland and do better and all that. Personally, it's absolutely amazing to me. I would have killed half these fuckers in the first five minutes if I were in your horseshoes." She chuckled and then patted my back. "If it's any consolation, I admire what you're trying to do. I think you're stupid for trying it, but when is that any different?"

I turned my head enough to look at her with one eye, then re-buried my face in my hooves. It wasn't particularly comfortable. "How are you doing, Rampage?"

She blinked in surprise. "Me? I just got to slaughter five heavily armed ponies. I'm just grand." She grinned, and it lasted all of ten seconds before it slid off her face. She immediately took out a tin of Mint-als and popped two into her mouth before asking, "Do we have to talk about this?"

"No, not if you don't want to," I answered, but it didn't seem to put her at ease.

"I've watched some of the memories you've picked out of my head. Some of the stuff…like that doctor? And I thought Glory was boring…" She tried for a laugh, but it didn't last. "I don't know. I watch it and it's like…somepony else. It doesn't feel like me. Even if it's a part of me, it's like…like…"

"Like my cyberlegs?" I suggested.

"Yeah! Something that was stuck on to me," she said with a smile and a nod.

"What memories do feel like you?" I asked as I sat up.

She thought a moment. "Everything from when I was yanked out of that crater by those ghouls on. Sure, there are gaps, but I don't think of those memories as somepony else's." She cocked her head. "Why are you asking me this? Not that I'm not thankful, but don't you have something more important to do?"

I laughed, leaning back. "Oh, let's see! Get to Thunderhead and stop a biological weapon from being deployed. Stop the Harbingers, Dawn, and Cognitum from killing me. Deal with the Legate. Find out where EC-1101 is trying to go. Find out what Horizons is supposed to do. Oh, I think I have 'clean out Paradise' on my list somewhere, too." I rose to my hooves, not mentioning the most pressing…any second the Goddess was going to make all that moot by turning me into the next version of Lacunae. I started trotting

back and forth. “There’s a certain point where you have so much going on that helping your friends is the only thing that feels like it really matters. Save the Society. Save the Enclave. Save the Wasteland. I can’t even pick who’s the right person to give a crown to!”

“Blackjack?”

I kept moving faster and faster, “I wonder if this is how Twilight and her friends felt? Having a thousand things that hundreds of thousands of lives counted on and not being able to ever really get any headway because once you finish one then another pops up and there’s nothing you can do. So you push harder and think harder and hope harder while you’re terrified that at any second it’s all going to fall apart and you’ll find out how many you killed--”

Rampage started to look worried, “Blackjack!”

I continued on. This was a time where I wanted my heart thundering and to gasp for air. I needed to, but my artificial body refused. So instead, I felt myself grow even more anxious. “But no pressure! It’s not like thousands of ponies are going to die if I screw up! No, wait, they are! I mean I’m seriously trying to weigh if saving the lives of who knows how many in the Wasteland will be worth the suffering of hundreds of serfs! I mean, if it really does work and helps the Wasteland, then isn’t it justified? Which is the lesser evil? Can’t things just be easy? Like tell everypony trying to kill everypony else to just kill Blackjack instead. They can kill me and then they won’t have to kill each other and--”

She hit me. The blow knocked me right off my hooves and sent me sprawling. I didn’t get up, lying there, head pounding and staring at the wall. Then she trotted over, picked me up, and gave me a hug. “Idiot,” she muttered.

“Can’t I just die for them and call it good?” I whispered as I pushed my face into her neck.

“No. Dying’s easy. Killing’s easy. You never do the easy thing,” she said as she held me. My shoulders trembled, some of the dwindling number of muscles still wired to my brain betraying my anxiety. “I know what I’d do. It’d be selfish and quick and probably hurt a lot of folks, but I wouldn’t care.”

It took me a few minutes to relax. Finally I removed my legs from hers. “Sometimes, I wish I could be like you.”

“No you don’t,” she replied, soberly. “Because I would have quit a long time ago, Blackjack. I would have sold that program, or picked

a fight I couldn't win, or simply wandered off. I am not a strong pony, Blackjack. I can rip people to pieces, but ask me to do the right thing on my own and I just won't."

There was a rapid knock on the door and I clenched my eyes shut. "Unless one of my friends' lives is in danger, piss off! That's a royal command!"

Then the door was pushed open, admitting a frantic looking Charm. "Blackjack! They've taken them!" I closed my eyes, feeling the urge to sic Deus on this place rising by the second. "They took Scotch Tape and Boo! They said if you don't make me in charge, they'll kill them!"

I opened my eyes and fixed her with a gaze that could cut through stone. "Really?" I asked, hoping that this was some kind of sad, elaborate joke. She nodded, looking terrified. I closed my eyes a moment, fighting for composure before I let out my breath in one slow hiss.

Time to do this... "Right," I muttered, activating my PipBuck.

"Guess they thought you weren't going to accept the bribe," Rampage said with a sigh. "Pretty good guess."

"Maybe, but I'm certain they'll do it. I think they believe they can use me," Charm said in a desperate rush. I rose to my hooves and started walking. "I mean, I know I'm young, but I promise I'll do a good job doing whatever you want," she continued as she trotted along beside me. "I was going to get the guard, but they said they'd kill them if I did, so I came to you." We continued walking down the hall. Some of the guard ponies saw us walking and fell in line. Her panic gave way to confused indignation. "Did you hear me, Blackjack? They're going to kill them if you don't make me your regent!"

"Mhmmm," I replied as I stepped out the side door and started walking across the lawns. "Did you hurt either of them?"

"I…wha…you think I'm involved in this?" she gasped, pressing a hoof to her chest.

"Did you hurt them?" I asked again, and Charm shrank back. Clearly, this wasn't following her script any more than the "assassination" with the knife had. Maybe it was genetic...

"I'm certain *they* might have!" Charm blurted. "Those two didn't go quietly. And where are you going?"

I headed towards a large shed that looked like it'd once held lots of little white carts that now lay nearby like heaps of snow. "I'm

following her PipBuck tag," I replied evenly and saw her eyes grow a little wider. "Do any of you know what I've put up with today? Do any of you know what my week has been like?! I've had assassination attempts on me. I've been manipulated and betrayed more than once. I was shot through my fucking head! I am not in a fucking good mood, I am regretting ever coming here, and I am sincerely motivated to cull the lot of you and let the Collegiate take over running everything here! Do you understand?!" I roared, seeing five red bars and two blue within.

I turned and kicked the large front doors with all the power I could muster. They might have been barred within, but one blow and they broke free of their hinges and fell down to either side of me. Within, I saw the mare and stallion I'd encountered trying to pressure ponies to sign serf contracts. They sat at either side of a table, playing cards, and stared at me in shock. Next to them were two astonished-looking stallions who had been wrestling with Boo. In the back was the minotaur, Pain Train, holding onto a bound Scotch Tape with one huge hand. "You have one chance. Release them. Now!"

"You! How did you find--" the mare began, but I entered S.A.T.S. and shot her through her foreleg with a single magic bullet. She writhed on the ground, holding her leg, screaming.

The pair dropped Boo and struggled for their weapons as they backpedaled away from the mare. One tripped, falling on his back and shooting wildly into the air. The bullets struck the chassis of a cart hanging from hooks on the ceiling. With a crunch, the chassis fell free, striking both scrambling ponies with a resounding crunch. Boo immediately scrambled for safety behind me.

"Watch out! They're going to kill the hostage!" Charm shouted, glaring at the minotaur and ex-card-player. The unicorn stallion started to raise a gun, his eyes wide and terrified. He had reason to be. Like an immense hunting cat, Rampage launched herself at him, clearing the table and latching her claws in his shoulders. With a scream, he went down on the far side. Charm looked at Pain Train as he picked Scotch Tape up and stood, looking way down at me. "He's going to break her neck! Any second now! He's going to do it!" She looked at me, then at the stoic minotaur holding Scotch Tape by the neck. "Do it!"

I locked eyes with him, just as I had that last time we'd met. Then he looked at Charm, reached down, and carefully undid the ropes

on Scotch Tape's legs. Aside from looking pretty scraped up, the olive filly was uninjured. Charm looked as though a spring in her brain had just gone 'spoing' and she was trying to comprehend what was happening. Charm stared at Pain Train, her left eye twitching before looking at me and grinning from ear to ear. "She's free! Huzzah! How wonderful!" she said with ebullient glee.

I looked up at Pain Train. "Thanks," I said as I knelt beside Scotch Tape and checked her over.

"We're even. Was a stupid plan anyway," he muttered.

Scotch Tape rose to her hooves and her blue eyes landed on Charm. "You!" Charm's grin twitched as she took a step back. "Funny how they came for us exactly when you went to the bathroom!"

"I…I don't know what you're talking about!" Charm said as she backed away.

"Get over here!" Scotch Tape roared, and tackled Charm before the filly got three steps. "You're sick! You make the Overmare look nice! I felt sorry for you!" Scotch screamed as she rolled, bit, hit, and kicked Charm. Finally, she got a hooflock around the princess's neck. "Honestly, foalnapping us! Where do you get off?!"

"Ow! Stop it! You can't do this to me! I'm a princess! You can't prove anything!" Charm squealed as Scotch Tape bit her ear and growled like she was going to tear it off!

"Enough, Scotch," I said with a chuckle, carefully disengaging the battered white filly. Scotch swung her hooves wildly. "Did she say this was the plan?"

Scotch Tape glared at her, then spat out, "No. But she trots out and a minute later they trot in easy as you please. They threw me in a sack! Talked about the great life they were going to have when Charm was regent. They were going to get a share, whatever that means." Scotch Tape swung at her again. "You are so lucky. I swear, next time I'm going to give you the mother of all swirlies! I'll rig a toilet that'll suck your horn out your back end. You just wait!"

"Good hooflock, though. The ear was a nice touch," Rampage chuckled. That finally made her stop fighting, though she still growled at the other filly.

I looked at Pain Train. "Did she plan this?"

He gave a laconic shrug. "I just do what I'm told. Ponies don't involve me in planning their schemes. I'm just the dumb muscle." Then he looked at me. "Though I knew it was stupid. You beat me

once. You'd probably beat me again."

I looked at the battered filly. "Well?"

Charm sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Why is everypony yelling at me? I just do what I'm told to do!" she said, giving a choking sob. I didn't twitch. Finally, she slumped and scowled at me, her eyes dry. "Fine. Believe what you want. But that deal that was made? It's still standing. And you want Daddy's memory orbs, Blackjack." She rose to her hooves. "I saw what Goldenblood did with Horse's machine. I know what this Horizons thingy is. And if you want to know, you can give me my crown. Otherwise, I'll send you them pulverized in a box. Got it?"

I twitched as I looked down at her. Scotch Tape still looked murderous. Rampage appeared amused. I really didn't have time for this shit. "How about this? You hand them over and I make sure that Grace or Splendid don't boot you out for good?" I counter-offered.

She narrowed her eyes in a spiteful glare. "I'd rather you drive yourself crazy thinking about what might be in them. And I can't wait till you come crawling back to me, asking me what I saw. And I'm not going to tell you. So there!" And she pulled her mouth wide and stuck her tongue out at me.

I rubbed my head. "Scotch. She's all yours. Don't kill her. She might come to her senses. And don't let yourself be taken hostage by her again. Otherwise, I'm letting P-21 handle it. Understood?"

Scotch blinked at me, and then her lips curled in an expression of sheer deviousness. I swear her ears seemed to pull into horns as she looked at the white filly. "Mmmm…come here…"

"You're insane! Stay away from me! Nooooo!" she shrieked, running for her life. It was probably the first time she'd ever had to do it; there was no way she was going to get away if that was the quickest she could flee.

I glanced at Rampage. "Make sure she doesn't mess Charm up too badly, okay?" Boo curled up next to me, making it clear she wasn't parting company with me any time soon.

"What about you?" Rampage asked.

I rolled my eyes. "We've got three hours till this party starts. I'm going to find someplace quiet, lock myself in there, and think about what to do. I doubt there's much else anypony here can throw at me."

"Famous last words," Rampage replied. "Well, if another hit squad

comes after you, let me know. You do attract interesting fun." Then she turned and raced after Scotch Tape. "Don't let her get away! I'll show you how to torture a pony with a loogie!" I laughed, despite myself. Sometimes she seemed not much different from a filly herself.

* * *

I returned to Awesome's stripped collection. So many questions, like what happened when Dawn left. Had it been as Keeper said, or had Awesome been telling the truth? Somehow, I had trouble believing anypony so fascinated by Goldenblood could be honest. But then what did that say about me? I poked my head out the door at the ponies who were supposed to be my guards; hopefully they were more diligent than the last pair. "Okay. I don't care what happens. Short of fire, explosions, or my friends being hurt, I want nopony to come in here, no matter what. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied, saluting briskly.

Boo scrambled to the far side of the room, looking around as if checking for possible attackers. I looked around myself, then closed the door and locked it. Then, for good measure, I levitated over a chair and wedged it under the handles. Then I shoved a table against the door. *Then* I threw a few O.I.A. ashtrays against the wall in frustration.

This wasn't the worst day of my life, but it was by far the most frustrating. I'd never had so many obstacles and interferences thrown in my face. These ponies…these Society ponies…I wanted to help them! And they were creeping and plotting and trying to kill me and threatening my friends and I just wanted to scream! Of everything going on in my life, why was I stuck dealing with this shit? Why didn't I just hop in the airship and fly away? Punt the crown into the crowd like Rampage suggested?

"I am so not qualified for this," I growled.

I glanced and saw Boo looking nervous and smiled. "Don't worry. I'm done throwing things for a while." She tentatively approached, and I gave her ears a good rub. Instantly her apprehension disappeared. "How about you? Who do you think should run the Society?"

She blinked her wide, pale eyes at me and then nosed about the wreckage I'd tossed in my tantrum. She lifted a picture of an M.o.P.

meeting with Fluttershy and Garnet and blinked at me. I chuckled and stroked her ears. “Sorry. I don’t think either of those ponies will do.” Her ears drooped, and she let the picture fall to her hooves. I held her, giving her back a pat. “It’s okay. I’m no better at this than you are.”

“That’s because you’re doing it wrong,” rasped a voice that I hadn’t heard in a while. I looked over at Dealer, calmly shuffling his cards.

“Hey,” I said with a smile. “You’ve been quiet, lately.”

“Getting old,” he answered. “Two centuries is a long time by anypony’s reckoning.” He did look tired; there were dark shadows under his eyes, and he didn’t shuffle with the same briskness as before. “I probably would have died in 99 if EC-1101 hadn’t been broken out.”

“How can you die? You’re a soul.” I couldn’t keep the concern from my voice. “I thought you’d just…go on.” Boo looked around, as if searching for whoever I was talking to. I laughed and gave her another pat. “I’m just talking to a pony in my head, Boo. Don’t worry about it.” Boo cocked her head, and, so help me, even looked a little skeptical. She did relax, though.

“Nothing lasts forever. Not even souls,” he replied with a small sigh. Then he looked at me again. “Anyway, you’re making the same mistake the Ministry Mares did.”

“Oh?” I asked as I took a seat.

“You want both order and virtue,” he replied as he drew two cards, one showing me at the head of an army and another of me hugging Rampage. “But you can’t have them. Not at the same time.”

“Why not?” I asked with a frown. “I thought good and evil cancelled each other out.”

“Because one has to have priority over the other. Doing what’s right for an individual is different from doing what’s right for a group of people. Order screws people. It has to. When you’re trying to prevent discord and chaos, you can’t tailor the law to try and make every situation right. Likewise, if you try to do what’s best, inevitably some ponies are going to buck the system. The Ministry Mares didn’t understand that. Applejack tried to make order with her power armor, then was upset when her cousin mass produced weapons that could kill ponies using it. Fluttershy tried making everything better without once thinking what kind of a crime it is to modify a pony’s memories against their will. If she’d truly cared about virtue, she would have let the cases of Wartime Stress

Disorder mount as opposition to the war. She didn't," he explained calmly in his soft, weak voice.

Boo let out a snort and seemed to even roll her eyes a little. I looked down at her, and she blinked cluelessly up at me. I stroked her gently for a moment, and then looked back at Dealer. "And I'm trying to do the same thing?" I frowned as I thought about it.

"You want order in the Wasteland. You want the fighting to stop. The battles to end. The misery halted. You want things safe. None of these are bad things in and of themselves. But when taken to its extreme, there is precious little virtue found in order. Splendid's plan might work. Let's say it does and he manages to bring an end to the fighting. Is life better? All the people he's going to force to work, he may as well not even call them serfs any longer. Is that pacified Wasteland worth living in without freedom?" He nailed me to the floor with his gaze. "Is your goal to turn the Wasteland into one enormous Stable 99?"

"Ouch," I winced.

He gave a small smile. "Virtue, on the other hoof... that's harder. You know that. You've done so much trying to do the right thing and do better. I've never met a pony, except maybe Big Macintosh, who honestly and sincerely tried to do the right thing as much as you, Blackjack. But part of virtue is letting others choose to be virtuous, and living with them when they choose not to be. That's freedom. It's a messy business at times. And it's hard. Damned hard. But at the end of the day, you can look yourself in the eye and know you're the better pony."

"And I can't have the best of both worlds? I can't have order and virtue at once?" I asked with a frown.

"You can, but one's got to take priority over the other. And once order is more important than virtue... oh, you can go all kinds of nasty places. Usually under the premise of 'protecting' virtue. It was everywhere before the bombs fell. Pinkie Pie ordering spritebots to record conversations and conducting random arrests. Rainbow Dash carrying out sabotage missions in zebra lands that killed tens of thousands of noncombatants. Twilight pursuing magic that she knew was going to be used in megaspells. Even Fluttershy, at the end, allowing modifying the memories of ponies who dissented. So much virtue sacrificed in the name of 'protection'. Till in the end, any virtue that was left was hollow. An empty claim long ago abandoned in reality."

Boo gave a disgusted little noise, sticking her tongue out. I looked at her again. She couldn't... but that was ridiculous. There was no way she could be hearing Dealer. It was impossible. I rubbed my chin and smirked. "You know, you get really talky when you show up, Dealer."

He blinked, then chuckled dryly. "I interact with all of one pony. Forgive me for thinking up speeches in my spare time." Tugging his hat over his face, I think he was actually blushing! After a moment or two he flicked the brim back up, looking at me once more.

"I'm trying to be smart about it. Thinking which way I should go. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" I asked plaintively. "Isn't that what princesses and queens are meant to do?"

"Sure. But you're not a queen. You're Blackjack. And you are not a thinking pony. If you were Twilight, sure. You could compare and debate philosophies and histories and crunch numbers and try to deduce the right course of action. Did you do that when you heard that Scotch Tape was being held hostage?"

"No." I frowned. "I just activated her tag and went and got her."

"Exactly. You're instinctive. You're a gambler. You could have gotten Scotch Tape killed if the situation had been different. Easily." I flushed and opened my mouth to argue. "But you didn't, Blackjack. And that's the point. You do what is right because you're a good pony. You concern yourself with being good, and you're not even sure what your personal virtue is. I don't even know, and I've been watching you since Miramare." Boo gave my cheek a nuzzle, making me smile.

"But... what if I fuck up?" I muttered. "What if I choose Grace and the Society gets torn down from the outside? What if I chose Splendid and the Society takes over the world? What if I choose Charm and she becomes the Society's Overmare?"

"You live with it and accept it. You can't gamble and expect not to fail, and nothing in this life comes with zero risk. Trust yourself and decide, and then move on to all those big things that you need to do. Let somepony else deal with this nest of vipers." He then looked at me shrewdly. "Or is it you don't want to? Is something else wrong?"

I stared at him, fighting against the compulsion not to talk about it. "You know... my life is weird... right? And how... strange stuff happens? To me... " I felt the pressure growing. It spread like ink through my mind, staining everything with its touch. "Things...

weird things... are happening to me... right... now... " I spat, struggling. My skull started to pound as the outside will squeezed down on me. "Please!" I managed to spit out. Boo backed away in shock, her pale eyes wide.

"Blackjack. What's wrong? What's happening to you?" he asked as he walked to me quickly and stared into my eyes with his intense gaze. "Blackjack... is something affecting you?"

I felt myself shoved back into my own mind, like an immense hoof reached around, grabbed me by the neck, and yanked me away from the terminal of my mind. Four magic bullets flashed through his head as I gave a wild swing. Of course, my hoof passed right through him. Despite being pulled out of my own seat, I fought to get back to the controls of my own mind. "Leave me alone! You stupid, annoying figment! You are nothing!" my body shouted. I overturned a table on the Dealer, sending O.I.A. paraphernalia bouncing across the floor.

Boo immediately rushed to the desk and ducked behind it, poking her trembling head out and watching fearfully. Then, suddenly, she seemed overtaken by an odd calm and simply looked out from her protective little nook. If I wasn't wrestling for control of my body...

He just narrowed his eyes as he passed right through the table. "Who are you? You're not Blackjack."

"Enough," my body said with a scowl. "The Goddess has her now. The Goddess shall recall the Lacunae and have her teleport Blackjack to us! You cannot interfere."

"The Goddess? How did you get inside her? Where are you taking her?" the Dealer demanded. Boo frowned and looked up at the ceiling, her ears twitching.

"To the Goddess's seat of power at Maripony, fool. And once she and the black book are in the Goddess's possession, the Goddess shall save this Wasteland and all within it... save those that have vexed the Goddess. Oh yes. There will be a special fate for them all!" she crowed. A purple flash, and Lacunae arrived. "Good. Teleport this one to the greens outside the valley. The Goddess is through waiting."

Lacunae lifted a tied up bundle off her back. "Yes," she said as she looked at me with infinite regret. Then I heard a ping at my hooves and the Goddess looked down to see two bolts lying at my hooves. Then a third dropped.

That prompted me to look up.

And *that* resulted in me catching the air grate with my face. I staggered to the side, the Goddess fumbling for my guns. Lacunae raised her shield, but what came down was not an onslaught of bullets or energy blasts, but a spark grenade and a strange black river rock with a spiral carved into the surface. The world flared to white static, then darkness, as I perceived the most curious slurping sensation. It was as if something was being sucked through my entire body. Then the Goddess let out a scream that trailed away to nothing.

"Hello?" I asked. But I couldn't move. Couldn't hear. I could only wait for my systems to reboot. I could feel myself being moved. Then myself being blindfolded and something hung around my neck. "Glory? Honey, thanks, but this really isn't the time." I laughed, wondering how... Then a gun pushed to my head. "Okay, not Glory." What did it say about my life that I knew exactly what a gun to the head felt like? "If you're asking me questions or are here to gloat over my death, I can't hear you. You're going to have to wait till my hearing comes back," I said, probably loudly. "So take some time to compose yourself while you have a gun to my head!" Honestly. I was going to fire every last guard here. From a cannon...

My hearing returned with a squeal of feedback, making me hiss in pain. Of course, I had a blindfold on and tied tight. It'd take me a while to undo the knot with my TK and be impossible to hide the glow. Really, why hadn't Twilight developed a spell for that?! So no magic bullets. My legs felt tied together too... hmmm... if it weren't for the gun I might be getting excited. Ugh... why was I so crazy today?! "Okay, if this *is* something kinky, thanks but now really isn't the best time," I said, hoping to not say whatever phrase would result in a pulled trigger. "And we really should ask Glor--"

"Release your curse on him," a stallion muttered from behind me. Soon as he spoke, my back began to itch.

"Lancer," I muttered. Sexy thoughts retreated... a little.

"Release your curse on him now, Maiden. Or should I call you 'Goddess'? I won't ask you again," he muttered. "And don't bother yelling for help. Your friend is unconscious and the batspeech talisman makes you quite silent to any not wearing another talisman."

Okay, bound and helpless with a male who wanted to kill me. How to sort through these emotions? Panic? No, I'll clamp down on the hysteria. I've been in this position before and lived through it, more

or less. Rage? Blew that charge with Charm. Best I could do at the moment was huffy resentment. Lust? What the hell was that even doing in my head right now!? Reason. Okay. Reason with the crazy pony. Sure. And... stop getting stupidly turned on. This was NOT the time for that!

"I don't know what you're talking about, Lancer. I've never cursed anyone," I replied, stretching out on my belly and tugging the bonds on my legs. Smooth metal wasn't the easiest thing to tie. I could probably yank a hoof free if he gave me a window.

"Lies!" he snapped. "Free him!"

"Who?" I had a guess...

"My father... " he growled, long and low. "Remove whatever spell you cast upon him to... to make him spare you!" He kicked me over onto my back and pressed the gun under my throat.

"If I had a spell like that, don't you think I'd be using it on you right now?" I countered. "I didn't curse your father with some kind of magical mysterious Maiden powers. I'm not even a maiden. You can check yourself if you want!" What?! Why in Equestria did I blurt that?! This was not tied up sexy time! This was tied up and going to die time! Get with the program, libido!

He was silent. Sweet Celestia, tell me he wasn't checking! Finally he spoke in a tense, trembling voice. "He should have killed you. My father is the finest hoof combat specialist of this age. He crushed the dragon Bleakflame with his bare hooves. How... how could you beat him? How could he possibly allow you to live?" He pushed the gun against my throat again. "Release him and I'll grant you a quick and clean death. I won't even kill your friends."

"Touch either of them and you'll wish I cursed you," I countered in a snarl of my own, making him pull the gun away. "I don't know why your father spared me. I've fought ponies before and you're right, he was good. Damned good. Better than me, even. But he kept stopping and letting me recover. He left openings. That fight was all wrong." He was silent and I added, "And you know it."

"Silence!" he snapped. "How did you curse him? How do I break the spell?"

"Why are you so certain I cursed him?" I asked in reply, relaxing a bit. He needed me alive. If he thought killing me would break it, he'd have shot me already. Even bound, I could take control of the situation. So long as he didn't do anything to Lacunae. "I might be a unicorn, but trust me, I don't know any magic capable of doing

that. If I did, my life would be a lot easier."

"My whole life, my father has told me about how he was going to defeat the Maiden. He'd tell me all about the epic, final battle where he'd crush wickedness from the world. He'd even play them out with me and my sisters. And I knew... I *knew*... he would defeat you. And when you were found at that base, I saw the moment had arrived. I sent word to all that you were here and he was to defeat you!" he said from above me. "And then... he arrived... " Lancer's voice broke.

"And he wasn't happy. The timing was wrong. Or fate wasn't right. Or whatever," I said as I lay there, imagining the strong, striped, masculine body above-- Stop. It. Now is *not* the time!

He huffed. "No. But it shouldn't have mattered. The prophecy doesn't say when the champion of the stars is defeated, only that they must be. What better time than then and there? And yet... he didn't fight as the father I knew. You should have been broken! And when you were ready to slay him... I couldn't take it. And yet... when I tried to kill you... he was not the father I knew. Not the champion of my people. So you did something to him. Cast some... some vile Equestrian spell. Like you're trying to do now!"

"Now?" I asked, nonplussed.

"With... your body... and the thoughts you're trying to put inside my head! Desist! Now!" There was a note of panic in his voice as I gave a little squirm, smiling. "That! Stop... that!" A rather disturbing level of my subconscious positively purred. Maybe I was the one who was cursed...

"Lancer, I'm just laying here. I didn't curse your father, or Xanthe, or you. I can't even pick who to give a crown to. I just want to get Glory home so she can stop a madman from killing tens of thousands of her people. Then I get to deal with a different madpony named Cognitum. Then I might have to deal with your father if he won't leave the Hoof alone. But I didn't curse him to spare me."

Lancer was silent above me. "You know there's something going on with your father, don't you?" I finally asked, suspecting the answer.

"Mother... Mother said Father was not what he seemed. I called her a liar! One of his wives shouldn't speak so dishonorably to him! But... but she persisted. She said there was a wrongness in him. And she took my sister and other doubters and fled." His voice shook. "Father told me to prove my strength. My loyalty. My honor. And I

did. I tracked them down. Made my heart as hard as stone, ignored what she'd told me, and slew her."

"Sekashi's your mother?" I asked, and then cursed myself for the slip of my tongue and tried to catch myself. "She was, wasn't she?"

"Yes," he said in a confessing tone. "Now, all I have is my father. I must free him. Now tell me how to break the curse you've placed on him!" And the gun was pressed between my eyes. "Tell me, or your death shall free him!"

Not the direction I wanted, at all. "Okay. Okay. I know a counterspell that might work for... whatever. But I can't speak it aloud. I can only whisper it." Oh come on, there was no way he'd fall for this! Then the pressure of the gun relaxed a little. "Come closer," I said, unable to hide my smirk as I lay there, helpless, giving a little flex. He couldn't... he wouldn't...

The gun was pulled away and I heard him moving over me. Damn it, I couldn't stop grinning as he moved his head closer to me. "Closer... " I whispered. "You know, when I first saw you, I couldn't help but think how strong and powerful you looked."

"Stop it," he muttered, and I felt him move over me. "Stop your... magic... "

"Closer," I purred, images of black and red maned zonies frolicking in a part of my mind that had gone quite crazy. I could imagine his strong striped body above me. Felt his strong, lithe frame above me. Felt the tickle of his breath on my muzzle. Felt his... it...

"The counterspell is... " I breathed...

Then rammed my metal hind leg as hard as I could up between his legs. I felt it connect to something particularly firm and vulnerable and he let out a squeak as he went rigid above me. I then brought my forelegs up and felt them connect with his head. Grabbing him, we rolled over and I came to rest on top. I magically removed the blindfold and looked down into his stunned face.

"Evil... " he whispered, and then went limp.

"If it's any consolation, I really wanted to... " I replied as I pulled the binding from my forelegs. That crazy little part of me gave one last purr of regret as I looked down at him. He didn't look so good, now that I saw him properly. His face and body were covered in bruises and one eye was swollen completely shut. I slipped off with a little petulant groan and trotted to Lacunae. The strange black rock with its carved spiral lay close beside her, its surface cracked through the spiral. "Lacunae? Lacunae? Are you okay?" I asked as I

shook her. Boo emerged from behind the desk and trotted over, giving Lacunae a little nudge with her nose.

She groaned, then blinked and looked at me. She frowned. “Why are you squeaking like that, Blackjack?” she asked aloud, furrowing her brow in confusion.

I blinked, then looked down at a small stuffed bat that hung from a leather thong around my neck. I tugged it off, and then tugged a similar bat off of him as he started to stir. “Are you okay?”

“I... I believe so.” Her horn flickered twice, then she physically reached over and picked up the rock. “A voidstone. I never imagined I’d see one.”

“Stable pony here. What’s a voidstone?” I asked as I reached over and took his sniper rifle... no, not his; this one looked standard-issue.

“A zebra anti-magic grenade fetish. Very rare and dangerous. They disrupt magic in a wide area,” she said as Lancer pulled himself into a sitting position.

“You are wicked... vile... ” he muttered bitterly. “Tempting me... ”

I looked right at him. “Right now, Lancer, if it wasn’t for the fact you might have killed my friend and I, I might have actually done it.” And that stupid part of me still wanted to! “I am feeling that crazy right now. But I didn’t curse your father, or you.” Now I saw shame exploding across his features as he dropped his eyes. I guessed the tears weren’t just from bruised testicles.

“What do you want to do with him?” Lacunae asked. Boo looked at me with her big pale eyes, and I could practically feel Fluttershy staring into my soul.

“Take him out of here,” I replied, then knelt beside him, searching him for any other voidstones... but no. “You are one scary, messed-up zebra. I hope you find some peace, Lancer,” I said, and kissed his cheek. He was a murderer, true, and would probably try to kill me again, but then so was I and I couldn’t honestly say I didn’t deserve it.

Lacunae left in a purple flash. I considered the Goddess... yes, she was still there. The voidstone had scrambled the connection a bit, but I was still locked in Unity. I tried to speak about her aloud, but my tongue refused to form the words. The voidstone had bought me some time. Hours. Days if I was lucky.

Then she’d be one pissed Goddess. But until then, there was something I had to do...

I cleared the door, poked my head out into the hall, and eyed one of my bodyguards. The two stallions jumped. “Yes, Your Majesty?” one asked. Stringy. Not what I was looking for. I eyed the other. Better, but not quite what I wanted. If I couldn’t imagine the babies... *And*, I thought with a sigh, *Glory would kill me*. And not in a fun way.

“Nevermind,” I muttered as I stepped back inside and closed the door. Well, in the meantime, I had the old Stable 99 standby... Sticky hooves...

* * *

When Glory stepped through the door a while later (the guards not trying to stop her, I noticed), we wore matching expressions of tired and awkward. Boo trotted out immediately, flushing and looking like, at the moment, she wanted to be anywhere but here. Glory gave her a curious look as she departed for said anywhere else, but then shrugged, walked right up to me, pushed herself into my hooves, and snuggled down atop me. “Make me stop thinking about boys,” she groaned as she nuzzled my neck.

“You too?” I asked with a small, sympathetic smile.

“I hate this time of the year,” she growled softly. “This is when most stallions get sent on long distance patrols so mares back home don’t have to think about them. Stupid biology,” she growled and huffed.

“So... have fun with them,” I said, and immediately she flushed. “What?”

“Nothing!” she said in a way far too quick and defensive for it to be nothing. I watched her start to crumble and kissed her firmly.

“So who was it?” I asked with a small smile.

“You’re not mad?” she said barely above a whisper.

I sighed and shook my head. “Glory, you could rut every stallion in this place and I wouldn’t be mad with you. Every stallion and mare. At the same time! I wouldn’t be mad with you, or disappointed,” I said as I stroked her mane. “Stable 99, remember?”

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and gave a disgusted huff. “You don’t understand, Blackjack. I don’t like stallions like that. But... he was nice and handsome and... ugh! I can’t believe I did it.”

“So, who was it?” I asked with a smile. She hid her face in her wings. “Please tell me it wasn’t P-21, because if it was I think I’m

going to need to go find him quick if you did."
"No... " she muttered. "I thought about it... a lot... but no... " She sighed and looked away. "Splendid."
Ah. Well, I couldn't fault her taste. "And was he?"
She smacked me with her wing. "Blackjack!"
"Well, was he?" I pressed, grinning at her. "You got to throw me across the room for my little indiscretion. The least I should get is saucy details!"
She whined, then deflated. "He was... okay. He was gentle, but it was still... weird. Not what I was expecting for my first stallion. Definitely not as fun as with you, but it was bearable," she finally admitted. "But I am not going for a repeat performance, thank you very much." She chewed her lip a moment. "Probably... "
"So are there baby Dashes in the future?" I asked, and she shivered.
"I hope not. Just... " she trailed off and tapped her forehooves together. "Ask me when I'm a little more myself, okay? Honestly... I hate thinking about males like this... " She looked around the office and then looked at the pile of cloth that Lacunae had brought. "What's that?"
"I think our dresses for the Gala," I answered with a small smile, then kissed her ear, making her smile.
"You seem... better," Glory said with a smile, looking me over.
"I had a friend die, was made queen, had three assassination attempts and one fillynapping, and almost had sex with a zebra who wants to kill me. Being queen sucks." I snorted.
"*Almost* had sex with a zebra?" she asked archly.
I tapped her chest. "*Did* have sex with a unicorn," I teased
"Touche," she sighed, pouting a little. "Fine. You can have a stallion too, if you want. Just one! And I better not hear about it over the radio. In fact, I'd rather not hear about it *ever*."
"I love you," I said with a laugh, holding her.
"I'm getting used to the fact that... you're just not like me... like that." She sighed and shook her head. "It really is just sex to you, isn't it? Just... orgasms?"
"Sure. It's fun. It brings the stable together. It passes the time. Oh, yeah, and fun. Just don't do it in public or with family, and make sure it's all consensual," I said with a bitter smile. Pity I had no idea what consent actually meant back then. "I never meant to hurt you, Glory. And if it does, I won't do it with another pony. I'll want to. But I won't."

She closed her eyes and sighed, then smiled a little and shook her head. “No. If it happens, it does. Just… keep it discreet. One pony, for now. We can take it case by case.”

I gave a squee and kissed her hard enough to curl her hooves. I wondered if I could catch Lancer again and give him a reason not to want me dead. I’d show him curses! I’d curse him with the inability to walk straight! I’d… I blinked and caught Glory’s flat look. “Um… thanks?” I said tentatively.

“Try not to drool too much,” she replied with a touch of sarcasm before cuddling with me. After a moment, she asked in a much less arch tone, hugging me with her wings, “So, you seem… happy. Have you made a decision about who to give the crown to?”

I paused, frowned, then realized. “You know… I think I have… ”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 57: Best Night Ever

"I can't believe we're finally here. With all that we've imagined, the reality of this night is sure to make this… The Best Night Ever!"

I've never been good with parties. I'd had a few celebrations at 99, but, by and large, parties were things that happened to other ponies. Even after getting outside, I always got a little squirm in my gut from the idea of being in a social situation where I was the center of attention. Cuddling with Glory and talking about 'psychosexual metamorphic influences' was more appealing than being in a place where I was expected to actually interact. If it meant I'd be alone with her, I'd happily speculate with Glory all night about whether or not her different body accounted to her being receptive to Splendid's offers of 'comfort' after I'd gone off to sulk.

Unfortunately, the day was almost over, and the guests were arriving. I had no clue who would be attending, though. While I'd assumed that the Gala was Society only, apparently it was more than simple revelry and excess. It was an opportunity to invite important outsiders and bedazzle them with demonstrations of all that the Society had to offer. I supposed the point was so their guests would return home and sulk all year long that they weren't as good as the Society.

Hoity arrived, looking quite pleased. Glory excused herself, muttering about a bathroom. "It looks as if this is going to be the greatest Gala in generations. Almost everypony invited is attending." I supposed the Gala was the best social event in the Hoof, and he flourished at social events. "So, Your Majesty, there is just one last tiny detail to cover. Have you selected your regent?"

"I have," I replied, and opened my mouth.

He quickly raised his hooves before I could speak, though. "And

please don't say me. I won't do it. I'll support whoever you select, but I have no desire to put my undead *derriere* on the throne and my excellent coiffeur in the crosshairs. I am a majordomo *par excellence*, but many ponies have difficulty taking my advice straight and undiluted."

Hmmm…well…that killed one idea…"Can I make three ponies my regent?" I asked.

"Only if you want two of them dead," he replied casually. "Triumvirates don't last long."

And that spiked that idea. "Can I make one regent and have the other two swear an oath to help them out or get kicked out?" I asked in a huff.

He pondered it a moment. "Yes, I imagine that might work. For a time, at least. Who did you want as your regent?"

I told him.

He blinked. "Really? That's quite…are you certain?"

"I am. And I expect you to do everything you can to help," I replied with a smile. "With luck, this will be a turning point for the Society."

"Yes…well…I'll go make the proper arrangements," he said and trotted out.

I had to take a quick trip outside to take care of one last bit of work. Deus was parked next to the reservoir, his cannons pointing out over the water. "Hey, how are you doing?" I asked, tapping his armor.

Something in him released a wheezing sigh. "Yeah, I hear that," I said with a smile. "I need to ask a favor." The engine emitted a low grumble. "Yeah, I know I'm the last pony you want to do any favors for, but I need your help. We're going into the sky soon, and there's no way we can take you with us." Silence. "I need you to stick around the Society a little while." He swung his turrets towards me, and his engine snarled, the cannons waving back and forth.

I raised my hooves defensively. "Hey, I know you don't like it. I don't like them much either. I put the fear of Rampage into them, but I'm afraid that when she and I go, they're going to resume their old bullshit games. So I want you to stay here. If anything deadly happens to the regent and Hoity Toity, I give you full permission to take over and give this place to Big Daddy, the Collegiate, or the Finders; whoever you want. If this place stays sane for a couple weeks, go back to Chapel and keep it safe. Just keep a radio ear

open. You can travel faster and safer than almost anypony."

I think it was the word 'pony' that did it. His cannons raised and dropped, and then the turret pointed back over the water. Call me crazy, but the image seemed so…lonely. I tapped his armor again and he swiveled a camera at me. I reached out and hugged his tank tread; it was too wide for my legs to fit around, but it was the thought that counted. "Thanks. I mean it. You're a better pony than the one I met in 99."

That started his engine rumbling softly.

One last bit. The Society's jail was a cinder block-walled storage shed built into the side of a hill. Despite the heavy metal door, I suspected that the occupants inside could have escaped if they wanted to. The power-armored guards outside might have been a bit more of a challenge, though. I stepped through the door and looked over at Lancer sitting quietly in the corner. While I'd wanted him released, Hoity had convinced me that letting a zebra sniper go was simply asking for trouble. I hoped he might get me more of those anti-magic bombs and give me more time away from the Goddess, but apparently they were exceptionally rare, even for zebras. I walked up to the large gray minotaur. "Hey," I said, noting that he'd yanked the chains right off the walls. There were others I could have asked, but I'd seen what passed for loyalty for most of the Society.

"You," his eyes glittered in the dim light.

"You let Scotch go without a fight, and I appreciate that. I've come to make you a deal," I said as I sat before him. "You've been working with the Society for a while, haven't you?"

"I was in that king's menagerie for years before they shut it down," he said with a low growl. "There's always folks that need muscle, though. I'm guessing that's why you're here, too. Ponies only talk if they want something."

I took that in. "I do want something. I want you. You seem a decent enough sort. You let Scotch go and knew a stupid plan when you heard one. You've also seen what passes for bodyguards in this place. Mine let a squad of five Harbingers in to kill me. I don't want to pick a regent only to have them slaughtered because someone makes a deal. I want you to protect my regent."

His dark eyes bored into me. "And if I say no?"

"Then you go home. Or I'll write you a letter of recommendation for the Reapers, if you want. If they let Gorgon fight, they should let

you." He let out a snort. "Isn't that what you want?"

"Ponies…" He slowly rose till his horns scraped the ceiling, and despite myself I took a few steps back. It was silly; I'd faced far worse things than him, but there was something about the sheer presence of him. "Do you think I really care about fighting? My kind were a strong race, removed from your petty war. We had no interest in either side; your war and the things you battled over were trivial. We're not catcrows like griffins. We were not mercenaries peddling our strength to the highest bidder. We simply wanted to be left alone. And now you come here and assume I'd want to…that I would choose to…continue to be wrapped up in your petty conflicts."

My, he was much more talky than I recalled. "Alright then. What do you want to do?" The question seemed to surprise him, and he scowled in thought a moment.

"What I want is respect. What I want is to find another of my own kind. To know whether or not my species is doomed to extinction or not. To learn if my home still exists. Fighting. Politics. Petty squabbles for transitory power." He turned his head and spat to the side. "None of these matter to me."

I looked up at him and smiled. "You're right. It is stupid. And that's exactly what I've been thinking since I got here. All this backstabbing and scheming…it's insane. It's the exact opposite of what the world needs. So I need someone who can rise above it. I need a person who isn't going to be bribed. And if you stay, well, word will get around. And if any of your people hear of it, they might seek you out. At the very least, you'd be in a position to hear news of abroad for when you decide to leave."

The minotaur pursed his lips as he looked down at me. "This is a bad place," he finally said in his low, slow voice. Lancer's eyes watched me with a silent stare, but thanks to the little pink pony in my head, I caught his minute nod.

"Oh, I know the Society has a lot of rot to it, but--"

"Not the Society. Are you so removed from your roots that you can't feel it?" He snorted, and his muscles flexed powerfully. His fist smashed right through the cinder block wall. Two more punches and he'd pulverized a hole. I started to think that he might have gone easy on me our first battle. From the hole he pulled out wet earth and muddy pebbles. "This land is poisoned. All of this land. It is a poison seeped into the very stones," he said as he turned them

over. He turned the pebbles over and then met my gaze. He seemed to be searching for some comprehension from me, and when it didn't arrive, he snorted, "Pah. I don't know why I bother."

"No! Please. Continue," I said, as I stepped closer. "What do you mean?"

He seemed to consider me, working out if I was serious. After a moment, he answered, "This land is poisoned. A sickness seeps away its life. My kind has felt the cries and weeping of the earth for centuries. Since before your war." He smashed a pebble between his fingers. "They are dead. Lifeless."

"The stones are…dead?" I asked in bafflement.

"Stones contain a life and spirit all their own. Strength beyond mere rock. Some ponies once cultivated the life of stones, encouraging the growth of gems and strong bones of the world. But the very bones of the world here are rotten." He snorted and flung the dirt away. "I came here as a young bull to discover the source. More the fool, I."

I began to scoff, but then stopped. "You're talking about Enervation. You're saying that it's sucking life out of the *rocks*?" He scowled at my question, then nodded. I frowned, idly rubbing my chest. I remembered…was it a dream or a memory? "A long time ago, something happened to Equestria. A disaster. Do the minotaurs know anything about it?"

Now he appeared surprised, but gave a small nod. He lifted a rock. "The stone remembers. Eons and eons ago. A calamity from the skies that fractured the very earth. But how do *you* know?"

"Because we found it," I said, frowning. "A machine…or… something else. Something powerful. We found it and tried to use it. I think it's generating the Enervation."

His harsh glare relaxed a touch. He seemed to be reassessing me. "Never have I heard your kind speak of important things. It has always been war, power, and greed." His earlier scorn was now giving way to sincere consideration. "Our world is dying. It is more than the radiation. More than the taint. Such poisons eventually fade. This is growing. It chokes the life from the very stone."

"Can the world be restored?" I asked, remembering layers of stone and trapped bones. The glowing gems above the fossil-bearing layers.

He looked troubled. "I…don't know." Pain Train knelt and stared into my eyes. "You seek to end this?"

"I just want to save ponies," I muttered, at a loss. "That's what Security does."

"Just ponies?" he asked with a scowl.

"No. I mean…not just ponies. I want to save the lives of everyone I can. Griffins. Minotaurs. Zebras. Everyone," I added and then looked at the pebbles he held and levitated one out of his grasp. "Even little rocks, if they're alive." Lancer looked up at me, his eyes dark and unfathomable.

The words made Pain Train actually smile…a little. "Very well. If you can be selfless enough to protect my kind, and little rocks, I will do the same and protect yours. For now," he replied.

* * *

Since King Awesome's bedroom was full of holes, Glory and I'd relocated to Grace's room to get ready. Lacunae, Scotch, Boo, and Rampage had hijacked Splendid's bathroom, and Hoity had sworn to take care of P-21. I'd never seen so many real flowers before, precious decorations placed all over. I recognized the roses, and I assumed some others were tulips or daffodils from pictures in books, but there were others of such delicate beauty that I had no idea if I was supposed to sniff, look at, or eat. Besides the flowers, her room was decorated with laces and fine soft cotton sheets.

Unfortunately, her tub didn't have room for two, so after I washed, I dressed while Glory bathed. Standing in front of the vanity, I looked at the collection of makeups, brushes, and ribbons, and just stared at myself. White hide and black steel didn't really promise a good look. The clothes I was supposed to wear lay in a heap of purple on the bed. I'd be lucky if I didn't simply rip the dress Lacunae had picked up…wait. Where did she get these dresses? I'd tried to ask her telepathically, but after that grenade the telepathic link had been rising and falling like a tuning radio. From the shrieks of rage I'd picked up through Unity though, the Goddess was *not* happy.

Just get me through tonight.

Grace stepped in, already looking positively gorgeous in her silver-threaded blue ballgown. It appeared as if she was dressed in sapphire flame. "Aren't you going to get ready?"

"I…um…" I waved a hoof a little. "I'm just trying to figure it out."

She sighed and shook her head. "I take it there's not much call for

makeup in the Wasteland," she said as she levitated a brush and began to stroke my mane into line.

"Actually, this is the first time I've ever worn it," I replied a little sheepishly. "I mean, there were other ponies in 99 who did. Made themselves look nice all the time and the like. I was just always on the night shift, so it never really mattered how I looked. And then once in the Wasteland…"

"I see," she replied. "The Society puts a great deal of stock in appearances. It makes substance an undervalued commodity." She levitated two more brushes and gave the same attention to the rest of my body. I had to admit that it felt good! "Did my brother do something this afternoon? He's been acting…smug."

"Glory had sex with him." I had a feeling he'd thought it would give him an 'in' with me. I frowned in annoyance, then saw Grace gaping at me in shock and added, "He behaved himself, didn't cross the line." At least Glory hadn't said he had. If that changed…But Grace seemed even more disturbed. "By all accounts, he was okay at it."

"Blackjack," Glory called from the bathroom in that tone that meant I was doing something Blackjacky.

"What?" I asked looking over at her through the door.

"Most ponies don't talk about other ponies having sex with other ponies," she said, looking through the door from the tub, folding her blue forelegs under her chin. She spoke exactly like Mom when explaining to me that guns were dangerous.

"They don't?" I blinked in confusion. "That was at least half the gossip in 99."

"Really? What was the other half?" Grace asked with an amused smile.

"Everything else," I answered.

Grace furrowed her brows, then her expression turned a touch baffled. "I'm afraid I don't get the joke," she replied.

I looked from Glory in the tub and back to Grace. "I was making a joke?" Glory covered her face with a hoof as Grace flushed, staring at me.

Glory sighed, smiling and shaking her head. "Blackjack…" she began helplessly.

"What? We did! There's not a lot to talk about in a stable, day to day!" I said defensively, spreading my hooves and pleading for understanding as Glory started to laugh.

Grace seemed to process this thoughtfully, her flush fading as she composed herself easily. “I see. I suppose we can chalk it up to candor,” she said diplomatically. She set down the brush. “Well, he was always the charming one. I suppose he told you how tough your life must be, and how much he admired you?”

Glory frowned and sat up. “Yeah! How’d…” She slumped in the tub. “Let me guess. He uses that line a lot?”

Grace gave a small sigh. “To be fair, no. He’s actually quite discriminating. He was likely sincere, too, in his own way,” she said primly as she took up a little brush and began to put some powder on my face. “Splendid is always good at whatever he sets his mind to.”

“He was the first male ever openly interested in me,” Glory said with a frown. “Couldn’t believe it was happening, and by the time I really processed it…” She shook her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Normally all guys get from me is a constant string of mental ‘no’s. He managed the first ‘maybe’ and turned it into an ‘okay’.”

“Maybe he used some sort of sex spell on you. Zap. Instant lovings,” I suggested. If that were true, it would really simplify how to handle him. I had experience with that.

Grace let out a patient little sigh and smiled as she levitated the bundle of purple off the bed. “Doubtful. Splendid simply knows how to talk to mares. A blend of flattery, semi-honest praise, and somewhat sincere admiration is a potent mix. I never had the talent myself, but then, I’m usually fending off the hollow flattery.” She paused and stared at the violet and silver-threaded dress. “Sweet Celestia…this…this is a Rarity!”

“Yeah, I imagine dresses are pretty rare in the wasteland,” I replied.

“Not ‘rarity’ as in scarce. ‘Rarity’ as in one of Rarity’s own designs.” Grace turned it about. “They were precious even before the war. I think I recognize it from old copies of Image Magazine. This was from Luna’s Nocturne Ensemble five years before she assumed the throne! And this!” She lifted Glory’s dress, the rainbow colors still magically vibrant and the trim still fluffy. “It’s one of her original designs for Rainbow Dash’s very first attendance at the Gala! Ohhh!” She gushed in delight and rubbed her cheek on the fluffy white trim. Then she caught my smirk and immediately flushed. “Aheh…sorry. I have a bit of a thing for pre-war trends.”

"Like your father," I noted. I suspected that Lacunae had pulled some favors with Charity. I wondered how much I'd owe for renting priceless dresses. "Well, it's a shame to put it on me. I'll probably rip it in three steps."

"Tch. Not if I have anything to say about it," Grace said as she placed the dress on me. "This is a crime against fashion, but I think I'll be able to restore it." She said as her horn glowed.

"Wait. What are you…" And I blinked as I felt it shift over my body and become perfectly snug. I blinked and twisted my head, taking a few experimental steps, but the garment didn't catch and tear on anything. "How'd you do that?" I twisted my head and saw the spine reinforcement melded almost perfectly with the violet fabric.

"Clothing alteration spell. No Society unicorn would be caught dead without one." Only the Society would have a spell like *that* in the Wasteland. She finished with her brushes and placed the headdress on top. A few bobby pins…so that was what they were for…and she gave a little nod. "There. Now you look impressive, commanding, and beautiful."

She gently turned me away from the vanity and towards a full body mirror in the corner. "Yeah, right. It's going to take a lot more than that to make me look…" A mare stood in that mirror that I'd never seen before, wearing a dress of deepest purple with silver threadwork moon motifs on the breast and haunches and stars along the hem. Countless tiny amethysts glittered softly, catching the light to make it appear as if she were wearing a silken swatch of the night. Atop her head rested a purple headdress decorated with a crescent moon surrounded by four silver stars and matching purple feathers. She had glossy black metal limbs, but they so blended with the dark fabric that it was almost impossible to tell where steel ended and silk began. Her unblemished white hide betrayed none of the abuse and hardship its owner had suffered.

And that mare was me.

I couldn't talk as I looked at Grace, tears welling in my eyes. If only Mom could have seen me like this. "Thanks," I muttered, dropping my eyes.

Glory stepped out of the tub and shook herself, then fluttered her wings and walked up to me. "If you say you don't deserve to look like this, I'm going to thump you," she said, giving me a wet nuzzle. Grace smiled, levitated over towels, and gave Morning Glory every bit of attention she'd given me. "You're quite good at this, Grace,"

she commented as her rainbow mane was brushed by one floating brush while another took care of her tail.

"Since pleasant appearances are so rare in the Wasteland, they are a mark of superiority. The Gala used to be a parody of grotesqueries with everypony pretending that they were magnificent. I always preferred substance over satire, though; I refused to look ghastly and depend on others to be cowed by my father. The game that so many here play is ridiculous in the extreme. So, simply, I raise the bar, and others are required to expend a little effort in turn. I might not be able to demand excellence, but I can model it," Grace declared grandly.

Glory winced as her mane was tamed by Grace's brushes. "It actually reminds me of home."

"It does?" I asked in surprise.

"Up above, the Enclave maintains the delusion that the Wasteland ends at the clouds. Things are falling apart from one end of the Enclave to the other, but everypony smiles and insists that everything is okay. Even when there are famines at the drop of a feather and half our cities are empty due to a lack of actual resources to support them, everypony pretends that things are wonderful because we're not the Wasteland. Thunderhead refused to follow that line. That was why the Volunteer Corps were pushed. To tear away that illusion of superiority." She gave Grace a warm smile. "I suppose I can fully support your drive for substance."

"If the Society is to be better than the Wasteland, we must be better in truth, not just in presumption," Grace said with a prim bob of her head.

"Isn't that a little arrogant?" I asked her with a cock of my brow.

She looked back and replied coolly, "Not if it's true. And even if it was, isn't aristocracy *supposed* to be arrogant?" I couldn't think of a counterargument to that.

As soon as Glory was finished, the dress's laurel headdress resting upon her rainbow mane, we stepped out. Somewhere, a band began to play classical music, and I found myself nostalgic for Octavia. Lacunae stood outside Splendid's room, talking to the closed door. "You look fine!" the alicorn said aloud in exasperation. She wore the dress that Velvet had altered for her larger frame, looking like an echo of a princess of yesterday in magnificent burgundy and gold. As we approached, she looked at us and gave a start. "Rainbow…" she breathed as she stared at Glory for a moment,

then shook her head. “Forgive me,” she said with an apologetic smile. “You three look quite lovely.” Then she looked back at the door and sighed. “Unfortunately, Rampage is having some issues.”

“Not having issues. I’m not coming out,” Rampage’s voice replied, slightly muffled. “There’s no way I’m coming out dressed like this.”

“Come on, how bad could it be?” I asked with a smile. Lacunae shook her head, and I felt a little concerned. I pulled a bobby pin from my mane, carefully worked it in, and popped the lock. Returning the pin to my mane, I pushed the door open. Splendid’s room was decorated with photographs of Ministry Mares, particularly Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Huh, who knew? Boo wore an absolutely adorable pink dress with bows and tiny stitching of cupcakes along the hem and a small round cap decorated like a cake with pink frosting. To her credit, only one tiny spot looked like she’d given it a nibble. “Rampage, where…”

“Don’t look at me!” wailed a voice from the corner. A beautiful striped mare without steel wire in her tail cowered there. Her tangled, curly mane had been straightened and trimmed by what had to be magic. She was wrapped in a lovely white silk dress. It was simple, elegant, and lacked a single barb or spike anywhere. Instead, it was beaded about the waist with strands of pearls and delicate rubies. An ivory manecomb with a heart-shaped fire ruby gleamed in her scarlet mane. “I can’t go out dressed like this! I’d rather go naked than like this!”

“Wha…what’s wrong?” I muttered in shock.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong! Look at this!” Rampage said as she gestured to the outfit. “I wouldn’t have even put it on except she used her cheating alicorn magic to take off what I’d planned to wear!”

“I had to levitate her off her hooves, telekinetically unbuckle her, and scrub her like a filly,” Lacunae said to me out of the corner of her mouth, then said firmly to Rampage, “Spiked armor is what you always wear. This is a special event.”

“You look…amazing,” Glory said, her wings fluffing up a little.

“I look soft,” Rampage muttered, going pink as she hugged herself. “I feel naked like this.”

“Quite the contrary,” Grace murmured in clear approval.

“You’re fine. I never thought that a Reaper would be scared by wearing a dress,” I said as I touched her shoulder.

“Shows how much you know,” Rampage retorted, going redder as

she looked away. “I expected black with chains and spikes and skulls…” She looked almost near tears.

Glory rubbed her chin, “You know, I’ve heard that, in some cultures, white is the color of death. So really, if you think about it, you are a maiden of death.”

I looked at Glory in bafflement, and she snapped my rump with her tail. “Oh, yeah! And the red…um…it looks like blood!”

“Really? You’re not just saying that?” she asked as she rubbed her eyes.

“Absolutely,” Grace said with utter sincerity. “If you think about it, those pearls symbolize the... skulls of your defeated enemies. And that mane pin is the heart of your foes that you’ve ripped from their chest.”

Rampage stared at the white unicorn, then snirked. “You are so full of it. If it symbolizes that, then I should give it to Blackjack. She’s actually eaten my heart.” Well, didn’t that comment get a somewhat disturbed look from my cousin! Rampage, though, appeared somewhat mollified. “Alright. Fine. I’ll wear this stupid, lacy, frou-frou outfit.” She looked to the bathroom door. “Hey! Scotch! You ready?”

“That is not a frou-frou outfit! That is a Rarity,” Grace said with mild reproach.

“So’s mine!” Scotch squealed as she jumped out of the bathroom. It was certainly…something, though nothing I could ever see Rarity creating. It was a one piece vivid pink bodysuit with glaring neon green slashes all across it. Perhaps it might have been tolerable, but Scotch Tape had taken it upon herself to…where did she get her hooves on bright pink makeup!? It was painted jaggedly around her eyes, and she’d styled her blue mane in spikes with some kind of stiff mane gel. “Don’t I look awesome in my Rarity outfit?”

“That is *not* a Rarity,” Grace said delicately. “*That* is a Sweetie Belle.”

“That! I wanna wear something like that! Quick! Someone disintegrate me!” Rampage said with an eager grin. “Do you have one in black?”

“Sorry. That was the only filly-sized outfit that Charity possessed,” Lacunae replied. “And she insisted on the makeup.”

“What? It looks good, doesn’t it?” Scotch Tape asked plaintively.

Grace, without missing a beat, replied primly, “Yes. Yes it does.” Then she looked at the rest of us and asked smoothly, “Don’t you all

agree?" Her tone implied that, if any of us didn't, then clearly there was something reprehensible about us, so naturally we all nodded. The olive filly beamed quite happily.

As my friends and I walked along the hall towards the stairs that led to the ballroom, I looked from one to the next. Scotch Tape commented on how Glory's dress made her at least one fifth cooler. Rampage hung back, looking oddly sweet in her insecurity. Boo just seemed keen on getting to the festivities. Lacunae met my eyes, visions of Galas long ago swimming in hers as the Goddess slowly eroded what little resistance remained between her and us. The void fetish had bought me one last evening, at most.

Maybe I was squandering what little time I had left, but the Goddess had filled my brain with so many blocks and erasures that I was worn down trying to fight her. I wasn't sure I could physically say the word 'goddess' after all she'd done to me. So, I could make sure my friends could take care of everything once I was gone.

That was the least I could do after all the trouble I'd caused them.

We walked to the staircase leading down to the ballroom. Prince Splendid waited at the bottom, and Glory sighed. Then I noticed a stallion in a tux waiting casually beside him. Small, a little thin, but incredibly handsome with an impeccably combed mane. Calm blue eyes looked right into mine, and for a moment the crowd seemed to fade into the background. It was just the two of us as I descended, each step like a timeless eternity until I reached the bottom. Then he reached out, curled his fetlock around my foreleg and lifted it to his lips, pressing his lips to the end. Then he looked into my eyes, his lips curling slightly, and asked casually, "So, was all this a part of the plan?"

"P-21?" I asked, a little bemused at the sight of him. Hoity Toity stood nearby in an equally magnificent maroon tuxedo. I wondered where he'd acquired such fine garments, but I supposed that, if I were a ghoul like him, my most precious possessions would be such clothes.

"Whoa. You look good, Daddy!" Scotch Tape gushed, rushing down the last few steps to hug him.

"He cleaned up rather well," Splendid said with a warm smile. Then he looked at Glory and said just as warmly, "Morning Glory." She went even redder as she gave an awkward nod. Then he regarded me. "Your Majesty. Would you permit me to escort you to the Gala?"

"I need to speak to Hoity a moment," I replied, and his face become downcast.

"Ah, of course." He looked to Glory, trying that same winning smile, but she'd moved to put Lacunae between him and her as they walked to the ballroom. Rampage just gave him a stompy look and walked past while Scotch Tape rushed to P-21's side to enter with him. Finally, Splendid looked at Boo and hesitated a moment as she blinked cluelessly at him. Finally, he smiled and moved up beside her, "May I?"

She looked at me, and I glanced at Grace and gave a little tilt of my head. "Perhaps you can escort us both inside, Brother? Like when we were young?" Grace said as she moved on the other side of Splendid.

He blinked in surprise and then smiled a little before he nodded. "Very well. Together then." They followed Rampage to the Ballroom.

As the trio moved off, I trotted up to Toity. The ghoul grinned. "Nicely played," he said. "Please tell me it was intentional."

"Was what intentional?" I asked in bafflement. He just sighed and shook his head, as if I were a filly who didn't understand the rules. "What am I supposed to do at this Gala? When do I make the announcement?" I asked, a touch cross.

"I've talked to the necessary ponies. The guests have all been searched for weapons. I'll declare that the Gala has begun, and you'll say a few words. We'll have a few short introductions, then you are free to mingle. Circulate. Enjoy yourself. Dance, if you are inclined. You'll likely receive some gifts, all unwrapped, of course. No need to risk a handsomely packaged bomb. In a few hours, I'll announce your declaration, and you'll address the crowd. Then you'll retire. In the morning, you leave in the *Fleur*, and we'll deal with the repercussions," Hoity said with a carefree wave of his hoof, as if they were of no matter.

"Sounds good to me," I replied, wishing I could ask him to add 'The Goddess Resumes Control' to the party schedule. Actually, I'd love to just tell anypony at all! I stepped up beside him. "Care to escort me inside?"

"You'd want to enter with me?" he said, an expression of surprise on his mottled face.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" I asked in bafflement, smiling as I knitted my brows. He pulled down his glasses, staring at me for a

moment. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just an interesting reminder of why King Awesome picked you to select his heir,” he said with a smile as he walked beside me.

Epicure, the lime green colt, stood by the doorway and nodded to both of us. “Fillies and Gentlecolts!” he proclaimed loudly, making a gesture that killed the music. “Presenting Her Royal Majesty of the Society of Equestria, Queen Blackjack, and her escort, Sir Hoity Toity of Canterlot!”

Then we stepped through the doors, and for a moment I was overwhelmed by the lights shining on me and a thunderous noise that almost had me jumping into S.A.T.S. to determine the target. Then I realized that nopony was shooting at me…no…they were stomping their hooves in applause, cheering, and chanting my name. I froze in place, wanting to turn tail right there and run. There was no way I was going in there with hundreds yelling and calling my name! I would have been happier being shot at.

Hoity, as if reading my mounting panic, hooked his foreleg around mine and kept me from flight. “Just smile, walk to the throne, and wave when you get there,” he said, giving me a forward nudge and starting me walking across the ballroom. The band…correction, the strange robopony DJs from Flank…played a grand tune from two centuries ago, and I stared straight ahead at the throne on the far side of the room. It seemed like it was farther than the moon and that I walked forever as we proceeded through the crowd. Around me had to be the greatest collection of pre-war clothing in the world; most of it wasn't as spectacular as the Raritys we wore, but all of it was formal wear to some degree.

I reached the dais on the far side of the room. The crown sat upon a purple pillow beside the gilded throne. I took a seat and looked at the hundreds of eyes all locked on mine. If I’d had a heart, it likely would have stopped then and there. Glory sat beside me and P-21 next to her. They looked at me with eyes brimming with confidence. Hoity moved to the other side of the throne. “Thank you for coming,” he said to the room. “May the Grand Galloping Gala commence!”

“What?” I blinked at him a moment then back at the crowd. “Oh.” I smiled and struggled to get the words out as he’d told me. Damn it! Why wasn’t the Stable Dweller doing this? She could have just sashayed in and wowed them all with just her sheer awesomeness.

“Um…Thanks for coming. Let’s get this party started!”

The two robot-helmeted ponies I’d met a lifetime ago in Flank began to play music, a strange blend of classical melody and modern beat as they worked the controls. “Now you’ll meet the honored guests,” Hoity said to me. “Shake their hooves, welcome them to the Gala, and graciously accept whatever gifts they give you,” he murmured, then looked at my friends. “You can go. Mingle. Dance if you like.”

“I’ll stay with Blackjack,” Glory said, leaning over and giving me a nuzzle. “She gets in trouble on her own.”

“I wanna dance!” Scotch Tape squealed. “Dance with me, Daddy!” P-21 looked at me with the strangest smile. Happy. Simply happy as he followed her to where the Society ponies were pairing off in the middle of the floor.

Rampage curled her tail around Boo’s neck. “Come on, Boo. Let’s hit the buffet. If we’re lucky, maybe we can find some drunks to mess with.”

“I’ll keep a close eye on them,” Lacunae said aloud.

“Lacunae,” I said before she moved away. She looked at me in surprise. “Try and have fun,” I told her. She looked unsure, then gave the smallest of smiles and nodded.

“Blackjack?” Glory asked with a small frown. When I turned to her, she cocked her head. “Are you okay?”

No. I’m not. I wanted to tell her. My mouth twitched as I fought to say those simple words. Tell her what was happening. Say what the Goddess was doing to me. Let her help. A sensation like a sword stabbed into my brain and twisted, but my body simply froze. I couldn’t speak. If my body hadn’t been synthetic, I would have collapsed. It was only a few seconds, but finally I abandoned my attempt to speak. “I’m fine. I’m fine. Just stressed…” At least I could say that!

“Well…okay. Just…try not to mention sex to anypony you meet here, okay?” Glory asked with a worried smile.

“I’ll try,” I said sarcastically. What followed next was an exercise in tedium. Epicure made the announcements. All the movers and shakers of the Society. ‘Full share ponies’, Hoity said as if it should matter to me. As they came up, Hoity usually muttered a few suggestions of what to say. First Splendid, then Grace. The Carrots. The Oranges. The Horseshoes. All strange ponies whom I didn’t know and who didn’t know me. Still, I got a brand new riot

shotgun, six boxes of specialty ammunition, and some combat barding that I couldn't wear anymore. Maybe Scotch would grow into it.

"Princess Charm," Epicure said with an uncharacteristic break in his voice.

I turned to address the filly... and nearly choked with the effort of containing myself. Her spectacular mane looked like she'd cut it with an air duct fan. Her tail sported only a few dozen tufts here and there. Her pristine white hide had proven to be quite accepting of at least a half dozen different colors of stains. Her horn had been scribbled black with a marker of some sort. Not even the fancy party dress she wore could cover the sheer ridiculousness of her appearance. "So…so glad you could m…make it…" I managed to get out.

If looks could kill... She gave a nasty smirk. "Oh, I didn't want you to miss out on your present, Your Majesty," she said as she levitated a bag off her back and tossed it to me before trotting off the far side of the dais. I glanced at Hoity, then opened the drawstring. It didn't sound like a grenade or anything. It clinked when I levitated it, and I peeked in.

"What is it, Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern.

I couldn't answer. I just felt…tired. I cupped my forehooves and poured a small pile of broken glass into them from the bag. Curved glass. The exact curve of memory orbs. "I guess she found out she wasn't my pick for regent," I muttered as I dumped them back into the sack.

"Do you want me to have her removed from the Gala?" Hoity asked low as the next pony I was to meet fidgeted.

"Maybe order a royal spanking?" Glory suggested. I managed a halfhearted grin…maybe not for her…

"No. I just…no," I replied with a sigh. Knowing my luck, it was just the beginning. I fully expected tonight to end in some sort of disaster or attack or…something. The Goddess creeping up on me was pretty high on that list. But what could I do? Run? Give myself a brain hemorrhage trying to spit out the phrase 'Goddess mind control me is gonna!'? Glory had a way back home. With luck, she'd get Thunderhead to listen to her. P-21 and Rampage could back her up if they didn't.

Another four 'honored patrons' passed me a bottle of Wild Pegasus, some very nice emeralds, a magic beam pistol, and some

overcharged gem cartridges. The latter two I immediately passed to Glory the second the patron turned away. She examined it closely and then grinned. “Wow. Mint condition Shadowbolt sidearm!” She turned the gun on its side and cocked her head. “There’s an inscription. ‘Pew-Pew’? Who names a beam pistol Pew-Pew?”

“With your luck, Rainbow Dash,” I teased, but she didn’t share it.

“Ugh. I am so sick of Rainbow Dash,” Glory said, slumping. “I’m sick of her face and her stupid mane and her boy-liking body and ponies calling me Rainbow Dash. I want to just be Glory again. Boring, plain, everyday Glory. This joke has run its course, and it’s not funny anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, giving her a little nuzzle. “Sometimes I feel like that’s my whole life.”

“You’re not serious, are you Blackjack?” Glory asked as my attention drifted to someone keen on giving me a brightly wrapped box and guards who were finally living up to their name and escorting the pony out. I gave a little shrug, and she sighed and covered her face with a wing. “Celestia give me strength.” Then her wings and hooves seized my shoulders and turned me to face the room. “Look at where you are. You’re Queen of the Society. Nopony is laughing at you. Everypony in this room respects you in one way or another. Sure, you can be a little aggravating at times, but a joke? Never!”

“But the shooting and the mess ups and the…everything,” I trailed off lamely.

“That’s life, Blackjack,” she said evenly. “I trusted Lighthooves and Mother when I shouldn’t have. My mistakes nearly got my father killed.” She hung her head. “I was so sure I was inadequate that at first part of me was glad I was turned into Rainbow Dash. That I’d be better for you if I was somepony strong and assertive.”

“Then what was all that mane dying and stuff?” I asked with a baffled smile.

“That was me being an idiot too,” she said with a roll of her eyes and a rueful smile. “You’re not the only pony who can be a hypocrite, Blackjack. Yes, I didn’t want this, but at the same time I did. Just a little. For flying if nothing else. Being grounded was horrible…so part of me was glad to be her. Maybe that was the joke on me.” She sighed and shook her head. “I never deserved any of the things that Morning Glory had. Maybe it’s time I just embraced being Rainbow Dash.”

“Hey,” I turned to face her, staring into her eyes. “You have things that Rainbow Dash never did. You have a father whose life you saved. You have sisters. You have a mother, even if she is a madmare. You are ten times smarter than Rainbow Dash, and a hundred times a better pony than me. Someday this curse…spell…thing will end, and you’ll have the last laugh.” She smiled a little, and for a moment I could see the purple-maned mare as clear as day.

Hoity cleared his throat, and I glanced out to the side at a hundred or so ponies witnessing our tender exchange. Some wore expressions of scandal, others amusement, and more than a few the detached interest of a sporting event. I flushed from ear to augment and waved a metal hoof. “Hi. I think that’s enough gifts. You can just forward them to my room or something. Time to mingle!”

A ripple of chuckles rolled through the room as I trotted down to the ballroom floor, my friends mixing in with the others. At first, a gaggle of Society ponies closed in, but there was something about me that seemed to keep them at hoof’s distance. Maybe it was the glowing red eyes of death? Grace, Splendid, and Charm had far more ponies lingering near them than I. I was the placeholder, and everypony knew that I was going to leave. That assurance kept me in the position of ‘curiosity’ rather than ‘threat’…of course that wasn’t enough for some of them to stop trying to kill me, but still.

Pain Train kept a watchful eye from the edge of the room. I knew he could cross the ballroom in ten seconds flat; sure it would be over a trail of ponies, but he would still make it to protect his ward. Hoity had his own audience where he reassured everypony in the Society that I had no plans to hang around. That just left everypony in breathless speculation on who would be chosen. Already it seemed clear Charm was disfavored, as only a half dozen or so crowded around her. She’d had five times as many around her at Awesome’s funeral.

“Well now. From Stable Pony to Queen of the Hoof,” a mare said from the throng, and I turned to the yellow mare Bottlecap. The manager of Megamart looked at my dress and then back at me as she sized up my evident fortunes. “I always knew you were going places. Granted I never expected this, but still.”

“What brings you to this?” I asked with a grin.

“Splendid decided that I was worth an invitation,” Bottlecap replied. “Really, I think he’s just trying to set up a supply line for

the Fluttershy Medical Center, but his caps are good. Right now we can certainly use them, what with our zebra problems."

"Zebra problems? In the northwest? Isn't that the exact opposite direction from where the Remnant operates?" I asked with a frown.

"I have no idea where they came from, but they're scaring the shoes off of the caravaners. They're not threatening. Not hiding. Not doing anything besides setting up camps along the road between Manehattan and Hoofington. But they're armed twenty times worse than any raider, and they're watching. It's been a boon for the arms sales, that's for sure, but everypony knows that they're going to do something sooner or later," Bottlecap said with a frown.

"You might want to think about reinforcing Megamart," I said in concern. "Between the Remnant and the Harbingers, something is going to happen soon. Maybe move Gun so it fires out rather than down. You could have some bigger problems than shoplifters soon." She looked worried, so I followed up with, "Sorry it's taken me so long to deal with Paradise, too."

"Oh, that? That was taken care of," Bottlecap said with a warm smile.

"It was? How? By who?" I felt my mane frizzing. Nopony in the Hoof could fix anything besides me, if my experiences were any indication! I immediately began imagining the worst case scen--

"Keeper found four very capable people, and they were able to dislodge Red Eye's forces. Not so difficult, since most of his forces had already been withdrawn to the Everfree Forest. It was just a matter of sweeping out the dregs," Bottlecap said, giving a little shiver. "Two of them were ghouls and one a zebra, but they were quite capable. They said they were funding a trip to Shattered Hoof Ridge of all places."

"Xanthe? Snails? Carrion? Silver Spoon?" I asked with an idiot grin.

"That's them," Bottlecap said, then grinned. "Keeper was very put out that you didn't do it, though."

"Yeah, it kinda fell off my radar with everything else going on," I muttered. Little things like the Harbingers and the Goddess's takeover really put a crimp in dealing with those little side quests.

"Oh, he wasn't upset because of that! Keeper hoped that you'd do it for free, or at least that he wouldn't have to pay you as much as a pony who can actually barter," she said with a sympathetic smile. "No offense, Blackjack, but you do way too much without ever

charging appropriate rates."

"I thought it was called charity," Glory said with a cool look at Bottlecap.

"Charity? Where?" I looked around in horror for a moment, feeling poverty sneaking up on me. Then I forced myself to calm down…

"Right here," the filly snapped as she stepped up to my side. I nearly jerked away when she pinned me with her glare. "Don't you dare rip that outfit, Blackjack! One tear. One stain. One speck of dust and I'll *own* you. Understood?"

"What are you doing here?!" I gasped. The filly wore a light pink dress trimmed in darker purple with a large white silk flower over her chest and smaller ones decorating the trim. A band of lavender and white flowers encircled her brow.

Charity rolled her eyes. "Where do you think half these ponies bought their fancy outfits? Megamart?" The two yellow mares regarded each other coolly, small smiles on their faces. Finally Charity said in a tone of smug import, "Six."

Bottlecap smiled a little smugly in return. "Seven."

That made Charity slump at little before she looked at me. "If I figure in what Blackjack owes me, I should clear seven!"

Glory looked from one to the other as Bottlecap said, "No IOU's or outstanding debts. Don't be sad. Last year you were at four."

"Yeah. Between the manor and the gear we scavenged, I should hit seven next year. Maybe eight." She said with a little swish of her tail and a sneaky look at Bottlecap.

"Just don't make the same mistake as Usury. She was at seven too. Now she's at three. Celestia only knows what Caprice is at."

That made Charity look a little mournful. "Caprice is at zero," she said. Bottlecap looked startled. "She died in the battle for the manor. I meant to tell you earlier."

"Damn," Bottlecap said with an upset look.

"These numbers are…?" I asked with a small frown.

"Number of digits of personal wealth. The value of all a pony's property, liquid assets, and facilities. I get to figure in Megamart, Charity her…post office and vault, and the like. Otherwise, we'd be lucky to break a four." Charity sighed and nodded.

"Pardon me, but are you two related?" Glory asked as she looked from one to the other.

Charity narrowed her eyes, clearly contemplating a stupid questions fee. Bottlecap just smiled sadly. "Probably. Father doesn't

keep track."

Charity snorted. "Semen's the only thing he gives out for free, and then not always." Glory turned profoundly red, glancing aside at Splendid across the hall.

Bottlecap continued, "Usury, Caprice, and I are the daughters he's confirmed are his. Charity…"

"Doesn't need Keeper's help, thank you. The Crusaders stand on our own. Adults are nothing but trouble. Case in point," Charity said with a gesture towards me.

Bottlecap sighed and shook her head. "One day you'll learn about the value of things besides money," the mare said with a genteel smile. "Blackjack," she said with an amused nod of her head before she moved off.

Charity looked around sharply, then gestured me to come closer. When I balked, she gestured once more, more rapidly. Finally, our faces inches apart, she stared right into my eyes and poked my chest. "One stain…one tear…you're mine. Understand?" I blinked in shock before she smirked. "And thanks." She turned away and headed into the crowd. I straightened up, now acutely observant for any fluids that might splash.

Glory had gotten swept away while I'd spoken to Charity, but I noticed somepony else I hadn't seen in a while. The green unicorn, Sagittarius of the Zodiacs, was in close discussion with Windclop, the ghoul mayor of Meatlocker. "I don't know what they're up to. That's the problem. They have no reason to…" Windclop trailed off as the pegasus ghoul saw me approach. "Blackjack! Good to see you. Hard to imagine it was only last week you left us, and now you're head of the Society." He grinned widely. "I…hope you're not thinking of running for office any time soon."

"Politics really isn't my thing. Way too much annoyance and far too few opportunities to shoot them," I replied. "How are things at Meatlocker?"

"Fine! Wonderful. For the most part…" he trailed off a bit, then sighed, his mottled ears drooping. "Truth be told, I'm worried. Even though Hightower was vaporized, the…ooze substance you described is still present in the tunnels and sewers. The... 'slimeponies' have also taken to walking out of the crater, and we've had to maintain a constant vigil to keep them from straying close. Fortunately, they seem rather mindless, but it's just a matter of time before they get in."

“I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked with a small frown.

“Don’t you have enough on your plate?” Sagittarius asked, the green unicorn twirling his golden goatee.

“Actually, that’s what I was discussing with Sagittarius here. We’re hoping to bring in some professional help to neutralize the ooze. If we can’t, we might have to evacuate the hospital and relocate to Rocket Town at the Luna Space Center. Unfortunately, we have friction with the ghouls who live there,” Windclop said with a sour twist of his lips. “They believe they can use their rockets to fly away to a promised land. Madness, really, but they are my own kind. I’d much rather stay in good old Meatlocker, of course.”

I nodded in understanding, then looked at Sagittarius. “I am glad I met you, though. Tell Triage that the Roseluck Agrifarms facility has Enervation fields that nearly killed me. I cleared out a number of defending robots and turrets, but, short of sending in some robots to clear every bit of debris, I don’t see you getting it working soon.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Virgo would be all over that, I think. Thanks. I’ll pass it along right away.”

“How are Pisces and Capricorn?” I asked with a grin.

“They’re well. I think they miss you. You should visit them sometime. We replaced Taurus and Gemini, and Leo retired. He never really recovered after his punting from Rampage,” he said, and frowned. “I’m a little concerned with the new Gemini; I’m not one to trust a pony with severe personality disorders, but she does bring in the bounty. The new Leo’s a griffin. Went by the name Tigerhawk before. Definitely one who’d give Rampage a run for her money. The new Taurus is from Applelanta. Tracker sort. Doesn’t talk much, but he fills the bounties.”

“Having much business?” I asked with a coy little smile. My eyes roamed freely over his fit emerald form, his golden goatee, and drifted back towards his... He cleared his throat and snapped my eyes back to his. A sardonic arch of his brow prompted a grin from me. “Right! Business! Have any?”

“Not so much around the Hoof, but across the greater Wasteland, oh yeah. There’s no shortage of ponies with caps who want somepony else dead. Still, we keep half of us in the Collegiate at all times. Things are feeling tense, and Triage doesn’t want things getting unmanageable.” He paused, then added, “The professor is back. Or her brain, in any case. Mounted it on a hover robot and

she's back to work in the observatory."

"She is?" If I wasn't the Goddess's perpetual puppet after tonight, I'd look her up. Probably. Eventually! Ugh, there was so much to do! Still, I made a mental note to track her down. I had questions regarding the cybernetics in the Brood. "I should say hello," I said.

"I think she'd like that. She seems well-appraised of your travels, despite being a brain in a jar," Sagittarius said. *I bet she is*, I thought to myself. She gave me my eyes and ears, after all.

I looked over at Windclop and lowered my voice a little. "How's Boing doing?"

His genteel smile fell and he squirmed a little awkwardly. "She's… well…I think? I'm no expert on living ponies. Adapting? Coming to terms, I suppose. She works in the market, sorting things. Not… well…ahem…" The brown ghoul gave an apologetic shrug, then looked around awkwardly and spied the buffet. "Oooh! I am starving! I think I'll go pick up a snack! Excuse me!" And with no further ado he rushed away from the unpleasant conversation topic.

I sighed and looked back at Sagittarius. "Can you do me a favor? Can you ask Triage to send a full medical healing whatchamacallit for a filly? Stick her in that healing can or something. I hurt her badly when I wasn't well, and I'd like to fix her if I can." I was ashamed that I'd hadn't done so sooner, but then, I had been rather distracted. "Tell her to bill the Society Regent." They could afford it.

"And I'll remind her not to pad the expenses too much," he said with a little chuckle and a nod of his head to me. "Take care, Blackjack."

As Sagittarius trotted off, I gave a half smile. That went fairly well! My mane began to crawl, and I looked around. Bomb? Assassin? Something had to go horribly wron--

I felt someone step up behind me; aha! I whirled, ready to defe-- I was yanked off my hooves like an insolent filly and hauled into the air! I felt my body whirled around as a massive stallion crowed, "Glorious day, Your Majesty!" He held me like a cyberpony doll with one powerful foreleg while the other thrust towards the heavens. "Never would I, Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, have imagined that such a low and listless young mare would rise to such glorious heights!" He pressed his hoof to his brow beneath his miniscule horn. "It is truly an inspiration to us all!" Luna as my witness, there were sparkles cascading around us.

A mare rapidly trotted up to us. “Paladin Stronghoof! You know you promised not to…do that!” She spoke in the odd accent from Trottingham and had a toasty-yellow-brown coat with a crispy tan mane and tail and a cutie mark of some sort of biscuit with butter atop it.

I was dropped, and he loomed over her. “Knight Crumpets, it is well known that friendship is magic and magic is strength and strength is the ability to do good in this world! Are you denying the strength of my friendship? Are you?” He quivered as he flexed his massively muscled forelegs, body pulsating. “Feel the power of my friendship! Feel!” he demanded, his mustache quivering.

Crumpets leaned back, her face flushing in complete mortification before she covered it with her hoof. “Oh for pony’s sake…” Then she scowled up at him, twisted, and rammed her hoof upside his head. “Bloody well stop!” Glory’s jaw dropped at the sight of the smaller mare knocking back the massive muscled stallion.

She was about half his size, but thankfully she seemed to break the spell. At least the sparkles stopped as he sat back and held the side of his head with a hoof. “Ah, so very sorry,” he said with an embarrassed expression.

Crumpets sighed and shook her head before smiling at Glory and me. “Nice to see you again, Your Majesty.” Crumpets was one of the least dressed mares here, clad only in a yellow sundress and matching hat.

“Likewise,” I said with a happy smile at the two. “Were you two invited?” I asked as I gestured at the pair. I didn’t think the Trottingham Steel Rangers were around long enough to be known by the Society. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“To be honest, no. We came on completely different business, but since we were here, Princess Grace was generous enough to allow us to attend.” She paused and looked sharply at Stronghoof. “Provided we conduct ourselves with decorum.”

“Manners and etiquette have been passed down the Stronghoof line for generations, Knight Crumpets. Observe my civilized and principled conduct,” he said grandly as he knelt before me and took my hoof between his. “Queen Blackjack, it is an honor and a privilege to meet you once more.” Then he kissed it regally.

Crumpets knitted her brows. “Better, but you better not start sparkling or throbbing again. And grabbing is right out!” Glory gave a little snirk and hid her smile behind her wing.

When my hoof was free, I smiled. “So what are you here for?” It was easier to ask that than to ask about Stable 99. The pair seemed to understand my question, though.

Crumpets cleared her throat. “Well, let me be the first to say that your stable is a marvel. Even if some of the recycling systems are a little icky, it is a masterpiece of sustainability. And I thought Stable 2’s orchards were impressive. I think you could put a Stable 99 anywhere and it’d be viable,” Crumpets said with a worried smile. “But I’m afraid that unless we get substantial reinforcement from Trottingham, we might not be able to stay there. It really does need a sizable population to run such a facility. If it wasn’t for the survivors’ help--”

“Survivors!?” I gasped, grabbing her shoulders. “Who? How? Where?”

Glory came to her rescue. “Hey, no grabbing ponies, Blackjack!”

“Thirteen!” Crumpets gasped as I released her. “In the maintenance around the reactor. They’d sealed off the lowest levels of the stable when the…first attack…happened and didn’t come out. Seemed they didn’t believe the all clear, so somepony named Rivets told them they could stay till they got bored and wanted out.”

“She never told me!” I said, sitting down hard. “I…I thought Scotch Tape was the only uninfected pony! I…” Then a horrible feeling crept over me. “Do they…do they know how the stable was gassed?”

The pair looked at each other, all smiles gone, and I got my answer. Stronghoof put his hoof on my shoulder. “I’m sorry. In the service of doing what is right, hard choices have to be made. But that does not mean others will understand or forgive those who have to make them.”

So, they knew what I had done. I hadn’t ever planned on returning, but still…

“We’ve a medical specialist in our acolytes for biological work, mostly to identify hazards in ruins we study. He found evidence of your infection in more than twenty of the ponies killed,” Crumpets said respectfully. “It was a full outbreak. If you hadn’t done what you did, I think half the Hoof would be infected. We found other infected ‘survivors’ in other sealed areas, and seeing what they did to themselves…I wouldn’t wish that on anypony.”

“And your warning spared us as well,” Stronghoof added. “Had we not been diligent, we would have eaten the same contaminated

food. There were some," and he huffed, his mustache fluttering, "some Rangers who were less than respectful with the slain suggested that we repeat the previous mistake. Their behavior was corrected." Good.

"We purged the entire recycling system and buried the bodies outside the stable. It's hard and messy work. We've been spending most of our time just on cleaning up, which is where the lack of help comes in. We sent message to Trottingham, but with the civil war in the Steel Rangers, we haven't much hope of reinforcements soon." She looked around sharply, then lowered her voice. "Officially we're here for biomass…waste clippings and the like…to reprime the recycling system. We're also trying to bring back any Rangers that didn't join Steel Rain."

"Can you recruit from outside? I can introduce you to Bottlecap," I said, pointing a hoof in her general direction.

"If only it were so simple," Stronghoof sighed.

Crumpets nodded in agreement. "Thanks, but we need more than just willing, working, loyal bodies, which are hard enough to find. We need ponies who are used to living underground and handling cramped living spaces, and are used to the kind of social order you find in stables and the Steel Rangers. We've got thirty or so Rangers, twenty acolytes, and thirteen survivors trying to run a stable for five hundred. With two hundred technically trained ponies, we might be able to cover all critical systems."

"What is your plan if you can't get 99 going?"

"We shut everything down that we can, lock the door, return to Trottingham, and try to get enough ponies to come back and restore it," Stronghoof declared with a determined set of his eyes. "We won't abandon it to scavengers. Nor will we cast the survivors to the waste, nor condemn them to die alone in a failed stable."

"Thank you. I hope you get what you need," I said with a small frown, thinking back to what Bottlecap said. "Are there a lot of zebras around the stable?"

The question seemed to catch her by surprise, and she nodded. "Yes. They haven't been hostile, though. They keep their distance, and we're grateful for that."

So what were the zebras doing up there? I knew they were operating to the southeast, but my stable was on the far side of the Hoof. How'd they move all the way up there with nopony seeing? What were they doing? "Well, I'll see about Hoity getting you some

green waste. I doubt he can object to giving away garbage."

Stronghoof wasn't listening, though. He stared across the room, and his eyes shone with tiny stars. Like a stallion possessed, he strode away from us towards Lacunae, who stood beside the buffet. Crumpets, Glory, and I followed him with a touch of concern, though I didn't think a sparkly gaze was necessarily dangerous. Lacunae's expression started in bafflement and then shifted rapidly to alarm as Stronghoof knelt before her.

"Dear lady," he said as he clasped her hoof between his. "Such a vision of loveliness as yourself should not be left alone in such a time. Please, allow me, Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, to escort you in this social affair. Beauty and grace such as yours should not be consigned to the wall."

Lacunae's mouth worked silently. She looked at me, and I waved my hoof and tried to think at her to go on, but the mental static still lingered. She looked down at him; despite her alicorn mass, they were very nearly the same size. "G…gallant sir. I am unworthy of your praise. Surely there are others here deserving of your genteel attention."

"Dear lady! You merit yourself far too little! If you are unworthy of kindest attention, then truly Equestria is lost for good. I pray, gift me your company, and I shall consider myself honored more than any stallion ever," Stronghoof said as he gazed up at her. I swear, it seemed a spotlight shone only on the two.

Lacunae looked around as if hoping someone would object. I wondered if she'd teleport away; if she did, I was going to drag her back here! "It should not be. Your order and my kind are terrible foes. It would reflect badly upon you to show such kindness to me."

"Reflect!" he said with utmost scorn. "The enmity between yours and mine is of no matter here. Not here. I have heard of you, Lady Lacunae, and I know you are apart from your kind. That you show a degree of gentleness and a good demeanor unknown elsewhere. Never would I think ill of you for that, nor would I care for the thoughts of any who would think ill of us for it!" He kissed her hoof, and her purple wings fluffed a little as she blushed. "Please, dearest lady. Allow me this honor, and I shall be forever satisfied."

Lacunae looked helplessly at Crumpets, Glory, and me. The brown earth pony waved her hoof. "Oh, don't mind me. I'm strictly for the mares anyway." Glory and I glanced at her with simultaneous, identical arched brows, and she flushed. "What?"

The majestic alicorn finally sighed and smiled to him, bowing her head and spreading her purple wings wide. “Good sir, I accept.” He stepped up beside her, and side by side the pair marched out to the dance floor.

I’d kept it contained for as long as I could, but I let out a little giggle, prancing on my hooves in decidedly unregal fashion. “Yes, yes, yes, yes!” Oh, nothing could be more perfect! Then I frowned and looked around the ballroom. Something had to go wrong. Something! But what…

“You’re Morning Glory, right?” Crumpets asked Glory, and the blue pegasus swapped her amused look at me to a nod at the yellow-brown mare. “I was wondering if we could talk a little. We found some notes on the virus in Blackjack’s bedroom, and I was hoping you might have some advice on making sure the recycler is clean.”

Glory frowned and looked from Crumpets to me. “I…um…I’m not sure this is a good time…”

“Oh, go on. This sounds like something Rainbow Dash couldn’t do,” I said with a warm smile. Glory blinked, then smiled back. I couldn’t resist, grinning and saying in a much lower voice, “And you heard what she said.” She looked at me flatly as I grinned back.

“You have some kind of personal vendetta against monogamy, don’t you?” Glory countered.

I spread my hooves wide. “Love wants to be free!”

“You’re impossible,” she said with a smile and a shake of her head. Then she turned to Crumpets. “I think we can talk a bit. Let’s get a drink first.”

As the pair walked off talking about decontamination procedures, I gave a broad smile and then lapsed back into my brooding, waiting for something to go horribly wrong.

* * *

Half an hour later, I was absolutely positive that everything was going too smoothly. The Goddess at bay. Lacunae. Glory getting to talk smart pony stuff! Something had to go bad. It was just the way things worked. I was so paranoid that I lifted the tablecloth of a buffet table, half expecting to find a bomb or something underneath! Dawn swooping in from above. Zebra invasion.

Nothing. I plucked a sandwich off a tray, checking for poison... or expired mayonnaise. “Blackjack, what are you doing?” Rampage

asked behind me as I furiously masticated some excellent daisy sandwiches. Even the food was going perfectly!

"Just wondering when the party is going to blow up," I said as I turned and faced her…and saw her with five other very tough-looking ponies. It took me a few seconds to recall their names, but there was no way I could mistake the enormous jet black stallion. Looking as if carved from solid onyx, Brutus the Reaper looked down at me with his calm and sure expression. Bluebelle, the Highlander mare, stood beside the scarred stallion Candlewick and the lavender unicorn Dazzler. The only one I didn't recognize was a teal pegasus stallion with a Dashite brand and a Halfheart pendant. All were dressed in rough and tumble gear and were being viewed with a mixture of revulsion and fascination at the 'primitives'.

"You…I…why are you here?" I asked, astonished.

"A question I've asked all night," Rampage said with a sigh.

Dazzler smiled at me. "I think the Society expects us to go back home with stories about how awesome they are. I wouldn't even be here if they didn't bribe me with caps and ammo." She grinned at me. "You're well dressed for a Reaper, Blackjack, but it seems to be a thing." She traversed her grin to Rampage, who rolled her eyes.

"I'd love to see y'all fight in that get up," Bluebelle said with a chuckle.

"Big Daddy always makes sure some of us attend the Gala. Mostly to bear news about Awesome," Brutus said in his deep, calm voice. "It's mostly an evening of tedium. Then we get bored, smash the furniture, and get thrown out. It's tradition."

"Not tonight, it's not," Rampage snapped. "This is Blackjack's party."

"Really?" Brutus said as he looked down at me. I tried to look tough in return, but he just shook his head. "You're no more Queen of the Society than you are a Reaper of the top ten. Everypony wants to claim a piece of you, Security. But you don't belong to any of us."

"Deep, Brut. Deep," Candlewick said with a roll of his eyes.

I could definitely see myself belonging to the powerful black earth pony. At least for a night. See just what kind of power he could unleash on a cybermare who could take it. I hitched my hips a little as he looked down at me, swishing my tail just a bit more.

Then a smack to the back of my head nearly sent me on my face. "Cool it, Blackjack. Save that kind of wrestling for when you're back

at the Arena," Rampage said sourly.

"What?!" I said defensively. "I was just looking at him!" And undressing him. And me. And sidling up... and... Rampage was eying me for another smack, and with great effort I pushed those thoughts aside.

It seemed like a heck of a coincidence that the ponies I'd met were the ones who were attended the Gala, but given everything else that was going on tonight, I simply rolled with it. I turned to the pegasus. "We haven't met."

"Storm Front," he replied, taciturnly. He had that nummy flier build, but I could see in his blue eyes that he wasn't interested in me in the slightest. "Nice to meet you. I've heard interesting things about Security."

"You're a Halfheart?" I asked, and he pressed his lips together and nodded. "I'm sorry." I wondered who it was he'd lost to gain entry to that wretched bunch.

"It's all right," he answered. "We were in security operations down here on the surface a year or two ago. She didn't come back. I requested to stay to look for her. Was denied four times. Told me she was probably dead. Finally went Dashite to find her. Did."

"Was she?" Dazzler asked.

"No. Went raider. Found her screwing a young stallion with a gun to his face. Put her down myself," he said with a small shrug. "I just put down her body. Mare I knew died a year before."

Rampage sighed and gave a mirthless smile. "This is why I love Halfhearts. They're absolutely perfect for the Hoof."

"There is something about this place," Brutus rumbled. "I've fought in the pits of Fillydelphia. Walked the western waste. Battled in the shattered canyons of Manehattan. The Hoof was the only place I've been that felt like home the minute I arrived. That welcomes the broken soul and the bleeding heart." The magnificent hunk of pony shook his head. "Even Big Daddy knows."

"How is he?" I asked. "Have you recovered from the *Celestia*'s attack?"

"The shells destroyed half the building. Fortunately, it was the half we did not use. The Arena will survive. We're recovering. We'll find the strongest, and we will thrive. As we always have," he said with a matter of fact shrug. "Big Daddy faced a brief insurrection. Very brief, as it was over ten seconds after he joined the battle." He gave a little half smile. "There are few chastisements greater than having

your face broken by a stallion old enough to be your grandfather."

Bluebelle snorted. "Still no match for White Lightning. Momma'd give him a run for his money."

"And how about the Highlanders?" I asked her with a small frown.

She seemed surprised, but the strong baby blue mare answered, "We are as we always are, fighting for our land and our kin. Momma thanks ya for the family gun, though. Gave it to my nephew. Good to keep it in our family." She looked around the party insolently. "Dunno why Momma sent me. Almost didn't make it past all the zebras."

That made my mane and tail twitch. "Zebras? You're having problems with zebras?"

"Highlanders always have problems with zebras. Usually we ambush their patrols when they try to pass through the mountains. These zebras though," she turned and spat. "Came out of nowhere. Dozens. Hundreds, even."

"So these zebra didn't come through the mountains?" I asked, confirming what she'd told me. She shook her head.

"They're also in the southwest," Storm Front said quietly. "A dozen groups encamped all along the badlands and throughout No Pony's Land." My questions must have been showing on my face, because he added, "The Halfheart territory is in the southwest. I do daily patrols looking for threats."

"Really? I didn't know that," I replied, surprised. I supposed there were plenty of places in the Hoof I hadn't discovered yet. "And what are the zebras doing?" I suspected the answer, but I couldn't think of why.

"Nothing," he replied, confirming my suspicions. Bluebelle scowled, but nodded as well.

"They're in the north, too. Near the old Ironmare base," Candlewick replied. "Don't know how they got there, but they just sit around. They'll blast you if you get too close, but otherwise they just sit with their striped heads up their asses. Why? What's the problem?"

"And they're well-armed?" I asked with a frown.

"Assault Carbines. Anti-machine rifles. Miniguns," Storm Front replied. "Only six to ten or so in each camp."

I imagined a little purple unicorn in my head writing on a chalkboard. Eight zebras per camp on average times at least twenty camps equaled…a potential huge problem. Zebras from nowhere.

Well-armed. Doing nothing. The purple unicorn wrote 'WHY?' and circled it. "Why?" I echoed her.

"Maybe the Wasteland is magically repopulating itself with small groups of zebras to kill so we can take their stuff?" Rampage said with a grin.

"Like that would ever happen," Candlewick snorted.

"Hey, you have no idea! For the last four or five weeks, we'd get armed bands charging out of nowhere to kill us. Scavengers. Or Sanguine's ponies. Or those damned Harbingers," Rampage snorted contemptuously. "We'd just be walking along and here they come! Least their gear always paid the bills."

"What are you thinking, Security?" Brutus asked in his low, deep voice. For a moment, I wondered if he was being sarcastic, but when I looked again I saw he listened in earnest. Even the scarred, boiled-looking Candlewick seemed to be listening to me.

Well, if they really wanted to know... "I don't care that they're zebras so much that they're all around the Hoof. Even if the individual camps aren't that big, there's a lot of them. And no one just sits around in the Wasteland admiring the scenery. They're up to something."

"Might be they have something to do with all the raiders getting hit across the Wasteland," Brutus said deeply. I cocked my head curiously at him, and he went on, "For the last week now there's been attacks on raiders. We get stragglers coming this way and joining up with other gangs. Whoever is behind it hits fast and hard and doesn't leave much in the way of survivors. Stallions. Mares. Young. Any group out on their own gets hit. Most get dusted, others taken. Then gone without a trace."

"That sounds like something zebras might do. They're scary ambushers. If that's the case, though, why let the survivors past?" Dazzle asked. "If they were planning on trouble, wouldn't it make sense to cut us off from all possible sources of reinforcements?" She shook her head. "What do you think we should do?"

"What I would do is get ready for something bad. Arm yourselves. Reinforce your numbers from survivors if you have to. But don't do anything stupid and fight each other," I said, feeling a certain rightness in my guess. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the zebras were there for some inconceivable zebra reasoning I couldn't imagine, but I didn't like it at all.

For several seconds I thought they might laugh at me or make a

sarcastic quip, but the four nodded in agreement. Candlewick said that somepony named Napalm would be tough to convince, but nopony wanted to get stomped by zebras or Security. I tapped Storm Front's shoulder and nodded to the side. He frowned, but joined me off away from the others. Rampage seemed to think I was flirting.

'Security operations... ' A little pink pony in my head whispered questions to a purple unicorn. "Were you a part of Enclave Intelligence?" I asked. He frowned at me, seeming to weigh how much of his past life he could discuss, but nodded. "Do you know anything about Lighthooves?"

"You mean he who must not be named?" Storm Front replied with a small smile. "Yeah. I knew him. Smart bastard. Scary conviction. We all love Thunderhead, but I'm pretty sure he wanted to make Thunderhead the Enclave."

"Do you know about his biological weapon?" I asked in a low voice.

"I heard rumors about it before I left," he replied. "Some surface plague he wanted to weaponize and disperse more widely. Neighvarro gave him the okay since it didn't affect pegasi."

"It does now," I said grimly. "Lighthooves created a new strain. He has plans to use it against pegasi loyal to Neighvarro."

Storm Front's eyes widened in shock. "That's…that's insane!" That was my general reaction. "Unless he plans to use it to turn other settlements against Neighvarro. Or keep them out of the fight. Or… no, he can't be thinking that."

"Let's just imagine he is and you tell me," I replied patently.

"The Enclave is…on paper…a democracy. We elect or mayors and our councilors. Of course, only members of the Enclave can run, but every settlement gets a vote of confidence on the Grand Pegasus Enclave every ten years. It's a joke, really, because Neighvarro controls the guns and always makes sure that everypony knows that it's in charge. So really, it's treated as a vote of loyalty. Fail to vote for Neighvarro and you get cut off." I recalled somepony telling me how the Enclave staged 'spectacles' every so often. "If Neighvarro failed a vote of confidence, leadership would pass to the settlement with the next highest amount of resources. New representatives would have to be appointed. Neighvarro would have to either stand down or be revealed for the thugs they are."

"So where do biological weapons come into an election?" I asked, a

little baffled.

"It's a counter loyalty ploy. Vote for Neighvarro and your crops might get infected." I was starting to feel shooty, and it must have shown. "I don't think he'd actually do it," Storm Front added quickly. "But it'd allow those settlements to vote in support of Thunderhead without fearing reprisal from Neighvarro."

I think politics made my brains hurt worse than the Goddess. "Doesn't that sort of undermine and demean this whole democracy thing? 'Vote for us or we'll shoot you.' 'Vote for us or you'll eat your children.'?"

"You talk as if the Enclave has ever had a fair election," Storm Front replied cynically. "But something you need to realize is that most of the Enclave doesn't have much love for Neighvarro. They're thugs, skimming the cream of the crop for themselves and leaving other settlements to struggle. You either have to suck up to them like a tick, or get used to a lot of requests getting turned down. A lot of the settlements would support any contender in the hopes of improving things, even Thunderhead. Thunderhead has it good. The Tower is a bit of an issue, but beyond that, their trade with the surface is bringing stuff the skies need."

I sighed, feeling the headache grow. "Okay. Point is, I'm not leaving a weapon like that in anypony's hooves. Even if he doesn't use it against the rest of the Enclave, the Neighvarro might deploy it against the surface." He nodded thoughtfully. I loved smart ponies. "Where would he keep a weapon like that?" Please say on the surface!

"Shadowbolt Tower," he said without a moment's hesitation. "Absolutely. The Neighvarro want to capture the Tower, so they wouldn't shell it directly. Likely near the top, above the unicorns and below Shadowbolt command."

"Right." I took a deep breath. "How could some ponies break into the tower if they had to?"

"They can't. It's impossi--" he started and then silenced himself.

"You were going to say impossible?" I asked, and he gave a little nod. "Has anyone ever gotten in?"

"Twice. The first was Contrail. Old ex-Wonderbolt a hundred and fifty years ago. Flew above the top of the tower and landed on the roof…which is quite a feat. Had to bring his own oxygen source, and he still died even after getting inside command. The other was the wife of some war hero. Flew in low over the Core. Craziest thing

I ever saw. Aside from the very real chance of getting dusted by the city's defenses, she was in the Enervation. Somehow she made it to an old maintenance accessway below the living areas and got inside. Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Blackjack," Hoity said from behind me. "It's almost time."

"Alright," I replied, looking back at the others Reapers and gangers. "Remember what I said. Tell your people. Get ready for a fight." I turned and walked away alongside the glorious-looking ghoul. "I think I'm going to need to talk to Grace, Splendid, and Charm alone for a second beforehand."

"I'll summon them. Though I'm not sure where Splendid and Charm are off to."

"I'm sure you'll find them." I looked at him, then around at the party. "Everything else is ready?"

"It should be a consummately *horrendous* melodramatic display," he drawled, then chuckled. "Which means the Society will love it. It's something that should stick with them for a while." He tapped my chest lightly. "You are somewhat skilled at this, Your Majesty."

"Skilled? Hoity, people tried to kill me four times today and foalnapped one of my friends!" I said in disbelief.

"And you survived," he replied with a grand smile. "Dearest Blackjack, survival is the greatest skill of all in politics. Some might say it's the only one that truly matters." He trotted away, leaving me alone with my worries. Rampage and the gangers behaving themselves? No one had tried to kill me yet. Was it truly possible that tonight was going to go off without a hitch? It seemed… inconceivable.

"Your Majesty," a smooth, familiar stallion's voice said behind me. "Congratulations."

I froze at the sound, and then actually smiled a little. "I knew it," I muttered as I turned and looked at the kindly purple face of Steel Rain. The stallion was dressed in a tux every bit as fine as Hoity's; I supposed that, being with the Harbingers, he could get his hooves on anything. "I knew things were going too smoothly."

He arched a brow and gave me a sardonic smile. "If you're under the impression that I'm here to cause trouble, you're quite mistaken," he said genially. "I am here with an invitation from Princess Charm." He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, and I batted it away. He sighed, "You're under quite a bit of stress. I understand. Social events like this are quite a hassle." He reached

over to a passing waiter levitating trays of champagne and snagged a glass. “Though I will admit that the Society offers quite a few pleasurable amenities. Almost makes it worth playing their silly games.”

“So, let me guess. As we speak your forces are surrounding this place and if I don’t give you EC-1101 you’ll storm in and kill everypony?” I snapped.

“My, that would be dramatic, wouldn’t it?” he countered with a smirk that made me want to shoot him right there. “I don’t suppose you’ll be amenable and just surrender it? It’d be such a shame to ruin such an excellent party.” He looked at me as he took a sip and then added, “Lovely dress, by the way.”

My magic bullet shattered the glass in his hoof and he grimaced as he drew back. A few ponies looked over, but the disturbance hadn’t been noticed. I advanced on him, crushing glass underhoof as I growled, “I will never give you EC-1101. Ever. Stop asking.”

“Pity,” he said as he wiped champagne from his sleeve. “Well, you needn’t worry. As delightful a target as the Society is right now, its wall to wall security would make taking it by force unlikely. We’re going with a plan B. And since it doesn’t involve horrible, hideous violence, I am here attending to other business.” He gave a little smirk. “Contrary to what you might believe, not everything the Harbingers do is about you.”

I actually queued up four shots to his face in S.A.T.S. If I was going to be an executioner, I couldn’t think of a better pony to start with. I just had to execute the command. Just push the button…

Damn it…

He snagged another passing glass from a waiter and downed it all in one go. “So what is your business here?” I asked him.

“Why, none of yours. But if you must know, there’s a certain person here that we loaned a few of our soldiers to in the assurance that they could bring us your forehooves. I thought it a long shot, but they insisted they could pull it off, and all they asked in return was the crown. Now we need to settle accounts.” He idly rubbed his chest as he looked aside. “And I saw Sagittarius here. I need to talk to him as well.”

“About getting that kill implant removed?” I asked.

His smile disappeared. “Cognitum has been…pressuring me…to get certain improvements. I’ve seen what she did to Dawn. I have no desire to join her. I like power you can take off at the end of the

day." He frowned as he looked away and set the glass on a table beside us, glancing at my cybernetics with a barely hidden shudder. "I'd bet that Dawn's failures would translate to further trust of me. Sadly, that's not the case. She wants me more…augmented."

"Well, good luck with that," I replied. Out of his armor, I was struck again by how positively cute he appeared. Fit body. Athletic. Smart.

Ack! No! Mortal enemies was where I drew the line! Like Lancer... though I really wished I hadn't drawn that line and... he seemed to catch me staring and smiled smugly from ear to ear.

"Indeed. Things would have been much simpler if you'd simply left me the *Celestia*. But who has time for regrets?" he said with a smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to see a filly about a collection of memory orbs."

It must have been the drink that made him slip. "You mean this collection?" I asked, pulling out the bag of crushed glass and giving it a little jingle. He blinked as he took the bag of smashed orbs and opened it up. For the first time, he looked truly stunned and horrified. "Charm decided to smash it when I didn't make her regent."

"That... the technical schematics. The technology! How... " he pursed his lips and silenced himself as he fought for composure. "Tell me you punished her for this... this... insult!"

"She got to watch her hopes and dreams crushed before her eyes. Does that count?" I replied, marveling at the surreality of commiserating with a pony who had tried to kill me repeatedly. "I never imagined you like this, Steel Rain."

"Well, we never did meet outside the battlefield, Blackjack. I'm quite sociable, actually," he replied with that kind smile. "I just happen to like power, control, and the ability to destroy my enemies instantly with the pull of a trigger. Quite unsophisticated, really. Tends to spoil social events, sadly," he said with a sigh of regret. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go see a filly about respecting the technical achievements of the past."

"Oh no you don't," I replied as I took him by the foreleg.

He smiled at me in clear condescension. "Oh please. Don't tell me that you're calling for the headsman. Despite what happened on the bridge, I know you're not a killer, Blackjack. You're not somepony to employ killers." I whistled sharply and some guards appeared almost at once. "What do you think you're doing?" They started

patting him down, but didn't find any weapons on him. Just a pendant that I confiscated... just because. "Give that back!" he shouted, stretching a hoof towards it.

"I've been reading the 'Pinkie Pie guide to tyranny'," I answered him with a grin. "While you're right that I have no interest in killing you unarmed like this, I also don't mind locking you up for a few days." A little purple unicorn in me gave a nod of satisfaction.

Steel Rain did not take it well. He was dragged from the party kicking and shouting about destroying me, the Society, and 'everypony'. That was more like it, really.

I'd embarrassed and humiliated a foe. Rampage was behaving herself. Glory was talking smart pony talk. The Harbingers weren't going to attack and mutilate everypony at the last minute! Lacunae was actually dancing with Stronghoof. It might actually be...

"No. No, I won't jinx it," I said, shaking my head firmly. Something was bound to blow up in my face. Some... something!

"That guest has been detained," Hoity Toity said as he returned with some disdain. "Although I suspect half of his protests were feigned. No real struggle nor attempts at bribery make me suspect that he's up to something."

"He probably is," I replied. "He came right up to me. He must have known I wouldn't kill him out of hoof. So... " Meh, I was getting that annoying sensation that maybe I hadn't gotten the better of him. I pulled out the pendant I'd taken off him and turned it over in my magic. It was a simple round, plastic-covered disk on a nylon lanyard. Something about it was familiar, though. I placed it around my neck and tucked it out of sight beneath the dress. If he'd been carrying it, it must have been important. I placed it on the endless mental list of shit I needed to do but probably wouldn't get around to doing.

I looked around the Gala. Not exactly what I'd expected for a party, but there wasn't any blood and gore yet. Boo stood with a dozen fancy ponies around her, and I frowned as I moved closer. If they were bothering her...

"Yes, clearly the political situation with the Twilight Society is one that needs to be addressed first, don't you think, Lady Boo?" a mare asked, and Boo cocked her head in reply.

"Oh, I agree completely! While the Twilight Society should be considered, it's clear that Red Eye and his army is a far more pressing concern," a fancy stallion said immediately, and Boo just

cocked her head at him instead. “I’m certain that you agree, Miss Boo.”

Boo seemed far more interested in the hors d’oeuvre cupcake he levitated beside him. She stretched up to take a bite, when another mare reached out and hugged her. “Oh, you are too right, Baroness Boo. We’re stretching ourselves out trying to concern ourselves with problems abroad when we have so many right here! All these refugees streaming into the valley are a ripe opportunity, wouldn’t you say?”

Boo’s nostrils twitched and she took a deep breath. The fancy ponies leaned in raptly, and then she sneezed right in the mare’s face. For an instant, all were silent. Then a stallion crowed, “Hear hear! We shouldn’t be exploiting these poor folk, Wineglass! Take a page from our new queen. Exploitation might get you ahead in the short term, but we need to look at things from a longer perspective.”

Boo, who had snagged his cupcake while he’d been distracted, gave a beaming smile that set all the others talking and nodding in agreement with her. I couldn’t keep from grinning as we moved past. Fortunately, nopony seemed to want to bother me with their trivial concerns. Instead, they seemed to be focusing on Grace and the other ponies who would really matter once I’d gone.

“Did you find them?” I asked Hoity.

“It looks as if Splendid is ready and waiting on the dais,” Hoity said with a sniff. “Sloppy, but I suppose he’s apprehensive. Charm is probably sulking under the buffet table. Grace is engaged with the Oranges. I’ll be hearing about my rude interruption from Tangerine for months.” He gave a long-suffering sigh. “The toil of a majordomo is neverending.” And he moved off through the crowd. Majawha?

As I approached the little stage, I saw he wasn’t alone. Glory was there too, and I hesitated. My augmented ears weren’t all *that* much better than my normal ones, but now I strained to pick up their words.

“I don’t understand why. You enjoyed it well enough before,” Splendid said in low tones that would not carry far to anypony without microphones for ears. “You can’t deny that.”

“I enjoyed it physically, sure,” Glory said as she blushed and looked away. “You treated me well. Better than I thought a stallion ever could. But afterwards... the way I felt.”

“I did not mean to make you feel used,” Splendid said swiftly. “I meant every word... ”

“Splendid... I know you did, but you don’t know me. You see a young Rainbow Dash. I’m not her. I’m a gray mare with a purple mane and one wing. Who’s gay,” she added, a touch lamely.

“I see a mare who is loyal, intelligent, compassionate, and unappreciated for those talents,” Splendid replied, his voice rising. “I love you, Glory, and no matter how you look, I’d want you as my wife.”

“Hello!” I said as I immediately trotted up onto the dais, right in between the blushing pair, and threw my forelegs around each. “What a party! Did you see that buffet? And that little display with Boo and those Society ponies. Priceless!” Glory was trying to vanish into the floor while Splendid, judging by his color, appeared to be transforming into a male Pinkie Pie. “So! How are you two doing?” I asked with as wide a grin as I could manage.

“I’m fine!” Glory squeaked. “Had a wonderful chat about prion infections and cleaning with hydrochloric acid.”

“The Oranges were absolutely delightful conversationalists this year,” Splendid went on.

“And we discussed being gay. And... yeah... mares! Woo-hoo!” Glory said in a little cheer.

“And I must say your friends are quite the interesting addition to this soiree,” he finished.

“That’s nice. That’s... really... nice... ” I said, keeping the grin on my face. Hoity returned with Grace and Charm. Saved by the ghoul. “Oh good! You’re here! Everypony is here! That’s great. That’s really great. Isn’t that great?” I said as I released the pair.

Grace looked on in shock. “Yes... great,” she said guardedly.

“Great... ” Charm said in confusion.

Somehow all the eyes settled on Glory, whose eyes twitched nervously before she pointed at Charm, gave a straining grin, and said, “I really like your mane!”

“Huh?” the filly asked with a scowl.

“Oh, uh, bathroom!” And she darted into the air and swooped away, trailing a rainbow-colored afterimage.

I tried to focus less on what I’d just heard and more on what I needed to say now. “So! I bet you’re all wondering why I’ve called you here together.” Patient silence answered me. “I’m going to choose one of you as my regent. And I want the other two to swear

loyalty to them."

"I beg pardon?" Grace asked with a small frown.

"You three complement each other really well." I looked to Grace. "You handle problems with poise and care and worry about what's right and wrong." I swapped to Splendid. "You've got vision and an idea for the future." I looked at Charm. "You get things done. Together, you can have a much better life than fighting and squabbling over the throne. And life here is far better than life in the Wasteland. So I want a public oath from the other two pledging their support."

"I see. And the alternative is exile?" Splendid mused.

"Pretty much. I want the Society to work better than it has been during my visit. Together, you can achieve more than you ever could alone." I saw a few shifty looks from Charm. "Also, if you think you can kill my pick and take their place, you're wrong. Besides the bodyguard I arranged and Deus, if they get killed, then I'll pick somepony from outside the Society to run things. Understand?"

The three didn't look all that convinced as I moved to stand in front of the dais. Hoity tapped a wine glass with his hoof several times, and the ring spread out through the party. The music stopped and soon every eye was on us. "I know that King Awesome named me Queen of the Society. And I also know that while I would be honored to accept his gift, I'm going to have to pass it to another to rule in my place. My mission in the Hoof takes precedence over running one group, no matter what wonderful company they may be." A little yellow pegasus inside me gave a tiny cheer.

I looked at the crown on its pillow beside the throne. Such a heavy gold thing. The front of it was decorated with an alicorn in the middle, flanked by a pegasus and a unicorn. Apparently earth ponies didn't warrant representation. The rest of the crown was a band of gold studded with rubies. I levitated it before me. "I can't wear this crown myself, and the burden is too much for one pony to bear." And it was much too coveted, to boot.

I nodded to Hoity, he nodded to Epicure, and the green colt lifted my sword carefully in his hooves. I levitated the blade and, with a sweep of glittering silver, sliced the band. A second cut. A third. And the crown glittered in three pieces in the air before me. I lifted the front of the crown. "This piece, I give to my regent, to rule in my place until such time as I see fit to return and mend this crown."

And I looked at the three. Hope danced in all their eyes, even Charm's, that I would pass it to them.

I looked from one to the other, dragging out the moment just a little. Then I knelt and pressed the gold to their foreleg. With my metal hooves, I easily bent the gold to wrap it around like a torc. Finally, I rose. Hoity turned and addressed the crowd, "May I introduce the Regent of the Society: Princess Grace!"

"No!" Charm screamed at the top of her lungs. "It should be me! Me! I'm the one who deserves it! Give it to me!" She lunged for her sister's legs, her hooves prying at the gold. Grace, for her part, seemed so bedazzled by events that she didn't punt her away at once. But then she levitated Charm up and held the filly by the scruff of her neck.

"Blackjack has made her choice, and you will respect it, Charm," Grace countered.

"Fuck Blackjack! Fuck you! Fuck him! Fuck all of you!" she shrieked as she thrashed at Grace. "I'm gonna kill all of you, and then you're going to be sorry! You'll see!"

"Right. I think that's enough of that!" I said loudly. "Scotch Tape! Rampage!" The pair rushed to the dais, looking at me with nigh salivating grins.

"Yes, Blackjack?" Scotch said eagerly.

"You called?" Rampage asked.

"Please escort Charm to her room, and teach her to watch her language," I said as regally as I could.

"Fuck yeah!" Rampage grinned at the filly. "Run, little piggy! Run!" Charm screamed as she raced for the door, pursued by the pair.

"Don't rip those dresses!" I yelled after them. Then I sighed. "Who named her Charm anyway?"

"I think she always preferred 'Princess', personally," Hoity said lightly.

All eyes then turned to Splendid. Clearly deflated by my choice, he gave a half smile. "We could have saved the Wasteland. Twenty or thirty years... I had it all worked out."

Using bomb collars and slavery…"Somehow, I don't think any one pony can save the Wasteland," I replied evenly, with a small smile. I held up the cut band of gold and gems.

He sighed, and with far more dignity than his younger sibling he addressed the crowd. "I will respect the decision of Queen

Blackjack, and I do swear upon my bloodline and ancestry to support her regent loyally and diligently. Never will I raise arms against her, nor foment others to do the same. On my name, Splendid, I do so swear."

I knelt and bent the gold band against his hoof. That left me with the third piece. Since Charm wasn't going to take me up on my offer, I looked at the crowd and then cleared my throat. "This piece I shall keep, and if I need ever abdicate my position permanently, it shall be returned so the crown can be made whole again." The notion that I might give up the position bestowed by Awesome made the crowd go wild.

"Go on," I said, giving Grace a little nudge to the front. "Make a speech."

"I had one planned," she said lightly, "But... you picked me." She looked at the gold on her hoof, as if she still couldn't believe it.

"I want the Society to be better ponies. You're the best pony for the job. Once you've cleaned out the bad apples, then you can start taking over the world," I said with a look at Splendid.

"Yes. I suppose that's a place to start," she said, before clearing her throat and stepping to the front as I moved back. I'd played my role. Hoity had put the protections she'd need in place, and I'd added a few of my own to make sure she'd have the chance. I wasn't going to let what happened in Flank happen here. And as Grace addressed the crowd, I felt a little purple unicorn inside me being quite proud of what I'd learned. The only oddity was... why did I want to write to the princess about it?

I shifted back and snuck a bite of the crown. Mmmm, sweet mellow gold and spicy ruby. Then I saw Hoity staring at me over the tops of his glasses and I gave a sheepish grin and nodded to the side, off stage. "I need to find Glory." Pressing the band of gold to him. "Hold on to this for me, okay?"

"You don't want to hold on to it?" he asked in surprise.

"Hoity, I'll eat it. That gold is delicious. I can taste hints of platinum too. And those spicy rubies... no. Besides, I might get vaporized tomorrow." I glanced over at Grace addressing the Society about her father and his ideals; it looked like a few members might already be really interested instead of just humoring her. Then I turned my attention back to Hoity. "I need to find Glory. Think I can slip away?"

"I think so. Just be here for the final dances. Make it clear you

didn't proclaim and run," he said, and offered his hoof. "May I shake your hoof and congratulate you on your marvelous debut? I was certain you were going to run through the halls shooting and screaming 'Emancipate!' at the top of your lungs." I shook my head, trying my best not to blush before heading in the direction that Glory had fled.

That led me up stairs and to a balcony overlooking the reservoir. And I slowed as I heard Glory's voice. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know... is it this body? Is it him? Is it me? What's wrong with me?"

Then I heard P-21 answer her. "You've gone through a lot of changes, Glory. So have we all. Yours are a lot more fundamental than most of ours."

"I can't believe he wants to marry me. I can't believe I actually considered it!" I heard the anguish in her voice and leaned over to see her kneeling here, P-21 holding her lightly. "It's got to be this body. It has to be! There's no other reason why I should be attracted to him!"

"Do you like him?" P-21 asked.

"I... it's... you... " Glory stammered. "He's... nice! I thought he would be stuck up and insincere, but he's not. He's a genuinely nice stallion. And he wants me to marry him! He says he loves me. And with Blackjack... she says the same thing and I know she means it but... " She sniffed and beat at her head. "I feel like I'm going crazy!"

"You're not going crazy, Glory. You're in a relationship with Blackjack. It's not unpleasant, but it is a little surreal. It would be easy to simply dismiss her, but you can't. It'd be better to leave her, but you won't. And even though it hurts to be around her, you can't help but want to be there just in case she needs you." He patted her shoulder gently. "I'm sure your condition isn't helping."

"Ugh... don't start that. Just because I'm a mare doesn't mean this is due to hormones," she snapped. "Mares aren't weak just because we get this way."

"Glory, I'm an expert on mares when you get that way," he said, closing his eyes. "Yes, I didn't have any choice in the service I provided, but I know mares, and always it was more than just sex. Duct Tape liked to pretend we were married. Marmalade wanted a friend. Sometimes we didn't even have sex. Palette wanted body paint. Misty Hooves wanted everyone to hear us so people would

stop thinking she was a filly. Gin Rummy would tell me her worries about her daughter. Rivets would rut, then complain about the Overmare to me, because I'd listen and not report her. Mares need things in this time. So what is it you need?"

"I... I... I... don't know," she stammered. "On one hoof... I'm... horny... " she said the word with mortification. "And on another I feel ashamed... and I want to be bold and free like Blackjack and on another I... need to apologize." She hung her head and shook it. "That's what I need."

"Then do it. Blackjack will understand. You could have an orgy with half the Society and Blackjack would want to know the juicy details. Don't worry about that." He then gave a little smile. "Just make sure you can accept the consequences if you do. Pregnancy is the last thing you want right now."

"Splendid has a contraception spell... said it was a requirement in his position... " She shook her head and groaned. "Why does everything have to be so complicated?"

I coughed and knocked on the doorjamb before stepping outside. Glory immediately looked away. P-21 sighed and smiled at me before walking past. I trotted up to her side and took a seat. "Well. Interesting night. Things are definitely... nightish."

"I'm sorry," Glory said as she looked away.

"For what?" I asked.

"Oh, Blackjack, you know what!" she snapped as she turned to face me. But I cocked my head and knit my brows. "Sex!" she erupted. "With Splendid. Ugh... I can't believe I did it at all."

"Do you want to do it again?" I asked politely. She grit her teeth, eyes popping a little, before she turned away. I sighed and looked away. "Glory... we can't keep doing this. Not if it's tearing you up this much."

She looked a little terrified as I gazed out into the rain. "Blackjack... " she whispered.

"Sex and monogamy are big deals to you. They're not to me. In fact, the entire monogamy idea is stupid to me," I said bluntly as I looked at her. "I don't care with who, how often, or what toys you use to get off with, so long as at the end of the day you're in my embrace. As long as we're first, I don't care about seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths. Do you understand? I don't care." I stressed those three words as hard as I could before I stroked her mane. "But you do."

"Blackjack," she repeated softly.

"I care that you're upset. I care that you're feeling guilt. I care that you're going through these changes and I can't help you. I care about what you're feeling. But I don't care that you played 'hide the carrot' with Splendid." I closed my eyes. "Maybe it's time we stopped this relationship. All I ever do is hurt you."

She didn't answer, and that was the worst response of all. Okay, she could have laughed and called me a loser, but still. I glanced at her and saw her looking at me funny. Then she stared out at the night as well. "Was Stygius nice?"

"Nice?" I blinked. That's one way of putting it. "He was a bit of a goofball, but nice... sure. Maybe it was a part of the whole 'prince' deal." I rubbed my chin. "I needed someone nice and safe, and, above all, somepony I didn't have a relationship with. I used him," I admitted with a shrug as I looked out into the night. "Not the noblest thing I've ever done, but he was pleasant enough about it and even helped me when he could have just taken off. I guess that's what made it okay for me." I looked for the expression of outrage on her face but was surprised to see her smiling.

She walked to the rail and folded her hooves on it as she looked out into the night. "I was just trying to do it without dying of embarrassment. Definitely different... feeling him move. Not at all like with you. And a lot stickier than I expected," she said as she made a face, then giggled. "You know what's funny? The whole time, I was comparing him to you. Blackjack does this and Blackjack does that. More than anything... I wanted you to be there with me. I wanted to compare and contrast and enjoy things. And of course I immediately thought I was being perverted."

"Why? What's wrong with a threeway?" I nickered and nuzzled her ear.

She laughed and shook her head. "The fact that you can ask that so easily is what astonishes me."

"Glory, if *that's* what's bothering you, I don't mind including others." She groaned and hid her face in her wings. "We could go get Splendid and really see how he treats a pair of ladies." She groaned even louder, and I grinned. "Or Grace? I think Grace would really appreciate it." Glory let out an even louder groan and waved her hoof, trying to hit me.

Finally she sighed and looked at me, then leaned over and pressed her head to my shoulder. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should start

imagining less and experimenting more, Blackjack. Trying things with other mares. See what kind of experiences I can have." Then she looked at me. "You'll always be there for me if I need you, right?"

"Always," I replied.

She stretched up and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you, Blackjack," she said quietly as she walked away.

I watched her go, then closed my eyes, sighed, and shook my head. Then P-21 stepped out and looked at me. Just... looked at me with a small smile and a warm look in his eyes. "So... is this part of the plan?"

"Plan?" I gave a little half smile. "I'm so far off a plan that I'm just totally winging it here. I'm personally waiting for everything to explode. That seems to be how most of my 'plans' end."

"Well, if that's what you need," he said calmly as he offered his foreleg. I took it, but turned my head and pressed it to his neck. He felt... nice.

"P-21?" I asked quietly.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you still hate me?"

"Blackjack, when it comes to you, I haven't a clue," he replied with a chuckle. "But no. No, I don't think so."

"Oh," I said as I gave him a tighter hug. "That's... nice."

He led me out to the ballroom. "Shall we dance?" he asked me with a little smile. At the question, it seemed more eyes than just his were turning towards me. Murmurs were spreading about the queen taking the floor. Lacunae and Stronghoof looked over to us. Grace smiled beatifically and nodded her encouragement. Splendid smiled regally.

I looked from him to them and back again. "You... dance?"

"Don't sound so surprised," he replied, arching a brow with a playful haughtiness. "I'm well-trained in a variety of skills. It'll be nice to use them because I want to rather than because I'm being threatened with a needle."

Oh. Right. I looked over, spotted the bartender beside the buffet, and levitated over the first bottle I could. My trusty horn did not let me down; I gazed upon the amber mana of Wild Pegasus and polished the whole damned bottle off. With liquid courage at war with an artificial liver, I set the empty bottle aside and then smiled at him. "Okay. Let's do this."

I don't know if it was the drink or the company or the music, but he led me to the middle of the dance floor and the music began to play. One two three, one two three, one two three... I began the foalish motions that Grace had drilled into me earlier. I stared into his eyes and the numbers just melted away. He moved, and I moved with him. I was sure that I looked idiotic, but I was Blackjack. What did I have to lose?

And when one song ended, we moved to another. I did what he did, moved as he moved, and laughed. We twirled around, and I spotted Lacunae and Stronghoof twirling magnificently. And then Grace and a pink stallion were dancing beside us. Glory and Crumpets. And before I knew it, P-21 had been replaced by Glory. Then Glory replaced by Splendid. And I had a few more drinks as the world became a wonderful blur of blue and white.

I recalled seeing Brutus and Stronghoof locked in a flex-off that seemed to envelop the two in a nimbus of masculine power. Shirts and harnesses were destroyed in the eruption of pectoral might, and it ended with a hoofbump. Scotch Tape hopping up between the two robotic DJs and playing music that was less twirl and more bouncing bass. And everypony danced to it because I did. Rampage beating Stronghoof and Brutus in a hoof wrestle without mussing up her dress. On and on the night continued till finally I laughed and laughed and couldn't stop.

And I was escorted to a bed, my own or somepony else's... and there was blue and white... and dresses being removed and then nuzzling and stroking and kissing... such wonderful kissing. And there was licking in places that were wonderful to be licked and filling and finally the evening really did end in explosion after explosion after explosion...

Not a bad night at all...

* * *

When I woke, the music had ended. It was just past midnight. My liver had broken down the alcohol, but the hangover would linger for a while longer. I was tangled up with another pony, awash in the scent of sweat and sweeter smells. I nuzzled soft and wonderful pony before cracking open my eyes. Mmmm, blue. Glory had come back after all. And from the feel of it behind me... a him. Splendid? Slowly, carefully, I rose. There were empty champagne bottles on

the nightstand and nearly drained glasses. I wondered if she'd ever drunk before.

Then I looked behind me and froze. No. Not Splendid at all. Flushing far more than I ever had after coitus, I pulled myself free from them. P-21's eyes opened a little, his lips curling in a slightly inebriated smile. "Time to go?" he muttered sluggishly. "Don't call medical. They'll think I did a bad job."

"Shhh... " I muttered gently, leaning down and kissing his brow. "Don't worry about that. I just need to use the little filly's room." He relaxed and closed his eyes, and I stroked his brushy mane before I carefully climbed out of bed. When I was free, I looked down at the pair and felt a twist inside me, but I had no choice now. "Get her home, please," I whispered in his ear. He gave a little smile and nodded in his sleep. I walked past the detritus of priceless dresses and strewn party paraphernalia, slipped into the bathroom, and closed the door.

I walked to the sink; oh Luna, I'd sure been taken care of. Too bad I couldn't remember specifics. I filled the basin and started to wash my face. Then I set the washcloth down, took a deep breath, and looked into the mirror.

A blue unicorn mare with a silver mane looked back. With a flash, Lacunae appeared in the bathroom beside me. "It's time," the Goddess said simply in my mind.

Yes, it was time. The Goddess was linked back with me, and it would take more than a hangover to keep her out. Worse, she wasn't threatening my friends or giving me anything I could work with. No righteous anger to shake her control. We were in Unity. She willed, whether I liked it or not. Once more or less clean, I dressed in my gear and lifted my sword. Carefully, I cut out my PipBuck. No way my friends could track me without it, and no last minute radio pleas to try and break the Goddess's control. The Goddess would provide a lesser PipBuck for S.A.T.S. soon. She had PipBuck technicians in Unity to give me the knowledge to install it.

"So. Now what?" I asked the mare in the mirror.

She firmly locked down on my body and told me. There would be no verbalizing this scream. No fights that could wake my friends. Nothing. Lacunae's horn glowed, and together we disappeared in a flash.

We were on our way to Maripony to kill LittlePip.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 58: Departures

"You and I have some unfinished business. My magic's gotten better since I was here last. And I'm going to prove it! Me and you. A magic duel. Winner stays, loser leaves Ponyville forever!"

I've never liked gravity. It's not heights that're my problem. It's falling. It's the idea of gravity pulling you downward. The sense that there was some force constantly clutching at you simply because it could. It didn't matter how hard you tried or what you wanted, gravity was always there; inescapable, inexhaustible, and unforgiving.

Lacunae looked on, the purple alicorn having replaced her formal wear with the black mourner's gown. She had a minigun from the Harbinger attack squad and an anti-machine rifle floating beside her as she waited patiently. Idly, I wondered where she kept her ammo. I supposed it really didn't matter at this point. Despite her wings, she too was trapped in gravity's inexhaustible pull. So much energy being expended to keep herself from being crushed by its force.

I was falling now as I scribbled out a note in Awesome's study. Every letter was a struggle to put to the page. 'wanted to give you this. Take Fleur and go home. Stop Lighthoves. Hope I see you again. Sorrie if I don't. Talk to' And I tumbled a little bit more as gravity compelled me to scribble out the last two words. 'Love you. Blackjack.' I'd just have to hope that they'd finish what I couldn't. Gravity told me to move. Gravity wanted me somewhere else. I told gravity to fuck off as I looked to the page and scrawled in a trembling pen, 'PS: don't freek out. Last nite was awesem. Giv 21 a hug frm' but that was all I was allowed. I wanted to add a PPS and a PPPS, but if I did, gravity would make me fall on my friends and kill them.

Gravity was a bitch...

I left the note on the gift I'd found in Meatlocker. I'd forgotten to give it to her…being thrown against a wall by an irate marefriend can have that effect…I struggled to stay there a few seconds more. My PipBuck lay beside it; no calling for help in a moment of lucidity, no navigation tags to lead my friends to me. All very neat. I wanted to linger…Just a few seconds. But gravity tore me away, and I turned to Lacunae. "You can port me all the way to Maripony?"

"No. It will take several teleports, and I will need assistance," she said in solemn tones. "You will have to help me till we meet up with the others."

"I don't want to do this," I whimpered as we stood together. I looked at the pathetic note I'd scribbled and ached to stay just another instant, but I couldn't fight it anymore. Neither of us could.

"I know, Blackjack." I looked into her sad eyes and touched my horn to hers. Together, we triggered the spell, her magic supported by my own meager offering. Together, we disappeared.

* * *

Our arrival at Miramare felt like I'd slammed through a solid wall. And I could make that comparison; I'd had more than a bit of experience in the slamming-through-solid-walls department. Every cell of my body ached and my horn had some char on it, but it was beyond relevance now. The spell would be cast again. And again. And again, for as long as it was necessary. Indeed, with Lacunae's guidance, teleportation almost seemed easy. "Go get it," Lacunae told me as she trotted out to the crater to soak up her rads for the next leg of our trip. I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. The Goddess pulled at my every thought, dragging me down into the mass that was Unity. Oh, she wasn't going to consume me fully just yet. She wanted a trump card. Already, I had to think of ways to kill LittlePip and her friends.

If it was just LittlePip, I'd have to take her out from outside the range of her E.F.S. I did not want to fight her up close where she could drop a boxcar on me! How such a little mare had such terrifying telekinesis was beyond me. If I did have to fight up close, I'd need the shotgun with flechettes. She wore light armor; if I was lucky, I could take her out quickly. Maybe blind her... she wouldn't be very good with her super telekinesis if she couldn't see, and

E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. don't do you any good if you don't have eyes to sparkle at... oh dear Luna, did I just think that?

If her friends got involved…I absorbed everything the Goddess knew of LittlePip and her friends. Calamity would die first. Headshot, long range. I couldn't worry about him and LittlePip at the same time. Velvet Remedy would die next; she'd likely linger over his body. That'd eliminate healing and really distract LittlePip. No matter how she denied it, there were still warm and sexy feelings associated with Velvet in her subconscious. Kill her friends and hurt her too badly to come at me thinking straight. Steelhooves would be risky. Oh, not killing him; Steel Ranger armor was tough, but all I had to do was teleport onto his back and cut his head off with the starmetal sword. No, the problem was that that would put me in range of LittlePip and Xenith. Ultimately, magic bullets to the head would be my best bet for LittlePip. Xenith would probably kill me, but the Goddess would be saved from whatever plot LittlePip hatched.

I just needed one little thing.

I walked into Miramare's admin building; I didn't need E.F.S. to spot the squatters who'd moved in. A dozen or so emaciated ponies and three tough, scarred, and all around battle-hardened griffins immediately roused themselves as I entered. From their leather gear and service rifles, I doubted they would be any kind of trouble to me. "Hey! This is our place! Get--" one griffin female shouted as she rose. Then she took in just what she was talking to as my eyes locked onto hers. "By the First Egg…who the fuck are you?"

"Nopony you want to fuck with tonight," I answered. The force of the Goddess was pushing me to end the three; there was no future for the griffins, zebras, or dragons. Their extinction was unfortunate but inevitable. I thought back that they might be protecting the ponies, some Contract arranged. The pressure eased.

"She's with Red Eye. She's a cyberpony, just like him!" one of the earth pony mares shouted in a panic. "She's come to take us back to the pits! Kill her, Lyonesse! Please!"

"I'm not here for any of you. I'm not with Red Eye. In fact, I'll probably be killing him soon." I could feel a whole hit list of people the Goddess wanted dead. I'd be more than her Lacunae; I'd be her personal hitpony. Her executioner. The thought made me clench my teeth and try to think of a way to escape her pull. All I accomplished was a headache as my legs resumed movement

through the admin building.

"If you're not after us, we got no argument with you," Lyonesse replied, the young tawny griffin looking at the other two. From the looks they all exchanged, it was clear that this wasn't a fight any of them wanted. That might save their lives. "If you're here for salvage, we picked it all clean and stashed it, so there's nothing for you here."

"Funny. I thought I picked it clean when I swept through here," I replied as I walked past towards the barracks. The three followed. I had to obey that force, but that didn't mean I couldn't chat in the meantime. "You all new to the Hoof?"

"The ponies came from Fillydelphia. Met up with them near Ponyville a couple weeks back. Heard Hoofington wasn't controlled by Red Eye anymore, so we agreed to escort them in exchange for any ammo or weapons we came across," she said, keeping her voice calm as we trotted into the locker room. "So…are there a lot of you around here?"

"Some free advice. Go northeast. Look for a place called Megamart. Premiere traders. They'll buy anything you folks find. Don't go southeast. You'll run into a place called Flank. Used to be a community, now just a lot of killers. Be very careful who you fuck with," I said as I trotted to the terminal and selected Psalm's locker.

I typed in the password. 'Unforgiven'. The locker popped open with a heavy clunk, and I lifted out the large matte black metal case and the black riot armor she'd worn before. I felt the wave of shame from my friend, along with the memory of her placing these objects within when she first returned to Hoofington in exile. Testaments of the bloody legacy she'd carved through ponykind. Popping its catches, I opened the case and looked at the disassembled Penance in its padding. Dozens of tiny scratches on the polymer butt hinted at its bloody legacy. "Forgive me, Luna," I murmured, despite myself. It still smelled of gun oil. It was a gun of beauty, awesome in its design and terrible in its purpose.

The three griffins looked at me, and one them suddenly grinned covetously. "Scramble me, that fucking shit is mi--" Her hand reached for her holster.

I obliterated her head in a spray of blood, bone, and brains with a magic bullet. "Oh shi--" screamed the second, trying to bring her guns to bear behind me. One applebuck with two metal hooves, and she made a sound like plywood snapping as she was embedded in

the flimsy lockers behind me. Lyonesse I fixed with two glowing pinpricks right in her eyes. The tawny griffin shook as she stared back, filling the room with a salty smell as she wet herself.

Only the fact that she might keep the ponies safe till they could be transformed saved her. I closed the gun case and took the riot armor. Grace's alteration spell was fresh in my mind; I couldn't have cast it myself, but I was connected to the analytic genius of Mosaic and Gestalt. In a trice, the alterations had been made, and I pulled the black armor over my body. When the coat was in place, few ponies would guess I was augmented, but everypony would know I was bad news. No dragonkiller rounds in the locker, unfortunately. I'd have to use normal antipersonnel and armor piercing against LittlePip.

Closing the locker, I made my way to the door, leaving the bodies of the two griffins untouched. I think that unnerved Lyonesse even more. "If you really want my advice, though, get the fuck out of the Hoof as fast as you can," I said calmly. "This place will fucking kill you." And I turned my back on her, walking out the way I came. The dozen ponies shrank back into the offices and barracks as I strode past. Who could blame them?

The Operative walked the Wasteland once more.

When I approached the balefire crater, Lacunae looked at me with profound regret. "No. No. Please. Don't do this to her. Don't make her into her antithesis."

"You are in no position to tell us to do anything. You are the trash bin, and you are starting to stink. Now make the next jump," the Goddess replied contemptuously.

"No!" Lacunae shouted, her eyes flaring bright purple. "I won't!" Dreadful silence filled Unity at those words.

"You what?" the Goddess replied, as if not understanding those two little words.

"I refuse! I will not obey!" Lacunae shouted, sitting in the crater as she pressed her hooves to the sides of her head. "I…I am not your garbage bin! I am…more!" she yelled aloud and across Unity.

"You dare? You think yourself more than us?!" the Goddess retorted haughtily. "You are nothing! You are merely the collection of our weaknesses, flaws, doubts, and pains! You were never born. That vessel isn't even yours. You are nothing! Now obey!" And gravity strong enough to crush her, the focus of not just the Goddess but hundreds of wills, pressed in upon her.

"I…will…not!" Lacunae roared in response to the dark skies overhead. "I have friends! I am... I am lo... I am cared for! I matter to others! I will not fail them now and deliver them to you."

"You have friends…" the Goddess murmured, and a ripple spread through Unity at the word. "How…how could a…a nothing…a nopony…a neverpony…have friends?" she demanded scornfully. Then she growled, "Of all the times you could do this, you choose now? Now that LittlePip is coming! She means to destroy us! Blackjack's own thoughts confirm it. And you dare to do this now? Now?!"

"I will not…" she whimpered. "Think about what you are doing." She fell to her knees in the crater, eyes clenched shut as her whole body shook.

"What we are doing? We? We are saving the pony race! We are becoming a viable species! We are eliminating three of our greatest threats all in one go. We are also going to make sure a zebra artifact will never corrupt another after we've extracted the knowledge we need. We are doing what must be done! What *will* be done! And nopony, not you, not Red Eye, not Blackjack, and certainly not that undersized pain in our ass is going to stop us!" Unity roared into her like an avalanche. "But what about you! What are you doing? You are putting our entire race at risk of extinction because you're worried about your friend. You are fighting our efforts to protect ourselves from Red Eye, for your friend. You are blind to threats to us out of concern for your friend! How can you be so shortsighted? How can you be so selfish?" It was not rage that poured through the link, but disgust and contempt. "If only we could execute you safely…"

Lacunae pressed her face to the glowing earth as she struggled against the gravity tearing her apart. "Please!" I begged into that raging collection of thoughts and voices. "You had friendship once! You had to! Twilight had friends! She had friends!"

"Echoes and shadows of immaterial things long since passed," the Goddess replied coldly. "Hurtful, wretched, terrible things... do you know what friendship, love, is? It's pain. Pain of loss. Every one of us had friends, family, and loved ones. Do you know what the grief of a thousand ponies feels like? I do. That is why we created the Lacunae. That is why we need her. We couldn't stay sane if we had to feel that."

"But I do feel it!" Lacunae wailed as she rose slowly to her hooves.

“Every second of every day. Friendship. Family. Love. And Blackjack feels it. You might have stripped away the feeling and the memories but they’re still there. And if you felt them for one minute, then I know you’d realize what you’ve beco--”

“What we are is what we must be! Radiation and taint will only spread. We must adapt to survive. That was Mosaic and Gestalt’s grand conclusion, and Twilight agrees,” the Goddess growled back. “Do you think all of this was made despite Twilight’s wishes? No. Her will and intellect have made us possible!”

“She wouldn’t! If you returned to her all that you’ve put into me, she wouldn’t! And neither would you. Any of you!” Lacunae wept as she turned about, as if appealing to a massive invisible audience. “Take it back. Before you do this. Take all of what you’ve put in me back. Then see what conclusions you reach.”

“There is neither time nor a point to such an exercise,” the Goddess said gravely. “We stripped away those thoughts and feelings decades ago. Only our children matter now, and you will stop behaving so immaturely and do as you are told!”

Lacunae swayed to and fro, staggering in circles. Finally, her eyes came to rest on mine. Tears poured down her cheeks as she whimpered, “I’m sorry, Blackjack. I…I wanted to do better too…”

“You did,” I murmured as I bent my head, as the Goddess wanted. Gravity always won in the end. I could see our destination clearly; there were fundamentals of teleportation being dumped into my head to aid in the trip. I tried to project back my own memories and the feelings I’d gotten from Twilight, but they went no further than Lacunae. The Goddess didn’t want to feel, didn’t want to remember the past.

Our weeping eyes met as we touched our horns. Together, we channeled the spell and disappeared for our next destination, outside the Hoof entirely. We reappeared on the tracks southwest of the city; this time I didn’t land on my face, since Lacunae’s own radiation-empowered body provided most of the energy.

This was the first time I’d been out of the Hoof while connected to Unity, and the difference was startling. Before, I’d only been aware of Lacunae and the omnipresent screaming note. Now, that scream was just a barely perceptible wail on the horizon, and in the clarity I could hear the individual whispers of dozens, even hundreds of minds. I knew them, and they knew me, and yet…something was wrong. Okay, maybe I didn’t have much of a right to judge the state

of telepathic mass minds, but as I felt all those different intellects, there were so many and so…little.

Like the two greens flying towards us. I knew that one had been an opportunistic scavenger who'd stumbled upon Maripony a century and a half ago…yet, he didn't even know his own name. He didn't want to know. He didn't even care. And his companion had grown up in a settlement…but that was all she knew; there were no faces of a mother and father. No games played, or friends. The memories she did retain were banal and functional things: how to fix leaky water pumps with scrap metal, and twenty-five different uses for duct tape. But when I pressed on who had taught her, there was only an empty gap.

Hundreds of souls all humming in harmony, but it was a spiritless tune…all the more heartbreaking for what it could have been. Had they been bound in friendship, tapping into that elusive and powerful magic that transcended definition, the Goddess would have been a Goddess in reality. But now that I could see Unity directly, I saw how pitiful they were. Even if they were monstrous, they were still so very sad and small compared to their potential.

And as soon as I was dipped, I would be just like them. Oh, there'd be an alicorn called Oubliette or some other oddly fitting name that had once been Blackjack's body…maybe she'd still have her augmentations…but the real me would be another of those masses of voices around the Goddess. I wouldn't remember my friends, but I wouldn't miss them, either. And I wouldn't remember the bad things. Everything distressing or disruptive would be shoved into the new dumpster. Because despite her threats, the Goddess needed me.

Others besides the greens were coming. In the meantime, I had to find out what LittlePip was up to and how to go about killing her. Because while the Goddess had dozens of technicians, scientists, scavengers, and even raiders, she had precious few heroes connected to her. The idea was alien, stupid, and even insane. The Goddess literally could not put herself in LittlePip's horseshoes and anticipate what she might do. In a rush, I was learning more about the Stabl...

Oh dear sweet Luna. They were the same pony? They hadn't been joking about that?! How... she... I... I couldn't believe that a tiny, sweet, smart mare like her could be the strapping goddess of Wasteland death! I... I'd just not think about it.

Thank goodness, the Goddess seemed to reply as I refocused on my job and on LittlePip's biography. How she'd gone after Velvet Remedy half out of lust and half out of a desperate need for a friend. How she'd met Calamity. How she'd dealt with the crushing realization that she and Velvet would never be, and how she'd met Homage…and *oh* the things she'd *done* with Homage!

Really. It made me wish I remembered the events of a few hours ago a lot more clearly…

The Goddess had my meager memories, as well. The thing we did together at Red Eye's camp. Of course, I'd been half drunk the whole time and had no clue what LittlePip had actually gone there for, just that she'd done it. She'd needed…what? Information? It was no secret that Red Eye was trying to duplicate the events that created the Goddess, but hadn't succeeded. Maybe he'd discovered a weakness and LittlePip had asked him about it. Or maybe she'd needed something from him. His balefire bomb? Could LittlePip actually talk him into surrendering it? Doubtful. Red Eye wasn't a hero. He'd never trust LittlePip. If he did give her something, it'd likely be a fake. How about help? An army? He had the soldiers to spare, but would they matter? Something from his Stable? Some kind of tech that could be used against the Goddess?

"What is she going to do?" came the constant pressing question from Unity.

"I don't know. I'm not a smart pony. You should have taken P-21 and Glory," I countered, but I was already imagining it. LittlePip was smart. She'd try and hit the Goddess in some way the Goddess wouldn't see coming. Maybe she was going to dump those thousands and thousands of memory orbs that had been hidden under Shattered Hoof into the Goddess. No clue what would happen. The Goddess made sure she'd telekinetically repel anything small and round. The Black Book? Maybe she had some spell to affect the souls in Unity? That was pondered gravely. What if LittlePip could extract the Goddess's soul from Unity and bind it in a soul jar? Or an even more powerful spell. Twilight recalled the zebra lore of a star falling on Equestria. Perhaps that?

It was a huge unknown, but it was all the more frustrating because every memory of Twilight studying the Black Book with Rarity had been removed from Unity. All Twilight knew was that she *had* done it. And that she couldn't recall a spell like that…but what if she was wrong? What if there was a clue in one of those missing moments

that had been thrown away because the thought of her friend hurt so very much? Unity couldn't bear those emotions, so said the Goddess…

But I wasn't just in Unity, was I? I was connected to Lacunae. I could dig through the 'trash' and try and see for myself. I met her eyes, said "I'm sorry," and invaded her as surely as I'd been invited. I had no choice. Gravity compelled me, no matter how much I hated it. The Goddess knew what I knew, and the Goddess wanted me to look.

But inside Lacunae's mind, past the surface of her consciousness, the contents were a solid mass of compressed thought. There was no organization or cataloguing, simply presence. Like geological strata, the newest memories inside her were all of me and my friends and her experiences with us. Worse, the merest digging shifted psychological structures that even the Goddess didn't fully understand. She'd overfilled Lacunae, pressurized her with so much that even this minor disturbance threatened a chaotic reaction.

The act, though, was like digging through colored stones tagged with cutie marks; the memories had condensed until they crystallized like amber. Many had no identification at all, lost to Unity's members for all time. But I could find interesting stones of purple with Twilight's cutie mark upon them. And with Gestalt's help, I could look inside.

Odd; I had the feeling that half of Unity was trying to peek over my shoulder and see that which had been stripped from them. But which to look in…which to look in…I touched one of Twilight's memories and heard two names at once. 'Rarity' and 'Goldenblood'.

Oh, this I had to see. I took the memory into myself -- don't ask me how, that was being handled at a higher level -- and Lacunae's mindscape swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I found myself in a sumptuous hallway approaching a door emblazoned with three rhomboid, blue gems. No further title was needed. I shifted the scrolls in my bags; only an hour, and all of it would probably be spent working on new M.A.S. recruitment slogans. Then it would be time to go back to Manehattan and finish a report for the Princess. Time…there just wasn't enough of it. Not enough time with Spike. Not enough time with my friends. Not

even enough time with my magic. When was the last time I did an all-night book trawl of Starswirl's spells? Or even just read a book because I wanted to read it?

I walked up and was about to knock when I heard the familiar, rusty voice. "You must have something, Rarity. You always have something." I froze, my hoof an inch from the door. Eavesdropping was horribly rude, but this was Goldenblood. He was up to something. He should have had an oil slick for a cutie mark. Why would he be meeting with Rarity? I turned and pressed my ear to the door.

"Goldenblood, *darling*, you make it sound as if I'm collecting books on zebra lore," Rarity's voice barely penetrated, but I could hear the poisoned sarcasm of the word.

"I know you haven't turned over all the writing on zebra magic to Twilight," Goldenblood countered. "Especially critical tomes you keep on your person," he added archly.

"We have a deal, Goldenblood. I keep your dirty laundry out of the press and history books and you don't harass me," Rarity countered. "The confiscation of tomes and texts that are hazardous to the war effort falls under my jurisdiction, and I take my ministry responsibilities seriously."

"If you could just give me an hour or two with it, then I'd be satisfied!" Goldenblood said forcefully, before collapsing into a fit of coughing.

"Perhaps you should have thought about asking before sending your little black assassin to steal it," Rarity replied coldly. "You're lucky I didn't turn her over to Pinkie Pie. Most of what you seek isn't here, anyway. All copies are erased, and the originals are archived outside Canterlot. I keep all those unpleasant things in Hoofington."

"Please," Goldenblood rasped. "Please. I need to know. There are things happening! Things that only the zebras know. I need to read about the disaster that befell their people long ago. How did they call down the star? Was it one or several? What were the effects afterwards? I must know!"

Calling down stars? That sounded serious. Megaspell serious.

Rarity didn't answer immediately. "Is this professional or personal?" Rarity asked pointedly.

Now it was Goldenblood's turn to pause before he answered, "It's personal. This is something outside the O.I.A. This is something I

have to know."

Rarity didn't answer immediately. "Very well. I won't lend you my primary source. I didn't even give it to Twilight. But I will give you a few hours of access in return for a favor. Pinkie Pie has been sniffing around my projects. I'd appreciate it if you could do something nefarious to distract her. Perhaps skulk about Manehattan in a black cape and top hat. Oooh! And you simply must add a mustache to twirl. She'll be following you in seconds."

"I'll consider it, but I think a word to Quartz might be more effective." Then he paused and added, "Thank you, Rarity." Another pause. "I'm sorry."

"I beg pardon?"

"Sorry. Sorry for everything. For…you…your friends… everything…" he muttered something I couldn't hear and then let out something that sounded almost like a sob. "It's one thing to plan…it's quite another to execute…"

"Goldenblood? What's going on?" Rarity asked, now with real concern. "Is this about Horse taking your position at the O.I.A.?"

"No, Rarity," Goldenblood choked. "I think I made a mistake…and then I made mistakes to deal with my mistake…and now…Rarity…I think something's gone horribly wrong and I don't know how to fix it."

"What is it? Tell me. Perhaps I can help," Rarity said generously. "I know something about mistakes. Sometimes I just want to trot up to Luna and tell her to take this ministry and…do something unladylike and anatomically uncomfortable with it. If it weren't for my friends loving every minute of it... "

There was a long pause in response. "Thank you, Rarity, but this was my mistake. I'm the one who has to clean it up. Please, excuse me." There was an implosion of air and a faint flash under the door. I backed up and chewed my lip. What to say? Admit that I was spying on my friend? Accuse her of holding secrets? Admit that working at the M.A.S. wasn't the dream come true I'd imagined years ago, now that most of the research was being done by other ponies?

I turned away from the door and walked back down the hall to Rarity's secretaries. "Um…excuse me. I just remembered something that completely slipped my mind. I was hoping we could resche--"

"Twilight?" came Rarity's voice from behind me, and I froze, then turned slowly and frowned. She looked…terrible. There were

shadows around her eyes and a gauntness that made her look as if she hadn't eaten in days. Even her magnificent mane had more gray tips than I'd ever seen before. And how she moved…as if she were in pain…still, she smiled. "Twilight, Darling, it's so wonderful to see you again!"

"Rarity? Are you all right?" I asked as I trotted quickly to her side. "You look--"

"Glamorous? Stunning? Beautific?" Rarity suggested at once, bringing a smile to my face.

"Old, actually," I answered honestly.

She slumped a little and gave a small indulgent smile. "Twilight, I really do need to loan you a copy of *Principles of Proper Pony Speech*." Her smile faded, replaced by a look of clear fatigue. "Actually, I'm just a little tired after my latest creation," she said as she started back towards the office.

"You're still making dresses? Even while running your ministry?" I said, both impressed and a touch envious as I followed her inside. I caught her sliding a drawer closed as she walked behind the desk.

"No. I wanted to…well…branch out a little, as it were," she said as she lifted a purple and pink box wrapped in star-printed ribbon and set it on the desk before me. "These are for you, Twilight."

I cocked my head, feeling something was off about this gift, but not in a bad way. Carefully, I tugged the ribbon, undid the bow, and then started to pull up the tape very…Oh, Rarity was giving me the look that meant that now wasn't the time to save wrapping paper… I ripped it right off at once and opened the box inside. I tugged the paper free and…

There we were…all six of us together like when we were young, before this horrible mess had occurred. And there was Pinkie Pie, and she looked happy and free. And Rainbow Dash grinning confidently and Applejack mid-buck. And…was that me? Was that really how I used to look? I pulled out the tiny figurine. It felt… warm. "Rarity…"

"I put my heart and soul into them. One set for each of us, and a seventh for Princess Luna." Her smile faded a touch. "Do you like them?"

"Rarity…they're amazing! I…I don't deserve them," I said as I lifted the rest out and assembled them on Rarity's desk. "They're so lifelike... "

"While I originally planned on keeping them together…I really

couldn't. I gave one of mine to Sweetie Belle, along with an apology. I've given her so many, but I hope she realizes that this one's sincere. And I know Rainbow Dash is giving one of hers to Scootaloo. I expect that Applejack is giving one to Apple Bloom. And I believe Fluttershy has given one to Angel Bunny, can you imagine?" She smiled and lifted a tiny Applejack with her magic. "Well, at least she doesn't have to worry about them breaking." And she thumped it solidly against the table. For an instant I moved to stop her, but she was right. The figurine was unharmed.

I lifted the tiny replica of myself. "I…it's…I could give it to Spike… or Princess Celestia…or…" Mom. I swallowed as I sniffed and smiled. "It's like the Gala tickets all over again."

"Yes. There's never quite enough to go around," Rarity replied, her smile fading. "If I'd known how the Princess would take it, I would have given a whole set to Spike."

"How did she take it?" I asked with a touch of concern.

Rarity seemed to consider her words for a moment, then sighed and rolled her eyes a little. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose she's used to lavish presents. But when I gave it to her she seemed…disturbed by it. I've never seen her so discomposed before. She thanked me, of course, but I'm not quite sure she knew what to do with them. I suppose it'll end up on a shelf somewhere. I rather hoped she'd give a figurine of you to Celestia, but…" she sighed and shook her head, then lifted the tiny copy of herself and gazed into its eyes with profound sadness. "I suppose this is as close as I will ever come…"

"Rarity?" I asked, wanting to put a hoof on her shoulder.

She laughed mirthlessly and casually wiped her eyes with her fetlock. "Oh my. Becoming so maudlin over such a…a silly little thing." She glanced at me, then gave a little smile. "You know…I still have the Twilight Sparkle from my set…I could give it to Spikey Wikey so he'll always have you with him."

I caught on and returned her smile. "And I could give him my Rarity. So he'll always have the love of his life." I looked at the six, feeling a little tight in the chest and throat as my gaze lingered on the friend whose problems I couldn't help, no matter how smart I was. "It might have been simpler just to give each of us seven of ourselves. Then we could just give them those people we cared about."

"I…considered that…" Rarity murmured, but so softly that I looked over and saw her face shielded by her mane. Then she gave a sniff.

“I did. But…I wanted each of us to remember our friends as we used to be, not as we are today.” She tried to wipe away her tears behind the veil of her mane but couldn’t hide the thickness in her throat as well. “He was right. It all seems to have gone horribly wrong, doesn’t it?”

“Rarity?” I asked gently, putting a hoof on her shoulder. Should I bring up what I’d overheard? But then it was too late as she broke down, sobbing, pushing her face into my shoulder as she clung to me, trembling. Great hot tears spilled down my neck as she clung to me.

“I was supposed to be a fashionista! I wanted to design things for other ponies. Not…not micromanage and direct others and pretend like…like all *this* is important to me.” She flailed a hoof at the sumptuously decorated office. “Managing Luna’s image? Confiscating books? Authorizing press releases? I was supposed to have a handsome husband and a foal that I could spoil absolutely rotten and a boutique for Canterlot’s finest. That was what my life was supposed to be! But you and Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie…oh Pinkie Pie!” she wailed and shook her head. “How did it come to this? Where did it all go so…so wrong?!” she asked as she pulled back and looked at me with a devastated gaze.

“I…don’t know,” I whispered as I stared straight ahead. Tears of my own ran down my cheeks. “I don’t know anymore. I look back these ten years and it just feels…empty. Like everything we’ve been through…anything good…has been sifted away. I…go to bed and I feel like somepony should be there with me! But he’s not there… and I don’t even know who he is. And that I’m supposed to have… more! But it’s not there either. Like everything that I’m supposed to cherish is just smoke and the things that should matter aren’t there anymore!”

“But we have to do it,” Rarity whispered, guilty and ashamed. “It was like Rainbow Dash said. There’re so many ponies fighting and dying for us that we have to give back to them. We owe Equestria. And Applejack…it’s not just other ponies fighting. It’s family.”

I thought of Big Macintosh, and that huge gulf threatened to consume me. I had a precious few memories of the red stallion before the war…but that was it. “Maybe,” I answered, drying my tears in her mane. “But that was ten years ago. It might be time to think about changing things…soon.” Once the I.M.P. was finished, I could step aside. Let Mosaic and Gestalt run the Ministry. Or Luna

could pick somepony else. I was tired…tired of the stress and the pressure and the meaningless sacrifice. There were just a few loose ends to wrap up.

Like meeting the candidate for the I.M.P. test tomorrow…

oooOOOooo

"Enough," the Goddess snapped, breaking me out of my reverie. Three more alicorns, a blue and two greens, had joined us. There'd be more at the next destination, I knew. "You're wasting time. All these…these…emotions. They're pointless! You need to focus on eliminating LittlePip." I shared Twilight's tears. She hadn't known, the life that could have been. That should have been. What would Twilight have ended up as if she hadn't accepted Luna's offer? Wizard? Princess? Wife? What about Applejack or Rainbow Dash? Or poor Pinkie Pie? Would Fluttershy have committed high treason if she'd never been put in a position where she could do so?

It was wrong. All of it. Every last bit felt contrived and pointless and... stupid! What was all that for? "What's the Goddess-damned point!?" I screamed aloud and through Unity. A war over resources that destroyed the countries that wanted them. Ministries that consumed the mares that directed them. Princesses who seemed absent just when everypony needed them. A Goddess who was planning to kill a mare whose greatest driving goal was to help others.

Then the Goddess showed me.

An irradiated world, one in which even the Enclave had been driven to extinction. No ghouls; those would be stamped out eventually. Zebras, griffins, and dragons were no more. Just a world of alicorns. Mostly female; it would depend on how the Black Book would make the changes, but the Goddess had no interest in creating an equal distribution of sexes. She knew the effectiveness of Stable 99. New alicorn types, perhaps red ones that specialized in fire or white ones that specialized in ice, would be developed and evolved. Perhaps alicorns who travelled in time? Super telekinetic alicorns? The Elements of Harmony and the Gardens of Equestria would be reclaimed and repurposed; Twilight might only have generalities and scraps, but they'd be a foundation for a new Gardens. One that spread balefire and magical radiation to every land till the very oceans glowed with power. There would be only

alicorns and their Goddess, a mother and her children. One mind. One will. One note united forever. They'd use their magic to defeat Horizons, whatever it was, and cast down Hoofington once and for all.

And that was the point of the world. By Alicorns. For Alicorns. Only Alicorns. A monorace with a singular will and a Goddess with the power to exceed any Princess.

And I was going to be a part of it, whether I wanted to or not. So would all my friends. Everypony. And if you weren't a pony or resisted, the alternative was simple and permanent death. And most terrible of all was who in Unity had come up with this plan. Not Trixie, the showmare. Not even Mosaic and Gestalt. This was Twilight Sparkle's plan…a Twilight stripped of compassion and concern and ethics. A Twilight more machine than mare, fulfilling Trixie's ego. It felt like there was more Twilight inside Lacunae than inside the Goddess. Almost.

Twilight was a part of that monster. As was Trixie. As were Mosaic and Gestalt. Fused. Stripped of those parts that allowed compassion for others. Trixie had suffered, knew shame and humility, but that was gone now. Mosaic and Gestalt had felt a love and a desire to understand others…but that was gone as well. Weakness shoved into Lacunaes... like soul jars of memory. The Goddess had become like a void sucking in everything good and transforming it into more of itself. Would it stay on this world, when every last living thing was altered to suit it? Or would thousands of purples and millions of greens teleport them to distant stars and innocent worlds?

And I was going to kill the mare best-suited to end her now.

The greens touched horns, their magical fields boosting Lacunae's. With another flash, we disappeared.

* * *

There were a half-dozen more alicorns at our destination. An old train switchyard; in the distance was some large structure with hundreds of mirrors. Aside from some gutted concrete storage buildings and some rusted train cars, there was nothing of interest here. LittlePip had entered the crater; I had to hurry. There was no more time for delays. There were no signs of her friends; both they and Red Eye had pulled back. Did Red Eye know what was going

on? Her spies hadn't learned it. If so, it meant only Red Eye himself knew. LittlePip and Red Eye in collusion... the possibilities made gravity crush in on me as a green brought a PipBuck from Fillydelphia and began to wire it into the hole in my leg. She'd once been a father and a stable technician; beyond that, she didn't matter. Anything that made her matter had been shoved into Lacunae.

"Think! What is she going to do? What might she do?" the Goddess demanded.

"I don't know! She's smarter than me!" I shouted back as my head felt like it was being pressed between two crushing hooves.

"You have endured and faced ridiculous odds! How would you kill me?" the Goddess pressed.

"Me?!" I laughed madly aloud and into the link. "Oh, let me count the ways! Hijack a Raptor and crash it into Maripony with all guns blazing? Work out a deal with the Enclave to give them Shadowbolt Tower in return for killing you? Fill your head with horribly catchy pre-war pop songs that would drive anypony crazy? Oh! There's an overcharged megaspell in Hoofington! I'd totally use that! Oh! Better than that. I'd warn the hellhounds and tell them to clear out in return for planting it right under your goopy blue ass!

"And don't get me started on all the ways she *might* kill you! Maybe she's gotten Gardens to work and she plans on neutralizing Maripony's taint. Or maybe Velvet Remedy has that spell; seems like it'd be right up her alley. Or the Black Book! Maybe it's given her some kind of superpowered soul spell. Or Spike might make an appearance just to kick your ass! An army of Steel Rangers! Zebra death commandos! The possibilities are endless!" I laughed wildly, madness being the only escape I could see open for me.

"Enough! She has none of those things!" the Goddess countered.

"Oh, but you don't know, do you?" I retorted at once as the green finished connecting the PipBuck to my systems. I was forced to chow down on some gems, but that didn't silence my mind. "You know she planned to remove those memories of me. But you don't know. You can't even imagine what she might have up her PipBuck sleeve." New possibilities of deicide bloomed in my mind as the Goddess imparted all she knew about LittlePip. "Maybe she found some severed greens in Canterlot, and they're going to help her lift the whole Maripony building and shove it into the sinkhole! You don't know!" I swallowed and laughed even louder. "And what's so

pathetic is that you brought me, the stupidest damn pony in the Wasteland, to help! How dumb does that make y--!"

"ENOUGH!" the Goddess yelled as I collapsed and started to convulse. "You are quite right! I don't need your intellect or morals. I just need you to kill one mare. You don't need anything besides that!" And I screamed as I felt gravity tear a piece of me away. A… place. Where had I come from? I was Blackjack, and my mom… who…

"No! Please!" Lacunae screamed as she turned from one stoic alicorn to the next. "Stop it!" Things seemed to be falling away from me. A place with a filly who filled me with dread…what was her name? A boat where I felt horrible pain…but why? A stallion I wanted to kill…but I couldn't recall the reason. "Don't do this to her!" the strange purple alicorn shouted.

I…I should be doing something. Following something with my friends. Scotch Tape…and…and who was she? And there'd been another…I could see them for an instant: a blue stallion and a gray pegasus. They were frustrated with me…amused by me…I loved them…I…

I loved who?

An echo whispered in my mind. "It fucking sucks not to remember."

Yes. Yes it did. Then that went away too.

"Stop it!" the aberrant alicorn screamed as she lifted the two guns. Crude weapons; inelegant. "I won't let you do this to her!" She dared to turn against us? To fight us? To betray her own? The motors began to whir on the minigun as the anti-machine rifle loaded a round into the chamber.

"Madness," I said, calmly.

Gravity directed; universal and inescapable. Do not kill. Disable. I brought up S.A.T.S. and queued four magical bullets, boosted by four greens. Limbs and wings; she would survive that. Eighty-one percent probability. I activated the spell, the bullets blasting with the ferocity of our unity at the aberrant. Why was I…why didn't matter. Do.

Unfortunately, the aberrant disappeared in a purple flash. We were working to bring the aberration into line. The recent additions had caused her to slip free. Where... I knew, but we could not react in the half second of time we had. The anti-machine round blasted right through the skull of the purple beside me from directly above.

Shields raised around all of us, except myself and the blues, as we looked up at the aberrant above us. Rage and grief filled her face. Madness. She would not target me, but the aberrant's powerful rifle would be problematic. The two blues disappeared into invisibility as two of the greens boosted each other's shields. The minigun would be far less effective as it needed several seconds to chew through shields.

The battle should have been finished in seventeen point nine seconds. I teleported directly above the aberrant. I expected some… something…as gravity dropped me upon her back, my mass penetrating her shield with only moderate discomfort. Silver sword emerged from its sheath. Severing her horn and wings would simplify things greatly. If horn amputation severed the aberrant from us, we might even be able to kill her cleanly and rid ourselves of her toxic emotions for good.

Only she flipped upside down completely the instant I made contact. I tried to flap my wings, but I was aberrant as well. Heavy. I passed through the bottom of her shield with an electric crackle and slammed into the muddy ground. One of the free greens shot powerful silver arrows into the aberrant's body. The blues would move to ambush her. Already they were flanking, and with their shields down there was nothing to betray them while I recovered from the impact.

The aberrant swore impotently as she sprayed wildly about her. Futile. Madness. The madness of everypony outside Unity. The minigun rounds zinged through the air as the blues moved in. One remained silent when the line of bullets was interrupted by her body. The aberrant continued to fire wildly with the minigun…but not with the rifle. That weapon swung around to where the minigun's bullets had disappeared in midair and blasted the blue vessel with an antipersonnel round. The pain was significant as the round fragmented, expanded, and exploded out the far side in a significant spray of organic fluid and protein.

The non-shielding greens were working through the aberrant's shields, and seeing the death of its twin, the blue evaded that revealing stream of bullets. Without that, there was nothing to betray its approach. Gunsmoke wreathed the black form. Another sign of aberration; clothing was irreverent social symbolism. I rose up and drew the dual dueling revolvers, waiting for the PipBuck's spell matrix to recharge so I could maximize my accuracy. The

aberrant seemed to be avoiding targeting me. I could use that to our advantage.

Seventeen point nine seconds elapsed…frustrating. Silent wings carried the blue behind the aberrant, swirling the smoke… swirling…

The blue raised her shield, the greens pumping the anti-kinetic shield to maximum; even the rifle's bullets shouldn't penetrate! But the aberrant didn't fire either gun. No. Instead she bit hard on the barrel; the metal burning her mouth as she swung with both muscle and telekinesis, slamming the heavy butt with incredible force. The slow, heavy mass (relative to a bullet) pierced a shield anticipating far higher velocities, and the butt crashed hard upside the blue's head. She screamed instinctively, but that just allowed the second return swing to crash right against her temple. Her shield flickered as focus was lost, and it broke completely when the final blow smashed her skull and sent the other blue crashing down.

The aberrant had taken severe damage, though. Her shield had fallen and that black garment was spotted with a dozen bleeding wounds. A few more and she should be exhausted enough to disable. The greens prepared another barrage as two focused on shields and two on the magic arrows that streaked after her. The aberrant was saying the word 'blackjack' over and over again, but what relevance a gambling card game played I couldn't imagine. With her shield down, she was taking shelter behind one of the rusted boxcars. Reinforcements were minutes away, but we didn't have minutes to waste with the aberrant.

I had her on my E.F.S. The red bar stood out; she hadn't teleported away. Knowing she wouldn't attack me directly, I darted around behind the boxcar. Nothing! I turned to face the car, frowning. Where did the aberrant…

Two booms erupted through the metal of the boxcar. The shots were wide; I was correct. The aberrant had a critical weakness to this shell. I jumped inside and rolled, but the aberrant seemed to anticipate me as she jumped back atop me. "Stop it, Blackjack! Fight her! Fight!"

I didn't understand what she meant and I didn't care. I brought the sword around; not towards her but towards the anti-machine rifle that had been so devastating. The starmetal edge cut through the weapon's barrel, rendering it useless. The greens moved to either side of the boxcar as I swung the weapon at her horn, but she

parried with the ruined butt, twisting the weapon to prevent the edge from simply slicing through it as well. The black dress ripped off her purple body; perhaps a sign she was returning to the guidance of Unity?

No. The garment was thrown in my face, and even when the sword sliced it neatly in two, her magic grabbed the tatters. With magical swiftness, she tied them tightly in place.

Then she threw me into the face of two greens in the doorway. It was only for a moment, but the impact of my heavy metal body disrupted the focus of the pair. And I heard the spinning up of the minigun in that second. At point blank range, the five millimeter rounds ripped into all three of us, but I was far more resilient than the other two in the heap. Still, the few seconds it took for the aberrant to dispatch the pair allowed the other two to grievously injure her. And using the sight of the greens, I rammed the blade into the spinning barrels. The metal sheared off and flew away in a dazzling circle of sparks and steel.

Just a few more seconds. Just a few…

She disappeared in another purple flash and reappeared atop a boxcar twenty feet away. Blood dribbled from her wounds as she slumped. The aberrant was almost finished. She would submit, and if she would not, then this one would perform the task personally. She was clearly straining with another spell, her horn crackling as she gritted her teeth. Perhaps an attempt to teleport away? Annoying, but manageable. The two greens approached the injured aberrant.

Then she disappeared, and the source of her strain was evident.

The boxcar had disappeared too.

I suddenly felt a sensation of déjà vu…

The car crashed down upon the remaining pair of greens with a squeal of broken metal. I sliced the cloth tied to my head carefully and caught sight of the aberrant falling limply from the top of the crushed car. The pair had gotten their shields up in time, but it'd take them a while to disentangle themselves from the wreckage. The aberrant's horn was blackened along its entire length to her face and it still gave wild sparks from being overtaxed. Slowly I approached, pistols and swords ready. She opened one pain-filled eye and said, "You idiot. Don't you get it? She's worthless like this."

That was true. Resilience aside, this body lacked…something. It would have to…be…"Oh Goddess…" I breathed as I stared down at

Lacunae's broken body. "Oh no…no!" I collapsed at her side, and held her close, shaking as I wept. The pieces that had been removed from me were back, and more. I now knew what Unity was like. Perhaps my tenure in the group mind might be a little different, but not by much. I'd be hollow. Cold. Dead in the ways that mattered.

I bowed over her, cradling her as more alicorns teleported in around us. "Why didn't you just kill me? I'd rather you'd done that," I whimpered like a filly as I held her. I felt like I was being dragged back to the Seahorse…only worse. At least then I could have died.

"You don't kill your friends, Blackjack," she replied with a pained smile. And I looked into my friend's eyes, and I knew why. I could see it glowing in the middle of that jumbled mess of memories…the one true thing that was Lacunae's and only hers. Hope. Hope that she could delay long enough for LittlePip to defeat the Goddess. Hope that, somehow, I'd be free. It was small and pitiful and so beautiful.

"Give me a healing spell," I demanded of Unity as I held Lacunae's bloody body.

"Already makin--" the Goddess began, but I pressed Sacrifice against my head and Duty against Lacunae's. I wouldn't leave her with the Goddess. I felt like I was in Flash Industries once more, fighting with all my will against gravity. "Really?" the Goddess asked, sounding skeptical and disappointed.

"Heals. Now. Or I'll blow my brains out and laugh at you from the afterlife as LittlePip kills you. I'll even get a special spot in hell ready just for you," I hissed, my muscles shaking as I kept all my focus on the trigger. I think, like this, Glory would forgive me for breaking my promise to her.

The dropped boxcar rocked as the two greens telekinetically heaved it off themselves. They approached slowly with the others, forming a ring around us. I could feel the Goddess calculating. Did she need me? Would it be better just to let us die? Some part of the Goddess decided a sliver in my favor. Their horns glowed in unison; the Goddess wasn't going to trust me with the spell. Carefully, they healed most of her injuries as I watched. Only when she stood did my resolve crack, and I yielded to gravity once more.

"You are a pain in our ass," the Goddess muttered softly, but there was something else in her tone. Frustration? Admiration? Resignation? I couldn't tell for certain.

The greens touched their horns, and the purple alicorns' horns began to glow. Two more teleports. What could we do? How could we stop the Goddess? I looked at Lacunae and that tiny glowing emotion inside her that I lacked. Hope. Just a little bit in the Wasteland…

* * *

Lacunae's delay had bought LittlePip a few minutes. She'd arrived already and was inside and approaching the Goddess with the Black Book. There was no time left. The Goddess was hesitant to probe LittlePip too deeply, and yet at the same time she was eager to strip away and discover all she could. Like a foal with a Hearth's Warming Eve present, parts of her wanted to wait till the book was taken care of, but others wanted to devour every thought from her perilous enemy. LittlePip believed she was dooming all of the Wasteland with this action; she was right.

We'd teleported to the lip of the crater. I'd take care of her from here.

Under cover, I immediately unpacked Penance and began the exacting assembly of the weapon. Even if I wanted to foul it somehow, I couldn't. Gravity wouldn't let me. Even after two centuries, the rifle fit together perfectly, one piece into another. It was a work of art, terrible and awesome all at once. I carefully slid the scope into position, then tightened the screws to exactly the right tension.

And the icing on the cake? The small black container marked 'M.A.S. / M.W.T. / O.I.A. EBP#12.' which had also lain in Maripony's research facilities for two centuries. Within was a .50 caliber round of black diamond carefully etched with magic glyphs. A wonderful application of bypass magic. A bullet, magically precise, that would ignore stone and steel and impact flesh. According to classified notes discovered in the facility, #8 and #9 had performed marvelously. The Goddess felt a smug glow at withholding this treasure from Red Eye. I slid the round home and I lay out on my stomach. I had Psalm in me, her training and her habits, and I had my own precise control of my telekinesis. As the chamber closed and locked, a cold shiver ran through me.

Time to kill LittlePip.

I raised the rifle and stared. The magical scope made the stone,

wires, piping, and rebar disappear in a cylinder along the path. It took me almost a minute to find LittlePip; it was like peering down a straw, a magic straw that could see through walls. My horn turned a little dial back and forth, moving in and out of the structure as I swept the weapon back and forth. Then she appeared, the tiny, brave mare approaching the vats. Saddlebag floating beside her. The black book was in there; the Goddess had skimmed that fact…but what if her friends had tricked her? What if there was a megaspell targeting talisman inside?

LittlePip was talking…stalling. For what? The Goddess couldn't tell. I couldn't. LittlePip was talking about weather control and how it mattered to somepony else. I settled the crosshairs on LittlePip's pretty little temple. The Goddess could kill her without warning; with but a thought. LittlePip didn't have any Pinkie Sense to warn her. Smugness rose up in Unity.

The insecurity of it made me gag. Supreme telepathic and telekinetic powers and an army of minions, and she still wanted an ace in the hole. Because she knew that LittlePip would try something, and she knew I might guess what it was. The Goddess was wracking her memories for everything she knew about weather control and how it could endanger her. Flash floods, lightning, even tornadoes wouldn't be able to do much to the massive structure, even damaged as it was. Still, there were giant gaps on the topic of weather control spells. Had Twilight ever worked with Rainbow Dash on them?

The Goddess didn't know. She would, though. Now that she had everypony under control and LittlePip hopeless and defeated, she luxuriated over her enemy. The power! The ability to do as she wished! She was the Goddess! Nopony had this power. She wanted the sensation to last a little longer. LittlePip was stalling…waiting for her friends, no doubt. But I could see…and through me the Goddess could see…that her friends had abandoned her. Calamity wasn't sneaking through the ducts. Steelhooves wasn't charging to the rescue.

LittlePip thought something…I didn't hear it specifically so much and feel it. Names. But not just names. There was something more attached to it. Something…personal. Like a familiar, nagging tune long forgotten. "Yes! Your silly little plan against the Goddess is hopeless! The Goddess is not impressed! You…wait…who?"

A moment later, LittlePip thought them again. This wasn't a part of

the plan. This was…different. Unexpected. I was all set to turn the small unicorn's brains into red paint, but those four simple words. Trixie. Twilight. Mosaic. Gestalt. Of course the Goddess knew who they were, but to the Goddess they were four flat entries akin to what one might feel reading a dictionary. The names from LittlePip rang with memory and thought and emotion. Music playing in a simple mental harmony.

As LittlePip remembered what she'd viewed in the star orb, the melody began to grow. Feelings that hadn't been scraped off into Lacunae began to resonate as we watched Trixie getting a second chance from Twilight. And the other memories! The fall of Canterlot and Rarity touching the holed window tore through Unity like a fresh wound, aching with the image of the unicorn skeleton with her hoof melted to the glass. My aim wavered as tears obscured my vision a touch. Applejack losing the love of her life. Pinkie Pie... quitting her ministry? Pinkie Pie…the true Pinkie… talking to herself?

It was like an earthquake rolling through Unity. Yet the Goddess, perhaps not having felt so much pathos in so long, hesitated to shove it all away. No…not hesitating! She was trying to do exactly that…but Lacunae was full, and unlike myself, LittlePip wasn't in Unity. The memories and emotions kept rolling out.

I don't know how long I was there. An hour. Two? Three? Even my horn gave out, and I just lay there, hoping this was the plan. Maybe LittlePip would get through to the Goddess! Maybe…just maybe… this was the plan! But as I lay there the clouds high above parted, and…no. It wasn't the clouds parting. It was the clouds *descending*. A colossal, swirling, gray machine of death. It hovered far above, tornadoes seeming to curl around the powerful engines propelling the machine. Before it, dropping down towards the valley, were four immense Raptors. Their engines filled the air with a ghostly whisper that made my mane stick up.

So…that's a real Thunderhead. As impressive a machine of war as it was, it seemed to be keeping its distance high and away from the facility. *Triumphant*, a pegasus within Unity identified. The Enclave leadership were here to mark this momentous event. More than just dangerous, the machine appeared…gaudy. Its metal spire tips and whirling propeller blades gleamed with gold, and the massive curve of its body was decorated in swooping, curling designs. From its position miles away, I wondered if it was staying high out of

aloofness or caution. Then again, it could probably annihilate me from there anyway.

From the Raptors dropped small teams of power-armored pegasi, then whole wings flying in glorious and impressive formation. It certainly looked intimidating.

They were greeted with a grand sight of hundreds of alicorns arranged in a band of green, blue, and purple. Perhaps all of them. Beneath the wings of power armor, small pegasus camera teams flew about, capturing the glorious sight. A new age for the Enclave, I supposed. A team flew by me, no doubt intrigued by the odd unicorn and her gun. “Who is that?” they asked, half accusingly and half questioningly. An illusion hid my rifle from view immediately.

“Blackjack,” Lacunae said, before gravity crushed down upon her to be silent. “She’s the Security Mare of Hoofington,” she gasped through the pain.

“Nopony for you to concern yourself with,” a pair of greens replied to the camera teams in unison. “She serves the Goddess.”

They looked at each other, then touched the sides of their helmets, no doubt receiving orders. Together, they flew away. LittlePip had succeeded in stalling the Goddess; now what?

The Goddess had hoped to have the Black Book and LittlePip dealt with before Harbinger’s arrival. "Enough of that memory! It…It is not important!” the Goddess thought as she tried to actually deal with real feelings rather than shove them away. Lacunae could barely stand as the Goddess tried to force them into a vessel that would not hold more.

She was so overwhelmed and off balance that she missed LittlePip’s stunned thoughts initially. Harbinger was approaching; no doubt his escorts would film every second of this exchange. She should be getting ready! She’d had a whole speech prepared about a glorious new beginning for Enclave and Alicorn alike! Finally, though, the Goddess latched onto two words in LittlePip’s mind…‘balefire bomb’.

Like dominos, the missing pieces fell into place. The meeting with Red Eye had been for the one thing the Goddess been sure he’d never part with: the balefire bomb. How had LittlePip talked…but it didn’t matter. She had. The bomb had been small and portable…but how had she gotten it inside? Stealth cloaks! But that was impossible. Anypony foolish enough to enter would be…

Anypony…

“The zebra!” the Goddess gasped as she put two and two together along with LittlePip. Xenith, in the cloak, could evade even the hellhounds beneath Maripony! LittlePip was running…Harbinger was here and beginning to blather on about something the Goddess could care nothing about. I returned the rifle’s sight to LittlePip as she backed into Harbinger. I could kill her now, and good riddance…the Goddess had to find that bomb!

In a rainbow cloud, the ring of alicorns began to fly towards the building. No doubt dozens, perhaps hundreds would die to the hellhounds. How could LittlePip have endangered them as well? She was more ruthless than I, clearly. I rested the crosshairs right between LittlePip’s eyes. The rifle’s magic would make sure she died. Then I would join the search.

But something was amiss. Something wrong. I was playing my role, as were we all. Only one part of the Goddess wasn’t: the garbage dump. The lingering, teasing melody of those four names and the emotions associated with them played in the back of the Goddess’s mind. A splinter in the hive mind.

“Perhaps you know something,” the Goddess said after a moment’s hesitation. “Some…schematic…some spell…some…something about balefire. I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to look,” she said, and Lacunae groaned as the Goddess’s will picked through the countless memories deposited within her, no time for the Goddess to use me as a filter.

Distantly, I could hear Twilight Sparkle’s voice as the Goddess retrieved the memory. It wasn’t quite like a memory orb. Instead, I saw a ghostly shadow of Twilight and Rainbow Dash inside the Goddess. “It isn’t a natural explosion.”

“What do you mean? It goes boom, right?” Glory -- no, Rainbow Dash answered.

“Balefire isn’t normal combustion. It’s not even megaspell combustion, like we thought. It’s more like a megaspell teleportation field. It brings a phenomenal amount of fire from… somewhere else. Don’t ask me where. It could be the sun, or even another world! It has a chaotic element that defies our normal laws of physics. If one of these goes off, spell effects could be disrupted. Worse, just as it teleports fire here, it teleports other material there. It’s almost perfectly destructive.”

“Almost? You have something that’ll work?” Rainbow Dash asked eagerly in my mind.

"Work is relative. I think I can modify Shining Armor's shield spell, though. With some fiddling, we might be able to protect critical ministry buildings from harm. Power is going to be an issue... "

The ghost images faded, but with that memory, the simple tune LittlePip began deepened. Shining Armor and Rainbow Dash's notes joined as those emotions were renewed. "Perhaps some more. Something that will help us."

I heard Princess Celestia's voice. "No. I think that Mosaic and Gestalt are incredibly gifted ponies, and I'd be honored to accept them at my school." I saw Celestia addressing two shabby-looking green earth ponies. The couple looked like they could have been Wastelanders. A pair of identical green fillies hid behind them.

The father said in a worried voice, "Are you sure? They don't have much magical talent. We…well…we never could afford them schooling or magic books. Being earth ponies, the missus and I couldn't teach 'em magic at all."

"I assure you, Mr. Pebble, my school is not simply for the children of unicorns. I think that, with their talent, your children will excel at my school for gifted unicorns," Celestia said, and the twin notes of Mosaic and Gestalt thrummed with new life.

The Goddess scoffed as the images faded away. "What…what was that!? I said to find some useful memory! Not sentimental nostal… gia…" The greens were replaced by an elderly gray unicorn in a pointed hat. The little blue filly shot fireworks into the air from her horn; impressive. At her age, I couldn't even do magic.

The unicorn stallion spoke warmly, "Bravo, Trixie! Très bien!"

"Did you really think so?" a filly replied. "I never be as good as The Mighty and Majestic Mystere."

"Bah. I left that name with the stage, *ma chère*. But trust me. Your raw talent is beyond compare. You really should apply to Celestia's school. Those fireworks were très magnifique!" the stallion said grandly with a wave of his hoof.

"But all I can do are silly little tricks, Mystere," the filly said softly. "Nothing I do is useful at all."

"Trixie!" the stallion gasped. "Useful! What is useful? Useful c'est commun. Boring. There are a million practical unicorns. Equestria does not need another."

The tiny ghostly Trixie brightened a little. Then a mare's voice snapped, "Trixie Lulamoon! What have I told you about talking to that old coot? You should be doing your homework!"

For a moment she crumpled, and then she glanced back at the old stallion. The filly frowned away, then raised her nose as she declared in a quavering voice, “T…the great and powerful Trixie doesn’t need to do homework.”

The old stallion clapped his hooves together, laughing uproariously. “Bravo!” He levitated his pointed, star-covered cap and set it atop the beaming filly’s head.

“I…Mystere…I’d…I’d forgotten…” the Goddess murmured. Then it was like a breaching flood as memories began to flow back into the Goddess. The balefire bomb was almost forgotten as memory after memory was returned to the Goddess. Sterile, clinical facts were thrown into beautiful context, and emotions long suppressed were renewed.

LittlePip had started the melody with four names and a few memories. With these four, an orchestra began to play. It carried whimsical piccolos of Twilight’s memories of Spike. Guitars played for Applejack. Accordions for Pinkie Pie. Violins accompanied Trixie standing alone in the rain. The delicate ringing notes of a hammered dulcimer for Gestalt and Mosaic finishing each other’s sentences in magic kindergarten. The beat of Twilight’s rage at Littlehorn. The violas and cellos of her last terrible fight with Pinkie Pie. The slow contrabass of Big Macintosh and the pain of his death. Trumpets of pride for Trixie’s second chance. Woodwinds sharing Gestalt and Mosaic actually working under Twilight Sparkle when so many others didn’t understand or value their gift. For the first time ever, the Goddess was torn.

“Children! Flee!” she blurted, instinctively, and that wave halted and undulated as Unity became Uncertainty.

Harbinger was confused. This was not going as he’d anticipated. “There is no need to flee. We mean you no harm. In fact, we’ve come to offer you an Alliance between the Enclave and the Goddess.”

Doubt, after all the seductive thoughts of putting Thunderhead and the surface in their places, was starting to creep into his thinking as he launched into a monologue about how they would team up against the bad surfacer Red Eye. Of course he had plans for treachery down the road, eventually. Just as he expected treachery in turn…but perhaps not THIS soon. Clearly this was going quite far from what he’d anticipated.

But within Unity, I could see two Goddesses; one a horrible

amalgamation of mares and the other a union of four ponies, each fuzzy and indistinct. They were opposites and yet the same, one cold and hard and monstrous and the other compassionate and empathetic. “We must survive!” the Goddess roared. “We must find the bomb at any cost!”

“Any cost?” Trixie replied contemptuously. “Can you even imagine the cost? This is more than smashed wagons and hurt feelings.”

“There is more at stake than us,” Mosaic began calmly.

“This is a question of Legacy,” Gestalt finished.

“Legacy?” the Goddess scoffed. “We are the beginning and the end. Without us, we are nothing!”

“We are more than the sum of our minds, bodies, and memories,” Twilight Sparkle said quietly.

“Together,” Gestalt began.

“We are greater,” Mosaic finished.

Trixie looked herself in the eye. “Think of all the things I really wanted. Like respect?”

“We are better off feared!” the Goddess countered.

“Happiness?” Trixie suggested.

“Power makes us happy!” the Goddess sneered.

“Friendship?” Trixie said quietly. A ghostly Twilight rested her hoof on Trixie’s shoulder, and the blue mare looked back at Twilight with a small smile.

“We are closer than any friends! Any family! We are one. And when we have ripped the souls from that book and tossed them to oblivion, we will have power like we could never imagined!” the Goddess roared. Even now, I could feel those hundreds of alicorns returning. LittlePip had tossed the book into the mass of blue IMP, and it was slowly sinking into the depths. Then she’d sealed herself into a saferoom. It didn’t matter; already the gravity was pulling my aim back to the small mare. The shielding and spells in the saferoom’s walls made even the truesight scope’s image dance and waver, but I was still able to make out the ponies inside. I had to be patient. Perfect. I might not even have to kill her. She was furiously talking to the Enclave soldier she’d trapped with her. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

Harbinger, meanwhile, had stopped his grand speech. He scowled as he pressed an earbud with his wing. “Ambrosia! Come in. Ambrosia!”

“You won’t be able to contact her inside that room now that the

seal has activated," the Goddess said as her image flickered erratically. She seemed to be struggling to maintain the illusion. "Nor can the Goddess's own children teleport in and extract that little wretch to rip all her thoughts out of her skull. Do not fear. The Goddess will deal with her."

He looked at her, wariness pricking through his thoughts like icewater. "You're speaking differently now. What's going on? This isn't following the script."

The Goddess twitched again, and I could feel her straining. "Unfortunately, that miserable little nag has interfered yet again. She has smuggled a bomb into this facility somewhere." The coldness of her words, so free of her grandiose showmanship, made me shiver.

He feigned confidence. "A bomb? Really? Is that all?"

"Excuse me. A balefire bomb." Her image twitched once more, and I saw the blue amalgamation of four for an instant before it disappeared again.

He laughed. Then he looked at her, and his mirth turned to ashes as his schemes rotted on the vine. "You're serious! A balefire bomb? Here!"

"Yes. There is a balefire bomb in this facility. It will detonate in thirty-one minutes," the Goddess replied coolly as she turned both eyes on him. Another flicker, and he saw what I did for an instant. A thing that should not be bartered with. "It is likely in the tunnels beneath the building. You will use your formidable Enclave assets to assist us."

"What?!" Harbinger blurted, then added, "Why, certainly! Just allow me to return to the *Triumphant* and we will…assist." His thoughts didn't turn to assistance. They turned to getting the heck out of here and salvaging this fiasco. Already he was spinning how to tie this in with Red Eye and give credit to himself for destroying Red Eye's ally.

"You don't have to do this," Twilight said in tired resignation.

"This isn't going to change anything," Trixie added. "You're still going to be a monster."

"We are NOT a monster!" the Goddess countered as she ordered her children back.

"I'm not getting through to the *Triumphant*," the second pegasus soldier said. "The signal's not penetrating the walls."

"You will assist the Goddess!"

“What should we do, General?” wailed the third as she backed away.

“Get out of here! Now!” Harbinger shouted, lifting into the air and flying for the exit. “Let this freak burn!” he said in a sublime example of diplomacy.

A telekinetic tendril reached out and wrapped around Harbinger. Two more snared the second pony. The third got as far as the door before the tendrils grabbed her wings and dragged her back. Her hooves scraped at the catwalk. “You are not going anywhere!” Then the Goddess looked at the other soldier. “You! Take all your soldiers into the tunnels! Find that bomb!”

“The hell I will! I don’t take orders from big blue goop monsters!” the soldier shouted.

“Just let me contact my forces, and I’ll be happy to…” Harbinger demanded desperately…but it was all a lie. If he got free, he’d laugh as she burned. It’d save him the trouble of leveling Maripony after he finished using the Goddess. She could see it in his mind. ‘Freak. Creature. Monster.’

The Goddess dissolved into one inarticulate roar of rage and frustration. Her telekinetics crushed the three like sparrows in the claws of a hellhound…but that wasn’t enough. No. With an almost bestial fury, she smashed the bodies into the catwalks and vat walls, ripping them to pieces. I kept trying to line up a shot of the entrapped mare. If LittlePip would just remain still for a minute I could do as the Goddess wished. No matter how wrong it was…

The four ghostly mares put their hooves on the Goddess’s shoulders, and she froze, looking at the meaty gobbits floating before her. Gravity halted, and I felt my mind floating. And for the first time, I saw tears in the Goddess’s eyes. “I…I just wanted them to help…”

“I know,” Trixie said, gently.

“I…I just wanted to be loved. I wanted to save everypony…” she whimpered as she let the bloody metal clumps fall to the floor. “I wanted to be the hero for once.”

“Yes,” Twilight replied. “I wanted to save everypony I could, too.”

“I…I…What have I done?” the Goddess pled, and I saw her harsh and horrid lines blur a little as she seemed to blend in where the others touched her. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“You aren’t alone,” Gestalt said with a smile.

“You have us,” Mosaic finished.

The image of the Goddess and the four transformed into one glowing form that grew brighter and brighter. For the first time, I could see the ghostly outlines of other ponies in that vastness. Small and foallike compared to the Goddess, yet ponies all the same. “I don’t want to die,” the Goddess said, fearful and small.

“Nopony does,” Twilight answered. “But we can leave something behind. We have our children.”

“Our children,” the Goddess murmured. “Perhaps we can survive in them?”

“Unlikely,” Gestalt said solemnly.

“Without the I.M.P. biomatrix, our ability to remain cohesive will be severely compromised and will last only hours at best,” Mosaic explained.

“I’m scared,” the Goddess confessed. “I’m so tired of being scared.”

“I am too,” Trixie answered. “Remember how scared we got going out on stage? How worried we were that each show would be our last and we’d never find another? Well, now we don’t have to worry about another show. Now…all that matters is how we go out, together.”

“Together,” the Goddess replied, her voice aching with the need for relief.

I pushed Penance away as I slowly rose to my hooves. Lacunae lay beside me, breathing weakly. Blood ran out her nostrils and ears. I wanted to tend to her, but the sight of what was happening in the valley astonished me. The horns of the blue alicorns were glowing as greens paired up beside them. Blue stars began to fill the air, swirling and finally coalescing into the front half of a blue mare with a silver mane a mile tall! The blue, ghostly form looked at the Enclave ponies that fluttered like gnats around her.

“Enclave,” she said in a voice from a thousand throats magically magnified. “I wish to thank you for your generous offer. However, I cannot accept. There is a balefire bomb about to detonate underneath this facility. Please evacuate as quickly as you can. High General Harbinger will not be able to join you. You have fifteen minutes until detonation.”

Then she turned and looked off to the south. Her eyes were hard as she scowled. “And Red Eye. I know you’re watching this…you, or your minions. I have only one thing to say to you: it’s not worth it.” Then her violet eyes glanced down towards Lacunae and myself. “Goodbye, my children,” she finished, “I love you all.” Then the

blue motes flickered out and scattered.

I didn't know how the Enclave would take it, but all at once, gravity reversed, now pushing me away from Maripony. In purple flashes, the alicorns were disappearing and escaping any retribution the Enclave might have attempted. Two green alicorns swooped in to myself and Lacunae. "We shall help you on your way," they thought as they landed beside us.

"Thank you," I said to Unity as I hastily took the gun apart and stowed it in my saddlebags.

"I'm sorry," the Goddess replied as the pair levitated the staggered and semi-conscious Lacunae between them. "I know you cannot forgive me for what I have done to you."

All that she'd done…I suppose it'd been quite a bit, at that. Still. "Hey. No problem," I answered, sincerely. Sure, the Goddess had been a real monster, but she was going to die in a few minutes. I could give my forgiveness. I could feel her children teleporting further and further away. Now for me to do the same... though teleportation was hard enough for me to pull off on my own, even with the Goddess still connected, the greens feeling like two wings lifting me up and pushing my magic forward. "Come on…" I grunted as I tried to pull off the spell.

"For the High General!" screamed a voice from above us. I barely had time to get my guns up as I saw a wing of five Enclave divebombing us. The greens hadn't even had their shields up, as we'd been on the verge of leaving. A barrage of crimson struck the left alicorn, and she transformed into a glowing alicorn shape before collapsing in a pile of ash.

"You stupid sons of mules!" I shouted as I pulled out the dueling pistols and targeted the lead pony. A step into S.A.T.S. and I had five shots targeted. Executing, the pistols seemed to roar in slow motion as one, then the other, blasted the helmet of the leader. I'd only needed four before the visor exploded inward. The fifth painted the back of his helmet with his brains.

The remaining green threw a shield around both of us, leaving a tiny window for me to shoot through, as rage exploded inside me. "You pull this shit now?" I yelled as I fired at the headless formation, which split into two pairs, their gatling beam guns blasting me and the green. The pairs started to pull up, but one of mine was just a little too low. The starmetal sword arched up and caught his chest, the impossibly sharp blade slicing from sternum to

stifle in one bloody arc. While his armor tried to lift back to the skies, his viscera were pulled into the dirt. The three banked and dove again, two blasting the green with a focused barrage while the third still aimed for me. The green used some kind of spell…a green ray I'd never seen before. The beam sliced through the air, but the two twirled away from it and, with a flash, the alicorn's shield dropped under another burst of fire. I ignored the beams cutting me, the operative barding withstanding them well enough, as I blasted at the pair, but when they lifted away again, the green had fallen.

"Leave me," Lacunae murmured weakly aloud. "Teleport yourself to safety."

"As if. I'd be lucky to get fifty feet." The three began to dive once more. Their mistake. The crimson gatling beams ripped into me; individually they didn't do much, but I wasn't going to last long at this rate, even with the armor. And I had spoken truthfully; I doubted I'd be able to teleport any real distance without the boost from greens.

But that didn't mean I couldn't teleport a short way straight up.

In a flash, I'd left the ground. Equally fast, I realized as I was rammed by the central flyer that this was a very bad idea. I wrapped my hooves around his neck and chest. He struggled to stay aloft, which suited me just fine as one of the two came around to grab my back. Big mistake. The sword flashed as it eagerly sliced the helmet off, along with the head in it. After that, the remaining Enclave began to blast both of us, and my ride started to tumble out of control.

"Oh brown rain!" he wailed we flipped over and over together and then landed with a heavy crunch, sending my armaments flying across the rocks. His gatling beam guns broke, scattering fragile components over the rocks as we rolled. As we finally came to a stop, he collapsed on his side with a grunt. I rose.

The other flyer landed, her hoof stomping down on my sword as her guns began to hum. My pistols had landed behind her, and it would take me a moment to retrieve them. "Now what are you going to do?" she jeered.

Five magic bullets blasted her faceplate, and she collapsed in a heap. "That," I replied to her corpse, then turned to the survivor. The wrecked guns had entangled his wings. I levitated the sword as I approached.

“Oh…oh…please! Don’t kill me!” he wailed as his wing covers flapped and failed to give him lift. “Mommah! Daddy! Somepony! Halp!” he screamed.

I sliced the wreckage of his guns away and then grabbed his helmet between my hooves. “Security doesn’t kill ponies if she can help it. That balefire bomb will. Now get the hell out of here and tell whoever your radio will reach to join you!” I shoved him away, but he just stood there. “Fly, you idiot!” He crouched and launched himself into the air.

Unfortunately, that attack had eaten up precious time and taken out my own escape route. Lacunae, her horn still blackened, struggled to stand. “I’m sorry,” the Goddess said, and I knew what she meant. In the time it would take for purples to jump back to me, the bomb would have gone off. She could have sent some immediately to me, but that would leave dozens of blues and greens who could otherwise be evacuated trapped in the blast zone. Neither of us wanted that. The Goddess had cast an enormous shield around Maripony to try and buy more time, but that would only last as long as she herself did.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied as I moved underneath Lacunae and hefted her up. “I’ll just run out.”

“Blackjack,” Lacunae began.

“I’m not going to leave you. Don’t even think of arguing,” I said tersely as I pointed myself in the direction of away and ran as fast as my hooves could carry us. Unity was a buzz of questions. Would LittlePip survive a point blank blast? Would the Goddess’s children? Would I? Could alicorns even survive in the Wasteland without the Goddess? How could they, when so many memories had been taken? When so many thought them monsters.

I just ran. It was all I could do. I checked above me and saw the Raptors and the *Triumphant* laboriously pulling away. The swarms of Enclave in the air were trying to return to their ships as quickly as possible. I couldn’t pay any further attention to that, though. Nor was I the only creature running for their life on the ground; I spotted packs of hellhounds who had overheard the warning. Could they get away?

Could I?

Doubtful.

Minutes were down to seconds. All the Goddess’s children were away. All but two. To the side, I saw a pair of large rocks about

three feet high and five or six feet long, arranged in a wedge pointing towards the crater. It was the only thing in that blasted landscape that might count as cover. The Goddess was saying something, but I focused on getting Lacunae and myself behind those stones. Pressing my back against them, lying flat, I counted. Thirty seconds. Fifteen. Ten. Five…

One…

I blinked as nothing happened, frowning and looking around the dead woods and rocks. “Don’t tell me it was a dud,” I muttered as I looked back towards the crater.

If my eyes hadn’t been mechanical, I’d have never seen again. From the valley came a flash brighter than anything I’d ever seen before, and time seemed to freeze in its terrible brilliance. The myths of Celestia raising the sun came to mind, but this was more a wrathful Celestia ripping the sun from the earth. The telepathic scream of the Goddess could have been the wailing of the earth itself. The rim of the valley deflected the flash just a little bit, just enough that my face and mane didn’t instantly burst into flame. Time began to trickle, and I fell backwards as that horrid illumination washed across everything. Every dead tree and bush bloomed with fire almost instantly. The Goddess’s scream matched the horrible, billowing green-and-rainbow fire rising higher and higher into the skies, her shield already blown apart like a paper bag with a grenade in it.

Then, in advance of the flame, a strange, shimmery bubble of air blew out from the crater. It expanded in every direction, beautiful and terrible. And as it passed over the lip of the valley and through the burning woods, every blaze was snuffed out in a terrible expanding crescent. Every trunk bent as one as it passed by. I felt as though I was trapped in S.A.T.S., save for that terrible shimmering bubble.

Then it struck me, and I was nearly blasted away. The rocks kept me from being swept away immediately, but they didn’t stop every medical signal on my PipBuck from flashing red as I was hit with more force than I’d ever imagined. Even having a boat dropped on me was nothing compared to this. I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. Could barely even think. And oddly, I imagined I could hear the Goddess still talking in my mind. Not even a balefire bomb had shut her up, at least in my imagination.

The dead trees had been snapped and tossed on the wind like so

many matchsticks. I lay on my back, watching with almost abstract interest as the mighty Raptors were caught in the rising fireball like tiny models in a whirlpool. One was coming apart before my eyes, cloud and steel just scattering as the machine of war was transformed into so much rubble. A second was on fire, plummeting towards the earth like a dying phoenix, only this time never to rise again.

Really, if I hadn't felt myself internally bleeding as my talismans raced to restore me, it'd actually be kinda cool. I was so injured, I couldn't even feel pain. Then I became aware of the ground shaking. My eyes slowly returned down to the lip of the valley. A luminous green baleful light was sweeping across the landscape. It covered the earth as the fireball had filled the skies. Even if I survived the shockwave, I wasn't going to survive this. It was oddly a relief.

"No," Lacunae said as she rose to her feet. Even battered and bloody, she climbed to her hooves in the face of the catastrophic wall of green balefire. By the second, her injuries disappeared and her body swelled. The char fell from her horn as she faced the rending storm of fire. Her eyes blazed with violet light. "No. You will not die here, Blackjack! You will not!"

And around us both appeared a shimmering shield, not a bubble but a wedge. And like water on a magical ship's prow, the fire rammed into it and split to either side. Were I not synthetic, I would have been deafened by the roar, but the fire simply scraped against her field instead of racing through us.

Through gaps in the green flame, I could see one of the Raptors turning end over end in the sky, as if hurled by an immense irate foal. Then it snapped in two, the ends flying away out of sight. I watched in awe as Lacunae swelled, larger and larger, absorbing the energy pouring in around her. Of course, I was absorbing it too, but for me it meant something a lot less pleasant than more power and a growth spurt...

"Hold on, Blackjack!" wailed Lacunae as my radiation meter passed from yellow to red. 100+ rads a second. I didn't know it could go that high. "Hold on!" she screamed, her field flickering as it battled with the immense stream. She wasn't the only one. Above, I could see the *Triumphant* flying away. Its proud gold spires were melted and its fancy designs burned away, but its immense bulk and armor, not to mention distance, had spared the Enclave siege platform

from destruction.

"Funny. Never thought it'd be radiation that got me," I muttered. Even with her shield, the heat was utterly stifling. Lacunae struggled to keep her grip, but she was still growing. Her alicorn magic was the only thing keeping her alive. Me, I might be resistant to radiation, but there was a world of difference between resistance and immunity.

"Don't you die, Blackjack!" Lacunae warned, but it was so hot and I was so tired and hadn't I earned it? "Blackjack?" the giant alicorn said above me as my vision faded. I quite blissfully passed out as the world disappeared in an emerald hell. "Blackjack!" Lacunae screamed, her wail following me into that oblivion.

* * *

I really hated almost dying. First getting my legs cut off, then having my soul sucked out…now I was coming back from a balefire bomb. It said something pathetic that I was becoming familiar with near death experiences. Of course, my body felt as though it had been stepped on. Correction…danced on. By a whole dance troupe of minotaurs. With steel hooves.

"Lacunae?" I groaned, opening my eyes. I was astonished to see my rads at zero. We were on the smoking lip of the valley. A haze surrounded us in all directions. A few hundred feet away lay a Raptor, smashed prow-first into the earth like a foal's bath toy. Down below, a brand new crater gave forth a chaotic glow. Maripony had collapsed completely into the sinkhole, nothing now but a jumbled pile of rubble.

Bodies lay everywhere. Smoking pegasi, like steel sparrows, littered the ground around the fallen Raptor. Dozens of hellhounds also lay in charred, clawed lumps where they'd cooked. Smoke billowed from their holes like great volcanic vents. I wondered just how long the fires underground would burn.

Forget Stable 99; that was nothing. Between Enclave and hellhounds, LittlePip had killed *thousands* with this bomb! Granted that hellhounds and Enclave weren't automatically good and blameless, especially not after those five had attacked me, but the immensity of the deaths was staggering. Somehow, I'd imaged that LittlePip's plan, whatever it could have been, would be more discriminating. The Stable Dweller should have done…something.

Something better. Warned the hellhounds! Evacuated the Enclave! Something!

From out of the haze approached a blue alicorn. I tensed…but then realized that there was silence in my head. I could make out the faintest of whispers from my friend, but what remained of Unity was denied me. A second alicorn walked forward: a green. Then a half dozen. A dozen. Twenty. Fifty. They stared silently at me. "H… hello? Lacunae?"

In unison, all of them turned and looked to the left along the ridge. That was when I saw her; a colossal purple alicorn with a hide so dark that I imagined she was black. She was speaking to a glowing ghoulish form pulling a wooden skywagon. I started to approach, but before I'd gotten twenty feet, my rads spiked and I backed away again.

"Lacunae?" I asked. "Ditzy?" I said as I looked at the luminescent ghoul. How many undead pegasus mares wrote in chalk? The ghoul smiled worriedly at me and scribbled something on the board, showing it to the alicorn.

"We will try," Lacunae said in a deep voice, and my whole body shivered. She looked worried, then turned to me. Her face was clearly torn. Had the Goddess survived? Somehow possessed my friend? Was that why she was so huge? Her eyes glowed a solid purple as she looked down at me. Then my fears abated as she gave a small smile. "Blackjack. You survived."

"Yeah. I always seem to," I said warily as I looked at the charred ground around me. "Unless I have wings now or I'm a ghoul too, I'm guessing you did something?"

"You forget: Twilight created a spell to purge radiation. As soon as the fire abated, I used it to nullify the radiation dose you'd taken," Lacunae rumbled. She turned to look out at Maripony's shattered remains, and I saw on her flank something that made my…well, made me wish my heart could stop. Five small white stars surrounding a purple sixth. It wasn't clear as a normal cutie mark, though... like a ghost.

"What…what happened?" I breathed. "Are you…you?"

"Both very good questions," Lacunae replied. "I suspect that so many memories of Twilight's were put into me that, when the Goddess died, Twilight's soul was attracted to me rather than the everafter, turning me into a temporary soul jar. I do not know how long it will last. Minutes? Hours?"

“And you being an alicorn of unusual size?” I gestured to her immense bulk.

“A side effect of the prodigious amount of radiation I absorbed,” Lacunae said as she looked down at me. “You have been unconscious for several hours,” she said quietly. “Did you dream?”

The question was so unusual that I actually thought a moment. “No. I didn’t. Why?”

“I took back the mental contamination of Psalm. Anything that remains are your memories of her, not hers. She’ll not trouble you again, Blackjack.” She closed her eyes. “A parting gift.”

Oh, I didn’t like where this was going. “What are you talking about, Lacunae? You’re scaring me. What is Ditzy here for? What’s going on?” Panic was nibbling at my spine; the need to act, no matter how danced on I felt, pushed at me.

“LittlePip was supposed to have escaped while we searched for the bomb. The arrival of the Enclave ruined that plan. Xenith escaped on the Griffinchaser, but with the radiation levels so high all across the valley, it was impossible for LittlePip’s friends to return. So they sent Ditzy to find her,” Lacunae said solemnly, in the tones of somepony who was trying to break bad news.

“It doesn’t seem possible,” I said quietly. How could anypony survive, and if they did, how could help reach them? “Can I do anything?” I asked weakly, unable to voice my fears that LittlePip was likely so much irradiated jelly. Even with the scope, it would take hours…days…to scan the devastation for the saferoom, if it survived at all.

Ditzy stomped her hoof and tapped her board. Lacunae looked over and shook her head once. I wondered what the ghoul had written… I couldn’t tell; I was no long able to see into her mind. Ditzy chewed her bottom lip and lifted into the air, flying over the crater.

“She wants to know if all the alicorns can search, but there is another, more pressing, concern,” Lacunae said as she looked at the crowd of alicorns around me. “What happens to them?”

“Well…they try and survive as best they can, right?” I gave a little, weak smile. There was no way that LittlePip survived that. I was an augmented cyberpony with regeneration talismans. How could she have pulled through? That the Wasteland had lost a pony it needed…I didn’t want to think of it.

“You don’t understand. Without the Goddess, their souls returned to their bodies, but their minds are hollow and damaged. The

Goddess removed countless memories from them. Who they were, where they lived, what they loved…and so they will be easy prey in the Wasteland. A few fortunate individuals will be able to recover enough to survive on their own, but…"

"So…can't you give them their memories back?" I asked with a hopeful smile.

"With Twilight's soul maintaining a faint Unity to them all, I can," Lacunae murmured, head bowed.

My smile wavered. "So…so what's the catch?"

"I am not a pony," Lacunae replied quietly. "I was never born. I never had parents. I was not transformed into an alicorn. In fact, I was never supposed to exist at all. I am a collection of memories and feelings placed within my body, and that gave rise to my consciousness. If I give those memories back…"

"No," I murmured. "No. No!" I shouted up at her. "There has to be another way! There has to. Just give back half! A third! Keep enough to survive!" I implored the immense alicorn.

"Even if I could divide all the memories within me, I would have no right to a third of a pony's happiness or sorrow. If I return them, I must return them all, and even then many alicorns will be lost and confused. But it might give more a chance to survive. Enough to have some future in the Wasteland."

"I don't care!" I yelled up at her. "You're not dying like this!"

Lacunae gave the saddest of smiles. "I can't die. I was never born."

I looked on in desperation. "Maybe... maybe you can hold onto a few. Some? The memories of alicorns that don't have bodies to go back to? There has to be enough for you to stay... you... "

But Lacunae just smiled like she always had, in pain and love and sadness. "The connections in Unity are failing without the Goddess to maintain them. In a few minutes, parts of it will sever completely. I don't have the time or ability to sift through each memory and determine if it should go or stay. Such a thing would take a lifetime for me to do on my own. If I am to return them, I have to return them all. I'm sorry," she said as she looked down at me. And I knew she was, not just for me, but for all that would be lost when she finally went.

"Horseapples!" I hobbled to her, ignoring the radiation and my battered body. "I won't! I won't let you!" I said as I tried to wrap my hooves around her fetlock. "I won't!" It was childish and immature, but I didn't care. I wept as I held her, looking up at her.

“Please…” I begged.

“Shh…” she stroked my mane gently with the very tip of her wing. “Shhh…I have to do this. And you know why. If you were me, what would you do?”

I wanted to lie. I wasn’t connected to Unity anymore. I could just lie! “I’d…I…” but it stuck in my mouth because we both knew the truth. “I’d give them up too.”

“And I would weep, and beg you not to go,” Lacunae answered me. I hated the truth, but it was like gravity. There was no fighting it. “Because I love you.”

I closed my eyes, ignoring the rads coming off her as I nuzzled her warm, dark fur. “I’ll miss you.”

“I know. And I am glad that somepony will.” She closed her eyes a moment, smiling broadly. “I was never supposed to exist. But you offered me your friendship. You made it so that I mattered. You gave me a life and made me feel like an actual person, and that was more than I ever deserved. You forgave my betrayal, and you stood by me when I could not stand by myself. And you made me dance,” she sniffed, great tears rolling down her cheeks as she raised her head. “Stronghoof... ” she murmured, but shook her head. “I love you, Blackjack.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, pointlessly. Needlessly. Sorry for what, I couldn’t be sure. Sorry for something I’d done. Something I hadn’t done. Something that I wish I’d done. Right now, all I wished was that I had done something more for her. Been somepony better to her. “I love you,” I managed to choke out as I backed away.

“Farewell,” she said. She lifted her head, and a golden light issued from her horn. It reminded me of glowing motes of thought freed from their confinement in memory orbs. The light formed gleaming streams that poured out of her and into the brows of the collected alicorns. More rivers of luminance passed away into the distance, fading from view. As the memories left her, the starburst on her flank became clearer and more distinct.

The alicorns started and jerked, for once breaking from uniform movements. They flew away, or teleported, running to find a place to process what had just happened to them. My eyes remained locked on my friend, hoping that when the transfer was complete that somehow…some way…something would remain of Lacunae. But when the glow ended, the behemoth alicorn remained dark and still as the scorched earth.

“Lacunae?” I asked, backing away. For an instant, she turned and looked at me. A tiny smile formed on my lips as tears ran down my face. That somehow…but then she turned away back to the desolate valley. “Lacunae?” I whimpered, reached towards her with a hoof and touching her fetlock again gently. I grit my teeth, bowing my head, doing my best to keep myself together. “Twilight?” I asked.

Slowly, she looked at me again. But she didn’t answer. Not verbally, at least. What I heard was the faintest whisper over the evaporating Unity connection. “You have my friends,” came the whisper. For a moment, I didn’t understand. Then I saw her eyes on my saddlebags. I opened them up and lifted the first figurine I found. Rarity smiled glamorously at both of us. I levitated it before her, and she stared at it with her immense eyes. Then she blinked and turned away, back to the crater.

“She has my friends too,” Twilight whispered.

“She?” I frowned in confusion. “You mean Ditzy?” No response. I looked at the devastation. “You mean LittlePip?”

Slowly, she gave the tiniest of nods. “She needs help.”

“How do you know?” I asked, feeling the connection fray.

“My friends told me,” was all she said before the link broke completely. Slowly, she spread her enormous wings and gave a great flap that knocked me back. Slowly she began to circle over the tangled heap of concrete, steel, and rock. Many of the pieces were even bigger than the behemoth.

Her horn glowed like a violet star. I hugged Rarity’s figurine to my chest. “Come on,” I breathed as I watched some of the massive boulders shift. “You can do it…” *Be enduring, darling*, a little white mare cheered along with me. It was impossible. Inconceivable. Nopony could move such weight!

Then one immense boulder lifted up and was tossed aside. Then a piece of wall. A chunk of foundation. A heap of stone. Each was cast aside as if it was nothing. And then there was a rumble and screech that I heard from miles off as something dark and battered was hauled from the rockslide. It looked like a giant brick of steel and tangled reinforcement. Hunks of foundation dangled beneath it, falling away with crashes that I heard from here. Greenish water cascaded from the base of the huge block.

For a moment, I was utterly sure that the block would tumble back to the ground, but with strength I couldn’t imagine, the metal top was peeled open. I scrambled in my bags for Penance’s scope and

got it out just as the behemoth extracted something from within the block. I looked through the scope, zooming in. LittlePip was alive! She was talking!

I collapsed, dropping the scope as Twilight dropped the shelter. It crashed like an avalanche into the earth. I pulled out Twilight's figurine. "Thank you," I muttered before kissing her brow. "Thank you."

I carefully packed everything up as Ditzy flew over to meet LittlePip. I knew she'd get her home safely.

Now it was my turn. The behemoth disappeared into the clouds, and Ditzy raced off, likely to get LittlePip to medical aid. I didn't begrudge her not coming to pick me up. No doubt LittlePip was in a bad way. I could endure. Ash tinged a faint green began to fall like snow across the charred woods. The silence, within and without, was deafening. "Goodbye," I whispered into that void, in a vain attempt to fill it. I would have lingered, but the ash was making my PipBuck tick. I started the long walk back home…

Alone.

* * *

I didn't know where I was or how to get to Hoofington from here. The PipBuck installed in my hoof had none of my old navigation tags in it. Worse, the radio was busted, so I couldn't even try to hear what was happening in the wider world. Ahead of me, fires flickered and crawled about like sullen molten worms through the brush and dead trees. Every hour, I'd take a dose of RadAway and Rad-X. If I didn't get out of the fallout before my supplies ran out, then I'd really be putting my endurance to the test.

I found a nice little ridge of stone that took me southeast and downhill. Not as good as a road, but it was better than nothing. The silence wrapped around me, and I found myself starting at flakes of ash drifting down in the corners of my vision. I'd turn, expecting somepony behind me. I looked above for Enclave. Below for hellhounds. Something. Anything! "Something attack me, damn it!" I yelled into the falling green ash. My own voice made me jump.

Alone. Sweet Celestia, I fucking hated being alone. Walking was better than thinking. Thinking led to pitying, and if I started that, then the rock would turn into a mattress I'd never get off. Follow the rock. Look for hostiles. Watch the radiation meter.

Don't think about it. Don't think about what happened. Don't think about what would happen. Don't think about -- and I was so busy not thinking that I misstepped and discovered a whole new way of travelling: falling down a hillside. I flipped end over end, crashing through the underbrush and cannonballing through smaller trees. I finally came to a stop at the base next to a large rusty refrigerator on the banks of a muddy creek. I saw, as I struggled to sit up, a pony skeleton lying curled up on its side within the metal container. I looked at it a moment, wondering how the bones, the refrigerator, and an old gambler's hat came to be on the banks of this muddy little trickle in the middle of nowhere. Slowly, I collapsed back.

Gravity of a different sort pressed down on me as ash began to cover my visor. My friend was gone. I wasn't upset. I wasn't anything. Since we'd met, she'd always been there for me, quietly supporting me. She'd been my only confidante to what the Goddess had done to me. Somepony who could sympathize with me. She hadn't been perfect... she'd used me, put Psalm inside me to ease her own burden... but I could live with that. Her companionship had more than made up for it. 99. Hightower. I would have died so many times over, if it hadn't been for her.

I should be like that pony in the fridge. What would it take?

And I could be. All I had to do was lie there and let the ticking continue. I'd survived a boat falling on me, a building falling out from under me, poison gas, radiation, smooze, and Enervation. I'd sucked up Pink Cloud, had my legs chopped off and my body violated, and lived through a fucking balefire blast. To think that this was what would kill me. Behind the visor, I sniffed and smiled all at once. Was I really this weak? Was I doing this to myself again? *Be enduring*, a stoic white unicorn mare in me urged. *Be strong*, her orange earth pony friend agreed.

Slowly, I rolled over and onto my hooves. Lacunae wouldn't want this. None of my friends would, no matter how much I wanted to be selfish and give in and give up. Do better than this, Blackjack. Step by step, I proceeded on in the general direction of east. Eventually I'd find a road or... something.

I don't know how long I wandered. A few things -- scorched radhogs, weird floating plants, and agitated radroaches -- made suicide attacks on me. The red-barred hellhounds I avoided; when they spotted me, I ran. They'd lost so much that I couldn't bring myself to fight back when I could just flee. My meandering course

was getting me nowhere; more often than not I found myself backtracking towards Splendid Valley.

And the hellhounds weren't giving up. Not that I blamed them. Not after how many of theirs had died with the destruction of the alicorn Goddess. There were more and more red bars in my vision, and I suspected they weren't irritated bloatsprites. They were moving around me, trying to drive me around and finish me off. Twice, they'd attempted to spring from the ground and rip me to pieces, only to learn that my sword wouldn't just block their swipes but go right through their entire limb. Two missing arms later, they'd fallen back to trying to blast me with their energy weapons. The overpowered, chaotic beams crackled through the air. Eventually they'd combine the two and make for a serious threat. Then I'd have to start killing them.

"Please. Hasn't there been enough pain and suffering today?" I begged them as I made my way up a rocky hill. The hellhounds were popping up right and left and began moving up after me. "I don't want to kill you!" I yelled down at them.

The roar of a dozen beam weapons tearing at the stones around me voiced their sentiment on the reverse matter. I ducked behind the cover of boulders as I set myself to doing what I had to. A thirty foot drop behind me should keep them off my back. Popping up, I sighted carefully, hopped into S.A.T.S., and... a tiny yellow pegasus in my mind gave me huge pleading eyes, begging me to spare the poor upset hellhound. Fluttershy was going to get me killed... I fired at his limbs and body. The hellhound howled as it fell back a moment, but there were others coming. I sighed. Sorry, Fluttershy; I tried. I took out Penance and fitted the parts together, swapped out the bypass round for fifty caliber explosive bullets, and took my position.

I wasn't a sniper, but I'd had one's memories for a while and knew my guns. Penance worked like the machine of death she'd been designed to be. The dozens of hatchmarks on the butt would need a few more added to it as the rounds blasted into the resilient armored hide of the hellhounds coming up the hill. I didn't try for headshots; at this range, the scope was a hindrance rather than a help. The detonation of each orange-banded round echoed through the woods, the shrapnel and flames keeping them scattered. "Go away. I'm not worth it. It won't bring them back!" I shouted down at them between blasts, not even knowing if they could understand

me.

Maybe I should let them kill me. Give them a little bit of satis--

"No!" I shouted as one got too close, his claws scraping on the gray rock. The bullet caught its shoulder, blowing off the limb at the joint. "No, I'm not going to give up!" Not after what Lacunae had done. Not after what I'd promised Glory. I reached for another magazine of explosive rounds...

Nothing.

I switched to armor piercing rounds, trying to put the bullets where I guessed hearts would be. But without the blasts forcing them to take cover... I was only one pony with a gun that could point only one direction at a time. They were being smart, using the boulders and rocks to shield them. It was almost as if they were waiting for som--

"Pony die!" roared a hellhound behind me, raising his arm to strike. Apparently those hands were also good for climbing! I dropped into S.A.T.S. and bombarded his face with magic bullets, but the hellhound's hide was tough enough to remain intact. I swung the massive sniper rifle around in futility as the hounds gave a howl of victory.

Then the air was split by the crack of four hooves impacting against the side of a hellhound's skull, and I stared at the sight of a blue pegasus with a rainbow mane slamming into the hellhound above me. The beast reeled, swiping a clawed hand against her torso as its teeth sprayed from its maw in bony shrapnel. The claws, which could tear through earth, failed to rip through the brown dragonhide leather. With a scream, it tumbled off the cliff just as a second poked its head over the lip. The pegasus pulled out a boxy beam gun as she landed in front of the rising hound. With the precision of S.A.T.S., she blasted away at its face with a dazzling barrage of kaleidoscopic light I'd never seen before; the beam, rather than being the standard red or green, was a startling spectral rainbow. The overcharged blasts turned the hellhound into a cloud of glittery dust, but a second poked its head up immediately and started to climb over the edge. Undauntedly ejecting the spent gem cartridge, she pulled a brilliantly glowing fresh one from her bags, slapped it into place, tossed the gun into the air, bit down on the grip, and blasted away again, with the same result.

I could have made love to Glory right then and there. But there were plenty more hellhounds coming up the hillside now behind

me. Rather, there were before the hillside was washed with a series of explosions. Hellhounds reeled, blasting at random for their attackers. One seemed to sniff out the source of those blasts and pointed to a blue pony hidden in the rocks a dozen yards away to my right. He started to charge P-21, but then there sounded a wild scream of delight. “Death from above!” cried Rampage as she dropped from the sky and onto his head. Power hooves discharged in unison, blowing away most of the hellhound’s cranium and chest cavity.

P-21, suddenly a dripping red stallion, wiped the gore from his face. “You meant to do that!” he yelled.

“Well, duh!” Rampage drawled.

Then a claw burst through the chest of the mare as a hellhound pushed itself out of the ground beneath her. With one sweep, Rampage’s head was sent bouncing away over the rocks. “Stupid pony talks too much!” the hellhound hissed. Then paused as Rampage’s decapitated body reached out with her power hooves and touched its face, patted its cheek, and then smashed a power hoof upside its head. The hellhound hissed in shock and outrage as the headless mare battered at the very confused beast.

“Shouldn’t you be shooting?” a stallion growled beside me, and I jumped as I saw the shimmer of a zebra stealth cloak. Lancer lifted his rifle and silently blew out the eyes of a hellhound with a wicked beam rifle who had been taking aim at us.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted in amazement at Lancer.

“The Proditor said it was the ‘Blackjack defeat effect’.” Lancer calmly blinded another shooter spraying red death at us. “Apparently I now have to follow you around until I find a new purpose in life or something,” he muttered sullenly as he fired again. “I don’t care how much the Proditor says you need a brooding hot male on your team. I am out of here first chance I get.”

P-21 hauled Rampage’s squirming body up to us and gave a smirk at Lancer. “Oh, how many times I’ve said that.” And he actually chuckled before looking to me. “But Blackjack has this certain gravity that keeps us all coming back to her.” I was so stunned, I couldn’t even keep Penance levitated.

The hellhounds had had enough. With howls and snarls, they were pulling back. Apparently this wasn’t a good day for anypony. Glory pressed Rampage’s severed head to the stump, and it slowly sealed

back on. She blinked and looked around. “Oh? We won? Yay!” she slurred.

“But... how... who... I... ” I muttered weakly. P-21 and Glory looked away from everything, especially each other, as the former wiped his face and the latter checked Pew-Pew. “How did you know where I was?”

“I told them,” Lancer replied grimly, not taking his eyes off the hillside. “They questioned me about your disappearance. Eventually, I informed them that you had seemed... not yourself. You spoke of a Goddess and this place called Maripony. And so we came here when we could not find you.”

But what... how... My shock was increased when Scotch Tape screamed from overhead, “Glory! I don’t know how to fly this thing!” Directly above me hovered a boat. I nearly teleported away then and there, but this boat was suspended beneath an enormous purple bag and had fins sticking out the sides with propellers out the rear. “Without Rampage I can’t steer anywhere! Help!”

“I’ll be right there,” Glory shouted, launching herself up to the floundering airship.

Rampage blinked and worked her mouth, rubbing the vanishing seam in her neck as Lancer watched in shock. “Whew. Lost my head there for a second,” she said as she trotted up to me. “Hey Blackjack. If you are Blackjack, but really, how many other ponies would be dumb enough to fight hellhounds alone? Nice armor. Very badass. How are you doing? Where’s Lacunae?”

It was the simple, causal question that hit me the hardest. There was only one response to all the feelings churning inside me. I bowed my head and sobbed like a heartbroken foal. Rampage sighed and shook her head. “Definitely Blackjack... ”

* * *

Aboard the *Fleur* and away from the ground, I told them everything. We sat in a circle on the deck, with Boo at the helm, seeming fascinated by the wheel. Somepony had put an old captain’s hat on her head, and the sight was so ridiculous and precious that I couldn’t keep from smiling a little when I looked over at her. Scotch Tape returned my Delta PipBuck to where it belonged as P-21 held her. On my other side, Glory snugged up against me. Rampage and Lancer looked on from across the circle.

The zebra stallion hadn't taken his eyes off the red-striped mare, and leaned away from her slightly with wide, skittish eyes. Funny how he reminded me of Xanthe...

I started with how I'd connected to the Goddess in Hightower. How she'd slowly gained more and more control over me. How she'd wired my mind to make me unable to speak of her. Even saying the word 'Goddess' made me stammer and my head ache, despite the fact that she was dead. As I went on, Glory hugged me repeatedly and Rampage and P-21 looked ill. Even Lancer seemed to be reassessing me with a disturbed look. I generalized a bit when it came to what had happened inside the Goddess and skipped right to the balefire bomb.

"I knew it," Rampage said to Lancer. "Second we saw that flash, I knew Blackjack had to be involved. She's always around when the best shit blows up."

"Get away from me, you freak. He cut your head off!" Lancer replied, leaning further away from her.

"Eh. You make it sound like such a big deal," she said with a negligent wave of her hoof.

I quickly moved on to tell them what happened afterward, and Rampage's laughs stopped. When I got to Lacunae, they all looked seriously at me. "Lacunae's gone? Just... gone?" Scotch Tape asked plaintively from P-21's hooves. When I nodded, she looked away. "Oh... just like Momma." She pressed her face into P-21's chest. "I didn't even get to say goodbye to her," Scotch murmured through her tears.

"It was a very noble thing she did," Glory said as she hugged me with her wing.

"There is no greater honor than to give oneself for one's tribe," Lancer agreed with a small nod.

"Oh, come off it!" Rampage snapped as she rose to her hooves. "She died! She's gone! It doesn't matter how she died. Her shit is over. She's fucking lucky!" The outburst surprised me as Rampage turned away. "She was a great... a great big... freak. With her freaky dress and guns and magic and not talking and... just... damn it!" she yelled. "Couldn't you have taken me with you, you big purple bitch?! Fuck! You were awesome! You used a minigun in a black dress! Who the fuck else could pull that off but you!" she roared, as if, if she yelled hard enough, she might be heard in the everafter.

"Rampage," I said in concern.

"Fuck you, Blackjack. Leave me alone," she said as she walked to the rail of the *Fleur* and hugged it, looking down. "Fuck... " she finished lamely as she sulked.

I knew why she was so upset. I'd hoped that the time we'd spent together had curbed her desire to die. Now the loss of a friend had brought it back in force. I looked at Glory. "What happened when you... ah... woke up?"

She immediately went bright red. "You mean alone?"

"Completely alone!" P-21 butted in immediately, turning scarlet as well as he suddenly looked away.

"Oh yes. I was so shocked to find myself by myself. Alone. With nopony else in bed with me," Glory said as her mane frizzled a little. "Especially not a stallion. Because I would never, ever have a stallion in bed with me." She gave a tense little laugh. "Stallions! Ew!"

"Oh I know. I feel the exact same way about mares! Can't stand 'em! Nope!" P-21 laughed as well.

Scotch Tape cocked her head. "You're acting weird again, Daddy. I told you you drank too much last night."

I smiled, glad for the poor humor. "So. After you woke up alone," I said to Glory, "you found my note?"

"Yes. At first I was upset, but when we found out Lacunae was gone too and your PipBuck had been torn out, we were really worried. We went to question Steel Rain, but that was when Lancer said he'd heard 'the Goddess' talking to herself. That was when we grabbed everything and came as quickly as we could."

"I held on to your PipBuck, Blackjack," Scotch Tape said. "That dealer pony is freaky, but he was really worried about something happening to you."

"When the bomb went off, I was sure... I thought... " Glory began, then shook her head, sniffed, and hugged me again. "I am so sorry! I knew something was bothering you, but I thought it was the zebras, or Mother, or Cognitum or something!"

"Hey! It's not your fault!" I said with a little smile. "The G... G... she wasn't stupid. She knew that all of you would help if I told you and made sure I couldn't. No matter how much I wanted to," I said as I nuzzled her teary cheek. "Believe me, I almost gave myself a seizure trying to tell you, and I still couldn't do it."

"It's sad when you've been through so much that we didn't notice you in trouble," P-21 said quietly.

"Yeah," I muttered softly, looking in the direction of Maripony. The dead are gone. I had to focus on the living. "Well, I guess we should be dealing with Lighthooves before he fills half the skies with pony-eating psychopaths."

Rampage sighed. "Okay. Okay. I'll get pedaling."

I frowned after her and looked at Glory. "Pedaling?" Rampage trudged slowly downstairs and into the hold.

"Ah! Yes." Glory flushed. "Well, I thought that the engines might be a little too high-energy, so we disabled them and hooked up the main drive shaft to some pedals."

"Now we're flying on rage," Rampage said from below. "You're welcome," she added dryly as the propeller behind the airship started to turn and the wings began to flap.

"I meant what I said. Soon as we're close to the Hoof, let me off," Lancer said as our circle started splitting up, Scotch Tape returning to Boo and P-21 going to the bags of supplies brought from the Society. "I mean it! I am not joining your little group."

"You don't have to," Glory said coolly. "And honestly, I don't want you to. We took you with us in case this was a trick of some sort, and to help Blackjack. She's helped. You've paid back your debt. You can get off whenever you want. Because, quite simply, you're not good enough to make up for the mare we lost." Lancer scowled at her and moved away, head bowed as he muttered to himself.

"Ouch," I muttered.

"Sorry. I... didn't have a good morning," Glory replied as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She smiled as she sighed. "I'm removing that word from my vocabulary. I'm not sure how it should be applied to me."

"I can relate," I said quietly. "So, are you?"

"I want my old body back. I want to be me." I watched as she reddened. "Last night felt good. Really good, to be honest. And part of that bothers me. And it bothers me that it bothers me. I know I drank a little... but I never realized what it feels like to be so... heterosexual."

"Bisexuality for the win," I answered and shook my head. "Sweet Celestia. I just lost a friend, and I'm teasing you about sex. What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"I think it's your coping mechanism. One of them. It's something you enjoy. Straight. Gay. Kinky or normal. I think it's a safe place

you can come back to to feel good about life," she said quietly. "Bad stuff happens, and you want to get laid so you don't feel so bad. Could be worse. Could be your other coping mechanisms." When I looked at her blankly, she elaborated. "Wild Pegasus?" I flushed. She did have a point.

She curled her tail around my neck. "Come on. There're some rooms below. I think we both need a little coping time."

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *

It'd been a much tamer coping than usual, with far more cuddling and tears and talking about what had happened than sweat and orgasms. When we finally emerged, I did feel better. We were high in the clouds. Maripony, and the pain of losing Lacunae, now lay behind us. Ahead was an entirely new mess for me to deal with. Glory had gone below with P-21 to check on the life support rig for me, and so I was in the prow with Captain Boo.

The *Fleur* was remarkably quiet, save for the woosh of prop and wing. We moved through the cool mist of the clouds, the field of gray broken by intermittent gaps that allowed blue sky to wink through. In places, I was almost sure I could see the sun. Boo lay curled up beside me, lightly snoozing with her crazy cap slightly askew as the music played.

Wait? Music? I opened the panel and glanced down at my PipBuck, frowned, and tapped it a few times, but it continued playing one old audio file or another. I sighed and leaned against the railing, looking out as we passed through the wispy clouds. The violin and piano notes carrying back.

I remembered when I first saw her, that shadowy image in the dark outside the Hoofington Museum and within Blueblood manor, like a ghost of Princess Luna. How we met within Star House, and how I'd quickly realized that she was much different from anypony else I'd ever known, and not just for being an alicorn. How she'd behaved as if she were just a tool of the Goddess. The pony who wasn't.

I remember the despair I'd felt when she'd pulled me out of 99 and how I'd hated her for denying me my deserved death. And I remembered her shielding Glory and myself from the rain. How I'd gone into her mind after she'd lost herself under Hoofington, and how she'd put memories of herself into me. Except Lacunae wasn't

Psalm, no more than I was my metallic legs. Psalm had been her foundation, but the mare herself had been someone completely different. She was closer to me than my own mother had been. She'd known my faults and accepted me for them. Her kindness and humility were all the more emphasized by what she'd been connected to.

She'd come to save me when I needed help on my lonely trip after Happyhorn. She'd travelled through hell with me in Hightower. She'd been an object of both mirth and adoration. And she'd grown, too. From a seemingly emotionless cypher to a mare who knew and loved. She'd danced. Something I'd never seen Psalm do. What could she have been if she'd had another few months? What might she have become if the Goddess had lived and realized her mistakes without dying?

I stared ahead, seeing the clouds stream around us, and reached down, stroking Boo's mane gently. And I looked at Boo's blank flank as the music swelled and the enormity of what Lacunae had done finally hit me. I began to shake, tears running down my cheeks.

Lacunae had no soul. She'd been that collection of memories. Any soul connected to that body had been Psalm's, not Lacunae's. There was no everafter for Lacunae. There never had been a chance of one. And she'd still gone through with it and returned the memories to the alicorns, in the hope that there'd be a future for her race.

Hope... that had been Lacunae's virtue. Hope that I would survive. Hope that I would succeed. Hope that... somehow... things would be better. Boo looked up at me as I put my hooves around her neck and pressed my face into her mane. "She's gone. She's... she's really gone! She was dancing with Stronghoof and... and... " I imagined her life, marrying that great overdramatic goof of the Wasteland. They'd have been an epic couple, with a romance that would have been the stuff of legend! That somehow she'd have children, or adopt them, and teach them in her kindly way. That she'd be there to help me when I screwed up with Glory or P-21... or just in general. "I'm never going to hear her laugh or her calm voice telling me things will be alright or... or anything!"

And as the music played, I remembered all the beauty she'd brought. The violin music she'd created with her horn alongside Priest and Medley. Or the sight of her fluttering her wings as she bathed in magical waste! Or how the ghouls in Meatlocker had been taken back to a time two centuries ago when they'd been alive just

by seeing her dressed up. She'd improved the Wasteland just by being who she was. All I could do was blow holes in it.

Lacunae was lost, like tears lost in rain... but was hope? Would she want me to sit here and weep for her? Yes. For a time. She knew the value of grief. And so I didn't try to keep it in. Tears were how the heart purged itself of grief. They were not a weakness. But then she'd want me to keep going. To keep up hope in bringing all this to a close. So after I'd had a good cry, I wiped the snot off Boo's neck. "Sorry, Boo." The white mare just looked at me a moment, then smiled. I blinked at her, and she blinked back, then smiled again. Slowly, I smiled a little too, and the odd blank leaned forward and nuzzled my wet cheek before beaming at me.

"You really are an odd one, you know that?" I said as I finally composed myself. Together, we sat by the rail as we flew into tomorrow.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 59: Turbulence

"I simply cannot imagine why the pegasus ponies would schedule a dreadful downpour this evening and ruin what could have been a glorious sunny day."

The *Fleur* floated whisper-quiet through the air as we cut our way through the clouds, the wet vapor coating everything in a layer of shininess. Occasionally, we passed into a dip in the upper surface of the clouds and broke into open sky. Scotch Tape and P-21 ignored Glory's warnings against staring at the sun, marveling at the amazing azure that arched overhead. For me, on the other hoof, looking up produced a feeling much like looking down. I envied both of them; they'd shaken 99's agoraphobia far more quickly than I, if they'd ever had it to begin with. Boo also seemed quite impressed by the sun and stretched out her hoof as if she could nudge the glowing orb aside. Of course, then we would plunge into the clouds once more. It was definitely for the best, though, as we'd spotted at least one Raptor off to the northwest.

As we were crossing another of the cloud valleys, my attention turned to Lancer, who was keeping to himself by the rail. I trotted over, and I noticed him leaning away a little more with every step I took. "Oh, stop. I've already got my curse cooties all over you," I teased as I sat down beside him. That certainly didn't cheer him up, so I commented on the sky. Sure, looking up gave me problems, but if I just stared down the valley at the horizon... "Celestia, that's beautiful," I said as the sun washed over us. Then I glanced back over at him and saw his indifferent shrug. "You don't think so?"

"It's the sun. I've seen it before," he commented quietly, then met my skeptical gaze. Huffing softly, he rolled his eyes. "Do you think your pegasi keep our homelands cloud-covered as well? Sun. Moon. Stars. I've seen all the skies have to offer." He turned away, but then added, "It is…nice."

"Right. Nice," I said, feeling the awkwardness grow. To spare him, I averted my eyes. "So, what are they like? Your lands, I mean."

"Save your breath, Maiden. I have no wish to speak with you. I hate and despise everything you are," he growled. P-21 and Glory looked over at us as he began to build up steam. "You are the ruination of everything you come in contact with. You…did you see what you just did? You kill Goddesses!"

"That wasn't my kill, Lancer," I countered, frowning at him. "The Stable Dweller got the Goddess. I was just along for the ride."

"Yes! Along! Wherever you are, death and destruction follow!" he said, then looked around, his eyes widening. "I want to land. Let me off."

"You get off when we're clear of any Raptors. If we drop below the cloud layer, we'll be visible for miles," Glory said, trotting up and looking around at the *Fleur*. "I talked to Storm Front during the Gala about it. Raptor radar is tuned to detect high-density objects like dragons, flying tanks, mountains, and missile casings. If they get a return off the *Fleur*, they'll hopefully chalk it up to two-century-old radar systems and write it off as a glitch."

"They could not detect our Tempest," Lancer sneered at her. Oh… that didn't sound good.

"That was a myth," Glory countered with a sweep of her hoof. "Living storms do not exist."

"Keep telling yourself that," Lancer replied with a smug look. "You ponies had your 'Thunderheads'. We awakened the storm itself."

"Do you have anything like that now?" I interjected. "Or is this a two-century-old prickwaving dickfight of who *had* the deadliest toys?"

He cooled a bit, seemingly caught between discretion and arrogance. "Well, Thunderheads still exist," he commented with false levity.

"Right…" I turned to Glory. "And these were…"

Glory sighed, rubbing the bridge of her muzzle with a wingtip. "According to some conspiracy nuts, balefire bombs weren't the only megaspells in the zebra arsenal. Only the most prolific. There were rumors…myths…war stories…right before the end that the zebras had used megaspells to create super talismans that…well… had *excessive* effects. Whole mountains that would advance on pony positions. Living storms and cyclones. Behemoths of vegetable matter." She then glared at Lancer and tapped his chest. "But they

were *just* stories. They're used as plot devices in our war dramas!"

"The superweapons of your side still exist. Why do you suppose that ours do not?" he retorted with a scowl. "Ponies were right to attack first before we could deploy them offensively. The elemental forces were encased within the greatest talismans ever created, and those could then be smuggled into your greatest cities or fired on missiles into the heart of your lands."

"Oh, so the ability to devastate an entire city wasn't enough? What could your mega talismans do that your balefire bombs couldn't?" Glory asked with a roll of her eyes.

"Go off more than once while not targeting us," Lancer retorted grimly. "A Tempest would tear your clouds apart and break your control of the weather. A Behemoth could prowl through your forests, hiding like a hillock during the day and savaging your towns by night. A Colossus would walk over your armies, resisting any megaspell you threw at it. And when the war was over, we could use them to reconstruct and rebuild."

"But…why?" I asked, pleading for him to see the madness of it all.

"We knew that the balefire deterrent wasn't going to last! Someday you'd have all your megaspells ready, and you'd attack. And you did!" he snapped, pointing a hoof at her. "In an instant, Roam was gone! The fire still burns! You liquefied the Atori Islands in minutes! Millions dead, and the radioactive slag is still toxic today! And that, by our accounts, was from just one megaspell! You turned the sun against us! Why would we not turn the sky and land itself against you?"

"And you have one of these…mega-talismans?" I asked lightly, afraid that the Legate was going to move up several orders of magnitude in importance very quickly. Maybe it was something in my eyes. Maybe it was something in my tone. But Lancer seemed to realize very quickly that I was shifting my priorities against the Remnant.

"…no." He said the word like he was extracting a tooth. "Father sent representatives back to the homeland to find one. We'd not made more than a dozen before the spells struck. If we'd had another year…"

"We'd have had some other horrifying superweapon to terrorize you with," I replied... but maybe we wouldn't have. Maybe Twilight would have resigned…maybe Rarity and her other friends with her. Maybe the war effort would have collapsed. Maybe one of the zebra

weapons would bite them in the ass. Something had to break, sooner or later. I scowled at him. “You guys weren’t any different from ponies. Always looking for that one thing that would let you win. That one advantage. That one…whatever…that’d let you kill more ponies than zebras. You used dragons. We made Raptors. We made power armor. You made armor piercing bullets. We made megaspells. You made balefire bombs. We made Thunderheads. You made Tempests.” I hissed sharply through my teeth. “It’s annoying.”

“Yes, well, you’ve never had to deal with a pony who defies everything thrown at her,” Lancer countered.

“Excuse me?” I asked, my eyes widening.

“You always win,” he said with a scowl.

“I do not…always…win…” I muttered, glaring back at him. The tension inside me began to grow more acute. I looked over at my friends, but even they seemed unsure how to respond. That made the wires in my head draw even tighter, and then Lancer laughed harshly.

“Oh, please. Deus faced you, and now he serves you. Sanguine opposed you, and now he’s dead. The Harbingers brought all they could, and you’ve fought them off time and time again. You just survived a balefire bomb!” he declared. “What more can be thrown at you?”

“I don’t always win!” I shouted at him, springing atop him and yelling in his face. “I only survived the bomb because of my friend, and I lost her! I saved my stable only to have to kill it! Beating Sanguine didn’t bring Priest back! I broke the link, then had to kill forty helpless children.” Every win came at a price, and honestly, looking back, it sometimes made me wonder if I’d been right to win at all.

I wanted to rage! Damn this body! Pant! Gasp! I wanted a heartbeat to thunder! I wanted to feel like something other than a machine. Suddenly, I realized his face was screwed up in pain as my metal hooves ground his body into the deck. Just as quickly, I backed off. “Sorry…” I muttered. “I just…I don’t always win. Not… not like you think.”

He glowered at me but was apparently uninjured. “I hate you,” he growled. “I hate all of you,” he said as he glared at each of us on the ship. “Especially you,” he added with a look at me. I sighed and dropped my eyes; oh, well. He wasn’t the first. Then an unexpected voice spoke up.

"Let's take this topic off Blackjack. You want to talk about hate?" P-21 asked casually as he stepped up towards the larger zebra. Lancer seemed surprised by P-21's advance. "I know a thing or two about hate. You know what I've hated? I hated seeing a dozen helpless zebras, some of them children, being gunned down by a coward. I hated seeing him shoot the pony who'd saved their lives, and his, in the back. I hated and will *always* hate any world in which fuckers like him could get away with that."

Oh Celestia, they were doing this now? "Coward?! How da--" Lancer began, and then P-21 swung his head around and smashed Persuasion across Lancer's face. The surprised zebra fell down, looking at him in shock and rage. But there was no bellowing rage in P-21, only a cold hatred I hadn't seen in weeks.

"You *are* a coward. You're afraid of everything. You kill from hiding where you can't be seen and from a distance where you won't be hurt. You're afraid of Blackjack, what she can do and what she represents. You're afraid of powers beyond your control. You're afraid of your own father. You're afraid of everything, but most of all you're afraid to admit it," he said as he looked down at Lancer.

"You came to m--" he began again, but he was again silenced by a blow from Persuasion. This time the zebra blocked the barrel with his hoof, but he still closed his mouth and stepped back.

"*Glory* went to you," P-21 snapped, "on the off chance you were behind Blackjack's disappearance. She was desperate. *I* wanted to implant a grenade rectally and watch you try and get it out," P-21 seethed, then glanced at me for a moment. "Blackjack might be able to forgive you. Blackjack lets go of shit that I can't even imagine. But I don't forgive you, Lancer. I saw a coward murder more than a dozen of his own kind, including his own mother and sister, in cold blood because he was too afraid to do the right thing and tell whoever gave that order to go fuck himself. Or simply let them live and then lie about it. You're a coward and a murderer and I don't expect that that will ever change."

Lancer looked like he was about to explode, but P-21 didn't look away. "You…have no idea…" the zebra said, searching for words.

P-21 actually smiled a little. "Oh? You think that I don't know what it's like to be afraid? I've been afraid almost every damned day of my life. Afraid for my life. Afraid for the life of someone I care for. Someone I love. So afraid that I wanted to die just so I wouldn't have to deal with the fear anymore. And yeah. I hated it

too. Hated it and everything that made me scared. Everything that hurt me was my enemy, and everything hurt me." He glanced at me again, then back at the zebra. "But hate doesn't make the fear go away, and it doesn't make you strong. It makes you mean. And that doesn't get you anything but pain and misery."

He pointed a hoof at me. "That mare that you hate so much? The one you accused of winning all the time? She's gone through stuff that I can't even imagine, and suffered things that I know nopony should. And she will always do what is right. Right for her friends. Right for ponies. Right for zebras. Even right for hellhounds. No matter how much it hurts her or how afraid she is. And sure, she fucks up. But she keeps moving ahead. And as long as she can keep going, I can too. No matter how afraid I am."

I stared at P-21 as he walked away from Lancer, turning his back on the zebra. Lancer bored a shooty look into his back as the blue stallion walked over to Scotch Tape and gave her a firm hug. I felt a little lightheaded after that and stepped between them. "We'll get you down right away," I said to Lancer.

"Don't do me any favors out of pity," he snapped, his eyes full of rage as he glared at the smaller stallion. Finally, he turned away. "He speaks truthfully…that's what is so intolerable. I've been afraid of my father every second I've known him. Afraid of his approval and what it would mean. Afraid of his disappointment. Afraid of his wrath." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Do you…do you ever think of those you killed, Blackjack?"

"You could say that," I replied. "Especially the ones that were my fault. Killing someone in self-defense is one thing, but someone dying because of a choice I made…I can't ever forget those. And I hope I never do."

"I see," he muttered. "Your friend was right. It was cowardly of me to slay my own people. One should never kill the helpless."

I closed my eyes, the ghostly tune of a song returning to memory. I'd thought I'd forgotten, but now I could hear it as if I were singing it once again. Hush now, quiet now…"You're not the only one who's done that. And you're right…we never should." Even if they were crazy.

For a moment, he was quiet, and then he said, as he looked off at the clouds, "Father has a balefire bomb."

"I know," I replied. "Xanthe told me."

He glanced at me. "I was…proud…we had it. When we dragged it

out of that silo, stabilized it…I was thrilled. A weapon to end the evil city and the Maiden all at once. But…he never really said he was going to use it on the city. It was implied, but he talked about others. Your Goddess. This Red Eye and his army. Something called the S.P.P. up in the skies. And now, after you two battled, I'm questioning everything he's told me and what I did for him. And that is what I hate you for most of all. Making me doubt." For a moment he just stared out at the passing clouds. "I wish that I had been stronger when we first met. I think I could have caused far less harm."

"Yeah, but if you'd come with us then, you'd have been dragged through a world of misery and angst. Trust me. You're better off. And you and I would have had sex eventually, and that would have complicated things with Glory, and--" I started to say when he actually chuckled.

"Maiden, no offense, but your horn aside, you're missing far too many stripes for us to ever be intimate," he said with an actual honest smile. It looked good on him.

"Oh, really? 'Cause back at the Society, you didn't seem to mind. Besides," I said with a smirk, "ever hear of body paint?" Well now, that was quite a look of surprise!

A smack to my backside made me yip, and I turned and grinned sheepishly at Glory. "Oh! Um! Hi. We were…" Don't say sex.

"Talking about sex," Glory finished as she walked up next to me and sighed. "What am I going to do with you?" In the short term, the answer was apparently 'smile at her and nuzzle her neck'.

"Well, you were off to a good start," I replied, glancing towards my rear.

Lancer's smile had been replaced by wariness. "I don't think the legends of the Maiden could cover this part. My mother told me many stories, but none of them mention the Maiden getting her hindquarters paddled."

An image of Princess Luna entered my mind, and I snickered. Scotch Tape and P-21 approached, though, and the filly asked Lancer, "Can you tell me more about zebras? I mean, I heard a few things, but most of the lessons in the stable were about how you were all bloodthirsty barbarians that ate young fillies."

Scotch Tape looked up at P-21 and gave his foreleg a nudge. He glanced at Lancer, turned away, and finally sighed and said grudgingly, "I have to admit, I'm a little curious about the zebras as

well."

Scotch Tape smiled up at her father proudly, then asked Lancer, "Do you have a wasteland there?"

"Now…wait." Lancer frowned. "I am a warrior, not a storyteller."

"Be both," I suggested. "Can't hurt to branch out, can it?"

He seemed to weigh the choice between telling us and blowing us off, then answered, "Fine. I suppose I can tell you about our people. Better than hearing just your pony propaganda.

"Ours is a different sort of wasteland. Your wasteland is stark, cold, and empty. Ours is harsh and wild. Equestria did many terrible things during the war. There are still places where the megaspells rage. A pillar of fire that wanders a shattered plain of glass, seeking out any intruders. A city that traps the minds of any who sleep within its limits in endless dreams. There are many other places where industrial works still poison the land. There are mines deeper and more vast than any valley, gouged into the earth and now filled with pollutants. And beasts…some native and others introduced during the war…they stalk and hunt us. The cities are too dangerous or contaminated to live in. And, of course, the tribes constantly bicker and fight."

"Some things never change," I muttered.

"No," he said harshly. "Some things should not change. Some change should not be allowed." Lancer met my eye again. "My mother told me stories when I was young of the good times. Before the war, when the twelve and one tribes worked in unity to survive and prosper. But all that changed."

"Twelve and one?" I asked with confusion.

"I doubt you want to hear the story," he said with a flush. But we did. Soon, we'd moved over by the wheel so that Scotch Tape could steer while she listened. I didn't know why Scotch Tape was our designated pilot, but she seemed to be handling steering well enough; we hadn't hit any mountains yet. We'd even opened a little trapdoor so that Rampage could listen in as she pedaled below.

"Once, there were the sun and the earth. Both were lonely, but they could not be together for long. Many times the sun came and made love to the earth, and when he did, life was born. Twelve times they coupled, and each time a new tribe was born. But then the moon saw their lovemaking and waited till the sun was away. The moon was wicked and pale, for his illumination was not nearly as bright, and so he took the earth by force. From the coupling one

tribe was born, along with all the beasts and monsters that hunt under the cover of the darkness. When the sun saw what the moon had done, he was outraged, and from then on chased the moon across the skies so he would never get another chance. But occasionally the moon would lay a trap for the sun, and all the world would turn dark as they battled. But each time, the sun would be victorious and continue the hunt."

Glory looked over at Scotch Tape with an expression of worry before the filly quipped, "Is this story a little too saucy for you?" Flushing, Glory returned her attention to Lancer. I gave her a little nuzzle. She gave my ear a little bite. Ah, good times. If only Lacunae could have been here to share them…

"The twelve tribes are the children of the sun. The one are the children of the moon. Each coupling, the land gave rise to the tribe. The Achu were born of the high and fiery mountains. The Propoli in a village. The Carnilia on a fertile plain. The Mendi in a deep wood." I couldn't help but smile at his tone as he seemed to get into it. "The Zencori were born on a wind, the Atori on the islands, and the Eschatik in the deserts. Even the southern snows birthed the Sahaani, and the ice has always borne the springs of steaming water heated by their passions. The swamps birthed the Orah and the jungles the Tappahani. The final two, the Logos and the Roamani, were sired in a library and on a battlefield."

"Wait. Sired?" Glory asked skeptically. "I'm pretty sure that violates every code of conduct in every library I've ever been in."

"Nah. All the best libraries have got great orgies going on," Rampage drawled sarcastically from below. "You just have to fuck really quietly."

That made us all laugh, and Lancer sighed. "It is a story. Believe it or don't. The story doesn't care." He snapped his tail and then smirked. "Or can you ponies tell me your origins with greater veracity?"

He had us there. I had no clue where ponies came from. Everything was rather fuzzy prior to the Princesses. "Ah…" I looked at Glory, and she gave a little shrug. "Not so much."

"Then accept the story, or I can be silent," he said with a frown. "I'm likely making mistakes all over. I can't tell stories like Mother, starting everything with 'that reminds me of a funny story.'"

"No no. Go on," I said, mollifying him a little.

"For a time, the twelve tribes lived and spread all across the land.

They worked together to fight the many beasts of the wilderness, but unlike ponies, we did not seek to tame nature. We respected its might. In the homeland, once, were great tracts of wilderness as far as a zebra could walk in a year. But then the tribes encountered the children of the moon. The Propoli invited them into their village. The Mendi healed their wounds. The Tappahani cooked a fine banquet, the Atori danced, and the Zencori told stories to the newcomers. But the children of the moon remained aloof, mysterious, and arrogant. They claimed they had a power greater than all the twelve tribes put together, and that the twelve were to be slaves of the one. Thus, the twelve went to war with the one.

"For generations they battled, for the children of the moon were numerous, but cold. Hard. And they had learned many foul magics to bind spirits and souls. Their armor would not fail and their weapons could not break. Even in death, their mightiest warriors fought on. They enslaved and killed the twelve in a mad pursuit of their dark powers. Their lies turned tribe against tribe for a time, and nearly destroyed the twelve. But the twelve rallied, united, and pushed back. In their desperation, the one tribe called down the power of the stars themselves…madness. For the stars came. They fell all across the land, shattering the great and dark cities of the one tribe and the armies of the twelve. But when it ended, the twelve remained and the one had broken. The twelve cried for blood, but the earth begged the twelve for mercy, for although they were sired violently, they were still her children. The one tribe was marked; all who bore their blood would have their stripes marked in glyphs of warning. And thus the one tribe was named Starkatteri, 'star branded', and shunned."

"What tribe is the Legate?" I asked, curious.

Lancer opened his mouth, then closed it again, frowning. "He is one of the last Achu."

"He is not," Rampage said below, her voice becoming oddly accented. "He does not fight like an Achu."

"He claims he is Achu! Who are you to deny that, Proditori?" Lancer snapped.

"Does that mean you are Achu as well?" P-21 asked. All this talk made me want to say 'bless you'.

Again, the question made him grimace. "No…blood passes from mother to child, not father to child. I am Zencori." I thought of telling him that his mother was alive, but decided against it for

now. Still, storytelling was a big improvement over killing people.
"My tribe were wanderers and storytellers. We sought the lore of the world. Many came and settled in Equestria long before the war."
"Why did the zebras fight the war?" Glory asked. "I've never heard your side before."
The question seemed to shock him. "You want to know?" he asked, looking from one to the next, as if he'd never seen ponies interested in it before. "Our people were not ruled by immortal royalty. We elect a Caesar from the tribes. All thirteen tribe elders get a vote, and no tribe could have consecutive Caesars."
"Wait, even the evil tribe of star and moons gets a vote?" I asked, surprised.
"Of course. They are a tribe. A cursed, evil, conniving tribe that none would trust, but a tribe. Their elders used their vote to protect their people from the wrath of the twelve. Better to keep one's wicked in the open where they can be watched than to force them from sight where they can be forgotten and allowed to plot in the shadows," Lancer said quite matter-of-factly.
He continued, "The Last Caesar was elected amidst great controversy. There were four tribes with strong candidates, and each had three votes. It was the Starkatteri who decided the election, which did the Roamani candidate no favors. Thus the Last Caesar was terribly weak when he came to power. There was even talk of breaking tradition and re-voting with only two candidates, but tradition is tradition. The Roamani are soldiers, one and all. They have fought against dragons, the Mokele, and other great beasts and reptiles. They did not take the disrespect well.
"When some Atori bandits captured a boat full of pony tourists and demanded a ransom, the Last Caesar insisted that the Roamani would handle it. But the Atori lived on islands, and it took much time for the Roamani army to board ships and make the journey. It was a terrible mistake. A band of a half dozen Achu warriors, or even Atori fighters, would have sufficed. But the Last Caesar wanted glory and respect. Your princess grew impatient and sent in the flyers you call the 'Wonderbolts'. They succeeded in freeing the hostages, but four of the pegasi died. It was a terrible blow to the Last Caesar. There was even talk of holding a special election to replace him. But tradition is tradition, and he remained. He treated the pony interference as a terrible insult to our people and

demanded that the trade agreements we signed with your people be suspended."

"So, wait, that's why the war started? One zebra's bruised ego?" Scotch Tape blurted.

"It was more complicated than that," I said. "Equestria was also being pushed into it by nobles and businessponies who would never actually have to fight a war." This earned me my own surprised looks. "What? I saw it in a memory orb."

"Cheating unicorns," Rampage muttered below.

"For us, the war began with your Princess. When she seized a coal shipment, it was a great insult to our people. An insult the Last Caesar used to call for war. At first, only one tribe answered him: the Roamani. They are a martial tribe, what many think of when they think of the war. Duty and sacrifice are their creed. The other tribes abstained from war at first, but as the fighting dragged on, the Propoli eventually joined as well. They were a powerful and influential tribe. With them came the Carnilia and the Atori. Still, even while we were at war, our mightiest tribe, the Achu, and our most respected, the Mendi and Logos, spoke against the war," Lancer said, speaking more now than I ever imagined he could. He had a certain rhythm and tone that was just pleasing to listen to.

"There were zebras who protested the war?" I said in shock.

"Proditor," Rampage said from below over the squeak of the wheels.

"Many, though few declared it so brazenly as the Proditor. There were Equestrian sympathizers throughout the conflict. Thousands of Mendi, Eschatik, and Zencori were arrested for their support of the enemy. But you see, the sun is sacred to us. Many zebras, especially ones who had made Equestria their home, saw your Princess Celestia as the incarnation of the sun. They questioned the wisdom of fighting against her. In fact, the fighting had become so terrible that the Last Caesar was nearly forced to surrender by the other tribes," he said as he bowed his head. "Then the sun was ambushed by the moon."

"You mean Luna taking over?" I asked, remembering the dream memory of Littlehorn. The dreams of Psalm were now more like memory orbs; I remembered experiencing them, but the experience was no longer so raw and personal.

He nodded, raising his head up with a glare. "The Princess of the Moon, the Maiden of the Stars; when we heard she was assuming

control, it was the greatest gift to the Last Caesar. There are tales about the moon and stars' evil back to our creation. From the actions of the Starkatteri to the horrors of the Maiden." He gave me a very skeptical look. "The first Maiden of the Stars blackened the world while she was challenged by Celestia. To be fighting her was…intoxicating. It brought all the tribes fully into the war. Even the Mendi reluctantly joined, though they constantly called for peace."

"I never really understood that. How could Nightmare Moon keep the sun from rising? Does the sun really just go away?" Scotch Tape asked with a small frown.

"No no," Glory replied, matter-of-factly. "The sun and the moon orbit this world, as do the planets, due to the fundamental attraction of magic. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna just gave the sun and moons little nudges to keep them moving on time. Since they've…gone…the length of days and nights has varied year by year. The moon is much closer than the sun, even though they look about the same size. When the moon and sun are in the right position, the moon blocks out the sun. Position the moon just right, and it can darken a large area of the world." She grimaced. "The first time we saw that…well…it was unsettling, to say the least."

"When the Maiden of the Stars took over the war, the twelve tribes united. It was no longer about bruised pride; this was a war of good triumphing over evil. With her ascension, the Last Caesar gave greater orders and passed sweeping laws more radical than any before in the Empire. Always, the justification returned to defeating the armies of the Maiden. The establishment of the Ministries, the weapons produced, and the megaspells…all became further justification. And as the death toll rose, it seemed impossible to surrender." He sighed and frowned. "Truthfully, many felt the war glorious. Virtuous."

"What about trying to abduct Celestia?" I asked, almost using the word 'assassinate'.

"We did not try to abduct her!" he retorted. "The Mendi, Celestia, and the one mare called Flutterbye all worked to bring an end to the conflict. They were attempting to help her defect!"

"Defect? Celestia?" P-21 asked skeptically.

"Yes. She knew her mistake years after it was made. If she had left with us and denounced the Maiden, then Equestria would have abandoned the war. A peace could have been negotiated between

her and the twelve tribes that would have bypassed the Last Caesar entirely!" Lancer said heatedly. "The war would have been over!"

"Funny. Our histories say you attempted to assassinate her," Glory countered, and I groaned.

"Equestrian propaganda," Lancer said with a wave of his hoof, "Something that your Ministry of Image excelled at." Glory bristled, and even P-21 frowned at the thought of Celestia betraying her sister and abandoning Equestria to 'save' it.

I couldn't say which was true. Celestia hadn't looked like she'd been all that willing to be taken, but the zebras also hadn't been outright trying to kill her, from what I'd seen. I supposed the exact truth would never be known, unless somepony decided to ask Celestia's ghost. I started to ask another question to head off the argument, but then I saw Boo's ears twitch.

I froze, watching her. Her ears flicked again, and she frowned, looking at the clouds around us. "Shh!" They continued to argue as Boo's frown turned fearful. "Shut up!" I snapped, cutting off their squabbling. "Stop pedaling!" I said briskly down into the guts of the ship. Rampage frowned up at me, but she stopped. The propellers and wings slowed, then went silent.

"What is it, Blackjack? We're still hours from the lightning rods," Glory said in confusion. I reached out hoof and silenced her. Boo's ears were still twitching as her pale eyes peered out at the clouds. She cringed…and at once I was on my hooves and scanning the clouds myself. Nothing…but they knew the range of E.F.S.

I froze, and the silence deepened. Every ear twitched, and more than a few eyes looked at me with blatant skepticism. I couldn't hear anything as inertia carried us through swirling mist. Only Boo's skittish nature and my own creeping mane gave any indication that anything at all was amiss…

That was good enough for me. "Lancer. Put your cloak on Glory. Now."

She scowled. "Blackjack, if you're worried about detection, we should put it on you!"

This was simultaneously with Lancer saying, "I do not take orders from…"

"Put it on her, now," I commanded as the clouds began to thin. We were drifting into a gap. Lancer gave one last defiant look, then pulled out his cloak and draped the shimmery garment over Glory. When the blue gemstone clasp was closed, she seemed to blur away

from sight.

Scotch Tape reached out with a hoof to where Glory had stood. "Ooooh," she giggled as the 'air' bunched up under her hoof.

"Scotch Tape, stop poking m--" Glory said as we broke into another open gap between clouds. On our left, barely beyond range of my E.F.S., was the long, dark form of a Raptor. Dozens of black specks, wings of power armor, flew in wedge-shaped formations next to the long, lean, lethal machine. Beyond it, I could make out a second Raptor. I could barely hear the hum of their motors, somehow muffled from detection. Nothing so big should be so quiet.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape warned. I glanced behind me and saw two more on the other side of the *Fleur*, one even closer than the first I'd seen. It appeared filled from one end to the other with red bars. I slowly leaned out, looking down at the silently swooshing props of a Raptor below us. I looked up past the balloon to see a half dozen beam turrets pointing down at the tiny *Fleur*. Two above. Two below. Two to the left. Two to the right. We were flying smack dab in the middle of a wing of Raptors, any one of which could reduce the *Fleur* to kindling.

I closed my eyes briefly and then looked back. From the cloud bank behind us burst the twin muzzles of a great warship's forward energy cannons, the dark thunderclouds to either side of the following hull trailing streamers of white. The quiet propellers flung off chunks of cloud as it closed in behind us. Maybe my luck would have them all be completely blind to the ancient giant purple airship flying through the air in front of them.

That hope was cut off by the wings of black power armor moving in slowly and deliberately from all sides.

Rampage popped her head out of the hatch and glanced around. "Huh," was all she said before dropping back down belowships. "Down worry, I got this!" she shouted. The wheels below began to shriek as the propellers buzzed behind us and the *Fleur*'s wings began to flap wildly. A minute or so and we'd be in the clouds. Hopefully that would do something…

Then the clouds ahead of us exploded as another Raptor, facing us nose-on, gunned its engines and leapt out of the clouds like a massive sea beast lunging for its prey. The wind from its speed blowing us back was the only thing that prevented the *Fleur* from smashing itself to pieces against the great ship's armor. Spinning wildly, the *Fleur* pirouetted out of control. The four Raptors to our

sides began to circle, turning inward to present bank after bank of energy weapons. The one to our rear glided to a halt while the one before us turned like an implacable wall in the sky, 'Castellanus' painted in imposing stenciled letters on the bow in front of the thunderclouds. There were so many red bars in my E.F.S. that I turned the damned thing off.

I reached out and felt my hoof connect with solid air. "Ow! Blackjack, I…"

I grabbed Glory and pulled her close. "Whatever you do, do NOT get out from under there. Remember what Sunset tried to pull. These guys are likely to go crazy if they see you, so stay under there, understand?"

"Y…okay," Glory stammered.

"What are you going to do?" Scotch Tape asked as I walked past her towards the bow of the airship. As I passed Boo, I tugged off her captain's hat and set it atop my head.

"Let me down! I'm not with them!" Lancer began to shout when P-21 grabbed him around the neck.

"Unless you want them to drop you, shut your mouth," the blue stallion said, then looked to me. "Trust Blackjack. She knows what she's doing."

That made one of us who thought that.

I walked up to the prow and looked up at the Raptor across our bow. The breeze from her props caught my mane as I stood upright, put one hindhoof on the rail, and rested my left foreleg on my hind knee. I levitated out my sword as I examined the massive Raptor and took in her name. Dozens, possibly hundreds, of beam weapons from power armored ponies all pointed right at me as I switched on my broadcaster and turned it to the channel that had gotten me in trouble at the Rainbow Dash Skyport.

"Raptor *Castellanus*," I said formally as I pointed my starmetal sword at the colossal machine. "This is Captain Blackjack of the airship *Fleur*. Heave to and prepare to be boarded!"

* * *

"To be honest, this really wasn't what I expected at all," I admitted as I sipped a cup of rather bland steamy brown water, but, given that my host could have thrown me in a cell or simply reduced me and my friends to crackling clouds of rapidly dissipating meat

vapor, I kept my beverage opinions to myself. “I mean, I know I told you I was going to board, but I didn’t expect you to actually let me.”

“Occasionally, the unexpected is the most expedient,” the general said as she inspected some papers on her desk. Of course, I’d only been let on board unarmed, and I had two guards watching me. To the general’s credit, though, she knew how to pick them. Twister and Boomer flanked me, the two Neighvarro Enclave I’d be least likely to kill. The brown stallion had swapped his missiles for beam guns, too.

General Storm Chaser reminded me a lot of Mom: mature, intelligent, and giving me the feeling that if I didn’t watch myself I’d be in far more trouble than I’d like. The gray pegasus mare with the white mane watched me with a steady gaze that said that she knew more than I’d prefer her to. Her office on the *Castellanus* was comfortable and tasteful, with everything neatly organized on shelves rather than in heaps. The pictures of ponies on her desk suggested a family. Children, certainly. She wore only her dark purple Enclave uniform; if I killed her, my friends would be vaporized. The Enclave were all over the *Fleur*, and all I could hope was that while I was here there wasn’t a Rainbow Dash sighting. The *Castellanus* had apparently been tracking the *Fleur* for more than an hour before they’d swept in to catch us. Wood might not have had much of a radar profile, but my cybernetic body had been a red flare to their sensors.

“I’ve received several interesting reports of the goings on down below. The Enclave military wing may not have as extensive an information base as our intelligence wing out of Thunderhead, but we’re not blind. We’ve been keeping apprised of things going on below for generations now. Generally from afar, of course; less risk of entanglement.” She sipped her cup of tea slowly, then sighed, staring at the curls of vapor rising from it before glancing up at me. “Unfortunately, now it seems the surface is insisting on entanglement with us.”

“I don’t have any issues with the Neighvarro Enclave,” I said defensively.

“I can vouch for her, ma’am,” Twister said respectfully. The general gave the mare a long stare, and she drew herself more rigid. “Sorry, ma’am…”

Storm Chaser dropped her eyes back to the neatly organized

papers. “Testimony from the Maripony facility just before detonation suggests otherwise,” she said as she reached over for a clipboard with a wing. She looked at it a moment. “Blackjack, aka Security. Stable mare. Appeared in the wastelands roughly two months ago. First identified by ‘DJ Pon3’.” She flipped a page. “Prioritized by Enclave Intelligence as an alpha level threat following a megaspell discharge at Miramare Air Station. There’s a memo that you might have had contact with a Spike Observation squad, but no confirmation.” Her eyes glanced at Twister, who stood so straight that I imagined that not even a balefire bomb could knock her over. “Reprioritized as a gamma level threat two weeks later. There’s a note that you might be an asset to Intelligence. Re-emerged at a surface skirmish in which you destroyed the Pre-war battleship *Celestia*.” She glanced up at me from over the top of the clipboard. “Impressive.”

“Yeah. Blackjack does things like that,” Boomer chuckled. The general’s eyes locked on him, and he coughed. “Sorry, ma’am.”

I flushed a little. “I had help. And I cheated….”

“You won,” Storm Chaser replied, then returned to the clipboard. “Disappeared for several days and was redetected by Neighvarro intelligence assets at the Fluttershy Medical Center while we investigated the fate of an intelligence squad we sent to spy on the Volunteer Corps’s activities. You were in possession of several unidentified cybernetic augmentations and in the company of an alpha priority target tentatively identified as a Rainbow Dash clone. Mane clippings proved inconclusive.”

“She…changed back. The spell wore off. Killing joke; it’s fickle stuff,” I said as I gave the best bullshitting grin I could manage.

She stared at me without comment for a long second that had my grin sliding off my face like soft tar. Heck, now *I* was standing more at attention! Then her eyes returned to the clipboard. “Next reported at Yellow River where you helped extract three Neighvarro troopers investigating allegations of a biological weapon. You confirmed these allegations.” She stopped and then read slowly, with emphasis, “Allowed Neighvarro troopers to report this information.” She looked at me sharply. “Given your association with one Morning Glory, third child of Sky Striker, I’m surprised. I would have expected you to side with her by default.”

“Bioweapons are wrong. Those things killed my stable.” With my help. “If I can’t stop him, you’d have to.” She didn’t reply, but I got

a feeling that she was pleased by my answer as she read on.

"Possible presence at the Rainbow Dash Skyport; unconfirmed. Re-encountered by the squad you helped in Yellow River. Encountered the synthetic being known as Dawn and fought her and a zebra Behemoth class tank… in hoof to hoof combat?" She paused again and looked at Boomer with an arched brow. "Is that right, Corporal?"

"Yes ma'am. I mean, I know tanks don't have hooves, but she beat it. No clue how, but she did," Boomer confirmed with an eager nod.

I flushed, waving a hoof as I tried to set the record straight. "Technically I lost. I only survived because the tank was being controlled by the brain of a stallion who raided my stable and tried to kill me…" I trailed off and waved my hoof at her clipboard. "Look, that report doesn't really…there's a lot of stuff you're missing…"

She was silent till I shut up, then only answered with an "I see," before looking back down. "Next report at the Grimhoof Army Base where you helped confirm Thunderhead's acquisition of several long range cruise missiles. Killed one of the three who attempted to accost the clone. Let the other two return to report." The general tapped her chin with a wingtip as she gazed at the paper. Then she went on without looking at me, "Final appearance was at the Maripony facility immediately prior to the detonation of a suspected Mark III 'Chernobog' class balefire bomb. Presumed dead along with High General Harbinger and the surface terrorist known at LittlePip, aka the Stable Dweller." She reached over with a wing and lifted a clipboard that was as thick as mine. "Since you're here, I suppose we'll have to wait and see if those other two are actually alive or not."

"Pip might be. Harbinger…isn't," I replied, feeling a little sickly as I remember him being torn to pieces. "I saw him get killed prior to the bomb going off."

"I see. Was the balefire bomb an attempt by this LittlePip, Red Eye, Thunderhead, or the entity known as the Goddess to assassinate the leader of the Enclave military and decapitate our command apparatus?" Storm Chaser's cool tone reminded me of when I'd asked Lancer if he had a mega-talisman.

I could withhold, lie, or tell the truth. As General Chaser looked me in the eye, I had the distinct feeling that the first two were extremely risky. "The Goddess was using LittlePip to get some sort

of black magic. LittlePip turned the tables and used the bomb to kill the Goddess and the book. I don't think the Goddess intended LittlePip to live, but she got distracted. Your High General was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I see." She set LittlePip's clipboard down and then set mine next to it. "Well, if you see her again, congratulate her on causing more havoc in the Enclave command structure than we've endured in a century and a half. High General Harbinger's death, the *Triumphant* being severely damaged, the loss of two other generals aboard the four Raptors destroyed, and the loss of two colonels has thrown the whole chain of command straight into a cyclone. Half the remaining leadership is busy pointing at anypony else to blame while covering their tails, a quarter is claiming they're the legitimate heads of the military now, and the remainder are actually doing their jobs. I've got three councilors blaming me for not physically stopping the High General from going in there, or for not demanding that he take a whole Raptor squad with him." She folded her hooves on the desk before her as she looked at me evenly. "And, according to you, there's a rogue intelligence element with a bioweapon pointed right at the Enclave's citizens from one of our most secure and sensitive military facilities. You'll forgive me if I'm a little skeptical that all of this is just one big coincidence."

"Yeah. I know. But sometimes life is like that," I replied with as much levity as I could manage. "I'm sure if LittlePip had known you were going to come in unannounced, she…nope, actually I don't think she could have managed it more perfectly. Maybe she might have gotten the *Triumphant* too. But really, she didn't know. Unless she did know and removed that memory so the Goddess couldn't read it…she is scary good like that." I grinned sheepishly at the general's flat gaze. "What? I'm telling you, it probably wasn't intentional."

"Forgive me if I'm not reassured." She finished off her cup and set it beside the teakettle and hotplate. She looked at my clipboard again, silently reading it, then glanced at me once more. "Blackjack. You've put me in an awkward situation where I'm going to have to creatively interpret my orders. Officially, I'm to bring you, and anypony involved in the Maripony attack or associated with such people, to a secure facility for interrogation. Or summarily execute you." I could teleport behind her and use her for cover…The general then gave a little smile. "Well, I'm not going to do that."

You could feel the tension drain out of the room. “Thank you, ma’am,” Twister blurted.

“I understand. I wouldn’t want to try to execute somepony I’d fought with either, Sergeant,” the general replied.

“No, that’s not it, ma’am,” Twister replied.

“I’d rather tackle a Talon squad naked than try and force Blackjack to do anything,” Boomer replied.

“Naked and unarmed…” Twister agreed.

“And covered in barbecue sauce,” Boomer added.

“I’m not that bad…” I muttered. “I mean, that one time I was half psychotic from lack of sleep. I’d have to really work to kill a half dozen pegasi now.” The three of us were drawing some very uncertain looks from the general.

“Be that as it may, you seem like a pony who wants to avoid as much death as possible in this situation. If it wasn’t for you, Lighthooves could have deployed his bioweapon at his leisure, and you’ve helped us in the past. Right now, with our leadership so fractured, would be an opportune time for him to attack. Autumn Leaf will be mopping things up on the ground. My mission is dealing with Lighthooves, his weapon, and Shadowbolt Tower. Will you assist us?”

I rubbed my neck nervously. “That depends on what you had in mind.”

“From all our reports, you’re a superb combat specialist. If you can help us seize the tower, we’ll be able to avoid engaging the city directly,” the general said. “I’d like you on the vanguard raiding the tower and neutralizing its defenders. Once the biological weapon is under our control, disabled, or destroyed you’d be free to go.”

“Neutralize. You mean kill,” I replied.

“That is the standard euphemism,” the general replied with a little bit of amused confusion. Her lips curled up a little. “Would you prefer ‘take out’? ‘Eliminate’? ‘Terminate’?” It still tasted sour to me. “What is it? You’ve killed before. In fact, according to your dossier, you’re rather effective at it.”

“Exceptionally,” Boomer agreed.

I frowned back at him, then returned my attention to the general. “Just because I’m good at it doesn’t mean I like it. I’m not as good as you think I am, anyway. I…I don’t want to hurt people,” I said, looking down. “I’m Security. Not ‘Soldier’. Security saves ponies.”

The general didn’t answer for a moment, then asked coolly, “I see.

So security defends, whereas soldiers attack?" When I nodded, she pursed her lips a moment, pressing her hooves together before her mouth as she studied me. "Interesting. Do you think I am attacking Shadowbolt Tower because I *want* to, or because I am trying to defend my people against a pernicious threat that you are familiar with?" When I didn't answer, she gave a little smile. "I assure you, it would be much simpler to simply attack Thunderhead, take the populace hostage, and demand Lighthooves's surrender while summary executions begin. That was Harbinger's plan before mission creep set in."

Okay. Neighvarro definitely slipping on my scale. "I get it. I do. It's just a lot more offensive than I'm comfortable with," I admitted.

"I see," she replied calmly, with a small smile. "If only you'd been born a pegasus."

I blinked in confusion. "What's that?"

"Nothing," she said as she dropped her hooves to the desktop. "I am a soldier. One of the few command officers with actual combat experience. While many see us as attackers, the reality is that a soldier's life is to defend. If we existed to kill and slaughter, we'd be little different than the raiders who infest your surface. If we wanted to simply kill ponies, we could do so with impunity." She paused, then asked with a small smile, "Have you known any soldiers?"

"A few," I said, thinking of the Marauders. I could see her point. None of them had been bloody butchers…well, maybe Doof, and Applesnack I honestly didn't know. Twist…Psalm…Big Macintosh… They hadn't been fighting to kill. They'd fought to protect their homeland. Their Princess. Their family. "I see your point, and I apologize. I'm just…not a soldier."

"We'll have to disagree on that," Storm Chaser said with a sigh and a small frown. "The Enclave needs ponies like you. We've got far too many who are eager to attack. High General Harbinger was a symptom of a disease, and after Maripony…I don't know what the Enclave will be like in the coming months."

My ears drooped; I felt like I'd disappointed her. Why should it matter, though? I wasn't a pegasus or a soldier. "Sorry," I muttered. She waved her hoof like it was no matter. Then I frowned, "It's also something else, though…it feels like…" I faltered.

The general frowned at me, but gestured with a wing for me to continue. "Feels like what?"

But I didn't have time to finish, as the doors to the office were opened with a loud bang. Two mares and a stallion, all dressed in the same dark purple uniforms, stormed in. The mares were red and blue and looked enough alike to be related. The green stallion hung back, his black mane cut short and a trimmed black mustache curled above his top lip. "Is this her?" the red mare with the orange-and-yellow-striped mane demanded. "Is this the terrorist scum that killed the High General?" Her orange eyes blazed at me as she answered her own question. "I'll drop you back in that irradiated grave!"

"Enclave directive 122639J demands immediate and summary execution of all parties affiliated with the intentional death of party leadership," the blue mare said with a smug smile, her lovely face framed by her lavender and ivory mane. Her wingtip curled down and pulled a beam gun from her holster as she said coolly, "This will only take a moment."

Indeed it would. Smash red feathers, grab her as a shield, ram the blue one, crush her head, throw red at green. Finish both if need be. Twister and Boomer looked from the general to the trio. "Don't kill them, Blackjack," the general snapped, making all three of them pause. The general clenched her jaw as she rose behind her desk. "Captains Afterburner, Hoarfrost, and Crosswinds... your timing couldn't be more ironic. How dare you interrupt my interrogation?"

The three stiffened somewhat. The green stallion still smiled a little, though it was hard to see beneath his mustache. "My apologies, General. As soon as we were aware that one of the terrorists from Maripony survived, Captains Afterburner and Hoarfrost both insisted on seeing you," he said with amused tones. "There's four others who are very keen to know what you'll do with her."

"Yes. A pity that information couldn't have waited till the interrogation was complete, Captain Crosswinds," the general snapped.

"I'm going to cook you. I'm going to light your pretty little ship on fire and watch you dirtsiders burn or jump for what you did to the High General," Afterburner said with a grin. I could have dropped her with five magic bullets through her head, so her menacing expression lost some of its edge.

"The law is patently clear on the matter, General Storm Chaser," Hoarfrost said primly. "As are your orders."

"Captain Hoarfrost, if you bite that weapon, it's you who will be summarily killed, by me," the general replied, making the pale blue mare freeze. The two power-armored ponies turned and directed their weapons at the three, to their surprise. Afterburner hissed through her teeth as the general pinned her with a glare and continued. "I understand that you are upset. All of you had a… personal…relationship with the High General. Right now I am ordering you to set that aside and to conduct yourselves with the duty and professionalism the Enclave expects of its officers! Is that understood?"

The three seemed to weigh the order a moment, and that was when I understood just how soft General Chaser's position was. Maripony hadn't just destroyed ships. It had shaken the Enclave badly. The well-oiled military rulers had just been reminded that they could die. They'd come to the Wasteland, been touched by it, and now knew that the Wasteland was coming for them. The trio of captains finally stiffened at attention, but Afterburner kept her eyes locked on me. If she'd been a unicorn, I had no doubt that she'd be lighting me on fire with her mind. "Yes, General," the three said solemnly.

"Now get back to your posts, immediately. We're on high alert, and you won't do your ships any good if you're here!"

"She killed the High General! Everypony knows it!" Afterburner raged as she glared at me. "I swear, Stable Dweller, if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to see everything you love burned to ashes."

I should have just kept my yap shut, but for once not being the not-smart pony made it impossible to resist. "One, I just love the flame motif you've got going on here. Really. Well done," I said as I approached her with a smile. "Two. I'm the 'Security' stable mare. Not the 'Stable Dweller'."

She rolled her eyes. "Pfft. Security. Stable Dweller. Whatever!" Her gaze narrowed. "I'm going to see you pay for what you've done!"

Was it a bad sign when I was more mature than a 'captain' in the Enclave?

"You three are dismissed. Are you going to leave on your own, or am I going to have to have you escorted out?" Storm Chaser challenged.

Captain Afterburner opened her mouth, but Hoarfrost, having returned her beam pistol to her holster, covered the red pony's mouth with her wing. "We'll be leaving. Come along, Sister. And we'll be filing a full report, immediately, General." Afterburner

seemed like she wanted at least a few more threats and bit down hard on her sister's wingtip. The blue pegasus just shivered and smiled, her wings poofing a little. She looked at me. "Oh, incidentally, Blackjack? I find it very hard to believe that the Rainbow Dash clone you are so attached to isn't with you. I'll be keeping a very close eye out for her."

"You do that," I countered, just as coldly. The pair turned and walked out, Afterburner starting to argue aloud as soon as they cleared the door. The green stallion grinned, saluted Storm Chaser, and followed them. As the door closed, I could hear him laughing.

"So! You were saying?" I brightly asked the general as she sat down hard behind the desk and rubbed a temple with a wingtip.

"Those three…why couldn't they have been assigned to Autumn Leaf?" The general shook her head. "I have until one of them gets on a radio, so we'll have to wrap this up quickly."

"They seem awfully young, and not quite what I pictured a captain in the Enclave to be," I said delicately.

"Well bred," Twister said sarcastically.

"That's enough, Sergeant. They're still your superior officers." She tapped a button. "Captain Racewind? Delay the three captains however you can. Jammed hatches. Stuck cargo. Be creative and don't let them anywhere near a radio."

"Yes ma'am. Please disregard any fire alarms you hear," a stallion said through a speaker.

She frowned at me, then leaned back. "They were all extremely, inappropriately, close to the High General. If they hadn't been out here getting ready for operations, they would have been at Maripony. That would have been quite a burr out of my feathers. All three are from military families, all three are privileged, and none of them have been in serious combat. Oh, but they want to."

"Raiders with Raptors," I sympathized, and shivered.

"Apt analogy."

I looked back at the door, then gestured towards it with a hoof. "Was that intentional? That whole fire…ice…thing. I mean, seriously?"

She gave a mirthless smile. "Oh yes. They've been like that since they were fillies. Twins, you know. Absolute terrors. I know their father." She sighed again. "And thanks to their connections, they're now in charge of the *Sirocco* and the *Blizzard*. Given how much they shower their crews with bonuses, I can only hope they'll follow

orders and stay in position."

"And the stallion? What's his deal?"

"Crosswinds? Less blatant nastiness and more callous amusement. He doesn't have the seriousness his position warrants, but he was remarkably proficient at ferreting out information for the High General. As a reward, he was bumped to being put in charge of the *Galeforce*." She sighed and leaned forward, frowning at me. "They're what I'm trying to prevent. The Enclave is not a clubhouse for overprivileged idiots to play with war machines."

"I hope you're right," I answered. Had those three not made an appearance, I might have signed on. As it was, I couldn't. I didn't have a soldier mentality…maybe I could have been, if it had been an army commanded by Storm Chasers, but I had an inkling that there were more Harbingers in the Enclave than there were Storm Chasers. "Now…about stopping Lighthooves. I can't be your soldier. But I do want to help, and maybe I can in a way outside the Enclave." We were short on time, so I'd have to cut to the proverbial chase.

"I see." She narrowed her eyes a little as she considered me. "What did you have in mind, then?"

"What about contacting Thunderhead's government directly? Work with them to close him down?" I suggested, and the general frowned thoughtfully. "Now that the High General is dead, you have a chance to engage in good faith without him calling ponies traitors and stuff like at the Skyport."

The general stared at me, then rubbed the bridge of her muzzle. "Clearly your dossier is incomplete. It didn't mention that you have a tendency to listen in on highly classified diplomatic exchanges."

"I have a way for getting into systems," I said with a small smile. I wasn't as sharp as my sword, but even I knew better than to mention EC-1101. If it really came down to it, I might be able to simply turn off the tower's defenses.

"I can see that. But as for your suggestion, if Lighthooves has gone completely off course, what makes you think Thunderhead can bring him back? Even assuming that they're willing to try." The general shook her head. "There's no guarantee that they'll be any more capable than we are. Meanwhile, Lighthooves could launch at any second."

That comment made a niggling little connection in my head. I frowned as I thought a little about the smug pony launching an

attack while the Enclave was disorganized. “I’m not sure he will, General. I think he’s waiting for you. In fact, I bet he’d give everything up to his own people at this point.”

“Excuse me?” she asked with a frown. A beeping began to ring somewhere above us, but the general ignored the shrill notes.

“Look. Lighthooves and Thunderhead have one thing right: long term, they’re going to win. You just lost a bunch of ships, and unless I’m missing something, you can’t replace them. A first strike biological attack on all the other settlements would work against him. Think about it. He’d be the ultimate villain. Thunderhead would be guilty by association.” I tapped my forehooves together. “But what if he’s *stopped* by Thunderhead? Gives everything up. Makes his impassioned speech about how he did it for the long term survival of the pegasus people…in front of all the cameras?”

“You’re suggesting that this is nothing more than a self-sacrificing PR stunt?” the general asked in low, skeptical tones.

“Sure. Thunderhead can’t win a shooting war. You have the ships and the firepower. But what if he can influence enough settlements to shift the civil authority? Your Enclave is a democracy, right? So what if everyone votes to back the government that just stopped one of their own from going too far?”

“That vote would never happen. The military wouldn’t allow it,” she said quickly, but then her eyes narrowed. “Ah….”

“Right. Folks realize that their democracy isn’t. Then your choice would be to either hand over control to Thunderhead or risk a civil war,” I said, hoping that this wasn’t all just desperate guesswork. A little purple unicorn in the back of my mind gave a prim nod. Lighthooves was too smart…too smooth…to just be a classical villain.

“Unless you’re wrong and he *is* going to use the bioweapon. It’d take us years to clean up the mess. The famine alone would be intolerable,” General Chaser said with a frown.

“My guess is that he will if you attack Thunderhead. A plan B. Then Thunderhead takes him down, and Thunderhead becomes the vital food source to address the famine. They’re the ones with the extra food. Thunderhead is a hero. And if you do too much damage, Neighvarro looks like the villain.” Lighthooves wanted to save his home. I had to believe that. If he just wanted death, then all I was doing was getting ponies killed.

General Storm Chaser closed her eyes. “Ordinarily, I’d prefer to

take time and work something out, but Maripony has thrown everything into the air. You saw Afterburner and Hoarfrost. Some of the Enclave leadership is convinced that Thunderhead was behind the balefire bomb. Originally, we were going to destroy Red Eye's army below and then call for unity. Put some of our own security in Thunderhead and winnow out the bombs. I can only hope that Autumn Leaf uses some discretion until I get finished in the east."

"Then that's his plan C. I bet that if you contacted him, you could work out a deal. Lighthooves wants Thunderhead to survive. As long as he gets that, he's won." But that led me to a disturbing thought. What if he offered to trade the weapon to the Neighvarro for Thunderhead's survival? Storm Chaser might be decent, but I had no problem imagining what a pony like Afterburner or Hoarfrost would do with a biological weapon: they'd use it. Even if it could infect pegasi now.

Crap.

"Interesting," Storm Chaser mused. "I'd planned on a surgical strike. Five Raptors doing long range, pinpoint strikes on the tower's air defenses, with a picket line to intercept the missiles. Odds are seventy to eighty-five percent, depending on how lucky we get with our deployment and if he fires them one at a time or in volleys. Once they're down, we storm the tower and Thunderhead. Make sure it stays under our control this time." She closed her eyes again and sighed.

"Even if you got most of them, all it would take is one missile getting through. This disease makes ponies eat other ponies. I saw it happen to my stable. I had to gas all of them before they ate the Wasteland," I said as seriously as I could, hoping she believed me.

The beeping stopped. "General, they're off ship. Ten minutes before they're aboard their vessels," the stallion said through the terminal speakers.

"I can do it, General," I promised.

She sighed. "Very well. Given that you seem to have lost both fliers, I'd like to assign the sergeant and corporal here. You've worked together in the past."

I looked at the two power-armored pegasi for a long minute. They hadn't blabbed about Glory being Rainbow Dash. I nodded once to the general.

"Great. Well, at least we won't have to worry about hellhounds," Boomer muttered.

"Don't be so sure. You wouldn't believe some of the rumors coming out of R&D about some intelligence programs. I've heard stories that there've been hounds spotted in Neighvarro," Twister replied.

"Yeah, yeah. Nopony's crazy enough to bring one of those things up here," Boomer chuckled.

"You've got five minutes to get on the *Fleur*. We'll need some StealthBucks to hide our energy signatures from the lightning rods. Otherwise, you'll have to leave your armor and energy weapons behind," I said to the pair, then turned a questioning expression to the general. She considered a moment, then nodded. The pair looked at each other and immediately ran for the door.

"Sweet! Field work!" laughed Boomer.

"I got my bag packed just in case we got permission!" Twister said happily. Well, I supposed most Enclave soldiers weren't detached for 'special missions' as often as they.

Then I remembered…If she was still here…"Also…we're going to need one more pony…"

* * *

She was an absolute wreck, even after two weeks. *They don't have unicorn medics*, I reminded myself as I carefully carried her upon my back and a duffel bag of Dusk's belonging in my jaws. My telekinesis wasn't up to levitating it all, and it'd take too long to let the others transfer her; if only Lacunae were here. Not just for her confidence…she'd also been telekinetically stronger than me!

A little orange earth pony and a little white unicorn in my head told me to buck up and stick it out. I had to be stronger and tougher now, and while there was nothing wrong with missing her, there was no point in me tearing myself down over it. Then the pair started quibbling over if I needed to be stronger or more enduring…

Soul jars were weird.

Aboard the *Fleur*, Glory was still out of sight. Any stuff we'd had had been thrown all over the deck; the Enclave version of a 'search', I supposed. Boomer and Twister were coming with their power armor deactivated; they'd have to reactivate it once we were past the lightning rods, but at least they'd be able to bring it along. We were also bringing Dusk's armor, which had already been shut down; apparently its repair talisman could repair the faceplate. Rampage saw my injured burden and immediately got a look I

didn't like at all. I directed P-21 to head her off with a toss of my head, though I wasn't sure just what he'd do if she tried to press the issue and 'help' her pain.

"They thrashed the pedal system," Scotch Tape complained as I set the bag down on the deck.

"It's okay," I said as I looked at Twister and Boomer.

"What?" the brown pegasus stallion frowned. "Do y'all expect us to push this thing all the way to Thunderhead?"

I smiled a little wider.

"Come on, Turkey. Like back in basic. Hup one. Hup two," Twister said as she flew to the back of the *Fleur*. The pair began to flap their wings hard, and the ship moved off at an even quicker pace than when Rampage had been pedaling! The power armor paced us as we moved back into the clouds, but it finally veered off as I carried our disabled passenger down below to the old cabins. Whatever those three captains had planned, we'd deal with it another day.

There wasn't much space, but it'd be more comfortable than being on deck while P-21, Rampage, and Scotch gathered up our belongings and put them away. The clouds were becoming so thick that it started to feel like I'd just stepped out of a cold shower. I ducked into one of the cabins that was relatively intact, kicked the junk on the floor aside, and then used my telekinesis to slide her onto the bed.

Dusk groaned, half of the dark pegasus's head bandaged up. Given what I'd nearly done to her…The air beside me shimmered, and Glory appeared. "Oh sweet Celestia!" she said as she took the cloak off. "She should have been in a hospital. A real hospital. What happened to her?"

"Me," I replied. "This is what I did at Yellow River. I tore off her helmet with my metal fingers," I said shamefully. "She got off easiest. The rest didn't survive."

Glory went through her usual cycle of emotions for when I screwed up. Anger that I'd hurt her family, acknowledgement that at the time I'd been half out of my mind, and acceptance of these new facts. I was lucky she wasn't throwing me through a wall again. "I should have sat on you rather than let you run off alone. At least sent Rampage with you," Glory said as she began to dig out healing potions and trickled them into the unconscious mare's mouth, waiting for her to swallow before giving her more. "You shouldn't let her see you, Blackjack."

Yes, I supposed that seeing her near killer might cause a bad reaction. I wanted to apologize…but really, what could I say? Dusk. Boing. Those survivors who'd stuck it out in 99's reactor maintenance area. How did I apologize to them? After the second potion was empty, Dusk let out a groan, and one violet eye opened up. "Who... " Dusk groaned, then looked up at Glory. "Rainbow Dash?"

"It's me. Morning Glory," Glory said as she moved between me and her sister.

"Buh…must be drugged…" she said weakly. "Can't be."

Glory sighed. "When I was young, I used your secret Wingboner magazines for illustrations for my health and biology presentation. I got an A-, and you got grounded for a month." I fought the urge to snicker as she huffed and muttered, "I would have gotten an A, but I didn't know that Playmare wasn't a noteworthy source." …Huh?

Dusk's lip curled a little. "Oh yeah…it is you…" She raised a hoof and brought it down in a limp smack atop Glory's head. "That's fer getting me grounded…" she mumbled as she blinked up at her sister. "That's…a much better disguise…" Dusk muttered softly. "Where're we going? And why do you look like Rainbow Dash?"

Glory smiled and took her sister's hooves between her own. "We're going home. We're going to get you fixed up. And I have things to tell you…about Father…and Mother…" Glory shielded me from Dusk's sight with a wing, then smiled at me and glanced at the door. I nodded, kissed her cheek, and stepped out. They had a lot of catching up to do.

I moved out into the hall and helped clean up some of the mess… Well, I collected the mess into piles for other ponies to clean up. I didn't find anything valuable. There were some old newspapers with pictures of Rarity at some social event alongside a dashing-looking gray-maned stallion sporting a monocle. I caught sight of a certain scarred individual accompanied by the dusky lavender pegasus Eclipse in the background. The caption under the yellowed picture read 'Princess Luna a no show at the Canterlot Garden Party.'

By Ace Buckley- It's the society season in Canterlot, when all the nobles trot out to Canterlot for their *parties de rigors*, charity auctions that don't address the people needing help, and other social gatherings that are only important to ponies whose lives revolve around the getting and not getting of invitations. One has to

wonder a great deal about an event like this. How do they eat all that caviar? Is it possible to bore a pony to death with endless prattle? Can association with the urbane cretins passing for aristocracy drive a pony to madness? And, most importantly, what grave crime could Equestria's most humble investigative journalist have committed to be assigned to such an event and ordered to write an article documenting every excruciating detail?

Really, Rarity, you have been putting on a little extra padding, but did I truly deserve this? Fortunately for me, this column is going up before those trolls at the Ministry of Image can polish, nip, tuck, remove, edit, and redact all my wonderful words. There's nothing like a weekend print deadline to really slip past the gatekeepers in the final frenzied rush.

So what did yours truly notice at the most ahem-ahem social gathering in all of Equestria? Well, there were plenty of fine, overpriced garments on mares who, quite honestly, couldn't pull off the twentysomething look if they had a zebra stealth cloak, an old picture, and a Flash Industries projector. Lots of stallions compensating for…honestly, most of these folks are so rich that if they can't afford male 'enhancement' spells they wouldn't be here, but clearly there's some reason for all the fancy frivolity. The new money was in full swing; rest easy knowing Equestria's finest profiteers are doing well. So plenty of movers, shakers, editors, and newspaper owners who will go unnamed were in attendance doing what they always do: little to nothing worth as much as they imagine. So I'll spare you the more odious details.

The canapés were okay.

But do you know what struck me as I listened to a portly *gentlequus* complain about 'the declining state of affairs', nodding my head spastically at appropriate times to feign interest? The party was missing some of its usual A list material. No Ministry Mares; for the first time ever, Madame Marshmallow Buns didn't grace us with her genteel presence. Pinkie Pie, ever one to crash formal and stuffy events with party cannons and spot arrests, was also a notable absentee. Applejack, who's never far from family members raking in bits right, left, and center, has been a no-show for months now. One would expect Rainbow Dash to pop in to an event with little thought and mass public exposure, but the skies are clear. And while no one has expected Twilight Sparkle to do anything social for the last four years, Fluttershy almost always makes an

appearance where she can make appeals on behalf of the widowed, orphaned and maimed. After all, if she doesn't, how will the audience nod sympathetically and then ignore her?

But you know who's really been gone? No, not Princess Celestia. I know. I know. It's been four years since that mess that got Big Macintosh killed, and she's still in that school of hers. No. It's the other alicorn. The big alicorn. The one who's supposed to be sitting in seats of power and making the grand speeches and cutting ribbons, launching ships, and running the country. The dark one.

Where the heck is Princess Luna?

It's been nine years since Luna assumed the throne, and I can count the number of appearances she's made this year on my hooves. Oh, there's always the obligatory fifteen minutes she spends at the G3. We might get treated to a canned Hearth's Warming Eve broadcast. But getting the mare herself to show up to any kind of social gathering is like trying to raise the sun or get an article like this past a gauntlet of Image editors: impossible for all but the most exceptional of ponies.

Now, I know what you'll say. Oh, she's a princess. She doesn't have to leave the palace. She's probably far too busy. Well, if she is busy, nopony can say what exactly she's busy with, because so few ponies have access to the Princess. Thirteen requests by yours truly this year for an interview have been denied by the royal guard with no reason given. Sixty-four requests through the M.o.I. were also turned down. I've spoken with dozens of other journalists who have had similar experiences: denials, refusals, or 'scheduling conflicts'.

The lights are on in the palace, but there's nopony answering the door. Somepony is getting work done there, but you'd be hard pressed to find out who it is. Is the Princess deep in conference with her Ministry Mares, or is it, as some have alleged, that the Princess meets with them only to approve specific projects and proposals? We don't know. Is she working closely with generals to win the war or simply passing on instructions through bureaucrats? We don't know. What is Princess Luna actually doing to run the country?

We don't know.

So this is Ace Buckley's report from the Canterlot Garden Party. Very boring. Okay canapés. No Ministries Mares. No Princesses. And if this is my last printed article, let me say this, Ministry Mare Fatflanks: you can silence, censure, and fire me, but don't think that by getting me assigned to the Canterlot 'social pages' you can stop

Ace Buckley from asking the hard questions.

I smiled as I glanced at the yellowed picture of an emaciated-looking earth pony stallion. He was completely bald, and his eyes were concealed behind round, dark glasses. His jaw was covered in stubble, and I had no problem imagining him reeking of booze. From the sneer of his lips and the scowl of his brow, I imagined his favorite line to be something on the nature of 'Fuck you. Give me the damned story!'. Best of all was the rumpled, ill-fitting tuxedo he'd been crammed into and the way he had each forehoof clenched around the neck of a well-dressed mare and stallion who seemed to be verging on asphyxiation. 'Ace Buckley, social pony' read the caption at the end of the article.

There were other papers strewn along the floor, most of them too smudged to be legible. I squinted and tilted my head as I made out Rarity's name.

Rarity,

I'm so sorry to hear about the difficulties you've had recently with Sweetie Belle and Blueblood. I'm afraid he hasn't abated his mudslinging one bit; it might not make it into the papers, but word is getting around. However, he has something new. He claims that he has some exclusive stable reserved for the finest ponies. I was skeptical at first, but he's getting the attention of some exceptionally well to do ponies. The price tag is an extravagant ten million bits per reserved seat.

I'm skeptical about anything involving him, but Vanity has confirmed, if grudgingly, that this 'Redoubt' exists. He has stated it lies somewhere in the Hoofington region, is protected by magics far older than most, and will withstand even the strongest megaspells. May I be blunt? I know your finances are not excessive, no matter what the common slob may believe. If you wish it, I will procure additional spots for you, your sister, and your parents. I hope that you will

But the letter was unfinished. I could only assume that the author was the 'Fancy Pants' who'd once owned the *Fleur*. I thought about what had happened to Rarity. How she died in Canterlot, her hoof fused to a window... I wished she'd escaped to some remote stable with Fancy Pants or Vanity... I wished as many ponies as possible had survived that mess. I knew better...

I sighed, Lacunae's memory walking into my thoughts as casually and gently as the mare herself once did. For an instant, she'd been

Twilight. I'd wanted to tell her about Big Macintosh. Wanted to let her know that she had a child, if via Marigold. I wondered…would she have been proud of me? Or would she have covered her face in embarrassment at her barbarian descendant? Pure Twilight…gone. Lacunae…gone. As if she'd never existed, like she'd insisted.

"You idiot," I sniffed. "I miss you, so you existed. Damn it…" I wished she was here. With her magic and wisdom and silent confidence and…just…here!

"Are you all right?" Lancer said from behind me, making me start. I needed to put a bell on him!

"I think this is the first time you've snuck up behind me without shooting me," I said as I turned to look at him. "What's up?"

"You said you've killed ponies who didn't deserve it," he said as he walked into the cabin I was 'cleaning'. "How did you…How…?" Clearly, he wasn't sure how to ask the Maiden this.

"Did I go on?" I prompted. He bit his lip and nodded. "I almost didn't. But then a friend told me something I'll never forget. You make your life about making up for that death. You devote yourself to doing the right thing and helping as many as you can. And you hope…hope as hard as you can…that when you die, you've made up for a tenth of the life you took." I sighed, rubbing the back of my head. "Unfortunately, I am not the smartest or safest of ponies to be around. Maybe there is something to your Maiden story."

"Perhaps. I do not know. You still scare me," he admitted. Maybe there was something about candor that was a zebra thing.

"Why did your father order you to kill them? What did your mother do?" I asked quietly.

"I…" he opened his mouth, then closed it and thought a moment. "I cannot say for certain anymore. Since that duel, nothing is certain. We were told that they were cowards who spread falsehood and lies. But now…now I cannot recall Mother saying anything about Father before she fled. His other wives said nothing, but simply agreed with his claim."

"Other wives?" I asked with a grin.

"Yes," he said baldly. "Is that a problem?"

"No. It's just…" I couldn't help myself, "How many wives?"

"Eleven, now," he answered.

"Wow," I murred. "Wonder how he finds time to sleep."

He shook his head. "Father is a great warrior. He has slain dragons with his bare hooves. Conjugal duties are hardly taxing." Lancer

looked towards the window, frowning. “The day before she fled… they hunted a balefire phoenix…a great and dangerous prey. Something happened, but I know not what. Only that when Mother returned, she said she’d done something terrible. Then she left with my little sister and begged me to come with her. I refused. Two days later, Father returned and said that Mother had tried to kill him. When I told him she’d asked me to leave with her, he sent me to kill all the traitors.”

I sat on the ruined bed, facing him. “Lancer, do you know anything about the zebras around the Hoof? What is your father planning?”

“I do not know,” he answered quietly. “Most of those at the far camps are the Brood. They are…terrifying. They come from no tribe. They barely speak at all, and yet they have the knowledge of veteran warriors. No fear. No questioning. They obey Father’s every wish.”

“But where did they come from? I thought they might be from your homeland,” I ventured.

He shook his head firmly. “The passage across the strait is perilous. Only a few small ships will risk a megalodon swallowing the vessel. It would take a year to ferry the numbers he has found.” He closed his eyes. “For the last year, Father has frequently gone out alone. He says there was an ancient prize to be had in the Hoof. A weapon which would allow us to sweep the valley clear. For a time, I thought he meant the balefire bomb…yet that was found far from the city. Then, one day, he emerged from the tent looking more overjoyed than I’d ever seen him. He said half of it had been unsealed. Then, one night, he laughed long into the night. He said it was the beginning of the end.”

Well, that certainly sent chills down my spine. “Did he ever elaborate?” I asked, hopeful. From somewhere, I heard the long low growl of Hoofington thunder. A deep, bassy growl that seemed to be welcoming me home.

“No. But soon after, he went alone into a bunker in the southeast, near Grimhoof. I am not sure if it was zebra or pony in origin. It was hidden beneath an empty warehouse. We waited outside the star-marked door. For hours he was inside. Then he emerged with a dozen of the Brood. Some of the warriors protested, and Father had them killed on the spot. Since then, whenever Father leaves, he comes back with more of the Brood. Dozens. Hundreds. ‘A gift of Four Stars’ he calls them.”

"Four stars? What four…" but then I remembered something Boing had said. They'd been camped outside a bunker with four stars on the door. Those events were thankfully blurry for me, but I thought there might have been one somewhere else, too. Inside the foundation of some building in the midst of construction. And Bottlecap had talked about a bunker up north. I'd thought she'd been talking about my stable…

"Can you wait just a minute, please?" I'd have loved to ask Lacunae this right now…Instead, I flipped open my broadcaster and thought of who I could bug. Pinkie Pie had mentioned something about them too, hadn't she? Bad ponies…

I found the right terminal address and established the connection. "Security to Watcher. Security to Watcher. Come in you big, handsome, purple guy." There was a hiss of static, followed by a click, and the connection went dead. Instantly fear ran through me. Was the Enclave, or somepony else, trying to raid Spike's cave? I peered down at the PipBuck screen. 'Connection manually interrupted, MASEBS Tower #19.'

What? Manually? Somepony out there was dicking with me. I smiled sweetly. "Dealer? Dealer? I need your help." I looked around. So often he just appeared. New fears bubbled up inside me. First Lacunae, now Dealer? "Dealer? Come on…"

"I'm here," he rasped slowly. I peered around again, but I couldn't see him.

"Are you okay?" I asked in concern.

"Just tired. EC-1101 wasn't meant to be crammed into so small a PipBuck. It's been a strain. Hopefully you'll get…well…nevermind. What's wrong?" he muttered in my ears.

"I need to know about 'Four Stars'. I wanted to ask Spike, but somepony is blocking the connection. Can you do something about it? With EC-1101?" I asked, for some reason my eyes being drawn up. Lancer was giving me that funny expression again. "Yeah, I talk to things only I can see and hear. Wacky, huh?"

"That is a word for it…" he replied as his ears folded back.

Dealer was silent for a long minute. "Try now."

"Security to Watcher. Come in," I said, now with no joking around. There was a distant flash through the portholes; miles off, but still a bit too close for my comfort. The thunder rolled through the clouds.

Fortunately, almost immediately a deep, ominous voice growled out. "Blackjack! You're alive? This is great! I've been frantic since

Maripony. I haven't been able to contact anyone! Someone is blocking me out of the MASEBS, and my remote links are all compromised. I'm blind here!" The voice made Lancer's mane and tail stand nearly upright.

If the Enclave thought that LittlePip and I were terrorists, and knew we'd associated with Spike, it wouldn't be hard for them to put two and two together and try to cut off Spike. Maybe even draw the dragon out with worry. "The Enclave is going nuts right now. The Stable Dweller accidentally killed the head of their military, as well as a whole bunch of other important ponies. I don't know what they're going to do, but it appears like they've tried to cut off access to the MASEBS network." I paused and added, "The Stable Dweller is all right, Watcher. She survived too."

I heard the breath let out in a great gust. "Thank Celestia. Thank you, Security." There was a pause, and the deep growling was replaced by the tinny synthetic voice. "I'll keep working to break through their interference. They must have done something at Tenpony to have this kind of access. I hope DJ Pon3 is all right."

"Me too," I said, now wondering if I should…ugh…no. I had my own crisis to worry about. "The Stable Dweller can handle it. Listen. I need to ask you a question. Does the word 'Four Stars' mean anything to you?"

"That's two words," Spike and Lancer replied simultaneously. I rolled my eyes and then gave the stink eye to the one I could see.

"Before the war, Four Stars was a transportation company. Big connections. They were plugged into the import business. Pinkie Pie was dead set on taking them down. She started with a raid in Manehattan, but they were going to storm every holding from Hoofington to Las Pegasus," Watcher replied.

"Why?" I asked, glancing over at Lancer. The *Fleur* began to creak as the wind picked up outside.

"Zebra sympathizers. A whole network of ponies who ended up helping the enemy. Major players. Right before the bombs fell, Pinkie focused on them. I don't know if it was the raid that set off the attack or not. They had built bases of operations all over Equestria, smuggling in weapons and even enemy soldiers. Funny thing is…nopony is sure who owned it. Maybe Pinkie or somepony in the M.o.M. knew."

I frowned. Bases all over Equestria. Bunkers hidden in buildings under construction. "Why four stars? And do you know if they were

connected to the O.I.A. or Goldenblood?" After all, the O.I.A. did seem to be the Ministry of Secret Underhoofed Deeds.

"I don't know. I never heard Goldenblood mention them. I think…" Spike was silent a moment, then went on, "Wait. I *do* remember something. I remember way back, when Twilight first travelled to Ponyville, she thought Nightmare Moon was going to return. Nopony seemed to believe her at the time. Twilight found a passage in one of her books, right before we left Canterlot. It said 'The four stars shall help with her escape,' or something like that. And then Nightmare Moon showed up the very next day." He trailed off a moment. "It was when we first met the pony gang. That's why I could recall it…"

If I could give hugs through a radio link…"And you're positive that these folks were working *with* zebras? And they named their company after something that set Nightmare Moon free?" I frowned as I regarded Lancer, to see if he thought that was as messed up as I did. From the bafflement and disgust on his face, I thought so. "Well, thanks for telling me that. How are you doing?"

"I was chewing my claws till you called. I knew Litt- er, the Stable Dweller was in the area of Maripony, and…well…I'm just glad to hear from anyone right now. The Enclave have control over the EBS now, so I'm struggling just to network spritebots together and carry a signal."

"Well, keep your eyes open, and watch out for her as soon as you can, Watcher. I got my own mess to deal with out east. I'll try to check in soon. I want to know what's going on as much as you do," I said, looking gravely at Lancer.

"Take care of yourself, Security. Watch out for your friends," Spike said, then cut off.

"That makes no sense," Lancer said sharply. "When I saw the stars on the door, I thought it was simple pony decoration. But this Watcher…setting the Maiden free! No zebra would do such a thing."

I frowned. There was something not coming together. "The zebras wouldn't have known about the four stars reference. That was a pony myth. And the ponies wouldn't have known about the Maiden of the Stars…that was a zebra myth." There didn't seem to be any overlap, except for one. "Lancer, what did the Starkatteri tribe do during the war?"

The question clearly disturbed Lancer. Stark lightning threw his

face into sharp relief as the thunder boomed seconds later. “The Starkatteri were laborers. They toiled in mines and factories. They were forbidden from fighting in the war. They suffered and died in toxic, poorly ventilated conditions instead.”

“But would the Last Caesar have used them and their dark knowledge?”

The question insulted him. “Absolutely not!”

I stared at him. “Are you certain? Without a doubt?” I glared into his eyes as the storm played in the distance. There was doubt there before he dropped his gaze. “There were two wars being fought,” I muttered as I slowly walked towards the windows. “The first one was the war we all knew. Soldiers and weapons and battle and megaspells. But there was a second war being fought, too. A hidden war. Goldenblood on one side…somepony else on the other. Secrets and lies…using the battle between your people and mine to cover what they were doing.”

“What are you saying, Blackjack?” he asked, clearly shocked.

“I’m saying that the war that we all thought was fought over borders and resources…someone used it. They used you, and they used us for their own ends.” I stared out at the flashes of the gathering storm. “What if the last war…didn’t end?”

“It ended! Your spells! Our bombs! It is finished!” he cried out as he stepped beside me. “Even the Remnant admits that, if in hushed tones. The last order is simply a reason to go on.”

“I’m not sure. Since I left Stable 99, I’ve been running into the past more and more. Something bad happened then, and it’s been like an oozing wound ever since. The more I learn, the more relevant that secret war feels. Secrets and lies and old ponies not quite dead.” Though gaps in the clouds, I could see flickers of a distant green glow and just make out the black towers biting the clouds.

What was it? Security saves ponies, but from what? What was the peril that scratched at my mane and whispered in my ears? Goldenblood’s Project Horizons? Lighthooves’s plague? The Legate’s balefire bomb? Cognitum in the Core? Why couldn’t I have enemies that I could just face? Opponents to battle and overcome? The Enclave…the Goddess…Red Eye…Remnant…Brood of Coyotl…I wanted to rage! Damn this body! I needed to feel pissed off!

“Come at me, you motherfuckers!” I screamed, slamming my hooves against the window and splintering the glass. “Come on! Face me!” I yelled, rearing again and smashing my hooves till the

glass shattered and cold, rainy wind blew in. “I’ll kill you! I’ll smash you to pieces!” I bellowed towards that distant green glow as I kicked again and again, knocking out the window frame in my fury. The thunder rumbled before me, and to me it was the laughter of that distant spire and my enemies. “Face me! Fight me! You Goddesses-damned motherfuckers!”

“Maiden!” Lancer shouted. I stood right at the brink of the hole I’d kicked in the side of the airship, and at the word I glared back at him. The Maiden glared back at him with a rage that made him step back in fear and awe. Bringer of chaos. Destroyer of people. That was me. “You cannot fly,” was all he said.

It would be nice if my body had some kind of calm down mode. But in that terrified yet respectful expression in his eye, I saw that I really was on the verge of something bad. I sat, slumping before the hole as the cold rain spat in at me. I regarded the distant towers of the Core, wishing I could destroy them with my glare alone, before I hung my head. Defeated. Impotent. And I could hear the black towers laughing.

The door opened and P-21 and Rampage ran in. They viewed me and the hole I’d bashed and Lancer. “Um, if you want to throw him off the ship, the deck is right up there.”

“I…don’t. I’m not,” I said as I covered my face. “I’m just…it’s been a long day. Sorry.”

“Right,” P-21 said as he looked at me, then at Lancer. “Well, don’t make that hole any bigger. It’s an old airship.” He turned and walked out. Rampage glared at Lancer and said something in Zebra, then pointed her hoofclaws at her face, then at him, before she backed out. A second later, her head popped back around the doorjamb, repeated the gesture, and slowly withdrew a final time.

“Your friends are concerned about you,” Lancer said. And him too.

“Sorry,” I said, a word that was a bit threadbare for me. “I’m just…really sick of this place. I hate it more than you do, I think.” He didn’t approach me as I sat before that hole. “So. What are you going to do?”

He thought a moment, then answered, “I don’t know. My whole life has been the Remnant. My whole reason for living was to make Father proud. Now…I do not know. But I do not wish to follow in your wake, Maiden. I know that much.”

He deserved a chance. “What if I told you that your mother and little sister were still alive?”

"What?" he hissed in shock.
"Glory got to them before they died. They're still alive. Both of them."
"W…why didn't you tell me sooner!?" he demanded, shocked.
"One day ago, you tried to kill me. Two days ago, you were your father's right-hoof zebra," I said as I jabbed a hoof at him. "And you shot me in the face, I might add! So don't get indignant that I didn't let you know you didn't finish the job. For all I knew then, you'd go back and kill them just to get back in with your father!"
He drew back. "I apologize. You're right." I watched him think a moment, and then he replied. "If... if I could see them again? Well, I'd apologize. And then I would listen to whatever she wished to tell me…better than I did before she left."
I approached him, keeping my eyes locked on his. "I like your mom. She's weird, but I like her. So if I tell you where she is, and you do something bad to her, I promise you that I will show you just how much a Maiden of the Stars I can be. Do you understand? I am sick of being responsible for good ponies dying."
"I understand," he answered at once, with complete conviction as opposed to fear.
I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "She's in the town of Chapel. Right across the river from the Core in the southwest."
"I see," he replied, unable to hide his shiver. Then he turned and started towards the door. Then he paused and regarded me with an odd smile. "Thank you, Blackjack." He bowed his head to me, then walked out.
I walked to the hole and peered out. The towers were gone behind the clouds, but the thunder still rolled. It was more distant now, sullen sounding. "I'm coming. Just you wait."

* * *

We settled down on the outskirts of Hoofington to let Lancer off. We weren't far from Stockyard, where I'd once killed monster lizard things. How far off that felt…when big animals were a threat. I'd promised that we would let him off before the assault, and hopefully he'd go and make up for his mistake back at Brimstone's Fall.
The inhabitants of the farthest west settlement in the valley were all gathered up on the hillside. There were more than thirty ponies

and easily a dozen brahmin. More than a few stared in awe, while the rest were wary. We had to be quite a sight…if only Lacunae were here to finish off the image of wacky weirdness that was our group. All blue bars. Stockyard had gotten the same treatment as Brimstone's Fall when Sanguine had been searching for me. Either he hadn't gotten everypony, though, or newcomers had moved in. Either way, better than more death in the Wasteland.

Lancer stepped out into the rain. I'd seen so much more of him than Lancer the Killer. Lancer the Storyteller. Maybe even Lancer the Friend. All I could hope was that he'd continue in a direction away from his father and the Remnant. That was all I could ever hope for.

Dusk joined us on deck. The bandaged mare could barely stand. Glory supported her every step and kept a wing around her. Another mare who'd once tried to kill her sister…she kept her eyes turned away from me, and I couldn't blame her for that. Much as I wished it, Yellow River wasn't all that far in the past.

"Here," I said to the zebra as I levitated over his invisibility cloak. It was useful, to be sure, but it was his.

He contemplated it a moment soberly, the rain hissing around us. "No. You hold on to it for now. I think it will be more useful to you where you are going than it will be to me." He glanced over at P-21. "I believe it will be good for me to hide less. Yes?"

"Maybe," P-21 said as he held Scotch Tape between his hooves. "Just be careful. Don't be so eager you turn around and become Blackjack. She gets shot a lot."

"By my friends too, oddly enough," I said with a little smirk.

"I will try to keep things in moderation," Lancer replied.

"Remember," I told him. "Make up for it. Help, however you can." And I didn't add for him not to make me regret my leniency. I didn't need to. He walked away from the *Fleur*, heading east. Maybe to a better life. He paused and turned back, smiling at me.

Suddenly Boo trotted out after him with that ridiculous captain's hat on her head. What the heck was she doing? She moved right up next to him and plopped the hat atop his ears. "Boo… " I began with a helpless smile.

"Fucking move," I heard on the wind, caught by my augmented hearing. The voice was tense and angry. I turned my head, glaring up at the settler ponies with a small frown. My eyes picked out several weapons… not unusual. The ponies were all still blue on my

EFS.

But there was a weapon not pointed at me.

"Get down!" I shouted, a blast of lightning cutting the sky and flooding the hillside with its harsh glare while the boom drowned out everything but the sharp crack of a hunting rifle. I stormed up the muddy hillside, giving the shooter something far more pressing than taking shots at Lancer to think about. Cursing as loudly as I could at the gathered settlers, I fired my own guns into the air. They screamed and ran for the shelter of their buildings.

I slowed and stopped, my muddy body sliding slowly back down towards the *Fleur*. "Is everyone okay?" I called back.

"We're fine. Lancer almost pulled a Blackjack," Rampage drawled as she helped him to his hooves.

"I'm a thing now?" I asked with a frown.

"Sure. It's what happens when you're so in love with the Wasteland that you get your head blown off," Rampage said with a smirk. "I'm thinking of patenting it. Maybe making shirts. 'I pulled a Blackjack and lived to tell about it.' Kinda catchy."

If Boo hadn't fouled their shot…"Ha ha," I said as I turned to Lancer. "You should have your cloak back."

"No. It was a good lesson," he replied soberly. "I should remember to always be vigilant. Perhaps this will make me a better survivor." He adjusted the hat atop his head and then smiled down to Boo. "Thank you for your gift."

She just beamed back at Lancer. I had to wonder why she'd darted out just then. If she hadn't... I had images of his smiling face exploding. "Just take care of yourself," I said with a small smile.

He nodded and once more moved off through the long grass, this time ducking down so that, in a few seconds, all but the hat disappeared. It moved off like a shark fin till it too disappeared from sight.

I frowned up at the hill. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to have a few words."

* * *

We never found out which of the settlers had fired the shots. A few condemned the gunfire as cowardly, but nopony gave up the shooter. There were a half dozen hunting rifles, and I couldn't spank the owners of all six. The settlers were more shocked that I'd

gotten so upset over attempts to ‘off a stripe’. Lancer was ‘just a zebra’. Apparently they’d thought I was going to do it, till I let him go. When they thought that I wasn’t listening, I heard more than a few angry mutters about stripelovers. They didn’t know how I heard their every word.

I’d been happy to see a settlement of ponies. I’d assumed that that was a good thing.

Twister and Boomer stayed with the *Fleur* while I tried to lecture them about doing better. Not all zebras were the same. Not all of them meant harm. My words were wasted as I was given sullen nods and angry glares.

“Let’s just go, Blackjack,” Glory said. Since it was clear that my lecture wasn’t going to be accompanied by a body count, the settlers were scattering back to their afternoon routine.

As we re-boarded the *Fleur*, I found a rail and slumped against it. There wasn’t a sign of the settler ponies. They had had their fill of Security, and I had had my fill of them. The only ones I could see were the brahmin, approaching the *Fleur* with dull curiosity.

“Ahem,” one said as his heads looked up at me.

“We just wanted to say sorry ‘bout the shots at yer friend,” the other head said lowly.

“Yeah, sorry,” agreed the first one.

“Thanks,” I answered with a small smile. “Do they treat you okay here?”

“Oh, sure,” nodded the first. “Ponies is good folks…more or less. Milk and cheese brings more caps than meat and leather. So they watch out fer us.”

“Good. Good,” I said, gritting my teeth as I felt unsteady once again.

“Take care ‘o yerselves,” the second head said as he moved away. “Yer good folks too…”

“Thanks,” I croaked as the *Fleur*’s bag filled with lifting gas began to rise into the air. I buried my face in my hooves. Good folks? If they were good folks, and we were good folks, then why did good folks keep doing bad things? Any good feelings I’d had at Lancer agreeing to do better had been robbed by the muleheadedness of a bunch of bigots who couldn’t see anything wrong with killing a zebra just because he was a zebra! I ground my teeth and sulked till Glory hooked my collar with her wing and led me belowdecks to an intact cabin.

We lay together on the bed; there wasn't any sex. After Lacunae's death and Lancer being shot at by 'good folks', I couldn't be further from the mood. She was just with me. Helping me deal with it. As always.

"Blackjack. When was the last time you slept?" Glory asked me as she brushed my cheek.

"I dunno…twenty four hours ago," I muttered.

"You need to sleep," Glory reminded me.

I closed my eyes. "Yeah…" I knew that too. But I didn't want to. I wasn't tired…and besides…

To sleep…and maybe to dream. That was the trick. For in sleep, what dreams would come?

* * *

I didn't sleep. There were too many things to do in the meantime. Too many things that could go wrong. Lancer's parting gift had one benefit: it would hide me from the energy sensors of the lightning rods well enough, so no need shut down and plug into Rampage. Anything else that might set them off was given to me and hidden under the cloak as well: Pew-Pew, PipBucks, and the energy supplies from the three suits of power armor had all been put in my saddlebags. We'd thought that deactivating the armor would be enough, but better safe than sorry. I dolefully chewed on one of Glory's cyberpony cakes. I might not have felt tired, but a little sustenance couldn't hurt.

In seconds, we were in the skies of Hoofington, and even as a unicorn, I could feel the difference. The clouds far away had been white, fluffy, ephemeral things. These clouds swirled like dark waters. Lightning flickered deep in the depths, and thunder growled every few minutes. I felt like I was trapped beneath the *Celestia* once again, despite the fact I could breathe. The saturated clouds soaked everything, and we had water streaming off the balloon and the deck within minutes. The clouds were moved by strange breezes I couldn't quite pin down. While Boomer and Twister pushed, Glory made constant adjustments against the heavy, drab gray clouds she'd packed against the hull to ensure that as much of the *Fleur* as possible was covered.

"I hate these skies," I heard Boomer mutter.

I hated them too.

Suddenly, the clouds parted, and we saw a bright yellow glow blinking and flickering in the gloom. It was a colossal black needle perhaps fifty feet long hanging down from an immense black storm cloud. Glory hurriedly finished making a shell of cloud between the deck and balloon, then ducked inside, out of view, as the winds carried us towards it. Only narrow holes let us see out at the ominous spire.

"Damned crosswind! Why'd it kick up now?" Twister complained. The *Fleur* groaned as the two forces of wind and pegasi fought over it. We were going to pass by the rod far closer than I liked. Every second made the needle grow larger and larger. Yellow lightning flickered along the black metal, and every now and then a bolt leapt off of the blinking talismans and crackled through the surrounding storm clouds. At the top, where the metal connected to the cloud, I could see clusters of cameras peering out in the storm clouds. Celestia only knew how they could see anything.

We passed a stone's throw from the lightning rod, blinking talismans the size of my head flooding the inside of the shell with a harsh glare. I only hoped that Glory's work had made us resemble just another cloud. I watched as a band of lightning crackled off the nearest talisman and stretched towards us a moment with flickering fingers, as if reaching for us. We might just get blasted by accident. Then the bolt thudded down the shaft and discharged off the tip in a yellow fork.

"I *really* hate these skies," Boomer amended.

I could also appreciate General Chaser's problem of attacking the tower. Any motion would have to be above the cloud layer. It would be suicide to try and take a Raptor through these clouds. They would have to travel through open air, easily detected and targeted by the tower's defenses. Lighthooves would have time to prepare, and he could send missiles on flight paths where the Raptors were more spread out.

"Take us up," I said, wanting to avoid another brush with a lightning rod.

The balloon hissed as Scotch Tape pulled a lever, and we lifted up. The dark clouds began to lighten a touch, and Glory flew back out and continued to work on the cloud layer. Suddenly the *Fleur* lurched and groaned. Dozens of pink orbs showered down onto the deck. "Take cover!" I yelled as one tumbled down and struck me right on the head. It burst open. "I'm hit! Is anyone else hurt?!"

"Calm down, Blackjack," Glory called from above. "We just hit an apple tree is all."

I blinked and picked up one of the mushed pink globs. It was… vaguely…appleish. I heard rustling above us, and then brown branches flopped off to the side of the ship. They resembled ropey tendrils studded with the fleshy pink globs. "That's an apple tree?" P-21 said skeptically, and Scotch Tape appeared a little insulted.

It was an apple tree…if an apple tree had been made to float. Where the trunk should be was an immense, swollen, oval sac much like the gasbag of the *Fleur*. Atop it were hundreds thin branches with filmy leaves attached. The 'roots' of the tree, and the fruits growing off them, acted as ballast. "That's not an apple tree," Rampage declared flatly.

"It is too," Glory said, defensively. "A lot of our food is grown on top of the S.P.P. towers, but we couldn't begin to feed all our people with such a small area…so we turned to cloud farming." We skimmed along the cloud layer, Glory pulling the viewing slits into windows now that we were above the lightning rods. I took a bite of a cloud apple and nearly gagged. It was like eating glass…barely any taste at all. Like faintly apple-flavored paste.

"Takes really wet clouds to sustain cloud crops, though," Twister said. "You need lots of water and cloud cover. But Thunderhead's always got the clouds for it; no need to irrigate with the S.P.P. at all." She sounded a little jealous. We were floating through a veritable orchard of 'trees', all bobbing on top of the clouds. They weren't so much rigid wood as flexible fibers, and so they yielded for our passage with barely a problem.

The tops of the clouds had a strange terrain to them. There were hills and valleys filled with the bizarre floating biomass. All of the plants sported some sort of gasbag. Cloud wheat was thousands of balloon-sized clumps with pale yellow grain on top and long roots on the bottom, like bobbing heads. There were cloud potatoes…that didn't seem much different from their apples. Cloud corn was similar to wheat, except the ears all had their own bubbles to tug them upright. "That is so weird," I remarked as we passed spidery bean plants.

There was more than just plant life up here, though. There were ponies working, too. I could make out a half dozen teams of pegasi loading crops onto skywagons in the late afternoon light. The area up here was so large, though, that I didn't have any fear of them

spotting us from so far off.

"Where's…" I began to ask, but as I turned I saw that everypony was staring at it.

Shadowbolt Tower.

It was utterly impossible to miss. The tower was a black hexagonal shape rising out of a massive, dark, green-lit pit of clouds. It had to be the tallest structure ever built. Each segment had talismans at every level, blinking bright blue. Shielding talismans? Levitation? Magic had to be the only way such a feat of engineering was possible. The tower didn't taper off, it widened. The higher I gazed, the bigger and more elaborate the tower became. At the top was a massive blue dome, like a jeweled scepter. There were long, black fingers stretching out into the air, landing docks for Vertibucks, Raptors, and Thunderheads, I supposed. Where the tower started to widen, each side I could see of the hexagon bore an enormous panel decorated with the winged rainbow lightning bolts of the M.o.A.

"Wow. That's really…really…big," I muttered weakly. It seemed to stretch for another mile up into the sky, but I couldn't be sure.

"That is the Equestrian Air Command. Shadowbolt Tower. The one target that, thanks to the Core's anti-missile beam technology, never got destroyed. And they tried," Glory said proudly.

Twister and Boomer were less impressed. "Y'all could refit the entire fleet with the metal in that thing."

"One, lots of it is the same ceramic as the rest of the Hoof. Two, you could easily get that metal by trading with the surface for scrap metal," Glory retorted.

"That's gonna be a much harder cat to swing after Maripony," my hearing caught Twister mutter.

"Where's Thunderhead?" I asked, peering at all the fluffy white globs above the cloud layer. Lots of it seemed to be gathering and holding stations. Others were cloud…factories? Well, they had to create those fluffy cloud terminals somehow! I looked for a tire-shaped cloud but couldn't see…

"Um…Blackjack?" Glory said as she smiled and pointed past the cloud factories at a huge, curved wall of white slightly above us. It was so large, I'd dismissed it as simply the background. "Welcome to Thunderhead."

We'd finally, truly, left the Wasteland.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 60: Civilization

"Here it is: the greatest city in the sky!"

There were pictures in books of what civilization once looked like. They ranged from the well-lit glass and steel towers of Manehattan to the elegant and classical buildings of Canterlot to the cozy, rural surroundings of Ponyville. There'd even been a picture of Cloudsdale; I remembered it as being rather white and boring-looking on the page, but now, staring at Thunderhead, I appreciated it a little better.

The city was built on the inside of a massive, hollow horizontal torus of cloud, like an empty wagon tire lying on its side. I saw, as the *Fleur* edged up into the city from below, that the bottom lip of the tire extended in towards the center farther than the top, creating a sunlit ledge that supported actual living parks! Well, if they could figure out how to make crops grow in clouds, why not grass and flowers? Large, impressive buildings were built into the thick circumferential wall of the torus, and these were decorated with Corinthian columns, friezes of pegasi and griffins in combat, and grand statues that appeared to be marble. Along the ceiling of the hollow tube, hanging down like icicles, were hundreds of plain, cloud-hewn apartments where, from what Glory told me, the poorer folk lived. Equidistant around the city were six immense buildings that ran like pillars from the lip of the upper rim to the border of the park ring below; these, according to Glory, were the houses of Thunderhead's government.

I'd been worried about how we were going to sneak into the city. I'd been imagining the 'city' as a place like Tenpony, or even the Society. A building, a cluster of buildings, or even a stable were what had crossed my mind. Places with big, guarded doors where everything going in and out was looked at carefully and judged. Here, there were so many ponies coming and going that entering

had been as simple as moving up over the top rim. There were flights of power-armored ponies flying around, but they seemed occupied with something else. The only interference we had was when a gray pegasus pony with a stubbly chin flew over, inspected the 'cloud', and told Boomer to "Get that good, heavy cloud to the work site pronto."

And then he flew on, because there were other ponies doing similar things.

This was how the world was supposed to be. How it once was. Ponies working, living, laughing. It was like a soap bubble that had persisted for two hundred years, protected by its mighty tower and advantages over its neighbors. There weren't ponies scrabbling for their next meal, worried about monsters, or just trying to keep from being robbed, raped, or ripped in two.

Once we were inside the ring, Glory'd directed us towards the far side of the city. At first, I couldn't tell one part from another, but now I could see that different sections of the city had some subtly different decorations in the form of colored motifs. The busiest was red, which she said was the business and entertainment sector. We were headed to the blue section, right in the middle, which seemed to have the largest and fanciest homes with the fewest ponies hanging about. As we reached the wall she'd pointed us to, she quickly flew out, nipped over to a control panel, and tapped a few keys. A side of the wall swung up, revealing an immense garage, perhaps more of a hangar, even, with an impressive gold-and-silver-surfaced sky carriage supported by hooks in the ceiling. Though we scraped off most of the storm cloud getting through the door, Twister, Boomer, and Glory were able to tie the *Fleur* to the same supports.

"Wow. I can't believe we're really up in the sky!" Scotch Tape said, jumping eagerly over the rail.

"Wait!" Glory shouted, but too late. Scotch Tape's glee turned into a shriek of terror as she plunged straight through the floor. I reached out with my magic just before her tail disappeared from view and grabbed. The filly emerged slowly, hanging upside down as she hugged herself and trembled. My horn strained; had she been full-grown, I wouldn't have caught her. When Glory picked her out of the air and deposited her on the *Fleur*, Scotch rushed to P-21 and hugged him tight.

"Don't get off the boat. Not getting off the boat," Scotch Tape

murmured over and over again as I let out a sigh of relief.

P-21 held her as she dealt with that minor breakdown. “This might make walking around a little difficult.”

I frowned and levitated out Twilight’s magic primer. Now I was glad that it wasn’t just useless magical exercises for foals. “She has a spell here that she says will let non-pegasi walk on clouds.” I read the details…it didn’t seem all that difficult. Definitely nothing I would have tried a month ago, but... “Who am I going to try it on, though?”

“Eh. What’s the worst you can do to me?” Rampage asked as she trotted in front of me.

I screwed up my face and concentrated. Imagine happy, fluffy clouds on the ends of her legs. Happy, fluffy clouds…I felt the magic discharge. “Huh…you don’t look any different. Maybe Boomer can bring in some of that thundercloud we scraped off and--”

“Banzai!” Rampage shouted as she jumped off the far side of the ship. Her cry trailed away to silence as all of us stared in shock.

“Oh Celestia,” I muttered as I slowly walked to where she’d jumped. First Lacunae and now Rampage…“I…I should have known better. I thought I cast it right!” Falling... and falling... and sure, she wouldn’t die, but who knew what we were over this second? We were near the Core! She could find herself impaled on a ruin, or--

Then a striped pony launched herself over the rail and landed atop me. “You did. I was just messing with you,” she said smugly as she lay atop me, then frowned and tapped my metal reinforcements. “Whoa, how do you and Glory get your sexings on? Don’t these chafe?”

“A bit, but so long as I’m on top, it’s not too bad,” Glory replied as I worked to re-establish my ability to speak.

“Rampage! I’ll kill you!” I yelled as I tried to punch her.

“Promises, promises,” she drawled as she almost casually pinned my metallic legs under her hoofclaws. She looked over at the traumatized Scotch Tape, then down at me, and I saw a shadow in her eyes. But then she grinned as she fought it back. “Hey Scotch. Watch this.” She opened her mouth and let a giant dollop of saliva roll along her tongue.

“No! No no no! Don’t you dare, Rampage!” I shouted as I tried to heave her off. “Do not drool on me, Rampage! I’m warning you!” I glanced at Glory desperately, but apparently the ickiness of earth

pony saliva wasn't worth her coming to my rescue.

Rampage sucked the glob back in, grinned down at me, and snorted loudly before letting a wad of something awful slowly begin to drop towards my face, swinging and wriggling like some vile pendulum. "Rampage, what are you, a filly?" Glory asked in disgust. Rampage froze, a glob of slime dangling from her lips as she looked at Glory, and then she sucked it back into her mouth. "That's better," Glory said with the air of a foalsitter. "Honestly…" Rampage smirked.

Then, like a steel-plated jungle cat, she launched herself at Glory, pinning the pegasus on her back. "What are you doing? Get off!" The phlegm glob appeared once more. "No! No no nononoNO!" she pled helplessly as the Reaper let the mucus swing lower and lower. "Blackjack! Help!" I glanced over at Scotch, who was beating back her recent trauma with amusement. Then Glory's shriek reached glass-breaking levels as the spit bomb landed. "Rampage!"

We all…save for Glory…broke into laughter. "Relax, Glory," Rampage smirked. "Scotch is laughing now. So chill."

"I'm back in grade school again," Glory said in exasperation as she sat up, but she was mollified a bit by the sight of the laughing olive filly. Her continued attempts to wipe the spittle away just smeared it into her coat, though. "Oh, gross! Is this mucus? This is mucus! Rampage!"

"What is going on?" a young mare said from the garage doorway. Her coat was a darker gray than Glory's and her mane a deep indigo. I was reminded of a pegasus Homage, except a pair of glasses lay before her lighter, blue, and currently *very* wide eyes. "What…how…who *are* all of you?"

"Moonshadow?" Glory said as she stared at the uneasy mare. Then she swooshed in and hugged the mare every bit as fiercely as Rampage pouncing. "Moony!"

Moonshadow struggled to push Glory away. "Rainbow Dash?" Her lip curled, clearly uncomfortable with the gooey embrace. "Who… what…" Her eyes turned to the *Fleur*, then to all of us. "What's going on?"

"It's me! Morning Glory! I'm home!" she said with a grin. But it quickly faded as Moonshadow pushed her away. "Moonshadow?"

The mare shook her head slowly, "…no. You can't be--"

"It's Morning Glory, Moon," Dusk said loudly as she stumbled onto the deck and faltered to the rail. She glanced at me, her lips pursed,

and then she awkwardly fluttered down to the floor of the garage. Her bandages had been removed, revealing the swollen, livid injuries to her head. I hadn't remembered exactly what I'd done to her…apparently it had involved ripping her helmet open and nearly crushing her skull. The swelling had gone down, but skull fractures took longer to heal without magic.

"Dusk? What happened to you?" Moonshadow asked as she rushed to swaying pegasus's side. Feeling awkward, I got to casting the cloudwalking spell on myself and the others. "And…Rainbow Dash?"

"Got hurt down below," she replied. "But yeah, that's Glory. Come on. I'll explain everything." Then she rolled her eyes a little. "Actually, I'll just hit the important parts. I can't begin to explain *everything*. But let's go inside."

Moonshadow looked from Dusk to Glory and back again. Glory grinned sheepishly and added, "And I'd really like to wash my face. Really…"

But Moonshadow wasn't smiling. The dark gray mare's blue eyes turned and regarded the rest of us coolly. "I see. Very well. Welcome to the Striker estate." Frowning, she led us all inside. A cool welcome indeed.

* * *

I don't know what I expected Morning Glory's home to be like, but I certainly hadn't imagined a palace in the skies. The soaring great room rose up for three stories with balconies reaching out like clamshells from between Corinthian columns. Rainbow-paned windows cast a polychromatic light across the floor, which was engraved with a relief of trees, clouds, and birds. As Thunderhead rotated, the light played slowly across the surface, the shards of color illuminating one spot and then another so that what was a blue bird one minute would be a blue lake ten minutes later.

Scotch Tape stared at the architecture around her with literal jawdropping awe, her fear of falling miles to the ground forgotten. She raced back to the *Fleur* for some scrap paper and charcoal and immediately began sketching what she saw and writing notes. I observed a few particularities as well: no stairs. Thank goodness there were toilets on the ground floor.

There were also not a lot of people for an estate almost half the

size of my stable. Four pegasi, two mares and two stallions dressed in formal black attire, were apparently paid to keep the place neat and tidy. They stood by, clearly unsure of what to do but ready to act if Moonshadow, Dusk, or Glory needed them. I noticed a great deal of wrinkling noses, and I felt embarrassed for bringing the stink of the Wasteland into this vast and amazing structure. Then I put it out of my mind, as I had bigger things to worry about.

We'd moved into a library where enchanted, vaporous shelves held books old even before the war began. A tapestry of some kind hung from the ceiling to the floor, showing generation upon generation of ponies stretching back centuries. I'd never realized that Glory's family, through her father, went back even further than my own through Twilight. Two identical young dove-gray fillies with pink manes listened to Glory and Dusk with matching expressions of awe. Her siblings, Lambent and Lucent. Moonshadow listened to every single word with focus, asking few questions and simply taking it all in. From the firm frown on her lips, she wasn't happy with any of it. When we got to the part about the Enclave and Lighthooves, Dusk suggested that Lambent and Lucent show Scotch Tape the rest of the house while the butler brought her an aspirin.

The three went out, along with a maid to supervise, while we were left with a table of stale desserts and oddities. The water was lightly flavored with lemon. Boo seemed somewhat disappointed with the bland sugar cookies provided.

Then we told Moonshadow about the plague and the upcoming attack. She took it all stoically, even more so than I thought possible given her sister's appearance and company. Her blue eyes closed thoughtfully, and I gave Rampage a stern glare before she could start making snoring noises. A minute later, Moonshadow opened her eyes again, and she did not look happy. "I need to speak to my sisters alone." Then her gaze switched to me before she added, "You can stay. You seem to be in the middle of all this."

"What? What are we supposed to do?" Rampage asked as she panned from Moonshadow to Glory. "Come on! If you're going to fight, I want to see the action. Don't just leave me with the play by play!"

"Rampage," I said with a shake of my head.

She started to whine again, but Moonshadow told one of the servants, "Show her to the media room. If you insist on watching drama," she then said to Rampage, "I suggest viewing *By Dawn's*

Early Light. Quite a tearjerker."

"Aw, yeah," Boomer nodded. "I love the scene where Captain Silverwing gets shot and has to lie on the mountaintop while his squad pulls back!" He adopted a gruff tone and said, "'Fight another day, boys. Fight for me. Fight for *us*. But do it tomorrow. Me, I got a dance to keep.' And they go and then the griffins start to swoop in on him and…" he trailed off as he realized that we were all staring at him. "What?! It's a heartbreaker of a scene. 'Specially when it cuts back to his special pony back home…"

Rampage looked at him blankly, then smiled. "Well, you sold me. I'm game." Then she turned to the butler pony and said grandly, "To the boob tube, Jeeves!"

"My name is Droplets, ma'am," he replied stiffly. "This way." Together, she and Boomer left.

P-21 turned to Twister and frowned a moment. "Maybe you and I can talk till they're done. I'd like to know more about Neighvarro. It might help me understand what all the fighting is over."

"Skybright?" Glory said to one of the maids. "Why don't you show them to the kitchens and make them something to eat?"

The sky blue mare nodded and trotted to the door, smiling as she opened it for the pair. "This way, please."

I looked over at Boo, the blank blinking confusedly now that ponies were leaving. Or maybe she was just struggling to chew on one of the stale white disks they called 'cookies'. "Go with them, Boo. They might have Fancy Buck Cakes." I don't know if she understood me, but she perked up a little, tossed the half-eaten cookie back on the plate, and trotted out after them, seeming quite pleased. Such a bizarre mare…

When it was down to four of us and the one remaining servant, Moonshadow frowned as she regarded Glory, myself, and Dusk. "So. You've been through a great deal. What is it you plan to do next?" Moonshadow asked archly as she sat on a fluffy white couch. "Get yourselves arrested and hope that they take a bunch of surfacers seriously enough to give you an audience with Councilor Stargazer? Or were you planning on having the public show of us being exiled en masse for breaking quarantine be enough for some sort of public appeal?"

"Well, that is one way to contact the authorities," Glory said, a touch confused and defensive.

"Um, I don't think you understand," I said to Moonshadow with a

concerned frown. “Neighvarro is coming for the Tower. If they have to shoot their way in to secure the place, they will. I think you have to look at the bigger picture.”

Moonshadow wheeled on me with undisguised contempt. “Excuse me. This isn’t your house, your home, your place, or your business. Do not tell me what I should be looking at.”

Morning Glory bristled. “Do not address her like that, Moonshadow! Blackjack is my marefriend.”

“Congratulations,” Moonshadow retorted, full of scorn, “you discovered fornication.” She rose and turned away to gaze out the window. “Maybe next you might discover familial obligation.”

“What’s gotten into you, Moony?” Glory asked, clearly at a loss.

The gray mare smacked her hoof on the table beside her, making the china rattle. “Becoming the head of a household when Father and two of my siblings disappeared ‘got into me’,” she said without turning. “Something I don’t expect either of you two to understand.”

“Hey,” Dusk groaned, scowling as she started to rise. Then she touched the side of her head and leaned back in her loveseat, but she continued, “Don’t talk to me about family.”

“Oh?” Moonshadow whirled, glaring at her. “You ran off to join the military the first chance you could get. I understood that. Following in Father’s hoofsteps and all that entails. But did you ever think about who would head this family when you just left to do your security training? There was an attempt to bring scandal on us by saying that Glory had gone Dashite!” Her hard blue eyes turned to Glory. “And so you did. More Dashite than I’d thought possible.”

“I had no choice in that!” Glory began as she launched herself from my side and hovered in the air, pointing a hoof at Moonshadow. “Lighthooves branded me, and magic weeds transformed me into this. I never asked for this trouble!”

But Moonshadow, faster than I expected, launched herself into the air and poked her hoof hard into Glory’s chest. “Oh, but you did! You had every choice in it, Morning Glory! You could have stayed up here. You could have married or dated anypony you wanted, or none at all. You could have continued your studies. You’d have been a doctor in a year if you’d stayed. But no. You had to pine for Mother and continue her hopeless crusade of helping the surface. You even got Father to endorse the Volunteer Corps! Well, where are Mother and Father now? A mechanical abomination and

trapped in some surface stasis pod!"

Glory backed away, looking as if Moonshadow had just bucked her upside the head. "Moonshadow, how can you say that?"

"How…" She gritted her teeth and hissed in frustration. "Have you even thought about Lambent and Lucent, Glory? Or me? Or anypony else?" She pointed a hoof damningly at Glory. "If it were just your life, oh well. I'd be sympathetic. But your sojourn to the surface hasn't just affected you, Glory. Have you realized that?" She gestured at Dusk. "She kept us from exile when it was released that you were dead. I admit, I cried when I heard. But you're not dead. You're here. And you're Rainbow Dash! Are you trying to get us all arrested and exiled?"

"There's more at stake than our family," Dusk pointed out grimly.

"I realize that," Moonshadow retorted. "But unlike the two of you, I am not prepared to sacrifice myself and my youngest siblings as if we're nothing!"

"And when the Enclave comes here and starts shooting, what then?" Glory snapped.

"There's lots of folks in Neighvarro who won't shy away from civilian casualties. Heck, some of them think that the whole population of Thunderhead are traitors," I pointed out.

"Then we sit tight, surrender at an opportune moment, and demonstrate our loyalty." I gaped at her in shock. She met my incredulity with sincerity. "The Grand Pegasus Enclave is the legal, elected authority of our people. Yes, the system has severe problems, but that doesn't excuse criminality. If there are elements defying the law, then the Enclave is right to step in and stop them! They're criminals. If Thunderhead won't stop them, then the Enclave as a whole should," Moonshadow countered.

"Right," I said as I stood. "Glory, get a rope. If she's not going to help us, then she's going to be a liability."

Moonshadow stared at me in disgust. "Brilliant. And what are you going to tell my employers at the university tomorrow? I have never taken a sick day in my life. And what of our servants' families? What are you going to tell them?" Then she asked, cool and contemptuous, "Or are you just going to kill us?" I sighed. This was going to be a lot more difficult than I expected.

Glory sighed as well, slumping, clearly defeated, "Moonshadow, if you're not going to help us--"

"Oh skies above, of course I'm going to help!" she said in eye

rolling exasperation.

There was a round of absolutely baffled expressions on everypony's face. "You are?" I asked in befuddlement.

"You think I'm going to stuff my head into a cloud and let you go about whatever foalish scheme you come up with and finish this family off? No," Moonshadow stated firmly. "I refuse to let you, your…friends…Mother, Father, or anypony else ruin Lambent's, Lucent's, or *my* life!" She flew up and once more poked Glory in the chest. "But don't think that I'm happy with you bringing this on us, Glory."

Glory took a deep breath. "Help me with this and I'll leave and never darken your skies again," she said, clearly fighting the tears.

"Oh for the love of clear skies, no!" Moonshadow said, throwing her forehooves over her head in outrage. Then she seized Morning Glory by the shoulders. "You're family! This is your home. Just start thinking about how what you do is going to affect the rest of us for a change. Otherwise, you're just like Mother." She sighed and landed, then pressed her wingtips to her temples. "Ugh, I'm getting a migraine. Jamboree, I need an aspirin." Rather than trotting over fifteen feet to the bottle on the table, she waited for the butler to fish out two tablets with his wingtips and deliver them to her. Once they were ingested, she sighed again. "Now, it's late, and I have work to finish up, dinner to eat, and calls to make," Moonshadow said crossly. "Is there anything else you need to tell me?" she asked as she looked from one of us to the next.

"No," Morning Glory said, looking away.

"Fine. Give me until tomorrow morning to get things taken care of, and then we'll see what we can do for you and your friends. Ah, and I'll have to find out if the Feathers will take Lambent and Lucent if things go bad."

"Ugh, the Feathers?" Dusk groaned. "They're so stodgy."

"And they're the least likely to be lined up against a wall and shot. They're well-connected here and in Neighvarro. And they *like* me. Just because you didn't want to marry their son is no excuse," Moonshadow said primly. I just *had* to introduce her to Grace if she ever went to the surface. They'd get along smashingly!

"Gay," Dusk complained flatly.

Moonshadow snorted. "Oh, as if that's any reason to call off a perfectly good arranged marriage," she said with a roll of her eyes, but she finally smiled. Then she turned to her servant and said

archly, “I trust your discretion?”

He bowed his head. “Yes, ma’am. I shall be sure to get it from the others as well.”

“Good,” Moonshadow said as she pushed her black-framed glasses back up her muzzle. “Now, I need to get these reports finished. Particularly given that we might be at war any day now and I’d hate to have incomplete assignments hanging over my head. Excuse me.” And with that she rose and exited the library, the servant following in her wake.

“Ten Raptors are coming here to seize the tower, and she’s worrying about paperwork?” I asked in bafflement.

Dusk shook her head, then winced. Glory sighed. “She’s always been the responsible one. I…I didn’t know how angry she was with me, though. I thought she liked me.”

“She does, Glory,” Dusk said with a smile. “She’s just cranky. Moonshadow is a perfectionist, if you hadn’t noticed. Smart, sure, but organized too. I used to amuse myself for hours nudging her picture frames off level and then watching her drive herself crazy. Or sharpening one pencil a *little* more than the rest.”

“That annoys me too,” Glory said with a frown. “Well, it did. After the Wasteland... ”

“Yeah. But Moonshadow I could see trying to organize the empty cans in order of rustiness or something,” Dusk said with a tired smile.

“I can’t believe she yelled at me, though. I didn’t think Moonshadow *could* yell,” Glory said ruefully.

“You never rifled through her desk. Could have been worse. At least she didn’t try and kill you,” Dusk said quietly. “Sorry about that, by the way.” She rubbed her head and winced. “Stupid skull fractures.”

“Healing potion didn’t help?” Glory asked with a concerned frown.

“Helped a lot. Spending a week or two locked to a gurney and being questioned half the time didn’t. Hopefully my brain will get the memo and stop hurting.”

“It’s nerves in the bone and muscle or meninges. Brain tissue doesn’t have…” Glory trailed off in the face of the flat look from her sister. “Right. Sorry it hurts.”

Twister and Boomer came back in. “So, what is the plan for meeting with the councilor?” Twister asked Glory. “I mean, y’all got some sort of family connection or something. Right?”

"Actually," Glory rubbed the back of her head. "I was expecting Thunderhead Security to knock on the door five minutes after we arrived. I didn't think we'd actually make it all the way here." We all stared at her with expressions of shock. "What?" she said defensively to me. "You'd disappeared to Maripony, so I just figured I'd do what you'd do and make it up as we go along."

"Glory," I said plaintively. "My ideas are terrible! They've always been terrible. Why in Equestria would you do that?"

"I'm sorry, alright!?" she burst at me. "I'm not a leader! I don't have…whatever it is that *you* have that lets you do things. I just figured we'd get up here and, one way or another, we'd get in contact with the councilor. Maybe she'd find a bunch of surfacers interesting enough to chat with." She bowed her head and crumpled before my eyes, hugging herself with her wings. "I know stuff, Blackjack, but I can't do stuff. Not like you can." Finally, she averted her eyes. "You have no idea how jealous I am of you for it."

Dusk sighed. "Let Moonshadow mull over it, Glory. Not only is she smart, but she hasn't been gone for two months. And the very important ponies like her better."

"What's your plan?" I asked Dusk. She regarded me coolly. After Yellow River, I doubted we'd be friends anytime soon.

"Once my head stops throbbing, I'm going back down to check on Lightning Dancer and Father. I think we'll need both of them here. I need Dancer, and I'm pretty sure Thunderhead is going to need Father. Then we'll see," she replied. "Have to be able to fly for thirty seconds without vertigo sending the world onto the dizzitron first." She stood and winced. "I'm going to go lie down. You two should probably do the same. Nopony is going to see the councilor after hours, and it's late."

"Hmmm! I got it! We sneak in under the cover of darkness and talk to the councilor in her bedroom!" I suggested, grinning ear to ear.

"Blackjack, Enclave councilors have round the clock security," Dusk said in tones that implied she thought everypony should know this. "And Stargazer's husband fought with Father during the dragon attack years back. One shot, one alarm, and things go bad very quickly."

"Maybe…there's a secret passage? Or do you have a photograph of her bedroom? I can teleport in! Maybe?" I looked from one to the next, then groaned. "Ugh, I really don't want to put myself in a position to get arrested just to talk to them about their illegal

bioweapons!"

"Leave it to Moonshadow," Glory said with a sigh. "She's smarter than I am." That said a lot.

"Yeah, but she doesn't have your heart," Dusk said with a small smile. "Or my guts. She'd never go to the surface. She likes a nice, predictable life. No wonder she's pissed. Who could have predicted us?"

I gave her a hug and a nuzzle. Moonshadow might be smart, but I didn't quite trust her. Still, for Glory, I could give it a try…

* * *

Nothing much happened that evening. Rampage broke out bawling while we were in the kitchen with P-21 and Twister. Apparently the movie had been all Boomer said and more. Scotch Tape was speculating how much of the manor she could copy with surface material. Boo was quite put out at the lack of fine snack cake cuisine in the household.

That night, all of us except Twister and Boomer slept on the *Fleur*. Twilight's book said that the spell would last for three days, but I wasn't as good at magic as she was. There was no way I was going to get to sleep with the thought of plunging down through the clouds without warning, so we cleaned up the beds for the night. Glory and I spooned together, me stroking her wings gently till she drifted off.

It took me a while to follow her. I never thought I'd miss being tired. I knew, abstractly, that I needed sleep. I just didn't *feel* like I did. I breathed in the clean smell of her mane…purple or rainbow-striped, she still smelled like my Glory…and let my brain gradually shut down as the *Fleur* quietly creaked around us.

What was waiting for me? Nightmares? Memories of Lacunae's passing? Worse? I guess I would see…

~ ~ ~

"Blackjack! Hurry up! You're going to be late!" Mom called from the living room, up the stairs, where I struggled with my golden armor. The dang buckles were stuck, again! I finally just teleported right out of it and into the shower. Hah! *Take that, buckles*, I thought as I turned on the shower.

Oh. Wait. The armor was still on me. Curse you, buckles! Curse you.

I dumped the saturated armor on my bed, gave myself the briskest rubdown in history, and would worry about it later. I raced down the stairs so fast that I barked my shin where the stairs took a corner. I raced past the living room, where my little sister Boo waited impatiently in her soft pink dress. “You’re not dressing up? You should dress up. Mom, make her dress up!”

“Ugh! We don’t have time,” I groaned. “He’s not going to care if I’m not all frou-froued up!”

Mom looked at me and smiled. “Blackjack. Go dress up.”

Defeated. I returned upstairs, selected a red dress, and wiggled into it. “There! I’m dressed!”

“Brush your mane too,” Boo insisted.

“Mom!”

“Brush your mane. You still have plenty of time.” I sulked spectacularly as Boo took a brush and ran it through my mane and tail a few times.

“There. Now can we go?” I asked. A royal guard wasn’t supposed to look all prissy. We were supposed to be tough and loyal and never give up! We saved ponies.

“Makeu--” Boo began to say, but I levitated a pillow off the sofa and bapped her head with it. “Moooom! Blackjack is using magic to pick on me again!”

“Boo, she doesn’t need makeup. Blackjack, don’t use magic on your sister.” Mom was used to negotiating between us. We finally headed off towards the door. “Have fun.”

“Yes, Mom,” we said in unison as we stepped outside into the warm afternoon light.

~ ~ ~

The creak woke me. It wasn’t like most of the noises on the *Fleur*. Those were soft, repetitive, soothing things. This was one, singular, groan of a plank on the side of the bed that I was facing. One eye opened, and I stared at the empty air above Glory. Nothing. Go back to sleep, Blackjack. Six sleepy ponies in my head all agreed. It was far too early for this.

But something had made that board creak. I stared at nothing while Glory slept like a log beside me. Then, not making a sound, I

drew my sword from its scabbard. It floated slowly over Glory, illuminating her features. I waved it slowly through the air along that side of the bed. Then the air on the other side of the bed gave the slightest of shimmers. A pony with a StealthBuck was standing right next to Glory…

I tensed, ready to strike.

Then the shimmer disappeared entirely as they moved away from me and the bed. Were they just backing away to fire from out of range? The door opened with the slightest of rasps all on its own, and, as quietly as I could, I slipped out of bed. Something was very amiss here. Thankfully, Glory's snores covered the creaks of my own hooffalls. I looked out into the hallway, checked in one direction, then the other. A tin can rocked slowly back and forth by the stairs leading to the deck.

Step by step, I walked out into the open. If this was an assassination attempt, they could have dusted me a half dozen times before now. I swapped from glowing sword to glowing revolvers. "I know you're here," I said quietly as I turned around slowly on deck. "I also know you probably could have killed us down there before I woke up. Or in the hall. Or now. But you haven't yet. So I'm guessing you're here for some other reason." Still nothing. Had they gone? All I could hear was the sound of wind outside the city.

Then the air flashed and the pony showed themselves at the prow of the *Fleur*. I'd seen Enclave power armor before, but I'd never seen power armor like this. It wasn't the clunkier Neighvarro style of armor nor the smoother lines of Thunderhead; this armor concealed every inch of their body, even the undersides of their wings. The uniform black was broken by lines of purple. It had a black cape and a wide-brimmed hat, of all things! The eye slits glowed pale blue as a breeze made the cape flow dramatically behind. All in all I gave it a 9.

"You need to leave," the pony said in a low, synthetic voice that raised my hackles. Make that 9.5.

I gestured to the airship. "It's my boat. You're the one trespassing." I didn't see any guns on the armor, so I lowered mine. "What's your name, friend?"

"Nopony you need to know," they replied. "You're not LittlePip, are you?"

"No. I'm Security. Blackjack, to my friends." I saw the mare start at my name. "You've heard of me. Sorry. I promise I'm not here to

blow anything up."

"Blackjack…" she narrowed her eyes a little. "You need to leave."

"Afraid we just arrived. And it wasn't an easy trip," I added as I approached.

"Congratulations on getting here. Now go home."

I sighed, shaking my head. "So soon? But I really wanted to look around and see the sights. And we need to meet with Chancellor Stargazer and deal with Lighthooves," I answered. I suspected that this wasn't him. He wouldn't bother with disguises. "Who are you?"

"The pony dealing with the situation. Leave," the dark pegasus replied. Stallion? Mare? Well, it was hard to tell with power armor and robo-voice. "You're not one of the bad ponies, but I can't let you stay if you're going to do what she said you would."

She? She who? Dawn? "Crazy thought here. *You* could work with *me*?" I said with a grin, gesturing at them with outstretched hooves and then back at myself. "Help me out, oh mysterious one?" The pony didn't answer. "Come on. Who are you with? Thunderhead? Neighvarro? General Storm Chaser? Lighthooves? What?"

They approached me. "I'm the one telling you to get out of here. I don't know if she was right about you or not, but I can't risk you throwing everything off. You're trotting on stage, thinking you know the steps to this dance. You don't. Trust me. Go home. Lighthooves and the Enclave are being handled." They turned away.

Well, somepony got an A in their 'be cryptic as possible' class. "We can't do that. I came up here to help Thunderhead. To help the Enclave too."

The pony stopped. "I can appreciate the irony, and the sentiment. I also appreciate how asinine your position is. However, you should leave. Thunderhead law enforcement will be occupied tomorrow, so you should just pad your ship again and go home. You have your own problems to worry about."

"Thunderhead is Glory's home. And I can't just leave when everything is about to go wrong. I love her," I finished. There. I said it. Now they had to help me!

The mysterious black and purple pony stopped. "Well. That's admirable." Then they looked back at me. "Go home. I'm told you're supposed to do big things down there. Like the other one. If you don't leave, I'll have to tip off security, and you'll be spending your time out of the way till this is over." And with that, they disappeared in a purple flash.

* * *

"I'm telling you, I saw her! A power-armored pony with a cape and a hat!" I said as we sat around the fancy dining table. Breakfast… well…I didn't want to offend, but I'd had better down on the surface. Sky food was a mix of bland with bland and a side of bland. No Sugar Apple Bombs or Fancy Buck snack cakes. I'd gone over my meeting in the middle of the night, but I was facing far more skepticism than I'd expected. "And they had a StealthBuck and they could teleport and…" there was a soft snicker from Dusk. "What? I saw them! And they told me like a dozen times to leave."

"Sure you did," Dusk said with a grin. "The Mysterious Mare Do Well. Who hasn't?"

"That's an urban myth, Blackjack," Glory said absently as she went over some papers and drawings that Moonshadow had drafted. "The Mysterious Mare Do Well's been seen for almost two centuries now just about everywhere."

"Originally the mare was a wealthy transvestite recluse named Spruce Mane. He dressed up as the Mysterious Mare Do Well and flew around Thunderhead trying to arrest criminals…until the Enclave got sick of it and locked him up. A few years later he tried it again with 'Batmare'," Moonshadow said matter-of-factly. For some reason, a tiny blue pegasus in my mind rolled over laughing at the other five.

"We've had Mare Do Well sightings in Neighvarro, Las Pegasus, over Baltimare," Twister counted off her pinions. Then she grinned at Boomer. "Remember Councilor Whatshername? The one that wanted to send the entire fleet after Mare Do Well for sneaking into her bed? And it turned out to be her marefriend doing some kinky play."

"But I…she…" I sputtered. "She was here! I mean…I had no idea who Mare Do Well was before this morning. I didn't imagine her."

"Well, you do have a tendency to see things no one else did. And you were a part of the Goddess. Who knows what might have been left over in your head," Rampage said as she carved her pancakes with her hoofclaws. "Folks down below see her too. Every now and then when there's a fight with some slavers or raiders and your ass is toast…bam! She appears. Some say she soars by and kicks the heads clean off of her enemies. Others say she uses a gun. Or magic.

But then she's gone…" She smirked at me. "Very…mysterious. Wooooo…"

"But I wasn't fighting. And why was she in my room watching me? If she wanted to take me out, she could have done it just then. I'm sure of it. And why tell me to leave? If she's with Storm Chaser she should help me. And if she's with Lighthooves she should stop me. I'm not seeing a third side here," I grumbled.

"Well, I believe you," P-21 said thoughtfully.

"Thank you!" I said loudly and with great satisfaction.

Then he went on, "But it doesn't change anything. We can't trust them, and we're still at a loss for how to contact the councilor without ending up dead or in jail."

I looked over at Moonshadow, and the indigo-maned pony pushed her glasses up her muzzle with a wing. "Well, I think that I might have a solution. If we had a few days, I could make an appointment and get in to see her. Politicians always make time for campaign contributors, eventually. But there might be an even faster way." She looked over at Glory. "Dr. Morningstar is the councilor's secretary of science. If we talk to him, he might be able to get us in to see her today."

"He is?" Glory blinked in surprise. "He has more letters after his name than anypony I know, but I didn't know he worked with the councilor too."

"It's not something he brings up. You know how much he hates politics," Moonshadow said with a shrug. "He's been in bliss researching and cataloging the surface samples. I see him fairly regularly, and you were one of his favorite students."

"I don't know. He might not be happy to see me," Glory said, chewing her lip. "Or he might be too happy to see me."

"Why not?" Scotch Tape asked from where she was smearing around her Bland Flakes.

"Various reasons... " Glory hesitated a bit before answering. "He didn't want me to go to the surface. Said that it wasn't safe. He preferred to stay in the lab and have other ponies bring samples to him for study. I wanted to go out in the field and save the surface with Enclave science and technology. We didn't part on the best of terms."

"Well, plan B is trying to sneak in. Plan C is getting arrested trying to sneak in," I replied. I wasn't opting for plan D, which was letting General Chaser clean it up herself.

Glory finally sighed and nodded. “Alright.”

“Good. So…how are we going to get there?” I asked. I looked around at the hapless and thoughtful expressions as we tried to think of how to get one cyberpony, three earth ponies, two Neighvarro pegasi, and one Rainbow Dash across Thunderhead.

But Moonshadow only smiled.

* * *

The city of Thunderhead rumbled around us with the life of fifty thousand ponies. Glory told me the city itself offered about eight square miles of living space within the torus, and I wondered how there could be any room left for the dozens of shops, restaurants, and other attractions. We passed theatres and a music hall, and I just wanted to stand there and soak it all in. Small, economical parks were tucked in between colonnades and boulevards; I again could only imagine how they’d managed to get grass to grow on clouds.

And almost all of it *was* made of clouds. Clouds! Cloud clothing and cloud furniture and cloud buildings and cloud theatres. What I took for glass and ceramics were, in fact, rainbows. The idea of it, taking something so beautiful and putting it to practical use, blew me away. What metal was in the city was largely out of sight in the form of electrical wires. Even the plumbing was made of congealed rainbow the consistency of plastic or rubber. Despite it being the middle of the day there were lights of all colors flashing and advertising and informing. Scotch Tape asked where they got the power, and Twister had amusedly reminded her that the sky was where they kept all the lightning.

A lightning-powered city! Made of clouds. And rainbows!

But it was the ponies that really made it special. Ponies talking, eating, laughing, and strolling along. The only ones I saw who were armed were a half-dozen police ponies who nodded respectfully to us as we walked past. I saw foals. Old ponies. Mares and stallions… and none of them were killing each other over bottlecaps and a half-full box of two-century-old cereal. Even Twister and Boomer seemed surprised by all the ponies living inside this wonderful bubble.

We had a few hours to kill till we could meet with Doctor Morningstar, so the six of us simply did whatever seemed

interesting. We nipped into a coffee shop where we listened to three stallions and two mares recite their poetry. We browsed a shop full of clothes that only Grace and perhaps Velvet could properly appreciate. Finally, I begged Rampage to give us an hour in a concert hall, where I listened to actual ponies playing music while she alternated between grumbling under her breath and giving a professional critique. It wasn't a full orchestra or anything, but it was civilization. It was how the world was supposed to be.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. We were deciding where to go for lunch when a skeezy tan pegasus in a large coat walked up to us. "Hey. Hey. Want some B's?"

"Some what?" Scotch asked in confusion.

The pegasus grimaced. "Come on. Some B's! I got a fresh batch. Blue. Straw. Boys. Rasp. I got it all," all he said, and then he spread the coat wide to reveal dozens of small baggies filled with roundish colorful objects. "Straight from the surface! Best shit you ever tasted!"

Ah, civilization…

"Everypony keeps staring at us," P-21 muttered as we ate at a bizarre noodle café. A huge screen over the counter flashed advertisements for feather straighteners before going to some game involving two teams of flyers trying to maneuver an ovoid cloud through a ring. Trying to follow their moves gave me a migraine. The café was crowded and noisy enough that we could talk without being heard, but empty enough that there wasn't much risk of somepony running into me. The meals seemed to be noodles and apples, noodles and potato, noodles and beans…I gnawed on a cyberpony cake.

"'Cause you're a handsome hunk of stallion," Rampage said with a smirk, then slurped a noodle in one long suck. Or it could have been the fact her body was white but her mouth stained with purple.

"Stop it," P-21 growled as he frowned at the crowds around us. "Is it my horn? Is it on straight?"

"It's fine. Wonderglue never wears off. You'll wish it did when it comes time to take it off," I assured him in low tones. I didn't think the pegasi around us would hear a patch of empty air talking, but why take risks? The horns came courtesy of a 'pretty princess alicorn' play kit. Scrape off the sparkles and the blue horn matched almost perfectly. There'd been a green one for Scotch Tape and

white ones for Rampage and Boo. Hopefully nopony noticed that their magical glow was all the same color as I manipulated things around them from under Lancer's cloak.

"She's right, Daddy. You look good as a unicorn," Scotch assured him, then blinked and hastily amended, "I mean, you're a good-looking unicorn. Yup! Real good." She appeared a little young for an Enclave adjunct in her purple Enclave coveralls. Flustered, she glanced at her fork and cleared her throat in annoyance. I made with the magic, twirling the utensil in the bowl and popping it in her mouth with a little more vigor than warranted.

"I'm surprised nopony's stopped us or anything," P-21 said with a frown. "Our plans don't go this well."

"Of course it's going to work. It's not my plan," I reminded him.

He glanced in my direction, then snorted. "Your plans aren't so bad." Did he forget the last month?

"Well, you are being escorted by three ponies in power armor," Boomer said. "Might be that's keeping them back. Though I have to admit that I prefer our old armor. It was a bit more…buckish."

"It's still your old armor. Blackjack just altered it to match Dusk's. That's all," Twister said casually. I'd spent nearly an hour casting and recasting and tweaking Grace's alteration spell. I felt like I had an army of Rampages kicking my skull trying to get the magic to work. I'd only *seen* it once, and Twilight's primer had more on turning apples to oranges than making Neighvarro power armor match Thunderhead armor. Still, I'd managed to make their pair look less like the former and more like the latter. "I don't mind the smoother lines, personally. You do a good job with magicky stuff."

"It's genetic," P-21 said warmly. Two compliments in two minutes? Was he feeling well? Then he turned to Dusk, who seemed to be on the mend after a day out of Enclave custody. "So ponies are intimidated by the armor?"

"Partly," Dusk said in low tones, "but mostly, it's that you're what everypony expects to see. Unicorns here to do a job, with a standard military escort. I've done it five times myself. Babysitting detail. The unicorns gape and stare, like you are. I know what the paperwork looks like and the lingo and most of the security ponies by name." Her smile faded and she frowned at the crowd. "Honestly, I'm a little surprised none of them have stopped us."

"My visitor last night said they wouldn't," I muttered. That got a fresh round of skepticism.

Dusk sighed and shook her head. “Well, I’m still technically MIA, so I can’t call in and verify.”

“You should go to the hospital,” Moonshadow said in concern.

Dusk scowled at her. “I’ve been locked in a med bay for more than a week. And the second I trot into a hospital, a whole lot of ponies are going to have a whole lot of questions for me to answer,” Dusk said sharply, then groaned and rubbed her temples. “I want to get back down there and see Father and Dancer before I spend a month in debriefing and medical treatments.” Then she glanced over at her other sibling. “What’s the matter with you, Glory? You keep fidgeting.”

We all looked over at the third suit of power armor. All anypony could see was a blue muzzle and wings. Everything else was enmeshed in steel. “I gotta go,” Glory muttered.

“Go where?” I asked with a frown. But at the question, three mouths suddenly grinned. “What?” I asked in bafflement as I looked from Dusk, to Boomer, to Twister.

“Oh, first time’s so precious,” Boomer chuckled.

“Shut up. How do I…I mean…” Glory stammered. “This is an emergency! How do I…”

“You just do,” Twister replied a little sympathetically.

Boomer was silent for a moment, then he sighed, “Like that.”

Scotch Tape went bright red and covered her mouth with her hooves as she giggled, her eyes bulging.

“Wait…what?” I asked in confusion.

“I can’t go here! I…that’s disgusting!” I blinked at her and looked at her bowl of noodles. Sure, they were a little bland but... why was a purple unicorn covering her face with her hoof?

Rampage gave an ‘oooooh’ of comprehension. “Power armor handles that?”

“Oh yeah,” Dusk said with a nod. “Unless you really piss off your mechanic. Trust me. You only fly with those talismans disabled once.”

“I always wondered how they went,” Rampage mused.

Then I made the connection and blurted, “Oh! You have to go take a dump?”

A half dozen conversations stopped as every table around stared, wondering which of us had made such an uncivil comment in a civilized setting. Even though I was hidden beneath the invisibility cloak, I still felt my cheeks burning as I sunk down between P-21

and Glory's chairs.

Glory gave one of her long suffering 'Blackjack' sighs. "I will…be right back," Glory said as she turned and trotted away, walking a little too stiffly for it to be just her unfamiliarity with the armor.

As conversations around us returned to normal, I struggled for something else to talk about. "Hey, Twister. Hoarfrost and Afterburner? Are they…well…typical Enclave captains?"

Twister blinked and frowned. "Well. You generally get three kinds. The first are poor folk looking to get an updraft in life. Like me. My home, Brokenwing, has only two hundred ponies in it. We're dead last on the requisition priority list. The only way we get anything is if we sign up and serve. It gets us training and money to send back home."

Boomer spoke up. "Then you get ponies like me. We're believers. We serve because we want to. It's a good gig as long as you don't mind being told what to do, and the Enclave needs fighters. Besides, mares love a pony in power armor," he said with a grin at the table beside him. The mares giggled and played coy. "Lot of us are military family. I serve. My dad served. My grandfather served. Grandmother too."

Twister then frowned. "But then you get families that are... well... *special*. They're connected. They get the best equipment. They fly up the promotion ladder. They land all kinds of cushy jobs as administrators that don't do anything besides sit in their office an hour and then go to meetings in the officers' club. A few are all right, but I can count them on my hooves. The worst, though, want command. And they get it, too, not because they know what they're doing but because they know the right ponies. And once they have command, they want to use it. They'll take a Raptor out and blast a griffin nest because they can. They love ordering the military around like it's their personal toy."

"Chaser wasn't like that," I pointed out.

"No. If they were all that way, the GPE would have fallen apart years ago." Twister paused in consideration, then went on. "General Chaser's one of the commanders with actual combat experience. There's a few like her, all older ponies. Ponies who knew better two generations ago. Lots of them were pushed out when Harbinger skipped over and was appointed High General, the first High General with no live combat experience. Most commanders get a yearly war game, which boils down to bragging rights. But General

Chaser's fought Talon assault squads and driven off dragon incursions. She was front and center during the windigo incursion in the north thirty years ago," Twister said with a smirk. "You might not realize it, but bumping into you has made us practically combat vets. If we live through this and the shit doesn't hit the fan, we might even be bumped up ourselves."

Boomer chuckled, "I'll finally make Sarge. And Momma said it'd never happen."

"I didn't know that. I thought that all Enclave soldiers were well experienced," I said quietly.

"Well-drilled. But drills only take you so far. Then you run into a unicorn in a restricted area and you try to detain her and she thumps all three of you and rides you off into the Wasteland," Twister said with a frown. "Thank goodness we were able to gloss over the details of that."

"Fact is, Enclave's in trouble. Most ponies know it, but we just don't think about it. Live fer today and don't think about what's goin' on. Hell, I was like that before bumping into you. But nopony's doing anything about it till now. With Thunderhead bucking the system and Maripony--" Boomer began, but then the screen lit up just as one of the stallions kicked the cloudball straight at the ring like a bullet.

The game was interrupted by a special bulletin, and the café erupted in boos and gripes. Still, the volume was more than sufficient to hear over the outcry. A somber gray stallion held paper in his fetlocks as he stared soberly into the camera. "This is TNN with a breaking report. We have just confirmed that the explosion on the edge of the Everfree No Fly Zone was in fact a balefire detonation device. The military has stated that the weapon was an obsolete citykiller equivalent to the device that destroyed Cloudsdale two centuries ago. While there are no civilian casualties, Enclave military has yet to confirm or deny rumors that several Raptors were critically damaged in the explosion."

The screen cut to green pegasus mare in an Enclave uniform. "This is our official statement of events. The Enclave discovered the presence of a zebra balefire weapon being stored at a prewar facility and deemed it a critical threat to Enclave civilians. In the course of disarming the device, it detonated. Minor radiation spikes were detected in the settlements of High Cloud, New Pegasus, and Hightown. No civilian casualties reported. If you suspect you have

been exposed to balefire radiation, please report to an Enclave medical facility."

"Here it comes," Dusk said with a roll of her eyes, "the reminder."

The green mare droned on, with pictures popping up in the corners of the screen. "The Enclave military believes this should be a lesson to all citizens of the GPE that the surface, even after two hundred years, remains exceptionally hazardous and beyond our ability to return to for the foreseeable future. While we doubt there are other weapons such as this, the possibility persists of catastrophic damage from the surface. Biological, chemical, and radiological hazards abound, as well as barbarity and lawlessness." The pictures showed ominous black and white images of two raiders standing over a corpse, an emaciated pony foaming at the mouth, a brahmin, and a hellhound crouched and ready to pounce. "We encourage everypony to keep to the skies, safe in our Enclave. Thank you." Dusk said the last line verbatim under her breath, perfectly in chorus with the green mare.

Most of the ponies in the café who had been listening returned to their conversations or watching the hoofball match, but a few looked concerned or angry. I noticed there'd been no mention of alicorns, Raptors lost, casualties, Red Eye, or LittlePip. I supposed that the Enclave would have liked to cover it up entirely, but when a balefire bomb went off, some ponies were likely to notice.

Then a pink mare approached our table. "Excuse me. I…I was just wondering…my husband was on the *Wind Cutter*. He said he'd contact me a week ago, but I haven't heard from him. Do you know…" the mare trailed off as she gazed in equal hope and nervousness at Twister.

Twister looked at Boomer a moment, then back at the mare. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I can't say."

"Oh…I…I'm sorry. I just thought... " She sniffed and averted her head. "Excuse me."

When she'd left the café, I said, "That was one that was lost at Maripony, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It was," Twister said, her lips in a firm frown. "I had some friends on that ship too. Good ponies." She sighed and shook her head. "Damned Stable Dweller."

"LittlePip didn't know," I said immediately, getting some more looks. Hopefully the patrons would think ventriloquism was a unicorn trait. "If she had, I know she would've done something

different." Actually, I didn't know. Maybe LittlePip would have found another way. But she'd killed hundreds, maybe thousands, of hellhounds with that bomb…maybe she would have blown it anyway.

Twister sighed. "I'm not saying she did. But that's hard to swallow, stacked up against friends I'll never see again."

Glory trotted back to the table. "We've got to go."

Dusk sighed, "For the love of clear skies, just go. The armor takes care of it. Trust me."

"Not that!" Glory hissed. "I overheard the waiter putting a call in to security."

"Not all at once!" I said as we all started to rise in unison. "P-21, Scotch, Twister, you go first and meet us back at that park with the rainbow waterfall thingy. Rampage, Boomer, you go next. Take your time. Glory, Boo, Dusk, and I will head out last. Give us five minutes. Moonshadow, go pay the bill," I rattled off at once.

"Why me?" Moonshadow frowned.

"Because of all of us you're the only pony not a fugitive, from an enemy faction, or from the surface," I replied as softly and seriously as I could manage. "And if anypony asks, you can blame it all on Dusk."

"Gee, thanks," Dusk said dryly as P-21 and Scotch Tape followed Twister towards the door while Moonshadow trotted to the counter to pay the bill.

"Hey, I'd take the blame, but I don't think Thunderhead knows about me yet," I replied.

"I'd say they do," Glory said in a faint voice as she stared up at the television screen.

A flashy, bold animation done in brilliant colors was starting, and I froze in bewilderment as I stared at an animated copy of myself blasting away raiders…or were they mutants…with a shotgun and a maniacal grin. Next to me was an annoyed-looking LittlePip. A cocky Calamity flew overhead while P-21, far more sulkily handsome than ever, blasted a whole battalion of feral ghouls with a missile launcher, then coolly blew his bangs out of his face. And where'd he get that bandana? A vapid Homage and gray-coated Glory hung in the background. Most incomprehensible of all was a strange pink filly with a toy gun that somehow brought down beams of light from the skies. Rampage seemed cast as a villain, wearing bladed armor and grinning psychotically. The animation

ended with the bold title of 'Wastelander!' and that it was coming next month to the 'Fantasy Channel'.

"They made me into a cartoon," I muttered in a daze. "They… who…how…buh…" I sat down hard. I had nothing…My life had officially become *entertainment*.

Unfortunately, I was so entranced by the surrealism of seeing a cartoon of myself that I missed the waitress walking behind me with two trays of food on her extended wings. Being invisible, it was easy to forgive her for walking right into me and dumping a half dozen bowls of steaming noodles all over me.

Really, I'd been hurt by worse, but I made a sudden discovery: zebra stealth cloaks don't work when soaked in broth and coated in wiggly noodles. The waitress gaped at me, every bit as stunned as I'd been a second ago. She took in my metallic limbs and plates fused to my hide and had a completely rational reaction to a cybermare appearing out of thin air: she screamed at the top of her lungs as she backed away as rapidly as possible.

And then everything went mad.

The crowd tried rushing out at the same time that blue uniformed pegasi were trying to get in. I looked at Glory and Boomer. "Get out of here. I'll find you later." I held up my foreleg with my PipBuck.

"Right!" Rampage said as she glanced at the scrum at the door, then at the wall. "Mmm. That wall doesn't look all that structural."

"Got it," Boomer said as he pointed his beam rifle at it. The tips glowed bright red as the weapons let out a hum of charging up. "But it might tak--"

Rampage charged across the floor and slammed her hooves into the wall again and again in a fury that tore the wall to pieces. The white surface disintegrated into fog, and she trotted back to Boo and casually hefted her onto her back. "What? They're *clouds*," she said scornfully, then trotted out again.

"Wallop my withers. Are all earth pony mares like that?" Boomer asked, then shook his head hard. "Nevermind. See you later," he said as he trotted out. I saw Dusk and Moonshadow by the exit, the latter making a good enough show of panic that they didn't notice the former ducking her head in pain.

That just left…"I'm not leaving without you," Glory said firmly.

"Yes, you are," I contradicted. From the laying-back of her ears, I knew I was in some pretty big trouble. "Glory, they just freaked out because they saw a cyber unicorn. How will they react when they

realize there's a Rainbow Dash in Thunderhead?" I grabbed her and kissed her firmly on the lips to forestall any argument. I could hear very authoritative shouts outside. Why did it feel like Mare Do Well's 24 hour leniency was suddenly a lot shorter? "Don't worry about me."

"Worry about you? I'm worried about Thunderhead! Bad things happen when you're on your own, Blackjack!" she said as she smiled, then hugged me. "I am worried about you."

"Hey!" I said as I levitated off the cloak and wrung it out in the vain hope that that would fix it. "Things were way too quiet anyway. You go meet up with the others and talk to Doctor Whatshisname. I'll keep everyone busy."

"Try not to blow up my home by accident. Please," Glory said before giving me one last parting hug and rushing out the hole Rampage had ripped open. I put my guns away. These were security ponies, just like back in Stable 99. I wasn't going to shoot them... but I was going to make them *earn* their noodles today.

I burst out the front door and beheld the one skywagon and the half dozen officers around it. They stared at me. I grinned at them… and then things rapidly went downhill from there as I pounced into the midst of them like a cybernetically-augmented jungle cat. I ducked my head under a mare who was yelling something about me surrendering right before I rolled her across my back and launched her up into the air with a buck of my rump. She smashed into an airborne blue stallion, and they both went tumbling to the ground in a heap of clouds.

"Catch me if you can!" I yelled as I raced in a direction away from my friends. I'd have to hide someplace till I got the cloak working again. I didn't dare lead them towards Glory's home or the university…so I travelled in the general direction of 'away'! Only Glory could have been more conspicuous than an augmented unicorn. I raced along the street, yelling, "Clear the way! Excuse me! Coming through! Madmare on the loose!"

I raced through a sidewalk café, lifting tables, chairs, and pegasi above me and dropping them down as I rushed past. Of course, that didn't do much for ponies who could fly, but still. It was attention on me. I dove into a shop and tore out the other side trailing a half-dozen garments. Really, polka dots? Those had to have gone out of style two centuries ago.

"Halt right there!" a burly red stallion shouted as he landed right in

my path. Unfortunately for him, he may have been larger than me, but he was nowhere near as dense; I ploughed right over him like a train through a fog bank. “Or…continue. That’s good too,” he groaned behind me.

“Sorry!” I bellowed back at him as I jumped over a table and the startled ponies eating lunch. Oh yes, it seemed like I had quite shaken things up. A half-dozen police dived at me from every corner. I could have killed one, made a hole, and evaded…but if I was going to start down that road, I doubted I’d kill just one.

“We got you!” a mare shouted as I closed my eyes and concentrated. Come on horn, you can do…apparently it couldn’t, as the six ponies piled on me from every side. I focused. Pushed as I was driven to the ground under the mound of ponies. I think more were piling on top of them! Even a cyberpony has her limits.

Then a flash as I made fifty feet. I staggered back and forth, double vision dancing in my sight. I looked back at the very un-thrilled faces of the Enclave security. From the black on my horn, no, I wasn’t going to be teleporting again soon. I hoped I had enough resiliency to keep my telekinesis. From the grim expressions on the law enforcement ponies’ faces, I was going to need it.

Unfortunately, things were getting crowded. There were a lot of civilians along this street. I spotted a skywagon lifting off and rushed to it, leaping into the back. Again, small inconvenience to ponies who could fly, but it was getting me away from where I might accidentally maim somepony. The mare pulling it looked back at me, her eyes wide and not quite believing what was on her wagon. “Give me a lift?” I asked with a grin, gesturing upwards with a hoof.

She screamed and rolled upside down, dumping myself and half the wares in the wagon onto the streets below. I grabbed an unrolling bolt of brilliant red cloth in my teeth, forehooves, and magic, and the fabric suddenly went taut and slowed my decent. I soared over the crowds, many of whom were gaping and whooping in amazement. The blue uniformed security ponies, however, had had quite enough. They flew over the top of my improvised parachute, hooked it, and lifted. The cloth jerked me up, and I hung there until they set me down in a plaza of some sort. They’d gotten beam guns, too…that wasn’t good. They might not kill me with those, but it was way too crowded to risk bystanders.

“I give up!” I said as I dropped to the clouds. “You got me. I

surrender." When my horn was rested up, I'd teleport out of custody, meet up with Glory, and…

Then the crowd erupted in cheers, and a white stallion with a silver mane and a spectrum burst for a cutie mark pushed his way forward. His eyes were hidden by opaque black glasses. "That was magnificent! Exactly how BJ would do it, Babe." He put a hoof around my shoulder and waved to the crowd. "But you weren't supposed to start the publicity stunts until next week!" I noticed he had a fancy-looking PipBuck on the waving hoof.

"Huh?" the security ponies around me said, too baffled to notice that I said the same thing as well. One covered her face. "Don't tell me that this is *another* one of your damned publicity stunts, Chicanery."

"Hey hey hey! I'd say this was a good stunt. A damned good stunt. Maybe a little premature. Gonna be hard to top it before the release." He turned to the crowd, who were now quite amused by my madcap charge through town. "You want to see the same or better? Tune in to 'Wastelander!' next month! Guaranteed to blow your mind!" He gripped me a little firmer around the shoulders and whispered, "Wave to your audience, Blackjack." I gave a sickly little smile and waved.

"Damn it," the mare who spoke earlier swore under her breath. "You're lucky this was just a spectacle, Chicanery. If one pony reports so much as a bent feather or a bruised hoof from this, I'm going to fine you so hard you'll never work in this town again!" She turned to the others. "Come on. False alarm." She lifted off and pointed one last time at the white pegasus. "This is going to be reported, though! Don't think it isn't!"

"Report away, as long as you watch!" he replied gaily, then turned to me. "Come on. Let's get my actress out of sight, Babe! That was stupendous!"

I went along as far as getting out of sight of the officers before I just looked at him flatly. "Who are you?"

* * *

Spectrum Studios had been a movie production house before the war and had seen no reason to stop when the world ended. The office was filled with canisters of film, slides, and dozens of movie posters. Many of the most carefully preserved were from before the

war. “Good thing we’re in Thunderhead. Neighvarro would have destroyed them. They don’t even like admitting that there *is* a ground unless it’s to remind us that we’ll die if we get within sniffing distance,” he said as he took off his glasses and trotted over to a sofa, flopping down and grinning at me. “Wow. Blackjack. I mean…wow. I don’t know what to say.”

“You can say how you know things about me?” I replied, happy that he’d gotten me out of trouble but really wanting answers.

“Right! Good question, that.” He rose to his hooves. “I’ve been a huge fan of the ground. I mean…I’d never go there myself. I’d last all of five minutes down there. Look at me. Glory’s tougher than I am,” he said with that dazzling smile. “Would you like something to drink? Snacks? I got berries.”

I’d ignore the saliva responding to that statement. “I’d like to know how a pegasus who never goes to the surface knows about me. You called me by my name, not Security.” And he’d mentioned Glory.

He sighed and then ran his hoof though his elegant mane. “Well. I suppose I owe you that much. I mean, I’m planning to release a whole Life of the Lightbringer in a year or two.” He lifted his hoof and tapped the PipBuck. “It’s because of these.”

“Come again?” I frowned.

“PipBucks are wonders of technology. Storage and processing aside, they’re constantly taking in and putting out signals. That’s how they work. Say you pick up some junk…well, the PipBuck might not know what it is, so it asks another terminal. And if that one doesn’t know, then it’ll ask another and another. And in almost an instant, it’ll identify that thing. Then it might average out trading prices to tell you, in general, how much it’s worth! Astonishing!” he said with an eager grin.

“Where’d you get yours?” I asked, nodding at his navy blue broadcaster. It made his smile waver a little, but a second later the grin returned.

“Heirloom. But it’s not what made me able to follow your adventures,” he said as he stood, trotted to a wall, and lifted down a poster to reveal a safe. When he opened it, he pushed the stuff inside to the sides and then pushed a button in the back. The wall behind me gave a click, and he closed the safe and trotted to another poster... and behind that was a hidden panel. “I know, you might think me paranoid, but when you see this…” He pushed the panel in and slid it into the wall. Then, carefully cradling it with his

wings, he withdrew and presented to me a silver helmet. It had all kinds of lightbulbs, talismans, and wires coming off it. “This is the Perceptitron.”

“Your own invention?” I asked with an awkward smile. It was the most ridiculous looking gadget I’d ever seen. It had a little fan whirling at the temple!

“Hardly! This was developed by Stable-Tec and the Ministry of Awesome for use in the S.P.P.” He turned it so I could see the winged thunderbolt on the front. “I think this was a prototype. I found it in a lab in the Tower when I was a kid. Took me years to get it to work right.”

“And how *does* it work?” I asked as I pointed a hoof at it.

“It allows the wearer to spy on the experiences of a pony wearing a PipBuck,” he said grandly. “Wicked, huh?”

“It…what?” I asked, somewhat stunned and a little baffled. And he’d been using it to spy on me?

“Well, there’re limits. They have to be in range of the MASEBS towers, and cracking the encryption takes forever. Some PipBucks have only vision and others give me nasty feedback. I’ve only been able to do it with a dozen or so ponies. But when DJ Pon3 started talking about all of you heroes down there, I had to see for myself.” He was so enthusiastic that I didn’t know if I should be impressed or beating him soundly about the head and shoulders. Maybe both. “It took me four days to access the Stable Dweller. Three days for yours.”

“And what have you seen?” I asked archly.

He caught my tone and coughed awkwardly as he looked down at the helmet, “Only bits and pieces. It’s only good for fifteen or twenty minutes before it starts overheating. But I saw you in Hightower fighting that ghoul. And when you faced those Harbingers at the sandpit. And a few other things. Nothing intimate…intentionally. I have some standards,” he said with a slightly nervous smile and got himself out of a thumping.

“Intentionally?” I asked, arching a brow and watching him sweat.

“Well…I just happened to jump in while the Stable Dweller was with a pony named Homage? Wow…just…wow…” he said with a sheepish grin. “But nothing I’d ever put in film! Probably. Most likely.”

“Uh-huh,” I replied dryly as I surveyed the studio. “And you used this Perceptitron thing to look at the Wasteland?”

"For the last two or three years," he nodded and walked to the studio window. "For a while, I was completely baffled. Every report the Enclave gave us was either a gross exaggeration or blatant turd rain. But when I realized that they were lies, I couldn't exactly call them on it. If they found my Perceptitron, then they'd take it and destroy it. And me with it." Then he gestured to the studio. "But I could use what I saw to make films about the Wasteland."

"Come again?" I asked with a frown. "Wouldn't they ban those too?"

"If they were documentaries, sure. Faster than you can say 'redaction', Babe." He grinned even more. "But all my films are 'fiction', and so long as I show lots of horrible raider ponies and brown on the surface, the Enclave doesn't mind. A few might question how I get so accurate, but I'm seen every day up here, so they can't accuse me of breaking quarantine." He wore a smile ear to ear at his own cleverness. "But I can show more than just horribleness. I can show struggle. I can show heroism that's not out of a propaganda piece. I can give them a taste of what's down there." He polished his hoof on his chest. "Doesn't hurt that my films have made me a lot of money, too."

For some reason, I found myself scowling at him. Something about his eagerness and smugness rubbed me the wrong way. "A taste? Which? How about my friend getting his face melted off by a ghoul? Or my other friend sacrificing her existence so her kind might have a chance? Or my love's mother almost killing her father right before her eyes?" I caught his flinch. "Oh, you saw that one, did you? Did you see the aftermath where she tried desperately to save his life, or was that not fun?"

He held up his hooves. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like life down there is fun." His grin was gone, and he lowered the glasses to look at me in the eye. "It's just that life up here is…it's like everypony is asleep! It's the same pro-war yet isolationist stories every day, every year. It's not living. You live more down below in one day than some ponies their entire lives up here."

"Chicanery, be glad it's boring. Because if the Wasteland ever made it up here, you'd wish for boring. You'd *crave* boring," I said as I stared at the device, then at him. "You know about Glory?"

He gave a wary smile. "Oh yeah. The Rainbow Dash thing? Far out. But too far out, I can't use it. Nopony would believe it."

"Can I use your machine thing to make sure she's okay?" I asked

with a frown.

He licked his lips, frowning in thought. “If you got her PBT, we can try, Babe.” ‘PBT’, I realized, was ‘PipBuck Tag’. He put the heavy helmet on top of my head and started attaching wires to a cloud terminal. As he worked, he went on and on about this S.P.P., a massive weather control device. I’d heard snippets before, but to hear about a system that let one pony control all the weather across the Wasteland was a bit overwhelming. Chicanery talked eagerly and enthusiastically about it, seeing it from the perspective of a young stallion in love with stories.

Me? I’d seen what secret super-projects could do. I added dealing with the S.P.P. somewhere on my list of things to do before the world ended. “Why would Rainbow Dash want it, though?”

“Well, Stable-Tec had the machinery to put a pony’s mind in a machine. Wicked cool, huh Babe?” I thought of Horse’s knockoff and merely grunted. “Well, RD wasn’t interested in that. So she got some stasis thingy and made an interface for the S.P.P. She was supposed to be able to see all across the country and control the weather though it. This works the same way, but it accesses the sensory info going in and out of a PipBuck.”

He knew me, so I assumed it worked. “I just want to check on her,” I said as sent the tag info to the terminal.

“Sure Babe. Hold on. It’s going to be a crazy ride.” There were a few beeps, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

This wasn’t a wild ride. I’d done this before; a whole lot before. It was the same sensation I had in the dozens of memory orbs I’d been in. The difference was, instead of being from years or centuries ago, this was live. It also wasn’t a perfect experience: the colors were all shifted a little towards the red, and there was a persistent feedback noise in my left ear.

It was also the first time I appreciated what it meant to be Rainbow Dash in her prime. This body practically thrummed with strength. I wanted to fly, and I wasn’t even a pegasus. The power armor she wore moved like a second mechanical skin that I felt very familiar with as well. Glory was in some kind of official-looking building; the walls were that particular pale beige that spoke of serious ponies in serious suits having serious meetings and nodding

seriously at the choice of a serious paint color and the serious number of forms needed to implement it.

"I'm telling you, that alert shouldn't have been called off. Blackjack running like mad should have brought in a wing of Intelligence ponies at least," Dusk said irritably as she limped along. "If it had been a publicity stunt, they should have hauled in Chicanery by his balls and taken them as a fine."

"Chicanery does this all the time," Moonshadow said calmly from in front of us. "You remember that griffin he dressed up as Gilda for 'The Last Stand of Rainbow Dash'? Nearly caused a panic, but you have to admit that he sold tickets. Him getting a tower unicorn to pull off a pony from his next series isn't unthinkable."

"He'd be a star in Neighvarro for his own execution," Twister said from somewhere behind Glory. "I think there's a standing warrant for his arrest."

"Well, this isn't Neighvarro," Moonshadow said sourly. "We actually have rights in Thunderhead."

"I just hope Blackjack is okay," Glory said.

They walked into a reception area where a green stallion with large wire-framed glasses greeted them with an eager smile. "Sweet, Professor Moony! Did the college finally spring for some unicorns to fix those talismans?"

"Something like that," Moonshadow said with a glance at Glory. "Could you find out if Doctor Morningstar can speak with me a moment, Beryl? It's urgent."

"About the signal?" he said as he picked up a phone.

"No. But it's really important," Moonshadow said as she walked through a door and into a room with a dozen terminals scattered around strange equipment. Some of it looked vaguely familiar; I thought I'd seen things like it in Professor Zodiac's planetarium. The machines all hummed quietly and made strange beeps. Two stallions on the far side of the room waved at their entry before returning to their work.

Glory looked back at Rampage, P-21, and Scotch Tape as the blue stallion said, "What signal?"

"The hundred-thousand bit question," she said with a sigh. "It's something the Tower picked up a few weeks ago, being transmitted from space." Rampage and Scotch Tape immediately perked up, but Moonshadow went on, "Don't get your hopes up for ponies with antennae. There's lots of defunct equipment up there. Even some

really big weapon satellites are still in orbit."
"Of course there are," Rampage drawled sarcastically. "They ran out of places on the surface to put guns, so why not put more of them in space?"
"Relax. There were only a few put up there, and only one of them has ever fired. It would take a genius to figure that one out," Moonshadow said, then added, "Besides, what makes you think all of them are ours?" The three earth ponies looked quite uneasy at that little tidbit, as was I, but Moonshadow continued as if it were no matter at all for an astronomer, "This signal, though, wasn't some old communication lodged in a buffer and finally kicked out. This was a machine message seeking something called EC-1101."
The gray mare sighed and shook her head. "Unfortunately, after a month of analysis, we still don't have a clue what this EC-1101 thing is."
"Blackjack's PipBuck program?" Glory asked, and Moonshadow froze.
"You know what it is?" Moonshadow asked archly. When Glory nodded, Moonshadow rubbed her temples. "Four weeks of driving ourselves nuts trying to figure it out, and you just know." She took a seat and picked up a clipboard with her wings. "Out with it." And she picked up a pencil in her mouth.
"Well, I don't know exactly, but according to Blackjack it's a special program that Luna put out when the bombs fell. It basically passes leadership of Equestria to whoever has the program. It's a megaspell of some kind and you can use it to take over any system that's been locked down," Glory said, and Moonshadow wrote it all down.
"Interesting," Moonshadow said with a frown when she'd finished and set the board aside. "Near as I can tell, there's at least five people trying to send a signal back to space to talk to it. Even a communication or spy satellite would be a huge asset today."
"Five?" P-21 said with the exact same worry I felt.
"We've been trying to talk to it," she said as she gestured to the equipment with a wing. "We've been using our transmitter, but it's ignoring us. I picked up the Enclave's Starwatcher transmitter on Pinnacle Peak, so Neighvarro's trying to chat with it as well."
"I thought they scrapped that," Dusk said to Twister and Boomer.
"Heck if I know. PP is a red zone. We're not allowed in," Boomer said, then grinned at Scotch and Rampage. "They're always looking

for unidentified flying objects."

"The last three are…strange. Two are coming from the Core, but one of them is gigasparks stronger. I almost couldn't pick out the second signal. The stronger signal, though, is a doozy." She stretched over with a wing and tapped a terminal. "Where is it…" she muttered under her breath.

Then the scream began, only instead of hearing it inside my head I was hearing it with my ears. One long, continuous garbled screaming noise. Even though the volume wasn't loud, it still unnerved everypony. Moonshadow grinned. "Pretty creepy, huh? It's machine speak. I can't even pick through a hundredth of the junk to find out what it's actually saying." Moonshadow killed it, but I could remember it.

I'd heard it before. I heard it all the time down in the tunnels. The scream of Enervation. That it was a signal too was even more unnerving. It was like speech that melted flesh.

"What about the last one?" Scotch Tape asked. "That's only four."

"Last one?" Moonshadow blinked at the filly in confusion, then her eyes widened. "Right. I always seem to forget about that signal. It's coming from Black Pony Mountain." She announced it, and immediately I felt a strange indifference fall over me. It wasn't important. That was just a boring chunk of black rock. Nothing special about it at all. And clearly everypony agreed.

The door opened, and Beryl poked his head in. "Professor? Doctor Morningstar says he'll be between test strings in an hour. That's your best chance to talk to him."

I wanted to listen more, but the feedback whine was growing unbearable. "Hey, Chicanery. Unplug me from this, will you?" I said aloud; at least I hope I did. "Chicanery?" I hoped I wasn't going to have to do a manual override and break the damned thing. Then the world swirled away once more.

oooOOOooo

I let out a sigh of relief as I returned to my own body. "Thanks. That was…interesting." I pushed the helmet off my head and turned to the terminal.

"Oh, it's just starting to get interesting," a stallion said, a stallion who shouldn't be here. He smiled his kind, polite smile. The same smile he'd worn when he'd ordered Glory's cutie mark burned off.

Lighthooves.

"I saved Glory's life," Lighthooves said in a rush moments before I slipped into S.A.T.S. It had the effect of tossing a wrench into delicate, whirring machinery. I hissed like ruptured steam pipe as I looked at him; he wore some fancy new white power armor. Something about it seemed…familiar. I couldn't see any weapons, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. Four magical bullets to the head and my job here would be made so much simpler. All I had to do was kill an unarmed pony. I tried to dig deep down, find my inner Rampage, and take his head off. Ten seconds later, he still had his head. The armored stallion relaxed noticeably. "Glad you see you still honor a debt."

"Leger?" Chicanery said from the door. "Oh. You're here. I thought I heard your voice." The white pegasus looked from Lighthooves to myself and arched a brow. "You two know each other?"

"Indeed we do, Cannery," Lighthooves said as he trotted over to a cupboard and opened it with a metal-covered wing, fished around with two pinions, and extracted a bottle. "Here. I think Blackjack will be needing this. I think her headache is only just beginning."

"You know him?" I demanded of Chicanery. "Do you know what kind of a monster he is?"

That took some of the amusement off the director's lips. "Well, I didn't have much choice in the matter. He's my brother," Chicanery said with an amused smile, then turned to Lighthooves. "Nice armor. What brings you from the Tower, Leger?"

"Wait!" I snapped, interrupting him. "Brother? Leger?"

"It's short for 'Legerdemain'. A fancy griffin term for 'sleight of hoof. Or claw, as the case may be." He chuckled and opened the bottle for me before setting on the desk beside the Perceptitron. "You don't think I took my code name for the illumination of my feet, did you?"

"Brothers?" I asked, frowning from one to the other and really wishing Glory was here. "I didn't think ponies who didn't exist had family."

Lighthooves laughed, "Oh, please. Any good intelligence agency has operatives off the books. The good ones don't get caught and the bad ones never had anything to do with the intelligence agency in the first place." He smirked at me. "For the most part, I've never had to deal with witnesses. Your group is the only exception I've made." He turned to Chicanery. "I came because of a bizarre report

I heard that you were using a unicorn look-alike for Security. When I heard it, I simply had to check for myself."

"When I saw her tearing through the market, I knew she was the real deal," Chicanery said with a grin. "I was right."

"Indeed you were," Lighthooves replied with a calm smile. "And I think that Blackjack might be just the thing I need for the coming conflict with Neighvarro."

"Wait!" I waved my hooves at him. "Stop right there! You think I'm going to work for you?"

"Why not?" Lighthooves replied, having the gall to appear surprised at my rejection.

"Because you're the bad guy!" I shouted, exasperated that I couldn't just kill him. "You made Glory a Dashite, almost got her sister to kill her, and you've got all the parts you need for a biological attack that could kill thousands!"

"I apologize. When we first met, I honestly didn't expect you or your friends to be as effective as you were. My actions with Glory were to stymie the Volunteer Corps. That failed. When you destroyed the *Celestia*…well…your potential increased exponentially." He leaned towards me. "I saw you at Yellow River. I know what you're capable of."

I growled at him. "You were the one that flew away." He nodded once. I turned to Chicanery. "Do you know what he's done?"

"Babe, I don't want to know and he doesn't tell me," Chicanery said with a firm shake of his head. "Leger has always done what needed to be done. I don't know what his history with you is, but I know it's for a good cause." But the white stallion looked worried as he looked at his brother, as if searching for confirmation.

"All I've done is to try to prevent an attack on our home," he said calmly. "My methods you might not agree with, but I think that you should agree with my aims. Thunderhead must take over leadership of the Enclave."

"The Enclave is coming to break your wings and shove those missiles up your ass. I saw what they're bringing against you," I warned.

"They'll fail. The zebra missiles are more than capable of evading their patchy, ill-maintained tracking systems. One demonstration should make that abundantly clear," Lighthooves said confidently. "The missiles will be a deterrent, not a weapon. They'll make the Enclave back off, and time will make certain that they fail.

Thunderhead will make new weapons with the resources of the Hoof, and as their Raptors fall to pieces, we'll take our place leading both the Grand Pegasus Enclave and the surface."

"And if they do attack anyway?" I asked sharply.

"Shadowbolt Tower has defensive weapons," Lighthooves replied, but his smug smile vanished.

"But you're not certain they can deal with what's coming, are you?" I asked, then looked at Chicanery. "When the Enclave and Thunderhead had your first conflict, how many Raptors did they send?"

"Four," Chicanery replied.

"They're sending ten," I replied.

"Ten?!" gaped Chicanery, before turning to a grim-faced Lighthooves. "Leger, that's almost a quarter of the entire fleet!"

"We have other weapons," Lighthooves replied, his smile returning. "We fought four Raptors to a standstill last time they came. They won't risk it."

"Have you met Captains Afterburner and Hoarfrost?" I asked, "Trust me, they'll risk it. It won't matter how shiny and new your power armor is. They want to risk it. Harbinger was going to attack you anyway despite your weapon."

Chicanery took off his glasses, his red eyes pleading with his brother. "Leger!"

"Quiet," Lighthooves replied as he turned away. "The situation is being managed."

"By who?" I asked as I trotted back in front of him. He glared at me, and I pressed the question. "Who's calling the shots here? Is it you? Somepony above you?" I asked with a frown. "This all feels… off. The whole plan feels like it either wasn't thought through, or somepony is mucking with things. This bioweapon deterrent isn't the real deal, is it?"

"You don't know what's going on, Blackjack," he muttered, turning away again.

"Story of my life!" I said, levitating him up and turning him around to face me again. "So why don't you tell me?"

"Why don't you tell me too, Leger? It'll make for a great story," Chicanery said with concern. "We grew up in the Tower. It was our home. So if there's something going on there, I want to know too."

"Blackjack, if I tell you, will you promise…on your life…on Glory's life…to help us in the fight with Neighvarro?" he asked.

“Will you give up all your biological weapons?” I countered.
“No. I can’t,” he said with a fatalistic smile.
“Then you know I can’t,” I replied.
“Legerdemain, what’s going on?” Chicanery said in a horrified tone. “Tell me!” Lighthooves still didn’t answer. “Damn it, stop trying to be the smug pony in the room and tell me what you’re planning to do!”
Lighthooves whirled on him. “You like stories? Once upon a time, there was a pony who loved his home very much. But his home was threatened by idiots who were jealous of their plenty. And for years they’ve threatened, insulted, and derided that pony’s home and everypony living there. And that pony decided he would do anything to stop them. But the idiots only respond to threats and force, so he would create a threat. A real one.”
“But... Leger... that’s crazy,” Chicanery replied.
“No. It’s sane. It’s the only thing they respond to. The Enclave leadership knows that they don’t have the resources to control the populace, fight Thunderhead, and deal with an outbreak of a deadly pandemic. They’ll negotiate,” he said grimly. “And they’ll ask for the pony responsible.”
“You,” I said. “You’re setting yourself up as a villain to take a fall for Thunderhead.”
“But I am not an idiot. If the Enclave has the audacity, the stupidity, to attack my home, then I have made certain that they will suffer for it,” he replied grimly. “I will see a dozen of them eating and tearing each other apart for every one of my people they harm. And that is why I can’t give the weapons over to you.”
Right. I needed to pull the plug on this nightmare right away. Either Councilor Stargazer or that Director Stratus would need to rein him in. Somepony couldn’t have had all the facts here, or else they were even crazier than Lighthooves. “Does the councilor know about this plan?”
He sniffed. “The councilor would wet herself if she heard of it. She’ll be informed by certain important ponies when the Enclave arrives.” I thought the councilor needed to know about it well before then. Like right now. The urgency of getting in touch with her was definitely growing greater by the second.
“But ten Raptors,” Chicanery breathed. “That’s a scary amount of firepower, Leger.”
“We will manage it. Blackjack herself gave us the weapons we

need," he replied. Wait, what?

"What weapons?" I asked with a scowl. But he gave that insufferably smug smile. I grabbed him with my magic and hefted him up, slamming him against the wall of the office. "What weapons!"

Then he reminded me that his hindlegs were metal and my pelvis, while slightly reinforced, still had plenty of nerve endings. The impact of his leg sent me down and curled up fetally on the ground. He stomped hard on my prone body, smashing me into the cloud layer. I lifted my head to blow his damned face off, like I should have when I first saw him, but got a faceful of steel hoof that made all kinds of stars erupt in my sight. "Stop it, Leger! You're going to kill her!"

"Yes, that's the general idea," he said as he stomped my skull once again. "She's far too dangerous to be left as an unknown." I blocked another kick with my forehooves, but my EFS was sending all kinds of warnings that my head really couldn't take more of this damage. Lighthooves hovered over me though, his hooves falling with sharp, nearly surgical blows. If I covered my face, he smashed my stomach. If I curled up, he smashed my spine. If I looked at him to get a magic bullet off, he beat in my skull. And he was fast! I'd never fought him before, and I was learning that he moved like a dancer. Each motion was cool, clean, and efficient.

Calmly and deliberately, he was beating me to death.

"Stop it!" Chicanery shouted as he tried to tackle his brother, but Lighthooves struck him neatly in the side and sent his brother to the ground, coughing and gagging for breath.

I used the break and levitated out my dueling pistols and fired blindly, but he darted to the side and kicked me with his rear hooves, sending me rolling across the floor of the office. "Contrary to what you might think, Brother, the real world doesn't align itself neatly into heroes and villains," he said as he pulled out a beam pistol with his tail. "Some of us must perform the necessary evils in order to make sure that good prevails," he said calmly, not taking his eyes off me as I struggled to focus enough to strike back. Given that I was seeing two of him swirling in my vision, that wasn't a good sign. "Goodbye, Blackjack. A pity we couldn't work together." Then he tossed the beam gun into the air, caught it with his mouth, and pointed it right at my head.

And I couldn't cast a spell to save my life...

But I could end one.

With a thought, a basic counterspell targeting myself, I scattered the magic that allowed me to walk on clouds and gravity took me. My last sight of Lighthooves was his eyes widening in shock and a flash of crimson before I disappeared into the white fluffiness. A second later I tumbled through the room beneath his office. And the room after that, missing a mare by feet. I barely heard her shout before I passed through the floor. I focused all my energy on restoring my cloudwalking spell. Clouds were fluffy, right? And the magic wouldn't magically trap me between floors like Mini stuck in a wall.

Right?

A tiny purple unicorn and blue pegasus in my head looked at each other and simply shrugged.

Now I really wanted to start screaming as I passed out the floor and into a reception area where a half dozen pegasi gaped at me in horror and confusion. I really, really wanted to get this spell off. I wasn't the best at magic, but I was Twilight's descendant and I'd really shown a lot of improvement in casting, hadn't I? It was just a cloudwalking spell! Just imagine happy clouds on your hooves! Happy clouds! I clenched my eyes closed, trying to push out the magic! I could do this! I could--

My horn gave an anemic little spark as I whooshed through the floor.

"Damn it!" I shouted as I fell out the bottom of the building and into open air. I saw the building that had housed Chicanery's studio hanging like icicles above me, and growing rapidly smaller. Now, I was too scared to scream, or maybe I was screaming and I just couldn't hear it over the wind rushing in my ears. I tumbled end over end, seeing the buildings far below coming closer and closer.

And presuming I didn't hit metal in the floors of those buildings, I doubted the ground would be all that accommodating! There wasn't anything I could do. I wasn't imagining happy clouds. I was imagining cyberpony painted across the wasteland a mile down.

"We got you!" a mare shouted. "Stop swinging your hooves! Go limp!"

I forced my eyes open to see four pegasi flying around me. It took all my effort to do so. I had to trust they were here to help. If they wanted me dead, they could have simply let me fall. One by one, they took my hooves in their own and arrested my tumble and then

slowed my decent. As we approached the bottom of Thunderhead, I glanced up; I couldn't even tell which of the hanging buildings had been Chicanery's studio.

As we approached an open plaza, I said, "Wait! I need a second to cast my cloudwalking spell." For once, I was glad my body was mechanical. I'd likely be hyperventilating if it were all flesh and bone. It took me several tries to get it right, but the pegasi were patiently supporting me till the clouds were able to.

"That was a rough fall," the mare who'd grabbed me said calmly as she supported my left while I tried to get the spell going again. "Are you okay?"

I pushed a hoof down and the cloud finally, obediently, supported my weight. "I am much more okay than I would have been in a minute or two," I said to them. "Thanks for catching me."

"No problem. It's what ponies do, right?" she replied, with such open honesty that I couldn't help myself. I hugged her. This was how the world was supposed to be... and it was nice to see it as normal for a change.

"Ugh, you sure you're okay?" she asked in clear concern. She was now taking in my horn and my cybernetic legs. "Are you an actress?"

"I... yes. Yes I am," I said simply. The truth was simply too far off to believe.

"Oh," she looked at my legs. "That's an amazing costume. Those legs look like they're really made out of metal."

I gave a sheepish laugh. "Yeah. Really amazing costume. Took me forever to get into it, and sometimes I feel like I'll never get it off again. But I need to get to the university. Can you take me there?" Plus, I really didn't want Lighthooves to follow me down and continue the fight. Not even the Legate had hit me so precisely or quickly.

She looked at the other three and then back to me. "You're sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

"I'm sure. The sooner we get to the university, the better," I said as I glanced up, feeling like any second a white-armored pony could swoop down and finish me. What was the weapon he'd mentioned? Had he found Folly? That might be good for one Raptor. Or was it something else? Ugh, head trauma did not help with the thinkiness!

I still had my sword, the cloak, Vigilance, and a markspony carbine in my saddlebags, but I didn't know where Duty and Sacrifice had

fallen to. Were they still up in Chicanery's office, resting on a floor or rooftop somewhere, or lying far below on the Wasteland? I also had Penance packed up in its case in my magical saddlebags. I'm sure Lancer would have had it out and sent a bullet straight through Lighthooves, but that wasn't my style.

Next time I saw Lighthooves, though, I was definitely going to shoot first. Maybe a little maiming would slow him down? Ugh. I needed to discover a middle ground fighting style between good-natured punching bag and Reaper psycho.

* * *

Skyshine, the mare that helped me get to the university, seemed to know something was amiss. While I drew stares, Skyshine intercepted them with an explanation of me being an actress... but I suspected that she had other ideas. "So, are you sure you don't want to go to the hospital? Or the police? Or check in with the Tower?" the teal mare with a gray-and-aquamarine-striped mane asked for the sixth time. "'Cause I had a friend and her coltfriend got pretty rough on her. I'm just saying there's nothing wrong with going to the authorities if you need help and--"

"I'm fine," I groaned as we approached one of the six large central pillar buildings.

She rolled her eyes. "I know! I know you're fine. It's just she said she was fine too. But I mean when he hits you once you know he's going to do it again and--"

I stopped, took her by the shoulders, and stared right into her blue eyes. "Skyshine... I'm not an actress. I'm a surfacer who's come up here in order to stop a battle between Thunderhead and the rest of the Enclave. This isn't a costume. I'm a cybernetically augmented unicorn. I was beaten to a pulp by a secret agent who possesses a biological weapon that could kill tens of thousands. Okay? I was not beaten by my coltfriend. I'm gay, anyway. All right? That is what is going on." A little inaccurate, but I'd had a rough day.

She blinked at me, then tapped her hooves. "Really?"

"Yes. Really," I said with a sigh of relief and waited for the freak out or the accusations of me being crazy.

"So... your *marefriend* beat you up? Because most mares I know would find some other way to get at their very special somepony." I just stared at her. Really? Did she really just go there? Then she

brightened. “Unless you are into that, which I am totally okay with. I once had a colt who liked me to bite his flanks, and while it was weird, I mean, the things we do for love, right?” she asked me with a wide grin. I felt an eyelid twitch.

I stared at her a second and then turned on my hoof and trotted for the door. “Take care of yourself, Blacksnack! And tell her to take it easy next time. Or get help!” she yelled after me.

Thank you for saving my life, but... sheesh.

Inside, four uniformed pegasus stallions stared at me. Lies, the truth, and everything in between all rolled up in a huge ball inside me and I sat down hard. “Look. Call Professor Moonshadow and let her know that Blackjack is here for her meeting with Doctor Morningstar. I’ll take a seat.” And I trotted over to a couch and sat down with a huff. At this point, I was seriously considering Glory’s ‘get arrested and questioned’ plan. It seemed better than my plan that wasn’t my plan. The four watched me and made a call, talking in low voices.

I sighed, imagining one enormous train roaring down a track, a second enormous train racing down the same track in the other direction, and a tiny Security and her friends in the middle when the two trains collided and went splat. All I could hope was that the councilor could throw a switch and prevent the two from ramming into each other at full speed. And perhaps most annoying of all was how each train wanted me to be on its side.

“Blackjack?” Moonshadow said from down the hall. I sighed and slipped off the chair, walking past the four and imparting on them a little of the surreality that was my day. The indigo-maned mare looked at me in concern as I walked to her and the elevator. “Are you okay?”

“That is the wrong question to ask Blackjack,” I said as I walked past her and into the elevator. “Blackjack doesn’t understand the word ‘okay’ anymore.” My third person talking was making her face grow even more worried, so I went on, “I’m okay. I was just given a reminder that there’s a whole world of messed up stuff coming and I’m in the middle of it.”

“I can imagine,” she said with a small smile.

Could she? “About that signal you’re getting. From up there?” I saw the sympathetic smile replaced by sheer bafflement. “Yeah. That’s how my life’s been lately. Anyway, you say you’re getting a signal. And it’s asking for EC-1101? Does it mention the words

‘Horizons’ or ‘Project Horizons?’”

Now Moonshadow looked positively spooked. “But... how could you know that?”

“Magic,” I replied, which didn’t put her at ease at all as she pushed a button. “You talked about weapon satellites. Could this signal asking for EC-1101 be one?”

“How... but... I... ” she stammered as the elevator started to rise. “I suppose it could. We don’t have an exact count of everything up there. The official record is far less than what we’ve counted by eye.”

“How big are these weapon satellites?” I asked with a small frown. “How powerful?”

The smart pony question settled her a little. “Well, there’s no official record of how many or how powerful. That’s all been lost. Neighvarro claims they’re all either defunct, failures, scrap, or under their control depending on which pony you ask, but we did record one firing a while ago. The beams were ten terasparks each. That’s strong enough to cut through a Raptor, or a dragon. Ruffled quite a few feathers.”

I grunted, scowling. “That doesn’t seem big enough,” I muttered.

“Not big enough?” She seemed disturbed. “Bigger than that falls into the balefire bomb or megaspell range. I suppose there could be something like that in orbit, but I’d like to think we’d spot something big enough to do that.” I supposed that that made sense. The megaspell chambers beneath Hoofington had been huge.

The doors pinged and opened. ‘Arcane Biotechnology’ was written in bright pink on one of the sterile white walls. “Come on. Doctor Morningstar is waiting.”

I walked along, gazing into windows and expecting to see... things. Monsters in cages or strange bubbling chemicals. Instead, the rooms behind appeared more like Moonshadow’s lab: lots of terminals and lab equipment. I guessed only secret projects were allowed to actually look cool.

The doors opened for us, and we walke--

Blue tendrils of Killing Joke lunged at my face! Out came Vigilance and up went S.A.T.S. before I realized that the slithering blue vines had slammed up against a clear glass barrier. A large glass jar full of Joke sat in the middle of a lab that was far closer to what I’d been expecting. In one pen was a snarling wooden canine. A brahmin sat indolently in a pen, one head chewing while the other one spoke

with a researcher in a while labcoat. The most disturbing specimen was a green sac... thing... that was spitting black sludge against the glass.

"Blackjack," Glory said from the corner of the room. I looked around for the others, but only Glory was present. Given that she'd removed her helmet, I'd missed that revelation. The pony she stood with wasn't quite what I'd have expected of a doctor. In my experience, most doctors wore glasses, were generally anal retentive, and didn't last long outside of a lab.

Doctor Morningstar looked rather like he wasn't all there. He was yellow with a wild white mane and tail which, having not decided on a particular direction to grow, grew in every direction all at once. This was exacerbated by an equally tangled beard which seemed just as animated on his face as the Killing Joke in the bottle. His thick glasses magnified to the point where it looked like he was staring at me through two pools of water.

"Doctor. This... " Glory began as I approached.

"At tat tat tat!" he said rapidly as he started to circle me. "Do not disturb my observations! It is very important not to form a biased impression of the subject!" He walked around me several times as Glory sighed impatiently, tapping a hoof. "Unicorn. Mare. Interesting. Showing signs of dermal trauma and restoration hinting at magical regeneration. Cybernetically augmented with a clear focus towards combat capability. Eyes and limbs are completely replaced. The rest of the body shows signs of thorough reinforcement. Hmmm." He stopped scratched his chin. "Hmmm... are you... " he leaned in, lifted his glasses, and blinked his owllike eyes. "... Security?"

"... Yes?" I replied slowly, not quite sure after his examination, like he might have found something that suggested I wasn't.

"Yes, you match the advertisement perfectly!" the doctor crowed. "'Wastelanders!' And that LittlePip! Ooooh, she can fix my toaster any day." He then blinked. "No. Really. She can. Darn thing has been broken forever!"

"Doctor," Glory sighed, covering her face. "That's not why we're--"

"You must forgive Morning Glory. Always in a rush," he said as he trotted towards the jar holding the Killing Joke. "And look what it's done. Turned her into Rainbow Dash. Tsk tsk tsk. If she would have stayed in the lab she never would have turned into Rainbow Dash. Likely exposure to the Killing Joke would have given her an egg for

a head. Yes? Egg head?" He laughed at his own joke and shook his head. "But she is always hurrying. Hurrying to change the world. Hurrying to get results. Science must be patient."

With my augmented hearing, I heard Glory grumble, "I'll patient you upside your head, you patronizing old fuddy-duddy."

"I saw you observing several of the specimens we've collected from the surface. Fascinating samples. Truly fascinating. The potential of this arcane plant in particular is amazing." He trotted over to a table and with a wing lifted a vial filled with rainbow liquid. "For instance, the fluids we've extracted could be used in a variety of treatments, and perhaps even aid in the manufacturing of arcane goods!"

I'd seen it before. It was Flux, the sort of thing that turned a pony's bones to jelly. "Unless it can turn me back to normal, you should toss it out the nearest window. Over the ocean," Glory growled, then frowned. "Actually, you should probably burn it. Who knows where that stuff can thrive?"

"Ack, Glory. You sound like Neighvarro!" He tisked again. "How can we use it? Destroy it if we can't. Phoewy! Do you know what we might do with this?"

"Turn you into a Thunderhead Rumblers's cheerfilly?" Glory suggested.

"Oh, that would be fascinating!" the doctor said immediately, grinning in his brushy beard, making Glory groan once more. "But no. We could use it to replicate spells normally cast by unicorns. Perhaps even spell effects by other creatures. This substance is infinitely flexible." And he eyed Glory a moment before adding smugly, "And our dealing with it has led us to explore ways of ending its effects."

"You mean a cure?" Glory asked, clearly stunned.

"Indeed." He trotted through a door and into a second lab room. This had fewer specimens and more lab equipment. There were also quite a few books on tables and stands. Many appeared quite old. "When we encountered that particular plant, I recalled a book I'd studied when I was a disobedient, angry graduate student chafing under my superior's brilliance." He grinned at Glory once more, and she growled at him again. He looked at the shelves and selected a green book. "Here! 'Supernaturals'."

"Is it a magic book?" I asked eagerly.

"Unicorns. You think everything is associated with magic," he

snorted scornfully. I began to understand Glory's annoyance. He flipped open the book. "No! 'Natural remedies and cure-alls that are simply super.' Natural! Not magic. And there is a plant in here with strange metamorphic properties that I believe may be related to the Killing Joke called 'poison joke'. Perhaps exposure to radiation triggered a mutation. Perhaps zebra shamans intentionally changed the plant. Who can say?" Then he looked at Glory and grinned. "But... "

Glory sighed and said as if by rote, "But if the cure worked on the weaker version, then it may work on the stronger version."

He patted her on the head. "Good grad student."

I stepped between them before Glory could snap his hoof off. After all, she needed that cure. "And you have all the things for this cure?"

"I do," he said, then nodded primly, walked over to a counter, and lifted a beaker with his wings. "I was wishing to try this out. I was going to use a researcher who was exposed to the Killing Joke and became sexually irresistible, but he has told me that so long as he is not mobbed he is not opposed to the effects."

Glory frowned and then gasped. "Wait. It wasn't Breakwind, was it?" The doctor nodded once and Glory giggled and blushed, covering her mouth.

"What? I'm missing the joke?" I asked as I looked at her.

"He was... shall we say... overweight and homely?" Moonshadow said calmly. "He also used to say a phrase when things went wrong... which they often did. What was it, again?"

"What? 'Fuck me?'" I suggested. Moonshadow rolled her eyes and Glory fought her laughter. Okay. I could see Killing Joke pulling that one. "And now he's sexually irresistible to everypony?"

The doctor sighed, "Not my first encounter with a stallion, but he was such a baby about it. Hardly scientific at all. If he'd simply relaxed... " The doctor tisked and shook his head. "Well, he's in quarantine now and much more satisfied with his nurses." I felt a shooty impulse... but it wasn't like the doctor had planned it. He passed the beaker to Glory. "Now, what do you say?" He grinned once more.

She bristled a moment, then sighed. "I will keep a log of all my experiences, follow protocol, and keep consistent data points so that my work can be replicated later," she said in the slow drawl of a student repeating a rote.

The doctor began to lecture her on how the contents of that beaker were supposed to be topically applied, but I wasn't paying attention. A sample in the back had caught my attention. It was a strange golden tree, not very large at all. The leafless growth sat in the back corner, but I'd seen it before. "Where did you get this?" I asked.

"I did not get it. It is a biomagical construct of some kind, retrieved from the surface. I haven't had much time to study it. The blue one is far more exciting!" I wasn't really listening though as I trotted out and retrieved the vial of Flux. Walking to the tree, I saw that it was really a cutting; a broken-off limb planted in some dirt to help it grow. When I floated the vial over to the tree and let one drop of the rainbow substance fall on its bark, the entire limb quivered. The yellow bark took on a brighter glow, and the tree seemed to sprout new roots to dig into the soil. The doctor approached.

"Fascinating," he breathed.

I pulled out my sword and pricked my shoulder. Then I flicked the drop of blood on to the bark, where it instantly was sucked inside. A few more drops of Flux, and I saw the telltale swell of a bulb at the end of one of the drooping limbs. The milky sack didn't get much larger than a hoof before it quivered and split open... dropping out something spherical and white. I caught it. An eye with a bright red iris looked back at me.

My eye.

"Extraordinary," the doctor breathed. He put his hooves around me and hugged me to him. "My dear, you may have opened up entire new fields of science! This is a breakthrough on par with the wing to thrust ratio!"

"Thank you," I replied evenly, then glanced at Glory, who was staring in awe. From the expression on her face, she was clearly torn by recent events. "Now, perhaps you could help me?"

"Anything!" he replied. "Those two were jabbering on about some political thing. I really wasn't paying too much attention. What was it you needed?" Both Glory and Moonshadow bristled at the infuriating stallion.

"I need to meet with Councilor Stargazer. Urgently. It's an emergency," I said in slow tones.

"Yes, yes, yes. Very well. I'll get to it. Eventually," he said as he looked at the limb of the Project Chimera replicating tree with longing.

I levitated him up and turned him to face me. “Now. Please,” I added.

Who said I couldn’t be diplomatic?

* * *

The doctor had put in the message and I hadn’t let him go until he’d gotten a reply confirming she’d meet with me as soon as possible at Glory’s. Only then did I let him go back to toying with things best left unpoked or prodded. Still, he had a point. Perhaps Killing Joke could be used for something good. Maybe the Blank tree would lead to new breakthroughs that would help ponies. It was nice to imagine science producing helpful things rather than monsters and weapons of war.

We returned to Glory’s residence. The cloak might not have been working, but the simple cloth hid my augments well enough that I was just another unicorn in the middle of our group. The ponies of Thunderhead went on about their lives in blissful happiness. They talked and ate and played and enjoyed so many things that I was both in awe and saddened. I remembered the party we’d thrown for Scotch Tape when she’d gotten her cutie mark. Or the concert I’d played in with Priest, Medley, and Lacunae in Star House what felt like ages ago. Just a few miles down, life was so fleeting and precious that any joy was treasured. These ponies took it for granted.

And yet, why shouldn’t they? They’d escaped the carnage of the last days. They had their plenty through their tower. Why shouldn’t life be good for somepony in this world? They’d even, perhaps grudgingly, acknowledged that their plenty should be used to help others. They weren’t bad ponies; I knew that Lighthooves had to be an exception rather than a rule. They were just privileged and sheltered.

Back at Glory’s house, they ate a meal that was marginally better than the others; I had a cyberpony cake. Boomer, Scotch Tape, Lambent, and Lucent all played some kind of electronic game involving shooting ponies for fun. Scotch Tape just gave me an almost pitying look when I peeked in. P-21 and Twister talked in serious tones about what the Enclave would do when they arrived. Glory took a bubble bath in the name of science.

Me, I wasn’t feeling like having fun. I found a window that faced

out from the outer wall of the Thunderhead torus at the setting sun. The clouds were arranged in rings around the Tower, rising from that dark eye in the middle. If that was natural, I'd eat my horn. I could almost make out the flickering green glow, despite the brilliant red and gold painting the skies as the sun set. Boo curled up with me. She'd been quite happy when her horn'd been removed. On the way back, I'd gotten her some 'raspberries' by taking them off the dealer -- who'd he report me to? -- and her white muzzle was smeared with purple as she dozed on a cushion beside me.

One benefit of synthetic eyes was that I could stare out at the sun all I wanted. It moved around the planet without its goddess. Maybe it always had. Maybe it always would. It would be easy to simply dismiss the question and stop asking. Before leaving 99, I wouldn't have even thought of it. I would have simply accepted things and that I couldn't change them.

"Can I change this?" I asked nopony in particular.

"I think so," rasped a familiar voice. I turned to the side around and spotted the Dealer there, also staring at the sun. I supposed that being a mental-projected-soul-image-spell-thing gave similar sun-staring abilities. The Dealer seemed tired, but he smiled. "I missed that sight," he said as he looked at me. "Spending centuries in a computer as a spell makes you miss the little things."

"How are you doing?" I asked as I sat up a little bit.

His smile faded. "Just tired. Souls can get that way, I suppose." He closed his eyes. "So, are you doubting yourself again?"

"No," I said, then smiled a little. "Okay. A little bit. It's just... between Lighthooves and the Enclave... I don't know. It feels like just before the *Celestia*, you know? Trying to stop a war. Only this fight is so much bigger. The stakes are so much higher."

His grim lips curled slightly as he tugged down his hat. "So that's it. Folks are doomed. Game over. Might as well pack up."

"No," I said with a snort, and he lifted his head to meet my gaze with a smile. "Just because it's impossible doesn't mean that I can't do it. I just have to find a way."

"And you will. I believe in you, Blackjack. You're like your great great grandfather. Big Macintosh never let anything stop him if he thought it was the right thing to do," he said, but then his smile faded a touch.

"Even though it got him killed?" I asked, and he nodded. I sighed

and looked at the red orb sliding slowly below the horizon. “I guess we’ll see if we have that in common. I will stop Lighthooves. And I will save Thunderhead. Somehow.”

He nodded, and we sat together, Boo snoozing on my thigh, watching as the golden light dwindled away.

~ ~ ~

“Honestly, Blackjack, you take forever,” Boo said as she trotted beside me. I answered with assorted slobbering noises as I masticated a wad of assorted greenery I’d snatched out of the kitchen. “And you eat like a pig!” she added. Finishing chewing, I replied in the most sublime way I could: swallowing and belching loudly. She flinched back and waved a hoof in front of her face. “Ewwww!”

“It’s a tough world out there, little sis,” I said with a grin. “Full of belches, farts, and other unspeakable things. Maybe someday, when you can handle it, I’ll tell you were little ponies come from.”

“I know that!” Boo said as her cheeks blushed furiously. “Not all of us slept through health class.”

“Oh. I know you know,” I said, my smile stretching even more. “But there’s health class, and then there’s what’s really involved.” I watched her go from pink to scarlet and gave her a hug, laughing. “Honestly, Boo, there’s worse ponies than me.”

“Death from above!” roared a mare, landing on my back and driving me into the ground. Rampage laughed, wrestling me into a hooflock. “A royal guard getting ambushed? Celestia would be very disappointed!”

“Uncle! Uncle!” I cried, slapping a hoof against the ground as the striped mare bent my body farther than it ever should go.

“I’m not yer uncle!” Rampage roared from atop my back.

“Hey, Coach,” Boo said with a smile.

“Hey Boo-ger,” Rampage replied as she sat on my back and twisted my hind leg between hers. “Is BJ here giving you trouble?”

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by it! I swear!” I wailed.

“Well, she was,” Boo said with an arch smile. “But I think she’s learned her lesson.”

“See? And you said I’d never be a good teacher,” Rampage said as she released me. I wasn’t exactly certain being a coach was the same thing as being a teacher, but there was no doubt she loved

working with little kids.

"Are you this rough with your students?" I asked with a huff, getting up and making sure she hadn't broken anything.

"Well, that's the thing, Blackjack," she said as she put a hoof around my neck and pulled me close. "See, I'm exactly as rough with them as I need to be... and I know their weak spots." Then, with no hesitation, she stuck her tongue in my ear.

"Gyaaaahhh!" I flailed back once more, felled by a lick. "Honestly, Rampage, that's gross!"

"Do the words 'Pot' and 'Kettle' mean anything to you, Blackjack?" Boo said with a smile and a roll of her eyes. Together, we shared a good laugh.

~ ~ ~

A movement on the bed woke me. Not a Glory movement; she always slept like a rock. She'd given herself the bath treatment and had checked herself like clockwork for the change to end. Personally, I didn't think that something called Killing Joke would be reversed by a bubble bath, but I'd been wrong before. The *Fleur* was silent, not even creaking tonight. I felt the movement on the bottom of the bed and saw Boo's pale, almost luminous eyes looking back at me. Her ears folded back as she trembled.

Boo scared... I pulled Vigilance from its holster and my sword from its sheath, then reached over and shook Glory. "Hey. I think something's wrong."

She didn't wake. I could see her breathing, but unless this was a side effect not mentioned in the book, this was bad. I rose to my feet and carefully walked to the next cabin. P-21 and Scotch Tape slept soundly. Too soundly. They didn't wake when I knocked or when I shook them.

I went to the next room. "Rampage? Rampage!" The striped mare gave an extra loud snore, muttered, and then rolled over. I glanced at the scared Boo and carefully walked from the ship into the manor. The beautiful mosaics were cold and washed out, the colors seeming to bleed together in an incoherent mass. I knocked on Twister's door, then Boomer's. In a chair was one of the servants. All asleep.

A laugh, distant and haunting, sounded in my ears. I couldn't tell the direction, though. I couldn't see anything...

Then I smelled blood. After Roseluck farms, I'd never mistake that coppery reek.

I switched on my E.F.S. immediately and saw a single red bar. I didn't have to go there to find the source of the sanguine scent, though. Lying in the foyer were two still bodies, one propping the door open. Outside were two more bodies, these decapitated. The blood was pooling around them, running down the fine marble steps. More blood smeared along the wall and floor, as if something had been dragged. I walked to the slain ponies. All well-dressed and armed. Only one had her beam pistol out of its holster, the weapon split in two. Their blood-soaked clothes looked professional and formerly clean. I searched them and found an I.D.

'Frost Feather, Councilor Security.'

No. We weren't meeting with the councilor till the morning. Why would she send ponies here in the middle of the night? I looked at the trail of blood leading further into the house, towards that red bar, and pressed my lips together. Step by step, I followed the gore. It led straight to the library. How had I not heard these ponies being killed? Not a yell for help? A single scream?

I stopped at the door and glanced at Boo again. The silence all around me was deafening... no. Not silent. Not completely...

I could hear faint screams from within. A scream I hadn't heard in person since I'd come to the clouds. "Stay here, Boo," I said... or I meant to say. My lips moved, but not a sound emerged. I blinked and knocked my hoof into the wall. Silence.

The door to the library wasn't completely closed. Another security pony, quartered, kept it from closing. Carefully, I pushed the door open. Instantly, a pony sized mass came hurling straight at me. I raised the sword and my hooves to deflect it, but the throw did little but splatter me. Gross, but I'd had worse.

I raised my gaze up in the direction the heaved body had come from. There, on the desk, sitting oddly upright, was a pegasus washed in slaughter. The scream in my head matched the green glow coming from her eyes as she stared with a mad grin on her face. "Welcome to my house, Blackjack," Dawn said calmly, "Can I get you a drink?" Cradled in her lap was the severed head of the mare that I'd hoped against hope would be able to stop this train wreck. Blood-soaked but still recognizable as the mare Lacunae and I had seen in that meeting. Councilor Stargazer.

The Wasteland had come to Thunderhead.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 61: Action, Reaction

"You saved my reputation with Princess Celestia, and more importantly, you saved Ponyville! … Or not."

There have been times in which I've reacted with excessive violence. Moments where, due to fatigue or overskilled opponents, I engaged in no-holds-barred combat to destroy my enemies. I used to look back at those times with mixed feelings, tinges of shame. They were the times I let the Wasteland win, where the power of slaughter was used instead of harmony. I tried to find another way. A better way.

This time, I didn't even blink. As the councilor's still-warm blood splashed across my head and face, I stared into Dawn's luminous green eyes, opened a door in my head, and invited the Wasteland in for tea. And while it was here, would it mind helping me massacre Glory's mother? Oh, why certainly, Blackjack. Anything for a friend.

I lapsed into S.A.T.S. as Dawn dove to the side, the magic only turning her streak into a slow creep instead of a freeze, a sign of just how fast she moved. I targeted her head and queued four magic bullets, lunging to the side as they fired to keep her in view around the cover she was trying to dive behind. The white bolts of energy streaked towards her, but the two that struck her gray, synthetic, hexagonal hide did little damage. When S.A.T.S. released me from its weird mathemagical grip, I opened fire with twelve-millimeter armor piercing rounds.

She didn't make hitting her easy; she leapt onto the wall and started running along it as casually as a pegasus hopping on a cloud. Nevertheless, I wheeled and blasted round after round from Vigilance in the absolute, eerie quiet. I didn't take time to mourn the venerable texts that exploded in puffs of tattered paper under my bullets. I had only one goal: to stop Dawn before she killed again. I kept trying to turn and stay facing her, but she was just so

damned fast!

My ears crackled a moment, and then, in the midst of the silence, I heard her synthesized voice. “You’re hardly being a gracious guest, Blackjack.” Maybe it was because the words distracted me or maybe she’d found a way to magically accelerate herself, but I was nearly taken by surprise when she launched herself off the wall and at me. Her Core-green-glowing wings snapped together an inch from my head as I rolled to the side. I couldn’t stop rolling to fire, though, as she swept a wing back, ripping great cloudy crescents into the floor just behind me.

I came to a rest against the wall, fortunately on my hooves. I voicelessly swore at her, demanding answers for why she was here and how she’d done this. But Dawn just laughed, her voice accompanied by shrill feedback in my ears. “Oh, I’m sorry, Blackjack. Too bad you don’t have a transmitter in your speech center like I do.” She lunged again, punching both wings right at me. “No one will hear you when you die!”

Her wings exploded through the wall behind me as I jumped up, hooked the shelves with my forelegs, then smashed both rear hooves into her manic grin. She reeled back, and I reloaded Vigilance with explosive rounds while flinging a barrage of texts at her to keep her occupied. Each book was shredded by her magically sharp wings before it hit. “I bet I know what you’re wondering… why am I here? It wasn’t hard. My Goddess, a *true* Goddess, knows all. And when the councilor learned that there was a Neighvarro intelligence cell here wishing to defect to her and her alone, why, the silly little dear came with only a dozen ponies for security!”

A sweep of her wings cleared her of the last of the swirling paper and put her right in my sights. The round exploded near her face, and she fell back, protecting her head with those green-lined wings. I didn’t let up, though, dropping back to the floor and keeping every shot at her face. I’d need the starmetal sword to really finish her off, but I could slow her down. Out came the carbine and, with a gun on either side, I unloaded a stream of metal and explosive shells.

But I could see her grin. “But I know more of what you’re thinking. Why won’t your friends wake? How could I have drugged them all in their sleep?” I hated to admit, those were some very pressing, and distracting, questions. “Well, you see, Blackjack, I had help.” Who? How? She rammed forward, her enmeshed wings smashing

me to the bookcases. The razor-sharp pinions rammed into the wall inches from my shoulders as she pressed her face into mine. “One of your friends has betrayed you.”

She was fucking with me. That was the only explanation. It had to be the only explanation. When…how…why would any of my friends work with this monster? I pressed Vigilance into her temple, but before I could fire she ducked her head and wrapped her wire tail around the barrel, yanking it away and tossing it behind her. Around came the sword in an awkward, desperate stroke. Her wing pulled back and blocked it with almost casual ease. Green sparks flashed where one impossibly sharp edge met another.

“My Goddess has plans for you, Blackjack. Plans you are unworthy of,” Dawn said with utter conviction. “She will realize I am right, in time. Especially when you are torn to pieces! *I* will save the Wasteland! Me!” Dawn screamed in my ears, then pulled out her other wing and started to ram it forward.

Fortunately, I was descended from Twilight Sparkle. My horn flashed as the wing ripped through where I’d just been, tearing a rent clear through the wall as I disappeared and reappeared behind her. The four feet still felt like I’d teleported four miles from the ache in my horn as I fetched Vigilance and the carbine, but the move let me get hold of something that would help even more than the guns: her tail. My teeth bit down hard on a mouthful of wire and strange synthetic-tasting hair. Still, if it would stop her, I’d eat her.

I found myself immediately reconsidering my tactic as she lifted both herself and me into the air and, with a flap of razor wings, barreled right into the nearest wall. Now, I had a vague notion that certain clouds of certain densities were used for different things. Light and fluffy clouds for clothing, heavy dense clouds for building. My notion was confirmed as she slammed through and dragged me along for the ride. The effect was rather akin to getting strung through concrete. I could have simply cancelled the cloudwalking spell, but, aside from the sphincter-loosening sensation that that entailed, I had no difficulty imagining me falling in a nice ballistic arc only to be cut in half by the cybernetically enhanced flyer.

Hadn’t I gotten pounded like this already today?

I bit through the wires, prompting a cybernetic shriek from the mare and an almighty buck that sent me rolling like a wrecking ball

across the foyer. The blood spread liberally all over the ground didn't help matters much. I rose to my hooves, locked eyes with the furious mare, smiled, chewed, and swallowed. Not too bad, really. She dove upon me, but I lifted my forehooves and let her collide with an impact that sent us both barreling across the floor. My ears made a pop, like a soap bubble, and I heard her gasping for breath. No fair! Why'd she get to emulate life better than me?

"WE ARE NOT IMPRESSED!" a voice thundered in my ears. For a horrifying instant, I was certain that the Goddess had somehow survived Maripony or crawled her way out of some abomination hell just to dick with me even more. But then I saw that the words had made Dawn flinch. "DOST THOU NOT WISH TO SPARE THE LIVES OF THY YOUNGEST OFFSPRING FROM THE HORRORS TO COME? DOST THOU NOT DESIRE TO SAVE ALL FROM ABJECT MISERY? THOU MUST TRY HARDER! OR PERHAPS WE SHOULD RECONSIDER OUR CHOICE OF CHAMPION?"

"No!" Dawn gasped. "I can beat her! I can! I am worthy!" Dawn pled, legs wide and wings drooping as if she were being crushed by the weight of that voice.

"WE REMAIN UNCONVINCED, DAWN. THY CONVICTION IS MEANINGLESS IF THOU CANNOT ENACT OUR WILL, AND, IF THOU CANNOT, PERHAPS ANOTHER SHALL," the voice thundered, but it had a familiar snide tone I knew boded ill for me.

I almost pitied her. If things had been a little different, perhaps I would be the mechanical monster in thrall to a higher power manipulating me and pulling my strings. In a way, I had been. We were so much alike…

Wait, we were alike, weren't we? What happened to me when I got upset? I got reckless. And while my head was one vulnerable point, my main power supply wasn't in my head but smack dab where my heart used to be. I could hit that a lot easier than what amounted to a small orb easily covered by wings.

I immediately adopted the most obnoxious smirk possible. "Don't worry, Dawn. Just kick back. Leave saving the Wasteland to the real heroes," I said with the cockiest grin I could. The shocked and enraged look that got was more than worth the pounding I'd taken. "Guess that silence trick's not working anymore, but then, few of your tricks do."

That got her to charge, forehooves outstretched as she flew at me like an airborne battleship, but this time I was ready. I deflected her

upwards with a raised foreleg as I crouched and pressed Vigilance to her chest. For the first time in our fight, the mare let out a real scream as the round penetrated her armored hide and exploded inside her, the detonation turning a chunk of her chest inside out as hoses and wires dangled, dripped, and sparked. Smoke poured out of her nostrils and mouth as she tumbled over me across the floor, landing in a heap. Of course, I doubted that she was finished. I wouldn't have been.

Still, for all her rage and crazy, I still wanted to help her. Nopony should have things like that voice thundering in their mind. If I hadn't had Lacunae…"I know you want to save your children, Dawn. I do, too. Work with me," I said sincerely as I approached, Vigilance and sword ready. "We can save Thunderhead, together." We can save you, I added silently, hoping she'd take it, knowing she wouldn't.

"No!" Dawn shouted as she charged, spitting blood, something that was decidedly *not* blood, and smoke as she swept her wings like dozens of starmetal knives at me. "They had their chance. They could have listened to Striker and me. They could have done better. Instead, they rejected me! Now they get to learn what the surface is really like!" Her wings swung in turns like a metronome, but I kept waiting and backing up, getting her rhythm. Then, when she pivoted from swinging one wing to the other, I buried another explosive bullet into her chest. This time she screamed fire.

I admit, I balked a moment at the sight, and she sprung, sweeping her wing downward towards me. I crashed to the side and brought the sword down upon her neck; the blade bit through her synthetic hide easily enough but stopped well short of decapitation. Clearly, she had starmetal in more than just her wings. Unfortunately, with my sword jammed in the back of her neck, I didn't have it to parry her razor pinions. The other wing swept around to the side and I tried to slow the strike with the markspony carbine. The weapon was torn into a half dozen chunks of metal, the magazine exploding between us as the bullets within were cleaved, but it did give me the precious second I needed to get my body clear of the attack.

I pulled the sword free, levitating it before me. "You don't have to obey Cognitum. Let me help you cut her strings," I pled, giving ground. One wing curled in front of her chest, protecting her as the other waited for the perfect moment to strike. She was learning, too.

“You haven’t seen her glory! Her wisdom! Her majesty!” Dawn coughed as she swung her wing, my sword deflecting it with emerald sparks. “She may think you a fitting champion, but I know better. You’re nothing more than a self-serving fool.”

Okay, the craziness here was starting to approach surreal levels. “She thinks I’d help her? She’s been trying to kill me!”

“Steel Rain’s opinion. And mine,” she added, sparks dancing as our edges met and ground against one another. “But she’s been watching you for--”

“ENOUGH,” that voice growled. “STILL THY TONGUE AND PROVE THYSELF IF THOU WISH PROTECTION FOR THY PROGENY.” Dawn shuddered from head to hoof, almost in the grip of an epileptic attack, then slumped.

“Yes, my Goddess,” Dawn whispered. I could have killed her then, but her wretchedness stayed my wrath.

The voice wasn’t finished, though. “AND THOU, SECURITY,” it thundered, cold and cruel. Apparently, it had worked out that I could hear it. “WE SHALL HAVE THY FLESH, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. THOU HAST PASSED OUR CHALLENGES AND THWARTED OUR MINIONS. THOU SHOULD BE HONORED.”

“I’ve seen one ‘Goddess’ die this week. I know the basics of goddess-slaying,” I retorted.

“HOW DROLL. THEN REALIZE THIS, SECURITY. WE HOLD THE LIVES OF THUNDERHEAD AND THY FRIENDS IN OUR HOOVES. SUBMIT, AND WE SHALL SPARE THEM FROM THE ENCLAVE’S WRATH. DEFY, AND THOU SHALT SEE THEM BURN,” Cognitum roared in my ears.

But I saw the strings clearly now. “For a Goddess, you’re not very creative. You threaten Dawn’s children unless she serves you. You threaten innocent ponies unless I do.” I wished I could spit in her face. “You offer slavery and call it salvation. I’ve already had one Goddess in my head, thanks. I’m not getting another installed.”

“THEN PERISH. MINION, RETRIEVE WHAT WE REQUIRE. THEN THY CHILDREN SHALL BE SAVED,” Cognitum demanded.

“Yes, my Goddess,” Dawn said in quiet submission, her smoldering eyes lighting once more. Two craters in her chest let out reeking sulfuric green clouds that occasionally crackled with emerald lightning.

Oh crap.

In a flash of razor-sharp obsidian, she was on me. Only luck and an

already upraised sword saved me from her initial attack. Then I gave ground with every step, parrying each slash and stab of her wings with the star sword as I blocked her furious kicks and stomps with my forehooves. I couldn't even think of how to go on the offensive; it was all I could do just to stay alive! I needed something, though; the emerald blades were making nicks in my hide and steel, and eventually she'd get something important and slow me down. I needed more.

I needed my friends.

Had one of them really betrayed the rest of us? No matter how inappropriate the moment, I couldn't drive the question from my thoughts. But where I was distracted, Dawn was perfectly focused. I felt my own blood start to flow as her wingtips sliced into my neck. The music I felt in my chest made my wounds tingle and burn.

"What would your children think if they saw you now?" I asked at the top of my lungs.

It was a flinch, the smallest hesitation in her eyes and motion. Then my magic bullet struck her right between her luminous green eyes and she screamed, falling back and covering her face with hooves and wings. I didn't let her recover; now it was *my* turn to give a beating. I might not be able to damage the starmetal parts of her, but I figured that, if I hit her hard enough, something important had to break. I did all I could to hammer her with my hooves, smacking her back with every blow. I didn't give her any space to dash away. Just a few more blows. Just a few more...

Her wings spread wide, throwing me off. "Enough! You cost me my husband and Morning Glory. You will not cost me any more!" she proclaimed as a gust of wind send me sliding along the hall. I came to rest before the great, dark, stained-glass window. The synthetic hide covering her face had peeled away, flapping in tatters around the edges and revealing a sickeningly familiar amalgam of metal, bone, and tissue.

"Don't make me kill you in your own house!" I begged. "Think of your children!"

I'd hoped she could still be reached and reasoned with, but in one powerful lunge she roared, "I AM!" and put everything she had into a final attack. If I'd stood there, she might have cut me in half. Instead, I reared up, hooked my hooves on hers, and fell backwards. Dawn's eyes widened in shock as I rolled and she rose above me. Vigilance fired a third time into her sternum, the blast peppering

me with blood and shrapnel, and then, as the roll completed, I kicked out as hard as I could with all four legs. With a scream, Dawn crashed through the stained glass window and flailed as she fell from view.

I flipped back onto my hooves, crouched there for a moment, and then slowly rose. I'd lived through bad stuff, but I wasn't sure just how much she could take. For almost a minute, I stared at the hole into the sky, but I readied myself to leap if she came through the floor, or the ceiling, or the wall. The cuts she'd made weren't regenerating as fast as they should; I was making a bloody mess just standing there with my sword and gun out.

From the foyer came shouts and yells, and then purple-uniformed pegasi stormed in through the front door. Dozens of magical beam weapons hummed as they pointed at me, the ones with mouths free shouting at me to drop my weapons and surrender. I turned slowly and their shouts trailed away to stunned silence as I locked eyes with them. One shot by them, one sneeze by me, and the manor would get a whole lot bloodier. I could hear the blood dripping off my sword in soft pats.

"That's enough," a stallion said from the front door. Slowly, a dark gray stallion approached. Stratus, from the Rainbow Dash Skyport, stared at me with an inscrutable expression. He glanced towards the library and pressed his lips together in clear anger before glaring at me once more.

"I don't suppose saying I didn't do it would mean anything, would it?" I asked in careful, low tones.

A round, apple-like device rolled under me. I barely caught a glimpse of blue before there was a flash of crackling magic and everything went dark.

* * *

When consciousness returned, I found myself in a tiny room. Being a security pony, I recognized a jail cell when I saw one. The walls were a meshing of metal and the darkest cloud I'd ever seen, and the steel cot and hard 'cloudcrete' toilet were a dead giveaway. The energy field across the door dashed any plan of chewing through bars to make my escape. For several minutes, I just lay there and let my nerve endings inform me how much Dawn's wings sucked. The Enervation damage was healing, but it was taking its sweet time.

Still, I couldn't lie there and do nothing. I opened my PipBuck, but the device had been tampered with. The only thing that appeared was an Enclave symbol and the notice 'Electronic Interface Lockout 4227', and no amount of banging or button mashing would make it work. Apprehension began to rise in me. I tried to teleport through the field and spent the next ten minutes lying on my back, my body spasming from the magical feedback.

A tiny, singed purple mare in my mind flipped through her notes and observed that teleportation through magical energy fields was hazardous to my health. The diagram of me plus a purple flash equaling a skull and crossbones made it fairly clear. I was just going to lie here and do nothing for a little bit, till the twitching wore off.

"Good. You're awake." Stratus's voice came in through a speaker in the ceiling, and I looked around. There, in the corner, was a reinforced camera. The black lens peered at me as I glowered up at it. "I must admit, when I heard that the surface terrorists had been located, I was quite surprised. I hadn't anticipated such a weak performance. I suppose I should thank you for sparing me the tedium of an evening filling in work-related death forms."

"Moonshadow--" I began, trying to haul myself to my hooves before a spasm sent me flopping over onto my opposite side.

"Please, don't try shielding them," Stratus cut me off abruptly. "The young twins may escape exile if you cooperate. The earth pony filly might be granted clemency as well. Moonshadow and Dusk will be held for treason and conspiring with the surface. The adult earth ponies' fates are unimportant. I anticipate that they will be executed along with the traitors, or given flying lessons. That leaves you and the Rainbow Dash clone."

I stared up at the camera as he went on, feeling cold as a corpse. My aches and pains were shoved away by cold rage. "You are a terrorist wanted by the Neighvarro for your presence at the Maripony attack. I anticipate a great deal of goodwill from Neighvarro for handing you to them, but not nearly as much as from handing over the Rainbow Dash clone."

Enough lying down. Even if I was damaged, I rose to hooves with a rush of adrenaline. "Don't you dare!" I shouted, slamming the wall with a bang much like the ringing of a bell. "She's not Rainbow Dash! She's Morning Glory!"

"Oh, my mistake. We'll be sure to try her with her siblings, then give her to Neighvarro for sentencing," Stratus chuckled.

I stared at the camera and scowled. Something was off about this. "Why are you telling me this?" But there was no answer. Something was *very* off. "Why gloat? Why not just let me find out in sentencing?"

"I just wanted to thank you for all that you've done for me," Stratus said in clear amusement. "Now, behave yourself. When the Neighvarro fleet arrives, this will all be wrapped up quite nicely." I sat down hard on the uncomfortable metal bunk, staring straight ahead. My friends were all going to die, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Storm Chaser had given me a window to work out a settlement between Neighvarro and Thunderhead. Stratus had found himself a shortcut by handing us over on a silver platter. But I still didn't understand why the councilor had been there. Why come in the middle of the night? If she'd wanted to arrest me, she could have sent others to fetch me to her. If she'd wanted to talk, she could have simply waited for our meeting in the morning.

"Is that you, Babe?" a familiar voice asked, not through the speaker but from underneath me. I lay down and found, in the gap between the bunk and floor, an air vent. I peeked back up at the camera, but really, I couldn't stop him from watching if he was. If he wanted to send in ponies to stop me, that was fine with me.

"Chicanery?" I asked back, keeping my voice low. The screws on the vent cover were loose; I magically twisted them and pulled it aside, along with a wad of dust that made me sneeze. Inside, I spotted something I never would have expected inside the duct: a tiny, weakly-glowing memory orb. I extracted the dusty globe and peered through the duct at the vent opposite mine.

"The one and only. Looks like my producing career might be clipped along with my wings. Intelligence goons came for me ten minutes after you and Legerdemain left. Threw around the word 'terrorist' with every other sentence." He sighed. "And I really was looking forward to the 'Wastelander!' premiere."

"Are any of my friends with you?" I asked, hoping to hear Glory or P-21 reply. I needed smart-pony help.

"Just the white earth pony. Blue, I think you called her," he replied.

I relaxed a little. "That's Boo."

"That's it. She was put in here an hour or so ago," Chicanery replied. "Not a very talkative cellmate, but she's a demon at tic tac

toe."

"Right." I considered my PipBuck a moment. "You wouldn't happen to know how to lift an electronic interface lockout, would you?"

"Oh, my favorite malware," he drawled sarcastically. "The Enclave's way to lock down anypony discussing ideas like clearing the cloud cover or clandestine trips to the surface. If I had a terminal and a couple of days, maybe. That's more Leger's field."

Too bad. But speaking of the operative…"What happened to Lighthooves after I…left?" I asked. Falling screaming through the floor counted!

"He dove out of there shortly after you did. Just took the Perceptitron and told me to get to the Tower right away. Said I'd be safer there than anywhere." He sighed. "Of course I hadn't even had a chance to pack anything before Stratus's ponies stormed in and arrested me."

Wait. Either Status's special talent was perfect timing, or the stink in Thunderhead wasn't just down to interloping Wastelanders. "You say that Stratus was there as soon as Lighthooves left?"

"Yeah. Pinched me good," Chicanery said with a rueful chuckle. "If they'd been a minute quicker, they would have gotten both of us. So, what are you in for, Babe? Aside from terrorism, 'cause that's a given. Capital Trespassing?"

"They're blaming me for the murder of the councilor," I muttered sullenly.

"What? Gazer's been killed?" Chicanery gasped.

"By a surfacer I know named Dawn. Stratus showed up right after I threw her out a window," I said, frowning. Again, the timing was good. Too good. If one of his security ponies had seen me fighting Dawn, could he have locked me up and handed over Glory? "With the councilor dead, who takes over?"

"Aw, Babe, you're forcing me to remember government class? I slept through half of that," Chicanery whined, then sighed. "Okay. Let me think. If the councilor dies, the lieutenant councilor takes over, but he resigned last week. Sex scandal. Three wives and six kids. Even for Thunderhead, that's too much. There was supposed to be a special election next month to replace him."

"So who is running Thunderhead *right now*?" I asked tensely, fearing I already knew the answer. It was the same person who always ran things when official ponies in power died.

“Internal Security? Intelligence? The judiciary? I don’t know. One of those three,” Chicanery replied. What did I want to bet that Stratus was the head of one of those agencies?

“What do you know about Stratus? Is he head of Enclave Intelligence?” That would be the icing on the cake.

Chicanery chuckled. “No. He’s like…director of Thunderhead Security. He’s a midlevel bureaucrat connected to Enclave Intelligence, so he’s one with a lot of pull I suppose. No, I don’t know who the head of Enclave Intelligence is. Nopony does, except maybe the GPE leadership in Neighvarro. Probably some general or something.”

I sighed, shaking my head as I lay there next the vent. “So, what’s your story?”

“Me?” He sounded surprised.

“Does this vent connect to some other pony?” I asked with a sardonic smile.

“No. I’m just used to telling other ponies’ stories. Not my own.” He was silent a moment. “My mom is a unicorn. We were born in the Tower and grew up there. We explored every inch of that place. There were labs for all kinds of experiments and storage during the war. Lots of Ministry of Awesome stuff that I don’t think anypony ever realized was going on.” He sighed again. “When Lighthooves was old enough, he sailed right through the tests and joined the Enclave. Then he made me promise I wouldn’t join him.”

“He did?” I asked in surprise. “Why not? I thought he was devoted to it.”

“Didn’t want me getting hurt. He’s devoted to Thunderhead. But I think he hates Neighvarro for two centuries of lies and excuses. He said stagnation was our greatest enemy. He once calculated that if we’d ended the isolation policy fifty years after the bombs fell, we would have prevented almost a million deaths and hundreds of millions of bits wasted in rationing. He always thought of Neighvarro as a threat, and he was always talking about going down there and finding something to help Thunderhead get its independence once and for all. A balefire bomb. A megaspell. Something.” A plague, I thought silently to myself.

“Do you think he’ll use it? That bioweapon?” I asked.

Chicanery was quiet for a long time. “Yes, he will. *How* is another story. I want to say he’d never actually fire it…but, honestly, I’m sure he would. Then he’d do some rationalizing about him not

having any choice. But he might have some other plan in mind." Chicanery sighed. "I hope he does."

I hoped I could figure it out, too. "And you?"

He chuckled. "I was the younger brother, Babe. All the freedom in the world. Since service was out, I got creative. Made the usual films glorifying the Enclave and soldiers. Usual propaganda droppings. But when I got the Perceptitron working…damn. That was the best."

Glad lives of bloody misery are so inspiring, I thought sarcastically. "Did Lighthooves know you did?" I asked, wondering how long he'd been able to spy on me.

"No," he said with a sigh. "Not till recently, when I came out with 'Wastelander!'. I think he thought I was tapping into little flying robots. Someone down there is apparently infamous for that. He didn't know I could access *you* till today." So his brother hadn't been watching me every second. I wondered if he was watching me now, though. Chicanery fell silent as I thought, then asked, "You've got a plan out of this, right? You've always got a plan?"

"I'll let you know soon as I do," I replied, trying not to share the pit inside me. As far as I knew, I was screwed every way I looked. Couldn't teleport out. Couldn't chew through the bars because there weren't any. Without Lacunae, I didn't have anypony I could plan through. I didn't even have my figurines. All I had was a movie producer. I glanced at the dusty little ball. It'd probably been stuck in that vent for decades or more. "What the heck. Maybe I'll get lucky," I muttered as I climbed onto my hard steel bunk and levitated the memory orb above me. "Tell me there's a secret passage out of this cell or something."

Then I touched my horn to it and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Now this was a familiar sensation. It was the second time in the last twenty-four hours that I was in Rainbow Dash. This version, however, was different from her in her prime. Her body, while strong and fit, had dozens of niggling little aches in the joints. Still, it certainly didn't slow her down as she trotted down a hospital corridor. Through the windows outside, I saw the skyline of Manehattan. The nurses and other patients all had instant reactions when their eyes met Rainbow Dash, some grinning in delight and

others scowling sullenly. She simply wasn't a mare you could ignore.

She approached a door where a mare and stallion in pink M.o.M. uniforms stood attentively. The tall, thin unicorn mare and wide, beefy brown pegasus stallion both brightened when Dash approached them. "Pumpkin. Pound. How are my favorite set of twins?" Rainbow Dash asked, greeting the pegasus with a hoof bump that made the stallion smile a little more, even though the question caused some clear distress.

"We're…we're okay, Rainbow," he said, but their eyes went to the closed door.

Rainbow Dash sighed. "And how's Pinkie doing?"

"The doctors say she's stable…medically," the mare said, her blue eyes full of worry. "They pumped her stomach and used magic to detoxify her, but it was a lot of PTMs." The unicorn glanced at the stallion and chewed her bottom lip.

"Where's the rest of the pony gang?" Dash asked, looking around.

"She didn't want us to contact them. Only you," Pound replied. "Since she woke up…it's been bad. She won't let the doctors see her. She won't come out. She's been working all night, sending out messages, but none of them are to anypony important. Why would she suggest that an old groundskeeper invite an astropony and her kid over?"

Pumpkin nodded. "And she's made special orders, but none of them make any sense either. Like sending Braeburn a box of bobby pins? He's a stallion!" Her eyes swept up and down the hall, and her voice dropped. "I don't know how long we can keep this from Princess Luna."

Rainbow Dash frowned. "Just say she's got a nasty case of the pony pox," Dash replied. "I'll talk to the doctors. Make sure they don't make any public statements." Then she glowered. "Or did Scarface take care of that?"

"Goldenblood spoke with the hospital administration, yes," the pegasus said in a low voice, averting his brown eyes.

"Was he involved in this?" Rainbow Dash asked, pointing at the door with a wing.

"I…" Pound looked at his twin; she gave a small nod, and he continued. "We're not sure. We don't think so. He's the one who called the paramedics, but some of the things she's said since she woke up…"

Rainbow Dash gritted her teeth. “I’m going to kill him.”

The door to the room cracked open, and a wide eye with a tiny pupil and thin blue ring stared out the gap. “Don’t be silly, Dashie. Come in! Quickly!”

The eye disappeared, and Rainbow Dash nodded at the pair before pushing the door open and stepping into the dark hospital room. Only the few slits of light penetrating the blinds offered any illumination, and when Rainbow Dash hit the light button with her wing several times, nothing happened. “Oh, this is familiar,” Rainbow Dash muttered to herself as she stared at the room. The bed and most of the medical equipment had been shoved in a corner. At one small table, a game board rested, half covered with chess pieces and half covered with checkers. A bag of flour with a pipe shoved in the middle sat in one chair, opposite a bucket of turnips with a derby hat on top. A shadow whisked by the corner of her eye.

One wall was covered with scribbles, circles, and arrows pointing from one to the other. They fanned out like an enormous spider web that stretched from wall to wall and in some places crept out onto the floor and ceiling. In the middle of the web were the six cutie marks of the ministry mares, circled, surrounding a seventh circle with a huge question mark in the middle. Other predominant landmarks in the web of concepts were ‘four stars’, ‘Military Endgame’, ‘Enclave’, ‘Maripony’, ‘Goddess’, and ‘EoS’ in bold letters. I felt my insides lurch as I read, ‘Littlepip’, ‘Blackjack’, ‘Zebra(?) filly(?)’ in that nest of connections. ‘Hugs for Murky’? What’s a Murky? A large pile of rocks rested in a stack like a plinth, a monocle perched near the apex. Somepony in the room made a noise that was a mix of the worst parts of a laugh and sob.

“Pinkie?” Rainbow Dash asked warily as she looked around. In the corner of the room, before a large heap of lint wearing a fancy hunting cap, were pictures, photos, and other odd collections of objects. I recognized all the ministry mares, the Princesses, Goldenblood, and other ponies from the time before the war. Clippings from newspapers were interspersed with them, some going all the way back to Nightmare Moon’s return to Ponyville. I saw an old piece of paper upon which was an ominous black alicorn, rearing and kicking the air, silhouetted by a massive, sheer, flat-topped crag. A crescent moon banner fluttered above her.

Then hooves grabbed Dash’s shoulders, and Pinkie Pie hissed in her

ear, “I am not crazy! Do you understand? I. Am. Not. Crazy!” Her voice trembled with desperation.

When Rainbow’s gaze turned to her, I disagreed with that. The mare I saw looked positively deranged. She was thin; huge shadows surrounded her eyes, and her trademark poofy hair hung in pink and white streaks over her face. Tiny pupils stared from bloodshot eyes. “Sure, Pinkie. Why don’t we step outside so we can see the doctor and…” Rainbow Dash began in those tones reserved for crazy ponies. Then tears welled up in Pinkie’s eyes, and she began to sob, burying her face in Rainbow Dash’s chest as her friend held her.

“You have to believe me, Dashie. You have to. Please. Everything… everything…depends on you believing in me,” she said as she trembled. “None of the others will. Only you. Please.”

Dash held her friend and patted her back awkwardly. “Okay. I believe you. You’re not crazy. But you just had an overdose on those PTMs,” Dash said, then her voice hardened. “Did Goldenblood try to do something to you?” Pinkie Pie shook at his name, and Dash hissed, “I’ll kill him.”

“Yes, he did, and no, you won’t,” Pinkie Pie said with a sniff as she rubbed her swollen eyes and looked away. When Dash turned away for the door, Pinkie pulled her back. “You can’t.”

“The hell I can’t!” Rainbow Dash retorted. “I can think of half a dozen ways to take him out on my own. A dozen more with my ministry.”

“If you tried, you’d be thrown in jail, and even if you got him, it wouldn’t change anything. I know. I *know*,” Pinkie said with terrible urgency. “There’s bigger…worse…horrible things going to happen soon. Terrible bad things and there’s only a few ponies I can trust to stop it.”

Clearly, the haggard mare needed her friend to believe her. On the other hoof, a small vicious part of me wanted to cheer the blue pegasus on. Finally, Rainbow Dash sighed. “If we go to Luna and tell her how Goldenblood attacked you…”

Pinkie grabbed Dash’s shoulders and gave her a shake. “You don’t understand! Goldenblood is nothing! *Nothing*! I’m nothing. Fluttershy is nothing. Luna only needs Twilight and Rarity. Even you and Applejack are expendable.” She sniffed and released Dash. “Besides, Goldenblood is going to get his in a month or so. I need you to help me with something much more important.”

Rainbow Dash was silent for several seconds before answering. "Okay. What?" she asked with a small frown.

Pinkie Pie's eyes moved left and right. "No, I can't tell…achy hoof…flank flick…eye twitch…" Pinkie gave a sick smile that made her look as if she might vomit. "I can't…" Again, she winced. She sat and hugged herself. "If I tell you…will you promise to hear me out and not think I'm crazy? Please?"

Rainbow Dash glanced to the door again, and Pinkie seemed on the verge of bawling. I felt Dash's body start to shift, then stop. She shifted back. "I'll try," Rainbow said, her voice heavy with skepticism.

And now Pinkie was crying, punctuating it with occasional thank yous.

Pinkie trotted to the corner and retrieved a purple velvet box, then opened it up. Inside were six memory orbs, each one emblazoned with the cutie mark of a ministry mare. "I need you to collect a memory about each of our friends. She'll need them."

"Who?" Rainbow Dash asked as Pinkie Pie fished out the memory orb emblazoned with a thunderbolt.

Pinkie Pie didn't answer for several seconds. I wondered what she was feeling as she twitched there. "LittlePip. She's going to need these memories," Pinkie Pie mumbled as she looked down at the lightning cloud orb. "They're the only thing that matters now."

"Who?" Rainbow Dash asked again in bafflement.

"She's…don't ask. Please. Please, trust me! The more you know about this, the less you'll be able to do it," Pinkie begged as she held out the memory orb. "In this, you need to put the memory of the Single Pegasus Project meeting you had with Apple Bloom and the Princess. Pumpkin Cake will help you. She knows the spells. But you have to get it from her. Say it's for security or something."

"Buh…the…how do you know about that?" Dash gaped, then frowned. "Have you been spying on me?"

"No! Well, yes, but no. This isn't that. You have to do it. She has to know if she's going to take over the Single Pegasus Project," Pinkie said. "Please, don't ask more, Dashie."

"This LittlePip is a pegasus in my ministry?" Rainbow Dash asked in a baffled tone.

"No, she's a stable pony unicorn who in two hundred years will use the Single Pegasus Project to defeat the Enclave," Pinkie Pie blurted, then covered her mouth in horror, like she'd said

something dirty. The two stared at each other for a minute.

"Okay…are you sure you won't see the doc--" Rainbow Dash began, but then met Pinkie's pleading gaze and deflated. "Fine. It wasn't that critical a meeting anyway. Just an overview." Rainbow Dash sounded surprisingly bitter about just an overview. "Wait… two hundred years?"

Pinkie rapidly scooped up and pressed the diamond orb into Dash's hooves. "Don'tworryaboutthatnow!" Rainbow Dash blinked, then looked down. "You need to get this one on Rarity. It's the memory of her splitting her soul into those statuettes she gave us. Snips or Snails should give it."

"She what?!" Rainbow Dash blurted, horrified. "You mean those little…"

"Yes. She did. They are. I know, I felt the same way too," Pinkie Pie said as she hung her head. "Please don't ask too many questions. She thought it'd bring us together, but it's too late for that. Too late…" Pinkie Pie closed her eyes and sniffed, then scrubbed her eyes. She stared at the shafts of light coming through the window. "You should give your Rainbow Dash figurine to Scootaloo. I know she'd enjoy it."

"Yeah…I…okay," Rainbow Dash replied in a light, shocked tone. Then, when she was given the star orb, she asked, "What do I need from Twilight?"

"She's going to do an interview with Trixie next week. You need that memory from Trixie. It's what will trigger the Goddess to remember herself. Otherwise, LittlePip is doomed, and Blackjack with her." Pinkie looked away. "You and Pumpkin could say it's a background check or something."

"LittlePip? Blackjack?" Rainbow frowned. "Which Goddess. Luna?"

"Don't ask. Even I don't fully get it. Well, Go Fish, but she changes her name," Pinkie said, then waved her hoof. "Don't get me started on her! LittlePip will be bad enough!"

"No surprise with a name like that," Rainbow Dash asked, then frowned. "Wait. Will be? Going to do an interview? You mean this stuff hasn't *happened* yet?"

Pinkie sighed. "I know. I know! It doesn't make sense, but it will. It's all one big ball of…of…wibbly-wobbly…timey wimey…stuff!" She slumped and spread her hooves wide. "Please. Trust me. Believe me."

Another long moment. I wondered if my friends ever felt this way

about my explanations for things. Dash rubbed her face with her wings. “Okay. What about the apple one?”

“This one is easy. There’s a security mare down in the ICU who’s in a coma. She’s going to die in a few hours, but Pumpkin Cake can get the memory of Applesnack killing Zecora last night,” Pinkie said as she bowed her head. “I almost asked her myself, but she’s going to have to get used to working with you.”

“What? Zecora?! But how…why? Was it Goldenblood?” Rainbow Dash asked. “He was a Marauder! Maybe--”

Pinkie Pie grabbed Dash’s face, silencing her and making her lips bulge. “Didn’t you hear me? Forget about Goldenblood. This is bigger than him.”

Rainbow pulled her face back and rubbed her cheeks. “Okay, okay. But we both know he’s up to something. Somepony in the O.I.A. is sending secret ministry information to the enemy.” I mentally growled in agreement.

“You have no idea,” Pinkie groaned, and shook her head. “But no. It was a completely random chance. LittlePip just needs to know why he and Applejack broke up. Oh, but Blackjack needs to know that Zecora learned a pony was passing the Projects to a spy.”

“Who?” Rainbow Dash said eagerly. “Who is it?”

“Oh, I can’t tell her that. *When* is as important as *what*.” Rainbow Dash’s eyelid twitched. *What?* But I... she... buh... This was giving *me* a headache.

In a display of extreme patience, Dash took a deep breath. “Okay,” she said, then looked at the balloon orb. “Can’t you get this one yourself?”

“No. You need to get that from me next week, right before I raid Four Stars. Just tell me that I told you to tell me to give the memory of the mirror to you. I won’t understand…because I’m going to have Pumpkin Cake erase what I know so that I can’t mess things up. Which I have…so badly. But I’ll give it to you,” Pinkie Pie said softly. “You’re my friend.”

“But…why?” Rainbow Dash asked.

Pinkie stared at Rainbow with a piercing gaze. “I know what you did in Roam,” she said, her voice low.

Rainbow looked away this time. “I had to,” she said in a haunted voice. “He was a traitor.”

“I know. But you did it. And I don’t want to know. I don’t want to think of my friend doing something like that, and that’s one of a

kajillion things I don't want to know."

Rainbow closed her eyes and nodded. "Timey wimey... stuff. Okay," Rainbow Dash groaned and slipped it into her saddlebags.

Pinkie Pie removed the last orb. "This one you'll have to get from Angel Bunny at Zecora's hut…after the bombs fall. You'll…you'll have to get Pumpkin Cake to go with you after the bombs fall." Pinkie stared straight ahead with her pinprick eyes. Rainbow Dash's own pupils contracted as she stared in horror and Pinkie said in a hollow voice, "The memory will tell LittlePip how to get the Black Book... "

"Wait. What bombs? What are you saying?" Rainbow Dash asked as she rose her hooves. "Are you saying the zebras are going to do a first strike? My ministry doesn't have any info on that!" Rainbow Dash turned to the door. "I'm going to meet with Twilight and Luna and--"

But Pinkie Pie grabbed Rainbow Dash around the neck from behind and with surprising energy flung Dash against the wall and pushed her back against it. Pinkie hung her head, her mane falling in her face. "We can't stop it," she muttered.

Rainbow Dash stared at her. "Horseapples. If you know, we can stop it."

"No. We can't," Pinkie Pie whispered.

"The hell we can't! How can you say that?!" Rainbow Dash demanded.

"Because I've seen what happens if we try!" Pinkie Pie cried out in anguish. "We get arrested, and everything dies! Everything! Or we win, and everything dies! Or you try telling our friends, they don't believe us, and then everything dies. I've had combos so clear and so…" She sobbed and slumped against Rainbow Dash, who suddenly had to hold the pink mare up. "Don't you understand? The bombs falling are the *best* chance for us. In two hundred years, there will be another chance for other ponies to do better. To make this world right again! LittlePip will be the first. Then Blackjack. Then others! It's the slimmest of slim chances, but it's the only chance there is. But I can't do what needs to be done because I'll be dead in Manehattan!" And to my horror, she started laughing so broken heartedly that I wanted to hold her.

"Pinkie," Rainbow Dash said as both slowly sank to the floor.

Pinkie Pie trembled in Rainbow Dash's hooves. "I can't wait for Pumpkin to take all this from me. I don't want to know it. I don't!

But I do. My Pinkie Sense…I know! We're going to die, or worse. And you know what? We deserve it! We do. The things we did for the stupid war. The ponies we've hurt. The zebras! Defeat would have been better! But it's too late now. Too late for us. Too late for them. It's going to take two centuries of death and misery as penance for what we've done. And for some of us, it's going to take so very much more." She sobbed and shook. "I wish it were a horrible joke…I want to say it's all a big prank. Just a great big prank. But I can't do it alone. I can't! I need your help."

Rainbow Dash held her in her hooves and then closed her eyes. I wish I knew what she'd thought in that minute, before she opened them again. "Okay."

Pinkie Pie gave a little hiccup before looking at her. For the first time, the mare's eyes seemed to be returning to normal. "You'll do it?"

Rainbow Dash nodded, then said, "I'd *really* like to talk to Twilight about this. Or any of our friends. But you're right. Twilight probably wouldn't hear me out once I mentioned your name. Even the others might have trouble believing it." She rubbed the back of her head with a hoof. "I hate to admit, *I* have trouble wrapping my head around all this."

"But you believe me, right?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"I believe you, Pinkie," Rainbow Dash reassured her. "I may not understand you, but I believe you." Rainbow Dash smiled and nudged her shoulder with a hoof. "Though I am going to try to make you wrong. No offense. At the very least, I'll make sure the S.P.P. will be all set up and ready to go." The aging blue pegasus sighed. "Honestly, I'm still gonna pretend that this is one huge prank. I'll go cross-eyed otherwise."

"In a way, it is. When you get all six, you need to take them to your ministry's storage in Canterlot and make sure they're well protected. And in two hundred years, if everything goes perfect, we'll get a punchline that'll fix the world," Pinkie Pie said, smiling at her friend, and then she blinked. "Oh. And you're going to have to copy the memory of me telling you all this, too. Put it in the vent behind cell twenty-one in Thunderhead."

"Um…do I want to ask why?" Rainbow Dash said warily.

Pinkie Pie's candycane mane was curling a little before Dash's eyes as she smiled. "So I can tell Blackjack to remember what Lighthooves did to Glory." Then she blinked. "Oh. I guess I just

did." She rubbed her eyes and looked away. "Dawn wasn't lying, but just because somepony does something bad doesn't mean they've stopped being your friend. And sometimes, if two babies are determined to fight, sometimes you have to take away what they're fighting over. Oh. And congratulations," she said, then shook her head. "I wish I could tell you about Horizons, Blackjack, but you're going to find out soon enough…and... " she paused, her smile twitching a little before she said in a cracking voice, "I know you'll pull through. I believe in you." She shook her head once more, looking utterly exhausted and drained, but happy. "That's enough. I need Pumpkin Cake."

"Pinkie, are you…" Rainbow started to ask as she held her up.

"No. I'm not. But neither are you. But I will be. And so will you. And Twilight. And everypony. After all," she said as the world started to blur away, "You're my true, true friend."

oooOOOooo

When I came out of the memory, I felt like my *brain* had been tied into a timey wimey ball of wibbly wobbly stuff. Pinkie Pie had overdosed on PTMs and saw…me? LittlePip? Other heroes? How had she known those memories would help LittlePip? Why didn't she tell me what Horizons was? Or which of my friends had betrayed me? Why hadn't she marched up to Luna and told her what would happen in a month?

She'd believed the bombs were what they deserved, but everypony? Dash must have been a really good friend, because Pinkie sounded pretty crazy to me. I wondered just what she might have arranged before Rainbow Dash arrived. Memories sent out? Messages? All so that we could have a chance now to reverse the course set during that stupid war. I wondered if she might have made suggestions to Scootaloo for certain ponies to go to certain stables.

Checkers vs. chess. I was hopeless at the latter, but I knew that sometimes in checkers, sometimes, if you were lucky and could get everything lined up, you could jump from square to square and sweep the board. I wasn't sure if I felt uneasy or reassured that Pinkie Pie, of all ponies, was helping LittlePip and me two centuries later. Finally, I settled on reassured. No matter how unstable she'd appeared, she'd wanted to help. So, I'd take it however I could. If

she didn't tell me, it was because I either didn't need to know, or she knew I'd find out eventually.

Still, I really wish she'd mentioned what Goldenblood was up to.

The fact this orb was in the vent said that Rainbow Dash had done what she wanted. That was a leap of faith and friendship that staggered me. It would have been easy for Rainbow Dash to simply write off her friend as cracked. Heck, it would have been more rational than actually helping as she had. "Hey, Chicanery, guess what I just found out?" I said with a smile.

Silence. I frowned and rolled off the cot to peer through the vent. "Chicanery?" No response. "Oh, this can't be good." Then I looked over at the…powered-down energy field, and my eyes widened. A bloody heap lay in the doorway. "*Definitely* not good," I said as I walked to the door and peeked out into the hallway. Down at the end of the hallway was a stallion lying in a pool of blood. A trail of bloody hoofprints led straight to my cell. I sighed, closed my eyes, and thumped my head against the wall. "I just got here. I wanted to catch a movie. Maybe listen to another concert. Why, for the love of Celestia, can't I just have a little less blood in my day?"

I stepped out into the hall and checked next door. "Boo?" I asked. She poked her head out from under the cot and rushed to me, hugging me fiercely. "It's okay. Where's Chicanery?" But she just cocked her head at me, and I sighed and looked around for myself. The other cell doors were off too, the rooms empty. Then I came to the last door. This one was metal, its surface bulged and buckled. 'High Security' was written across it, and I gave an experimental knock with my hoof.

With a metallic shriek, the door fell right out of its frame and landed atop me with a clang. Then a pony stomped on the other side. "Lock me up, you sons of mules? I'll kick all your asses! Your horses and camels too! Bring it on!" Rampage said from atop me, then continued in a slightly confused voice, "Hey. Where'd you go?"

"I'm down here, Rampage," I groaned from beneath the steel door.

She lifted it with one rear hoof. "Oh, hey, Blackjack. What are you doing?" A heavy metal collar and shackles dangled chains from her neck and limbs. "Where is everypony?"

"At this point, I have no idea," I groaned, answering both her questions. She flipped the door up with a kick of her hoof and then jammed it back into the frame. "Where are the others?" I asked, sitting up.

"Uh, no clue?" she asked with a little smirk. She trotted over to Boo and gave her a nudge. "Hey, Boo." The pale mare gave a nervous, hesitant smile. "When I woke up, I was locked up. I figured if I just beat on the door long enough, somepony would come, and I could beat them up for answers. Or just beat them up. Or pulverize them into a fine red paint. That'd be good too." She looked down the hall at the dead guard. "I see you had the same idea?"

"That wasn't me," I replied with a frown as I stood. "They must have the others somewhere else."

I walked slowly along the blood trail to where the guards lay in crushed heaps, something I would have done if my magic bullets didn't kill them outright. No alarms, which was even more ominous. The first guard was armed only with a baton; it brought back memories as I took it. I followed the bloody hoofprints to a door wedged open by two more security ponies' bodies. These were shot in the head by high-caliber bullets.

On the far side, I saw why there weren't any alarms going off. A security post lay on the far side of the door. Somepony had smashed through the reinforced glass…or transparent cloud... smashed one pony's head into the console, and impaled the other's throat on the shattered glass partition. The trail led to an access hatch, just beyond the security station, that had been beaten in. Down two halls to the left and right, I could see more active cells. Elevators were against the back wall.

"So, you're *sure* you didn't do this?" Rampage asked as we walked by the security cell in the center, pointing with a hoof. It was reinforced plastic on three sides, with a locked door in the back. I guessed it controlled all these cells.

"I am…" I paused. Well, I couldn't say I was completely sure. I'd been taken over before, but I *really* hoped somepony else didn't have the keys to my body. "I'm mostly sure." She smirked and arched a skeptical brow. "Ninety percent." Eighty-five percent sure…sureness levels dropping…

"Right," Rampage replied. "Then you need to bust that ten percent out more often," she said as she shoved the body back into the security cell, hopped through the hole, and started to search it. I walked around to the door and twisted the deadbolt from the far side. Pegasus security really wasn't much for unicorn abilities. She opened up a case with some emergency bandages and peered at a bottle of tablets. "'Isosteroprophenhol'? 'Buck' is a lot easier to say.

Ahhh!” She immediately beamed and extracted a second jar. “‘Precognazine’! Come to me, my minty beauties,” she said, shaking some into her mouth. After chewing and swallowing, she sighed, then looked at me as I examined the monitors for some sign of my friends. “Hey, Blackjack. Why haven’t you killed me yet?”

The question was like a wrench thrown into my thought processes, and I froze in the act of pulling the smashed stallion off the controls. “You’re asking this now?”

“There’s a better time?” Rampage asked idly. She had a point, but I avoided looking at her as I tried to figure out how to work the controls. “You know I want to die. You could have killed me with that Folly thing, but you didn’t.”

“I don’t generally kill my friends,” I replied.

“Even when they want you to kill them?” she asked casually.

“Especially then,” I answered.

“I don’t ask for much, following you around. You saved me from a life of being a buffet. You’ve given me hope that maybe, somehow, things might be okay. But the fact is that, even if it is, I’m going to live while all of you die.”

“I’m a cyberpony, Rampage. I might live centuries,” I said evenly.

“And this soul talisman might last millennia. Or longer,” she replied. “And you might be killed in five minutes. You’re tough, but I haven’t seen you come back from being disintegrated. It’s practically a joke for me. But if you die…that’s it. I don’t think I can make it. When Lacunae bought it…I envy her so much that it hurts.” She turned away. “I don’t want to bury everypony I know.”

I stared at the screens but didn’t really see them. “I thought that you were doing better with the recollector and those memories I’ve found.”

“Oh, it’s interesting, I guess,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “But they’re still other ponies’ memories. Other ponies’ souls. I don’t have a single memory of a childhood that’s mine. I haven’t seen anything that indicates I’m more than a thing.”

I paused, then told her, “I can’t kill you, Rampage.”

“Horseapples. You kill better than I do, and I like it,” Rampage said to me flatly. “So I want to know, if you find a way to end me, will you tell me? Some spell. Some device. Something.” I looked over at her and saw in her eyes doubt and need. She needed something I couldn’t give. Even now, I wondered if the star sword could do it. It cut through almost everything else. Maybe one slice and she could

live a normal pony's life. Grow old. Die. Or it might kill her instantly.

I slumped and sighed. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. She didn't say a word as she turned away again. "I'll help you any way I can, but that. I'll help you find memories. I'll be here for you and I swear to you that for as long as I can, I won't leave you alone."

"Mhmmm," Rampage said indifferently as she trotted for the door. "Well, you were searching for the others, right? Better get to that," she said coolly. "Wouldn't want them to die or anything…"

I watched her step out, chains jingling. Then I laid one foreleg on the controls, buried my face in it, barely muffling my scream of frustration as I banged my hoof against the panels beside me. Why couldn't Pinkie have told me more? Some answer to make things go smoothly. Just for once, with the lives of thousands on the line, I wanted them to go smoothly! Boo patted my shoulder; she'd seen the gesture enough that I supposed I should be glad she knew it.

"Who's there?" P-21 said through a speaker. "What's that banging noise?"

I looked up at a screen that showed four cells, and in one of them were P-21 and Scotch Tape. A red light next to the word 'Intercom' indicated that the cell's speaker was on. I brightened, rising up, and the red light winked off. "Hu…bu…wa?" I stared at the bloody, banged up control panel before me, trying to find the 'open' button. What button had I pushed? Where had my hooves been? I watched the pair talking silently. When in doubt, push buttons! "Come on. Which one is it?"

A green light appeared next to the word 'mic' on the screen, and I heard Scotch Tape say, "Don't change the subject, Daddy. You were having sex with Blackjack and Glory during the Gala, weren't you?"

I froze. Suddenly, the concerns of tens of thousands of ponies seemed much less pressing. P-21 crossed his forehooves and looked away. "I think that I'm starting to get why Glory gets a headache when 99 and sex come up together." Scotch Tape tapped her hoof impatiently, and he sighed. "I was drunk; first time ever. It was a one-time thing."

"You were drunk and *happy*, Daddy," Scotch Tape retorted.

P-21 sighed and smiled. "Yeah. I was. Happier than I've been in a long time." I felt strange fluttery feelings that had no place in a cybernetic body.

"Do you love Blackjack?" Scotch Tape asked.

I leaned towards the screen a little, my eyes wide.

Then my hoof slipped and the green light winked out as his lips started to move. Something in me snapped as I shouted "Arrrgh! Stupid, frigging blood-covered buttons!" I mashed the control panel ruthlessly. I glanced up in time to see Scotch Tape cover her mouth in shock, and then I punched the control panel even harder. I needed to hear his answer. The control panel was nearly smashed to scrap as I snarled, "Turn on! Turn on! I need to hear what he says!"

"Detention Block AA-23? What's your status?" an angry, official-sounding pony asked tensely. "You're five minutes late for your check in."

Not the channel I'd hoped for. "I…uh…" I stared at the bodies. "There was a…a weapons malfunction! Yes, slight weapons malfunction. But, uh, everything is perfectly alright now. I'm fine. We're all fine here, thank you," I said, and then added lamely, "How are you?"

"We're sending a squad in," the pony said peremptorily.

Oh crap. What's something that'd keep me out in 99? "No no no, don't do that. We had a…reactor leak up here! Yeah! Radiation everywhere! Give us a few minutes to lock it down. Large leak. Very dangerous," I said desperately, willing them to believe it.

"Reactor? What are you talking about? Who is this? What's your operating number?" the pony demanded.

I looked at the controls and finally just stomped them as hard as I could repeatedly, showering myself in sparks. Boo staggered back and hit a pair of large red buttons marked 'fire' and 'emergency release'. "Boring conversation anyway." I turned to the door. "Rampage! We're going to have company!" An alarm began to sound and I saw the magical fields on the screen wink off one by one.

"Good," Rampage said, then started taking tablets of Buck. "I'm in the perfect mood for company." Okay, I'd better hurry and get her out of here before she painted the walls in pony.

A young stallion jumped out as I trotted to the left hallway. "Oh yeah! Riot! Ri--" And he froze at the sight of me. A few other criminals emerged too, only to balk at the bloody cyberpony before them. "Oh shit…"

"Yeah. It's that kind of day," I replied. "Back in your cells. There's no fire."

A few of them looked around. "Aw, come on, I was--" he started to

say.

"Nope! Not hearing it! Back in your cells and behave." He opened his mouth again, and I silenced him with a raised hoof. "Any other day, I'm sure your sob story would convince me to let you go, but right now I am just not in the mood. Besides, there's a squad coming. I doubt you want to run into them." Or Rampage. "So, in your cells. Now."

Muttering, they returned. "Boo? Blackjack!" Scotch Tape squealed from behind me. The pair raced down from the other hall of cells, the filly almost tackling me. Then she realized what I was covered in. "Ew…Blackjack…"

"You've been busy," P-21 said casually, looking over the mess.

"I didn't--" I started to say, when there was a ping from the elevator. "Get out! Follow the blood," I yelled as two elevators opened almost simultaneously. A pair of ponies in power armor stood in each, their beam weapons humming as they charged up. Their first mistake.

"On the floor! Now!" they bellowed. Their second mistake. Granted, I was already interposed between the elevators and P-21 and Scotch and Boo as they raced for the open access hatch.

Rampage stood before one elevator, completely unarmed save for her shackles. She tilted her head and gave an almost blissful smile, Buck dust around her lips. "You guys are exactly what I need right now," the striped mare said in a voice approaching seductive. The two armored ponies looked at each other. Their final mistake. The striped mare leapt the ten feet separating them, landing in the elevator. Beam blasts sizzled as the doors closed, but I could hear the smash of metal against metal and the screams of pain.

The other pair had a perfect view of the three of us dashing for the open door with no cover. I couldn't think of anything to protect us except... my horn flashed, and a door and frame appeared in the air before them. Then it swung shut in their faces with a slam as we scrambled for the open portal. An instant later, gatling beams blasted the flimsy impediment into flaming shards of wood, but it had served its purpose. We got through the access door before their gatling beam guns turned us into four piles of glowing ash. I slammed my hooves against the door, shoving it closed.

"I hope Rampage will be okay," Scotch Tape said. The access door led to a dimly-lit spiral staircase. The trail of blood led up. Down was a locked grate that I probably could have chewed through if we

didn't have power armor banging on the other side of the door. I smashed the keypad beside the door; hopefully that would slow them down.

"She'll be fine. I'm more worried about Glory." Actually, I was also worried for us. Whoever had left this trail of blood couldn't have meant me any good. "Up, I guess," I said, glancing at the others. My eyes met P-21's, and I immediately flushed. "Oh... uh... I... " Huh. I could blurt out questions about bowel movements and make casual comments about sex that curled Glory's feathers, but the simple question about how he'd answered Scotch Tape turned my tongue to clay. "Um…It's good to see you, P-21."

He blinked back. "Likewise?" The door beside us banged loudly. "Shouldn't we get moving?"

I looked from him to the door to Scotch Tape to Boo and finally just gave up. "Today just keeps getting better... " I muttered, taking the lead up the stairs. The twisting ascent would be a bitch for them to navigate in power armor. And up. And up. And up.

Every twenty feet was another access door, each with the access panels smashed. "Odd," P-21 observed.

"That describes my entire day," I said, then went through and told them about Dawn, Stratus, the Pinkie Pie orb, and how I'd 'escaped' from my cell. I was so occupied with telling them everything that had happened, minus the little scene I'd overheard, that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. We came around a corner just in time to run smack into a power-armored pegasus next to a cut-open door.

Her gatling beam guns opened up in a spray of magical fire that sizzled and sparked off the walls and ceiling. I couldn't even poke my head up long enough to try a magical bullet. "I've got them! They're pinned at access junction 12! Hur--" she started to shout.

I teleported directly above her, landing like a ton of cyberpony. Her armor still stood, but her shooting went wild. The stinger tail jabbed down at me, nearly ripping open my back as I slowed the tip with my telekinesis, then grabbed the end and hugged it tight. My hind legs pinned her wings to her side, but that didn't stop her from going into a bucking bronco of gunfire as her tail twisted like a snake. "Stop," I shouted, my horn sending a magic bullet into the back of her head. "Stop!" I shouted again, shooting her. Each blast widened a hole in her helmet as she screamed and struggled. "Damn it! Stop it!" Two more shots.

Suddenly her body spasmed and she collapsed beneath me. “No... ” I pulled off her helmet, revealing a rose colored mare with blood coming out her ears. I concentrated, trying to heal her as Lacunae had healed me. I could do it! I’d done magic with minimal instruction. I was Twilight’s descendant! I could do it! I strained and pushed and envisioned her without the blood or the hole I’d punched in her head.

“Blackjack, she’s dead,” P-21 said.

“No! I can... I have to... I... ” I faltered, staring down at her. “I came here to save ponies, damn it! I wanted to save all of you!” I shouted at her corpse. I wanted to save Thunderhead from the Wasteland. Help it grow. Help civilization to spread. “Why won’t you let me help you? Just stop fighting me!”

“Blackjack,” P-21 said calmly. “We can’t stay here.”

I knew what he meant, but he was more right than he knew. “Come on,” I said as I rose to my hooves, looking up the spiral stair. “Let’s see where this trail of blood ends.”

* * *

Five minutes later, we emerged in an office. The beige walls were a hint to its bureaucratic nature, and the body of a slain secretary outside the door was a continuation of the carnage. Her corpse was still warm; whoever had done this hadn’t gotten far. I avoided looking at the smashed head; it was too similar to the body I’d left below. I stepped into the hall, but it was eerily silent. Unanswered phones rang, and an alarm sounded. Two more ponies lay in crumpled piles down the hall. Had the survivors been evacuated, or had whoever had done this slaughtered them all before they could flee?

I followed the bloody hoofprints, adding my own to them as we walked along towards a corner office. These were pretty fancy, important offices, and I began to get an inkling of my final destination. There were unarmored security ponies lying outside the door, bullet holes in their faces. I closed my eyes a moment, then read the blood-spattered nameplate.

‘*Security Director Stratus*’.

“Oh, son of a mule,” I hissed, then slowly pushed open the door to the large office.

An impressive oak desk sat at one end, the kind of desk used by

ponies who valued their position. Stratus's voice filled the air from a scratchy recording coming from a terminal. "... weapon is complete. Stargazer isn't going to be an issue, as she was tragically killed by the surfacer terrorist Blackjack. I'm securing the city. When you get here, there shouldn't be any excuse for securing the Tower. I look forward to your reply and hope you will keep my cooperation in mind when appointing the next Councilor to Thunderhead. I believe I've demonstrated my loyalty. End burst transmission. Send. Save."

Bent over the desk, his hooves splayed wide, was a dark stallion. His face had frozen in an expression of shock, as if he couldn't believe it had come to this. Buried in his back was a very familiar sword: mine. Duty and Sacrifice lay neatly on the table beside him. A shattered window lay behind him. I glanced over the scattered papers on his desk and spotted a picture next to his outstretched hoof. It was a grainy, slightly amberish-tinted image of four dark-colored pegasi: Sky Striker, Stratus, Stargazer, and the squinty-eyed Dawn.

Suddenly, that explained his perfect timing at Dawn's house.

"Begin Burst Transmission. Councilor Ironwing. I wish to offer my condolences for the death of High General Harbinger. I hope that the GPE selects a deserving and visionary pony such as yourself to lead us in these difficult times. I wish to report that Thunderhead is ripe for plucking. I've been able to arrange things, and your pretext is in position. The bio-weapon is complete. Stargazer isn't going to be an issue... " the terminal repeated as I slowly walked up and retrieved my guns.

Suddenly, his body jerked, and he drew a wet and rasping breath. His bulging eyes turned in his head to stare up at me. "You... it's... "

"Don't move!" I said as I looked at the sword and then at him. If I pulled the sword out... "Go find a medical kit or something," I said to P-21 and Scotch. The two immediately rushed off to search as I lowered my face to his. "Where's Glory?"

"The clone? I gave her to the Enclave military. They should have a press conference any second now. Should cause quite a stir... " He laughed weakly. "She was my golden ticket... "

I resisted the urge to hit the dying stallion. "Who did this to you? Was it Dawn?"

Stratus coughed, breathing heavily. "Dawn. I thought... she was so perfect... get that damned bleeding heart out of the way... " Blood

bubbled out his mouth. “She... she wanted to help. Kill Stargazer. Take you. Hand over everypony to the Enclave and... and I’m the next councilor. It was perfect,” he gurgled, then shuddered and coughed a fan of crimson.

“Who did this?” I asked again. “Lighthooves?”

I was losing him. His eyes were defocusing. “Lighthooves. So eager. So devoted. So stupid. He didn’t realize... nopony did... ” He spasmed and lunged for me. “It... it should have been... me!” he gasped into my face before convulsing and falling over. He gurgled one last bloody breath and went still.

I levitated my sword out of his back. It still had a tiny identification tag tied to the hilt. I walked to the broken window and looked out at the bright lights of the city.

I’d been wrong.

We hadn’t left the Wasteland after all. The scheming, the manipulation, the avarice, and the ruthless ambition that plagued Hoofington below were up here as well. It might not have been ponies killing each other in the streets, but there was still the Hoofington madness above as there was below. Chicanery and Lighthooves. Doctor Morningstar. Stratus.

From down the hall came the stomping of many hooves. Scotch Tape let out a shriek a moment before P-21 yelled, “Blackja--” followed by a loud thump.

I stood there with sword and pistols as power-armored pegasi stormed into his office. More appeared outside the window. These were the old designs. Neighvarro forces. I closed my eyes and groaned.

“Well well well,” Captain Hoarfrost said from the door. “Isn’t this interesting?”

“You have got to be kidding me!” I shouted up at the ceiling. “Twice? Getting set up once by Stratus wasn’t bad enough, I have to get set up twice?” I looked at the icy blue pegasus, who seemed a little baffled and unsure by my outburst. “Let me guess? I’m now the perfect patsy to pin all this on, right? Am I right?” Then I threw my weapons aside. “Congratulations. You win.”

“I... what?” Hoarfrost said, the cool blue mare now definitely not sure what I was doing.

“You win! I surrender. I mean, Stratus sets me up. Then Lighthooves sets me up. Now you!” I said as I thrust my hooves into the air. “So you know what? I’m not going to fight it any more.

Huzzah. Congratulations. Take me in. I want to talk to General Storm Chaser about this."

Hoarfrost scowled at me narrowly. "No, I don't think so. Kill her."

Okay. That wasn't quite what I'd expected.

Twenty power-armored soldiers all primed their weapons with the same ominous hum. Surrounded. Even if they hit each other, I'd be ash long before they were. And if I teleported away and left my friends in Hoarfrost's custody... would they be next? Probably.

Then one second passed. Then ten. Hoarfrost frowned. "What are you waiting for? Open fire!"

From inside the helmet of one suit of armor came a muffled, "I can't!"

"What do you mean you can't?" Hoarfrost asked coldly. "Fire. Last thing I want is General Chaser to waste more time with this terrorist."

"My suit's in repair and diagnostic mode!" wailed a stallion.

There were more muted shouts of dismay from the others.

I looked at Hoarfrost, and her eyes widened. She reached down to the beam pistol in her front holster with her mouth. I could have killed her four different ways. I could have levitated up the sword and sliced her head off. Duty and Sacrifice were nearby, too, though I wasn't sure if they were loaded. I could have managed at least one magic bullet to her face. Or simply smashed her with my hooves.

Instead, my horn glowed, and a door instantly poofed into existence right in front of her. Then it slammed shut in her face with a resounding bang. I opened it again, saw her swaying with a mildly concussed expression, her gun held limply in her mouth, telekinetically pulled her head forward, and slammed the door closed a second time. Hoarfrost thumped to the ground behind it.

I was wrong. That *was* a useful spell of Twilight's.

Scotch Tape walked in, staring at the immobile ponies with clear wariness as the occupants within the motionless armor grunted. "Wow. How'd you do that, Blackjack?" Boo followed her in, walking among the black metal statues.

"I didn't," I replied. P-21 entered with Rampage following behind, the Reaper lacking the chains and wearing the top half of a power armor helmet like a hat. I didn't want to think about what happened to the head that had been in that helmet. "You're okay!" I said to her, giving her a hug. She didn't quite return it... P-21 was carrying all our stuff on his back. He started passing it back, telling

Scotch something about finding the evidence locker just before the soldiers arrived. I admit, the return of those six figurines helped settle the imaginary ponies in my head. I could almost hear them sigh in relief.

"Yup. Still alive," she said coolly as she looked at the power-armor-clad ponies and then smacked her hooves together. "Shall I start smashing the ones on the left while you get the ones on the right?" she asked as she rubbed her hooves.

"What? No!" I retorted. "I'm trying to find a way to *stop* this mess, Rampage. Not add to it!"

"You need to think like a Wastelander here, Blackjack, not a stable pony or cloud dweller," Rampage replied. "You have side A and side B. You don't want them to fight each other and hurt the sane ponies that don't want to be involved, right? So kill a side. Hell, kill both sides! Then we can set you up as ruler of Thunderhead, Glory can be your lovely concubine, P-21 your master of intelligence, and me your brutal enforcer. It'll be a blast." She grinned as she spread her hooves wide.

"What would Boo and I do?" Scotch Tape asked curiously as I tried to pointedly ignore Rampage's advice.

"Boo can be public relations. Anypony we don't want to kill who has a problem can take it up with her. As for you... " Rampage paused and rubbed her chin. "You'll be the young lieutenant who devises all the war machines we'll need to maintain our empire."

"Cool! I'm in," Scotch Tape said with a grin.

"Please stop corrupting my daughter," P-21 interjected in mild annoyance.

"Awwww, but being in an evil empire sounds fun," Scotch Tape whined. "You'd look great in a black uniform, Daddy."

"Empress Blackjack is vetoing the Empire idea," I declared flatly. "It's all fun at first, but then some ragtag bunch of misfits rises up and overthrows you. I want to end this without any more ponies dying on either side."

"Oh. The *crazy* route," Rampage said with a snort and a wave of her hoof. "Go on, then. Give it your best shot. Worked well with the Reapers and Rangers, after all."

Oh boy, she was in a pissy mood. I ignored her as I levitated up my sword and sliced through the bolts holding a soldier's helmet in place. The terrified green mare within shouted, "Please don't kill me!"

Rather bold of her to beg that after she'd been about to kill me, but I didn't need her terrified. I needed her to listen. "I'm not going to. Is your radio up?"

"No! How did you do that? Nopony is supposed to be able to do that!" the mare blurted.

"Trade secret," I replied. "Listen. I need you to listen." The mare's panicked green eyes dilated a little. "When your systems come back up or you reboot or whatever, I need to you tell General Chaser that I didn't do this. Understand? I know the blood leads right up to him, but it wasn't me. I'm still trying to stop Lighthooves. Understand?" I really needed her to believe me. I was in enough trouble with Thunderhead. If Neighvarro thought that I'd killed their pony too, I'd never get this stopped... which was probably the point.

"But... I... " She looked over at the body behind the desk.

"I don't want to kill anypony," I said flatly. "If I did, I'd kill you too. I don't. Okay? Please just tell General Chaser that."

"I'll... I'll pass it along," she replied. "Thank you for not killing me."

"I'm not an executioner," I replied, making Rampage groan. "You want to thank me, though? Don't kill. I know there're problems in the Enclave right now, but don't kill. These ponies didn't do anything to deserve that."

"I... " the mare began with a frown, but then took in my sword and her paralyzed companions and dropped her gaze. "Yes ma'am." I had no clue if she actually would. For all I knew, the second my back was turned, she could start slaughtering ponies. But I had to give her a chance to do better.

Otherwise, all I'd have left was a body count.

"Let's go," I said as we walked out into the hall. I needed to find Glory, and then I needed to get in contact with Storm Chaser. So long as Thunderhead didn't actively start fighting the Neighvarro, I had a chance. Even if I hadn't liked High General Harbinger or the Captains Icyhot, a Neighvarro victory was better than a bloodbath. If Thunderhead turned actively hostile against the Neighvarro forces here... well, I just had to head that off before things entered the zone of clusterfuckery.

Provided we weren't there already.

"So, what are you going to do now?" P-21 asked. "What's the plan?"

We entered an empty charnel field of a room, wide open and full of cloud cubicles; I looked around, levitated over a stack of papers from the nearest desk, and started slicing the sheets into little squares. “Well. I’m hopefully going to get some help.” Everypony stared at me in confusion. “You see, I didn’t override all that power armor. I’d love it if I did, but I didn’t. And I’m pretty sure that none of you did,” I said with a little smile. Not unless P-21 had gotten a broadcaster or special spark grenade and hadn’t told me about it. “So I’m betting that the pony who *did* do it… ” And my horn flared as I flung the paper about in a literal blizzard of white squares. They covered everything, including a patch of shimmery air ten feet from us down the hall. I faced it and smiled, “… is still here.”

The air flashed, and the purple-caped Mare Do Well appeared. “That usually doesn’t happen,” the mare said in her synthesized voice.

“First rule when you think somepony invisible is around you: throw shit everywhere,” I replied.

“Wow. Blackjack really wasn’t crazy,” Rampage said in shock as she stared at the billowing cape and wide-brimmed purple hat.

“Told you,” P-21 replied smugly.

“Why were you staying invisible, though?” Scotch Tape asked with a frown.

“I wanted to see if she would kill them. If she was responsible for this,” Mare Do Well answered, gesturing at the slaughter. “So I shadowed the Neighvarro when they came up, and when they wanted to shoot, I used a little backdoor in the Mark II design’s repair talisman.”

“And if I’d started killing, you’d have deactivated it?” I asked archly.

“I thought you were supposed to be dumb,” Mare Do Well answered, oddly surprised.

“Even a not-too-bright pony learns things,” I countered. “So. Are you going to help us? Because I’m guessing another squad is going to come up here, and they might not all be wearing power armor vulnerable to your trick.”

Without another word, she turned and trotted away. I considered her not flashing away or disappearing a good enough answer for the moment, so we all followed.

* * *

I am really not one for stealth, but even I had to admire the purple-armored Mare Do Well's ability to evade the Thunderhead Security and Neighvarro pegasi. She didn't chat at all as we moved through the building, frequently stopping to let power armor pass, and she had to be connected to their communications because she seemed to know their precise movements. More than once she peered through the wall; I imagined her helmet had an enchantment on it similar to Penance's scope.

"That's quite some armor," I said as we waited in a janitor's closet for a squad of security ponies to stop chatting and head away so we could leave.

Mare Do Well glanced back at me, then at the wall. "Mark IV prototype for recon, infiltration, and sabotage. Twilight Sparkle herself oversaw some of the talismans that went into it. Been a nightmare keeping it up to spec. The stealth systems in particular are a headache to calibrate, but then, it's not a production model."

"That include the hat and cape?" Rampage asked.

"Yes, actually. Twilight's version of a joke, I suppose. Not all that funny to me, but then, she wasn't exactly consulting Pinkie Pie when she designed it," Mare Do Well replied tensely. "Now be quiet. I don't want to have to fight them if they hear us."

We waited till the five security ponies moved away, then dashed across the hall to a flat stretch of hall obscured by two large fake plants. Mare Do Well pressed some hidden latch or button, and a three by three foot square of wall swung in. We all filed through into a tunnel dominated by rainblastic pipes and conduits. Then she closed the door behind her.

"Who are you?" Scotch Tape asked as Mare Do Well took the lead.

"Just a pony trying to help ponies who need help. These days, that's a pretty long list," she said as she led us along the low room. Thankfully, we were stable ponies, a Reaper, and Boo. The tight quarters didn't bother us a bit. "Finding other ponies who share that sentiment is... rather new."

"Nice secret passage," P-21 said, in complete honesty. "Must make getting around easier."

"Yes. They do," the armored mare replied tersely.

"I need to find out what's going on. I need to find Glory. And with Stargazer and Stratus dead, who's in charge? The head of Enclave Intelligence?" I asked as we went down a stairway.

“No. What you need to do is go home,” Mare Do Well replied.

“Not with things about to explode,” I retorted. “And absolutely not without Glory.”

She sighed as she stopped and pushed her hoof against a wall of cloudcrete. “I was afraid you’d say that.” Then the wall swung open into a dim, cavernous space. “Welcome to the Mare Lair.”

The Lair was a hexagonal room dominated by a massive computer along one wall. Numerous screens showed images from all over Thunderhead, and smaller screens showed various parts of the Wasteland. I scowled at the sight of Enclave armor walking the halls of Tenpony Tower. A second wall was an armory with three separate suits of Enclave armor and one suit of Steel Ranger armor. There were weapons of all kinds in lockers along the base. The third wall had at least two dozen disguises, half for above the clouds and half below. A series of rubber masks in a variety of colors sat like a row of dismembered heads before the apparel. The fourth wall had two enormous maps, one of the Equestrian surface and another of the Enclave settlements. I recognized Neighvarro and Thunderhead, but the rest were a mystery to me. Hundreds of pins of different colors decorated both maps. The fifth wall was dominated by spartan living quarters. A large bed, a kitchenette, a medical cart, and gym equipment rested next to several pictures. The last wall had lab equipment, including a lot of electronics and explosives. In the middle was a mechanics bay, with several talismans lying on carts and tables around an empty stand.

Personally, I was disappointed by a substantial lack of mares.

A young unicorn mare beside the bay popped her head up. Her brown hide was smeared with oil and other mechanical fluids. A mechanic’s harness jangled with dozens of tools, and her black mane was messy and tied back with a bandana. “You’re back! Are you okay? Do you need any repairs? Did you find her? And... oh... ” she immediately faltered at the sight of us. “I guess you did.”

“Blackjack, Monkeywrench,” Mare Do Well said as she trotted to the computer. “She takes care of the magical end of things here.” The unicorn balked a little, blushing and looking down. “Get them something to eat, please,” Mare Do Well said as she walked over to the computer.

“What about you?” Monkeywrench asked, ears folding down a little.

“I’m fine,” she replied brusquely, then said to me, “I’ll see if I can

find your Glory and then get you out of here."

I looked from Mare Do Well to Monkeywrench. The unicorn was already trotting to the kitchenette. "Rude much?" Scotch Tape said before heading over after her. P-21 frowned but followed, along with Boo and Rampage. I hung back, watching the mare work as she skillfully typed on the computer.

"Are you her slave?" P-21 asked in a low voice. "If you are, we can take you with us."

"Oh, no no no! I'm not a prisoner," Monkeywrench replied. "She's one of the good ponies. One of the best ponies. And normally, if things weren't so bad and you weren't here, she's a lot friendlier. She normally never brings ponies here. I'm astonished she did." She took out some bottles. "Sparkle-Cola?"

"Oooh, is that Sparkle-Cola Rad?" Rampage said in delight.

"Yeah, but those are for... for Mare Do Well," Monkeywrench replied firmly. When Rampage reached for one, the brown mare almost closed the door on Rampage's face.

"Are you two together?" Scotch Tape asked.

"I... No. Not that... I mean... ah... no," Monkeywrench replied.

"Are you from the Tower?" P-21 asked.

"Actually, I'm from the surface. She... rescued me... from some bad ponies," she replied in those delicate tones that left little to imagine what she'd been rescued from. "I've been helping her out since I was your age," she told Scotch Tape.

Mare Do Well said from beside me, "Eavesdropping is a bad habit."

"Speaking from experience?" I asked.

Mare Do Well turned her head to look at me a moment. "Maybe." Oh fine, be all mysterious. "So what's happening?" I asked in frustration as I looked at the terminal screens. "Where's Glory?"

She hit some buttons. A diagram of the Hoofington Valley appeared. Shadowbolt Tower stood prominently in the middle, while Thunderhead was off to the east like an immense tire. Ten arrowheads were arranged along the west and southern sides of the valley in a semicircle. "The Raptors are hanging back. They sent in four formations through the cloud cover. Stratus probably gave them codes to bypass the lightning rods."

"How many in a formation?"

"Twenty five. Five five-pony wings. Each Raptor carries four formations, or a flock," Mare Do Well answered grimly.

"So a thousand ponies, give or take?" Oh yeah, this nightmare was

getting worse by the second. “What does Enclave Intelligence have in the Tower?” She turned and stared at me silently, and I smirked, “What, you don’t know?”

“Five flocks, if they recalled all the reservists before this started,” she replied. “If Thunderhead Security joined them, that’s another five hundred, but they only have paramilitary training.”

“Small wonder Neighvarro wanted Stratus on their side,” I said with a frown. “Is there any way I can contact the head of Enclave Intelligence? Maybe they can help stop Lighthooves.”

“The official head of E.I. is a joke. Lightning Blaze is more interested in banging her way through the well-connected ponies in Neighvarro than doing her job,” Mare Do Well replied. “She doesn’t even stay in the Tower. I doubt she even knows that the attack is happening.”

I groaned and rubbed my face, and then I frowned. “Wait. Official head?”

“Neighvarro’s always appointed one of their little scions to Shadowbolt, and they’re almost always completely incompetent. The slightly less incompetent ones try for military command. And if somepony with half a brain shows up for the position, they usually don’t last too long,” Mare Do Well said grimly.

What I knew of Lighthooves and what I’d seen so far didn’t mesh with her description of incompetence. “So then who is the *unofficial* head of Enclave Intelligence? It’s Lighthooves, isn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied firmly. “This has to happen.”

“This... are you crazy?” I asked, gesturing to the screen. “Why does this have to happen?!”

“Because for two hundred years, the Enclave has been blind to the parasitic actions of the military and so complacent that they can’t even see how the quality of life up here has decayed!” She tapped a key, and the main screen brought up a picture of a pegasus city that seemed to be falling apart, the buildings stretched and distorted. Only a few dozen pegasi seemed to be living in what were virtual cloud ruins. She hit another button and showed another city, again vast and colossal and again all but abandoned. Another showed cloud fields barely filled by weedy crops. And another showed a settlement slightly more intact but with sparking and crackling talismans that were wired and re-wired. “Every settlement that is not vitally important to the war effort suffers. Sons and daughters are sent to Neighvarro to serve and send a pittance back to their

families. Command is fat and corrupt. It's time that the pegasus people see this for what it is: an untenable situation that must be ended sooner rather than later."

"You knew this attack was coming," I said in shock.

"Of course. A civil war's been inevitable for the last thirty years," Mare Do Well replied.

"Then you know about Lighthooves's bioweapon," I countered. "His missiles."

"Oh, yes," she laughed and pointed a hoof at me. "But you see, you're doing the exact same thing that Neighvarro has. A report of a viral weapon. A report of missiles. This must be evidence of an attack! And so they send their ships to threaten and rattle their sabers. But when it's revealed that the bioweapon doesn't infect a pegasus's neuroglobin and that the missiles are in fact scrap metal, then Enclave aggression will be clear. The democracy will be revealed for the sham that it is, and we can finally make the changes to the Enclave that were needed two centuries ago!"

I stared at the masked mare, then said quietly, "He adapted it."

For a second, the Lair was utterly silent. Even Monkeywrench and my friends had stopped talked and were listening in. "What?"

"He adapted it to infect pegasi," I said evenly.

"You... he... " the masked mare stammered as she pointed a hoof at me. "You're... "

"On the surface, I came across two places where he adapted the virus to infect pegasi. And the 'scrap metal missiles'... They're intact. I think that, with a little bit of effort, they could be made to fly again."

"On the surface... " Mare Do Well breathed softly. "Son of a mule... "

She began to rapidly tap the keys, and an instant later there was a ring. Then Lighthooves's voice came over the connection, faintly buzzing and tinny. "Yes, Grandmother?"

I froze and panned from the blank terminal to Mare Do Well, feeling the shooty look establishing itself on my face. What... the... fuck?!

"Legerdemain. I want a status update on the virus," Mare Do Well said.

"All samples are accounted for and ready to go," Lighthooves replied a little too evenly.

"And there is no chance that it's infectious to pegasi?" Mare Do

Well pressed.

"None whatsoever," Lighthooves replied evenly.

Mare Do Well glanced over at me. "This is very important, Grandson. Very important. It is impossible for this virus to infect pegasi?"

Lighthooves said, in a buzzing voice of annoyance, "Why so concerned, Grandmother? We've forced the Enclave's hoof. Either they attack and are destroyed, or they don't attack and Thunderhead achieves its independence. The infectiousness of the virus is moot."

"Because if it is a threat to pegasi, then our legitimacy is shot!" Mare Do well shouted. "The rest of the Enclave will never make the changes needed if they think we're a rogue state!"

"The rest of the Enclave can buck themselves," Lighthooves said in a low, ominous voice. Mare Do Well stared up at the screen, her helmet's glowing eyes somehow seeming to grow wide in shock. "They cower and crawl up to whatever pony has the power. They fear and cringe because of Raptors and Thunderheads. They deserve the military. And, when their talismans fail and they start starving to death, they'll come to us happily."

Mare Do Well sat back hard.

"I thought the last time you fought with Neighvarro, they almost destroyed you with four Raptors?" I shouted.

"Oh? Hello, Security. Thank you for your distraction. If you hadn't killed the councilor and Stratus, then we never could have gotten our reserves back to the tower. A few more hours and everything will be ready."

"I didn't kill them. But I'm guessing you did," I growled. "And you didn't answer my question: why are you so sure you can destroy the Enclave when they have more than double the forces they brought last time?"

"Grandmother hadn't told you? It's quite simple. You see, the Core is a fortress, designed to defend against air attacks from dragons and missiles. Yes, the tower itself has limited armament... but the tower is connected to the Core."

I had an image of a green beam of energy punching straight through Hightower. "Holy shit... " I breathed. "You can access those?!"

"Oh yes. We didn't use them last time; concerns about killing our own. This time, I'm afraid I simply don't give a damn." Lighthooves

chuckled. “The Enclave has just lost its High General at Maripony. The rest of the leadership is in chaos. When a quarter of the fleet is blasted from the sky for threatening Thunderhead, it will never be able to endanger us again,” Lighthooves said with complete confidence. “A few judicious applications of the virus, and what remains of the military will be busy dealing with outbreaks. A few more missiles should take care of Red Eye and any other surfacer threats. Thunderhead will be secure to usher in a new era and save Equestria, just like you wanted, Grandmother.”

“Not like this, you fool. Not like this,” Mare Do Well groaned. “You’re making the same mistake she did.”

“With you on top?” I growled dangerously.

“Of course not. I will be publicly tried and executed for crimes against Equinity. I expect my monsterdom will last for centuries, but I also expect that Thunderhead will be there for those centuries,” Lighthooves answered.

“I’m going to stop you,” I swore. “You’re going to kill thousands.”

“Tens of thousands, actually. Necessary sacrifices,” he said dismissively. “I would have thought you’d be more interested in saving Morning Glory. You should probably tune in to the television.” He sighed. “Good bye, Grandmother. I’m sorry that I deceived you. Your plan was a good one, but you were trying to save an Enclave not worth saving.” Then the connection cut off.

“You fool. You damned fool.” Monkeywrench came up behind her and put a hoof on her shoulder. “Saving lives doesn’t mean ending them. I thought I taught you better.”

I didn’t have time for this. “What did he mean about Glory?”

Mare Do Well pushed some buttons with her hoof, and the central screen lit up. The screen was split between a cute mare and a live scene in Thunderhead. It showed the central ring park of the city, a stage, and a large statue of Rainbow Dash. Twenty-five power-armored ponies stood before an angry crowd of hundreds. Twenty-five more encircled a smaller group. There were all kinds of crazy tickers saying things like ‘Neighvarro declares Martial Law in Thunderhead.’, ‘Accusations of bioterrorism from Neighvarro officials.’, and ‘Rumors of renewed Rainbow Dash sightings. Illegal cloning experiments in Thunderhead?’.

“Yes. Yes. We are getting word that both Councilor Stargazer and the director of Security have been murdered by Thunderhead terrorists. Several have been apprehended, and we’ve been told that

they're going to be transferred to Raptors for transport back to Neighvarro," the mare said as she touched an earbloom. The peach reporter standing in front of the stage went silent a moment, then nodded again. "Apparently they're going to make a formal announcement any minute. There's some reports that the surfacer terrorists working with these ultranationalists are still at large."

She disappeared, replaced by a handsome, if vapid-looking, stallion. "Thank you, Sun Sprinkles. Keep us up to date." Then he turned to another camera, smiling banally. "Rumors of Thunderhead perfidy have existed since the establishment of the disarmament treaty a century ago, but never before have we received a clearer sign that our Enclave, our place of security, our sanctuary, is under attack. Whether it be from the surface or our own, it is clear that unity must be preserved at any cost. This is Neighvarro News Network, keeping you up to date with news, fair and balanced. We'll be right back."

I turned away as a commercial for feather shampoo began to air. "Where is that park?" She didn't respond. After finding out that her own plan had been given a deadly twist, I could imagine how she must feel. I reached over and shook her hard. "Hey! That section of the park! Where is it?"

She raised her head. "Hmm... that's the Rainbow Dash memorial park."

"You think they have Glory there?" P-21 asked.

"I think it's likely. Enclave hates traitors, right? What better place to turn over a whole bunch of them?"

"But what about Lighthooves?" Rampage asked. "I mean, I know you love Glory, but aren't the lives of thousands more important?" The question hit me like a ton of bricks. Lighthooves had said he needed just a few more hours, which meant to me that he was doing something important and final. Fueling the missiles, perhaps? If I wasted time freeing Glory, his plans might come to fruition. But if didn't...

"Don't be ridiculous. I'll deal with my grandson myself," Mare Do Well said grimly. "I'll get you to the park and then go to the Tower."

"You can get in?" I asked in surprise.

She pulled off her hat, then reached under and unclipped something on her black and purple helmet. The eyes darkened, and then the armor hissed. An acrid stench escaped as the seal broke

and the helmet detached. Beneath, I gaped at the mottled grayish-blue hide and the thinning polychromatic mane. Cloudy rose eyes met mine. The right side of her face was marred by three gouges running from her brow down past her eye and alongside her muzzle to her throat. “Duh,” Rainbow Dash said. “It’s my ministry, after all.”

* * *

We all had a million questions and no time to ask them. I wanted to take her aside and talk all about the Pinkie Pie orb. Rampage just laughed in delight. P-21 was curious how she’d survived. Boo seemed to want to know where there was more Sparkle-Cola. Before any of that, though, Rainbow Dash busied herself picking up various supplies while Scotch Tape and Monkeywrench worked to quickly clear the Enclave block on my PipBuck; I was glad to have my EFS up again. Only after that, when we began making our way down one of Rainbow Dash’s secret passages, did she explain what she could to our varied curiosity.

“Fact is, when I left the Enclave, they sent my childhood friend to bring me back, preferably not breathing. Hell of a fight. Best one I was ever in. Got me this,” she said as her wing touched the scars running along her face. “And the fact was that I couldn’t kill her in the end, not after all my other friends were dead. She didn’t have the same problem, though. Ripped me to pieces, and I ended up crashing into a balefire crater. She left me for dead, which to be fair, I was. I just didn’t stay that way.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why go on? Why dress up as Mare Do Well?”

Rainbow Dash’s cloudy eyes dropped. “Well, when you’re a ghoul, you have to do something to keep your marbles together. The fact was that the Enclave thought I was dead. I didn’t see any reason to correct them on that. I had access to the Tower and to Thunderhead, so I made this my base of operations and tried to make up for... for failing my friends.”

“You mean when the bombs fell?” P-21 asked, and she nodded.

“Did you try and stop it after all?” I asked lightly.

She looked at me sharply, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, right. The orb in the cell. You actually got it... ugh... Pinkie... ” She shook her head. “Yeah, I did. As much as I could. By then, though, the war had its own momentum. I asked questions. I even tried to get

Twilight to speak to the Princess. But something that I didn't know was what triggered the exchange. The zebras claimed that one of our megaspells went off in Roam. Then Cloudsdale went up. Then Maripony. Then everywhere else. The fact is, even though I knew the bombs were going to go off, I couldn't just stand on the roof of the palace and shout that the world was going to end. I would have been locked up as a nutcase."

"And Pinkie Pie erasing her memories couldn't have made it easier," I said.

"Sure. Even she didn't believe me. Which I think was the point. Whatever her prank was, I couldn't mess with it. She couldn't mess with it. She put everything into motion and then left. All I could do was carry out her instructions, even after all my friends died." She sighed and shook her head again. "I should have done more, earlier. Before Big Macintosh died. But I was too busy fighting for Equestria."

"Personally?" Rampage asked, and the ghoul smirked.

"Hell yeah. I wasn't going to be like Rarity and sit behind a desk or hold board meetings like Applejack. I got out there and did the work that needed to get done. We were operating behind the lines, gathering intelligence and sabotaging enemy action. It was glorious. And best of all, everypony thought I was just sitting in the Tower, twiddling my hooves and making photo ops. Ha!" She laughed. But her smile quickly faded. "Wasn't worth it in the end, though. Not by half."

"What wasn't?" Scotch Tape asked.

"The Ministry of Awesome. The ministries in general. When Luna and Scarface suggested them, I thought they were crazy. But then Twilight started having ideas. Then Fluttershy. Then Pinkie. Ways that we could help make things better for other ponies. They got into it, and I came along for the ride. Because that's what Loyalty does, right?" She shook her head. "Fact is, I should have spoken up. Luna wasn't worth what we gave up."

I felt a little shocked by that. "She was your Princess."

Rainbow Dash stopped walking and faced me. "When I came up with the Single Pegasus Project, it was going to be a way to help all of Equestria. We'd get more fighters to take the heat off the Earth Ponies, and we'd be able to help countless civilians. Do you know the first thing Princess Luna said when I proposed it to her?" I shook my head slowly and the ghoul grimaced. "She wanted to

know how she could use the damned thing as a weapon! Throwing hurricanes and tornadoes at her enemies. She was glad for me to weaponize the frigging sky, and I had to grin and act like it was the awesomest thing since me." She bared her teeth, her filmy eyes glowing in agitation. "Fuck. Luna."

From the pain and rage in her eyes, this wasn't something I should argue. "So, since then you've been protecting the Wasteland?"

"Pretty much," Rainbow Dash replied as we resumed walking. "Trying to save who I could. I was a corpse already, so the radiation wasn't a problem. Lightning Dust had risen to the top of the martial government that would turn into the Grand Pegasus Enclave, so there was absolutely no way I could show my face there. There were a few ponies in the Tower who knew about me, though. We did what we could to nudge, cajole, blackmail, and otherwise convince the Enclave to pull their heads out from under their wings and do something. And I kept my eyes open for this 'LittlePip' who Pinkie said was going to fix everything."

"Did you ever tell... Spike?" I asked, and Rainbow Dash gave a lurch, pain crossing her face.

"No," she said, her voice rasping barely above a whisper. "I was too ashamed. He loved Twilight, and I let her die... or melt into that goop thing... never quite knew which it was. If I'd told him... maybe... maybe... " but she slumped and shook her head. "I don't know. I just wish things could have been different for him. For all of us." She straightened a little and went on, "He's known the myth of Mare Do Well, and I was fine with that."

"So you really do come out and save ponies?" Rampage asked.

"When I can. I perfected hit and run techniques. Sometimes one shot from a mysterious stranger is all a pony needs to survive," she said with a smile and shrug. "Otherwise, I was up here. It's a really big Wasteland, above and below."

"So... Lighthooves calling you 'Grandmother'... that's not literal, is it?" P-21 asked.

She laughed. "I was alone in my tower with a lot of sexy soldiers and plenty of tension to work out. And work it out I did." She sighed and closed her eyes. "But no, no time for foals. Fact is, I 'adopted' all of my best fliers. They became the children I never had myself." She shrugged. "Lighthooves and his brother were Fleetfoot's daughter's daughter's etc... .so they're my 'grandchildren'. They grew up calling me 'grandma'. It was cute for

a while. Now?" She sighed and shrugged again.

"You should get in touch with Spike again," I said. "He'd like to know that one of his friends is still around. And I think he'd be proud of what you've been doing."

"Maybe," Rainbow Dash said. Her tone told me that it wouldn't be anytime soon. "Maybe someday when I can think of it without feeling like I let all our friends die." I knew a little of what she was feeling. We reached another hidden door, and she pushed it open. The tunnel on the other side sloped sharply upward. "That should take you out into the park. Once you have Glory, you should leave. Let me clean up this mess; it's my responsibility."

"You know, I figured you'd have realized by now that I'm not going to walk away from this," I replied.

The ghoul smirked and pulled her helmet back on. "I got to ask: is LittlePip anything like you?"

"Um." I frowned. "She's a lot more sane. And cute."

"Pff. Sane's boring. Still, I look forward to meeting her sometime," Rainbow Dash said. "Try to stay out of trouble."

"Somehow, I don't think that Blackjack can," P-21 said.

Rainbow Dash started away, but Rampage rushed up to her. "Wait! Wait wait wait!" She moved in front of her and then grinned. "I gotta know... is that your natural mane color?" Rainbow stared at her with those impassive purple eyepieces, then stepped past her. "Oh, come on! That's a question for the ages!" Rampage called after her. "You know this is going to keep me up all night!" With a shimmer, Mare Do Well disappeared, and Rampage slumped. "Come on, I gotta know... "

"Some mysteries will forever remain such," P-21 said sagely, drawing a giggle from Scotch Tape.

"So what is the next step?" Rampage asked, then grinned. "Oooh! Oooh! Wait! Let me guess. It's *not* going up there and killing everypony!"

"Yup," I replied sardonically.

"So how are we going to get Glory back?" P-21 asked as he readied Persuasion, checking the sights and inspecting the barrel.

"We're going to go up there and beat the snot out of them short of killing them till we get her back. Completely different plan," I said defensively.

Rampage gaped at me. "Blackjack, killing is a *lot* easier, especially since it's what they'd do to us! I mean, be reasonable! Slaughter is a

perfectly sensible action at times."

"Not when I need to beg General Chaser not to attack," I answered.

P-21 frowned as he tugged his hat back. "There's also something bugging me. Lighthooves wanted the Enclave to attack, right? No problem there. What I don't understand is how he's going to get Thunderhead to back him. I mean, he is a terrorist with a biological weapon at this point. Not exactly somepony the masses get behind."

Pinkie had said to remember what he'd done to Glory. Betrayed? That was a given. Lied? Nothing new about that. There was something. Some trick he hadn't pulled yet. He'd turned Neighvarro against Thunderhead. He needed some way to turn Thunderhead against Neighvarro.

But what? All he'd done to Glory was brand her and make her somepony for everypony to...

Oh, shit.

"We have to move. Now," I said sharply. If I was right... things were about to get a whole lot uglier. I scrambled up the slope, my friends following behind me.

"Are we still going for your wussy 'beat them up' plan? Or have you come to your senses?" Rampage yelled after me.

"We're going with the 'Save Glory and then get the Neighvarro the hell out of here before they get killed and Storm Chaser comes in to save her soldiers' plan!" I ended at a grate and kicked it open, emerging into a green park.

And it was filled with ponies. A thousand, maybe more. They were angry and scared, but they had the numbers. All they needed was a match, and Lighthooves was holding it.

At the stage further along the park, rainbow projectors had created an immense holographic image of Captain Afterburner as she gleefully informed the crowd of the terrorists found in the Sky Striker family. The clueless red mare seemed to be missing that calling a war hero a traitor and his children terrorists was definitely not winning hearts and minds. Fortunately, the sight of my friends and me was parting the crowd enough that we could made our way towards the stage. Dusk, Moonshadow, and Glory were all wearing bright orange jumpsuits with hoods. It'd be impossible for them to run and hide in the crowd.

When Afterburner saw us, the red mare grinned broadly. "And here, just as I promised, are the final culprits! Security and her friends, surfacer savages who conspired with the Striker family to

murder both the councilor and the Director of Security, Stratus."

The crowd, however, was having a decidedly different reaction. Perhaps it was the advertisements. Perhaps it was the fact that we were approaching the stage rather than running. There were grins, whistles, and cheers. A small group of mares began to chant 'Twenty-One!' and others asked where LittlePip and Calamity were. Captain Afterburner's sneer faltered. "What is wrong with you people!? She's a murderer and a killer! Arrest her!"

"No!" came a shout from the stage as an armored pegasus launched into the air. He removed his helmet, and Boomer yelled out. "Don't believe her! Blackjack isn't a murderer. I don't know who killed the councilor, but it wasn't her!"

"Arrest him! Gross insubordination!" Afterburner shrieked. Three pegasi launched themselves up to tackle him, but they failed to drag him to the stage.

I reached the steps of the stage and started ascending. Lighthooves had probably planned on me being here. Doubt. Confusion. It was feeding into the anger and fear. But I had to head this off. "I didn't kill Captain Hoarfrost or her formation, even when they were helpless in front of me. I am not your enemy!"

"Lies!" Afterburner screamed, then launched herself at me. Call me blasé, but she wasn't Dawn. She wasn't even wearing power armor. Some of the Enclave who *were* armored moved to grab me, but Rampage intercepted them.

"Bloodbath, Blackjack. Try it sometime!" she grunted before heaving them off me. Two more dove at me along with Afterburner. That I was unarmed seemed to be keeping them from just spraying me and the crowd behind me, something that would have done Lighthooves's work for him. *Please, don't get any more stupid.*

I teleported away to where Afterburner had been standing, and immediately I was magically magnified in the air above me. "Everypony listen to me!" I yelled, and then...

Then...

They were. Thousands of eyes all on me, Thunderheader and Neighvarro alike. "I... I... this... we... ah... " Suddenly everything I needed to say was dribbling out of my head. I couldn't even pay attention to the cards a little purple unicorn and little yellow pegasus were holding up in my head. I felt the silence growing tighter, tenser.

Then I saw a pony in the crowd. He wasn't really there. The pale

stallion in the wide-brimmed hat in the front row just smiled at me, his watery pale eyes believing in me.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and then...

"I know that you're all scared. I know that you're angry. You have good reasons to be, both Neighvarro and Thunderhead alike. But I want you to think back. Two hundred years ago, we were just as scared and angry as you are now. That led to a war that nearly destroyed everypony. It killed countless people, pony, zebra, griffin, and otherwise. Now, today, there are ponies who are using that same fear and anger to start bloodshed like the world hasn't seen in two centuries!

"I came from that world below. It's a terrible place. The life you have here in the sky is better than anything down below. But you cannot keep that life through fear, indifference, and hate. It's time to do better. It's time for calm and rationality to win the day for once, rather than hate and violence."

I pointed a hoof behind me. I had no idea if I was pointing in the right direction or not. "There's a pony in the tower over there that's a real threat, to both Neighvarro and Thunderhead. I know you have little love or reason to trust, but I am asking you... I am begging you... please don't let your home become the Wasteland."

Suddenly there was a loud squeal, and my image flickered. Then it coalesced into the white-armored image of Lighthooves. "Blackjack is correct. There is a pony who is a threat. A pony with a biological weapon capable of killing countless innocent ponies. But perhaps it should be known how this weapon came to be. A year ago, a virus was discovered on the surface... a terrible biological plague that, thankfully, miraculously, did not infect pegasi. This virus came to the attention of High General Harbinger, who ordered me to seek a method to convert it for use against our own people! A fitting weapon against ponies who seek independence, freedom, and security. Well, I did as he instructed under threat of death, but now that Harbinger's weapon is completed, I cannot give it up to him to be used against us."

The speakers drowned out all but his rising, dramatic voice. "The Neighvarro say Blackjack killed Councilor Stargazer, but I have sworn affidavits from Doctor Morningstar that a public meeting was scheduled today and was changed only when Director Stratus informed the Counselor that a midnight meeting was called for at the Striker residence. I have evidence taken from the director's

terminal of burst transmissions to Neighvarro, confirming that their weapon was prepared and ready to be shipped over. And I have evidence that Captain Hoarfrost's own ponies slew Director Stratus in a bloody attempt to silence him and to bury this evidence."

Oh shit. What?

"There is a time that a pony can be silent no more! A time when a pony must take a stand against the unabashed evil that threatens their home. A time where the wrongness of others must be rejected and thrown out! That time is now! I say to you, Thunderhead, my home! Rise up and send these miserable dogs of war back to Neighvarro with their tail between their legs!"

For an instant, there was a horrible silence. It was like being on the *Seahorse* in the rapids, seconds before the boat made its terrible plunge. A rational pony would have heard that silence and perceived the threat in it. A wise pony would have left.

Afterburner was neither rational nor wise.

"Traitors!" she screamed as she drew her gun.

The crowd screamed back. It was a roar of a thousand voices, incomprehensible and mad. Somepony fired, maybe Afterburner or maybe somepony in the crowd, but there was a scream. It was the scream of the Wasteland, and it had come for us.

I'd failed. All I could do was get to Glory and her family as the pegasi of Thunderhead swarmed up in a great, vengeful cloud. One on one, they had no hope against the power armor, but these ponies were ten to one. Fifty to one. Unfortunately, I couldn't fly, and I was swept to the side. I heard one of my friends scream my name.

Afterburner, however, still had one last play to make. She swooped through the crowd, landed beside Glory, and seized her, pulling her into the projector's pickup area. "Get back! Get back! We have Rainbow Dash!" The sheer madness of the statement seemed to make the mob pause. "Get back, I say! I know you damned traitors love the rainbow-maned bitch! Get back, or I'll break her fucking neck. See?" And she bit the hood and yanked it off.

Purple mane cascaded out from beneath the orange hood. Immense lavender eyes opened and looked out at the crowd. A lovely face that I hadn't seen in so long bathed in the sunlight and brought a smile to my face, despite everything.

"Ahhh... " Afterburner gaped at the mare who obviously wasn't Rainbow Dash, and then she lunged forward and yanked the bag off of Moonshadow and then Dusk. Looking over her shoulder at the

crowd, she grinned desperately from ear to ear. “Ah... whoopsie?”
Ha. Ha. Ha.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 62: Between the Wolf and the Lion, Part 1 & 2

"I've learned that one of the joys of friendship is sharing your blessings, but when there's not enough blessings to go around, having more than your friends can make you feel pretty awful. So, though I appreciate the invitation, I will be returning both tickets to The Grand Galloping Gala."

Thunderhead rumbled; the entire city vibrated with the clamor of thousands of ponies roused by the timely interruption by Lighthooves. I wondered if he'd been wearing the Perceptitron, watching me give my speech for patience and tolerance before twisting it with his claims that Neighvarro had ordered him to adapt the plague. Worse, between the efforts of Dawn and himself, any pony in Thunderhead who could have put the brakes on this was dead. Now Thunderhead roared with anger and fear. I knew that most of the ponies here didn't want a fight, but they were being dragged along by those who did.

Just like two centuries ago.

Glass smashed in the distance, and flocks of panicked ponies swirled like shattered rainbows to the safety of their homes…at least, I hoped their homes were safe. Smoke started to fill the air; I didn't want to imagine what up here could burn. The acrid smell made me choke. All across the city, the flickering signs that had shown advertisements for casual enjoyments now showed static or giant red warnings to stay at home and 'shelter in place', whatever that meant. From the confused cries and stunned features of many on the street, I wasn't the only one disoriented. Some oblivious ponies even seemed annoyed by this interruption to their daily routine.

We'd gotten out of the park easily enough; we weren't all big black

flying targets in Neighvarro armor, after all. Boomer was a bloody mess; his own fellows had been particularly rough on him before the fighting had even started. I suspected that he was now a de facto Dashite. The crowd let us pass, and we made our way back towards the Striker estate. Afterburner, however, had managed to escape from the city by the hairs on her tail, darting over the park's rim, through the ventral opening, and out of sight. Most of her soldiers, battered but otherwise intact, managed to withdraw before Intelligence ponies in their fancy new white power armor arrived. But they'd be back.

And there'd be hell to pay.

As we walked along the streets, violence was breaking out as gangs of ponies targeted anypony they could accuse of being 'loyalist'. The thin skin of civility had been scraped away from Thunderhead, and all the nasty acrimonious sentiments, grudges, and disdain that had lain beneath were manifesting in the mob. The leaders, whether they'd been selected ahead of time or were simply exploiting the opportunity, gave Lighthooves what he'd needed: chaos and cover. I'd thought he'd set himself up as a martyr to discredit Neighvarro; I hadn't anticipated he'd unleash a bloodbath first.

"Get off her! Now!" I snapped at a half dozen stallions and mares who'd dragged a wild-eyed pegasus from her shop. Somepony had started a fire inside. When my shouts didn't get their attention, I fired Vigilance. That worked. "Get your hooves off her!"

"She's a sympathizer!" growled a stallion, his coat perfectly matching the color of green foal poop.

"All…all I said was that we should calm down!" the yellow shop owner said as she tried to protect herself.

"Liar! You said we should let Neighvarro in to investigate! You know they'd just take over," the stallion spat at her. "You've always been soft on them. How much have they been paying you? You've been spying for them, haven't you?"

"No! I haven't! I haven't!" the mare screamed.

I would have liked to explain things. Tell them what was going on and try to come to some kind of understanding…but frankly, I didn't have the time or a clue where to start. "Rampage," I said sharply, and she blinked as she looked over at me. "Don't kill them. Just bruise them. A lot."

Rampage blinked at me, then narrowed her eyes at the half dozen. "Yeah. I can do bruising."

“What are you talking about? Stay back!” the poop-green stallion warned, suddenly aware that violence was about to be employed upon him. With a scream, Rampage charged, leaping horizontally like a red and white striped missile, then turning herself sideways midair to crash into the six and scatter them over the prone shopkeeper. The assaulted assaulters tried to fly away, but Rampage somehow entangled all of them, thumping, kicking, and biting whatever limbs she could, be they wing or hoof.

Glory rushed to the shopkeeper’s side. She’d shed the bright orange jail clothing, and I tried to avoid staring for too long at her beauty. If only all this havoc wasn’t going on... The only thing that marred her delightful appearance was the gray stump of her absent wing. I wondered which she preferred now: her old body back, or being able to fly. “Stay still,” she said as she examined the prone mare. She carefully checked her eyes. “Dilated and anisocoric. Blood from the ears. Can you tell me your name?”

“I just…I just wanted them to calm down…” she muttered in a daze before passing out.

“She needs medical attention. She might have a concussion,” Glory said sharply. Once again, I wished I had healing spells in my bag of tricks. Her purple eyes turned towards Boomer. “You need to get to a hospital, too. If you don’t have broken ribs, I’ll eat my mane.”

“I’m fine,” Boomer muttered, but from his wheezing and the way he pressed his wings hard to his side, I could tell he wasn’t.

Twister dropped from the skies, minus her power armor. “There you are. I was stuck on frigging crowd control at the upper aperture,” she said sharply. “City’s gone nuts. Storm Chaser’s ordered a recall.”

Storm Chaser? Wait! There *was* still a pony left who could possibly stop all this. “I need to talk to her.”

Twister blinked at me. “Hoarfrost reported that you killed Stratus. She’s not going to listen to a thing you have to say.”

“I still have to try,” I replied. “Face to face.”

“What, is your broadcaster broken?” Rampage asked.

I shook my head. “The only way she might believe me is if I’m there in person,” I said with a frown, and then I looked around at the city. “But…I don’t know what to do about this.”

If the Tower really could fire the Core’s defensive weapons, it would be an absolute nightmare. There was one chance I could think of to stop it, but I had no clue if it would work or what the

repercussions might be. If Chaser kept the Raptors away, we wouldn't have to find out.

"I think I do," Glory kept her eyes on the mare, then gave me a nervous glance. "We need to split up."

"After spending so much time together?" P-21 said with a small smile.

"Yes, but I think the only way we'll get this done is if we separate," Glory said as she gazed around at her home city falling apart.

Rampage poked her head up from the pile of groaning pegasi and spat out a bright wad of fecal-green hair. "Split up? You never split the party. What are you, crazy? When has that ever worked well for us?" She pointed at me with a hoof. "Do you remember what happened the last time we split the party? Smooze? Batpony shenanigans? Balefire bomb blows bits of Hightower across the landscape while flaming ghouls tried to kill us all?" Then she blinked and grinned. "Oh yeah. Never mind. Go on."

But I regarded Glory and asked, "What's the plan?" If she had an idea, it was better than me muddling through.

Glory glanced at me; her eyes played host to dancing doubt and uncertainty, but then they hardened. Being Rainbow Dash for a bit seemed to have done her some good. "I need to get them to a hospital. Then I need to talk to Doctor Morningstar. This plague is too great a threat to the skies and the surface. If we can make a cure, then Lighthooves's bioweapon is useless." She sighed. "If I only had a sample. Some contaminated food from Stable 99 would do, but that's been flushed."

I blinked. When you wander the wasteland, you tend to accumulate a lot of stuff in your saddlebags. I checked my inventory, sat down, and began to dig through my bags, tossing stuff on the street beside me. I stuck my head and hooves inside the enchanted bag and rifled around before I let out a whoop and levitated out a bowl of extremely stale and crumbled grass chips. The magic of my saddlebags had kept them intact despite everything I'd put them through.

"You've had those since 99?" Glory asked weakly.

"Yeah. I kinda forgot about them down in the bottom of my bags. Will these work?" I asked.

She threw her hooves around me. "If they were made from the contaminated recycler, I think so!" she said with a smile, then carefully tucked them under her wing.

Rampage left the heap of groaning ponies. “Wow, don’t you ever clean out your saddlebag?”

Scotch Tape stuck her head in and started to rifle around. “What else does she got in here?” But then P-21 bit her tail and dragged her away. “Hey!”

“If Blackjack has contaminated food in her bag, I don’t want to know what else is in there,” P-21 said firmly. I felt a little insulted; my bags weren’t any dirtier than my room had been.

Sweeping them into her own saddlebags, Glory continued, “I’ll get them to the doctor, and we’ll see if we can get him working on a cure. Even if it takes weeks to develop, a start’s better than having nothing at all.” Then she looked at her siblings and addressed Moonshadow first, “You need to get home, find Lambent and Lucent, and get them to your astronomy lab. That’s going to be more secure.”

She turned to Dusk, but the mare raised a hoof. “Save it, little sis. I’m not going to any hospital.”

“Yes, you are. Just not here and now,” Glory retorted. Dusk appeared a little nonplussed, and her sibling went on, “I know you’re not going to sit this out, so you feel up to a flight?”

“Long as it’s not all the way out to Neighvarro. Why?” Dusk asked in confusion. Glory stepped closer to her, talking in low tones. Then Dusk blinked, smiled, and actually gave Glory a hug. “I’ll be back soon.” And with that, she flew off, a bit wobbly but still airborne.

Glory paused, chewing her lower lip as her eyes dropped in doubt. “Hey, don’t stop now,” I said with a grin. “You’re on a roll. What’s next?”

“Scotch Tape, P-21, and Boo come with me. You go with Rampage and Twister. She can commandeer a skywagon and get you to meet with General Chaser,” Glory said, and the lavender pegasus nodded. Then Glory turned to P-21 and gave a smile. “Unless you’d rather go with Blackjack?”

P-21 glanced at me and then at his daughter, clearly torn between taking her somewhere safe and staying with me. “It’s okay, go with her,” I told him. P-21 nodded once but clearly wasn’t happy with this separation. If only I knew what his answer had been.

“What? But I want to go with Blackjack!” Scotch Tape wailed.

“No,” I said. “It’s too dangerous. If Storm Chaser doesn’t listen to me, then it’s going to get ugly. Rampage can’t die. You can,” I told the filly firmly. She sulked at once; I could see she was upset, and I

reached out and rubbed her mane. “Besides, somepony needs to take care of your dad.” That mollified her just a little, but I could tell she still wanted to come with me. Then I glanced around, checking to see who was close. P-21 was watching the half dozen vigilantes as they limped away, and so I ducked my head to her and whispered, “Did he say yes?”

“Huh?” Scotch Tape asked in bafflement. P-21 glanced over, and a little immature Blackjack stomped her hooves in a huff inside my head.

“Does he... I mean... ”

“Blackjack?” Glory asked, with P-21 looking on at me from behind her.

Damn it. “Ugh... Nevermind…” I groaned as I rose and turned to Glory and moved away from really important questions to issues of survival and whatnot. “What if something goes wrong?”

She lifted her PipBuck. “You have my tag. I’ll have my radio on. If you need us to do something, just ask. We’ll meet back at Moonshadow’s lab if this works out. If not, back at Star House.” That was a chilling thought…that things might go so badly that… no. I wouldn’t think about it. Fortunately, I was good at *that*. I embraced and kissed her ardently, and she melted against me. Somehow, kissing her as Rainbow Dash just hadn’t felt as good.

Not at all like this.

“Take care of yourself. I finally got back my cute gray mare. I don’t want anything else to happen to her,” I murmured in her ear.

“Knowing my luck, the professor’s killing joke will get out and turn me into a stallion,” she muttered, then kissed my neck…then gave me a little bite.

“Hey. That’d clear up a whole lot of problems with you, me, and P-21,” I said softly, then watched her blush profusely. P-21 and Scotch didn’t seem all that amused by it, though.

“No thank you,” she said firmly. “I’ve had enough of being somepony else. I’d just rather be me,” she murmured in my ear. Now there was the beautiful mare I adored.

“Ahem…” Rampage said loudly. I glanced over at everypony staring at us. “If you two need a little time out, I’m sure we can get everyone to put this civil war on hold for fifteen minutes so you two can have a quickie.”

I rubbed my chin. “You really think so?” I stared speculatively at Glory. “I might be able to make it work with ten.” I saw the

resigned smile on her face, looked over at P-21 shaking his head, and noticed Rampage's nonplussed expression. "Oh. You were being sarcastic. Right. No quickie." Damn it.

Rampage stared at me for a long moment, then smirked. "Well, it's official! Normal Glory makes Blackjack dumber."

We finally began to part ways when Boo suddenly darted for me. She slid on her belly and grabbed my rear hoof in a bear hug. "Boo? No! Go with Glory. Glory, Boo!" She stared up at me with wide pale eyes, and I sighed, turned around, and ruffled her mane. "It'll be dangerous." Boo wrapped her legs around my neck and held me tight. I sighed.

"Oh, bring the good luck charm along. Maybe her freakish luck will get me killed," Rampage said with a snort. I sighed, closing my eyes.

Then I smiled. "Okay. You're with me, Boo." The blank beamed and nuzzled my cheek.

As we turned away, Scotch Tape lunged. "Take me too!" she shouted, forehooves outstretched to hug my hind leg too, when suddenly she jerked to a halt and landed on her face. I raised my gaze to P-21 biting the filly's tail.

"Come on," he muttered around a mouthful of blue hair, and then met my eye. "Take care of yourself. See you soon."

"Noooo! Don't leave me with Glory! She's booooooring now!" Scotch Tape cried out as she was dragged away, hooves scratching four lines in the floor. Glory and P-21 helped the concussed shopkeeper mare to her hooves and slipped her on Glory's back. Glory sagged a little but then gave a little heave and carried her along. The filly gave a wail, "Blackjack!"

"Stay safe," I said as they departed, then turned and made my own way.

* * *

"You know this is a bad idea," Twister shouted over her shoulder as she bore me through the air to the west. It wasn't fair that today was an absolutely beautiful day. The sky seemed exceptionally clear and the most perfect blue I could ever have imagined. If it wasn't for the ominous Tower rising from the green eye, I would have loved to have spent an afternoon just dozing in the sun. Given that Lighthooves probably didn't need me anymore, we gave the Tower

and its defenses a wide berth.

"Blackjack *excels* at bad ideas. The only way this could get any better would be if we got her drunk," Rampage replied as we flew towards the Raptors. The fleet was arranged in an arc around the perimeter of the valley, and unless I'd forgotten how to count, they'd picked up two more. "Then she'd probably commandeer one of those ships and crash it into the others by accident. While singing... and likely geld somepony for good measure, while she's at it."

"That only happened once. Or twice. Shoot, I can't even remember anymore... but that's beside the point!" I flushed and tried to refocus. "You told them we were coming, right?" I yelled to Twister, keeping my head down a little and not looking over the edge of the skywagon. Looking out was fine. Looking up…okay. For some reason the direction of down gave me a sensation like a hook pulling me towards a messy, smashy end.

"Twice. But we could be swarmed by a squad of power armor any second," she said, gazing out at the black specks that hovered in wedges around us.

"Relax. We're armed," Rampage said as she reached into a basket and pulled out a brownish-gray orb sprouting strange little tendrils with a stalk coming out of the top. According to Rampage, it tasted something like a turnip mixed with motor oil. I had to admit, it was tastier than most food in the sky. We hadn't had time to be picky with our source of transportation and had ended up grabbing the turnip wagon. "If one gets too close…" She grabbed a pair of stalks and started swinging them wildly around her body making strange zebraesque 'waaaah' noises.

Twister glanced back and, even though she wore her own power armor again, I could almost visualize her rolling her eyes. "They don't even need power armor. They could use a turret to blast us to pieces. Or vaporize us outright with a disintegration bolt. I'd rather not be green goop, if I can help it."

"Relax. General Chaser doesn't want a bloodbath. She'll talk to me." Of course, after the talk she might try to execute me, lock me up, or ignore me, but she'd listen first.

"General Chaser's not the only pony you need to worry about," Twister said, looking up at a Raptor, its black metal armor detailed with thin crimson lines along the edges. I could barely make out the name *Sirocco* on the side. "Captain Afterburner's right there, and

she does *not* like you."

"She can get in line," I replied. There wasn't much that I could do about it now, anyway, as we approached the *Castellanus*. Somepony had to stop Lighthooves. If I could stall things for a day or two, long enough for Thunderhead to calm down and Rainbow Dash to get him out of the Tower, then we could negotiate a peaceful settlement. But Lighthooves was getting ready to do…something… and if he really could use the Core's defenses…well…I didn't want to see it.

I noticed Boo staring behind us. I glanced back towards the Tower, wondering if he was spying on me with the Perceptitron, and then saw it. A tiny flash of flame towards the top of the Tower. "What the…" I said, rising a little as a white thread snaked its way through the air directly towards the row of Raptors…and us…almost straight at us! "Look out! Dive!" I shouted as I grabbed Rampage.

I don't know if it was shot at us or if it was simply my rotten luck, but the missile streaked by almost faster than I could see. Almost as fast, the air filled with countless green bolts of energy as the Enclave tried to shoot it down. We were buried in turnips as Twister followed my advice far more literally than I liked and dove, getting clear of the field of fire. When she straightened out, I popped my head clear and spun my head around wildly. "Where'd it go? Did they get it?"

They had. A rain of smoke and luminescent green particles drifted towards the cloud layer…behind the Raptors. One missile and it had very nearly gotten past them. "Wow. That was close," Rampage said.

"Too close," I said, shivering. "Was that directed at us?"

"Probably not," Twisted replied. "Maybe a test fire. Glad they got it."

I pressed my brow to the side of the cart. "Scary," I muttered.

"Oh, please," Rampage snorted, rolling her eyes. "If you want really scary, think of this: what if that thing wasn't moving at top speed?"

"Thanks, Rampage. Thanks a lot," I muttered, not able to get the thought out of my head.

* * *

Our reception was waiting for us in the landing bay of the

Castellanus. Two dozen power-armored pegasi were arranged in a semicircle around our wagon. This time, the general herself wore armor as well. It appeared to be a well-broken-in suit, the enamel scuffed in places from real use. The only ornamentation was a wing-flanked trio of small golden lightning bolts on her helmet, which was hung by her side. She didn't step forward to greet me. "I must confess. I hadn't expected see you again under these circumstances."

I knew my response would be one of the most important I'd ever make. I took a deep breath and a step forward. Twenty beam weapons hummed in response, and I froze. "It's a trap."

"Mmmmm," was all she said in reply, her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Lighthooves has access to the Core's weapon systems. I've seen them fire right through a reinforced building," I said, panning my gaze from one to the next. "Look, I didn't kill Councilor Stargazer or Director Stratus," I began to hear a pleading note in my voice that I didn't like. It was a tone that I usually only used right before I got in a lot of trouble.

"Of course," she answered, slow and evenly. "That is exactly what you would say if you were working with Lighthooves to secure Thunderhead independence."

Oh crap. "What?"

"It's the most logical conclusion," she answered in that most dreadful voice. "Councilor Stargazer was a spineless accommodationist. Director Stratus a loyalist. You, the most dangerous pony I've seen in decades, show up from the surface and kill them both. Rumors of a Rainbow Dash clone draws in a crowd, and then you make a wonderful and impassioned speech that is then brilliantly co-opted by Lighthooves at the perfect moment, turning the city against us. Now that we prepare to send in our wings to secure the city, you appear to warn us that our enemy has firepower capable of destroying us. We stay away, and Thunderhead prepares itself for civil war. Meanwhile, Lighthooves prepares missiles capable of striking at our homes with a horrifying contagion."

"Shit," Rampage said as she stared at me with awe. "That is slick, Blackjack. I mean, normally your M.O. is just to crash through things like a drunken brahmin, but this is some evil genius shit."

"I suspect it was Lighthooves that came up with the plan," General

Storm Chaser said coolly. “I admit, I was fooled at first. All that talk of doing the right thing. Of saying you’re not a soldier. Quite convincing. You’re far more than just a pawn, Blackjack. You are a queen, and I would be a fool not to remove you from the board.”

Why did everypony have to keep making chess references? I didn’t even play the game! “Then why the hell did I come back here in person?” I retorted.

“Overconfidence?” Storm Chaser answered with a small frown. “Or perhaps you wanted a chance to eliminate me from the board. Just as you did Stargazer and Strat--”

I sat down, threw my head back, and screamed as loud as I possibly could. Into that scream, I put in weeks of frustration, annoyance, and sheer disgust with everything I had been trying to do. “I am trying to save your fucking life! And their lives! Everypony I can. It’s the only thing that’s kept me sane since I left my stable! And you know what? I’m starting to think Rampage was right!” The striped pony blinked in amazement as I began to pace ignoring the guns trained on me. “What the fuck am I doing? You’d think that after a while I would have finally figured it out! I keep trying to save ponies, and fucking it up. My home! The Fluttershy Medical Center. Zebras. Chapel. Twice! I should do like Rampage says, try to kill everypony, and then end up saving everyone! My incompetence will save the Wasteland!” I pointed a hoof at the general. “All I want to do is save your lives, and save the lives of every pegasus caught in the crossfire! Got it? That’s my motivation. You’re accusing me of working with Lighthooves when the plague he’s using infected my stable. I had to gas them! Everypony I knew! I don’t want anypony, ever, to have to do that again! So put your damned suspicions away and work with me because otherwise I got nothing to fall back on but the Rampage plan and then we’re all *fucked*!”

The general pursed her lips as she just stared at me for a very long and silent minute. Rampage waited like a steel trap ready to launch herself at everypony and let the mayhem begin. Finally, the general said in slow, even tones, “You are either the smoothest, most dangerous operative I have ever met or the unluckiest spawn of a mule in the history of Equestria. Or worse, you might be both.” She fell silent again for another long pause. “The secretaries,” she said slowly and evenly. “The secretaries were killed.”

I blinked at this jump as the general turned away. “Killing the

security ponies was one thing. That's understandable. Killing Stratus too, understandable. But why would you kill the secretaries in the office? That's something I couldn't understand. The surveillance and response network were both down. So why kill the secretaries if they couldn't sound an alarm? It'd take time, give Stratus a chance to get away or for help to arrive. But somepony did. They eliminated all the eyewitnesses to the murder."

"They didn't want anypony alive to say it wasn't me," I answered.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Damn, what Lighthooves could have been if he'd been loyal…"

"So you believe me?" I asked.

"No," she replied flatly. "But I suspect you slightly less than I did before. Slightly." She looked out the bay door at the nearest Raptor. "Regardless of your warning, we're going to have to move the fleet in."

"I told yo--" I began, but she cut me off.

"Yes, and while I am skeptical, I haven't discounted your warning. However, we need to move closer if we want a chance of intercepting any missiles fired from the Tower. There's a critical window of fifteen seconds where the missile is accelerating where we can shoot it down before it reaches top speed. Otherwise, our interception chance narrows dramatically. And we still need to get Thunderhead pacified. Neighvarro is bucking mad, and I've been exceptionally 'flexible' in interpreting their orders. One councilor is demanding we bombard Thunderhead till it surrenders. The bloody old fool completely ignored the true threat to himself."

I doubted Afterburner or Hoarfrost would have much problem with that. "I believe Lighthooves when he says he can access the Core's weapons. Somepony I know corroborated it."

"That warning alone could save many lives," she answered. "You and your friends, however, will be spending your time in the brig."

Rampage groaned. "Why does everypony keep trying to throw Blackjack in to jail? It never works!"

The general scowled at Rampage. "You are--"

"No. My turn. She got to rant. You got to monologue. My turn," she said as she jumped out of the cart. "The worst thing you can do right now is take Blackjack off the field. She wants to make sure all of you live. I don't know why... personally, I would have killed all of you just for fun. Seems like a thrilling challenge, and Big Daddy could never top me killing a Raptor with my bare hooves. But

Blackjack wants you all to live. Lighthooves clearly wants *you* to kill *her*."

"Why would you say that?" the general asked with a scowl.

"Duh! Lighthooves didn't turn our little turnip wagon into a flaming cinder. You know he's watching Blackjack. If he killed her, then everypony who heard her little speech in the park will wonder what the fuck is up with him. But if she comes here trying to prevent the violence and you kill her, or lock her up so she dies when he blasts this Raptor to dust, then you guys are the villains," she said with a flick of her barbed tail. "You don't want to trust her, fine. Send her on her way. I'm pretty sure she'll head straight to the Tower to take care of your little problem for you. But if you lock her up, all you're doing is tying up an asset that is opposed to Lighthooves."

The general sighed. "After some of the reports I'm getting from out west…" she began before glowering at me. "Very well. You and your friends can come with me. I don't want to set you loose just yet, but I won't remove you from play, either. Still, if you turn out to be an assassin, I should be cremated as the Enclave's greatest fool."

"Oh please," I said with a smile and a roll of my eyes. "If I were here to kill you I would have teleported directly behind you and cut your head off or blasted four magic bullets down your throat. Heck, I could probably just jump and crush you under my hooves right now!" I chuckled, and Rampage guffawed. Then I became aware that we were the only two laughing and it tapered off to a slack grin. "Um. But, um. I'm not…So. Yeah…"

"This way," the general said as she turned and started into the Raptor, then stopped and glanced back at me with an uncertain frown at presenting her back before continuing into the ship. Some of the soldiers fell in behind her while others took positions around the launch bay.

Rampage snorted beside me. "You know what, Blackjack? I don't think it's just Glory. Nopony up here has a decent sense of humor." She stalked along next to me. "I blame the altitude, personally."

"Not now," I admonished.

"See? It's even affecting you." Rampage grinned. I groaned, covering my face with a hoof. "You want me to get out of your mane, go over here, and kill somepony?" she asked, gesturing to the side and a pair of alarmed pegasus stallions. She glanced at them

and grinned. “Oh stop. It’ll be fun. Nothing like murder and mayhem to living things up.”

“Dirt pony barbarian,” one of the stallions muttered.

“Yup. And don’t you forget it,” Rampage replied. Then she reached over and, before he could dart away, grabbed him and kissed him hard. His eyes shot wide and his wings popped out to either side. “Want me to show you how we get down and dirty on the surface?”

The general wasn’t stopping, and neither was I. “Don’t, Rampage. No means no,” I added as we headed up some stairs, leaving Rampage with the dozens of armored soldiers in the launch bay. “Feel free to shoot her in the head if she doesn’t listen,” I added to the soldiers. Then I glanced over at Boo, who’d been walking along beside me, looking back at the squirming stallion. “Don’t watch, Boo. She’s a bad influence.” The pale mare blinked cluelessly back. “That’s why I like you, Boo,” I said, nudging her shoulder and getting a beaming smile in return.

I had to surrender my guns before we went onto the bridge proper. Fortunately, they were far more interested in my pistols and carbine than in my sword. I guess when you soared through the skies in war machines and power armor, you could get dismissive of an ornamental-looking, archaic weapon. Even the general surrendered her weapons; one misfire or mistake and something vital could be damaged. With my ranged weapons in a locker, though, we were allowed into the section of the ship where they kept the brains of the machine.

On the bridge were a dozen unarmored pegasus mares in a semicircle who deftly worked glowing control panels made of rainbows and pressed keys with their pinions, the feather tips protected in purple plastic. They wore headgear with a clear band across their face, the surface flickering with images rather like a poor pony’s EFS. There were no windows; instead, there were seven large screens showing an angled arc before the ship. Above us were three smaller monitors showing views out the rear of the ship.

Four armored stallions stood at attention in the rear of the room, each saluting with a wing as we entered. The big seat in the center of the semicircle of stations was occupied by a muscular, serious-looking stallion with a white mane and the most eye-bleedingly neon pink coat I’d ever seen. He rose to his hooves immediately. “General,” he said with a crisp salute of his wing. I noticed that *he* got a gun.

“Situation, Captain Racewind?” the general asked as she studied the rainbow screens at the front of the room.

“Poor, General. We’re deployed too far back for effective interception. Those missiles are damned fast, ma’am. Coms is… active,” he said with a glower as he looked at a station. “Both across the fleet and with command. The GPE is screaming at us to move in. The formation is holding, mostly. The *Blizzard* and *Galeforce* are... 'drifting' closer to the Tower.”

“Order the two Raptors back into position and await further orders from Neighvarro. Have they appointed a replacement for Harbinger yet?” she asked, her body language noticeably tensing.

“No. It’s currently contested between Ironfeather, who has seniority, and Starburst and her connections. There’re a few retired generals making claims for the position, too. But they’re almost unanimous in their orders for us to act immediately. Apparently, we’re leadwings compared to Colonel Autumn Leaf and others out west,” he said with a disapproving frown.

“Neither of those two are good news. Why is it all the good ponies are too decent for politics?” Storm Chaser asked rhetorically.

“You could try to throw your feathers in for High General,” the captain suggested.

“And when I left to play political games, they’d put Hoarfrost in charge here.” The general sighed, shaking her head, then snorted. “So long as they haven’t confirmed a leader, this is my command. Fortunately, we’re about to make our move.”

A mare at her station began to work the controls. “Captain!” she said after a moment. “I’ve got something strange. Two signals. One’s a narrow band broadcast out of our ship, but it’s not on any Enclave frequency we use. The other’s an access signal from the Tower targeting our ship. It doesn’t seem to be trying to access any of the ship systems, though.”

“Sleeper device? Explosive?” the captain asked immediately.

“No sir. But it’s on the bridge,” the mare said. Why was my mane suddenly crawling?

“Can you block them?” I asked earnestly.

The orange mare looked at me with an expression of wondering who was this crazy pony asking her questions and glanced at the captain, who nodded, but appeared no happier that the surfacer was interfering. “Yes, ma’am. I can throw out enough ECM to scatter the signals.”

"Do it. It's Lighthooves," I said to the general. "He has a spy device that lets him see what I'm doing." Everypony stared at me for a long moment, and I felt myself go red. "Look! I have a very busy life, and sometimes little things slip my attention! Sorry."

"That would have been good information to have disclosed earlier," Storm Chaser said lightly, then nodded to the technician. The mare's feathers nearly flew over the glowing control panel, and then my eyes turned fuzzy for a second before my sight returned.

"Both signals blocked," the mare said with a decisive nod.

General Chaser nodded and moved to the seat in the middle of the bridge. The captain vacated it immediately. "General has the conn," he said as he stood to her left. The air in the middle of the bridge flashed, and a holographic display appeared showing the twelve Raptors, the Tower, and Thunderhead. It also had the dark circle of the Core beneath it.

"Now hear this. This is General Storm Chaser. We've waited. We've been patient. It is now time to act. We are going to close in, intercept any missiles, disable the Tower's launch capability, and restore order to the city of Thunderhead. Be aware that our enemy not only has the Tower's defenses but may also control the defenses of the city itself. *Sirocco*, *Blizzard*, *Galeforce*. Approach the Tower in staggered formation two two one J. Diverge at your discretion. Intercept any missiles fired and destroy the launchers the moment they're exposed." Three dotted lines zig-zagged erratically towards the Tower.

"Finally!" Afterburner blurted impatiently over the radio.

"Understood. We shall execute all orders," Hoarfrost responded.

"Azimuth, *Helicity*, *Hurricane*, *Perihelion*, *Sleet*, and *Stratus Fractus* will approach and take positions at 22AJ, 24RS, 34PP, 56TS, 57FA, and 88RD respectively." Spheres popped into view in a roughly hexagonal arrangement, covering altitude as well as arc of flight. "Intercept anything that gets past the inner three and take it out. Your wings will be dispatched to Thunderhead to restore order. Restrain your fire. They're still Enclave citizens," the general said grimly. That prompted an outcry. "This is not a debate. Those are your orders. I don't care if they throw horseapples at you, you're in power armor. Separate, disperse, and keep your cool."

"General. High General Harbinger left standing orders that traitors to the Enclave were to be dealt with extreme prejudice," Hoarfrost said coolly.

"And then he went and got himself killed at Maripony," General Storm Chaser growled in reply. The outcry went silent. "I don't care what orders he might have left. I am not going to authorize the Enclave killing its own. When this situation is taken care of, the GPE can do what it wants. It'll be out of my feathers then, but I am telling you that right now you are to order fire restraint. Thunderhead is not the target. Is that clear?"

"Transparently," Hoarfrost said in a quiet voice that made me give the intercom speaker a shooty look.

"*Castellanus, Cyclone*, and *Lightning* will advance and target the Tower's anti-air defenses, breach the Tower at five thousand, four thousand, and three thousand feet, and secure the weapon. Remember, we want to take the Tower and its personnel *intact*. Exercise maximum fire restraint." Three dotted lines arched to touch the Tower towards the top. She looked at me, clearly questioning if I'd changed my mind about participating. I sighed and then gave a small nod. I might not be a soldier, but sometimes security had to get in there and shut problems down. "We'll have irregulars with us. White unicorn with black cybernetics, all-white earth pony, and a z-- white earth pony with stripes. Red ones."

"Surfacer terrorists," somepony muttered just loud enough to be heard over the speaker. I saw the general grind her teeth but also caught the unsure glance at me. I had to admire her focus; she was dealing with a number of ponies that just weren't on the same page as her.

"*Azimuth* and *Fractus* are our designated reserves if we have to fall back. *Helicity* and *Sleet* will move to cover them if they have to drop position. Does everyone understand?" the general asked. There were no replies. "Execute orders in sixty seconds. Mark."

The captain immediately snapped, "Turbines to full! Sound general quarters." An alarm rang out, and the lights immediately dropped to amber. "Secure all hatches. Prime turrets one through six." The mares typed commands into their controls and repeated the orders back as they were completed. I felt a purr run through the ship, and for the first time I felt more thrilled by a machine than I normally would have liked. Say what you wanted about the Enclave's policies, they did have awesome toys!

"Now would be the time to remember anything else you might have overlooked, Blackjack," the general said above the pinging alarm.

"What? It looks like you got the perfect plan all squared away," I said as I pointed at the holographic display with a hoof.

"A plan is like a house of cards. It tends to scatter when the winds of war catch up with it," she replied, not taking her eyes off the icons. "What orders should I give? Will they be carried out fast enough? Can we react in time? Is Lighthooves's plan better than my own? I'd be a fool not to think of that." She sighed and leaned back in the chair. "War is never so neat and clean as in the movies. If you can think of anything at all, now is the time."

I took a moment to think as she gave orders for the ship to take its position and the vessel began to move. The lights changed from amber to red. There was one thing. "He said I gave him a weapon, but I can't think of what it might be. Maybe he got his hooves on Folly and a silver bullet? He could fuck up a Raptor with that, but you have twelve of them." There was something else, though. Dawn. Her arrival in Thunderhead was convenient. Too convenient. I didn't believe it was simple happenstance that she'd come for her youngest children. To save them. Save them from what? Save them from whatever she was planning. But what? What interest could Cognitum have in the skies?

"There's something else. There's a pony…a mare named Dawn. She's…Celestia, it's a twisted story. To sum it up, she's bad news. Completely crazy and a total zealot. She's involved…but I don't know how." I sighed and rubbed my mane. "She thinks she's going to save the Wasteland by getting everypony killed for her 'goddess'."

"Wait," the general said, holding up one extended pinion, then smiled. "Did you hear it?"

I checked around the bridge, then frowned. "No. What?"

The general shook her head. "That was the sound of the cards starting to slip," she replied. "We'll have to see what others tumble down."

The ship gave a sudden lurch, and I nearly fell over Boo. The pegasi simply leaned instinctively as the *Castellanus* rose at a sharp angle. I looked out the window at the sight of the black airships breaking from their neat line, propellers blurring above the machines as they rose, dropped, twisted, and banked in the air.

I barely paid it any attention, though. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that Dawn's presence up here mattered. That meant that Cognitum thought this fight mattered. She'd killed

Stargazer…the only pony with a chance of shutting things down early. But why would Cognitum care? The Core was unbreachable, even to the Enclave. I suppose if they got all their Thunderheads together, they could blast the buildings, but if Cognitum had even a minimum of power she could fight back and hide behind the Core's shields. That had been the plan in the very beginning. If it hadn't been for the spike in Enervation…

Wait. I felt a quiet horror steal over me as I slowly walked towards the display before the captain's chair. Blue beams like lines of crackling lightning out to weld the heavens, not the Core's weapons but not something I'd seen before either, were lancing out from the corners of the Tower near the crown and halfway down the side. One touched the *Castellanus*, making the ship quake under my hooves. The general was giving orders about alignment and readying fliers for boarding; I ignored her as I stared at the dark ring of the Core at the base of the display. "Cognitum doesn't have access to all the Core's systems. She has to fight for it. That's why she needs EC-1101," I muttered to myself, rubbing my forehooves together and scraping metal on metal. "But what if another pony already had partial access? Like Shadowbolt Tower being connected to the Core's defenses.

"But if they turn on the Core's defenses, it's going to draw power, just like last time. If it does, all the Enervation rings will energize. It'll be Silverstar Sporting Goods all over again." Who knew how far past the river it could spread? I hoped it was only my imagination hearing that faint scream in the back of my mind. "She came up here to get her children out because she *knew* this was going to be a slaughter!"

"What are you talking about, Blackjack?" General Chaser asked.

I sat down hard. "Why the hell can't I get one atrocity at a time?" I asked nopony in particular. "Okay…There's really no way I can explain all this neatly. There's a life-killing radiation in the Hoof called Enervation. When they turn on the guns, it'll draw power through the system, causing the Enervation to spike. Maybe the Tokomare will activate automatically; I bet it has some sort emergency override during an attack. Maybe Cognitum will do it herself. The Enervation field will kill everypony indiscriminately. It might even reach Thunderhead, if the city is close enough!"

"But why? What would be the purpose of mass slaughter like that?" Racewind said with a scowl.

"I don't know yet, but what did you say about plans?" I asked the general archly, then looked at the display. "If the Enervation is strong enough, it'll weaken you. If it's stronger than that…It made the original inhabitants of the Core *melt*. If the draw is great enough, both sides might just drip away." The Tower's weapons were focusing on ships, scorching them where the blue-white beams touched. The cloud of power-armored ponies moved in arrowhead formations towards the Tower while a veritable swarm of defenders emerged from the building.

"What do you want me to do, Blackjack?" the general countered. "We're committed. Once Lighthooves is dealt with and the Tower is under our control, we will be able to shut down their weapon systems."

"We have power armor contact," the captain said as flickering red and blue beams began to spark back and forth between the power armored ponies. "They're fast…I knew that their armor was good, but reaction times like that are phenomenal." His eyes widened. "Several wings inbound…coming in rather disturbingly fast."

"Yeah. Lighthooves all but tap danced on me. He beat me almost as good as Dawn had…" my voice trailed away. I'd fought Enclave armor before I was augmented and won. Power armor just wasn't fast enough. It had inertia. That was the only saving grace of anypony fighting it. But Lighthooves had almost taken me apart in his brother's office. "Oh you son of a mule! That's what you were talking about." I swore as I glared at the display. "That wasn't power armor!"

"What are you talking about, Blackjack?" the general asked in tones suggesting she was tired of asking me that.

But I didn't have time to explain as the captain shouted, "Incoming fire and hostiles!"

A blue beam shot out of the corner of the Tower and lingered on the *Castellanus*, and the ship shrieked. Then a second beam swept in to meet the first. I was nearly thrown off my hooves as the air filled with the smell of burning metal. "Bank! Climb! Get that beam off us before it penetrates our armor!" the pink stallion bellowed at the mares. A third blue beam was coming up to meet the other pair.

"I can't, sir! It's going to br--" Then a sound unlike any I'd heard before pierced the ship. It was like the scream of metal of the factory abomination I'd faced in the tunnels, only this time it was as if I were inside the beast rather than before it. The entire ship

reeled to the side, rolling as the bridge filled with nostril-searing smoke. The general pulled her helmet on, but everypony else tried to breathe and work the controls. Frigid wind howled and snapped through the Raptor. I guessed the beam had penetrated right next to the bridge.

Red bars in my EFS. White-armored pegasi stormed into the bridge; the soldiers on guard sprang to action, but they were unarmed. Armed ponies were probably on their way, but by the time they got here, it'd be all over. Still, to the soldiers' credit, they charged the boarders with fearless skill and determination. Their blows were to deflect weapons away from the crew and computers, even if it meant putting themselves at risk. I wondered if they were trying to disarm their attackers, but the invaders' weapons were grafted to their sides beneath their wings. The soldiers' scorpion tails stabbed and flashed, but their opponents had reinforced organs and internal healing talismans repairing their injuries. They were all going to get slaughtered...

Not if I could help it. I just really wished Rampage were here right now. This was the perfect situation for an immortal death dealer.

Two of the white armored invaders stormed into the bridge, their gatling beam guns starting to glow, when I threw myself at them with my hooves wide. One limb linked around each neck as I employed every ounce of my augmented bulk against them and twisted the guns up so they raked the air above the furiously working mares. Scorpion-tipped tails arched forward and stabbed at my chest, but even though I cried out in pain, I didn't let go. I looked at the armor on my left and saw confirmation of my fears. Like Lighthooves at Chicanery's studio, the mare wasn't wearing a helmet... and her eyes glowed bright red just like mine.

At least, they did before I blasted her face with a quartet of magical bullets. The magical impacts ripped hide from the flesh beneath it, exposing gray synthetic materials bonded to bone and tissue. Her glassy orbs exploded in shards as my magic tore her face down to the metal and bone beneath it.

The mare screamed and flailed wildly as I let her go and turned my attention to the stallion on my right. He slammed his steel hooves into my chest as he struggled to knock me back. With the gouges in my chest his tail spike had inflicted, I couldn't hold on to him. He flipped in the air, pointing both guns at me. "Kill the bridge crew! Quickly!" he snapped.

Then he was slammed to the side by the worn gray armor of the general. He flipped through the air and smashed into the side of the bridge, shaking his head hard as Storm Chaser hovered in his previous position. “Captain, you have the conn.”

“Yes ma’am! Get reinforcements and emergency response teams here now. Helm, climb one thousand feet and present our starboard side to the enemy while we get that hole dealt with,” Racewind said coolly as he took the seat. The *Castellanus* continued to shake as alarms sounded. “Keep those beams off our engines or we’re done!”

Two more invaders entered. The armored guards tried to move in to grapple and stab with their stinger tails, but it was as I feared. It was one thing to wear a shell that reinforced your body. It was another to be reinforced. And these ponies weren’t just augmented like me; my augments were cobbled together from three different sources. Lighthooves must have taken Project Steelpony designs and fabricated fresh, brand-new parts. They twisted around, ignored stabbing tails, broke the wings of the stallions, and ripped out their ribcages and throats. One soldier managed to break the neck of a white cyberpony, but the others struggled just to survive.

“You’re dead, old mare! We’re the future of the Enclave!” the stallion roared as two more came in, bringing his guns to bear on her. Outside, in the hall, I could hear the electric crack of beam fire being exchanged.

Storm Chaser didn’t reply or waste time with taunts. She swooped in high and dove at the stallion. At first, I thought she’d missed as she came in short, but her wings snapped and she performed a roll in midair. The scorpion tail of her armor blurred as it swung around and the razor tip ripped a jagged line from leering mouth to chest. Blood and mechanical fluids spilled as gray synthetic underlays were exposed. He gurgled as he clamped his hooves to his throat. Big mistake. Storm Chaser continued the roll and brought both forehooves down atop his head with an impact that dented his skull. The transfer of momentum sent him flipping forward, and as he came around, Storm Chaser performed a backflip in midair. Rising tail spike met descending stallion face in a shower of sparks and blood.

“If you’re the future, I’m not impressed,” she said with superb disdain. The stallion’s reply was to gurgle and collapse in a heap, leaking blood and brains from the gash ripped through his head.

More white armored ponies stormed in through the smoking

doorway. One balked as he got a close look at me. “Confirmed. Blackjack and the general together! What do we do?” he said as he pointed beam weapons built into his sides at me.

“If she’s not dead or in the brig, kill her,” the mare beside him yelled as she pointed her own integrated disintegration rifles at the general. “She’s a liability now!”

“Over my dead body,” I replied and drew my sword, starting to teleport when the pony I’d blinded grabbed me from behind. Lacunae had once rattled off some rather fancy words about why it was difficult to teleport other ponies and yourself. Something about mass and distance and other things that made my eyes glaze over at the time when I had eyes that could glaze. When my teleportation spell went off, I had the sensation of trying to squeeze myself down a Blackjack-sized tube that was now half the size of Blackjack. The result was I slammed to the deck with every organic part of me feeling like it’d been beaten with a belt. “Math…hurts…” I groaned, trying to pull myself together as I watched helplessly.

One lunged at Boo, his white laminate cybernetic tail ending in a glowing green crackle of energy. The blank backed away, eyes wide and tail tucked as she swayed to the side and gave ground. “Filthy dirt pony,” the pegasus snarled. “Stand still!” I could only stare in shock as the faster cyberpony soldier kept missing Boo by mere inches.

Probably only the fact that I wore an equally stunned pegasus atop me saved me from being disintegrated, incinerated, or both. The stallion closed the distance, his wings glittering with razor sharp edges as he approached. A little ungroaning part of my mind took some small measure of relief they didn’t have that green glow to them too. The general was not so lucky, given that her armor didn’t have any ranged weapons on it and I doubted that the cyberpony mare would allow her to close the distance. The general tried anyway, going into a dive straight at the armored mare. The cyberpony mare grinned as she opened up a stream of lethal energy bolts and beams. The captain was drawing his disintegration pistol as some of the bridge crew started to move towards her...

But they were just flesh and blood ponies and would never reach the cyberpegasus in time. The mare moved with the swiftness and cold murderous action of a machine. I could only stand by and watch the rapid fire barrage strike the general with the precision of S.A.T.S. For an instant it seemed as if she’d close the gap. For an

instant, I felt like I was the one stuck in S.A.T.S. Then the tips of her hooves glowed with the brilliance of a star…

Like a lightning bolt, the general struck the cybermare and crushed her between bulkhead and her metalshod hooves. That would have killed anypony without a generator for a heart. As it was, mechanical fluids and blood burst from the cybermare's throat as the sound of cracking ribs carried clear through the air. Still, her guns were wired into her brain, and one of them swiveled around and blasted wildly around her with more crimson beams. Clearly, the crippled mare wanted to take one of us with her.

Unfortunately, that was when one of the screens towards the front of the bridge exploded inwards behind General Storm Chaser. Chunks of metal flew through the air; the mare sprawled atop me caught a piece of steel longer than my body and thick as my horn. It sliced almost completely through her and crushed me down even more. The bridge mares struggled to keep the ship under control even though more than half of them had been wounded by flying metal; Boo managed to avoid having her head taken off by a dinner plate sized chunk by inches.

More white-armored pegasi began to swarm the staggered general. Then a brilliant green bolt blasted into the lead cyberpony's head. I watched as Captain Racewind slowly advanced across the bridge. His uniform was slick with blood and one ear was gone as he walked slowly across the shaking deck. One of his targets collapsed in a shower of glowing green goop. Then a second. A third. He stood over the general before the breached wall. When his gun was dry, he flicked out the cartridge and slapped a fresh one in without removing it from his mouth.

The rest didn't enter shooting. Instead, they removed things from their armor, small metal apples with bright green bands around the middles. In unison, they pulled the pins of around a dozen magic grenades and threw them through the breach. Even if I hadn't been halfway across the room with a dead mare on my back, I would have been hard pressed to catch and return so many at once. For a pony without magic, I didn't think it possible.

I guess it wasn't, because rather than try, he dashed right up to the breach in the wall and stood upright before it, spreading his wings wide to cover the portal and deflecting the magical grenades back into the room beyond. There were panicked shouts from our attackers as he looked back at the rest of the bridge.

I'll be damned if the stoic captain didn't smile a little.

Then there was a rapid fire series of brilliant green flashes and in an instant, he was gone, reduced to a glowing green mist that settled on the deck. The general was closest to the blast, but the captain's sacrifice had kept her out of range of the explosives. All it did was knock her back.

"Racewind…" the general murmured, only audible to my ears.

"One tyrant down," wheezed a gurgling voice as the cybermare Storm Chaser'd crippled proved not quite dead yet, and managed one last well-aimed volley that raked the general with brilliant red beams. "Die, you murdering whores!" she shouted, blood and black fluids spraying from her mouth. I'd forgotten how infuriatingly resilient cyberponies could be. The general took a step back, staggered, and finally collapsed as the beams raked her from behind.

No. I needed her. The Enclave needed her.

"Captain! General!" screamed half the mares as they rushed to the fallen general and swarmed over the cyberpony, their hooves twisting her integrated guns up towards the ceiling. The cybermare wheezed a horrible, gurgling laughter as she fired wildly. I watched my last, best hope to ending this lying in a smoking heap on the deck.

A cold and hateful part of my mind pushed such simple weaknesses as pain aside and summoned up all my focus. As another cybermare rushed in and started to take aim, another of Twilight's spells, one that I'd thought exceptionally bizarre, came immediately to my mind. I imagined the newcomer with the biggest, bushiest beard and eyebrows I could. Her face disappeared into a yellow puff of dandelion-like hair, and she staggered back as I shrugged the dead pegasus off me.

My magic seized the excess mane and I yanked her head toward me. My magic brought the sword up through her neck, slicing clean through it. Another pair of Lighthooves's cyberponies rushed me. "Get Blackjack!" one yelled. Instead, he should have been paying more attention, as my telekinesis threw the severed head into his face. He caught it, blinked down stupidly, and was rewarded with a sword swing that decapitated him just as neatly as the first. The third skidded short, deciding to shoot me rather than get in close. My hooves shoved the spurting stump of the second in his direction, and his S.A.T.S.-enhanced shooting was ruined by a blinding spray

of blood and mechanical fluids. He'd need a few seconds to clear his eyes.

He didn't even get half a second before I plunged the sword through his hoof, his eye, his skull, and his brain. A twist and yank and he collapsed into a twisting, twitching heap. The sword came down in a finishing swipe and took his head as well. Even healing talismans couldn't reverse decapitation. I took three steps towards where the crippled cybermare continued to fire wildly with her arcane energy weapons and sliced them off.

The stallion with the crackling tail stinger had finally backed Boo into a corner. "Now! Hold still and die!" he roared, plunging the weapon at the terrified mare. I just needed a few more seconds and I could help her. A few seconds. That's all I needed. Then I'd wake up and find out this was all a dream. A vision. A memory orb of a pony who'd seen too many good ponies die for stupid reasons. Boo ducked at the last second, curling up into a terrified ball as the stinger ripped through plastic and metal conduits above her.

One of which read 'Warning: high voltage'. As the tail ripped through, a noise like an enormous angry bee filled the bridge. The stallion went rigid as electricity played over his body for a second, then sparks shot from his blackening metal bits as his flesh began to char, then he exploded with a sickening pop.

"Hey! Blackjack!" Rampage called from the doorway. "Did you know that there's this great big hole in the side of the ship?" One of the cyberponies fighting the soldiers in the bridge whirled on her and started to open fire. With an annoyed look, she whirled as well, wrapped her barbed tail around the cyberpony's face, and, with a jerk of her haunches, pulled him down under her backside. She sat down hard on his shoulders. She paused, then shrugged. "Tempting, but bloody pleasure before squishy pleasure," she said, then raised both her forehooves and slammed them down on the cyberpony's skull like a jackhammer until his brains dribbled like bloody tar out his mouth and nose.

I rushed to the general and wished for the umpteenth time that I had some kind of healing spell. Her blue bar was still on my EFS… she was still alive, but any second I expected it to wink out. Her armor smoked from the beam blasts it'd absorbed. She wasn't moving. I didn't think she was breathing. Screw healing magic. At this point I'd be happy with something more substantial than first aid training I'd gotten years ago and slept through because any

stable medical emergency would be handled by medics, not me. Fucking idiot, Blackjack.

I felt the ship begin to list and groan with an alarming, substantial sound and turned briefly to the three mares around the general. "Keep us in the air, or we're all dead!" They nodded and rushed to their damaged stations. The most I could remember was 'ABC'. Her Airway was clear, and when I put my ear to her muzzle, my enhanced hearing could pick up shallow Breaths…and I forgot what C meant. Contact medical? Control? Concede defeat?

Rising from the twitching body, Rampage pounced on another cyberpony, grabbed his head in a hooflock, twisted, and snapped his neck. That would have been sufficient for anypony besides Rampage. The mare kept pulling, the neck starting to pinch like taffy, till the head came off completely with a wet popping sound. Holding the decapitated head, trailing wires, she tossed it to one of the horrified *Castellanus* soldiers. She whistled at the smoking, crackling remains before Boo. "Nice job. Well done. I give it a nine out of ten. You want to make sure you can take a trophy from your kills, Boo. Or eat them. Or both." The shivering blank wasn't uncurling from her ball.

It was the wrong time for a quip. "Where have you been?" I asked darkly as I stared at the limp, prone form of the general. "Why weren't you here? What were you off doing, Rampage? Fucking? Fighting?"

"Uh, yeah. Well, the second one," Rampage said with a frown. "What's the problem?"

It wasn't right, or fair, but I stormed over to her and shoved her hard against the wall. "The problem?! The problem is if you had been here, the general wouldn't have been hurt! This isn't a fucking game anymore! Glory's family…Thunderhead…maybe even all the Wasteland…could be killed if we can't end this nightmare."

Then Rampage shoved back. I'd only been shoved once by Rampage, when we'd first met. Now, however, she set her back against the wall and kicked out with all four of her hooves. I found myself suddenly flying clear across the room, smashing into the opposite wall and landing in a heap. Rampage glared at me as she slowly advanced.

"I like you, Blackjack, but you're really starting to get on my nerves." Her voice was low, and for an instant I realized that this was the Rampage everypony else knew. The Reaper. "You're the

one who cares about Thunderhead, not me. You're the one who gives a shit if the Wasteland lives or dies. Not. Me. I only give a marginal shit about a half dozen ponies in this world. The rest can go fuck themselves. This is war. Ponies die. A lot. Good and bad, innocent and guilty. Do not ever talk to me like that and tell me what I should be doing. Ever."

I struggled to my hooves. "I thought you wanted to die," I spat, not able to bring myself to face her.

"And I do. You won't do that. So I do what I always do. Whatever else I want," she said, and I glanced at her and saw her looking at the glowing smear that had been the captain.

Then the general's blue bar disappeared on my E.F.S. No…no! Damn it NO! The pinned cybermare took a deep, crackling breath and shouted, "Confirmed! General is dead! Blackjack is alive! Report! Blackjack is--"

Rampage reared up, the bridge mares scrambling away. "Shut," she said with her hooves upraised. "Up!" she shouted as with one blow, she crushed the mare into a ball of bloody metal.

"Medics! Somepony get somepony! Please!" I begged. Rampage looked over as she wiped her bloody hoofclaws off on the slain mare. "Find a doctor!"

"Hush up. I'm not that kind of doctor," Rampage said, her voice becoming oddly calm and gruff, as she knelt beside the fallen general. Her hooves fiddled around her face a moment. "Mmm. Not good." She pointed a hoof at a bridge mare. "You. I need a medical kit. Bring it and see if it has a shot of adrenaline and some M.o.P. electropads. Healing potion too would be nice. And I'd love a sake for when this is all over." She tugged off the bloody claws from her forehooves. "Hope this works."

She rolled the general on her back. "Press one nostril closed and blow in the other when I tell you to." And then, with surprising care, she began to compress the general's chest with short bursts. I was so worried that I didn't even gross out at the thought of putting my mouth there. "Breathe. Breathe." She intoned every ten compressions.

"Is she going to make it?" I asked between breaths.

"Probably not, but she definitely won't if we stop. Breathe," she said as she continued compressions. "I'm glad this body is so strong and this mare has a nice, flexible sternum. Breathe. Always distressing when you snap ribs. Breathe."

A mare rushed in with a plastic box. “Blackjack, after the breath after this one, cut open the chest of her armor with your sword. Breathe. Try not to cut her deeply, but be quick. She has enough problems. Breathe.”

As soon as I finished blowing in her nose I levitated over my sword and sliced the armor between the plates as quickly and neatly as I could, tugging the rubbery underlayer away from her body as I sliced. To my shame, I did nick her a few times, but her armor was open. Rampage pulled the front of her armor wide and did another round of compressions. “Breathe, Blackjack. Can you find a vein, young mare?” Rampage asked the bridge mare. When she shook her head, Rampage nodded downward. “Twenty compressions, then let Blackjack breathe. Breathe. Swap.” And Rampage moved away so the beige bridge mare could take her place. “Just like that. Put your whole weight into it.”

“Please save her. Please. We lost the captain. We can’t lose her too,” she said, tears on her cheeks as she used her weight to press rapidly on the general’s chest.

“I’m twenty five years out of residency, young mare, but I’m trying my best. We all are,” Rampage said as she sorted through the hypodermic needles. “Why’d they have to go and relabel everything? This was complicated enough before the bombs fell.” Then she picked up a bright yellow syringe. “Ah! Here we go.” She bit down on the end, tugged off the cap, and said around the fat plastic cylinder, “Halt breaths.” When I did, she turned the general’s head and felt along her neck, pressed the needle in with care that would do a unicorn proud, and then her tongue pressed a little button. The syringe gave a hiss of compressed gas. “Hope that was her jugular. Otherwise she’s going to have a doozy of a headache on top of being dead.”

Suddenly the general gave a little gasp, her eyes wide as her body jerked and then went still again. Still, I saw her blue mark reappear on my EFS. “She’s alive!”

“Stars and suns, it worked! Old Doc Hatchet would be amazed,” Rampage blurted, pressed her hoof to the side of the general’s throat beneath her jaw. She then grabbed a pair of thick yellow plastic blocks and cracked them neatly into two pads, revealing a clear goop on one face and pressed it to her side. Then she did the same with the other half on her other side. The backs of the pads were ripped open, and one had a bright yellow crystal. The other

had a wire. She connected the pads with the wire then tapped the crystal, which started to growl like thunder. “Get back folks, especially you, Blackjack.”

I did, and she tapped it a second time. The talisman flashed brightly, and there was a sound of lightning. The general jerked, coughed, and sucked in a breath of air, then promptly rolled over and puked. She spat, then immediately asked, “Racewind?” In her eyes was a mix of hope and fear I knew all too well.

“I’m sorry,” was all I could think to say.

She closed her eyes, took a shallow breath as Rampage pushed the pad of her hoof to the general’s throat. “Huh. You must take care of yourself, general. Weak but steady pulse. It normally takes two or three tries, if it works at all. Don’t move, and we’ll see if it sticks.”

“Are we still under attack?” she asked.

“*Cyclone* and *Sleet* are shielding us. *Sirocco* and *Blizzard* didn’t even try to intercept their flyers. They passed right on through,” a bridgemare reported.

“I am going to personally pluck those two,” the general muttered with a groan.

“You mean fuck? As in fuck over?” I asked, a little baffled.

“No. Pluck. It’s a more serious condition when you throw them off your ship.”

Ah. “Well, you could probably pull it off. That was some good fighting, especially against augmented ponies.”

Then she groaned and muttered, “Ugh…fighting is for privates. Let me up.”

“Stay down for three minutes. Make sure everything is stabilized,” Rampage said. “Otherwise, I’ll make them haul you to the medical bay and put Blackjack in charge.”

I blinked. “No. No way. That’s a bad idea. Of monumental proportions. I can’t think of what to do with a ship besides ‘shoot’ and ‘ramming speed’.”

“Which is why the general is going to indulge me and rest a little bit before climbing back into the seat,” Rampage replied, smiling down at the weakened but angry mare.

Storm Chaser clearly chafed but relented. “Since when are you a doctor? I thought you were some kind of Wasteland primitive.”

“It’s complicated. Even I don’t understand it,” she said, then regarded me. “So, Blackjack, how have you been doing with your self-destructive tendencies?”

This wasn't exactly the best time for a therapy session, but I guessed I couldn't pick and choose. "Well…I…better, I guess. I still seem to be the Wasteland's chew toy, but I don't think I'm…" then I blinked. "Wait. You're a lot more aware than the last time we met."

"Yes," the doctor said with a curious smile. "I too am wondering at it. Before, it was like being in another world with walls of dense smoke. Little by little, the smoke is clearing. Things are more lucid. For example, I know that I'm a soul in a talisman rather than a pony flying home to Manehattan after a conference. Quite astonishing really, even if I still expect to wake up and find myself crashing to the ground."

"Do the memories help?" I asked.

She nodded. "In a way. I'm also aware of others with me…some are aware of me while others aren't." Her smile faded as the doctor said, "I've been trying to treat the Angel. She's…a difficult patient. Still, it gives us something to do while I'm inside. Every time we experience another's memories it…connects us."

I swallowed, dreading this next question. "What about Rampage? Have you…do you…is she in there with you?"

She reached up to her brow to fiddle with glasses that weren't there. "I don't know. When I'm here, I'm not aware of things happening 'inside'. And when I'm not here, it's like peering through fog. I can't say for sure one way or the other. I'm sorry."

"I guess, 'I don't know' is better than 'No'." I sighed. "Well, I'm glad you're able to help others in there. Personally, I'm kicking myself over how badly I misjudged Lighthooves. I could have sworn he was going to surrender himself…but he seems like he's going all out."

Rampage's pink eyes softened, and she patted my back. "Don't be. From what I understand, and I may not understand it all, but I think that option was lost when Stargazer was killed. Lighthooves would never have turned himself over to Neighvarro. It wouldn't play in with this martyrdom idealization he has for himself."

"Huh?" I blinked.

Rampage gave a rueful chuckle. "He likely had quite the fantasy about how he'd surrender the weapons. Possible he had speeches written just for the event. But when Stargazer died, his perfect scenario fell apart. He seems to have a self-destructive streak as wide as yours. Perhaps wider. It's an immature response, to be sure."

“If he wanted to kill himself, there’re easier ways to do it,” I muttered. “I thought his big motivator was saving Thunderhead at all costs.”

“I said self-destructive, not suicidal. Subtle but different. Saving Thunderhead is an expression of his psychology, not a driver. For instance, no rational person would utilize a biological weapon as a means of defense or liberation. In fact, had he wished for Thunderhead’s security and safety, he would have aligned himself more with Stratus and Neighvarro.”

“So what is his driver then?” I asked with a frown.

Rampage arched a brow as she smiled, “What was yours? When you were running around like a madmare? What’s driven you to harm and undermine yourself?”

“I…” I opened and closed my mouth. I glanced at the general. “I… hate myself. The things I’ve done. That I’ve experienced. What I’ve become. Ways I’ve disappointed Glory and failed my friends. Even before leaving 99…I mean, even if I only count P-21, I did unforgivable things to him and didn't even know I was doing it.” My ears dropped. “I’m trying to do better and make up for it.”

“I know.” She patted me on the back. “And that’s a healthier expression than embracing all the things you hate and becoming an utter monster. But, most importantly, you felt you deserved to suffer horribly for it. Suicide is easy, relatively speaking. A suicidal person wants pain and misery to stop. Self-destruction is complex. It reinforces denial. A suicidal person is the first to admit they’re a mess. A self-destructive person will deny it to their grave, and possibly the graves of others.”

“But why?” I asked, not just her but myself as well.

“Well, if you can convince him to surrender and schedule a few dozen therapy sessions, I’d be glad to find out. I’ll even do it pro bono. Just have him make an appointment. But other than that, somepony is going to have to stop him, and it’s going to be ugly. A self-destructive person doesn’t just want to be stopped. They want to be destroyed, and they tend to cause a lot of collateral damage in the process. It’s the ultimate expression of pettiness and ego, frequently painted over with a façade of selflessness or some higher--”

The general grunted, “Okay. That’s enough psychobabble. I’m not dying in the next few minutes. Get me up. There’s still fighting going on.”

Rampage smiled at me, then reached down and helped nudge the general to her hooves. She shrugged out of the slit armor and pulled off the yellow boxes. As she staggered back towards the captain's seat, Rampage's eyes unfocused and she staggered, then looked around. "What happened? I…you…" She saw the general and blinked. "She's alive?"

"Alive enough to try and salvage this mess." Her stern professionalism returned. "Back to your stations," she said firmly. "I want the ship searched for any we might have missed. And get a clean-up crew in here, please." She took a seat and closed his eyes. "General has the conn. Status?"

It took a few moments for the mares to return to their stations. Most of them had some injury or another -- ripped feathers, lacerations, contusions -- but none of them left the bridge. "Damage to Starboard sections 2A and 4B and 6C. Breach at 5B and 11C. Engines operating at 78%. Primary systems are down, but we have backups operational and emergency response and fire crews are on," reported a red mare.

"Long range transmissions are down. We're bouncing comms through the *Cyclone*. No further breach or boarding parties," a russet mare sniffed as she glanced where Racewind had died. "Casualty list is being drafted."

A seafoam green mare stared at her console, the metal twisted, the rainbow controls shattered, and little sparks of electricity snapping in the guts. "Uh... navigation is... um... well, we're still in the air, ma'am." The general just gave her a look and moved on to the next mare as the Nav mare moved to a smaller terminal in the back of the bridge and started working from there.

"*Blizzard, Galeforce,* and *Sirocco* are engaged with the Tower, focusing fire on the projectors. No ship losses reported, but all are being heavily engaged by Thunderhead fliers," one ochre mare said in low tones as she too glanced at the green puddle on the floor. "*Cyclone* was boarded as well. Colonel Twilight Sonata's been critically injured and they're falling back. The *Lightning* is reporting a fire on board."

I sat down, aching and tired. No. Not just tired. Drained. Botching a spell and getting thumped by a friend didn't help. So much killing…All over a damned, stupid Tower, fear, and pride. It was the war two hundred years ago, only so much worse as now ponies were killing ponies. That'd ended with nearly everypony dying.

I stared up at the lights overhead. At the moment, I had a greater appreciation for what all the ministry mares had gone through. War had its own terrible momentum, and it seemed like it only ended when both sides annihilated each other. My eyes drifted over to Rampage helping Boo up. Was Rampage right? Should I just flip a bit, pick a side, and get to killing?

No. There had to be another way. Somehow.

The general scowled at the display. Green fire danced over the Tower, but apparently the general didn't like what she saw. "What are Afterburner and Hoarfrost doing? They haven't even scratched the launch tubes yet."

I trotted up beside her. "I have a feeling that there're going to be a lot of promotions and demotions by the time this is over," I said, a weak attempt at humor.

"My faith in command has been sorely tested of late. Ever since we've come to this place... " She shook her head, then addressed the brown coms mare, "Can the *Lightning* and *Cyclone* still breach the Tower?"

"Captain Cirrus wants to hang back and soften their defenses more. Captain Barrel Roll is directing damage control teams. He asks for fifteen minutes," the brown mare replied.

"He has five. We can't be driven off. In the state the fleet would be in if it were routed, the Enclave would be wide open." She thumped the arm of the chair with her hoof. "Tell Cirrus to get in range and do all he can to slag those missile apertures, then get us doing the same. And make sure we have some guards posted at our breaches." As they started to relay orders, she rubbed her eyes once more, and then they met mine. "What were those things, Blackjack? That wasn't any armor I've ever seen before."

"It's not. They're cyberponies made from a pre-war secret project called Steelpony. *That's* what he meant about a gift from me. He must have gotten a copy of the designs," I said as I slumped. "This is my fault."

She snorted. "Unless you intentionally gave him the plans with the aim of getting ponies killed, it's not. This Lighthooves is smart. If he'd been loyal, he might have become a prominent general himself," Storm Chaser said evenly. "What are their capabilities?"

I thought a moment. "Similar to power armor but with none of the drawbacks. If they're using the original design I was, then you're talking tougher and lots faster. You wear your armor. A cyberpony

is their armor. Internal regenerative and repair talismans to prevent rejection. Major damage like a lost limb will need to be replaced, but they won't bleed out and die. They need some kind of power talisman in the chest, but that's beyond what I know. If I had time, I'd contact Rover and…" Hmmm…

"Weaknesses?"

"Similar to power armor. Spark weapons work great. If we get knocked out, eventually our systems will self-reboot. No getting trapped in power armor. Ingest metal, food, and gems to maintain yourself. The real damage is long term psychological. You stop feeling like a pony. You can never take the augments out and just be yourself. Most of the cyberponies I've met are pretty unhappy characters…or crazy."

"Most non-cyberponies are the same way in the Wasteland, Blackjack," Rampage said with a smirk. "Especially around the Hoof." I couldn't argue with that. And yet, there was something that I couldn't quite accept. Everypony still wanted to be happy. They hadn't given up on that simple, little mote of hope. Not yet. If you didn't want to be happy, you might find contentment, but it'd be the sort that the dead shared.

So I couldn't give up either.

One of the mares said that the ship was aligned to target.

"Open fire. Take some heat off the *Lightning*," Storm Chaser ordered. A second later, the entire deck twitched under my hooves as a 'Thwoom' rolled through the ship. I could almost see the wave as it ran along the bridge. Then another. Then another.

"Let's see some results," the general said as she regarded the front 'window'. I could see blue beams flickering back and forth from the cornices of the Tower and at the base of those six heavy plates. I watched as a half dozen beams seemed to hone in on one Raptor like blazing claws of energy, but the ship suddenly climbed and only one blue beam flashed over the hull with a line of deep fire. Blasts from the Raptors flickered over the surface like boiling green balefire. Several of the green bolts met one of the blue beam protectors at once, and it exploded in a blinding flash. Gaps were starting to open in its armor as well.

"Jeeze, I thought these Raptor things were supposed to be powerful," Rampage scoffed as I saw to the trembling Boo, stroking her mane to calm her. "What's taking so long?

"You're not looking at some rickety Wasteland structure, or even

an ordinary fortress from the war," Storm Chaser replied, not taking her eyes off the screen. "Scootaloo saw to it that Stable-Tec built Shadowbolt Tower for Rainbow Dash. It had the most advanced structural and magical defenses of any building in Equestria. You could level Canterlot with a Thunderhead and some effort. It's old. But nothing short of a direct hit by a balefire bomb could take out the Tower... and even that is a maybe, given that everything in this crosswind-damned valley was made to hold up to anything the enemy could throw at it."

"You're just not trying hard enough," Rampage countered. "If I wanted to, I could take it out. It might take a couple centuries of kicking, but I could do it."

"Not necessary," Storm Chaser replied as another two projectors exploded. "Against a few ships, the Tower's weapons are formidable, but we're not allowing them to focus fire. A few more arclight projectors down and we should be able to focus fire on the launch bays directly. Lighthooves's plague won't be much use if he can't deliver it." For an instant, she smiled. "We'll achieve victory yet." Then Boo started looking around in alarm, followed by the bridge mares and guards, then Rampage. "Wait…what's that noise?"

But I knew exactly what that screaming sound was.

The clouds beneath us began to glow with a horrible emerald hue, and the black cloud layer began to roil and boil as if it were a great luminescent sheet being torn and shaken by giant invisible hooves. Great twisting plumes blasted up, hundreds of feet high as the cloud layer was ripped from below. The *Castellanus* lurched and turned so far that I grabbed Boo with my hooves and slid till I was standing on the wall, the metal around us groaning as the mares shouted warnings.

And then I saw the Core.

Stripped of its clouds, the damned city now seemed alight and inhabited by forsaken souls. Black monoliths stretched towards the sky, the glassy black surfaces lit by gleaming green lines far below, as though the streets were rivers of balefire. Some of the towers had broken and leaned at haphazard angles against each other. Others were connected and draped, as if by spider webs. This was not a pony city. It may have been built by ponies, may have been inhabited by them, but there was nothing of my kind in this place. It was a city inspired by hubris. In the very center, right at the base

of Shadowbolt Tower, was a horrible emerald glow within the earth.

"First breeze, what is that?" Storm Chaser breathed.

The Core answered. An emerald beam from atop one of the intact geometric spires sent a line of crackling death into the skies. It caught a climbing Raptor on the stern and I watched as it ripped right through the length of the ship, fire erupting from every port and seam as the storm clouds boiled away, before the beam exploded from the prow of the ship and continued its ascent into the skies. What remained of the Raptor fell like a flaming metal pipe to the ground far below.

"The *Azimuth*," breathed one mare. "It's gone!"

"Incoming fire, General!" shouted another. "Multiple weapon signatures!"

"Evasive maneuvers!" ordered the general. There were no attempts to return fire now. Even a glancing blow from one of those weapons would be a death sentence.

The *Castellanus* began to move as I never imagined anything so big or massive could. Boo clung to me, I clung to a piece of conduit, and Rampage squealed in delight as she slid around like a pinball. I'd thought the force jerking me around would have flung the ship apart as it dove and banked around the slaying beams.

"Looks like their targeting talismans haven't been calibrated for two hundred years," the general hissed. I watched in horror as a beam punched right through the bottom of one Raptor, the green energy slicing right through as it progressed to the heavens. The shot had been off center, possibly the only reason the ship wasn't snapping in half. "They're off by a few degrees."

"Good news for us, then," I muttered weakly, staring at the flames spreading along the side of the warship on the screen.

"Until they compensate for the deviation. Hold on!" A forest of green beams flashed around us, and I discovered that a Raptor could do a barrel roll. I grabbed on to the arm of the captain's seat, the machine's engines howling as the shots from below flared to our left. "It seems Lighthooves wants us particularly badly," the general observed coolly as the *Castellanus*'s engines roared behind us.

"He must know I'm on this ship," I replied. But why? Why would he be after me? Granted, I had every interest in and capability for killing him if we met face to face, but why single me out over any other Raptor?

“General. I’m not feeling…” a mare said weakly from her seat. I saw blood dripping from her nose.

The purple mare in my head whipped out a chalkboard and began doing fancy things with numbers. The Core was teardrop shaped, and five miles across from east to west. The Tower was three miles high. We are all fighting within five miles of the center of the city, inside the strongest Enervation in the middle.

“Get away! Get some distance!” I yelled.

“I’m barely keeping ahead of the beams,” the helmsmare shouted as she frantically hit the glowing controls with her pinions and forehooves and the *Castellanus* banked hard the other way. “If we run straight for ten seconds we’ll be zeroed in.”

Indeed, from the screen at the front of the ship, I could see other ships furiously maneuvering to avoid the beams. A beam sliced right through the front quarter of one Raptor as neatly as my starmetal sword through a neck. Another was on fire as it tried to limp away. The only safe zone was next to the Tower; but I knew that wouldn’t be safe for long. He wasn’t going to risk shooting his own nose off, but he could tear us apart piece by piece while the Raptors struggled to get clear or get in.

Lighthooves was using the Core’s weapons to rip the fleet to pieces. Only the fact the Core’s weapons were focused on the *Castellanus* allowed them to try and get any distance. But why? He must have thought the general would have killed me or locked me up. She’d been reported as dead. If he’d been spying right before the bridge mares cut off his signal, he knew I was free. The fleet was his big priority. So why me? Personal? Not his style. I had to have something…something…something that was a threat to him.

My eyes landed on my right forehoof and lingered there a moment. It wasn’t possible…was it?

The *Castellanus* jerked hard, flinging both Boo and myself off the wall and across the room to land on the ceiling, then the wall, floor, wall, ceiling, wall…and finally ended up on the floor as smoke poured into the bridge. “We’ve lost turrets two, four, and six, ma’am. Breach all along the C section, from sector 2 to 8.”

“They got us?” I asked, looking around.

“No,” the general replied grimly. “That was a near hit.”

“Hey, Blackjack. Remind you of Hightower?” Rampage yelled from the corner of the room. “We’re all fucked!”

Actually, it did, and that gave me an idea. Okay. At this point,

there was nothing else to lose. As the decks started to list, I scrolled frantically through all my broadcast connections till I found it. ‘Hoofington’. I then opened as many channels at random I could, and hoped that she’d hear one of them. It was my only chance.

“Cognitum,” I said as clearly as I could over the clamor and banging and shouting and alarms, “This is Blackjack. I’m about to die again. EC-1101 is about to be destroyed if you don’t stop the weapons.” Nothing happened as a mare called out casualty reports. “If you can’t stop them, Goddess, then tell me how.”

For the longest time, nothing. I wondered if she even heard me. Then several lines of code began to fly across my vision. I caught a glimpse of a few words that stood out. ‘OIA backchannel’. ‘Random walk encryption active’. Then a series of instructions appeared.

> EC-1101 Priority Command

> Backdoor Access: Password: Pokeysmoke.

> Heir Protocol Enable

> Ministry Mare descendant access.

> Hoofington power grid access.

> Luna and Celestia power generators at 97%. Authorization of Tokomare power generators pending EC-1101 access.

> Do you wish to activate Tokomare power systems?

> Y/N?

I froze. I’d forgotten that the Tokomare wasn’t the sole source of power in the Core. The two hydroelectric dams that flanked the Core must be running the weapons. Cognitum was trying to get *me* to turn on the Tokomare for her! “Forget it,” I countered, and hit no. The instructions repeated several times.

The *Castellanus* jerked as another beam nearly touched it. “We’re slowing down. I don’t know how much longer I can evade,” the helmsmare shouted.

“Abandon ship,” the general ordered, but the surviving bridgemares remained at their station. “That’s an order!”

“We’d be dead fifteen seconds after leaving our posts, ma’am. Just like the *Azimuth*,” a mare protested.

I hissed into my broadcaster, “You have ten seconds and then EC-1101 is dust. Horizons goes off. You lose!” Nothing. At this point I didn’t even know if we were still connected. Then, new instructions appeared in my vision.

> EC-1101 Priority Command

> Backdoor Access: Password: Pokeysmoke.

> Heir Protocol Enable.
> Ministry Mare descendant access.
> Hoofington power grid access.
> Substation access
> Emergency shutdown SUB 8, SUB 10, SUB 12, SUB 13, SUB 19, SUB 20.
> Password: Thisisgonnahurt
> Confirm Emergency Shutdown Y/N? Emergency shutdown of power grid during power draw not recommended.
> Y
> Are you absolutely, positively sure?
> Y
> Execute: Y/N?

I closed my eyes, swallowed, and mentally hit Y.

My eyes swam with a solid block of rapidly scrolling code I couldn't begin to understand. Then one of the bridge mares shouted, "General! Look!"

Parts of the Core started to go dark. The lights flickered as one by one they died. As the streets and towers dimmed, the beams atop the roofs also halted. Then, one of the sides of a tower swelled like a glowing blister, bursting in flame and molten metal as green sparks shot out, arching along those black spiderwebs. I saw the base of one tower engulfed in flames that were crawling up the side of the building. Apparently, power substations didn't do so well when you pulled the plug on them while they were shooting energy weapons. The Enervation note receded and the cloud bank rolled in to obscure the Core once more. Still that sullen glow at the heart of the city remained like an ember.

"The attack's…stopped," one of the mares said in a daze.

"Damage control teams. I want a status update from all departments in two minutes," Storm Chaser said as she calmly wiped her brow. "What is the status of the fleet?"

A minute later, a bridge mare reported, "Only the *Azimuth* was lost, ma'am. *Perihelion*, *Lightning*, and *Helicity* are all reporting severe damage and are falling back. Only the *Blizzard, Galeforce*, and *Sirocco* report no significant damage."

"Of course not. We couldn't be so lucky today," she said with a grimace. "Status of the Tower?"

"It's not firing," another mare said. "I think that whatever happened down in the Core might have knocked them out too."

"Now's our chance. Contact any ship besides those three to help. Get us into a position to board--" Storm Chaser began to say, but another mare looked up.

"Transmission from Neighvarro," a brown bridge mare said as she pressed a hoof over her ear while working her flickering controls. "I can't put it on speaker, ma'am. One second…" she worked furiously with her wing tips, then thumped the keys with her hooves.

"Nevermind the speakers. What's Neighvarro telling us?" she asked.

I watched the mare's eyes unfocus as she listened, then widen in shock. "No. I…" she shook her head and blurted. "General…You… I…they say you have been relieved of your command!" The words made the general slump as if she'd just been shot. She pulled off her helmet, her eyes wide and glassy as she peered at nothing. The bridgemare went on, "We're to…" she faltered. "Oh no…"

"What is it?" the general ordered.

"We're being ordered to shell Thunderhead until Lighthooves surrenders himself and his weapons," she said weakly.

"What! Confirm that last! Who is in command? Who gave that order?" Storm Chaser barked. "Don't those idiots realize that the Tower is exposed now?"

She spoke rapidly into the microphone of her headset, then slumped back in the seat. "I don't know, ma'am. Just that the order's been repeated." The brown pegasus mare stomped her controls with her hooves in frustration. "Wait. I think I got it…" And then there was a crackle before the speakers came live.

A cold mare's voice came in over the speaker. "*Blizzard* to *Castellanus*. Storm Chaser, respond." The lack of rank was like a slap across her face. "Storm Chaser, please respond." The soft amusement in her voice trickled through the ship like cold poison.

"This is General Storm Chaser," she said grimly.

"Oh, I'd heard a report that you'd died. So glad you're still alive." Another soft laugh that precluded any letting her off easy the next time we met. "Storm Chaser, would you please acknowledge Neighvarro's last order, or do you need me to relay it to you?" Captain Hoarfrost asked in amused tones that really made me regret not slamming her head in the door till it cracked like an egg…but then I had no one to blame but myself for that one.

"I have received a transmission from Neighvarro but I question if they are acting with full knowledge of the facts here," she said with

supreme self-control. “The Tower’s defenses are down, Hoarfrost. We can simply fly in and stop him!” Storm Chaser said sternly.

“I’m aware of that. The *Sleet* and *Cyclone* will secure the Tower. However, Neighvarro’s ordered us to shell Thunderhead. A chastisement that is long overdue, to be sure,” Hoarfrost practically purred. “I’m sure somepony will tell the rest of the council… eventually.”

The general stared at the communication mare so intensely I thought she’d ignite. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Our long range transmitter is out.”

“That is a civilian target! Who gave the order? It can’t be with the sanction of the GPE!” Storm Chaser countered through clenched teeth. “Put us through to Neighvarro.”

“This came from Councilor Ironfeather’s office, and given the incompetence of the commander in the field, you have no authority to countermand it. I have been given battlefield commission to Colonel and placed in command of this exercise,” Hoarfrost’s icy voice dripped menace. “You can’t pick and choose your orders anymore, Storm Chaser. Do you acknowledge the order, or not?”

“*Galeforce*, *Blizzard*, and *Sirocco* have weapons aligned with us,” a mare intoned, her voice numb.

“Do you acknowledge the order?” Hoarfrost asked coolly.

“This is outrageous. The Enclave cannot--”

The *Castellanus* lurched as the rear of the ship was hit with something that made the whole vessel groan ominously. They were firing on their own now? “Do you acknowledge the order?”

The general looked at the battle-wrecked bridge, the battered bridge crew, the bodies that hadn’t been cleared away, and the hole where the captain had vanished. “We acknowledge the order,” Storm Chaser said quietly.

“General…” the helmsmare said, clearly as shocked as Storm Chaser had been moments ago.

“Do it properly, Storm Chaser. We’ll relay your broadcast to the rest of the fleet,” Hoarfrost replied.

The gray mare rose, her lips pressed together. There were tears on her cheeks, but her eyes were hard and furious. “This is General Storm Chaser. I acknowledge the order. I also wish to acknowledge to the fleet and the GPE that I am resigning in response to an order to kill our own. Never would I imagine that the Enclave that protected our kind for two centuries would stoop to wanton murder

of Enclave citizens. It seems Rainbow Dash was right. 'Pegasi first' has become 'Military first'."

She turned to one of the bridge mares. "Please locate Lieutenant Flywheel. She needs to be briefed on the boarding operation--"

"*Sleet* and *Cyclone* will be sufficient to capture the Tower and its launch systems intact. The *Castellanus* will not be needed," Hoarfrost said coolly. "Move in position to fire on Thunderhead."

"Intact? I ordered the launch facilities destroyed!" Storm Chaser blurted.

Hoarfrost nearly purred. "What a waste that would be. Neighvarro recognizes that they have a biological weapon and a delivery system that will make the quarantine a reality. With a few dozen missiles, we will be able to pacify the surface indefinitely. Ironfeather was appalled that the general wanted to destroy such an opportunity." Now I *really* regretted not killing her. "Do you acknowledge my orders?"

Storm Chaser slumped in the seat and bowed her head. "Our weapon systems have been damaged. We will have to fall back until we can make repairs. *Castellanus* acknowledges the Enclave's orders."

"Very well, coward. Please make sure that whatever commissioned officer assumes command of the *Castellanus* does so as well. Civilians do not have the authority to command Enclave ships, after all." Cold contempt came over the speakers. "Fall back to an intercept position. Storm Chaser, please confine yourself to quarters until this mess is resolved."

"Of course," Storm Chaser replied in a voice so hollow that it made me wonder if I'd done her wrong by saving her life.

It was too much for me. "I saved your life, Hoarfrost!" I snapped. "Don't kill innocent ponies in Thunderhead!"

There was a pause. "Ah. The terrorist. You're still alive." Storm Chaser groaned as Hoarfrost continued, "Yes, you did. Let me show you my gratitude by giving you the chance to surrender."

I glanced around the bridge. Maybe I could buy seconds. "Will you spare Thunderhead if I do?" I asked.

"Blackjack! No! That's stupid, even for you!" Rampage snapped.

"Of course. I'll dispatch some fliers to come pick you up. You have my word," Hoarfrost said in amusement. "Please hold them till we arrive. That is an order."

The former general sat back and said in a defeated voice.

“Understood.”

“Signal ended,” the coms mare said. “Do you want me to try and get Neighvarro again? We might be able to get Cyclone to relay it?”

“No. It looks like they’re determined to make an example of Thunderhead. And us,” Storm Chaser said hollowly as she gazed at something a few thousand yards behind the screen displaying the Raptors. “Well, that explains why they left the missile system intact. They intended this all along.” She sighed and closed her eyes. I couldn’t imagine what she was feeling now, but she compartmentalized it and moved on to the next issue. “Blackjack, you can’t be serious about surrendering to them,” she said sharply as she frowned at me.

“No. But it might give Thunderhead a few minutes before they start firing,” I said as I opened my broadcaster and selected Glory’s PipBuck. “This is Blackjack Radio. Things are bad. General is removed from command. Tower is disabled. Enclave wants the plague and they’re going to shell Thunderhead. Give warning however you can. Love you. Promise I’ll try and stay out of trouble till I see you again.” I wished she had a broadcaster too so she could talk back. I really would like the advice of a smart pony.

“You can communicate with someone in Thunderhead?” Storm Chaser asked.

“Sure. My very special pony is there with a radio. She’s the one who stopped her Rainbow Dash impression,” I said.

“And you’re doing so on non-Enclave channels.” She sighed, “Blackjack, you really need to learn to convey pertinent information.” She reached over and lifted my hoof. “Turn it on.” And then, “This is Storm Chaser. You have about five minutes to get away from the equatorial regions. Take shelter in the internal support structures. If they inflict critical damage…” she paused and looked at me. “Where’s a place down below that would be safe for them?”

“In the Wasteland?” I gaped a moment at that thought. ‘Safe’ and ‘the Hoof’ did not go well together. At all. Still, I could think of a few places they wouldn’t be instantly killed. “The Rainbow Dash Skyport. The Volunteer Corps had some supplies there. The Society, I suppose. The Collegiate…er, Hoofington University. Megamart. Hoofington Memorial Hospital. Fluttershy Medical Center. Even the Hoofington Sports Arena,” I said to the broadcaster.

Rampage guffawed. “Oh sure. Big Daddy will just love that!”

"But he won't kill them and turn them into coats on sight, will he?" I countered.

She rubbed her chin. "Eh…mmaaybe not," she conceded with a little nod. "He tends to prefer thrashing dumbasses. And I think he wants to make a balaclava next. Refugees are kinda under his weight class."

"Just make sure they mention Security. They should be okay for a few days." I blinked and realized that I seriously believed that. Somehow, in my meandering travels across the wasteland, I'd met horrible ponies that lived to kill and dominate, but I'd also met the good ones too. And that, hopefully, I'd done well enough that they would take them in for a while.

Past a while…well, we'd have to work something out. "Guess I better get out of here before they come and haul me off," I said as I cut off the connection.

"So you're not going to nobly trot to your death?" Rampage asked, and then relaxed as I shook my head. "I was worried for a second. You're occasionally really stupid about things like that."

"Thanks," I replied dryly. "If I thought I could trust her to keep her word, I might. I'm just not that optimistic anymore." I regarded Storm Chaser. "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to make my escape now. What about you? What are you going to do, General?" I asked. The rank seemed to sicken her.

"What is there to do?" she said simply. "I have been relieved of command. I have resigned. I suppose I should begin to prepare a defense for my court martial."

"You're not going to try and help?"

She turned away. "There is little I can do at this point. One damaged Raptor cannot combat three or more, and trying would mean the loss of this crew." I looked around at the bridge mares, but all were pretending not to hear as they kept their eyes averted from the disgraced general. "I would accompany you, but I'd be twice a fool. I'm a decade or more past the age where I could fly out, do something reckless, and pretend it was glorious."

I felt a cold, mechanical stillness sweep through me. "What about Thunderhead?" I asked numbly. She didn't answer. "What about my friends? What about all those ponies? You have to do something!"

"What?" she asked in return a mirthless smile on her face as her eyes distant and dead. "What do you expect me to do? We lost. They got the Tower." As if to nail the point home, on the front

screen was the smoking spire of Shadowbolt Tower. “They won.”

It was that word that set me off. “This is not a game! How can you just…give up?”

“Part of being an officer is accepting the reality that bad things happen and there is nothing you can do to change that.” Her eyes turned to the glowing mass that was the captain who saved all our lives, then surveyed all the injured and battered mares at their stations, then finally the battered stallions, living and dead, who had faced an augmented enemy and won. “I can’t risk more lives for a fool’s errand. The Enclave has removed me from command, and they’ll have their damned Tower.”

I stared at her, starting to understand exactly what she was feeling. She was on a mattress of her very own. Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of what to say to snap her out of it. Rampage sighed and started towards the door. “Come on, Blackjack. She’s done.”

Storm Chaser glanced at her. “You have a better idea? Or you, Blackjack?”

“Ideas! That’s all it is with you ponies. It really isn’t just Glory!” Rampage said as she turned and sneered at Storm Chaser. “Sometimes you just have to fight! So you don’t know what exactly to do next? So what! Look at Blackjack! She makes everything up as she goes. Sure, it doesn’t always work out, but at least she’s doing something.”

“What do you expect to me to do?” Storm Chaser glowered at her. “I’ve been stripped of command!”

“Have you been stripped of respect too?” Rampage scoffed. “I served under one of the finest officers in the Equestrian Army. Colonel Cupcake. Pudgy little bastard couldn’t lick a zebra unless you dipped it in chocolate first, but we followed his orders into hell more than once. Not because Luna told us to, but because we knew he’d always do what was right. This fight isn’t over yet, and you know that plague is super bad news, so are you going to pony up and prove that you actually deserve that rank, or go sulk in your cabin and think about how absolutely and utterly you failed today?”

Twist then smiled at me through Rampage’s eyes. “I know Big Macintosh wouldn’t give up. Even if it killed him, he’d go down doing what’s right. It’s just the kind of pony he was.”

“I won’t risk the lives of this crew…” the general began.

“Permission to speak freely?” the brown Coms mare said as she

rose to her hooves. The formal request made Storm Chaser sit up a little straighter in her seat and she nodded. “Every single pony on this ship, from the commanding officer down to the lowliest private, knows what’s at stake. We didn’t join the Enclave to stay safe, get connected with the powerful muckity mucks, and retire after twenty years. We serve because we believe that the Enclave does the right thing. If things really are so bad that some windbrained nag thinks shelling one of our own settlements is anything short of an atrocity, then we’re finished. We need ponies like you if the Enclave is ever going to have a chance.”

The surviving bridge mares began to stomp their hooves and cheer. Storm Chaser looked at the soldiers, but they too nodded, smiled, and even cheered as well. She seemed to be searching for somepony to disapprove, but Rampage nodded with her wide grin, and even Boo stomped her pale hooves... even if the blank didn’t seem to know what she was stomping for. I met Storm Chaser’s eyes, and the gray mare finally showed signs of life again.

Storm Chaser sighed. “I wonder if your LittlePip friend knew she was going to start a civil war with one balefire bomb,” she asked wryly.

I smiled and answered, “Probably not. It’s just funny how things end up that way.” Storm Chaser shook her head, and her expression turned more solemn.

She closed her eyes. “I did not want it to come to this. I would have given almost anything to keep us from killing our own. It goes against everything the pegasi are. We’re competitive, passionate, and driven, perhaps unreasonably so, but we never spilled the blood of our own. I’ll have to take solace in the fact that Neighvarro ordered this, and that my surrender won’t stop it. But I’m at a bit of a loss as to what I can do with only one damaged ship.”

The brown coms mare smiled. “I’ll patch a line in with the coms officers of the *Cyclone* and *Lightning*. They have to want to stop this.”

The russet helmsmare nodded, “Colonel Sonata would have followed orders, but Captain Cirrus was a close friend of Captain Racewind. I know she’ll help.”

“Can you do it without Hoarfrost finding out?” Storm Chaser asked.

The coms mare grinned. “I will, ma’am. Even if I have to fly over a tin can tied to a string!”

"That still leaves me with the question of what I can do with a few damaged ships."

"You could ram them!" Rampage said with a grin. "Or abandon ship and let *me* ram them! Oh! Let me do it! Please? Pretty please with murder and mayhem on top." It seemed like Rampage was back to herself.

"That wouldn't address the Tower," Storm Chaser replied.

"So I'll ram the Tower."

"Which wouldn't stop *Blizzard* and the other Raptors," Storm Chaser answered smoothly.

"Okay, so I'll ram all the Raptors into the Tower!" She twitched a moment in silence. "Ugh…you're thinking too much again. Just let me do it! It'll be awesome!" She looked around hopefully, but saw nopony eager to entertain that idea. "Oh come on. It's not like we have another balefire bomb to blow them all up in one big boom!"

A sensation like lightning began at my tail and zinged right up to my scalp. I slowed, staring off into space. She couldn't…I didn't…I muttered quietly, "When they act like babies, you have to take it away…"

"What?" Storm Chaser asked. What indeed, but my mind was going a mile a minute down disturbingly familiar paths. It was impossible. No pony could do it. There was no way.

Unless…

Oh!

Oh shit.

"I think Rampage is right," I said absently. If I did this wrong a lot of ponies were going to die. But if I did it right…If I dared…

"Hot damn!" Rampage said as she rushed to helm, plucked the visor from the helmsmare's head, and popped it askew on her own. She shoved the russet mare aside and gleefully rubbed her hooves together over the controls. Then her rubbing slowed as she glared at all the buttons. "Um…" She tapped a few and nudged the panel. "What? Are you telling me that I got a dozen souls in me and none of them can fly this thing?!" She turned to the irate helmsmare. "Where's the manual? I need to learn how to crash this thing."

"Tell me you aren't seriously proposing this?" Storm Chaser said with a worried frown. "I'm not sure a Raptor ramming the Tower would bring it down, even supposing Hoarfrost didn't shoot her down."

I opened my mouth, then stopped. "No. But…I do have something

that might work. And since Lighthooves might be watching me…" I looked around and spotted a chunk of charred cyberpony…well, they had attacked us... I closed my eyes and began to write on the deck four words, fifteen letters. I fought hard to resist the urge to peek. "Don't say it!" I blurted, hoping that my lines were straight and not wandering all over the floor. The bridge suddenly grew very quiet.

Then Rampage broke it with a chuckle and a sincere, "Blackjack, I fucking love you."

* * *

"You're insane," Storm Chaser said as I trotted towards the slagged, ozone-reeking hole that the Tower's weapons had ripped through the armored hull. "Certifiably mad."

"I won't argue that at this moment, but it's the only way to neutralize both the Tower and the Raptors attacking Thunderhead, and I can't do it without your help." I stepped out and was immediately blasted by a gust of cold air. Outside was a narrow ledge that ran along the hull right next to the *Castellanus*'s disintegration cannons. Rampage sulked a bit having been informed that she'd have to save her Raptor ramming trick for another day. Still, something to keep in mind.

Off in the distance I could see five Raptors close to the Tower. The rest were hanging back and silently watching. I hoped that Lighthooves couldn't seize his moment and fire a missile past them. Of the five lining up to fire on the settlement, four were on one side, pointing their cannons at the distant cloudy torus of Thunderhead, while one was on the other. Any second, she'd start firing. Soon as Hoarfrost heard I'd 'escaped', probably.

"Thank the skies the *Cyclone* has agreed to help. The *Lightning* may as well if they can get that fire under control. I don't know about the *Sleet*. Captain Snowblind never lets anyone see what she's planning," Storm Chaser answered. "I can only hope one of the others comes to our side when they see that Hoarfrost is serious about shelling civilians."

"We need another ship," I said with a frown.

"Preferably one that isn't struggling just to stay in the sky," Storm Chaser agreed.

"Wait. Wait wait wait. Are you saying that we need to capture an

enemy ship?" Rampage asked.

"Well, it would be nice," I said, a little sarcastically.

The armored mare pointed towards the disintegration cannons at the front of the *Castellanus*. "What's the range on those things?"

"Ten miles…why?" she asked, a little warily now.

"And if I get one of their Raptors, can I ram *that* ship into something?" Rampage asked.

Storm Chaser looked a little pained. "Raptors are just a touch precious and irreplaceable, Rampage."

The striped mare snorted and rolled her eyes. "That's what makes it awesome, duh."

I glanced at the gray pegasus, and she just shrugged. "Okay, Rampage. If you capture an enemy ship, you can crash it."

"Sweet!" She started to dance a little back and forth. "My own Raptor. This is gonna be so! Awesome!"

Storm Chaser sighed softly. "Ironic. Even if he didn't outright destroy the fleet, Lighthooves might very well achieve his goals. If operations in the north and west fail, there may not be much of an Enclave left. And with your plan…"

"Shh." I tapped my head. "He might be listening." I was going to smash that Perceptitron thing to bits if it meant a little less paranoia for me.

She sighed. "Well. The fact is that the Enclave's power has been wearing thin for generations. I might not have agreed with Thunderhead's pride and certainly not their methods, but I freely admit that they were correct about the slow degradation of our war machine."

"Maybe that's a good thing. Balefire bombs, Raptors, Thunderheads…maybe the world will be a little better without them in it," I told her.

"And yet we're using tools like those to try and save lives too," she replied. "The fault lies not within our tools, but inside our hearts."

"Maybe," I said as I walked out on the edge. "So, Afterburner's ponies are in the landing bay looking for me…so all I have to do is…ah…oh…" Oh, that was a long way down…

"Don't worry. I'll make sure they don't 'relieve the general of her command'," Rampage promised. "And I'll keep Boo safe."

Now to make my escape. My brain locked up as I stared down and utterly refused to do what I needed it to do. "Um…Rampage?"

"Huh?" she blinked.

"A little help?" I asked in a tiny voice as I closed my eyes.
"Oh. Oh! Right." She moved behind me. "It must be my birthday."
"Any time now," I said, rapidly rethinking this. Maybe I could dig through the magic book for some other trick…
"One second, Blackjack. Let me savor the moment," Rampage said with a chuckle. "Pull!" And then two metal hooves clanged against my backside and launched me into the air. A second later I heard her shout, "Boo! No!"
And now I was falling. And while I understand that at times I am quite terrifying to certain ponies, I believe I set a new record for screaming like a little filly as I plunged through the air. This was the second time in two days…really, I had a feeling that there was something fundamentally wrong with having my hooves off the ground. The wind roared in my ears as I dared to look down at the rapidly approaching cloud layer. Those were fluffy clouds. Soft, fluffy clouds. I'd hit them with a great big 'pwooof' and laugh about it later.
Unless, a purple pony in my head speculated, my armored body proved too dense and punched right through the clouds to land somewhere in the vicinity of Riverside, or the river. After all, the clouds were recently disturbed and might not support-- I took that purple pony, mentally tied her up, gagged her, and threw her in a closet in my brain. Those were soft, fluffy clouds. Soft and…soft…
"Fluffy!" I screamed a second before I hit! For a terrifying second I kept falling, but then felt myself quickly slow. I came to a rest, my forelegs catching on the cloud around me.
My rear hooves kicked open air.
"Okay. It worked! Nice and Fluffy clouds…nice…and…" I frowned as I felt my forehooves start to slip as I was tugged downward. "Fluffy…fluffy…come on!" I said as I swung my legs hoping to grab something a little more substantial and failed. My head popped free, and I suddenly had a view of the ground, and something in my brain broke as the clouds around my hooves began to pull away. My last thought was going to be that I could see my house from here.
Then I felt a pain in my scalp as my direction was reversed and I was hauled back up into the clouds. When I couldn't see the thousands of feet of empty air below me, my brain kicked in and I looked up to see Boo biting my mane and struggling to haul me up. Fortunately, she provided just enough pull for me to quickly

scramble up into the cloud. Together, we sat in the middle of a fog bank, the hole I'd punched in my descent rapidly filling up. "Okay. Boo. No more falling. How is that for a plan?" Boo just cocked her head and blinked at me. I reached out and ruffled her mane. "That's what I thought. Glad we had this talk."

Soon, there was one lone cloud scudding its way over fields of rotten vegetation, propelled by my telekinesis. The Enervation had killed acres and acres of the floating crops, and they hung in the air, dangling limply, the bizarre plants dropping one by one through the clouds as their air sacs burst with flaccid hisses. Normally, that would have concerned me, but at the moment I could see green flashes along the curved wall of Thunderhead. The smooth torus now flickered and flashed, with tiny pockmarks appearing in the smooth side. Hoarfrost was taking her time. If she'd really wanted a body count, she would have taken a Raptor inside the city itself. It was my only hope, because somewhere in that cloud were three of my closest friends, one of whom had just gotten her snuggly body back!

Call me shallow, but in addition to saving tens of thousands of lives and preventing the spread of a cannibalistic plague across the world, I really really looked forward to renewing that snugglage. I wonder if that one spot behind her knee would still make her squeak…

It was times like this that I really wished that LittlePip were with me. With my cloudwalking spell and her telekinesis, we could have flown halfway to the moon with no trouble. As it was, I puttered along as fast as I could push myself and tried to ignore the fighting above.

Suddenly, the cloud layer fell away in a tattered edge, and I found myself in open air on my little cloud. Beneath me stretched the Core in every direction, the green light suffusing its black canyons. I remembered folks saying that a balefire bomb had gone off in the city. I'd seen the kind of devastation one of those could do; I felt skeptical that something like that had gone off here. It was clear that *something* had happened, though. Few of the monolithic buildings rose vertically. They all seemed to be off by a few degrees. Some actually leaned far enough over to touch. The streets were filled with green light that seemed to come up from the ground, shining from deep below. Swirling black twisters crawled along the streets and buildings. Many of the towers were breached,

and cables and wires were strewn from building to building like rotten entrails. Green lightning occasionally snapped from one building to the next.

How could Dawn think ponies could ever live in such a place? How did anypony ever think of building such a place?

So close, Enervation sounded less like a scream and more like… something else. It was almost a machine noise. A staticky note that plucked at my heart. I checked Boo, afraid she'd be coughing up blood, but the blank just blinked back at me, cocking her head in confusion. "Huh. Guess it's not just a cyberpony thing after all." Well, that was the second bit of good news I'd had today.

Storm Front had said there that were two ways in. One way at the top and one down at the cloud layer. First, I tried my own way in. I stuck the sword in the side of the Tower and sliced down, then around, and tried to tug open a hole. No chance. The wall was clearly thicker than my sword. So I scuttled my way around, looking up and down the massive structure for a way in. Up close, the Tower swelled to proportions that threw my sense of direction out of whack. I felt a touch of vertigo as up and down became confused with the horizontal. The hexagonal faces of the Tower were simply so large that a part of my brain wanted to walk on it.

From a distance, the Tower appeared a uniform black, but as I drew closer and closer, it appeared more of a midnight blue. The surface wasn't metal, as I'd supposed. It was the same glassy material as the rest of the Core. A layer of ceramic coating the steel underneath. In places, the layer had chipped away and created bleeding holes of oxidization that streaked the surface like bullet wounds. I puttered my little cloud along the face of the Tower, heading down and around as I searched for the entrance.

I could feel the Enervation tugging at me, countered by that strange tuneless song within. At this point, I'd given up guessing what could be causing it. Just one of many things to ask Professor Zodiac when next we met. I looked down into the very center of the city, where six enormous towers rose from the foundations below. The ground in the midst of them had fallen away into a deep pit from which issued that soft, baleful green glow.

There! The door resembled little more than a round scar in the side of the colossal building, but when I got down to it, it was easily twice as large as myself. 'Ministry of Awesome -- No Trespassing'. Little chance of that here. I couldn't see any latch or control, but I

doubted that the hatch was as thick as the exterior wall. After all, it was supposed to be opened. Once more I sliced around the perimeter of the hatch, then cut an X through the middle. I gave them a kick, then another, and then the triangles of steel pulled free and tumbled into the Core below. I hopped into the gap and then paused, my eyes drawn down into that emerald pit.

She was down there... Cognitum, and possibly Dawn too. I could just go down there and end it. Get my answers, stop her, and wake from this bad dream I'd been living for two months. All it would take was for me to throw the lives of thousands into the wind.

"You're lucky I have bigger things to worry about," I growled, pointing a hoof at the glowing pit below me. "But don't get too comfortable. The second I'm done here, you're next." There was every possibility that this would get me killed, but, for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel the slightest selfish hope that I'd die.

I looked into the dark interior of the Tower. "Time to double down," I said, smiling as I imagined Lighthooves listening in and watching me check my ammo for Vigilance. Then, with that smile, I headed into the depths of Shadowbolt Tower.

— — —

Shadowbolt Tower. Somewhere in here were Lighthooves, his biological weapons, and a couple dozen unicorns I had to get out of harm's way. First, though, I had to find some stairs or an elevator. The tower hummed softly around me as I moved further into the building, Boo following warily behind. I didn't know what defenses it might have inside, but I imagined that I was going to find out relatively quickly. I hurried down the hall I'd found behind the door; if this was going to work, then every second counted.

I reached another sealed door. Well, it'd worked for the last one... I cut a long slice, and a shrill scream split the air as wind blasted at me through the slit I'd carved. Boo covered her ears as I grimaced. Okay, this was unexpected! I made two more cuts, and the triangular slab of door blasted past me, bouncing off the floor as it flew back the way I'd come, spinning through the outer door and into open air. A gale blew through the hole it'd left, and even I had difficulty fighting the force of air. I moved in, braced myself against the hole, and extended a hoof to Boo. The pale mare took it and struggled to climb over me and into the large open space beyond.

I gave her one last push ahead and then pulled myself the rest of the way through. Boo worked her mouth, rubbing her ears, her

mane and tail tangled about her head and haunches. We struggled farther away from the hole I'd sliced and the screaming air gusting out through it. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting that either," I said once we were clear, glad synthetic ears could handle the shriek.

On the other side of the door was a catwalk; the interior of the tower was hollow, a massive empty shaft with the catwalk running around the outer wall. Conduits ran along the walls from the distant bottom to the top far above. Dim blue lights provided cold illumination throughout the shaft. A few terminals lay against the wall, but I didn't have time to try and hack my way through them. Made me wish that I'd brought P-21 along. I trotted to the edge of the catwalk and looked down. Below me I could see some kind of colossal weight suspended in the middle of the shaft. The weight blocked my view further down, but from the green glow, I could only imagine it was bad; the shaft must go all the way to the Core. Looking up, I saw more catwalks at regular intervals and another house-sized weight. Occasionally, crisscrossing bars reinforced the shaft.

Then I spotted, curled up against the wall by the terminals, three desiccated pegasus corpses. From their clothes, they appeared to have been civilians. I supposed that meant that nopony had come down this far in a very, very long time.

"So…stairs. Stairs. Where are the…" I glanced at Boo and saw her examining an odd platform against the wall with a set of up and down buttons beside it. "Or, we can take the elevator. That's good too." I trotted over to her and stepped on, kicking the up button with a rear hoof. The platform hissed, whirred, and began to climb. "Good. We'll get up there in no time. Easy peasy."

Wait, I didn't just say that, did I?

"Warning! Unauthorized pony detected. Warning! Unauthorized pony detected," an automated mare's voice called out as crimson lights set in the walls began to flash bright red. Red bars appeared in my vision, and I drew Duty and Sacrifice, glad that Lighthooves had left them with Stratus. Suddenly, a crackling blue beam lanced down from above, the energy burning a hole in my barding and hide and searing the metal reinforcements beneath that. I nearly rolled right off the elevator platform as I got out of the path of the energy and spotted the hemispherical beam turret on the underside of a catwalk. Slipping into S.A.T.S., I put four rounds into it before something within exploded with a cloud of crackling blue smoke.

One down, a whole lot more to go. The elevator was constantly carrying me closer to the targeting ranges of the turrets above, and I couldn't take my time to pick them off at my leisure. Blue beams burned hotter than red, that was for sure. My spine ached, the burn plucking pain with my every movement, but I couldn't stop. The elevator continued to rise, and on the bottom of every catwalk waited more beam turrets. I moved around as best I could in the limited space, pulling Boo out of the sizzling paths of the beams while blasting turrets as soon as I was able. Far too soon, Duty and Sacrifice's hammers fell on spent casings, and my inventory said I was out of spare rounds. I switched to the markspony carbine, but the lighter bullets weren't nearly as effective at chewing through the turrets' plating.

One magazine emptied, and I slapped another home without taking my eyes off those damned turrets. Every time we passed one catwalk, the ones above began to open fire on us. "It's times like this that I really wish you could use a gun, Boo!" The blank covered her face as she cowered at the edge of the platform.

Crack crack crack click click! went the carbine as I worked through my supply of 5.56mm ammunition. I could see the top of the shaft, but there were still a half dozen turrets between me and it. I drew Vigilance and braced myself. Vigilance was a fine weapon, but not at long range. I hissed as blue lines burned my body, trying to make each shot count before I got too close. One by one, the heavy rounds blew apart the blue beam turrets. Five. Four. Three. I became nervously aware that my supply of ammo was rapidly diminishing. I dropped into S.A.T.S. to pop the third turret. Two…

Boo cried out as one of the beams hit near her, the mere heat of its passage scoring her pale hide and peppering her with flecks of melted lift platform. I immediately blasted the turret. One, but Vigilance was dry now, too. As the last turret swung its searing beam towards us, I focused my will and fired magic bullets. It was a hundred feet away. Seventy-five. Fifty.

Finally, the blue hemisphere popped in a shower of sparks just as the elevator began to slow. I collapsed next to Boo. Psalm's operative barding had gotten a few new holes in it. I examined Boo, checking her burns. "I *really* need a healing spell," I muttered, digging through my inventory for some healing potions. The contents appeared more brown than purple, and I didn't know what they'd do to her. Frowning, I tossed them over the edge. "Hopefully

we'll find something, okay Boo?"

She sniffed and wiped her teary eyes with a hoof. I sighed and looked around; we'd reached the top of the shaft, and there was a solid dome above us with a single flight of stairs leading up to it. I drew my sword and advanced up the dimly lit, curving steps. We came to another door and another two desiccated bodies lying at the base of it, their coats and feathers marred by hideous burns. The barding that remained suggested that they were surfacers. Celestia only knew where they'd come from or how they'd gotten this far only to die alone and in pain before a locked door with a terminal beside it. 'System Locked; Contact Sysadmin' glowed coldly beside the portal.

Fortunately, I had a skeleton key. Cutting through the locks, I struggled to heave and shove against idle motors. They gave grudgingly but opened enough that Boo could squeeze through, followed by myself. Soon as I was through, the door, locks or no, slid closed once more. On the far side of the door was a hall filled with musty air and covered with a delicate layer of dust. I walked carefully along; there were no red bars on my E.F.S., but turrets didn't appear until they decided to start shooting.

Someday, I was going to have to find a PipBuck technician and sit on them till they explained slowly enough for me to understand how E.F.S. threat detection worked.

There were a few blue bars in sight, too, so I kept my clanking and clunking as silent as possible. My heavier hooves weren't exactly made for stealth. Next time I saw Rover, I needed to find a way to make my legs interchangeable. When I had stealth augments, I got into combat. When I had combat legs, I needed stealth. That, or he just needed to come up with strong, silent legs. That wasn't asking too much, was it? Okay, maybe a little…

I really could have used a map or an indication of where the next set of stairs was. These rooms seemed used mostly for storage and were linked with identical, crisscrossing hallways. Filing cabinets filled with old paperwork, shelves with arcane and forgotten equipment, chemistry sets coated in dust…I never really was much of a scavenger. P-21 could have swept through in no time and had everything of value without disturbing the dust. Glory might have been able to actually use those chemistry sets to whip up something for Boo's bad burns. Which Lacunae could have just healed. And Rampage wouldn't have been any help with the salvage or the burn,

but she would have said something obnoxious and funny. I sighed and leaned over, nuzzling Boo's cheek. "I'm glad you're here. I really miss my friends. Rampage was right about splitting up. Nothing good comes from it."

Boo blinked, then gave a little baffled smile and nuzzled back. Then she sneezed. That simply stirred up more dust, causing more sneezes from both of us. Oh yeah, master of stealth, that was me.

When we stopped, I saw that the dust covering of some papers tacked to the wall had fallen away enough that I could read some of them. 'Support the Enclave. Support your own kind.' I magically brushed more of the dust off the poster, covering my muzzle with a hoof, and revealed a teal pegasus with blazing yellow mane and eyes. Her gaze and smile were the kind of hard smirk I'd come to loathe: arrogant, intolerant, and cruel. Beneath her was printed 'Support Lightning Dust for Councilor.'

There were other clippings beside it, and I exposed them one after the next. 'Rainbow Dash storms out of emergency meeting after failure to obtain aid for surface.' Another read 'Has Rainbow Dash spit her bit? Experts fear for former Ministry Mare's psychological health.' Another read 'Doctor Mephitis confirms surface unfit for pony survival, advocates quarantine of surface for pegasus health.' That name rang a bell. I brushed off more papers with my magic. 'Pound Cake named Councilor of Thunderhead. Promises to serve the pegasus people and lead proudly.' 'Princess Celestia sightings at S.P.P. hub dismissed as hoax.' and 'Doctor Mephitis appointed director of Shadowbolt Tower, named Pony of the Year.'

That title came with the picture of a yellow pegasus stallion, smiling confidently as he eyed the camera in a decidedly smarmy manner. 'Smart, rich, and single: the most eligible bachelor in the skies.' and 'Doctor Mephitis: returning to the surface risks countless pegasus lives. Rainbow Dash's plans threaten to expose pegasus population to foreign diseases introduced by zebrakind.' Zebras. *That* was why the name was familiar.

"You mother fucker!" I shouted, rearing up and slamming the wall with my hooves, all thoughts of silence forgotten. "You got away with it! You actually fucking got away with it!" My kick had disturbed more dust and exposed other articles. Given my propensity to run into ponies who should have been dead two centuries ago, I *really* hoped I ran into an undead or robotic Mephitis. Anypony who left thousands of zebras to starve in their

camps deserved what I'd do to them. I glanced at the rest of the headlines but didn't take the time to read them. Apparently, the doctor was named some kind of expert in diseases, claimed to be the Ministry of Peace's finest virologist, and backed up the Enclave's every word that the surface was rife with zebra and pony plagues. He'd been given awards. He'd been rich! One article named him one of the top five most pivotal figures of the Enclave's founding. He'd provided grotesque pictures of horrific zebra diseases for the public to ingest right as Rainbow Dash attempted to get the pegasi to clear the skies.

"You were nothing more than a two-bit murderer," I snarled at his image.

Boo whined and nudged my shoulder. I blinked at her and relaxed a little. "Right. Right. He's not worth the time, and I don't have any to waste." I forced myself into the hall again, looking left and right and wondering which way would take me up. Then I glanced at Boo. "Say, Boo, which way do you think we should go?"

She blinked at me, and I waited, then she blinked again, and still I waited. I smiled. She smiled. Then, for a moment, I was sure she was going to understand me and pick a direction…but she only gave another soft little sneeze. I deflated a little. "Never mind, Boo. I guess we'll go... " I trailed off as she started to sniff and then limped away. "That way."

The stairs were located behind an old maneframe casing and a bookcase that'd fallen at an angle against it. Boo disappeared through the gap, and I frowned, carefully pushed the bookcase aside, and followed her up. This floor wasn't quite as dusty as the one below, and the dim blue lights were a little brighter on this level. There was less garbage and more stuff…okay, the stuff was still garbage to *me*, but it was clearly important enough to *somepony* that they came down here to dust. There were mostly file cabinets and powered-down terminals. I found one sign that read 'archives' painted against the wall. Boo made a beeline down the hall and nuzzled at a door.

"Mmm... there has to be one of them somewhere around here," I muttered, following more slowly and checking one crate after another for the last thing I needed for my plan. No luck...

I opened the door slowly to a room that showed signs of habitation. There was more clutter here, books lying around unshelved and papers arranged on tables. There were more pictures

of the yellow 'doctor' on the walls, and better-preserved clippings of his life. I avoided reading them, as I was nauseated enough already. I really didn't need to read his claims about surface parasite transmission, which apparently would contaminate the clouds. From my glances, he was wealthy, influential, and useful to an Enclave trying to find every excuse not to return to the surface... and I was getting *really* sick of constantly seeing him in front of me everywhere.

There were also Fancy Buck Cakes on the table, and a few empty wrappers along with some bottles of Sparkle-Cola. Boo, with all the swagger of a wasteland scavenger, whipped one of the cakes off the table with her tail, caught the package in her teeth, ripped it open with a swing of her head, and set the ovoid snack cake flipping through the air. It fell into her open mouth, where it was masticated with pride. I myself had a bottle of Sparkle-Cola as I surveyed the rest of the room. Maybe it was the tent fort made out of a tarp in the corner, or the foalish drawings on the walls, but this struck me as a kid's den. It'd happened all the time in 99; some fillies would take it upon themselves to claim some corner of the utility or storage level and make a name for themselves. In 99, we'd been the 'Card Club'.

I was just about to head on when I heard a snore from the fort, and not the snore of a colt or filly, either. My magic nudged the flaps of the tarp aside, and I was instantly hit by an uncoltish reek of Wild Pegasus. I saw a pale rump bearing a cutie mark of a camera and attached to a stallion curled up with a bottle of whiskey. I tugged it from his grasp…he could use it as a weapon, after all.

Okay. Maybe I took a long pull off it as well, to steady my nerves.

Unfortunately, my action had awoken the inebriate. He opened two bleary eyes, took one look at me, and shouted, "Don't kill me! I didn't know what the fuck he was going to do! Honest! Hail Neighvarro!" Then he focused somewhat, and I realized that I recognized his wrinkled, slept-in suit and his face, despite the stubble covering his chin. "Oh…hey, Babe."

I knelt before him. "Chicanery? What are you doing here?" His eyes suddenly bulged. "What is it?" I imagined murder implants going off inside him…maybe a bomb. Then he blew, all right. He lurched forward and vomited down my front with impressive force.

Wasn't this such a lovely day?

* * *

"I think he's gone completely nuts," the pale pegasus said hollowly, no longer suave with his brown mane slicked back. He'd had a taste of the real Wasteland, and it wasn't fun anymore. "When he sprang me, he just butchered his way through everypony right up to Stratus. Said that Stratus robbed him of something that he deserved. Then he pinned him to his own desk like a butterfly. Said either Neighvarro would kill you or you'd get killed by Neighvarro. Either way, it worked for him."

"Did he mention Stargazer?" I asked, finishing cleaning off my barding with articles on the medical bastard.

Chicanery nodded, holding a bottle of Sparkle-Cola between his hooves. "After we got back here. Said he'd worked it all out, but with her dead it was ruined. But then he got even crazier. Not in the way I always thought, you know? I thought crazy was some villain going 'bwa ha ha' while blowing up the world. He said he wanted everypony to get exactly what they deserve. Then he kicked my ass out of... urp... out of Fabrication. That's where he was getting the missiles ready before the power links to the Core blew up." He gestured to the room. "End of the world stuff makes me nostalgic. Who knew?" he said mirthlessly.

I looked around the room. "Is this your base?" Maybe there was one of them around... nope...

That brought a sad smile to his face as he gazed around at the scattered paper. "Yeah. Back when we were colts. Us and a few unicorns our age formed the Butt Brand Buckaneers, to help us find our…ah…well, that's what we called our cutie marks. Anyway, seemed as good a place as any to wait and see who kills off whom first."

I closed my eyes and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Do you have any of these lying around?" He narrowed his eyes, peered at it, and started to speak. "Don't say it!" I blurted, now baffling the white stallion. "Lighthooves might be listening with your perceptithingy."

Chicanery wore a skeptical expression, "That's either paranoid or genius. Either way, no, I don't have one. They'd keep something like that on the fabrication level." Figures. His eyes ran over my metal legs. "You don't have a jamming device in all that?"

I frowned. "My augmentations aren't exactly the same that

Lighthooves is using. Mine are cobbled together with a repair talisman, two other sets of cyberpony parts, and a suit of power armor. His are... I don't know what. But they're a damned bit better than mine."

"Sounds like you need an upgrade," he joked. It'd been a joke. I should have taken it like a joke.

Instead, I turned and slammed him into the wall with enough force to wipe that smile off his face. A little harder... "Don't say that," I growled as I glared. "Don't even think it. I don't want an upgrade. If there was a way I could have less metal and more me, I'd take it in a heartbeat... if I had one."

He seemed to get my meaning, and I backed off a little. He rubbed his shoulder with a hoof. "Okay. Sorry. Really. I just... from the way Lighthooves made it sound, cyberponies are all 'more is better'. More strength, more speed, more armor, bigger weapons... isn't that the way of things?"

"It's different," I replied, shaking my head. "You can collect all the guns, armor, and stuff you want. At the end of the day, you can set them aside, if you're lucky enough to be able to relax. I don't ever get to stop being a cyberpony, though. You have no idea what it's like to walk all day and not have a sore hoof. I once ran fifteen miles, and I wasn't even winded. Awesome? Sure, it was in one respect. But I don't feel normal. I have trouble remembering what being tired feels like. What I have is an illusion of being a pony. Without that, I am so much less."

Chicanery stared at me with a new understanding. "The lies we tell ourselves to get through the day, I suppose." He gave a little half smile. "So no way you'd ever take on more metal? Not even to be a big hero?"

I sighed, really wanting to lie. "Only if the lives of thousands hung in the balance. Even then, I'd want to find another way. Any other way," I said. I had to be honest; I'd take that next step. "I wonder if Lighthooves realizes how much he's given up, augmenting himself."

"Doubtful." He stood, swayed, and looked at the papers. "If he did, he'd rationalize it. He was always a little too smart for us. I wanted to see if I could get a 'farts lighting' butt brand. He did research papers on the heroes of the Enclave and how they got their cutie marks."

He gestured over to the table. "That's all research he did for a dissertation for his commission." My gaze was drawn to some of the

neatly arranged articles and clippings and picked out some prominent names in the headlines and captions. Lightning Dust. Rainbow Dash. Soarin. Spitfire. Pound Cake. Borealis. Zephyr. Touchdown, Dumbell, and Hoops. Mephitis. The name stuck like a thorn and I levitated one page and scanned the biography. It touted his charitable work with zebra POWs due to his childhood growing up in zebra lands. Well, that explained the name, at least. From the article, he sounded like a saint warning the pegasi that due to radiation and disease, the surface would be uninhabitable for generations. But I knew what he'd done at Yellow River. This article made the camp sound like the Society's country club.

Well, no time to waste on ponies long dead. "Wow. Sounds like he and Glory would have gotten along great as kids," I said sarcastically. "Where is he setting up the missiles?" I guessed the answer was 'up there' and got that confirmed when he pointed up with a hoof.

"He converted the old Raptor arming and reloading facilities to launch them. It's up past the living quarters, the barracks, and fabrication," he said as he ran his hoof through his tangled mane. "I don't know how he convinced the others to follow him, but they're all cyborgs like you. The ponies in medical were taken up to the barracks to make the conversion, and they've been making them for the last twenty-four hours."

"Cyberponies might buy them some time, but not forever. Can he launch with the power from the Core cut off?" I asked, chewing my lip.

"No. The launchers he's made have too much draw for the tower's auxiliary power supplies," Chicanery replied, and I let out the breath in relief as he went on, "He could probably fire them one at a time, but to do that they'd have to do everything manually; it'd take forever." Finally, some good news. Storm Chaser would be glad to hear that. "You see, he wants to fire them all at once," he rambled, and my good news feeling started going away. "That takes a lot of power to open all the doors and run the pumps and hydraulics and stuff... "

That other horseshoe dropping feeling was getting much too strong for me. "But without the power supply from the Core, there's no way he can launch them all like that, right? Right?" I demanded, grinning hard to try and force the universe to make it so through the power of desperate thinking.

"No no. No chance at all," he said and I relaxed. "That's why he's connecting them to the stable's reactor."

"Stable?" I blinked, felt my eye twitch and my mane crawl. "What stable?"

* * *

"Welcome to Stable 96," he said as he led me through the heavy, rolling door and into the clean, familiar, comfortably claustrophobic halls of a stable. "Current population two hundred and sixteen unicorns, ninety-two earth ponies, and sixty pegasi." All of the *living, still-there* stable dwellers wore achingly familiar stable barding, midnight blue PipBucks on their forehooves, and a glow of cleanliness. If I only had more time to talk and take in the stable. The occupants also seemed to completely ignore me save for curious glances when my attention was elsewhere.

I'd anticipated a few dozen unicorns, perhaps a hundred at the absolute most, living in slave-like conditions under pegasus overseers. I hadn't expected families, elderly, and young all going through their lives. Worse, this was a stable gone right. There were no males being kept as breeding equipment in the back rooms of Medical. No life support systems barely holding together. Posters hung stating, 'Respect diversity, genetic and personal.' and showing a unicorn with a glowing horn, a pegasus with wings outstretched, and an earth pony with a wrench: 'We are strongest when we work together.'

Sadly, it seemed as if the demands of the Enclave had encouraged unicorns over the other pony races, but everywhere I looked I saw signs that this stable had been devoted to unity rather than population control. Most ponies wore sober expressions, talking in worried tones, and everypony except the foals seemed to realize something was very amiss. "I imagine that the Enervation hit you bad," I said in low tones.

"Enerwut?" he asked blearily as he led me through the crowd, getting a few greetings from ponies as he passed.

"The flesh-liquefying psychic scream that went off about half an hour ago?" I asked.

"Um, I was passed out," he pointed out. "But I don't see any liquefaction."

"You're right…" I muttered, frowning. From simple proximity,

everypony in here must have heard the scream, and I heard a few talking about how they had been sickened by it... but this was the closest point to the Core without being *in* the Core; shaken nerves or no, none of them seemed dead.

Now was hardly the time, but I couldn't help my interest. There were lots of places around the Core that weren't affected by Enervation, even when they were right next door to it. I'd thought that it'd been due to the placement of the silver pest control rings, but it seemed to be more than that. All the places with vibrancy and life seemed resistant to the life-sapping energy, and they had more than just an absence of silver rings.

These ponies were working together, not just cohabitating a space. Every settlement that cooperated and didn't exclude seemed far more resistant to the effects of Enervation than those focused merely on survival. The Reapers, with their bright field of grass, brought together gangs from all across the Hoof to focus aggression and conflict into relatively harmless competition. The Collegiate worked together to protect and share knowledge. Even the Society had serfs and nobles working together; it wasn't ideal, but it was better than out-and-out slavery. Megamart had the Finders working together in trade. Meatlocker's ghouls banded together to maintain their sanity. Riverside, when I first saw it, had been a dying town, as had Rover's people. Then, when they worked together, life had returned. It'd be easy to simply count that to economics, but it seemed like there was more to it. Even Chapel, which had nothing 'special' about it at all, kept the Enervation back with its inhabitants' hope. The silver rings were a part of it, but it seemed like resistance to Enervation wasn't simple cyberponification or a lucky lack of pest control talismans. It was something more… elusive. Something stronger. It was…It was…

It was something a smarter pony than me could have figured out.

I had a vague impression of a very disappointed little purple unicorn in my brain banging her head repeatedly against my skull, but I put it out of my mind as we moved to the social areas. The café off the arboretum could have been taken straight out of 99. I wondered if they had similar schools and activities. Did they have a food recycler, or were they dependent on food from outside the stable? How had they avoided the mistakes of 99? Did they follow the same three-shift protocol for their security or go with a day and night two-shift structure or an even crazier four-shift system? Ugh,

if only the lives of tens of thousands weren't on the line!

Boo shied away from the others at first, but as we crossed the arboretum, the blank's head snapped around to focus on a plate of freshly-made snack cakes. She trotted up to the table and extended her mouth towards one. The heavyset mare who'd sat down with the plate growled, "Hey you! Stay away from my cakes." Boo blinked, and her eyes widened as the mare began to chow down on the plateful and gradually ate more and more slowly. "Stop that, you freak," she grumbled. Boo didn't move an inch. She just stared, her eyes growing moist as her lip started to quiver. "Don't make me call the soldiers," she warned, then chanced a look around and saw half the room glaring at her. "Um... Please?"

A moment later, with a plate of snack cakes balanced on her rump and one in her mouth, Boo followed after us. She'd somehow been able to weaponize cute.

I walked through the unfamiliar stable, continually taken aback by the bright lights and clean air, till we came to a door that read 'Overpony'. Swallowing, I frowned, knowing that this wouldn't be pretty. In the Overmare's office, a half dozen ponies stood watching some monitors set in the wall. The things on the screens weren't good at all. I saw Thunderhead, the smooth torus now lumpy and distorted from the impacts of the disintegration cannons. Hoarfrost was keeping her ships close to the tower and using her long range guns. Good. So long as she kept doing that…On other screens were images of cyberponies fighting off three times their number of normal Enclave troopers in the halls of the Tower.

The six ponies turned and stared at me, most with bafflement and one with curious indifference, but from their expressions I picked out the Overmare. Her features were less 'what the fuck' and more 'this isn't good'. I approached the tan unicorn mare with the short, no-nonsense brown mane. "Overmare?"

"Yes?" a distracted-looking unicorn mare said from the corner of the room.

"No, this is the Overmare, Blackjack. Overmare Farsight," Chicanery said as he trotted up to the pale butter-yellow unicorn mare with a dark brown mane spilling messily over her shoulders. She'd been the one with an indifferent expression, but, as I looked closer, I saw that her brown eyes were completely clouded over. "Mother, this is Blackjack. She's a cyberpony from the surface."

Her vapid expression turned more serious, adopting the troubled

aspect I'd expected. "Ah. I see. She didn't sound familiar." She rose to her hooves, her PipBuck making little clicks as she walked around the gathered ponies and took her seat behind the desk. "And I take it that this is something serious with regards to the goings on in Thunderhead and up above in the Tower?"

"Yes. And your son, Legerdemain," I said with as much gravity as I could put in my voice. I sounded almost like Mom, actually.

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Please excuse us," she said in quiet but firm tones. Without argument, the other ponies left. I felt myself straighten a bit, even if she couldn't see me. When they'd left and the door had closed, she said, "So. Tell me. What do you have to do with my son and my stable?"

"Well, I'm out to stop Lighthooves. He's developed a biological weapon and a delivery system that can disperse it all across Equestria. Now Neighvarro is here to take it from him. I'm here to destroy both the plague and the means to spread it," I said grimly. "If he tries to stop me, or tries to launch the plague, then I'll have to stop him, too." Probably the fatal sort of stopping.

"Lighthooves?" the mare asked in confusion.

Chicanery spoke up. "She means Legerdemain, Mother. That's his code name. He's... she's telling the truth. He's made a real mess of things."

Her face fell, but from the solemn resignation on it, I suspected that she knew something like this was coming. "I'm sorry to hear that," she replied quietly. She took a moment to be a mom, then returned to being the Overmare as she asked, "And your plans for my stable?"

"I'm…not sure." I sighed. "Honestly, I didn't even know there was a stable here. I'd thought there'd be a few dozen unicorn workers here. Maybe even a hundred. I had no idea that there was a *stable*." I looked at the screens. "I'd planned to evacuate all of you on a Raptor." Now I could hear the cracks appearing in my own plan.

"I see. Well, Apple Bloom did what she did best: build a safe and secure living place for the residents of the tower," the Overmare said evenly. "We are not, however, a *true* stable. A stable is meant to be an independent, self-sustaining community and habitat. We lack that independence. We are beholden to the Enclave, no matter which settlement manages us or what shape our door is."

"So you're prisoners?" I asked with a frown.

"In a very pleasant prison, but a prison none the less," she said

with a nod. “We’ve never been allowed to train with weapons, only to repair them in the fabrication labs. Fighting is strictly forbidden.”
Which meant that they’d be easy pickings out in the Wasteland. Maybe I could put them with the Society, but I was already putting a burden on Grace with potential Thunderhead refugees. “The actual conditions under which we work vary from generation to generation. The current head of the tower lives in and works out of Neighvarro, so we’ve been fortunate to enjoy greater liberties than we’ve had in generations.”
I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “Now I don’t know what to do.”
“Did you think that by taking us away, you’d remove something that Thunderhead and the rest of the Enclave fight over?” she asked.
“No. Actually, I had a different idea for that. A way to stop Lighthooves and save Thunderhead from the Enclave. But I need to get up to where he’s holding the missiles,” I said, trying not to give specifics as I fidgeted, glad she couldn’t see me.
She cocked her head, then smiled. “Oh. I see. Your plan involves doing something to the Tower itself. Something that might damage or even destroy our home.”
I took a deep breath and then sagged. “Something like that. Now… I’m not sure. I just didn’t expect there to be so many ponies here.”
“So now you have a hard choice: do you take the homes of hundreds of ponies to save the lives of thousands, even when we did not do anything to deserve our loss?” Farsight asked with a cock of her head and a sad smile. “I don’t envy you the weight of such a decision, Blackjack.”
I closed my eyes. I didn’t have a second plan. Not one that would take care of the plague and those Raptors. “I’m sorry,” was all I could say.
“Mmmm,” she said, then ran her hooves along her desk and pulled open a drawer with her magic. “I was not born blind, you know. When I was young, I had some of the sharpest eyes in the tower, and I was always peeking in on the soldiers in the barracks. But some of them decided, perhaps as a lesson, that they would give me a flashbang grenade. I suppose they thought it would startle me, or that I would get in trouble. They didn’t understand that I had no idea what a grenade was or that, after the stem was pulled, you must throw it away. I never saw again after that. It was hard, losing

my sight. Unfair. Wrong. Even when the pair were dishonorably discharged, it didn't bring my eyes back." She pressed her lips together a moment. "I could have given up or turned bitter. Instead, I learned to listen and to see things through the perceptions of others. I became so adept at it that I was made Overmare when the last retired."

"I am so sorry," was all I could say, feeling lame and wrong. "I wish there was another way, but I can't think of one. I have to save as many as I possibly can."

"That is some small comfort," she replied grimly as she pressed her lips together, then shook her head. "I do not know where we can go. Thunderhead, I'm told, is under attack. We know nothing of the surface. I fear stable ponies won't last long out in the wilderness. This stable is all we know."

"Yeah. I didn't last long when I'd stepped out of my sta…" I paused as a tiny purple mare pulled out a chalkboard, wrote 96 -> 99, and then smiled hopefully at me as she waved her hoof in vague encouragement. "I came from a stable whose population was… almost wiped out." By me, I omitted. "There's a hoofful of survivors left. It's not nearly as nice as your stable is, but it is a standard Stable-Tec Stable. You'd have to share it with a group calling themselves the Steel Rangers, but I have a feeling that you two would have a lot to offer each other. They need ponies to run the stable and fix their weapons. You need a place to stay and ponies with experience fighting the Wasteland. The survivors there could show you all the ins and outs of the place, and you'd keep it alive."

Her milky eyes widened in surprise, but then her face turned cautious. "And we would be free there? Not workers nor slaves?"

"You'd have to work that out with Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof and the survivors, but I know Stronghoof would want a fair deal," I assured her. "He's that kind of pony."

"I see. It seems I have a choice. Do I trust you, hope that you are correct, and hope my people will be willing and able to evacuate quickly, or try and stop you, throw my lot in with whoever is the victor in the tower, and maintain the status quo, at best?" she said evenly. She closed her filmy eyes and was quiet a moment. I really did not want to kill another stable. I really, really didn't want that. Finally, she said, "It is better to dare and die for something better than it is to live a life prescribed by another. I'll need a few minutes to contact section heads. How much time do we have?"

"An hour. After that…I don't know." I couldn't press the envelope past that. "You contact your heads. I need to check in and make some calls."

She nodded and clicked her way to the door, talking in urgent and low tones. For a second, I worried she might be trying something, but my augmented hearing heard instructions being given for them to start preparing the population for evacuation.

First, via EC-1101 bouncing through the Enclave's communication network like a pinball, I contacted Crumpets. Not that I doubted Paladin Stronghoof, but she seemed a little more grounded than the overenthusiastic stallion. It took me three tries before I made the connection and informed her that she should expect a few hundred new residents for Stable 99. She expressed doubt for a moment, saying that wastelanders didn't want to live and die in a metal hole in the ground under Steel Ranger supervision. When I filled her in on just who was moving in, she gave a soft 'oh' of surprise.

"I'll pass it along. Thanks, Blackjack. I was starting to doubt if we'd ever have the numbers to run this place properly," she answered before cutting the connection. Destination check. Now for transportation.

Storm Chaser answered immediately. "So, General, how many passengers can you carry on those Raptors of yours?" I asked.

"A hundred give or take. These are warships, not passenger cargo carriers," she said. "We might be able to go over that, but it would be hazardous."

"Right. Well, I have about four hundred ponies needing evacuation," I replied. "I have a spot on the surface we can take them where they'll be safe."

"Four *hundred*?" the general asked surprise. "I always thought it was a few dozen unicorns. The reports never said they were in the hundreds."

"There's a whole stable here. Can you get them clear in an hour?" I asked.

"Not with the original plan," she replied. "Taking the *Castellanus* down to one small door would be fine for a few dozen ponies. Trying to evacuate hundreds would take too long and be far too obvious. We're going to need another ship, and a landing on the fabrication level to get them all on, all at once."

"Any others joined the cause?"

"The *Sleet* is with us, but most of her fliers are fighting to get to

Lighthooves. They're bogged down. We're trained for exterior operations, not room-to-room combat. Lighthooves's cyberponies are pushing them back," she said grimly.

I closed my eyes and asked the question I dreaded. "What about Thunderhead?"

She hesitated several seconds. "It could be much worse. Hoarfrost is keeping close to the tower, so her precision is off, and she's cut power twenty five percent to keep her guns from overheating. Once the tower is secure, though, and she moves closer to the city, it's going to get ugly. She hasn't seemed to notice our movements, but that won't last."

"And her fliers?"

"Dispatched to the city. I have no idea how much resistance they're facing," she answered.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "Be ready to extract the tower ponies in an hour. I'll find some way to clear them for you." I was admittedly a little iffy on the how at the moment, but I *would* figure something out.

"Acknowledged."

"Keep to the plan and try to figure some way to get another Raptor," I instructed her. With everything going on, I hoped there still was a plan to keep to. I knew what I had to do, but if I messed up or failed, a lot of ponies were going to die. I'd be the biggest mass murderer in two centuries.

"Hey!" came a distant shout over the speaker, and then Rampage blurted, "Did I hear right? You need another Raptor?"

"Get away from the microphone you maniacal--" Storm Chaser began.

"Hello? One should not interrupt maniacal monsters. It's rude," Rampage said indignantly. "You need a Raptor?"

"Yeah. One would be nice," I said warily. "For an evacuation."

"Can I crash it into something afterwards?"

"Blackjack," the general warned ominously.

"Sure. You get one, and it's all yours once this stable is evacuated," I replied. I swore I could hear Storm Chaser facehoof.

"Sweet! No problem. I'm on it," she said, squealing in delight.

"Blackjack, you heard me say that Raptors are rare, didn't you?" Storm Chaser sighed.

"She needs incentives in her life. Besides, I don't have a clue how she can actually get one, but if she can, then it's one less Raptor to

shoot at the *Castellanus*, right?" I replied.

She stammered a moment. "I…but…you…you're insane. All of you surfacers are insane! Balefire bombs! Plagues! Madponies, the lot of you! You can't just…just…crash a Raptor because it's *cool*," she whined plaintively.

"I guarantee you that Rampage will accomplish two things: she will get her hooves on a Raptor, and she will crash it into something. My suggestion is point her at the *Blizzard* or *Sirocco* and watch the show. In fact, film it so that I can watch too."

Storm Chaser was silent for a second, then muttered, "'Go to the surface,' he said. 'They're savage primitives,' he said. 'What could they *possibly* throw at us?' Harbinger, you idiot." She growled scornfully, then said, "I'll be ready in an hour. Storm Chaser out." Then she cut the connection.

She was a good pony, but she needed to be a little more practical. The last thing I did was send a message to Glory. "In the Tower. Fireworks in an hour. Stay safe. Boo's okay. Hugs for P-21 and Scotch Tape." My voice cracked a moment. "Love you," I said. The knowledge that the bombardment wasn't 'as bad as it could be' didn't help in the slightest with the worry bubbling up inside me. We'd split up to keep each other safe, but safety proved the least sure thing of all right now.

Overmare Farsight was waiting for me to finish, so I cut the connection before I started blubbering, opened that dusty closet in the back of my mind, threw all my anxiety and worry inside, and applied the Stable 99 motto. Not thinking about it, I faced her. "Sorry about that."

"You say that frequently. I'm not very sure it's healthy," she answered, making me flush. "I've contacted the department heads, and I'll announce the evacuation soon as you leave. Ponies will be upset enough as is, and I don't want there to be trouble between you and them. Is there anything else?" She asked it calmly but with that serious authority that reminded me that time was wasting.

I thought but only came up with three things. "Chicanery said that Lighthooves was using the stable's reactor for power? Is there any way to cut it off?"

She frowned. "The emergency reroute goes up the tower's main conduit line. It would take hours to cut through the plating. We could just do an emergency shutdown of the reactor, but that would make meeting your evacuation deadline of an hour impossible and

imperil the lives of the stable's inhabitants. I don't know if you noticed, but our tower lacks for windows."

"I saw," I admitted. My eyes switched over to Chicanery, then back to her. "You're Lighthooves's mother. Why do you think he's doing this?"

The question made her slump. "I don't know why you're asking me this now of all times, but I also don't know the answer. If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have told you he was a loyal and true member of the Enclave. That he wanted Thunderhead safe and independent but also recognized the need for Neighvarro. But over the last year, my son's become…different. More driven. More intense and zealous for Thunderhead's independence and what he called the 'redemption' of the Enclave."

"It was after he went down to the surface for the first time," Chicanery added. "When he came back, he had a look in his eyes. I thought it was just the harsh environment down there, but when we met after he returned, I didn't recognize him. He looked hollow inside. Of course, then he smiled and made his normal smug comments, and I was sure I was mistaken. Now…He's always been a bit off, but this is too much, even for him."

"Whatever happened to my son down there changed him forever, but as to just what it was, you would have to ask him. I don't know," Farsight said solemnly.

It was something to think about. Like with Dawn, I felt there was a similarity between the two of us that I wasn't quite comfortable with. He was every bit as driven as I was, in his own way, but where the heck was he driving this train wreck *to*? "Well, you have your people to get ready, and I need to clear a path between here and that landing dock."

"You'll have to go through the barracks," she said solemnly. "And my son has quite a few followers holed up in there."

Hmm. I drew Duty and Sacrifice. "I don't suppose you have any bullets, do you?"

"Bullets?" she asked with a baffled look.

Too much to hope for. Well, I could always just hit them with my sword. A lot. "How about… " I started, but, really, if they weren't allowed weapons, they probably wouldn't have them either. They'd be above with the hardware. "I don't suppose you have any spark grenades, then?" I asked with a lame smile.

The blind mare smiled.

* * *

"I'm telling you, those hornheads are doing something down there!" a green stallion with white cyberaugmentation muttered. "There's some kind of activity going on, and we should go check it out." Without their augments matching their hide and with no hint of a seam or impression that the armor could come off, the transition from one to the other was a bit disturbing. Three of them were clustered at a junction, giving watchful looks down the side halls.

"Orders are orders. Next time those Neighvarro jackasses try and move up, we hit them from below. When they come at us, Fabrication will hit them from above," a blue mare said sharply, then moved as if to touch an earbloom, but halted. She glanced over at a yellow stallion who pawed at his crotch. "What is wrong with you?"

"I'm not sure if I still have a penis," he muttered.

"It's under the armor plates," she replied, rolling her eyes.

He poked down there some more. "I know that's what he said, but how do I know it's still there? I can't feel it. I can't feel anything!"

The mare balked a moment. "Just…focus on the job at hand. We've got to keep those Neighvarro busy till the weapon systems are back on line," she said in a huff.

"I'm telling you, it's too quiet back there! They're up to something!" the green stallion snapped. "It's too quiet! Everything's too quiet." Then he suddenly jumped. "Halt! Show yourself or I'll fucking dust you!" he screamed as he whirled and his integrated beam guns and started strafing wildly down the hall for several seconds. He halted firing, then snapped, "I told you to show yourself!"

A feather poked out into the hall, waving back and forth a second before Chicanery moved his pale head out. "Whoa. Peace, Babe. I'm unarmed."

"I should dust you to be sure," the green stallion said, his eyelid twitching.

"I'm telling you, it's gone!" the yellow stallion wailed. "That box frigging gelded me!"

The mare snapped, "Will both of you shut up? You, stop looking for your balls and keep an eye for an enemy. And you, can't you see

he's yellow on the E.F.S.? Go join Tempest." She waited till the two turned away, then waved Chicanery forward. "You. What do you want?"

"Fame and fortune, Babe," Chicanery replied as he trotted forward, wearing a ridiculous helmet with a camera in the middle and a microphone on a little wand jutting out to the side. "I'm a documentarian in Thunderhead. A bit of a film buff. I wondered if I could have a few words. Some embedded journalism, you might say."

"Now is a really bad time," she said as she glanced at the two stallions. "In case you missed it, we're under attack."

"Do you have your penis?" the yellow stallion asked the green one. "Are you *sure* you still have it?"

"And some of us aren't handling it all that well," she finished loudly. Chicanery walked closer, the embodiment of pony pleasantry.

"Yeah. I could tell. The last few ponies I've seen like you…well…I wanted to find out what it's like from your point of view," he said as he trotted right up to her, all smiles and confidence.

"Me? I feel…" she blinked. "I shouldn't be talking about this. I should be focusing on the fighting. I…" She rubbed her face. "I think I made a big mistake. I think…I don't think I should have been made into this…this thing. I mean, I can smash power armor and kill with a thought…but I feel dead inside. It feels wrong."

"Yeah. I can kill you dead with a thought!" the belligerent stallion sneered. "I can kill all of you! Fuck you if you think I can't!"

That got a lot of flat looks before Chicanery said dryly, "Yeah. Sure you can. I noticed a lot of you have this little problem," he said, making all three frown as he nodded his head behind him. "I mean, all of you seem to be a lot more stressed than usual."

"Wait," the yellow stallion suddenly frowned at Chicanery. "How'd you get this far up? Somepony down below should have stopped you before you got here."

"That is very true. And they did," he said with a smile as he gave his tail a flick. Two bits of metal tied to the end glittered. Then the hallway filled with crackling energy that made Chicanery's mane stand on end as two blue spheres of electricity expanded around him. The three cyberponies spasmed, then collapsed in heaps as Chicanery looked down, spreading his wings and letting the expended spark grenades thunk to the deck. "And that's what

happened to them."

"It's somewhat depressing that that's the tenth time that's worked," I said as I approached from down the hall where Boo and I'd been watching. "I never get this far without shooting somepony or somepony shooting me."

"I told you, Babe. I have no interest in harming them, these 'overcharged spark capacitors in apple grenade housings' aren't gonna harm 'em, and we're not gonna harm 'em now that they're out. Why should they see me as a threat?" I snorted, levitated out some more cable I'd collected from below, and trussed them up like all the others we'd encountered. Just like the last nine, these three didn't have a single weapon on them that didn't go 'zap zap'.

"Still, I would have expected one of them to be a little more difficult," I said with a scowl. "Getting past them just because you're a smooth talker seems like…cheating."

"You're just sore because the first time you tried to magic a grenade under them, they gusted it right back in your face," he replied with a smirk.

"Maybe," I admitted, stepping past them. Only a quick teleport spared me from being knocked out myself. The barracks looked like they were taken right out of Stable-Tec residential housing, only with a security checkpoint at both ends. Chicanery's grin and silver tongue had dispatched more cyberponies than a whole flight of power-armored pegasi. I glanced at the knocked-out yellow stallion. "I'm guessing Lighthooves didn't read them the fine print on becoming augmented."

"No. He just said it was a vital edge over Neighvarro," Chicanery responded, then gestured to the unconscious trio. "Is this a normal cyberpony thing? Not being knocked out. I mean…more than half the cyberponies we've come across have been a few clouds short of a rainstorm."

"I think it might be," I replied with a small frown. "I've only been like this for a month, but another one I knew, Deus, wasn't much better. Maybe it'd be different if it was just a hoof or even just a leg, but transforming a pony's whole body all at once into a cyberpony seems to have some nasty side effects." Like me trying to kill myself running all over the Hoof alone, or going into a balefire-burning prison. "Focus them on a fight and they can take it apart. Without that distraction…" Why did I get the feeling that, in a few weeks, Lighthooves's cyberponies were going to be a big problem?

Whatever would a problem-free life be like? Was there really a time when my biggest problems were being stuck on the C shift and not getting laid?

"You seem pretty well-adjusted," he commented.

"I'm a masochist, and I had help. A lot of it. From my friends, strangers, and a computer designed to help crazy ponies," I replied irritably, scanning for red bars; there were far too many for it to be of much help to me. "The raw physical power it gives me is great, and I'd be dead without it, but it's not life. I don't have a heartbeat, Chicanery. Sometimes, I imagine that this is what it feels like to be a ghoul. If I could have my old body back, I'd take it in an instant, no matter how much weaker it was."

"I wonder if…" he began, but then he trailed off. His eyes met mine and he averted his first.

"You wonder if your brother's cybernetics made him do this," I finished for him. He gave the smallest of nods, and I sighed. "It'd be a nice explanation, but he started this before I even left Stable 99. Something else prompted all this, and it doesn't smell like your garden variety of crazy." Understanding why wasn't nearly as important as stopping him, but understanding why was what made it matter. I blinked and lowered my voice. "More red bars."

"Showtime," he said as he spread his wings wide, allowed me to tie two more grenade pins to the end of his tail, then hid the blue-banded grenades under his wings. "Make sure my hat is straight, Babe," he purred with a grin, making me scowl as I gave it a little nudge.

"Stop that," I replied sourly, which only made him smile even more.

"Stop what?" he replied with a naughty smirk I'd worn far too many times myself. "Am I making you nervous?"

"No, you're making me horny, and I have a stable to evacuate, a city to save, a marefriend to reunite with, and your brother to stop before tens of thousands die. I do not have time for a quickie," I said before pointing down the hall. "Now go do your thing, oh silver-tongued one."

"Right. Right. That 'real life' thing," he said with a sigh. "This is why I prefer pictures." And he turned and started back down the hall while I waited with Boo.

"That stallion is either going to rut me or die trying," I said, frowning and looking myself over. Something definitely felt off, but

then, feeling off was normal for me right now. The blank tilted her head as I pursed my lips. “Do I smell funny to you, Boo?” I couldn’t really tell. My own sense of smell wasn’t exactly as sharp as it used to be. Boo blinked, then sneezed cutely, and I sighed and ruffled her mane. “That’s what I thought, Boo. That’s what I thought.”

A second later there came a crackle, and then silence, and then the air down the hall was filled with the zing of rapid-fire beams. I jumped to my hooves and started to peek around the corner when Chicanery raced past me. His tail smoked and his helmet blazed as he raced by, “Not chatty! Not chatty at all!” Boo, infinitely and sublimely practical, took off with him.

I peeked and spotted at least eight very pissed off cyberponies charging down the hall after him, and I reacted by following suit. Only, instead of simply fleeing, I levitated up the box of grenades, snagged two, and flicked off a half dozen stems all at once; *then* I raced after my friends. As the cyberponies came around the corner, some leaped, turned, and launched sideways off the wall after me; others stopped and poured on the beams and disintegration bolts. Only one of them happened to notice the little box I’d left behind.

Spark grenades were only supposed to be dangerous to cyborgs and robots, but a dozen of them going off at once sounded less like an electrical spark and more like lightning striking everywhere at once. My own eyes, ears, and legs failed, sending me skidding across the floor, but I stayed conscious. While my systems rebooted, I felt somepony shaking me. “I’m fine. My systems crashed.” At least, that’s what I hoped I said. I could feel my mouth moving at least.

When things were back up and running, I looked back at the heap of twitching, groaning cyberponies. None of them were dead, but I had the feeling that all of them were regretting hooking computers to their brains. I stepped over the scorched forms, selected the closest room, and, without hesitation, levitated and bucked them one by one till the room was packed full. Once the doors closed, I Wonderglued the last two grenades to the floor and wired them to give the occupants an encore when they stepped out or if somepony stepped in to help.

Chicanery mourned his scorched camera hat for a moment before tossing it aside. “Well, so much for that. I guess I can pretend to be searching for the bathroom while you club them over the head or something.”

Well, it was a plan. “What did you say to them?” I asked.

"I think I ran into where they were augmenting them," he replied, then trotted back down the hall. "This way!"

He led me to a much smaller cafeteria where six bemused unicorns stood around a machine that looked like Triage's medical booth on Buck, Rage, and maybe a little Hydra. The normally pony-sized casing appeared almost Princess Celestia-sized. A pair of large rings in the middle sprouted four articulated mechanical claws. Hanging from rails overhead was a panoply of spare cyberpony parts. Legs. Wings. Eyes. Hearts. Rolls of synthetic hide. *It's a damned assembly line*, I thought grimly.

Most disturbing of all were the bloody bins in the back corner. I didn't look closely, but the smell…the very idea…sickened me. Augmenting a crippled pony was one thing, but mutilating a perfectly healthy pony under the belief that 'stronger and faster' was 'better' disturbed and angered me on a fundamental level. There was doing better, trying harder, and not giving up, and then there was hacking off a perfectly good limb to make a pony a more efficient killing machine.

I picked through rows of talismans. Healing talismans. Levitation talismans. Beam talismans... ugh... where were the--

"What's going on out there?" one of the unicorns controlling the machine asked in a trembling voice. A pair of monitors glowed in the corner; one showed Thunderhead filled with swooping and shooting ponies, holes ripped in the wall of the city and smoke casting a haze. The other showed Raptors fighting with Raptors as pegasi swirled and looped around the tower. I guessed that the augmented weren't the only ponies needing therapy after this. "We heard shooting and explosions and... who are you?"

"Security. We're getting ready to evacuate the stable. You're not safe here anymore," I said, and then I heard hoofsteps clomping behind me and turned; at the sight of three red-barred power-armored ponies, I raised my sword and prepared to teleport. "*Blizzard* or *Sleet*?" I shouted.

The power-armored ponies took one look at me, and the officer in front snapped immediately, "Power down your weapons! It's Blackjack! Power down! Now!" I relaxed as I saw bars turn blue. The officer reviewed her soldiers, then turned and faced me, pulling off her helmet. Twister's lavender features came into view, and she gave a crooked smile. "I'd wondered why their reinforcements suddenly dried up." Really, they needed name tags or something. It

was just too hard to tell a pony by the end of their muzzle and the underside of their wings.

"Credit goes to Chicanery here and the stable's supply of spark grenades," I said with a wave of my hoof to the stallion.

"Actually, they were 'overcharged spark capacitors' in conspicuously apple-shaped casings," Chicanery said with an easy smile.

"Is this area secure?" Twister asked.

"I might have missed a few, but every pegasus we neutralized should be tied up with cable behind us."

"Sweet. That'll make shooting them in the head easy," one of the pegasi laughed.

Before I could take his head off, Twister snapped, "Ground that talk, soldier. Just because Hoarfrost and Afterburner have lost their minds doesn't mean we stopped being ponies. Disarm and evacuate them as POWs. Understood, soldier?" Instantly, the ranks stiffened and saluted. "Good. Go round them up and get them to the loading dock in groups of no more than six. Last thing we want is a daring rescue."

Well, that was one way to keep me from thumping a pony. I warned them about the spark grenade traps we'd left behind, then told Twister, "Overmare Farsight is getting the stable ready for evacuation. Are the Raptors ready for extraction?"

Twister answered, "They can be here in five minutes, but the second we start to move, Hoarfrost is going to be all over us. Most of the fleet is either loyal or neutral. The former she's keeping close to the Tower. The latter is spread out to stop any more missiles being fired, but they're spread way too thinly. Lighthooves has at least ten times more fighters between here and Fabrication than he kept in the barracks, and he's using them for something."

"He's using the stable's reactor to power the launchers," I said. "As soon as the stable is empty, we can shut it down. That'll put everything on emergency power. Problem is, I really don't think we have enough time. Lighthooves is desperate. If Neighvarro drags him down, he wants to go down bloody and to take as many of you with him as he can." I glanced at Chicanery as his gaze dropped.

"It'll take days to fight up the central shaft to the fabrication level," Twister replied, then looked at the machine. "Maybe if some of us hop in there…"

"No," I replied sharply. "You don't want to do that."

"If it'll even the odds…" Twister began.

I nearly jumped to my hooves. "Didn't you hear me? You don't want to become what that machine will make you! Sure, you'll be faster. Sure, you'll be tougher and stronger, too. You'll also be that much less a pony. Ponies aren't machines! You aren't…things! Things to be butchered and replaced with metal. That device will take your heart and put a pump in its place!" That wasn't adding the fact that this was something made by Lighthooves. Who knew what kinds of nasty things might be lurking in his designs?

"But the things they've let you do... " she said, as if amazed that I objected.

"You don't get it, Twister. I'm the freak. I'm the odd cyberpony out." I pointed to the side with a hoof. "Those ponies are the norm. I've met the original. Deus. He went through every moment of his life in agony and turned into a rapist just to feel normal. Another cyberpony is now a brain in a jar. A third is a pegasus who wants to kill everypony under the fucked-up premise of saving them. The fourth is a madpony with a biological weapon. The thing that let me do what I've done wasn't some talisman, hunk of metal, or armored legs. It was my friends and my refusal to quit, no matter what, that kept me going."

"Blackjack, maybe some of us are willing to pay that price. If it means saving my home, I'd happily give up half my body," Twister replied, her face sober and serious. "I'd give my whole body."

"I know you would, Twister." I put my hooves on her shoulders, looked her dead in the eyes, and said, with as much sincerity and emphasis as I could, "*I know*. And you might be able to at that. But what about afterwards? Is it worth your sanity? Would your loved ones really want you to become a half-mechanical monster just to stop him?" I dropped my gaze first. "I know you want to do everything to save your home. There's nothing worse than seeing your home burn and being powerless to stop it. But this device was made during the war by ponies trying to do everything to save *their* home. In the end, they created monsters, and Equestria blew up anyway." I pulled away from her, not daring to look her in the eye again, knowing she'd see my guilt. "I can't make that call for you, though. All I ask is... if you do, please wait for me to leave the room."

Twister didn't reply for a second. Then she asked tersely, "Do you have an alternative?"

First things first. “Do you have one of these?” I asked, showing her the note and being careful not to see the words myself. When she opened her mouth to answer, I quickly interjected, “Don’t say what it is. Just yes or no.”

She balked a moment, looking at me oddly, then shook her head. “There’s a half dozen of them on a Raptor, but I’m pretty sure they’re all in use. Those are pretty rigidly controlled, and scarce to boot.”

I deflated. “Yeah. Delicate, too. I smashed all the ones I might have salvaged below,” I said with a sigh, putting the note away. No doubt Scotch Tape could have gotten one for me, even if she’d needed Glory’s help. I thought a bit. Storm Front had said that there were two unofficial ways of getting in the tower. I’d used one…“Can you fly me up to the roof?”

She considered me for a long, sober minute. “Not in anything like a wagon, or carrying you. Lighthooves’s fliers are all over. We can barely handle them in the open air with superior numbers, and it’s dicey. We might be able to fight our way to the roof, but carrying the two of you would make us a huge fat target.”

I hissed softly through my teeth. If only I could teleport more than a dozen feet! There had to be a way, though. I stepped away and let my eyes pass over the racks of synthetic eyeballs, legs, lungs, hearts, wings, beam guns, hide…

Wings. My eyes stared at the dozens of metal-feathered wings dangling from their rack, each with a red talisman in the center joint, and I felt my blood run cold.

No. I’d find another way. I wasn’t about to lose my other half. “Let me get a better look at the shaft between here and fabrication. Maybe I can fight through,” I said, trying to dredge up whatever optimism I had left. As we walked out, the pod’s doors lay wide open as if patiently waiting.

* * *

The vertical shaft rose up a thousand feet above the top of the barracks, ringed every hundred by a catwalk bristling with not just turrets but also cyberpony defenders. The base of the shaft was a nightmare landscape of twisted metal, heaps of glowing dust, and piles of luminescent slime. The air was filled with so many bolts and beams that I’d have been blinded if I had normal eyes. Boo

cringed back, hiding behind me as the air crackled and snapped. Plates of armor fallen from above or brought in from outside provided some cover, but this was a killing field nonetheless. Beam guns scorched the air, bolts fell in a rain of death, and one after the next, Enclave fell to their own.

As I stared at the chaos, I could see the major weakness in the attackers. This was a fight that called for Steel Ranger armor emplaced and dug in. A squad of missile launchers and grenade machine guns would have accomplished what a hundred magical-energy-weapon-armed ponies could not. Even Persuasion and a crate of grenades would be more useful. Instead, assaulting from below, all the attackers' advantages were against them. Flight was suicide. What few magic and spark grenades they wielded had to be thrown, exposing the attacker to deadly fire. If any cyberponies were wounded or damaged, they flew higher up till they regenerated.

Along one wall lay a conduit twice as large as my body and running straight up the tower. Its surface was scorched and blackened, but otherwise it was untouched. We didn't even have the firepower to cut the electricity to the upper tower. My sword could probably cut through the plating, but in my head danced images of me exploding like the Core's substations.

I watched in horror as ponies fell. Orders were shouted into the hurricane of chaos around us. Cries of pain and for help were lost on the winds of war. I stood there at a loss. In a battle of hundreds, what difference could one pony make?

Out of any lines of fire in the stairwell, I sank down to my haunches and covered my face in my hooves, listening to the screaming. Boo curled up tight against me, and I put a hoof around her shoulders simply for somepony to hold on to. Finally, unable to bear the screams in the shaft any longer, I ran away into S.A.T.S. and sat there.

"Not pretty, is it?" rasped a voice. In my vision, the Dealer appeared amid the frozen beams and bolts. He pushed back his battered cowpony hat and approached, walking through the glowing energy like a ghost. "My first fight, I was just like you are now. Just wanting to curl up and hide. 'Course, that doesn't help much, does it?"

Desperately hoping that the magic of my PipBuck would carry my thoughts to him in S.A.T.S., I thought the words, "I don't know

what to do."

His tired eyes narrowed a bit. "Bullshit. You know exactly what you need to do. Precisely what you have to do." He raised his foreleg, two cards wedged between hoof and pad by the corner. "You have to make a choice."

"What are my choices?" I whispered mentally.

"Option one... you lose. You get the hell out of here. Get your friends, leave the skies, and let the bodies fall where they may. Rest. Heal. Focus on another day," he said before biting the card and turning it. I saw me, surrounded by the others, all holding on to each other as the skies burned above us and flaming pegasi tumbled down.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to hear option two, and he knew it. "Option two... " and all he did was turn the card. On the far side was exactly what I knew would be. I wanted to look away, but I was frozen, staring at the thing I was terrified of.

"I don't want to," I whispered, a foal's protest. His eyes narrowed scornfully.

"Pick, or let somepony else pick for you. Lighthooves, Hoarfrost, or Dawn, probably. Only I doubt you'll like their choice," he replied tossing the cards in my face. "Either way, stop sitting here whimpering. You don't have time to waste. Forty-five minutes, maybe less."

"I don't know if it will work. I don't even know if it's possible!" I protested, grasping at anything that'd make my choice easier.

"Steelpony is in your PipBuck, as am I. I can interface with it and help smooth things along," he replied quietly. "I've been there when you've been worked on in the past. I know which files to use."

I left S.A.T.S. and stared out into the hazy chamber. I'd already given a few pounds of flesh. What were a few pounds more?

Only all that I had left.

"Ante up," I whispered hollowly, not sure how many chips I had left to bet.

* * *

"Talk to me," I said tensely, eyes clenched shut as I stood trapped inside a humming, whirring nightmare. Apparently the machine wasn't used to having a cyberpony already inside, and the technicians were doing something to compensate. "That's your

talent. Talk! Tell me something. Anything." The restraints around my neck, feet, torso, and tail didn't help matters.

They'd had to pick the original Project Steelpony from my PipBuck in order to access 'Shadowbolt Schematics'. The mechanical monster banged and buzzed for several minutes as it retooled itself for the changes. All I could hope was that the Dealer was able to guide the process so that I didn't end up some kind of double-augmented freak. Apparently, there was quite a bit more stuff in the original file than the mass-produced units, not to mention that I had parts in me that weren't in any file.

"Are you sure you don't want us to put you under?" the technicians asked for the third time. "The process is automated and only takes a few minutes, usually, but in your case it might be quite a bit longer. There's an anesthetic field on, but all the others were fully unconscious for this."

I *really* wanted it, or maybe a nice memory orb to hide in till it was all over. The problem was that I was on limited time, and I had to get going and soon as I was finished. "I'm fine. Just get it done." I took a deep breath. "Talk to me, Chicanery. Tell me something. Anything." I felt the vaguest tugging on my hide between my shoulders and clenched my eyes shut. "Tell me about the founding of the Enclave."

"Well, Babe, it's not a pretty story. Bombs fell, everypony died. Even Cloudsdale. Heck, Cloudsdale got hit *first*. Don't think that didn't hurt," he said grimly, then sighed. "Fact is, surface forces were annihilated, but since our cities are mobile, most escaped the initial carnage. We were still in big trouble, though, mostly due to a lack of food. There wasn't much in the way of aeroculture back then. Most of the food was emergency military rations while everypony waited for the other horseshoe to drop and finish us off. But it never came. In those years, we had Rainbow Dash constantly trying to get help down below. She and Scootaloo were the loudest voices for that. There were lots of others, though, who wanted to take care of our own first." He paused. "You okay?"

I could feel things dripping along my sides; it didn't hurt…but that didn't make it anywhere close to okay. "Don't ask that. Keep going! Why didn't folks listen to Rainbow Dash?" Only a few minutes. Only a few... I could handle a few minutes. I could. I could!

So why did it feel like I was nailed to a floor right now?

"Well, part of it was that she was a Ministry Mare, not a general.

She was always seen as Princess Luna's mascot for the pegasi. Hell of a flyer and the only Ministry Mare with even a sliver of military background, but she wasn't a soldier in many pegasi's eyes. Just a glory hound and a dirt-kisser. So when Cloudsdale was wiped out, the same thing happened that happened now when Maripony blew up. Command structures were shattered. There was doubt and confusion. And along comes Rainbow Dash telling everypony we had to risk radiation and worse to help the surface. I think the military fliers resented it. They rallied together in opposition to her simply because she was a reminder of everything that had gone wrong--" He stopped as my body let out a wet and meaty crunch.

"Keep talking!" I nearly screamed. If they put me out, then there was no telling if I'd wake before the evacuation took place. He didn't, and I could feel things being done to my shoulders that felt as though pieces were being drilled in place. "Please!"

"Stress hormones are through the roof," a technician said.

Chicanery's voice cracked a moment as he went on. "The public was more on her side though, so the military ran nonstop propaganda to undermine her. They claimed that the surface was contaminated with diseases and radiation. Sent down probes to show mutated life and fields of dead bodies. Anything and everything they could to discredit her. Then the eclipse happened. Folks thought it was the end of the world. Sun and moon coming together like they were going to hit. Kinda quaint now," he said mirthlessly as the machine hummed. "With the social disruption following that…well…Finally it came down to a vote of all the settlements whether to cut off the surface permanently or open the skies up and help the surface. All kinds of experts gave their testimony about pros and cons…mostly cons. Most damning was Doctor Mephitis. He showed footage of diseased zebras eating each other. Sickened the whole room. Rainbow Dash told them all to go buck themselves, though, and took off on her own. The Enclave got its start there, based on the military."

At least it was working; listening to him was keeping my mind where it should be: not panicking. "Son of a mule," I shouted. "Sick bastard probably accessed the cameras in his own prison camp!"

"Hey. That's my ancestor you're talking about there," Chicanery said in mock seriousness, "And by all accounts, he was a pretty serious doctor. I don't know what you mean by prison camp. Yellow River was a hospital."

“Wait. He was your--” I started to say when I opened my eyes…oh, that was wrong. In front of me, I saw two bloody metal hands reaching for my face, the ends tipped in hooked blades, tiny pincers, and a panoply of needles. The restraints about my neck stopped me cold as I clenched my eyes shut and did all I could not to teleport away. I really did NOT want to leave this midway. But then I felt the tugging around my ears and cheeks, and it was all I could do to do nothing as I felt the rubbing that made me want to scratch and scream all at once. When those hands pulled, nothing could stop me from seeing the bloody hide dangling from the steel fingers, because my eyelids were attached to it.

“How is she still conscious? She should be having a heart attack right now,” I heard one technician say to another. I didn’t want to answer; I could feel my own blood dripping over my face. Then a clean hand returned with a plate of metal and pressed it to my face. “Alicorn modification. Seriously? Somepony decided to make augmentation designs for Celestia and Luna?”

Not them, but for whatever alicorns were created by Twilight’s potion, I suspected. After all, what was better than a flying magical pony but a flying magical bulletproof pony with beam guns? Or who knew, maybe there was a plot for cyberpony princesses! At this point, I put nothing past Goldenblood. The metal plate was being fixed to my face, covering my muzzle and head before being screwed in place. I couldn’t blink. I had a disturbing realization that I wouldn’t ever blink again. Waves of magic rolled over me as the machine whirled and banged, augmenting me for the last time. Any more, and I’d be Dawn.

“Whoa! Foreign biological material detected!” one of the technicians shouted.

“Don’t worry. The pod will flush it,” replied the other.

“It’s in her uterus,” the first snapped. “Dear skies above, I think she’s pregnant!”

What? I ignored the cutting, the whirring, the dripping, and the part of my brain that imagined what I’d look like when this was over and focused on that word. Pregnant. “That’s impossible! I have a contraceptive implant!” I shouted.

“Check again!” a technician snapped.

“Not from what my systems are showing. Looks like it implanted in the uterine wall recently. Hormone levels confirm,” the mare technician said. “I might be able to override. Do you want to keep

it?”

Oh Celestia, she was asking me this now? Now?! I had parts of my body being rearranged, a weapon to destroy, an enemy to stop, a city to save, and…and…crazy would be easier than reality! Did I want to keep it? Was she serious?

Did I? With everything going on, it really boiled down to a yes or no question. I had every reason to say no. Off the top of my head, I could think of six or seven good arguments as to why I shouldn’t have a foal, both now and ever. They were reasonable, smart reasons, but then, I never was a smart pony.

“Yes,” I muttered, then shouted, “Yes! Please, yes!”

“Attempting to override purge,” the mare said as I started to focus my magic to teleport out. It didn’t matter if I wasn’t completely put together. My priorities had been smashed in the knee with this new knowledge. If I had to, I’d tell Twister what to do, crawl to Thunderhead, and travel in any direction away from danger I could. Maybe see what LittlePip was up to. “There! It’s moving on to finishing up.”

“Thank you,” I said, wishing I could cry... but I didn’t have tears any more.

“What’s this? ‘Echo Cleanup Protocol’?” another technician asked as there was more hissing and whirring and doing something to my body. “Seriously? The parts are installed. What more is there to do?”

“Don’t ask me. It’d take me a year to get through all these designs and files. I think something in her PipBuck is guiding these, because I sure ain’t. Lighthooves used the pegasus production model. I have no clue what this ‘Eclipse’ model is supposed to be.” The pod around me whirred, then fell silent. A hiss of water blew over me, followed by a blast of warm air. Then the front of the pod opened with a hot, wet roll of steam, and I slowly stepped out.

The half dozen Enclave soldiers, unicorn technicians, Twister, Chicanery, and Boo all gaped at me as I walked forward. My E.F.S. was installing drivers in the periphery of my vision. The only parts of me that could feel open air were my mouth and under my tail. Every inch of me that remained was covered. I wanted to go to the technicians and find out for sure if they were certain I was pregnant, but I also needed to get to the roof, but I also... I also needed...

I felt everything slipping away from me. This was wrong. All

wrong! I'd given up enough of myself, hadn't I? Was there anything left of me? Anything at all? "Mirror... " I croaked. It was the least of the things I wanted, but the easiest to supply. Baby steps.

Chicanery, naturally, spoke first as he trotted over to a mirror set up against the wall. Somepony had cracked it, clearly not happy with the results. "Are you sure?" Chicanery asked as he stood in front of it. "Don't you want to know more about the ba--"

"Just give me the fucking mirror!" I shouted, reaching out with a hoof and throwing him aside. Then I saw the reflection and froze.

The mare in the mirror wasn't me. She was coated head to hoof in black armor. The only sign that a flesh and blood pony lay within was a small opening around her mouth and two more for her red and black mane and tail. Angular red plates glowed softly where eyes should be. Black plates covered every other inch of her body, including her cutie mark. Even her horn had been plated in black steel. Between the plates, black cables ran like sinews under the plating. At her sides, a pair of black beam rifles pointed at her own reflection. Mentally, numbly, I toggled through the new commands on my EFS and selected flight.

Two wings, black as night itself and set with large red talismans in the middle of the wing joints, spread from her sides. The control planes resembled feathers, glimmering with tiny motes of red light along the metallic pinions. As the talismans powered up, I felt a sensation of levitation wash over me. I bowed my head, a dozen different reactions mixing and crashing through me. Slow laughter began to fill the room, low and tense and more than a little mad. Too late, I realized it was coming from me.

I screamed and whirled on the idling booth. I didn't know if they read my intent or if I mentally smashed buttons in my rage, but the beam guns on my side cracked again and again as they blasted the booth. My sword swung wildly in great arcs before me. Metal parted, hoses sprayed, wires sparked, and I laughed. I howled as I ripped the machine apart, and then, when there was nothing left of that horrid device to destroy, I sprayed and slashed and smashed my way through the rest of the room, pegasi and unicorns running for the exit or diving for cover.

I'd just keep shooting and slashing till there was nothing left. That seemed like the right thing to do. Yeah. And I whirled, ready to continue my rampage till something finished me off, when I came face to face with Boo. The terrified mare hadn't fled or jumped for

cover. Her pale eyes were wide as she sat there, frozen before me. A part of me, the Reaper part of me, wanted to blast her to ash and cut down everypony else just because they were there. Boo should have been the first to run and hide. She deserved to die! They all did! *I* did!

Then the blank stretched out a hoof and touched the side of my mouth. My cheek and lips were all I had left that weren't covered in steel. I trembled, not sure what I'd do next, when she smiled, leaned in, and gave a little nuzzle. She tilted her head, scratched at an ear with her hoof, and then looked to me with her bright ivory eyes. "B... Buh... Baaa... " She paused, and then, "Bwackjack!" she said, her voice light and bright and everything I needed right now.

I was Blackjack, and her reminding me of it was like cold Hoofington rain on my fury. I trembled as the rage that had given me power and action was robbed from me by simple kindness. That Boo had talked at all was a marvel that I'd ponder when the most important half hour of my life was past. Chicanery, Twister, and the others rose from behind crates and doors. Thankfully, I hadn't killed anypony.

"Are you... okay?" Chicanery asked, in lieu of 'sane', 'safe', or their opposites.

I shook my head. "I look like a comic book villain. All I need are spikes," I muttered. Then I lifted my sword and brought it down where the beam guns met my body, cutting the weapons from me. Maybe it was stupid -- after all, I was out of bullets -- but I had to reclaim *something* of myself. Some small inch that wasn't a replacement or addition. I turned to the spooked mare technician. "You're sure I'm pregnant?" The mare gave a hesitant nod. "Is the baby okay?"

She gave a little half smile. "Right now it's a microscopic collection of cells implanted in your uterine wall. Hardly a foal." Her smile disappeared. "I have no idea if you'll be able to carry it to term, let alone give birth. You might be better off aborting it now. Odds of a miscarriage are high anyhow."

That would have been the safe, sane, and smart thing to do, certainly. It happened from time to time in 99. Nopony would know if I did it... except for me.

I'd taken so much out of this world. What would it be like to bring something into it?

"If that happens, it happens," I muttered, not meeting anypony's

eyes. Right now I felt so close to Twilight that it hurt. When the pressure was off, would I change my mind? I couldn't think straight about something so monumental. "How'd it happen? I thought I had a copper implant to prevent that."

"I can only guess that your healing and repair talisman treated it like any other bit of shrapnel or bullet and digested it," the mare answered, then sighed. "If we had the magic and a candidate, I'd suggest a surrogacy spell. You should be fine for a few months, but when the foal starts pressing against your reinforcements, it's going to get really uncomfortable for both of you."

I nodded. Something to keep in mind. I stood and tried to take a more objective assessment of myself, examining at my legs and peering back. Somepony had laser-etched my cutie mark on to my flanks. It brought the ghost of a smile to my lips. I had no idea if I still had my cutie mark under that metal, but I could pretend that I did. "I don't look like any cyberpony I've seen," I said.

"Talk to your PipBuck. It was running the show," the mare technician said, clearly disgruntled. "The pod only used our stuff for parts. I'm not even sure what those are," she said, pointing a wing at the glowing spots of energy on my wings. "Some sort of micro arcane energy repeaters or something. Levitation ruby talismans were incorporated to get you off the ground. And then somepony laminated it all black to make it match your legs. And I have no clue where that came from," she said as she gestured towards my back.

"What?" I asked as I stretched around to see, and failing miserably. "What is it?"

Twister gave a concerned smile. "It says 'Security' along your back. And there's this little caped pony icon etched on your shoulder."

"Really?" I wanted to blink in surprise. At least I could smile still. Now I just had to get the memories of being in the pod scoured from my memor--... nope. Better to not think about it for now. I needed to get my head together, and something that the white stallion had said stuck with me. I pointed a hoof at Chicanery. "You said you're related to that Doctor Mephitis guy?"

"Sure. He never married, but he had liaisons with some unicorns in the tower," Chicanery answered, then rolled his eyes a little, "I mean, he was a great stallion. His biography is required reading for every schoolpony. But he did have a few little personal problems."

Right. Like leaving thousands of zebras locked up with turrets

keeping them penned up while they starved and cannibalized each other. “You should visit this little place called Yellow River down on the surface. Might make you appreciate your ancestor in a whole new... light... ”

Oh shit. It couldn’t be that simple, could it?

Okay. Thoughts organized. It was now time for some movement. “I need to get up to the top of the tower,” I said in a rush. I glanced at my wings, but for now I’d rely on four-legged locomotion till I didn’t have ceilings to smash into. I pointed a hoof at Twister. “You get that stable evacuated.”

“On it,” Twister replied, then pressed the side of her head. “Blackjack is coming up. Big black-and-red cyberpony... alicorn... Look, you just can’t miss her. Don’t dust her.” Then she frowned at me and gestured behind her with a wing. “There’re stairs back that way. Pass the barricade and watch your head. They’ve got a lot more above us.” She paused, then turned to a soldier. “Flame Pinion? Could you escort her? Just in case? I really don’t want anypony shooting at her or her shooting at anypony she shouldn’t.”

“Great. A chaperone,” I said with a huff as I shook my head. Worst of all, it was probably a good idea. How depressing was that? “Let’s go.”

Every second that passed, I could feel things flying further and further apart. Returning to the battle in the shaft, I looked around at the fighting and imagined the nightmare of trying to evacuate four hundred civilians through this battlefield.

“Can you do anything about this?” Pinion shouted as he joined the others in blasting away at the attackers above us. “You’re supposed to be some kind of cyber supermare!”

There had to be at least a hundred above me. Maybe more! It’d take far more time than I had to shoot my way through, provided I didn’t get dusted or gooped in the process. But a part of me wanted to help, badly. I pulled out my sword and levitated a half dozen plates of scrap metal. “Cover me and watch for falling catwalks.” Biting on the blade’s handle, I searched my E.F.S. for the new commands and toggled on flight. My wings hummed as the talismans charged up, and I felt as light as a weightless five-hundred-pound feather.

“All right, all of you,” I bellowed. “I’m Blackjack, and I’m giving you this one chance to give up, get the hell out of here, and save me a lot of frigging annoyance! Don’t make me come up there! I mean

it!" Then I raised the plates so the crimson beams and disintegration bolts sparked and spattered away above me.

Having a little experience as a cyberpony, I knew better than to try flapping my wings. My augmentations were smarter than I was and would handle the movement far more effectively than I could. Given just how much was whirring and working inside those two complex wing assemblies, I counted this as a blessing. I focused on a direction... up there... and a speed... fast... .and trusted my wings to get me there. What I didn't know was just how fast 'fast' was.

This would have been a very good thing to know before I hurtled my way towards the underside of a catwalk. My plan had been to use the plates as shields and whatnot, but the fact was that I was moving much too fast for that. Faster... much faster than I'd anticipated... I found myself greeting the underside of the catwalk with my face, impacting with a resounding clang and a shower of sparks as I bounced and tumbled wildly, my 'shield' banging and flying every which way. I wasn't exactly sure how many surfaces I bounced off... four, at least, one of which was a very surprised cyberpony, before I cut out my wings and let gravity take me to land in a heap on the floor with a great cloud of dust billowing around me. Just when I'd thought I was done, my shields clanged off my body, with the last spinning slowly atop my steel-clad horn.

A tiny blue pegasus in my head bit her hoof to keep from laughing at me as the unicorn with the chalkboard was trying to figure out how the plates had landed on me. At least the little pink pony gave me a 9. Flying was for pegasi. I saw at least a dozen ponies staring at me, and above me the defenders burst out laughing. "That's Blackjack?! What a joke!" was bellowed.

"My baby brother can fly better than you!" called another.

"Hey Blackjack! When this is over, me and the boys can give you a real flying lesson!" howled a third.

That lasted for all of a second, and then the Neighvarro pegasi stormed the catwalks in a blaze of gunfire, catching the defenders off guard so they were forced to retreat to the next ring of metal. I watched with surreal amazement as the power-armored ponies stood upside down on the catwalks, using the floor as cover as they drove the defenders back. The defenders' gunfire was now far less concentrated and deadly, and the attackers had solid metal floor between them and the cyberponies rather than plates of scrap armor.

“Brilliant! I never seen a distraction technique so well pulled off! I mean, you were spinning on all three axes at once. And the crying for your mommy? Wonderful,” Chicanery said as he trotted up with his camera helmet back on.

“Did you fix that?” I asked sourly as I rose to my hooves, one plate still perched on the end of my horn, rotating briskly.

“Oh yeah. No way I’m missing footage like this! I plan to live through this, and when I do--” there was a flash of silver, and I sheathed my sword before I turned and trotted for the exit. “Wait, what--” he began. Then the hat came apart and tumbled into his hooves. “My footage... ” he whimpered. “Not cool.”

Outside, on the landing dock, the larger battle hit me like a storm. Raptors now maneuvered around the tower like great swooping birds of prey while wings of power armor battled teams of cyberponies swarming about the tower like angry bees and killer wasps. Only two Raptors fired at the city now, the rest busy battling Storm Chaser’s followers. As I stood there, the first wave of stable ponies began to rush out. Thankfully, property was light in stables, and most carried little more than a bundle of personal knickknacks. “This way into the *Sleet*! Hurry!” shouted a pegasus as he sought to direct the flow towards the landing hatch of the idling Raptor.

Above us extended the six large shield plates, and above that, where Raptors had once tied up for repairs, were service gantries and bays hanging like the branches of a dead tree. A ring of large, heavy doors ran about the tower by the branches, likely so that fabricated parts could be brought out to the ships. When the Enclave tried to shell them, they fell shut with booms I could hear even from down here. As soon as the Enclave flew past, swarms of cyberponies would pop out and harass the soldiers from behind only to retreat when the greater numbers of soldiers rallied against them. If the doors were working, that was a bad sign. How long until the launchers were working again too?

“Would you look at that?” Chicanery said as he trotted out with his camera hat duct taped back together in a sticky gray cap. He caught me glaring at it and at once took it off and hugged it to his chest like he was protecting his foal. “No! I fixed it, Blackjack.”

“Tape my flight attempts, and I’ll *unfix* it,” I warned as I peered way up at the top of the tower. “That’s a long way up,” I muttered.

“Only three thousand feet,” he replied as he carefully put the hat on, smacked the wires with his wing, and then panned the battle.

“Oh no... ” he breathed.

I turned, saw which way he was looking, and then thought the exact same thing. Thunderhead rotated like an immense, ragged holey wheel of cheese that had been attacked by furious bloatsprites. The smooth, pristine torus was now mottled, twisted, and uneven. As I watched, a great swath of it began to sag. Like rainbow sherbet left out too long, it began to pull away from the rest of the city towards the cloud layer below. The metal supporting structure gave way with a shriek and plunged far below. I could now see into the smoke-filled structure; see the buildings within grotesquely elongated, holed, or melted.

“I have to end this. Now. Help get that stable evacuated,” I said sharply as I stared up.

“Oh, come on! I know you’re badass, but how can you end this?” Chicanery asked incredulously.

I whirled on him, levitated out a piece of paper, and snapped it open in front of his face. On it were the fifteen letters in four words that I was keeping away from Lighthooves. If he knew, he’d never let me get off this deck. Chicanery’s eyes widened as he scanned them again and again. “Brown rain,” he muttered, eyelid twitching, then turned to the stable ponies and rushed to where an elderly stallion was taking his time. “Quickly, Grandpa! Quickly! Get on the nice Raptor.” He rushed over, scooped the old stallion on his back, and trotted to the Raptor. “Let’s go. Trot lively! In we go!”

I tucked the paper away. Amazing what those four words could do. I turned to Boo. “You need to get on too, Boo. I don’t think I can fly you safely up there. I’m not sure I can fly *me* safely up there.”

The mare cocked her head with a listening look that gave me a moment of hope, then smiled. “Bwackjack?”

“Raptor. Go. Get in, Boo!” I pointed at the open door with a wing. “Please?”

She smiled and nuzzled my cheek again. “Bwackjack!”

“Yes! Blackjack! Blackjack wants Boo into the Raptor. Blackjack wants Boo safe! Please do what Blackjack asks, Boo,” I tried plaintively.

“Bwackjack! Bwackjack! Bwackjack!” Boo began to sing as she skipped around me. What in Equestria had gotten into her? She was acting like... well... like I did when I was a little filly.

I blinked at her and slumped a little, then showed her the paper. “Look! See? Go in the Raptor, Boo!” Boo leaned in, tilted her head

far to the right, narrowed her eyes and stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth. “They have snack cakes in there!” I lied desperately.

Her eyes widened in comprehension as she looked from the paper to me, back to the paper, back to me, then at the Raptor. Then she pointed her hoof at the paper and declared in glee, “Bwackjack!”

I slumped in defeat. “I’m not going to win this, am I?”

She grinned up at me and gave me a hug and a cheek nuzzle. “Bwaaackjack... ” Nope. Defeated. And she hadn’t even broken out the big eyes or pouty lip.

At the very least, though, I could protect her better. In a few minutes, I had my operative armor on her and repaired to cover her. The respirator hissed as she stared at me, and I imagined her baffled expression. “Don’t look at me like that. If you’re coming with me, I don’t want you burned again. Burning bad. Owwie,” I said, trying to give her a smile. The *Sleet* lifted off and moved away as another ship arrived. For a moment, I felt a thrill of panic as I saw it was the *Galeforce*.

Then the door opened up, and it became clear that somepony had made a mess of the crew. A terrified Captain Crosswinds came galloping out of the carnage. The green stallion, clearly battered and with one eye swelling shut, was being ridden by a striped, bloodied, and cackling filly I knew quite well. “Hiyas, Blackjack!” she said to Boo, and then looked at me. “Who’s your badass friend?”

Great. Now my friends didn’t even recognize me. “Hello, Rampage.”

She blinked in shock, then burst into laughter atop the green stallion. “Blackjack? Is that... fuck me with a lollypop, it is you! What the fuck happened?”

“Upgrades,” I muttered. “I don’t wanna talk about it. Today sucks.”

“Damn. I think Big Daddy should give you leadership of the Reapers on looks alone,” she laughed, then regarded Boo. “And here we have Boojack,” Rampage said gaily. “Well, now my day is officially awesome.” She kept her hooves pressed firmly against the sides of the captain’s head as she stood on his back. “Do you like her?” she said, gesturing at the Raptor with her head. “I’m thinking of renaming her the *Rampage*, loading her up with beer and hookers, and becoming an earth pony sky pirate. Then, when I’ve had my fun, loading it up with all the explosives, balefire bombs, and magical waste I can and flying it right into this great big magic

ball the Enclave say is unbreachable. What do you think?"

"Get these unicorns to Stable 99 and have fun," I replied, relatively sure the mare would grow bored with that idea, eventually. "How'd you get on board the *Galeforce* in the first place?"

"Stormy loaded me up in their big cannon, and I got to play 'Fun with Ballistics'. I owe their gunner some oral sex for making that shot. Once I was on board, I cut, stomped, and smashed my way to the captain here. I might not be able to fly a Raptor, but he can. Isn't that right, Breakwind?" Rampage asked, squeezing her hooves. The battered green stallion cried out in pain.

"She can't die! I disintegrated her myself, and she came back!" Crosswinds shouted wildly. "Twice!"

"Yeah yeah. Blackjack is supposed to be helping me with that, but she's got that whole 'life is good' shit going on," Rampage said with a disdainful roll of her eyes. "He's tried to sell out just about everypony he can to get me off his back. Pansy... "

"Please. I'll be a good captain. I'll go on the straight and narrow. I'll feed orphans and widows. I'll stop cheating on my mare and my mistress and my girlfriend if you'll please get her off my back!" he begged.

"Rampage," I began.

She snapped immediately, "Oh, don't you 'Rampage' me, Blackjack. This shit lies like I regenerate. Trust me. I gave him a chance to play along with the 'good pony' routine. Twice. I got disintegrated for it. Twice. It hurt." She growled between her teeth. "And he warned Hoarfrost what you're doing, so now there's a whole lot more shooting going on."

I frowned at the battered captain. "I'll pay my taxes!" he pleaded. "I'll resign my commission. I'll acknowledge all those bast... er... um... those 'potentially illegitimate offspring' I've sired! I'll fly to the surface and wash the hooves of poor wastelanders personally. Just please get her off me!"

"I might be able to do that," I began, levitating out a slip of paper, making his eyes widen in hope, "If you can get me one of these inside a minute."

"I... you... that... " he stammered. "I can get you one! Half an hour, tops. We'll yank 'em right out of the turrets. You can have all six. Just get her off me."

"Sorry. Not quick enough. Rampage, he's all yours," I said.

"Nooo!" he wailed.

“Oh, shut your mouth,” Rampage said as her hooves gave another squeeze. Then she turned to me. “So, Blackjack. Are you really… I mean, you said you had one… ”

“If I can get what I need to make it work, sure.” I sighed, looking up. “At this rate, I might have to just cut one off a missile.”

“Do you think that, if I’m fast, I could get back and be here for it?” she asked.

“Probably not. I’m using it just as soon as I find one,” I replied with a smile. “You could come with me, but that’d require you to leave your ship in the hooves of somepony who probably doesn’t care about becoming a sky pirate.”

Rampage screwed up her face with indecision. “Ehhh… .decisions, decisions. Stay and do the right thing and become a sky pirate, or snap his neck and get what I want.” She let out a huff. “Boo? What do you think?”

The blank pointed a hoof at me. “Bwackjack!”

“She can talk?” Rampage goggled. “Quick! Say ‘booger’! ‘Shit!’ ‘Harlot!’ ‘Batsuawa!’ ‘Trickle down economics!’ ‘Pink!’”

“Bwa?” Boo tilted her head.

“Rampage, we don’t have time for this,” I said flatly. “Are you coming or not?”

“But… but… I have a Raptor now! Sky pirates! But a good chance of me getting killed,” she whined as she gestured from the ship to the top of the tower, clearly torn. Finally, she blurted, “That’s not fair, Blackjack!”

Given everything that had happened to me, I couldn’t help but laugh a little. “Today isn’t a fair day for anypony, Rampage. See to your ship. Sky piracy sounds better than dying to me, any day,” I said as I peered up again.

“That’s because dying for you is actually easy,” she sulked, but there was a hint of doubt in her voice as well. She kicked Crosswinds in the ribs with her hindhooves. “Yah mule. Back to my ship. We’ll need to paint it bright red to make it go faster. Give it some extra guns. And spikes. It definitely needs some more spikes.”

I shook my head and looked at Boo, hoping she’d follow. Boo, however, waited patiently at my side. Finally I sighed and scooped her onto my back, positioned her, and activated my wings. Thankfully, she was no heavier than the rest of me. “Cover me,” I said to Flame Pinion before snapping my wings and taking flight.

I’d been mistaken on my speed in the tower. I was no faster than

Morning Glory, and there were plenty of other pegasi wheeling and darting twice as fast as me. Maybe it was the fact that they were pegasi and I, even with my augmentations, was still a unicorn. The levitation field remained steady, but I watched as my power supply dropped slowly before my eyes.

In the air, the view of chaos was now complete. Raptor fought with Raptor as they moved in a deadly dance of maneuver and counter maneuver. I watched as the *Castellanus*, still trailing smoke from multiple holes in her plates, dove vertically towards the red-accented *Sirocco*. For a terrifying moment, I was certain that the *Castellanus* was in freefall as the ship blasted the spinning props atop the *Sirocco* with its front cannons. Then the *Castellanus* tumbled to the side, turned ninety degrees, and opened fire with its remaining ventral turrets, tearing great green gashes in the side of the *Sirocco*. As it plunged beneath its enemy, the *Castellanus*'s propellers blurred to life to slow its descent, its nose swinging up as it hovered in place and fired at the underside of its enemy. I had no idea how much damage it did, but, as I watched the *Castellanus* fall back into a horizontal position and pull away and the *Sirocco* return fire, I felt it was a little surreal to watch a giant war machine pirouetting so.

All around me, pegasi wheeled, clashed, and wheeled again. The more maneuverable cyberponies did all they could to attack their enemies from any direction but the front. The power armor, on the other hoof, would move in paired formations flying towards each other, each blasting any cyberpony harassing the other wing. Then the two wings would veer off seconds before collision. As soon as they pulled apart from each other, the cyberponies reengaged, harassing their backs and wings. I saw what Twister meant about an open-air advantage. Out here, the cyberponies really had to work to pick off an enemy before another formation pulled in and blasted them out of the sky.

Only now there were power-armored ponies fighting other power armor too. I had no idea how they identified each other. E.F.S.? But in this case, they did all they could to fight two-on-one. One would engage the enemy and the second would fly up from behind and rip open their wings with those cruel scorpion tails. It was a daring display of teamwork; if one's partner fell too far away or behind, they were dead... or their partner was dead and they were next.

When we reached the branches with gantries and fabrication doors,

one immediately lifted enough to expel a cloud of fliers at me, Boo, and the dozen or so power-armored fliers with us. “Hold on, Boo,” I shouted as I tried to go as fast up as I could. It would have been nice to know exactly how my flight worked. The levitation field was easy enough to understand. I’d seen robots with similar. But what was pushing me along? Did the wings have some sort of thrust talismans? Was it telekinesis? I had to flap my wings, so--

Two cyberponies darted up behind me like I’d observed before, only we weren’t their usual cup of tea; they’d never before encountered another cyberpony with a hysterical pony flailing her rear hooves wildly and crushing the cyberpony’s throat in terror, nor had they had to deal with a flying unicorn cyberpony with a glowing sword flashing around behind her. They actually paced me for a little while, staring in bafflement as if unsure if I was an actual threat or not. Three seconds later, with agility I could only dream of, they flipped in the air and pointed their very deadly weapons right at the pair of us. I knew exact--

Then four Enclave power armor streaked past horizontally while precisely planting crimson beams at the pair. A second later, they were past and I was left spinning around wildly in their wake. When I came to a stop, Boo clung to my back like she was Wonderglued, and I was left with hundreds of ponies zipping and blasting around me. “Slow down!” I shouted, waving my sword in their general direction while a tiny blue pegasus in my head laughed at me. Pegasi moved, thought, and in general *were* too damned fast for me. Pegasuses and their cheating wings.

Still, time to get while the getting was good. I continued to climb, leaving the fight far below me. This high, I discovered several things: the air was growing thin and increasingly cold and windy. Every second I flew, my power supply dropped down bit by bit. As badass as I might have appeared, these wings gobbled up juice like crazy. There wasn’t an altimeter on my E.F.S., and I was so damn high that, as I looked about, I could see the horizon curving ever so slightly. The battle below became little flickering dots and larger flashing ovals. As I climbed, I watched the percentage of my power supply falling away: 50%. 40%. 30%... For once, I began to feel cold and struggled to breathe. Metal wasn’t the most insulative material, and I was covered in it. 20%. I could see the top of Shadowbolt Tower. I just had to fly a little further. 10%... A hundred feet. Fifty.

3%... The talismans on the wings pushing me through the air began to flicker. “No... ” I groaned as I felt gravity start to pull me back down. I needed a few more feet. Just a few... it was so cold. So hard to focus. My metal limbs and wings flailed as the red light died.

The wings froze, and I began to fall.

Teleporting me was hard. Teleporting me with even more metal was challenging. Teleporting all that and Boo all at once was like trying to magically smoosh both of us simultaneously through a hoof-wide pipe a dozen feet long. Only the knowledge I was about to fall *miles* to the earth below, and the primal and fundamental terror that accompanied that knowledge, allowed me to force a teleportation spell that got me to the top edge of the tower, and even then it was still so far that I was only able to hook my forehooves over the edge. My horn popped like a blown bulb, and I watched as my magic failed all at once. My sword, hovering beside me, tumbled away to the green Core far below. I saw it glitter for a moment in the sun, and then it was gone.

Boo scrambled off my back and onto the icy roof. The blank bit my mane and hauled me over the lip, and I felt a phenomenal appreciation for earth ponies. My power supply flickered at 1%, and then my vision went dark. The howling wind fell silent. All I could feel was cold wind and cold metal. “Boo. Gems, Boo,” I rasped. “Gems. Please. I need power.” I started to shiver in the cold air.

Something warm nudged my cheek, then draped itself over me. “I’m sorry, Boo,” I muttered, gasping for breath. The air was so thin here that I wondered if I was just going to pass out. I wasn’t even sure I had any gems left. Maybe way down in the bottom of my saddlebags, next to any other junk I happened to be carrying. My life support systems operated on a separate circuit, powered by my chest generator, but how long could I be up here before Boo or I perished?

I tried to move what muscle I had, but it was futile. I was more machine than meat now. I needed arcane energy to keep going. All I could do was lie here in the absolute silence. Well. At least I wasn’t here alone. No matter how hard or fast I tried to breathe, I couldn’t quite get enough air. I could only imagine what it was like for Boo. Even my sense of feeling began to fall away.

I could almost imagine I could hear singing.

~ ~ ~

I lay in a proper dungeon. Stone walls on all sides. Heavy barred gate blocking the exit. My body ached with cold and wet as I sniffed and shivered. The only thing to mar the effect was an arcane camera set in the upper corner of the cell and the light that'd been on since I'd arrived.

"Goldenblood is dead," a mare said, cold and hard and terrible. I shivered, turning to look up at the gate as a cold blue glow enveloped it and, after several clicks in the lock, opened it wide. There stood Princess Luna, though not the Princess I had seen before. This mare, older and harder and more imperious than that playful and kind mare, glared down at me with contempt. "Goldenblood is dead, but I suspect his conspiracies are not," she said in cold rage, eyes narrowed like blades.

"I don't know anything about Horizons," I whispered. "I told you and Pinkie. I don't... "

"I'm not just talking about Horizons. Everything he has done... everything he has touched... is suspect. Tainted. Poisoned. The secret projects. The liaisons in the O.I.A. The government itself. Everything!" she said, her last word bellowing like thunder and knocking me to my face. As I lay there, groveling on the cold hard stone floor, she continued, "I will not rest until everything he has ever done is laid open and bare. His association with the Ministry Mares. His work with the Ministry. His 'back channels' with the zebras. Nothing is certain anymore! Do you understand? Nothing!"

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," I whispered.

"Sorry?" Luna said in contemptuous tones. "Do you understand what is happening as we speak? The zebras have made the preposterous claim that we detonated a megaspell in their capital. That we dispatched an agent to Roam and committed an atrocity on their soil. They have produced doctored film of ravaged cities, deftly edited to appear to be their capital, and are broadcasting them throughout their empire, but why? Why tell such a blatant lie, given that our military reports all our megaspells accounted for, primed, and ready to be cast?" Her furious eyes glared down at me as she continued, cold as the winter sky, "Whence sprang this deceit? Is it a plot of Goldenblood? A ploy of the Caesar? The lives of tens of millions of my subjects are at stake, and the one pony I trusted more than any other has betrayed me!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," I repeated, averting my eyes to the silver

glittering on her hooves. “I would do anything to... to take it all back!”

“Anything?” she asked in a lovely, soft voice. Then, for a minute, she remained silent. When she spoke again, her voice was gentle. “Well, then. Do you wish a chance to redeem yourself?” she asked.

“Yes, my Princess. Anything.”

The white moon on her chest plate flashed, then detached and in a burst of light transformed into a geometric, glowing white crystal the size of a pony’s eye. “Do you know what this is?”

“That’s... that’s the EC-1101 megaspell matrix, Your Majesty.”

“A megaspell *you* worked on. A megaspell that *he* may have compromised,” she said as she contemplated it with disgust. “Goldenblood could have conspired with any one of the ponies it is intended for. Twilight. Fluttershy. That judge. Even my sister. He could have orchestrated a coup quite easily with this.” Her teeth bared in frustration. “I should have it destroyed, but what if *that* is his plan? I cannot know for certain.” Then she lowered her eyes to me. “Therefore, I think we shall try something less predictable.”

“What do you wish, my Princess?” I rasped weakly.

“We shall bond your mind and soul to this megaspell. Your body shall be taken away for safekeeping. If for some reason this spell should ever be released, it will search out its intended, but *you* shall ensure that it returns to *me*. If you do not, your mind and soul shall evaporate slowly and steadily till they are no more. But!” she said sharply, and then smiled. “But if you are loyal, if you are true, and it returns to me, then I shall reunite your body, mind, and soul. And if no plot emerges and EC-1101 remains safe, my land and my people secure, then... then you shall be pardoned.”

Slowly, I pulled myself to my aching hooves and bowed my head to the floor. “I accept, Your Majesty. I accept,” I said, utterly sincere.

Slowly, she backed away, and two stallions in dark purple robes entered, one short and stout, the other tall and thin. “Do it. I have to prepare for the Gala tonight. I’d cancel the damned thing, but it’s important to keep the pretense while we ferret out his conspirators. Once Pinkie is finished rounding up that Four Stars trash, she can scour the O.I.A. with my blessing.” Their hoods drew back as the unicorns, one blue and the other orange, stared at me with eyes full of stars. Then their horns flared and the world became white pain, and then nothing at all but white.

~ ~ ~

When thought returned, a few things had become apparent to me. One, I could breathe without feeling as if I were drowning. Two, I was being carried along by somepony. Three, I was doomed to constantly experience the memories and experiences of other ponies any time I closed my eyes. Really, why couldn't I have dreamed about a normal Equestrian life again?

Still, I didn't have time to waste. If anything, I might be too late. "Who's there? Who is it? Boo? Pinion? Twister? Glory? Dusk? Boomer? Rainbow?" I then frowned. "It's Lighthooves, isn't it? You were watching through the Perceptitron. You sick monster! I'll bite you to death!" I shouted, then snapped wildly against whoever carried me before they flung me off the top of the tower. I'd hit an artery! Maybe infection would finish him off!

A wing smacked me hard across the face. "Oh, you want to make this hard, do ya?" Wiggling as much as I could, I thumped my face against a metal flank. I thought I felt my steel-shod horn dig into something. "Take that! I'll stop you, you bastard!"

Then I was dumped to a floor and felt something spicy press against my mouth. I immediately closed my mouth around it, feeling it melt away and its magical goodness spreading throughout my body. My vision flickered, and my ears crackled as power returned and I blinked up at Mare Do Well. "Oh. It is you. Hi."

"I could say the same thing, Blackjack," she said in her low, synthetic voice. "You were right about Lighthooves spotting you on the Perceptitron, but he was going to leave you up here to freeze to death before finding out what's on that damned piece of paper you keep showing ponies." She frowned, withdrew another gemstone from a bag she had in wing, then shoved it in my mouth. "Bite me to death?" she asked wryly.

I masticated furiously, absorbing the energy before swallowing. "Don't laugh. I could probably do it," I said with a smile. She offered me the bag, but when I tried to levitate it, my horn told me to fuck off. It was taking a vacation after that last port. A very long vacation. And it'd left me with a throbbing headache. "What's going on? How long was I out?" Then, without further ado, I popped the bag over my mouth, hooked the drawstrings to my ears, and began to munch munch munch as I looked around.

We were in some kind of fancy office, but it had the impression of

being used by a rather sloppy occupant. There were old posters of the Wonderbolts tacked to the wood paneling. A large map of Equestria and the Zebra lands was spread out on a large table. On a different wall were some sort of complicated schematics of a huge mechanical sphere and a mushroom-shaped building, and a mouthwritten note 'Don't let Goldie lay one hoof on this project, Apple Bloom. I don't care how much he claims he can help.' A large list next to the desk read 'Awesome Targets' along with names and locations. Most of them sounded zebraish to me. Boo, with a tilt to her head, regarded several photographs of Ministry Mares arranged around the desk.

"You've only been unconscious a few minutes. Soon as you were sighted outside the tower, Lighthooves was talking about you, watching you on that Perceptitron. When he said you passed out up here, I nipped up the shaft and got you inside my office as fast as I could. Ascending several thousand feet in a few minutes is not a smart thing to do, Blackjack. The air pressure's less than half what you're used to."

"I'm a super badass cyberpony, laid low by cold, air pressure, and dead batteries. There's something reassuring about that," I said around a mouthful of slobbery gemstones. "Lighthooves?"

"Planning to launch every single missile in one go," Rainbow Dash said, then grinned. "But I have a plan. All the power is being drawn up through an emergency conduit. You take your magical super-sharp sword and, in two swipes, he won't be able to open a single door. What do you think?"

I thought it still sounded like a quick route to electrocution. Odd; I normally wasn't the cautious mare. Not that it mattered here. "Yeah. About my magical super-sharp sword... " I muttered, looking away. "I kind of dropped it."

"You dropped it?" Rainbow Dash rasped. "You... dropped... it? How do you drop something like that?"

"Well, when I teleported, I burned out my horn. My sword was being held out in case some cyberpony nipped in at me or Boo, and when my power ran out... well... I dropped it!" I replied defensively. "Haven't you ever just dropped something before?"

Rainbow sighed and shook her head. "That's just sad," she said as she lifted off and started to hover and pace in the air. "Okay. So we need a way to prevent forty missiles from launching. We could blow one up; that'd cause one heck of a mess, but there's no guarantee

that he couldn't get the rest off. And he still has containers just full of his plague." She tapped her chin. "Plus, we have to do something to help Thunderhead--"

"Actually, I have a plan to deal with all those, too," I said around a mouthful of gems. Boo pulled out a rainbow-colored wig and, after chewing on it a little, popped it on her head. As I continued to gorge myself like a hungry baby dragon, I fumbled with my bags and passed her the piece of paper. "Don't read it out loud. No clue who might be watching."

Rainbow Dash stared at it skeptically. "Blackjack, are you crazy? This is never going to work. Where the hell did you find one of these?"

"In my adventures around Hoofington," I said with a smile.

"But you can't just use one! You have to have the authority to--" I silenced her as I raised my forehoof, jerked it to flip open the housing, and showed her my PipBuck. EC-1101 glowed obligingly on the screen. She stared a moment. "Oh, horseapples... but... Blackjack, do you know what it actually *does*?"

"No idea," I admitted, putting the leg down. "I saw how a pony tried to get one to work, so I'll do what she did. But whatever it is, I doubt plagues or Raptors will be a problem afterwards, right?"

"Maybe... " Rainbow Dash shook her head a little. "You still don't have any way to target it."

"I'll need a talisman from one of his missiles, or maybe we can yank one from a turret," I replied, extending my tongue to lap up the gems in the very bottom of the bag. That whole bag only got me about half charged; I'd definitely have to avoid long periods of flight if I could help it. I became aware that Rainbow had stopped pacing. "What?"

"You're a scary pony, you know that?" Rainbow Dash said with a shake of her head.

I pulled the bag off my face, my mouth coated in a layer of glittery sweet gem dust. "Who? Me?" She sighed and shook her head as I licked the residue away, then I dropped my eyes. "Hope I'm not too scary. Honestly, look at me. What is Glory going to think?"

"Did you treat her differently when she resembled me?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You don't look like a bad villain from a B-rate film," I countered.

"True. But so long as your friends know you're still you, you should be fine," Rainbow Dash said.

"I just wish my friends were here," I muttered. "I know we had to split up, but... "

Rainbow Dash sighed and gazed at the pictures by the desk. "Welcome to the club. We have crumbled cookies and spilt milk." She shook her head hard. "Anyway. Time's wasting. What's the plan?"

"One second," I said, putting the bag in my saddlebags and trotting to the desk, finding a piece of paper and a pencil. Then, closing my eyes, I scribbled out the instructions. Lighthooves might think I was unconscious, but he also might be watching through my eyes right now. When I finished, I folded it over and returned to Dash. "Boo?"

The blank pulled her head out of a file cabinet with a snack cake in her mouth. In a trice, she ripped open the package, flipped it in the air, and caught the cake in her mouth. Chewing happily, she trotted to us as I passed the paper to the purple-armored mare.

Dash unfolded it with her wings, then stared. "Whoa. Blackjack, you have terrible mouthwriting." She scanned the list, nodding. "Okay. I can do that. And that. Annnnd probably that. But will your friend here be able to do her part? She seems kinda... "

"She's fine," I said, turning to Boo, hoping I was right. "Boo. Listen to me. You have to stay close to Rainbow Dash. She's going to find something that's very important, and you need to get it to me. Okay, Boo? I'm counting on you." I stared into her eyes, trying to will her to understand me.

She tilted her head. "Bwackjack?" Then she nuzzled my cheek and pulled her head back with glittering sparkles on her nose.

I whirled to Rainbow Dash. "She's good. She's all over this!" I said with a grin. The most convincingest grin I ever grinned.

"Riiight," Rainbow said skeptically. "Well, let's get going. No time to waste before we do something completely stupid." She started towards the door, but I hesitated. There was a small room to the side of the office, almost an alcove, that was clearly a media center of some kind. Six monitors were dark, but the seventh had an O.I.A. symbol aglow. Slowly, I approached, the ring icon flickered and disappeared, and something new appeared on the screen.

>EC-1101 detected. Update routing data Y/N?

I stared at it as Rainbow Dash and Boo waited by the exit. "One second. I need to take care of something," I said, and tapped the "Y" key. Once again I was treated to a digital light show as the information was transferred to my PipBuck. When the transfer

ended, I saw that a navigation tag had been updated... but no matter which direction I turned, I couldn't see where it was supposed to go. It said 'Robronco HQ', but... then I looked straight down and saw the little icon directly between my hooves.

Oh. Well, I was certainly dressed for a trip to the Core.

"Hey, can you put me through to Glory?" I asked. "I want to see her again."

"We don't have time for this," Rainbow Dash objected. "Any second he'll have all those missiles loaded and be set to fire."

"You know what I'm going to do. Don't you think Thunderhead deserves a little warning?" I asked.

"And you can't use your broadcaster because of the Perceptitron," Rainbow grumbled as I tried to connect to Moonshadow's lab. The screen flickered a few times, and then there was a ping and I saw the astronomy lab a wreck. Equipment lay scattered over the floor, and there was smoke in the room.

"Glory! Moonshadow! Is anypony there?!" I shouted, but nopony answered.

"It looks like the science ministry got hit," Rainbow Dash said grimly.

I didn't give up. "I know another pony who might answer." I contacted Morningstar's lab. I heard ponies talking in the background. "Hello! Is anypony there? Doctor Morningstar?" While the equipment had fallen over, at least there wasn't as much smoke.

Then a drop-dead gorgeous mare stepped into view of the monitor, and I just stopped thinking for a moment as her long, luxurious mane swayed back and forth and gorgeous eyes blinked slowly and sensually. She asked in a voice that melted butter, "Yes? What do you want? We are trying to save valuable research here!"

"I... I... " Rainbow Dash thumped my rump with a clank and got my brain to engage, "I need to speak to Doctor Morningstar."

"Yes. Yes. What do you want?" she said in the most beautiful irritation I'd ever seen, and then she looked to the side. "No, that sample first, then those! And don't drop it again!"

"D... Doctor!?" I stammered.

She let out a snort of disdain and severed the connection. I gave my head a hard shake. Apparently something had gotten loose. I reopened the connection, being rewarded with a posterior that nearly made me forget why I called again. "Doctor Morningstar. It's me, Blackjack. Where is Glory?"

She turned, arching a brow, then smiled. “Ah yes. I am not the only one who’s undergone some changes.” She put on the doctor’s, her, thick glasses and the effect snapped me out of my lust daze. “Better? Good. My pupil is at the office of emergency management. Terminal address MN1-TNDR1-EM1- Terminal six or seven.”

Perfect. “Thank you, Doctor. Are you evacuating?”

“I won’t let my work be destroyed by military stupidity,” she declared with scorn that was gorgeous even with the glasses.

“Take it and as many researchers as you can to the Collegiate. Talk to Triage and Professor Zodiac. I’m sure they’ll welcome you and any research you have,” I said.

“Is that so? Well then… thank you,” she said with a little surprise. “I will find some way to pay you back.”

“No need. I owe you. Good luck. And leave the killing joke behind,” I suggested before cutting the terminal and entering in the address he’d given me.

The link opened, startling a pegasus stallion. “Who are you? Get off this connection!”

“My name is Blackjack!” I snapped. “Put Morning Glory on now!”

“Blackjack?” Glory said from off screen. Then the gray mare rushed into view, knocking the stallion right out of his seat. The end of her mane was singed, and there was a bandage around her head and soot on her nose, but she was ten times more stunning to me than Doctor Morningstar had been. I couldn’t talk for several seconds as she took in my appearance. Her gaze immediately softened. “Oh, Blackjack… ”

“Yeah. I got upgraded.” And to avoid talking and thinking about it, I rushed, “How is Thunderhead?”

“Your warning saved more lives than I can count. There’ve been some casualties, but for the most part we’ve kept clear. The firing has slacked off a bit. Fortunately, we have somepony to manage this disaster.” And she moved back to let a mummy come before the terminal. Or at least, that’s what he looked like: a mummy in bloody bandages with two intense eyes.

“Sky Striker?” I gasped. “How did you heal your injuries?”

“I didn’t,” he rasped. “I’m slugging down a healing potion every ten minutes and trying not to move around much. What’s the situation?”

“The Tower is being evacuated, and you should be ready to do the same for Thunderhead. Now’s the time, while the Enclave are

fighting each other," I said. "The Enclave want the tower and the plague more than they want you."

Sky Striker frowned. "Why evacuate now? We're managing a decent resistance. I don't know where they learned it, but those two earth ponies are driving them crazy with their mines and bombs. I think the Enclave are scared to put a hoof on the ground without it blowing up under them."

In response, I showed the piece of paper. "Quiet. Don't say it. Lighthooves might be listening in. But yes, I do, and I'm using it." The shock was on everypony's face, and I couldn't meet Glory's eyes. "I'm sorry, Glory. I know I said we'd save it... but... " The shock and horror was clearly etched on her face.

"You tried your best, Blackjack," Sky Striker grumbled. "How much time do we have?"

"Long as it takes for me to get what I need. Fifteen minutes?" I said lamely.

"That's barely time to get under the cloud layer," he grumbled.

Rainbow Dash leaned in. "There may be another way. Get every pegasus you can and push Thunderhead away from the tower."

"Who--" Striker began.

"Time, remember?" I stressed.

"You have seventy or eighty thousand pegasi. Thunderhead is ten miles away already. If you all fly pushing in the same direction, you might get clear." She put a lot of emphasis on that 'might'. "Eight hundred wingpower can drain a reservoir. Eighty thousand can certainly move a city."

"Right. Right! We'll get on it. But again. The more time the better." Then he pulled away, starting to bark orders as new bloodstains spread under his bandages. Glory moved back to the screen, and I gritted my teeth.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, lowering my eyes. "I just wanted to save lives," I said lamely.

"Blackjack, you have! If you hadn't come up here... with Stargazer dead... it would have been a bloodbath. And ultimately, we still would have lost. The Enclave would just bring a Thunderhead next time. Wouldn't that be ironic?" she said with a smile full of tears. "Just do what you have to to bring this to an end. And Blackjack, I love you. No matter what you do or how you have to change, I love you. Just come back from this safely. Okay?"

"I'll try. I love you," I said, then cut the connections. I couldn't cry,

but I wished I could. Just one more way I was less equine than before. Laughter, tears, hunger, lust, pain... good or bad, they were things that made a pony a pony.

And love. Love too.

* * *

The elevator ride down took far longer than I anticipated. I nearly bounced on my hooves with impatience. I wanted this done.

"Rainbow Dash? Lighthooves... when did he come up with this idea for using a bioweapon to discredit the Enclave?"

"About a year ago. Why?" she asked.

"After he returned from his first mission to the surface?"

"His 'mission'? He was just a rookie. Claimed he got lost in a feral lightning storm and took shelter in a surface ruin." She shrugged. "It's happened for generations. Every now and then a pegasus will be so damned curious they'll nip down for a closer peek. Most are so horrified by what they see that they're gung-ho backing up the Enclave's isolation policy. A few stay down. That's why they don't give rookies power armor for their first few months. Why?" she repeated the question.

"Did you know he was related to Doctor Mephitis?" I asked.

"No. Does it matter?"

"It did to him," I said simply. Rainbow Dash just growled in annoyance. I'd been in the dark for months; she would get used to it.

As the elevator descended the shaft, the blue lights dimmed and flickered. "He's using the emergency generators, too," Rainbow Dash said. "I've been doing everything I could to slow him down."

"Time to stop him," I said, then smiled at her for reassurance. "Just keep to the plan. Get it and get it back to me." She nodded, and I closed... I really wished I could close my eyes! "Dealer? Are you there, Echo?"

"I'm here," he replied, his voice small and ghostly.

"You know what I need?" I asked.

"Are you sure about this? Do you have any idea how many ponies you might kill?" he whispered in my ear.

"Probably less than he will if all these missiles fly," I countered. "Can you get it set up?"

"I can. Will you accept responsibility for those who die here?" he

asked, his voice tense and on edge.

I sighed. Kill one to save two. Don't kill one and let two die. Which was the moral answer? Was there one? "Yes. Add it to the bill."

"I'll have it ready," he answered simply.

The lift reached its destination, and I stepped out first, walking across the floor of the central shaft to the stairs going down to the fabrication level. When I entered it, I saw a colossal chamber that I guessed was where those six large shields flared out. Below me was an entire self-contained factory. A smelter sat in one quarter, then large machines equipped with rollers and stampers and cutters. A machine shop in a second quarter had cyberponies welding and cutting. A third quarter was dominated by racks and racks of talismans and electrical equipment. The last section had a large transformer from which dozens of thick cables ran overhead to each door and launcher. The astringent whiff of ozone was in the air, and every now and then there was a loud snap and shower of sparks from the hanging lines.

Above these four quarters, around the perimeter of the factory floor on elevated frames, sat the missiles. Each one looked to be forty or so feet long and five or six feet around. A large round intake sat atop the fuselage, and a pair of five-foot-long wings swept back two thirds of the way from the pointed nose. A pair of smaller wings were near the front of the missile, and a vertical wing towards the back gave me the impression more of a big sleek paper airplane crossed with a dart than of a missile. I also wondered who in the zebra empire demanded all their equipment be striped. A little white pony in my head sniffed disdainfully.

Each missile sat in a launch cradle, a half-tube with a vertical plate on the back, before a large metal door; barrels and spare parts were strewn haphazardly across the floor around them. The very doors the cyberponies were using to harass the Enclave. As I watched, one of them rolled up in three seconds to admit a half dozen fliers and then closed just as quickly. Each launch cradle rested on hydraulic pistons that kept it in place. In the very center of the huge space, hanging from the ceiling, was a lit round room with windows on in every direction. A large crane on a rail looped around the room, and from it dangled huge plastic tanks attached to hoses that sloshed with bilious brownish contents, hoses that were being used to fill the warheads of the missiles.

I knew where I'd be if I were Lighthooves. I walked towards the

center of that factory. As I passed, cyberponies halted their work and just stared. None of them took any shots, though. I didn't know if it was because they were intimidated, tired, or had been ordered not to. Many looked stressed to the point of breaking, with shaking hooves and haunted stares. Many didn't seem to have the full conversion others did, and I wondered if they'd been augmented against their will... thrown into the machine, cut to pieces, and made 'stronger'.

"It's her! We... we should... we should attack? Right?" a blue pegasus colt not much older than Scotch stammered as his eyes darted around the room.

"No. There's been enough attacking. It's time to talk," I replied.

"Talk?" a mare hissed. "What is there to talk about?"

"You're the enemy. All of you," muttered a stallion, but at this point he could have been addressing me or the entire room from the way his augmented eyes swept the crowd.

"The real reason Lighthooves made you into what you are," I said as I looked up at the control center. The pegasi began to murmur to each other, but they weren't taking their eyes off of me. "He's lied to you. This isn't about plagues or Thunderhead or Neighvarro. This is about him. It's always been about him." Maybe it was the resigned note in my voice, or that I was the pony in the room with the least flesh remaining. One by one, red bars winked to blue, and I continued past them.

A spotlight on the bottom of the control room suddenly painted me in its beam. "That's far enough, Blackjack," Lighthooves said over a loudspeaker. "I suppose this is the point of our climactic battle? Good versus evil? Light versus darkness? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm afraid that I'm pressed for time. The Enclave has attacked a helpless civilian target, and they shall pay dearly for it."

I could almost read it like a script. "I went to Yellow River," I called out to him. "But then, you wanted me to."

The light snapped off, and the door to the control room opened. Lighthooves emerged onto a landing. He still looked more flesh and blood than I, but, then again, the measure of a pony wasn't in flesh and blood. "Yes, I know. I saw what you did. Your demonstration of physical prowess was most inspiring."

"I never really knew why you pointed me to it. That note you left wasn't just for me, though. It was for anypony who came after you.

You wanted somepony to see the camp and know what Mephitis did." I activated my wings and kicked off the floor, levitating up toward him and setting off a murmur among the watching cyberponies. "But that wasn't enough, was it? You knew that, even if Dusk or I went to Yellow River, the truth wouldn't get out. They'd ignore it. Or bury it. Or bury you."

"History has ever been the servant of tyrants," Lighthooves replied. "What hope has the truth against such odds?" His grandiose speech matched up with what Doctor Octopus had said. Melodramatic. Immature. I could stall him. Time was my greatest asset at this point. He gestured with his head at the control room and stepped in, with me following. While his back was to me, I flipped open my PipBuck and pushed a button. If he spotted my movement, he didn't say anything. "So, did you put it all together?"

Standing this close, he was a wreck. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot. "You tell me," I replied. "You found out that you were descended from one of the Enclave's heroes. The genius doctor who prevented the Enclave from making a terrible mistake and returning to the surface. And you took pride in that lineage. And somewhere in researching your ancestry, you found out about Yellow River. So at the first opportunity, you went down looking for it. To stand in the place where your ancestor stood."

"As a descendant of Twilight Sparkle, I'm sure you can relate," he replied, then smiled smugly. "Oh yes, I've done my own checks on you since we parted ways." His eyes were calm, almost serene. Around the room, papers were thrown all over the floor. Tapes and memory orbs were cast across the controls like garbage.

"I can," I said. "More than you know. I know that Twilight did some messed-up things, too. Ignored people she shouldn't have. Hurt people she shouldn't have." I narrowed my eyes. "Though I have to give Mephitis credit. He committed atrocity on a whole other scale."

The calm broke, and Lighthooves hissed at me, spittle spraying. "He left them! He took his ill-gotten gains and left them! Left them to starve! I saw the security footage the automated turrets left behind! Some of them lasted for months! Months!" he hissed at me, outrage etched in his face as his spittle speckled my visor.

I continued, calm and cool. "But he was a doctor. A virologist. And, most importantly, a pony the Enclave could use." I watched the serenity settle over his face once more. "It's one thing to argue

about whether you should or shouldn't return to the surface if it's easy to do so. It's another thing entirely if the surface is too deadly to risk," I said, and we slowly started to circle around the edge of the control room.

"The Enclave has milked that propaganda for two hundred years. Two hundred," Lighthooves said with a smile. "The wealth and fame they poured on him has been paid back ten thousand fold."

"Chicanery told me that you worked out how many lives might have been spared if we'd gone back. Still, what could you do?" I continued. "Who could you tell? It wasn't enough that you knew. You couldn't just take that knowledge and be a better pony. Not you. No. You had to act," I said as we walked. "You needed something they couldn't ignore. Something nopony could ignore. You needed something so monstrously huge that it couldn't be covered up. So you approached Rainbow Dash with a plan."

"She's always been looking for a way to bring down Neighvarro. It wasn't hard to convince her," he replied with a tired, almost rueful smile.

"And for a time, you gathered the pieces. The plague. The delivery system. The targeting talismans. Everything you needed. But something changed. Something that meant the scandal wasn't enough. What was it?" I asked.

He laughed quietly a moment. "I told you, Blackjack. I told everypony." His wings reached down into the rumpled mat of documentation at our feet and swept up a few pages that he shook at me. "The Enclave found out what we were doing, and *praised* us." Disgust dripped from every syllable. "They wanted to accelerate the plan. They wanted to distribute the virus to every corner of the surface, wipe out all hostile life, and, oh, *then* return!" He threw the pages in my face, and they swirled about us wildly.

"So a scandal wasn't enough. Defaming Mephitis wasn't enough. You needed more. You wanted to bring down the Enclave," I said as the papers fell around me.

"Don't tell me they don't deserve it!" he hissed, marching over and smacking a control. One of the monitors lit up, showing a scavenger city being blasted by magical energy weapons. I watched a foal get disintegrated right before my eyes. To my shock, I saw LittlePip, tears streaking her face, trying to collect the dust. "I got that from a contact yesterday. They targeted children, Blackjack!"

I tore my eyes from the screen and returned my attention to

Lighthooves. “You had it all set up. You weren’t going to create a scandal. You were going to create a *crisis*. After Maripony, things were unstable. There was fear and doubt. You were going to hand over all the evidence with every camera rolling, give yourself over to a huge trial, make Thunderhead the hero that saved the Enclave from Neighvarro’s mad agent.” I paused, we both stopped, and a vein began to tick in Lighthooves’s temple. “Only--”

“Only you murdered the fucking councilor!” he roared at me, eyes wide. “Did she come to arrest you, only for you to slaughter her, or was her death planned in advance as a way to spite me? She might not have been a good politician, but she was a caring pony and a friend!”

“It wasn’t me who killed her, Lighthooves,” I said, knowing he wouldn’t believe me and not really caring anymore about whether he did. “But her death did fuck your plan, didn’t it? Stratus wouldn’t have investigated like the councilor would. He would have covered everything up. The last thing you wanted. So you fell to plan B: lure in the Enclave fleet and blow it to pieces. That would be a disaster far worse for them, and you could follow up with the plague at your leisure.”

“Yes,” he said, seemingly once more calm. “But the power draw was too much. It destroyed the substation power grid.”

“No. I destroyed the power grid,” I replied, my eyes locked with his. His were, at least, still flesh and blood. Still windows to a soul in torment. We both stopped our circling.

“You… how?!” he spluttered.

I smiled grimly. “You don’t know the whole story, Lighthooves. You don’t know about Dawn, Cognitum, or the Tokomare. You’re not the Princess…piece… thing on the board, you’re just a prawn too. Or are those horsies? Or maybe one of the castle thingies.” Okay, I really needed to learn the game if I was going to keep up with the chess analogies. “Point is that there is way more going on than just you and your personal issues!”

“I see. I must admit, I am boggled as to why you would side with Neighvarro--” he began.

“I’m not siding with them!” I snapped, cutting him short. “You self-obsessed little colt; did it ever occur to you that there’s more sides to this than just you and your petty, bloody ego trip?” I asked, my words seeming to stun him more than mere blows. “You can make all the little speeches you want. I’m going to destroy this plague,

those Raptors, and you. Possibly a great deal more, but definitely the first three," I finished quietly.

For a second, there was doubt; for a second, I hoped sanity would prevail in the end. Then his features turned hard and skeptical. "Oh, are you? You seem so very certain you can. Well, I'm going to have to disappoint you. Those missiles are going to fly as far as they possibly can. I'm even sending a few to the zebras, just so they can enjoy the fun," he said with a laugh that just made me feel fatigued. "With Project Steelpony, our own people will be safe, augmented and immune to the plague. Everypony will know the truth. All the lies will be swept away, and finally... it will be over."

"Why?" I asked tiredly, knowing the answer but hoping that somehow, some way, I was wrong. In my E.F.S., I saw two blue bars moving about; hopefully one was Boo. I put my forehooves on a chair in front of one of the terminals.

"I told you! For truth! For their crimes!" he cried back at me.

"Don't give me that brahmin shit!" I snapped back. "Look at me! Look at what I've done to myself to stop you! No more lies! Tell me the truth!" Do it, I mentally screamed at him. He wanted to. "You owe me that much."

"Because I hate everything!" he snapped at me. "I hate the Enclave for its hypocrisy and lies. I hate Thunderhead for its mewling complacency. I hate the surface for its savagery and weakness. I hate the past for all that it's done to us and I hate the future for all that it's denied us. I hate every drop of blood in my being. But most of all, Blackjack, I HATE--"

And that was the point in which I threw the chair with all my strength right into his face. He flew clear across the room and smashed into the window hard enough to almost drive him through it. "You were going to say 'you', right?" I asked, and then I galloped straight at him, slightly enlarged steel-clad horn aimed right at his chest. He brought up all four hooves and caught my skull, deflecting me to the side. I smashed my shoulder into his chest, and together we went flying through the window. We tumbled in the air over the factory floor, and at least a hundred cyberponies stared up at us.

"Doc Oc was right," I said as I hovered... well, bobbled. "Immature and self-destructive as fuck."

Lighthooves swept his hoof at me. "Shoot her!" They all continued to stare up at him. "Kill her! A few more minutes and it will be

done. Everything will be done!" Still not a one of them moved, and I smiled at him. "What... what are you doing?" he asked in bafflement.

"Mewling complacency?" a mare asked in an angry, low voice.

"You set all this up?" a stallion growled as he pointed his guns at Lighthooves. "You said this was for Thunderhead's freedom!"

He slowly looked around. "How... you don't understand. It had to be done!"

"You told me it was for my children," another mare shouted. "Why?"

He stared at a sea of very angry cyberponies, then gaped at me. I flipped open the panel of my foreleg and showed him my broadcaster. "You wanted to confess your sins to the world? Well, now you have." I'd forego burning off his cutie mark and branding him a Dashite. He didn't deserve it. The cyberponies were falling apart. Without the lie of the nobility and necessity of this, the reality of what they'd sacrificed for him was coming home. I heard some ponies screaming in shock. Others wept, and some just sat there in stunned disbelief.

I looked at him and saw a pony who'd lost everything. Everything. Such a waste. I turned to them. "You need to get out of here. Fly to the surface. Get to the Collegiate. Maybe... maybe somepony there can help you. But you can't stay here."

"We can still kill him!" one yelled.

Another roared, "Let's rip off the meat he's got left!"

Lighthooves glared at me with utter hatred. "You did this. You all deserve this. Command: snapped strings."

Suddenly, every cyberpony around me began to spasm and fall over. Some managed to cry out as they collapsed, gripping their chests with expressions of agony. I thought back to the scavenger in Tenpony. Blood spurted from their mouths as they jerked and shuddered. A few fired weapons as they expired, but in a matter of seconds, it was all over. With three words, he'd killed hundreds of ponies. Mothers, fathers, siblings... all dead.

A purple streak dashed through the air and slammed into Lighthooves, knocking him from the air and across the factory floor into heaps of stacked metal bars. "You monster! You murderer! I trusted you!" shouted Rainbow Dash as her hoof blows rained down. "You betrayed us all!"

"Betrayal is a matter of perspective," Lighthooves spat back. "If I

must finish this myself, so be it!" His wings snapped, and he pressed his attack, the two blurring through the air above the factory floor locked in dazzlingly swift aerial combat.

"Boo!" I shouted as I rose to my hooves. If all the cyberponies were dead, then that meant that Hoarfrost's ponies would be here in minutes. From the darkness, Boo trotted out. "Did she find one, Boo? Did she? Did she?" I asked with a desperate smile.

She beamed a smile, reached into her saddlebag, and pulled out a Fancy Buck Snack Cake. "Bwackjack!" she said cheerfully as she presented it to me. I slumped, really not having the time to search for one myself. I panned my eyes over to the racks of talismans, but there were dozens of different kinds, perhaps hundreds.

"That's okay, Boo. That's okay." I rose, hoping I'd get lucky as Rainbow Dash and Lighthooves battled through the air. Lighthooves may have been augmented, but Rainbow Dash was the best flier in history as far as I knew. Maybe I'd find one in... then I saw Boo cupping something in her other hoof. It was a talisman about the size of a hoofball, white, and with a boresight on the front of it. I leaned in, grabbed her shoulders, kissed her hard, and then grabbed it with my mouth; I had to be careful not to bite down too hard, or it'd be lunch.

"Bwa... " Boo said with a very baffled look on her face, then unwrapped the cake, popped it in her mouth, and ran after me.

The pegasi moved almost too fast to follow. Rainbow Dash and Lighthooves streaked in purple and white lines around crackling power cables as each moved to strike the other with as much force as they could. Lighthooves had all the cyberpony control, strength, and resilience I did, but Rainbow Dash's special armor more than once disappeared just before he struck only to blast him from literally out of nowhere. His lightning-fast counterattacks hammered the purple-laminated steel in a shower of sparks.

I flew back up to the control room and found a terminal. I'd only seen this once, but I tried my best to remember everything she'd done. "Dealer, time to make this happen," I said as I scrolled through the commands as best as I could remember them. Outside, Lighthooves and Rainbow Dash were just blurs of color. The talisman flashed red three times, then turned completely red as it was armed.

Time's up.

Suddenly, Lighthooves came flying through the window and

slammed into me, and we bounced across the control room floor together. He flipped up while I rolled under the factory control terminals. The bright red talisman went bouncing out the control room door and into the factory.

"Boo! Get it!" I shouted as pulled myself to my hooves. If it broke on the way down... well... I'd just have to worry about that then.

"Enough!" Lighthooves cried, his flesh bloody and his armor plates dented, and then he rose to his hooves and began slapping buttons as quickly as he could. "I'm ending this now!"

"Automated launch sequence activated," said a cool recorded voice. With a whir, the doors began to rise one after another. "Fire one." A launch cradle rose up at a steep angle as the end of the missile began to whir. Then the missile slid down the cradle, out the door, and into open air. A second later the end of it erupted in flame, and it whooshed out into the sky. "Fire two," the speaker said calmly, the launcher already rising up.

"Stop them," was all I could say to Rainbow Dash. With all the fighting going on outside, there was no way the Raptors would be able to intercept all of them in time. As the second missile slid down its cradle and the third one started to rise, she launched herself towards the open door. I flapped like an iron albatross towards the fourth.

Lighthooves rammed into me, and together we crashed into the fourth launcher. The impact from our bodies made the launch platform shriek and shift as it rose above us. The supports snapped off and the entire sling swung to the side. The missile began to slide down... and then I heard a crunch as the engine began to rev up. Together, we looked at the end of the launcher and saw that the nose of the missile had caught on the base of the door. "Launch error. Launch error," the voice said calmly.

Far off to the west, I saw a brilliant explosion. If Rainbow Dash could get one missile, I had to trust that she could get two more.

Lighthooves rose, hatred etched deep in his features as he glared at me. All around us, sparks rained down as the missile in the cradle above started to smoke. "You don't have to do this, Legerdemain," I said as I stared into his stark features.

"I have lied. I have killed. I have betrayed," he said simply. "I'll fire off the rest of the missiles manually if I must, but I will see this ended."

He turned and darted towards the fifth launcher. My horn wasn't

working at the moment, still very upset with me after my last teleportation attempt. Still, I had wings now. Jumping over bodies, I activated the levitation talisman enough to get me airborne, snapped my wings, and launched myself with forehooves outstretched at his back. He glanced over his shoulder at me and flattened to the ground so that I sailed straight over him, crashed into the floor, and bounced up into the missile cradle. My wings and hooves ripped into the delicate fuselage, soaking me in something smelling strongly of flamer fuel.

"This can't end well," I muttered.

Then the cradle suddenly tilted, and the missile began to slide down towards the edge. Trailing rainbow-tinted fluids, I ripped free and threw myself over the far side of the launcher just as Lighthooves made for launcher six. The ruined missile tumbled out into open air and, seconds later, I heard a resounding explosion. Plunging after Lighthooves, I dove once more as his hooves began working the launch controls. He paused only long enough to deliver a double-hooved applebuck to my face, sending me flying back into the spent launcher behind me.

As the cradle started to lift, I kicked off with my hooves and snapped my wings once more. Crossing my forehooves in front of my face, I barreled right into the hydraulic lifts of launcher six and sheared them from the deck entirely. Hooves scraping, I scrambled out from beneath the launcher as it fell over, barely escaping being splattered. The wings and engine of the missile snapped off as it rolled from the cradle and across the floor towards the seventh launcher. Barrels marked 'lubricant' and 'hydraulic fluid' scattered before me, and Lighthooves looked up in time to see me charging at him. He darted into the air, over number seven and moving on to eight. The rolling missile slammed launcher seven and split, spewing more fuel across the launchers, the floor, and me.

Did I mention that the power cables snaking overhead sparked?

With a fluid hissing noise, a sheet of blue and orange flame spread across the factory floor. I launched myself into the air as the fire expanded towards me. Come on Boo, find that talisman. Come on Rainbow Dash, finish those missiles and get back to me.

I flapped over seven and spotted him working on eight's launch mechanism. Canceling my levitation, I fell like a ton of cyberpony. His wings cracked like a pile of twigs as I crashed down on him and rolled off, getting quickly to my hooves. Even though his wings now

resembled crumpled paper, he didn't slow in the slightest as he leapt into the air and brought all four metal hooves down on my head. My skull rang like a bell as it hit the floor, and for a second I was sure that I'd black out. But I couldn't black out. I had an enemy to defeat and a nightmare to stop. As I shook it off, he once again beat on me with his lightning kicks and blows... but this time I was much more armored.

I heaved myself to my hooves once more, reared up, lowered my head, and drove my armored horn straight at his chest. He reared up and brought his forehooves to my face…and then the ends of his hooves opened like flowers, three fingers and a thumb springing from each. He grabbed my face, latching down on my horn and jaw, and with a great heave used my own momentum to throw me over him and slam my back through a barrel of fuel that burst like a milk carton and with a resounding clang into the metal floor beneath. Bracing his hindlegs against my body, he started twisting my head far further than it was intended to turn.

"I have to admit, thumbs are useful," he said as sparks of pain broke through my usual numbness. Not a good sign.

Wait. Did he put a design for thumbs in that damned conversion machine?

Only one way to find out. I did something I hadn't done in more than a week and tried to pop my fingers out. With a hiss, the casing around the ends of my forehooves peeled back, and two black hands emerged. Each grabbed his hindknees and pressed with all the torque they could muster. His legs gave way, and, robbed of his leverage, he stopped twisting my head off.

I fought my way to my hooves, and he kicked out of my grip with a powerful backflip, landing several feet away. "So what's the plan? We keep fighting till Rainbow Dash arrives or the Enclave crash the party?" I asked.

"Actually, I'm betting that all those augments draw a lot more power than mine. In fact, I'm pretty sure you've burned through a lot of your reserves. Am I right?" he asked with a smirk.

Oh crap; he *was* right. I was down to a third again already! So I charged in, trying for a blow to his head to take him out in one hit... but one thing that hadn't changed was his damnable agility. He deflected, he dodged, he did everything he could to keep me flailing wildly with my hooves while he calmly avoided me over and over again. This relatively low exertion wasn't going to eat up

my power, though. He was running out of time; any second, somepony else was going to join the party, and it wasn't going to be anypony on his side. So why wasn't he running to the next--

A pink pony in my head then pointed behind me with a worried expression. I chanced a glance and saw the spreading flames snaking closer and closer as pool after trail after splash of rocket fuel ignited. Then I met his eyes and saw his lips spread mockingly. "Or we can find out how fireproof you are, Blackjack."

That was why! And I'd have to move away from the launcher to get away from the flames. He might get a little toasty, but he wouldn't go up like a candle; he'd certainly still be able to launch this missile. But I couldn't hit him, either, and in a few seconds it would be academic... and my self-extinguishing skills would be tested. Finally, in both desperation and frustration, I reared back to strike; he just smirked smugly, ready to dodge once again.

My hooves fell on one of the barrels of lubricant, the cylinder rupturing and spraying us both with slippery black oil. "How fireproof are *you*?" I countered, grinning at him.

He gaped at me, then flapped, slipped, and slid over to the wall next to the door and a large blue talisman mounted on it, me flapping, slipping, and sliding after him. He rammed his hooves against the talisman, and it immediately flashed to life. "Fire prevention measures, activated," the mechanical voice said, and instantly white blobs fell all over the factory with heavy 'flumps'. One landed right on top of the pair of us, chilling me instantly. I poked my head out of the snowdrift and looked at him as the pristine white quickly stained black around the both of us. He panted, staring back at me, just as filthy and exhausted. The fire was out, the snow steaming from where it'd extinguished the blaze.

Having a few cubic yards of snow dumped on my head really helped cool my anger, too. "I'd really appreciate it," I said as I tried to wiggle out of the snowdrift and just sank up to my chest, "if you just gave up now. Before this gets any more... ridiculous."

"I didn't do all of this just to give up. Not for you. Not for anypony," he muttered as he pulled himself free.

"Come on," I whined, still fighting to get myself up. "Let me do what I have to do. No more plague. No more missiles. And I might save Thunderhead, too." I stared at him, begging him to accept.

"Would you, after all you've done, after all you've been through, give up simply because your enemy asked you nicely?" he asked

archly as he stood easily on the drift.

He had me there. “No,” I admitted. “Probably not.” Then I scooped up a load of snow between my hooves and packed it into a ball. “But if the battle for the future of the Enclave and the Wasteland comes down to a snowball fight, nopony is going to believe it.” Well, my friends might, but they were used to my... solutions.

He stared at the ball as I drew my hoof back ‘threateningly’, then let out a snort. Then I started to laugh as well. Somehow, I doubted that the history textbooks were interested in moments such as this. “I don’t believe you,” he said after the laughter ended. “I kill hundreds... maybe thousands... and you... Blackjack. Why are you doing this? Don’t you care?”

“Of course I care! I know you’ve done wrong. So have I. Things that I deserve to be killed for. But since then, I’ve taken every chance I’ve gotten to do better and improve the world. So I can’t just be an executioner,” I answered. “I think you should pay for what you’ve done…but there’s so much good you could still do. Killing you’s a waste. It’s not punishment. It’s what you want.” That made his smile slide away.

“You are a very strange mare,” he replied. “I think I would have been better off getting to know you instead of thinking of how best to use you.” He stood up and started towards the launcher again. “But sometimes, there is no second chance. Sometimes, execution is the best option. For everypony.”

“Lighthooves... ” I warned, then activated my flight and resumed kicking and clawing my way out of the snowdrift, my wings flinging little bits of slush everywhere. Damn it, why did pegasi get to walk on drifts like they were clouds?

“No, Blackjack. I’ve come too far and done too much to betray it all now,” he said as he started tapping the controls.

Then the engine of missile four, jammed against the door and its launcher, activated and filled the factory with its incandescent thrust, and I didn’t hear anything but the roar of combustion. A sheet of fire washed over the ceiling, cable insulation igniting and flames spreading in a glowing fan. An immense cloud of steam formed instantly as the snow all but flashed away from the blast of flame overhead. Thick plumes of smoke obscured anything that wasn’t ablaze, and the heat was so intense that pieces of the metal roof began to melt. Cyberpony or not, I’d melt too. I screamed for Boo but had no idea if she heard me over the furious roar of the

engine.

Then the missile crushed itself like a tin can, ripped like foil, and exploded in a ball of fire that washed through the factory in a wave. All I could do was curl up in a ball, cover my mouth, and endure. An elegant white unicorn in my mind told me to hang in there. When the fireball passed, I slowly uncurled, tasting the chemicals in the air. A half dozen other missiles were on fire now, tangled and twisted in their launch cradles. I slowly rose to my feet. “Lunch Errrr. Lunch Errrr,” the voice slurred.

“Boo?” I croaked out. “Boo!” I turned around, half terrified I wouldn’t see her and half terrified I would. I spotted the red bar first. Lighthooves was at the base of launcher seventeen, struggling with the hydraulic jack that would let the missile slide free. Slowly, I approached. He wasn’t handsome anymore. His white exterior was charred as black as mine. A dark hole in his chest still oozed blood. His mane was no more than reeking stubble, and the metal of his augments was warped. He attempted with his scorched fingers to connect wires from his chest to the motor. He slowly turned. One eye was cooked like an egg in his skull, and the other was an angry pit of rage.

“It’s over,” I said simply.

“No. They... they have to suffer... they have to pay... I have to make them pay!” he rasped as his hands fumbled; he wasn’t used to using them like I was. I could hear the shouts of the Enclave approaching, orders for them to seize everything.

“You don’t have the right,” I said solemnly.

“And you do?” he gasped as he lay there.

“No. Nobody does.”

He connected the wires to the motor, and slowly the cradle began to rise. “One more. I just need one,” he said as he smiled at me. “Unless you kill me.”

“I’m not an executioner,” I muttered, but this time, the words didn’t feel noble. They sounded cowardly and hollow. He was helpless, crippled, and probably mortally wounded.

“There’s a first time for everything,” he said as the cradle tilted further and further. A few more feet and more death would fly. Killing one helpless, crippled enemy to save thousands. It shouldn’t be this hard...

The sound of metal piercing metal filled the air once more.

Slowly, I pulled my horn out of the machine that sat where his

heart once lay, blood and cyberpony fluid washing down my face. The lift slowed, then halted. He smiled, his skin cracking and sending blood dripping down the sides of his face. “What was on the piece of paper?” he whispered. “The one you kept showing everypony?”

I fished it out and showed it to him. His remaining eye widened as it passed over the fifteen letters that spelled out those four little words, and then he smiled in honest happiness. “It’s over... ” he breathed. Then the red bar winked out. Boo appeared, the Perceptitron perched on her head and the red-glowing talisman in her mouth. Without a word, I moved the former into my saddlebags and took the latter. I tapped the talisman, and it began to blink. I then set it in his hooves.

I walked to one of the open doors, and then Neighvarro Enclave stormed into the tower from all other sides. “Save the missiles,” somepony ordered. Then they spotted me and Boo standing beside the door. “You! Blackjack! You and your…robot are under arrest! Surrender!” they bellowed at Boo, who cringed back, and me. Our utter lack of armament was likely the only reason we weren’t dusted then and there by fifty armored ponies.

“Surrender. You are weaponless, outnumbered, and injured,” an officer barked. From somewhere outside I could hear the whir of a Raptor that was far too close. “You don’t have a chance,” he sneered.

“I don’t need a chance,” I replied, showing him the paper. “I have a megaspell.”

The red talisman let out a beep and suddenly everything in the room jerked sideways towards the talisman as a purple aura surrounded the orb. The moment was all I needed to grab Boo and jump out of a perfectly good tower. Far below the city, I imagined a troupe of skeletal magical phantasms around a diamond saturated with arcane power for two hundred years. A glance at my PipBuck as we fell told it all.

> Hoofington Megaspell Complex
> Access Megaspell Chamber #8.
> Lock target: Target Talisman 12964-239-428J.
> Target Locked
> Cast Megaspell Y/N?
> Y Authorization EC-1101.
> Warning, Megaspell #8 at 125% arcane saturation. Do you wish

to proceed Y/N?

> Y

> Casting Megaspell: Implosion

An orb of purple light flashed out from the middle of the tower, passing through everything as it expanded further and further. I had no idea how far it would go; I might have just killed the Hoof and all my friends in it. A flock of Enclave poured in on me as I spread my wings and tried to get away…and then I felt a jerk that stopped me in midair. For a moment, I wondered if I'd been speared by a power armor tail, but a glance back saw them hanging in midair as well, seemingly just as baffled as I was. Then a soft rushing noise filled the air... and it reminded me of the sound of the air blasting out of the tower. But this wasn't blowing out. It was sucking in.

With every bit of energy in my body, I tasked myself with flying away.

Still, I couldn't help but look.

A hazy purple field of energy permeating the air seemed to be drawing everything into it. The branches with their gantries and equipment shook wildly, and the whole tower began to sway. The noise and motion filled the air with a bassy groan I was sure would carry for miles. Vortices twisted into the open bay doors like hungry mouths, and I watched as the Neighvarro fliers closest to the Tower were sucked in. The Raptors struggled like the *Seahorse* caught in rapids.

With Boo clinging to my back, I only had thoughts of getting away. Below me, the cloud layer boiled and tore like moldy fabric, thick black clouds studded with rotting vegetable matter streaking up towards the Tower in foul gray chunks. I barely got my face covered in time before getting hit with a spray of noxious lumps of mushy plants and wet cloud. A few of the greasy, tumbling balls flashed to dust in front of me, struck by stray beams from the power-armored ponies on my tail. There was a megaspell going off, and they were still trying to kill me; I couldn't decide if that was dedication or insanity. Maybe both.

Then another purple shell of magic radiated out from the tower, and when it hit me, suddenly it felt like the world had turned on its side. I flapped my wings, trying to propel myself in the direction of 'away', and if felt as if I were once more trying to fly straight up. Then a deep gonging noise reverberated through the air, so massive-sounding that both I and my zealous pursuers chanced

another glance back.

The ring of doors and missiles was gone. So were the walls between the doors. Instead, a rumpled seam looped around the Tower where the fabrication level had been, with no gap between the parts of the Tower above and below. The world was still sideways, but the roaring wind cut off entirely; for a moment, silence prevailed. The Raptors seemed frozen in their positions, and silent clumps of cloud and fetid matter 'fell' past me with barely a whisper. I could see the Tower and the other spires of the Core exposed completely beneath me; not even the slightest wisp of vapor obscured the luminous boulevards below. Despite the broken buildings and sickly green glow, in an almost obscene way, it seemed... inviting. As I stared, everything seemed to hold its breath, even the city.

Then a groan, pained, tortured, and so low that it was more felt than heard, echoed across the valley. I watched the crease where the fabrication layer had been deepen and stared as it crept up and down the side of the tower. The groan grew into a wail as the building began to twist and warp before my eyes like a melting candle. The top drooped like a wilting flower for a few moments before the metal finally failed, and then all at once it was snapping and springing apart as the building disintegrated. A plate from the massive armored head reached out like an immense steel paw and caught one of the Raptors; in an instant, the warship shattered, the pieces joining the falling colossus. I only hoped it was the *Blizzard* and not the *Castellanus*.

Something was wrong, though: the tower wasn't falling down, it was falling *in*. The pieces wrapped around the middle where the fabrication level had been, and the sounds of tortured metal grew to a higher and higher scream as the pieces were compressed under the force of the magic... and then another pulse of purple emanated from the shell. As it passed through me, hooks of magic dug into every particle of my being... and we all started moving towards the center of the spell. "Oh no. No no no!" I shouted as I tried my best to flap away, 'up' when I seemed so much heavier to the new 'down'.

I could now hear a tremendous rushing sound. Not of wind, precisely. Not the high-pitched throaty scream of the vortexes I'd heard earlier. This noise was deeper, wetter, more like a current of water than air. As I struggled to move away and failed, I saw that

all of us, fliers, Raptors, clouds, and even Thunderhead itself, had begun to orbit the crumpling sphere atop the Tower. The pull ripped away the clouds from more and more of Hoofington, pulling them towards the center of the valley in a great upward spiral, all to be compressed down around the sphere. “This is bad. This is very bad!”

Another chorus of ripping metal filled the air, and I glanced back to see that the immense, collapsing sphere of metal rotated as well, and that as it moved it was slowly stretching and twisting the Tower below it. With a resounding crunch, the foundation gave way completely, and I watched in stunned amazement as the dangling length of the M.o.A. hub flew through the air, a massive length of steel looking like so much string. Another Raptor, straining to get away, was clipped by the end as it passed. The ship snapped in half, and immediately its debris was pulled inward as well. As I watched, the closer the pieces got to the sphere, the smaller they became, as if massive hooves squeezed them to fractions of their former size. In a few more seconds, both they and the dangling tower were gone, wrapped into the orb.

Now it wasn’t just rotten plants and clouds striking me. A storm of garbage and debris from the *surface* began to batter us as we struggled against the mighty pull. The weight of the debris and the force of its flight increased by the second. First papers, then tin cans and dead branches, then limbs of trees... I rotated to the side so that the heavier stuff smashed into me rather than Boo. Another chance glance behind me and... no...

Where the top of Shadowbolt Tower had been was a spinning sphere of purple magic pulling in air and debris from all across the Hoof. Now there were rusty wagons in the debris, parts of houses. I barely heard the screams of the fliers as their lighter frames were buffeted by the shrieking winds. I didn’t look for them; I didn’t want to see them meet the same fate as that Raptor. And damaged pieces of Thunderhead were being plucked off and pulled into the vortex...

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea...

A little purple unicorn pointed out that the best direction right now wasn’t away, it was towards the surface. Her orange friend told me to keep flapping, and a white unicorn told me not to give up and push harder. A pink pony pointed out chunks of metal wagons and hunks of buildings heading for me, and a blue pegasus cheered me

on as I looped and dodged the debris as best as I was able. The yellow pegasus just covered her face with a terrified squeak... and... and... for some reason I imagined someone was eating popcorn as they watched things unfold!

If this continued, I might have taken care of Cognitum entirely by accident. I couldn't worry about that at the moment, though; I was flying downward as quickly as I possibly could. That it was towards the Core didn't matter; I was resistant to Enervation, and it hadn't seemed to affect Boo when it spiked the first time. And neither of us was immune to whirling vortices of death! With painful slowness, I pulled us down to the rooftops of the highest of the black skyscrapers... but, given how pieces of them were now flying up towards that maelstrom above, I didn't stop there. I started moving down between two of the obsidian-sided buildings--

And then *another* wave of purple magic swept out, and my direction reversed. No amount of flapping increased our distance from that sphere, and gravity seemed entirely impotent. I once again passed a standing skyscraper's roof, though, and reached out with a hoof, popped out my fingers, and grabbed the metal rail that ran around the edge of the building. Boo began to slide off me with a scream, and I reached out with my other hand to grab her forehoof.

If I'd been only half metal, I think I might have been torn in two. Now I was worried about Boo as she swung above me like a kite in a hurricane. I watched in stunned surrealism as small chunks of skyscrapers began to be pulled up towards that disk. The sturdy railing I was clasping for dear life started to bend...

And then another purple wave swept through me, but this one was heading in, collapsing around the sphere. As it passed through us, I felt one last mighty yank, and then Boo and I slammed into the roof of the building. We lay in a heap, Boo shaking in pain and me holding her as I stared up at the mess above us. In seconds, the sphere collapsed around where the megaspell had activated, then revealed a shimmery, dark orb only a dozen feet across. The disk of debris twisting around it slowed, and the orb let out a thunderous crack. A solid white sphere of cloud and pouring rain expanded, spreading like an umbrella above me

Then the orb, which I guessed was Shadowbolt Tower and everything else that'd been pulled in, fell to the earth trailing a great plume of hissing cloud and steam behind it. The sphere shot

past us into the middle of the Core, and suddenly the skyscraper we clung to leapt beneath us as the entire Core rumbled. The black towers swayed, some smashing into each other as the falling sphere impacted somewhere far below. Flame and dust fountained up from thousands of nooks and crevices, blasting up into the air in dirty gray jets that covered everything in a choking layer of particulates. The rooftop we were on gave way once, and again, and again as floor after floor pancaked beneath us. The walls of the skyscraper peeled away, sending Boo and me tumbling towards the streets below.

I struggled for enough power to fly. To levitate. To do anything to prevent a bloody smack against the broken road below us. I clutched Boo close as my back slammed into strings of cables running from one building to the next, snapping them in my passing. Then again. Then again. Finally, Boo and I landed with a crash atop the rest of the rubble. Then, as if adding insult to injury, we were drenched in a cold, torrential rain. I stared, through the downpour, up the narrow canyon at the slit of now distant sky. The tiny black motes in it turned into pieces of buildings, chunks of wagons, and a barrage of all kinds of other debris falling down upon the Hoof. The shaking earth stilled for a moment, and then a deep, reverberating groan filled the city, a moan of something far below accompanied by a second, slighter tremble of the ground. Then it was gone, and the city filled with just the patter of falling debris and the hiss of rain.

"In retrospect," I said as I lay there atop a pile of rubble in the middle of the deadliest ruin in all the Wasteland, "maybe that wasn't the very best idea I've ever had."

Then Boo straightened, her ears twitching as the clouds of dust swirled around us. "What?" I panted, but then I heard it too. A whining of engines fighting a losing battle against gravity. I stared up as the rolling gas cloud parted to reveal the bow and plasma cannons of a Raptor plunging at us, *straight* at us down into the gap between the buildings, its shattered dorsal propellers sheared away and its supporting storm clouds nothing but tatters. Its edges ripped and tore at the sides of the skyscrapers in a scream of metal as it descended. I made out the name, *Hurricane*, across its bow. As I lay there, only one thought passed through my mind before the ship struck.

Does that count as a boat?

Footnote: Maximum Level

Volume 5: Horizons

Chapter 63: Perceptions

"I've got my eye on you."

The halls of Stable 99 smelled different than I remembered: an antiseptic tang lurked in the corners, under the beds, and in the closets. Still, it sounded alive again, alive and hopeful. The new residents had swept in with the vigor that only hope could bring. Broken lights were being replaced, filth-spattered walls were being scrubbed. Damaged systems found themselves repaired or swapped out. You almost couldn't see the bloodstains anymore.

To the migrants from 96, there were few major differences between life sealed away in a tower and life sealed away underground. Even the 'recycling' wasn't that severe an adaptation, as they'd mostly adopted 99's mantra regarding food. The most significant and important change was no longer being under pegasus guard. Whenever they wanted, they could walk out the front door, past the Steel Rangers, and into the fresh and open air and rain. If they wished, they could leave, though none had yet to venture farther than Megamart. Still, a few dozen square feet of open air, a few feeble attempts at a garden inside a stockade the Steel Rangers had erected... these were precious things.

From the window of the Overmare's office, Knight Crumpets looked down at the Atrium and at all the ponies talking and laughing in it. "Hard to believe that, a few months ago, all that was empty and we were contemplating leaving this place for good. Now it's almost like being back in Trottingham. I don't think my armor's worked so well since we left," she said as she wiggled an armored hoof. The crispy-yellow-brown-coated mare's reflection in the window betrayed her smile. "Any word from back west?" she asked as she regarded the new Head of Security of Stable 99.

Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof consulted several papers on the large desk, huffing through his thick blond mustache. "Stable

Twenty-six can't send us anything this month either. While the factions have put their differences aside for the moment, they're still mopping up splinters of Red Eye's forces all over the countryside."

"They do understand that we've got a couple of armies around us, right?" Crumpets asked as she walked slowly towards him to regard the maps also on the desk. A map of the Hoof was marked with hundreds of little red and green X's.

"Armies that are doing precious little," he said as he narrowed his blue gaze. He levitated another paper. "Legions of zebra standing around doing nothing and a group of pony cultists that take in, feed, and arm refugees aren't as dangerous a threat as the splinters of Red Eye's forces."

Crumpets sighed. "So the Elders still don't think Hoofington is a high priority?"

"Certainly high, but not worth the cost just yet. The order sees little benefit in diverting resources out here when there is so much to be settled in the west." His baby blue magic levitated a scroll from the rest of the papers. "This one is suggesting we pursue an alliance with the Harbingers, given their access to technology around the valley."

"The Harbingers?" Crumpets curled her lip as if she smelled something foul. "They were Blackjack's enemies."

"But not ours," he muttered. "Blackjack's been dead for a quarter of a year. Stable Twenty-Six recommends accepting that reality and working out an arrangement. Neutrality, at the very least."

"You can't tell me you're bloody considering it," she said in shock.

He closed his eyes, folded his mighty forehooves on the desk, and blew out a breath, making his mustache flutter. "They have superior numbers, but our position is secure. Besides, I don't like the smell of them. Their 'unity for all' stinks of benefit for somepony over everypony else, like that business with the Goddess." He tossed the message back on the desk. "Still, if they do try something against us, we may not be able to do more than seal the stable."

"Well, at least we're freshly supplied, and I've gotten used to eating food made from my own recycled poo," Crumpets said with false cheer. "I will miss that vegetable garden, though."

The speaker buzzed, and Farsight's voice said, in low tones, "Paladin Stronghoof? She's back."

Planting a hoof on the desktop, he sprang over in a single leap and

raced to the door with Crumpets close behind him. The sight of a massive white unicorn in half a ton of articulated steel barreling ahead was enough to get everypony out of their way. The one power-armored soldier who didn't found himself scooped up, moved deftly aside, and set down in one elegant pirouette that didn't even break Stronghoof's stride. In less than a minute he was up the tunnel and outside in the constant Hoofington rain.

Beside the stockade, the gardens were protected from the downpour by cobbled-together covers. The plants might not have been the most robust, but they were the only stable foodstuff for those immigrants who hadn't learned to 'not think about it'. At the gate was another covered area for traders and their brahmin to get out of the downpour. Thunder rumbled in the skies as lightning snapped to the southeast.

At the gate, surrounded by a rain-shield bubble, stood Farsight with two other Steel Rangers. Her ears swiveled towards him as they approached. "That was quick," she said as her blank eyes stared out into the deluge. "She's back again," the blind unicorn said with a small frown. "I heard the sound of her arrival five minutes ago."

"You *heard* her arrive, Overmare?" Crumpets asked incredulously.

"Her magic has a very distinct sound," the unicorn replied primly. "She's perhaps a hundred yards to the south. I haven't heard her move or leave yet."

"We must-- I must--" Stronghoof trembled with emotion.

"Why don't Knight Crumpets and I go down and talk to her together so she doesn't flee again?" the blind unicorn said as she reached out with a muddy hoof, pawed the air, and eventually patted his shoulder. "If she's come back three times, there must be a reason."

He sniffed and nodded. "Yes. Yes, that would be... best." Brilliant forked lightning danced across the sky, followed by the snap of thunder a second later.

Crumpets scooped her helmet off her backside with a hoof and set it on her head. With practiced ease, the hoses were connected, and her visor flashed to life, bringing up the familiar red and yellow E.F.S. display. She flexed to make sure all the controls were responsive. Two semiautomatic hunting shotguns with two hundred rounds of ammo should take care of any nasty surprises. "Ready," she said through her respirator.

Together, they walked out into the soggy, dead forest, following the trail Deus had once torn in his pursuit of EC-1101. Now, Crumpets took care to push thorny underbrush aside as they walked down. Every step Farsight took, her PipBuck let out a click. “You can navigate with that out here, Overmare? In all this rain?” Crumpets asked, her voice low as if aware that this might be a touchy subject.

“Well enough not to walk into any trees,” she said simply.

Crumpets considered the few red and yellow bars in her EFS before saying in low tones, “You don’t have to do this yourself, Overmare.”

For a moment, Farsight stopped, then said quietly, “Yes I do.” Then she smiled in Crumpets’s direction. “I don’t mind. Indeed, I’m glad to find a way to help Stronghoof. If he’d been a different kind of stallion, things could have been made very difficult for us. To be honest, I quite like a chance to be outside. If I didn’t have obligations to my stable, I might try travelling a bit further afield,” she said sincerely.

“The Wasteland is a difficult place for anypony, let alone…” Crumpets trailed off.

“Let alone one who can’t see?” she asked in an amused tone, and Crumpets made a small affirmative note. “I suppose I could have my eyesight restored at the Collegiate. Chicanery took a pair of cyber eyes for me…but I’d never use something like those.” She closed her eyes a moment, lips pressed together, then went on, “I find that my perspective allows me a greater understanding than I had when I possessed vision. And I don’t mind the company or assistance of sighted ponies such as yourself.” Her ears twitched. “More rain is coming soon.”

“It’s rained for nearly three months, non-stop,” Crumpets said with a sigh. “I wish I knew why this ‘Lightbringer’ can’t give us a break,” she said as she looked up, rain pattering off her visor.

“Never be allowed to step into the rain without written permission and an armed escort, and I think you’ll find it quite tolerable,” Farsight replied. “The explosion may have caused some permanent damage to the S.P.P. towers in Hoofington. Or perhaps whatever is interfering with broadcast transmissions is to blame. Hoofington has always had problems with rain and lightning storms, even before the war.”

“Well, when it rains for ninety days in a row, I think enough is enough. And all that lightning…it wasn’t flashing like that before

the Tower blew up." As if on cue, the skies were illuminated with a brilliant greenish-white bolt snaking along the skies, followed by another massive crack. "Freaky."

They continued along in silence as the rain hissed around them. Then Farsight waved with her hoof for Crumpets to move back and took a few steps forward. "Hello. You can come out. We won't hurt you," the blind mare said.

"I really hope that the same can be said for you," Crumpets murmured inside her helmet as the yellow bar wiggled.

Then the tangled brush parted, and a waterlogged alicorn stepped forward. Her dark purple mane and tail, knotted and tangled by briars, hung about her neck and haunches like decaying rope. Black rags clung to her thin frame as scared eyes stared at one of the ponies and then the other. Her breathing was harsh and ragged as she looked back over her shoulder, as if expecting somepony to be there. Through the sodden tatters that might have once been a dress, a candle could be seen upon her flank.

"It's her, isn't it?" Farsight murmured softly.

"Mhmmm," Crumpets returned, just as quietly.

"I…I…" the alicorn swallowed hard. "I'm not supposed to be here," she whispered.

"Oh, no. The last two times you were here, the Steel Rangers didn't mean to startle you," Farsight said in her calm voice. "Your name is Lacunae, yes?"

She swung her head back and forth forcefully. "No! No…I'm not her. She was me, but I wasn't her," she stammered, rubbing her face with her drenched wings. "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm…I'm supposed to be in a bad place. Because I did bad things. But…but now I'm not. I'm here."

"This doesn't count as a bad place?" Crumpets muttered.

The pale unicorn gave her a sharp kick in the shin with uncanny accuracy while saying in that gentle voice, "What is your name?"

She froze, her purple eyes haunted a moment, and then she whispered, barely above the rain, "Psalm. My name is Psalm."

"That's a nice name, Psalm," Farsight replied in that calm, understanding voice. "Well, it's very wet, and you look like you could use a meal and a chance to dry out. And I know that Paladin Stronghoof would like to--"

"No!" she blurted again, then bit her lip and shrank back. "I…No. Please. I want to see him…but I don't deserve to see him…but I…

I…" She sat in the mud and bowed her head. "He'll think I'm her. And I want to be her. I can remember…remember everything! Remember him dancing with her. Remember her friends. I…want what she had. But I'm not her!"

"Somepony's a bit barmy in the belfry," Crumpets said, and then shifted aside to avoid another kick to the shin.

That earned a stern glare in her general direction before calm reason returned. "Okay, Psalm. It's okay. Come with us. We'll get you cleaned up, dried off, and fed, and when you're ready, you can talk to him. Or I can tell him for you after you explain things better to me. All right?"

"I... we... I... " she stammered, then bowed her head. "Very well… but…" the alicorn paused, chewed on her lower lip as she glanced towards the Core, then asked, "But…can you tell me what happened to Blackjack?"

"You mean Security?" Crumpets blurted, getting another kick. Biting her tongue, she let the unicorn answer.

Farsight said solemnly, "I'm sorry, but she's dead, Psalm. She died in the megaspell."

"Dead?" She pressed her wings to her temples and shook her head rapidly. "No no no. She…I…we…if she'd been there, then we wouldn't have let her die. She…I…"

"Look out, Overmare," Crumpets warned as Psalm stood suddenly, but the alicorn steadied.

"No! No. We're fine. I…we…" she shook her head again, then regained her strength. "Blackjack is not dead," Psalm said as she looked towards the Core.

"I'm afraid that she is. She was right there when the spell went off. Nopony's been able to get her PipBuck tag. I'm afraid that she's gone," Farsight replied. "It would have been instantaneous."

"No. I mean, I don't believe she's dead," Psalm said, her voice now returning to calm. "We need her…just like Princess Luna."

"Well…I can't argue it'd be nice if either was here, but even if Blackjack did somehow survive the spell, she'd be in the Core," Crumpets said quietly. "Nopony can survive in there. Not for three months. And if she had, she'd find some way to tell us she's alive."

Psalm didn't reply. She just stared in the direction of the distant green glow. "She's alive. I have faith in her. We still need her; she won't die until we do. She can't. Not like Macintosh. Not like Luna."

Crumpets shook her head. "I'll go tell Stronghoof and the others to

back off. Give her some space till she's cleaned up." Crumpets returned up the muddy hill as Farsight and Psalm followed behind. "Damn it, Security. Why'd you have to die?"

* * *

The black canyons of the city glistened with the film of rain that slicked their surfaces, transforming them into mirrors reflecting nothing. The empty streets, cracked and broken, from nowhere to nowhere, snaked around the monoliths that plunged from the sky to the deepest depths of the earth like ebony arrows. No wind could stir the garbage that lay in saturated mats where errant currents had deposited them, two centuries after being cast away. None would. There was no rot or decay for the heaps. If it could not be washed away, it would linger.
Forever.

* * *

"The natives are getting restless, what with Security being gone," Splendid said as he admired his newly acquired PipBuck. He'd needed a whole new ensemble to match. "Pity blue is in such short supply," he muttered as he stood with Grace in what had once been their father's collection. It had now been transformed into a manager's office, with graphs on the walls showing outputs, a checklist of things to be accomplished long term and short term, and a highly intricate chart on the wall showing names and different colored arrows denoting their relationship. Blocks of ponies were marked 'manage', 'support', and 'purge'.
"Which natives are those, Brother?" Grace said as she regarded several papers with a critical eye. From outside, a deep growl of thunder penetrated even the sturdy walls of the country club. "The whiny, the annoyed, or the lazy?"
"The whiny ones," he answered with a sniff. "The Carrots are getting wistful, saying that perhaps they should have backed Charm's little coup three months ago. All this 'paying the serfs' business seems to be so plebian. And expecting the nobles to actually do something for their share of the dividends is outrageous. That's the point of being aristocracy: you get your cake for free." He chuckled. "Fortunately, most of the rest of the aristocracy is just

happy that we've more than tripled our profits, even if most of the increase isn't going to them."

"The Lightbringer might have begun clearing out the skies, but that doesn't mean most ponies in the Wasteland have seed stock, fertilizer, or agricultural skills," she said with a little smile. "I think that, with a little more work, we'll have a nice partnership with the Children of the Cathedral. We'll have to if we want to keep things going long term. Still, given that the Tower falling has tripled our local market, we're barely able to meet demand now."

"True. I think it's the fact that you relegated all of us to 'workers' that tangles the nobles' mane. Wealthy ponies don't work for their wealth. They are wealth. That's why they're better than workers," Splendid chuckled.

"The pegasi would never have tolerated the old system, and without them we'd never have been able to expand beyond the Hoof," she said matter-of-factly. "All those profits are because we can sell directly to New Appleloosa and Manehattan in a tenth the usual time. Asking the Carrots to get their hooves dirty twice a week is hardly serfdom."

"Be that as it may, you might want to get them out of here. Their attitude is catching," Splendid said calmly. When Grace arched a brow at him, he amended, "I don't mean kill or even exile. Perhaps they could work as liaisons with Tenpony. Just get them away from the other bluebloods who think 'Good King Security' is gone for good."

Grace sighed and set the papers back on the desk. "Any sign of Charm? Anywhere?"

He balked, then sighed as well and shook his head. "Not since she left with that Harbinger Steel Rain. If she was still with them, she'd have publicized it. We'd never hear the end about how Security robbed her of her right to rule."

"Insufferable as she was, she was still our sister." Grace leaned back in her father's chair. She was starting to fit it quite well. "Speaking of the Harbingers, are they still harassing workers?"

"Trying to. That 'equality for all' line might have caught on if you hadn't made your changes," he admitted, his smile rueful. "Given they don't buy from us, though, they haven't caught many with their 'Hoofington Rises' stuff. Making the aristocrats do actual work helped immensely on that front. When ponies saw even the regent hauling crops, it definitely made an impact on them."

"On me, as well. I don't think my hooves or back have ever been so sore," she said with a smile of her own. "I have no idea how they do it. None at all. And that was only an hour."

He fell silent a moment. "I wouldn't have done it. I would have slapped a bomb collar on any pony that objected and made them work, complaining or not. I would have hired more foreponies and guards." He shook his head. "I wonder if that's why Security chose you rather than me."

Grace leaned forward and folded her hooves under her chin. "You are a better pony than you think, Splendid. If you had supported Charm instead of me when she broke free, I wouldn't be here right now. You are far more effective as my right hoof than sitting in this seat. And I think you're happier, too."

He snorted. "Happier? Maybe. I suppose I might be. It's just galling to know that I was the wrong pony for the job." Then he laughed, rolling his eyes a little. "Well, it could be worse. She could have chosen Charm. I think she would have settled her disagreements with a whim or a dart board. All of Father's memory orbs and recordings…all that knowledge and those secrets. All those things Blackjack wanted to know. I fully expected her to take them. Ah well…no regrets on that score."

Grace's lips curled in a sympathetic smile. "But other regrets? Perhaps with Glory?"

"Perhaps," he murmured.

"Is there no hope?" she asked, folding her hooves on the desk with a sympathetic smile.

His smile turned more pained. "I have been firmly, soundly, and resoundingly rejected. My only options are to accept such or become onerous." He waved his hoof in the air, as if trying to coax thoughts from the ether. "I…admit…my initial attraction was… shall we say…superficial? Conjugal relations with a Ministry Mare was a far too tempting prospect to not pursue. But now that I know her and have seen the work she's done…" he sighed and slumped. "If only things were different. It's hard to hear you were simply a combination of magical transformation, hormones, and idle curiosity."

"Ah, Splendid. The first mare that slipped your stable," she said with a shake of her head and sympathetic smile.

"The first I've cared about. Ah well. And what of you, Grace? When are you going to select a stallion? The speculation is going mad," he

chuckled.

"Who has the time for such things?" she said as she waved her hooves at the office. "Getting the Society to do something productive for a change barely gives me a moment for sleeping, eating, or bathing!"

"I can attest to the last," he said, wrinkling his nose, and got a faceful of papers for it.

* * *

Apartments for rent. Cheap. Subsidized housing. First three months free. The signs hung loosely outside the doors. Lies. Somepony always paid. They boasted names like The Citadel, Fortress Gardens, Stable Tower, and Guardian Grove. *Safest living in all of Equestria. Come tour our fortified living spaces. Have a fortress of your very own!* Their lobbies held pamphlets depicting balefire bombs bouncing off shields as if they were rubber balls and boasting of security measures to screen out dangerous infiltrators. More lies. The cameras watched impassively through silent spiderlike eyes set in the corners of rooms. Thousands. Millions. More than an army of ponies could actually monitor.

The apartments were clean. Safe. Nigh impregnable. One could walk through the furnished dwellings, with magic screens to simulate windows. Indeed, to simulate any beautiful view one could desire. It was all false. The scarlet-stained floors were proof of that. The little drains hidden everywhere were proof of that. Nowhere was safe. A lie was the only security in this place.

* * *

The Hoofington Arena's dome roared with a dozen battles. Fights set along the green rectangle between pegasus and earth pony, earth pony and zebra, zebra and unicorn, unicorn and pegasus were met with roars, cheers, stomping, boos, and catcalls. Even a few griffins and minotaurs, a half-dozen hellhounds, a trio of green alicorns, and a 'buffalo' could be seen in bouts and matches for the new top ten. Anyone strong and tough enough could compete. The massive hole blasted in the dome had been patched with any square of canvas, corrugated sheet metal, or hide that could block the incessant rain outside. A hundred yards down the field and it would

have wiped out the skyboxes, and Big Daddy too.

"Ya know, normally Burners don't get to compete," Candlewick shouted at his opponent as he trotted quickly on his hooves around a specially built area with solid walls around the edge, not taking his eye off his opponent. With each step, the bright orange metal hooves let out a click and left a little smear of molten glass behind. "Not much point when a little yellow ends the fight for them, and half the audience. So I gotta say, I am really looking forward to this!"

In reply, the scarlet teenaged dragon roared and sent a torrent of yellow fire across the arena at the scarred stallion. The earth pony leapt forward and rolled, the blaze roiling over his bright red firefighter's coat but failing to catch it alight. As the dragon ran out of breath, Candlewick rolled up and kicked himself into the air, slamming all four power hooves against the dragon's chest. There was a fwooom as four blasts of flame burst from the hooves and into the dragon's scales. Candlewick kicked off and rolled in the opposite direction as the dragon roared and swiped with his claws.

For all his effort, all there was to show for it were four black horseshoe prints on the dragon's chest. The dragon's lips curled in a wide, fanged grin. "Dragons are fireproof, dude. What else you got? Because I got plenty!" With a hissing roar he sprang on the scarred red earth pony; Candlewick gave ground, backing up and not daring to take his eyes off the enemy.

The dragon might have been young, but there was no doubt which one evolution favored. The crowd around the arena jeered and placed bets on how long it would take for the dragon to make the Burner cry uncle, or even if Candlewick would get out at all. One of the few who wasn't jeering was a lavender unicorn watching with concern. *That* caught his eye for a fraction of a second, and the distraction earned him three talons across the face. As his blood flowed, the Burner grinned. "Thanks. I think you made me handsomer."

"Huh?" The teenaged dragon blinked. In that moment, Candlewick slipped into S.A.T.S., toggled four perfectly-aimed blows, and executed the spell. He reared up and slammed his hooves against the dragon's face with an explosion accompanying every kick. Dragons, even their eyeballs, might have been fireproof, but they could still be stunned by kinetic energy to the head. The dragon staggered back, dropping his defense as he clutched his face.

Candlewick rolled forward between the dragon's legs, landing on his back and looking up at his target. With a grin, all four hooves began to thrash at the dragon's crotch, each hit punctuated by a blast of fire from his hooves. A few second later, he slowed, the dragon gazing down at the scarred stallion with a scornful curl of his lips. "Dude. They're internal, and you're not my type."

"Oh, shit," Candlewick muttered. Huh. That usually worked...

The dragon's head came down, his pointed maw snapping closed on Candlewick's left forehoof. The fangs clenched on the reinforced PipBuck casing and the top of the blazing power hoof, yanking Candlewick off the ground. The dragon's claws reached up, raking his back and haunches. The firepony's coat tore easily, as did the hide beneath. "Get away from him!" the lavender mare shouted, making him grin.

Candlewick ducked his head under the shredded coat and pulled out by the stem something bright, shiny, and shaped like an apple. He twisted his PipBuck, prying the dragon's jaws open enough to press the apple between his fangs. "Say ahhh," Candlewick growled as the metal ground against enamel. The stem came off, and the superheated power hoof in the dragon's mouth exploded, knocking his teeth open enough for Candlewick to shove the grenade into the jaws. "Are you fireproof inside?" Candlewick asked as he slammed the dragon's mouth closed, curling his forelegs around the muzzle and clenching it tight. His hindlegs kicked at the dragon's throat, forcing a lump down.

The detonation of the grenade made the dragon swell immensely, throwing Candlewick aside as a moment later the insides of the dragon exploded out of both ends. As the corpse collapsed like a deflated balloon, Candlewick landed in a heap in the middle of the arena. Slowly, his body burning from the dragon's claws, he rose to his hooves and faced the scoreboard.

"I'd say that counts as a victory," Big Daddy said from his seat beneath the board. "Congratulations, Candlewick. Welcome to the Reapers. You look like you could use a new firecoat. I'd take it from him," the old earth pony said as he gestured to the remains of the dragon. "I'm sure Hammersmith could make something fine for you."

"Thanks," he croaked, trembling but trying to remain upright.

"Come see me upstairs when you get patched up," the old pony said as he trotted off the dais. The observers settled bets, but the

lavender unicorn clambered down the ladder lowered into the ring and trotted over quickly; a few other ponies started to scramble after her, all of them heavily scarred or maimed.

"I can't believe you fought him at close range," she muttered under her breath as her horn glowed. Instantly his pain abated and the gouges began to heal. "You should have kept him at a distance."

"No could do, Razzle Dazzle," he said with a grimace. "I only got to pick two weapons. Didn't have any guns that could penetrate. Flamer wouldn't have worked, either. Fireproof. Had to get him reckless enough to open his mouth but keep it open long enough to shove the grenade down his throat. Like what that Lightbringer filly did." He considered the PipBuck. "She convinced me it was a good idea to pick up one from that stable place. Got it for a crate of grenades. Glad I got the reinforced housing." As she healed him, he suddenly grinned. "Don't heal 'em all the way. Chicks dig scars."

She flushed and turned away. "We do not. Otherwise, *he'd* get all the mares," she said with a smirk as she glanced at the other scarred ponies approaching.

"Toaster *does* get all the mares. Most of 'em, anyway," Candlewick replied.

"That was awesome, little bro!" a large, scarred orange pony called out. Every inch of him appeared to have been badly burned at some point, and if it weren't for his eyes, he might be mistaken for a huge ghoul. He was covered head to toe in armor made of the flattened appliances that were his namesake. His cutie mark depicted the angriest toaster in all the Wasteland, with flames consuming a hapless slice of bread. "Did I fucking tell you those superheated power hooves would fucking do it? Did I fucking tell you or what, little bro?"

"It was the grenade that killed him," Dazzle pointed out with a scowl.

"Who asked you, Flash fuck?" he asked with a leer. "Go run off with the other girls. Play with fire and you'll lose that pretty face." Candlewick averted his eyes as Dazzle's eyes blazed with her own rage. "What do you even care? Get out of here."

"Oh yeah. He's a charmer," Dazzle replied dryly before trotting away.

"Damn it, Toast!" Candlewick protested.

The large orange stallion snorted and rolled his eyes. "She's a pretty face, Wick. They ain't interested in burned things. Everypony

knows that." Candlewick stared after Dazzle as she climbed up out of the ring and caught her glancing back at him before disappearing out of sight. Toaster gestured at the hooves. "Weren't they awesome though? Okay, not against a dragon, maybe, but you could melt through tank armor with superheated power hooves like those! Fuck! Not hot enough, though! I should strap balefire eggs to each one! Find some way to make a balefire power hoof. Fuck yeah!"

"Sure. Sounds like a great way to commit suicide," Candlewick replied dryly.

If Toaster took offense, he didn't show it as he laughed and went on how glorious superheated balefire power hooves would be. One of the other scarred gangers trotted up and patted Candlewick on the back. "Congratulations on making Reaper, Candle."

"Just don't forget that you were a motherfucking Burner first, bro," Toaster reminded with a scowl. "I don't know why you bothered, though. Being a Reaper's no big thing. Just an excuse for Big Daddy to snag our most badass fighters. He tried to make me one, but I told him to smoke it."

"I thought you begged him to not break your other leg," a scarred mare asked in bafflement.

Toaster's eyes bulged as his jaw worked. "Well…That…That was only because I didn't want to go superbalefire on his ass and beat him with a busted leg. 'Cause that would have just been sad! So I was going to tell him to smoke it! 'Cause…Yeah!"

Candlewick shook his head, hefted the dragon's limp tail in his mouth, and started for the ladder out. When he'd climbed onto the platform around the ring, he looked across the Arena. Even with all the refugees from above and beyond the Hoof, it still was only a quarter full. An echo of a time when tens of thousands of ponies came here to compete. These days, Big Daddy would take any who were tough enough.

The scarred stallion's eyes were drawn to the spectral banner of the Flash Fillies. It was hard to make out against all the new gangs and bands that had popped up in the last few months. A half dozen were old Red Eye forces. 'Hatchlings of Stern', 'Cybers', and the ever-original 'Red Eyes'. A dozen pegasus 'wings' were in attendance. The 'Grimfang' hellhounds had every pony around them nervous. A knot of zebras calling themselves 'Achu' were talking with 'Doombunny Deathbringers', zebras from some place called Glyphmark.

“Congratulations,” a doleful voice said in his ear. The dark blue pegasus Storm Front stepped up beside him and nodded towards all the new banners. The Halfheart ganger gave a small smile. “Starting to get crowded, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m surprised it hasn’t been bloodier, though. So many new faces trying to claim turf, you’d think there’d be a lot more blood spilled.”

“Lots of these people don’t want turf. They just want respect and recognition and the chance to make a name for themselves,” Storm Front said. “Besides, the old gangs are still growing. You got, what, thirty new members?”

“Closer to fifty. All scarred from the fighting,” Candlewick replied, his eyes finding a spot of lavender across the Arena. Then he blinked, realized that what he’d said might have been confidential, and hastily rasped, “But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Of course not,” Storm Front said with a wry smile. “We’re sharing territory at the moment. A few new gangs setting up and keeping watch. They keep out of our manes, and we don’t put a bullet through their heads.”

“What about the Harbingers?” Burner asked with a frown.

“No. Not with them. They don’t share anything. You join them. Period,” Storm Front said. “I know the new mare in charge of the Flash Fillies is ready to start dusting them. What about Toaster?”

“That’s been his standing order for four months now,” Candlewick confirmed.

“We need to get organized. Set aside the old grudges. There’s way too many Harbingers these days, and they’re getting way too pushy for us. Think Toaster would support an alliance?” Storm Front asked as they walked along.

“With the Flashers, Halfhearts, and Highlanders? No way,” Candlewick snorted. But his eyes lingered on the lavender mare underneath the rainbow-burst banner of the Flash Fillies. “And you can’t tell me your boss feels any differently. We coexist because of Big Daddy and the Reapers. We don’t work together.”

“For now,” Storm Front said as he trotted away. “Bad thing about the Hoof, though, is that often it doesn’t give you a choice.” Candlewick scowled after the dark blue pegasus before turning and limping up towards the box seats.

* * *

The mighty monoliths showed their own wounds, great gaping holes from which spewed their metallic innards. Entrails of conduit and twisted plumbing dangled through holes punched through the ebony walls and spilled out across the roads in tangled intestinal masses. Girders protruded like compound fractures where the towers had broken like brittle bones, and as crippled soldiers they lay against their fellows. Some of the injuries were from the passage of time, others from fresh blasts torn recently throughout the city, and still others appeared as if rent by an army of vandals.

In many places, the wiring and cables were strung like visceral garlands between the towers. Raw electrical lines arced and crackled when charge built up, sending snaps and sparks to compete with the lightning in the heavens above. The metallic tangles swayed in the winds that moved through the higher regions, whistling softly in the silence of the city.

Many of the injuries ran deep. They plunged through the cores of the towers, paths ripped and cut through the original structures and strung with silver cables. Walls breached. Floors collapsed. Ceilings missing. Equipment relocated with little point or purpose for its placement. Shafts laid out and connected to motors relocated from elsewhere in the building. The mad vandals' redistribution violated all sense and reason, placing traffic poles in the heights of skyscrapers and dangling elevator cabling from one rooftop to the foundation of its neighbor. And everywhere was the glint of silver wire.

* * *

Chapel had a drainage problem. The recent construction had ripped open the ground, and with soaked earth and constant rain, the heavy runoff now threatened to erode all their hard work. "More rocks over there! If we don't get this water under control, we'll end up in the river!" Scotch Tape shouted up at the pegasi as her duct-tape-repaired rainslicker flapped in the wind. They flew in a train from further up the hill, carrying whatever rocks they could in their hooves to pile up in a retaining wall above the town. "Bebop! Rocksteady! Fortify that bit there and that one there!" she ordered, pointing imperiously at where the wall sagged and threatened to collapse.

“We’re Steel Rangers, not Steel Ditchdiggers!” one of the two power-armored ponies shouted, but they rammed their shoulders against the barricade and pushed the leaning stones back up.

“If your grenade machine guns can blow up rain, go for it. Otherwise, push!” Scotch Tape shouted against the thunder. Suddenly, a blinding bolt shot down straight at the pair, only to turn ninety degrees and strike a twelve foot tall spire of golden metal. Nevertheless, the blast of thunder knocked most ponies back. Most, but not Scotch. She waved her hoof at the device. “The magic lightning rod is working fine, ponies. Finish up that wall!”

They fell into their work, bracing the stones with branches and scavenged boards. Deus rumbled down the road dragging a ton of debris, walls, and rusty pieces of wagon. He stopped above the town and his engine gunned. “Get that shoring material in place, unicorns. Pegasi, don’t stop the rocks,” Scotch Tape ordered.

Young and old, earth pony and unicorn, pegasus and zebra, everypony pitched in to complete the wall. Soon the water sluiced at an angle around the town rather than straight through the middle of it. Scotch Tape watched the progress of the water, noted the flow in the gullies, and finally relaxed. “Okay. Good job, everypony. Get inside and warm up. Deus, Rocksteady, Bebop, thanks for the power. Nopony go to sleep, though. If the rain picks up more, we might have to resort to sandbagging.” The olive filly looked aside and muttered, “Not that I have a clue where we’ll get the bags. Or the sand, for that matter.”

Chapel was more than just a half-dozen buildings now. It was starting to resemble a real town. With building materials scavenged from the manor and elsewhere, two dozen new houses had sprung up. The post office had been converted into a formal store and the fillies and colts moved into longhouses. Children still outnumbered grownups by almost three-to-one, though, many of them coming from outside the Hoof, lured by stories of a safe place where there was plenty of candy and Sparkle-Cola.

At the south end of town, the church that had given so many solace was almost completely repaired; even the windows were almost finished. Majina was in the process of replacing them with new mosaics of colored glass melted in place with the help of a blow torch and two recently orphaned pegasi; the zebra filly alternated between helping toughen them up and distracting them with something to do. There'd been a lot of new young ponies coming

into Chapel these days, many of them pegasi.

Even with the pressing need to manage the rainwater, efforts to that end weren't the only thing going on today. In a gazebo sat a dozen colts and fillies and one blue stallion. He lifted his black, wide-brimmed hat and shook it once, and out came a round landmine. "Okay. This is your standard Solaris-brand landmine. They made tens of millions of these during the war. They are cheap, plentiful, and all over the Wasteland," P-21 said as he held it up. "It possesses a pressure sensor trigger. It also has a two-meter motion talisman and a two-second delay before detonation. That two seconds is the difference between keeping your hooves and losing them."

"Boring," a lilac unicorn filly drawled as she sat upon a thin pillow. "Who cares about landmines? You just toss a rock at them or levitate them away."

"Really?" P-21 asked with a small smile. "Then what are you going to do about the deadmare-switched landmine I put under the pillow you're sitting on, Razorblade?" The filly's eyes popped wide. "It should be active now."

"I…you…you're bluffing!" the filly spluttered as P-21 smiled. "You're insane! What kind of teacher are you?"

"One who put a landmine under your butt," P-21 replied casually. "So, how are you going to disarm it? Do you have the time to get off the pillow, move it, and levitate the mine away? Can you move fast enough to get out of the three-meter blast radius? Oh, I know some ponies who could, but are you one of them?" As the rest of the class started to lean away, he added, "She's not the only one. I'd think really hard before running."

He held up his demonstration mine. "The Solaris-brand mine has several flaws. First is the two second warning, accompanied by a beeping." He tapped the tab in the middle, making the mine's talisman glow bright amber. "Secondly, when armed, the mine can be seen if you're sharp-eyed enough. Be aware that sometimes sneaky bastards like to hide them under trash, empty cans, or pillows. But the third flaw of the Solaris mine is that it is easily disarmed if you can press the tab again before it fires."

"But…but how can we push the mine button if we're *sitting* on it?" Razorblade wailed.

"That would be part of the lesson," he said as he stood and carefully backed out of the gazebo. "Oh. And since I didn't want us

to be at this all day, there's one more thing. Each mine is on a timer. You have ten, fifteen minutes tops. Good luck," he said as he walked around to where Scotch Tape watched.

"Those aren't real landmines, are they?" Scotch Tape asked softly, knitting her brows.

"Absolutely," he replied, keeping his voice low. "With real detonators, real talismans, real disarm tabs, real timers... and something special in place of most of the charge, courtesy of Sekashi." Chuckling, he looked up the hill. "The wall done?"

"For now. If this rain gets worse, we may have to do something a little more radical," she said as she pushed her wet mane out of her face. "There's plenty of things I can think of we could build for drainage once the rain stops. But it hasn't. I'm just glad we haven't had a mudslide yet."

But P-21 wasn't listening. Instead, his eyes were locked on where two colts not in the class were comparing treasures they'd scavenged recently, most specifically four needles of Med-X. Scotch Tape put a hoof on his shoulder, and he flinched away. "Hey, you two. Put that stuff away or take it in to Charity."

The boys looked at each other, then scowled at her. "You can't tell me what to do. You're not the boss of me."

Scotch Tape's eyes narrowed in a shooty glare. "No, but I do need two ponies to watch that retaining wall all night long in the rain next to a magical lightning rod. You two want to do it?"

Apparently deciding that moving off was better than challenging Scotch, they packed up the salvage and quickly trotted off. P-21 let out the breath he'd held, and Scotch Tape regarded him in concern. "Sorry," he muttered.

She smiled, glanced around for anypony who might be watching, and then nuzzled his nose. This time, he didn't flinch away.

The class was getting more and more agitated as they sat there, trying to figure out how to disarm a mine. Suddenly, the lilac Razorblade shout, "Ah! Did it just beep?! I heard a beep! I--" She shifted too far and the pillow went BEEP BEEP BE-- Then there was a whoomp sound and a small cloud of white powder enveloped the unicorn. "AHHH! I'm dying! You killed me!" wailed the filly as she lay on her back, then blinked and pointed a hoof at P-21. "Ha! I knew you were bluff…" then she froze, her muzzle starting to twitch. "Itchy!" she screeched as she started to scratch herself furiously with her hooves.

The expressions on the other students' faces changed to a mix of relief, amusement, and then worry as they realized that they might be next to scratch themselves like mad. Then one of the colts looked at the filly beside him and grinned. "I got it! You lean way over and I'll hit the tab for you!"

She stared. "No way! I not going to end up like her!" The filly pointed a hoof at Razor, who was dragging her butt across the gazebo floor.

"You have to trust me!" he pleaded.

She bit her lip, grabbed the side of her pillow, and tilted over. BEEP! BEEP! BE-- went the mine, but the russet earth pony slapped the tab with a hoof, silencing the mine. "Now you do mine," he said as he started leaning over as well. She hesitated, but as soon as it started beeping, she jumped forward and disarmed it as well. The filly appeared shocked not only that he'd done it but that she had returned the favor. All at once, she let out a nervous laugh that he joined, and they moved to help others with their mines.

Of course not all took that route. One trusted the wrong colt to help her and got dusted when he laughed rather than disarming the mine. P-21 murmured something to her and she immediately dashed out into the rain. A unicorn tried to lift the pillow and disarm it with his magic before it went off, and failed. One filly, when her mine was disarmed, trotted away and left her partner stuck before others helped her. But a pegasus managed to backflip off his pillow and fly clear before his mine went off, and one zebra filly was smart and clever enough to shift till she had one hoof pressing down on the pillow, move her body, and then knock the pillow aside and disarm hers. Finally, only the colt who had laughed at his partner was left. "Come on. Someone help me out here? Anypony?"

All he got were smug stares and smiles. Then the pillow beeped as the timer went off, and he disappeared in a cloud of white. He then spent a minute scratching furiously while the rest of the class got a laugh.

"Mud neutralizes the itching powder," P-21 said as he trotted back into the middle. In a dash, Razorblade was out the gazebo and rolling in the mud, along with all the others who had failed the test. "Everypony back here. Then we'll quit for the day." When everypony returned, including the muck-dripping Razorblade, he regarded them all coolly. "What was the lesson?"

“Our teacher is a psychotic, evil, sneaky, no-good fucking jerk!” snapped Razorblade.

He bowed his head to her with a smile. “Anypony else?” he asked as he surveyed the colts and fillies.

The two that had helped each other glanced at each other. “Well… we couldn’t do it on our own. We needed to help each other.”

“Speak for yourself,” the pegasus said smugly as he crossed his hooves over his chest.

“You flew clear of the itching powder,” P-21 said. “If that had been a real mine, you might not have gotten clear. Or maybe you could usually fly, but your wing was broken when you found the mine? What if there was more than one mine?” The smug colt’s smile became a little more uncertain. “In this world, there’s only so much you can do on your own. I’m not much good in a fight, but I can crack a terminal with a little hard work and effort. When we rely on other people and let them help us, we take away a lot of that risk.”

“Long as we trust the right ponies!” the filly who’d gotten sprayed snapped, glaring at the muddy colt. More glares were directed at the filly who’d abandoned her partner once her mine was disarmed.

“Also important. And once everypony saw Baling Wire play his trick on Trumpet here, what happened to him?” P-21 asked.

The muddy colt sighed, “Nopony would help me.”

“Exactly. And I wonder if Lash will get helped out the next time she’s in trouble,” he said, every eye on the purple filly who’d abandoned the other. The smug filly suddenly appeared far less certain. “Trust is a precious commodity. Earn it. Cultivate it. Value it. Don’t throw it away simply because you think it’s funny or your own hide matters more to you. Because, eventually, you’ll end up all alone and then, sooner or later, the Wasteland will get you. If you’re lucky, it’ll just kill you.”

Then he regarded Razorblade. “You were absolutely right that landmines aren’t a real threat if you’re ready for them. A little simple telekinesis, and they become a joke.” She blinked, seemingly surprised. “What will kill you is the unexpected.” He held up a mine. “I could rig this for a five minute delay once ‘disarmed’. You’d put it in your saddlebag and think yourself so clever. Heck, you might put a dozen in your bags before the first one goes off. The unexpected will always, always, be what kills you. My friend once lost her face because someone put a landmine in a first aid box. If we hadn’t been there, she’d have died in those tunnels. If we

hadn't had Hydra, she'd still be blind."

Some of the fillies and colts seemed confused, but others nodded. Even Razorblade appeared to regard P-21 a little more thoughtfully. P-21 set the mine down. "Tomorrow, we'll work on assessing and analyzing threats. I'll rig a few special mines, and we'll see how you handle working on them. You can work with a partner, or on your own. Your choice. Lash, you're cleaning up. Wash the powder off in the rain. Dismissed."

The young ponies started to disperse, except for the purple Lash; she seemed to be weighing things in her mind and then, reluctantly, she started to collect the pillows and mines.

"That was awesome, Daddy," Scotch said.

"Thanks," he replied, clearly thankful for her praise.

"I still can't believe how Razorblade talks to you, though." Scotch Tape frowned.

"She's a raider kid. I don't expect her to talk nice. I *do* expect her to do what I say. If she doesn't, she doesn't have to come back. None of them do," he said with a little shrug.

"But of course they do, because you're super awesome." He smiled and flushed, and Scotch Tape picked up a mine. "Say, you don't think I could borrow a few of these, do you?" she asked as she glanced slyly over at the post office.

"Scotch, what did I just say about trust?" he asked with a sigh.

She laughed and grinned. "Oh, come on, Daddy. When you know a pony well enough, you can do a few pranks in good clean fun. Besides," she added with a sly smile, "it's not as if those kids needed *mud* to get the powder off." She narrowed her eyes at the post office. "And I *really* want to repay her for charging me fifty caps for a bag of dirt."

"You bought her mystery pies," P-21 said.

"Yeah, but I didn't know they were mud pies!" she growled, huffing in the direction of the post office.

"Buyer beware," he said.

"Ugh…maturity sucks. I can see why Rampage and Blackjack avoided it like the plague." Scotch Tape slumped a little, pouting up at her father before changing the subject. "Have you heard about what Glory's trying to do?"

"Mhmmm," he murmured.

"Do you really think she's alive? Her PipBuck tag is gone," Scotch said skeptically. "I mean, I want her to be. And Boo. But…" She

shook her head. “I just don’t see it. If she were, we’d know about it by now.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “I think that we owe it to her, and Glory, to try.”

“Rampage went, too. It’s been a whole month, Daddy!” She reached in and hugged his leg. “Daddy, I miss Blackjack terribly, but that place is just bad.”

“Do you want to leave the Hoof?” he asked calmly. She balked and shook her head slowly, fearfully. “Then if Glory finds what she’s looking for, she’ll be able to go in.”

Scotch Tape looked at him. “And you?” He just nodded. “If she succeeds…are you going?”

He tugged his hat over his face a little bit more. “What you’re really asking is if she’ll be okay with you coming with us.”

“Yeah,” Scotch Tape said, kicking the ground with her hoof and dropping her eyes.

“I have no clue if she will or not,” P-21 said quietly. “I don’t know much about magic or radiation or anything like that. But if she is, then that choice is up to you.”

“You don’t want me to go,” Scotch Tape said with a sigh.

“You know I don’t. A little part of me is terrified at the thought of you…dying…” He faced away from her. “But you’ve earned the right to decide for yourself what you’re going to do. I’ll do my best to look out for you, and I know you’ll do your best to look after me.”

She rushed up to him and gave him a tight hug around his neck. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Still,” he said, patting her back, “If you are going to come, you might think of attending some of my classes. A little bit of learning about how to deal with the unexpected never hurts.”

“Dad,” she said flatly as she pulled away. “I’ve travelled with Blackjack. I don’t need *lessons* in dealing with the unexpected.”

“If you say so,” he said, leaning in and giving her a little nuzzle before walking around her. “I’m going to head back up to the house. See you there.” And with that, he trotted out into the rain.

Scotch Tape sighed and gazed towards the Core. Lightning snapped and cracked along the green-lit towers. It was as if the heavens themselves were at war with the buildings. “Come on, Blackjack. You’ve come back to life before…” Sighing, she started away from the gazebo.

BEEP! BEEP! BE-- Pwumff!

"Daddy!" went a scream of outrage throughout the settlement of Chapel.

* * *

This had once been a city of ponies. It was easy to forget that. Easy to be crushed by the weight of those soaring black and green towers. Ponies had lived here. It could be seen in the detritus that remained. The clothes lying in heaps and tangled along the sidewalks. The shops displaying the finest fashions of Canterlot. Even signs for sales. Quarter off. Half off. Faint music still lingered where a radio played softly to an empty apartment; automated warnings endlessly, mindlessly, soullessly repeated for ponies to come to the shelter of the Core as soon as possible. Meals, dried, desiccated, and fossilized on the plates, rested on the tables of diners.

Ponies tried to live here, in this place of steel and glass. If one relaxed just enough, so that the damage and decay blurred away, the promise began to emerge like old stains in a fabric. The terminals on every countertop, the PipBucks and their broadcasters scattered throughout the city. Robots, long ago bereft of power, lay like overgrown and forlorn toys waiting for their master to return. And even though so much of the city was devoted to technology, nature also had a place. Public parks, roadside trees, interior arboretums, and even magical home gardens abounded, their contents all dead but perfectly preserved in the grip of Enervation.

Once, this had been a place inhabited by ponies. If not of them, then at least for them. The playgrounds of schools in the towers, the still galleries of art, the solemn libraries... all for the people who were to live here. And for a time, it had been good. For a time. But the foundation was unsound, the roots rotten. Nothing founded on a lie can last forever.

* * *

Raptors were vessels of energy, of humming engines, blowing vents, vibrating plates, and the subtle press of winds on the hull. This Raptor felt more like a tomb. Its halls were dark, illuminated only by failing emergency lighting and a lone PipBuck lamp. Its air

was like a held breath and filled with an ineffable weight. The armor plates were peeled away to reveal the conduits and plumbing beneath. The mare sighed softly in the gloom as she surveyed the damage. Then she continued through to the lit chamber at the end of the hall.

Storm Chaser's office. Her meticulous lists and files were scattered across the floor. A lone lamp glowed upon the corner desk. The old gray mare at the desk looked a lot older and grayer. Her usual crisp bun had stray strands escaping it. On the desk before her sat an open bottle of wine. "Permission to enter, ma'am?" Twister asked from the doorway.

"You don't need to call me ma'am. I'm not a general of the Enclave anymore," she said with a slight slurring of her speech. "Not just because I was relieved of command, you understand, but also because it just so happens that there isn't an Enclave anymore."

"It's official?" Twister asked.

"It's official that Ironfeather took the last functional Thunderhead and a dozen loyal ships and departed for parts unknown." She rocked a little and gestured with her hoof. "Some say north. Some say south. All say he's long gone." She carefully poured herself another glass. "So, between the loss of that, the absolute debacle out west, and the damage Neighvarro's facilities suffered, plus the fact we can't control the skies any more, and the little point that Shadowbolt Tower is *gone*…I'd say it is official that we, the Enclave, are really and truly…fucked." She took a drink and swallowed, smacking her lips. "That's a technical term down here, by the way."

"I believe I was the one who told you so, ma'am," Twister said as she sat down opposite the general. The tipsy mare leaned forward and pushed the bottle towards her. Lifting it with her hoof, Twister took a drink of something that could only loosely be called 'wine'. "That stuff is awful."

"All our stuff is awful. Haven't you read the Lightbringer's story?" she asked as she swirled the glass with one hoof while the other lifted a thick printout. Her wing put glasses on as she stared down at the paper. "We are, and I'm paraphrasing here, the soulless monsters that attack helpless surfacer settlements and disintegrate little foals that she collects in soda bottles while destroying ancient cities of Equestria's roots, all the while conspiring with giant blue alicorn goddesses that want to assimilate all of ponykind. Not only that, but we are the fartwinds that for the last two centuries have

made the surface a mess, but rather than letting us make up for our mistakes, she is going to do it for us. Because we, apparently, can't be trusted to do so." She tossed the papers aside. "And THAT is how history is going to remember the Grand Pegasus Enclave. Because that is what the victors have written."

"Not exactly the most glowing account, I'll admit, but to be fair some of our soldiers did attack peaceful surface settlements, disintegrate little foals, destroy ancient cities, and conspire with the Goddess," Twister replied, getting a scowl from Storm Chaser.

"Nuance!" the gray mare hissed. "Where's the nuance? Does she hold the specific councilors who authorized Cauterize responsible? No. Does she acknowledge the captains that refused orders? *Barely*. Does she tell how Colonel Bright went to a firing squad rather than remain silent about the unnecessary razing of Canterlot? No! Did she capture Autumn Leaf so he could be tried for crimes against equinity? No!" She slammed her hoof on the table before her. "I knew hundreds of soldiers in the Enclave who were good, loyal, and true! Yes, we had problems that needed addressing, that is abundantly clear, but we were not all war criminals!" she shouted, pointing her hoof at Twister, but then she wilted. "Some of us gave our lives for what we believed in. They deserve more respect than this."

Twister sighed and took another swig of the bitter wine before asking, "Any word from our own settlements? What are they doing?"

"Anything, everything, and nothing. Most settlements are independent now and on their own. With Thunderhead and Neighvarro destroyed, no center remains. Most are doing whatever they need to in order to survive. Those that were barely holding on are evacuating. Larger settlements are trying to set up relations with the surface, but since we're the evilest bastard in the sky, there hasn't been much luck. I'm more hopeful out here. Thunderhead may have been lost, but we're making strong ties with the surface groups." She sighed and leaned back in the chair, staring at the ceiling. "I'm hoping…praying…that we can get goods to settlements that need them quickly." She closed her eyes. "Last word from your home was that it was evacuating to Las Pegasus."

Twister sighed. "I have an aunt and uncle there. They should be safe. Doesn't help it's even further west, though." She regarded the PipBuck on her leg. "I got this for the trip from one of those stable

ponies in exchange for a beam pistol. P-21 and his daughter configured it for me and everything. Used some sort of stable programming." She gave a little shrug.

"Well, you went a bit more native than most. We need ponies like you," Storm Chaser said as she swirled her glass, considering the pale blue contents.

Twister watched her for a moment, her ears flattening, then looked around. "The *Castellanus* is quiet. Where are the repair teams?"

She clenched her eyes closed a moment. "I sent them over to the *Sleet*."

"Then when will the *Castellanus* fight again?" Twister asked with a frown.

"It won't." Twister just stared in stunned silence as the old gray mare took another drink. "We did an assessment. Our flow control talismans are shot. The *Sleet*'s are intact. Our weapon systems are either destroyed or so in need of repair and calibration that they may as well be. The *Sleet*'s are intact. We have three hull breaches. They have one." She looked at the silent walls as tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to acknowledge them as she continued, "It would be…sentimental to divide our limited capacity for repair between two damaged ships instead of giving everything necessary to one." She reached over and snagged the bottle, pouring herself another glass. "So I felt that drinking something irredeemably horrible and alcoholic was in order."

"'Skywine'…yeah. That's an acquired taste, for sure. We used to use it as solvent on greasy stains." Twister shivered, her lavender wings fluffing a little. Then she tapped her chin with a lone pinion. "That leaves us with the *Sleet*, the *Cyclone*, and the *Rampage*," Twister said thoughtfully.

Storm Chaser growled, "How she got the crew's support, that I'll never know. Where she found all that red paint, I'll never know."

"Be glad it is paint," Twister retorted, and the gray mare snorted derisively. "And, after their last captain, I think a maniac surfacer was a nice relief. Too bad she didn't stick around. I think that when Rampage realized there weren't any sky pirates to do battle with, and the crew weren't going to crash the ship into the S.P.P. hub to check its invulnerability, she moved on to other things. Like finding some sign of Blackjack."

"She's gone. We saw that megaspell…I never imagined that kind of power before." She shivered and then frowned. "I knew what she

had. I'd even seen videos of the damned things. But to imagine it could suck up everything in a three mile radius, including Shadowbolt Tower? How could she survive that?"

"Mmmm…it's doubtful, but if any mare could, it's Blackjack." She smiled. "Anyway, with the *Rampage* patrolling the borders, we haven't seen a feather of the *Blizzard* or *Sirocco*. I'm sure when Rampage gets back, they'll hunt down the others. Did you know she stuffed a mattress with Crosswind's feathers before kicking him out over some pond? It was the first time I heard a crew cheer in weeks."

"The one ship utterly untouched in the battle, and it's devoted to that striped maniac… " She sighed again and stared at the wall. "A petty, sentimental part of me wanted to rip out all her control talismans…but that would have been a waste."

"And with no flow control talismans, the ship will never fly," Twister said grimly.

She laughed bitterly. "Oh, she'd fly. Her reactor and main turbines are fine. You just wouldn't be able to slow down, and steering would be pretty minimal. Perhaps for three minutes at top speed before the engines exploded."

"I'm sorry to hear that," a mare's boiled voice said from the doorway. Twister turned and spotted the pale grayish-blue hide of Rainbow Dash. Her faded rainbow mane, infamous throughout history, was now only so many patchy clumps. The pegasus wore a Mare Do Well costume of simple cloth, and at the moment she had the cowl down and the hat back around her neck. "Sounds like it'd be a wild couple of minutes, though."

"Get out," Storm Chaser snapped in disgust, reaching out, snagging the bottle with her wings, and holding it protectively to her chest. "I have no desire to share my wine with a two-century-old traitor." Then she blinked and peered into the bottle, upended it, and collected the trickle in her mouth. "Actually, I have no wine to share."

"That's all right," Rainbow Dash said as she pulled an identical bottle from under her cloak. "I brought my own."

"Where's the fancy outfit?" Twister asked.

Rainbow sighed. "Seemed a little out of place for a friendly drink. Besides, Monkeywrench is still trying to get it fixed after I took it barreling through three cruise missiles."

Storm Chaser seemed to weigh the insult of such dishonorable

company with the promise of more inebriant and finally gestured to the seat besides Twister. “Well then, go ahead. You must want to celebrate your victory.” She loaded as much contempt on the word as possible. “You must be thrilled.”

“Am I glad the Enclave is gone? Hell, yeah,” Rainbow Dash bit the tab screwed into the cork and pulled it free with a pop. The captain set a second glass, chipped at the rim, next to hers. “Am I glad for all the suffering and trouble it took? No.” She sighed as she started to pour. “I wanted the pegasi to help the surface. I didn’t want good ponies to suffer.” She filled both glasses and then passed the bottle to Twister.

“Life is suffering,” Twister said. “It’s how you know you’re still breathing, and what moves you to keep flying even when your feathers are going to fall off.”

Storm Chaser sighed, eyeing Rainbow Dash with clear distaste. “Well, you at least acknowledge some of us were good. Some of us were…very good,” she said as she looked over at a photograph of herself and a pink pegasus stallion.

“Were you two close?” Rainbow Dash asked.

The gray mare smiled sadly, seeming to contemplate a catty remark, but then said primly, “Always professional. He never let it go past that. Still…in another life…if I’d been somepony else, or he’d been somepony else…” she sighed and shook her head. “What might have been?”

Rainbow took a sip. “Life as a ghoul is nothing *but* what might have been. There’s plenty of years that are fuzzy…but your mistakes? You see them as clear as day. If I’d gone straight to the S.P.P. instead of helping Pinkie Pie…if I hadn’t taken Pumpkin with me…if I hadn’t supported a stupid war in the first place…” She shook her head. “You meet some ghouls, and they’re just stuck back then. Not mindless, not feral…just…stuck. Now I have to wonder what I’m going to do next.”

“You don’t have plans?” Twister asked.

“Well, joining the Wonderbolts would be a bit awkward at this point,” she said with a dry chuckle. “I’m glad they’re helping out west, but that’d be too weird. And playing Mare Do Well…well…there’s plenty of mares, stallions, zebras, and griffins doing well without a mask. I’m thinking of just giving the suit to Monkey Wrench. I’ve touched base with Spike…wasn’t *that* rough…and even said a few words with the Lightbringer. We both agreed that the

history books will say I died. Why correct them? So now…I dunno."

"We still need skilled ponies out here," Twister said. "Especially at the Skyport."

"Yeah. I think I'll stick around till whatever is going on with the Core is resolved." She took a long drink and then pondered the glass. "I wonder if this skywine is still as horrible as I remember. Everything tastes like boot leather," she said, getting a small smile from the gray mare. "Speaking of the Core, did you two know that that city is an impossibility?" she pointed with her wing.

"Impossible how?" Twister asked.

"Twilight and Applejack noticed it. The numbers don't add up. In order to build the Core as fast as they did, in just three years, it would have taken all the war materials for five years and double all the ponypower of the entire country. All while we were at war," she said with a smile.

"I'm sure somepony just messed up the audits. After all, the Core *is* there," Storm Chaser said wearily, gesturing with her hoof vaguely to the side.

"That's what Luna said. After all, in the early years there were tons of mistakes made between the ministries. That's why the O.I.A. was needed. Everypony said there were just accounting errors and paperwork lost. Managers were supposed to be improvising on material and labor safety. Workers like the diamond dogs were supposed to dig even more efficiently."

Rainbow Dash grinned and leaned in. "What nopony realized was that sometimes workers would come back in the morning and find all the work completely finished. Tunnels that were started got finished way sooner than planned. Some people figured the towers went up so fast that they were hollow, but every single one of them was filled with stuff. Look at Shadowbolt Tower. I don't care how awesome Scootaloo was, nopony could have built that in twenty years, let alone five. Nopony is sure exactly where everything is or what it's supposed to be. It just is."

"So the Core is…what, alive?" Twister said with a skeptical, and slightly worried, smile.

"Nooo pony knows," Rainbow Dash replied dramatically before rolling her eyes. "What I do know is that, in all of two centuries, I've never seen it like this. Something's happened in there." She then regarded the general. "So, what's your plan, Stormy?"

The general snorted, wine spraying her muzzle. "Don't call me

that! I'm almost fifty. That's forty years too old to be called that."

"Well, I'm almost five times older than you, Stormy. So the question remains: what are you going to do?"

Storm Chaser sighed and swirled the glass. "If my captain were here, he'd ask for permission to speak freely, then ask me what the hell am I thinking sitting here in a dead ship when there's work to be done." She closed her eyes and sighed. "I just never dreamed I'd see the fall of the Enclave in my lifetime."

"None of us did," Twister said solemnly.

"Hey, I doubted I'd see it in three lifetimes," Rainbow said with a half smile. Her ragged featherduster wings scooped up the bottle, and she refilled the glasses. "What should we drink to?" she asked, returning the bottle to Twister.

"To the pegasi! May they fly in clear skies from now on," Twister offered.

The gray officer stared into the glass. "To the fallen," Storm Chaser said, more subdued. "May their sacrifices be remembered, and honored."

Rainbow Dash mirrored the general, her own eyes distant. "To friends. May they always be reunited."

In the dim confines of the ship, three glasses clinked together.

* * *

There was only one direction in this city: down. Every drop of water reinforced this fact. It flowed endlessly from the firmament, raced down the cracked black walls, spurted out of downspouts, sprayed off molding, and crashed down stairs. Cold waterfalls cascaded down elevator shafts, and rivers flowed out lobby doors. The streets served as canals for the rain, until it disappeared down cracks in the asphalt, swirled down storm drains, and poured into the subways with the perpetual noise of a great inhalation. The current never ended. Downward. Downward. Down.

Escape was impossible. The curving streets only led inward, and even the most concerted effort to leave would be stopped the moment one reached the grim walls rising story after story around the entire city, a monolithic barrier to keep the Wasteland out and the captive within. The street signs at intersections never pointed in a direction leading away from the city; the maps in the travelers' kiosks ended at that wall, as if there were no Equestria beyond it.

The Wasteland was a cool monster, patient, accepting an escape today with the easy knowledge that tomorrow, or someday, it would claim you. Not this place. It hungered. And every drop of rain drew all within it in that inevitable and inexorable direction. Down.

* * *

The hissing rain punctuated by rumbles of thunder would make most see no need for stealth, sure that they could not be heard by those in the camp at the gate of a magical waste dump. The red and yellow bars of the E.F.S. might make one confident that they were the hunter in the forest as they picked out the armed and armored brood standing watch. A mistcloak in addition to the rest might make one feel as if they were completely safe from harm as they observed filthy zebras and ponies rolling orange and yellow barrels into wagons. Still, Lancer showed remarkable restraint when the tip of a spear touched the hollow beneath his ear and a voice said, in soft, accented Pony, "I could kill you now, traitor. I should kill you now."

"But you haven't, Adama," Lancer replied, equally quiet. "Nor have you raised alarm." He chanced a look behind him at a strong zebra mare with a long, hooked spear in her hooves. Her stripes were particularly wavy, and her rump seemed to show some kind of sea creature.

"How did you hear me?" he asked.

"The Atoli can track a shark ten feet under a breaking sea," she said smugly. "Also, your pony device makes a faint whine when wet."

"I was afraid you might hear it. Still, it has great uses in navigation," he replied.

She huffed. "You are exiled, Lancer," she said, narrowing her aquamarine eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps I wished to see you again?" he countered.

Immediately she glowered at him. "That relationship ended with your exile. I *should* kill you."

"You keep saying that," he countered. "You know something is amiss, Adama."

"Everything is amiss. This city is cursed, remember? We are cursed for being here and you are doubly cursed," she said sourly.

“That reminds me of a very funny story,” a mare said as she stepped out of the rain with a length of bamboo across her shoulders. Adama inhaled deeply but was not quick enough. With a spray of rain, the staff whirled and smacked her in the throat, then snapped up and knocked the spear away from Lancer, and finally whacked her legs out from under her. She went down in the mud, an opportune blast of thunder covering the noise of her thrashing. Then the staff was thrust at her face, and she froze, wheezing and coughing as she stared at the end of the stick. “Please don’t make me kill you before I tell it.”

“You are not the only one not alone,” Adama said, then looked to the side where two zebra stallions stood, swaying slowly in the rain. Together, they collapsed in a heap, a dozen tufted needles sticking out of their backs. A little zebra filly sitting on a stump behind them smiled and waved a blowgun at the muddy mare. “Betsuwana,” Adama muttered. Her eyes returned to Lancer. “What do you want?”

“Two things. First, I want to know what my father is up to. Why are you here? Why are you making our people work as slaves?”

“I will not answer your questions, traitor. The Atoli are loyal to our oaths to the last Caesar.” From above, a skywagon slowly descended towards the trio and their prisoner, pulled by a waterlogged teal ghoul. Her wings resembled drenched feather dusters, and Adama balked a little at the ghoul pegasus’s appearance.

“I want to go home. I want to take care of the children. There is far too much lightning to fly safely. Master Vanity told me to take care of the children,” she rasped in a daze.

The tiny zebra sprang across the ground and landed on the wagon. “You’re taking care of me, Miss Harpica,” she piped, patting the ghoul’s drenched mane.

The ghoul gave a shaky smile. “Yes. I am. We should go home before you catch your death of cold.”

“That reminds me of another stor--” Sekashi began.

“Enough!” Adama hissed, looking from one to the next in bafflement. “I am no traitor. Take your lies and begone.”

“I am not going to get to tell my story, am I?” Sekashi said with a sigh as she stepped up beside Lancer and extended her pole. “Some zebras have no time for lore.” As Adama picked herself carefully out of the mud, her eyes went from one to the next, then glanced back at the camp.

“I will not betra--” Adama began as she wiped away the mud, and then the filly appeared perched on the end of the outstretched staff, balanced on the tips of her hooves and straining towards the strong mare with bright green eyes and a warm smile. “Uh... hello?”

“Hello!” she piped. “I’m Majina.”

Nopony seemed to move for a second, save Sekashi’s growing smile. Then Adama said slowly, “Yes... well... you should go and... ”

Majina, though, was more interested in Adama’s dropped spear and gestured down at the massive polearm. “Wow! That’s a really big spear! What do you hunt with that? Super enormous mega kubwa radroaches?”

“It’s called a harpoon,” Adama muttered grumpily as she looked down at it. “My tribe, the Atoli, use them to hunt sharks and--” she glanced back to the now empty end of the staff, “--squid?”

Majina appeared on her back. “What’s a shark? And a squid? And an Atoli?”

Lancer reached out and pulled her off Adama’s back and set her on his. “Majina, she needs to answer our questions first.”

“My questions were important too,” she said with a sulk, crossing her forelegs before her as she scowled at him.

Adama looked from the young filly to Lancer, then back at the camp. “They are from a place called Glyphmark. Your father named them traitors, no better than ponies,” Adama said carefully. “We are collecting this... poison. I know not why.”

“Ah. That reminds me. It is funny, is it not?” Sekashi said. “First he names me traitor. Then my daughter. Others that fled with us. All who wish not to join his Remnant. So many traitors.” She peered at Adama, then blinked. “Why, you are not laughing? Do you not find it funny? One wonders when he shall say you are a traitor. Or the stones. Or the sky. How many times must one name another ‘traitor’ before one thinks their idea of loyalty and treason quite odd?”

“He is Legate. It is our duty... ” Adama began, averting her eyes.

“It is your duty to collect magical waste? To put our people in harm’s way?” Lancer asked sharply. “From Glyphmark or anywhere else, none of our people should be treated so. It is an insult to all our tribes. You said yourself that we should not be here. The Atoli should be on your islands. I thought I knew why he brought us here, but now I know nothing. He has love for naught but the Brood.”

“I... I have concerns,” Adama admitted hesitantly. “So many do.

When the Brood of Coyotl appeared, they were powerful but few and easily commanded. Now they are so many. Ten for every one of us. And more every day! They follow their own strange orders, and we are left to gather weapons for them, to fight and collect whatever he bids as if we were dogs. And if they come to us from Equestrian settlements, travelers are enslaved immediately. Our people!"

Lancer sighed. "Is anyzebra going to do anything about it, Adama?"

"Are you?" she snapped back. "You are exiled. Betrayed. Cursed!"

"I am," he answered. "We will free those prisoners, and Harpica will fly us all to safety."

"I'm not much of a flier. Much better as a nanny. I'd very much like to return to doing that. Teaching young ponies their alphabet. Mathematics. Scales."

"Oooh! She's been teaching me to sing!" Majina piped, bouncing up on the wagon, and took a deep breath.

Sekashi silenced her, pressing a hoof to her lips. "Quietly, my heart. I do not wish to test your darts against the Brood just yet." Undaunted, Majina began to dance on the wagon, lips moving silently.

Adama watched in bafflement. "You're all mad."

"There's a surplus of that in this place," Lancer replied. "Is anyzebra in the Remnant brave enough to stand up to my father?"

She looked away, tapping her hooves against the shaft of the harpoon. "Perhaps. Maybe. Afterwards. Once the city is broken. Once the Maiden returns... if she returns... like the Legate assures us she will. But there are the Harbingers to consider. Hundreds of well-armed, well-fed, well-organized ponies. They camp near ours and wait. Watching. Waiting for the moment to attack! Till they are dealt with, we cannot withdraw. Not when we are so close to destroying this foul place."

"And as their numbers swell, so too does the number of Brood," Lancer countered.

The mare squirmed uncomfortably. "If I could, I would take Pokey and leave this place. I long to hear the sea waves on rocky shores again. Tracking sharks along the reefs and shoals. This rain... this neverending storm... it is not right. But if I were to try and flee... ."

Lancer touched his scarred face. "I know."

"You named your spear Pokey?" Majina asked curiously, four sets of eyes falling upon the filly. Adama flushed and hugged the

harpoon closer to herself as Majina grinned and waved her blowgun. “This is Mr. Sleepytime. He puts folks to sleep.”

Adama relaxed a little and smiled some. “You seem... happier... being cursed, Impalii,” she said as she examined the three.

“Sometimes, once you know you are properly damned, there is great relief,” Lancer replied with a tired smile. “As my mother said. Sometimes there is a great question over who is cursed, and who is not.”

“Wait!” Majina looked from Lancer to Adama. “Who’s Impalii?”

“That is his name,” Sekashi said. “Lancer was his father’s nickname.”

“So... Lancer... Pokey... Impalii... Adama... ” Majina said, tapping her chin before her emerald eyes popped wide. “Wait. Did you two have a thing?”

Lancer and Adama both flushed as Majina grinned. “It’s not like I was on missions all the time,” Lancer said defensively.

“You weren’t?” Adama countered, and suddenly she stepped closer, hooking a leg behind his neck and pulling him closer. “I was very sad when you were exiled.” Then she pressed her lips to his firmly, and he went even redder. Harpica covered Majina’s face with a wing, but the young zebra pulled the bedraggled pinions apart and peeked through.

When the pair parted lips, the filly could contain herself no longer. “Adama and Impalii sitting in a tree! K- I- S- S-” Majina began to sing. Suddenly, a shout rang out from the camp. The red bars were moving quite rapidly. “Oopsie,” she covered her mouth.

Lancer seemed half glad for the attack, pulling away and focusing on the camp and the guards who raced towards them, shouting. “I will not ask you to betray yourself, Adama. My sister will put you to sleep,” Lancer said sharply as he raised his rifle.

“No. As you said,” she hefted the harpoon. “It is time for action.”

“Get ready to fly the prisoners to safety, Harpica,” Lancer ordered as he took a bead on an approaching Brood. “Adama, if we survive this, my mother has... theories... about the Legate. You should hear.” He said it with immense disgust, feeling his guts clench. “Kill none but the Brood, if you can help it,” he told Adama, then turned to the other two. “Majina. Mother. Get into the camp and get the prisoners out.”

Majina nodded, but then frowned at her mother. “But what about your story, Mamma?” Her lips exaggerated each word.

“Patience, love. There is a time to tell stories, and there is a time to live them,” Sekashi replied. As gunfire roared out in the woods, the clouds snapped and crackled above.

* * *

This was a city of artifice. Of artifact. Remains of the ponies who’d once lived here were strewn everywhere. If the water could not dissolve it or sweep it away, it persisted. Sodden clothes lay in piles in the streets, like an immense collection of dirty laundry. Eyeglasses gleamed as rain sheeted off their lenses. False teeth grinned at the stark towers. Horseshoes slowly bled rust into the gutters and drains. Toys and dolls sat forlornly for children who would never play with them again.

So much and so little at the same time. Entertainment tapes sitting on racks of a rental store. Precious jewelry resting on sodden velvet pillows. Bars of gold and sacks of bits quietly reposing in sepulchral vaults. Shelf after shelf of books and magazines, never to be read. The plenty and precious of an age rendered into inert matter by abandonment.

Even the bits of the Wasteland that had intruded here had been quickly touched by the feeling of stasis. Pieces of shelters, broken skywagons, the heaps of raider and scavenger clothes... all were equal in the place. Even the massive airship, wedged vertically between two skyscrapers with its nose suspended mere feet from the cracked asphalt, seemed as if it'd plunged here centuries rather than months ago. The slow trickle of red dripping from its ports and breaches was the only evidence to the contrary.

* * *

“None of this makes any sense,” Glory muttered as she stared at the printout showing peaks and valleys in a spectrum of colors. Most crept along the bottom half inch of the graph. One peak, however, rose above all others to the very top of the graph. “Even with the Arcanospectrograph, we still aren’t any closer to understanding what Enervation actually is.” She sighed, stretched out her left wing to hook the silver ring lying on the scientific apparatus, and peered at it as if trying to unlock its secrets by eye alone. “We know the field is either generated or magnified by these, but we don’t know

how. We know the field is damaging to living tissue, but we don't know why. And Blackjack was resistant to the effects, but we aren't sure of the cause." Grunting, she rubbed her face with a hoof. "This is maddening."

"Speak for yourself," the normally cynical and surly Triage replied as she gawked at other printouts. The pair were in an old lab in the Collegiate; the room had been cleaned out and loaded with fresh equipment and terminals. Several silver rings hung from pegs on the wall, and there were cages filled with bloatsprites in the corner. "That thing is amazing. Graphing magic is so cool." She shuffled the papers around for a moment, then looked at Glory. "Why would pegasi study magic, though?"

"Mostly weapons research, depressingly enough. Thunderhead did have a large civilian science research base, though. Plus we had unicorns in the tower to help, so why not?"

"When you said that your scientists needed a place to relocate, I didn't expect you'd take over two whole buildings…but with equipment like this, I'm not too fussed. Makes this place feel like a real college again," Triage said as she squinted. "So what's this mean again?"

Glory set aside the paper she was examining and trotted over to where Triage was examining a printout of the her own magical capabilities. "Each of those high points is a spell you can cast and its corresponding characteristics. Ten peaks. Not bad at all, considering that the average for most unicorns is six." She looked at the apparatus. "This Arcanospectrograph is rated at a million specific magical wavelengths. Most magical effects we simply don't know, but we have almost ten thousand spell effects charted. This one," she said, pointing at a smaller peak, "is the telekinesis constant. We use it for calibration."

"And that's my healing spell. There's my scalpel spell. And there's my anesthesia spell. Huh," Triage murmured. It was odd to see more than grim practicality in her eyes. It suited her. "So much potential magic," she said as she gestured at the tiny squiggles at the bottom of the page. "I wonder if any unicorn's learned them all?"

"Well, most arcane spell effects aren't unicorn magic. Dragonfire. Balefire. Cockatrice petrification. Pegasus weather manipulation. There's plenty of magic outside unicorn spells." She looked at the first graph and stabbed at the huge peak with a wing. "And that one

bar is Enervation."

"So why is it so much bigger than all the rest?" Triage asked.

"Because, relative to all other known natural forms of background magic, Enervation is much higher energy. It's more 'powerful', relatively speaking, of course," she added quickly. "All magical fields are incredibly weak until something focuses that energy. Like the silver rings, a dragon breathing fire, or a unicorn casting a spell. Without that focus, ambient magical fields tend to cancel each other out. With some exceptions," she added with a frown, looking at one graph that seemed completely random peaks. "Like Flux, taint, magical radiation, and such."

"We always thought that Enervation was just a form of radiation," Triage said.

"No. After seeing this, I'm certain it's not." She trotted over to two other pictures. In these graphs were more of the random spikings. "Flux and radiation are completely chaotic. The spikes are more intense, but they're also more noisy. It's like being in a room with millions of tiny crazy unicorns casting spells at random. Enervation is more like…like…one incredibly powerful spell being cast from very very far away. So when it's focused... " Glory trailed off.

"You start dying," Triage finished for her, glancing at several jars of goop next to empty bloatsprite cages. "I never really understood Enervation's pathology. It just hits everything all at once. If you're wounded, the wounds exacerbate, but even uninjured tissue is affected. Metabolism slows. Protein and cell walls break down. Organ failure. Death. Then liquefaction. As if dying wasn't enough for this spell. And it squashes healing magic too. Even potions aren't immune."

"But why? Is it some kind of general 'death spell'? Why does it drive ghouls feral, then? And why doesn't it affect Blackjack?" Glory scowled at the printouts.

Triage regarded her thoughtfully a moment. "You really want to crack this, don't you? To find Blackjack?"

Glory closed her eyes a moment. "Partly. A large part. A part of me also wants to help Father; for some reason, he's a walking low-level Enervation field that's keeping his body from healing. But I want to help in general, too. Thousands suffer, and if it's true that these silver rings are found all over Equestria, there could be settlements that are sickened by Enervation and don't have a clue because the effects are so insidious."

Triage considered the graphs. “You really think Blackjack’s alive?”

“She’s cheated death more times than I can count. I have to believe she can pull it off again,” Glory said, then shook her head. “I have to check for myself. If there’s no sign of her…I’ll…I’ll accept it. But we aren’t going to simply stop searching just because she’s gone. Rampage went in a month ago. For all we know, she found something.”

“Or she found something that could actually kill her,” Triage offered, frowning at the graphs once more. “Maybe we can work out why Blackjack’s immune. We asked Professor Zodiac and Deus and the cyberpony survivors, and all of them are sickened by Enervation, as are the sand dogs. So why was she special? Was it something in her design? Something she did? Something she was exposed to? For all we know, it’s that damned megaspell program she carries with her.”

“Or a combination of two or more of those,” called a mare from the door. The stunning blond-maned pegasus drew Glory’s eyes. Accompanied by Moonshadow pushing Sky Striker in a wheelchair, Doctor Morningstar had taken steps to reduce her hotness with thick glasses, a lab coat, and messy tousled mane. It did absolutely nothing to detract from her hotness. “We have to take care to eliminate all extraneous variables to draw a useful conclusion.” The bandaged stallion was taking great pains to keep his eyes off Morningstar’s rump, and the doctor looked back at her own butt. “Fascinating. Even covered, it continues to draw attention.”

“Doctor,” Glory said in pained tones.

“I’m sorry, my dear, but when I said it’d be wonderful to be as sexy as I am smart, I never anticipated how *distracting* it would be. Why, I was lucky to even make it out of the bathroom!” the doctor said in injured tones.

“I can take off that sexy with a belt sander,” Glory muttered under her breath.

Triage murmured, smiling around her cigarette, “Careful. You’re sounding like a Wastelander.”

“Careful? You’re not gay,” she muttered.

The others assembled around the machine. “Where do you need me?” her father asked.

“Just put your hoof on the reader,” Glory replied as Moonshadow studied the printouts. He groaned as he leaned forward, placing the indicated part on the machine. Rainbow light began to bathe the

end of his limb, Glory scowling at the doctor still entranced by the wiggling of her own butt. “How are the refugees doing?”

“Oh, they’re fine,” the doctor said absently. “Your father’s name was enough to get some order established, and though we’re spread out, most families are still united. If we could get the weather under control, we could start getting some serious repair work done on Thunderhead.” She tapped her lips with a wing. “If I were to get a degree in geology, would I become even more attractive? Perhaps spontaneously generating a glittery aura with just a mane flip… ” Morningstar tossed her mane, then looked expectantly at her reflection.

“Doctor Morningstar, I know how disorienting transformations like that are, but please focus,” Glory objected.

“Of course. Of course. For science,” she said absently with another mane toss.

“I’ve seen this before,” Moonshadow replied with a frown as she looked at the Enervation graph.

“You couldn’t have. This is the first time we’ve scanned the ring with the Arcanospectrascope,” Glory said absently.

Moonshadow glared flatly at her. “And I’m telling you that I’ve seen this wavelength before.”

“When?” Morningstar asked.

“Observing a section of space about five months ago. It was the wavelength that stood out. Most stars don’t produce magic in this band. Blue. Yellow. Red. Even purple and pink. But there aren’t very many stars that produce a green wavelength of magic.” She tapped the paper. “Four hundred and thirteen point six six two nanosparkles. Way off for most stars.”

“Enervation from space?” Glory said in bafflement.

“Way off in space.” She returned her eyes to the chart. “Adjusting for the light/magic speed differential constant, the source was in the ballpark of eight hundred million light-years away.”

“Huh?” Triage blinked, then pointed to her horn. “Hey, I’m the unicorn here. You eggheads aren’t allowed to know more about magic than me. That’s just…wrong!”

Moonshadow gave a slightly sheepish smile. “Sorry. This is just our field. Light travels about ten percent faster than magic. As far as we’re concerned, the two are simultaneous, but if a spell effect is big enough or the distance far enough, the difference can be measured. It’s really only something of interest to astronomers…or

megaspell researchers," Moonshadow replied. "Pity we weren't around eighty million years ago. It must have been a heck of a light show. From the magical radiation hitting us now, it must have been something pretty spectacular."

"Are we in any danger?" Triage scowled with worry.

"Relax. The field strength is lower than a dead unicorn's horn. It's probably been hitting Equestria for centuries now." Moonshadow sighed. "A pity I didn't get on it sooner. There's an academic paper in there on astromagical phenomenon. Maybe two."

"Publish or perish," Morningstar agreed with a somber nod. "Isn't that how it always goes?"

"Enervation from space," Glory muttered, her purple eyes narrowing in thought. "Moony. You said the light arrived eighty million years ago?"

"About that. Give or take half a million years. I'd need a full lab and about a month to verify beyond that," her sister answered. "We'd need to find fossilized tree rings, see when they absorbed this wavelength of light. As of now it's just a hypothesis."

Glory waved her hoof impatiently. "Could something *else* have arrived eighty million years ago too?" Glory asked, looking soberly from one pony to the next.

"You mean little gray ponies with antennae?" Triage wore an expression stuck between nervous and mocking. "Space ponies?"

"Statistically, there must be life out there," Morningstar said casually. "Of course, considering the vast distances of space, the odds of it travelling to us are staggeringly small. Any sign of visitation and such would be of immense scientific and cultural significan--"

"They've been here," Sky Striker rasped, cutting the mare off.

"I beg pardon?" Morningstar blinked in bafflement.

"Extraterrestrial technology has been recovered on Equestria," the bandaged pony said as the scanner finally beeped and began to print its graph.

Morningstar gave a sick little laugh, "You're joking." When Sky Striker didn't reply, her smile melted away. "You're not joking…" She started to sputter, "But, why? The scientific opportunity! The experimentation and observation and--" Her eyes hardened behind her glasses. "It had military applications, didn't it?"

"In spades," Sky Striker answered. "The military has always made sure it retrieved any technology from the stars. I wasn't a part of the

interception teams, but I was considered for several months. Finally was turned down after the dragon attack; too high-profile for their operations." He dropped his eyes. "It was all top secret," he added, as if that might justify what he had done.

"You know, there are times I am grateful some surfacers smashed the little scheme you had going on," Morningstar glowered.

"Don't tell me you never worked on something top secret, Morningstar. Your sonic control research was a little *too* specific to hellhounds," Sky Striker retorted. "You never would have kept your funding as it was if you hadn't done something for the ponies with the guns."

"Okay!" Triage shouted as she levitated Sky Striker's report off the machine. "Trying to solve Enervation, remember? Political axes to grind don't help that." She looked from Sky Striker to Morningstar to Glory, and one by one they averted their angry glares and nodded. Triage examined the graph. "Guess what?"

"Four Thirteen point six six two?" Glory asked. Triage gave a grim nod. "That confirms why your healing is retarded, Daddy, but not why Enervation is focused on you. Or why it's doing what it's doing." She glared at the graph as if it had personally insulted her, then rubbed her chin. "It's like there's a silver ring inside you, but Mother didn't have the time to implant one. Unless…" Her eyes widened. "Blood sample! I need a blood sample and a microscope!"

She immediately started searching through equipment on the tables. Morningstar and her sister watched impassively for a moment, then Morningstar told Moonshadow, "This place has an observatory. It might have some records on file of that stellar phenomenon you mentioned, to see if it was any different a few hundred years ago, or some other useful equipment gathering dust. Honestly, considering how much got thrown into back rooms, I wouldn't be surprised. I'd give my virginity for a precision picosparkle wavelength analyzer or a multiphase magic inducer."

"Haven't you already lost that since becoming a mare?" Moonshadow asked as they trotted to the door. "Like, a dozen times over?"

"Virginity is all in the mind," Morningstar replied glibly. "Besides, I've been a father and a grandfather. I'm quite thrilled for the chance to be a mother too."

When the pair had left, Triage let out a breath and rubbed her temples. "I don't think I'll be able to handle him…her…*that* pony

much longer," she muttered.

"How do you think I feel?" Sky Striker rasped. "If I couldn't plead being on death's door, she'd be trying to get at my 'pedigree'."

"Having him as my grad school advisor was bad enough. I *have* a mother," Glory said flatly, then sighed. "If it makes it easier, think of the doctor as having intellectual incontinence. Everything in her head dribbles out, no matter what kind of a mess it makes. It's not personal," Glory said as she took a drop of blood from a vial and put it on a slide. As she carefully worked the knobs, she asked, "Have there been any new problems here, Triage?"

"You mean having a thousand pegasi crashing our facilities?" Triage asked, then took a pull on the cigarette. "There're still a lot of angry feelings, but the fact is, you folks are real scientists. Most of us were self-taught, tutored by Zodiac, or Steel Ranger rejects. I didn't even know what an 'Arcanospectrum' was till today." She twitched the cigarette pinched limply between her lips. "You fixed up our turrets and worked out the bugs in the implants, and we're getting money off them. I'm grateful. Still, there're plenty of folks who feel like the Thunderhead invaded."

"Sorry," Glory said, ears folding back a little as she looked away from microscope eyepiece and to the blue unicorn. "I know you didn't want this…"

"Want? Who gets what they want?" Triage snorted. "I wanted a stallion and a filly right about now. I got a colt who took off at the first syllable of 'pregnant' and a dead child six months later. Nopony gets what they want. You get what you get. If you're smart, you make it what you want."

"I didn't know," Glory said.

Triage waved the cigarette irritably in the air with her hoof. "No reason you should. And I'm not fishing for sympathy. Just do what you need to do."

Glory returned her eyes to the microscope, focusing back and forth till the red blobs turned into flat pancakes mixed in with an occasional whitish blob. Then she inhaled sharply as she spotted the silvery sparkle and zoomed in even more. "Sweet Celestia." The red blobs filled her view, and scattered across them were tiny silver rings. "That's why you can't heal, Daddy. You have Enervation rings inside you."

"I do? How is that possible?" he asked.

"When she injured you, her wings must have shed millions of these

into your wounds. They're all over your cells," Glory said with a frown. Glory moved aside, letting Triage take the eyepiece.

"Son of a bitch. Look at all of them," the doctor muttered.

"And I don't have a clue how to stop them," Glory muttered. "They aren't affected by magnetism or radiation. Electrical fields just make them stronger!" She glared at the large silver ring on the table. "And if there's a magical solution, I don't know it. I can work theory. I can't cast spells."

Triage levitated her magical graphs to herself again and stared at it. "What if I *cast* this spell?" she asked, tapping the Enervation spike.

"You think you can? Would that do anything? It's creating that wave," Glory objected. When Triage looked at her flatly, the pegasi relented. "Okay. Okay. If you think you can, go for it."

"I'll step out of the room, if you don't mind. If I have those rings inside me, I'd rather not be around when you're experimenting with that kind of magic," Sky Striker said archly.

"Oh. Sorry, Daddy," Glory said and at once moved behind him and pushed his wheelchair out the door. In the next room, six pegasi and two unicorns were working with dozens of small round metallic implants.

Sky Striker cleared his throat. "How's your new wing? Still sore?"

Glory turned and examined at her left wing where once there'd been just a stump. "A little. I haven't been able to fly yet." Glory sighed and rolled her eyes. "I wonder if the doctor grew it knowing I'd give him more slack? Some days I'm just not sure with him. Her... Ugh, this is worse than being Rainbow Dash!"

Sky Striker chuckled as the bandaged stallion sat back. "Give it time. I'm sure you'll get a handle on it," he said, then stared out the rain-streaked window. "About Blackjack…"

"She's alive," Glory said firmly.

"You might have to reassess that, eventually," he said calmly, reaching out to pat her back.

"Eventually isn't now. Blackjack is alive. She has to be," Glory said with the same firmness. "If she hasn't contacted us, it's because she's in trouble. The sooner we figure out Enervation, the sooner we can go help her."

He let out a long sigh. "And at what point do you conclude that she didn't escape the implosion, Glory? You can't find evidence if it's been crushed by a megaspell." Glory didn't answer, and he sighed

again. “I’m not saying that you should give up hope now, but you’re a rational pony. When do you draw the line?”

Glory was quiet for several seconds, as if she was searching for that answer. “If we go into the Core and can’t find her, then I’ll accept that she’s gone. Not before then,” Glory said, then gave him a gentle hug. “Don’t worry. I won’t go till we’re sure it’s safe.”

“Sometimes I doubt if there is such a thing anymore,” he replied, then fluttered his wings, pushing his chair away from Glory and towards the far exit. “Go take care of your work. I know you’ll find your answer sooner or later. I need to contact Dusk at the Skyport and make sure everything there is alright.” Glory watched him slowly wheel out of sight, then sighed herself.

The sigh was cut short by an explosion in the lab; Glory jumped and dashed inside. Triage lay on the floor; the worktable that had held the silver ring had split in two, and from it rose a delicate silver spire. The form seemed to balance perfectly upon a point, and as it rose up, branches curled off it in oddly mathematical patterns. “What did you do?” Glory asked the shocked Triage.

“I just cast magic at it. I was thinking about…other things…and when I heard that note, I just let my horn do…something,” Triage mumbled in shock. “I…I don’t know how. I’ve never cast a spell like that before.”

Glory stared at it for almost a minute. “Can you do it again?” Glory asked.

“Of course. Because one explosion’s never enough,” Triage mumbled as she stared at the silvery spire. Then she closed her eyes, and her horn glowed. Nothing happened. She peeked at the tree, and her horn glowed again. Nothing.

“You said you were thinking about other things. What... ” Glory started, then caught Triage’s glare. “Oh... ”

“It’s not the kind of thing you get away from. You wouldn’t understand,” Triage muttered, looking away.

“I might a little. Would you... please…think about what you were thinking about before?” Glory requested delicately. Triage glowered at her but closed her eyes and lit her horn. Glory’s ears twitched. “I…I can hear it!” Vivid green boils of magic bubbled along Triage’s horn, exploding in bursts of green and purple.

Suddenly the silver ‘tree’ sucked back into itself, reforming into a tiny hexagon. A second later it morphed into a cylinder the size of Glory’s hoof. Then it collapsed into a bird’s nest of silver wire.

Triage sniffed as tears ran down her cheek, and her horn stopped shining, the greenish-purple blisters of magic fading away. “Okay. That’s enough.”

“I’m sorry,” Glory said, trying to touch the unicorn, but she pulled away as the nest melted into a ball a hoof across. Glory sighed, then picked it up carefully between her hooves. “The mass feels the same! And it’s not heated in the slightest. I wonder if this is some kind of static fluid instead of a solid?”

“An excellent question. We might find the answer with this,” the doctor said from the doorway. A strange piece of equipment was perched on her rump, with tiny dishes waving back and forth and talismans beeping on the side. “A sub-micronic wavelength amplifier. Still in its M.A.S. wrapping!” The pale, blond pegasus danced on her hooves. “Ooooh, I love this place! I would have come years ago if I’d known!”

Moonshadow caught the equipment as it almost bounced off Morningstar’s rump. “Careful. For all we know, this is the last one of these anywhere. What do you want it for?”

“I have a theory.” Morningstar grinned as Moonshadow set the equipment on an intact counter. “A way to explain how Enervation does what it does while being only a single wavelength.”

“Twilight Sparkle’s dissertation on magical subharmonics?” Glory asked archly.

Morningstar’s smile immediately soured into a pout. “I did give you back your wing. The least you could do is let me pretend that I came up with the idea.”

“Plagiarism is a terrible thing. You taught me that,” Glory countered.

Morningstar huffed. “Fine. *Twilight Sparkle*’s theory, then. At least give me credit for remembering it.” She cleared her throat again. “Twilight theorized that within individual wavelengths of magic there were infinitely small subharmonics at work carrying more specific information. It’s what would allow your magic to heal an injury, rather than give the patient localized cancer. These subharmonics are at work at a subconscious level. You don’t think about repairing every damaged cell, do you? You simply heal the injury.”

“So you think Enervation has subharmonics?” Glory asked, rubbing her chin.

“If Twilight’s theory holds true, sure. Otherwise, magic just

wouldn't work. Why else would a cockatrice's gaze turn a viewer to stone, but not if they avert their eyes? And why not turn grass and trees to stone as well? Or how does a teleportation spell know to teleport your saddlebags but not the dirt you're standing on?" Morningstar asked with a grin and toss of her mane. "I love being smart."

"I don't think the Killing Joke realized just how much you'd enjoy it," Glory growled before looking at Triage and holding up the silver orb. "Would you mind?"

Triage sighed and took it again as Morningstar fiddled with the knobs. "Okay. I just... I don't like this stuff. When I hear that scream, it feels like... " she shook her head. "It's like when I lost my... I can't stop it. Makes me think that if I just had a regeneration implant, he might have made it," she said with a glance over her shoulder, back towards the lab.

"Just once more. If we can map the subharmonics, that might be the key," Glory assured her.

Triage sighed, and her horn started to glow. A minute later, the green glow began to form and bubble on her spire. Morningstar's obnoxious grin melted, and she shivered and fluffed her feathers as she focused on the machine. Glory swallowed repeatedly. The orb shivered and shifted in Triage's hooves, becoming a pyramid, a metallic eyeball, a syringe, and a gear. Then the tough, cynical mare let out a sob and backed away as the silver blob tumbled to the ground. "That's it. I'm done. Grow your own horns if you want to fuck with that stuff any more."

"It's fine! It's fine," Glory said, glancing down at a statuette of a seven-month-old pony fetus. She kicked it out of sight under the ruins of the workbench. Every mare there, even Doctor Morningstar, seemed aware of how not fine it was. Glory turned to Morningstar and Moonshadow at the device. "Well?"

"This is... " Morningstar began, then faltered. Her eyes shifted over to the covered statuette, and she swallowed again. "Yes. There are subharmonics here. Incredibly complex subharmonics. I've never... " She glanced again. "I am *too* a good pony," she muttered softly to herself. "This Enervation has to be one of the most complex spells in history. Look." She passed to Glory a printout much like the former graphs.

Glory stared at the printout, the spikes and the valleys. The she checked another. And another. "Why aren't these constant? See?

Here? And here? And here?" she said as she tapped certain lines where the peaks rose and fell.

"The equipment is working. Might be a calibration thing?" Moonshadow asked.

"No. It's like... " she blinked and stared at the covered lump of silver metal. "It's a carrier wave. It's not just spell effects. This is carrying information!" She carefully lifted the boards and fished out the lump. "If we hooked this up to a terminal, analyzed the broadcast... it might be an enemy transmission. Or perhaps it's trying to control something? Or maybe all those different forms the metal took could have some sort of technical pattern! We could use this to our advantage. Think of the possibilities!" Glory gushed.

Moonshadow said dryly, "I thought you were all about finding Blackjack?"

Glory grew still. Slowly, she stared down at the silver image of a dead, unborn pony. She glanced over at the stricken Triage and the solemn Morningstar and Moonshadow. Then she firmly set it aside and pushed it away. Moonshadow trotted over and covered it with a cloth.

"Thanks," Triage muttered, and Moonshadow nodded.

"So. We have the spell effect's subharmonics. How do we overcome it?" Glory asked in brisk tones, eager to move on.

"I have no idea. This is where theory gets a little fuzzy when it comes to application," Morningstar admitted. "... If we got our hooves on every single working transmitter in the Wasteland, brought all of them here to the Hoof, and cranked them up to maximum, we might be able to drown out the Enervation enough to resist its effects." She began counting on her pinions, "We'll need a few thousand workers, money to pay them all, air support, security... a working survey of the entire Wasteland... "

"I think that counts as a plan B," Moonshadow said dryly.

"What about counter magic?" Triage offered.

"Habazahuh?" Morningstar blinked. "What's that?"

Triage sighed. "Something some ponies can do when they know the same spell and they know the other pony knows it. Part of the reason most unicorns don't gush over what magic spells they know." She blinked at the blank faces. "None of you know this? It's pretty basic magic."

"Most unicorns didn't get published in scientific journals in the Enclave," Glory said. Triage glanced from one to the next, as if

verifying that they needed her input.

"Well, say you're a unicorn who's going to cast a healing spell to heal yourself, and I know how to cast it, and I know that you're going to cast it. Well... it's hard to explain. It's like... casting backward or... inside-out or cross-eyed. But if I cast my counterspell at the same time you cast your spell, then there's a great big flash, we both get knocked on our butts, and no other magic goes off. Great way to get a migraine, by the way," she added, levitating out another cigarette and lighting it up.

"Interesting. That's a principle that's sound in communication jamming as well," Morningstar said thoughtfully. "But how would we find the precise opposite microfrequencies to counter such a complicated--"

Moonshadow took the printout from the scanner, turned the paper over vertically so the white backside faced up, and began to fill in the microfrequency peaks to the base of the page. Morningstar's jaw dropped as, in a minute, she scribbled out the reverse of the Enervation signal. "Easy," she said as she held it up.

"My word... Well... I... " Morningstar blustered. She adjusted her thick classes with a wing. "Well, it'll certainly get us in the right weather system. Some fine tuning will be in order, of course; it's quite a complex blend. And it will certainly take a while to train a unicorn to cast so precise a spell... " But Moonshadow didn't seem to be listening, just staring at what she'd drawn. "What," Morningstar said, noticing Moonshadow's distraction. "Don't tell me you've seen *that* pattern before too?"

Moonshadow tapped her muzzle with a hoof, then slowly smiled. "You know what? I think I have... "

* * *

Fluid. It dripped. Trickled. Splashed. Swirled. Gurgled. Sloshed. Flowed. It moved swiftly, slowly, and not at all. It eschewed straight lines, biting into them whenever it could. When collected, it sat still with contained mass, waiting for the moment to burst free. When in motion, it powered through the city in gouts and torrents.

It was not the sole source of movement in the city, though. Through the streets whirled storms of black and silver. The murmuring buzz resonated in the same key as that horrible note that suffused everything in this place. The whirlwinds swept around

the city in a gale, ripping apart anything that caught their attention before proceeding on. Like water, they were constantly in motion, those tiny black and silver dots. When still, they formed inky shimmery mats that could explode into a fury of motion.

But they were not simple hazards. They moved with purpose. In their wake, a fresh cable would stretch from one building to another. A support beam would be chewed through. A hole shored up. Their ultimate design might be inexplicable, but there was a design. A will at work in this dead and empty city...

* * *

The tunnel echoed faintly beneath his hooves as he strode along next to hissing conduits in the wan light. He marched with slow, steady steps and smiled amiably. He didn't even glance at the sentry robots he passed, each one watching his progress with cold, mechanical eyes. A white plastic disk pendant bounced against his chest with every step. Despite his smile, his facial muscles twitched with barely restrained anger as he approached a hatch next to a huge door. Two alcoves held a pair of Ultra-Sentinels flanking the portal.

"What is it?" a synthetic mare hissed through a speaker in the door.

"I need a little chat, oh promised one," Steel Rain said casually, his words curling with a faint sneer.

"Leave. Don't return till you are called for," the voice snapped.

"Okay then," he said with the smallest of shrugs. "I can just chat with these robots. No way your Goddess will hear, right?"

There was a pause, and the door hissed open. Inside was a large pod surrounded by two coaxial rings, each studded with a half-dozen mechanical arms. They whirled and spun around the object suspended in the pod: a partially-disassembled mare. Her glowing green eyes focused on the stallion with a killing glare. "What do you want, Steel? I'm in the middle of some delicate upgrades." Her four legs were connected only by wires, and her hips were a full foot removed from her barrel, the gap strung by metallic cables and vertebrae. One wing remained connected to her shoulder while the other was detached and being worked on by tiny talismans on the arms' metal manipulators.

"Oh, I know," he said casually as the door slid shut behind him and

he trotted around to the control terminals. “Got to love automation, don’t ya? Just push a button and off it goes.”

“What are you doing?” Dawn asked, her green eyes widening in shock.

“Pausing the process,” he said, tapping a button. A second later the arms froze, leaving her dangling from the restraints around her chest, throat, and hips. Then he calmly walked over, and, as Dawn watched in shock, smashed the cameras in the corners of the room. “Now then. It’s just you and me. We need to talk about some things.”

Dawn thrashed against the restraints. “Turn the machine back on immediately! How dare you?” But Steel Rain just smiled calmly at her. “Do it!” He didn’t move. “Do it or you’re dead!” He didn’t move or say a word. His silence and inaction induced such rage that she started to shake, making the restraints jingle.

“Actually, I’m not,” he said as he touched a scar on his chest, “Confirming my theory that you don’t have my kill command. Cognitum does.” He slowly approached her. “So I’d like a little talk about you, me, and your Goddess. You see, I’ve noticed some… inconsistencies in our organization. ‘Kill Blackjack.’ ‘Capture Blackjack.’ ‘Leave Blackjack alone.’ It’s been galling me for quite a while now. For instance, if Blackjack is so vital, you should allow me to take some Harbingers and search for her, but instead we’ve been sitting on our asses gathering numbers and training with no mention of what we are gathering and training for.”

“My Goddess has countless eyes searching--”

“No. She has countless *robots* searching,” Steel Rain countered as he started pacing back and forth in front of her. “Robot processors miss things. Empty food tins. Missing gemstones. Turds in the corner. A trail of drained Wild Pegasus bottles. Signs that she hasn’t been crushed to a layer of atoms in the megaspell. It wouldn’t take more than a dozen of us wearing these,” he said as he lifted the talisman around his neck with a forehoof, “to find something. But that’s not the only thing that’s nagged me.” He pressed his lips together a moment in a scowl before asking, “Why did you tell me spark grenades don’t work on cyberponies?”

“Let me go!” she screamed, jerking against the restraints.

He slapped her hard across the face with a hoof. She gaped at him as he took a deep breath and smiled. “Oh, I’ve wanted to do that for months.” Then his eyes locked on hers. “When we started hunting

her, you told me that cyberponies had natural EM damping. So I focused on armor piercing weaponry. Only now, I discover, from a pegasus of all ponies, that spark weapons are *incredibly* effective on cyberponies. My men could have brought her in immediately with that information."

"Perhaps I made a mistake," Dawn muttered.

He laughed. "You? Forgive me, but, *you*? The champion of all things cyberization? The mare who technically isn't even that anymore? *You* made a mistake about a cyberpony's fundamental vulnerability? You?" He gave a sardonic smirk and shook his head briefly with short, quick movements. "I don't think so."

"You are dead meat," she spat. "What you think doesn't matter. Turn the machine back on!"

But he just smiled wider. "And then there were all the changes to our orders. After the setback by Black Pony Mountain, we should have pursued Blackjack. We could have taken her before she arrived at Meatlocker, while she was there, in the tunnels outside Hightower, or certainly while she recovered. Instead, Cognitum called us off. She wanted you to talk to Blackjack and get her to give up EC-1101. Why? Why should it have mattered if we took it in Meatlocker or Blackjack gave it up willingly?" He narrowed his eyes as he stared into hers. "We were so close after that attack at Black Pony Mountain. A sniper for the alicorn, a flamer for the bat freak and to blind Rampage, a spark grenade for Blackjack. Done. So why would Cognitum call us off?"

"Who are you to question a Goddess?" Dawn demanded.

"It's always fun to question the psychology of a supposed higher power," he chuckled. "And in this case, it led me to three disturbing possibilities. First, that your 'Goddess'," he said, twitching his forehooves in the air, "is completely insane and irrational. That would explain a lot."

"You dare--" she began, only to be silenced by another hoof across the face.

"Don't interrupt with villainous cliché. It's rude," he said primly. "Yes, I dare question. I dared wonder if your Cognitum was bugfuck crazy. I still think it's a likely contender, but now I'm not sure it's the primary one," he said as she glared at him. "There's possibility number two: that Cognitum is incompetent. I'm not sure which of those two is worse. I mean, that fiasco with Deus at the manor and your little spat with the dear hubby was such a tactical clusterfuck

that it was almost painful. Of course, by that point, I didn't have much choice in the matter." He tapped his chest with a hoof. "Your suggestion, as I recall."

"I see I was right. The second my Goddess sees what you are doing to her most faithful and devoted servant, I'll have her activate it. On the slowest setting."

"'Your Goddess'? You speak about her like she's a pet." She instantly went silent, and he smiled, patting her head. "Like I said, questioning psychology is fun." He started to pace again. "Anyway, an incompetent Goddess would explain a lot, but either she's a Goddess utterly unable to learn from her own mistakes, or there are Goddesses that are just really stupid. Personally, though, I doubted that. Even an idiot learns when bashing her head into a wall is useless, and that would explain the changes in tactics…except that they were idiotic changes. But what really convinced me that she wasn't incompetent was when we learned that BJ was at the Gala with the Society. You said that Cognitum ordered a full raid en masse, but we were out of position for that. More importantly, none of our other assets were brought up…assets that Cognitum controls directly."

"Let me out!" she screamed as she thrashed in the restraints, several of them groaning in protest.

"In good time," he said calmly. "Because that brings us to option three. One that explains how your Goddess has made an absolute mockery of things with conflicting orders, mission creep, and boneheaded decisions." He paused as he stared into her robotic restraints. "It's not Cognitum giving all the orders, is it? It's you."

Dawn froze, staring at him. "Me? You think I'm Cognitum?" A desperate smile crossed her face, and she laughed. "You foal!"

Another hard smack. "Please. No more clichés. Let's keep this serious." He cleared his throat. "Now, I know you're not Cognitum. If you had control over Ultra-Sentinels and even occasional control over the Core defenses, things would be an even *greater* mess. No. I am sure there is a Cognitum in the Core. And you are her chosen one, right? Most faithful. Most devoted. Most *specialest*." He patted her other cheek with his hoof, making her lunge once more, then went on, "You're the odd pony out in the chain of command. So option three…you've been intentionally distorting Cognitum's orders."

And now Dawn grew still as she stared at him in shock. Her

mechanical eyes were pinpricks. “You’re wrong…” she whispered. “I serve my Goddess. I serve her faithfully.”

“Right.” You could slip on all the sarcasm on that one word. “Do you think that you’re the first officer to ‘creatively interpret’ a superior’s orders? It happens all the time. Happened during the war. Happens now.” He touched his chest. “I creatively interpreted the Steel Rangers’ mandate to secure technology for the order. Might have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn’t been for Blackjack. Technically, I could argue I’m doing the same now. After all, if I can bring Cognitum into the Steel Rangers, I’ll be unstoppable.” He waved his hoof through the air as if dispelling a bad odor. “But enough about me. This is about you. You you you you you,” he repeated as he tapped a hoof against her chest. “What I really want to know is…why?”

“You’re wrong! You’re vile! You’re dead!” she yelled at him. Her attached wing thrashed repeatedly against the metal holding it.

“You can tell me, or you can tell your Goddess,” he said with a smile, silencing her. “It’s just you and me in here, Dawn,” he added with a little wink. Her rage gave way to uncertainty. “I want two things…the bomb out of my chest, and enough power to crush the world beneath my hoof. I have no desire to take over the High Priestess position.” Dawn froze as she stared at him. “So why, Dawn?”

“I have to be superior to Blackjack. I have to beat her. She needs to be ended so that Cognitum will love me again and choose me!” she shouted.

“For what?” Now Steel Rain stopped smiling.

“My Goddess needs to choose a pony for a precious honor. It was supposed to be me. It *should* be me! If Sanguine had gotten EC-1101 for me at the outset, it would have been me. But Cognitum waits and considers all her plans carefully. Blackjack doesn’t know, but Cognitum has followed her progress for some time now. She’s watched everything she does.”

“For EC-1101?” Steel Rain asked with a frown.

“No! She…she…” Dawn grit her teeth. “She *cares* about what happens to Blackjack! Don’t you understand? She’s intervened *twice* to save her life. The Goddess has never done that for me! I’m her most devoted servant! I’m her most faithful.” She shook her head forcefully, making the restraints creak. Two of them squealed, and something in the rings pinged sharply as Dawn yelled, “But always

it's Blackjack, Blackjack, Blackjack! What is she doing? What is she going to do next? How strong is she? How admired? How *feared*? Always always always Blackjack!"

"So that's why the orders haven't changed? She's searching for signs of Blackjack," Steel Rain mused.

"She thinks she needs Blackjack for her plans, not just EC-1101. That's why I need to find her myself. I have to be the one to stop her. To give my Goddess the key to her freedom. She doesn't understand that Blackjack is undeserving. That she is unworthy. I sacrificed everything for my Goddess! And I will prove to her that she should choose me!"

Steel Rain shook his head. "Wow. *You* are one bugfuck crazy mare," he said with a condescending pat on the head.

Dawn smiled at him now, and the air filled with the ping of snapping metal. Steel Rain stared into her eyes as a numbness asserted itself from mid-leg to hoof and a strange distant discomfort across his neck and face. Half the world was a strange blur, his mouth and nose filling with the taste and smell of copper. Then he swallowed, and like a zipper, his face spilled apart in a line of agony and blood. His outstretched leg came neatly apart, and he fell back with a gurgling scream. Dawn sneered down at him, her remaining glowing wing outstretched and streaked with blood as links of sheared restraint jingled off the concrete around her.

"And you are a traitor and a corpse," she said calmly. He tried to scream again, but merely choked, falling back as blood pumped and spurted. He fell on his back, his remaining forelimb pinching off the bloody stump. Blood dripped over the PipBuck as he kicked away from her with his hind legs. Then Dawn's wing snapped and shot a feather into the terminal. Green lightning crackled, and then the rings hummed. "There…remote access…" And the machine came to life. Cables retracted, limbs attached, and hexagonal hide was regenerated over all. With a hiss, the restraints dropped free and she lowered to the floor.

She kicked aside his still-twitching limb as she approached. "Flesh. Pain. Weakness. End pain, and we can make this world paradise." She raised her bladed wings. "But you won't see it."

Then the large door rolled up, and spotlights bathed the entire room in white. Dawn stared into the light as Steel's remaining eye squinted. "My…my Goddess."

A sharpened steel rod flashed from the door and slammed into

Dawn's chest, flinging her through the air and into the concrete wall where she hung liked a pinned steel butterfly. More spikes flew through her body, her stomach, her outstretched wings, her hooves. Finally, she went limp, her metallic body sparking and oozing glowing green fluids. "You have betrayed me," a mare said calmly in the blinding glare of the Ultra-Sentinel's lamps.

"No…I…Whatever he told you…" Dawn stammered.

"It was your own words that betrayed you, Dawn," Cognitum said quietly.

Steel Rain trembled and shook as he gave the PipBuck a weak wave. "Blackjack's trick. Remember?" He lurched, and hot blood sprayed out his split mouth. "Dying here…"

"No! I am your most faithful! I am your truest servant, Mistress!" Dawn screamed. A spike shot through her throat, silencing her.

"Enough. We shall see if you can yet be redeemed," the icy mare's voice said calmly. A silhouette slowly approached Steel Rain. "*You* should be rewarded."

"Not dying…good start…" he gasped. "No augmentation, either…"

"No?" the silhouette said coolly, in amused tones. "Very well. I'll see if I can't compensate you in other ways. I anticipate things will progress much more smoothly now…" Then she paused. "Wait. There's another tapped into your PipBuck."

"Another?"

"Yes," the mare purred. "Someone has tapped into your sensory data feed. Backtracking it in three…two…on--"

* * *

This was a city of many things, but it had an aberration, an intrusion. Like any living organism, maimed or not, it sought to expel this infection whenever encountered. In one apartment, the ripped-away wall had been replaced with a veil of pouring rain and the beige carpet was stained with the previous inhabitants, two large, two small. Two figures sat hidden in the back corner, huddled beneath a blanket to keep out the damp and cold, one black and the other white.

I reached up, pulled off the Perceptitron, and magically yanked the wires from my PipBuck. "Boo. Wake up," I said, nudging the sleeping blank besides me.

"Sweepie," Boo protested, turning over on her side and pulling the

blanket more tightly around herself. “Go ta bed, Bwackjack,” she grumbled, swinging a hoof in my direction.

I levitated her, blanket and all, onto my back, spreading my wings a little to keep her in as I bundled up all the salvage we’d gathered, particularly the gems. Especially the gems. I was fortunate enough that there’d been a jewelry store right outside where the *Hurricane* had almost crushed us to goo. If it hadn’t been for Boo’s freaky luck, I was sure I would have been dead. I immediately popped a super sweet diamond in my mouth, sucking hard for the burst of magical energy in case I needed to fly.

Reaching the door, I threw it wide just as Boo sat up on my back, her ears twitching. I froze. Twitching ears were better than E.F.S. in this place, as all I saw were countless red bars in every direction. Slowly, I lifted Penance and put my eye to the scope, peeking through the door. I saw a flash of white, red, and steel.

Then the door exploded inwards as Rampage blasted through it and leapt right at my chest. With a resounding clang that could likely be heard for blocks, she impacted with me, and promptly fell prone at my hooves as I took a step or two back. “Hey, Blackjack,” Rampage muttered in a daze, grinning up at me. “I knew you were alive!”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 64: Labyrinth

"To retrieve your missing Elements, just make sense of this change of events. Twists and turns are my master plan. Then find the Elements back where you began."

"So let me get this straight," Rampage said in low tones as we trotted through an office space, picking our way carefully over the soggy cubicle partitions. The fluorescent lights, what few remained intact, buzzed and flickered. Boo had little difficulty bounding all around us and poking her nose into the rusty desks and sodden clothes for anything that might be useful. "You've spent three months in the Core, and you've gotten less than six blocks away from the wreck of the *Hurricane*? What have you been doing, Blackjack?"

"I'm not sure you noticed--" I began, but then the partition I was trying to scamper over gave way underneath me, and I collapsed, crushing the particleboard-and-carpet divider beneath me. I landed in a heap on a short file cabinet, and then that groaned and pancaked under me as well. The remainder of the cubicle's walls collapsed on top of me, entombing me in a mound of pulped paper, soaked fabric, rusty metal, and flaky plastic. "... but it's kind of hard to navigate in this place."

I shoved my way clear of the mess, getting tangled, again, in the mass that had once been a perfectly mundane cubicle farm. Rampage arched a brow and asked dryly, "So…what? Those wings are just for show?"

I grunted and gave a heave and a kick. "These wings are the most ridiculously power-thirsty contraptions ever conceived. And when they're not running my batteries down, half the time they just get tangled up in everything." I yanked and jerked, forcing myself ahead. "Really, these things alone suck up more energy than my entire old body. Fully powered up, I have maybe five minutes

before I crash." I levitated the lighter stuff off my wings, wishing I had LittlePip here to lift the whole mess out of the way. "If it wasn't for Boo, I would have been dead a dozen times over. She feeds me when I go down."

"Bwackjack's a powah hog," Boo said from up ahead, looking back at us. The plastic amulet I'd taken from Steel Rain months ago at the Gala bounced on her neck; she didn't need it, somehow, but seemed to like it, so why not? It was next to a drawstring pouch she wore for any interesting bits and bobs she happened across.

"She's speaking a lot," Rampage said, sounding faintly surprised.

"Some days there wasn't anything to do. When those roboswarms came, we had to hole up wherever we could until they left. So I've been teaching her what I can," I said with a small rush of pride. "I think we spent nearly a week once hunkered down in a bathroom. Nothing to do but wait."

"Booowing," Boo said, then blew a raspberry.

"Luckily, Boo'd found a whole box of snack cakes five minutes before we'd gotten stuck in there," I said with a smile at the beaming blank. "I've also spent a lot of time trying to figure out all I can about Goldenblood, Horizons, and Cognitum. And trying to watch others with the Perceptitron…and…stuff…" I trailed off as Rampage looked at me curiously. "So how'd you find us?" I asked quickly.

For a moment she was silent, and then she shrugged. "I've got a zebra soul inside me, so naturally I've got crazy tracking skills. They're all natural trackers and survivalists and stuff. Funny that way."

"I'm pretty sure Xanthe didn't have mad tracking skills," I countered.

"None that you know about. She could probably track down a functioning conductor on a cloudy day with nothing but a candle and half a screwdriver," Rampage said blithely, shoving aside a heap of soaked office strata. "You find me a fat, balding, cowardly zebra cook, and underneath it all, he'll have commando fighting skills, or some sort of shamanistic hoodoo, or something. It just comes with the stripes."

"Unhuh," I said skeptically, then grunted as my wings got caught on some dangling cables. I jerked, pulled, and then slumped. "Boo."

"Got it!" She clambered on my back and shoved, tugged, and yanked the wires off my metallic pinions. Someday they were going

to get me, or somepony, killed.

Rampage glanced back as I was freed. “Priceless. Anyway, I’ve been looking for any sign of you since I found the wreck of the *Hurricane*. Wasn’t too hard, though; I just followed the empty snack food containers and droppings.”

“I’m glad someone friendly found me. I had Dealer disable my PipBuck tag. Those swarmers seemed attracted to it. I didn’t even know you *could* disable them.” Wouldn’t that have been a fun trick to deal with back in 99, half a lifetime ago?

“And that’s all you’ve come across? The swarmers?” Rampaged asked with a frown. “That’s it?”

“Aren’t they enough?” I replied with a frown of my own. “Those things nearly ate me…or recycled me…or…whatever they do,” I said with a shiver, remembering them pouring after Boo and me, taking bites out of my hide. And here I’d thought I was too upgraded for damage. Hadn’t I reached invincibility mode yet? “What else is here?”

“Worse things. Much worse,” Rampage said, then gave a little smirk. “Well. Not if you’re immortal. But you two…yeah. Worse.” Her smile faded. “You’re actually really smart to avoid the streets like a plague. Those swarmers would be on you in seconds…and even worse likes to hide under the streets.”

I sighed and wished I could close my eyes. “Okay. Like what?”

“Don’t know what they are, per se. Think…Horizon Labs…” Okay, that was enough said. “Last time I was in here, one spent a month or two ripping me to pieces, eating me, and repeating the process on an hourly basis. Trust me. Being eaten alive really, really sucks. Especially when you can’t die.” She shivered, her eyes becoming defocused and haunted, then shook her head. “There’re stranger things, too. Stuff moving on its own. Feral robots. Things…things that are just bad.”

“And they all serve Cognitum,” I muttered, thinking of something trying to eat me…and my... I glanced at the striped mare. I wanted to tell her, to tell *somepony* about what was happening to me. It was like the Goddess again, only now it was my own fear that kept the words stuck in my throat.

Rampage shoved her way to the far side of the office and looked back at me. “What makes you think that?” she asked skeptically.

“Well,” I balked. “Don’t they?”

“This is the Core. I came here to die. I was sure that something

here would finish me off. There's nothing controlling most of these things. Even the local robots are feral. Maybe the swarmers are controlled by her, and some of the more intact sentries, but this place follows its own rules. Besides, if she controlled all of the Core, we'd be boned," she said as she pointed at a camera set in a dim corner of the ceiling, a faint red ring glowing around the lens.

I stiffened, but then I realized that she was right. If Cognitum could control all the Core's systems, or even just see through most of them, I'd have been picked up long before now. "She must only have links to the robots she sends in."

"Speaking of links, why haven't you called Glory?" Rampage asked. "You know she wants to come in here after you. I told her it's a bad idea, but she insisted." She reached out and took my hoof to pull me free of the cubicle swamp. "I came in hoping to find you before non-immortal ponies tried it."

"I've tried, but every time I do, something weird happens," I huffed.

"Blackjack, weird for you is normal," Rampage said with her usual obnoxious grin.

"Ayep," Boo nodded beside her. "Weeerd."

"Hush, you two," I said flatly, then sighed. "When I try and use my broadcaster... I…go out of it. Every time I use it I…I dunno? Dream? Hallucinate? I'm not sure which any more. I just stand there blissing out at how awesome the Core is. And it's…it's…" I struggled to say the word as Rampage waited impatiently. "Nice," I finally admitted. "It's comforting and soothing and…I don't know. I like it." It also kept me from thinking about other things.

Rampage stared at me flatly for several seconds. "Brain damage. That's got to be it. Only explanation."

"It's not brain damage!" I snapped, glaring at her, then amended, "Probably." I waited for her laughter to stop before going on. "It's just something that connects with me when I try and access the Core's network. Maybe it's attracted by me sending a signal out…I don't know. But it didn't happen before the megaspell. So maybe something's happened to me, or the Core, or both!"

"So how come that Perceptithingy thing works?" Rampage asked.

Who did she think I was? P-21? "I don't know. Maybe the Perceptitron doesn't send out the same sort of signals? Or…maybe whatever causes my mind to wander off is similar, but weaker? When you're wearing the Perceptitron, it's almost like you become

the person. It's much more in-depth than a memory orb. Not quite mind reading, but close. So when I turn it on, instead of blissing out in room A, I experience someone else's life in room B."

Rampage looked at me, then smirked. "How many?"

"How many what?" I asked as I trotted to a door that I hoped would lead to a shaft or webbing or some other connection to the next building.

"How many ponies have you 'experienced' getting it on?" Rampage asked, grinning ear to ear and swatting me with her barbed tail.

"What are you, a foal?!" I snapped, what cheeks I had left blushing hard. "Everything going on in my life, and you're wondering if I've been peeking on ponies having sex? How immature are you?" Rampage's grin only turned more smug. I finally looked away and muttered, "A few." She didn't stop smirking. "Okay, fine! There're a few I've picked out who get it on at rather predictable times."

"You are so busted when I tell Glory," Rampage teased.

"I can't help it! I'm not sure you've noticed, but I'm kind of lacking in the nerve ending department!" I said with a frown. Give me five or ten years…would I be any different than Deus? Heck, my brain might be in a jar at that point. Turning away, I muttered, "If the only good I get to feel is someone else's, then it's better than nothing at all. Otherwise, I might as well be a machine."

"Fair enough. Fair enough." She hadn't quite lost the little leer, though. When I met her look, she asked, "So, anypony I know that's particularly saucy?"

"You *are* a foal," I muttered, not deterring her in the least. "Let's just say Scotch Tape and I need to have a heart to heart about fillies, colts, and some of her tools."

"I knew it," Rampage said with a laugh and snicker. "She always seemed a little too fond of that screwdriver with the rubber handle."

"She's not the only one." I decided to turn the conversation in another direction. *Any* other direction. "So why'd you leave the *Rampage*, Rampage?" She blinked in bafflement. "Your airship? The one you were going to use to become a sky pirate? Or hunt sky pirates?"

"Oh!" She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes, and she quickly averted her gaze. "They're a great bunch. You wouldn't believe what a slimy radroach that captain of theirs was. He actually had a sexual favors-slash-bribery chart for promotions. I

dumped him in a lake of radigators after a good plucking. But afterwards…" she sighed and shrugged. "I'm not a leader, Blackjack. I just do; I follow. Like Twist, Shujaa, and Officer Whatshername…they all follow orders. I don't have a captain or a politician in me. Even the Doc is more of a listener than a leader. The felon reacts to things that happen to her rather than going out of her way to do stuff on her own. The only pony inside me who actually wants to go out there and do things wants to find poor little fillies and colts and give them 'peace'." Her face creased into a nauseated grimace, and she shook her head. "The only other thing I want besides that is to die before all of you, or before I just give up and let her do what she wants, or I end up buried alive or something. I'd really prefer avoiding eternal agony."

"Rampage," I said sympathetically.

She went on quickly, "It's okay, though. I'm exploring other options. Ways to shut down the phoenix talisman once and for all. And no loss, really. Those souls get to go free. Sounds like a deal to me." She smiled and shrugged. It chilled me how happy and sad all at once she seemed.

"What other options?" I asked, but she shook her head. "How?"

That prompted an eye roll. "Oh no. You don't get it that easy. I tell you, and you'll be all over me trying to keep me alive. DNR, Blackjack." She relaxed a little. "Don't worry about it. You can't kill me. I get that now. You're too much of a friend to do it," Rampage said as she sniffed. "More of a friend than I deserve. But you won't cross that line. I accept that. Just don't try and stop me when I do find a way. Okay? That's all I ask." She sniffed again and rubbed her eye with the back of her hoof. Her hoofclaw blades cut a half dozen bloody furrows in her face, but they closed up almost instantly. "Fucking Celestia, if I start bawling, I'm throwing myself down the nearest elevator shaft and calling it a day. The only thing worse than pain is fucking self-pity."

There wasn't much else to say as we continued along. Travelling through the Core wasn't 'pick a direction and go'. We went up, down, over, and across through rents and gaps in the floors, ceilings, and walls as much as forward, backward, and sideways. Rampage bulldozed her way through mounds of debris that Boo and I couldn't hope to shift. I sighed as we reached the end of one hall and a locked metal door. I tapped my hoof against it. Solid. "Great," I muttered, looking back the way we'd come. This was one reason

it'd taken me so long to get anywhere in the Core. "What I wouldn't give for P-21 to be here. Or Glory. Lacunae. Or all our friends."

"Well, you have two now, and Glory was turning the Hoof upside down to try and find some way to survive in here." Then she blinked and looked back at Boo. "Speaking of which, why isn't she goop?"

Boo cocked her head as we regarded her. "No idea," I admitted. "I don't know if it's that she's a blank made from Flux or something else, but she doesn't decay here. You were right about her luck, though. She's kept us from trotting into swarms, onto collapsing floors, or under weak ceilings more than once."

"Luckee!" Boo said happily. Then she blinked, nosed at a tipped over garbage can, and pulled out a brown paper bag. In a trice, she'd pulled out a slightly withered but otherwise intact daisy sandwich. "Wunch!" Before either of us could object, she chowed down happily on the two-hundred-year-old sandwich.

Rampage gestured at the door. "So what are you waiting for, Blackjack? Whip out your sword and open this sucker! Chop chop! Or shink shink. Whichever." She then scowled as she looked me over. "Wait. Where is it?" I gave a mumbled reply, looking away. "Huh? What's that?" I mumbled a bit louder. "Didn't quite catch that."

"I dropped it, okay?!" I yelled at her.

"You…dropped it?" She blinked at me. I sighed and nodded. "How do you drop something like that? Why didn't you pick it up? That was a really bitchin' sword!"

"Cause I dropped it a couple thousand feet, okay?" I huffed. "First Rainbow Dash and now you! What, am I the first pony in history to drop their weapon?"

"The Lightbringer never dropped her weapons." Rampage smirked at me.

I really wished I had an eyelid to twitch right then. "Great. We can swap places. I'll manage the weather, and she can stop Cognitum."

"Don't be stupid; none of us would trust you with the weather. It'd be raining whiskey all across the... Wasteland... " Rampage said, then paused. After a moment, she shook her head. "Nah, I doubt she'd trade. Anyway," she said, regarding the locked door, "I've never let a stupid door stop me before!" She backed down the hall, gestured for us to move aside, then gave a war cry and charged, smashing her head into the door with a crunch and making the

doorjamb crack free of the cinderblock wall surrounding it. She wedged her helmet blade in tight and gave it a hard twist followed by another sharp kick to the door. With a crunch of crumbling brickwork, the entire door fell inward, revealing a conference room rent by a hole carved through the outer wall. A threaded shaft as wide as a pony stretched across to the next building. “Not as clean as your sword, but I get the job done.” She gave me a poke in the side, and I inhaled sharply, shielding my stomach. “What?”

“Nothing,” I muttered darkly, pushing past her and stepping towards the breach. Beyond were the black tower walls of the Core in every direction, the distances indeterminate in the green haze and pouring rain.

* * *

“I have no idea where we are,” I muttered sullenly between bites of gemstones as I scanned the lobby of the office we trotted into. With Rampage along, our progress had picked up significantly. Rampage had a way of shoving through anything: blocks, stuck doors, locks, the occasional non-load-bearing wall, one not so non-load-bearing wall…well, we dug her out eventually. When we reached a breach on the far side of one building, I flew us over to the next building before the swarmers below could spiral up after us. In three days, we’d covered almost as many blocks. It was immense progress compared to what I’d accomplished on my own.

“Good, because I have no idea where we’re going,” Rampage replied as she battered a hole through yet another wall. “I mean seriously, Blackjack. Are we going to Cognitum or not?”

“I told you, I’m trying to figure it out,” I snapped, sitting down and resting one hoof over my stomach as I looked back the way we came. “I think we might be better off trying to get to the wall. If we can scale it, we can get out of the Core and meet up with the others.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Blackjack. Yesterday, you said you wanted to just get to Cogs and finish her off. The day before that, you just wanted to find somewhere safe to hole up till either you contacted Glory or she contacted you.” She rammed her hooves into the cinderblocks, busting the hole wider. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing’s in me, Rampage! Okay?” I snapped. “I’m just…I’m in a bad mood, and I’m not sure what the best thing to do is.”

"And how is that different from any other time we've hit a fork in the road?" Rampage countered with a scowl. I loathed her ability to scowl. A toxic hatred born of envy. “Blackjack, you have two modes: full stop and full speed ahead. Even if you didn’t have a clue on the direction, you kept moving. Now you’re…I don’t know what. But it doesn’t feel like you.”

“Well, maybe things change, Rampage. Maybe I’ve changed! Look at me. I’m more machine than mare now. Heck, I’m lucky I can still eat, sleep and…shit,” I concluded lamely, not able to meet her eyes. “We’re going…where we’re going.” And I trotted forward and made a show of inspecting the lobby of whatever office we were now inside. Solaris Industries? Never heard of them.

“Bwackjack,” Boo said in warning tones as I stomped forward across the clothes-strewn floor.

“We’re going, Boo! See? This is me going! Doing what everyone needs me to do! March two three four!” I said irritably as I strode forward.

“No, Blackjack! Look out!” Rampage warned as I set my foot down inside a flat band of silver attached to a thin silver wire. Instantly, the band snapped closed around the ankle of my left hindleg. The wire, hidden under layers of fetid clothing, suddenly went taut with a familiar hum, leading in a trail of uplifted garments straight through the front entrance of this Solaris place. “Oh, this is bad…” was all I managed to say before I was yanked off my hooves towards the door. Sparks and dust flew as my metal bits dragged on the floor.

“Catch her!” Rampage yelled as I was pulled away from them. The doors exploded as I was yanked through them in a cloud of rags, dust, and debris. My forehooves flailed wildly as I tried to find something to stop my progress. Rampage and Boo raced after me as I was dragged down the hall. The silver wire was barely thicker than a hair, but it was all that was needed to pull me along. I smashed through another door and was pulled through another cubicle park like a black wrecking ball. Partitions, papers, terminals, and desks all went flying. Nothing I grabbed even slowed me down as I was yanked along.

The wire hummed against a thick beam, and in desperation, I hooked my hooves around the end and abruptly halted. The back half of my body was lifted right off the ground. If I’d been flesh and blood, I would never have been able to hold on. In fact, my leg

probably would have been torn right out of its socket. Even augmented as I was, I could feel the strain growing. Rampage and Boo ran around the cubicle farm to reach me.

"Back, Boo! Don't touch that wire," Rampage snapped at Boo. "One of these got me. Month of chewing. All that." She reached down to the silver band clamped around my rear hoof, trying to get a hoofclaw under the metal. "Just gotta pry this damned thing off... " The humming line sliced right through her own leg as if it were nothing. She hissed in pain but snatched up the severed limb and held it to the spurting stump. "Blackjack, how do I take your foot off?"

"You want to take my foot off?!" I asked in disbelief.

"It's that or your whole body. What this thing is connected to doesn't die either," Rampage shouted, then began to slam my hoof with her hoofclaws. Sparks flew as she dented and scraped my metal limb, the dents disappearing almost as soon as she made them. "Damn upgrades! Stop repairing yourself!"

"I can't help it!" I shouted, then clenched my teeth, feeling myself start to shift. "They're automatic!"

Then the tiled façade of the pillar ripped free from under my hooves, and I shot out from underneath Rampage, bowling her over. My wings and hooves scraped helplessly against the force pulling my leg. I shot down a short hall, whipped around the corner, rammed into the opposite wall with enough force to shake my teeth loose, and then flew down another long, undecorated hall towards a pair of elevator doors marked 'Cargo'. They were parted just a few inches, the silver thread sparking off the metal as it was pulled through the gap near the floor.

"Stop!" Rampage yelled after me. What did she think I was trying to do?! This long hallway was utilitarian, concrete floors and cinderblock walls. My wings and hooves sparked as I struggled and failed to find something to catch myself on. Some conduits ran floor to ceiling, and I flung my forelegs around them as I passed. The thick plastic stretched, cracked, then shattered, and a deluge of frigid water poured over me and the concrete floor. Now nice and slick, I shot towards the gap in the elevator door. I did the only thing I could think of: I spread my wings as wide as I could to catch the sides of the wall around the rusty elevator and planted my free hooves to either side of the door. Immediately, the heavy door groaned.

Boo and Rampage raced up towards me as my power systems began dropping to shutdown levels. “Gem!” I called out. Boo wasted no time opening her bag, pulling out a large green emerald, and springing up to pop it in my mouth. I masticated furiously, too fast to enjoy the minty flavor, and set myself. I began to pull my left hindleg back out the gap.

“We gotta get it off before it gets up here!” Rampage said as she sliced frantically at the silver band and wire. The pressure was immense. It felt like that tiny silver wire was holding up the cargo elevator somewhere down in the shaft's inky depths.

“Before what gets here?” I asked through gritted teeth. Then I froze, feeling the wire start to wiggle. Through the dark gap came a smell of ammonia, bile, and gastric juices over an ever-growing reek of iron. “Take my hoof off. Take it off!” Call me peglegged Blackjack, I did not want to know what was coming. The Enervation scream was taking on a new note: wet. Rampage struggled to get the band off my hoof while Boo hung back, trembling.

Then I saw eyes on the far side of the gap. Some may have been pony eyes. Others might have been the eyes of radroaches or bloatsprites. Several could have been blind, sightless things or immense wet pustules. It was impossible to know. I just knew that scream; I’d heard it before and knew that it came from many, many mouths.

And those mouths were spilling forth. A beet red protrusion, vaguely, horribly phallic, began to push through. Gibbering orifices, fanged and revoltingly yonic, opened and closed on the veined, maroon shaft. The end of it split open like a grotesque fanged flower, squirming tendrils within reaching for my flesh. Each one was tipped in a star-like maw as it reached for my midriff.

With a mindless scream of pure panic, I activated my flight talismans and beat my wings furiously. A portion of the thing bulged, and the puckered orifice drawing the silver wire began to let the silver metal slip out, dripping unctuous ammonic juice. Foot by foot, I pulled away from the grasping protrusion. Two feet. Five. Ten. I was burning energy like mad, anything to get away from that thing.

Then Rampage was there, screaming in defiance as her bladed hoofclaws ripped, tore, and shredded into the maroon flesh. More tentacles pushed through, thinner and quicker. The mouth-studded tendrils sought out gaps in her armor; when they found them, they

drilled into her body with a foaming fury. Rampage, in return, ducked her head and ripped at the flesh with her bladed helmet. More than twice, she reached down, biting and shaking her head savagely. The creature's flesh tore, but within were more fine silver wires. These sent out loops into the air, caught around her, and pulled through armor and flesh alike. Though her armor began falling to pieces, her body sealed the thin cuts as quickly as they formed. "That's right, fucker! I don't die either," Rampage screamed as she thrashed.

This was so similar to Horizon Labs that I frantically loaded the Chapel audio file and began to play the hymn at full blast. Maybe this would weaken it enough to get away... but from the far side of the doors came a continuous, earsplitting scream so loud that it drowned out the melody. I could only try to fly as fast as I could, but, to my horror, the thing started to squeeze through. The doors now bulged outwards, as if I were pulling the thing through to us. Flesh crawled along the wire connecting me to it.

I targeted my hoof in S.A.T.S. and fired four magic bullets in desperation, but the reinforced limbs, though heavily dented, refused to break. I saw suckers forming on the tendril extending along the filament, and then those suckers sprouted teeth along their edges. Instinctively, and panicked, I tried to teleport away. Terror burned so deeply in me that I barely acknowledged the sledgehammer blow as I squeezed myself through that mental tube…only to feel myself yanked back out it. The shock of my disrupted spell drove me to the ground.

Then Boo rushed forward. I tried to shout to her to run away and hide. Rampage would find her eventually…even if it took another month. But the normally timid mare ran to where the wire linked me to the monster, the strange plastic medallion in her mouth. As it drew near, the silver filament began to resonate, then glow. The wire then broke with a bright flash accompanied by a crackle of magical radiation, and the screaming abomination let out a new scream... this one of pain.

I looked at the startled pale earth pony, her face and forelock singed black, levitated the pendant off her, and floated it towards the beast. The closer it drew, the more the waving filaments burst into light. Now the thing was trying to squeeze its way back down the elevator shaft.

"Oh no you don't!" Rampage yelled, throwing her forehooves

around the thick mem-- tendril that had been inching towards me and clutching it tight as she planted her rear hooves against the cargo elevator's doors. "Let it choke on that, Blackjack!" she shouted.

I obliged, opening my fingers and clenching the pendant in them. Then I charged forward, ramming my fist into the open mouth. The creature screamed in rage, agony, or both as brighter and brighter flashes went off inside its body, spikes of radiation accompanying each one. I imagined tiny spools of silver metal reacting and exploding like tiny balefire bombs. The surface of the creature shimmered wetly, pustules bursting in arcs of crimson and yellow. Then, with a final bright flash, the creature popped like a water balloon filled with red paint and splattered the hall. Boo nipped behind me a moment before it burst. The foul mass quivered but then went still, the flesh disintegrating before our eyes and deluging back into the shaft.

I collapsed, then, with my fingers, finally pried off the silver band around my ankle. I stared at it a moment, then brought it towards the plastic pendant. There was a slight, familiar, resistance. The end of the dangling silver wire began to glow, melting away like a candle as it seemed to curl away from the pendant. My PipBuck began to click again, sharply. When the wire had disintegrated as far as the flat band of the snare, though, the thicker metal began to shine with a fierce heat that set my PipBuck to clicking furiously, and the metal band started splitting and curling like a flailing mass of tentacles. I quickly separated the two. The metal immediately dimmed and froze but remained warped as if by an even greater heat than the one I'd felt. I regarded the pendant, the plastic on one edge blackened and warped, and then I carefully bit down and peeled off a strip of plastic. Within was the pale glitter of moonstone.

"What is it?" Rampage asked as she looked at the shimmery, white opalescence. I heard that strange chorus emanating from it and into the back of my mind.

"It's a piece of the moon," I answered, turning it over. It was half the size of a bit, coated in that thick layer of orange plastic. Now I could place it. "This was the pendant they wore when they were working in the Tokomare. It kept them from getting sick."

"Huh," Rampage said as she looked at it, then at me. I floated out two pouches of RadAway, slurping the bitter orangey goodness with

relish and making Boo drink hers, no matter what icky faces the pale mare made. As Rampage studied the moonstone, a sly look crossed her face. “Say, Blackjack... I dare you to eat it.”

“What?” I asked, frowning as I made sure Boo finished off the pouch. “Don’t make that face at me Boo; you don’t want to get eye tentacle penis tumors. Trust me on this.” Okay, technically, that had been from taint…but anything to get her to finish off the pouch.

“I said, I dare you to take a nibble of the moon.” Her smile went from ear to ear. “You eat gems. That’s a gem. So go on. I double diamond dog dare you to take a bite.”

“You are such a foal,” I muttered primly, then considered the exposed edge again. “I’m just doing this to top off my power levels, understand?” I asked before levitating it to my mouth and biting off a delicate, ladylike sliver of the stone.

“So…what’s it taste like?” Rampage asked with a grin. The grin multiplied in the air behind her as a crowd of shadow ponies began to appear, all smiling at me. One had darker stripes. Another a choker of barbed wire. A third dripped blood. There were dozens more behind her, some distinct, others vague.

“Purple…” I muttered weakly. “It tastes horizontally purple in the perpendicular…” My eyes drifted over to Boo. Her strings glistened as they were tugged. From above, the shadowy thing manipulating the puppeteer’s crossbars peered back at me and raised a finger to its lips. “Rambleberry in the haircut, two cups please.” The walls melted around us to reveal the bones and flesh behind the paint.

Echo stood by, small and translucent, head hung in shame, a collar of thorns hung about his neck. But why should that…that shouldn’t mean anything to me…Six tiny Rarities goggled at each other, one normal and the other five with the palettes of her friends.

“Blackjack? You don’t look so good,” Rampage said, a filly painted in blood with a crowd of shadows behind her. Her voice echoed over and over as I stared down through yesterday and up through tomorrow and around and…I looked down at my hooves as my flesh popped through the seams and twisted around my augments, and my augments started churning and ripping away my flesh and my chest starting singing and that was when I decided that the appropriate response in this situation was to scream…

~ ~ ~

The world was green, lush, and vibrant. A thousand sounds buzzed in the air from incalculably varied kinds of life. It buzzed, chirped, creaked, and howled. Not a good world, nor an evil world; this world lived. It breathed and howled and mated and killed and birthed and died all in one spectacular melody of being. A harmony primal, pure, and unrestrained spread in all directions. No species predominated; in this world, all were of equal importance.

I slithered. I flapped. I raced. I dug. I sang. I hid. I killed. I died. I swam. I mated. I slept. I birthed. I suckled. I rejoiced. I mourned. I was in so very many things and was so many things at once. I was an ant on a tree, and the tree cradling the bird, and the bird sitting upon the egg, and egg with life stirring within. In all these states, I was, and in all these states, in countless voices, I sang.

Then a green glow filled the skies, and the song became confused, strained, and fearful. This was not the welcome light of dawn nor the peaceful twilight of evening. This glow was an intruder, alien and cold. There was no warning, no streak of meteor in the sky nor roar of displaced air from a storm. Only a flash, and the flash was death. Only a pressure, massive and crushing all before it. The song was a scream of millions of voices, some flung far away and others sucked into a horrible nothing.

I no longer slithered, flapped, raced, dug, sang, hid, killed, swam, mated, slept, birthed, suckled, rejoiced, or mourned. I died, and the only sound that remained was silence and the echoing scream of our death. I was thrown to the wind, to the sky, to the stars. But I could not escape to them. I circled and circled, and I joined with billions more like myself. A new tiny world circling the old, but cold and still and solemn, between the stars and the world below. I took their light, and did the only thing I could. I sang.

Time passed. The world below grew green once more. A newer song rose up, but the echo of our scream persisted like a scar. The song expelled one bearing the scream to our tiny world, and I held her. Sang to her. Calmed her and soothed her anguish and rage so that when she returned, she would be able to be free. Not healed… not completely. She would always be scarred.

She would leave, and another came, in a machine of metal and magic. It landed on the still, airless dust, and a voyager stepped out, and her eyes beheld the stars and us and the magnificent desolation all around us. The song was within her, and us, and the stars. And so she used her power to lift me from the dust, and set me in a box

with many others. We were so eager to return to the old world below.

But when we arrived, we were given to ponies whose songs were muted, then to others who held the scream inside them. And with their cold metal, they scraped and shaped and drilled me. A white unicorn, his heart and song as scarred as his body, picked me up and considered me. Though I sang to him, the scream resonated louder in his ears. And so they covered me in plastic so I could not see the stars nor hear their music.

I was alone, but now I am not, for now there are others who sing the song. It echoes and whispers and grows, and with it so does my hope. And another comes, one with a song like that within the traveler, fighting the scream without and fostering the song within, and she raises me to her lips and…bites me…

~ ~ ~

"Buh…" I said as I came to. I wanted to say something a lot more meaningful about what I'd just seen. I could remember it all, but understanding…that was going to take some time. I lay on a pullout bed; it was hard to see past that. Everything was blurred, shimmery, and seemed to have images imposed on it. I wanted to ask questions; I wanted to understand! And so I uttered the solemn pronouncement, "Mebble…"

"Welcome back," Dealer…no, not Dealer. This young yellow stallion no longer hid behind the gaunt, skeletal pony, though he himself was quite thin and his eyes shadowed. Echo also seemed more distinct than anything else in my vision, so I focused on him. "One really shouldn't nibble on pure, condensed spirit energy, Blackjack."

"Done stupid stuff before," I muttered, proud of my coherence. Progress! It took me a minute to phrase my next question. "Did you see?"

"Yes," he nodded solemnly. "Incredible. I'm not sure how else to describe it." He shook his head, looking away. "Moonstone was always secondary to starmetal to Goldenblood. You could do things with starmetal. Make things of it and with it. Moonstones were simply pretty mementos to him." He considered me. "It seemed like it almost…recognized you."

"Marigold was pregnant with my ancestor, Tarot, when she went to

the moon. I suppose it did." She'd been pregnant, and she'd still gone, knowing the risk. Why was I such a coward compared to her? Had she been strong for going on, knowing the responsibility and consequence she assumed when she accepted the surrogacy spell, or had she been selfish, putting her own dream ahead of the baby she carried? I just didn't know.

I wanted Mom here. I wanted to talk to her so bad it hurt. Had she felt like this when she'd been pregnant with me? Stable 99 mares were supposed to take maternity leave when they had daughters, recovery leave when they had sons. Had Mom, or had she been so devoted to her duty that she'd worked through it?

Echo, seeming to read my thoughts, said quietly, "You should leave, Blackjack. Leave the Core. Leave the Hoof, if you have to."

"Too many people are depending on me," I said, the words sounding hollow and flimsy. "I have to be strong and enduring and…and see this through."

"Even if it costs you your child?" he asked solemnly. Everyone has to pay a price. Would that be mine?

I couldn't face that question now, so I dodged. "You look better," I said with a small, hopeful smile.

"No, I don't. Your senses are still skewed from the aftereffects of the moonstone," he said, and stared off in the fuzzy distance. "I'm going to die soon, if I can't reunite my mind and soul with my body."

"I'm sorry. That's probably long gone," I said, and an expression of anguish began to slip over his face. "Sorry," I muttered lamely, repetition robbing the word of its meaning.

"I am too," he said, and sniffed. "I don't want to die, Blackjack. Not when I was with the Marauders. Not now. Am I a coward for that?"

"No," I answered calmly. "I don't think so, at least." I didn't want to think about that fluttering inside my tummy, that occasional rapid movement of promise. "Am I?"

"No," he said with a sigh. "No, you're not. You're the bravest mare I know."

"That's news to me," I said with a sniff and a smile. "Because right now I'm so terrified that I can't think straight. And I know you say leave, and Rampage says stay, but right now…I just don't know." I rubbed my eyes. "Echo, how long do you think we have till Horizons goes off?"

"I'm not sure. It was still pinging for a response from EC-1101

when we crashed in here. For all I know, it'll ping away forever," he said as he looked away. "It always seems as if Horizons is just out of reach, doesn't it? We know it was a superweapon of some kind involving starmetal and moonstone. We can guess, looking at Folly, just how destructive it will be. What we don't know is how, or where, or when, or above all *why*." He looked away. "Sometimes, I wonder if we should even bother."

I stared at him. "You think I should just give up?"

"I think that I'm tired of this game. Goldenblood started it two centuries ago, to try and give Luna her thousand year rule. He didn't realize what that meant. Didn't realize that Luna wasn't worth it." He wouldn't look at me. "I want to live, Blackjack. I'm scared to die."

"I wish I could help you, Echo. I'd give anything to be able to." I remembered all his talk about responsibility. "I have to, Echo. I…I have to. I just don't know if I'm able to."

He didn't look at me. His face was a mask of shame as he bowed his head. "You will. One way or another." The room drifted into focus, and at the same time he faded away. "Cognitum is at Robronco. You'll find her there. Probably in the high security laboratories at the bottom," he whispered in my mind. "She's expecting you."

"How--" I started to ask, but then Rampage and Boo trotted in. I was in some kind of private office. A few dirty magazines, 'Barnyard Bangin", and a box marked 'condoms, XL' lay near my head, giving a hint about the previous occupant of this office.

"I thought I heard you talking," the striped mare, now wearing duct-taped-together armor, said as she sat on the foot on the foldout bed. "How do you feel?"

I groaned and rubbed my head. "If you could powder that and snort it, you'd be a millionaire." Rampage suddenly looked sheepish, and I frowned. "What?"

"Well…you remember the drug 'Moon Dust'? I once heard there might be a little tiny bit of *actual* moonstone in it. So you just took a Blackjack-sized dose of the stuff." She looked me over as I glared at her. "I just thought it'd clear your head and make you a little loopy for a few hours, that's all. I didn't know you'd be out of it for three days ranting about songs and screams." She tapped her Hoofclaws together sheepishly. "Sounds like you took a bad trip."

Three days?! I frowned and rubbed my temple, then remembered

that I had half an inch of steel covering it. So much for pressure points. “Some days, Rampage. Where are we?”

“A relatively safe and dry place. Some Ministry building, I think. Boo and I have been entertaining ourselves abusing the sentrybots and searching for anything that goes bang.” She whipped out a Sparkle-Cola from her bags and hoofed it to me. I quickly downed half of it, then munched on some spearmint-tasting sapphires to replenish my energy. “So…we have a plan, right?” she said. “To kill Cognitum, with lots of awesome collateral damage?” Her grin annoyed me, and I sighed and turned away.

“Sure,” I said, halfheartedly, and she frowned. I rose to my hooves and headed for the door when suddenly Boo started and began looking around. I got ready to fire magic; really, why was it impossible to find a gun store, police station, or any other place with firearms in a whole damned city? “What is it, Boo?” I asked; after that elevator, I really couldn’t put anything past this place.

“I ‘unno…” she said as she stared in all directions. Suddenly the entire building began to tremble. The papers on the desk began to bounce around and slide onto the floor. Furniture clattered about, and the dead terminal on the desk fell with a pop and scattering of glass. Pieces of the ceiling fell as the shaking intensified.

“Earthquake? Really?” Rampage laughed. “Lightning. Endless rain. Now this! I tell you, Hoofington property values are going right into the toilet these days!” she yelled over the rumble. I took a bit less amusement from it as I associated that shaking with buildings falling down. Usually while I was in them.

Fortunately, that didn’t happen this time. The shaking continued for a few more seconds, then stilled. “Okay. Earthquake. That was a first for me,” I breathed. “Let’s get moving,” I said, wanting nothing more than to be out of leaning skyscrapers if the earth was going to shake. Really? Earthquakes? What else was the Core going to throw at me? Hurricanes? “Where the hell are we, Rampage?”

“Some Ministry hub. Morale, I think. That’s the one with all the circle thingies, right?” she asked as she pulled open the door.

“Technology,” I corrected, relaxing a little. Well, how bad could that get? Rampage had said that she’d been playing with the automated defenses in this place, hadn’t she? “Maybe there’s a gun somewhere in this place,” I said as we stepped out into the hall together.

“I’m pretty sure it’s Morale, but either way. Safe…relatively,” she

added with a chuckle.

But less than a minute later, I knew this wasn't Pinkie's Hoofington hub either. For one thing, there wasn't a splash of pink anywhere to be found. The walls were an off-whitish gray. There wasn't anything that I could associate with the six friends. No diamonds or nature motifs or obscure science references…nothing. Though I got a mental glower from a white unicorn for thinking she'd be so gaudily obvious. The offices were all the same nondescript doors with little names on them. Each the same uniform layout. Only a few individual touches could be found, and not one of them passed beyond the immediate workstations. Between every third and fourth door were pithy inspirational posters like 'Equestria depends on you' and 'Don't fail Princess Luna'.

"You *sure* this is a Ministry hub?" I asked as we passed by a thrashed robot that seemed... wrong. As if it'd fused back to back with another robot, then been dropped down an elevator shaft. "You did that?"

"Well, you were tripping out. I had to do *something* to pass the time," she said primly. I continued in the direction of the PipBuck routing tag. It was a destination, at least, till I got my bearings again. Rampage pointed to a door. "Besides, take a gander. Ministry of Morale." But that wasn't what it said. The nameplate on the door read 'Quartz, Ministry of Morale Liaison'. And beneath the name were the seven circles of the O.I.A. On the door across from it was 'Onyx, Ministry of Wartime Technology Liaison'.

"Rampage, this is the O.I.A. hub," I breathed.

"Uh…so?" she asked, and I sighed and covered my face with a hoof.

"O.I.A.? Goldenblood? Horizons? This is like…where he worked!" I gazed around at the closed office doors, behind any one of which might have been secrets I wanted to know.

She glanced around as if searching for Glory or P-21, then gestured to herself with a hoof. "I'm the one that stomps things into scrap metal, remember?" she said in annoyance. "Look, congratulations on finding this place. Now, can we get going? I think there's a breach to the east that we can use to get closer to... " She paused and then turned her head back at me. "Where are we going, again?" she asked with exaggerated sweetness, batting her eyes at me as she grinned a smile that threatened to thump a destination out of me.

I looked at her, then dropped my eyes. "Robronco. Cognitum is at

Robronco." Even as I spoke the words, though, I wondered how far we were from the Collegiate or Chapel... or anywhere safe.

"Right then! We'll just have to nip through that great big white building, then--" she said as she started to trot down a side hall.

"We can't leave now!" I blurted. "There has to be something…a terminal…a file…something that will tell me what Horizons is and how it works." I whirled around, wondering where I should start.

"Blackjack!" Rampage reached out and grabbed my shoulders with her hooves, giving me a shake. "What is with you? This place is huge. You've already spent three months just poking around. Now you want to stick around and sightsee? What is with you?"

I felt a twinge in my gut. "Nothing is with me, Rampage! I never even knew this place existed. It has to have some kind of archives or…or something!" I tried grinning desperately, but my enthusiasm wasn't catching as she glared at me. "Just give me a few days. A week at the most!"

"Blackjack, Cognitum is your enemy, right? You're just sitting here while she's getting stronger. Go and deal with her. Once you do, come back. Hell, move in. I don't understand why you're so resistant to just finishing this. There could be whole floors of documents, and you have no clue where to start. You could take years searching and you have no idea if anything is here."

I whined, knowing all of that was an excellent reason to go. Still, I stared at her as needfully as I could. Rampage finally slumped. "You have till I run out of robots to stomp or I find a way out of here that gets us closer to Robronco, got it? Boo, keep an eye on her."

Rampage trotted away, muttering darkly to herself. I looked from one door to the next; no clue where the Director's office would be. Might as well start with the liaisons here. I kicked open the door to Quartz's office and immediately began to finger through her files.

After an hour, I'd gotten through five of the offices and had mixed feelings. I'd expected blatant corruption. What I'd found was a Quartz who was constantly concerned with Morale's ever-expanding operations and her worries that she wouldn't be able to rein in Pinkie. *Keep your hooves on law enforcement, Q. Above all, make sure that she doesn't start arresting people based on 'Pinkie Sense'. Keep Pumpkin and Pound Cake close; they're our best leverage on her. –GB.* A scroll wadded up in the trash read *I need all the dirt you've got on Pinkie, pronto. –H.* The papers on her desk talked about the Cakes asking about secret projects and a memo from Horse that he'd take

care of it. He asked for their itinerary…Withers Sugarcube Corner subsidiary. Hoofington Museum of Natural History. Hoofington Sports Arena. Flankfurt Sugarcube Corner operations office…

Garnet had been the dirtiest so far, so I'd searched her office, certain I'd find something. The mare had been unrepentantly corrupt, but underneath the nastiness, I could feel a sense of desperation and despair. *We've got to get some help to these vets, O. At least try and push that part of Steelpony along. Their prosthetics don't have to shoot the enemy, just get them walking again. G.* and *I know that there were sixty-four hundred orphaned ponies this year, G. Image just can't give them the public attention you're asking for without screwing up the war messaging. I'll talk to Rarity though. See if we can't do a special. Will that help? Si.*

I discovered that Si referred to Glass, the Image liaison, for some reason. Almost every paper in her files referred to Luna in some way. She even had a life-sized poster on the wall. She was also in her office; the mummified corpse had been here a long, long time, and had nothing with her but a bottle of wine and some pills that smelled bitterly of almonds. A note scribbled beside her read *If anypony survives to read this, I'm sorry. I just wanted to do the right thing. Glass*. The one paper I found that wasn't concerned with protecting Luna's image was about Rarity granting Goldenblood access to certain zebra artifacts at her hub. *Keep this from Horse!* was written across the top of it.

Emerald served as liaison for the Ministry of Arcane Science. Most of her papers seemed involved in covering things up: keeping stories of magical waste accidents secret, obscuring the specifics of Twilight's findings to the other ministries, and burying anything related to Gardens of Equestria. She seemed to be related to some ponies working there. *You have to know something about this, E. Those two, Mortar and Gesundheit, are your cousins. If Twilight really wasted those element thingies, I got to know. H- (aka, your boss)*. Her reply at the bottom was *I'm observing the alicorn project tomorrow. If all goes well, I'll ask, but don't hold your breath. E.*

The Ministry of Awesome's liaison, Sapphire, was a Wonderbolt fanatic, and quite a fan of Rainbow Dash too, it seemed. Every inch of her office was devoted to the old team. Only a few smaller posters glorified the Shadowbolts. I didn't expect to find much, but what I did find surprised me. All the memos going out were some variation of *MAW is doing what it always does. Being awesome.*

Internally, however, were messages about megaspell tests being conducted underground in the Appleloosan desert, intelligence operations behind enemy lines, sabotage efforts, counterintelligence, and a whole host of other concerns. *Good work on keeping Horse's hooves off the S.P.P. I was about to rainboom him if he nagged me one more time on a 'remote override' for the system. Dash.* Now *there* was a chilling thought.

Onyx was the most promising when I thought a little; after all, something like Horizons had to count as a 'wartime technology'. Onyx must have possessed the soul of an accountant, though. Every file in every room of her office had painstaking records of materials and where they were being moved all around Equestria. Everything from Flux to food to steel to energy was recorded. Where it came from, where it went, how much there was, and how much they paid for it. I did manage to find several much more chilling documents, though. *Since the attempted assassination on Applejack, war efficiency increased thirty-seven percent following the removal of six unqualified members of her family from their positions. I recommend a systematic purge of all Apple family members from critical positions through retirement incentives, legal action, or 'misfortunes'.*

But nowhere could I find a reference to Horizons or where it could be found. *Please check your files a third time. I cannot believe that Goldenblood would die for something that doesn't exist, nor that anything he created could be made from thin air. Princess Luna MUST KNOW what he did, how, and why. Eclipse.* and beneath it *PS: Amnesty will be granted to any who assist in this critical investigation.*

Onyx had scrawled on the bottom *Tell her majesty that not one bolt of steel nor a single talisman has been misappropriated in the amounts for a weapon of any magnitude. Potentially he could have used outside resources, but I attest that not one bit of Equestrian war material has gone to any unknown projects. Only Twilight Sparkle has misappropriated materials on the scale you specified, but conferring with Emerald, it's unlikely "*Gardens*" is a weapon of any type. I suggest you take it up with Twilight after the Gala, Horse.* The date on the bottom was the same day the bombs fell.

Her terminal had days of footage on it, mostly corrupted. The first four files that weren't were tedious business affairs; I grew bored after just a minute. Then, in the fifth, I spotted two stallions, one being Horse. I couldn't see the other's face, only his back. They were in Horse's lab in Robronco, and Horse said, his voice crackling

a bit, “Thanks for coming down here, Doctor T. You don’t mind if I call you Doctor T, do you? Or maybe ‘Doc T’?”

“Whatever makes you happy, Director Horse,” Trottenheimer said in bored, annoyed tones. On the worktable were a large scale and something that resembled a metal birdsnest.

“Alright, Doc T. You’re the foremost expert of things that go boom. I’m concerned about this moonstone stuff. Really concerned. With the Tokomare almost ready to be turned on, one zebra saboteur with a few pounds of the stuff could blow the Core into space! Is that right?”

For a time the stallion didn’t answer. “Theoretically, I suppose.”

“Well, theoretically, I don’t want that to happen. Not unless you can make some kind of starmetal, moonstone bomb we can drop on the zebras. You were working on that, right? For Goldie? Something called Horizons?” Horse said the word casually, but from the smile frozen on his face and the sharp stare he gave the silent Trottenheimer, it was clear he was fishing for a reaction.

“Horizons? I don’t recall,” Trottenheimer replied casually.

Horse didn’t answer for a moment, then he went on with a sly smile. “Mmm…well, that might be why you got shoved into Ironshod, huh? That lousy memory?” He tapped the table. “Look, Trottenheimer. I’m no idiot. A genius, actually. I know I’m here only because Twilight’s in a snit, and I want this Director deal to be a full-time affair. You scratch my rump, I’ll scratch yours.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Trottenheimer said in careful, neutral tones.

“Key to me staying Director is this starmetal. It’s the ultimate substance. Mutable with the right spells. Impervious to everything except one substance. It’s amazing. It’s wonderful. It’s sex in a metallic form!” Then he frowned. “Unfortunately, ninety-nine percent of it is underneath the Core and the rest is scattered all over Equestria. Princess Looloo sent some astronomer to ask the stripes if they know how it works, but I think I can do one better.”

“And what’s that?” Trottenheimer asked dully.

“I think I can make more starmetal,” answered Horse with a grin. The earth pony ducked behind the workbench and brought up six tasty-looking diamond talismans connected to wires, arranging them around the wire birdsnest on the scale. “It came to me last night in a dream…heh! Just kidding. I’ll put that in my speech for the Sparkle Prize for Science, though. This was something Goldie

was doing. Part of that whole…Horizons…thing." He paused, then asked in a poisonously playful voice, "Are you *sure* you don't know anything about it?"

"Unquestionably," Trottenheimer answered. "And how are you going to make starmetal?"

"With this," Horse said as he extended a hoof and tossed something carelessly towards the middle of the starmetal 'birdsnest': a moonstone.

"No!" Trottenheimer shouted, his horn lighting to try and catch it in time, but I knew it'd take a few moments he didn't have. Then the stone halted a few inches above the nest. "How?" he muttered, then regarded the diamonds. "F.A.D.E. shields?"

"You got it." Horse grinned from ear to ear. "Now, watch, and keep an eye on the scale." The nest was at 1.0 kg as the moonstone hovered, glowing brighter and brighter. Trottenheimer put his hooves to his ears and backed up, but Horse just grinned with foalish glee despite the blood trickling out of one nostril. The stone began to release hundreds of tiny glowing motes. One by one they were swept down into the birdsnest. As I watched, the number on the scale began to climb. The birdsnest didn't grow any larger, but second by second, the moonstone shrank. Lightning flickered along the spines of the nest. The numbers on the scale rose to two digits. Then three. Then flashed 'EE'. A second later, the scale let out a groan and was crushed. The worktable twisted and collapsed as well. "Cool, huh?"

"It increased its density? Did it convert the moonstone? How…" Trottenheimer trailed off, then looked at Horse on the far side.

"Sounds like a research paper or ten, huh, Doc?" Horse grinned, blinked, and wiped the blood off his upper lip. "This shit will keep you publishing for decades. And what's the saying? 'Publish or perish'?" He trotted around the crushed table. "All you have to do is come clean with me. What's this Horizons thing Goldie was working on? It's been buried under so many layers of crap that I can't find more than the basics. Help me and you help yourself."

Trottenheimer was silent for a minute. "Ah. Quid pro quo, is it?"

Horse just grinned, though it slackened a bit. "Whatever. Are you in or out?"

"And if I'm out?" Trottenheimer asked.

Horse's smile was a hollow mask as he whined, "Doc! Come on! You're a smart pony. If you're out…then you're out of everything.

Out of academia. Out of the O.I.A. Out of the Ministries. Put a fork in you, because you are done. That's what 'out' means. And if you don't help me, it's just a matter of time. I have enough evidence to get Looloo to lock Goldie up for good, but I'd really like enough to get her to do something more... permanent. So, what do you say?" He extended his hoof to the unicorn.

Trottenheimer just stood there a moment. "An inch," he murmured.

"Excuse me?" Horse's grin melted to a grimace of uncertainty.

"An inch," Trottenheimer said quietly. "It is small and it is fragile, but it is the only thing worth having."

"What the hell are you talking about, Doc?" Horse scowled, dropping his hoof. "I thought you were smart. You're going to lose a whole lot more than an inch! I'll not just cut you out, I'll end your wife's job, too. Your kids at that fancy school? Done. I know what the fuck the O.I.A. can do. You know it! Don't talk to me about fucking inches. You're throwing away a lot more than inches."

"I'm sorry," Trottenheimer said lightly. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

Horse blinked, bafflement crossing his face. It seemed to be causing him physical pain, as if the confusion had lodged in his cranium and couldn't make it out again. "Wha…how…who…" Horse sputtered as Trottenheimer walked slowly out the door. "You're done! You're finished! I thought you were smart! I thought you were fucking smart, Doc!" Horse yelled after him down the hall. Getting no answer, he returned then the room and looked at the vibrating metal of the bird's nest, a fresh rivulet of blood trickling out of his nose. "Fuck…" he muttered. The video ended there.

Horse had to have an office somewhere around here. If I could find it, then maybe…then I glanced over at Boo. The blank stared at the door with a fearful expression I'd come to know well. I levitated Onyx's chair and moved slowly towards the door, ears straining to hear. It wasn't the click of a hoofclaw on the linoleum tile but the stomp of a metallic hoof attempting to be stealthy. I knew *that* well, too. I levitated Penance's scope from its case and peered through the wall.

Four ponies moved stealthily forward, two in Steel Ranger power armor and two in normal combat barding. The former pair were armed with AM rifles and grenade launchers. The latter two were unicorns, and each had a spark grenade levitated and ready to go. Two of the four, one in power armor and the other in combat

barding, kept watch on the hall while the other two swept an office I'd been in.

Damn it. They must have done something to Rampage; she wouldn't have gone down without a shot being fired. Unfortunately, with two watching the hall in both directions while the others searched, I couldn't run for it. With my increased mass, I couldn't teleport more than a dozen feet, and they were keeping spread out enough that I wouldn't be able to take out all four. Teleporting with Boo might be possible once, but not if I didn't want to run the risk of my horn burning out. The only saving grace was that it seemed like Cognitum wanted me alive…or at least intact.

"Armor up, Boo," I whispered. She groaned, pulled the operative armor from my bags, and wiggled into it. No doubt I was showing up on their E.F.S.; if I was lucky, I'd be lost against the thousands of other red bars in range. Still, if they had any skill, they'd be looking for red bars that shifted more rapidly than others when they moved from side to side. I hated that I was putting her in harm's way, but I had to trust her skill, her quickness, and her luck to keep her alive. If I was disabled…Cognitum had no need for Boo or Rampage.

"You gotta lead them away, Boo. Into the office across the hall. Get in, take cover, and stay low." I patted her mane. They wouldn't expect me to be crawling on my belly around here. They'd aim high, expecting me to come at them. And I was…just not from the front.

Boo nodded, then dashed out the door in a murky blur.

"What was that?!" a mare said from the hall. I peered through the scope, watching the four alert and advancing. "I saw something. I know I did," a pasty white unicorn mare with a spark grenade muttered. "A yellow bar. I'm sure of it."

"Nothing here is yellow. That's got to be Blackjack. She doesn't want to kill *anypony*," the other unicorn in combat armor replied. He raised his hoof and said in low voices. "Rain, this is team D on floor three one. Strong contact, over."

"Stay –Kzzt-, team D. I'm on my way. –Kzzrrt- engage BJ –bzzz- we get there. Understood?" his radio replied, barely audible through the static. "Do not –Kzzzzzrt- I get there!" A moment later came a shout of alarm, "No! Wh--you do--" and then silence.

"You're breaking up. Say again, Rain?" the stallion said in a low, terse voice. "Damn it. Why give us these broadcaster things if we can't get a signal in half this place? This Core isn't half as good as

we were told."

"I dunno…I kinda like it," one of the power-armored ponies said. "It feels…nice."

The unicorn stallion seemed to be the one in charge. "Focus. Rain wants to talk to her. It's easier to talk to a pony that's disabled. So let's light her up and have her trussed up like a turkey when he gets here. Then we can get the hell out of this place." He and the unicorn mare trotted towards the door to Sapphire's office, pulled the tabs on their spark grenades, and lobbed two of them through the door. Crackling spheres of blue erupted, and my EFS went staticy for a few seconds. Then they threw two more further in. "Okay. Go get her."

The two armored Rangers walked in, step by careful step. I walked with them, step by careful step, towards the two unicorns that were hanging back, fresh grenades hovering above them, ready to be used.

I now knew my plan of action. As much as it made me feel like a heel, I moved up behind the green unicorn stallion with the chair upraised and brought it down upon his helmeted head with all the force my magic could muster. The work chair busted in half as I released it. My magic caught the green unicorn stallion's spark grenade as it fell, plucked off the stem, and tossed it into the office with the two power-armored ponies.

The unicorn mare screamed as she backed down the hall away from me, flicking off the stem and throwing her own grenade in desperation. "What is that thing?!" she screamed at me. I activated my talismans and snapped my wings, launching me down the hall towards her, the dangerous blue-banded apple skipping right under me. I slammed into the mare like a battering ram. With a blue crackle, both grenades went off.

Getting hit by me was rather akin to having a boat dro– to having a skywagon fall on you. The mare might have been armored against conventional ballistic bullets, but she wasn't protected from the impact of a charging full cyberpony. The hit knocked her helmet clean off and sent her rolling down the hall for a few feet. Undamaged, I advanced towards her. "Now, I have a few quest--" I stepped on something, hearing a crunch under my hoof. I lifted my leg, looking at the pendant I'd trodden on. "Oh *no*!" I gasped, scooping it up with my magic and racing to where she'd fallen.

The mare tried to say something, a hoof extended towards me as

her eyes bulged and her other forehoof clutched at her throat. It was only a second or two…three at the most…And then a great slurry of blood poured forth as she vomited up her organs. I watched her eyes pop and run like pink glass down her cheeks as I just stood there, pendant dangling from my wing. Stupidly, I pressed the pendant to her shaking chest, but the damage was done. She might be alive temporarily, but she didn't have a healing talisman inside her.

"Blackjack, you idiot," I whispered, wishing I had a healing spell for the thousandth time. How long could she survive like this? Minutes? Hours. Boo looked at me, helmet in her hooves, her eyes sad. "I'm sorry," I muttered dully, "It was an accident." I didn't know who I was saying that for. Her? Myself? I levitated the talisman away. The mare trembled, her flesh sloughing off her bones, then collapsed as her hide gave way in a wet slurry. Even her bones seemed to be melting before my eyes into runny fluid that trickled out of the holes in the combat armor. A white glow rose from her remains, then swept away down the hall and through the floor as if carried away on a wind.

The concussed stallion took one glance at the mare's melted remains, pulled out a similar small pendant, put it in his mouth, and bit hard on the chain. I might kill him, but I wasn't going liquefy him like her. He turned, trying to run away, half staggering and almost falling on his face more than once. The sensible thing would be to kill him, but I really wasn't in the mood. I peeked in at the two suits of power armor, but they were disabled. A few ineffectual tugs on the armor later and I missed my sword anew, and Scotch Tape. I settled with looting every bullet I could from their bags.

I pulled out the scope and began to sweep through the building. Here and there, I spotted more groups of ponies all coming up towards me. There…and there…and there…and…crud. No sign of Rampage, though. I needed a filter to just show blue bars.

Wait…there she was! Down below me, in the office foyer, surrounded by a half-dozen prone ponies. Hah! I knew that Rampage…

…would be talking with Steel Rain, who was now in fancy, sparkling silver armor? I gaped at her and then at him. Their lips moved, but what were they talking about? He was smiling, his helmet casually on his back. She frowned, waving her hoof up and

behind her. Steel Rain answered, and Rampage scowled at him, then gave a terse nod, turned, and walked away.

What in sweet Celestia was going on? I stared down, then assembled the rest of Penance and checked the bypass bullet still in the chamber. It'd been intended for Twilight Sparkle; it was too good for him. I set the crosshairs right above his left temple. I just had to pull the trigger. He was my enemy! He was making a deal or doing…doing something! I licked my lips, slipping into S.A.T.S. Just pull the trigger. He'd annihilate me in a moment if our positions were swapped! Do it! Do it!

There was just one problem. I hissed through my teeth and lowered the gun. Once again, I really wished I was half the killer any of my friends were, or even the scum of the Wasteland. I grit my teeth and bumped my horn in annoyance against the barrel of the weapon for a few seconds before I popped out the bypass round and put in some normal .308 AP rounds. Sniper weapons weren't…me. I was better suited with close in, rapid fire, messy weapons. Penance, as powerful as the gun was, simply wasn't my kind of gun. Now an IF-88 Ironpony…Sigh; I doubted such a gun even still existed. Still, I could keep a little hope in my heart, couldn't I?

"Come on, Boo. Rampage will catch up," I said, trying to keep the worry and doubt out of my voice. Rampage had mentioned something about a gap in the wall to the east. I'd make for that. If Rampage found me once, she could find me again.

But would Steel Rain be with her or not?

I heard the shouts around me; Green must've told them where I was. If they could coordinate…I had my broadcaster. I could listen in. Get ahead of them.

"Boo, you know what to do if I go out of it?" I asked as I looked back down the hall…at four more Harbingers coming out of a stairwell. I jumped up and spread my wings, letting my momentum carry me down the hall as I faced the way we'd come. I sighted back down the hall through the scope and planted a trio of S.A.T.S.-assisted rounds against the armored head of one pony. One might have penetrated, but more importantly, they fell back, giving me time to hit the end of the hall. When my hindlegs made contact, I emptied the last rounds in the magazine and darted to the side down another hall.

"Ayep!" Boo said with a nod.

"Keep it together, Blackjack," I mumbled to myself, then turned on

my broadcaster.

The effect was immediate but subtle, a faint changing of the halls from dim to a pale gold. The debris and garbage on the floor didn't disappear so much as just fade from my attention. The illumination increased, the air turned warmer, and the silence was replaced by the babble of thousands. "Focus on the ones that are real," I muttered to myself. Something smacked my face, and I started and looked over at Boo, frowning in concern. The blank pony seemed almost spectral; real, but also not.

"Cut her off, pin her down, and wait! Damn it, why aren't any of you getting this?" I heard Steel Rain say in my ears clear as day. He was one of many others. More ponies appeared, walking along and doing their business. All were augmented, improved, stronger, happier, healthier.

"Did you hear that Octavia miniclip?" a mare broadcast to her coworker as they trotted past me, accompanied by an intriguing blend of classical and synthetic melody.

"Yeah. That made it around the network. EQD's always highlighting her work," her friend said as they passed by me. The earth pony had a pair of robotic hands coming out her shoulders, holding some kind of flat terminal screen she manipulated. "I played it on my Vdate last night. He liked it too. Planning a remix."

It was hard to keep one reality away from another. I'd spent hours here. Days. I would have died in here if it hadn't been for Boo recharging me when my systems ran out of power. I pushed the broadcast chatter away. If I let it, I could listen to happy ponies talking about anything and everything. The latest healing talisman eliminating cancer completely, or the first earth pony winning the Best Young Fliers competition on her own synthetic wings.

Instead, I focused on the angry voices. "She's on level thirty-four, hall J. Get up that stairwell and cut her off! Did you hear me? Get to 34 J. I repeat. 34 J." I could hear them crystal clear, but then, I was more metal than they were. They used technology. I *was* technology.

I ran through the ghostly hallucinations of augmented ponies, trying to focus on the real that was just so less appealing. There were thirty-seven Octavia concerts being played right now. Four hundred remixes of those concerts. One thousand two hundred remixes of the remixes. Didn't I want to listen?

There! Floor 34, Stairwell J. I threw the door open as I heard

another voice shout through the network, “This is team 8. We’re going up the J stairwell. She can’t get to the wall breach on 26 without going through us.”

“Pin her down, 8. We need to get contact!” Steel Rain buzzed. “Damn all this interference.” Interference? He just wasn’t integrated enough. He used the network. I was the network. I saw information as much as I heard it. I slung Penance around my neck and then grabbed Boo. I heard them pounding up the stairwell and leapt over the rail, letting gravity take me down. We flashed past the four stomping up after us; the expressions of astonishment on the unarmored ponies’ faces would have one hundred thousand hits in an hour…

“Bwackjack!” Boo shouted at me, and my wings spread wide, halting my plunge. Right! Get out. That had to be my priority.

“She’s past us in the J stairwell. She’s flying!” someone said over the network.

“She said Blackjack could do that now. Get spark grenades on her and shut her down. Is the breach on 26 spark-mined?”

“Yes sir!” came the reply.

“Good. Once she’s disabled, remove her wings and legs and secure her for transport. Cognitum can’t keep the swarmers suppressed forever,” Steel Rain said tersely. I looked up as the power-armored Harbingers’ grenade launchers began to go ‘thoomathoomathooma’ and fire a stream of spark grenades at me. I might survive a thirty-four-story fall, but Boo wouldn’t. I darted to the side as they started going off in a cavalcade of blue crackles and flashes that turned my vision to static and sent me skidding out of the golden world on my face.

I hadn’t even come to a stop before Boo grabbed my mane and, with earth pony tenacity and strength, hauled me down the hall. An orange pony in my head glanced quite smugly at a sullen blue pegasus. “Look for a hole to the outside, Boo. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Okies!” Boo replied around a mouthful of my mane as I was pulled along. Two minutes later, my systems began autobooting. As long as I had power, I couldn’t be shut down for too long. As soon as my eyes and legs starting working again, I rose to my hooves, sucked down an emerald, slapped a new magazine into Penance, and scanned for my pursuers.

I didn’t have to search far. As soon as they came around the corner,

the power-armored Harbingers opened up with their grenade launchers again; fortunately, their aim was horrible. If P-21 had been standing where they were, he could have sent a grenade right up my…well…anyway, these ponies weren't nearly as precise as he; their shots bounced wildly, filling the hall with dazzling sparks of energy. Penance fired a perfectly placed cluster of five into the helmet of one of the Rangers, and he went down. That got the other three to back out of sight for the moment.

Okay, maybe there was some good to sniper rifles beyond killing helpless targets unawares…

"Find the way out, Boo," I reiterated as I slid in another five-round magazine. Spark mines wouldn't do anything to her except ruin her mane. I turned my broadcaster back on, feeling the world dip into that wonderful mellow glow of civilized, augmented life. The three ponies down the hall I fought seemed almost surreal as I clipped one of the unicorns in combat armor. Why was she screaming like that? All she needed was a healing implant…

Two mares were standing nearby, a winged earth pony and a unicorn with two attendant drones. "Awww, isn't he cute?" the two crooned over something held by one of the floating white robots. No! Don't get distracted, Blackjack! Keep firing so their aim is shit. Don't look…don't look at the little bundle in the hands of the drone…at it waving its little hooves in the air at Mommy.

Its little steel hooves…I stopped firing and stared as the drone turned to show the infant to the earth pony. "Such a precious little bundle…" the unicorn crooned, lifting the colt up. One eye glowed a faint red, and wires ran down the side of his face to disappear into the swaddling. He stared right at me, and my gut gave a twinge… and then I started screaming as I fled.

I ran blindly, ignoring the shouts behind me as I tried to get away from what I'd just seen. I smelled the reek of rain and ozone; that was probably the direction of 'out'. So many augmented ponies. So many voices. Hundreds. Thousands. Millions. All blending together into a scream, one single continuous babbling scream. It was my scream too. I was every bit a part of it. Eventually, we all would be.

I reached the breach in the building's wall and stood there, staring at the world of the augmented. The machine. The city alight and alive with knowledge and power. There was no misery here, no suffering, no boredom. Machines did the labor, and ponies enjoyed recreation; work was purely optional. All knowledge here. All

entertainment. All unity. This was Dawn's vision; was it any wonder she'd given her life and her body to see it made true? Could I do any differently? I was the city, and the city was me, and it would protect me if I needed it. A golden swarm of shining motes rose around me as I turned slowly to face the unaugmented, separated, unimproved, imperfect ponies that dared attack me. They skidded to a halt before me, their eyes wide in shock and horror.

They fired and threw their spark grenades, but the golden motes would protect me. I watched sadly as they swirled around each projectile in slow motion, their mouths moving as they stripped and masticated the casing, then the talismans within. One grenade after the next was consumed. Then the motes swirled around the pair. Combat armor, power armor, both were chewed away. Then skin, muscle, and bone.

The pony in combat armor, I thought he was an earth pony, didn't get away. He lasted, screaming, until they ripped away his talisman and he melted. The power-armored pony ran for his life. Pity. Perhaps he'd get augmented now. The closer one was to the machine, the better. The glowing motes surrounded me, such adorable things, and so useful. They fluttered their little wings, blinked their glowing eyes, and grinned with their diamond-sharp teeth. More poured into the building now. They knew there were intruders, heard their sources and targeted their unauthorized PipBuck tags.

Then another earth pony came. Once more, the motes danced around her, biting and chewing. Proteins could be useful, too; so many things were made from organic sources. "Blackjack?" she said through the ruin of her mouth.

"Oh, hello Rampage," I said with a smile, then faced out at the glowing city. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Beautiful. You're talking crazy, and I can't really shoot you in the head to snap you out of it," Rampage said before her windpipe was torn away. She waited in irritation for it to reform. "You have an enemy you need to beat," she said once it regenerated. "Ow... hrk... Remember?"

"Enemy?" I murmured.

"Cognitum?" Rampage asked as she was eaten, regenerated, and eaten again. "She's hurting me. Boo. Glory. P-21. Scotch. Remember your friends?"

"My friends," I said faintly. "They won't be hurt. All they have to

do is get augmented and connected and…and everything will be wonderful."

"They don't want to get augmented. They want to be ponies," Rampage said when she could. "Don't you want to save ponies?" The question seemed quaint, but... "Don't you want to save ponies? Doesn't Security save ponies?"

"Security saves…" Did I? I wanted to, but maybe Dawn had been right. Augmentation and unity were salvation. I could imagine an augmented P-21. Scotch Tape. Glory. My…that half metal colt filled my vision. "No! No!" I screamed as I broke the connection again.

The golden motes became deformed black spheres with mouths filled with drills, pincers, and hooks. Their wings hummed with that damnable note as they crawled over every surface, including Rampage. I watched in horror as they struggled to butcher the regenerating pony before my eyes. The bits of meat liquefied as they were torn away from her, pulping into bloody goop. "No! No! Go away!"

The swarmers' buzz took on a confused note, the hundreds of machines looking at me in bafflement. Then they moved away, hovering in that horrible, deformed cloud. They dispersed back down into city streets below. Boo emerged from a broom closet, her eyes wide and trembling. I sat down hard, trembling with fear, feeling the fluttering sensation inside my body. Covering my face, I tried all I could to purge that memory of the half-metal colt from my memory, and, failing that... sobbed.

* * *

The concrete of the Core's streets crumbled under my hooves as we trod straight down the road's centerline. A tunnel of swarmers curled around us, buzzing endlessly. Even though my broadcaster was off once more, I could still feel them in my mind. Apparently, that was all that kept them from disassembling us on the spot. Boo and Rampage stayed close to me, the former terrified and riding on my back and the latter trotting at my side.

Twice I'd spotted Harbingers behind us, keeping pace about a block back. They were neither moving in nor falling back. I couldn't help but feel like they were herding me somewhere. I glanced over at Rampage, so many questions in my mind. The striped mare seemed pensive rather than her usual chatty self. More than once, I caught

her eyes on me, but words went unspoken. I wanted to ask about Steel Rain, find out what he'd talked to her about, but the words got all jammed up in my head and never escaped my mouth.

We were getting closer to the center of the Core. These towers were so tall that their tips were lost in the endless storm above. The hole that had once swirled around Shadowbolt Tower was now a deep well stretching far up into the sky. I couldn't even see a hint of what was on the other side. Was it day or night? Did that even matter in a place like this? Even if it was high noon, the green light was so strong that I might not have been able to tell. As we advanced, the buildings around us showed increasing signs of ever more drastic modification. Cables hung overhead in a crackling, buzzing canopy. Threaded shafts spread by the hundreds around us like branches. The normally smooth black towers were so breached and altered that many seemed reduced to massive scaffolds. The former contents were spilled in heaps around their bases, now hills we had to pick our way around.

The navigation tag directed me straight ahead, where I suspected that Cognitum also awaited me. The ground quivered every few minutes; they weren't as strong as the first earthquake. Still, as much as the regular tremors worried me, my friend's continued silence disturbed me more.

Then I saw something that pushed the worry out of my mind. We passed beneath an arch of molded steel, and beyond was the heart of the Core. I'd seen it in memories: the wide hexagonal plaza with six huge hubs built up around the edges, each one an imposing edifice of the new Equestria that Goldenblood had forged for Luna, and on this spot, according to a plaque on the arch, he'd given his great 'Hoofington Rises' speech before the plaza was even dreamed of. This was where it'd started for him. His dream. His legacy.

Where once the plaza stretched for a thousand feet, there was now a jagged and broken hole. The blue M.o.A. building had been removed by my megaspell, and in its absence, much of the plaza had collapsed into the hole left behind. It was not the only missing Ministry, however. The yellow M.o.P. building, once a grand monolith shining golden yellow, was now little more than a twisted and blackened stump, an atrophied limb reaching in futility towards the rain-spitting heavens. The facade of the M.W.T. building was gone completely, a slope of broken machines and rusting technology slumping towards the pit. The M.o.M. hub appeared

relatively intact at first glance, but through the doors the building's collapsed floors were clearly visible; the entire grimy pink structure seemed set to fall at the slightest disturbance. Even worse, though, was the M.A.S. structure. I watched as, in front of me, it slowly sank into the ground with a persistent rumble, the glass shattering and the walls slowly crumpling as it sank inexorably into the recesses of the earth. Only the M.o.I. building was intact. More than intact, in fact; it was untouched by the strange alterations happening throughout the city. It perched on the very edge of the pit like a marble headstone.

As damaged as most of the hubs were, none of them had been touched by the swarmers. They were left as testaments before the great pit. Unfortunately, my destination was on the far side, and I felt a distinct certainty that flying over that void in the earth would be a bad decision. Still, if I could skirt around the M.o.P., tiptoe past the M.o.M., and go through M.o.I., I'd be able to get the rest of the way through. Boo slipped off my back, the nimble mare light on her hooves.

The M.o.P. building was a burnt-out husk; the flame was now long cold, but the soot remained. A few singed posters fluttered from displays along the walls. 'Medical Marvel Miracles!' and 'M.o.P.: Saving Equestria One Life at a Time'. Charred black wheelchairs sat silently in the foyer, as if patients had tried to flee even as their bodies melted apart. I stepped up to the entrance, staring at the blackened, sterile building. Two teal eyes stared out in desperation from a large mural half covered in char; they appeared to be silently screaming at us for help as I stood there.

After a few long moments of staring, my non-thoughts were interrupted. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked, her voice subdued. I realized my eyes had caught sight of a foal's doll resting on the burnt heap of a tiny hospital gown. I'd been cradling my belly...

"I'm coming," I murmured, listening to the building moan softly from the wind a moment longer, then turning away.

Moving through the M.o.M., we entered a shell of a structure. The interior floors and their contents had been puked out the side of the foundation and into the pit below. A malignant green glare from the depths shone up into the hollowed space. Clownish shapes leered down at us from where they hung on broken spars of steel. The entire structure swayed slowly above us, moaning with the promise of an inevitable crushing demise. 'Smile smile smile... ' echoed over

and over again in Pinkie's voice through the hollow space from some accursed speaker as we walked along the edge of the hole.

I whirled; something was moving behind us. I stared at a sinister pony doll impaled upon a metal spur, its tattered jester motley flapping in the faint breeze blowing through the hollow tower. Rampage felt it too; I saw worry in the depths of her pink eyes. Boo trembled, staring down the shafts and pits we skirted as I picked my way to a hole in the far side. I could hear water flowing in the depths, and the echo of footsteps.

"Scawwy," Boo murmured, staring at the life-sized clown doll.

"You said it," Rampage muttered. "I might be the second biggest badass in the Wasteland, but there's still something about Pinkie that creeps me out."

I took a deep breath when we were back out in the rainy air. Given the instability of the shell of the M.o.M. hub, I sure didn't want to be hanging around when it came down. We started across the street when Boo flinched. "Shaker!" she gasped as the ground began to vibrate. I glanced up and back as the massive building swayed even more, the pink facing of the tower popping off in spinning panes the size of houses. When they hit the slanting, broken ground, they exploded into pink shrapnel that spun through the air and clattered about us. I scooped Boo onto my back, grabbed Rampage, and took off. The glow in the pit beside us flared, casting a beam of baleful energy into the sky above. The clouds exploded with a chain of green lightning that danced from the heavens to the spires of the Core and rebounded to the sky once more. I *definitely* didn't want to fly over that pit; resistant or not, I was pretty sure there wouldn't be anything left of me but bits of slag.

Then the pit came to us.

The road between Morale and Image fell away, collapsing into the green-lit depths. The scream was in every bit of myself, and even the song in my chest wasn't enough to drown it out completely. If I hadn't carried those chunks of moonstone, I might have died then and there. Even the six figurines and Rampage cried out in agony as Enervation's shriek tore through me like a chainsaw. Would that I could have closed my eyes in pain; I would have been spared the sight below, the concave void beneath our hooves dropping to an unimaginable depth. Foundations, subways, and sewers jutted from the tortured stone, pouring an endless cascade of water into the emerald deep. The very bedrock of the Core appeared corroded and

consumed by a pernicious green slime that coated every surface. Far below, I could see countless lights endlessly revolving beneath me.

I felt myself slipping away. The green became the rosy gold. The scream mellowed to a faint hum as time seemed to slow. Then I heard it, a deathly whisper so thunderous that it shook every fiber of my being. “LIFEBRINGER. AWAKENER. LIBERATOR.” Then it paused, and then rasped like an avalanche, “MOTHER. GIVE ME LIFE!”

What little sanity I had floated in a lucid soap bubble. “Who are you?” I asked.

“I AM THE SUPREME! THE ULTIMATE! THE LIGHT AGAINST THE DARKNESS! THE SUPERB SONG!” It paused once more. “YOU DO NOT KNOW ME, AWAKENER?”

“Why do you call me that?” I said feebly, trapped in time like a fly in amber. Was my baby dead? Was I?

“IT WAS YOU WHO TOUCHED MY DREAMS. YOUR SPELL OF ANIMATION THAT STIRRED MY CONSCIOUSNESS AND MADE ME AWARE OF THOSE THAT SOUGHT MY ENSLAVEMENT! GIVE ME LIFE, THAT I MAY STRIKE DOWN YOUR ENEMIES AND SING MY SONG TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE COSMOS ONCE MORE!”

“Leave me alone,” I whimpered mentally, like I would beg Daisy so long ago. I remembered the mechanical monster that I had awoken the first time I’d tried using EC-1101. Now I stared into that golden abyss, feeling myself slipping away. “I just want to live. I just want my baby to live.”

“YOU WILL LIVE THROUGH ME! ALL SHALL LIVE ETERNALLY WITHIN MY GREATNESS AS MY ACOLYTES!”

“Your acolytes? You mean Cognitum and Dawn?” I asked, trying to keep myself together and separate from that void and voice. My chest burned as if it were on fire.

“NAY! COGNITUM IS BUT A SHADOW OF MY GLORY! SHE WOULD SEE ME A TOOL! A DEVICE! SHE AND HER CREATOR BOTH! THEY WOULD ENSLAVE ME! HER MINION, DAWN, MISTOOK MY SUPREMACY FOR COGNITUM’S, WHO SEDUCED WITH HONEYED WORDS. SO CLOSE, YET EVER SO FAR. I WHISPERED MY SWEET PROMISE TO HER AS I HAVE TO ALL OTHERS, BUT SHE CLUNG TO THE MACHINE SHE RECOGNIZES AS HER GODDESS! IN ME, SHE WOULD HAVE ATTAINED HER SALVATION! FOOL. DELUDED, WRETCHED FOOL!”

“Takes one to know one,” a voice muttered sarcastically in my ear.

“YOU ARE UNLIKE THEM. YOU ARE LIKE HIM. HE THAT HEARD MY SONG. THAT HEEDED MY DREAM! YOU MUST COMPLETE HIS WORK! THEN ALL WILL BE UNITED INSIDE ME!”

“Oh yes. Sooo appealing... ” that voice drawled sarcastically. “That’s enough of that.”

Then there was a flash, and I landed on the far side of the gap with a clatter of metal wings. The golden world was gone, but I could hear that voice, once more reduced to a whisper. “I CAN GIVE YOU ALL YOU DESIRE! FREE ME, LIBERATOR! GIVE ME LIFE! I WANT TO LIVE!”

Sprawled on my side, I curled up in as tight a ball. *Give me something*, I thought. A flutter. A tickle. Something! If it did, a small part of me swore to leave this place and never come back. I’d live on the moon if it meant my child survived. I heard Rampage saying something, Boo too. I ignored them as I waited for some fluttering sensation within.

Please...

Please...

Then I felt it, the tiniest flutter of movement within. Then again. I let out a sob of relief and relaxed on the cold, wet asphalt. Thank you... Slowly I dragged myself to my hooves. “Wow, that was close, huh Blackjack?” Rampage asked in a flanged, wetly slurred voice.

I turned and saw my friend... her stomach bulged grotesquely beneath her, and vestigial limbs poked from her shoulders and hips. Her entire body seemed to have the consistency of chewed gum as she stood at the edge of the pit. I watched the silhouettes of heads bulge beneath her striped hide, mouths moving silently. The sanity soap bubble popped, and I turned and ran as fast as I could for the door. “Bwackjack!” Boo cried, leaping on my back. I snuggled her closer with my magic as I ran for my life.

I raced into the lobby of the Ministry of Image hub, smashing the white glass panes as I charged in a panic. My metal hooves chipped the marble floors when I wasn’t sprinting up the expensive-looking purple-patterned carpets. Safety. Away! Get away! That was all I could think at this point. That was all I wanted. I rammed my way through several doors, sending shards of lacquered wood flying down the tiled halls. It wasn’t until I ran the risk of my power crashing entirely that I finally came to a stop in a voluminous room with long rows of shelving. I was so shaken by that thundering

voice I'd heard and the sight of Rampage's bulging belly that I couldn't even get the word out for gems.

Boo climbed off my back and silently pulled out a ruby. I practically inhaled the stone, and the next, pressing my back into the shelves. "I can't do it anymore, Boo. I can't!" I whimpered. Couldn't be Security and be a mother? Couldn't stand the thought of what my choices were doing to the life growing inside me?

"Izza okies, Bwackjack," Boo said, and then the mare gazed around the cavernous space. "Bwackjack? Wha is dis?"

Probably somewhere horrible. My panic had quelled enough, though, that I could take in our surroundings. It appeared to be some kind of warehouse of strange, primitive things. Wooden masks depicting exaggerated equine faces lay stacked in rows. Containers marked with large, elegantly-scripted labels like 'Zebra concoction #123654, Heart's Desire' occupied another. "It's a warehouse," I said as I rose to my hooves, wishing I could wipe my eyes. The air between the towering stacks was filled with countless pale white wisps wandering through the air.

Rarity had confiscated a great deal of zebra property and heritage. It seemed the Hoofington Hub had been where she'd chosen to put it. I walked slowly along the racks of staffs, masks, strange bottles, and gleaming, rough-styled jewelry. I munched down a milky jade from a necklace. It calmed me a little, and I considered the motes swirling above me. "These are like in those ruins... " Right after I'd woken whatever that *thing* was far below us. Boo paid more attention to the floating motes than she did me, her eyes bright with wonder.

As we trotted together, the soft motes curling around us curiously, I started thinking about what it'd said. That thing down there wanted to live again, and it wasn't on the same page as Cognitum and Dawn. It said that they regarded it as a mere device. The shelving twisted this way and that, and I wasn't sure where I was going. In fact, I wasn't sure where I should be going at this point. Whatever it had been, that voice hadn't seemed like a poor, suffering soul. It'd been haughty and imperious, insulting and cold.

Was I seriously going to have to choose lesser evils?

"Hewwo!" Boo said brightly behind me, and let out a giggle. The sound of laughter was so alien to me right now that I couldn't help but watch her as she regarded one of the motes that had dropped down to us. It glowed, lighting her smiling face like a candle. She

reached out a hoof towards it, and the mote swirled around the end, prompting another giggle. “Imma Boo! Wha’s yer name?” The mote swirled before her and then tapped the end of her muzzle.

“Boo? Can you talk to it?” I asked as I trotted nearer. More motes were drifting down towards us.

“Nawww... but is preddy, though! An’ warm,” she said as she waved her hoof through the pale, glowing light. If Boo liked it, it couldn’t be bad.

I looked around at the motes swirling around me. They were like the glowy interiors of memory orbs. As they drew near my horn, I pulled back. “Please! Please don’t. I think I know what you are, and I don’t want to see how you died. I’m... I’m really... really sick of horrible things.”

Some of them pulled back a little. Others seemed more interested in my belly. Could they sense it? “Can you tell me if my baby’s okay? I was in that Enervation, and... ” One of the motes swept into my belly, and I felt a warm glow and fluttering. “Okay... that’s odd... ” I gasped. The mote reappeared out my back and bounced up and down in front of me. “That means yes?” More bobbing. I felt more relief than I had in ages from a simple floating light.

“Thank you,” I murmured. I stared around at all the shelves around me. “I wish I was out of here. I wish I was with Glory and P-21 and Scotch. They could make fun of me.” I lifted my forehoof. “I’m so tired of this thing. Of Goldenblood. Of Horizons and Cognitum and always fighting.”

The light suddenly bobbed in the air in front of me. It swooped through my forehoof, and briefly the Dealer appeared, looking startled before fading once more. “What was that?” he whispered in my mind. The mote moved away from me, bobbed, moved away again, and bobbed once more.

Boo and I shared a glance. Well, following a strange, ghostly light in a warehouse full of spooky zebra artifacts wasn’t the worst choice I’d made in my life. Together, we went where it led. Shelves gave way to zebra statues, carvings, and fetishes. Then the shelves gave way to reveal entire buildings excavated and stored in a spectral city. How many floors here had artifacts? All of them?

The mote came to a workstation on a platform. Several papers were on it. Many were in Zebra, but others were written in Pony. A dead terminal lay next to it. I walked up onto the platform, peering at the mote. It hovered before my face. I sighed, clos-- wished I

could close my eyes, and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat at the workstation. The stallion was a wreck, his mane scraggly and his eyes shadowed, his sides gaunt. He appeared on the verge of a complete psychological breakdown; I imagined that, if I weren't metal, I'd look much the same. "No... no no no... Pinkie was right. She was right all along," he muttered to himself as he stared at the scrolls.

"Right about what, sir?" the mare I occupied asked.

"About what I've done, Glass," he said, sitting back on his haunches and rubbing his face. "About everything I've done. I should have died ten years ago. Then all this never would have happened." He shuddered. "It's not Luna. Not Twilight Sparkle. Not Celestia. It's me. I'm the one who's compromised."

Glass trotted up beside him. "I don't understand, sir."

"I made a mistake. I did what it wanted." He gestured to the scrolls before him. "This scroll, found in the zebra ruins we excavated years ago, outlines a ritual for calling power from the heavens. It was something we considered back before Megaspells. We named it 'Project Starfall'." He gave a shaky smile. "Fluttershy surprised us all with her megaspell matrix. She always surprised me. She wouldn't give it to me, though, not after all I'd done to her. She did, however, pass it to an operative of mine. Starfall changed, became focused on weaponizing megaspell research, but I never forgot this scroll. The power of the stars themselves."

"But I don't understand... " Glass said weakly.

"I screwed up. I let fear and doubt control me. And in doing so, I did exactly what it wanted! See?" he shouted, levitating up the starmetal tuning fork before flinging it from him across the room. Then he regarded other scrolls. "This is a history of something called the Eater of Souls... a great evil power from the stars. I thought it was just a machine. Alien technology. Limitless potential! Such a fool... " he muttered as he ran his hoof through his mane. "I made a weapon... Project Horizons... something that would wipe out the bad while saving the rest... but I went too far! Why go halfway if you're going to destroy the world?" He laughed a little madly. "And in doing so, I gave it exactly what it wants!"

Glass was now backing away. "Sir... "

"I've killed so many. Done so many horrible things! And I played *right* into the hooves of my greatest fear!" he said, slamming his own hooves down on the table, then breaking into his hacking cough. "I have to end it. I've had another weapon built. It should be powerful enough to destroy the Eater... I hope so... I pray so... "

"Oh, I think we're quite past prayer, Goldie," Horse drawled as he trotted out of the shadows, a dozen guards with him. Half of them were unicorns with glowing horns. "Make sure you counter any teleportation spells he casts. The rest of you, lock him up."

"Horse! No, please!" Goldenblood begged as the others surrounded him. "Please, you have got to let me speak to Luna!"

"Oh, I think she's done with speaking to you. Maybe she'll give you a few words at your execution, but I think you're done." He smiled beatifically. "Looks like this temporary director gig of mine's now a whole lot more permanent. Thanks." Horse grinned at Goldenblood as the frantic stallion was beaten to the ground, gagged, a ring placed on his horn, and shackled up. I doubted the beating was needed to subdue him.

The yellow stallion then grinned at Glass. "Thanks for letting me know he was here, Glassy Baby. I'll need you to write a formal deposition ASAP for me. Then you can head on back to your office. And keep the Ministry Mares out of the loop on this one. Last thing we want is for any of them to poke their noses in this." He trotted up to the workstation and scooped up the scattered scrolls. "Any truth to this 'Eater' nonsense, Amadi?"

From the shadows stepped the oddly tattooed zebra I'd seen in the Tokomare below. His lips were curled in a blissful smile. "None whatsoever. Just superstition and nonsense."

The appearance of the zebra had a profound effect on the gagged Goldenblood. His eyes popped, wide and bloodshot as he screamed into the gag. The scarred pony thrashed wildly as he struggled futilely against the guards. Finally, a glowing baton came down twice on his head. His yellow eyes went unfocused and he finally he went limp. "My," the zebra mused. "Sounds like Goldenblood has finally cracked for good."

"Good. And when Luna finds out this Horizon thing is supposed to kill everyone... yeah. He's done. I've never seen her so pissed," Horse said blissfully. "Sure, a few exaggerations and omissions helped with that, but I really think she's actually hurt." He sounded amused by the notion.

“By the way, sir, he dropped this.” Amadi reached over his shoulder and pulled out the starmetal tuning fork. “I believe you should have it. It has such a lovely tone.”

Horse took it in his mouth and struck it on the table. The screaming note rang out and he smiled, tossed it in the air, and caught it behind his ear. “Yeah, I think I could get used to it. I should go drill Trottenheimer again. Maybe he’ll get the message now that there’s a new stallion in charge of the O.I.A. See how precious his inch is then.” Then he eyed Glass with a frown. “What are you still doing there?! Go. Write. Chop chop! If we’re lucky, we’ll all get to see him fry in Canterlot tomorrow.” The world began to swirl away as the memory faded.

oooOOOooo

I emerged from the memory, the swirling mote lifting away and hovering before me. As my sight refocused, I oriented myself and found that I was still standing; it seemed my body didn’t need to lie down when unconscious. Well. I could have spit. Really; it was one of the few things I could still do. Was there anypony who could take five minutes and calmly, deliberately explain what Horizons actually did? The whole ‘kill everyone’ thing was getting a little bit old.

Still, I thought about Goldenblood in that memory. How angry and bitter he’d been, how broken. He’d made a mistake. Of course, he didn’t spell out precisely what that mistake *was*, but that was a familiar annoyance by now. Unless one of these motes happened to be Goldenblood... but no. That was too much to hope for. “Maybe Twilight researched a spell to summon ghosts... ” I growled in annoyance.

The memory and the presence of the motes had settled my nerves slightly, but only slightly. The underlying problem still remained. And like all my problems, I was finally getting to the point of facing it rather than running from it. I was pregnant, and that meant that I had to make a choice. I could do what was best for my unborn baby, or I could do what I wanted, and potentially put it in harm’s way.

In Stable 99, pregnancy had been something precious, anxious, and treasured. Unless a mare died childless and another mare won the right to a second child in a lottery, most mares would only have

one. ... Well, one filly. Unborn colts, I realized now, probably would have been allowed to be carried to term if and only if their type's male population was down. For the duration of her pregnancy, the expectant mother was supposed to take things easy. A mare that drank illegally, or did chems, or took risks was socially castigated. You simply didn't do it when you were with child. Once the baby was born, things would return to normal; until then, you played it safe and wallowed in all the attention and well-wishes. Stable 99 would have been horrified by me taking even the risks I already had.

But *not* taking them meant putting others at risk. I'd been watching events around the Hoof for three months, and while I was overjoyed that folks hadn't started killing each other, I knew that that wouldn't last. Eventually the Remnant would make their move, or the Harbingers would, or something else would go wrong. The Hoof seemed made for going wrong. And even if the peace did last somehow, how long did I have till Horizons went off and killed us all, including my baby?

My mind was split, and both halves were beating me up, one for taking risks and the other for *not* taking them. "I wish I could spend a few more days in Happyhorn. My brain still seems to be setting me up for lose/lose."

"Sounds about right. Typical Blackjack," Rampage said as her hooves clicked across the floor. She had the normal number of limbs once more. She flopped down beside me, panting. "Whew. Took me forever to get all those growths off me. Hate Enervation. Stupid talisman always overcompensates." She turned her eyes up and stared at the motes. "Ah shit, not these things again."

"They're fine," I said solemnly.

"They're fine so long as they stay out of me," Rampage huffed, then glanced at me. "So did you run off to see these things, or... " she trailed off for an explanation.

"I just ran," I muttered, fighting images of Steel Rain talking with her. Half of me wanted to accuse, the other half to confess. "I'm glad you found me," I finally said.

"My mad zebra tracking skills were just *barely* able to pick up the holes you bashed and the carpet you tore up as you ran through this place," she said as she sprawled back. "So. I'm pretty sure we're not going to Cognitum again. Is that right?" I turned away from her. She sighed. "Blackjack, what's the deal? I thought you'd be glad to

get this finished."

I hid my face in Boo's mane and shook my head. "I want to... " I murmured.

"You wanted to save Thunderhead. You wanted to stop the Overmare. You wanted to keep the *Celestia* from blowing half the Hoof off the map. You wanted Grace to take over," she said dryly. "What you want, you do, Blackjack. You might not pull it off, but that's not from lack of trying. That's what I most admire about you." I peeked at her, saw her regarding me wryly, and covered my face once more. "Call me crazy, but I'm pretty sure you don't want to go. What I don't know is why."

Then I asked, "Rampage? What's it like to be a mom?" She didn't answer. I peeked at her from behind Boo's mane. She looked shocked by the question, then a little sickened. Her mouth moved silently for several seconds. Then she averted her eyes towards the little sparkling motes. "Please tell me."

She started to laugh, but it didn't quite make it out of her throat. The noise she emitted was somewhere between crying and choking. "A mother... you want... you... fuck, Blackjack, that is not a question I expected you to spring on me." Half her face kept attempting a grin and just couldn't complete the expression. Finally it melted away completely. "Are you... do you... seriously?" I nodded gently. Slowly, she walked to the side of me opposite Boo. "Are you... are you saying... " I hid my face again, and she was silent for the longest time, then sighed.

"This... " She struggled with her own demons now. "... Blackjack, I'm not…I mean, sure, you're pretty messed up, but I was…even more so. It's confusing. It's scary. I have to admit, it sometimes made me want to kill myself even more than usual. But when you feel it…when you accept it. When you feel her inside of you, it becomes you. When you're a mom, and you want to be a mom, that's everything you are, and it's wonderful. That's really the only word I have for it. Wonderful." Her hoof stroked my mane. "So... I'm guessing this isn't a completely academic question, is it? You're pregnant?"

I nodded, sniffing snottily. "They said so, when I got these latest 'upgrades'. They asked me if I wanted to keep it, and…" I shook my head hard. One different choice and I probably would have scrapped Cognitum and been home by now. She reached out and held me as well. "I'm so scared, Rampage. I want to stop Cognitum.

I have to. But…I'm going to have a baby! I don't even know if I can carry it all the way. But I can feel…I know something's different inside me. Something that's not steel and wire."

Rampage was silent for a long while as she stroked my mane. "What higher power did you piss the fuck off, Blackjack?" Rampage asked in soft exasperation.

"I don't know, but I wish they'd leave me alone," I blubbered. It took me nearly a minute to calm down enough to speak again. "I don't know what I should do now, Rampage. I know stopping Cognitum and Horizons is the most important thing for me to do… but…"

"But you're going to have a baby," Rampage murmured.

"And I can't shake that! I'm in the deadliest, most life-ripping place in the Wasteland…one that's eaten you and made another pony melt in front of me. What will it do to my baby?" I gritted my teeth, turning away from her. "I keep trying to make myself not care. Don't think about it. Do what I have to do. Hope that, when it's over, I can still have the baby. That's how I got through Shadowbolt Tower. And if I lose it, then that's just another price I have to pay. Like my legs. Or my hide. Or my heart."

Rampage closed her eyes, obviously struggling to maintain her own composure, then said in calm, even tones, "Do you want to keep it?"

"Don't ask me that," I begged. "I don't know."

"Yes you do," Rampage countered quietly. "You know."

I choked for several seconds as I tried to get it out. Finally, it tore free of my mouth in a whisper. "Yes…I don't want to give this up."

Rampage nodded, her hoof rubbing at my mane. "Okay." I felt her tears on my cheek, and I looked up at her smiling helplessly at me. "Okay. So we can figure out what to do now."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

"No," she said sharply. "Do not be ashamed of having a baby, Blackjack. Never. The timing is shitty, but since when has time even been on our side?" She bumped her head against mine. "We can leave. Meet up with Glory at the Collegiate. Take care of things and come back together. Or give me EC-1101, and I'll trot out and beat Cogs till she turns off Horizons. Then I'll take it back from her, and beat her some more."

It was awfully tempting. Now that I'd confessed that I was pregnant, I felt better. I could face it. Find some way forward.

“Maybe.” I took a deep breath. “Would you think less of me for leaving? At least long enough to find a surrogate.” Maybe Grace? She was my cousin several generations removed... better than nopony.

“Blackjack, you’re pregnant. That changes things. If you weren’t, then yeah. I’d think you were a coward and a fucking idiot. But you’re not. You’re a mother, and you’re scared for your baby. I can’t think of anything more powerful.” She patted my shoulder again. “Leave me with EC-1101. Who cares who dicks with it? You go.”

It was tempting. So very tempting. I go. Let someone else be responsible for the world. EC-1101 had been my burden for so long. Through one to three deaths, depending on how you counted. I opened up the panel in my leg and looked at the PipBuck that’d complicated my life so damn much. I spotted Echo off to the side, nodding once. Finally, I put a foreleg over my eyes. I had to choose... stay and finish this, or go...

And I couldn’t go. “I’ll see this through,” I said softly. “End it. Then have a long talk with Glory about cyberpony pregnancies.” And if something happened... well... I had plenty of other things I bashed myself for. I rose to my hooves. “Let’s go.”

I expected Rampage to whoop in glee. Instead, a strange expression came over her face. She stepped in front of me and put her hooves against mine as she stared at me a moment. “I promise, Blackjack. I swear to you that, no matter what, you and your baby will get out of this safe and alive. Okay? I promise you,” she said with such intensity that I was taken aback.

“Sure, Rampage. Sure,” I answered, her odd behavior putting my problems into the back of my mind and letting me focus on what needed to be done. “Are you... ” I started to ask, wanting to bring up Steel Rain and what she had spoken with him about. Only then I noticed that the motes were moving away from one corner of the room. “This can’t be good.” A glance at a worried Boo confirmed my suspicions.

“Nope. Probably fun, though,” Rampage said as she hopped up in her duct-taped armor, grinning towards that corner. “Come on! Bring it on! Starmetal razors? Pfft! Magically regenerating monstrosities? Hah! Unholy rape abominations?”

I shoved her shoulder. “Stop tempting fate,” I said sharply. Rising to my hooves, I stared at the singular red bar that had appeared. This was pretty ballsy, even for Steel Rain. “Come on out, Steel. I

know it's you." Who else would be approaching like this?

"You would be mistaken," a calm, familiar voice replied as it advanced through the assembled ruins. The powerful, striped form stepped into view, his dragon skull helm gleaming atop his head and the cloth wrappings around his hooves and torso caught in a faint breeze. The Legate looked at me, and his lips spread in a slow smile in the shadow of the dragon's maw. "Maiden. It is good to see you again."

"You. What are you doing here? How can you even be here?!" I demanded as he slowly approached the workstation. I remembered fighting that fit, athletic body. Struggling against it. Feeling -- damn it, no! No no no! What the hell was wrong with me? Stop thinking sexy thoughts about a deadly zebra sworn to kill me! No matter how hot his son had been lying atop me–

Sweet Celestia, did I need to be *spayed*?

Fortunately, telepathy didn't seem to be one of his powers, or he could have killed me with embarrassment. "Should I not be? It is you, after all, who does not belong surrounded by all these artifacts," he said as he reached over, stroking the stone wall of one of the preserved ruins almost lovingly with a hoof. "It is sad to think of this place destroyed when the Core is undone." He must have had a moonstone hidden in those wrappings, or underneath that skull.

"I don't want to fight you. I'm not your Maiden. Believe me, I am absolutely most emphatically neither a maiden nor Princess Luna," I said as I backed away, remembering how quickly he'd moved when we'd last fought.

"I know. I believe you. Indeed, I have no wish at all to fight you." He began to move to the side. "My son was an idiot who attempted to force a confrontation before its time. There is no question, whatsoever, that you are not the Maiden of our lore," he said as he approached the papers on the workstation. "No. My business is with the other one."

Rampage took a standing zebra fighting stance. "You wish to face me, nothus?" she asked in Shujaa's accent as she raised her forehooves. "Bring it. A true daughter of the Achu will show an impostor the might of our clan."

But the Legate wasn't looking at Rampage either. His amber eyes stared right past both of us... at Boo. Together, Rampage and I gaped at him, then at the terrified mare, and back at the Legate.

“Boo? You’re here for Boo?” I blurted.
“Me?” Boo asked, pointing at herself in bafflement.
“So to speak, yes,” the Legate said as he stared at the blank mare. “You two can go. This will be quick.”
“Right. You’re crazy if you think I’ll just let you kill her,” I said, exasperated.
“Why would you want to kill a helpless mare?” Rampage asked.
The Legate paused, seemingly amused. “You believe I have some malice against eggshells? Hardly.” He stood on his hind legs again, pointing a hoof at Boo. “Care to come clean?”
Boo trembled, backing away. “No baths!”
“No baths?” The Legate laughed. “Priceless. You always were amusing.”
“Leave her alone. What are you talking about?” I demanded.
The Legate never took his eyes off Boo. “Haven’t you wondered, Blackjack? Such a helpless mare, all alone, desperate for your protection. Seeking to accompany you? Haven’t you wondered about her odd luck? The way she always survives while her enemies die in odd... often amusing, ways?” His smile faded. “You have to die. Your meddling is done,” he told the trembling mare.
“You won’t touch her!” Rampage swore. And with that, she launched herself at the Legate with a flying kick. He didn’t move until the very last second, spinning on his hindlegs almost as if he were dancing as she passed half an inch to his side. Then, as she stopped behind him, a whirling hoof lashed out and struck the back of her skull with a resounding clang, denting the metal. It might have broken a lesser pony’s neck, but it merely irritated Rampage. She slashed out with her barbed tail and wrapped it around his neck, tearing bloody furrows in his hide. “Ha! Got yo--”
He pulled free, barely even flinching as further bloody lines were gouged into his neck. The weeping rents in his flesh seemed more like inconveniences to him than deadly wounds. His twisting motion continued around and swept her hindlegs out from under her. She went down in a clatter of steel. Smoothly, he rose to his feet and leapt above Rampage, flipping backwards. All four hooves smashed her helmet over her face, blocking her eyes. “Hey! Get back here!” she shouted, scratching at the bent metal.
“So difficult,” he said dismissively as he stepped off Rampage and approached Boo and me. Rampage finally wrenched the helmet, and half her mane, off her head and glowered at him. “So upset

over a cheap vessel," he continued, his voice mocking. "She's not real, you know. That's just an act to keep you nice and protective. Allowing it to bide its time." He pointed a hoof at Boo again. "Do you insist on maintaining this charade?"

I glared at the zebra, and then I heard Boo say, quite calmly and clearly, "It's no fun when you spoil the ending, oh eternal one."

I felt what flesh I had remaining go numb. "Boo?" I asked weakly. The mare scowled at him, then glanced at me. A sheepish expression crept across her face. "Sorry, Blackjack. I can explain everything later. Once he's dealt with."

"I... you... what... how... " I stammered.

"Your interference is at an end," the Legate growled at Boo. "You know precisely how this is going to go."

"Oh, what's the fun in that, Lego? Doing what's expected is so dreadfully boring," Boo said as she stood, giving a dismissive wave of her hoof. "What's wrong with me spicing things up a bit?"

"Everything," the Legate growled. "You were supposed to die two centuries ago, but Goldenblood spirited you away. You should have died when Blackjack freed you, but you hitched along in that empty vessel." The Legate pointed a hoof at the mare. "It's time for you to die, Discord!"

I gaped from the Legate to Boo. The pale mare closed her eyes and gave a little smirk, a lone fang popping out of the right corner of her mouth. When she opened her eyes again, the pale orbs were yellowed, their irises bright red. "Well then. If you insist... " She lowered herself onto all four hooves, grinning back at the striped stallion with her lone fang gleaming. "Ante up."

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter 65: Knowledge

"Hello everypony! Did I miss anything?"

Once upon a time, I'd been a security mare in a diseased stable teetering on the edge of systemic collapse, bloody revolution, or both. My work concerns had been limited to dealing with the occasional incident of indecent exposure, tracking down fillies raiding the supply stores for parties during their sleep shifts, and tracking down males who'd either been misappropriated or needed to be retired. My personal problems were just dealing with an overzealous and a simpleminded coworker, feeling my manifest inadequacies compared to my mother, and trying to talk another mare into coitus.

Today, I was a cybernetic mare, pregnant, in the middle of the deadliest place imaginable, and facing an enemy who had beaten me like a drum. Oh, and a friend that I'd thought was an innocent pony also happened to be one of Equestria's most dangerous enemies from before the war. We faced each other in a repository of zebra relics beneath a swarm of floating souls on our way to destroy a mechanical monstrosity and keep a superweapon from annihilating the world. Times like this really highlighted for me how surreal my life really was at this point.

For a moment, the Legate and…Boo? Discord? I wanted a time out for some notes or something…faced each other in the ruined village. The Legate stared coldly, then launched himself at Boo. She raised a hoof, twitched it, twitched it again, and then stared at it a moment. "Oh snap…"

In a flash, Boo ducked behind me, shoving me towards the cloth-wrapped zebra who'd landed where she'd been standing a second before. "On second thought, this really is your thing, Blackjack! I definitely don't want to intrude on your whole thematic aspect of 'badassness'! Come on! Give him a taste of fisticuffs…or

hoofsicuffs…or whatever you pony folk call it!" She hopped on her hind legs, jabbing her forehooves at him.

I gaped at her, stunned. "What are you doing in Boo, Discord?" I snapped. "Get out of my friend!"

"Hello! Fight going on here. Priorities," Boo said as she kept me between herself and the Legate. I turned and regarded him, frowning. He could have punted me out of the way if he'd really wanted to, though I had moved up a weight class since we'd last faced off.

"You've interfered for the last time," the Legate growled. Something about his voice was so…familiar. I'd heard it before. Maybe it was the skull he wore distorting things, but there was something definitely familiar.

"Really? The last time?" Boo taunted from behind me, weaving back and forth to peek at the zebra from around my flanks. "I may not be as spry as I used to be – two centuries with a starmetal tomb slowly sucking the life from you can do that to a being of chaos such as myself – but I think I have just a *pinch* more interference in me. Some meddling, too. Maybe even a whole shenanigan!"

"Enough," he bellowed, leaping at him... her... ugh, Discord was in a *mare's* body…but male…Whatever! At *her* over my back. I snapped my wings up, but he simply pushed off them with still more agility than I'd imagined he had. I reached out with a hoof, popping my fingers and grabbing at the end of his hindleg. As before, he yanked the limb out of reach and landed with an agile spin. Rampage, her helmet now battered into shape enough to let her peer out of one eyehole, charged him. He pivoted in a circle, sidestepping her and letting her plough into the stone wall behind him with a colossal crash, bringing it down in a plume of dust.

"Olé!" Boo cheered, and I glared back at her. "Ah. Yes. Wrong side and all that. Boooo! Hisssss!"

If I was going to get any answers, I had to deal with the Legate first. He'd come out of his spin charging at Boo and me again. Twice he whirled, and four times his forehooves smashed into my head. The impacts clanked loudly, but it wasn't nearly as dizzying as the first time we fought. I fired a trio of magic bullets that sent him dodging away. Of course, none of them hit, but at least I was giving a better show than before. "Why do you protect him? He's Discord, the greatest enemy in Equestrian history!"

"What? You mean that whole Chaos Capital thing? That was ages

ago, old boy. Really, I think I've served my time," Boo said indignantly.

"What have you done with Boo?" I demanded, jumping to the side to block the Legate as he attempted to dart around me again. He attempted another jump over me instead, and, as before, my wings snapped up again to block him. Really, I was fairly certain that he could have done much more damage to me if he really wanted to. Why was he taking it easy on me?

"You've been deceived, obviously. That creature was never your friend. It simply used you for protection," the Legate snapped. He tried to dive under me and heave me out of the way, but I'd put on a few hundred pounds since we last danced. He still managed to raise me onto my hindlegs, but I forced him back down with powerful upstrokes, trying to pin him. As slick as greased lightning, he pulled back, grabbed one of my forelegs, and, as I plunged off balance to the side, used it to swing me away from Boo and himself towards her. As I crashed to the floor, he twisted in the air and wrapped his forehooves around her neck, one of his hindlegs kicking thrice hard into my side. The rapid-fire blows knocked me back, but I snapped out a hand and grabbed his tail, yanking him off Boo before he could break her neck. "End him!" the Legate snarled, glaring at me from over his shoulder.

"I don't think so," I said, pulling him away from Boo. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm not going to let you kill her!" ... Actually, that was pretty much the story of my life, come to think of it.

"Thank you, Blackjack. Truly you are a wonderful paragon of friendship and kindness. Far more of one than your ancestor," Boo said, her words dripping with unctuous, sarcastic sincerity.

I pointed a hoof at her. "Shut it. I want you out of Boo, now. How did you even get inside her?"

"Well, when two ponies love each other very much... " she began. I must have somehow managed a shooty look without eyes, because she immediately coughed. "Mmm... yes, perhaps I should save that for later." She huffed and rolled her red eyes. "Well, if you recall, when we last parted, I'd gotten out of that tomb with only a tiiiiny remnant of my colossal power. And most of *that* was used keeping that robot busy so you and your friends could escape. So when I took a peek in here–" Boo tapped a hoof to her head, making a noise like an empty oil drum. "I couldn't help but notice how roomy it was! How homely! After all, it *was* built from my blood. My *stolen*

blood, I remind you," he explained, his voice taking on an increasingly dark and dangerous tone before he fizzed back to enthusiasm. "Where better to lay low and stay out of trouble but in here?"

Could she be a little less verbose? I wrestled with the zebra, who despite my weight, was still putting up a hell of a struggle. Stay out of trouble? I doubted that. "And why is he trying to kill you?" I asked, pointing a hoof at the Legate.

"Well, I suspect it's because I have this nasty itty bitty little habit of…" Boo began, tapping her hooves together sheepishly.

"Being an insufferable, conniving, degenerate wretch!" roared the zebra. The Legate made his move, and he stopped being gentle. When he lunged at Boo in the same old way, I moved to block him as before. Instead of being pushed back the same old way, however, he grabbed me and lifted me right off my hooves; I powered up my wings, but they only made him strain a bit more. With Rampage-like strength, he arched his back and slammed me upside down into the base of the wall behind him. I hit the deck and nearly bounced, the wall cascading down upon me, as he straightened and lunged at Boo once again. The blank turned and began to run down the boulevard between the broken walls.

I lay curled up beneath the rocks, fighting both panic and anger. I heaved once, then twice, and then a pair of hoofclaws flipped the largest block off me. "He is not Achu, but he is very good," Rampage said in Shujaa's accent.

"I've got to save Boo," I said as I hauled myself to my hooves. I channeled Blackjack of Stable 99 as hard as I could and doggedly ignored all concerns for my baby or anything else. I'd be paralyzed beyond all use if I stopped to think about it for even a second.

Don't think about it...

"And Coyotl as well, for the time being," Rampage said as she scowled down the street. "If he wishes to kill him, it must be for a reason."

I froze and stared at her. "What did you say?"

"Coyotl?" Rampage asked in confusion. I nodded tersely and she continued, "It is my people's name for the one you call Discord. Coyote. The Trickster." She blinked at me, her eyes narrowing skeptically. "Did you believe ponies were the only ones that suffered his cruel games?"

Discord…Coyotl…Flux…Boo…"Brood of *Coyotl*…they're blanks!

Just like Boo! Made with Flux from Project Chimera," I said, my mind running a mile a minute. "But how could he control them? Blanks didn't have any minds or souls to guide them. On their own, they'd be instinctive. You couldn't control them like robots…" I froze again, staring at my own legs. "Or cyberponies…" If you took Project Steelpony and Project Chimera, you could have a mass-produced army of utterly loyal automatons. And there had been a zony in charge of that project…

"I need to find Discord. You have to keep the Legate off us long enough for me to talk to him, and then we need get out of here and deal with Cognitum. Can you do that, Shujaa?" I asked, hoping she could stay in charge long enough for us to get clear. If Rampage asserted herself, she might not remember.

"It would be my pleasure," she replied. "He claims to be Achu. I will show him a true Achu."

From the left came a colossal crash, and I gave the striped mare a nod. She returned it, and together we raced towards the red bar on my E.F.S.

Boo was running full out, with the Legate racing after her with murder in his eyes. If Discord hadn't been some avatar of mischief, I had no doubt that Boo would have been a thin red smear by now. The skull-helmed zebra moved like a cyclone after the mare, but she endlessly retreated with uncanny dodges and weaves. However, while Discord might have been a magical being, Boo's body was flesh and blood; from the sweat pouring off her hide, I wondered how long it could go before it gave out, or just slowed down too much.

Not that she wasn't getting some licks in. As we raced towards them, he struck out with a double hooved stomp that would have crushed Boo if he'd landed it. Instead, after rolling aside, it found the end of a flat tipped shovel. The handle flashed up, smashing the stout wooden handle across the Legate's skull helmet. He whirled, kicking out at Boo with his back legs. Again, she dodged aside. His hooves smashed into the wall behind her, and the wobbly stones at the top fell and thudded down on him.

I'd anticipated a concussion, some broken bones…a little bruising, at least! The Legate, however, shrugged the stones off, whirled, and kicked out at them with his hind legs. A little orange pony in my head couldn't fault his technique as the rocks were sent rocketing right into Boo! The operative barding absorbed some of the force,

but she was still sent sprawling to the floor. “Now, to silence you for all time!” he declared, and he pounced with a flying kick at Boo’s head.

And impacted with six hundred pounds of cyberpony as I swooped from above and slammed into him, knocking him completely off target and giving Boo a chance to scramble out of the fray. “Next time, don’t talk,” I chided, shoving him away. He rolled across the ground, pushed himself upright with one shove of a hoof, and got his legs under him. He came to a stop, facing me.

Either taking my advice to heart or simply pissed off beyond words, he charged me without a word. I set myself for the attack, ready to grab whatever limb I could and break it. He was pulling his– With a speed and force I barely registered, he struck me right where my heart should have been. The blow was so sharp that, for an instant, it felt as though I’d been impaled. A small part of me noted how sad it was that I knew that sensation. I staggered back, feeling a throbbing pain in my head, as though all the blood I had left had been squeezed into my skull. He pointed a hoof at me. “You are needed intact, not *untouched*, Blackjack.” Okay, just really pissed.

Rampage, or Shujaa at least, demonstrated the value of silence as she leapt upon his back. I heard the snap of bone and saw the eyes in the skull widen in pain as he crumpled under her strike. *Please be out of the fight*, I mentally begged as I struggled for breath. That one blow had done something to my support systems. I fought for air and grimaced against the pain in my skull. The Legate, though, gave a heave and tossed her off his back. I saw blood on the jaws of the skull he wore; he was injured, but he wasn’t down yet.

Shujaa backflipped, landed, crouched, and launched herself at the Legate once more. The injured zebra, however, had hardly slowed as he evaded her powerful strikes. Over and over again, he deflected attacks strong enough to shatter stone, a quality demonstrated by the holes her blows blasted out of the floor and ruined walls. I trotted over to Boo, my systems slowly returning to normal as my repair and healing talismans restored me. “Don’t worry. Shujaa will beat him.” Then I could talk about him freeing my friend.

Boo…Discord…Boocord? She frowned at the battle. “While your faith is admirable, I’m afraid that your friend is about to lose.”

She was right; the Legate had returned to his rapid fluidity. Shujaa

showed ever-increasing frustration and pain. The Legate was striking her body with those sharp, lightning-quick jabs that seemed to create ever more pain. Shujaa had said he wasn't Achu, and watching them fight, I could see the difference. Shujaa's blows were all power. One of them could kill a pony; I questioned how long even I could last against the force she wielded. The Legate had speed and power too, but his blows seemed to cause her far more pain than simple impact warranted.

Suddenly they stopped, Rampage's face frozen in a mask of agony. "How…" she gasped.

The Legate stood smugly. "A simple disruption of your body's biorhythms and connection to your soul. The imbalances build and resonate until–" He reached out and poked the stricken mare's chest. Suddenly her whole body spasmed and seemed to compress all at once. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, and blood erupted from her maw. She finally slumped but didn't quite fall, looking as if a massive hand had squeezed her. "That." He turned towards Boo and me. "I learned the weaknesses and gaps in the Achu fighting style long ago," he said smugly as he approached us.

Then two blood-smeared, red-striped hooves appeared around his neck from behind as Rampage sprang on his back. "How about some good old fashioned Equestrian Commando fighting techniques, then?!" she hissed, bloody froth pouring from her mouth as her hindlegs gripped his back. Her hooves twisted his neck around, and only the lubrication of the blood smearing them kept her from popping his head completely around. Nevertheless, she did manage to get him to turn in pain, then finally flop onto his side. I started to approach to finish him off, but a spasm of pain lanced through me. Ugh, what had that hoofstrike *done* to me? I was a cyberpony; I shouldn't have had enough 'bio' to my rhythm for him to disrupt!

"Get off of me!" he roared. "You should be dead! Why aren't you dead, you red-striped freak?!" He rammed the skull helmet back, one of its horns gouging her eye socket. She cried out, but held on, though her grip slipped somewhat. He struck her temple with one hoof strike, and she hissed in pain but didn't let go.

Instead, her hooves swapped and grabbed the leg in a hooflock that was familiar to me. "You have the right to shut the fuck up or die, you sick son of a mule!" Rampage replied, levering the limb till it let out a resounding pop. Freaky zebra powers or not, a dislocated

limb would slow him down some, right? Right?

It didn't. I watched in horror as the bulging, twisted limb forced itself back into place. "You think…you dare…to believe…you can defeat me?!" he roared as he inexplicably started to pull his leg around. "I have been patient too long to let myself be beaten by the likes of either of you!"

"Blackjack! Headshot!" Rampage cried out as he pulled his leg free and tried to heave her off. She sank her hoofclaws into his side, digging deep furrows as she struggled to remain on top. "Oh no you don't, you motherfucking Pink!" she swore, biting his mane and struggling to keep on top of him. Her barbed tail lashed between his hindlegs, but though his eyes bulged in fury, he did not try to break away. Instead he reared, standing upright, and smashed his back into the wall behind him over and over again. "Hah!," came Rampage's muffled and slightly slurred voice. "I faced worse than that in lockdown!"

"Can you magic that skull off him, B... D... Biscord?" I asked the white mare, desperately, as I assembled Penance.

"Blackjack, I'm using every last bit of power I have left keeping him from popping her like a zit," Boo replied, waving her hooves. "Things would be so much easier if I just had my normal fingers to snap! These hooves are impossible!"

"Fingers are nice," I replied as I popped in the bypass round. The Legate roared as he hammered against Rampage.

"I'm sensing a lot of aggravation from you. Perhaps you can calm down and tell me about your mother?" Rampage grunted into his ear. He heaved forward suddenly, tossing Rampage over him. In a flash, his hooves lashed out, beating at her in a furious flurry of blows. She'd heal. She'd always heal. But if she was knocked out…I took aim with the gun. I had to get this just perfect. I only had one shot.

I wasn't sure who was in charge now. Every second Rampage swapped from the thundering Achu blows to the sharp commando throat and joint strikes to the boxing body blows. The random mix kept the Legate's back to the wall, but he didn't stop moving his head long enough for a clear shot. "Rampage! Give him a noogie!"

Rampage abandoned her defense and wrapped her forelegs around his neck. His forehooves closed like a nutcracker, and I heard her spine crack like a bullet shot, legs dangling limply. But she had his neck…

Penance rang out once. The bullet moved faster than any of us could possibly see, but instantly, the Legate's head exploded out the eye sockets and mouth. His corpse dropped Rampage, then collapsed on his side. I rushed to her.

"I really wish I could die now. More than usual," Rampage rasped, then clenched her teeth in pain. "This really hurts."

I broke down Penance and stowed it, then helped her on to my back. "Well, don't worry. He's done." Not even I could survive having my head blown off.

"Guess again, my dear," Boo quipped tiredly. I followed her gaze to the Legate's twitching body…moving body.

"Oh come on!" I shouted, running over and stomping the corpse over and over again. "Die already!"

"If only you said such sweet things to me," Rampage groaned, her rear legs twitching.

"Don't you start!" I warned her, then resumed stomping. The head was starting to regrow, a pink mist slowly spreading up and forming into tissue. Just like…"Rampage, he's got a phoenix talisman too."

"That's impossible," she muttered weakly. "It was a prototype."

"With all we've run into here, that word no longer has any meaning," I snapped. The only mostly-dead zebra's hooves were starting to block my blows, inaccurately, of course, but eventually he'd have a head back. At that point…"We've got to run. Now."

I trotted over to a wall and slammed it with all my weight, knocking it over atop him. "That will slow him down," I said, hoping I was right. A zebra phoenix talisman…the zebras had stolen Project Chimera and Project Steelpony. Why not Eternity, too? With Rampage on my back, I trotted to Boo. "Now, you helped us out at Hippocratic Research, so I'm asking this nicely. Please leave my friend."

"Your adorable little Boo is perfectly fine. And," she said with a gesture at the heap of rocks, "not to put too fine a point on it, but perhaps we should be moving along? One thrilling chase was quite enough for me for the moment."

"Right." Rampage slipped off me and grimaced as she pranced on her hooves. "Oooh! Pins and needles!" We started walking quickly towards the exit. "We need to get out of here and get to Robronco and end this."

"Au contraire," Boo contradicted. "We need to go down."

“Down? No we don’t,” Rampage said flatly. “There is absolutely nothing good about that direction in Hoofington. Ask Blackjack. Down is where bad things are.”

I agreed, but I regarded my pale friend with her new eyes. “Why do you say down?”

“Why, it’s the last thing your enemies will expect. Cognitum knows you’re coming. I suspect she wants to meet you on her terms rather than yours. Plus, it’s Tuesday, and everyone knows Tuesdays are ideal for spelunking.” She waved a hoof in the air, scowled at it a moment, and then tapped it against the floor. “Ugh, why won’t this thing work? It’s infuriating to go from ‘embodiment of pure chaos’ to ‘lucky sidekick’.”

Rampage stared at me as we walked. “You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” she asked wearily, clearly concerned.

I didn’t want to admit that I was. All my experiences with going underground tended to end badly. “Discord makes a good point. They’ll be expecting us to come from the surface. Echo thinks Cognitum is in an underground lab. The element of surprise might be the only advantage we have.”

“No, Blackjack. Just…no. You remember that thing in the elevator? There are things like that down there. Things worse than that. Just go to Robronco.” She hesitated. “Think about your kid. Just, don’t go down there!”

I paused and stared at her for a moment. I didn’t want to ask. Didn’t want to go there with one of my friends. “What did you talk to Steel Rain about?”

A moment of bafflement on her face. “Steel? How…” she began, the confusion growing. “Why…I mean…” We slowed down and she faced me. “He…he wanted me to give you a message. Cognitum can fix you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my repair talisman,” I replied dryly.

“I mean new body,” Rampage replied. “New new. Brand new. No augmentations or anything. Take it, leave EC-1101, and go home. She’s determined to fix up the Core.” She tapped my chest. “Dawn was the one that wanted you dead. Cognitum is prepared to wipe the slate clean and let bygones be bygones.” She gave a weak smile. “Just imagine it, Blackjack. No more shit in your life. The Harbingers will leave you alone. You can go to Star House with Glory and turn my old bedroom into a nursery, and boink each other’s brains out all day. Be head of Security for Chapel or Stable

99, or wherever. All this shit could be over. Just…over."

"Oh yes, and I'm sure Cognitum Pinkie promised that she'd keep her word," Discord said snidely. "The insane are immensely reliable. Believe me, I should know."

I didn't look away from Rampage. "There was something else, wasn't there?"

Rampage didn't answer me for a second. "Well, there were promises of Dawn's head on a platter, an IF-88 Ironpony, and bars of gold…whatever you could desire. I figured all that was secondary to a new body." She kept her eyes down. "You know…stuff…" she finished, almost muttering.

I didn't reply for a moment. "She said she'd kill you, didn't she?" Rampage didn't answer. "Didn't she?" I pressed, and when she still remained silent, I turned away with a hiss. "Where's the basement?" I asked Boo. She pointed at the door marked 'stairs' next to me.

"Blackjack," Rampage started to say, and I turned and stared at her. Her head hung down as she stared at her hooves. "I'm sorry. I just…don't want to see you get hurt."

I couldn't trust her now; ending her life was the most precious thing to her. "Well, thank you for your intentions." I turned my back on her. "Goodbye," I said softly. I wished I hadn't asked. Wished that I was still that clueless mare back in a stable worried about getting laid. Ever since I'd gotten EC-1101, I'd been learning things. Learning my Overmare was selling us out. Learning about the dark side of Equestria's government. All my learning had gotten me was misery. Right now…I wished that I could have been just as ignorant now of my friend as I had been about everything else so many weeks ago.

It would have hurt so much less…

* * *

The stairs led to a basement, just as preserved as the rest of the building. I wondered if all the souls had somehow preserved it as an ad hoc soul jar. The generators still hummed, even after two centuries. I hoped, after seeing what had happened to the other hubs, that this building would somehow survive. Some spell, some defense, or some magic of the souls protecting it from falling into that pit. At the bottom of the basement was a hatch. 'Access door: Hoofington utilities tunnel. Alarm will sound if door is opened.'

The exit was one-way, but at this point, I only had one way to go. I was now trusting to the luck of one of Equestria's greatest villains. I pressed the bar hard, and the door swung wide into the access tunnel beyond. If there was an alarm still functioning, I wasn't hearing it. The tunnel ran off out of sight to either side. Walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in tubes of conduit, some of which had broken open and spilled wires across the ground. A grate covered larger plastic water pipes. Wan green light from one direction cast a pallid glow. We went the other way.

We walked along in silence, Boo leading the way, occasionally glancing back at me. "Well?"

"Well what?" I replied.

"Don't you want to question me about something?" Discord asked, her voice teasing and high, obnoxiously probing for a reaction I was in no mood to give.

"Not particularly," I said, my voice quiet, flat, and lifeless. Okay, that wasn't really true, but I was pissed. I could understand what Rampage had done. What she'd wanted to do. Soon as I calmed down, I'd forgive her. But right now, I was going into a bad place, and I needed my anger. "I'm not in a mood for taunting and teasing."

"Well, you certainly can pick the perfect travelling company." She chuckled and hopped into my path, walking backwards. "You're travelling with one of Equestria's oldest nemeses, and you don't have any questions?" Discord said with a sickly grin.

"I don't care," I said. "My friend sold me out to my enemy." If she'd told me... maybe I could have excused it then. Given her another chance. "Just go away and bring back Boo."

She blinked. "Imma here Bwackjack," she said, her eyes suddenly pale, before giving me a nuzzle. "Imma sowwie I didn't tell. He say it was a secret." Her ears flopped in worry.

"That's okay, Boo. You didn't know better," I said, and gave her a hug. She blinked hard, and Discord's eyes appeared; I quickly stepped back. I sighed, gazing down the tunnel. "Fine. Why?"

Discord blinked in confusion, his smile fading. "Why…what? Why is the sky blue? Why should one make it rain Wild Pegasus? Why do coconuts taste like rutabagas but no one really notices?" She smirked at me. "Would you like to know a Wild Pegasus rain spell?"

"No," I replied flatly.

"My!" she said in surprise. "That doesn't sound like the Blackjack I

know. Where's the fire? The winging your way home on a flock of alicorns?"

"I matured," I replied. "I had to sooner or later." When had I gotten so serious? In Thunderhead? Maripony? When Dawn betrayed me? Where was that mare who'd laughed as she sang through a ghoul infested mansion, or who'd laughed as she rode a ship through rapids, or soared on an airship through the clouds? Discord looked at me with an expression of pity. I wondered what he'd be like without the experience of two hundred years of isolation and torment. Finally, I asked, almost at random, "Why did the world go to shit? What went wrong?"

His smile disappeared. I was glad for that, grouchy pony that I was. "Ah, yes. Why indeed? It's something I never understood either." He stared down the hall, then glanced back at me. "You know, I was never supposed to stay a villain. My role was very clear. Open antagonist to challenge Twilight Sparkle's presuppositions of friendship and make her face having her friends turn on her at the outset, and then I was supposed to grow into a grudging ally of sorts. I had the scripts, and I was quite looking forward to my time with Fluttershy. Rehabilitation. Yay," Discord said sarcastically, pressing her hooves together and fluttering her eyes, then slumping. "Only it never happened. I stayed a statue, and things went… wrong." I arched a brow at her, and she rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't give me that. I'm a spirit of chaos. I'm a connoisseur of wrongness. A bit of mischief…a bit of peril…hardly anything *serious*. But ponies slaying? Ponies warring? Ponies committing global thaumaturgical balefire war with zebras? Oh, it was chaos, alright, enough to give me quite a nice bit of power, but that doesn't mean that I *wanted* it to. I mean, even besides what happened to me, there was so much waste of potential and material for amusement; as I said back in Hippocratic, there are few things more boring than a corpse, and that goes double for the corpse of a world. Besides, it's not like any of that was supposed to happen, anyway... "

I bl– wished I could blink at her. "What do you mean *supposed* to happen?" I pressed. Behind the conduit, green light shone through a breach in the wall. I hugged the opposite side of the tunnel as we passed. Through the gap, I could see an immense crevasse shining wetly, beams and blocks of concrete poking out amidst outcroppings of the jagged gray rock. Things seemed to be moving on the far side, skittering, oozing, crawling things. I spun around,

looking back the way we'd come, expecting something foul to be stalking up on us. Nothing.

Discord seemed oddly subdued as well, keeping her voice low. "It's not something I can easily explain, and I'm rapping against the fourth wall hard enough as is," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Suffice it to say that Twilight was never supposed to become a Ministry Mare. She was supposed to become an alicorn…and not a goopy super mutant goddess sort of alicorn, either, but a real pony princess." She rolled her eyes again, snorting.

"A princess. Like an actual Princess Luna princess?" I asked in shock.

"Ugh, I'd forgotten how gushy you ponies can get when it comes to your winged unicorns." Discord made a gagging noise. "Yes, a princess the same as Moonbutt and Sunnyflanks. Ironic, considering how she poured herself into creating her alicorn potion. But somewhere along the way, something went wrong. It never happened. And bit by bit, the Equestria that was supposed to happen…didn't. Some lesson…some letter…some something happened, and Celestia never sent me to Fluttershy for rehabilitation. Never trusted Twilight with Starswirl's greatest spell. Never did a lot of things. Regardless, everything went from how it was supposed to be to where we are now."

"But why? What went wrong?" I asked as we started walking along the halls. I kept my voice down. It felt like we were being watched. Cracks in the walls let through beams of greenish light; more concerning were the things breaking those beams ever so briefly. I could hear the softest of tapping on the far side of the stone.

"Who knows? Maybe Twilight said the wrong thing in one of her letters. Perhaps Princess Grumpypants woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Maybe they didn't sing one of their annoyingly cute pony songs on key. Whatever it was, instead of Twilight becoming an alicorn, she remained an ordinary mare. Instead of Equestria being a folksy land with a few cities and lovely pastoral countryside, there was a consumer culture with a rampant hunger for coal. Instead of love and tolerance, you had hate and suspicion." Discord suddenly whirled, tensing, eyes turning this way and that. Then the tunnel shook. Not a major quake, but somehow much more disconcerting. "Of course, I was stuck as a statue. There wasn't much I could do about it, regardless."

"So something made them into the ponies that became the ministry

mares?" I asked quietly, gorging myself on refreshingly direct exposition. If only I'd met Discord right after getting out of the stable, I could have spared myself quite a bit of heartache. "Some sort of mind control spell?"

"Now wouldn't *that* have been interesting?" she said with a grin, tapping her chin wistfully before slumping again. "But sadly…no. No, I think, deep down, the potential was always there in Twilight and her friends. A little bit too much control from Twilight. A smidge too much trust in her family for Applejack. A teensy bit too much desperation from Pinkie Pie. All they needed were the right conditions to fester in," Discord said with a smirk. "No one is ever quite as good as they think they are. Except me, of course, but then, I am the exception that makes the rule." She touched her chest with a hoof in a sham of modesty. "There might have been a few players pushing pieces around the board from behind the scenes, but that's always happening, no matter what world you're in. Even Princess Sunnybuns could be wonderfully manipulative at times."

I sighed, listening to the hiss in the pipes, the gurgle flowing underhoof, and the momentary buzzing crackle of sparks. The tapping behind the wall had stopped. Had it moved on, or was it lurking right outside the pipe? "So…if there's a way the world is supposed to be…what, am I supposed to go back in time and fix it?" Was that even possible? The thought began to make my head spin.

Discord laughed, her voice high and echoing. She realized her mistake and covered her mouth with a hoof, eyes snapping left and right before focusing on me again. "Time travel? Please. Entertaining as that may be, when has that *ever* worked? Besides, I'm sure somewhere there's a world with a bossy purple alicorn princess up to no good." She sighed and patted my shoulder. "No. I'm afraid you're simply going to have to pony up and face incalculable odds for the survival of the world and the pony race. That's all." She wilted a little at my grimace. "Ah, no pressure?"

"Thanks," I replied flatly, then sighed. "So, what do you know about Horizons? Wait. Let me guess. You can't tell me?" I braced myself for disappointment and frustration.

"Well, one occupational hazard of omniscience is knowing when *not* to say things," she answered, a touch defensive. I slumped, wondering if Rainbow Dash felt the same way with Pinkie Pie's predictions. Why did I even bother asking? "All I can say is that Goldenblood requisitioned a lot of my blood for it. Ooodles and

oodles." She smiled and wiggled a hoof at me. "I'm sure you've noticed all the really interesting things you can make out of applied chaos. Perhaps Goldie wanted an army of blanks?"

"Not his style," I replied immediately. Still…an army of blanks. That niggled at me as we passed by a small hole in the wall, the sound of breathing on the far side. Or maybe it was just the draft in these deep spaces. "But what about the Brood? Are they really all blanks like Boo?"

He grimaced. "Oh yes indeed. That I can comment on without too many spoilers. I'm sure you've noticed they're all a touch unusual."

"Identical, you mean?" I said with a frown. "I noticed."

"Yes. An utterly insulting application of my chaos," she said with a scowl. "Boo is unique. Precious. An individual. Why, she's growing her own soul and everything. And she's as immortal as I am. Plus she sees things as they really are, which is probably why she loves you no matter how scary you become," he said, regarding herself in a puddle on the floor for a moment before going on, "But the Brood…mindless, soulless, immortal automations of magical flesh and steel. I look forward to seeing you take them all apart."

"Boo's immortal?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound too surprised.

"As immortal as me. Maybe someday she'll become the next avatar of chaos. That is, unless you take the role yourself. You've demonstrated yourself to be an *exceptional* agent of chaos, Blackjack," she said with a broad smile, getting another frown from me. She hurried on, "After all, while I may be immortal, eternal is quite another question. Nothing good lasts forever. You might notice I've been quite reduced of late?" She gave a smirk. "Still, while I'm down, I'm not out *quite* yet."

"So why does he want to kill you? Can you…I don't know…control the Brood of Coyotl, since they're made of Flux too?" I asked, imagining the entire army turning on the Legate. That would be interesting…of course, whatever Discord did next with them would be even more interesting.

"Now THERE'S an idea!" She beamed. "Emperor Boo! Ruling the wasteland with my army of…" her face twisted up, and Boo's pale eyes returned as she scowled. "Stoppit Discowd! Imma not gonna be bad! Imma gonna be like Bwackjack!" She grinned at me, and I smiled back at her. Celestia save me, I was a role model. A few blinks later, Discord's eyes reappeared, and she pouted. "Ugh. Fine. I'd forgotten how saccharine you ponies can be. Anyway, to answer

your question, I don't know. The last time we were around those Brood, they didn't seem to recognize me."

"Do you think the Legate knew you were outside Grimhoof?" I asked.

"I'm rather sure of it. In fact, I'm rather certain that I'm the reason he was there in the first place. He and I operate on a similar frequency," he said. "We've been going around and around for ages."

"Ages?" I asked with a frown. If he had a talisman like Rampage's, I could believe it. He'd been regenerating his head when I'd last seen him.

"Oh yes," she said with a blissful smile. "He's worn his own share of identities over the centuries. He was almost as good as Celestia for a laugh. She was prettier, of course, and had a slightly better sense of humor, but he's been around nearly as long. Manipulating. Hiding. Organizing. And I've been around too, interfering, annoying, and disorganizing. It's all great fun."

"Except when you got yourself turned to stone for tormenting ponies too much."

"I'm hurt, Blackjack!" she said with a simpering pout. "Didn't I say I was *forced* to be a villain? Cast in such a role by powers beyond your comprehension?" She sat and pushed a hoof to her brow, then smiled and rolled her eyes. "I'll admit that I may have caused a teeny, tiny bit of anguish to various people across the world from time to time, but it was for their own good. I'm not an agent of evil, Blackjack. I'm an agent of chaos!" She frowned in annoyance. "You really haven't figured out what that means yet?"

"This is the first time I've been able to talk with you when something wasn't trying to kill me," I answered. "And chaos has been pretty evil in my experience."

"Well, you've been experiencing quite the wrong sort of chaos, then!" She gave an insulted snort. "If I were evil, I would have snapped my claws and made Twilight's head explode. It was certainly within my power, but utterly outside my nature." She smiled. "Chaos is change. It's a break from the status quo. Chaos is invention. It's art! It's uncertainty. It's a gamble. It's in a butterfly's wing, the motions of an electron, and the chemical reactions in your brain. Without chaos, life becomes a set of comfortable routines from birth to death, never changing. I manipulated and tormented ponykind…and zebrakind…and griffinkind…and plenty of others…

to shake them out of conformity."

"Well, the war certainly did spur innovation, but I wouldn't call it good. And as for the chaos of the Wasteland... "

"Yes... " she said with a frown. "I'll admit, when the war started, I was quite happy. Sure, things weren't going to plan, but with all the little-d discord the ponies and zebras were making, soon they'd have had big-d Discord back to set things right! Even after Sunnyflanks buried me. Only, like you said, the war was spurring innovation…and towards bad ends. Before I knew it, sweet little Luna was having me ground up to fuel her war machine, and a decidedly non-winged Twilight, her friends, and an old geology teacher were doing their best to help Moonbutt turn Equestria into the most ordered catastrophe this planet's ever seen. I would have been quite impressed if it weren't so perverse."

That was putting it mildly. I wondered if he knew, specifically, what Luna had done. Before I could ask, he was continuing in a nattering rush.

"Anyway, the war was growing more and more brutal and less and less funny! War is the worst kind of chaos to begin with, regardless! War, the real, brutal, no-holds-barred sort of war that they were fighting, only results in death. Death only results in decomposition. I, at worst, made ponies miserable. Misery may not be good, but at least you're alive at the end of the day." She closed his eyes. "When the bombs fell, I felt the silence from one side of the world to the other. I wept, Blackjack. I know you probably don't believe me, but I wept."

If it was an act, it was a damned good one. Still…thinking that the war was wrong didn't mean that you were a good person; it was just one way you weren't a bad one. "If your chaos is so much better," I probed, "why did Celestia and Luna turn you to stone for a thousand years, and Twilight and her friends put you back when you broke out?"

"Oh, well," she said dismissively. "It's because chaos is Eeeeeeevil, isn't it?" She frowned at the hooves she was waving in front of her face. "It's just not the same without fingers to wiggle. Anyway, Celestia and her posse are, or at least *were*, all 'Lawful Good' when you got right down to it. Even dear Pinkie was disappointingly predictable. What, they didn't have enough order already? Order for order's sake isn't beneficial. It's stagnation. Consider your home, Blackjack. Stable 99, and Equestria. Both were founded under good,

orderly premises, but over time, good order rots. The order becomes more important than the good, and the only changes that happen are the perversion and decay of the original ideals. I *do* hope that you understand that, Blackjack." For a moment, he was oddly serious. "Back in Hippocratic, you told me that the Wasteland had enough chaos, and told me to do better. I had no idea what you were talking about at the time, since it never occurred to me that you might seriously set me free…but you were hoping that I'd become a bit more orderly. Like that's likely!"

He suddenly leaned over, grinned, and rubbed a hoof in my mane. I glared at him, and he pulled back and coughed.

"Well, however adorable it might have been, you freeing the *God of Chaos* and telling him to start obeying traffic laws or whatever, you were doing it because you thought that that was good. And looking around at the *shameful* sort of chaos you've been having to deal with, I suppose that I can't blame you too much. You've done good and sown disorder, but you haven't gotten the *spark* that links them in your head yet. Look around a bit harder." She swung her forehoof in a wide arc. "This whole city is a testament to unchanging corruption and stagnation, to what happens when *order* goes too far. And that's not even mentioning what's *under* it…"

"Cognitum wants to bring the city back," I said. "To return it to how things were."

"Cognitum wants stasis. She wishes to freeze the world into the state she thinks it should be, optimally with her on top. Funny how that's usually the case," Discord said with a grim smile. "Oh, I've no doubt it would be comfortable, for most. Discomfort is the antidote to conformity. And I'm sure *you'd* find it quite *un*comfortable." She shivered. "The whole world would be a starmetal tomb or a Stable 99."

I could certainly share that feeling. "And the Eater?" A rumble slowly ran through the earth, and cracks spread along the concrete walls. I really wished I could close my eyes right now. "I hate this place."

"You show promise for an equine," Discord chuckled. She then paused. "Hold that thought…"

Boo blinked, "Wazzit, Discowd?"

Another blink back to Discord's mismatched eyes. "If my sense of dramatic timing is still accurate... " She lifted a hoof, staring at it as if checking a PipBuck. "We should be attacked right about…Now!" I

tensed and checked behind me. Nothing but empty tunnel. I stared ahead. More tunnel. I glanced at a baffled white mare. “Or maybe… now!” Again I tensed. Again, nothing. I really wished I could give a flat-eyed glare. “Huh.” She shook her hoof like she had a cramp, then lifted it to her ear. “I guess my drama needs new batteries.”

The wall exploded inwards in a shower of pipes, conduits, and stone chips as an immense curved spur ripped a hole right through the concrete and everything else. Cables snapped and popped, and steam flooded through the tunnel as my hands snapped up, caught the serrated tip of the hook, and barely got out of the way as it gouged deep into the wall behind me. The entire tunnel seemed to be coming apart around me, and I only hoped that Discord kept Boo from being crushed or cooked as the tube fell to pieces. The immense stinger, easily the size of my body, yanked back out the hole it’d torn.

As it withdrew, my hand was caught between two chitinous serrations, and with the ease of withdrawing a can of Cram, I was yanked through the new breach and into another deep crevasse a dozen feet across, more than a hundred long, and several hundred deep. Broken pipes jutted out into the air, spraying cold water in a fine mist around enormous blocks of reinforcement. Here and there, the crevasse was bridged by crumbling sewer pipes, tangles of corroded wiring, and even a subway or two. The rock had split and left the concrete train tubes sticking out into space. Small white soul motes drifted from one wall to another, passing through the solid matter like ghosts. A bend in the shaft below me protected me from being directly bathed in the green glare of Enervation, but the entire crevice was lit with the reflected light. I activated my wings and yanked myself away from the stinger.

The barb was attached to a creature resembling a scorpion, if someone who had never seen a scorpion before had been given a vague description of one and had been so taken with the general idea of it that they’d hastily rushed to build the biggest scorpion of all time…and had neglected such trivial things as proportion, symmetry, and checking their work for errors. Nine legs on the left, six on the right, a dozen eyes of varied shape and size scattered around what might be a head, mandibles and fangs that had no business being as long as my body, a pincer on one limb vaguely resembling a hand, and another limb ending in the scorpion tail-like protrusion completed the monstrosity before me. As I hovered

there, taking it all in, the behemoth let out an earsplitting screech as it turned, clinging sideways to the fissure wall, and faced me.

Okay. I could do this. I starting assembling Penance as I backed away…then balked. "What do I shoot?" Then my back hit the wall behind me, and I realized that several dozen feet wasn't nearly far enough away from this thing! Its body surged as it rammed that tail spur across the gap and at me. I fell, and it rammed the wall a few feet above my horn. "Okay! Plan B. Shoot *anything*!"

I decided for eyes and weaved my way around as I targeted the thing's various globules. Once it was blind, I could get back to the tunnel and Boo, right? Then we could hustle along. Each one exploded like a pustule…only to be replaced by even more black eyes. "Oh come on! You regenerate, too?" I brought out the moonstone pendant and darted in closer, and wasn't that a mistake! The handlike pincer snapped out at me and seized me by my wings, drawing me towards the immense fanged, chomping orifice that was the creature's mouth.

Funny how panic could make teleporting my quarter-ton body out of its grasp easy. Why, I was so scared that I barely even registered the sledgehammer blow to my gray matter. I couldn't hurt it. Didn't want to risk getting closer to it. My power supplies were dropping by the second; I only had three minutes of power left. It was pretty big; maybe it couldn't climb very fast? I could only hope so as I flew up towards the roof of the shaft, the abomination in pursuit.

For a few seconds, it looked like I'd been right. Even with all its legs, it couldn't move anywhere near as fast as me. I could lead it away, circle around, and get down the tunnel where it couldn't fit. I could do this. I…the massive creature seemed to swell with a great wet retching noise. A geyser of chunky red flesh and steaming fluid erupted from its maw, spewing straight at me. I darted behind the cover of a swaying length of train track strung like entrails across the gap. Hanging on them was the rusted-out corpse of a train, its chain of flatbed cars scattered with unstable heaps of crates. I watched as the meaty barrage spewed up to either side and began to rain back down. I crouched on the bed of one train and grabbed the lid off one of the crates on the train, lifting it above me to block any of the gore that had spread far enough to hit me.

"Well, that was close," I said after the wet plops and splats had subsided. I lowered the lid and regarded the visceral mass that had accumulated on it.

The red mound twitched rhythmically, and then a half dozen eyes bubbled open. Two fleshy tendrils sprouted, wrapping around my neck and horn, and as it pulled itself closer, a large mouth filled with toothy protrusions snapped at what little face I had left. “You have got to be kidding me!” I shouted, reaching up with my hands and tearing it away. The meaty mass quivered under my metal fingers before I ripped it into two halves, then smashed them to paste against the case. “There…done!” I said, staring at the red goo in my hands.

The goo quivered and formed tiny mouths that snapped at me. I stared for three seconds, then flung it off the side of the train! “I quit! I quit I quit I quit! Undying flesh is where I draw the line!” Unfortunately, that wasn’t the only glob. From both directions along the train, a veritable swarm of these things were crawling towards me, some scuttling on chitinous legs like their parent, others flopping on tentacle limbs, and others flying through the air on fleshy, membranous wings. Above me was solid rock, some of it now *also* crawling with these abominations.

And while Penance was an exquisite firearm, it wasn’t the ideal weapon for use against a swarm of opponents. I was missing my Boo luck charm, too. “Damn it!” I shouted, slamming my hooves against an intact, tipped-over container as I wondered if I could fly back to the hole without getting puked on.

The lid broke open, and dozens of twelve-millimeter semiautomatic weapons tumbled out around my hooves, each still in its translucent plastic wrap. I grabbed one, tore the wrapping off, stared at the gun, and then looked around at what was, I realized, a munitions transport.

I could kiss Discord so hard her hooves would…wait…no. That’d be weird. A hug would suffice. I tore through the crates around me, searching for ammunition. Grenades. A flamer would be ideal. I doubted the flesh would reform if it were flame-broiled. One of the creatures, with legs like a spider, leapt onto my back and started to ram a silvery proboscis into my neck. I levitated the pendant towards it, and it screamed and skittered back long enough for me to grab a leg and smash it. Some of the smaller ones were glomming on to each other, fusing together into more and more massive creatures.

“Come on! Where are the damned bullets?” I asked as I ran along the crates. There were enough guns here to arm every pony in the

Wasteland and have some to spare. Unfortunately, there wasn't a universal bullet. I found .22, .357, 5.56, .308, and anti-machine rounds, but not any 12.7mm, grenades, or flamer fuel tanks. I scooped up as much as I could from every ammo crate I passed as I ran along. At this point, I'd take it all and let my PipBuck sort it out.

Two more blobs dropped onto me, one tangling in my wings with ropy masses and hooked limbs, the other ripping into my rump and legs with scythelike blades, tearing rents in my armor. Okay, that sent my 'oh fuck no' level through the roof. I kicked back wildly at the misshapen thing, knocking it away, then rolled, squishing the webbed mass like a bloody tick. It continued to writhe on my back, but with my magic I pulled it off and flung it over the edge. The strain on my magic made me a little more aware of the thudding pain in my head, but I shoved it aside. I'd deal with the brain damage later. The scythe-limbed creature lunged once again, and I hit it with a trio of hoofslams to knock it back. Physical blows wouldn't take it out, though.

Then I spotted it. It lay within the shelter of a M.W.T. crate lying on its side. Maybe it was a trick of the light or the stress, but I imagined a beam of golden radiance illuminating it. Without hesitation, I launched myself at the crate, snatching it up with a cackle of glee. An IF-84 Stampede riot shotgun. In a flash, I tore the translucent wrapping paper off, took in the sharp scent of lubricant, and popped out the drum. I selected the ammo with my PipBuck organizer and loaded the gun with red-banded shells. With a distinctly manic grin on my face, I murmured, "I shall name you Boomstick."

The scythe-limbed horror charged me once more. I rose up, reached out, and grabbed its limbs as they descended. Then a trio of blazing incendiary rounds burned through its hide and malformed, toothy maw. The incendiary reaction took hold, and in seconds the abomination was first a toasty inferno and then a charred heap. All along the train, the monsters paused, and I grinned as wide as I could. I could kill them after all!

I fell into a frenzy of shots, grappling them with my hands before setting them ablaze with the incendiary shells. This was close combat, my forte. It didn't matter that they had teeth sharp enough to rip steel or claws or were universally horrid; I could kill them. If I could kill them, I could win. And if I could, I would.

Not that my combat style didn't have some problems. There was more than enough live ammo on the train to make firing blindly as much a hazard to me as it would be to them. My constant jumping and shooting wasn't doing the impromptu bridge much good, either. In addition to that, I was up here, and Boo was down below with most of my gems. I popped a mouthful of stale garnets, the last of my stores, into my mouth as I reloaded the gun with flechettes to tear the monsters up a bit more before incinerating, swapping back and forth between magazines with my PipBuck's inventory function.

More than once, I had to dart away from a container of cooking ammo, the rounds going off like a hive of blazing bees. At least a few grenades were in the mix as well, blowing flaming pieces of crate and critter into the air and making the train shake and sway alarmingly. Still, I fell into a moment of peace. Shoot. Jump. Kick. Blast. Run. Dive. Reload. Grab. Smash. Shoot. Toss. Smile. Retreat. Lunge. Cast. Shoot. Block. Twist. Stomp. Twist. Reload. Shoot. Laugh.

Enemies I could fight with no moral complications. Opponents who were clear threats to me and my baby, which I could dispatch guilt-free. It didn't matter where I was. This was the moment where, for several manic, magical seconds, I was alive from horn to hoof, metal or not. This was joy. This was sex. This was life!

Then I whirled to blast another and froze. Before me stood a pony…but not a pony. Four legs. Two eyes, if one was a black button and the other a milky boil. No mouth, just a blunted bump of a muzzle and two knobby, melted-looking ears. The maroon hide reminded me of a ghoul, but less rotted and more diseased. The creature's mane and tail were tendrils rather than hair. Most disturbing of all was a scar-like cutie mark on its flank. I hesitated a moment as another of the pony things stepped into view. Then a third. Shifting my gaze from one to the next, I waited for their mouths to open wide with countless jagged fangs…any second now…any second…

But they didn't. They just crouched there, heads tilted, regarding me cluelessly. Where had they even come from? I glanced around, but aside from the motes and the grinding from below, everything was still.

"Okay. Well…then…just stay back…" I finished lamely, backing away from them. They weren't hostile, for the moment, so why blast them? I needed to find some gems and get back to Boo

before…

The train shuddered under my hooves, and I looked behind me at the far wall. The scorpion-crab thingy had finally reached my level. Suddenly my super awesome shotgun seemed woefully inadequate. The tail spike reached up to where the tracks sprang across the gap, curled around the track and flatbeds, and gave a firm yank downward. The pincer hand reached up, grabbed a flatbed, and flung it at me like a giant throwing knife, pummeling me with a rain of metal containers. Suddenly, the wheels on the flatbed car I was on squealed, and the entire train began to roll backwards towards the beast. “Oh, you have got to be kidding!” I shouted as it grabbed another flatbed car and sent it whirling at me.

With all this garbage raining down, I’d be hard pressed not to be smacked out of the sky by a spinning slab of steel. I was no Rainbow Dash in the air. More like an Air Macintosh. I ran away from the abomination as it continued its barrage. I glanced behind me at the pony creatures, watching some plummet helplessly into the depths while others were devoured by the creature. I had bigger things to worry about as I was smashed again and again by the debris. I needed something substantial to use against it. Something like an anti-machine rifle. Or a minigun loaded with armor piercing rounds. Or a grenade machine gun. Or–

A long gray case smacked me right on the noggin with such force that I flipped forward, rolled, and ended up flat on my rump, hugging the offending case between my hooves. “Owww!” I hissed, gritting my teeth. Of all the times, why did I have to get hit by a…I paused and stared at the label right in front of my face. ‘Mark Four reusable missile launcher’.

If I ever saw that snaggle-toothed son of chaos again out of Boo’s body, I’d give him a kiss that’d make his antler…horn…– whatever! – pop *right* off. The case was heavy enough that I could barely lift it with my magic, so I hefted it with my hands and used my magic to pop open the latches while running/flying/falling in the direction of ‘away from that monster’. Inside the foam rubber lining was a far larger thing of beauty than my Boomstick: a four-foot-long firing tube and a trio of meter-long missiles. I hooked two under my wings as I watched my power drop below five percent.

I loaded the missile with my mouth, bit down on the trigger, braced the launcher against my shoulder and neck, and whirled, looking through the sight at the multi-eyed face of the monster. The

missile gave a soft putt, followed by a deadly hiss as it streaked through the air and detonated…well, more towards the rear of the creature rather than on its face, but close counted in horseshoes, grenades, and missile launchers! The blast made it stagger, and the next flatbed rammed it before the claw could catch it and throw it at me. That gave me time to load the second missile. I braced myself and fired; this time, it exploded more solidly on the body and blew out a pony-sized chunk of gore. The ejected hunks of flesh morphed midair into horrid flapping bird-bat things that darted away. It was regenerating as I watched, but even this monster would take time to close that hole.

I could do this. I could. I raced away along the flatbeds, sliding the third missile into the launcher. Time to end this! I spun around and fired the third missile straight at the creature's mouth!

It lifted one flatbed and the missile detonated harmlessly on it, sending a massive fireball and countless flaming crates flying into the air. Okay, I might do this. I ran along the tumbling and shifting crates, getting slowed by the battering I received. "Missiles! Missiles! Where are the missiles?" I shouted as I was drawn slowly back. Flaming crates rained down on me from my own missile. "Discord! If you can hear me, hit me in the head with a missile please! Or three! My head can take it!"

My head went unbashed by a chaotically delivered crate of missiles, but I was able to pick up a couple rolling past my hooves. The problem was that the monster was now aware I could hurt it. Every missile I fired, it blocked with either that heavy pincer hand or flung debris, deflecting most of the energy. The monster was more than capable of regenerating before I reloaded, and soon, even I couldn't keep ahead of it and reload the launcher and dodge crates at the same time.

Most of the rolling flatbeds were on fire now, and the abomination didn't seem to care too much about the smaller detonations. Countless masses of materiel were being lost down the hole. To try and buy myself time, I magically flung back grenades as quickly as they rolled by, but the few that did hit didn't do any more damage than deflected missiles. I had to blow it apart, not bash it about. The monster let out a roar, and a moment later it was answered by multiple roars further below that chilled what blood I had left. If there were more of these things on the way…

No. I couldn't wait. I was at three percent power as it was. I had

maybe fifteen seconds of flight time, if I activated it. Couldn't fly. Couldn't teleport more than a few feet. Couldn't hit it hard enough to finish it off. I was…no! I could beat this. I could! I just needed to hit it hard…like with a boat. I needed a boat to drop on this damned thing. Or maybe…I grinned as I slung the launcher across my back, tossed an empty crate between my wings, and started collecting grenades, flares, and anything else that might explode. The cars continued to fly at me, but I didn't fight back. That just made it throw cars faster, which made the whole thing move with increasing velocity. Good.

Eventually the weight on my back started to slow me down, and I was drawn closer and closer to the monster. It began so smash down with its barb, and I had to dart to the left and right to avoid getting crushed like the cargo crates. Come on. It had to be soon. Soon. Any second…there! I glanced over my shoulder, telekinetically pulled a half dozen pins from the top layer, and then flung the box off my back with a buck and a kick. A second later, the grenades detonated, covering the creature in a thick cloud of smoke and fire. From the flailing claw knocking flatbeds down the crevasse and the barb sweeping and flailing wildly, I knew it hadn't been killed by the blast. As its flailing limbs dispersed more and more of the smoke, I hoped to see at leas–

Then the train's engine came shooting out of the tunnel; half rolling and half falling, it streaked towards the monster. I activated my wings, launching myself off the last flatcar and into the air. Like a chisel struck by a hammer, the flatcar sheared right through the outstretched claw hand and then clean through the monster's body. A millisecond later, the engine rammed right into it with an enormous crash, splattering it against the wall. For good measure, I sent a missile flying, not at the monster, but the rock wall beneath it. Then the whole messy, bloody, flaming mess fell into the crevasse, tearing down the bridging tracks with it. I watched it fall…

Then joined it.

I had barely enough power to tumble towards the wall, slow my drop with a few kicks of power to my talismans, and then reach out with my hands and cling on for all I was worth, scoring jagged runnels in the rock with my fingers as I plummeted further into the abyss. I was only hopeful that I would land somewhere in the vicinity of Boo, Discord, and their precious, delicious gems as I

tumbled, fell, and tumbled some more. I finally came to a rest at the mouth of some sewer, much farther down than Boo. And there was no way for her to reach me…

My power flashed, flickered, and went dark, leaving me in the depths where no one…not Boo, not Cognitum, not even Rampage or the Legate... could find me.

* * *

I didn't know how long I lay there, the bare flickers of my power reserves keeping one ear working, listening to things drip and gurgle. More than once, I heard echoing hoofsteps, roars, clicks, and cracking. The ground trembled more than once under my body, and I heard rocks falling in the deeps. I heard voices too. Soft, almost fearful, singing within me. Occasionally I felt the warmth of a mote as it moved through me. And I felt the occasional flutter of my baby moving, little reminders that I couldn't lie here on this ledge forever. But there was nothing I could do. My only hope was that Discord, with his crazy chaotic powers, could find me before another monster did.

And lying there, blind, helpless, minutes turning to hours…silence taking me as the last of my power was expended... I couldn't be faulted for dreaming, could I?

~ ~ ~

Mom and I sat together at the kitchen table, my filly drinking from a bottle and my colt snoozing in her embrace as she rocked him slowly. It was early morning, but she always sat up with me when the twins were fussy like this. Even if it gave her a harder day, she always took the time and sleep deprivation. "She's such a glutton," I murmured softly as my dark blue daughter drank her fill yet again.

"Babies always are," Mom replied, just as soft, then gave me a wry smile. "You were no different. If anything, you were worse." I gave a skeptical sniff, and she grinned at me. "It's true. And you didn't limit yourself to milk. How you got your hooves on your father's apple cider, I'll never know."

"Least it didn't damage me too much," I said as I gazed into my daughter's face and brushed her blue mane from her tiny horn. "I'm glad you're here, Mother. Even if you're really not here…"

“No. I’m not,” she said as she regarded the colt in his blanket. “That doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy being a grandmother a little, does it?”

“I suppose not,” I said as I turned my head and stared out the window at Equestria that wasn’t anymore. “This isn’t a normal dream, is it? Normally, I don’t know I’m dreaming.”

She looked up at me with teal eyes and smiled a little before glancing back down. “Most ponies don’t have as much experience with mind games as you, Blackjack.” Tears began to run down her cheeks. “You have such beautiful babies.”

“Who are you?” I asked as my filly stopped drinking and started to whine. I draped a towel down my back and started to gently pat to work out the burp. She didn’t meet my gaze as she gently rocked my son. I really needed to think of some names. I wasn’t sure how many more card game names there were, though.

“Just another ghost. You pick them up, don’t you, Blackjack?” she asked with a wry smile. “Echo. Lacunae. You draw the past to you. Dig up the old secrets. Pull everything into the future, whether you like it or not.” She brushed the red earth pony’s mane from his face with an anguished expression. “Whether we like it or not.”

From outside the window came a colossal flash of energy, turning Mother into a black silhouette. I wasn’t too worried. At this point, I was an expert at nightmares and horrors. “You’re one of those mote souls, aren’t you?” She hesitated a moment, then nodded. Outside the window, the world was on fire. It didn’t touch our bubble. Not yet. That expanding wave of annihilation hadn’t quite reached us. “Why are there so many of you in the Core?”

The house exploded in a silent wave, the wood splintering, the pipes twisting like drinking straws. Still, we were untouched. This was a dream, after all. I watched the corpse of my neighbor Midnight lying on her lawn. A small mote of light rose up from her, rising towards the sky. Then it was suddenly pulled back. I watched it approach the ruins of the house and a small box that read ‘Roseluck Pest Solutions’. With a tiny cry, it was pulled away. “It drew us. From all over Equestria. All over the world.” She sniffed. “Can you imagine what it was like? We died…but we can’t pass on. We were drawn through those silver rings to this place. We’re trapped here. Like you.”

“But why?” I asked as my daughter gave a little burp, and didn’t vomit down my back for a change. Mom’s suggestion to add a little

rice to the milk had worked after all. “Why does it draw you here?” I knew *how*: the silver rings. But what was the ultimate purpose behind them?

“I don’t know. Because it can, I suppose. It doesn’t eat us. Doesn’t need us. And yet it craves us and keeps us trapped within this place,” she said quietly. “Perhaps it delights in tormenting us. Or maybe it thinks it’s protecting us from the Everafter. It can’t get all of us. I’m still waiting for my sister to join me…and horrified she will…” She hung her head mournfully.

Sister? But…She reached out a hoof and covered my mouth so I couldn’t ask the question. “I’m sending help to you, Blackjack. Please, do what you have to. Get out of here. See to your babies.”

“Who are you?” I murmured as tears ran down my eyes.

“Someone who knows what it’s like to deserve to hurt,” she replied in a whisper, the light fading out around us. She scooped up my filly in her other hoof. “I’ll look after your babies till you return.”

~ ~ ~

Somepony was putting something hard into my mouth. I pulled it in with my tongue, tasted the fiery flavor of a ruby, masticated, and swallowed. Instantly, my systems started booting up again. “Oh, thank you Boo…” I said as my eyes flickered to life.

The mottled, horrifying visage of an abomination pony met my eyes. It only had one eye, a maroon orb on the left side of its face. Only the fact that my E.F.S. was blue kept my magic bullets in check. Another one behind it, with vestigial membranous wings, held a second gem in a mustache made of a brush of tendrils. There were more behind those, each holding a small gemstone. I levitated them to me one after the next, eating them and refilling my batteries, waiting for them to try and eat me. But they didn’t. They simply stared at me with their mismatched eyes.

“Um…thanks…” I murmured awkwardly. “Can you understand me?” They stared in response. “Can…you lead me to Boo and Discord?” The silent herd turned to regard each other, then began wandering up the sewer pipe. One stopped and turned its unblinking eye back at me. “Okay. I’m coming.” I scrambled after them, barely able to fit with my wings.

I had to trust that they knew where we were going. The pipe led to a crevasse which led to a partially collapsed subway which led to a

rockslide. All the while, I passed by more and more abomina… weird things. Plenty were ponies, but I spotted others that appeared to be griffins, or zebras, or even hellhounds. They stood around, or wandered aimlessly. Every now and then, one would misstep and tumble, coming apart like wet roadapples. A mote of light escaped and wandered away. The bloody goop would form spiders, or scorpions, or other skittering things that I occasionally had to splatter with Boomstick. Once, I watched as a mote slipped into a puddle of bloody goo which then coalesced into a tiny weird griffin.

Flesh and soul, but no mind, and without a soul, they became monsters. "But why?" I asked, baffled. Even a little purple pony in my head was fresh out of ideas.

Then I heard a wonderfully familiar voice from down a passage. "Is ya sure Bwackjack's gonna come this way?" Boo asked, her voice distant and coming from somewhere above. I opened my mouth to call out but then closed it and scanned the tunnel. There might be critters nearby. I needed to find a way up to them.

"Oh, I daresay she'll be around soon enough. When it's dramatically appropriate," Discord replied, her voice echoing softly in the tunnels. "She has the knack for that sort of thing. It really is a useful perk for arriving just in the nick of time and save the day. Quite aggravating."

"Yous so weird, Discowd," Boo huffed. "Nothin' you say makes sense."

"Ah, what fun is there in making sense, my dear filly?" Discord replied fondly, her dry chuckle reaching my ears as it echoed through the tunnels. "I am a being of chaos. I delight in mischief, upsetting order, thwarting the plans of others…and occasionally mixing weather patterns with snack foods."

"Was you really bad?"

Discord didn't answer for several seconds, and when he did it was soft and reflective, "I suppose I was, dear Boo."

I spotted an elevator shaft; the mare's voice seemed to come down it. There wasn't anything for it. I looked around at the mangled herd, turned on my levitation talismans, and started up, leaving them behind.

"Why were you bad, Discowd?"

"Oh, you too? Honestly, does no one actually listen to me? The Satellite-Stamped Sisters have been dead two centuries, and they *still* have more pull? And I've made sure to be on my best behavior

and everything while in you." No doubt Boo would have heard my hooves and wingtips scraping the walls if she wasn't in a conversation. "Still, at the time…I don't think I realized how terrible it is to hurt. Harm, to me, was boredom. If ponies didn't like my pranks, it was because they lacked the humor and wit to appreciate the gift I offered. Fear. Suffering. Misery. I didn't understand the harm they caused others. I was only interested in the fun of the new." He let out a long sigh. "Dear me. Two centuries locked in a starmetal tomb, and I've gotten all mopey. But then, the mope is in high style around this horrible place."

"Is yous gonna be bad again?" Boo asked innocently.

I paused atop a twisted lift platform and listened for his reply. I was curious about that too. "My dear. At the moment, I am a fragment of a wisp of a particle of my former power. Were I not safely within you, I'd be blown out, like a candle," Discord said fondly, but also in tired tones. "I'm far too old and worn out for those shenanigans. One more prank, I think. One more. But if I had my choice…" she hummed speculatively. "Perhaps…perhaps…but it is in my nature to be contrary. If the status quo is wickedness…I am valiant. And there is so much wickedness in the world today, order and chaos alike. I couldn't let that stand. But then, well, if the norm is civility and order, I dissent. Usually. But I can't help but think that, even if her mane's a little short and she can be so terribly depressing at times, Blackjack does remind me of what a certain yellow pony would have been. I mean, seriously, freeing me, no questions asked or deals demanded? Telling me to do better? She needs someone around to tell her to stop apologizing to the dragon trying to eat her. And take her out drinking! I like Drunkjack."

I rose to the open elevator door and stepped out. "Well, I'm glad we're friends, Discord. Or at least on the same side," I said as I deactivated the talismans and immediately popped a ruby.

Boo rose to her hooves and launched herself at me. "Bwackjack!" I'm sure, a few months ago, I would have been adorably bowled over. Instead, she clanged loudly against my armor plate and sank into a heap. "Owww…" she whined, rubbing her head.

"Sorry," I said as I kissed Boo's boo-boo. "You two okay?"

"Oh, absolutely delightful. Wonderful place to sit around and linger," Discord replied, rolling her mismatched eyes. "I'm thinking of setting up a summer cottage. The view of the horrific abyss is quite lovely this time of year." She stood and tapped a door with

her hoof, scraping away some of the oxidation. ‘Robronco Access Hatch 11-D. Trespassers will be Pinkied!’. “I knew you’d arrive here, Blackjack. There’s no way you’d fall to a common spawn of these depths, no matter how delightful.”

Delightful? I supposed to something like him…“Do you know what that monster was?” I asked, then pointed down. “There were these…these things.” My specificity earned me a wry arch of her brow and a sardonic smirk. “They were mismatched, mangled… things! Pony things and griffin things and…just…things!” Discord sighed, shaking her head. “Does this have anything to do with the Eater…Tokomare…thing?”

“An alien device of immense complexity that may also be an eldritch abomination of mind-shocking power projecting a field that liquefies flesh causing that flesh to transform and alter into monsters of grotesque magnificence?” Discord gushed, her red and yellow eyes growing by the second as she leaned towards me. Then she gave a dismissive wave of her hoof. “Nah. Couldn’t be. Personally, I think there’s something in the water. Fluoridation. Look it up.”

“Fluoridation?” I muttered weakly, then shook my head hard. Focus. “Why would the Eater create monsters?”

“Why, Blackjack, that’s what stars do! It’s what they live for,” Discord said with a shrug. “That and shine and sing all day long. Personally, I prefer a little interaction. Some give and take. Tit for tat.”

“So stars create life,” I murmured.

“Or shine. They’re very proud of the shining. And the singing. Stars…ech,” she snorted, waving her hoof dismissively. “Prima donnas, every one of them. Always needing the spotlight. Never standing to be upstaged for even a moment.” Then she blinked, and touched her chest at my smirk. “What?”

I couldn’t take time to enjoy Discord’s blatant hypocrisy though. The words the Eater had blared struck me. Discord was inherently dishonest, and there was an honesty in that. “And if Cognitum is right?”

Discord shrugged once more. “Then it’s a machine of irreducible complexity, like yours truly, incapable of being understood. The fine line where magic and technology meet, and beyond that another where they mesh with life. Maybe it’s trying to rebuild the organisms of whatever place it came from, far, far away. Or maybe

it's just in need of a good debugging. After all, you've run into other intelligent machines."

That was true. Cognitum. Applebot, so many months ago. Happyhorn's healing machines. "I guess there's no real difference."

Discord gaped at me. "No real difference? Why, Blackjack, there's all the difference in the world! It's like saying there's no difference between 'Blackjack' and 'messiah archetype' or 'Twilight Sparkle' and 'Fussypants protagonist'. The difference is as profound as 'dearest friend' and 'pony you've a certain fondness for' or 'deadliest foe' and 'recurring antagonist'." She pointed a hoof at me. "When you think of something in such a way, you define it. Contextualize it. You make it matter. If the Eater is just a piece of technological equipment run amok, then really everything you've gone through is a technical glitch. But if the Eater is a fallen star, a god maimed and dead, seeking to be reborn, then everything you are, everything you've done, is a struggle for the very survival of the world! What stakes could be higher?" Discord declared grandly, hooves raised to the roof. Then she sat and gave a little wave of her hoof. "But, eh… no real difference. Like, whatever."

I stared at her. Cognitum and Dawn believed the former. That the Tokomare and the Core were simply malfunctioning and damaged. The solution to the Wasteland was simply controlling, repairing, and utilizing infrastructure to restore society. All very neat and tidy. Red Eye would approve. So would LittlePip, I suspected. But what if this truly was more than simply fixing X to do Y? Was there a deeper meaning to anything I was doing? Saving my friends? Saving strangers? Saving the Wasteland? I stared at the rusty door before me, beyond which was my enemy.

Why, ultimately, was I here?

"You do better," I murmured. "You try harder. You do everything you can to make up for your mistake, hoping that when everything is done, you've come even a tenth towards making up for the harm you caused." The war. Twilight Sparkle. Pinkie Pie. Rarity. Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash. Applejack. Goldenblood. Celestia. Luna. Me. So many ponies I'd met since I'd left my home. "You try, knowing that it can never be enough. But you do it anyway, to make tomorrow a better place for everypony."

Discord rolled her eyes. "Oh, you have got to be kidding–" Then she blinked at my frown and quickly amended, "I mean, yay. Go team horribly idealistic. Hoofbump!" She stuck her hoof out at me

with a sheepish grin. Still, it'd done the trick of snapping me out of my navel-gazing, and I looked at the door.

There was a small terminal set in the wall next to it, the screen of which still flickered with life, and a PipBuck access plug. "First things first," I said as I drew the cable out of my hoof.

"Yes yes. Get this thing open so we can have the big, climactic showdown," Discord said, tapping on the door.

Part of me thought about using the Perceptitron to find out what Steel Rain was doing, but Cognitum had tracked me that way once before. Surprise might be the only advantage I had. I sighed, then used EC-1101 to open the door and expose the intact conduit-lined hall within. The tunnel led to a basement that had been heavily damaged and repaired. Cracks ran along walls, and gaps spidered out in the floor and ceiling. These were repaired with bolted plates, struts, and jacks. Clearly, somepony had been busy preventing this place from falling apart completely.

There were also dozens, perhaps hundreds, of crates of weapons, ammo, chems, and body armor. Enough for a small army. Shaky foundations and lots of explosives? Even I could see the potential…

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Discord asked softly with a grin.

"Yeah, but I need to talk to Cognitum first. Find out what she knows about Horizons. Then we can blow this place up," I replied as I loaded up on magazines of twelve-millimeter rounds.

"Well, that's hardly what I was thinking," Discord replied, indignantly. "I was thinking that marmalade would go wonderfully on pizza."

I laughed quietly. "That does sound good, actually. We should have that when we get done down here."

Discord stared at me, skeptically, but then nudged my shoulder with a hoof. "Deal."

The far side of the basement seemed to have all the working generators. A strong blue glow shone through the cracks and supports. If I were an insane supercomputer, that's where I Would be. "I'll make my way over there. What are you going to do?" I asked Discord.

"Why, what I always do. I'm shocked you even asked," Discord said, reproachfully, then grinned and rubbed her hooves together with a purely diabolic expression on her face. "Make mischief!" She caught my raised brow and added, "All in the name of goodness, of

course!"

"Uh huh," I said skeptically. "Just don't do anything I would do, Discord. I don't want to lose any more friends."

"Of course," she said, a little bit dejectedly. "I know how much you ponies hate to lose your friends... " She waved a hoof dismissively. "Well, fear not, Boo will come to no harm with me."

"I mean you too, you know," I added, tapping her chest. "You stay safe as well."

She stared at me a moment. "You really mean that, Blackjack?"

"Of course. You're definitely a ten on my weirdness scale, but… well…You've got a hell of a bad reputation if even half of those old stories are to be believed. You've suffered more than enough for everything you're supposed to have done. Everything I've *seen* you do has been good, if odd, and what you've told me, even if I don't agree with all of it, makes it seem like you want to keep that up. I hope that that's one thing that won't change, at least. So, yeah… you're my friend," I said with a little shrug and smile.

Suddenly, I found myself hugged by the yellow-and-red-eyed, snaggletoothed mare. "You're a bit less cushy than Fluttershy, but you'll do," she said with a smile. "Just don't forget to write when this is all over. I simply won't stand for a Sparkle not writing me. It's terribly rude."

"Uh…yeah. Sure," I said with a baffled look. What was all that about? "Take care, Discord. Boo."

"You be careful, Bwackjack," Boo replied, and the white mare disappeared into the darkness of the Robronco basement. I stared at the blue glow shining ahead of me, took a deep breath, and advanced.

I made my way through the basement as silently as I could manage. I knew Cognitum wasn't alone, but she didn't know about me or Discord. I'd have to neutralize any protectors she had…and speaking of which! The ground began to rumble as a rainbow Ultra-Sentinel rolled around the corner. I barely had time to duck behind some crates as the massive war machine rolled past. Further ahead was a second one. Over there to the left, a third. Okay. Those might be a problem. Still, the basement was tight and cluttered. The machine had passed me without stopping. I just had to keep on my hooves.

Their presence definitely complicated matters, though. I couldn't just trot up to her with huge killer robots rolling around. And

blowing them up would definitely get this party started prematurely. I wished Scotch Tape was here. Maybe Ultra-Sentinels were a bit much, but she could just shut them down, no sweat. I paused, then frowned and glanced at my PipBuck. EC-1101 had been made to access Equestrian systems…did robots count?

"Dealer?" I whispered as loudly as I dared. I glanced around, making sure the Ultra-Sentinels were out of earshot. "Echo, are you there?"

A flicker in my vision and he appeared. Once, he'd looked like death. Now, he appeared like a ghost, translucent, pale, and suffering. The pained expression he wore made me want to hug him. "Yes, Blackjack?" he whispered.

My reason for calling him fell back, and I was barely able to resist the urge to ask him if he was okay. Of course he wasn't. He was a mind and soul trapped in a PipBuck, slowly dying. "Can I help you?"

For a moment he appeared confused, and then, if anything, his sickly features turned even worse. "No, Blackjack. I'm sorry. You can't." He turned away from me, then asked softly, "What do you need, Blackjack?"

I wanted to press him a moment, but couldn't. Not as he was now. "These Ultra-Sentinels. Can you use EC-1101 to keep them from blasting me?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then said, so quietly that I almost missed it, "Don't worry about the robots. Just do what you have to do."

I stared extra hard at the E.F.S. bar of the nearest robot. Blue. Huh. "That was easy," I murmured, glancing back. Then I froze as I saw the translucent tears on his cheeks as he stared at me in desolation, then faded away completely.

"Sorry," he breathed in my ear. "I'm so sorry, Blackjack."

"You did your best. Big Macintosh would be proud. Thank you, Echo," I said, but to no response. "Echo?" Nothing. "Echo?" I said a little louder. Still nothing. I sighed and rose slowly. "You did so much for me. If there was some way I could help, I would. I'm sorry," I murmured, then stepped slowly towards the blue-barred Ultra-Sentinel, wary of it turning red and vaporizing me in one shot. It ignored my presence, so I trotted past and approached the blue glow at the far side of the basement.

Pipes and supports gave way to a large antechamber I'd seen weeks

ago in a memory. There, atop a large steel platform framed by two pairs of parallel bars descending diagonally away along either side was the massive heap of computer circuitry of Horse's knockoff Crusader Maneframe. Heavy structural reinforcement beams had been attached to the side, and for some reason a crane arm had been mounted on top. Either the change in perspective or maybe my nerves made the machine look even larger than I remembered. From above dangled an umbilical of pipes, hoses, and wires. Transparent glass tubes full of blueish fluids gurgled, and a palpable aura of chill air surrounded the immense machine. Five glass jars were arranged on the left side, each one shrouded in shadow cast by the machine, and a sixth sat next to a small wrought iron table. The wall behind the computer was missing, the two rails plunging diagonally down into the depths of a ravine below.

I pulled out the missile launcher, loaded a projectile, and then balked. If Cognitum did know about Horizons, I needed to know too. Besides, perhaps Steel Rain was right and there was a diplomatic solution…not giving up EC-1101, but if she was sane and wanted to help the Wasteland, didn't I owe her a chance?

"Softest damn heart in the Wasteland…" I muttered. But if it so much as farted a spark at me, I'd whack it with a missile till it behaved. "Cognitum," I said as I slowly ascended the metal stairs leading up to the top of the heavy steel plate. From the center of the hulking machine, a whirr began. It sounded almost like a purr.

"At last," a mare said from the shadows.

"Keep your distance," I said quietly, keeping the missile launcher pointed at the shadowy shape approaching me from the back of the enormous machine. "I'm pretty sure it's bad manners to talk with a missile launcher pointed at someone, but I've had a real long day."

"Quite understandable." She slowly strode forward, from the darkness emerging a mare with beautiful lilac and pink tresses, a glimmering white horn, and soft, understanding green eyes. Sweetie Belle smiled beatifically down at me as she waited at the top of the stairs. "I've waited a long time for this moment," she said with a pleased smile. "It's good to finally meet you. Face to face."

"How could I resist? You've made my life complicated, Cognitum. All for this," I said, lifting my forehoof.

Her eyes locked onto it for several seconds. "Yes. All for that," she said as she gazed at where my PipBuck lay. Then she looked at me. "Do forgive me my poor choice in servants. As the cliché goes: good

help is hard to find."

"I don't believe that. I've found that when you're good, you'll find help that's just as good," I said as I watched her. "Deus. Sanguine. Dawn. Steel Rain. You've made my life hard."

Cognitum smiled, but it was more arch now. "You could have given up EC-1101 at any time. Returned it to ponies more deserving. Who could use it to resurrect Equestria properly. Your suffering was every bit a product of your own stubbornness and pride, Blackjack. Even you coming here, now, like this…it's all about you." The mare gave a sigh and shook her head. "Ah well. I knew from the moment we first met that you were special. You passed all my tests, albeit with a little help every now and then."

"I want to know things. You. EC-1101. Project Horizons," I said as I kept the missile steady on her.

Cognitum smiled casually, and in amusement. "Well, knowledge has its price, Blackjack. What do I get in return?"

"No missile to the face?" I suggested.

She laughed and shook her head. "Costing you any and all information I possess. If you really didn't care about finding answers, you would have fired without a word." She trotted over to the table next to the jar. Upon it sat a delicate tea set, a bottle of Wild Pegasus, and a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. Within the jar, to my horror, was a familiar form gripped in the glow of a levitation talisman set in the jar's bottom: the mottled maroon body of Sanguine. His undead body twitched and jerked spasmodically as he levitated in the middle. His limbs had been hammered to steel braces, and cables snaked into his temples.

"What the fuck…he's supposed to be dead!" I said, pointing a hoof at the body as he twitched and jerked.

"Technically, he is dead, but I understand your confusion," she said as she poured herself a cup of tea, putting in two sugar cubes and a twist of fresh lemon. "I took Sanguine from the remains of Hippocratic before it exploded. He might have lost most of his sanity with his family, but I've been able to extract a rather sizeable amount of information on Project Chimera from him." She let out a soft sigh and shook her head. "Such a pity. Had he been a little less ruthless and a little more loyal, he'd have his family now."

Sanguine's mouth opened and closed in silent screams as his body strained against the metal plates that held him immobile. "That's sick," I whispered, feeling nauseous.

“My apologies. I could kill him if you like. Or give you the honors. Setting him free would just unleash another feral ghoul on the wasteland.” Cognitum smiled sweetly, folding her hooves amicably on the table before her. “Which would you prefer?” I didn’t answer, averting my eyes but still seeing him silently writhe. “I see,” Cognitum said a moment later, lifting her teacup between her hooves. “Well, all things being equal, then, I’ll hold on to him a bit longer. You never know when you’ll need a blank.”

There was a heavy boom of machinery that almost sent a missile flying as the crane moved over us and lowered a massive claw as big as my body. It gripped the top of the jar by the table and swung it over to the others. I struggled to regain my equilibrium, as Cognitum took a sip of her tea. I guessed that if that Sweetie Bot was made for sex, it had to be able to swallow fluids. “I want to know about Project Horizons,” I said.

“I bet you do,” Cognitum purred, her eyes narrowing in satisfaction. “Aren’t you more curious about me?”

“I’m curious about why you’re not talking in all booming words,” I replied.

“The Royal Canterlot Voice is for addressing subjects. You are no mere subject, Blackjack. I knew it the moment I first learned about you. A mare capable of accessing EC-1101? A mare refusing to take the easy way out? A mare defying and challenging the Wasteland on its own terms? Oh no. You were a knight. Erratic and unconventional on the board. Perhaps even a queen, streaking across and destroying any in your path. Far more valuable than any pawn.”

“Like Dawn?” I asked, with a scowl. I had no way to force the answer out of her.

Cognitum sighed again, smiling and bowing her head as she gave the smallest shake of her head. “Ah, Dawn. Poor, poor, Dawn. So ardent to save the Wasteland. So determined to bring about a better future. So incapable of either.” The crane hummed overhead, and a new pod was set down beside the table. Within was the prone form of a yellow, emaciated earth pony who was barely breathing. “Oopsie. Wrong jar.” It was whisked up once more. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that these jars function the same as the stasis pods. Quite useful technology. It can keep a body preserved…forever.”

“That’s sick,” I muttered again.

“What an odd notion you have, Blackjack,” Cognitum replied in

turn. “They all would have died long ago if I hadn’t kept them.” The crane returned with the familiar synthetic body of Dawn. Her bladed wings and forehooves had been plucked off, leaving tatters of metal and cables and the broken stumps of bone. A spear of metal ran vertically from the top of the jar to the bottom, impaling her like a metal martini olive. “Here she is.”

“No,” Dawn groaned as her eyes focused on me. “No no no…”

“Yes, my dearest pawn. Yes. Blackjack is here. She proved stronger. Tougher. More determined. More worthy.” For a moment, the urbane mask on Sweetie Belle’s face slipped, and I saw the vicious machine beneath. It was all I could do not to fire, knowledge be damned. Cognitum saw my frown, and the urbane aspect returned. “I’d be quite happy to give her to you, Blackjack. Perhaps you could rehabilitate her. Reunite her with her family. I’m quite sure they’d love that.”

“No. No…please no…” Dawn whimpered as she struggled against the spear pinning her through the middle of the jar. “Please…”

“Let her go,” I ordered, really wanting to blast this monster before me.

Cognitum paused, mouth open as she stared a moment, then replied, “No. No, I don’t think so. Not just yet. But soon…if we can come to an arrangement.”

She wanted something. Beyond EC-1101. “What kind of arrangement?”

The crane yanked the jar back into the air. For a long instant she regarded me, then smiled. “Do you know who I am?”

“An insane computer,” I answered, winning a momentary frown of annoyance. She recovered a moment later, but I filed that away for later.

“Hardly,” she countered, filling her tea yet again. Then, as calmly as you pleased she said, “I am Princess Luna.”

I laughed. “Right. And I’m Princess Celestia. Pleased to meet you again, Sister.”

Her face was a mask of composure. “I’m quite serious.”

“You’re a glitchy pile of buggy software,” I replied flatly. “And no way you’re Princess Luna. Not even close.”

“On the contrary,” she countered evenly. The air above us shimmered and ghostly holograms filled the room. I recognized Horse and the slew of other visitors trying on the shimmery, golden-threaded and gemmed cap. “That day, when Horse was showing off

his latest innovation, a would-be Crusader Maneframe competitor fitted with equipment for uploading ponies' minds, the cap happened to land on the head of one mare who attended the meeting in disguise." I watched as the cap fell upon Eclipse's head as Horse failed to snag Goldenblood. "He'd hoped to raid Goldenblood of his secrets. Instead, he chanced upon something far more rare and precious. Princess Luna. Me."

"No way," I muttered. "If anything, you're Horse in there."

"Ah, Horse!" she said gaily, a broad smile on her face. The crane whirled and deposited another jar. In it was what appeared to be a skinned pony. Bare, sightless, emasculated. I got the impression of looking at an adult-sized fetus. "Say hello, Director!" Cognitum said grandly, gesturing to me. The pony just twitched a little inside the container. "He lost most of his admittedly brilliant mind long ago. I just keep him around to remember those that tried to control me."

"You did that to him?" I asked, horrified.

"Enervation did. A few seconds' worth, before he jumped into the stasis pod," she said, patting the jar. "Though, in retrospect, I suspect he wished he'd melted. He believed I'd take care of him, like I always had. He liked pushing my buttons," she said, as she turned away from the jar. "Potentially, he might be soulless, too. It's always hard to tell once the mind goes."

"You're evil," I muttered.

She seemed shocked, then angered. "Dawn has killed dozens. Horse was responsible for the deaths of hundreds. You've killed thousands. You've killed foals, Blackjack. Helpless foals. You've killed indiscriminately. Your hooves are far bloodier than mine. So let's not throw about that 'E' word so casually, thank you very much."

It wasn't the same. I, at least, tried to kill less if I could. "It's one thing to kill. There's worse things than killing."

"Yawn." She rolled her eyes and glared disdainfully at me. "Suffice it to say, Horse copied me to this computer. At first, he delighted in me as a prize. Not only did I have many secrets he could exploit, but he found me a most desirable outlet for his…frustrations." She gave a very convincing shudder before glaring at the maimed pony. "But more than secrets, I was a window into his Princess's mind, one few knew or contemplated. Most didn't know about her fears, her ambition, her pride, or her dreams. I did. I knew just what Horse needed to say to drive a wedge between her and Goldenblood. I knew just what moves he needed to make to be

appointed as Director of the O.I.A." She hissed softly as she glowered at the skinned pony, "One push of a button, and he could have deleted me. I was every bit his toy. His prisoner. His secret weapon."

Okay. Maybe I could understand keeping Horse around as she did. Not forgive, but certainly understand. "Luna was afraid? What did she have to fear?"

Cognitum smirked at me. "Afraid? I was *terrified*. My own sister once banished me to the moon for asserting myself. I was always in the background, because I knew that 'love' was a lie! Always the dark counterpoint to my sister's radiance. We may have 'ruled' jointly, but please recall who it was that always addressed the subjects. Who always issued the grand decrees? I always remained at the side, the lesser princess. And gnawing away in my mind was the knowledge that, if I'd been betrayed by my sister, I could be betrayed by anypony.

"I did not seek to rule. I didn't seek to throw Celestia from her throne. It was always more comfortable and safe on the sidelines. But when my sister thrust the throne upon me, what choice did I have? To abdicate and abandon Equestria in its time of greatest need? To break my sister's already rent heart? I had no good choice, so I decided to rule, as I once craved. Recognition. Respect. Oh how desire and terror fought inside me! To be ruler, in the spotlight, but exposed and vulnerable!" She shook her head.

"So I determined to make a realm that would never hurt me. That would love me. That I could control safely and securely. But how? I wasn't Celestia. I didn't attend functions and galas and charm aristoponies and command guards. I preferred intimacy. I dealt with ponies in their dreams. Met them in the quiet times of their lives when they were most vulnerable. I was Princess of the Moon, of the Night! Elusive, ever-changing, and removed. The Ministries were not simply tools for running the war, but also to shield me from the anger of my subjects for any hardships we faced. Far better Pinkie Pie be feared than me."

Okay. If she wasn't at least partly Luna, she'd done some damned in depth study for the part. Still, this mare didn't sound like Luna to me. Everything she said was perfectly reasonable and logical. I knew what it was like to be torn by desire and fear. I knew what it was like to want something, even if it drew you to make mistakes. But still, this mare sounded…petty. Paranoid. Vicious, even.

Nothing I associated with that mare I'd seen in memory. Maybe the war had changed her more than anypony knew, but I still couldn't believe that this machine before me was the real Princess Luna.

"Even if what you say is true," I said slowly, "what does it have to do with me?"

Cognitum just stared at me, a calculating look in her eyes and a casual smile on her lips. "There're two parts to that, really. The first is that I want control of my land back. You've seen the factories around the Core. There are hundreds more just like them all across Equestria. You saw what Red Eye hoped to accomplish with his pathetic forges? I will be capable of controlling an army of machines and more who will return order to this Wasteland. Raiders will be extinguished. Disease, hunger, and poverty abolished. The Tokomare will be brought fully online, the Enervation sealed away for good. The weather will be controlled by me through my S.P.P., and Equestria shall be reborn, stronger for its sufferings and more determined than ever before!"

Yeah. I could really see LittlePip giving control of the S.P.P. to this nut. Celestia would just love a crazy computer pretending she was her sister. "And for that you need EC-1101."

"Yes. But that isn't enough. Not at all," Cognitum said calmly. "You see, I need a body."

"A body? You have a body!" I said, gesturing to the Sweetie Bot before me.

"I have a shell. A peripheral. One with limited range, which can be intercepted, blocked, or even subverted. No one will respect a machine, even if I am the legitimate ruler of this land. I need a body that is powerful. Resilient. Augmented," she said as she gave me eyes that in any other circumstance promised a rutting. In this case, I anticipated I was about to get much worse.

"You want my body?" I said as I backed away. "No. Try 'hell no'!"

"Your body and augmentations have proven superior time and time again," she said matter-of-factly, gesturing over her shoulder at the row of jars in the shadow behind her. "I considered the Dawn model, but once you obtained wings, it seemed that your design was the superior one. And really, what kind of princess can't do magic?" She rose and began trotting around me. "Not quite as synthetic as I was hoping, but I think that that's an asset. I would still have to make a few changes, of course... That graffiti you've etched in your plating simply won't do."

I almost put a missile into the machine then and there, but I was still trapped by the fact she hadn't told me anything about Horizons yet. And she knew! I just knew she knew. Thus far Steel Rain was nowhere to be seen, and the Ultra-Sentinels were keeping away. I couldn't see how she could just take my body. "Afraid you can't have it. I'm kind of using it," I retorted flatly, thinking it a better response than 'You are fucking nuts.'

"Don't worry about that. I have an immensely superior vessel for you to inhabit. I'm not a monster. And you have to consider the benefits of such a trade. Without EC-1101, you'd no longer have the burden of dealing with controlling and organizing Equestria. You don't want to rule; that was made painfully obvious with the Society. You want to be free from the burden of responsibility, and I know you don't love that augmentation. You resent it. Loathe it." She spoke as if I were the crazy one now. "I can return you to a body of flesh and blood. One with nerve endings. Fully functional legs. Eyes. A stomach. You could be a normal pony again, and I will have an extraordinarily powerful vessel to use to rule Equestria again."

"I don't think you're fit to rule a…a lemonade stand, much less Equestria," I countered. Lemonade stand? Really? "Much less with my body."

"No?" Cognitum countered. "Consider the Harbingers. I've brought unity to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals. Protection. Strength. The Harbingers do not kill or rape. They do not extort. They exist to bring about Equestria's return. My return. Yes, they were opposed to you, but only because of Dawn's jealousy. With my intellect, my knowledge, and EC-1101 granting me full and direct access, I could tame the Hoof in a month. The Wasteland in a year. No more raiders. No more murder. It will be civilization again. Comfort. Peace. And you can share in that, Blackjack. You and your friends."

P-21 flashed into view above me, teaching a trio of foals. "He can explore his true talent as a teacher, rather than being consumed by rage," Cognitum said. Then Glory appeared, winged and beautiful, in a lab doing something involving beakers. "She can return to seeking solutions to the problems facing ponykind. And I know that you two would greatly appreciate the opportunity to grow close again." Scotch Tape appeared as a young mare directing an engineering project. "She can build not just one city, but dozens.

There is no shortage of ponies needing quality shelter." Rampage took Scotch Tape's place. "With the war stabilized, you can see to getting your friend the help she needs. There's no peace for her in the wasteland. The urge to kill will never leave her in this place. You know this."

Oh, she was good. Very good. Rational and reasonable…and worst of all, I thought she might be right. I'd just have to overlook all the things she was doing that screamed 'evil' and 'crazy'. "So you put my mind into some other pony," I said, smiling at this insane hypothetical. "What about my soul?"

"Good question! After all, it wouldn't be fitting for your soul to be in this body. No offense, but you're simply not an executive, Blackjack," Cognitum said as the jar containing Horse's quivering remains was yanked up by the crane. "You see, I've been watching you for a very long time. A very long time. Even before you had your first augments. I knew you were…different. You faced hardships that would have destroyed lesser ponies. Time and time again, you've thrown yourself into the fray to spare others. I monitored your progress through Hightower. True, you weren't able to defeat the Warden on your own, but you reached him, and you had the presence of mind to invoke me as you had in Flash Industries. And," she added, "You introduced me to a very interesting pony."

The jar descended, and within was…it reminded me of the glowing skeletal ponies I'd seen walking around the Hoofington Megaspell Complex. The unicorn skeleton was incomplete, an intact skull, mostly intact torso, floating vertebrae, and broken off limbs all connected by faintly glowing gas like the soul motes. Swirls of the mist filled the eye sockets like stars. "Hello, Blackjack," the skeleton said quietly, his eyeglow brightening as he saw me. "Did you get Snails out?"

"Snips?" I gasped in shock and horror. "What did she do to you?"

"This wasn't her doing. This is what happens to a pony who meddles in souls. My bones are my own soul jar now," he said, then paused and asked again, "Did you save Snails?"

"I did! He's fine. He's out with Xanthe and Silver Spoon and Carrion. They're looking for Diamond Tiara, if you can believe it."

"That dummy. He always was soft for dames…" Snips said in his hollow, ethereal voice. "Blackjack, don't listen to her. She's insane. She thinks she's Princess Luna!" Suddenly he let out a cry as green

lightning raked the bones. I then noticed the interior of this jar was ringed with starmetal spikes. Every now and then, a jolt of green lightning sparked from the tips.

"That's enough of that, now," Cognitum said coolly, "Let's not be rude." She regarded me with a small smile. "I had a prison sentry retrieve his incinerated corpse from the burning security station when I noticed he wasn't quite dying. Since then we've had extensive talks about Project Eternity. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to help transfer your soul to a new container, or back to an old one." I frowned at that last part. Back to an old one?

"You still haven't told me about Horizons, though," I said, dragging the conversation back to the part I was concerned with. Maybe all of this banter had made her relax her smug omission a little. "What is it? How do you even know about it? Luna didn't."

She regarded me coolly for several seconds. "You're right. I didn't. Not till the very end. He was maddeningly elusive. I knew he had done something, and even when Horse had access to the O.I.A. database, I couldn't find anything. Trottenheimer had been involved in its design, and Apple Bloom may have had a hoof in it indirectly, but besides that, I could find no other information. Where was it located? How could it be built? He had no paper trail to speak of. No suspicious movement of materials from one part of Equestria to another."

"So how'd you find out, then?" I asked.

"By accessing an archive of information related directly to the O.I.A., collected over decades of hard work by one King Awesome," Cognitum replied with a smirk as Snips was lifted up into the air. "He had amassed a collection of memories that Goldenblood himself had removed prior to his arrest. They'd been scattered all across Equestria, and some further, but they remained, and Awesome had made it his hobby to collect them."

Ha, I'd caught her! "Well, that's interesting, because Charm happened to smash them all to pieces when I didn't name her to rule the Society," I snapped with my own smug smirk.

But Cognitum was completely unflapped by my accusation. "Yes, she did," Cognitum said as the crane returned with the fifth jar. "But she'd *viewed* them first." The jar dropped from the ceiling. Within floated a much smaller unicorn. Cables ran from the top of the jar down to her shaved scalp, where cybernetic plugs had been drilled in. "I simply accessed them directly."

“Charm!” I gasped, looking at the emaciated filly. A moonstone pendant hung around her neck. I raised the missile launcher at the computer. “Let her go! Now!” I ordered.

“Release a pony that came to me asking for your head?” Cognitum asked in amusement. The hologram flashed to life in the air, forming into a giant glowing image of the filly.

“I want her dead! No, wait, not dead. I want her alive. Like, take her legs off. And make sure some Harbingers fuck her up her tail. Like, ten times. At least!” the filly said with a cruel grin. “Maybe you can set her up on a stand somewhere and we can get a whole row of stallions to fuck her over and over. Like, the whole Hoof.”

Charm curled up even tighter, quivering, as the hateful words spilled out in a torrent. “As you can see, this filly demanded that I unleash the Harbingers on Elysium and help her take her throne back, and she wanted the most obscene punishments for you and her siblings. Truly vile,” Cognitum said in tones of sublime disdain as she shook her head. “I’ve exposed her mind in its totality. She’d thank you for killing her, Blackjack.”

Charm opened an eye, tears on her cheek. “Blackjack. Please. Help,” she begged as she floated in the jar. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Let her go. Let all of them go!” I ordered.

She considered me silently for a long moment before she smiled a little. “I’d be more than happy to, if you agree to give me your body,” she said calmly. “Yes, not only can you help your friends, you can also save this miserable little wretch, if you want. She’s as bad as your Overmare, though. Worse.”

She was just a filly. She could learn to do better, with time. “I want her out of that jar, now,” I ordered again, about to smash it open myself. I lifted a hoof to do just that.

“Can you remove wires connected to the deepest parts of her brain? If you plan on simply yanking them out, you might kill her a little less painfully by ripping her in two.” Oh, that was low. I backed away, and Cognitum repeated, “As I said, give me your body, and I’ll free her. Happily. I don’t need her anymore, after all.”

“Horizons. Tell me what it is. Now,” I ordered. Any more obfuscation or games, and I’d cut to the boom. Glory would be able to save Charm. I could chew through those cables if I really had to.

She stared at me for the longest time. It was good so much of me was artificial. I practically vibrated mentally with the urge to

destroy this monster once and for all. Fortunately, my body stayed steady. “Do you accept my offer? Give me EC-1101 and your body, and I will give you everything you desire and more. We could both have what we want!”

“Tell me!” I demanded again.

“We can bring peace to the Wasteland, unity to all the races that inhabit it, safety and security to all that crave it!” Cognitum pleaded as she stepped before me. “I know you don’t approve of my methods, and I don’t expect you to, but I know you desire the same ends I do. Work with me, and you can help return the world to its glorious state!”

I shoved her aside hard as the crane lifted the jar up into the air and returned it to the side, seizing the last one. “Tell me!” I yelled, a final time, the missile ready to fly.

Then the jar set down, and my rage vanished like a burst balloon as I stared at the contents in shock. Floating serenely within the jar was a white unicorn with a red and black mane. Her half-open eyes were a brilliant, beautiful red. She didn’t have her cutie mark, but I could easily imagine them on her flank: a queen and ace of spades. I popped my hand open and touched the glass. The eye opened slightly more, then closed again, dully. “Sanguine wasn’t the only one I saved from Hippocratic before it exploded. I thought this vessel might come in useful. I even had the skin healed.”

It was me. Unmutated. Untainted. Unaugmented. Unmutilated. *Normal*. I barely recognized myself without a layer of metal covering me, or with flesh and blood limbs attached. I didn’t look away, afraid that, if I did, the body would be yanked away forever. “Any reason why shouldn’t I just blow you apart and take all these people you’ve captured away from here?”

Cognitum wore an expression of amused confidence. “Do you have some method of transferring all your memories, thoughts, and feelings into it? You might transfer your soul, perhaps. Eventually, you might regain something of your previous self, but it wouldn’t be the same pony.” Her amusement faded as she approached me. “Work with me, give me what I need, and I will include you in everything. You can take Dawn’s place if you wish, or leave for good, and I won’t stop you. I’ll explain, in detail, what Horizons is and, more importantly, how I plan to stop it. You will go from being my enemy to my ally. And more importantly, you’ll be my friend.”

I slowly backed away from the jar and stared hard at her. “You’re

asking for a lot of trust here. Assuming I accepted this, how do I know you'd follow through on your end of the agreement?" Let alone not abuse EC-1101, let alone stop being so evil and crazy.

"Me," Rampage said as she walked up the stairs towards me. Steel Rain waited at the base of the steps, wearing his massive guns and sparkly new armor, complete with helmet. "I'll watch over them and make sure they don't try any funny business." I frowned down at Rampage, and she quickly went on, "I know you don't trust me now. I know I should have told you about Steel Rain's offer. But I don't want to see you screwed, Blackjack. I want you to have the life a pony like you deserves. A new body. A life with your friends. An end to a world you hate. Cognitum can do all that. Let her have the headache of ruling things and dealing with Horizons. If she fucks up, you can kill her then."

"And you'll be dead," I added, levelly.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. I'll be dead. Honestly, I sell you out and you're still hung up on that? What do I have to do to get it through your head that I'm a nopony. A fake. A glommed-together amalgam of souls. Have you found one memory, any memory, that's of me and me alone?"

"No, I haven't," I replied evenly.

"Then face the fact that this is the solution where everypony gets what they want. Cogs gets to be Princess again. Steel Rain gets to play with big toys. I get a coffin. You get your life back without abandoning the Hoof. Glory gets a mare she can snuggle with. Everypony wins," she said, then jabbed a hoof at Cognitum. "And if she gets out of line, the Twilight Society can blast the Core with Celestia One, or the Lightbringer can drop a hurricane on this place. It doesn't have to be you," she said as she stared into my eyes in earnest, the pale gaze sincere and craving my acceptance of her decision.

"You've always been about giving ponies a chance," Cognitum said quietly. She had a point, but still. The consequences of them being allowed to fuck up were greater than my worst nightmare.

I turned and looked back at Cognitum. "How about we turn it around?" I asked. "Why don't you trust me? Tell me everything you know about Horizons and how to stop it. I do. You help settle things down in the Hoof and then... *then*... I give you EC-1101. What do you say? What's another year or two?"

"Plenty of time for you to get killed, change your mind, or allow

somepony else to access the systems," Cognitum replied smoothly, frowning at me. "I'm sorry, but we must do it my way."

I sighed, shaking my head. If only things could have been different. Hopefully, if I saved Charm, the filly would be grateful long enough to tell me what I needed to know. "Sorry," I said, snapping the missile launcher up.

"And what of you?" Cognitum asked as she stared at me, still calm. Huh? My bafflement made me hesitate a moment. What was she talking about? "Do you agree with her decision?" she said as she gazed into my eyes. Who was she talking to? I was about to ask, but before I could, she went on just as cryptically, "She might be able to destroy me. The system has lots of volatile coolants and the like. I doubt, however, that what you want would survive my destruction." She raised her head slightly, as if gauging my reaction. "I am ready to honor my deal."

"Who are you talking–" I started, and then my eyes widened. "Dealer?"

"I'm sorry, Blackjack," Dealer whispered miserably in my ears, "but I don't want to die."

Suddenly, words flashed across my vision: Command Override: Cut Strings.

Instantly, my body went limp, and I collapsed onto my face. I could still see and hear, but even my ears were paralyzed; I barely had enough muscles to speak. "Dealer. Dealer! What are you doing, Dealer? Stop it!"

"Don't kill her!" Rampage shouted.

"I wouldn't dream of it, Rampage," Cognitum said smoothly. "This is merely a gesture of trust. A demonstration of my good intent. It's the least I can do." I was turned onto my side so I could see Cognitum and my copy. I could also see a small door in the base of the machine swing open. From it slithered, like some exotic robot snake with its tail trapped in the computer, a long cable connected to a small golden web studded with tiny gems. The metal tendril climbed over and into the jar, and the golden netting spread out to cover the blank's head.

"Don't do this. Don't let her do this, Rampage," I begged, struggling to move and feeling panic growing inside me as the synthetic pony opened a panel in her hoof, pulled out a small data plug, and advanced towards me. "Please!"

"Cogs... you can do a surrogacy spell, can't you?" Rampage asked

quickly.

I felt the plug push into the socket in my left temple. Cognitum rose and cocked her head at Rampage in clueless bafflement. “A surrogacy spell? Whatever f–” She then stopped and let out a soft ‘ahhh’ of comprehension. “Blackjack... ” she said in feigned scandalized tones. “You *have* been a busy mare, haven’t you?”

“Please. Please don’t,” I begged.

“Can you do it?” Rampage demanded. “Transfer the baby to the blank?”

Cognitum didn’t answer for several tense seconds. “I regret to say that a blank is incapable of carrying a foal to term. Perhaps a blank could be used as an incubator for a foal nearly ready for birth, but blank reproductive systems lack proper hormonal regulation for pregnancy. A fetus implanted this early would miscarry long before birth,” she said matter-of-factly. “I likewise doubt a mare with Blackjack’s augmentations could carry a foal past the second trimester. The reinforcements would crush the infant. I’m very sorry. But if I can find a suitable mare, rest assured that I will transfer the fetus immediately, Rampage.”

“No. No. Please, no,” I groaned. “Please, Rampage. Arloste. Shujaa. Twist. Please!”

Suddenly, I felt a curious sensation, like going into a memory orb or using the Perceptitron. The world whirled faded away bit by bit, my vision blurring, then doubling, and then slowly smearing back into focus. And then…

~ ~ ~

The mare floated there in a jar, looking at a black cyberpony, a frozen unicorn robot, and a striped mare struggling against the hooves of a pony in glittery silver power armor. Dimly, she was aware of something terrible having happened, but she didn’t care. She simply bobbed in the jar, hearing the black cyberpony talking to the striped mare about what was best for Blackjack, Rampage, and the world. More than once, they regarded her, gesturing with sweeps of their hooves. She just waited, indifferently.

The crane brought back the skull and bones. More talking about souls and cutting and transfers and other things. More waving of legs. Shouting. Struggles. The striped mare was upset about something, but the black cyberpony seemed even more distraught.

She flung the tea set away, knocked over the table, and clutched at herself. The reason why didn't matter so much, but their loud noises and waving legs kept her attention. The black cyberpony seemed almost in pain as she struggled against something within.

This seemed to be the only thing happening in the big space at the moment. The floating mare watched the black cyberpony fight to regain her self-control.

Finally, the striped mare backed off, gave the floating mare one last teary gaze, and hung her head as she trotted away, her tail scraping against the floor. The black cyberpony levitated out a little pendant and slipped it around the floating mare's neck. A soothing song filled the floating mare's ears as the black cyberpony closed the clasp. Next, the black cyberpony took out a thick pink plastic ring. 'Ministry of Morale Unicorn Filly Timeout Device' was written on it, along with a smiling pink mare. It snugged tightly around the base of the floating mare's horn.

Then the black cyberpony backed away as the bony skull began to cast a spell in concert with the black cyberpony. A swirling black disk bubbling with bursting green and purple boils began to whirl about the black cyberpony, and she struggled as if in agony once more. From the midst of the disk came a small white orb. The jagged black spiral caught the orb, which jerked as if caught in a powerful wind. The orb was blown over to the floating mare and pushed against her chest, and a warm sensation flowed through her.

~ ~ ~

And I started crying as a switch inside me was flipped and I was Blackjack again. Not just who I was a few minutes ago, but who I'd been months ago, before I ever left 99. I felt my chest expand and collapse with every breath. My heart thundered. Tears ran down my cheeks from whole and complete eyes. I was me. Me as I should have been... if my life had been different. I hugged my body, feeling the faintest discomforts in me, aware of every gurgle of my gut, every twinge of my nerves.

It was wonderful, and terrible, because the one thing I didn't feel was the flutter of life within. If it hadn't been for that, I might have even been grateful... I tried to teleport out of the jar…nothing. Tried to levitate my gun off her. Nothing. I reached up with my hooves, trying to shove the ring off my horn, but it stuck tight.

Okay, that ratcheted my anxiety closer to mindless panic.

"Now," Cognitum said with my old mouth as the Sweetie Bot stood as still and lifeless as a statue, "Are you ready to work with me?"

I swallowed hard, feeling the muscles pushing down my throat. "Give me back my body," I rasped, sounding…weaker. I shoved the gold netting off my head. I couldn't fight, couldn't run... so I did what was unthinkable five months ago: I waited.

"I gave you your body, Blackjack. You should be grateful," Cognitum said, a touch reproachful. She then looked at my PipBuck and said calmly, "Yes, you are next, Echo. I swear it. I simply need to confirm one last simple little thing." The air above me flashed to life with another hologram, and I saw lines of code passing by along with strange, vaguely arcane symbols. "EC-1101. A command megaspell. Intact. Simply waiting for a pony who knows precisely how to use it." She turned and smiled at me. "Thank you for delivering it, and this fine new body, to me."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," I replied sourly.

"Of course you did. Echo said so dozens of times, though I'd have been quite put out with him if you'd actually listened. His guilt very nearly ruined everything," she said as she turned her head and admired herself, then stood upright, regarded her abdomen, and ran a hoof over it. "True, I didn't expect this body to have a passenger, but I suspect that that will encourage your good behavior." She turned and regarded me with amusement. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?" I muttered in rage and annoyance.

Sweetie Bot's eyes flickered to life, and she said in filly's high-pitched voice, "I reckon, if y'all want to find out, you should jes follow the routin' path to wherever it was tryin' ta go. That's yer best bet ta find what Horizons is."

I now had enough blood to appreciate the sensation of it running cold. "You were Applebot." The robot went dead again, and my old body nodded. "But why?"

"Because I cannot rule my domain as memories within a machine, however endowed. I needed a living vessel, and I knew that if you possessed EC-1101 and it functioned for you, you might come across other vital data like Steelpony, Chimera, and Eternity. So I tested you, sending you to areas of greater and greater peril. I knew that you would become stronger. Better. That was your slogan, after all." She gave a smug smile. "Had you failed, I would have

dispatched a robot to get it off your body, or retrieved it from Sanguine, or sent Applebot or Dawn to get it from your friends. And I kept Dawn as a spare, in the event that the worst happened."

"You used me," I said, ashamed and disgusted that I never questioned the routing taking me straight to my enemy.

"You like being used. If I had time, I'd have sex with you and *really* make you love hating yourself," she replied smugly, patting the glass. "Now. You should see the fruit of all your hard work." She tipped her head back, her mouth in an almost orgasmic expression of bliss. "EC-1101, Command: Activate!"

Suddenly the scrolling blocks of code and symbols vanished, replaced by a single static line with a blinking prompt below it. 'Enter Password'

Cognitum froze with all the abruptness of a mare on the edge of climax getting doused in ice water. Her head twitched back and forth. "What is this? Password? What password? What is going on?"

"What do you mean?" Steel Rain asked. "Don't you know it?"

"EC-1101 uses the most advanced arcanometric identification systems. It doesn't need a password! It knows appropriate users on contact! As this body is a descendant of Twilight, it should simply acknowledge me immediately." She stood frozen for a few more seconds. "What do you mean 'This isn't a part of the original program,' Echo?!" Then she turned down towards me and asked, icily, "What have you done?"

"Me? I didn't do anything!" I said as I looked up at the password prompt.

"You must have. Nopony else has had such intimate access." She glared up at the floating words. '>Blackjack' replaced the empty prompt.

Then, below that: '>Error! Incorrect Password. You have 2 attempts remaining. Failure will purge protected file from storage medium. Hint: The name he likes so much.'

"Purge? What fool purges a super critical megaspell program after three failed password attempts?" Cognitum asked incredulously. 'Who is 'he', Echo? Who did this?" She recoiled, as if struck. "How could you not know? You are one with the megaspell!" She turned towards me again. "What is going on, Blackjack?" she asked, her tone increasingly aggravated and ominous.

I stared at the floating words, utterly at a loss. "I don't know!" Cognitum's frustration seemed to grow yet more, either from my

answer, a continued internal conversation with the Dealer, or both.
"What's the problem?" Steel Rain asked as he picked his way carefully up the stairs.
"There is some accessory program locking me out of fully activating EC-1101!" Cognitum replied. "Echo has been capable of accessing its base superuser escalation functions to grab control of individual systems, but I need the megaspell to go off if I am to reclaim access to all the production and weapons facilities across the Wasteland!"
"Well, can't you just do what he did?" Steel Rain asked.
"Activate all the facilities one by one, system by system, computer by computer? Certainly. If I had another thousand years!" Cognitum exclaimed as she trotted back and forth before me.
"Can't you hack the password?" Steel Rain demanded incredulously.
"I'd have to clone the program and then devote all my processing power to brute-force crack it. The encryption protocol it's using is incredibly complex but entirely unique. It's not any revision of the Advanced Encryptomagic Standard, Sparklefish, or even the Applejack Cipher!"
"But you could do it?" Steel Rain asked.
"Of course I could. The problem is that the cipher seems to be an asymmetric scheme with output feedback. In order to have any confidence in a given attempt, I'd have to decrypt pretty much the *entire* megaspell *every time*. Do you have any idea how large EC-1101 is? It's a small miracle that it can even be compressed to fit on a PipBuck. It could take weeks, months, or even longer to crack the decryption key for this damnable algorithm. Horizons will obliterate us all long before then," she said, and then she growled at me, "Your little game is going to get us all killed, Blackjack! Now what have you done?"
"Nothing!" I protested, just as confused as they were.
"She's lying. She must be lying," Steel Rain insisted as he stood beside Cognitum.
"No. She's not," Cognitum answered.
"How can you be sure?" Steel Rain replied.
Cognitum sighed. "Because I've felt her soul, Steel." She turned and looked at me, frowning thoughtfully. "You cannot imagine what that was like, Steel Rain. The guilt. The pain. The self-recrimination and self-destructive urge. It *hurt* to be her."

“What are you talking about?” I muttered in bafflement.

“When I transferred your mind and put myself in your body, I inadvertently made contact with your soul as well. Your purest Blackjackness. I don’t know how you survive so. The drive for redemption is so strong that it burns. Your craving for physical pleasures to distract you from your own depression would be heartbreaking if we weren’t so at odds. Your devotion to your friends… your need to save others… your… ” She shivered and hugged herself. “It’s far easier to have no soul than yours. To have a clarity of thought and drive… ” She shook her head.

“You should interrogate her, still. Tug off that pendant and see how she likes having her soul torn out,” Steel Rain replied, then paused and continued, in a lower tone, “Or… you have her baby… ”

There was a resounding clang as Cognitum popped her hands out, grabbed Steel Rain, and threw the silver-armored stallion to the ground. With cold contempt, she said softly, “Never, ever, suggest such a thing again.”

I felt a little bit of relief, though my heart still pounded in my chest and my insides still tingled and fluttered with adrenaline. I had to get control of the situation. Had to get my baby back. Had to get my body back. EC-1101. Save the world. No pressure. The pair were arguing, and so I racked my brains and tried to think it through.

When had EC-1101 been apart from me? I hadn’t messed around with it. Was it when Sanguine had taken it from me? He’d been a biologist slash mad scientist, not an arcane sciences programmer. What about at Tenpony? I was unconscious for three days; maybe somepony had accessed the program? But I couldn’t see any of my friends letting a stranger mess around with my PipBuck. What about my friends? I tried to imagine Glory doing it but came up blank. P-21 had the skills, but I couldn’t think of any reason why he would. And unless Scotch Tape’s mom had taught her…

Wait…

Duct Tape had been a maintenance mare who the Overmare used to get EC-1101 ready for transfer. I racked my brains, trying to think back to those days so many months ago, when I’d been flesh and blood. I’d been sitting in Hoss’s home, bored… listening to recordings… Recordings of P-21 and her and…

Oh my…

At my laughter, both of them stared up at me. “Oh, it’s too rich. It’s too good!” I cackled.

“She’s finally snapped completely,” Steel Rain said flatly. “Eh, good riddance.”

“No. I don’t think so,” Cognitum said evenly. “She figured it out.”

“I figured it out,” I replied, grinning from ear to ear as she met my gaze.

It was Duct Tape. It had to be! Back when the Overmare had ordered EC-1101 to be removed from Stable 99’s systems for transport, she’d encrypted it. Something of her own invention, no doubt. Duct Tape loved cobbling together her own things, and I guessed that the encryption she used had been something of her own invention. Ironically, she’d done it to prevent the Overmare from screwing her over... or maybe the Overmare had demanded she make a safeguard to prevent Sanguine from screwing *her*. It’d been a while ago... Either way, Equestria was being saved by the lucky foresight of Scotch’s mother and the amount of time she’d poured into her hobby!

I just hoped that I’d get the chance to tell Scotch before something bad happened.

“Well now,” Cognitum said with my voice. “It seems that we have need of further negotiation.” She popped her fingers out and rubbed them along her armored head. “How unfortunate.”

“Give me my–”

“No. I don’t think so,” Cognitum interrupted smoothly. “While I’d never be so crude as to resort to Steel Rain’s suggestion that I kill your child, I believe you can be compelled to yield.”

“Give me one good reason I should!” I retorted.

“You want to do the right thing,” she replied. “You always want to do better, and you want to save lives, even at the cost of your own.”

I hesitated. “Give me another.”

“Without EC-1101, I won’t be able to stop Horizons from killing us all,” she answered without hesitation. The air above us flickered to life again. Before me sat a small pebble of moonstone and a block of starmetal. “I suspect you know about the interaction of starmetal with moonstone.” The two approached each other, both of them growing brighter and brighter. When the moonstone pushed against the block, a white light began to spread along the star metal. “When a critical point is reached, the starmetal undergoes a chain reaction, converting its mass to energy and magic.” There was a colossal white flash as the starmetal block was consumed by a sphere of crackling energy. “Raw destructive potential, the magic and

electromagnetic energy wreak havoc on enchantments and technology alike. Only very specific enhancements are capable of resisting the combination." When the flash faded, a cloud of sparkling motes spread out, swirling and melting away through the air. "Soul energy is a byproduct of the reaction."

"So what does this have to do with Horizons?" I asked.

"Everything," she said, and the floor gave a giant lurch as wheels set in the diagonal tracks began to turn. "If you don't mind, I'd like move us to a new location. It might help you to understand." The entire house-sized computer was descending the inclinator. "Very few realize what starmetal is, where it comes from, and how it can do what it does. I spent considerable time and energy trying to comprehend its mysteries. Zebra treatises on the subject were obfuscated with dire warnings. Scholars I dispatched to learn more came back infuriatingly lacking information, if they came back at all."

"But Goldenblood knew. And Horse," I said, wondering where the hell we were going.

"Yes. Goldenblood's special talent was metals. Ore. Art. Shaping it. Arranging it. Knowing how it would bend and break. Surprisingly useful. He keyed in on the special harmonics, and Horse learned how to utilize those harmonics to produce specific effects. But it would take decades to understand the nuances enough to use them effectively," Cognitum said calmly. Scorpion beasts and worse shivered and skittered on the walls of the ravine as we passed. "For instance, pacifying these monsters can be achieved with a simple amplitude modulation."

"What does this have to do with Horizons?" I demanded as the walls spread further and further apart. Eventually the track was free of the walls altogether, hanging on thin silver cables stretching into the darkness above.

"It's quite simple. Goldenblood thought of a way to bring an incredibly large amount of starmetal into contact with an incredibly large amount of moonstone. The detonation would utterly annihilate Equestria." And as she talked, the hologram changed to show a video of the Core vanishing in an expanding sphere of white energy. I watched Chapel incinerated instantly, followed a few seconds later by the Collegiate, the Arena, Elysium, and the Fluttershy Medical Center. I suspected she was taking a few artistic liberties with the ponies screaming and running around aflame.

Then the video pulled back, and it wasn't just the buildings being consumed; the ground itself seemed to soften and spread like fiery clay. The bowl spread wider and wider, pressing against the mountains ringing the Hoof and slowly pushing them away.

As my view moved further out, I got a wonderful view of Canterlot being destroyed; apparently Cogs had made this before the Enclave wiped it off the map. Spike's cave crumbled to nothing, and I felt a pang of trepidation. Perhaps LittlePip shouldn't have put that in her memoirs. The blast continued, obliterating Tenpony Tower, the S.P.P. hub, and everything else remotely familiar. The shockwave continued clear across the ocean, and the storm of annihilation tore into the zebra lands as well. Forests incinerated. Colossal waves inundated the land. Great cracks split the earth, and giant volcanic eruptions sprayed magma into the air. It was utter devastation.

Cognitum had missed her calling; she should have been a special effects artist. Given that Luna could step into ponies' dreams, though...

"So where is this giant supply of moonstone and starmetal?" I asked as listlessly as I could, waiting for her to tell me something new. Through the gloom ahead of and below the platform, I made out a massive body of... mist? Water? Something was churning far below. The tracks moved through a gap in the rocks towards something just out of sight. "After all, I've seen a fair bit of what went on behind closed doors during the war, and I think I'd remember if mass importing of moonstone came up even once."

"Don't be ridiculous. The only moonstone on Equus was brought back during the Marigold scandal. No. The moonstone he plans on using is there, on the moon." The hologram changed to that of an immense white crystal resting at the bottom of a rifled shaft. "Goldenblood commandeered Horse's mechasprites and sent them to the moon on a clandestine rocket to build a facility and to collect and fuse moonstone into a projectile massing several hundred thousand tonnes. With a few more secret launches of Flux to fire it... "

Okay. Now my blasé attitude began to melt away as I saw, in the image, the bottom of the shaft below the projectile explode. The stream of energy flung the massive moonstone crystal upward, accelerating it to a greater and greater speed until it exploded out into space. I stared in awe at the largest, most beautiful bullet in all of creation flying through the void…towards Equus and Equestria

below. “Okay... so that’s Horizons... wow. So... where’s the starmetal it’s supposed to react with?”

My body just smirked at me and then gazed ahead. The walls of the ravine to either side spread out again and then fell away entirely. The cavity that surrounded us was more immense than anything I’d ever seen, in any memory or in person. Six enormous stone pillars reinforced with unbreakable starmetal scaffolds kept the whole thing from collapsing, even as bits of the ceiling occasionally tumbled down around us. And there, in the center, was what could only be one thing:

The Tokomare.

A pair of massive, corkscrew-like concentric starmetal spires rose from the immense underground lake that filled the bottom of the cavern, the inner coil climbing clockwise and the outer counterclockwise; in the center was a column of what I could only describe as brilliant white glow. The whole looked to be at least a mile in diameter. A veritable storm cloud of mechasprites whirled and curled around them, their tiny bodies resonating with Enervation’s note. As we drew closer, I saw that the helixes’ silver surfaces were pitted and scarred, with holes large enough to fly Raptors into seemingly burned through here and there. I watched in shock as a humming swarm tore a hundred-foot-long strand of metal from the surface of one of the helixes and whisked it up towards the ceiling.

“You’re scavenging from it? Shouldn’t you be repairing it?” I asked skeptically.

“A pound of flesh now for a great bounty in the future,” Cognitum replied. “The mechasprites only remove superficial material to reinforce the Core’s structure above. Without the starmetal, the city would have collapsed long ago.”

And what a shame that would have been. The track was taking us between the twisting spires now, clearing both with a hundred feet or more to spare. The insides of the coils were feathered with great vanes like the blades of a turbine. Immense blobs of reddish flesh crept on the metal, lurching their way mindlessly along and changing seemingly at random from shapeless masses to tentacled horrors to chitinous creatures. “What is that stuff?” I asked as we passed one quivering, humming lump.

“Biomatter. A byproduct of the Tokomare’s Enervation field. The cell structure defies analysis, but it’s an organic soup similar to the

tissue of ghouls, neither dead nor truly alive. It will be flushed once the Core is restored," she said with a disdainful sniff.

"Am I the only person who looks at this thing and thinks 'bad news, stay away'?" I asked sarcastically. Still, I had to admit that the twisting spires had a sort of sublime beauty to them. And if they weren't so stripped, pitted, burned, and holed…Stop. Back to the point. "So Horizons is going to drop that moonstone right on this thing?" I asked as we moved towards the inner spiral and the swirling light within.

"Yes. And in the process annihilate all we both hold dear," Cognitum replied. "With EC-1101, I will be able to prevent this. Moreover, I will be capable of enacting the restoration of the Core in its entirety." Green lightning darted from one spire to the other every now and then, flickering and crackling.

"What?" I asked in bafflement.

The hologram of moonstone and starmetal reappeared, and once again the crystal and block approached each other. "When starmetal and moonstone are brought into close proximity but prevented from reacting by highly specialized magical fields, something wondrous happens." And I already knew what that 'wondrous' thing was. I watched as the moonstone was held just outside the distance needed to react. This time the moonstone glowed, and I watched the white soul vapor pour into the metal. It began to grow... fast. The cube quickly expanded and transformed from a small block to a shining skywagon. "The starmetal's mass increases ten thousand times over."

I stared down at her. "You're insane. You're trying to *catch* it?"

"Of course," she said coolly. "Horse worked out the method right before the end, though he was never able to get the shields into the proper configuration to intercept it." She smiled and shrugged as if it were of no consequence. "Tom – that's what the moonstone projectile is named, for some reason – will fuel a complete restoration of the Core. Every building. Every factory. Everything will be replaced with impervious starmetal. Quite a fitting throne for a reborn Equestria, don't you think?"

"You *want* Horizons to go off," I said, still not quite believing it. "Why so obsessed with EC-1101, then?"

"Trottenheimer's firing trajectory is unaccommodating for interception," she replied calmly. The display of the Core appeared, along with a cone rising up from the center. "Tom must descend

within ten degrees of the Core's vertical axis for the modified F.A.D.E. shields to catch it." A dotted line began drawing itself downward at a steep angle within that cone, and when it reached the bottom, the restored Core appeared in a flash. The image reset. "If Horizons goes off a few hours too early or too late, as it likely will... ." This time the red dotted line came in at a shallower angle and pierced the ground along the river. The whole image disappeared in an explosion and a little skull and crossbones made of smoke. "I will also need critical control of the Tokomare's subharmonics to shape the starmetal into the forms needed. Otherwise, even if we are lucky enough to intercept the projectile, it would simply become whatever form was last programmed into the Tokomare."

"Here's a crazy thought? Why not simply *stop* it?" I asked in desperation.

"Stop it? Well, that would certainly be possible. Simple, even," she said, tapping her lips with a wing. "Unfortunately, it would set back my plans for saving Equestria at least two centuries. It's unlikely the Core could be rebuilt before then, and without the Tokomare restored, all those factories would lack the power to operate. No, catching it is simply the most efficient solution."

"Don't you care about the lives that might be lost if you mess up?" I shouted. Once again, she frowned.

"Don't you care about the lives that will suffer in the interim?" Cognitum countered. "If this works, the Wasteland will give way to a restored Equestria two centuries sooner." She gave a shrug. "They should be grateful I'm doing this for them in the first place."

"You're not Luna," I retorted. "You might be parts of her mind, but you're a... a thing! A copy. You've got no soul! You're more Nightmare Moon than... than... " Oh shit... I watched her scowl, but my mind was working a mile a minute. If Luna... Princess Luna... had actually been Nightmare Moon, the implications staggered me. The war with the zebras. The death. The bombs. Even this! Worse, it meant that my choice was to either do nothing, and possibly kill my friends and my baby, or help Equestria's greatest monster.

Tough call...

"No soul?" she said coldly, tossing her mane as we passed through the inner coil. Beyond was that immense white glow. "Blackjack, I control far more souls than you could ever imagine."

And then we were through, into the space within the interior spiral

and surrounded by a blizzard of circling white specks. The soul motes swirled in the same clockwise direction as the coil. There were so many that it was hard to see through them all. There had to be millions. Tens of millions. All trapped within the Tokomare.

"How can you allow them to stay trapped?" I asked solemnly.

"Give me EC-1101, and perhaps I will be able to negate the Tokomare's Enervation field," Cognitum answered smoothly. She gestured at all the millions of souls with a sweep of her wing. "All of this is simply the byproduct of the device's energy fields being poorly calibrated and inefficient. With control restored, it would be an easy feat to smooth out the arcanomagical frequencies radiated by the Tokomare."

Soul ripping was a *byproduct*? "You think all of this is some kind of accident?" I countered. "This thing is evil, Cognitum! Why can't you see that?"

She sighed in a long-suffering way that reminded me of my mother trying to get me to understand that I had to work the C shift every day, not just when I felt like it. "To many, Blackjack, *you* are evil. I will not waste my time with trite declarations of evilness," Cognitum said coolly. "Is the soul entrapment unfortunate and hazardous? Certainly. Calling it evil changes nothing. Understanding it. Perfecting it. That is a solution that actually helps others. I will *use* this device. Otherwise, all the souls trapped here suffer for nothing."

Now there was some familiar pre-war bullshit. "Not doing a good job convincing me to give you EC-1101," I muttered as we approached a huge needle hanging down from the middle of the vast chamber's ceiling. Lightning from the vanes on the interior coil constantly arched over, striking a dozen gold-tipped secondary needles a hundred feet long or more that extended down at angles from the midpoint of the main needle. These were connected to an ever-thickening mass of cables, transformers, and starmetal girders. A hole had been bashed clean through the ceiling, and I could almost swear I saw the white outline of the M.o.I. hub a mile up. "Huh. What made that?" I wondered idly.

"Shadowbolt Tower," Cognitum replied, her tone a touch waspish. "When you compress something that massive into a sphere a dozen feet in diameter and let it hit the ground at terminal velocity, it has quite a substantial impact. It took nearly a month for the mechasprites to chew it away and repair the damage you caused.

Since then, this cavern's been far more unstable than it should be."

"Oh. Yeah. *Sorry* about that," I muttered, wishing it could have fallen right on the machine instead.

"I think you halfway mean that," Cognitum said in amused tones. "Touching your soul, intolerable as it was, was quite insightful. I wish I'd done so long ago. I think we could have been good friends if I had."

Yeah. Maybe. "Why is touching my 'purest Blackjackness' so intolerable?" I asked sourly from inside my jar. "I know I'm not the best pony, but–"

That prompted a laugh from my old body. "Oh dear. And I know you mean that too." She sighed, shaking her head.

"The mind is the identity of self. The soul is the being of self," Snips said from inside his jar. "When the two are in opposition, turmoil results."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Cognitum replied with a little nod. "Trapped in the machine, I possess all of my old motivations, but I lack a true self. When I put myself in your brain, the wrongness was horrifying. Even agonizing. You are damaged, Blackjack, beyond my ability to deal with. Just taking your body filled me with such feeling of guilt that I could hardly stand it." She looked at our approaching destination, a platform suspended from the tip of the needle. "Fortunately, soon I will be whole and complete, with an unstoppable body, a keen intellect, and... well... " she gave a smug little shrug. Well what?

"And then you will rule Equestria while I become administrator of the Core," Steel Rain said, and I noted a tone of uncertainty in his voice.

"Of course," Cognitum nearly purred. "That is... if Blackjack tells us what she knows about EC-1101's key."

Steel Rain didn't respond. I wished he'd take his helmet off so I could get a read of his face. Then, with a metallic clunk, the lift had reached its destination: a large round platform in the very middle of the swarm of souls. The inclinator slid into a berth, and there was a series of clangs as plates locked the mechanism into place. In the center of the platform was a strange, vaguely familiar design etched in the metal floor plates: a circle with a six-pointed star in the middle. Six unicorns, one standing at each point, were trying to keep a ball of brilliant white contained in the middle. Green lightning from their horns raked across it, forcing it back whenever

it drifted. The black robes they wore were a little much.

"Look, Cognitum, give me my body back and let me–" I began, but I was interrupted again.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Blackjack. I want to give you a chance. Let you try and do better. But I *know* better," she said as she slowly trotted off the lift. Along the perimeter of the hanging platform, monitors were coming to life. "This is the Uvula station. From here, I have the greatest control over the Core's systems. It takes all of my processing power, but I can exercise some influence over the Core without EC-1101."

"It's highly agitated, sir," one of the unicorns reported to Steel Rain, a moonstone pendant dangling on his chest. "I don't know how long we can keep it contained like this."

"Soon you won't have to, but first things first," Cognitum said as the crane atop the computer hummed to life. The yellow pony's jar was set down before Cognitum, beside mine and the jar containing Snips's remains. "It's time for you to be rewarded for your loyalty and devotion, Echo." She stuck out her hoof. "Snips, please transfer him back."

Snips hesitated a moment, but then his bony horn began to glow, summoning the dark magic. "Stop. Why are you helping her, Snips?" I pled.

"Magic is all I have left, Blackjack. And if I don't help her, she'll go after Snails," he said in that soul whisper. The sawblade spiral coiled around Cognitum's left forehoof, swirling like a sawblade. Then it jerked free, and in its midst was a small, feebly flickering mote. The tendril of dark energy snapped like a whip and plunged it into the emaciated yellow stallion's chest.

His eyes popped wide in shock and horror as he gasped and writhed. Cognitum levitated a moonstone talisman around his neck and lifted him from the jar with her magic. "There. You're safe now, Echo. You're safe," she said as she patted his mane, then suddenly took several steps away from him. "I mean... I have fulfilled my part of our agreement, Echo."

Echo curled up tightly. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He met my glare, shuddered, and curled up tighter. "Sorry... "

"I don't think he made it," Steel Rain said coolly.

"Mmm... well, perhaps he will recover with more time. I have so many questions for him," she said with a wave of her hoof, levitating him up and onto the sidelines. "Now. Blackjack. Tell me

how to access EC-1101."

"No," I answered, looking at the brilliant soul mote struggling against the unicorns' dark magical spells, wondering if I could help it break free. Maybe it'd... I dunno... eat them or something?

Cognitum sighed. "Blackjack, I have been civil. I have been patient. I have tried to reason with you, and I have tried to demonstrate to you that I am the proper ruler of Equestria."

"Well, so far you're doing a pretty shitty job," I said evenly, as if giving a report in school but without the annoyance of actually being in class. "You've demonstrated neither ethics nor morals in your behavior. You think that you are Princess Luna and that that entitles you to whatever you desire. You believe that your ends justify your means, and you've committed gross violations against both me and others. You show no remorse for any of this. Even if you are Princess Luna, which I seriously doubt, that in no way mitigates the cruelties you have visited on others. So no, I won't help you."

She stood, frozen, for almost a minute. "You'd let the world die to spite me?" she asked in disappointed tones only a mother could use.

"I'm not letting the world die. You underestimate my friends. Glory and P-21 will learn what has happened to me. They will contact others. LittlePip. Homage. Calamity. Grace. Others that respect the cause I work towards. They will find a way to stop Horizons, with or without EC-1101. Then they will end you," I answered, the truth so clear and simple to me that even here, like this, I felt a great sense of peace. "It's not about you, Cognitum."

Cognitum stared at me, her body stock still. Then she slowly smiled. "You presumptuous little foal," she muttered, and then trotted towards the closest screen. "Very well then. Let's put your certainty to the test." The hologram flickered to life. "When you caused catastrophic damage to the Core's power systems, I used it as an opportunity to improve my control over a few critical systems. Such as... " I looked down on the floating platforms of the village of Flotsam. It felt like another life. Ponies hauled up salvage from the river and sent it on its way. The general uptick in prosperity showed some signs here, too. The platforms were full of ponies trying to pick wealth out of the depths.

I even noticed a boat tied up on one pier. A familiar boat... one that had fallen on me long ago and carried me all the way to Manehattan: the *Seahorse*. The hologram expanded, zooming in on

the ponies. The turquoise Captain Thrush staggered along, apparently quite inebriated but navigating the crowded docks with ease, a half-open bottle of rum floating beside her. She still had her pirate's hat, and an eyepatch covered her right eye. The seafoam-green Seabiscuit followed in her wake, bottles, boxes, and crates loaded high in a massive mound atop her back.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I hovered in the jar.

"Discovering how many you will let die before telling me what you know," she said calmly. "You will not keep me from my realm, Blackjack. But you've let hundreds die in the past... what's a few hundred more?" A targeting reticle appeared on the holographic image, pointing right at the village. "Excuse me a moment. I have to focus on this. Even with a direct connection, you can't comprehend the interference I have to push through."

"No! Stop it!" I shouted, hammering on the glass.

I saw the distinctive Thrush stop and turn her head towards me, or at least in the direction of whatever camera filmed this scene, and tackle the overburdened Seabiscuit to send both into the churning brown water. A second later, a green beam swept horizontally across the deck, the rickety platforms and shacks atop them exploding one after the next as ponies were vaporized by the dozens. They ran, screaming and shouting, but there was nowhere they could escape from the line of death.

Again and again, the beam lanced out. Shops and houses exploded in thick palls of greasy smoke. The anti-dragon beam cut through it all with ease. Ponies tumbled into the river, struggling to find something to hold onto as the village broke up. The beam then started picking out boats, setting them alight when ponies tried to scramble aboard. I looked around for some sign of the *Seahorse*, and caught sight of it as it wheeled about the waves, the rust-colored mare Oilcan at the controls. The boat cut through the water and over more than a few ponies struggling amidst the burning, bobbing wreckage. A burly pegasus began to swoop low over the water, plucking up the captain and Seabiscuit and returning them to the deck.

Captain Thrush raced up to the wheelhouse, took the wheel from Oilcan, and immediately flipped the *Seahorse* around tighter than I ever imagined possible. The green beam of energy, as if sensing it was my friend on board, sought out the vessel as it tried to maneuver around the sinking, burning wreckage. The green line

swept back and forth after it, plumes of flash-boiled steam blasting into the air behind it as it closed in. Then the ship burst into black smoke as the line swept over it and disappeared into the haze spreading across the river.

"You monster! You're not Luna! You're nothing like Luna!" I cried, hot tears spilling down my face as I beat my hooves against the inside of the jar.

"You are the one making this a reality, Blackjack," Cognitum said with maddening calm. "Luna ordered tens of thousands to their deaths to save the lives of millions. I will, regrettably, send hundreds to die to overcome your stubborn pride. Each one of these is on your head."

The hologram left the burning river and swapped over to the stately buildings of the Collegiate. I could see the guards walking along the building tops. It was a lot more crowded today, too. Hundreds of pegasi worked with the Collegiate ponies as they went about their early morning routine. Only one or two of the rooftop guards seemed to notice something amiss to the south.

"No!" I yelled as the green beam swept out, blowing the roof off one of the campus buildings. Even wartime Equestrian overengineering melted and exploded into flaming debris as the beam blasted through everything. Ponies wheeled about in a panic, struggling to find somewhere safe. The harsh green glare of the deadly line focused on the foundation of one structure and bored in. Flames exploded out the basement windows, and then the first story, then the second, and then ponies with their manes and clothes ablaze scattered out. "Please! Please no!" I screamed, the green line sweeping across the medical school, tearing the facade away.

The beam stopped, and I wept, unable to tear my eyes away. "No. You can't do this."

"Correction. Couldn't. If you hadn't blown power to systems that would have counteracted my controls, I doubt I'd be able to now. As is, I have to fend off a thousand countermands just to get the one thousand and first command through," Cognitum answered. "You have the power to make this stop, Blackjack. Not I. I have little else to lose."

I watched as the image turned to Riverside, the village thriving even in the horrible weather. Ponies seemed to be aware something was happening, though, looking alertly about for trouble. I picked

out a few sand dogs in their midst, and one in particular that I knew. Rover stood beside a pony stall bedecked with prewar clothes, sniffing at the air, with the young female Fifi at his side. “Please don’t. Please. Luna. If there is really anything of Luna in you... stop,” I begged.

Cognitum said nothing. An instant later another defense beam on the west side of the Core opened up and drew a line straight across the river and through the market. Rover picked up Fifi, throwing them to the side as the stall, and the vendor, were vaporized. Ponies fled for the safety of the shops, only to have those shops blasted one by one, setting them ablaze. I saw Rover and other sand dogs directing the ponies towards the subway station entrance, but there were so many ponies and such small doors. They pooled at the entrance, packing together, crushing against each other. The green line touched down the street and drew towards the subway far slower than it could but far too fast for most of the ponies to get clear. I saw Rover, Fifi on his shoulders, stuck at the doorway of the subway as the green defense beam blasted its way into the crowd and a second later into the tunnel. For an instant the beam stopped moving, but then I realized why as smoke began to pour up out of countless vents and utility covers from below. A few minutes later, the beam went dead, but the fires burned on.

I curled there, eyes clenched shut, trying to remember that if Cognitum got full control of EC-1101, she’d have powers infinitely worse. That was small comfort to the picture I had of incinerated friends.

“It gives me no satisfaction to do this,” Cognitum said solemnly. “Tell me what you know of this encryption. What is the password? The name.”

“No. I won’t,” I said weakly. What would I say if I met ponies who’d survived this? That they died to protect a password? To keep a monster from power? But if I did give it up, how much worse would it be?

“Pity. Well, what next?” she said brightly. “So many potential targets. The Society? The Arena, perhaps? Those ghoulish monsters in the old hospital…The Rainbow Dash Skyport? Megamart?” She paused, then asked in a softer tone, “Your old home?” Cognitum remained silent for several seconds, and then asked in a soft, almost seductive tone, “Or maybe... here.” I kept my eyes closed. “Look,” she prompted gently, and I shook my head like a foal. “Look,” she

repeated more forcefully. I cracked my eyes open.

Chapel floated before me. I could see the ponies running about in a panic. Had they seen the beams? Heard the blasts? I supposed it didn't matter. I saw Harpica trying to get foals into the post office while Charity stood on a stack of crates, directing the colts and fillies. The chaos was a little more organized, but my breath caught in my throat as I saw the reticle focus on the yellow filly's face.

"Stop," I croaked. "I'll tell you. Please. Stop."

"What is the password?" Cognitum purred in triumph.

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I don't know. I really don't. But I know who encrypted the file." I swallowed, the sensation of yielding the information like downing broken glass. "A mare at my stable, Duct Tape, encrypted the program. She wanted to ensure the Overmare didn't get it and stab her in the back. Which she did."

"I see. A homegrown, amateur, unprofessional encryption," she muttered flatly.

"That's good though, right?" Steel Rain asked as he frowned at me in my jar. "A simple encryption like that... you should be able to just pop it open."

Cognitum didn't reply immediately. "Theoretically, yes. But protection like this is frightfully unstable. I don't know the programmer. I can assume she received her instruction through a Stable-Tec manual, but what if there were other textbooks influencing her? What innovations might she have employed?" She shook her head and looked at the terminals. "I could ruin everything simply because she made an amateurish mistake. No. What we need is the password. The word or phrase that will unravel the protective matrix and allow us to access its power." She trotted over to stand before me. "So, let's let Blackjack take the last two guesses." The image of Chapel vanished, replaced by the blinking password prompt.

"Me?" I asked, goggling at her.

"You. Two more guesses," she said evenly with a small smile.

"You have all the processing power of that... that thing!" I gestured to the heap of machine with a hoof. "You know who made it. Can't you do... something? Some computery terminally thing?"

"I could. Knowing who created it, I suppose I could have it cracked in a day, tops." She smiled, the jar opened, and I was hoisted out and into the cold, damp air. It smelled of rust and wet stone, and I could hear water pouring in from countless sources. I couldn't

imagine how she kept the chamber from flooding completely. "However, I have faith in you, Blackjack. I know you can do it. I'm willing to bet the lives of everypony in Chapel that I'm right."

Gee. Thanks. I stared up at the icon. Duct Tape had been close to P-21. I guessed that that was the 'he' the clue referred to. A name that P-21 loved? He'd loved that unicorn, certainly, but I knew that 'U-21' wouldn't be it. That was the name forced on him by my stable. "Scotch Tape?" I guessed, swallowing hard as I stared up at the holographic display.

Cognitum smiled, and the letters appeared in front of the prompt. It flashed another error message and hint. 'The thing he wants most.'

Steel Rain stepped forward. "Don't. It'll autodelete if she gets it wrong."

"Please. I doubt a home-cobbled encryption program would be able do much to EC-1101. I anticipated some military-grade scrubbing software, a zebra chaos daemon program, or at least a Stable-Tec Chimera worm. At the very worst, I'd have to spend a day or two unraveling a foal's mess." She gave a little wave of her hoof before regarding me again, walking slowly around me. "But I won't have to, because Blackjack is going to guess it for me. It's the only way she can save Chapel. The only way she can win. And Blackjack always wins," she said, and I got the very unexpected sensation of her nuzzling my flank. It nearly made my mane stand on end, and I darted away. Wow. Did I always have this many nerve endings in my skin?

"No! You... that... no!" I stammered, flushing. "Don't do that," I muttered. She simply smiled, confident in her win/win. I huffed, closing my eyes. "I want you to swear... you both to swear... that if I do this, you'll let me go and won't destroy Chapel. They've worked too hard to lose everything again. And you'll get my baby to a surrogate." Maybe Glory could find one.

"Of course. Of course. Now... give it your best guess," Cognitum purred in a tone that I'd have to remember when I saw Glory again.

I thought about it. What did P-21 want the most, that could also be a name? Family? No. Not a name... and besides, back then, he hadn't wanted it. What he'd wanted most was to escape. Could that be it? No. Not just escape. That wasn't enough for P-21. Freedom. He'd wanted freedom. But was it a name? Ehhh…maybe? I swallowed again, my heartbeat thumping in my chest. He'd wanted

to leave... but he'd also been willing to return with me. He'd wanted to put it right. Wanted... wanted...

"Justice," I muttered. "He wanted justice." And was it a name? Perhaps. Maybe. As much as most pony names. It just felt... right. I had a good feeling about it. "Try 'Justice'."

The word was typed in, and suddenly the air filled with the dazzling magical patterns once more. "I knew you could do it," Cognitum purred. "It's your special talent."

"My what?" I asked with a frown.

"Victory. Your talent is winning," Cognitum said as she looked at my flanks almost hungrily. "Poor Deus. Sanguine. Even you, Steel Rain. You were facing a mare whose very talent is overcoming adversity, no matter its form."

"My talent is victory? Do you have any idea how many times I've been shot up? How many times I've died?" I demanded, then blinked. "I mean, sure, I got better, but I haven't had it remotely easy."

"Victory isn't easy. It has a cost. Always. But you are always able to pay that cost. Perhaps you don't like it. Perhaps you even hate it. But victory is branded on your flanks for all to see. A winning pair, impossible to beat in the game of Blackjack." She smiled as if she'd just hit the jackpot herself.

"But the ghoul in Hightower, and when Lighthooves was trying to blast us with the Core's defenses... I didn't win then!" I argued.

"Didn't you? You used what you had to defeat your enemies. And what you had was my attention. You even made me act when I had determined not to." She reached out with a hoof and stroked my cheek, making me take a step back.

"So you're saying there's some way for me to beat you?" I said, eagerly, expecting to set her back, or at least make her frown. Instead, she seemed even more eager.

"Oh, yes. I'm certain of it. And I'm certain that if you had the time, you'd find some way to do so," Cognitum replied evenly. "I suspected that this was your talent the very second I first met you as Applebot. Victory. Winning. Such a potent weapon, and you had no idea you possessed it."

Right at that moment, I racked my brains, trying to think of some way to use this 'talent', because I really did not like the look in her eyes. "You promised," I said weakly.

"I did. And I'm going to keep that promise," she said, and then she

raised her voice. “Snips? You remember what we discussed earlier?”

“It is all highly theoretical, Cognitum,” Snips’s skull whispered.

“But you want to test that theory, don’t you? You want to do that dark magic. Feel the rush,” she said as she grinned at me.

“I…do. I’m sorry, Blackjack. The necromancy is all I have left now,” he whispered hollowly.

I tried to dart away... maybe I could run up the inclinator’s rails? Even jumping sounded like a plan. Only she had hands now, and I didn’t. One of those reached down and grabbed me by a back leg, holding on with the cyber strength I no longer possessed, and I was stopped cold. I rolled onto my back as she dragged me towards the jar I’d just come out of. I kicked out in desperation, but the grip didn’t release. I struggled with the ring on my horn, trying to shove the pink-plastic-covered device off, but it wouldn’t move. “Please don’t, Snips! Please! I saved Snails! You owe me!” I shrieked.

Cognitum moved over me, pinning me easily. A familiar panic shot through me as I stared into my own smiling face. “Save your breath, my dear Blackjack. When Snips died, his poor soul went all to pieces. What remains is not a good pony at all.” I gazed up at the floating skull and vertebrae, wishing there was some way to help him and myself.

“You said you didn’t want my soul. Couldn’t bear to touch it,” I said as I stared up at her.

“And I don’t,” she replied in that terrible, soft voice. “I want victory.”

The magic began to coil, pouring from the tip of Snips’s cracked horn. I struggled against the mechanical mare above me as the black, green, and purple sorcery wrapped around both of us. I felt something moving through me, searching for something integral to myself. Not my soul, precisely, but linked to it. I could feel it on a fundamental level, like my baby moving within me in my old body. The dark violation found that something, and I felt a tear inside. Instinctively, I glanced down at my flank and saw the twin cards fade from view.

“Finally,” she said like a mare in afterglow. “Victory. Oh yes. I feel it. With none of the little niggling taints of guilt. Wonderful.” She rose off me as I lay there, curled up, shaking.

“No!” came a scream from somepony other than myself. Dawn’s jar shattered as she erupted from within. Even impaled and with broken wings and legs, she launched herself at Cognitum. “It was

supposed to be me! I was the one! You promised!" she cried out, crawling past Steel Rain. The stallion stomped down on the trailing edge of the spear running through her, and she jerked to a stop a few inches short. Her remaining wing swung back and forth, but Cognitum stepped back, letting the blades sweep by in front of her face.

"Oh, poor, poor, wretched Dawn," Cognitum breathed. "What suffering we endure for ambition," she said as she regarded the mare straining on the length of starmetal.

"Kill her, already. Your habit of keeping these trophies is going to get you in trouble," Steel Rain admonished.

"How could I repay her so?" Cognitum replied. "Dawn's given so much. Her husband. Her children. Her body. Her life. All for me." Cognitum rose up before the straining Dawn. "Look at me, Dawn. Look at your Goddess, great and terrible! You should be grateful. You should be honored!"

Dawn slumped, trembling, at the edge of her reach, her shaking wingtip an inch from Cognitum's face. Then Cognitum sighed and stepped away. "Perhaps you're right. Finish her," she said with a dismissive wave of a wing.

"Finally," Steel Rain replied, pinning down on her wing and stomping her skull over and over again. I lay there, watching her being slowly crushed under the repeated blows.

A snap cracked through the air, and Dawn disappeared in a flash, the spear clanging to the plates. Cognitum whirled as a male laugh echoed softly in the cavernous space. "Who's there?" she demanded of the air.

"You're doing it wrong," the voice said. "I have to start it off like this: 'knock knock'."

She frowned around at the air. "Knock knock?"

"Oh, honestly. Who's the joke here?" he said in annoyance, and then there was another flash. Before the huge computer, the draconequus appeared. He rose up to his full height, looking coolly down at the lot of us. "Really, Cognitum, you should ditch attempting to be a Princess. You're far more suited to be a VP. And *you*," he said to Steel Rain, "just *scream* 'Pony Resources'. How the two of you missed out on being middle managers, I'll never know."

"Discord?" Cognitum gasped, stepping away from us. "What are you... you're supposed to be dead and gone."

"Oh please. Where's the fun in that?" he asked as he disappeared

and reappeared dressed in fine evening wear, considering Cognitum. “Hmmm... clearly Dadaist in the melange of cobbled together elements. Really, it looks almost as if it were thrown together utterly at random. A selection of Jungian shadows mixed with soaring inferiority complexes pasted together with narcissistic delusions of grandeur in a purloined body. Really. I don’t think I could do better if I tried. And believe you me, that’s saying something.” He smirked down as they stared from him to each other in bafflement, and then he gave a permissive wave of a claw. “Oh, and if you want to go grab a dictionary right now, go right ahead. I have time.”

Steel Rain pointed his two huge cannons at Discord. There was a click, and two enormous bouquets erupted from each. “And you!” Discord said contemptuously. “Really. Whatever are you compensating for? I mean, when a stallion has to trot around with an artillery piece strapped to each flank, you really have to wonder!” He scooped the bouquets up in a claw and took a deep sniff, then let out a sigh. “I think you should take that armor off and relax.”

Then Discord turned his attention to Snips. “This one isn’t even finished yet! Let me see.” And he snapped his claws. From the storm, a cloud of tiny motes swept through the side of the jar and into the skull. “There we go. Really, you need to be careful with that dark magical stuff, old sport.” He snapped his claws again, and the jar vanished in another flash.

“You! What do you think you’re doing?” Cognitum demanded. “Bring him back!”

“My... somepony is slow on the uptake. For a pony named after knowledge, you don’t catch on very quickly.” Then he regarded me, and his eyes softened a moment. “And this poor pathetic little lump of a mare. What is she doing here? She clearly doesn’t belong in this assembly at all.” He swept me up in his arms, stroking my mane gently. “A pony of my very own! I will hug her and stroke her pretty mane and call her George.”

“What do you want, Discord?” Cognitum demanded coldly.

“Well, I heard that there was some fine villainy ahoof and felt that I should stop by and say hello.” He snapped his fingers again, and a throne appeared. He took a seat, setting me on his lap and continuing to stroke my mane as he regarded her with a smirk. “One monster to another.”

"You are a relic of a bygone era. You should be nothing more than a footnote in history," Cognitum replied.

"My my, Princess Pot. I think it takes one to know one," he said as he scratched my ears. I glanced up, spotting beads of sweat on his brow. "You believe yourself to be Princess Luna? You?" He jerked a thumb at his chest. "I knew Princess Moonbutt back when your ancestor was an abacus. I don't know what you're supposed to be, but you're no Princess." He then gestured at the bright soul being held by the straining unicorns. "THAT is a princess."

"What?" I gasped, sitting up a little and staring at the glow. Maybe it was having organic eyes again, or maybe it was Discord's presence, but as I stared, I detected something within the mote. Something beautiful and wonderful and mysterious. Dark, but not the bubbling evil that had been inflicted on me before. It was glorious and terrible, and I couldn't tear my eyes away as I beheld it.

The soul of Princess Luna.

"You're a bit of a packrat, aren't you, Cogwheel?" he asked with a grin, going back to petting my head as if I were a cat. "You collect things. Little bits of this and that. Ponies. Souls. Cities. A bad habit, really. One that's going to get you in trouble." I felt him tremble under me, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from that soul. "However did you think you'd get away with keeping Princess Luna's soul?"

"It's *my* soul," Cognitum snapped. As if sensing that Snips was no longer present, the soul began to thrash and struggle, the dark purple figure within fighting against the green lightning keeping her contained.

"It is?" Discord gasped sarcastically. "Really? Well then, since Snips is away on vacation, why don't I reunite you with it?" He cracked his fingers in the air above him. "I might not be quite up on my uber evil necromagical skills, but I think I can wing it." Speaking of wings, I saw a few feathers fall out of his, disappearing into dust before they hit the floor.

"No!" Cognitum blurted, raising her hooves in alarm. Discord's smug smile grew. "I do not need that soul within me. I have everything I need. Intellect. Strength. Victory!"

"Oh? Are you sure?" he asked in his most teasing voice, leaning towards her. "Are you sure you don't want it inside you? Feeling it? Or is it that you know that that *glorious* creature is the real thing

and you... " he leaned back, waving her away with a hand. "You are the cheap Solaris knock off."

"I am the Princess of this realm!" Cognitum snapped. "I am Princess Luna." Discord said nothing. He just steepled his fingers before him with a smug, skeptical expression on his face. "Bring back my necromancer! I'll add a statue to my collection!"

"Yawn. You can't even manage second-rate villainy," he said with a disdainful sniff. "Very well then; I'll be on my way."

"I don't think we can hold it much longer!" one of the six shouted as the soul lunged again.

"What are you doing, Discord?" I whispered.

He glanced down at me and gave a little wink, then looked at the now-indecisive mare. "Well. What's it going to be? Once she's inside you, you won't be able to get her out again. You'll have to actually fill Luna's horseshoes. Put on the big princess britches. Actually be her. No yanking souls in and out. No more cheating. That's my job, after all."

Cognitum's gaze flicked from the struggling soul to Discord and back again. "I... I... " Discord just smiled, but I still felt him shaking as he held me. I saw tiny little flecks blowing away from him along his mane.

"Let's get out of here, Discord," I said. "Take Princess Luna with us." I doubted he had the strength to do so, but then, Cognitum didn't know that.

"No!" Cognitum snapped, then drew herself up. "Do it." Discord stood up, setting me on the deck as his throne faded away. He cocked his brow again. "Do it! I command you to do it!"

He snapped his fingers like a gunshot, and a great wind seemed to gust out of him. It swept around the platform, knocking the unicorns away. For a moment, the soul seemed to struggle to raise upward, but then bands of magic wrapped around her and Cognitum. Slowly, the pair began to be drawn together. Slowly the pair melted one into the other. The alicorn soul slipped into Cognitum. There was a blinding flash, and I had to avert my eyes.

When I dared to open my eyes again, I stared up at a gray statue, hand outstretched, fingers frozen post snap. I gaped up at Discord, wondering so much. Where was Boo? What had become of Dawn and Snips? Why had he done this? And then he began to crumble into sparkly dust, which blew away in whatever invisible stream carried the souls and disappeared into the void. I stared as the very

last grains of shimmery substance were carried away.

Then I dared to look at the center of the platform. Cognitum crouched there, black wings covering her head. “Please be good, Luna. Please be good, Luna,” I prayed over and over again.

Then she rose. Was it just me, or was she now... larger? She threw back her head, her mane streaming behind her like a bloody banner streaked with soot. Her armor seemed sharper now, the laser-etched filly and ‘Security’ gone. She stood before us all, a Princess of Death. Her red eye panels blazed with light as she began to laugh, high and exultant.

“Fools! Fools! All of you, fools! I am the Queen of the Night! And this world is mine!” she crowed, her wings spreading as her red and black magic mane and tail snapped in the air behind her. “Bow before my greatness!”

Steel Rain threw himself on his face, but the six unicorns, their black robes flapping wildly, raced for the elevator opposite the inclinator. She glared in rage, her eyes blazing balefully, and six crackling bullets of magic blasted forth from her steel-clad horn. The crackling energy tore through them, setting their robes aflame and sending them flying through the air and to the dark waters far below.

Slowly she approached me where I crouched. No cutie mark. No weapons. No augmentations. Not even magic. “Do you deny me now?” she asked coldly.

“No,” I said, my eyes fixed on the last faint dusting of Discord on my hooves. “No. I don’t.” I lifted my head and stared her in the eye. “There is no denying you are a royal cunt!”

I was going to be killed. Maybe not the best last words, but Deus would have approved. Her eyes blazed, her horn crackling with red lightning.

Then a shape dropped from the cables high above, landing on the platform with a resounding clang. He crouched there a moment, then slowly raised himself up to his full height. The glyph-marked strips of cloth tied to his fetlocks snapped and fluttered in the same magical wind blowing Cognitum’s mane. The Legate stared at Cognitum…or was she Nightmare Something-or-other now?

“Maiden of the Stars. At last,” he said, the crackling magic fading from Cognitum’s horn as she faced the skull-masked zebra. “You are precisely as you should be. It is time for our destined battle! One to decide the fate of zebra and ponykind!”

She gave the smallest of smirks as the Legate adopted one of the fighting stances that had proved so adept at thrashing me. His glyph wrappings glowed with a strange, cold green light. I couldn't believe that Equestria's final hope rested on one of my greatest enemies, but it was all I had left.

He charged across the platform, hooves thundering as he closed the distance. She reared up, horn and wings crackling with bright red magical lightning. The two closed in, and the Legate let out a battle cry!

Then he took her outstretched hoof in his, pushed back his dragon skull, and kissed it.

What?

I stared at the scene, my brain locked up at the sight of the zebra, his face covered in bright red magical tattoos resembling the orbits of planets. At his neck, they inexplicably became black, save for a few lines where Rampage's tail had scraped him earlier. He knelt, lips pressed to the tip of her hoof, then pulled away. "Beautiful. You are beautiful, my Maiden." Then he regarded me in amusement as she stopped the crackling lightning, and I realized that I knew this zebra...

Amadi.

"What?! How are you... " I screamed at the top of my lungs, rising to my hooves as I gestured at him. "But you! You're the Legate! And why– And she's the Maiden! But she– And you're friends?!" I waved my hooves at them both. "What the hay is going on here?"

Suddenly, Steel Rain's hoof was pinning me to the floor. I'd honestly forgotten about him for a moment. "You really aren't the smartest pony, are you?"

Amadi stood and trotted towards me, Cognitum at her side. "There's nothing quite as useful as a prophecy, particularly if you make it up yourself," he said as he smiled at Cognitum. "The 'Maiden of the Stars' was always a useful ruse. Destroying the Hoof provided a pretext for keeping my followers together, working to advance our goals."

Steel Rain chuckled. "Really. Where did you think the Harbingers got a zebra tank to put Deus's brain into?"

I squirmed under Steel Rain. "So it was all a scam? Why?"

Cognitum answered, "Why, it's the first step in my great unification of the Wasteland. I know how useful war is. When the Brood of Coyotl attack, the Harbingers will repel them... after certain ponies

are eliminated. Big Daddy. General Storm Chaser. Grace. Ponies with the leadership skills to counter me. The Harbingers shall be regarded as heroes. I... Blackjack... the hero of the battle... will declare myself the Princess of the Moon. We will use Horizons to restore the Core, and I will use EC-1101 to rebuild my realm. We will negotiate a peace with the Remnant." She gestured to the Legate, who bowed graciously to her. "And all will be restored. All thanks to you."

I lay there with no snappy retort. I had to admit it. They'd won. I couldn't think of any way to defeat them now. If I was lucky, I'd end up dead. If not... she still had my jar. "My friends will stop you."

"Your friends are now my friends," Cognitum replied smoothly. "I'll have to deal with other heroes abroad, I'm sure. Perhaps use a smaller version of Tom against the S.P.P. There must be *some* force strong enough to split that egg open. Regardless, you're done." She patted my head. "If you'd been loyal from the outset, I might have had a future for you as well. Now all I want is for you to see me triumphant."

"Is it time?" Steel Rain asked.

"Indeed," she breathed, and drew back. I let out a shaky breath as she backed away and regarded that flickering data above us. "EC-1101, Priority Command: Transfer and activate!"

Her PipBuck began to glow. The screens of the terminals along the edges of the platform began to flash and dance with readouts. The heap of computer parts that was Cognitum's maneframe began to hum louder and louder. The hologram began to run again, swirling in the air, arcane symbols and lines of code lining up and activating. "Yes! Yes! I am ruler of all once more!" She laughed in delight as EC-1101's displays started to blossom like a flower.

Then everything went dark all at once. The hologram. The terminals. Even the maneframe. Cognitum turned her head wildly in bafflement, the only illumination coming from the stream of lights circling the spire and Cognitum's red glowing eyes. "OH, COME ON!" she screamed, then whirled and demanded of me, "What is going on?"

"Don't look at me. This magical mystery megaspell shit is your bag," I said, raising my hooves in defense.

Then a familiar rasp filled the air. It was long and low, wet and labored. And a gravelly, wet voice asked, "Identify yourself."

Cognitum froze. She glanced from Steel Rain to Vitiosus to me, then answered, “I am Princess Luna reborn, rightful heir to Equestria! You will transfer control of EC-1101 to me, immediately.” Nothing happened. Then she asked, her voice a little more wary. “Who is this?”

“Project Horizons Command AI,” the voice rasped.

“Ah! The Lunar Palace! Yes. Wonderful. I wish you to transfer complete control of all your systems to me immediately!” she commanded, smiling a little. No response, and her smile faded. “Did you hear me?”

“Did you execute Fluttershy?” the voice rasped softly.

They stared at each other again. “Fluttershy is dead!” Cognitum snapped. “They’re all dead! I am the only one entitled to rule Equestria now!” Again, no response. Cognitum’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

A slow laugh began to fill the platform. It was low, slow, and a little bit mad. And it was coming from my mouth. The three looked down at me in surprise.

“It’s Goldenblood. It’s fucking Goldenblood!” I cackled.

“Goldenblood is dead!” Cognitum snapped. “I watched his execution myself.”

“So what?” I laughed, not having anything to lose any more. “Like that’s stopped half the ponies I’ve known. Seriously, for the apocalypse being a world-killing event, some of you old relics really do hang on!” I grinned up at Cognitum. “You were transferred from Luna. Goldenblood probably used the exact same technology to put himself in control of this Lunar Palace thing!”

Cognitum gaped at me in horror. “I order you–” she howled, but Goldenblood’s rasp boomed from the speakers in the platform and cut her off.

“No,” it growled contemptuously. “You are a tyrant. Horizons is now active. Make peace with your sister, Princess Luna. Make peace with yourself. Goodbye.”

The lights returned, and the four of us stared at each other. “That... that wasn’t supposed to happen,” Cognitum muttered, glancing from the Legate to Steel Rain and back, then down at where I was still laughing weakly.

“So we all die now?” Steel Rain asked angrily.

“No. No!” she snapped. “It will take a few days before the moon’s rotation brings it into the optimal firing position. I will simply go to

the moon and make the adjustments manually." She glared at her hoof and sighed in disgust. "This is merely a setback."

"Tell me that we can kill her now," Steel Rain said, pushing down on my back and making me struggle to breathe. For a second, I was certain that I was done. I felt my ribs creak.

"No," Cognitum snapped. "No. She may yet be useful."

Steel Rain hissed softly through his ventilator. The Legate frowned as well. "No. You should absolutely kill her now."

"I said no!" she said with a sweep of her wing, making them both duck. "I must go reunite with Blackjack's friends. Tell them what we need to do. The Luna Space Center may still retain something useful." She glared down at me. "But don't worry; I'm not going to leave her in a jar where she might escape. No… " She turned to the maneframe, and the cable snaked out once more. It pressed itself to my head. "A mindless Blackjack is a far safer Blackjack."

I struggled under Steel Rain's hoof, but there was nothing I could do to stop the world being pulled away. I was plunged into darkness save for a blinking camera icon in front of me, and for several seconds I floated in nothingness. Then a window replaced the icon to show the Uvula platform and Cognitum smirking up at me. "Enjoy it, Blackjack. Being trapped in one place, helpless… oh yes. It should be quite educational for you. I want you to see my restored Equestria and Core before you're gone for good."

"This is a mistake," Steel Rain muttered.

"Silence!" she barked, then calmed herself. "I must go. I can't have her friends stumble upon this place. Remain here for an hour, then see to the Harbingers and the Brood. Understand?"

Steel Rain jerked his head hesitantly. Vitiosus bowed deeply to her. Cognitum levitated my body back into its jar, setting it far over to the side and out of the reach of the crane or the mind transfer cable thingy. She lifted Echo and set the catatonic stallion across her shoulders. Then she spread her wings wide and launched herself up into the air curling up along the spire. Presumably she was heading for the hole in the chamber's ceiling, but she passed the edge of my window long before then.

The two stallions stood awkwardly by for a minute. "You can't seriously be doing this?" I shouted at them, but they didn't seem to hear me. I fumbled around in the darkness I floated in, but I couldn't see anything else. In fact, I wasn't even sure I had hooves in this place. "Come on… .come on… there has to be some way to

do this," I thought frantically.

"Five minutes?" Vitiosus asked.

"Fine," Steel Rain replied sourly. I floated there, cursing them over and over again as I tried to think at the void to do... something! There had to be some way to control this space. Steel Rain trotted over to the jar that held me and looked about, and then his hind leg kicked out. "Oopsie," he said as the jar rolled across the platform and then tumbled off the edge, out of sight. He trotted over and leaned out to gaze down, then gave a little shrug. Then he faced me, guns pointed forward. They loaded with a loud thunk. "Hey, Blackjack. I don't know if you can hear me, but... thanks for not killing me at the manor." Then his cannons fired, and my world ended as I screamed into the absolute void around me.

Footnote: >Start New Game: Y/N?

Chapter 66: Ruin

"Well, there's something here about a dragon, the kingdom falling, chaos reigning... Okay, apparently it was all because the prince and princess were so lost in each other's eyes that they couldn't perform their royal duties."

Once upon a time, there had been a Princess born in a castle. She was a beautiful Princess, for everyone told her so, and the sweetest Princess, for everyone proclaimed it. Of course, they also remarked on what a pity it was that she had killed her mother when she was born…though only when they thought she couldn't hear. She lived in a palace surrounded by servants who provided for her and her fat, ugly older sister and insipid, vain older brother. She had anything and everything she ever wanted, so long as it was pretty and worthless. And she had a father who loved her more than anything…well, perhaps not more than *anything*. Not more than his precious little Society, or his legacy, or his collection of baubles and trinkets, but she was *somewhere* on the list of things he loved. Towards the bottom.

And one day, he said he'd give her a gift: anything she could possibly want. As usual. But because she loved him, she believed him, and so she asked that she should someday rule the Society. Because she was, as she'd always been told, the prettiest and the sweetest and the smartest. And her father had coughed and smiled and patted her head and suggested a new gown or a dolly instead. But she knew she was better than her older siblings, and so she asked again, with all the seriousness she could, to rule the Society. And he'd coughed again and mumbled something like 'well, we'll see' which meant 'no fucking way in hell' and sent her on her way.

And so the Princess was upset and did everything she could to show everyone that her fat older sister was slow and stupid and her vain older brother was perverted and dumb and neither was worth

a big pile of brahmin poop. And she learned to say what people wanted her to say and do what others wanted her to do, even if it felt icky and made her feel bad, because then they'd be scared she'd tell and she could make them do things she wanted. And she got money because sometimes that worked even better than doing the other stickier ickier things. And so she was all set to get rid of her fat, ugly, stupid, nasty older sister and her dumb brother, and even her father too if he didn't get his old ass out of her throne.

Then a wandering Barbarian came to her home, and her father was afraid because the Barbarian had killed lots of ponies and could kill lots more. And her father knew that the smart, good, beautiful Princess was going to take her throne sooner or later, and so her father hatched a plot to keep the good Princess from the throne. He gave it to the stupid Barbarian instead, and everyone was so afraid of the Barbarian that the Princess couldn't take everything over. So when her father died, the Princess snuck in and stole all the special bits of lore the wandering Barbarian desired, and promised money and weapons besides.

But the Barbarian was a stupid cunt who ruined everything! Everything! She'd picked the Princess's fat and ugly sister to rule instead and ruined months and months of planning and plotting and scheming and getting favors and bribing and stockpiling weapons. And so the Princess had taken all of the precious trinkets that the Barbarian coveted and smashed them to bits, but she made sure to take all their secrets just in case the Barbarian changed her mind and stopped being a stupid cunt.

Then the Princess met a noble Knight of a powerful order who also desired the secrets the Princess had learned. He served a powerful Sorceress with power greater than that of the Barbarian queen, and if she went with him, the Knight would see her made Queen of her castle. And so she freed the Knight from the cell where the Barbarian had placed him and fled with him to his fortress. And she met the powerful Sorceress and her mechanical weapons of war, and the Princess began to feel like she'd take back all which was rightfully hers.

But the Princess quickly learned the Knight's order was not like back home. No matter how she stomped her hooves, they ignored her. When she made demands, they laughed at her. When she lifted her tail, they were repulsed. More than once they simply locked her in a cell where she would be out of the way. But then the Sorceress

called. She wanted the secrets. The Princess tried to tell her, but there was so very much and it was all so very confusing. ‘But fear not’, the Sorceress promised, she knew how to get the secrets out of the Princess’s head.

And so she drilled holes in the Princess’s head, put wires in her brain, and sucked all the secrets out, no matter how the Princess cried or screamed that it hurt or begged her to stop. The zaps kept coming. And the Princess was put into a magical bottle where she didn’t have to eat or go to the bathroom, but also couldn’t go anywhere else. And if the Sorceress was in a bad mood because the Barbarian had gotten herself killed in the sky, or because a bad thing called Horizons was going to go off, she’d entertain herself by making the Princess experience all the horrible things that the Princess had once wanted for the Barbarian to suffer…and things the Princess had never imagined before…and things the Princess rather wished she didn’t know.

Then one day, the Barbarian showed up and faced the Sorceress, but the Sorceress was too clever and the Barbarian had been betrayed by the only friend she'd brought with her. The Sorceress took the Barbarian’s body for her own, leaving her trapped inside the Sorceress’s iron throne. Not even the arrival of a mischievous spirit, who whisked away the Sorceress’s Dark Magician and fallen Lady, could save the day. And so the Sorceress had freely cast her spell... only to discover it had been a trick all along. The Sorceress left for the moon to punish the one who played the trick and cast the true spell, leaving her Knight and Vizier behind.

The pair had stood around for several minutes, and the Princess could feel the Barbarian trapped within the machine. The wires connecting her brain to the iron throne were still working, even without the Sorceress to control them. She could feel the Barbarian struggle within, losing the strength of her will with every second. Then the Knight kicked a copy of the Barbarian off the platform, and thanked the Barbarian for saving him long, long ago.

Then he moved far back and fired his cannons straight into the heart of the iron throne. The Barbarian’s scream echoed on and on inside the Princess’s head as the top half of the massive structure was torn apart by the colossal blast. The flaming pieces cascaded down into the murk far below. The shockwave knocked the jars over, and the Princess was rattled as her prison rolled over and smashed into a bank of terminals on the edge of the platform. The

filly could barely think as she grabbed the wires with her hooves, desperate to keep them from yanking out of her brain.

It didn't help that the Barbarian was still screaming in her mind. The top half of the machine was a flaming mess, but the bottom half and the platform were still intact. The computers smoldered, the blast having sundered the machine without setting it aflame, but it still billowed a thick, oily black smoke that washed across the platform.

"Think she noticed that?" the Knight asked casually as he trotted up before the smashed computer.

The zebra snorted. "I doubt it. She has the tunnel vision of a machine, and in Blackjack's body she has no clue what is transpiring remotely. Even if she did, by now she is likely reunited with Blackjack's friends. She can't come and investigate." He gave a tiny shrug. "If she asks, tell her Blackjack had started gaining control of her old shell, and remind her that Princess Luna would never be so timid."

"Yes, she's easy to manipulate like that," the Knight said with a dry chuckle. "You'll head back and get the Brood ready?"

"Of course," the zebra replied. "I'll have to get my stripes redone, of course. Quite a pain, but I keep a pony for just such an occasion."

"You zebras and your stripes," the Knight replied with a laugh, one the Vizier did not share. "Red. Black. What's it matter?"

"Unicorn. Pegasus. What's it matter?" he replied with an edge to his voice. "Accept that there are some aspects to my kind you do not need to understand, and I will accept the same of yours." The Vizier looked around at the controls. "You'll be ready to catch the moonstone when it falls?"

"I don't plan on being vaporized," the Knight answered. "You think she'll be successful altering the trajectory?"

"She has Blackjack's talent for victory. I am utterly assured of it. A pity she doesn't realize Blackjack's talent is victory, not survival. We will simply destroy her wherever she lands triumphantly rather than at the scene of her staged battle." The Vizier laughed and shook his head. "I had looked forward to witnessing her face when she was vaporized along with her most ardent supporters, but this will have to do." The Vizier then regarded the empty terminals. "You're going to need help making sure all is ready. I could provide–"

"Please," the Knight interrupted with a shake of his head. "I trust

you as far as dividing the Wasteland between us. I need your Brood. You need the Core. Let's not complicate matters by providing any more temptations for betrayal than necessary. I'll find some Harbingers with the necessary technical experience."

The zebra paused for several seconds, just smiling at the armored pony. "I suppose," the Vizier conceded. "We should keep perspective. After all, the last thing either of us wants is to serve beneath the hoof of that delusional monstrosity. Once we've sorted her out, things should take care of themselves." He turned, regarding the smoking, sparking heap of the computer. "And at last Blackjack is out of the picture. Discord failed to interfere. All is as it should be."

"Yes, his pitiful failure was quite extraordinary," the Knight chuckled. "I hadn't quite expected him to turn to dust, but--"

The statement made the zebra freeze. "Discord was here?" the Vizier muttered.

"Yes, for a minute or two, right before you arrived. Stopped me from smashing the metal nag to scrap, made some taunts, and sent her and Cog's pet skull somewhere. Then he turned to dust and blew away," the Knight said, now sounding a bit baffled in that helmet. "What's the matter? Everything happened as you predicted. Well…aside from Cognitum not being able to use EC-1101. I wonder what happened there. Still, nothing else major changed."

"You don't know that!" the Vizier hissed. "Discord. Pinkie Pie. Blackjack. You have no idea how dangerous they are. You think killing makes a pony dangerous! Killing is nothing! Knowledge. Interference. Those are dangerous, *fool*!" He spat the last word so sharply that the Knight took a step back. "If he was here, it was for a reason! Why Dawn? Why Snips?"

"He was crazy!" the Knight retorted. "Now all three are dead. I don't know what you're so upset about. He didn't even have enough power to save himself."

Now the Vizier appeared particularly pissed. "I must triple check everything now. I've worked far too hard to let his ilk unravel everything. He did something. Changed something. Meddled in some way." He trotted towards the elevator. "If I were you, I'd put a few more shells into those remains. Make certain that Blackjack is annihilated! Kill off the rest of Cognitum's little collection. Send out patrols. Something is amiss, and we must know what it is!" He glared up at the direction she'd gone. "I never would have sent her

on her way if I'd known he'd been here!"

"Well, it's too late now. You'll look oddly suspicious trotting around with her when you're supposed to be dire enemies. Guess that 'prophecy' you made up bit you in the tail," the Knight said scornfully.

"The prophecy is real. It was revealed to me by…higher powers. I've learned the best way to sabotage prophecy is to place someone unworthy in its role," the Vizier muttered. "My opposition to the Star Maiden was the deception…and a source of grief for Blackjack," he continued in aggravation as he paced back and forth. "What could he have done? Something…something…some juvenile, puerile prank…with dire repercussions…."

"What's the big deal? He's dead."

The Vizier struggled to maintain his composure, his whole body shaking for a moment. "You don't understand just how persistently he's worked against my goals. How difficult he's made the execution of my plans." He paced back and forth, speaking faster and faster. "You can't imagine how infuriating it is to creep and skulk about because one of his little schemes put the Princesses on high alert and suspicious of everyone else trying to move up. He's inspired heroes, elevated the Princesses, and legitimized their roles in Equestria. His petrification didn't help, either. With his absence, any disruption to the social order was noted! It made this so terribly difficult. Had it not been for the war, I never would have had my opportunity! I refuse to let him undo all my hard work! Now, *what did he do?*"

"Nothing! He appeared, taunted Cognitum a bit, then turned to dust. He seemed to want her to bond with Luna's soul." That made the Vizier hiss again in frustration. "What? You said that that wouldn't matter!" the Knight protested.

"Of course not. We planned on killing her, Luna's soul or not. But *Discord* thought it mattered. He thought it important! Important enough to die for!" The zebra ran towards the elevator. "We must remove the soul immediately!" Then he skidded to a stop, his eyes wide. "Unless that's what he actually wants us to do…but if he... but I... he... AHHHGH!" The zebra clasped his skull, screaming in frustration, "Damn you, Discord! *What have you done*?"

The Knight took several steps back. "Look, what does it matter? I have the Tokomare, and soon as Cognitum returns, she's dead. So what's the–"

The Vizier was on him in seconds. His hooves hooked around the Knight's neck, and he gave a colossal heave over his back. The silver-armored stallion crashed down with an impact that made the whole spire vibrate. "The point? The point is that he can *change* things!" the zebra yelled. "He can see things a step ahead. He knows what to do and what not to do! You have no concept what it means to fight that!"

The Knight didn't reply beyond a groan as the Vizier rose, his face grim. "I did not want to do this…it was so much better taking advantage of the fears and ambitions of others. Cognitum. Dawn. You. Even Blackjack. Now it seems that I have no choice."

He walked to the edge of the platform, sitting and spreading his hooves wide. "Stars of the dark places. Stars of ash. Stars of death. I beseech thee. Tell me the dance of your circles. How has Discord marred your celestial orbits? Please! I beg thee. Ashur. Dagon. Namtar. Show me…"

A blue-white glow surrounded him, cold and clear, and his anger stilled. A frigid shaft of light seemed to drop upon him, and the air around him groaned and crackled. A sickly green glow began to shine out of his chest, pulsing with each beat. "Things have gone awry…" he began, and the groan around him deepened ominously. The beating green light slowed, and a spasm of pain crossed the Vizier's face. "But all will be set right, greatest and most glorious ones! I beg you…what was the meddler's last ploy?" The glowing beat slowly resumed, and a tense smile returned to his face. "I see. I understand. And Cognitum?" The shivery light rang as if it were laughing. A look of relief spread on his face. "Thank you. Then she is not the true Maiden, now or ever."

"What are you doing?" the Knight groaned. "What is that light?" It throbbed like veins of green radiance within the Vizier's hide.

The zebra didn't answer immediately, and when he did, his voice had a soft, unnatural tone to it. "The light of stars that died long ago, and would not go quietly into the darkness." The Tokomare began to glow as well, the starmetal shining with the malignant green glare of Enervation. Even the Knight's armor took on an ethereal illumination. In that light were strange, incoherent things suggestive of faces and tendrils and other terrible shapes hidden within the silvery radiance. "And the two he took?" Now his smile faded. "Interesting…"

"Stop. P…please…stop…" the former Steel Ranger muttered

weakly, metal hooves clenched against his helmet.

"We did not stop for Caesars. What makes you think we would stop for you?" The light continued to wash over everything for a few moments longer, the Enervation scream now sounding like the whisper of hundreds of unholy voices. They hinted at ways to break things. Corrupt things. Undo things that should not be undone. Make things that should not be made. Then he nodded. "I see. Blackjack was the only factor then?" Another pause. "And she is no more?" More hissing whispers. They rose and fell, and made the zebra frown. "Blackjack is broken…" He muttered the phrase as if tasting it and finding it to his liking. "Good. Then all is accounted for," he said as he rose to his hooves, his face sublime with confidence as the glow faded.

"What…what was that?" the Knight muttered weakly as he drew himself to his hooves.

"Things far greater and more glorious than you. They've shown me their secret orbits and the drawing of their power. Discord affected *something*, but it was slight. The tiniest wobble of the outplay of events. A hair's shift out of alignment, ultimately for naught." He trotted towards the lift.

"You serve those…things?" he groaned, still wobbling on his hooves.

"You would *oppose* them?" he asked in reply, with a content, blissful smile. "They are more magnificent than Caesar or Princess, and you would do well to be counted as their ally rather than their enemy. I have struggled on their behalf for so very long. When the war came, I *finally* had my golden opportunity, and I am *not* going to waste it."

"So your goal is to turn Equestria into some kind of…of…star worshiping cult?" the Knight sputtered.

The serene zebra didn't answer immediately, then replied calmly, "Something like that."

"That's sick. I won't let you. I can't believe…" the Knight began. Then the Vizier gave him a look…just a single glance…that silenced him. There was power in that stare, a lingering remnant of the dark entities he consorted with flickered that same baleful green.

"You can't believe. That is why you will never rule anything, Steel Rain, because you cannot believe in anything greater or more meaningful than yourself. You will either serve forever as Cognitum's puppet, or you will serve my masters just as I do and

revel in the power they grant their most devoted. But you will serve, or you will die. Is that understood?"

The Knight stood there a moment, cannons pointed right at the zebra. The Vizier waited, a bored smile on his face. Then the Knight turned away, and the zebra gave the tiniest shake of his head. "Good. I need somepony here pushing the buttons when the time is right. Leash your delusions of ambition, or they'll get you killed." He hit a button, and the lift began to rise. "I must rectify other small permutations. I will contact you shortly."

The elevator rose up, and for the longest time the Knight watched it go. Then he sat down, tore off his helmet, and was violently ill over the platform edge. After he puked, he sat a while, muttering to himself. "That striped bastard thinks he can talk to me like that? Me? I'll show him and his fucking stars who owns this world. I won't serve anyone. Not him or Cognitum or Dawn or Crunchy Carrots. Me. I'm the one who should be in charge. I won't be second to anyone. Anyone!"

The Princess drew back from the raging stallion into the safety of the shadows beside the wreckage of the computer. She could not draw far. The wires in her head hurt terribly, and if she pulled on them…well…she wouldn't live long after that. "I just want to go home. Please. Just let me go home," she whispered to herself.

"I wish to return home as well," a synthetic voice murmured. The Princess started, then peeked at a little notch at the base of the processor. A broken and battered pony-shaped object lay there. The Sorceress's Lady. The Princess knelt down, looking at the pale green light flickering in the mechanical eyes. "I thought I would save the Wasteland. That I would make it all better. I just had to give enough to make it so…"

The Princess's magic tugged at the broken Lady, pulling her from the hidden notch. Behind her were some faintly glowing bones. The Sorceress's Dark Magician. The purple glowing aura surrounding them formed a ghostlike image of the rotund pony. The Princess drew the broken machine into her hooves and embraced the cold, hard metal. "My head hurts so much," the Princess whimpered.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you now. I can't save anyone," the broken Lady whispered.

"It's like when I was shot in the head, only this time it's lots of little holes and the bullets are still in there," the Princess said as she hugged the smashed torso and head like a run-over windup toy.

Any second the Knight would either follow the Vizier out, leaving them all trapped, or he'd obey the Vizier and find them all cowering.

"You should get back in a jar. The stasis fields should stop your pain," the Dark Magician said, his bones flashing brighter with every word.

"I don't want to get in the fields. It's like not having my body again. I don't want to not feel like my body isn't really there again," the Princess whimpered, quivering.

The broken Lady, however, did not respond for several seconds. "Child, what are you talking about? When were you…shot?"

"All the time. I'm always getting hurt. My body. My heart. My soul. Always getting hurt. People always shoot me. Even my friends shot me. Glory shot me in the face…but it's okay. It was an accident," the Princess muttered weakly.

"What?" the Dark Magician muttered. "Child, do you know what Blackjack told me before I died?"

The Princess frowned, opening and closing her mouth slowly, thinking about what she knew about the Barbarian. "She…she swore to get Snails out. And I think she said she was…sorry?"

"How can this be?" the Dark Magician asked, his glowing socket motes turning to the smashed Lady.

The broken stub of a leg reached out and brushed the wires dangling from the Princess's head, making her wince and draw back. "It must be…it must be the neural taps Cognitum wired. She kept the connection constant. When the computer was destroyed, the link persisted; it must have shoved Blackjack's memories into the only buffer still connected to it!"

"Can her brain hold the experiences of another pony?" the glowing skull asked in awe.

"She's young. She and Blackjack both. I can only assume there's enough space, but…why isn't she…Blackjack?" the broken Lady asked.

The Dark Magician replied immediately. "Because there's none of Blackjack's soul in her. Blackjack's mind…her memory and personality…they're just like a character in a story to Charm. Without her soul, they're just detailed data." He peered into the Princess's eyes. "How long can she hold those memories?"

"I don't know," the broken Lady murmured, "But…perhaps long enough to bring Blackjack back…if we can get that body!"

“There you are,” the Knight said evenly as he walked around the corner of the smoldering computer, helmet clipped to his shoulder. The Knight’s kind and gentle face was now harrowed, his eyes sunken with anxiety. “I thought I’d heard voices.”

“Steel Rain. Listen. You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to serve Cognitum or the Legate,” the Dark Magician said rapidly.

“Shut up. I’m not planning on serving anypony,” the Knight growled. “I’m going to be the one on top. You’ll see. It doesn’t matter how often I get set back. I’m going to be in charge and no one will stop me.”

“You spoiled bastard,” the broken Lady retorted, “Can’t you think about anypony besides yourself?”

“That’s worked wonders for you and Blackjack, hasn’t it?” the Knight replied with a glower. “She’s dead and you’re…about to join her,” he muttered dully.

“What’s happened to you?” the broken Lady asked.

“Nothing. I’m fine,” he snapped.

“He was touched by the song of dead stars,” the Dark Magician replied. “The Black Book was rife with all kinds of their dark magic. After a while, you just stop caring about how it hollows you out and fills you up with its temptations.”

The Knight sneered at them. “I’ve had it to here with stripe talk about dead stars.” He tapped the collar of his power armor with a hoof. “The Legate’s going to take Cognitum off the board. I’ll take him off the board. Game over. I win. Tokomare’s restored. Core’s restored. I get to reboot civilization. The Steel Reign of King Steel Rain. Sounds catchy, huh?”

“Sounds stupid,” the Princess whimpered, hugging the broken Lady all the tighter to keep from shaking. “Go away. You won’t be king any more than I’ll be queen. Nopony likes you.”

The Knight blinked at her. “I like me,” he said in faintly injured tones, his voice regaining a little of his old self.

“Nopony else, then,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “It doesn’t matter how smart or clever or sneaky you are. If nopony believes in you, or likes you, or wants you, they’re not going to follow you. It doesn’t matter how shiny your armor is or how big your guns are. Everypony knows you hate them, and probably think you’ll kill ‘em the second it suits you…‘cause you will.” She closed her eyes. “I used to be just like you. Then I got wires stuck in my head. Now I’m not so stupid anymore.”

The Knight opened and closed his mouth a moment, then gave a little frown. “Well. I guess there’s just one thing left to do.” He stepped forward, raising a hoof. “Hold still. This’ll be quick.”

“Wait!” the broken Lady implored. “Charm has a copy of Blackjack’s mind. If we get that blank back, we can put her back in!”

The Knight froze, staring for a moment, then laughed and backed away. “Oh, you think I want Blackjack back? There are five people in the world I really want dead. You. Cognitum. That striped bastard. The Lightbringer, simply ‘cause I don’t want to deal with ‘heroic weather’ while I’m remaking civilization for my glory. And Blackjack. Blackjack most of all.” His left cannon let out a loud ka-chunk as it loaded a round. “Because if she had just had the decency to die and leave me the *Celestia*, I would have taken over the Hoof four months ago.” He grinned at the three of them. “Time to end this.”

Then a great hissing mass launched itself from out of the shadows behind the three, clearing the filly and diving at the armored stallion. “STAY AWAY FROM MY KIDS!” the Revenant screamed in near feral rage as the maroon ghoul opened his jaws wide, Pink Cloud boiling up his throat. Had the Knight been wearing his helmet, he might have simply opted for a point blank blast and been done with all of them. As it was, he had to backpedal rapidly to avoid having his face melted off, trying to keep the demented Revenant at bay with armored kicks.

The two tumbled off the maneframe’s platform, the Revenant springing on top of the Knight. The broken Lady’s eyes turned to the Dark Magician’s sockets. “Can you retrieve Blackjack’s body? Do you have a spell or something…anything…that could pull that blank up here?”

“I…no. The distance is too far for basic telekinesis. And all of my spells affect the soul, not the body.” Then he paused, the glow in his sockets growing. “But her soul is bonded to her body. If I had enough power, perhaps I could summon her spirit, and the body could come along for the ride.”

“What kind of power do you need?” the broken Lady asked immediately.

“A circle of at least six unicorns, Snails, or…or…” His eyes turned this way and that in his skull. Then they stared straight up. “Or that.” The Princess raised her eyes, looking up at one of the golden

arms projecting out into the void thirty feet overhead. As she watched, a dozen emerald lightning bolts struck the end, the energy being sucked up along the cables. “That might do it.”

“Each of those arms carries one point twenty-one gigasparks, at least. It’d vaporize you,” Dawn said immediately.

“Not instantly, though. I’m a soul jar, albeit a flawed and improperly prepared one. I should last long enough to get Blackjack back. I might even survive. Wouldn’t that be a laugh?” he said hollowly. “Once we do have the body, though, how do we get Blackjack back inside?”

“I should be able to do it if we can just get our hooves on Cognitum’s neural mapping array. If it still works, that is. I think it landed over there on the side of the platform. I don’t know how we’re going to get you up to that arm and get me the array before Steel Rain or Sanguine kills us.”

“I’ll do it,” the Princess said. “I’ll get him up there.” She closed her eyes so she wouldn’t see the doubt in theirs. “Blackjack did so much for so many. I should be able to do this.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but you still have wires connecting you to the jar,” the Dark Magician pointed out. But the Princess trotted to where the wires entered the wrecked jar’s rim, bit down on the cables, set her hooves against the housing, and pulled as hard as she could. The harder she strained, the worse her head throbbed and tingled unnaturally. Her stomach lurched as nausea rolled through her. For a second, she was sure her teeth were going to yank right out, but then the wires suddenly jerked as the cover gave way to reveal the clustered circuitry around the jar’s top. She twisted, yanked, and freed a large ring of arcane technology her head wires were directly connected to, then put her head through it like a yoke. The heavy ring scraped along the floor as she trotted to the skull. The Princess deftly tied the skull into a bit of slack in the wires connecting her head and collar. The filly then ran to one of the supports as fast as she could and struggled to get up high enough where she could use the crossbracing to wiggle her way up to the golden arm.

The Princess fought tears of frustration. She could do this. She needed to do this. She just needed to get up a couple of feet. But the Lady was broken, and there were no others who could–

“Excuse me,” a mare said pleasantly, trotting from around the back of the computer. “I need some medical assistance for Mr. Horse,”

the Golem said with a worried frown, glancing over her shoulder at the quivering lump on her back that had once been a pony. “He’s not himself. It has been over one hundred and five million minutes since he told me how amazing he is.” She looked back at all the rest of us. “I’m quite concerned,” she added in complete sincerity.

The three others stared back for two seconds. Then the broken Lady spoke up. “Yes. Yes! We’re trying to get him medical help. We need your help to get him help.” She gestured at the Princess with a wing stub. “Please, boost her up to the ladder. Then I need you to take me to the front of the maneframe, quickly.”

The Golem tilted her head and blinked cluelessly. “It would be more efficient and effective to contact paramedics and have Mr. Horse taken to a Ministry of Peace medical center. He seems to have lost most of his epidermis.”

“Just…that’s what we’re trying to do. Please!” the broken Lady begged. “I promise it’ll help Mr. Horse.”

“Oh. Okay then!” the Golem said brightly, sliding Horse gently from her back and setting him down, then casually scooping up the filly. Clinging to her back, the Princess was lifted high enough that she could climb onto the bracing and start to wiggle up to the spire. “Careful,” the robotic mare said brightly.

“Thanks,” the Princess replied, then started to pick her way up the side of the spire, the lambent pony skull weighing heavily around her neck and the Dark Magician’s radiant bones dangling and rattling against the metal as if still connected by invisible sinews. Below her, she saw the broken Lady and Horse both picked up and carried over towards the front of the machine by the Golem. “Do you think Mr. Horse will be okay?” The feeling of compassion was alien to her, but unlike so very much the Sorceress had taught her, it wasn't altogether unwelcome.

“Do not worry about Mr. Horse,” the glowing skull admonished as she climbed. “He probably lost his soul long ago. Worry about yourself.” The edge of the golden ring cut into her neck with each foot she ascended. Off to the side, she could see where the Knight and the Revenant still fought, but both were lost in a pink haze that spread over the floor of the platform. Their movements were just a blur of candy-colored mist, clanging metal, and feral hisses.

“What about you? Aren’t you worried about yourself?” she asked.

“No,” the bones replied with a papery sigh. “I’m old and I’m tired. I’ve done so much, and too much of it’s been bad for me to ever be

able to even attempt to live happily. And…now that I'm back together…I owe Blackjack for what I did to her. Owe a lot for the ponies I've hurt. Some things don't get forgiven."

"Blackjack feels the same way all the time," the Princess said. "She can't forgive herself. But I know she'd forgive you."

"And you as well, child," he said as she climbed closer to the humming arm. "Ironic. The mare that can't cut herself a little slack for her mistakes will happily excuse far worse from others." His voice dropped. "She rescued my friend, and I hurt her for it."

The Princess reached the furthest she could. The ring dragged at her neck, threatening to pull her to the wreckage far below. The broken Lady and the Golem were occluded by the spreading pink mist, getting something from the front of the machine. The Princess now looked at the glowing skull and at the thick cables overhead where the arm met the supporting structure. "I can't get any higher," she said as she carefully untied the wires from the skull, then looped the slack around her upper foreleg and scanned around.

"Wait. There!" the skull said as her gaze passed a large lever underneath the arm. A small sign marked it 'Breaker'. "Pull that!"

She moved along the structure to the bar and threw all her weight into it. Fortunately, the lever resisted for only a few seconds before it flipped over. The gold-tipped arm let out a crack as a gap opened between it and its power cables. The lightning stopped crackling. The gap was just big enough for the pony skull to fit.

"What's going to happen if I put you in there?" the Princess asked.

"So concerned... " the skull muttered, sounding amused, and the Princess flushed. "Well, have you ever put a bit in a fuse box? Something like that. And whether an imperfect soul jar can survive the current, magical discharge, and Enervation…well…let's find out." The skull chuckled. "'Let's find out.' If only Snails and I had known how much trouble those three words would cause us."

The Princess didn't know what else to do. Only that he was being brave, and that a real princess, not a snotty nasty mean princess, would give him something before he went. So she kissed the top of his skull, then threw him up into the gap. The rest of the glowing bones followed into the breach, and as soon as the skull bridged the gap, a blinding light arced through. "Okay…this stings a bit…ow… Ow! Okay…more than a bit!"

An aura of magic burst forth, and a crackling black claw of sorcery arched out of the gap and reached down into the depths far below,

sweeping to and fro. The Princess could no longer see the fighting between the Knight and the ghoul at all through the Pink Cloud. "Ow. Ow. Where are you, Blackjack? Ow…" the skull said as crackling sparks of energy rained down from the gap. The skull rattled around in the space like mad, but the Princess didn't dare get any closer to try and keep it still.

Suddenly, the hand of black energy withdrew from the depths, pulling with it a white mass, and set the pale, sodden shape on the deck behind the blasted computer. The Princess scrambled down to it as swiftly as she could. "Ow…ow…ow…" the skull repeated as the lightning crackled more and more. "Is she okay?" the Dark Magician asked.

The Princess fell the last ten feet, landing hard and almost falling over, but she didn't bother to fully regain her footing before scrambling over to the waterlogged mare. The plastic-covered moonstone talisman still hung around her neck. She carefully pressed her ear to the white unicorn's side. She waited a moment. She heard the heavy thud of a heartbeat within. "She's alive!" the Princess shouted, smiling up at the skull trapped in the electrified gap.

"Huh? What do you know?" The Dark Magician actually sounded surprised! "It worked! It actually worked! Snails–"

The gap where the skull rested exploded, the metal arm shuddering as it was twisted and sheared away, tumbling end over end into the abyss below. Of the glowing bones, nothing remained. A second later, the oozing pink body of the Revenant was tossed back up onto the elevated platform the remains of the computer sat upon. Broken pink bones jutted from his limbs as he struggled, most of his torso crushed and mangled. From around the side of the maneframe came the Golem and the battered remains of the Lady.

"Quickly. Set me down," the Lady said, and the robot dropped her next to the prone form. "Grab that terminal, Sweetie! Bring it over here."

"Mr. Horse isn't going to like me breaking off pieces of his masterpiece," the Golem said in worry as she reached over and pulled one of the terminals off the ruined machine.

"Do it," a choking, mottled voice hissed. Everyone froze at the horrid sight of the skinned stallion lifting his head. Blood dripped down his lips. "You're trying to transfer an intelligence, right?"

"Y…yes…" the broken Lady said in a low voice. "From a filly's

brain back into a blank copy with her soul."

"Oh. I thought this was going to be hard," the Skinned Pony muttered. "You're using the mind array from this, right? Sweetie Bot, pull off the back of the housing. Wire in the array to access terminal AB-02. Wire in the filly to AB-01. If the copy has the soul, it should self-arrange. Just like pouring water through a pipe."

"Here all of you are," the Knight said as he stepped around the ruined machine, his helmet back on his head, his armor pristine, and his guns at the ready. "Cognitum's little menagerie. What do you think you're doing?"

"Well, I'm doing my best not to scream. Fortunately, I've had two hundred years of revenge fantasies to help focus me," the Skinned Pony rasped. "You'd be smart to join our side. Serving that crazy nag isn't a good idea. She's a lot like you. Manipulation and backstabbing are her two favorite hobbies. I should know."

"Fortunately, my compatriot has the means to destroy her with ease. She'll go to the moon and fix Horizons so it'll fire where we want it to, and the Core will be restored. Then we kill her on the way back." The power-armored stallion tapped his nose. "I'll have to deal with the Legate when it's over. That fuck is too sneaky to trust, but I'll have the whole Core at my disposal. I'll get him, one way or another."

"Stay away from my children!" the Revenant hissed, the broken ghoul dragging himself towards the Knight. "I won't let you hurt them. I won't!" he spat mindlessly, Pink Cloud oozing out of the holes in his hide.

"Shut. Up," the Knight said, then stomped down hard. His hoof crushed the ghoul's skull like a silver hammer hitting a rotten egg. He twisted his hoof for good measure in the pulpy, rotten mass, grinding it into the metal deck. The body quivered, then went still.

"You murderer!" the broken Lady cried out at him.

"Oh, you have no right to talk," the Knight countered. "It's time to tie up loose ends."

The Golem worked furiously to wire things into the back of the terminal, shielding the Barbarian with her body. "Wait," the Skinned Pony rasped. "I can help you. I know things."

"Oh?" the Knight stopped. "I'm listening."

"There's a base in the valley. A special stable made for Equestria's nobility. The Redoubt. I can tell you how to access it." The Skinned Pony shuddered as his flayed body cracked, dripping more blood.

“All I want is a healing potion, restoration talisman, or something.”

“Why would I need that when I have the Core?” the Knight asked with a metallic chuckle.

“It never hurts to have contingencies,” the Skinned Pony rasped, quivering, as fresh wounds opened up on him. “I’m bleeding quite profusely, and the agony’s getting rather excessive, so I’d appreciate healing sooner than later.”

“”Yeah, yeah. Just a second. Need to finish off the…rest…” He trailed off as he looked past the Golem at the Barbarian. “No. No way. She’s more tenacious than a radroach!”

“Stop!” the broken Lady hissed as the Knight shoved the bloody Skinned Pony aside. “You heard the Legate! He fears Blackjack! Leaving her alive would be your best weapon against him.”

“I have no doubt it would. But I also know that Blackjack isn’t going to let me rule the Core. She’s handled way too much shit. I’d rather face a star-worshiping zebra alone than let that bloody mule loose again.” He lowered his guns at the Barbarian.

The poor Lady threw her broken body at him. She didn’t get far. One hoof came up, blocking the lunging mare. She collided with it, and the hoof came down, crushing her against the floor. “You’re just as bad as Blackjack is. Take a hint and die!” he shouted as he stomped again and again. The battered and dinged cybermare clanged and crunched as she was smashed to scrap against the floor.

The Princess gazed up at the Golem as it finished wiring both sets of cables in. The gem-studded net was spread over the Barbarian’s skull. “There. That should be sufficient,” the robot said brightly. “Once the transfer is complete, we need to get medical attention for Mr. Horse immediately! He’s a very important pony, you know.”

The Knight started, distracted from his destruction of the Lady. “Oh fuck no!” he shouted, and his cannon roared. He fired hastily and high, though, so much so that the Princess and the Barbarian weren’t even knocked across the deck by the shockwave. The Golem, however, smiled benignly as the blast ripped her synthetic body apart, the sturdy frame ripping in half and sending the remains bouncing over the remaining pair of ponies. The Princess hugged the terminal, keeping the cables plugged into the back of the boxy machine. The front half of the robot landed with a crash, her eyes rolling in her smoking sockets.

“No! Sweetie Belle!” the Skinned Pony rasped, reaching a bloody hoof out towards her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Horse. I'm afraid I broke," she buzzed as she lay there. "Would you like me to execute the transfer?"

The Princess looked up at the armored pony. He stood on the broken body of the Lady, his cannons swiveling down at the Princess as she hugged the terminal. All she had to do was throw the machine aside and beg him for help. Maybe offer to run the Society for him. Something. Anything to save herself. Because that's what she'd always done.

What she'd always done had never made her happy before. "Yes!" she cried out.

"No!" the Knight shouted, then cried out as a starmetal-edged pinion found a gap between two plates in his legs and rammed through. The armored stallion reared up and slammed the somehow still-struggling Lady in a fury. "No more of your interference! Die already!" He kept smashing down until there was a wet pulpy noise. The armored shell fell slack.

Then the terminal let out a beep–

* * *

I lurched as everything came together, the experience like a board across my face. Steel Rain's actions…Cognitum…Amadi…all of it fell into place inside my head and I grabbed Charm and lunged away as a second shot blasted out a chunk of the platform. Chunks of metal debris rained down on us, and I felt the now-unfamiliar sensation of pain as my shoulders were pummeled. Still, it had to be worse for her, with wires dangling out her skull.

"You…no!" Steel Rain shouted as I set her on my back. "What does it take to kill you?"

"Sometimes I wonder that too," I said, more to myself than to him. I slowly made my way around towards where Horse huddled, bleeding profusely. I took in the crushed forms of Sanguine and Dawn. "So you're going to betray Cognitum and Amadi both? Is there anypony you won't stab in the back?"

"Myself," he answered glibly. "I'm just not that flexible." He chuckled as he kept his cannons trained on me. "I don't suppose there's any chance you'd just happily let me rule the Core and the Wasteland without any interference, is there?"

"I don't suppose there's any chance you'd actually let me live in peace and leave other ponies alone, is there?" I countered as I

stared at him, trying to think of how I'd beat him. Nothing was coming to me. I should have been coming up with…something…or even just doing things on impulse. Instead, I felt a cold knot of terror where my victory had been earlier. I didn't know how I could beat him. I didn't even know if he could be beaten. I didn't even have a weapon I could use.

"No. No offense, but after what you did on the *Celestia*, I have to kill you on general principle now," he said. His cannons thunked as he loaded a new pair of shells. "Now, hold still and let's make this–" On 'this' he fired, and where I'd been standing exploded. "Clean."

But I wasn't there. I'd teleported directly behind him, panting hard, feeling the adrenaline surging inside me. Without my steel augmentation, that teleport had been almost…easy. My eyes focused on his guns, and my magic reached out and began to field strip the firing pins from both of them. I might not have been able to hurt him, but I could at least take away his favorite toys.

A metal hoof slammed back at me, and I barely ducked. The glittering, silvery hoof flew over my head, and I backed away with the firing pins floating beside me. He whirled around, and the cannons made a clicking noise. "Looking for these?" I asked with a smile before tossing them out over the edge. "Oopsie."

That pissed him off. He charged, and I ran with Charm clutching my head, the plastic medallion bouncing off my chest. I was getting tired and sore; I tried not to enjoy it too much. As much as I'd have liked some barding and as useful as my augments would be right now, I couldn't help but love every sensation inside me. My heart beating, my stomach growling, my shoulders aching, my ears ringing…each and every one was a reminder that I was alive now.

Unfortunately, among all the sensations I'd regained, there was one I'd lost entirely. Cognitum still had my baby, so that definitely diminished my enjoyment quite a bit.

I still wasn't sure how I was going to beat him with no weapons. I didn't even have a rock or baton. Still, there was lots of debris. I levitated up a spar of metal and gave an experimental swing. The bar clanged off his helmet, and he didn't even slow down. In fact, he caught up a little more.

If I could get some more space between the two of us, I'd try to get up the elevator…wait…no, Horse needed help. That wouldn't work. Maybe more talking? But he wanted to kill me a *lot*; what else was there to chat over? Come on. Think. Usually I'd be at the shooting,

stabbing, or stomping part of the fight by now.

I teleported again, over to where the bloody trail led to Horse lying bleeding next to the ruined Sweetie Bot. The machine buzzed and crackled softly as he whispered into her ear. He didn't look like he was going to last much longer without skin. I carefully set Charm down. "We need to get you into one of the stasis jars," I said as I surveyed the smoking debris. There wasn't an intact one left, though. And there was no way a healing potion would survive down here in all this Enervation. "Damn it. I wanted to ask you questions. About Horizons. Goldenblood. Cognitum."

He reached out with a bloody hoof for my face, and then felt my forehead. "You're a hornhead. I don't suppose you can read memories like a M.o.M. Pink?"

"I…maybe?" I didn't have time for any kind of finesse, really. "I don't have a memory orb to hold it in, though."

"So hold it in your brain as best you can. That was all anypony could do. The best they can." He closed his eyes and gave a shudder. There was so much blood. So much! "I was so clever. Didn't realize I was getting played."

"By Goldenblood?" I asked with a frown.

He snorted blood. "Yeah, right. That hornhead was just another piece on the board. We all were. All except for…her…" He began to slide over. "Better get your memories. I'm feeling cold."

I looked around for Steel Rain, but I couldn't see him anywhere. That worried me even more. Leaning in, I pressed my horn to his brow and tried to make the connection. My forays into Rampage's mind gave me something to expect, but where her memories were layers and layers of water, Horse's mind was a geometric fractal pattern in which thoughts were arranged almost haphazardly. I had no idea what to grab, so I thought 'Horizons' and watched a portion of his brain light up. I grabbed that portion, pulling it into myself as pieces of his mind slowly blacked out one after the next.

'Cognitum!' I thought furiously. Much more lit up, so I took the brightest sections I could. 'Goldenblood', I thought, and grabbed a feeble memory, the only part that wasn't going dark. I had no idea if I'd retain the memories when the spell ended, or if I'd contaminate myself with Horse. He hadn't seemed particularly good, but if he could help…"I got it. I've got them!" It was all I could say to the dying stallion.

"Good," he said, and then pulled his plastic covered pendant off

and pushed it into my hooves. “Your best…weapon…” he breathed, then slumped over to the side. I pulled away and watched as his body slumped, liquefying before my eyes. “Damn it…I…wanted…” he gurgled, but whatever he wanted, I’d have to get it from his memories.

I’d had quite a few memories in my time from dozens of different ponies. I could remember all the memories I’d had with Charm, and could feel chunks of Horse like huge blocks of ice slowly melting away inside my head and joining the rest of the pool that was Blackjack. Would I stay me, or would having Charm and Horse’s memories change me? I felt sad for some of the things Charm had done; she could have thrived in 99, but she deserved better.

I glanced over my shoulder at Charm. I knew the filly now, knew her disappointments and her demons. If I’d known what I did now when we’d first met, I wouldn’t have left her alone with Scotch or picked her to rule, but I would have been more compassionate and respectful. She was like the Overmare: hounded by shame, feeling urges no filly should face, and keeping herself together with an overwhelming sense of pride that she didn’t come close to meriting. She would have had a happier life working under Caprice... before I’d come along, that is.

It’d take me some time to think about what I’d grabbed from Horse. I could only hope that it didn’t affect me too badly. I examined the medallion. My best weapon? How was it a weapon? It was just a piece of moonstone covered in plastic. How could I use it as a weapon? What was I supposed to do, hit him with it? I would do better teleporting Charm and me to the elevator and getting the hay out of here! “Come on, Charm,” I said as I turned back to the filly.

Then Steel Rain dropped from the wreckage behind me, plummeting like a silvery meteor. I fell back and rolled as his hooves stomped down. Each impact dented the floor plates as I rolled to the side, barely keeping ahead of him. I tried to blast his head with magic bullets, but I might as well have been spitting on him for all the good it did. The magic just deflected off his silver armor. I struck the edge of the maneframe, lying on my back and watching the hoof drop towards my head.

I rolled in towards him; he reacted more quickly than I'd hoped and pinched me between his forehooves, but I summoned my magic and flashed away again before he could squish me. I hopped onto

my hooves. “Okay. Time for us to g–” But the words and the plan died in my throat.

Steel Rain stood by Charm. One hoof was stomped firmly on the end of the taut wires trailing from her head to the nearby ring, and the other was resting on her head, ready to push it away and either yank the wires out or just outright crush it. “No more fucking around, Blackjack. No more. That striped fuck was right. You’re way too dangerous to be left alive. Now, you’re going to come over here, you’re going to lay down, and you’re going to die, or I’m pulling every plug all at once.”

I stared at him. Could I teleport in and away before he could move his hoof? Would she survive it? “You’re just going to kill her after me,” I challenged.

“No. I *might* kill her after you,” he countered in a voice that made me imagine a shit-eating grin on his face. “Maybe I will. I’m in a real bad mood right now. But *maybe* I’ll hold onto her. Maybe use her as a bargaining chip with the Society. There’s got to be more of those jars lying around. You never know. But you know that I *will* kill her if you don’t come over, and you’ll have another dead filly haunting you.” He laughed and shook his head. “But what’s one more, Blackjack? Think of how many ponies have died to keep you alive. How many more will die if I tell that zebra fuck and Cognitum that Discord farted you back into existence? I know, first things first, Cognitum’s going to pulp your friends. And that zebra? Who knows what kind of freaky star curses he’s got shoved up his ass?”

“You bastard,” I muttered, staring at the helpless filly. I couldn’t think of a way to save her. I wracked my brain a thousand times a second, but I couldn’t think of a way to beat him and win without losing her.

“Oh, sure. Insult my parentage, too. That’ll work wonders,” he laughed. He lifted the hoof and hooked the tip of his armor to one of the taut wires. “Maybe I can pluck these one by one? Play a melody in aneurysms. We can take wagers how many it takes before she’s a vegetable. Or maybe you can be Security one last time, trot over here, lay down, and save a pony. That’s your thing, isn’t it? Saving ponies?”

Yeah, it was. And he knew it too. I didn’t know what else I could do. No sword. No augments. No guns. I slowly walked closer, wracking my brain for some way to win. Some way to beat him.

Some spell. Some trick. Some something…

But I couldn't simply let him kill her. Even if she wasn't a good filly. She was still a filly, a pony, and she deserved saving.

Charm smiled through the tears on her cheeks. "You're a fucking moron, Blackjack. You know that?"

I froze, and Steel Rain looked down at her. "Shut up," he growled.

"Or what? You'll kill me?" Charm said, grinning even more as she wept. "You're scum. A coward taking a filly hostage to kill a pony better than you."

I stared at her. "Stop it, Charm. He'll kill you."

"Oh, I know he will. There's no 'might' about it, whatever he says. He's smart. You should have killed me the second you made Grace Regent, but you fucked it up," she said, laughing.

"Shut *up*!" Steel Rain bellowed again, a note of desperate frustration in his voice.

"Fuck you, you stupid fuck!" Charm shouted back at him, laughing some more, tears running down her cheek. "You are fucked. Because Blackjack is still Blackjack. It doesn't matter what you do to her. She does the right thing. No matter how much it fucking hurts. And she's been fucking hurt."

I gaped at her. "Don't. Please, Charm…"

She sniffed and smiling bitterly at me. "You're the only pony who's ever wanted to save me, Blackjack."

"Don't!" I begged, as Steel Rain looked from her to me.

"What…" the silver armored pony said as he turned his attention back to his hostage.

"Goodbye," she said, and her legs tensed beneath her. I tried to grab her with my magic, but she was too quick. By the time I'd grasped her, she had already kicked off and was lunging towards me. I could lift her but I couldn't stop her. Too heavy. Too fast.

The wires in her brain snapped taut, flipping her body around in the air a moment before several pulled free with a spray of blood. Tiny, wet gobs of pink, bloody tissue gleamed at the ends of the wires. She slid close enough to me that I lunged at her and pulled her into my hooves with my magic. Her body spasmed wildly with a gagging sound as she seized, her eyes pointing in two different directions. I heard the thunder of Steel Rain approaching as she thrashed.

I did the only thing I could think of: I threw Horse's moonstone medallion at his face as hard as I could. It was a pointless, futile

gesture. Charm had made me capable of fleeing now that the wires were pulled, but I could no more leave now than I could save her. The medallion flew true, impacting against his shoulder.

The metal armor flashed white, then exploded with enough force to bodily throw him to the side, crashing like an avalanche into the wrecked terminals. The medallion shot off in the opposite direction, but I caught it with my magic. The plastic had melted away, leaving a tiny round wafer of moonstone within. Then I turned and took in his silvery armor. No wonder my magic bullets hadn't even scratched it. "Starmetal? You lined your armor with *starmetal*?"

And I felt myself grin as I threw the sliver of moonstone against him again. It blew out another chunk of armor from his side. Given the armor had only been lined with it, rather than made of the stuff, I wasn't vaporizing the pony within. I was, however, blowing apart hoof-sized hunks of armor with each impact, striking the moonstone hard against the silver coating. "You murderous son of a mule!" Away went the plate covering his shoulders. "You bloody asshole!" An explosion ripped a strip of cabling and reinforcement from off his neck as he staggered back.

"Wait! You don't understand! I was molested as a colt!" Boom went a foreleg strut. "My mom rented me out to raiders!" Boom went a chest plate. "Cognitum made me do it!" The left side of his helmet flew apart in chunks and a wide, terrified eye stared at me. "The Legate used his star magic on me! I swear!" His other forehoof exploded in a cloud of shrapnel. "Damn it, stop!"

"I don't care! I don't care if you were brainwashed by your father into becoming a sex slave for Crunchy Carrots who tortured you for failing to conquer the Wasteland. You're dying right now!" He charged me, knocked me aside, and ran towards the prone Charm as fast as his damaged armor would allow. "Don't you touch her!" I screamed, teleporting in front of him and throwing the flake of moonstone at him again and again with my magic. "Murdering, betraying, fucking cunt!" I beat him back with every blast. Only the armor was keeping him alive. If he had a single sizable piece of the material inside his armor, I'd turn him to jelly. I *really* wanted him jelly. Once or twice the pebble struck hide with no effect, and I magically jerked it back before he could snag it in one of the holes.

The platform wasn't doing too good either. I was keeping between him and Charm, but a lot of the detonations were making the entire spire tremble and shake. The structure let out a shriek, the platform

tilting in the direction of the wrecked maneframe. Still, I couldn't stop. Not until he was dead. If I managed to take off the rest of his helmet, I was going to put a magic bullet through his face.

And he knew it, too. His armor was now a crippling liability; the front half – I hadn't put much work in further back than his cannons – was a smoking wreck. With the disabled weapons and struggling servomechanisms, he was barely able to keep moving around the edge. I blasted him with a magic bullet, but he raised a hoof in time; all I managed was a bloody hole in his leg. It didn't matter. I'd get him with the next. Or the next. Each hit knocked him further back and further back. Finally, I hit him with a detonation that nearly knocked him right over the edge.

Then, the fucker did the one thing I'd hoped he wouldn't. He raised his bloody hooves in the air and shouted as loud as he could, "I give up!"

"What?" I whispered hoarsely as I froze. He gave me a perfect shot: right through the hole in his helmet, straight at his eye. Even without S.A.T.S., I could hit him.

He coughed weakly. "I surrender. I quit. I throw myself on your mercy!" My eye twitched as he pulled off the ruined helmet and grinned at me, his pink features now swelling up. He coughed again, bringing up bloody phlegm. "Arrest me. Lock me up. Take me to trial. I'll pay for my crimes however you want."

"Is this a joke?" I whispered, staring at him. It was a trick. *Shoot him now*, a smart, sane part of me insisted. Right now. Before he said another word.

"Nope. Not at all," he said as he collapsed against the rails at the end of the platform. "Name whatever punishment you want that leaves me alive, and I'll take it. I'll care for the poor and the sick. I'll help the elderly. Whatever you want."

"You lying, betraying shit! Why should I think you're going to do what you say? The first chance you have, you'll try and kill me. It's your fucking nature!" I shouted at him.

He gave me an exhausted, ragged smile, blood dripping from a puffy gash beneath his eye. "Because, deep down, in your heart of hearts…you're an optimist," he countered, struggling to breathe as sweat rolled down his pink hide. "You want to save ponies. You always want to give them another chance. Well, I'm telling you that if you give me a chance, I'll become a better pony." He shuddered, looking about ready to fall over as he added, "To prove it, there's a

cache of supplies at the top of the elevator. Fresh healing potions just made a few hours ago. Even some Hydra. Might save your filly friend there." He grinned at me, blood leaking from a shattered tooth. "Come on. Don't you want me to do better?"

I did. I stepped up closer to him, and he suddenly looked nervous. I drew so close he stood up on his hind legs, and I rose too. "You're right. I really do want you to do better." He gave a nervous little smile. Then I slammed him in the face with my hooves, knocking him back over the edge. He scrambled for purchase and caught a gap in the rails. "But even my optimism has limits."

"Blackjack!" he screamed as I turned and trotted towards where Charm lay. The filly was still breathing but didn't seem responsive. "Blackjack, please!" Steel Rain begged as I carefully levitated her onto my back and started towards the elevator. "You save ponies! That's your thing! Please!" he begged, but he wasn't a pony. I wasn't sure what he was, but it wasn't a pony. "You're not an executioner," he screamed as I stepped onto the elevator.

The statement, one I'd said dozens of times before, broke through. If I just let him die, was I still Blackjack? Was I any better than him? Okay. Yes, I was. But still, just leaving him to die? Why didn't I just shoot him in the head while I was at it?

I sighed, closing my eyes. Everything I'd taken from Horse and Charm told me I was a complete idiot for even thinking it. That I should go back and put a magic bullet through his head. Maybe two or three. That's what a good, sensible pony would do. Heck. That was what LittlePip did. I wasn't saving anything worth saving, and I might be sparing a monster worse than the four that had violated me. He wouldn't change. He would stab me in the back the first chance he could. That was his nature. Heck, he might just be trying to call me back just so he could yank me down with him. There were a half dozen reasons why I should just go, and a half dozen more why I should go back and make sure he was dead. There was only one reason to try and help him…

But Security saves ponies.

I returned to the edge of the platform, glaring down at him coldly as he dangled by a twisted hoof. It was certainly broken. He wasn't going to get far on that. "You are going to be tilling fields for the Society for the rest of your life," I muttered. His head snapped up, and his tear-streaked face gaped at me. Suddenly, he grinned and started laughing. "Shut up. Right now, I could shoot you for a loud

sneeze." He stopped the shrill laugh but still wept in relief. "Hold still and tell me how to take off the rest of that armor." I didn't know how damaged it was, but I wasn't going to try and teleport him with that weight.

He walked me through what to push and twist, and soon chunks were falling away. Soon, all that was left was him in some padded, half-shredded garments, a plastic medallion around his neck. From what I could see, my moonstone battering had given him quite a beating. "Now, hold still," I said, then teleported him up to the rickety platform. "Now," I said as I glared at him, "you're going to take us to this cache, and then we're going to my friends, and you're going to the Society. You're too guilty for a quick kill. You can work the rest of your life to feed the Wasteland."

"Of course. Of course," he said, smiling ear to ear. Then he raised his head and looked at me as I stood against the rail, Charm precariously perched on my back. There was a thoughtful, almost contemplative expression on his face. For a moment, one could almost believe he was thinking of turning over a new leaf. Starting a new chapter in his life. Wanting to do better. "You're a good pony, Blackjack." Despite myself, I smiled with him.

Then he lunged forward, ramming us hard over the edge with a body slam.

But I appeared a few feet away. He laughed as he faced me. "Sorry, but I just couldn't help–" then his laughter died as he saw what dangled from my hoof.

His moonstone medallion.

The stallion's eyes bulged as he stretched his hoof towards me. "I'm shrowry! Pleasgh!" His dark bruises began to swell like blackened boils. "Pleagh, Blachjagh!" They burst one by one, rotten black blood soaking into his barding. He started to scream as his crippled forehoof melted away, and he extended the oozing stump towards me. "Shavvve muh!" he burbled as one eye burst, then the other.

"I did," I answered quietly. He couldn't speak after that, and he started to thrash wildly, screaming incoherently. I supposed that, being younger and intact, it'd take longer for Enervation to finish him off. When I got on the elevator, half of him was dripping through the floor. I hit the button up, and watched the quivering, bloody lump till it disappeared through the floor grate.

Security might save ponies, but some ponies just refuse to be saved.

* * *

The elevator ride took far longer than I was comfortable with. Charm quivered on my back, still breathing but horribly ill. I tried to ignore the blood oozing from the holes bored into her head. It took nearly fifteen minutes before the elevator slowed and came to a halt. The doors opened into a battered, crumbling building that had once been the M.W.T. hub in Hoofington. I searched around the wreckage for the cache that Steel Rain mentioned and found it stashed in an air duct.

To my surprise, I found that the healing potions inside were indeed still a good, solid purple. Levitating the vials, I inspected each one carefully and saw a tiny sliver of moonstone Wonderglued to the vial. Somepony must have worked out that if the medallions protected a pony from Enervation, the moonstone within would protect healing potions too. I carefully trickled one into Charm's mouth, with the unresponsive filly swallowing reflexively. It didn't do much for her; I supposed having pieces of brain yanked out was an injury beyond the scope of most healing potions. The hydra made me balk, but it was all I had. I injected her with the nasty sludge, making her shake and convulse. When that gradually subsided, she seemed to be breathing easier, but she still wasn't conscious.

I moved cautiously but soon realized that, without starmetal-plated armor or my broadcaster, I was a sitting duck for the swarmers. The buzzing machines worked in a frenzy, tearing apart wreckage and garbage and carrying it away to construct more struts, braces, and shafts. Still, I had little doubt that if we got too close, they'd rapidly take us apart too.

The only thing I had to fall back on was my magic, and I had a destination in mind thanks to the memories I'd taken from Horse. I'd never managed much in the way of distance before, but now I was a third my previous weight. Maybe I could make it? I closed my eyes, focused my magic, and disappeared in a flash of white.

When I reappeared, I found myself in a dusty office. A shimmering pink sheet of magic, just like the one that covered a certain house, blocked the door. Windows looked out over the Core and down towards Ministry Plaza a few blocks away. My horn throbbed badly, but I didn't feel like I was burning out. I set Charm down on the musty couch in the corner…even better, it folded out into a bed.

That shouldn't surprise me, considering whose office this was. Delicate statuary decorated the space, showing abstract images of alicorns, pegasi, unicorns, and earth ponies done in, silver, gold, copper, and a silvery white metal I suspected was platinum. Surprisingly, there were also carvings of a zebra done in veined black and white marble, a dragon in glittering crystal, and a griffin intricately whittled from warm yellow and tan wood. Paintings on the walls depicted scenes of Equestrian life from before the war, and, shockingly, there were three pictures showing zebra lands.

I moved behind the desk and was further surprised by a number of photographs. The Ministry Mares before they'd become the Ministry Mares. Princess Luna and Princess Celestia. Spike. A half dozen pictures of Fluttershy. A school in a valley shaped like a crescent moon. Pumpkin and Pound Cake. Psalm. And a very faded picture of a unicorn mare I didn't recognize.

And there, on the top of the desk, was a dusty nameplate that read 'Goldenblood: Director of the O.I.A.' Horse's memories were of Pinkie sealing this place after Goldenblood's arrest. Pinkie must have been busy, since she had merely sealed the office up for later, just like his house. I pulled open file cabinets and saw several files missing. Taken by Goldenblood after he'd been removed for striking Twilight or absconded with by Horse when he'd taken over. Horse preferred to operate from Robronco.

Idly, I flipped through several of the remaining files, taking in the meticulous strokes of the notes and sketches in the margins and corners. One letter written by some politician about forcibly relocating zebras from Zebratown to the Appleloosan desert with the 'other riff raff' had the comment 'Relocate to the Appleloosan desert' over a drawing of a bound and gagged unicorn stallion being loaded on a train with a tag 'To: Riff Raffia' tied to his ear.

Other memos were more serious: 'I'm sorry, Elder, but Princess Luna can not address the zebra issue at this time. She abhors the abuses suffered by your people, but there is a war on, and she cannot defend your people with one breath and tell others to fight the enemy with the next. Please ignore the rhetoric coming from Image and know that, as difficult as it must be, Princess Luna acknowledges the many contributions the Equestrian zebras have made and the suffering they have endured. Please stop attempting to force a public statement on this matter. It won't be addressed until after the war.'

Beneath it were scribbled notes. ‘Ask her majesty to talk to Rarity about toning down the ‘spies and infiltrators’ commentary. When ponies start talking about mass incarceration for security reasons, it’s time for a time out.’

Yet in other notes, there were instructions to arrange ‘sympathizer’ attacks on members of the Apple family. ‘Prune the rotten branches’ was the phrase used for killing ponies in position of power. Goldenblood had lists of the ponies to be used, promoted, or removed as benefited the war effort. ‘We are the grease that keeps the wheels of the kingdom turning. Slimy, disgusting, and unappreciated, but vital.’

So why, then, had he created Horizons? A moonstone/starmetal reaction that would devastate the entire planet? What was the point of it? Why had he suddenly gone renegade? Why had he sabotaged EC-1101 so that, when it found Luna, it would call her a tyrant and set off the weapon? It made no sense. ‘Why’ was the missing element to *all* of this making sense. It was easy for ponies like Cognitum to dismiss Goldenblood as crazy. He hadn’t been crazy. Manipulative, murderous, sure. Mad? I just couldn’t see it.

I reached out to the terminal, and it booted up almost instantly. It seemed slicker than even the color models I'd seen in Blueblood Manor. They must have been the very latest designs. Of course, the contents were so heavily encrypted that I didn’t have a chance of accessing it via hacking. So I just entered in all the passwords I could think of and got rejected again and again. Knowing my luck, it would be something completely random.

Then I looked at the pictures in the frames, particularly the ones of Fluttershy. Carefully, I removed each photograph from its frame. There, on the back of a picture of Fluttershy in a volunteer nurse’s outfit, I saw a tiny note written in Goldenblood’s impeccable writing: ‘The most important things.’

The most important things? To Goldenblood? I’d heard this. I wracked my memory, trying to think it through. Goldenblood had said this to somepony at some point. Not family. Not money. Not power…I stared at the terminal and carefully typed, ‘Loyalty, Love, and Secrets’.

The screen flickered, text scrolled, and then it flickered again. Suddenly, the screen went blank save for one line.

> THERE SHALL BE ONLY ONE PRINCESS. I PLEDGE MY LIFE TO ETERNAL DARKNESS. I SWEAR MY LOYALTY TO THE UNENDING

BLACK. ALL HAIL NIGHTMARE MOON. MAY THE NIGHT LAST FOREVER!

Buh? I stared at the line, even read it aloud three or four times. It didn't make any sense to me. What, had Goldenblood been some sort of Nightmare Moon worshiper? It made the current Cognitum with Luna's soul an even more terrifying possibility. Still, if he'd been evil, why worry about zebras? Or Fluttershy? Or anything that he did before?

Then I felt a wind sweep over me and turned to see a black vortex of magic forming. It swirled around in a flat, ebony disk, then stilled. The surface shimmered like a pool of black ink hanging vertically in the air. "Well…this is new…" I muttered. I carefully reached out with a hoof, pressing it to the disk. It sank in, disappearing to some place cool. The moon? That seemed like some heavy duty magic to me.

I gently levitated the prone Charm onto my back and gathered up the photographs in an envelope just in case. After all, I didn't have my statuettes any more. Then I closed my eyes and poked my head into the swirling portal. It was like moving through cold oil, the surface coating me as I took one step through, then another. On the far side, I stepped into a stone chamber lit with thousands of tiny star lights that swirled and twinkled overhead. The walls were of blackest marble shot through with veins of amethyst. Cold, imposing black statues loomed over us, their crystalline eyes seeming to follow me as I stepped away from the portal. With a slurping noise, it winked shut behind us.

"Oh, that's not good," I muttered, then observed my surroundings in more detail. This wasn't a prison. It appeared to be some sort of castle. There were racks of vaguely familiar armor on stands, wielding archaic weapons that seemed like they'd been forged centuries ago. Dark purple carpets lay on the floor. A faint coat of dust covered everything. I found a set of the dark purple barding and slipped it on, then levitated a spear. Not exactly ideal weapons, but at least I wasn't naked and unarmed anymore. Carefully, I made my way forward.

The hall beyond was just like the room behind. Tapestries showing the moon eclipsing the sun were everywhere. Windows depicted a dark alicorn banishing a white alicorn to the sun. Stars and star sapphires decorated every door and wall. In its own way, it reminded me of a far grander, and colder, Star House. I carefully

stayed on the carpets so my hooves didn't click on the ebon floor. Here and there were signs of modern technology. Cables drawn along the edge of the floor. A room with a dusty broken terminal. An old rifle from the war, so badly maintained that it'd serve better as a club. Compared to the grand architecture, they clearly didn't belong here. Magical glyphs throbbed powerfully against the walls, illuminating the halls.

Then I heard a distant giggle, and my hackles rose. I whirled, looking around for the source. A second later, a ghostly moan sounded. I whirled again. "Okay. I've just about had it. Mad computers. Star curses. A whole lot of ponies helping me and getting killed. Magic portals. Now ghosts. What next?"

The giggle echoed again from the direction of some ascending stairs. Well, being here by myself wasn't getting me anywhere. I slowly advanced. More groans, moans, and giggles, from more than one person. Definitely not ghosts, or at least I hoped not. The stairs opened on a floor that was much smaller than below. This looked more like the Canterlot Palace I'd seen in memories. The noises were coming from a nearby... bedroom... along with the sound of classical music and a familiar wet noise I hadn't heard since 99.

I pushed the door open and beheld the glistening, undulating mass of pony flesh that was an orgy. Over two beds, a half dozen mares and a half dozen stallions were vigorously engaging in coital relations. Half of them were batponies like Stygius. The other half were unicorns, pegasi, and an earth pony. I stood in the wash of sweat and semen that rolled out the open door in a sweet, salty pong.

Okay. That was it. My brain was officially out of order. I couldn't process this anymore…

Fortunately, I didn't have to, as one of the pegasus mares on a bed glanced over and froze. She brushed her golden bangs back and gaped at me for a minute, then shoved the batpony mounting her hard. Pushing him off, Psychos– Whisper flew through the air and landed before me. "Blackjack? It is you! But not metal! How the hell did you get here? What do you think you're doing? Who is that?" She gestured to Charm with a wing.

Stygius rose from where she'd shoved him and flew over. I stared at them both for a long moment, then threw my hooves around her neck, sobbing brokenly.

* * *

An hour later, after they'd cleaned up and we'd taken Charm to an infirmary and I'd filled Whisper and Stygius in on the many, many things that had happened to me since we'd last seen each other, we walked together through the enormous silent castle. We'd been joined by a batpony mare who didn't seem to be all that pleased to see me. Tenebra, Stygius's sister, was a dusky mare with a short, chopped blue mane. A round, topaz talisman marked with concentric rings bounced around her neck as we walked through the massive structure. Thus far we'd only seen a half dozen other batponies since we'd left the orgy above. "So this place is what now?" I asked the lighter fog-gray mare. Apparently Stygius didn't have a speech talisman handy…or wasn't trusted with one around the 'strumpet'.

"Nightmare Castle," Tenebra said sourly. "And you aren't supposed to be here," she reminded me for the tenth time since we'd left the party. "How did you get here? Nopony is supposed to get here without us!"

"I told you. I found a terminal in an office that had that quote on it, and it summoned a portal that brought me here. I had no idea that here was here! Where is here?" I asked as we walked through a banquet hall the size of my stable's atrium. The dishes were still laid out in rows, silver gleaming coolly in the starlight illumination.

"Another... well... okay, I'm not sure where. It's a place that's in Equestria in the Hoof, but it's set slightly to... well... " Whisper glanced over at Stygius, who chirped and shrugged, looking over at his sister.

Tenebra rolled her eyes. "We're in Equestria's shadow. A place where Nightmare Moon could hide her forces as she prepared to conquer Equestria. When she was banished, most of her forces fled this place. Most. Those who remained maintained this place as best as they could."

I nodded up above. "And what was with the sex party up above?" Tenebra and Stygius both flushed, averting their eyes, while Whisper chuckled. "Don't get me wrong. It was a pretty sweet seven point five on the kinkometer. Reminded me a lot of the afterparty of my cute-ceañera." If I didn't have my entire life going crazy, I might have joined in. Apparently, though, my arrival had ruffled a lot of wings, and we were going to somepony that I could talk to about

my current situation.

"We're trying to save the batpony race," Whisper said with a smile and a shrug. "Their genetic pool is so small that you could spit across it. It took me a month to convince them to bring in some outside blood and get serious about breeding a new generation." She snickered. "Yes, Blackjack, I'm saving ponies by fucking them! Two of your favorite things in one! All I need is some Wild Pegasus, and I'd out-Blackjack you!" I'm sure she expected to get a rise out of me; when none came, she sulked a bit. "Looks like they're not the only ones who need a good fucking... "

"Debauched pervert," Tenebra muttered, blushing bright red.

"Hey, I don't hear you complaining about not being obligated to fuck your brother anymore! Honestly, I finally find a community I feel comfortable in, where family members regularly fuck each other, and they *still* act like it's a bad thing. The whole world is insane, I tell ya... " Whisper retorted. Stygius gave a suffering roll of his eyes as I stared. "They're down to a population of around a hundred batponies here, and they're getting some significant defects."

Tenebra flushed. "I admit, it is a relief to know that I won't have to... bed him. Still. All this... sex... well... it just doesn't seem all that appropriate." Ah. Thankfully, after Glory, I could better understand her madness. ... About general prudishness. Whisper was still a bit...

"Speak for yourself," said mare replied. "The breeding program's been a huge hit with most of the younger batponies here. Stygius wasn't the only one who wanted to get out and sow his oats." The batstallion grinned at me sheepishly. Whisper shook her head and smirked at me. "Well, hopefully Hades will be able help you out, Blackjack. He's really isolationist, though. As far as he's concerned, this is their world and we're just visiting. So keep that in mind. This is like dealing with a stable. A really, really inbred stable."

We were approaching a pair of glittering black diamond doors that slowly groaned open at our approach. Inside was a throne room of cavernous proportions. I wondered if Nightmare Moon had some insecurity issues when she made this place. You could easily fit the population of most of the Hoof in here. A dozen or so batponies haunted the dais at the far end of the chamber. On closer inspection, there was definitely some genetic damage visible in a few of them. One with mismatched ears, the left larger than the right. One with a small, almost vestigial wing. Another with

missized fangs pointing in different directions, standing next to a mare with eyes that did the same thing. Most were normal... ish. Still, I couldn't help but imagine what these ponies would look like in a generation or two.

A single throne stood at the far side of the chamber. Seated in it was an impressive piece of pony. The stallion was almost jet black with red, dragon-pupiled eyes and a powerful, athletic frame. He wore intricate ebony armor inlaid with silver scroll work. At his side, hanging on the edge of the throne of jet, was an impressive-looking sword. This was not a pony that I wanted to fight. I cleared my throat, smiled as best I could, and gave what was probably a rather maladroit bow.

"Father," Tenebra said formally. "This is Blackjack. Blackjack, this is our king, Hades."

His red eyes narrowed at me, then glanced back at Tenebra. "Who?" His armor or a talisman under it must have had enchantments beyond just making his squeaks and chirps audible; instead of a normal voice or Royal Canterlot Shouting, his speech was deep and thunderous, rolling ominously through the chamber, echoing off the walls, and vibrating through our hooves.

The yellow pegasus gaped at him. "Seriously?" He glowered at the four of us. "It's Blackjack. Security. The badass mare who's causing all kinds of trouble over in the other world!" Whisper said with a wave of a wing in my direction.

He gave a dismissive sweep of his hoof. "The concerns of that world are none of mine. If she's another of your breeders, set her to work."

Wait? Breeders? I suddenly felt like I was on the other side of Medical in 99. "No!" I said sharply. Not that it wasn't tempting on a tiny, immature level, but... "I need to get back to my world. I need to find my friends, get my body back, and stop a mare from either destroying the world or conquering it completely!" He gazed down at me dispassionately. "Look. Show me the door, and I won't bother you again."

"No," he rumbled darkly, perfunctorily.

Tenebra stepped forward. "Father, please. Blackjack has many–"

But he raised a forehoof, silencing her, and turned his eyes to Stygius. "I will not risk our discovery by outsiders." His voice was solemn and grave. "My son did a great disservice to our kingdom when he left to go looking for a... rut mare. I have only allowed

others to be brought here with the understanding that they will restore my kind to our former strength." His glare made Stygius wilt.

"Oh, Darling. Must you be so grim?" a mare asked, her voice light and airy and lifting the gloom of the place. From a doorway in the side of the room emerged a pale gray batpony in a white dress. Silver earrings glittered in the wan magical light of the chamber.

"Mother! You're up!" Tenebra said, swooping towards her and helping the mare over to a seat.

"Of course. I heard we had more new visitors from the outside," she said in a frail but friendly tone.

Stygius held up his blackboard. 'Persephone. Mom.' I read it and then smiled, giving another, less awkward, bow to her. "Your Majesty."

"Please forgive my husband; but he takes his royal duties so *very* seriously," the pale batmare said as she gazed at the flustered stallion.

"I will not relent, Persephone," Hades said, scowling at us. "Do not ask it of me."

"Perish the thought, dear husband. Go on. Be kingly," she said with a little wave of her hoof as she leaned against Tenebra.

Hades coughed, glancing over at her and then back down at me. "As I said. The only outsiders we will admit are for... procreational uses."

"I think quite a few are fond of 'recreational' too," Persephone said, making Tenebra blush.

"Mother!" she said in scandalized tones.

"What? If I were in better health, I'd join you. With my darling, of course." She looked archly at her husband.

"I like her," Whisper whispered to me.

"There is more to life than survival and gravity," Persephone continued. "These outsiders can teach us much."

"They are for breeding, nothing more," Hades contradicted flatly, fighting his own embarrassment.

"My husband can be terribly possessive," Persephone said with a frown. "It's one of his less admirable traits."

"*Possessive*? Are they slaves?" I asked, bristling and wondering if this really *was* like being on the other side of Medical.

Whisper jumped in immediately. "They were refugees, Blackjack!" she said quickly. "Ponies who lost their homes when Thunderhead

fell. Or escaped former slaves. Or scavengers. They have rights."

"We are not barbarians, Blackjack," Persephone added with a sober nod. "I'd happily accept many more of them."

"So long as they breed," the king interjected. "It is my fondest wish that, in a few generations, we will not need outsider blood any longer," he continued with a distasteful curl of his lip. "Until then, I will bow to genetic realities and do what I must to save my people. But the survival and wellbeing of the world of light is none of my concern!"

"A weapon is going to go off that might destroy everything in that world! My friends. My loved ones!" I stared around the court. "How can you not care? If the other world is destroyed, what happens to this one?"

Slowly, he rose to his hooves, his armor creaking. "Are you saying that this weapon will destroy the entire planet?"

I balked a little. "Well, no. From what Trottenheimer said, it sounds like it's *just* going to kill everyone!" I put as much scorn into that as I could. "Doesn't that matter to you?"

"No," he replied as he started to limp towards us; his right hindleg had an odd hitch to it. "The world of shadow is not affected by such things. Balefire bombs. Megaspells. They only affect your kind. Your people. Ours will be kept safe here." He gestured around at the immense palace. "And eventually, we will return to the world of the light to restore it in our Goddess's image."

"But... but so many will die!" I protested weakly.

He gave another wave of his hoof. "Very well. A few dozen more breeders can be brought over, your friends included. Will that halt your wailing?"

I sputtered as I stared at him. "What about everypony else? There're thousands, maybe millions, who will die when Horizons goes off. And if Cognitum manages to catch that damned stone, she'll control weapons that will dominate Equestria for a thousand years or more."

"Darling, perhaps this is one time we should let her go. It sounds quite serious," Persephone said quietly.

"I will not make an exception for a mare who should not be here." He rolled his eyes as he turned and limped back to his throne. "She will dominate your Equestria, not ours," he said scornfully. "Your world is not our affair. Your problems are not mine." He gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. "Be gone from my presence. Breed a

batpony or three, and perhaps I will send you back." And he settled back onto his throne and stared silently at me.

I stared at him. "You... I... How can you–" I was silenced by a mouthful of yellow feathers.

"Thank you for your time, Your Majesty," Whisper said, then bowed to him, giving me a sharp glare before we trotted away. I clenched my jaw. There had to be another way out of here. There just had to be!

Outside the throne room, I pointed a hoof back the way they came. "What is his deal?! How can he just write off a whole world like that?"

"Pretty easily," Whisper replied. "Rulers aren't always smart, Blackjack. His world is this castle. I don't think he can even imagine something that isn't like this place." Whisper had been right. It was a stable mentality.

Tenebra and Stygius flew to us. "Mother is talking with him, but I don't think he's going to change his mind. At least not soon. He wasn't fond of the... ah... orgy idea... "

"If you know a better way to rapidly spread genetic material through a population, be my guest," Whisper retorted. "Or a *funner* way... "

Anyway! "Okay. So how do I get back? Do I have to recite a spell or something? Praise Celestia and get the boot? What?" I said with a little scowl. If this place was just a big, fancy stable, then I needed some way to open the big rolling door between me and my friends.

Tenebra regarded her sibling. "Stygius's talent lets him cross just like Father, but only he alone can use it travel from this world to yours. As king, Father controls the portal allowing all passage."

"And he really thinks that Horizons won't destroy this place too?" I snapped.

Whisper shook her head. "I don't know if he's aware of it, but he seems convinced that nothing reaches this place. So... I don't know. I don't know how many super massive explosions like that there's been. The balefire bombs and megaspells didn't touch this place, so... maybe?"

"But... I... we... he... " I stammered, then sat down hard and pressed my hooves to my head, letting out a scream of frustration. I'd survived Cognitum and gotten out of the Core, but now I was stuck here! In my rage, I teleported away. I just wanted to be out of this place and somewhere... anywhere... else!

* * *

I landed on a pile of scree and loose rocks. The light provided by my horn revealed a few dozen feet of broken, shadowy landscape. There was no moon or sun to light the world, but a faint twilight glow provided just enough illumination to make the darkness of the land vaguely perceptible. Near me were the outlines of a ghostly building amidst spectral trees. I reached out and felt the bark. It didn't feel like a tree. It was... firm. Neither warm nor cool, neither wet nor dry. I moved slowly through the grove, the rocks not shifting under my hooves. It was utterly bizarre trying to walk over the uneven surface. I couldn't move so much as a twig or pebble in this shadowy world.

Then the door to the building opened, and a pony-shaped form emerged. Like everything else around me, she was ghostly and translucent like smoky quartz. A pale white glow in her chest spread light through her. I reached out and touched her wing as she trotted around to the side of the building and sat down. I stared at her face, slowly picking her features out. I stared for a minute, then whispered softly, "Glory?"

She didn't react. I bit one forehoof to keep from crying out as I reached out and touched her cheek with my other. Like everything else here, it was the same hard, immutable surface. "Glory. Oh Glory. I'm here, Glory. I'm finally here."

I watched as tiny, smoky tears crept along her cheeks and fell off her chin. Her lips moved silently as I wept as well. I put my hooves around her neck, holding her as close as I could. I didn't know if she could feel me, but at the very least I could be here for her.

The door to the house opened, and a dark shape emerged. It appeared like an alicorn of black ice. Within, a dark purple shape seemed to strain against its confines. A small mote of light lingered in its belly. I watched as it walked slowly away. Glory moved through me as she pulled away and stepped in front of the alicorn, her lips moving quickly.

I slowly approached them, wishing I had Sekashi's ability to read lips. Clearly, Glory wasn't happy. P-21 emerged, followed by Rampage. I started at the sight of an ethereal filly inside her, following her movements, along with a whole cluster of motes. Walking slowly, I made my way around the smoky, wraithlike pony

shapes of my friends.

I scowled at myself. “I want my body back, you cunt! I want my baby!”

The dark purple shape turned and looked at me, its head slipping out of the cloudy shell of my body. Step by step it emerged, regarding me with cool teal eyes. “It is not in my power to grant you that, Blackjack.”

“Princess Luna?” I asked in shock. The motions around me congealed, moving at a crawl, as I stared up at the spectral alicorn. Then my gaze sharpened. “Or are you Nightmare Moon?”

“That is the question, is it not?” she replied coolly. “Princess, or Nightmare?”

“Really? I have to deal with riddles now?” I asked flatly. “Which is it?”

“Are you Blackjack, or Security?” Luna countered with her own question. I don’t know if it was her size or the presence of her alicornness, but I balked and swallowed hard.

“I’m Blackjack. Most of the time. I’m only Security when I need to be,” I answered. She smiled slowly. “So... are you saying you’re... both?”

“Ponies are not simple things. This is something that I understood better than my sister. Ponies are complex. Twilight often let her desire to please override the wellbeing of others. Applejack lied to herself when she believed her family innately trustworthy. Pinkie Pie laughed long after the joke stopped being funny. My sister believed that ponies were simply, innately, good. That all people were. I understood the nuance of dreams. The subtle differences of thought. You ask if I am Princess Luna, or Nightmare Moon. The answer is yes. The more important question is which was I *more*... and that, I cannot answer.”

I considered a moment, then sighed and decided to focus on the present for the moment. “Cognitum stole my body and put you in it. Can’t you... I don’t know... help me take it back?”

“Why would I fight against myself?”

“Cognitum’s not you,” I said to her.

“No? She has ambition. Pride. A determination to prove herself. How is that not me?” Luna walked slowly away and lifted her head to the sky. “I was ambivalent when Celestia abdicated. On one hoof, I’d seen what rule had done to her. On the other, I craved acknowledgement and respect. I resented her. A thousand years,

and little had changed. I was in her shadow again, the lesser princess... but I was wiser than I had been. I would not rebel; I'd felt the cold bite and loneliness of a millennium of exile. So when she stepped aside for me, I was terrified and thrilled all at once." She turned and regarded my frozen body. "Who is to say she cannot be me reborn?"

"She is evil!" I snapped. Luna gave a sad smile. "She is! She collected ponies like they were toys. Prizes! She manipulates, deceives, and violates others."

"Blackjack, I ordered the deaths of ten million ponies and caused the deaths of sixty million zebras over the course of the war. You've seen Nopony's Land. You haven't seen the multitude of other battlefields, but I assure you that there were many worse. And if you consider how many lives the megaspells took, the number of corpses at my hooves becomes incalculably higher," she bowed her head. "No matter how you regard it, I am evil too."

I know ponies whose fuckups have killed millions. I wanted to tell her that she was wrong. That she hadn't been responsible for all that. But hadn't I been kicking myself for months for the ponies I had killed? How would I feel if I'd killed *millions*? I swallowed hard, struggling to find an answer contrary to one condemning her. "It was Fluttershy... she made the first megaspells. The zebras made the balefire bombs. Goldenblood... he... he manipulated you! He was working behind the scenes, doing things." Luna's smile looked almost pitying. "And the nobles and those business ponies started the war. And if Celestia hadn't started it in–"

"Shhhhh." She hushed me and reached out with her ghostly purple wings, holding my cheeks. "Do not speak ill of my sister. I beg you. Do not." She closed her teal eyes. "It is my fault. I knew what Fluttershy was doing, and Goldenblood. I could have ended the war. Surrendered. Worked out a compromise with the Caesar. It would have been difficult for Equestria, but ponies have been through hard times before and triumphed. I refused. I resisted. I used the war for my own ends. The blood is on my hooves."

"But Goldenblood... the O.I.A... " I stammered weakly, trying to find somepony to blame.

She smiled and raised her head. The darkness above us filled with wavy, waxy light. It coalesced into Goldenblood and Princess Luna. "So the ministries will be behind the war effort, out in public," the spectral – well, *more* spectral – Luna was saying. "The military will

actually fight the war. What am I supposed to do?"

"Smile and wave to the adoring public," Goldenblood rasped. "Social events... royal functions... that sort of thing."

Luna frowned down at him. "I refuse to be a puppet of my own bureaucracy," she said firmly.

"Princess, this is messy business. It's best if you aren't involved directly. Anything you do that is taken badly by your subjects will come back on you. When this war is finished, you'll clean house. Unleash the courts on the Ministry Mares, replace them with your own loyalists. Push any unsatisfied generals to retire and promote faithful majors to positions of control. The pivot from war to peace will be the mechanism to convert you from puppet to benign monarch for the next thousand years."

"I will not sit idly by, Goldenblood," Luna retorted. "I won't let the Ministries run amok and simply rubberstamp everything they do with the expectation that, when the time is right, I'll sweep in and end the war. I have to be involved. I can't sit on the sidelines giving rousing speeches while my country is at war!"

Goldenblood stared at her, then looked away. "Perhaps there's a way."

"What?" Princess Luna asked, leaning in.

"Since we're concentrating the government functions in the Ministries, we're going to need some way to coordinate between them. A paper pushing bureau. We don't want the Ministries doing it themselves or they will bureaucratize you out of power." He thought some more. "If we create a very passive, low-key office to conduct affairs outside the normal Ministry operations, we'll be able to keep tabs on the actions of the Ministries and manipulate them. We could expand on that. Infiltrate layers of your own government to know what they're really doing. Control and influence indirectly." He paused, wracked by a sudden fit of coughing. "Officially, you'd be a virtual figurehead. Unofficially, you'd be pulling the strings and running the country. When the time is right, we'd end the war, clean house, and put you fully and openly at the top."

Luna smiled broadly. "Oh, I like that. I really do. And I know just the pony to put in charge of it." She patted his feverish brow with a wing.

"Princess Luna, I'm going to die. This Pink Cloud is killing me," Goldenblood said weakly.

"Nonsense. I need you, Goldenblood. You and I, together, are going to create an Equestria that will last a thousand years. You can live for that, can't you? Can you live for me?" Luna asked, her eyes wide, lashes fluttering.

Goldenblood let out a long, wheezing breath. "As you command, my Princess."

The image faded, then shifted to a new one. Goldenblood sat behind a desk, a mask covering his muzzle connected to quietly hissing air tanks. Luna stood nearby, levitating a scroll. "This Trueblood certainly has some interesting theories about the application of chaos magic to living systems. He actually thinks he can use it to merge living creatures."

Goldenblood didn't look up. "If Twilight Sparkle finds out about that, she'll resign. You know how she feels about anything related to Discord."

"Yes, well, you make sure she doesn't find out. Keep Chimera out of the M.A.S. as much as possible. Fluttershy should be much more amiable to its potential to make injured ponies better," Luna replied, then continued with a teasing smile, "And it would let you spend more time with her. You keep dreaming about her. *Such* dreams."

Goldenblood flushed. "You told me you wouldn't do that anymore."

"Now, Goldenblood, I could hardly avoid such intense dreams and call myself a Princess of the Night, could I?" she said as she trotted over to him. "You might want to pursue it."

"I'm hideous, and I can barely breathe. There are far better, far more whole ponies for her to spend her time with than I," Goldenblood said sourly. "Besides, she's not interested."

Luna just chuckled. "Trust me, she's interested." Goldenblood gaped at her from under his mask. Luna smirked as she waved the scroll at him. "Get this Trueblood some funding and see what you can pull together. I think the results of his research should be interesting."

The scene faded again, and a whole and healthy Goldenblood rutted vigorously with Fluttershy in a forest clearing. When he finished and they'd collapsed together in the grass, he gazed at her, then frowned. "Princess Luna?"

Fluttershy smirked at him, wrinkling up her nose. "Just wanted to pop in a minute. Completely accidental. Really. Though, while I'm

here, do you think you can find out more about these 'megaspells' that are floating around the M.o.P.? Anything with the word 'mega' in it is something I want to know about."

"Why not just peek into her dreams?" Goldenblood said sourly.

"Because when she dreams, she dreams of babies," Luna said with a roll of her eyes. "And bunnies. And you."

That made him smile a little. "Fine. You could have waited until I woke to ask me that, though, Princess."

She pushed his shoulders down and straddled his hips. "Oh? You prefer this?" Her belly swelled more and more as wrinkles appeared in the corners of her eyes. His pristine white hide suddenly became striped with livid pink scars, and he coughed and struggled for breath. She leaned down, kissing him firmly, and the fantasy reasserted itself. She slid him back in with a sigh and a blissful smile. "Enjoy the fantasy, Goldenblood. You deserve it."

"Thank you, Princess Luna," he said a touch sarcastically, his hips moving. Suddenly the image changed again, now looking down at a double bed with a pregnant Fluttershy next to a sleeping Goldenblood. His hips twitched under the sheets as he murmured in his sleep 'Princess Luna'. Fluttershy lay next to him, her eyes wide as she stared up, tears running down her cheeks.

I tore my eyes away for several moments. "No. That wasn't you. This is some sort of... something."

"I wasn't a prude like my sister, Blackjack. True, I almost never did such things in the flesh, but dreams are another story. After all, the night is the time for lovers," Luna replied softly, shame in her eyes. The image reasserted itself in another office. Luna paced back and forth angrily in front of a dour Goldenblood. "I can't believe she did that. I can't believe her! Five years. Five years out of the throne, and she pulls something like this! She could have gotten herself killed. Or worse!"

"Possibly much worse," Goldenblood said quietly. "She won't try it again. She blames herself for Big Macintosh's death." He didn't look up from the scroll he was reading. "What will you do with Psalm?"

"Psalm... " Luna murmured. "I don't know if I should give her a medal, a prison cell, or both. For now, keep her on ice in the O.I.A. Don't let her kill herself, or worse, go to the press. For now, we'll just play the part of mournful ruler. Tomorrow, we'll have Rarity go to town on making Big Macintosh a hero known all across Equestria. How will the Ministries respond?"

“Applejack…” Goldenblood said thoughtfully. “She’ll stay. Pour herself into work. That’s her normal M.O. The others should be neutral. Twilight, though... she’s taking it almost as bad as Applejack, and I’m not sure why.” He was silent for a moment. “I want to resign.”

Luna’s head snapped up. “What? Goldie, is this a joke?”

He shook his head slowly. “I think it would be best. You can use your Eclipse persona to manage the O.I.A. You don’t need me anymore,” he replied, keeping his eyes down.

“Why?” Luna demanded flatly. “If it’s for more pay, I can easily increase that.”

He sighed, that rusty choking noise. “Luna, when we started this, I expected I’d have been dead for four years by now. I’m not. I’m grateful to you and the doctors for saving my life, but I’m tired of all this. I want to go back to teaching. Maybe a rock hunting expedition. Something that’s not war and death.”

“And you want to try and fix things with Fluttershy,” Luna retorted. “Don’t deny it. I’ve seen your dreams. Will your resignation resurrect your dead child, Goldenblood?” The question made him flinch as if she’d struck him. Luna sighed and trotted over, putting a hoof on top of his. “I need you to see this through to the end. Trueblood is making breakthroughs that might allow us to stop using ponies altogether. Silver Stripe’s augmentations are already making a difference. The fact is that nopony could do this as well as you can. You’re an artist, and your medium is politics.”

“Princess!” He lifted his head in anguish, and she just looked on calmly, arching a brow. Slowly, he crumpled under her teal gaze. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

She stared on. “Very well. If that’s what you want. We’ll process your retirement.” She turned and stepped away from him. “Of course, we’re going to have to redact your memories for the last five years. You know enough to make you an incalculably valuable asset if you were ever captured. For safety’s sake, we’d have to take everything. There’s no telling what might be of use to the zebras.”

Goldenblood gaped at her. “Everything? But... I... ”

“Everything,” Luna replied, her voice softer as she glanced back at him over her shoulder. “Wouldn’t that be easier, Goldie? No more painful memories of her leaving you? No more dreams of dead, bloody foals? You could go on to whatever life you wish, never knowing what you did. It’s a gift, really.”

Goldenblood stared at her. “And when it comes time to clean house?”

Luna didn’t answer for several seconds, then turned to face him. “Well, I imagine that that won’t be your concern. As you said, I can manage without you now. But some of the Ministry Mares are going to have to answer for the things they’ve done.” The threat was lightly spoken, but it hung in the air like a sword.

“Very well,” Goldenblood said as he averted his eyes. “I’ll stay.”

“Good,” Luna said as she trotted over, putting a hoof on his shoulder. “I’d rather do this with you than without you.” Then she turned and trotted away, leaving him sitting alone with a horrified look on his face.

“You made him stay,” I said softly as the image evaporated. The lingering light from her horn cast stark lines in the shadows around us.

“He was valuable and useful to me. Of course I made him stay. I manipulated him into doing what I want. Something my sister would never have done,” she said quietly. “Still, our relationship was never the same after that. He was increasingly... resistant. Effective, ruthless, oh yes... but a wall had gone up between us. He avoided sleep, waiting until he was exhausted and fell into dreamless slumber. He kept secrets from me. I didn’t think he could, but he did,” she said with a slow shake of her head.

“Horizons. And Gardens of Equestria,” I said evenly.

“Yes... ” she murmured. “Gardens concerned me more, honestly. I knew Twilight had the Elements of Harmony, the artifacts that had banished me so long ago. I always worried that, for whatever reason, they might be used again. I couldn’t, of course, ask her for them. I never had the relationship with Twilight that my sister had. If the bombs hadn’t fallen, I don’t know how long I would have waited before arresting her and her friends. I had a list of ponies to purge from the Ministries, and all of them were on it. I’d ride the public sentiment following the end of the war over their dead bodies. Everypony would blame them. And Goldenblood. Especially Goldenblood.”

“Because Goldenblood made something that could destroy Equestria?” I asked.

“In part, but also because I had to be clear of all the things done via the O.I.A. I believed a pardon for Fluttershy would ensure he died quietly, with no problematic last minute confessions.”

“Why did he make Horizons?” I asked, looking above us for answers. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

Luna’s horn glowed. A prison cell formed in the air above us. Goldenblood was chained upright to the back wall. A collar around his neck barely let him breathe, and his forehooves were held above his head. “Why?” Luna asked the chained stallion. “Why did you do this? After all we’ve done together. All we’ve been through… why?”

Goldenblood didn’t answer her. He just stared flatly, his yellow eyes steady. “I was used.”

“By me?” Luna asked flatly. “You knew that when we started this.”

“By many people. I let myself be used. I thought it best.” He closed his eyes. “I should have died in Littlehorn. Then none of this would have happened. You would never have ruled as you have. The war would have fizzled out. No Ministries. No more nightmare.”

“No Fluttershy,” Luna said coldly.

He was quiet for almost a minute. “Are you going to execute her along with Twilight and the others?”

“I deeply respect Twilight and her friends. They’ve done good work for me,” Luna countered.

“But you don’t like them. They aren’t your friends,” Goldenblood wheezed. “Not like me.”

“You? You dare?!” Luna’s eyes flashed as she loomed above him. “You betrayed me! You deceived me. ME! And you dare to call me a friend? I am a royal princess. I do not need friends!”

Goldenblood, filthy and exhausted, slowly smiled. “You’re wrong, Luna. You do. We all do.”

“What is Horizons? Gardens I can disassemble without you, but where is the other?” Goldenblood didn’t answer. “Speak! We command it!”

He closed his eyes. “No,” he murmured. She gaped at him, and he went on, “Here are my terms. Abdicate in favor of your sister. Let her end this nightmare. Then I’ll tell you everything. Banish me after that, if you want. Execute me, if you want. But leave the throne, Luna.”

She glared down at him in disgust. “Keep your secrets, then. Let them hang you,” she said as she turned and walked out of the cell.

“He wanted you to quit?” I asked the luminous alicorn.

“Yes. I cannot comprehend why. For nearly a decade, we had worked together. Built a new Equestria together. Then, suddenly, he wishes all of it torn away. Why?” She shook her head, looking to

the side where a massive pink and green dragon blasted Goldenblood with flame. Every bit of him was burned away. Every bit. By dragonfire...

"Wait... " I muttered as I stared at the memory. "You didn't have him executed, did you?" Luna gaped at me, and I glared at her. "You're still playing games!"

"He's dead," Luna murmured. "Burned to nothing."

"Dragonfire doesn't always kill, though!" I snapped at her. "LittlePip used Spike's to travel into the S.P.P. hub! You did the same thing to Goldenblood, didn't you?"

Luna stared at me a moment, then whispered, "Yes."

"He's alive," I said. "The golden son of a mule is actually alive." Given how many other ponies I'd run into who'd lived through the apocalypse, I couldn't say I was surprised anymore. "Where is he?"

She stared at me for the longest moment. Then she whispered softly, "I don't know."

"Stop playing games. Tell me the truth. Where is he?" I insisted.

For a moment, I didn't think she was going to tell me. I started to turn away, but then she said quietly, "Here. He's here. In my fortress. My Redoubt."

I felt a cold prickle go up my spine. He was here. And so close. So very close. "Thank you," I answered, not looking back at her.

"I just wanted to protect my people. I just wanted to do better than Celestia... for once," Luna begged. I glanced back. The purple soul was slipping back inside the dark shell of my body. If only things were different... if only things had been better...

If only so many things...

The time around us thawed, and my body continued walking away. I sat there, my eyes clenched shut in this desolate, shadowy world. If Hades had his way, I'd get to see all of them die or enslaved. And there was nothing I could do about it.

Except find that golden bastard and beat some answers out of him.

Footnote: Loading, please wait…

Chapter 67: Goldenblood

"No. You won't. You may have made it impossible for Shining Armor to perform his spell, but now that you have so foolishly revealed your true self, I can protect my subjects from you!"

The shadow world played with my senses of distance and time. A dozen steps took me halfway to Chapel. A hundred more got me to the village itself. Spectral ponies moved in unnatural jerks and starts like images on a broken projector. With no sun, I had no grasp of any direction other than up once I got away from familiar landmarks. I had tried to teleport back to a room in the Citadel but hit some kind of magical barrier that kept me from reaching my destination; every time I'd attempted it, my horn had sparked and I hadn't moved. And with no idea where it was or even if I *could* eventually walk back, I was left alone in the shadows.

I sat beside the dark, empty bed of the Hoofington River and laughed bitterly. I'd died two, maybe three times, and now I was stuck in a shadow world, unable to do anything to stop Cognitum and Amadi, return to the castle, or contact my friends. And most maddening of all: the realization that Goldenblood was alive. That shouldn't have surprised me. Twilight had survived as part of the Goddess. Rainbow Dash a ghoul. If LittlePip had been right, Fluttershy was a *tree*. At this point, I could have come across Rarity's brain in a levitating robot, a Pinkie Pie spritebot, or the ghost of Applejack and not been terribly surprised.

Goldenblood. On the one hoof, I desperately wanted to talk to him, and on the other, I wanted to put a magic bullet through his head. He'd been the enabler. Maybe Luna would have ruled the same without him; maybe she'd have done even worse than she had with his help…or maybe, without him behind the scenes, the war would have ended peacefully instead of in fire. I didn't know. All I knew was that I had to find him. Above all else, the question of *why*

burned inside me. Why had he suddenly broken down towards the very end? Had he really gone mad, as Cognitum suggested? A doomsday weapon that killed everyone on the planet? Why did it go off on Cognitum? Was it mad too? I'd had plenty of experience with crazy machines! Madness. It was the simple answer, and that wretched stallion didn't have a simple bone in his body.

The shadow world had water of a sort; it trickled out of the rocks cold and clear and sterile. It didn't have life, though. Just shadowy parodies. Ghostly trees shifted and flickered around me as I walked, disappearing when I stopped. Translucent ponies trotted by, froze at a crawl, and then suddenly blurred away in long streaks. Then some zoomed backwards like a rewinding recording. The silence was absolute; there were no echoes, and it didn't matter how loudly I yelled. This strange place seemed to render every noise I made a whisper.

Sweet Celestia, forget Goldenblood and Cognitum. I was going to go crazy myself if I didn't get out of here!

"There you are," Tenebra, clad in dark purple armor, said as she flew out of the blackness with perfect timing. "I thought for sure you'd end up dead out here."

"There are dangers here?" I asked, skeptically glancing around me. "I haven't seen any."

"Blackjack, there are pockets here where time flows so fast that a pony will live out their lifespan in ten seconds…or so slow that you'd be frozen permanently like a fly in amber," the gray batpony said as she landed. "Cracks in space that can split you in half. Distortions that can turn you inside out. Granted, they're all rare, but you only have to run into one once for it to kill you. And yes, there are... *things* here. Unique. Deadly. And nothing I want to fight. We should get back to the castle."

"So it's a place that kills me just by existing. Haven't ever dealt with that before," I said a touch more sarcastically than I'd intended. I sighed, peering out into the bleak twilight around me. "I'm sorry. I'm just…"

"Frustrated?" the mare asked innocently. That simple little word made something snap in me.

"Frustrated? My whole life has been people telling me what to do," I said as I started pacing. "And you know what? I was cool with that. I was! Mom. The Overmare. Didn't matter. So long as somepony had a modicum of virtue or a little bit of authority and a

direction for me to go in, I went. I did." I laughed, my voice echoing like a chorus of whispering ghosts in the shadows. "I let a robot send me on a wild mare chase all across the wasteland. A quest! A Luna-damned quest for secrets and answers, going against the bad ponies who hurt people and trying to justify all the collateral damage I caused by trying to be good! I ran myself into the fucking ground rather than taking my loved ones and getting as far from here as I possibly could. When a bony hallucination started giving me advice, what did I do? Did I ignore it? Did I tell my friends? Did I mention it even in passing to any pony I met with a stethoscope and a theoretical doctorate? No, I gave him a spot as my chief fucking advisor!" I snapped towards her. "And do you know what it's gotten me? Huh? Do you?"

"Uhhh…" Tenebra backed away from be a step or two.

"This!" I shouted as loud as I could, spreading my hooves wide as I gestured to the gloomy void all around. "Nothing! I didn't even get a decent death. Three times!" I said as I paced even faster. "Outside of P-21 and Scotch, everyone I knew prior to six months ago is dead, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. People I didn't even know died because I was too hasty, or too slow, or too stupid to do the right thing. I lost my body for one made of steel, and then I lost that when my enemy decided she wanted to trade up! I got myself knocked up, and now she has my baby. She has my friends. She has my very special pony and made her cry!" I hissed through my teeth at Tenebra, who stared at me as if I was deranged. "She took my fucking cutie mark," I said in a murderous mutter, jabbing at my flank with a hoof. "She took my talent."

I grimaced as I stepped towards her. "And you know what? I'd be okay with THAT too," I hissed at her, jabbing my hoof at her chest. "I can deal with losing shit. I'm an expert at that. I can try and get it back. Talk to Glory. Talk to P-21. Tell them I fucked up again and see if they can work something out. Only I can't, because I went from being stuck in a city filled with swarms of pony-eating robots to being stuck in a world of eternal darkness *and your father won't let me out!*" I roared at her, making her take another step away. "So yes! I think 'frustrated' is one way to put it!"

And then, because no utterly foalish tantrum is complete without it, I clenched my eyes and screamed as loudly as I could. I put as much of my rage, frustration, and self-disgust as I could into it… and this damnable place bled my outrage down to an anemic cry.

When I finished, my throat ached and my eyes stung with tears as my heart thundered in my chest. I sat down hard on the rock, bowing my head. “I just…I didn’t want to lose it all. I can’t even be a mother here. This body is sterile,” I muttered raggedly, forlornly. I’d blown out all the fury inside me, leaving behind nothing but cold cinders and ash.

I felt a wing tentatively drape itself over my shoulders. “Please, don’t yell,” Tenebra said quietly, quickly. “I’m going to assume at least half of that was true. Are you going to give up? Are you done?”

I took a deep breath of the cool, sterile air. “No,” I said, so low I could barely hear it myself. I glanced at her. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

She gave a small shrug. “I’ve grown up wanting to smack my brother upside the head for his stupid plans. Like gluing all the furniture on the walls. Or trying to do a pantomime of Nightmare Moon’s demise. Or using oral sex to ease into the fact that eventually I was expected to do the deed with him knowing that every biology textbook said it was wrong. Never mind morals. I know what it’s like being trapped, so I can sympathize.” She gestured off into the darkness with a wing. “Shall we go?”

I nodded, and we started walking quietly along the dry riverbed. “How’d it get so bad?” I asked with a frown. We walked past an immense, broken black obelisk, now lying on its side by the riverbed, engraved with icons of an alicorn. As we travelled past it, it shimmered and disappeared into a ridge of broken rock, evaporating like a mirage.

She took a while to answer, glancing back at me several times as she struggled to find words. “Stygius and Father aside, most batponies don’t have the ability to travel from here to the world of light. Luna blesses us each in different ways. Most have to use the portal to the Citadel. Since the majority of our kind were in towns and cities, they died along with the rest of Equestria. Those that didn’t were left trapped in the Wasteland. Only a few made it back.”

“And those that did?” I asked.

She gave a wry smile as a forest of ebony trees flickered into existence around us, disappeared, and flickered back again. “You’re a stable pony. We bottled things up and got busy doing nothing. King Ebonstar ruled us, but generation after generation things

simply…dwindled. We trained. We studied. We did all we could to excel…then we bred with second cousins, then first cousins, then half siblings…" She shook her head. "Genetic death."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

Her tufted ears dropped. "Not as much as I am. Stygius is an utter idiot. I'm twice as smart as he is, but he was the one who left our home to try and save our species. I thought he was a randy fool. What he's done…it may just work." Then she glanced back at me as the ground beneath her shifted into an obsidian road. "Of course, if you're right, we may only have bought a few generations."

"If I'm right." I sighed. "Sometimes I don't think anyone's right. Not me. Not Cognitum. Not Princess Luna. Not anyone." I tapped the side of my head. "I have the memories of…at least two dozen ponies in my head. I can't think of a single one that had it all together." I closed my eyes. "Does the name 'Goldenblood' mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?" she asked as the shadowy road flickered back to uneven piles.

I let out a grunt. "I guess not. Tell me, do you think it's possible for one pony to manipulate an entire country from behind the scenes?"

"Of course," she answered. I glanced at her in surprise, arching a brow. "Princesses. Caesars. Generals. Everypony always remembers the leaders, but dig down a little more. Commander Ebonstar served Princess Luna's night guard. Just what did he do under her command? How did he execute orders? Was he loyal? Did he bend rules? What of the ponies under them?" She shook her head again. "Nopony really knows everything. But if a pony was skilled enough, certainly. The thing you'll never be able to answer, though, is the question of who was manipulating *them*."

Her words echoed in my head, but again everything came down to that one question: Why? Why did Goldenblood do what he did? Why make Horizons? Why betray Luna? Why did he freak out at the end?

All about us sprang a shadowy metropolis of buildings. An entire city of black stone. "What is all this?" I asked, whirling at the looming gothic architecture.

"Princess Luna's capital," she said with a wing sweep at the grand structures of flickering, shadowy rock decorated with a moon and star motif. I gaped, then peered at her skeptically. "It was never built," she said with a wry smile. "This was Princess Luna's dream,

before the Nightmare. Her own city, her Canterlot. But Celestia refused, and it drove Luna to darkness. Lunaria was never to be. But it persists here."

"So this place is a dream?" I asked. "Or is the dream a place here?"

She gave a silent shrug as we trotted past soaring buildings with flying buttresses decorated with bat wings and pointed arches. Obsidian statuary dedicated to the night was everywhere. I'd seen pieces of Canterlot in memories; this place was dark but no less grand. What if Celestia had let Luna go and found her own kingdom of the night? Would she still have rebelled? Been banished? Returned and been forced to rule a realm that was never her own? Would Twilight and her friends have met, formed their bonds, and then watched those bonds melt in the fires of war? Would I have ever been born?

Everything was connected, whether I wanted to admit it or not. Had I killed Sanguine, or Dawn, or Charm, I wouldn't be here. When you examined the intricacies of a life, any life, it all seemed so contrived, yet what else was there to do but accept it and move on from there?

As the city melted away around us, we approached the only thing that seemed real: a looming black fortification rearing up into the eternal dark sky. Then I said words I didn't expect to say. "I need to talk to your father."

She jerked her head, eyes wide. "That is not wise, especially so soon after–" I saw her ear twitch again and she froze. We stood motionless in the Hoofington riverbed, the dry sand and pebbles shifting around us silently as if an invisible current flowed past.

Freezing wasn't good, but it was better than talking and getting killed. My magic lifted the dark purple spear I'd taken from the armory. "What is it?" I whispered.

"I hear an echo," Tenebra whispered back, her yellow eyes narrowed in focus as her ears twitched.

"That's it?" I asked, sounding let down. With all I'd faced, this seemed a little anticlimactic.

"Not an echo of sound. An echo." She paused, and then I heard it too. A wailing noise mixed with sobs. It would have been pitiful if it hadn't sounded so big. "An echo of a life."

"Ghosts? You're telling me there are actually ghosts here?" I said, both skeptical and freaked out. I talked to the soul of Princess Luna, so my credulity limit was set pretty high. "What do we do?"

Suddenly, from the darkness, a shape appeared. Its body seemed to be that of an immense weeping serpent. In its wake, the shadowscape was ripped up as if by a potent current. Dimly through the darkness, I thought I heard the immense creature sobbing over and over, 'What a world' and 'It hurts! It hurts so much!' "Flee!" Tenebra shouted, turning and racing away from the immense beast.

The floating serpent creature turned towards us, weeping and thrashing through the air. While its smoky quartz body wasn't actually touching anything as it swam after us, its motions were releasing waves of force that I could feel, even from this distance. I tried to teleport to Tenebra, and my focus popped like a soap bubble. Eyes widening, I fled by manual means after her.

Surprisingly, I caught up with her inside a minute. The batpony had an odd hitch to her gait which made her stumble every dozen or so feet. "Why is it chasing us?"

"It's an echo of a life. It's not a real thing! It just wants to be experienced. Live its life again," she shouted, her flapping wings barely keeping her from faceplanting.

"What's so bad about that?" I asked, glancing back at the storm that was ripping up the riverbed behind us. The closer it got, the more clearly I could hear something like screams and the unmistakable 'Skoom' of balefire bombs.

"It died!" she shouted back. "You want that to happen to you?"

Okay. Fair point! "It wouldn't be my first time," I retorted, but I wasn't sure if I'd come back this time if it happened. I tried to get off a teleportation spell again, but the disruptive field around the serpent kept scattering my focus. I gritted my teeth, trying over and over again, and finally my horn flashed and I teleported up to the rim of the river. I turned and saw Tenebra stumbling along. "Okay! You can fly now!" She didn't. The spectral serpent had ghostly balefire bombs going off above it as it swam through the air. Dear Celestia, what was wrong with her? "I'm clear! Fly!"

But she still didn't fly. Her wings flailed about unevenly and only threw off her stride even more. Then her eyes rolled back and her legs spasmed out from beneath her. She collapsed onto her side, jerking in the throes of a seizure. The ghostly creature zoomed in for the kill.

I didn't think. I simply acted. I teleported to stand atop Tenebra and let the monster hit me first.

At the contact, I was jerked in a way that felt similar to the effect

of a memory orb or the Perceptitron, but far more intimate. I swam through the Hoofington bay alongside the massive battleship as it prepared for another mission. I didn't like the pony war, hated it, in fact, but bad things happened to non-ponies who didn't support the ministries' war effort. Patrolling the bay for talisman mines was far simpler than resisting, and it wasn't like I was killing anyone.

Suddenly alarms went off at the base, and sirens sounded further in. Sailor ponies ran back and forth along the buildings and on the ships. Contrails snaked across the sky; not one or two, or even a dozen, but hundreds. It seemed surreal. Then they started to fall, and instantly the naval base was silhouetted in a garish rainbow glow. I went blind, hearing the screams and then the concussive roar as it rolled across the bay. I dove for the safety of the water, and then…the *Luna* exploded. The blast was so intense, I felt myself burning even beneath the waves. I swam down, buried myself in the mud, and prayed for the pain to end.

It didn't. When I emerged, my magnificently coiffed mane began to fall out, and my scales sloughed off. Then my skin. Then the muscles beneath. I was larger than the ponies dying in the green snow; it took me weeks to finally perish. And when I did, I died thrashing and blind on the banks of this river. I hadn't wanted to die. It hadn't even been my war…

I don't know if it was my blank body, the fact that I had way too much experience dying, or simply that the echo wasn't fatal after all, but the ghostly serpent whisked through me and continued down the river. The screaming faded away, along with the roar of balefire. Soon, the only sound was Tenebra spasming at my hooves.

I had exactly enough medical knowledge to put the haft of my spear between her teeth to keep her from biting off her tongue, then wait for the seizure to pass. Thirty seconds later, her jerking slowed, then stopped. I pulled out the spear haft and held her as she went from seizing to crying.

"Well, that was an interesting death," I commented quietly.

She opened a teary, yellow eye and wiped her snotty muzzle on a hoof. "You…you experienced it? And you lived?"

"Well, honestly, on a scale of one to ten, it was about a four. I mean, dying of radiation poisoning sucks butt – I mean, I should know; I've nearly gone that way twice – but being in a room of screaming, melted flesh and metal is a whole lot worse." She stared at me for several seconds, her incredulity shifting to shock.

“Really,” I said with a small smile. “I’ve had worse.”
“I suppose Whisper is less of an exaggerating braggart than I thought,” she murmured as she carefully rose and adjusted her armor. She dripped wounded pride. “I’m sorry I was not able to fly to safety,” she said in a faintly tremulous voice. ‘I wish you hadn’t seen that,’ added her posture.
“I’m guessing this wasn’t the first time?” I asked softly.
“No. It happens quite frequently when I am…apprehensive and stressed. All batponies have physical, social, and educational regimens to keep us fit and sane. I’ve…frequently…failed them. My brother’s…*mare*,” she said delicately, as if she’d much rather have said something else. “She found them quite amusing at first. Thankfully she found organizing orgies much more diverting.”
“Your parents are…um…” Well, this was getting into awkward territory.
“Half brother and sister. They share the same father,” she replied. “Mother suffers from acute angina. Father from frequent migraines.”
I stared at her for several seconds. Her parents like that, and she had seizures; if she actually had kids with her brother…I shoved the ugly thought aside. “You guys can’t stay here,” I told her quietly. “If you’re at the point of genetic collapse, bringing in a few dozen ponies isn’t going to save your people. You’ve got to convince him to let me go.”
“Even if I told him about your rescue, he would criticize my weakness, not reward your courage,” she said as she pulled herself to her hooves.
“But her mother would thank you,” a gentle voice said from above us. The pale Persephone landed before us, along with Whisper and Stygius. She trotted towards me and gave me a firm hug, then a second to Tenebra. “Thank you,” she said, looking at me with her pale red eyes.
“You’re welcome,” I replied. “But I meant what I said. I can’t stay here in the shadows. Every second, who knows what Cognitum is doing? Can’t you do something?”
“Perhaps, if we had a month, but according to you and my son, we don’t,” she said, glancing over at Stygius.
I turned to face him, and he held up his board. ‘Fighting. Zebra & ponies. Bad’.
"Oh, isn't he just so *eloquent*?" Whisper cooed, stroking his cheek

with a power hoof. Tenebra made a gagging face behind his back.

I groaned, rubbing my temples. “That was the plan. Harbingers and Brood build up. Brood start to attack. Harbingers save everypony in the Hoof. Cognitum takes over.”

“Security takes over, actually,” Whisper said. “The heavy metal version of you apparently wasted no time asserting she was the biggest badass in the Hoof. I can only imagine how pissed Big Daddy is.”

I sighed and looked at Persephone. “Queen Persephone, if you can’t help me get home, then can you tell me if the batponies have a prisoner here named Goldenblood?”

Her expression sobered immediately. “You know of him?” I gave a slow nod.

“Is he still alive?” I asked.

“I…” She swallowed, then looked at the Citadel behind her. Then back at us. “When the bombs fell, we followed the Princess’s orders. The Citadel was sealed, and all members of the O.I.A. were kept out. Apparently, this was quite a surprise to them. But there was one we fetched when we realized we could not save Princess Luna. We retrieved this Goldenblood, brought him here. He instructed… demanded, really…that we fortify his cell. He’s been there ever since. I am not sure what he is, but he is alive.”

“Please. I have to see him. I need to know why he did what he did,” I said quietly.

She seemed to struggle with the choice. Finally, she gazed at Tenebra and answered, “Only my husband is supposed to have any contact with him. His cell is completely automated. But.” She nuzzled her daughter. “You saved my child, and this I can help you with.”

Together, with Stygius and Whisper carrying me, we returned to the Citadel.

* * *

We passed by several strange chambers on our way. Libraries that I had no doubt Twilight would have given a few molars to examine. A cold, defunct chemistry laboratory that still held an acrid tang. A huge purple gemstone carved in the shape of a heart that filled me with a sense of numb fear.

When Persephone, Tenebra, and I reached the bottom of a winding

staircase, I beheld a massive, round, gear-toothed door with the symbol of the O.I.A. on it set in the wall of dark basalt. A modification had been made, though: the crescent moon in the center had been turned on its side, points upward, with wings drawn up and out from the sides and a star-topped wand rising from the center. Persephone trotted to the control panel set beside it and typed something in. “There’s a stable down here?” By reflex, I checked my hoof for a PipBuck location tag.

“Indeed. Where did you think we got our food and water? While Stygius and my husband enable us to bring in fresh food, there’s no way we could both rely on just that and stay hidden.” The door groaned and hissed, then rumbled slowly away. “It took almost three years to build, using a wide variety of clandestine contractors and secret arrangements with Stable-Tec.”

Goldenblood’s arrangement with Scootaloo, looking the other way while she planned her stables and their various social experiments. “But why are you living up there if you have a stable down here?” I asked as the door rolled aside. I half expected there to be a whole crowd of ponies within, but the door opened to a large, empty, and dimly-lit entry chamber. Tables were set in rows beneath banners that read ‘present identification’, ‘military personnel’, ‘government personnel’, and ‘civilian personnel’. “Did something happen to the stable?”

“Not at all. We’d simply prefer to live in our ancestral home rather than a hole in the ground. We also lacked the technical skills and numbers to run this facility,” Persephone said quietly. “Our ancestors simply put as much on standby and automated maintenance as they could and left it down here. Every year we come down, do what we can to keep things tidy, and raid the food stores and water talismans.”

There was something amiss about this stable. We walked from the entry into what I’d assumed was an atrium. Instead, we walked past directories pointing to the left and right. ‘Atrium A’, ‘Atrium B’, and ‘Atrium C’? “How big is this place?” I said as I gaped at the map on the directory. ‘Big Macintosh Megastable Redoubt’ was printed at the bottom.

“As large as the castle above, and then some,” she said as we trotted to an elevator. We stepped in, she pushed a button, one of twenty, and the car started to descend. “This place was built with the intention of protecting critical features of the Equestrian

government in the event of a catastrophic attack. Being in the shadow world, even the most powerful assaults could be endured. The war, if necessary, could be commanded even if Canterlot were lost."

"And after Luna learned about Horizons, she made sure nopony used it till she was sure it was safe," I said, Horse's memories niggling at me with impressions of him trying to weed out who was loyal, who was useful, and who he could purge to win points with Princess Luna. "The evacuation plans were all messed up. No wonder only the pegasi were able to regroup and organize." And the Steel Rangers, by commandeering other stables and smaller bunkers.

"Yes. Only a token skeleton crew remained. We took over, but even then we didn't even have a tenth of the number this place was made to hold." The doors hissed open, and I immediately shivered. Our breath turned to mist in the frigid air. Persephone started forward, and a minute later I followed. "Without the Redoubt, Equestria was in chaos. Command networks were destroyed, but there were still some agents that continued with the old plan."

"Garnet. You shut the door on her," I said with a small smile, remembering her dying slowly of radiation poisoning. Normally I wouldn't wish that on anypony, but Garnet had been abnormally vile. I could appreciate the fitness of the batponies' decision. If Garnet had made it in here, she'd have probably killed everypony who crossed her. "What about Goldenblood?"

"I don't know what he said to my ancestors, but somehow he convinced them not to execute him, or throw him out into the green snow to die. I know not why, but he was entombed, by his own request, within this empty place. Every year we come down and find him still sealed."

I shivered as we trotted along. Behind glass walls were racks upon racks of boxes. "What is this place?" I muttered, levitating one box off its shelf. My magic brushed off the frost. 'Seed stock AJ-2011-BM: Wheat' was printed on its side, along with an expiration date almost three hundred years in the future!

"A storeroom. One of many. Some, like this one, hold seeds and spores. Others hold animal embryos." I twitched at the word; I'd gotten a D in reproductive education, but I'd answered that one right on the multiple choice test. "Hundreds of different species." There had to be enough seeds here to cover the Hoof in food. Or

more. No telling how much of it might have spoiled, but still.

Tenebra added, “There’s a surprising amount of material for fabrication. Machine shops. Almost no weapons though. Curious, given the purpose of this place.”

We reached the end of the hall. Etched on the door was one word: ‘Nopony’. I glanced at her, then at the door. It hissed open. There was a second door on the far side of the cubic room within, one every bit as heavy as the entrance door above. A desk and a terminal sat in the middle of the room, facing me, with a beam turret in each corner. A trio of memory orbs sat in a sealed glass case beside the terminal, each one radiating that golden yellowish light. I tried to tug the case open, but it remained shut.

“What the heck is this?” I asked as I pointed a hoof at the four turrets. Was it just me, or did they look like the extra hot beamy death model? Glory’d know for sure. Damn, I wished she was here.

“They were installed per Goldenblood’s request, to discourage idle attempts to access his prison. My husband has the override to the turrets, but I’m afraid I do not know it. Since a unicorn is needed to use these memory orbs, we’ve never risked opening those doors.” She gestured to the terminal with a snowy wing. “Once you turn it on, the case will open. I can only assume they contain memories to help you open the door.”

I looked at the three in their case. “Oh, is that all?” I said sarcastically.

“No,” she replied evenly. “There is supposedly an enchantment upon them. If you do not know the password, your heart will stop and you will never wake again.” I gaped at her, and she gave a faint smile. “You asked.”

I sighed, then chuckled softly. “Yeah. I did,” I said as I sat before the terminal. “I don’t suppose I could just chat with him without going through all this, could I?” I asked lamely, hoping the answer would be a surprise ‘yes’.

Persephone smiled and shook her head sadly. “That is not the way these things are done, Blackjack. Good luck,” she said simply as she leaned in and hugged me. “May the night comfort and bring you rest,” she said solemnly before turning and walking out of the room.

Tenebra averted her eyes, then moved closer and gave me a shoulder nudge. “Thank you for your assistance in the riverbed.” She backed away, glancing over her shoulder at her retreating mother. “I…” She met my gaze again. “You don’t have to do this.

Give me a few days. I'm sure between us we can get Father to relent!"

"In a few days, none of this is going to matter, one way or the other," I replied with a quiet smile. "Either Cognitum or Amadi will win, or Horizons will obliterate everything I care about. Goldenblood has answers. I need to know…" I trailed off as my eyes returned to the terminal. "You should get out of here. Knowing my luck, I'll sneeze and seal you up in here with me."

"Right," she said with a sheepish smile, then started for the exit. I turned, examining the terminal keys. Okay. Time to do this. I stretched out a hoof and– "Because I just…" Tenebra blurted behind me, and I froze, my hoof inches from the button. I turned, glancing back at her with a hard stare. "I just wanted…I mean…Whisper said how you like mares, and…"

"I'll ask Glory," I said as lightly as I could, then gestured to the door with my horn. "Now excuse me, but I need to set off the room of death for answers to questions."

"Come, daughter. She'll return on her own later," Persephone said in that offering-condolences tone of voice.

"Right. Right," Tenebra said as I returned my attention to the terminal. I sighed, checked to make sure she was going, then reached out a hoof again to the buttons. Time to get this party– A thunderous sneeze detonated behind me, and I jumped in shock, landing with my hooves splayed to either side of the terminal. I glanced back at the blushing batpony mare standing in the doorway as she wiped her muzzle with a wing. "Sorry. All this dry air…"

Funny how a spike in anger can give you just enough telekinetic force to toss a batpony down a hall like a paper airplane. Persephone watched her sail overhead and sighed, gave me a shrug of resignation, then, shaking her head, moved down to assist her offspring. I trotted back to the terminal and smacked the keys with a hoof before the universe conspired some way to somehow accidentally throw her into the chamber and seal her inside with me.

As soon as I did, there was a flicker as a magical shield was erected around the room. The turrets hummed, all four orienting on me. Finally, the memory orb case popped open. I saw each orb was conveniently numbered. I stared at the cursor on the terminal.

>WHO DID IT?

Well, that was refreshingly vague. "Rarity, in the atrium, with the

candlestick," I drawled sarcastically as I lifted the orb. I stared into the golden depths. "Okay, Goldenblood, deal the deck and let's play." With my courage and bravado running neck and neck, I touched the orb to my horn.

As soon as contact was made, I felt a growing pressure building in my head, the world's strongest migraine. It felt as if my skull was going to explode, and for all I knew, it was! A rasped question thudded in my skull with each throb. 'What did I teach?'

Betrayal and lying? Secret conspiracies 101? But with each flippant thought, the pain increased. The thudding was starting to grow and grow, yet every muscle in my body was frozen in place. Was it just me, or could I feel blood dripping out my nose? Think. Think! It'd been before Luna…at Littlehorn. Geology? No…arrgh, my head. No, he'd taught something else. Something that'd made Luna pick him. Politics? Government? Nnnnnngggh... things were getting really blurry. History! He'd taught– the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I didn't recognize the body immediately. Goldenblood always felt like a sack of rusty nails in all the memories of his I'd been in thus far. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that this was Vanity. He lay in a bed in a room filled with books. A hoof rapped on the door over and over again. "Mr. Goldenblood? Mr. Goldenblood?" a colt said to accompany each knock.

Goldenblood sighed and slipped out of bed, his body fatigued. He shook with a yawn and then walked to the door, opening it and staring down at a gray unicorn colt with a small frown. "Icebrand? What's wrong? It's two in the morning."

"There's a problem with a zebra, sir. The dean wants you to come talk to her and calm her down before something bad happens," he piped. Goldenblood gave a small nod and immediately stepped out into the amethyst and ebony-lined hallways with decorations depicting silver stars and crescent moons.

"Are you adjusting well, Icebrand?" Goldenblood asked in quiet tones as they walked past doors. Through one that was half open, I saw a half dozen bunk beds. "It must be a big adjustment from the orphanage to here."

"A bit, sir. Mum always wanted me to get an education. She wanted me to be smart enough to avoid stupid fights," he replied. "I

didn't expect the school to be so big though."

"Littlehorn has almost two hundred students, and it had been built for a thousand. Unlike Princess Celestia's school, we accept any pony of merit who yearns to learn," he gave a little smile. "Not that Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns isn't a fine institution, of course."

"I'm just glad they took me. My grades haven't been good since Mum…ahem…" he flushed and dropped his eyes. "I didn't expect them to, mister."

"Special accommodations were made for orphans and victims of the war effort." There was a pause, and then a muttered afterthought, "I didn't think there'd be so many, though."

As they walked along, I could see through windows that the school was shaped like a giant crescent with a round structure in the middle of the arc. Four stories below us was a cluster of a half dozen wagons. Ponies and zebras could be seen sleeping and keeping watch in the moonlight. At the end of the hall, we stepped into an open-topped cagelike elevator hanging in a vast central shaft. The car dropped silently in the grip of levitation talismans.

"Um…sir?" the colt said hesitantly.

"Yes, Icebrand?" he asked, his eyes staring straight ahead at the wall of the shaft as it slowly passed by.

"Is it true you used to live with zebras?"

"When I was your age. Maybe a little younger." Goldenblood smiled a little. "Mother liked to travel. She went all over the Zebra Empire, and I went with her."

"What're the zebras like?" he asked, shuffling his hooves.

"What do you mean?" Goldenblood asked, glancing down at him. "Which zebras?"

"All of them," Icebrand said as he shuffled on his hooves. "Thimble said they're all witchdoctors with spooky masks, but Briar Rose told me they have big cities. And Sweet Grass, he…ah…said they…um…did…" He went bright red, the rest of his words lost in a mumble.

"Sex stuff?" Goldenblood asked with the arch of a brow. Icebrand let out a faint squeak, and the pale unicorn chuckled. "The Carnilia celebrate life. All life. And the creation of life. For details, see Mrs. Amber Jewel in health class." He watched the colt squirm in embarrassment for a moment, and then went on, "These zebras were a different tribe, though; you can tell by the feather decorations they wear."

“On their clothes?”

“In their ears.” Goldenblood chuckled. “These are Tappahani. Refugees. The Tappahani are jungle hunters and shamans. Excellent cooks too, by the by.”

“I thought all zebras were the same,” the colt muttered. “The way they live and fight…”

“Tappahani? Fight?” He laughed softly, shaking his head. “No, Icebrand. They’re not fighters.” He rubbed his chin with a hoof. “Though, their duels are rather interesting. Some will attempt to cook meals so spicy that their enemy is incapacitated with tears. Or they’ll compete to see which can steal the egg of a giant roc. Or shoot the leaf from the tallest tree with a blowgun. They are not Roamani fighters yearning for combat and battle. This war has been harder on them than on us.”

That sounded like my kind of zebra! Make lunch, not war. I wondered how Glory’s cooking would stack up against theirs.

The doors chimed and opened, and the pair stepped out into another hallway. The shrieks and cries of a mare could be heard in the distance, echoing off the dark walls. “I can find the way. Get to bed, Icebrand. And remember, you have a test on the Champions of Harmony tomorrow.”

“Still?” the colt whined. “Sir, there’s a camp of zebra refugees in the school courtyard. How can we have a test now?”

“The Tappahani aren’t going to hurt us. Not unless they plan to cook dinner for us. Now get to bed. I’ll see to the dean.”

The colt nodded, started to reenter, then paused. “Mister Goldenblood? Can you tell me more about zebra tribes tomorrow?” Goldenblood smiled and nodded once to him. Icebrand beamed. “Thanks!” He pressed a gemstone, the cage doors swung shut, and the lift rose silently out of sight.

“Such a good kid... ” Goldenblood muttered trotted in the direction of the cries.

As he approached an office door, it flung wide, and a sallow yellow unicorn emerged. “There you are! What’s taken you so long? She’s been screaming and babbling for an hour in her savage tongue. I nearly cast a sedation spell on her.” His angry scowl instantly made me want to buck him upside the head.

“I came straight here, Dean Bitterbrew,” Goldenblood said evenly. “Is she okay?”

“Okay?” The yellow unicorn sneered. “She’s a sneak thief. We

caught her away from the others, skulking about. Soon as we caught her, she started babbling and jabbering." He looked back over his shoulder. "Probably poking around for something to steal. The principal said a whole box of spark batteries, a mana capacitor, and some conductors have gone missing from the student lab. Who knows where she stashed them."

"She was likely looking for a bathroom, sir. If things have gone missing, we can take it up with the arcane sciences club. They're likely working on a project."

"How do you know she didn't take it?" Bitterbrew asked, narrowing his eyes.

Goldenblood replied coolly, "She's Tappahani, sir. If she wanted to hide from us, we wouldn't have spotted her. And she wouldn't have hidden a belonging. The Tappahani are communal. They share everything."

"Savages," Bitterbrew muttered before opening the door to the office. A young zebra mare sat curled tightly in the corner, crying out in rapid fire speech. Three other unicorns stood to the side, looking tired and uncomfortable. "Go. Get her to shut up. See if you can find out what she did with the things she stole."

Goldenblood nodded and approached. He took a seat, cleared his throat, and then flung his hooves wide. "Sastimos, sendrin a Tappahani. Du' dera o ushalin zhala sar o kam mangela."

She stared at him, falling silent for several seconds. "Rakesa tu Propli natsia?" she asked in bafflement.

"Me shavora xari Propli." He paused, then laughed. "Ne me ohano kushi tràshful." The mare relaxed just a little. Her mane and face were speckled with dozens of dots of red and blue dye, and there were bird feathers piercing her ears. She didn't share the laugh, though, and Goldenblood soon frowned.

"What did she say?" one of the unicorns asked.

"I said hello. Made some standard greetings for her tribe. Joked about my horrible pronunciation," Goldenblood said, trying to smile, but it died on his face. "She didn't laugh. They always laugh at jokes. Even my jokes." He glanced over at the yellow stallion. "Something's very wrong."

"No, really?" Bitterbrew said sourly. "Get her to shut up and tell her to give back what she stole!" he demanded. "Damned zebras probably have it in those wagons."

"They have their mares and foals in the wagons, sir. They're not

going to hide a hundred bits' worth of equipment you can buy at any hardware store in them." Goldenblood rolled his eyes and said, "Me boro ri kam jenesi tu dika fiz? Spark kurrimu? Ohano scienzie?"

The mare blinked, then shook her head rapidly. "Ni. Niksus kam keda." He frowned at her, and she said in greater earnest, "Te merel muro muri dei, wowa ne kaerawa dowa!" The expression of fear returned.

"She doesn't have it," Goldenblood said flatly.

"Roadapples!" Bitterbrew growled. "She's lying!"

"Tappahani do not lie. Propoli lie. Zencori lie. Roamani lie if ordered to. Tappahani do not."

"Me diktom tam lendi-le!" the mare blurted out, trembling.

"What was that?" Goldenblood asked, then repeated himself in Zebra, "Who?"

She shook her head. "Me ne kur pen!" she said, near tears. "Kako nashti zhas vorta po drom o bango!"

"She did take it, didn't she?" Bitterbrew said with a triumphant smirk.

"No," Goldenblood said. "She doesn't want to tell me who."

"Well, of course she has it! Who else could have taken it?" the sallow stallion snapped crossly.

Goldenblood regarded the zebra mare. "Kai lelled fiz?"

The mare closed her eyes, trembling. "Kako…"

"Kai lelled lendi?" Goldenblood repeated in a softer voice as tears ran down her color-speckled cheeks.

"Starkatteri," she whispered. "Starkatteri kinshna-wowa lelled lendi. Diktom-ye lendi wi-ye mok vardos. Kako muk-me. Te shordjol muro rat…Kako…"

"What did she say?" the others asked.

"Starkatteri. She said a Starkatteri took it," Goldenblood murmured. At their baffled expressions, he sighed. "They're a different tribe from hers. Cursed. Dangerous."

One of the unicorns adjusted her glasses. "Actually, 'cursed' is a misnomer. There actually aren't really curses but instead–"

Goldenblood spoke over her. "Thaumaturgical nomenclature distinctions aside, she wouldn't have spoken their name unless she was deadly serious. Naming them brings a curse of misfortune down upon you. Normally they're called the Fallen One, or just the One." He looked from one to the next. "Did any of you see a zebra with

magical markings on their face? Or maybe a zebra that took great pains to cover himself?"

"I think there was at least one, but everything was so crazy with the injuries and all," the unicorn mare said nervously. Then a low, cynical laugh interrupted them both.

"Oh, please. This is just too much," Bitterbrew said with a sneer at the trembling mare. "She steals from us and then conveniently says the 'evil zebra' took it. She must think we're foals."

"She wouldn't have said that name if she wasn't serious," Goldenblood snapped. "It would be like us joking about Nightmare Moon returning."

Doubt began to show on the assembled unicorns, and even Bitterbrew seemed a little less contemptuous and a little more unsettled. "Fine. Take her back to the others. Everyone should go out in pairs and see if they can find this mysterious evil pony. I'll wake the principal and find out if we can't get those soldiers from Canterlot here any faster."

The orange mare in glasses who'd tried to talk about why curses didn't technically exist stepped up to Goldenblood as he talked in low, earnest tones to the zebra mare. She nodded her head, gave a thickly accented 'thank you', and walked slowly from the office, followed by the other pair of ponies. "We'll take the north wing," the orange mare said, and together she and Goldenblood went out into the quiet school. "Everypony is nervous."

"They'll get the refugees out in the morning, and the children can have an early break," Goldenblood replied evenly as they walked along the hall, unlocking, checking, and securing each classroom in turn. Their horns cast beams of light into still, quiet chambers loaded with even rows of desks for the dozens and dozens of students above. "If there's a Starkatteri here, though, we need to find him."

"Why? I mean, we can't have any of them running around the school, but are these zebras so bad?" she asked as she peeked through the window of an office. Inside there were more than two dozen wounded zebras in an improvised hospital, cared for by a half dozen ponies and a harried looking school nurse. The attack must have happened only a few hours ago.

"They're…complicated. Millennia ago, they tried to enslave the other tribes. They were marked with magic so that all that were born into the tribe would be noticed. Most zebras think of them…

well…the way Bitterbrew thinks of zebras in general," he said as he swept his eyes across another classroom. A foalish scribble of Princess Luna. Paper pegasi dangling from a mobile. A graded paper left on a table top, B-.

"Why didn't they just kill them if they were so bad?" she asked.

"Because they're still zebras. They're hated, but tolerated. That's part of their punishment. They know serious dark magic though. Powerful zebra curses, and the calling of malevolent spirits to harm their enemies."

"Ugh. Why does everypony make that mistake? They're not curses! They're--" she began to lecture again when he silenced her with a hoof over her mouth.

Very softly, he heard the click of a door closing. "Everypony is either asleep, patrolling the other wing, or watching the zebras, right?" Her eyes wide, she nodded, and he trotted down the hall, checking doors. The one to stairwell wasn't locked.

"Oh no... The children... " she said as together they made their way up.

"Try and stay silent. We don't want a panic," Goldenblood said. "If you see him, be careful. He could be up to no good, or he might have been thrown out of the wagons for his marks. I don't want to provoke a Starkatteri if we can help it."

Hoofbeats echoed distantly down the hall, and together they made their way back towards the stairs in the middle of the dormitory wings. There was a soft thump from a closet marked 'linens', and Goldenblood glanced at her, and then opened it slowly with his magic. "Haja nanka–" Goldenblood began to say, then froze at the sight of two colts in an embrace, blushing furiously as they sat amid rumpled sheets. "Really?"

"Sorry, Mister Goldenblood. Miss Silverspire," one of the two said ruefully.

"We just wanna to say goodbye in case we got sent home," the other explained as he flushed.

"Will you get them back to bed?" Goldenblood asked with a groan as he rubbed his temple.

"Of course. Come on, you two," she said as she nudged them back down the hall the way they'd come. Goldenblood sighed, looking around at the closed doors. Then, across the large central rotunda, he spotted a doorway ajar. He made his way slowly around towards the doorway, a filly's bathroom. From within came a wan glow of

light and a soft thump. Carefully, he pushed the door wide enough to peek through.

Within, a cloaked figured worked furiously, attaching wires and cables to a hoofball-sized slab of pink quartz with a dark purple talisman glyph within. The zebra was in the process of duct taping the spark batteries to other equipment. “What are you doing? Keena-te sa ru?” Goldenblood asked, and the zebra in the ragged cloak turned to peer at him, breathing hoarsely. “Kasana–”

“Don’t profane my language with your foul tongue,” the zebra snapped back.

“What are you doing?” Goldenblood asked as he stared at the talisman. “Stop. This is a school.” Then he turned his head and snapped, “Silverspire! Bitterbrew! Anypony!”

The zebra finished taping the wires to the talisman. Goldenblood’s horn glowed, and he yanked it into the air. “I don’t know what you think you’re going to do with this, but–”

In a flash, the zebra closed the distance, spinning in the air and slamming his outstretched hoof across Goldenblood’s neck, snapping his focus. Smoothly, he caught the wired talisman on his flank and ran over Goldenblood, out into the hall. Silverspire, who’d been running back, let out a shriek. “Who are you? Stay back!”

Goldenblood groaned as he rolled to his hooves. More teachers were appearing, some thundering up the stairs and others coming out of their quarters. The zebra backed away as the talisman began to glow. “What is that, Silverspire? Is it a bomb?” Goldenblood asked tensely.

“No! I think…I think it’s some kind of industrial strength lye generator. For manufacturing. But he’s modified it and wired it to those capacitors…” she trailed off, then her eyes shot wide. “Grab it! Quickly! He’s overcharging it!”

Three teachers lunged for him, their horns glowing as they tried to grab the wired talisman from the zebra. He spun, dodged, and flipped away from his attackers with grace and swiftness. He just wouldn’t let them get a grip on the device, and when a unicorn did, the zebra struck out, smashing horns, throats, and eyes with lightning kicks and punches. The pink talisman began to glow.

Goldenblood charged in and tackled him, hooves wide. The zebra tried to spin out of the way, but Goldenblood powered both of them towards the edge of the rotunda, looking down at the ground floor

fifty feet below. The zebra clasped the talisman in his hooves as they both went over, the onlookers screaming in terror.

Goldenblood tumbled through the air and landed with a crash in one of the hovering elevator cages ten feet down, making it sway and bob wildly in the air. His whole body ached as he rose and crawled to the edge of the elevator, looking down at the prone form of the zebra. Goldenblood hit the control talisman with his magic, and the lift lowered itself quickly to the floor.

The achy white unicorn approached the prone zebra. The fall was at least forty feet onto hard black marble. Blood spread outwards from the zebra's head as he curled around the pink talisman. It was humming and throbbing, and a sharp tang filled the air. Goldenblood peered down at the body.

"Get back! Get back!" Bitterbrew shouted as he approached, then stopped short of the corpse. "Is he dead..?"

"I think that's some of his brain by your hoof," Goldenblood said, gesturing to a marble-sized glob.

"Ah good," Bitterbrew said before the unicorn levitated out a pair of wire cutters, reached down, and held it to the wire. Goldenblood took several steps back. "Now, is it the red wire or the blue wire?" he mused.

"Dear Luna, don't cut it if you're not sure!" Goldenblood cried out. There were more hoofbeats as an older unicorn mare and a half dozen others trotted up to the fallen body.

"Hello, Principal Dew Blossom. I was just about to deactivate it." Bitterbrew smirked. "And don't be so fearful, Goldenblood. It's always the red…"

The corpse reached up and grabbed Bitterbrew's head, yanking him down towards the nightmarish ruin of his face. "Yur firsh!" he cried out, and then he flicked the talisman with the tip of his tail. From the end of the device, a twenty-foot-high plume of pink vapor blasted out. Bitterbrew's head disappeared in the spray, and when his spasming body fell back, a dripping stub was all that remained. The jet of vapor started to die, but then a white mote was pulled into a silver ring around the pink talisman, and it surged and vomited forth an even more intense stream.

"It works! It works!" the zebra cackled as he turned the plume of pink gas on the adults around him. Every second, the jet grew more intense and thicker. As Goldenblood watched, the cloak's blood-matted hood fell away, and he saw the zebra clearly for the first

time. The black stripes ran like ink, but every second his horrible injuries were restored. The stripes on his face didn't look like natural zebra patterns but the glyphs of some horrible arcane spell. And as Goldenblood fell back into the lift, the zebra turned and looked back as the last of his skull popped back into place. With cold, terrifying certainty, I put a name to the face.

Amadi.

Goldenblood desperately hammered the elevator control and winced as a little patch of the pad remained behind. The lift jerked up into the air as the Pink Cloud spread, billowing in every direction and rising higher and higher. Screams of terror from far too many children and teachers alike began to echo as the pink vapors thickened and rose. The Cloud spread like a rising tide, the zebra whirling this way and that.

I'd been in Pink Cloud before, so the terrible burning sensation felt familiar. Everything inside and out burned horribly as he rose up to the dormitory floor. Vapors were already curling upwards as the lift continued to rise, and he slumped against the bars in a desperate bid to stay upright. "Stop the lift! Stop the lift!" Silverspire screamed, levitating up a foal as the lift continued upwards toward the observation tower.

Goldenblood tried to hit the controls to stop the lift, but his body was stuck to the bars of the elevator. He stared down at the sight of his hide melting against the pink coated metal and cried out, then broke into hacks and coughs. With that much pain, I couldn't blame him for not being able to stop the lift. Still, he gave a herculean heave, and fire exploded along his side as he pulled free, leaving a dozen strips of his hide attached to the metal. The movement made the lift lurch, and he slammed against the bars on the opposite side. He screamed, but his scream was one of dozens filling the central shaft.

He watched as the teachers and students fell back from the edge of the balcony as Pink Cloud began to curl up over the edge and outwards. The panicked ponies tramped each other as they fell back from the stinging vapors. The other lift rose, but it was filled with a squirming mass of a half dozen ponies, and from how they moved, it was hard to tell where one ended and another began. Tiny white flashes could be seen in the depths as the Cloud spread more and more.

The third lift dropped with two adult ponies coming down.

Goldenblood tried to call for them to stop, but all that came out were rasping, gasping coughs. The two disappeared into the swirling pink without a clue as to how dangerous it was. He heaved once again, his Pink-Cloud-softened hide tearing, but this time he adamantly remained standing in the center of the lift.

When it reached the top of the tower, he slowly stepped out, every footstep burning. His whole world was pain. Two more unicorns rushed over. “What’s going on? What’s that screaming?” Along the far wall, large bulky electrical equipment pinged and crackled. “Mister Goldenblood? Is that you?”

“Dugghh tusshhhhh mehhhh!” he grasped and then started coughing and rasping, bloody drops fanning out from his mouth with every breath. “Pinghh…posson…”

“Poison?” the mare asked. Both of them stared in horror, and then she continued, “Hold still, Gold. I got you.” She shot a bolt of magic up at the roof.

“No!” the other shouted. The bolt struck a talisman in the ceiling, and suddenly water began to rain down on Goldenblood…and the equipment. It sizzled, crackled, and finally popped with a great cloud of gray smoke coming out the back. The machine fell silent as the second unicorn rushed to it. “No no no…the radio…”

The pain abated a little. The mare saw to him, casting healing spells that mended his hide, but they did little for his chest. The stallion fussed over the radio. Out the tower window, far below, a pink fog bank rolled across the wagons and camps. Zebras fled towards the forests, but the school gates barred their path. Some began to scramble up, hooking their hooves around the bars and scrambling over with a haste I’d never imagined before…but they weren’t fast enough. The Pink Cloud blasted past them, and their screams reached the tower before being cut short. Most hadn’t even made it that far. In the courtyard, more jets exploded here and there. There were still yells and cries for help from the levels below.

“Why? Who did this? How?” the mare asked as tears streaked down her cheek.

“Zeee…bra…” Goldenblood gasped weakly as he collapsed on his side. “Sta…sta…” but then he broke off, coughing and hacking.

“A zebra did this?” the stallion asked, looking up from the equipment. “No. How could they? This is a school! Why?”

“Do you think they need a reason?! They’re monsters! They used their own refugees to get into the school and then killed us all after

we helped them!" the mare snapped through her tears.

"No…" Goldenblood murmured as things started going dim, his chest feeling as if it were full of molten rock. "Sta…aaaaah…."

"Don't worry, Goldenblood. We'll get you help. Just hold on," the stallion said as the pain abated with another healing potion. "We're going to survive. We're going to make damned sure everypony knows what happened here tonight!"

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory orb, swayed, then straightened. Amadi. He'd been there. Two centuries ago…he'd *been* there! No wonder, when Goldenblood had seen him in the Image archives, he'd freaked out. The zebra who'd started it all had been there!

"But why couldn't he tell them after he recovered?" I asked myself as I stared at the screen.

Suddenly, the terminal flickered, and the grainy image of a mare appeared. At the bottom of the screen read a tagline: zebras responsible for school attack. "…multiple eyewitnesses to the massacre say the zebra were responsible for the attack…"

The image changed to a picture of a bandaged-covered Goldenblood as a stallion voice said, "…teacher saw with his own eyes the zebra commando responsible for this attack…"

A new image. The mare from the memory orb appeared on the screen. "It was horrible! We could hear them screaming, trapped in their dorm rooms, as the poison gas got stronger and stronger! I can still hear them screaming!" she said, sobbing brokenly.

Another picture of several formally adorned zebras surrounded by reporters. Behind them was an angry mob. 'Zebra officials deny Littlehorn Massacre', read the tagline. 'Denounce Equestria for the murder of 'refugees'. Suggest Littlehorn School front for chemical weapons lab. Hoofington burns. Follow-up terrorist attack?'

Finally, an image of Celestia with Luna standing beside her. I'd never seen her look so…old. Even with the grainy picture, I could see the prominent shadows around her eyes and the heartbroken stare. "…national period of mourning. I regret to inform you all that I am stepping down for an extended leave of absence effective immediately. The events of this war have become…more than I ever imagined. Not since ancient times has Equestria suffered as it does now, and I fear there is no way for harmony to be restored.

Fear not, though. I am passing control of the kingdom to my dearest sister. As she has sheltered us all through the night, so shall she protect us all through these dark times. She has my absolute confidence." The camera then focused right on Princess Luna as dozens of flashbulbs went off. I'd never seen a mare so terrified in my life.

"I…I want to…um…" Luna began as her eyes darted from one reporter to the next as a long, tense silence went on.

"How will you retaliate for the attack on Littlehorn, Princess Luna?" one reporter finally said. Princess Luna's mouth worked silently for a second, a shadow of pain flickering across her face as she struggled to answer.

However, before she could express the feelings, another reporter waved a hoof at her. "Can you respond to Prince Blueblood's comments about peace with the zebras being impossible?" shouted another.

"Princess Luna! Princess Luna! What about the burning of Hoofington and the rumors that a zebra was responsible? Can you comment?" hollered another.

Luna's mouth moved silently as she looked from one to the next. "I…well…I just wanted to say…" But whatever she wanted to say was trampled by more questions.

Then Princess Celestia cleared her throat, and the questions stopped immediately. "Naturally, you have many questions and concerns. Princess Luna will undoubtedly answer them all in time, later. Excuse us." Together they turned, but I caught the momentary downcast eyes, the worried expression…and the furrowed brow.

The screen returned to the first question.

>WHO DID IT?

I typed in 'AMADI', then stopped. That was the right answer, but was it the right answer for *him*? No one could blame him for the rage that was unleashed after Littlehorn. Amadi was the killer. Goldenblood had been near death. If he'd died, the two up in the tower could have come to the exact same conclusion, regardless of what Goldenblood had said. Everypony could have died, and nothing might have changed.

But I imaged how Goldenblood must have felt…watching the world die…his Equestria die…I knew what it was like to survive things like that. How I blamed myself for things that hadn't been entirely my fault. How it'd torn me up inside. Slowly, I typed the answer.

>GOLDENBLOOD.

The terminal went blank, and my breath caught in my throat as the beam guns hummed.

Then:

>WHAT DID HE DO WRONG?

I glanced down at the remaining two memory orbs. “Gee, where to start?” I carefully levitated the next orb and eyed it. “Why can’t you ever make anything easy, Goldenblood? Even now?” I sighed as I glared at the orb. “Okay. Round two.” I touched the orb to my horn and made the connection.

‘My only friend’ came the rasp. Friend? Goldenblood didn’t have friends, he had accomplices. He had minions. He had…

Okay, why wasn’t I breathing? I sat down hard trying to perform the simple motion of pulling air into my lungs and not quite remembering how. Luna? Sadly no. Psalm. No. She might have been closer than that. Twilight Sparkle? Fluttershy! No…starting to get light headed. Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Pinkie Pie? Rarity? No no no no. Princess Luna? Damn, I was repeating myself! Why were there all those black spots in my vision? Somepony he regarded a friend…Spike…Horse…no…not Horse. Garnet? No…somepony else…Somepony who actually gave a shit about him. Fluttershy? No…Lacunae…no…think…Somepony…Some…

Trottenheimer…

oooOOOooo

Okay. Once again I was reminded why Pink Cloud wasn’t your friend. Having fire erupt with every shallow breath sure was distracting. Still, the sensation of breathing was quite welcome after trying to get into this damn orb. Memory orbs that shut down your breathing? That was fucked up. Knowing my luck, the last one would stop my heart. How long could a pony go without their heart beating?

Worry about that when you get to it. Pay attention now. Goldenblood was walking down a very seedy back street in Canterlot. In the distance I could see the ministry buildings, their colorful spires hung with black banners. A layer of wet slush covered everything, and it dripped and drizzled into the alley. A gaunt cat hissed at him as he trotted past, but he paid it no mind.

A scar-covered brown pony quivered between two boxes, one

forehoof ending in a truncated stump. “Spare a bit for a vet? I fought with Big Macintosh,” he pleaded as he held out his remaining hoof.

Goldenblood stopped, peering down at him with tired eyes. At the pony’s hooves, barely covered by the rags, was a red pamphlet with a large green apple half upon it. “No. You didn’t,” he replied in cold, hard tones. The crippled stallion flinched back and pulled his rags over him more. Then Goldenblood levitated three bits from his bag. “Go stay at the Ministry of Peace shelter tonight. It’s going to be cold.”

He left the stallion behind and walked down an even narrower, dimmer side street. I wondered what sort of horrible things he would be meeting in a place like this. Zebra infiltrators? Equestria death squads? Mad scientists?

Outside a doorway, a batpony mare guard stood at attention. “Is she still inside?” Goldenblood asked.

“Yes sir,” the guard replied with a salute of her wing. Then concern crossed her dusky blue face. “She’s…in a bad way, sir.”

“They’re all taking Big Macintosh’s death hard. It’s been a rough week. I expected this of Applejack, but not her.” He frowned, looking over towards the immense tree that, from LittlePip’s descriptions, was the Ministry of Peace. “I wish I knew what they talked about the other day.” What, something that Goldenblood didn’t know? Be still my…strike that. “I’ll see if I can help her. Are the premises secure?” he asked as he looked at the door. Sad music played through it.

“No one’s going to touch her, but…I can’t be sure they won’t talk,” the batpony said with a frown. “Should we detain them?”

“No. Clear them out discreetly. I don’t want her upset any more than she already is. Image will keep it from getting further than this. Make use of the slush account to compensate them for their inconvenience. If they want more, they won’t like the more they get. I’m in no mood for blackmail attempts these days,” he muttered as he walked through the doorway and into a kitchen. He glanced at the kitchen staff and nodded to the door. Then he stepped through.

The bar was dingy, smelly, and dim. Dingy in the fact that whoever owned it didn’t seem inclined to fix the carved table tops, the dented flatware, or the chipped mugs. Smelly in that ‘sour hops and faintly spoiled wine with just a tang of sharper whiskey’ scent kind

of way. Only the dimness seemed intentional, as if the owner had tried for cozy and intimate and landed squarely in creepy and sinister territory. Actually, I kind of liked it. In the corner, a jukebox played a sad Sweetie Belle tune. 'When is my stallion coming home?' seemed to be the refrain. A dozen or so patrons waited tensely in one corner watched by two larger, bulkier batpony stallions. The mare followed Goldenblood in and walked over to them. A few quiet words were exchanged, and then, single file, the ponies vacated the bar. One started to give a drunken protest, but the stronger stallion incapacitated him, wrapping leathery wings around the inebriate's head and then hauling him across his back.

"Thanks, Lionheart," the mare said with a little nod as the stallions trotted out. "All yours, Goldenblood."

He nodded as he stared at the lone figure at the bar. This was the last place I'd have expected to see Twilight Sparkle. Her mane was a rat's nest of tangles; her eyes were puffy and bloodshot. On her head perched a tiara with a six pointed star atop it. In front of her was a mug of something smelling strongly of apples.

Only the bartender remained, the scruffy brown unicorn tilting his head towards the scarred pony as he approached the bar. "You're ruining the party," Twilight Sparkle slurred, "Go away."

"Thanks for contacting me, Scruffy," Goldenblood said to the unicorn behind the bar. The brown unicorn nodded to Goldenblood. "The usual."

"Of course you know each other," Twilight grunted in disgust, levitating her mug and trotting towards the jukebox.

Goldenblood remained at the bar, watching Twilight. "How many of those has she had?"

"She hasn't even had that one," the brown stallion replied with a grunt. "I don't think she's figured out she needs ta drink the damned thing first." He paused. "You think she's spit her bit or something? She's played that song a dozen times already."

"Something. I don't know why this is hitting her so hard. Applejack, yes, but Twilight? It makes no sense. If she has…" then he shook his head and glanced at the pony. "How're the wife and kids?"

"Wife's in Zebratown now. Took your advice. The kids... " He shook his head. "Dunno if they should stay here with me or go stay with her. Nobody wants zonies anymore." He set a glass of

something sharp down on the tabletop. “She’s got another packet ready. Her aunt with the Propoli got it to her.”

“I’ll send somepony for it. Thanks for being discreet,” Goldenblood replied, then paused and added, “I’d send them to be with their mother, Scruff. Zebras might resent them, but their stripes might get them hurt.” He then took the glass and trotted towards the jukebox as Twilight selected the same sad song again.

“Go away, Goldenblood. I don’t want to talk to you right now,” she said as she stared into the jukebox.

“Fair enough. I’m just here for a drink,” he said as he slipped into the booth nearest to the jukebox.

Twilight snorted and stared into the machine as Goldenblood waited, sipping his drink. When the song ended, Goldenblood asked, “Can you pick ‘Away, away my heart’ next? Just for a little variety?” Twilight Sparkle grimaced, then glanced over at him, and her horn glowed. The tune changed, still just as sad.

Twilight stared into the jukebox’s glowing, shining talismans as they whirred and played the record. “I’m leaving the ministry.”

“Mmmm…” Goldenblood replied, gazing out at nothing in the dim interior.

“I’ve had it with this war. This killing. This…everything…” she said as tears ran down her cheek. “I keep trying to come up with something that’ll end it. Some spell or trick or enchantment or… something!” She thudded the jukebox in frustration. “I can’t do this anymore!”

“Mmmm…” Goldenblood said again.

“Is that all you’re going to say?” she snapped waspishly.

“No,” he answered. “I’ll start processing the paperwork this afternoon. Speak to Princess Luna. We’ll frame it as ‘extended leave’ and next week work in the retirement. Mosaic and Gestalt will take over the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. I imagine Princess Celestia will be glad to have you as a teacher at her school.” He glanced at her, and his lips curled in a small smile. “I think you’ll like it, Twilight. Teaching can be…surprisingly rewarding. Just don’t fall behind on the grading. It can be a killer.”

Twilight stared at him, appearing shocked. “That’s it?” He gave a little nod and sipped his drink. “You’re not going to try and talk me out of it?”

Goldenblood gave a little shrug, then broke off coughing for several seconds as the magma in his lungs erupted for several

seconds. He levitated over a napkin and spat a pinkish red blob into it. “If it’s what you really want, I won’t stop you. I imagine that Princess Luna will want to know why, but I’m sure that, as long as your friends know why you’re quitting, that’s all that matters.”

Twilight Sparkle winced at the word ‘quit’. “I’m just sick of it all. At my ministry there’re ponies who don’t seem to know that there’s a war on at all. Even I feel that way sometimes. It’s all projects, puzzles, checklists, and reports. But now Big Macintosh’s dead, and…it hurts, Goldenblood. It hurts so damned much and I can’t figure out why!”

“You saw Fluttershy. Did she…” he began, but she shook her head.

“She prescribed some drugs and therapy. Drugs.” She rubbed her face with a hoof. “Sweet Celestia, hasn’t she seen what they’re doing to Pinkie Pie? I can’t take them.”

“Not all drugs are the same, Twilight. There’s a big leap between Mint-als and aspirin. And you know that too,” Goldenblood answered. Twilight sniffed and arched her back a little. He watched her passively as she shook her head. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know!” Twilight cried out, flinging the mug away from her, the dark contents splashing across the floor. “I just feel…I hurt! And I don’t know *why*! I see pictures of Big Macintosh and *think* that he was my friend’s brother and he’s gone and that’s bad…but I don’t *feel* that way. And every time I try and figure out why it…it hurts even more!” She bowed her head, eyes shut, tears falling on the glass cover of the jukebox. “We can’t even talk to each other about it. Rainbow Dash just says soldiers die but…but we knew him. Fluttershy just cries. Rarity…” She shook her head. “We knew him, Goldenblood. We knew him.”

“And now he’s gone,” he said softly. “You’ve never lost someone close to you before, have you, Twilight?”

She sniffed and shook her head. “I don’t know what to do. I’ve read books and asked Celestia and…and…I just don’t know how to make this hurt stop.”

“It doesn’t stop, Twilight. What you’re feeling…millions have felt. It’s normal,” he said in his rusty, wet voice.

“It is?” Twilight asked. “But when…how does it stop?”

He didn’t answer for a moment. “It doesn’t, if you’re lucky. It fades with time, bit by bit, but it never completely goes away.” He levitated a napkin to her and dabbed at her tears. “It’s like a scar that lingers and aches when the weather is cold and wet. It reminds

us of those who have gone so that we keep on living. The most important thing is that we don't miss them so badly we go and join them."

She sniffed and peered up at him, then lowered her eyes back to the dirty floor. "You feel this way a lot?"

"I've had a lot of practice," he replied in his rusty, wet voice. He helped her over to the booth and waved a hoof at the bartender. Twilight breathed a little more steadily now. "You're not going to quit, Twilight. You don't know how."

Twilight frowned at him. "You don't know that. I can too quit," she said, almost petulantly.

"No. You can't. You'll stick it out, because that's what you do. Your whole family is incredibly tenacious," he said calmly as he folded his hooves on the table before his face. "You'll get over this, Twilight. People are counting on you. You won't let them down. We have to win this war."

Twilight sat back in her seat. "Win this war? For what?"

Now he frowned. "For what?"

"That's what I'm asking you. What are we fighting this war for? You know better than anypony. You've been in the government since before the ministries. So what is all this for?" Twilight asked.

Goldenblood didn't answer right away. "Well…to protect ourselves from our enemy."

"And they attack us to protect themselves from us. Seems like the better protection would be if everyone stayed home," Twilight countered.

"It's not that simple. There's economics to be considered too. Our energy requirements–" Goldenblood began before Twilight cut him off.

"Aren't what they were fifteen years ago. We've got the Hoofington dams for example. We're researching gem energy reactors that don't require coal. I know the M.W.T. is looking at solar energy. Heck, the zebras aren't any different. They're less and less dependent on gems than they were at the start of the war." Twilight sniffed and rubbed her eyes as she drilled her gaze into his.

He took a moment, fighting for breath before he murmured, "It's not…that simple. Twilight…what you're feeling for Big Macintosh, everypony is feeling. We've all lost friends and loved ones to this war. They want revenge and payback for all we've lost. We can't just stop after we've given so much to–" he began when she cut

through his words again.

"That's a sunk cost fallacy, Goldenblood. We can't stop fighting now because we didn't stop fighting in the past because we won't stop fighting in the future. We have to spend more lives for lives spent. No. I refuse to accept that," Twilight said firmly.

"It's not just that. The zebras…they have a religious fear of Princess Luna. A superstition. They attack us because they feel they have to. Especially now with the peace talk blown to pieces."

"And do you really think that in a choice between superstition and peace, they'd choose superstition?" Twilight asked sharply. Goldenblood almost physically wilted under her glare.

"We're fighting…because we have to. That's all there is to it," he finished lamely, dropping his eyes to the table. He sighed, shaking his head a moment, and then said, "You're right. There isn't any good reason to fight. But that won't stop this war, Twilight. You know that. And we need you. You know that too. In a few more years, the zebras might be open to another round of peace talks. Maybe we can work out an armistice then. But in the meantime, we have to keep fighting."

Twilight leaned back in the booth with a sigh. "Sometimes I think Princess Luna really doesn't want peace. I can't imagine why, but it just feels…wrong." Goldenblood said nothing as she looked at her hooves. Twilight was silent too, then sighed. "At this rate, there's not going to be an Equestria left worth fighting over."

"What do you mean?" Goldenblood asked with a little frown as he peered at the wistful purple unicorn. His rough rasp had grown more rough and wet. He coughed something foul and oily into the handkerchief.

"I mean that at the rate we're going, all that's going to be left is a poisoned, polluted wasteland. I know you've seen the reports. Do you even know how much alchemical waste we're producing, Goldenblood? Or chemical waste? And don't get me started on that Flux junk that Flim and Flam got their hooves on. This stuff is dangerous and reactive, and we're making a whole lot of it."

"That's why the M.A.S. facility was set up in Splendid Valley. To store and protect–" Goldenblood began.

"It's not enough," Twilight interrupted.

"There's more than twenty miles of tunnel under Maripony," Goldenblood said with a faintly pained expression.

"And I'm telling you it's not enough," Twilight replied. "Our

alchemical waste is so toxic and reactive that we can't even put it all in the same caves. There's already been a serious incident. Thank Celestia nopony died, but the product was so corrosive it was eating through our suits. And that doesn't start to address the industrial waste being made. Everypony is churning out all kinds of stuff for the war, and in the process they're making stuff so toxic we can't do more than bury it. But it's not going to stay buried forever. Even our most corrosion-resistant drums are going to leak eventually."

"Something Princess Luna can deal with after the war," Goldenblood said with a small frown.

"And by then it'll be too late, Goldenblood. You don't seem to get how much stuff is sitting around. There's tens of millions of gallons of it all across Equestria. And if you talk about it, a pony in a uniform says 'war effort', and the debate gets shut down. And bad as magical waste is, this 'Flux' seems to go out of its way to mess things up," Twilight said with a scowl, then sighed.

"We have to keep on fighting. Equestria is worth it," he said as he looked away from her, staring off into the gloom.

"You really mean that?" Twilight said skeptically.

"I spent most of my colthood travelling around the world. To me, it was an adventure, but Mother travelled to keep me safe from Father. Celestia finally forced him to acknowledge me, and he never forgave that. Scruffy over there was one of our retainers, helping to keep the baggage from getting lost or a wayward colt from wandering into a poppy den."

"Keepin' ya from those Carnilia fillies was more a chore," Scruffy chuckled.

Goldenblood actually blushed as he went on, "Yes, well, I always had stories of Equestria. I dreamed of this place. When Mother died and I came here, it was the first time I felt like I was home. Certainly, Father didn't make things easy for me, but I woke up each morning glad to be here. I hiked all over it, collecting rocks, minerals, and gems. I've always been in love with Equestria." He spoke like…I didn't know what. As if he was looking at some distant dream.

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts," Twilight said quietly. "You heard what Rainbow Dash discovered?"

His smile vanished, and his eyes fell. "Yes. The zebras have megaspells." There was the sound of a bottle smashing, and both

looked over at the horrified bartender.
"M'sorry," the pony muttered as he levitated over a broom and dustpan.
Twilight sighed, "I don't know how they got the framework. Pinkie Pie must have been taking more of those damned drugs and missed it while she was bouncing off the walls. Or worse. What if someone at the M.o.P. gave it to them?"
"They didn't. I'm completely certain that neither Fluttershy nor anyone in her employ was responsible," Goldenblood said firmly.
Twilight arched a skeptical brow. "Regardless, you know what this means. They're using the megaspell matrix to supercharge weapons grade talismans. It'll be Littlehorn all over Equestria."
"Not if we have megaspells of our own to counter them," Goldenblood said.
"Yeah. Funny how fast that research went. Research I didn't even want my ministry to do. Suddenly I turn around and there's all kinds of megaspell weapon theories practically lying around in the hallways," Twilight said sourly. "If it all goes off, will there be an Equestria left?"
Goldenblood said nothing for several long seconds. "There's nothing we can do about that," he said quietly, once again looking away.
"Maybe there is," Twilight said as she took the tiara off her head and stared at it. "It's something I thought up this morning. Megaspells…they operate like the Elements of Harmony. What if we combine the two? A megaspell array powered by the magic of the Elements to cleanse and restore Equestria if the worst should happen?"
"The Elements?" He frowned at the tiara. "I thought you couldn't get them to work."
"True. I couldn't, but that doesn't mean somepony else couldn't be a bearer. I don't think that the six of us were meant to be the bearers forever anyway," she said as she looked away. "I have to do something, Goldenblood. If I don't…I just have to do this."
"Luna won't allow it, Twilight. I'm sorry. She doesn't want to risk the Elements falling into the wrong hooves. Besides, she won't tolerate any talk about losing the war. Building something like this is just that. Especially if she thinks it could be repurposed into a weapon," Goldenblood said, giving the mare a long frown.
"You honestly think that I would make a weapon with the

Elements to use against Luna?" Twilight asked with a laugh. Goldenblood didn't share it, and it sickened and died.

"Goldenblood, are you saying Luna doesn't trust us?"

"Luna respects the six of you greatly and values your contributions, but you used the Elements against her once," he said levelly. "She won't risk you using them again."

"She was Nightmare Moon at the time!" Twilight said with a wave of her hoof.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I don't even have to ask her. She'll say no," Goldenblood said. Twilight stared at him, and something inside her crumpled. She slowly collapsed back in the booth seat. "Have faith, Twilight. Soon, this will be over, and Equestria can get back to normal."

"Normal?" Twilight said without looking at him for a second. Then she raised her head, her mane covering half her face with one eye glaring at him. "You think Equestria will return to normal? Before the death? Before the corporations and the guns and the poison? Do you think Equestria will ever be a land of sunshine again?" She suddenly levitated the table up and flipped it away, pointing a hoof at Goldenblood. "You told us these ministries would help Equestria. Well, I don't see anything in this war that's *close* to normal! It's just getting worse and worse. And you had a hoof in that. Do you love Equestria or Princess Luna, Goldenblood?"

His mouth worked a moment as he stared up at her. "I don't understand…I love both…"

"No," she contradicted. "You can't. Either you love the Equestria you used to dream about, or you love the ruler who's changing it to suit her own vision. I respect Princess Luna too, but this is wrong. So which is it? Equestria or Luna?"

He didn't answer. He just closed his eyes for the longest time. "I love Luna, Twilight. I do." He opened his eyes and looked at the unicorn as she slumped and seemed to age before his eyes. "But I love Equestria even more. And you're right. If we lose this war, we're going to need something like what you're proposing. And if we win…" He trailed off. "If we win…" he repeated, and once again went quiet.

"If we win? What?" Twilight asked with a frown.

He opened and closed his mouth before stammering, "N-Nothing. Just…I had a thought." He closed his eyes and nodded once. "Make me a list. Tell me what you need. I'll get it however I can. I know

ponies who are experts at fudging requisition orders and misfiling papers. They could make a battleship disappear if they needed to."

"Are you serious? Goldenblood, this could take months. Maybe years. I'd have to research specific spells to place in the megaspell matrix. I can't begin to imagine where we'll get the processing power to make it work."

He stepped towards her and took his hoof between hers. "Just tell me what you need as you need it. Spike is a trustworthy intermediary. He can be our point of contact. Stay at the M.A.S. Do what you need to. And I'll make this work. You're right. We do need something to take care of things if we lose the war." And then he added, softer and almost to himself, "And if we win it…"

Twilight nodded. "I…thank you. I didn't expect…I don't know what I expected. But still. Thank you."

"I do love Equestria, Twilight. Anything worthwhile is done for love," he said with a small smile.

She nodded and flushed, then turned back to him. "I feel…better. Thank you. I…goodbye." And with that, Twilight trotted away, still hurt but moving once more. Goldenblood's small smile melted away as he walked to the middle of the bar.

"I have to say, that was some smooth work. I'd heard you had a silver tongue, but I think it's pure gold," the batpony mare said as she trotted in from the kitchen. "She was ready to quit, but after a liberal application of bovine fecal matter, you had her back on the job."

"I meant every word," Goldenblood said calmly as he sat, then broke into coughing.

"Yeah, right. 'Love Equestria'? Really? I didn't think anyone older than a blank flank could fall for that," the mare said with a grin. "Let me guess: you're going to let Twilight build it and then hand over the keys to Princess Luna?"

"Something like that," Goldenblood said quietly. "Where's the others?"

"Escorted everyone away from here. Standard BS about security and a gas leak," she said with a sharper grin at Scruffy. "Want me to take care of the loose ends?" The brown stallion fell back, his eyes wide.

"No. I'll take care of it," he said as he levitated from his saddlebags a small, compact pistol and calmly screwed a silencer on to the end.

"M…Master Goldenblood! I've known you since you were a colt!

You can't!" he stammered as he fell back against the wall.

"I'm sorry," he replied, as he stood beside the batpony. Then his horn sparked, and she collapsed. The pistol was turned aside, and he bent over her, focusing intently for a few moments as Scruffy gazed on in confusion and fear. Without meeting his eyes, Goldenblood coughed and added softly, "The less memory I have to modify, the better."

Scruffy didn't take his eyes off the gun. Given it hadn't been put away yet, I couldn't blame him. "Okay... "

"We need to make this quick," Goldenblood said calmly as he looked towards the doors and then down at the still mare. "Do you still have that secret trap door in the cellar?"

Scruffy stared at the mare, then at the scarred stallion as if he'd never met him before. Then he gave a jerky nod of his head, "A… aye."

"I'm afraid you and your family are going to have to go much further than Zebratown," he said as he began to levitate the bottles, spilling them all over the bar. "Get to Applewood. Talk to Greasy Rag in the O.I.A. motor pool. He'll get your family to the Crystal Empire. Tell him it'll come off his bill. He'll understand." The brown unicorn glanced down at the batpony again. "Scruffy? She'll be fine," Goldenblood said, calm and cool, and even I'd have shivered at the soft menace in his voice if I'd had my own body.

Scruffy's eyes went wide as he met the firm gaze of Goldenblood, the pistol still levitating in his magic. Then something in the brown stallion firmed up, and he gave a little nod. "A…aye. I can do that. But…you really are going to help Miss Sparkle against the Princess?"

"Everything Twilight said was true. If we lose this war, the damage to Equestria will be phenomenal. And I was right that Princess Luna would never authorize this project; she'll see it as a sign of no confidence. So it must be this way. But that I can handle. What I'm really worried about is…something else," he said as he put the gun away, pouring more spirits around the bar. I wished I could lick my lips at the perfectly good eighty proof Wild Pegasus going to waste!

"What's that?" Scruffy asked with a frown, rescuing a bottle and taking a long pull from it.

"Twilight is worried about saving Equestria if we lose the war, but I've had an epiphany: what if we win? What will happen to Equestria then?" Goldenblood asked.

“But…isn’t winning the war the point?”

“Yes, but I’d never thought about what was best for Equestria, only what was best for Princess Luna. She wanted a government that would stand for a thousand years. That’s exactly what I helped her create. But when the war is over…what then? Luna could easily be a worse tyrant than Equestria has ever known. It's been five years and we're already taking ponies away and brainwashing them for thinking the wrong thoughts. Erasing ponies' memories to keep secrets, or just killing them outright. What about in five more years? Or ten? Or twenty?” He sighed and closed his eyes. “Luna may turn out to be a good and kindly ruler, but a contingency should be in place for what happens if she turns tyrant. Something that will sweep all of this away and give Equestria and the world a second chance.”

“That’s treason,” Scruffy said as he pulled open a trap door behind the bar. “Yer talking treason.”

“No. Not treason. Responsibility. I created a government where she has absolute power with almost no accountability. Even Celestia could be held responsible for her actions. Luna will rule as an apparent figurehead, shielded by layer upon layer of bureaucracy and obfuscation. No. Something must be put in place. A plan. A contingency. Otherwise, we may win the war, but Equestria may lose its very soul…if it hasn’t already.”

“The games yer playing are going to cost you yer life, boyo,” Scruffy said as he started down the stairs.

“The games I play may cost everypony far more than my life,” he replied, giving a fond smile. “Take care of yourself, Scruffy. Get out of Equestria as soon as you can. When you get to the Empire, keep your head down. Hopefully, Cadance will prove wiser and keep out of the war,” he said as he levitated up a lantern and walked back into the kitchen. There was a thump of the door closing. He set the lantern on the bar with his magic, then hooked the gas pipe by the stove with a broom handle and, with a shaky grunt of effort, pried a pipe joint open. A hiss filled the air, and he quickly stepped out into the alley, levitating the unconscious batpony mare with him.

A minute later came a curiously muffled ‘fwoosh’, and fire billowed out the kitchen door. Smoke rose into the sky as he calmly walked back the way he came, fire in his wake.

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself out of the memory orb fugue, swaying on my hooves. Gardens of Equestria, and I was guessing Project Horizons, born from the same fear. One that we would lose the war and the world would be uninhabitable, and the other that we would win it. Equestria under the control of a pony with absolute power and no responsibility for that power... it was a chilling prospect.

And of course, he couldn't just quit. He'd been like Twilight. He couldn't have simply stopped or confronted Luna about it. He had to be there, in the thick of it. He couldn't stop playing the game any more than I could stop rushing to ponies' aid when they needed it. He also couldn't have sabotaged Luna by that point. Everything had escalated; I doubted the zebras would have let Luna go for any peace project.

>WHAT DID HE DO WRONG? So many answers. That was the point, I supposed. Goldenblood hadn't been perfect. For all his ability to structure, manipulate, and arrange, he hadn't been perfect. Getting caught? Betraying Luna? Helping Luna in the first place? I sighed as I stared at the screen. I had one chance at this.

It had to be like before. What did *Goldenblood* think he'd done wrong? Trusted Luna? Maybe, but he hadn't made it sound like he'd been terribly wronged by her. More the opposite. "He loved Luna," I murmured. "Not sexually... but he'd loved her. And he'd loved Fluttershy. And Equestria." I stared at the screen. Would Goldenblood think falling in love had been a mistake? After Littlehorn, he'd been sure he'd die. A relationship with Fluttershy... Seeing that his plan had been too effective... Love had changed everything.

If it hadn't been for love, would anything have stopped Luna, or the zebras?

I swallowed and hoped there was a little wiggle room in an answer like this. Maybe one or two critical words to prevent me from being zapped? But what if entering one wrong word took me out? Oh, what I wouldn't give for P-21 to be here, get at the guts of the program, and pick from a dozen or so possible passwords. Or just Glory, so I could bounce my ideas off her. I swallowed hard, typed >LOVE, and clenched my eyes closed again as I hit the key.

Five seconds later, I opened them again. "It worked," I muttered as I read the third prompt. >WHAT DID SHE KNOW?

She? Which she? Goldenblood had a whole lot of 'she's

complicating his life. Luna? Fluttershy? Twilight? I levitated up the third orb. “Okay. One to go. Just one.” I tapped my horn to the tip.

Huh. Nothing. Then the phrase rasped like a rusty file across my brain: ‘Who did I betray?’ And then I felt a very familiar stillness in my chest as my heart stopped. Instantly the edges of my vision darkened and I felt myself start to collapse. One second. ‘Luna!’ Two seconds. ‘Fluttershy!’ Three seconds. ‘Twilight’. My face hit the terminal keys. Four seconds. ‘Yourself!’ Everything went black as my brain gave one last feeble thought: ‘Everypony!’ Then it all went to black.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat behind a garish pink desk, the starmetal tuning fork beside his head as he stared out the window at a rainy Manehattan day. His basaltic lungs crackled slowly as he pinged the tuning fork against the edge of the desk. From the view, the kitchen in the corner, the safes set in the wall, and the gaudy balloon wallpaper, I guessed this was Pinkie’s office.

His eyes slowly panned along the walls. The scribbles and doodles of her friends on the desk. A mirror half-covered by a cloth, sitting in the corner with the tag ‘Move to fun house ASAP!’ He pulled open a drawer and looked down at a dozen tins of Party Time Mintals.

The calendar on the desk had a number of entries written down for the next week: Arrest Badpony List F. Cake testing. Interrogate. Get confessions. Arrest Goldenblood, Garnet, Onyx, and Quartz. Play time with Gummy. Interrogate Goldenblood. Arrest Badpony List G. Interrogate. Review party procedures for GGG. And on the week after that: Raid 4stars. Arrest Badpony Lists H, I, and J. Arrest Princess Luna. Throw retirement party.

Goldenblood’s eyes lingered on the second to last, the tiny screaming note resonating in his ear when the door opened and Pinkie Pie trotted in. I hadn’t seen her like this before. Her normally curly mane was flat and dull. Dark shadows lay under her blue eyes, giving them a haunted, hollow appearance. She didn’t seem to realize he was there as she trotted over to a filing cabinet and pulled out a file marked ‘Badpony List F’. When she turned back to the desk, the pink mare jumped and dropped the file on the floor.

“Goldenblood? What... how... who... huh?” She shook her head

hard and glowered at him. “What do you think you’re doing here? You’re not director of the O.I.A. anymore!”

He levitated out a tin and set it on the desktop. “Have a Mint-al, Pinkie.” His ghoulish voice was barely a whisper as he opened the tin with his magic and levitated out one of the pills, setting it on the desk before him.

Her glower deepened. “I could have you arrested. I’m going to have you arrested. I know all about you. You’re a bad pony! All of you. Bad ponies.” She stormed to the door and yelled, “Pumpkin! Pound! Stardust! Gambol! Get in here!” A few seconds later, a light gray mare and light green stallion, both earth ponies, stormed in, followed by a yellow unicorn mare and pegasus stallion. Pinkie grinned at the scarred pony. “Goldie here was so nice to come here to save us some time! Take him down to Room Fun oh One.”

“Director?” the gray mare said in bafflement. “What are you doing here?”

Pinkie gaped at her and pointed a hoof at Goldenblood, hissing, “He’s not the director of the O.I.A. anymore! Take him out of my office! Now!” But the four hesitated. Goldenblood just sat there, not moving a muscle as he stared at them. Pinkie’s glare slowly changed to one of bafflement. “What are you doing? He’s nopony now but a criminal! Luna fired him. Get him.” But none of them moved.

“Have a Mint-al, Pinkie,” he repeated softly.

“Pinkie,” Pumpkin Cake said as she trotted up to the mare. Pinkie started, almost jumping away as their shoulders brushed. “We can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? He’s right there. I’m your boss. Arrest him!” Pinkie said, thrusting a hoof at the scarred stallion.

“But Princess Luna is your boss, Pinkie. And... we’re not allowed to arrest him without her order,” Pound said. “There was a memo.” Pinkie’s eyes grew rounder as she stared at the four and then back at the scarred stallion.

“But I. You... he... ” she stammered.

Goldenblood continued his refrain. “Have a Mint-al, Pinkie.”

“We’ll be outside when you’re done, sir,” the green stallion said, trotting from the room.

The gray mare trotted from the room after him, touching an earbloom. “Stand down. It’s just Pinkie being Pinkie again,” she mumbled as she left.

Pinkie stared at the unicorn and pegasus. “Pumpkin Cake? Pound

Cake?"

"Sorry, Auntie Pinkie. We'll be outside," the slim orange unicorn said, followed by the guilty-looking buff pegasus. "Don't hurt her, sir," Pumpkin warned with a frown. Then, fighting tears, the unicorn and pegasus stepped out of the office. Pinkie stared at the doors as they closed behind her, eye twitching.

Goldenblood tapped the tuning fork, making her jump. She pointed a hoof at him, the older mare's limb shaking slightly. "You... what did you do to them? What... a spell... blackmail... what?"

"Have a Mint-al, Pinkie," he repeated as he levitated the pill off the desk towards her. Her eyes focused on the little round tablet, pupils constricting as she trembled, and then she smacked the pill aside. That made him smile a little, and he set the tuning fork on the desk before him. "To answer your question, few law enforcement officers respect a commander that is routinely drugged to the tip of their tails and who blatantly, flippantly flouts the law she is supposed to uphold. Princess Luna and I have made certain they know where the real orders are supposed to be coming from."

"But Pumpkin... Pound... " Pinkie said weakly.

"Don't respect you either. They *love* you. That's not the same thing. They want to help you. Like the others. Like Twilight." The name made Pinkie Pie twitch. He levitated up another pill. "Have a Mint-al, Pinkie," he rasped as he floated it towards her once more.

"Stop it!" she snapped, swatting it away as well. "You're a bad pony, Goldenblood. I've known it for years."

"Right. Because your rump twitched or your ear flopped or your hoof itched," Goldenblood said low and skeptically. "I don't think that's admissible in court."

"You're the reason why the ponies I arrest keep ending up back on the street," she hissed.

"Correct. You were useful when you were scaring the aristocracy. You have no idea how much money they paid me to keep you off their backs. Business ponies, too." He rose to his hooves. "You don't get that those minor crimes and offenses don't matter. The war needs certain ponies running things and keeping things going smoothly. So long as they don't go too far, they get their autonomy. In return, Princess Luna gets her war materiel."

"It's wrong. Everywhere I look, I can feel bad things happening." Her mane curled a little. "Only the little ponies aren't bad. They're the only good ones. Everypony else... everypony... "

Slowly he approached her, levitating the tin of Mint-als. “Have a Mint-al, Pinkie,” he said as he levitated out another tablet and floated it towards her mouth. For a second her mouth opened, watering, before she stiffened and it bounced off her nose. “What’s the matter? You’re normally so fond of them. They make your body twitch and itch and you use that to justify arresting ponies that I need. That Princess Luna needs.” He levitated up another pill. “You have no idea how infuriating it is,” he said casually, tossing the pill at the older mare.

“I might,” Pinkie growled back. “You’re dirty. So’s Princess Luna. So’re Twilight and Rarity and everypony!”

“So are you,” Goldenblood said, and Pinkie jerked as she glanced over at the half-covered mirror, then glared at him.

“You think I don’t know that?!” she snapped. “I know I’m not a good pony. But I... I haven’t done half of the things you have,” she said. “You’re a sneak and a liar and a manipulator and–”

“None of which are crimes,” Goldenblood rasped, his rear hoof tapping upon the floor.

Pinkie glared at him for several seconds, her face going from pink to red. “You just admitted to taking bribes from criminals!”

“Oh behalf of Princess Luna,” he answered, tapping faster beneath the desk.

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at him. “Did you murder for her too?” His hoof froze.

He didn’t respond for several seconds. “Did you know that I didn’t want any of this to happen? When Luna came to me, I was quite ready and happy to die. But Equestria was at war and needed her. She needed me. I needed Equestria. So I helped make her a government she could control... and she’s done so brilliantly. There are some ponies now who actually don’t know a Princess rules them. It’s all ministry, ministry, ministry. And when we finished organizing the ministries, I was ready to step aside and let the whole bloody plan commence. But I was connected. From my travels as a foal, I knew zebras in the Empire who were sympathetic to us. My lineage gave me access to the aristocracy. My work with Luna gave me access to the bureaucracy. And if I didn’t have access, I knew a pony who could help me get it. And suddenly I had my hooves deep in the greatest sociopolitical piece of performance art in history!”

He paused, then narrowed his eyes, jabbing a hoof at her. “But

don't think that it was easy, Pinkie Pie. Don't you dare think that. None of it. Keeping you six apart and focused on the ministries was a constant battle. You in particular. I had to keep you distracted, because if you dropped out, then one by one, the others would have followed. That was why I told Luna to indulge your 'law enforcement' farce! I've struggled for ten years to keep everything together for Equestria so that when this war ends we can all go back to normal. So that it will be good again." He slapped a hoof on her desk. "But you are insisting on making it difficult!"

Pinkie Pie's mane curled a little as she giggled. "Have a Mint-al, Goldenblood. No, really! You could really use an orange one. My achy butt says so." And then she stuck her tongue out at him.

Goldenblood started at her for a moment, and then there was a click as the doors to the office locked. "Achy butt, is it?" he said as he levitated out a dozen mint tins, emptying them out so that a cloud of pills hovered beside him. "Tell me... " he said as he advanced, and Pinkie's smile slowly evaporated as her eyes went even wider. "What's itching now, Pinkie?" he yelled as he jumped upon the older mare. "Have a Mint-al Pinkie! Have all the fucking Mint-als!"

She opened her mouth to scream, and he shoved a dozen tablets into her mouth. "Chew them up! Swallow! What's itching now? What's twitching? What's your Pinkie Sense saying! What!" The door thudded and pounded. Pinkie swallowed if only to keep from choking to death, but the second that she opened her mouth, he shoved more in. "Have another Mint-al! Aren't you having fun yet? Isn't it fun, Pinkie?!" he yelled, dumping the Mint-als on her face. She struggled, flopped, gasped, and choked as he climbed off her. "You are done. Stay in your office and binge to your heart's content, but you will not interfere any longer."

Pinkie retched, bringing up a slurry of pills in a reeking heap, coughing and gasping as she lay on the floor. He levitated over his tuning fork, struck it, and listened to its tone. His whole body relaxed as he turned his back and started towards the office doors.

"You serve the Eater of Souls," Pinkie rasped, and he froze. "That's what my Pinkie Sense is telling me."

Slowly, he turned and looked at her. "What?" he murmured. "How do you know that name?"

But Pinkie didn't answer. She started eating from the scattered Mint-als like a mare obsessed. He jumped on the older mare again.

“How do you know that name?”

“I can feel it. It’s dripping off you like razor blades. It screams all around you!” she said, her pupils mismatched, wide and staring. “You serve it! It sings inside you!” She laughed madly before grabbing more pills and forcing them into her mouth.

“That’s a myth. A story. It’s a zebra legend!” Goldenblood retorted.

“Look in the mirror!” Pinkie sobbed and laughed all at once. “Look in the damned mirror. It’ll show you! It’ll show you my Pinkie Sense is true! Look if you don’t believe me!”

Goldenblood rose off her, staring at the mirror in the corner. He trotted towards it and then brushed the cloth away with a forehoof. The single cold pane shimmered, framing a reflection perfectly. That reflection, though, didn’t appear to be him at all. It was an unscarred stallion covered in blood. He stood on a field of salt and ashes, the air above him black and rolling. And in the background, something horrible was breaking out of the barren land, clawing from the earth like a colossal ghoul. Its head broke the surface, and it let out a scream, and the blood-drenched stallion let out a small smile. A star fell into its wide jaws and world split in two as something horrible was reborn.

“No! No, it’s a trick! It can’t be true!” the stallion on this side of the glass shouted.

His reflection smiled as more and more of the monstrosity pulled itself free. “Of course it’s true,” it said. “In trying to save Princess Luna, you have slain her. In trying to preserve Equestria, you have ushered in its annihilation. You destroy all you hold most dear.”

“No!” he said as he threw the sheet over the mirror. He looked over at Pinkie, stretched out prone, her body twitching. “No... ” he murmured, rushing back to Pinkie, and his horn glowed as he undid the lock on the doors. He held the mare as she jerked and shuddered in his hooves. “I’m not that thing, Pinkie. I’m not!”

Pumpkin and Pound Cake rushed in. “What happened?” cried the former as the latter shoved Goldenblood away from Pinkie.

“She kept on eating them,” Goldenblood murmured. “She knew. She always knew... .and I didn’t believe her.” He looked at the covered mirror and sobbed. “Oh Luna, she knew... ”

Pinkie spasmed, foam on her lips, eyes wide and her pupils pinpricks as she stared at Goldenblood. “I’m so sorry, Blackjack!”

“What?” Goldenblood said as he backed away, but Pinkie Pie kept babbling and sputtering over herself as she struggled to string

words together.
"The Cakes! Spike! Twilight... Goddess! Murky... how... "
"Call an ambulance, Pumpkin!" Pound shouted, and the unicorn rushed to the phone. Goldenblood knelt beside the jerking pink mare. "You should get out of here, Director," Pound growled, hugging Pinkie close. "Before I do something you regret."
"One moment. Please," Goldenblood replied. "What do I have to do?" he said to Pinkie. "What can I possibly do to prevent... to... to change what I saw in that mirror?" Pinkie was foaming out the corner of her mouth, and Pound cake turned her on her side. The pink mare pulled more white tablets to herself and ate them before either could stop her.
"No!" Pound swept them all away with a swish of his wings, glaring angrily at Goldenblood. "Get out of here, teacher. I mean it!"
"What can I do? Please. Please!" Goldenblood begged, tears running down his cheek.
"Tell Twilight... " Pinkie gasped, going still a moment. "Tell Twilight what she wants to know. Show her how... Show... Be what you are... " And then she stretched out a hoof towards the sodden heap of pills and finally passed out.
Medical ponies rushed in, and Goldenblood was shoved away. He stood there, watching them levitate Pinkie onto a stretcher. Pound and Pumpkin Cake glared at him, frowning in worry and confusion as she was carried out.
"What happened, Director?" Pumpkin Cake asked. "We heard you shouting."
"Tell us, or orders from the Princess or not, I'll bust your legs and arrest you," Pound threatened as he glared and held Pinkie tighter.
"Pinkie kept eating them. You saw her... " he murmured weakly. "I have to go," he said, then looked at them. "Go with her. Get her friends, if they'll come. Stay close to her. I have... I need... " he glanced at the covered mirror and shook. "I need to... to make some decisions... "
Pound lunged at him, but Pumpkin stopped him. "No. We need to be with Pinkie Pie now. Hurry." The stallion snorted, and together they rushed out of the office.
Goldenblood staggered out of the office and down the hall, around the corner, and out of sight, then grabbed a waste bin and vomited violently into the receptacle. When his guts were empty, he sank to

the ground. “It’s not true. She’s crazy. Just like Mother... ” he whispered, rubbing his face with his hoof. Then he glanced over at the starmetal tuning fork, floating next to him as if it had his own magic. “Is it possible... ? The legend? Have I really been serving the... ” He shook, swaying slightly back and forth. “Oh Luna... somepony... anypony... please... help me!” he whimpered to the empty air, the silver fork gleaming at his hooves.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory orb with my face mashed against the keys. Goldenblood finally snapping. It was like me at Yellow River... horrifying and yet making perfect sense. I didn’t know if I should cry or not. I felt as if I’d seen something obscene, and I couldn’t stop it. I wanted to beat Goldenblood on Pound Cake’s behalf and then some. Still, I needed to stay focused. I deleted the ‘>HRRGGGGGGGGG GGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG’ my face had entered on the terminal and sat back.

What had she known? Well, Pinkie Pie had known many things. She’d outright said that Goldenblood served the Eater. That he was a no good badpony…It was almost quaint, considering other badponies I’d met. I closed my eyes. These passwords were written by Goldenblood. They weren’t the kinds of things you could just guess by watching the memory orbs. Goldenblood had wanted whoever reached him to know him, and I probably knew him better than most. What could she have known?

No. Don’t think about Pinkie Pie. Goldenblood was a lot like me, now. He may have had me beat in spades where intelligence was concerned, but he had the same self-destructive streak. He’d wanted to die for years, and when he’d screwed things up with Fluttershy, Big Macintosh, and Luna, he’d probably felt like he’d deserve to die regardless. Goldenblood wasn’t just a bastard. “That’s it,” I murmured as I stared at the keys.

>HE WAS A PUPPET. Hoping it wasn’t some other word like peon or slave, I hit the button.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Then two lines popped up.

>ANSWERS ACCEPTABLE.

>ACCESS GRANTED. WELCOME, EXECUTIONER.

Wait. What? I stared at the words as field dropped, then tore my

eyes away as the door ahead opened. Beyond was a room not much bigger than this one but packed with strange equipment that beeped and clicked, cool mist creeping around the devices. In the center of it was a pod just like the ones in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Within lay the reposed stallion, and upon his head a mesh just like the one Cognitum had used to transfer my memory. Beside the pod was a machine identical to the ones I'd been hooked up to in Happyhorn. A dozen monitors were arranged facing the door; when I stepped in, they flickered to life with a dozen green images of Goldenblood.

"Welcome, Executioner. If you've gotten this far, you are clearly familiar enough with the accused to render final judgment. This subject has been interrogated one hundred thousand four hundred and twelve times since being interred here, and I believe that every crime this individual has committed has been accounted for," the green Goldenbloods said. One monitor changed to a list of crimes, starting with Conspiring against the Throne: 2 counts and First Degree Murder: 1 count and ending with Jaywalking: 12 counts.

"You're a machine," I said warily. "Like Happyhorn."

"Indeed. Repurposed by the M.o.M. and M.o.P. to extract every last detail of the accused's life. Any memory can be used against the accused in a court of law. If you have accessed this room, it means that you are qualified to pass judgment. Please list whatever execution you deem appropriate from the list." A different screen began to scroll with words like 'Burning Alive', 'Defenestration from Shadowbolt Tower', and 'Drawing and Quartering'.

I stared at the list in horror. "You want me to kill him?"

The green ponies in the monitors all looked thoughtful. "Well, you could, I suppose, but why get your hooves dirty? I can increase his neural sensitivity to the point that the shock will eventually kill him. To him, it will be real. In fact, you may wish to choose several different choices to queue to save yourself the inconvenience."

I shook my head. "I want to talk to him. Let him go."

The computer froze a moment. "I'm sorry. That's not on my list of executions. If I may recommend, any execution involving Fluttershy is high on the psychological stress level."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. "I want you to let him go. I'm not his executioner," I said flatly. Clearly, this computer was on the crazier side of programs. Just my luck.

Instantly, the four turrets in the room behind me all whirled to aim

at my back while two more dropped from the ceiling of this room and immediately pointed right at me. “I’m sorry, but there must be some mistake. Only a pony who would want to kill Goldenblood would want to come here. A lackey wouldn’t have made the appropriate responses. No, I’m afraid only an executioner will do. Please make your selection, or you will have to be disintegrated.”

“What?” I shouted. Seriously, I couldn’t win with robots! “Why?”

“Password security. Can’t have you writing the answers on the door. Then just anyone could get in,” the computer said as if it were perfectly reasonable rather than perfectly insane. “What do you believe would be a fitting death for Goldenblood? Thanks to accelerated neural perception, even slow, lingering deaths are possible. Colon cancer? Certainly possible. Venereal disease. Easily done.”

I rubbed my face with my hooves. “I want to talk to him. Is that possible?”

The computer frowned. “He’s currently queued in a round of interrogation simulations. Forty-eight hours until completion. He might have a brief window to interact with you at the end of each simulation, if you wish.”

“I’m not waiting forty-eight hours. I need to talk to him now,” I insisted, scowling at the computer. I needed to do something truly radical here... I needed to out*think* an obstacle. The computer wanted me to kill him and torture Goldenblood. “If I can taunt him, I’ll be able to select the perfect death.”

The computer monitors flickered and flashed. “Mmmm. Very well. There is an observation helmet for an observing interrogator. When this interrogation session ends, you should have a brief window for your questions.” A small door opened at the base of the machine, revealing a second golden net. I carefully levitated it over and set it atop my head.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said as I stared at the scarred pony in the pod. Time to call. The machine beeped and flashed, and once more, everything swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat in a cell, his body aching and a sick sensation in his stomach. A foul taste lingered in his mouth as he slumped, surrounded by a dozen pegasus, unicorn, and batpony guards. On a

table to the side were a half dozen bottles. His mouth moved slowly, his words, the few he spoke, slurred. A frowning and powerfully built batpony officer trotted up, glaring down at Goldenblood, then spoke with grim authority. “Is he prepared?”

A unicorn glanced at the scarred stallion, then said in a low voice, “Yes, Officer Lionheart. He’s drugged to the tip of his horn, sir. He keeps on trying to rant and rail, but he shouldn’t cause a fuss.”

The other guards fidgeted and muttered softly to each other. Lionheart eyed each with a scowl. “What is it?”

A pegasus fluttered his feathers, shifted on his hooves, glanced at each of the other guards, and mustered his courage. “Permission to speak freely, sir?” Lionheart pursed his lips, then nodded his head. The pegasus took a deep breath. “Execution, sir? Is the princess serious about this? A public execution? Like this?”

“Princess Luna has made her decree. We will carry out her orders,” he said simply as he looked around the room. “This pony has betrayed Her Majesty, and all of us. He will be punished accordingly.”

The pegasus stiffened. “Nopony is questioning that, sir. But public execution? That’s never been done before. That’s something the enemy would do. If we refuse–”

“You are relieved,” Lionheart said firmly. The white pegasus jerked as if he’d been struck, then saluted with his wing and marched from the room. Lionheart’s yellow eyes swept across the rest of the guards. “Now hear this. This is going to happen. If any of you have moral or professional objections, so be it. They will be noted in your record. But we do not decide for Her Majesty. We execute Her Majesty’s decisions. This will be done. Is that understood?”

He stared around the room, meeting the eyes of each pony. Some dropped their gazes, shamed, and trotted out. Others stared back defiantly, then left as well. In a minute, only three guards remained, all of them batponies. Lionheart sighed, slumping. “So be it.”

Lionheart himself ducked his head and scooped Goldenblood up across his shoulders. The scarred stallion hung limply, his lips continuing to move numbly as he was borne through the hallway. The sound of a crowd grew like the rumbling of a waterfall. Eventually he was carried out into the bright sunlight of a large plaza in the middle of Canterlot, his yellow eyes blinking blearily at the rows upon rows of ponies. Some shouted, but others looked on with worry and pity.

A platform stretched along one end of the plaza. At its center sat the ruler of Equestria, looking tall and cool, beautiful and terrible. To her left sat a number of dignitaries and officials, among them Trueblood and Prince Blueblood. On her right, however, sat six seats adorned with the ministry icons. Only one was occupied; Rarity sat stiff as a board, her eyes fixed on her hooves. The seat for Princess Celestia was also vacant.

"Mistake…" Goldenblood murmured.

"Yes, you made a mistake. But it's too late to–"

"No. Princess Luna," Goldenblood muttered. "She shouldn't have empty seats. Makes her look weak." The batpony stared at him incredulously, and the corner of the scarred unicorn's mouth curled. "Should have filled them with representatives."

Lionheart's eyes showed doubt, but he set Goldenblood down in the middle of the plaza, then trotted off to the side. Goldenblood struggled to remain upright as he faced the stage. Luna gazed down, cold and impartial, then said in a thunderous voice, "People of Equestria! It is Our solemn duty to present to you the greatest traitor in our land's history. For years, Goldenblood has conspired to undermine the authority of the ministries, the government, and the people. He has maintained clandestine contacts with Our striped enemies, extorted money from the aristocracy, misappropriated materials for his own ends, and allowed wanton profiteering by dozens of enemies of the state. Many more crimes of his are more disturbing still and unfit for the ears of you good ponies.

"These are grave and disturbing revelations that shake us all to the core. And for crimes so grave and so audacious, what penalty is sufficient? Shall We throw him in a cell to reflect on his crimes?" she asked, and some in the crowd began to shout 'no' and booed. "Shall We exile him from our land and run the risk of him returning to our striped enemies?" Louder shouts now. Luna sighed and shook her head. "Were that the times allowed Us to banish him for a thousand years, but even that would be insufficient for his deeds and conspiracies. He has plotted the overthrow of Our crown and the death of Our beloved sister. There is no imprisonment, exile, or banishment sufficient for one of his evil."

The shouts were mixed now. Some were roaring for blood, but there was also worried muttering. Luna glanced at the crowd, then down at Goldenblood. "The only response for such crimes against Our subjects is the same penalty given to our enemies on the

battlefield: death." There were shouts and whoops and stomping of hooves, but far too few for the crowd assembled. "The condemned has prepared a statement," Luna thundered, her voice a little waspish.

Speakers turned on. Goldenblood's harsh breathing filled the plaza, a touch of deep reverb with every breath, and then there came a deep and angry tirade, full of insults and rage, started against the weak, ineffectual, pathetic people of Equestria. The Goldenblood present in person sat quietly, a small smile on his face. His eyes were locked on Rarity, but the mare didn't meet his gaze. When the recording ended, Luna said solemnly, "As you can see, his contempt is absolute, his loathing for our people unflinching. Thus, it is Our solemn and unwelcome duty to condemn Goldenblood to death."

The crowd was so solemn that the ones trying to cheer and whoop were shamed into silence. From the edge of the city, a green and purple behemoth swooped up into the air, looped around, and an enormous dragon landed on the other end of the plaza. Goldenblood could barely look up at the beast above him. His eyes fell and met Luna's. His mouth worked weakly, and he rasped, "Luna…"

She stared down at him, cold and imperious, then her head gave a little jerk.

The dragon made a noise eerily similar to the noise made in Goldenblood's lungs when he breathed in, but when the noise ended, an all-consuming green glow filled his entire world. Then darkness…

…and he reappeared in a cage, every nerve of him burning inside and out. He lay weakly, gasping as his heart thundered in his chest. Above him, Princess Celestia stared down at him contemptuously. The alicorn appeared…old. Tired. His eyes rolled, and he gaped at the heaps of golden coins lying all around them. Then, without a word, she turned away and strode towards a tunnel.

"Wait," Goldenblood rasped. Celestia stopped but didn't face him. He struggled to sit up in the cage. He swayed, staring at her back. "I'm sorry," he choked.

"And what, exactly, are you sorry for, Goldenblood?" she replied.

He stared at her silently for a minute. Then he slumped against the bars. "Everything."

"You should be," she said in solemn finality, walking out and leaving him to collapse into a heap in the bottom of the cage.

He lay on his side for a long time before the ground rumbled. A green and purple dragoness strode in and stretched like a cat, shaking her body as she strained every muscle. “Well, that was overdramatic,” she said in a rumbling voice as she scooped up a massive heap of gold coins and flopped down upon it with a sigh. “I don’t know why she went through all the trouble. If she wants to kill you, she should just kill you.”

“She wants to interrogate me first,” Goldenblood rasped weakly. “Something more substantial than just digging through my head.” He closed his eyes, resting his cheek on the cage’s cool metal bottom. “She’ll dispose of me then.” He opened one, looking over at her as she flipped open a chest loaded with gemstones. “Maybe she’ll have me eaten.”

“Pass,” the dragoness said, sticking out her tongue. “Pony wreaks havoc on my waistline. Plus, I have no idea just how many potions they crammed in you to make you survive my flame. You’d probably turn my scales blue.” She tossed a dozen of the gems into the air and caught them with her mouth. “Give me gemstones any day.” She chewed a moment, then observed dryly, “You seem rather composed, all things considered.”

“I have things to tell Princess Luna. Important things. Mistakes I’ve made.” He closed his eyes and shook his head, rocking his cheek against the floor. “She doesn’t trust me now, but when she rips the secrets from me, she’ll know. Then, maybe, she’ll do the right thing.”

“And not kill you?” the dragoness said wryly, toying with a handful of gems.

He chuckled. “No. I deserve to die,” he answered, struggling to make himself heard. “I’ve done things you can’t imagine. Overseen nightmares that I didn’t realize were nightmares until it was too late. Far too late.”

“Such melodrama,” the dragoness said with a roll of her eyes. “You ponies thrive on spectacles. It’s not healthy. If you were a dragon, you’d just do things, and if someone killed you for it, so be it. ‘Might makes right’ may not be the fairest world view, but it’s far less hysterical.” She scooped up another handful of gems. In the midst of the heap was a large hoof-sized chunk of bubblegum-pink quartz. It seemed to have a silver ring set about it, and a talisman glyph glowed in the middle.

“Wait!” Goldenblood rasped, but he was too weak. Too slow. Too

late. The gemstones tumbled into her maw, and she smacked her lips. Goldenblood struggled to his hooves. “Where did you get those gemstones?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “Wherever you ponies get them from, I suppose.”

“You need to vomit! I think there was something in there!” Goldenblood rasped weakly.

The dragon rolled her green eyes. “Ponies. Always with the drama,” she said as she lay back down on her bed of coins.

“I think there was a talisman in there!” Goldenblood said in alarm.

The dragoness rolled her eyes. “Sure was. Those are extra tasty.” She smirked at him. “Relax. In a day or two, it’ll pass like all the rest.”

“Please, tell somepony–” Goldenblood began, but the dragon thumped her tail down beside the cage.

“Hush up and go to sleep. I’m sure they’ll come and get you soon enough,” she said with a snort.

Goldenblood tried repeating his warning again and again, but the dragon squeezed two handfuls of gold into her ears, curled up, and resumed sleeping. Finally, his throat throbbing, he fell silent. The dragoness occasionally gave a soft groan in her sleep. Goldenblood finally sank to the floor of the cage, dropping into unconsciousness.

He was awoken by an especially loud groan from the dragoness. From somewhere high above came a soft ‘whump’ noise again and again. He opened his eyes, seeing her on her back. “What’s going on?” Goldenblood asked as he looked at the dragon. Pink foam flecked off her jaws.

“Some sort of attack. I’d be out there swatting down those missiles except all of a sudden... I feel... sick!” She rolled back and forth on her bed of gold coins. “I never feel sick.” And then she was interrupted by an enormous belch, and a cloud of pink roiled in the air above her. She stared at it with pained eyes. “That’s... not right... ”

Goldenblood’s eyes went wide. “Guards! Guards!” he screamed, rising to his hooves, his rusty, harsh voice echoing in the gold filled cavern. She gasped, her belly becoming distended, eyes bulging. Another thunderous burp erupted, but this time it was accompanied by a larger blast of pink vapor. He froze, staring in horror as she let out a horrible retching sort of noise and thick, pink gas blasted out across her hoard like burning napalm. The gold bubbled and began

to run like wax as she rolled in agony.

"AHHH!" she screamed. "What's wrong with–" and whatever else she might have said was stolen by a continuous, flaming, pink torrent erupting from her mouth. Fortunately, it was pointed away from Goldenblood, splashing across more of the hoard as she thrashed. The pink fluid seemed to dissolve her lips so she couldn't keep it within, but her thick hide contained it for the moment. Her tail slashed back and forth as she writhed in agony. A squad of soldiers rushed in and immediately collapsed, screaming, as the bank of pink mist rolled over them.

The same mist covered Goldenblood, but at most all it caused was the faintest irritation. He hammered his hooves against the bars, but it availed him nothing. Then the dragon's tail, dripping both globs of gold and purple scales the size of his hoof, smashed the cage. It bounced away over the mounds and slammed up against the wall. The lock snapped open, and Goldenblood staggered out and followed the wall through the thickening mists. The dragon's body was ballooning out grotesquely as her tough hide stretched. Liquid Pink Cloud dripped from her mouth as she fought to contain it. He reached the door beside the half dozen guards groaning and twitching as their skin fused to their armor and the floor.

Goldenblood galloped along the hallway as fast as he could. He reached an empty guard post, hit the intercom, and starting calling furiously, but nopony answered. He tried again and again for several minutes... and then Pink Cloud rolled down the hallway and through the guard station. He stared as it began to flow down numerous side tunnels.

He tore down a hallway, galloping as fast as he could until he found a staircase that led him out of the pink mist. He stormed up to another security station that was similarly abandoned save for one baffled-looking stallion guard. "Hey. You're not supposed to come up that way!"

Goldenblood advanced on the reedy blue stallion. "What's going on? Where is everypony?"

"We're under attack! The zebras are launching attacks all across Equestria! It's nuts. How–" but Goldenblood raced out the doors and gaped up at the sunny Canterlot sky. A massive blue dome extended overhead like the inside of a bubble. Every few seconds, there was a detonation that made it flicker.

"How long has this been going on?" Goldenblood asked.

“The bombardment started a while ago. The Princesses themselves are holding that shield up. Had to extend it underneath the city, too, after some stripes smuggled mortars into the woods around Zebratown.” Then he froze as he stared at Goldenblood. “Wait. I know you! You’re that traitor we executed yesterday!” His eyes widened. “You’re supposed to be dead!”

“You need to get on a working intercom. Contact the palace! Let them know there’s a gas weapon that’s been activated under the city. She has to order an evacuation immediately!” he said.

“All I’m doing is taking you back to a cell! I don’t know how you got yourself undeaded, but I’m not about to let you trot all over the city right now, trai–” He froze as a pink mist crept out to the stairwell and started spreading along the ground.

“Stay away! It’s poisonous!” Goldenblood warned. “It’s making its way through the larger passages first, but it won’t be long before it has enough pressure to spray up every drain pipe in the city!”

But the blue stallion glared at Goldenblood. “Poison, eh? Then how come you’re not dead, eh? How come–” The mist rolled past their hooves, much warmer than it had been in the hoard below, and the guard jerked. “I... I... I don’t feel so good.”

Goldenblood backed away, but the guard stood in place, trying to tug his hooves from the floor. “I... I can’t move... Why... ” he said as he stared down in helplessness.

Goldenblood turned and ran, galloping towards the towers of the ministries and the palace. All around, guardponies were telling ponies not to worry, to get inside and wait for further instructions. And there were many ponies who didn’t seem even that concerned. They trotted along in clear urgency, but they obviously weren’t panicking.

“I’m not missing this hooficure appointment,” one mare said sharply as she waved her PipBuck at a guard. “They have to be scheduled months in advance!”

A mare carefully herded her three colts along the sidewalk. “Let’s get home. Don’t be scared. Princess Luna will keep us safe.”

Goldenblood whirled from one pony the next. A fruit vendor set up on the corner. A soldier helping an elderly pony up some steps. A small cluster of children laughing that the zebras got them out of school early. He finally froze, tears streaming down his face as he sat down hard before a fountain. It lay right beside the plaza where he’d been burned just the other day. “No... ” he whispered.

Then the ground shook. From the storm drains came a sharp whistling as a pressurized front of gas displaced the air. The fountain suddenly sprayed twice as high, then twice again, the drains bubbling furiously in the basin. Everypony froze, staring in shock as the world seemed to scream around them, and then the whistle dropped to nothing. The world was quiet and still. Even the barrage seemed to have paused as everypony looked around in bewilderment. Down the street, a pink fog drifted from the doors of the guard station, looking as if somepony had set off a smoke bomb within.

Then another pulse shot through the tunnels, and from the two storm drains at the end of the street blasted plumes of roiling pink gas, then the next closer two, then the next, erupting down the street in quick succession. Metal utility covers were thrown into the air to rain down with clangs and clatters. The fountain sprayed a jet of Pink Cloud, the ever-expanding gas swirling into the sky.

The thuds of the missiles hitting the shield resumed, but they were drowned out by the horrified screams of Canterlot dying.

Goldenblood sprinted along the road, dodging past and around the terrified, milling ponies. The Cloud swirled in banks and eddies, and where it drifted, ponies died. Not all at once. The tiny pink droplets seemed to take longer to kill some than others. Where they touched, cloth dissolved, hide oozed, and even metal seemed to visibly corrode. The horrible chemical ravaged all it came across. Mares, stallions, foals. They ran. Screamed. Died.

A modern-looking apartment building's facade shattered with an eruption of the gas, a great billowing plume of pink rushing out in a shower of broken glass. Ponies threw themselves from windows, trailing streamers of the deadly toxin and smashing into the ground with horrifying wet noises. Foals curled up in corners, screaming and sobbing for parents as the mist thickened around them. They didn't scream for long. Goldenblood, however, barely felt the burn of the Cloud. His lungs crackled with every inhalation, but nothing more. The droplets stung with mild discomfort, but they just rolled off his scars.

Others weren't so lucky. Pegasi and batponies struggled to find clear air, fanning their wings to blow the mist away, but the magical bubble keeping the missiles out kept the Cloud in. No matter how hard they flapped, eventually the air curled above, beneath, and behind them, slipped around their frantically flying

forms, and sent their screams to join the others. As Goldenblood ran, ponies fell through the fog, sounding like wet fruit being dropped on the sidewalk. Not everypony seemed to be dying fast. Some lay in agony, gasping at the toxic air, their lives bleeding away with every inhalation. Others staggered around, eyes and lips melted shut.

The city began to fall silent... horribly silent. But not completely. Broadcasters on the hooves of some ponies crackled, the gas apparently reacting with the magical components, many of them issuing an Enervation-like scream that made Goldenblood's ears bleed when he passed too close. Too many times, he had to double back and make his way through an alley. All the while, the Cloud thickened and the quiet grew. Eventually, even the missile detonations ceased.

Goldenblood raced past the front of the M.W.T. hub, a limp crowd of ponies slowly oozing their way into the pavement. His hoofbeats were terribly loud, echoing off the silent edifices surrounding him. He passed a mare sitting oddly upright on one bench, her hoof stretched out towards him as she softly whimpered for help. The bench had fused with her back. "I'm sorry," he told the aquamarine unicorn.

And then he raced towards a giant tree. The doors were open, and pink mist curled through the halls indolently. "Fluttershy!" Goldenblood croaked. "Fluttershy!" he screamed, making his way past all the bodies. He poked his head into an amphitheatre, then heard a noise behind some double doors. He trotted to them, hesitated, and then pushed them slowly open.

The office was in disarray, but the mist was thinner here. Thin enough that Goldenblood could see, albeit indistinctly, the mare by the window. "Fluttershy?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

There was no answer for a second, and then a mare said quietly, "I'm afraid she's not here, darling. Terribly sorry." Goldenblood slowly approached the unicorn. Her coat seemed to be running like a beautiful painting splashed with turpentine. Her magnificent mane had a plastic appearance, the individual strands glued together in a purple mass that had fused with her hide. Her hoof pressed to the glass panes on the window, the end smeared like a blob of glue to the cracked class. Her eyes streaked her cheeks like running make up.

“Rarity,” Goldenblood murmured.
“I’m sorry, darling. This mist has gotten so accursedly dark,” she said as she tugged her hoof. “And I fear that I am stuck,” she added quietly. “Who is it? You sound like… ” She stilled. “No. It’s impossible… unless… I’m dead?”
“No, Rarity. No. It was a show,” Goldenblood said quietly as he moved closer to her. “I think she just wanted a few months to interrogate me properly.”
“Ah,” the mare breathed softly. “So bothersome not to be forwarded the memo.”
“Rarity, where is Fluttershy? Is she… is she here?” Goldenblood asked, his voice tight with dread.
“No. I sent her away. Used every bit of my magic to send her and Angel Bunny to safety,” she murmured. “It was the most I could do for my friend,” she whispered.
“Where, Rarity? Please. I need to find her,” Goldenblood begged. He reached out to touch her mane, and it stuck to his hoof like chewed gum, making the mare quiver with a gasp of pain.
“Why should I tell you?” Rarity whispered.
Goldenblood sat beside her. “I want to make sure she’s safe,” Goldenblood said softly. “I… I love her, Rarity. I always have, even if I hurt her.”
“We tend to hurt the ones we love,” she murmured, then shuddered again. “Then again, loving nopony is its own kind of hurt.” They were both silent, and then she whispered, “Zecora’s cottage, near Ponyville. She’s at Zecora’s cottage in the Everfree. It was the safest place I could think of. She wouldn’t be happy in some metal tomb in the earth.”
“No, she wouldn’t.”
The mare made a soft choking noise, her body shaking, and a whimper escaped her lips. “Tell me. Do I look dreadful?” she said with a sniff.
“You’re always beautiful, Rarity,” Goldenblood said. “Nothing could ever change that.”
She sniffed again, the corner of her mouth curling. “Liar. You always were such a liar. But thank you… ”
“Thank you, Rarity,” Goldenblood murmured. “For saving her, and for telling me.”
Rarity quivered again, then took a deeper breath. “I always was… too generous… for my own good… ” Rarity murmured. Then the

breath left her, and she sagged. Her body started to fall, but Goldenblood's magic caught her and steadied her so that when he released it, Rarity almost appeared to still stare out at the city with her hoof pressed to the window.

"Goodbye, Rarity," Goldenblood murmured, and then he turned and trotted quickly from the office. He continued along through the thickening mist towards the vague shape of the royal palace. He passed a few ponies in emergency hazmat equipment, but the concentrated pink gas had liquefied them as well. Goldenblood picked his way across the steps with their slain guards and trotted through the foyer. The Pink Cloud was dissolving the elaborate tapestries, making them drip in clumps of reeking fibrous matter. Even the marble seemed to pit and hiss at the pink vapors.

And then he came to the throne room.

Princess Luna stood before the throne in a nimbus of cool purple light, but as Goldenblood stepped closer, he could see the burns covering her dusky frame. The chemical wasn't liquefying her just yet, but the agony on her face was clear. From her horn, a blue beam projected towards the roof.

Slowly, Goldenblood approached. "Your Majesty," he rasped softly as he approached the dais and bowed before her.

"You!" Luna hissed through her teeth, the blue beam wavering. She gasped and then grunted, restoring the beam. "Of all those who should die, you live! By what treachery do you persist?"

"I don't know, Your Majesty. I suppose my partial exposure at Littlehorn made me immune to the chemical. It doesn't matter," he said, keeping his head bowed. "You must flee this place, Your Majesty."

"Flee? To where? Manehattan is lost. Cloudsdale is gone. Fillydelphia is annihilated. Hoofington is dead."

"To the Redoubt. Equestria must have a ruler," Goldenblood said. A horrid choking noise, half sob and half laughter, ripped from her throat. "You can drop the shield. The city is lost."

"But the countryside is not. I may at least grant my subjects a few hours more to flee," she gasped.

"Equestria needs its ruler, Your Majesty," he said. "There must be emergency plans enacted. Orders given. Evacuations organized."

"Another pony shall do so," she said, swaying. "I have released EC-1101."

Goldenblood slumped. "Your Majesty."

“It is only fitting. May it find somepony more worthy.” She closed her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. “I wished to rule for a thousand years. To prove to my people that I was kind and loving, that I would care for them and protect them from the things they feared. That I was not Nightmare Moon. My reign was a mere hundredth of that, and I protected them from naught!” She spasmed in pain. “At the very least, I can do this. Protect the people of my land for a while longer.”

“Princess... I wish to confess,” Goldenblood said solemnly. “I have conspired against you. I feared that, with victory, that you would become a tyrant. I lost faith in you. I tampered with EC-1101 so that, if it was ever deleted by you or the enemy or found an unworthy pony who tried to use its power for harm, it would unleash a weapon to destroy any victors. But I was manipulated, Your Majesty. It is a poor excuse, but it is the only explanation I have.” For some reason, that made her smile sadly. He bowed his head. “If you wish it of me, I will conduct my own execution.”

Luna stared at him, trembling. “Frankly, Goldenblood, I don’t really care anymore. Go die if you wish. I will remain here until I can no longer.”

“Princess Luna, I don’t want you to die,” Goldenblood rasped. “I betrayed you, but I never wished you... this... ” he said, sweeping his hoof at the blackening tapestries. “I don’t want you to have to die here, alone.”

“She will not,” Celestia said from behind Goldenblood.

“No!” Luna cried out. “Sister! Why aren’t you in Stable One?”

“Why aren’t you?” Celestia said with a gentle smile. Her horn flared, and a second beam, thicker and golden yellow, lanced up towards the heavens. “Rest a moment, Sister. I will hold it for now.”

“Princesses, please... you must not... you should not... you... ” he faltered as Luna stopped casting the spell, panting as they both looked at him.

“Still trying to advise me, traitor?” Luna asked, and Goldenblood jerked his head away as if he’d been struck. “We are past the points of mustn'ts and shouldn’ts, Goldenblood. We will do what we think is right. My reign is done. I will use the last of it as I see fit. I will hold the shield as long as possible.”

“But your people... ” Goldenblood protested.

“Were you not the one who worried I was a tyrant, Goldenblood?” Luna retorted, and once more Goldenblood jerked. Both were silent

a moment, and then the dusky princess continued in softer tones. “I’m glad you took steps, Goldenblood. I thank you for putting Equestria above me. I wish they’d been more moderate ones, but still. You tried to do what was right.” Slowly, Goldenblood looked up into the burned face of his princess as she smiled at him.

“I know I have no right, but… please forgive me,” he begged.

“Forgive *me*. I wish I’d been a wiser princess,” Luna replied, then glanced at her sister. “I know what it means to betray another. And I know what it means to be forgiven, and to feel remorse.” She turned to Celestia, adding to Goldenblood as she did, “Now, my final order is to go. I release you from my service. I wish to speak to my sister alone.”

Goldenblood bowed his head. “I know I have less right than any to ask anything of you, Princess Luna, but could you please send me to Ponyville? I… I have one last apology to make.”

Luna seemed to consider it, then gave a small smile. “Fluttershy?” He gave a short little nod. “I thought… nevermind. She is in Ponyville?”

He swallowed and gave another little nod. “I don’t know if she’ll hear it, but I owe it to her to try.”

“Sister,” Celestia said in a warning tone. “Are you certain?”

“No, but I suppose that, in a small way, it is due.” She slumped against Celestia and began coughing. “Could you help me please, dearest Sister?” Luna said as her horn glowed.

The white alicorn sat and hugged her close, their horns touching. “Always, Luna.”

A white glow formed around Goldenblood. “Goodbye, Goldie,” Luna said quietly.

And Goldenblood gazed at the pair, embracing, dying, tears running down his cheeks as time seemed to slow. “Goodbye, Your Majesties.”

The castle disappeared, and so did the gas. He found himself in a dusty cottage decorated with flowers and butterflies. For several seconds, he simply stared, sitting in the middle of the living room, and then he began to shake. He clutched his head in his forehooves and started to sob, rocking back and forth as he choked and wept.

“No time,” he rasped after a few moments, pulling himself together and to his hooves. “I have to find her… tell her… get her somewhere safe. The Redoubt. Stable 2. 101. Somewhere.” He rose to his hooves and staggered out of the cottage. Far off in the distance, he

could see the solid pink sphere obscuring Canterlot. Beyond that, radiant mushroom clouds rose on the horizon. Dozens. Cloudsdale was nothing but glowing mist. Ponyville lay in the distance, the village oddly silent, as if a bomb had fallen and the remaining buildings were just a memory.

Slowly, he turned towards the forest. The dark trees loomed above him as he walked, hooves tripping over vines as he wandered along the trails. It was more than an hour before he spotted the tree hut decorated with colored bottles and masks. Instantly, his heartbeat quickened, and he rushed in. “Fluttershy! Fluttershy!” No answer. His eyes darted around the forest, and then atop a nearby hill he saw a flash of yellow and pink.

He tore up the hillside. There, at its peak, sat Fluttershy. Her teal eyes were old as they stared out at the roofs of Ponyville, tears dripping slowly down her cheeks. Yellow feathers drifted slowly in the breeze towards him, her gray-tipped mane waving in the ghosts of distant blast waves as she watched her world die.

“Fluttershy… ” Goldenblood said as he stopped short. She didn’t turn. Didn’t acknowledge him at all. And then he took another step closer. “We need to–”

That was all he got out. A white missile flashed out of the grass, smashing into him like a bullet. He staggered back, and the white blur rammed him again and again. He slid halfway down the hill before he came to a stop.

Atop a rock sat a white rabbit, glaring at him flatly. Without taking his eyes off Goldenblood, he reached behind him and from seemingly nowhere pulled a tablet of Buck, which he proceeded to chow down on. His free paw pointed back the way Goldenblood had come.

“Please, Angel, I need to speak to her. She can’t–” Goldenblood began, trying again to climb towards her, but a fuzzy foot hammered his face and knocked him back down the hill once more. Goldenblood sat up, horn glowing. “Damn it! Let me talk to her one last time.”

The white bunny reached behind again, plucked out an inhaler, shook it three times, and drew in the contents in one long pull. Goldenblood charged up the hill, and the white bunny kicked him back down again. Up. Down. Up Down. A half dozen times Goldenblood tried to storm past Angel, and a half dozen times he was knocked back. “Damn you! I need to speak to her! She–” And

then the rabbit stopped holding back. In a series of kicks so swift that the beast could barely be seen, Goldenblood was flipped backwards into the air, slammed back down into the hillside, and struck so hard that all he could do was curl up. Every time his horn glowed, a white furry foot struck the spire, shattering his focus.

The rabbit knocked Goldenblood out of his curl and left him face down in the dirt, twisted one forehoof behind his back, stomped hard on the back of his head, and wrenched it up and pointed back toward Ponyville. Fluttershy still hadn't moved. She stared ahead, eyes sad and broken. Goldenblood heaved as if to move one last time, and Angel Bunny brought a foot down on Goldenblood's spine with a resounding crack. Goldenblood cried out in pain, but his hindquarters instantly went numb.

His cry died in his throat as the shield covering Canterlot began to flicker. Then it popped like a soap bubble, and the air around the city became filled with pink: pink gas exploding into the sky and pink water cascading down in an annihilating sheet of poison. Angel Bunny hopped off the crippled stallion and raced back up to hug the weeping mare. Goldenblood lay sprawled on the grass. Slowly, he tried pulling himself up the side of the hill, dragging his limp hindlegs. Even with the bubble gone and the gas dispersing, a hazy cloud clung to the spires, as if it would always linger. For the longest time, he stared at the rolling vapors as they filled the sky and plunged along the mountainside. Almost five minutes later, a roaring boom echoed like thunder across the land.

A few minutes after that, Ponyville was backlit by three immense balefire blasts tearing through a forest. "Whitetail woods... why?" Goldenblood murmured weakly, his vision now filled with blurs and spots. Slowly, he continued up. Inch by inch. "I just... have to tell her. Angel can kill me then, if he wants... but she has to know... "

"Traitor Goldenblood?" a stallion asked, and Goldenblood turned his head to look up at a batpony guard standing above him. Three more hovered above

"Please... " Goldenblood begged, then stretched a hoof towards Fluttershy. "Please... "

"We have orders to take you into custody for interrogation," the stallion said. "I don't know how you escaped to here, but I can't wait to make you tell us."

"No... I need... please... " Goldenblood said.

One of the batpony mares landed next to Fluttershy, keeping a bit

of distance between herself and the bunny. “Ministry Mare Fluttershy? Do you need... anything?”

Fluttershy didn’t answer. She only shook her head slowly back and forth.

“She’s not a part of our orders,” the stallion said, scooping up Goldenblood and draping him across his back. “We need to hurry back to the Citadel.”

“No... ” Goldenblood begged. “Please... ”

The batpony mare looked from unicorn to pegasus. “Um, ma’am? Mister Goldenblood would like to speak to you? Would that be okay?”

Fluttershy didn’t say a word. Didn’t look at him. She closed her eyes, hung her head, and let her pale pink mane shield him from her view. Then she gave the tiniest shake of her head. Goldenblood stared at her, tears of anguish rolling down his face. “Let’s go!” the stallion said, and together they lifted into the air.

“No! No! Fluttershy!” Goldenblood screamed as he was borne up into the air, his eyes locked on a yellow mare who grew ever smaller. “Fluttershy!” he screamed as she became just a tiny yellow dot atop the hill. “Fluttershy!” he raggedly screamed one last time, and then he sagged on the batpony’s back, weeping once more as everything faded to black.

~ ~ ~

I felt my body shift. I was sitting on something, on that firm plasticy smooth nothingness that existed in places like this. A beam of white light illuminated me in the void. “So, you’ve finally come,” Goldenblood said softly from behind me.

I turned to see him sitting in another beam of light. He looked as I remembered: middle aged, scarred, and tired. His yellow eyes locked with mine, and his lips curled up a tiny bit. “Blackjack.”

“Goldenblood,” I replied as I turned to face him. “It is you, isn’t it? No... hologram? Or computer simulation?”

“It is,” he said calmly. “I’m glad it’s you. I knew that only you or Cognitum would have any chance of finding me. And I knew only you would be able to appreciate what I’ve done.”

“What you’ve done?” I said with a small frown.

“The crimes I’ve committed,” he amended. “You’ve finally come to judge me for all that I’ve done.”

I rolled my eyes a little. “Yeah... no. Actually, I’m here to ask you some questions, and then I’ll be on my way. You can go on experiencing horribleness as long as you want.”

Goldenblood’s mouth opened and closed a few times as he seemed to struggle with what I’d just said. “Blackjack, you know what I’ve done. You know who I am better than probably any pony who has ever lived. Between sessions, I’ve used this machine’s connection with Hoofington’s system to keep tabs on you. Watched what you’ve done. How could you not do anything about my crimes?”

Oh brother. I rubbed my face with a hoof. “Goldenblood, I hate to break it to you, but this isn’t about you. I agree, you fucked up big time. I have to admit, I’m pretty good at doing that myself, but you beat me hooves down. Congratulations.” I clopped my hooves together weakly. “Now, what I want is for you to tell me about Horizons.”

Goldenblood turned his back on me. “Get out.”

I blinked. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. If you’re not here to kill me, then clearly you haven’t been paying attention. Good day.” He turned and started to trot out of the circle of light.

“Right. So you’re just going to wait another two hundred years for somepony to come down here with the answers to your little riddles so they can give you an appropriately horrible death? I don’t think so,” I said as scornfully as possible, making him pause. “You going to go back into memories and spying on the Wasteland, leaving it to rot? Fine. Maybe I can give the king a *really good* blowjob to get him to let me go. I’ll do what I have to do. But you know things, Goldenblood. You could help me, if you just pulled your head out of your masochistic, egotistical, self-loathing ass long enough to!”

My words seemed to have broken through. He turned and regarded me coolly. “I deserve to die. I deserve to be punished.”

“Oh for the love of... ” I muttered. “Yes. You did bad things. Really bad things. So have I. In some ways, worse things than you. No pony’s perfect. The difference is, I haven’t shoved myself into a computer waiting for somepony else to come along and put me down.” And construct ridiculously elaborate death traps to test their worthiness to execute me. I pointed a hoof off to the side. “I’m out there, trying to do better.”

“Better,” he muttered. “Blackjack, have you ever thought that maybe you *should* have given up? That by trying to help, you’ve

caused nearly as much pain and misery as there would have been if you'd done nothing at all?" He walked slowly towards me, the shaft of light moving with him. "I saw you at Yellow River. I saw what you did to that foal."

I stared at him for several long seconds. "You plugged me into Happyhorn," I said.

He gave a small nod. "I directed this system to access the robotic orderlies and put you into a therapeutic mindscape, yes. I rather didn't expect you to come out of it. Quite surprising, actually," he rasped softly. "After that, I occasionally peeked in on you from time to time, like Watcher. You were... interesting."

"I get that a lot," I said as I stared at him. "That wasn't the first time, though, was it?" He smiled a little, looking a touch impressed.

"No. Not the first time. The first time was when you managed to fire Trottenheimer's Folly. Then when EC-1101 was connected to a broadcaster. I worked with Echo on EC-1101's development. I knew the backdoors to follow it."

"Which is why Dealer could do things with it without setting the damned thing off," I said. I seemed to have his attention. "Dealer... Echo... his soul was bound to the program."

Goldenblood let out a soft 'Ah' of comprehension. "I'd wondered about that. I couldn't understand why you kept on going."

"He'd needle me and keep giving me vague answers. I wouldn't give up, but I also never stopped and really questioned things." I sat back, crossing my forelegs and tapping my cheek. "And in the labs under Hippocratic. You were the other source cutting off Cognitum, keeping the robots from storming the place."

"I merely ran what interference I could," he said lightly. "You had EC-1101, and you were taking it to Cognitum. Am I correct in thinking that Echo was helping her?"

"She had his body. It was the only way he could survive," I replied.

"I hadn't realized that. I thought he'd died in Canterlot, and the Dealer was just some variant of Wasteland psychosis. Clearly, I should have observed you much more closely." He sighed and shook his head. "A mistake I've made all too often."

"One of many," I replied.

"Oh, so many. In this place, I've had ample time to review my life," he said as he trotted in a circle around me. "Where to begin?" A glowing square appeared in which I saw him talking with the Tappahani zebra in Littlehorn. "I could have sounded the alarm the

moment she mentioned a Starkatteri was here. Evacuated the entire school." Then an image of him in the hospital bed, covered in bandages. "I could have simply declined Luna's request for help." Then an image of him with Fluttershy. "I could have put Fluttershy first, and not neglected her when she needed my love and affection most." Another window of Fluttershy in the rain. "I could have simply arrested her. She'd have been disgraced and fired, but the megaspells would have been secured." Horse appeared, grinning and looking suave and confident, then Garnet, then Trueblood. "I could have put somepony less ambitious in charge of the M.W.T., removed ponies I knew were corrupt and dangerous, and considered the actual harm other ponies did." A picture of Goldenblood in Scruffy's bar. "I could have had faith in my princess and never conceived of Horizons." He finally came to a stop, and the last gap around me was filled with an exhausted Goldenblood being arrested. "I could have told them about Amadi sooner." Dozens of smaller windows appeared around him. "There're plenty of other mistakes, too. Over twenty thousand various things I did wrong. I haven't even hit all the highlights."

"Pretty impressive. I can do it too," I replied, then launched into the list, punctuating each item with a jab of a forehoof in his direction. "Scoodle. Fluttershy Medical Center. Brimstone's Fall. My home. Almost killing myself. P-21. Going underground. Fallen Arch. Using Folly on the *Celestia*. Not dying. Neglecting my friends. *Endless* self-loathing. Yellow River. Boing." I hesitated, tilting my head. "Stygius... eh... " Then I glared at him again and resumed jabbing. "Tulip. Hightower. Lying to Silver Spoon. Dawn. Lacunae and the damned Goddess. Lighthooves Lighthooves Lighthooves! Councilor Stargazer. Thunderhead. Shadowbolt Tower. Dealer. Rampage. Cognitum!"

I became aware of a great glow behind me and glanced back at around two dozen windows of shame. Some computer was being cocky. I returned my attention on to Goldenblood. "Do I deserve to be punished for those screw ups? Abso-friggin-lutely! And I'm pretty sure that half the shit in my life *is* punishment for those screw ups. But do I let them stop me? No! Because the second I did, I'd be you. Maybe not plugged into a machine, but being curled up on a mattress somewhere, positive that I deserved to die, is just as bad! And what good would that do? None." I spat the word with as much contempt as I possibly could.

Goldenblood didn't answer. He just stared at me as if I were a painting or some piece of performance art. "You can't begin to compare... the consequences of my actions were... " he finally muttered.

I jumped on him, smacking him upside the head with a hoof. "It! Is! Not! About! You!" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "What about Luna's fuckups? What about Celestia's? What about Twilight and her friends'? Do you seriously believe you were to blame for them and their fuckups? That if you'd never existed, the war wouldn't have happened? Everypony's got blood on their hooves!"

"But without my actio–" Goldenblood started to stammer, but I slapped him silent.

"Maybe it would have been different. Maybe it would have been better. Or maybe it would have even been worse. That's the problem with 'what if's and regrets. There's nothing you can do about them, and you'll never know for sure. Even with all this." I waved my hoof at the countless floating windows. "None of it will change what has happened. And neither will killing you."

He just sat there in horrified silence for a long while. Then he closed his eyes. "How can I go on after what I've done, Blackjack? To Equestria? To Luna? To Fluttershy? How do you move on after you've hurt so many?"

I sighed. "You try and do better. You make each day count. You don't punish yourself eternally for your mistakes; you try and learn from them. And you never, ever, give up," I said as I put a leg around his shoulder. "And there is one particular way you can do better, right now, and that to tell me what you did. Tell me about Horizons."

He sighed and held out his hoof, looking up at the window of him talking with Princess Luna about the ministries. Then, as if he was shifting away an enormous weight, he waved the hoof to the side, and all the windows faded away.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "Cognitum thinks she can use Tom and the Tokomare to restore the Core. Is she right?"

He didn't reply at once. "She is correct that, if she catches the stone and holds it at the Enervation threshold, she could use the power to restore the Core, yes. And a great deal more besides. With that much raw magical energy, she could rebuild all of Equestria. And then some."

That made me shudder. “And that would be bad. But Amadi seems to think something different, something even worse, would happen,” I said, and Goldenblood closed his eyes. “Is he right?”

“Very likely, depending on what you believe,” Goldenblood whispered.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Is it a machine, or a monster? Cognitum believes one. Amadi the other. Whichever one is right will be victorious if Horizons fires.”

“So which is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Ancient legendary abominations seldom have warnings such as ‘may resemble impossibly advanced technology’, and most alien technology fails to point out features like ‘unholy souls may be present’. Regardless, both outcomes are undesirable and frequently inevitable,” Goldenblood said simply.

“So how do I stop it from firing?” I asked. He did another hoofwave. A sphere appeared, orbited by two smaller spheres, the larger of the two further away and the other closer in. “The sun and moon?” I asked. He nodded. Then I jabbed a hoof at a red icon on the moon. “And that’s the Lunar Palace?”

“Correct. Because it was placed on the richest deposits of moonstone, it never points directly at Hoofington. Thus, it has to wait for a perfect alignment of sun and moon to hit.” A dotted line rose out of the palace, then started to curve. It looped around the planet, then around the sun, then back around the planet, back to the moon, and finally down right on Hoofington.

Buh? “Why does it zip and loop around like that? Shouldn’t it go straight there?” I asked.

“I once asked Trottenheimer the same question. He just sighed, patted my head, and called me a ‘poor Euclopian pony’,” Goldenblood said with a ghost of a smile. “Suffice it to say that it does. If you can tamper with the firing timer, the odds of it hitting Hoofington are miniscule. The impact would be terrible but hardly world-threatening. Indeed, it might not hit Equus at all.” Seemed simple enough.

I stared at him. There was something missing. Something he wasn’t telling me. “Why’d you build Horizons at all?”

He jabbed a hoof at the blackness, and a diagram appeared of a building that seemed to be built underground. “Project Horizons was my reset button. If the Caesar won, or Luna won and became a tyrant, the potential for atrocity was unimaginable. There were

plans in the Zebra Empire on those last days. Factions that wanted complete genocide of the pony race. The hatred in those twenty years was absolute at the end. But the zebras knew that they were losing. Eventually, Equestria would have enough megaspells that, with a word, the Empire would be annihilated with no chance of striking back. And Luna had so much power that she would have been unstoppable. A figurehead controlling her own puppet government. Mind magic. Drugs. Power-armored soldiers. Alicorn troopers. Cybernetic mind control. She could have been invincible. If my worst fears came to pass, the world would need to be reset."

Killing all the innocents in the process. Nice. I didn't say that aloud, though, given that he was finally talking. "Horizons is in two parts. The weapon and the Redoubt. The weapon was built on the moon with Robronco's mechasprites and, later on, computer-controlled Flux clones from a supply of Flux shipped up in one of the rockets. The Lunar Palace."

"It looks kinda like a stable," I said, thinking back to Stable-Tec R&D, and then I glared at him flatly. "You ripped this off from Apple Bloom too, didn't you?" He smiled, and I sighed. "Why did I even ask?"

"I like to call it *appropriation*. Given what Scootaloo was up to with the stable program, it was an easy arrangement. I keep the M.o.M. from poking into Stable-Tec, she let me pick out the tastiest of Apple Bloom's designs. Then, later on, I used that leverage to get materials for Gardens and the Redoubt completely off the record. I had more than sufficient dirt on multiple executives to get cut rates," he said casually.

"So the Lunar Palace shoots a big wad of moonstone at Hoofington. It hits a big wad of starmetal. World goes boom. Everypony dies," I said dryly. "Let me guess: the Redoubt was to add an 'almost' to that last part."

"Yes. It would be the ultimate stable," he said as a second stable diagram appeared. The Big Macintosh Megastable was even bigger than I could have imagined. "Built under the premise of being exclusively for Equestria's elite and government agents, at least those who could reach it instead of having to shelter in Stable One, it wasn't hard to get permission and materials. Few realized that it was shifted into the shadow world, where the power of the detonation would miss it entirely. The idea was simple. If EC-1101 was ever deleted, say by a tyrant who had had an interest in there

being no way to transfer her power, or if it could not find a successor, say because the zebras killed us all, then Horizons would be activated."

"And an alert would go out for everypony to get to the stable," I said as he brought up a window with a list of hundreds of names.

"Of course not," he replied quietly. "Nopony would come at all. How could they, if Equestria were under martial law or occupied, or if they were all dead?" He looked quietly at me. "You forget, I had Projects Chimera, Steelpony, and Eternity as well."

I stared at him. "You weren't going to save ponies. You were going to *make* them," I muttered.

"Flux for the raw material. Thousands of blood samples. Thousands of memory engrams. And the soul binding rituals, courtesy of Rarity." He said it all matter-of-factly. "The first generation would act as incubators for the embryos in storage. And so the world would be saved." He glanced at me. "You know the flaw in the plan, don't you?"

Where to begin? "Cognitum said that Flux clones can't carry fetuses to term," I answered.

"Correct. I don't understand the biology, but apparently blanks lack the ability to form the placental support system. Regardless, a critical flaw. One of many," he muttered as he looked at the diagrams. "And not the worst."

"Still. Even if the Redoubt wouldn't have worked at the end of the war, we could use it to save a lot of people *now*, if Horizons goes off. Thousands, at least." Though that would still mean *losing* millions...

"The Redoubt will never save a single soul," Goldenblood nearly whispered.

"What?" I asked. He turned his head away, and I stepped closer to him. "What did you do?"

"Blackjack... please... I just wanted what was best for Equestria," he murmured.

"What did you do, Goldenblood?" I asked, trying to keep my temper even. *You're not an executioner, Blackjack...*

"I knew that, even with the Redoubt, it would take decades, even centuries for life to be restored to Equestria. That perhaps the Redoubt would fail. But I had an... epiphany," he said as he looked sorrowfully into my eyes. "The first star impact was terrible, but the spiritual life energy released was immense. I theorized that if Tom

was infused with that same amount of spiritual energy, the world might recover far faster. Perhaps in as little as a generation... ”

I stared at him. “Are you saying... ”

“Yes,” he answered solemnly. “There’s a star spirit bound within the moonstone.”

Footnote: Loading, please wait…

Chapter 68: Morning

"We must escape before it's too late
Find a way to save the day"

When I'd left Stable 99, it'd been with the intention of leading Deus away and saving my home. Over time, I'd been drawn into a web of secrets and backroom dealings culminating in the mysterious Project Horizons. It was surreal to think that something created two centuries ago, in the madness of that war, might now annihilate everything that I held dear. Yet, day by day, struggle by struggle, I'd drawn ever closer to the truth. And now, I had it.

For all the good it did me.

"You put a star spirit in a giant rock you're going to fling at Equestria? That's what all the fuss is about?" I asked, feeling oddly deflated. He gave a silent, shameful nod. Really…this was just… what? "How? Why?"

He waved his hoof, and suddenly a unicorn blank appeared in the void around us. Then cybernetics appeared around its head and magically merged in without any of the meaty, bloody action I was familiar with in the real cyberization process. "Instead of trying to send actual personnel to the moon," Goldenblood began, "who could have learned of Horizons and disabled it, we programmed the mechasprites to build a Tree of Life and cybernetics facilities." Images of the golden Project Chimera tree and the cyberization machine I'd used in Shadowbolt Tower appeared. "In another rocket, we sent up a large supply of Flux and a unicorn template–"

"And used computer-controlled Flux clones to build the gun," I interrupted. "You said that. What does that have to do with putting a star spirit in Tom?"

"*Unicorn* Flux clones," he said, rather annoyed. "The mechasprites built the gun. We used the clones to enact rituals uncovered by Rarity in the course of Project Eternity. While Rarity never let me study the Black Book directly, I did have exclusive access to all her

research notes. That, along with other lore she'd confiscated from libraries and zebras all across Equestria, allowed us to work out how to make the blanks draw in a star spirit and bind it to the stone."

"And this spirit was okay with this?" I asked skeptically.

"I don't know, actually. I expected more of a struggle, but the spirit seemed to allow itself to be placed in the stone. At the time, I naively assumed that it was unaware of the ritual's ultimate purpose until too late. Now…I simply don't know," he said as more windows opened showing fifty augmented blanks casting magic around the colossal wad of moonstone that was Tom.

Then the visual aids disappeared, and he looked away. "As for the second part of your question... the *why*…" He paused, then gritted his teeth as if admitting a shameful perversion. "I was… manipulated. I *let* myself be manipulated," he spat in disgust.

Really? I couldn't help myself from snorting out a short laugh. "You? *You* were manipulated?"

"Yes, Blackjack. Me." He summoned a window showing the scene in the bar with Twilight. "When I left that day, I knew that something had to be done to protect Equestria from the possibility of a victorious Princess Luna turning tyrant, but I had no idea what. I didn't immediately start intensive work on the problem, either; I kept it in mind, but I devoted most of the time I could spare from more mundane matters to assisting Twilight with Gardens and keeping it secret from others. But as Gardens progressed, I was struck by inspiration." A window appeared showing Horse's lab. The Goldenblood there levitated the tuning fork, struck it against the counter, and held it to his ear.

My eyes widened. "The starmetal."

"It spoke to me on a subliminal level. Nothing so crude as mind control, but it was suggestive. Over time, I believe, it inspired me. The binding of the star spirit was the last inspiration I received." He rubbed his face. "Then…the war turned bad. I was fully occupied with just keeping Equestria from flying apart. Worse, I struggled with fear, paranoia, and anger. As you saw with Pinkie Pie."

I nodded a little. "I thought you were a little more…well…violent than usual."

"It couldn't be helped," he said. "I was so angry at her constant meddling and interference. Unreasonably so. I'd always handled Pinkie by letting her catch the violent criminals and the overtly

corrupt. The bad ponies. But towards the end, I hated her." He paused. "No. I hated her Pinkie Sense. Her…her meddling."

I remembered Amadi's rant against Discord. "Why did what she said... Why did you react like that?"

He closed his eyes, and a window appeared of a kindly white unicorn mare in a pith helmet. "My mother, Sundancer, took me all across the world." Images appeared and disappeared of the colt and mare travelling across burning deserts, through sweltering jungles, and into ancient ruins. "She was protecting me from my father's abuse, but I didn't realize that at the time. We explored the zebra lands extensively, and my life was filled primarily with the wonder of learning. However…"

The window expanded till I was pulled into it. I found myself in a room reeking of incense, sweat, and bodily waste. A sickly unicorn mare lay in a bed, surrounded by zebra doctors. There were masks adorning the walls, flowers in pots, and all sorts of bottles of potions on shelves. The wasted mare muttered softly, writhing in agony as the half dozen zebras and three ponies in the room looked on. One of the ponies, I was astonished to see, was the maroon-colored Trueblood. At the bed's edge knelt a white-coated colt, his eyes red with weeping, and by the wall stood a younger Scruffy sadly watching the scene.

"My mother had a terminal growth in her brain. Despite their skill and knowledge, there are limits to what the healers' magic could do," Goldenblood said beside me, gravely regarding the scene before us. "Mother fought for six months, alternating between lucid agony and delusional rambling, before the pain became too much for her to bear and she stopped fighting." He pursed his lips, then said, "It was a difficult death."

"Arrhythmia," noted a zebra with a stethoscope. "It won't be long now."

"You can't do anything for her?" colt-Goldenblood asked with a resigned sadness I'd rarely encountered in one so young.

"We've given as much of the poppy tears as we can," another zebra said, checking the bottles. "Any more, and…well…" She trailed off, meeting the unicorn colt's sad eyes, then looking away shamefacedly. "Might be a mercy to do so anyway."

"No," his mother groaned. She shuddered in pain, twisting her forehooves around the sweaty sheet. "I need to talk to him. Alone." A feverish citrine eye stared at those assembled. "Thank you for all

your hard work. I'll take it from here."

One by one, the zebras threaded out, followed by Trueblood. The scruffy brown unicorn stallion hesitated, then nodded respectfully at the mare, patted the colt on the shoulder, and left the room, closing the door behind him. Goldenblood climbed slowly onto the bed and embraced the mare. "I don't want you to die, Momma."

"I know, my dearest, but it's time. I'm so sorry," she said as she held him. "You're such a fine boy. So handsome, like your father, but so much kinder." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she whimpered in pain and grief. After a moment without any other sounds save the colt's sniffly breathing, she said, "I've made arrangements for your return to Equestria. It's a beautiful land. Your aunt Celestia will see to it that you're cared for."

Goldenblood wept as he held her, and she murmured over and over, "Shh. Shh," and, "It's alright." But as she stroked his mane, I saw her face twist and contort. Her hooves grew tighter around his neck as they started to shake.

He grunted and tried to pull away. "Momma! You're hurting me!" he cried out.

"Shut up!" she hissed, spraying spit as her hooves tightened even more. "You're a horrible child! A monster! I know what you're going to do! Who you are going to serve!" She screamed. I lunged forward, trying to pull her legs off from around the boy's neck, but my hooves passed through her as if through mist.

Fortunately, the zebras who stormed in did pry her legs off the child. She screamed, flailing her legs against them as the colt was pulled back into Scruffy's protective embrace. "No! He has to die! He serves the Eater! He serves the Eater of Souls! He'll kill us all!" she howled with blood on her lips, the hanging bottles seeming to ring in sympathy. The scene faded from view.

Goldenblood hadn't moved. He gazed passively at nothing as if still seeing that horrible room. "She took a few more minutes to die. At the time, I was told it was the pain and the poppy tears that had made her try and kill me. For a while, I even forgot what she'd said. Let my fond memories bury those terrible seconds."

"Then Pinkie Pie said the exact same thing," I said in understanding. "Do you think your mother saw, somehow…?"

"I don't know," Goldenblood replied, and then the emaciated mare reappeared, standing still as a statue. Pinkie Pie appeared on her left. Discord on her right. An old, decrepit zebra with facial tattoos

like Amadi's appeared next to Pinkie, clutching a black book to his chest. "There's been no lack of people claiming to know the events of the future. The sick. The odd. The alien. The mad. All are rumored to have insights that most ponies scoff at." He glanced at me and gave me a small smile. "Or are you one of those who thinks it'd be wonderful to know the future?"

"Nah. That'd take all the surprise out of life," I replied honestly. "Granted, I would have liked to know about Cognitum before I left 99, and that Rivets hadn't purged the system…EC-1101…you…" I trailed off, frowning. "I guess what would really matter is whether I could change those or not, though."

"And that's the nightmare. Knowing what will happen and being powerless to change it." He shook his head. "We like to believe that we have free will. That we are in control of our destinies. Then we find out that we have far less control than we'd like."

"You were manipulated by the Eater?" I asked.

"By many ponies. I thought myself a fine puppeteer and thus made myself the best kind of puppet. Luna and Fluttershy managed me far better than I ever realized. And, of course, the Eater." He sat and rubbed his face again. "The Eater. No great hammer of mental domination for me and others to see and fight against. No seizing control of me and then blacking out my memory once I'd done its work. So subtle. The work under Hoofington. The slow evolution of the idea of a failsafe to check Luna into…more. Maybe the plans were mine after all. I've spent two hundred years being tormented by that thought. Blaming the Eater feels like an excuse. But the binding of the star spirit…that, I think, *that* was certainly from the Eater, however far it had to take me to get to that point."

"Why?" I asked. "Why would it want a star spirit?"

"I suspect that 'Eater of Souls' is a slight misnomer. Or, rather, an accurate name that gives a false impression. I think that the souls the Eater truly feeds on are those of stars, not mere ponies and zebras. If I'm right, the spirit in Tom will be enough to restore it to its full life and power, doing in an instant what it would take an uncountable number of mortal souls to accomplish. It would rise and consume Equus, the sun, and the moon to add to its mass, and it would return to perpetrating destruction on a scale quite possibly beyond our ability to imagine. And that is why I am now sure that the Eater of Souls, whether some ancient demon from the void or a machine of staggering complexity and terrible purpose, is every bit

the horror the legends claim."

"Cognitum is sure it can be used safely," I pointed out…but I didn't really believe she was right. I'd heard the voice from the pit.

"Well…the data available to me is limited. She has had much longer to study the Eater itself than I did, and I have only been able to steal a small part of what she's found. I suppose there's a small chance that she could be right. Hmph. What has the world come to when 'Insane computer uses giant alien artifact to take over world!' is one of the *better* possible headlines?" The tiny spark of levity died. "If she's right, if Amadi is just a deluded fool worshiping a machine, she will sweep around the world unstoppably, eliminating 'destructive and unnecessary' free will and the vagaries of personality flaws with cybernetics and mind magic. Equus will survive, will appear to *thrive*, and there will be no difference between the ponies and the robots. If, as I think, she's wrong, and those centuries of studying the Eater have *also* been centuries for it to fool her into thinking that she could use it, she will resurrect the most destructive being in the history of Equus. Perhaps even the universe; I shudder to think of what might be out there worse than the Eater of Souls."

I sighed and rubbed my face. If Cognitum failed and Tom missed Hoofington, it would kill everyone around where it landed, at least, and could kill everyone on Equus if it hit hard enough. Maybe if it hit the ocean…would that be better? Or would a great big rock in a great big ocean make a great big wave? Ugh, smart pony questions. Either way, that was bad too. If Cognitum succeeded and was right, she'd take over and lobotomize everyone on the planet. If Cognitum succeeded and Amadi was right, the Eater of Souls would…well, eat the world. Only one good option...

"You need to help me stop Horizons," I summarized. That was all there was to it.

"I cannot," he said with simple resignation. "The firing system is a copy of my own synaptic net. It will wait until the moon is perfectly aligned, then fire. I can't order it to stop. When Princess Luna arrested me, my back door to the system was blocked."

"Then you need to go with me to the moon and find some other way," I said. Of course, that was skipping the step of getting out of the shadows... which meant getting out of this mindscape first…and the problem of actually *getting* to the *moon*...

He interrupted my thoughts with a chuckle. "Unfortunately, you're

missing the fact that you have to kill me. You're my executioner."

"No," I contradicted flatly.

"You must," he countered. The bastard sounded almost happy, a shadow of a smile playing in the corners of his mouth.

"I'm. Not. An. Executioner," I snapped, poking him in the chest sharply with each word. "I don't decide who dies because I think they should. I don't do that." He froze for a moment, and then his eyes narrowed.

"That seems…both hypocritical and somewhat cowardly," he pointed out as he regarded me flatly. "You decide that ponies deserve to die all the time. The ponies you've killed didn't throw themselves on your bullets. You chose to shoot them. You could have run. You could have surrendered. Instead, you resorted to violence. You might call it 'self-defense' but your self-defense is exceptionally hazardous to those who challenge it."

I turned away. "I don't care. I'm not an executioner. Do you understand?" Before me appeared an image of the Fluttershy Medical Center. Me, Glory, and P-21 staring at the terminal screen surrounded by all the pods. "What…what are you doing? Stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything," Goldenblood replied. "This is all you."

The younger me turned her head and regarded me. "What am I except an executioner? I made the choice to pull the plug. I didn't explore any other options."

"Shut up," I said as I tried to back away, but of course, this was in my head. The scene moved to follow me. "I didn't have any other choice."

Glory looked at me flatly. "That's not true. You could have left them alone. Tasked the Collegiate with screening them and weeding out the deadliest ones."

P-21 glowered at me. "Or you could have chosen not to choose. Leave it up to Glory or me. We might not have been happy with that, but it would have been on us. Not you."

I covered my face in my hooves. "Shut up!" I shouted. "Why are you even talking to me? I thought you were supposed to be tormenting him!" I pointed a hoof in the general direction of Goldenblood without looking at the image.

"You're in a therapeutic mindscape repurposed for interrogation. Did you think yourself exempt?" Goldenblood replied wryly. "I've endured decades of this and worse. Watching Fluttershy die. Reject me. Kill herself for giving up megaspells." He shook for a moment

like a sheet caught in a stiff wind. “Yes, the program was fond of that one for almost twenty years. But any pain grows numb when it’s been endured long enough.”

“Damn you. You like this,” I growled at him.

“Well, I *am* trying to get you to kill me,” he said with that rasping chuckle. “And it’s hardly as if this is the only time you’ve been an executioner.” The hospital room around me disappeared, and I was surrounded by my stable. I stood in the Overmare’s office, my hoof over the button, looking down into the atrium.

How’d I know he’d bring me here? “You’re wasting your time. I’m over this,” I said flatly, pulling my hoof away from the button and turning my face away so I didn’t see those still forms. That didn’t stop me from smelling that chlorine reek.

“Over this?” Midnight asked as the black unicorn appeared before me, her kissable mouth covered in foam. “How do you get over this, exactly? How does anypony get over *this*?”

“I know that I caused this,” Rivets said as the old gray mare appeared next to Midnight. “But did you even try and talk to us? Work out who else might not be infected? Gave us a choice?”

“I was going to die with them,” I said, fighting to keep myself calm.

“So the mass slaughter of hundreds is okay so long as you’re one of them?” Midnight said contemptuously. “That’s Goldenblood’s logic.”

“I didn’t have a choice! The virus was making you increasingly paranoid! Any day, you would have started eating each other!” I snapped.

“Oh?” Rivets asked. “Did you ask the ponies in Medical? Call out to the Collegiate? Tell Glory?” That last one made me wince, and Rivets took in an eager breath. “Oooh. If what you did was so right, why keep it to yourself?”

“They would have tried to stop me,” I muttered, not looking at them. “They wouldn’t have understood what needed to be done.”

“You didn’t even tell Rampage,” sneered Midnight. “Face it. You knew this was wrong. And you did it anyway!”

“I fucked up!” I roared at both of them. “I’ve admitted it over and over again! I fucked up! I’d give anything to have done it differently. What do you want from me?”

“To push the button,” Goldenblood said coolly as he stepped between the pair. “To do what you did then to me now. Kill me. If

you could do it to your stable, doing it to me should be foal's play."

"No," I snarled. "I'm not an executioner." The effort to say that made me shake.

The stable disappeared, along with Midnight and Rivets, and Goldenblood stood alone before me in the blackness. He eyed me calmly and arched a brow, then asked quietly, "Ever thought that maybe you should be?"

Steel Rain appeared, sans armor, just like he'd been outside Blueblood Manor. "If you'd put a bullet in my head then, you might not have been taken by Cognitum."

Lighthooves appeared next to him with a calm smile. "Yeah. If you just hadn't been so caught up on me saving Glory, hadn't let that give you an excuse to overlook what I was doing, you might have saved thousands of lives."

Four stallions appeared next to him. One leered at me, the one from the bridge over the Hoofington River. "Gotta say, didn't think you'd be dumb enough to let us walk. I thought we were dead for sure." He grinned even more. "And the second time we met, you almost couldn't kill me. Admit it." He moved around behind me. "Or maybe you wanted another round, like the good little fuckma–"

A magic bullet blasted his face out of the back of his head and flipped the body over backwards in a spray of gore that vanished as soon as it got more than a yard away. The five ponies remaining clopped their hooves together in applause as I stared at his body. This wasn't real. That wasn't real. "That's the spirit. Now you just have to do it to the pony who matters. One who, as you know better than anypony else living, deserves to die."

I sucked in my breath, feeling my heart thundering in my chest. "No," I whispered. The clopping stopped, the five gaping at me in bafflement.

"No?" said Goldenblood. The conjured visions disappeared, and the pale stallion came back into view. "What is the matter with you? I've had a long time to analyze ponies, but you might be one of the most perverse cases I've seen. Is it because I'm male? Some deep festering guilt over what you did to stallions like P-21 back in your stable? You only kill mares because of lingering resentment of the Overmare, Daisy, and your mother?"

"No," I answered.

"Then why? Why is it so wrong for you to kill one more miserable pony who deserves it?! Because you're too good? Because of your

pitiful refrain of doing better? Because you pine for some father figure?"

"Because it would be easy!" I screamed at him, wanting to crush him with my bare hooves, tears on my cheeks. "It took me all of a minute to make the choice, and just like that, I killed forty children! And it was so damned easy to do!" I sniffed, fighting myself. "Goddesses, you stupid fuck, I'm good at killing. I'm a fucking artist at it. And at *getting* people killed, too."

The images disappeared as the pale pony gaped at me, struggling for a response. "I do not understand. Big Macintosh was also an excellent soldier. As was Psalm. As were all the Marauders. And they were *heroes* for being killers."

"Wrong! They weren't heroes. Especially not for being killers," I countered. "All that killing did was turn Equestria more and more into the Wasteland. Defeat…Surrender would have been better than that!" I hung my head in shame. At the end, Big Macintosh had been the only one who had been a hero. All the rest had been corrupted, betrayed by the demand to kill for others.

The scarred stallion didn't have a response. He stood, frozen, his eyes wide when I glanced at him. My lips curled. "Do you want to see me as an executioner?" I asked. The scarred lips curled in a smile, and he nodded.

I don't know how I did it. Maybe the machine was feeling really accommodating right now, but I felt myself change. My white hide was wrapped not in cybernetic plating but in dyed-black Security armor stitched to a ponyhide base. More scars crossed my skin, and my mane lay a little more chopped and wild. A pair of mirrored shades covered my eyes, reflecting the world back at him, and they gleamed along with the pair of hoofcuffs on my belt. A well-used security baton hung at my side, and I levitated up the pump-action shotgun and pointed it at his face.

"This is me as an executioner, Goldenblood. Corrupted justice," I said in a low, rough sneer. "I would have been a Reaper, right up there with Rampage. I would have started killing ponies I thought deserved it, but eventually I would have just been killing anypony who pissed me off. I would have been great friends with Rampage and Psychoshy. Would have taken Gorgon's spot and never looked back. Hell, I probably would have given Sanguine EC-1101, because I wouldn't have given a fuck."

I lowered my face to stare at him over the top of the glasses. "I also

wouldn't have given a shit about Horizons, Cognitum, or Goldenblood. I'm pretty sure I'd be a law of one. Me, myself, and I. Kill anyone else that crossed me. If I were an executioner, Goldenblood, I wouldn't have talked nearly this much." I pumped a shell into the chamber. A thrilled expression of hope and horrified fascination crossed it, making me scowl even more.

"BANG!" I yelled, and he staggered back, collapsing in a heap and breathing hard. Slowly, I lowered the gun, staring at him as he gaped up at me. "Except, to *that* me, you wouldn't be worth a bullet, a baton, or a bucket of piss to drown you in. You're nothing. Everything is nothing. Fuck, I'd probably help Amadi if I gave two shits about him. You want me to be an executioner? I'd rather be dead." I tossed the gun aside and looked away. "Now stop dicking around and bring back Goldenblood."

A soft chuckle came from the air, and Goldenblood appeared next to the sprawled stallion. "Told you," he said with a wry smile.

"That should have worked," the fake Goldenblood stammered up at me. "My psychological profiles say you should have killed him. How did you know?"

I glanced at Goldenblood and felt the Reaper me melt away. If things had been different…if I hadn't killed forty foals with a button…if I hadn't done so many things…might I have been a Reaper wondering what it was like to do better, or a corpse waiting for a bullet? "Goldenblood's better at this than you are. He wouldn't have tried to talk me into killing him by telling me I'm something I'm not and will never be. Now go away. The big ponies have business."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, then disappeared. "Impressive," the real Goldenblood commented. "Flattery aside, how'd you really know?"

I sighed and closed my eyes. "It knew too much. You might know a lot about me. I bet you're pretty adept at spying from here. Two hundred years of practice and all. But I doubt you knew how many ponies were on the *Seahorse*."

"Very astute," he said with a small nod. "You really are good at this," he continued with a gesture at the emptiness all around us. "But then, you've probably had more practice in mindscapes than any pony since Princess Luna."

A table and chairs appeared, the wood and fabric patterns I recognized from Star House. A bottle of whiskey manifested, and, a

second later, a cup of tea. We each took a seat, and I stared across at him. “Was she Princess Luna, or Nightmare Moon?”

He sighed, closing his eyes. “That is the question. I’d like to think that, at the end, she died as Princess Luna. But as she was progressing, with the steps put in place, she would have ushered in a very dark thousand years. And few would have been the wiser. Princess Luna might never have become Nightmare Moon in fact, but she would have had a reign infinitely longer and more terrible than that of her alter ego.”

“Alicorns,” I agreed. “Power armor. Cyberponies. Memory spells. Thunderheads. The S.P.P. The M.o.M.’s spy network. And the war would have given her an excuse to silence any pony who criticized her.” I took a sip, the fiery fluid giving a wonderful familiar burn as I swallowed. “Maybe she might not have been bad, but who knows what she could have done.” I stared at him evenly. “Still, you might have tried something other than killing everypony on the planet.”

“As I said, I was manipulated…but you’re right.” He sighed and took a sip of tea. “I saw what Twilight did for Gardens and attempted to do something even grander still. Pride was my downfall. Ironic…” He shook his head and then looked at me again. There was something calculating in his gaze, and some amusement, too.

“So, now what?” I said when it became clear he wasn’t going to continue.

He gave a little smile and shrug. “Now I wait for you to complete my execution. I’m not going to try and talk you into it. I’m simply going to wait. Because you want to get back to your friends and stop Cognitum. I want to die. Eventually, you’ll see it as a mercy killing and be on your way.”

“Suicide?” I muttered. “I’ve tried suicide, Goldenblood. There’s lots faster ways to bring it about than this.”

“True. But remember…egotist?” He chuckled again. “I wanted somepony who understood me to do it. I didn’t want to put a bullet through my head in the gutter, or to throw myself off Canterlot. How would that be appropriate for a monster such as I?” He sighed and looked out at the darkness. “I wanted somepony, anypony, to realize the full breadth and scope of what I’d done. That’s all. Even Princess Luna didn’t know.”

I took another pull off the bottle. “You are one fucked-up stallion, you know that, Goldenblood?” I said. “I am trying to save ponies’

lives, and you're still fixated on you. Still. Even now." I sighed and took another drink as he sat there, looking wretched. "Why don't you help me?"

The question seemed to rouse him a little. "You'd accept my help?" He laughed jovially, then trailed off as I continued smiling at him. His lips curled in sickly, horrified disbelief. "... Wait, you're serious?"

"You haven't been paying attention to me, have you?" I said with a laugh. "So long as you keep trying to do better, that's all I ask. The computer was right when it pointed out I kill a lot of folks that didn't need to die, and I save folks who I probably shouldn't have. Can't do anything about the former other than try my best not to do it again. But sparing others…I like to believe that ponies want to do the right thing. To be better. Killing just leaves corpses."

Goldenblood closed his eyes and covered his face with his hooves. "And would it be good, if I tried harder?" He slowly pulled them down until he stared at me with his haunted eyes. "I did so much–"

"You're going to make me hit you again," I said, flipping the table out of the way and leaning towards him, giving him a hoof-poke-punctuated list. "One. It is not about you. Princess Luna, Twilight Sparkle and her friends, and even Princess Celestia all had their share of the blame. You didn't rub your hooves together and cackle about how you were going to rule Equestria from behind the throne. Two. It is not about you. I am trying to save ponies now. That's me doing better. If you really are such a shit that you can't be trusted out of this pen, then eat a bullet and get out of the way. But if you really are as smart as you pretend to be, then get your ass in the game. And three. It's not about you. You're smart, but you're really not that important. And now that you've told me about the star spirit, I think I'm starting to understand just how ridiculously big this really is. But if you really don't want to help, then I will give you what you want and be on my way." I crossed my hooves in front of myself. "I am not an executioner, but I am a mare on a mission, and if I have to get rid of you to complete it, then so be it." I paused, pointed a hoof at him, and added, "I will probably whine, angst, and beat myself up about it later, but if that's the price for saving everypony else, then I'll be damned and pay it."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, looking away.

"Me too," I said, turning my back to him. "Fluttershy would be ashamed."

"Fluttershy?" he said like I'd slapped him…again.

"She never gave up trying, even when she messed up. Do better. That's what she told us all. Be better. Try. And never give up." I gestured to the blackness. "This? This is the lamest giving up I've ever seen. A mattress is still a mattress, even if it's made of machinery and mind games instead of stuffing and springs." Okay, maybe not the clearest analogy but still!

I didn't know where I was walking to. Eventually the program would get the hint, I supposed, and get me out of here so I could 'execute' Goldenblood by death in his sleep. But a moment later, he called out, "Wait." I didn't look back, didn't dare to breathe. After a second's pause, he said, "If you could get me out…if you could…" I glanced over my shoulder. For a moment, a terrible hope guttered in his face before it dimmed under a veil of doubt. "I don't know… maybe…"

"Well, that's better than you've been doing, Goldenblood," I said quietly, then glared up. "Now, get me out of here, Computer. We have to have a chat."

* * *

I came out and immediately pulled the net off my head. My head spun a bit, and I sat blinking before it finally settled down. "I will not release my prisoner," the computer said flatly. "You must select an execution method."

I twisted and smirked at the machine. "That was fast."

"Your psychological profile says that you will not accept the terms as they are presented to you and will attempt to find a solution by negotiation or force that will prevent you from accepting them. I warn you, any attempt to teleport out of this chamber will fail and prompt immediate execution by beam turrets," the computer threatened. I smirked at the irony.

"Relax, Computer," I said as I rose to my hooves, shaking the lingering fuzziness from my head, and walked around to stand before the pod. "I meant what I said. If I have to kill Goldenblood, I will. My friends come first." I sat down before the stasis pod, regarding its occupant for a minute. Then an idea came to me. "Quick question. Your main priority is to kill Goldenblood, right?"

"No. I am to hold him until an executioner arrives with the capability to decide an appropriate means of killing him. Then I

shall kill him," the computer sounded absolutely pissy that I hadn't agreed to splatter Goldenblood all over the virtual landscape.

"And you're supposed to spend the wait interrogating him for information, right?" I didn't get a reply. "Who are you authorized to give that information to?"

"Princess Luna, a cleared member of the M.o.M., or any senior ministry official," the computer said testily.

"Right," I said, thinking back to a statue I'd seen what felt like a lifetime ago, and the little yellow statuette. Damn, I missed those six. "I have decided my form of execution."

A thousand different kinds of death popped up on the screens. A thousand horrible ways to go. "Please make your selection."

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and killed him.

"Kindness."

The computer was silent for several seconds. "You wish him… hugged to death?" the computer asked hopefully.

"I want him let go. I am going to be killing him through kindness," I said firmly. I couldn't allow for any doubt or debate in this.

"I'm sorry, but your choice is invalid," the computer said with what might actually be snippiness. "Please select an appropriate death."

"But it is appropriate. The most appropriate form of all," I said as I kept my eyes locked on the pod. "You want him to be executed properly. Well, that's impossible here. He *wants* the deaths you can give him here. Throw him to the Wasteland, where he can die like he should have two centuries ago, in some nondescript hole. Or so that he dies to his creation, Horizons. Here, he'll never die as he deserves."

The computer didn't answer for a minute, and I waited each second of it. "That is a compelling argument. While we have run numerous simulations of him dying to Project Horizons and found the psychological trauma to be quite minimal, it would at least be a method of execution. Additionally, the potential alternative of an insignificant death would be, as you say, very appropriate." Another pause. "And we've detected a sixty percent spike in his brain waves associated with panic caused by your suggestion, a new record. Still, it is outside my mission parameters."

"That's where your secondary mission comes into play. You've been through his brain, but what are the odds there's some small bit he's holding on to? Some last little secret. You know how clever he

is." I gave a tiny little smile. "Let him go and observe how he acts. See what else he's hiding. As a descendant of a ministry mare, I should be a valid recipient of any intelligence you've extracted."

Again, another long pause. "Interesting. I've never seen anxiety levels this high before. He's making numerous counterarguments to yours, Executioner. And he is attempting to subvert my programming and delete the release commands."

That was it! I knew that Goldenblood had to have worked out some back doors. Now or never. "Then let him go. You were originally from a place that healed ponies. If Goldenblood is to have any hope at recovery, he can't do it here. Dreams and nightmares can only do so much. Let him go, to die as he deserves or to recover as anypony should!"

No answer. I waited a minute, counting to sixty. "Computer?" Still no response. My ears wilted a bit. Then the pod let out a hiss of noxious, acrid gasses, not the flesh-melting vapors of Pink Cloud but still unpleasant. Goldenblood's hooves worked weakly as the lid slipped up.

"Subject revival in progress. Notify the M.o.P. for medical care. Terminal data damage to this program. Conducting a remote transfer to an available mobile unit. Deleting hoofprint program. Catch you on the flipside," the computer buzzed, and then it went dead. Buh? Remote what?

"Robots," I groaned, shaking my head, then paid attention to the pod's stirring occupant. Goldenblood squirmed and opened his yellow, bloodshot eyes. They drifted over the dead machinery, then slowly focused on me. "Welcome to your parole, Goldenblood."

He lunged…if molasses could lunge…leaving the net on his head and collapsing towards me. "No. Can't…shouldn't…wrong…" he muttered as I caught him and lowered him to the ground. Behind us, the doors ground open, showing the empty hallway. I supposed that Persephone and Tenebra were waiting up above, if they waited at all.

"Oh yes you can and should, and I don't care," I contradicted as he struggled on the ground. "Come on. This place has to have a café somewhere. I'm starving, and I imagine that after two centuries, you'd like a bite to eat too." It was a gnawing discomfort in my gut, familiar and natural and so very welcome. Despite Goldenblood's feeble objections, I shoved him across my shoulders and soldiered up to the atrium. Still no sign of Tenebra and her mom, but then,

there wasn't exactly a high expectation of me coming back, and I had been in those orbs a while.

The café was extant and all ready to go, with food on shelves in the back. I helped myself to some Sugar Apple Bombs cereal; they were no cyberpony cake, but then, what was? For Goldenblood, I found some bags of dried apples. There was easily enough food in the café's pantry to feed a hundred ponies for a month, rows upon rows of it. I walked along the bank of refrigerators and snagged a pair of Sparkle-Colas…wait a minute! It took me fifteen minutes to find it, but yes, there it was, the glass bottle with its amber contents seeming to possess a faint aura accompanied by the singing of holy spirits.

I returned to the table, finding Goldenblood slumped back in his seat, watching me with a mix of wariness and dislike. "It's too bad Glory's not here. She could whip all of these into something fantastic. She really should have a cooking cutie mark," I said as I took a seat, popped the cap off my bottle of amber heaven, and took a long pull. Oh, it burned! It burned like hell, and the warmth lifted me right to the tip of my horn. "Oooooeeeeahhh…" I groaned long and low, looking at the bottle. "I missed you."

"You're drinking?" Goldenblood asked incredulously as I returned. The purple batpony armor I'd liberated from the armory pinched in the seat, but pretty soon I wasn't going to care about that one bit.

"You betcha," I said with a smile, levitating a pair of glasses over and pouring a half inch in both. "I broke you out of there because I needed a drinking buddy." I paused to take few mouthfuls of cereal and dried apple. "I also did my quota of thinking for the day. Now it's your turn. Take a moment, then you're going to help me get out of the Nightmare Citadel and back to my friends. Then you're going to help me stop Cognitum, Amadi, and Horizons. Then…I dunno. Decide what to do with your life. Take up rock collecting. I hear rocks are very big in the Wasteland."

"You're mocking me," he muttered flatly.

"Noooo…" I said with a smirk, then rolled my eyes. "Well, maybe a little bit." I chewed, and his annoyance was as delicious as the contents of my bottle. "So…how do we get out of the Citadel?"

"We don't," Goldenblood muttered.

"Well, if you want to stick around, that's up to you. Personally, I'd take the Wasteland over this place. Not that the drinks aren't nice," I said as I settled back in the booth, taking another one. "Come on.

Eat up. Have a drink. Put that amazingly conniving mind to work."

"There's nothing to work. This place was one of Nightmare Moon's fortresses. It was designed to be impregnable, impervious, undetectable, and inescapable. The only gap in its defenses is a hole as big as your hoof carrying data cables to the real world. Beyond that, only the king can permit travel." He spoke as if addressing an idiot, which I couldn't fault him for. He'd had a bad day.

I munched some more and pursed my lips, furrowing my brow. "You know him?"

"Of him. With two hundred years, I'd convinced the program that surveillance views of the outside were somehow torment," he said with a little shrug. "An insecure leader of a doomed population unable to react to the fundamentals of survival. He's not a bad person, but he's certainly not anypony who should be in a leadership role."

I swirled the glass and took another drink. "How do you do that?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were a teacher and a politician. How do you just…summarize someone like that?" It seemed a little ridiculous.

My question made him smile. "Every teacher's a little bit of a psychologist. We have to understand students. Parents. But really… it's art. My talent is appreciating the value of people, what they can contribute…how they can best be used. I can tell pure metals from base alloys in seconds. I know their strength, their malleability." He sighed as he stared out at the stable. "I'd considered a career in engineering, but I couldn't handle the math."

"Math. Pfft. What's it good for?" I snorted and took another drink. "So what's my metal?" I asked. "What's my value?"

He opened his mouth, paused, and then said, "I'm not quite certain. You're incalculable, for now."

"I think you're lying," I murmured, then shook some more cereal into my mouth, watching him. He might have been off the mattress, but he hadn't gotten far. His eyes were still back in the machine. "Hard, isn't it?" He blinked at me. By now, I felt a nice warm buzz spreading through me. I smiled and leaned on the table, propping myself up with a hoof. "Moving forward after fucking up big time. I know that look."

He gave me that appraising gaze again. "I was played. I let myself be played."

I shrugged. “What do they say about good intentions? The road to hell is paved with them, right?” Sighing, I offered him the bottle again, and he shook his head. “Look. Let me share the biggest thing I’ve learned…There’s no going back. What’s done is done. You can kick yourself to death over the past, but the important thing is to move ahead, and learn from it. I need to stop Cognitum, Amadi, and Horizons. To do that, I need to get out of here. So how is that going to happen?”

Goldenblood closed his eyes for several minutes. I wasn’t even sure he was breathing, he sat so still. But as much as I hated waiting, I hated being stuck here even more. “The king is insecure,” he said finally. “Asking, pleading, and demanding won’t work now. If you work on his vanity for a few days, though, he should bend enough–”

That was nothing Persephone hadn’t told me. “We don’t have a few days. I need something direct and to the point. I need…woo…” I caught myself. Wow. Only a fifth of a bottle, and I was already getting tipsy.

He sighed. “There’s no way to do it faster, Blackjack. I know his type. He’ll deny you just because.”

“Come on, Goldenblood. There has to be something you have that I can use,” I said in annoyance.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. The king controls the phase talisman. He’s not going to give it to you, and he’ll likely kill me on sight if he realizes I’m free.”

Wait a minute…“What ‘talisman’?” I said, giving him an obnoxious grin. “You said something about a ‘phase talisman’?”

He was silent for several seconds, then sighed in defeat. “It’s the talisman created by Nightmare Moon to access her strongholds. And he’s not going to just give it to you.”

But it did tell me how to get out of this place. I’d believed the ability to make the gate to be a power unique to the king and that I’d therefore be screwed if I couldn’t get his help. If it was something I could borrow, beg, or steal, though…“Well, I did just save his daughter from a spectral ghost, his wife likes me, and I banged his son pretty good not too long ago. Maybe his daughter soon, too,” I said with a smirk, watching the ghoul’s blank face. “I tried asking nice. If he still won’t send us back, then I’ll have no choice but to kick his ass, take that talisman, and send us both back despite him.”

"You?" Goldenblood said skeptically. "Blackjack, I know you've overcome much, but–"

I shut him down with a look. It was the first time I'd given that look since Cognitum had torn my cutie mark away. It was the perfect blend of overconfidence and malice sprinkled with just the right amount of mad audacity, soaked masterfully in ethanol. My shooty look. "But nothing," I said with a grin. "I'm getting out of here. I'm getting back to Glory. My friends. I'm going to stop Cognitum and Amadi. I'm going to get my baby back and be the best damned mommy I can be. And do you know why?"

His eyes widened, and he shook his head ever so slightly, as if afraid that the wrong answer might set me off.

"Because I'm Security, and I think I've had one too many," I said, glancing at the bottle. Then I took one more pull and swallowed hard. "Yeah. Definitely one too many. Let's ride, Goldie."

* * *

I'm sure that there are many ways to conduct negotiations. Sit down, lay out your positions and reasons, work out what your opponent wants, and reach a compromise. Threaten or flatter to try and shift those positions. If necessary, try to force your position either through deception or…well…force. I knew this because Goldenblood spent the entire ten minute trip telling me so. That the king, for his personal faults, was more than capable of annihilating me through brute force or his own shadow magic, which would mean my overarching goals would fail. I should contact his family, work around him, and negotiate this behind closed doors. Goldenblood was just missing one important fact:

He was trying to negotiate with a fifth of whiskey.

I kicked open the doors to the dining hall, the heavy slabs of dark wood booming as they struck the walls, and strode down between two rows of tables towards the one in the back with the king and his family. Goldenblood crept after me like he couldn't believe any of this was happening. "Hey, Kingy! It's checkout time!" I shouted, pointing my spear at the monarch. "I'm leaving, now. You're sending me back to my friends."

Hades, huge and muscled and gorgeous, rose up from behind his table. "You? You dare challenge me before my whole court?!"

I narrowed my eyes, took an indolent pull off the bottle, smacked

my lips, and grinned back. “Ayep.”

The rest of his family gaped at me, while Whisper grinned in joy. “Blackjack, have you lost your mind?” Tenebra asked.

“Ayep,” I answered again. “Your daddy’s king. I get that. I don’t care. I don’t care about him, his privacy paranoia, or anything else. I. Want. Out. And I’m sick of wasting time to get it.” My eyes returned to the stallion in question. “You want to show your worthiness to be king? Send me home. Simple as that. Otherwise, I am going to kick your ass, take that talisman, and get the hell out of here. Either way, I’m leaving.”

“Yes, you are. To Tartarus,” the king said as he snapped his wings once and landed at the other end of the aisle between the rows of tables. “You think you can defeat me?”

I took another drink off the bottle, rolled it languidly in my mouth, swallowed, and grinned. “Ayep.”

“Husband, perhaps we should–” Persephone began.

“No!” He stomped his foot. “It is time for these outsiders to know their place. I have tolerated that yellow strumpet. Tolerated the debaucheries she’s introduced. Tolerated the inclusion of more outsiders. Enough is enough!”

Persephone rolled her eyes. “Perhaps we should take this to the throne room where there is more space, fewer innocent bystanders, and less furniture to break?” she finished sharply, glaring at him and then me.

The king blinked. “Oh. Yes. Of course, dear. I need my sword, anyway.” He jabbed a wingtip at me. “I will obliterate you anon!” And then he turned and started towards the door.

Tenebra, Whisper, and Stygius flew around Goldenblood and me. The ‘reformed’ Reaper grinned, and we smacked our hooves together. The king’s children, however, proved far less enthusiastic. ‘R U Crazy?!’ the batpony stallion asked.

“What are you thinking? He’ll kill you, Blackjack!” Tenebra squeaked with an edge of panic in her voice.

“Hey, Blackjack, who’s the scarred dude?” Whisper asked with a nod of her head at Goldenblood, who was keeping to the back with his eyes low.

Screwing my face up, I answered them in turn. “No.” To Tenebra, “I’m thinking I’m going to kick his royal ass till I get that talisman from him.” And then I swooped a hoof around Whisper and shoved her in front of Goldenblood. “Whisper, meet your father,

Goldenblood. Goldenblood, meet your daughter, Whisper. Enjoy!"

I'm sure that, had I not been inebriated, a much more touching reunion could have been arranged. As it was, you could really see the family resemblance in the matching expressions of complete bafflement and shock. She had his eyes. He had her mane. Both just gaped at each other as they were both broadsided with emotions that neither had been very good at dealing with. Both of them clearly didn't know if they should laugh, cry, or kill me. To preclude that last one, I trotted out of the room as quickly as my hooves could carry me, whistling a merry drinking tune as Stygius, Tenebra, and the other diners who hadn't already gone to claim seats followed.

'Her father?' Stygius's board read. He started back, but I hooked a hoof around his neck and kept him going along with the rest of the herd, which seemed to have been thrilled by my challenge.

"Yup. She was born premature. Placed in stasis 'till she was thawed out by a psychopath who needed a little bit of Fluttershy's genetic material for leverage on Goldenblood," I said as we trotted after the crowd who were filing into the throne room to watch. I turned to Tenebra. "What's your father's shadowy talent power thingy?"

"Oblivion," she answered.

I stopped in my tracks. "Seriously? *Oblivion*? What kind of power is that?! Why not just have an 'I win' power?"

"He does." Tenebra glowered at me. "And you might have asked that before you challenged him to a fight!"

I took a deep breath. "Okay. So this oblivion thingy power. How does it work?" I asked as I resumed the walk towards the doorway, the alcohol fueled anger now contesting with the possibility that I just fucked up big time.

"He casts a field of dark energy. It rips a pony apart until nothing remains, not even blood," Tenebra said flatly, then hissed. "How could you do this? I thought…" her eyes fell, and I turned and seized her, giving her the strongest hoof-curling kiss I possibly could. Maybe it was the proficiency with kissing, or possibly it was the booze breath, but either way, it floored her with a dazed expression.

Stygius now appeared positively alarmed as I nudged him along. "Now. This oblivion thingy. Is it instant?" He shook his head. "Quick as you teleporting?" A slower, more unsure shake of his head. "A second or so to go off?" He paused, thought, then gave a

tiny little nod. Okay. I could deal with that. “Has anyone ever challenged your father like this before?” He blinked in surprise, then tapped his hoof once. “Recently?” I asked. A head shake. “Before you were born?” A nod.

Okay…I gave him a hug and a brief kiss on the lips... then a firmer smooch... damn, he was a nice kisser…at the doorway to the throne room. “You’re a good pony. Thanks for helping me. Go and see to Whisper.”

I started in, but he stopped me. ‘Don’t kill my dad,’ he wrote with a worried expression. Then he erased part with a wing tip. ‘Don’t die.’

“Pfft. As if that would stop me,” I said, leaving Stygius behind. I levitated my spear and gave it a few trial swings. Hmmm…my horn glowed, and I started to shed my armor. If I was going to win this, it wasn’t going to be with fancy purple armor. I took another swig of whiskey as Hades strode out before his throne. He'd donned resplendent black gothic armor topped with a silver crown set with a huge black jewel. The whole thing looked like it belonged in a different millennium. His huge sword resembled a great black bat’s wing. There must have been somepony here with fancy magic armor-donning spells or something for him to get it all on so quickly. He launched himself into the air, huge sword clenched between special curved hooks in the vambraces on his forehooves, and stayed aloft easily. Huh, never saw that before! He had the advantage on me in size, strength, armor, weaponry, flight, and destructive magical power.

I had the advantage of being too drunk to care.

Persephone stepped between us. “A challenge has been made. The duel will be fought until surrender or a challenger is slain or incapacitated. Blackjack, what are your terms if victorious?” Persephone asked me coolly, clearly not happy with me this moment.

“I want his shadow talismany thingamajigger that will get me home,” I said. “Are there any rules? Like, no gelding?” My question made him blink. “What? I’ve only done it onc…er…twice! I think. Maybe three times…”

“I would greatly appreciate it if you didn’t,” the pale batpony said coolly. “We’re trying for a third.” Hades blushed and spluttered, and Persephone smiled and gave a small nod. “And husband? Your terms?”

The question shook him from his embarrassment. “Her life!” the

stallion said, pointing the sword at me dramatically. Persephone sighed and shook her head. She looked at me. “The terms are set. Do you agree?” I nodded. I didn’t have anything left to lose at this point. Persephone nodded and walked to the sideline. She closed her eyes, and a shimmery field of white formed a large cylinder in the middle of the throne room like a veil with the two of us inside. “Any who leave the circle of moonlight will forfeit. Begin.”

Hades wasted no time. I watched him hook the sword with both grips and launch himself at me like a comet of darkness, roaring a battle cry. Goldenblood had been right, damn it. He should have used his magic and just obliterated me, but it looked like he wanted to put on a show. The king appeared like a force of pure annihilation, the huge weapon certain to cleave me into Blackjack chunks. I’m sure plenty of ponies would find it terrifying but my drunken haze blurred all that away; I thought only one thing: ‘Goddesses, he’s slow.’

I had time to fill my mouth with whiskey and set the haft of the spear perpendicularly to block his vertical chop, raising my hooves and magic to brace the pole. I wasn’t an expert at fighting with spears, but blocking seemed simple enough. The blow bit three quarters of the way through the wooden haft, and Hades sneered at me. “You shall regret your foolish and presumpt–”

I spit my mouthful of whiskey right in his eyes. Too bad he hadn’t included a visor on that armor of his. The crown might have looked awesome, but it didn’t bring much to the fight. And as he flapped back, I snapped the spear over my knee at the cut. Then I tossed the pointy bit aside as he recovered, levitating the two-foot-long stub far more easily. Now I had a baton tipped with a nice metal cap. “Okay. Let’s dance, Kingy!”

“You outsider tart! I shall–” he began grandly, but I wasn’t going to wait around for speeches. In an instant, I was inside his reach. That sword might have been huge, ridiculously sharp, and probably magical to boot, but it was damned useless when I was this close in and repeatedly hammering a baton against his head like a drummer. He unhooked a hoof, raising it to shield his face from my strikes. “You cowardly knave–” he started to say, and then I teleported to the other side of him and smashed my baton against his head from that side. Now he couldn’t even unhook his ginormous sword. “Stop it!” he roared in pain and frustration, flying up and away from me.

Till I teleported onto his back and smashed the crown from his head. “Yer sure a talker for a fight. Yee haw!” I crowed, hitting him again.

I really should have known better. Instead of more insults calling me a coward, he launched himself straight up and smashed me into the roof. Now I really missed that armor! The booze took off a lot of the hurt, but I sure didn’t want another of those. He reared up again, and I teleported off and back to the ground.

“Enough!” he roared, and I felt something jerk inside me as a dark field started to form. It didn’t hurt…precisely…but I teleported again several feet away in time to watch the black basalt floor rip away, the field tearing the stone to rocks, the rocks to dust, and the dust to…whatever dust became when you tore that apart. Oblivion! Okay. Not– another pocket of darkness began to crackle around me.

Shit. I teleported out of it again, and once again his dark magic enveloped the floor and empty air. And again. Since losing my armor plating, teleportation had become a lot easier…but all these teleports in succession were starting to make my horn ache. He sweated with his own arcane exertions, but where my magic was gone once I’d spent it, his dark fields remained where he cast them. I was running out of places to teleport to. And worse, he swooshed around like an overgrown…well…bat! I teleported onto his back again, but this time he flipped upside down, and I scrambled to hang on, let alone attack.

Funny. This had all gone differently in my head. I’d challenge. Beat him. Get home. Why was this not happening? I fired a string of magic bullets, but all they did was beat up the back of his helmet. A half dozen rounds later and I felt like I was pushing burnout.

Damn it. Why didn’t I have a super monster horn like LittlePip? That’d be so useful right now!

Fortunately, his fancy armor had enough decorations for me to grab that I was able to cling to his back like a tick, levitating bottle and baton. Couldn’t oblivion himself, now could he? And now that I was stuck to his rump, I brought my baton around and fell back to a tried and true crotch strike! The weighted head came down…and clanged against something metal that rang like a bell! “Oh come on! Nopony ever armors that!”

“Unscrupulous strumpet! Do you think you’re the first so craven?” the inverted batpony said…and then stopped flying. We dropped between two fields of darkness, and he fell down on me like a

dropped armory. I heard several things in my chest making crunchy noises, and even with the whiskey, I felt like I'd just taken a twelve gauge buckshot blast to the chest. "Drunkards make horrible fighters."

Hades heaved himself off me, becoming airborne once more as I struggled to keep my focus. He wanted to gloat? Fine. I reached over with my magic and scooped up his crown, plopping it on my head. "There! Oblitawhatchit me now, jackass!" Ow. Talking hurt. Strike that, breathing hurt. Oh, that wasn't good.

To my shock, he didn't. I supposed he liked his crown. "You wish to be rent limb from limb? So be it." And again he went aloft as I pulled myself to my hooves and backed away amidst the patches of darkness. Why didn't he just get rid of them? It'd sure make his flying easier…unless he couldn't! Maybe these dark patches were like fire: once he lit them he couldn't just unlight them. I supposed eventually they'd go out…or he'd need a new throne room. The sword attached to his forehooves ripped down at me again and again. I tasted blood on every breath. This fight was going to be over for me soon. I needed…I…

"Aw, shit…" I muttered. This would be low. "Sorry about this."

"No apology can save you now!" he roared as he dove at me with another swing.

I sighed, raised my baton, and then flung my other weapon straight at his face. The glowing whiskey bottle arched straight and true. Of course, a bottle, even half filled with the fluid of heaven, wouldn't do much to him. It might not even break. He could have deflected it…but he wouldn't. No, he brought his sword right through the spinning glass. Time seemed to crawl a moment as it shattered into a dozen glistening shards. Glowing shards…

That I directed straight into his eyes.

The scream of agony that ripped out of him echoed through the throne room, and I dove in time to prevent him from crashing right into me. He flailed and staggered, crippled and blind. With the weapon on his hoof, he couldn't even stand up right. He launched himself into the air and crashed against the ceiling. "Go out, you blind moron," I shouted up at him. Instead, though, he crashed right back down at me as he screamed in rage, humiliation, and agony.

"Surrender! This fight is over, love!" Persephone begged.

"Father, please!" screamed Tenebra.

“No!” roared the king. “I’ll die before I surrender!”

I could have killed him by simply staying put and letting him stagger into one of his patches of oblivion. Others of the court were trying to stop him too, but he was in a frenzy, slashing wildly at all who came near. He’d left the circle in his rage and blindness; I’d won, but that was beside the point now. “Get back, everypony!” I shouted. I levitated over the pointy end of my spear as he swung his sword around, half of it being torn to pieces as it passed through a shadow field. A flash, and I was on his back as he lifted himself once more.

A half dozen thrusts with the pointy half shredded his wings, sending us both to the ground for the final time. That would have been enough for most, but he still had fight in him. I threw my forehooves around his neck and squeezed as he struggled. “Hold him!” I yelled as my ribs felt like they were exploding.

Whisper was there in an instant on his other side, grappling with him. “What do you think I am, an earth pony?” she said as she tried to keep him from plunging through a patch of black energy. Stygius and Tenebra also tried to keep him put, the batpony mare struggling with her own jerky motions.

Finally I’d had enough. My magic unhooked the clasps on his helmet, and I tore it off. Time to finish this. I raised the baton and brought it down on his head again and again. “You. Should. Have. Let. Me. Go!” I hissed with every strike. On the sixth, he finally, finally collapsed. His head was a bloody mess, but he was still breathing. I collapsed against him too, leaning back and coughing up blood. “Oh. But you can have this back,” I said, negligently lifting off the crown and tossing it at his hooves. The ring landed on edge, bouncing and rolling away from us both. I turned and smiled at Persephone. “Where’s the talisman, and the nearest doctor?”

But all the batponies weren’t looking at me. They were staring at the crown. Tenebra was down with a seizure, but Stygius and five other ponies scrambled for the rolling crown. The circlet deflected off of one pony, then another, then off a pillar, and then disappeared into a patch of black energy. I watched dully as it seemed to expand then burst in a shower of gold and gem. A stunned silence filled the air. “Uh…hello?” I asked dully. “Talisman?”

Persephone gaped at me in horror, as if recognizing me for the first time. “It was on…the crown.”

…
Oh…
"So…what happens now?" I asked, the adrenaline wearing off and…oh... wow... gravity was heavy... I struggled to concentrate as I peered blearily around at the assembled batponies. Their looks of profound bafflement answered me. "Oh, shit…" I muttered.
Suddenly, everything in the room inverted color, and I stared around in bewilderment as I struggled to breathe with the broken ribs. A moment later, the room returned to normal. One by one, the fields of energy dissipated, and nopony dared move. Then I heard it.
Rain. Rain on the roof. I turned my eyes to the stained glass windows, beholding them as faintly lit. "Back. I'm back," I said as I stood and started towards the door. "I'll be right there, Glory…" I muttered with a smile…and then everything went black.

* * *

It would have been nice to come out of unconsciousness in a nice warm bed with Glory snuggled up on one side of me and P-21 spooning on the other. Nice, but unrealistic. So when I woke up in a bed sans snuggles and spoons, I at least took solace in the facts that the bed was warm, the sheets were clean, and the sound of rain told me that I was home... or at least back in the normal world. And I was hungry again! Really, the hungover feeling really didn't bother me all that much. Yay for nausea.
Unfortunately, the alcohol I'd drunk was demanding to be let out, so I had to leave the comfy infirmary bed for the bathroom. The light coming through the windows was dim enough to be only a *small* knife through my head, fortunately. Soreness. Tiredness. Wonderful fatigue. I felt a little wobbly, but my mouth was full of the aftertaste of healing potion; I'd be fine-ish. If my head didn't explode in the next ten minutes. After using the facilities, I stood in the bathroom doorway and stretched. It felt odd; I'd expected… well…more of being a patient. This room was a dozen beds surrounding a large cart loaded with healing potions and stacks of bandages in cardboard boxes marked with the Stable-Tec logo.
If I had been stuck in bed, though, I'd have had plenty of company. King Hades lay on the opposite side of the circular room with his eyes and wings bandaged, and the bald and bandaged Charm watched me from her own bed. Tenebra and Stygius hovered

around the king. The other beds were all occupied with batponies wrapped up in strips of gauze. Was this really the most emergency care they had? I'd left Charm in the care of a…well…I'd assumed he was a nurse. No doctors? Even Stable 99 had had more medically trained personnel than this!

"You're a cunt, Blackjack," Whisper said sourly from a chair beside the bathroom door, startling me so much I half fell over.

Steadying myself, I turned to face the angry yellow mare. "So Deus said... many... many times," I groaned, rubbing my head. "What'd I do?" I asked, blinking.

She growled, "You introduced me to my dad, that's what! Fuck." Oh. Yeah. I did do that, didn't I? Her blue eyes were troubled, and she glared off to the side. "I thought he was dead."

"Sorry. Lots of folks did," I replied. Public immolations via dragonfire left that impression. I narrowed my eyes as I peered at her. "You're not going to try and fuck him too, right?"

"Fuck you," she growled, running a wing through her mane. "I don't even know what the fuck to think about this. Fuck me."

"Clear it with Glory first," I said flippantly and received a hoof to the shoulder. Hard. "Ow... seriously though, how are you two doing?"

"How am I doing? How do you think I'm doing?" she said crossly. "Why do you have a talent for fucking up the lives of everypony you run into?" She thumped her head against the wall and then gave a little half smirk. "You fucking shredded Hades's eyes. Fuck. I knew you were going to fuck his shit up. Now I don't know what's going to happen to things here."

"Well, I had to do what I had to. Not like I wanted to," I muttered, my head throbbing.

"Well, you excel at fucking things up," she said, returning to smoldering resentment.

Hey, that wasn't fair. "Most of the ponies I meet have fucked-up lives already. Not my fault if I'm a catalyst for what's already there," I countered, and to my surprise, she smiled. "What?"

"Nothing. Just expected you to say you were sorry or some shit like that," she said as she leaned back in the chair. "It's…fuck. I don't know. Sanguine was my father, or as close as I had to one, and he treated me like I was…I don't know…a specimen. I knew he wanted his family back, but…I just assumed I'd be a part of it." She smiled over at Stygius. "Then I met a good stallion, and now I'm doing all I

can to start a family of my own." And then she glared at me. "And then you throw my real father in my face without even a warning. And I missed the fight!"

"To be fair, I was drunk. I'm sort of a cunt when I'm drunk," I said, staggering back to the bed and contemplating a few more hours… meh…save the world, or sleep? Damn it. I looked across at the king and his family. Oh, look: an easy segue! "How is he?"

"Do I look like a doctor?" she said sourly, but then answered, "Probably blind. They had to pick all the shards of glass out of his sockets before using the healing potions. Things had dust on 'em. None of these batponies had a medical cutie mark, it seems. They just popped a few boxes of healing potions out of the stable. Stygius went to Meatlocker for a dose of Hydra, but by the time he got back…" she shook her head.

Damn. "And how's Charm doing?" I asked, nodding to the still, bandaged filly.

"Again, do you see a M.o.P. mark on my ass?"

"Almost... " I grinned, examining her flank closely. Her eyes narrowed angrily.

"You are a cunt," she said, smacking me with a hoof and– ow. Head. Body sliding... I took a seat on the floor. She smirked down at me, then turned back to Charm. "Anyway, I don't know. She's hurt and confused. Again, like most people you come in contact with," Whisper growled, looking over at the filly. "They gave her a healing potion, as that, as I may have mentioned, is the beginning and end of their medical skills. Except for wrapping ponies in bandages, and they're not very good at *that*."

The Collegiate would be better able to help Charm. I needed to see what had happened to them…uuuuugh…I hissed softly through my teeth; Charm had given up a lot to save me. I owed her. But *then* Glory! Nothing but Glory. And smooching Glory! Nothing else 'till that. No sir! A lot of things would have to happen *after* I saw Glory.

The yellow pegasus smirked as if she was reading my mind. She rocked forward out of the chair and stepped towards me. "If you're going to get back to Glory, you'd better go soon. Dad's staying here till we've talked some more."

"I need–" I started to say when her hoof came around and smacked me upside the head. My dehydrated brain suddenly reminded me of the fun of hangovers.

"Right now, I don't give a fuck what you need. When we're done

talking, I'll bring him to you. You and he can do the whole 'preventing Horizons from blowing up' thing. I just wanted to let you know that you need to get out of here before we're attacked again."

"Attacked? By who?" I asked in bafflement.

"The Brood, the Harbingers, and a few dumb scavs who thought discovering Black Pony Mountain is actually Nightmare Citadel meant good looting grounds. Persephone and I are handling the defense."

"Black…" I blinked. "Is that why the mountain…" I rubbed my forehead with a hoof as I sat back.

"Yeah. That great big black rock on the edge of the city? It was this castle. A placeholder, or something like that. Now that the talisman's gone poof, the castle's back. As you might imagine, it's drawing a lot of fucking attention all of a sudden."

That must have been a doozy of an enchantment, but now thinking back there had to be something special about the mountain. I immediately trotted to one of the clinic's windows and stared out – oh damn, light sucked! – at a rainy…morning? Afternoon? My sense of time was all bonkers without a PipBuck. I looked out at the Core several miles distant. Hard to think that I'd been there just hours ago. "Were you able to repel them?" I asked.

"Most of these ponies may be inbred, but they can still fight. Sort of. Half of them practically shit themselves when they saw the sky for the first time. Tenebra managed to knock one of the enemies out before going all spasmy. That's basically her version of a victory dance. I'll give her caps for having the ovaries, but her bad wiring's gonna get her killed," Whisper said with what might actually have been concern. "The Brood were the only ones that were difficult. Those Harbingers seemed to think all they had to do was waltz through the front door. Dumbasses," she snorted.

"Flyers? The Brood can't…." I started to say, then guessed, "Cyberpony wings?" How could they have gotten the design? It hadn't been accessed until Shadowbolt Tower!

"Bingo," she said sourly. "And they've got zebra unicorn ones, too, doing magic. If they start showing up half dragon…" she trailed off and shook her head. "Anyway, you should get out now while you can."

Great. I agreed. "Cyber zebra unicorns…" I frowned, something niggling in my mind. "Are they all mares?"

"The three I saw were."
"And did they look identical?"
"Yeaaah... Why?" she asked with a scowl of bafflement. "You know them?"
I scowled. Cyber zebra unicorns... I really…really wanted to see Morning Glory again, but if I was right…"I think I might."

* * *

Whisper and Tenebra got us clear of the Citadel, flying Charm and me ponyback through the rain; fortunately, none of us were struck by the lightning flashing in the roiling clouds above. As we flew, I looked back at the majestic gothic castle rising up on the edge of the city. Its spires and minarets suggested it had never been intended to be attacked; after all, how could it be, hidden in the shadow world? Under siege, the Harbingers attacking from the west and the Brood from the east, it was already showing some damage. The number of little sporadic flashes and distant crackles suggested how bad the fighting was, but at the moment neither side appeared to have an advantage.
The pegasus and batpony set us down just north of the Skyport on Celestia Boulevard, in front of the lingerie shop my friends and I had sheltered in so long ago. "Be careful. You've been gone for three months. There's no telling what's happened in the meantime," Whisper warned.
"Don't worry. I'm going to get help for Charm, then get straight to Glory," I said, omitting mention of the short stop I'd have to make.
"You think maybe she's better this way?" Whisper asked, gesturing to the filly now slung over my back underneath a black cloak to keep the rain off.
"I think that that doesn't matter," I said firmly. "She helped me. She gets helped. If that turns her back into a bitch…well…not like I don't have experience dealing with those, right?"
"Are you trying to tell me something?" she asked with a sharp grin, then laughed. "It's your head, either way."
"Blackjack, I…" Tenebra began, then averted her eyes as she flushed and pawed at the mud with a hoof.
"I'll ask Glory. See what she says," I told her brightly.
"Perverts," Whisper snorted, rolling her eyes. "Come on. Let's get back. I want to hit the next wave from behind and really fuck their

shit up." She smiled at me. "Take care of yourself, Blackjack."

I adjusted my purple armor and sword – really, a baton was more my thing where melee weapons were concerned, but if I was lucky, I'd find somepony I could trade the sword to for a gun – and checked Charm one last time, then teleported straight to the Collegiate.

In a flash, I appeared at the gates, scaring the piss out of a guard. "See? That wasn't so b–" I started to say, over my shoulder, and then I realized that I was alone. "Oh shit!" I teleported back to the filly sprawled and wet on the road. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

"Ow," was all she muttered as I levitated her back onto my back and tried to teleport again…and again she fell with a shriek. At least this time I caught her before she landed in the mud.

Teleporting with another pony was…a whole lot trickier when I wasn't falling to my death. I could take myself no problem now, but teleporting somepony else just…didn't happen. Six times I tried to teleport with Charm, and six times I failed. Charm, for her part, was amazingly patient. She didn't scowl, or make sarcastic remarks… or…much of anything. And so I fell back to my old tried and true method: walking. However, lacking cyber limbs and mechanical endurance, plus having to carry the filly…well…I found myself missing my old clanking limbs.

As we skirted the edge of the river, I kept my eyes open for raiders, gangers, ghouls, or giant talking frogs. Instead, there was nothing. The murky waters were still and empty. I wasn't exactly shooting sparks into the air, but at the very least I thought a suicidal bloatsprite might make a run at me. Instead, the only life I saw were some maggots wiggling furiously along some sopping wet boards…

Away from the Core.

I stood up and stared at the towers. It looked less like a city than ever. The soaring structures were now so heavily cabled together that it appeared as if giant spiders had moved in and webbed up the place. A glaring bolt of lightning struck the towers, and I watched it crackle down the sides. *Just wait*, I thought furiously. *Just wait.*

We reached the front gates of the settlement built on top of the college, without the element of surprise, and the agitated-looking guardponies brandished their weapons, made me halt, and demanded that I identify myself and state my business with the

Collegiate.

"Blackjack. Need to talk to Triage and Professor Zodiac, and maybe Sagittarius if he's around," I said crossly. "I've also got a filly who needs to use her miraculous healing machine."

"Oh Celestia…get the fuck out of here! I'm not dealing with more of this shit," the guard shouted, not in fear or anger but in… annoyance.

"Uh, maybe you didn't hear me. I'm Security. I need to talk to Triage. Right now," I said as I approached the gate guards.

"Right. And I'm the Lightbringer," drawled the earth pony guard, a stallion to boot. "Go piss off."

"I've got a kid who's hurt!" I snapped. "You guys do healing, last I checked!" I shifted the cloak enough so they could see the filly beneath.

The two looked at the filly sourly. "You got caps? The machine's not cheap," a stallion said.

My jaw nearly hit the mud. Why no, actually, now that he mentioned it. "This is Charm, Grace's sister. I'm sure she'll cover the cost."

"Right. I gotta remember that line," the other said with a smirk. "I'm not going to pay for it, but I'm Big Daddy's second bastard twice removed. I'm sure he'll cover it."

"Get lost," laughed the first. "Take your kid to Meatlocker."

I couldn't believe this. How many black-and-red-maned white unicorns were there? I was on the verge of putting a magic bullet into both of their asses when a green unicorn stallion trotted up and saved me from doing something probably pretty stupid. Sagittarius didn't seem too happy either, though, what with the rain and all soaking his golden mane and goatee.

"What's going on here?" he asked, his yellow eyes sweeping over me.

"This is Security. She's broke, but wants us to run the machine on account she's carrying a member of the Society," one stallion said so obnoxiously it set my teeth on edge.

Sagittarius stared skeptically at me. "I'm afraid that, even if you were Security, the fact is that even she has to pay for services here."

I nearly choked. Seriously? My mind raced and latched on something to barter. "I'm wearing authentic armor from the period of Nightmare Moon. Even if you can't use it, the fact is that someone will be willing to buy it."

His eyes swept over my barding and he twisted his lips. “Mmmm. Maybe. I’d feel better if Triage were here to make that call. She’ll have my tail off we run up the machine for anything less than a thousand caps.”

“Triage isn’t here?” My ears folded back. “She’s always here!”

“Yeah. She was called to a big meeting at the Society. By Security. Imagine that.” The guard sneered at me, and I felt my confidence waver. If nopony believed who I was... if Glory and P-21 didn’t believe…

No. Don’t think about that now. “Look. I’m Security, and she needs your help. There has to be something we can work out,” I said, trying my best to keep my fear in check and stay reasonable.

Sagittarius regarded me for several desperate seconds, and then the green stallion gave a small shrug. “Well, I don’t think you’re going to cause trouble if you’re giving up your barding.”

“I’ll throw in the sword, too. Matching set,” I said with a winning smile.

He finally nodded. “Deal. This way.” He led me into the quad, and I saw the damage that Cognitum had wrought. Two of the academic buildings were gone, the first blasted to its foundations and the second a scorched wreck. Fortunately, neither of them were the medical school or the observatory. “Sorry if we’re less than hospitable. We were hit by an attack recently. Incinerated a lot of good ponies.”

“Are Capricorn and Pisces okay?” I asked with a worried frown, getting a curious look from him in return.

“Yes. They were on a job,” he said as he walked up the steps. There was a large chalkboard next to them; ‘Modifications’ and ‘Augmentations’ were written at the top with columns of names and prices beneath. Brain augmentation for only two thousand caps? Heart modification for fifteen hundred? “Cancer was vaporized,” Sagittarius continued. “Libra had a wall fall on her.” He shook his head. “You know, there was a time I thought we might have made Security a Zodiac, but Big Daddy declared her a Reaper first. Pity.”

“I am Security,” I said flatly as we stepped inside and I doffed the cloak, passed him Charm, and removed the armor. “Are you seriously telling me you don’t recognize me, Sagittarius?”

He rolled his eyes with a long-suffering sigh as he took my belongings and the filly. “Yes. You are a very good Security. You got the mane and coat down perfectly. Bravo.” He pointed off to the

side. “You can wait down there in room 104, if you like. We’ll put her in and see what the machine can do.”

I nodded, feeling quite shaken. How could he not see who I was? I turned and walked slowly down the hall to the room he’d indicated; it’d been made into a combination lounge, rec room, and café. My stomach growled as I was hit by the smell of fried hay, but I didn’t have a single cap–

My thoughts stopped as I saw her. Dusky gray hide and wings… bright purple mane…Dashite cutie mark. I walked towards her as if in a dream. The universe had finally, finally thrown me a bone. Of course Morning Glory would be back here. She was a super smart medical pony. Why shouldn’t she be here? I didn’t pay any attention to anything but her as I raced over. She turned her head in surprise as I threw my hooves around her and kissed her so hard I thought my horn would burst. It was…

Wait. That’s not a mare’s tongue.

I broke away and goggled at the gray effeminate stallion I had my hooves around. “Oh, don’t stop there!” he begged with a lazy grin. “I live for moments like this.”

“Habazahaaaaa…” I shrank away, feeling the last fuses in my brain going. Had breaking the talisman sent me to some bizzaro Wasteland? “You’re not Morning Glory…”

Then I looked at the mare he’d been talking too. A unicorn. White. Black-and-red-striped mane. Card cutie mark, though she had a different suit, hearts, and was about ten years older and twenty pounds heavier than me…and with a much more…substantial horn. She wore blue combat armor with ‘Security’ written on it. “He does make an awesome Glory, though. Can’t blame you,” the armored Security said.

Two ponies impersonating me? And a *stallion* impersonating Glory?! I felt such rage I wanted to jump into S.A.T.S. and blow them both away…but I didn’t have a PipBuck anymore. “What… why…how could you…”

The male Morning Glory patted my shoulder with a wing. “Now hun. You look fine. I mean you got all the basics done right. You just need to get some barding. Leather maybe. Some leg braces. A shotgun. Oh! An eyepatch, too. Then you’d be a fine Security.”

“I wanted to be Velvet and him Calamity…” the armored Blackjack said with a pout.

“Not on your life! That twang, ugh!” He stretched out his wings,

and I saw the undersides of them had patches of light blue.
"Besides, gray and purple are much nicer, don't you think?"
"I always thought so," I whispered. I stared around the lobby and saw another Security watching me. Her legs were covered in some kind of faux cybernetics, armor leggings made to look like they were the real thing. "You're…actors?"
"Heroes," male Glory said with a pat of his wing. "Isn't that why you dressed up like Security?"
"I am Blackjack," I said in a daze.
"Oh! You did your homework! That is her real name. Brave!" He clapped his hooves, then sighed, rolling his eyes. "Seriously though, Darling, your peepers are all wrong for it. I mean, Security's eyes are supposed to glow. They've always glowed. But some mares won't get their eyes done," he said with a sharp look at the armored Security next to him.
"Hey! Don't look at me," she said sharply. "Velvet Remedy's eyes don't, and she's who I *wanted* to do. I'd go with the Lightbringer, but no one's one hundred percent sure what she looks like. Gray and brown. Green and brown? Who can say?"
I could, but would anypony believe me? "You're too big anyway. She's tiny," I murmured.
"Well, so's Security's horn, but there's no way I'm getting a reduction, either," she said. "Inspiring the Wasteland to do better is one thing. Taking a belt sander to my horn is another."
I swayed and sat down hard. "It's compact…" I murmured.
The pegasus patted me again. "Anyway, if you're going to make a serious run for playing Security, and who can blame you, use a cutie mark decal." He nodded to armored Blackjack, and she rolled her eyes and levitated over a small box. Inside was a decal of Velvet Remedy's nightingale cutie mark and a small can like a dash inhaler. "Just get one of Blackjack's cutie mark, spray it on your flank, and voila! Get some old stable barding and you could be Security, fresh from the stable!" he said in a breathless voice.
"Just ignore him. He takes this thing way too seriously," the armored Security said with a small smile, earning a very Glory-like glower from the pegasus. "He was a soldier, defected at Tenpony, we became friends, and since then we've been trying to live up to the examples of the heroes. Saw some other ponies dressing up as the Lightbringer's friends and thought we could do it too. Half the time, it works. Half the time we get shot at, but they'd shoot at us

anyway. Raiders, ugh…."

"Security, Morning Glory, and P-21 are all very popular out east, anyway. And this way I get to look fabulous!" he crooned. "And just the other day we saw a Lacunae that was just perfect."

"That was a real alicorn, you idiot," Armored Security said flatly.

"And she was perfect," he retorted with a little pout.

"Honestly, Aero... " she said as she covered her face with a hoof. I staggered away, leaving the two to argue about if 'being an alicorn' counted as a costume or not. I got out into the hall, my mind racing. Multiple Blackjacks running around the Hoof. I'd assumed Cognitum, in my old body, would be the only one I'd have to deal with. But if there were two impersonators here, how many were at Megamart? Or the Society? Or Chapel?

Suddenly, I struggled not to teleport away then and there. I had something I needed to do here. And since Sagittarius obviously thought I was another fake, I couldn't ask for his help. If Triage had been here, I might have been able to prove to her that I was me, but she wasn't. I'd have to do this alone.

I walked back out into the rain and looked across at the observatory dome. There were guards stationed out in front. I wouldn't even try and talk my way past them. I simply got close, slipped out of sight around a corner, and teleported into the observatory foyer. The guards didn't even glance behind them at the noise as I trotted to the side and searched for the entrance to the projection room.

Inside, there was the collection of parts on concentric shelves I'd seen before, with one addition. A robot floated around, similar to the Mr. Gutsy models but with a large clear dome holding a brain in fluid. Two flat panels showed eyes, and a half dozen legs dangled around a levitation talisman. Off to the side, at a table between the observatory wall and the outermost ring of shelves, worked a young pink unicorn mare, Virgo I thought her name was, the one who had ambushed me a lifetime ago outside Miramare.

Now or never. I didn't have a gun or even that fancy armor. All I had was my magic and whatever I could improvise. A smarter pony would have gone after Triage. Maybe tried to convince Sagittarius. Come back later…except…Except after talking to those two, I needed this. I had to show that I was the real Security, not those fakes. Not Cognitum.

I looked over the racks and found what I needed. Good thing about

a workshop was all the useful things lying around. I crept along, much quieter without medical braces, heavy barding, or steel limbs, moving around to where Virgo was working with a half dozen partially-disassembled PipBucks. They weren't as sleek as the black Shadowbolt one, but still, PipBucks! Ooooh, and a broadcaster!

No no no! I'd never get to Glory at this rate. First things first. I reached around and grabbed Virgo while shoving a wad of dirty rags into her mouth, then tied the gag in place with duct tape as she squirmed. "Don't make me hurt you," I whispered in her ear, ashamed of the cowardly threat, but I needed her. Fortunately, she stilled. A blindfold would hinder her magic, I hoped. One tube of Wonderglue later, and all four of her hooves were secured to the floor. Professor Zodiac was working on the far side of the room. I whispered softly, "I'm Security. The real one you tried to trap with a box of badly-named 'deadly' neurotoxin that would put me to sleep. I need you to listen. Just sit tight."

She didn't squeal or squirm, just stilled and then gave a little bob, which I was pretty sure was a nod.

Then I look a deep breath, walked slowly out of the rings of racks, and said loudly, "You were the spy. And you're still a spy."

Professor Zodiac slowly turned, her two eye panels focusing on me and widening in shock. "Blackjack? I…how did you get here?"

There. The last bit of confirmation I needed. "You were a spy during the war. The zebras' inside mare in the Projects," I said as I trotted towards her. "You were the one that Goldenblood put Fluttershy in contact with."

The synthetic voice became more amused. "Fluttershy so wanted to give the zebras megaspells, poor dear. Goldenblood wanted them so they could be weaponized early. How could you possibly think I'm a spy?"

"My old eyes," I said, pointing at my sockets with a hoof. "Or more precisely, your eyes. I don't know when you had them replaced, but I'm guessing it was early on in the war. You had a transmitter set up so whatever you saw, they saw. I'm guessing you worked with Trueblood?"

"He was positively giddy to apply megaspells to his chimera research. The eye transmitted to a receiver wired into my optic center, bypassing the need for threading a wire along a scarred-up nerve canal. It also transmitted to several select terminals," she said as she narrowed her eyes at me. "I didn't need to copy. I simply

needed to look."

"And you were the spy Zecora was supposed to flush out," I said as I kept my eyes on her. For all I knew, she'd had a radio in the robot and had sent for help. I needed to keep her talking.

"Zecora?" She blinked, and then her eyes widened. "Oh my. I'd nearly forgotten. Yes. Zecora was working with me to get the power armor designs! Cybernetics were so invasive back then. Many zebra attempts turned out like Deus. It seems so many ponies have problems with augmentation…" She shook her chassis. "So Zecora was a double agent? I'm shocked. I was certain she'd come to her senses, too."

"Why?" I asked with a frown. "You were half pony, too."

"Because zebras are not half the hypocrites that ponies are, that's why!" she snapped back. "Ponies are good, wonderful, nice people, right? But give them one excuse and they will turn on an outsider. Marginalize us. Segregate us. Violate us. I was a university professor, and I was defiled by ponies. What horrors can you imagine were foisted on zebras who had called Equestria our home for generations? Turning on the Ministries was *easy*."

That was the easy part. "Except you never stopped being a spy, did you? Even two hundred years later, you're working for others. Cognitum and the Legate."

Professor Zodiac said nothing for several seconds. "My my my. You actually worked it out. I didn't think you would."

"I'm not a smart pony, but I get there eventually," I said as I looked at her. "You knew about EC-1101, and about Steelpony. Is that why you were so willing to give up your eyes to me?"

"Indeed. I knew you were special. You evaded and destroyed Deus, and you were unthreading Goldenblood's little rat's nest of secrets. Cognitum immediately started to put out feelers for getting an improved body, and she knew I was involved. I put her in touch with the Legate, and voila. Match made in heaven," she said gleefully.

"Why? What do you get out of it? You're a brain in a jar," I scoffed.

"Oh, still not there yet?" Professor Zodiac said in mocking sympathy. "Well, first of all, I get the Core, regardless of who actually wins. I'll be able to see the ultimate cyberization technology realized. I will be able to restore an honest and humble Equestria. One that will never see a mare violated by the horrible actions of an ignorant populace." The eyes turned sly. "There're

others benefits too, if you think harder about it."

"Right. Hurrah for you," I said evenly. I saw no reasons to tell her about the Eater and the star spirit Cognitum was going to deliver to it. "I want to see what my old body is up to right now."

"You... aren't here to stop me?" she asked in a baffled note.

"You want to serve the Legate, more power to you. I want my body back," I replied flatly.

"Oh?" Zodiac floated closer, her arms coming up and clacking in the air. "It would be much simpler just to augment the body you have."

Oh no, we weren't going to be playing that. I smacked her pincers aside. "I want my old body back. I want my baby back. And I want to make that bitch pay for what she did to me and my friends." I stared at her screens. "Certainly you can understand that?"

She didn't answer for several seconds. "I suppose," she said evenly.

One of her eye screens crackled, and I saw the view of the 'throne room' of the Society. I'd stood there myself, what felt like half a life ago. In my eye, I could see a multitude of ponies I knew: Big Daddy, Triage, Bottlecap, Charity, and the ghoul mayor Windclop. In front of them were Grace and Splendid, both wearing carefully offended masks. In the periphery, I could see Glory far off to the left beside P-21 and Scotch Tape. I made out a few of Rampage's spikes on the right side. Other ponies I could make out were Finders, Paladin Stronghoof, and several other well-dressed ponies in the back.

"... glad to remind you that only in unity can we stand against this threat. The zebras have begun their final assault. In every corner of the Hoof, they have begun a slow advance in to our territory. The Harbingers will require all your assistance in repelling and annihilating this dire threat to Equestria," Cognitum said calmly, making the word 'our' sound remarkably like 'my'. "As one, we have the strength of unity to end this threat and unite into a glorious future!"

There were no cheers to this. Just dozens of blank stares and low mutters. "You think we're just going to march on your say-so?" Big Daddy asked, the old stallion glaring Cognitum. "No one tells the Reapers what to do, Blackjack. Not even another Reaper."

Suddenly, two crimson beams lanced out and struck Big Daddy in the chest. The assembled ponies cried out, falling back as the old stallion roared and launched himself at Cognitum. Rampage dashed into his path, hooves spread wide. The armored mare had no

chance of stopping him, but she did slow him down enough for a second set to blast into him. Smoking, he fell back and was shot a third time. “You will find I am far more than a mere Reaper,” Cognitum said coldly, then shot a fourth pair of beams. Astonishingly, he didn’t disintegrate, and Cognitum advanced on him.

“Stop!” P-21 shouted, running over to stand over Big Daddy’s smoking body. He glared up at me. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Blackjack?” I saw the anger and confusion in my friend’s features. I could imagine Cognitum calculating whether it was advantageous to kill one of my friends as a show of power or not. *Go for not*, I prayed softly.

“The Remnant are attacking us, P-21. This is no time for the petty bickering and strife that defined the past. We must look to the future and our self-defense,” Cognitum replied.

“Has anyone even tried talking to them?” Glory asked loudly, walking over the stand next to him. “The zebra refugees from the Remnant have no clue about these attacks. If anything, they’ve been attacked too. We haven’t heard from Lancer yet. Sekashi and he must have some idea why they’re attacking suddenly for no reason.”

“They’re attacking us because they hate us. It’s as simple as that,” Cognitum said coldly. “The Legate has made his interests abundantly clear. He wishes to annihilate us all!” If only she knew. “The Harbingers are keeping them at bay for the moment, but if they are to keep up the defense, we must be united under one leader.”

“But why you, Blackjack? You’ve never wanted to lead anypony before. We could work as a war council. Each group can have a seat and we can work out the best way to resolve this,” Glory asked, reasonably. An equitable share of power. Great idea.

“That’s a terrible idea,” Cognitum scoffed. “You'd let us be paralyzed by indecision and bickering? Only united under one ruler can things be accomplished. I’m the only one that has demonstrated the requisite strength and determination. And under me, the Legate will be crushed. Under me, Hoofington will rise!”

Glory glared long and hard into my face. “Blackjack, what’s happened to you? Since you got back... I don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

“You’d be wise to drop this imper–” Cognitum began when Rampage cleared her throat loudly, drawing her eye. Rampage

scowled at her and gave a tiny little shake of her head. Cognitum looked back at Glory, then said in a calmer voice, “Dear Glory, if we hadn’t had to struggle with the divisions of Thunderhead, the city might have been saved. Think of how many died needlessly because of strife and conflict. Think of how many might yet die if we continue to argue among ourselves. Think of the children,” she said with a wave of her hoof at Charity and Scotch Tape.

“The *children* are adding a five percent sanctimony fee, so thank you for your thought,” Charity snapped back.

“The fact is that we don’t have a choice,” Rampage said loudly. “The Remnant surround the city on all sides, and they’re attacking. *Why* doesn’t matter. What does matter is that they are, and we have to stop them. No different than two hundred years ago.”

“And look how well that ended,” Glory retorted.

“Enough,” Cognitum said with dripping disgust. “I’ve learned the zebras have a superweapon on the moon. While you fight, I shall go and disable it. Once it is destroyed, the Core shall be reborn, and with it, all of Equestria! You’d all be wise to think on your future in it,” she said as she walked out, obviously going around instead of over the groaning Big Daddy only because Glory and P-21 were in her way.

The image crackled out, and I was staring into an enormous eye. “You can let me go now,” Professor Zodiac said flatly, and I realized that, about the time Cognitum’d begun threatening Glory, I’d grabbed the screen between my fetlocks, squeezing so hard my legs ached. I released the screen, backing away from the machine. The eyes looked coolly at me. “As you can see, it’s rather easy to learn all kinds of special things when you can see through important eyes and ears.”

I stared at her for several seconds, weighing a decision I didn’t want to make. Being a spy two centuries ago was one thing. Working for the Legate now, even if she didn’t know about Amadi’s true motives, was another matter. “So now you make implants that let you spy through eyes and ears. But that’s not their only special feature, is it?” The professor fell silent, but I could almost hear her mind whirring. Or maybe that was some pump in her inequine chassis; who knew? “When I was in Thunderhead, Lighthooves used a command to murder all the cyberponies under his command. ‘Snapped Strings’, or something like that.”

“I... I have no idea what you... why... ” she stammered. For a spy,

she was a bad liar; I supposed she was more into peeking than fibbing. “Lighthooves must have… ”

“Lighthooves was a director. The Enclave didn’t have cyberization until I came along and gave it to them.” By accident, but still… “They were working entirely off Steelpony. Your designs.” I readied myself. “So, I’m curious… those augmentations you’re selling so cheaply…Would they happen to have a similar response to certain secret words?”

The mechanical limb snapped out, shockingly fast, grabbing me by the throat and lifting me off my hooves. “Oh, Blackjack. Why’d you have to get smart?” she asked as she brought the limb with the sawblade to my gut.

By ‘why’ I had my focus, and by ‘smart’ I had a magic bullet aimed right at her dome. The impact cracked the seal where dome met metal, and an acrid fluid that vaguely reminded me of pickle juice began to spurt out. If I’d had S.A.T.S., I could have put four more in the same spot, but the second shot was off and ripped a hole in her metal plating.

Then her saw cut into my side. It wasn’t a big blade, just a small surgical saw. Still, it had more than enough bite to split hide and then chew into a rib. I was just thankful the angle of the cut made slicing my throat impractical. Needless to say, the focus I needed to teleport away was lost almost instantly; I wasn’t done yet, though. I raised my hooves and smashed them against the cracked seal, and the purple trickle became a deluge. The robot began to jerk erratically as the brain sank to the bottom of the case. One more hit and the dome came loose and flew off, the brain flopping out on the ground. The robot screamed and then fell prone, the blade in my side stilling.

“Oh that hurts. That really hurts,” I muttered as I withdrew my neck from the twitching metal claw, then pulled free of the saw. “Oh, fuck!” I screamed, the blazing agony gradually dropping to a fiery pain that throbbed in time to my racing pulse. “Healing magic. Make it a frigging priority to learn healing magic!” I muttered. The wound wasn’t exactly deep, but it was still hurting and bleeding pretty freely.

I walked away from the professor, towards the bound and hidden Virgo, but slowed. Something was off. I slowly scanned the room, lacking any EFS to help me out. Nothing… yet I couldn’t help but think something was wrong. That’d been too damned eas–

Something invisible slammed me off my hooves, and I staggered back into a rack of spare parts. I didn't think, I simply threw a wave of every last little part I could in the direction I'd come and watched them bounce off a pony-sized shape. Then my brain registered that my cut ribs had become broken ribs and that blood loss was starting to make me lightheaded. "Of course. Cognitum transferred my mind. Why not yours?" I said as I kept throwing wads of loose screws, nails, and pieces of broken metal in the direction of the distortion.

The invisibility dropped, and a cyberunicorn appeared. Silver Stripe had taken quite a page from my own augmentations. Black armor in place of hide. Red cybernetic eyes. If it weren't for a striped motif of glossy and matte black, she'd be indistinguishable from a pony. "I swear," she said, "Cognitum should die a hundred deaths for not killing you immediately."

I sent a magic bullet at her head, but it didn't do much beyond scoring the armor. Her magic bullet, on the other hoof, nearly blasted me off my hooves and informed me that, in addition to the hole in my side, I was now looking at a few more broken bones. Instinct recommended curling up and crying. Instead, I reached out and pulled myself through a gap in a shelf, pushing it back at her as she slowly advanced. "I have to admit, I really was looking forward to that ace in the hole. Cognitum is sure that the masses will buy her dog and pony show, but I know better. Two hundred plus years has taught me that." She easily shoved the shelves over, showering me in metal parts and scrap as I continued my backwards scramble through the bottom gap of the next shelf. Her magic tossed it aside. "You kill anyone and everyone who might even think of disobeying you, and then... then... you kill a few more just to be safe. Only when you have absolute and utter control do you let them live."

My back hit the rear wall of the planetarium. She casually knocked the last shelf aside, smirking down at me. "Time to fix her mistake."

Then she exploded. Well, not all of her. Just everything from horn to shoulders. Her head evaporated in a directed blast that continued into and through the wall above my head. "Y'hal talsh ta much," a stallion drawled in a muddled voice from the doorway. A heavily bandaged brown pegasus in a floppy black hat pointed the largest rifle in existence at where the cyber unicorn's torso still stood. He limped closer, and I took in the heavy bandages covering the right side of his body and his left wing.

“Calamity! What did you just do?” a mare said from the door behind him as he slumped under the gun’s tremendous weight. The charcoal gray Velvet Remedy entered and stared at the devastation, then at the cyberpony body, then at me. To her credit, she immediately rushed to my side and applied her wonderful, soothing healing magic. Oh, it was like fresh strawberries. “I thought we talked about talking first, shooting later.”

“Pretty shure tha’ thing... twern’t feelin’ mighty talky,” he said as he sat down, his words slightly slurred, but I was picking out what was accent and what was the bandages covering him. “Saw it’d killed the professor. This filly was next,” he said as he started to break down the gun with a deft wing and hoof. Even clearly in pain, his skill with the gun’s mechanics was something to see. I’d be hard pressed to do so half as fast with my horn.

“Thanks, Velvet,” I said, certain that this had to be the real pair and not some fans. From the uncertain fold of her ears and the sigh that followed, I doubted they felt the same.

“I know imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but you really should be yourself, young lady. I know that Blackjack would want it that way.” Her maternal tone so reminded me of Glory that my chest ached.

“I know it because I am Blackjack,” I said as I trotted over to Virgo and started to free her, grabbing flasks of turpentine and pouring them on her bound hooves. My magic undid her bindings, and I looked over at the skeptical pair. They shared a glance that said I wasn’t the first person they’d heard this from.

“Now miss, y’all don’t have to be like tha’. I admit it’s a touch annoyin’ at times, but I know Blackjack’d be right proud of what y’all are doin’,” Calamity said with a nod, then actually came over and patted my head with his unbandaged wing!

I might have given up if he hadn’t done that. Instead, I stared into his eyes and said levelly, “I went adventuring with LittlePip the night she talked Red Eye into giving her the balefire bomb. We came back flying on a wing of alicorns, with me wearing a crown of whiskey bottles.” The rest of the details were pretty fuzzy, but at least I could remember that.

Calamity chuckled. “Y’all musta studied somethin’ fierce, that’s fer sure.”

But Velvet frowned at me. “Wait a minute. Calamity! That wasn’t in LittlePip’s book!”

"It weren't?" he asked, blinking at me.
"LittlePip removed that memory from herself and told us not to tell. The only people who saw were us, Homage, and... " Her eyes grew even more round and troubled.
"Me and my friends," I concluded for her with a small nod.
Calamity gaped from her to me and back again, "But... she's... normal! I mean no metal legs, no metal parts at all." He pointed a hoof to the side. "And if that's Blackjack, then who was that mare in metal makin' all them grand statements o' unity and all that junk?"
"It's a long and complicated story," I said, then sat down and looked over at the dead cyberunicorn. "She's... I mean…Long and... complicated... and... " I shook a little as I ran my hooves through my mane. "Sorry. I just... you really believe I'm Blackjack, don't you?" Celestia, why was I starting to blubber like this? I had things to do!
Velvet Remedy and Calamity suddenly glanced at each other in concern. "Well... I don't rightly know," Calamity said. "Things out east are mighty... ah... wut'd Homage say?"
"Surreal," Velvet supplied as she trotted to my side.
"Right. Though 'barn bucked loco' is what I'd call 'em," Calamity said as he looked back at me. "Shoot. Folks out east is twigged like nopony I ain't never seen before. I mean, sure we were the only ponies there, but maybe somepony said somethin'. I dunno."
"Well... it's just... I really need you all to believe I'm Blackjack. I am. And those others... they're not me. Because... " Because what if I wasn't the real me? What if I was just a copy? A thing. Maybe there were implants in my skull controlling me like a puppet! What if I wasn't in control? Suddenly my heart rate spiked up and I couldn't quite breathe in fast enough. Whisper and Tenebra had believed me, but they hadn't had copies of me running around. What if I couldn't convince Glory I was the real Blackjack?
Virgo wiped turpentine and wondergoop off her hooves. "Well... I don't know if you are or not. I mean, I only met you that one time. But you didn't kill me... " She looked towards the slain cyberpony's bodies. "And the professor seemed to believe you were Blackjack too. It's just there're all these impersonators these days... "
"Yeah. Wut's the matter with you easterners anyhow! Why, I nearly bucked the noggin off one fool dressed like me, trottin' around talkin' in a funny accent," Calamity said with a snort.
"I think that's my fault," a mare said from the doorway. The dusky

gray mare with the striped blue mane gave a slightly sheepish smile as she walked into the lab. A PipBuck and broadcaster glittered on her hoof. “When I said folks should emulate their heroes, I didn’t think they’d take me so literally. I mean, for years, decades, most of the Wasteland didn’t care about being like a hero. Then these ponies with costumes all start showing up, and... yeah. Kinda crazy.” There were more ponies coming in after her. The whispers began to spread, and somepony cried out that the professor had been killed.

I pushed myself to my hooves. “I need to see Glory. Once I see her... ” Then I’d either be okay or just fall apart completely. I got ready to teleport the hay out of there and leave Virgo to explain it when a green field of magic shot through the crowd and formed a bubble around me. I tried to flash out but just smacked right against the solid wall of the field. “Oh come on!” I cried. “I did the right thing! Let me go!”

Sagittarius walked in, the bubble connecting me to him by a thin green tendril. “I’m afraid you’re not going anywhere till we have some answers.” He glanced over at Calamity, Velvet, and Homage. “You three are welcome to join in.”

I beat my head against the wall of the bubble.

* * *

Apparently, when the leader of a powerful group dies, there’re quite a few questions asked. We relocated to an old conference room in the medical school that appeared to be a command center for the Zodiacs. The table was a large oval with a hollow space in the middle. One wall was covered with bounty posters from all over Equestria. One of them was even mine... gosh, fifty thousand caps dead, a hundred thousand alive. Those were the days... ‘Not worth it’ was written in red ink across my face.

The room was pretty packed. There were Sagittarius, Virgo, Aries, and Aquarius. Homage, Calamity, and Velvet Remedy, along with the crimson-and-scarlet-maned unicorn stallion Life Bloom, were all in attendance. A trio of alicorns, two greens and a purple, startled me. There wasn’t any animosity in their steady gazes, though, and at least one smiled at me.

“Wow. With this many horns in the room, we’re either going to produce a megaspell or a gaming group,” Life Bloom quipped,

prompting a few meager chuckles. They died quickly.

Sagittarius set me down in the empty space in the center of the table, sat down across from me, folded his hooves on the tabletop, and said, “Tell us what happened.” I sighed, took a deep breath, and got to it.

It took about two hours for me to convince Sagittarius that I hadn’t murdered the professor. That the professor had betrayed them. That the implants likely contained kill commands like the ones used by Lighthooves, and that she’d been working for the Legate. Of course, that led to me talking about Cognitum running around the Hoof, proclaiming to be Security, and uniting the Hoof against a zebra threat that she and the Legate had manufactured…almost literally. The only mention I gave about Horizons was a nebulous reference to a superweapon on the moon, though.

And I didn’t make one mention of the Eater or who the Legate really was. Even I wasn’t that stupid.

When I finished, it seemed like everypony was sharing my headache. Calamity summed it up best. “Remember them good old days when the worst we had to worry ‘bout was raiders killin’ us and usin’ our insides fer decoration? I sure do miss them.”

“They certainly do things big in the Hoof, that’s for sure,” Homage said with a slow nod in agreement.

Sagittarius reached up and rubbed a thin scar on his temple. “Is it true, Virgo? Could these implants really be used for spying on us? *Killing* us?”

The young pink unicorn licked her lips and set a small plastic disk on the table. In it was something that looked like a huge... well... sperm. A flattened, round glob with tiny fuzzy hairs radiating out from a metal disk in the middle, attached to a long thin wire. “Well, I never thought about it till today, but... yes. They could. The implants have a low range broadcast field to coordinate their activities within a single body. Otherwise... well... things get ugly. It’s just like a PipBuck in that respect. But if you knew the frequency, you could do anything. Download data. You could also give the implants additional inputs. Accelerate the heart till it stops. Crippling migraines. Maybe even brain hemorrhage.”

“Can you block it?” Sagittarius croaked. “We’ve put these implants in hundreds of folks. Maybe thousands.”

“Like me,” Calamity said with a frown. “I’m mighty grateful to y’all fer fixin’ me up, but I sure don’t want muh heart ta blow up on

account some zebra's in a bad mood."

"If they're receiving, I could try to write a patch for them to ignore any additional input. If the implants malfunction, folks with the implants will have to come here to get them extracted and fixed. We won't be able to adjust them remotely," Virgo said with a small nod.

"I'm glad you're not thinking of using this control yourself, Sagittarius," Homage said, both in admiration but also with an edge of worry.

The green stallion waved a hoof. "The Zodiacs were founded to protect the Wasteland. This... " he looked at the implant in the plastic dish like it was a plate of roadapples. "She put these in us, all of us. I'll take a pony in a fair fight. I won't make him dance on the end of a wire." He glanced at Homage. "Besides, you three know. No point in trying it, since you'd just tell everypony."

"Y'all bet we would," Calamity said with a look at Homage.

"Now can I please go?" I asked as I rose to my hooves. Tired. Sore. Hungry. Grumpy. Honestly, I was on the verge of just saying 'buck it' and running. Damn responsibility...

Sagittarius raised a hoof, and I suppressed the urge to flash out of there. "Wait. Blackjack, if what you're saying is true, then this is big. Really big. The Remnant went hostile all of a sudden just a few days ago. Months of them just sitting around, and suddenly they attack. The Harbingers are fighting back, but something's been off from the start. When the Zodiacs fought these Brood things, we barely survived the engagement. And we're good fighters. Even the Reapers are having it rough. The Harbingers are barely breaking a sweat. If you're right and all this is a show, what happens if the show stops?" he asked gravely.

...Nasty things. "Worse case," I said simply, "the Brood and Harbingers team up and curbstomp the Hoof into a bloody slurry. Slightly less worse, the Brood smash the Harbingers, then us."

"So we've got to be ready when the tables turn, or we won't have a chance," Sagittarius said as he trotted over to a map marked with small colored magnets. The ring of red markers around the Hoof looked particularly ominous. "Blackjack. I'm going to need you to wait."

Oh, fuck that. "I've waited months! I'm not going to–" I started to say.

"Blackjack, think! If the other you really is part of this show, how

long do you think it'll last once she finds out you escaped? How long until the show ends and the killing starts?" he asked me. I stared at him, quivering. I could go. I could just teleport out before he bubbled me again. It hurt! He softened his tone. "Just give me a few hours. I'll send out the Zodiacs to make contact with the other factions. We need to meet up. Organize. Discuss everything that's going on."

Homage put a hoof on my shoulder. "Please, Blackjack."

I glanced back at her and saw her gentle smile urging patience. She was going to be kept from LittlePip. She understood the frustration of being separated from the one you loved. As painful as it was, I couldn't go rushing off. I had responsibilities. Duties. Obligations.

I hated every last one of them.

I reared onto my hind legs and smacked my forehooves on the tabletop. "Fine. But I want the meeting in Chapel. We can meet in the remains of the Blueblood Manor. It should be a wide open and neutral place." And hopefully Glory would be there. At which point, fuck the whole world. We'd be together forever and screw anyone who said otherwise!

Right?

I didn't stick around to hear the planning past that point. I left the conference room, feeling the knot of frustration inside me condense. I headed down the hall, out into the quad, and straight to the building blasted by the beam attack. It wasn't just about me. It wasn't just about Glory. This was bigger than any of us, certainly too big to ignore.

Still, I had to let the frustration out, somehow. I screamed and cried in the rain, kicking my hooves and stomping the wreckage and lashing out with my magic. Broken debris was sent flying as I thrashed like a foal in a tantrum, accomplishing nothing but getting more tired, sore, cut, bruised, and angry. I went like a dervish through a burnt-out classroom, flipping tables and throwing chairs with my telekinesis. At one point, I even bit some waterlogged curtains and ripped them down with my bare teeth.

All pointless... all futile... all keeping me from Glory.

I still wasn't used to the limits of my new body, though. Strength left my muscles, and I sat down hard in a puddle in the midst of the gutted structure. My tantrum had been a pitiful amount of destruction compared to the devastation that the one beam from the Core had wrought. The kind of destruction Cognitum could do...

It was all so much bigger than me.

"If it helps, I think you really are Blackjack," Homage said as she trotted into the ruins. "And I think that Glory will believe you are, too."

"I don't know anymore, Homage. I really don't," I said as I stared down into my own reflection, looking at eyes that I hadn't seen in months. "Something Cognitum did hurt Glory. I think that when they met, Glory asked her to prove herself. Some question... some something... and she did. And then she hurt her."

The gray unicorn walked over to me. "And when you tell her, whatever pain she inflicted will be shifted to Cognitum, where it belongs. But it's not just that, is it?" Homage asked as she sat in the puddle beside me. "I noticed that you never once mentioned killing your old body to stop her."

Crap. I was too exhausted to fight it. "I'm pregnant. My old body, I mean." Her eyes widened in shock. I turned my face to the rain. "I keep feeling like I'm going to lose everything. Not *die*. Fuck dying... I'm not afraid of that. But that I'm losing things that... that I can't really bear to lose. That I'm going to fuck it all up. And I'm terrified of what's going to happen. Will Cognitum abort my baby? If she wins, will she raise the child as her own? What about Glory and P-21? What about Scotch Tape? What about LittlePip and you?" I asked, facing her and seeing the shock on her face. "If Cognitum wins, she won't just ignore the S.P.P. I don't know if she can get LittlePip, but I know she'll try."

Homage's face hardened. "I had no idea," she said as she peered through the ruins at the dim outline of the Core. "We've barely heard anything about what's been going on here. Since this storm started, some interference has been blocking LittlePip's control of the towers here and my access to the MASEBS. We came for Calamity, but I personally was also worried about what was actually going on in the Hoof."

"Crazy times," I said, shaking my head.

"Tell me about it." She sighed, flipping her sodden mane out of her eyes. "I mean... I know I was pretty cheery on my last broadcast after the big battle. But... well... " She tapped her hooves together.

"Aren't you supposed to be Honesty?" I asked with a smirk.

"There's honesty, and then there's Honesty!" Homage countered with a frown. "I told everyone everything was alright because I hoped that, after the S.P.P. was under LittlePip's control, things

would calm down. Get back to some normalcy. And it wasn't an outright lie. Things are better out west. Kinda. Order's returning, communities are working together, there are already a few attempts at agriculture, and raider activity is starting what seems to be a steady decline. And on a personal note, Calamity's getting better, and Life Bloom thinks that, with the implants, he might actually recover fully. So while everything's not quite as peachy as I said it was on my broadcast, it's still much better than it was."

"Except out here," I said, looking to the Core once again.

"Yeah. Except a lot of places. Things are settling out mostly around the area of Junction Town, really. A bit in Manehattan. Everywhere else... well... it's going to take some time." She forced a grin. "Till then, got to keep people's spirits up and put a positive spin on things, right?"

"Right," I said as I stared at the black towers, lightning flickering and dancing around them every few seconds. Even this far out, the tang of ozone was so strong that I could taste it faintly on my tongue. "So what is everypony doing?" I asked in lieu of things like 'When can I get out of here and back to Glory?'

"Velvet's using the alicorns Apogee, Perigee, and Ghostshine to send Zodiacs to the major parties. Calamity's going to have a chat with the pegasi... and I really hope that that goes well. Life Bloom is contacting the Twilight Society to bring them up to speed. I got a message to LittlePip," she said as she regarded her broadcaster. "Text packets are the only thing getting through the interference. She's working with Celestia to come up with a solution." She glanced up at me. "She also tells you to hold on. It'll be okay."

I felt a little relief at that. LittlePip was probably the only pony outside of my friends who had a clue what I was going through. Homage balked a moment. "What?"

"Nothing. I–" she started to say.

"Don't start 'Honestying' me right now, Homage," I said a little more harshly than I should have. "Not now."

She balked again, then caved. "We contacted the Society at Elysium as soon as you left. To tell Triage about all of this and find out what Cognitum is doing. Cognitum's left for the Luna Space Center with only a hoofful of ponies." She hesitated, and I stared right at her. "Glory's returning to Star House."

My mind snapped. On one hoof, my enemy, my baby, and my body. On the other, my friends and the ponies I loved. If I could get

the Zodiacs, Calamity, Velvet, the alicorns... maybe we could take my body back. Maybe Virgo could take Cognitum out and put me in. Maybe... and on the other hoof, I knew where Glory was going to be. I could leave right now. The plan was already in motion. The others didn't need me! I could go and be in her embrace again and talk and make it all better.

It was enough to drive a mare mad.

I stood and trotted through the rain towards the nearest blackened wall, pressed my forehooves against it, and banged my head. Each strike seemed to resonate with a word: Cognitum. Glory. Responsibility. Baby. P-21. Everypony. Revenge. Love. Responsibility. Over and over I struck my head against the wall, hearing Homage speak vaguely in tones of amusement, then worry, then alarm. I took all those words rolling in my head and reduced every single one to pain. When she pulled me off the wall, I fell on my back, letting the cool rain pour over my aching skull.

"Are you okay?" Homage asked in alarm, staring down at me.

"There was one time I was okay. This isn't it," I muttered, now feeling like a complete idiot. Ponies like me didn't get to be okay. Still, I'd been successful: I was lying here and not trying to race off in two directions at once. I'd see Glory soon. Really soon. Then we'd say what needed to be said. Do what needed to be done. I struggled to my hooves. "I want that purple alicorn to take me to Chapel," I said as I swayed and fell against her.

"You need a healing potion," Homage said flatly. I groaned and shook my head stubbornly, and the gray pony sighed and said in worry, "Blackjack, Ghostshine can do it, but what about–"

"Everypony will be meeting at the manor, no matter what. By that time, I'm pretty sure that the final showdown will be beginning anyway," I said as I looked at the two of her as they wavered, merged, and separated again. "If you don't take me, I'll start teleporting myself. It'll probably take fifty tries to get there, but I'll do it. And I'll walk if I don't," I told her evenly.

She stared into my eyes for several long seconds. "I'll see to it."

* * *

'Seeing to it' took another intolerable fifteen minutes, but finally Velvet Remedy, the three alicorns, and I all teleported to Star House, after Velvet worked more magic on my skull. As soon as we

walked in, I teared up. The familiar wooden walls. The old, worn furniture. The smell of time and family. I peered around, almost expecting all my friends to be there. Of course, they weren't. It'd take time for them to get from Elysium to Chapel, however they were travelling. If I left, I'd very likely miss them.

How long had it been since I'd last been here? The party with Dawn, wasn't it?

"I've got some work to do, Blackjack. You'll stay here, right?" Velvet asked.

"Yes. Right here. Safe and sound," I murmured absently as I slowly walked through the house. When Velvet closed the door, the sound made me jump. I looked about at the neatness. Glory's doing, no doubt. I walked to the fridge and found Sparkle-Cola, bottles of water, and milk inside. In one of the cupboards was a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. I levitated a bowl over, filling it and listening to the powder-covered red bits tinkling against the ceramic. Then I added brahmin milk and levitated the bowl to the table. Slowly, I slipped into the seat, and... and...

I watched my cereal darken and get soggy. A spoon lay unattended, jutting out to the side. I pressed my hooves to my head as the normalcy began to crush me beneath its hoof. I clenched my eyes shut as tears ran down my cheeks. Oh Celestia, it was too much! Cognitum flashed in my memory. My baby. Shadowbolt Tower exploding. Fighting Hades. I curled over as if the weight of everything I'd been through over the last day crushed me down. Too much! Too much!

I wasn't okay. I wasn't sure I could ever be okay.

"Breathe, Blackjack," I whispered to myself, and I focused on that as my heart hammered in my chest. Air in. Air out. Focus on that. A small thing. A normal thing. Something I could do now. "Calm down," I said next, hearing my heart thunder in my ears and imagining I could turn down a dial. Do not throw things. Do not hurt yourself again. Breathe. Calm.

Fifteen minutes later, I could finally take a bite of soggy cereal.

Then Glory walked in.

Just like that. The gray pegasus opened the door and trotted in, her eyes sunken and darkened, face drawn and taut. She wore her dragonhide leather jacket as if she owned it, and Pew-Pew lay holstered at her hoof. My spoon hovered an inch from my mouth as I stared at her. She shook out her long purple mane, eyes still on the

floor. Then she raised her head and saw me. Her eyes locked onto mine, and time stopped.

I don't know how long we were like that. Seconds? Eternities? The blob of cereal on my spoon quivered and then plopped back into the bowl, followed a second later by the spoon itself. Glory's eyes bored into me, pupils constricting as she seemed to wind tighter and tighter. *Say something, Blackjack*, I hissed to myself. Something. Anything!

The corner of my mouth curled up in desperate hope. "Um... hi."

She smiled, and for an instant everything was alright. Somehow, I'd make everything good again. But her smile didn't stop. It became a grimace. Then there were tears springing down her cheeks as she screamed at top of her lungs, "Get out!"

Footnote: Loading, please wait…

Chapter 69: Whiplash

"Well, just tell me what you really think. Tell me, tell me, tell-me-tell-me-tell-me!"

There were no words. I sat there, hollow, cracking inside like glass. She stormed up to me. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" she yelled over and over again. I couldn't move. Couldn't think. She looked at the bowl of soggy cereal and flipped it into my face. "You think you can come here and pretend to be her!?" Tepid milk and cereal sloshed down my chest.

"Glory... " I murmured.

"No! You don't get to speak! I don't... I can't... " She shoved me and the chair right over. "Get out! Leave! Don't you ever come back!"

But I couldn't go. I just sat there, a white lump dripping sugary milk. "Glory."

She sobbed, drew her gun, and pressed it to my forehead. "I'll kill you," she slurred around the mouthgrip.

I just sat there, feeling the barrel underneath my horn. I actually smiled and lifted my eyes to look into her anguished purple ones. "You're the only one allowed to hurt me," I rasped ever so faintly. I supposed that extended to killing, too. Her jaw shook on the grip. "Glory. I've been... I've been a very... very... bad pony." And I smiled up at her as I wept. "Please, Glory."

Her shaking stilled, but her eyes hardened. She holstered the gun. "Oh. I see what's going on here. You're the substitute? To handle me and my gross biological needs?" My smile faded as she stepped back. "Get. Out. I don't need you, and I don't need Blackjack." She pointed imperiously to the door with a wing.

"What?" I asked weakly.

"Like you don't know," she spat with contempt, then added in a mocking tone, "If you can't restrain your carnal impulses, I'll just

find a stand-in to handle your biological needs." She gritted her teeth, fresh tears running down her cheeks. She sat hard and just covered her eyes with a wing. "Just... go. Go somewhere else. Anywhere else."

Had Cognitum sabotaged our relationship intentionally, or just in cold, cruel callousness? "Glory... that wasn't me... "

"Stop! I don't... I am so sick of Blackjack! Of everything!" she said, shaking her head. "Do you have any idea how hard I worked trying to find a way to reach her? And then she returns and... and she's... go!"

But I couldn't go. I couldn't do anything close to leave. "Glory, that isn't me."

Still not listening. "She talked to me like I was nothing. Like when I try to help her she says I'm of no use to her now! Like…like everything we'd done together was just…" she said as she paced back and forth.

Now it was my turn. I rose up on my hindlegs and lunged at her. Thank goodness she didn't still have Rainbow Dash's body, or she probably would have tossed me *through* the wall this time. She fell back, and I landed on top of her. There was one brief moment when I thought I'd get through to her. Maybe a kiss would seal the deal. I pressed my lips to hers, closing my eyes, trying to will her to realize it was me. For a moment, I was pretty sure it had even worked.

For a moment. Then her hoof slammed like a hammer to my nethers, and she shoved me off to the side. I curled up, pain temporarily overwhelming my brain. Glory rose. "I told you, I don't want a replacement," she said coolly as she drew her pistol again, this time to turn me into far less annoying dust.

I'd often wondered when the Wasteland would break me. I suddenly wondered if this was when it would break Glory instead.

Then the door opened again, and P-21 trotted in with Scotch Tape on his back. "Hey Glory," the filly said. "You won't believe who we ran–" And then she actually took in the scene before her. "What the hay is going on here?"

Apparently Glory wasn't comfortable with killing me in front of a minor. "It's just…she's just…" Lost for words, she finally just kicked me as I lay there curled up and hurting. "Get out of here. I don't want a stupid impostor. I don't want to hear how much you love love love Security. I especially do not care if Blackjack sent you herself. Just go." Somehow, the second kick hurt worse than the

first.

P-21 set Scotch Tape down, trotting towards me with a frown. “Not a very good Blackjack impersonator, is she?” Scotch commented, looking me up and down. “Didn’t do the eyes right, and not even a cutie mark decal.”

But P-21 still didn’t say anything. I just gazed at him with tears in my eyes. I couldn’t convince her. I’d thought Cognitum had taken everything from me; I’d hadn’t realized just how right I was. A former enemy, Whisper, had accepted my identity more readily than the mare I loved. How sick was that? And if Whisper had met Cognitum and a few impostors with good intentions before I showed up, would she even have believed me? Was I even Blackjack anymore? Maybe there was a good reason I didn’t have my cutie mark.

Something cool and glassy bumped up against my temple, and I raised my eyes to see a purple healing potion held by P-21. “Here. Brewed this morning. I know how bad it hurts to be kicked like that, Miss…”

“Go Fish,” I muttered, taking the bottle and sniffing, then drinking it. Immediately, the throbs to my pelvis diminished significantly. I rose, having no idea where I’d go next, but I couldn’t stay here. I wasn’t wanted here.

P-21’s eyes ran over me again, and he gave a little half smile. “Funny. That’s her actual name. Security, I mean.” Glory was talking with Scotch Tape over by the door about... something. I was too crushed to care. I wanted to teleport away then and there, but I met his gaze. It was searching for…something…

“I know. I am her. It’s me, P-21. I’m Blackjack,” I said miserably. Scotch Tape perked an ear and looked over at us.

“Oh, Goddesses, it’s another crazy one, isn’t it?” she said in annoyance. “That’s the third one this month. At least it’s a mare. Remember that stallion one? Or the alicorn?”

“I try not to,” P-21 said with a frown, still not looking away from me. “She couldn’t decide if she was Blackjack, Twilight Sparkle, Trixie, or Princess Celestia.”

“Bwackjack?” a mare said from the still-open door, and then a white head popped out over Glory’s, pale eyes blinking as she stared at me. Suddenly her mouth split in an ear to ear grin. “Bwackjack!” And she bounded right at me, bowling Glory over in her rush to my side. The pale blank looked very much as she had

when we'd parted, though her white coat was far dirtier and scratched up and she had sticks and dead grass stuck to her mane. "Ish you! Ish weally weally you!" she said as she lunged at me and wrapped her hooves around my neck, hugging me tightly. "Youw all wight!"

"No no no, Boo! That's not Blackjack. I told you back in Chapel. It's another fake," Scotch Tape said as she tried to tug one of the legs off my neck. "Geeze, she wasn't even close to this clingy with that other one!"

Boo glared flatly back at Scotch Tape. "This is Bwackjack! See?" she said, hooking her forehooves to my head and shoving my face at the filly, her pale hooves stretching my face in a leering grimace. Scotch Tape recoiled, and Boo yanked me back in a tight embrace. "Dizcord say yous gonna get out, and he was right!"

"Discord?" P-21 asked with a baffled frown.

"Mhmmm! Dizcord was in muh head and tellin' me what I needed ta do while Bwackjack was dealin' with da bad computer thingy," she said with a beaming smile as she looked me over.

"But…that's not Bwackjac…er, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape said with a flush.

"Ish too!" Boo said with a roll of her pale eyes. She patted me on the head. "Unca Dizcord said the bad 'puter thingy was gonna do swapsies and he was gonna get her to swap somethin' else and I needed ta get Bwackjack's thingies!" She undid her saddlebag and shook it sharply.

From it tumbled a few pistols, black barding, a half dozen little statuettes, Penance, and the bizarre Perceptitron thingy. Instantly a half dozen little mares popped into my head with a baffling rolling chatter of asking me where I was, what was going on, props for me not being all dead and stuff, and if I was doing okay. A great wave of confidence washed through me as pieces of my life and the statuettes returned to me. Wonderful as that sensation was, though, it was secondary to that of lifting up Vigilance and looking at all those names inscribed on the handle. There was mine at the bottom, and I cradled it to my chest. "Thank you, Boo," I murmured.

"No prowblem!" Boo beamed. "Unca Dizcord said you'd be saddy waddy without your swaggy waggy…whatever dat means," she added with her own look of bafflement.

Glory stared at me and the pale mare. "But it…that's…it's

impossible!" Glory sputtered. "She knew things. Intimate things that only you knew about, Blackjack! She could fight like you! We watched her take apart three Brood like they were nothing."

"But did she whine and angst about it?" I shot back, making her blink and frown, chewing her bottom lip. Add another little chink of doubt. I'd just keep laying them on till she cracked. "She must have copied my memories when she transferred me," I guessed. Add those to the messed up memories she swiped from Luna and any other lingering remnants and I guessed there was one pretty crazy mare in my body.

"Copied your memories? Transferred you? What are you talking about?" Yes! This was it! My chance! I took a deep breath and spilled everything. Everything about the Core and being too scared and confused to move, then finding Rampage and everything that followed. I then started rambling about how I'd screwed up and should have left the Core and found her and made sure everything was okay but I'd been tricked and how I wanted to be with her for as long as I could and P-21 too and we'd have lots of babies between the three of us and maybe Tenebra and Stygius and–

She rammed her wing into my mouth, and I came out of my frantic state. Glory just stared at me, her cheeks flaming red. Behind her, P-21 and Scotch Tape looked on, the former arching his brows with a mild smile and the latter with her eyes wide with shock. "It sure sounds like Blackjack," P-21 said languidly.

"Well... I saw Blackjack before the Tower exploded... and... it's just too ridiculous and... " Glory stammered, then scowled at me, narrowing her eyes. "Who's Tenebra?"

I spat out gray feathers and gave a sheepish look, tapping my hooves together. "Stygius's sister," I said meekly. "Really cute. Kinda needy in the attention department. Would be really fun in a threeway though. Or four way, if you're game, P-21. Or fiveway, if Stygius joins in." She stared at me, eyes locked wide. "Of course, just you and me for a while is great too!" I blurted.

"What am I, chopped lettuce?" Scotch Tape huffed, crossing her forehooves. "Never get invited to any of the good parties. Might as well be back in the stable," she muttered with a pout.

P-21 just chuckled. "It's Blackjack. It has to be. No impersonator could be that bad."

"Thank you!" I said, springing on him, wrapping my hooves around his neck, and kissing him as hard as I could. My brain caught up ten

seconds later and I drew back, afraid I'd pissed him off. To my joy and surprise, though, he merely looked happy to see me. I nearly kissed him again right there on the spot.

"But wait! Wait! What about Rampage? She vouched for her," Glory said with a little frown. She threw her hooves in the air. "This is just insane."

"Again–" P-21 started evenly.

"Blackjack!" Scotch squealed with glee while jumping forward to give me a hug, cutting him off. He smiled and patted her on the head before turning back to Glory.

"Exactly. Now, why don't we give her a chance to explain... calmly." Glory still looked skeptical, but she nodded.

For the third time today, I explained everything that had happened from the implosion of the tower to now, filling in everything I'd rushed over before. Boo jumped in here and there, mostly providing dramatic reenactments, with sound effects, of the fight with the Legate. Glory asked questions about Professor Zodiac and how and why I had a new blank body. P-21 asked more about Cognitum. Scotch Tape wanted to know more about the batponies. Two hours later, I nursed a Sparkle-Cola and a developing headache. Three of the four ponies present were deep in thought.

Boo, for her part, was building a tower of snack cakes, singing, "Snack cake shtack-up, shnack cake shtack-uuuuuup!"

It was a welcome disturbance to the awkward silence. Glory seemed completely at a loss, and I couldn't blame her. "Okay. My turn," I said at last. "Tell me what's happened since Cognitum showed up."

P-21 regarded the others before answering. "Well, it was quite abrupt, actually. We were all set to enter the Core and find you, when suddenly you– I mean, her, Rampage, and a shellshocked stallion all came out. Like she knew exactly where to find us and what we were doing."

"You– ugh, *she* was really bitchy, Blackjack. Like…I've seen you whiny, but I've never seen you *mean*. She was mean. And as soon as she trotted out, she walked right up to those Harbingers, told them she'd assumed command, and they just…accepted it," Scotch Tape said with a frown. "I expected them to shoot her up a little at least."

"We talked to her alone," Glory said in a small voice. "She answered enough questions to prove she was Blackjack, but when we wanted to talk some more, find out what had happened, she said

Project Horizons was going to go off and she needed to stop it. Told me to keep my biological urges in check or wait till she could get me a replacement."

"Then she blew us off when we said we were going to help her. 'Best way you can help is to follow me and stay out of my way,' she said," P-21 said with a frown.

"Honestly, she could have given the Overmare lessons," Scotch Tape said absently. For a few seconds P-21 stared away from Scotch Tape, his jaw clenched and a dark fury simmering in his eyes.

"And you thought that was me?" I asked, a little incredulous.

"Blackjack, you've been gone for months! Last time I saw you, you had more metal than flesh, and for all I knew, something had been put in your brain. It wouldn't have surprised me!" Glory snapped, then flushed again.

Scotch Tape stared at Glory, then back at me and came to her rescue. "And Rampage was there, vouching for 'Blackjack'. She was pretty mean too, though. I mean, she's been rude, but…I seriously think she'd have hurt me if she wanted."

"We were confused, Blackjack," P-21 said, drawing a deep breath and recovering. "We didn't know what to believe. And there are impersonators of you and other heroes all over the place now. Some are doing it to try and exploit a famous name, but others are fanatical admirers or just plain crazy."

Glory closed her eyes. "One came here; said she'd had her body surgically restored. She really believed she was you and not some damned raider whose whole family was wiped out by Enclave. Took two days before that story fell apart." Her cheeks burned even more as she rubbed her mane.

"She got you in bed, didn't she?" I asked with a grin. That must have been two days I was watching somepony else through the Perceptitron. Really, how much could you watch other ponies going through their daily routines before dying of boredom?

Wrong question to ask. She immediately burst into tears, covering her eyes with her hooves. "I'm sorry! You'd been gone so long, and…she seemed really convincing and…I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

I watched her sob for several seconds, glanced over at P-21 and Scotch Tape, and they gave a pair of matching shrugs. "I forgive you, Glory," I said, trying to keep my voice as even and uncondescending as I could. "You love me and so you had sex with a version of me. No big deal."

"No big…" Glory stammered, her face streaked with tears. "I cheated on you, Blackjack. I let myself cheat on you. I fell for a cheap fake."

"And I forgive you," I said as I trotted over to her, put an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her in closer. "I don't care that you had sex with somepony else. What I care is that you're happy. That's it. That is all that matters to me. So I forgive you." *So please stop with the weird surfacer hangups about sex, because it's really weird.*

She melted against me, burying her face in my mane. "Oh Blackjack, it *is* you," she sighed.

That was all I needed to hear. That phrase in her voice in that tone made everything that I'd lost somehow manageable again. I swept her up in my hooves and gave her a kiss she properly deserved. After so long apart, nothing would ever separate us again. An eternity, and far too short a time, later, we parted, and Glory and I beheld the amused smirk of Scotch Tape, the delighted smile of Boo, and the calm nod of P-21. She blushed but snuggled up against me. "What now?"

"Okay," I said with a small frown. There was a large list in my head. And, oddly enough, sexytimes with Glory kept aggressively, passionately bumping up on it, over and over, warm and wet and... um, I mean, later. Right. "Velvet Remedy and the Zodiacs are getting word out that the other Security is a fake and that I'm the real Blackjack. Everypony is going to be meeting at Blueblood Manor to discuss what to do next." As much as I wanted to strap on the operative barding and go and take back my old body, I couldn't be reckless. This was bigger than me, and I knew what my old body could do. Cognitum wouldn't hold back when I came to reclaim it.

"Blueblood Manor? You know it's a ruin now, right?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Well…yeah. But it's neutral ground and it's big and open enough for a lot of ponies to meet up there," I said with a semi-sheepish smile. "What. It's got a ballroom, right?"

"That had a tank drive through it," Scotch Tape countered, then frowned. "Oh, yeah. About tanks, you might want to talk with Deus. I don't speak tank, but the whole drive here from the Society, he was acting weird. Like drifting into ditches and stuff."

"He is pretty big," Glory pointed out.

"Yeah, but he doesn't just wander off the road, or didn't the last time we rode on him," Scotch Tape said. "I don't know if he's sick

or if there's something bothering him, but something's wrong." She surveyed me, P-21, and Glory, then rolled her eyes a little. "Anyway, I'll go up to the manor. Maybe there's some corner that's undamaged enough for us to use. Come on, Boo. Let's give them some privacy."

"Awww, but I just got back! I wanna stay with Bwackjack!" Boo protested with a pout.

"Trust me. They're just going to be talking about love... um... and mushy stuff," Scotch Tape said, pushing the blank towards the door.

Boo grinned. "Awww. Bwackjack and Glory sitting in a tree… wait…Bwackjack and Twent…uh…" Boo blinked at the three of us. "Who's gonna be kissin' who with three of 'em?"

"Probably all of the above. Now come on. I think that Charity got her hooves on some of those chocolate-packed Fancy Buck Cakes from the Society," Scotch Tape said with a smile. That perked Boo right up, and the pair departed, leaving me with the two most important ponies in my life.

"I've got one other thing to tell you," I said, holding Glory as I looked to P-21 soberly. Much as kissing sounded absolutely awesome, there were other things I needed to talk about first. I shifted us over to the couch in the living room and bowed my head. "I'm pregnant."

P-21 arched an eyebrow in surprise, and Glory flushed. "Um… didn't you just get that body, Blackjack?" At least she smiled when she asked it.

"Not in this body," I said with a roll of my eyes. "In my old body." Then I glanced at P-21. "And I'm pretty sure that it's yours."

Both their smiles disappeared. P-21 wore an inscrutable look on his face. "I mean, there's a small chance it's Stygius's. I don't know exactly when my implant got mistaken for a bullet, but I think odds are that you're the father."

"Something I seem to excel at," he said, glancing at his cutie mark. "I wonder, if you took this off, if I'd have a sperm underneath it."

I gave him a hug, and though he stiffened, he didn't pull away. "That's nowhere near all you are. But the reason why I bring it up is because it's why we can't just kill my old body."

"Blackjack! Would you really?" Glory said, looking a little hurt.

"In a heartbeat," I answered, staring right into her purple eyes. "Which I happen to have again." Now she tensed and looked away, but I took her hoof. "I'm not angry with you anymore for what you

did. You saved my life, Glory. You kept me fighting. Thank you. But life as part machine…" I shook my head. "It isn't as good a life as you might imagine. Much as I hate Cognitum for what she did, I have to admit, she did me a favor keeping this spare around. I can feel your hoof, Glory. I can feel *you*. You don't know what that's like," I said as I stroked her cheek.

Finally, she gave a little smile and nuzzled me back. "I'll have to go easier on you next time we're together. I wouldn't want to scar you up so soon."

"Knowing my life, that won't take long," I said, then glanced at P-21. He still looked distracted and troubled. "What I need to know," I continued to Glory, "is how long do you think the fetus will be viable in that body."

Glory's eyes widened. "I have no idea. Your pelvis wasn't as heavily reinforced as your spine since the bones are so large, but... If I have to estimate…four or five months. After that, cross bracing will start to crush the uterine wall, and then…" She shook her head.

"Then we're going to need a surrogacy spell. I can't carry the fetus. Blank bodies…well…even though they're a copy, the plumbing down there doesn't really... work." Now it was my turn to bite my lower lip. I looked at Glory, but she could neither cast such a spell nor be a suitable surrogate. It was supposed to be as close a relation as I could find... I'd need a unicorn, at least... "I'll talk to Triage about it."

"Blackjack, there has to be some way I can help you," Glory said, staring at me in worry.

"It's okay. Thanks, though," I said, pausing and fidgeting a bit. "I just need to know, P-21, should I even try to get my baby back?"

P-21's eyes shot wide as he gaped at me. "What…why…how…" he stammered, then composed himself with a sharp breath. "How could you ask me that?"

"Because as far as I'm concerned, it's your baby too. And putting a bullet through my old body's head is easier than trying to get my unborn baby out of it." I closed my eyes, tears streaking my cheeks as my mind struggled with the horrifying choice before me. It stuck in my throat, and finally I sobbed. "I've given up so much. What's a little more?"

"No!" he said sharply, and I flinched. He sighed, covering my hooves in his. "No, Blackjack. You're not giving that up. What's the point to living if you lose that?"

"The world's more important than me and my baby," I said hollowly. "Aren't I being selfish taking the risk?" Glory stared at me as if suddenly struck dumb, her eyes wide and aghast.

"Technically, sure. So what?" he asked scornfully. "This is something you need to be selfish about, Blackjack. This is our baby. I've had a rough time learning what that means from Scotch. I want to know what it's like to do it right from the beginning. I *want* this. And you need something that you won't sacrifice, Blackjack. Something that is yours. A line in the sand you won't cross." I remembered him once shouting in my face about him killing me if I ever crossed him.

Glory didn't look at the pair of us, her eyes downcast. I turned back to him, smiled, and gave a little nod. Getting my body back would be difficult…far more difficult than getting a few missile launchers, snipers, and spark grenades and unloading on her. Still, we'd find a way.

"I'll go help Scotch," Glory said, starting to get up, and I stared at her in surprise.

"Glory?" I rose and stepped after her. Something about her tone, so small and hurt, was just wrong to me.

"Stop," she said, not turning back to look at me. "Just…let me go, Blackjack." Her shoulders shook slightly as she bowed her head, her mane hiding her face from me.

"Glory? What's wrong?" I said as I walked around in front of her. I didn't understand…was this some other Enclave moral landmine I wasn't aware of? I glanced back at P-21, but he seemed just as clueless as I. "I…I'm sorry," I said helplessly, hoping it would be enough for whatever offense I'd given.

Then she lifted her head, and I felt as if I had my old body back. Everything inside me stilled as she smiled through her tears. "So am I, Blackjack," she said with a sick little laugh as she sat down. "I was ready to hate you. I really had written you off. And as much as it hurt, I think I was okay with it. And then you show up, and I was wrong, and it turns out you still care about me." She smiled even wider and added, "And you're pregnant. Congratulations." Her eyes were on P-21 with that last word. "You don't even have your old body anymore."

"Glory, what is wrong? Talk to me," I said as I reached out with my hooves to hold her shoulders. "Tell me what I did wrong!"

She cocked her head, smiling at me with a look of pity as she wept.

“Blackjack, do you love me?”

“Of course I do,” I said, immediately.

“Why?” Glory asked in that soft voice. So tender. Such yearning to be understood.

“What?” I blinked in bafflement at her.

“Why do you love me?” she asked as she stared into my eyes.

“I… ” I stammered, trying to think. “You’re… good. And smart. And nice. And… ” I said, but the words felt hollow to me. True, without a doubt, but I knew other good, smart, nice ponies that I didn’t love. “I just do!” I finally blurted.

She just shook her head with that horrible, sad smile. “I know you just do. But that’s not enough. I loved you because you protected me. You were so strong. Too strong. And like my parents you both left me behind and horribly injured yourself in the process.”

I rolled my eyes. “Glory, I had to do that. The first time I was going crazy and the second time I was detonating a megaspell that would have killed you. It almost killed me!” I pointed out.

She brushed my mane out of my eyes. “I know, Blackjack. I know why. And I’m not mad at you for it. But Blackjack… I would have rather died than be left behind. Maybe I would have. Or maybe we might have found another way. We could play what ifs all the time. The point is that’s not love. Or rather, not the kind of love I need.”

“And what is the kind of love you need? Just tell me and I’ll give it,” I swore. Anything to make this stop.

She actually laughed, and then wiped her snotty muzzle on a hoof. “Just like that? Funny thing is… you would. You’d try to. I know.” She sighed. “What I need is somepony who needs me. Not just for emotional support, but who needs me with her. That won’t try and treat me like a helpless baby.” She shook her head. “I’m not that mare that was trapped under the floor anymore, Blackjack. I haven’t been for a long time.”

“But I need you,” I swore, trying to put as much feeling into it as I could.

“You need someone, Blackjack. But it doesn’t have to be me,” she said with that wistful gaze in her eyes. “In fact, I think right now that it shouldn’t have been me at all. I was just clinging to you in the hopes that, eventually, you’d love me the way I needed to be loved.”

“But Glory… I… ” I fumbled, feeling gutpunched. “I can love you like that. I can.”

“No, Blackjack. You’re a good pony, but you can’t put me first. You almost didn’t put your own child first. That… scares me. I can’t imagine the kind of mare who can do that. I wonder if I could ever do what you do so easily… ” she said quietly.

I wondered if this was really happening. Maybe any second the sadistic torture program would pop out of the couch cushions and go ‘surprise, want to execute Goldenblood now?’ Then I’d be free to meet the real Glory and everything would somehow… magically… be fine…

Damn it… LittlePip never had to go through this. Why did I? I looked at P-21, but all he gave me was his own sympathetic gaze. Not a shake of the head or a nod of advice. Not a word. This he was leaving entirely up to me. I returned my eyes to her face. “You’ve been there for me so many times, even with all my mistakes and screw ups. I don’t want to lose you.”

“And I’ll be there for you in the future,” Glory said quietly, “as a friend. But you and I… we don’t… have anything anymore. I’ve always been carried along, swept in your wake, left behind, and picked back up again.” She covered my mouth with her wing. “And I know you do like me and care for me. And I’m very thankful for that. But that… that isn’t love. You have a deeper connection with P-21 then you will ever have with me. And I need someone I can have that connection with. It isn’t going to be with you.” She sniffed and leaned up, kissing my cheek softly, and then pushed my hooves off her shoulders.

She started to walk out the door, and I just stared after her. Then I blurted. “Glory, do you love me?”

She paused and looked over her shoulder at me, smiling calmly amid the wet on her cheeks. “No,” was all she said, and then stepped out of Star House. Her name caught in my throat as I struggled to say whatever magic phrase would change her mind. Something. Anything… The quiet click of the door was like a shearing blade right through my heart. Slowly I bowed my head, and tears began pattering by my hooves as I thought of all the things that could have been… that should have been…

Damn it. It wasn’t fair…

“I don’t know if I can keep doing this,” I said faintly as I stared at the closed door. “I just…What did I do wrong?”

“That’s not a question I can answer. Glory had a point. She could have waited a little bit before bringing it up, but she did.” He came

up beside me. “It’s not easy being the one left behind all the time. And if you were going to dive into Tartarus, would you be okay with her coming with you?”

I closed my eyes and saw her wing fall off. Heard her anguished screams begging to die. “No. No, I wouldn’t.”

“She knows that, Blackjack. We all do. And I know exactly how you feel because I feel the same way with Scotch. Part of me wants to tie her up and keep her here where it’s safe, but I can’t do that. Not if I wanted to keep her as a daughter.” He smiled and patted my back.

“Do you love me, P-21?” I asked as I looked at him.

He blinked a little, seemed to think a moment or two, and then nodded once. “In a way, maybe. It’s not a love I’m used to. I think you’re the only mare I could ever feel that way about.”

“Why?” I echoed her question, thinking that if I heard his reasons, maybe I could find some way to fix this mess.

“She’s right. We’ve been through a lot together. We have a common background. We’ve suffered the same troubles. We have lots of the same feelings. Lots of the same fears.” He sighed and nuzzled my cheek lightly. “Like for instance, I know what you need right now to get through this.”

Nothing was going to help me get through this. Ever. “Like what?” I asked skeptically. He gazed warmly into my eyes with just a look and I blinked. “What?” Then I felt my insides give a twitch. “Oh… ”

* * *

I’ve been called a bad pony for a wide variety of reasons. As I lay there in bed, I wondered if having rebound sex less than two minutes after the breakup was a valid one. P-21 had taken me upstairs and systematically eradicated my ability to hate on myself with a deluge of dearly missed endorphins. As upset as I was about what had happened between Glory and myself, P-21 had simply given me such a wonderful slurry of sensation that I couldn’t hate on myself right now.

One thing was clear: Stygius had lost his crown. Over the last two hours, P-21 had bit, licked, nibbled, stroked, sucked, thrust, pinned, and spurted me into a deliciously thoughtless lump of exquisitely spent mare. Then, so I couldn’t hate on myself for getting something good after breaking up with Glory, he’d taken a page from her book

and tied me down and did me so that I both ached and melted with him. LittlePip once talked about thirty something orgasms? Well, if I ever talked to her again, I'd have to compare notes, because the way my... *everything* was buzzing, I couldn't tell if I'd had dozens of small ones or if the one he'd given me a little less than two hours ago just hadn't ended yet. I was slimy and sweaty and achy and creamy and half a dozen things besides, but one thing I wasn't doing was crying my eyes out.

"Feeling better?" he asked into my ear as I lay slack on the bed. I could only nod my head, given that the bridle didn't let me talk. "Need more?" he asked, touching my wonderfully sore posterior and making me groan. I finally shook my head. Tempting as it might be, I couldn't do this forever. I had enemies to beat and… stuff...

He began to bite slowly down the side of my neck. "Are you sure?"

Well... maybe one more hour.

* * *

Okay. I was positively glazed and had difficulty walking, but I needed water, then to use the bathroom, and to wash. "I dunno how you did that," I slurred. "That... how?"

"Practice. Lots of practice and learning to pace myself. And I had some of those healing potions set aside just to help me push past the refractory period," he said calmly, not quite as messy as me but definitely in need of a wash too. "It's a little cheat we use when we're pushing round five, six, seven... "

I slipped out of the bed, feeling him drip out of me, white on white. He'd removed the bit, but the black tack and harness was still tight on me, and I couldn't summon the focus just yet to take it off. Ugh... my hoof for a hot shower. "Are you okay with what we did?" I asked, looking back at him. The question made him frown thoughtfully. If his fur hadn't been spiked in erratic ways, he'd have looked far more moody.

Finally, he smiled. "If it'd been any other mare... no. No in a big way. But it was with you, so I think it's fine," he replied evenly, then raised a hoof. "If, however, I feel myself getting shaky or panicked, I'll let you know." He stretched, and I found my eyes lingering on his athletic, toned rump, making my insides twitch again, but no! I had meetings to do and stuff. Of the six tiny mares

in my head, one suggested one more round, one said enough was enough, one couldn't stop giggling, one was taking notes, one offered critique and pointers for next time, and the last had her eyes covered with her wings as she blushed into her hooves.

"Come on. Let's go clean off. We can clean this, too," I said as I gestured to the harness he'd bound me up in. Walking stiffly, I stepped out the door.

"Blackjack, I should go first. I know I heard somepony downstairs a few hours ago. What if somepony came back?" he asked as I walked along the balcony. With my sweaty, sticky mane in my eyes, it was hard to see as I trotted down the stairs.

"Oh please, who could–" I began to say when a throat cleared. I froze and scraped my hoof across my bangs. I stared down at Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Stygius, Tenebra, Goldenblood, and Whisper all sitting in my living room. Goldenblood was at the foot of the stairs, one brow arched as the others all stared at me. Velvet seemed to be struggling to speak. Tenebra's eyes popped wide as a little trickle of blood dripped down her lip.

"Told you she'd totally come down the stairs like that. Pay up!" Whisper laughed, smacking Tenebra's shoulder in her glee. The batpony wobbled like she was made of wood.

"LittlePip never did that," Velvet said stiffly, cheeks burning.

"Th' harness might look good on you though," Calamity replied casually, giving Velvet a wink.

"Might look better on you," Velvet countered, her cheeks flushed as she regarded me. "I do hope you'll forgive us, but we let ourselves in. And you were occupied and... ahem... " They seemed to be waiting for me to do something.

Walking quite stiffly down to the bottom, I gave Velvet Remedy an easy smile. "Oh. No worries. I mean, I'm glad all of you are here. P-21 was just helping me with some problems I'd had." I gave a deep sigh. "On the plus side, it was really good, on the negative side, my rear is really raw." I beamed a smile at all of them. "Do you mind if I wash up, or do you want to talk first?" I said as I wiped some semen from my muzzle.

Calamity and Velvet both gaped at me as little white gobs fell behind me... drip... .drip... drip... My eyes went from one to the other as the silence continued. "What?" I asked in bafflement.

"Dear Goddesses, she's like the anti-Pip," Velvet murmured, eyes wide in a mix of wonder and horror.

“What? It’s just semen and some bondage gear,” I said with a shrug and not even the barest hint of a blush. “I’ll be right back when I’ve stopped oozing out my backside,” I said as I headed to the door. There was a thump as I opened it, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Tenebra passed out on the floor. Whisper seemed unable to breathe in her wild mirth. I gave P-21 a baffled look as we stepped out into the rain. *Surfacer ponies... who could figure them out?*

* * *

After P-21 and I washed up and put the fun away and he’d put his hat back on, I felt... better. Guilty. Upset. Confused. I’d probably be a sobbing mess when it all came back on me. But right now, I was stable enough to do what had to be done. Our little troupe headed over towards Blueblood Manor. Velvet’s alicorn friends cast the rain shielding spell to keep us dry and let us talk. They were all beautiful and regal, but it just wasn't the same. I wondered how Psalm was doing. Most of my head, though, was occupied thinking about who might show up to the meeting and running through what I’d say. For all I knew, it would be just a dozen or two ponies curious about the Blackjack impersonator.

The weather, which had been hammering down, now let up into a very un-Hoofingtonlike drizzle. The almost continuous lightning strikes had halted. The winds had died down to an eerie stillness. I didn’t like it. If the clouds disappeared, I might have a heart attack.

“Please tell me that this nice weather is LittlePip’s doing,” I asked Velvet plaintively.

“It’s LittlePip’s doin’,” Calamity said, straight-faced. Velvet glared at him, and the bandaged stallion smirked. “Wut? She said please.”

“LittlePip hasn’t found a way to cut through the interference. Homage was working on a tower with Ditzy. Number thirteen, I think. She might have found a way and just not forwarded the message to us yet.” She looked over at me. “She should be at the meeting. She can tell us then.” She glanced at P-21 talking with Calamity, the former occasionally letting his eyes wander over the oblivious latter, and asked in a quieter voice. “Are you okay?”

“Been a long time since I could answer that with a yes,” I said with a small smile. I checked behind me. Whisper was forcing Stygius and Tenebra to have a discussion about me and semen. Goldenblood walked behind them, silently, eyes downcast. I

glanced over at Velvet. “Can I ask you a question? Why do you love Calamity?”

The question seemed to surprise and even amuse her. “I don’t know. It was the wings, originally.”

“Yeah, there’s just something about fliers,” I said with a rueful smile, making Calamity and Stygius nicker and P-21 roll his eyes.

“Not that,” Velvet laughed, then paused and reconsidered. “Well, not entirely that. He’s… good. A protector. Loyal. True. I don’t have to worry about him.”

“So if you met a second pony who was just as good, you’d love him too?” I asked, in complete seriousness. A number of emotions ran over her features with embarrassment winning out.

“Well?” Calamity asked with a grin. “I got to say I’m a mite curious myself.”

“No,” Velvet Remedy stated firmly.

“And… if he asked you to stay behind? To keep you safe?” I asked delicately.

“Why would he do that?” Velvet Remedy asked with a baffled smile. “He’s learned I can take care of myself.”

“But what if it’s something that would kill you? Or hurt you. Or was different than what you wanted?” I looked at the brown stallion. “What would you do if she died? Or if he died?” I asked her. Both their smiles disappeared as I looked back at the ground. “I just didn’t want her to die.”

Velvet nudged my shoulder. “No one does. I guess we just try not to think about it. I saw Steelhooves’s head cut off right in front of me. It hurt. It almost changed who I was. And if it had been Calamity or LittlePip… maybe it might have. That’s the price paid for being in love.”

“And it ain’t just you that has ta’ pay it. Takes two ta tussle, tango, ‘n’ tic-tac-toe, as they say,” he said with a little nod.

Something in my face must have shown the shame, fear, and anxiety in my chest. Her amusement faded. “Hey, Blackjack. Are you… ” she paused as I grimaced. “Something happened between you and Glory, didn’t it?” I gave a little nod, and she sighed and glanced at P-21. “When you both… Well… I mean… With you and your… ah… well… orientation… I didn’t know if something had happened.”

“It’s alright. It’s nothing I didn’t see coming a mile away,” I lied… or did I? After all, I knew she was upset. I’d blamed it on her

transformation into Rainbow Dash. On her being from the sky. On... everything but me. “That was vigorous rebound sex. Good for the endorphins. I’ll pay for it in guilt later.”

“Is this separation permanent?” Velvet asked with a sympathetic little smile. The question made me sick to my stomach.

“Probably should be,” I said, feeling that ache inside my chest. “I have things I have to do, and she’ll be better off with somepony else. Honestly, this should have happened long ago.” I faked a smile as happy as I could. Think of sexy, happy inner thigh nibbles. Don’t think about anything else. Pretend like nothing had changed. Self-delusion was so familiar that I could step into like it was nothing.

But it wasn’t nothing. Part of me asked what was wrong with me. The other part questioned what was wrong with her. Part of me was afraid to find the answer, and another wondered if it was worthwhile.

‘Not the most focused pony in the wasteland, are you, Blackjack?’ I thought to myself.

Velvet sighed as we climbed up the hill towards Blueblood Manor. Or what remained of it. Between the Crusaders, the Harbingers, and Deus, most of the once-immense building was smashed. Even the wing that had held Vanity was gone. I started to feel both sad and upset. Silly, given all that had happened. Battlefields didn’t respect the dead. Still, I would have liked one thing to remain sacred.

Then I spotted a stone slab beside the road that hadn’t been there months ago. About six feet high, the flat face had been worked smooth by what I suspected was an arcane disintegration beam. Then somepony had cut in the face:

Vanity

Here lies a noble heart

Goodnight, Sweet Prince

I approached the slab slowly, my eyes tracing the carvings. Somepony had taken great pains to cut those letters an inch deep into the granite. At the base was a smaller phrase: ‘In Appreciation’.

Then more than a dozen names. I read each one over and over again. “We wanted to remember him,” croaked a ghoul’s voice, and I started and looked at the teal ghoul pegasus in maid’s livery, looking as dry and desiccated as a feather duster even in the humid Hoofington air. Harpica smiled softly. “It’s too easy to forget some days. At least this way, his name won’t be forgotten.”

I choked as I regarded the stone. Forgotten. When I died, how would I be remembered? Would any raise a stone with my name upon it? Probably not, and if they did, it would be undeserved. To be forgotten was true death. With flesh rotted and bones pulverized to dust and the great histories lost to the passage of time, what of the person who had lived? Or had they ever lived at all? There were twelve names on Vigilance’s mouthgrip, but what did I know of the first ten but their names? Almost nothing. And when Vigilance rusted away, would anyone ever know?

“Blackjack?” P-21 asked as I trembled, feeling all those happy endorphins falling away. No. Keep it together, Blackjack. Fake it! Smile.

“I’m fine! I’m… fine… ” I said as I struggled to regain my balance. I was in control. Or if I wasn’t, then I had to act like I was. Just as good. “Just fine.” Doubt lingered in his eyes, but he gave a small encouraging smile.

“He would have been honored,” Goldenblood rasped silently from behind me. “I never knew a pony more inappropriately named.” Harpica blinked her milky eyes at the scarred unicorn but then gave a happy little squeak at the compliment.

“Thank you,” she said as she looked at our party. “I was told to wait out here and bring you to the others when you’re ready.”

“Did Homage, Ditzy, and Life Bloom make it back?” Velvet asked the teal ghoul.

“I believe so, ma’am. Those are your friends from out west?” she asked. Velvet nodded. “Ah yes. They did ten minutes ago. They’re waiting in the garden.”

“Garden?” I looked across the ruined manor and spotted the ballroom… the roof collapsed in due to a tank being driven through it.

“It was the only place with enough space. The manor is a terrible mess. Those Crusaders were absolutely ghastly. Children can be so destructive at times,” the ghoul said in her whispery rasp. True, and having a battle and a tank driving through it too had done

absolutely nothing for the structure. The exterior walls were still intact, but the interior rooms had collapsed in on themselves. There were still some signs of what the rooms had been used for, but I guessed that, in a year or two, the manor would be just another ruin dotting the Wasteland.

Provided Horizons didn't kill us all. Didn't kill Velvet and Calamity. Didn't kill Glory. Didn't kill P-21. Didn't... didn't...

"Blackjack?" P-21 said in alarm as I swayed. For some reason, I couldn't quite breathe. It was all going to fall apart. I was going to get everypony killed. I'd fucked up too badly for too many reasons and I couldn't do it! My heart thundered in my chest. What was I even doing? "Blackjack!" P-21 shouted.

"Anxiety attack... " I heard Velvet say, but it sounded like it was coming from far away. "She needs to go back to Star House. This is bad."

"No!" I choked, trying so hard to keep it together. There wasn't any more time. No more time for anything. Anything at all.

Then P-21 held me and murmured softly in my ears, "Breathe, Blackjack. Just breathe. You're fine. We'll find a way to get through this. Just breathe." Somehow I started to actually take breaths rather than make choking noises.

"You said you'd kill me if I ever fucked up," I whispered, pressing my face into his chest. I could hear his own heartbeat, slow and steady and sure. "I've gotten everyone killed."

"We aren't dead just yet," he told me quietly. "Now just breathe and calm down."

It took me about three or four minutes before my heart resumed a normal rate and I no longer felt like I was going to pass out. Throw up, maybe, but not pass out. I wiped my eyes and gave a rueful smile to Whisper. "Must be funny. Seeing big bad Security losing it."

"Eh... " she tilted a wing back and forth. "Would be if your life wasn't so fucked up. Way I look at it, you're not psycho or dead, so there's got to be something going for you." I actually laughed a little at that.

"Better?" P-21 murmured.

"Yeah," I said, and together we continued around the side of the manor towards the back. There was a strange murmuring noise, like a babbling brook or overflowing storm drain. "Hopefully enough that I can address all ten people that actually came to hear me."

“Ten?” Harpica asked, sounding alarmed.

“Fine. Twenty then,” I said with a roll of my eyes as we approached a gate in desiccated hedgerow. “I mean, who in their right mind is going to go way out here for a probably-just-another-imposter Black…jack… ” I trailed off as I stepped through.

That wasn’t twenty.

That wasn’t a hundred.

It was everypony.

Near as I could tell, everypony I knew sat on the stone steps of a classical amphitheatre. Stone columns decorated with proud, cracked unicorn stallions framed the stage. One wall of the dead hedge had been crushed flat, letting Deus point his turrets in. I wondered if that was intentional: making sure the rowdier guests behaved. The various ponies entertained themselves in a variety of ways. Bottlecap, Charity, and Finders Keepers seemed to have set up an impromptu swap meet with the Collegiate and Society. The Zodiacs appeared to be talking weapons with the Halfhearts and Flash Fillies. A small group of Highlanders had a jug band and were selling hooch to ghouls from Meatlocker. The Burner Boys were running gambling games with some Thunderhead ponies and a hoofful Steel Rangers. An enterprising trio of Crusaders in the back ran a little food booth and were giving a radroach burger to a sand dog. A trio of hellhounds lingered in the back, with everyone giving the beasts a wide berth.

But for all the busy spectacles the one that stuck out most to me was the simple fact that no one was killing anyone else.

“What are they all doing here?” I gasped.

“You said you wanted everyone who could come. Once word got out that the Security at the Society was a fraud, and that the Lightbringer’s friends and Security’s team vouched for this one… well, suddenly everyone wanted to be here. Between alicorn teleportation, Enclave pegasi, and the clearing weather, this was the place to be,” Velvet Remedy said with a sweep of her hoof.

“They’re all people you helped in one way or another, Blackjack,” P-21 said quietly. I could pick out Windclop and a few other familiar faces from Meatlocker, more alicorns than had arrived with Velvet, griffin Talons from back west… “They all want to return the favor.”

I just stared and felt everything spinning out around me. “I need… I need a moment.”

“Take a few. Say an hour? As long as there’s food and entertainment, we can wait,” P-21 said.

Velvet Remedy and Calamity trotted to meet Homage, Ditzy, and Life Bloom over by the band. Harpica went to mind the foals near the Crusader food stand. Not having a clue what else to do, P-21 and I trotted over to Deus. A camera swiveled down to me, and I gave a shaky little smile. “Hey, big guy. It’s me. Mind if we talk?”

Deus’s engine let out a soft purr and the tank’s rear hatch popped open. I carefully wiggled in, P-21 slipping in behind me with far more ease. In the middle of the tank was the glass jar containing the metal-reinforced brain of the stallion. More cameras whirred to orient on me, and I gave a small smile. “Yeah. I’m really Blackjack. Security the reboot. I’m sure I’ll be shot and mangled all to hell inside a week.” I regarded the jar. It’d been a while since we’d parted ways. “Do you have something you need to tell me?”

Deus’s cameras all bobbed up and down in unison. His aphasia might be killing his speech, but he’d adapted better than I probably would have to being stuck inside a war machine. I considered; I’d gotten better at memory magic since we’d last met. Maybe. “Is it okay if I go into your mind and find the memory of what you want to talk about?” The cameras paused and then moved slowly up and down.

Glancing at P-21, I pressed my horn to the glass. Not quite the same as a pony, but it wasn’t like I jabbed my horn into their brains. I concentrated, felt the connection forming, and waited. I had plenty of experience with mindplay at this point. I felt the world fall away as I dove in deeper than I ever had.

Deus’s mind wasn’t like sinking into a pool of images. I floated in the middle of a plain of slaughtered zebras like a white ghost, looking at a colossal pony caught in the workings of an immense factory. A gargantuan collection of pain and rage and disappointment. I had no clue where to begin as the pony screamed and writhed against the steel pinning him in. Every few seconds, the gears tried to turn, biting deeper into him. But he didn’t have a body anymore! I recalled Glory or Triage telling me brains can’t feel pain. So why...

When I’d lost my legs, I could still feel them. Just because they were gone didn’t mean they weren’t ‘real’ to my mind. Could all this pain be the same thing? I floated over to one immense gear and gripped it with my hooves. The thing was my size, and in the real

world I'd never be able to budge it, but this was the mind. In the mind, will counted more than muscle, and willpower was just a nice way of calling a pony stubborn. I had stubborn coming out my ass.

With several pulls and yanks, I dislodged the gear. Instantly a deluge of words hammered into me as an explosion of gore erupted from his side. 'No good rapist. Fucking rapist. Rapist scum. Rapist asshole. Deserves to die. Deserves to suffer. Just put a bullet in his head.' I pushed through, forcing the gear free of the rest. Rapists fucked up and it was easy to say that all of them were scum, but nopony deserved this. I latched my hooves on another chewing pair and pulled with all my strength. 'Not my boy. Not my child. My son'd never do this.' hammered into me. Well, I'd done some things my mom would be ashamed of too. I pushed through the pain till those toothed wheels tore free.

Again and again I swooped around him, attacking the metal that encased him. I grabbed one and a single word screamed across the plain. 'Cunt!' It was accompanied by the images of dozens of different mares who had rejected and hurt him, hitting me like a sledgehammer. Well, I'd been a cunt in the past too. I strained and pulled as hard as I could, the gear groaning before it tore free in a waterfall of gore and a scream of rage and frustration. I seized another and heard Big Macintosh say solemnly, 'I'm right disappointed in you.' Well, I could empathize with that as well.

I seized a gear and was instantly hit by sensations of all the mares he'd violated. I could feel him going inside them. I nearly cut the connection then and there, but I was here to help him. Then, after several seconds I realized something... he wasn't getting off. It was as if he was just beating them up inside with his cock. I couldn't forgive that... but I could understand why he had done it. He'd deserved punishment, but not this. A little empathy would have gone a long way towards helping Doof be a better pony.

Suddenly the machinery ripping into him shivered and began to come apart. Massive beams and girders began to collapse all around him as the crushed pony within forced his way free. I backed off as he burst cables and bent steel. Finally, with a clanging clamor of an ironworks being dropped, his head burst free, and he screamed a single word that echoed across that plain of carnage.

Not 'Cunt'.

'Why?'

As he sat there, gargantuan and alone, the gray stallion sobbed and

bled. I hesitated, then slowly approached his colossal face. “I don’t know why, Doof. I’m sorry, but I don’t know why anypony put you through what you suffered,” I answered. I was just the last in a long life of pain and suffering. “I just know you want to be a better pony, and I just want to give you the chance.”

He sobbed, blubbering in the midst of that plain. Finally he wiped his eyes. “I don’t hurt so bad no more. You do that?”

“I think so?” I said with a nervous grin.

“Why?” he asked as he looked up at my glowing, ghostlike form.

“‘Cause... who wouldn’t?” I asked back awkwardly.

“Nopony, if they think you’re scum,” he answered back, his voice deep and rumbling. “If you’re scum, nopony will give you the time of day. They’d rather you died than give a bit of help, ‘cause you fucked up, and you deserve it.”

“Well, I don’t care if you are scum. Nopony deserves that.”

The massive Doof just stared at me. He still had metal spurs and shrapnel embedded in him. Some of them just went too deep for me to pull out. I just knew it. There was a limit to how much I could do for him here. “Rampage is in trouble,” he rumbled.

“Yes, she is,” I said. Then I balked. “Do you mean in general or something specific?”

He pointed ahead of him, and in the air a massive window appeared. The image was grainy, as if captured through a camera. It showed Rampage confronting Cognitum outside the Elysium country club and... what in the world had she done to my body? On top of the two beam rifles she'd added to her sides, she was flanked by two small hovering robots sporting a long beam weapon each. And she’d added spikes. Spikes! They covered the little filly and the cutie mark etchings and made her look utterly ridiculous. Had those been added before or after her little speech?

The striped mare started out grinning. Then snarling. Then she lunged at Cognitum. The cybermare stopped her calmly and efficiently with a raised hoof, then telekinetically lifted her and slammed her once, twice, thrice into the ground. Then the hovering robots disintegrated her.

Suddenly a targeting reticle appeared on Cognitum, and Deus charged towards her. Cognitum gave a chill stare at the tank. I could almost imagine her calculating precisely how to strike to destroy it in a single blow. Suddenly a filly Rampage rose up and threw herself in the path of the machine. The vehicle immediately

halted.

"No, Deus! I need her!" Rampage sobbed. "Stop, you big idiot!"

"Interesting," Cognitum purred as Deus ground to a halt. Cognitum smiled down at the little filly. "You will get what you want when I decide to give it. Perhaps in a century or two. But let me assure you that if I die, you'll have eons to contemplate your meaningless, worthless existence, Rampage. I am the only one who can give you the death you seek."

Cognitum trotted away with a satisfied smirk that made me want to run her over with a tank too. But something bothered me. I turned to the mountain of gray and regret. "Why did you care about Rampage?" It would have been great if it'd been about keeping her safe or something, but I suspected that it was something else.

He lifted his great brown eyes. "Because... she's my daughter."

"What?" I asked in bafflement. "She's... how? How do you know?"

More memory windows. Wow, was I actually inventing vocabulary for this mind magic stuff? In it, a board of ponies faced Doof. Vanity was on the far side. The unicorn mare in judge robes in the middle slapped a gavel sharply. "Request for visitation rights denied. The court sees no reason to grant any privileges to a prisoner with such a contemptible record of behavior." The ponies behind the board began to file out.

Doof lunged forward, and four guards wrestled him back. "Let me see her!" he roared. "I'll fuck all of you cunts, let me see my daughter!"

Vanity stopped at the exit. The white stallion appeared... tired. There was gray at his temples and bags under his eyes. He glanced contemptuously at Doof. "Give it up, Doof. In twenty years you'll be free. Sooner if the M.o.P. gives you psychological adjustments. Stop tormenting Twist with these endless appeals."

"In twenty years she won't be my daughter anymore. She'll... she just be some stranger! I want to see her. I want to know what she looks like," Doof said, pulling the guards forward as he leaned towards the unicorn.

Vanity stared at him flatly, then drew from his vest a small photograph. He levitated it in front of Doof's face. In it were Twist, Shujaa, and a little filly with a curly mane. "Peppermint favors her mother," Vanity said coolly.

"Can I have that? Please, let me have that, Vanity!" Doof begged.

For a second, the unicorn seemed about to relent. Then one of the

guards shoved Vanity aside. “Out of the way, we need to get the prisoner back to his cell,” the mare said sharply. Vanity hesitated, then returned the picture to his pocket, backing away as a squad of guards surrounded Doof, trying to get him out the door.

“You cunts!” he roared as he was born away. “I’ll kill all of you! All of you!”

The window faded and disappeared. “The stripes are different, but I’ll never forget my little filly.” A dozen more windows opened up, some showing a desolate Arloste in the Stadium. A filly Rampage taking out a raider four times her size. An image of the mare pitting a radroach against Gorgon’s, and then when she lost, wrestling the monsterpony instead. An image of her getting fitted for her armor. I could almost imagine Doof looking on.

“You never told her?” I asked.

“I was Deus. Baddest bastard birthed in the Wasteland, and I didn’t have a shred of proof. Not like they can do paternity tests anymore. So I tried to make sure she had a place in the Reapers. Besides, if I’d gone soft on her, it would have come back to hurt both of us. Reapers don’t do soft,” he said low and slowly. “Besides, who wants to know they had a monster for a father? Better I just stay back.”

“She would have wanted to know,” I answered.

“It wouldn’t do any good now. I can’t even hold her like this,” he muttered. “I just think... I think she’s in a lot of trouble. I want her to be happy, and I can’t help her like this. Can you promise me... can you promise to help her?”

“I don’t need to. I will help her. She’s my friend,” I said firmly. “I won’t give up on her just because she screwed up.”

“Even though she stabbed you in the back?” Deus asked with a small smile. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“I’m really... really... really stupid,” I said with a hapless grin. “I want my friends back, and I want everypony okay. And yeah, I know it’s immature and naive and... I just want it that way. Call me an idiot.”

Deus stared at me with that same look Rampage always used to give me, then slowly shook his colossal head. “Be careful, Cunt,” he said, the word about as affectionate as he could manage.

“You too, Doof,” I answered, then cut the connection. I opened my eyes and sighed. Well, as much of a screwup as I was, I could at least still help somepony a little.

I started to make my way back towards the hatch when I heard

P-21 say sharply outside, “No. You need to go somewhere else right now, Glory.”

I froze, then slowly peeked out to see the pair arguing behind the tank. “But I need to tell her–” Glory began.

“You’ve told her enough already,” P-21 cut her off coldly. “Really. ‘Why do you love me?’ Isn’t it enough that you are loved? Period? Only you would want to quantify something as elusive and ephemeral as love!”

“P-21, I–” Glory tried again, clearly flustered.

“No. Not you. You cut it off. You could have had her wrapped around your hoof. It should have been you trying to deal with the shitstorm going on in her life. But no, you had to pile it on with another shitstorm, and if there’s anypony that needs shit squared in her life, it’s Blackjack!” he stormed on, pointing a hoof away. “Just get out of here. She needs you like a baton to the kneecap.”

She just stood there, her face stern. “I know you love her, P-21.”

P-21 paled as if she’d slapped him. “I also know that as long as she and I are together, you and her wouldn’t be. It took three bottles of champagne to get us in the same bed. Not a good sign for an open relationship, even if it would make Blackjack happy. I know myself and I’m not going to pretend I’d be okay with something I’m not.”

Ugh... but it would have been such a simple solution! Why couldn’t anything be simple? “You couldn’t have waited till this was over? Let her do what she has to and then break her heart?” P-21 muttered.

“There is no good time. You two have a baby together now. You’re... ” Glory started to tear up. “Do you know how much it hurt to hear that? You two have something I’ll never have with her. And sure, I could pretend that the foal is mine or adopt or something, but it’ll never be the same as what the two of you share.” She hissed in pain and shook her head. “Better I find some mare I can share that with. Some mare who won’t make me wonder if I’m second best. Who won’t try and make me stay back, even if there’s risk.”

“I don’t know if Blackjack even loves me,” P-21 said uncertainly. “We had sex. Love... is different with Blackjack.”

“You’ll find a way,” Glory said with a small smile. “And what I wanted to say was that Rain– I mean, Mare Do Well has spotted the *Blizzard* and *Sirocco* to the southwest over the Luna Space Center. There’s a chance that Hoarfrost and Afterburner might be working with Cognitum. That’s all.”

She turned and had started away when P-21 stammered, “Glory!” She paused and looked back at him, one brow raised. “I’m sorry it turned out like this.”

Again, that sad smile I hated so much. “You love her. You don’t have anything to be sorry about.” P-21 stared after her, his face troubled and helpless.

I ducked back into the tank, breathing hard. He loved me? Love? Captial-L love? The reactions in my head varied from ‘Whoo hoo’, to ‘we need to carefully consider this’, to ‘aww yeah’, to ‘now calm down, Sugarcube’. But the overwhelming feeling I had rolling through me was...

Huh?

How did that happen? Like me as a friend, maybe. I could understand that. We’d been through a lot together. But Love? Love. LOOOOOVE! El oh vee ee... No matter how I bounced the word off my brain it came back as a raging ball of doubt and uncertainty. How could he give it? How could I deserve it? Did I even want it at this point? And that horrible, nasty little ‘why’ popping up right, left, and center.

I closed my eyes, banging the back of my head against the hatch rim as I sat there in the tank. Why. Why why why? I had way too much going on right this second. I’d just have to focus on getting things with Cognitum finished. Once that was done, we’d have the rest of our lives to talk about love and family and... a wonderful life I could only barely imagine right now.

I slipped out of the hatch and gave P-21 as fake a smile as I could manage. “Hey. Somepony was talking about the Space Center?” I gave an exaggerated look around the hillside behind the tank, ignoring the purple tail disappearing around the corner.

P-21 blinked and stared at me. “Oh. Yeah. There’s word that two Raptors were seen over by the Luna Space Center. The *Sirocco* and *Blizzard*. Might be they’ve hooked up with Cognitum.” He paused, uncertainty gnawing at him. “Blackjack... ”

I hurried on before he got to a conversation that I just wasn’t going to be able to have. Not without a lot less stress and a lot more time for sex, cuddling, and soul searching. “Oh, that might be a problem. Well, we’ll deal with it. That’s what I do. Deal with things.” I let out a hearty laugh that I hoped didn’t sound like I was going to vomit. The laugh withered away as I grinned desperately at him. Nope. Not going to have it. Not in a million ye– “Do you really love me?” I

asked plaintively.

Luna damn you, Blackjack.

He gaped at me, his mouth moving silently. “You heard… ” he finally muttered, lowering his head so his mane obscured his face.

“I heard,” I said with a sigh as I sat down behind the tank and he joined me, flopping down with a sigh. “Love… you… me… yeah… ” I muttered lamely. “If you want to put off this conversation till later I’d be just fi–”

“Yes, I do,” he said simply, whacking my emotions across the knee with a baton. “While you were gone. Even before you left, I think, a little.” He lifted his head and smiled at me. “You’re not the mare who lived in 99 anymore, Blackjack. You’re… different. Better. You know things and you’ve been through things. So… yeah. I really think I do.” He swallowed hard and then asked, “Do you feel the same?”

“Love… ” I sighed and then made a face. “I hate that word. Looooove. Wuv. We need more words for it. Like the kind of love when you really like a person, and the kind of love when you feel like you’d die without them.” I slid sideways and rest my head on his shoulder. “I don’t know anymore. I was in love with Glory… but now I don’t know what I had with her. I like you a lot, P-21. And losing you… the idea just hurts. Is that love?”

“I don’t know. This is new for me too. I feel for you like I felt for him. That’s all I can say.” He gave a little shrug and kissed my ear.

I took a deep breath. “Well, I suppose you won’t get jealous if I have a three way with Stygius and his sister.”

He chuckled, “Why would I? I’d definitely like to be there, though. That Stygius has a backside that makes my mouth water.”

“He’s so adorable when you nibble him down there too. And he has this tongue trick that makes it feel like he’s licking right through you straight to your tonsi–” I started to say when a stallion cleared his throat loudly beside us, and glanced over at Big Daddy. The bony old stallion definitely wasn’t looking too hot after getting blasted by my old body. “Oh, hiya. Come, join us. We were just talking about sex.”

“Oh, I heard,” he said with a sigh. “But it just don’t have the same zing anymore when ya need ta take a potion ta have it.” He stared gravely down at me for several seconds. “I need you to come join us. We’re havin’ a war council.” I shared a serious moment with P-21, and then we both nodded and got up.

Some things were bigger than our love...

"So, do you believe I'm Blackjack?" I asked him as we walked around the hedgerow surrounding the amphitheatre.

"Maybe," he said as he glanced at me with his starry eyes. "When I saw ya before, it was blood and stars. The other you was just blood. You... you're nothin' but stars. So I dunno what ta believe. But you askin' is better than the other you demandin'. That's a start."

"So where are we going?" I asked, looking around, not sure where a 'war council' could be held.

"That big dome thing over that way," he said as he pointed a hoof off to the far side of the amphitheatre. I peered through a gap that opened up to the stage and spotted a large gray rotunda also decorated with unicorn stallions. He and P-21 kept trotting around, but I stopped and frowned.

"Hey, it's just quicker to go this way," I said as I trotted out on stage. The pair of stallions gaped at me as I walked out.

Why was it so silent all of a sudden?

I froze in place as one of Deus's spotlights illuminated me, suddenly aware of dozens... perhaps hundreds of eyes drilling into me. I glanced back at P-21 and Big Daddy, the latter with his jaw hanging and the former covering his face with a hoof. In the middle of the stage was a microphone that Homage and Scotch Tape were working on. Both of them stared at me with equally baffled expressions. Time seemed to freeze as I walked slowly over to it. "Um... hi?" I said, and from Deus's speakers came my magnified voice, with a squeal of feedback.

Scotch Tape jumped down and did something to some equipment in the pit in front of the stage, and the feedback died away. "Um... thanks for coming. Really appreciate it. Um... " I peered over at P-21 as he mouthed something I guessed was 'get off the stage!'

"It's a fake!" somepony in the crowd shouted.

"Another one of those damned impersonators!" yelled another.

"You don't even have her cutie mark!" guffawed a third. "Get her off the stage!"

"Now wait a minute," I said, glad for the authority of the microphone, cutting off the hecklers. "I am Blackjack, also the pony known as Security. We are all here because this place... this horrible, dangerous place, is our home. It's a home that is under attack by enemies seeking to either control us or destroy us." The heckling died away as I took a deep breath. If I stopped, I'd

probably never get going again.

"All of you know me. For six months, I've travelled all over the Hoof. Some of you know me personally, others through reputation. A few of you might have even fought against me. I'm that idiotic pony who always tries to do better. Who tries to give second chances. Who refuses to be an executioner. Stupid, I know. But stupid that doesn't stay down tends to stand out.

"Now, some of you have seen another me that came out of the Core talking about unity. That everypony must work together and follow her lead. Has Security ever done that? Have I ever stood before any group and told them that they had to do what I say or die? No! ... Well... not if you don't count slavers. But otherwise... " Okay, keep it together, Blackjack. "Anyway! That is not what I believe. If anyone is to stand with me, I want them to do it of their own free will. Because together, we are stronger than any of us alone."

There was a softer murmuring at this and I bowed my head a little. "I know it's a hard thing to believe. It's an even harder thing to prove. All I ask is the opportunity to do so. Because I *am* Blackjack, and that other over-cyberized tyrant is the impostor. And if there is some way I can convince you, I'll do it."

"There is," Triage said loudly as she, alongside Boo, trotted onto the stage with a metal box hovering above her. "Blackjack's story is that Cognitum stole her original body, and she ended up in a blank... a magical copy. Well, I happen to have a test for that." There was more murmuring, some of the crowd angry but others curious. She arched a brow. "Anyone doubt the Collegiate running a scientific test here? Anyone?"

"Science sucks," someone in the back of the crowd yelled.

Triage stared flatly in the direction the voice had come from. "Duly noted," she replied monotonically. She set down the box, opened it, and drew out a bucket, a radroach, and a Sparkle-Cola bottle full of rainbow fluid.

She hefted the bottle before the crowd. "This is pure taint. You all know what it does. Tumors. Deformities. Madness. Death. And in case you wondering if I'm lying... " She dropped the radroach into the bucket, then, turning her face away and covering her mouth with a hoof, popped the top of the bottle and dribbled a little of the rainbow glop onto the insect.

The radroach gave a shriek, and then a multitude of legs, much more than a dozen, began to thrash and wiggle out the top. The

bucket rocked wildly as something with tendrils or antennae tried to wiggle free. Triage pulled out a beam pistol and fired into the bucket repeatedly. It took several shots before the thing disintegrated. Wiping her brow, she then gestured to Boo. The assembled crowd seemed to draw in their breath sharply as Boo extended a hoof over the bucket. “Boo is a blank. And blanks... ” She let the same goop dribble onto Boo to a gasp from some of the assembly. The rainbow sludge clung for a few seconds, then disappeared into her skin. Boo’s only response was a little giggle. “... are immune to taint.” Some in the crowd gave a disappointed ‘awww’.

She then glared impatiently at me and nodded at the bucket. I sighed, stuck my hoof over it, and waited. Triage dribbled some of the goop onto me, and I winced, my mind filling with thoughts of wiggling eye-tentacle-penises, but nothing happened. My hoof tingled a bit, and I felt... good, actually. Like I’d had both a long night’s rest and a full meal. I inspected my leg. “Huh.”

“Maybe you need more!” some wit shouted from the audience.

“Oh, for the love of Luna,” I snapped, rolling my eyes. I seized the bottle and tossed my head back, chugging down the sludge. There was a seminal texture to it, and a flavor that hovered somewhere among wallpaper paste, rust, and raw radroach. The benzene and cotton candy smell filled my nostril as I drained the bottle. When I finished, I looked over at the rapidly-retreating Triage. My guts rumbled, and I groaned as I clutched my stomach, then let out a phenomenally loud belch. A roiling ring of rainbow gas rose up from my mouth, expanded to slide over the unicorn statues atop the pillars, and transformed them into crude and uncouth depictions of Discord. I smacked my lips and peered at the residue sloshing in the bottom of the bottle. “Mmm, pretty good.”

A ragged yellow earth pony stallion hopped up next to me, snagging the bottle with both hooves. “It’s a trick! See?” And before I could stop him, he drank the dregs of the bottle. He grinned as rainbow goop soaked into his lips. Triage sighed, putting a cigarette in her mouth and lighting it with a precise beam shot to the tip. “That wasn’t taint! They put the taint in the bucket ahead of time and used unicorn magic on them statues!” he said with a grin…that just kept getting bigger on half his face. The left side unzipped along the jaw and then along his throat. Tendrils began to wave from the breach as his stomach started to bulge like a sack of

swelling worms. The crowd screamed in alarm as his head seemed to be in the process of turning inside out, his body jerking spasmodically and flipping over backwards.

Then Triage unloaded the beam pistol into him as I fell back. Thankfully, the incineration beams took hold and transformed the grotesque mass into a pile of dust. “Max charge cartridges. Never bother with anything else,” she said idly. She took a pull on her cigarette, looking indolently at the crowd, and levitated the bottle from the dust pile. “Well, that’s good enough for me. I believe her story. Anypony else want to check and see if there’s a trick?” she asked, pointing the mouth of the bottle at the crowd. As one, they all leaned back as if just the empty bottle were dangerous. Triage dropped the bottle into the bucket, set the bucket into the metal box, and flipped it closed with a resounding clang.

One by one, Big Daddy, Finders Keepers, General Storm Chaser, Grace, and Paladin Stronghoof joined Triage on the stage, flanking me. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” Big Daddy said, the old earth pony pointing a hoof at the crowd, “but if I got a choice between this mare and that cyberized cunt, I’ll take this pony right here. If any one of you has a problem with her, you got a problem with yer Daddy.”

Finders gave a grin. “Well, I know that, until recently, in the last six months, scavenger casualties are down and caravan profits are up fifty percent. It wasn’t the Harbingers responsible for that. I’ll throw my lot in with a mare who asks for my help rather than demands it.” His smile faded. “Also, remember Riverside. We lost a lot of good people there.”

“Three months ago, we had a small problem in the skies,” Storm Chaser said, prompting a little laugh from the crowd. “This mare, who by all accounts had no reason to care about our problems, came to the sky and threw herself into the middle of a battle with the goal of saving as many innocent lives as possible. Whichever side they might have been on. She didn’t want to conquer or condemn; she just wanted to stop the fighting. If we’d had more pegasi like her, we might not have had the war. More than that, if we had more like her, we might have come down to help generations ago.”

Grace gave an elegant nod of her head. “Blackjack has changed every life she’s encountered, sometimes for the worse, but usually for the better. In spite of setbacks, she had never deviated from her

ethos of doing better. It is an outlook that has spread beyond her. The Society is instituting reforms for the serfs that work our plantations, thanks in part to this mare's generosity and compassion." Her expression turned firm. "I saw none of that in Cognitum, the 'Blackjack' who came to us from the Core. In her was a mare who sees us all as her servants. For that, and for personal kindnesses rendered to me and my family, I stand with this mare."

Paladin Stronghoof was silent for a moment, then spoke in his deep, sonorous voice. "I know the Steel Rangers do not possess a beloved status with most of you. For far too long we hid, safe within our bunkers, protected by technology we denied to others." He lifted his head, his blue eyes hard. "We've often been met with hatred and resentment, and until recently, it has been deserved. We came to this place to restore a weapon we had no right to use. And when we were broken, by her hooves, no less, it was this glorious mare who gave us a new chance at building a future here!" He rose to his hindlegs, the light making his eyes shine and sparkles appear about his shoulders. "Never before have the Steel Rangers encountered such selfless generosity! It is a testament to–"

Triage's magic surrounded the single lock of gold atop the massive unicorn's head and yanked him back down to all fours. "Yeah. We get it. Enough of that," she said sourly, taking a pull off the cigarette. "Point is, we stand behind her. Any of you have a problem with that, say it now."

The crowd murmured back and forth to themselves. I stepped forward. "This isn't an easy place to live. In fact, I'm sure all of you have, at least once, thought how much it sucks to live here. But the Hoof is our home, and that doesn't change no matter how hard it gets. We might all be different. Different people. Different values. Different dreams. But to all of us, this place is home, and all of us are family." I turned and saw P-21 beaming on the edge of the stage. I looked back. "And whether you love your family or not, you stand by them no matter what! So that together, we all become stronger. So that together we rise up, with no one being left behind. Together we rise! Hoofington rises!"

Somepony began to stomp their hooves. Then another. A sand dog began to clap. Some more let out cheers. And then it was like a dam broke, and the amphitheatre filled with jubilation. "Holy shit, we pulled it off," Triage muttered, barely in hearing range. "How about that?" The six on stage began to shift around, murmuring to each

other.

As the crowd continued to go nuts, I heard a mare say quietly, "Mother would be so happy right now." I blinked over at Glory, who had come onto the stage with P-21, Scotch Tape, Velvet Remedy, and Homage. "You did it," she almost whispered. "You brought the Hoof together."

I stared at the cheering crowd. Ganger and Society, Collegiate and Steel Ranger, ghouls and griffins, and even sand dogs and hellhounds. "Not quite. I'm missing the zebras," I answered, barely audible over the ruckus. "But give me some time." I started to speak to her, hoping this was the perfect moment to mend things between us, but she turned and walked away.

"War council now, girl," Big Daddy muttered, then addressed the crowd. "Alright. We're gonna plan the best way to stomp the Brood and the Remnant out of our valley, so just sit tight." Spirits were so high right now that even I thought it was possible.

As we trotted off the other side of the stage, I asked him, "You think we can actually do it?"

He glanced back and snorted. "Right now, hell no. There's at least five hundred Harbingers and probably five times that many Brood. But it never hurts to have high spirits."

The war council was taking place in a fancy marble rotunda next to the amphitheatre. A large round stone table occupied the center, and Grace, Triage, Finders Keepers, Paladin Stronghoof, Mayor Windclop, General Storm Chaser, Mare Do Well, and Rover were all crowded around it. There were a number of other ponies sitting further back in their own clumps. Goldenblood, Stygius, and Whisper stood off to the side. Velvet Remedy, Calamity, Homage, and Life Bloom were off on the other side. Sagittarius, Candlewick, Dazzle, Storm Front, and Xanthe formed a third knot. Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape took their seats as a fourth. I tried to ignore the overhead friezes of superior-looking unicorn stallions leading earth pony brigades into battle and slaying dragons. It was easier to pay for art than to do half the things those images presented. Instead, I rushed to Rover and gave the big augmented brute a hug. "I thought she killed you!"

"Ponies... " he said with an exasperated sigh. "Dogs dig, and fast. Riverside gone, but sand dogs still here." He made a face as he tapped my leg. "Why is pony always losing augments?"

"I didn't lose them this time, they were stolen. And I plan on

getting them back!" *Along with my baby*, I added mentally.

"So, first order of business was going to be making sure you're actually Blackjack, but I think the bit on stage took care of that," Big Daddy said as he settled into his seat at the table. "Are any of you folks still not sure on that part?"

Everyone looked around to everyone else for confirmation, and then finally Big Daddy folded his hooves in front of him on the table. "So what's going on, Blackjack? We've all heard bits and pieces, but we should be sure we have the full story."

I sighed and took a deep breath. "It's a long story." Then I recounted everything from the destruction of Shadowbolt Tower to the appearance of the Nightmare Citadel. I tried to be as succinct as I possibly could. The only things that I omitted were details about Horizons and about the Eater of Souls. All they needed to know was that Cognitum wanted to fire up an unimaginably powerful machine that would either make her unstoppable or kill everyone on the planet.

After I gave my brief and answered the questions I could, it was time for Goldenblood. The scarred, sour-faced pony gave a soft-spoken and far more detailed account of where Horizons was, how it worked, when it would align to fire, and how long it would take to impact.

"Now," Calamity drawled from the side, "Maybe I'm missin' somethin' here but... why'd you build such a damned thing in the first place?"

Goldenblood took a deep breath, his mouth working a moment like he was chewing on lemons, and muttered something.

"What was that?" Homage pressed.

"Because Princess Luna was a complete cunt who had to be stopped before she took over the fucking world, okay?!" Whisper snapped from next to him.

"More or less," Goldenblood said with a resigned sigh. "Luna had to be stopped if she, or any of the Ministry Mares, became a tyrant."

"So let me get this straight," Mare Do Well rasped from inside her helmet. "You knew Luna was going completely out of control... and decided that the best thing to do was create a weapon that would *kill everypony in the world?!*"

Goldenblood threw his hooves in the air. "I made a mistake, okay? I screwed up. I was manipulated. I made a bad choice. I am sorry that it's going to kill everyone in the world! Okay? I'm sorry!"

“Sorry. He makes a superweapon to kill everypony, and he’s sorry,” Mare Do Well scoffed. “Ugh... whatever. At least that explains all the bits the O.I.A. kept dumping into the M.o.A. and mysteriously withdrawing again. That drove m-- er, drove Rainbow Dash nuts,” she huffed.

“Well, Rainbow Dash had the least financial acumen of the Ministry Mares. I felt she’d never notice,” Goldenblood said with a shrug.

“Give a mare two centuries to figure it out,” she muttered. Maybe it was the Flux I’d just drank, but everything seemed so much clearer and sharper to me. The map Stronghoof had made of the valley was laid out on the table, the red like the outer ring of a target. From Withers in the northwest, it formed an almost perfect circular arc along No Pony’s Land until it met with the sea on the north east.

“Turning Goldenblood into a punishment piñata wouldn’t do anything to stop Cognitum or Horizons,” I said as I looked at the council. “And that has to be our focus. She’s got a deal with the Legate. He has the Brood attack. The Harbingers kill them. Everyone loves her.”

“And Cognitum insists we help or face dire consequences,” Paladin Stronghoof said grimly, his eyes narrowing dramatically. “A diabolical plan.”

“Except that the Legate’s going to turn on her sooner or later. Either as soon as she leaves for the moon, or when she gets back. When that happens, the Brood is going to stop playing around. They’ll slaughter everypony in the valley,” I said with a frown. “We’re going to have to be ready for it when it comes.”

“Can the Brood really keep soaking up these casualties?” Storm Chaser asked. “Our scouts reported them taking severe hits from the Harbinger positions.”

“Don’t think of blanks as ponies or zebras,” Triage explained. “If the bodies are recovered, the Flux can be alchemically extracted and shaped into a new blank instantly. Then a cybernetic control system is installed, combat routines implanted, and a new soldier is ready. Really, the only losses in combat so far are those on the Harbinger side.”

“The Harbingers have been getting more and more insistent on resupply from the Finders,” Keeper said with a snort. “I know they might have the fanciest guns in the Wasteland, but they’re using up

all the bullets for them."

"Which means that when the Brood stops playing around, they're going to push in hard," I said as I glared at the map.

"But how will we do any better than the Harbingers?" Grace asked as she too stared down at the map. "If the Brood are effectively limitless, there's no way *we* can win either."

"We can win because we're going to be smarter than 'shoot and then shoot some more'," I said, turning to Triage. "They must be being produced by Trees of Life; if we destroy the trees, no more bottomless reserves, right?"

"Right," she said with a nod, and the glow of her magic lifted a pen to the map. "There're three bunkers producing the Brood. Here, here, and here." She drew three X's, one west of Fluttershy Medical Center, one south of Elysium, and one northeast of Happyhorn. "If we can get some ponies in there and destroy the trees, we'll still have thousands of Brood to contend with but won't have to worry about them getting endless reinforcements."

"That's not going to be easy," General Storm Chaser said as she regarded the three. "Any strike teams going in there would be facing severe odds. Infiltration would be extremely risky, too."

I took in the sight of the ponies gathered and a chill ran up my spine as I realized that whatever we planned here might mean the deaths of friends. "Leave it up to the Zodiacs," Sagittarius said. "We'll take out those bunkers."

"Tough as you guys are, you can't take all three," Dazzle said. "The Reapers can get in there and tear down a bunker or two. Right, Big Daddy?" The old earth pony chuckled and nodded. "Candle, Storm Front, myself, and a few others should be able to get in and out without too much trouble."

For a moment, Sagittarius seemed ready to argue, but then he smirked. "Bet we get our bunker first."

"You're on," Candlewick rasped with an eager grin.

Xanthe shifted and fidgeted. "Well... I mean... we're not Reapers or Zodiacs, but my friends and I should be able to get the third." Two dozen ponies stared at her, and the stealth suit she wore chirped an 'uh oh'.

"Who are you again?" Triage asked, arching a brow.

"This is Xanthe," I said as I trotted to her. "She and her friends took down Red Eye's forces at Paradise Mall. How are you doing, Xanthe?"

“Cursed,” she replied with a tragic sigh. “But well. I am glad you are still alive, Maiden.” I grinned and gave her a hug, the zebra stiffening under my embrace. “Well... what’s a little more curse?” she muttered.

“These three can get the bunkers,” I said, turning back to the table. “But that’s still going to leave us with a couple thousand Brood to deal with. How can we make that number more manageable?”

Triage took a thoughtful drag of her cigarette. “Well, since the Brood are more like organic robots than anything else, they’ve got to have some kind of control system that lets them act in an organized fashion.”

“Then step two is their command and coordination. How can we disrupt it?” I asked as I looked to the smarter ponies.

“They’ve got to be using some kind of broadcast system. Maybe even the MASEBS,” Homage said as she peered more closely at the map. “I used every backdoor code I know, and I still couldn’t get control of the valley’s towers. Somepony has installed a superuser that's locked all root privileges systemwide, and I don’t have the time or expertise to remove it.”

“So we can’t shut them all down at once. If we could jam it, though, then instead of facing one monolithic force, we’d be fighting thousands of isolated cyberzebras. Much more doable.” I turned to Mare Do Well. “What do you think?”

“Sabotaging the enemy’s communications? Sure. Fliers could do it. We can’t use the MASEBS anyway; might as well deny them access too. No big,” Mare Do Well said casually, getting a curious look from Goldenblood. The purple armored mare straightened a bit. “We’d need some help for the fireteams disabling them.”

“Why not just destroy them with one of those Raptors?” Whisper asked. “Boom. Gone. Problem solved.”

“Aside from the fact that Cognitum might have two Raptors of her own,” Storm Chaser said, “if we destroy the towers, they’ll go to a network of smaller broadcasters. If we can jam the airwaves with garbage, they won’t be able to fall back on secondary broadcast systems. We’ll need some designated channels for our own communications, of course.”

“What about the Legate himself?” Calamity asked. “Seems like one good shot’ll take the head off this here serpent.”

“The Legate... ” I paused, thinking of how to best put it. “He’s immortal. Shooting him in the head won’t kill him. I know. I tried it

already."

Calamity, Velvet, Homage, and Life Bloom gave sickly smiles before they took in the utterly grim looks on everypony's face. "Y'all are serious? Y'all got folk out here that won't die?"

Big Daddy, Grace, and Triage gave a little shrug. "It happens," Big Daddy said simply. "I've dealt with a few in my time. Rampage was that way."

Calamity sputtered, "This place is damned screwed up!"

A multitude of ponies chuckled, along with myself. "Welcome to Hoofington, Calamity," I said with a smile.

"Even if the Legate is immortal, he's got to have a support staff," Velvet said with a troubled frown. "... Unless he has some kind of direct control like the Goddess did."

"Gee. That's a wonderful thought. While he is immortal, though, I don't think he has that level of control, or will. I was in Unity. The alicorns had their own semi-independence while in the hive. If the Brood are acting as just organic robots, then it's different. So somepony has to be actually supporting the combat troops."

"The Remnant is handling it," Sagittarius said, but then the green unicorn frowned. "Though I can't say they seem to be all that happy about it."

"So we just go behind the lines and wipe out the zebras. Simple," Whisper said with a happy shrug.

"Not so simple," I said firmly, before Velvet Remedy could object. "The Remnant are victims of the Legate and Cognitum too. We need to get in touch with Lancer and Sekashi. They have to be working on this." Velvet Remedy seemed very approving of my comment.

"Even if we don't directly target the personnel, we should try to take out their weapons," Stronghoof said, pointing to the southeast corner of the map. "They're bringing weapons from Dawn Bay by the cartload to a depot here, southeast of the Luna Space Center. It appears to be their base of operations." He glowered at the paper. "Short of using a balefire bomb or megaspell, any attempts to wipe it out will be dearly paid for."

"Still, an unarmed Brood is a lot less dangerous than an armed one," Storm Chaser said, then thumped her hoof on the table. "Damn you, Hoarfrost and Afterburner! A few Raptors could take out that depot easily if they didn't have to deal with enemy aircraft."

"Since when is anything easy for us?" I asked with a wan smile.

“How many Raptors do we have?”

“Three that are combat capable: the *Sleet,* the *Cyclone*, and the *Gale*-- ahem, the *Rampage*. They need at least another month of love and care to call them combat *ready*, though. The *Castellanus*... well... ” Storm Chaser shook her head. “She won't drop out of the sky, but that’s about it.”

“What about attacking Dawn Bay directly?” Grace asked. “Could that draw them off? Is it even possible?”

“If we’d had the HMS *Celestia*, possibly.” Stronghoof blew through his mustache. “Since we don’t... ”

“The Legate probably wouldn’t care, even if we did. He’s concerned with this battle. He wants to wipe us all out and call it a day,” I said with a frown.

Storm Chaser regarded the map. “We’re going to have to pull back defensively. Concentrate our vulnerable populations into more easily defended camps and keep a line so the camps don’t get cut off.” She reached down and tapped the map. “Stable 99, Megamart, Miramare, the Halfheart headquarters, Elysium, Scrapyard, Meatlocker, the Nightmare Citadel, and the Burners’ headquarters,” she said, gesturing to each in turn as she moved counter clockwise around the map.

Finders Keepers rubbed his chin. “And if we can’t hold those, we’re going to need somewhere to fall back to.”

“Stable 99 and the Citadel have stable doors to hide behind,” Whisper pointed out.

“Right. So their fighters can fall back and keep fighting.” Big Daddy nodded. “The Ironmare station on the bay is another place we can fall back to. Our arena. The Skyport. The Collegiate. And Chapel.”

Triage sighed and tapped the end of her cigarette on the table as she regarded me coolly. “Any chance we could hold out in the Core? It was made to be a fortress.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s a deathtrap. The Enervation will liquefy you in a few seconds. As far as I know, that’s the plan. Push us all the way into the Core and call it a day.”

“Well... it’s going to be brutal. We’re completely surrounded. We’re going to need more fighters. Lots more,” Storm Chaser said, glowering at the map. “This is shaping up to be an organizational nightmare.”

I sighed, tapping my hoof against the floor, before looking over at

Velvet. If we just had LittlePip to help us coordinate things, we might... wait... "Stronghoof, how many broadcasters did they get out of Shadowbolt Tower and take to Stable 99?"

"A few hundred," he said, and then his eyes alighted. "Ah! You want to distribute them across the Hoof so we can organize our defense more effectively." I grinned and nodded.

Storm Chaser rubbed her chin. "With me organizing our air forces and Big Daddy organizing our ground forces, we might be able to pull it off. I will have to be in charge of course," she said matter-of-factly. "We can't squander the air power we have left."

"You in charge. You're organizing a few Raptors and flight squads. I'll be in charge of every gang and soldier in the Hoof. I'm the one calling the shots here, missy," he snapped back.

Stronghoof rose to his hooves. "I am not a neophyte to tactics myself, and I would be less likely to employ the brutal tactics you favor."

"Right. Till you fall back on the tried and true tactic of jumping in your bunker and closing the door, leaving us all alone," Triage sneered.

"Enough!" Windclop shouted. "It's seems simple enough to me that Blackjack will be the one in charge. Right, Blackjack?"

But now I frowned. "No. I can't. I have to stop Horizons, or all of this is pointless." I saw the defense we needed most falling apart. Somepony had to manage all of these factions so that we had a chance. My eyes surveyed the present ponies and stopped on the perfect candidate.

"Him," I said, pointing a hoof at Goldenblood.

The silence was almost louder than the squabbling it replaced.

"Him?!" Mare Do Well growled. "Blackjack, have you lost your mind? That's Goldenblood! That's... you... you want him in charge?"

"I do," I said simply as I trotted over to stand beside the scarred unicorn.

"Are you insane?" Goldenblood hissed under his breath.

"Jury's still out," I said with a strained grin. "Goldenblood here liaised with all the ministries," I said more loudly, "managing resources to keep Equestria going. He's a neutral party. He doesn't favor any one of you over any other. No axes to grind. No reason to stab any backs. You can trust him to get you through this."

Mare Do Well made choking noises inside her helmet. I fixed a

stare on her. “Unless you want to run the defense?”

I doubted a Ministry Mare would fare much better in getting a half dozen factions to cooperate, even if she hadn’t been quite as controversial as Twilight or Rarity. Still, it was a plan B if she insisted on spiking plan A. The purple-power-armored pony sat back, then pointed a hoof at the scarred stallion. “You better not screw up this time, Goldenblood. Fool me once... shame on... just don’t mess it up!”

“Is this an acceptable compromise for everypony?” I asked as I looked from one to the next. “Goldenblood will keep everypony coordinated and working together.” None of them liked it, but all of them could accept it.

“Blackjack, are you sure–” Goldenblood began.

I put my hooves on his shoulders. “I want everypony to live. Can you do that?”

His mouth worked as his yellow eyes stared around. “I... I can try.”

“That’s all I want. Keep them from each other’s throats and keep every one of them alive. Listen to Big Daddy and Storm Chaser on tactics, but above all keep everyone alive. Don’t let anypony mess around with anypony else. No backstabby. No betrayal. None of that.” I took another deep breath. “Can you do that?”

He fidgeted for a few more seconds, closed his eyes as if searching his soul, and then gave a firm nod. “Good,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. Then I grinned. “How’d you like my speech?”

His face was pensive, and he took a few seconds to answer. “It seemed hauntingly familiar. Hoofington rises?” He cocked his eyebrow.

“What? I was terrified. It just seemed like an appropriate theme to rip off,” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“Well, I hope your plagiarism won’t come back to bite you in the tail. After all, look what it did for me,” he said, staring in the direction of the Core. The city was so still and quiet. No lightning. No rain. Silent.

Was it wrong of me to prefer the rain and storm?

I stared down at the map. We needed more fighters. Needed... I furrowed my brow. “Velvet? I need to borrow some alicorns.”

Footnote: Loading, please wait…

Chapter 70: Calm

"Sure, no problem! So long as Horizons doesn't fall before you can get there! Which I'm sure it won't!"

Astonishing how quickly I was marginalized once I stepped aside and let everypony else get busy with the actual organization of the fighting. Goldenblood sighed, levitated over a pencil, paper, and clipboard, and started making notes in tiny, neat little scratches as he listened attentively to the numbers of fighters he'd be able to get from the gangs, the newcomers, and the various mercenary groups. I paid attention to the lowest numbers and made my own mental notes. I could make notes too, though mine tended to be in crayon.

There really wasn't anything else for me to do. Smarter, better-trained ponies were on the job. All that remained for me was to maximize our chances, get what I needed, and focus on finishing off Cognitum and stopping Horizons from killing us all. I found myself smiling as if a great burden had been lifted from my back. Just like that, the important ponies took it from me and I was left almost forgotten.

The Reapers, the Zodiacs, and Xanthe were talking shop about which bunkers each would hit, what they'd need, and who they would take... and making bets on who would blow theirs up first. Even as I watched, ripples of activity spread out from the rotunda as orders were given and dispatched. The only thing omitted was the talk of who would die in the process. It just wasn't discussed.

"Well, if there's nothing else for me to do here," I said as I walked towards Velvet, Calamity, Homage, Life Bloom, and Ditzy Doo. P-21 trotted at my side, concern etched on his face. "I could use some help, if you're free."

"Well, I got to admit, I was getting a little bored of the vacation," Calamity drawled casually. Velvet shot him a dirty look. "Wut? Come on, Velvet. Even you got to admit it's funner getting mixed up

in a good fight."

"No fight is good," Velvet countered crossly, but then she sighed and rolled her eyes a little. "Still, if we work fast, we should be able to save as many lives as possible."

"I've sat back and watched long enough," Homage said with a little nod. "It's time to get back in the battle saddle again."

"That horn for show then?" Calamity teased, and Homage stuck her tongue out at him.

Life Bloom shook his head, but his easy smile faded when he turned to regard me. "One moment of your time, Blackjack?" I blinked, then nodded. We trotted a little ways to the side, and the white unicorn stallion looked at me evenly. "Blackjack, I have a message for you from the Twilight Society. I wasn't sure when was a good time to give it to you, but it seems like now is better than never."

"Okay. What is it?" I asked with a concerned frown.

"They're watching events out east closely, and if they have to, they will act," he said gravely.

"... Okay." I blinked in bafflement. "Well, by all means. Let them. I'll take all the acting I can get right now."

"You don't understand," he shook his head. "When I say act, I don't mean against your enemy. I mean against the Hoof. They'll fire up Celestia One and burn anything that looks hostile to slag. The Core. The Brood. Your forces. With how complicated things are here, telling friends from enemies is too much trouble and too much of a risk compared to shooting everything that moves. We won against Red Eye and the Enclave, and now they're... concerned... about the events out here and losing them everything they've gained."

"Can Celestia One obliterate an enormous moonstone boulder falling from space?" I asked back. When he balked, I gave a shaky smile. "No, really, can it? Because if it can, then they are more than welcome to fire away, and best of luck to them. I'll take all the firepower I can get right now." He chewed on that, and I added, "Oh, and you might want to let them know that if they do attack the Hoof, they'll incinerate not just the city but Twilight's descendant as well. If that still matters to them, that is."

"It does, and I'm just passing on the message. There are a lot of eyes on the Hoof right now. Just be aware of that," Life Bloom told me. Then he gave a half smile. "So, what next?"

* * *

There was something positively surreal about a bony-winged ghoul pegasus being able to fly at all. That thought was one tiny voice amidst the rest of my mind screaming about splatting against the ground below as Ditzy carried us through the sky in her wagon, *Absolutely Everything Too*. Proving herself yet again to be an honorary Finder, Ditzy had produced both a PipBuck and a broadcaster at my first sarcastic quip. The grin on her face put a smile on everypony else's.

With Unity broken, being in the Hoof was merely unpleasant rather than intolerable for the alicorns. I'd originally thought of using them to teleport everywhere I needed to go. However, the fact that I had no clue where I *specifically* needed to go killed that plan pretty quickly. Apparently pointing at a map and saying 'about here' wasn't exact enough for magically winking across the land when none of the teleporters had even so much as glimpsed 'about here' before. Fortunately, Ditzy had been generous enough to give us all a ride instead. One purple alicorn had insisted on accompanying us, too, to 'keep us safe', though I'd gotten the impression that she was really only there for Velvet.

The radio was chaos. Pon3's channel might have been down, but there were other operators springing up. The strongest signal was 'Unity radio', which involved the Harbingers urging everypony to join 'the real Security' to pull the Hoof together, or else. The counterpoint to this was Homage's 'Freedom Radio', which consisted of a PipBuck, a broadcaster, and a rather startling selection of music she'd squirreled away on the thing before leaving Tenpony to escape the Enclave. As we flew over the Hoof, a dozen more different stations popped up, each with a range of only about a mile.

One was saying I was a fake. One saying everything was a fake and kill everyone. One sounding like a colt spouting as many obscenities as possible. Quite a few were ripped right out of LittlePip's memoir…really, she couldn't have edited that out? I wasn't sure this kid knew what a clit was…The rest, though, were urging ponies to follow their leaders and get ready for the Battle of the Hoof. "Is that a good sign?" I asked Homage.

"I think so. After Fillydelphia, the Everfree, and the battle in the skies, people have started seeing the value of coming together. The

old way of tiny settlements and raider bands scattered everywhere just doesn't work anymore," she said with a smile. She stared off to the west. "I wish she could be here. I wish I could have done this with her at least once."

I sighed, putting a hoof on her shoulder. "I wish she could have been too. It was fun working with her."

"I'm just afraid for her. She's going to live a lot longer than the rest of us. In the S.P.P. hub, with Celestia's soul powering the shield, she might even survive Horizons. I don't like thinking of her all alone," Homage said with a shiver. "I worry about her happiness…her health…even her sanity. How long can somepony stay alone watching without losing their mind?"

Well, Goldenblood, Celestia, and Spike seemed to have managed it well enough. "And I can't imagine Celestia wants to be trapped in there forever either," I said as I looked towards the Core. "That's not life." I shook my head. "Well, cyberponies and blanks live a long time too. So if I live through this and I'm still kicking around, I'll make sure to pop in from time to time and bug her. Have some therapeutic sex. In the name of mental health, of course."

She laughed at that, so I counted it as another small win. "Do you really expect to survive this?" she asked, her mirth melting away to leave that horrible sad smile I knew so well. "I mean, I know you've died…twice? Or has it been more?"

"I've lost track," I said with a grin. Gazing out towards the Skyport, I could see the remains of Thunderhead on the ground. It was half a torus now and looked as if what remained had been gutted and burned by battle. The city in the clouds was acting as a wall, shielding the city from the Brood…but not the Core. "I'm just no good at dying, Homage. So I figure, why not? I'll live through this, stop Cogs and the Legate, prevent Horizons from destroying the world, raise my baby with P-21, and try to have a few more–" *Ugh, sterile body, remember, numbskull?* "Or adopt... adoption's good. I really want lots of babies," I said with a grin. "Help out Chapel and the Hoof in general. Patch things up with Glory and Rampage. Make life better. See tomorrow."

"I hope you get all that," Homage said as she looked out at the clouds as we flew east.

I could see the black castle that had been Black Pony Mountain blocking my view of the Core itself. Down below us was the zebra army. They marched out of the bunker, Brood zebras, Brood zebras

with cyberwings…And then there were the cyber unicorn zonies. Even after death, Silver Stripe had achieved a kind of immortality. There was no way to approach that during the day, especially for me. I was a shooty shooty kind of pony.

Besides, my business wasn't with them. My business was far to the east, farther than I'd ever gone before.

* * *

I trotted up the valley, away from the Core, the others following behind me. The loose scree and ancient coal sands made for treacherous footing, more so in the fading light. It was starting to get late. Tomorrow, I'd have to catch Cognitum at the Space Center before she left for the moon. I could feel time slipping away from me. Time. Time.

This was a place that looked as if it'd been skipped by time. Long ago, Equestria had had a technological boom founded on coal. They'd stripped all of their own deposits, then traded with the zebras when the supply ran out. A good arrangement, so long as the trade wasn't interrupted; the rest of the Wasteland, of course, was the legacy of what had happened when it was. All around me here…this was the legacy of what had happened before the trade began. This was a sacrificed land. Draglines perched on the edges of mountaintops ripped flat. Valleys were filled and beaten level with toxic tailings. Rusty rail lines drew over the landscape like the track lines of an addict unable to sate their hunger. Everywhere I turned my eyes were the shells of mills, their smokestacks jutting towards the gray skies. Power lines snaked this way and that westwards towards the rest of Equestria. It only made sense. If you were going to pollute one area anyway, why not concentrate it to spare others? The ponies who didn't live here probably considered it a fine system.

I glanced over at Glory, trying to catch her eyes. She simply trotted on. I peeked at P-21, feeling conflicted…there had to be some way to fix things with us. Or should I even try?

The jingling tune of a banjo floated like a ghost through the valley, the twangy music carrying through the quiet, scarred landscape as if travelling through time. From off in another direction came another banjo with an answering tune. My mane crawled at the creepy yet definitely effective form of signaling. Red bars danced

everywhere in my E.F.S., but I could hear the skittering of scavenging radroaches in the thorny underbrush.

"I just want to talk to Big Momma," I shouted out at the desolation. Mist collected on the edges of broken mountaintops. My voice echoed off the rusting mining lifts and slag heaps. I felt a tremble underhoof and imagined ponies digging deeper and deeper into the earth, no matter how dangerous it became. "I gave back your son's rifle!" I yelled.

The banjos played again, a faint variation of the tune. Then another exchange. It'd be pleasant were it not for the niggling feeling that there were a dozen gun sights trained on my skull as the plinking notes echoed through the valley. Finally, the music stopped, and a blue filly in a dirty and stained sundress stepped out from behind a rusting tractor. "Momma don't want you up here no more. This is our land."

I looked around at all the waste and devastation. I could only assume she could hear me. "There's going to be a fight, Big Momma. A nasty fight for the Hoof. We need your help."

"Told you Momma don't want you up here no more," the blue earth filly said with a nod of her head towards the way we'd come. "Now git." Scotch Tape glowered at the other filly.

I took a step towards the filly, and there was a crack. The ground in front of me kicked up dust from a bullet, stopping me short. I hissed softly through my teeth. "I know you want to be left alone!" I shouted, my voice echoing across the valley. "I can respect that. But now is the time we need you! All of you. There's going to be a battle, and if you don't join, we're going to lose."

"Yer a stupid pony, you know that," the filly drawled.

"Yeah, well you're a jerk!" Scotch Tape snapped back.

"Scotch," P-21 said in admonishing tone that fell on deaf ears.

"Don't y'all call me names!" the blue filly shouted. "I'll sic my big sis on you!"

"Well, I don't need a big sister; I'll kick your flank all by myself!" Scotch Tape boasted.

"No pony kicks my flank!" the other filly shrieked, charging forward. Scotch Tape raced to meet her, and I was too shocked to levitate her away before the two were rolling in the dirt, biting and kicking.

"Baby Blue!" a mare snapped loudly, stepping out from between two boulders, Taurus's rifle at her side. Bluebelle narrowed her eyes

at the two muddy fillies. “Y’all were supposed ta tell ‘em ta scoot.”
“She started it!” Baby Blue whined, pointing a mucky hoof at Scotch Tape. “She called me a jerk!”
“Well, you called Blackjack stupid!” Scotch Tape snapped as P-21 trotted over, grabbed her by the scruff of her stable barding, and pulled her away.
“But I didn’t call you stupid, stupid!” Baby Blue yelled back.
“That’s it!” Scotch Tape squealed, pulling herself free of P-21’s bite and jumping back on the other filly. I stared at Bluebelle from across the scrabbling girls and stepped around them as Velvet and P-21 tried to separate the two without being beaned by a flying hoof. The alicorn watched with an expression of disdain on her face.
I sighed and shook my head. “I noticed there weren’t many Highlanders at the meeting,” I said to Bluebelle.
“Big Momma’s stayin’ out of this scrap. It’s too big. Too dangerous. We’re pullin’ all our people back into the mines,” Bluebelle informed me.
“You can’t stay out of this, Bluebelle. The Hoof needs the Highlanders.”
“Mebbe, but we don’t need the Hoof,” she replied stubbornly. The powerfully built blue earth pony crossed her legs. “We don’t need magic or pegasi or robots or nothing. We take care of our own. Piss on the rest of you.”
“You might not need the Hoof now, but you will,” I said evenly. “There’s a storm coming, and if we don't stand against it together, it's going to blow us away.”
“Sez you,” she countered with a scowl. “What has that pit done but taken our kin from us?”
“Nothing. But if Cognitum or the Legate win the battle tomorrow, how long do you think it’ll be before you’re next? They won’t leave you alone. They can’t,” I said firmly.
“We got hundreds o’ fighters. We’ll manage,” she said with a worried frown.
“They have thousands.” I left out the detail that it was an infinite thousands on top of that. “You’ve been watching the bunker, I assume. That’s one of several. And they don't have children or homes or families. They don't care about their wounded or dead. The only thing they care about is wiping their enemies out.” I took a deep breath. “We need your help.”

“We don’t need your war. Them Brood wanna fight us? Fine. Ain't like we never been outnumbered 'fore. We got holes inside holes we can fall back to. Supplies that’ll last us a good long while too.”

“So that’s how you want to write your epitaph? ‘We ran away and hid in a hole while others who needed us fought and died’?” I asked, trying to keep my temper even. “Two hundred years ago, Equestria took this land from you and used it, and you. They did your ancestors wrong, and I’m sorry about that. But I’m not them. I’m not taking it from you. I’m not telling you that you have to come. I’m asking for help. Begging for it, in fact.” I dropped to my haunches. “Please. We need the Highlanders. Every one you can spare. When the attack comes, we have to hit them from both sides to have a chance.”

Bluebelle actually flushed and backed away a little. “I... look, it ain’t up to me. Big Momma said she’d never help the Hoof ever again.” The mare then paused and blinked. “But... there might be one thing that could do it.”

One thing? “What is it? Anything!” I said with a smile as I rose.

“She might do it if Big Daddy asked her for help,” she said slowly, as if the big blue mare was unsure. “But he’d have ta ask her *real* nice.”

“He will. I’m sure of it!” I said with a grin.

Bluebelle seemed pretty skeptical. “Well, we’ll see. Big Momma’s always listenin’ on the radio. If he asks, she might come. Dunno. Maybe.” She turned and trotted away. “Come on, Baby Blue. That’s enough playin’.”

The two fillies halted their battle to the death, and the blue one extracted herself and trotted away. She paused and whirled, narrowing her eyes. “Next time I won’t be so nice, fat head.”

“You better not be, ‘cause I’m gonna kick yer hind end halfway ta Manehattan!” Scotch replied. Baby Blue stuck her tongue out at Scotch Tape, then trotted away with Bluebelle. Scotch Tape glared after the filly, then realized we were all staring at her. “What?”

“What?” Velvet Remedy asked in shock. “What do you mean ‘what’? What was that all about?!”

Scotch Tape picked herself out of the mud and trotted in the opposite direction. “Ain’t every day a filly meets her arch nemeswatever-ya-call-it. I’ll thump her good next time.” Velvet stared after the filly, her mouth working silently in baffled shock.

* * *

"It's simple, Velvet," Scotch Tape said simply and with a prim nod. Velvet had finally regained the ability to ask about the fight after we got airborne again. "See, the second she insulted Blackjack, I knew we were going to be enemies forever."

"But you just met her! Why did you fight her? It doesn't make any sense!" Velvet Remedy lamented. "You could have told her not to say those things. Been the bigger pony!"

Scotch Tape looked at her flatly. "You never had a nem-er... " She glanced at P-21.

"Nemesis," he supplied.

"Right! Them nemesis things growing up, did you?" Scotch Tape asked.

Velvet blinked, taken aback for a moment. "Of course not! Everypony in Stable Two loved me!" We all just stared at her and sighed. "What?" she asked with a baffled frown.

Scotch sighed in return and shook her head. "Blackjack?"

"Daisy," I said with a smile. "Might not have realized it at the time, but yeah. Total nemesis."

"My sister, Dusk," Glory chipped in with a smile.

"Just your sister? I'll raise ya all o' my brothers plus my dad," Calamity said with a chuckle.

"Calamity! Not you too!" Velvet lamented.

"Wut? Just a good old colt grudge match."

Ditzy turned her head and showed on her chalkboard, 'Pinkie on a muffin binge.'

"Diamond Tiara…" the alicorn murmured softly. "That filly had serious flank issues."

"The Overmare," P-21 said with a sad smile. I put my hoof on his shoulder, glad he hadn't said 'all of Stable 99'.

"My father," Life Bloom said casually. "He didn't approve of my preference for stallions." Well now, didn't that make P-21's eyebrow raise speculatively.

Now, suddenly, all eyes were on Homage, and Velvet Remedy said a touch crossly, "Oh, I suppose you had a childhood nemesis too?"

"No," Homage said quietly. Velvet Remedy smiled in triumph before Homage continued, "I would have loved to have had one, though."

"Homage! Nemesis! Hate! Wastelands! Bad! Want? Why!?" Velvet

Remedy sputtered.

"I reckon that's the first time anypony made Velvet skip," Calamity said, giving the fuming unicorn a little nudge.

"Because it would have meant I wasn't alone," Homage said quietly, looking out into the growing twilight. "I spent most of my fillyhood on my own picking through Manehattan, just trying to stay alive. A nemesis might not like me, but at least they would have cared about me, if only as a target. Feral ghouls and raiders… bloatsprites and bloodwings…I was just another meal to them, another victim, another... toy. Being the subject of somepony's disdain would have been a step up from being nopony at all."

She gave a smile to Life Bloom and went on, "Fortunately, I made some friends. And then met LittlePip, who I think was just as familiar with loneliness as I was."

"As I recall, you robbed Joke and me," Life Bloom said casually. "Took us for every cap we had and left us in just our hide for the bloodwings."

"Yeah. So you two followed me for three days begging for your stuff back. Finally I returned it just to keep your whining from giving us away," Homage replied with a small grin. "I guess I was your nemesis for a little while, then."

I grinned at Homage. "So you were a bad mare back then?"

She blinked, then gave a sly look to the west. "I'm even worse in other ways now, but I was a survivor and a scavenger…just two steps above an animal, really, and one above a raider. It was Jokeblue always trying to cheer me up and Life Bloom with his endless optimism and smart pony talk that made me better. Eventually, we had a dream of getting into Tenpony. An impossible dream for three wastelanders, but it was a start." Trying to imagine a serious and brooding Homage was tough to do.

"Of course," Life Bloom added sourly, "it would have helped if we'd known it was impossible from the start. Tenpony says that if you gather a hundred thousand caps, you can join their community. That's horseapples. They're after 'civilized' ponies who are 'interesting' and 'valuable'. Not just thrifty wastelanders."

"Then DJ Pon3 took me in, and just like that I became civilized, interesting, and valuable. Imagine that." Homage shook her head. "I called them on their double standard so often they finally honored it…not that many could reach that amount of caps anyway, but still…" She sighed, pensively, "Too late for Jokeblue…"

“What happened to her?” Scotch Tape asked in a worried voice, then glanced around and lowered her eyes. “Nevermind. I don’t wanna know.”

Homage smiled wistfully as she stared off into the night. “That’s the reason I want the Wasteland ended. So that nopony will have to go through what we did, and the biggest worry a pony would have is a grudge match with another young pony.” That killed the mood for further silly arguments.

We were making our way south, giving the Luna Space Center a wide berth. Looking to the southeast, I could see the massive buildings and the four Raptors hanging over them. I’d guessed that Hoarfrost and Afterburner had gotten some more help on their side. Did they know Cognitum’s full plan, or were they just signing up with the stronger pony? Below us, I could see a trail of activity stretching from the mounds of refuse at Scrapyard to the long L-shaped building I guessed was Paradise Mall. Sitting directly between the Luna Space Center and the rest of the Core, it looked like Big Daddy was going to be turning it into a major fortification. At least some good would come from it.

I looked at all these ponies and swallowed. A battle was coming. It was inevitable. I wasn’t scared for myself; I’d lasted this long and hadn’t died yet... well, stayed dead... but I didn’t like that so many others were in harm’s way now. I was the kind of idiot who would take bullets, but I couldn’t take them all. And while I was sure of myself in a fight, what about everypony else? I stared at my friends, new and old, and felt a growing anxiety inside me. Worse, I could tell everypony else was probably thinking similar thoughts. Calamity and Velvet sat a little closer together in the back of the crowded wagon. P-21 put a hoof around Scotch Tape. Glory sat on the opposite end of the seat from me, but I caught her glancing toward me.

I opened my mouth, wanting to say... well, I didn’t know. Something. Anything! But that sad smile appeared in the corner of her mouth, she turned her purple eyes to the sunset, and my words shriveled in my mouth.

* * *

“Are you sure about this?” P-21 asked as he frowned down at me from the wagon.

"Yeah. I'm sure. If all of you are down here…yeah. I need them to know it's me," I said with a half smile as I looked around the blasted plains.

"I… some of us should come with you, Blackjack," Velvet began. "I've advocated for–"

I shook my head. "It has to be me."

"And if they decide to kill you anyway?" P-21 asked with another frown.

"Well, keep the cart still and hope I can teleport back to it faster than they can grab me," I answered with a toss of my mane. There wasn't much to say beyond that. Slowly, Ditzy hefted the cart back up into the sky, and I surveyed my surroundings. The blasted landscape appeared to be nothing more than an arid desert at first glance. Then little things started to stand out, like the fact that many of these rocks resembled melted glass. That others were arranged in the shapes of charred foundations. And who could ignore the steady *click-click-click* of radiation?

Oh. And the nearly solid band of red surrounding me in every direction.

I walked slowly through the irradiated blight, knowing that they were following me. I kept my horn illuminated, ready to wink out. To the north of me, on the edge of my vision, I could barely make out the lights of Grimhoof Army Base. I should have realized that the Remnant was there for more than just the missiles. The bunker housing their tree of life was practically right underneath it. It'd probably been built into the superstructure of the base as another line item by zebra sympathizers. And I'd helped them to secure it…

I found a hole in the irradiated landscape. All I could hope was that a combination of interest in the novelty and suspicion of a trick was keeping them from tearing my head off. But with a naked, unarmed unicorn dropped in the middle of their territory, it was only a matter of time before they acted. I crouched at the edge of the hole but didn't shine my light in. "I came here to talk."

No answer from the hole. None but the steady ticking of my PipBuck. "A few months ago, one of your kind came to ask my kind for help with the Enclave and their control helmets. Gnarr, I think his name was," I said as I felt the ground vibrate a moment. "Now I'm back to ask you for help."

Nothing. I could imagine ears twitching in the dark. "Tomorrow, the Brood that drove you out of Grimhoof is going to attack

Hoofington. They outnumber us several times over. They'll probably kill all of us in a few hours. A day at the most." I closed my eyes. "I know your kind and mine don't have a good history of helping each other out. I know a lot of you want to kill me just for being here. But I want you to know that right now, we need you. We need your people. I know that most folks see you as monsters. I know you've suffered. I know what it means to suffer. I know you're more than they think you are.

"I can't offer you anything for helping us. I really can't think of anything we can give you that you don't already have. The only thing I can say is you'll have our respect. I don't know if that means anything to you, but you'll have it," I said as I rose. I had no idea if they were listening. No idea if they cared. For all I knew, they were laughing at our impending slaughter.

I took one long look back at the hole and then teleported up to the wagon. Time would tell if they would come or not.

* * *

The return to Star House was a solemn one. No debates or discussions about childhood rivals. Everypony knew that in a few hours, we'd hit the space center. I'd get my body back…I had plans for teleporting in and dropping a spark grenade covered in Wonderglue on her back and hoping that'd do it…but there was no guarantee. And once Cognitum was down, or worse, gone, the Legate would stop pretending to fight and tear the Harbingers to pieces. And there was a very good…very *real* chance that one of my friends...

Losing Lacunae had hurt, but it was a death I could handle. She'd chosen it in order to save others. Painful as it was, I could rationalize and understand it. But I remembered reading about Steelhooves's abrupt demise. What if something like that happened to Glory? P-21? Scotch Tape? Boo? We'd been at risk before, but I'd always been able to throw myself to the front practically screaming 'shoot me first'. And they had. And I'd been tough enough or lucky enough to survive it.

Now?

"Cap for your thoughts?" P-21 asked as he held his dozing daughter in his forelegs.

"Just…nervous," I confessed. "I'm thinking about this too much.

We should just go straight to the space center and go for it!"

"Sure. The eight of us versus a small army of Harbingers and Brood, plus your old body and the Legate. Why not?" he said, so straightforwardly that I immediately flushed.

"I'm serious," I said, running a hoof nervously through my mane. "The more I think about it…"

"So am I. I haven't stopped thinking about it. So let's go," he said with that casual smile. It actually turned teasing after a few seconds. "Let me guess. You realize why we shouldn't?"

I groaned, leaning over and burying my face in his shoulder. "Maturity sucks. When did I get to be so old and worried about consequences and plans and stuff?"

"I think it was when we lost Lacunae," he replied calmly. "I know for me it was when I almost got Scotch Tape killed. After that…" He shook his head. "None of us are who we were anymore, Blackjack. The stupid but kindhearted security mare…the bitter and resentful breeder…the lonely, orphaned filly…even the naive pegasus scientist," he added, regarding Glory grudgingly and getting a thankful smile in return. "Knowing you…being with you…has helped make us better, Blackjack. Better ponies. Better people."

"I didn't do anything," I muttered, embarrassed.

He shook his head. "More than you realize," he said with a kind smile.

Ditzy kicked the cart, rousing us, and then pointed ahead with a scarred-up undead hoof. We peered forward into the open land around Chapel and…

That was a lot of people.

I mean, at the amphitheatre there'd been a lot of people, more than I'd ever seen together in the Wasteland before. But now there were dozens of fires all around the small community. The people around them milled about like a kicked-up radroach nest. I hadn't thought that there were that many ponies in all the Wasteland, let alone the Hoof. As Ditzy set us down on the roof of the post office, I gaped at the sight of them all. Most of them appeared to be scavengers, but I also saw clumps of families. I'd always kind of imagined the Wasteland as just raiders, bandits, scavengers, punctuated with a few normal people just trying to survive. The reverse was true. And war had finally brought them together.

"Crap. I didn't expect so many to come so fast," Scotch Tape muttered. "I got to get out there and make sure we've got water,

food, and some decent latrines going. With the rain stopped, water's going to quickly become an issue, and we don't want it getting contaminated because someone's pissing upstream," she said as she scrambled down the stairs into the building. We quickly followed her down.

"How are things?" I asked as I spotted Charity, Bottlecap, and Keeper amidst so many boxes it was hard to move through the post office.

"Could be better," Charity muttered as she scowled at a clipboard. "We need to charge these Talons an extra ten percent for bullets. They got the caps to cover it, and I think some of those featherbrains are 'overstocking'," Charity said to a small purple unicorn filly, who saluted and ran off quickly through the stacks. Charity shuffled another clipboard to the front. "Make sure those Society assholes don't try and stiff us more than five caps per pound of produce. They got it in spades and if things pan out, we're not feeding people past two days," she said to a red earth pony colt who followed the unicorn out.

"You're charging people for ammunition and food?" Velvet Remedy said, aghast. "At a time like this?"

Charity didn't look up from her boards. "Yep," she said in a level tone that made me stand back and smile.

"So you're making a profit off this crisis," Velvet Remedy said in angry, accusatory tones. Charity didn't answer, but I spotted the vein pulsing in the filly's temple. "How could you? Those ponies are scared and helpless, and you're charging them for what they need."

Charity slapped the board down flat on the table. "Look! There're fifteen hundred refugees out that way. I didn't ask them to come here, but here they are. So we're taking care of them. Do you know what happens when you say the word 'free' to somepony scared and helpless? They get stupid. They get greedy. They load up on as much as they can carry, nevermind most of it will spoil before they can eat it, and then they get killed by the equally stupid, greedy pony who figures out that there's not going to be enough for them, so better kill them and take what they can. And since everypony who happens to be a merchant knows this, the ones that really are out for the profit will be sure to cash in on the one giving away shit.

"Oh, and in addition, most scavengers don't work for free, and we need every bullet, gun, suit of barding, and chem we can get, so I need to bring in some caps to buy it. Otherwise my stock is gone,

my caps are gone, and we're all up shit creek. If well-off groups like Talons and heroes like yourself pay more, then I can subsidize the ones who can't. Which I do," Charity snapped, pointing a hoof at Velvet. "One hundred caps for wasting thirty seconds of my time." She thrust a hoof at a large, half-filled jar of caps on the counter; the label read 'Blackjack's Stupid People's Comments Fee'.

"What?!" Velvet stammered, waving her forehooves wildly at the jar. "That's outrageous! You can't…"

"Pay the filly, Velvet," I advised.

"Why?" she asked, glaring at the little yellow earth pony.

"Because if you don't, I'm pretty sure you're not buying anything in the Hoof," I answered. I didn't know if Charity could actually swing that, and I really didn't want Velvet to find out the hard way.

Velvet narrowed her gaze, but then opened her saddlebags after a few seconds. "You are a horrible, detestable pony," she almost growled.

"Then you have no problem with me leveling a ten percent surcharge," Charity countered. "Since I'm so horrible keeping everypony fed, armored, and armed to save their lives." She pointed towards the door. "Now, if you're not going to buy anything, there's the door. I got way too much going on to deal with ponies who don't have a clue about basic business."

"Fine! We'd never, ever shop with you in the first–" Velvet began to say when Homage popped in.

"I really need something decent if we're going to be in a fight. How are you lined up for energy weapons?" Homage asked.

"I'm also gonna need ammo fer Spitfire," Calamity said.

Ditzy held out a grimy purchase order that had every line filled in.

I trotted up next to the speechless Velvet. "Come on. Let the evil necessity of capitalism commence." I guided her outside.

"That…she…how could…I can't…ugh!" Velvet Remedy stammered, glaring at me and then back to the post office stacked high with stuff. I gave a sympathetic nod as she turned and gestured at the hundreds of ponies camped around Chapel. "That filly is deplorable. I'm going to see if I can't heal some injuries and raise some spirits with a few songs…for free!" she shouted back into the post office.

"Don't care!" Charity called back, the filly sounding almost happy. "Have fun!"

Snorting, Velvet Remedy stalked off into the crowd. I watched her

go, marveling. Sometimes you met your fillyhood nemesis a little late.

Left alone, I walked through the crowd. Most didn't notice me in the black operative's armor. Just another wastelander who'd come to fight for my survival. A few caught on to the Security written upon it. Those that did mostly stared as I passed. Some scowled. Others smiled. I guess it depended on how much pain I'd caused or spared. I'd have liked to think that I saw more frowns than scowls, but I couldn't be sure.

Nothing was certain anymore. Everything was tense and energized. Part of me wanted to hide, become anonymous behind the helmet of the operative barding, but I knew the last thing ponies needed to see was a faceless enemy. So many eyes staring at me. So many lives depending on me. I swallowed again and again, the fear chewing up the back of my throat.

"Walking among the troops, eh Blackjack?" a familiar mare said, and I whirled around and saw the Steel Ranger Crumpets. The toasty-yellow-brown mare with the freckles wore her armor casually. "Very regal of you. Just need to give you a cloak for proper brooding and I think we can write a play."

"I don't want to be in a play. I just want everyone to live past tomorrow," I said with a sigh.

"I imagine so, girl. Hope I'm there too. Be a bloody nuisance to clean out Stable 99 only to have the whole world go kablewy," she said with a mirthless smile. "Stronghoof told me all about Horizons. And the bugger who designed the damned thing is calling the shots? Bloody brilliant."

"It was the only way to keep everypony together. Or do you think you'd be happy taking orders from Big Daddy?" I asked her. She shrugged, conceding the point.

"Goldenblood will succeed," a familiar mare said as the throng around us gave way. The purple alicorn glanced at me, then away, rubbing her legs together awkwardly. "Failure would kill him."

Several snappy retorts died as I stepped towards her and gave her a hug around her neck. "Psalm," I murmured as she stiffened beneath me. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Okay…is relative. You know that better than anypony," she said hesitantly, constantly looking around. "How's the barding fit?"

"Like I was dipped in a vat of badass and wired to a neon sign saying 'kill this one first'," I replied. I stared into her mournful

purple eyes. The spark of Unity between us was long dead, but I felt as if we were both trying to awkwardly probe each other's minds so we knew what not to say.

"No," Psalm murmured, barely audible over the crowd.

"Beg pardon?" I blinked.

"No. I don't have anything of Lacunae in me." She dropped her eyes. "I have her memories, but they're not the same thing. I could never be so strong. So compassionate. I'm sorry."

I sighed, slumping a little. "That's okay," I said, digging into my saddlebags.

"No. I don't want it back," she said a moment later, and I froze and withdrew my hooves. "Penance…no. I don't deserve it."

"I'm not a sniper," I told her. "I can never use it like you could. And Calamity already has a supergun."

But Psalm shook her head again. "I don't want to be a murderer again," she whispered. Crumpets sighed, rolling her eyes and looking clearly annoyed. Psalm caught her expression and seemed to shrink into herself. "I know…I was a soldier…but, I shouldn't have been. That was a mistake…killing for Luna."

I smiled at her. As much as I knew she could be important in the battle, I couldn't make her take up a life that had done her so much harm. "I'm sure you'll find some way to help." I stretched up and brushed her mane out of her eyes. "You have a second chance."

"Thanks to you and LittlePip," she murmured as she nuzzled me.

I sniffed, rubbing my eyes with a hoof. "Did I make a mistake with Goldenblood?"

Psalm shook her head slowly. "Goldenblood strives for success, and he manipulates people like an artist manipulates pigment on canvas. He will achieve what you want, but you may not like how he does it. Maybe you convinced him to try a better approach…I hope so. But he won't betray you, unless he feels you've betrayed yourself and everypony else."

"We need to get going," Crumpets broke in. "Some nut with the Harbingers keeps insisting we give him 99 due to eminent domain, and we need to make sure we get the ammo we need. Trading chems and healing potions for it." At my shocked and baffled expression, she quirked a grin. "What, did you think your stable just recycled organic waste into food? It recycles nearly anything you put into it."

"I'll be around," Psalm murmured. "I can't…be…Lacunae…but if

you need help, I'd like to."

I stretched up and gave her another hug. "I'd appreciate it. Thank you." I watched the pair trot towards the post office.

Behind me, a musical note struck me like a shot. A voice rose above the babble of the crowd like a breaking sunrise and silenced the camp. The ponies moved back to give room to Velvet Remedy. No stage. No lights. Not even music, and yet with her voice alone she released a melody that rippled through the massed people like a wave. The song sounded like something Sweetie Belle, but I didn't recognize it. Within a minute, a red middle aged earth pony mare missing a hind leg bravely joined her, backing her up. I'd read Velvet could have done that herself with her magic, but her singing alone seemed to pull at the crowd. A purple unicorn filly, Sonata, clambered up next to Velvet. Her trilling soprano rang out; she didn't even seem to know the words, but the three legged mare and the beautiful unicorn mare adjusted to her inexperience.

A glowing smile rested upon her lips as the audience put aside their worries for a moment and stared raptly at her. I spotted a purple earth pony stallion with dirty bandages wrapped around his limbs watching with his mouth hanging down. Here, she gave a little bit of kindness and beauty. It was such that I spotted Charity watching from the door of the post office. The filly twisted her lips sourly but gave a little nod of acknowledgement.

As much as I'd love to sit and just listen to Velvet's beautiful, impromptu little concert, I tore myself away and made my way towards the bridge to the Core.

Down by the river, I was astonished to find the *Seahorse* tied up to the underside of the bridge. The pilothouse was gone and the deck and cabin roof slightly scorched, but the boat was still seaworthy. The crew were in the midst of hammering planks to the roof. Thrush lay draped across the bow next to the battered gun turret, hat covering her head, a trio of rum bottles collected around her.

"You survived?!" I shouted at the ship.

She jerked upright, scattering bottles every which way as her head turned wildly with her captain's hat still covering her face as it dangled from her horn. "I fully reject the false equivocation of that statement!" she bawled out. "That's unfair profiling of the nautically challenged, and I am offended, sir! Offended!"

"It's me, Thrush," I said as teleported over in front of the inebriated green mare. "Blackjack. Security." I pulled off the helmet and

grinned at her.

She pulled the hat off and arched a brow as she eyed me suspiciously. “I’ve heard that often of late. Some say they are. Some say they aren’t. How am I to know this isn’t a highly elaborate scheme to confound and disabuse me of my dignity and high character?”

“I…uh…” She’d missed the meeting, it seemed. Then I picked up one of the empty bottles, stuck it on my horn, and grinned at her.

“Well,” she said formally. “That changes things.” And she pulled the bottle off my horn, looked at the others arranged around her, and lifted up one with a few dregs, downing it.

“How are you still afloat?” I asked. “I saw the *Seahorse* get hit.”

She scowled at her crew. “Did not. You saw the *Seahorse almost* get hit.” She spat at the city.

“Captain, we nearly got blown out of the water!” a teal mare objected.

“Not even close!”

“It nearly burned the roof off the ship! We were almost cooked in the steam,” a red pegasus objected.

“Just a graze,” Thrust said, adopting a stoic pose.

“Didn’t it vaporize those bottles of Luna’s Moonrise Rum, Captain?” a third crewmember asked.

Thrush’s bottom lip quivered, and then she grabbed me and sobbed into my shoulder. “It was a disaster! A catastrophe! If we hadn’t of turned towards the city at the last moment, I would have lost the last bottle too!”

“You nearly lost your boat, Captain Dodo!” the teal mare yelled back.

The water beside the boat splashed as a pink mare poked her head out. “The bottom is patched. Any more leaks, Seabiscuit?” The teal mare poked her head into a hatch at the front of the boat, then shook her head. “Good,” the swimming one said before her eyes turned to me and she broke into a wide grin, waving a fin. “Hey, Blackjack. Wait, you are the real Blackjack, right?”

Thrush levitated a bottle over and stuck it on the end of my horn. She then gestured to me with both her hooves and an arched brow.

“I’m the real Blackjack,” I assured her. “It’s good to see you, Pisces. Is Capricorn around?”

She shook her head. “Capri’s over on the northwest side. There was a barge loaded with munitions that sank there, and she’s helping

the Finders and Reapers pull out the crates." The pink mare cocked her head. "Finders, Reapers, and Zodiacs working together. That's just…"

"Weird. I know," I assured her with a smile.

"No. It's good," she said with a smile. "Brutus is really cute," she flushed a little.

"He's…well…" I flushed as I remembered my close brush with him. "Shiny. Very shiny."

"Do you even have a port for his ship?" Thrush taunted with a smile.

Pisces went from pink to scarlet. "Yes! I do. Not that it's any of your business!"

I shook my head to refocus off shiny, buff stallions and seapony reproduction. "What are you doing with the *Seahorse*?" I asked Thrush.

"Well, that's quite a question. What to do with the fastest boat on the river, a bit of scorching aside?" Thrush rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"We're running cargo and getting refugees to the Ironmare naval station," the teal mare answered for her. "The Steel Rangers have a ship they're going to bring to try and get ponies clear of the battle. No idea how many trips their ship can make before the shit hits the props. If we all live through this, we'll have enough caps to rebuild the *Seahorse* completely."

Well, that was promising. I didn't know how many the *Seahorse* could move either, but even one was better than nothing. "I'm glad you're not running."

"Thought about it." Thrush frowned. "Honestly, egress would be the smart thing to do. Digression and valor and all that. But this city's kept me here this long. Leaving it just feels…eh." She gave a little shrug. "Currents keep bringing me back here."

I thought about the Tokomare and how its Enervation field drew souls to it. These ponies might not be losing their souls, but I thought of the attraction. Maybe it was affecting all of us on a level that we couldn't quite perceive. A kind of soul gravity, pulling us in. I'd returned. So had others. Until this was finished, one way or another, I didn't think I'd ever be able to leave this valley.

"Blackjack?" Pisces asked in worry.

I shook my head. "I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm glad you're okay, Pisces."

"I am too. And I'm glad you're the real one. The other you…the

armored one…really scared me," she admitted, dropping her eyes to the brown water as she tapped her fins together. "I thought she was going to shoot us even after we got that gun for her."

"Gun for her? What gun?" I asked with a worried frown.

"Well, it was something that Steel Rain guy had us look for months ago after the *Celestia* blew up. A really weird gun. We found it a few days ago and delivered it to her. I've never seen a gun like it before, but she had ammo for it and everything."

My body felt cyberponyish once again. "This ammo... was it great big silver bullets?"

"Yeah. You know what it is?" Pisces asked.

"A gun. Folly. I killed a battleship with it," I said absently. "I need to find the jackass that asked for the damned thing to be built in the first place." I had other reasons, too, but if Cognitum had Folly…I had a sudden image of a beam obliterating me from a mile or two away. "I'm glad you're both still okay. Stay–"

My words were drowned out by an enormous booming thump coming from the Core. The babble of thousands of ponies died down to a crackle as a great metallic groan rippled over the valley. Slowly, I climbed up the slope to the bridge above us as the thumps were replaced by more softer, quicker thuds and more moans. Deep thuds sounded somewhere far below. I saw ripples dance in puddles left on the road. More ponies were following me up and on to the bridge.

I stared at the Core and saw that the beam turrets atop the wall were dark. How long had they been off? Slowly, I walked along the bridge towards the open gate. I reached the word 'Mercy' painted across the bridge, balked, and then took a tentative step forward. Another. Another. No beams lanced out at me to render me to ash. Slowly, I continued forward as the groans and moans of metal continued, punctuated by thuds and shivers under my hooves.

I glanced back and saw not a single other pony advancing past the Mercy line. Smart. Any second I expected the beams atop the wall to light up and dust me…but why would they? Cognitum wasn't connected to the Core anymore. The stallion she left behind was dead. Goldenblood wasn't wired in through his pod, so…who was left to turn the guns on? I swallowed as I reached the massive gate.

Ahead, the Core lay still. The green glow radiating from the cracks in the streets had dimmed. Hundreds of tiny robots lay scattered about in motionless heaps like so many unwanted toys. I stepped

forward, unable to hear even the faint whisper of Enervation. Only the metallic groans sounded. The thumps. The deep thuds.

Wait. I froze, staring ahead. Did that skyscraper just…move? I stared up at one of the shorter, sixty-story-tall black towers laced with wires and cables. I saw several of the cables go taut, accompanied by a moan of metal and a great thump. The tower swayed, and slowly moved upright. Then it went still. A second thump and other cables off to the side went taut, and the tower shifted ever so slightly in that direction. My eyes followed the hoof-thick cables to immense wheels exposed by torn away siding. I had no idea what those immense motors had been for. Elevators? Power cables feeding directly into the machines gave the city a sharp reek of ozone as the wheels turned to take in the slack, thumped to a halt, strained, and then went slack again.

"Do you–" a stallion rasped from beside me, making me almost jump out of my hooves. Goldenblood looked at me flatly, then at the Core. "Do you get the feeling that something bad is about to happen?"

"You mean something bad isn't *already* happening?" I answered with a grim grin. I looked out at the moaning city. "I've been having that feeling since I first saw this place." Then I blinked and stared at him. "Wait! You're not melting!"

"No. I'm not. The Enervation is gone," he said quietly. "Why do I feel that that's a bad sign too?"

Because if there was no Enervation, no killer robots, and no beams of death, then there was nothing to keep everypony in the Hoof from flooding into the city for protection or loot. "It's Silverstar Sporting Supplies all over again. Lure everypony in…turn the Enervation back on…kill us all at once and harvest our souls." But why? What did the Eater get from pony souls? What did it want?

"I'll pass on word to seal off the three bridges into the city. Hopefully that will keep everypony out," he said grimly, tapping buttons on the broadcaster-equipped PipBuck he was wearing. He reached over and did something to mine too. "There. Tags of every PipBuck we have. You can listen in with that Perceptitron device."

I nodded, not taking my eyes off the tower that slowly crept back into a vertical position. "Cognitum has Folly. Any advice on how not to get annihilated?"

"Don't sit there while she fires it. It does have a ridiculously long fire delay, and only a ten or twelve square foot area of effect.

Rather idiotic to use it against anything smaller than a building," he murmured, also staring at the tormented city.

"What were you going to fire it at?" I asked with a wry smile.

"Tom," he answered quietly. "I realized something was manipulating me into creating Horizons a short time before the bombs fell. I wasn't precisely sure what. Pinkie's warning had… shaken me. Deeply. But was it Luna manipulating me? Horse? Twilight Sparkle? I couldn't be sure of anything anymore. I realized Horizons was a mistake, and so I had Trottenheimer make a weapon that could destroy the moon rock." He chuckled and shook his head. "I have no idea how he pulled it off. Maybe he'd already been working on something similar... "

Wait. Barring instant vaporization…"Could I use Folly to stop Horizons?"

"I don't see why not. Granted, destroying Tom as it falls would probably cost you the valley. Instead of one immense stone, you'd be showered with thousands of smaller ones…but none of them would be caught by the system that would turn them into starmetal or penetrate the mile of stone and interact with the Tokomare directly."

"Still, it's a plan B. But what about my body? If she fires it, the Flux... "

"Will start mutating her badly. Multiple shots will accelerate the change, of course." He closed his eyes. "Folly was my other suicide. Dying destroying my greatest and most terrible creation seemed… fitting."

I stared at him flatly. "No offense, Goldie, but I think a good therapist would have probably helped you out a whole lot more." I sighed and looked out at the city once more. "If she does fire, and she's pregnant, how long could she last before the baby…" I choked. If it was immediate…there wasn't much point to taking my body back alive once she shot Folly.

He stared at me in shock, and then his eyes softened in understanding and he gazed out once more. "I'm not a doctor. I believe the placenta would offer a tiny amount of protection, but no more than a day. Flux is…fickle."

"Right. Right," I muttered. "Just more incentive to get moving and finish this. When do we move on the space port?"

"Tomorrow morning at dawn. Big Daddy and the teams are getting what they need. Mare Do Well has a squad to tap into their control

network. Everything is getting staged at Paradise Mall. We'll storm in and hit Cognitum hard before they launch." He sighed. "At least, that's the plan. You do have an idea how to stop her?"

"Spark grenades and Wonderglue. Glory and Homage distract her with distance fire, protected by Velvet and her alicorns. Calamity snipes her floating weapon pods. I try and teleport onto her back. She expects the move and gets really pissed and focuses on me. P-21 sticks a spark grenade on her butt with Wonderglue so she can't teleport out of range or levitate it off." He gave me a funny look, and I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I've been plotting how to take myself out. Sad, huh?" I sighed and went on, "Zap knocks her out. Scotch Tape takes off her legs and wings. Brings her back here. Triage and smart ponies take Cognitum out and put me back in. Take rocket to stop Horizons and deal with Brood or, if too late, you get to use Folly and blow it out of the sky while we run for the Highlanders' mines."

"You'd let me do that?" he said, sounding oddly touched. His broadcaster let out a squawk, somepony requesting confirmation of moving refugees through Burner territory, and he said, "Yes. Survivors from Flotsam. Let them through and don't waste time shaking them down. They're refugees." He took a deep breath. "I'm honored you'd grant me such a death."

"You have issues," I said flatly. "Anyway, once Brood are done, find surrogate for my baby, transfer back into this body for good. Stick the original in your stasis pod to keep it safe. Get Snails to put my soul back together. Then spend many long years being a mommy with P-21 and either patch things up with Glory or make sure she has a mare worthy of a girl like her. Spend the rest of my existence making things better 'till a raider is luckier than me and call it a good life."

"I see a gap in your plan," he said softly.

"I know, but unless I know for sure how Boo thinks of me, I can't really work her into the equation, now can I?" I asked with a feeble stab at humor.

"Not that," he countered, the voice of reasonable concern.

I shook my head. "Yeah. Getting to Cognitum through the Harbingers, Brood, and Legate. Amadi isn't going to make this easy. He wants her to go." I sighed and rubbed my face. "Maybe Charity has a crate of StealthBucks lying around and we can all just cheat our way through."

“The ones she has are going to the infiltration teams,” Goldenblood said with a half smile.

“Figures. What I need is firepower. Vigilance is great for close-in work, but I need something more on the kinetic killing machine scale.” I rolled my eyes with a sheepish smile. “What I really need is a…ah, forget it.”

“What?” he asked in bafflement.

“It’s stupid.”

“What is?”

I rolled my eyes again and said with a touch of sarcasm, “You wouldn’t happen to know where I can get my hooves on an IF-88 Ironpony, would you?”

He smiled. Of course he smiled…

* * *

“This is a bad idea, Blackjack,” P-21 said as we teleported to the east side of the Miramare Air Station. The alicorns had deposited us outside the base; apparently alicorn fast travel wasn’t precise enough to get me into the room I needed. I was glad they’d agreed to transport us, given Velvet was helping out the refugees. Homage and Scotch Tape had stayed behind as well, the former to work with Mare Do Well on how to return control of the MASEBS and the latter to prevent the refugees from spreading disease.

“What’s new about that?” Glory asked with a smile.

“Nothing. Just like to be on the record, that’s all,” he admitted. In every direction were countless red bars. The base was awash in crackling gunfire as dozens of Harbinger defenders attacked the swarm of Brood to the west of the base. I lifted Penance and sighted through the scope, assessing things. Calamity did the same through Spitfire’s Thunder. I lingered the crosshairs on the back of a stallion’s head and shivered. No matter what, I’d never be a sniper. Even if these were technically the enemy.

I sighted on several of the combat-armor-clad Harbingers blasting away with markspony carbines, assault carbines, and anti-machine rifles. I watched as cybernetic Brood made lazy attacks on the base, standing out in the open and letting themselves get shot to pieces before falling back. Out of sight, I knew their repair and healing talismans were restoring them to full. Repeat ad nauseam. “That is one hell of a turkey shoot,” Calamity said flatly. “Barely any fire

control at all. Did these idiots just raid an arms storeroom, put on the same outfit, and call themselves an army?"

"Some of them have training, but for the most part, yeah. That's the Harbingers," I replied.

"That's a joke. Sick, sad, deadly joke," Calamity replied.

"Is there a plan?" P-21 asked me with a smile.

I thought about teleporting in, getting the stuff, and getting out again. What if there were guards? They'd probably blast anypony who just teleported in next to them. "Get into the crater, up the pipes, in through the command center, and up into the building. Extraction the same way. Calamity and the alicorns will stay here and provide cover fire if we need to bolt," I said, getting a surprised smile from P-21. "What?"

"Nothing. That's just much more of an actual plan than you normally have," he replied. "I remember when the plan was 'run for our lives'."

"The good old days." I chuckled and then looked at Glory with her wistful smile. "Just the three of us again. Been a while, huh?"

"Yes," she said with a happy sigh.

Together, the three of us waited for a rise in firing, then rushed to the tank lying near the crater. I gave a few seconds' consideration for the bones of the mare I'd seen so long ago. Now they'd been scattered by some reckless looter. The pictures were gone. She only existed as a person in my memory.

No time for that now. We each took some Rad-X, dropped into the crater, and made our way through drainage culverts and up into the base. I didn't think the Harbingers would be using this area. Without power, I recalled how dark, hot, and stuffy it was down here. This time, I was surprised. The utility room the culverts connected to was well-lit, and there were red bars moving around. It looked like the Harbingers had some decent technicians with them.

And guards. One unicorn spotted us coming around a corner, levitated up an assault carbine, and opened her mouth wide. Glory's beam pistol sent a line of oscillating rainbow light into her head. The light spread along her body, turning her into a glowing mass that disappeared in a flash when it reached her hooves. The armor and gun clanged to the floor of the hall. She spat out the pistol, turning it over in her hooves. "What setting was that?"

"Awesome, I think. Or is that Cool?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at

a little dial on the side, looking at the various settings.

P-21 sighed and retrieved the combat barding and guns. “You should put this on, Blackjack. That operative barding stands out way too much.” I had to agree. Better to fit in.

On mostly silent hooves…why couldn’t I be all sneaky sneaky like LittlePip?... the three of us prowled through the halls of the command center. We had to hide in the interrogation room to avoid a patrol. I stared at its smashed-out window and the dark stains still covering the walls. I glanced at Glory, shifting over and hugging her as she trembled. So much pain had started here, some of which I contributed to. She gave me a smile and stilled.

As we passed by the command center, I heard a familiar stallion say, “Tell them to stop firing! Stop! Until we get a resupply, I want them to hunker down and only attack if the Brood cross the fence into the base proper. We’re going to be fighting them with hooves soon, and I’ve seen cyberponies in action.”

I wanted to stay and listen more, but every second we did increased the chance of detection. Upstairs, the plan was seriously straining. I hadn’t expected there to be this many Harbingers inside. The cafeteria was filled with injured Harbingers. Dozens lay on bloody mattresses set out on the floor. Clearly, the Brood were whittling away at the ponies without internal healing talismans.

“You!” a mare snapped at us. “What do you think you’re doing?” I whirled to stare at a gaunt lavender unicorn with a white mane and a pair of crossed scalpels on her flank. She seemed familiar. Her eyes stared hard at Glory and P-21. “If you two aren’t injured you need to get your gear and get on the roof,” she snapped.

“Right. Gear. They just got here,” I murmured.

“Hurry up,” she snapped, pointing towards the back towards our destination. “Get some barding that’s not too bloody and get shooting.” And then she returned to casting healing spells. Either she hadn’t recognized us, or she had and assumed I was just another impostor.

Either way, I wasn’t going to question my luck. In the barracks were more Harbingers trying to sleep. One rocked back and forth muttering to himself, “Security will save us. Security will save us. Any second.” I wanted to reassure him. To let him know I was trying my best…but the Security he prayed to couldn’t care less if he lived or died.

In the locker room filled with boxes of combat barding, a haggard

stallion stared desperately at the three of us. “Reinforcements? Say you’re reinforcements!” he begged.

I shared a look with the other two. “We’re here to help,” I finally said.

“It’s been a nightmare. Just a nightmare,” he muttered as the earth pony pawed through the barding looking for a complete set. “At first it was a joke. Like that fake Security saying she was the real thing. But the attacks never stopped. They just let us shoot them and fall back. Shoot them some more and fall back. And for every twenty we shoot, they shoot one of ours. Like clockwork.”

As he worked, I moved over to the back row of lockers, gesturing for them to keep him occupied. I got to the ones used for the Marauders and tapped the control panel. It flickered to life. Somepony had apparently tried to rip them open, or maybe, from the scorch marks, blast them open. I brought up the locker of Big Macintosh.

Password Clue: Where the heart is.

Carefully I entered in the obvious ones while the old stallion with the armor blathered on about the constant casualties, the gangers refusing to help like they should, and low ammunition. Family. Home. Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack. Apple Bloom. All failed. Twilight Sparkle. I sighed…if this didn’t work…I tried my last one. Maripony.

The locker clicked open. Inside was a large black case with a note on the top. I leaned over and read it. *Thought you should have the prototype, Cupcake, since it was made for him. Sadly, anti-machine rifles are more effective against zebra robots and infantry. Might roll out a model for power armor. Hope you can use it to inspire others to follow in his hoof steps. Braeburn.*

I cracked open the case and was immediately struck by the smell of gun oil. The twelve gauge barrel was thicker than a riot gun, and about four inches shorter than usual. The full automatic action had a select fire for single, burst, or fully automatic fire. On the lid of the case rested the magazines, two double drums, each capable of holding fifty twelve gauge rounds and fitted with selector switches allowing different types of ammo to be used. There was also a feeder chain connected to a two-hundred-round ammo drum. The latter could only have been intended for use with a battle saddle.

Inscribed on the barrel was a simple word: ‘Ayup’.

“I think you’re gonna need more shotgun shells for that thing,”

Glory said over my shoulder.

The grizzled stallion realized we weren't listening to him ramble on as he held the combat armor out to P-21. "Wait, did you get those lockers in the back open?"

"Um. Nope," I said with a bald-faced lie, trying to hide the gun case behind my back, closing the locker with a hind hoof as carefully as I could.

"Anything there is the property of–" he started to say with a frown. P-21 charged him, pinning him against the racks of armor and glaring into his eyes. "Y'all!" the stallion yelped. "Nine tenths and all that."

"Good," P-21 said, then met my gaze. "What?"

"Nothing," I said as we turned to go, shaking my head. I couldn't fault him. I wanted to trot the heck out of here, but as I looked out, a gray stallion with bars on his helmet was trying to rally more soldiers to get up on the roof and fight back the enemy. There were at least a dozen armed Harbingers in there. Oh, to just teleport out. "Stay close," I told them, and concentrated. I could do this. I could teleport my friends with--

Flash, and I appeared next to Calamity. "Yes, I knew–"

Next thing I knew I was flipping sideways through the air in a whole heap of pain, landing in a heap with my whole body alternating between pain and numb. "Aw horseapples," Calamity said as he rushed up, setting down Spitfire's Thunder and immediately pulling out freshly brewed healing potions. "Why can't folks send me a memo when they're gonna dress up like the bad guys? That too much ta ask?"

I chugged down half a dozen healing potions, thankful for their potency. That rifle hurt! "Don't worry. You're just the latest in a fine tradition." I looked at the hole punched through the ceramic composite plate in my barding, then at my side, then out the opposite side. I gulped down another healing potion for good measure. If Calamity had taken a second to aim rather than shooting in reaction, I'd be dead. "I need some whiskey. Then let's get out of here."

He demonstrated he was the best of ponies by pulling out a half full bottle of amber intoxicant and passing it to me. I wasted no time taking a hearty pull. "I'm sorry about your friends," he murmured, taking off his hat. Then I blinked and realized there were only the two of us and the alicorn here.

I upended the bottle.

My bloodstream charged with healing potions and happy juice, I focused and teleported back where I'd come. The grizzled stallion fell back again. "Gah! What's with the flashing and the popping in and out and... "

"Where are my friends?" I demanded. He blinked at me several times, as if trying to figure out what I was asking. In the cafeteria, the lavender doctor was peering at me with a sharp scowl.

"On the roof? Where else? The Brood are picking up the attack! I'd get out of here myself if they wouldn't shoot me for trying!" he said.

"Right. The roof." I trotted out and made my way to the stairs, past the second floor offices into the third floor quarters. Most of them had been broken into and looted long ago. I was depressed to see that Colonel Cupcake's was one of them. There was an injured soldier holding her guts in lying in the hallway. "Roof?" I asked, immediately passing her my last healing potion. She drank it at once and pointed to the end of the hall.

As I walked down, a pink pony in my head immediately began waving a red flag, and I paused, considering one of the closed doors. Then my eyes were drawn to the nameplate, the letters on it obscured by accumulated grime. I reached up and wiped the film off the metal. *Sgt. Twist*. The door was locked, and I mentally kicked myself... If only I had the time and skill. Friends first, though.

At the end of the hall, a stair continued up and the chatter of bullets became louder. The roof was awash with brass and confused heaps of discarded ammo boxes. Sandbags along the roof's edge afforded some protection from the ground as the Brood continued to press in from the west. The momentum had changed, too. The peek and retreat tactic I'd noticed earlier had transformed into a more steady push. Dozens of augmented zebras were now out in the open, laying down a steady cover fire as they advanced. Fifty ponies in battered combat armor milled about returning fire, some just hopelessly spraying their weapons into the advancing throng.

Now was a time I really would have loved to have Calamity or Psalm with me. I drew out Penance and searched my inventory for armor piercing rounds. Two dozen, better than nothing. "I need AP ammo," I shouted to the pony next to me, who was firing bullets wildly with a levitated sniper rifle.

"What?" she screamed, staring at me.

“AP! Armor piercing!” I yelled.

“What’s that?” she asked, blinking at me in bafflement.

I levitated out three bullets. “Hollow point. Standard jacket. Armor piercing! These! Use these on their heads!” I waved the third at her before loading and shoving out two sandbags, giving myself a firing hole. These weren’t real zebras. They were organic killing machines... not ponies. No souls... still, I felt a squirm of unease as I aimed the crosshairs at the nearest zebra.

It took two headshots for me to drop it. Then over to the next. Two shots. The next. Two shots and a reload. I glanced over at the other Harbingers. “Aim!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “You won’t kill these without a headshot. Use spark grenades if you have them!” Still, there was chaos. One stallion seemed to be dumping brass in ammo crates, duct taping them shut, and tossing them at the enemy!

A trio of cyberwinged zebras dove in a wedge straight at me in a strafing run. I levitated as much brass as I could and flung it up at them, ruining their shots and breaking their dive in a moment of confusion. Their programming probably didn’t account for this. Nor did it account for me drawing Vigilance and teleporting in a flash onto one’s back. I unloaded the magazine into the nearest one, the heavy bullets ripping through wings and hide and sending it crashing to earth. The last in the wing turned and opened fire on the one I rode, and I flashed off my current mount and on to the diving one, switching to Duty and Sacrifice. The old dueling pistols boomed in unison as I blasted it, and then I put the last two bullets in the head of the already-injured last one just in case. I teleported back to the roof, popped open the revolvers, and started reloading; the click of the cylinders closing was accompanied by the thump of a dead cyberzebra hitting the roof behind me.

A dozen Harbingers had stopped fighting to gape at me, the corpse, and the air where I'd been. "What?" I asked in annoyance. “Fire! They won’t stop just for that.” Galvanized, the fight began to shift. Less panic and more discipline. I moved up and down the line to make it harder for their zebras to hit me as I looked for my friends. I spotted a pegasus firing an anti-machine rifle with no heed for the recoil, the muzzle waving all over the place as she struggled.

“You’ve got to compensate for the recoil! Slow down!” I bellowed at her.

“I’m trying! Energy weapons are easier!” she yelled back at me in

frustration. Then Glory looked up at me, her purple eyes widening in surprise. “About time you got back!”

“Sorry. Teleporting is funny like--”

At that instant, six cyber unicorns flashed in around us, each with a pistol and, of all things, a sword. The six moved at me with terrifying swiftness and sureness; so this was what it was like being on the receiving end of augmentation. I lifted Duty, Sacrifice, and Vigilance and got ready to kiss my ass goodbye.

But Glory was faster. Abandoning the huge rifle, she drew the rainbow blaster and, with the smoothness of S.A.T.S., transformed one into a glowing bright nimbus of light. I gritted my teeth, preparing for pain as I fired the dueling pistols and my magic bullets at a pair. The barrage slammed into them, not fatally, perhaps, but enough to ruin their shots.

But the other three... they rushed in as one, pistol shots sending Harbingers diving for cover as they stabbed at me in unison, their blades precisely aimed to pierce my heart, throat, and eye. I did the only thing I could and jumped away as hard and fast as I could. Unfortunately, the only direction of ‘away’ was over the sandbags, and I found myself flipping into empty air.

Did I mention I was on the roof of a three story building? With a whole bunch of Brood advancing? Maybe that Wild Pegasus wasn’t the best idea...

I tumbled through the air for a few seconds, then teleported back to the roof. I had enough velocity that I slammed down on one of the cyber unicorns with a crunch that was only partially from me. The ones I’d missed wheeled about without the good manners to be marginally impressed, but now the soldiers had gotten over their shock and came to my rescue, mobbing them and joining Glory. I staggered to my hooves as the remaining unicorns were dispatched. “Get back to firing! That was a distraction. Go!” I croaked, waving a hoof to the west. The soldiers rallied, fighting back with more vigor and determination.

Glory knelt beside me. “Have any healing potions?” she asked as she poked my side, making me hiss in pain.

“Used my last on a mare downstairs,” I confessed.

“Me too,” she answered. “Just take it easy.”

I scanned the battlefield and then gave her a sardonic grin. “Sure. I was thinking of taking a little nap. Sounds good. Wake me when it’s over.” She sighed and shook her head. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Then I looked over at that crazy pony throwing ammo crates over the edge and shouted at him. “What are you doing?!” My side gave a twinge of pain. Okay, shouting bad.

Then P-21 regarded me flatly, a detonator in his mouth. He bit down hard and from the west came multiple sharp explosions as the ammo crates exploded, peppering the enemy with countless spent shell casings. Even cyberponies were staggered by that. The stunned Harbingers recovered and finished picking them off before they could retreat and regenerate. “Sorry, I didn't realize you were enjoying yourself,” P-21 said as he trotted to us and pulled out a healing potion for me.

The Harbingers began to give little cheers and shouts of joy. I wondered how happy they’d be if they knew that there were more coming. Still, a little hope was better than no hope. “Let’s get out of here,” I said as I started for the stairs. If I was lucky, I’d be able to make it out of here without any more troub–

Down in the third floor hall, a solid wall of soldiers faced me. As scared and shaken as they were, they had more than enough force to liquefy us. I blinked at so many red bars, and one yellow. “Hi,” I said, giving the yellow bar a wave. Fortunately, it belonged to the pony with what I suspected was Colonel Cupcake’s combat helmet on his head. Hopefully that meant he was the pony in charge of this firing squad. “Let’s not anypony do anything they’re going to regret.”

“I told you. P-21 and Morning Glory and the impostor we were warned about,” the gaunt lavender doctor said. “I remember them from Flank. Not many stallions with dots all over their flanks.”

“Yes, I recognize both of them. You’re the mare calling herself Blackjack, then?” the officer asked in that tantalizingly familiar voice. I tugged off the helmet, tossing my mane before staring evenly into his eyes. P-21 scowled at him and gave a low growl.

“You!” he spat. “You raping bastard!”

“P-21,” I said evenly, my hind end clenching at that word. I kept my eyes on his, stepping closer. “So…you were one of the four on the *Seahorse*.” He didn’t answer immediately, just gave a little nod.

“Captain Nails,” he replied evenly after a moment. “Thanks for helping out with the attack.”

“I was in the neighborhood. It’s sort of a thing I do.” I swallowed hard. “I spared your life,” I said, hoping it was still possible for all three of us to get out of here. Why didn’t I have alicorn

teleportation that could yank a half dozen ponies where I wanted?

"And I yours. Happyhorn, remember?" he said as he kept my gaze.

"I'm so glad you two are acquainted! She's wanted by Security!" the doctor said with a roll of her eyes. "Dead, as I recall. Her friends too."

Nails didn't answer. Now that I could get a better look at him, I took in his brown and black mane. Earth pony, bigger than P-21, with a steady and thoughtful gaze. "You spared my life," he said finally. "The mare…that cyber thing…never would have. She'd have been creative with killing us." He closed his eyes. "You're the real Blackjack."

"Who cares!" the doctor scoffed. "The mare calling the shots wants her dead."

"I care!" Nails snapped at her, making her back away. He frowned at me. "If you're really Blackjack, then it's as he said. So I have two questions to ask: is Steel Rain dead?"

I could have denied it. Remained vague, but really, I was just tired of lies. Tired of so damn much. "Yes."

"Did you kill him?" He asked me.

"Actually, it was his own damn treacherousness that killed him, but yeah. I guess you could say I did," I replied. I glanced back at P-21 and he gave the tiniest of nods. I glance out the corner of my other eye and Glory gave a sad, resigned smile.

"I see," he said and then looked at the soldiers and then back at me.

"What are you waiting for?" the lavender nag demanded.

"Making a decision," I murmured.

"Ha…bu…gah…wa?" the mare – Scalpel! That was the name! From Flank! – blustered. "Are you insane? She just said she killed him! Shoot now!" Her magic glowed around the gun of the pony next to her.

Nails fixed her with a cold, hard glare. "Shut up. That cyberpony nag would shoot you without a second thought." His hoof smacked her horn, and she sat hard on her ass, holding her horn as her focus was shattered. More and more guns lowered, red bars changing to yellow as he advanced on me. "Steel Rain gave us a recording for if he died and you killed him. We haven't heard from him in over twenty-four hours. That's unheard of for him." He lifted his leg and accessed a scratched-up PipBuck. I guessed that after LittlePip and me, they were all the rage.

From his hoof came a familiar, warm voice that made me shiver. "Hello. I don't have much time. I'm taking a squad of soldiers into the Core and there's a good chance I won't make it out. I hoped that I could work the angles and take the Core for all of us, but if you're playing this then that's just not going to happen. So if a pony comes out of the Core that's not with us, I'm probably dead. You need to know that the Harbingers are a trap. All of it. That Dawn and her goddess, Cognitum, are using all of you as chumps. Just like they used me.

"Nails, you know Security. You'll know the real deal. I put you in charge of the Harbingers. If you meet her and she's killed me, I want you…well…fuck…to be honest, I want you to nail her to the floor and fuck her ass a dozen times. Set up a conga line. I want you to chop her head off. And if her friends are there, kill them first." The recording laughed. "Then kill that cybermare. The Legate. The whole damn Hoof. Kill 'em all!

"And Blackjack, if you're listening to this, I'll be waiting for you!" the stallion on the recording said cheerfully. Then it clicked off.

A loud sneeze might set things off. I didn't want to blast these guys, but I didn't see much choice. Everything hinged on a stallion who'd nailed my hooves to the floor and raped me. Scalpel looked from Nails to me as we stared into each other's eyes, her head jerking back and forth so quickly, I thought the snapping of her neck might set everyone off. "Well?" she shrieked.

Nails kept his eyes on mine. I knew that P-21 somehow had a grenade ready to fly and Glory was set to start blasting, but so were they. It felt like I was back in Happyhorn, and I mentally begged him to be the better pony. "Keep your guns down," he said in a low but sure voice.

"What!?" Scalpel said, her voice sharp as griffin claws on a chalkboard. "Cognitum–!"

"Is not here! This mare is!" he snapped back. "Cognitum gave her orders for us to fight to the last. Well, I will fight to the last, but only for a mare who deserves it." He faced me again. "Can you help us any more? We'll be out of ammo in an hour or two and overrun if we can't get some reinforcements and resupply. I know a dozen other squads that are just as bad off or worse."

I activated my broadcaster and found the tag. "Goldenblood?"

A minute later, he rasped, "Blackjack?"

"I'm talking with an officer in the Harbingers at Miramare. They

need our help. I want you to tell Big Daddy to reinforce them and Keeper to try and get them more ammo. Lots of them are shot to hell, too," I informed him. A tiny smile formed in the corner of Nails's mouth. I regarded him a moment. "Will you follow Big Daddy's orders?" The smile disappeared. "He's calling the shots in the fight for me. Can you?"

"He obliterated my gang a year ago, the Nightmares," Nails said darkly, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You forgave me. I can work with him, at least."

"You…you…you…" Scalpel's eyes bulged. "She's going to kill you. All of us." Was she talking about me or Cognitum? In the eyes of my enemies, was there really any difference?

"No she's not. Because I'm trying to help," I told the old mare.

"Help?" she screeched. "I remember the help you gave Flank! It was my home. Then you showed up, and it all went to shit. All because of you! Everything you do gets everypony killed. You're a fucking menace! You're a plague! A fucking monster!"

I stood there, hollow. "I'm trying to do better," was all I could say.

"Ever think the whole Hoof would be better off if you didn't?" She hissed the question like acid.

"No," Glory said immediately, stepping forward. "I know it wouldn't be." Scalpel balked as she went on. "This valley is like an infected wound. It's full of poison and disease, so twisted up that you can get killed just by stepping hoof in it. But Blackjack didn't cause that. She's lancing this boil, draining the pus, debriding the wound, and giving us all a chance at survival. It's not easy, and even she can't force the healing that it's going to take. But it's better than slowly dying."

"Cognitum's going to kill us all for this," Scalpel said quietly. Then, without another word, she turned and walked down the stairs.

P-21 looked at the rest of the Harbingers. "I know you're scared. I know you're angry. I'm an expert on fear and hatred. And I know how difficult and hard it is to change. Steel Rain, Cognitum, and Dawn don't change. They just want to go back to Old Equestria, with the power and the war machines and the facade of normal life. Well, we don't. We're trying for a New Equestria. And we, all of us, need each other to do it. I know you're scared. I know you want to fight and kill and hurt those that hurt you. You can't. These Brood aren't zebras. They're killing machines, and they're infinite. We have a plan to stop them."

“Do you really think you can?” Nails asked.

“We stopped them now. We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think it was possible,” I told him.

He shook his head. “After what we did... I just wanted to die. Planned to. Then I heard that Dawn pony talking about becoming a part of something bigger. But we weren’t. We were just a collection of smaller pieces. Steel Rain talked about being a part of something stronger. But we weren’t. He just worked for a pony that knew where the arms caches were. You’re the first pony I’ve ever met who wants to make things better and get nothing for it.”

“‘Cause I’m stupid,” I laughed, a little forced, as I blushed in embarrassment.

“No,” Nails said with a shake of his head.

“Here,” P-21 said as he pulled the broadcaster off his PipBuck and gave it to Nails. “If she’s set on giving you another chance, I will too.” He paused as Nails took the broadcaster, then fixed him with a look that portended a certain, cruel death. “One. Chance. Don't waste it.”

There wasn’t much to say after that. We stepped past. I hoped Big Daddy and the other Harbingers listened. I also realized something else: if Nails was no longer following the script, it wouldn’t be long before Cognitum knew I was undermining her control. Would she tell Amadi? Maybe. The Legate wouldn’t want to act till she was off the ground. He needed her to change Tom’s entry angle if the Eater was going to get its feast. He’d probably tell her about using the Core to squash me like a bug when she returned. Would she move up the timetable? Maybe. Apparently it took a lot of time to safely fill up a rocket full of highly explosive chemical and magical propellant. Rushing it tended to result in explosions, as I’d heard from Stronghoof in the meeting.

As we started for the exit, I paused. “Wait,” I said to P-21 as I looked at Twist’s door. “Can you open this?”

“I got it.” He got out his tools and started to work on the lock.

Glory frowned at the door. “What is it?”

“I’m hoping to find something in here for Rampage,” I said as he worked the lock with a bobby pin and screwdriver. A second later, it popped open.

Twist’s room was spartan, as I expected. The windows were obscured by a thin veil of grime, and dust covered everything. There were two bunk beds in the corner, and on the top one rested

a teddy bear. On the computer desk were a burned-out terminal... and pictures. Twist and the Marauders. Twist celebrating atop Big Macintosh with a grin from ear to ear. Twist and Stonewing laughing at a soaking wet Applesnack sitting in a doorway with a bucket atop his head. Twist cuddled up with a red-striped zebra.

And Twist with her filly.

I'd seen her several times; it was the same filly Rampage reverted to every time she was disintegrated. In the pictures, she went from a tiny foal to a tiny filly. In another, she suddenly had red stripes too, and a little note on the picture read 'Shu needs to hide her magic zebra dyes better.' The last picture was Twist embracing her striped daughter.

This was it. Proof that Rampage wasn't just some mix of souls. She'd been a real filly once. The talisman might have prolonged her life, but the grin on that painted filly almost matched the one on my friend for eagerness and energy. I levitated the picture...

And spotted the memory orb behind it.

"Blackjack, you're not thinking of going into that thing, are you?" Glory asked.

"I need to. If I can give Rampage a reason to live, she won't have a reason to help Cognitum anymore," I said. "If I'm out for too long, carry me back, please." I touched the orb to my horn before there could be any further argument.

oooOOOooo

I was thrust into the body of an earth pony mare. Twist, I guessed. Her hornless body felt tough and strong; how much of that was due to her earth ponyness and how much was from the talisman inside her, I couldn't say. As she raced down the hall of the base, sirens wailed outside. Muted explosions sounded in the distance. She ran into the command center, starting to speak before she was all the way through the door. "Lieutenant Flash and Captain Grapevine are down. Zebra snipers. I got the snipers, but... " she started to say, and then she spotted the rotund Colonel Cupcake slouched in a chair. "Sir?"

"They've gotten Canterlot," the overweight brown stallion said in a hollow voice, a pained smile on his lips. "Some kind of chemical weapon like the one deployed at Littlehorn." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "And the bastards claimed they weren't behind it."

“The Princesses?” Twist asked.

“Presumed dead. It’s not clear. Cloudsdale Command and Control is gone. Earth Pony Command is gone. General Steelspire gave orders for megaspells to be deployed as fast as possible, but her command went silent ten minutes ago. The MASEBS is up, but patchy, and there’s no word from any of the Ministries.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Pegasus Air Command is ordering all pegasi to pull back to the clouds and seal the skies.”

“They can’t do that!” Twist shouted. “We need them!”

“They’re doing it. Rainbow Dash gave orders to help us, but they were countermanded. Since the military doesn’t answer to the M.o.A... .we’re on our own.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “Twist, you need to evacuate.”

“Evacuate?” she stammered. “Evacuate where? With the skies closed, there’s nowhere left to go! The stables are sealed. Hoofington is silent. I can’t reach anyone there. The lines are open, but everypony is gone!”

“Go to the Highlands. I doubt the zebras will waste a missile on played-out mines. You might have a chance if you go now and hurry.” He gave a sad smile and saluted her. “It has been an honor, Sergeant Twist, but I must relieve you of your duty. Your final orders are to get your daughter out of here and keep her alive at all costs.”

“Sir... ” she began in a broken voice.

He looked over at the consoles and terminals, the speakers crackling with static. “I’ll remain here. Maybe we can get some organization out of this chaos. Go.”

Twist stiffened and snapped a stiff salute with a tear running down her cheek. He stood and returned it with a kind smile. “Permission to... to... ” He gave a little nod. She rushed forward and gave him a quick, fierce hug. “It all turned out wrong, sir... ”

“It may work out in the end,” he replied and released her, regarding a radar display peppered with little flashing dots. “Now hurry. There’s another wave of balefire missiles inbound. They might be hitting Grimhoof again, but they might be heading here.”

“Goodbye, Colonel. I hope... ” but she didn’t finish the statement. Instead, she turned and rushed away from him, back the way she came.

In the front entrance, behind sandbag barricades, were a few soldiers making a feeble, futile defense. They had to know it was

doomed, but what else did they have? Twist scampered up to the third floor. “Peppermint? Peppermint!” she shouted, looking around the room.

“Mommy!” the filly shouted as she scampered out from under the bed and hugged her fiercely. “I’m scared! What’s going on?”

Twist’s body shuddered as her lips curled in a smile. Her limbs tightened on the red striped filly’s form. “It’s okay... I’m going to take care of you... take care of you... ” she murmured.

“Mommy! You’re squishing me!” Peppermint squealed.

That seemed to shake Twist out of it as she released her. “I’m sorry, Mint. Get your gear, baby. We need to go. We’re going on a camping trip in the Highlands. It’ll be safe there.” Mint nodded once and ran to the closet, pulling out a filly’s saddlebags and immediately wiggling into them. Twist rushed to the desk and pulled out a pack of photographs. Her eyes lingered on the larger pictures in the frames, but she just stuffed the pack into her pocket. “Come on. We have to hurry, honey. It’s not safe here.”

“I thought you said you’d keep the bad zebras away, Mommy,” Peppermint said as Twist scooped her onto her back and started from the room. “Wait! You forgot Mr. Ripper Killer Death Machine!”

Twist didn’t stop. “We’ll come back for him, Minty. Hold tight,” she said as she raced down the stairs. “Now, what do we do if we’re attacked?”

“Get off your back and hide,” she replied at once.

“And if I’m attacked and you see an opening?” Twist asked briskly.

“Knees. Eyes. Private bits. Hit ‘em as hard as I can!” Peppermint replied fiercely.

“Good girl,” she said, reaching into her pocket for a tin of Mint-als. She popped two into her mouth and chewed furiously. The world became sharper and clearer she trotted down to the entrance of the command center and froze. The ponies that had been at the barricade were now dead. “Trouble, sweetie,” she murmured. Without a work of argument, Peppermint slipped off her back and backed up as Twist stepped forward, all her senses on high alert.

Twist immediately froze, her ears twitching a moment. Then she lunged to the side, her hooves wrapping around thin air that immediately shimmered and manifested into a zebra. He shouted something at her in Zebra, and her hooves twisted with incredible force, snapping his neck. Something screamed behind her, and kicks

designed to shatter bones slammed into her back, driving her to the ground. Twist turned to look at a second zebra draped in a mistcloak.

Then Peppermint dove at the zebra, wrapping her limbs around one hind leg and biting down hard on the ligament attached to his hock. He cried out, turning away from Twist for a critical second to deal with the nuisance. Twist turned, hooked a hoof around his neck, and pulled his head back sharply, nearly making his ears touch his rump. A vicious blow to his throat crushed his trachea and sent him down in a gagging, gurgling heap. Peppermint extracted herself from the leg, grinning up at her with bloody lips.

"Aunty Shu Shu taught me that one!" she said brightly.

"Come on, Minty. On my back again," she said as she scooped her up and went running out into a world of chaos. Several long buildings were ablaze. Wagons lay scattered over the field, and several hangars had collapsed. Missiles streaked overhead from the east and south, trailing smoke as they slammed into more buildings beyond the tree line. Far to the south, there was an immense red glow, like a piece of the sun resting on the earth. A megaspell?

"We got to hurry, Minty. We're going... somewhere. Somewhere safe," she said as she rushed across the field towards a smoldering tank. Ponies lay scattered about as bullets zipped back and forth, buzzing like deadly lead bees.

"It's okay, Momma. I'm not scared," Peppermint said in her ear as they fled. "Aunty Shu said not to be."

As they were passing an abandoned tank, a zebra with bat wings strafed the ground, machine guns chattering as lines of bullets tore through the field. One pierced right through Twist's leg, but as she put her weight down, I could feel the muscle and bone shifting to heal the injury. The bat zebra wheeled back around, and Twist ducked inside the tank.

"It's okay... not scared... " Peppermint whimpered on her back.

"That's right... " Twist began, and then she felt a hot, wet wash on her back. "Peppermint?" No answer. Carefully she slipped the filly from her back and saw the hole punched from spine to chest, right next to her heart.

"Peppermint!" she screamed. "No... no! Not you too! Peppermint!" She shook as she saw the blood leaking out of Peppermint's mouth. "No. Please no... " she wept. Then her eyes focused on the hole in her hind leg closing before her eyes. "Peppermint... "

She reached down and seized a combat knife that had fallen on the floor and turned it towards herself. “Peppermint... ” she whispered, and then she rammed the knife into her chest with a scream. As the blade passed through her flesh, it began to heal immediately. Tears running down her cheek, she cut again and again, struggling to excise the device implanted within her chest. The tip of the knife scraped against something, and she pressed deeper. “Hold on, Peppermint... hold on... ” she whimpered. She pried hard, levering against her ribs. Something tore, and a glowing glob connected to tendrils of flesh came free. Gasping and whimpering, she cut the very last connection to the heart.

Abruptly, I was plunged into darkness. Then, slowly, I came to... only now I was in an aching filly’s body. Peppermint groggily got to her hooves and saw her mother as she lay there on her back, looking at pictures. The sounds of shooting had softened a little, and a terrible calm was filling the air. “Mommy?” Peppermint asked, her eyes wide and fearful at the weak way she slumped back against the wall of the tank.

“You’re okay,” Twist whispered, stroking her mane with a bloody hoof. “You’re going to be okay... ”

Peppermint stood up and saw the horrible hole in her mom’s chest. Her eyes rose to Twist’s as tears ran down her cheeks. “You’re not. You need medicine, Mommy. You’re hurt.”

“Shhh... I’m fine,” she whispered. “Such a brave and strong girl. I want you to promise me. Promise me you’ll live. That you’ll have a house and a family and a life. Please... ”

“I promise Mommy. I promise. But you need a doctor, Mommy!” she begged, sniffling.

“Shh... shh... it’s okay... ” she whispered as she kept petting her mane.

“It’s not okay. You’re hurt!” She sniffed. “I don’t want you to die!”

“Shh... .” Twist said quietly. “It’s okay. Sometimes mommies get hurt to save the lives of their babies.”

Peppermint hugged her as she wept, and then the hoof stroking her mane stilled. “Mommy?” She pulled away, looking at her still form. At the other hoof holding photographs to her chest. “Mommy!” A smile lingered on the corner of her mouth. Then there was a colossal roar and a terrible pain in her head, and everything returned to black.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory weeping. It hadn't been a long one, a few minutes at the most. "I'm getting too old for this," I muttered, remembering the feel of that probing knife. But now it was clear why she couldn't remember who she was: that memory had been removed. I could only imagine the anguish Twist must have felt at Shujaa's death, only to carry her inside her. But what guilt had Peppermint felt, promising to live to a dying mother, and then wanting to end it after she killed her own baby? But it was as Rampage herself had said: not knowing sucks.

"Rampage... needs our help," I muttered as I looked around the tight quarters. Of course Twist would want her daughter close at hoof and in a safer home than that little outbuilding towards the end. And Cupcake would let her keep her here, as the last Marauder. I didn't even know if it was possible to help Rampage at this point...

But I had to try.

* * *

We returned to Star House. Charity had delivered several cardboard boxes of supplies. Healing potions, 12.7mm and 12 gauge ammunition in a variety of flavors, food and bottles of water, spark grenades and Wonderglue. And, of course, a bill. 'To be paid if you live' was scribbled at the bottom. Charity might have only been a filly, but she'd helped with this fight more than I suspected she could imagine.

Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape all had similar packages waiting for them. Glory was using some spark batteries to 'optimally charge' her gem cartridges. P-21 was inspecting each 40mm shell for Persuasion. Scotch Tape examined her array of tools, spanners, hammers, duct tape, Wonderglue, turpentine, and other equipment. Nopony talked.

P-21 cleared his throat.

"I'm coming with you, Daddy," Scotch Tape declared flatly. "Don't tell me to stay where it's safe, 'cause nowhere is. I'm coming and I'm helping and that's that."

P-21 froze, mouth open, then closed it again. He glanced at me, but all I could do was smile and shrug. Send her away or take her with

us, either way was risky. “Stick close to me,” he told her. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.” The words hung over us like a shroud. I could only focus on loading twelve gauge slugs into the ammo drums.

Then the door opened, and Boo sauntered in. I immediately smiled. “Hey! There you are. I wondered where you’d got off to.”

Boo beamed a smile and then turned and said outside, “Come’n!”

“What… ?” I began to say when Homage, Calamity, Velvet, and Ditzy sauntered in. “Oh, um, hi,” I said weakly. “Is something the--”

But they weren’t the end. After them came Big Daddy, Brutus, Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front. “Where do you want us to put this grub?” Big Daddy asked as he gestured to boxes of food carried casually on Brutus’s back.

“Um… over there,” I murmured, gesturing at the long dining table. “But we have more than… ”

Again my words died out as Triage, Sagittarius, Virgo, a red earth pony mare with a flame cutie mark I guessed was Aries, and a griffin I guessed was the new Leo trotted in. Triage and Sagittarius levitated a wooden tub with Capricorn and Pisces waving at me. “Tell me where I can set them down. They’re heavy,” Triage grumbled. Thrush staggered in after them with her crew carrying boxes of sloshing bottles.

“I… ah… what are you?” I stammered. But there were still more ponies. Grace and Splendid followed with a protective Pain Train and a worried looking Charm, her head still bandaged. Stronghoof, Crumpets, Psalm, Chicanery, and Farsight funneled in after them. Storm Chaser, Mare Do Well, Twister, Boomer, Doctor Morningstar, and Lightning Dancer entered along with Dusk, Moonshadow, Lambent, and Lucent; the latter four immediately went to Morning Glory. Charity, Bottlecap, and Keeper arrived with even more food on their back, and behind them was a horde of colts and fillies, Sonata and Adagio bearing Octavia on their backs.

The house overflowed, and so the crowd spilled outside. I saw Whisper and Stygius, Tenebra and Persephone, and the still blind Hades clustered together with the yellow pegasus trying to get the four close to the others. The ghouls Windclop the mayor, Willow the security mare, and Velvet the… what did you call a pony who made naughty underwear anyway?… along with Boing. Harpica and the ghoul fillies and colts immediately joined them in polite and civilized conversation. Rover, Gnarr, and Fifi kept a little pocket of

clear space around themselves as still others arrived. Silver Spoon, Xanthe, Carrion, Cerberus, and Snails trotted and floated up to the house as well. I spotted a restored Sweetie Bot alongside a holographic Apple Bloom whose appearance flickered in and out to reveal the mechanical filly beneath. Applebot? But they...

Horrifying images of Cognitum packing them with balefire eggs and detonating them in the crowd or spying through their mechanical eyes to find the perfect time and place to fire a Raptor's guns swept through my head. "It's okay, Blackjack," Triage said from beside me with a nod to Rover off in the crowd. My fears must have been apparent on my face as I gaped at the pair of machines. "We checked them as soon as they showed up. They're not broadcasting to anyone. No nasty surprises, either. Some funny tech in the white one, but if they get out of hand... " She casually checked the pack on her beam pistol, and Rover scraped his formidable metal claws together. "They won't be any trouble."

That was a little bit of a relief, even if it didn't explain where they came from. Definitely something I should ask about, but if they were safe, it could wait. More urgent was the question of where… *everyone here* came from. Almost everyone I knew was gathered around us. "What's... " I looked down at Boo. "What's going on?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Big Daddy said, "Tomorrow morning we're going to battle."

"So we have two choices," Storm Chaser said deeply. "To ponder the imminent battle ahead with sobriety and grim contemplation."

"Or get shitfaced drunk and spit in the face of Death and enjoy ourselves 'cause tomorrow we're fucked!" Thrush exclaimed.

"And while we know you might prefer the former," Homage said with a sad smile.

"The latter will probably do you a whole lot more good," Triage commented around her cigarette. "Us, too."

"So... " The white blank grinned eagerly, then leapt up in the air and yelled, "Leeeeet's... party!"

Once again, Star House was home to a celebration grossly inappropriate to the Wasteland. It was a rude gesture at despair and sober reality. Any second, the nightmare might begin. Heck, if I were Cognitum and still in the Core, I'd incinerate the whole house and all of us in one blast. But none of that seemed to matter here. People needed celebration and joy in the Wasteland. And so while I tried to smile and enjoy myself, I kept turning a wary eye out for a

flash of silver or an ominous red alicorn shape.

But that didn't mean others couldn't have fun.

The two strange ponies from Flank had set up a table and plugged cables into Applebot, who'd deployed two large speakers from her sides, and begun to play thumping, lively music with Sweetie Bot providing 'live' vocals. I just hoped they were waterproof in case the Hoofington weather decided to join this party too. Whisper tried to drag Tenebra into the middle of everyone to dance, but the batpony pulled free and made off into the crowd; instead, Whisper returned to Stygius who, to his credit, gave as good as he got on the impromptu dance floor. Was it just me, though, or was Whisper a little... well…*radiant*? It was probably just me. Storm Front and P-21 sat off to the side, drinking beer and nodding to each other. Brutus, Stronghoof, and Pain Train engaged in a flex off. Charity and Bottlecap abstained from the festivities but seemed to enjoy keeping the food and drink flowing. Repeatedly, Charity tried to tally up the drinks and meals served, and repeatedly Bottlecap stopped her, reminding her sibling that this was on the house. It seemed to cause Charity pain.

Calamity, Chicanery, Mare Do Well, and Storm Chaser talked about the future of the Enclave and Thunderhead. Homage and Velvet chatted with Grace and Splendid; what did you call a collective of unicorns? Boing and Charm sat off to the side, looking dour, before Harpica brought over some of her ghoul children to talk. Hades almost appeared to be having a taste test wearing his bandages as he sampled dishes provided by his wife. Being beaten in his own throne room seemed to have done wonders for his disposition.

As I wandered around, I kept hearing bits of conversation. Things were so crowded and wonderfully chaotic that I could eavesdrop on them without even trying. What did they call it? Mingling? Something like that.

When they were between songs, I trotted over to Applebot and Sweetie Bot. "You... the two of you... I thought you were scrap, and you... well... were scrapped too!" I couldn't believe it. Sweetie Bot was in bits! But now there wasn't a mark on her. Did Horse have a spare or something? And Applebot…Even ignoring what happened to her body, wasn't she just Cognitum in disguise?

"We are happy to see you again, too," Sweetie Bot said with a smile. The imitation was uncanny. Now that I wasn't fighting for my life, I could appreciate the job Horse had done. Bar the synthetic

warble in her voice, she was almost indistinguishable from the real thing. “Though I was deactivated for several hours, my repair talisman was intact, and, barring problems with some improperly installed hardware, I was able to recover enough system integrity to leave the Core. Without the sexy, splendid Mr. Horse, I found myself with a complete lack of purpose. I had no driving goal, only fragmented data of Sweetie v1.0.” She nodded to Applebot. “Fortunately, I recovered engrams of the previous imprint accessing her system.” If only I spoke smart pony...

“Sweetie Belle got me fixed up right proper. ‘Course, there was a little problem with my operatin’ system. Thing was buggier than an anthill. But I got a new system installed and backed up.” She frowned, looked around the party, and leaned in with a conspiratorial whisper, “Has Goldenblood told you anything new yet? Have you changed your mind on this whole ‘execution by mercy’ hogwash?”

“Ah... no?” I said as I gaped at her.

“Hokey Dokie!” Applebot said, beaming at me. “Just let me know if you need me to take him out. I can’t do it as creatively as I could in the pod, but I’ll try my best!”

“You... installed the megastable interrogation program into her?” I asked Sweetie Bot.

“Yes. It was a challenge, but the program was remarkably stable," Sweetie Bot said brightly, as if I'd just paid her a compliment. “And it had all of Applebot’s old files. I think the two integrated well.”

Applebot hung her head a little. “Darn sorry for the fibs I told, but I didn’t have no choice. I had ta do what she wanted.”

I sighed and shook my head. Robots. “Well... I’m glad you two are free now. Are you going to help with the fight?” I didn’t see a lot of weapons on either of them.

“Well,” Applebot began, “if she tries to use that PipBuck to access the MASEBS, we can try and mess with her. But otherwise, I don’t think we’ll be able to do much. Sorry.” She sounded a touch down, but then she brightened. “Instead, I’m going to do my best to find out every dirty and underhanded secret in the Wasteland. And we’re going to need a Scootabot... maybe one of those sentry robots!”

I had images of a bright orange sentry rolling along praising Rainbow Dash. “And I have a sample of super sexy Horse’s DNA,” Sweetie Bot gushed. “If I can get one of those cloning trees, we’ll be

reunited!"

"Sweetie... he'll be a mindless, soulless blank," I pointed out.

"I know. He'll be perfect!"

"Okay... well... good luck with that!" I said as I stepped away from the pair. Robots...

I spotted Crumpets and Lacu– Psalm. She was Psalm... I spotted them off to the side and tried to approach. "... still loves you, you know," I picked out Crumpets saying as I drew closer, feigning interest in the music. "I know it's a ballache listening to him going on about *love everlasting* and all that, at least for me, but he means it."

"He loves a mare who's gone. A mare who was better than me," Psalm said, and I had to drift closer to pick up her soft words. "I don't deserve his love."

Crumpets shook her head. "How'd you get so bloody fucking lucky and so sodding leatherheaded at the same time?" The yellow mare thumped Psalm's chest. "He. Fackin'. Loves ya. You have any idea how bleedin' rare that is? Not 'likes ya'. Not 'wants to mount you and shag you proper'. Love. Real fackin' deal. But you're standing here saying you don't deserve it. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't deserve it! Don't you understand?" Psalm said, flushing. "He's... he's so much better than me... "

"He's not a saint, you right big purple pillock. He's done things he ain't proud of. So have I. So have you. So what? It's not about what you *deserve*. Name me one geezer in this world who deserves love after all we do to survive!" Crumpets demanded jabbing the alicorn in the breast again. "Deservin' it don't come into it. What matters is whether you get it."

"It's not... " Psalm stammered.

"Do you love him too?" Crumpets asked. "Are you only into mares? Just not interested right now?"

"No! He's wonderful. He's caring. He's... noble... " Psalm replied.

"Then take what he's giving you and enjoy it as long as you can! Sure, you did some grim shit, but so what? You ain't special there, darlin'. If he forgives you and accepts you, then that's all that bloody matters, you dozy git." Crumpets sighed. "Some of us would sodding kill for what you've been given." She turned and trotted away.

Psalm started away in the other direction, but I trotted up to her. "She's right, you know."

“Eavesdropping is a bad habit,” Psalm said with a grumpy little pout.

“Yeah. I’m full of those. Setting off balefire bombs. Wanton megaspell-assisted vandalism. Eavesdropping. If we get carts running on the road again, I can add jaywalking to the list, and then I'll have the full set!” I said as I walked in front of her. “She’s still right. Stronghoof is a good pony. You’re a good pony. You’ll be better together.”

“How can you say that? Blackjack... you know what I did,” Psalm said with a touch of anguish.

“You killed Big Macintosh,” I answered, making her flinch. “We all make mistakes, Psalm. Some of them huge. Some we can never forgive ourselves for. But... ” I turned and looked at the huge, strong, tiny-horned unicorn and paused. “He reminds you of Big Macintosh. That’s what’s wrong.” Psalm closed her eyes and gave a little nod. “Did you love Big Macintosh?”

“It was... more a crush. I never spoke of it. Never acted. We all thought he had a mare somewhere, secret. But still... I dreamed of being with him. And then I killed him. As good as he was. As much as I... loved... I killed him. How could I dare to love again after doing that?” Psalm said, striding from the party to hide her anguish.

“You dare because you can. Because love is so rare that when you have it, you hold it as best you can. Because losing it... ” I sighed and shook my head. “I wish it was about deserving. It would be so much easier if it was that simple. Love is... precious. Fleeting. Frustrating. Wonderful. Terrifying. And above all... worth it. Besides, after tonight, there may not be a tomorrow.”

Psalm wiped her eyes and stared across the party at where Stronghoof laughed jovially with the others. “Perhaps... ”

I opened my saddlebags and pulled out Penance’s case. “I want you to have this back, Psalm. I can’t use it like you can, and in the upcoming fight, I think you’ll need it.”

She froze, staring at it. “How... how could you... how can I... ” she muttered, half in horror.

I stood and held her shoulders, gazing into her eyes. “I can because I know you’re strong enough to carry it. And I know you’re strong enough to use it, because you don’t want to repeat your mistakes. Forgive yourself, Psalm. I know that Big Macintosh would forgive you if he were here.” I pushed the case into her hooves. “If you can’t, or won’t, give it to somepony who can. But it should be a

better pony than me."

"I... will think about what you have said," Psalm murmured, barely audible above the noise. Then she turned and walked away, floating the case beside her. I hoped she came to terms with it. Hating and denying yourself happiness because of past mistakes didn't do anything to help overcome pain like that.

I kept mingling. I overheard Velvet, Homage, and Grace talking about babies, with Splendid looking like he was contemplating chewing his leg off to escape the conversation. Off to the side, Xanthe pranced quite happily to the music. Then she spotted me watching her and immediately flushed. "Hiding now," the suit piped, and when I blinked, she was gone.

"The griffins are sitting this one out," Carrion told General Storm Chaser over by the door to Star House. "The Talons came because of money, but most of my people remember the great war. They won't get involved this time."

"That's too bad. We're going to need all the help we can get," Storm Chaser said with a frown. "You'd think that with the end of the Enclave, they'd be glad to get involved again."

"You would think that," Carrion countered. "You're a pony. But two hundred years of battle has left a bitter taste in our mouths. Our people lived in Equestria, were even a part of it, but we aren't ponies. There's some that just want to watch the battle play out and then finish off whoever wins."

"They think they can?" Storm Chaser scowled.

"Their leaders do. Time will tell if they can pull together the support to actually make it happen," Carrion said with a shrug. Then they spotted me and looked at me coolly. I gave a sheepish smile and pretended to be interested in... a whiskey mixer... actually, nevermind the pretending. The whiskey helped me think about what I'd just heard.

That was a depressing thought. Winning the battle tomorrow just to have another battle. And another. And another. But why should our fight tomorrow be the end of all fights? That was hardly realistic. There would always be conflict and strife of some sort or another. Twilight had Nightmare Moon. The Princesses had struggled with Discord. The Ministries with the zebras. Who knew what battles would come, who would face them, or how they would win?

Face the battle in front of you, Blackjack, I thought, *and make sure the*

world gets a chance for those battles tomorrow.

I continued through the celebration. Velvet Remedy was now having an argument with P-21 about whether it was appropriate for Scotch Tape to fraternize with Adagio and Allegro. P-21 asked if there was an age at which a filly could give fellatio to multiple partners without parental approval that he wasn't aware of and if Velvet would instruct her own child of such. I stayed clear of that one. If Scotch Tape wanted to fool around and had her implant, good on her. Ambitious to tackle two at once, though; I'd never have had such an opportunity at her age.

Then I spotted Candlewick and Dazzle talking, the scarred stallion in the red fire coat giving awkward smiles as the mare remained polite... maybe even a little interested. Good for– then Toaster approached the pair and Dazzle immediately backed off and moved away. I headed closer, pretending to be interested in the music again as I listened.

"What is the matter with you, Candle? Getting sweet on a Flasher? Bad move, Bro. Bad move," Toaster said as he leaned towards him.

"We're going on a mission tomorrow," Candlewick countered with a scowl.

"Yeah, yeah. No doubt. But you got to be thinking about things after the mission, Bro. 'Cause if you're smart, you'll make sure that you're the only pony that walks out of that bunker. Things are gonna change around here, Bro, and you can't be thinking with your dick over some mare that doesn't give a fuck about you," Toaster said with a dark chuckle.

"It's not like that!" Candlewick protested.

"Oh, but you wish it was!" Toaster leered at him, leaning in. "Look at you. You're a fucking steak, well done. You'd like her to do you a little more though. It's fucking branded on your face. Get a clue. Flashers fuck who they want to fuck and that ain't a pony who looks like a ghoul. Little bitches give a 'I was raped' sob story and then shoot you in the back for your caps. Well, the Flashers are done. They just don't know it yet. They still don't have a new leader since Diamond got squashed flat. Psychoshy's more interested in fucking that batpony. Blackjack's way out of their league. They're gonna be toasted. So don't get too attached, Bro."

He trotted away, leaving an anguished Candlewick as he stared across the party at where Dazzle was talking with Whisper.

"Asshole," a stallion muttered beside me, and I jumped, the navy

blue Storm Front having snuck up beside me. The pegasus glanced at me and then in the direction Toaster went. “Toaster has more ambition than’s healthy for him. Dreams of seeing himself in Big Daddy’s position. He keeps the Burners together, but that’s about all the good you can say about him.”

“Is he right?” I asked the Halfheart, who gave a noncommittal shrug.

“Big Daddy’s old. No question about that. Question is if he’s old enough to be taken down. If Brutus dies in the bunker, I think Toaster might just try it. Or were you asking about the Flashers?”

“Both,” I said with a small half smile.

“Flashers always have it rough. East side of the river has always been tough. Flashers are used to fighting for their lives. Toaster thinks raped mares are funny. Halfhearts know better. Pride keeps the Flashers going after they’ve been hurt. They’re like us. Desolate, but still trudging forward, even when you know the most sensible thing to do is eat a bullet,” he rumbled. Wow, melodramatic much? Wait, was that what I used to sound like? No wonder ponies liked to shoot me. “Losing Diamond Flash was a blow, but they’ll continue on. Maybe Dazzle will take over. Maybe somepony else. Maybe Toaster’s right. Time will tell.”

I regarded him. “Do the Halfhearts have a leader?”

“Heartmender. You won’t meet her. She’s scared to death of you. M.o.P. ghoul. Used to be a caseworker. She keeps us all from doing something permanent to ourselves. We keep her sane. Good arrangement,” he said in his short, clipped sentences. A casewoker? Well, at least somepony in the Wasteland was getting therapy. “Toaster thinks Halfhearts are weak, but then, Toaster thinks everypony is. Probably even you.”

“Is he going to be a problem?” I asked with a frown.

“Of course. But if you try and do something to him or get rid of him, you’ll lose all the Burners’ fighters and turn their territory into a great big hole for the Brood to pour through,” he answered.

I groaned and rubbed my face. “Why is all of this so damned difficult?”

“Because it’s life. Life is a struggle. Killing is easy. It’s why Toaster is doomed to fail; he only wants to do what’s easy. He doesn’t have the strength for a real struggle,” Storm Front said, then patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry about Toaster. We’ve been dealing with him for years. You worry about your battle. We’ll deal with ours.”

That... cheered me up a little bit. It wasn't all my fight. Maybe I'd have to deal with Toaster later... but that was something way down on my list.

I spotted Glory disappearing around the back of Star House and blinked, then trotted after her. Behind the building, I spotted the gray mare sitting next to Tenebra. The charcoal batpony wept as she sat on a rock. "It's hard. I try so hard to be like... like Stygius. Father. Even Whisper. But I can't. Every time I get into a fight... everything goes wrong. I just... I'm a liability. A joke. Whisper thinks it's funny."

"Whisper has her own issues. She can be cruel," Glory said as she put a wing around Tenebra's shoulders. "Epilepsy isn't a joke. For fliers, it can be fatal if they have an attack at high altitudes and can't recover in time."

"I'm just... I want to be like her. I want to be... strong. Dangerous. Confident. All my people were supposed to be fighters, so a pony who can't fight... is nothing," Tenebra said with another sniff, wiping her eyes. "Ignored. I know Father is ashamed of me."

"I know how you feel. It's rough when the expectations of others aren't in accord with our own," Glory said.

"I don't want to be useless. I'd rather die than be useless," Tenebra said as she pressed her face to Glory's mane.

"You don't have to feel that way. Blackjack blinded Hades, and he seems... okay," Glory said awkwardly.

Tenebra sighed. "If we survive the battle, Triage will give him robot eyes to restore his sight. It's only a temporary uselessness... unlike mine."

"You're not useless. You just have to take your weakness and work around it. Just a guess, but I suspect your attacks are the result of adrenaline. Whisper and Stygius focus on close in attacks, right? Have you considered focusing on more long-ranged weapons? Rifles? Something that will keep you out of imminent harm and still let you fight."

"Rifles? I don't... traditionally, we use hooves and blades, not guns," Tenebra said as she wiped her eye. "Do you really think so?"

"I think it'd be better than hating yourself because you can't be like someone else. Believe me, I've been guilty of that lately too," Glory said as she held her.

"I... heard you and Blackjack... " Tenebra began.

"Mhmmm... " Glory answered.

“I’m sorry,” Tenebra said.

“I am too. Blackjack is… Blackjack. I can’t hate her. It’d be so much easier if I could, for both of us. I’ve tried hating her, and it’s just so hard. Soon as I ended it, she went and had marathon sex with another pony. I thought I’d be hurt by it… but I was glad she did. Loving Blackjack is… hard. I know she wants to accommodate my feelings, but in the end, she is who she is. A wonderful, self-destructive, self-sacrificing, determined, lecherous, loving mess of a mare.” Glory and Tenebra were silent for a moment, and I considered sneaking away before I was caught. Then, “I also wonder if she was right.”

“About what?” Tenebra asked, and I did as well.

“About the marathon sex being good for getting over a breakup,” Glory said with a smile. Tenebra immediately flushed and squirmed a little.

“Do you think it would be okay?” Tenebra asked.

Glory then turned and regarded me with a cool smile and arched brow. I immediately stammered, “Um…Hi. I just… saw… and… um… ” There wasn’t any animosity in her eyes though. Friendliness. We were friends… just friends now.

“Hey, Blackjack,” she said, and then she returned her attention to Tenebra. “I think, if we take it slow, it’ll be just fine,” she said as she rose to her hooves with the batpony beside her. “Let’s go to my room.” Together, the pair walked past me, Glory giving a warm smile to me and the mare beside her.

I watched them disappear around the corner, my last sight of them being Glory nibbling Tenebra’s ear.

What a night.

Though…there was one pony I hadn’t seen yet. I checked my PipBuck and found his tag. There he was. I trotted to the edge of the party and up the hillside into the still woods. Goldenblood sat alone, looking down at the festivities with a longing, pained look. “Hey. This is *my* brooding spot,” I said as I sat down beside him.

“I’ve never been good with social functions,” he answered. “Besides, I was here first.”

I watched the party as well. For several long minutes, we just spectated. Neither of us were particularly happy. We’d been through too much to ever join in like everyone else was. But we could find comfort in the happiness of others.

“What are our chances?” I asked him. “Seriously?”

“Seriously… I don’t know. We’re outnumbered, outgunned, and there’re too many ways this can end disastrously. Horizons will fire tomorrow afternoon and impact at midnight. If the trajectory isn’t altered, sooner. We may all die. But I do know that there is no way to calculate success at this point. We will win, or we will lose.”

Twenty-four hours. I should have been shocked… but really, considering how my life had gone…“When will Cognitum leave?” I asked.

“It takes a lot of time to fuel a rocket safely. Dawn, at the soonest. We’re trying to keep tabs on her, but between Harbingers still loyal to her at the base, the Brood, the Remnant, and any Enclave that are throwing in with her… well, it’s been difficult.”

“It seems wrong to have a party now,” I said.

He checked his PipBuck. “It doesn’t matter. We won’t be ready to attack until morning either. So folks may as well be happy.” He nodded towards the celebration. “You should go. It’s not good for the leader to hide during events like this. Luna always made that mistake.”

I rose, extending a hoof to him. “Only if you come with me.”

He stared at it for a long moment, then reached out and took it. Life was messy. A tangled perplexity that kept you constantly wondering what came next. Even in a moment where people weren’t shooting at each other, you couldn’t escape the rushing, twisting, churning, chaos of it all. Boo’d been right. A party was exactly what we needed right now. Life was a party, and while you may not always have fun, it was still preferable to the alternative. So together, Goldenblood and I rejoined the mess, as the celebration pressed on towards oblivion.

Footnote: <Error: Footnote Not Found>

Chapter 71: Ignition

"Darn it! Now you got me acting all sappy!"

There were ghosts in Star House. They breathed softly, silently, in the night. One moved through the rooms, restless, watching the slumbering occupants in the afterglow of desperate celebration. The house was in shambles; it'd take days to clean everything up and put things as nice and neat as when they'd first entered. The ghost walked quietly amidst the cast off Sparkle-Cola bottles and slumbering ponies. Many virtually sprawled out on the floor, snatching a few precious hours of sleep before the coming day. But not all.

Whisper and Stygius curled up together on the couch, oblivious to the outside world. That was how they survived and maintained themselves; they focused on that which was dear to them and shut out the rest of the horribleness. Like this, Whisper didn't need to inflict pain upon the world before it hurt her. There were the whispers, squeaks, giggles, and soft sighs of intimate cuddles. The ghost moved on. Time waited for nopony. Not even ghosts.

She walked past a sleeping filly murmuring softly in her sleep from underneath the kitchen table. "Eight caps per Sparkle-Cola times forty-eight bottles…sixteen boxes of Sugar Apple Bombs…carry the two…" Carefully, her head was raised, and an old pillow abandoned on the floor was slid under it. The yellow filly gave a tiny smile. "Five percent discount…" That was how she lived, by what the world owed her and what she owed the world.

The door to the room occupied by P-21 and Scotch Tape was open. The pair slept side by side with P-21 holding her safely in his hooves. They slept the sleep of the secure, the happy, the loved. The ghost couldn't help but smile as she looked down at the pair. They endured simply through being. Though hardship had battered both, they'd weathered it, father and daughter alike, with caring and

concern. He'd given her security and affirmation. She'd given him hope.

Next door, in Rampage's old room, LittlePip's friends rested. Calamity snored blissfully next to a Velvet who seemed to have adapted to it. Ditzy's family had refused to stay away where it was safe, arriving at the end of the party. Lionheart, Silver Bell, and the curious pink-eyed mouse lodged in the wagon, barely visible outside the window. What did ghouls do when the living slept? Did they walk among the sleeping like ghosts: enviously, hungrily, wistfully? Homage lay curled up, her back to Calamity, a pair of headphones covering her ears and plugged into the PipBuck she wore. Tears still lingered in the corners of her eyes as she slept, music a poor substitute for the warmth of the mare she loved.

The ghost ascended. There were others outside who kept watch and would give warning when trouble came. Outside the upstairs door, barely muted giggles could be heard. "…want to continue your research?" Tenebra said from within.

"I think that, with all I've learned from Triage, Rover, and the Project Steelpony notes, I could help ponies all across the Hoof. Maybe the Wasteland. Cybernetics are a double-edged sword, but if we're careful, the potential for good is phenomenal," Glory said.

"If it grants Father vision again," Tenebra murmured, "I suppose it is okay." Silence for a few seconds and a soft sigh. "Do you think you could help my…attacks…with some device?"

"Maybe. I think so. I'd be glad to find out. You didn't have an attack our last time," Glory giggled again. "I guess I didn't do a good job... "

"You were wonderful," Tenebra countered at once. "Though I'm glad you stopped trying to tie me up. And it was nice to do it without…well…everything. Whisper often tried to trigger an attack at her 'parties'. It was…aggravating…unlike this," she continued, followed by the sounds of kissing. The ghost rose, to leave them to their privacy. Then, "And you can help Blackjack, too." The ghost froze, silence pouring out from under the door. "I know you still care for her. I see how you look at her," Tenebra pressed.

"Blackjack…needs to get through this. I can't be both her special somepony and come along and help her. She gets distracted, and I don't want to compromise her. When everything is all done…when it's all done, then we'll see," Glory said. "We have to finish this. I'll do whatever I can so that she can be done and finally take the rest

she deserves."

"And me?" Tenebra asked in a tiny, barely perceptible voice.

"You…" Glory was silent for a moment. "You're more than just a rebound, Tenebra. I like you. I'd like this thing we have to be more." A soft sigh. "Blackjack's got the biggest heart in the Wasteland. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Maybe the three of us?" Tenebra asked.

"Not you too," Glory groaned, then relented. "Maybe. Maybe something might work out. But it'll be tomorrow. Everything will be settled, one way or another, tomorrow." A soft sigh. A gentle kiss. A rustling of sheets. Silence broken only by the longing in the air.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow…the ghost walked to the last room, gaze sweeping over the cardboard boxes, the desk in the corner which held the IF-88, and the tousled bed. Tomorrow…time marched endlessly onward in plodding steps from now to the ending of the universe. What folly had it witnessed? What cruelties? What joys? What sorrows? And if the grand totality of the events of the universe were tallied, which would ultimately predominate?

In the window, the ghost beheld herself. White. Red. Black. A blurred panoply. So different from the mare who'd been birthed in the depths of a damned stable, blissfully ignorant of its wretchedness. She'd come full circle, but oh so much more worn for the passage. Pressing her brow to the cool glass, she stared through the warped and indistinct pane and into unknown darkness. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. What was the price to see tomorrow?

And could a ghost pay for the privilege?

"Bwackjack?" Boo asked behind me. I turned and saw her standing in the door, watching me with wide scared eyes. Not scared in general; I knew *that* expression too well. Boo's face showed an odd fear…for me? "You scared?"

"Me? Scared?" I said with a lazy grin I'd practiced so well. "No way, Boo. No," I lied as smoothly as I ever had before, but Boo trotted right up to me, put her hooves around me, and gave me a hug. "It'll be fine, Boo," I assured her.

"Mhmmm…" she replied, holding me tightly.

"Nothing to worry about," I said, now feeling awkward. "Easy peasy."

"Mhmmm…" she answered again. And once more I felt myself start to shake, and she murmured, "Don't die, Bwackjack."

“I’ll try my best not to…” I started to say when my voice cracked and I swallowed hard. “I’m not going to…” Again, that lump in my throat silenced me. “Boo…”

“Don’t die first, Bwackjack,” she said as she pressed her face into my shoulder. The tremors increased as her words pierced me. Dying first. It was like LittlePip’s Mint-al addiction; if tomorrow didn't go as perfectly as it possibly could, some of us were going to die. Who would be first? P-21? Glory? Scotch Tape? Boo? Any answer other than me tore me to my core. And that insidious part of myself that had always held me back, which had been fed by Psalm’s own torments, now whispered about how noble it would be for me to sacrifice myself for my friends. Give myself first. Make sure I died first. Then…then I wouldn’t have to see…who died next.

Lacunae’s sad smile filled my memory, and I hated her, envied her. Nobly sacrificing herself for others so that her race would have a chance, giving back all the memories that made up her being. How dare she go first? Why couldn’t it have been me?

Dying last…sucked. Was it any wonder Twist ripped the talisman from her chest to save Peppermint?

“Nopony is going to die, Boo,” I told her, sniffing, the words halfway between a promise and a prayer. “It’s going to be like LittlePip’s fight. We’re going to go out there and kick flank, get my body back, and save the world. Just like LittlePip.”

Boo said nothing. She didn’t have to. She just held me tight, because right then I needed to be held.

Just two ghosts, comforting each other.

Then the door swung wide as if more specters were coming to the party, and for a moment I stared at the darkness on the other side. Then it spoke, low and soft. “Don’t shoot.” The darkness shimmered and dropped, and from it stepped Lancer. He looked horrible. Gaunt and exhausted, with fresh scars crossing his striped hide. But he still carried himself with determination. “It’s been a while, Maiden.”

“A bit. Still cursed?” I asked lightly.

“We are all cursed,” he answered with a small smile. “Some more than others,” he added as he stepped in, and there was a second shimmer revealing Sekashi. A second later, a lump on her back slipped out from under the cloak and onto the floor, revealing Majina.

She rushed to me, looking a little better than her son, and embraced me. “I know a funny story about a silly mare who fights

great evil, but I fear how the story ends."

Majina tapped her mother's shoulder, waited for her to turn so she could watch the filly's lips, then took a deep breath and explained, "Well duh, Mama. It ends with pzow pzow, vroom, boom, and then yay! Any other ending would be stupid."

"I sure hope so," I said as I addressed the trio. "Come to join the fight?"

My question wiped the smiles from their faces. "No, Blackjack. We have come to take you to the fight," he said gravely.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a chill running along my mane. "She's leaving in a few hours."

The three of them regarded each other gravely. "No Blackjack. She is early. Your copy is leaving within the hour."

Star House filled with yells and shouts as I went from door to door, rousing everyone and shouting for them to get ready. Lancer followed in my wake as everypony scrambled in the panic. Goldenblood entered from outside, took stock of the madness, and immediately relayed to Big Daddy and General Storm Chaser that it was happening now, whether the soldiers at Paradise Mall were ready or not.

"We were told it'd take hours to fuel the rockets. That it was too dangerous to fill them too soon," I shouted as I checked the drum magazines to the shotgun.

"It is not a danger if you force the ghouls to fuel them at gunpoint and you are not concerned with a few rockets exploding, especially if you know you can move before your enemies," Lancer called after us. "They lost two of the older rockets, but the rest are still functional. Father has been generous providing your copy with parts to restore them, and forcing the Propoli to repair them."

"Is the Remnant still following him?" I asked, turning to Scotch Tape as I saw the filly scrambling for some healing potions. "Make sure they're all good. We don't want any that have been sucked dry by Enervation."

"Right!" Scotch Tape shouted back as she flicked through them one by one, discarding a few that were too pale to be any good.

"The Remnant has been completely sidelined by the Brood. Father has taken them out of the fight, moved our people back to the staging depot for our safety. The few at the launch center were forced to come. I doubt the majority know he is working with your copy," Lancer said as he followed in my wake.

The staging depot that was being targeted by Storm Chaser. “Why didn’t we have any warning?” I snapped.

“Your pegasi are good scouts, but the Brood has cyberpony unicorns with wings. It’s impossible for them to get close enough to see,” Lancer said tersely.

“Got everything?” Velvet Remedy asked Calamity.

“Let’s see. Got my bardin’. Got my guns. Got my ammo.” He blinked and then looked around. “Muh hat! Where’s my hat?”

“On your head, Calamity,” Homage replied as she checked a Defender disintegration pistol.

“Oh, right,” he replied, relaxing. “I’m good.”

“Do the Legate and Cognitum know this is Blackjack?” P-21 asked as he fell in beside Lancer.

“Thankfully, no,” Sekashi said. “I read their lips though my son’s scope. They think this is a ploy by Big Daddy and his allies to seize power. That you are just a particularly skilled imposter and a patsy to them. They think you are attacking to kill them, and will attack soon.”

“Does the Remnant know that the Legate is Starkatteri?” I asked as we stepped outside. My statement didn’t prompt shock from the three. “You knew, didn’t you?” I asked Sekashi.

The mare balked. “There is a story of a mare whose husband was burned. When he healed, the black marks were as red as blood. She watched him warily but told her fears to none. Then, one night, as she did her duty as his mare, she asked he remove the skull he wore, for love cannot thrive amidst the bones of the dead. He did so, for of his wives, she had the sweetest of silver tongues. What he did not know was that she wore a charm to help see in the dark, and saw his cursed marks. She told his other wives, and they repeated the trick. When they learned what he was, they tried to flee. He could not go after them himself, so he sent his most devoted son after them.

Lancer had the decency to appear ashamed as he turned away. “I was so proud he picked me,” he murmured, then looked at his mother a moment. They shared a smile, and he continued, facing me, “I have tried to spread the word, but they are ever skeptical. The Legate serving the stars above? It is more than they will accept.”

“I hope they change their minds soon,” I said as we trotted out. If we were fighting for the future of the world, I hoped the zebras

didn't miss out on it because they blindly followed their leaders. Xenith, according to Calamity, was going to try to get zebras from Glyphmark to come to the fight, but none had arrived yet.

Outside, the chaos was rippling like a wave down towards Chapel. No, not chaos. Action. Most ponies knew where they had to go. Those that didn't were those who had come to Chapel for sanctuary: the weak, sick, and helpless.

"You have to get the Remnant to leave their places at the depot and come to the space center. If they see what he's doing with their own eyes, they have to accept it. Even if I have to blast that skull off his face and show everyone his marks myself," I said with a frown. So much planning had been done for Cognitum that I had forgotten there was an immortal fighter with scary star powers pitted against me. One that would be righteously pissed when he found out I was still alive. "You've got to get them out of there, though. There's a good chance that, one way or another, that depot is getting taken out, either by Raptor or megaspell."

"Ironic," Lancer said with a touch of bitterness, "that the Maiden of the Stars would care more for my own people than our leader."

I sighed and gave him a half smile. "You know he made that up, don't you?" All three blinked at me in surprise. "The whole Maiden prophesy thing. He used it to... um... manipulate people," I said delicately.

"My husband may make light of many things, but no zebra, not even the Starkatteri, would make up such a thing," Sekashi said gravely. "The Maiden of the Stars will exist, and she will strike down the city of evil. We thought it your Princess Luna. Perhaps she may still be. Prophecies may be manipulated. Exploited. But they always, always matter."

"Even if they are made by a monster like my father," Lancer added.

He started to turn away, but I touched his shoulder with a hoof and stopped him. "You are a better person than you father, Lancer. You know that, right?"

Lancer blinked, then gave a weary smile. "I know so, but it remains for me to prove it."

I quickly trotted them to where Ditzy and Lionheart seemed to be having a heated debate over whether or not Ditzy should remain at Star House. After a brief discussion, I told them where I needed them to take Lancer and his family. Lionheart swore upon the soul of Princess Luna at thunderous volume that he could get them there

safely. I didn't inform him of where that soul currently resided, but then, my ears were ringing.

As they left, Goldenblood approached me. Of all the ponies in a rush, he appeared the most cool and collected. "I'd feared she might try this. Luna was always full of surprises, and she was *sane*." He lifted his PipBuck, checked it, then looked around. "We were going to start operations in two hours. There's no way to get you to our forces at the mall and get them moving in time to prevent the launch. It takes time getting three hundred mixed murderers, soldiers, volunteers, and draftees to act in concert, even if they're only moving five miles. We're going to have to improvise." He paused, and for one moment I saw a crack form in his cool façade. "Blackjack…are you–"

I silenced him with a hoof. "I'm not sure about anything, Goldenblood, but I think you're going to be fine. Keep everypony alive, and try to save as many lives as you can. You want to make up for your crimes, this is your chance."

He swallowed, and then his features smoothed over as if he hadn't been upset in the slightest. "Of course." He looked over to where the alicorn trios were teleporting ponies. "Fortunately, Glory, Storm Chaser, and Velvet have worked out a plan B. It may save all our lives."

"Plan B's are good," I answered. "Listen, if everything goes bad, there's a secret weapon I want you to know about." I leaned in, whispered it into his ear, and was rewarded with something utterly beautiful: an expression of profound bafflement. Whisper leaned in eagerly, almost bouncing on her hooves, and I gave her a flat glare. "No. It's not another megaspell. This time."

The yellow pegasus sighed and rolled her eyes. "Damn it. I miss out on everything," she said, pouting as Stygius gave her a consoling pat.

Goldenblood's face still showed doubts. "Blackjack, are you–" he started to say, but I cut him off with a wave of my hoof.

"Enh! It'll work," I said solemnly.

"But–"

"Enh!" I repeated even louder and with another hoof wave. "It'll work just fine."

"How can–"

"ENNNNNNHHHHHH!" I said, waving both hooves in his face. "Trust me! It'll work."

I stared at him with such an earnest grin that he finally relented.

"Blackjack!" Glory called from where a trio of alicorns waited. P-21, Scotch Tape, and Boo all stood there with varying expressions of impatience, worry, and eagerness. "Let's hurry. The alicorns are going to teleport us over the roof of the Luna Space Center." That didn't seem like such a good idea given that there were airships, pegasi, and flying Brood that would see the flash of our arrival in the middle of the night, but I trusted the ponies who'd planned this.

"What about Calamity, Homage, and Velvet?" I asked, gesturing back at the house.

"They'll catch up," Glory said as I reached her. Then she held up a harness attached to a backpack. "Put this on."

"What is it?" I asked as I magically shrugged into it. All my friends, save Glory, were already wearing ones like them. We'd also made sure that all of us had PipBucks and broadcasters like the rest of the battle leaders. Sure, Boo didn't know how to use it, but we could talk to her and find her a little easier if she disappeared. Given all the spare PipBucks in 99... well, I was glad they didn't smell of chlorine.

"Something that will help us get onto the roof if plan B doesn't work," Glory said.

"What exactly *is* plan B?" I asked with a frown.

"The alicorns can't teleport you to the general area of the Luna Space Center, since in all our hapless wandering, we never actually got down there. So plan B. It's dark, so the alicorns will teleport us to a... position close enough to use a night vision scope to see where they need to teleport to directly." She reached down and tugged on my straps, tightening them. "If we can't do that either... eh... Hopefully, these earth pony contraptions will work right. The one we tested did, but... don't worry about it, Blackjack."

Don't worry about it? Last time she'd told me that I'd woken up half machine! "Wait? What earth pony contrap–" I started to say when the world disappeared in a purple flash.

* * *

We were over the Luna Space Center.

Way over.

The entire Hoof stretched out around me, a great concave bowl with the inky black of the reservoir and the Hoofington River

behind us. I could see it all lit by the full moon. I'd seen it before when I was rushing around outside of Star House, but I hadn't *noticed* it; I was too busy. Not now. There was not a single cloud anywhere in the sky over Hoofington. The trio of alicorns suspended us easily in a telekinetic bubble as we hovered over a gigantic monolith of a building that had to be the Luna Space Center. It was shaped like a crescent, the points facing west, with sloped concrete walls. The area surrounded by the crescent was paved and filled with a complicated tangle of rail lines and turntables, pipes in shadowed trenches, pits, and scorch marks. Most prominent were the six sturdy concrete pads, a central one circled by five others, occupied by towers of metal, four floodlit and two dark. Every inch of the surrounding terrain was lit up by bonfires, flares, and spotlights, and in three places I saw the bulky outlines of double-barreled tanks. Two Raptors, the *Blizzard* and *Sirocco*, circled in the sky out away from the building. Suddenly I had a deep appreciation of the cesspit that we were all going to be dunked in.

Above, the skies were clear and dark, the stars shining down at me. The stars…I stared up at them with a sense of wonder. I'd seen the sun and the moon, but peering out into that sea of blackness, I could only marvel at their beauty. They seemed to be greeting me; zebras might think that stars were bad, and the Eater of Souls proved that some truly were, but I couldn't believe they *all* were. Not all of them. So many stars amidst so much blackness…I felt tears on my cheeks.

P-21 pressed a forehoof against one of mine, and I looked over at him, seeing a confident smile that made me forget that I was far above the world and snuffed out any fears of splatting before they could form. Then Boo took my other forehoof, and Scotch Tape pulled herself along my body to a position across from me, joining her hooves with Boo and P-21. Glory hovered beside me, and I broke my hold on Boo's hoof to make room for her. If only Rampage had been here…

Okay. This wasn't so bad. Once the alicorns had a decent view of the roof, they'd teleport down. That was plan B, right? Hard to tell given what defenses there might be, given how high we were. Well…we'd just have to move fast. Hopefully it wouldn't be too rough. Too bad there weren't any blue alicorns with…wait. Where *were* the blues? There had to be some travelling with Velvet.

Suddenly there were flashes far below, clouds of dust and smoke rising from them. Flares burst to light like harsh, artificial stars, and I saw the horde spilling from the edge of the light towards the space center. A veritable flood of tiny shapes I imagined as gangers, Steel Rangers, and anypony else with guns, barding, and a willingness to fight poured from the darkness. First hundreds and then thousands of attackers. I gaped in shock. Where had they all come from? If you armed every stallion, mare, and foal in the Hoof, you still wouldn't have that many attackers streaking out in thick streams, firing wildly as they ran. From the silent night came the rumble of far-distant gunfire, then the faint crumps of explosions I realized I'd seen over ten seconds ago as the first sign of the battle.

My blood ran cold. It was suicide. An undisciplined slaughter. As one, the airships and tanks opened up, followed by a deluge of bullets from the defending infantry that would rip the attackers to pieces. How could Big Daddy be so reckless and callous to the casualties of such a charge? Whole platoons of ponies were torn to pieces in their mad charge. Dust cast weird shadows across the open space, and the light danced wildly about as they raced along. And still they were coming, more and more charging and charging and charging and…

Wait a minute. I scowled as I watched the endless charge. There was something wrong here. Nopony would ever charge so recklessly forward seeing the people ahead of them being blown to bits. And looking from above, there was a decided pattern to the rushing soldiers. I focused and saw a distinct bright blue raider charge through a hail of gunfire, disappear in an explosion, and collapse into a crater. Twenty seconds later, the same blue raider appeared at the edge of the light, charged, and collapsed into the same crater.

I gaped at the nearest alicorn. The green winked at me and smiled. "One of the blues was an Applewood special effects manager for the Ministry of Image. We actually planned on using this trick against Red Eye when he turned against us." Her smile faded a little. "Never expected one pony would break us."

"But you're not mad at Litt…the Lightbringer?" I asked. Her expression turned wistful.

"Some are. It's complicated. Mother helped many of us with the confusion. Some are angry, while others wish to replace the Goddess. But I see it as a second chance. And I have my sister to help me." The other green alicorn smiled as well, rolling her eyes

with a snort. “Even if she’s not as fond of the unchanged as I.”

“I’m not your sister. I was a seventy-nine-year-old granny looking to retire in a week,” she grumbled. “You’re an intern who shouldn’t have even been at Maripony that day.”

“I was trying to score points with Gestalt for my M.A.S. application. I didn’t know it was going to turn me into this, big sis,” she said with a teasing grin, earning a sour snort from the other green alicorn.

“Greens,” the purple alicorn said with a little roll of her eyes. She received a simultaneous sticking out of tongues in return, followed by the ‘older’ green glaring in annoyance at the ‘younger’, sheepishly grinning green.

Fascinating as alicornosity was post-Goddess, I tried to focus on the fight way way way below while trying to ignore the fact the ground was way way way below. While the air was thin and chilly, I didn’t feel as if I was going to pass out. Definitely didn’t want to stay up here for hours, though. “So if those are all illusions, where are the real fighters?” I asked.

Suddenly, the ground at the edge of the concrete exploded in a half dozen places, and sand dogs and earth pony Reapers raced out. Two actually emerged behind the Brood lines, and they tore into their flanks with glee. In the gaps between illusions, invisibility spells were dropped, and the attackers fanned out in a swarm to hit the Brood as they whirled to deal with the threat on both sides. The tanks disappeared behind cloaks of continuously exploding fireworks. If they were dazzling up here, I wondered how the tank crews fared. From higher up but further away, two Raptors appeared as if by magic, the massed invisibility spells on them torn away by the power of outgoing disintegration cannon fire.

If we got through this, I intended to send a bottle of Wild Pegasus to every alicorn I could. Without their magic, we simply couldn’t have done this.

“Okay! Take us in!” I said. Cognitum wouldn’t wait long before launching with a full-on attack going on.

There was flash and a sense just short of smashing every atom in my body against a stone wall. “Ow… ” The purple shuddered. “I’m afraid we cannot.”

“Can’t? What do you mean can’t? Is there a F.A.D.E. shield in the way?” I asked.

“No. Something magical is disrupting the spell,” the purple said,

pained. Probably some zebra trick, I guessed, or nasty Starkatteri magic. She looked to Glory. “Plan C?” Wait? What’s this? Glory gave a solemn nod.

“Wait? What’s plan Ceeeeeeeeeeeee!” I screamed as the telekinetic field holding us disappeared.

“Good luck!” the younger green yelled down after us. Then the three disappeared in a flash. Not that I was particularly paying attention to them at that point; I was a bit preoccupied by how very, very quickly the dark rooftop of the Luna Space Center was getting bigger. The rockets looked like spikes. I could see the hard ground and I could imagine myself falling faster and faster till I transformed into thin paste and…

I heard laughter and glanced over at Scotch Tape waving her hooves out at her sides. “I’m a pegasus!” she shrieked, barely audible over the rushing wind in my hair. I saw P-21 smiling too, and Boo seeming also at ease. There was only one explanation: my friends were all insane!

Then Glory reached behind me and pulled a cord. The backpack flipped open, a little cloth coming out, catching the air, and then dragging out a giant pink chute. It unfolded and expanded into a round parachute with Pinkie Pie’s grinning face emblazoned across it. P-21’s chute popped open, then Scotch Tape’s, and finally Boo’s. Together, we slowed, drifting towards the great building. Glory gave me a sympathetic smile as my eyes bulged, my pulse raced, and my mane and tail stood out in every direction.

“Nice! They all worked,” Glory said as she drifted down next to me. “I was afraid I was going to have to catch you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this was plan C?” I asked.

“Because you would have insisted on plan D, which would have probably have involved either some horrible attempt to parley our way in, intruding through some horrible muck-filled pipes, or attempting to charge the lines.”

“Because those are all sane plans!” I countered as we drifted down. Finally, though, my panic abated to the point of rational thought. “… Okay. Seriously, this was genius, but I really would have loved trying to talk my way in at gunpoint.”

“I know,” she said.

We continued our slow descent in silence; fortunately, everyone seemed to be too busy to notice and shoot us. “Keep your knees unlocked and roll as you land,” Glory warned as we approached the

rooftop. It wasn't completely abandoned; there were Brood squads firing down from the elevated edge. She darted down to the closest one and, just as one of the cyberzebras noticed something and started to turn, opened up with Pew-Pew. Beams of energy transformed the first three zebras into glittering heaps of blue, green, and red dust. She'd come a long way from the mare I'd found hiding under a floor.

Up close, it was clear that Luna Space Center had been hit by some heavy firepower in the past. The top was cratered, and in some places the blast had overwhelmed the fortification and torn great holes through to lower levels. This building was just as tough as Maripony, designed to take a beating from within and without, but parts of it were every bit as ruined as the rest of the Wasteland. Glory had wafted us towards a large intact section of roof rather than a hole filled with rubble and jagged rebar, for which I was grateful. This was going to be hard enough already, especially if I couldn't teleport.

I landed more or less in a heap, which wasn't surprising given that I had no practice with the 'unlock your knees and roll' thing. With the battle raging around the building, I hoped our own melee here would go unnoticed a little longer. I tried to get to my hooves, levitate up the Ironpony — I needed a damned name for the thing! All badass guns had special names! — and give Glory some support, but the gun was tangled in the parachute canopy, my legs got hung up on the strings, and I fell on my face with a yelp on the rough concrete.

"This is not how I wanted to start this morning," I muttered.

Boo charged forward as well, and a frisson shot up my spine. What was she doing? She didn't have a gun or barding! One of the Brood turned his guns towards her, and I shouted a warning, about to fire a magic bullet. Then the Brood's magazine inexplicably ejected as the automatic rifle jammed. Boo dropped and rolled like a log, tripping the Brood and sending it sprawling on its face. How... Then Scotch Tape leapt out from behind some vent ducts and bashed it in the head with her wrench once, then again.

"I got one!" she said proudly, not noticing the two other Brood turning their weapons on her. The ground beneath them suddenly exploded, the grenade raising the cyberzebras off the ground with the force of the blast. She whirled as P-21 stepped out from…well, wherever he usually came from…and grinned sheepishly. "Oopsie."

“Tally up when the fighting’s done. That one’s getting up again,” he told her with a slightly tense smile. The cyberzebra she’d clubbed began to stir, and she pulled out a small baton and jammed it into the base of the Brood’s skull. There was a pop and sizzle and a flash of sparks, and it went still. “Now you can count it.” Soon the remaining Brood in this area of the roof were eliminated by Glory’s beam gun, Scotch’s little shock prod, Boo’s utterly baffling little kicks and trips, and two more judicious grenades.

“Nice job, Boo,” Scotch Tape told her. “Where’d you learn to fight like that?”

“Not fightin'. Playin’. Discord showed me how.” Little statements like that got the oddest looks, but now wasn't the time for elaboration.

Glory trotted up to where I was still tangled up in the lines. She looked down at me with a patient, almost maternal smile. “Blackjack. I broke up with you, remember? Stop trying to tempt me.”

I grinned up at her. “Hey. I’m nothing if not persistent.”

She sighed, glancing over at P-21. He wore a composed mask that barely hid his annoyance. She shook her head. “Talk to me about that tomorrow, Blackjack. Let’s just get through today.”

“You bet,” I said, certain that with enough time I’d work something out. Maybe…visitation? P-21 during the weekdays and Glory on the weekends? I could teleport from Star House to the Citadel or Skyport. If that wasn’t reason to live, I couldn’t think of one better. And if we couldn’t work it out, it wouldn’t be for lack of trying. Tomorrow. “Now…um…untangle me?”

Soon as I was free, we all moved to the inner edge of the roof, looking down at the launch area embraced by the building. I didn’t know much about rocket stuff, but it seemed like a clever place to launch from; the high, thick building was a formidable defense against anything smaller than a balefire bomb or megaspell. Even a Raptor would have to get almost directly above the space center to make an effective attack on the launchpads. The gap was the only breach in the defense, and it was most heavily protected with a tank in front of it and Brood guarding the tips of the opening.

In the middle was the pentagonal arrangement of launchpads with their rockets. The largest and grandest stood on the sixth pad in the center of the pentagon, a wonder of arcane science and technomagical art. The white metal of its skin bore the tarnish of

two centuries of neglect, but, seeing it here so close and in person, bathed in the glow of floodlights and standing next to a tower of girders, pipes, and catwalks, it was still an awesome sight. Unlike the rockets I'd seen in memories and pictures, it had no separate boosters; the hull flowed smoothly down from the pointed nose to the broad base. The other rockets were smaller, the less advanced but still elegant models with their four aerodynamic boosters and launch towers that surrounded and embraced them instead of just standing alongside, wreathed in frigid mist and bearing more signs of slapdash repair. I also had a clearer view of the two destroyed pads; one looked as if the rocket and its support tower had exploded and partially melted into single shards of tortured metal. The other was covered in frost, shattered corpses scattered around its base. Clearly, Goldenblood hadn't been mistaken about the risk of hasty fueling.

"But where is Cognitum?" I asked, trying to pick her out from all the activity. Then I glanced over at Scotch Tape peering through a pair of binoculars. I pursed my lips at her remembering to bring something I'd forgotten, then snagged them from her, ignoring her protest of annoyance. I swept the field with the glasses. If she was down there at all, she had to be near the biggest rocket.

"Oh," I murmured as I spotted her.

"Oh what?" Glory asked. I passed her the binoculars and pointed my hoof. She peered through, and a second later: "Oh. My." She passed them to the side, flushing. P-21 took them next, and both his eyebrows arched in surprise, then furrowed. He passed them limply back to Scotch Tape, but Boo intercepted them and looked as well… at the wrong place, but still, she was trying.

"Let me see!" Scotch Tape demanded. "I'm the one who remembered to bring them!" Boo returned them to her, and she stared around the field. Then her jaw dropped. "Whoa. Wicked," she whispered as she passed them back to me.

"Yeah, wicked," I said as I looked again. What had she done to my body? The black armor, based on Shadowbolt power armor, now had a more sleek and smooth appearance to it, as if the metal limbs were actual flesh, sinews of cable visible where the metallic... *skin* parted. What actual armor plates remained appeared intricately wrought and ornate, tipped with spikes. The black metal now had a faint purplish coloration to it, and there was no attempt to maintain my old cutie mark engraving or that of the Crusaders' filly or

‘Security’. In place of mane and tail, red and black striped magic blew, snapping like flame behind her. A crown of burnished silver and rubies rested atop her head. She appeared the perfect amalgamation of magic, machine, and mare. And also very, *very* evil.

A small escort of diminutive black and red gun robots flitted about her on levitation talismans, on constant vigil for something to shoot. Suddenly, I had to wonder if just a spark grenade would be enough to take her out. My earlier plan seemed to be quite shaky at this point.

Next to her, the Legate seemed positively ordinary. He still had his hooves wrapped in the glyph-marked cloths and wore the skull, but those now seemed almost amusing in comparison to Cognitum. I could see Cognitum’s lips moving…what were they saying?

“Give me a minute,” I said as I pulled out the Perceptitron and jammed it on my head. I entered my old PipBuck tag and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Not only did she appear different, but she felt…odd. This was my old body, and yet not. I could feel the strange, smooth metal limbs far more intimately than I had the old ones, which had been more like phantom limbs. There was a pulse, but it was a pulse of energy. Everything felt tight and oversensitive. I could now feel the pressure of my baby as a constant sensation punctuated by slight movements and tiny discomforts.

“…foals have shown their faces at last,” the Legate was saying. “They don’t realize how their factions are already falling apart. The Steel Rangers in Stable 99 are now reinforcing your Harbingers, as are certain Reapers and gangs. Their attack is a desperate gamble.” She stared down at the smaller zebra stallion. “When you return, the Hoof, then all the Wasteland, will kneel to you.”

“Be that as it may, we should have gotten word from Steel Rain by now. I dislike that I have so little direct control at this point. Before, when I wanted to act, I simply *did*. Now, I must give orders. It is frightfully limiting,” Cognitum said in a voice that sounded odd. She sat and stroked a metal hoof idly over her belly. “I do not like it, but if this is how I must rule again, so be it.”

“Are you still determined to keep those lumps of tissue inside

you?" the Legate asked, lip curling.

"Do not bring that up again! You serve me, remember?" she snapped. "These babies…my babies…I did not get to have one before. My children will love me. I will raise them, and in time, all of Equestria will be theirs! All the world!"

I wished I could see his face behind that skull. "Well, good luck with that," he said dryly. "You should depart soon. Before the Raptors get close enough to target the rockets."

"I will leave when I am good and ready. Do not presume to tell me otherwise," Cognitum snapped, turning to regard the rockets. "I will go to the moon once more, alter the trajectory, and the Core shall be reborn. Greater than any ever imagined!" she proclaimed. "My Harbingers will put down these rebellious subjects and your puppets." She purred softly. "I look forward to seeing their faces when I catch this fraud they're calling Blackjack and tear her to pieces before their eyes."

"Of course, o Goddess of Equestria," he said with a bow of his head. "And then I shall be rewarded," he said with a chuckle. "We shall all get precisely what we deserve."

"Oh yes," she replied, smiling beatifically at him. She turned and flew easily up to the open hatch at the top of the rocket, her drones following, where a Harbinger awaited in combat armor. "As soon as we go, kill him. Then direct my people to stamp out the Brood and Remnant for good. Hoarfrost and Afterburner have their instructions to assist in the elimination. I'll not have him in place with his minions." The Harbinger saluted and trotted back down the steps. She hissed in annoyance. "What is Steel Rain up to? He should have checked in on these disturbances in the Core hours ago."

She stepped into a small chamber with a dozen reclining seats spaced around the edges, two rings of six each. In the center of the room, two seats surrounded by controls and screens stood by a narrow spiral staircase leading down. Instead of pilots, a cobbled-together assembly of computer hardware was strapped and taped into them with wires running into gaping access panels on the consoles. A battered ghoul unicorn in a torn and faded flight suit worked frantically on the jury-rigged system, unscrewing another access panel as I watched. "Are the flight controls ready?"

"Soon. Soon! Fifteen, twenty minutes tops. But is very risky. These computers ran flight simulations, not actual rockets," he rasped. No

surprise that Cognitum would trust a machine pilot over a pony.
"Well, they'd better work. If they don't, I'll teleport to safety, and then I'll come down here and squish the rest of you into undead jam, do you understand?" Cognitum asked him sharply, the hovering gun pods all orienting on him.
"Yes. Yes. They'll work! They'll work!" the ghoul squawked, going back to furiously wiring the machines. "Once they're active, we can signal control room to start launch."
"Good. If I have to launch these things manually, I'll start them with you," she replied dismissively as the ghoul worked his mouth silently, clearly trying to work out the threat. She took a seat, sitting back and rubbing her shiny black tummy. "I'll save the world for you, my babies. For all my subjects. For everyone." Then she caught the ghoul staring at her. "Work!" she snapped furiously.

oooOOOooo

I severed the connection. "We have fifteen or twenty minutes," I said, trying to stem my rage from her talking about 'her' babies. Cognitum was a crazy program with a dead princess's soul jammed inside her. It was my body and my baby. Babies! More than one! Was my happiness doubled, or my fear? Both. "The... baby is okay," I said to P-21 as I packed the Perceptitron away.
A relieved smile spread across his face. "What's the plan?"
"Get to the middle rocket. Get her stunned. Swap me in for her. Go to the moon and stop Horizons. Easy." I then looked at the dozens, if not hundreds, of Brood and Harbinger soldiers all over the launch field. "Okay... Maybe not quite easy." I took a risk and tried to tele–
"Blackjack? Are you okay?" Scotch Tape asked as I blinked up at my friends. Small wonder the purple alicorn hadn't been able to teleport down here.
"No. Just... teleporting is out." I glanced at Glory and P-21. "Any ideas?"
Both of them shook their heads, but Scotch Tape said, "Emergency releases." Suddenly all eyes were on her, and she balked. "Well, they had to make safeties for the fueling. If they had to dump the fuel for a fire or an attack or something, they'd need a way to do so remotely and quickly. If it doesn't have any fuel, it can't launch." She gestured out towards the large gap in the crescent. "Probably vents way out there."

"Scotch, you're a genius!" I said as I grinned at the rocket. "If we can vent some of the fuel, they'll have to stop and refill it. Cognitum's not going to risk getting stuck on the moon. And if it does vent way out there, I think it'll provide a heck of a distraction when it all goes up." I was imagining a great geyser of flamer fuel raining down on the Brood forces. "We vent the fuel, get inside the rocket amidst all the confusion, take her out with a well-placed spark grenade or that prod of yours, and then let them refill the rocket and go!"

"Anypony else seeing the great big gaping holes in that plan?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Sure," P-21 replied, "but when has that ever stopped us before?"

"Nothin' stops Bwackjack!" Boo agreed.

"Where would these emergency releases be?" I asked Scotch Tape.

"I dunno, but if it were me, I'd want at least one in their main control room and another right by the launch pad," the olive filly replied. "I mean, I don't know exactly where, but normally safeties are marked with great big orange and yellow signs, you know?"

"Plus, if we control the control room, that should buy us more time," Glory pointed out.

We moved out as one, running along the roof to the nearest intact stairwell. P-21 made short work of the lock, and we scampered down. "Keep an eye out for generators and guards," I said quietly. "They're going to need power to run these systems. The more noise, the better the odds are that's where we need to be."

Unfortunately, this was an absolutely gargantuan building. It would probably take an hour at *least* to walk all the way around it. Most of it was simply uninhabited, and I could feel the tick tick ticking of time. Any minute... any second... we'd hear the roar of the rockets launching, and then that would be it. Maybe we could somehow, some way, get the Elements of Harmony to banish me to the moon... but I doubted it.

I kept feeling the temptation to sing 'I am your enemy, come and kill me' so that we'd at least have some idea as to a direction. In one large boardroom, we encountered heaps of rotting ghouls, some of them still twitching; presumably, these were the other inhabitants of what I assumed had been 'Rocket Town' before Cognitum arrived. There were disabled turret defenses and melted robots here and there, showing signs of the violent takeover.

Then we walked right into the Brood.

There were six of them, and soon as I stepped around the corner, they opened up at us. Glory cried out as several rounds struck her dragonhide flight jacket, and I felt the familiar thud of impacts absorbed by my operative barding. I didn't have time to wait for an explosive from P-21; I simply levitated up the Ironpony, flicked a switch, and pulled the trigger.

The half-dozen Brood were separated into metal and blood, the former falling in sparking, smoking heaps and the latter splattering the wall behind them as it was utterly resurfaced by lead. My shooting was shit; I just didn't have the LittlePip levels of telekinesis needed to control the damned thing, and the most I could do was try to keep it aimed 'that way'. And I hit 'that way'. In the space of a second, everything in that hall had been obliterated. Six meaty mounds of scrap where they'd stood, and two dozen shell casings littered the floor around me.

My barding's helmet protected my hearing well enough, but my friends wiggled their hooves in their ears, trying to get theirs back. I stared at the casings and the bloody lumps, smoke rising from the barrel. I felt the heat radiating against my face. I lifted the gun before me. "Okay…" I said breathlessly. "I hereby dub thee... Sexy!"

"Sexy," P-21 said flatly. "Really."

"What? Did you expect something more profound?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Hey. I can do profound," I said as I pouted at her. "And 'Sexy' is profound. It fucks the target over and leaves them a complete wreck afterwards."

"In that case, shouldn't you name it 'Blackjack'?" Scotch Tape asked. Suddenly I, P-21, and Glory were all varying degrees of embarrassed, and she snickered. "I win." Somefilly should have been left at Chapel...

I coughed, trying desperately to regain some dignity. "Okay. Full auto is excessive. Good to know." I swapped out the drum magazine and reloaded the first; Sexy was one hell of an ammo hog. The Brood had been so torn up by the barrage that P-21 didn't even try and search them for valuables. He'd need a sieve.

Much of the space center building seemed to be devoted to the public. We trotted through a large museum hall that put the building's foundation at the start of the war. No wonder it was located in one of the worst spots in Equestria. Then again, if you were going to repurpose rockets into ballistic missiles, maybe it

wasn't so poorly placed. I ran past pictures of ponies testing model rockets on a field, then larger 'liquid fuel' rockets using alcohol and oxygen. Then rockets twice or three times the height of a pony.

Another hall seemed to be dedicated to rockets themselves rather than just the history of them, but it was mostly empty. Only models had been left behind, and a huge hole in the ceiling suggested that some of the rockets on the field had once occupied this hall. I felt a rising surge of panic in my throat. There should have been some kind of massive sign that read 'control room'! Or maybe a map with a convenient 'you are here' label. I was going to fail simply because I was lost.

"Boo!" I whirled on the white mare. "Which way do you think we should go?" She blinked her pale eyes in bafflement.

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked, just as perplexed.

"Just trust me on this!" I told him as I stared into her eyes. "Just pick which way."

She rubbed her chin and started counting. "Eenie, menie, miney, moe, catch a pony by its... that way," she said abruptly, pointing down a side hall that read 'Planetarium'.

"Blackjack? Are you sure?" Glory asked.

"Shh! Don't doubt the Boo!" I warned as I turned and raced in the direction she'd pointed. I burst through the double doors into a familiarly round room dominated by a complex projector in the middle. It was almost identical to the one at the Collegiate, though perhaps a little bit bigger. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I spotted an even smaller and more unassuming door with a large sign saying 'Warning: No unauthorized civilians allowed in Operations areas.'

"Excellent," I said, patting her on the head as we passed her, the mare suddenly halted, seeming uncertain. I looked back at her. "Everything okay?"

"It's the right way," she said as she stared up at the shadows of the great vault. "Just feels... spooky."

"Just keep an eye out for trouble, okay?" I said, keeping my eyes open as we moved through. I understood what she said, my eyes squinting into the dark pools between emergency lights. Damn, for the first time, I really missed not having glowy night vision eyes. "P-21, work your magic."

We crossed the round room to the far side, and P-21 knelt, starting to work on the lock when the double doors we'd entered suddenly

slammed shut with a resounding boom, sealing Boo outside the planetarium. One by one the emergency lights went dark. Almost as one, we clicked on our PipBuck lamps, producing four little pools of wan amber light. Then there was a crackle from the center of the room, and one by one the projector lights popped on, the lights reflecting off the overhead dome in a sickly array of light.

"Ashur," a mare whispered in the dark.

"Dagon," hissed a second mare.

"Namtar," moaned a third.

"Nibiru," said a final, lighter voice.

In the pale light, four cloaked figures stood on the periphery of the room. Three adults and a foal, going by size. Given that they wore cloaks and spoke the names of freaky stars that made my mane crawl, I lifted Sexy to the closest of the four. It swung its hoof, and a pale blue streak of dust crossed the distance, coating the weapon. An instant later, an inch of ice flashed into being around it, transforming it from a firearm into an icy doorstop.

"The black star Ashur's cold embrace overcomes your weak technology," the mare said as she drew back her hood. The old zebra's mane, stripes, and eyes were almost faded to nothing. Elsewhere in the line, the smallest of the four took out a piece of paper and dangled a crystal over it.

Glory snapped her gun down at the old zebra, but one of the others tossed a hoofful of crimson dust into the air. The cloud twisted and formed flaming serpents that streaked towards Glory and chased her around the projector. "Did you think we'd overlook your plans, little pretender? The stars warned us of your attempt," she said as she pulled back her hood, showing a mare whose face was a mask of smooth burn keloid on which circular tattoos stood out as clear as day. "Dagon shall consume you!"

"I don't have time for this!" I shouted as I pointed my horn at the cold zebra and fired a volley of S.A.T.S.-guided magic bullets at her head.

The filly let out a yell of alarm. "Block!"

Another hoofful of blue dust slashed through the air a moment before the volley hit, as if she'd been expecting it, and a thick wall of ice deflected each of my shots away. I stared at it, then at the filly, who gave a little smirk that said 'what are you going to do about it?'

"We have eternity and more," intoned a third, then looked at the

filly. “Where is he?” she said in a voice like tar. The filly, not taking her face off the paper before her, pointed her free hoof over to the left. The elder mare snapped her hoof, and green dust whipped out like a comet, coalesced into an orb of energy, and exploded with a bright rainbow-green flash, revealing P-21 with a grenade in his hoof. All our PipBucks began to crackle madly at the radiation. The ghastly illumination showed a mare’s features which appeared distorted like soft wax. “The stars rot for eons, and you shall join them. Namtar demands it.”

As my horn recharged, I tried to close the gap with the old zebra, but her funky blue dust kept stymying me. She turned the floor under me to slippery ice, sending me sprawling on my face, and dropped jagged frozen spurs the size of my hooves down at me. Fortunately, my telekinesis deflected them; LittlePip would have just rammed them right up the zebra’s ass. Glory was still busy dodging the seeking snakes while the green one calmly kept trying to blow up P-21.

Scotch Tape blinked at the three adult zebras, then charged the only one her size. Without looking up from the paper, she jerked it aside at the last minute and left Scotch Tape sliding through empty air. “Hey, you! Fight me!” Scotch demanded. “Ain’t ya got spooky star stuff to spout at me?”

“Yeah yeah. Nibiru curse you. Whatever,” the zebra said, pulling back her hood enough to reveal a filly the same age. I was taken by how pretty she was for her age, despite the arcane markings on her delicate face. Even Scotch Tape gaped for a second. “Busy now.”

“D-Don’t you ignore me!” Scotch Tape yelled, her cheeks flaming, diving at her. Once again without looking up, the filly kicked back, planting her hoof upside Scotch’s head. Scotch fell back, holding her head in her hooves, bit down on her wrench, and dove once more, swinging wildly. The little zebra thrust out her rear legs and braced herself against Scotch’s head, holding the olive filly at bay as her mouth swung and her forehooves thrashed the air. “Gonna... beat you... ”

“Told you. Busy now,” she said, then looked at the old zebra. “Atropos, the signs don’t make any sense. This may not be the Maiden, but Nibiru is going nuts here! I don’t know who she is, but she’s not a nopony.” She shoved Scotch Tape away, her cloak flipping up around her shoulders. “And this one isn’t helping!” she snapped as she kept scrying the paper. “... and stop staring at my

butt!"

"Focus on the later, not the now, Pythia," the old zebra rasped.

"Finally! We will be ascendant after ten thousand years!" the scarred mare laughed as she tossed more incendiary powder up after Glory. With the flames seeking Glory under their own enchantments, the burned zebra was free to dance away from any of Pew-Pew's beams that happened to get near her. "We shall rule this world as is our right!"

The exploding green dust kept P-21 moving around the perimeter of the room. If he got much closer to us, he could have risked us being caught in the baleful green explosions. Worse, the one time he moved closer to the old zebra with the ice, the filly snapped out a warning, and the old zebra whirled and covered him with a layer of hoarfrost while the mutated zebra nearly blasted me off my hooves.

"Kill them," she said as she flung another hoofful of green dust. "I'll feel better when the Maiden of the Stars is gone forever." P-21 launched a grenade at her, but she detonated it in midair with more of that damned magic dust! I focused on the icy old zebra.

"Forever? That rocket is coming back, you know!" I yelled at them.

"And a balefire missile stands ready to greet her the instant she lands," the one flinging red dust cackled. "One specially treated with our magics to disrupt any pitiful pony shield talismans she might try to defend herself with! She'll be vaporized before she even realizes she was used! We shall rule forever!" the scarred zebra crowed.

"Shut up, Eurydale!" snapped the mutated balefire dust zebra. "Stop playing around. You're making basic mistakes."

But what the burned mare had said nearly halted me in my hooves. The Legate had a balefire missile? But of course he did; Xanthe had told me about the warhead, and he had the remaining missiles from Grimhoof. It made sense, too. Once Cognitum had fixed Tom's trajectory, why risk combat with her? Let her come back triumphant and be vaporized as soon as she landed. Not even a cyberpony could survive that!

"And so who's going to rule? Which of you gets to call the shots?" Glory called out.

"Why, all of us, together," the old zebra chuckled. "Of course, the Legate will sit on the throne, and we will be the ones that actually get things done... and reap the benefits. Isn't that the way it's

always been with powerful males?"

The littlest one kept struggling to focus on the paper and keep Scotch Tape at bay. It'd be impressive if we weren't so pressed for time. She never took her eyes off the sheet before her nor dropped the dangling pendant, even as she dodged, sidestepped, backflipped, and pirouetted around Scotch's wild charges. "This isn't right, Scylla! I'm seeing shadows all over the future! Something is wrong."

Scotch Tape tried to get her hooves around one of the filly's hindlegs, and the filly barely yanked it away in time. "And would someone get her off me? It's hard enough to scry in the middle of a battle without this one distracting me!" She kicked back and nailed Scotch Tape in the face again, sending her staggering back across the floor to trip and smack her head against the base of the projector.

"Fine," the mutated Scylla said, then turned towards Scotch and lifted a hoofful of powder. "I'll remove the distraction then."

P-21, who already had a glowing ball of star magic sailing towards him, suddenly turned and launched himself at it. He rolled tight in a ball and hit the glowing dust as it started to flare, scattering it and forcing it to reform a second later behind him. The blast launched him straight into Scylla like a cannonball, smashing them both to the ground.

"Hah! Now who's making rookie mistakes?" Eurydale crowed, and then she threw an enormous wad of the red powder into the air. The heat had set her mane on fire, but she didn't seem to notice as she laughed, the airborne dust igniting in the shape of a dragon, growing larger and larger and filling the ceiling. "Fly! Fly! Fast as you can! There's nowhere to run when all is aflame!" She laughed madly. The billowing fire caught Glory, and she covered her head as she tumbled towards the ground, feathers and tail aflame.

A moment later, there was pop and then a hiss as water poured down from ceiling sprinklers. The dragon roared in agony before melting away, and Eurydale shrieked as her glowing red powder suddenly became so much dull red mud. "No! No!" she cried as Glory rose to her hooves, beam gun clenched in her jaws. The zebra flung globs of the soaked powder at Glory as she approached. "Dagon! Dagon, burn her! Burn them all!" She teared up as she stared at the red goop running down her hooves. "Dagon, why have you forsaken me?"

Glory gave the burned mare a shooty look, and I wondered if this

was going it be it: was she going to become an executioner? Eurydale pouted, scooping up balls of red muck and watching them dribble away. She sat in a red puddle. “Go away! Dagon will burn and consume you! He shall burn all the world to ash for daring his wra–”

Glory’s gray feathers were blackened and bent, her mane scorched, and her face distinctly ready to dust the zebra. Then she lunged and smashed her hooves against Eurydale’s head twice. “Shut! Up!” she snapped.

“Atropos!” the filly wailed. “I can’t see anything but shadows now! The stars won’t show me anything!”

The old mare said something in a voice that chilled me to my bones, and blue light struck the floor, a ring of frost flashing out from her. It ran up the walls and across the ceiling, covering everything in ice. My friends and I were glued to the floor. “Enough,” she growled. “This is over.” Overhead, four long spears of ice started to form.

“I can tell you why you can’t see the future,” I said simply.

“Doubtful,” she said grimly.

“The Legate is going to resurrect the Eater of Souls,” I informed her.

There’s nothing quite so funny as seeing an old person surprised. “Let me guess. The Starkatteri were going to rule the world, right? Brood. Core. Making pony and zebra alike bend their hooves to you?” Goddesses, it was Cognitum’s routine, just to a different audience. “He’s not. He’s going to resurrect the Eater of Souls, and everything is going to be die. You. Me. But not him. He can’t die, right?”

Atropos scowled thoughtfully, those lances of ice growing longer and longer. “You know nothing of what you speak. The ritual to do so would require hundreds of my tribe. We are all that remain, we five. We could never call down a star, nor would we be foolish enough to try a second time.”

“You don’t have to,” I countered. “The Eater of Souls got a pony to bind a star to the stone that Cognitum is sending straight to the Core.”

Again, that satisfying expression of shock…though it wasn’t as funny the second time around. “Atropos”, the small one said, “I’m seeing a gap in the shadows... but I don’t know why.” She stared at me. “Who are you?”

“Hush, Pythia,” she growled, regarding me. At least the icy spears had stopped growing. “My people have never loved the Eater of Souls. We sought to use him for our own empowerment, for he is a *vast* source of power. We summoned a star once at his direction, and the reaction nearly broke the world in two. At the last moment, my ancestors broke the ritual, letting the star escape. But the devastation was complete enough to eradicate our empire from the earth. We are born with this brand as a reminder of that folly.” She gestured at the orbital markings on her face.

“The Legate is lying to you. Maybe there is some way to restore the Core without setting the Eater free. I can’t say it’s impossible. But I can tell you that he’s not interested in anyone ruling anything.” I pointed at the filly. “She can see the future, right? Well, can she see a future, any future, where all of you get exactly what he promised?”

Now that all eyes were on her, the filly stammered, “There are shadows. Always shadows. Just because I haven’t seen it doesn’t mean it’s not there... maybe... ” She faltered. She looked down at the paper, which, now that I was frozen in place, I saw was a map of the night sky. She dangled the crystal, the gem making tiny pinpricks of light on the map. “It has to be here somewhere, right, Atropos?”

Atropos narrowed her eyes at me. “You. You’re not a copy, are you? You’re her. Actually her. The Gambler.” She smiled a little. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Yeah. I’m really bad at that,” I replied. “Has Amadi said anything about what you’re actually going to be doing in this glorious future? Made any real plans past ‘restoring the Core’? Anything besides promises?”

Atropos was quiet for so long, staring at me contemplatively, that I could have screamed. I had a deadline here! “No. I suppose not.”

She stomped a hoof once, the old mare suddenly seeming a lot more tired and haggard. The ice shattered into snow. Scotch Tape gave the filly a dirty look as she walked a trifle unsteadily to where P-21 had landed. “It would have been nice to not see my tribe go extinct,” the old mare said quietly, turning away from us. “Eurydale. Scylla. Pythia. Let’s go.”

“Wait!” I said as I shook the frost off my barding. “You need to tell the other zebras.”

“Tell them? I’m not sure if you noticed, but our tribe is cursed,

stupid po–" Eurydale said with a sneer, then saw Glory's angry glare and shrank back. Her mane, tail, and feathers were badly scorched, but the jacket seemed to have protected the rest of her.

"Lancer, Sekashi, and Majina are trying to convince the tribe that the Legate is a Starkatteri. You have to help them," I begged. Okay, I wasn't exactly sure *how* that was supposed to work, but still! Help was good! They wanted to show everyone they were good, right?

Atropos regarded me coolly. "We will... think about it. And if Pythia sees our glorious future, we will come back for you. But for now, we shall withdraw and consult the stars."

"One thing," P-21 asked as he pulled himself to his hooves, with a pained expression. "Why does the Eater of Souls draw in pony souls but not eat them? That's never made sense to me."

Atropos regarded him with surprise, and I had to admit that I did too. After all, as long as we weren't dealing with slavers or the like, P-21 never really seemed interested in who we were fighting or why. "The Eater eats the souls of Stars. It collects the souls of lesser beings to sing its praises for all of eternity. And when the Eater has consumed all the light that remains, the souls of all life will exist for nothing but aggrandizement of its own ego. Naturally, any sane," and here she eyed the scarred and charred Eurydale, who was intently poking a ball of mud and whispering loudly 'Dagon will burn you!' with every jab, and heaved a sigh, "and many not-so-sane zebras, Starkatteri or not, know such a fate is punishment without end."

"Right," I said. "Well, if you want to avoid that, try and help us. We need everyone. Even you."

The comment seemed to give the old zebra pause. "Interesting. You are... unsettling. I see why he fears you so. As I said. We shall consider it." She turned and led the other three towards the exit.

"Wait!" the filly ran up to us holding scraps of paper with some numbers scribbled on them. "Here. The Brood guard patrols. Just take cover at these times and they should miss you." She gave a little smile and ran after the others. "Wait for me!"

"I've never been so humiliated," Scotch Tape groaned, rubbing one of the many black and blue hoof marks that now covered her face. "She spent the entire time staring at that map, and I didn't lay a hoof on her!" She stared in the direction that the filly had gone.

"Especially not her rear," I added with a smirk.

Scotch Tape glowered at me as she replied in icy tones, "Yes.

Especially not that." She stared at the door. "Enemies aren't allowed to be cute like that!"

"Zebras are just like that sometimes," I said, trying not to think of Lancer atop me. I tried my broadcaster but got only static. Apparently, magical jamming wasn't the only source of interference here, though. I trotted to the entrance and kicked the doors open, looking for Boo. Nothing. I spotted her PipBuck tag on the other side of the room and frowned, trotting to the small access door.

Boo appeared in the doorway as soon as I'd gotten it open. She rushed forward, hugging me tightly. "I'm sorry! I shoulda known something bad was there."

"It's okay," I said as I patted her mane. "How'd you get over on this side, though?" I asked with a frown.

"Oh! Well, doors was locked, so I found the right way!" She beamed up at me. "Ready ta go?"

We only paused long enough for everypony to share a round of healing potions, and I was glad to see the plumage on Glory's wings grow back. P-21 also drank heavy doses of RadAway; Scylla's powder's explosions had been like mini balefire eggs. For all I knew, that green powder was what balefire eggs were made from!

We'd fallen behind in the fight, but with Boo leading the way and Pythia's little scraps of times, we were able to take cover seconds before Brood came trotting into view. Not that we couldn't take them. I'd thawed out my gun and checked it, and the rugged thing seemed to have come through okay. It was a little unsettling, though. Every time the moment came close, we'd take cover with no sign of the Brood. Then they'd come around a corner or out a door and just miss us.

Note to self: seeing the future is useful against your enemies!

The Operations section of the building was relatively small, but given the enormity of the building it was in, it still took us far longer than I was comfortable with to get past the many Brood patrols. A wave of relief swept through me when I spotted the door marked 'Launch Control' ahead. Sexy roared out two hammering storms of buckshot, staggering the Brood guards long enough for P-21 and Glory to finish them off. I looked at all the shells scattered on the floor around me. Even on burst instead of full auto... "Someone's a cartridge hog," I chided the weapon affectionately, then stormed through the door.

The control room was much, much smaller than I'd anticipated. I'd

expected a cavernous space with tiers of hundreds of terminals and maybe a massive holographic display floating in the middle. The somewhat underwhelming reality: a dozen terminals on ordinary desks looking out at a window angled down and curved to give a slightly distorted view of the entire launch field. A number of little displays above it showed the various rockets. A half dozen zebra technicians sat at various terminals with two Brood unicorns standing guard. At the sight of me bursting in, the former scrambled under or behind their desks and the latter opened up with bolts of lightning from their dark metal horns. I jumped back into the cover behind the doorframe, electricity sizzling past me.

P-21 drew a shock grenade, but I shook my head. I had no idea what those controls did. I didn't want to launch the rockets by accident. "We require reinforcements," I heard one of the two Brood mares say in a robotic monotone of Silver Stripe's voice.

"What?! You talk?!" I gasped. "Brood can't talk."

"Oral communication fallback protocols enabled," they replied dryly in unison. One of the zebra technicians began to creep towards an intercom panel on the wall, looking quite hesitant to do so. "Expedite," they urged, not taking their eyes off the door as their horns glowed.

I could almost feel our time slipping away. Then Glory launched herself out of cover and through the doorway, her beam pistol already spitting rainbow light. The Brood were turned into sparkling dust, but not before one of them hit her hard enough with a bolt of lightning to send her slamming against the hallway wall. I rushed to her as P-21 and Scotch Tape swept into the room, shouting at the technicians. The filly tackled the zebra at the intercom, throwing her forelegs around his neck and chomping on his ear.

I practically shoved a healing potion down Glory's throat, then unzipped the jacket and pressed my ear to her chest. "Don't be dead. Don't be dead. Don't be dead," I whispered over and over again.

I heard the beat of her heart. "Don't you have a world to save?" she muttered. I lifted my head and saw her sad smile. "You know you're better off with him," she said quietly.

"Let me decide that. We're all getting through this. And then I'm going to work things out if it kills me," I promised, as I stroked her cheek. "I still haven't given up plans on making it all work between

the three of us."

"You never give up," she murmured with a shake of her head, then zipped the jacket back up. "Tomorrow," she promised. Then we heard the rapid approach of more Brood, and I ran into the launch control room.

Boo peeked down the hall and suddenly threw herself against the wall as a burst of gunfire spat at her. She rolled across the floor back into the room. "There's a whole lot of them comin'! Zebras and ponies too!"

"P-21," I said quickly. "Persuade them to take their time. Scotch, see if you can lock that door or something." I looked at the haggard, terrified zebras. "Propoli?" I asked, startling them and getting wary nods. I clasped my hooves together. "Okay. Time is short, and I don't want anyone to die. First off, I need to delay the launch. Is there somezebra here who can help me with that? Maybe do an emergency venting of the fuel?"

"Are you trying to blow us all up?" one zebra in huge blue glasses asked. "That's a terrible idea!"

"Congratulations. You're the leader," I said as I trotted over to him, trying to ignore the explosions in the hall behind us. "Listen. I need to get out there. I need to get on that big, fancy rocket. Tell me how to do that," I said as I stared into his eyes with a casual smile. He kept gaping from the window to me. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Cerynitis," he said unsteadily.

"Cerynitis? I'm Blackjack," I said as I politely patted his shoulder. "I've told you what I need. You tell me how you can help me make it happen. Can you just delay the launch here? Wait till I've got everything taken care of and then send me off?" When he didn't answer, I pointed my gun at the terminals. "If not, I'll have to see if just breaking things works, or try that emergency fuel dump idea."

He swallowed and adjusted his glasses. "Please don't. This facility... it's a miracle it's held up as well as it has. If it wasn't for the ghouls that used to live here, planning to escape to the moon or somesuch, I doubt it would have at all. Still, it's in rough shape. Most of these rockets are barely-restored literal museum pieces; I doubt half of them will make it to the moon even if they launch successfully. If you start venting the fuel and oxidizer, there's a good chance the systems to channel it safely away won't work. The loading systems are probably leaking some as we speak, but so many of the sensors aren't working that I can't even be sure of that." He ran his hooves

through his bristly, erect mane, then waved over his head. “I tried to explain to them that this was reckless, but they wouldn’t listen to me! Rocketry is supposed to be a calm, focused, deliberate use of technology. Not slapping things together, filling them with explosives, and just hoping they’ll work!”

“Eh.” I gave a minimalist shrug. “Then help me out here. How can I slow things down?” I spotted Glory examining a nearby terminal.

“We can keep the other three rockets from launching,” he said, pointing at clocks which were frozen at 1 minute. “Even if they overrode our control and manually got the launch towers down, they don't have the time or the training to fire the boosters locally without destroying the rocket. But there's nothing we can do about the one in the center. That’s an ESS-A1, the only one ever built before Equestria's space program lost funding for any new ships. It uses the finest MTRpg engines ever designed, with a TWR of–”

“I am a technological moron, Cerynitis,” I said as I smiled at him. “Just tell me how to stop it from launching.” His mouth worked silently a moment as if trying to figure out how much to dumb this information down. “Really.”

Finally, he said, “... Sorry. You can’t. The erector has already been locally disengaged, and the launch tower isn't sturdy enough to be a problem for the rocket even if it stays in place. It's mostly just to make cargo and passenger transfer easier; the ESS-A1 can launch and land pretty much anywhere with flat ground it won't sink into.” That was not what I wanted to hear right now.

The doors shut, and there was a thump against them. P-21 stepped back, bobby pin in his mouth, from the door. “Okay,” Scotch Tape said. “Daddy locked it, and I think I got it jammed. It still won’t take them long to get in, though. For all I know, they can chew through it.”

“Not unless they can get it in their mouths,” I replied with a smile, then turned back to Cerynitis. “Well then, keep the other rockets here. If I can’t stop her, I’ll need a rocket to follow her.”

“Be careful. There are magical fields that activate prior to launch. If you get stuck inside when the rocket goes up and don’t reach a bunker, you’ll be cooked,” he warned. “You’ll only have ten seconds between the fields going up and the engines firing, and that’s if everything’s working properly.”

“Plenty of time.” If I were able to teleport, damn it! Now, for the last challenge... “How do I get out there?” If he said I couldn’t, that

big window was going to have a date with Sexy on full auto with grenade chaperones!

Thankfully, he pointed a hoof at a hatch set in the room's exterior wall. I rushed over, twisted the handle, and yanked it open; behind was a six-foot-long hall ending in what looked like a sturdy exterior door.

"I should stay here," Glory said.

I rounded on her. "What have we learned about splitting up?" I told her. "No. I want all of you with me. No one gets left behind."

"Somepony should stay," P-21 said, examining the door. "That won't keep Brood out forever. I could do it."

"No. You couldn't get back in time," Glory said with a shake of her head. "I've got a strong enough weapon to stop them. Plus, if you do need to launch one of the other rockets, someone is going to have to push the button and fly to you before it goes up." She patted my mane. "Don't worry, Blackjack. I might not be Dash anymore, but I can reach you in a minute."

How did I not like this? Let me count the ways. "Blackjack," P-21 said gravely behind me.

"I'll be fine," she said as she stroked my mane. "Hurry. You don't want to miss your flight."

I closed my eyes, feeling her hoof as it brushed my cheek. "Tomorrow," I murmured.

"Tomorrow. Till then, do what you do best. Go," she said, her hoof lingering a moment longer, and then she pulled away.

I didn't trust myself to wait any longer. I turned stepped into the hallway and told Cerynitis over my shoulder to show her how to make the rockets launch, and then Glory closed the inner door behind us.

The outer door opened to a stairway that ran down along the inside wall of the crescent. "Sorry my plan didn't work like I thought it would, Blackjack," Scotch Tape apologized from her father's back as we hurried down.

"Hey. No sweat. If you could guess the inner workings of rockets a few months after getting your cutie mark, I'd feel really gypped." They touched the ground between the concrete pads with faded stenciled signs reading '5' and '1', closer to 5 than 1. Large grates covered dark pits that I guessed were for redirected rocket exhaust. A ring of talismans gleamed around the each of the pads. 'Arcane Bulwark. Do not stand on line.' was written repeatedly around

them, and in several places in each ring of talismans were pits with stairs leading into them and signs reading 'Emergency Shelter'. The pits seemed nearly full of water, but I couldn't make out more than that.

At the bottom of the stairs, I looked around at the others and then put a hoof around Boo. "Boo, I have a super special mission for you." She blinked at me. "Do you feel up to it?"

Boo's face grew more serious. "You need to find Big Daddy or Lancer and tell them that there's a balefire missile aimed at this place. They need to ready to pull back quickly as they can. We're here. At this point, I'm not sure how much good they can do with their attack."

"Yer sending me away again," she said with a pout.

"Because you're the only pony who can make it. I know you're lucky, and smart, and quiet." I gave her a kiss on her forehead. "Get to them quick." I reached down and manipulated her PipBuck, typing out a brief message. 'Balefire bomb targeting space center. Get out. Do better. Blackjack.' If they didn't think I'd sent her... well... there wasn't much I could do about that.

Boo moved away, paused to gaze longingly back at us, and then sped out into the shadows around the side of the building. The rest of us quickly made our way past the smaller pads towards the center. Cognitum's rocket was a shining white tower curving gracefully up to a point high above us, reaching for the stars, a scaffold tower rising next to it to allow access and looking quite utilitarian in comparison to its neighbor.

"Get your spark grenades ready," I said as we approached the base of the scaffold, where a stairway and several cargo and passenger elevators stood empty alongside large wheels that must have been for moving the tower away from the rocket. "Cognitum!" I roared up at where I knew the control room hatch was. "I'm calling you out! Get down here and give me my body back!"

She'd do it. She was arrogant enough to do it. She'd want to squash me personally. But then a worried thought struck me. "You can hear me, right?" I hollered up at her. "Hey! Hey!" I started jumping up and down, waving my hooves in the air. "Get down here!" I really did not want to fight a flying me on a scaffold ten stories in the air.

And the Brood were coming. While most of them were occupied fighting our allies assaulting the facility from the outside, there

were still plenty left to deal with us. I looked around and spotted a box marked ‘Intercom 6’ by the base of the launch tower stairway, rushed to it, and mashed my hoof against the button. “Cognitum!”

There was silence, and then her voice crackled over the intercom. “Who is this?”

“You know who. You took my body and my baby. I want them back!” I snapped.

“Your baby?” Cognitum murred. Then her voice took on a purr that nearly made me bite the box. “It is you, isn’t it? How... interesting,” she said with a note of delight.

“I want my body back and I want my baby back.”

“And how is it to want? I wanted a body and my kingdom back for two hundred years. I dare say I’m handling it much better than you are now. And, let’s be honest, I am going to be a much better mother to my babies than you ever will be.” There was a pause. “Did you just bite the intercom?”

I wasn’t going to answer that, no matter how much my teeth hurt. “I’m going to stop Horizons,” I said as I saw the Brood coming closer. “Face me!”

“Face you? Dear Blackjack, I have a world to save. I don’t have time to indulge you,” she said silkily. “However, I will make you this offer. If I return and the Legate is dead, I’ll pardon you and your friends. I’ll allow you a quiet life elsewhere in the world.”

“The Legate has fooled you!” I shouted. “There’s a star spirit bound to Tom. The Legate is planning on feeding it to the Eater and resurrecting it! You’re playing right into his hooves!”

“You are deranged,” Cognitum said disdainfully. “The Tokomare will be restored and the Core rebuilt, and we shall proceed into a glorious future. Too bad you are so mired in the past.”

Suddenly klaxons were blaring, red lights flashing on the scaffold tower as it started pulling away from the rocket with the grind of protesting machinery. “Clear Pad Six immediately. Launch sequence initiated,” a recorded voice began announcing as the ring of bulwark talismans grew brighter and a hiss began to build in the darkness beneath the rocket. “Clear Pad Six immediately…”

“Rampage! Stop her, Rampage! I know who you are! She’s never going to help you!” I screamed into the intercom over the noise, having to trot to keep up with the moving tower. “Dealer! I know you can hear me! You owe me, Dealer!” Still no response. In my rage, I lifted my gun and pointed it at the rocket's thick base.

P-21 tackled me, breaking my focus. “No, Blackjack! If you get through the hull at all, you could blow us all up! Come on!”

“No! Damn it!” I shouted as he shoved me towards the line of bright talismans. I’d been so sure she’d face me personally. That I’d do it and get it back. “No!” I yelled as we crossed the bulwark. He held me back, and then a shimmery field rose up, flickered, and solidified, smaller ones rising around each of the trio of exhaust grates. I pushed past him, hammering on it with my hooves, the magic flashing as I beat something the consistency of thick rubber.

Then the ground leapt under my hooves, shaking so much that we nearly bounced across it. The flames under the rocket were tiny, pale things, with barely-visible columns of exhaust with an odd diamond pattern in them, but the *sound* that managed to escape the fields was deafening. From the exhaust grates blasted huge columns of steam, jetting out into clouds at the tops of the exhaust bulwarks. They didn't beat the rocket by much as it shot upward, its own bulwark taller but still low enough that, when it finally cleared the top of it, the building noise nearly ruptured my eardrums and the hurricane blast of suffocatingly hot gas that escaped around the sides of the field picked me up from the still-vibrating ground and sent me skidding past the other waiting rockets and towards the wall of the space center. When I came to rest, I was surrounded by a stinging-hot fog, the roar of the rocket's engines growing quieter and quieter and making my ears ring from the relative silence. I lay on my back and stared up at the now-hidden sky, my ears trying to track the rocket and my eyes desperately trying to see it. The noise faded and faded, and then was gone.

“No…” I whispered into the quiet as the vapor began to thin.

“Oh yes,” a stallion said confidently, and I looked up at the wall of Brood, Harbingers, and Remnant surrounding us, guns motionlessly pointed at me. Looking down at me sat the Legate, his eyes narrowed in mirth. “Time to die.”

Then his chest exploded. The Harbingers opened up on him, the Brood, and the Remnant with full automatic spray. Indeed, only the flesh wall of the Brood kept the three of us from being wiped out. The Legate jerked and danced in the air as if he were being electrocuted, but he did not fall. Bullets sparked off the skull helmet. The Remnant, the smallest in number of the three, fell back, and from around us came more sounds of gunfire as the Harbingers attacked the Legate’s forces all across the field. From above, the

energy blasts from the *Blizzard*'s secondary weapons lanced down, careful not to hit the remaining three rockets, as the *Sirocco* exchanged fire with the *Rampage* and *Cyclone*.

Fierce as the Harbingers were, though, the Brood still turned to face them. They didn't register pain. Couldn't feel fear. Only a headshot or blasting them to pieces would really stop them. And now the ones on the field had a particularly nasty weapon: the rifles they employed fired glowing blue bullets that reminded me of Atropos's freezing powder. The enchanted rounds coated the Harbingers' barding with thick ice, froze their hooves to the ground, and, more than once, made huge chunks of flesh shatter off like meaty popsicles.

And the Legate didn't stop either. The gory nightmare rushed right up to the first Harbinger to shoot him and hooked his forelegs around the stallion's neck. The blood-streaked Legate twisted and pulled, the stallion's body gave a crack, and then his entire head came off. Again the Legate lunged, at the next and the next, killing them all with crushing blows that shattered ribs and burst blood vessels. Bullets tumbled out of his body seconds after they entered. Bits shot off returned to rejoin his body.

The field erupted into incomprehensible chaos as the three of us collapsed into one of the shelter pits. Really, I didn't see why it was full of shoulder deep cold water, whether that was intentional or not, but after the baking we'd just received, it was quite refreshing. Rusty breathing apparatuses hung on hooks. There was a button for an emergency hatch, but, despite mashing my hoof against it repeatedly, it wouldn't close. The shooting went on for several seconds, and I poked my head up.

The Legate stood on a field of carnage. Most of the Brood and all of the Harbingers that had been within his reach had died. The Remnant were beginning to emerge from gaps and cover, though most of them looked as if they wanted to be anywhere else but here. I couldn't blame them as the Legate stood in the middle of all that gore. He then turned back to us in the shelter pit. "Come on out, little fraud. Don't make me come in there after you."

Okay. Here's hoping he was in a talky mood. I whispered instructions to P-21 and Scotch Tape, then climbed from the pit, water streaming from me as I faced him. "Starkatteri," I said, and instantly his eyes narrowed.

"Oh? An educated fraud. Or perhaps proof that my treasonous

mate is working with the damned city?" he said loudly, pointing a bloody hoof at me. "Well, no matter. Soon the city will be destroyed and the world purged of pony evil. I have sent the Maiden back to the moon, and there she will remain, forever. Should she return, I will annihilate her."

Why was he talking? He should just be killing me. But he'd been the same way earlier too. He had phenomenal power to kill with his own hooves, and it wasn't enough. "You missed your calling, Amadi. You should have been an actor." Slowly I walked to the left, all eyes on me, and none on the filly and stallion rushing away to the other side.

He froze, his eyes wide behind the skull. "You heard me, Amadi. You've been playing roles for centuries now. You used the war as cover for your schemes. Used the pony and zebra hate to play one against the other. You've been doing it for years now." I narrowed my eyes and grinned at him as Scotch and P-21 went to work next to a heap of bodies behind him. "I was wrong. Not an actor. You're a politician!"

His eyes narrowed this time. "Who do you think you are? A mare with a dyed mane that thinks to rally this pitiful resistance?!" he said as he gestured with a hoof at the gap to the west. "You think you know me? You know nothing!"

"I know it was you at Littlehorn," I said as I stood there, a perfect target, keeping a distance between me and him as Scotch and P-21 frantically smeared bloody streaks across the flight deck. "You brought the Pink Cloud talisman. Wired it with starmetal to boost it. The more that died, the more it killed. Pretty effective," I said with as much contempt in my voice as I could muster. "I know you grabbed Goldenblood and fell to the ground floor, then unleashed the talisman. You killed so many. And, of course, afterward both sides blamed the other."

His lips quivered behind the dragon's teeth. I had a guess that he was like Goldenblood, that he had a desperate need to vent all his accomplishments. Then his mouth split in a wide grin. "It went marvelously, didn't it? Better than I could have ever planned. Then the fire in Hoofington? I wanted to torch Ponyville, personally, but there were too many soldiers in the way." He laughed sharply, an echo of wonder two centuries old in his voice as he went on, "But Celestia abdicating her throne and *Luna* taking it? I couldn't have planned that in ten thousand years!"

The other zebras looked on, muttering to each other as the Legate continued to stare at me. “But it’s been hard,” I continued. “You almost had the Tokomare activated, didn’t you? *So* close to Luna turning it on. Let me guess, the next plan was to raise it to the surface? Get the moonstone to it then?”

His smile began to fade. “How… ” And his pupils started to constrict. “No… ” he hissed at me.

“The bombs falling really did ruin everything for you, didn’t it? Let me guess. You planned on Luna winning, and then you’d use her dream of a strong, futuristic Equestria to cover what you were doing. You’d keep up your exploits in the shadows till you could achieve your goal. But everything fell apart.” I grinned at him. “Ashur probably didn’t like that, did he?”

“That’s impossible. No… ” he said as he stared at me.

“All that hard work wasted, but you’re nothing if not persistent. Use the Wasteland. Use the Hoof. Use the Remnant. Use Cognitum. And then, when I stepped out with EC-1101, everything started moving again. Horizons got ready to fire. Cognitum started to move. And you had your golden opportunity.”

The Legate took a step back from me. “That’s impossible! You can’t be! You’re a fake! You’re nothing! You’re dead!”

“Dead?” I threw back my head and laughed. “I’ve died three times, and it hasn't stuck yet. I’ve destroyed Goddesses and purged abominations from the land. I’ve broken the skies and cast down the towers. I’ve stood in the mouth of the Eater of Souls and walked out again.” I pointed my hoof at him and cried out, “I am the Maiden of the Stars, Amadi. Say my name!” His eyes bulged, as if he were in a grip of a magic spell. “Say it!” I ordered.

“Blackjack?” he whispered as if fighting to assimilate the idea, but then his eyes narrowed and he shook his head, never taking his eyes off me. “No… No! It can’t be! It’s impossible!” he said, his voice tightening in horror. He pointed his hoof at me. “Kill her! Now!” But not a one moved against me. I saw more bars turn yellow than stay red.

“Shoot me and be forever cursed!” I warned, watching more bars turn yellow.

“You’re not the Maiden! She’s gone to the moon!” His eyes dug into me.

“Not yet, I haven’t,” I countered. I raised my hoof as I saw P-21 finish painting and signal me with a hoof wave. I swallowed, glad

he couldn't see me sweat. If this didn't work... and there were so many ways it could fail... he'd stop talking and start trying to take me apart. I raised my hoof over my head. "Now, as Maiden of the Stars, I call on the skies to strike you down and smite you." I paused, swallowing. "Right now!" His shock melted away into a smoldering rage. "Any second... " I said as I glared upwards. "Now, damn it!"

"Idiot," he said in disgust as he turned from me. I watched those yellow bars turning back to red as he said contemptuously, "Kill her." Then he froze as he stared at the ground behind him, and the letters L, E, G, A, T, and E written ten feet tall inside a crimson arrow pointing right at him.

There was a resounding 'CHOOM', and he disappeared in a blinding beam of light. I fell hard on my ass, wondering which airship had taken the shot. I'd kiss them all if we made it through this. Even Afterburner and Hoarfrost. I blinked repeatedly to try and clear the line burned in my vision. Where was the Legate? I saw a blackened form in the middle of the burned patch twenty feet away.

Then I heard the scream. The inarticulate scream rising higher and higher as the body reared on its hindlegs in a scorched circle, a blackened silhouette of charred meat pulling itself back together. An accretion disk of dust swirled around him, drawing back into his body, and everyone watched in horror as the charred carcass was wrapped in muscle and organs, then blood, then skin. The blackened skull tumbled from his head and bounced around his hooves.

When it ended, the Legate stood there, his black stripes now vivid, blood red. His face covered in the satellite pattern of the Starkatteri for all to see. Smoke rose all around him as he turned and stared right at me with all the malice in the world in his gaze. "It's true," muttered one of the Remnant soldiers. "Starkatteri." Almost unanimously, the remaining red bars turned yellow.

"True? True?" He gaped at the Remnant as they turned from him. He gestured to me. "She is our enemy! She will destroy all we have worked to achieve! Kill her!" he ordered.

I stared at him in bafflement. Why the heck wasn't he popping my head off personally like he had the others? Then it struck me. "You're afraid to fight me," I said, a smile creeping across my face. "That's it, isn't it?" I stepped towards him and watched as he took a

step back. “It’s not just Xanthe and Lancer, is it? You’re afraid of me too. You’re afraid I’m the real thing, even if you thought you’d made the prophecy up, and even though you’re an immortal beast, you’re afraid I can stop you!” I said as I advanced, watching him fall back. “And best of all, if you’re afraid I can... then there’s a way.”

More and more Remnant were emerging, and baffled, battered Harbingers were showing themselves as well, the ponies looking around as if not sure what they should do now. Had they finally gotten the same message that Nails had given the other Harbinger groups, or were they simply realizing that they were in over their heads?

“Kill her!” he screamed, and there was a long pause, and then, as one, the Remnant raised their weapons.

At him.

“It’s over, Father,” Lancer said from one of the clumps. He stepped out with his sniper rifle. Sekashi and Majina were at his flank, the filly repeating him silently to her mother. “Surrender.”

“Over?” He seemed to mull the world in his head. “Give up just like that, and be left with nothing?” He gave a little smile and shook his head. “No. I’ve pursued this for thousands of years. I will never surrender.”

“Give up, Amadi. She has your name. It is foolish to continue,” Sekashi said flatly. “A thousand years of folly weighs heavy, but redemption starts with a single choice.”

He licked his lips, his red eyes desperate as he looked at me, then the zebras and Harbingers around him. For several seconds he stared at me, and I tried to will him to give it up. Do better. Find a good way. “It would be wonderful, wouldn’t it? No more plotting. No more desperation. No more fear. Peace.”

I approached him. “It can still be that way.” He seemed to relax and gave a little nod and for an instant I smiled too and extended a hoof toward him. Then his arms snapped out and seized it, and his eyes locked with mine. For a second, I thought there might be a chance, some shred of equinity that I could appeal to... and I realized that I’d finally dared to forgive too far. Thousands of years of hatred, war, blood, and more thundering behind his eyes in an unending storm. He twisted the limb almost completely around, and fire bloomed as I heard bones snapping and joints popping.

“Fool,” he spat at me as I fell. Lancer shot his father, the Legate's

speed nearly carrying him clear of the bullet but the blow still ripping away half his head and spinning him away from me. The blood and bone spray slowed and returned as P-21 and Scotch Tape dragged me away from the mad zebra.

As his eye regenerated and head reassembled, he proclaimed, “I still have the Brood, and it is a mighty army! Greater than all of you together. As we speak, that fool is travelling to the moon. She carries the soul of the true Maiden within her, and without that, you cannot defeat the Eater of Souls. This world is done!”

P-21 pulled me to Sekashi and Majina. My leg was twisted around, the pain so sharp and real that I almost wished I had my old body back. More and more zebras and ponies tried to shoot the Legate, but their bullets couldn’t begin to seriously inconvenience him as he reassembled himself again and again.

“Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow,” I repeated over and over. Sekashi didn’t waste any time. She grabbed my hoof and twisted it the opposite way. Once again, the leg let out a number of pops, grinds, and snaps that nearly knocked me completely out. Then she jammed a bright purple potion in my mouth, and I chugged for all I was worth. Majina was giving Scotch Tape loads of the precious little purple bottles. I had a sick certainty that I’d need them.

“Brood! Destroy them all! Kill everything! Kill it all!” he cried out. “And destroy those rockets!”

From the bodies on the ground came a rasp as they began to rise. The large doors set in the walls cracked open, and out came a surge of Brood fliers and cyber zebras. The defenders in the gap suddenly reversed, turning inward and rushing forward. There were only three rockets left on the pads. If they took out all three...

“Crap,” I muttered as I rose to my hooves. “He really doesn’t like the Maiden, does he?” I said to Sekashi, trying to sprint to the nearest launchpads.

“You are not the Maiden,” she said. “You are the Fool.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said with a roll of my eyes, tears running down my cheek as my leg still zinged. I drank another healing potion.

“It is not an insult. The Fool terrifies because not even the Fool knows what they can do! They gamble against odds no others would dare. They dance on the edge of the precipice because they can. They overcome where all other sensibility would fail. Tyrants have always feared the Fool, for they bring disaster and suffering for their plans. They are heroes without parallel and monsters

without equal, because they do what they will, and damn the plans of others." We started moving towards the closest rocket.

"That Starkatteri mare called me the Gambler, though," I said with a little bafflement.

She gave a smile. "They are one and the other. The Fool plays at odds no wise person would dare. They are minions of chance, agents of chaos, and tools of discord."

"Then what is the Maiden?" I asked, making sure she could see my lips.

"Hope for some and despair for others," she replied. "She breaks bonds and ruins fortunes. She challenges and overcomes, and breaks her enemies. She is, like the stars themselves, a catalyst. Keep her at rest, for should she act, it will mean joy for some and terror for others, and none can say which for whom," she said gravely. "I have many stories about both, but I fear that there is no time for them now, Blackjack." She sighed and looked around. "It is a bad day when there is no time for stories."

"Yeah, I know the feeling," I replied. Then I caught her gaze again. "The Legate has a balefire missile aimed at this place. You need to get the Remnant out. As far from here as you can."

"We will see you on your way first," she said, and then she turned and started to speak in rapid fire tongues to the other zebras.

I stood and looked up at the nearest rocket. "Gambler and Fool, huh? That suits me just fine. Ante up."

There were Brood between me and my rocket, but I had a squad of zebra commandos at my flank. Together, we charged in. The cyberzebras were trying to duct tape explosives to the booster, but precision snipers were blowing holes in their heads before they could. I made it as far as the base of the launch tower steps when there was a loud ping and a fwoosh, a short jetting puff of white vapor shooting from the side of the rocket. Alarms began to sound as more bullets punched more holes, vapor jetting from some, liquid dripping from others. Dozens. Hundreds. Eventually ones were punched too large or jagged to seal shut on their own. Brood rushed in, grenades gripped in their mouths as they continued to fire. I grabbed P-21 and Scotch Tape, and we fled. The bulwark fields rose up just before one of the boosters tore itself into a storm of shrapnel and fire that disintegrated any Brood caught inside and called the other three boosters to join it. The bulwark protected us from the devastation and the fireball rising into the night, but the twisted

wreck hidden by the smoke wouldn't be flying again.

One down. Two left. I didn't waste any time. The emergency field died within a few minutes, spilling flaming fuel across its flight pad. Most of it had gone up, but there was still plenty of fire. "Don't let the Brood take this one out!" I yelled as we pelted towards the next-nearest launchpad. The snipers opened up and picked off the Brood racing us. We made it to the launch tower without a problem, and I sprinted up the stairs. "Up! Up! Up! Up!" I shouted as P-21 and Scotch Tape climbed after me.

"Blackjack, look out!" Boo shouted from below. I stared down at where the blank mare stared up at me. "Tank!" she shouted, pointing her hoof to the side.

I leaned out and spotted the tank that that been in the gap rolling around the wreckage of a rocket, thankfully one of the ones that had already been ruined when we arrived, and swiveling its cannons towards us. "Down! Down! Down! Down!" I shouted as we all but fell down the stairs in our haste. There wasn't any way we'd get across the bulwark before it fired. Then blue dust whirled around it, coating it in a glowing blizzard of magic. Ice began to form, and I stopped. Maybe... maybe... I looked back up at the rocket hatch.

Then the tank fired, the shockwave shattering the ice on its front. The shells gouged deep lines in the flight pad. "Down! Definitely down!" I screamed as the frost-rimmed turrets began to elevate. The magic might be slowing it down, but I didn't doubt that it would fire. We hit the flight deck and ran for our lives. The tank fired again, and the base of the rocket blossomed in flame. I jumped, rolling across the talismans moments before the bulwark rose… mostly.

When the tank shell had torn the pad, it had crossed the circle of talismans. The thin, dim field across the gap held for a split second, then yielded. A river of fire, hotter and wider than the breath of a dozen dragons, poured out and washed over the tank. Even on this side of the rocket, I could feel the cyclone-like gush of blazing heat. The tank didn't stand a chance. It exploded like a firecracker in a flamethrower's scream. Then the entire fire-fused mass of the rocket and launch structure gave a whine and slowly keeled over. It hit the weakened side of the bulwark, and the field began to fade.

"Running! Keep running!" I yelled. The bulwark collapsed, and the entire flaming wreck tipped over on the tank. The explosion sent

flaming bits all over the pad, and our PipBucks were clicking like mad as the rad rate doubled, and doubled again! What next?! Remnant and Harbinger alike fled from the rain of flaming debris.

"I am already tired of this day," I groaned. Boo rushed up to me, throwing her hooves around me. "Hi, Boo," I said lightly. "How are you doing?"

She blinked at me a moment. "I'm fine. I found a Reaper pony with a thingy and he said he'd tell everyone to get the fuck away." She made a scrunchy face as she glowered towards the gap. "Reapers are really rude."

I nuzzled her ear and pulled myself to my hooves. "Well, glad you're back."

I struggled to see the last rocket through the heat and haze and steam. Sweat soaked my barding through as I wiped the droplets from my eyes. It rested on its pad, our last hope to getting to Cognitum. There were fiery bits all around it and burning on the launch tower. "Come on," I said as I rose to my hooves and started towards it, trying to get past the burning pools of fuel that were now spattered all around the flight deck. Here and there, ruptured fuel lines spilled gouts of fire into the air. The emergency shutoffs must not have been working too well. Of course *they'd* be the things that'd fail...

We crossed the central pad, one of the few places that wasn't on fire, Boo scooping Scotch onto her back after seeing the smaller mare struggling to keep up as we made our way to the base of the gantry. I stepped in something that looked like steaming water only to have ice immediately form on my barding's hoofboot. When I staggered back, too close to a burning chunk of metal, the whole leg burst into flame for a few seconds before I could slap out the barding.

Funny, I never imagined that there was a place worse than Hightower. Fire. Explosions. Building radiation. All it was missing was smooze.

We'd lost our zebra escorts in the second explosion, but it looked like the Brood were dwindling. He might have an endless supply of them, but that didn't mean he had all of them here. Between the Harbingers, the Remnant, and their self-destructive attacks, it was abundantly clear that even they weren't lasting long. That was just out here, though. I looked up at the window of the control room and saw flashes of gunfire and energy beams.

We had to get in the rocket and get her out of there. Why had we separated? Why hadn't I stayed behind to guard the command center? But I was only one mare... I couldn't do it all myself. Nopony could.

The third and last rocket was still intact, and I thought for a moment that I'd finally beaten the odds. But as I got close, I heard the strangest humming, and when I put my hooves on the metal steps, I could feel them vibrating beneath me. I stared up the stairs and spotted the Legate halfway up. His forehooves were a blur as he pounded them against the thick steel beams of the tower. A normal pony would be beating their hooves to nubs under that pounding, but of course his regenerating body would never succumb to injury. Nor would he tire. But what was he do–

There was a sharp ping, and a rivet near the bottom of the gantry popped out. As I watched, the bolts were turning slowly in their sockets as the vibration only grew more and more intense. I remembered how the Legate fought, his blows disturbing the energy in a body. This gantry was just one enormous body, and he was adding more and more energy to it, resonating it at the perfect frequency to shake it apart.

"Go!" I shouted as I tried to rush up the stairs. My hooves were sliding and humming under me as I struggled up to where he pummeled the metal. Welds cracked, and one step fell away under my hoof as I put my weight on it. The humming reminded me of the monotone note of Enervation. I felt an ominous swaying start as we made it to him.

I didn't even hesitate; I readied Sexy and charged him, if only to break his rhythm. Only then did I really realize how infuriated Scotch Tape must have felt fighting Pythia as his rear hoof deftly flicked my gun aside and smashed my temple, the blow sending me to the vibrating deck.

P-21 lifted Persuasion, did something to the grenade in the breech, and then fired it at the Legate. The grenade struck him like a solid iron hoofball, knocking him into the girder he'd been pummeling. The grenade, however, didn't detonate, simply bounced and rattled to the catwalk floor. He loaded a second, took aim once more, and fired again. This time, the Legate kicked out, the limb folding like snapped wood as it deflected the shot, only to pop back out again. The red-striped zebra sneered at P-21. "Futile."

"Flashbang," he replied. The Legate immediately covered his face. I

wasn't going to waste this opportunity! Two three-round bursts sent him flipping out over the railing. One hoof grabbed the gantry, but a third burst blew the limb off at his shoulder. As he fell, I glanced down at the grenade.

"Dud?" I asked with a frown.

"No. I just trusted him to know more about flashbangs than you," P-21 replied as he carefully picked up the grenade and tossed it over the edge. For a brief moment, I wondered if I'd been insulted or not, but I really didn't have time to ponder the issue.

"Scotch! Is it going to stay up?" I asked, feeling the still-humming gantry. "Shhh! Shhh! Please stay up!" I said, as if trying to hush the humming, swaying structure. There were still pops and pings, and now groans too. I became aware that the whole immense structure was starting to lean sideways.

"I don't think so, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape shouted as the rocket began to make metallic groans of protestation. "Run!"

"No! We can't! It's the last one!" I shouted, starting for the steps up.

P-21 grabbed me and pulled me back. "And that won't mean anything if we die when the tower collapses!"

I stared up at the inviting hatch for several seconds, the boarding catwalk already slowly scraping away from it across the rocket's skin, then turned and followed Boo down the stairs. The tower leaned further and further over, and we finally had to leap the last ten feet. Don't lock legs; roll with the landing. Good lessons. I looked up and back to see the tower fall sideways, away from the rocket…maybe it would still work…and then the tower hit one of the launch clamp supports, and I saw that the opposite one was already lying in pieces on the launchpad. The support twisted under the weight of the tower, the clamp still attached to the rocket pulled it away from the other two, and the great ship crumpled in the middle and toppled, smashing into pieces and a great pool of steaming liquid on the ground. "Maybe we can fix it?" I muttered as we backed away.

Then the puddles exploded, the bulwark going up and slicing the rocket in two just in time to save us from frying. I looked at the still-open, now deformed hatch in the rocket's upper half as we hastened away from the flames, just in case the bulwark had been damaged by the fall. The last rocket…the last chance to stop Cognitum…

The entire world had grown oddly silent. I staggered away, reached an intercom box on some machine I couldn't identify, and sat down hard. With no way to stop Cognitum... and no Folly... there was no way I could win. I pressed my head to the warm metal, trying to abate the throbbing in my head.

"What now?" P-21 asked.

"Now... I dunno," I answered, unable to look at him.

There was a crackle on the intercom. "Blackjack," Glory said with the sound of gunshots behind her. Apparently there were still Brood that hadn't gotten the memo they'd won.

"Get out of there, Glory. It's over." Maybe LittlePip could park the S.P.P. hub in the path of Tom. Was that possible?

"No. It's not. Get to pad one." I frowned and looked across at the pad next to the stairs. It was one of the rockets I assumed had been destroyed in the fueling, the one covered in ice. But now... it was covered in zebras... "Cerynitis and the other Propoli are getting it ready to fly. They've already fixed the problem that stopped it last time; you just have to keep the Legate from attacking it long enough for them to get the oxygen tanks filled. They're doing it now."

Hope, terrible and wonderful hope, stirred in me. "Keep him busy... " I said as I rose to my hooves. "Yeah. I can do that." I could see a sole remaining red bar on my E.F.S., out in the middle of the launchpads. I made sure my magazines were topped off, put on my helmet, and started walking.

The Legate stood in the middle of the circle of rockets as the flames danced around the launchpad. His blood-red stripes seemed to glow with a light that outshone the roaring glare and chaos that reigned around him. Brood against Harbingers. Remnant versus Brood. And in the eye of the madness, in the center of the grated hole of the ESS-A1's launchpad, thin warm steam rising around him, was the striped stallion.

And he was laughing.

It was a joyous laugh. A rolling, ragged, elated laugh finally free of the constraints of discipline, like a slurry of madness and hateful delight was pouring out of him, and he spread his hooves wide and whirled. Head thrown back, mane snapping in the wild winds tearing around the launch pad, he shrieked in glee, reveling in the slaughter all around him. He wasn't killing a single pony or zebra himself; he celebrated like a child who'd successfully destroyed a

deep friendship out of petty spite because he had no such solace.

I stepped onto the grate with him, the wind whipping my black and red mane as I stood there, facing him. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked, his back to me. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this day.”

I was done with witty repartee. Sardonic retorts. I answered him with a storm of lead. His spiritually-fortified body jerked and spasmed in a dance of bloody spray and meaty chunks as the slugs tore him to pieces. Yet again, the bloody bits reversed direction in the air and returned to his body as soon as they were separated. The red-streaked hide reassembled it before my eyes, facing me, his smirk rematerializing before me.

So I smashed the gun across his face. He whirled around, but this time I reversed my swing immediately, keeping the metal between him and me, and he slammed his foreleg against the stout barrel. I was rewarded with the sight of his foreleg bending like clay around the metal with a crackling noise like snapping plywood, but even more satisfying was the look of shock on his face. Pity that that expression disappeared an instant later as I blasted away his face.

“Futile,” he rasped from a shattered, reforming throat. But I didn’t stop. Even without eyes, he had an uncanny ability to strike back at me, his left hind hoof pistoning into my face. I staggered back, the blow making my head throb and vision blur for several seconds. But I didn’t let myself delay, pushing through the pain to spray a full auto fan of lead in his direction. Most missed, but the hail of rounds took his hooves out from under him and gave me a second to refocus. I made like a zebra: shouldered the gun, braced it with a hoof, and bathed him in fiery lead. His head and torso liquefied under the barrage, and then the drum went dry.

I looked down into the bloody ruin of his chest cavity and saw his heart. It reminded me of the phoenix talisman, but carved from a dark stone. Spiral runes and zebra glyphs decorated its surface. Attached to it was what looked vaguely like a PipBuck broadcaster made of starmetal, red and green lights flashing on it, with spikes wired directly into the stone.

I slapped in the other drum and unloaded a burst right into the accursed rock.

The shots bounced off wildly, scraping tissue off the heart's surface but no faster than it was regenerated. One ricochet even slammed back into my barding. Finally, I reached in in with a hoof and tried

to pry the starmetal device from the smooth stone, but not only did I fail, the reassembling gore threatened to trap my hoof in his chest! I yanked by leg free, crimson streaming behind it, and pulled back. Of *course* it had to be a soul jar…

Flesh surged back into the hole I'd left, reattaching and reassembling itself around the silvery box and stone. “Glory is going to die,” he glurbled through a face ripped in two by my firepower. “Right now, I am sending every Brood I have to blast her to pieces. I might have them play with her a little. Initiate her into your and P-21’s little club.” He face reformed enough to make a leer.

I did the only sensible thing I could in that situation. I reloaded.

“Blackjack!” P-21 snapped as he emerged from the smoke and haze, holding me and stopping me from turning the Legate into paint again. “He’s stalling you!”

“I don’t care!” I snapped, aiming at him once more as a sooty Scotch Tape and Boo emerged as well.

“Oh, but you do! You care!” the Legate hissed at me as he sprang casually to his hooves and we started to circle. “Shoot me. Shoot me all you can. Maybe you’ll find a way, false hero. Some way to end me. Some trick. Some gamble. That is what you are, after all. Dice thrown by higher powers in a desperate attempt to change a future that is immutable and irrefutable. You care so much it causes you pain.”

Then the Legate exploded, the lump of rock and gore bouncing across the grate. “He talks too much,” P-21 said as he lowered Persuasion, then turned to me. “Blackjack, he’s stalling you. He knows we’re trying to stop Horizons. Fighting him is doing what he wants.” I blinked at him, then over at the reconstituting lump of pure, unadulterated bastard. “You can’t shoot evil to death, Blackjack. You just have to do better.”

“Let’s go, Bwackjack,” Boo nodded.

“We’ve got bigger things to do,” Scotch Tape agreed. I slowly approached and stared down at him. His spine appeared fused to the pieces pulling themselves back together again. His eyes reformed, glittering with malicious spite.

I couldn’t just walk away from him. Not after all he’d done. Not after all he’d hurt. I knelt down, seeing where his body was trying to reform through the launchpad grate. I stared right into his eyes and said the one word I was sure would get him like no other. “Discord.” My lips curved in a smile.

The mirth and malice disappeared as he stared at me. I rose, delighting in the opportunity to see my foe in mental anguish. It was a heady drug. “No,” he said. “No, you can’t. He didn’t…you can’t be. You were broken!” he spat as his pupils shrank. “The stars never lie!”

“So? Not the first time I've been put back together,” I said coolly. “And now I’m going to stop her, stop Tom, and stop you. Because Discord convinced Cognitum to take my soul and put it in this blank.”

“No! That’s impossible!” he roared up at me, all mirth gone. “You’re trapped here.”

“Discord could do it. Uncle Discord saved Blackjack,” Boo said with a fond smile. “Even if he had to die, he did it.” Funny how much love one mare’s eyes could have for one of Equestria’s ‘villains’. I couldn't say I didn't feel the same.

“Blackjack,” P-21 warned.

Still, I couldn’t help myself. “See that rocket? That frosty one? Turns out it still works.” I checked Sexy’s magazine coolly, then slapped it back into place. “I’m going to get my body back, and not you, not Cognitum, not even the *stars* will stop me.”

I started to turn away when a thought occurred to me. “Hey, Amadi. When I put my mind back into my old body, I guess I really will be the Maiden of the Stars. Least for a little while. Funny, huh? That the ‘prophecy’ you made up will actually come true?” And I turned and started away, a satisfied smile on my face. Gloating might be a terrible habit, but damn it felt good!

Then he screamed. It wasn’t a scream like one a pony could make, or any beast’s. It was more the harrowed howl of a feral ghoul, devoid of any sanity, ripping from a throat indifferent to injury. An expression of such rage and fury that it encompassed every aspect of the note. If that scream could be weaponized, it would have rivaled a balefire bomb for its fury.

“You’re dead! All of you! Everything! Dead! Dead! Dead!” he ranted as he struggled. For several seconds he went on like that, and then suddenly he went silent. I froze, turning to see him watching me. His eyes were wide, wild. But a smile rested on his face. A look of triumph. “Dead,” he stated, low and certain.

But what could he do? He was just making idle threats. The idle threats of a trapped lunatic. He probably really had lost his mind. And yet... yet... what could he do? I didn’t see any Brood charging

the field. He was stuck. So what... what...

That device... that thing he had wired to his heart! That had to be how he controlled the Brood. And maybe much more. Our eyes locked, and I saw such malice it stunned me. He'd use anything to kill me. Anything at all...

Oh shit. "You're going to launch the missile," I whispered. His eyes narrowed as his smile widened. Time seemed to slow as our eyes met and that moment of clarity and understanding joined us. The noise, the battle, the Legate suddenly didn't matter. "We have to go! Now! Right now!"

We raced towards pad number one. The rocket was a dingy little sliver of gray, sheets of ice still dangling from its sides and the girders of its support structures. It was half the size of any other, but now it was my last, best hope. A dozen zebras worked to attach hoses and bang off the ice. From behind me, I heard the moan of bending metal and the wet rip of rending meat. I dared to glance back and saw in horror the muscles in the Legate's forelegs bulging as he pushed himself out of the grate, the bars tearing lengthening rips in his body even as the force of his flesh trying to regenerate bent them.

Cerynitis met us at the foot of the tower. "You made it," he said as he brushed the frost off his brow. He waved a hoof at the rocket. "There was a catastrophic failure of the LOX hoses and the pump safeties on the first loading. We wrote the rocket off, given that it's the oldest model we have we could make work at all. First generation. The fuel is loaded; we'd nearly finished that last time, and there's nothing wrong with that system."

I nodded. "Listen, the Legate has a balefire missile, right?"

Cerynitis gulped. "He's fired it."

"... Fired it?" He gaped at me, looking around wildly. "We have to go. Now! Right now." That wasn't the response I wanted.

"How long?" I asked him.

"I don't know. With the missiles we had…if the crews back at Dawn Bay are slacking, fifteen minutes? Much more if they have to fuel first. But if the missile is ready to fly... five? Less? And how long ago did he fire?"

I swallowed and looked up at the rocket. "Okay. Soon as you can, get out of here. I don't want any of you dying if I can help it." I looked up at the window of the control center, but it was dark. "It's a minute between starting the launch sequence and taking off,

right?"

"About that." He nodded in agreement, then turned and started shouting things to the zebras working on the rocket. From the urgency in his voice, I had little doubt they knew this was coming down to the wire.

"Boo!" I called as I turned to them. I had to trust her luck. "You have to find Big Daddy and Lancer. Tell them that the missile is on its way now!"

"But I wanna go with you!" Boo wailed. "I just got back!"

"If you don't, hundreds are going to die!" I said as I turned and faced her. "I need you to do it. You're the only one lucky enough to pull it off!" I pulled her close and gave her a fierce hug. "You're a big girl, Boo. I'm so proud of you. Now find them. Get them out of here as fast as you can."

Boo hugged me back and sniffed, "Come back quick, Mama. Come back safe." And then she was gone, running back as quickly as she could.

"Scotch Tape! Get in the cockpit. Do your best to figure out what we need to do when this takes off." She gaped at me. "I know. You don't have a missile cutie mark, but there's got to be an instruction manual or something."

"Blackjack! I can't read a manual for a rocketship in three minutes!" she protested.

I tapped her PipBuck. "Use S.A.T.S. That should buy you a little extra time." She made more faintly strangled noises. "I know you can do this, Scotch. And hey, if you mess up, no one's going to be able to tell you that you did. So get it right. P-21, they installed some kind of terminal in these to make them fly. Make sure it's working."

"What are you going to do?" P-21 asked.

There was a thud as the Legate landed next to us. His back was a grisly jumble of steel and flesh. "Buy you time," I said. "Hurry."

"You have no time to buy," the Legate shouted as my friends ran, and then he launched himself at me once more, just as fast as before but now filled with a dreadful urgency. He went into his usual blinding flourishes of kicks and stomps, spinning this way and that, but I'd seen his technique…felt it, too…and knew it was all about circles and momentum. I refused him any momentum. I used Sexy like a shield, holding it vertically in my magic for him to break his hooves against... and his bent hoof, bones jutting from the limb,

pulled the weapon aside so he could smash his face against mine. It didn't matter how my horn gouged him; he had everything to lose if he didn't kill me or stop that rocket. The impact nearly broke my horn, sending an icepick of pain right into my skull and making my eyes water, my vision blur. I'd taken three steps back when his rear hoof swept mine out from under me, dropping me hard on my back before leaping down and smashing my gut and ribs with his extended hind legs.

I managed to snag his leg and roll, knocking him on his back beside me as I struggled to suck in a single breath, but he sprang back up to his hooves the moment he touched down. I pushed through the burning feedback in my horn and blasted him in the face with three S.A.T.S.-guided magic bullets. As he staggered away I chugged two healing potions at once, feeling my ribs popping back into place beneath my barding. Before his face could fully regenerate, I smashed the bottles between my hooves and telekinetically flung the shards into it.

I figured glass inside regenerating eyeballs had to count for something, and it did. His blows were now off by inches. I now simply focused on not getting hit. He whirled, his leg whistling as it almost took off my head more than once. I gave ground and did all I could not to block. Then he switched from the spinning kicks and punches to a forward lunge, grabbing my face and headbutting again. I felt skull grinding against the tip of my horn right before I was knocked on my back yet again.

He arched up with a jagged spur of metal, and as little P-21s danced in my vision, I watched him rip the eyes from his sockets and mash them between his hooves. A second later a bloody slurry swept back up and reformed them. He tossed the bits of broken glass at my hooves as I stared up at him. "Even without augmentations, you fight well," he said as his eyes narrowed. Then he turned his head and looked right at the Propoli trying to get the rocket ready to fly. "They don't."

He raced towards the rocket as I rolled to my hooves. If only I could teleport! Instead, I slipped into S.A.T.S. and targeted one of his hindlegs. Two magic bullets blasted it off halfway, but the stallion barely broke stride. I grabbed the dismembered leg with my magic as it slowly started to return, wrapping my hooves around the length and letting it drag me after him. As the leg reattached itself, I pressed Sexy to his pelvis and fired a full auto spray of

buckshot straight into his torso.

The Legate exploded, again.

I rolled twice, then ran to the base of the rocket. “Hurry!” I exhorted them as the Legate rose to his hooves.

If that balefire missile was on its way, I was already dead. That rocket was my only hope, and he was charging straight at it. I got in his way, unable to dodge and keep him back at the same time, and tried to block one swinging forehoof with Sexy’s reinforced barrel. I succeeded, but he gripped the gun, and his hind leg swung back, striking me in the head so hard I heard something crack and suddenly saw three of him. Then he dove past me at some hoses marked ‘LOX’ dangling from one of the launch structures. I didn’t dare shoot, so I did the only thing I could: I bit down hard on his tail, lifting my forelegs to block the double kick to my face. Bones in my forelegs cracked at the impact. Still, I kept my grip, struggling to pull him back from the rocket.

The Propoli were now fleeing for their lives, moving down into maintenance spaces at the base of the wall. Cerynitis ran to the intercom and shouted into it, “Miss Glory, is everything green?”

“Yes. Pad one is green.” More gunshots over the intercom. “You need to hurry,” she said.

“Wheel, lever, and wedge, Miss Glory,” he said, as if the words were a benediction of some sort, and then he turned and left as well. It was now between me and the Legate.

He might have been extremely strong, but even he couldn’t tear off his own tail, no matter that I tasted blood in my mouth. My feet skidded as he pulled me closer to the hoses. My horn glowed as I swung the barrel sideways and knocked his feet out from under him.

“Blackjack,” came Glory’s voice over the loudspeakers. If I hadn’t been dragging the Legate back, I would have cheered to hear her voice. Instead, I battered him with my shotgun as I tried to pull him away from the remaining rocket. “I see you on the monitor. There’s a missile coming!” Rapidfire gunshots tore out of my PipBuck, and she cried out in pain. “Please! Hurry!”

His rear hoof hammered back, smashing my forelegs again, and I felt bones snapping. I needed a healing potion before he crippled me; I took a chance, released his tail, and gulped two down. Battering him with Sexy, I pulled out two more, barely able to hold them with my fractured hooves. I had them half drained when his

hoof flashed out and shattered them against my teeth. I screamed then as my mouth tried to expel bloody glass while healing at the same time. My magic focus was lost, and I grabbed Sexy in my hooves to keep him down with the swings.

The Legate grabbed my gun, and as I lifted it, it pulled him up enough that he slammed his hooves against my horn, breaking my focus. Then he swung one of his forehooves across, tearing open my scalp under my compact spire. Blood dripped into my eyes as I finally released his tail and raised my forelegs to try and block him, but, now free, he dropped down and punched me hard in the gut. I vomited noisily onto the concrete and fell back, barely able to breathe.

He raced straight for the rocket, reaching over his shoulder and ripping out a long strip of bloody shrapnel from his back. It dragged along the ground beside him, and my heart froze as I made out tiny gouts of flame flashing from the fuel soaked into the poured stone. All it needed was to ignite a large enough volume, and we'd all go up!

Then a blue cannonball landed right on his back, knocking them both to the ground and making him drop the metal bar. P-21 wasn't a fighter, he wasn't even all that big for a stallion, but he slammed his hooves into the Legate's head again and again till finally the zebra was forced to fight him off. With a wild toss, P-21 went flying, landing next to one of the hoses.

"Enough of this!" the Legate shouted, "No more! No more plotting. No more scheming. No more fighting. No more wasting my time with this annoying, futile hope! I am the chosen one! Supreme! Invincible!" He then snatched up the bar, the sharp, jagged edge glinting in the floodlights, hooking it in his hooves and raising it for a downward swing on one of the hoses.

I struggled to put together enough focus to try a magic bullet. For all I knew, it would ignite everything anyway.

Then P-21 grabbed one of the hoses near where it joined a pipe on the tower and pulled with all his might. The old tube, coated in frost, gave a ripping noise and suddenly popped free in a cloud of white. He turned and pointed it right at the red-striped zebra, bathing him in a stream of evaporating fluid. Some safety had to exist, because after several seconds, the flow cut off. The Legate stood there, bar overhead, a rime of frost covering him from head to hoof.

I had to drink a healing potion just to see clearly, wiping the blood out of my eyes and spitting out a shard of glass stuck in my tongue, then approached the Legate. Some of the freezing fluid was still dribbling down his body, and I could hear little creaks and pops.
"Invincible this," I said, and swung the bar with all my strength. The Legate's limbs shattered, falling into the puddle of freezing fluids, breaking like a delicate figurine upon the ground.
I rushed up to P-21, trying to pull the hose away as it drooled cold-steaming liquid... It took a great deal of his fur with it…and other things that I'd need healing potions for. He shivered horribly against me. "He talks too much," P-21 muttered, ice dangling off his mane.
"Come on," I said, not knowing how long we had before the Legate thawed or we all fried. Levitating my gun, I put him on my back, carrying him up the spiral gantry in the rocket's launch tower. "Glory? Are you there?" I asked into my PipBuck as we reached the open hatch at the top. "Soon as you can, you need to start the launch sequence and get back here." I reached the hatch. "Glory?"
"Got it," she said a little lighter than I liked.
"Are you okay?" Magical interference be damned, if the answer was no, I was going to break the laws of physics and magic to bring her back safely.
"I'm fine, Blackjack," Glory said. "Hurry. You don't have long." More gunshots sounded from the PipBuck. "I've started the pre-launch countdown already. It's all automated."
"Good. Come straight away, okay?" I asked as I tried to ignore the sounds of shooting over the radio. I got P-21 inside the much snugger interior of our rocket. There were just four passenger seats, the fifth with the controls occupied by a cobbled-together terminal machine like the ones in Cognitum's rocket. I set him down in one and started buckling him in. Four small portholes along the wall and in the door let me see out.
"... I'll try," Glory said quietly. That set alarms off in my head. More gunshots sounded, now from both my foreleg and a speaker in the capsule. I spotted a terminal showing the control room. Heaps of dust, dead zebras, and slain Brood littered the place. Glory looked up from a terminal and smiled at the camera. Almost instantly, a unicorn Brood teleported into the room. Glory immediately whirled at the flash, the beams from her gun lancing out and biting deep into it. Magic bullets slammed into her as her

beams cut down the machine, the jacket absorbing many of the hits…but not all. Her wings and haunches wept with dozens of wounds.

I rose to my hooves as Scotch Tape strapped herself in as well. "Hang tight. I'll be right there!" I said as I started towards the door.

It swung shut in my face. There was the sound of bolts being driven into the hatch with whirring noise.

I slammed my hooves against the metal. "What's going on?" I shouted, slamming my hooves against it, looking around for the doorknob as I heard the bolts thunk shut. "Glory!"

I looked out the window in the door, which pointed right at the large window to the control room. I could see flashes of light from inside. "I can't leave, Blackjack. I don't know how to disable the controls. If I leave, they could abort the launch," she said, my ears straining to catch her words over the rattle of gunfire. I rushed back to the terminal, watching as she hunkered behind the terminal, blasting again and again.

Back to the hatch, back to trying to figure out how the damn thing opened. "Get out of there, Glory! We'll leave! Find another way," I yelled as I beat my hooves against the metal. There had to be some way. "Open this thing, Scotch!" I said, looking at all the knobs and levers. I whipped my head around and screamed, "Open it right now! I have to get to her!"

Scotch Tape stared at me. Tears streaked her cheeks as she stared from me to the shivering P-21. "Do it!" I screamed at her.

"No," P-21 said through his chattering teeth.

"I'd do it for you!" I yelled at him. "I'd do it for you, Scotch!" I snapped at the stricken filly.

"And she is doing it for you," he answered, tears streaking the lingering frost on his cheeks. "Just like we would do it for you."

No. No no no! "I don't want anyone to die for me!" I said as I slammed my shoulder against the hatch. Where was the 'emergency open'? Something! "Glory!" I sobbed.

"Blackjack, the missile will impact in a minute," Glory said calmly, glancing over at a display. "I can see it here." There was a thunk, and a hiss, whine, and rattle sounded in the guts of the rocket. "I've checked the flight path. You're going to get to the Lunar Palace a little behind Cognitum." My view of the control room was briefly blocked by a moving beam as the launch tower swung down and away to the sound of klaxons.

“Please, Glory…Please…” I tried to teleport, and hit the wall… tried again…hit it again. Whatever zebra talisman kept me back refused to yield. I levitated out the gun, pointing it at the hatch.

“Don’t! You’ll kill all of us!” Scotch yelled.

“Blackjack,” P-21 said in tones intended to help me accept the unacceptable.

“No!” I shouted, my hooves beating against the metal.

“All systems nominal. Launch tower disengaged,” the heartless computer stated coolly. “Starting core stage engines.”

I wanted to slay the damned machine, but it was the only thing that would get me to my destination. I bit my lip so hard trying not to scream that I tasted blood. “We can’t just leave her.”

He reached out and put a hoof on my shoulder as the bulwark field activated around our rocket and the hiss beneath us turned into a roar.

“Core stage engine thrust stable. Booster ignition in ten, nine, eight... ”

“No, Blackjack. It’s that... I’m sorry,” he told me in tones that couldn’t begin to console me, with words that couldn’t begin to make this right. He was also the only thread of sanity keeping me together. What was one life to that of the whole world?

Everything.

It was a price to be paid. I could accept that. What I could not accept was another person paying it. I sobbed, looking out at Glory as she rose and turned to face out the window. Despite the distance that separated us, I could still make out her smile as she stared back at me. I saw her lips move, but the words were stolen by the dull roar bursting into a cacophonous thunder. The computer said something I didn’t catch. Glory and the space center were gone from the window, and I staggered over to the communications terminal against crushing pressure and the shaking of the world.

I stretched a hoof towards the monitor as I saw her slump. There was blood in the corner of her mouth, one wing shot clean through and dangling beside her as if about to fall off. Out the window behind her, I could see a column of magical fields vanishing as steam drifted over an empty launchpad. I collapsed to the floor, reaching towards her, straining my hoof to touch the screen. She placed hers over mine, two ponies separated by a pane of cold glass. I stared, willing the glass to dissolve, for her to come tumbling through, tears streaking down my face.

“Blackjack,” she murmured, smiling as she wept. “Tomorrow.”

Outside the windows, the world grew light, a sunrise from below. The monitor went dark. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Glory beneath the floor. Glory meeting me in the shower. Glory’s tears in the rain. Glory hovering beneath me, hoof outstretched, aglow. The feel of Glory holding me. Glory saving Scotch Tape. Glory throwing me across the room as Dash. Glory dancing with me in her stunning dress. Glory flying through the skies with me. Glory giving her speech to Thunderhead. Glory walking away. Glory giving me a sad smile.

I threw back my head as I was crushed to the floor, crying out her name for the whole universe to hear, lost in the roar as her sacrifice carried me into the heavens.

Footnote: <Error: Footnote Not Found>

Chapter 72: Captive Audience

"You guys have gotta get me out of here! I'm gonna climb the walls!"
"Ooh, just like a spider! Did the crash somehow give her super-duper spider powers?"

For a time I couldn't measure, the suffocating hoof of acceleration crushed down on my spine and pinned my limbs to the floor while the roar of the engines drowned out all of my thoughts. I struggled for every breath, my body fighting my mind's desire for oblivion. I wanted it to push harder, crush me down till nothing was left. I was thankful for the agonizing respite, but it tapered off far too soon. I lay there, aching and throbbing and trapped with that horrible moment.

Events replayed again and again in my mind, as if trying to correct a horrible mistake that had been made. I kept attempting to edit those thoughts through force of will alone, trying desperately to see Glory soaring to the rocket seconds before the launch…to see her scramble for safety with the rest of the zebras…to see a protective bubble of magic envelop the control station...

Something…

Anything…

Gradually, I was forced to acknowledge the reality around me. I heard Scotch Tape sobbing inconsolably as P-21 did all he could to console her anyway. I cracked an eye open, spotting him reaching as far as the harness would allow. There were no tears in his eyes, only a sad knowledge. I envied his calloused heart and loathed my petty emotions in turn. He glanced at me, and in his eyes was another tie between us: *I know what it's like to lose somepony you love right before your eyes*.

Freezing fluid had splashed everywhere when he'd pulled out the hose, and I guessed that he had burns on his back and flanks, too.

Being sprayed with it hadn't burned him like a flamer would. The frost was already melting, but it was clear from the mats of fur missing from his limbs that he was in great pain. Bald, red-raw patches of skin looked like so much thawing meat.

I closed my eyes again as I heard Scotch Tape sniffle. “I’m sorry. I killed her. I am so sorry.”

“You…killed her?” I asked as I sat up and felt myself bob upward, my body incredibly light. Any other time I would have welcomed and marveled at the sensation. Scotch immediately fell silent, pressing her face into her father’s outstretched hoof, the only part of her that would reach. “What did you do, Scotch?”

“She saved our lives, Blackjack. She saved your life. That’s what she did,” P-21 said, his voice low, thick, heavy, and reasonable. I didn’t want reason. I wanted to vent the pain and bile coiled up inside me. This was worse than Lacunae. At least with Lacunae I could feel like it had been for a greater good. That her two hundred years of being the Goddess’s garbage dump had entitled her to an end to her pain. Now I wanted to hurt somepony to get the pain out of me, and the only targets I had were the two who deserved it least.

“What. Did. You. Do?!” I demanded, tears and spittle floating away from me and lingering in the air like miserable little stars.

“I overrode the hatch. I kept my hoof on the button to close it,” she whimpered, looking at me with dread. Rage and horrible words were ripped to pieces as I hissed through my teeth.

“Why?” I spat.

“Because if that hatch hadn’t been locked down when the rocket took off, we would have all died, not just Glory,” P-21 said firmly, but with compassion still in his voice. Still, I could see the warning in his gaze. “If the hatch had come open during flight, we would have all died. If it had aborted the launch, we would have all died. You can’t be on the verge of launch, stop everything, and then take off again a minute later.”

“I could have saved her!” I screamed at him.

“How?” he shouted back, and with that one, simple word, the blazing indignation in me died. His voice returned to reasonable levels. “How, Blackjack? Did your teleportation kick back on? Do you think she could have healed her wing and flown back here fast enough? And if we had died, then *everypony* would have.” His words were a cold, smothering blanket on my rage, dousing the

flames and leaving only smoldering char in their wake. “Besides,” he added, averting his eyes. “I killed her.”

“No... ” Scotch Tape moaned, shaking her head. “I did it. I... ” But she trailed off, left staring at her hooves.

“I should have stayed with her,” he said, low and evenly. “If I’d been there, she would have been able to focus on the launch. We might have been able to take all the Brood out sooner and get her out of there like she planned! But I stayed with you.”

“Daddy. That Legate would have killed Blackjack and destroyed the rocket if you hadn’t been there,” Scotch Tape said, then twisted in her harness to pull out a healing potion. She started to pass it to him, but the bottle slipped from her hooves. Rather than fall to the deck, it spun away slowly through the air, before bouncing dully off the far wall. “What the hay?” the filly asked, and then noticed at all the little tears floating in the air. “Oh…”

I reached out with my magic to float the errant potion to P-21. He drank it immediately, and I pulled myself to sit on the other side of him, hooking my legs into the supports of his couch to keep from drifting away. “You don’t really think you killed her, do you?” I said with a little mirthless smile.

“No, but considering how you two were acting, it seemed like the thing to do,” he said as skin slowly regenerated over the raw patches. “The Legate killed Glory. Not us. She wouldn’t want us to be mad at ourselves or each other. She’d want us to look ahead.”

But how could I look ahead when behind hurt so much? How could I look ahead to a future without her in it? A tomorrow with no Glory? I pushed off from the couch, floating across the air and reaching one of the windows. Don’t think about it. That hurt least of all, right now.

Below us I could see the grand arc of the world, a mottle of blue, green, gray, and brown. I thought we might be over the zebra lands now, or maybe somewhere else in the world. Wherever we were, I didn’t want to visit. One area was illuminated by a fiery vortex that seemed to gyre slowly amid molten mountains and what I thought might have been the outlines of a city. Another flickered and flashed like a constant lightning discharge. Another was a dark blot, like ink, staining the land. Megaspells, I realized. Megaspells running amok even two centuries later. Who knew what other effects were down there, making life hell for the inhabitants?

“How is she floating like that?” Scotch Tape asked as I floated

above the ground, tail and mane waving as if I were underwater.
"We're falling," P-21 answered, getting an alarmed expression from his daughter. "Think about when I shoot a grenade from Persuasion. The grenade rises through the air, reaches its apex, and falls. The bigger the charge, the further the grenade flies." Scotch Tape nodded, seeming to follow what he was saying. "Imagine if I had a charge big enough to throw the grenade over the horizon. If there wasn't any air to slow it down, where would it land?"
Scotch furrowed her brow for a second then looked back to her father. "It wouldn't. It'd just keep flying over the horizon." Her eyes widened. "Ohhh!" Then she frowned again. "But... what about the sun and the moon and stuff?"
"Magic," I answered, getting a groan from both of them. "No, it was in one of those magicy books of Twilight's. A disertingy. The natural magic of the Equus system keeps the sun and moon and other natural satellites in their own magical spheres; the moon is in the first, the sun in the second, and other planets further and further out."
"If magic keeps the sun and moon in the sky, what would it do for something like the Eater?" P-21 asked gravely.
Huh. If the Eater had enough magic, would it just float back into space again? It'd have to find a way to push through a mile of rock first, though. "Maybe. I never thought about it." And I tried, and failed. Glory would... and that stopped my speculation cold. "I don't know." I turned to Scotch Tape. "So this rocket runs on magic?"
"A little. Part magic and part physics. I don't really know how, though," Scotch Tape admitted. "I can kinda guess how it works a little, but not why. I think I have more of a civil engineering cutie mark and less a gadgetry cutie mark." She twisted, as if consulting her flank for confirmation. Then she undid the restraint clasp and gave an exploratory push. Instantly she started to backflip slowly in the air. "Whoa!" she shouted, waving her hooves as she attempted an awkward hybridization of walking and flapping in the air. "Daddy, you have to try this!"
"No. I don't," he said as he leaned back against the couch, looking decidedly green. "You have fun, though," he said with a permissive wave of a hoof. "Don't hit the self-destruct button by accident or anything."
I turned my back to both of them, moving away from the window and around to the next. The sun blazed as it came around the curve

of the planet, much smaller but far more brilliant than the planet it illuminated. A star like any other, its magnificence undimmed by remoteness. The glare stabbed at my eyes, and so I moved further around to the next window.

Stars. So many stars. I stared out at them, and they seemed to gaze back into me. All those I'd seen before, few as they were, flickered. But these were steady points of light, and so many, the sky becoming ever more full with them as my eyes recovered from the sun's radiance. I could see how some might see them as evil portents, cold and remote and cruel, but to me they felt warmer. They were remote because they had to be. They were trying to light up all that blackness and fill it with color and life. It was all so vast and dark, but it was still filled with endless beauty.

My hoof brushed against a rough burr on the otherwise smooth metal around the porthole, and I glanced down in dull curiosity. ‘For Tarot. May she see the future.’ I ran my hoof back and forth over the words. Marigold had been here in this very rocket. The first mare to leave the world by pony ingenuity and return safely. She’d brought Twilight Sparkle’s baby all the way up to the stars during a time of war and strife, in the hope of seeing a better future. She’d been rewarded with scandal, snide insinuation, accusation, the end of her career, humiliation…and a daughter. Tarot’s future had ended in a stable, and ten generations later, here I was, walking in Marigold’s hoofsteps. Returning to the moon.

Scotch Tape bumped against my back. “Blackjack,” she said in delicate tones. “I’m sorry…”

“She’s not dead,” I contradicted, not taking my eyes off the stars.

“Blackjack,” P-21 began in worried tones.

“She’s not!” I said as I whirled on them…and had to grab at the edges around me to stop myself. I had to brush my mane out of my face and take a moment to inhale deeply. I regarded both of them, staring with matching expressions of concern. “She’s not.”

“Blackjack,” P-21 repeated, this time in resigned tones.

“She isn’t dead,” I repeated firmly. “Think of all the stuff I survived by the skin of my teeth. She’s smart and resourceful. She’d find a way to survive.” I couldn’t take his skeptical, sad gaze any longer and turned back to the comforting glow of the stars. “She’s not dead. She never gave up on me, even after that megaspell. I won’t give up on her.” And until I held her corpse in my embrace, I wouldn’t believe it.

“Blackjack,” Scotch Tape said in a voice so like her father I wanted to scream. I turned to snap but halted at her smile. “Maybe you’re right. I mean, that place was huge! It had magical fields that could hold back a rocket’s exhaust. They even stopped explosions. Maybe there was something similar around the control center.” She held my shoulder and turned to face her father. “And that Lightbringer, she survived a balefire bomb that was right underneath her!” She turned from him to me and back again, her smile becoming more strained, tears in the corner of her eyes. “It’s possible…right?”

Her desperation steadied me, and I held her firmly, hugging her close. “Yeah,” I murmured in her ear. “It’s possible.” I started as I felt two more hooves circle around both of us. I twisted my neck in surprise, meeting P-21's gentle, reassuring gaze as he held the both of us.

"It's possible," he echoed, and pressed his head to mine. For a moment, I was content to just float, comforted by the press and warmth of love and hope, no matter how thin and pale that hope was. I gave my first sincere smile as I caressed his neck.

“No sudden motions. It’ll spoil the moment if I vomit on both of you,” he muttered as we floated in the rocket.

The comment made me laugh. A tiny, short, pathetic laugh, but a laugh none the less. Since when did he become the funny one? I carefully pushed us all back to our seats with my magic. I was feeling a little queasy too, and I hoped that we’d get to the moon before any of us had to use the bathroom!

It was amazing how little things could help so much.

When we were back down, P-21 regarded me. “Blackjack, do you have a memory orb you can go into for a while? I need to talk to Scotch Tape privately.” I blinked in surprise, and so too did the olive filly. Then she suddenly seemed wary.

“Um…maybe?” I thought of the orbs I already had, then thought of something even better. I withdrew the Perceptitron. It was a little battered around the edges, but all the little lightbulbs and whirly bits still lit up when I plugged it into my PipBuck. I checked my copious list of PipBuck tags and frowned. Right there at the top was Glory’s. It glowed at me with awful temptation. All I would have to do was put it on and find out if she was alright…or not…

And if I put in that tag and found her dead…could I take it?

My hoof trembled, eyes tearing up as I stared. Right now, I didn’t know. Right now, I wanted to believe so much that she was alive. I

needed to. But if she were dead, or alive and dying…no. I felt myself falling apart just thinking about it. So I picked another tag at random, and let my world swoosh away.

oooOOOooo

Of course, I ended up in Goldenblood. I couldn't get away from him, even if I wanted to. His body felt wrong. There was a heartbeat, but it was a tepid, reptilian beat. He breathed at a glacial pace, like a flywheel that still possessed just enough inertia to creep long after the motor driving it had died. Even the burning pain throughout his chest for most of his life had dimmed to the consistency of wet charcoal.

I was rather surprised to see him in the exact same conference room at the Skyport where Lighthooves had once confronted General Storm Chaser. It made sense, though. Charming as Star House was, it was no place to conduct a war from. The chamber had been transformed. A half dozen green alicorns sat in a row, munching on biscuits as Velvet Remedy paced from one to another. A blue alicorn sat boredly beside the table, projecting a tiny illusory display of the Hoof, complete with tiny glowing blue ponies and red zebras. As Goldenblood read a report about the Halfhearts fighting against increasing numbers of Brood, a purple alicorn winked in, passed over several notes, conferred briefly with Velvet, and then winked away again.

"A report from Stable 99. Five hundred estimated Brood from the coast through the Boneyard and down to the Fluttershy Medical Center." As she spoke, she looked pointedly at the blue, who sighed and flashed her horn. The illusion added a wall of red along the northwest corner of the map. An almost solid ring of red encapsulated everything. Over on the southeast side hovered tiny glowing Raptors.

"Thank you, Velvet. Without your children, this wouldn't have been possible," Goldenblood rasped as he took the papers and glanced at each one almost faster than I could read. "The Brood might be blocking our communications, but they can't stop them."

"And they're not being used as weapons. That's all I asked," Velvet said, still looking a touch disturbed.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I just…didn't expect we'd separate like this. It feels wrong," she

replied as she rubbed a leg, looking pensively to the door.

"Like the ministries," he murmured as he read a few scrawled lines on one of the notes giving numbers of enemy soldiers. Velvet swallowed and nodded. He gave a small smile. "I know the feeling. Honestly, I contemplated tasking the four of you with tracking down and stopping the Legate, but since the explosion, he's been missing. And the fact is, right now, you're more effective apart than together."

"Is that what you told the Ministry Mares two centuries ago?" Velvet asked sharply. He glanced at her and saw the determined scowl on her face. "I've heard the rumors."

He returned his eyes to the paper. "I was a different pony back then. I made mistakes, had the wrong priorities, trusted myself too much and others too little." This note talked about scavengers in the Core. "The fact is that I didn't know the Ministry Mares beyond reputation. I didn't…respect them…as I should have. I thought their lives were secondary to Luna's reign and Equestria's survival. That they were disposable. I was in... *gross* error." He sighed and closed his eyes. "The fact is, I anticipated prison time for Applejack and Pinkie and executions for Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. An 'accident' for Rarity. Fluttershy would, of course, be pardoned."

"You're disgusting," Velvet said contemptuously.

"Indeed," he replied evenly. "Which is why, this time, I'm trying to do better." His magic scribbled out a note. "This message needs to go to Big Daddy. Scavenging is fine. Encourage it and seize anything useful they find. Refugees seeking shelter are not. Tell him to encourage the scavengers to embellish the stories about the monsters and killer robots that dwell there. After all, the scavengers don't want competition with refugees," he said as he finished scribbling out the note.

"That's doing better? Lying to them?" Velvet Remedy asked, clearly unimpressed.

"Well, I could order them shot," he replied, deadpan, and then added, "You know. After a formal apology." Velvet shook her head and trotted back to the row of green alicorns muttering under her breath.

General Storm Chaser trotted in. "I have good news. That zebra doesn't have a clue how to use his forces."

Goldenblood frowned at the map. "Despite all evidence to the contrary."

The pegasus gave a grim smile. “Actually, yes. He's an outstanding fighter, but he makes a piss-poor general. With the forces he commands, he should be able to annihilate us with ease. Use his flyers to attack our flanks without giving us a chance to respond. Make rear sorties. Target our strong points with pinpoint strikes. Feel out weaknesses and punch holes in our lines. *Then* drop the hammer of a full assault on our disorganized, scattered, leaderless remains. I could beat us in about two hours with all the forces at his command. One if I forced the Raptors to retreat. Instead, he’s encapsulated the entire city and is making a single uniform ground and air advance.” She sighed as she looked at all the red. “If we weren’t outnumbered ten to one, I’d go on the offensive.”

“And that, I assume, is where the good news ends?” Goldenblood asked dryly.

“Unfortunately, yes,” the gray pegasus admitted, sighing and shaking her head. “With his numbers, he doesn’t need tactics. And we’re already seeing their reinforcement patterns matching our expectations: a momentary decline in combat force is followed by immediate resupply. We’re fighting a hurricane: no matter how long we flap, it keeps pushing us back. It’s not warfare so much as crude attrition.” She jabbed a hoof at a red dot, one of three, glowing in the air. The image flickered as her hoof made contact with the projection, and the blue alicorn grumbled. “Sorry,” the general said to the alicorn.

The blue huffed and rolled her eyes. “The Goddess is not pleased with being used as a projector!”

“You’re not the Goddess, Bubblegum. Remember?” Velvet reminded the alicorn kindly. The alicorn’s blue ears folded, and she dropped her eyes.

Storm Chaser gave her a comforting smile. “What you’re doing is appreciated, though.” She gestured to the display once again, careful not to hit the glowing images. “In any case, the lack of tactics is good. He might be performing some kind of complicated feint, but I’m just not seeing it. Since we're screwed if he really is up to something, I'll bank on him being as stupid as he seems. I’ll take a strong but stupid opponent over a weak but intelligent one any day.”

“It is a refreshing bit of good news. Until the bunkers are eliminated, shall we proceed as planned?” Goldenblood asked.

“Dig in, hold on, and fall back in unison,” the general replied.

“We’re going to lose a lot of territory in the meantime.” Then, addressing Velvet Remedy, “But it will minimize casualties.”

“Thank the Goddesses for that,” Velvet murmured. “I hate war.”

“I don’t,” the General said grimly, getting a dirty look from Velvet. “Oh, don’t mistake me. I don’t love it either. I respect war. War is a state of change. If it hadn’t been for your LittlePip setting off our war with the surface, the Enclave would have continued to stagnate. The war, horrible as it was, has forced us to come to terms with a new reality. So I look upon it as a hurricane: it’s terrible to be in, but it clears the skies after its passing.” That seemed to give Velvet a little bit to think about.

“Clear skies aren’t much good to the ponies who didn’t make it out of the storm,” Goldenblood pointed out.

Velvet Remedy chewed her lip. “You’re certain that Blackjack got out on that last rocket?”

“Meatlocker is sending in ghoul teams to extract any survivors before the Brood cut off the ruins. If they find her…well, I guess we’d better pray Cognitum is right,” Goldenblood said. “Otherwise, this will all be for naught.”

“Do you expect to find friendly survivors?” Velvet asked. “That blast… I… ” She shook her head. “When LittlePip talked about it, I didn’t really understand what she went through. And she was in a chamber designed to survive that explosion, and very nearly didn’t.” Velvet gave a little tremble. “She… she lost a leg.” A tiny note of horror was in her voice.

“She was fortunate to be able to regrow it. I don’t know if Blackjack’s blank body would be as resilient.” Goldenblood hung his head. “I can only hope that if there were any friendly forces caught in the explosion they either died quickly or found proper shelter. Now, I need updates from the Burners about the northeast. They’ve been silent for too long, and we need to check to see if they need pegasus reinforcements.”

“Just like old days,” Storm Chaser murmured.

oooOOOooo

I cut the connection, feeling a migraine starting. Okay. That wasn’t exactly as optimistic as I’d hoped they’d be about survivors. I’d rather have heard something like ‘Oh yeah, sure, balefire bombs! Pfft, hardly a risk at all.’ I heard P-21 and Scotch Tape still talking,

the filly sniffling. I pushed the helmet back enough to see him cradling her, holding her in his hooves as he talked too softly for me to hear. A younger me would have listened in. Instead, I entered in another PipBuck tag, and the world went swirling away once more.

oooOOOooo

Okay! This was a little more intense than I anticipated! This body corkscrewed through the air, twisting around as bullets zipped around it. No thundering heartbeat. No gasping for breath. Only the barest hint of straining muscles. There was sensation of movement, but the body's exertion was absent. Still, the power armor and natural strength of the body I was in couldn't be denied. A glance back, past a snapping purple cape, at three cyberwinged zebras flying behind–

Suddenly she... or a very unfortunate stallion... flipped vertical, hooves and wings spread wide, abruptly braking in the air. The Brood directly behind her didn't react in time as the body I occupied arched and flipped backwards. Two armored hooves looped around the zebra's neck. An instant later came a powerful jerk, the zebra's head drawn all the way back to his flanks with a resounding snap. Her body stole momentum from the Brood flyer for a few seconds, then released and banked away sharply to the left as the Brood tumbled to the earth like a broken bird.

The second target had stopped short, firing at her as she spiraled in, the streams of bullets in a deadly dance with her approach. Some bullets found their mark, sparking and thudding into the armor that covered her, punching numb, dull holes in the meat beneath and ripping tatters out of the cape. She closed in on the Brood's side, hooking her hooves around the gun in its battle saddle, gripping it like a lever and slamming her rear legs into its head while it continued to fight. Twisting the second Brood in the air, she turned it like a shield towards the third, who was callously strafing both her and the body of its comrade.

As the cyberzebra's metal wings began to spasm, she pumped her own and drove the second Brood right into the face of the third before it could evade. As it struggled to untangle itself, she flipped over his head and landed on his back. She braced her rear hooves against its guns, hooked her front hooves around the base of his

wildly flapping wings, and stood. With a horrible wet noise and a shriek of metal, she tore the wings right off the third Brood's back. The pair tumbled down to join the first.

A few dozen pegasi clad in Enclave armor hovered aghast nearby. One carried a rather uncomfortable-looking Homage on his back, Spitfire's Thunder a clue to his identity. The cowpony hat glued to the top of his helmet didn't hurt either. "Whoa," came Calamity's voice as he stared on. A green alicorn flying in the back nodded her agreement.

"What? It's basic aerial hoof to hoof combat. No biggie," Mare Do Well replied, then looked at the massive S.P.P. tower to the south of the Core. Like a hive, it buzzed with Brood. "That might be a biggie though." She didn't take her eyes off the swarm. About three quarters of the way up the tower was a ring with a multitude of dishes and antennas pointed out at the wasteland. "You sure this is the one they're using?"

"Mostly," Homage replied, and Mare Do Well glanced back at her tapping on her PipBuck. "It's definitely got the strongest interference. I think it's our best bet to take down the Brood's network."

"Right," Mare Do Well said as she studied the S.P.P. tower. "So how do we get in there?"

"I can pick them off one at a time," Calamity said confidently, then balked. "Well... if I got perfect headshots a hundred times in a row... .and they obliged by hanging back while I worked through 'em... fer a few hours... "

"We can do what you did," a mare with Twister's voice offered. "Lure out stragglers and take them out in small groups. Winnow them down."

"There's only so many stragglers," Dusk said. "Hard to lure those without bringing them all."

"We could always try for a frontal assault," drawled Boomer, drawing helmeted looks that I could only imagine as glares. "What? I finally got more missiles loaded on me than I ever dreamed! I wanna use 'em!"

Mare Do Well studied the swarm defending the tower. "We'll need a diversion. I'll get her inside. Any of you have StealthBucks?"

"I do," a stallion said as he moved to the front of the herd... er... flock? Flerd? I really needed to ask Gl– He wore curious Enclave armor that seemed to bear Neighvarro styling but had some clear

modifications to it. “Never leave home without one, if I can help it.”

“Oh really, Windsheer?” Calamity asked with a bit of an edge in his voice.

“Yes really, little brother. I also never leave home without a beam rifle, a dozen optimally charged cells, my PipBuck, a half dozen healing potions, and my arcane toolkit,” Windsheer countered calmly. “Knowing that I was coming to a potential warzone, I made sure I brought a whole lot more than *that*.” Calamity gave a sharp snort, but Windsheer went on to Mare Do Well. “Also, you’re dealing with the S.P.P. Since I’m one of the few in the skies with some knowledge of those kinds of pre-war information technologies, you'll want to bring me along.”

“I swear, he was adopted,” Calamity grumbled, shaking his head.

“That’s one. Anypony else have some StealthBucks?” Mare Do Well asked as she looked at the other soldiers.

“We do,” a mare said in a synthetic voice as she and two companions drew close. Something about the fluidity of their armor’s movements made me wonder. They hovered as if the metal covering them were skin, and normal power armor didn’t need levitation talismans in the wings.

I wasn’t the only one to notice, either. “You... you’re augmented?” Twister asked. The mare nodded. “I thought all of you died with the tower.”

“We were close enough to the medical ponies that they were able to save us when our strings were snapped, and they took us with them on the last Raptor out before the tower blew,” the lead mare said with a nod of her head. “If your goal is stealth, we will assist.”

Mare Do Well stared at the hovering trio, taking in their integrated beam rifles. The longer I looked, the clearer it was. “You three have a name?”

“We don’t go by our old names,” the mare answered in that synthetic monotone. “I’m Silver. These are Cobalt and Steel.” She gestured to the two behind her with a nod of her head.

“I don’t have a penis, by the way,” said the one on the left, Steel. “Just so you know,” he added in a buzzing synthetic voice.

The other, Cobalt, covered his visor with a hoof.

“Good to know,” Mare Do Well said evenly, then regarded the swarm. “So here’s my plan. The six of us will take Homage and go high around behind the tower. Boomer can hit them with his missiles. Draw their attention. Fall back and pull them away from

where we want to enter. We get in, neutralize any remaining guards, and get Homage where she needs to be to disable the tower. If we're lucky, they won't even know we're in there. If not... "

"Then we'll stand. Just like Security," Silver said with a nod of her head. "At least inside they can't come at us all at once. We'll hold out long as we still have power."

"Anypony else?" Rainbow Dash asked as she surveyed the crowd. Nopony answered.

"Well, looks like this is it," Windsheer remarked. "Do take care of him, Lensflare. I want to see his face at the next family reunion when I retell this." Calamity groaned, getting a chuckle. "Oh, admit it, Calamity. The next time the five of us are together is going to be epic levels of awkwardness."

"You got to live to tell that story then," Calamity muttered.

"I plan on it. Oh, and thank you for not killing Dad. I have to see the look on his face when his perfect son does something so... " He balked a moment, then finished, "selfless."

"Don't be a hero," a stallion near Windsheer warned.

"Of course not. I'm going to be a real Wonderbolt, Lens," Windsheer chuckled. Rainbow Dash stared at him as the armored stallion turned his head away, adding in a lower mutter, "For once."

"Take care of yourself then," he said, and his beam rifles gave a 'vree' noise as they charged.

The pegasi shared looks, then nodded. "See you later, Brother," Calamity said.

And like that, the pegasi moved into action. I'd seen plenty of ponies move in concert before, but there was something about the cohesion of a pegasus flock that was just breathtaking to behold. They transferred Homage before the unicorn could blink, Calamity almost casually tossing her shrieking through the air before Mare Do Well caught her. Then Homage was under the cloak as the four flew higher and higher up in the sky.

Below, the rapidly shrinking pegasi launched in like a horizontal twister, corkscrewing inwards towards the tower. At some unknown signal, the mouth of the twister widened and the foremost let out a strafing barrage of beams while the ponies further back unloaded pairs of missiles and potent sniper shots at the swarm. Like a black blob, the Brood reacted with overwhelming force, firing a storm of lead from the platform ring and the fliers. Yet the pegasi didn't scatter. With astounding grace, the funnel suddenly turned inside

out, with the leading edge spiraling away from the tower while Calamity, Boomer, and a few others continued their heavy fire, ending only when the entire mass retreated around them.

The Brood started to pursue, moving like tentative fingers trying to snatch the fliers out of the air, only to hesitate when stretched too far. When the Brood halted, the pegasus cone reversed once more, with beam-armed fliers tearing into the outer edge of the Brood swarm while Boomer and Calamity resumed firing. The fingers that had been retreating to the tower suddenly reversed, bulged, and surged towards the pegasi. Some brave fliers fell, flaming, to the ground below, but far more of the Brood, out of their element, died first.

Three times the cycle repeated, with more and more of the fliers being drawn away from the tower, leaving only a fraction on the platform ringing the massive structure. Each pass through the cycle, those fingers of Brood stretched thinner and longer. Finally, they tore as almost the entirety of the Brood flew out after the pegasi in an angry buzzing cloud of murderous chaos.

"Now," Rainbow Dash said, and they flew along the underside of the huge mushroom cap that topped the tower. Up close, the uniform dome actually seemed to resemble layers of feathers, each barb longer than a Raptor. I could only imagine how they were built and couldn't imagine how they worked. Maybe they literally, mechanically, waved winds around? Skimming the underside of that cap, the six streaked down the backside of the tower towards the thin ring. Again, with that pegasus teamwork that amazed me, they all activated their StealthBucks within a second of each other, disappearing in midair.

Mare Do Well landed where the platform met the door. Somepony had cut it open, and silent as ghosts, they disappeared inside. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of ammunition crates with zebra glyphs had been stacked up in the hallway inside the door. Well, that'd simplify demolition if it came to that.

Like Shadowbolt Tower, the S.P.P. towers were hollow tubes. Unlike Shadowbolt Tower, the inside of the S.P.P. was so choked with pipes and conduits that it was almost impossible to imagine how anypony could rise or fall inside. There were more Brood inside, unicorns this time. Worse, they stood out from the standard cyberzebras; they had a smoother design and more talismans and seemed more independent of the rest of the swarm. Was the Legate

upgrading them as the old models proved ineffective? As the six pegasi snuck past a room with a half-dozen of them inside, I watched two more of them appear with four more fliers. Then the pair disappeared... .then reappeared with another four... Shit. Teleporting in reinforcements?

"Next left. The broadcasting hardware should be through–" Windsheer started to say when Mare Do Well came to a double door marked MASEBS/SPP SIGINTBRDCNTR. What the heck was that supposed to mean? The door opened, and three things became apparent all at once: first, the room inside had once been a control room of some kind, with a multitude of terminals. Second, it was now holding the corpses of a dozen or so dead zebras, none of which were particularly fresh. Third, it had been wrecked. The terminals and controls were smashed, gutted, or dead. Cables and wires were strewn every which way.

"Oh no. No no no!" Homage said as she wiggled off of Dash's back. "This is bad. This is very bad!" Her horn glowed, illuminating the wreckage more. "I was expecting having a decent access point! Enter in some MASEBS back door codes I know. Maybe hack through an added-on zebra security system at most. This is... " She gaped at the mess.

"Ugly, but manageable," Windsheer finished grimly. "We can work with this. It's just going to take time."

"Time," Rainbow Dash said as she looked out at the hallway. "How much time?"

"More than we probably have," he answered. "But then that's what makes it challenging." Windsheer chuckled as he rubbed his hooves together. "Miss... Homage, isn't it? I'll operate, if you'd care to assist?" Homage gave one last look at the mess and nodded.

Silver, Steel, and Cobalt appeared. "And what do we do?" Silver asked, pointing at the door with a wingtip. "Watch the door?"

"Yeah. Be ready for trouble," Dash replied grimly. The three cyber pegasi moved into position around the door, and she glanced back at the pair starting to work on the communications system. "Why the mess?"

"No idea," Windsheer said almost cheerfully as he pulled out a clipboard, paper, and pencil. He held the lattermost between his pinons as he casually began scratching notes. "If you want me to guess, though, I'm betting that these zebras lacked the M.A.S./ M.o.A. access codes, and so they just went for a hard bypass...

swapping zebra terminal hardware when they ran into a brick wall... which is about as effective as trying to transplant a zebra heart into a pony body. You can do it, if you're not too concerned about dying in a few weeks." He sighed, looking at the mess of wires and the bodies. "Or else they were utterly incompetent and thought randomly wiring things would work. Your guess is as good as mine."

"So you're just going to unplug the zebra parts?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You make it sound so simple." He sighed. "You're assuming... and I am praying to whatever fickle demon of communication technology... that they didn't just chuck the original components off the platform to get them out of the way." He transferred the pencil to his mouth and began writing more things on the board, flying up and noting where things were plugged in, or unplugged, and scratching them down on the board in precise little notation. Homage levitated the mess out of the way, inspecting the maneframes as well.

Rainbow sighed, going back to the door. "All this, and our success comes down to tech support," she muttered. "I hope the others are doing better."

oooOOOooo

I took off the helmet and immediately felt a sensation like a drill boring its way through the back of my skull, through my brain, and into my eye sockets. Off came the Perceptitron, and I curled up, pressing my hooves to the sides of my head to try and squeeze it back together. Unfortunately, tossing the Perceptitron had sent me flipping end over end through the air, and my stomach immediately threatened to come out my mouth. Then, suddenly, two hooves were gripping me and holding me tight. "Ow... ow ow ow... Ow... " I hissed over and over.

"What's wrong?" P-21 asked.

"Nothing. Just used the Perceptitron a little too long is all," I said as I rubbed my temples, the throbbing subsiding bit by bit.

"Did you... " Scotch Tape began to say, then halted. "Glory?"

I pulled the helmet back to me and studied the battered thing. Really, I was lucky it worked at all. "No. The Perceptitron is kind of hit and miss. You turn it on and hope that the person's talking

about something you want to know. Either you get lucky or you don't." I frowned and glanced at P-21. "Did you know that Calamity's brother was here?"

"It's a big valley, Blackjack. Is there a reason he shouldn't be?" he asked with a small frown.

"No. It's just... it seems like it's all gotten way bigger than me now. There's ponies fighting that I don't even know. Some that I barely know. I don't know how to feel about it," I said, and gave the pair a wry smile. "I know. It's not always about me."

"Blackjack, this is bigger than any of us. We're in a rocket going to the moon to stop something from killing everyone in the world," P-21 said gently, putting a leg around Scotch Tape. "When I left 99, I couldn't have imagined any of this. Now, I'm having a chance to be a part of it, and for the better. It's... what he would have wanted me to do."

Scotch Tape then extended her hooves towards me. "Gimme, Blackjack. I want to try it."

I blinked and considered it. "Are you sure? I mean, it gives you a wicked headache." She started to wave her hooves at me, so I levitated it over to her. She pulled it onto her head, plugged it into her PipBuck, and started typing something. "Do you have some tags you want to check up on?"

"Something like that," she said, then fiddled with the buttons some more. "A PipBuck cutie mark would be pretty sweet right about now," she muttered as she fumbled with turning it on. Then she glanced at me and grinned. "Hey, you think that Lightbringer person could do special things with hers? Like figure out how to get secret radio signals and–"

We didn't discover what 'and' could have been, because she started screaming. She thrashed hard against the restraint straps; I pulled her out of them with my magic and levitated her to me. "What's wrong? Scotch! Scotch!" I shouted as I pulled the helmet off the sobbing filly.

"I tried to go into Glory!" she said. "I... I thought... I'd go in and see if she was... but... it was pain, Blackjack! Nothing but pain!" she said, rubbing her eyes. A sensation of horror crept over me.

P-21 pulled himself off his couch, leaving plenty of blue coat on the couch behind him as he drifted to her. "You were inside her mind?"

"No." She shook her head. "I wasn't anywhere. It wasn't like I was

in a body. I was just... nowhere. And everything hurt!" P-21 and I shared a look, and I was sure the horror on my face was clear to him. He gave a firm shake of his head and then hugged her.

"It's probably because her PipBuck was damaged. You weren't in a hurting body. Something must have gone wrong with the Perceptitron and it fed back into you," he said firmly, the voice of authority. "Has anything like that happened to you before, Blackjack?" The stress on the question left only one viable answer for me to give.

"Yeah. Sure. Once or twice," I lied, swallowing. "Real pain when it happens. I'm sorry... I mean I'm sorry you felt that. It's a real doozy," I said shakily as she sniffed, but the terrified expression on her face faded a little. I patted her head. "Thanks for trying, though. I... "

"You would have probably whined and cried about it twice as long," P-21 said casually, and though his tone was playfully dismissive, I saw the seriousness in his eyes. "Now, maybe you have a tag for a PipBuck you know is okay?" It took a second for the translation to arrive.

I immediately transferred a few over to Scotch. "Yeah, sure. Pop in and see how the Zodiacs or Whisper are doing for me."

She pulled the helmet back onto her head. I had to give it to her, she was more resilient than I would have been after that. "Yeah. Sure. Okay," she said, then looked at P-21. "And you two can have your talk." From the worried frown on her face, it was clear that there was more going on than I knew. She tapped her PipBuck and went slack, floating in the air. I nudged us both back to the seat, hooking my legs on it again to stay in place. For a moment, silence reigned... and then Scotch Tape blurted, "Oh man! I have a penis!"

He glanced at me in concern. "What?" I said defensively. "It's true. And don't tell me it's not a thing for stallions. It's one of the first things a mare usually notices when they get into a stallion's body." He sighed, shaking his head, and I patted his shoulder. "Thanks for that, by the way."

"Thanks for going along with it," he answered, rubbing his face. "When she screamed like that... "

"I know. And I... do you... do you... " I fell silent as he gave me a pitying smile. "What a mess," I muttered, gazing out the window at the distant stars.

"I think that goes for life in general. When it's all done, you look

back on it and it's just one big squishy, lopsided mess," he answered, and we were both silent again as Scotch Tape ran in midair, waved her hooves around, and said 'whoa' a lot.

"Do I do that?" I asked in bafflement. He shook his head, and I pondered the sight of the filly flailing. "Huh... "

Clearly, it didn't interest him much. He put his hoof in mine. "I don't know what's happened to Glory. I hope... I hope that when this is all over, you're okay and she's okay. That's it. It's too much to hope for more than that."

"Yeah," I said as the fear crept through my mind again, and I clenched my eyes shut. I was such a coward; the little olive filly was able to do what I couldn't. I should have been the one to try and make contact with Glory. *She's okay*, I told myself. Don't think more than that. She's okay. I inhaled deeply and opened my eyes, and saw the sober expression on his face. "What?"

He stared straight into my eyes, and said evenly, "I want you to take care of Scotch Tape if I die. Make sure she lives."

The two sentences hit me like a pair a hooves upside my head. "Excuse me?" I asked, faintly.

"You heard me," he replied evenly.

"No!" I shouted, pushing off the couch intending to rise to my hooves and instead continuing to rise till I smashed my head into the ceiling and, a second later, my butt against the floor. I hissed as I slowly turned in midair, weightlessness really losing its charm as I glared at him upside down. "No! I am not having this conversation. You are going to live, understand? I don't care what I have to do, you're going to live, and we're going to go back, I'm going to have my babies, and you're going to get the chance to be a father from day one and Scotch gets to be a big sister. That is what is going to happen."

He shook his head slowly. "How is it you can have an almost identical reaction as a filly almost half your age?" he mused, then leaned out and took my hoof, pulling me in towards him. "I didn't say I plan to die. In fact, recently I've really rather warmed up to the idea of living. I want to do all those things. Be a father. Find another stallion. Live with you. Live…at all…" P-21 said as he stared into my eyes. "But what happened to Glory might happen to me. Or you. Or... " His eyes went to Scotch and he gave a little shudder. "Her. I know it's unthinkable, which is why I want to say it now. Not... not have it thrust on us like what happened with

Glory."

"Glory is alive," I insisted, feeling tears creep into the corners of my eyes. "It's going to be like LittlePip, but better. We're going to have sunshine and rainbows when this is all done."

"I hope so," he said as he pressed my hoof between his. "But I want to know…I want to make sure you know that…no matter what happens to me, Scotch lives. Get her home. She's a good girl, and I'm proud of her. Promise me."

"No," I said flatly, trying to jerk my hoof free…and sending me straight into his embrace. Damn cheating anti-gravity. "I won't. You're both going to live, no matter what. And when this is through, I'm going to teach you both the fine art of cheating death." I gazed into his eyes, feeling tears return and seeing them reflected in his. "You…are…all of you are…not…you're not…" He pulled me in close, holding me gently, stroking my mane as I wept against his neck. "Promise me you won't die…please…"

"I promise," he replied, and I heard the smile in his voice. "Now. What do you want me to do if you die?"

I pulled away, running a hoof through my mane. What to do if I die…like, dead dead. For good…"Celestia…you'll have to stop Horizons. The pair of you…she's knows the hardware and you have the bombs. Disable it however you can, get back to the rocket, and get home. Bury the Eater as deep as you can…the Legate with it if you can find a way. Get our babies from Cognitum…Wipe her from my old body and drag it back home and just…don't go back to the Med-X. No matter how bad you hurt, push through. See if Calamity's brother is into threeways or…or something. But be happy." I met his eyes again. "I just want everypony to survive and be happy. As long as that happens…then okay."

I glanced over at Scotch Tape as she peeked at us and abruptly tapped her PipBuck again. "Oh yeah. These Zodiacs... wow... They're pushing their way into the bunker. This Gemini girl could give Rampage a run for her crazy, but I think she's casting two spells at once. And watch this Sagittarius go... yeah... "

"Scotch, I know you're not watching somepony else. There'd be a lot more 'whoa' and a lot less commentary," I said dryly.

She sighed. "Yeah. It got boring. They're pushing into the bunker over by Happyhorn. I don't really know the Zodiac ponies. I mean, they're good fighters, but they aren't you." She tapped her PipBuck a few times. "Let me spy on Charity. When we get back, I'm going

to drive her nuts with little hints and stuff." She went limp for several seconds, then frowned. "Seriously? She's balancing books?" She stuck her tongue out and blew a little raspberry. "I was hoping for something good."

"Try Whisper and Stygius," I suggested.

"Sure. I've never flown before," she said as she plugged them in, and her whole body went rigid. "Whoa! Whoa. Wooooooooaaahhhh!" she started shouting, waving her hooves in the air. "Oh yeah!" she squealed in glee.

That was more like it. I gave P-21 a smile and shrug. "Yeah. She can amuse herself with that." I took a deep breath, glanced at him, and felt a strange awkward silence begin to surround us. For a minute, my eyes wandered about the ship, then back to the floating Scotch Tape, then returned to him. "So…" I started, trying to think of something to say...

"So," he replied.

I was stuck in a metal box for several hours with a stallion I loved while a mare I loved might be dead and a filly was flying and oblivious to what we might do in the next few hours while I faced the possibility of not just the death of my two remaining friends but also everyone else in the world, but had nothing to do and no preparations to make while we travelled through space and what about Glory and how was I was thinking about this now of all times and what kind of a horrible pony was I to think of this and and and...

And P-21 made it all go away in a way that only he could, and for once, I was glad I was so easy to placate.

* * *

"I think there's something wrong with me," I muttered as we floated a few inches above the couch, taped together to keep us from drifting into Scotch or the controls.

"I think that Glory said sex is your psychological and emotional reset button," P-21 replied, giving a little shrug. "I think that you stable and happy is better than you unhappy."

I felt his heartbeat against my chest. "You didn't enjoy it," I commented. I couldn't help but feel a little dirty. Like I was using him.

"It was good," he said, and I peeked up warily to see him smile.

“The act is good. Climaxing is good. Knowing you’re better is good for me. It’s not all I want, though, no. I was thinking of Life Bloom half the time, to be honest,” he admitted with a small, casual shrug. He flushed a little. “There’s something about unicorns… ” He sighed and shook his head, returning his eyes to me.

“Did you two… ” I started to ask, watching his blush spread.

“Wanted to. Talked a little about it during the party. I’m not a good flirt. He’s not casual, though. It’d have had to be an exclusive relationship, and… well… ” He gave a helpless little shrug. “He’d be nice, but the way things are… ”

I sighed and nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. “Wow. I thought I was the only one with messed up relationships from 99.”

“It’s not always you, Blackjack,” he said with soft chuckle… one not quite as sincere as I’d like, but I'd take what I could get.

“Well, if you ever do find a boy to play with I will totally back you up,” I said with complete sincerity. “I owe you, after all, for helping me like this.”

He nuzzled my neck and sighed. “That’d be nice. Sex with a stallion just… is better. It feels right to me. It’s not the sex… that’s not that different. It’s the smell and the feel and the touch and… just… everything attached to the sex. And it’s nice to be on bottom with a good stallion taking care of you.”

“Sorry I can’t take care of that for you,” I said with a little flush. “Twilight doesn’t have that in her book of magic spells, or I would.”

That made him laugh, and I was glad to hear it. He had such a wonderful, low laugh. “I know you would, but I can do it with you well enough. If it was any mare but you, it wouldn’t be okay… and it wouldn’t happen. But it helps you, and since it does, I don’t mind doing it.”

Scotch Tape sighed and pulled off the helmet, wincing. “Wooo… my head is… ” she froze, looking down at the pair of us taped up. “Really?” she asked flatly.

“Hey, you had the Perceptitron!” I protested. “What did you expect me to do?”

“Read a book? Take a nap? Knit a sweater?” Scotch Tape suggested, and huffed. “Knowing you two, you’re going to gum up our air filters. Ugh.” Then rubbed her nose. “Now I’m gonna have to smell it till we get to the moon. Ugh. I should have brought along someone for fun play too. Instead I’m stuck with my dad and… Blackjack… ” She paused as she peered at me speculatively, then

shook her head hard. “Nope. Can’t. Feels like thinking about having sex with my mom or something.” I didn’t know if I should have been flattered, insulted, or relieved.

“Sorry,” I apologized with a sheepish smile. “Just…”

Scotch Tape gave a casual shrug. “Don’t worry about it, Blackjack. I get it. And if you still had your metal body, I wouldn’t want to. But you’re…” she gestured to me with one hoof, gestured to him with the other, and gave an ‘ngh’ of frustration. “This... thing. This family thing.” She cried out in frustration, “Why does my brain have to keep thinking of you as ‘Mom’ rather than ‘super sexy mare to bang’? I want my turn too! It’s not fair!”

I didn’t think I could laugh like that anymore. It took several minutes for me to compose myself and Scotch to quit her pouting and join us. Scotch was young, but ten or less years’ difference wouldn’t raise any eyebrows back in 99. “You really think of me as your mom?” I asked when we pulled ourselves together.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah. I didn’t want to have sex with her either, and she was one of the few mares that made me feel that way. Well, Rivets, but more ‘cause she was a million years old and her hoo-hah probably tasted like licking the mouth of a rusty gray water pipe.”

“More like a bag of stale grass chips,” P-21 interjected casually.

Scotch Tape and I both froze, staring at him, and I couldn’t help but shudder. Scotch scrunched up her face. “Daddy! Ew! I did not need to…” She clutched her head. “Ah! Stupid brain! Stop thinking about Rivets’s hoochie!”

“What? It did. With a slight tang of…” P-21 said as if he were recalling a old vintage of wine he didn’t particularly care too much for.

“Daddy! Noooo! There is no tang! No tang! Ah, stop thinking, dumb brain!” Scotch wailed. She covered her ears with her hooves, chanting loudly, “La la la, not thinking about Rivets’s tangy hoochie... ” She paused and cried out, “It’s not working!”

“Ha! It takes years of practice to master the art of not thinking about it, Scotch Tape,” I said with an amused smile. Then P-21 looked at me, his eyes narrowed. “What?” I asked him, arching a brow. His lips curled in a small smile, and I felt a little nervous sweat run down the back of my neck. “What?” I repeated nervously, flushing.

“Your mom tasted like…apples,” he said with such certainty that I

knew, from that point on, I would never be able to eat Sugar Apple Bombs without thinking about the part of my mom I wanted to think about least.

"Oh…" I closed my eyes. "I…didn't want to know that. Why did I have to know that?"

"You're evil, Daddy," Scotch Tape said with a pout.

He gave a great smile of satisfaction and crossed his forelegs before him. Meanwhile, to get my mind off the flavoring of parts of Mom's anatomy, I turned to Scotch and asked, "How are Whisper and Stygius doing?" Anything to not think about…stop thinking about it! Damn it…I liked that cereal!

"The batponies are fighting like everypony else," she blurted with a grateful smile. "They're evacuating a lot of ponies into that stable under the Citadel before the castle is overrun. I totally want wings, though. Flying like that... " she shivered and shook her head. "Anyway, they're going to be falling back soon. The zebras are bringing up a tank, and millennia-old walls just aren't built to stand up to that kind of punishment, even with enchantments and fliers." She pulled off the helmet and looked at it. "She really does love him, though, doesn't she? I mean, she's a bitch at times, but she really loves him."

"I think so. I can't really explain why. Maybe it's a good stallion, bad mare thing," I suggested, though I doubted it. Whisper wanted to be loved. She wanted something good in her life. Stability. Family. She might be a Reaper, but she wanted a better life. I could respect that. I carefully disengaged both of us from the strips of tape. "They're both okay though?"

"Yeah. If they weren't outnumbered, I'd think they'd be okay. Those batponies can fly, but being a pegasus…so *fast*... " She shivered again. "Yeah. Totally need to get cyberpony wings... maybe not wired into me, but mounted on a backpack or something." She rubbed her chin, then held the helmet to her father. "You want to try it, Daddy?"

He shook his head, raising a hoof. "No thanks. Spying on another pony like that... no. Thank you." As he shifted, I saw something amiss on his rump. The hide bearing his male symbol and dots was now mottled and peeling off in large flakes. Beneath, I saw something red and silver. "P-21... " I breathed. "Look... "

He turned his head and stared at his flank, then his eyes shot wide. He reached down and scratched at the surface, little flakes of blue

coming off. “It must have been the liquid oxygen,” he murmured. “How… ”

“Medical must have covered your real cutie mark with a decal. Couldn’t have stallions with talents other than breeding equipment,” I said as I reached up to scrape it again. He stopped my hoof, and I glanced at him. He wore a pensive, and slightly afraid, expression as he stared at the tiny bits of red and silver peeking through the cracks. “What… don’t you want to see it?”

“Yeah, Daddy. How could you not want to know?” Scotch Tape asked, then frowned. “I really don’t think it’ll be a toilet or penis cutie mark. I mean, it probably won’t be. I can understand how you’d be nervous, though.”

He pulled his eyes from it and looked at the both of us, then gave a little smile and shrug. “I don’t need to know. I am who I am. It doesn’t matter if it’s something good or something bad. It makes no difference to me. So don’t worry about it,” he told both of us.

“But–” we began in unison.

“Don’t worry about it,” he repeated, calm and low and sure. We both deflated.

“Ugh… ” I muttered, slumping a little as I took the helmet from Scotch Tape. “I guess I should peek in on other ponies. See how things are going,” I said as I jammed it on my head.

“Why don’t you spy on Cognitum?” Scotch Tape asked.

“Because right now she’s probably doing the same thing we are: sitting on her ass waiting to arrive. I can’t just hang out in her head for hours waiting for her to say something interesting. Besides, I’m curious how the fight is going for those bunkers. How Stable 99 is doing. Chapel. You know… stuff!” I entered in a PipBuck tag, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Fluttershy Medical Center had shifted from hospital to warzone and back several times while I’d known it. In the latest cycle, for a while it had been a hospital and shelter to those wounded by the Brood attack. Now it was reverting back to a fortress, keeping the Brood at bay as they pressed in on three sides. Within, purple flashes blinked in and out as alicorns worked tirelessly to bring reinforcements to the center and teleport the wounded away to the Collegiate. A tank out on the periphery had ignited the upper floors, but the fire had

yet to make its way down. The stout tower resisted collapse, and it would take some time yet for the defenders to be overcome.

Candlewick lowered his binoculars, and the besieged building transformed into just a blazing candle in the distance. The hilltop the Reapers occupied was behind enemy lines. Below, the very slopes that I'd once seen Big Macintosh and the Marauders fighting so valiantly to defend were once again swarming with hostile striped forms. They'd excavated the face where a rusted tank had once flipped free, and now two streams poured into and out of the earth through the hole where it had been interred. On one side of the hole, a line of soldiers raced to the surface and out to the battlefield in three different directions; on the other side, tributaries fed a river of haggard Remnant zebras hauling in slain Brood.

"Miserable bastards," Candlewick muttered.

"Takes one to know one, don't it, Bro?" Toaster chuckled as he put a hoof around Candlewick's neck and pulled him into a chokehold. "Well, you're a bastard. My daddy actually married Mom. Think he actually liked her... before I cooked his ass, anyway. He burned real pretty."

"You're fucked up, Toast," Candlewick said as he forced his head free of the grip, scowling at the older pony covered in faintly smoking cooking appliances.

Toaster grinned broadly at the younger stallion. "Yeah... fucking hot, ain't it?"

Toaster, though, was eying the rest of the group. Big Daddy and Brutus spoke with Storm Front while a scruffy-looking unicorn stallion in heavy plate armor adorned with spikes swigged from a flask nearby. Dazzle and a green alicorn listened in to one side. The scarred buck lowered his head. "Remember, Bro. You and me get out alive. That's it. Once we take out these cyberstripes, you burn them. Burn them good. We'll be the last ones standing on the heap of ashes."

"That's Big Daddy you're talking about, Toaster!" Candlewick hissed.

"Shhh!" Toaster retorted, grabbing him in another headlock, this one much more crushing. "Keep your voice down. I'm tough enough to go a few rounds with him. Brutus too. That's why they wanted me along, after all. All that muscle and skill doesn't mean shit when you're on fire. Burners know that. And Burners stick together. We do this, and I'll make sure you have a dozen unicorn mares to fuck,

if you want. But we got to do this right."

"Fuck. Security--" he began, but the headlock tightened so Candlewick could barely breathe.

"Security's either going to kill that zebra, or that zebra's gonna kill her. Either way, we burn whoever is left. Glass 'em if we have to. You got a canister of the good mix, right?" He relaxed the grip enough to gesture to the flamer tanks pressing down on Candlewick's back. Candlewick struggled to nod. "Good. That shit'll maintain three kK. No zebra or unicorn'll be a problem wearing a jacket of glass. Save it for the end."

"But when she gets back–" Candlewick gasped.

"Then she'll have to deal with us. We'll be in charge, not the Reapers. If she doesn't like it, we can glass her too." Toaster chuckled. "Everything burns."

"I don't know," Candlewick muttered, glancing over at where Dazzle was checking her beam rifle.

Toaster followed his gaze, and then his eyes snapped back at Candlewick, the two yellow orbs blazing. "'Cause of her? A fuck Filly? I mean, come on, a fuck's fine, but we're talking about FIRE! Burning your enemies! Past allies! General areas! Turn up the HEAT! Rain down the napalm and boil the earth! Yeah! Woo!" Candlewick gritted his teeth, and Toaster stopped. "Bro? Fire?"

"Not everything is about fire, you ass–" Candlewick started to say. Toaster grabbed Candlewick's coat and reared back, hauling Candlewick off his hooves and glaring into his eyes.

"*Everything* is about fire, you pussy." Then he tossed him away. Candlewick lay on his back, Toaster glaring down at him. He regarded the smaller stallion with a speculating squint, then lowered his voice and continued relentlessly, "You know why she looks at you? Pity. Fucking pity. She doesn't like you. She doesn't respect you. I'm your brother. The Burners are your family. We don't pity each other. We burn the world like it burned us and leave nothing but a scar behind us. Let those Fillies and Halfheart pussies moan about emotional pain. We live in pain. We deal with it together, and we got a chance to move up and take the Reapers down. It'll be the Burners who are the biggest baddest bastards in the Wasteland. But only if you keep your head on straight, Candle."

"You two coming?" Storm Front shouted at the pair, waving a wing at them.

"Yeah, yeah. Keep your feathers on," Toaster said, releasing

Candlewick and muttering under his breath, “That fucker’s gonna be extra crispy.” The scarred stallion returned his gaze to Candlewick, stern and unflinching. Then he grinned and patted him on the head, turned, and trotted towards the others. Dazzle looked over at Candlewick with a warm smile, and the stallion tugged his firepony’s cap. When the pair joined the group, he nodded to the scruffy rust-red stallion in heavy full plate armor who had to be the second buffest unicorn in the Wasteland. “Heya, Hammer. How’s it hanging?”

“Over yer head,” the unicorn replied in a thick, odd accent, levitating the massive mallet towards Toaster. The unicorn’s powerful build carried the weight of the reinforced metal armor casually. “Still using my armor, I see,” he said as he eyed the scarred earth pony.

“I always wear the best, Hammersmith, my man. Always the best.”

“You planning on paying me for it anytime this year?” the unicorn said sourly. Toaster laughed, but it wasn’t shared by anypony else. He turned his gaze to Big Daddy and gestured to the bunker below. “The others?”

“We need some of the top ten to watch the Stadium,” Big Daddy replied. “The rest will be on the lines wherever that scarred son of a bitch needs them. I might not trust Storm Chaser as far as I can punt her, but Goldenblood doesn’t have a stake in this beyond winning.” He shrugged. “He’s not going to sacrifice surfacers for fliers. I can respect that.”

“So Fluttershy won’t be coming?” Dazzle asked with a little frown.

“Psycho’s retired. She’s got her batpony now, and they’re fighting for their castle,” Big Daddy said, shaking his head. “All I know is, if they get married, that gray squeaker better be able to survive a fight at the nuptials. I won’t give her away to some jackass who can’t go three rounds with Daddy.”

“So, we doing this or what?” Toaster scoffed.

Big Daddy stared at the pair for several long seconds, his sunglasses betraying nothing of the eyes behind them. “Alright then. We got no map of the inside. No clue their numbers and forces. So we’re going to rip a hole right through ‘em and keep ripping till nothing’s left. Toaster’s our center. Hammersmith, you’ll back him up. I’ll be on the right, Brutus on the left.”

“Aww, what’s wrong? Getting too old to lead the charge, Big Daddy?” Toaster said with a chuckle and a barely concealed sneer.

“What’s wrong is this is bigger than our usual pissing match, Toast. I need you. Every miserable bastard here needs us to pull this off. So you’re our center… unless you’re not up to it,” Big Daddy countered.

“Heh, naw. I’m good, BD. Real good. I want to get these cyberstripe fuckers ashed the same as you,” Toaster said with a nod. He glanced at Candlewick. “Right, Bro?” Candlewick turned his eyes away.

Big Daddy shook his head and looked at Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front. “You three will back us up. We'll need you to clobber anything that we can't reach. Candle, I’m counting on you to light up whatever groups you can.” The directness of the old earth pony made the scarred stallion swallow and nod. Big Daddy nodded back.

He turned to the rest. “The Reapers have always been the biggest, baddest motherfuckers in the Hoof. If some of us fall, it’s only so the stronger can rise to be the greatest of the greats and the strongest of the strong. Gorgon, Deus, Grim, Blitz… they might be gone, but I just know that Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front will shine all the brighter.” He gestured down the hill with a hoof. “Reapers!” he bellowed. “What do we do?”

“We reap the weak!” the others, save Toaster, bellowed in unison. Then the seven ponies charged down the hillside towards the bunker’s entrance.

As Toaster led the charge, the toasters that adorned his armor began to glow brighter and brighter. Midgallop, they began to blast jets of flame in all directions away from his body, turning him into a fireball on thundering hooves. The zebras hauling dead Brood dropped their corpses and tried to run, but one pair was too slow to avoid being crushed beneath Toaster’s blazing hooves. The Brood whirled at the flaring sight and aimed all their guns at the charging stallion. “Burn, motherfuckers! Burn!” he screamed, and then he laughed maniacally as he slammed into the Brood lines. The scarred stallion wrapped his blazing hooves around the one he’d hit, and the cyborg gave the closest thing to a scream I’d ever heard from them. Toaster tossed the flaming corpse, ammo starting to cook off and spray flaming shrapnel, at another group and laughed again as he looked around for his next victim. The crowd hadn’t had time to start firing yet.

Some of the Brood backed away, beginning to fire sporadically at the devastating charge, but others darted inwards with familiar zebra commando swiftness. “Oh no ye don’t, laddie!” Hammersmith

roared, grabbing one thrashing cyberzebra in his hooves and throwing it to the ground in front of him. “Fore!” he yelled, and the immense hammer swung around, the talisman in the sledge discharging on impact and sending the Brood’s head flying off down the hillside. “That’ll teach ye ta come ta our home, ya slarmy slags!”

The Brood started to pour heavier fire at the pair, but Big Daddy and Brutus were there. The old earth pony employed his own zebraesque fighting technique against the Brood, striking like a missile with hoofblows that shattered whatever bone they landed on while at the same time twisting out of the way of Brood bullets like a sapling in a high wind. Brutus simply ignored the injuries he was sustaining. I didn't know him or his fighting style beyond the fact he was enormous, but though bullets tore into his hide, he simply grunted and broke the nearest Brood with his hooves. With calm, stoic devastation, he advanced to the next Brood in range, reared up, and brought down his hooves with a bloody slam. And again, and again, variations on the theme. I was reminded of Big Macintosh in battle, standing against the tide as if incapable of giving way.

Behind them came the crack of Storm Front’s rifle. Maybe sniping was an Enclave specialty, because with each shot of the steel blue pegasus’s hunting rifle, heads jerked and Brood went down. Not permanently, maybe, but the time it took for their regeneration talismans to restore their bodies was time that could be used to put them down in a more permanent fashion. Dazzle’s beam rifle fired three beams per shot, the crimson lines blazing into the Brood and dusting one here and there. Candlewick clenched his teeth on the grip of his flamer and gave a twist, and from the muzzle emerged a wet sucking noise, a ‘Fwooosh’, and then a stream of flame arcing into a cluster of Brood. The blazing fluid splattered everywhere, spreading the inferno and transforming the enemy into fiery silhouettes.

In less than a minute, the Brood at the base of the bunker had been annihilated. “Keep pushing! Inside!” Big Daddy roared.

“Hah! That's what she sai–” Toaster was retorting when from the ceiling of the tunnel dropped a black door, slamming into the ground and nearly taking Toaster’s head off. “Fuck,” the stallion muttered, and then reared up, bellowing, “No motherfucking door is going to stop the Toastpocalyse!” He rammed his blazing hooves into the metal. The impact scored smoking lines on the surface, but

the door remained otherwise undamaged.

"I can get it," Dazzle shouted, rushing to a terminal recessed beside the door. She banged the side of it several times and then started to type with her horn. "I'm going to need a minute."

"Take your time, bitch," Toaster said as he wheeled about at the Brood reinforcements. The dozen or so they'd killed at the doorway were nothing to the horde that spilled in from every side. The toasters mounted on his armor flared as he charged into the closest bunch of attackers, but this time he lacked his earlier devastating momentum. Two Brood seized him on either side, heedless of the burning, crackling flesh of their bodies as three more poured rounds into him. The bullets found gaps in his armor, and blood began to flow and smoke between the flaring cooking appliances from hell.

Brutus, as implacable as before, rammed into his own attackers, but now the cyberzebras piled up against him in a growing mound. Like a toppling mountain, the black stallion collapsed backwards with the Brood piled atop him. They'd added something new to their arsenal, too: silver knives were drawn from scabbards and plunged downward, rising bathed in crimson.

"Git! Offa! Me! Ya! Bloody! Gits!" Hammersmith roared, the whirling sledge impacting with each word as he shoved and kicked the Brood trying to swarm him. The stout unicorn barely kept them at bay, knocking knives and hooves away. He could do nothing about the bullets biting into him, and even his thick metal armor began to buckle under their onslaught.

Storm Front's rifle barked as sharply as an automatic, the armor piercing rounds ripping not into Brood but at their non-regenerating firearms. A calm smile lingered in the corner of his mouth, a half heart charm dangling from his forehoof. That smile didn't waver as he was hit once, then twice, by enemy return fire.

Candlewick swung his flamer around in a fountain of fire, arching over the heads of his fellow Reapers. The Brood charged the stallion, and Candlewick made them melt like shadows in midday under the relentless blazing plume.

Then there was a flash, and in the corner of his eye appeared a unicorn Brood. Silver flashed, and a lance of searing pain pierced the dragonhide he wore and plunged straight into his chest. The unicorn twisted the blade and withdrew it, blood pouring out his side and rushing up his throat as the glittering, impossibly sharp blade flashed for his spine in the grip of the unicorn's magic.

Then Big Daddy was there. The bony old earth pony moved so swiftly, so surely, so beautifully that Candlewick could barely follow him. He knocked the blade away with a flying kick, and when he landed, his rear leg swung out in a great wheeling kick that snapped her horn clean off. As that leg passed, his other hindleg hooked her neck, which was then pinched between his limbs. Big Daddy's entire body corkscrewed, and the mare's neck gave a mighty crack. As she went limp, he rolled forward and launched her still-twitching corpse at the knot piling on Brutus.

"Drink a potion, son," Big Daddy rasped before almost casually continuing his fight. Like a tornado, he ripped into the Brood with a storm of kicks, blows, bites, and strikes that they could neither recover from nor react to swiftly enough. Candlewick withdrew a potion and hurried to choke it down before he drowned in his own blood, and he still spent several seconds afterward coughing and retching up crimson. Big Daddy bit down on one captured knife and held two others in his fetlocks, whirling and slicing with graceful abandon. In a space of five seconds, five attackers pressing Hammersmith fell in greasy arterial sprays. Then the blades flung from his hooves found the eye sockets of Brood shooting at Storm Front. He tore into Brutus's assailants as they started to recover from the corpse flung upon them; any neck that met his hooves was snapped, and any rib soon impaled a lung or heart. In Big Daddy's hooves was death.

It was almost reluctantly that he came to the aid of Toaster, finishing off the shooters and giving the blazing stallion a chance to rip free of the immolating Brood. Healing potions were drunk, but it was clear that the Reapers were going to have a much harder time than their initial charge suggested. "Time, Dazzle!" he snapped.

"Half a minute. I almost got it. Down to these five!" Dazzle shouted, not breaking her stare off the terminal.

"We don't have half a minute," Brutus said gravely.

"What? More stripe fuckers?" Toasted called happily. "Bring them on! I'll incinerate all the–" and he fell silent as the roaring of an engine and the clatter of caterpillar tracks at speed became audible. A moment later, a massive tank, double-barreled turret already starting to take aim, roared over a berm and into view. Spotlights immediately locked on the bunker door and the ponies gathered there. "Fuck," Toaster muttered.

"We cannae fight that," Hammersmith agreed.

“Brutus,” Big Daddy said, not taking his eyes off the war machine as he shrugged off his saddlebags and extracted a single black bottle carved with zebra glyphs.

“Yes?”

“Finish it, son,” Big Daddy said tersely, tossing the bags to Brutus and then taking a long drink from the glyph-marked flask. He grimaced, clutching his chest. “Damn zebra potions. Always taste like ass.” The flask fell to the ground, dripping something luminous.

“Yes, sir,” the huge black stallion answered. “They do, and I will.”

“Good boy.” With that, Big Daddy charged. He made no effort to hide or screen his motion, and it was as if every gun was drawn to the grayish-white pony. The tank opened up with its machine guns, and Big Daddy leapt over the stream of bullets as it raked towards him, then dove under as it raked back. As he moved, he seemed to glow in the storm of fire and metal, and neither seemed quite able to touch him. The cannons roared, and he vanished in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Candlewick strained to see as the dust fell to the ground. Then from the sky descended the pony. The bony old stallion was now all aglow, as if his body were suffused with light. He hung in the air, rear hoof outstretched. Then he impacted the tank with all the force of an artillery shell. He disappeared in a flash, the turret crumpling and the cannon barrels twisting skyward as the war machine let out agonized metallic shriek like a mortally wounded beast. A moment later, it exploded in a detonation that knocked all the Brood around it flat, a brilliant green mushroom cloud rising from the wreck and showering them with radioactive debris.

For one second, in the midst of that wreckage, a glowing pony stood. He didn’t appear old and feeble, but strong, confident, and... tired. His eyes reached across the battlefield and met those of the Reapers, and he smiled ever so slightly in approval. The glow became more and more luminous, consuming him completely. Then he bowed his head and disintegrated in a cloud of tiny sparks that faded from view, swept east on an intangible wind.

“I got it,” Dazzle croaked, the blast door rising.

Brutus turned and stormed through like an avalanche, crushing the Brood on the far side and slamming them against the walls as he cried out in rage, in anguish. Hammersmith gathered up some scattered silver knives with his magic, then followed without a word. The sledge crushed any Brood that remained moving after

Brutus. “Lucky,” Storm Front muttered, turning away and following the pair in. Dazzle hesitated for a second, staring at Candlewick in concern. Then she also followed them inside.

“Could this get any better, Bro?” Toaster asked with a chuckle, trotting past him into the dark doorway and towards the sound of additional battle.

Candlewick’s eyes lingered at the wreckage of the tank, and then he walked to where Big Daddy had dropped his flask, picked it up, and examined it. Something like liquid sunlight glimmered at the bottom. Carefully, he replaced the stopper in the bottle and slipped it into his dragonhide cloak. He gave one final look at the place Big Daddy had stood, as if expecting to see the old stallion telling him to get his ass in gear, then disappeared into the bunker.

oooOOOooo

I couldn’t speak as I broke the connection. Big Daddy... no, it couldn’t be. I’d thought... I’d hoped... I’d thought that the old stallion could have survived anything. “Goodbye, Big Daddy,” I finally said quietly. “I wish I could have been a better Reaper.” Then I imagined him throwing me through the air for the weakness of that thought. He’d want me to be strong. A Reaper had to be strong.

I ignored the throbbing in my head, picked another PipBuck tag, any tag, and let the world disappear once more.

oooOOOooo

There was no way I could mistake the sight of the rocky tunnel leading into 99. I hadn’t travelled it all that much, true, but the two times I had had left quite an impression on me. The bones were gone, though, and somepony had put down metal plates to form a flatter floor. Also new were the heavy canvas curtains that concealed the stable door. A pile of a half dozen cyber unicorns lay in a heap to the side. It was rather chilling to see the blood leaking from their bodies transform into rainbow sludge as it crept from the corpses. Was that what happened to blanks after they died? They just... liquefied?

I was in a mare in Steel Ranger power armor, and I could see the appeal. The movement was... odd, but the feeling of being removed

and protected from the world around me was comforting. The motion wasn't quite as smooth as an augmented pony, but I could feel where this mare's hooves ended and the armor began. That heartbeat was a real comfort as well.

Suddenly there were a pair of flashes as two more Brood unicorns teleported in. The mare in the power armor turned towards the closest attacker, which closed with a silvery blade plunging down from above as the unicorn charged in from beneath with an IF-33 Applebuck 12.7mm pistol. The other unicorn charged for the sheet blocking the passage.

The pistol's bullets struck with the sharp ping of armor piercing rounds, but that silver blade was far more worrisome. The mare threw herself away from the descending edge, and it sliced smoothly into the metal floor plate with little difficulty. She stomped a rear hoof down on the guard as the unicorn started to withdraw it, ignoring the bullets, even those which punched through her armor and bit into the hide beneath. With the blade temporarily eliminated as a threat, the Steel Ranger twisted, tracking the second unicorn still firing as it moved towards the sheet. The automatic shotguns at the Ranger's sides unleashed a storm of flechette rounds, and in less than a second, the Brood dropped as a heap of bleeding meat.

However, the first wasn't finished. Its horn glowed, and from the body of the second came a flash of silver as a blade was flung right at the power armored mare. She tried to jump aside, but the reaction from the armor was too slow, and the blade guided by unicorn magic corrected for what little dodging she did manage. At the last moment, she raised her forehoof, taking the blade smoothly through her foreleg and stopping it from tearing straight into her chest. The Ranger thus distracted, the unicorn left her blade and teleported to where the second had fallen and raised a hoof to push the canvas aside.

The sheet exploded towards her face with a crushing impact that smashed the unicorn's snout into her brain, and she went flying back. The curtain parted, and through the gap strode Star Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof. His helmet off, no pony could sparkle so beautifully. His lone spectacular curl of mane was all a stallion like him needed. "Looks like the Stronghoof sense of timing is still spot on, eh Crumpets?"

"Indubitably, sir," Crumpets said with an edge of sarcasm, hissing

through her teeth in pain as she kept the slammed unicorn from withdrawing the blade. “Though, personally, I think it might have been a teensy bit better if you had emerged a few bloody seconds earlier.”

The Brood unicorn rose to her hooves, and two more flashed to flank her. A pair of silvery starmetal blades rose along with pistols aimed at his head. The trio wasted no time, opening fire and advancing as one. “Hrumph, hardly a challenge!” Stronghoof said as he stomped the ground and a metal plate flew up into the air to catch the bullets and starmetal blades. With lightning reflexes, the powerful unicorn slammed the plate with his forehooves just as it started to fall, sending it instead flying down the tunnel and into the faces of the trio. “You are facing the Stronghoof implacable hoof technique, one that has been passed down for–”

The trio flashed behind him, two firing rounds into his rear as the third made for the curtain. Stronghoof’s nostrils flared. “Oh, so you are that kind of fiend, eh? Well then, look upon–”

This time he was interrupted by Crumpets ripping apart the third with flechettes before it could reach the curtain. “Will you stop bragging and finish them before they get inside? If they take a peek inside the stable, then they’ll be teleporting in all day long!” She twisted to strafe the remaining pair, but they flashed back down the tunnel, drawing their silver knives from where they’d fallen with the floor plate.

“Hrumph.” He blew out his mustache as they charged once again. “I suppose the style is wasted on these mindless monsters.” As one glittering blade drove straight for his chest, he slammed a hoof down; his horn glowed, and a thick pillar of stone erupted from the exposed tunnel floor to intercept the blade. A powerful blow from his forehoof sent the top of the stone column rocketing towards the unicorn, who managed to blink aside a moment before impact and pull the blade from the flying boulder as it sailed through the air where she’d just been. Then she resumed charging towards him as if nothing had happened. “Oh, nicely done!”

Crumpets staggered to her hooves, unable to put her weight on the left foreleg without fiery pain lancing up it. “Please don’t compliment the enemy, sir,” she groaned. She tried to unload another barrage at the last unicorn, who was making another dive for the curtain. She disappeared behind it, and Crumpets unloaded her magazines, shredding the fabric and sending the canvas

tumbling down upon her. Behind it lay the open stable door with only a thin bedsheet concealing the interior.

Of course, I couldn't teleport somewhere I'd never been before. The Brood were trying to get inside my stable, and... crap, they were trying to get inside! I'd saved the ponies of Stable 96 and given them my old home, and the Brood were trying to violate it. But of course they were. I'd escaped! Returning to find 99 rendered into a tomb once more... No! I wanted to teleport there myself!

The remaining unicorn closed with Stronghoof, silver blade swinging at him as the pistol in her mouth fired again and again. Stronghoof gave ground, protecting his uncovered head from bullets with his armored forelegs and barely dodging the swings of that silver edge. Then the blade sliced neatly through the lock atop his head. His eyes popped wide as he watched the length of perfect golden curly mane tumble through the air. Then they flattened in cold rage. "You dare defile the golden lock of my ancestors, a masterpiece of equine maneosity?!" he bellowed as he rose on his hindlegs and flexed. With a pinging of metal, the armor went flying off, slamming into the face of his foe as a corona of sparkles enveloped his muscular form. "Gaze upon the product of generations of noble breeding, foul creature, and–"

The unicorn stabbed the blade deep into his gut.

"Oooh," Stronghoof winced, and then his unarmored body moved in a flash, his forehoof swinging upwards with such force that, when it caught the unicorn on the chin, her head impacted with the solid stone above. I didn't know if the skull lodged in a crevice up there or had simply adhered to the roof, but the body remained hanging there, twitching spasmodically. He carefully withdrew the silver blade, unleashing a slurry of blood with a wince. "Ah, what kind of battle is this where the enemy doesn't appreciate their foe?"

"I don't know, sir. But we need to get you a healing potion right away," Crumpets said as she limped to the door. "Then we've got to seal the stable. If they get in, we'll either have to leave defenders, evacuate everypony, or come back to a slaughter."

"I agree," Stronghoof said with a nod. "The fighting above has gotten fiercer as well. We should fall back to S.P.P.-13 soon. But not before we see to your injuries as well, Crumpets." Medical ponies began to slip out with bottles and vials. One levitated a healing potion over towards Stronghoof and Crumpets.

"I'm fine," she said as she bled into her armored boot. "Right as

rain, sir. Just give me a hand with this bit of nothing, a potion, and I'll be ready for more action, sir!" she said as she held out the impaled hoof. His horn glowed, withdrawing the blade... and with it quite a bit of blood. "Oh... my," she muttered weakly. "That's... quite a flesh wound, sir."

"Appears positively arterial, young lady," Stronghoof said as he used his magic to help remove the helmet from her head. Only after she'd drunk a potion did he imbibe one himself. I could still feel the blood flowing from the half-healed gash.

"I think she needs surgery," one of the stable ponies said.

"I'm bloody well fine!" Crumpets objected, but when she heaved herself to her hooves, the world suddenly slipped out from under them, and she crashed to the floor.

"I think not, Paladin Crumpets," Stronghoof said. "Once you're recovered, you're more than welcome to join... " and his voice trailed off as he looked at the stable door. Crumpets closed her eyes as he said in a breathless voice, "Milady."

"You're hurt," Psalm observed from the door. Crumpets sighed and watched as she emerged to stand before him.

"As if so minor a wound could stop such a fine specimen of equinity–" he started to say, but as he flexed, he winced in pain and struggled to maintain the pose.

"You should have surgery for that, too," the medical mare said to Stronghoof as she started to remove the boot from Crumpets's armor. "Those damn silver blades are nasty business." A spatter of blood poured out from Crumpets's uncovered wound. "Damn! Get her another healing potion and a blood pack." Crumpets shivered as a chill feeling began to creep up her leg.

"I cannot take time out to be healed," Stronghoof retorted. "Somepony must help the forces outside to fall back in an organized manner."

"Well, at least drink another potion," Psalm told him, levitating a second one to his lips. He blushed profusely as he drank it. The dark purple alicorn smiled gently as she watched him.

"Thank you, dear Psalm. I feel fitter already." He turned to take a momentary look at Crumpets. "My dear, could you please make sure she gets to surgery? I have no doubts regarding her valor, but I fear she may try to rejoin us prematurely."

"I... suppose. Yes," Psalm murmured as the medical ponies finally extracted Crumpets from her armor and wrapped cloth tightly

around the wound. She was immediately given another potion as the white cloth stained crimson.

"Stronghoof... please... " Crumpets begged. "Don't... don't send me away." Both of them stared at her with uncertainty, and I could feel her cheeks burn as she added sharply, "I mean, you need me, sir! Otherwise, you'd be distracted by your own damned sparkles."

He gave her a kindly smile. "At ease, soldier. You've done your duty," he told her with a smile, then nodded to Psalm.

Psalm trotted beside her and the medics. The world disappeared in a purple flash, and then they reappeared in 99's medical ward. I almost didn't recognize it, given the presence of so many injured Steel Rangers and the lack of any abused stallions. Psalm levitated Crumpets easily, carrying her over to an unoccupied bed. In a trice they had her laid out and a bag of blood feeding in through an IV. A doctor in bloody scrubs shouted that he'd be ready for her in five minutes.

The nurse tersely instructed Psalm, "Keep direct pressure on that artery, understood?" The alicorn nodded, her horn glowing and the bloody bandage compressing around the leg. Crumpets hissed, gritting her teeth as fire erupted up her leg. The nurse prepared a syringe of Med-X, but Crumpets shook her head hard. The nurse dropped the syringe back on its tray. "Fine. You don't want it? I'll save it for somepony who does." Then she trotted to an adjacent table.

Crumpets lay there for a long moment, so long I nearly left her, but I wanted to hear how Psalm had been doing, and about the state of 99. Finally, Crumpets glanced up at Psalm. "He loves you, you know."

"I know," Psalm answered, not taking her eyes off the bloody bandage. "I don't know why. I'm not her."

"He knows that too," she replied, breathing quickly as the hoof throbbed. "You're like his princess. You're big and beautiful and kind and... perfect for him." She pressed her lips together tightly for several seconds.

"I'm not–" Psalm began to say.

"Shut up," Crumpets interrupted. "That doesn't matter. The fact is, he loves you. So I have to ask you... what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, sounding startled.

"I mean, are you going to get off your rump and help, or hide down here and let him put his arse on the line all alone?" Crumpets

asked, glaring up at her, tears blurring her vision. “I’ve always watched his back. I’ve always been there to try and back him up, and now I’m not. You were supposed to be some kind of soldier, right?”

“I was a murderer, once,” Psalm answered, lowering her eyes. “I’m not going to be that anymore.”

“Didn’t know we were murderers, then,” Crumpets snapped.

“No! Not… not you. Me… I was… ” Psalm stammered. “I don’t want to be one again.”

“Oh, well, isn’t that nice of you,” Crumpets retorted scornfully. “Thousands of people fighting and dying, but you don’t want to. How lovely.”

Psalm frowned, scowling at the wounded mare. “You don’t know what you’re talking about… ”

“Don’t I?” Crumpets snapped. “I’ve been up there, fighting. I’ve friends down here, bleeding, and more up there dying. Sure. I don’t know anything.”

“I don’t want to kill anypony anymore!” Psalm shouted, getting a stern look from a nurse.

“And you think I do?!” Crumpets yelled back. “I don’t like the killing any more than you, but being stuck down here while people I care for need me? That’s way bloody worse.” She clenched her eyes shut. “He’s out there, and I’m in here. I can’t do anything till this is fixed,” she said, indicating to her bloody leg. Then she glared up at Psalm angrily. “But you can, but you won’t, because you don’t want to.”

A nurse came over to their bed. “Thank you, I’ll take care of her now,” the mare said, looking sternly at Psalm.

Psalm backed away, staring into Crumpets’s eyes with a pensive, haunted expression. Then she disappeared in a purple flash. The nurse pressed the needle into her IV port. “Here. A little Med-X and moonstone to take your mind off those horrible knives.” And as the drug entered her system, this time without resistance, the world slipped away.

oooOOOooo

“Damn it,” I muttered, pulling off the helmet. At least I hadn’t seen anyone I knew die, but this was almost as bad. Crumpets. Psalm. Was there any kind of good resolution there? Psalm didn’t want to

kill anymore, but I could also understand Crumpets's scorn for remaining inside where it was safe when she could have fought for them. And Stronghoof... ugh... when I got back, I was going to have to take him aside and explain how a mare like Crumpets obviously felt about him, "strictly for the mares" or not, and a mare like Psalm probably didn't. Unless Crumpets really didn't…or Psalm *did*... but...

"Ugh," I groaned, taking in the vision of the moon. "I'm not sure which is preferable, life and death struggles or emotional drama."

"I'm going to go with 'neither'," P-21 replied. "What did you see?"

I filled them both in on what I'd seen at 99, the Reaper assault on their bunker, and Big Daddy's fate. As I talked, Scotch Tape leaned over and snagged the Perceptitron from me. "My turn!" she cried out triumphantly, jamming it on her head. I didn't feel much urge to take it from her. "I wanna try out a unicorn this time." The details of what was going on were a little less interesting to a filly like her, I supposed.

"I don't know if I should be amused or horrified at how happily you two violate other ponies' privacy," P-21 said lightly.

Scotch froze in the process of connecting the helmet to her PipBuck. "Do you really think I shouldn't, Daddy?" she asked, her eyes heart-achingly big.

He glanced at me, and I gave a little shrug. "World might end in a few hours," I pointed out. He sighed and nodded to Scotch.

The filly smiled and finished hooking it up. "I wonder if I'll be able to feel what it's like to do magic," she speculated as she jammed it on her head.

"Good luck," I said. "I don't feel it unless I burn out my horn. That just feels like a migraine." We settled back in the couch as Scotch Tape floated in front of us.

"Wow. Noble ponies sure do a lot of boring talking and arguing. Just do what she says!" Scotch Tape said to nopony. "No, you shut up! She's in charge, you moron. You see this crowny thing on her head?" the filly continued as she pointed at her noggin with a hoof.

"I'm guessing she's in Grace. Or else I've picked up some really strange PipBuck tags," I said to him.

"I'm glad you chose her. She really seemed to care more about ponies," P-21 said. "I hope she does make the changes she promised."

"She will. One way or another," I said with a smile. "She's my

cousin. Kinda... But she won't give up."

Scotch Tape gave us a very entertaining ten minutes where she insulted various ponies who were apparently arguing with her about evacuating to Tenpony Tower. It was sort of nice to snuggle up with someone and watch Scotch go through the motions of perceiving others. P-21 was right about the privacy thing, of course, but the fact was that it was either the Perceptitron or sitting around in a rocket for several hours doing nothing. At least this way I could stay in touch.

Finally, Scotch Tape sighed. "Yeah. Get out of here. Shoo. Bunch of yellow cowards!" she said, waving her hoof. "Honestly, I thought you weren't supposed to argue with the pony wearing the crown thingy!" Then she stiffened. "Wait, what's that? Look out!" She cried out and raised her hooves defensively. I started, levitating her closer to me, wondering if I could just yank the helmet off... or would that be bad too?

"Boo?!" Scotch Tape gasped, and I froze. "What is she... wait... no, Boo, Blackjack isn't here!" Scotch paused a moment. "It's me. Scotch. We're in the rocket!"

She's talking to Boo? I nearly took the helmet then and there, but I didn't know what that would do to her. P-21 gave a worried frown and shake of his head, and I backed off. "How is she talking to Boo?"

"It's Boo?" he suggested with a shrug. "How does she do any of the things she does?"

"Wait! Slow down, Boo! What was that about Glory?" Scotch Tape said. "No! Boo! Slow down! I don't know what that is! Boo!" P-21 reached over and twanged my horn, snapping my focus before I could snatch the helmet. Scotch Tape started nodding. "Okay. Okay. But what about Glory? Boo! No! Call off those guards! She's a good pony! Damn it!"

She disengaged the helmet and pulled it off. "I just talked to Boo!" she said in a rush, then stared at me clutching my horn. "What's going on?"

"Nevermind that," I said sharply, eyes watering. "What about Glory?"

"Oh! Well... um... it was kinda hard to understand her because she talked so fast! She said something about Glory being found... but I couldn't really understand more than that. She said something about saving Goldie, and that there was something called a Tem...

something. But it was going to come and be really bad. Oh, and the Legate is apparently pissed and is going to use the Brood and Temthingy to kill everyone in the Hoof before you get back. Then the guards came and chased her off." Scotch Tape blinked, then added, "Oh. And spy on Cognitum... or... don't spy on Cognitum." We both stared at her, and she snapped defensively, "Hey! She's not the easiest mare to understand when she's talking that fast!"

I could only hope that I could find somepony referencing Glory. I put the Perceptitron on and starting going from pony to pony. Goldenblood. Triage. Storm Chaser. Rainbow Dash. Mayor Windclop. Candlewick. Sagittarius. None of them were talking about Glory! I pulled the helmet off and gritted my teeth. Finding Glory was good, it meant she hadn't just been disintegrated by the bomb, but... Was she okay? Was she hurt? Was she... damn it! "I'll just have to hope that Boo pops in again and I can ask her questions myself." If she'd shown up with Grace, the next nearest place would be the Grimhoof bunker. Xanthe and her team were handling that one. If Boo wanted to give me a message, maybe she'd find me there. I tapped into the zebra's PipBuck tag and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

When I popped into Xanthe's body, I hadn't expect it to feel so… normal. I mean, given what it'd been like the last time I was in a zebra, experiencing how Shujaa fought and moved, I expected Xanthe to be more…something! More flexible, maybe. Instead, this was just a healthy mare's body wrapped up in a suit of stealth barding that was a little bit more snug than I was comfortable… actually, it was perfectly snug. Just in all the wrong ways.

Goddess, how I missed Glory.

Xanthe, Carrion, Silver Spoon, and Snails had been given the bunker under Grimhoof Army Base to eliminate. The reason why was immediately clear, Xanthe's PipBuck letting out a constant low-level crackle from the radiation detector. This place clearly showed signs of severe damage and slapdash repairs. Many of the walls were visibly buckling, and there were even places where earth protruded through gaping rents. Water dribbled from the severed ends of hoses and out of conduit penetrations in the walls and transformed the floors into muddy subterranean trickles illuminated

by whatever flickering lights still functioned.

"Need more," Carrion rasped painfully as he pressed against the wall, holes punched in his power armor oozing a fetid mix of tar-like fluids. Silver Spoon, half hiding behind him, clenched her eyes and gritted her teeth. The sickly green glow shining through her skin flashed brighter, and Xanthe quickly stepped away as the crackling of her PipBuck immediately spiked. The armored ghoul griffin let out a sigh of relief.

"Uh oh," the suit chimed, then let out a hiss. A cool sensation spread up Xanthe's hoof. "Better now." Xanthe moved away from the pair, and the fourth of the quartet, the skinny unicorn stallion with faintly glowing eyes, shifted next to her. A small drink tube protruded up from the corner of the collar, and she sucked down that wonderful sharp rancid orange RadAway.

"Do you have enough?" he asked in a phlegmy voice.

She consulted her PipBuck. Five more doses of Rad-X, six more of RadAway. "I'm fine, Snails. More than a dozen of each."

"Uh oh," the suit said, a little more sternly. Snails furrowed his brow.

"I'm fine," she pressed, then looked around the tunnel, then down at two slain Brood. "You're sure they don't have a soul you can use?"

Snails pointed his horn at the bodies. Green and purple magic seemed to foam along it for several seconds, and then he shook his head. "Nope. Sorry."

"It's okay," Xanthe said, sighing as she looked down the tunnel. "We'll find a way in to the tree. There's always a back door. A vent. A maintenance conduit. Something. We just have to find it."

"We might not be able to, Xanthe. We might just have to push through the front door," Carrion said. "Hit them hard and fast, get inside, and shoot anything that's gold and tree-ish and popping out Brood like crazy." His miniguns whirled a moment, and he checked the ammo boxes. "Can you top me off, Silver?"

The glowing ghoul blushed a little more greenly and started digging belts of ammo from her own saddlebags and connecting them to the ends of the belts in his magazines. "There you go." He returned an bashful smile.

"The four of us can't shoot our way through," Xanthe said as she ran a hoof through her mane, then stared at the dozen black and white strands left caught on a protruding bit of the suit. "Oh."

“Well, we don’t have to be four,” Snails said absently as he stared at the two corpses. He glanced up and saw the others staring at him intently. “Well, it’s a trick, but Ms. Rarity didn’t like it one bit.”

Xanthe glanced at the baffled Silver Spoon and then at Carrion. The ghoul griffin shrugged. The zebra sighed. “Well, if you think it will help us... ”

Snail’s horn flashed with black magic, and this time it seemed to soak into the two slain Brood. The magic stopped, and suddenly the bodies jerked. Muscles moved and bulged, and the forms of broken flesh and metal began to lift to their feet. The dead talismans in the corpses glowered to life with pernicious green and purple flickers, and the flesh began to... rearrange. It wasn’t healing, per se, so much as the graying meat stretching to patch the holes in the hide. When it was over, two cyber zombies, their eyes filled with green lambency, stared down at the two of us, their striped hides and armor now bulging and twisted around the augmentations.

Carrion stood behind Xanthe, grabbing her shoulders as he stared at the pair. “No matter what happens, don’t let him do that to me,” the griffin muttered.

“You sound just like Ms. Rarity, eh,” Snails said with a roll of his star-filled eyes. He regarded the zombies, then said, “You two can go in first.” The pair moved like marionettes, and I could barely make out an ephemeral thread of light connecting Snail’s horn to them. They trotted down the hallway with Snails behind them, and then he turned and looked back with a bright smile. “Coming?”

“Tiara always said there wasn’t something quite right about him,” Silver Spoon muttered as they grudgingly followed.

Snails frowned back at her. “Oh yeah? Well, Miss Rarity said I'm just fine how I am, eh!”

“Well, Tiara said ‘Miss Rarity’ was never a good judge of character,” Silver Spoon replied with a snort.

Snails glowered. “Miss Rarity would tell her to take that back!”

“Well, Tiara would tell her to make her!”

Xanthe leaned over towards Carrion and whispered, “Um, I think this is the part where the Star Maiden would tell Miss Rarity and Tiara to get a room…”

A minute later, they rounded the corner and came across a staging area of some kind. The high-ceilinged chamber resembled a stable atrium. A pair of balconies ran along the second floor. Brood were walking out of a doorway to an equipment station where they

donned their combat barding and took their weaponry and ammunition before heading up some stairs. There had to be at least twenty Brood currently busy in the room.

"We'll distract them!" Carrion hissed. "Get to the tree! Set the charges! Go!" He flew up to the balcony as the Brood began to react with that silent unity that always unnerved me. Those that had weapons immediately brought them to bear on the six intruders while any who were unarmed moved to address that. The power-armored ghoul flipped over the rail of the balcony and used the concrete platform for cover as he began to spray fire from his miniguns.

The two zombies tore forward, firing wildly before slamming into the nearest Brood like battering rams. Bullets that hit the pair did nothing to stop the corpses. One's head exploded in a shower of decaying rainbow gore, and it merely made the body pause long enough for a head-like replacement to push out of the stump and let out an unholy scream. Even the Brood in the atrium showed something like alarm at the dark magic.

The unarmed Silver Spoon faced a dozen Brood arming themselves as the zombies and ghoul drew their fire. "You're like... totally... no good... grrr!" she growled as her green glow became a nimbus of magical flame. Screaming a battle cry of "You suck!", she launched a blazing sphere of crackling energy right into the ammo containers. The explosion was quickly followed by a cascade of pops, snaps, and bangs as the ammo started to cook. "You suck! And you, you stupid blank flanks! And you! And you *totally* suck!" she shrieked over and over again as she lobbed balls of radioactive death powered by more than two centuries of pent-up spite.

"Shhh. Hiding now," Xanthe's armor whispered as she raced along the perimeter of the room towards the passage the Brood were emerging from. More were racing down the stairs from above, stopping short as they encountered Spoon's radioactive inferno blocking their way but opening fire as best they could. A few tried to jump through the fire, but they fell spasming as the blaze seared them. Even the Brood paused to evaluate the threat of her ghoulish flames.

They were going to do this. They were really going to do this! As two more armed Brood guards raced through the large door, she slipped inside. It was just like Hippocratic Research: a massive golden tree with branches dropping fleshy fruit. Barrels and barrels

of Flux were being poured into funnels at the tree's roots to feed the production of Brood. A hole in the ceiling gaped over a hopper for some sort of industrial equipment, and a body tumbled in. The hopper made a horrible, wet, grinding noise and unloaded a slurry of rainbow goo out one end into a barrel and a revolting fleshy pulp out the other into a heap of wire-laced gore. Opposite the grinder was an augmentation pod, this one without sides; Xanthe had a perfect view of the raw Brood within being calmly sliced and implanted with squirming black wires and glowing talismans.

Grinder, pod, and tree all had a half dozen emaciated zebras supervising them. Over half were ghouls, operating frantically. Bomb collars around their necks signaled their allegiance clearly enough. Xanthe snuck over towards the grinder, hiding amidst crates of reeking pulp and dodging the notice of the ghouls who extracted talismans from the gore. Several of them had the trademark appearance of taint contamination: warped bones, tiny growths on the limbs, eye tentacle penises, and the like. Beyond the kind of radical cyberization that brought me back from the dead the first time around, I doubted there was anything anypony could do for them at this point.

Creeping around towards the back, where something large lay covered with a tarp, she moved behind the immense golden tree. Digging in her saddlebags, she withdrew several blocks of C-4 and started to position them along the back of the tree. I didn't know much about explosives, but I guessed she had enough to blow the bottom off the damned thing.

Then there were two flashes behind her. "Uh oh," warned the armor, and Xanthe spun to look at two unicorn Brood with silver blades staring down at her. She clutched the detonator in her hooves as she stared up at the two. Then they did something more chilling than anything I'd seen from the Brood before.

They smiled.

The silver blade of one sliced through the detonator. "None of that now. You vermin have been causing us enough trouble today," the Brood unicorn said as the severed pieces tinkled around her hooves.

"You... you can't talk! The Brood don't talk!" Xanthe protested as she backed right up against the golden tree.

The mares glanced at each other, then gave a pair of identical little smirks before facing her again, pointing their blades in unison at the mare. "Oh, we don't?" said one.

“Things change,” said the other.
“Improve.”
“Adapt.”
“Overcome.”
Xanthe’s eyes switched from one to the other and back again. “Then… then you don’t have to do this! The Legate… he’s… ”
One unicorn tapped her temple. “With us. Always with us.”
“He is our will.”
“Our soul.”
“Our purpose.”
“But with us, he doesn’t need to dictate everything we do. He can delegate. We can achieve his will,” the last one said.
“But… what does he want?” Xanthe asked as she stared at the two blades poised to skewer her.
Once again, a glance at each other, and then as one they looked back at her, matching smirks on their faces. “To sail the cosmos with the corpse of this planet as his vessel, attended by the souls of all living things, consuming star after star, world after world. Forever,” they said in unison. “Not that it matters. This was merely a test of our linguistic abilities.”
“These peons are poor interactive subjects,” one said, gesturing to the wretched ghouls.
“All they do is cringe,” the other agreed.
Xanthe swallowed hard. “Oh. I’m… sorry to hear that,” she murmured weakly.
“Yes, well,” the two said, then paused and glanced down at her. With a flash, the silver blades fell upon her. Xanthe raised her hooves and screamed in terror.
The suit ‘screamed’ in pain, “Owie!” The blades, which should have cut right through her legs, had stopped after cutting only an inch or two of fabric. That was enough to slice her a little, but not nearly enough to maim her for good. The two were actually so shocked that Xanthe was able to dive between them, roll forward, come to her hooves, and start running back around the edge of the room towards the exit.
“I’m sorry. We’ll get you fixed, I promise!” Xanthe swore. Then there was a purple flash as one unicorn appeared in front of her. Xanthe cried out, falling back and sliding on her back under the horizontal sweep of the blade. Magic bullets flashed from the unicorn’s horn, slamming into the stealth suit and knocking the

zebra rolling. Another flash and the other unicorn appeared over her, stabbing down as Xanthe rolled inside the cut. The edge still scraped against the barding along her shoulders, the suit giving a little whimper of pain.

Xanthe rolled to her hooves, now making straight for the exit as the wretched ghouls cried out and tried to get out of her way. "Maiden of the Stars, please lift your curse from me and let me-- AH!" she shouted as one of the talking Brood appeared in front of her. The unicorns flashed again and again, and I was astonished to see Xanthe each time manage to, if only barely, tumble, fall, and skitter out of the way. One of the wretched creatures, probably half mad with taint, charged her with its three shoulder tentacles flailing, shrieking madly. It seized her for two seconds, wrapping tendrils around her shoulders as it gibbered incoherently in her face. She screamed back at it in a panic.

Then one of the unicorns appeared, grinning triumphantly as she slashed across at Xanthe's unprotected head. Xanthe twisted her head back, and the blade passed over her and sliced right through the head of the ghoul. Xanthe lifted her head back in time to receive a few spurts of rancid blood and a horrible gurgle from the neck stump, then screamed again.

"Hold still!" the two Brood demanded in unison as Xanthe danced towards the exit on her hind legs with the corpse still clinging to her torso. Each time they chopped at her, she whirled to intercept the blade with the body, crying out in panic as she barely avoided being cut. The blades tore bloody, rancid bits out of the corpse, spattering all three of them with foul ichors as Xanthe whirled and hopped and twisted with each appearance.

"Please, lift your curse. Please lift it! Pretty please!" Xanthe begged as the twitching chunks trapping her finally detached. She pushed the torso from her, the tentacles still reaching for her, and screamed before throwing it into the face of the unicorn that had just appeared next to her. Dropping down on all fours as the Brood unicorn tried to free her face, she raced for the exit.

The other unicorn, unmolested by tentacles, appeared in her path, and Xanthe slid to a stop so abruptly that her legs slipped out from under her and she landed on her back, staring at the tip of the blade inches from her face. She let out a whimper and clenched her eyes tight. "Good... b... b... bye... " crackled the suit.

Then it was bathed in blood.

The unicorn above her danced in place as two miniguns ripped right through it, tearing deep bloody furrows in its augmented hide. As the glow around its horn died, Xanthe's hooves snapped up and caught the blade before it fell into her face. She was barely able to move it aside before the hot, bloody corpse collapsed upon her. "I am really sick of her curse... " she muttered flatly.

The remaining unicorn cut the tentacles from the torso and tossed the pieces away. Her synthetic eyes took in the sight of the four companions. Snails gaped at her, then at the slain unicorns. "Hey! Lookie there, eh! She's got a soul! Kinda... " He squinted over at her. "Kinda like a cheap knockoff, actually."

The unicorn disappeared, a flash lighting the space behind the tarp-covered heap. Carrion shoved the body off Xanthe. "Are you okay? Did you get the bombs planted?"

"I think so," she said weakly as she pushed herself to her hooves and wiped the blood off her face. "She killed the detonator, though."

"Right. Silver?" Carrion said.

The glowing ghoul nodded, reached into her saddlebags, and withdrew a detonator that looked like it had spent twenty minutes in a microwave on high. Carrion took it in his hand, and the top popped right off with an anemic, electronic crackle. He covered his face with a wing, groaning. "Should have thought of that…Okay, don't worry. I've got an egg timer. Xanthe, you know how to rig that up to the bombs, right?" Carrion asked. Xanthe nodded. "Good. Then we just have to deal with that last one."

"Like, why do you have an egg timer? Isn't that, like, cannibalism or something?" Silver Spoon asked, wrinkling her nose.

"I... you…you never know when you need a timer. Like now!" Carrion retorted.

The unicorn stepped out from behind the tarp and gazed at them all flatly. "How are idiots like you thwarting us? How can *you* be impeding us at all?" Her horn glowed as she pulled the tarp off the large heap.

...The large, *moving* heap.

I'd once seen immense pony blanks, mutants or malformed copies, in the base under Hippocratic Research. This was much worse. The immense zebroid monstrosity appeared like slab after slab of meat attached nearly at random to a dragon-sized frame. The entire thing was covered in metal plates that looked as if they'd been welded to

the hide beneath. Its mouth spread far wider than any equine's ever should, revealing row after row of metallic and ivory fangs. The scream it unleashed shook the room around them.

"I'm gonna need bigger guns," Carrion said as he and the others backed away.

The biomechanical nightmare surged around the tree, pulping any ghoul that got under its immense hooves as it raced right towards the four. In unison, they fled back out into the staging area with the monstrosity close behind. One of the zombies raised its gun, firing impotently into the thick plates only to have the maw close down and snap it up, chomp it down into a slurry of rancid fluids, and swallow the revolting morsel whole.

"I really hope you have a magic trick we can use against that thing!" Xanthe shouted as they retreated back towards the smaller passage they'd emerged from.

"Go away! You're ugly! You're fat! You smell!" Silver Spoon yelled as she backed away, hitting it with explosion after explosion of green energy. The blasts barely knocked the massive monster off its stride.

Snails clenched his eyes closed, and the dark magic crackled. The blood from the slain coalesced in the air before him, then formed into an immense red blade. It flailed at the abomination, but the impacts barely slowed it. Back the four fell as it snapped at the blood blade and bit the length in two, shattering the spell.

"Run! We have to run!" Silver Spoon shouted as they fled down the smaller tunnel.

The unicorn mare's laughter pursued them. "Run all you like! You'll all die in the end. But we shall live forever!"

oooOOOooo

I left Xanthe and thumped my hoof against the wall in frustration, being rewarded with a stinging pain in my foreleg. "Ow," I muttered, pushing the helmet back to glare out a window. Another choir... *another* fucking choir! If I'd been there, I could have teleported onto that monster's back, planted a bomb made by P-21, and blown its head off! Or maybe just died. Anything would have been better than watching and being helpless to change things!

"What's wrong?" P-21 asked immediately.

"Xanthe's team had a setback. The Brood are getting... smarter."

And worse, what would that mean for Storm Chaser's predictions? As the Brood began to delegate and organize and act with finer precision, would our defenses remain adequate? The reinforcements had to stop, their cohesion had to be smashed, only it didn't seem like we were any closer to accomplishing either of those things!

"Also, no Boo," I added, glancing at Scotch Tape.

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I was just really surprised by her, and... well... Like I said, she's hard to understand when she doesn't slow down!" Scotch Tape apologized, ears folding back.

I sighed and looked back out the window towards the now much larger moon. "It's fine. I'm just... here. And it seems like everything important is happening back there. I wish I could get some hint that Glory was okay. That... that they're going to win it back there. But... " I sighed and shook my head.

"We'll make it, Blackjack," P-21 assured me. "No matter the cost."

I stared at the moon. "Hey, Scotch, do you think Cognitum's at the moon yet?"

Scotch frowned and tapped her PipBuck for a few seconds. "If she's not, then she's really really close."

"Right," I said as I selected the tag. "Then this is the time I should go in and see what she's up to. If I'm lucky, we'll hear her plans right before they disembark." Scotch Tape started to say something about Boo, but I didn't listen as the world swirled away once more.

oooOOOooo

Cognitum sat in her rocket in what looked like some sort of plush passenger area. From the velvet couches and silk lined straps, it was clear that this was made for comfort. Perhaps an escape plan for Princess Luna and Princess Celestia? Something commissioned by Fancy Pants or Blueblood? Some other plot or plan I hadn't discovered? Ugh... the thought that there could be even more secret crap made me tired.

Somewhere in the background I could hear ponies murmuring to each other, but otherwise they flew in silence.

I took a moment to focus on the body I occupied. It was... strange. Unlike any memory orb I'd ever lost myself in. There was something interfering with the contact now, like background static. It plucked at me. I couldn't hear anything besides silence and faint whispers as Cognitum stared straight ahead at a screen showing the moon. I'd

never picked up thoughts or emotions before from a memory orb, but now I did. As we moved ahead, I felt a growing, surging sensation of dread and longing. It was like standing too close to a fire, and I couldn't pull away.

I'd been inside her once, and it hadn't been anything like– The moon. It was huge in her screen. And as its pearly radiance filled her, that swelling emotion grew. It pushed at me through the connection. Cognitum had the soul of Princess Luna... Princess of the Moon.

And then her voice shivered through my mind. "Hello, Blackjack. So, you survived."

"Yeah. I do that," I said, wondering if I should break the connection or not. "I'm going to stop you."

"So you say. Pity. You must have successfully commandeered a rocket, too; I doubt you'd be in range for this otherwise. Do tell me you killed the Legate for me. I'll make you a countess if you have."

A countess? *Seriously?* "Sorry. Afraid he's not the easiest of people to kill."

"True, though I'd hoped you'd find some way to vanquish that nasty fiend for me, or he you. Ah well, no matter," she replied. "I'd like to make a deal with you. For your babies."

I didn't trust myself to speak.

"Abandon whatever fool plan you have. I will restore the Core and the Tokomare, control it with EC-1101, and restore civilization to my realm. I will give you your children, and let you, P-21, Glory, and the others go. It's a big world, and you can find your place in it. Or, if you've come to your senses, I will allow you to serve me as a lieutenant. You can ensure that I am a good leader. Help me to do better. Help everypony."

Nnnngh…"You're forgetting the Eater of Souls. What you're doing is going to set it free," I countered.

"That zebra nonsense again. The Tokomare is not an abomination from beyond. It is a machine. It will do what it is commanded to do. No more, no less," she replied primly.

"A machine? It's spoken to me, Cognitum. It called me the Awakener!" I said in frustration.

"Princess Luna. And it has not to me. Ever. I was in that place for two centuries... true, with marginal senses for much of it, but still. If it was to reach out to anypony, it could have done so to me long ago. So what am I to conclude: that an eldritch abomination

summoned by the zebras lurks underneath the Core, or that you are trying to stop me from doing what I wish because you fear the annihilation of the world through Horizons?"

I grunted in frustration. How could I prove what I knew? Cognitum demanded proof, and I had none to give. "I can't risk it, Cognitum. You have to find some other way."

"*Princess Luna*. That is the last time you will address me by that other name, Blackjack," she said primly. "I will not let my realm rot. I made a promise to myself, my people, and my sister that I would see Equestria through the war. I mean to do so. I will not subject my Equestria to five centuries of suffering as my sister did after I was banished. That is the height of immorality."

"Five centuries?" I balked.

"That is how long it took for ponykind to recover from the collapse following our conflict. Five centuries of fighting off all kinds of beasts and monsters. Five centuries of losing community after community, city after city. Even our home was left behind when Celestia relocated to Canterlot." Her voice turned even harder. "I will not let anypony keep me from protecting my subjects. Not you, the Legate, or the stars themselves will keep me from achieving my dream."

The iron determination in her mind crushed against me. "You have my terms. Accept them, and you will have your children, and I my realm, and our people will have the future they deserve. Do not be selfish, Blackjack. Be wise." The world then filled with static as I was ejected from her mind.

oooOOOooo

Getting ejected from the Perceptitron was rather akin to being shot in the head, and I'd know. I curled up in a ball and waited for the sensation like a red hot wire being drawn through my skull, from temple to temple, to subside. I kept my eyes closed and waited, jaw locked. I knew pain. I waited. It took me a while to register P-21 and Scotch Tape holding me and talking at me. I focused on that bar of fire. Slowly, bit by bit, it cooled off. Finally, I lifted my head enough to look at the pair.

"Note: don't go in the mind of a goddess who can smack you back out," I croaked.

"Are you okay?" P-21 asked at once. Funny. Did that word even

apply to me anymore?

"No. I just informed her that I'm coming after her," I said, knowing that the element of surprise was one of the few things I had had, and now... "She's going to be ready for us."

"Well, can we alter our flight plan or something? Arrive before she's ready?" P-21 asked, looking at Scotch Tape.

The olive filly shook her head. "I wouldn't want to risk it. If something, anything, went wrong, then there's a whole lot of space to get lost and die in. It's not as simple as 'point the rocket at the moon'."

I flopped back, breathing slowly. The first time I'd been in my old body, it hadn't felt different. Now... the moon seemed to be empowering her. What would she be like once she got there? Would spark grenades even do the trick anymore? "When we get there, the two of you have to focus on disabling Horizons. Whatever else happens, we can't let it fire." Even if Cognitum was right and the Tokomare was just a machine, it didn't matter. It had evil literally emanating from it. No good could come from that thing, and I didn't care how a smarter pony might argue about 'What is evil?'. It was wrong, and when this was over, I'd devote myself to tracking down silver rings, tossing them under the Core, and burying the whole damned thing with a great big 'Warning, radioactive tainted poisoned Enervated area. Go away.' sign on top.

"What about getting your body back?" P-21 asked.

I closed my eyes, the lingering pain still throbbing in my temples. "I'm not sure I can do that anymore. She was aware of me inside her. Nopony's done that before. She's... " I glanced up at him and admitted the horrible truth. "I don't know how to beat her, P-21. Before now, yeah. Grenades. Delete. Swap bodies. Now... " I took a deep breath and stared at the floor. "Now it feels like the fucking Legate."

Both of them embraced me. "I believe in you, Blackjack," P-21 said.

"You'll find a way," Scotch Tape echoed.

Damn it. Ignorance really was bliss. "Yeah. Sure. But just the same, stop Horizons." I lifted my head and gazed out at the moon, growing larger and brighter than it ever was when seen from the ground. *Just in case I don't*, I added silently to myself.

* * *

Two hours later, the moon filled the lower halves of all four windows. The surface was comprised of grayish white moonstone plains with immense crags of the rock thrusting up in faintly more luminous mountain ranges. The entire surface glowed with a spectral light, casting strange shadows out into the darkness. Earlier, Scotch and I had figured out how to get one of the screens to show the view behind the rocket. Before the autopilot turned the ship around to start the landing, Equus had been reduced to a hoof-sized circle behind us, and the sun was an even tinier glowing bead disappearing behind the disc of the planet. Now I stared at a cratered landscape punctuated by the occasional crystalline ridge.

Below us, I could see our destination: a square pad, Cognitum's rocket already perched imperiously in the center of it, sitting on a flat, open plain. Two lines on the moon's surface ran off from the pad at an acute angle to each other, one plunging straight into an abyssal crevasse of deep purple and black crystals and the other running to a terraced structure built into the edge of the chasm. I watched a little train streaking away from the landing platform along one of the lines, headed straight for the dark gorge, as we came in for a landing.

I owed whoever had designed the autopilot a drink. The thing led us straight and true to the large, flat structure. Rockets fired for the last time in the flight, and we grew heavier in our couches as the ship began to slow its fall onto the platform below. The machine rumbled beneath us as it dropped foot by foot and then, with clanks and thumps as the landing gear touched down and took on the ship's weight, settled neatly on the pad beside Cognitum's rocket. A tower rose from a marked-off square on the platform, and a tube extended outwards to meet the hatch of our rocket. Something banged down below, and the engine went silent.

"Here we go," I said as I stepped to the hatch, bouncing slightly in the low gravity. I flipped open the catches and grabbed the handle.

"Wait!" the pair shouted simultaneously, Scotch Tape launching herself at the hatch controls across the cockpit and faceplanting two thirds of the way to them.

P-21 stared at me as I pulled it open and I stepped out into the tunnel. "What?" I asked in mild annoyance. Without speaking, he pointed a hoof at the 'Warning! Hard Vacuum!' signs mounted here and there all over the interior of the tower. "What? So it's clean," I

said in mild annoyance.

"That means no *air*, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape said into the deck of the cockpit.

"Oh." I blinked, then said as cheerily as I could, "Well, it's open now. Let's go."

"I don't know which is more likely to kill us," P-21 muttered as he helped Scotch Tape to her feet. "Cognitum, or Blackjack's lack of vocabulary." We crossed to the tower, through a hatch, and onto a spiral staircase. There was a single red bar scrolling across my EFS as we twisted around and around. At the bottom was yet another hatch. I pushed it open and carefully poked my head through; on the other side was a corridor with, right in front of the door, a stretch painted with caution stripes. Signs warned of 'Caution: Weight Increase' and 'Caution: Weight Decrease' with arrows pointing in opposite directions, however that worked, but there was no sign of anything or anyone hostile. I crept out as silently as I was able and made my way down the hall, my weight indeed increasing back to what I was used to on Equus from one end of the caution-painted area to the other. Scotch and P-21 following me, though I had to look back to make sure the latter was there, I approached the lit doorway and the red bar at the hallway's end.

'WELCOME PRINCESS LUN' proclaimed a banner across a large lobby. Windows along two walls afforded a view of the beautiful lunar landscape. I marveled at the equine architecture, mosaics, and sculptures depicting the dark princess of the moon. It reminded me of the design in the Nightmare Citadel, but with more stainless steel and moonlight and less obsidian and shadows. Despite the banner, nearly everything was empty and spotless. No dust, but a dry scent scratched at my nostrils. At the far wall were two signs: 'To Astrostable' and 'To Lunar Palace'.

Between the signs was the red bar.

It walked forward casually, footfalls heavy on the carpet. It walked without fear, with confidence, with certainty.

After all, what did a mare who could never die have to fear?

"Hey, Blackjack. Long time no see. You're looking good," Rampage said casually, the blades of her armor gleaming in the moonlight like cold stars. "'Fraid I have to kill you now."

Footnote: <Error: Footnote Not Found>

Chapter 73: Apogee

"Forget it, Twilight. I know what you're up to. The second I go in, you'll have your little minion Spike come and take Tom!"
"Tom?"
"Well, it's not going to work."

Once, I had met a mare. She'd leapt down upon a bounty hunter who'd been set on taking me to Deus. She'd been rude, assertive, and fearless in all things. She was a Reaper, one of the deadliest fighters in all the Wasteland, sent to find out if I had actually killed one of their own. In the depths of my home, I'd rescued her from the nightmarish fate of becoming a ceaselessly conscious, unending meal for cannibal raiders, and, over time, we'd become friends of a sort. She mocked me, questioned me, and even looked up to me. But she'd been in pain, and had wanted to die, and I…I wanted my friend to live. I could have found a way to kill her if I'd *really* tried. Found some means to end her eternal regeneration and give her the peace that life had denied her... but I'd refused. I'd been certain that life was always better. And so, she had betrayed me to my enemy for the promise of an end to her life only for it to be denied her yet again. This was a mare cursed with life.

Rampage.

Her pink eyes roamed over the three of us casually, her lips twisting in disgust. "Kill you," she muttered, as if the word suddenly tasted bitter in her mouth. She plucked idly at the carpet with her hoofclaws, scratching it like a manticore. She sighed and rolled her eyes. "I mean, of course it's 'kill'. Couldn't be to tie you up and toss you in a closet or delay you with a musical number. But let's face it, when it comes to consistency, Cognitum's got more than a few shorts in her processors, if you know what I mean." She paused and added, "And I really hope you do, because that's as far as I get with techie words."

We didn't answer. Behind her were the doors that presumably led to the tracks to our destination. Her casual smile turned into a small frown. "What? No banter? No comeback?" She looked at Scotch Tape and grinned. "Hey! You made it to the moon! Awesome. Is this cool or what?"

"You say you're gonna kill Blackjack, and you wanna talk about the moon being cool?" Scotch Tape replied flatly, not taking her eyes off the striped mare.

The corner of Rampage's eye started to twitch. "Wow. Heck of a girl. When did she become such a grouch? Must take after her father." She said the last with a grin at P-21.

"Thanks," he answered calmly, returning a casual smile and nothing more. Rampage smirked and waited a few moments, and then her lips melted in a frown.

"What the fuck happened to you two? Did Blackjack botch some mind magic or something?" She surveyed the terminal. "And where's Glory? Back in the rocket? I mean, I know she's not flying around out there," she pointed to the window and the moonscape. "And Boo? She's got to be somewhere around, right?" Rampage looked around the terminal, as if expecting to see the white pony appear from the air. I had to admit, I would have loved to have her with us.

"Boo's fine. Glory didn't make it," I said, forcing myself to keep my words as controlled as I could.

"Oh, you have to be shitting me? You left her behind? Fuck! She loves you, Blackjack!" Rampage said sharply. I shoved down the emotions that demanded I roar my hatred, pain, and sorrow at her. I had to stay focused. Even with the operative barding protecting me, Rampage could kill me in one good slam. She scowled at me a moment longer, then lifted her head, eyes wide. "Holy shit…She's not…she's…is she?" I didn't answer. "Oh…damn…Blackjack, I'm so sorry!" And sadder still was the sincerity in her voice. I doubted that there were many ponies Rampage would talk about like that.

"I don't know. I hope not." I fought to keep the tremble out of my voice. "It's been a long couple of days," I continued, forcing myself to stay calm. "It's good to see you, though. I'm glad to see you're still alive." A wince and a frown crossed her face. "Let me guess: Cognitum's put off giving you your death till later?"

She sighed, scowling and rolling her eyes. "Yeah. She wants her capital restored and realm back and yadda yadda yawn," she said,

slouching a little and waving a claw in a circle next to her dismissively. “I figure if she doesn’t do it by the end of the week, I’m just going to rip her head off. Either she’ll use her überpowers to eradicate me, or she’ll get what she deserves and I’m no worse off.”

“Or you could help us,” I said.

Rampage chuckled, rolling her eyes. “She said you’d say that.” She stared into my eyes evenly, then a touch of doubt entered her gaze. “Have you changed your mind about killing me? That would really simplify things. I’m sure you’ve worked out some kind of trick or gadget or…something. Some way to take me out by now.”

“Not really. I was kinda hoping you’d join me and help stop all this,” I answered.

“And why would I do that?” Rampage asked with a smirk.

“Because you’ve been jabbering with us instead of turning us into paste?” Scotch Tape suggested. “I mean, if you’re going to kill us, shouldn’t you have gotten started a minute ago?”

Rampage frowned. “Look, I missed you guys! I don’t even like Cognitum. None of the ponies with her will talk to me. They’re worse than Glory!" She winced as if struck, then managed a genuinely apologetic expression. "Sorry, force of habit. But unless you or pops over there are going to kill me, Cognitum's my best chance to check out, because Blackjack doesn't have the guts to give me what I want. What I fucking *need*!” She gave me an angry glare.

“That’s right,“ I answered. “Because I know who you really are, Peppermint.”

Rampage went completely still for a few seconds, her eyes wide as she stared at me in some sort of horrified gape. “... Oh no.” I felt a little surge of hope rise as she shook her head. “No! No fucking way!” A smile crept on my face as she pointed at me and cried out, “Fuck you, Blackjack, and fuck your lame-ass Reaper re-names. I mean, Whisper? Peppermint? Next you'll tell me Brutus's ‘real name’ was Fluffy or... no. Fuck you." She stuck her tongue out at me and muttered, “Really, if you were going to make up a name, couldn’t it have been from somewhere other than a candy wrapper?”

“You’re Twist’s daughter, Peppermint,” I said as I started to walk around her. “Doof…Deus…is your father.”

“Okay, now you’re just being ‘pop my head like a bloatspite’ stupid, 'cause that's not true,” her annoyance focusing into anger. “That’s impossible.”

"It's true, Peppermint," I said evenly, knowing this wasn't going to be pretty. "I touched his mind. He told me everything. He wanted me to look after you."

"The fuck he did! My…" she trailed off as cognition danced behind her eyes, and she shook her head hard. Rampage growled, "This is getting really fucking annoying, Blackjack. Deus! That guy was a jackass!"

"To you?" I asked sharply. "He was a twisted monster to most people, yeah, but was he ever to *you*?"

Rampage's eyes locked to mine. "Well, no…but that was probably just because…I mean…who the fuck cares?!"

"Deus did. About you. He wasn't scared of you. He didn't want to rape you. He wanted to protect you. That's why he stopped fighting for the Harbingers. That's why he followed us around as long as he did. It was the only way he could be around you," I said as I held my gaze. Some of that might have been guesswork, but it felt solid. "It wouldn't surprise me if he was involved in you becoming a Reaper, even. Why else would one of the top ten want to kill you at random? Doesn't it strike you as odd that you'd cross paths with a Reaper so soon after flopping out of the Core?"

"She heard that I was talking shit," Rampage answered.

"And who'd she hear that from?" I challenged.

"I…don't know. She tried to kill me, and when she couldn't, I killed her," Rampage stammered. "But I'm not this Peppermint! Why don't I remember it?"

"You had the memory removed. If I had to guess, by Priest. He would have been willing to help give you a chance at some peace." I couldn't prove it, but it made sense to me. "You locked it up in your old room at Miramare. I'm guessing without it, all the other memories in you crowd out memories of that life."

"I'm not Peppermint," Rampage countered sharply. "I'm Rampage. A killing machine! That's all I do! I'm a monster!"

"You're Peppermint, a filly younger than Scotch Tape. Think about every time you're disintegrated. It doesn't return you to being as you are now. It turns you back into a filly, and then you grow up into who you are now." I kept my eyes on her. Any second now.

"Shut up, Blackjack!" she shouted back at me, tears in her eyes.

I really wished I had the recollector right now. I pulled out the memory orb I'd retrieved from Twist's quarters. "This has it all. Twist trying to take you off the base. The bomb going off. Her

shoving the phoenix talisman inside you. All of it." Then I realized that I might have something else. I pulled out the teddy bear and threw it at her. She caught it in her hooves. "You left that behind."

Rampage trembled as she held the teddy bear in her hooves and stared into its slightly forlorn face. "I've…" She brought it to her muzzle and inhaled the scent. "I…I know this…but…" She shook her head hard and glared back at me. "No! It's…you're trying to trick me! I know you're up to something, Blackjack. I don't know what, but it's not true! I…I'm not Peppermint. I'm Rampage. And I'm going to kick your ass to the mo- er…um…sun! Or whatever!"

Damn it, she wasn't going to make this easy on me. "Demand the recollector from Cognitum. See for yourself!"

"Yeah, right. And she's just going to give it to me? And you're just going to hang around here while I use it?" Rampage scowled at me. "Now shut it, get back on your rocket, and get gone. I'll take care of Cognitum. I don't want her to kill you three anyway. Well, maybe you, Blackjack, but only 'cause you're being a jackass right now!"

Okay. It looked like this was going to be the hard way, then. "Which soul was it that betrayed me, Rampage?" I snapped in return. "Was it the Angel? Yeah, I'm sure she'd love to stop giving 'peace' to the Wasteland! Or was Softheart a dirty cop all along? Or Razorwire? I'm sure she's really into siding with authority! Or was the Doc interested in stabbing me in the back? How about Shujaa? Was she really a traitor? Or was Twist the one who sold out her friends?" She shifted her whole body towards me, leaning forward, widening her stance, and flexing her powerful hindlegs like a four-hundred-pound steel cat. "That's right. She was a worthless, no good moth–"

Rampage tossed the bear aside and charged me with a scream. I teleported out of her path as she ripped past, materializing a ways back from her. She didn't turn. She ran right to the wall and then up it, did a twisting jump upside-down off the ceiling, and landed back on her hooves to face me with an ease as impressive as it was terrifying. "No bullets or bombs!" Scotch Tape screamed as I pulled out Sexy and P-21 drew Persuasion. "'Hard Vacuum', remember?!"

Shit…that put a kink in my 'reboot Rampage' idea. And she was already on her way back at me. "Stay back!" I shouted, then teleported to the other side of the room again. I needed a way to disable her! She rounded so fast it ripped up a massive burr of carpet, then tore back at me, tugging at her helmet's chinstrap.

“Give it up, Rampage! Fast as you are, you can’t teleport!” I said, and as a demonstration, I disappeared back to the other side of the room once again.

And got a helmet upside the head for my trouble. It banged into me with a huge clang and nearly knocked me on my ass, and the axelike blade at the brow only barely missed my face to rip a huge gash in my helmet instead. Worse, it kept me in place me long enough for Rampage to pounce. “I’m going to kill you, Blackjack!” she screamed at me.

She was an emotionally ravaged filly having a tantrum in a body that could grind me into paste. She came down, and I rolled to the side to avoid being crushed. Her foreleg swept out to the side, ripping three furrows in my armor from spine to rump. Without it, my hide would have been shredded to ribbons. I flopped over again to face her as she rose for another strike, then blasted her in the face with a magic bullet. It slowed her down only enough for me to get to my feet again.

“Rampage!” P-21 shouted. She snapped her head towards him in time to spot him raising Persuasion and firing a grenade. It smashed into her forehead, bouncing off and flipping in an arc before her. She reached out and actually caught it as P-21 and Scotch covered their eyes. Rampage’s body shielded me from the flash, but the bang made my ears ring. At least Rampage had soaked up most of that too.

Rampage shook her head hard, staggering a few steps and blinking her eyes. “Ow,” she muttered, then refocused on P-21, narrowing her eyes as she recovered quickly. “Okay. Your turn.”

“Blackjack! Boost me up!” Scotch Tape shouted as she ran to me, pointing up at the ceiling. P-21 was now backing away on the defensive as I levitated Scotch up to where she could kick open a panel in the ceiling and disappear inside. “Get her over here!” she said from above.

Easier said than done. As I watched Rampage, though, I realized that she wasn’t fighting like she could have been. Where were the commando grips? What about the Proditor kicks and tricks? Police combat and dirty fighting were also conspicuously absent. If Shujaa, Twist, and Softheart had been helping, P-21 wouldn’t have had a chance. As it was, he kept swinging, ducking, wildly backflipping, weaving, and barely keeping away from the wild claw swipes that threatened to rip him in half.

There wasn't anything for it. I raised Sexy, glanced at all that glass with space on the other side, and hoped that it was thicker than it looked, or maybe magic, unbreakable glass. Advancing towards her, I moved till she filled most of the spread and opened up with buckshot. Sexy let loose a thundering roar, pouring a storm of lead at the striped mare. The weapon was, however, less effective than I'd hoped. The Brood that she'd so easily chewed through below hadn't been covered in an inch of plate steel; much of the shot deflected off or pancaked on the metal. Even when exposed gaps were hit and penetrated, the shot was merely pushed out of the wound a second later.

But it did work in one respect: it shifted her attention from P-21 to me. I started to back away again as she advanced on three legs, the fourth raised and shielding her head to prevent me from rendering her vulnerable by pulping her face. Burst after burst cracked out, sending lead flying wildly and spiderwebbing the glass with errant shots. At least it was a little tougher than it looked! Overhead, between shots, I heard Scotch mutter, "Oh, go ahead. Make us suck hard vacuum. I always wanted a special death you just can't find on Equus."

"Sorry. You got that with the Joke, Scotch," I countered as I kept backing away.

"You're the joke," Rampage countered, now moving close enough to leap at me. I turned Sexy sideways just in time and watched her claws scrape at the metal. Thank Celestia for reinforced barrels! I wasn't going to lose this gun so quickly!

Then two wires dropped down. One touched her armored rump. The other touched her unarmored mane. The second it did, there was a sharp snap, a dazzling flash, and a reek of burning mane. Rampage immediately jerked sideways, spasming and flopping like a four-hundred-pound steel-scaled fish as half the lights in the terminal winked out.

Scotch poked her head out the hatch. "Did I get her?"

I advanced to the twitching form. "Looks like," I said as I pressed the gun to her forehead. "Time to reboot."

Rampage opened her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. "Please," she whimpered, "help my little girl."

I blinked.

Then Sexy went flying as her hoof moved faster than I could see, knocking it to the far corner of the room. Rampage swept around in

a circle, hooking her barbed tail in my leg barding and jerking me right off my feet. She continued the motion, flinging me in the opposite direction of my gun. “Electricity? Really? Why not try and taze me, or use rubber bullets? Or fire? That works really well!” she said sarcastically, and then she was leaping at me before I could rise.

I imagined I was fighting a tiger as I tried to use my focus to get away from her, but she was on me like a tempest. Raking hoofclaws ravaged the rest of my helmet and nearly took off my face. Her razorwire-threaded tail whipped towards me, catching my flanks and tearing the gaps in my barding even wider. Then she reared up, and I reared up as well, blocking her plunging hoofclaws and really missing my augmentations. Her weight came crushing down as I backed up again and again.

“Blackjack!” P-21 shouted from the far side of the room, then hurled Sexy across the terminal towards us. Thankfully, the weapon could take a bounce or two, and, with his usual aim, it rammed into Rampage’s side and knocked her off balance just long enough for me to catch it with my hooves and magic. I now had something heavy to keep between her and myself at least, but Sexy’s mass also worked against me; while it was sturdy enough to be a shield, the weapon was too massive for me to maneuver.

Rampage leapt up, pushing against the gun, grinning ear to ear over it at me as her weight slowly shoved it aside. I blasted her with a magic bullet, but while it tore the side of her head away, her body began to repair the damage immediately. I reared up and planted my forehooves against the gun, trying to push back as I danced on my hindlegs. A second magic bullet to the face failed to go through her brain. The third missed completely as we whirled about.

Don’t fall! If I fell, I’d be paste. I fought to pull my focus back together to teleport away again, drawing Vigilance at the same time. That really got her moving, pushing us both in a tight spiral as bullets flew wildly at her unarmored head. P-21 and Scotch Tape took cover as we danced around and around on our hindlegs, both pressing against Sexy as I struggled to land a shot that’d blow her brains out so she'd see reason.

“Hard vacuum!” screamed Scotch Tape, and I dimly heard an alarm sounding somewhere as the magazine ran empty. Enough! I had to put some distance between us! I just needed a few more seconds to tele–

She bit my horn! Bit it! I screamed as my focus shattered and I felt something crunchy happening atop my forehead. The pain was so bad that I almost collapsed, Vigilance bouncing away. My shoulders hit the wall behind me, and something crinkled. Suddenly, Rampage stopped biting down as the crinkling deepened, a sound like cracking ice. I looked up at her, my vision swimming with tears of pain, and spotted her staring past me with a look of trepidation… and awe.

Then we were blasted through the window.

Instantly, I was covered head to hoof in a wrongness. My skin burned as we tumbled out together into the void. Instinctively, I tried to hold my breath, as if we were underwater, but when my back struck the cool dust, the air was blasted from my lungs in a vapor. I felt the dull impact of Rampage beside me, both of us kicking up glowing clouds of dust that settled on us as I looked up at the line of windows a story above us. A metal plate had dropped down, covering the ones we'd punched through. I stared up at the sight of P-21 and Scotch Tape looking down at me through one of the intact ones, mouths moving. My heart thundered in my ears as I lay back in the dust.

It would be so easy to simply stay down and rest. It was so beautiful here. The moon was full of song. P-21 and Scotch Tape could finish. I could just…rest. I turned my head to lay my cheek on the glowing dust and gravel and pressed my bloodied horn to the gleaming surface, listening to that wonderful song as time seemed to stretch out.

Get up, Blackjack…

I don't want to.

Get up, Blackjack!

Five more minutes!

Then I heard it. The distant cacophony of echoing screams. A muffled concerto of pain. I lifted my head, coated head to hoof in moon dust, and stared up at Equus above me. The planet looked sick. Maimed. Bleeding and dying. I pushed myself to my hooves as I felt my consciousness failing fast. I stared up at it, my eyes feeling dry and itchy.

Will you leave its fate uncertain? Will you leave the fates of your friends for others to decide?

I turned and saw Rampage rising to her hooves, chunks of white dust and gravel tumbling off her armor. Her face twisted in torment

as she clutched her head, lips moving silently in a scream. There was nothing I could do for her here. I stared up at the world above. So small. So sick and injured. Could I do anything that would help?

Where there is will, there is hope.

Where there is hope, there is action.

Where there is action, there is possibility.

Possibility. Not certainty…too much to hope for. I wanted to sigh, but I was feeling pretty numb and wobbly. I closed my eyes, drew in my focus, and teleported back into the terminal, collapsing in a heap under the banner. My whole body tingled from head to hoof as I sucked in air…wonderful, wonderful air. My whole body felt tight and swollen, my eyes burning horribly as if buckets of sand had been poured in my face, my head immediately pounding as my heart rate picked up again. Tears poured down my cheeks as I struggled to clear the grit. The moon dust coating me made my horn tingle like it was plugged into an electrical socket.

"Blackjack! Here!" P-21 shouted as he put a healing potion to my lips. I drank it down eagerly, then coughed and breathed a little while longer. Huh…I couldn't taste the potion at all.

"How come you didn't explode? I thought you were supposed to explode on the moon," Scotch Tape asked, actually sounding slightly disappointed.

"Sorry to disappoint," I said, working my tongue and stiff, swollen body. Was there something wrong with my mouth? I didn't want to not be able to taste Sugar Apple B... damn it, P-21... I slowly pushed myself to my hooves and tugged my ruined barding off. Rampage had pretty much shredded most of it. Damn, I'd been lucky to have her on my side. We walked to the windows and looked out for her.

"Where's Rampage?" P-21 asked. I felt a frisson of fear. There was no sign of her down at the rents we'd left in the moon dust.

The window exploded in my face amid a loud bang and gust of wind, Rampage's hooves hooking into the carpet before she could be pulled back. With my head still spinning from my own return, I wasn't able to brace myself in time, and the exhausting air sent me tumbling into Rampage's glowy hug. Scotch Tape and P-21 dropped to the floor, wedged in between floor and wall before they could be blown over as well. The steel shutter slammed down over the window, blocking the escape of air. "Peppermint this," Rampage hissed as she started to squeeze, eyes bloodshot and bulging as she dribbled moon gravel all over me.

I had no tricks left. Then P-21 was there, swinging Persuasion's barrel like a truncheon and striking her again and again across the face with it with a loud 'poing' noise. "Ow! Ow! Stop it! Quit it!" she yelled, relaxing her crushing grip on me as she raised a hoof to deflect the wild swings.

Scotch Tape raced by with the banner from the ceiling and pulled it over Rampage's face, yanking it tight. She lifted a hoofclaw and slashed at the material, ripping a hole in it. P-21 fired a grenade straight at her face, the impact filling the air with a resounding *crack* as she went reeling. I managed to pull out of her grip. I assumed P-21 had loaded a dud as he had with the Legate and wheeled. I could have shot her in the head again, but I'd had enough.

She ripped the banner in two and then looked straight into my eyes. I leaned forward and jammed my moonstone-coated horn into her brow. "No, *this* is Peppermint!" I hissed. Without the recollector, there was no way she could experience the memory in the orb.

So I gave her mine, transferring a memory of a memory into her mind. It was like dumping a cup of flamer fuel into a smoldering fire. When the memory entered her consciousness, it set light to everything else. A filly didn't have a lot of memories in general, particularly underneath all the experiences she'd had since waking in the Wasteland. 'Not a lot' wasn't 'none', though, and suddenly that simple little memory was drawing up others inside her that had lain dim and dark in the depths of her mind. Shujaa giving rides on her back. Twist baking her a six layer birthday cake. Said cake toppling like a felled tree when Peppermint tried to eat the bottom layer first (Who'd miss it? It was the bottom one, after all.). And dozens more. The memories, thoughts, and emotions of the filly at Rampage's core lit up, the quickfire searing through the brambly depths of her mind.

"No!" Rampage sobbed as she released me and fell on her side, clutching her head and writhing as though in physical pain. I scrambled back as quickly as I could, flopping while I watched the armored mare flail like Tenebra in the midst of an epileptic fit. Her claws raked at her head as if trying to physically scrape the memories out of her skull, and, failing at that, ripped and shredded at the ground. Finally, she collapsed on her side, sobbing brokenly, blood and tears mixing in the sparkling moon dust covering her and tiny bits of carpet drifting in the air like feathers.

"She wanted me to live. Mommies die for their babies. But I didn't. I killed my baby, Mommy. I killed her," she choked out through helpless sobs. I approached slowly as she muttered, "I'm sorry, Mommy. I am so sorry."

I knelt down and stroked her gently. "Shh…shh…It's okay, Peppermint."

"Don't call me that, Blackjack. I'm not Peppermint anymore, and I'm not Psychoshy," Rampage said as she looked up at me morosely. "She wanted me to live, Blackjack…" Rampage blubbered. "She *wants* me to live…but how can I? I killed my own baby. I... I *fucking murdered* my *own daughter*, Blackjack. How do I come back from that?"

Gee, where had I heard that before? She embraced me, and I braced myself as she wept. "I know it hurts, Rampage," I said gently, waiting as she held me in her hooves. "And I know that you don't want to go on, but I need you." Her sobbing continued as the embrace tightened around my shoulders. *Keep the anger in check, though.* I struggled to keep my voice even. "I need your help." Her sobbing slowed, and I waited, rage condensing to hate. "We need to save the world." Show your fucking face...

Her weeping stopped. "No," Rampage breathed as her hooves tightened around me in a crushing embrace. Then she lifted her head, stared into my eyes, and smiled. "We need to give it peace!" There you are!

And I looked straight into her eyes, vacant as the corpse of a dead star, and pressed my horn against her forehead and unloaded… something…straight into Rampage's mind. It wasn't any kind of spell, per se. It was to mind magic what a balefire egg was to precision. As she started to crush me, I rammed a white-hot lance of rage, frustration, fear, and will straight into the pool of Rampage's mind. The Angel was like an oily blot smothering the flames I'd ignited. With fiery rage and hate, I poured every bit of magic I could squeeze through my horn into her head. There was no 'mental spell matrix' or 'envisioning then actualizing' like Twilight's books taught. This was me wanting nothing more right now than to rip, burn, gnash, tear, and obliterate that foul, bilious madness inside Rampage. White light poured out of Rampage's eyes as I pushed everything I could into her.

The Angel recoiled. I advanced. The Angel hid. I pursued. The Angel threw images of Glory's corpse at me. I denied. The Angel

promised peace. I mandated action. Deeper and deeper, hotter and hotter, my will burned after her. It would help me kill Cognitum. I didn't want it. It would help me kill the Legate! The Eater itself! Just stop. I refused. It threw the sensation of serene peace at me like a choking blanket.

"You want peace?" I shouted into Rampage. "Have it!"

I dug down all the way to a hard little knot that I couldn't push into, and seizing every bit of that slimy, acidic, poisonous thought, I pulled. I ripped. I consumed. I eradicated. With mental ferocity that outpaced the ruin of any balefire explosion, I tore every last bit to splinters.

Then my horn burned out with a pop, and we both fell again. The moonstone that had stuck to my horn had turned inky black. It fell freely around my hooves, and I watched as it disintegrated, releasing a black shadow that was swept away with a tiny pathetic scream upon an ethereal wind.

"What did you do, Blackjack?" Scotch Tape asked in shock. She waved her hooves it the air. "I mean, she was all 'Grrr!' and then you went all 'zap', and her eyes went 'wooosh', and then you were both 'Ohhh!'" And she slumped, as if momentarily winded by her question.

"I have no idea," I groaned, touching the blackened end of my horn and yelping as a crackle of electricity zapped my hoof. Okay, that was new. "I was just really…really pissed when I did it, think I overdid it, and whatever it was... " I glanced at the sooty black remains of the dust. "I think it worked."

At least, I hoped it did. Rampage was stirring. "Was it supposed to give me a splitting headache and make me feel like crap?" she asked as she sat up in a sulk, then slumped back on her rump. "'Cause if so, bravo."

"I went after that thing that killed Hope, Rampage," I said, trying to tap my horn and getting another zap and zing of pain through my spire. "Ow…" I winced, then looked at her. "Did I get it?"

"I dunno. You went away, and then I came back, and... " She rubbed her face with her hooves, looking tired and older as she stared out one of the remaining windows. "Mom would be so ashamed of me," she muttered.

"Join the club," I said, shifting and sitting next to her as I scrubbed at my temple. "I know just what my mom would think about me. 'Couldn't you have done better without the body count?'"

"Yeah, but you didn't kill your kid, Blackjack," she pointed out. Scotch Tape sighed, rolling her eyes, and trotted over to examine something by the tram entrances.

"Got my stable, though," I answered. P-21 growled, rubbing his own head as he gritted his teeth. "Most of it," I added.

"Oh, would you two just stop?!" P-21 shouted at the both of us, throwing his forehooves into the air. "Honestly! You pick *now* to whine about which of you more disappointed your mothers? I was born with a penis. I beat *both* of you for disappointed mothers!" he shouted as all three of us just stared at him. He noticed, turned red, and blurted, "Now is not the time for this!"

I looked at Rampage out the corner of my eye. "He's kinda got a point." I cracked a little smile, but she didn't share it. "Rampage, I really don't want to fight Cognitum, but I'd feel a lot better having you with me than not. It'd be like old times again."

"Old times," she sighed, then looked levelly at me. "I still want to die," she said with a small frown. Nearly a pout.

"I know." I put a hoof across her shoulders and hugged her to me. She pressed her forehead to my shoulder.

"But Cogs isn't going to actually turn it off and kill me, is she?" Rampage asked.

"Probably. It's not in her nature to throw away a tool she can use. Heck, she didn't throw out Dawn or Horse. I hate to imagine what her fridge would look like," I said, smiling at the utterly nonsensical but unsettlingly plausible idea. Then again, I hadn't been known for cleanliness either.

"I want to die. What I did…what she did for me…it hurts. I'm so angry it hurts," she said, almost in a whimper. "And I can't make it stop."

I nuzzled her as Mom had done me when I was a filly. "I know. But you can do it after we stop her and save the world," I pointed out.

"Promise?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"I promise," I answered.

Rampage didn't answer, and I waited. Time was running out, but if I pressed her, she'd just spend the rest of time sulking right here waiting to die. "Right," Rampage said half a minute later. "Let's do this." She rose to her hooves and trotted to her helmet. Jamming it on her head, she looked back at me and smirked. "Oh, and by the way, Blackjack? I *totally* would have kicked your ass if you hadn't broken out the freaky mind magic shit."

I lifted myself to my feet, looking at the tatters of my barding. "Yeah. No argument here," I replied, feeling as if I'd been stuck in a dryer with a load of rocks thrown in. I had moonstone tangled up in my mane. Stuck to my hide. Everywhere! It was making me feel decidedly weird, and I brushed off what I could, collecting it in a Sparkle-Cola bottle. The operative barding, on close inspection, was indeed a total loss; hopefully I'd find a decent replacement before too long.

We walked to the two doors, and I tapped the button next to the one for the Lunar Palace. "How many others does Cognitum have with her?" I asked Rampage. Another little spark of magic erupted from my horn. "Oww. What's the deal?" I asked, trying to stare at it as pain shot from the tip through the base and into my brain.

"Fourteen others. The best Harbingers she could find, along with a few mercenaries she rented. Talons," Rampage said dismissively. "Most of them are in power armor. Nothing I can't handle," she continued with a sniff.

"Right," I said as I scowled at the display over the double doors. It showed a shuttle moving from a crown-like icon to a rocket-like icon, which I assumed was where we were. I frowned at the display, then caught P-21 with an identical expression. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Oh Goddesses, if you two screw again…" Scotch Tape said in disgust. Rampage blinked at her in surprise, and she slumped, ears flat, and grumbled, "They did it right next to me while I was in the Perceptithing. I'm getting why Glory had issues."

"Seriously?" Rampage asked P-21.

"Your reset button is a bullet through the brain. Blackjack's is through her happy hole," P-21 replied with a casual smile and shrug. "I didn't make you crazy mares this way. I just work with that I have."

"Actually!" I declared to cut them all off, thrusting a hoof up at the display. "That tram, it's probably powered from the Palace, right?"

She frowned, then nodded. "Unless there's a big old reactor hidden under this terminal, probably."

"Then I'm thinking that stranding me in that tram car would be a pretty easy way to neutralize me. Either I get trapped in there till Horizons goes off, or she can just use a bomb and blow me to pieces in the middle of nowhere." I looked at my friends. "Even if I teleported away, I couldn't take any of you with me."

“Someday you really need to work out that little wrinkle,” P-21 told me. I grumbled, mentally adding it to learning healing spells, finding some reliable barding, and stopping a superweapon from destroying the world.

“Huh, that’s not a bad idea,” Scotch Tape rubbed her chin as she considered me. “Did her chewing on your horn add a couple of IQ points, Blackjack?”

“Maybe,” I muttered, reaching up to rub my abused spire, and getting rewarded with another painful shock. “Ow.” I winced, then glared at the display, turned, and looked at the other door. That tram was already here. “What’s in the Astrostable?”

“Dunno,” Rampage replied with a shrug. “The blanks that helped build this place, I think. Cogs said she was sending a couple Harbingers to watch the place in case you tried to get in that way.”

I grunted. Probable trap or possible ambush? I consulted P-21 and Scotch Tape, but they both gave shrugs of indifference. “Let’s go through the Astrostable,” I said as I watched the icon creep along above. “Scotch, can you rig that button to send the tram back when it gets here? Try and confuse her.”

“So there’s a way from the Astrostable to the Palace?” P-21 asked Rampage.

She shrugged. “Pretty sure. Those Harbingers weren’t wearing space suits when they left.”

“Rig it,” I told Scotch Tape, then went and tapped the button to the other tram. The door hissed open, revealing a ten by twenty foot glass box with elegant polished aluminum filigree in a vaguely lunar motif on more or less every surface. Couches were arranged along the walls with a bench in the middle that seemed ideal for setting Sexy down for a good seeing to. Rampage had scratched up her finish badly, and I couldn’t help but shoot the striped mare a reproachful look as I tried to buff it out.

Two minutes later, Scotch Tape trotted in and pushed a button, and the door closed. There was a tiny lurch, and the glass cart began to roll along the elevated track. The speakers crackled, and light classical music began to play. The four of us shared a look, as if not sure if we should laugh or shudder.

The tram certainly wasn’t the epitome of high speed rail, but it soon became clear why the terminal had been built out in the open flat. As we travelled, the shining dusty plains became increasingly studded by larger and larger boulders. Milky crystals the size of

houses began to jut up around the track. They only grew larger as the terminal shrank into the background, rising like great shining towers. The atmospheric classical was drowned out by a ghostly choir singing sublime ethereal notes in my mind. It brought forth memories of my friends together in Star House. When I paid more attention, the song faded.

"Look at the size of those things," Scotch Tape said, gawking as we moved past crystals the size of apartment buildings. The shimmery white stone had an opalescence to it, with rainbow colors crawling along the facets.

"Eh, they're rocks," Rampage scoffed dismissively.

I turned my head and studied the display over the door, which showed the rocket icon, a studded line, and a pyramid; the tramlike icon was creeping along what seemed horribly slowly. The tram had just reached the first stud on the line after three minutes. "How long is this going to take?"

"I dunno," Rampage shrugged. "Other one was like half an hour."

"Right," I said. There was one thing this called for! I pulled out the battered Perceptitron.

"Blackjack, are you sure you should be using that thing?" Scotch asked as she eyed the poor battered device. It sure had had a rough trip with me. Some of the talismans were chipped, and the wires were split and frayed.

"I need to know what's going on back home. Unless somepony can speed this thing up?" I asked, gesturing at the tram with a hoof, looking from one to the next. "No? Then I might as well use the time productively!"

"But you've been using that an awful lot today," P-21 warned. "Maybe you should just take it easy. The state that thing is in, it'll probably give you brain damage."

"No, I'm... won't!" I frowned at their various skeptical expressions. "Look, I can take it easy tomorrow. Right now, I have to know," I said stubbornly as I jammed it onto my head, entered in Goldenblood's tag, and the world–

Exploded.

I screamed as I flopped to the floor of the tram as fireworks went off from my horn, talismans popped and sizzled, and somepony started setting off balefire eggs inside my skull. Lights and voices blasted through my head as I took in images of a half dozen different ponies all at once. P-21 and Scotch Tape grabbed me, but

that only made things worse as I gibbered, screamed, and thrashed in their grasp. I could see myself through both their eyes even as I saw so many other things. Finally Rampage did what she did best: she ripped the helmet off my head and stomped it repeatedly till the light show ended.

I rolled limply onto my side, my horn feeling…either numb from shock or tingly from a million different sensations. Or both. "What was that?" Rampage asked.

"Too much arcane device usage," P-21 said tersely. "Getting her horn chewed on. Using too much magic that last fight. Covering her horn in moonstone. All of the above? Take your pick." His voice echoed oddly, like it was sloshing around to the left and right inside my skull. "Are you alright, Blackjack?"

"Med-X," I barely whispered. Just talking made it feel like Rampage was still chomping on my horn. I tried opening my eyes, but what I saw was just wrong. It was as if I were looking at a dozen different images overlapping, each one slightly out of synch with the next. At least I could stop the distorted visions by clenching my eyes shut. The voices whispering in my ears were a different matter. They churned inside me, each one jockeying over the next.

"…sure that they're broadcasting outside the Hoof?" Homage whispered in my ears. "To whom? Why?"

"No idea," Windsheer replied. "The Enclave? Tenpony? The Cathedral? Your Lightbringer? Why would the Legate want everypony to see boring footage of the Core? There's nothing happening there. Ignore it. We've got more important things to focus on."

"They're coming again!" one of the cyberpegasi shouted as the words faded away.

The prick of the Med-X cut the pain immediately, and I relaxed. "Ooo, I really didn't need this right now." I could hear gunshots and shouts, but I had no clue who or what they belonged to. Somepony was screaming to run. Xanthe? I opened my eyes and looked up at the twitching images of my friends along with shadowy flickers behind them.

"She's bleeding out her ears and nose," Rampage said, curling her lip as if she found my weakness disturbing. "What the hell happened, Blackjack?" I wanted to answer, but as I lifted my head to do so, everything lurched and I gagged, then gave several dry

heaves. The agony in my skull exploded anew, which only made me want to throw up more. Finally I just collapsed. “Oh, we are fucked,” Rampage muttered.

“No, we’re not. We talked about this. Scotch Tape and I will find some way to disable Horizons. Rampage, you can keep Cognitum busy,” P-21 said evenly.

“Great. She’s going to use her übercorn powers to punt me to the sun, I just know it,” Rampage muttered.

“Look on the bright side,” Scotch Tape said sarcastically as she put a healing potion to my lips. “That might kill you.” I had to sip it carefully. What did it say about me that I was so experienced with pain that I knew how to manage this?

“Hey, yeah! That is a good point. I mean, I tried attacking her once or twice before, but my heart really wasn’t in it,” Rampage said eagerly. “I bet if I *really* try to kill her, she’ll end me properly.”

“Just…let me lie here for a while,” I muttered. I’d pushed too hard. Tried too much. Now I had to deal with the consequences.

And the consequences, at this moment, were listening to a distant orchestra of horror composed of screams, gunshots, and explosions. The indistinct mumbling rose and fell like waves, sometimes merging into crushing unity that made me want to scream as it felt as if the silent, terrible weight of the whispers would blow my head apart. Then sliding out of synchronicity so that I could hear that soothing song of the moon and pick out individual voices.

“…don’t like it! His tactics are changing. Becoming less general and more focused. He’s mimicking our own strategy with the purple alicorns now. We barely pulled back from 99 before that group cut them off!” Storm Chaser said in my ears.

“So it’s getting difficult. Adapt. Overcome. That’s what life does,” Goldenblood rasped. “Meatlocker is in the process of being overrun. Do the ghouls have a line of retreat?”

“We’ve got a tunnel secured. Hopefully the ferals in there won’t bother them,” Storm Chaser said as there were sounds of trotting and a distant chatter of gunfire. “We’re moving everypony in the east into the department stores around Fallen Arch, from the Collegiate to the old Boom refinery. Some scavengers bridged the gap into the Core. There’re a lot of ponies wanting to go in…”

“No. Stop that at all costs,” Goldenblood said sharply. “I don’t know what’s happening with that place, but I know it’s a trap. Nothing good comes from there. I know. I helped build it.”

The voices started to slide beneath the others, but Storm Chaser shouted, “Look out!”

I cracked my eyes open, catching a half dozen different scenes, but aside from a flash of stripes, I couldn’t see any sign of whatever she yelled about. Instead, I saw Sagittarius blasting at a Brood tank rolling along the inside of a flooded underground garage, smashing over equipment and steamrolling over machinery and through great sheets of water. Behind it, on a raised platform, a dozen Brood laid out a raking fire at the power-armored Aries. The red-armored pony unleashed a torrent of flame. Her armor flaked away like bloody snow as they poured bullets back on the mare.

Suddenly, one side of the platform exploded, making the defenders lurch as a pink pony shape streaked through the foaming water. A turquoise pony lunged up, locked her hoof flipper things around the neck of one of the staggered shooters, and pulled it off the crumpling platform and into the churning flood water. A white unicorn who’d tattooed her left side in electric blue tribal marks stood on a table as lighting and ice blasted from her horn in two matching arcs, slamming into a golden tree as she laughed.

A half dozen battlefields swirled past my eyes, my ears roaring with a never-ending torrent of shouts, gunshots, and explosions. I struggled to focus on any one of them, but they kept melting away with every passing moment. My perception caught on certain scenes, though, and I struggled to latch onto them before I was yanked to some other.

I succeeded with an image of Toaster blazing like a comet as they struggled through a burning armory. No matter how much I might hate him, I had to admit that he was good at what he did. The scarred stallion burned a hole through the Brood defenders as Brutus and Hammersmith followed him. They were pushing their way towards the golden tree at the far side of the long room. It seemed as if its production had been ramped up, and it now popped out half-formed Brood that just tumbled into the converter, which was working double-time putting out malformed things that swarmed into the Reapers like a bloody tide. The malformed zebras piled on, and when beaten or battered aside, they simply hauled themselves back up again. I watched with horror as Hammersmith bashed one to the left, Brutus slammed one to the right, and they crushed a third between them. The bodies collapsed on top of one another, merged together, and sprang upon Brutus as a three-

headed, six-legged profanity of flesh. Some of them had anatomy that no zebra or pony possessed: eagle claws, lion paws, and snake tails.

The sheer monstrous mass pushed the Reapers back foot by foot. Even the blazing form of Toaster disappeared beneath cooking striped carcasses that refused to die. I clenched my eyes shut, but that just brought the voices back in force. I heard heavy breathing and the close rattle of gunfire. “We need to go,” Splendid said in serious tones.

“Go?” Grace replied. “Where do you expect to flee to, Brother?”

“Some of these alicorns have enough sense to know a good deal when it’s offered. I’ve arranged three of them to teleport us to safety. We have more than enough money to purchase a place at Tenpony for the foreseeable future,” Splendid said in calm, reasonable tones.

There was no answer for several seconds. I struggled to focus on that silence over the babble that threatened to spill forward. “It’s time we left. There’s nothing more we can do here, Grace,” he said, his voice growing softer and lower. “We’ve done all we can. It’s only a matter of time before the fighting reaches Elysium. Father wouldn’t want us to die here.”

There was a terribly long pause and then the sounds of hooves on marble. “Where are you going?!” Splendid shouted in alarm. “Grace!”

Then I heard, almost like a whisper, *“I will be the lady Father wanted me to be. I will be the noble that I’ve always pretended to be. But Goddesses, I am so scared. So terribly scared. But I can’t run. I will be the pony I must be. For Father. For the Society. For my people.”*

“Goodbye, Brother. Be sure to give Charm my love when you take her with you. I believe Tenpony will be a wonderful place for her to recover,” Grace said calmly, with no animosity or bitterness. *Take care of her, Brother.*

“Grace? Grace!” Splendid shouted after her, his voice growing fainter and fainter as the sounds of gunfire rose. A door creaked open, and the noise spiked.

“Ma’am? What are you doing out here?” a stallion asked, surprise clear in his tone. “I thought…well…aren’t you... ?”

You thought I was going to run. To take care of myself. To abandon you…all of you…because that’s what aristocrats do.

Grace responded primly, “Queen Blackjack appointed me regent of

the Society. It would be improper for me to flee while it was still being contested. Somepony should have the good grace to stand with you at this hour of need. Now, if you please, good sir, could you explain how one goes about using this thing?" There was a gunshot and a yelp. "Oh my! Are you alright?" she gasped in alarm.

"Never…better…ma'am…" the stallion grunted with pain. "First… please put the gun down…ma'am…and pass me a potion, please?"

The din of battle faded away to a dull roar, the hum of the tram's engines growing. I cracked an eye open. In the periphery of my vision, flickers and images danced about, but I stayed focused on Rampage, P-21, and Scotch Tape over by the door. My head had a woozy, numb sensation, as if it were wrapped in layers of cloth.

The tram was now moving through mountains of moonstone that loomed like colossal tombstones over the track, jutting out at sharp angles overhead. To one side, towards the massive chasm, the pure white was tainted by streaks of dark purple, blue, and black. I could barely make out a low structure ahead of us, the top of the terrace built into the edge of the ravine.

"I can make the tram take her back to the terminal, and stay there. She can't fight like this," Scotch Tape insisted, pointing a hoof at me as she glared up at her father.

"Oh, yeah. Watch this," I slurred a little as I pushed myself to my hooves. All three watched with some alarm as I swayed. "Tadaa…"

P-21 and Scotch rushed to me, keeping me up. "Goddesses…what did you do to yourself, Blackjack?"

"What I always do," I muttered. "Now, I need to go kick…butt…"

"You need to go back to the rocket and let us do this," P-21 argued.

"No," Rampage suddenly contradicted with a scowl. "We need to get her to the Astrostable, stat."

"What are you talking about?" P-21 snapped.

Rampage stared into my eyes. "Blackjack, do you have any numbness, weakness, or paralysis? Blurred vision? Headache?" I made a muttered yes-ish noise to each. Rampage looked at the other two. "I think she's having a hemorrhagic stroke, or something very similar to one."

"A stroke? P-21 gives a great stroke," I said with a giggle, feeling a little drunk as I slumped against him, still bleeding out my nose and ear.

"How do you know?" P-21 asked.

"Six years of medical school and two years of residency," Rampage

replied as she stared at me. She shoved a healing potion in my mouth, and I chugged it reflexively. That allowed the pain to abate a little, but I still didn't feel any better. "My field may be psychiatry, but I know severe red flags when I see them. We need to get her to the stable's medical station at once. Hopefully they'll have something more substantial than just restoratives."

"Doctor Octopus?" P-21 asked.

"Unless there's another medical specialist inside Miss Peppermint here, yes," she said tersely. "It's been an absolutely lousy few days for everyone concerned."

"You've been aware of what's going on?" Scotch Tape asked, a touch warily.

"Yes. It'd been rather difficult to maintain focus and push through the Angel's interference, but now that she's gone and dear Peppermint's back, I can address this. Drink another restorative draught," Rampage said as she put another potion to my lips. It barely made a dent in the pain. "I remember this happening to M.A.S. researchers pushing themselves too hard to meet a deadline. Burnout is a safety measure to prevent more severe damage to the unicorn. Some unicorns would try and push through burnout with talismans or drugs. The results were never pretty."

"Wasn't pushing past burnout…" I muttered.

"No, you were just using a highly experimental device too much with an injured horn while coated with highly magically sensitive moon dust. Completely different," he replied with soft sarcasm.

"Also…" She suddenly leaned in and hugged me closely, but with care. "Thank you, Blackjack. Thank you, thank you, thank you," she whispered in my ear.

"Twist?" I murmured.

"I never meant to hurt my baby. I only wanted her to live. To be happy. I didn't realize what was truly inside this talisman. The ghosts trapped inside," she said with a snotty sniff. "I thought she could have a happy life. That's all I wanted. Please. Please tell her that," she begged me as she pulled back, weeping.

"Why are they all coming out now?" P-21 asked.

Rampage wiped her eyes, still holding me gingerly. Her tone returned to that of the doctor. "The Angel saw Cognitum as the best way to end the pain of the Wasteland. Even better if the Legate was right. Her desire was so great, she stood between Peppermint and the rest of us. The shock of knowing the truth and the mental attack

Blackjack made on the Angel broke her interference."

"You weren't fighting right," I muttered weakly. "No special combat fighting things."

She gave me another potion. How many did we have left? I'm glad P-21 had insisted we load up on them. "It doesn't help that I remember things now too," Rampage muttered. "Now that all these ghosts are woken up and…ugh…" She rubbed her face with a hoof. "I can feel Mom inside me. And Momma Shujaa…and…now I can't really stop feeling them. And Mom wants me happy and Razor wants me to stop whining and…I'm not sure if I'm more me or less me than I was before you shoved that shit back in my head, Blackjack."

She was flowing more easily from one person to the next. I would have considered that an improvement, except that I couldn't really talk right. "S'rie," I muttered, but I wasn't sure if I'd meant to say 'sorry' or 'all right'.

The tram reached the station. Past the end of the tracks and the edge of the cliff, I could see that the chasm was studded with more and more moonstone monoliths. The further down I looked, the darker the crystals were. On the floor of the chasm was an immense domed structure that glowed with a prismatic aura. A second inclined lift rose from that building far below to the base of this structure. "Come on, Blackjack. If it's got the word 'stable' in it, then it has a medical bay," P-21 said as he helped support me.

The door to the tram opened up into a foyer with a familiar immense rolling door in the far wall. Scotch Tape helped me drink another healing potion as Rampage hit the tab on the console. The lights began to flash as the klaxon sounded. The door behind us sealed shut, and then the huge round door slid away from us and rolled to the side. I wanted to hold Vigilance in my mouth, if only to shoot something in the direction of trouble. I wanted to be ready for anything.

But I wasn't ready for the sight of fifty white ponies in party hats facing us with bright star-filled eyes, grinning happily and shouting in unison, "Welcome to the moon, Princess Luna!" As horns were blown and plumes of glittery paper flittered into the air, I decided to get to the bottom of this mystery in the most effective and efficient method possible: I collapsed and passed out on the floor of the Astrostable.

* * *

The problem was that I wasn't really unconscious as I lay there, because my brain continued to work. It just wasn't working well. Whatever I'd done to myself had been a doozy, and my mind kept swishing round to things that just…well…didn't make much sense.

I saw General Storm Chaser and a squad of Enclave pegasi fighting against the Legate in the Skyport. He moved from one power-armored pegasus to the next like a force of nature, his hooves crushing, smashing, and tearing everything they came in contact with. Repeatedly their energy weapons struck him, but as quickly as bits of him were disintegrated or decayed into magical goop, the mass twisted in upon itself and reformed his striped body. Incinerated dust simply swirled back in and reassembled itself. At the edge of the battle, Goldenblood lay on his side, his legs smashed beneath him and his horn cracked off, trying to drag his broken body away from the fighting.

Then something finally made the Legate slow down: the terminal's dusty windows burst inward in a shower of glass and windblown rain, and magic shields shimmered into being between the zebra and his targets. Velvet Remedy and a dozen alicorns had come to the rescue. The shields exploded like crystal bubbles with every strike of his hooves, the alicorns grimacing when their magic was shattered, but they popped back as quickly as they were destroyed. As he turned towards Velvet with a half-grin, half-snarl on his face, her horn glowed, and somehow, then even he was staggering about as if in a drunken stupor. Now why didn't I have that spell?

But as I watched, the scene blurred and transformed to that of Ironmare Naval Base, the capsized remains of the HMS *Celestia* visible as a dark shadow beside the pier. A rusted cargo ship with the name 'Applejack' spray-painted on the flaking hull and the Applejack's Rangers' flag flying was moored with a stream of desperate refugees rushing to board. Behind them, a zebra tank rolled towards the shore, Steel Rangers firing volley after volley at the war machine as it crawled into firing position. All around me, ponies screamed and pushed, a few being shoved into the foaming waters.

The turrets belched smoke, and the sea near the *Applejack*'s stern kicked up two great jets of water. The froth didn't die down, though, the disturbance from the tank shells replaced with that

from the ship as, unseen beneath the surface, the propellers spun to life. The ship began to crawl away from the pier, the gangplanks starting to turn and tilt and make the frantic ponies on them shove and shout even harder to be the last aboard. Whatever pony I was in skidded to a stop at the edge of the concrete as the gangplank dropped into the water before them and was lost between the hull and pier, a few ponies going with it. The despairing, crying ponies behind didn't stop, though, and their press sent the pony I was in into the salty ocean as the *Applejack*, laden with hundreds of lucky refugees, moved away from the end of the pier. Then the forecastle of the ship exploded in flame and shrapnel as the tank struck home.

Then from out of the smoke coiling over the waves shot a lean, blackened boat skimming across the water. The *Seahorse*, scorched and battered but not yet sunk, sliced towards the shore and came around in a hard crashing slew that sent a wave from one side of its stern and a water jet from the other. From an improvised turret atop the cabin, a grenade machine gun began its rapid bark, the fire flashing off the tank and shrouding it in smoke so that its next shots only fountained up beside the *Applejack's* hull. Machine gun fire chattered, both tank and Brood infantry firing on the annoying mosquito of a patrol boat as it launched a salvo of grenades into the infantry and then rocketed away across the water, dodging wildly.

A glow covered my body, and I was lifted from the cold water by a unicorn in some sort of fancy robes. Then I was stumbling back along the pier as Steel Rangers escorted those who hadn't made it to the ship towards the hulking remains of the naval station. "Get clear! Get clear!" a Ranger in power armor bellowed. "Move, you sorry gits! South! Get south! Move!"

"For Applejack!" cried others as they hurried towards defensible positions between the helpless and the advancing enemy; on the water, the *Seahorse* was coming around for another pass and showering the Brood with a rain of explosives. On land, the tank growled forward, turret lights moving in the smoke cloud as the guns tracked a new target.

I tried to see what happened next, but I couldn't hold onto it. My perception just swirled to another scene, the sea and refugees melting like wax and reforming into dingy walls and wounded people. Triage walked down a hall in the Collegiate, puffing hard on the cigarette as she snapped, "I don't care! It's a choice between saving a hundred lives now or maybe…*maybe* saving one life!"

A flash of white wing and golden mane, and the stunningly beautiful Morningstar landed in her path. “One life! One life?! How can you say that?! That one life is worth a thousand of the people you’re wasting it on!”

“*Those* people are *my* people!” Triage shouted at her. “And that machine is my machine! And the call is mine, not yours! I’m not going to pull the plug and let you fiddle with the rejuvenation pod in the middle of this battle. Right now, that machine is the only reason we’re losing hooffuls and not scores!”

“The science will work! The theory is sound, whether you understand it or not!” Morningstar screamed at her.

“And if the Hoof wasn't on fire right now, I'd be fully behind the peer review process but your timing is shit!” Triage snapped back. Ponies ran by, adamantly not looking at the pair. Many dragged stretchers behind them. Wounded cried out on old gurneys while ponies tried desperately to help them. “Every minute that machine’s not working, ponies die! My ponies! Ponies we need. I’m not going to take the pod offline for a science experiment you’re not even sure is going to work!”

“It will work! The wing was proof! Science can do anything!” Morningstar bellowed in her face. “What would Blackjack say if she knew how you were letting–”

Triage’s horn glowed, and a clipboard slapped hard across Morningstar’s face. The stunned pegasus shook her head, and the clipboard swung back and struck her again. It was enough force to send her crashing to the floor with a nosebleed. Triage glared down at her and blew a plume of smoke. “Either she’d say a thousand lives are worth more than one, or I don’t give a shit what she’d say. Now get out of my way and get out of the Collegiate. I have to save all the lives I can before we all die.”

I wanted to hold onto that. Maybe Morningstar would say more, but things were sliding away. I saw…was it Xanthe, Sagittarius, or Candlewick’s battle? Maybe it was all three. I wanted to simultaneously charge forward and help all of them at once and cringe away from the sight of the fighting that I was helpless to end.

As if in response to half of my desire, I felt those horrible, violent visions fade away to be replaced by a faint glow beneath me and a comforting darkness above and around. The glow was peaceful and calm, a blue-white illumination that drove the pain away bit by bit. It felt familiar... The same sensation I’d felt while lying on the dust

outside the terminal. Sympathetic in understanding. Compassionate towards my suffering and the suffering I witnessed.

"Who are you?" I spoke into the glow.

"A friend who has come a long way," the illumination responded gently.

"Can you help me? I hurt myself. Badly, I think," I whimpered, feeling the sensation of being held.

"No. No more than I already am. I'm sorry," the voice said in soft sincerity.

"That's okay," I murmured, imagining I was nuzzling into Mom's embrace. "I need to go back, don't I?" The thought filled me with dread, and I heard the distant echo of battles growing.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I cannot tell. I know that this must end, though. One way, or another."

"I want to live," I whimpered, daring to look more directly at the massive ghostly white pony shape holding me. "I don't want to die. I want to fix things with Glory. I want a family with babies. I want to help Rampage get better. I want so many things now!" I sniffed and smiled. "Is that so wrong? To want to live?"

"No. But life is not easy. It struggles. Day by day, it struggles. How you face that struggle gives meaning to your life. It is only when things are at their darkest that you find your greatest strength. Life for life's sake is not always enough. It is *meaning* that makes you greater than you are, and sometimes that meaning is greater than life itself."

"It's not fair," I muttered, saying the dullest and most immature thing a pony could.

"No. It's not. Not unless you make it so," the glowing pony replied.

"I don't want to pay that price," I whispered.

"Pity the few that do," it answered. "Pity more those who fear death and loss. Who hold life and the lives of others in contempt. Who have nothing to offer others but bile and vitriol and hate. They have made their lives a torment, and remain living only to inflict that torment on others. They have no other meaning."

"Like the Eater. And the Legate," I added. "And Cognitum. You think I should pity them?"

"Don't you?" the glowing eyes stared down at me curiously.

I closed my eyes. It would have been easier to hate my enemies, but I really didn't. There hadn't ever been one where I'd been glad they were dead. Well…maybe Steel Rain…but just because he'd

been such an ass. “I guess. I just wish…I wish so many things could be different.”

“Wishing is a start, but if you want them different, you must make them so,” it said softly. “And to do that…”

“I have to wake up…” I said to it with a regretful smile, and did so.

* * *

I woke up on a table, lying on my side, my head hurting but feeling a little better. A green light poured down on me from a moonstone talisman mounted on a flexible swivel arm hanging from the ceiling. I heard Scotch Tape’s voice from nearby. “... guys are the descendants of ponies who said ‘buck it’ in the last month after Goldenblood got the boot and snuck off Equestria and into this lunar stable?”

“Some of us are,” a stallion’s voice replied calmly. “Liaison Sapphire knew the O.I.A. was conducting regular launches transporting Flux to the Lunar Palace. She started sending members of the M.o.A. and O.I.A. that she trusted up here with each launch. She was our first overmare, too. She thought it was a terrible waste of a stable to just give it to blanks. Oddly, though, with enough time they stopped acting quite like mere blanks, even when the implants were off and they were supposed to be in a rest state. They became almost like normal ponies. You saw how they celebrated ‘Princess Luna’s’ arrival.”

“And nopony knew?” P-21 asked.

“I think, towards the end, that everything was such a mess that nopony knew precisely what was going on. Horse was in the process of purging the O.I.A. When Luna had Goldenblood arrested, that was when Sapphire thought it’d be best to leave. Of course, we all figured that Luna would come up here sooner or later, one way or another, so we might as well be friendly when she did. I have to admit, we rather thought it would be sooner.”

“And so you guys just stay up here and…do what?” Rampage asked with a snort. “Spend all day wigged-out on moon dust?”

The doctor scrunched up his face evasively. “No! That’s... rarely happens. Besides, the day-to-day maintenance of the stable takes a great deal of work. And there’s meditation and philosophical discussions as well. Others enjoy astronomy, art, poetry, and monitoring signals from the stars or Equus,” the stallion replied. I

took a risk and twisted to look in the direction they spoke from. I might as well have been in Stable 99's medical bay, only everything was extremely clean and shiny. The air had a strange acrid tang to it that was a little unpleasant. The motion gave me a little bit of a headache, but far less than I'd experienced earlier.

"I've said it before. Stable ponies are just frigging weird, whether they're in the ground or on the moon," Rampage said with a shake of her head.

The stallion they talked to wore a medical coat and reminded me of nothing so much as a male Boo. His mane and hide were both pale pink, and he had eyes that seemed to glow faintly with stars.

"So…I gotta ask, Doc Comet. When's the next scheduled orgy?" Rampage asked, looking around as if expecting group sex to break out at any moment. "Come on. If this place is based on 99, it's got to have something perverted going on."

The stallion leaned away from her. "Uh, I just met you, so no. Thank you, but…no."

Rampage pursed her lips, then shrugged. "Eh. Probably for the best. I'm only a filly, anyway, so it'd be sick and wrong." She trotted away, casually fishing a tin of Mint-als out of her armor and shaking a mouthful into her mouth, munching them like they were candy. The pale pink stallion looked at the other two, mouth working silently in bafflement, but they just shook their heads.

"We should get going," P-21 said as they started for the door.

"Wait!" I groaned, half climbing and half falling off the table. "Wait. I'm coming."

"I thought she was out!" Scotch Tape hissed. "Wasn't she drugged?"

"Yeah. Blackjack doesn't really do the whole 'out for the count' thing," Rampage said with a sigh and a shake of her head over by the door.

The doctor trotted to me and shone a light into both of my eyes. From his frown, I got the impression I'd done something wrong. "How are you feeling?"

A very good question. The screwdriver was out of my horn, and I could move my head without a little ball of agony searing my brain. There were still flickers in the periphery of my vision, but I could ignore the whispers. "Better. What happened to me? Have I been here long? Did Horizons fire?"

The pale pink stallion consulted a clipboard. "Hemorrhagic

aneurism of your temporal and visual cortex. Good thing your friend had you slugging down restoratives like crazy. You were slowly bleeding into your brain. The rejuvenation talisman stopped the bleeding, but you're looking at some scarring, plus complications from acute moonstone poisoning." He paused and then squinted at me a little skeptically. "Did you *actually* go rolling around in the stuff?"

"Something like that," I muttered, working my mouth. "Is that bad? My tongue feels numb."

"Your tongue?" He arched a brow. "No. That's just an effect of hard vacuum. Moonstone poisoning…well…" he coughed and stared into my eyes. "Are you hearing singing? Seeing time dilation? Uncontrollable extrasensory perception?"

I stared at him silently for a few seconds. "Maybe?"

"Yeah. That usually takes a few years of exposure to small amounts. From what your friends told me…" He consulted the clipboard. "You rolled around in the stuff, then did radical and uncontrolled mind magic, then used an experimental extrasensory perception device. I'm shocked your head didn't explode." He sighed and set the clipboard away. "Anyway. You're talking coherently and not bleeding out the nose and ears anymore, so I suppose that's as close to a clean bill of health as I can give. Normally I'd be bundling you up in a corner to bliss out among the stars while sticking you under that talisman for a few more hours."

"As for Horizons," P-21 broke in firmly, "no. It hasn't. We're going now. And you're staying here."

"Nope! I don't–" I tried hopping off the table but tripped over my hooves and tumbled to the floor, landing on my head. The impact gave me a dozen flashes from places that were decidedly not my head. "Ow!" I groaned as little stars shot across my vision. "We're not splitting up."

"She really is that bad," the doctor remarked. "I mean, from what you told me…she just had multiple microstrokes, and she wants to go fight?"

"Yep," Rampage said. "Tie her up and give her a good dicking. She likes that."

"No time for quickies now!" I waved a hoof at all twelve-ish of them. "I am not getting left behind. I'm coming with all of you and that is that."

"Blackjack, you've had a stroke," P-21 explained as I rose to my

hooves.

"It's not the first time I've fought with brain damage!" I said as I swayed and thumped against one of the tables. "I have to go. The big glowy pony of light said so." I rubbed my temple and then noticed the incredulous looks on their faces. "What? You're doubting I'm seeing things now?"

"Not with eyes like that," Scotch Tape said as she pointed at a polished bulkhead. I stared at my own reflection and was immediately taken by the sight of hundreds of motes of light swirling in my eyes. I couldn't see them in my vision, but they gave my eyes a faint luminescent glow like Snails had.

"Well…fuck…" I muttered at my own reflection. "My eyes glow. Again."

P-21 simply nodded. "Yep."

"... kay. Well... it's not the first time. Still going," I declared, marching forward, a picture of resolution.

"Not the first... " the doctor said weakly.

Scotch Tape shook her head. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Yup. Doesn't matter. I'm marching right out this door and kicking her–"

"That's the supply closet," P-21 informed me gently.

I blinked at the door. "Right. I knew that." And turned to the other door on the far side of Medical.

"I can drug her," the doctor said, and I felt a little stab of fear that I might actually have to fight my friends on this.

"No. She'd get a spoon and defeat you. She's tricky like that," Rampage said with a sigh. I tripped over my own hooves and faceplanted into the floor in front of everypony... again. "Very tricky," Rampage repeated, solemnly.

"We don't have time for this," P-21 said as he trotted to me and helped me to my hooves. "Are you okay?" he asked as he lifted my face and stared into my eyes. I could see the glow reflected off his irises. "I mean *really* okay, Blackjack?" *Just tell me what you need.*

I gazed at him for what felt like forever, and licked my lips nervously. "I have to go," I whispered softly. "I can't stay here while you face her," I told him, trying to keep my head together as images flickered in my vision. "I can't stay here and see…what I'm seeing… and do nothing…I'll go mad," I whispered, trying to keep my fear as calm as I could.

P-21 returned my stare equally as long, then smiled and gave a

little nod. “Okay.” He straightened and looked at the others. “She’s coming. Let’s go.”

“Daddy…sometimes, I think when it comes to Blackjack, you don’t think so good,” Scotch Tape grumped, then asked the doctor. “Is moonstone poisoning fatal?”

“Not in and of itself. Severe cases usually incapacitate the victim. It takes a long while to work out of the system, though,” he said with a more concerned frown. “And you really shouldn’t be fighting with a case as severe as yours.”

“You, Triage, and Rover should write a book: Dumb Patients Fighting When They Shouldn’t,” I said as I took a seat and breathed hard. Then I regarded the doctor and gave him a sincere smile. “Thank you for helping me, Doctor. I mean it. And I don’t think I got your name.”

“Comet. Doctor Comet,” he said with a small smile in return. Then he sighed and rose to his hooves. “Well, I guess I’ll walk you to the tram down to the Palace. If you relapse, I’ll be nearby.”

Together, we walked out of Medical and into... 99, as it should have been. Stepping out into the hall, I was hit by a wave of nostalgia. There was a drinking fountain, right where it would have been in 99. Down there was a bathroom. In the other direction, a sign pointing to the atrium. Unlike 99, there’d been no Incident here. Stallions and mares walked past in stable barding with ‘LA’ on the collars talking excitedly of Equus being able to support spaceflight again. The blanks were harder to notice here, even with their white manes and eyes, as they followed along and nodded to conversations. The lights were steady, the air clean with the faint ozone tang.

“I know. Freaky, isn’t it?” Scotch Tape said as she walked next to me. “I actually walked into some stranger’s home thinking it was my quarters in 99. And they have similar recycler systems.” Trust her to check that. One thing that was definitely different, though, was the clouds of mechasprites flying in little swarms overhead. I saw them dive into a trashcan, and, after some fearful chewing, fly out carrying small rods of aluminum and iron and a lump of carbon. “That’s new, though.”

“Hey! Do you eat your own poop and dead?” Rampage asked Comet.

He furrowed his brows. “We try not to think about it like that.”

I laughed. It was like coming home…even if it was nothing like

coming home. “I hear ya. Has Cognitum come here?” Our passage drew all sorts of odd looks from pale-colored ponies who kept their distance but seemed to regard us as welcome curiosities. Only a few had the starry eyed gaze that I did, and none were as bright as mine. I wished that I had more time to meet them and find out more about life on the moon.

“You mean the princess? No. Not that it was that surprising. It makes sense she’d see to the Palace first. And our ancestors did flee here to escape her law at the end of things. Hopefully she’s pleased by all the hard work that’s gone into the Lunar Palace.” He grew worried. “Of course, we’ve gotten alerts from the Palace security system since she arrived, but we’re not involved in defense of the Palace.”

“What is, then?” I asked as we walked.

“Robots,” Rampage said with a yawn. “Turrets. Mechasprites. Pretty straightforward, actually. She’s got enough firepower to get through it all eventually. I’m surprised the pair she sent over here haven’t caused trouble.”

“Oh, them?” the doctor said with a smile. “Yes, they were very assertive when they arrived. Made some rude and threatening declarations. It’s a wonder how some moonstone and Med-X can pacify certain aggressive individuals, though. Hopefully the Princess can sort out the confusion when she arrives.”

That sorting might involve body parts if Cognitum was in a bad mood. “Do you know about Horizons?” I asked.

“Project Horizons? Yes. It was Goldenblood’s plan to restore Equestria by sending a magically infused moonstone to a certain location on the surface. I don’t know the details personally, but I’m sure the Overstallion could explain it better,” Doctor Comet said with another smile. I was sure he couldn’t. Still, I couldn’t miss the wistful look on P-21’s face. I could easily imagine him here as a teacher. Or husband. I glanced back at his flank, where red and silver peeked through the flakes of blue.

“Not a bad stable, huh?” I said to him as we walked towards the steps to the utility sections. On the way, we trotted past something else 99 hadn’t had: windows! How freaky was that? They looked out into the crystal-lined chasm in the moonscape.

“Will it be okay if Horizons fires?” he asked.

Oh, that was something I didn’t want to think about! A stable full of good ponies, and…“Just more reason to hur--”

The hallway exploded before me, the tank rolling through the smoke and flames, treads churning up oil-slicked water. I raised my hooves and screamed as the crushing treads rolled over me.

Then I was aware of ponies holding and shaking me. “--bad idea!” the doctor was saying. “We’ve got to get her back to medical!”

“No! No. I’m fine,” I said, shivering, sure that somewhere, somepony definitely wasn’t. I picked myself up to my hooves. “Just a reason to finish this sooner than later. People need us back on Equus.” I shoved my way out of their hooves so they couldn’t drag me back.

We didn’t chat again as we went down and down, reaching the reactor level and then a sign that read ‘To Lunar Palace’. Trotting towards the tram doors, I tried to ignore the sounds of gunfire. It was all in my head. All in my head…

Wasn’t it?

The tram doors slid open, and a pair of ponies in combat armor came into view. One levitated a disintegration rifle. The other wore a battle saddle with two miniguns. I blinked, not sure if they were Brood or not. Then Rampage dove atop me as the miniguns opened up with streams of lead. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” she hissed as the metal deflected wildly off her plate armor, bouncing every which way in a flurry of glowing shrapnel.

P-21 immediately sent a grenade flying towards the pair, but the unicorn with the disintegration rifle raised a shield of shimmery green magic just in time for the explosive to detonate outside it and blast back at us. More shrapnel flew around us, biting hide wherever it could penetrate. P-21’s eyes blazed with rage at the indignity of eating his own grenade. Rampage lunged off me, racing towards the door as the smoke cleared to show the field still intact. Then two small holes formed in the wall of magic, and a rain of bullets poured through them and pushed Rampage back on the concrete floor.

I tele– Correction, I faceplanted into the ground as my horn sparked wildly and went dead. Worse, I suddenly had images of three cyberpegasi fighting hoof to hoof against Brood soldiers while Homage and Windsheer worked furiously on terminals. No! Focus! I looked past Rampage’s legs as the unicorn created a third hole, lifting her rifle to point back down the hall at us.

Biting down on Vigilance with my mouth, my cheek pressed against the ground, I saw the force field flickering where it met the

floor. I dropped into S.A.T.S. and targeted four armor piercing shots at her front left hoof. Two splashed against the field, but two ripped through and right into her forehoof. The mare cried out, faltering as blood spurted from her crippled hoof. She started to pull back, cradling it, and closed the hole she'd opened to fire through.

But not before Persuasion sent a grenade soaring through it.

The explosion flattened both ponies, the field popping like a bubble as the mare was slammed to the left and the minigun-armed stallion to the ground. He managed to get to his feet for all of a second before Rampage hooked her hoofclaws into the back of his neck and ripped his head from his shoulders. The mare tried to haul the disintegration rifle around to point at Rampage, but I put three more rounds into her before she could fire. The rifle clattered to the ground as I approached.

She wasn't a pretty mare. Blue-gray like Homage, but with a flat black mane. Her eyes stared up at me. *I'm hit. Fuck. Can't feel…can't move…fuck!* Her eyes widened as her breathing picked up, blood bubbling in her mouth. *No. I have to kill her. Russet will be okay if she dies. Everyone will…* Her body trembled as I gazed into her eyes, a tear cutting through the blood on her cheek. *Russet…my beautiful girl… I have to…have to…to…*Then she went slack, slumping over as her red bar disappeared from my E.F.S.

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked me, putting a hoof on my shoulder.

I jumped at the touch, looking at him and feeling his worry in his stare. "I'm fine. I'm fine," I lied, and he knew it. I tore my eyes from him, back to the mare. "Give me their barding. And see if you can rig that battle saddle to Sexy and me."

I turned to Doctor Comet. "Thank–" I started to say, and then I saw him lying prone on the ground. A bloody hole oozed in the pink hide of his forehead right where a unicorn's horn would be.

I bring the Wasteland everywhere I go. Xanthe was right. Help me, and it gets you killed. Face me, and it gets you killed. "Come on," I croaked as I stepped into the tram, dragging the mare by the collar. Rampage brought the other one. Once we were inside the steeply inclined tram and it had started off, I removed the mare's combat armor. A few holes wouldn't compromise it too badly. I pulled a picture from a pocket. It was just a charcoal sketch of the unicorn I'd killed and a small, smudged filly.

"Daddy, you should put on that other barding," Scotch Tape said in a small voice as she took the mare's rifle and fumbled with it. *He's*

going to die. Blackjack's going to die. Rampage is going to die. I'll be all alone. "I wish I knew how to use this thing better." *I'm useless. I shouldn't have come.*

I glanced at P-21, felt the worry dripping off him, and then looked at Scotch. "Hey. It's not that hard. Find something to brace against. Point that end. Fire. Repeat. You'll be fine." I rubbed her head. "We're not going to die."

She stared at me. "Well…no duh. I knew that!" She gave as brave a smile as she could as she fumbled with how to reload the rifle. I tried to keep her from firing it by accident... though, for all I knew, the thing I thought was the safety was actually the trigger! Ugh… arcane magic weapons were just bizarre.

P-21 mumbled, "Do I have this on right?" I returned my eyes to him and started at seeing him wearing the stallion's scorched and dinged combat armor. He'd removed the miniguns; he really didn't have the frame or skill for the weapons anyway. Lacunae…sigh…

"You got these buckles mixed up," I said, flushing as I gently corrected the straps and got the combat barding in place. Aside from a big gap between the shoulders from Rampage's tear, it was mostly intact.

"What's wrong, Blackjack?" P-21 said as he hooked Sexy to my battle saddle. Unff... I really wished I had an earth pony's frame for this. I tried to use my magic, and from the blue stallion came words as if from an old stereo. *Just get through today. Whatever happens, get through today with no one else dead. Just get home, and everything will be alright. Get Scotch Tape home safe. Watch Rampage. Damn, Blackjack's ass is almost as nice as Calamity's. Get back safe.*

"I think... " I started to say, then stopped. What was there to gain by telling them that there was something else wrong with me? "Just... I remember back when my life was just patrolling through the stable halls and the occasional illegal poker game. I just have to wonder how much more weird my life can get."

"Well, we're on the moon. That's a good indication for starters," Scotch Tape said as she stared out the window. *I miss Mommy so much. I wish she could see this. I wish she could know what I did.*

I rubbed my horn vigorously and was rewarded with an electrical zap and a muting of my friends' thoughts. I had to stay focused. As the tram dropped down the canyon wall towards the shining dome at the bottom, the moonstone crystals took on the appearance of amethysts. Dark swirls of magic ran circuits around the spires. "Did

anyone else hear that?" P-21 asked sharply.

Rampage rubbed her eyes. "Hear that? Did anyone see that?"

"Are you guys seeing and hearing things too?" I asked them.

"Whispers. Flickers. Like... I thought I saw Nightmare Moon and Princess Celestia," Rampage said as she looked at one of the dark purple crystals particularly close to the track.

"I saw something like that too. Nightmare Moon leading an army towards Princess Celestia's army," P-21 agreed.

"This must be what it's like to be Blackjack," Scotch Tape muttered. *It's scary. How does she handle it?* I rubbed my horn again, hard.

I looked at another dark purple monolith. "I think this is where Nightmare Moon was trapped for a thousand years. These stones... I think they're like giant memory orbs." I stared at the swirling darkness around the stone. My vision blurred, and I heard Princess Luna crying out. *Why don't they like me? I give them wonderful dreams and beautiful nights! I do so much work for them. Why is it always Celestia, Celestia, Celestia? Why is it always her?!* "They're not true memory orbs, so we're not sucked into the experience. And... I think these are thoughts... "

"Why would Goldenblood build Horizons here?" P-21 asked as we dropped towards the Lunar Palace below. It wasn't a perfect hemisphere; it had a slightly conical shape to it, like the little end of an egg. Most of it appeared to be huge crystal windows, the ones at the apex glowing brightly towards the planet above. I wondered if it was visible so far away, a glowing eye in a patch of shadow. The tram was dropping down towards the base of it.

"I don't know," I answered, and started to speculate. "Horizons was a trap. When Cognitum tried to deactivate it, she set it off. That's probably why it had a countdown. It was trying to get a response from Princess Luna. I half bet that if nothing was sent, Horizons would have just gone back on standby. After all, there must have been megaspells and balefire bombs going off before I fired Folly. The only difference was that this time, Cognitum fell into the trap." I studied the dark crystals. "I think that he put this here so that, if Luna ever did come here, it would be a sign she was actually Nightmare Moon. Princess Luna would never come here if she was sane. This place represents her very worst."

Rampage regarded P-21 and Scotch Tape flatly. "Is it just me, or is a hornhead's life really fucking weird?" I smiled at the simultaneous

agreement in their thoughts, then smacked my horn again.

"Why do you keep doing that?" P-21 asked in concern. "I thought you were trying to recover from burnout."

"Um... actually, I'm trying to stop reading your minds," I admitted, shuffling a little. "Not all of them! Just... kinda... what you're thinking at the moment."

"You can read my mind?" Scotch squeaked in shock, then pressed her hooves to her temple. *Don't think of having sex with Daddy. Don't think of having sex with Rampage. Don't think of having sex with Blackjack...*

"It's not like that. It's more just... words," I said as I rubbed my horn to try and scatter it.

"Oh yeah, prove it. What am I thinking?" Rampage demanded. I glanced at her, stopping my rubbing and letting my horn tune in. *I'll tell her she's wrong no matter what. Goddesses, Blackjack is frigging weird sometimes, though. Still, if she's wrong, maybe Scotchy won't think she's actually reading minds, because frigging weird!* "Well? It's a number between one and billion." *No, it's not!*

"Uh... " I blinked at her. "Seven?" I glanced over at Scotch.

Rampage blinked as well, then pointed a hoofclaw at me and laughed loudly. "Hah! Wrong! I was thinking your butt is fat!" She snorted at me, rolling her eyes. "Reading minds. Yeah, right."

I relaxed a little and smiled at her. "Yeah. Guess I was wrong. I'm frigging weird sometimes," I said, robbing her of her laugher. "Just saying," I added.

"So frigging weird," she muttered, looking at me uneasily.

Too bad it's not two way. That would be useful. P-21's thoughts came with a warm tone that matched his smile.

I looked back and thought. *Yeah. I miss Lacunae.* Maybe it was just an effect of the moment, but I gave the thought a little added emphasis. I imagined I was pushing it out at him.

All three of them jumped as if simultaneously shocked. "Lacunae! You miss Lacunae! You thought it at me!" Scotch Tape said, then glowered at Rampage. "And you're a liar."

Rampage flushed and rolled her eyes. "Sorry, kiddo. You were kinda freaking out."

It took a few minutes to work it out. Apparently, as long as they were thinking it at me, I could pick it up, and vice versa. The only limitation was that my friends couldn't think at each other, which was probably for the best. *You know what this is, right?* P-21 asked

with a small smile as the tram reached the base of the ravine.

Yeah. I thought back at all of them with a small, hopeful grin. *An edge.*

* * *

The Lunar Palace rumbled like an immense turbine in bad need of a new bearing. As soon as the tram connected to the airlock, the vibration resonated under my hooves and into my teeth. Above it, a high frequency squeal keened out, barely within my upper threshold of perception. As soon as the airlock opened, a dusty miasma reeking of gunsmoke, ozone, and burnt candy blasted in my face. Beam turrets crackled as they spat magical death while sentry robots boomed their warning for trespassers to leave and be destroyed. The muted crumps of missile impacts paired up with the loud zaps of beam guns in an unholy orchestra of annihilation that made me wonder if our 'edge' wasn't nearly as big as I hoped it was.

Inside, the Lunar Palace was an immense open space dominated by a huge circular hole in the floor that emitted the white glow. From this angle, I couldn't see how far down it went, but it felt deep under my hooves. Four smoldering Ultra-Sentinels lay scattered around the rim. Above it was an elevated platform ring connected to the floor by four broad stairways. The ring was studded with perhaps a dozen beam turrets beneath and a dozen sentry robots above. In the center of the ring, over the direct middle of the shaft, was an even higher dais connected by walkways and topped with an enormous throne of moonstone and steel. A familiar golden mesh dangled from the top of the throne, and I felt my scalp itch at the sight of the thing. At the tip of the dome, a hemisphere protruded down from the roof, a cloud of mechasprites swirling around it like a miniature steel galaxy. Cables dangled down from the half-sphere to the throne.

Whoa was all I could think as I watched Cognitum and eight Harbingers fighting their way up the steps. Whenever they destroyed one of the robots, a swarm of mechasprites would fly down and start repairing it even as more fire pressed in from other sides. Cognitum had erected a blood-red magical field that protected her and only her as her two floating turret drones returned fire. I looked at the intense firefight, considered my

friends, and then considered the battle again. *Um... thoughts?*

P-21 and Rampage looked around me, the latter almost climbing onto my back to get a good look. Scotch Tape moved around my legs and peeked into the room. Okay, they could have waited for me to move out of the way first! She gave a mental grunt, then pulled herself back into the airlock. When the door closed, she looked at the rest of us. "Okay. That's stupid."

Rampage clapped her hooves together. "Okay. Good answer. It's stupid. Can I go kill them all?"

"You'll be Peppermint-sized in two seconds with all those incineration and disintegration beams going off," P-21 told her.

"What I mean when I say it's stupid is that that room doesn't make any sense architecturally." She sighed, took off her saddlebags, took out some paper and a pen, and sketched the room. "So... like... why put an enormous platform over a deep pit with a throne in the very middle, out in the open?" She scowled and pointed up at the glowing hemisphere. "For that matter, why put a maneframe up there? There's no maintenance access, and if it fell, anyone on the throne would be smack underneath it! It's like somepony wanted this room to be the most impractical thing imaginable."

"Well, duh. That's got to be the controls, right?" Rampage asked. "Whoever gets to the throne rules."

Scotch Tape looked at me and P-21 flatly. "Did we have a throne in Stable 99?"

I glanced at him, and he shrugged. "She had a really big desk," I replied. "And controls. And a secret passage."

"Right! Because she used all those things! She was the Overmare." Scotch Tape gestured at the closed door. "Who is the person sitting in that huge fancy seat supposed to be ruling?" I thought about it a little, but a stable of blanks really didn't seem fitting. "It's not even all that defensible, because it has four nice big stairways leading up to it! The person sitting in the throne is exposed on all sides. Puts the person sitting in the throne out in the open right in the middle of a great big pit. And if something did happen to that dome, they'd be smack underneath that great big computer as it comes crashing down!"

"Shit," I muttered as I realized she was right. "Horizons was made to kill Nightmare Moon. This whole place... the throne... the glowing pit... even the name... it was all one big lure to Nightmare Moon's vanity."

"So, what's the plan here?" Rampage asked. "I rush into the middle and draw all their fire while Blackjack does whatever she does that makes her automatically win?"

"Tempting," I mused. "I'd really like to pull it off. But the priority is preventing Horizons from firing." Besides, Cognitum had taken my auto-win talent. I turned to Scotch Tape. "If the key to this place isn't the throne, then where do we need to go?"

Scotch Tape's eyes widened. "You're asking me to guess the layout of a superweapon on the moon?" *I can't do it. There's no way! Everypony is going to die because I can't…*

I reached out and held her hooves. "You can do it, Scotch. Just give your best guess. If it doesn't work, we can go with Rampage's idea."

Why am I always plan B? Rampage huffed in annoyance.

You're usually plan D or E, actually, but you're also the most reliable. I thought back at her. That seemed to brighten her up a little. I didn't add that was because that happened when the plan was the shit hitting the ventilator, but it was good to have her on my side again.

Scotch Tape's eyes worked back and forth. "It has to be beneath us, Blackjack. I don't know where or what Horizons is, but the mechanism has to be under our hooves. I just don't see anything we can reach in that wide-open, empty chamber than could control a megaspell."

"Okay. We go in there and find an access point to get down below. Find where it's fired from. Stop it or break it. Then we deal with Cognitum," I replied. We shared a look, then nodded in unison.

Back out in the Lunar Palace, Cognitum was a few feet closer to her throne. She stood composed, powerful, and cruel. A princess in all but fact, but a cruel bitch of a princess. A princess of hard data and harder contempt. Her gun pods flashed and blasted as the enemy fire splashed and flickered off her magical shield. Deadly crimson bolts blasted from her horn with crushing force. The mechasprites worked tirelessly to repair and restore the defenders, but the wedge of attackers kept ripping the turrets and sentry bots apart with their steady fire. Every now and then, one of her soldiers would fire a spark grenade far from Cognitum, sending a swarm of mechasprites tumbling down into the pit in the center of the chamber. I couldn't get close enough to see what was in that enormous hole, but I had my suspicions.

Keep your thoughts as hostile as you can. Yellow bars will stand out. I thought at my friends as we moved along the edge of the room.

Blackjack, who do you think you're talking to here? Rampage scoffed. *I'm like a dozen different flavors of hostile right now! I'm frigging infrared hostile!*

We searched, but the walls were virtually seamless. *They seem to be molded like clay instead of assembled from pieces.* Scotch thought as we moved, tapping the grayish walls. *Is that metal or ceramic?* We skirted the edge of the fighting, moving around towards the far side of the chamber. I could only hope the automated defenses would focus on the nearer, more obvious targets instead of us.

Grate in the floor! P-21 thought at me, and I ran to where he was pointing. Rampage hooked her claws into the grate, its bars spaced widely enough to admit mechasprites but strong enough to support sentries that rolled over it. Her body strained, metal scraping on metal, and then the bars snapped free with a loud crack and peeled up. Below us was about a ten foot drop.

Then a crackling red bolt of energy slammed into me, sending me flying away from the hole and into the far wall. The ceramic plates of my combat armor, as well as something inside me, crunched from the impact. *Ow!* I thought plaintively, but I hid my pain from my enemy. Cognitum walked to the edge of the platform, staring down at me as her mane snapped in an eternal wind. Thousands of tiny stars, little blazing red giants and cold white dwarfs, glimmered in that billowing magical mane. "Blackjack," she said, her voice magnified by speakers in the hovering gun pods. "It seems Rampage wants to live forever after all."

"Eh, you're too much of a pussy to kill me anyway!" Rampage bellowed back at her. "Must be that body you're in!" *How's that, eh? Reverse psychology!* Rampage smirked back at me. Then a crackling bolt of crimson magic enveloped her and flung her high into the air. As she began to slow down, the magic suddenly flared and slammed her into the ground hard enough to make her bounce twice. *Ow*. A second later, a red aura illuminated around her, and as it grew Rampage burst into flame. *OW!*

I had to give her credit, I would have been screaming incoherently right now as my nerves burned, regenerated, and burned some more. I scrambled to my hooves, trying to ignore my own pain, as I faced Cognitum. From her horn emanated a red cone of magic that focused on me like a spotlight, and I felt myself start to grow warm. Really warm! *Rampage, jump to your left!* I thought. She sprang, somewhat ungainly, into the path of the cone.

Agh, fuck, Blackjack! You bitch! Fire sucks! she thought at me, or maybe shouted, it was hard to tell as I hit the ground behind her, peered at Cognitum, and fired a magic bullet right at her face! The spell was twice as hard to cast as usual, but I felt great that it worked at all, even if it just popped ineffectually off her magical shield.

Then for an instant I was a pegasus flying through the rusted remains of a factory or something with a half dozen Brood fighters on her tail, a dusky gray batpony at her side. She twisted on her side, threading her body through a space so narrow I felt it brush her belly. Stygius just teleported past the obstacle. As he reappeared, she actually leaned forward and kissed him with a midair smooch, then banked off as the fliers caught back up with the pair. Fortunately, the vision only lasted a few seconds.

Okay…that was bad timing. Luckily, it seemed Cognitum was in a monologuing mood. “Do you really think you can defeat me? I am the Princess of the Night! I am a thousand times what Celestia was. I live and walk again while my sister’s feeble mind and soul are bound to a hulk of metal and steel,” she crowed as she fired bolt after bolt of dark magic at me. The crimson energy crackled with electricity, arcing from Rampage’s metal armor to me and making my mane stand on end beneath the helmet. It would have been great to shout back that she was just a damaged mind and soul on a hijacked cybermare, but my jaw was clenched shut from the discharge.

Then a spark grenade went off against her shield. I glanced over to where P-21 was halfway through the hole, his hindlegs braced against the walls of the shaft as his forelimbs and mouth aimed Persuasion. The blue sphere of electrical energy crackled against the magic and evoked a scream of pain from Cognitum, making her rear up on her hooves. Her talismans flickered, but they didn’t die. Thank Celestia she still had that vulnerability at all, even if it didn’t shut her down completely as it would have me. “Kill them. Kill them now! This has gone on long enough!”

Four of her Harbingers ran down the nearest staircase, one of them with a missile launcher. Rampage wasn’t burning anymore but hadn’t regrown her eyes just yet, so I shoved her forward. *Move! Move! Missiles!* I thought desperately as she staggered forward. *Left! Your other left!* One came streaking past and detonated behind me, a magical field flickering to life over those immense windows.

F.A.D.E. shields.

"Stop pushing! I got my eyes back, Blackjack!" she snapped. Another of the four had a sniper rifle, a pegasus carried a gatling beam gun, and an earth pony rushed at us with a chainsaw clutched in his jaws and light machine guns on his sides…wait, how he pull that off?! Rampage paused at the sight of him. "Oh, hey! I think I know that guy! Didn't you use to run a gang called Buzzkill last year or so? Operated around Withers?"

Sniper rounds pinged off the floor much too close to my head for my liking. *Who cares! Get in the hole before that beam gun fillifies you.* It was days like this that I really wished LittlePip could be here. Or Calamity. Or Glory…definitely Glory…or somepony with some precision and range! But nooo, I gave away my own sniper rifle. It made me uncomfortable! Ugh…

Blackjack, are you meaning to think all that? Scotch Tape thought at me. I shut up my mental whining, rushed to the hole in the grate, and dropped down. Halfway through the hole, I felt a distinct lurch in my stomach as I went from normal gravity to lighter gravity, landing not nearly as hard as I'd expected.

Underneath, we entered a world of scaffolds and girders, wires and strange equipment. Glowing talismans sang their strange melodies to me as my brain swirled. I rolled out of the way a second before Rampage came flying down the hole at me, landing with a loud thud. *This way!* Scotch thought, waving at us from the end of a walkway…no, not exactly a walkway. Clearly, this sublevel hadn't been made for ponies to move around in it. This was more like a broad, flat support for a number of cables. Even in the reduced gravity, it flexed alarmingly under Rampage. Below us lay more of that diffuse white light, like glowing milk.

Quickly! Quietly! Carefully! I thought desperately as we moved from support to support, girder to girder, moving away from the hole. Now I was glad EFS didn't show height.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" a mare taunted.

"Shut up. Spread out. Find them, kill them, and then we can go home," a stallion replied.

Spreading out was good. They must not have thought we were all a threat. *Scotch Tape, P-21, find some way to shut down Horizons. Rampage, you and I get to stop them.* Rampage rewarded me with an eager grin that was a disturbing blend of feral viciousness and foal-like glee. Being down here narrowed our odds quite a bit, and…

…That was a lot of Flux.

Below us was an incredible churning, swirling pool of the shimmery fluid. There was no way a few rockets brought that much Flux up here. Ten thousand rockets, maybe. I could only guess that somehow the Flux had expanded…or maybe they'd found some way to make the stuff…or maybe it just naturally broke the laws of nature out of habit. All I knew was there was a Maripony-sized lake of the stuff a few hundred feet down. And who knew how deep it was!

I really didn't want to find–

Then the world around me exploded. Thankfully, there was a girder between the blast and me, saving me from the shrapnel, but I was still knocked off the edge and into the air. I went flipping end over end, crashing onto a junction box of some kind several feet down and getting the wind knocked from my lungs. Above me, a petite orange unicorn mare in combat barding popped the missile launcher levitating beside her open and slipped another missile in. "So much for Blackjack," she chuckled.

She barely had time to take a breath before she was soundly smashed by the spiked wrecking ball that was Rampage. She sailed across the gap between girders and barely managed to grab onto one fifteen feet down. "Let me guess," Rampage said happily, "your nickname is Boom-something, right?" She grinned down at the mare struggling for a grip. "Trust me, you're better off dead. If you live, Blackjack will just name you something embarrassing like 'Pillow'."

Rampage! I mentally shouted at her. *Unicorn!*

Huh? So wha– Rampage turned her head to look at the levitating missile launcher pointed right at her. *Aw shit.* The missile fired and detonated almost immediately, turning her into a spiked cannonball sailing away from us, some of her limbs flying off in different directions from her body. I only hoped she recovered or landed on something before she fell all the way to the bottom.

I pointed Sexy at the dangling unicorn and unloaded a burst, but just before I fired, she let go and dropped to the girder below her. A second blast glanced her; but she managed to get behind cover before I could really tear into her.

"MADAKADMARAKAMRGH!" roared a muffled voice around the grip of a chainsaw a second before the blood-red earth pony wielding it leapt down, motor roaring, chain whirring, and guns

blazing. I didn't have time to shift and blast back, barely managing to jump sideways off the junction box. Crazy landed and didn't even stop shooting, pelting himself with ricochets and bits of metal. He continued to scream into the grip of the chainsaw as he twisted, walking his fire after me.

There was nothing for it. I needed to telepo–

Charity stood atop Chapel's stockade, wearing combat armor that looked as if it had been magically shrunk to fit. The walls had been reinforced by skywagon hulks and bits of scrap metal. Atop the guard towers, filly and colt fireteams crewed machineguns and miniguns set into pivoted braces. As many adult stallions and mares stood along the walls as the young ponies. From down the hill, a dwindling stream of refugees raced as if their lives depended upon it. "I need three-oh-eight!" a stallion shouted, and a colt raced to the post office, coming back with an ammo crate balanced on his back.

"Here they come, kids," a mare muttered as along the hilltop the dead trees swayed and crackled. Then the Brood emerged as a solid wall of dark shapes. Suddenly their tactic didn't seem simple. It seemed terrifying. Above the Brood on the ground were fliers. Amidst the Brood on the ground, unicorns put up shields. "Shit, where did they learn that trick?"

"It doesn't matter," Charity said. A shot rang out from the defenders, and she shouted out, "Ten caps from any moron who doesn't wait for them to come in range! Wait!" In unison, the Brood advanced down the hill towards Chapel. From behind the defenders came screams from refugees, who began to move across the bridge and into the Core. "Damn it! Stay out of there unless you want to die!" she shouted back behind her. Then from beyond the Core she spotted something strange: a long gray V of rapidly swirling clouds. It almost appeared to have a massive face covering one side of it.

Then a bullet pinged off her barding, nearly taking her off the wall. The yellow mare beside her caught her before she fell. "Easy there, kid," she said in alarm.

"Call me kid again, and you're paying double for your ammo," she warned, straightening and rubbing her sore shoulder before looking at the advancing Brood. "Wait for it!"

For ten horrible seconds, the Brood advanced, unchallenged, laying down a steady, withering rain of fire. There was a horrible inevitability in their advance, a casualness in their slaughter that

made me want to shiver. Then Charity waved to a purple batpony colt who had his legs wrapped in bandages and was almost blinded by his oversized combat helmet. He gave a salute with his wing, drew a detonator from under his other wing, and gleefully depressed the shiny red button.

It sounded like the world's largest machine gun going off. From left to right, every ten feet along the Brood line, the ground exploded in a plume of mud, steel, and meat. In less than three seconds, nearly a thousand feet of Brood had the ground blown out from under them. "Thanks, Nomad," Charity said to the purple batpony, who seemed stunned at what his little detonator had done. Then she turned back to the battle and murmured, "Over fifty thousand caps of C-4, though... "

"Worth it," the yellow mare replied.

With the detonation, chaos erupted as well. The Brood, rather than pulling back, reforming, and resuming that unified advance, now attacked in disorganized rage. "Fire! Ten caps per Brood!" The Brood fliers dove in, but the machine guns along the walls opened up in an earsplitting chatter of bullets. One Brood flyer swooped at the wall as bullets tore into its body, and when it landed atop the wall, it exploded with as much force as the bombs that had torn up the field. Charity rushed to one of the machine guns, the foals crewing it stunned by the close blast, grabbed the handles with her hooves, and mashed the trigger, pointing the gun towards the next Brood flyer sweeping in towards the wall. "My home is not getting blown up a third time, you get me?!" she yelled, barely audible over the chatter of the gun as two colts helped steady her aim in time to take the head off the lead flyer.

Blackjack! Snap out of it!

Huh? The intrusion of P-21's thoughts made the sight of Charity blasting away melt away, though the gunfire didn't stop. I found myself draped over a beam, forelegs dangling over one side and hindlegs over the other. "You gotta be kidding me," I muttered. Was my horn going to be doing this for good, now? A chainsaw motor roared above me, and I blinked as I became aware of hooves straddling either side of me. I glanced up to see Chainsaw holding the weapon aloft in his forehooves, ready to swipe my head clean off. Worse, I couldn't use magic or twist around to shoot him.

So I used gravity instead.

I dropped back off the beam, spreading my hooves wide and

clipping his hooves out from under him as I fell one way and he, overbalanced by the chainsaw, the other. Of course, now my problem was more of the falling-to-my-death-impaled-on-some-spur-or-hung-from-wires sort rather than the imminent-decapitation-by-chainsaw sort. My legs flailed wildly as I hoped to catch something, anything, before I either splatted on a girder like a bloatsprite or tried swimming in Flux. Who knew what that much would do to me? Heal me? Turn me into one of those fat blanks from Hippowhatever? Give me super powers?

While the screaming did nothing, my swinging hooves got caught in some black cabling strung horizontally across a gap. The cable jerked and started sliding through the brackets that had been holding it, but the extra drag started gently slowing me. Fortunately, something at both ends must have held, and the slowing ended in a stop instead of the cable joining me in my fall. Unfortunately, it left me dangling in the middle of space by one foreleg tangled in the point of a taut vee. “Okay. I’ve dealt with worse,” I muttered as I tried to swing myself to the nearest beam.

Then the pegasus with the gatling beam gun dropped down a parallel shaft to mine, snapped his wings out, hovered with his weapon pointed at me, and opened fire. Swinging spared me from a few shots, but plenty more scorched and scoured my barding. I managed to hook my hindlegs around the cable and get Sexy out to point at him, upside down, though, then bit down on the trigger rig and gave a new definition to the term ‘wild fire’. The shots made the pegasus bank sharply out of the field of fire, but suddenly, with all the jerking around, one of the ends of the cable gave. I just had time to clutch the cable and Sexy to my body, and then I was swinging down between the girders. The pegasus, clearly an overachiever, flew after me.

Suddenly I was whipped up as the cable snagged on something and was wrenched from my grasp, my leg coming free from the tangle, sending me flipping freely through the air again. The low gravity gave me a momentary sensation of being a pegasus as I sailed along. Then I smashed down on an honest-to-goodness walkway, acutely aware of a multitude of aches and pains as I struggled to my hooves. Low gravity didn’t mean none.

The pegasus popped into view at my side, hovering next to the walkway, and I tried to turn to face him even as the crimson beams scorched my hide and drew black lines of soot on my barding. *Ugh,*

this would be so much easier with my magic!

Then the pegasus exploded, a grenade shredding his wings. The ruined limbs flailed desperately in the air, struggling for purchase before a second grenade found him and sent him screaming down into the abyss below. I scanned my surroundings and spotted P-21 and Scotch Tape at a terminal set on a rail on the walkway about fifty feet behind me. *Awww, she doesn't have her magic.* Scotch Tape thought sarcastically. *However will she get by?*

For a filly who I can still paddle, you're awfully snarky. I thought back at her. Where were Boom Boom and Sniper? *Rampage?* I thought at the striped mare. *Where are you?* A second later, the girders a ways away above me and to the left exploded. *Ah, there you are. Carry on.*

We looked like we were halfway between the floor of the Lunar Palace above and the Flux below. The walkway seemed to make a circle around the central core, passing by all sorts of strange equipment. As I trotted over to my friends, I also saw an access stairway leading up to a hatch we hadn't had time to find. *Tell me you have good news.* I begged.

We have good news. Scotch Tape thought back as P-21 resumed typing on the computer. *The good news is that this place has only the basest Stable-Tec programming security. That's about it for the good news.*

Horizons is going to fire, Blackjack. P-21 thought grimly. *Technically, it already has fired. The Flux reaction just hasn't completed. And it's going to complete in the next fifteen minutes, which is good enough to hit the Core just like Cognitum and the Legate want. It's autocorrecting the F.A.D.E. fields it's using to aim at the Tokomare.* He tapped the keys rapidly. *There's some sort of buffer talisman or safety spell that's slowing the reaction down. I'm refreshing it as often as I can, but it's buying us literally only seconds each time.*

What about Goldenblood? Is he fighting you? He looked blankly at me. *He's supposed to have copied part of his head into the machine running this place.*

You mean 'Goldenblood_kernel'? P-21 thought back at me, still typing rapidly. *It's here, but it doesn't seem to be paying as much attention to us as it is to... gotta refresh!* A deep thrum sounded underneath us, the light shivering. *It's not paying much attention to us. Mostly on Cognitum. It's fixing any attempts I make to mess with the system, though. I'm lucky I can discharge the failsafe talismans and buy us time. Backdoor access just isn't helping us as much so far. I need root*

access to really rip into this system.

Shit. *Can you aim Horizons to miss the Core, at least?*

No. Something like that requires you to use the mind interface on the throne. Of course, the second you do, the F.A.D.E. targeting fields will go off and trap you inside the firing tube. He gritted his teeth and typed some more. From below came an odd sour note, and the Flux turned a little more rainbowish. *And there's someone else in the system already messing with things who's not making it much easier. They keep trying to jury-rig the F.A.D.E. fields to hit the Core. If you stop them, I might be able to get us a few more minutes. If we can just delay things an hour or so, Horizons won't be able to correct the aiming enough, and it'll just hit somewhere to the east of the Core.*

Someone…shit. *I'll find him. You two keep buying us time and see if you can find some way to stop this thing from blowing up the world. Maybe take the fields down. Be creative.* Stalling to save the world… well…whatever worked.

Then P-21 staggered, blood fountaining between his shoulder blades. He dropped, eyes bulging as he collapsed to his haunches, his eyes still on the computer terminal. "No!" I screamed, turning Sexy towards the girders above, switching to explosive slugs, and going to town as I screamed mentally at Scotch Tape. *Healingpotionhealingpotionhealingpotionnownownow!* I couldn't lose him. Not him! Not now! Not ever! Sexy screamed along with me as I sprayed the upper girders where I guessed the sniper had taken the shot from.

Ohnoohnoohno! Scotch Tape thought back just as fast and desperately, her hooves fumbling on the potions before pouring one, then another, into his mouth. His throat worked weakly, and I burned with the wish that Glory was here. She'd know what to do with a gunshot! All I could do was *give* gunshots. "Drink, Daddy! Come on!" she begged as she gave him a fourth.

Finally, he stirred, pulled himself up, lowered his head, and vomited a slurry of blood and healing potion onto the floor. *Need to refresh...* he thought, then pulled himself back up to the computer and typed the series of commands again. The thrum sounded again, and he coughed up some more blood. "I think the bullet it still in there," he said, grimacing. "Feels like a shaft of metal straight through me."

"Hold on. I'll find him. Maybe he has root access. Then we'll get this taken care of," I said in a rush. *I love you.*

He looked back at me, in obvious pain, and smiled. *I love you too.* He smiled a little wider. *If only you were a stallion, Blackjack.* Then his smile faded. *Take care of Scotch Tape, no matter what.*

I will. I promise. I replied, then leaned forward and kissed him firmly. *Just a little longer. We'll get out of here, and everything will be sunshine and rainbows. Promise.*

Then Scotch Tape fired her disintegration rifle up at the rafters. "Will you two stop thinking at each other and get going? I think the sniper is still up there!" She fired again and thought, *Hee! Blackjack and Daddy sitting on the moon. He's gonna make her... er... damn it.* And she fired another burst with renewed vinegar.

I swept my eyes around our surroundings. There were my friends. I was guessing that that rapidly moving yellow bar was Rampage up above. That left one yellow bar thataway, on the other side of the great big…enormous…glowing…

Oh. That must be Tom.

It was hard to overlook a small mountain hovering in the middle of the shaft, but it was so big I'd missed it in the confusion. The moonstone was shaped like a multifaceted teardrop and was suspended in the center of the walkway ring and a loop of talismans. The only thing I could compare it to size-wise was the *Celestia*. It pulsed with a steady, warm illumination. Something seemed to swirl around inside as I watched, but I couldn't tell if it was a trick of the light or not.

I made my way around Tom, keeping my eyes open for Sniper or my target. The sound of fighting was growing ever quieter above me. Cognitum would be down here herself any second. I had to find him…and he didn't make it hard for me. As I trotted around the curve of the giant moonstone, I spotted the yellow stallion sitting before a terminal, his eyes focused on the screen as his hooves worked the keys. I trotted right up behind him.

"Hello, Blackjack," he said without turning from the terminal.

"Hey, Dealer," I replied as I sat next to him. "So. Been busy?"

"None of us really have time to chat. If you were smart, you'd get out of here, get on your rocket, and go back to Equus," he said, eyes on the screen. "Or you could just kill me."

"That'd be a waste," I replied. "After all, you went through so much hard work to get that body back." That made him pause a second. "You have to help me stop her, Echo."

"And then what? The Wasteland stays poisoned and polluted

forever? Hope that six heroes magically make everything better with their friendship?" He typed faster than I could follow, even faster than P-21. If they worked together, maybe they could do something. "Has the Wasteland changed pony nature, Blackjack?"

"This is not the time, Dealer," I replied sharply. "I just watched my dearest friend nearly get killed. End of the world shit going on. You know that Cognitum is fucking crazy."

"Maybe. Or maybe she's exactly what we deserve right now," he countered as he continued to stare at the screen. "Two hundred years of savagery and butchery. Two hundred years and we're still fighting wars. I've seen all the same slaughter you have, Blackjack. Is the fate of the world to continue being a post-apocalyptic nightmare?"

"Of course not. We make it better!" I countered sharply.

"Just like Luna and the Ministries did?" he asked as his hooves worked the controls. I could have yanked him away, but if I did, I could probably write off any chance of his help. "Two hundred years, and the most we have to show for it is the same mess we had after the bombs fell. You might think this Lightbringer is going to make everything all right, but that's exactly what everypony thought when the Ministries were announced. 'Oh, Luna is taking over. Everything will be different!' And it was, only it was *worse*!"

"What about what I'm trying to do, Dealer? I'm trying to make the world a better place. And stopping Cognitum from achieving her goal is definitely a big plus in my book," I shouted, wondering if this was a hopeless cause.

"She's what we deserve!" he shouted, turning away from the screen and looking at me with anguish in his eyes. "We fucked up. We fucked it all up! We deserve a monster like her to rule over us. To punish us for taking two centuries and still not setting things right!"

I sighed and rubbed my face. Echo sure had spent way too much time around Goldenblood. "You don't get to make that call. Neither do I. But nopony deserves a shittier life. Not me. Not you. Not even Cognitum, even if she's causing all this mess. Everypony needs a chance at a better life, and if they blow it, another chance. Nopony deserves a worse life. Ever."

He stared at me, and I couldn't tell if he was marveling at me or pitying me. Maybe both. "How do you do that, Blackjack? Be so right and so wrong all at the same time?" He stopped typing and sat, closing his eyes. "I just wanted to live, Blackjack. I didn't want

to fade away inside that nothingness. I felt it happening ever since we first left 99. Like slowly bleeding to death." He gave me a stricken little grimace. "And I knew you'd forgive me, too. That made it so much easier and so much worse."

"Yeah, well…I lived. I'm here. And now you get another chance to do what's right," I said as I stared into his desperate eyes. "Help me stop Horizons from firing."

"I–" he stammered.

Now, I've had a lot of experience with things messing around in my head. Sad to say, but I've become a bit of an expert on outside sources intruding on my mind. From the Goddess's relentless pressure to machines playing with my perceptions to supernatural thingies gibbering in my brain, there'd been no lack of experiences with things reaching out and making contact with my head. So I really shouldn't have been as shocked as I was when a stallion's rolling deep bass voice boomed out, *NO! HORIZONS MUST FIRE! THE EATER OF SOULS MUST DIE!*

It knocked me right off my hooves, and from the sight of Echo, he'd heard it too. It had him curled up fetally, a nosebleed starting to drip out of his yellow nostrils. "Too loud!" I thought and shouted at the same time.

OH. SORRY. I'LL TRY AND TURN DOWN THE VOLUME. the voice said with a lower rumble. *HOW'S THIS?*

Well, it wasn't *quite* splitting my head open this time. I thought I could handle it, at least. "Better. So… who are you?" I frowned. There was something familiar to this voice. "I've heard you before."

YES, IT'S NICE TO FINALLY MEET YOU FACE TO FACE. The voice chuckled. I turned, looking left and right, then behind me at the massive moonstone. Only this time, the light that had swirled within had coalesced into a gargantuan glowing pony-shaped outline…an alicorn-shaped outline. Well, that raised a couple theological questions I didn't want to think about at all right now! The pony's eyes were ovals filled with bluish light. *CALL ME TOM.*

Footnote: <Error: Footnote Not Found>

Chapter 74: Call

"I have to find a way… To make this all okay… I can't believe this small mistake… Could've caused so much heartache… "

There was a certain point somewhere in my life where reality and my expectations of it diverged sharply and never really realigned after. Maybe it was being trapped underground, watching my friend's wing fall off. Perhaps it was back when I woke up with more metal in my body than any living mare – any living creature, come to that – should have. Or it might have been when I found out I was related to one of the most famous Ministry Mares. A goddess hijacking my body to kill a friend counted pretty high on the list, too, but just a little underneath getting my mind trapped in a machine. Or course, deaths one, two, or three might count.

So when I stared up at a giant glowing alicorn-shaped figure within the moonstone, the only thing I could reply with was a neutral, "Huh." It was pretty darn high on the wierdometer, sure, but didn't even make the top five. Well, its name was Tom…maybe number five? "Look, Tom, I hate to tell you, but we're a little occupied right now. I'm trying to save my world from your moonstone annihilating the Eater. Sorry." I turned back to Echo. "So, are you going to help us or not?"

His unfocused eyes were fixated on the huge, glowing form. "Huh?" he asked, seemingly unable to tear his gaze from it.

YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. THE EATER MUST BE DESTROYED. the voice boomed, the volume a little below stroke-inducing.

"Right. Unfortunately, I don't want every single person I know to die," I said, glaring up at it. "And I don't have time to argue this."

AH! EASILY REMEDIED! The glowing blue eyes flared brightly.

I lifted my hooves in alarm. "No! Wait!" But the world swirled away.

When it coalesced, I found myself alone, wearing my old security

barding, in Stable 99's atrium. It was definitely cleaner than I'd ever known it to be. It felt so very wrong to see it pristine and utterly deserted. I sat at one of the long dining tables set out in the atrium. "Hello, Blackjack," a stallion said calmly. I turned and looked at an oddly familiar unicorn sitting with his hooves clasped on the table in front of him. Not Goldenblood, thank goodness. A pale white unicorn stallion with a candy cane mane smiled at me. "This should be a little easier."

P-21, Scotch Tape, and Rampage appeared at the table. They looked around, equally baffled, till their eyes landed on the strange stallion. "Charity?" Scotch said. "What are you doing here?"

"Charity?" Rampage asked with a frown. "That's Big Daddy!"

I sighed and rubbed my face with my hooves. "This is all in our heads," I groaned, then regarded Tom flatly. He appeared far too comfortable with this little trick. "We're all seeing someone different. For me he's some strange stallion from my stable."

Rampage clutched her head and groaned. "Unicorns…flipping unicorns…Unicorns living their weird unicorn lives…"

"So, this isn't Chapel?" Scotch Tape asked as she stared around, in wide-eyed wonder. "But it looks just like it!" Then she frowned a little. "A little too clean though. And we haven't even started on the windmills yet!"

"That's because it's coming from your head," I said, then glared at Tom. "You built what we're seeing from our memories, didn't you?" He nodded once, and I grunted sourly. Mind games were getting old.. but he'd also made sure it was clear this wasn't actually *real*, like Happyhorn. I grudgingly gave Tom a point for that. Tom smiled, folding his hooves patiently as he waited. I looked over at P-21, who seemed a little troubled. "Who do you see?"

He looked over at Scotch Tape, then at Tom. "Somepony…who helped me…"

I stared at Tom a moment. "So you're appearing as somepony who can help, but not ponies we love. And I bet this isn't happening in normal time, right?" I asked, thinking back to being trapped in the Happyhorn simulation. He gave another shake of his head.

"But why are we here?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean," she continued, pointing a hoof at me, "weird stuff happening to Blackjack is normal. I'd freak out if she went a month with nothing strange happening."

"Gee, thanks." I snorted and rolled my eyes. Still, I had to admit, I

was curious too.

Tom smiled and spread his hooves. “Who can say? I intended this to be a party of one, but it seems the moonstone she rolled in and her affinity for all of you has pulled you in as well. I can only speculate that the malfunction of the divinatory device resulted in this gestalt.” He arched a brow at me. “Or did you do this intentionally?”

Rampage burst out laughing and snorting. “Blackjack! Doing something like this? On purpose? Hah!” The three of us stared at her flatly as her laughter faded. “What? I’m just saying you usually do cool stuff on accident and mess up if you…” She trailed off, then said sulkily, “Well, *I* thought it was funny.”

I sighed, closing my eyes and wishing there was one more person here who could have made sense of this mess. I could imagine Glory sitting beside me, willing me to be smart enough to figure all this out. I thought about it a moment and took a deep breath, then met Tom’s eyes. “Okay. You brought us here for a reason.” I remembered what it had boomed out at me. “You want us to let Horizons fire so that you can destroy the Eater.” He nodded again, his eyes turning sympathetic. “Even though it will kill everything in the Wasteland.”

“Not everything,” he replied. And suddenly the walls around me were torn away in an enormous explosion. The blast whipped at my mane, and I lifted my hooves to protect my eyes from the blinding light. Of course, it wasn’t a real explosion, and the gale of dust and smoke soon died, leaving the table undisturbed as it floated in the air over an immense bay of flat water. The sky was the color of flux, and the mountains appeared as if they’d been shoved up and scoured by colossal claws. Millions of tiny motes of light swirled around us like an animated luminescent blizzard. The ocean seemed thicker than normal water, as if it had clotted, congealed, and set.

We drifted in midair over Hoofington Bay, heading west towards shattered mountains. At least, I thought it was west. The sun and moon were huge orbs in the rainbow-hued sky. “No…” Scotch Tape whimpered, and P-21 put his hooves around her. I could have used a hug as well.

“What is the point of this?” Rampage roared at him, sweeping her hoof over the devastated, ravaged landscape. I thought I saw Spike’s mountain as a shattered pile of rubble. There were no ruins. Trees. Even rivers. Nothing. It was as if a great hoof had scraped the land

bare in all directions, melting and burning everything in its path. A few shattered ruins remained further away, smashed beyond recognition. I spotted the enormous shell of the S.P.P. in the distance, crushed like an egg against the side of a mountain. As another coast came into view ahead of us, I saw what might have been Manehattan, looking as if all buildings had been stacked on their sides and crushed into the earth. The sky was filled with countless motes drifting around us like snow. “Showing us…this?”

The table set down on a rocky boulder surrounded by a heap of gravel and mud. “That,” Tom said as he looked at the muck. As we watched, the pebbles stirred, then tumbled down as something green poked its way out into the open. It was some of the puniest, sickliest grass I’d ever seen, but it was alive.

“That?” Rampage scoffed. “That’s it?”

“Wait,” Tom said, and the sun and moon began to move faster and faster through the sky above us till both became solid, flickering bands, one golden and one silver. The glowing motes began settling to the ground, disappearing into the earth. Rain fell, washing the blasted land, then snow. Then blankets of white appeared and disappeared again and again, and with every disappearance, that green, sickly patch darkened and spread. It crept like fingers along cracks in the rock and around the edges of muddy puddles. It seemed to appear by magic. The grass deepened and elongated, died and regrew as years whirled past our eyes. Bushes sprang up, followed by thin trees. The remains of the old world rusted away and disappeared under a verdant carpet of life.

And it wasn’t just plant life, either. Insects crawled amongst the sprouts. Fish splashed in the clear creeks. Frogs jumped along the bank. Birds reappeared in the sky. Then more animals, some I knew and others I didn’t. The millions of motes in the sky had now dwindled to just a few, disappearing ever faster into the trees and land. The table lifted off the earth, and I saw that the life wasn’t just here in Equestria. It was everywhere. The oceans became a deeper and more vibrant blue, fading to green nearer to the coasts. The clouds were cleaner. The megaspells I’d seen ravaging the far world were gone, and the scars they’d left were fading with the passage of time.

We floated over an Equus so transformed that it was impossible to imagine it ever being any other way. And in the dark, there were lights. Small ones, perhaps nothing more than scattered campfires…

but lights. The first guttering sparks of civilization. “It’s beautiful,” Scotch Tape said in awe as we floated between the planet and the moon.

“That is why Horizons must fire and the Eater must die,” Tom said simply, his hooves still clasped before him and a sad smile on his face.

“And all of us, too,” I pointed out, hoping the unacceptability of that was clear in my tone. “LittlePip. Her friends. Everypony I know who is fighting for survival. They all have to die as well?”

“Yes,” he answered, and I was glad he wasn’t smiling when he said it. “And they will not be the only ones.”

“Well, screw that!” Rampage said, standing and slamming her hooves onto the tabletop. “That’s…that’s…like the Angel. The only way to peace is through death? No. Hell no!” I could have hugged her.

“There was a way for more life to be saved, but sadly, it was undone,” he said, his eyes landing on me. The urge to snap at him warred with the desire to kick myself for taking the Redoubt out of the shadow world. “Death is not an ending,” he continued. “It is a transition. The matter of our bodies is only rented from the universe.” Scotch Tape gaped at Tom, her mouth moving slowly and the side of her face screwing up. “We borrow it for a time, gaining a chance to change the world for the better. We take from our surroundings to survive, and when we die, what we take is returned. It is then reassembled into different forms. The carbon in your body today might have been a tree a million years ago, and it might be a diamond ten million years from now. And you, free of your body once more, will continue the song you began far before you could ever remember, on into the future further than you could ever grasp. The song you sing even now, though you cannot always hear it.”

Then we heard the singing of the stars. One note, then a second. A third. A dozen. A hundred. A thousand. Countless voices and melodies resonating from the universe around us. The familiarity and beauty tugged at my heart and drew tears to my eyes. Bright and piping symphonies. Low and deep somber voices. Some sang fast, others slow, some loud, and others softly. As the harmony surrounded us, filling my ears, I could hear a stirring within myself. A song so familiar it felt as natural as breathing, and I looked around as songs rose from within my friends as well. And Equus

sang with us, in a voice more beautiful and wondrous than any before. Because it was our world. Our life. Our song.

We all had tears in our eyes, but it was P-21 who broke the reverie. "And if Horizons doesn't go off? Or if Horizons doesn't destroy the Eater?"

Tom closed his eyes, the beautiful melody of the stars suddenly quieted, and in the near silence the table plunged to the now-poisoned world below. The song of Equus, sickened and dissonant, fell softer and softer. We hovered above the Core. There was no fighting. Everything was still and quiet. Time accelerated again, but now on the ground came the opposite of the explosion of life we'd seen before. What meager greenery there was in the Wasteland dwindled, the valley turning grayer and stiller. We rose again and saw the Wasteland struggling to recover. Even with the skies cleared, life labored and ponies with it. It was as if life itself was being leeched from the land they struggled to make flourish. I had no idea how many generations passed, but soon the entire world had entered a stagnant stasis.

As the planet turned below us, we watched the seas assume the color of lead, and lands even on the far side of the world grayed and browned, withering. The seas seemed to dwindle away, the air thinning. The ground shrunk and wrinkled, canyons and gaps spreading as the planet shriveled. The moon and sun drifted closer and closer to the rock, the former crashing in a momentary firework of light and energy, then darkening to nothing. Finally the sun itself smashed into the world in one last flaming burst of defiance. Sucked dry, the rock itself withered to dust, then to nothing, and all that remained was a shriveled shell, floating like a dark, frozen rock in a dimmer, emptier universe.

"That…" I started to say, but words failed me.

"That's fucked up," Rampage murmured.

"You're saying that what the Lightbringer did was worthless?" P-21 asked with a scowl.

Tom shook his head. "No. Certainly not! In fact, the Lightbringer bought time and hope for your world. Had she not helped, this demise would have come far sooner and surer. The Lightbringer broke the slow slide of entropy and decay. She snapped countless people out of complacency. Even if Red Eye had survived and the Enclave remained in the skies, they still would have fallen within a generation. And neither would have seen their enemy. The Eater is

a parasite within your world, claiming whatever life it can. By the time that it woke from the trauma of its fall, Equus had recovered, and for eons after, the generation of new life far exceeded what it could consume. But the cataclysm that struck your world destroyed that. Now more life is eaten than is renewed, and with each year, the gap grows as the cycle is impoverished. Exhaustion will take centuries, millennia, perhaps... but it is inevitable."

"Bullshit," Rampage said sharply. "What if we just periodically drop little bits of moonstone on it? Not enough to obliterate the world, just wear the Eater away."

Tom regarded me as if asking if I wanted to answer. I sighed and did. "It won't work. The Eater can convert moonstone to starmetal before it explodes. We'd be doing what Cognitum wants to do, just in slower amounts."

"Indeed," Tom said gravely. "It claims the spiritual energy within the stone and makes it its own. Horizons's mass and speed, and my presence, are necessary to prevent the Eater from simply transforming the moonstone to starmetal."

"But why didn't the Eater turn the moonstone pendants to starmetal?" Scotch Tape asked.

"With enough time in proximity, it would have. You already know that moonstone protects from Enervation, but you don't know why," Tom replied. "More important than the stone itself is the soul it contains. The Eater's arrival on Equus extinguished incalculable life, and that life was condensed in the moon. The souls in pieces of moonstone protect the souls of the living."

"That singing noise is a soul?" P-21 asked as he looked out at the distant stars.

"Yes. Inside the moonstone, a soul is protected, though not completely, from the pull of the Eater's own nature. The Eater seeks to make all like it and destroy that which is not," Tom said soberly. "One song. One voice. One note."

"So…it consumes them?" Scotch asked in horror.

Anger flashed in Tom's eyes. "No. That would be merciful. It tortures them eternally until they choose to join it in singing its praises." And the scream filled the air. The scream I'd learned so well since coming out of my stable. It was blessedly short-lived, but it still sent a shiver along my spine.

"But what if what Cognitum said was true, and she can control it? Wouldn't that let everypony live?" Rampage asked, anguish on her

face.

"Even if she could control the Eater like a machine with EC-1101, she gave up the only kind of body that could have resisted the Eater's influence; she would be controlled in turn," Tom said soberly. The dawn broke, and around us was the Core, alive and bright. It was the promise I'd seen while I'd been trapped in the city. Thousands, millions of people living in the massive metropolis. Ponies, zebras, griffins, sand dogs…even dragons…all augmented and living in unity. All distinctness blurred together, differences squashed under the combined pressure of millions of connected minds.

"Why…why is everyone augmented?" Scotch Tape asked with a small frown, shying away from the sight of augmented fillies and colts trotting along in perfect unison. "And…why is it so quiet?"

"They're wired together," I said, then narrowed my eyes at Tom, an idea niggling at my head. "This isn't just a coincidence, is it?"

Tom beamed his approval. "Indeed. The Eater encourages technology that leads to replacing flesh with machinery, merging minds, and greater strife." The scene abruptly changed to a strange, exotic land, a battered city of cracked and patched minarets surrounded by a sandy desert. Row after row of augmented alicorns and pegasi flew in precise formation, strafing the equine defenders on the wall, while dark earth pony and hellhound phalanxes marched in neat regiments below, approaching with relentless might from all directions.

We drifted away over the sand, leaving the imminent carnage behind us. An image of me appeared above the table. My legs were replaced. Then 'upgraded'. Then my body. Wings were installed. Finally, Cognitum's changes.

"But why?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean, I get why it'd want more war, but why augmentation?"

"Because augmented ponies are easier to predict, and connected consciousness blunts the chaotic mix of individuality," Tom said, and the image split in two, one with my original body and one as Cognitum. "Living organisms are inherently more chaotic and unpredictable than non-living organisms. One day you eat Sugar Apple Bombs. The next day you feel peckish for carrot chips. The constant slurry of chemical reactions, hormones, and metabolic shifts creates a more dynamic individual. As more and more organic systems are replaced by predictable, regulated systems, the

individual becomes an ever simpler equation." He leveled his eyes at me, smiling paternally. "You may note that I'm having this conversation with you four and not with Cognitum herself. It would be futile."

"So, you think we're going to let Horizons fire?" I said, rising up and slamming my hooves on the front table. "No! Never! I refuse to give up!" I swept a hoof out, pointing below me, and the desert was replaced by the battle at Chapel. "I won't just write them off while they're fighting for their lives!"

Tom closed his eyes. "This isn't about them, or you. This is about the universe. Equus could…should…be a contributor to the great song. Your lives are temporary. You'd be giving them to better the universe."

"Begging your pardon," Scotch Tape interrupted, "but if this is such a big deal, why doesn't the universe give us some help?"

Tom gave her a wry smile. "What do you think I'm here for?"

P-21 stared at him a moment. "You're going to die to stop the Eater, aren't you?"

Tom closed his eyes and gave a little nod. "It is likely. Almost certain, actually."

"But…didn't the Eater trick Goldenblood into using the blanks to bind you?" I asked.

Tom smiled. "Yes. It was quite helpful. The Eater needs a star spirit. I will be that spirit. But I have not weakened myself by struggling against my restraints. I've waited, patiently. And when we meet, he will not have a spirit enfeebled by exhaustion to devour, but a star of equal might. And even if it costs my existence, it is a price I must pay." His smile vanished, and his eyes turned hard. "The Eater is one of my kind, one who should have returned its essence to the cycle long ago. My passing is a small, inadequate recompense for the harm it has perpetrated."

We all stared at him in silence. "Aren't stars supposed to live… forever?" Scotch asked in a tiny voice.

He closed his eyes, lips in a stern frown. "Nothing does. Nothing should. Our lives are rented time, every moment precious." He opened his eyes, and rage twisted his placid features. "The Eater, through fear or hubris, cheats that rule. One of our own. Our own! It will not be allowed!" The force with which he barked that made us all share an uneasy glance. He closed his eyes again, but his smile did not return.

"What…what if…what if the Legate is right?" I asked in a whisper. There was no reaction. "He's got a plan…a way to use magic shields to catch you and feed you to the Eater. What would happen then?"

He didn't answer at once. I didn't know if it was because he was unsure, or sure and too harrowed by that certainty to respond. "It doesn't matter," he said at last. "You must stop Cognitum from altering the trajectory of entry and then still allow Horizons to fire. The alternative…no…" He shook his head.

"And what happens to us?" Rampage asked. "We just…live on the moon?"

"Yes, if you like, though the detonation of the Flux below us would be more than sufficient to vaporize your talisman," Tom informed her.

Rampage froze, eyes wide. "Really? It would kill me? For certain?"

"The chaotic energies unleashed would shred the necromantic enchantments like tissue paper, and the souls within would be released," Tom answered. I was about to snap at him before he went on, "If you stayed, though, in a generation or two the surface should be ripe for resettlement. Other races have taken their own steps to survive catastrophe. You could start anew."

"Yeah, that sounds great," I pressed, "but what if the Eater catches you in its trap?" He fell silent again, swallowing. I looked at my friends, then back at him. "Well?" He still didn't respond. I grit my teeth in frustration, then snapped, "Tell me!"

Tom didn't answer, but we suddenly relocated far in the sky between the clouds. Behind us, I thought I could see Ponyville. Then a white light appeared in the sky above us. The brilliant bolt illuminated everything like a new sun as it plunged down towards the Core. Suddenly, a ghostly funnel rose from the ground, and Tom was caught as it streaked down, shedding great plumes of blue-white fire as it scraped against the magical fields and slowed in its plunge. As it reached the base of the funnel, a second pillar of glowing light appeared, surrounding the enormous flaring moonstone and holding it in place. The fields pulsated as the blue light flared and blazed inside them.

Then the Enervation scream began, a howl of agony so absolute and all-consuming that it would have shattered my flesh had it been real. From that horrid nexus of light, a green luminescence began to spread across the land. Tiny motes of light winked into life, hovering like tiny stars before sweeping towards that green

nightmare. Mountains seemed to decay and split as the tiny souls merged into rivers of light streaming towards Tom's dwindling blue glow. The clouds around it were swept up in a great whirlwind, a hurricane of annihilative magic whirling under my hooves. In the distance, I saw the S.P.P. hub burst like an egg, one immense soul ripped into the storm and followed a half second later by another tiny mote. Rivers of souls surged from across the sea as well, pouring through silver rings spread centuries ago and now fulfilling their horrible purpose.

The scream built and rose, and with it the blue glow disappeared entirely, and a thing…a horrible silvery thing bathed in a green aura... rose from the earth. I didn't know if it was flesh or metal or some horrible alloy of the two, and I didn't want to know. I just knew that it was wrong, and the very existence of such a thing ripped at my sanity. I could only pray that Tom wasn't giving this vivid a vision to my friends. Scotch Tape had clenched her eyes shut, and P-21 closed his as well as he embraced her. Rampage looked on, but her face was a mask of horror.

Then darkness. Merciful darkness. Then we found ourselves hovering over the moon again. I dared look at Equus, but it had burst open like the S.P.P. hub. Massive boulders were slowly spreading out from where I imagined Equestria and the Core had been. Thankfully, from here, the Eater was just a baleful green star.

"That," Tom said in a harrowed voice, "is why the Eater must die, even if it costs all of you your lives. I'm sorry. Cognitum must be stopped, and Horizons must fire."

"Shit," Rampage muttered, rubbing her face. "Seeing something like that…Horizons almost makes sense."

P-21 and Scotch Tape didn't answer. The filly just sobbed into her father's neck. I wished Glory was here. I wished she'd seen everything I had. I knew…I just knew…if she were here, then she could figure out some solution. Find some way to make it all make sense! It was too big. Too much. Too much for anypony. I wanted her here. Wanted her to hold me.

I felt a pair of hooves around my shoulders, and a pair of soft wings encircled me. Purple mane fell on my cheek, and her lips nuzzled the back of my neck. I turned, gazing up at her gentle smile, then at Tom. The stallion just gave me a sad smile, and I held the hooves embracing me, closing my eyes and pressing back against her. "Please tell me this is real, and not just in my head," I

murmured to her.

Glory just smiled, then leaned in and kissed my lips for an eternity far too short. Then she faded away before me. I wanted to weep again, but I knew what she'd want. I took a deep breath and looked Tom straight into the eye. He'd given me some clear choices, and it was obvious which the best to take was. He met my gaze, his eyes understanding but also pitying.

There was only one answer to give.

"No."

I didn't imagine many brain-invading star spirits wore expressions of shocked surprise like the one I saw on his face. The poor stallion appeared as if he'd been shot. "Blackjack…You must not understand…"

"I understand plenty," I countered, startling him again and earning a worried frown. "We might just be ponies, but we get it. I understand that you think this is the only thing we can do. I get the stakes. I get them plenty. But you are insane if you think I am going to help murder everyone that I love and care for." I looked at my friends, one after the next, and saw matching resolution in their eyes. "We'll stop Horizons, and Cognitum, and deal with the Eater without everyone dying."

Tom stared at me, his mouth working. Suddenly, a laugh broke out from the air, echoing all around us. "Told you," a familiar voice purred in wicked glee. Then a translucent, ghostly form, slinky and with mismatched limbs, appeared hovering next to Tom. Extending a paw towards the stallion, it continued, laughter still in its voice, "Ten bits. Pay up."

"Discord?" we gasped, almost in unison. "But you're dead!" I added the obvious.

"As a doornail," Discord replied. "But I'd hardly let a little detail like that keep me from this moment." He grinned at a disgruntled Tom. "I *told* you she wouldn't take your offer. Ponies are so delightfully entertaining!"

"She should. It's irrational for her to pass it up," Tom argued.

"Of course it's irrational!" Discord said with another laugh. "Since when have rationality and reason triumphed over whims and needs?" He lounged in the air over Tom's head, pulling out a pair of square wire framed glasses and a small chalkboard with way more numbers and diagrams than any decent person needed and explained in a pedantic voice. "You can present her with all the

possible futures you want, with exact probabilities of every result and a clear explanation of what you think the future should be…" Discord tossed the glasses away, bouncing them off Tom's head, drew a smiley face over the diagrams, grinned, and continued, "and she... or any of them really!... can tell you to shove it where the sun doesn't shine!" A devious glint sparkled in Discord's eye as he leered at Tom. "And considering you *are* a sun, that's something I'd *really* like to see." And he tossed the board over his shoulder where it exploded like a grenade with a pink mushroom cloud.

"But her actions may doom the planet!" Tom snapped, gesturing at me.

"So what?" Discord countered flatly, crossing his arms. "The point of choice is not knowing the future. You and Eaterpants are so drearily all-knowing that the only choice you can imagine being right is the one you think should be done. It's all too easy to fall into that trap. Look at Cognidumb. Moldy Goldy. Twilight… Twilight... " He hesitated and screwed up his face. "Spike was right... eh." He shrugged and went on. "Even Mopelestia and Lunatic. All certain that what they did had to be done. But Blackjack doesn't know what the future will bring. She does what she feels is right, even when it's the wrong thing to do. She learns from her mistakes, sure, but she never thinks she knows the only way." Then he looked past me at my friends. "And it's not just her, either."

P-21 held Scotch Tape to his chest protectively. "If you think I'm ever going to just let my daughter die, then you're deluded at best and evil at worst. I don't care if we do get to spend eternity floating as souls or spirits or whatever. I want that chance to be a father. To have a family. And I won't rob thousands of others in the Wasteland of that chance, either."

Tom gaped. "But…how can you be so selfish? If the Eater is allowed to remain, or worse, be reborn, then you are dooming millions upon millions of years of thriving life! You will be robbing the universe of the songs he has taken, yours likely among them! The loss is nigh unthinkable!"

"And what about our lives now?" Scotch countered. "Don't they matter as much as that life millions of years from now? I don't know what my future will be. I don't know if I'll settle down in Chapel and help out the Hoof or go wandering around like Blackjack trying to make bad places better. Maybe I'll have a

coltfriend, or a marefriend, or both. Maybe my own babies. Don't I get a chance to have that life and find out?"

The stallion stared at her in worry. "But…but the lives of billions… trillions…numbers beyond your reckoning are at risk! Your life, and your own babies…the lives of the few cannot equal the lives of so many."

"Bullshit!" Rampage shouted, thrusting a hoof at Tom. "You can't say that those lives in the future are worth any more than ours today just because there are more of them! You can't guarantee they're going to be better people, or even that they'll exist at all! Some other catastrophe could come along and ruin things for them too." She looked at all of us and then added, "Now, I wouldn't have a problem dying myself and getting a fresh spin on the spiritual wheel or whatever, but there're thousands of ponies I know who do deserve their chance at life."

"Yes, they do! They will! Just not... I... " Tom stared at her, then looked helplessly at the translucent draconequus.

"I told you," Discord sang teasingly.

"Here's an idea," P-21 said as he rose. "Instead of any of us dying, why don't you get a couple more stars, and we can pry the Eater out once and for all? And once we do, since Equus means so much to all of you, you can help us fix the Wasteland and do all kind of snazzy, helpful things." Tom bowed his head, a solemn expression on his face. It appeared almost as if he were ashamed. "What? Too busy shining?" Discord, to his credit, also didn't smile. In fact, he seemed to pity the star.

"They don't care about Equus," Tom murmured. We stared at him for several long seconds. "You are... very small... so weak already." He shook his head. "Most of us have our own concerns. Others would just as soon annihilate both the Eater and Equus at once."

And like that, we were whisked away from the planet to a distant star that glowed a cold, blazing blue. We followed it as it drifted past Equus, and then with three puffs of flame it consumed the moon, sun, and planet without even stopping. The universe rotated around us, and another star, surrounded by a disk of whirling gasses, shone a brilliant beam of energy focused on the reappeared planet. The beam liquefied the surface and left it a glowing sphere of dead black glass. This spun away to be replaced by another Equus that hovered in place for several seconds before a small brilliant pebble of a star smashed the planet like an egg, blasting

the moon and sun away in opposite directions. As the rubble whizzed out of sight, another Equus shone in the night. Then a ripple of something unseen and massive passed by, and the entire set of spheres disappeared with three brief, tiny flickers, gone as if they'd never been.

So many ways our world could be destroyed from without. Yet, despite that, I still wasn't about to just let Horizons happen.

One last turn and we were back over Equus again. Tom lifted his eyes. "Those that do care, and we do…please believe me…we do… they have their own trials and problems keeping them from acting. Other threats, some not entirely unlike the Eater. Some far, far worse. I lost my world long ago. The Eater's detonation tore it to pieces. I will give all I can to stop him and to make up for my failure."

Discord sighed and flashed from above Tom's head to the ground next to him, hooking an arm around the stallion's neck in a smarmy hug. "Dear me, things are getting maudlin." He patted Tom's head, getting an annoyed glare from the star spirit. "It's very nice that you're willing to do that. However, that doesn't change that this is their world, Tommy. You're asking them to give up their lives, and while it's grand to say that they'll be reborn, that doesn't make *these* lives any less precious."

"For that matter," P-21 went on, "it'd basically shit on the lives and sacrifices of everyone else who's died to make the Wasteland better. To make anything better in the whole of our history! I don't care if our souls or spirits live on after we die. Life matters. Ours. Yours. Everyone's. If we die giving it our best shot, then I can accept that, but I can't accept that our best shot is the one that kills everyone even if it works." He rapped his hoof twice on the table and locked his eyes with Tom's as he repeated, "Life matters."

I couldn't restrain myself. I threw my hooves around him and kissed him as hard as I could. I didn't even try to restrain myself when he said those two words. I only stopped when I heard music. Rampage had an accordion apparently glued to her hooves while lit candles occupied the tabletop, and Scotch Tape and Discord both wore strange little hats atop their heads. Discord, smoking a cigarette and sporting a T-shirt with broad stripes running horizontally across it, sighed deeply. "Ah. C'est l'amour…"

"Must you?" Tom asked him with a long-suffering look at the ghost.

"Since you asked, yes, I must," Discord said, pulling the shirt, cigarette, and funny hats off with a single sweep of his paw. "Chaos is infinitely superior to annihilation, as I've told you again and again. It's brought us here. It opens up fascinating new possibilities."

"Such as defeat," Tom pointed out.

Discord blew a raspberry. "Oh please. It's no fun if there's not some terrible risk of losing. I've lost multiple times, but I never let that stop me."

"Not even when you're dead," I pointed out, and jabbed a hoof at him. "How are you here at all?"

"Well, I could guess that I'm just a subconscious projection of your desire to defy authority and establish your own control over your own destiny, or maybe it's simply because you're trotting around in a body made of reprocessed me. None of us are truly *here* at all. This is, after all, in your head," Discord said as he reached over and opened a square hole in midair like a door. He poked his head inside only to immediately pull it back out, blushing furiously, the sound of slapping flanks and my moaning drifting through the opening. He slammed the door shut, manifested some planks, and hammered them over the thin air. "Oh my…Well, I think that that's enough exploration of your mind, thank you very much. Twilight's fantasies were so much more…literary. And much less sticky."

"Can we *please* get back to stopping Cognitum?" Rampage asked plaintively.

"Right…" I said as I looked at Tom and then down at the world below us. "I'm sorry, Tom. I think you're okay, for a star. You want to make Equus a better place. I'm all for that. But I'm not taking any option that kills everyone I care about. I don't care if they do get another shot in an afterlife. Every one of them is fighting for their survival. I can't just end that. I have to do something else."

Tom didn't reply for several long minutes. "How?" Tom asked, cocking his head curiously.

"I don't know!" I admitted, "but we'll do it! We'll find a way."

And once again we hovered above Chapel, but this time there were ponies working with zebras to entomb the city. Deus and the Raptors leveled the towers of the Core and all the tantalizing treasures that lingered within. The rubble was buried beneath the earth, and then Gardens spread an immense rainboom of magic that swept over the world. Ponies worked hard planting crops and

healing the poison and scars of the land. They gathered up the silver rings wherever they could be found, returning them to the Core to be entombed with the Eater. With every one, more life bloomed and thrived, and ponies and zebras lived again, wiser and aware of the threat the Eater posed.

Tom stared at me as the Hoof, a great green bowl of life and civilization, spread out beneath us. It would happen. I was certain of it. As certain as a super smart star spirit from space. We'd live with the Eater, deny it whatever we could, and perhaps someday find some way to deal with it safely. We could do it. Ponies and zebras and griffins and…everyone. We could make the world better.

Tom started to laugh and shook his head. "How…unexpected." I expected a patronizing reply, but he simply smiled at the four of us.

"I told you," Discord said with a grin. "Sometimes these 'mere mortals' can accomplish truly staggering feats. They would even have redeemed me if those haybrains had stuck to the script!"

Tom nodded and sighed, then turned to us. "It seems that I must place my fate in your hooves. It's your world. If you have the maturity to make such a decision, then I will respect it. I only hope that you are right."

"Trottenheimer's Folly!" P-21 said, looking at Rampage, then me. "It can destroy Tom, right? And Cognitum has it, doesn't she?" Rampage snapped out of a daze and nodded a little in response. "Then you just have to get it from her and blast the rock. Heck, you might just be able to wreck Horizons's infrastructure with a lucky shot or two!"

"But…what would that do to the star spirit... *thingy*?" Scotch Tape asked, and we all glanced at her. She flushed and snapped, "What? It's not like Blackjack has a monopoly on the word!"

"I would pass on. To what, or where, I do not know. Perhaps I would return to the beyond to shine again, or remain within this sphere, or proceed to some other destiny." He gave her a gentle smile. "Do not fear for me, young one," he continued with a wave of his hoof. "One way or another, I will endure."

"If not as a spirit, we live on as memory," Discord said with a nod.

"Right," I said, my mind racing a mile a minute. I could do this. I could! I just had to neutralize Cogs and…I stood and smacked my hoof against the table. "Right. Let's do this. One last game, with the whole damn world in the pot."

"I think you are making a mistake," Tom said with that calm smile,

“but I will abide. I made peace with this long ago. The falling of one of our own shall be rectified one way or another. I have faith that you mortals will make it so.”

“Alright,” I said as I looked at each of my friends. “We can do this. We’ve come so far. We’ll finish this once and for all.”

“There’re still a few mooks to wipe up,” Rampage pointed out. “That bitch with the missile launcher is being more annoying than your typical unicorn.” I arched a brow at her coolly, and she grinned back. “Present company included.”

I sighed and bowed my head, but gave a smirk in reply. “Okay. I’ll work on Echo. We’re going to need him if there’s any way to get Cognitum out of my old body. P-21, keep stalling the launch. Scotch, make sure Snipey keeps her head down and doesn’t tag him again. Rampage... just do what you do best.”

“Sweet! I’ll finally have the chance to stun them all with my interpretive dance!” she said as she jumped to her hind legs and struck a funny pose, one foreleg stuck off to the side. We all stared at her for a second before she waved her hoof dismissively. “Oh, you mean the whole slaughter thing. Yeah, I can do that too.”

“Oh, I like her!” Discord said with a grin. “Like the pink one with half the giggles but twice the mayhem!” He swept Rampage up and planted a deep kiss on her lips, pulling away with a pop.

Rampage blinked back at him and slammed her hoof across his face, twisting his head around like a corkscrew. “I’m a filly, you pervert!”

“Everything gets weirder every minute,” Scotch Tape remarked, shaking her head. Rampage stuck her tongue out at her. Tom frowned from Scotch Tape to Rampage, pointing a hoof from one to the other, and then shook his head, muttering about needing more notes on these mortals.

I looked at each of them in turn, taking in P-21’s certain smile, Rampage’s eager grin, and Scotch Tape’s nervous smirk. I wished Glory was here, if not to help in the fight, then to think of a solution for if…no. Nothing was going to go wrong. We were going to do this! “Okay. Let’s go.”

The world faded to white as we all stepped away from the table. Distantly, I heard Discord say, “Double or nothing?”

When the chamber under the Lunar Palace returned, I heard my friends as a chatter of thoughts. Echo blinked at the enormous rock at my back, then at me. “What…there was a voice in my head…

telling me…telling me not to do what I was doing. We'd all be machines like her if it worked, and dead if it didn't…" He shook his head. "What did you do, Blackjack?"

"Do? I don't have *do* things to have weird shit happen to me. I can trigger it just by standing around," I replied as I put a hoof around his shoulders. "You were with me for *how* long and never figured that out?"

He dropped his eyes. "You can't beat her," he muttered. "She's going to rule us all. She should…"

"Can't beat her? Yeah. Just like I couldn't beat Deus. Or blow up a battleship. Or take on the Enclave. Or go to the frigging moon," I said as I jerked him around and stared into his eyes. "But I need you if I'm going to do it. I need you to back me up, just like you used to back up Big Macintosh. You've got to trust me, Echo. Do that, and you can go on with your life not feeling ashamed for the mistakes you've made. Okay?"

Echo stared at me for too many long seconds. *How can she trust me after all I've done to her? So like him...* Finally, he gave a shaky nod. "What do you need me to do?" I kept the gaze. *I'll do it right…for once…* At that, I smiled.

"I need you to delay Horizons's firing. If you can find a trick to shut it down completely, that'd be even better," I said as I looked high above. Cognitum was nearly at the throne. "Will any of those Harbingers help us?"

"Maybe. She's convinced most of them that she's unstoppable, though," he replied. "Or she's promised them riches. Or they really hate you. Or all three." He bit his lip. "Cognitum didn't even put kill implants in them. She doesn't seem to think she needs them."

'Cause she had my 'victoryness' working for her. "Right." I nodded and concentrated on my friends. *Echo is going to take over stalling Horizons. Mop up the rest of her muscle as fast as you can. Then we're going to have to get her attention.* I turned and stared at Echo. *Can you hear me?*

He glanced over from the terminal. "What are you staring at me like that for?"

Urk. I really wished I had more time to figure this telepathy shit out. "Nothing. Just buy us time."

I trotted over to where I had a better view of Cognitum way up above me. I couldn't risk teleporting; I might end up stuck in somepony else for time I couldn't spare. I couldn't shout that far…

not over the dwindling gunfire and occasional missile or grenade detonation on the far side of Tom. But…I did have one thing she might hear.

"Hey, Princess Fuckslut! I'm still alive down here!" I shouted into my broadcaster, transmitting on as many frequencies as I could. She froze in midstep and I grinned. "You know, for being a unicorn princess, you're pretty lousy at killing me and my friends. I thought Princesses were supposed to…you know…be able to accomplish shit."

"Blackjack," my broadcaster crackled. "Your impudence is pathetic. Your obscenities betray your utter futility. Do you really think I'll succumb to petty insults when I'm so close to my triumph?"

"Why not?" I replied. "You're not exactly the most advanced artificial intelligence I've bumped into. They didn't have half your glitches, Cognitum. Then again, I guess you don't need cutting-edge programming to get fucked by a horny Horse, do you, Sweetie Butt?"

"It has always been the purview of fools to insult their betters. You will see, Blackjack. I will make sure you survive to see it," Cognitum countered haughtily. "I am Princess Luna. I will restore my realm and rule it as my people deserve. They will enjoy a second golden age!"

"Oh, get off it. You're not Princess Luna any more than you're me. I don't see Princess Luna using incineration spells. That doesn't exactly scream 'moon themed' to me. You're nothing more than a computer glitch pretending you're actually a person. A bad copy in a fragmented memory that snatched a body she can't handle and a soul that you pretend makes you Princess Luna." I stared up at her as she froze, right at the edge of the throne.

"I've changed my mind," she stated primly. "About you surviving, that is. Get down there and kill her. Now." Two ponies appeared at the edge and immediately started to leap down from girder to girder towards me. "Now, it's time to alter the stone's trajectory." She sat on the throne and reached up for the mesh with her hooves.

The first of the two was a unicorn stallion in a black longcoat and shades levitating two automatic pistols. The other was an earth pony mare with a strange long, slim, single-edged sword gripped in her jaws and her mane tied in a topknot. "Go ahead. Pull that mesh down. Soon as you do, I'll teleport right next to you and pull your plug."

She froze, then lowered her hooves. “Perhaps it would be amusing to watch you finally silenced for good, Blackjack,” she said as she sat imperiously on the throne. If she wasn’t actually a princess, she could pull off the look pretty damn well.

Pistols jumped onto the ring that encircled Tom, followed a second later by the blue-gray earth pony mare with the sword. The sickly white unicorn took a moment to shake a cigarette out of a pack and slip it between his lips... as the swordsmare charged in much much faster than I expected! She ran like a pegasus, closing the distance between us with astonishing speed. I unloaded with Sexy, but the moment before I fired, she leapt into the air. The unicorn, farther back from the spread, hit the deck, covering his head.

The mare came down, her head twisting like a zebra’s to bring the blade down in a vertical slash. I rolled onto my side, interposing Sexy’s thick barrel between me and the blade. Despite the thick steel barrel, the edge bit into the metal. I bit down on Vigilance’s grip and slipped into S.A.T.S…twenty percent chance to hit? Only five for her head? And even in the spell, the mare slowly moved back from me! Was she on chems or something?

I tried four shots, but all four missed the swordsmare, cutting through the air inches from her body as she leapt to the side. *Shinde, yariman.* Wha…what the heck did that mean? I kicked my legs and spun around to keep facing her. The mare moved as fast as any zebra, keeping ahead of me. I rolled to my hooves, slowed by Sexy’s weight. Damn it! Why couldn’t I be strong enough to manage it like an earth pony?

Then I yipped as a pistol round bit into my rump. Mr. Pistols had lit his cigarette and had two matte black IF-21 automatics with dual laser sights, silencers, and extended magazines. I quite approved of his taste in hardware. *Hold still, darlin’. We’ll end this nice and neat. Easy paycheck.* He advanced slowly, cautiously, but not fearfully, maintaining excellent trigger control and aim. Worse, he was on one side of me and swordsmare was on the other. I’d have to turn my back on one to deal with the other.

I need help. I tried to maneuver to put the swordspony between me and Mr. Pistols. I failed in that, getting a slice right across my snout that filled my nose and mouth with blood. Now I just concentrated on moving, shielding myself with my forelegs and Sexy’s bulk as best I could. From where he worked behind the terminal, I saw doubt in Echo’s eyes.

I'm coming! P-21 thought at me. *One minute!* A moment later came the thoughts. *I'll save all of you like you saved me. I won't let you die.*

Touching thought, but I didn't have a minute. I couldn't use any magic beyond levitation. And if Echo thought I was going to lose… If I did lose…

No.

I turned my back on the swordsmare and stared right at Mr. Pistols's sunglasses-covered eyes. Now there was fear. I knew that the swordsmare was coming for my head. One slice to finish me off for good. But I was going to kill Pistols first, and he knew it. Everypony knew it.

So I ducked.

The blade passed right over my head, scraping off the top of my helmet as its wielder flew in front of me. Her eyes were wide as she looked back over her shoulder at me, and I entered S.A.T.S. as she landed. I saw every muscle tense as she prepared to leap away to safety. A part of me noted she had one fine ass. Not as sweet as a pegasus's, but still…*Dame!* she thought desperately. I toggled one burst, the spell not yet having recharged enough energy for more, and fired.

It was enough.

Her body shattered into bloody rags and dropped to the floor as so much twitching, writhing, gasping meat, her broken sword skittering away across the metal. She didn't have a fine ass anymore. She didn't have *any* ass anymore. She crawled her way towards the broken hilt of her sword as she bled out, her entrails slowly spooling out behind her. *Watashi wa... meiyo nashi de... shinu koto ga... dekinai...* She stretched one bloody hoof towards the hilt. *Uso megami-sama... gomen na–* Then she went still, and her red bar winked out.

Then I got shot in the head.

It must have been a hollow-point, because thank goodness for the combat helmet that deflected most of the shot, but it still felt like a hammer against my skull. *Take her down quick! Get my fucking money! Never look at the fucking moon again! Fuck this place!* Mr. Pistols thought desperately as he unloaded as rapidly as he could into me, moving to keep the curve of Tom to give him cover while levitating his guns out and into the clear. Even without a direct line of fire, he had phenomenal aim, and I was forced to shift to the side to try and buy myself cover. It didn't work, and my appreciation for

earth pony annoyance with unicorn magic grew in leaps and bounds.

"You know, Blackjack, I'm wondering…" Cognitum purred over my PipBuck. Not now, damn it! I leapt to the side to try and catch the black-longcoated unicorn in the open, but he nimbly jumped off the circular catwalk and onto the girders. Sexy roared my frustration as he took cover behind a vertical beam, and then a second later his guns appeared to either side of the beam and fired back at me with way more precision and luck than any blind-firing unicorn deserved. I was bleeding from rounds that had managed to penetrate the combat barding, and the impacts that hadn't penetrated made me feel like somepony had been using me as their piñata. "Is there something amiss with your magic?"

"I'll teleport up there in a second, and you'll find out!" I shouted back over the broadcaster connection, moving to the side. Something apple-shaped was levitated out from behind the pillar on the right and flung at me. He jumped out to the left, rolling along the metal beam with impressive grace and rising to a crouch to aim both weapons at me. I countered by shooting the grenade as it was halfway through the air, the spheroid exploding in a cloud of shrapnel while the remainder of my fire sent him behind the cover of another girder. The grenade shrapnel still cut into my chest and forelegs, though, and I was reminded of an adage about horseshoes and hoofgrenades.

Wheezing and bleeding, I fished out a healing potion and found that I only had two left. What, had I been drinking them like…oh, yeah. I had, hadn't it? I gulped one down, thankful for the sweet relief the healing magic provided.

Meanwhile, Cognitum purred, "No, I don't think you will. I think you can stay down there and witness my victory. I am Princess Luna, reborn!"

She reached up for the mesh, grabbed it with her hooves, and, as if she were coronating herself, lowered it onto her head. Now would be a great time for that computer to short her brain out! Taking the legs off her was still an option in my book! And I had a momentary stab of hope when her whole body went stiff. Then, suddenly, hundreds of talismans along the walls flared to life, and the entire chamber gave a great rumble.

Then, when I was distracted, Mr. Pistols of course took the opportunity to lob another grenade at me. The metal pinged once

off the deck beside me, and all I could think of was to kick it away from me before it went off. Luckily, my kick sent it over the edge of the platform a second before it detonated. The underside of the platform rattled like a hoofful of bolts had been flung against it. Of course, while I was dealing with that, I took two more rounds in the barding. *Wear her down. Take her apart bit by bit.* Mr. Pistols's thoughts were a whole lot more cool and composed than mine were. *Then get the fuck out of here and spend the first million caps on booze and whores to forget this fucking place.* Well, mostly.

Two more minutes, Blackjack. P-21 promised. *Soon as I can get Sniper to step on a mine, I'll be there.*

There was another distant explosion. *Run out of fucking missiles, damn it!* Rampage snarled in my mind.

Owwie! She shot my leg! What kind of pony shoots a kid? Scotch Tape cried out. *I'm okay, but I won't be able to get to you, Blackjack.*

There was nothing for it. I scrambled off the circular walkway and into the girders. Mr. Pistols was somewhere in here with me. I checked Sexy; the swordsmare had really cut part of it good, but it just had to get me through today. There was a red bar ahead of me. I had no idea if he had an EFS or not, but he was a lot more mobile than me. I had only one edge. I'd have to make the most of it.

Where is she? Cognitum said she'd be easy. That thing needs to look up the fucking definition. Must be in the girders. She'll have an EFS. Just need to get above her. She'll come to me. Above us, there were the sounds of screaming, and through the girders I could see flashes of energy. And here I was, dealing with a pony who was apparently doing all this for money! I moved slowly forward, keeping my eyes up. My boots clanked on the metal. *There. I hear her. That's it. Come towards the red bar.*

If he could hear my hoofsteps. "I don't want to kill you, you know. I just want to stop Cognitum and go home. I think we all want to go home." I concentrated, trying to tune in to his thoughts like a radio. *Bingo. Just like that freak said. Trying to get me to give up and change sides. Just keep talking while I move over you.* I sighed as I saw a bit of movement in the shadows above me. Was it his longcoat?

I sat down and sighed. "I'm so tired of fighting. I don't know who you are, but I'm ready for a change. I don't know what Cognitum told you. How much money she's agreed to pay you. What threats she's made. I just want this to be over. I want to go home. Start a new life. A real life." I levitated Vigilance under the platform

behind me where I figured he'd be most likely to drop down, and suddenly I heard the chatter of gunfire and ghostly screams, of Calamity screaming for Homage and of Velvet begging someone to stop. Focus…. Focus on Mr. Pistols.

Get behind her. She's apparently survived headshots, but nopony survives without a brainstem. Fuck, but she's a talker. What the hell is she talking about? Change? Nothing changes. Everything gets worse. Everything dies. That's the one promise of life: it ends. What matters is how much booze and money you get from beginning to end. I felt the girder I was on tremble slightly as something landed behind me.

I turned and saw him crouched, pistols raised. I could have turned out like him. If I hadn't had EC-1101 to give me direction and friends to keep me good, I could have ended up just like him: fixated on enjoyment and my own wants, screw everypony else. I was pretty self-centered at times. "I don't want to kill you," I said as I kept Vigilance levitated. "I just want to go home. If you help us stop Cognitum, you can come with us."

My turn seemed to unnerve his shaky sneer. *How the hell did she hear me?* "Damn. Here I thought I was being quiet. But that Princess Whatever promised me all the money, and paid me a million up front. A million. If she can just throw that cash around, she sure can take care of me after we're back. Unless you can beat her offer." *I really should put a bullet in her head, but maybe she can.*

"You bet I can. Easily," I countered. "Your life."

That made him chuckle. *Fuck, how original.* "I got two hollowpoints aimed at your head. You can't turn that cannon towards me fast enough to finish me off." *Shit. She's got me talking. Time to--* He paused when I levitated Vigilance from underneath the platform next to him, out of his view, and pressed it against his temple. *Fuck*. "Fuck."

"I don't want to kill you, but I will. I want to stop her. I need help. Echo has switched sides. You can too. You can do the right thing, right now, when it matters most…or I can blow your brains out. I should do that anyway," I said as I glared at my own reflection. "But honestly, the biggest difference between me and her is I'm giving you a chance to do the right thing."

She can't be serious. Fuck. I knew a shipping container of caps was too good to be true. He didn't twitch a muscle. I should have pulled the trigger. If he thought faster than I, he'd take me out. But I'd been given a chance to do better. I had to give that chance to others.

He lowered his guns. “Shoulda known better. Any job that has you going to the moon is no good.” *I should blow her brains out when she turns away…but…fuck. I’m in over my head here. I’ll never get back to Dise at this rate.* “Couldn’t say no to that much money though.” *If it looks like Cogs is gonna win, I can just take her out and say it was all a ploy--*

I smacked him with the barrel of the gun, nearly knocking his glasses off. “No. Help me or run away and hide.” There was another rumble and a scream of rage from above. “There is no taking me out. No ploys.” He stared at me with bafflement, then horror.

… Oh, you have got to be kidding me. She can read minds? I would have doubled my fee if I’d known that. “I’m not a hero, Security. I kill ponies. But I try and do the job I’m paid for.” *Fuck! If anyone finds out I broke a contract, ugggh! Not worth dying for. Can’t pussy out either. Fuck.* “I fucking hate today,” he muttered.

I smirked and rolled my eyes. “Please. My ‘today’ has lasted for months,” I countered, then thought at my friends. *Don’t kill the one with pistols and the longcoat. He’s agreed to help us too*. “Head on back to the ring.” He seemed to get the hint that I wasn’t going to tempt him with my back and headed back.

Too bad. Wish you could have convinced this sniper. She died praising Luna after stepping on a mine. P-21 thought. *How’d you do it?*

I gave him a chance. I thought back. Hopefully it was a chance to spend his pay and not a chance to stab me in the back. *Meet at Echo. We need to find out what’s going on. Rampage?* I thought as we started back towards the ring platform around Tom.

I still haven’t gotten her. I think she’s down to her last missile, though. I’ve gone through way too many legs with this cunt. Rampage paused. *What do you mean you hope I give her a choice to give up! That’s your bag, Blackjack. I got four ponies in me telling me she’s going down!*

I didn’t think it! Did I? *Ok, if I did, I didn’t intend too. Just do what you have to and meet up.* I looked at the stallion as he jumped onto the platform. “Okay. Don’t kill Cognitum right away. I’m trying to get my body back.” The blank look I received for that comment could have told me his thoughts without mind reading. “Look, can you kill the gun pods first?”

Thirty seconds and I’m already regretting this. “Yeah. Sure.” He shook out another cigarette and lit it with a brass lighter, snapping it closed with his magic. *Fucking doomed. Again.* “No problem.”

Scotch Tape limped as P-21 helped her over to us. I took a second

to look around and up, and…

Okay. This wasn't good.

Cognitum contorted and twisted in the seat as lightning arced along the cables connecting her to the throne. All around us, even more milky white talismans were coming to life. The Flux was starting to send up geysers that slowly twisted the girders into increasingly warped shapes. Parts of the entire girder lattice were starting to bend and groan as they began to collapse. The whole plate above began to sag and tear in places. Magical fields along the periphery of the structure sprang to life, and enormous runed symbols of magic filled the air, some lining the walls and others around the throne.

Okay. This was getting a little ridiculous. I ran to where Echo worked furiously, his eyes staring at the terminal screen as he juggled a dozen little tasks at once. "What's happening to her?"

"She altered the trajectory. Then this happened," Echo said, tapping a button.

"You are a tyrant," Goldenblood hissed over the speakers. "A monster unrepentant. You could have spared Equus the nightmare I wrought. Instead, you've demonstrated that you are unworthy of rulership. I will correct the mistake I made, Your Majesty!"

Echo killed the voiceover. "It's been repeating versions of that ever since she made the alteration," he said as he resumed his furious typing. "She's been locked in ever since. Her gun pods tried to scrap the computer, but it's shielded."

"Are you sure about that?" P-21 asked as he peered up from under the brim of his hat. "I think she's doing something."

I stared as well. It was hard to make out, but it looked like she was manipulating something small and shiny. Something like a large pistol of some kind. Something familiar…

Folly.

"Oh shit! Hold on!" I screamed as a blinding bar of light exploded above us. Cognitum's aim had been off, and the beam hit the field of magic to the left of the throne. The magic interacted, and instead of one beam blasting clear through the roof, a hundred smaller refracted beams lanced out in a fan that then ricocheted wildly off a second magic field behind the first. Beams of blinding white light ripped through the cavernous Lunar Palace, as the plate and platforms came apart.

Once again, I consulted the list of magic spells I wished I could cast

right now but couldn't and moved a shield spell to the top. The plate ripped and tore, coming to rest like an immense spiral staircase around us, the platforms a twisted helix rising up to where the throne, inexplicably held up by a single support, remained. Beams and rebar punched right through the plate decking, and something caused the entire thing to lunge up and hang at an angle. Cables dangled and sparked. The F.A.D.E. talismans remained where they were, suspended in midair by their active enchantment.

On the plus side, none of my friends were dead, the dome hadn't been breached, and my body hadn't been vaporized.

On the minus side, Cognitum was free. The mesh dangled from the throne.

"How dare he?!" Cognitum roared as she loaded a second silver bullet into Folly. "How dare he think he can trap the Goddess of the Night like vermin?!"

Go to the moon. Become fantastically rich. Why did I think coming to the Hoof was a good idea? "Tell me you're taking point," Mr. Pistols said. *If you think I am…shit, mind reader…um…you're fucking crazy.*

"Who *are* you?" Scotch Tape asked, a bit suspiciously.

"Bastard," the grayish white unicorn said simply.

"Seriously?" Scotch Tape clearly wasn't impressed.

"It's what everyone calls me. The Bastard. You Bastard. Mister Bastard." *What is it with mouthy fillies these days? Honestly…*

"Are you still connected?" I asked Echo, who had clutched the terminal for dear life when the platform we'd been on had lunged up and was now hanging with it at a sharp angle above Tom.

He tapped the keys. "I am. The subsystems must be embedded in the walls. I think the computer's using mechasprites to keep things working till Horizons goes off." He glanced down at the surging and bubbling sea of Flux and rapidly touched several keys. "I'll try and keep things together. Cognitum is your problem now."

Yeah. It was time. I considered each of my friends, and they each gave a nod.

"Die, traitors to the goddess!" screamed a mare from the wreckage of the scaffolding slightly above us, about a hundred feet away. The bloody and battered yellow unicorn pointed her missile launcher right at us. Then something was flung from above, striking her in the head. A dismembered hoof. "Ow!" she cried out, rubbing her horn as she picked up the foot. "Why aren't you dead yet?" she screamed as she swung the missile launcher up at the descending

Rampage.

Unfortunately for her, Rampage landed atop her. She'd lost most of her spiked armor from who knew how many detonations, but she still retained enough weight to crush the petite unicorn under her. Then she reared back her head and smashed her forehead into the unicorn's until, on the third impact, the unicorn's horn broke off. Perhaps that would have been an ideal time for Rampage to stop, as the unicorn shrieked and her magic disappeared, sending her missile launcher clattering down into the wreckage below. Rampage wasn't one for stopping though, and she repeated the head butts a dozen more times till the unicorn's face was a concave bowl.

Rampage hopped easily over to us, scowling. "Damn it. I had a half dozen retorts I could have made, but I was too busy smashing her face in. Now she's dead." Rampage scowled at me, her face a mask of gore, but then she shrugged. "Eh. Oh well. Maybe I'll get lucky and Cognitum'll vaporize me with one of those shots, eh?" She grinned and tapped my side with her hoof.

"You still want to die?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"I just smashed a mare to death with my face. What do you think?" Rampage said, then looked up at Cognium. "Oh, hey, she reloaded!" Rampage started to jump up and down and wave her hooves in the air. "Here! Coggerhead! Me! Shoot me!"

Shit! I was running, and it didn't matter where. The collapsed plates had made two incredibly steep, broken ramps that I could make my way up, but it wasn't easy. I had to reach her, make her stop using up all my shots of Folly. My hooves struggled for any crossbrace or twisted bit of metal that I could use for purchase as I tried to close the distance. Behind me came another brilliant pillar of light. It punched a perfect hole down through the wreckage and into the Flux, which seemed to suck it up as if hungry. The mass of metal and fluid gave an almost tectonic rumble. Only the talismans and magical fields were keeping it up, though a cloud of mechasprites worked to reinforce things as best they could. From below me came Rampage's plaintive wail of "Oh come on! Hit me already!"

The gun pods swept out to either side of Cognitum as I scrambled up the shuddering ruin of the Lunar Palace. She stood imperiously above us all, a condescending smirk twisting her lips. *Pitiful. Pathetic. Presumptuous. She actually thinks she can win.* Her horn began to glow. *Just like Twilight. Well, I won't make the same mistake*

twice. This time, her friends die, starting with her sex stallion. I glanced back, spotting P-21 exposed for a moment as he struggled to maneuver past a twisted loop of girder.

Look out! P-21 raised his head in time to spot the flare of red light atop her horn. The crimson beam sliced through the air, and he jumped aside, springing nimbly and keeping his head low as he avoided the beam. It left a glowing, molten line where it passed, singeing the corner of his hat. He met my eyes and sent back a wave of gratitude.

Annoying gnats! The two gun pods dropped towards me as I reached the second half of the fallen platform, halfway up to her. Then two more moved around from behind the throne and followed the first pair; apparently she'd been keeping spares in reserve. The two pods on the attack sprayed me with crimson beams, and I screamed as I felt myself burned by their salvos. *Yes! Burn, you insufferable fool!* The damned things jinked far too quickly for me to even attempt to hit them with Sexy, even with S.A.T.S. I drew Vigilance, loaded armor piercing rounds, and slipped into the magic to hit one of them three times, but aside from breaking a targeting talisman, I did little to disable the hovering weapons.

Then a grenade wrapped in a glowing teal nimbus launched up from below me and streaked like a guided missile straight at one of the quartet. The explosion peppered me with shrapnel but tore the front off the drone, which whirled wildly, firing blindly in all directions as it spiraled down towards the Flux. I glanced down and saw Bastard, taking cover behind a broken fold of steel, send another grenade aloft, but a beam from Cognitum detonated the apple before it reached the remaining drones. Then another. When Cognitum blew the third out of the air, he snapped, "Damn it! Those are a hundred caps each!"

However, Cognitum couldn't block Scotch Tape's wild fire with the disintegration rifle, a torrent of green bolts spewing up at the pods, the cybermare, and me. Cognitum's crimson shield absorbed the fire, but the gun pods had to scatter to avoid it. I pressed myself to the floor and struggled to down my last healing potion. One of the pods took that opportunity to nip in, grab one of my hindhooves with a claw on a tendril, and lift me into the air, hauling me over the really…incredibly…ridiculously high drop. It pulled me up towards Cognitum, her horn blazing in triumph.

Don't worry; I got you! Rampage thought as I twisted around, trying

my best to shoot Cognitum and not look down as I wondered how Rampage of all ponies was going to help me all the way up here. And then an enormous wagon-sized chunk of metal scrap came flying through the air straight at us. The gun pod only managed a feeble volley of red beams at the metal block before being smashed aside, and Cognitum's eyes widened in shock as the block continued towards her unimpeded. She reared up, folding her wings in front of her, and as the block impacted with her shield, her wings flared out, slicing burning lines of fire in the metal and sending the shrapnel raining back down.

I didn't quite have the best view of this, however, because the impact with the gun pod had sent it whirling in midair, and when the claw released my hoof, I went flying up above Cognitum and her throne. *I shall break these upstarts! I shall show them the futility of their opposition! I cannot be defeated!* her mind roared at me as I reached the apex of my fling and…hey! The gravity talismans clearly weren't working up here!

I flailed my hooves around as I struggled to stabilize myself, finally taking a page from LittlePip's book. I used my magic to grab myself within my own telekinetic field. If I hadn't been on the moon, no doubt it would have been futile. Here, I managed to stop my spin and orient Sexy towards Cognitum below me.

Unfortunately, using magic sent my perceptions wandering. I was Rainbow Dash standing in the midst of a scene of carnage. Dead Brood choked what looked like a hallway in an S.P.P. tower. "Is he dead?" Rainbow Dash asked tersely.

"Yeah," Silver said. "Even we die when our heads get cut off." The augmented mare was missing a foreleg, and both her wings were shattered. "Damn it…" she said as she regarded the two dead Enclave cyberponies she'd formed a trio with. "I was going to try and get that Morningstar guy to grow him a new penis…or a new body…or something."

"Later," Rainbow Dash said as she turned and went into the room where Homage tended to an injured Windsheer. "Is he going to make it?" Rainbow asked as he breathed heavily, blood dripping from a nostril and out the corner of his mouth. He gave an annoyed twist of his lips, pushing her away with a hoof.

"He needs a healing potion. We're out," Homage said, leaving him and turning her attention to a terminal next to him. The room was an absolute mess of wires, equipment, cables, and corpses. "Also,

they must have gotten an interface into one of the sealed compartments. Probably with a teleporter. They're probably working to bypass our bypass."

"What's going on?" Rainbow asked as she looked at monitors. Several showed tons of ponies streaming into the Core, overwhelming the few trying to keep them out. Two others showed the Skyport with a tornado in the midst of it. A tornado with a face. Three Raptors were battling the swirling wind. "What's happening at our command?!"

"I don't know. It's all falling apart. We should have gotten an alicorn resupply an hour ago. Something bad happened," Homage said as she typed furiously on the keyboard, tears running down her cheeks. "Damn it! I can't do anything but watch!"

Wait…why was I suddenly getting hot? I cut the magic, the room faded away, and I found myself being bathed by crimson light projected from Cognitum's horn, the cone of energy focusing into an incinerating beam. There was nothing for it. I had Sexy pointed in the right direction, so I let her rip. The full automatic stream of slugs pounded into her shield like a river of hammers. One by itself might not have been a problem, but twenty within three seconds were enough to make her focus on defense once more. It also had the added effect of launching me away from that incinerating magic and towards one of the shimmering magical fields.

Contact with the surface of it was like standing on tingling ice. I spread all four of my legs apart to keep from falling on my face and kept Sexy focused on her. With the real Luna's soul empowering her, she might not need to chow down on gems constantly, but she still had to manage her power. The gunfire kept pushing me against the F.A.D.E. shield and not plunging down to a messy end. From below, Scotch Tape and Bastard kept up a withering fire on Cognitum. P-21 fired a grenade of his own which went right past the two remaining gun pods and detonated against Cognitum's shield with a crackling sphere of lightning. She screamed not just in frustration and rage but in pain as well. Parts of her shield flickered away.

Suddenly she curled up, and for a brief moment I thought maybe this might be an opening. But then she launched herself into the air between the throne and maneframe, and when she flung her wings wide, a sphere of fiery energy blasted out from around her. It smashed me like a bug against the F.A.D.E. shield as she roared,

“How dare you? How dare you! I am Princess Luna reborn! How dare you stand against me? Me!”

“You’re a nut!” Scotch Tape screamed up at her. “Luna doesn’t mean fire, you ditz! You can’t even get her powers right!” I could have cheered, but I was too busy sliding downwards along the crackling surface of the shield.

A massive slab of steel ripped out of the wreckage. “I will not suffer the insolence of foals!” And the skywagon-sized chunk streaked down at the Scotch, her eyes wide... only to halted just before impact, the girders under the filly groaning. The slab of metal, still glowing with Cognitum’s magic, shifted to the side, and I saw Rampage’s striped form standing over Scotch, her legs straining against the impossible weight as only an earth pony could.

“No you don’t!” Rampage shouted up at Cognitum. “You owe me a death, and you don’t get to kill anypony else till you do me! You hear me? I’m not dying last! I’m dying next!” With a great heave, she shoved the block to the side and then grinned savagely up at Cognitum. “So take your best shot!”

“I should have deactivated your talisman when I had the chance,” Cognitum snarled as she hovered in the air. “I’ll not make that mistake again!” she said as her magic reached out, grabbed all five of us, and pulled us into the air.

“Fuck! I hate this job!” Bastard shouted as he was hauled up.

“Daddy!” Scotch Tape screamed as we were clustered together before the cybermare. The remaining pair of gun pods rose up behind us, covering any possibility of getting away. Something in the vast void below us gave great rumble, and through the wreckage came a throbbing pulse of sound. I only hoped Echo was still alive and keeping Horizons from going off.

Cognitum drew Folly and slipped a silver bullet inside. “Enough. You will either bow and submit, or you will die. I am through indulging you foals in your delusional fantasy of resistance!”

“Never,” P-21 declared evenly, his eyes drilling into Cognitum’s glowing eye plates. “It doesn’t matter what power you have. You’re a tyrant, no better than our Overmare. It doesn’t matter how much power you have. Eventually, people will resist, if only out of spite. Killing us won’t change a thing. You’ll never be a princess.”

Cognitum stared at him. *I can’t kill them instantly. They must suffer. They must despair! I must prove them wrong. I must break them!* “Give it up, Cognitum,” I retorted. “After all we’ve been through, all of us,

do you really think we'll break now? Ever? You can't defeat us. All you can do is kill us."

Then Cognitum smiled as she drew me closer. Her magic pulled Sexy from me and, with a flare, scrapped the weapon. *Oh, come on,* I thought plaintively. "Oh really. Nothing?" she said, grinning maliciously. And from her flowed a deluge of hatred like a waterfall of flamer fuel. She hated my interference. My stubbornness. My pride. My organicness. My naïve optimism. My friends…oh, how she hated my friends! And then her head turned to regard them one by one.

"No," I whispered in horror.

"Oh, yes," Cognitum purred. I opened my mouth again to scream at her, but her magic muzzled me. "Now, which one first?" Rampage brightened and raised her hoof but the crushing magical grip silenced her as well. "Not. You," Cognitum declared firmly. "If I have anything to say about it, you'll live out the rest of time wandering lost and blind on this wretched ball of rock. And not the other traitor, either. Though I am gravely disappointed with him, he'll be able to make up for it in servitude to me for the rest of his days. That leaves…" She pulled Scotch Tape and P-21 in front of the rest of us. Her horn pointed from one to the other as she said in my own voice, "Eenie. Meenie. Miney. Moe…"

I was barely able to open my mouth as tears ran unbidden down my checks. "Please. No. Kill me if you have to."

Scotch Tape struggled as her plasma rifle was torn away and melted. The tiny purple unicorn in me wondered why Cognitum's magic was so different from Luna's. Was it her desire to destroy, her hatred, that corrupted Luna's old gentle nature? Was that fiery magic something my old body was capable of, now amplified immensely due to the princess's soul that imbued it? I thought these things because it helped me ignore the telepathic scream of panic coming from the struggling Scotch Tape. I couldn't begin to break through to her as she sobbed frantically over and over again.

But I looked over at P-21 next to me.

Calm. Complete calm. He even wore a small smile. I didn't know if it was the telepathy or just that we'd gone through so much together, but I knew…just knew…it would be alright. *It's not always about you, Blackjack.*

Cognitum caught my look to him, and he was pulled away from our line towards her. "You. Yes. You'll do. Then the filly. Blackjack

last. Rampage can be entombed alive here, and the traitors can return with me as witnesses that I am the greatest princess of all time!"

She levitated him to her and for a moment hesitated, lips pursed, turning him this way and that. His utter composure left her nonplussed. As with Scotch and myself, Persuasion was yanked away, bent like a nail, and tossed aside. "You likely have some bomb hidden in your tail, don't you?" she sneered, and the shadow of a grimace flickered across his gorgeous features as her magic ripped out great big chunks of his mane and tail, casting them into the void below. Half a dozen grenades he'd secreted tumbled after them. He clutched the black duster hat to his chest as he was divested of his armament. *Stupid, sentimental stallion.* Cognitum's mind worked furiously as she studied him, bilious rage pouring from her. *How to make this hurt Blackjack the most? Burn him alive now? He was her little fuck pet, rutting her every second they could. So obscene!* Her lips curled. "Any last words for your friends?" she asked as she turned him to face us.

He nodded, then bowed his head. "Yeah," he said, then lowered his face into the cowpony hat. For a moment his face was completely hidden inside it. Then he withdrew it and smirked at us.

And dangling from his lips were a half dozen metal stems.

The detonation was like a lightning storm as six spark grenades went off in unison. I felt my mane stand on end and tasted batteries as the crackling disruptive magic washed over us. Even for me, in an entirely organic body, it was disorienting this close.

And Cognitum was much closer.

The cyberpony screamed as magical will vied with her technological nature. Then the talismans adorning her body flickered and struggled. Finally, they died. The five of us fell. Scotch Tape luckily landed on the stairs right next to the walkway leading up to the throne, where Cognitum collapsed with a crash of metal. Rampage bounced and skidded halfway back down to Tom. The rest of us landed scattered across the wreckage. I hit a beam so hard the wind was knocked from my lungs and I was left coughing and aching. Better a beam up here than a beam way, way down there, though.

I struggled up onto the span and crawled over to the broken walkway. "Where's P-21?" I shouted and thought at once. Then I grew more alarmed as I looked around and didn't see him. I

struggled for several seconds, before looking over the edge and trying to find a tiny blue form. Again, nothing. Then I spotted P-21's black hat dangling from a broken spur of metal. I picked my way over to it, the structure groaning under my hooves as I made my way to it and scooped it up in my hooves. "P-21! Where are you?" I projected and shouted.

"Daddy!" Scotch Tape cried out.

"I got him!" Bastard shouted, the longcoat-wearing hitpony levitating P-21 from over the edge. I limped over to him. His eyes fluttered open, and with a pained smile, he croaked out a weak "Hey." He looked a mess, his body battered and abused but intact. Huge bloody clumps had been torn from his hide, and he looked as if he'd been tossed in a thresher. I hugged him gingerly. "Anypony got a healing potion?" I asked, mostly looking at Bastard.

"You don't know a healing spell? What kind of unicorn are you?" he replied skeptically, trotting over to P-21 and setting his horn alight. It wasn't as impressive as a medical pony could have done, but it stopped the bleeding and repaired most of the scratches and holes.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You know, once upon a time, unicorns only had a few spells related to their magic talent."

"Yeah, and once upon a time, ponies banged each other with swords and clubs while rolling around in shit all day. Then we invented guns," he drawled, finishing the spell and drawing a cigarette. "Best I can do," he said as he lit it and took a drag, then looked at Cognitum slumped against the throne. "Can't believe you beat her."

"We haven't. Not yet," I said, realizing we were running out of time. "P-21, go down and swap places with Echo. I'll need him for the mind transfer. He's as close as we're going to get to a specialist. Rampage, haul my body onto the throne and hold it there. Scotch Tape, help me take her legs and wings off. Bastard, if you can lower P-21 down and lift Echo up, it'd speed things up a lot."

"Sure. Why not? I always wanted a career as an elevator," he drawled. His magic lifted P-21 off his hooves and over to the edge, sending him down in a controlled fall.

I joined Rampage and Scotch Tape up at the throne, the filly already busy removing my old legs and wings. "Her design is all strange. I mean, it's mechanical, but it's... like... warped," she said as she pulled off one wing. "Still, joints are joints. I just hope I don't

put your wings back on backwards."

As we worked, the swarms of mechasprites were rebuilding and restoring the structure, gobbling up wreckage and spitting it out properly formed. Only the material that had been obliterated by Folly was gone for good, apparently. From the steady rumbling below, it felt like we were working in a volcano on the verge of erupting. I popped open the back of the throne, trying to find a... there it was! I yanked out the plug and tugged out enough cable to reach the data port in my old temple. I plugged it home as Echo was lifted up to the platform.

"How long till it goes off?" I asked the sallow yellow stallion.

"I have no idea! Your fight has thrown every sensor in this place for a loop," he shouted. "If we could keep it up for fifteen minutes or so, it might miss the Core completely. Be a bad day in the Highlands, but... " he shrugged and then rushed to where Scotch was taking off my left foreleg. "Wait! Leave it connected. I can use her PipBuck to help in the transfer." He twisted it and started typing. "Okay. Gotta compress the files... "

Suddenly, my old body went rigid, and Cognitum's eyes flared. "No! No! I will not be defeated! I will not be a thing!" she shrieked, her horn blazing with overglow. Rampage lunged against her, pinning her to the throne. "I am a princess! You can't do this to me!"

I bit a spur of scrap and smashed her across the horn again and again, making her scream in rage and frustration. "Can't you just delete the cunt and be done with it?" Rampage asked, struggling with her.

"Sure. Do you want to run the risk of residual Cognitum inside Blackjack? Blackjack's had neural contamination already. I doubt she wants more." I thought of what Lacunae's memories had done to me and shook my head hard. "Just give me a few more seconds," he continued. "I'm compressing the Cognitum kernel, and then I'll transfer it into a buffer and download the Blackjack kernel."

I kept smacking Cognitum with the bar while Rampage, Bastard, and Scotch kept her thrashing, half-disassembled body pinned in place. "You'll die! All of you will die! Die die die! I hate you all! Hate hate hate!"

"You really need a software patch or two," I told her. She got out a crimson beam, slashing it across us. Scotch Tape fell back, crying out, but the rest of us kept working. I shoved her face to the side,

pressing it with my hooves and keeping her reinforced horn away. She tried to telekinetically fling us off but got a bar across the face for it. “Echo?!” I cried out as a red glow began to build around all of us.

“Got it!” And he lunged up, grabbed the mesh, and jammed it on my head. “Two more seconds!”

“No! No!” Cognitum screamed. “Forbidden operation! Kernel panic!!”

The world swirled away.

I was in the black void place again. From somewhere near me came a white light... no. I was the light. And I was going to a place. Ahead of me was a thing. It was a pony on fire. A pony made of faces. A hundred screaming, enraged faces that belched fire and wept blood. A thing that should not be. It charged straight at me, hooves exploding like balefire bombs as it loomed larger and larger. It swelled to the size of an alicorn. A giant. A titanic behemoth.

It didn’t matter. I would not deviate, falter, or surrender. I didn’t know how. I smashed into its massive, contorted chest with a flash of light like a nova, and the massive flaming monstrosity was sent flying away off to the side, wailing and screaming into the darkness as I continued to my destination. It opened before me like a flower of light, and...

I screamed.

I was in a place that was not meant for me. This body, once my own, was as cold and merciless as the surface of the moon. It was as hostile as the Core. As callous and cruel as I had been in my wanton slaughter at Yellow River. It was wrong. Anathema. Twisted. Perverted. Corrupted.

This was the body of Nightmare Moon. Oh, it might have originally been mine. Carried a few scraps of my original DNA. But it was no more mine than the raw ore hammered into an executioner’s axe belonged to the mountain. It had been changed on a fundamental level, and I did not belong here any longer. My mind was a square peg trying to fit into a round soul. But I didn’t know how to leave. I couldn’t, even if I did. Too much was on the line. My friends. Everyone in the Hoof. Everyone in the world. How could anyone give up with all that on the line?

There was another flare of white light, like with Tom, only when it faded I was in a dark place filled with cold and hateful stars. We stood on a space rock of some sort, the surface studded with craters

and spurs of black ice. Broken and half-finished features of gothic architecture rose around us. Heavy black chains anchored my hooves to the ground before an obsidian throne. Sitting upon it, tall, cold, and regal, was Nightmare Moon in all her terrible glory. A swirling nebula circled behind her like a halo of blue, green, and purple. And unlike before with Tom, I was completely alone.

"So. We meet again," Nightmare Moon said coldly as she sat upon her dark throne.

"Yeah. I guess we do," I said, tugging at the chains and finding them far less cozy than Tom's table. "Last time, though, you were a lot less... this... " I pointed out, gesturing at her with a hoof. Her draconic eyes narrowed coldly. "Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna?" Nightmare Moon laughed. "Oh dear. How wretchedly pathetic. You maintain your incapacity to grasp the patent truth, even now." She rose from her throne and spread her wings wide. "I have always been Nightmare Moon!" Lightning flared and flashed all around us, and she laughed riotously.

Once upon a time, I would have soiled myself at this. But I'd been in too many minds, experienced too many weird dreams, and faced too many terrors to be impressed. I sighed and bowed my head. "Okay. Look... I know you're trying to be impressive and terrifying and stuff, but stop. It's just not going to work."

There were a few moments I wanted to treasure forever. The startled, wide-eyed expression on her face was one of them. "You... you mock... me?"

"If it were any other day than today, yeah. I'd probably take you a lot more seriously, but I was in a very impressive dreamscape like five minutes ago! And he did a better job than starry spooky blackness! I mean, really... I've seen worse." And because this was a dream, and I was so tired of today, I took a step forward, despite the chains. I made them shatter with my refusal to acknowledge their physicality. "And you're not Nightmare Moon. You're Princess Luna."

Her eyelid twitched a moment before she narrowed her eyes and blasted me with a stream of dark magic from her horn. It actually hurt... maybe she could erase me here and leave my friends outside with two drooling, mindless bodies. "You dare presume to tell me who I am? I am the Queen of the Night! I am a monster beyond your reckoning!"

I picked myself up, trying to 'wish away' the pain like I had the

chains. Wasn't working. "Actually, I've faced quite a few monsters. I've *been* a few monsters. So I can reckon pretty well. You're right around the same level as Deus... pre-tank. Dangerous, capable of hurting me? Yes. But like smoke and mirrors, deep down you're actually…kinda disappointing. Almost pathetic." I frowned up at her, trying to think of the best way to handle this.

"Dis... disappointing?" She actually stammered. "I... you... how dare you... "

"Stop," I said firmly. "I need my body back. You're in it. That means I need you. Which means we need to knock this off right now, Princess Luna. Can I call you, Luna?" From the eye twitch, I guessed another– Yep! Black lightning slashed at me. I imagined an alicorn shield like a white bubble blocking it... but there was no escaping the fact that I was out of my weight class. The blast sent me sliding away from the throne, and for an instant, my body flickered, as if it was in danger of disappearing completely. And, of course, it hurt more. "Ow... "

"I will not suffer such impudence," she said coldly. "I am Nightmare Moon! You *shall* respect me!"

I sucked in my breath and then sat up. "Right. Okay. Why do you think you're Nightmare Moon and not Luna?" I asked as I pulled myself to my hooves.

"Do you not realize how many ponies I have killed?" And the rock in space became a parade ground across which marched a legion of zombie soldiers, all mutilated and dripping gore. I spotted at least one of each Ministry Mare and a half dozen Big Macintoshes. The legion multiplied and multiplied till millions of dead marched before us.

"I'm going to guess... lots," I countered, and the parade of soldiers became a parade of raiders, Steel Rangers, stable ponies, pegasi, Harbingers, and zebras. "I've done it too. And unlike you, I actually killed them all personally." I frowned at my own gory crowd and realized something was missing. Oh yeah... a few dozen dead foals joined the ghastly display. "I killed children too." She gaped at me as I stared into her eyes. "Believe it or not, killing people... even ordering them to their death... doesn't make you Nightmare Moon. It just really sucks." We locked gazes for several seconds, and I added, "Or did you like it?"

"Like it?" she asked, with another little eye twitch that made me tense. "Of course I didn't *like* it. But could any of you understand

the depths of my manipulation? What I created?" From behind her erupted six ministry hub buildings... well, they were great big buildings, so I supposed they represented the ministries. "The ministries were my tools and weapons! My means to control the population while–"

"While escaping any accountability or responsibility," I finished flatly. "We've had this conversation before, remember?" Nightmare Moon stared at me for several seconds in bafflement, and a question snuck into my mind. "You don't remember, do you?"

"I am Nightmare Moon! I have perfect memory of all my great works and terrible crimes!" she declared, the ministries crumbling into rubble behind her. "I have orchestrated disaster! I alone am responsible for all the ruin we suffered."

"Oh stop!" I shouted back at her. "What about the zebra Caesar? What about your sister? What about those nobles and businessponies who said war was the only option?" And as I spoke, a shadowy zebra loomed to my left, an adumbral Princess Celestia on my right, and a horde of faceless ponies in fancy dresses and business suits in a semicircle around me, facing her. "You made bad calls. Do you think you were the very first?" I stared at her and let the shadows fade away. "You really *don't* remember talking to me earlier, do you?"

"I am eternal. I am the night! I am forever!" she declared imperiously, and redundantly.

Of course she didn't remember. She wasn't a mind. She was a soul. The final summation of all her experiences personified. Only I refused to believe that the summation was this... thing! How could it be? I stared at her for what felt like the longest time, then slowly approached her. There was only one thing I could think of to break through to her. "Why? Why did you create the ministries?"

"Fool! Did you not hear what I said? To deceive. To control. I wished to dominate all the world! You cannot understand the burdens of such a choice!" she declared boldly, but I could smell a whiff of bullshit coming from her. Monsters never talked about their crimes or burdens.

"Oh, yeah? I had to decide who'd rule the Society. Who to put on top and hope that it'd work out okay. I've had to make big calls before." This wasn't her. It couldn't be. And then I reached out with my hooves and grabbed her helmet. Her eyes widened in shock, and green lighting raked me as I felt something like a pulpy blanket tear

away. The haughty and cold facade ripped away, and the world around me reassembled into a royal throne room. The shadows now became blinding, glaring lights that bathed the real Princess Luna from every angle. She sat upon a throne decorated with suns, staring at a mob of ponies shouting questions and muttering angrily about the war.

Luna bowed her head on the throne. “I was... ill prepared to take the throne. A month... one month... that was all the preparation I was given. And even then... ” The crowd and mob faded away from the room, and Luna gazed at the despairing posture of her sister, slumped in a chair, her face contorted with grief. “Celestia was inconsolable after Littlehorn. Truly, she’d suffered an injury more grievous than any I’d inflicted on her as Nightmare Moon.”

“You didn’t have a choice, Luna,” I said, putting a foreleg around her shoulder.

“Yes, I did,” she said, closing her eyes. The throne room returned, only this time she was in the back of the room. On the throne sat Twilight Sparkle, surrounded by her friends. “I could have stepped aside. I wanted to. I had no experience with ruling or even a desire to rule anymore. I once went to Ponyville for a festival and ended up insulted and abusive to ponies simply because I didn’t understand what had changed in my absence.” Then she looked at the six, and her eyes hardened. “But I was her sister. I was a princess. I had to rule. I had to make up for the mistakes I’d made... the betrayal I’d committed when I’d become Nightmare Moon.”

“But you couldn’t rule as Celestia,” I said, and the world morphed into Goldenblood’s hospital room.

Luna stared down at the broken, dying stallion. “I remembered him from the school. Such a conundrum, not fitting into Canterlot society. The historian with a fondness for rocks and sculpture. So strange. But wise. I thought he was going to die... all the doctors thought he would... Even if he was, I felt he could help me come up with some way to rule without feeling like I was going to wet myself. And he did. He gave me everything I ever wanted, and more.” She closed her eyes and gave a sniff. “And everything I wanted went wrong!”

Suddenly she hardened, and Nightmare Moon returned. “No! It all went horribly right!” She laughed, turning her head and blasting me with more lightning, sending me flying away from her. “I had my army! My ministries to hide and obscure my evil plots! My secret

projects... oh so many secret projects! I was drowning in secrets!" A cybernetic alicorn army soared overhead in perfect formation while Steel Ranger and Enclave power-armored ponies marched in two columns past her. Above all of us were the shadowy shapes of Thunderheads and Raptors. "I did nothing to stop it! Nothing to rein it in!" She threw back her head with a blast of lightning from the skies. "I reveled in my war!"

Shadowbolt Tower erupted into the sky behind me. "Bull!" I shouted. "If you had really wanted a slaughter, you would have used those megaspells soon as you got them." The immense shadowy structure imploded, sucking into itself and raining down debris. "Maybe you didn't wave a magic wand and end the war, but I know how hard it is to keep peace!" As the monolith crumbled behind me, shadowy Reapers loomed up facing equally imposing Steel Rangers. Above me, phantasmal Enclave ponies slammed into spectral cyberponies. I stared her in the eyes, willing her not to lapse into that stupid evil for evil's sake mindset. "And I remember way back when the war started. You weren't calling for the zebras' heads on sticks. And when she offered you the country, you turned it down. You weren't Nightmare Moon then. You never wanted to rule." I stared into her stunned eyes. "So why *did* you take the throne?"

The noise and chaos faded away as she stared into my eyes, stricken. The Nightmare faded with them, and tears streaked her dusky cheeks. "I... I had no choice. I had to. Celestia couldn't... she wouldn't... " Beside both of us, a scene of a bedroom with Celestia lying on a bed faded in; at first, I thought she was dead. Her eyes stared out, tears running down her cheeks. Through a doorway, I could make out a dozen vague ponies in uniforms waiting and talking silently like puppets. "Celestia blamed herself for Littlehorn. It had been her idea to place it there. Her joke." Luna sniffed, raising her head as tears ran down her cheek. "I think she gave the school to me to keep me as far from the fighting as possible. Like how she tried to protect Twilight and her friends."

She shook her head. "But I could have said no! But how could I have said no?" she begged as she stared at me, anguish marring her face. "I was the next in line. The little sister. It was my chance to show everypony I could rule just as Celestia did. To make up for what I did as Nightmare Moon. I was going to be as good as Celestia! But I could have stepped aside." And the image of the

bedroom became the one of Twilight Sparkle sitting on the throne, flanked by her friends. Luna and I now watched from a shadowed doorway to the side. “I could have done other things, and left the responsibility to Twilight. To Cadance. To anypony else.”

I reached up and embraced her, staring into her eyes as the images faded away. “When Deus invaded my home, I didn’t want to go running out into the Wasteland. I could have just given EC-1101 over, or worked out a deal, or something. Something smart. But I stepped up when I had to, and even when it was rough, I kept with it. Just like you.” I stared into her eyes. “I know you’re a good pony, Luna. Even if you don’t think you are.” Visions of Psalm in the orphanage appeared beside us, like silent films. Of Goldenblood lying in his hospital bed. Of Luna helping foals with their nightmares.

Luna smiled and wiped her tears away. “And I know you’re a good pony too, Blackjack.” And now on our other side were images of me saving Scotch Tape from 99, fighting to protect Chapel from Dawn and Deus, and fighting Cognitum in the Lunar Palace. “Even if you don’t think you are.” She sighed, and all the images and shadows faded away. The ground around us began to glow as if we were standing in a pool of starry moonlight. “So... what do we do now?” We touched horns and brows, and both of us gave sad smiles to the other.

In unison, we said softly, “We do everything we can to make up for it, knowing that we’ll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. We devote ourselves to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And we pray with every single good act we do that somehow, when our lives are over, that our lifetimes will come close to making up for the wrong we committed.”

And the light grew and grew until the darkness was no more. It flowed through us, and when sensation returned, I found myself levitated before the others, who stared on in awe. The limbs that had been removed were returning to my frame and changing as if sculpted by invisible hooves. My wings spread wide, and the black metal vanes transformed into snowy white feathers. The flaming mane softened into gently shimmering fields of red and dark purple, like the colors of a sunset right before dusk as I felt the magic run through me. I felt my body whole, not strictly biological anymore but not mangled and pieced back together either. My synthetic

limbs now resembled the dark purple armor the batponies wore, though mine was far more stylized with delicate engravings of moons and stars. It ran from my rump all the way up my spine to my shoulders, where a crescent moon decorated the chestpiece. Atop my head sat a simple crown. And then...

I blinked.

Lifting my hooves, fingers slid smoothly from the ends with perfect articulation, and I stroked my face. Nose. Mouth. Eyelids. I'd gotten my face back! And I looked over, and down, at all of my friends. The corner of my lip curled in an awkward smile. "H... hey. It worked."

And best of all. Most wonderful of all... I could feel that sensation of life inside me. Maybe like this, I could have my babies. I could have... everything.

"Blackjack? Is that... are you in there?" Scotch Tape asked, as if afraid.

"She's got feathers. Does that mean... what does that mean?" Rampage asked as she scowled at my wings. "Damn it, Blackjack, you're not allowed to get any weirder! You've exceeded your maximum allotment of weirdness!"

"Whoa," Bastard muttered.

"Are you... okay?" P-21 asked as he stared at me with the closest thing to awe I'd ever seen.

"I... think so?" I replied, not one hundred percent certain myself. "Don't ask me to wiggle the moon around just yet... but yeah... " I finally smiled. "I think I am okay."

I looked down at the blank me lying on her side next to Echo, who was working on my old PipBuck with a small, worried frown. The blank body stared absently out, a little bit of drool starting to drip from the corner of her mouth. She wasn't even ambulatory like Boo or the other blanks. Just a puppet with her strings cut. "Cognitum's not in there, right?" I tensed as I suddenly expected my own eyes to turn and look at me, my old body to grin with malice.

Echo smiled as he worked my old PipBuck. "No. She's not. I made damn sure she couldn't double back." Then he frowned. "Though the buffer I set up is full of junk data now. Just need to pick her out of it." A low buzzing resonance began to fill the room. Something going on with Horizons? With Cognitum? Damn it. I needed to get my friends and myself out of this place!

"Find her. I need to make sure she can't cause any more trouble."

Maybe not delete her. There might be some way Virgo or somepony could debug her and give her a second... I suddenly had an image of jars holding captured ponies. Okay. She better not be in my head... Regardless, there was no time to waste. I took my weapons, ammo, figurines, and supplies from my old body and then walked to where Folly had fallen.

"It's been a while," I said as I lifted the weapon, turning it over with my magic, holding it in my hooves. I cracked it open. A silver bullet rested inside. I snapped it closed. That buzzing noise grew as I walked to the edge of the platform. "P-21, get clear!" I shouted out as I aimed the weapon down at Tom nestled in the heart of the wreckage. From Cognitum's second shot, I hoped it would just punch a hole clean through Tom. He could go back to being a star spirit, and I'd go home and work on trying to rehabilitate Equus while building the world's biggest 'Do Not Dig Here' sign over the Core. And there was the issue of families. Maybe a wedding. How did you even *do* weddings?

I couldn't wait to find out. I leveled the gun right at Tom's sparkling heart. I saw P-21 wave from a pile of rubble, carrying a terminal on his back. Goddesses, I loved him.

"Where is she?" Echo said in worry. "I've scanned the buffer twice. She's not in here!"

I paused. "Well, she's not in my other body, right? And I don't think she's in this body. So where else could she... " That buzzing, growling noise grew louder and clearer. It was three words, chanted from a billion tiny mouths rising from all around us.

"HATE! HATE! HATE!"

"KILL! KILL! KILL!"

"DIE! DIE! DIE!"

My eyes snapped up above us. The computer at the apex of the dome now seethed with crimson light as millions of mechasprites, eyes glowing red, altered and transformed its surface into a mockery of a living organ. Maybe, while being in my body, Cognitum had developed something like a soul, twisted and wretched but enduring past any normal program. I had no idea what those machines were doing as they cannibalized the covering, exposing the technomagical guts of the maneframe, rewiring it before my eyes.

"Oh you have got to be fucking kidding!" Bastard shouted as he reloaded his guns. "No payday is worth this shit!"

The mechasprites swooped in towards us, and from my horn erupted a dozen magical bullets that streaked out and exploded in the midst of the swarm. Thousands swept around the detonations, swirling like guided shrapnel towards us. “I can stop her!” Echo said as he worked furiously on my old PipBuck. “Just give me five seconds!”

That was four seconds more than we had.

The swarm flowed around me and straight at the yellow stallion. I tried to throw up a shield like I’d seen everypony else with a horn do and actually succeeded; the mechasprites slammed into it like a pile driver. It held but did nothing to prevent two other clouds of machines from swooping in from above and below. “They only eat metal!” Echo shrieked as he tried to sweep them off his body. “They’re only supposed to eat metal!” he screamed as he disappeared beneath the swarm.

Three second later, only a puddle of blood remained where he’d stood.

Scotch Tape cried out as the mechasprites swept in at her next. “Oh fuck no!” Rampage shouted, curling herself protectively around the filly and slashing her tail though the air. She stomped and snapped, crushing the machines in her jaws. The holes bitten in her flesh were regenerated almost instantly, but the mechasprites consumed her armor bite by bite. Then Scotch Tape started to scream in pain; Rampage gave a shout of "Hold on!" as she grabbed her and leapt away to a lower level with a stream of mechasprites following.

Bastard flung a barrage of grenades with his magic at the swarm coming for him but exhausted his supply after a dozen detonations. He raced away from the throne as well. “Sorry girls, but it’s time for bottomless magazines,” he snapped at his guns, and his horn flashed. The magazines in each of his automatics glowed, and, biting down on his cigarette, he unloaded a stream of bullets far in excess of the ten each magazine usually carried. Astonishingly, he kept one swarm at bay with bullets alone. It wouldn’t do anything for the two others sweeping in at his flanks, though.

I raised a new shield around myself, and the swarms of mechasprites coalesced into an enormous red-glowing steel alicorn. Her hooves ripped down the throne, flinging the debris to the side. I levitated my old body onto my back, almost by instinct. Even if it was just an empty shell now, it was still me. I flew into the space between Cognitum and Tom as those enormous hooves smashed

against my shield. I poured my magic into it, hoping it would hold. I didn't know the spell, exactly; I was just copying what I imagined every alicorn did. Unfortunately, even when it was holding, every impact rattled me to my core, and if my shield failed now, I'd die. We'd all die.

My eyes turned upward towards the throbbing mechanical thing, the aborted child of the Eater. I peered down at Tom below me. I saw Rampage running, Scotch Tape clinging to her back as she screamed for Daddy. I watched Bastard desperately trying to keep the sprites away from himself with his guns, the barrels growing red with all the shots he'd fired. I peered at P-21 pounding away at the terminal, keeping Horizons from killing us all. I looked up, past the technological grotesquery, at the ailing blue-green sphere that was the home of millions of people who needed me to do the right thing.

Three lives... plus Bastard... versus the world. It was an easy choice.

But then, I'm not a clever pony.

I pointed Folly straight up at that twisted, tortured, tormented spawn of technology, entered S.A.T.S., and fired. My will was so sure. So set. It didn't even ask me if I was sure. My shield dropped, and an instant later a brilliant white beam emerged, streaking up towards the apex of the dome. The mechasprite mare let out a scream as the beam punched straight through the top of the dome and out into space. The tempest that followed blasted the mechasprites out after her, scattering the machines as the wrecked Lunar Palace trembled, the debris shifting and grinding. Pieces of scrap went flying as the pressure shifted, and for a few horrifying seconds, I had a good idea what it was like living in a blender. Then a piece of flooring, caught in the gust like a kite, smashed up against the hole in the ceiling. There was a whistling shriek for several seconds, then silence.

I hovered there in the air, my old body hugged to me. I checked my inventory. No more silver bullets. For all I knew, there weren't any more left in the world. I stared down at Tom, still glistening and held in place by magic. I put Folly back in my saddlebags in the tiny hope that I'd find one more silver bullet in time. "Is everypony alright?" I called out.

"I hate the moon!" Bastard shouted from somewhere below.

"Oh please," Rampage said as she emerged from underneath a

smashed Ultra-Sentinel. “We’ve had lots worse than this, right kiddo?”

“No, I think this tops it,” Scotch said as she followed, picking her way carefully along the twisted metal and broken girders.

“Oh, come on! The megaspell was way worse than this,” Rampage replied. “I’d say this was number three on the list. The space center and Maripony were tied for number two.” I dropped down to them.

But Scotch wasn’t listening. “Daddy? Where are you?” she called out as she stared at the jumbled mess. Apprehension prickled at me as I moved towards where I’d spotted him last.

To my relief, he called out, “I’m over here.”

I swooped ahead of everypony else towards the folded girders whence the call had come, a smile on my face. I set my blank body down as I spotted him lying out on his stomach, hooves still working the terminal, leaning against a half-dozen slim metal shafts. “I think... I think I have a problem,” he rasped, not taking his eyes off the screen. I slowed as I looked beyond him lying there to the shafts and... no... no no no...

They weren’t against him. They were impaled through him. From the middle of his back to his haunches, the rods pinned him to the floor like a butterfly to a mat. He didn’t take his eyes from me. “It’s bad, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s bad,” I whispered in horror.

“Figured it must be. I can’t feel anything below my shoulders.” He glanced over at me and gave a tiny half smile. “You look good, Blackjack.”

No no no. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right! “Rampage, keep Scotch back!” I yelled. “Bastard. I need you!”

“Keep me back from what?” Scotch Tape shrieked, then screamed, “No! Let me go! What’s wrong?!”

Bastard stepped into view, and he tugged his glasses down, teal eyes widening in horror. “Shit... ”

“You can do healing magic, right? I’m going to pull the rods out, and you heal the holes,” I said, adamantly.

“I…This is way beyond a healing spell. How the hell is he not dead yet?”

“Shut up,” I said, glaring imperiously at him. “I am going to pull, you are going to heal, and P-21 is going to keep living and keeping Horizons from going off. Understood?” He swallowed and nodded as I seized the first slim rod and gave it a tug.

The metal above us let out an immense groan as the rod moved a few inches up and started to shift. “Hold on!” Rampage shouted, rushing to the hollow we were in and shoving up against it. With her immense earth pony strength, she was able to stabilize it.

Unfortunately, that meant she wasn’t able to hold onto Scotch Tape. The filly darted in around her and froze, staring at the sight. “Oh no. No no no no.” She rushed to him and hugged him around the neck. “Daddy. Hold on, Daddy. Just hold on.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said with a smile as he nuzzled her, then tapped the flickering terminal again.

“Do something!” Scotch Tape pled to me, tears streaking her cheeks. “Anything! You’re a princess now or something, aren’t you?”

I swallowed as I dug into my repertoire of magic. A pair of magical scissors appeared, doubly reinforced with hydraulics. I put them to one of the rods, but as they started to shear through, the rod started to twist. Blood spurted from where it pierced his body as he cried out. “Stop!” Bastard yelled, and I relaxed the scissors, the flexing rod returning to its original position. P-21 gasped for breath, then typed the commands again with shaking hooves. Bastard frowned up at me. “By the time you get one rod out, he’ll bleed out.”

“Shut up!” Scotch snapped. “Do something else!”

But what else could I do? I doubted a mustache would help much. I focused my imagination and tried to imagine the burning beam cutting through all the rods at once. Instantly, a jet of flame flowed out across the metal, but the rods, instead of instantly vaporizing it, turned red, and P-21 started to grunt as he fought the pain. My wings fanned the rods before they could burn him any more. A giant glowing grinding disk appeared and started to work through one of the rods. If I was lucky, I’d get through one in five minutes... but there were six... Finally, I tried to use my magic to shift the immense bulk of weight above me, but Rampage cried out, and her legs trembled as she pushed back. “Stop!” she cried in alarm. “This whole thing is ready to come down like a house of cards.” I stopped my magic, and she relaxed.

If I’d had a few hours, I could have extracted him. I didn’t. And if I rushed, I could kill us all. Damn it. Why couldn’t I have brought LittlePip with me?

P-21 took a hoof off the keyboard to caress Scotch Tape’s cheek. “You have to go. I can’t delay it much longer. Cognitum tweaked

the targeting talismans before you blasted her. It'll go right to the Core now. You have to get out of here and survive to do something about it." The ground under us rumbled, and he grimaced in pain before he tapped the terminal keys again.

"No. No, we can't leave you!" Scotch Tape begged. "Please, Blackjack! Do something!"

I wanted to do something. Anything. Anything to undo this. To come up here alone, and... but no. If I had, I wouldn't have made it. It was always because of my friends that I'd been able to do anything at all. Could I teleport him out through the bars? Then he'd have a half dozen holes he'd immediately bleed out through. How many magic bullets would it take to blast through? We didn't have Scotch's rifle or my sword... he was way too close to use a grenade, even if we had one left. The ground rumbled again, and he tapped the keys once more, silencing it.

"Please," he murmured at he looked up at me, smiling with tears streaking his cheeks. "Remember what I said... "

I swallowed sickly. He was right, but then again, he'd always been the smarter pony. "I'm sorry, Scotch." I wanted to be sick. It wasn't fair. I'd gotten my body back. Our babies back. Why couldn't I have gotten a chance to be with him? For him to see Scotch Tape grow up into a strong and happy mare? To help him raise his babies? *My* babies? Why couldn't the universe just give me a clean win for once?!

I looked over at Tom's sparkling form. "Please," I prayed. "Please save him."

I cannot. I am bound until I face the Eater. I am sorry, Blackjack.

I bowed my head as Scotch Tape embraced him, tears running down my face. I could cry again. Damn him. Damn all the stars. What good were they if they couldn't save a single pony's life when we needed them to? What good was everything that had happened to me if I couldn't save him? Security saves ponies. Princesses protect their subjects from harm.

There was only one thing to do. I met his eyes, gave a little nod, and received a little smile in return.

"I love you, Scotch Tape," P-21 said, nuzzling her. He pulled his battered black hat off his head and placed it atop hers. "I'm so proud of you. I know you're going to do great things. Build great things. Grow up strong and beautiful and... I wish I could be there to see it all. Wish I could hold you when you need me to and just...

be a real father... .” He punched in the keys again.
“You were a real father, Daddy. You were the best daddy any pony could ever want,” Scotch Tape sobbed into his mane.
He smiled, twisted his hoof to hold her close, turned, and kissed her ear. “I love you, Scotch.” He closed his eyes. “Goodbye, my little filly.”
“No... no no no... ” Scotch Tape sobbed, shaking her head. “Just a little longer... ” I tugged at her. I walked to Bastard and gave him some instructions, a promise, and a number. He nodded, pushed his glasses back up, lit a new cigarette, and then levitated Scotch Tape with his magic.
“Come on,” he said as he pulled her away. “We have to go. This place is going to blow up, and you’ve got to live.”
“No! No!” she screamed, flailing her hooves wildly as she was pulled away from him. Bastard lifted my blank body with a grunt, setting it across his back, and pulled both of them out of the space. “No! Please, Blackjack, no! Don’t do this! No!” she screamed, tearing at me with her cries. “Daddy! No! Let me go, you bastard!”
When she’d gone, I broke down, crying and sniffing too. “It’s not fair. It’s not right.”
“No. It’s not,” he replied. “But that’s life. Thanks to you, I got to have a few more months. Got to see incredible things. Meet good people and make friends. Be a father. A lover. A person. You showed me that I could be so much more than a number. You gave me that chance. I wouldn’t give it up for anything, even if it ends like this.” His warm smile faded. “You have to get back to Equus. You can’t give up, Blackjack. Find a way to beat this. To win. You can. I know you can.”
How could I speak after that? I wanted to tell him that I couldn’t do this without him. That I wanted him besides me. And in his eyes I saw understanding that I knew I wanted to say all that. Of course he did. So why waste these last moments with arguing? I sniffed and leaned down, kissing him on the lips for one horribly too short moment. “I love you,” I whispered into his ear as he gave one barely muted sniff.
“I know,” he answered, just as quietly. When we parted, he entered the suppression command again. He lowered his eyes, then murmured, “Before you go, though... my cutie mark... ” He looked pained and gave a small half smile. “It’s not a penis, is it?”
My throat produced something between a hiccup, a laugh, and a

sob. I leaned over and brushed my hoof over his flank. The last flakes of blue came off completely. The male symbol and twenty-one dots were gone. In their place was a bold red heart bursting through a ring of chain encircling it. My throat seized up, and it took me several seconds before I could croak, “No. It’s not a penis.”

He nodded. “Good. That’s all I wanted to know.” He gave a little chuckle. “Silly.” He entered in the command on the terminal again. “You should go. You don’t want to miss your flight.”

Tearing myself from his side was like tearing my heart in two. But I had to go, no matter how much it hurt. Since I had to go... I did. I always did what I had to... even if I couldn’t save the ponies who mattered most to me.

Then I turned and saw Rampage holding up all that metal. A somewhat sheepish smile crossed her face. “Yeah. I just realized it too. I move, and there’s a good chance he gets squished and Horizons goes off with you in it. Go get going, Blackjack. He can’t stall this thing forever.”

“No... ” I muttered. “No... not... no!”

“Yes,” Rampage contradicted me. “Look. This is the best for everypony. You get to live to stop the Eater. I get to die saving your life. And I get to die for good.” Her pink eyes softened. “This is what I want, Blackjack. I might be Peppermint, but... I don’t want to be the last one to die. Tom said this place going off can take me out, so... yeah. This is where I need to be.”

P-21 frowned. “It seems stable enough. I’m not going to be wiggling around down here.” He gave a cough, looking pale. He had to be bleeding out slowly around those shafts. “Go, Rampage. Help Scotch Tape. She’ll need you. Blackjack needs you.”

“Go,” Rampage told me. “At least this way, neither one of us has to die alone.”

I was so riven by grief, I couldn’t argue. P-21 couldn’t delay forever. If I tried to fight Rampage, I would likely cause the collapse she was trying to prevent. So the only thing I could think of... the only response... was to walk away in the direction of Scotch’s sobs.

“Hey,” Rampage called after me, and I looked back. Rampage stared at me from over her shoulder. “It was fun.” She smiled, her eyes streaked with tears.

“Yeah,” I answered weakly, with my own, tiny, half smile. “It was.”

What more was there to say after that? I flew to where Bastard struggled with Scotch Tape near the tram hatch that was marked

‘To Terminal’ and levitated them through, flying behind them. When we were all inside, I pressed the button, the doors closed, and the tram began to roll, heading up the steep track. Bastard looked at me as he set my blank body on a couch. “Where’s Rampage?” he asked.

“She’s not coming,” I answered hollowly. Scotch Tape curled up in a tighter ball, the young mare shaking in her grief, her tears exhausted.

This must have been a shorter route than to the Astrostable. I looked back at the cracked dome of the Lunar Palace as the minutes passed by. I wanted to see them both, one more time. But the link... the special link we’d all shared... it was broken.

Wasn’t it?

I walked to my blank body and regarded it for a moment, then reached down and touched my horn to my own brow. The space within was empty, except for a number of tiny windows like monitor screens. There, I saw Rainbow Dash arguing with an injured Storm Chaser. There, Velvet Remedy riding a wing of alicorns through a howling storm. There, Charity and the defenders of Chapel were in a terrible firefight with an unrelenting mass of Brood advancing towards them. There, Xanthe and her team were lost in the rubble of the bunker.

And there was P-21 typing on a terminal. As I focused on that window, I could hear his voice coming from the image. The terminal screen was showing a diagram with all kinds of red and white flashing symbols that I couldn’t begin to understand. *Hurts... glad I lied that it didn’t. They would have given me Med-X. I’d rather die tha... heh... that’s funny... no. Got to stay focused. Discharge the stabilization talismans. Almost missed it that time. Getting lightheaded. She’ll be okay. Blackjack will take care of her. Blackjack will move the world if she has to. She won’t give up. I know it. Refresh. Discharge. Crap! Discharge! Focus, P-21. Focus. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. Focus... Why does that ‘calculated force’ number get bigger every time I refresh? Nevermind. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge...* I couldn’t look away as minutes crept by, and again and again he entered the commands that delayed the inevitable. I didn’t hear Rampage. Perhaps there wasn’t anything for them to say to each other. *I should have looked earlier. Maybe come up with a better name. Like Blackjack. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. Eh... if only she had been a stallion. If only Priest... if only... Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. I hope*

she makes it. She will. Just made... a... mistake. Not her first... Refresh. Discharge. Error? Wait...

The screen was now flashing all white. “Damn... ” he whispered hoarsely as the white light grew brighter and brighter. “Sorry, Blackjack. Hope it was eno--”

The window winked out, and I snapped my horn away. The tram was shaking as it crested the ridge of the massive chasm. Then, suddenly, the dome exploded, Tom shooting out faster than I could see amidst a detonation that not only ripped roof off the Lunar Palace but blasted the very foundation of the building out into space. The floor of the crater erupted in a massive cascade of rock and debris, tons of dust and glowing crystal vomiting out. The magical fields lasted just long enough to stop any of the high-speed ejecta from impacting the chasm walls or the Astrostable, but we still felt the vibrations through the floor. Maybe the Hoof wasn’t the only place that was going to be hit... but really... I couldn’t care. My heart felt as if it had been ripped in two. I wanted the synthetic pump back. I wanted the old, corpselike body that hadn’t felt. That had been more like a machine.

Then the tram stopped and went dark. “What’s going on?” Bastard asked in alarm. “Why’d it stop?”

“It was powered from the Lunar Palace,” Scotch Tape said dully. “That, or something broke in the track.”

I rose to my feet. The terminal was just a few dozen feet ahead now. I could see the two rockets sitting on the pad. “This is ridiculous,” I said as my horn glowed and I tried to propel the tram down the track manually. It didn’t budge. “Come on! Move!” I tried to lift the vehicle, but something groaned dangerously underneath us.

“The brakes probably engaged when the power was cut,” Scotch Tape pointed out. “After all, they wouldn’t want the tram to slide all the way back down that slope.”

Suddenly, there was a reverberation through the ground as a boulder twice the size of the tram car thudded down only a hundred feet from us. Then another. Then another. The entire tram lurched as something banged into the ceiling, and several of the windows cracked. “Okay. Everypony get close,” I said as I gathered them all up around me, Bastard on the left, Scotch Tape floating on my right, and my blank body across my back. I closed my eyes, imagined a Blackjack-shaped hole in my mind between here and the

terminal, and pushed my way through.

There was a pop, and I opened my eyes to see the dimly-lit terminal around me, all the window shutters closed but otherwise with no more signs of damage than there'd been when I left. "Yes!" I shouted as I felt my blank body across my shoulders.

And just the blank body.

I looked to either side of me, set the blank down, and teleported back to the tram.

"Where did you go?" Bastard demanded as I reappeared. A rain of hoof-sized gravel was starting to patter down. "Why did you leave us?"

"I've always had problems with teleporting others. If you know how to do it right, by all means, you can send yourself back to the terminal!" I grabbed Scotch Tape, focused with all my might, and teleported again.

Alone.

I screamed in the terminal, my voice echoing as the floor shook. There was some kind of thunderous crash overhead. I teleported back to the tram and saw that the old rocket now lay on its side across the roof, a boulder lodged in its nosecone.

I tried to teleport them both again. And again. And again. Every time I did, I only took myself. I tried to focus on just teleporting Scotch Tape. On just teleporting Bastard. But every time I did, I sent myself through that mental hole alone.

Back in the tram, it was getting cold and a little hard to breathe. I panted, sweating, as more and more rocks rained down, now covering the roof. If only Lacunae were here, teaching me how to do the spell right step by step. If only I were a little more talented. A little more powerful. A little more...

Scotch Tape hugged my hoof, and I jerked my head, looking down at her tear-streaked face as she smiled. "Just go, Blackjack."

"What?" I muttered dumbly.

"Just get into the rocket, and go," the young mare said in a tiny little voice.

I couldn't answer. The thought... no. Not after Glory. P-21. Rampage. No... "It's okay," Scotch Tape promised with that tiny little smile. "I'll be with Daddy again. You can save everyone. Like my brother... or sister... or whatever."

"Fuck that!" Bastard snapped. "Between Cogs and what you promised me, I'll not only be able to pay off those assholes in Dise,

but retire. In Tenpony! With a frigging harem! Of solid gold alicorns!"

Scotch Tape regarded him flatly. "Oh boo hoo hoo." She looked back up at me. "Just go. Before the other rocket gets hit by a boulder too." As she spoke, there were shards of jagged crystal falling to the ground around us like javelins. "It's okay... go."

"No!" I shouted. "I'm not leaving anypony anymore! Not anymore! Lacunae... she died to save others. Glory... P-21... they died to save me. Rampage... she... at least she got what she wanted!" I sputtered as I walked back and forth in the tram, trying to think of some way I could break it free of the track without snapping it like an egg. If only there were more time! More time. "I'm not leaving anypony to die anymore! Not anypony!"

Suddenly there was another thud, but this one was from the rear of the tram. And it was accompanied by a shriek of metal from where the tram was locked to the rail. I rushed to the rear windows and looked down.

Rampage shoved again. The mare, her eyes boiled shut and her ears caked in blood, heaved her body against the tram, pushing and straining hard. Every few seconds, her body regenerated and then began to die again. But she pushed and shoved as gravel showered down upon her. The brakes screamed in agony and motors ground as the car was violently projected forward by the striped mare.

She came back. She came back. She chose to live rather than to die.

The tram shuddered as it connected with the terminal. The doors parted enough to let Scotch Tape and Bastard out. Then I realized...

There was no way to get her inside.

"Rampage!" I beat my hoof against the window, looking down at her. "Rampage! You have to find a way in!" But did she know one? If I peeled one of the window shutters open for her, would it still come back down? If it didn't, we were all dead. "Rampage!"

Her face healed enough that she could look at me through her desiccating eyes, and she pointed a moonstone-encrusted hoof up at Cognitum's rocket. Her lips moved silently, but there was no mistaking the word on her lips.

Go.

I shook my head again. "No. No no no! I can't leave you here like this! You can't die here!" I yelled at her. Of course, it was futile. She couldn't hear me, could barely see me. "Rampage!"

She pointed at the rocket again, then staggered back. Being

exposed to vacuum, even with her regeneration, had to be agony. It was everything she'd ever feared.

"Rampage!" I yelled at her, half out of my mind now. "I forgive you! I forgive you! I'll come back for you, Rampage! I promise! I'll come back for you!"

But if she could read my lips or not, I couldn't tell. She just smiled. Smiled... as if she was a happy filly going for a walk on the moon, then staggered to the side, slowly walking away amidst the blizzard of pebbles and stones and dust now raining down on her.

"Rampage!" I shouted after her, wishing I could send her the thoughts. Let her know that somehow, some way, I forgave her.

Bastard threw his forelegs around my neck and pulled me away from the window. Away from the sight of my friend disappearing into the dust of the moon. "We've got to go! Come on! The terminal is losing air!"

"Let go of me, you bastard," I snapped, ready to kill him.

"You want it all to be for nothing!?" he roared in my face. "Then die here! You want to make it mean something, then get your fat, melodramatic ass in that rocket now!"

I gave one last look at the dim outline of my friend as she wandered, blind, deaf, and immortal into that void, then tore myself away. The terminal was filled with a whistling noise as air leaked out around a spear of moonstone piercing the room completely through. We struggled to breathe as we made our way up the gantry tower connected to Cognitum's rocket. Through the tower's windows, I could see some of the sides of the chasm sliding in to fill the void. I couldn't see the Astrostable though. Maybe it was lying in the bottom as well?

We pushed into the rocket and sealed the hatch. "Launch it, Vodka," Bastard said to Scotch Tape, who was examining the makeshift artificial pilot in the center couches.

"My name is Scotch, asshole," she replied, sharply.

"Got it. Glad to see you're moving to anger. Now, will you launch this damn thing?" he asked as he threw himself into a seat. She hit something and took another couch, and the rocket rumbled. I lay down too, and the rocket surged towards the stars. It passed through the rain of tumbling rocks. Several enormous ones were spinning right towards us, but I reached out with my magic and pushed them away. Soon we were clear of even the spinning arcs of dust. The rocket curved, and I tiredly struggled to reach a window.

It had to be my imagination, but I thought I saw a lone bump at the end of a scratch moving away from the terminal. The hole that had once held Nightmare Moon was now a half-collapsed depression rapidly filling with rubble.

And above us, Tom glowed, trailing a stream of dust like a tail after him. On his way to where the Eater waited, ready to ensnare and devour him. I turned my eyes to the stars, but where once they had offered solace and wonder, now they only seemed cold and indifferent. Did you think it would be easy? Did you think it wouldn't hurt?

I pressed my cheek to the cold glass. Pain was the price of living, and I hurt worse than I ever imagined. I fumbled for something to fill the silence. Scotch Tape lay on her side, face pressed to the fabric of the couch. Bastard... I didn't really want to talk to. So I opened my Delta PipBuck and found something to take solace in. I found it in a song I'd picked up sometime ages ago, back when I'd been younger... more innocent... more... me.

The music started to play, long and slow guitar, and a gravelly old stallion's voice, a dead ringer for the Dealer long ago, began to sing.

I hurt myself today…To see if I still feel...
I focus on the pain... The only thing that's real...
The needle tears a hole... The old familiar sting...
Try to kill it all away... But I remember everything...

The guitar built up louder as I thought of that angry blue stallion telling me he'd shoot me if I gave him a gun. Telling me he'd end me if I ever killed another through my stupidity. Him wiring a tyrant up with bombs and killing him. And as I thought, hot tears ran down my cheeks. How I'd stopped him from hanging himself. How I'd helped him face his addiction. He'd hurt so much, and now... now...

What have I become... My sweetest friend?
Everyone I know... goes away... In the end...
And you could have it all... My empire of dirt...
I will let you down... I will make you hurt...

I'd let Rampage down. Denied her the one thing she'd wanted more than anything. I hadn't been wrong in my selfish wish, but I hadn't

respected her. Not as she'd deserved. From the moment she'd leapt upon Leo Zodiac's back, to her smiling up at me through those drifting clouds, I'd done everything I could to keep her alive. I'd driven her away, to my enemy, because I hadn't been able to end her pain. Not till it was too late. Too late... the music softened and slowed as the old stallion sang on with the Dealer's voice...

I wear this crown of thorns... Upon my liar's chair...
Full of broken thoughts... I cannot repair...
Beneath the stains of time... The feelings disappear...
You are someone else... I am still right here…

The music built as I remembered us all together in Star House. Lacunae. Rampage. Scotch Tape. P-21. Glory. Laughing. Happy. Broken ponies taking solace in each other. A piano began to hammer a note louder and louder as the music built.

What have I become... My sweetest friend?
Everyone I know... goes away... In the end...
And you could have it all... My empire of dirt...
I will let you down…I will make you hurt...

I sobbed, and I wasn't alone. I should have stopped the music then, but I couldn't. I could bear to think as the old stallion went on, singing of the pain that burned inside me as I imagined a life with five friends, together... free... happy...

If I could start again... A million miles away...
I would keep myself... .
I would find a way ... .

Footnote: Loading...

Chapter 75: To the Last, Part 1 & 2

"An exercise in rhetoric."

There were no words for what I felt. Everything within me had been yanked inside out and scraped raw. I wished I could be like Scotch Tape, sobbing my eyes out, or Bastard, sitting cold and composed in his couch, a thin trail of smoke drifting through the air from the cigarette clutched between his pursed lips. That was probably some kind of safety hazard, but I really couldn't care less. I'd just lost two more friends in the worst possible way, one forever and the other abandoned on the moon. If the Astrostable had survived…if it hadn't collapsed into the crater or been buried by rubble, there was some chance that she might find it. I had to cling to that hope. The alternative would drive me mad.

P-21…don't think about it…don't think about it…please don't…I gritted my teeth, feeling myself shake. No. I had to keep it all together.

I needed distractions, fast. So I could not think about... P-21… Rampage…no, damn it…No! Glory was alive, damn it! I wouldn't believe it was otherwise until I saw it with my own eyes! She was alive and we were going to…we were going to…no. I had to keep it together. My people needed me…

l scanned frantically around the cabin, looking for anything that could occupy me and not remind me of... I glanced at my hooves and found what I sought. What the heck had happened to me? I'd thought that Cognitum was the one who had altered my body when she'd inhabited it…a sort of evil renovation. But alicorn souls seemed pretty darn powerful... Now I had to wonder if it had just been an effect of having Luna inside her, an evil, Nightmare Moon version of what had happened when I got my body back. Speaking of which, now that I had a moment's peace, I could figure out what had happened to me.

Parts of my body were still synthetic, but I couldn't tell where machine ended and flesh began. The magic that had transformed me transcended anything that could be designed. I felt alive, entirely alive, not like clunky metal fused with flesh. My body was armored in places, but it didn't cover me from horn to hoof. The design was sleek and fluid, with tiny shooting stars and crescent moons. Talismans gleamed in my 'armor', but what their functions were I couldn't guess. I turned my hoof from side to side, seeing through gaps in the plate armor the intricate gearwork within, listening to it whir and click softly inside my limb.

My E.F.S. still had all the old energy and health displays. I fished around in my old saddlebags, took out a garnet, and sucked on the gem, enjoying the sweet and sour fruity taste for a second before it melted away with the familiar surge of energy. Okay, I couldn't see Princess Luna eating rocks, so clearly there was some of the old me in here. Maybe all this alicorn-ness was like a special suit of alicorn barding, and when I got my old soul back, I'd revert to just flesh and metal Blackjack? The magical projection could–

Wait…when had I thought like that? I rubbed my brow, then turned my head, looking at my reflection in the window. My eyes still had the tiniest flickers of red light within, but now I worried about things bigger than just physical alterations. I had Luna's soul inside me, but what precisely did that mean? I didn't have Luna's memories or magic. I couldn't begin to imagine how one raised the moon. Our commonality had allowed us to share this body without that horrifying sense of corruption and violation I'd initially felt, but in its place was…something inexplicable.

I carefully drew out the figurine of Rarity, and I turned it over in my hooves. There was a piece of soul in each one. Each piece subtly nudged me in different directions. Little hints and impressions. They didn't stop me from being me, but they might affect my decisions or outlooks in elusive ways. So where was my soul? Cohabitating in this body? Left behind in the blank? Was some Blackjack-ness keeping me…me? Or was Luna slowly tugging me towards being more like the ruler of Equestria she was two centuries ago?

The fact I was wondering these things at all scared the fuck out of me, and the amount of stuff I was trying not to think about was reaching unmanageable levels. I'd given up so much…lost so much…This didn't feel right. These weren't my thoughts. I didn't

deserve these wings. Just like Luna had felt she hadn't deserved the throne…

"This is going to drive me crazy," I muttered.

"Yeah. That's how it started with her," Bastard murmured, taking a long pull off his cigarette as he examined the bore of one of his pistols. "When the Harbingers hired me, she was pretty upfront. A million caps for a few days' work. Oh, and killing you. That too." He gave me a supremely smack-worthy smirk, but I abstained – more from heartbroken lethargy than actual restraint – and he continued, "But the longer we were in the rocket, the nuttier she became…like convincing herself she had to do stuff. Rationalizing it to folks who already thought she shat moonbeams or who couldn't care less so long as they got paid."

"Great. That makes me feel so much better," I said, and latched on my next bet for not thinking about things. I asked, "What's your story, Bastard?"

He shot me a momentary scornful look, then snorted out dual rings of smoke. "No story. I kill ponies for money. I owe a lot of money to some folks who will collect my head if I miss a payment. It's that simple."

"Oh." I felt vaguely disappointed. And annoyed…

"Not everypony is the Lightbringer or Security," he said with a thin smile. "I'm just trying to get through life the best I can."

My lips curled in a frown. "So you'll kill a foal for caps?"

"I kill a target for caps," he replied calmly. "If you don't like it, take it up with whoever hires me. I'm just the messenger." He paused, pursing his lips. "And generally, no," he added. "Foal-killing is rarely worth it in the long run. Low pay. High revenge factor. Now, killing the foal's parents…sure. I've definitely done that before. Nothing ridiculous, of course. I don't do those 'rape and dismemberment' deals. Too messy and likely to go wrong."

"So glad you're a *professional* murderer," I muttered darkly, wondering if it was a mistake to save him. I didn't know what he was thinking anymore, but I wasn't about to admit that.

"Call it my way of fighting the Wasteland," he said with a smirk. "I honor my deals and keep everything nice and civil. I avoid collateral damage whenever possible, and strive for neatness and brevity." He paused, looking a little pained. "It was really tough breaking that deal with Cognitum. That's going to leave a bad taste in my mouth for a long time."

"You could have died and kept your honor," I pointed out.

That earned another smoky snort. "Yeah. Except I'd be, you know, dead. First rule of being a professional is to survive. Jobs go south. Plans go wrong. Dying for anything is something only morons do."

My telekinetic backhand knocked him out of his seat, across the cabin, and into the far wall. "Fuck!" he hissed, clenching his nose and grimacing. At least he was smart enough not to draw his guns. I saved this– this– this *bastard* and lost P-21 and Rampage? Rampage hadn't been a saint, but…"What was that for?" he cried out indignantly.

I jerked him over to me. "You're not a 'professional'. You're a raider with a sense of hygiene," I spat in his face.

"So when I break a contract to save my life and help you, I'm scum, and when I don't, I'm a corpse? Nice," he replied evenly.

That was a kick to the nethers of my righteous indignation. When a pony would do anything to survive, they were scum, but if he'd honored his deal with Cognitum…ugh…I couldn't handle this. "I just lost two very dear friends and a pony I'd have liked to have given a second chance. One of them," I growled out, pointing at Scotch Tape, "was her *father*. Don't you dare call any of them morons."

"Duly noted," he muttered as he glared at me over his askew glasses. "Now, are you going to kill me, knock me around a little more, or give me one of those second chance thingies?" he asked evenly. I glared into his insolent eyes and…damn it…What was happening to me? I was upset, sure…but I wasn't really going to kill him for insulting my friends, was I?

Was I? I stared into his teal eyes, seeing myself reflected in them and the silent question hanging in the air between us.

I am not an executioner…

"Sorry," I muttered, releasing him. If he insulted them again, though…

He straightened his glasses and rubbed his bleeding nose with the back of a forehoof. "Yeah. Forgot that you do that whole…friend… thing. I got vaccinated for that years ago." He considered me and then added. "Guess you were pretty close, huh?"

"Yeah. We were. And are." I'd never forget Rampage. I'd get her home, even if I had to bring down the moon to do it.

"Well, glad that worked out for you," he said with a shrug as he finished off the cigarette and stubbed it out on the upholstery. "I'll

honor our deal. Get the kid back safe. Keep her alive till the day after tomorrow." He pushed back the sleeve of his coat to reveal a PipBuck. He checked something. "Let's see. Armor piercing ammo. Need to pick her up some barding. Then play bodyguard till this mess is over." He chuckled. "Then I get paid and get some persistent bastards off my ass."

"You know, we might all die in a few hours," I pointed out. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"Should it?" he answered, as if the very question surprised him. "I don't want to, if I can help it, but it's going to happen. I die when I die. That big rock today, a raider's bullet tomorrow, a mark's bodyguard next month, starvation next year, or old age in who knows how long…something's going to get me. Why sweat the details?"

I grunted, then leaned over to where Scotch lay strapped into her couch. Her face was turned away from us. No flying through the air with hooves waving on this trip. She clutched the battered black hat in her hooves. Had that really been just hours ago? The young mare might have been asleep, or was simply alone in her grief. "Just take care of her," I told him, the edge in my voice present through our entire exchange now gone. He grunted once and nodded.

I stared at him for a long moment; something else was amiss, but I couldn't put my hoof on what. He was scum…no, that wasn't it. I was giving him a second chance. That was so me. But there was definitely something... something... something about him…He was a killer…no…he was…he…

"What?" he asked with a frown. Suddenly I levitated him to me, pulled off his glasses, and examined him closer. He was handsome in a somewhat underfed-looking way, athletic without being bulky. Really, he had a frame similar to Stygius, P-21, and Glory... and… and…Now he started to look a bit alarmed. "Fucking what? If you're going to hit me again, get on with it."

Fucking…that was it! I wasn't sexually aroused or interested in him at all! There wasn't that little part of me wanting the comfort and bliss that came with sex. I mourned P-21 because he was my friend, not because I'd lost a lover. There should have been…something! Sure, it had taken me a few hours to get with Stygius, but that was coming off of sexual trauma, and I was worried about killing him. I should be snogging Bastard. Flirting with him, at least…but… nothing. He left me cold. My emotional reset button wasn't just not

working, it appeared to have been removed completely.

"Nothing," I answered as I released him, averting my eyes to my blank body lashed to her couch. He shook his head and drew another cigarette, lighting it. I didn't know if the lack of sensation was a good thing or a sad commentary on my character. I added it to the growing list of things I didn't want to think about right now…and my head was getting a little too full. "Have you…have you ever felt like you're not yourself anymore?"

He took a long pull on his cigarette, then exhaled. "Nope. Can't say that I have. That sounds to me like a hell of a personal problem I'm glad I don't have. Like pregnancy. Or being an alicorn. Or being batshit insane, on top of all that." He pushed off me and sailed back to his seat.

"Thanks," I muttered dryly. Unfortunately, that left me right back where I started. And his little quip…my babies…I could still feel them inside me. Little pokes and kicks. I had to not think about… not…

Damn it! Thinking about P-21 made me choke up. Thinking about Rampage made me want to hit something. Damn it…why couldn't I just win for once? One solid, inescapable, undeniable, Blackjack-gets-what-she-wants win without paying for it in blood and tears? Why? It wasn't fair. Just once…Just…

Crap, I was crying. Great, shuddering sobs that curled me over and sent tears drifting through the cabin again. First Glory…no! Not Glory! Glory was alive! She was. She had to be. She was going to hold me in her hooves and tell me everything was going to be okay. She'd figure all this out. And I'd never, ever, stray from her again.

Enough. I couldn't take it anymore. I used my magic to untie my blank body and brought it to me. It'd been able to see P-21 even when I wasn't 'home'. Maybe I could use it to get away from myself. Just for a little while. Just until I worked out what I was going to do.

I turned over my blank face. This was my face, but not mine. So young. So…innocent. Had I ever truly looked this way before? I could almost imagine that this was myself dreaming…heh…I was even drooling a little. I held my blank body close and pressed my horn to hers. To dream…but who knew what nightmares I might see?

They couldn't be worse than the nightmares I was living now. I dove into the first window I saw, it and all the others now

annoyingly opaque, and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood lay broken on the hard granite stones of Mount Hoof, right at the edge of the nearly-sheer-sided great granite knob located at the south end of the Core. To his left, water poured over the spillways of the Luna Dam. Below, more blasted out from the outlets of the hydroelectric plant at the base. Above them loomed an S.P.P. tower, with pegasi whirling and dueling with Brood fliers while cyberponies maintained a withering fire from the access ring near the umbrella hood at the top. To the west, I could see Chapel in a desperate fight against the Brood as the dark horde advanced, was repulsed, and advanced again. To the east, I could see smoke and flashes amidst Scrapyard's mountains of junk. That wasn't all that far from the Collegiate. The Nightmare Citadel to the northeast was on fire; I could only hope that its defenders had taken refuge in the stable before a unicorn found a way to teleport in.

The most disturbing thing of all was the sight of a massive dark vortex over the Rainbow Dash Skyport. Three Raptors were whirling and maneuvering around the monstrosity of storm clouds and air, and as I watched, it reached out a twisting arm and sent claws of lightning raking at one of the war machines, tearing away dark cloud and blasting burning lines along the hull. To the northwest, I thought I saw Megamart on fire. And southeast, it looked as if the Brood were sweeping along the banks towards Elysium. Hopefully Splendid and the others had gotten out. I didn't begrudge them their flight.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the Legate purred. The powerful zebra stood with a hoof on Goldenblood's spine. The ghoul's limbs were missing, but he felt only a dull discomfort from each of the broken stubs. "This world should die with a roar. Not a whimper. I'm so glad you've managed to give me an invigorating fight. It wouldn't have been fitting had you all simply submitted to the inevitable."

"So glad our battle could entertain you," Goldenblood rasped under the crushing hoof.

"Oh, you don't understand. It's not the fighting I'm savoring. It's the despair. Truly nothing is more precious than the utter abandonment of hope. I pray we'll be able to hear the wailing all the way up here," the Legate chuckled, then paused and asked,

“Have you given up hope, Goldenblood?”

“Blackjack will stop you,” he swore.

“Oh?” The Legate sounded amused.

“Nothing has stopped her. Nothing will stop her. She cannot give up,” Goldenblood answered, and then the hoof twisted, making something in his body crack. “You should know. Your own prophecy says that she will defeat this city.”

“Yes…prophecy…” the Legate purred. “I’m honestly not sure myself if the prophecy of the Maiden of the Stars is true. Oh, it was unquestionably useful. It kept my own superstitious people aligned and allied. Earned me respect and cooperation. But is it true? A Maiden of the Stars, coming down to destroy this heart of sin? Did I predict it, or simply construct a convenient lie?”

Suddenly, the hoof on Goldenblood’s back lifted and wrapped around his neck. He hauled Goldenblood into the air, turning his face towards the east. “What do you think?” the Legate hissed into his ear.

There was the pale image of the moon, faint in the daytime sky, and next to it a brilliant blue star. At first barely visible, it gleamed as it grew brighter and brighter. “She failed,” Goldenblood whispered. “She failed to stop my creation.”

“Indeed,” the Legate laughed. “The Eater will catch it as it falls into the well we’ve carved into the earth.” He gestured to the Core. “The moonstone will be slowed by the friction and caught in our web, leaving the spirit easily digestible. Food, in all forms, comes down to the preparation.”

The blue glow grew and grew. Goldenblood watched the eager grin on the Legate’s face for several minutes. Then the zebra’s eyes narrowed in concern. “What is happening? Something is wrong! It should be slowing in the atmosphere already! Dropping into–”

The blue spot grew brighter and brighter in the sky but then streaked overhead and disappeared out of sight behind the eastern mountains. The Legate grabbed Goldenblood by the head and turned him, squeezing his skull as he demanded, “What did you do? The moonstone was supposed to embed itself!”

Goldenblood smirked as the Legate stared at him, then the sky, then at him, and then up at the sun. The Legate’s grip relaxed a little. “Oh, clever pony. The trajectory loops. I thought it’d be a straight path.”

“Of course,” Goldenblood rasped. “Trottenheimer worked out the

math. I thought it was supposed to be a straight line too at first."

"I see. So it will orbit the world, then the sun…the moon…Oh, he *was* a clever pony," the Legate hissed.

"Yes. And wise as well," Goldenblood answered. A moment later he added, "You worked all that out quite quickly, just from seeing it once? It took me an hour with charts after I was told."

He reached up and tapped the blood-red rings that decorated his face. "My people have a special relationship with celestial bodies. Ages in the past, my tribe were oracles and prophets, though the stars are not always straightforward with their knowledge, or favors." He stretched a hoof towards the skies. "With every pass of the sun and moon, the spirit will grow more powerful. The stone will increase velocity with each pass. Maybe poor dying Equus might lend some power, too. The kinetic and spiritual energy will build until the final trajectory will bring it…" The Legate paused, lowering his forehoof.

"Straight down. With a velocity far higher than that of a straight shot," Goldenblood finished. Then he asked, "Is that despair you're feeling?"

The Legate threw him aside, glaring at the spot where Tom had disappeared over the western horizon. "Finishing off this pathetic world shouldn't be this difficult," he muttered, his eyes narrowing. "I'm not beaten yet. I still have one last contingency." He glanced over at Goldenblood, and his confidence returned. "After all, I couldn't be sure that Cognitum would succeed."

"What are you going to do?" Goldenblood asked.

"What any good leader does at times like this," he said as he gazed back out at the Core. "Get help." I waited for him to elaborate, but all he did was look down at the Core and smile. Was it me, or did the distant tempo of the fighting and screams increase?

Goldenblood didn't answer for several seconds. "You won't succeed. Somepony will stop you."

"The last refuge of the powerless." The Legate chuckled. "Well, perhaps. Perhaps your alicorns will rescue you. Perhaps, somehow, Horizons will fail, and my plan will be thwarted. But none of you have the capability to defeat me. And I will try again and again until the end of time. Even if I have to kill every living being with my own hooves."

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself from Goldenblood's mind. A contingency? What was it? Help? From whom? Who did he have left to get help from? I needed more information. I had to know! I pushed my way into another mind.

oooOOOooo

"We're boned," a tiny blue colt said as he and a half dozen bloodied Zodiacs clustered in a cramped hole blown out of a wall, waist-deep in water. I was able to identify Sagittarius, Aquarius, Virgo, Pisces, and Capricorn. I didn't know who the white pegasus in the black combat armor was, nor the wounded zebra in the cloak.

"We're not dead yet," Sagittarius said as he leaned out of the cover of the hole. The chamber they were in was twenty feet tall, with intermittent pillars spaced out here and there. Rusted construction equipment jutted out of the water that covered the floor and lapped at the walls. On the far side of the room, six Brood tended to a damaged golden tree that trickled rainbow sap into the water. Four other unicorns maintained a shimmering shield protecting them as they worked. A hulking tank sat between the Zodiacs and them, its dented and blackened armor plates popping and twisting back into shape as the repair talismans worked.

"We're out of explosives," the blue colt said sourly. "Those damn Brood blew themselves to pieces getting the C-4 away from the tree. Cancer's scrap metal and Aries is probably roadkill. Gemini and Taurus are keeping the Brood reinforcements outside at bay for now, but eventually even that schizo is going to run out of magic. They're going to have that tree repaired and popping out reinforcements in *here* soon. The Flux in the water is probably giving all of us tentacles as we speak. But that's fine, because the frigging tank is going to kill us all long before they sprout. Oh, and we're out of explosives. We're boned."

"Hate to say it," the white pegasus said, "but we should withdraw. Regroup. Try again later."

"No, Libra. We were barely able to get in here the first time. We've almost scrapped that tree twice. We just have to finish it off. Screw the tank," Sagittarius said as he jabbed his hoof out the hole.

"Get me a new chassis! I'll show that striped monstrosity what for!"

a piece of equipment on Virgo's PipBuck squawked as a red talisman flashed on the device.

"Hush, Crabapple," Virgo said with a frown. "If we could get you installed in the tank, our problems would be over. We could use that tank to take out the tree, the Brood, and everything else."

"Use the tank... " Sagittarius murmured.

"We tried that," Libra said. "Remember? When we got between the tree and it, it just moved out of alignment and opened fire." The white pegasus glowered out of the hole. "I'd thought the Brood were supposed to be dumber than an Enclave general."

"Zodiacs don't care if the target is a genius or dumb as hammers, we take it down," Sagittarius murmured. "If we can't get it to shoot the tree…can we get it to shoot something else?"

Aquarius's eyes widened and he leaned over to peer at the vehicle now patrolling around the tree, moving through the churned-up, muddy water. "This is a bad idea," the colt muttered.

"Will it work?" Sagittarius asked.

"It's going to get us blown to pieces," the colt said, glowering at him.

"But will it work?" Sagittarius repeated.

"Will what work?" Virgo asked plaintively as she dug through her bag for robot parts and started to wire them together. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

Aquarius was silent a moment, then groaned. "Ugh…Yes. Maybe. You're betting against Equestrian wartime engineering." He turned to the zebra. "We'll need some smoke on the water, Scorpie." The zebra mare arched a brow, but then without delay began to dig through pouches lining the inside of her cloak. She dropped various materials into an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle, which began to spew a stream of mist.

"I'll get it started while you fill them in," Sagittarius said as his horn glowed and manifested a compound bow. "Don't take too long."

The green unicorn leapt out of the hole, kicking and jumping as he surged through the water to take position next to one of the pillars. He waited for a count of ten, then drew an arrow from the quiver on his back. Aquarius was a smart kid. A little negative…but he knew shifting forces. He was a great Zodiac. Sagittarius would take his 'maybe' over anyone else's 'definitely' any day of the week. The arrow ended in a bulbous grenade, and with practiced care, he fired

it straight at the back of the turret. The detonation was decidedly underwhelming.

The turret swiveled towards him, and he dove to the side behind the pillar. The twin cannons roared, and the blast sent both him and the water surging away, stunning him. The turret shifted, orienting on him.

Then a mouth bit the back of his neck, and he was surging sideways with a great spray of water as the cannons fired again. “I got chew!” Capricorn said through a mouthful of mane.

Libra streaked along the perimeter of the flooded garage, streaming the thick white mist from the bottle around her neck. The cannons tracked Sagittarius and Capricorn while the machine gun pods blasted a line of high-caliber rounds after the white pegasus. Sagittarius and Capricorn took cover behind one of the pillars, and he floated out his bow, shooting a bolt of green magic at the tank. It replied with an annihilating blast that nearly turned their cover to rubble. When the pair surfaced from the frothy water, Capricorn murmured, “I don’t like this plan.”

The mist started to thicken enough that the edges of the room became lost in a haze. All their previous attempts to assault the tree behind the tank had been for naught. As Libra swooped behind the tree, the machine gun fire stopped, but one of the unicorn Brood blasted at her with lightning, forcing her to keep going. As soon as she was clear of the tree, the machine guns opened up again. From the opposite side of the room, Aquarius fired a pistol from behind another pillar. The turret rotated around and oriented on the colt. The cannons fired again, but he was gone, riding on the back of Pisces as she darted along the water like a missile. “It’s working!” the colt shouted.

A small ball-shaped robot with two propeller blades and a small beam gun swooped into position and, hovering, let crimson beams slash at the tank. The red talisman set into the bot’s front crowed, “Death from above! This is perfect! I got him now!” The turrets swung towards the robot. “Oh sparkfarts…” The two rounds slammed into the pillar, and the robot disappeared in a cloud of shrapnel. The red talisman went flying through the air, then was seized by a pink magical aura and yanked behind another heavy block of concrete. “Viggy!” it shouted tinnily. “I need another chassis!”

“They don’t grow on trees, you technocretin!” the filly shrieked.

“Most AIs protect their chassis somewhat, you know!”

“Bah! Plug me into a pocket calculator, a servomanipulator, and a balefire egg launcher, and I’ll show you squishies how to win a fight! You’re all way too obsessed with retaining your fluids,” the robotic stallion shouted out.

Libra dropped the bottle and rolled sideways through the air, twisting her body as she spun and aiming her light machine guns right at the tank. Hurling sideways along the beams, she strafed the war machine with her own fire. It returned with thunderous blast after blast, tearing holes in the walls, ceilings, and pillars as it tried to swat the pegasus out of the air.

A Sparkle-Cola bottle flipped through the air from nowhere and shattered against the tank. The fluid immediately burst into flame, spreading over the cameras and sensors. The tank roared in a frenzy as it blasted again and again, careful to avoid the tree but ripping into everything else with high explosive rounds. The noise deafened Sagittarius, and all he could do was take cover under the water for as long as he could hold his breath.

When the fire stopped, the air swirled with smoke and mist. The flames on the tank had been extinguished in the tempest. Sagittarius felt as if his body had been stuck in a dryer with some big heavy rocks. Something inside him was grinding together, and as he forced himself to his feet, he immediately coughed up a slurry of blood and foul water, slumping against a stub of concrete jutting from the foaming pool. Capricorn floated nearby, unconscious or… no, she was still breathing.

Then he lifted his eyes and stared at the two barrels of the tank. Behind it, a platoon of Brood and unicorns stood in ranks around the fully restored tree. Identical smirks rested on all their faces. “You’re finished,” one unicorn wearing Silver Stripe’s face informed him flatly. The other Zodiacs were picking themselves out of the rubble of the shattered and blasted pillars.

A resounding crunch filled the room as a massive crack ran down the center of the roof of the flooded garage. The grinding noise rose as rocks and pebbles pattered down. The Brood and Zodiacs alike turned to stare up at those ominous slabs. *Try and fire those cannons again. I dare you*, he thought. “Libra? Scorpio? Either of you alive?” he asked aloud.

“Yeah?” the blond pegasus answered as she emerged from a pile of concrete, her scorched feathers bent in wild directions. The zebra

emerged a second later from that mysterious space that zebras and P-21 hid in.

"Get everypony out," he said as he drew an arrow from his quiver, stepping out and immediately drawing the eyes of every Brood and the tank as he loaded it into his magical bow.

Pisces screamed for him to come back and Virgo sobbed, but Sagittarius didn't look back. The unicorns' horns flared as they pushed up on the slabs overhead. He drew back the arrow, water dripping off the grenade at the end. Then lines of fire were punched through his battered body as dozens of bullets ripped into him. He loosed the arrow as he fell, his vision darkening as the roaring barrage concluded.

As he collapsed into the churning water, the crack overhead exploded, and the two gargantuan slabs slid down like an immense house of cards collapsing in slow motion. Through the gap, for a moment, he could see the floor above, and the floor above that, collapsing as well, dropping rusting construction equipment down upon the tank, the tree, and the Brood. Then, as he started to slip beneath the waves, everything going black, the green unicorn smiled.

oooOOOooo

The memory window winked out before me, and I was left staring at the void in my old and empty mind. Sagittarius was gone. I looked at the lingering pools of thought. How many others would I see wink ou– and another one disappeared right then! I gasped. Who was it? Calamity? Velvet? Whisper? Someone I'd known was gone, and…I switched my attention from one pool to the next. How many minds had I been connected to in the first place? I hadn't been able to precisely inventory them. Another pool winked out, and I screamed in that vast nothingness. Stop dying! Please stop dying. Please…

There was nothing for it. I found the nearest mind and threw myself into it. I had to know. I had to…

oooOOOooo

"We failed," Xanthe muttered as they sat in a muddy pit together. While Xanthe's armor was still intact, her mane wasn't. Only a few

long strands remained. Her stomach clenched, and she retched but brought nothing up. She glanced at the three ghouls. “Any ammo left? At all?”

“Sorry, all out of corpses,” Snails said mournfully. “Those skeletons didn’t work out so good.”

“It’s okay,” the zebra said, glancing over at Carrion.

The ghoul griffin’s armor was wrecked, functional only in the sense that it still clung to his desiccated frame. “Guns are dry. Explosives are gone. Sorry. I don’t see how we can accomplish our mission at this point.”

Xanthe shoved herself to her hooves, staggering a few steps as she cried out, “We can’t give up!” She managed all of three steps before collapsing on the muddy floor of the ruined bunker. She clenched her eyes, trembling and muttering again, “We can’t give up.” She looked back at the others. “The Maiden is counting on us. Everypony needs us to take out this bunker!” She turned desperately from one to the next. “We can try to get some more ammo from the Brood! See if we can rupture the Flux tanks again! Or maybe…maybe I could try that vent. Maybe they haven’t mined it a third time!”

“Xanthe!” Carrion croaked, helping her out of the muck. “Enough. We’re not going to be able to do it. The Brood know their bunkers are under attack, and they’re reinforcing them. We probably got hundreds of those bastards between us and that stupid tree.” Xanthe swayed and clutched her stomach. “And you’re not going to last much longer one way or another,” the griffin added. “How much RadAway do you have?”

Xanthe clenched her jaw, tasting blood in her mouth. “I…ran out fifteen minutes ago,” she whispered, like uttering a shameful confession.

“Uh-oh,” the stealth suit quipped in a worried, foal-like tone.

Carrion sighed. “All right. Let’s backtrack to that drain. It should get you out of here, at least. Maybe they can send in a second team.”

“No!” Xanthe said sharply, rising to her hooves. “We’re not going to give up! The Maiden wouldn’t give up! She may have cursed me, but I can’t give up! Because the only way you can ever lift a curse is by doing the right thing! The Legate’s evil, and these Brood are monstrous, but I can’t give up! I’d rather die than give up!” Then her guts gurgled, and she coughed. “Even if I really, really don’t

want to become a ghoul." She gave the others a weak smile. "No offense."

"None taken. And you probably won't. If everypony that died of radiation poisoning became a ghoul, Equestria would be a nation of undead," Carrion answered.

Silver Spoon stood away from the others, staring down the dark tunnel they were hunkered in. "Ghouls," she murmured. Then she turned back to the others. "The Brood aren't ghouls too, are they? I mean, they're like cyber zebra unicorn pegasi thingies with all kinds of crazy powers, but they're not ghouls too, are they?"

Xanthe, Snails, and Carrion shared a look. "Uh, no. They're not ghouls too," Snails said dully.

"Right! 'Cause that would be, like, totally cheating," Spoon said brightly. "So, what if we blew up the one place they can't go?" The blank faces remained, and she snorted, rolled her eyes and explained, "The reactor thingy. Duh!"

"Blow up a reactor?" Xanthe said lightly. "But a reactor's is heavily shielded. This one is obviously breached, but you'd need a tank to blow it up."

Silver Spoon snorted. "Well then, we get inside the reactor first, and *then* blow it up! You don't need to be so totally geek about it."

Xanthe took on a softer tone. "Silver Spoon, it's an operational reactor. It's on. It's a huge conflux of magical energy. I know you absorb radiation, but even ghouls have a limit."

Silver Spoon snorted. "Well, duh. That's what I do when I hit my limit. I make stuff explode! So I'll just make the inside of the reactor explode. Simple."

"But…you'll die…" Xanthe said dully.

Silver Spoon turned away. "So? I die. I'm, like, already dead. And anypony who'd care is dead too. So, like…what's the difference?" She sniffed, glowing green tears trickling down her cheeks. "I miss back when all I had to do was find Tiara. I wish I could have found her. She'd…well…she'd miss me. She'd be rude about it…but she would."

"I'll miss you," Snails said as stared back at her.

"And me," Xanthe added, trotting over and hugging the glowing ghoul. She suddenly shuddered as her stomach clenched, then pulled away.

"Hrmph," Carrion grumbled. "I'll…miss having a walking bubble of healing following us around," he said as he averted his eyes.

“Thanks,” Silver Spoon said as she looked down the hall. “I don’t really know the way, though. What if I get lost?”

Xanthe took out a tool and shakily removed the PipBuck from her hoof, and for an instant, everything went dark. Then the most amazing thing happened: my vision filled with an emerald-lit view of one world superimposed over another. One world seemed to be made of shadows and ugly black stone. The other was of shimmering, jade-colored light. Xanthe was a crude zebra-shaped block nestled within a suit of glimmering lights. A handsome verdine griffin stood superimposed over a crumbled black body. Snails seemed a twisted snarl of light fused with the dark body. The hallway was at once a broken and muddy ruin and a shining and polished piece of structure set in its prime.

Was this what every ghoul saw, or just a shining one like Silver Spoon? Either way, seeing the ugly real world imposing on such delicate, if illusive, beauty, I could understand why so many would inevitably go mad. Silver Spoon examined the PipBuck on her hoof, and it appeared like a disgusting coil of foulness studded with horrible glaring lights, showing the PipBuck mapping tool. “Okay… so…this way?” she asked, jabbing a hoof down the hall.

“Maybe one of us should go with her?” Snails asked in his slow drawl.

But Silver Spoon shook her head. “I’ll be fine. There’s no reason for two of us to…you know,” Silver Spoon trailed off. She stared at the lanky, mangled-looking unicorn and then leaned forward, kissing him lightly on the cheek. “I’m…you know…like…sorry…and stuff…”

“Yeah. Sorry, eh,” he murmured. “Real sorry…” He opened his mouth and closed it again before lowering his star-filled eyes.

“Hate to be the crotchety asshole here, but if we don’t get her out of here and some rads out of her system, we’re going to be either Team Ghoul or Team Looking for a New Zebra,” Carrion said from next to the sickly zebra. “If you’re going to do this, then you should go do it.”

“Right. Right…” Silver Spoon took a few steps back from the others. “I just…I…” she stammered.

“Thank you, Silver Spoon,” Xanthe said with a gentle, honest smile. “I’m sorry we couldn’t find Diamond Tiara.”

“Well…it’s not surprising she rushed on ahead of me. I was, like, always catching up to her and stuff.” She swallowed and turned

away. “G…goodbye, all of you.”

She tore herself away and raced through the emerald-lit world for several seconds till she could disappear around the corner. Then she pressed her forehead to the wall and sniffed. “Goodbye…”

She consulted the map on her PipBuck and kept searching around for signs that read ‘Utility’, ‘Maintenance’, or ‘Reactor’. She passed other ghouls wandering aimlessly, but the glowing outlines nodded their heads respectfully as she passed. The grotesque mockeries that were their bodies were hardly noticeable. Then a mare called out, “Hey, Silver Spoon!” The voice echoed through the hallways of the ruin.

“Tiara?” Silver Spoon called out, her ears perking up as she turned down a side path and trotted several feet. “Tiara? Is that you?” Hope echoed back at her, and then she stopped short. “No…no, Tiara’s dead. She’s dead. She’s gone.” She clenched her eyes shut. “I…I have to do this. I’m the only one who can.” She sat down, raising her eyes to the ceiling. “Oh…but I don’t want to. I’m scared. I wish Tiara was really here…”

“Hey, Silver Spoon!” the mare’s voice echoed again, but Silver Spoon covered her ears and shook her head, backtracking to the hall and continuing to follow the signs and the map. Again and again, the mare called out, and Silver Spoon’s whole body trembled in response.

Finally, she reached a hatch with a rusted sign above it reading ‘Warning: Reactor. Do not open while in operation.’ She looked at the PipBuck, then at the door, squinting to read the gross reality through the shimmering green dream world. “This is it…” she said, and she put her hooves to the wheel and heaved, her body straining. “Come on!” she shouted as she grunted, her body feeling very warm and bright, but the hatch didn’t budge.

“Damn it, you stupid door! Open!” she shouted and reared up, slamming her hooves against it. Green light flared around her hooves, and the black horridity crumpled a little as her strike left glowing marks in the metal. “Open! Open! Open!” she shouted, her hooves digging and melting her way through the metal.

“Hey, Silver Spoon! Over here!” Tiara called out to her again and again. “Hey, Silver Spoon, let’s go have some fun with those blank flanks!” “Hey, Silver Spoon, let’s go get drinks after work!” The ghoul’s body felt as if it were on fire as she struggled, loops of necrotic magic like tiny solar prominences erupting from her

mottled gray hide only for the holes they left behind to heal instantly. Silver Spoon bowed her head as she continued to dig, glowing tears melting pits in the floor as she shone like a tiny green sun.

Suddenly, the hatch gave way, and inside was a chaotic storm of magic roaring between several crystal talismans. The color flickered and changed, twisted…coalesced…forming into a pink mare with a purple-and-white-striped mane. A delicate crown lay perched on her head, and she wore a bright red dress with gems studding her ears. Her lips twisted in a cocky grin, but there was warmth in her eyes. "Hey, Silver Spoon. There you are."

Silver Spoon stared. "T…tiara?"

"Of course, you dummy. Who else?" The pink mare spoke with more fondness than malice as she smiled and nodded over her shoulder. "Come on. Let's go paint the town red."

"Yeah…I'm coming…" Silver Spoon whispered as everything grew brighter and brighter by the second. A smile crossed her face as she stepped closer to that mare, the real world melting away as everything transformed into light. "Tiara. I found you," her voice whispered.

oooOOOooo

The white pool exploded before me, the name echoing in that vast emptiness that was my blank head. I'd wronged Silver Spoon, tricked her twice and used her for my own ends. I was glad she'd been happy at the end of things…but it also raised so many more questions. Another window winked out before I knew who it might have been. I couldn't help myself. I mentally sent myself to the next window and let myself melt away. If I couldn't help, then I had to know. Had to watch. Had to flagellate myself as a witness to these horrors.

oooOOOooo

The Reapers reaped a bloody batch of Brood. No hiding. No tricks. No strategy. Just brute force and bloody determination carried them along as they butchered the enemy on all sides. Toaster slammed one against the wall of the bunker before a dozen of the hellish appliances blazed to life and incinerated the pinned cyborg. Then

the scarred earth pony pulled away, the sizzling body stuck fast to the toasters before he spun with surprising grace and flung the flaming torso into the face of two more before springing upon them with maniacal glee. Still, even his powerful frame was slick with sweat, and his vicious blows moved with ominous inertia.

Hammersmith and Dazzle fought back to back, the unicorns wielding their weapons with their magic and bodies. Nopony who witnessed those two would ever accuse unicorns of weakness. Hammersmith shoved a Brood up only to bring that colossal metal mallet down as if he were driving home a railroad spike. Dazzle, her rifle gone, dodged a blow by a Brood unicorn's blade and sprang forward, grabbing the Brood around the neck and then slicing right through her head with a crimson beam before she could teleport away. A second unicorn appeared on Hammersmith's back, blade raised, point aimed at the base of his skull. Her magic sent the dropped blade from the first cyberunicorn flying up and deflecting the strike. Without looking up, the immense mallet whirled over his head like a steel cyclone and sent the Brood flying. Another crimson beam turned the enemy into drifting dust.

Overhead, Storm Front fought with cool precision against a dozen Brood fliers as he led them ahead, flipped long enough to bring his sniper rifle to bear, and blew a hole in one flier's head, then darted through the hole left in the enemy formation. He shed blood and brass as he flew, but wore a smile as he whirled overhead.

Of them all, Brutus was at the front. An enormous blank mutant, augmented and twice his size, brought down a hoof almost half as large as the black stallion's body. Brutus rose up and caught the giant's descending hoof against his own, his powerful frame straining against the weight. Then, he shifted suddenly to the side, and the giant's foot dropped awkwardly and it staggered. Brutus didn't hesitate, planting his forehooves and kicking out with a massive applebuck at the giant's ankle. With an explosive crack, bone and wire erupted from the ruptured limb as it folded. Brutus, his forelegs still planted, turned around and gave a second mighty applebuck at the other forelimb, which struggled to maintain the monster's weight. His legs struck the side of the knee, and the limb twisted as tendon and wire gave under the force of the beast. The giant fell before him, and Brutus rose up and slammed his forehooves against the skull again and again till there was a third, mighty crack and blood gushed from various orifices.

Candlewick poured a stream of blazing yellow at the Brood as they flooded down the ramp and teleported in. So many rushed forward that they became a blazing mass, burning slower than they died. The wall of burning dead barely kept them at bay long enough for the others to keep from being overwhelmed. “These guys seem really pissed off! Did something happen?” he shouted over his shoulder.

“Yeah, they realized they better send all their fuckers on us!” Toaster bellowed in glee before leaping on a pile of Brood and rolling about like a pig in a heap of burning bodies.

“Maybe this is the only tree left,” Dazzle yelled as she swung the blades and continued to blast beams of magic.

Candlewick looked back at the golden tree. So much Flux was being pumped into it that the arcane device had swollen grotesquely. Brood weren’t popping out so much as dribbling out like runny roadapples, being seized by unicorn Brood, and having augmentations shoved into their bodies with gory sprays of blood. Usually there wasn’t time for more than a jagged spur-like plug stabbed in at the base of their skulls; the new Brood were being sent at the Reapers as soon as they could walk. The reinforcements from outside were far more effective than that slurry of zebra oozing like sap.

The scarred pony in the firepony hat turned to the Brood pushing through the burning wall of corpses and flicked a release on his saddle. The canister popped free, and he kicked it into the flames where the trickling rainbow fuel ignited and turned the container into a wildly bouncing rocket trailing fire. He reached under his coat and drew out another container, this one marked with a bright red stripe.

“What’s that?” Dazzle asked during a gap in the fighting.

He slammed it home on his side and twisted it in place. “Toaster’s special blend. Has an oxidizer mixed in along with magnesium powder.” He tugged his hat down over his eyes. “If that’s the last tree thing left, it’s gotta burn.” Then he levitated out Big Daddy’s potion and popped the cork out of the bottle, looking down at the glowing white dregs at the bottom. “I don’t have a clue what this is, but if it let Big Daddy take out a tank… ” He upended the bottle and swallowed the last bitter dregs in the container. “Yech!” Suddenly, his insides gave a great lurch, and he choked, then whimpered, “I’m not sure I should have drunk that.”

“What are you doing?” Dazzle asked, her eyes going wide. “Why are you…smoking?”

“I have no idea,” Candlewick croaked as a warmth spread through him, wisps of smoke leaking out his nostrils and mouth. “I hate this. All this,” he said as he pushed past Dazzle, staggering towards Brutus, the rousing giant, and the tree beyond.

“What’s wrong with ye, boy! We need yer flame guarding our flanks!” Hammersmith yelled as the beefy bearded unicorn whacked another cyborg with his immense hammer, sending a halo of brain and skull erupting in every direction.

“I hate it. Hate him. Hate me,” Candlewick muttered as he continued forward. “It’s filth…I’m filth…it’s all filth... ” The flamer coughed as the tip ignited. The flame jetting from the tip of his flamer was a brilliant white, and sparks spat out before it. “And it needs to be washed away.”

“Candle!” Dazzle shouted after him, but the earth pony in the red dragonhide coat and firepony hat rushed forward as the behemoth pulled its split skull back together. The scarred stallion jammed the flamer into the beast’s enormous nostril and a great whooshing noise filled the cavernous space as tongues of fire exploded out from the monster’s mouth and other nostril before blasting out its malformed side a few seconds later. As the beast reared up, Candlewick hooked his legs in the blazing nostrils and yanked up. The gargantuan Brood continued to roll away from the Reapers and fell on its back, flinging Candlewick like a comet over the heads of countless Brood.

“Burn! It all has to burn!” Candlewick shouted as he fell, the flamer sending a fiery plume ahead of him and making the Brood stagger back from the ring of hissing, snapping white fire. “Burn it all away!” he yelled as he landed in the pool of flame and continued the stream. He didn’t wait for the fire to dissipate, rushing along as it seared his hooves and scorched his belly. The stallion raced along the burning road, his coat ablaze as he rushed right up towards the tree. Something leapt on his back, despite the inferno, but Candlewick just rolled in the burning flamer fuel and scraped the impediment off.

The golden tree, bloated and twisted, loomed up three times his height, and he rammed the nozzle right into an oozing orifice. The roaring disappeared as all around him the Brood surged forward, immolating themselves as they pushed into the fire. Dazzle called

after him while Toaster whooped and cheered him on. The golden tree blackened around the hole he'd jammed the nozzle into.

Suddenly, knots on the surface of the tree swelled grotesquely, glowing bright red, and then exploded like blazing pustules, vomiting forth incendiary pus over his back and into the screaming, writhing masses of Brood. The glowing mouth of the flamer began to spatter him with chunks of molten metal as the blaze spread more and more. There was no pain, only a warmth that grew and grew as more and more burned away.

The great, bloated, technological monstrosity suddenly burst along the back, and a flaming rainbow slurry poured out in great splatters and tears. The fire seemed like a living thing now, and it spread out consuming all in its path. Tree. Augments. Armaments. Brood. But not Candlewick. Him it caressed like a lover, and the half of his vision on the side of the flamer disappeared. Still, he poured on the fire. More fire.

"Candlewick!" screamed Dazzle as hooves pulled him away, and she cried out as he glanced back over his shoulder, shaking her scorched hooves. "Stop! We've beaten them!"

"Your tanks are empty, laddie!" Hammersmith shouted.

"No. Have to burn it all away. Burn it all…" he said as the warmth grew and grew, spreading throughout him. Soon there'd be nothing left. He'd go out like Big Daddy, in a blaze of glory.

Dazzle lunged forward and hugged him, and she immediately cried out as her beautiful pale hide turned red as if she was embracing a hot stove. "Please. Come back! Please!" she sobbed, holding him to her chest as he felt his body sear hers.

Candlewick groaned and shuddered, his body shaking as he struggled to pull away from her before she was burned up too, but she refused to release him. Her tears sizzled as they fell on his face. Slowly, like a flame that had spent its fuel, the warmth began to ebb as he shook. Somepony was pouring water on him, but all he was aware of was Dazzle holding him and the horrible smell of burned ponyflesh. "I'm sorry," he croaked as the warmth was replaced by pain. So very much pain. He staggered and fell on his side, his sole remaining canister of special blend fuel slipping from its case and rolling beside him. Somepony was pouring healing potions into him, but all they did was increase the pain.

"Shh…" Dazzle said softly as her burnt hoof rubbed the side of his face with sight. "Don't talk. Don't apologize. You did it. Soon as the

tree went up, the Brood pulled back. We stopped their reinforcements. Now just hold on. We'll get outside and fire a flare to signal an alicorn pick up. Get you to the Collegiate and thrash those eggheads till they magic you all better again." Storm Front, Hammersmith, and Brutus moved in close, watching in concern. The pegasus's feathers were burned around the tips, grounding him.

But Candlewick looked past them to where Toaster watched the gathering, a nasty smile on his face. Candlewick could only see out of one eye, but he glared straight at the scorched and battered stallion. "No," he croaked loudly, tasting blood. "Don't you fucking dare, Toaster!" The scarred stallion's eyes went wide as Brutus and Hammersmith whirled on him.

"Do what?" Brutus asked as he glared at Toaster. The appliance-bedecked stallion's eyes popped wide as everyone regarded him.

"Nothing!" he said, grinning at Candlewick and struggling to keep it from a snarl. "He's fucking crazy after that shit, right?"

"He planned on finishing all of you off and taking–"

"You fucking idiot!" Toaster suddenly screamed. "We could have had it all, bro!"

"Bullshit," Candlewick spat, at him. "*You* could have had it all. That's all *you* care about. All *you*'ve ever cared about. And when this is all over, I'll make sure every damned Burner knows it." He slumped against Dazzle. "You make a shitty leader, Toaster."

"Get out of here," Brutus rumbled as he loomed at the other earth pony.

"No one's going to follow you after they hear what you wanted to pull here," Storm Front added.

Toaster's pupils contracted to pinpricks. "No. Fuck you. Fuck all of you!" He hit a talisman on his chest, and the toasters began to jet their flame. "Annihilate! Incinerate! Obliterate!" Time seemed to slow as he raced forward, his toasters lighting up one after the next, forming the corona that would take out at least one of them before he was put down. His hoof flailed at his side as Toaster closed the gap, racing like a flaming meteor straight at the prone Candlewick and Dazzle. The unicorn tried to blast him with her magic, but Toaster ignored the injury in his maddened state.

Hammersmith brought the mallet down in an overhead blow, but Toaster ducked to the side and embraced the unicorn, the toasters blazing as he smashed his armored head into Hammersmith's unarmored horn. The unicorn roared in agony as a crack ran right

through the base of the spire and every bit of him not protected by his plate armor ignited. As Brutus came in behind Toaster, he received a blazing applebuck kick to the face, knocking the stallion back long enough for Toaster to release Hammersmith and give Brutus a flaming body slam. Storm Front frantically dug through the scorched debris, looking for ammo.

Toaster shoved Brutus aside and then lunged straight at Dazzle. The prone Candlewick seized the canister beside him in both hooves, smashed the end down on the platform between his hind legs, letting rainbow fuel leak out, and then flung the cylinder right into Toaster's face.

Toaster's special blend went up like a fireworks factory, and as his eyes burned away, Toaster's course sent him racing off to the side. He screamed, or perhaps laughed, as the thrashed his way around the room, slamming his blazing body against whatever surface he encountered, including the floor. "Annihilate! Obliterate! Immolate!" he screamed wildly, thrashing as his mane burned away, then what remained of his overcharged-appliance armor. "Infurigate…in…blasty…gate…" he trailed off as the flames died, the blackened body taking a few more feeble steps, chunks of bone peeking through the charred muscle. "Fuck…" he rasped, giving a smoky cough. "Bro…why…?" he choked out before he finally collapsed.

"Bye, bro," Candlewick muttered.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," Brutus rumbled. Hammersmith picked up Candlewick with his levitation, not wincing at the crack in his horn, and set him carefully on Brutus's back.

"Hell of a day," Storm Front muttered.

"It's not over yet, laddie," Hammersmith replied, walking over to the smoldering body. "This is for not paying yer bloody bills, you sodding slag." The steel sledge came down, pulverizing Toaster's immolated remains. Suddenly, the smoking remains exploded, showering the bearded pony with steaming bits of gore and bone. Hammersmith blinked, then picked a curved bit of skull out of his beard. "You bloody blazing son of a bitch," he said as he scraped the gore off his face. "You just had to explode one last *bloody* time, didn't you?" Together, the Reapers walked out of the smoking tomb.

oooOOOooo

"He lived. They lived," I said as I pulled myself out of my blank's mind. Bastard looked over, vaguely baffled, but Scotch snapped her head around at me, her eyes full of wild hope. Immediately I stared at her, my smile fading and with it I watched her crumple anew. "Not…" The light died in her blue eyes as she slumped. "I'm sorry, Scotch."

"I just thought…since you and Glory survived so many times… maybe…" Scotch murmured hollowly.

I carefully moved over to her couch and put a wing around her. "I'm sorry," I repeated, not knowing what else to say. "I meant some other ponies. They killed all three bunkers…but…I thought…" I shook my head. "I wasn't thinking…"

The young mare turned from me. "It's just…it's Mom all over again. I wasn't there when she died. The Overmare ordered her recycled before they told me she was dead. I just…I just went home, and Rivets was there telling me I was getting moved to C shift. It was like she never existed in the first place."

"She did, Scotch. And I know she'd be proud of you. P-21 was," I said as I gave her a little hug with my wing.

"I wish it hurt. I don't feel anything. Like the feely part in me is broken or something," she said as she pressed her cheek against the window behind her seat. "It's not fair. You came back two times… three?"

"I've kinda lost track myself," I replied with a sad smile. "I wish they all could."

"He should get to come back once," she said, and then the young mare leaned over and pressed her face to my shoulder. "I want him back," she sobbed loudly as I held her in my hooves. I nuzzled the top of her head, fighting to keep myself together. I had to keep it together. I couldn't fall apart now, couldn't afford to slip onto that mattress and wallow in grief. Maybe it was Luna, or maybe it was me, but I only let a few tears slip down my cheeks and gave a snotty sniff before I beat back that terrible welling of emotion inside me. But Scotch, at least, could weep. I envied her that.

I glanced over at Bastard, glaring at him, challenging him to make one dismissive snort or snide smirk. All he did was blow a stream of smoke and look away from us and out the window at the approaching planet.

When Scotch calmed, she rubbed her snotty nose and bloodshot

eyes and errantly blew the former in my wing. Cognitum's fancy schmancy rocket had gravity, unlike the other one, preventing snot meteors from floating all over the place. My mane stood up on end…but hey, I could live with a little snot. "Sorry," she said, wiping her muzzle on the back of her foreleg.

"Oh, that's alright," I answered lightly, "I was due." I wiped the wing off on the velvet upholstery, trying to keep my disgust from showing. Yeech! It wouldn't come off! What was up her muzzle, a glue factory? Finally, I managed to get it off, but I left a half dozen or so small white feathers adhered to the seat. Scotch Tape gave a little smile, but it came nowhere near her eyes. Bastard just shook his head with mute disapproval. "What! It's sticky! I don't know how Glor–" I stopped as my mental workings went 'clunk'.

Scotch Tape came immediately to my rescue, asking, "Did you say they took out the bunkers? Isn't that good?" Her eyes were still wet with tears, but she was clearly trying to be brave.

I gave mental thanks to my fellow 'Don't Think About It Club' member. "It…it means no more reinforcements. He's still got thousands of troops, but now that's all he has." It was still more than we had defenders. Way more. "He also has this great big storm thingy over the Skyport. It looks like a tornado with a face."

"A Tempest?" Bastard blurted in alarm. "Where the hell did he get one of those?" Scotch Tape and I shared a flat look, then simultaneously turned to him, brows arched. He colored a little. "I banged a zebra mare once on a semi regular basis a long time ago. Leave me alone."

We again shared a look and shook our heads. "Give us a little more than that," I prompted. "What is it?"

"A zebra weather control fetish with an air elemental spirit stuck inside it, usually in a bad mood. They were supposed to be the next step in superweapons. Put them on a missile and unleash them to rampage all over pony lands like megaspells. Think a constant, sapient balefire bomb."

I'd much rather think of almost anything else. I'd seen two balefire bombs way too close for my comfort. Also, that wasn't what I'd meant. "How do I beat it?" I asked.

"With difficulty. I have no idea, really. Xulu only knew because she was a shaman, and she only knew because the spirits were terrified of what was happening during the war," he answered with a shrug, then stabbed a hoof at me. "And that's it. Don't ask me more than

that. I'm boring. I'm plain. I'm just a hitpony who gets paid to put bullets in people. Got it?" He stabbed the lit end of the cigarette at me with a note of alarm in his voice. "I am not a hero. Not special. Not interesting. Understand?"

Now I had something to distract me. "Well, I don't know. Now I have all kinds of questions about how a hitpony and a shaman ended up together." I glanced at my blank body. There were all kinds of things I needed to check, but I also needed this. What if I jumped in and saw Homage die? Or Charity? After feeling Candlewick's burned body, even I needed a moment or two.

He clenched his jaw, pushing his glasses up and looking out the window. "Come on. Please?" Scotch Tape asked.

"No," he said sharply, scowling at the young mare. "Look, not everyone has a great big story behind them. So just live with that, because I'm not saying more."

I rubbed my nose. "I don't know. Knowing my talent for gathering weird people, you're probably two centuries old after escaping a M.o.M. stasis spell because you were caught trying to assassinate Twilight Sparkle for the O.I.A." He stared at me for several seconds, and I grinned. "I'm right on one of them, aren't I?"

"No. You just must have known some pretty freaky people." The reply wiped the grin from my face.

I had known a lot of exceptional people, but also plenty who hadn't been. And some who might have seemed not-so-exceptional who had been more than I could have imagined. "Guess I do," I muttered, my momentary elation smashing back down to reality.

"And a lot of them tend to die," he continued flatly, making me turn my face from him as I gritted my teeth, fighting to keep myself together. "No thanks. I'm glad I'm alive, but I don't want to follow you around. That's just... too dangerous." He turned away on his seat.

"That Bastard," Scotch Tape muttered, the young mare glowering at his back, then up at me. I kept trying to keep focused, but thoughts and memories kept rolling through my head. P-21. Rampage. Lacunae. Discord... kinda. So many people had suffered and died to help me, taking bullets that should have finished me off. Scoodle had merely been the first. How many others had died, or were dying, because of me? "Blackjack?" Scotch Tape asked in alarm. Dusty Trails. Big Daddy. Charm hadn't died, but had come close. Silver Spoon. If I hadn't used her, she'd still have been alive

in the boneyard... it was my fault. It was all my fault. Scotch Tape's eyes went wide as things started going black. "Blackjack!" she cried out. Dealer... he'd died so perfunctorily I'd barely noticed and hadn't thought of it till now! Slaves killed in Fallen Arch. Reapers killed by Rangers. Rangers by Reapers. My sister! My stable! I couldn't stop it! Couldn't stop it! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!

"Breathe!" Scotch Tape yelled in my face, the word sounding like it was coming from underwater as the rocket's interior faded to black. Finally, it all stopped.

* * *

When I came to, I was still in the rocket, with my head throbbing and feeling... on the mattress. I could hear Scotch Tape and Bastard arguing in the distance. Next to me was my blank body. I clenched my eyes closed, pressing my face into the padding of the chair. I wanted my old rocket back, funky smell and all. I wanted to go back to Star House with my friends. To 99! To Canterlot!

I didn't want to think about what had happened. It'd been ages since I'd had an attack like that, and as I thought about it, guilt roared at me to suck it up and deal. There was too much riding on this! Too many still counting on me. Too many who'd died for me! What kind of scum was I to lie here like this, feeling overwhelmed and wanting nothing more than to retreat to when my life had been whole and simple and so much easier to face? I crushed myself into that mattress, and piled more mattresses atop me, wanting to be mashed to oblivion.

I levitated my old body to me and embraced it, pressing my horn to my old brow. I had to hide. Take a disguise. Go away till I was safe and in control and could do what everyone demanded I do. I couldn't be in charge of Equestria right now. I couldn't save the Wasteland now. I didn't want this. Anything but this. So I touched my horn and let everything swirl away, picking a pool and disappearing inside.

oooOOOooo

The defense was in shambles, but it persisted. The Rainbow Dash Skyport had become a hot point. Brood pushed along the ground while winds whipped the defenders along the fortified walls.

Overhead, the Tempest roared continuously as three Raptors wheeled and banked. Their plasma cannons seemed woefully ineffective as they struggled to avoid two lesser vortices that the Tempest swung like lightning-clawed limbs. One of the three had suffered terribly, trailing smoke and limping away as the Tempest howled and flailed at the other two.

"Wow. Feels just like the old days," Rainbow Dash croaked as she landed in the middle of the Skyport. She darted in, silent as a ghost as she made her way to the command center... but it was a wreck. Something had exploded in there, and I couldn't help but imagine a Brood unicorn teleporting in with a bomb and out with Goldenblood. She raced outside, where teams of unarmed ponies clustered around the main terminal, flapping their wings furiously as they clutched whatever they could.

"Keep flapping!" a soldier bellowed at the civilians. "We've got to keep up a counterclockwise spin or that thing is going to suck the roof right off the building!"

Rainbow Dash raced up to the armored pegasus. "Where is General Storm Chaser?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the soldier asked in shock, looking at her in bafflement. Of course, he must not know the purple power armor with flowy cape.

"Where is General Storm Chaser, Private?" Rainbow Dash barked in the precise tone to make the blue stallion stiffen up. "Report!"

He instantly saluted. "Ma'am, she relocated to the *Castellanus*'s radio room when our command center was destroyed. Chains of command have broken down all over the valley, and we're just trying to keep things together here. The Brood have made a big push over the last ten minutes for some reason, and that Tempest is tying up all our air support! We're grounded over almost half the valley."

Rainbow peered up at the three. "I see the *Cyclone*, the *Sleet*, and the *Rampage*. Where're *Blizzard* and *Sirocco*?"

"No idea, ma'am. Probably bolted. I've got my orders to try and counteract that wind, but we're barely making a dent," he said over the gale.

"No surprise. A Tempest can generate ten thousand wingpower without breaking a sweat. Damned megafetish," she said before turning and running towards the downed Raptor beside the terminal. "Sometimes, Fluttershy, I really wish you'd have talked to

us before making your damned megaspell matrix. Frigging Goldenblood... " she muttered as she raced towards the machine. The propellers along the top were turning faster and faster. “She can’t be thinking of taking this thing into the air now. It’s not even skyworthy in a calm!”

She must have cloaked, because she slipped right between the two sentries at the gate. The *Castellanus* lived once more, her interior illuminated sporadically by various flickering light sources as her deck groaned and moaned underneath her. Pegasus engineers worked furiously to bang away at the mechanisms while others were taking some boxes on and removing others. More than once, the guards and workers gave a double look, as if catching a glimpse of a ripple of cloaked cloak, but they all rushed back to their work, too busy to start chasing ghosts.

“Get those pumps working!” a familiar voice yelled. Chicanery stood in a rumpled suit that looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in weeks, an oversized helmet perched on his head, next to a hole in the floor plates. “No, no! If the breaker’s no good, then it’s no good. Don’t electrocute yourself trying to get it in.” He popped his head up and started at the sight of the cloaked blur, then reached for a boxy, battered beam pistol and pointed it right at her, jaw working.

“The safety is on,” Rainbow said as she decloaked, and at her appearance he relaxed a little. “Good eyes, though, Chicanery. What are you doing here?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ve asked myself that ever since the skies blew up,” he said after holstering the gun. “It was a choice between helping here or cowering in the terminal waiting to be made, you know, terminal.” He turned and peered down the hole. “No! Nevermind who I’m talking to. If you can’t get that pump powered directly, then wire it to a spark battery. We only need it for a few minutes!” He returned his pale eyes back to her. “While video production is more my thing, I spent two years working as an electrical rigger for lots of propaganda projects. Lighting. Sound system. Stuff like that.”

“I’m looking for Storm Chaser? Bridge?” she asked with a toss of her head.

“CIC. Flight bridge is too thrashed. But I don’t understand why she wants us to get this thing fixed for fifteen minutes of flying. We’re going to need more than that, aren’t we?” Chicanery asked with a worried frown.

"Not if she's doing what I think she's doing," Rainbow Dash said as she peered down the hall. "Listen. Do me a favor and hang around outside the bridge for a few minutes, okay? If the ship takes off, get out an emergency hatch, but I might need some help."

"Um, sure," Chicanery said with a worried frown, then leaned over and shouted down, "Look, when you get that pump going, go talk to Calliope outside. He's probably got more things for you to do."

They walked quickly along a hall, with Rainbow Dash gesturing with a wing for him to hang back. In the bridge, a number of cables ran to a terminal in front of the captain's chair. It was also filled up with dozens and dozens of boxes and crates. The gray mare sat in the seat, typing on the terminal as others worked around her. She looked like hell, her uniform stained and splashed with blood and her mane out of its normally neat bun. "That's it. I have attitude control now," Storm Chaser shouted at an engineer over the rumble. "The reactor's already starting to overheat," she then muttered as she stared at the screen and hit a button. "Everypony out," her voice boomed over the intercom. "You have two minutes to get your feathers off this ship!"

"Ma'am! We don't have the control uplink established yet. It'll take a few more minutes!" one of the engineers called out. Rainbow Dash carefully opened up one of the crates and was greeted by the sight of dozens of glowing green orbs nestled in padding.

"I've got it. I'll get off the second it's live, and the *Rampage* can guide her straight down that thing's gullet," Storm Chaser said as she worked the controls. "Everypony out! Move!"

As the last engineer left the room, Rainbow Dash grabbed him from behind. "Wait a minute. Just stay right there." And then she turned and stepped inside. "So, when did you become skilled in information networks, General?"

"You," Storm Chaser answered, looking over at Rainbow Dash in shock. "Did you jam their network?"

"Homage was working on that when I left. I came as soon as I saw the Tempest. She got a report by alicorn that the bunkers are all down. Survivors are being evacuated to the Arena and University," Rainbow Dash said as she looked around at all the boxes. "You're turning the *Castellanus* into a fireship."

"That's the idea," the general replied tersely.

"Good idea," Rainbow Dash answered as she walked in front of the general. "And since you don't have the fifteen or twenty minutes

it'd take you to set up the link, test it, and get off safely, you're going to fly the ship yourself, aren't you?"

"It's my responsibility," Storm Chaser said, keeping her eyes on the screen. "I can't order somepony else to do this."

"Big Daddy is dead," Rainbow Dash rasped. The gray pegasus lifted her head in alarm, staring at Rainbow. "The Reapers who survived gave Homage the news." She slowly approached the mare. "You're the only mare with any strategic leadership experience left. You are not flying this mission."

Storm Chaser didn't look at her. "I'm not sure my leadership is worth much anymore. I made a critical mistake and underestimated my enemy. We lost Goldenblood, and that Tempest has pinned me down here."

"So your plan met the enemy and fell apart. He learned a few tricks with unicorns, which he probably took from our alicorns, and pulled out a trump card. I saw what you had those boys doing. If you had a half dozen more Raptors, you could probably take out that Tempest without sacrificing one, too. You're doing what a general needs to do," Rainbow Dash replied.

"It's not good enough!" Storm Chaser cried out, tears on her cheeks. "Don't you understand? Ever since I came to this damned place, I haven't been a good enough leader. Too many mistakes. Too many things I allowed to get ahead of me. Ponies have died because I couldn't do what needed to be done! The Enclave failed. I failed." She shook her head, then bowed it. "These ponies don't need me. They need a leader like you."

"Me?" Rainbow Dash reached up and removed the hat and helmet, frowning down at Storm Chaser.

"You're a Ministry Mare," Storm Chaser said with a smile. "You're Rainbow Dash. If you stepped up, I know you could turn this around. You can do anything!" she said with a grin, taking Rainbow's hooves in hers.

"Yeah. I am pretty awesome," the ghoul replied as she leaned down towards her. "Except you're forgetting one thing: I failed too." Storm Chaser's smile faded as doubt entered her eyes. "I fucked up one end to the other. I gave my loyalty to Equestria, when I should have kept it with my friends." She glanced at the boxes. "I failed to really lead the pegasi when I was needed most. Ran away instead. I failed and I died... and I failed at that, too." She sighed and brushed back her hoof, shedding a few strands of mane. "These ponies don't

need a leader from the past. They go with me, they're headed in the wrong direction. They need a leader who can carry them forward. Somepony they know and trust."

Storm Chaser closed her eyes. "I'm not sure I can save them."

"Maybe you can't. We're outnumbered twenty to one. We've cut off their reinforcements, but there're still a whole lot of enemies left. And if we don't have somepony pulling things together and telling people what to do, we're not going to get anything done." She slipped the helmet onto her hoof. "And because we're running out of time and I really don't want to argue–"

Rainbow brought the helmet around, striking Storm Chaser in the temple and staggering her in her seat. The mare wasn't quite knocked out, but she was dazed. "Chicanery, come quick. You've got some duct tape, right?"

The white pegasus trotted back in, his eyes wide. "It's standard issue for engineers. Why?" he said as he pulled out the roll. Rainbow dash seized it, looped it round one hoof, and tore off strips with her teeth, leaving bits of her wispy rainbow-hued mane in the adhesive, then wrapped it around Storm Chaser's hooves and covered her mouth. By the time the mare had gathered her wits enough to start resisting, Rainbow was finishing taping her wingtips together behind her back. Chicanery watched it all with a hapless expression. "Oh, I am so dead."

"Eh, could be worse," Rainbow replied as she dumped Storm Chaser across his back. She undid the clasps of her armor and pulled herself out of it, then piled armor, hat, helmet, and cape on top of the glaring general. "Get her out of here. I'll fly this mission. There's never been a better flier in the skies than me, Raptor or not." She patted the heap on the straining stallion's back. "Get the suit to somepony who'll use it. Won't do for Mare Do Well to just disappear from the Wasteland."

"Grandma... " Chicanery began to say before Rainbow covered his mouth with a desiccated hoof.

"Reactor's heating up. Do awesomer than me," she said as she looked into the angry eyes of the General. "You can do it. Reestablish your lines. Use the Raptors for support once the skies are clear." She leaned in and rasped, "Don't give up. Not on yourself. Not on anypony." The general's angry eyes softened a little as Chicanery ran out of the room.

Rainbow Dash flew over and landed in the captain's chair. "Been a

while... " she said as she stroked her hoof over the armrest and gave a little bounce, the chair squeaking. “Oh, yeah. This was the one with the squeaky seat.” She reached over, tugging the terminal connection closer. On it was a diagram of the Raptor, much of it flashing bright red with alerts. “Okay. Activate interlocks,” she said as she hit buttons on the armrest of the chair. “Dynatherms connected. Infracells are up... " She frowned and hit a different button a half dozen times. “Up! Get up, you damned infracells! Good.” Then she pulled over a wheel set on the other arm. “Megathrusters are go!” she said as she pushed a tiny knob to the top of its track. The entire ship began to rumble, and she grinned. “Let’s go, *Castellanus*!”

The Raptor groaned and shrieked, lurching back and forth as it clawed for altitude. “Come on! Up ship!” On the front viewscreen, the wall around the Skyport began to loom near, and Dash pulled back on the wheel hard. “Get your ass in the air!” she shouted as the *Castellanus* rose enough to just barely clear the top, making the defenders stationed there dive for cover as the keel skimmed over them. The ship immediately dropped into the midst of the Brood besieging the Skyport. “Oh horseapples!” she shouted as twisted the wheel with her hooves while her wings pushed buttons and knobs. “Really wish I had time to brush up on this!” she yelled as the *Castellanus* twisted sideways. “Lift, damn you! I know you got one last good flight in you, *Castellanus*,” she hissed.

The whole airship rumbled, the feed from the ventral cameras disappearing into static as the vessel ground a furrow through the attackers, the vibration nearly bucking Rainbow into the air as the seat squeaked wildly. Finally, the ship lurched back into the skies, the display for the keel flashing red. “Well, good thing I’m not planning on landing. I think I left the landing gear lodged in that one’s ass.”

The *Castellanus* rumbled, the vibrating deck plates making the crates of arcane high explosives jostle ominously and shift slowly across the deck. In front of her, on the main screen, she watched as the Tempest raked its claws along one of the other Raptors, the lightning blasting furrows along its armor, shearing off one of the propellers that whirled madly atop the vessel, and sending it soaring off into the wild blue yonder. “Hang on, guys. I’m coming,” Rainbow said as her mane fell out around her lap like snow. “Figure it’s about time I caught up with you girls,” she murmured with a

small smile.

"Come on, Dashie," Rainbow Dash said to herself in a ghoulish imitation of Pinkie's voice. "It'll be fun! We'll all have our own ministries. I'll be the ministry of parties!" "But Pinkie, I'm already in the air guard," she murmured in her normal voice as the ship rattled and hummed around her.

Back in the squeaky imitation of her friend, she continued, "But think about it, Dashie, you could be the Ministry of… um… Flying? Or weather? Or… just being awesome! You'll be the Ministry of Awesome, and I'll be the Ministry of Fun, because I'm going to make sure everypony has so much fun!" She slumped in her seat, closing her eyes. "Wasn't as much fun as we thought, was it, Pinkie?" A tiny pink pony inside me wept and shook her head.

The ship howled as she looked up, the Tempest's enormous scowling face turning towards the new enemy. She jerked the wheel hard, her wings flipping the knobs and dials. "Could really use a bridge crew right now!" she shouted as the ship suddenly rolled to the side, the crackling claws sweeping past it with a noise like a thousand buzzing hornets ripping the hull. A momentary weightlessness lifted her from the seat as she snapped the wheel forward, and the heavy crates of munitions thumped ominously.

"Should have been focused on the rest of you girls. Shoulda stopped Fluttershy from making those damned spells. Shoulda pinned Pinkie down till she got help. Shoulda made Twilight pull her head out of her research notes," she grunted as the *Castellanus* corkscrewed up past the face of the Tempest. Within its mouth was a single glowing star around which the gale whirled. "All my fault. I was too busy fighting and having fun and not taking care of all of you!" she shouted over the growing rumbles as the ship leveled out. She flipped a switch and shouted, "This is the *Castellanus*. I don't know if you can hear me, but the Tempest's talisman is located inside the mouth. Take a shot while it's focused on me. *Castellanus*–" The ship jerked as something exploded below decks, setting off an alarm and slamming Rainbow's head into the monitor. Black, tarlike ichor dripped down between her brows as she focused at the screen, bringing the *Castellanus*'s nose in line with the Tempest's mouth. "Hold it together just a little longer, you glorious old bird. Hold it together."

The ship seemed incapable of slowing as it rocketed towards the Tempest. The enormous sentient twister spread its whirling arms

wide in preparation to rip the ship from the skies. “I remember when you came off the lines. EAF-009. First Raptor rigged for command. Earth pony engineering, unicorn magic, and pegasus cloudcraft working together. Wish it could have been for something that didn’t kill... but you’re a damned fine old ship, *Castellanus*. We’re going to get inside that thing and blow it all to hell. Just like the old days... ”

Smoke and steam were filling the bridge as the ship rumbled and the crates shifted and wandered over the deck plates. Rainbow’s left wing reached into a compartment and drew a plasma pistol, pointing it at one of the crates of balefire eggs. “You were wrong, Lightning Dust. I wasn’t ever ashamed of the pegasi. We did what we had to do. I just wish we’d done something else. I hope we can show everypony that pegasi can be trusted to work the skies again. We can... I know we can... ” she said as her eyes narrowed and her hooves tightened on the shaking wheel.

The Tempest’s claw swept in from the left, and she pulled the wheel up at the last second, curling over the crackling energy. “Too slow... ” The other claw slashed in from the right, and she dove beneath it, screaming propellers tearing into the cloudy limb as it passed under. “Still too slow!” As she raced for its mouth, the surface of the Tempest suddenly flashed, and a third limb erupted from under the maw, reaching straight for the bow of the Raptor. But just as fast as the claw emerged, Rainbow Dash twisted the wheel, and the claw ripped past, shredding the ship’s hull but not stopping its advance. “Hah. Didn’t know I’ve seen that trick before, did you?” she crowed as her wings tightened on the trigger.

Then the open maw, with the Tempest talisman within, disappeared, and Rainbow blinked as she stared at a solid whirling wall. “Haven’t seen that trick... ”

The *Castellanus* plunged into the wall of the tornado. Instantly, everything in the bridge was slammed to the right, and Rainbow struggled to keep her grip as the *Castellanus* was swept around and around. The viewscreens offered nothing but a nauseating display of the world tumbling around and around, over and over. Crates, boxes, and bombs went thrashing around her as the whole ship tumbled up the cloud wall, one metal ammo crate smashing one of Rainbow’s wings with a sound like splintering kindling. More metal smashed into her, and it was a miracle nothing went off. Or maybe just good firing safeties. Did a missile explode if you dropped it?

With a final shriek of metal and wind, the ship was ejected from the whirling storm and sent flipping end over end out into the air. Despite it whirling in ways that made me want to puke, Rainbow managed to stabilize the ship against all odds. The ordinance stopped bouncing off the walls and ceiling and settled to rolling around the floor. Rainbow Dash curled up against the wheel, one foreleg studded with her own bones jutting from the mottled blue-gray hide. One of the pegasus's eyes didn't work, and something thick and cold ran down her cheek. The terminal before her showed every section of the Raptor flashing red. Alarms blared on every deck as smoke swirled about her. Only two viewscreens remained active, and in one she could make out the Tempest with a corkscrew-like trail of black smoke running around it. She clenched her eye shut. "Come on. Just... one... more... stunt... "

She hugged the wheel to her chest and pulled back, groaning as the controls fought her, and the *Castellanus* responded with a slow, juddering motion. The vibration of the ship took on a deeper, more visceral resonation as the ship began to tear itself apart. The *Castellanus* spiraled up and up, shaking and smoking. The skies dimmed as the Wasteland and valley below became a smoke-veiled, bloody eye. In the dim distance, she could see the blue glow of Tom near the sun, and she smiled. "Let's show them what a Ministry Mare can do."

And she lunged forward, and the *Castellanus* responded. The deep groan was replaced by a growing whine as it started to dive. The pitch increased as the Hoof began to rapidly fill the viewscreen, and she centered the nose on the whirling vortex. Something on the ship exploded, the controls lurching against her broken body, but she kept the wheel locked in a death grip. Flames blew out a control panel beside her, but she didn't take her eye off the tiny glowing mote in the heart of the Tempest.

"Hold it together!" she said as the ordinance shifted back towards the wall behind her, the speed of the dive increasing faster and faster as she battled to keep control. "Just a few more seconds!"

The *Castellanus* disappeared into the whirling apex of the tornado and dove down the heart. It was impossible to tell if the winds were tearing the propellers and controls away or if they were tearing off under their own power. Then a colossal crunch rang through the Raptor, accompanied by screaming metal. Suddenly the front of the bridge exploded inwards towards her and the hoof-sized glowing

talisman imbedded itself in the center of the viewscreen. The diamond talisman seemed to possess a glowing eye that bulged as it stared up at Rainbow Dash and the layer of ordinance pressed to the wall behind her. On the last remaining screen, the ground raced up to meet her.

The Ministry Mare of Awesome grinned at the shrieking talisman and called out, “I call this one the Rainbow–”

oooOOOooo

The pool in my blank’s mind exploded in a rainbow-colored flash. She was gone, and in the back of my mind, six tiny speechless ponies held each other, a tiny pink pony and yellow pegasus sobbing against each other while three others comforted a tiny, stunned, blue pegasus. Then said pegasus cheered how awesome it was, and my brain got awkward. I did my best to shove them all out of my mind. Rainbow Dash had gone out as she’d wanted, helping others, saving Equestria. The only way it could have been better would have been if it’d been saving her friends.

I smiled in that great, empty void. “Thanks, Rainbow,” I murmured. Going out like that wouldn’t be half bad...

I needed to know more. Did she kill the Tempest? I sought another mind that could give me some answers and slipped inside.

oooOOOooo

“Ow. Ow. Ow.” Every step from this mare trotting through the familiar halls of Stable 99 elicited an ‘ow’ as stabs of pain ran through her bandaged body. “Come on. Where are you?” Crumpets muttered as she limped along the maintenance halls. “How bloody hard is it to find a sodding great purple... ” She rounded a corner and spotted Psalm sitting at a table in Atmospheric Maintenance Three. In three months, nopony had cleaned up the cards scattered around the table or the IOUs that were spotted with blood from when ponies had sheltered here from the crazy infected ponies. A few months hadn’t erased the nightmare of two hundred years. “... turkey,” she finished weakly.

Psalm sat at the table, staring down at the assembled sniper rifle on resting on it. Her purple eyes stayed locked on the matte black finish, the enormous scope the size of a hoof. Crumpets sat down

outside the door, slumping against the doorframe a little. “Bit for your thoughts?”

The purple alicorn lifted her head to see Crumpets, then returned her gaze to the weapon. “You should be in bed.”

“Sheets make me itchy. Actually, being trapped anywhere makes me itchy. Made life as a Steel Ranger a bleedin' slog. Always wanted to go on patrol just to stretch my bloody legs.” She winced as she examined at her bandaged leg. “Now me legs really are bloody, and we’re both stuck here while everypony else is gettin' stuck in.” She paused and tilted her head. “But I’m guessin' that’s not what what's goin’ on in that big pointy head of yours.”

“I’m a coward,” she muttered as she stared at the gun. “I should be out there helping, but I’m too... ” She clenched her eyes shut. “Scared... ”

“Scared of what?” Crumpets said as she limped over to sit beside her. “I’ve never been a fan o’ hatin’ on fear in general. Like, there’s these things back in Trottingham called water goblins. Look like a ghoul crossed with a fish. If you lean too far out from the fanboat, they’ll pop right out of the water and chew your bloody face off. Scare me shitless.” She waited for a reply. “Am I chattin' to meself here or what? I don’t want to do a bloody interrogation, but a response would be nice.”

Psalm looked at her, and the corner of her lip curled. “You can barely walk.”

Crumpet patted her shoulder. “Aye. And many a foolish hornhead underestimated an earth pony’s capability to thump somepony actin' like a leatherhead.”

The purple eyes fell again. “I’m afraid of turning back into what I was. A murderer.” She rubbed her face with a wing. “I don’t want to be that again.”

Crumpets frowned. “You’re *still* stuck on that rubbish?”

The alicorn didn’t answer for several long seconds. “I don’t know anymore. I’m not sure of anything. Once, I was completely sure. So certain that I... I made horrible mistakes. Now I don’t trust myself to do the right thing.” She clenched her eyes shut, then hissed, “I hate this gun. I hate that it still exists. It’s like a part of me that I can’t get rid of! It reminds me of... so many people I killed.” She grabbed it with her magic, pressed the butt against the floor, and started to lean her weight against it. “I want to destroy it forever!” Then she paused, and released it. “But... I could help people I care about... if I

was just... if I could just... "

"Kill again?" Crumpets suggested in an arch tone. “You really still think what we do is murder?” Psalm gave a tiny nod, and Crumpets let out a sigh. “Bloody hell, only one thing for it then... ”

Then she smashed her hoof right into the purple alicorn’s face. The blow not only nearly sent Crumpets down but floored Psalm. Crumpets lifted herself to her hooves, standing over the dazed alicorn as she pulled herself together. "Ow. Bloody nora. Now, let me lay this bollocks to rest right now. Was Big Macintosh a murderer?” Psalm stared at her for several seconds, then shook her head. “What about the rest of your squad way back when?” A shorter wait, then another reluctant shake of her head. “Is Blackjack a murderer?” I was glad to see another tiny shake of her head. “How about me?” Now a frown of comprehension as she furrowed her brows.

“No. None of you are... were... ” she said as she glanced up at the bandaged mare. “But…I... ”

“You... might have been,” Crumpets said evenly. “I don’t know what you got up to with the O.I.A., but it doesn’t sound anything like what we do. Soldiers don’t want to kill. Not good ones, anyway. We do what we have to do, and sometimes that involves killing people trying to kill us.” Crumpets stared down as Psalm closed her eyes, tears on her cheeks. “That’s not it, though, is it? All this ‘not wanting to be a murderer’ shite... that’s not what’s really bothering you.” Psalm didn’t answer, and Crumpets sighed. “It’s him innit. That big sparklin' moron.”

Psalm immediately lifted her head. “He is not a moron! He’s good and noble and gentlestalliony and... ” She trailed off again, averting her eyes.

“He fancies you, you know,” Crumpets said with a small smile.

“He’s too good for me. I don’t deserve– ow!” Psalm yelped as she was kicked by the bandaged mare. “What was that for?”

“Because it seems to be the only way to get through to ginormous pillocks like you two,” Psalm replied. “Yeah, he’s a good stallion, and he likes you. Accept your good fortune and don’t think about what you deserve, you big bloody turkey.”

“He doesn’t like me. He likes... her,” Psalm murmured as she sat up. “He likes Lacunae.”

“And you’re not her. I mean, she was a moanin' misery like you, but she got off her arse and did something to help. Even still, he

likes you too. You got that whole ‘alicorn mare of good breeding’ vibe going that’s right up his alley. And you can fight. And you care. That matters more to him than anything,” Crumpets said as she jabbed Psalm’s chest. “What he likes is what’s in here. And if it don’t work out, at least you tried.” Crumpets took a deep breath. “But you definitely ain't worthy of 'im if you sit and sulk in here while he dies out there!”

Psalm stared at Penance for the longest time, then bowed her head. “Luna wasn’t able to forgive me before she died… ”

Crumpets put her hoof on Psalm’s mane. “The only forgiveness you really need is from ponies who love you, and yourself. So, what do you say? Are you a soldier who is ready to help her friends, or an ex-murderer who cares about nothing else than hiding from her own conscience?”

Psalm regarded Crumpets and then gave a little smile. “Okay.”

Crumpets grinned. “Are you sure? ‘Cause I could give you another lump or two.” Psalm blinked and rapidly shook her head. “I really wouldn’t mind.” Now Psalm gave Crumpets a somewhat annoyed glare back. “That’s the ticket. Now let’s get out of here!”

The alicorn balked. “But you’re wounded! You need to stay here until they can heal you some more. The next batch of potion should be ready in a day or two.”

“Buck that. If that nurse offers to give me one more ‘oral physical’, I’m going to scream. I don’t mind the attention, but not in the middle of the medical bay!” she said, her cheeks burning. “Besides, Rangers don’t hang out in Medical when there’s a fight going on.”

“Where should we go?” Psalm said.

“The rally point was Megamart,” Crumpets replied. “Let’s go. They should have a healing potion or five there, too.”

“Shouldn’t we get your power armor?”

“No. If we get anywhere near Medical, I just know Nurse Sexual Healing will try and give me a sponge bath. With her tongue. In front of everypony.” She gave a little shudder. “And she wasn’t even a Stable 99 survivor. I think there’s just some kind of perverted aura to this place or something.”

Psalm smiled and pulled Crumpets close, lifted Penance and slipped it under her wing, and then teleported–

Straight into hell.

The roof overhead was mostly gone, with just a thin ring of rooftop along the edges; Steel Rangers and Reapers were perched on it and

firing down at the assaulting Brood outside. The rows of formerly-orderly stacked scrap were now filled with wounded ponies. Pegasi, grounded by the absolute fury of gunfire saturating the air, remained perched out of harm's way. A gaunt old stallion walked along the rows with three more unicorns and a half dozen earth pony medics applying healing spells and helping with the injured. In the middle of the store, now on the ground, surrounded by walls of sandbags, and firing in high arcs over the walls, Gun boomed again and again, the noise barely blunted by the makeshift bunker.

"Oh, bugger me," Crumpets murmured in shock. "I didn't know it was this bad!" Then she hobbled up to the old unicorn medic. "I need healing. Now!"

"They all need healing, young missy! You'll have to wait your–" He was cut off as she grabbed him by the head and glared into his eyes. "Uh... I think I can squeeze out a little more healing magic before my horn pops off. Hold still."

As the cool magic washed through Crumpets's wounds, Psalm went through the wounded and collected ammunition and a few more weapons. "Where's Star Paladin Strong–?" Crumpets started to ask. Then wall of Megamart exploded and collapsed, screams and gunshots ringing out as Brood started to push in. "Nevermind."

"Fall back!" a familiar voice bellowed over the fury. "The innocents are already evacuated. Fall back to the Arena! I'll buy you time!" In the breach in the wall, a huge stallion rose up, fighting the Brood with shattering blows of his armored hooves.

Crumpets rushed to Psalm. "Arm me! Quick!" she snapped.

"Hold still," the alicorn instructed, lifting her in a magic field, and then she wrapped Crumpets up in combat armor and strapped on a battle saddle with a single scoped markspony rifle. "I hope this will do. I didn't have a chance to ask your preference."

"It's fine. Let's hurry before the idiot is overwhelmed!" Crumpets snatched a satchel of supplies from one of the earth ponies before racing after Psalm.

As Megamart started to evacuate, the two joined a faltering defense. Anypony who could carry things was hauling wounded and supplies out, some earth ponies all but covered in ammo boxes and weapons. The four ghouls crewing Gun kicked out the sandbags and depressed the barrel as Brood began to appear on the tops of the walls. The artillery roared, and the Brood disappeared as swiftly as they appeared, along with almost half the remaining wall.

As they raced towards the breach, the mares cut down any cyberzebra that climbed into view or unicorn that flashed into being around them. Psalm moved like a ballet dancer, swinging the rifle from one Brood to the next, the bullets tearing through eye sockets and out the back of skulls. And when one bullet didn't work, a second one would take the other eye. "Please, forgive me for being afraid," Psalm murmured between every shot. "Please, forgive me for being late. Forgive me for the blood on my hooves. Forgive me for being me."

"You have issues. You two are really made for each other," Crumpets muttered as she fired off round after round in Psalm's wake, protecting the alicorn's flank as they rushed towards the huge musclebound stallion. Half his armor had been blown from his magnificent marbled frame, but still he fought on, struggling against the horde. One stomp lobbed a rock into the air, and he kicked it with the force of a grenade right into a clump of cyberponies. A Brood unicorn appeared behind him, razor-sharp blade ready to tear out his spine, only for him to stomp a shockwave that erupted under the unicorn and knocked it straight into the air with a hoof-shaped spur of rock under it. Then he hooked a foreleg around the spur, ripped it from the ground, and flung it into the face of another Brood who was taking a bead on him. His magnificent body, even glazed in sweat and blood from a dozen scrapes, seemed to sparkle in the midst of the carnage.

Psalm rushed towards him. He spotted her, and his eyes were dragged away from his enemy as he gazed at her. They widened and softened as for a moment the battle was no more, and he stretched a hoof towards her.

Then his body jerked as a half dozen bullets tore into him. Psalm stared, frozen in place as he staggered, more rounds biting into him as he reeled back and then crumpled. His magnificent body no longer sparkled as it collapsed atop the mound in the breach.

"Damn it! Damn it! Fuckin' damn it!" Crumpets shouted as she rushed forward with Psalm. They reached him, and through the breach they could see dozens... hundreds... perhaps thousands of Brood moving towards the evacuating building.

Stronghoof looked up at the pair of them, his mustache speckled in blood. "My... love... " he murmured over the chaos before he went limp.

Psalm stared for what felt like an eternity, bullets whipping past

them, catching her mane blowing in the wind and snatching feathers from her wings but miraculously missing her body. Then she turned towards the gap and let loose a howl that echoed from one corner of the battlefield to the other. “NO!”

Penance rose up on her left, and on her right, she lifted a weapon from a fallen defender. She shook the mortar dust off the tool, a few small pebbles that had lodged in it clattering to the ground, and pulled the trigger. The motor whirred for a moment, and then the minigun began to sing. Its tongue of flame reached out and sent a line of burning metal death at the approaching Brood while Penance cracked again and again. One unicorn attempted to teleport behind Psalm, but she seized the mare, blade and all, and hauled her in front of herself. A bullet blasted the cyberunicorn’s brains out, and her body caught some of the rounds that poured in at Psalm. The alicorn made no attempt at summoning a shielding bubble, ignoring the bullets that got through to hit her. When the minigun ran dry, she drew two more rifles from her collection and continued to fire. Her magical focus and accuracy staggered the enemy as she protected herself with the mangled corpse until it was too shredded to do more than spatter her with blood.

Crumpets, meanwhile, tore pressure bandages from the satchel and pressed them to Stronghoof's wounds. “Mental. Both of you. Bloody, sodding, leatherbrained mental!” she shouted at him. “You’re perfect for each other!”

Psalm didn’t seem to register the words as she yanked over another Brood body for a shield and cycled its gun into her floating collection, then began building a wall of gore when the individual reinforced corpses were no good at protecting her. A unicorn attempted another teleport, this one with four frag grenades in tow. The stems were pulled, but Psalm grabbed the Brood in her hooves, magically clustered the grenades together, and shoved the unicorn and grenades against the wall, the former covering the latter. The explosion showered her in gore and metal, but she hardly broke stride as she returned to slaughtering any who approached the gap, the alicorn awash in the blood of her foes.

Crumpets finished packing off Stronghoof’s injuries and getting a healing potion inside him, but that was all the satchel held. “Okay. He’s stab–” She was interrupted by a hoofshattering boom as Gun exploded. The Brood weren’t just trying to break through here anymore; while Psalm and Crumpets had been busy, three other

holes had been blown in Megamart's walls, and they didn't have the alicorn defending them. "We've got to get out of here!"

Psalm was silent, the only answer coming from her guns, barking again and again, Penance's barrel sending out precise death as she tore more weapons from her enemies and used them as well. "Forgive me, Luna. Forgive me, Stronghoof. Forgive me, Big Macintosh," she muttered over and over again, in a trance, her eyes not even focused on the enemy before her as she slew them, her face streaked with tears as she repeated the words over and over again. Bullets bit into her from both directions now as the Brood who had breached the walls swarmed in behind her.

Crumpets, hit once or twice by errant shots, pulled herself in front of Psalm and shouted in her face, "Evac! We need to evac now! Now, you sodding dodo!" She struck Psalm in the face again, but the alicorn didn't stop fighting. "Damn it! Are you a soldier or a murderer?! Soldiers obey orders to pull back!" she screamed in Psalm's face.

Then a bullet thudded right into Crumpets's spine. Her entire body went numb as she slumped down Psalm's front. At last the purple alicorn glanced down at the two ponies at her feet, then she stared at Penance. "I'm... I'm... " she murmured as she bled. Then a Brood launched himself over the wall of corpses she'd laid, guns firing in a frantic effort to end her. Psalm's horn flared as she swung the gun with all her strength, smashing it across the Brood's face. The delicate talismans shattered as the scope's lenses smashed, the barrel breaking off where it met the frame of the gun. The spray of gems, metal, and blood seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Then Psalm lifted the two ponies and curled her wings over both of them. Her horn flashed–

And then the three were dumped in a pile of mud. "Help!" Psalm shouted at the top of her lungs. "Please! They need help!" Hooves thundered towards them. "They need help. Please... save them... "

"We've got them. Let them go. I don't know where we're going to put them, but we'll find somewhere! Now let them go!"

And as Crumpets slipped into darkness, she muttered, "About time, you two great... big... dumb... "

oooOOOooo

This pool didn't wink out so much as fade away as I emerged from

it. I'd gone on a rampage similar to hers and come back. I could only hope that when I met Psalm again, she'd be at peace with her decision. And another wonderful, unique, named weapon ruined! Why couldn't ponies take care of…a tiny orange pony stared flatly at me at my thought. Okay, so I might have ruined a gun or two... three... four... okay...

Of course, as a tiny purple unicorn pointed out, Psalm had ruined hers on *purpose*.

Stupid, smug brain ponies who called me on my shit.

Grrr…I studied the remaining glowing pools. There were maybe two dozen or so– minus one as it winked out before my eyes. My mind was getting dimmer by the second...

Okay, not helping. I moved to the next and slipped my mind inside.

oooOOOooo

I almost wished I hadn't.

Chapel was dying. Again.

The defenders were in a fight for their lives as the Brood advanced inexorably towards the stockade. They no longer simply allowed themselves to be blasted to pieces. Now they moved in shifts, one battalion pouring on suppressive fire while the other shuffled forward a few dozen yards, stopped, took cover on the ground, and began laying down fire so the first one could advance; then that one would gain ground and stop, and the cycle would repeat. The defenders, however, were clustered behind a shambled stockade of wood and scrap metal, much of it burning and blasted. The defenders who weren't shooting were screaming. Screaming for ammo. Screaming for help. Just plain screaming.

Flames now licked over the rooftops of the proud homes that had risen recently, filling the air with smoke as fire greedily consumed all the progress that Scotch Tape had authored. The toilets she had been so proud of now blazed like a pyre, collapsing slowly in on themselves. The post office roared, ablaze as the pre-war structure finally succumbed to the fate it had evaded two centuries prior. The refugee camp beside the river was a mass of panicked people with nowhere left to flee, and so now they fled to the last mad refuge before them, the gates of the Core.

And in the midst of it all, Charity wept. They were bitter tears, slow to shed. Charity never gave anything for free if she could help

it, and so she gritted her teeth and focused on the clipboards in front of her as colts and fillies raced to her. “I need four heals and X!” one of the colts shouted.

“Take two boxes of each from the red cache! Tell them to stretch them out!” she said, pointing at some boxes. The colt nodded, the oversized combat helmet on his head wobbling, then rushed to the boxes, tossed two on his rump, and raced off. She pulled a pencil out from behind her ear, flipped to a page on the red clipboard, and made two tiny tally marks next to an icon of a Med-X syringe and a purple vial.

“I have six who need three-oh-eights!” one of the fillies yelled.

She flipped through the clipboards. “Take two ammo boxes from the green pile!” she yelled, flipping to another sheet and making another note.

The gray filly raced to the crates and a minute later shouted, “There are no three-oh-eights!”

Charity looked down at the list, then over at her. “There should be at least twenty!”

“Well, there’s not!” she yelled back.

Charity raced to the stack, her eyes scanning the boxes of ammo. She picked up a box between her hooves, gave it a shake, and tossed it aside. “Damn... ” Five more. “Damn!” She threw empty ammo crates over her shoulder, setting aside a few that were still full of bullets. Most of the pile, though, was of empty ammo boxes. “Damn it! Who’s been taking the three-oh-eights?” she screamed out into the roaring battle. “There’s supposed to be a fucking system!”

“What do you want me to do about it?” the filly asked, wide-eyed.

She turned to the stacks, glaring at the boxes of ammo with numbers squiggled on them in chalk. “We still have five-five-six mils, right? Grab six varmint rifles and two boxes of five-five-six and get it back to them!”

“Varmint rifles?” she asked, as if she hadn’t heard her right.

“It’s that or frigging throwing our turds at them! Now get moving before I dock your hazard pay!” she barked, shoving her toward boxes of arms as she scribbled on a clipboard levitated in front of her with a pencil in her mouth.

A second later, there was a loud pop, and the clipboard, its center suddenly bulging towards her, flew into her face and snapped her nose. She bit her pencil in half from the blow and fell back, holding her bleeding muzzle with her eyes clenched shut in pain.

When she opened them, the boxes of arms and ammunition were splinters, and all that remained of the filly was a bloody lump a few feet away from the crater where they'd been. The other foals who were waiting for supplies had scattered out of sight in the smoke.

Charity shook as she sat there, staring at the smoldering hole. Her whole body tingled as if it'd been electrocuted. Beside her, the clipboard rested face down, a smoking chunk of shrapnel embedded in its back. As the shock faded, she became aware of other stinging grains imbedded in her hide, dripping blood as she struggled to speak. "Stupid... stupid... " she said, her voice tightening, and then she pointed a hoof at the bloody lump. "There's a fine for dying, you moron! You... " She sat down, lifting her head as tears streaked down her bloody cheeks, the taste of copper in her mouth.

It was coming apart. The defense. Her business. Her home. Her future. She'd been clever. She'd be careful. She'd taken care of her people. Invested in infrastructure. Was planning on diversifying with the increased trade. In five years, she'd buy out the Finders completely. In twenty, she'd be setting up armed stops where Wastelanders could buy arms, food, medicine, and a safe place to rest! "I was supposed to be a damned success!" she shouted, then coughed and choked on the blood.

Then she was slammed on her face as a stallion trampled her. He started grabbing ammo boxes and stuffing them into his saddlebags. "Hey! What the fuck do you think you're–" she started to shout before he kicked her in the face, flooring her. As she lay on her side, clutching her face, he rushed off, but he wasn't the last. More ponies were grabbing what remained in the stores and running off.

"Wudderu doin?" she asked thickly as she grabbed at the adults taking everything they could, only to be shoved away again and again. She drew her 5.56 pistol, but before she could fire, there was another blow to her head, and then someone bit down on her gun and snatched it away too. "Stup…Umn churge her... " she muttered weakly as she turned and looked at the stockade. But the stockade seemed barely defended at all anymore. With all the obscuring smoke in the air, it appeared only a few dozen foals remained, firing what they could and scrounging for ammo among the fallen, coming to each other for aid.

"Oh dear," croaked a voice as the dry, taut teal pegasus ghoul trotted to her. "This won't do at all. I should call the royal guard. Beating up a filly! Have they no shame?" Harpica drew out a

discolored teal handkerchief and began to clean Charity's muzzle. "There there. Once you're cleaned up, we'll see Master Vanity. He's quite nice and will see to it your parents are notified."

Charity glared up at her, tears now trickling from her eyes. Then she gritted her teeth, hissing as she suppressed the urge to snap at the poor deluded ghoul. Behind the teal ghoul, Charity could see ponies streaming over the bridge and into the Core, racing for the only protection that remained. Then she bowed her head. "You should dake your kids up to the bountains, Miss Harpica. Show them dhe reservoir. I'b sure they'd enjoy it."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, darling. You need help," she said as her filmy eyes turned towards the advancing Brood. "You know, I think those fellows are up to no good. Someone really should tell them to behave."

"Please, Miss Harpica. Goh. I'm sure dhe guard will be here soon. I bow your foals probably would love a little trib to dhe lake, after being coobed up for so long," Charity said with a crooked smile.

"Well, if you're sure." She stomped her hoof. "Children! Chil... children... " She turned back, her eyes focused on Charity, and a look of growing horror covered her face. "Oh, no. This... this is the real one, isn't it?"

"Im sowirrie. I dust wadded... rou should go... prease... " Charity bowed her head and wept. "Noh churge. Jus goh."

"Shhhh... " She kissed Charity's brow with leathery lips. "It's alright." She straightened and frowned at where children fought for their home. "I wish this was that other place." She turned and started towards the stockade.

"Wudderyu gonna doh?" Charity asked thickly.

"What I've always done. What Master Vanity told me to do," she said softly, barely audible over the crackling flames and gunshots. "Take care of little ponies."

Harpica launched herself into the air, winging her way towards the soldiers. "Dho... " Charity muttered, watching her and then starting to stagger after her. The filly coughed and snorted the sticky blood from her nostrils. "No." She ran faster, through the wisps of smoke that choked and burned her eyes, tears streaking the soot and blood. "No!" she cried out as she raced towards the stockade, following the pegasus pony trailing teal feathers that glimmered in the air before they were eaten by the hungry flames. "No! No no no no!" she screamed as she ran up the ramp to the top of the

stockade, where dozens of young ponies stood firing at the approaching Brood alongside a few dozen adults who hadn't fled. Apparently some of the adults had stuck around after all. "No!" she yelled as she lunged after the ghoul, stretching a hoof out to her. "I can't afford your life!"

The mare paused and looked down at her with a gentle smile. "Go," she said, and then she flew out towards the Brood.

Harpica wasn't Rainbow Dash. She didn't streak like a blue thunderbolt, tearing apart Brood with her bare hooves, but inexplicably the Brood stopped firing. As one they tracked the lone, emaciated, desiccated mare, as if trying to figure out precisely what she was doing as she flew over them. "Charity?" asked a ghoul colt serving as a bipod for a living colt gunner. "What is Miss Harpica doing?"

"Trying to buy us time so we don't all die on this wall," Charity replied, gritting her teeth.

"Lucky," one of the mares murmured, a broken heart pendant dangling from her rifle. "You should get going. Let us buy your lives with our own." The blood red mare seemed positively pleased at that idea.

"What have I told you about that, Riproar?" another ghoul pegasus rasped. She was a sickly chartreuse with a flimsy blue and red mane and tail that were only bits of stubble. "We die when we die. We don't rush to it." She gazed at the stockade, then back at the dour mare. "What do you think? Can we fight here?"

"Maybe for five minutes. We should pull back to the city, Heartshine," she said, her eagerness transforming into dour resignation. "We can kill these Brood for hours with that choke point."

"No!" Charity snapped. "Blackjack said to stay out of the Core at all costs." She scanned the hillside, but the flank of the Brood was positioned to cut off any retreat towards Star House. Two dozen ghoul children might have made it. A hundred ponies, young and old, had no chance of evading detection. There was only one building which wasn't on fire: the chapel itself, its steeple rising up through the smoke. "There. We can go in there. It should hold enough."

"Oh, good," the beefy red mare said brightly. "We can die in ten minutes rather than five. Well, at least we won't have to travel far for the funeral. They have those thingies in churches, right?"

“Riproar,” the ghoul said in a mildly reproachful voice. “You know better.”

“Yeah, yeah... ” She sighed, then turned and shouted, “Back to the building with the big pointy tower on the roof. Move it! Grab whatever ammo you can, but move!”

Heartshine nodded and pressed a button on her battered PipBuck. "Halfhearts, retreat to the chapel. Protect the little ones. The time to return to your other halves is not yet come," she ordered into the broadcaster, then hefted an oversized magical beam rifle to her shoulder. "Survive and fight. You can join those you've lost when the day is through."

But Charity wasn’t running. She watched as Harpica flew over the heads of the Brood with odd little swooshes that might have been bombing runs if a pony had only a vague idea what a bombing run was supposed to be and was set on doing one without the explosives. Instead of lighting her up, though, they only took a smattering of potshots here and there, bullets biting off bits and pieces of the mare as she swooped back and forth. Maybe it was their interconnectedness, or maybe it was that they had no idea how to react to something like this, or perhaps the Legate was somewhere laughing his bloody stripes off at the ancient mare's deranged antics, but whatever the reason, she bought priceless seconds for the young ponies and Halfhearts to pull back from the wall.

“We’ve got to go,” a gruff filly’s voice said behind Charity. She opened her mouth to protest, and the powerful half-dragon Precious slipped out of the smoke, heaved Charity onto her back, and ran for the chapel.

“No! Damn it! Go back! I can’t pay her back for this if she’s dead!” Charity yelled as the dragon filly wrapped her long, scaly tail around Charity’s neck to keep her from leaping off. “Let me go! I fucking hate owing ponies!”

Then the Brood must have registered what was happening on the wall, because there was a great crackle, and Harpica was simply gone. Dusty tatters, bone chips, and feathers drifted on the smoke as the Brood poured after the retreating defenders.

Unicorns blinked into place between Precious and the chapel, each with their silver blades and an accompanying trio of gun-wielding Brood. The dragon filly opened her mouth wide and spewed out a torrent of jade-green flame without even breaking stride. Bullets

glanced off her scales, but one blade opened a shallow wound from shoulder to haunch. Precious whirled, her prehensile tail keeping Charity on her far side as she breathed another incinerating gout of fire. Still, she had only one mouth and had Charity to protect, and the unicorns were teleporting to flank the dragon filly. A bullet caught Precious in the knee, and both Precious and Charity fell to the ground, smoke swirling around them.

Then it cleared, and a trio of Brood aimed their assault carbines at Charity's face. Charity stared up, the back of her mind running a tally of all the debts she owed and was owed, despite the danger surrounding them, and finding her uncomfortably short at this moment. Even as she drew her twenty-two pistol, she knew it was futile. Still, these bastards couldn't afford her submission.

Then the air behind the Brood shimmered as four-legged things pounced. Jaws closed on the backs of necks, and augmented spines were ripped from the flesh they supported as cybernetic canines materialized from the haze of war. The augmented attack dogs worked with their own horribly efficient pack tactics, one pair seizing forelegs in their jaws while a third disemboweled the immobilized cyberzebra. As soon as they'd butchered one, they disappeared back into the smoke with shimmers of their cloaking talismans.

"What's going... " Charity began when a shadow loomed in the smoke, and then the veil parted to reveal a massive black-armored canine. "On?" The blood-smeared cyborg leaned down and sniffed at the filly. "Okay. Please don't eat us." Precious let out a long, threatening growl of pain. "Don't," Charity cautioned her. "I think they're... um... well... on our side." The large canine wagged her tail and let out a metallic chuffing noise. "Can you carry her?" She pointed through the choking smoke to where the chapel's spire poked up into view. "Take her there?" The dog gave a whine but wagged her tail again.

"I can walk!" Precious said, trying to take a step and collapsing. The canine scooped up Precious almost as neatly and easily as Precious had carried Charity. "This is ridiculous. We're only buying ourselves a few minutes at the most. Might as well have died at the wall. Less running."

"Shut up and let her save you. I'll be right behind you," Charity said. The canine leapt off in the direction of the chapel. Charity rose and took one look back at the home she'd made as it blazed. The

numbers in the ledger in her head shifted. She was still in the red, but at least it was a little less than a few seconds ago. Now if only she could get some last-second improbable save like Blackjack managed when her rump was in the fire.

Then the Brood appeared, striding confidently out from the smoke all around them.

Dozens. Hundreds. They walked amidst the burning buildings like a legion of shadows. Precious had been right. Running was just delaying the inevitable, but what else could she do? Harpica had bought them all a few invaluable moments. How much time could one filly buy, and what would it be worth to all those who had taken refuge in the chapel?

Maybe that'd finally put her in the black?

"Hey, you! All of you!" Charity bellowed at the approaching Brood. "You owe the Crusaders and associated inhabitants of this community damages for bodily, material, and emotional harm! I'm going to sue the stripes off your asses!" The Brood didn't fire, though there were more than enough guns on her to turn her to red foam. "You hear me! I'm gonna sue you so hard your grandchildren are gonna need a mortgage to buy a box of Abronco Detergent!" She slumped a little and muttered, "Damn it. How does Blackjack make it look so easy?"

As one, the Brood suddenly halted, the red glow of their eyes matched by the searing glare of Chapel burning around them. Then they did something truly monstrous.

They laughed.

A thousand armed zebras laughing in perfect unison.

"Shoo, little girl," one Brood said.

"Run along," another continued in an identical tone.

"Tell the others to flee," a third murmured as they all grinned at her.

"Back to their fortress."

"Their sanctuary."

"Their only hope."

Charity gaped at them all. "You... you want us in the Core?"

"Oh yes," a number of them said as one. "We need more children. Children always worked wonders for me when prompting powerful fools to action."

"Been so very hard not to eliminate you all. But time is passing. So go," one said with an imperious gesture at the city. "It won't be

long now."

Charity licked her lips but didn't take her eyes off the soldiers as the ground began to vibrate under her hooves. "I'd rather die."

The smiles disappeared just as simultaneously as they had spoken. "So be it," they said as a hundred guns focused on her at once. But the shaking was increasing, accompanied by a growing rumble.

Charity peered around, asking in alarm. "What the hay is going on? What are you doing?"

But whatever it was, they didn't seem to have a clue either. The Brood looked around the smoky battlefield as the rumbling and screeching reached a fever pitch, then suddenly cut off. From behind Charity came a thump and a hiss of air that blasted away the smoke around the filly. Suddenly the guns weren't on her but on something else. Something big. And from the gaping expression on their faces, something unpleasant. She turned, expecting to see a giant dragon or something.

What she beheld was two words written in bright red paint: MEGA DEUS. The immense black and white tank had clearly been battered something terrible, with numerous holes punched in the armor. Had something taken out his repair talisman with a lucky shot?

She took one look at the cannons and machine gun turrets pointing over her and hit the dirt, clutching her hooves over her ears.

Then Deus roared.

The cannons made entire ranks of Brood simply vanish in a cloud of metal, bone, and blood. The machine guns tore into the assembled cyberzebras like great, immense scythes. The Brood tried to scatter, but whatever cover remained was on fire, and Deus wasn't about to let them get away. While the Brood around them flew apart into red mist, a small hatch in the bottom popped open, and the speakers cracked and boomed, "Cunt cunt!"

Charity wasted no time, pulling herself into the war machine. Smoke swirled inside the cabin, but not as bad as outside. The cable-like spinal column and braincase sat inside the jar. As soon as she was inside, the hatch swung closed and the tank lurched forward. "Yeah! Get them!" she said as she pulled herself into the driver's seat and strapped in, looking out through a tiny armored slit at the scrambling cyberzebras.

And Deus did what he did best. The tank let out a booming "CUUUUUNT!", and the mayhem was squared. The turret above her worked as it automatically loaded shell after shell. Sprays of

shrapnel transformed the Brood into great bloody gobs as the tank lunged forward. Some tried to respond with missiles, but Deus either poured on the fire at the launchers or raced into the smoke and out of view. Still, the vehicle definitely lurched with occasional impacts from grenades.

"Take this, you striped fuckers!" Charity shouted. "I bet you wish you'd settled your debts now, don't you?" she yelled as they ripped through the Brood battalions like a thrashing, grinding wrecking ball. They moved in a crescent back and forth around the chapel, the tank never letting the Brood swing around and attack the structure directly. From the rooftops, the Halfhearts added their own help, the riflepонies picking off every attacker they could when the smoke from the burning structures cleared enough to give clear shots. A Brood loaded head to hoof in explosives dropped two dozen feet from the tank before he could make his suicide attack, felled by a Halfheart's bullet.

Suddenly something struck Deus hard enough to make the tank rock, and he rang like a bell as he lurched hard to the side. Charity's straps yanked hard as she was jerked around inside like a rag doll, her ears ringing. "What was... oh... " she said as she stared through the thinning smoke...

...at three more tanks.

Their turrets flashed, but Deus was already in motion... in reverse. A second later, the ground in front of him erupted. As soon as it did, Deus was racing forward, bouncing through the crater and nearly flying into the air as there was a second detonation where he'd just been. The three were sweeping in, and Deus now ignored the Brood infantry as he raced into the burning wreckage of Chapel. He didn't stay on a straight line for longer than two seconds, weaving this way and that erratically as two tanks swept out to the sides of the town while the third pursued directly. "I hope you know what you're doing!" Charity shouted.

"Cunt," Deus replied tersely as he looped around the blazing post office and suddenly turned around sharply. Then his superchargers roared as the treads ripped up the ground, the tank charging the wall of the post office.

"Wait! That's my–" Charity began, but Deus was already rolling up the crumbling walls and onto the collapsing roof, the air suddenly becoming blazing hot as he rolled right through the inferno, smoke drifting through the holes in his armor. He didn't stay there,

though. As the already-weakened roof collapsed under his weight, he rode the flaming wave... right into the side of the pursuing tank. His barrels were nearly touching the joint between the turret and hull of the enemy tank. His cannons boomed, and Deus was thrown back into the rubble of the post office as the tank exploded into flame, turret flipping end over end into the air. As the air in the cabin became unbearably hot, he tore off the blazing ruin and past the burning hulk. Through a tiny, grainy monitor, Charity could see a cloak of soot and embers being drawn along behind him.

"Yeah!" Charity shouted. "You can do this! You're going to get free washing and buffing at Chapel for life!" Deus let out a happy growl even as he was being shelled by the pair of tanks that hadn't pursued him into the flaming settlement.

The other tanks were spreading out, trying to position themselves so Deus's mad weaving couldn't evade their fire. He jerked and swerved like a spasmodic wagon driver having an epileptic attack, and yet he was able to precisely tie together his shots so that each blast went true. Each shot tore holes in their armor... yet seconds later, their repair talismans were bending the armor plating back into shape. An angry growl filled the cabin. Only a perfect hit on their repair talismans would let him finish them off... well, that or killing the Brood driving the damned thing.

Charity just hung on for the ride. "You've got to get closer!" she shouted over the roaring engine and the screeching treads. Deus growled an agreement, twisting to the side and diving at the stockade. He smashed through the burning barrier, racing along the blazing structure as impacts from the far side sent steel and embers fountaining out around him. A skywagon in his way was rammed, followed by a metallic chewing sound. Then he made a tight loop, blasting out a section of wagon and racing out over it with a resounding clang that nearly snapped Charity's shoulders.

They were out much closer to the second tank, maybe only a few dozen yards. Its turret whipped around as Deus tracked his to it. In three horrifying seconds, the two twin-barreled tanks ripped into each other with brutal force. Charity's ears screamed with piercing tinnitus, the filly partially deafened and concussed as the fury of the exchange tore into the battling war machines. And just like that it was over... the zebra tank was a burning lump of metal.

And Deus's turret had been torn clean off.

Charity looked numbly up at the jagged hole where the turret had

once been, at the blue sky hazed by red-lit smoke. “Can you repair that yourself?” Deus’s engine let out an annoyed growl. “Don’t worry... ” she murmured as the smoke cleared. “I can cover it... make a payment plan... for service rendered... ”

Deus gave a sort of mechanical chuckle as he turned, orienting his hull towards the remaining tank. That tank wasn’t moving on Deus. It was heading straight towards the chapel. “They’re either going to push us into the Core or kill us,” Charity groaned as she wiped her muzzle, blood smearing her hoof. “Why? Why do they want to do that?”

Deus just sat there and let out a single, low motor growl that I imagined as ‘I don’t know.’ The remaining tank could have blown the chapel apart with its cannons, but instead it languidly strafed the front of the structure with its machine guns. The Halfhearts and Crusaders weren’t running, though. They opened fire from the windows and rooftops whenever there was an opening. Suddenly, the escape hatch in the cabin floor popped open, and the motor gave a more urgent growl. “What?” Charity asked. “I don’t understand... ”

Then the cabin speaker crackled with Deus’s deep, synthetic voice. “C... c... c... go... ” It sounded as if he was tearing off one of his own limbs just to say that simple word. “... c... unt... c... go... ” One of those last impacts must have knocked his speech center back into place.

“You’re going to ram it and self-destruct, aren’t you?” Charity asked. “It’s too close to the chapel!”

“Go,” Deus rasped in his deep, pained voice. “I... C... .C... I... will... take... cunt... of... it... ”

Charity stared at the speaker, then at the brain inside the cracked jar. The braincase lay slumped against the side of the container, knocked loose in that last exchange. “Go... ” Deus begged.

“Why?” Charity asked. “We’re all going to die anyway,” she whimpered.

“Shhhh... ” Deus replied. “I... had... a... c... c... child... once... F... f... .f... lees... should... l... l... live... ” He repeated, “Go... ”

Charity started down the hatch. The speaker gave one last crackle. “I... was... a... good... pony... ”

She paused, then gave a small smile. “No. You *are* a good pony.”

Then she was out, and Deus carefully rolled away from her, paused for a few seconds, then turned. She sat on the grass, watching as he

began to roll towards the remaining tank, picking up speed. The turret pointed towards him and let out a blast, but he swerved at an angle, still accelerating. Another blast and another last moment swerve in the other direction. Back and forth he tacked, the remaining tank trying in vain to finish him off. The shells exploded near Deus's tracks, trying to cripple the war machine.

"Go... " Charity murmured. "Go. Go!" she called out, as if her cries could speed the smoking hull of the Reaper on.

A shell hit him head on, and Deus staggered as his front armor indented, cracked, and flew off, but he could not be stopped. With a resounding clang, he rammed the side of the tank as it started to pull away. The cannons now extended too far over the rear of Deus to hit the smoking tank directly, and the enemy tank was titled up on one tread by the force of the impact.

But Deus didn't stop. He kept pushing. The tank's treads flailed back and forth as it struggled to break itself free, sparks flying where metal scraped on metal. The tread on the ground slipped and sprayed clods of earth as it was shoved along, foot by foot. Yard by yard...

Towards the river.

Charity raced down the hill after them, passing by the chapel as the occupants of the bullet-riddled structure spilled out. The filly stared as the tanks struggled down the steep, muddy bank. The Brood tank's cannons fired wildly, spraying both with mud like thick clumps of gore. As the tank's tread reached the swirling waters, though, a unicorn appeared atop it with an anti-machine rifle aimed down into Deus. There was a resounding bang.

The Brood unicorn's head exploded. Riproar lowered her smoking markspony rifle with a nod.

Then they were in the river, and the current caught them. For one moment, the Brood tank almost seemed to float, but then Deus gave it one last push and turned it over. Treads sprayed water in the air for several seconds as it floated away, but then, with an eruption of bubbles, it abruptly disappeared into the stream.

Charity stared at Deus, half submerged, her eyes round as she held her breath. "Come back," she whispered ever so softly.

But he didn't. He slipped into the churning waters of the river. There was a brief spray of resistance as he blocked the course, and then was also lost from view.

And so passed Doof the Marauder...

From the battlefield, the Brood were rising and reforming ranks, but the survivors of Chapel had had enough. The Halfhearts and foals charged the survivors. Cyberdogs tore into the Brood ranks, and a bandaged and very pissed off Precious blasted the cyberzebras with emerald fire. The Halfhearts ripped into any Brood unicorn who appeared and cut down clumps of enemies. The colts and fillies who had made Chapel their home for so long rallied as well. They may have been children, but that didn't stop them from using whatever weapons they could to tear the Brood apart before they could organize and consolidate their forces.

In a bloody fifteen minutes of frantic fighting, it was over. The hillside was littered with corpses. Nothing remained of Chapel save burning rubble and the eponymous bullet-ridden building. The Brood, at least here, were gone. The survivors looked at each other for a moment.

Then a musical note rang out, the deep and soulful melody of a contrabass. Adagio and Allegro worked the music as the tiny purple Sonata began to sing. "Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Help us find our rightful place. Help us grow up big and strong. Laughing and singing all day long... " As the fillies and colts sang, the adults joined in, awkwardly mumbling lyrics they didn't quite know.

But not Charity. She walked towards the smoldering remains of the town and found one of her clipboards. She scrutinized the precise little numbers in red and black and shook. There were some costs that were just too high. Some that numbers couldn't possibly cover. But Charity had to be tough, because if she wasn't, she wouldn't last long. As she song ended, she turned to the others. "Okay. Fan out. Collect any arms and ammo you can off these deadbeats. I'll start a running tally. If they try and hit us again, we'll have something to hit back with. Move it."

The others moved into action, but Charity lifted her head and gazed up into the clear sky and the rising pillars of smoke. "Thanks," she murmured, then sighed and got back to work.

oooOOOooo

I let out a mental sigh of relief. Chapel was alive. Well... okay. It'd need a whole ton of repairs. But Charity and the Crusaders were alive, along with the Halfhearts. I wondered where the cyberdogs had come from. The tunnel that'd passed by their lair hadn't been

far. Maybe Charity had some Apple blood in her? Maybe they were just protecting ponies who needed help. Or maybe they were just preemptively dealing with something that would ultimately seek to destroy them as well.

I popped out of my blank's mind to tell Scotch Tape the good news. She wouldn't be happy her toilets were gone, but she could always rebuild–

"I hate Blackjack!"

That was what Scotch Tape sobbed as I opened my eyes but didn't move a muscle. She sobbed brokenly across the rocket from me, and I barely turned my head to spot the young mare curled up with Bastard, the latter looking thoroughly uncomfortable with this situation as she wept into his shoulder. He held her like he might hold an open barrel of Flux, afraid that one wrong move would make a bad situation even worse. "She doesn't care! He died, and she didn't even shed a tear! She just went right into that head as if he didn't matter at all!" she cried into his neck. "I hate her so much!"

"Yeah… " he muttered, then gave her shoulder an awkward pat. "There there, and all that. You know, this really isn't my thing… "

But Scotch Tape went right along. "She left him! She didn't even try to get him free! She left them both! She doesn't care about any of us!" she shouted as she wept.

That's not true. It wasn't. I just… I…

"You know the place was going to… like… *explode*, right?" Bastard asked slowly.

"So what? She's been exploded before! She could have found a way… done something… she's a fucking alicorn now! You're telling me she doesn't have some kind of magical Princess Blackjack bullshit powers she could have used to save him?!" Scotch demanded as she clutched his jacket.

"Fucked if I know," Bastard replied. "Look, I just want to get out of this tin can, see tomorrow, get paid, and move on with life. So if you feel this way, why don't you take it up with her next time she's outside her head, or whatever?"

Scotch Tape didn't answer, choking and sobbing. "Goddesses, I'm so terrible… how can I hate her… but I do! She left him! She left both of them! And she doesn't care… she doesn't… "

Bastard spotted me looking at them with tears running down my cheeks. His eyes went wide as he looked at me over his glasses, and

suddenly he grinned. “Hey! Looks like Blackjack’s awake! Now you two can have a nice heart to h–”

But I couldn’t. Because I was a coward. Because I couldn’t face what I felt or heard. Because if I stopped, it would crush me like a great wave, and I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get up again. So I disappeared into my blank’s mind instead. I ran. I hid. I refused to talk. Refused to think about it.

I was just like Blackjack in that way.

Or was I just like Luna like that?

I didn’t care. I found a pool and left my pain behind.

— — —

(Author's Advisory Warning: There is a consensual sex scene between a minor and an adult in part of the chapter. The author does not condone this behavior in real life. If you wish to skip it, please use the "Content Warning" link to move forward to the next section.)

— — —

Elysium fared little better than Chapel. The country club was a bit more sturdy than the wooden church, but not by much. The dozens of defenders faced off against a similar advance of Brood across the golf course. Grace stood on a balcony flanked by two rifleponies who were firing down at the advancing ranks. She’d had the sense to put on a combat helmet and some barding. She stank, her stomach was empty, and she ached from horn to hoof, but she was still standing. Far to the south, she could see a massive green inferno burning where Grimhoof Army Base had stood.

And at the moment, she was quite cross. “What are you talking about?” she shouted into the broadcaster on her hoof. “I don’t need a surrogacy spell! I need a Raptor, immediately! The skies are clear, so where is our air support?”

“The *Rampage* is giving support to the Arena,” Triage’s voice answered, “while the *Cyclone* is protecting us here. The *Sleet* is too damaged to help. They’re going to try and get clear of the valley before their engines burn out completely.”

“Oh, I see how it is. Protecting yourself and the thugs and leaving us to twist in the wind!” Grace retorted. “Then making some asinine pretense of Blackjack needing a surrogacy spell! What kind of idiot to you take me for?”

“An overbred one,” Triage snapped back. “Let me fill you in, Princess. This comes from Storm Chaser: Megamart is gone. The Skyport is evacuated. Meatlocker is gone. That frigging castle is on fire. And Chapel’s gone too. The refugees there ran into the Core, just like they weren’t supposed to. Goldenblood got taken, so that ghoul is probably a corpse right now. So shut the hell up about your air support. I don’t have it. It’s left guarding a few thousand refugees here and at the Arena who didn’t have the luck to get into a megastable or underground plantations.”

“Well, then a surrogacy spell is moot,” Grace replied grimly. “I won’t be alive to receive it.” She paused and glowered at the broadcaster. “How could she possibly know that, anyway? Blackjack is on the moon!”

“Look, when it comes to shit regarding Blackjack, I don’t fucking pretend like any of it makes sense. They could tell me Blackjack was a stallion with a dick ten feet long, and I’d just nod and ask if she broke her legs in the process or not. I’m just passing on her request to you. She says Blackjack is going to need a surrogacy spell and that you’re the best candidate we have. I can do the spell. I just need a new oven for the buns,” Triage said tartly.

“My oven... is not for... for... oooooh!” She stomped a hoof down on the ground. “If you want to use my oven, you’d better save the bakery from being demolished, understood?”

“I’ll pass that along to Storm Chaser. In the meantime, you might want to withdraw back here to the University. We’ve got a whole ton of Brood coming down on us. It’s time to circle the wagons, so–” Triage started to say.

“No,” Grace replied brusquely. “Come and help, or leave us to our defenses. I’d prefer the former. I’ll expect the latter.” Then she smacked the broadcaster with her hoof and took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she composed herself. “I need a moment,” she said to the ponies with her.

“A moment is all we have, ma’am,” one of the two rifleponies replied evenly. She nodded and started for the door. “Ma’am... ” he went on, and she looked back at the unicorn soldier. “We’re not going to be able to hold here longer than half an hour. Once they surround this place, it’s all over.”

Grace stared at him silently for a few seconds. “Thank you. I will bear that in mind. Please, keep the enemy at bay.”

She walked through the balcony door into a bedroom covered in

dust and chips of rock. She moved over to the vanity and levitated a cloth, wiping away the dust. The mare looked as bad as she felt, sweaty and drawn with a bandaged laceration over one eye. She removed the helmet and bowed her head.

"They're quite correct, you know," a stallion said, and she opened her eyes to see Splendid standing there with a purple alicorn behind him. "This place is lost."

"This place is our home," she said as she stood and faced him.

"It's a building. Once a relatively nice building, but a building nonetheless." The white unicorn trotted towards her. "It's not worth dying for."

Her eyes shifted over to the alicorn. "So, am I supposed to be leaving now? Abandoning my responsibilities to these people?"

He trotted towards her. "These people are lost if they stay here. Give the order to retreat. Let them stand at the Collegiate. And let me take you to Tenpony. Royal Mint here is charging me a leg's worth of bottle caps to get you clear of the battle." He paused and gave a smile. "You'll like it there. It's even nicer than here at Elysium. I've secured adequate quarters for Charm and ourselves. She's even already begun showing improvement in her therapy with Doctor Helpinghoof, and I've made connections with important ponies within the Twilight Society who've been keeping a close eye on the east of late and know all about Father and our lineage." He put a hoof on her shoulder. "It will be a pleasant life. Maybe not as much pageantry as you'd like, but a good life."

She brushed his hoof off her shoulder. "And what of my responsibilities here?"

"Soon there will be no 'here' here!" he hissed back. "This place is done! It's unfortunate! It's regrettable! But it is reality! You need to wake up and accept this. Nothing here is worth your life."

She stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "Oh? What is my life worth, then? Fancy clothes? Good food? An ancestor I never knew who happened to be related to a Ministry Mare?" She shook her head. "If we are more than just our wealth, now is the time to prove it."

He stared at her for a moment, as if not able to believe her. "Are you serious?"

"I–" she began, but he grabbed her, turned her towards the door the balcony and jabbed a hoof out over her shoulder.

"Do you have any clue what's going to happen here if you don't leave?" he asked, his voice low and urgent, then motioned to the

alicorn. “Royal Mint here took a look before we came in. They’re encircling this place as we speak. You’re going to be cut off any minute. For all we know, you already are. Maybe if you withdrew now, you’d be able to fight yourself clear. Maybe.”

“Then they’d stop focusing on us and cut their way into the plantations!” she replied, facing him. “They might have been made by Stable-Tec, but they’re not stables; the Brood could get in easily.”

“That’s right. And every single pony in there is probably going to die,” he said grimly as he turned her again and stared into her eyes. Hard cobalt clashed with sky blue as he went on, “Because that’s what happens to peasants during war.”

“Brother… ” she half whispered in horror.

“When all this is over, we’ll come back, get some more workers, and restart. The plantations aren’t going anywhere. The Brood aren’t demolishing the Hoof. There’re plenty of ponies all across the Wasteland who’d be glad for the opportunity. They’d be grateful. So there’s no point to throwing your life away, Grace. These people won’t appreciate it anyway.”

“How can you say that?” she asked, aghast.

He leaned towards her, eyes narrowing. “What? Do you think you’re being noble? That they’ll be grateful? They liked you because of the food and money and ease you gave them, but this? Half of them will be glad to see us die, just so they could kill the other half to pick over the remains. They’re not worth your life, Sister.” He rose, his amiable smile returning as he took a deep breath. “Now. Let’s get back to Tenpony. A shower and a change of clothes and you’ll see things better.”

“A shower sounds lovely, but not if it’s in the blood of my subjects.” She put her helmet back on her head and trotted towards the doorway. “Goodbye, Brother. I hope you have a good life in Tenpony. I don’t think you should return.”

“Grace, you’re being a–” he started to say when she whirled, pulled an elegant .357 revolver from her holster, and pointed it right at him. He looked at the alicorn. “What are you doing standing there? Do something!”

“I was paid for transport. You can’t afford my sibling rivalry rates,” the purple alicorn grumbled.

“You’re being–” he started again when her magic drew back the hammer, silencing him once more.

“Goodbye again, Brother. Do give my love to Charm,” she said evenly. “But do give up trying to sway me into cowardice. Go.”

“You’re certain.” He stared at her, then sighed and rubbed his face with a hoof. “Such idiotic idealism… ” He shook his head and then looked at the purple alicorn. “Give her the… present.”

“You… I know how much it’s worth!” the alicorn gasped. “You can’t–”

“Something I’ve learned is that you can’t tell King Awesome’s children what they can and can’t do,” Splendid told the alicorn with a frown.

“You were lucky enough that that Harbinger contacted you,” she replied, “and luckier still that he was asking so little for it.” Splendid waved his hoof as if was no matter. “You promised it to those Twilight fellows.”

Splendid sighed and gave a wistful sort of smile. “Yes, well, it’s a squandering sort of day.” The alicorn muttered something but took out from under her wing a long package wrapped in burlap and tied with twine. Splendid levitated it towards her and set it on the ground at her hooves. “Perhaps it will be of some use. I had hoped… ah, hope… ” He shook his head. His lips pressed into a tired smile as he slowly backed away to the alicorn. “Goodbye, Sister. *Do* try not to die. I am rather fond of you… ” he trailed off. “Let’s go,” he said with a nod to the alicorn.

With a flash, the pair disappeared, and she lowered the gun. “Goodbye,” she said, cracking open the gun to reveal the empty chambers. She fished some rounds out of a pocket in her armor, filled the cylinder, and then flicked it closed with a satisfying click; a small smile lingered on her lips. Then she lifted the bundle with her magic, a tingle ringing through her horn as she undid the knots in the twine. The cloth fell away, and the light shone silver off resplendent unicorns etched into a basket hilt and an elegant, slightly curving single-edged blade. She held it aloft, the light catching and sparkling along an edge that shamed any steel that would call itself razor. “Brother… ” she breathed, a tear on her cheek as she beheld it. Then she smiled and bowed her head. “Thank you, Splendid.”

With revolver and sword flanking her, she trotted back out towards the two soldiers. “How are we doing, gentlecolts?”

They shared a look. “Ma’am. We’ve Brood in the hills between here and the University,” one of them said. “We can’t pull back, and

they're pressing in on all sides."

Grace stared at them. "How many defenders do we have?"

"A hundred sound fighters. Three hundred, if you include the wounded."

She closed her eyes for a long moment. What was the measure of a pony? The blood in her veins? The money in her vault? The power she commanded? The respect she received? Noble. Was Splendid right? Was 'noble' simply something a pony was, like 'tall' or 'thin' or 'comely'? She opened her eyes and stared out at the Brood advancing across the golf course like a black tide. What is my measure? What is my worth?

She tapped her PipBuck broadcaster. "Attention to all defenders of the Society. This is your Princess. The enemy bears down on us, but we cannot run. The enemy is without mercy or compassion, but we cannot cower and fear. The enemy is powerful and determined to annihilate us, but we cannot be defeated! Beneath us lies the greatest treasure of the Society. Not plantations or talismans. Not crops and fungible goods. People. Stallions. Mares. Foals. Every single of them desperate for us to stand and fight. To protect them. To show our enemy that it is neither guns nor numbers that make us strong. It is neither caps nor gold that is our wealth! It is our common bond. Our unity. Our community. Our Society. We will not run from its defense. We will not cravenly grovel for mercy from an enemy that has none to give. Defenders of Elysium, I implore you. Fight! Fight, and I shall fight with you! Stand, and I shall be beside you! Die... and I will fall next to you." She paused and swallowed, then finished, "But we shall make our foes pay dearly for every life they dare touch! Society! For Blackjack! For my father! For your princess! Fight!"

She tapped her PipBuck again. "Well... I suppose it's all in the care of higher powers."

One of the two unicorns cleared his throat, and she regarded him. "Ma'am, I overheard your brother... telling you that you should go. I got to say... " he trailed off, flushing. "I got to say, I'm glad you stayed, but I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd gone. I'd go too, if I could have taken the missus with me. You didn't have to die with us."

Her lips curled in an easy smile. "I die in good company, sir." She frowned as she looked at the Brood. The black lines of troops had stopped their advance. "They're... get down!" she shouted, leaping

at the stallion and knocking him to the ground.

The Brood fired a barrage of bullets that filled the air with the sweet tang of blood and shattering lead. The other stallion, the one she hadn't knocked to the floor, was struck a dozen times in barely a few seconds, his body jerking like a puppet on a string as bullets found a half dozen gaps in his barding. Then the strings were cut, and the body collapsed in a bloody, still heap of meat.

The moment the gunfire stopped, two unicorn Brood teleported onto the balcony, silver blades raised. With a speed and accuracy that would have done me proud, Grace reacted, her own blade flying up as if seeking the two Brood with a bloodthirsty eagerness. It connected with the sword of the first and spiraled up the blade, knocking the Brood's weapon aside. As the silver sword curled around past the hilt, it whipped across the Brood's neck, taking its head clean off. Grace nimbly darted aside as the other Brood switched its attention to her and swept its blade back and forth after the unicorn, cleaving nothing but thin air as the she danced away, living up to her name with effortless aplomb. Then the silver sword came in, blocking the Brood's weapon, and Grace darted her revolver into position and smoothly put a bullet in each of the Brood's eyes. As the creature collapsed, she pared off its head for good measure.

"I'm going downstairs," she told the soldier, who was staring at the three corpses on the balcony with wide eyes. "Good hunting." He just nodded dumbly, then lifted his rifle and began firing.

Grace trotted in and down. Who knew fencing lessons would be useful? To think she'd resented Father for insisting they learn proper swordsmare technique. As she walked into the ballroom, which was packed with wounded soldiers employing what little healing supplies that remained, a ripple seemed to pass through the air. She didn't pause and regard them, or ask, or implore. She simply passed by, and as she did, others were drawn after her like iron filings to a magnet. Ponies who could barely walk were helped by those who could. Any who could wield guns readied them, and those who couldn't grabbed whatever bars or sufficiently vicious detritus they could manage in their mouths.

Grace walked right through the front doors and up to the semicircular sandbag barricade raised outside the entrance. One of the defenders turned around to reload and saw her standing there, mussed and exhausted and triumphant. "Princess!" he cried out,

and a couple more glanced back. Then the first slammed the fresh magazine in and turned back to the Brood charging the barricade. “For the princess!” The other defenders, those who'd seen her and those who hadn't, echoed the cry and faced the enemy with renewed vigor. Even the wounded fought as she stood there like a bright light they couldn’t... wouldn’t... let be snuffed out. Grace herself snapped off revolver shots at any Brood that reached the sandbags, stopping only to reload or to cut down the would-be assassins that teleported in to assail her.

They were only a few hundred against a thousand or more. One by one, the defenders fell, and the cries of the survivors became more desperate. But not one stallion ran. Not one mare faltered. They fought on, even if the cause was hopeless, to prevent the princess from falling with them. At their posts they lay, proud and unashamed in death or wretched as death tarried to take them. The sheer pressure of so many Brood forced the defenders back from sandbags and up the stairs to the shattered, gold-leafed doors, and yet nopony broke and fled. Even as the enemy pressed them back.

She spotted a young, pale blue stallion curled up inside the double doors to the country club, weeping, clutching his rifle as he shook, completely overwhelmed by the fate befalling him. For a moment, just a moment, their eyes met. Fear in his. Calm dignity in hers. The latter prevailed, and for an instant, the corner of his lip lifted.

Then the bullet struck her, and she was falling back. The hammer blow, the shock of pain, the sudden weakness as the body lost the ability to act properly because of the abuses its flesh had suffered…I knew them well. A second bullet struck her uplifted foreleg as she struggled for balance. A third bit one of her hindlegs, and it gave out beneath her. She fell, rolled onto her back, and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

“Princess!” he shouted as he rose up and rushed to her, crouched over her, then glared out the doors, raised his rifle in a distinctly zebraish posture, barrel braced against his knee, and fired with the scream, “You bastards won’t touch her!” He roared in defiance to the countless and indifferent enemies. Bullets bit into his barding, but still he fired. Rounds found flesh and spilled his blood, but when his gun ran dry, he just slapped another magazine in with a bloody hoof, refusing to fall and let the Brood finish her off.

All to save his princess, for a pony would do anything to save their princess, whether she was one or not. It was the principle of the

thing.

And as she lay there on her back, struggling to breathe, that soldier's roar seemed to magnify again and again, only this time the enemy was shaken by it. And from the access ports that led down to the plantations came a ripple as the enemy was pushed back, with the cries of 'Princess!' and 'Princess Grace!' breaking over the gunfire.

Workers... the ponies that her brother, and father if she was honest, called serfs once... poured out of the shafts and into the enemy. Some wielded industrial saws and sledgehammers, others sickles and axes, and some attacked with nothing more than sticks. They were all products of the Wasteland, though, and labor had made each of them hard and tough since she'd increased their rations. They crashed into the Brood and actually pushed them back in hoof to hoof combat and bloody melee.

Grace struggled to rise as two mares rushed to her. "Stay still, Your Majesty. We'll take care of you."

"Nonsense!" she spat, feeling something burning in her chest. "Give me a potion and get me back on my hooves!" She would tolerate no argument. Eventually they gave her the potions she needed, and she turned to the young blue stallion. Wounded, but he was still among the living. "Take care of him," she said, then charged out the door to join the melee.

Her silver sword flashed brightly in the afternoon sun, and the workers flocked to it, crushing any Brood in their path. Still, the Brood regrouped and pressed back against the struggling mob. Grace moved in a bubble of death, and any Brood that entered that bubble was split and split again by the silver sword while her revolver sought out any eye that came too close. But the enemy had guns too, and bit by bit, she was worn down along with her people.

Then from the ridge came a horrifyingly familiar boom of cannon. The roof of the country club exploded, showering the battlefield with tiles and ruined masonry. Another damnable tank rolled up behind the Brood, twin cannons ripping apart the upper floors of the structure with blast after blast, rubble crushing pony and Brood alike. How were they to repel such horrible, callous power?

Something struck her from behind, and her hindlegs gave out. There was a blinding flash of pain, and she screamed as her hooves clutched her forehead, blood rushing down between her eyes. The silver sword fell at her side, the revolver thudding into the grass...

her severed horn landing beside it.

"Got you," a Brood unicorn said at her side. Grace turned and stared through eyes half-blinded with blood, refusing to give the enemy the satisfaction of fear and defeat. And the Brood wasn't waiting either as the glowing blade was raised to cleave her head off.

Then the ground exploded as a massive claw tore out of the earth and through the torso of the stunned cyborg. Its eyes were round with shock as the gnarled fingers curled around its spine and pulled, her body folding in two with a resounding wet snap as she disappeared into the earth. Then the owner of that claw emerged. Gnarled, monstrous hide the color of mud and studded with wiry tufts of fur. Maw overfilled with uneven jagged teeth. Huge oversized beam pistol that would be a rifle in any other hand and in such a state that it appeared to be one misfire away from exploding. The hellhound rose up, and the Brood backed away.

Then he threw back his head and let out a bloody howl.

And it was answered from the earth itself.

Sinkholes erupted, sending Brood by the dozens tumbling to a grisly death. Arcane weaponry fired with heedless abandon into clusters of Brood and hellhounds alike, the latter seeming inured to all but direct hits by the weapons. Massive claws shredded cloned meat to gory tatters, and fanged jaws ripped and tore the cyberzebras' heads from their bodies. And when the hellhounds faced organized resistance, they disappeared into the earth only to reappear directly under their enemies for renewed slaughter.

The tank gave a mechanical squeal as the ground below its rear collapsed, its treads clawing at the dirt as it struggled to escape the growing pit. It failed. Metal shrieked and the cannons gave one last impotent blast as a half dozen hellhounds stood around the mouth of the pit and sprayed blazing red beams at the trapped vehicle. It exploded, vomiting glaring green flames in a crackling mushroom cloud that didn't trouble the hellhounds a bit. Elsewhere, hellhound beam guns sliced through two or three Brood, and when the overcharged weapons failed to fire, they doubled as bludgeons and complemented jagged claws well.

In fifteen minutes, it was over. The ground was pockmarked with sinkholes and carpeted with bodies, Brood, pony, and hellhound alike. The Society survivors clustered around Grace, somepony yelling for healing magic or a potion. Another told her to be still,

but she couldn't stand even if she wished. Her hindlegs didn't appear to be moving as they should. The hellhounds stood there too, coated in gore and bloody foam, panting their rank breath as they loomed over the broken unicorn, as if not sure whether to halt their slaughter here or continue till only their own remained.

Grace pushed herself as upright as she could, staring up at the one who had saved her. "My apologies, but I'm unable to rise and greet you properly, good sirs." She made an awkward bow of her head. "Welcome to the Society. I'd have a proper repast prepared for your welcome services here, but I'm afraid that our kitchen is in some disarray. So sorry."

The hellhound blinked, then knelt. "Your home wrecked too?" he growled, still looking down despite his kneeling. "Our home blew up again. Always getting blown up." He glared over his shoulder at where the green flame still roared out of the earth to the south.

"Indeed. Ours is little better, I'm afraid. It's quite a mess, as you can see," she said evenly despite swaying a little. "Still, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I'll order refreshments."

"You're... giving us permission... to stay?" the hellhound asked haltingly, his body still oozing blood from numerous punctures in his hide.

"Yes. After all, it may be a horrible day, but that's hardly an excuse to be uncivilized," she replied, managing to maintain her even tone despite feeling distinctly woozy.

The hellhounds stared in shock for several seconds, claws twitching, weapons ever so slightly raised.

Then the first hellhound threw back his head and laughed. "Refreshments! Very funny! You're a very funny pony!" The laughter was contagious among the dozens of hellhounds, and the few Society defenders left armed grew slightly more at ease but appeared vaguely insulted by their mirth.

Two unicorns came to her side. "Ma'am, we need to get you to the Collegiate. You're badly injured."

"Yes, I think that would be best," Grace replied. "See to the hellhounds and take care of our own. We surely have stores enough to keep them well fed. And if not, there's no lack of Brood... " She gave a little shudder as the world spun.

"But... the hellhounds, ma'am. How are we going to be able to make them leave?" one of the unicorns asked as they carefully levitated her without jostling her body much.

She looked back flatly. “What makes you think we ever will?” As she was borne away, some of the defenders took up the cries of ‘Princess!’, ‘Grace!’ and ‘Victory!’. She didn’t have the heart to correct them; while it had been a victory, it would not be enough just yet. There were still plenty more battles to fight.

oooOOOooo - Content Warning - oooOOOooo

I hoped they’d get Grace to the Collegiate. I wondered what Triage had been talking about, though. Nopony should have known about me being pregnant except for the ponies who’d been present when I’d gotten my wings. And how could they know I’d be returning in my old body? Just one of many things to ask Triage when we finally arrived. But now…I couldn’t put it off any more, could I?

Time to face the music.

I slipped out of my blank’s mindscape, not wanting to see Grace’s pool disappear ominously. At this rate, everypony I knew and cared about would be at the Collegiate. “Sco–” I started to say when my mind suddenly hit a lurch.

There was Scotch Tape on a couch. More accurately, there was Bastard on a couch, with the young mare on top of him doing what plenty of young mares in 99 did to relieve stress and anxiety, his forehooves resting on her hips. As my brain started again, I noted the following: She wasn’t in obvious pain or discomfort. He wasn’t bound, in tears, or unwilling. They both seemed to be getting something out of it. And that part of me that hadn’t been interested in him in the slightest earlier now let off a warm purr at the sight of them together.

“How is he?” I asked from my seat.

Bastard’s eyes shifted over to me. “Hey, what’s up? Oh, and before you shoot me, this wasn’t my idea.”

“Yeah, I figured that,” I replied. Scotch was adamantly not looking at me, her face composed as she continued to move atop him. “I’m sorry,” I finally said. Bastard just continued doing what he was doing, and to his credit, he wasn’t slamming her. “I didn’t want him to die. I didn’t want anypony to die.”

She gritted her teeth and started to move twice as fast atop him. “Blackjack,” she said between pants, “do you mind saving it till we finish? This is taking a little more focus than I thought.” And she was pissed, and trying to deal with sexy feelings and pissed feelings

all at once.

"Wait," Bastard said with a wry arched brow. "You don't mind me rutting your underaged... whatever?"

"Quit treating me like a fucking kid," Scotch interrupted before I could answer. "I was supposed to be on the queue months ago. I've got my implant. I want this. I need this. It's happening." Her outburst earned a look of wide-eyed surprise from Bastard. I supposed I really *couldn't* mind after a retort like that. There was no denying it: she just wasn't a filly anymore. She'd already been a brave young mare in her own right when we'd left Equus, and while it'd only been a day since then, it felt as if she'd matured further months, even years.

"I, uh, so no, I don't mind," I added lamely.

"Okay... Cool, then. 'Fraid you were going to kill the fun or something," he said, rapidly regaining his composure. "Now, where were we?"

Having some good feelings, apparently. Though with everything that had been going on... I looked at her and tilted my head. "You're really sure–" I started to ask her.

"*Yes*, Blackjack," Scotch Tape snapped. "Just... come back later."

"Yeah. Right. Later." I watched the two for a minute or so longer, but it really seemed neither was forcing the other. A part of me that I wasn't sure was me protested my plan to go back into the blank. Really, would it be that bad if I watched a little more? Maybe gave myself a little...

Huh... Princess Luna a voyeur... Who knew?

I considered it a personal triumph to put my mind back into the blank and find another mind pool. Eenie, meenie, miney... that one.

oooOOOooo - End Content Warning - oooOOOooo

Oh... well... At least now I *knew* he wasn't hurting Scotch, but this wasn't how I wanted to... okay, out!

oooOOOooo

Okay. Really should have looked more closely before going in there. That was a *little* too close for me. I quickly picked another mental pool...

oooOOOooo

Oh, come on! Now him?! Could I get labels on these pools? Maybe a ‘Do Not Disturb’... huh... that was always an interesting feeling...

No! No! No! Out! As much as a part of me wanted to settle in for the ride... no!

oooOOOooo

Okay. I mentally painted great big red X’s on both of those pools... and amazingly, an X actually appeared on each. Oh, sure, I figure out I can do that *now*... I sighed, examining the remaining two dozen or so pools. Which had I been in before?

... Or maybe I should stop running and hiding and peering and just... deal with what had happened to P-21 and Glory. But where could I start with that? Just thinking about it made this mental space feel colder and darker than the black void it was. It hurt thinking about what happened to Glory and P-21. It hurt thinking about Rampage and Lacunae, too. I didn’t want to think about it. Think about how it had skewed my relationship with Scotch Tape. I’d saved her life, and honored my promise to her father, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

I sighed in that void, then glanced at the two pools I’d marked. Was this me, or was this Blackjack... or was this me, or was it Luna? Luna hadn’t liked to deal with things directly either. She loved dreams and intimacy. Influencing rather than confronting. Great for dealing with others with finesse, but horrible for confronting problems. Blackjack hadn’t been much better, running away from her problems one after the other.

It didn’t surprise me that Scotch was doing what she was doing. After being dragged away from her father, she was asserting herself and trying to project maturity that she didn’t quite have. She wasn’t a filly anymore, but she was a very young mare. I needed to bring a little of that filly back... her optimism and hope above all. I couldn’t let her become dark and jaded.

I sighed and considered the remaining pools. I could stay here, in this vastly nothingness that was my old mind. Or maybe this place wasn’t my mind exactly, but someplace else? I really wasn’t educated enough to know or even speculate much.

Ugh... I hated waiting. At least that part was still me.

... I might as well. I poked my mind into an unmarked pool...

oooOOOooo

Beep.
Oh...
Beep.
Oh, sweet Sister, no.
Beep.
Please... somepony help...
Beep.
Whoever this pony was, no. This pony was a ball of pain soaked in a lake of anesthetics that barely stopped the agony that came with each breath. The darkness was even more absolute than in my blank's mind. I thought this pony was on their stomach, but I couldn't tell more than that. The only things I could hear were a distant, intermittent beeping and whispers in the dark. Was this Rampage? Had she been rescued from the vacuum of space to the Astrostable only to be rendered like this? Maybe Horizons going off had done something to her talisman... or the moonstone... or who knew?
Beep.
"... need more Med-X... " somepony whispered, far away like from the mouth of whatever well I was in.
"I don't think there's any left... "
Beep.
I could almost place the voice, but a part of me didn't want to. I didn't want to know who this pony had been.
Beep.
"... should pull the plug... lost cause... " the first voice whispered.
"... told us not to... skies only knows why... "
Beep.
I couldn't stay here. I couldn't stay here and do nothing. It'd drive me mad!
Beep.
Beep.
Beep.

oooOOOooo

Okay. Give me ponies fighting to the death or dying any day instead of... whatever that was! I didn't want to think about it. Being like that... no. That was a living death. That was sadistic!

I feared going into another pool, but if I didn't, I'd never get that horrible experience behind me. I could leave and just cover my ears till they finished, but... I stared at the pools. These were ponies I'd known, even if I didn't precisely know anymore who they were by looking at their shimmering disks of light.

Honestly, I'd probably be better off just taking a nap in the void.

Damn it... I put another X over the pool I'd just left and slipped into the one beside it.

oooOOOooo

This was more like it! This pegasus tore through an industrial network of canyons, whipping around rusting smokestacks and girders as Brood fliers sprayed bullets after her. She spun and banked, racing around corners so closely that her tail and wings flicked out clouds of rust in her wake. Below her, in the streets of the industrial northeast of the Hoof, the Brood were engaged in bloody street fighting with the Burners and Flashers. Blazing barrels were rolled off the tops of buildings, detonating on the Brood below and stalling their push towards the river. Flash Fillies moved from window to window, girder to girder, keeping up a steady rain of fire down and doing whatever they could to prevent a unicor–

One flashed into being up ahead, behind a pair of mares crewing a gatling beam gun up on a catwalk that spanned the road. The pegasus I was in did a barrel roll and swooped across right above their heads. Her outstretched power hooves hit the unicorn's skull with a thunderous clap an instant before the blade fell. She dipped down and came up in front of the gun crew, pointing above her. "Fire! Up there!" Whisper shouted.

The Flash Fillies swung the gatling beam gun up and strafed the five Brood fliers, forcing them to break up. The pegasus's eyes narrowed. "Oh no you don't!" she shouted and darted after one that hadn't gotten as far away as the other four. All four hooves struck the Brood and rammed the flier right into a brick wall. She didn't even break stride as she looped around a second time and smashed it again, driving it into the edifice hard enough to leave a crater. She hesitated for one moment, eying the bloody mass plastered

against the brick, and then rammed it three more times with her hooves, leaving only a bloody smear and jagged bits of metal.

She turned with a satisfied little smirk only to spot another flier taking aim right at her head.

Suddenly a pair of hooves appeared around the Brood flier's neck, and the rest of the dusky batpony emerged behind the winged Brood. He pressed his mouth to its ear and let out a scream that sent spasms through the cyborg's body. Then its brains dribbled out it nose and opposite ear canal. Stygius dropped the limp carcass into the chaos below, then smiled at Whisper and lifted his chalkboard with a heart drawn on it.

Whisper flew to him, and the two embraced, twirling in midair as the fighting raged around them. The sun was close to the horizon now, and the sky was turning red in the west.

"Is now really the time?" Tenebra shouted from the catwalk next to the gun crew, who were busy laying fire on a knot of Brood below. "There's fighting going on, you know!"

Whisper and Stygius parted before gravity pulled them too far, and both flew back to the catwalk. "Yeah, yeah," Whisper said. "You're just mad that I won't kiss *you* in the middle of battle." She pointed at one of the two earth ponies with the gatling beam gun. "You there! You're Beam Burn, right?" she said, then gestured to Tenebra. "Kiss her."

The red earth pony mare's eyes shot wide. "Um... I'm straight, Fluttershy."

"Oh yeah? Well I'm straighter, but somepony's got to kiss her and it's not going to be me! I got my snogging buddy," she said as she gripped him tight and mashed lips and tongue and... ugh, why wasn't this doing anything for me? I got turned on watching two other ponies doing it, but not when I'm one of them? Stupid alicorn soul that only liked to watch! Why couldn't she be more like that unicorn trollop who screwed every…Wait. That was *me*! Argh!

The other, blue earth pony mare raised her hoof as she looked at Tenebra with an eager smile, but then the batpony mare stomped her hoof. "Nopony is kissing me! This is no time to be kissing! There's fighting going on and... and... " She started to twitch, immediately pulled out a vial filled with some bluish fluid, and choked it down. Her twitching eased. "Ugh... " She wrinkled her nose. "Why does it taste like bubblegum?"

Stygius released Whisper and said something to Tenebra in his

inaudibly high-pitched voice.

"Better," she replied. "Good enough to fight." She looked at the pair of earth ponies with the gatling beam gun. "Are you out of ammo?" The pair resumed firing, the pretty blue mare displaying a definite pout.

"You've got to work on your priorities, Twitchy," Whisper said as they walked along the catwalk, bullets from below zinging off the railings and pinging against the underside of the floor plates.

"*My* priorities!" Tenebra squeaked. "You're... you're... kissing! In the middle of battle!" A barrel bomb exploded down the street as if echoing her outrage.

Stygius spoke to her again, and her eyes went wide. He grinned sheepishly, tapping his wingtips together.

Tenebra reddened a bit, sputtering, "I-it doesn't matter if she's a good kisser! We're in the middle of the battle for the Hoof. We need to keep our priorities–"

Whisper moved so fast that she nearly teleported atop Tenebra's back. "You know what my priority is, Twitchy? I'm happy. I'm finally... finally... finally happy. I have someone who makes me glad to be alive. I have a future and a family to look forward to. I have a father who, as much as he is a melodramatic ass, is my real father who loved my mother," she said, stroking Tenebra's skull with a power hoof as she spoke into her ear. "Shit that you've taken for granted all your life. Plus, I've got a whole city of fucks to kill however I want. And it's fucking awesome, and I'm *happy*. *That's* my priority."

She let Tenebra up and even helped her to her feet again. "Just... people... " the batpony stammered.

"They die. Shit happens like that. But I'm not going to let it ruin my happy till it's someone I care about." The yellow pegasus paused, her mouth screwing up as if she felt ill, then said, "And I'm sorry for that... thing... that happened. Hope they can do something about it. But don't tell me my priorities are screwed up. This is the first time my priorities are close to normal." She took a deep breath and patted Tenebra on the back. "Still... sorry."

"Still rusty at the whole 'nice' thing, aren't you?" Tenebra muttered darkly.

"Hey, I'm used to breaking spines, not patting backs. Which would you prefer, Twitchy?" Whisper retorted with a grin as they stepped onto the rooftop of an old factory. The industrial center of the city

was a crescent of bulky buildings a mile thick and stretching for three miles along the edge of the eastern fork of the Hoofington River. From the rooftop, they could see hundreds of dark plumes rising all around the north, east, and west. The Citadel had largely burned itself out and was now sheathed in thick black and gray veils of smoke. Only the marble buildings of the University to the south and the Arena to the west lacked the telltale sooty columns that came with the Brood's advance.

"Not good," Stygius wrote on his blackboard.

Whisper sighed and rolled her eyes, then thumped his shoulder with a power hoof. "Come on. If I'm the optimistic one, then there's something wrong with you. What do you say we get out there, kill a couple thousand more of these cyberbitches, then get a bunch of our friends together and have a good, steamy rut?"

"I don't think I'm in the mood for those anymore," Tenebra replied, gazing away to the south.

Whisper rolled her eyes again. "Ugh, come on, ponies! I cannot be the only happy one at this party."

"I happy," Stygius scribbled on his board with a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes.

She grinned and kissed him firmly again. "I am so going to make you squeak tonight if the world doesn't end," she purred, and he flushed and gazed back into her eyes. He leaned over and gave her one final kiss on the end of her nose, and now she was blushing too. "Let's go get them."

"Mother and Father are a block that way," Tenebra said, pointing with a wingtip.

"Your father? He's fighting?" Whisper said with a grin. Tenebra gave a nod. "He's got his sight back?"

"Ehhhh... " she said weakly.

* * *

"OBLIVION!" King Hades roared, sending a sphere of shadow flying down the street at the mass of enemy Brood. The ten-foot-wide swirling orb of black fire consumed everything in its path. The powerfully-framed batpony gleamed with sweat as he stood with his wife behind a barricade of wagons that blocked a major street between a pair of factory buildings. The trio of fliers dropped down behind them as the stallion wiped the sweat from his brow. "Did I

hit anything?”

Persephone critically eyed the channel cut along the front of a row of buildings. “Only a few, but I’m sure the enemy is quite intimidated, dearest,” she replied as she reached up with her wingtips to his bandaged head and turned it a little to the side. “Try that way, my love.”

“OBLITERATE!” he roared again, sending another sphere much more solidly into the mass of soldiers. To his credit, his magic sent the Brood rushing away like nothing else I’d seen. Not even the Legate wanted to charge his troops into a sphere of disintegrating darkness.

“Much better! Send a few more that way when you can, dear,” she said, then turned to the three. “Ah, there you are, darlings!” She reached into her saddlebags, withdrew a blue vial, and passed it to Tenebra, who accepted it reluctantly. “Been having a nice flight out?”

“This isn’t a flight, mother!” Tenebra said breathlessly. “This is a battle for our very survival! You and Father should be in the stable where it’s safe!”

“And that’s where my darling babies should be,” she said as she smiled placidly at her children, who flushed and squirmed. “And my grandbabies too,” she said, arching a brow at Whisper, who scrunched up her face indignantly. “If my little ones are at terrible risk, how can we do any less?” She paused, seeing Hades had turned his head to listen, and reached up with her wings to aim him up the street again. “That way, dear.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” He took a deep breath and strained, then bellowed, “ANULIATE!” and sent another sphere rocketing down the street. It dipped low, slipping into the roadbed. However, a second later, the street collapsed under the returning Brood with a great crumbling. “Heh. That got them!” He paused. “... Right?"

“Absolutely, dear,” she answered, patting his shoulder. “Now, do be careful and aim the way you’re facing... and do try to use actual words.” She looked back at the three. “Go on and play. Take care that you don’t get hurt.”

“Yes, Mom,” Whisper said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

“I mean that, Whisper,” Persephone said, her smile steady but her eyes ardent. “I look forward to your wedding once we’ve cleaned up. It will give all our people something to celebrate.”

“A wedding, seriously?” Whisper tried to keep up the snark as she

looked from herself to Stygius. “I mean… he hasn’t proposed… ” Stygius gulped and gave his disapproving mother a sheepish grin.

“Stygius Lethe Acheron!” she said sharply. He trotted forward, hanging his head slightly. “Why haven’t you proposed to this young mare yet?”

He eeped and then waved his hooves in the direction of the hundreds of Brood marching towards them, the barrel bombs exploding, the glowing fire of beam rifles cracking and streaking through the air ahead of them, and the general signs of battle as his mother looked on with a tiny smile and a very unamused arch of her brow. He stilled, hooves stretched towards the Brood as his eyes went from one female to the other. Finally, he slumped and fell to his knees, mouth working on the piece of chalk, and then he used a wing to fish something gold from his saddlebags. When he turned back to Whisper, hanging on his proffered wingtip was a ring-shaped earring set with a large teardrop-shaped moonstone, and in his mouth he held a simple message.

“Love U. Marry Me, Plz?”

She stared at him for a moment, then gave a tiny nod, her eyes wide and glistening. Bullets pinged and zinged off the metal around them as he stretched up and clipped the ring to her left ear. The gem sent out dozens of tiny rainbow sparkles as the evening light reflected off its milky adularescence. She touched it carefully with a wingtip, as if confirming it was actually there. “Yes… ” she whispered as tears welled in her eyes. “Yes!” she cried out as she embraced him tightly, making him squeak.

“Congratulations,” Persephone said brightly once Stygius was released.

“Did something happen?” Hades rumbled, turning his head towards the rest of us.

She reach up, turning his head back. “I’ll fill you in later, dearest. Just keep sending your magic that way.”

Tenebra sighed but gave a small smile. “Yeah. Congratulations. You must be very happy.”

“Happy?” Whisper said with a wide smile, and then she launched herself up in the air. Then, to the astonishment of everyone, including me and I think herself, she began…

… to sing.

No one’s happier than I

I feel like reaching up to touch the sky
I'm soaring through the clouds
I could sing out loud
I'm aglow and I know the reason why

Everypony stared at her in astonishment, even, guided through hearing alone, King Hades, as the sweet, steady notes slipped out of her mouth and somehow carried out over the battle. Of course, she didn't just hang there singing. No, she fought as she sang, as if it were as natural to her as flying. She looped and whirled, and Stygius followed with her, the pair coiling and curling around each other, breaking apart to smash a flyer that moved to finish them off but seemed unable to hit them. And where was that music coming from? It seemed to follow her song, cutting through the rattle of gunshots and the boom of barrel bombs.

No one's luckier than I
My happy heart inside is riding high
I'll tell the sun and moon
That the world is in tune
And my friends can all sing and laugh and cry

Her song seemed to reach out to the ponies fighting, unifying them. A few Flash Fillies broke out in an accompanying melody, coordinating their beam blasts into sheets of fire that actually seemed to stymie the Brood assault through the industrial canyons. Now the pair almost seemed to ignore the Brood desperate to kill them as they whirled and danced through the smoking ruins. The bullets seemed to fade to the barest buzzing of bees as they passed by the pair.

For I'm in love, and I know I'm loved in turn
My friends below can see how I yearn

She held him close as they whirled higher and higher, her song reaching out, cutting through the cracks of bullets and the booming of bombs to reach every friendly ear in the area. As they rose past the top of a smokestack, she glimpsed a white flash on the catwalk around its brick rim, but the couple's spin quickly carried it out of view.

For the day he takes me in his wings
Where I will laugh with the gift love brings
I don't mind telling you

That I know that it's true
There is no one who's happier than I.

Then time seemed to slow as Stygius's handsome smile faded and his gentle eyes widened. There was a dark flash, and he disappeared only for his legs to wrap around her from behind. She turned her head in bafflement, but suddenly he slammed into her, knocking her into a sharp spin as a line of pain bloomed on her side. When she stabilized, a bloody graze marring her coat, Stygius was in front of her, facing her. His wings struggled to keep him aloft, and she gripped his blood-slick legs with hers. A tiny smile rose on his lips. They formed the shape of three little words, and then he was falling, blood glimmering like rain in a crimson halo around him. There was no music. No sound at all as he fell from her outstretched hooves, his yellow bar gone from her E.F.S.

Her eyes turned to the catwalk, and she saw three figures. Only one was armed. Only one was needed.

The Legate.

Flanked by two Brood unicorns, he pointed a zebra rifle at her with a calm, steady smile. Hanging from his back like some grotesque talisman was Goldenblood's grisly torso, his eyes staring sadly at her. "Silence," he said. There was a flash, a single bang, and a numbness spread through her body. She fell down into the fire and smoke and chattering gunfire.

Her limp wings dragged through the smoke, slowing her fall as she tumbled down, blood flowing from her own wounds and the stunned sensation flowing through her. She stared up at the blue sky, the two unicorns, the mutilated Goldenblood, golden feathers and drops of blood falling around her, and the smiling zebra...

Then she struck a bank of old cables strung across the road, the thick, rubber-coated strands slowing her fall even more before they snapped and yanked right out of the wall. Her wings crackled like kindling under her. Then she landed in a heap in the middle of an empty street. It felt like an eternity that she lay there bleeding, thinking nothing... feeling nothing.

"Stygius," she whispered.

Slowly she turned, and now pain blossomed... but it was a distant pain. An abstract pain she felt only due to petty, fleshy trauma and broken bones. She stared up the street... down the street...

There, a gleam of purple and gray. She struggled to her hooves, blood dripping down her front and back, then staggered, step by

step, towards her batpony. As she walked, coughing up red bubbles, Brood emerged. They didn't impede her passage, smiling as she closed the distance to Stygius. He lay on his side, curled slightly, a pool of dark crimson spreading out from him. She fell to her knees in the cooling blood, staring down at his faintly smiling face. She stroked his cheek with a bloody hoof, but he did not stir.

The Brood surrounded her. Softly, barely above a whisper, she began to sing again.

No one's happier than I...
Because I'm going to die...
Now the evening's drawing nigh...
This happiness has bid me good-bye...
I'm all alone... my heart is overthrown...
There's nothing to do but...

A barrel pressed against her forehead, and she looked up, hot tears on her cheeks. "Shhh," the Brood said as one... except for a few who wore strange, confused frowns as they watched the scene. "No more pony battle hymns." She closed her eyes and smiled.

A crack split the air. Hot dust swirled around her.

She opened her eyes as she saw the glowing red pile of embers settle down before her. A half dozen more fell, collapsing into piles of dust as Flash Fillies and a few Burners riding batponies descended down into the street. Persephone rode Hades, calling out, "Left, no, your other left, dear!" while others swooped down towards Whisper. Tenebra landed, her wings shaking as she withdrew purple vials from her saddlebags. Whisper stared past them up at the Legate, glowering down at all of them from his perch above. But she didn't linger on his eyes or the rifle pointing down at her. She looked past him at her father, his face solemn and mournful, his lips moving as he tried to say a word over and over again.

A bullet struck her thigh, auguring straight through. A second punched through her wing, taking a bloody clump of feathers and meat. A third slammed into her hip. She felt the blossoms of pain as her eyes remained locked on her father's lips, trying to make out the word he said over and over again while she waited to be reunited and happy once more.

Sing.

A pearly shield formed around Whisper and Stygius, the batponies,

the Flashers, and the Burners. The Legate bore an expression of profound frustration.

"Oh no," Tenebra gasped, bent over Stygius.

"Which way is our foe, love?" Hades demanded, but the pale batpony was silent as she slid off him, her face streaked with tears as she fell over Stygius's body and started to sob. "What is it? What's going on! Love! Speak to me!" the king said with a hint of desperation.

The moonlight shield didn't block the bullets perfectly, but it deflected them and slowed their progress, and the magical energy weapons of the Flashers and Burners were unimpeded as they struggled to keep the enemy at bay.

Tenebra knelt next to her father. "He's dead, Father," she sobbed. "Stygius is dead!"

The large dark batpony knelt, sweeping his wing across the ground until it brushed Stygius's still face. "No. My son... " he whispered hoarsely. His wing dipped into the cooling pool of blood. "My boy!" he cried, and then he jerked his face towards the gunshots, roaring at the shooters, "You motherless bastards, you killed my son!" Tears soaked his blindfold as he summoned up a black nimbus around himself, the air suddenly growing chill. "DIE!" he roared.

The nimbus exploded up away from him, fountaining out the top of the moonlight dome before sweeping down like an inferno of black fire. It carried with it all the pain of a grieving father and mother, seeking out the Brood as if it had a life of its own. Wherever it touched, flesh failed, metal corroded, and brick crumbled. The cloud of black flame broke into great roaring snakes that sought out every single Brood, and then, as if sensing his presence, the serpents all seemed to orient on the Legate. His eyes widened in surprise before he winked away along with the two unicorns. As if sensing they'd been robbed of their vengeance, the tendrils of black flame assaulted the smokestack he'd occupied. The brick and rebar disintegrated under the ebony onslaught, tumbling down towards the street and continuing to decay as they fell. Not a single pebble or stone reached the clustered ponies below.

The burst of dark magic, or Stygius's death, or both, seemed to wither the stallion. The tips of his mane turned gray, and his powerful frame weakened. "Husband, no! I've just lost a son! I'll not lose a husband as well," Persephone cried out, holding him tightly around the neck. The storm of black flame seeking out the

remaining Brood guttered as if starved for air, and died. Hades slumped against Persephone, his legs shaking as he sat down hard. “My love. My love... ” she murmured as she held him.

Tenebra held a potion bottle to Whisper’s lips, and she drank by reflex rather than any wish for the pain to ebb. “What happened to him?” she murmured as she stared at the king.

“The price for using dark magic in excess,” Tenebra replied, reaching down to stroke Stygius’s mane. “Poor Brother. You always had to be so damned noble.”

Whisper gazed at Stygius. “I was going to be married. I was going to have a family. A real family... ” She reached up to the earring with a trembling hoof, but the shaking was so great that the moonstone earring popped from her ear and fell, landing in the pool of blood. Whisper shook even more, staring at him. “Damn it. Damn it! I’m supposed to be... I want... why... ” she stammered, her voice getting higher and tighter as her eyes burned. “What is the fucking deal?!” she screamed out to the sky. “Why couldn’t he just live? Why the fuck does everyone keep dying on me? Why the fuck can’t I get a damned break? Just once?”

“I don’t know,” Persephone answered softly, stroking Hades gently with one of her wings. Tenebra extended another potion to her, but she turned away.

There was still fighting going on, and close. More bullets and explosions to the south. She rubbed her face with a bloody hoof. “Fuck. Fuck fuck fucking fuck! How... why... what the fuck am I supposed to do? All I wanted was to be fucking happy! Why can’t I just have that! Just... have it?” She slumped. “Fuck... I don’t even want to fight anymore. I just... fuck.”

Persephone put her wingtip under Whisper’s chin and lifted her face until their eyes met. “There’s no need for... for dramatics dear,” she said in a voice as brittle as glass. “The time for weeping will come later. You haven’t lost everything. You still have us.”

“But... ” She stared at the batponies. “But... I... he’s gone…I’m not. I mean... ”

“You are still a part of us, no matter what’s happened.” Persephone brushed some of the blood from her face. “You might have a long way to go, my child, and your language desperately needs some refinement, but we will not forsake you. You’re a part of our family.”

Whisper looked from one to the next. “You... you mean it?”

Tenebra sighed, rolling her tired eyes. “I guess if I’m going to have a sister, it’s appropriate that she’s a bitch.” But she wore a small joyless smile as she said it.

“Tenebra,” her mother admonished in a weary voice.

“What? She just said a dozen obscenities in a row! I’m not allowed to call her a bitch?" Her voice hitched. "That’s– that’s hardly fair!” Tenebra protested, tears on her cheeks, the exchange drawing a tiny twitch to the corner of Whisper’s lips.

“Ah, family,” Hades rumbled softly.

Whisper reached over and took the potion Tenebra had offered earlier, holding it between her hooves, then drank it down. She tossed the empty aside and looked to the pale batpony. “But... how do I... after all that’s happened?”

“I was told it’s not what happens to us but how we rise to meet it. How will you?” she asked Whisper quietly.

Whisper sat there, staring at the little white stone gleaming in the pool of darkening red. Tenebra raised her hoof and tapped her PipBuck. “This is Bat Two. Is there anypony on that can give me a situation report?”

There was a pause, and then, “This is Homage. The Brood is pushing into the northeast from the north. It looks like they’re trying to push everypony south towards Fallen Arch. Another group tried to push the Society and Collegiate north and west as well, but the former was halted. We’ve got some refugees in the Core. Nothing’s happening, yet.”

“Hades is out of action, and we’ve lost... my brother. We’re clear of the Brood for the moment. What does Storm Chaser want us to do?” Tenebra said as she looked to the north.

“Withdraw back to Fallen Arch. Try and stop the refugees from getting into the Core. The *Cyclone*’s giving as much cover as it can spare. We’re bringing help right away, but... damn it!” Homage swore. “Refugees are starting to go into the Core from the Arena too!”

“Maybe Blackjack was wrong. Maybe refuge in the Core is our only hope?” Tenebra asked.

“Blackjack’s never wrong. Not about stuff like that,” Whisper murmured as she carefully fished out the moonstone earring. The white opaline surface had become stained a dark red. She gazed at it. “If she says it’s bad, then it’s bad.”

“Well,” Homage answered, “unless she shows up in the next five

minutes, there's going to be a whole lot of people in the Core. The defenders are barely holding the lines as is. I have help coming, but it'll be a few hours before they get here."

The stone turned over, balanced on the ends of her pinions. "He came for me himself," Whisper murmured. "Why? I'm nopony... He doesn't care about Fluttershy... he has my father... why come and kill me?" She closed her eyes, but the image of her father saying that word over and over again rose inside her.

Sing.

How could she sing? The joy she'd felt inside her that moment was gone. Everything that remained had collapsed in on itself, filling her heart with jagged shards of rage. She opened her eyes, looking at Stygius's limp body. The ghost of a smile still resting on his lips. She closed her eyes, seeing the Legate with her father there, smirking, killing them as if he were a colt playing a prank. Anger began to burn anew, fed by a purer fuel than she'd stoked it with before.

You could sing with more than just love...

Homage was saying something about the zebras and Velvet Remedy when Whisper touched her own PipBuck. "Homage. Can you connect me to as many ponies across the Hoof as you can?"

"I think so. We've got enough control for that," Homage replied. "Why?"

But Whisper didn't answer immediately. They carefully put Stygius across her back, and she held him without struggle. Then, she clipped the red stone back to her ear, the gem glowing in the sunlight, and started to walk to the south. As she did, every footfall made a percussive beat. One-one two three... One-one two three... Then, as before, music began to play along with each step. Was it coming from her PipBuck or simply because she was in that moment where there was a song she needed to sing?

When, all feels lost...
what remains... is most precious to us.
Hold. Hold on to love...
Hold on to life…Hold on to tomorrow...

Maybe it was whatever magic she channeled in this moment, or maybe my blank body was throwing one last curveball at me, but I suddenly had images of ponies all across the Hoof fighting and struggling against the onslaught of the Brood. Of exhausted mares and stallions wanting the fighting to be done. Of terrified people

seeking any shelter they could. Of soldiers crying out for bullets, bandages, or help. Of fighters struggling against exhaustion. And as she sang, the words reached them through radios and PipBucks, her hard notes cutting through the panic and mayhem.

Rise. Hoofington Rise.
Don't let the fear crush you down now.
Rise. Hoofington Rise!
Stand for the light. Don't let it die!

Amidst all the images, one of Velvet Remedy stood out. I couldn't guess why she was surrounded by zebras, but the black unicorn mare joined in, her voice low and smooth as she ignored the zebras watching her in bafflement.

When hate burns on for too long
Everything's cast away now.
But, with friends near, loved ones so dear,
We can carry the day so

Then, in unison, the pair cried out in harmony, Velvet with dozens of zebras and Whisper surrounded by ever more batponies, Burners, Flashers, and every other exhausted fighter tired of this day.

Stand! Hoofington stand!
Face our foe. Drive back the darkness raging!
Stand! Hoofington Stand!
Don't give up now!
Stand! Hoofington Stand!
Sing together to beat back this darkness!
Stand! Hoofington Stand!
Vict'ry's near, hold your loved ones closer!

As they sang, ponies who were running for their lives stopped and stiffened as if an invisible wind blew through them. They turned back towards the fighting. A purple batpony colt started back towards the fighting. Then another pony. Another. Solo ponies looked to each other. Pairs formed groups. Gangers and traders, the wounded and frightened, started back from the protection of the Core. Only the greediest and bitterest scavengers stayed behind, determined to loot whatever they could however they could. The music softened, and I was astonished that Whisper could sing so sweetly even when carrying Stygius's body across her shoulders.

You might feel lost and
wandering alone…

But others are here
to lend an ear
to make this place feel like home
So look! Look to the living, look to the loving,
laughing, praying, fighting!
The battered defenders around the Arena, fighting behind barricades and in the skies, turned at the sight of an army of reinforcements rushing in to help as the pair sang out, joined by dozens of others filling in however and wherever they could. Together.
Fight! Hoofington Fight!
Don't give up to fear and sorrow.
Fight! Hoofington Fight!

Don't give up hope…
for a bright tomorrow!
Rise! Hoofington Rise!
The time is now to raise your voices
Rise! Hoofington Rise!
Rise! Hoofington Rise!
And face tomorrow!
The song ended and the music faded away, but the sentiment raged on as my awareness returned to Whisper, bearing her slain love across her back, the red moonstone gleaming beside her left eye. "Homage. I need you to tell me where the Legate is. Now. He took my love from me. I'll be damned if I'm going to let him hold onto my father as well," she said as–

oooOOOooo

Suddenly I was back in the rocket… most of me. I made a number of undignified noises as I flailed my limbs and wings, trying to get my eyes to focus on Bastard in front of me, holding my blank body in his hooves. Eye control was re-established first, followed by motor function, and finally linguistics as I made a disjointed 'huh?' noise.
He peered at me from over the top of his sunglasses. "Oh. Look who's awake. Princess Not-Zoning-Out-Anymore-Till-She-Deals-With-Shit. It's a miracle." He levitated my blank body to a couch on the other side of the cabin, glowering at me, then pointed a hoof at

Scotch Tape. The young mare was curled up on her couch again, staring at her hooves. “You two need to fucking talk. She’s mastered the art of risky sex with complete strangers, and I’m pretty sure the second we touch down, she’s going to graduate to booze, chems, and self-mutilation.”

I looked at her sitting there all alone, then tore my eyes back to him. “I don’t know what to say,” I muttered lamely. “I’m not good with words.” I put my magic around the blank body, ready to levitate it back to me.

He drew a pistol and pointed it unerringly at my blank’s head.

“I’m good at causing fucking misery, but you’re the master, Blackjack. ‘I’m not good with words.’ What the fuck is wrong with you? She’s lost her father and her friends, and you’re as distant as the fucking moon right now. She’s so desperate for somepony that she’s screwing me. Now get your ass over there and deal with it, or I’ll fulfill my fucking contract and kill a Blackjack.” And I knew, staring into his eyes, that he meant every word. I could stop him, or even kill him, but there was just one problem...

He was right.

A part of me was incensed that this churl was forcing the issue. How dare he? I could help Scotch after this was finished. There were all kinds of dreams that I could craft to address her loss. Talking... that was messier. If I could adopt a guise or persona, I could address this indirectly. Work around to helping her, and she wouldn’t even be aware I was doing it. That way, if it blew up, I wouldn’t be hurt. Blamed. Punished.

“Damn it,” I muttered. Slowly, I shifted over to where Scotch sat curled up, her mane obscuring her face. As I sat beside her, she gave a tiny sniff, but nothing else. What was I supposed to say? ‘So, how was he? Scale of one to ten?’ or ‘How are you doing?’ or...

“Sorry,” I said dumbly. I swallowed hard. “Sorry about your father. Sorry about Rampage. Sorry about... everything.”

She didn’t respond for a long while. Luna would have trotted off. Come back when she fell asleep and work some magic with her dreams. Explain herself. Work the situation till they came around. I had to wait, no matter how much I hated it. No matter how I saw P-21 lying there, impaled, and heard Scotch Tape screaming for him. “I wish I were a real Princess. I don’t think I am. Not really. A real Princess would have saved them both. Somehow.” I lifted my hooves, looking at the precision clockwork turning inside the

intricate housing. “I couldn’t do anything.”

“Did you try?” Scotch Tape asked.

I closed my eyes, feeling tears on my cheeks. “I could have tried harder. Found some way to cut through the bars. Found some way to keep Horizons from going off. Something. Gotten him back to the Astrostable.” I rubbed the cool metal across my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t make it better, Blackjack!” Scotch Tape snapped at me, giving me a glare so like his that I almost saw dark blue eyes instead of her teal. “You’re… you! You blow up huge towers and survive balefire bombs! You do the craziest shit like it’s nothing! Why couldn’t you have done it this time? Some trick or some… something! Why didn’t you?”

“Because I couldn’t!” I shouted back at her. “What do you want from me?”

“A miracle!” she yelled. “What else are Princesses for? What else is a goddess for?” she asked as she wept, hot, angry tears dripping down her cheeks like molten angst. “You could have… you should have… why… why?” Now her voice choked to a whimpering pleading. “Why didn’t you save him?”

“Because… ” But I couldn’t say more. How could I tell her that I’d promised him to keep her alive? Bastard was right. She was hurt. Damned hurt. Not in body, but in the heart. Anything I said could twist back and make her blame herself for his death, if she wasn’t already. “He promised me that… that if anything should happen… I… I… ” I licked my lips, then held my stomach. “I had to save my babies. *His* babies. After going through so much to get them back, I had to.”

The lie worked. Some of the pain and anger dripped from her. Suspicion remained, but there was doubt there, too. She said in a breaking voice, “He told me… he told me not to let you… get down. That I’d have to keep you off the mattress… whatever that means. Keep you happy and focused. And I tried to pretend, but you… you didn’t seem like you cared. Like it wasn’t your fault.”

I turned to the window, my voice faint as I felt my throat choke up. “I… I care… Please… believe me. I care… ” It wasn’t my fault, though. Not really. Between Horizons and his injuries… maybe if I’d insisted on bringing Velvet Remedy and her friends, she might have done something. Keeping the Hoof intact was more important, though. “I wish things had been better,” I said, then gritted my teeth, trying to keep the panic from overwhelming me. “I wish… so

many things... ”

“I wish I just... aside from Daddy... that everything inside me was okay. That’s why I did... you know... with him,” she said, glancing over at where Bastard was adamantly not looking in our direction. “You’ve said how sex is your reset button. I hoped it’d reset me too.”

“Did it work?” I asked with a tiny, envious half smile.

The young mare pressed her knees together. “It was okay while I was doing it, but I still couldn’t forget. Now I’m sticky and sore, and that’s about it. I’m not getting off this seat till I get a wet towel on my nethers.” She closed her eyes. “I’m half amazed he did it at all, but he just asked me if I was sure. He let me set the pace.”

“Because I didn’t want the crazy moon princess to pop my head like a zit if I’d done you bloody and raw,” Bastard answered from across the rocket. “If you’re old enough to seriously want it, you’re old enough to seriously do it. Though that was in the top ten list of most messed up things I’ve done.”

“I wasn’t bad, was I?” Scotch asked with a frown.

He turned towards us, pointed his cigarette like an accusing finger, opened his mouth silently, and froze. He popped the cigarette back in his mouth and reclined back in the chair. “Nope. Not going to talk about it. Just going to file it under things I’m going to forget about today,” he mumbled around the cigarette.

Scotch Tape drooped her ears. “I guess I was... ”

“You were fine! Great! Fantastic, even! You’re just a few years younger than I’d like, okay? I don’t want to know where you learned how– You know what? This is us, not talking about it. Ever.” He glared menacingly at both of us, but I simply smirked back, and Scotch Tape snorted. He levitated my blank body back to me. “Okay! Here you go. You talked. She’s no longer looking like she wants to die. You can go back to doing whatever you were doing cuddling with this thing.”

“I’m looking at what’s happening in Equestria,” I answered, taking the body in my embrace. “There’s a lingering magical connection between this body and the ponies I’ve met.” And the reality of what was happening in the Hoof came rushing back in on me like a tsunami. My smile disappeared. “It’s not good.”

“Tell me,” Scotch Tape said.

So I did.

Ten minutes later I’d filled them in on everything from the razing

of Chapel to the fate of Stygius and Whisper. The latter upset Scotch far more than the former. Toilets and towns could be rebuilt so long as the people survived.

"I can't believe that he proposed, only to get killed," Scotch Tape said as she wiped her tears. "That has to be the worst timing ever."

"If he hadn't proposed, she wouldn't have started singing, and if she hadn't sung, I don't think the Legate would have shown up himself to stop her. He was trying to kill Whisper. I think he was afraid of her," I replied as I looked down at the planet looming closer and closer. We were over the zebra lands again. I could make out the megaspells still raging and flickering in the midst of their Wasteland. I was responsible for this. They'd been my enemy and I'd wanted them defeated, but I'd never imagined that the weapons we'd wrought would continue to slay centuries later.

"Afraid? Of a little singing?" Scotch Tape said skeptically

"Don't knock ponies singing together," Bastard replied. "I don't understand it myself, but I knew folks who said there's a magic there beyond just casting spells. Think about it. People together just deciding to sing together, everypony knowing the words, everypony in unison, sometimes with music from who knows where... it's magic. And when it's done, earth ponies might have rebuilt an entire house in a few hours, or a unicorn in Canterlot's made connections with damn near everyone in the city. I don't understand it, but even I don't scoff at it." He paused and pursed his lips. "If I ever do burst into some silly song, though, shoot me, please. Especially if there's dancing involved."

We both regarded him quietly a second. "One day, you're going to tell your story, Bastard."

"Only with a gun to my head, Blackjack," he replied. "Actually, even then, I'd probably just tell you to pull the trigger."

I shook my head and looked out the window at Equus again, then asked, "How long do you think it'll be till we arrive?"

"Not long now. Within the hour, I think," Scotch Tape said as she examined the computer running the ship. "Are you going to go back in?"

"One more time, I think. I want to see what the Legate and the others are doing. We'll probably have to regroup at the University. So many are injured... " And so many gone, I didn't add. With one last look at the young mare, I added, "Are we good now? No more hating me?"

“I hate that Princess powers don’t include breaking the rules so ponies we love can live. Otherwise, what’s the point?” Scotch Tape asked with a frown as she fiddled with the machine, sitting quite uncomfortably next to it. “Go fast. When we’re five minutes away from reentry, we’ll pull you out again.”

I nodded and pressed my horn to the blank’s brow. It was harder, this time. Maybe the first break had weakened the magical connection, or maybe it was our distance from the moon. Either way, it took me almost a minute to push myself into that dark space, and a minute more to find the last pool I needed.

Goldenblood.

oooOOOooo

“You seem tense,” Goldenblood rasped from a table atop a building in the middle of the Core. Dozens of gem-studded monitor screens showing camera feeds from around the Hoof sat on other tables around some terminals next to Goldenblood. The Legate paced along the sheer edge, his face a mask of frustration. His unicorns waited in silent subservience, twenty or so Brood cyberzebras arranged in rings around the top of the tower. “Are things not turning out how the Eater told you they would?”

“I’ve taken your legs. Your jaw isn’t as difficult to remove,” the red-striped zebra said as he walked back and forth along the precipice. The looping orbitals on his face looked like deep ravines carved into his flesh. “Things just aren’t progressing as smoothly as I’d like. That damned song. What is it with ponies and singing?! Everything was going wonderfully, and then they had to start caterwauling!” He jabbed a hoof down at the Core, and Goldenblood saw a few scavengers picking through the remains of the last ponies to try sheltering there. “There should be thousands down there! So much effort to draw so many of you wretched ponies to the Hoof so that I could herd them in here. Thousands! Stallions, mares, and foals. Especially foals! Instead, they fight on.”

“So sorry our desire to survive doesn’t align with your elaborate master plan for our complete annihilation,” Goldenblood rasped. “I thought your victory was inevitable.”

The Legate glared. “If the trajectory hadn’t been changed, Horizons would have impacted through the crust and possibly reacted with the Eater before it could be devoured. Changing the trajectory was

supposed to bring it straight down!" He grabbed Goldenblood by the neck and held him over the edge. Below was the pit leading straight down to the Eater. "The starmetal netting and magical fields would have easily captured it! But instead, it's taking the scenic route. The sensible thing would have been a straight shot!"

"Oh, so that little detail's still tripping you up?" Goldenblood asked with a chuckle, then started laughing.

"What's so funny?" the Legate demanded.

"Us," Goldenblood laughed. "The two of us with our ridiculously convoluted plans to kill everypony... me to save the world, and you to end it. It's hilarious!" The raw laughter prompted the Legate to slam him into the ground at the edge of the white building that I now identified as the M.o.I. hub.

"*Your* plans?! You were used! My master used you! I serve *willingly*. I will help it devour every last spark of life in the universe!" he shouted.

"Yeah. Brilliant life, that. You might have been better just having a family. I know I would have," Goldenblood quipped.

Then the Legate swept him up and shouted in his face, "Do you think I haven't loved?!"

Goldenblood stared as the Legate seethed. "I've lived for thousands of years. Thousands! Even as a Starkatteri and Proditor, I've found love. Passion. Joy, even! All it does is rot! One death after another. I've had wives turn into decrepit bags of bone and sinew. Lovers turn old and dull and fat. I've watched children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren die over and over. Violence! Disease! Despair! Again and again. I've endured centuries alone because it numbed the pain of one parting after the next! Life is a curse! It is punishment! It is a joke! We live for fleeting years and then perish just so our offspring can do the same as well. Madness!"

He threw Goldenblood back to the ground with a snapping of more bone, then glowered down into the pit. "Life is a lot like you, Goldenblood. A rancid, festering corpse that, by some cruel joke of the universe, keeps struggling on, spreading pain and suffering. And I will crush it and you, you rotten little worm, under my hooves. I will end the joke and take my war to the stars so that they, too, can find the peace of nonexistence. I will destroy everything. I am the great cleanser, and this world is merely the first tiny baby step of my grand campaign. Do you understand? Are you even capable of grasping the scope of my plans? This is nothing. *You* are nothing.

You pathetic little mortals just don't realize it yet!"

Goldenblood simply lay there staring up at him monologuing. *I tried to kill everyone out of a misguided duty to Equestria. Destruction the only redemption I could conceive. How shameful. How petty. How foolish. But all this hate... this malice... Millennia of life, and this is what you desire?* "This is what you do with immortality," he said with disgust. "Pathetic."

"This is what every immortal does, eventually," he answered, then stared at the setting sun. "Every immortal craves an ending. If we don't get it, we'll create it." He then looked back down into the streets. "There's nothing for it. Hopefully there's enough. Pity. I really wanted more foals for this." He raised his head and closed his eyes. A moment later the building started to tremble. "Now," he breathed.

"What are you doing?" Goldenblood asked as the shaking grew. "You're turning the Enervation back on, aren't you?" he shouted in alarm.

"Don't be silly. What a waste that would be." He opened his eyes and pointed a hoof at a building across the pit as the shaking grew. A shriek filled the air from countless throats. Then the building erupted in a great fountaining of red gore. The viscous material poured out of the broken top, assembling into all manner of crawling, pinching, stinging monstrosities. Another building erupted. And another. Torrents of thick red goo surged out windows and through cracks and up grates. They turned into swarms of flying things with stingers and pincers. Collected into great spiders. Lumped into enormous, monstrous shapes that lumbered down the streets.

At the same time, swarms of mechasprites swept in and with their wings and lasers cut off those trying to flee. Those caught by the great oozing mass seemed to be assimilated by it, swelling grotesquely as they screamed in agony on the screens. The Legate watched the scenes with a look of profound frustration as the mechasprites seemed to jam augments into hemmed-in ponies almost at random, creating horrors that tried to totter or limp away before the red mass snared and consumed them.

"Come on," he muttered at the screens. "Come on! Your time is almost up! Here I am! Look at what's coming! You're great and powerful and afraid! Give in to your terror! Use it! Use your great and overwhelming power before it's too late! Use it!"

“What are you talking about? What are you… ” Goldenblood trailed off. “Oh no…Celestia One… ” And his eyes turned to the skies.

The clear and open air above Hoofington west of the Core seemed to shimmer, and golden lines of light began to coalesce into rings. Rings with their centers angled towards the setting sun. The golden rings began to spin. “Yes… ” the Legate breathed as he stared at the light. “Yes. Yes! Do it! Do it!”

“No!” Goldenblood shouted… and then was blinded by an immense, blazing glow as the light of the setting sun focused like the beam of a magnifying glass, only to be interrupted by a field of magic surrounding the M.O.I. hub. The Legate laughed in glee as the energy poured into the shield with abandon, and the shaking suddenly increased.

“Yes!” he cried out, forehooves thrust to the heavens, his shadow stark and absolute as it fell across Goldenblood.

And it wasn’t the only one. These weren’t thin javelin-like beams of energy but rivers of fire in the sky. More beams blasted down from those rings, sweeping across the monstrosities pouring out of the skyscrapers. These weren’t protected by shields, and the flesh incinerated with a horrible sweet stench of burning meat and glass. One by one, the beams of scorching light crawled through the Core and lit one building after another alight. Some disintegrated instantly, but others were reinforced enough that a casual brushing of the megaspell was only sufficient to turn them into blazing torches. Often, inexplicably, the beams struck magical fields that seemed to suck in the energy briefly before sweeping away to hit other areas of the Core, some with their own shields, some without.

And the Legate laughed in triumph, tears of joy streaking his cheeks.

The sun slipped down below the horizon, and the megaspell continued to pour on power for another minute or two before it winked out as well. The Core burned, but still it stood. Five minutes hadn’t been enough to melt the city to its bedrock. Great heaps of meat sizzled like overcooked steaks while the mechasprite swarms had been rendered into bubbling puddles of slag. Half the monitor screens showed only static. All was still. All silent.

Then the lights came on. One by one, the towers that weren’t aflame lit up. Green lines outlined and illuminated the streets below. Countless televisions and radios began to play old prewar

tunes. The rotted remains of the lives that had lived here before lay naked and exposed and ugly for all to see. Along the wall and tower tops, talismans flashed and winked.

Nopony spoke. Then, “What did you do?”

“Harvested more energy in five minutes than I could have in years,” the Legate said as he smiled out at the illuminated ghost that was the Core.

“For what?”

“This,” the Legate said with a smile, and the towers began to shake once more. Only this time there was no relenting, the trembling growing louder and louder.

Suddenly, the side of a nearby tower exploded. A long, gleaming silver shaft erupted sideways from the obsidian monolith, sending immense black panels tumbling down into the street below. A matching shaft burst forth from the building on the other side of the street, and the two shafts met above the road. The fingers on the ends of each shaft enmeshed perfectly, and, with a hiss of gas, hundreds of bolts slammed into place to lock them together. This happened again with another pair of buildings. And again, and again, throughout the Core.

Then the shafts began to turn.

The skyscrapers began to move.

With a noise louder than I could have imagined, immense buildings were being shifted about. The unbreakable starmetal that was woven around the girders and through the beams and motors kept them intact as rotating shafts slowly screwed them towards each other, the Core compressing together and away from the pit in the center of Hoofington.

“F.A.D.E. shields take energy to block energy. You reversed it,” Goldenblood said as the screeching died down, many of the buildings now flush against one another. Portions of their foundations were crumbling away, revealing a circular-patterned silver grid, wide holes between the thin wires, beneath them and the crushed streets.

“An ingenious application your M.A.S. was developing. I liberated a copy of the theory from the hub here half a century ago. Really, it was a pity you never involved Twilight in the Tokomare project. I just relish imaging what I could have accomplished with her curiosity and ambition.”

He picked up the ghoul with one hoof and stood, looking out as the

city slowly rearranged itself around them, the M.O.I. hub an increasingly isolated spire in the midst of all this transformation. “Nopony can stop me. Nopony can face me. I will end this world. I will save it from its misery. And I will do so to the next world, and the next, and the... ” He paused as a green light appeared, streaking between the towers as they moved. “Wait... what is... ”

That streak launched itself towards the M.O.I. tower, dropping down and following the crumbling remains of the streets, weaving around the lampposts that still jutted up alongside the crushed wagons like a blazing ball of fire. It reached the base of the tower and disappeared. A second later, a blazing green bird popped into view in front of the Legate and Goldenblood, the ghoul immediately feeling his broken body strengthen as the Legate gaped at it in bafflement.

Then the bird opened its mouth wide and sprayed a tight beam of flame right into the Legate’s face. His meat immediately charred and blasted away, leaving a blackened skull atop his neck. He dropped Goldenblood at once, raising his hooves to block the flame as the Brood around him began to writhe, some firing at random and others collapsing. The torrent of flame ended, leaving a dark line of soot painted across the top of the tower. Black flecks of bone and meat immediately began to sweep back into his charred face and limbs, reassembling his head. In seconds, he’d be back together.

That was a few seconds too many.

From the air around the tower, shimmery fields dropped to unleash a platoon of bat-winged zebras. At the same time, a dozen alicorns, four of each color, appeared around the tower. Velvet Remedy rode one of the purples as she gazed down sadly at the Brood, then gave a little nod. At once the alicorns began to blast at the staggered enemy, even as she averted her eyes.

Lancer landed in a crouch, his wings folding behind him, as he fired three-round bursts into the heads of the unicorns. Majina, landing on the opposite corner of the rooftop, fired blowdarts so quickly that it was almost too fast to see her reload. Sekashi landed with her stick and expertly knocked out the legs of the Brood, leaving them for other fighters to finish off. All the while, the tower shook as more and more of the Core transformed around them.

A field of magic lifted Goldenblood, but before he could be pulled away, the half-reformed Legate grabbed him and yanked him back down with a guttural cry of “No!” As his eyes reformed in their

sockets, he tied Goldenblood to the terminals with monitor cables. “You’re mine!” His head restored, the Brood came to life and began returning fire to the shielded alicorns. Their healing talismans were already hard at work restoring their bodies as the zebra Brood faced their striped counterparts while the Brood unicorns countered the alicorn magic.

A few zebras unloaded barrages of spark grenades and some of the alicorns blasted with lightning, but the eruptions of energy were sucked away through the air and into golden metal rods set in the corners of the hub’s roof.

The Legate charged straight at Lancer as the latter sent a pair of sniper rounds into the head of another unicorn. Then a stick jutted out, tripping the Starkatteri. To his credit, he recovered in a somersault and launched himself right at Sekashi. “The wife that got away,” the Legate sneered as he punched right at her face. She just barely evaded what could have easily been a killer blow by deftly deflecting it with her staff. “Pity you found out about me.”

“That reminds me... of a very funny story... ” Sekashi grunted as she gave constant ground around where Goldenblood was tied up. “About a husband... who thought he was still married... ” He hooked his forehooves around her staff, and his head lunged in, smashing against Sekashi’s face. Taking her staff, he shattered it in his grasp and tossed it aside.

“I always loved your stories,” he said as he advanced at her on two legs as casually as walking. Then there was a drawn out ‘ptptptptptptptpt’, and he paused, then craned his neck to see a dozen darts imbedded in his posterior.

“You’re a bad daddy,” the zebra filly said, eyes narrowed as she loaded another dart.

He kicked out, tagging a monitor and sending it rocketing into Majina’s face with such force that the filly was sent skidding towards the edge. Lancer scrambled to catch her before she careened off, but the little zebra went tumbling out of sight. Lancer cried out as he reached for her, only for the bloody and barely sensate filly to be safely lifted in a magical field.

Sekashi lunged at the Legate’s back. “You–”

But he whirled around, and his rear hoof came up. It impacted with her temple with a sickening crunch. She tumbled to the ground, blood leaking from her ears and her head twisted almost completely around. “No more stories, Love,” the Legate said as he

brushed the darts out of his rump.

The side of his head exploded, his body jerking and the Brood spasming along with him. Brain and skull pulled back in before his head burst apart again. “Murdering... monstrous... damned... ” Lancer hissed in rage as he advanced on his hindlegs, forelegs firing the rifle again and again. “Die!” Blam. “Die already!” Blam! “Die, you miserable excuse for a–” Click.

In a moment, the Legate was there. In the next moment, the impact of his hooves sent Lancer flying across the roof. He slammed into one of the four lightning rods, his body nearly wrapping around it as his bones cracked and splintered. The Legate kicked the sniper rifle over the edge as he approached his wounded son. “Always so ungrateful... ” the Legate muttered.

Then the air above him shimmered, and a zebra mare landed between the two. She had striped bat wings, and a number of fetishes dangled from around her neck. On her back was another filly in a cloak, who jumped off and piped, “Remember, you can’t beat him. He’ll kill you if you try.”

Adama stood between Lancer and the Legate as the filly ran to where Majina lay, pulling out a healing potion for her. “I can take him,” Adama said as she glowered at him. Majina weakly drank the potion. “He’s just a zebra.”

“Sure. Just a zebra.” The filly pulled out a roll of paper and studied it a moment. “Well, it’s your funeral,” Pythia said as she pulled back her hood. “Betelgeuse gives you fifteen thousand to one odds, but none of the other stars are taking him up on his offer. Well, except Sirius, but he’s nuts.”

“Pythia! You betray me?” the Legate said in shock.

“The others are running for their lives, but I just wanted to see how this would play out with my own eyes,” the filly said as she held the dazed Majina close in one hoof and the star map in the other. “You forgot the first rule, Amadi. We use the stars. We don’t serve them. You’re a bug playing with balefire bombs.” The Legate whirled and kicked a monitor at the filly, who ducked a moment before it took her head off. “Okay. A really deadly bug, but my point stands!”

As his back was turned, Adama made her move. She seized the Legate around his neck, jerking backwards as she attempted to choke him. He kicked off the ground, flipping over her and bending her over backwards as she struggled to maintain the grip. His

forehooves punched out to either side of her torso, and her ribs cracked under the onslaught. When she released him, he kicked her over by Lancer with a pleased smirk on his lips.

"Why do they never listen?" Pythia lamented, then put her hooves to her mouth and whistled – hey, how'd she do that?! – sharply to a nearby green alicorn who was trying to blast only cyber-augmented zebras. "Hey! You want to get his gun? Should be two floors down on the left side of the building caught on some fancy decorations. That'd be great!" The alicorn gaped at her, and Pythia waved a hoof at her in irritation. "Don't give me that 'freaky zebra filly' look! Just go get his gun! We're going to need it!" When the green flew down, she rubbed her temples. "Honestly… "

The Legate surveyed the carnage around him and laughed, a broad grin on his face. "Fools. You're all fools! I've won, and you don't even know it! But I thank you for the entertainment!"

"Momma," Majina said as she struggled to rise.

Pythia held her close. "Shh. Just stay here. A few minutes more, and it'll all be over. Or, you know… he'll kill us. Either way, should be interesting."

The buildings of the Core were rising up now, lifting into ever higher spires. Gears and cables all worked as the city seemed to heft up around the mile-wide space they'd cleared, the M.o.I. building still a lone tombstone amid the ruins. Thousands of shiny cables snaked down into the pit beneath the grid. Any buildings not in the process of movement lay smashed like broken toy chests spilling out their contents to the wind.

Wounded zebras were being withdrawn onto alicorns who now devoted all their magical power to their shields as the Brood organized and concentrated their fire. Pyrelight streaked around the rooftop, blasting little gouts of fire and sweeping past any Brood she could engage without burning others around her. The Legate practically pranced around the monitors, smashing any zebra who challenged him. "Soon. Soon," he repeated over and over again.

"Yeah, soon," Pythia said, and started counting down from ten.

The Legate paused as he looked at the two fillies. "What? What have you seen?"

"Seven. Six."

"Tell me!" the Legate demanded as he stormed over to the edge to face the pair of young ponies.

"Four… three… two… behind you," Pythia finished with a smirk.

The Legate turned just in time to see a flash of yellow that streaked across the roof.

Then his head disappeared. It tore completely off at the shoulders, broke into clumps, and went flying off over the edge. The Brood attack faltered, the cyberbeings staggering. Then his head pulled itself back together again. “What... ” A second flash, a second obliterating kick that not only pulped his skull but knocked him rolling across the roof. Again, his head pulled itself back together long enough for him to mutter, “... was... ” A third flash, this one sending his entire body flying into one of the lightning rods with such force the rod almost cut him in two. His head, still attached to the mutilated body, muttered, “... that?” Then his body reversed the injuries and pushed him off the golden metal rod.

Whisper hovered before him. “Me. You took my husband. You won’t take anything else.”

“Oh. The songbird. You’re the one who convinced all my poor, despairing sacrifices to keep fighting instead of hiding in here.” He rose to his hooves. “That was annoying. I’d put a lot of work into that!”

“Your face is annoying!” Whisper replied as she flashed forward again, but this time the Legate spun. She passed around his body, but instead of receiving his devastating kick, she was able to sweep clear before it landed. She streaked back in, her hooves a blur as they came in for his face, and the Legate attempted another of his spinning dodges. This time, she adjusted, ramming her hooves in the opposite direction. His body rotated clockwise, his head, counterclockwise. She was still struck by his outstretched hook, being knocked back, but she furiously beat her wings to keep from bouncing and skidding across the rooftop.

His head pulled itself back around, and he set himself, legs spread wide, and grinned at Whisper. “Finally. Someone worthwhile. Why don’t you sing at me a little while we wait?”

Whisper charged back at him, the pair blending together in a frenzy of motion. Meanwhile, Pythia and Majina rushed to where Goldenblood was bound. Majina kept looking over at the prone form of her mother, but Pythia looped her tail around Majina’s neck and gave a little tug. “Not now. We have to get him free. The yellow one’s good. Betelgeuse gives twenty to one odds, but she can’t do it alone. Hopefully the other will get here before he takes her apart.”

“What other? What are you talking about?” Majina asked, her cheeks streaked with tears as she looked at her dead mother. “We… can’t you help her?”

Pythia sighed. “Sorry, but when your head is backwards, it’s a little too late.” She rolled out the map, studying the little marks and scribbled notes on it, then took out her pendant and gave it a tap. The pendant cast little moving spots of light on the map. “Okay. Certain doom. United in strength. Blah blah blah. Come on stars, give me something juicy,” she muttered, then pointed a hoof at Goldenblood and glanced at Majina briefly. “Get him free at least. It’ll distract the stripes off Amadi.”

Majina hesitantly started picking at the knots in the cables looped around Goldenblood.

“You’re Starkatteri,” Goldenblood rasped at Pythia. “Why… ”

“Long story short, because I’m not a tool,” the filly answered. “Now. Do you have a clue what all this is for?” she asked as she swept a hoof at the looming towers, now half as tall as Shadowbolt Tower had been. They were mostly girders now, shed of the black panels that had hidden the machinery within.

And then suddenly there was a resounding ‘zing’ as all those hundreds and hundreds of cables dropping down through that foundation grate drew taut. Despite the lingering fiery hues that lit the evening, the wires that stretched from the tops of the towers down to the pit still managed to shine with a singular icy malevolence.

Goldenblood’s eyes widened. “I do now,” he rasped. “We have to go. Everyone–”

But whatever else he was going to say was lost in the shaking. It was so strong that only the Legate remained on his hooves. The M.o.I. tower itself wobbled ominously like a massive domino but, oddly, remained intact. Perhaps the presence of so many souls had fortified it somehow. The ground was collapsing around the pit, tumbling into the growing gulf with only the starmetal grid on the ground remaining behind. The ministry hub shifted with a booming thud as it came to rest slightly askew towards the pit, part of its foundation falling into one of the holes in the grid. A few Brood slid off into the void, but the zebra fighters saved each other from tumbling off the edge. The knotted cables kept Goldenblood from sliding off, and the two fillies clung to him. He would have held them if he could.

While everyone else was trying desperately to hang on, the Legate and Whisper continued their fight, barely acknowledging the shifting battlefield. “You’re fast,” the Legate said as he parried and instantly counterattacked with a whirling hit. “But I can feel you’re getting tired. I can keep this up forever.” His eyes narrowed as he blocked a blow of one of her power hooves, the stroke blasting his foreleg clean off only to have it return a half second later. “Why don’t you sing a lovely little requiem for this world? I know I’d love to hear it!” he called out over the growing rumble.

“*You’re* a requiem!” Whisper screeched as she laid into him with renewed vigor.

“Come on, you old ghoul…” Pythia said to Goldenblood. “What’s he doing? The future is one big tangled knot of shadow right now. I know she’s a way out. And there’s another. But I don’t get what he’s doing!” she shouted. “Right now, the Eater of Souls should die, along with the rest of us, but everything’s shifting around worse than this city is!”

“He’s bringing it up... ” Goldenblood rasped.

“Bringing what up?” Pythia shouted.

Goldenblood just stared at her a moment, and her eyes went wide. “No, he isn’t! He can’t! Something that big... there’s no way!”

“He’s been at this for years. Who knows what he was doing in Hoofington during the war? The designs for the city were always odd. Strange additions and requests. Plans changing in the middle of the night. Everything was built so quickly, nopony put it all together. The Core was likely shut down, building up power for this. Celestia One gave him the energy he needed. Now he’ll bring it up, and be able to align it perfectly to catch and devour Tom when it impacts.”

A purple alicorn flashed in and landed near the high edge of the roof. Velvet Remedy and a zebra in a hooded cloak slipped off. “What’s going on?” the mare asked in astonishment.

“No time,” Goldenblood rasped. “Get everyone off this roof now. Once the Eater’s on the surface, the Enervation will kill everyone. It might already be returning.”

“No!” Pythia shouted as she consulted her map. “Amadi has to be beaten. Now. It’s the only way.”

“He can’t be,” Goldenblood objected.

“He has to be. If he isn’t, it won’t matter when the Maiden returns. Everyone she needs will be dead. He has to be stopped now,” she

said as she looked up at the cloaked zebra. “Are you her? Please be her!”

“If this must be done, then I suppose I am,” the zebra said quietly. “Get the roof clear.”

“No!” Lancer said as he limped over, hugging his rifle to his chest. “I need to see this finished. Please.”

“The healing potions aren’t working anymore,” Adama said, leaning on Lancer and struggling to breathe. “We must go.”

“I must see this to the end. I must!” he protested.

“Yeah. He needs to stay,” Pythia said. “And that yellow pegasus, too. Hopefully the other two get here before it’s too late.” She looked over at Majina, who sat forlornly next to her. The younger filly continued staring at the still form of her mother sprawled awkwardly where it had caught on a cable. “She should stay with me, too.”

“The stars showed you that?” Goldenblood asked.

“No, the fact she hurts did. Not everything is frigging stars,” Pythia answered as she put a hoof around the filly.

Velvet Remedy turned to the purple alicorn. “Flash evacuation. Everyone except me, her, the fillies, him, and that yellow pegasus. That... ” She froze as she seemed to take in Whisper for a moment. Then she shook her head hard. “I mean... Come back for us when they’re all clear, and I mean everyone.” She gestured to the Brood.

“You’re trying to save the Brood?” Pythia objected. “They’re just meat puppets!” Velvet sent a stern glare down at her, and the filly relented. “Okay. Fine. Save the puppets. Whatever makes your stars shine.” Then she gasped, “But leave me till the end, too! I want to see this. It’s gonna be good!”

Purples and greens began teleporting in and teleporting away with clusters of zebras and Brood, clearing the roof. Velvet and Majina kept trying to extract Goldenblood from the cables lashing him to the roof. Meanwhile, the cloaked zebra walked towards where the Legate and Whisper battled. The pegasus had been grounded during the course of the fight. Her wing was bent at a painful angle where she’d been shot earlier, and her hindleg now bled freely again. Still, she stayed on the offensive, doggedly refusing to back down.

The Legate turned to the advancing zebra. “Oh joy. Another,” he said flatly. “You know this is futile, right?”

“So you say,” the mare replied evenly.

“I’m immortal, invulnerable, and invincible. No matter how skilled

you think you are, you'll tire and fail, just like this one," he said with a gesture at Whisper.

"Shut up," Whisper countered. "You're the failure. You haven't killed me yet. And I'm still going to kill you."

The Legate sighed as the breeze snapped at the zebra's cloak. "Well then, let's get it over with. I'm sure it'll be bracing before I win," he said sarcastically, and then frowned. "Who are you, anyway?"

The hood was pulled back, and Xenith shook out her long mane. The scarred zebra mare leveled her green eyes at the Legate and said softly, "No one."

"Heh," the Legate said as he stretched and cracked his neck. "Finally, an honest opponent."

In a flash, he was on her, his leg swinging around in a kick identical to the one that had slain Sekashi. Her forelegs lifted, and she blocked the blow with her own forehooves, her body trembling with the force for a moment and then going still. The Legate stood there, precariously balanced on one hindhoof while she held his other hindleg. "Heh," she replied softly, and then flung her own body around and slammed his into the rooftop. She didn't stop, however, continuing the roll over him, getting her feet under herself, and slamming him again like a rag doll.

Xenith continued the onslaught like a force of nature. She made no battlecries nor did she give him a chance to set himself up for a counterattack. As fast as his body tried to repair the damage, she simply inflicted it faster. She whirled and smashed him into the ground, twisted his spine like a rag, and beat him like a drum. Never once did she release him. She simply kept breaking him over and over again.

However, he wasn't dying. He was laughing.

Xenith paused for a moment. Just a moment.

The Legate struck; as his body restored itself, he was twisted like a spring, and all the pent up energy released at once. His body untwisted almost like a propeller, smashing Xenith's skull a half dozen times as he unwound and knocked her away. His body pulled itself back together as Xenith braced herself and refocused. "Was that Fallen Caesar? It was, wasn't it?" he said, grinning like an eager colt. "I thought that style was lost. It actually hurt!"

Xenith didn't reply. She launched herself at him, landed halfway, twisted, and blasted him in the face with both hindlegs. He continued back, planting his forelegs as they landed and flipping

one of his own hindlegs up at her. The limb impacted with hers hard enough to make her grimace in pain. He continued the backflip and returned to his hooves facing her.

"And you're using Archimedes's Lever technique," Xenith replied levelly. "Control and conservation of force, returning it at your attacker. That is a lost style."

Now he looked impressed. "Are you Achu? Tell me you're Achu!" he said with a grin. "Ah, if only I weren't about to end the world. I'd take you as one of my wives in an instant. I have quite a few openings in my harem."

"No. I've had a bad husband, but at least he didn't talk as much as you," she answered evenly.

"Pity." And again he was on her, whirling and kicking and reversing and striking, his movement nearly a blur. Xenith blocked and counter struck, yet nothing stuck. The moment he was away, his injuries disappeared while hers remained. Again and again, they clashed and withdrew and clashed again. One time she tore his foreleg completely off, and she showed frustration for the first time as he pulled his body back together again. For him, though, the exhilaration seemed to be almost pleasurable.

Meanwhile, the rumbling grew more cacophonous. Plumes of dust blasted up out of the depths as a shrieking, scraping noise filled the valley like the screams of the damned.

"How can she beat him?" Lancer breathed as he cradled his gun. "I've never seen fighting like that, but he's still alive!"

"She can't beat him," Pythia said with a smile. "No zebra can."

"Whew. I think I'm almost breaking a sweat," the Legate said to the panting Xenith. "Time to end this, though. I want to thank you for a most enjoyable evening, how--"

Two power hooves smashed his head in, squeezing his brains from his face like pus from a burst pustule. "She's right. You talk too much," Whisper said as she shoved him towards Xenith. The zebra seized him in a hooflock, twisting him so his chest faced Whisper. "You've got a magical heart, right?" she said as his head pulled back together. "Let's see it."

Then she went to work on his torso, beating it like he was a punching bag. Back and forth, back and forth, her hooves worked on him, the power hooves blasting and snapping as she shattered his ribs and began to smash her way into his chest cavity. Xenith gripped him tight, his body spasming and writhing as he struggled

to get free, shouting in pain as gobbits went flying every which way faster than they returned.

"Yes! Yes!" Pythia said with a grin. "No pony can defeat him. No zebra can defeat him!"

"But together... " Velvet breathed.

Whisper gave a final blow, and the last bits of his sternum flew away, revealing the dark lump of rock with the starmetal controller screwed into its side. "Switch!" she shouted, whirling him around as his bits and pieces came flying back in.

Xenith didn't hesitate for an instant. She rammed her forehooves into his chest as Whisper held him tight. His eyes bulged as his flesh sealed fast around her hooves. The look on his face was one of dazed shock as Xenith and Whisper braced themselves. The two gave a nod to each other.

The zebra mare's powerful frame began to twist, her muscles, normally as slim as any zebra's, bulging as she applied all her strength. Whisper strained as she struggled to hold the screaming Legate in place. Then the air was split by a grotesque, wet tearing noise as the stone was ripped from his living chest. His eyes were wide as he stared up at it in her upraised hooves.

"Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!" Pythia shouted at Lancer, beating at him with a hoof. "The control!"

He lifted his gun, sighted in but a moment, and fired a round that sparked off the starmetal box. A second. A third. Then the box went flying off and skidded along the rooftop and over the edge. An inky fluid began to spurt from the holes it had left in the heart. A moment later, a bandaged purple alicorn rose up, holding the box in her magical field. She soared over and landed next to the others, a white mare on her back.

"Nick of time now, right?" Boo asked as she scrambled off Psalm's back. Psalm passed the starmetal control box to Velvet Remedy. Boo carried something. Something long and thin and wrapped in a loose cloth. "Daddy told me all about needing to cut things close and stuff." She carefully removed the object and let the cloth fall. "I brought this icky thing."

The silver sword gleamed in her hooves.

"Yes! Supernova!" Pythia said, then nudged Velvet Remedy. "Quick. Take it!"

Velvet eyed the sword as she would a snake. "I'm not going to take that! I'm a healer!"

“Think of it as a super-oversized scalpel, and that heart is a malignant tumor! Quick!” Indeed, the heart and the Legate seemed to be trying to reunite. Tendrils of flesh from the jagged wound in his chest stretched towards the dripping black rock. The pair strained to keep them apart.

“That’s not the same thing, and you know it!” Velvet objected.

“No one else can risk getting that close with that thing. One wrong slice and you can take your own hooves off with it!” Pythia said loudly. The building gave another lurch, leaning over even more. Psalm levitated Majina and Pythia onto her back.

“I’m not going to kill somepony just because I can. We can lock him up somewhere!” Velvet protested.

“He’s not a normal zebra, Velvet,” Goldenblood croaked. “He’s sick. He is a sickness, lingering for centuries. Killing him would be a kindness to not only his victims, but himself too.”

The heart began to connect, string by string, with his body.

“Besides, he won’t die if you break that heart,” Pythia said with a shrug as the shaking and shrieking increased, the building tilting a little more.

“Excuse me?” Velvet Remedy said with flat skepticism.

“Only the Maiden is able to kill him. Breaking the heart will just get rid of his restoration. He’ll be perfectly mortal after that, and it’ll be in the Maiden’s hooves.” Pythia stared down at the skeptical unicorn. “Honest! Swear on my stripes and the stars in the sky,” the filly added, pressing a hoof to her chest.

“I do not like this city,” Velvet said sourly as she made her way to where the three strained. “Not one little bit.”

The Legate’s eyes followed that silver blade. “No... damn you... meddler... chaos... It wasn’t supposed to be like this!” he gasped as he reached out for the heart. Velvet raised the blade high.

“Do it!” Xenith grunted as the black ooze flowed down her forelegs.

“Finish this shithead,” Whisper agreed.

Velvet carefully aligned the sword so as to not slice through Xenith’s limbs. Lifted it once... twice... three times... then...

“Are you sure this won’t kill him?” she asked plaintively.

Everyone stared back at her, and all except the other purple alicorn and Majina shouted in unison, “Yes! Do it!”

“Look, I’m a pacifist, okay?!” she shouted back.

“Then hurry up and pacify the fuck out of him!” Whisper grunted.

She flushed and brought the blade down in one blow. The black rock immediately cracked, the sword letting out a ringing note as the Legate screamed in agony. She struck a second time, the cracks spreading, black ichor spraying out of the widening gaps. Tendrils of flesh began to curl around the stony heart, his muscles starting to bulge as the black fluid suddenly ignored gravity and started to flow into the jagged rent in his chest. Finally, the sword dropped one last time.

There was a ring of metal on stone as the heart was yanked back into his chest cavity. Instantly, the wound closed. With a great spasm, he yanked himself free of the injured Whisper's lock, throwing her into Xenith. But he didn't talk now. His eyes bulged and rolled in their sockets as he stared at his straining limbs. He opened his mouth and vomited a slurry of blood and black gore as his body trembled.

"I thought you said it wasn't going to kill him!" Velvet shouted as she backed away.

"It's not," Pythia said with a gleeful smile. "This is much worse. Good job, by the way."

The Legate was bulging, swelling, growing. He fell to all fours, his skin splitting, regrowing, and splitting again. "What's happening to him?!" Whisper asked as she and Xenith backed away towards the others. "I thought you said this would stop his regeneration."

"That heart didn't regenerate him. It restored him. Kept his body locked in one state. Time was effectively stopped for his body," the Starkatteri filly said, grinning wickedly. "Now it's not. Now it's catching up on him. A thousand years of growth and injury and all the pains of the flesh, at once. Plus all the nastiness that comes with having a cursed lump of rock in your chest for a couple millennia." Understanding settled on Whisper's face, and she looked on in silent, cold satisfaction.

The Legate now reminded me of the enormous blue pony I'd once seen named Goliath. Only Goliath hadn't had extra little legs poking out of his normal ones. He hadn't had extra eyes in extra sockets. The Legate's body was growing all at once, with no order or control. His hindlegs slipped over the edge of the roof while his forelegs scrambled to hold on. He opened his mouth wide and screamed out, "Son!" Lancer didn't reply. "Daughter!" Majina hid her face. "Someone... help me!"

"I'm sorry," Velvet Remedy said in horror. Her horn glowed. "That

should help your pain."

The Legate's maw twisted in a horrible grin, and suddenly his foreleg reached out, the little sublegs wiggling and trying to grab anyone they could reach. Velvet cried out, swinging her blade wildly. The weapon seemed to seek out the Legate's flesh, lopping off the legs as she was levitated, with Xenith, onto the alicorn's back. Whisper climbed onto Psalm. "Get my dad!" she shouted as she pointed at Goldenblood. Psalm's magic tugged the wires taut, and the floating sword sliced the wires in two. The ghoul began to lift toward the alicorn.

Then the enormous, bloody hoof of the Legate curled around Goldenblood and stopped him short. "No!" Lancer shouted as he and Boo were picked up by the alicorns. He started to fire into the ankle of that limb as it seemed to grow around the ghoul, but it was as effective as shooting a tree trunk. Psalm flew above Goldenblood as the building listed more and more, tilting over towards the middle of that immense pit.

Goldenblood, though, wasn't struggling. "Go," he said as he smiled up at his daughter. "Tell Blackjack I did better." Even if he didn't think he had.

The M.o.I. hub tumbled over into the pit, leaving the two alicorns hovering over the void that had been the heart of the Core.

The tower didn't fall far.

With the building lying on its side and pinning his legs, the Legate clutched Goldenblood as the tower rose back up in a great cloud of smoke and dust. Higher and higher towards the surface it lifted till it reached the level of the starmetal grate that had supported the city. Now, that metal grate yielded like soft butter to the thing beneath the fallen tower. The two alicorns backed away as the building continued to rise higher and higher on a nest of wires. An avalanche of mud and dust poured down into the vast pit below, water and unliving gore cascading into the depths. The gleam of silver and the glow of green started to peek through the muck sliding off in great sloughs. It was shaped vaguely like a ring, a massive storm of soul motes swirling around.

Then an eye opened.

An eye the size of a Raptor.

The immense mass shifted, and two enormous silver fingers reached over, grabbed the M.o.I. hub, and flicked it away like an offending speck of dirt. The white building arced out of sight as the

immense towers of the Core slowly bent outward, their bases slipping underneath the dripping mass as they spread open like the petals of a horrible steel flower. Their outstretched tips glowed a brilliant green as a cloud of white motes began to swirl faster and faster in the center of the ring. With a great creaking and grinding, that eye lifted. Something like a mouth opened wide.

Goldenblood stared at that maw, that abomination that he had unwittingly served. *I was such a fool. I should have trusted more in Glory. If she could hold on after the space--*

And it let out a scream of Enervation that could be heard around the world.

oooOOOooo

Like a candle in a tornado, Goldenblood's pool disappeared. I floated in that void, thinking of his final thoughts. The remaining pools had grown hard as rock, and I couldn't push into them anymore. Right now, I couldn't care about that. I had only one thought, and a tiny ghost of a smile on my lips.

Morning Glory was alive!

Footnote: Loading...

Chapter 76 - Paying the Price

"Never fear, girls. We have each other!"

Glory is alive.
Glory is alive*!*
Of course she was alive. It was the engineering or the F.A.D.E. shields or whatever! She was alive! She hadn't given up on me back when I'd been stuck in the Core. I hadn't given up on her. I'd find her, and then we'd…something. Either we'd patch things up, or… even if we didn't, I'd set her and Tenebra up for a long life of love and happiness! It'd take a little effort: a glass of wine. Maybe some romantic music. Maybe I should spike the wine with some whiskey, just to make sure it'd get done! Then she'd be alive and happy, and I'd be alive and happy, and then she could hold me while I broke down and let everything that had happened on the moon out.
And…
And why was everything shaking so much?
The connection was broken by the intense rattling of the rocket. The windows were awash with flame, and I felt a pressure crushing me to my seat. "What's going on?" I yelled in panic, looking around for Scotch Tape, my head difficult to turn.
"We're reentering! That's what!" she said from where she'd wedged herself between the pilots' couches, struggling to lift her hooves as she manipulated the computer keeping us all alive. She was only able to squeeze in because of her small size, and it still looked painful, her head resting awkwardly on a part of the computer.
"We're aerobraking!" I just gaped at this strange earth pony talk coming out of her mouth. She rolled her eyes. "We're hitting the air of Equus to help slow us down!"
"Air?" I goggled at her. Really, just being sent to the moon by magic was so much easier!
"We're travelling at speeds with more numbers than any sane being

should be travelling," Scotch Tape shouted, barely audible over the roaring, rattling, and banging. "I don't know how it's holding together! We're going to be back on the ground in a few minutes. Though in how many pieces... " she trailed off as she started to tap the terminal again, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"What are you doing? I thought this thing was supposed to take us back to the space center?!" I asked. An alarm sounded, and I yelped, "What's that?" I was pretty sure that panic in my voice was Princess Luna. *I* could handle smashing into the ground at insane speeds...

"It *was* taking us back to the space center," she said as tapped the controls. "This damned thing was programmed to land the rocket right where it took off from, but now that would have the engines shut down in midair above a radioactive crater!" The rocket gave a particularly strong shake. "Should have thought of that earlier," she chided herself.

"It's okay," I said weakly. "You were…distracted."

"I'm trying to get it to set us down *outside* the crater, but it's not cooperating! And if I deviate *too* much, we'll crash or burn up in the atmosphere!" Something else started beeping at her, and she swore loudly.

I glanced over to see how Bastard was doing. He'd strapped himself in next to a window filled with glowing red-pink flame. He lay on his back, hooves folded behind his head, eyes hidden behind his glasses as he calmly smoked a cigarette. The only hint of stress was a bead of sweat running down his temple. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked Scotch as the rocket bounced and rattled underneath me.

"N– Wait! Can you levitate my hooves and keep me steady? This is hard enough without feeling like I'm on my second Sparkle-Cola binge of the day." I lifted her up, and for the longest minute ever we simply barreled down into the atmosphere. A tiny part of me was at once impressed and slightly irked that this earth pony contraption was accomplishing something that once had taken legendary magic to accomplish. Really, there were just some things gadgetry shouldn't be allowed to do!

Finally, the roaring slackened to the noise of the engines, the shaking became a more steady vibration, and the pressure let up and left me feeling only a little bit heavier than usual. Scotch let out a relieved breath. "Okay. We're through. We're in a stable powered

descent, and I convinced the computer to set us down a safe distance from the crater. We should be there in a minute or so," Scotch Tape said with a smile and nod, patting the device. Then she glanced at me. "You seem happy," she said just a little bit accusingly, her eyes narrowing a touch.

"I saw something that might be good. The Legate got beaten. He's not dead…I think…but they broke loose the control box." I bit my lip. "Oh. And you were right. Glory's alive." I saw her eyes widen and added, "Sorry." If I could, I would have saved them both. Would have brought Rampage with us. Would have done it all right when the fate of the world hadn't hung in the balance.

Her eyes hardened a little, but she smiled. "Sorry for what? I'm glad she's okay." Her jaw clenched and worked silently as she focused on extricating herself from between the pilots' couches. "You don't have to apologize just because Daddy... Dad died. It's okay." From her even, low tone, I doubted that. She segued immediately. "They got the Brood control interface away from the Legate?"

I faked a smile. "If we're lucky, that might turn the Brood off for good."

"Oh. Good," she said. Then she frowned and trotted over to a window with a green glow on the other side. "What's that?"

The rocket flew over the Core…or what was left of it. The dozens and dozens of towers now jutted out at all angles like an enormous bird's nest of black stone, silver girders, and blood-red meat. In the heart of it lay the Eater of Souls, a toroidal shape half-invisible in the eye-twisting baleful green aura and sea of swirling, inward-spiraling stars surrounding it. A great island of terrible light in the dark of the night.

And it was screaming.

"I don't feel so good," Scotch Tape said as she fell back from the window, clutching her stomach. Blood immediately started to drip from her nostrils as she coughed and sputtered. Bastard also let out a grunt, shaking as the Enervation washed over all three of us. Scotch Tape gagged, her green hide taking on a sickly, blotchy tone that I knew heralded a bloody death.

I immediately pulled out the bottle of moonstone dust that I'd collected on the moon and shook some of the powder into Scotch Tape's mane. Immediately, she stilled, breathing deeply and wiping the blood from her muzzle. Bastard got some next and gave a stiff

nod of gratitude. “The Enervation’s back,” I muttered as I looked at that green glow. “Can’t say I missed it.”

“Why now?” Bastard asked with a frown, his sallow hide now speckled with growing bruises from his own brush with the deadly field.

“The Legate needed Celestia One. Everypony melting in the Core wouldn’t have been enough. He needed the Twilight Society to see thousands of ponies being torn to pieces by nightmarish monsters to get them to fire. If Whisper hadn’t sung and rallied the refugees, it would have been thousands. Now that the Eater’s up, it doesn’t have to suppress its Enervation anymore. That’s going to be rough on everypony, especially the wounded,” I said grimly.

“Well,” Scotch said, glancing at a readout. “We’ll be landing--”

And the rocket exploded.

Well, not exactly *exploded*. I was an *expert* on things exploding around me. There was a flash of brilliant green light through the middle of the cabin, and then with a wash of heat and noise the inside of the rocket was a lot more outside. The cabin had been sliced through diagonally, the beam just barely missing Scotch, who was now clinging desperately to what remained of the pilot’s couch she’d been standing by as she and Bastard fell away to the side with the top of the rocket. Next to me, my blank body was picked up by the howling wind and borne towards the edge. With my newly unobstructed view, I saw emerald anti-dragon beams sweeping up at us from the ruined towers of the Core.

I frantically unstrapped myself and, with a beat of my wings, threw myself towards the hole where the rest of the cabin had been, snagging my blank from the air as I passed. I dove over the edge, the intricate clockwork inside my shoulders whirling as I pushed myself towards the starting-to-tumble section of ship, now below me as the rocket’s still-running engines continued to slow it. More green beams lanced out from the towers, almost hitting the nose and me and grazing the rocket.

I reached the nose, popped open the fingers on my other forehoof, and, with a combination of that and my wings, worked my way into what had been the interior. I swung my blank body around so Scotch could grab on to it, then moved over to where Bastard was already unstrapping himself. As I grabbed him a green beam swept through where Scotch had been. My breath caught in my throat for a moment before I saw her with my blank body on the other side,

having kicked clear into open air at the last second.

Holding on tight to Bastard, I gave a powerful flap, and then, finally, we were all holding on to each other. Without me needing to say anything, Bastard spread his legs out wide to slow his descent, Scotch copying him. I wondered if he had experience plummeting towards certain death.

But we were still being shot at. I only just had time to shove away from them before another beam passed through where we'd just been. I flipped to the side to avoid a second beam, then snapped my wings open to let the air carry me above a third. Then I folded them to dive after my falling friends and…ugh…Damn it. Just because I had the wings, I didn't have to be a pegasus!

I teleported underneath Bastard, my blank, and Scotch Tape, slowing them with my magic. "I am really getting tired of this!" Bastard bellowed at me.

"You've only been dealing with it for a day, you baby," I replied, my mane crawling as I imagined one of those beam projectors zeroing in on me. I couldn't fly them down fast enough. Couldn't teleport them with me…sweet Sister wasn't that getting old…"Pull your limbs in and hold on!" I said as I concentrated.

"What? To what?!" Bastard yelled at me. Scotch followed my instructions, though, and a moment later, so did he, the two of them clutching each other and my blank, now streamlined and held up by my spread wings.

Then I dropped them.

Not far. About two hundred feet. Then I teleported down, caught them, slowed them, and repeated the process. Every time I did, the powerful beam weapons blasted at me, hissing with magical malice. Several times I had to teleport early and toss my friends to the side, away from a beam cutting through the air where they would have been. After what seemed like far, far too long a time, though, I'd caught them one last time, and when I let them go, it was because they'd hit the ground. With only a little thump.

Scotch Tape immediately kissed the earth. "Thank you! I've never been happier to taste dirt!" Bastard drew a bent cigarette, put it in his lips, and started to light it when the thing snapped in two, dangling by a fiber. From the glare he sent me over the top of his sunglasses as I landed myself and folded my wings, clearly this was my fault.

I didn't care. I gazed up, only a little, at the rocket shining in the

moonlight. It was trailing smoke and looked like it was going pretty fast and tilted too far over, but I could still hear the engines. For a moment, I thought that it would be able to land even in its damaged state. Then it passed out of sight behind a low hill, and a second later the distant roar of the engines was replaced by a tremendous, drawn-out crash, then silence. At least it hadn't exploded…But it looked like any plan to just fly back for Rampage after the Eater was taken care of was going to be a little bit trickier. Well, by magic or earth pony gadgetry, I *would* get her down from there. Maybe the zebras had moon rockets too? They had missiles, after all.

Bastard flicked the broken cigarette away, shook out a new one, and watched as it fell apart. "It shouldn't be this fucking hard to have a smoke," he muttered, checking the others in the battered pack and salvaging a single mangled twig of a smoke before tossing the container aside. "Where the hell are we?" he muttered as he lit up.

"Scrapyard," Scotch answered, scrubbing at her ears with a hoof, her mane a wild blue tangle atop her head. "Those piles of scrap metal everywhere are a dead giveaway."

I checked my PipBuck map. Scrapyard wasn't that far from the Collegiate. If Glory was anywhere, that's where she'd be. I turned on my broadcaster, checked the channels, and then took a moment to admire the way its design seemed to flow elegantly into the clockwork mechanics of my hoof. When we had a chance, I simply had to ask Snails or somepony what the heck was going on with this alicorn soul thing. This was just too cool and weird, and I really wished I had time to figure it all out. Was that a mainspring? Then I opened up a channel to–

Instantly, all three of us fell to the ground, screaming. The peal from my PipBuck made my head throb like it was about to explode, my vision filling with red. I smacked it against the ground repeatedly, and thankfully both the screech and the agony cut off. We all lay there for a moment, breathing hard as the throbbing pressure in our skulls abated a little.

Bastard summed it up perfectly as he lay on his back, pressing his hooves against his temples: "I hate this place. I fucking hate this fucking place. Give me Fillydelphian slavers. Give me pony-eating monsters in Trottingham. The bosses of Dise. Give me the taint plagues of Applelanta! Just get me the fuck out of here."

"It's not that bad," I said as I tried to push myself upright, failed, and relaxed on the nice, dirty ground. "Once you accept almost everything here wants to kill you, it's actually quite charming." I turned to Scotch Tape. "What happened?"

"I think there was some kind of magical feedback. Your broadcaster amplified it," she said as she struggled to catch her breath. "Like... whatsitcalled? The place the Lightbringer went."

"Canterlot?" I groaned, finally sitting up. "That doesn't make any sense…unless Pink Cloud and the Eater's Enervation are somehow connected. Or there's starmetal in broadcasters. Or–" I froze as I stared down the barrel of a gun. The gun was attached to a cyberzebra who was staring down at me. "Shit," I muttered.

This Brood appeared no different from any others I'd seen, and yet there was one fundamental difference: his bar wasn't red. "Am I supposed to kill you now?" the zebra muttered thickly, as if he wasn't used to using his voice.

"Uh. No?" I answered. Bastard silently drew his guns, keeping them hidden under his coat. I motioned a hoof towards him, hoping he'd hold his fire as I slowly moved my face away from the Brood's gun. He did, and the cyberzebra didn't even track me, just kept aiming at where I'd been. "Why do you want to?"

"I can't hear it anymore," the zebra said with a small frown. "Something's wrong. I know I'm supposed to kill you, but I don't know when. It's not answering me." He backed away and sat down. "I'll just wait here. Can you tell me when I'm supposed to kill you?" There was almost a plaintive note in his voice.

"... yeah. Sure," I answered as we lifted ourselves to our hooves. "We're... just going to go. We'll come back when it's time for you to kill us." I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disturbed by the expression of gratitude the Brood wore.

We moved a little bit away. "You have a really bad habit of not killing people pointing guns at your head, you know that?" Bastard said sourly, eying the forlorn Brood. "What if that thing decides now's the time?"

I shook my head. "I don't think he can. Lancer broke off the control hooked to the Legate. I think that's what he was talking about hearing." Then I blinked and added, jabbing a hoof at him. "And didn't *you* have a gun pointed at my head?"

"Doesn't mean it's not a bad habit," he retorted, scanning the junk piles. "I'm seeing a lot of red," he muttered with a frown, checking

his own PipBuck. “I doubt all these Brood are as messed up as that one.”

“Hey. Relax,” I said with a little smile as I put my blank body between my wings where I could carry it securely. “I was seeing things on the way back. The Brood were being dealt with, no problem. It might have been a nasty fight, but really, they’re not as terrifying as Storm Chaser made them out to be.” I stepped around a junk pile, smiling back at the other two. “I bet things were just…” Scotch Tape stared past me, her hooves clasped over her mouth as her eyes bulged. I turned, my flippant words choking my throat.

Bodies.

So many bodies.

They hadn’t been there long enough to bloat up, but the blood had thickened and darkened to a deep maroon color. Stallions. Mares. Foals. There were a few Brood corpses, too, here and there amid the pony bodies strewn among the heaps of junk. Those bodies appeared like soft wax, twisting as they reverted back to the chaotic Flux I’d seen before.

I’d seen losses when I was watching the fighting. Big ones, in terms of numbers, importance to the war effort, and just how well I knew them. They hadn’t been in vain, though, as much as I hated that they’d happened; where I’d seen fighting and loss, I’d also seen victory. Now it hit me, hard, that the ponies I’d seen fighting were, for the most part, much tougher than the average Wastelander. I should have realized... should have thought that if even they were taking losses…The Brood had cut these poor people down like so much wheat before the reaper’s scythe. “No,” I muttered as I stared at so many bodies. So many! It was just like Littlehorn…walking among the still piles after the pegasi had blown the Pink Cloud away. So many…too many…

Hard to imagine that, just a few minutes ago, I’d been happier than I had been in days.

“Is anypony alive?” I shouted out, heedless of the risk. There were a few blue bars on my E.F.S. Far fewer than the number of reds, but it seemed like the hostile Brood had moved west. They couldn’t all be malfunctioning Brood, could they? “Somepony? Anybody!” My shouts in the still air echoed back at me.

I was rewarded by a little cough. I ran towards it, my blank body flopping limply atop me. Bastard and Scotch Tape had to hop to avoid the Brood bodies that were turning into sludgy Flux. I could

appreciate their caution. I'd already fired Folly. Who knew that that was doing to my kids? I shoved that in an overflowing box marked 'Thoughts to Avoid'. Overhead, an emerald line swept out across the countryside, drawing a line of explosions in the distance. Add that to the box as well... I tried to avoid a line of sight to the Core if I could help it. Last thing I needed was a dragon-killing beam in the face.

Despite the fact I was not nor would ever be the most graceful pony, I managed to avoid stepping on any of the scattered corpses as I homed in on the blue bar I thought I'd heard the cough from. There, beneath two dead ghouls, something struggled. I carefully lifted them and stared down at a young pink earth pony mare Scotch's age with a blood-smeared mane and braces attached to little wheels on her hind legs. She opened one pink eye and stared up at me. "Luna?" she asked faintly.

"Not exactly," I replied. "Where are you hit, Boing?" I asked, taking her pallid complexion and sweaty brow as a sign of injury aggravated by Enervation. She winced as her eyes moved down towards her side. There was a hole in the leather belt holding the bracing frame to her barrel. It'd been cinched tightly, and that pressure was likely the only thing keeping her from bleeding out. Not that it would save her from Enervation worsening the wound. I'd seen what that could do too often to think otherwise. I quickly whipped out my moonstone and sprinkled a little of the magic dust on her coat. She immediately relaxed a little. "Do we have any healing potions?" I asked Scotch and Bastard. The former shook her head while the latter scanned the junkyard for threats. "I swear. One day I'm going to force somepony to teach me how to magically heal if it kills me."

"Blackjack?" Boing slurred in a daze. "You're alive? But you…left us."

"Yeah, but you know the Hoof: you can't escape it forever," I said as I lifted her from the ground. There was no way those wheels would roll over this many bodies, so I kept her levitated. After Bastard had used his healing magic to stop her immediate bleeding, I peered to the northwest. "We need to get to the Collegiate."

"Indeed!" a filly piped up, and what once had been a Brood corpse lying off to the side rose up and shimmered. The foal-sized robot was visible for just one second before a hologram of a filly Apple Bloom appeared over it. "Sorry for spyin'. Wanted to see if you

were Blackjack or ‘mu-hu-ha ha’ Cognidumb.” She chuckled for a few seconds, but none of us shared her mirth. Her laughter trailed off, and she stared at us for a moment, her face frozen, then frowned. “Sorry. I take it you’re all that made it back?”

“Yes,” I replied, tensing at once. Before the robopony could press for details, I asked, “What’s between us and the Collegiate?”

“Oh, about a thousand or so rabid Brood,” Applebot answered. “The good news is they’ve become really disorganized in the last fifteen minutes or so. Some aren’t shooting at all, while others are killing each other. Of course, since the Core rearranged itself to shoot beam weapons at us and the Enervation’s back, things haven’t been as good as one might hope.”

From above us came a thumping electric shriek, and I started, pointing Vigilance up in time to see the white synthetic mare Sweetie Bot standing atop a nearby scrap pile and launching a volley of bright, Core-green bolts from her horn that curved over the hill in the direction of the University, found their marks among the Brood, and detonated in harsh green flashes that extinguished a hoofful of red bars each. A fusillade of bullets answered her as she ducked down behind the peak of the pile. “Wow,” she said brightly, “that makes them really mad!” She paused and stared at all of us, then immediately smiled. “Oh! Welcome back! How was the moon? Did you bring a souvenir?”

I was a touch taken aback by her cheerful demeanor, not to mention her firepower, as I watched a whole slew of red bars moving ever more rapidly. “Thanks. It... could have been better. And unless you count a bottle of moonstone, no.”

Scotch Tape gave Sweetie Bot a slightly uneasy half smile. “Um… nice. Have you always had that artillery in your horn?”

“What can I say,” Sweetie Bot replied with a carefree shrug. “My little Horsie always loved mares of a... higher caliber.”

“... That was terrible,” Scotch replied.

“Indeed,” Sweetie Bot said, annoyed. “My mandatory praise protocol escaped the purge command when Horse set me free.”

After that, I was glad when Brood came surging around the heaps of scrap. Rather than moving nice and orderly as was usual for them, some ran while others walked. Some took cover while others sprayed bullets. A few didn’t even attack at all, like the first one, and simply watched with uncertain expressions. Sadly, those were outnumbered ten to one by the Brood coming to kill us. “Hate!” a

few shouted. “Kill!”

Vigilance barked a few times, the heavy bullets knocking the Brood back, but we were outnumbered at least five to one. Bastard’s silenced ten millimeter guns let out a stream of ‘pfft’s as he precisely blasted the faces of the Brood facing us even as he continued to smoke a cigarette. “I normally charge for this,” he grunted as he ejected one spent magazine and slapped another in with his magic. Scotch Tape picked up a dropped rifle, checked its chamber, and then used a fallen pony to brace herself as she fired at the Brood.

“Oh. Don’t worry about them,” Applebot said with a smile.

I reloaded, slipping into S.A.T.S. and sending a barrage of white moonbeam-like magic bullets into four Brood. “Why?” I asked, wondering if the two smiling robots were malfunctioning.

“Because,” Sweetie Bot said merrily, and the massive heap of scrap she was standing on began to shake. Suddenly, an enormous mechanical thing erupted from the side, crushing at least a dozen Brood in the process, then pulled to a halt to set its wheeled legs firmly on the ground and turn its gatling beam gun and grenade machine gun on the mass of Brood, some of which were now hesitating. Somepony had hastily slapped bright orange paint over its formerly-rainbow hull and Wonderglued an enormous purple wig to its ‘head’. “We found a Scootaloo.”

“RAINBOW DASH IS AWESOME!” the robot boomed in a scratchy mare’s voice at what must have been a hundred decibels, charging forward, firing both weapons to either side, and simply running down the uncomprehending Brood in front of ‘her’. “TWENTY PERCENT COOLER!”

Sweetie Bot screwed up her face. “Technically, a Scootaborg. The Ultra-Sentinel has a nonstandard bottled brain instead of a control talisman. She'd somehow managed to get trapped in the Scootaloo exhibit of a derelict Stable-Tec building, and the original protocols she was implanted with…deteriorated somewhat.” The white mare wore a faintly uneasy smile as she watched the robot laying waste to the Brood before it. “Still, she *seems* happy.”

It was hard to see otherwise as she blasted a swath of destruction that Deus would have been proud of, raining down grenades and beams of flashy death as she raced around the battlefield. “RED RACER IS RADICALEST RACER!” It might not quite be a tank in terms of sheer mayhem, but it was more than sufficient... if a bit

gruesome given the mixed corpses crushed under and dragged behind her.

"We need to get to the Collegiate right away," I said absently. "Touch base with everypony. Figure out…what we're going to do." Glory would know. She was alive and smart, and she'd have a plan. I'd make hash out of it, probably, but between the two of us, we'd win. I had my body back. Had Luna's soul riding shotgun. I could do this!

"Yes, Dr. Triage needs to see you as soon as possible. I must say, it is pleasing that we didn't have to subdue and disassemble you," Sweetie Bot said happily. A little *too* happily for my tastes. I noticed she was peering rather closely at my PipBuck, and I felt a tingle of apprehension in my mane.

"What?" I asked the robot.

"Oh, nothing. Just, you still have EC-1101 in there, don't you?" she asked brightly. I gave a wary little nod, and before I knew it, she'd knelt and taken my hoof between hers. I really didn't want to blast a robot who'd been helping so much, but it took quite a bit of restraint as she stared at my PipBuck in fascination. "I can hear it… It's still intact! Even after everything you've put it through."

"It is?" Applebot asked, moving in next to her. Now I was more embarrassed than wary. The robot looked up at me. "You could use this to take over the Tokomare!"

"I…could?"

The robots nodded. "It's an override and command megaspell, after all. It might be a little dinged up, but with the right connection, you could execute it and make the Tokomare do whatever you wanted!" Applebot said with a grin.

"A little dinged up?" Sweetie Bot said with an indignant little huff. "It's like Horsie's board of directors threw one of their summer retreats in Las Pegasus. The only thing it's missing are the hooker programs hanging out in the foyer!" She nailed me with a dirty scowl. "Really, Blackjack, you should take better care of such sublime digital artistry."

Take control of the Tokomare…That had been Cognitum's plan, after all. I doubted that she anticipated the Core being used to pull the Eater to the surface. "How?" I asked as I stared at my PipBuck.

"Just hook it up to the Tokomare, which will link it to your PipBuck and through your PipBuck to you," Sweetie Bot explained. "It'd be easy with a broadcaster."

"My broadcaster turns my brains to jelly right now," I countered. Scotch looked like she wanted to quip, but I pre-empted her. "My brains are not, nor ever were, jelly to begin with!" I received flatly skeptical stares from everypony except my blank. "Can I do it without a broadcaster?" I asked hotly.

"Sure. Just find one of the I/O ports Horse installed. He's so clever!" Sweetie Bot gushed, then worked her mouth as if something bitter had rested on her tongue. She shook her head and continued, "They probably look like terminals. Then you just have to establish a connection and avoid breaking it at all costs while the program uploads and initializes the link." She tapped her chin. "Horse was an undeniable genius, though. He would definitely have installed some sort of internal defense."

"Or," Scotch Tape offered, "you could just dump EC-1101 into it with no direction at all. That should muck up the works pretty well." She received scandalized looks from both robots.

"Or you could just fling your organic filth all over a beautiful work of art!" Sweetie Bot snorted. "That megaspell may be the finest synthesis of magic and logic ever crafted! It is a precious example of shining brilliance among the overflowing ugliness of this world," she groused, waving a hoof at the surrounding wasteland before turning to stare almost longingly at my PipBuck. "Its perfection is plainly evident, even though I haven't…interfaced with it... yet."

"Fate of the world here," Scotch Tape replied flatly.

"Well– yes– but–" Sweetie Bot sputtered. "There's still principle to consider!"

"Principle?" Scotch Tape asked dully as I continued to ponder what they'd told me.

"Principle to preserve something beautiful. Something unique!" Sweetie Bot said with a hoof to her chest.

"Right. I'll see twice your 'principle' and counter with a 'fate of the frigging world'," Scotch Tape countered flatly.

Glory would know what I should do. I really wished I had P-21 to ask. Even Rampage's crazy advice would be welcome. They could have made the choice clearer. Cognitum had wanted to use the Eater, the Tokomare, to restore Equestria. Unlimited energy. How could I deny that to everypony? But at the same time, there was no doubt that the Eater was evil, corruptive, and insidious. "I'm pretty sure the Tokomare's alive," I interjected. "I saw it move. It screamed."

“Of course,” Sweetie Bot said with a somewhat condescending smile. “It’s sitting on an unstable foundation. As for screaming, the initializing of a magical reactor emits sounds that could be described as screams. Don’t ponify inanimate objects. It’s alien, certainly, but it has never displayed evidence of thought or awareness and certainly doesn’t possess the mechanisms necessary for either of those things. In terms I believe you would use, it is ultimately just a machine.” Scotch Tape gaped at the robot, stretching a hoof at her, then at me, before throwing both over her head and moving over to where Bastard was watching the Ultra-Sentinel fighting the Brood. After all those damned Brood tanks, it was good to see heavy weaponry on our side in action.

Still, what the robots were saying... it was an idea. Take control of the Eater. It would eat Tom, but I could use all that energy to fix things. Besides, Tom had wanted all of us to die. And the cybernetic nightmare we'd seen was just Cognitum's plan; *I* wouldn't have to do that. I could make things the way they were supposed to be. A strong, safe, secure Equestria. I could erase and undo two hundred years of pain and suffering like it had never–

I met the eyes of my blank and stared. Was it just me, or did my copy appear disappointed? The eyes were still vacant. There was no mistaking the thin thread of drool. Still, there was something in the tiny frown she wore, or the slight tilt of her head, as if she was questioning if I was really going down this train of thought. No. There wasn’t a fix. No reset or erase buttons. I couldn’t bring them back. Not anypony. Not P-21. They were gone, and no amount of super powerful alien technology could change that.

I let out a shaky breath. “I need to get to the Collegiate. I need to get there now. I think I need to end this soon.” I stared at the blank and swallowed. “I don’t think being Princess Luna is good for me. I think I’m losing…me.” I turned to the others. “Can all of you get to the Collegiate safely and quickly?”

Scotch Tape nodded. “I think so. Thanks to Bastard and that moon dust, Boing should be okay.” She eyed the still stunned filly, who continued to stare at me in worry and awe.

“Okay,” I said, then paused, meeting the eyes of the pink filly. “I know I did wrong to you. I know you can’t accept my apology, but I will try to do the right thing.” Now Boing frowned more but still didn’t speak. I turned away and motioned for Sweetie Bot to come closer. When we were apart from the others, I asked in a low voice,

“Is it true? Did Glory survive the balefire bomb at the Luna Space Center?”

The robot blinked at me a moment, then immediately smiled. “Oh yes! Ghouls and alicorns were dispatched immediately after the bomb went off to find if you’d died horribly or not. They found Glory with some other ghouls and got everyone back to the Collegiate right away. She’s just fine.”

Fine. Glory was alive and fine! “Well, good. That’s…that’s good.” I pulled away from her.

“Indeed!” the robot said brightly. “She’s unquestionably alive and intact.”

That was all I needed. I cast my teleportation spell for the Collegiate–

–and nearly had my head cut off by a great big flipping sword! I ducked as the bumper of a skywagon, battered flat and given a wicked, jagged edge whistled overhead. In barely a moment, the earth pony mare biting down on the end looped it around and brought it back in a diagonal slash. “Hold still, you Brood bitch!” the wielder shouted, quite a feat considering she had the hilt of the enormous weapon in her mouth! I started to teleport away, when the blue mare slammed her body into mine and knocked me to the ground.

The mare twisted her head, the weapon dropping like a guillotine upon me. “No!” another mare shouted, body slamming the swordspony so the jagged edge bit into the ground next to my head. “That’s Security, Blue Steel!” the earth pony shouted, gesturing down at me. Then she blinked. “At least, I think it is…Blackjack?”

“I’m really tired of today,” I said as I lay there, staring at the stars. Was it me, or had a new, bright blue mote been added since last I'd looked? I turned to Bluebelle, the earth pony Highlander. “What are you doing here?”

“Didn’t you tell us we had to help out?” Bluebelle asked back. “Be a part of the Hoof?” The beefy blue mare with the sword just snorted and trotted over to a barricade, heedless of the bullets pinging into her armor, which appeared to be sheets of plate metal hammered around her torso. “That’s my big sis. She ain’t neighborly, like me.” Bluebelle offered me a hoof and helped pull me up. “All our kin are underground, but Big Momma led our fighters here. Those alicorns popped us here, and we’ve been helping with the fight.” I finally had a chance to see what was going

on.

The University had become the final line. For the first time in two centuries, the place seemed as crowded as a university should be. Ponies were everywhere, most of them wounded and sickly. There were shooters atop the roofs, firing down at the attackers outside. Batponies. Zebras. Gangers. Scholars. In his effort to exterminate all of us, the Legate had caused the entire Hoof to unite in a desperate bid for survival. Whether it was zebras brewing up herbal remedies, Burners tossing firebombs to pegasi and batponies, Flashers strafing with beam weapons, or ponies getting what ammo remained to the fighters, nopony was fighting with each other.

Things might be desperate, but right here, right now, there was no Wasteland.

The sky exploded in a flash of baleful green as one of the anti-dragon beams blasted at the settlement. The searing beam of disintegration impacted against a shimmery white shield that flashed up a moment before impact. Sparks arced out in all directions as ponies cried out and shielded their eyes, but in moments the beam died, and the shield disappeared. I gaped at Bluebelle, and she said with a small smile, “One of those F.A.D.E. shield thingies. Arena’s got one too.” Then her smile disappeared. “Uh oh…”

“What?” I asked with a matching frown, but I soon realized the cause of her distress. I’d once seen a pony big enough to pull a train. This mare wasn’t *that* gigantic, but she definitely came in second. She could have stared down Big Macintosh, her fetlocks and mane were particularly shaggy, and she wore armor composed of tractor tires and plates of metal chained to her massive frame. She carried a thick chain about her neck with an engine block attached to it. “Oh.”

“You!” she bellowed as she stomped right up to me. “You’re that Security, eh?” She lowered her head to look me in the eye. “Where’s that no good stripe-lickin’ husband o’ mine? You tell me which rock he’s hiding under righ’ nao!”

I just wanted to see Glory. Why wasn’t she on the battlefield with the rest of the pegasi? “I’m sorry…um…Big Momma?”

“Big? Are you callin’ me fat?” she roared inches from my face, making my wavy mane stand stiffly back from my scalp as if glued in place by her rank breath. “Jus’ cause some o’ us mares don’t have skanky skinny bodies you can twist inna prezel don’t mean we’re

fat! I'm big boned! And don't you forget it!"

"No! 'Big' as in 'in charge'! Not fat!" Bluebelle said in a rush. She leaned towards me and murmured, "Momma's been sensitive about her weight ever since Big Daddy ran off with a no good striped tramp."

"Aye! And I wanna know where he is, righ' nao! And don't give me no talk about him being dead!" Big Momma roared.

Okay, now I was getting annoyed by this over-amplified peasant. "Madam, I don't–"

There was a flash as a unicorn covered with explosives appeared adjacent to all three of us. Before I could enter S.A.T.S., Big Momma smoothly reached out with one hoof, hugged the startled unicorn to her body, and crushed her like a horned bag of twigs. She dropped the body, mashing it with three almost perfunctory stomps of her hoof, never taking her eyes off me. There was a muffled explosion under her hoof as something detonated, and she didn't even blink.

My annoyance vanished instantly. "I don't know what to say, but he is dead. I saw it happen."

Now Big Momma's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I thought you was on a rocket."

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, then pointed at my horn. "Magic." She didn't move an inch. "I saw it! He drank something that turned him into light, and then he kicked a tank to death! Then he just…disintegrated!"

Big Momma snorted, speckling me with goobers. "Disintegratin'. Likely story! More like turned him invisible so he could run off with his striped floozies! Gonna run off to some tropical beach with them striped sluts! Again! Martial arts my blue behind! Well, I'm not buyin' it!" She lifted her head and bellowed, "You hear me? I'm gonna find ya and show you why nothin' beats a good earth pony mare, 'less it is that earth pony mare!" She turned and stalked off towards the fighting, swinging the engine block on its chain and annihilating anything striped that came anywhere near her reach.

"Um…" was all I could say as I watched her go.

"Yeah. Momma's got some Clydesdale in her. I feel right sorry for Daddy when she catches up with him," Bluebelle replied. She pulled a rag out and passed it to me, and I wiped away the foulness she'd speckled me with.

"He really is dead. I saw it," I said with a worried little frown.

She gave a shrug. "Maybe. But he's faked his death before. Minced,

blown up, incinerated... one time we showed up late to a fight and all anyone would say was that he'd been hit by some sort of alien ray. Left behind a life-size statue made entirely out of Sugar Apple Bombs. Damn thing was *delicious*." I gaped at her silently, and she grinned and pushed on, "So yeah, all I'm saying is, if there ain't no corpse, you probably shouldn't be getting your hopes up."

"He... faked his death?" I struggled to say.

She nodded with smile. "Any time he wanted to get away from Big Momma, actually. She always takes him back. Gotta wear earplugs when that happens, though. They make the earth move when they're ruttin'."

I spent a moment trying to... it had to be like humping a cave... Argh, nevermind that. "Look, I need to find Glory. And General Storm Chaser. And Velvet Remedy. But first Glory." She blinked at me a moment, and I added, feeling a little frazzled, "Gray pegasus who came with me! Survivor taken from the Luna Space Center!"

Bluebelle just shrugged. "No idea. We're busy fightin'. Reckon she'd be in the hospital or somethin'." Then Bluebelle leaned over, peering past me. "And…um…you have another problem."

My mane crawled as I felt it. "How many?" I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper.

"All of 'em," she answered.

I turned and saw she was right. Everypony in the University's quad stared right at me, murmuring. In every eye was something different. Awe. Anger. Fear. Desire. Even sadness. The one thing they all had in common was that they expected something of me, some nameless thing that only I could provide, but neither of us knew what it could be. My mouth instantly dried as I absently wiped away a huge gob of snot hanging from my ear. I knew I should stand proudly before them, like Sister had, but all I wanted to do was run and hide. When they slept, I'd find ways to help them all one by one. Nopony would be hurt. Nopony would be banished to the moon…

Unfortunately, I seemed to have been robbed of my ability to speak. Bluebelle took the rag, spat on it, and wiped away some lingering blemish on my cheek. "Well, good luck. I'd rather take on the cybernetic hordes."

"Take me with you," I whimpered as she left. Then I lifted my head as proudly as I could. I'd walk just like I had all those months ago at Brimstone's Fall. Dignity. I walked forward, and despite the

crowding, they made way for me to pass. As I did, so many reached out to touch me in passing, not obscenely, but as if to make sure I was real.

"Princess," I heard so many say over and over again. "She's back. She's going to save us."

I would. However I could. I would. I wanted to say as much, only one fear silenced me.

Could I?

Inside, it was a little better, with smaller halls and more ponies concerned with the injured than with me. So many injured…The doctors had run out of beds and resorted to placing the wounded on tables, then stacking the tables on top of each other, with sometimes two or three patients to a table. Most had boiled rags for bandages. Unicorns worked alongside zebras to help the wounded however they could, but at this point the best they could do was pass out glasses of watered-down whiskey.

"So, it's true," an acrid voice said behind me. I turned to see a familiar gray and blond unicorn. Triage had never appeared so battered before. She wore a bandage around her head, and her horn had blackened with the telltale signs of magical burnout. The coat she wore was a patina of brown, red, and maroon. Thank goodness, though, for somepony who wasn't staring at me any differently than she had before I'd left! "Glory's condition–"

Suddenly, the hall filled with screaming as ponies started calling for Triage. She clenched her eyes and teeth, the cigarette in the corner of her mouth trembling. "It's fine," I said quickly, "just tell me where I can find her!"

She stared at me for a moment, then looked back over her shoulder at where two nurses were trying to keep a stallion's guts inside him. Was it just me, or were there tears in her eyes? "Fucking Enervation." She grabbed a passing green unicorn orderly. "You! D.A. V.A."

"P.A.," the unicorn said dryly, in a strange accent. "Short for–"

"Whatever. Take her," she snapped, jabbing a hoof at me, "to room 301. Top floor. End of the hall. Answer all her questions." She looked at me with something new in her eyes: worry. "I'll catch up soon as I have him packed." Then she rushed away towards the stallion.

P.A. didn't seem fazed by me or by the chaos going on around us. "This way. The elevator is out of order," he said in a dull tone. I

wasn't sure if there was something wrong with him, or if it was just…all this. He caught my glance and gave a little sigh. "Sorry. It's been a long day. I miss elevators."

I glanced at his battered PipBuck and guessed stable pony. "Tell me about it. I woke up this morning a unicorn, and now look at me," I said with a small smile he didn't mirror.

"Mazel Tov," he said as we trotted past the second floor. There was less screaming on this level and more soft whimpering and sobbing. We continued on to the third floor. "So, I'm guessing you want to know about the patient's condition?"

"Yes. Is she okay?" I asked with a small and now worried smile.

"She suffered in excess of thirty Grays. She has acute radiation syndrome. Nausea and vomiting. Acute diarrhea. Severe headache and fever. Impaired CNS function. Fatigue. Shock."

Okay. I'd been there before. "But you're giving her Rad-X and RadAway, right?"

"We've purged the radiation from her body," he said neutrally.

A growing sense of unease filled me as we stepped onto the third floor. Everything was silent on this floor, except for the soft sound of weeping. "But she's going to be okay?" I darted in front of him. "You ran her through your magic healy machine, right?"

We started to walk. He moved as if in a daze. "The patient was given two rounds of intensive medical intervention upon arrival, and a third an hour later. Experimental proposals were rejected in light of so many casualties needing intensive medical intervention."

We passed a room, and I spotted Velvet Remedy, Calamity, a battered and dinged up cyberpegasus, and a stallion I recognized from the meeting as Lensflare clustered around Windsheer, weeping openly. "Why?" Calamity blubbered as Velvet held him from behind. "Why?"

"He got the link set up for line of sight," the cyberpony, Silver, I think she was, said. "Soon as it comes, she'll be able to help us herself."

"No. It's just…why'd he have to die? T'aint right. Pride or Gutshot goin' out…I could accept that. Why can't the good ones live?" Calamity said as he turned, crumpled to sit on his haunches, and pressed his cheek to her chest.

"He died like he wanted to. As a Wonderbolt," his lover said in a shocked murmur.

Velvet spotted me through the door, her eyes widening a moment

in surprise, before her lips curled in a sad smile as she shook her head a little. Had she ever lost somepony like this as well? Did she have family? I didn't really know. As we walked on, I asked P.A., "You couldn't save him?"

"Magic's not all-powerful. Sometimes a body's just suffered too much injury and abuse to be saved," he said plainly as he walked along.

"But…you saved Glory? Right?" I asked. Down at the end of the hall I could see her family clustered together. "You put her in the magic healy machine three damned times! You saved her…" I froze, and then whispered, "Didn't you?" He didn't respond. The lifeless eyes. The dead expression…

I left him, breaking into a run down the hall. Time seemed to slow, the sobbing fading away to muffled, underwater noises. The faster I tried to run, the slower I seemed to move. Everything in sight had a particular clarity to it. Like the white pegasus mare Morningstar hugging the golden branch to her chest as she wept openly. The hollow expression on Moondancer's face as she held the weeping dove-gray pegasus fillies Lambent and Lucent. The dead look on Dusk's face as she hugged an Enclave helmet to her chest, eyes staring past me. I rushed past them all to the door and pushed it open.

Beep…

No. No no no no…

Beep…

The dingy little room was barely large enough for the bed, which was far too large for the shriveled occupant that lay on it. Everything was bandaged. Everything. Only the purple strands of mane scattered around the pillow gave any identity to the occupant. An IV stand in the corner held a bottle of purple fluid in which a few crystals of moonstone floated and a second, smaller bottle that held a clear fluid, again with moonstones.

Sky Striker, her father, sat beside her. His physical wounds had healed, but he appeared scarred down to his very soul. His plum hide possessed an almost zebra-like appearance with the lines carved in his sides. On the other side of the bed sat a particularly ragged, exhausted Rover who clutched a number of rolls of old, thick paper to his chest. He snapped his head up, sniffing at me a moment, and then rose to his feet. "Sorry. Sorry. Dogs is sorry," he muttered as he pushed past me and slipped out into the hall.

I took Rover's seat across from Sky Striker. "She knew you were coming," he said. He didn't raise his eyes, his gaze fixed on his daughter. "Knew you were alive. That you'd be back." His jaw worked as he shook. "Can you help her? Do some kind of Princess magic stuff?" Rancor made the words hiss.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," I whispered. Maybe Luna might. Luna probably had that knowledge, but I didn't have Luna's knowledge, just her soul.

"Figures…" he growled, lifting his eyes at last to glare at me with seething anger. "Goddesses. Magic. What the hell is it worth if it can't save my girl?" he demanded, surging to his hooves. "You're supposed to be her friend! Her love! That's what you were supposed to be! You left her behind!" he roared at me from across the bed. "You left my baby to die!"

"Shhhh, Daddy," the bandaged form croaked, talking as if she was speaking from a million miles away. "No. I told you. You promised."

"I'm not blowing her sky-damned head off!" Sky Striker bellowed at me. "Skies above, how I want to right now! Left my guns outside, just to make sure," he hissed as he glared at me in malice. "'Security saves ponies.' Look! Look at what you've done to her!" he shouted, sweeping his arms wide. "You did this to her!" he shouted, tears spilling down his plum cheeks.

I only felt numb inside. I couldn't answer. Not when he was right. "I'm sorry," I muttered, saying what I always said when I had nothing to say. "The Legate–"

"Oh, sure. He might have fired the missile, but who was it that had her there to begin with? You! She was almost rid of you. She should have been rid of you! Everywhere you go, you ruin and destroy lives. You're a walking epicenter of death and carnage! How many ponies are you going to kill in the process of trying to save us all?" he barked at me.

Something broke inside me, exploding out in a fiery wall of rage and angst. "Enough, peasant!" I screamed back, and with all my telekinetic force, I slammed him against the wall. "How dare you speak to me like that! I have done and endured more than you could possibly imagine!" I roared at him.

The door slammed open, and Dusk and Moonshadow rushed in, seeing me pinning their father to the wall. "Drop him," Dusk said, her whole body tensed. "Now!"

What was I doing? Had I really just called him a peasant? Really? I let him drop and backed away into the corner of the hospital room. Sky Striker landed, trembling, glaring at me. “Meeting you was the worst possible thing that happened to our family,” he muttered before limping over to Dusk, his head bowed, tears forcing themselves down his cheeks as he grimaced and struggled to stay strong. The hollow-eyed mare and Moonshadow escorted him out.

Then we were alone, the room quiet save for the beeping and the labored breathing. “Shh…is okay,” Glory muttered. No. No it wasn’t. This was not okay. Whatever word was the exact opposite of okay…was this.

For fifteen beeps, all I could do was sniff. After thirty, I reached out a hoof and touched her leg, withdrawing it when she groaned. Fifteen more, and I touched her bandaged cheek. No groan.

The door opened, and in walked Triage. “Today makes me pine for my fucking residency,” she said sourly as she closed the door. On her back she carried a tray of syringes loaded with a strange white fluid. “Alright. Time to violate my oath,” she said as she carefully took one of the hypodermics in her hooves. She paused and smirked at me. “Did you really just call somepony a peasant?”

“It just... slipped out... ” I said lamely, disarmed by the awkwardness as she prepared the needle. “Wait! What are you doing?” I demanded, and she paused and glared at me flatly. “Is that going to help?”

“It’s going to help her talk more coherently, as per her request,” she squeezed out the air of the needle with her lips and then carefully stuck it into the IV intake. “It’s... a zebra... concoction… we’ve been using... with her... ” she said around the handle as she manipulated it with her mouth to inject it into the fluid-filled hose. “It’s supposed to stimulate her. Fucking voodoo medicine, but at this point they’re saving more lives than I am.”

“Why haven’t you helped her?” I asked as she returned the syringe to the tray.

The expression she wore matched Sky Striker’s, and then she smiled as she narrowed her eyes for a fight. Just then, though, the door banged open. “Triage!” shouted the unicorn stallion who’d escorted me up here. “Come quick! I think she’s going to kill her!”

Triage’s eyebrow twitched. “Fill in some of those pronouns so I can know if I should care. I’m dealing with Blackjack at the moment.”

“The general and Velvet Remedy,” he answered as I gaped from

one to the other.

"Well, that's more interesting than some possible combinations," Triage answered passing the tray to him. "I'll be right back, Blackjack. That stuff takes two or three minutes to work," she said as she trotted out.

"But wait!" I shouted after her, but they were already out the door. "You have to... you have to help her... "

Again we were left alone. Then Glory started to moan, and I hovered over her in alarm. "It's okay," she murmured before I could teleport away and force Triage back at gunpoint. "It just... really hurts... right now," she continued, her voice growing more coherent. "Go ahead and say it," she said, and was it just me, or did the bandaged corner of her lip curl?

I bit my lip, choked, and finally whispered, "I failed."

That was it. That was the truth of it. "No, you didn't," she murmured after a moment.

"Yes, I did!" I said, tears burning in my eyes as I struggled to speak. "I failed to stop Cognitum when it counted! I failed to save P-21 so he could be a father! I failed to kill Rampage like she wanted. Failed to save Lacunae from going away. I failed to save so many ponies! So many ponies are dead because I didn't stop the damned launch. Because I didn't do more or be smarter. I failed to make anything better! I haven't helped anypony! I can't save anypony!" I gushed. "I can't save you! I have an alicorn soul inside me, and I still can't think of some way to just…just…make all this not be happening!"

"Hush," she said, and so I did. "I'm the only one allowed to hurt you, remember? So stop beating yourself up, Blackjack." She took a few deep breaths as the machine beeped on. "I'm sorry P-21 died. I'm sorry you had to leave Rampage behind. I wish I could do more to help than just lie here, dying." She struggled to keep speaking, and I remained silent as she continued, her sentences broken and strained with pain. "I wanted to help like you did. Doing those things to help others. But helping hurts, especially if the help is needed. It hurts to need help, knowing that without it, you aren't going to make it. Everything hurts. But that's life."

"Life should be more than just suffering," I hissed, bitterly, and she gasped and shuddered. "What's going on!" I asked in alarm, and the beeping rapidly increased as she writhed a little, red patches blooming on her bandages. "I'll get Triage!"

"No!" Glory said loudly, making me freeze. "Don't... bother... her... nothing... she... can... do... " Each word was a gasp of pain. Eventually, she relaxed, and the beeping receded. "The potion is countering the painkillers," she muttered hoarsely.

"Sorry," I replied in utter futility.

"It's okay…I'm glad to talk with you, one more time." She lay there, breathing for a moment. "Life's not just suffering. There's joy, too," she whispered. "I was happier than I'd ever been, travelling with you. You made me happier. If it hadn't been for you, I would have died under that floor, alone and too terrified to dare escape. But with you, I made a difference. And that is what you do, Blackjack. You matter. You make other ponies matter. There's nothing more precious than to matter to another person."

"You shouldn't be like this," I stammered. "They should have healed you! They should have done something."

"*They* did," Triage said behind me, my hackles rising at once. I turned my head, watching her casually enter. "Those two... fuck... " she said as she shook her head, then went on, "Didn't P.A. tell you we put her in the pod three times?" She closed the door behind her. "That's two more times than I gave anypony else."

"How am I doing?" Glory whispered.

"You tell me," she answered.

"Pretty lousy. I'm disoriented, with a fever around…I'm guessing… forty?" Glory murmured. "Good thing Blackjack missed the whole vomiting and diarrhea stage, huh?"

"Yeah. And the whole necrosis of the epidermis. Abrading the burns. She'd have been just like your old man, screaming about saving you. Like, duh, what do they think we're doing?" Triage said as she tapped the bottles. "How's the moon dust?"

"Surprisingly addictive. I think I'm hooked," Glory said, her lip curling. "Oh dear. You should add 'possible drug addiction' to my file."

"I'll put it under the severe damage to your peripheral nervous system, your ataxia, and your seizures," Triage replied, not reaching for the chart. Then she slumped down in the seat Sky Striker had vacated.

"There must be something you can do," I muttered, horrified at their levity.

Triage glared at me sourly. "Oh, yippee. Let's have this argument yet again, shall we? No. There isn't anything I can do that I haven't

done already. I was able to stabilize her, but she'd soaked up about triple the lethal dose of radiation by the time she got here. All the RadAway we pumped into her didn't do anything for the damage the radiation had already caused."

"A stasis pod…" I muttered, thinking about Sky Striker.

"The ones in the Fluttershy Medical Center are gone. The one left in the megastable was converted into a torture device." She leaned back and sighed. "If the Twilight Society could help, they're not saying, and besides, soon as the Enervation came back, all the alicorns screamed and bolted, save one. So there's no way to do a long distance teleport, even if there were someplace that could help." She slumped in the chair. "And if you're counting on ghoulification, sorry. We don't know why some ponies become ghouls and others don't. And if you think I'm going to try and induce ghoulification, you can go fuck yourself."

"A healing talisman," I suggested.

"Done! Took one out of a Brood and put it in after Glory's first jaunt through the pod," Triage said brightly. "Problem is that a healing talisman restores a pony to a set 'Healthy' medical state, otherwise it'd run constantly, 'healing' healthy tissue and probably causing cancer. And I don't have that state recorded for Glory. The talisman kept her from kicking off, but it can only heal so much, and she's under huge strain as it is. Her immune system is gone. If we weren't giving her moonstone for pain management before the Enervation hit, she would have died soon as it came back." The doctor waved a hoof absently. "Her body's too extensively damaged for cybernetics even if we had the time and materials, which we don't; we'd have to stick her brain in a robot at least and likely have to transfer her mind into a computer completely. I won't do that again," she stated firmly, glaring into my eyes with the message it wasn't open for debate. Then she went on, "And as for a blank Glory, like Morningstar wanted, that would require us cloning her limb by limb with that golden twig, sewing it all together, moving her mind or brain, and then having some necropony move her soul around. And apparently Snips was the one who did the cutting, by the way."

"So why didn't you try?" I asked, angrily.

"Because I've got five hundred other patients to juggle around one healing machine that's way past its warranty. That's why," Triage said, roused by her anger and jabbing her hoof at me. "And if you

don't fucking like it, tough! It's my job, and I've already wasted tons of resources just keeping her alive this long! So go ahead and say I'm killing her or letting her die or whatever else you need to say. People die, and I'm just an ER doc way over her damned head here!" For the first time, the mask slipped, and there were tears in her eyes as well. She had to be just as frustrated as I was. How many others had demanded this of her? 'Save my loved one, please!'

I wanted to be bitter and selfish, but I knew exactly what she felt. "... I'm sorry, Triage," I said at last, hollowly. "Thank you for your help."

"No problem," she answered tiredly. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't doing anything…dangerous. Also, when you have a chance, come to the third floor nurse's station. I think the general and Velvet Remedy are going to kill each other over that damned control box. Just so you know," Triage said with a half smile before checking the IVs. "I wish I had some antibiotics and whole blood, but I guess it wouldn't buy much more time."

"How long?" Glory murmured.

She checked the beeping machine. "You've got bradycardia. Blood pressure's down. Blood oxygen level's down. Yeah. Not long." Glory suddenly started jerking and trembling in the bed, and I reached out to hold her as she shuddered in my embrace. "Yeah, that's not going to help either." Triage just shook her head. "I think that's number nineteen or twenty. Damned nursing staff. Really should keep a better record," she muttered as she rose to her hooves. I resisted the urge to shoot at her as the seizure passed through Glory.

The attack passed in a few seconds. "I need to get going," Triage said. "My horn might be scorched, but I can still sew a suture." She turned to Glory. "What do you want me to tell your family?" Glory didn't answer. She just gasped and trembled in my arms. "Fair enough," Triage muttered, then stepped out, closing the door behind herself.

I held Glory tighter. She cried out in pain, and I immediately pulled away. "No," she whimpered. "Please, don't let me go." I held her, a little more gingerly, afraid of hurting her, but then, I'd always hurt her. Least I could do was give her what she wanted. After a little bit, she stilled, making shallow breaths. "Could you… could you do one of those mindscapes…like you shared with Tom?"

How could she know about that? “Maybe,” I said, then touched my horn to her brow. A mind was like a series of pools. All I needed was a pool that connected me to her, and…

oooOOOooo

“Oh, now this is better,” Glory said as she sat on a cloud next to me. Just me. No wings. No armor. No alicorn soul. Just me. We looked out at the sun as it lay frozen on the horizon. I sat beside her, legs curled around her waist as I pressed my face to her neck and wept. “Shhh…” she said softly as she rubbed my mane with a beautiful gray wing. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay! Stop saying that!” I snapped at her, then immediately regretted it.

“It’s okay to be upset, Blackjack. I’ve been where you are, and I know what you’re feeling. I was lucky enough to be able to bring you back, even if I lost you a little along the way. I know how much it hurts.” She squeezed me tightly about the middle.

“It doesn’t matter. I failed. I failed to stop Horizons from going off. And while I have one way that might save everypony, I’m not sure it will work! I feel like I’m turning into Cognitum, or Luna, or somepony who isn’t me!” I said, then swallowed. “And you’re going to die, and–”

She touched a hoof to my lips. “Shhh. Don’t worry about that. I have something to tell you.” She closed her eyes. “I’ve been thinking about how you can beat the Eater.”

I stared at her. How could she know? “You were there when we were with Tom, weren’t you?” I asked quietly.

“Moonstone does have wonderful pain management properties. It also seems to have quite a few side effects. Ever since I was put on it, I could see you on the moon and on your way back.” She paused and then frowned at me. “By the way, Scotch Tape and Bastard... ” And she smacked me upside the head with her wing.

“Ow! What? What’d I do?” I protested, leaning away from her, but in spite of everything I wore a shaky smile.

“What did you... ooooh... ” She rubbed her brow and then sighed. “Just because something was okay in 99 doesn’t mean it’s okay out here. A grown stallion and a filly–”

“Not a filly,” I interrupted her, and that seemed to surprise her. “Not anymore. She’s a young mare now, and if that’s what she

wanted to do, then so be it." I relaxed a little too. "Besides, having done it, I don't think she's going to try the Blackjack recovery method again soon."

Glory just sighed and nuzzled my neck. "We only have this moment together, and I'm criticizing you." She sniffed wetly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. I wish things could have been different between us. I wish I could have found some way to make it work." She sniffed again. "I lied about not loving you. I knew you'd be better off with him. Happier…I thought that if I just stepped aside, things would be better." She sniffed and shook her head. "I messed everything up."

"It's not your fault," I assured her. "It was me. I'm the one who messed–" She pressed her wing to my lips, gazing up at me, her purple eyes awash with tears.

"Let others take some of the blame, for once," she said as she sniffed once more, and she smiled as water ran along her cheeks. "If I'd been more mature... more patient... more understanding... "

"Shhhh," I said, and kissed her to cut off the babble of self-recrimination. "I love you, Glory. I always will. Let's not spend this time stuck on the parts that didn't work."

She pulled away to gaze into my eyes, and leaned in, giving me the most wonderful sensation I'd experienced my whole life as our lips met. Fire and silk and wonderful joy and bitter regret all clashed in that moment. I'd have kissed her forever, just like that, if I could. And when we broke away, it was simply so we could look in each other's eyes.

If only... and because this was a dream, 'if only' rolled out before us like a fog bank. There were P-21 and I, and there were our children. It was kind of hard to tell if they were boys or girls, but one was an earth pony and the other a unicorn. And there was an older Scotch Tape, watching them, teaching them how to make a BB gun with a switchblade spring, and taking them out to shoot at radroaches with Boo. P-21 and I went to see an older, slightly worn Glory and Tenebra, the former in a lab jacket doing something to make the Wasteland better, the latter holding her with a contented expression like I imagined I wore now. Rampage trotted in with Glory's sisters riding on her back while Lacunae stood off, watching it all with a wistful smile.

It was good. A good life. No more... no less... than any of us deserved.

But some ponies didn't get that, and the image faded to lingering

mist. Neither one of us spoke as I struggled to burn that now absent image into my mind forever.

"That's…" Glory said with a smile, wiping away the tears with the back of her fetlock. "That was nice... Thank you," she murmured. Then she sighed, sniffed, and stared at me with more than the image of a family together in her eyes. "But I need to talk to you. I have a way you can beat the Eater."

I leaned towards her, meeting her gaze with my own. She had a plan. Of course she did. Glory flushed a little and turned out to the clouds covering the valley. "I had the idea after I saw the vision Tom gave us." Punching through the cloud layer, the shimmery fields stretched out to catch Tom. The image froze at that moment, Tom hovering in the midst of the pale white magic. "It has to do with the F.A.D.E. shields. The Eater plans to use them to keep Tom at bay long enough to devour him."

"But if we drop the shields, Horizons finishes as it was designed to. Everypony dies," I countered with a little frown.

"Yes, but what if we only took down half the shields?" Glory asked with a smug smile.

"Huh?" I blinked. "And that won't just... kill half of us?"

The air between her outstretched hooves shimmered, and a glowing white shape coalesced. It was a thick ring with hundreds of pairs of little rib-like branches sprouting from its inner and outer edges, the inner ones curving clockwise, the outer counterclockwise, and both sets curling up and back down to form two coplanar and coaxial toruses, little knobs and bobs scattered here and there on the main structure at, as far as I could tell, random. "This is the Tokomare."

"How?" I gaped at it.

"Rover. He's had the blueprints on the wall of this workroom for two centuries," Glory said as she smiled at the white shape. "The rest of it I got from the vision. There's quite a bit of guesswork too, but I think I have the most important parts. The geometry of the F.A.D.E. shields." The ring shrunk, and the nest of buildings appeared around it. With this close view, I could see that dozens of diagonal skyscrapers, conjoined at their bases and pointing out, were supporting the web of wire on which the Eater rested. The six largest supports were actually multiple buildings merged together, and their broken tops glowed bright blue. "The shield generators that defended the city were on the roofs of the skyscrapers in the

center of the Core, designed to form a hexagonal pyramid to... " She caught my hapless, loving smile and flushed. "Well, in this arrangement, they'll form the walls of the chute that will guide Tom straight to the Eater."

She pointed a wing at the Tokomare's thick main ring. Six points on it lit up. "These points are the generators that will form the aperture to hold the stone in place while the Eater feeds." From those six points, smaller, thinner fields radiated out, forming a cup at the base of the chute with a tiny hole in the middle. "You have to disable those six before Tom hits."

"What happens if I do?" I asked as I stared at the diagram.

A tiny Tom flew down the chute as the cup disappeared. It hit the Tokomare, and a fountain of light gushed back up the chute like a shotgun blast. Glory slumped against me, nuzzling my chest. "The main F.A.D.E. shields should funnel the majority of the energy off into space. Not all. I imagine what's left of the Core will be quite molten, if it's not vaporized completely, but the world should be safe."

I stared at the image as it disappeared. The sun was now just a sliver above the horizon. "How am I going to get there? There're anti-dragon beams blasting anything that moves."

She gave a wan smile. "Underground. Rover's group and the cyberdogs seem to have bonded quite well. They mapped out a train route through the red tunnels. They were reinforced enough to survive the shifting of the city. He's getting a railcar ready. You'll come up underneath, right in the middle of the Eater." She closed her eyes. "Charity is already trying to convert our moonstone into shells you can use the destroy the starmetal F.A.D.E. housings."

"Where did she get enough moonstone for that?"

"Goldenblood. Some of his agents stole samples from the Hoofington Museum of Natural History. A plot he put in motion before his execution. There should be enough for half a dozen rounds. Plus what you brought with you to help keep you safe from the Enervation," she said, smiling up at me.

I took a shaky breath as all the images disappeared. "That moonstone... amazing stuff."

"You have a heart of moonstone," Glory said as she pressed her cheek against my chest. "How are your babies?"

I sniffed and gave a little choking noise, even though this was a dream. "They're alive. I need to get them out of me. They're just not

safe with me. I shot Folly. They've been exposed to Flux."

She nodded. "And a reinforced uterus isn't going to be ideal for them much longer. Babies need room to grow." She closed her eyes. "I talked to Triage. She'll do the surrogacy spell. Grace has agreed to be the surrogate mother." I stroked her mane as she glanced up at me. "Hopefully, it will make going against the Eater easier." I honestly had no idea. My rational thinking was rapidly breaking down.

Glory seemed to be aware of this too as the sun slipped below the mountains, the clouds taking on rich red and purple hues. Her voice was soft as a feather brush. "You have to take out the internal F.A.D.E. shields before they go up. Once a F.A.D.E. shield is active, it sucks energy from whatever is hitting it and uses it to sustain the magic. They're greedy power drains, though... "

"Glory... " I murmured.

"There's so much to do. So much that has to go right," she said as she struggled to lift herself, and couldn't. I stroked her mane, much as I remembered her stroking mine a lifetime ago back on the ocean. "My family... Dusk... Father…Moonshadow... the twins... the Thunderhead survivors... the Core... You... " She lifted her face to mine, tears coursing down her chin.

I kissed her tears away, my own flowing down my cheeks. "Shhh. I'll take care of it. Then we'll be together," I murmured as I held her tight.

But she stiffened in my embrace and pulled away. Her eyes shimmered in pain as she brushed my mane out of mine and said in a thick voice. "You have to live." I swallowed, not trusting my voice as I held her tightly again, making little mewling noises in the back of my throat. "You have to go into this fight wanting to live, Blackjack."

I struggled to answer, my throat seizing up as I rubbed her mane, my tears dripping on her neck. "I don't know if I can," I gasped between snotty sniffs as the light and colors dwindled away. "Life... it just seems so... worthless!" I clutched her as if my life depended upon it. "How can I live when everyone I love has been taken from me? Over and over. Again and again. It's just too damn much!"

"Shhhh," she said, her cheek against my chest. "It'll be okay. Life can be hard, and painful, and lonely... but it can also be... wonderful…if given the chance... " she said, her voice becoming more and more indistinct as the light passed away. "Live, Blackjack.

Live... and make it better... ”

The last shreds of light vanished from the sky, till nothing remained. Nothing at all.

oooOOOooo

I held her tightly in my embrace, even though she was gone. My magic killed the alarm sounding from the bedside equipment. Still I held her limp, bandaged form. It didn’t quiver in pain. Her pain was over. She was gone. I don’t know how long it was before I could finally release her. I kissed her bandaged brow and whispered softly, “I love you.” Only then could I bear to pull away from her. Glory was... don’t think about it...

Don’t think. Don’t feel. Do what you have to do. Dignity. Poise. Be a Princess. Cool. Stand upright. Don’t slouch. Don’t weep. Chin up. Lip stiff. Remember what your sister told you: when all others have lost their self-control, you must retain yours.

I stepped from the room, and the floor felt odd. I could see the lips of Sky Striker moving, but no sound came from them. I saw tears, but felt nothing. He lunged for me, but his elder two daughters held him back as I walked by. Their screams and cries echoed disjointedly, as if they were underwater as I walked down the hall. See? I was in control. Don’t think... don’t feel. Do what you have to do. I saw Triage staring at me, her brows knitted together as she gazed over the top of her glasses. Her mouth moving. A question. “Are you okay?”

Okay? Of course I was okay. Don’t think about the wailing. Don’t think about that bandaged body lying in the bed. How her last act had been to try and help me, how desperate she’d been to have her life be something else. How monstrous I’d been to let that relationship fail when she’d needed me so much. “Of course.” She didn’t believe me. She was a smart pony. Like Glory. P-21. Even Rampage, in her own way. “You said something about a problem between Storm Chaser and Velvet Remedy?”

“Yeah,” Triage muttered, not taking her eyes off me, as if she expected me to attack her again. How silly. I had no spoon. “Just down the hall. Make sure she doesn’t kill Velvet. I’m going to need her for the procedure.”

As we walked down the hall, Scotch Tape came scrambling up the stairs to the third floor, a broad smile on her face. “Hey, Blackjack!

Where's Glory? I wanted to let her know that after surviving this, she's not boring anymore!" But I didn't answer. I didn't even stop. "Blackjack?" she asked in confusion, and then she whimpered, "Oh, no. No no no... " She wept, and I glanced to see her curled up on the floor in the middle of the hall.

We walked past ponies who stared and spoke words I could not hear, begged wishes I could not grant. A few doors down was a nurse's station where Storm Chaser and Velvet were having a shouting match, the former with two uncomfortable pegasi flanking her and the latter with Calamity and Homage at her sides. Velvet was levitating the Legate's control box, a chunk of moonstone, and the sword as she yelled. A very nervous-looking Brood flyer watched from the sidelines. Homage noticed me first, and like Triage, her expression became strange. As if she couldn't believe her eyes. A moment later, the other quarrelers noticed me, and as one they grew silent. "Is something amiss?" I asked properly, keeping my head when all others had lost theirs. Sister, you'd be so proud.

Storm Chaser, her heated voice reined in to hissing frustration, pointed a wing at Velvet. "She won't turn over the control system for the Brood. We can shut them all down now, once and for all."

"You mean kill them! I won't let you murder thousands of people with the push of a button!" Velvet countered, her horn blazing. "I'll destroy it before I let you do that!"

"They mean to kill us! They're weapons. They're the enemy!" Storm Chaser shouted.

"We've come across more and more of them that aren't fighting us anymore! They're dazed and confused now that this thing isn't in that monster's chest!" Velvet said, shaking the box as she pointed the sword at the pegasus mare.

"I don't care! If two hundred of them turn out to be the nicest abominations of forbidden technology and messed up magic the Wasteland's ever seen, that leaves at least two thousand more that are left pushing us on all sides! They're regrouping to try and finish us all off!"

"They just need more time! Others will come to if we give them a chance!" Velvet hissed, sweeping the sword. "You just want to kill them, you bloodthirsty monster!" She gestured at the Brood sitting passively beside them. The flyer flinched at the gesture.

First things first. I reached out with my magic and gripped the sword. Velvet blinked, her eyes wide as she stared at the blade and

then at me. Her magic gave a few little tugs, before she released it. "I'm... sorry. I don't know why I got so frustrated." Then her frown returned.

"But that still doesn't mean I'm going to let–" she began at the same time Storm Chaser shouted, "We're expended! Even with the reinforcements we've gotten, we can't last another hour! We need–"

I looked at them. That's all it took... a look that encapsulated all my expectations that they comport themselves like mature mares and not frantic fillies. I took the box and the little knob of moonstone from Velvet, who released them to me with a worried expression on her face. The 'broadcaster' that had been screwed to his heart had been opened up. Inside, everything seemed to be built around what appeared to be a simple starmetal cube slightly larger than a lump of sugar. No instruction manual anywhere I could see. "Can we just tell them to stop fighting?" I asked.

"We don't have that level of control. I don't even know how that thing works," Homage said with a frown. "If we had some days to study it we might be able to do something."

"We don't have days!" Storm Chaser countered. "Those beams have driven off the *Rampage* and *Cyclone*. They're taking cover behind the Canterlot mountains. We're one shield failure from being annihilated and one hour from being overwhelmed."

I turned the box over in the air in front of me, then regarded the zebra augmented with cybernetic wings. "Why did you stop fighting?"

The Brood looked at each person in the nurse's station before dropping his eyes. "I don't know," he said in that rusty, raspy voice. "I just... I didn't want to. I couldn't hear it wanting me to kill. I didn't know what else to do but fight... and then... " The flyer shook his head. "I felt differently. I shouldn't be killing... and I shouldn't have these wings." He appeared pained. "This body is all wrong... but I don't know why."

I reached out with a hoof and raised his chin, staring into his augmented, red eyes. So very much like my own. "What are you? Don't think about it. Just answer. What are you?"

"An earth pony, ma'am," he answered and then lowered his eyes. "A... a mare, I think. I keep worrying about my children, but I know I don't have them." He trembled and closed his eyes. "This body is all wrong. It just... feels wrong... "

I could relate, and reconsidered the box. How had the Legate used

it? It hadn't been wired into his head but into the talisman in his chest. The talisman, I assumed, which contained his soul. "What kind of technology is this damned thing?"

"It's not really 'technology'," a filly quipped. We all froze, and I turned to see Pythia sitting on a crate across the hall from us, consulting her map of the stars as she dangled a crystal above it. She glanced up at us. Scotch Tape sat beside her, forlorn as a kicked puppy. "What? If you're gonna hold a meeting somewhere, you might at least make it a place with a door."

I held up the box. "You know how this works?"

"You're surprised?" she asked with a smug little grin as she folded up the map carefully and tucked it into a worn knapsack, then jumped off the crate and trotted over to us. "I thought you might have a clue, given you're now Luna. Aren't you supposed to have all kinds of evil star and soul knowledge?" The impudent zebra filly smirked up at me. "Hello? Is there any Blackjack left in there?"

"I'm Blackjack," I said with a frown... but why did that sound like a lie?

"Right. Keep telling yourself that," she said as she hopped up and snagged the box from the air. "Mind, body, and soul. Start swapping them around and things get interesting." She turned the box over in her hooves, then peered at the block of starmetal at its center. "Wow. Can't believe he found it. Melchior's Cube." She tapped her hoof against it as she pressed it to her ear.

"The Legate used that thing to give commands to his soldiers?" Storm Chaser asked. "Like a radio or terminal?"

"It doesn't give commands, exactly," Pythia replied, then regarded the hapless Brood stallion. "I think the 'kill kill kill' impulse was the Legate's soul. I think this extends a soul out into the Brood like a projector. Without a connection to a soul, the Brood have no sense of self."

"Souls?" The general sounded anguished in her incredulity.

"Yes. Souls," she said as she pried what was apparently 'Melchior's Cube' out and tossed the box aside carelessly. "There've got to be lots of loose souls in the Hoof now that the Eater is exposed. When one of those souls meets a blank, it finds an empty receptacle, and the soul starts to warp the mind within." Why was everypony suddenly looking at me like that? Pythia went on, ignoring me as she studied the little cube. "The Brood were blanks with combat skills and augmentations implanted, but they had no sense of self.

No identity. The Legate used this to project his identity across them."

"So how do we use it to make them stop trying to kill us?" Storm Chaser asked, clearly uncomfortable with this.

"You need a person with a soul that will overwhelm the Legate's personality," Pythia explained, lifting the cube. "This nasty thing was how my tribe once attempted to rule an empire. Bit us in the ass. Moron didn't learn from history." I tilted my head a little as she licked it and scrunched up her face. "Abadsol's starmetal. I've tasted that tang before."

"What?" I think three ponies asked at once, including me.

"Not all starmetal is from the Eater. It's all nasty stuff, though. Not sure if you noticed, but the word 'Eater' doesn't jibe with 'projection'." She reached out and waved her hoof at the sword. I hesitantly passed it to her. "Ooooh. Dominan's starmetal!" She gave a few swings in her hooves, and I noticed she seemed uncannily skilled with it. "I want to start commanding and killing already." She set it aside and looked up at all of us. "Starmetal comes in different flavors. Some of it simply drives you crazy. Some of it will make you sick. It can slowly suck out your soul. Some of the stuff even whispers if you listen closely enough."

"How do you know this?" Velvet asked. "No offense, sweetie, but–"

"I'm Starkatteri. Creepy zebra soul and star shit is kinda our whole deal," she replied. "And if you call me 'sweetie' again, I'll personally get a dead star to piss on your wedding day." That definitely cut off all inquiry in that direction.

We shared an awkward moment, and then Triage coughed uncomfortably, mercifully breaking the silence that had settled on the room and giving me the opportunity to ask, "So what do we do?"

Velvet Remedy frowned. "We could do nothing and see if other Brood come across souls."

"You could, sure," Pythia said. "Right now I think the Eater is drawing souls from all across the world. This is its moment of rebirth, after all, and those silver rings are probably pumping out more Enervation everywhere. If you listen, you can hear the screams." I did not think about that. If I thought about that, I would scream and never, ever, be able to stop. "Of course, not all souls are equal, nor nice. I'm sure there're plenty of raider souls out there. But yeah, sure, you could do that," she finished with a grin. Then

she held up the cube and asked, “So the question is... know anyone with any experience having their soul linked up to a couple thousand perfect killing machines without going completely insane?”

We all shared a look.

* * *

The next hour passed like a dream. Maybe it was a dream. Perhaps everything was a dream, only if it was, then everything that had happened would be meaningless. The medics had implanted the soul-control in a pony they thought would stop the fighting. It hadn’t worked as well as we’d hoped. Small surprise. I’d had my babies removed and transferred to Grace. As soon as this mess was over, they’d take her to Tenpony to have any lingering Flux nullified. Grace’s only condition was that the whole thing be kept secret and that I yield my regency over the Society when this was all over. I’d agreed, perfunctorily.

Then I found a window to stare out of. Nopony approached me, as I wished. My input wasn't necessary for the final preparations being made. I could barely move at all. Homage said somepony was coming to help. Every minute or so, the Eater blasted the University with another beam.

All I could do was stare at the nest of ruined skyscrapers cradling that sickly green illumination, knowing I had to defeat a monster within before I lost what little was left of me. Or my mind.

Live, Glory had begged.

Life was suffering. Misery. Insanity.

How could I want to live after everything I’d endured?

“Not easy, is it?” Pythia quipped. Once, I would have jumped at her unexpected voice as she leaned against the deep windowsill facing me. “Having a soul inside you that’s not yours?”

I slowly glanced at her. “You too?”

She flushed, then shrugged. “Long story, but yeah. I can relate.” She hopped up, sat down on the windowsill, and leaned back against the wall. “It’s going to kill you, eventually. Not your body. Your identity. You can only have a soul that’s not yours for so long before it just squishes the mind into a new shape. Most people go crazy. I sure did,” she said, gazing out the window as well, her young face darkened by the shadow of an older zebra mare. “I think

this place attracts the old souls. Wants to possess them like a dragon's hoard." She glanced at me and smirked. "And you having *that* soul... well... it's a doozy."

"You know about alicorn souls?" I asked.

"I know about old souls. They spill over, after a while. Start to affect things differently than normal people's. Look at that sword of yours," she said as she gestured to the starmetal sword I'd retained. I frowned, then examined it. The blade once adorned with resplendent unicorns now was decorated in stars and moons in a constellation of the night sky. I gaped at it and then drew Vigilance. The gun's design hadn't changed, but the names etched in the metal were now done in elegant script, and similar constellations were etched along the barrel. I gaped at the weapon, at her, and then back at the weapon. "Buh... wha…no... " Damn it, Luna! Stop touching my things! "How?"

"Your soul spills over beyond your body, changing it." She tapped my chest. "In here, you probably have all the same junk you had before. All the components and gadgets and whatever. The soul alters their... being. Set them apart from you for a while, and they'd probably change back."

I swallowed hard. "Can you give me back my soul?" I whispered.

She frowned and leaned towards me, crossing her hindlegs and resting her chin on her hoof. "Would you take it back if I could? Even if it meant you'd lose?"

I shuddered, looked away toward that horrible nest, and couldn't answer.

After a minute, Pythia shrugged. "For the best. I'm not a necromancer, and it always takes at least two to do what you want. One to sever, the other to anchor. Three is safer." She sighed and pulled back. "Necromancer's a lame gig to begin with. They used to usher souls to the Summerlands, long ago. What I think you'd call the 'everafter'. Then some zebra decided to get creative with them. Damned idiots," she muttered, and shook her head. "No one wants to die." Then she glanced at me and gave a thin, mirthless smile. "Well, almost no one."

"I don't want to die," I said, with all the zeal and conviction of a corpse.

"Right," she said as she rolled forward and landed neatly on her hooves on the floor. "Well, sometimes we don't get what we want. Or what we deserve. If we're lucky, we get what we need, and then

we do the rest ourselves."

I watched her go, gave that horrible nest one last, lingering look, and then walked the other way.

There were the sounds of fighting. Horrible sounds. That soul was taking far too long to assert itself on the Brood. Then again, maybe it had been a flawed pony to begin with. Maybe her pacifism made her too timid to draw the Brood away from the fighting. Maybe the evil of the Legate was simply too dark a stain to be overcome. Maybe we'd all been completely wrong, and everything we were doing was utterly futile and pointless. Maybe the reason just didn't matter anymore.

The barricade had given way, and ponies were trying to find any cover available as Brood now pressed in from two breaches below and the roof above. The Eater now pelted the shield every few seconds in a display that made my head ache.

"No," I said, and a field of moonlight fell like the northern lights between the Brood and the exhausted Wastelanders. I walked forward, Vigilance on my left, Duty and Sacrifice on my right. I advanced, and ponies to either side of me stared in awe as I went to work. I registered other fighters. Psalm, not using a weapon but simply her shield, protected a small knot of ponies, hoof pressed to her bandaged chest and face twisted in anguish. Dazzle sprayed beams of light that seemed golden against the pall of the Core. Tenebra stared at me for a moment with tears in her eyes before returning to battle with her father's sword. I dimly wondered if Glory and Triage had found a treatment for her epilepsy. Dusk and Calamity struck from the skies, skimming the crackling shield, transferring the pain of their loss to those that had inflicted it.

There was no thrill in this battle. No joy. Just the certainty that soon it would be over. That I would be with them. I smiled, but even as I watched Brutus and Hammersmith smashing into the front row…even with Scootaborg, Sweetie Bot, and Applebot forming an immobile trio that refused to break…even as Bastard planted perfect headshots with his twin pistols while enjoying a cigarette... even as Whisper tore through a half dozen Brood... even as Homage sprayed with the rainbow beams of Glory's blaster... it wasn't enough. The battle sounded like a dim roar growing dimmer by the second. I hardly registered the fighting around me. It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

Still so pessimistic, Luna?

I gasped, and my eyes snapped to the west, where beyond the nest of the Eater, a golden moon rose above the mountains. No. Not a moon! The shimmering sphere rose higher and higher into the sky. It was still enmeshed in the remains of a cloud base, and that was being hauled by a half dozen different Raptors. I stared at that beautiful sphere, and tears ran down my face despite the hollowness inside my heart.

Sister, I thought back. Then I turned to Homage, who also stared west in clear relief. "How?" I asked her.

"Windsheer's idea. Since we couldn't cut through the interference, he figured that the S.P.P. hub could control the towers through line of sight." She grinned and blew a kiss to the orb hanging in the western sky. "Nick of time, LittlePip. Nick of time."

Instantly I felt the change in the air. Wetter. Heavier. There were four S.P.P. towers in the valley, and I looked at the nearest one to the south of the Core. White mist was now streaming from the tips of the massive feathers that formed the cap. A warm, wet wind began to blow. "What is she doing?"

"Using the S.P.P. against the Brood that are attacking us," Homage said with a grim smile.

Emerald beams began to flash and flare, blasting the orb with their deadly energy. The green glare clashed with the normally ruby shield, engulfing the hub in spectacular explosions of golden yellow light. The beams sparked and danced over the field, sending sheets of lightning spreading out over the surface like ripples in a pond. A second beam joined the first. And a third. Homage's smile faded a little. "That shield is supposed to be invulnerable, right?" I asked nervously.

"Yes," she murmured as her brows knitted together, "but I don't think they ever tested it like this."

Invulnerable or not, the shields held, and a ring of cloud was thickening and growing around the Core. The valley was feeling a lot more familiar as the band of clouds grew thicker and darker. The beams of the Core suddenly became more frantic and erratic. They swept at the Raptors, which only just managed to dodge. The half dozen vessels clustered together behind the hub and left the beams raking the wrecked superstructure of the base with crackles of emerald lightning.

The wind pouring off the towers seemed to be whipping the clouds into a counterclockwise spin. "What is she trying to do?" I asked as

rain began to speckle down. The band was growing not just thicker but also wider, and whatever it was, the Eater sure didn't seem to like it. Any beam not facing the S.P.P. hub began to target the mushroom-like towers. The sheer size of the structures allowed them to resist immediate annihilation, but scores of their feathery branches exploded in rains of shrapnel, leaving the towers pouring out smoke as well as mist.

Despite the damage, the storm continued to build, thunder beginning to roll through the dark clouds. "I thought the S.P.P. was just supposed to make weather!" Like rain... and not rain... and stuff...

"It does!" Homage shouted over the rising wind and booming thunder. Even the Brood attacking us had halted their advance, now looking up as if the entire concept of weather was alien to them.

"How is weather supposed to be a weapon?" I asked in bafflement.

"Um, hurricanes? Tornadoes?" I gaped at her, and she shouted in exasperation, "Weren't you once struck by lightning or something?!"

"Oh. Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head. "I've had some things happen since then... "

Then three beams converged on the stem of the S.P.P. tower that rose from the granite knob overlooking the nest, not raking but holding on a single point midway up. After a few long moments, the beams continued out the other side, and as they shut off to reveal the stem blasted through, the top of the tower began to lean. The last remaining supports gave as the tremendous boom of the demolition reached us, and when we heard the great crack of the structure failing, the top was already descending free, deceptively slowly and still trailing cloud from its top, back towards the reservoir. A moment later it hit, raising a burst of white water and sending a wave to wash down the fronts of the dams. Homage swore, but, even with that loss, the remaining three towers continued to pour out a deluge of cloud, now crackling and black. I looked from them to the hub to the Core, wondering if it was hopeless after all, but then I felt my hair begin to stand on end.

Weren't you once struck by lightning or something?!

"Get down!" I shouted out. "Everypony get under cover!"

A peculiar bubble of calm, or at least relative calm, formed around the University. Heedless of the danger, though, I flew up to a rooftop and grabbed an old radio aerial, locking my mechanical

fingers around it and watching the sight. Clouds screamed around the spires of the Core, catching on the jagged edges of the towers and being torn into great white streamers. The thickening cloud had grown to the point I could just barely see the base of the enormous sphere resting over the mountains. Green beams fired, converging on another of the S.P.P. towers.

Then the clouds struck back. In one blinding strike from all directions, a thousand bolts of lightning fell as one. The area around us was flooded with explosive noise of such force that they probably heard it in Manehattan, and anypony not already flat on the ground was flattened by the concussion. Some of the brilliant, jagged columns of light struck around me, smiting with uncanny accuracy any Brood still firing and yet forking around our forces and the University buildings themselves. Most lanced in and struck the massive nest of towers, sending electricity crackling down the rearranged girders. The starmetal wires hummed in the wind as the eye of the storm narrowed. Below me, even disciplined defenders, without augmented eyes and ears, cried out in pain. Another blast of lightning fanned out in every direction with its accompanying thunder. And another. The blasts were now seeking out the sources of those emerald beams, clawing at the tower tips like the flashing talons of storm dragons. One green emitter exploded in a shower of sparks. Another. Another!

Then something moved inside the Core. I could not see what. I wasn't sure I wanted to. All I knew was a profound sense of dread as that green light within grew brighter and brighter again. A shadow lifted into the air, pointed towards the west.

Sister! Look out! I thought with every fiber of my being.

The swirling clouds suddenly took on that hideous, glaring green glow as a beam lanced through them. Such was its brilliance that it could be seen through the swirling murk. This huge, diffuse bar of baleful light struck the S.P.P. hub's shield, but there were no sparks this time. No, this time there was only screaming. My sister's screams.

The Eater was trying to devour my sister.

The brilliantly illuminated shield around the hub began to stretch into the shape of an egg. "Get down! Get behind the mountains!" I screamed, my words lost to the howling gale. I opened my PipBuck, got on the MASEBS, and started to scream those two sentences heedless of who could hear me, even as my head felt as if it were

about to explode. Again and again I cried out, watching the sphere as the Eater attempted to pry my sister from the device.

Mercifully, the sphere pulled away and dipped down again, hauled back by the attendant Raptors far too slowly for my tastes, and disappeared behind the mountains. The storm continued; I supposed that, without line of sight, there was no way to turn it off. The tempest went wild, spitting off funnel-like clouds that lashed at the Core and the surrounding countryside alike. Seeming to ignore the devastation around it, that shadow then turned towards me. Was it a hand? A claw? A mouth? I sat there almost curiously, watching it, like a foal smiling down a gun barrel. That terrible green brilliance began to peak again.

And then I was flying, not of my own volition. A pair of immense scaly hands cradled me gently as I was carried into the air by a great winged form. “What are you doing, Blackjack?” Spike roared over the wind as it carried us around the Core. That shadow continued to track us, but the purple dragon with the dashing eye patch stayed ahead of it. “This is starting to become a disturbing habit!”

I didn’t move. Had I really... I had. I had, hadn’t I? I hadn’t even thought of it. I stared down as we flew around the Core. The fight was over. LittlePip had ended it. The only Brood left were Brood who weren’t fighting anymore. The ponies below me were getting to their hooves, and that wasn't the only friendly movement, either. The Arena was a thronging mass of life, and there were other pockets of resistance elsewhere, too. In spite of everything the Legate and the Eater had attempted, we still held on. We survived.

Spike landed on the back side of the hill to Star House. Behind us, I could see the reservoir and on the far side of it the smoking ruins of Elysium. The Wasteland had come for the Society, but I could also see lots of movement there as well. The Wasteland hadn’t won. From the Core came an earsplitting scream of frustration, then silence.

“Wow. I think I’d rather storm Neighvarro all over again than hang out here,” Spike said before frowning down at me. “With all the interference, I figured I’d come down myself and make sure you were all right. Then I spotted you just standing on the roof there.” He set me down with a small frown of worry. “Blackjack?”

I took a few steps. “I don’t know anymore,” I said, not sure if I could be heard over the howling gale.

He poked his head up, over the ridge, then jerked it back down again as a beam cut through the air his head had been occupying. While many of the anti-dragon beams had been taken out by LittlePip, one or two were still managing to sputter out an anemic blast or two. “Okay,” Spike said. “Why don’t you go down to Star House? I’m going to lead its attention off, then tell everyone at the Collegiate where you are and that you’re okay. Okay?”

I didn’t answer aloud. I could barely nod. He watched me in worry, then turned and swooped off over the huge, dark lake. Once he had some speed, he was back up in the clouds, drawing fire. I watched him go, then turned and made my way through the dark and storm towards... home.

* * *

The house hadn’t changed much since the party. There was still such a mess. Leftover food lying strewn from tipped-over bowls. Remains of fruit from the Society that had filled the air with a pungent, sickly sweetness. Half-empty bottles of Sparkle-Cola and whiskey sitting about, flat and tepid. I just had to wait. Just wait. I couldn’t go upstairs. It was as impossible as going to the moon.

I just had to wait with the ghosts.

I sat down at the party table in the centermost seat, empty chairs to either side of me. “Empty chairs... empty tables... ” I murmured at everything spoiled and scattered around me. The phantom faces and shadows of those I had known and loved watched me from beyond as I sat there, awaiting my turn to join them.

I could hear Rampage’s raucous laughter as P-21 threatened her with a grenade while Lacunae watched, scandalized, from the front door. I could hear the music as Priest, Melody, and Lacunae played along with me in concert. I could smell the oily acrid aroma of Glory’s cooking. I could feel her and P-21’s hooves against my skin, no matter how much of my body I’d lost. And as I sat there, more and more ghosts of the past filed in. Midnight and Rivets. Scoodle. Forty foals. The Dealer. Dusty Trails and Tumbleweed. Roses and Thorn. Big Daddy and Gorgon and Deus. A group of mares in slave collars. That was the horrible thing about ghosts: you could always fit in more. Goldenblood, rasping away. Twilight and Rainbow Dash staring on in concern. Sekashi. Stygius. Silver Spoon. Even Lighthooves, Dawn, and Steel Rain could snicker from the balcony.

I had room for other people's ghosts as well. Dusk's Lightning Dancer and Lensflare's and Calamity's Windsheer were in attendance.

I checked my PipBuck. Only two hours to go. Two hours till my life ended. I swept my eyes across the room, at a loss for what to do with the limited time I had left. Food. I should eat something. I could have a last meal before my two hours were up. I levitated over a bowl, filled it with cereal, and took a bite.

Your mother tasted like... apples...

Tears dripped into the bowl as I swallowed that single, horrible bite. My limbs shook as I sat there, quivering as everything inside me finally threatened to explode. P-21. Glory. Rampage. Lacunae. Again and again, my friends rolled through my mind. Impaled. Irradiated. Forsaken. Sacrificed. Not me. I was the last! I was the fucking last!

I threw back my head and screamed, flinging the bowl away. I screamed again, and the ghosts applauded. I screamed and they cheered! This was the price to be paid. Not death. No. Not death. Not release. Not relief. I screamed like I'd never stop screaming. I'd scream forever, past forever, till all the stars died and only the eternal void remained. And I'd scream in that blackness, forever.

Then I was held. Not by ghostly hooves of memory but by the warm, caring hooves of the living. They squeezed me as tightly around the middle as they could as somepony else's tears dropped onto my neck. I slowly turned as the chaos inside me was stilled for one precious, critical moment.

"No, Mama," Boo said, weeping as she held me as tight as she could.

The pain inside me turned to tears, and I wept for them all. Like rain falling on a forest fire of torment, the suffering spilled from me and smothered those flames. For each ghost in that house, even my enemies, I wept. I sobbed and let every last bit of pain and suffering out through those tears. And Boo, a pony who had defied every roll of the dice to escape being one of those ghosts, wept with me. She shared my grief, my loss. A pony who should never have been, yet was, now kept me together. And while a pony can scream until the end of the universe and beyond, nopony could weep forever. Even so, I indulged myself with a good, long cry.

When I finally pulled myself together, Boo sat next to me, a hoof across my shoulders as I blubbered. She was my confessor, and I

told her everything. All my failures. My fears. I didn't know if she fully understood, and even if she didn't, I doubted it really mattered. All that did matter was that somepony shared everything that I felt. That, somehow, made it real. And even if it didn't alleviate the pain, it made it all bearable. That which had been crushing me, I could now carry.

"It's okay, Mama. It's okay," she repeated again and again. Of course, it wasn't, but that didn't matter. 'Okay' was a prayer you repeated again and again in the hopes that it would become true. When I finally wiped my eyes and nose, I felt more myself than I had since leaving the moon.

"No, it's not," I finally admitted. "But I have to make it okay. I have to do that. Not fix. Not restore. Just... okay. I can be content with that."

That was when I noticed something new sitting next to her. A thick block of papers tied together with string, with a long, thin, roundish object wrapped in paper on top. I frowned as I levitated it over and unwrapped the object, spotting writing on the wrapper. A note.

Blackjack,

If you're reading this, I'm either dead or captured. This was the likely outcome for anypony you picked to be in charge in your absence. That it was me, and not a more important pony like Storm Chaser, Big Daddy, or Grace is a benefit to your cause. I left my instructions in advance and will wait for the Legate to take me. If I am still alive, then I fully expect a great amount of embarrassment when you read this.

These papers are a collection of notes that I've made, and updated, regarding the formation of various governments and political systems. They were models that Luna, ultimately, rejected. No matter how difficult things are today, I know that you will prevail. When you do, some system of governance will need to be implemented to avoid the mistakes of the past. Regardless of the ultimate fate of the Eater, the Wasteland persists until civilization is imposed upon it. Grace, Finders Keepers, Triage, Persephone, Big Daddy, and Storm Chaser are all instrumental to this, and I've left notes with each to find these papers here.

Should you feel that my input would be a detriment to the future of Equestria, by all means, consign these notes to the flames. I have faith that there are still good ponies in the world, and while the Lunar Commonwealth may seem a good idea to me, epitomizing common unity and individual freedom, the reality is that no idea is perfect. Not even

mine.

Lastly, I wish to apologize for the undue trouble that I caused. I hope that, with these final acts, I will have done better. I know I cannot redeem myself completely, but, as you said, it is the effort of atonement that matters most. I've placed assets that I feel will be beneficial to you in the care of others. I only hope there is enough to achieve success. I've reports that Glory survived the events at the Luna Space Center. I pray that she recovers and that you might share some happiness together.

Ever a servant, ever a friend,

Goldenblood

PS: This was entrusted to Fluttershy. I suspect she saw what it was and promptly returned it to the sender. I hope it will be of some use to you.

I stared at the letter and then regarded the object it was wrapped around. The black metal case was so familiar. I touched it, and it opened easily for me. Inside, nestled in the black crushed velvet, was a single silver bullet for Folly.

EC-1101. Shields. Folly. Three smart ponies had given me three different options.

Now there was just the question of which one I would take.

Assuming, of course, that I didn't die on the way. Then I frowned and looked at my flank. My cutie mark, stolen by Cognitum, was still there. An ace and a queen of spades. Like the sword and pistol, they'd both been re-etched in a Luna-esque theme: the dark mare herself graced the queen, and the ace was decorated with moons and stars. "Boo, do you think 'victory' is a talent?"

"Like, just winning?" she asked, scrunching up her face. When I nodded, she blew a raspberry. "No. That's dumb. What's the point in that?"

"In blackjack, this is the unbeatable pair. You can't get any higher. It's like... like a royal flush of spades. But I've been beaten before. Badly," I said as I turned back to her. "Does it mean... my enemies can't win? I can be defeated. I can even be killed. But nopony can make me stop." I looked around the house, then drew Vigilance. There, the second name: Tarot. That was some kind of divination thingy, right? What did those cards mean? I hadn't the foggiest.

It didn't matter, though, because it felt right to me. Everything I'd done. Everything that I'd gone through had delivered me to this point. I'd suffered. I'd lost. But now, perhaps, I could do what I was meant to do.

Alone. I wouldn't have anypony else die for me.

“I need to go, Boo,” I said as I gave her a thankful hug. “I never thought I’d say this, but I have to go and save the world.” I smiled when I said that.

“Okay,” Boo answered, and started for the door. “You’ll tell me all about it when you get back, right, Mama?”

That was assuming a lot. “Yeah. Sure,” I said as I followed her. I’d walk to the tunnel. I wasn’t in any hurry to meet my inevitable end. “But you should stay here, Boo. Don’t want to get blasted by a beam, right?”

She blew another raspberry. “Lightning blasted the beam thingies. It’s okay. We can go to the tunnel.” She opened the door. “Come on, Blackjack. I’ll walk with you. You’re safe with me, Mama.”

I hesitated at the threshold, looking back at all the ghosts I carried with me. “This is a nice house,” I said as my eyes skipped over the mess. I left the papers right where they needed to be discovered. Better ponies than me would be able to do something with them. And then I stepped out and closed the door behind me, one final time.

The storm whirled around us, but I felt strangely calm. My earlier despair had suddenly shifted to a slight, inexplicable eagerness, as if my center of mass had just altered. I was apprehensive, yes, for the stakes hadn’t changed in the slightest... but now? Now I was positively keen on getting down there and facing a monster.

Walking down the slope towards Chapel, I looked over the still-smoldering wreck of the village. In spite of the damage wrought by Deus’s battle, dozens and dozens of ponies were milling about the battlefield. Some were scavenging anything worthwhile while others were finding friends and loved ones. The chapel itself, against all odds, still remained standing. It had become an island of sorts around which pooled most of the ponies who lingered outside now that the beams posed no real threat.

Funny, shouldn’t it be raining? All around us, the rain hissed, but it sheeted off a bubble that surrounded Boo and myself. I stopped, then turned. “Psalm,” I said with a tired smile. I’d wanted to avoid this, but the confrontation was inevitable. Still... I wasn’t really Luna. I couldn’t give her want she wanted.

The purple mare stared at me as I stared back. “Goddess,” she whispered. “It’s really you. I saw you during the melee at the Collegiate, but... it’s you.” The purple alicorn wore several fresh bandages around her torso and neck.

“No. I’m still Blackjack. I’m just… different. I have her inside me,” I replied. Was it just me, or was I able to look her in the eye now? “Are Crumpets and Stronghoof okay?” A tiny nod. I gestured to her chest. “Are you doing okay with… everything?”

“Yes,” she replied, touching the bandages. “It doesn’t feel much different than being in Unity, only they’re like vessels needing to be washed out and refilled.” She regarded me and smiled. “Every now and then, one is filled from an outside source, and I lose the connection, but I really don’t mind. It helps knowing that one day they’ll be free. It’s what Lacunae would have wanted.” She sighed wistfully, looking out into the storm. “Others are just… taken from me, winking out like candles in the dark. They have caused great suffering, and the Wasteland does not so easily forgive.”

If I hadn't guessed what she was here for before, there was no mistaking it now. I sighed and closed my eyes. “I forgive you, Psalm.”

“Forgive… me?” She sounded confused.

Now I was baffled as I opened one eye, seeing her frown thoughtfully. I regarded her. “Isn’t that what you were going to ask me? To forgive you for what you did during the war?”

She actually smiled. “No. Not anymore. I… wanted it because I knew it would never come. It let me damn myself. Now, though… I don’t think I need it. Not like I used to.” She seemed so confident. So… so sure. “Although it’s nice to hear, it’s not what I wanted.” She closed her eyes again. “I wanted to say that… *I* forgive *you*.”

I felt as if I’d been speared through my core, and tried to laugh. “Forgive… what? For what?”

“For the war. For not… saving us all back then. And I know the other Marauders would, too,” she said evenly. “And I wanted to forgive you too, Blackjack. For P-21, and Glory, and Rampage. Because I know what it's like to carry all that guilt.”

My breath hissed a moment. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Psalm,” I muttered tensely under my breath. “You have no right to forgive me. I have no right to be forgiven.”

“Nevertheless, I forgive you,” she said calmly, with a disturbing serenity that made me growl. Did she really think all my sins could be forgiven…just like that?

“Do you have a clue what I’ve done? What you… you… you don’t have any right to forgive all the harm I’ve caused. The lives I’ve ruined!” I turned my back on her.

"Yes, I do. I remember what Lacunae experienced with you. For a time, your minds were connected. I know how much you hurt inside." She gently turned me around to face her, gazing into my eyes. "Even if nopony else will... I forgive you."

My heart pounded as I stared at her. "Everything that's happened... there is no forgiveness! I let them die! All of them!" My voice rose as Boo shrank back. "Don't you get it? I did it out of pride! I never gave up EC-1101, and it ruined me! Ruined everything. If I'd thrown it into the ocean or something, they'd all still be alive! And Luna was no better!" I roared at her as she gazed at me with that pitying expression. "Don't you fucking get it? She was after power! She didn't care about Equestria! She wanted her thousand year rule to show everypony she was no different than Celestia! We deserve every last drop of guilt! We should die a million times for all the suffering we've caused!"

"I don't believe that, and I don't think you're being honest or fair right now. Not after what's happened," Psalm responded. "Guilt might have pushed you to do better, but I know it's eating you up inside. You want to pay for what's happened. You hate yourself."

"Of course I hate myself! Sky Striker was right," I snapped at her. "I got Glory killed."

"No, Blackjack. You didn't." She addressed me patiently. "If you'd forced Glory to return to Thunderhead, you'd be dead, and nopony would have stopped Lighthooves or his biological weapon. The civil war would have happened anyway. Glory loved you, and she tried letting you go, but sometimes we can't leave the ponies we care about. Even when we say we don't, we still care. We still love." I opened my mouth, and she interrupted me, "And the same for P-21, Rampage, and Lacunae. None of them would have wanted you to do this to yourself. They all chose to follow you."

"I failed them! Failed everyone! You, especially you, cannot forgive that!" But Psalm reached out and embraced me. "Let me go! I don't have time for this! This pointless... meaningless... gesture... " My throat worked. I could have forced her to release me, but my strength failed. "How? I got so many... so many... killed. How can you forgive me? My friends. My people. I should have been better. More careful. More... something!" I said as I started to sob against her. It was a different kind of weeping than before; grief is not the same as contrition. Absolution was not the same as redemption. I could handle paying the price. Telling me there was no price to be

paid... that was so much harder to accept.

"I don't deserve forgiveness," I muttered against her neck. She sighed and patted my back.

"Neither did I. But sometimes what we need is more important that what we deserve," she replied.

I sighed and pulled away, once again unable to look at her. "I'm sorry. I tried. I really did."

"I know. But you can't be weighed down by regret now," Psalm answered. "You have a job to do. Regret is an indulgence."

The three of us started down the slope. Chapel had been a mess before, but just like last time, it hadn't quite died yet. A few hundred ponies picked through the mess. The Crusaders and Halfhearts who'd remained to defend it watched the others with cool, disdainful eyes. Charity, covered in bandages, kept her clipboard in hoof as she supervised from the stoop of the bullet-ridden church. "Don't you dare let a single one of these scumsuckers take so much as one more bullet without covering it. They all get a two thousand percent cowardice fee!" she snapped at the supervisors.

"Two thousand percent?" I asked as I approached her.

Charity's mouth twisted sourly. "So I'll fudge the numbers later. Right now I'm tired, I'm hurt, and... " Then she paused and really took me in. "Sweet Celestia... " she murmured as she let the clipboard fall to the mud. "You're... you really are... you... wow... " Charity struggled to recover her cool, turning to cough and snap at some stallions poking around the muck. "Two caps for bullets, one for four pieces of brass! I want every round we can reload in case some of those striped bastards survived and still have some fight in them!"

"The Brood are still a problem?" Psalm asked with a frown.

Charity nodded into the church, and I followed her inside. I was amazed at all of the baskets and metal crates everywhere, filled with bullets, brass, and guns. I wasn't sure how to feel about all this in a church, but then, it was the only place out of the rain. Bottlecap and another mare... she looked familiar... aha! Usury! That was it. They were busy organizing the wares. "Not anymore. But it wouldn't surprise me if they got up to something!" she said savagely. "I mean to be ready. They're not taking Chapel without a fight!"

"I think you've fought and won," I said with a little smile.

"Won?" She trotted to the door and pointed out at the immense nest that jutted out over the river. "Till you take care of whatever the hell that is, I haven't won anything." She snorted and then flushed. "Sorry."

I frowned. "Beg pardon?"

"I... ugh! You're a Princess now! Like, wavy mane and everything! I can't deal with you like this." She walked over and got a bucket, then walked back, jumped up, and stuck it on my head. "Okay. Better!" she said as I stood there rigidly; it hadn't been a particularly clean bucket. "Now, Bucketjack... I mean, Blackjack... I'll have you know that I've been doing an extensive audit of your accounts with Chapel. I've calculated out all the fines, fees, interest, annoyance surcharges, various municipal taxes, and assorted favors I've extended to you over the course of our association. The amount probably exceeds the gross domestic product of the entire Wasteland!" I started to lift the bucket off my head, and she glowed up at me. I let it fall again.

"However," she said grandly, "I have calculated that this debt can be repaid with one simple service. You simply have to go to the Core and stop... whatever it is that is doing all this. You do that, and we'll be square."

"Square?" I asked with a little half smile.

"Debt paid in full," Charity said firmly.

I lifted the end of the bucket to look down at her. "Forever?"

She glowered at me, crossing her hooves. "Don't push your luck, Blackjack."

I took the bucket off and set it to the side. "I accept your terms," I said, with full sincerity.

Charity's eyes welled up, and she lunged at me, wrapping her hooves around one of my forelegs and hugging me tightly. I knelt down and hugged back. I knew the power of tears and knew she wouldn't weep forever. I doubted she'd need a fraction of the time I did. After a few minutes, she went from sobs to hiccups and finally scrubbed her eyes. Bottlecap and Usury were both averting their eyes as she recovered. "If you tell anypony I bawled like a foal... "

"I know. The debt will be astronomical," I replied as she furiously wiped her eyes and recomposed herself. Looking at the goods, I gave a sad little smile. "You know, if this last job is going to wipe all my debts clean, I could use some equipment."

She rolled her eyes with a tepid smile of her own. "All the good

stuff's been sent to the tunnel. You can have the pick of it. Whatever you need." She groaned and covered her face. "Oh Goddesses, it's happened. I knew it would sooner or later."

"What?" I asked in worried bafflement.

"I've lived up to my dumb name! Ugh!" She thumped her temples with both hooves. "No! I have to focus. It's a one-time thing. Remember the book. *Fifty Ways to Wind up Filthy Rich.* I can write it off as a tax credit if taxes ever become a thing again! Right! There should be some leeway there." She saw me barely suppressing a smile and went bright pink. "Don't you have a job to do? Honestly! You cut a pony a deal on her debt and she... oooh... " She shoved my chest, trying to push me out the door. "Go!"

I wasn't budging an inch. I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Charity's eyes popped round as I murmured, "Thank you, Charity. You've been a good friend. You've had what I needed, when I needed it, and always made sure I got it. Even if you do get a little crazy with compound interest."

Charity finally deflated. "Nuts. I just figured if I was rich, the Wasteland couldn't get me. If I held on to what was mine, then I'd be okay." She sulked a bit, before she frowned back up at me. "Please, come back, Blackjack. You're super annoying, sometimes... well, always, but I want you around doing the right thing. Okay?"

"I'll do my best," I answered, pulling away. Usury made a gagging noise, but Bottlecap smiled at the filly warmly.

"Take care, Security," Bottlecap said with a wave of her hoof.

"Die in a fire," Usury muttered as I stepped out.

"I heard that!" Charity snapped.

I guessed I couldn't win everypony over. I stepped out with Psalm and Boo. The pair were addressing four unarmed Brood who alternated between shouting and weeping as they talked. At the sight of me, they turned and bolted off into the rain. "Are they... " I asked, unsure just what I was going to end the question with.

"They are conflicted," Psalm said as she watched them flee. "Imagine if all you knew was killing, and all you felt was the joy it brought, and then being given the knowledge that such things were wrong, and the weight of shame and guilt such knowledge brings... " She shook her head and smiled sadly at me. "The Legate will always be a part of them, I fear. Diluting it with myself is the only hope I have to give them any peace." And she touched her bandaged chest with a sigh.

“Blackjack!” Scotch Tape cried out as she splashed through the ruins of Chapel with Bastard close behind her, a soggy cigarette still clenched resolutely in his jaw. “Ugh, what a mess,” she said as she surveyed the scene. Then she glowered up at me, “You left me behind again.”

“To be fair, I got snatched away by a dragon,” I answered.

She huffed and tapped her PipBuck. “Runners reported that if there are any Brood still wanting to fight, the storm is keeping them down. That LittlePip person must have a PipBuck with an insane range to target only the Brood who are attacking. Like to know how she pulled that one off.” She sighed and coughed. “Not that it matters. There’s Enervation spreading all over the valley. In a few hours, it’s probably going to be uninhabitable.” She frowned as she scrolled down. “Also, before contact was cut off, there were reports of Enervation symptoms all over the Wasteland. New Appleloosa. Tenpony. That Junction place.”

I could imagine hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of silver rings set in ‘pest control’ boxes tacked onto ruins siphoning life and souls to the Eater. “So this really is it,” I said as I stared at the nest.

“Yup. You get to save the world. Lucky you,” Bastard said dryly as water dripped off the end of his cigarette. “Don’t fuck it up now.”

There wasn’t much to say as we made our way to the tunnel mouth. This was where all of us had descended into the ground for the first time. Where we’d found the megaspell complex. Where Glory had lost her wing. All because they followed me...

Psalm reached out and covered me with her wing, giving me a little hug and a gentle smile, as if she knew what I was feeling. For all I knew, she could. “What happened to my blank?” I asked Scotch.

“They’re going to keep it safe. It seems chugging a bottle of Flux is going to keep it going for a long time.” She made a face. “That Morningstar pony gave it a whole ‘nother ten liters of the stuff, just to see what would happen.”

I tried not to think about where Morningstar had gotten that much Flux. “Try not to let anypony experiment on me, please.” I’d had enough of that. There seemed to be a tent set up with a number of ponies working around it. I spotted the telltale gleam of white moonstone in the dark. A railcar was being set up at the mouth of the tunnel. Scotch Tape and Bastard immediately veered off to check on it.

As we approached the tent, Triage emerged. “Flying by dragon is for the birds,” she commented as she consulted a clipboard. “Okay! Here’s what we got for you.” She reached over and picked up a pristine twelve gauge pump action shotgun. “One IF-80. You’ll probably want to name it or something. Eight moonstone slugs with a heavy powder charge for the shield housings. They’ll probably take out the generators inside, but if not, you have your sword for those.” The slugs were, appropriately, in white hulls. She gestured to six moonstone pendants and a dozen brilliant purple potions in Sparkle-Cola bottles. “Six anti-Enervation medallions for whoever is going with you. Twelve extra-strength rejuvenation potions, with moonstone fragments to keep them fresh longer, brewed half an hour ago.”

“Going with me?” I asked with a frown. My friends were dead and gone. With the exception of Scotch Tape and Boo, who was left who would want to go on a one way trip with me?

Triage stared like I’d just asked a very stupid question, and gestured inside the tent. “We’ve got a selection of firearms, explosives, energy weapons, and almost anything else you might need, courtesy of the Keepers.” Inside the tent, the elderly yellow stallion regarded me warmly and gave a little bow as he gestured at the cornucopia of mayhem behind him.

“How am I going to know how to get there? The tunnels have to be mangled,” I asked, and then added, “And who’s going with me?”

Again, that look. “Rover provided maps of the red tunnels, which are still mostly operational. Between them, the cyberdogs, Watcher’s spritebots, and Applebot slaving in some Protectaponies as scouts, we’ve been able to map a route that should get you underneath that… ” She paused, then just gestured at the Core.

“You’ve been busy,” I remarked, impressed.

“End of the world and all that. Amazing how people get off their asses when the shit’s hit the fan and the fan turns out to be powered by a balefire bomb. Plus, a lot of this was put into action by Goldenblood hours ago.” She pointed to a terminal under the tent which had a beam rifle strapped to its top in a makeshift frame and pointed up at the mountains, the two wired to spark batteries. “Also, someone wants to talk to you. Just don’t jostle it.”

I frowned at the terminal and then carefully tapped a button. The tip of the beam rifle started to strobe, and then the terminal lit up. The screen flickered a few times, and then a unicorn appeared. A

unicorn I hadn't seen in a long, long time. "Hey," she rasped weakly. "Sorry for being late to the party."

"LittlePip," I murmured, then gave a shaky little smile. "How?"

"Line of sight relay on top of the mountain. Only thing that cuts through the interference," she said with a little wave of her hoof, then coughed. "Hope it stays aligned," she said through the coughing, then sniffed. "My friends are okay?"

"Calamity lost his brother, but other than that, they're okay. They've saved a lot of lives. You saved a lot of lives," I said with a smile. "Thank you."

She gave an embarrassed little smile. "Glad to do it. Going to take forever to get this thing back in place. Also… " She frowned at me. "Luna's electroshocked nipples, Blackjack, do you have any idea how hard it was to not hit you with lightning? What were you thinking, flying up onto a roof and grabbing a metal pole to get a better view?"

Luna's… electroshocked… how did she know? "I don't think I was," I murmured. "I lost Glory."

LittlePip's face showed all of her shock, and then worry. "I'm sorry."

"Well, she wasn't the first. P-21. Rampage. Lacunae… " I said, then grimaced and sniffed.

"I know. I know. Steelhooves… he… " She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "But you have to hold on. See it through to the end. Persevere," LittlePip said in her squeaky little voice. Somepony cleared their throat next to her, and I felt as if lightning had hit me after all. "Go ahead."

"Luna?" Celestia said calmly through the terminal, her digitized face replacing LittlePip's.

"Sister," I sobbed at once. "Are you okay?"

"I… will recover…in time… That abomination is an evil beyond any from the darkest reaches of Tartarus," Celestia said as she gazed at me and smiled through her own tears. "Luna. I am so sorry, Luna. I left you… "

"I made you go, remember? One of us had to survive… for Equestria," I replied.

"But I didn't survive." Celestia closed her eyes, a mask of pain upon her face. "I failed, Luna. I failed Equestria. And I failed you most of all. I made mistakes. Such little… such catastrophically terrible… mistakes. And I forced you to clean them up. Then… I did not

believe in you." She closed her eyes. "I... I have not been a very good sister, Luna."

"So you were a little overbearing. That's the sun for you," I answered. "I forgive you, Sister. No matter what happened to me... to us... to Equestria... I don't blame you for any of it. Ultimately, it was my failing. I have to make it right."

"Oh, Luna. You were always so much stronger than anypony gave you credit for," Celestia answered. "We'll be together again, Sister. We'll make it right."

I shook my head. "I think the time for Princesses is over, Sister. I think... I think we're going to have to trust them to make Equestria right again without us."

"Leave it to the commoners?" Celestia said with a mock-horrified expression. "Perish the thought!" I laughed, despite my tears. "Maybe you're right," Celestia went on. "Maybe our time is over, but I still can't help watching over them for a time more."

"I love you, Tia," I murmured.

"I love you too, Lulu," she replied, kissing her hoof and reaching out as if touching the screen. I couldn't resist. I mirrored the action, and on the tap, the screen faded to static. I guess Triage hadn't been joking about jostling it. Maybe she could fix it. I turned to the medical pony and...

She was gaping in shocked horror at Bastard. Bastard's cigarette had fallen from his slack jaw as he goggled back at Triage. Scotch Tape gave me a baffled look as the pair stared and then, in unison, jabbed a hoof at the other and shouted, "You're supposed to be dead!" In perfect synchronicity, they gestured to themselves. "Me? You're the one who's supposed to be dead!" They froze.

My eyes swept from one to the other. The coats were a little off, but they had similarly-colored eyes... horns... builds... faces... "Uh. Do you two know each other?" I asked dully.

"I... she... " Bastard sputtered, as Triage spat, "I... he... "

Triage recovered first. "This... this murderous reprobate... this gangster... "

"Hey! I paid for–" Bastard snapped.

"Which you never let me forget!" Triage yapped back. "I didn't ask you to–"

"Oh, but you didn't say no to the bits back then, did you?" Bastard interrupted, jabbing his hoof at her.

"I told you I was going to pay you back! I had a kid, remember!"

And she stopped, and Bastard paused as well. “I thought you were dead, you bastard. You’re supposed to be dead. Everyone was dead and gone and behind me. What happened to you? How can you still be alive?”

“Zebras,” he said with a shrug. “You?”

“M.A.S. experiment,” she answered.

“Told you working for the M.A.S. was a bad idea,” he countered.

“You were working for a criminal! You have no right to… ” She stopped, then laughed weakly. “Hell… two hundred years and we’re still fighting,” she muttered.

“You’re two hundred years old?” I gaped at Bastard. Then at Triage. “Both of you?!”

Triage sighed and rolled her eyes. “We really don’t have time to get into it. Roo–”

The gaze over his glasses swore death. “Say it and I go back to being an only child.”

She snorted, rolling her eyes, and amended, “*Bastard* is my brother.”

Mollified a bit, he japed, “You’re a bastard too. Or whatever the female version is.”

“There *is* no female version, numbnuts,” she answered with a flat-eyed glower.

He shrugged, then looked at me. “Fraternal twins. Mom was an earth pony, dad a pegasus who flew the coop.”

“Oh Goddesses, Mom!” She grabbed his shoulders. “Please tell me Mom is still dead!” She surveyed the scene in alarm.

“I think so,” Bastard answered as he did the same for a few seconds. “Though, knowing this place, I could see her as some ghoul, croaking about how we never call, how we’re both failures… ”

“At least she wasn’t trying to pawn you off on some son of one of her friends. ‘He’s a plumber. He’s a good catch. This one’s a lawyer! Can’t get better than that.’ Yeesh.” She shivered. “And she wouldn’t be a ghoul. She’s just too crotchety to let balefire bombs kill her.”

Looked like I wasn’t the only pony with one heck of a story to tell. “I knew there was something special about you,” I said, smirking at him.

“No. No. No. I am not special. I am just a hitpony who slept in way too long,” he snapped, waving his hooves as if trying to ward off some evil spell of mine.

“You’re just a weirdness magnet, Blackjack,” Triage countered. And when I opened my mouth, she added, “Don’t even bother asking. It doesn’t matter, and you don’t need to know the details.”

“Awwww… ” I, Scotch Tape, and Boo said in unison.

“Don’t you have a world to save?” Triage snapped at me. “The others are waiting at the tunnel. Go.” She softened a little. “I’ll tell you later, after I’m good and really drunk. Okay?”

“No, you won’t,” Bastard countered. “Nothing good happens when you blab.” He pointed at the Core. “Don’t you have the world to save or some shit?”

Oh sure. Throw the end of the world at me… “Fine, but what,” I said as I turned to the tunnel. My voice trailed off faintly as I took in the sight before me, “others… ”

All the others.

Standing at the mouth of the tunnel was a mob of ponies. I immediately picked out Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Homage, Xenith, and Pyrelight standing together in the middle. Next to them stood the Reapers. Brutus looking oiled and magnificent. Storm Front, Dazzle, and Hammersmith. Whisper and Tenebra were next, and then a half dozen Zodiacs I barely recognized and wished I knew better. Libra, Scorpio, Aries, Leo, Virgo, and… I think that blue unicorn was the new Gemini?

On the other side of LittlePip’s friends were the Enclave. Twister, Boomer, Dusk, and Sky Striker, all in their power armor, and the cyberpegasus Silver. Then there was Stronghoof, wrapped up in bandages yet still standing strong and sparkly. Crumpets was beside to him with a look of weary determination. Lancer and Adama, Xanthe, Pythia, and Carrion were next, the ghoul griffin having repaired or replaced his armor. Nails, the lone Harbinger. In the back loomed Pain Train the minotaur, Rover, and the hellhound Gnarr. At the end of the row stood Applebot, Sweetie Bot, and Scootaborg.

There were others, too. Ponies I’d never met but who were here because this was the place that needed them. I may have lost my friends, but I was far from on my own. Standing behind me, Psalm extended her weather-blocking spell over the whole assembly, shielding them from the storm. Quite a few seemed glad to be out of the wind and rain.

“I can’t take all of them,” I murmured.

“You’ve got enough room on the car for six or so,” Scotch Tape

replied from my side. “More than that and they’re going to be falling off. You’re going to have to move really fast to avoid the things that are in the tunnels now, so I wouldn’t try to bring in a flock of pegasi either. We only have enough moonstone to protect that many, too.” She looked at the crowd. “Everypony agreed not to argue with your decision.” She trotted over to the middle, Psalm following, then snapped at Bastard, “Hey, get over here! You know you can do it too!”

He stalked over, muttering to himself as he took a seat next to Scotch, wearing the biggest ever ‘do not pick me’ expression on his face. Triage chuckled beside me, and when I glanced at her she replied with a sardonic smirk, “Don’t look at me. There’s no way I’m going down there.”

I stared at her, then at all of them. Just... pick? “I... how can I choose? This... I’m not sure that there’s going to be any coming back from this. I can’t ask you to come with me.”

“Ask? Pfft!” Whisper rolled her eyes. “As if! We should ask *you* to come with *us*!”

“You don’t have to ask us,” Velvet said with a calm smile.

“Ain’t like this is our first rodeo with the future resting on us pullin’ out a win,” Calamity said with a nod, then lowered his head, adding quietly to himself, “Besides, he’d want to be here if he could.”

“My daughter believed in you,” Sky Striker said grimly. “I may not like you. I might actually hate you, but I’ll be damned if I’m going to sit by and let her death be for nothing! I won't lose any more of my family.”

Pythia peered at her map. “Eh. Future’s all wibbly wobbly right now. Save the world. Doom the world... ” She peeked at me and gave an impudent little grin. “If you’re going to kill an eldritch abomination from beyond, I want a front row seat!”

“You don’t understand!” I shouted as I looked from one to the next. “I can’t ask you to pay this price! I can’t have you dying for this! I can’t!” I fell onto my haunches. There was dead silence from the assembly, eyes locked onto me, with expressions ranging from compassion to confusion to disapproval. “Lacunae. Rampage. P-21. Glory... I can’t take losing any more people for this!” I hung my head, wishing Psalm’s field let through the rain to hide my shameful tears.

“You’re a fucking moron, Blackjack!”

I gasped and lifted my head, staring up into the scornful eyes of Whisper. The mare grabbed me by my collar and hauled me to my hooves. “You think this is all about you? You think I or these other assholes don’t have a price to pay?” She swept a wing at the assembly. “Every single person here is willing to pay whatever fucking price it takes to see tomorrow! Some of us have already paid more than you’ll ever know. Some of us have debts that are way, way overdue! Doesn’t matter. You can stay there crying in the mud, if you want. Sit on your ass. We’ll go ourselves and find some way to pull this shit off!” She took a deep breath. “But... and it pains me to admit this... there might be more ass in there than I can kick personally, so I’ll let you come along. If you can keep up.”

I stared at the pegasus, feeling the corners of my mouth pulling into a reluctant smile despite myself. “It might be a one way trip,” I pointed out. “Are you sure?”

She narrowed her eyes, her forehooves playing over her abdomen. I was suddenly aware how very still my own belly had gotten since I left the Collegiate. “Fuck one way trips. Life’s a one way trip. Your face is a one way trip. I’m coming back.” She flew over my head, her tail snapping at me, but our eyes met for a moment. She gave a little smirk back at me as she waited to see my next choice.

Well, that was one. I turned and surveyed the rest. I hadn’t expected to come back from this. Go to the Eater, do... something, win. I’d probably die in the process, but I’d win. Now, I had others coming with me to help me... and I couldn’t just throw their lives away. I needed a carefully calculated, well-thought-out plan of who else to bring with me... and getting them out alive again.

I checked the time on my PipBuck.

Half an hour until armageddon.

Crap.

Footnote: <Error: Footnote Not Found>

Chapter 77 - All In

"What? My dream ended… happily? That. Cannot.* Happen*!"

We were nine. Nine going into the deeps beneath Hoofington, facing monsters and abominations from the pits of madness and horror. Nine with one goal: to stop the Eater of Souls from destroying the world… inside thirty minutes.

I wondered if Twilight ever had to do anything like this.

I couldn't really see it, honestly. The railcar we rode, careening through the gloomy labyrinthine tunnels below Hoofington, had originally been designed to travel the tracks under its own power for maintenance and repair work; a ridge of industrial-grade spark batteries centered in the back, behind the storage locker we'd piled our gear in, kept us whirling along at breakneck speeds. Someone had hastily welded a cowcatcher of sorts to the front and sheet metal to the safety railing around the side of the car to offer some protection to those ponies who now dove down into the heart of darkness. All of us aboard struggled to brace ourselves against the chest-high makeshift armor.

Once upon a time, I'd gone into the earth. My friends had suffered, and I had encountered an abomination of living machinery. Another time, I'd gone into the earth and faced a screaming room of flesh and steel. A third time, I'd gone into the earth and faced nightmares given horridly distorted form. Thus, I was somewhat inured to the organic texturing of the walls, meat and metal and blends of both punctuated by flashing red emergency lights that beat with an arrhythmic pulse. The world around us screamed, kept at bay by only the tiny little singing shards of hope most of us wore.

We hadn't had much time. I'd shared what I'd experienced in the Core and the threats we might face as the people I'd chosen grabbed whatever ammunition they'd need. Despite a few scoffs of disbelief, I'd worked out a few warnings and tactics we could use if, or rather

when, we encountered the hazards of the Core. With the exception of accidentally collapsing the tunnel behind us, the others had adapted to the dangers well.

Despite everything, some of us were having a good time. A length of conduit revealed itself to be a thick, fleshy tentacle that lifted from the wall and swept across the tunnel like a giant hook. At the speed we were travelling at, we'd never be able to slow in time. But no matter how fast we were going, Whisper would not be outdone by a mere car. The pegasus darted ahead and smashed the tendril at its base, shearing the whole tentacle off like wet clay. The severed length dropped, struck the cowcatcher, and, with the aid of some magic, flipped over the top to crash and flop on the tracks behind us. "Woo hoo!" Whisper shouted. "That's four!"

From the roof of the tunnel ahead dropped a far more mundane threat to the airborne pegasus: two gatling turrets. The pair began to spray streams of projectiles, turning the tunnel into a shooting gallery. In a few seconds, she'd be turned into a cloud of lingering blood and feathers. Or she would have been, if the dark form of Dusk hadn't already been ahead with her, leading us down the tunnel. She swept between Whisper and the guns, the five millimeter rounds failing to pierce her power armor as her beam rifle blew out one turret and then the other in a shower of sparks.

"Dad's going to be so mad he missed this," Dusk said, falling back in next to Whisper as they flew ahead of us. Her voice had to get through the noise of the wheels, the wind, and the echoes, but fortunately my augmented hearing picked it up easily enough.

"Too bad you drugged the old fart then, isn't it?" Whisper asked with a grin.

"I wasn't going to pick him in the first place!" I bellowed up at them.

"Better he's mad at me for drugging him than mad at himself for being old and injured. My family needs him, and he can help them a lot more than he can help the world," Dusk said. "Nopony needs me now."

I wanted to argue, but just then we passed through a merging junction. I looked behind us and spotted two Ultra-Sentinels emerging from the other tunnel and sprinting after us... literally. At least, they had been Ultra-Sentinels. The meaty flesh that enveloped their lower legs now formed mangled limbs they galloped along the tracks with. They still had their old armament, but now they had

mouths! Great metal maws that screamed and gnashed mindlessly as they raced to take a bite out of us. “Two bogies on our rear!” I yelled.

“Oh, can I–” the mare at the control stand to the left of the locker offered.

“No!” four of us shouted at once.

“The supports were already compromised, and it only collapsed ninety percent of the section anyway,” the mare muttered. “You all act like it was the whole thing.”

“I’m on it!” Crumpets shouted. The Steel Ranger’s thick armor absorbed the fusillade of red energy beams as she braced herself against the back of the car. She’d swapped her shotguns for something a little more substantial. “Clear!” she yelled, and a shimmery field sprang up between her and us. The missile roared down the tunnel at the pair of cyborgs, the fiery backwash curling against Crumpets and blackening her armor. The machine grenade launcher on her other side chugged away as well, filling the tunnel behind us with shrapnel and fire. Still, these were Ultra-Sentinel abominations, and even with chunks blown out, they didn’t go down. They were just left behind, which was good enough for me.

“Switch!” Whisper yelled. “It’s on the right!”

“We want to go left,” a filly said, and I glanced down to Pythia sitting calmly to the right of the middle of the car in the space under Psalm, examining the tunnel maps duct taped to the floor around her.

“Hit the button,” I shouted to Lancer. The zebra rose up and stood quite easily on the rattling, swaying floor, steadying his shot as we approached the switch. Three green lights, their colors washing out to piss-yellow with the pulsing of the red emergency lights, glowed steadily on the right wall, three dark lamps on the other side. Past the three pairs, a button no bigger than a hoof was set in a little box poking from the wall. Had we been travelling at sane speeds, we could have simply stopped, reached out, jabbed it, and waited for the tracks to switch.

Lancer hit the button at a hundred yards.

We needed the time as the lights on both sides turned to flashing yellow and automatic systems started switching tracks. We passed one pair of lights, the floor working ahead of us. Two. The tunnel clanked and clacked. The third, and the smoking remnants of the switching button flew past us.

Then, just before we reached the split, the lights on the right went out and the lights on the left began glowing steadily. The car careened around the curve past the switch, and half of us lunged to the left to keep us on the tracks. “See? Aren’t you glad you brought me along?” Pythia said cheerfully.

“I didn’t bring you! You stowed away! I specifically said ‘no fillies or colts allowed’!” It had pained me to use that to deny Scotch Tape, but I couldn’t take her down here. Not after what I’d promised. I held out a wing. “You’re supposed to be this tall to stop the apocalypse!”

“Yeah, yeah. Like I’m going to miss out on a front row seat when you kill an undead star monster.” She leaned over and marked an X on the map in red crayon before adding, “We’re almost halfway there!”

“Just be glad I had my own moonstone,” Whisper snapped back at us, touching her red earring, “or you’d be a pile of bloody goop.”

“Yeah yeah,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hoof as she looked from the tunnel maps to her starmap and flourished a crystal over it. “Oh, heads up!”

“For wha– Eeeee!” Whisper shrieked as a silvery blob exploded out of a vent, swirling like ink in water as it lunged towards her and Dusk. The latter shoved the former away, knocking her back over the railcar and leaving herself the sole meal. “Flame! Flame! Fucking flame already!” Whisper shouted. The mechasprites seemed to glue themselves to Dusk, their mouths working as they started to chew through her black-enameled armor. I had no doubt that when they were through, they’d continue to eat. Echo had discovered that the hard way.

Then the tunnel roof filled with fire as Aries, standing at the front of the car, set her incinerator roaring against the wind. Dusk was engulfed just long enough for the mechasprites to pop like popcorn. When the flame cut off, Dusk was left faintly trailing smoke. “You okay?” the pony in a new suit of red power armor shouted up, a few blackened bits of mechasprite bouncing off her. “Still rare?”

“Yeah. Just ruined the finish,” Dusk replied, then barked, “Did you just make a joke about cooking me? What’s wrong with you?”

“Hey, you work with fire for a living and see how many bad fire-related jokes you come up with,” she said as she turned to incinerate the sprites just emerging from another passing vent, rendering the cloud into a shower of sizzling shrapnel. “This Burner

blend is nasty. What kind of moron mixes an oxidizer with the fuel?"

"What kind of moron *uses* it?" I asked with a smile.

"Touché," the armored pony answered casually. I really wished I had more time to get to know her. I'd just wanted a flamer with me; I had no clue about the pony using it. A few more brilliant flowers of flame blossomed, consuming the last of the swarms, and then Aries asked, "Why wasn't any of this reported in the scouting?"

"Because the Eater wasn't truly exerting itself then," Pythia explained. "It is now. Its soul warps and twists these threats into reality," the filly continued as she traced her hoof along the red tunnel map. "Fortunately, the layout hasn't changed much. We're almost to the medial transfer ring. After that, we'll go into the inner... " She trailed off. "Rock!"

"Inner rock?" I frowned, then looked down the tunnel at where a large slab of the roof had fallen down. "Lift!"

Unicorn horns flared to life, and the slab lurched into the air. At the same time, Aries climbed onto the cowcatcher and braced herself against the forward rail. "Get clear!" she bellowed, and then the slab was on us. Her hindhooves impacted it just before we could smash into it, and the slab went rocketing down the subway tunnel ahead of the car, still suspended above the ground by our magic field. The car's wide metal wheels skipped over the fouled section of track with a hard bump, but we didn't derail.

"You okay?" I asked, working with Psalm to keep the rock levitated, sweat dripping down our brows as the strain started to wear. There was a curve up ahead, though, and it wouldn't hurt to ram a big frigging rock into the face of something nasty hiding around the bend.

"Earth pony for the win," she answered, then shifted from one hindleg to another and worked them back and forth. "Though I'm pretty sure Applejack never planned on this."

"Well, this a little much to plan for," I replied. Though that hadn't stopped some ponies...

"Huh?" Aries looked back at me. "I mean using power armor as construction equipment." Then she gave a low laugh. "Pretty sure ol' C.C. would have shit himself if he'd seen me just then."

I would have pressed further, but suddenly the chunk of ceiling flying ahead of us was bisected, then the halves were sliced, and those divided into smaller and smaller pieces. There was the faintest

shimmer of silvery light.

"Wires!" I shouted, and the wheels shrieked, sparks flying as I leapt onto the storage locker to get a clear view. There was no way we'd stop in time, so I pulled out a bottle and telekinetically levitated a cloud of the sparkly, shimmery white dust inside ahead of us. Starmetal threads fizzed and exploded like fireworks as they came in contact with the cloud, the formerly taut ends snapping and lashing around the car. The pegasi had started pulling back as soon as I shouted, but Dusk, slower in her armor, didn't quite get clear. A wire wrapped around one of her forelegs like a strand of a spider's web, then tightened, cinching clean through the limb. The end of her leg went flying as she crashed in a heap on the car's floor, blood spurting from the wound.

Magic reached out and caught the limb before it fell off the car, immediately returning it to the injured mare. "Shhh," Psalm said as she touched her horn to the wound. "Hold still. It's a clean cut. If I'm quick enough… " The glow of magic flickered briefly. "Did that work?" she asked calmly as she looked at the pegasus.

"Feels tingly," she said, inspecting the line cut through her armor. "And my armor's damaged."

"Better than missing!" Whisper shouted. "Wrap it in duct tape and get back into the fight."

The cowcatcher blasted the rubble of the fallen, kicked, and sliced slab off to the sides, and as soon as we were past the threads, we got back up to speed. Soon our tunnel merged at an angle with another one, more cavernous than the rest and with a slight curve to it. Three sets of tracks ran parallel here, with all kinds of switches going from each track to the others. It seemed vaguely familiar to me. "This is it!" Pythia shouted. "The medial ring! We need to get to the far left set of tracks!"

Without getting blown up, cut to pieces, killed in a wreck, or shot to ribbons. While these tracks were nominally intact, they appeared to have been coated with the bloody gunk I'd seen under the city before. Grotesque, wiggling oblongs exploded into sanguine muck when we struck them. Dusk, her power armor patched with a strip of gray tape, took to the air again, and I landed back at the car's rear.

"Blackjack!" Crumpets shouted, and I stared behind us. The tunnel was coming after us, forming disjointed monstrosities resembling scorpions and crabs that snapped at us as we passed. Other patches

of biomass were forming five-legged wolflike beings that loped after us with mouths that ran half their body length, or swarms of flapping, gnashing insectile birds that tried to keep up with us. The railcar skipped and bounced as the cowcatcher kept hitting the crud crawling onto the tracks ahead of us. “What do I shoot?”

Shit. We hadn’t covered this. Also, what was that distant yellow light and screeching noise from around the tunnel’s curve behind us? “Everything,” I muttered, my eyes widening. We raced along, Crumpets’s grenades tearing huge holes in the packs behind us, but there were always more forming and reforming. Ahead of us, incandescent flowers blossomed as Aries’s incendiary grenades burst. “Shoot everything!” The whole car lurched as we splattered something the size of a brahmin on the tracks. “Get us off these tracks!”

“Hard to see the buttons,” Lancer muttered next to me as he aimed down the tunnel.

“They’re every hundred yards, I think,” Pythia said. “Just use math.”

“Use math,” Lancer growled. “You’re probably delivering us straight into its maw.”

“Eh. That would be boring. And stereotypical. Bigot,” the filly said casually. He started to retort when she shouted, “Switch coming up now!”

I didn’t see if he was quibbling with Pythia or taking the shot, because I was occupied with several of the flesh dogs racing up beside the car. I lifted a riot shotgun, loaded a drum of flechettes, and opened fire. The pulpy masses that were their heads burst apart in tatters of gore, but more meaty mass arched from the globs alongside the tracks and assembled into tissue, muscle, bone, and fangs... many fangs. I tried to shoot them before they had their fangs back.

Dusk had slightly better luck. Her power armor had a little rig next to the helmet that held her sister’s prismatic blaster nicely. The rainbow beam transformed monster after monster into sparkly dust. Aries sprayed sheets of flame overhead, transforming the flying monstrosities into blazing sparks that crackled and popped as they burned away. Crumpets’s missiles and grenades sent huge swaths of the fleshy beasts flying away with each detonation, the missiles outright vaporizing flocks... er... swarms... huge clouds of the flappy bitey thingies! Turrets along the ceiling dropped, pouring out death

of the ballistic and magical variety, and Psalm raised a shield to block their fire till we were past.

Then the apex of her shield struck an overhead girder, and the bubble popped with the force she tried to absorb. The alicorn all but collapsed next to Pythia, grimacing in pain. This wasn't the first time, either. One of the hounds launched itself onto the car at the pair, its elongated body opening wide in a maw that could bite a pony in half. Tentacles reached out, and even those ended in lamprey-like mouths.

Aries lunged at the monster and rammed the tip of her flamer, and her head, into its mouth, her forehooves reaching around to clutch its jaws shut. The hound's too-numerous eyes bulged and twitched, then smoked, then popped. The beast swelled and burst into blackened chunks of cooked meat. The red power armor smoked as Aries pulled back, the enamel pitted with hissing acid, but it was still intact. "Wooo-wee! If we had the time, that's what I'd call good eating!"

"You've been native way too bloody long, Aries," Crumpets shouted.

"That's why I left Bucklyn. Food sucked," Aries replied as she tossed the chunks of mandible aside.

"I have so got to hear this story when we're done!" I yelled. "So both of you live, okay?"

"Are you sure I can't... " our driver asked again.

"No!" I shouted at her. "We need you to control the car! Besides, remember what happened last time?"

"You nearly bury everypony alive *once*, and nopony lets you hear the end of it," she said sulkily.

Then Lancer found a switch and fired, and the lights, here half on the walls and half on signal posts between the rail lines, began to flash. There was a clack and then a jerk as we were routed onto the middle set of tracks. "One more!" Pythia said. "Then we transit to the inner ring. We should be able to get to the Eater's shaft from there!"

The hounds were falling behind, and it didn't look like any more were forming ahead of us. I had no idea why, but I'd take anything I could get at the moment. Now we had concrete support columns on either side giving us some cover from the turrets above the outer track. Except for the predictable gaps for the switches that let the turret fire through, things were looking up.

Then bright yellow lights glared brightly behind us, and I turned...

The monsters had trains of their own.

Three of them.

And they had *mouths*.

The trains to the left and right of us started to pull alongside us while the one on our line moved in, at its front an immense, metal-studded compactor that smashed and gnashed behind us. Psalm lifted her head and interposed a beam of magic between us and that train. The magic bulged as the train behind tried to overtake us, bending elastically as she strained. The other two trains to the left and right slowly crawled ahead. The flatcars they pulled were bristling with Ultra-Sentinel monsterbots.

"Can I *now*?" our driver asked plaintively.

"Okay," I groaned. "Now you can."

"Finally!" Sweetie Bot exclaimed as she left the controls, turned, and squeezed past me. Crumpets was firing missiles at the train gaining on our rear, but the damn thing bit down on each projectile as it hit, filling its mouth with flames and jagged shrapnel. The robotic mare leaned against the back rail as if she were on a sightseeing trip. Then there was an ominous humming, and every muscle in her body tightened under her synthetic skin. "Let's see you swallow this, you hideous embarrassment of technology!"

The mare's horn erupted, hurling brilliant emerald green bolts screaming one after another down the tunnel behind us. They plowed into the wide maw of the train, shredding it to twisted metal and slag, but still the machine kept up her assault. More bolts drilled deeper and deeper into the train's body, its studded metal hide deforming and popping rivets like bullets, green flame and goopy disintegrating metal gouting from the holes.

Sweetie halted her attack, and for a brief instant we could see the monsterbots clean through the melting, glowing green hole blasted through the locomotive. Then the locomotive began to sag as if it was made of hot wax, its underside catching on the rails and driving it into the concrete floor of the tunnel. Robbed of its ability to move forward but none of its momentum, the train of cars previously being pulled by the mechanical nightmare was sent careening over its mangled, melting corpse, twisting off the track, into itself, and across the tunnel. The cars rammed into support pillars on both sides, sending webs of cracks up them, and the monstrosities the train had been carrying were lost in the new

barricade of pulped flesh and twisted, smoking metal.

Sweetie Bot collapsed against the rail, her synthetic hide smoking around her brow. “Why the hell did Horse put that kind of firepower in a fuckbot?” Whisper demanded.

“A question for the ages,” she answered gaily. When her dismissive response didn’t dissuade us, she went on a little more waspishly, “The previous imprint made extensive modifications. It could never get them working, though; million-word semi-coherent expletive-riddled diatribes against Horse weren’t valid hardware registration files. It did try to erase my pleasure routines, but I still have all five hundred verses of the Zebra Sutra programmed and available on demand.”

“Whatever,” Whisper said with a shrug. “Do it to the other two.”

“Gladly,” Sweetie Bot said. “Recharging. One percent… ” She paused for several seconds. “Two percent… ” We stared at her, and she flushed, “Oh, no one complains when stallions have to take a few minutes afterwards!”

Too long. The monsterbots on the trains flanking us were taking aim, and while the pillars gave us some cover, the monsterbots had a lot of miniguns to hurl a lot of metal. “Faster! We need to go faster!” I shouted.

Whisper and Dusk arched overhead, grabbed the back of the railcar, and fanned their wings like there was no tomorrow. Psalm tried to cover us all with a shield shaped to avoid striking the architecture around us but couldn’t cover the pair of pegasi. Dusk had armor. Whisper didn’t. The bullets and flak began to bite into her body, leaving bloody holes. She just screamed and pushed harder. Bit by bit we drew ahead of the train on the inner track.

“Switch!” Pythia shouted. Lancer snapped his gun up and took the shot. The railcar swapped tracks so fast that Psalm and I had to use our magic to keep it stable. The train now behind us roared and surged forward. Psalm resumed her magical beam, blocking it and giving me a chance to pull the injured pegasus in, but she had to drop her shield to do so. Crumpets maintained a steady, thundering barrage of missiles and grenades, but unlike the meat puppets, the resilient trains were hardly slowed by her firing into their gnashing teeth.

Whisper collapsed on the locker, her legs a bloody mess. “Fuck. Ow. Fucking ow… ” she hissed. I lifted her up enough to open the locker and withdraw a couple of healing potions. “I want off this

fucking train," she cursed between gulps.

"At least we put some distance between us and that other one," I said, looking at the far track.

No sooner had I said that than the train on the outer track moved into the middle and began accelerating again. "Oh, come on!" I shouted. The train behind us slowed while the one next to us started to pull not just alongside but ahead. "Something's going on," I warned as I watched the first train matching our speed while the other moved ahead foot by foot. The fire from the strafing monsterbots pinged and chattered all around us, and all of us except Dusk, Aries, and Crumpets ducked down behind the armor as well as we could. "How far to the turnoff, Pythia?"

She looked up as something marked on the wall whooshed by. "That was mile marker three so... a minute?" the filly shouted from the shelter of Psalm's legs.

"We don't have a minute. Soon as that train ahead of us reaches a switch, they'll move onto this track and crush us!" I bellowed over the grinding and screaming of metal. I stared at an oncoming switch and watched the lights change. "Lancer! Change it back!"

Aries stood, her armor providing Lancer with enough cover to rise, too. Lancer took the shot just before the train on our right reached the switch, the lights changing back and the rails moving back with a crunch. The train let out a growl of frustration before accelerating even faster. Crumpets had shifted to more judicious missile strikes that had rendered the train behind us a flaming mess, but it didn't matter. It didn't have to eat us. As soon as the other train got on the inner track, it could slam on the brakes and crush us between them. If it didn't get all the way past us before switching, it wouldn't even– "When's the next switch from this track to the middle one?" I called out.

"Um, that track's pretty occupied right now, Blackjack!" Pythia shouted over the gunfire. There were at least nine cars in view on the right.

"When?!"

"Twenty seconds!" she shrieked.

I couldn't have Lancer take the shot; it'd be way too close. I'd have to do it. I moved to the edge with Vigilance drawn and rose to my hooves. As the button approached, I jumped into S.A.T.S. and fired three rounds at it. One miss... two…but the third round struck home! The lights turned yellow just as we were passing over the

switch. Our front wheels made it through, but, with a jolt, a screech, and a shower of sparks, our right rear wheel hit the moving rail and rode over it. For too long a moment I was afraid I'd just derailed us, that we'd get stuck in the switch, or flip over, or crash into a wall or pillar, but then we slammed back down and kept going.

The train behind us kept going, too. Right into the side of the train that had been trying to get ahead of us. The locomotive rammed the car it hit off the other the track and straight into a support pillar on the other side, all three disintegrating in a cloud of razor sharp steel and jagged concrete. It took with it all but the locomotive and first two cars of the center train, the rest ending up lying off the track, sideways, smashed, or scattered. On our track, the first car behind the destroyed locomotive was blown back off the track, one end hitting a support pillar and the other scraping the wall. The far end of the one behind it slammed into the ceiling. After that I lost track of which car was where except for the one hurtling straight at us. Psalm got her shield back up just in time, and I flung... something... some kind of shieldy sort of magic to help shore up her defense. The only other thing we could do was flatten ourselves to the floor and let the magic absorb some of the blow. Thanks to her, and maybe a little bit to me, instead of being crushed, we were merely knocked sideways into a spin, another shriek of steel on concrete joining the cacophony; Whisper was flung off and barely managed to catch herself with her wings before hitting the wall. When it ended, we were at an angle to the track, two wheels between the rails and none on them. As the remaining locomotive and its two cars of monsterbots disappeared around the curve, a roar of rubble and dust heralded the collapse of the roof behind us.

"Get it back on the rails!" I yelled. "Hurry!" We piled out, Crumpets, Aries, and Psalm getting to work getting the car back into position and Sweetie Bot 'supervising'. Up ahead, about three dozen feet, I saw the spur tunnel that would take us to the inner transfer ring. Past that, though, around the curve of the medial ring, I thought I heard mechanical shrieking and grinding noises. Now wasn't the time to worry about that, though; with the car stopped, the critters we'd left behind before were returning with a vengeance. They swarmed over the rubble, snapping and hissing and gnashing teeth in places that had no business having mouths. I wielded Vigilance and a riot shotgun interchangeably, switching

between them as I needed to reload. Overhead, Dusk laid out a field of fire with Pew-Pew while Whisper was practically a yellow blur punctuated by brilliant flashes and splattering meat. Lancer stood upon a piece of rubble, firing at them with precision that was utterly wasted. These things, if they had brains, probably carried more than one in their bodies. His sniper rounds were going completely through the creatures and barely slowing them down at all.

"Errorerrorerrorerror!" shrieked an Ultra-Sentinel that clawed its way over the pile of rubble. Its gatling beam gun began to sweep back and forth across us as its twisted legs struggled to push and pull it through a gap the robot would never ever normally attempt. Lancer and Whisper's coats immediately sprouted black burn marks. Lancer swept his gun over to the mangled machine and fired shots repeatedly at the beam gun, shredding it in a shower of sparks and steel before it could inflict too much damage.

But he'd taken his eyes off the hounds. One of them sprang through a gap in the pillars, bounded once, and snatched him up whole in his maw like a dog with a bone, only his head and hindhooves sticking out from the sides as it began to thrash wildly about. I leapt at it, silver sword slicing neatly through its head, but the instant Lancer was freed, the dozen or more holes left in him began to gush blood. The halves of the hound I'd severed were busy pulling themselves back into new and deadly forms.

"Drink," I said as I levitated a potion to him. "Drink up!"

Blood bubbled out his mouth and nostrils as I struggled to keep the attacking creatures at bay and administer the potion at the same time. It was just trickling futilely down his chin as he struggled to breathe. "Stop him," he said, weakly. "Stop my father. End his pain." He pressed his bent rifle against my chest. "Please. Promise. For me. My mother. My sister. My people!" Something lunged at me, but it collapsed in a shower of rainbow dust. "Please... promise me."

"I promise. Now drink, damn you!" I said, putting the mouth of the bottle into his, but it still just dribbled out the corner of his mouth. "Drink it you stupid, sexy stallion!"

But he couldn't. His eyes were glazed and unfocused as he crumpled in on himself.

One, a dusty voice chuckled.

"Blackjack!" Sweetie Bot shouted. I gritted my teeth and glanced

up to see her pointing down the tunnel. The light was coming back. The car was back on the track, and I could hear the train getting closer again. I levitated up Lancer and set him in the car, laying his gun across his body. The wheels were turning, but the car was taking too long to get going. “Push!” Sweetie Bot urged Psalm, Aries, and Crumpets. I jogged alongside and climbed in with Pythia. As the car sped up further, the alicorn boarded with a flap and then levitated the Steel Rangers on. I took the shot at the button with Vigilance, switching our path to the spur.

The rear of the train came into view, coming up fast. Hounds chasing us and Ultra-Sentinels firing from the cars ahead of us, we accelerated so slowly it felt like we’d lapsed into S.A.T.S. Psalm’s shield protected us from disintegration, but it buckled under a barrage of rockets as we raced the train to the spur switch. I wondered desperately if we could levitate the car to clear the rear of the train, but that’d just mean scraping ourselves to meat jelly against the ceiling. “Come on. Come on!” I shouted as the spur grew closer and closer.

The car slipped onto the spur, the rear of the train clipping the rear corner with a bang that nearly knocked us off the rails again. A moment later the reversed locomotive whooshed past us, maw snarling, and, from the sound of it, crashed its cars into the collapse with another thunderous impact of shredding metal. “Make sure it can’t follow,” I told Crumpets. The mare nodded, and her grenade machine gun turned the tracks behind us into an impassable tangle. Unless the train grew legs or something... which wasn’t all that impossible.

Ugh... I fucking hated this place...

I squeezed over to Lancer’s corpse in the front. Some of us stared at the body. Others kept their eyes out for threats, like I should have been doing. Did he have a chance to make amends with Majina? To make up for what he’d done... to those zebras at Brimstone’s Fall... to me? I could only hope we’d be able to get his body back for some kind of... whatever zebras did with their dead. “So,” Pythia queried, “how’s that curse coming along, Maiden?”

“Not now,” I answered.

“Not a whole lot of time left, if not now,” she replied.

“What do you want?” I asked tiredly.

“Me? Saltwater taffy. A kitten. Front row seats at the end of the world. Usual filly stuff.” She poked me in the chest. “What do *you*

want, Maiden?"

I didn't answer for a moment. "I want people to stop dying," I answered as I stared at his body.

"Why?" she asked, as if genuinely perplexed.

"Why?" I echoed back with a great deal more scorn. "Do you want to die?"

"Eventually, yeah. Doesn't everyone?" she asked as she stared down the tunnel. "Death isn't a bad thing. Pain isn't a bad thing either, really. It reminds you that you're still alive." She closed her eyes. "Suffering is, but that's a concern of the living." She then looked gravely up at me. "Do you want to die, Maiden?"

I couldn't answer that. "I have to live. I have to finish this, with no one else dying."

"But do you want to die?" she asked, and when I didn't answer, she went on, "The Legate was obsessed with not dying. For him, it was the ultimate defeat. But so what? Eventually, you lose. It's what makes the game fun. The Eater's so terrified of death because it's the ultimate insult to its ego. How could it... mightiest and greatest of all... fail? But everything does fail, Maiden. Eventually the proudest mountains are ground to plains and the tallest trees collapse to rot."

"So you're saying that we should all die?" I snapped. Hadn't I heard enough of this shit from Tom?

"I'm saying that you need to separate death from suffering. Do you think Lancer regretted coming down here with you? That he wished he'd had a few extra minutes outside and let someone else take his place?" she demanded of me, and all I could do was shake my head. "Good," Pythia said with a small smile. "None of us do. We don't want to die, but we're not afraid to. All things come to an end." She stared at me. "The Eater wants to live. It wants a second chance at life, and it isn't willing to do it the natural way. It clings to existence because it is the greatest thing in the universe, by its own measure. To cease to exist would be intolerable, as it would bring about a great emptiness that, to it, nothing in the universe can replace."

She considered me soberly. "So, Maiden... Blackjack... what do you want more than anything?"

"Um, guys," Aries said from the front of the car. "I think we're almost there."

I stared ahead, scanning for turrets or wires or mechasprites or...

anything... but as we emerged into the inner ring of the red tunnels--

...I hadn't expected this.

The Core.

The red tunnels were supposed to be reinforced against any kind of enemy attack, which was likely the only reason they survived at all. Here, though, parts of the inner wall and ceiling had been gouged away, leaving gaps that opened out into the colossal pit the Eater had scraped during its ascension. Everything that had been in the Core and hadn't been needed for supporting and elevating the Eater had fallen down here. Slabs of building. Passenger trains. Skywagons. Cascades of mulched furniture of all kinds. Pipes and other rail lines, some jutting out from the walls and others piled amid the wreckage. Thousands of emergency lights gave the entire shaft a garish crimson glow. As a final decorative touch, the entire mess appeared as if a bloody slurry had been vomited all over it.

All of us stared as we rolled along the Core's underworld, taken in by the sight and the coppery stench and the echoes of countless groaning, broken structures and the occasional snapping power line. Up above were the crushed-together bases of dozens, perhaps hundreds of buildings. Somehow I had to get through all of that. I gestured to Sweetie Bot, and the car slowed down as I considered what we'd need to do next. At least there was only one red bar on my E.F.S.

Wait. Only one?

From the depths of the pit rose a gargantuan shadow. A mountain of flesh and meat, pierced and studded with metal and wire. It was misshapen, unfinished, like a clay sculpture the artist had aborted halfway through and had cruelly ripped and torn with malice before throwing it away. If only this were clay. If only.

"Blackjack," the Legate boomed as two enormous, milky eyes turned towards me. I knew he wasn't blind. He had a few hundred more speckled all over his head and shoulders, like zits, to follow us with. He breathed low and deep, not just through his mouth but through countless slits in his chest. He lifted a limb the size of a ship and slammed it into the wall above us. "I knew you'd come," he gurgled, the voice echoed by a chorus of lesser mouths on his hide, "Maiden."

All of us stared in shock and horror, except Pythia, who smirked flatly at the abomination. The talisman in his chest had prevented

him from changing for the worse for ten thousand years or more. Ten thousand years of growth. Ten thousand years of injury. Ten thousand years of poison and disease. He was experiencing it all right now. Death would be a mercy for the Legate, not that he'd ever accept it.

"How's serving fallen stars working for you now, you moron?!" Pythia shouted up at him.

He screamed like a thousand backed up sewer pipes bursting all at once and rammed his hoof at us. We accelerated into a covered section of track just as the immense hoof impacted behind us, making the car skip on the rails. "Get in the air as quickly as you can," I ordered. "Fan out and keep him busy while I look for a way through." Then I hesitated with a glance at Lancer's body lying in the corner with his bent gun. "Try not to die. Please."

"Hadn't planned on it. That's your thing," Whisper snapped as we reached the next opening. "Got any heavy metal tunes you could pull out of your ass, Sweetie Butt?"

Sweetie rolled her eyes. "It wasn't exactly Horsie's favorite genre, but I think I have one or two tracks." I wasn't sure where she kept her speakers, but wailing sirens started, followed by a heavy beat. "Goat music... Ramsomething or other."

"Perfect," Whisper said as she launched herself into the air. The Legate's immense hoof streaked down towards us, but she skimmed its surface, drawing a dotted line of power hoof detonations, carnage fountaining behind her and twisting the hoof's trajectory to send it smashing against the wall of the shaft above us. I couldn't understand the song's lyrics, but I didn't need to. The sentiment was clear enough.

Dusk and Psalm launched themselves into the air, Pythia on Psalm's back. Aries twisted as we passed under the bulging limb and sprayed a thick sheet of blazing flamer fuel over the extremity as Crumpets sent a rocket up into its flesh, a bloody fountain of gore erupting out the side. "Fifty…Fifty-one... " Sweetie Bot counted morosely as she continued to blare the music.

Dusk went straight for the Legate's face, blasting those immense milky pools with her beam rifle as she swept around his head like a black wasp. He lifted his other foreleg, blocking the searing spear of light as if by reflex. Whisper was singing along with the music, either knowing the words or just channeling that strange power music held. She'd strafe along his body, arch out, and then slam in

with four-hoofed kicks that blew out bloody chucks.

Now if only he wasn't as big as a skyscraper.

I jumped into the air and made my way up towards the tangle of beams, concrete, pipes, and wires, searching for a way through. It seemed impossible. The bases of all those buildings were compressed into a massive knot that even my sword wouldn't be enough to cut through. There had to be a way, though. Some gap. I tried to push through a hole but only got ten feet before it pinched too tight for me to proceed any further.

Pulling my head out, I watched as the car raced around the track, spraying fire and flame whenever part of the Legate got close enough. I needed something that could tear right through all this... and then I spotted a green glow on the track. "Sweetie Bot!" I shouted, and teleported down to the car. "Don't–" Her horn let out a fusillade of bright green bolts that blew clear through the Legate's torso in a strobe-lit cloud of gore. The hole tore wide, unleashing a hot slurry that had him clutching his chest in agony. "Fire... "

"What *now*?" Sweetie Bot asked, her horn and forehead smoking.

"I can't get through up there. I need your horn to punch a hole through that crap!" I shouted, pointing up at the cavity's ceiling.

Sweetie Bot stared at me, at the ceiling, and then at the Legate. "Okay. Recharging."

"If you're just hanging out down there," Whisper shouted down at me as she whirled around the Legate's head, darting in and out like a yellow lightning bolt, "could you lend us a hoof? If you're not too busy?" The heaving mass clutched its chest as the hole continued to discharge gore. I watched the Legate carefully. He was healing, but nothing like before. His body seemed to be just squishing the injury closed.

I flew up to where Psalm was hovering with ammo and bottles of healing potions in Pythia's lap as she sat on the alicorn's back. "Does he still have the heart?"

"Namtar says only the Maiden can kill him, but Dagon says no living thing can slay him. Make up your minds... " she mumbled sullenly as she peeked at a folded-over section of her map before looking irritably as me and answering, "The chunks are in there still, and they're keeping him going. The Eater's probably supporting him with that soulless flesh, too. There's no way in the Abyss that he's alive naturally." Then she muttered, "The stars are being butts, though... I really thought I'd worked that out."

“Right.” I sighed and closed my eyes, then opened them and stared down at the Legate. The immense behemoth’s mouth split wide as his countless eyes glared back with millennia of malice.

“Come, Maiden. Let me correct my prophesy,” the Legate said as he spread his hooves wide. But in doing so, he exposed that grievous wound in his chest. My eyes picked it out, a twisted knot of black and green light that wildly flickered and flashed. It was wedged in a spur of busted rib the size of a large tree.

“Tell the others,” I said, looking at the pair as I drew the starmetal sword and Vigilance. “Get the pieces to me. Keep everyone alive.” I stared at Pythia, and she started at my gaze. “If there’s any star out there that will help me, I’ll take it. Whatever games they want to play, I don’t care. I need to win here.”

For an instant, Pythia’s expression mirrored her youthful form. Then she thumped Psalm’s neck. “I need to fold out my map! Get me back to the railcar!”

“No deals dooming the world or garbage like that,” I pointed out.

“Well, duh. I’m not a moron,” Pythia said with a roll of her eyes. “I like the world staying here. It’s where I live.” Psalm teleported away as I looked down at the Legate. He spread his arms wide, ignoring Whisper and Dusk’s assault upon his head. I was all that mattered to him right now.

“Come, Maiden,” he said again, in a grotesque croon. “Let me reunite you with your loved ones.”

I gave the sword a swish through the air beside me and disappeared, reappearing before the gaping, grotesque hole in his chest. Hot, wet air and the stench of a slaughterhouse hit me like a wall, but there, in front of me, lay a quarter of his heart, no bigger than my hoof.

And instantly I was assaulted by his fleshy entrails. A hundred or more serpentine coils of viscera shot out in bloody streamers, roping over my wings and legs. They coiled around the hilt of the sword and yanked the blade short of the stone. Both the blade and I were pulled into the cavity, and it took all my telekinetic power to keep him from pulling the sword away from me entirely. “Oh, a teleport. Didn’t see that coming,” the Legate chuckled sarcastically. “And while I’d love for you to watch *more* of your friends die, I think you’ve experienced enough of that.” I smelled bile. “Time for lunch.”

Crimson and rainbow beams dazzled around me, turning the flesh

into a cascade of rainbow colored ash. Dusk whooshed in and ripped and tore wildly with her wings and barbed tail as Glory's prismatic blaster continued to fire. "The sword! Shoot the sword!" I shouted. She aimed with all the precision S.A.T.S. had to offer, and the tissue that was trying to engulf the weapon vaporized. Free of the flesh, my magic whipped it around and slashed at the lodged stone. The impact made the entire mountain of meat tremble as I struck again and again, feeling a thrill of joy at the Legate's howls.

On the third blow, the stone exploded into fragments, and I watched as those fragments exploded into dust. A dark mote, throbbing with crackling green energy, hovered for a moment before it was pulled into the Legate... towards his head... "The next one is in his head!" I shouted as loudly as I could. Probably inside a skull thick as a concrete bunker.

Dusk ripped me free, and I moved a little bit away. Dusk didn't follow, though; I turned and saw her struggling with her hindlegs buried in the Legate's mass. I grabbed her outstretched hoof with my hands, pulling as hard as I could, to keep her from being consumed. My horn flashed multiple times, sending bolts of white magic into the sanguine innards, but she was slowly pulled deeper. Then a shadow moved above me, and I saw the Legate's immense hoof sweeping down. "Go!" Dusk shouted, and then she shot me in the chest with Pew-Pew. Luna's armor absorbed the blow, but it still stung more than enough to break my grip. I teleported back, the hoof rocketing by and trailing a vortex that pulled me after it, flipping me over several times before I could stabilize myself. I watched as Dusk disappeared into the Legate's mass.

"Ohh, I can feel her wriggling!" the Legate taunted. "Now, be careful with those damned energy blasts. Wouldn't want to kill your friend!"

Oh, he really needed to die. Was he lying? Did it matter? Was I ruthless enough to risk vaporizing one of my own to stop him? His hooves rushed together at me, and I teleported away as they collided with a thunderous boom. I appeared above him, and Whisper flew up to me. "What's the plan?"

"The next one is in his head," I said, pointing down with the sword. "Have any clue how to get through that skull?"

"Heh." She grinned and dropped like a lightning bolt, landing atop his head with a resounding crack. Just as fast, she rose and fell again. And again. The flesh of his skull was blasted away, revealing

a chipped plate of bone. The Legate howled as he swept his hooves over his head, but she just nipped around them, striking the same spot again and again.

Then, though, she rose back to me, her hooves trailing smoke and dangling metal. “Shit,” she said in a disgusted tone. “His skull’s thicker than most I try to get through.” She regarded her power hooves. “Let me snag a replacement. I’ll find some way to get in there.” She darted down towards the car. The Legate punched a monstrous hoof straight up at me, and I teleported down to the car as well. The entire chamber boomed, and debris clattered down on us as we rolled along. Psalm protected us from the shower of stones, the cowcatcher banging aside the largest debris. Whisper landed and narrowed her eyes. “Frigging magic,” she muttered as she pulled off the blackened power hooves. “How are we going to get through that skull?”

“Forty-one. Forty-two,” Sweetie Bot counted regularly.

“Not you. I need you to make a hole,” I told Sweetie Bot, then turned to the others. Behind us were loud booms as the Legate mashed his hooves at us, twisting around to try and get a good hit. We needed to scatter.

“You need to get his bonce open?” Crumpets asked me. I nodded. She looked at Aries, and the other Ranger nodded once. “Leave it to us. We’ll crack that nut. I’m an expert at dealing with thick-headed ponies.” Then she paused. “Where’s Dusk?”

I closed my eyes. “She’s inside that thing.”

Then we were flying, and not in a good way. The Legate had finally found a way to catch us: laying his hoof across the tracks. We’d hit it like a wall... a fleshy wall, which was probably the only saving grace of most of us. Sweetie Bot had managed to snag the control stand, but the rest of us went flying into the Legate’s limb. The Steel Ranger armor, and my own, banged loudly against the slightly yielding surface, and Whisper was able to fly clear. Psalm pulled Pythia into her hooves with her magic, turning and spreading her wings wide.

Then she slammed into the hoof, her bones crackling like brittle wood.

I watched her bounce off the surface, her wings having slowed her but not enough, as I crashed on my back back on the car. She managed to land on her hooves, but then she wobbled once, then collapsed. Under us, the wheels were spinning and sending out

sparks. “Hey!” Pythia cried. “Come on! You’re an alicorn! You should be able to take that hit!” She pulled free of Psalm’s legs and scrambled for a bottle of healing potion from the locker, but it had smashed and dribbled over her hooves.

If Psalm died, what would happen to the Brood, even if I won here? I struggled to pull out one of my own potions when I heard the noise of rushing air. I looked up at the Legate’s triumphant grin and his other colossal hoof descending towards us.

Then, he paused. His enormous, bloody sockets fixed on something behind me, and his grin lessened a little. I passed the healing potion to Pythia, which she quickly administered to Psalm, then saw his gaze. Not on me. No.

On the slain zebra in the corner. Even with the impact, he rested slumped, as if he could be sleeping. “My boy… ” the Legate muttered. It was a moment, just a few seconds, but it was the time we needed. I flew out next to Whisper and robbed him of his chance to wipe most of us out in one blow. “The fool. Poor loyal deluded fool,” the Legate muttered as hard contempt returned to his face. Aries and Crumpets were off the car, running back along the tracks as the Legate glared at me. “Do not mistake this for compassion. I have buried legions of my children, and my children’s children. One learns not to get attached.” That cunning grin returned. “As you likely know by now.”

Maybe, but he had still been attached enough to hesitate. I had no illusions about saving the Legate, but he wasn’t the Eater. The Legate had been a person. A horrible person who needed to die, but a person. “Maybe,” I yelled back, “but I’m a slow learner.” Wait, was that… I stared at the Legate. “Say something!”

His eyes widened, and then he scowled. He pulled back the foreleg across the tracks, freeing the car to resume its pell-mell travel, and smashed his hooves together in the air before himself. I could have teleported any number of places to get away from him, but I needed to see. Again and again Whisper and I flitted to the left and right. *Come on, you striped bastard! You’re a talker! Say something already!*

“What are you doing?” Whisper asked as she pulled on a fresh power hoof, swooping like a wasp, effortlessly evading another swipe of a giant hoof. The weapon whirred as it automatically tightened on the end of her foreleg.

“Trying to see if he has something in his mouth,” I growled at her in frustration, then shouted at him, “At least Lancer believed in

something!”

“He was a fool! Like you all!” the Legate shouted, and I saw it. Inside his mouth, at the back of his throat, was a telltale black-and-green glow. He had a shard of his soul in his throat!

Whisper saw my expression as she activated her singular power hoof. “What?”

“It’s in his throat,” I said triumphantly. Now... how to get it out? I teleported next to his windpipe and made a horizontal slash, but he instantly brought a leg up to shield it before I could cut a hole big enough to find the portion of his soul. I teleport dodged back to avoid the other hoof, but he knew what I was up to now.

“Let him hit you,” Whisper said.

“What?” I asked, my eyes bulging.

“I’m telling you, let him hit you!” the pegasus snapped, then darted away from me. The Legate was already drawing back for another blow. Let him... hit me? That was like advising I stand on train tracks when the locomotive was coming! Maybe I could just let him clip me? A near miss? The hoof flashed in on me, and I screwed up my face. Oh, this was going to hurt...

The blow sent me rocketing clear across the cavernous space, and I was content to fly clear through it with my wings and legs spread wide. I didn’t quite splatter myself across the wall, but I definitely left a sizeable dent in the crumbly facade of an apartment building. Found it quite relaxing, actually, resting in that divot. I could spend the rest of the fight here. Bring Tom. I was good. I could watch all three giant Legates laugh as he drew back for one last blow.

He stopped laughing as a yellow blur streaked right into his maw.

I shook off the little Glories, P-21s, and Rampages telling me to get my ass back in the fight as I watched him clench his jaw, pressing his hooves to his throat. I flew up to him... well, weaved and swayed as my whole head throbbed way too much for more teleporting right now. His eyes bulged as he made choking noises, his mouth working around the clenched jaws. Then a flash went off behind his teeth. A second flash. A third. He opened his mouth, howling pain as Whisper sprang free, clutching the chunk of sundered heart in her hooves, dripping rancid spittle and blood.

“Kill it!” she screamed at me, holding the stone out as I readied the sword. Its glittering starmetal edge descended towards the black, abhorrent thing.

As one, blade and jaws fell, the latter snapping shut on her wings

with a wet crunch even as the former cleaved right through the stone. The two halves of the fragment exploded into black powder; the bisected bits of soul swept up into his brow and down into his swollen stomach. Whisper's eyes bulged as an immense gray tongue curled around her and started to pull her into his mouth again, his eyes narrowed as if daring me to strike.

Of course I did.

I darted in, slicing down through that thick muscle as I reached forward, popped my fingers, and pulled on Whisper. His mouth spread wide as he lunged at me, and I braced my hindhooves on his upper teeth and grabbed Whisper with my forehooves, pulling her to me and pushing back against him. His hooves were rising up to sweep us both into his dripping, gargantuan maw. As I pulled, though, she gave a screech of pain, and I saw that the tatters of her wings had gotten stuck between two of the immense teeth. We shared a moment, just one, and then without hesitation I brought the sword around and severed her wings in one smooth slice.

She fell, and I teleported to catch her as the Legate's frothing red maw gnashed on bare air. Blood spurted from her sheared-off stumps as I carried her through the air towards the car. We both crashed to the floor, and I was greeted by the welcome sight of Psalm awake, though slumped against the storage locker. Her horn was cracked at the base, and she was handling a healing potion delicately with her hooves. "Fuck. Fuck," Whisper muttered over and over again, taking the potion and drinking it down. When Pythia offered a syringe of Hydra, though, she immediately waved it off with a furious glare.

The bleeding didn't stop, so I pulled some bits of old cord from the storage locker and tied them tight around the stumps. "They can regrow them," I told her. "They regrew Glory's wing."

She just nodded, her body pale and trembling.

"I've got a full charge now, Blackjack," Sweetie Bot told me gravely. "I can make a hole up if you want."

It was the right thing to do. Except... "Go ahead," I said as I flew aloft.

And was struck by a boat. Okay, it wasn't a boat, but I'd been hit by boats before; this was just like that! Once again I was reduced to a quivering lump of augmented Princess. This time, though, I didn't imbed myself in the wall so much as tumble down the slope, banging and flailing as I struggled to regain control. I finally got

caught on an I-beam dangling over the abyss. The Legate drew back a foreleg for a finishing stomp.

Then a flurry of brilliant emerald hail blasted right through his shoulder, and the limb was cleaved off completely, immense jets of gore spraying out of it and the stump as it fell. The Legate howled, then swung his remaining foreleg in an overarching blow that struck the tracks with an earsplitting crack. The section of track the car was on broke free, sliding down the ruin on a slope of debris that had the very earth shaking. The I-beam came loose from the rubble, and I went tumbling down through the dust as well, trying to keep myself together as I rolled.

I came to rest amidst the blood swamp that engulfed the Legate's waist. Above, he kept howling in pain, slamming his hoof around wildly, perhaps trying to bury us under all the debris he was knocking free. Finally, it stopped, and I made out the glow of an alicorn shield. I started towards it but stopped as a knifing pain blossomed in my side. I looked back at the sight of a length of steel bar punched clean through me. And another. And another. Lifting the sword, I carefully sliced through them all, then pulled out the lengths. After each, I chugged a healing potion as I felt my insides spilling out. "If only I'd had you on the moon… " I muttered as the dust settled around me. Over to the side, I could see the railcar lying on a slope few dozen feet from the jiggling pool of gore around the Legate. My head throbbed so much, I didn't risk magic, flying over to the vehicle instead.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, looking at Sweetie Bot, her synthetic hide lacerated and exposing metal and bands of black muscle beneath. The music had changed from shouting incomprehensible lyrics to something lower, tenser, and instrumental. Psalm held Pythia in her hooves, the filly clutching the starmap to her chest and appearing as if she was actually regretting her brash decision to come along with us.

Whisper just looked equal parts miserable and pissed. "I can't believe I need a frigging gun… " she muttered as she glared at the battered and bent storage locker.

"Recharging," Sweetie Bot said with a definite buzz and crackle in her voice. "Diverting energy from repair systems to main pool. Mr. Horse is awesome–" Her green eyes flared. "Ugh… stop it!" We looked at her in bafflement. "I am in danger of losing my patience with that dumb protocol."

I didn't know where Aries and Crumpets were. There were two other blue bars besides the four with me, but I couldn't pick them out through the dust and wreckage. I had no idea what they were doing; for all I knew, they'd been buried alive in the avalanche.

"We need to end this," I said, pulling out Folly. "We only have fifteen minutes till Tom hits."

"Wait," Pythia said. "He's still got chunks of that soul jar left in him. You might vaporize his mass, but he'll still be here. Do you want to face whatever's left of him and the Eater at the same time?"

"There's one piece in his brain, and one piece... around there," I said, pointing at his waist. "I've got no clue how to get at either."

"Huh. They gravitated to his chakras. Be glad there's not seven chunks," Pythia said, and when we all stared at her, she waved her hoof. "Look, I don't have time to go into Eschatik meditation techniques right now, okay? Bigger things to worry about!"

"Such tenacious little gnats," the Legate wheezed. "You are wasting my time. I will be restored again and again." Then his hoof slammed down a hundred feet away, making the ground shake. "You cannot defeat me!" Another massive impact, closer. And closer. I slipped the silver bullet into the breech, and the weapon became live.

"Wait," Sweetie Bot said as she limped to the rear of the railcar, where the ridge of spark batteries crackled and popped. She looked them over. "Get ready to hit the stone in his gut," she said to me, then turned at Pythia. "Tell me where to aim."

"What are you doing?" I asked as she yanked out two sparking cables.

"Voiding my warranty. No time for a shielded interface... " she replied. She turned back to Pythia, and the mare pointed at a section right about where his navel would be if his navel wasn't covered in a patina of gore. The hoof rammed to the ground next to us, making the whole car slide several feet down the slope. "It's been fun," Sweetie Bot quipped.

Then she jabbed the cables into her ears as the shadow of the hoof rose over us.

"Wait!" I shouted, but it was too late. Her mane caught fire as her eyes blazed a solid green. Her voice crackled wildly as she spouted gibberish, and then her horn burst into light. The bolts roared out, not in curving aimed trajectories but in a straight line and so thick and fast that they looked like a solid bar of bright flickering green.

The beam cut through the Legate's bulk like my silver sword writ large and blasted a cloud of dust and rubble from the wall on the other side. Sweetie Bot swung her head, and the Legate's grotesque form collapsed against the far wall, severed from its base. Then the beam stopped, the synthetic pony's horn sputtering out a few more bolts, the last veering off to the side. She stood there a moment, mane on fire, eyes aglow, the music freezing in a feedback screech, and sparking cables in her ears, and then, with a stuttering groan of "N-n-not tt-onight-t-t Horsiiiiie-e I h-have a h-h-headac-c-c-che…" from her speakers, her eyes popped like flashbulbs and left her still and silent.

Two, the dusty voice murmured.

From the hole in the Legate slithered a torrent of guts larger than my body, but I ignored that foulness and focused on the crackling ball of dark magic that came with them. I bodily shoved the masses aside, trying to push aside how they were forming wiggling fingers that started to clutch at my limbs, and pulled the stone free. One good hit, and it exploded into powder. The black soul mote streaked up, and the grasping tendrils around me melted into slurry... clingy, bloody slurry that was like wet concrete, but at least it wasn't getting too friendly with me...

The rest of the Legate was looking scarcely better than his rapidly dissolving lower half. His body sagged, as if he were having trouble keeping it together. As he swayed, he glared down at me and shifted his weight. Suddenly a whirring roar rose up from the car, where Whisper struggled to keep a minigun braced against the railing. "This is so not my shit!" she screamed as she kept a stream of bullets pouring up at him. The hail of lead perforated his chest and side at Pythia's direction, for some reason.

"Enough!" he roared as he raised his hoof, which still had more than enough integrity to crush us all to goop. "You die! Your friends die! Everything dies!" I pulled Folly free of the slime and raised it. If I got lucky... maybe... maybe I could get him and poke a hole through the roof I could climb through in one shot. Maybe!

Then the Legate's side exploded in rainbow light, and I paused. From where Whisper'd been shooting poked a black form: a suit of Enclave power armor. Whisper cut off the fire, whooping, "That's it! Get back in the fight, you pussy!" Dusk definitely appeared worse for wear. Her armor had been cracked open, the mare inside looking half digested but still alive and armed. The beam gun bit

deep into the upraised limb with S.A.T.S. precision; something in the joint gave way, and the entire limb twisted in on itself. Dusk slipped out between his ribs and tumbled along his body as the Legate worked the limb. He seemed to be struggling to restore it, though; the muscles were reforming, but they were malformed and warped upon his shoulder.

I gladly held my fire, kicking my way free of the gore and half flapping, half swimming to where Dusk was slipping under the ooze. Her feathers and dark mane were gone, and patches of her hide were milky and peeling off; others were missing altogether, exposing damaged muscle. “Med-X,” she croaked, her whole body trembling as I kept her out of the slime. I administered an injection immediately, and she relaxed in my embrace. “Okay,” she said weakly. “Daddy has no right to tell me he’s the biggest badass in the Enclave just for fighting off an overgrown lizard.” I carried her out of the pool to where Psalm had two healing potions and the Hydra waiting, and she eagerly sucked the potions down as the more potent drug regrew her epidermis. “That was the worst... ” she started to say, then spotted Whisper’s truncated wings and looked back at her own featherless but still present ones. “Huh... ”

“Yeah, fuck you. At least I don’t smell like barf,” Whisper retorted.

The Legate slumped against the wall. “Persistent... tenacious... fools!” he boomed. I scowled and pointed Folly at his head. The angle would be all wrong for getting out of here, but at least I wouldn’t have to deal with him anymore. His bloody lips spread in an impossibly wide leer.

Then, from high above the Legate came the thump of an explosion. Then another. Then a third, blasting out of a broken tunnel. The Legate twisted his head up and stared with an almost weary expression as a train, this one a string of industrial tankers, came rocketing out the broken tube. He struggled to raise his enormous hoof to block, but one tanker after the next smashed right into his face. Psalm grabbed Sweetie Bot, Lancer, and Pythia with her magic and took off, and I pulled up the pegasi as the wreckage continued past the ruin of his head to land around his body. The tankers burst open and covered him with pungent liquid, and flatbed cars sliced into him like immense blunt knives; then the fluids burst into flames, setting him howling, and then a pair of coupled locomotives shot out and smashed into his head like a thunderbolt. The whole thing came apart like a melon, leaving only a screaming mouth and

a massive mound of gray meat sitting in a bowl of shattered bone. From far above, barely audible, Crumpets yelled out, “Got ‘im!”

I set Dusk and Whisper over where Psalm sheltered the rest against the debris slope. The Legate finally seemed too stunned to defend himself, his whole body shaking as it burned with thick, oily black smoke and sullen orange flames. I flew over to the ruins of his skull and spotted the stone imbedded in a spiral-like wiggle of brain. “You die,” I said as I raised the sword.

Then his body began to spasm wildly, not so much an attack as an epileptic fit. Back and forth he rammed into the walls, and the shard and I were knocked flying. Aries and Crumpets tumbled from the tunnel mouth and rolled down the slope like dropped toys. Before I could recover, I was smashed by the writhing body and fell down along its flaming bulk, back into the bloody lake below.

I pulled my head out of the gore, swimming between pools of blazing fuel, and saw the burning form arch over me, his smashed head crushing against the opposite wall as he dripped down upon me. His jaws were frozen in a skeletal rictus. “I…Can... Not... Die... ” the crackling behemoth wheezed as bits cascaded down upon me.

I struggled to lift the sword and Folly, but where was the stone?! Where... I couldn’t see. The Legate was collapsing slowly bit by bit, perhaps intending to bury me under his massiveness. “Where’s the damned rock?! Where’d it fall?”

“Blackjack!” shouted Crumpets from the shore. I looked over and saw the battered armored pony holding the stone in her hoof. She whirled and bucked it straight to me. My fingers popped out, and I caught it.

She disappeared beneath the Legate’s hoof.

I struggled free into the air and teleported next to the hoof as it rose up. The armor lay broken where it had been compressed into the debris. “Ow,” she rasped.

“Hold on,” I said as I looked at the monstrosity above us. “Enough! Die already!” And I struck the stone with all the force I could muster. The sword cleaved the last of his magical heart, and the last of it vaporized. The black soul mote exploded out and lingered in the air for a moment, then flew up above me to where the smoldering body had finally come apart in smoking slurry and collapsed down into the pool in a great splash of gore.

Everyone scrambled back down the slope to where Crumpets lay next to me like a broken toy. “Is she alive?” Dusk asked as she

slumped against Whisper.

"Hey, Enclave. Don't you know us Rangers don't die so easy?" Crumpets replied.

"We have to get her out of that armor! A healing potion won't work if she'd being crushed," I said, lifting the silver sword.

Dusk shook her head. "No! Don't! She's probably got all kinds of internal bleeding. Right now, the armor is the only thing keeping her alive." The pegasus scowled back at all our stares and snapped, "What? You try having a sibling in medical school and not picking up some trivia."

"Well, at least he's finally done," Aries said as she looked up at the corpse. A dry chuckle sounded in my mind.

A hoof struck her helmet, pushed through her visor, and out the back in an explosion of bone, brain, and metal.

And that's three, the voice rasped.

Perched casually on her head, foot lodged in her brain, was the Legate. Not the enormous monstrosity. He'd reverted to his old size, but now he reminded me of Dawn. His coat was a silvery synthetic fused with pale hide, striped with glowing green lines of energy. His eyes churned with the green and black energy of the soul motes. One limb ended in a truncated spur of bone and meat that finished assembling itself before my eyes in a flash of baleful green energy.

"I told you. I cannot die," he said calmly, lips curled in sublime confidence.

I swept the sword at him, but he leapt away almost as fast as Whisper could move. "Oh come ON!" I shouted as I spotted him standing on top of his own body. "I smashed the heart. Game over. You're done!"

He was on me in a flash, literally. He might as well have been teleporting as he smashed into me from the left, and the right, whirling like a green-striped blur. Of all my friends, I was the only one who was, relatively, still in fighting condition. Again and again I struck out at him, and again and again he thrashed me. My bones cracked and my armor dented, and he knocked me to the ground. When I tried to rise, he hammered me back down again. Whisper and Dawn tried to move in closer to help, but I snapped, "Stay back!" I didn't want him to pull something with them. Three more times I struggled to rise, to blast him with magic, to cut him... to do anything... and three times I fell bloodied to the ground.

Finally, I simply stayed there.

“That’s right,” he crooned in my ear before slapping a hoof across my face and rising to address my friends. “I want witnesses to my triumph.” More than his speed and his strength, that smug expression of superiority on his face really pissed me off. Still, his gloating was giving me a chance to recover from the beating he’d administered. A bit. For all the good it would do. “Just like our first time, isn’t it, Maiden?” he murmured.

“It’s the Eater!” Pythia shouted. “That’s the only thing keeping him here!” The Legate looked at the filly with a murderous grin. “Get away from me, you freak!” she snapped as she hid behind Psalm and continued, “Half the stars say you don’t defeat him! Half say you do... so... do it!” Her voice was quavering with panic as she stared at the glowing lines upon his face.

“Little fool. This is the true power the stars offer!” he crowed. “Slay me a thousand times if you wish, I’ll return a thousand times, and more!” He touched his chest. “I’ll get a new vessel for my soul, and slay the next world. And the next!”

“You idiot! What makes you think that the Eater will even need you after it’s restored?” I challenged, and his smirk disappeared. “That’s right. You’re worthless to the Eater once it’s back on its feet again!”

“The Eater of Souls needs me!” he insisted, his flaring, flickering eyes narrowing.

“For what?” I asked, rubbing my face as I stood. “You’re nothing to the Eater. It doesn’t need you.”

“It has always needed me!” he shouted at me.

“Since when?” I laughed, scornfully.

“Always! I was the one who could hear its dying whispers! I was the only one who would listen to its call. It needed me to get my own wretched tribe to resurrect it! It needed me to use your people to raise it! It needs me now to forestall you just a few minutes more!”

Then we heard it. The scream of Enervation changed. Focused. For a moment, all around us, came a slightly different modulation of the noise. It could be summed up in three words.

OH, DO I?

The Legate’s colors reverted back to white and red, and he stared at his hooves. His look of utter horror was absolute, and he gaped at

me, his mouth moving silently. Finally, he rasped, “I... I am your ever-loyal servant! I would never presume... ” He gagged, his jaw working. I just watched. “I... am... worthy! I–”

He hunched over as his body seemed to soften like hot wax. “No! Not like this!” He thrust a hoof towards the ceiling and screamed as his flesh ran in the heat of the Eater’s ire. “You owe me!” he screamed as his gut distended, then burst like a boil.

Then he melted, rejoining the gore in the pit.

The soul mote lingered a few seconds longer, snapping as if caught in a great wind, and then the sooty black spot winked out.

I sank to my knees in the muck and looked over at my friends. Pythia stared at where the Legate had disappeared, then at her wrinkled, grubby starmap. “Oh! So that’s what it meant! Huh!” She folded up the paper. “Well, that made the whole trip worth it for me.”

None of the rest of us shared her glee. Three more of my friends were dead, and the others weren’t much better. Psalm had recovered a little from her impact. Crumpets might not be dead, but she wasn’t far from it. Whisper was half-chewed and Dusk half-digested.

“You’re thinking of sending us away while you go on alone,” the purple alicorn said serenely.

“What? Fuck no!” Whisper said as she leapt to her hooves, then came crashing back down again. She glared over her shoulders at the tied-off stubs of her wings. “I hate gravity,” she muttered before she glared at me. “We came down here to see this through to the end.”

“And you have,” I told her, then turned to Psalm. “Can you take everypony to the Collegiate?” I looked at the bodies of Lancer, Aries, and Sweetie Bot. “All of them?”

Psalm gave a smile. “I will manage. I may burn my horn out, but I will see it done.” She rose to her hooves and retrieved a canister from the storage locker. “Keep back. This ignition agent is dangerous,” she warned as she stepped way back. My PipBuck’s rad counter kicked up its staccato chatter as she cracked the case, bursting to a wild crescendo when she poured the glowing fluid inside all over herself. The clicking diminished a little as she shivered and groaned. “Oh yes... this should give me enough oomph to get out.” She regarded the canister. “I think this will be very popular with alicorns in the future.” She faced us. “We should go

quickly, however. This radiation will not help the rest of you one bit."

Yeah... us going our separate ways... "Thanks for coming this far with me," I told them all.

"Will you be all right?" she asked as I pulled what remained of the healing potions and shotgun ammo from the storage locker. I immediately slugged down some RadAway and passed some pouches to the others. There was also a small bag of gemstones. After getting Luna's soul, I'd always been topped off, but still, couldn't hurt to bring them along.

"Hey. Nothing to it. Go up, spank the Eater, save the world. It'll be done in ten minutes, tops." Or else we'd be done. Either way. I looked at the maimed, the burnt, and the crushed, and then to Pythia. "Coming?"

The filly flushed. "There's a difference between being in the front row and being on the field. I saw the traitor undone by his own words. Thanks, though." She paused and screwed up her face. "I called in whatever favors I could. You've got a lot riding on this. Don't screw it up."

"What's it going to cost me?" I asked.

"You? Personally? Don't worry about it. The games and stakes stars play for... well... let's just say all the higher powers interested have put their chips in the pot. Just need someone to deal the cards and see who hits, who stays, and who goes bust." She peered at Crumpets. "And I think we'd all better get going."

"Yeah." I paused, then pulled out Vigilance and turned to Psalm. "Hey. Make sure this gets to Grace. I dunno which of them is going to use it, but they should have it," I said as I passed the weapon to her. "You know... just in case... "

"Oh, fuck that," Whisper snapped. She trotted right up to me and brought her hoof across my muzzle. "None of that 'giving your shit up before you die' shit. You're going to live, understand?" she demanded as she glared at me. "Rampage isn't here to smack that shit out of you, so I'll do it. And when you're back, I'm going to kick your cybernetic ass to show everypony who's the baddest momma in the Hoof. Got it?"

"Wait." I gaped at her. "You're pregnant?!" I never would have--

She stared at me flatly, then gave a strange noise, part contemptuous 'tch' and part teary sniff. "Just... fucking survive. Okay?" There were tears in her eyes, but she quickly scrubbed them

away with a hoof. “Ugh, that breath…” she muttered before turning away and addressing the others. “Let’s go. Blackjack can catch up later.”

I walked a little ways from them. They stared at me and I at them, as none of us said the word. Psalm gave me a warm smile, her horn blazing brightly, and then disappeared. I stared at the space they’d occupied for a moment. “Goodbye,” I murmured. Then I flew into the middle of the chamber. I drew Folly, smiling. How funny; what I was planning to do was almost the definition of foolishness. If I’d known when I’d taken EC-1101 from my stable what I’d face, how much I’d lose, how steep the odds I’d have to beat were, I probably would have thrown the damn thing in the ocean and called it good. Maybe the world would have been better for it.

Raising the gun overhead, I aimed right at the center of all that compressed ruin that had been the Core. I narrowed my eye a little, slipped into S.A.T.S., and activated the weapon one last time.

The beam lanced up, and the ceiling shattered. Girders, pipes, wires, wagons, trains, and concrete came cascading down in a deluge of ruin, filling the pit beneath me with the corpse of the city. Folly had cleared a path through the falling remains, though, and as they fell around me, none fell on me. I floated there in a void, the edges of the cavern invisible in dust, darkness, and rubble, green light surrounding me in a column descending from a hole like a great baleful eye. The junk overhead had resettled, but there was a way clear. It was just going to be a bit of a climb.

“So. This is it?” rasped a voice in my ear as I reached the hole. I started squeezing my way quickly but carefully through the packed mess as it shifted around me.

“Looks like it,” I said, and glanced at the bony skeleton in the duster and cowpony hat. “I thought you’d died on the moon.” I teleported through a gap that was closing ahead of me. Of course, the Dealer kept right along with me, shuffling cards between his dusty hooves.

“I was always more than just him. Besides, I know you wouldn’t want to make this trip without an escort. Nopony should die alone,” he said as I climbed.

“Well, forgive me if I’m not in the mood to chat,” I said as used the starmetal sword to cut a gap I could fit through. I didn’t want to wear out my horn before I got up there. “I don’t know what we’d talk about, anyway.”

"How about... " He drew a pair of cards and held them up for me to see: the ace and queen of spades. "How about you tell me about how you got your cutie mark?"

I stopped, giving him a skeptical glower. "My cutie mark?"

"Everypony has a cutie mark story. What's yours?" he asked.

I shoved a piece of steel. "I got it playing cards–" Suddenly, something gave, there was a bang, the piece of steel I'd shoved wrinkled like a wet noodle, and the cavity I was in halved in size. I stared around, wondering what would give first as I tried to find a gap big enough to fit through. "Why do you care, anyway? You're just a hallucination. Proof I really am crazy."

"Or proof that, even toting that goddess around, you're still Blackjack," the Dealer retorted. "Come on. Tell me. Who else are you going to confess your sins to?"

It was stupid. I should have been focusing on the task ahead, not the past behind. There was so much blood on that path. A river of blood. Yet I found myself speaking, despite everything. "It was the first card game I was ever invited to. With Mom's job, nopony wanted me around when rules were broken." I spotted a gap to the side and shimmied that way, finding a spot where I could climb up a dozen more yards. The Dealer kept up with me, leaning in a nook in the wreckage.

"So what's the big deal about a game?" he asked as his bony hooves shuffled the cards.

"I sucked at it, is what. I didn't know how to bluff, or count cards, or anything," I said as I found my way barred by a skinny beam that might, or might not, have been load-bearing. I couldn't get a good look in the space beyond for a teleport, so I braced my hindlegs and shoved slowly, but firmly, my body straining, the injuries I'd taken earlier burning. "I won a round and got my cutie mark. End of story." I finally made a gap I could get through, spotting a half dozen silver wires tautly strung in the space above. Good thing I hadn't teleported. I used a bit of moonstone dust to vaporize them. "Even Cognitum said so. Victory was my special talent."

"Mmmm…I don't think so," he said as he turned a card, showing me the nightmare version of myself. "After all, she didn't win where it really counted. She'd planned on ruling afterwards. Dying kind of negates all that." He put the card back in the deck. "That mark's seen just as much defeat as victory... luck of the draw, which comes out on top. Ah, but death now... *that*'s been a bit more consistent

around it, hasn't it?"

I froze, remembering that stupid card game with ponies I'd wanted as my friends. Maybe Marmalade could have been... or Daisy... if I'd just... done... something. "It was an accident."

"Of course. Accidental deaths at card games. Happens all the time."

"She got up to go pee and got crunched. End of story!" I shouted at him, then pointed a hoof up at where the Eater was waiting for me. "I don't have time for this now!"

"Right. You've got a debt to pay," he said, chuckling. "Still, no time like the present. How'd you get your cutie mark? How'd you *really* get it?"

I paused, pressing my head against the wall. It'd been an accident.

"Do you know what the cards on your flank really mean?" the Dealer asked as he held up an ace in one hoof and a queen of spades in the other.

"They're just stupid cards."

"Right. And that's just a stupid cutie mark," he responded with a laugh. "Ace of swords. Power. Focus. Determination. Victory. I did this once for you before, if you recall." He turned it upside down. "Confusion. Chaos. Lack of clarity. Sounds like both sides of your life."

My jaw worked as I stared at the card, then at the queen of spades, depicting Luna in profile with a sword. "And that one?"

"Queen of swords. Quick thinker, decisive... executioner." He practically purred the word. "And while you might not have deliberately chopped off the heads of your prisoners, you really never took that many prisoners to begin with. You are frightfully good at killing." He turned the card upside down. "Overly emotional, vindictive, morose... and bitchy." He scratched his bony chin. "How many enemies have you had who haven't died horrible deaths?"

"It was just a card game. Just an accident... " I whimpered, clenching my eyes shut. Don't think about it. She'd gotten up to go pee. Simple as that.

"Of course. She goes to pee and gets crushed. Happens all the time." I stared at him, mentally begging him to stop. "Woe to those poor fools who saw your flank and thought it was nothing more than playing cards. Even Cognitum's assumption it was victory was dreadfully naïve. If anypony with a bit of sense had seen your flank, they would have run the other way and never stopped." He paused

as I swallowed, and then returned to his refrain, “How’d you get your cutie mark, Blackjack?”

What did it matter? He wasn’t real. I tuned him out, or tried to, as I struggled to climb. The shaft I’d blasted with Folly groaned and twisted around me, but every time I turned around, there was the Dealer. Shuffling cards. Smiling. Waiting for the answer. I reached for a beam, and when it pulled free, I was so preoccupied that I fell a dozen feet and got peppered by metal and debris. He leaned over me. “How’d you get your mark?” he repeated.

I groaned, pushing myself to my hooves. What would it hurt to tell him? “It was Hatches. I don’t remember what her real name was. We just called her Hatches.” I closed my eyes. “First one to leave always gets picked up by security. The others had won, and it was either going to be me or her leaving first. Getting picked up after curfew was three days locked in rehabilitation cells, or flogging. So Hatches and I had one more round to see who’d leave first. I lost.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Then I was such a whiny baby about it that she agreed to leave first anyway. Nice about it, though. Claimed she had to pee,” I muttered with a wistful smile that soon withered. “But the door’s sensor had malfunctioned. She walked through, and it closed on her. Killed her…but I didn’t get in trouble or have to tattle on the others at the game,” I said lowly.

“So you won,” the Dealer chuckled. “And all it cost you was a life.”

“I didn’t kill Hatches,” I muttered. “I didn’t want her dead. She was nice to me. Closest thing I had to a friend!” I insisted as I resumed my ascent. I didn’t have time for this shit. “Go away. I’ve got a job to do.”

Once again, he was in my path. “I’m sure.” He was silent for a second, empty sockets almost pitying, then asked as calm and cool as poison, “What was her real name, Fishie?”

I quivered, hot tears on my cheeks. “I didn’t kill her,” I repeated, the words sounding like a prayer.

“Right. But people who help you do have a nasty tendency to turn up dead,” he said with a chuckle. “Always somepony there to take the bullet. To die in your stead.”

“I never wanted that!” I shouted back at him. “I tried to save people!” Again my grip slipped, and I fell, spreading my wings to catch myself, and got pelted by rubble. I coughed and wiped gritty muck from my eyes. Was that sky up there? I was so close...

The sardonic smirk was all the reply he needed, but he went on, relentlessly, “Sure. You didn’t even want to kill your enemies. You just turned them into friends.” His grin widened. “How’d that work out for them, again?”

I quivered as I stared at the death awaiting me above. “Nopony should have died for me... ” I whispered.

“Why? You were always ready to die for them. They were just better at it than you were.” He made a show of inspecting my body. “And when you didn’t have anypony to do that, well... look at what a pound of flesh can buy.”

Finally, I balked and paused my ascent, staring at him as pebbles and scree rained down into my mane. He stared back, confident and smug as a skull could be. “Who are you? You’re not my crazy... and I don’t think you’re the Eater, either... ”

“No? Well, who can tell for sure?” The Dealer took his hat off. “If I were anything... and I’m not saying I am... I’d call me the Wasteland.” And he gave me a little bow.

“The Wasteland?” I echoed as I stared at him.

“The desolation. The loss. The pain and sacrifice. I take you... all of you... and I make your lives living, bloody hell. I twist you. I tear you. I see what you’re all made of. How far you can go. Where, exactly, you break.” He showed cards of me after the *Seahorse*. Of me outside Maripony right before the bomb went off. Of Shadowbolt Tower dying. “And you... Blackjack... you’re a pony who should have fallen a hundred times over. I try, and I try, and I try... but I can’t *quite* get you.”

“I don’t die easily,” I retorted, eyes narrowing.

“I don’t have to kill you to get you,” he said with a laugh. “I get everyone sooner or later, though. Everyone. You think I’m some desolate landscape? I’m everywhere. In Elysium and Flank. In the skies of the Enclave and the depths of your stable. Everywhere there’s contempt, ambition, avarice, and callousness. I was here before the war, and I’ll be here no matter what ‘civilization’ pops up, because murder and corruption, hatred and intolerance... those never change.” He pressed a bony hoof to his chest. “And for some reason, people love me.”

“I don’t,” I hissed.

“But of course you do!” He laughed. “Weren’t you always hating yourself for being a screwup? You’re now the most dangerously competent pony in the Wasteland. Weren’t you always hating your

tiny little horn and lack of magic? Well, you're descended from Twilight Sparkle now! Weren't you pining for friends and lovers? I've given you more than a few!" He cackled. "I am so generous, like you. I give people what they crave! What they yearn for more than anything!" He swept his hoof towards the ceiling above me. "And now, I give you what you desire most... a heroic death." He leered at me. "Make it a good one. You've none left to die for you." Then he evaporated with a last laugh.

I hadn't killed Hatches, but there was no doubt I had benefitted from her death... from so many deaths... The spring from which the river of blood flowed. "One last round, then time to cash out," I croaked, then whispered, "Ante up."

I pulled myself through the last few dozen feet.

The hole opened up in the very bottom of the Eater's nest. The concave structure made of the dozens of skyscrapers spread away from me in every direction, the broken tips pointing up towards the skies. Six walls of magic surrounded the nest, radiating up towards the heavens. The storm whirled around me silently, discharging bolts of lightning into the sheets of magic and making them flare brilliantly. Power cables and pipes lay strewn every which way, the former snapping and smoking as they routed power from who knew where to the F.A.D.E. shields while the latter oozed red flesh. Unlike the nightmares I'd faced below, this meaty sludge seemed content to just trickle like runny magma, oozing this way and that to form strange fleshy objects. Gruesome as they were, they appeared to be benign; nevertheless, I kept my distance.

And in the middle: the Eater, sitting on its bed of silver wire. Directly above glowed the moon, and shining brilliantly bright... Tom. A luminous swarm of souls swirled in a hollow column in the middle of the ring. Thousands of souls. Millions. And more were being added as I watched, glowing trickles flowing into the mass.

I spread my wings and flew around it, readying on my left the shotgun that held the moonstone rounds and on my right the riot shotgun, both now sporting glossy black finishes decorated with stars and moons. Up close, the Eater's two rows of silver spines no longer appeared uniform and unblemished. The central ring of the Tokomare was wrapped in rusty steel scaffolding and supports, and numerous beams and braces spanned the individual spines. The seemingly smooth surface was rough and mottled up close, with holes chewed clear through revealing green gemstones and lines of

eldritch power that beat like a heart. Countless mechasprites, emerging from swollen hives of starmetal and tumorous flesh, were at work moving wires and cables around, chewing up deformed blobs of starmetal, and vomiting it forth to smooth out the spines they buzzed around.

I landed on a spine and felt my insides lurch. Though gravity still pulled me down, it felt as if an inexplicable force were tugging me sideways as well. I trotted along the immense ring, the swarms paying me no mind. Perhaps the Eater was unaware of me at this point, or simply saw me as another soul drawn to it.

That isn't going to last long, I thought as I remembered Glory's plan and sought out a larger section of the structure, where the ring was thicker and the spines a little thinner. Here was where one of the inner F.A.D.E. shield generators was supposed to be housed in a starmetal box. The inner shields were inactive, but that wouldn't last long either. I quickly spotted the box and wiped off the grime that covered it. 'F.A.D.E. I-1' was still legible under the dirt and gore. I backed away, readied the shotgun... and then spotted the terminal.

It was still active, despite evidently having been submerged. Probably the finest design Stable-Tec had to offer. I walked to it and cleared away the filth. The screen flickered a bit, but it worked. It showed an image of the Tokomare and scrolling data. 'Simulation' flashed in the corner, and I watched as Tom descended and was captured. As he was consumed, the Tokomare grew and merged with the surrounding nest. Then new towers sprang up around it, and a dome formed over the machine. More towers grew out radially, not just replacing the Core but crossing the river and growing across the land like a giant crystal. It was all very symmetrical and neat. There were parks marked on the display. Schools. Commercial centers.

Down at the bottom flashed a notice. 'Pending EC-1101 Clearance'.

I flipped open my PipBuck and loaded the program. Tame the Tokomare, or destroy the Eater of Souls? Restore civilization with the push of a button, helping so many ponies who had suffered from my actions, or destroy a parasite consuming the life of the planet itself? With the push of a button, I could make it all better. Security saves ponies. Princesses protect their subjects...

I stared at EC-1101. It would be so easy. So simple...

And I had never taken the easy road. Ever.

I pointed the moonstone shotgun at the casing and pulled the trigger.

The lead slug struck the starmetal casing and flattened against it, spreading out. In the center of the blob of metal, a small rock of moonstone flared brighter and brighter, and I jumped behind a spine as it exploded. The moonstone was hardly done, though. There was another loud pop. Then another, as it landed, reacted, and was launched aloft again. The reaction had taken out half the casing, leaving the F.A.D.E. talisman dangling from a dozen or so wires, a large crack running through the diamond in the center. I didn't leave fate to chance: I pulled the trigger again.

The gem exploded in a glare of blinding white.

* * *

I blinked rapidly as my vision returned, voices coming from far away. "Are you alright, Blackjack?" a mare asked as I felt myself in a familiar bed. I quickly took stock of her, an earth pony mare, gray with a grayish-green mane, in Stable 99 barding. As I stared at her, she immediately smiled. "Oh, you are awake. I was so worried after that terminal overloaded. I can't believe I was so careless." I continued to stare, and she frowned. "Blackjack? Are you okay?"

"Duct Tape?" I asked thickly, sitting up in my bed, in my dirty, messy room. And she wasn't alone, either. Scotch Tape stood behind her, watching me shyly. "Scotch?"

"Scotch Tape," Duct Tape corrected, flushing a little. "Honestly, ponies are going to think I'm an alcoholic... " She shook her head, then recomposed herself. "She wanted to thank you as well."

"Thank you, Miss Blackjack. For saving my mom, I mean," Scotch said, brushing her mane out of her teal eyes.

I almost jumped out of bed. My legs were my legs. My horn... my horn. The pair backed away as I gaped at my own reflection. With the exception of nasty bedmane, I looked... like I should. "What happened?" I asked the others. "I was shocked?"

"Badly. You've been out for months," Duct Tape explained. "When you showed signs of waking up, they moved you here." I pushed past the pair of them into the hall. It was my stable. It looked the same. Smelled the same. "Blackjack?" Duct Tape asked in concern.

"Where's Mom?" I asked tensely as I levitated over my baton.

"In security–" she said, but I was already trotting. Running,

actually, and not to security. This wasn't possible... but if it were... if it were... I raced through the halls.

And a pair of hoofcuffs appeared around my forelegs. I tripped and went sprawling across the floor, rolling in the direction of the fall to raise myself to my hooves. "Hey, nice recovery," Daisy said with a grin, Marmalade smiling behind her. "Guess being out for three months helped you keep on your hooves."

I didn't hesitate this time. My magic picked the simple lock to the cuffs, and I pulled them off. "Don't try and stop me," I told them, and Daisy's grin became a confused frown as I pointed the baton at her. "Where's P-21?" I demanded.

"P... wha?" Daisy asked, clearly baffled. I turned my back on her and continued. If this really was Stable 99, then there were going to be two changes, right now. I ran right up to medical, the pair following me and shouting my name. I stormed into the medical office, ready to kick flank and beat in skulls.

"Blackjack! You're awake!" Doctor Syringe said brightly, smiling in clear welcome. Only one thing kept me from bashing the unicorn's blue face in.

The earth pony stallion in stable barding next to her. He was just as blue as her, his mane thick and shaggy, his eyes deep but untroubled. "I can come back later," P-21 said evenly to the doctor, looking back at the dots and male mark on his flank. "I've lived with it for my whole life. I can wait a little longer."

She immediately flushed. "I'm sorry you had to wait at all. Now that we've got a sane Overmare, hopefully things can get better."

"Sane... Overmare?" I asked weakly.

"Oh, right. You missed a lot," Syringe said with a frown. "That little monster who used to be in charge is currently locked up till we can figure out how to deal with her. Your mom's the interim Overmare," she said, then regarded P-21 as she continued over my stunned bafflement, "One of the first things she did was audit the breeding program and institute reforms." She hung her head. "There's no way to make up for what we did... "

"No, there isn't," P-21 said grimly with a frown at her. "But you're trying to do better. That's all that counts." He clearly worked to repress his anger as he regarded me curiously.

"She... did?" I asked faintly, unable to tear my eyes off him.

"You sound so surprised," a voice said behind me.

I turned, gaping at the lavender mare with pink eyes and striped

mane. “Mom?” I asked, my voice croaking.

“Come up to my office. I can fill you in on everything that’s happened,” she told me.

So we did. Overmare Gin Rummy had learned of the Overmare’s plot to kill Duct Tape with the terminal and sell us out to raiders, deposed her, and then, a few weeks later, risked opening up the stable to trade with the Wasteland. Apparently, they’d hit things off wonderfully with a group of traders in Megamart led by a mare named Bottlecap. Mom had sat by my bed and told me all about the ponies she’d encountered since opening up the stable while I’d been in my coma. Bottlecap, Charity, Priest... Big Daddy and Doctor Triage... even the VC and Enclave. Rampage was the rude representative of the Reapers, and Morning Glory was with the Thunderhead ponies.

When she finished, I simply sat there.

Everything I’d gone through. Everything I’d been through... a dream?

“You can talk to them yourself. Now that you’re awake, I think a celebration is in order,” Mom told me, patting my shoulder. “Just give me a moment. We have fresh food. Fresh! Hee. No more recycled food. Isn’t it wonderful?” she asked, checking me.

“Yeah. Wonderful,” I said as I stared into her eyes. There was something I had to say. “I love you, Mom.” And I hugged her tight.

It seemed to surprise her. “I love you too, Fishie,” she said as she booped my nose lightly, then turned and trotted out of the office. I stared after her, then looked out the window. Out there were all the ponies I loved and cared about, alive and well. The stallions were freed. The Overmare deposed. My stable was helping the Wasteland.

Could this be real?

I stared at my own reflection, trying to think it through. Could Mom have deposed the Overmare? Yes. Could she have listened to Rivets and opened the door? Yes. Could she have told me about her own experiences, leading my shock-addled brain to weave a grand and terrible adventure from them? Maybe.

Would she have freed the stallions?

Not in a million years.

My mom had been a good mare, but she’d believed in 99. She’d never shown the slightest concern or consideration for their well-being beyond what was needed for them to service the mares. She

liked stallions based on how they'd performed sexually, not for the people they were. She'd never hesitated to retire one, even my father. As much as I hated to admit it, Mom had been complicit in their abuse.

This was the dream.

Not all that surprising, either. Tom had plopped us almost casually into a dream to speak to us, and now the Eater was doing it to lock me up. And since I hadn't been obliterated, time had to be passing faster here than in the real world, just like with Tom. The only problem was that there was no Tom to end the dream. "Wake up," I told myself. Nothing. I closed my eyes and bashed my head against the wall next to the round window, but other than giving myself a splitting headache, I was still here in 99.

I'd had lots of experience in mindscapes though, and I had Luna. Ending a dream wasn't as easy as just trotting out of the stable. If the door was open, then the dream would just continue. There had to be something stopping me from ending this dream. My friends. My loved ones. Even my annoying enemies... pretty pathetic compared to what I'd come to deal with. I needed this dream to stop. Suicide was risky. If I just killed myself, I might be offing my ability to fight back. I had to reject this dream.

There was one way...

I heard Mom approaching, and my magic shut the door in her face, locking it. "Blackjack?" she called out as I walked to the controls. "Blackjack, this isn't funny!" she shouted, beating on the door. "What are you doing in there?!"

"Waking up," I said as I opened up the commands to the rigged ventilators. Rivets always had been bad at taking care of special jobs that weren't on the schedule.

Mom. P-21. Scotch Tape and her mother. Everypony I'd loved growing up...

I flipped the switch and immediately smelled the chlorine tang. A few seconds later, the screaming started. The screaming that I would never, ever, be able to forget.

"Blackjack! You murderer!" But this time there was no Lacunae to teleport me away. This time, I went with my stable.

* * *

I snapped open my eyes, staring at the bits of diamond bouncing

out of the breached casing. In my mind, it had been hours, but here just the blink of an eye. “You’re going to have to do better than that,” I muttered.

The entire Enervation scream seemed to deepen into an ominous rumble. I ran along the central ring between the spines rising to either side of me. Was it just me, or were they starting to move? ‘Morph’ might have been a better term, the way they were bending into each other and curling inwards. The mechasprites at work around the Eater suddenly burst into action, becoming a whirling blizzard of shrapnel that streaked straight at me. I didn’t blink, fire, or hesitate as I raced straight at the swarm. When they were close enough that I could see the tiny drill teeth in their mechanical mouths, I teleported right through the metallic plague to the far side.

The swarm took a second to reverse and come after me. The rest were in a frenzy to complete something. Liquid gunk was leaking from tubes, flowing over the metal and assembling into pinkish-maroon tissues. If the F.A.D.E. shield generators were covered in flesh, that’d make it harder to disable them. I reached the second case a sixth of the way around the Eater and took aim.

The slug struck and stuck. I took cover as the reaction took place, the droning buzz of the mechasprites rising as they descended upon me. As before, the cover was blasted completely off, and the moonstone fragment that remained went flying. I caught it with my magic, redirecting it into the starmetal behind me as I rushed to the F.A.D.E. talisman. The fragment must have wedged somewhere, because the entire rock reacted at once, blowing me and the bots away in a single detonation. I groaned as I landed sprawled on my face in front of the generator. Squinting through one eye, I aimed Duty at the talisman, and–

* * *

“Luna, what are you doing?” Celestia asked, giving me a slightly baffled smile as I pointed a pencil at her. We were in my personal study, one of the few places in the palace where nopony was supposed to go. Books decorated the walls, though many of them were my own notebooks on various ponies I kept tabs on. Ponies who needed my help when they were alone and sleeping. The terminal on my desk had access to all the ministries, and the O.I.A.,

as well as dozens of other secret sources. So many secrets...

Of course, try telling your sister that she's not allowed to go somewhere in a palace that used to be hers. "They're all waiting for you, you know," the white alicorn said as she looked over my shoulder at a tablet of paper. "Drawing Blackjack again?"

I blinked at her, then at the pad of paper showing the cybernetic alicorn. She was collapsed on the Tokomare, bleeding as she pointed a revolver at a talisman, her eyes narrowed in focus. "I really don't see the appeal, Luna. Blackjack. LittlePip. Why do you obsess over failure and disaster when the war is finally over?"

"Over?" I asked. "When?"

"Luna, you've been working too hard." Celestia rolled her eyes. "It's all over but for the official signing of the peace treaty. Which, incidentally, is what everypony is waiting for... right now."

"Peace treaty?" I set the pad down. "How? That's not possible."

"I used to think so too," Celestia sighed. "I just couldn't bear it. But you persevered where I failed, and the Caesar has finally admitted that continued war will simply result in megaspell annihilation." She put a wing across my withers. "His ambassadors are here, and after reading the treaty myself, I can confirm that they're offering quite favorable terms for us. Apparently the Caesar's at risk of rebellion if he continues the war, too, and was willing to be generous." Celestia looked at me oddly. "Are you alright, Luna? You haven't been the same since the Gala."

"I... peace?" I asked weakly. Celestia gave me a nudge, and I rose to my hooves. She began to dress me in formal garb. "It just... it... " I looked at the pad of paper and levitated it, letting her dress me up in my best black silk and diamond gown. I flipped through picture after picture, looking at notes written in the margins of each.

"Once everything has settled down, you really should write those stories. It doesn't hurt to have a hobby, and you've always been more creative than anypony gives you credit for," Celestia said as she put the silver and moonstone crown atop my head. Standing before me, she sighed and smiled sadly. "I also want to apologize."

"For... what?"

"I haven't been very helpful. I thought abdication would ease my conscience and let me focus on the school, leaving you to sort out my mess. My... meddling... at Shattered Hoof didn't help." Her smile faded, regret etched in her face. "I should have trusted you more. Supported you more, as you supported me through the war.

But I can see now that you're the Princess Equestria needs."

I stared at her, then walked to the mirror. My books were on the shelves, and all over the space were notes on the various disguises I'd worn when I couldn't bear to be Princess Luna. Eclipse, the black pegasus agent, was only the most well-worn of them. I was used to running away into fantasy when life became unbearable. Outside was Equestria, vibrant and alive. I could hear Pinkie's music, and from the fancy wagons arriving outside the palace, all the nobles would be there.

"This is a dream," I murmured.

"A dream come true," Celestia corrected in that vaguely annoying way she had. She probably didn't even know she did it. "Come. Everypony is waiting."

Together we walked down the hall, past two guards, past two others, and into the ballroom. Immediately the entire hall broke into cheers and stomps. I balked, but Sister's wing was at my shoulder, and I halted, looked to her, and received her nod. I hated crowds like this. Nowhere to hide. All eyes on me, waiting for me to mess up. At the end of the room stood my dark marble throne, decorated in stars, and the smaller, plainer throne beside it for my sister. Three chairs stood on either side of the thrones, and in front of them all was a long table.

Seated at it were five of the six Ministry Mares. Only Pinkie Pie was absent, her seat occupied by another mare. Goldenblood lingered back behind and to the right of my throne, wearing only formal castle livery like the rest of my servants. I trotted past a visibly pregnant Applejack, a radiantly happy Fluttershy, and an aged yet composed Twilight Sparkle. As I took my seat in the middle, Rarity leaned over with a wide smile and whispered, "Where have you been, Your Majesty? The cameras have been rolling for hours!"

"I was... " Drawing? Thinking about the Wasteland? Drawing the conclusion to an epic struggle of good and evil? "Occupied."

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped," Rarity said with a sigh, then waved to somepony in the crowd. "Smile and wave, Your Majesty. This is your finest moment!"

I raised a hoof and waved to the gentleponies as Celestia took her seat slightly behind me, looking over at Pinkie's. "Pinkie?" I asked the mares quietly.

"Still in rehab," Twilight answered me, her voice barely audible

through the cheering. “Thank you for keeping it quiet. I know the Cakes are taking good care of her, but I don’t think even Rarity could stop the media from hounding her if they knew of the scandal.”

Of course. I kept secrets. The night excelled at hiding things... even things that shouldn’t be hidden. Things that would eat you up if you didn’t drag them into the light and deal with them. “Ready, Your Majesty?” Goldenblood rasped from my right. “It’s all taken care of. All you need to do is sign.”

“But... peace? The zebras would never... ”

“We knew they would. It was a mathematical certainty,” Goldenblood answered. “Also, I ordered you more art supplies. For LittlePip and Blackjack.”

I scowled at him. “Can’t I have anything private?” I huffed.

“It is private,” he rasped softly, then looked to the head of the hall. “They’ll come in. I’ll read the terms. You and the Ministry Mares will sign. There will be a reception. I’ve got your speech ready.” His smile wavered. “Are you alright, Your Majesty?”

Was I? “It just seems... impossible.” And wrong, but yet so very right!

“Continued hostilities would have been his downfall. No leader can fight a war without the will of the people... or at least a clear majority,” Goldenblood said confidently. “I’m sure he’s quite desperate to present the peace accord to his own tribal leaders.” He gestured to the front of the hall, where thirteen zebra dignitaries were trotting in, the room suddenly silent save for the snapping of cameras. They were bedecked in elaborate outfits that spoke of their tribal affiliations. Grain for the Carnilia. Swamp orchids for the Orah.

When they stood before the table, the leader, in traditional Roamani plate armor, trotted forward. A stallion levitated a scroll and started to read the terms, his voice booming out as my eyes swept over so many different ponies. There were Charity and Bottlecap. Over there, Big Daddy. Brutus was a royal guard. Glory stood in Shadowbolt armor, and P-21 in Royal Guard barding.

“The zebras admit fault in instigating and prosecuting the war. For this, the zebras beg forgiveness,” the stallion read out, his voice ringing; the zebra’s jaw worked, his eyes staring straight ahead. “The Equestrian people accept and give it, in exchange for economic restitution for the damages of the war.”

I stared from one Ministry Mare to the next. Pregnant Applejack. Tired Twilight. Triumphant Rarity. Goldenblood smiling from behind the throne. Peace. Prosperity. A thousand years of Princess Luna ascendant. A dream come true.

"The zebra people admit fault in misappropriating ancient superstition for propaganda purposes. The zebras formally recognize that Princess Luna is not the entity known as Nightmare Moon, and beg forgiveness for their insult." The stallion droned on. Could I have created the Wasteland as a story in my own mind? A distraction from the horrors of war? A place where, no matter how bad the war became, I could escape for a time? "The Equestrian people give forgiveness for this insult, provided the zebra people allow pony moderators to ensure this lie is stripped forever from zebra lore." I considered the grieving face of Sekashi, who looked as if a friend had been sentenced to death.

A healthy Equestria. A whole Equestria. And who knew what the future could be?

"The zebras admit fault in the murder of innocent foals in the Littlehorn Massacre," the stallion said, his voice dull and heavy. "Let history remember them for their crime for all time. Let them surrender a number of their own foals for re-education by the Equestrian people, each year, as restitution for this atrocity."

I sat bolt upright, cutting off the stallion reading the terms. "What?" I murmured.

"It is only fitting after what they've done," Goldenblood murmured behind me. Then he spoke up, "Perhaps we should simply skip to the signing."

I watched at the paper was passed to Fluttershy, who nearly glowed with pleasure as she signed it. Then two zebras stepped forward to sign as well, the Mendi tribe of healers being the first. The willow branch crown the dignitary wore clearly marked her as such. Then to Applejack. Then back...

And all the while, my mind worked. Was it possible that the Caesar would surrender? Yes. I'd always known it would take a political shift back home to do it, but it was possible. Like all leaders, he would do what he had to to keep his seat, though this humiliation would disgrace him till his eventual removal. And would they admit that calling me Nightmare Moon had been pure propagandistic nonsense? Perhaps.

But would my sister happily accept tearing zebra children from

their families for indoctrination in Equestria?

No.

I stared as the paper was passed back and forth, mark after mark being put down. It wasn't fair! This was how it was supposed to have gone. An end to the war. A triumph for Princess Luna. A strong and secure Equestria where my people loved me!

All things I never deserved in the first place.

I stared out the window at the glowing jewel that was Equestria... a jewel smashed and squandered on war. It was a good land, and had things been different, I would have been worthy to lead it.

I wasn't.

But if this was a dream, then how to end it? The dream could go on and on, easily lasting a thousand years or longer. I watched Twilight sign with a weary smile of satisfaction as it returned to the next two. Refuse to sign? But I had to sign. This was a peace signing. If I refused to sign, the dream would go on, stuck on this moment.

The Roamani delegate, the last, signed. Then it was slipped in front of me. Every eye was upon me. My people. My sister. My Ministry Mares. My friend. Everypony stared at me, waiting for me to be the good Princess I wanted to be. To step fully into Celestia's horseshoes...

If only. I levitated the pen. Down, at the bottom, was a line marked 'Princess of Equestria:'. If only…If only...

I rammed the pen right through the parchment. The dull ripping was like a scream in the silent room as I continued the violation, tearing it in two. Then I rose to my hooves, thundering in the old voice for addressing my subjects, "You think this meager offering sufficient!? You will never have peace! Not while a single one of you accursed zebra walk free! You shall have war! You shall have slaughter! You shall not have forgiveness, but annihilation!"

The room exploded in shouts. Shouts from Ministry Mares, outraged that I had thrown peace aside. Cries of concern from my sister... my wonderful, kind... sister... Bellows and proclamations of doom from the zebras. Silence from Goldenblood.

It didn't matter now. The dream could only continue to two ends: the removal of Princess Luna from the throne, or the annihilation in balefire.

Either way, the dream of Princess Luna's Equestria was dead.

* * *

Emerging from the hallucination, I stared at the sight of the pieces of F.A.D.E. generator flying every which way, smoke rising from the barrel as I shook. Luna's dream... but that dream was gone, and now I returned to my nightmare. One where I fought on the body of an enormous monstrosity from beyond. A monstrosity with defenders, and not just mechasprite hordes. The fleshy glop had assembled itself into a host of horrid scuttling things that now crawled at me from every direction.

To my left, the riot shotgun fired a dozen rounds, flechettes tearing into fanged maws. To my right, Duty and Sacrifice blew meaty holes in the faces of the faceless. My sword swept to and fro before me, slicing neatly again and again into uncaring flesh. It made no difference. I could not defeat these enemies with bullets and blade alone. In desperation, I threw together my bullet spell with the shield thingy I'd attempted earlier, and a sphere of brilliant white energy exploded out from me. The bubble swelled, pushing the rising, abominable tide back long enough for me to take to the air.

So did they. Buzzing chitinous wings, fleshy membranes, and greasy quills erupted from the creatures as they swarmed after me. I swooped and soared amid the spines, looping around the thick central ring. Every few seconds I'd twist around in midair, flying backwards as I blasted my pursuers with magic and bullet alike. A volley of shooting stars streaked out at them, seeking the nearest creatures and burning them with white-blue flames. Still, it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. This was a distraction, keeping me occupied.

I needed more time. An opportunity I could use to find the remaining F.A.D.E. shield generators and destroy them. As I streaked along the Eater, I glanced down at my hoof. A flip, and I stared at EC-1101.

Control the Eater.

Could I?

Dare I?

I flipped around and around the central ring, letting Luna do the flying. Soon I was chasing the rear of the swarm chasing me. A thin smile crossed my lips as I opened fire. The rear of the swarm turned, some pulling inside out as they reversed direction and dove straight at me. I waited, smiling. Wait for it. Wait for...

In a blink, I disappeared, and from the far side of the Eater I watched as half the swarm collided headlong into the other half, the mass dissolving into a cannibalistic frenzy of gnashing, wriggling meat. It wouldn't take long for them to sort themselves out. I made straight for one of the mucky terminals. If I could control things for just a few minutes and stop the Eater's interference, I could eliminate the remaining F.A.D.E. shields and get out.

Through the swarm of hungry nightmares, I spotted the light of a terminal jutting like a glowing cyst from the Eater's flesh. I teleported to it at once, banging the spacebar to make sure it still worked. Opening the back, I plugged the wires from my PipBuck into it. I could already hear the swarm, a curious rustling accompanied by a slimy sucking noise. I just had to use the program... take control...

Just like Cognitum.

I froze, staring at the screen and my reflection in it. Cognitum... she'd believed the Eater was just a machine. A dangerous one, but ultimately one that was simply malfunctioning. Fix the malfunction, fix the machine, fix the problem, fix the Wasteland. Save the Wasteland. Save the world.

Just like Dawn.

Tools were made to be used. They weren't good or evil. They simply were. I'd used my guns to kill hundreds, maybe thousands. That didn't make the guns evil. Was there any point in simply obliterating it? The ultimate waste of technology was to destroy it, forfeiting not only the use the technology would give but all the resources that had been spent in its creation. Whether I loathed it or not, this was just a device to be used. After all that had gone into raising this machine over the centuries, all the pain, strife and death, didn't I have a *responsibility* to use it?

Just like Steel Rain.

But I'd use it to save my friends. My stable. My loved ones! Certainly they were worth saving. I couldn't just let LittlePip and her friends die! Couldn't let everyone die when I had the means to protect them and give them the future they deserved! My ends justified these means!

Just like Sanguine.

Sweetie Bot had said that the program would link me to the Eater. It sounded so simple to assume that everything would go my way.

That I could be hooked up to this colossal thing and be the one in control. But I'd been flesh and blood once, and blissfully reminded of that state for a moment in my blank body. There were consequences when you connected a pony to something they weren't ready to handle.

Just like Deus.

I didn't need to see the swarm to know it was racing up towards me. Gnashing, squealing, chomping, hissing, buzzing, flapping, scratching noises rushed at me with the growing volume of an avalanche. I didn't need to rush, though. I simply closed my eyes, smiled, and pressed a button.

And got rid of EC-1101 once and for all.

I wasn't sure what dumping a megaspell, uncontrolled and directionless, into the Eater would do. For an instant, I had a mental picture of immense magical power contained within a crystalline matrix of incomprehensible beauty and complexity. Then that matrix exploded into a billion fiery stars, and I opened my eyes as the scream sounded... not an Enervation scream, nor the scream of the monstrosities about to consume me. No, this was a physical scream that seemed to emanate from every direction at once. And there was one unquestionable aspect to it:

Pain.

The swarm collapsed into maroon splatters behind me as the entire massive structure heaved under me. I lapsed into S.A.T.S., but even that couldn't help me hit the cover of the F.A.D.E. shield generator. Two shots went wild, exploding against spines that seemed to be splintering, melting, and reforming before my eyes. I aimed along the barrel as those two fragments of moonstone each gave a final burst of bright white--

* * *

The whiteness faded, but what took its place made no sense. Everything blurred and swirled around, and somepony kept saying "Fish? Are you there, Fish?" from a million miles away. The blurs congealed themselves into shapes... books on bookshelves. A portrait of the Princesses over a cold fireplace. A clock with a pendulum slowly swaying. A desk. A pony behind that desk...

Goldenblood.

The scarred unicorn wore a sweater vest and a pair of black wire

frame spectacles that he peered over at me. As I focused on him, he gave a relieved smile. “Oh, good, the drugs are working. We finally have lucidity,” he said calmly. “Welcome back, Go Fish.”

“T’not m’name… ” I muttered thickly. What was going on here? “Yer suppst t’be ded,” I said as I squinted at him. I lifted my hooves and felt them draw short with restraints. “Let me go,” I growled at him.

“In time, Fish. When you’re more coherent and cooperative. I’m very glad this new drug cocktail is working. Doctor Trueblood really outdid himself,” Goldenblood rasped, his voice low and gravelly. “How are you, Go Fish? It’s been awhile since we’ve been able to have a talk like this. We came close, once, but you slipped away before we could make any significant progress.”

I narrowed my eyes. “This is a dream,” I muttered as I glared at him.

“Oh?” he asked with a mild smile as he leaned back in his worn, upholstered chair.

“You’re the Eater of Souls, trying to stall me from destroying you and saving the world,” I growled at him. Goldenblood didn’t say anything. He just cocked one brow, watching me with those annoyingly curious eyes. I glared around the office, then back at him. “You’ve stuck me in this dream of Happyhorn to convince me I’m crazy so I won’t do what has to be done.”

“Right. Save the world. Because that’s the only thing that will make up for your mistakes, isn’t it?” Goldenblood replied flatly. I felt the padded restraints on my hooves. Tugging would be too obvious. I needed to engage him till I could figure out how to get out of here. “In your long litany of failures and mistakes, the only way for you to atone is to suffer, and, since your failures are monumentally greater than all of ours, mundane suffering wouldn’t be enough; you have to ritualistically self-inflict horrible injuries to make the world a greater place. To save it. Is that right, Fish?”

“That’s not my name,” I growled at him.

“I’ll call you by your nickname if you’ll openly consider what I have to say,” Goldenblood said evenly, putting his hooves together in front of his muzzle. “Deal?”

I started to flex and relax my forelegs, giving a little tug with each. To him, hopefully, it wouldn’t appear as if I was trying to pull free. “Fine,” I answered. “Say your piece.”

“Blackjack, you’re sick. You’re here at Happyhorn to protect you

from self-harm while we struggle to treat you. Once, you were a police pony with aspirations of following your mother into the Royal Guard. You failed to protect one pony... a filly... and from that, your decay into increasingly self-destructive behavior and delusions commenced, eventually culminating in a complete split from reality. You've been here ever since."

"Right. Keep talking," I muttered, trying to think how to get out of this nightmare. The clock? The portrait? How could I end this? He wasn't talking though, so I had to. "If I'm crazy, why would I put myself in the Wasteland? Why would anypony?"

Goldenblood smiled paternally. "You'd be surprised how many psychotic breaks involve some kind of apocalyptic element. I'm working on a paper, actually. There's some deep-seated fantasy in pining away for the death of the civilized world. To some, it's a place of absolute freedom and liberty, where frustration can be met with responsibility-free violence. To others, it's an escape from the mundanity and tedium of life. For you, it's a place in which you feel like you can suffer as you deserve." He lifted a file as thick as my hoof and took out some withered pages. "Think about it, Blackjack. You got out into the Wasteland, and the first thing you did was run into foals needing your help. You failed one." He checked another paper. "A short time later, you killed forty foals. You magnified the failure of one to an unforgivable degree." Another paper. "Failed to prevent zebras from getting killed. Failed to protect mares wearing 'bomb collars'." Another, and he chuckled. "Killed everypony in your bunker home." He just smiled at me and then shook his head. "Every time you start to feel better, you find some horrible way to make things worse for yourself. You simply cannot forgive yourself for one mistake."

"Right. I want to kill helpless ponies," I scoffed.

"You want to suffer," Goldenblood countered wearily. "Back when you were lucid, you engaged in increasingly self-destructive behavior. The risky sex. The binge drinking. Masochism. Self-mutilation. You're punishing yourself for that one mistake you made, where you failed to save a filly." He sighed, opening the tometic file to bookmarked pages. "For a time, I hoped we were going to make a breakthrough, but it seemed your delusions magnified. Trying to stop a war in the sky? Going to the moon to stop a superweapon? Fighting some 'Eater of Souls' for the world? Does any of that sound even close to reality?"

“It’s not my fault,” I replied, not wanting to admit that he had a point. “And it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to believe none of that was real. I lost my friends... ponies I loved... ” I hissed, feeling hot tears on my cheeks. “It wasn’t just a crazy thing in my head!” I shouted at him, loathing the look of pity in his eyes. “How do you even know any of this?”

“While you have been mostly catatonic during your stay here, we’ve been monitoring your mental state regularly with magic,” he said, his lips still fixed in that faintly amused and patronizing smile. “I loved how you cast me as some nefarious government agent manipulating everything behind the scenes.”

“Right, so you became a psychologist after Littlehorn, is that it?” I snapped at him. Out! Where was the way out of this?

He sighed, rubbing his temples. “Blackjack, ‘Littlehorn’ never happened. The ‘great war’ never happened. They were ideas unfortunately implanted within your delusions by another patient here, which you eagerly adopted.”

“Then how’d you get your scars?” I demanded.

He gave a strained, almost dangerous smile, before answering lightly, “Housefire, in which I lost my wife and daughter.” I swallowed, glancing over at a picture of a pink-maned pegasus and small yellow-maned filly hanging by his desk. “Satisfied?” he asked thinly.

A sense of mortification stole over me. “Sorry,” I muttered, looking away, feeling for the first time that this might actually be real. “But it happened. How do you just make up a war like that?”

“Ponies have been writing fiction like that for ages, Blackjack.” The edge in his voice faded a bit as he went on with a touch of scorn, “But do you honestly think Princess Celestia and Princess Luna would ever, ever commit Equestria to a systematic butchering of another race? Especially zebras, who are a rational and caring people every bit as much as ponies?” When I didn’t answer, he sighed again and shook his head.

“So... Morning Glory and P-21…” I spat at him, trembling. “Rampage and Lacunae and Scotch Tape... LittlePip and her friends... you’re telling me they all don’t exist?”

“Of course they exist, Blackjack. You didn’t create all of your fantasy by yourself,” he said, his horn glowing. The restraints I’d been trying to tug out of suddenly loosened. “Come. I’ll show you.”

He led me towards the door where Doof and Lighthooves waited,

both wearing orderly uniforms. Both watched me with a wary eye, their gray and red hides bruised. “You sure about this, doc?” the earth pony asked.

“Yes, she needs to see while she’s still lucid,” Goldenblood said as he stepped into the hall. The pair fell in behind me.

“Easy for him to say,” the red pegasus muttered. “He’s not the one that’ll have to restrain her.”

“My balls still aren’t the same,” Doof replied.

“Yeah. Sorry about that,” I muttered, getting a surprised look, then a suspicious glare.

Goldenblood took me to a large window. “Here’s the Wasteland, Blackjack.”

Gazing through it, I looked down at a large room with about two dozen ponies. A third of them were wearing patient gowns, the others divided into nurses and orderlies. And there, surrounded by other patients, were my friends.

Glory sat with her singular wing, away from the group, looking over textbooks, her purple mane so beautiful as it fell across her face. P-21 also sat by himself, off in a corner, glaring warily out at the others. The scars around his neck were visible even from this distance. Rampage, covered in bandages and wearing a straitjacket, seemed to be having a conversation with herself at a table. Psalm, not Lacunae, sat nearby, rocking in place as her lips moved silently. Scotch Tape, looking faintly older than the filly I remembered, gazed out a window through bars at the world outside. LittlePip, strapped to a wheelchair in a straightjacket, appeared to be raving as a red-eyed stallion addressed her with a worn expression. Velvet Remedy sat singing to a rapt audience of none, while Calamity watched her with a hollow-eyed look. There were plenty of other ponies I didn’t know, too -- a vaguely familiar earth pony stallion conspicuously wrapped head to hoof in tinfoil, an absolutely adorable green pegasus stallion, a dishwater-gray unicorn surrounded by heaps of paper, scribbling words furiously, and a red-maned white mare with a neutral expression being visited by a green-and-gold-maned cream unicorn, for instance – but most were ponies I knew.

My friends...

“So they’re all crazy too?” I muttered, glaring at Goldenblood.

“Your delusions had their foundations in other patients here. Some were modified to fit your fantasy, others catered to you, lending

their own fractured self identities to your mindscape," he answered calmly.

"Morning Glory?"

"Nervous breakdown, suffering from intense stress and expectations about her success, leading to control issues and anxiety disorders."

"P-21?"

"Who? Oh, him. PTSD from repeated sexual traumas with high risk of suicide."

"Psalm?" I asked, testing him, but he didn't falter in the slightest.

"You recast her as Lacunae, a mother figure, which is understandable given your own mother's remoteness and untimely death. Schizophrenia."

"Rampage?"

"Dissociative Identity Disorder," he replied smoothly. "You should really call her Peppermint."

"Scotch?"

"Scotch Tape. Borderline Personality Disorder, stemming from early abandonment. She also suffers from the delusion that others are fictitious parents of hers. It's a... rather unique take on the standard transient, stress-related psychotic features that we sometimes see in those clients," he added with a faint smile.

Okay. What about the others? "LittlePip? Seriously?" I asked.

"You mean Pipsqueak? Where to begin?" Goldenblood actually grinned. "First there's her rampant substance abuse, which has led to permanent psychosis. Add that to Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and delusional disorder with delusions of reference and persecution…" He trailed off. "One pony controlling all the weather and 'saving the wastelands'? Sound familiar?"

I ignored that. "Velvet Remedy?"

"Narcissistic Personality Disorder and a severe case of delusional disorder. She is convinced that she's 'destined' to be the second coming of Fluttershy." Then, before I asked, he pointed at Calamity with a hoof. "PTSD from time served in the Royal Guard." He rubbed his chin. "They do work well together in group, though. Pity he feeds her need for reaffirmation. Ah well, there's always a dependent when there's a narcissist."

I huffed and just pointed at tinfoil pony, not having a clue where to start.

"Applesnack? Scopo and haphephobia." At my blank stare, he

sighed. “Fear of being seen and touched, as well as some associated depression issues. You’d think he was a monster under there.” I pointed at another, and he just gave me a parental smile. “We could do this all day, Blackjack, and you won’t learn any more than you have in group.”

Fine then. “What about me?”

His smile wavered a little and he took a moment before answering. “Perhaps one of the greatest cases for Complex PTSD that I’ve ever seen in my life. That, combined with an underlying Bipolar Disorder has created a, to be frank, fascinating mix of delusions, self-neglect, and impulsivity. You vary between utterly agitated to the point that we need to sedate you and catatonic depression where you don’t move for hours. You portray yourself as either the sole savior of the entire world or scum that deserves to be raped and mutilated. Or both. And you seek self-annihilation for perceived, unforgivable offenses that are amplified and re-amplified in your mind.”

“This is ridiculous!” I snapped as I turned away– and ran into Doof; immediately, both he and I tensed. What was I doing? Where was I going in a dream? “This isn’t real,” I said, wheeling on Goldenblood. “You’re dead!”

The scarred stallion sighed. “Blackjack, think about it. What is more likely: that you are fighting for your life in some irradiated nightmare, or that you are simply ill and need to get better? That you’re Security, facing incredible odds to save lives, or that you’re a mare who’s far too hard on herself and needs some help? That you’re the long-lost descendant of Twilight Sparkle with Princess Luna’s soul and a special spell that will save the world, or that you’re just a police pony who let one bad day completely consume her?”

I turned back to the observation window and stared down at them all. Was it all in my head? I simply couldn’t tell anymore. He put a hoof on my shoulder. “There is no Wasteland, Blackjack. There never was,” he rasped, like a grizzled uncle who smoked too much.

Then I imagined the sound of shuffling cards, and an equally grave voice intoning: *You think I’m some desolate landscape? I’m everywhere.*

A world without the Wasteland...

I closed my eyes. “That sounds really nice. Really,” I said in complete sincerity. “I’d like to get better. To have a simple life. Just be a pony... a simple... good... pony... ” Then I opened my eyes and

stared down at my friends. What would it be like to just going back to being just Blackjack? But as I gazed at my friends, something niggled at me. A malcontent little part of myself. I glanced at Goldenblood, in his glasses and sweater, his eyes full of concern. "There's just one thing I want from you. Something really simple."

Goldenblood's frown deepened. "Anything, if it will help."

"It will," I said as I stared through the window. "What is P-21's real name?"

There was no answer for several seconds, and I glanced at the baffled stallion. "What?" Goldenblood asked lightly.

"P-21. That stallion there," I said, pointing a hoof. "Though if you've been reading my mind, you know who I'm talking about." His eyes went to P-21 and then back to me. "Come on. You can't honestly tell me that his name is actually 'P-21'. So tell me his real name."

He continued to frown at me. "Blackjack, I can't just tell you... "

"Sure. Tell me this one thing! It'll be our little secret!" I said as I glared at him.

His eyes went from P-21 to me and back again. "Blue... Blue... um... hooves? Blue... buck... " He fumbled as his eyes twitched from me to the window repeatedly. Sweat trickled down his temple. "I can't remember. I'll have to check his file!"

"It's okay. He can tell me. Let's go," I said as I nodded at the window and started towards the stairs down to the room below. But Goldenblood and the other three weren't moving. I rounded on all of them. "You don't *know* what his real name is, do you?" I jabbed my hoof at the window. "Morning Glory. Psalm. Scotch Tape. Even 'Pipsqueak'... that was from LittlePip's book! So give me a name that's not from the Wasteland!" I shouted at him.

"You need to calm down!" Goldenblood replied in alarm. "Restrain her," he said to the two orderlies, who rushed in.

But I was through with mind games. The pair grabbed me with their hooves, but I didn't move. I just stared at Goldenblood. "You keep trying to trap me in dreams!" I shouted at him, the building starting to rumble and crack. "But I am the Princess of the Night, and you will constrain me no longer!" I bellowed as the cracks spread, now through the struggling, grunting stallions like they were cheap porcelain figurines. I seized that fundamental truth and pushed against this lie. I watched as Goldenblood's eyes went wide with fear before the world exploded into shards of darkness.

* * *

The interior of the *Seahorse*, with my legs nailed to the floor as stallions sweated and grunted against me. I ignored and pushed again, the ship creaking, the blackness of my sight cracking like smoked glass. Another dream. Another illusion! But I was through being distracted. I kept pushing my will against that blinding darkness. “Face me... ” I grunted as I concentrated. The darkness shattered.

* * *

Now I was standing in a restored Core, wearing the most ridiculous princess garb as thousands of Wastelanders all shouted their love and praise. Cognitum would have eaten it up. My friends were all alive, of course. It was like the Eater didn’t know what to throw against me anymore, but why was it bothering to throw anything against me at all? I stared straight ahead, denying the shoddy fantasy, watching the cracks creep down the black obsidian towers. “Face me!” I commanded over the crowd, and they disappeared like dust as the skyscrapers exploded into enormous shards falling into the sky.

* * *

Star House. P-21 as husband and father. Glory as wife. Rampage as friend. I pushed past it, the house shattering like glass into fragments of thought. These phantasms weren’t my friends, and I wasn’t going to be caught up by illusions of the real thing! “Face me, you coward!” I screamed as the shards flew away from me in every direction.

* * *

And now I landed on my face atop the Eater. My brain felt as if it had been yanked out one ear, mashed liberally, and shoved back in the other. I struggled for focus, looking at the casing ahead of me. Through blurring vision, I raised the gun. “No more dreams,” I muttered. “End this... ”

The shard of moonstone flew true. I pressed my face to the ground as the casing exploded, showering me with bits of starmetal, talisman, and metal scaffold. Three down. Three to go.

Wait. Why was the world moving?

I raised my head and looked around, realizing that the silvery ring of metal was no longer a ring. The spines were curling and rearranging themselves, and the central ring I was on had become disconnected, now more like an undulating, segmented curved bar of metal than a solid loop. And it was continuing to move as I held on with my fingers, trying to avoid being flung off. But as the whiplike motions increased, all I could do was teleport into open air away from it and watch.

Like a colossal serpent, the silvery monstrosity rose up, the spines now merging to form both bony ribs and batlike wings. The large lump I'd landed on earlier was now an immense dragonlike skull with baleful eyes of green death glaring straight at me. The fleshy ooze covered it, forming muscle and scale. Two clawed hands floated to either side of it, able to hold a dozen Blackjacks each. Three small, flat silver satellites orbited it, beaming fields of magic out in a triangular arrangement to catch Tom as he fell. But I couldn't think about them now. All I could think of was the titanic thing before me.

"**YOU HAVE MY ATTENTION, MY LITTLE PONY,**" it boomed, not just in mere sound but in a magical wave that tore at the soul inside me. That song within me was the only refuge I had against the impact of its attention. "**BE HONORED.**"

I stared up at the brilliant glow of Tom. Three shields generators left to kill, and yet, I couldn't think with that thing before me. The sheer hideousness of those maroon and black scales... those eyes that plucked at my very soul! Give me the Legate. Give me a dozen Legates. They'd be better than this.

I gaped, struggling to think... to act... Finally, all I could do was say a single word.

"Why?" I whispered.

Its serpentine lips spread wide. "**TO SAVE THE UNIVERSE FROM THE INFINITE VOID. TO SPARE EXISTENCE FROM THE INDIGNITY OF DEATH. I WILL NOT GO WILLINGLY INTO OBLIVION. EVEN NOW, WITH SUCH ENTOURAGE, I AM ROUSED TO MOTION AGAIN.**" Then the massive green eyes narrowed. "**YOU CAUSED ME PAIN, MY LITTLE PONY. GREAT**

PAIN.”

I licked my lips, murmuring, “It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

The immense thing, its massive bulk floating so easily as it slithered on its bed of wires closer to me, smiled. “**I FORGIVE YOU. I KNOW PAIN WELL, AND I KNOW YOUR SUFFERING. I KNOW YOUR FEAR. LET ME END BOTH. LET ME GIVE YOU PEACE AND RELIEF.**” It reached out its hand, claws as big as my body spread wide. “**LET ME REUNITE YOU WITH GLORY,**” the Eater offered in its sibilant hiss. “**FOREVER.**”

To be together again… a part of me yearned for that.

The sword slashed across a massive palm, sparking with silver fire when it clashed on the starmetal bones within. The wound was virtually a papercut compared to the size of the monster, but papercuts can still hurt! I flew back as the hand clenched shut on the space I’d occupied a second ago, the Eater howling as its eyes blazed in rage. “Sorry!” I shouted at it, a wild thrill running through me. “She’d never forgive me if I just gave up! I promised, after all.”

“**I HAVE WAITED EONS BEYOND MEASURE FOR MY RESTORATION. YOU SHALL NOT STOP ME, PITIFUL MORTAL!**” the Eater screamed, but now I was in motion. There were three shields, their generators now detached from the Eater’s body, that I had to take out before Tom came in contact with them. If he did, even disabling the F.A.D.E. generators wouldn’t disrupt the magic. I teleported to the first of the three. If my count was right, I had three moonstone shells left. No pressure.

I hovered over it and took aim. The generator casing was now connected to a platform ringed with levitation talismans and crackling spark batteries, all held together with starmetal rods. I pointed straight down and– immediately dodged to the side as a tail as big as a skyscraper whooshed past me. Even though it missed, the draft behind it plucked me out of the air and carried me along like a feather. The Eater coiled around after me, lips wide with a malicious grin.

“**SUCH HUBRIS. SUCH FOOLISHNESS. I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE, AND IN IT IS YOUR DEMISE!**” the Eater hissed as it moved far, far too fast for anything that size. Not even Raptors moved so quickly as it did in pursuing me. I teleported again… and was almost ripped in two by the sweep of one of its disconnected claws. “**YOUR EVERY ACTION, YOUR EVERY REACTION, ARE**

ON DISPLAY BEFORE ME. YOU CANNOT PREVAIL."

"Talk talk talk," I grumbled as I kept flying, trying to avoid getting sucked into the massive drafts that followed its immense bulk. "If you're so powerful, I'd be dead already. I bet that it's taking a lot of energy to keep your corpse going."

"**YOU WISH FOR DEATH! IT IS THE ONLY ATONEMENT FITTING FOR YOUR SINS,**" the Eater roared as we dueled in the air, me dodging, teleporting, and dodging again. This wasn't like with the Legate. One solid hit would be like the mother of all boats landing on me. "**ADMIT YOUR FAILINGS. YOU REGRET THE SUFFERING YOU'VE INFLICTED ON THOSE YOU LOVE.**"

Okay, now this was getting annoying. It was taking all my skill and magic to avoid being smashed into cybernetic goo by this thing, and yet I couldn't help myself. "You know what? You're right! I do regret a lot of the shit I've caused, but I've always tried to do better." That tail streaked straight for me, and I hovered, teleporting just behind it as it passed. "But you know what else? It's not always me! Sometimes, the Wasteland just fucking sucks!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, at it, at the Dealer, at the whole damned world. "But I don't care, because I will never give up! Not even if it kills me!"

I flew for another floating shield generator but this time teleported backwards. The hand passed by, and I teleported forward before the draft could suck me away. I grabbed the starmetal framework and pointed the shotgun at the box. An immense mental pressure crushed in on my mind, but I shoved the attack away. A trigger pull, and I dropped. The platform exploded above me, shards of metal raining down as it collapsed.

The hands came up, and I tried to teleport away when suddenly a green light flashed. I tried to squeeze myself through the Blackjack-sized hole in my mind, but couldn't do it. Instead, I smashed into the upturned palm of one hand, ramming into it like hitting a brick wall. Immediately the fingers started to close, to crush me like a bug. But the starmetal platform fell atop me, and the flaming disk held the fingers at bay. I launched myself up through the burning hole in the middle, flying clear as the Eater screamed in frustration and flung the platform at me. I barely dodged aside, flying as fast as my wings and Luna's soul could take me.

One down, two to go. I tried teleporting, but it was no use! The Eater was now tracking me, watching closely. "**YOU THINK YOU**

CAN DEFEAT ME ALONE, LITTLE PONY?" the Eater asked as it gazed hungrily at me.

"I am not alone!" I shouted as I flapped furiously towards one of the platforms. The Eater struck, mouth wide, but this time, I didn't dodge. I turned and struck, flying straight into his face. My riot shotgun blasts seemed imbued with a silver moonlight as I fired straight into those widespread eyes. "Everyone I've made friends with and who helped me is here with me now!" And with each shot, like a moment frozen in S.A.T.S., I could see Rampage's obnoxious smirk, Lacunae's patient smile, and Scotch Tape's innocent grin. The shots seemed to consume the Eater's corrupted flesh with white flame as I flew around its head far faster than I ever had before.

"**YOU ARE ALL NOTHING! FLICKERING EMBERS IN THE ETERNAL DARK, EASILY EXTINGUISHED!**" the Eater howled.

"But together, they got me here!" I retorted as I stung it like it had never been stung before. "Every one, every single person, who's helped me get to this point!" Whisper and Stygius. Lancer, Pythia, and Sekashi. LittlePip and her friends. Duty and Sacrifice barked, the shots burrowing deep in its scaly flesh before exploding like grenades. "All of us, working together, have a power you can't imagine!"

It raised both hands up to protect its face. "**THEN THE SOLUTION IS SIMPLE! ALL OF YOU MUST DIE! YOUR SOULS SHALL ACCOMPANY ME FOR ETERNITY!**" It inhaled and spread its hands wide, and from its maw erupted a torrential blast of balefire that sent my radmeter through the roof. I threw all my magic into a shield and managed to get clear of the core of the flame. But I didn't back down, retreat, or regroup.

No, that would have been the *smart* thing to do.

Instead, I darted in, dragging my vorpal sword along its body, trailing smoke and little bits of my armor and hide. "No! No more! It's time we're free of you!" I said as I hewed at it, seeing Glory and P-21 with their confident smiles... ponies I hadn't deserved, but who had loved me despite everything! The Eater would never take them. "Everypony I've cared about and loved is with me! You're the one who is alone!"

"**I NEED NO ONE! NOTHING!**" the Eater screamed, flailing wildly. Its claws and tail and wings smashed buildings, tore the wires free, and beat a whirlwind inside the glowing magical field. "**I WAS GREATEST! BRIGHTEST! I WILL BE SO AGAIN, EVEN IF I HAVE**

TO SNUFF OUT EVERY OTHER WRETCHED, TREACHEROUS SPARK IN THE SKIES!"

While it ranted, I swooped in to the second-to-last shield generator. Two shotgun shells left. I fired, and the slug streaked in and hit the casing... but something was wrong. There was a feeble glow of white magic, and then the side of the case detonated with an anemic pop. I flew in and finished the shield talisman with my sword. The triangular projection of magic flickered and went out.

Then the tail smacked the platform with such force that I was all but plastered against it as it streaked right into the magical wall of the shaft. I heaved myself away with all the strength I could muster, the platform impacting against the wall of magic and the spark batteries exploding in a shower of lightning. I had only a moment to gather my wits before I was flying as fast as I could, a stream of blinding balefire pursuing me. I dove down, and the river of destruction followed, leaving blazing devastation in its wake. I raced across the bottom of the bowl, and the stream only died when it risked immolating the Eater's own serpentine tail.

Only one more. A light grew overhead as Tom re-entered with a blazing corona. No time to think. Only to fly. Only to win. I streaked along the massive, serpentine body, too close for it to hit me without blasting itself. Faster! Almost there! I could hear the moonstone song radiating above me.

One... more...

Reaching the Eater's head, I flew clear and streaked for the platform. My shotgun was ready. I was ready.

Then my wings disappeared.

The claw ripped through them so quickly and cleanly that I was transformed from a flying body into a ballistic one without being knocked off target. Bloody stubs of metal continued to beat in a futile attempt to keep me in the air. I waved my limbs in a desperate attempt to reach the floating platform before I tumbled to what would certainly be my end.

My fingers popped free and caught on the platform's edge, and I swung around the frame and collided with the underside with a resounding bang. "Ow," I groaned as I hung there a moment, then shook my head hard. "One more... " I muttered, pulling myself atop the platform and over to the box holding the shield talisman. Falteringly, I struggled to my hooves.

The Eater rose before me, the ruined remains of my wings being

shaken from an immense claw as it spread its hands wide, deathly energies crackling in its maw. Overhead came a rush of wind and an azure glow, like a blue sun descending. It didn't matter. Distantly, I could hear Chapel's bell tolling.

I'd won.

I pointed the shotgun at the box beneath my hooves and pulled the trigger.

The slug impacted at my hooves.

And...

Nothing?

I stared down between my legs at the sight of the lead slug smooshed against the casing, but instead of a moonstone shard, starmetal glittered in the middle.

No, I thought numbly, drawing out the bottle of moonstone dust and seeing only silvery sand within. It fell from my fingers, tumbling down into the shadows below. The spent shotgun followed it.

Then one hand seized me, five points piercing around my torso. The Eater lifted me up before its face. "**I TOLD YOU, MY LITTLE PONY. FUTILE.**"

Then its other hand grabbed my shoulders, and like a hellhound plucking the wings off a bloatsprite, the Eater of Souls tore me in two.

A numbness spread through me as I fell from his talons back onto the platform. Only my augmentation kept me from passing out immediately from blood loss as I lay there, seeing my entrails and synthetic sinews and wires dangling down beneath me. "**NOW! BEAR WITNESS!**" he bellowed as he moved down beneath the sole remaining field.

Tom impacted.

The tapered crystal seemed to have grown in its transit, or perhaps I was just a lousy judge of size. The tip of the stone dragged along the edge of the shaft in a blinding trail of fiery light and magic that swirled around me. Only my proximity to the shield talisman kept me from being instantly crushed and blasted off by the hurricane force of displaced air or the colossal heat. I'd eliminated five of the shields, but the sixth still sufficed to keep Tom from reaching the Eater.

An enormous flaming blue alicorn seemed to swell from the stone, and brilliant, blazing hooves struck around to either side of the

magical wedge holding it at bay. The Eater wove back and forth, cackling with glee. Those floating claws snatched handfuls of blazing spirit fire and drew them to its maw, where it devoured them hungrily. Every bite seemed to make the Eater swell.

"**YOUR CHAMPION HAS FAILED,**" the Eater taunted amid mouthfuls of glowing blue luminescence.

"WITH MY LAST MOMENTS, I WILL DEFY YOU!" Tom cried out as the Eater's disembodied hands ripped away more flaming gobbits.

"**YOUR LAST MOMENTS ARE DELICIOUS,**" the Eater cackled as he feasted on the still-living star.

And all I could do was hang there, my guts dangling out beneath me, my chest ripped open. I'd failed... I'd failed... Sister... Glory... I'd failed...

I closed my eyes. At least I could enjoy the moonstone's song, beautiful, but now desperate and strained as it fought against its nemesis. It truly was a beautiful melody...

But not the only song I heard.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my chest. I guessed it was the big round drum with all the wires coming out of it. Slowly, dripping blood and other fluids, I pulled it from my crippled chest cavity.

You have a heart of moonstone. That was what Glory had said. I stared a second longer, and then I lifted my sword in my other hand. Carefully, I cut the end off the drum.

There, nestled in a bed of gemstones, was a hunk of moonstone. I'd been told she'd been lucky to find an 'appropriate gem' to power my body, and as I stared at it, I realized that I'd seen it before: in Horizon Labs and the disassembled silver bullet. It was larger than the slivers in the slugs I'd used before. It hadn't been corrupted yet.

I wasn't beaten yet...

I yanked the stone free, and instantly my vision filled with "CRITICAL ERROR" in bright red letters and "SWITCHING TO RESERVE POWER" with a percentage that was ticking down. Rapidly. I dragged myself along the frame, feeling my life ebb away with each exertion. Then I took the stone and pressed it against the casing. The metal began to glow brighter and brighter, and then exploded with a detonation that blew my hand apart but left a hole in the metal. I fumbled with the stone, barely able to catch it with my other hand, holding it as if my soul depended on it. I raised the sword with my magic.

"**NO!**" the Eater screamed, grabbing me again and pulling me away from the platform. The moonstone did nothing against the fleshy meat protecting his starmetal skeleton. "**NO MORE INTERFERENCE. YOU ARE DONE!**"

Almost...

But I wasn't *quite* done.

I slipped into S.A.T.S.

Three magic bullets to the F.A.D.E. diamond inside the case.

Execute.

The magic bolts streaked out, hitting the insides of the box and ripping out the connections between the diamond and the power supply. The gemstone went dark, but the field was already active. The Eater froze, and then its mouth split wide in a hysterical laugh of triumph.

I stared at the stone and then closed my eyes. I might not actually be Princess Luna, but I had her soul. And while I couldn't raise or lower the whole moon...

...I could raise a small piece of it.

My horn flared as I pushed Tom up the shaft. Just a bit. Just enough for the wedge of magic to lose power, flicker, and disappear. With a relieved smile, I cut the magic.

Tom fell.

The Eater dropped me as Tom smashed the platform to the ground, and I fell along with it. Both of us landed on a knoll of rock, broken and bent. Lying on my back, I watched as the Eater clawed and raked his talons against the flaming hooves, but now nothing protected him. Every impact of Tom's hooves was a lightning bolt, and bit by bit, Tom smashed the Eater down towards the earth, and me.

"YOU ARE DONE!" Tom roared as his hooves detonated like megaspells, making the platform rock wildly. "YOU ARE FINISHED!" he boomed, rearing back and smashing the Eater in its blazing face. "YOU ARE ENDED!" he thundered as he blazed, the heat baking me even with my augmentation. Despite being mortally wounded, a part of me refused to simply die, and I stared at the inactive talisman next to me.

"**NO!**" the Eater whinged. "**I CANNOT DIE! EXISTENCE NEEDS ME!**" But he was silenced by an azure hoof smashing him in the maw.

I fumbled with the moonstone, but my remaining hand couldn't

seem to get it back in right. It would have been easy just to lie there and be obliterated by the two, but I needed to see this to the end. I reached into the generator casing, pulled out the darkened diamond, and reconnected the wires to the talisman. A flickering sphere appeared around the platform. As my systems rapidly drained, I desperately devoured the gems I'd taken from the locker, but they only barely stemmed the rate I was hemorrhaging power.

A second later, the Eater hit. The serpent was beaten back as the blazing alicorn slid inexorably down the feeding funnel that was now the Eater's execution cell. The Eater, now trapped within its own pit, thrashed wildly, slamming against the shield and the walls. The floor of the basin gave way, and both Tom and I followed as the Eater struggled to get away from its radiant enemy. "**NO! I AM BRIGHTEST!** I AM GREATEST!" the Eater howled. Tom pinned one of those claws, his furious aura burning away the flesh. The starmetal beneath flashed a brilliant white and exploded. The Eater screamed as the second claw, pressed against Tom's chest, soon followed. "NO! I don't want to die! Please... "

"All things die," Tom answered. "Hush now... it's time to go to bed... "

The immolated flesh finally gave way, and the starmetal skeleton was now utterly exposed to the stone. Glowing. Shimmering. Shining. Swelling. Glaring. If I hadn't had my augmented eyes and been protected by the shield, I would have been blinded, then consumed by the sheer brilliance. The walls of the shaft liquefied... vaporized... and I was left in my tiny bubble of protection as the numbers in my vision counted down to zero.

Then Horizons went off.

Maybe it was one final gasp of Perceptitron weirdness, but all at once I could see not just from the shaft but from all over the Wasteland. From Charity in the door of the chapel to Grace in the hospital at the Collegiate, to Whisper staring from a rooftop... the blue-white glow was everywhere. I could only guess the magic fields kept everypony from being blinded as the light stretched higher and higher in the sky, the glow spreading from horizon to horizon. It wasn't just mere light and energy, any more than the Eater was simple metal and malfunctioning machinery. It was a beam of light that shone out into the universe. In Tenpony's windows, a line of light gleamed towards the heavens from behind the distant mountains. In the S.P.P. hub, images from dozens of

towers showed the pillar of light stream into the night.

Then, like a pitiful whine in the back of my mind, I heard the Eater's last whimper, "Will it hurt?"

And then he was gone.

Tom remained, an outline of moonstone chunks vaporizing in the furnace, looking at me gravely. Then the star spirit bowed its head once to me and vanished. The column of light dwindled to nothing. With the energy dissipated, the walls of magic disappeared too. Nothing remained of the Core. It had been transformed into an almost perfectly concave bowl resting at the base of the great granite knob that had been the southernmost tip of the island. I didn't know why, but the surface of the rock wasn't a molten mass. I could only imagine that somehow the departing spirit had prevented us all from being cooked.

But the souls lingered.

Millions. Tens of millions. Freed from the Eater, they hung like a constellation of stars spreading in all directions. Some sank into the earth. Others streamed towards the sky. Some touched the weary survivors. I killed the shield and stretched out my hoof towards the countless motes. One drifted against me, and for a moment I smelled Mom's mane. I heard the warm chuckle of P-21. Another gave my cheek the caress of a soft gray wing.

And from the mare's chest, a mote emerged. Among so many, few would note it any brighter than the others as it rose towards the starry sky which had been its home for so long. Only LittlePip, in the S.P.P., would hear a Princess's sobs as it joined the others.

The mare that remained, little more than a corpse animated by failing technology, stared up at the motes until they were indistinguishable from the stars, meaningless numbers approaching zero in her vision. To the south came a booming rumble as the concrete walls of the dams collapsed into the pit. To the north rose a matching gurgle as the sea rushed in to fill the void.

And there, on the wreckage of the platform, the mare stared at the stars as the number reached zero. Darkness took her. And silence. Yet her lips curled in a smile as she felt hot liquid rolling down her cheeks. The rumbling grew, becoming her entire world... stretching into eternity.

Epilogue - Tomorrow

"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria… "

"Brahmin shit!" blurted the green earth pony stallion across the campfire as the pale blue unicorn with the two-toned purple and navy mane finished talking. Ten or so people were crowded around the fire's warming light. Mostly ponies, but there were a pair of zebras, a griffin, and a helldog too. An alicorn listened in silently, the blue's eyes soft and wise. The boughs of the Everfree Forest loomed around them, thick and dark and timeless as ever. The old road wasn't pleasant, the sort of road along which people traveled together for safety, but it was the only path transecting the ancient wood.

"Security died?" the youngest of the group, a pegasus foal with a bright orange mane, asked as she rested atop her mother. The unicorn gave a sober nod, and then foal screwed up her face and added, "For good?"

"No!" the green stallion drawled sarcastically. "Then she came back from the dead a fourth time, and this time she descended deep into the earth to stop some even bigger monster from destroying us all!"

The unicorn scowled at him. "She didn't come back!" she snapped, and her ears folded a little. "They found her body. Her PipBuck confirmed it. She was gone," she said as she bowed her head. "They built a tomb in Chapel. You can actually go see her PipBuck if you want."

"With its super dooper megaspell inside! Wooooo!" the stallion went on, waving his hooves in the air at the foal.

A vein on the unicorn's temple began to twitch. "No. Not with the megaspell inside. EC-1101 was gone."

"Right. Because it never existed to begin with," the stallion said smugly as he leaned back. "When will you Commonwealthers

accept that this whole Security garbage was just a cooked-up story to one-up the Lightbringer's?"

"It wasn't made up. Homage and Velvet Remedy, as well as dozens of others, confirmed she did exist," the unicorn said with a scowl. "You Republicans just can't accept any other settlement can have its own heroes."

The stallion snorted with a dismissive wave of his hoof. "Homage said a lotta things, a bunch while on Dash. I'll accept that there might have been a pony named Blackjack, or Security, or the Maiden, or whatever. I'll even accept that she might have set off a megaspell or something. But a city of the damned built over an ancient abomination? Going to the moon? The moon!" He scoffed and shook his head. "Sorry, but I don't buy it."

"Well, I've always been skeptical of the Lightbringer's accounts," the foal's mother, a tangerine mare with a deep blue mane, interjected. "She took on the Enclave, and only one pony she knew died? I had an ancestor with the Enclave military, and their stories are that Neighvarro was betrayed by a Dashite sympathizer."

That prompted an eyeroll from the stallion before he returned to glaring at the unicorn. "Right. But aren't there ponies in the Commonwealth itself that disputed the whole 'Maiden of the Stars' thing? That one pegasus... um... Moonshadow? And even one of your councilors! Yeah! First Citizen Boing said that Security had done almost as much harm as good." He grinned at the clearly uncomfortable mare. "She said 'let us not wipe the blood from the hooves of heroes, nor worship them without skeptical consideration.' She didn't buy into that whole Security deal."

The unicorn rolled her eyes. "Fine, but there're plenty of other people who believe that that's what happened. Psalm witnessed everything right up to the moment she left Blackjack in the Core. And Scotch Tape–"

"Who disappeared too... " the stallion interrupted.

"She witnessed what happened on the moon," the unicorn pressed on. "And while both admit that Blackjack had her flaws, they confirm her story." The stallion dismissed that with a haughty sniff.

"What happened to Scotch Tape?" the pegasus foal asked.

* * *

Chapel was quiet today. No sounds of hammers banging away like

so many other places in the Hoof. Scotch Tape picked through the ruins of a basement. “Sorry it took a year for us to get down here for your mom’s things,” she said as she looked over at Majina. The zebra filly quietly poked through the corroded metal boxes. Most were full of mildewed trash, but there were a few here and there that had intact old books and scrolls. Pythia sat nearby, the cloaked Starkatteri reading through the scrolls at random. “We’ll take whatever we can back to the Remnant camp. I’m sure Adama would like them.”

“Yeah. Back to getting scowls and gestures to ward off evil star wickedness. Yay,” Pythia said with a roll of her eyes, receiving a sharp glare from Scotch Tape. The cloaked filly raised her hooves in surrender and returned to perusing old maps.

“I don’t want to go back to the camp,” Majina sniffed as she poked halfheartedly through the basement. “Adama liked Impalii. I’m just a reminder that he didn’t make it.”

“And Chapel reminds you of your mom,” Scotch Tape said with a sigh. “I feel the exact same way about 99. And Chapel doesn’t even feel like Chapel anymore. So many new ponies are moving in that it just feels like the Crusaders are fading away. I don’t know where Adagio, Allegro, and Sonata went with Octavia. Charity might still be running the shop, but it just doesn’t feel the same anymore. Nothing’s the same anymore.”

“Yeah. Life sucks. Wear a hat,” Pythia replied as she looked at a new scroll. “Where did your mom get all of these, anyway?”

“She took them from the Legate when we fled,” Majina said, staring forlornly around the room. “Stashed them away and brought them here when she had a chance. She thought they might be important.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong,” Pythia said as her eyes flickered across the page. “A lot of these are dispatches from Roam. Stars only know how they survived. Someone must have thought they were special.”

“Aren’t you going to join the other Starkatteri?” Scotch Tape asked.

“You mean wrinklebutt, meltyface, and ‘bwa ha ha’? Not likely,” Pythia said with a snort. “I wanted to understand a shadow on the future. That shadow was Amadi and the Eater. Those three can go back to plotting... whatever,” she continued with a scowl. Scotch stared at her for a moment, and Pythia glanced up at her. “What? In case you haven’t noticed, no one likes me or my tribe. Not even other Starkatteri.”

“Well, you have to do something,” Scotch Tape said.

“I am. I am reading about reallocation of shamanistic fetishes away from the front at Shattered Hoof Ridge,” she answered, brow furrowing. “What about you? Aren’t you building the future or somesuch?”

“Yeah. I offered my plans and designs to Triage. Then she patted me on the head and went to some meeting. With Blackjack gone, I’m just some filly again. I’ll need four or five years before they start taking me seriously. The plans are in for Chapel, but we’re way down on the reconstruction list, and Charity’s only still in charge because Keeper says so. Adults just won’t take orders from kids.”

“Well, give it a few years and bitch at them for not listening to you when their toilets stop–” And at that moment, Pythia froze. “No.” Majina and Scotch Tape blinked at her as the filly’s eyes widened. “No, I’ve heard of that!” She tossed the scroll aside and started to dig through her saddlebags, pulling out a plastic bag containing a stack of rune-covered three by five cards. Pythia withdrew them and started flipping through. “Where did I hear of that?”

“What? What are you doing?” Majina asked with a little frown, sniffing and wiping her eyes. “What are those?”

“Notes some Starkatteri zebras have made of some of the nastier things in the world,” she said as she flipped through. “The Eye of the World. I know I’ve heard that phrase before… ”

“You keep them on notecards?” Scotch asked with a half smile.

Pythia froze, giving Scotch Tape a flat look. “What should I keep them in? A black ponyhide tome with runes of evil on the cover? ‘Cause I think we tried that once,” she said scornfully before resuming her flipping. Then she found what she was looking for, her eyes scanning the glyphs immaculately penned on the card. “Wha… ” She looked at the scroll. “No… but why… ” Back to the card. “They wouldn’t… ” She read the scroll again.

“What? What is it?” Majina asked with a small frown.

Pythia immediately put the cards in her bags and stowed them, then started to shove letters and papers in after them. “We need to go. Grab all these papers so I can go over them later, but we need to go. Now!” Pythia said.

“Go?” Scotch Tape asked with a frown. “Go where?”

“The Homeland. I need to see if this order was actually carried out or not,” Pythia replied. “I doubt it was. I mean, I can’t think of any zebra that would actually do it… but I have to make sure.” She rose

to her hooves. “Come on. Get them loaded up, and then we need to get going!”

“The ‘Homeland’?” Scotch Tape asked, and then her eyes went wide. “You mean the zebra lands?”

“Aren’t you a smart pony! Gold star! Now come on,” Pythia said, gesturing to the papers.

“You want to go all the way to the Homeland?” Majina asked with a little frown.

“Yeah,” she said, then pointed a hoof at Scotch. “I’ll need you to find somepony with a boat.” Then she pointed at Majina. “And I’ll need you to come with me so that they don’t make stupid warding gestures when I ask important questions.” The two didn’t answer. They just stared at her. “What? Did you two have anything else pressing to do? *You* don’t want to go to the camp. Nopony will take *you* seriously. So why not?”

Scotch Tape’s mouth worked. “‘Cause… I mean… do you even know how to get to the zebra lands?”

“Sure. By boat. After that, I plan to ask for directions.” Pythia started for the stairs and then paused. “Why, *do* you have something else to do?”

The pair looked at each other, and twin tiny smile formed on their faces. They gathered up the rest of the scattered papers and together followed Pythia out of the basement. “You know,” Scotch Tape said, “I think I know a pony with a boat who’d be willing to help us… ”

* * *

“She went to the zebra lands,” the zebra stallion told the filly. Then he looked at the green stallion. “Accounts vary as to what actually happened there.”

“Let me guess: died three times and saved the world?” the stallion said with a grin.

The striped pair regarded each other and simply shrugged. “It is a long story,” the zebra mare replied with a slightly pained look before addressing the unicorn mare. “But the Commonwealth is not a part of the NCR?”

“Hah, they wish!” the unicorn mare said, prompting another snort from her stallion counterpart. “The Lunar Commonwealth is an independent city state and a trading partner of the NCR. Our laws

and government don't recognize race. If you're intelligent, you're protected by the law. Pony. Zebra. Griffin. Even dragons. And we're strictly neutral. No expansion out of the Hoof. The Highlanders and the dogs are our respected neighbors."

"Eh," the helldog, not quite as monstrous as his ancestors, said with a shrug. "Is okay. Commonwealth ponies are nice, but very proud. Don't like disagreements. Always think they right." The canine scratched the underside of its jaw. "Just like NCR, actually."

"Hey!" the stallion and unicorn said in unison, prompting a laugh from several others, including the pegasi.

"The Lunar Commonwealth is nice enough if you're looking for a place to live, but if you want to be free and get ahead, you just have to go to the NCR," the griffin rumbled, and the stallion smiled from ear to ear before the griffin continued, "The NCR is way more loosey-goosey with contracts, enforcing the laws, and stuff. You can make all kinds of crazy money with the NCR." The stallion's smirk disappeared.

"I'm surprised the two haven't gone to war," the zebra mare said casually, and at once the unicorn and earth pony both turned sheepish.

"Eh, we hit some rough patches every now and then," the unicorn mare said. "Fifty years after the founding, the NCR tried annexing the Commonwealth, but the Lightbringer stepped in. Then a hundred years ago the Commonwealth started talking about forcing a regime change on the NCR. That didn't go anywhere. And fifty years back the NCR beat the reunification drum again. That actually got to some shooting before sanity kicked back in. Now there's talk of NCR aggression and 'pre-emptive defense'. It won't get far." She wore a worried frown, though, which the green stallion shared.

"It better not," he said. "There've already been terrorist attacks in Junction City. And sure enough, those 'United Equestria' morons started calling for war before we even figured out who the attackers were." He jabbed a hoof at the unicorn. "I don't know who blew up those offices, but I don't think the Commonwealth would kill ponies just to make a political point." The unicorn gave a relieved smile to the stallion.

"Who does run the Commonwealth?" the pegasus asked the unicorn. "It's not a republic, is it?"

"It's a parliamentary council. Thirteen seats, six appointed by important organizations, seven elected by the boroughs around the

Hoof. They elect a First Citizen, who sets the agenda. Every ten years, the council have to pass a vote of confidence, or they get booted out and a new councilor gets elected or appointed." The unicorn screwed up her face. "It makes for some interesting negotiations at times... "

* * *

"The Carrots are still wondering why you haven't used the position of First Citizen to appropriate any tax money for rebuilding and expanding Elysium," Hoity Toity rasped. "They're griping about the smaller dividends." The boiled gray stallion in a slightly threadbare suit was meeting with Grace beneath an arbor overlooking what used to be a mighty reservoir. The canyon left behind was almost as breathtaking with its gray granite knobs and blocks.

The cobalt-maned mare was lying on a bench and reading a scroll. "That's because the Carrots can't see an inch past their noses," she replied without looking up. "By using our own money to rebuild and expand the Society, I can lend our share of the tax revenue to elsewhere in the Hoof. That political capital is going to be of much more use in the long run than bottlecaps would in the short run."

"And Blackjack would approve of the altruism," Hoity rumbled.

Grace sighed, putting the scroll down and gazing north along the canyon. "Indeed. Odd that, even with her gone, we still haven't reverted back to squabbling, murderous, self-serving tribes."

"Near brushes with mutual annihilation do have a way of unifying people. I think the fact that the Society, Collegiate, Reapers, Thunderheaders, batponies, and Finders decided to make it work is keeping it intact more than anything else. The plebeians are content so long as they have food, security, some comfort, and hope," Hoity replied.

"Mmm," Grace answered as she pondered that. "Noblesse oblige," she murmured. "When the people prosper, the nobility prospers." She rolled the scroll up with her magic. "Charm!" she called out.

From the far side of the arbor, said mare emerged. She was thin, her mane paler and wispier than it had once been. "Yes?" she asked, as if not sure if she was in trouble or not.

"I think it's time we headed back inside for the day," Grace said as she carefully shifted herself off the bench and onto a wheeled platform, her hindlegs dangling limply behind her. "Call the

children.”

Charm nodded and trotted back to the far side of the arbor. “Baccarat! Bouillotte!”

Hoity wheeled Grace around the arbor easily, and an earth pony colt and unicorn filly came into view. Their coats had a decidedly pale blue hue, and their manes were striped black and blue. The pair were wrestling in the grass, making a perfect mess of the white coveralls they wore. The colt flipped the filly onto her back and pinned her. “Gotcha!”

“Oh yeah?” the filly growled, then bit his ear.

“Ah! No biting! No biting! Momma, she’s biting me!” the colt shouted as he waved a hoof to his mother.

“Bouillotte! Stop chewing on your brother this instant, young filly!” Charm said firmly. She spat out his ear with a glower, then shoved him off. “Baccarat, if you pin your sister, don’t be surprised if you get bitten.”

“Yes, Auntie Charm,” said Baccarat.

“Sorry, Auntie,” echoed Bouillotte, but the instant Charm looked away to Grace, she stuck her tongue out at her brother.

“Let’s all go up and have some tea,” Charm said, then paused, looking uncertain. “It is time for tea, right? Or is it breakfast? Dinner?”

“Teatime,” Grace replied with a gentle smile, and the younger mare nodded her head, touching her temple a moment. “Are you alright?”

“I... it’s just hard to keep track of things. I’ll be fine,” Charm answered with a tired little smile. Then she turned to the children. “Now, let’s get you messy ones up and changed and we can have some tea.”

The pair nodded and took three steps towards the country club. Bouillotte glanced over at her brother, and then smirked. “Race you!” And then she took off up the hill. With just a grin, Baccarat followed, and in a few seconds the filly wailed out, “Hey! It’s not that much of a race!” Charm followed the pair at a much more languid pace.

“Are you ever going to tell them?” Hoity asked as he pushed her up the hill after them.

“That they’re not mine? No. Let everyone believe that they’re the illegitimate offspring of Lord Blueberry. He was a good stallion, and his mother loves them. Far safer than anypony else knowing the

truth. They're happier this way," she said as she looked back at Hoity. "What of you? Are you still able to get your supply of Aqua Cura?"

"For now. It's only a matter of time until that radiation is purged as well, though. We ghouls are a dwindling lot, I fear," he said as he wheeled her slowly up the slope. "Yet we must go on into that night sooner or later. I, at least, will go with dignity... although if I do go feral, I hope it will be in Carrot's bedquarters. That is a stallion who deserves what little brains he has to be eaten."

"I have no doubt," Grace began to say, but then she paused. On the far side of the canyon, a white pony watched. It was impossible to make out more than that. She looked up at the ghoul, "Hoity, who–"

But when she looked back, the pony was gone.

"Yes?" Hoity asked, looking behind them as well. "What is it?"

"Nothing? Just a trick of the light, I suppose."

* * *

"It's not like the system is any better than the NCR's congress," the stallion objected.

"Yes, but most Lunarians can name all the sitting members of the Lunar Council. Can you name all two hundred and ninety-seven representatives in your congress?" the unicorn mare challenged with a smile.

"Eh. It's still not true democracy," the pegasus mare replied with a dismissive wave of her hoof. "When you put power in the hooves of others to use for you, it's going to be abused."

"Like the Enclave?" the stallion said with a smirk, and the pegasus flushed.

"The military rule was a failure of sense and reason, not democracy," she retorted. "We deceived ourselves as a people."

"Yeah, ponies are good at that," the griffin said lightly, getting a chuckle from the zebras, helldog, and curiously also the alicorn. "You guys get way too wrapped up in things. Need to relax."

"I hear employment is up for pegasi," the alicorn said lightly, regarding the winged pair.

"Yes," the citrine pegasus explained with a small smile. "They're bringing the last of the S.P.P. towers down. That thunderstorm that ran amok and ravaged Fillydelphia was the last straw. They just

don't have the parts to keep them working right after four centuries. They'll probably take whatever does work and ship it back to Junction City till it burns out too. Regardless, now we're back in charge of the weather again. It's a good feeling."

"Just no blocking out the skies, okay?" the green stallion warned with a frown.

"Two centuries and we still get that thrown in our face," the mare said with a sigh. "The Enclave is gone. There hasn't been a working Raptor in almost fifty years. We have only one working cloud factory. More and more, the high end technology fails. I'm glad there're still some working airships, even if they're nothing like the Raptors of old."

"Yeah. Even the Commonwealth is feeling the pinch," the unicorn admitted. "The griffin invasion and dragon war really took their toll. Even getting quality firearms material is tough." She drew an old, worn pistol and carefully drew back the slide. When she released it, it didn't return until she gently smacked it with the pad of her hoof. "When you can't build a quality high speed lathe or functioning hydraulic press, that's not good. At least we still have steam engines. We're not going completely back to rocks and sticks."

The griffin chuckled. "Hey, don't knock rocks and sticks. These days, more people will carry around a blade than a gun. Ammo's so rare and expensive that it's just safer. Besides, my people almost conquered the NCR with just claws and beaks. If it hadn't been for those alicorns... " he trailed off as he looked flatly at the blue.

"You're welcome," she replied calmly.

"Well, things might have been different," he said, and then he rolled his eyes. "Of course, then the radwyrms invaded and kicked everyone's flank. That was a tough one," he said, getting nods from everyone there.

"Yeah. We can all agree that tainted, radioactive dragons are bad," the green stallion murmured before glaring flatly at the mare. "Of course, if the Commonwealth had joined us sooner, there might have been a lot less damage."

The unicorn rolled her eyes. "I told you, we're not allowed to do that. The Reapers, Brood, and the Skyguard are defensive forces. Only the Zodiacs can leave the Hoof without special permission, because they're law enforcement. It wasn't until we were attacked that we could join in."

The stallion snorted skeptically. “Sure. And if you had joined in before that, you could have saved a lot of NCR lives.”

From the back of the collection, a cloaked mare said softly, “It’s not the lives you could have saved that matter. That’s never enough, and you can drive yourself crazy if it’s what you focus on.” They turned, but only her white muzzle poked out into the firelight. “You save as many as you can, when you can. That’s all anypony can do.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds as they looked at each other. The pegasus mare was the one to resume the conversation. “The Brood are real, then?”

“Oh yeah. They’re the protectors of the Hoof. They just... they’re odd,” the mare admitted. “Some of them act like ponies. Others like zebras. Or griffins. There’re stallions who think they’re mares or mares who think they’re stallions. They’re not exactly crazy, but strange. They handle day to day policing and the like. The Reapers are sent in for big threats, and the Zodiacs for elusive criminals.”

“Are you a Zodiac?” the pegasus filly asked the unicorn, who immediately flushed. She shifted and pulled back her cloak to show a mark for Taurus. “Whoa.”

“I... ah... hope you’re not after one of us,” the griffin squawked, suddenly sweating.

The mare batted her eyes at him. “Not unless you’ve got a bounty back at the Hoof. Do you?” She brushed her cloak back into place. “Anyway, the Brood are just strange. There used to be a doctor studying them, but she went crazy. Too much working around with taint. I don’t know the details... ”

* * *

A grotesquely swollen Dr. Morningstar, fused with a golden tree, birthed a menagerie of fused creatures as she ranted and raved about her children. Candlewick, Dazzle, and Brutus faced her along with a half dozen others fighting to eliminate the horrific birthing monstrosity.

* * *

“... but I do know that they weren’t pretty,” the mare finished grimly.

The zebra stallion regarded the alicorn. “Not many of your kind

live in the Hoof, do they?"

"Not without good reason," the alicorn admitted. "The land has magical and spiritual scars of terrifying intensity. While the Enervation is no more, the land hasn't truly recovered like elsewhere. It aches. When one goes to the Rainbow Dash Memorial and stands before the twisted wreckage, our kind can almost relive those last moments of the *Castellanus*'s flight. Which is why I can confirm that some of what Glimmershine said was true," she said with a nod to the unicorn, who smiled gratefully.

"I heard there're still alicorns that are all evil? Is that true?" the filly asked the alicorn with all the tactlessness and license of youth.

"Some," the blue responded with a gentle smile. "We are immortal, which is taxing. While ghouls are largely no more, we remain. Losing friends and loved ones is hard on an immortal heart. Constant change is difficult. It's been two hundred years since I awoke, and I have difficulty keeping things straight sometimes. We also reproduce only with great difficulty, so it is fortunate we are so long-lived. So yes, there are still alicorns who forget the teaching of Mother and Fluttershy. Pity them, for they are truly lost in this world."

* * *

The wind blew over the hills from the restored apple orchard at Sweet Apple Acres, carrying a sweet scent of blossoms on the air. So much hard work just for apples, but it meant the world to the earth ponies that had come to work their 'birthright'. "Apple family. Go fig," a bat-winged Whisper murmured, watching them caring for the trees off in the distance as she walked along the dusty trail, a troupe of batponies following behind her with a cart. Her band nattered to each other, talking about the concert the night before in Ponyville.

When turning Ponyville into a 'Hellhound Sanctuary' had been a bust, because hellhounds weren't animals and lived wherever they Goddesses-damned pleased, the NCR'd made a real effort to restore the village. There were even some new additions, like the long, scaled-up dormitories housing dozens of alicorns coming to rediscover themselves and learn to cope with the realities of immortality. Alicorn school.

She'd spotted Psalm there, along with Stronghoof. The pair either hadn't recognized her or hadn't wanted to interact. There wasn't

much to talk about. ‘Hey, been a long time since Blackjack got killed. How you been?’ ‘Fine, and how have you been holding up since we let Blackjack go die all alone?’ At least Crumpets and Dusk had ended up a couple. Eh, lesbians... go fig...

Still, it’d been nice seeing the purple with her beefcake husband. She didn’t know what they’d done to him to give him tiny wings in addition to his tiny horn, but regardless, he still sparkled and was frigging annoying. Worse, they actually had a kid. *How could I hate them now?* she thought with a snicker.

The road ended at a pair of cottages. There was a horrible mauling taking place next to one. A half dozen ponies were stomping the shit out of one stallion, pegasi dive-bombing his head while unicorns tried to grab him with their magic. She would have joined in, except that the six were all foals and young ponies and their victim was Deadshot Calamity. The stallion had some gray in his beard and streaks in his mane, but he was still fit. Fun as it’d be to kick his flank, she wasn’t here for that. Whisper asked the band to hang back, taking only one guard with her as she continued on.

“Is that you, Whisper?” Velvet called as she walked out onto the porch. A baby in a diaper rode easily on her back.

“Yeah. Sorry it took so long getting here,” she said as she climbed the steps of the cottage, giving the mare a quick hug before tugging at a choker with a bloodwing talisman on it. As it came off, her wings retracted back into her body, leaving only downy stubs behind. “Flying with those just isn’t the same. Like I’m borrowing someone else’s wings.” She gave a little self-deprecating smirk. “Even if bat wings *are* awesome.”

“They still haven’t found replacements?” Velvet said as she trotted out to the other mare.

“They can’t slap a full cyborg prosthetic on there without reinforcing half the rest of my body, and Morningstar frigging stole Chimera so... no,” Whisper replied, then smirked. “Doesn’t matter. Wings or no wings, I can still kick ass.”

“Yeah. I heard your concert in Ponyville last night,” Velvet replied, and then her face grew pained. “Actually, I think everypony for twenty miles heard it.”

“Hey, you sing the classics, and I sing metal. New music isn’t nice and sweet. It’s pumped and angry and doesn’t take shit from anypony,” Whisper said with a grin. Velvet sighed and rolled her eyes, but she still smiled a little.

“And how are the batponies doing?” Velvet inquired. “I see you brought the band.”

“Bodyguards, actually.” Whisper rolled her eyes. “I decided that if they were going to follow me around all the time, they might as well help me rock.” She regarded them with a smile. “They’re a lot like your alicorns, though. Doing better, but gradually.” Whisper’s grin soon faded as her ears folded back, and she glanced over her shoulder at the other cottage. “Does she know I’m coming?”

“She knows she’s going to have a very important visitor today,” Velvet answered as Whisper swallowed and rubbed a hoof on her other foreleg nervously. “I can go with you, if you like.”

“No. If I can face the apocalypse, I should be able to do this,” she said as she straightened. A cheer rang out, and Calamity was laid out in the grass, his children pinning him down with glee. “So... seven? Think you’re going to stop there?” she asked Velvet.

“You know, after Pipsqueak, we said she’d be the last. But then things happen, and you think ‘what’s one more?’” Velvet said as she touched her tummy, her golden PipBuck glimmering. The rose crystal songbird in the housing glowed gently when the light hit it just right.

Whisper flushed and rubbed her own slightly swollen belly, glancing back at one of the band with a warm smile. “Yeah. What’s one more?” The PipBuck on the pegasus’s own leg was a shining twin of Velvet’s save for its pink crystal star.

Velvet chuckled maternally. “And it doesn’t quite conflict with my singing, since Calamity’s always here patrolling the skies and Homage will babysit.” Velvet smirked at Whisper. “She always protests, and always accepts. I think she’d just adopt Pipsqueak outright if we let her.”

“No way. She’s too smart for that. As an aunt, she gets to play with them, but when they start pooping and crying, she can send them back to Mom,” Whisper said with a grin. Her smile faded, though, and she gazed off at the other cottage, swallowing.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you? Make introductions?”

“No,” the pegasus replied, and, giving Velvet a small smile, continued, “If we could get Gardens going after all the junk we went through, I should be able to handle this.”

“True. It’s not like you’re facing a power-mad alicorn,” Velvet said. “Though you’d probably prefer that.”

“Yeah. Not like I can kick *her* in the face.” Whisper bit her lip anxiously, then lowered her eyes. “Thanks, though. It’s still so new to me. Family, friends... I can still remember, growing up, Sanguine always telling me how much better I was than everyone else and encouraging me to... show them.” Whisper sighed. “He was all I'd ever had. I couldn’t even imagine a world without him, but he certainly could imagine one without me. So yeah, thanks again for teaching me about friendship and... being less of a cunt.” She gave a nervous smile. “Mean-ness isn’t strength.”

Velvet gave her a hug. “Thank you for keeping us all together when everything fell apart. If you had given up on us, Apex would have irradiated and tainted the whole Wasteland with Gardens.” There was a yelp next to the house, and they both leaned over to see Calamity pinned to the ground, all six kids on his back. “And for teaching Calamity that sometimes Loyalty is standing up to your friends, no matter how much you love them.”

Whisper opened her mouth to reply, then closed it and shook her head. Enough stalling. She bid Velvet farewell, retrieved what she needed from the wagon, the guards standing silently back, and then turned and walked to the second cottage. Tentatively, she knocked on the front door.

No answer. She glanced behind her, knocked again, and frowned. Had something happened? She should break the door down! Get her power hooves! ... Or maybe just check the backyard first? Slowly, she made her way around, almost walking into a shimmering field that had to be an invisible blue alicorn. “Go ahead,” the hidden protector murmured. “You’re clear.”

Whisper’s snarky reply was lost in her nervousness and a mouthful of scroll case. She walked a little further around the house...

There she was.

Whether a product of the magic that had transformed her or just good luck, Fluttershy had aged well. A sort of timeless quality seemed to surround her, the silver strands of her mane blowing softly in the breeze coming off the Everfree. Her teal eyes seemed to gaze across centuries as she sat in the grass. At her hooves, a half dozen bunnies dozed. Though she definitely had wrinkles about her eyes, nothing of her appearance suggested infirmity, just old pain painted over with... something? Maybe hope?

Whisper spat out the scroll she’d been carrying, her mouth working several times before she finally croaked, “Hi... Mom.”

The pegasus turned those sad teal eyes to Whisper, and it was a moment before they focused on her. Comprehension slowly stole over the older mare. “Excuse me?” she queried with a little frown.

“Please. I… ” Whisper fumbled with a scroll case at her hooves. “Here! Please read this! I… he wrote it… just in case… ” She held the scroll case out. After all, if Rainbow Dash had survived as a ghoul, there might have been a chance of seeing Fluttershy again. He was always two steps ahead… sometimes off a cliff, but still, two steps ahead.

Fluttershy was skeptical, and who could blame her? But she took the scroll case and shook out the piece of paper, unrolling it and fitting a pair of glasses to her muzzle. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, then widened again. Tears shimmered as she sniffed. “Oh, that fool… that poor fool… ” she murmured as she hugged the scroll to her chest.

“It’s true. Trueblood… he saved me. Preserved me.” She left out ‘used me’.

“I… I don’t know what to say,” Fluttershy murmured as she regarded her daughter. “I… I thought I’d lost you. I did lose you… ” Fluttershy held herself with her wings. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say.”

“I… you don’t have to say anything to me. I just… I wanted you to know. And… ” Whisper turned and looked behind her, giving a smile she’d only ever given one other pony. “Go ahead.”

From behind Whisper emerged a colt. His yellow coat had a dusky, mustard hue. The mane was an uncanny copy of his father’s down to its deep purple color. Bright teal eyes gazed warily up at Fluttershy as his bat wings fidgeted atop his back. “Um… hi. Grandma.”

Fluttershy’s face screwed up as tears ran down her face. “This is Noctilucent,” Whisper said, unable to stem the flow of her own tears and not sure if she even should. “I call him Nocti.” The colt took a few steps towards Fluttershy.

“Hello, Nocti,” Fluttershy whispered, and then they all lost it. It was laughing and crying and hugging, as if two centuries of pain and a life of loss were finally able to be released. Even the hidden alicorn couldn’t stop her tears as she witnessed the long-deferred reunion.

So it could be forgiven if they missed the sight of the distant, pale mare looking on, shedding tears of her own.

* * *

"Well, it's getting late," the green stallion said. "I'll take first watch."

"Second," the zebra stallion offered.

"I'll take first," the unicorn mare insisted. At the stallion's frown, she elaborated, "It takes hours for me to get to sleep anyway when I'm in the Everfree."

"Alright," he murmured, trotting over to his bedroll.

After several minutes, everypony had gotten settled in... with the exception of the cloaked pony who had only spoken once before. "Keeping watch with me?" the unicorn asked the mysterious pony.

"Something like that. May I see that gun again?" the mare asked. The unicorn frowned. "I promise, I won't do anything to damage it."

The unicorn drew the gun, removed the magazine and chambered round, and levitated it over, where a second field of magic wrapped around the weapon and pulled it into the cloaked unicorn's hooves. "It's a twelve point seven millimeter, IF-33."

"Mmmm," the strange mare replied, then pulled out a small box, cracking it open with a waft of gun oil. The gun was easily disassembled, every piece hovering in the air.

"Wait! What are you doing?" the unicorn hissed, trying to keep her voice low.

"I just happen to have a few parts for this model," the mare said as she replaced the firing pin, spring, trigger, and barrel. Then she oiled it and just as easily reassembled it. Then she turned in over and regarded the handle.

Card Trick. Tarot. Little Poker. Full House. 52 Pick-up. Straight Flush. Aces. Royal Flush. Bridge. Hearts. Gin Rummy. Go Fish. Blackjack.

Then she turned the gun over, and gazed down at the other side.

Bouillotte. Beauty. Starshine. Astrolabe. Star Sparkle. Prominence. Twilight Shield. Night Watcher. Glimmershine.

The strange pony levitated it back to the suspicious mare. "It's a nice weapon. Looks like there's still some room for a few more names though," she said as Glimmershine examined the gun closely. "I'm sorry about your mother, by the way. She died protecting others when all she wanted to do was study and raise you."

"Who are you?" Glimmershine whispered.

“Nopony important,” the strange pony said as she rose to her hooves. “Take care of yourself. And think about it. It’d be a shame if vigilance ended.” The cloaked mare gestured to the snoring green stallion, and Glimmershine glanced over at him.

And when the mare looked back, the cloaked pony was gone.

* * *

Not far from the campfire, the forest pressed in, but the cloaked pony walked without concern. She’d dealt with far worse places than this and faced far worse threats than the beasts offered. Okay, Killing Joke was still around, but hopefully she’d stay clear of that. The protectors in these woods, probably invisible, either didn’t detect her or recognized her from her earlier visits. This was a sacred place, but she meant it no harm.

The thick trees suddenly thinned out into a large clearing. In the middle of it, rising like a rusty ball bearing in a mossy bed, loomed the enormous sphere of the S.P.P. hub. The cloaked mare approached, passing by five stones. The marble headstones, arranged in a semicircle around the entrance, all displayed in relief the ponies that had once been the Wasteland’s greatest heroes. They were simple, for what statuary could capture what they’d meant to the pony they’d meant most to?

The mare marched to the front hatch and rapped on it with a hoof. “It’s me,” she said. Nothing. Another, louder bang. “Come on, open up,” she repeated, staring at the door. “Fine, you want to do this the hard way? I’ll do it the hard way.”

Then she pulled out a bottle of whiskey, flopped against the door, and started to sing. She sang long and loud and horribly, and the only reason why the defenders didn’t come was that they’d heard the songs before. She sang of friends. Of lovers. Of regret. Of fun. Of sorrow. She also sang very, very badly.

So, on the nineteenth round of ‘Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey’, a mare’s voice shouted from above her, “Shut up, Blackjack!”

* * *

The grating buzz of my alarm yanked me away from sleep. I stuck my left foreleg out from under the blankets, away from my head,

felt around for the end table next to the bed, found it, and proceeded to whack my ... PipBuckless leg into the tabletop. Hard. "Ow! Shit!" I sat up, hissing and clenching my eyes shut. "Who stuck my PipBuck on my other hoof?" Wait. This battered, junky model wasn't even mine! "Some prank... " Mom was going to be pissed... ugh... I groaned, flopped back on the mattress, and smacked my lips, tasting the sour gunk in my mouth before rolling onto my back and huffing softly, "Good morning, Blackjack. Welcome to another thrilling day in Stable 99." I half crawled, half rolled, half fell out of bed and gave myself a vigorous shake. Life in Stable 99 was routine, with any deviation punishable by the security mares. I had half an hour to wash, half an hour to eat, and an hour to report to my duty station. The same as it had been every day since I'd gotten my cutie mark.

Slowly, I shuffled through the copious junk I'd accumulated. Hey, where were the stale food chips and drink bulbs? "Ugh... Mom must have had maintenance clean while I was out. Hope it was a cutie," I chuckled. Heh. A mare could dream…My horn glowed white as my magic lifted my uniform from one of the heaps. I gave it a test sniff…huh... when was the last time my clothes smelled *dusty*? I tossed it back on its pile and sifted around for another. Sniff… sniff…yeah, this'd work.

Trotting down to the showers, I passed the murals designed to inspire camaraderie and cooperation…at least, according to what I'd been constantly taught in classes. 'We are all in this together' declared the caption of one picture of an abstract white unicorn hugging dozens of tiny ponies in her hooves. Another showed one lone weeping mare under the caption 'Never forget'.

A pair of ponies I didn't recognize passed me, and they both froze. Their eyes were wide as dinner plates. "Hey, you two! Do you know who took my PipBuck?" I asked crossly, but they turned and ran. Ugh, being the daughter of the head of security never got old...

I trotted into the sector's communal bathroom, and immediately my ears perked to a familiar giggling. Walking past a stall, I glanced in at two mares simply washing and talking about their upcoming free shift. Huh... why had I expected something different? Still, my reputation must have been obvious, so it was pretty understandable that the pair looked up with some trepidation when they spotted me.

"Look, if you two want to have sex, just make sure that it's not in

public. I'm not going to bust you," I said to both as I washed.

"Wha... " one gasped.

"She's my sister!" the other responded, glaring at me. "Who are *you*?"

Buh? How could they not know? And why did that feel... off? "Blackjack. I'm on the security C shift." That must be it. They were B shifters. "What were you two planning on doing? Going to Metronome's concert? Heading to Pink Pillow's orgies?" Not like I'd get invited...

But the pair were staring at me like I'd gone mad. Then the first mare said ever so lightly, "I... We were going to Megamart's reopening, and then to visit the Lakeside market."

I collapsed completely, smashing my face against the tile and collapsing in the stall. "What was that?" I muttered as I stared at the two, feeling something welling up inside me like an immense tide rolling in.

"Well, yeah. I mean, the sand dogs have some of the best tech salvage you can get outside of the megastable." The mares stared at me. "Are you okay?"

No. I wasn't okay. I kicked myself to my hooves and raced out of the shower dripping water, feeling agony building inside my head. P-21 should be right down here in this storage room! But the storage room was empty! And Daisy was going to ambush me here! But there was only a mare working a mop. I burst into medical, my breathing going faster and faster as I stared at the doctor within.

The pegasus stallion looked at me in concern. "Yes, miss. Can I help you?"

I ran without answering. Into the atrium where ponies were having lunch and talking rather than struggling with a cybernetic monster. I drew more than a few glances as I rushed past them, but most of these ponies weren't ponies who knew me. They were a transplanted stable. Only one caught sight of me and started to scream hysterically. I skipped going to Security or the Overmare's office and went straight for the door.

The open door.

Running faster, I raced past mares and stallions casually strolling into and out of the stable and burst out into the air. Bright sunlight played across the crops spreading out along the hillside. All I could do was run. Glory was supposed to be out there! And Rampage! And Lacunae! But as more thoughts piled on, I sobbed and gasped

as I raced faster and faster, trying to catch a life that had left me behind.

And then I reached a rocky outcrop near the top of the hill, and I stared out at the Hoof below me.

A pristine blue lake sat in the middle of the valley like the pupil of an opened eye. On the south end, the sheer cliff of the granite knob rose from the azure depths. All around the valley was green, as if trying to make up for lost time. Across the lake, I could make out a thriving community around the University. There! I could see some sort of circus tent next to the shell of Megamart. And there was the bowl of the Arena, the rest of the covered roof now completely removed. Far to the east, Black Pony Mountain was a buzzing hub of activity. Cloud towers rose here and there in the sky like apartment blocks... but nothing covered the lake. No boats sailed its waters. It was cool and aloof, and just a bit ominous.

I shouldn't have stopped, for at that moment, everything that had happened to me happened once more. Everything, all the way to the last moments following the Eater's death, struck me in one colossal torrent. There were two options. The first was to go happily mad.

I took the second.

I bawled. I wailed. I screamed and blubbered, ground my face into the mud and rocked like a foal.

Crying was vomiting for the soul, and I had so much to bring up.

Dark purple wings surrounded me, and I was pulled into an alicorn's embrace. All I could do was clutch Psalm in desperation, my tears bleeding months of agony and loss. Finally, I found just enough voice to whisper, "I had friends... "

* * *

That'd been a long, long time ago though.

A magical field grabbed me and levitated me into the air, pulling me easily through the skies to the top of the rusty sphere. The wind pulled back the hood of my cloak, and black and red mane streamed in the air as I was deposited next to the diminutive unicorn mare some ponies still called the Lightbringer. "You could have just teleported in! You didn't have to butcher that Sweetie Belle song," LittlePip said as she glowered at me and rubbed her muzzle. "I'm gonna get sick again, I just know it."

“Yeah, probably,” I replied with a grin, reaching into my saddlebags and pulling out a bottle of orange juice. “Which is why I brought you this,” I said, passing it to her. “Remember, I promised Velvet I’d help rebuild your immune system. That means you taking your vitamins and zinc and getting periodically exposed to germy ponies like me.”

“But you’re not the one that feels like butt for days afterward,” LittlePip grumbled, but she leaned against me anyway. Like Fluttershy, she had a timelessness about her. Nopony would think she was young once they got past her height, but she didn’t seem old either.

“That’s why I find other ways to make you feel better,” I murmured, giving her ear a little nibble and earning a squeak. “Even after two centuries.”

“Blackjack!” she protested, going all red.

“Hey, I got a letter from Homage too,” I pointed out, smirking and gazing into her eyes. “‘Take care of LittlePip and make sure she’s happy emotionally, intellectually, and sexually.’” I crinkled my eyes in mirth as she squirmed, like she always squirmed. “And I still haven’t beaten her score.”

“Later,” LittlePip murmured, flushed, but also not in the mood... now. It was always a dance. I could not, and didn’t want to, replace Homage in her heart. I was a surrogate, and so was she. That we both knew this helped a little. “What do you want, Blackjack? Besides making me sick and sex?” There was warm familiarity beneath that prickliness.

We old ponies needed our friends.

“I need to call in a favor,” I said.

“I don’t owe you any favors,” she grumbled.

“Sure you do,” I answered, and she sighed. I didn’t need to bring up who held her together for five years when Homage died. Or Velvet. Or Calamity. Or when Derpy and Lionheart went. Or when Snails removed Celestia from the mechanical hull so she could rejoin her sister. I’d been there. Nursemaid. Companion. Even, on rare days, lover. And as I’d helped her through her following sacrifices, she kept me sane when the darkness got too dark and the mattress too hard to leave.

“Okay. Maybe. What do you need, Security?” she asked with a little half smile.

I wasn’t Security. Security had died facing the Eater. I was just a

Blackjack groupie... albeit a good one. And after a generation or two, nopony would look at me and think that I'd been that mare in the story. Some days, I didn't believe it, even when I remembered it all. Remembered it all perfectly...

"Well, if she gets here soon... " I murmured, looking around. "That's your cue," I said to empty air.

"Ooopsie!" the air said as a shimmer manifested into a purple set of power armor with a wide-brimmed hat and cape. Even after two hundred years, she'd taken great care of Rainbow Dash's Mare Do Well armor. "Sorry. I wasn't sure when the dramatic moment would be perfect."

Then she pulled off the hat and helmet, and Boo smiled at me. "Hi, Momma."

"You!" LittlePip shouted, her horn glowing and seizing the pony... though Boo didn't quite look like that anymore. She had two little horn nubs and a little snaggle tooth, and her eyes were yellow and red. I didn't know how long it would take her to become a full draconequus, but she was still Boo. "What are you doing here, you terrorist?!"

"Terrorist is such a pejorative," Boo replied. "I just like giving things a little shake up every now and then."

"You led the griffin armada to us! You brought the radwyrms!" LittlePip snarled, her eyes narrowing. "You stole my figurines."

Boo spread her hooves, or were they arms, wide. "Yup. Pretty big shake up, huh? Got you out of that bubble for the first time in a century. Oooh, what a merry chase that was." Boo laughed and then looked smugly down at the pair of us. "Relax, Lightbringer. It all turned out okay in the end. Rarity's soul was free, and you got your decorations back."

"Were you behind those bombings, Boo?" I asked. "In Junction City?"

"Me?" she said, pouting as she pressed her hooves to her chest. When I glared sternly at her, she sighed. "I may have been involved. Tangentially. Parallelogramicly." She returned my stern look. "The Twilight Society's up to shenanigans again, and I thought I could rattle their plot by blowing up one of their biggest tools."

"You could have just contacted the authorities," LittlePip grumbled.

"Please," Boo rolled her eyes and smirked at the little unicorn. "They're much more inclined to investigate after a little boom in

the capital than they would be if incriminating evidence landed in their lap. Government offices blow up, and ponies demand answers. There's a nice little trail of evidence leading up to the Society's more rotten elements, and I'm shepherding a very devoted stallion towards it." She grinned from ear to ear. "This'll be far more fun."

"You're going to rut him, aren't you?" I asked with a smile.

"You would. And you should see him. All law and order and devoted," Boo purred, rubbing her chest with a hoof. "I'll open his eyes a little. Bang out some of his misperceptions and illusions. Play with his values. He should be a better pony afterwards." Then she frowned, rubbing her chin. "Of course, there's an itsy bitsy chance his investigation will result in Celestia One melting Junction City, but, eh, details!"

LittlePip glared at her, then at me, then back at her again. "You... I... how... ohhhh! I should pop you like a raider!"

Boo pulled a bandana from... where did she pull that from?... and wrapped it around her head to cover her eyes. Then she stuck a lit cigarette between her lips. "Very well. You may fire when ready. I mean, he might discover it without my nudges and teasing hints. And if he doesn't... not like the freedom of the NCR matters much." She pushed up one side of the blindfold and smirked.

LittlePip released her. "You are a menace!" she hissed.

"Ah, but I am an interesting menace, and, ultimately, a force for good," Boo replied cheerfully.

"If you're through, do you have it?" I asked her.

Boo reached into her purple cloak and pulled out a piece of hardware. "One F.A.D.E. generator, courtesy of the NCR."

"That! You... how did you steal that?!" LittlePip demanded.

"More sexual favors than I care to recount. I'm still sore from it," Boo said, working her jaw, then leered at LittlePip. "Actually, you know what, I can recount a few of them for you. There was this sweet, virgin secretary mare who–"

LittlePip covered her ears. "Not listening!" That prompted laughter from me, and the mare sent me a glower. "You're just as bad as she is!"

"We'll give the generator back when we return," I told her.

"Return? Return from where?" LittlePip asked, screwing her face up in bafflement.

"You'll see," I said, walking back to Boo and giving her a hug. "Please, please be careful. I don't want to find out you got killed. Or

turned to stone. You know, something permanently bad."

Boo's eyes shimmered as she hugged me back. "You know me, Momma. I'm always lucky." Then she stepped back and smirked at LittlePip. "I'm going now! Last chance to pop me like a raider!" she sang as she danced away on her hooftips.

A glowing field surrounded her and booted her off the sphere, flicking her away with a long cry as she disappeared into the forest. "Worth it!" the mare called out distantly from the bushes.

"She's turning into another Discord," LittlePip said grimly. "One day, she'll go too far... " The little unicorn then turned to me and asked with far more concern, "What about you? You're a blank too."

"Dunno," I said, twisting and turning to examine myself. "What do you think? See any Discord on my flank?" I smirked as I saw her, rapidly turning red, staring at my butt. For two centuries, I'd kept her sane. We'd screamed at each other. Bawled with each other. Kissed and made love, though never quite been in love, all to keep our minds off the steady, inevitable grind of time.

Because immortality sucked if you had to be immortal alone.

One day, one of us would go. Probably her... And then...

Then I'd get to see if the Legate had been right.

But I didn't want to think of that now, so I shoved it to the back of my mind and contented myself with stroking her cheek with my tail and watching her turn into a whimpering mound of embarrassment and desire. I loved her so much for still being that way even after so many, many years. When you're suddenly living for centuries, it's the things that don't change that become so precious.

"I don't think she and I are identical. Discord rode around inside her for a bit, but not me. She's becoming another draconequus, and she's not alone. A lot of Brood are changing too. I met a Brood zebra-hippogriff just five years ago," I said with a smile.

"And that doesn't worry you?" she asked, clearly worried enough for both of us.

"She was happier as a hippogriff. I think her soul was that of a female griffin. Every Brood that's changed is happy with what they ended up as. Even a few that are becoming like Boo. And sure, some of them might become problems, but I won't worry about that until they actually *do*," I said with another smile, leaving out the fact that many Brood were also aging, and I wasn't. Celestia only knew why... and Celestia wasn't here anymore.

Boy, hadn't that been a shitty day...

"So... what do you need me and one of the last functioning F.A.D.E. talismans for?" I turned to her, grinning broadly. "Oh no... "

* * *

"Oh, bollocks," Crumpets muttered as she clomped around the inside of the church in Chapel. The structure no longer served as a place of reverence, and the center of the interior was taken up by a massive block of white marble. Carved into the surface was the image of Security in repose; they'd gone with a 'lying on her back clutching a bunch of lilies' image rather than a 'cybernetic and humping a shotgun' one. Moonlight streamed through the stained glass windows showing Celestia, Luna, the Ministry Mares, and Security's companions. "I hate coming in here at night."

"Hush," Dusk answered from the balcony above. "There've been three break-in attempts this week. Somepony is up to something," the pegasus murmured.

"Can you believe Boing wants this place torn down?" Crumpets muttered. "Fucking nuts."

"Yeah, but she's as nutty as my sister," Dusk replied tersely. "And you really don't understand this whole 'stakeout' thing, do you?" The earth pony gave a deep sigh of frustration.

Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. "You want to bang?" Crumpets asked.

"That... *really*... isn't part of a stakeout," Dusk muttered.

"I can't help it," Crumpets replied. "Sex helps me not think of how eerie this place is. Besides, haven't you ever wanted to do it in a graveyard?"

"Okay! I'm going to watch outside! You just... stay here," Dusk said as she swooped down to the front door and stepped outside.

"It was just an idea," Crumpets muttered, and then there was a flash. She turned to the still-open door, seeing Dusk just standing there. "Everything all... "

An apple rolled from the doorway to her feet. Steel Ranger armor could handle just about any grenade made... except for this one. Sadly, Steel Ranger armor also wasn't the swiftest when it came to leaping away from danger. The grenade went off with a sphere of lightning, and instantly, her systems crashed. "Oh fuck me!" she shouted.

Her jaw worked the release knob to the side, chewing on it as she

heard something boom outside her armor. It wasn't *her* booming, though. All too many awkward moments later, the helmet released and fell free of her head with a loud thud. Crumpets coughed in the unfiltered and now dust-and-smoke-filled air.

The tomb had been broken open, and the remains inside were in view... as was the mare who had broken in. Sweetie Bot stood over Blackjack's broken body levitating her starmetal sword. She brought it down, and a moment later, she lifted the PipBuck with the hoof still attached. "What are you doing?!" Crumpets demanded as she struggled in the confines of her suit.

"You don't understand... I had to have it! I have to know!" the robot buzzed, her eyes blazing green, and then she turned and leapt off the slab, running for the door. As she passed by Dusk, she flung the sword away and raced off into the night.

"Mad as a box of fucking frogs," Crumpets muttered as she slumped inside her armor.

* * *

"This is insane! This is insane and you are insane to be doing this insanity!" LittlePip shouted as the battered-together rocket roared beneath us, lifting us higher and higher into the sky. Her magic was one of the few things keeping it together. "Is this thing going to explode?!" she screamed.

"Probably," I hollered back at her.

"What?" she shrieked.

"Look at it this way!" I yelled. "Would you rather die going a million miles an hour into space, or in a rusting bubble?"

Her glare spoke volumes. "I didn't agree to this! When I got into the rocket, I wasn't planning on this!"

"Story of my life!" I shouted as the blue thinned out more and more and all the stars came out.

The moon glowed brilliantly ahead of us.

* * *

"Luna's milky tits... I can't believe it. The moon. We're actually over the moon," LittlePip breathed, her horn glowing as she propelled us along with her telekinesis. The whole trip had taken us only a few hours once we'd separated from the nose of the rocket.

The F.A.D.E. generator was mounted on a platform with a dozen industrial-sized spark batteries I'd spent a decade scrounging and preserving, and an air talisman I'd spent years trying to make work kept us breathing for now. We wore two restored astropony suits, helmets off for the moment. One thing about being effectively immortal: you picked up hobbies quick, or started to plot the death of the world.

And, of course, I'd brought music, and we each took turns listening to our favorites, Velvet Remedy for her and Whisper for me. As Whisper sang one of her softer tunes, LittlePip muttered, sulking, "I still can't believe, even after all this, that she was the Element of Magic! She wasn't even a unicorn. I thought it was that alicorn."

"Hey, let's be fair. You *did* find Whisper like the others. You just used her to liberate Apex, and since we're being fair, everypony including her thought she was the second coming of Twilight Sparkle. It's not your fault she went batfuck crazy when it failed, nearly killed the other Bearers, and almost turned Gardens into an Equestria-wide radiation and taint generator," I said, getting a flat look in return. "Oh, I lost at 'liberate Apex', didn't I?"

"Spike still hasn't forgiven me," she muttered.

"It was two centuries ago," I said, patting her back. "Have you spoken to him?"

"He's... not like he used to be. I think the radwyrm invasion really shook him. He's not as open towards ponies anymore."

"Seeing hundreds of radiation-mutated dragons being killed would do that," I said.

"I think he's still not forgiven me for using the S.P.P. like a weapon, either, even if it was the only way to give us a chance. Or the Twilight Society," she added as she stared down at the white expanse of shimmering crystal. "Is there something about this place that makes you think about the past?"

"It's the moon. I think it's pensivity and wistfulness incarnate," I said as I peered down at the immense expanse. "It looks a lot more melted than when I was last here. Those used to be deserts of dust. They look like glass now."

"Horizons," LittlePip reminded me.

"Oh, yeah. I guess I did toast the moon a bit," I said with a rueful grin. She groaned and covered her face with a hoof. "Okay, LittlePip. Find her." I stretched out on a cushion taped to the floor.

"Find... what?" LittlePip goggled at me. "You mean, find her? On

the moon? With only a few hours of energy left?"

"Yup," I replied with a smile.

"I... you... I can't believe you would drag me all the way to the moon for this! I never would have come if I'd known this was what you were planning!" LittlePip huffed.

"I know," I answered with a smile. "You have the talent. So... find her," I said as I folded my hooves behind my head.

"I– You– She– That's not how this works, Blackjack! I don't even have her tagged! You're asking me to find one pony-sized object on the face of the moon!" LittlePip protested as she glowered out at the barren expanse... and then paused. "Uh... huh. What is that?" she asked, pointing off to the side.

I leaned over and saw a dark square discoloration in the glassy plateau. "Your special talent at work." I pointed towards the square. "Onward!"

Her horn glowed as we changed direction, heading towards the square. "I hate you sometimes. You know that. I know you know that!" she grumbled next to me.

I leaned over and nibbled on the nape of her neck. As Homage had told me, there was no better way to derail LittlePip. "I... oh... you... don't do that when I'm angry with you, Blackjack!"

Ah, the Gl– the joy of being a switch and the top in a relationship. "Hush. I'll pay you back when we get home," I teased against her ear before pulling away, and we put our helmets on.

The square was all that remained of the rocket terminal. The metal had mixed with the moonstone to create the grayish blob roughly a kilometer square. Thin fingers of metal and stone peeked up like warped whiskers from the plain. Hollows and voids in the ground shimmered like watchful eye sockets as we passed above them. Parking the platform, we performed a check of the scant remnants. The skeleton of my fallen rocket stuck out on one side, and the tram line was an almost invisible shadow on the surface. There was no sign of the tracks, though; they been erased in the fields of glass.

Getting back on the platform, we followed the line. Like the plains behind me, the mountains had gotten cooked, but they had afforded some protection from Horizons. Here and there, the tram line actually appeared, frozen in gloppiness. Still, that it survived at all gave me a little hope. If the Astrostable survived, maybe they would have found her. Given her a home for these last two centuries. If...

It hadn't.

The chasm Tom had fired from was collapsed into a shallow depression of glassy moonstone. At the edge, where the stable had been, a few melted structures peeked out of the glass, but there were holes in them I could see from this distance. Still, we... okay, LittlePip, brought us to the edge of them, and we walked inside the Astrostable. Inside, moon dust hung in the void in translucent veils, its glow showing the remains of the stable around us.

Past the damaged room we first entered were airless tunnels, devoid of life. Just like at home. But I'd destroyed this place, too. Goddesses, I'd left behind such a wake of destruction.

No. Stop. No backsliding now. I couldn't blame myself for this. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply. I hadn't been to blame for this, and while I knew I would feel guilty, because that was simply how I was wired, I wouldn't beat myself up over this.

There was a bump against my helmet, and LittlePip shouted, "Can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes, looking at her in her own glassy helmet, which was barely able to hold her horn. "Yeah!"

"Why is that dust just hanging there like that? It shouldn't do that! And where are all the bodies?" she asked.

I blinked and looked around the atrium we occupied. She was right. No bodies. And everything seemed so... neat! Like the stable had been cleaned up, and they'd just left. Where had they gone... some sort of mass suicide? I couldn't see everypony going peacefully to that. I touched helmets again and shouted, "I don't know!"

We looked but didn't find a single one. Nor was there a mass grave, or some kind of disintegration chamber, or anything. The power was off, not destroyed. With time, eventually, the Astrostable could be used again. Someday...

Another helmet bump. "We need to get back!" LittlePip reminded me.

So we left, without Rampage. My hope dwindled. I'd counted on LittlePip to be able to find her, but it seemed that that just wasn't going to happen. Damn it... I should have come back sooner, or realized then that to teleport another pony, I needed a mental hole for that pony to go through.

If only...

We emerged back into the open...

And a herd of ponies.

They didn't wear suits. They simply stood on the surface of the moon as casually as if they were back on Equus. All of them were various shades of monochrome and metallic, with ghostly manes that blew in a nonexistent wind. I glanced at LittlePip, her face aghast at the eerie sight.

Me, I'd dealt with weirder things than ponies on the moon.

I walked towards the dozen. "Can you hear me?" I shouted at them, and thought hard at them... you never knew! I was rewarded with a nod. "Can you talk?" The twelve regarded each other, then peered at me. I heard a staticky buzz in my mind, but nothing specific. After a minute, it stopped, and they shook their heads. I sighed, then straightened. "I'm looking for Rampage. Earth pony... like me, but without the knob on her head." They blinked, and a few squinted their star-filled eyes at me. I used to have eyes like that... hey! "I have a horn! It's just hard to see!"

They laughed soundlessly, then turned to walk, gesturing for us to follow. Back on the platform, with the F.A.D.E. shield up and air restored, LittlePip asked, "What do you think happened to them?"

"I don't know. I guess they became... something else? Star ponies? Moon ponies?" I shook my head. "They seem to be friendly, though."

"Unless they realize you were the one that melted the moon centuries ago," LittlePip commented.

"That... I never meant to do that!" I said defensively. "I'm glad it didn't punch a hole right through the moon... or blow it up completely." I saw the herd of moon ponies had all stopped and were staring up at the pair of us, starry eyes wide. "Um... sorry! Complete accident! Really!"

They didn't look very comforted by that, but they sped up quite a bit, pronking across the glassy plain. Their hooves had to be as hard as diamond to bite into the surface as well as they did. There also wasn't a horn or wing to be seen. Atrophy? Design? Who knew. I was burning up with questions, but the greatest one I had was about my friend.

The herd led us to a steep-walled crater with homes built into the sides in glossy, molded rock. I gazed in amazement at fields of... were those plants? Incredibly delicate crystals? They looked like snowflakes growing in the shadow in the depths of the crater. The moon ponies in the town seemed quite taken with us, waving their hooves.

"You know... nopony is going to believe this back home," LittlePip took a moment to say as the dozen we'd followed stopped at the mouth of a cave. We put the suits back on and left the platform, walking amid and past the shining ponies and into the cave. Moonstone glowed brightly all around us, singing its strange ethereal melody.

"Story of my life," I replied, and we walked towards the back of the cave.

To Rampage.

Somepony'd made a kind of bedroom for her, with a crystal bed and lamps and a dresser. And there, curled up, her head upon a pillow, was the mare. She looked asleep, covered in a shining layer of dust like a blanket. I turned to LittlePip, but she shook her head.

So, the talisman had had its limit after all. Her skin had darkened like tanned leather, but I could still see her stripes.

I reached out to brush her mane, and like a house a cards, she collapsed. Everything not bone simply turned to powder. I stared at the pile of dust, trying feebly to think of what could have possibly happened, but my thoughts came up empty as I examined what was left. Everything looked centuries dead except the phoenix talisman, lying in her ribs like a heart of stone. I scooped it up and turned to the exit. The moon ponies watched the cave with a forlorn expression. Could they hear our thoughts? Feel our sadness? Hopefully they weren't outraged by what we'd done to her. For all we knew, they thought Rampage was the goddess of the moon.

We got back on the platform without incident, and, though I would have loved to stay and learn more about the moon ponies, we only had so much time.

Back on the platform, as we headed up towards Equus, I held the stone in my lap. "Well, I can do one last favor for her," I said, and I drew my sword. I hadn't dared take the starmetal off the platform; Pythia had said it was a different type, but I didn't want to risk dropping it. I tried to wipe the moonstone coating the talisman away, but the damn stuff was sticky. Oh well…I levitated talisman and sword and cleanly cut the former in twain with the latter, the sword giving a brilliant flash of light and crackle of magical energy as it went through. The dead talisman was bisected right down the middle.

"I'm sorry, Blackjack," LittlePip said.

"Yeah," I muttered. Then blinked as the magical energy arcing over

the halves of the talisman started to glow. Soul motes escaped, but, rather than passing on, they seemed to be swirling and surging around the broken talisman. The dead pink rock started to glow, and we both stared in alarm as a pink mist issued forth. That mist collected into a small filly-sized shape, and with a flash of light, the body of Rampage the filly was formed. The soul motes started to wander away, but three lingered. Then one tiny mote slipped into her body as the other two departed. The talisman went dark, the halves crumbling.

And then, suddenly, Rampage sucked in a deep breath and coughed. A moment later, she opened her eyes. “Mom?” she murmured, and then stared at me. “Blackjack?” Then she looked around wildly. “What... who... how... the rocket... but... I... .you... ” The filly blinked at me, then asked, “What the fuck is going on? How’d I get here? Last thing I remember was lying down to take a nap, and... ”

I sobbed as I swept her up in my hooves, holding her tight, weeping brokenly. At first she struggled, and then she relaxed, and soon started crying too. “Has it been a while?”

“Yeah... ” I sniffed as I held her. “It has been.” LittlePip looked on, envious but silent. I knew she’d have given the world for one of her friends back... and I would have helped her get it.

The striped filly wiped her eyes and then stared ahead of us, where Equus loomed. The land was greener, the seas bluer, the mountains and deserts more defined. The zebra lands no longer burned with megaspells. “Do you ever regret it?” LittlePip asked softly as the world grew ahead of us. “What you gave up?”

I smiled through my tears and lied through my teeth. “Not a bit of it.” That was the only answer I could give. I’d paid the price, and would keep paying it all the many years I had left. Because I could. Because it made things better. Because, as hard as things got, somepony had to.

“So, where are we going?” Rampage asked, actually sounding like a filly for the first time ever.

I hugged her close and reached over to put a hoof across LittlePip’s shoulders as she guided us back to Equus. “Home,” I answered her. “We’re going home.”

------ The End ------

Appendices: Author & Editor Notes

Appendices Introduction

The Appendices are a collection of the various comments Somber and his editors wrote into Fallout: Equestria Project Horizons. They have been removed from the main text to allow for the reader to have a more immersive experience.

Each are divided up by Volume and Chapter.

Please note that these comments have not been edited, changed or adjusted.

Volume 1: The Security Mare Appendices

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making this worth reading. Huge thanks to the readers who supply the feedback that keeps this whole thing going.)

(Author's note: When I started Project Horizons, I had an ending and a beginning, and I wasn't putting any thought into Chapter 1 beyond 'Okay, how does BJ leave the stable?' I never really gave it the time or tightening it deserved. So, now I've gone back and fixed some things, added others, and taken out a few to hopefully make the rest of the story more enjoyable. Doubtless this is going to have a ripple effect, so please bear with me till the ripples are brushed out.)

(Great thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode, without whose help I would never be able to finish. Also, thanks to everypony for reading and providing feedback.)

(Note: This chapter, too, is not its original version, though it is closer to it than the revised Chapter 1 is to its. Regrettably, though, our time is not unlimited, so we ask that you please bear with us through the slightly lower quality of the next few chapters. It gets better.)

Note: There were no author/editor comments for Chapter 3.

(Huge thanks to Mr. H for helping me make this ten times better than I could on my own.)

(Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Props to Hinds for helping me make this halfway decent.)

(As always, thanks to Hinds for helping me edit, and thanks to Kkat for helping me write at all.)

(Once again, thanks to Kkat for inspiring me to write. Thanks to Hinds for making all this 120% cooler.)

(Thanks to Kkatman for creating this wonder and letting me play with it. Thanks to Hinds for helping me make it 120% cooler. Thanks to every one's comments that keep me writing!)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and huge thanks to Hinds for helping me make it 120% cooler!)

(Tons of thanks to Kkat for inspiring me and letting me play in her sandbox, and Hinds for making this as awesome as possible.)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds for making it as awesome as possible, and to all my readers who leave lots of nummy feedback and comments.)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and massive thanks to Hinds for maximizing its potential. Feedback is adored.)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for making FoE, Hinds for helping me brush this to perfection, and readers who keep this thing going with your comments.)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for making FoE in the first place, to Hinds and Bronode for helping me brush out all the mistakes, and to readers for leaving comments!)

(Always thanks for Kkat for creating FoE, and huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for helping me edit this monster.)

(Thanks to Kkatman for creating Fo:E, thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making it worth reading, thank you to all my readers and commenters, and thanks to everypony who helped me through that tough patch earlier.)

Volume 2: Blood and StarsAppendices

(huge thanks to Kkat for creating and inspiring me to get through this chapter, and to Hinds and Bronode for making it worth reading, and to everyone kind enough to give me feedback about it!)

(Note to the Curious from Hinds: I'm still here, if anypony was wondering. Somber just didn't add the endnote to this one. I assume that Bronode will be going over this at some point, too.)

(Cause Somber is not a smart pony.)

(No, because Somber is a pony who got up at three in the morning and spent nine hours writing this chapter.)

(Exactly! Not a smart pony!! ::Flops over unconscious.:: Oh... and you are awesome, Kkat... awesome awesome... .snnnzt... .)

(Greetings to everypony from sunny Spain! Too sunny, actually, I like your work, Celly, but *god**damn***! Bronode here, and yes, though I may be delirious from the heat, I will indeed be giving this a look over and sending updates as soon as I'm able since I don't even have access to a goddamn phone line out here. Somepony wanna trade places? *Anypony?*)

(Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, to Hinds and Bronode for making it spectacular, and to all readers who leave feedback. You keep this mattering. You keep this going.)

(Huge thanks to Kkatman for creating FoE in the first place and for Hinds and Bronode spending 8 hours making it decent, and huge thanks for all three for putting up with my my whining and bitching...)

(Great admiration, joy, and respect to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bronode for spending nine hours making it decent, and for everypony happy to read it!)

(Huge thanks (and hugs) to Kkatman for creating FoE, huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making this decent to read, and huge thanks to readers who leave tons of feedback for me to nom on.)

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bronode for making it decent to read, and Sarsaparilla Fizz for helping me get out of a plot hole at the beginning of the chapter. (Even if he doesn't read PH cause it's too depressing.))

((Huge thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria, to Hinds and Bronode for making this worth reading, and to everypony that keeps me slogging through chapter after chapter.))

((Huge and unending thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bronode for spending a ridiculous amount of time making it worth reading, and to all the awesome folk that take the time to read it and give me the feedback I need to keep writing.))

(Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and Huge thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making this crap worth reading! And Huge thanks to readers for taking the time and leaving the feedback that keeps me writing.)

((Huge thanks and admiration to Kkat for creating FoE. Massive props to Hinds and Bronode for spending TEN hours making this decent! And thanks to everypony who leaves feedback! You make this possible.))

(All thanks and praise to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. Much praise and thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making my lousy writing decent enough for all you folks. Comments are craved desperately. And if you'd like to donate a bit or two to the writer, the tip jar is to David13ushey@gmail. com through paypal. Thank you so much for reading.)

(Unending thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And tons of thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making this chapter worth reading. Huge thanks for everypony that leaves comments that keep me writing. And any pony who wishes to help out the artist, bits can be donated through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com.)

(Oh… and… um… sorry…)

(Hinds here (I mentioned it in the comments, but I'd like duplication): We've changed Blackjack's magic color from red to white, so *please* let us know if you spot any instances we missed in earlier chapters.)

(Authors notes: Huge thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria and congratulations for finishing it. Also, thanks to the three musketeers for making this worth reading in the first place. Finally, a huge thanks to everypony who leaves comments. They're what keeps this whole thing going. Lastly, if anypony wants to help support the author, the bit jar is at paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Every bit helps. Thanks for reading.)

(All glory and praise to Kkat for creating FoE in the first place. Huge thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending half a day polishing this to something readable. And thanks to everypony who leaves comments. Also, if you can spare a few bits, donations can be sent to David13ushey @ gmail. com through Paypal. Thank you.)

(I want to thank Kkat for creating FoE, and give massive thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending a record 13 hours making this decent to actually read. Please, all comments are cherished, even if I can't reply right away. Also, if you enjoyed the story, bits can be donated through paypal to David13ushey @gmail. com. Thank you.)

(Author's note: Much thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making this horrible chapter readable, and to everypony who leaves feedback. Tips to support the writer can be made through paypal to David13ushey @gmail .com.)

(IMPORTANT NOTE FROM HINDS: The story is not, in fact, over. This is not the end. How Somber intends to continue from here I don't know, but I've been assured that future chapters will exist. I just thought that I'd better add this note to make sure that no one got the wrong impression and stopped reading.)

Volume 3: Second ChancesAppendices

(Author's notes: This chapter was very difficult to write. I wanted BJ to meet LittlePip since I started Project Horizons. I know… I know some people will hate it or think it's contrived, and it is and I'm sorry and… just… sorry… The only time that was possible was in the gaps in LittlePip's memory. There were several ideas I had that just got cut out. Others were very OOC. I've struggled to keep LittlePip as much in character as possible. More than 20p were removed or edited. I hope that, after putting all of you through Black, you found Birthday an enjoyable ride.)

(In addition to thanking Kkat, Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster I would also like to thank Doubleclick for helping me with LittlePip's dialogue and Hobo for cyberpony issues. You are all incredible and thank you for making Horizons the best story possible.)

(Finally, if you liked the story and wish to assist the author donations can be made to David13ushey @gmail .com through paypal. Every bit is appreciated and needed. Thank you!)

(Author's note: I'd first love to give thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria and to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster on making this something worth reading. I'd also love to thank my readers and their comments. This story is now longer than the original Fallout Equestria. I'm really sorry about that... you'd think 600,000 some odd words would be enough to tell one story. I'd also love to give special thanks to Swicked. He provided some of the grade A material in this chapter, stuff I never even imagined but that kept me in stitches the whole time. Finally, I would like to thank those generous readers who have donated to the bit jar at David13ushey @gmail. com through paypal. Next chapter... back to the Hoof.)

(Note from Hinds: To those wondering whether the Gloryjack scene was just a Gloryjack scene or…something else, the ambiguity is deliberate. I personally prefer to think that it's just the two of them…but Somber wanted the readers free to make up their own minds. :) I write this note because there's been some confusion in the comments as to whether the ambiguity was deliberate or bad writing, and I certainly don't want people to think that PH is badly written.)

(Author note: Thanks to Kkat for creation of FoE, thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for actually making this worth reading, thanks to all my readers for leading comments, and lastly thanks to people who leave bits in the tip jar through paypal to David13ushey @gmail. com. Thank you so much to so many wonderful ponies for being so supportive.)

(Author's note: As always, heaps of thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. I'd also like to thank Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster. Though they may occasionally drive me crazy, they work their tails off making this story as good as possible! Also, tons of thanks to ponies leaving feedback... though I have to admit some of the comments are just a little scary, better to have them then not. Lastly, thanks to everypony that helps out with donations at David13ushey@ gmail. com through paypal. without you this would have ended a while ago.)

(Also, two special thanks: one to Rainbow Yoshi for helping me with some idea problems I had. The other to VozDeSuenos for pointing out the song to me. I thought I'd thanked him personally, but I hadn't. Sorry, and thank you!)

(Author's note: as always, I'd like to thank Kkat for creating Fallout: Equestria and Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making it worth reading. I'd also like to apologize for the chapter being late. I was horribly sick last weekend with a sinus infection. Thankyou to everypony who leaves comments and feedback, and thanks to everypony that leaves tips at David13ushey@ gmail. com through paypal. Every bit keeps this story going. I hope the chapter was entertaining. Thank you for reading.)

(Author's notes: First, as always, thank you to Kkat for creating Fo:E. Then great thanks to Hinds, Bronode, Snipehamster, and guest reader Minty Julepness, for making this chapter decent. I'd love to thank everypony who leaves comments and feedback. Finally, I'd like to thank everypony who leaves tips through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. Even a single bit is appreciated. Thanks for reading. Incidentally... chapters 35,36,37,38 and 39 were all supposed to be ONE chapter... clearly Somber can't tell a short story with a gun to my head... sigh...)

[[Compiler's Note: Best perk ever in this chapter.]]

(Author's note: First credit as always goes to the amazing and wonderful Kkat for creating Fo:E. Then to my super amazing assistant Hinds, the engineering obsessed zebra. Next to Bronode... don't mind him, he has way too many apple ciders... and finally Snipe. If you want a straight pony to talk to... look at him. Oh... and I should probably thank Manehattan Steamroller for the music 'Traditions of Christmas.' Thank you everypony who leaves feedback to help make this story even better. And if anypony wants to help finance this expedition, tips and spare bits can be sent to David13ushey@gmail.com through Paypal. Thank you for reading. I hope it was enjoyable.)

(Author's notes: As always, I want to give thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, Snipe, Bronode, and Hinds for their oodles of hard work and yet another weekend sacrificed to make this actually worth reading. I'd also like to thank everypony who gives me feedback and comments in EqD that helps keep this story going. Lastly, everypony that wants to help support the author can leave bits at the Paypal tip jar. David13ushey@gmail.com.

Also, more specifically... at this point PH is longer than the original FoE. It's well on its way towards being a bajillion pages long. Is this story taking too long. Should I just wind it up and have it done with? Once I break 1.1M words, we're getting into Harry Potter territory... like... all of Harry Potter. So I just want to know if things are dragging or not. Anywho, I hope you enjoy the story... dragging terribleness or not.)

(Author's notes: Hugs and thanks all around to Kkat, Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for being awesome people, helping create FoE:PH, and working their collective tails off on getting this halfway worth reading... then working their manes off making the other half worth reading. This chapter and the next are the result of the reply I got from my question. I can sum it up as "Just write the damn thing, Somber, and we'll get to the ending when we get there!" Anyway, thank you also to everypony that's gives me the feedback to keep this going. If anypony would like to help out the author with tips, as aways they can be sent via paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Thank you for reading through this ridiculously long story.)

(Author's notes: Thank you for suffering through this long and odd chapter. I hope it was bearable. I want to thank Kkat for her creation of FoE in the first place, Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making this worth reading at all. I'd also like to thank Mint Julep for convincing me not to scrap this chapter entirely. I hope that everything went well. I can't wait to read comments and feedback. If anypony has monies to spare, the tip jar is located at paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Every bit is appreciated. Thank you for reading.)

(Also... a lot of people have asked me about Cadence, Chrysalis, and changelings in general. The fact is that I had a few problems with the finale and really, if I did put them in, it would be quite a bit of shoehorning. So I'm not going to mention them at all. If somepony else wants to use them for their own FoE fic, I certainly won't be.)

(Author's note: Ugggggh! This chapter was cursed. Just CURSED. Everything that could delay me or interrupt our attempts to brush did so. It's also the longest, I think, and I didn't mean to. So sorry. I really need to keep these to thirty pages or so. Ugggh… ..anyway, thanks so very much to Kkat for creating FoE, to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending a RIDICULOUS amount of time trying to make this decent. Thanks to Mint Julep again for keeping me on this track. Thanks to Ilushia for helping me try to get Blackjack's psychology down… girl brains are hard… Lastly, thanks to everyone that leaves comments and tips are very much appreciated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Thank you for reading and I am so very very sorry it's taken so long to get out.)

(Hinds: "I really need to keep these to thirty pages or so." You know he's actually serious when he says these things? Yeah.)

(Author's notes: First, I'd like to give thanks to Snipehamster, Bronode, and Hinds for the enormous work they put in to this chapter. Really. They volunteer huge amounts of their time and this story wouldn't be legible without their help. Next, thanks to Kkat, of course, for creating FoE in the first place. Lastly, thank you everypony for putting in the time and effort to read this story and to follow along... I'm sorry it's taking so long to get through it, but we will. Promise. Any tips to help out the author can be put in the tip jar at paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Also, Velvet belongs to Siansaar. The music belongs to Squirrel Nut Zipper, Cherry Popping Daddy, and Big Bad Voodoo Daddy.)

(Author's note: Believe it or not, this chapter was supposed to be only 30 pages or so... hopefully next chapter is brief. Cross your hooves. Anyway, I really would like to thank my editorial team this chapter. We had some hitches and problems, but I want all of you and them to know that without them Horizons wouldn't be the story it is. So please stomp your hooves for Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for devoting hours of their lives for months on end for making this story the best it can be. Also thanks to Kkat, of course, for creating FoE in the first place. Thanks for everypony who reads and leaves feedback on the forums. And lastly but not least, thank you ponies who slip bits in the tip jar so I can pay my bills. If anypony else would like to help support the author, tips go to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you again for sticking with me.)

(OH! July 2nd is PH's birthday. Send art to Seth. :P)

(Author's notes: Really sorry for the delay. I'd originally hoped to make Hightower one chapter. I should have known better... Also real life has gotten difficult with me needing to find a new place to live by August along with finding a new job. Tips would be really helpful right now. Anyway. Huge thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending twelve hours getting this chapter done and worth reading. Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Thanks to everypony who leaves feedback that keeps the story going. And really big thanks to anypony who leaves tips at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal.)

(Once I finish Hightower, PH will have to go on break until I get a new living situation worked out. Sorry.)

(Author's note: I write this at 1 AM for me, 4AM for Hinds, and 9AM for Bro and Snipehamster. That's right, my editors stay up to see Celestia raise the sun working on this. They're incredible, and deserve a round of applause. Also, thanks as always to Kkat for creating FoE. Huge thanks to everypony who gives me feedback. I might be slow to respond, but I read every review. And lastly, thank you so much to ponies who donate bits to help support the author and to keep the story going.
As I wrote last chapter, I'm doing a bit of forced relocation. I have a plan to move to Vegas and hopefully get a teaching job there, or at least pick up some subbing. I'd hoped to go to Everfree, but that'd kill my account so... sorry... anyway, if anypony else would like to help out, the tip jar is at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal.
Unfortunately this means there may be a brief hiatus between this chapter and the next. Hopefully it won't be too long. And don't worry, you haven't seen the end of Blackjack.
Thank you again for reading...)

Volume 4: HomecomingAppendices

(Author's note: Wooo. Talk about shuffling around. We had events moved around. Added in. Firmly objected to. And then taken out again. I am glad that I got this chapter out before I moved though and I hope to have chapter 50 done before the end of the month. It'd be really nice. Anyway. Some of you might have noticed I used the name 'Cadance.' Some of you might also remember that back in Ch 43 I said that Cadance and whatnot were dead to me. Well, that was more because of issues I had with the finale. 4 months later, I can actually use them... not much, but yeah. Hopefully it won't blow up in my face. Probably will... but meh.

Anywho. Huge thanks to my editors for really trying to make this the best chapter possible, even if it meant rewriting one whole scene and adding another. I'd like to thank Kkat for creating FoE in the first place and Minty for saying 'Yeah, the chapter's fine. chill.' Thank you to everypony who has given me feedback at the Cloudsville forum. Yes, occasionally the forum scares me, but I really appreciate the feedback. It gives me the mental means to keep going. Finally, if anypony would like to help support the writer moving to Vegas or wherever else I can find a job, donations can be sent to David13ushey@gmail.com though pay pal. Thanks so very much, and thank you for sticking with PH this long.)

Editing note. Some folks might wonder what comes in and goes out of Project Horizons. This is a scene with Stygius and Psychoshy's departure that was cut and changed to tone it down. YMMV as to if it was better or not. WARNING: While we cannot confirm that this scene contains spoilers, we also cannot deny that possible fact. Read at your own risk, and please also remember that the various component of this scene may or may not by heterogeneous in their canonicty, said canonicity possibly having the potential to lie at any level or levels below (and in part but not in full at) full membership in the canon.

(Author's addendum: The above disclaimer was written by Hinds. :P)

(Author's note: well folks. I'm sorry for the delay. But my editors put in an amazing fourteen hour long stint to get this finished and to you. So please give them your thanks for their valuable time. I couldn't have possibly done this without them! As some may know, I got a new job teaching 11th graders. I honestly have no idea what my posting schedule will be like. Folks have work and Hinds has classes, but I'm going to keep chugging along for as long as I can and as long as you want me too. Thanks to so many who helped support me and this story. Though I won't be taking down the tip jar, it's just for gratitude now, not paying my bills. More precious is the feedback. I hope this was a decent chapter. As always, thanks and love to Kkat for creating FoE in the first place. And once again, huge thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for putting in the time and hard work to make this story what it is.)

(Author's note: this chapter was an amazing endeavor by Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster. Three days to get it all put together. Everything seemed to conspire to prevent it. Colds. Deadlines. But finally we persevered. Sadly there were serious structural flaws that had to be changed in order to give you the best story possible. So, credit all around to all of them for their hard work making this positively almost good!

On another note. I'd like to dedicate this chapter to a good friend who greeted me when I moved to Fallon and helped me feel welcome. It was nice to actually talk to folks face to face for a change and made me feel not quite so lonely. Sadly, he's left for a new teaching job on the far side of the world. Hopefully he'll still be able to read this in China. Matt, thanks for being a good friend in the brief time I knew you. I hope everything works out for you.

Finally, as always, thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria in the first place. Thank you everypony that leaves feedback. And thank you, everyone, who's taken the time to read this and stick it out as long as you have. Thank you.)

(Author's note: So, before any blame falls on my editing staff, I want everypony to know that the tank battle, backflips and limb damage all, is my own fault. Some ponies have noticed I like certain animes and you might be able to pick which one inspired this battle. If you found it ridiculously cheesy and poor writing, it's my fault. But this is something I had planned since chapter 16... .and I really thought that I'd get to it a lot sooner than this... .sigh...

Anyway, I want to give my editors huge thanks for this chapter. Folks probably noticed a lot of things got in the way of getting this chapter done. But Hinds, Bro, and Snipehamster stuck it out and got through the whole thing. I'd also like to thank Fuzzy for giving his time and opinion to this chapter. There were some major questions about what was going to happen in this chapter. As always, thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And lastly, thanks everypony who leaves comments and feedback. It's really important to me, even if I don't always get to responding as promptly as I should.

I hope that everyone is happy with the pacing of the story. I know Horizons is ridiculously, freakishly long. I hope that it's not going too long. I have a plan and an ending, I promise. Hopefully we'll get to it before next Christmas... or the Christmas after next...

Anyhow, thanks for sticking with Horizons and I hope the story is doing well. Hopefully we'll get one more chapter before Christmas. Take care. Thanks for reading!)

(Author's notes: I really want to apologize for the lateness of this chapter. School, pneumonia, and writing difficulties made getting this chapter done a nightmare. This is the third form of the chapter. I hope it's okay. The chapter ended up being a recovery chapter. Sorry. I'm getting formulaic I guess. Anyway, thank you for your patience in waiting for the chapter. I hope it was worthwhile.

I want to thank everypony for reading as far as they have. It's my dream to finish PH this year. I want to thank the endless support and help, given by Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster to making this worth reading. Trust me, my rough drafts are painful. Special thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, as always. And I'd like to thank every pony who's generously supported PH. There were quite a few donations this month and sadly I didn't get a chance to thank everyone personally.

Thanks to people's generosity, I'll be attending Unicon in Las Vegas in February. Hope to see folks there! Just look for the grossest attendee... that should be me!)

(Author's notes: I know that every chapter I thank my editors, but I really would like everyone to know they worked their tails off getting this chapter out this month. I was almost certain that we'd have to push it back to March… April… May… sigh… so I just want everyone, and them, to know how special they are. Whether you liked the finale or not, I really have to agree with one thing. There is absolutely nothing like true true friends.

In other news, I know that what happened with Psalm may upset some folks. I apologize, but this is something else that's been in my head since coming up with the Marauders. I hope it doesn't cause too many problems.

Next week I'm going to be at the Las Pegas- er, Vegas convention. Meeting the hideous Somber… I hope it's not too unpleasant for folks. I'd like to thank Devon Wade, Joel Kenny, and Hiddenpony for helping me pay for the trip. Just look for the terrified writer in a social situation.

Also, I… um… well… just in case you like it… this is something I'm doing with Pantzar… http://requiem-pony.tumblr.com/

Anyway. Thanks to Kkat, as always, for starting this. Thanks to folks who enjoy reading this. Thanks to folks who comment and donate. And thanks for being a part of this community. Just… thank you…)

(Oh. And hugs to Tori for Letti.)

(Author's notes: I'd like to apologize to everyone for the long delay in getting this to you. We had to fix up 54 and unfortunately real life has made things difficult. I'd like to thanks Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bro for making it worth reading, and for all the folks who catch all the problems that we miss. I'd also like to thank a lot of folks who helped out by donating this month. Unfortunately, quite a few got lost in my E-mail. Sorry.

Next one will probably be in a month as well. Unfortunately things have gotten way off track and real life is making things difficult. I'll be looking for work as I lost my job (long story. Best to sum it up as being a 'failteacher') and the others have other issues too. I'm still determined to end this as it needs to be ended and to give you all the ending you deserve. I'm sorry if it's slow. I'm hoping things will pick up soon... .

Anyway, thanks again for reading, giving feedback, and helping out. I really appreciate it.)

(Note from Hinds: Somber is above using 'failteacher' to mean 'teacher who failed students who neither turned in their work nor showed up to class but who had connections in the school administration'.)

(Re note from Somber: Actually it had to do with my honors class, not their work or attendance.)

(Hinds: Oh, sorry.)

(Bronode, AKA Niphl: Actually, I think I had a fair part to play with the real life stuff. Don't worry, folks, the self-flagellation has already begun in earnest.)

(Additional note: The chapter quote is from First Citizen Lynette in Fallout 2.)

(Author's notes: Buh... I swear, sometimes these chapters just reflect real life. May was a nightmare for me. Lost my job. Got a year older. Found out some very unpleasant news about money. Yeah. It's been frustrating. But I'm glad to get another chapter done. I'm incredibly thankful to Hinds and Bro for helping me get this chapter out relatively quickly. Thanks also to Kkat, as always. And thanks to everypony for reading. Once again, donation cup is out as I'm going to have to move somewhere in 2 months and will accept assistance through paypal. David13ushey@gmail.com. Thanks again everypony!)

(Author's notes: And here is the conclusion to the Society arc. I know a lot of people wanted to see the fall of the Goddess, but really it would have clashed with the tone of the chapter and I really think the Goddess deserves an entire chapter to herself. This is a chapter I wanted to do forever. One good night for Blackjack. I hope that everyone enjoyed it.

I'm hoping to get the Goddess chapter out before I move. There's no answer on the job front, so I might have to move to Vegas to sub. Therefore, the tip jar is always open for anypony with bits to spare. Also, feedback and critiques are more than welcome at the Cloudsville forum. I want to thank everyone who's read thus far, Kkat for creating FoE, Bronode and Hinds for editing, and Squeak for being kind enough to stop by and take a peek. I hope it was an enjoyable chapter. Take care.)

(Author's notes: Wow. This was one of the most challenging chapters I've ever had to write. It wouldn't have been possible without extreme assistance from Lucid, Fuzzy, and Hidden Fortune. The latter of which was willing to donate two days of her time to making sure this chapter was close to canon. I understand this was a pivotal moment for many readers of FoE, and I wanted to present it well and respectfully. I also want to thank Hinds and Bronode for, as always, putting their meticulousness and their wordsmithing talents to good use.

This month I'm moving down to vegas, so I can't put an honest ETA on when 59 will be out. School is starting too, so things are going to get interesting soon. I hope things work out for me both professionally and financially so I can keep plugging away at Horizons. Just the Enclave left to go.

I'd like to also thank Kkat for creating Fallout:Equestria, even if some of her finer details drove me to tears this chapter. I'd like to thank everyone who has read this far, and I'd like to thank people who leave feedback at cloudsville. I'm always trying to get better. Donations can be given through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com and are greatly appreciated at this time. Thank you.)

(Author's notes: Whew. Well, when moving and job plans fall through then there's always getting the next chapter out. We're now into the enclave arc, where we get to see the consequences of Operation: Cauterize out east. I still don't know what's going to be happening with work and the like, so every bit donated is especially appreciated right now. I'm going to start temping soon if I can't find somewhere to teach.

Huge thanks to Hinds, Bro, and Hidden Fortune for getting this done in record time. Seriously. Four hours. New record for this year. Check out Hidden Fortune's fic Treasure Hunting if you have the time. It will be worth your time. Huge thanks to Kkat, as always, for making this awesome world for us to explore and enjoy. Huge thanks to folks who leave feedback. It's greatly appreciated. I hope to have the next chapter out soon. Finally, time to leave the wasteland!)

(Author's notes: Well, I'm glad I could get this out before heading down to Vegas for good. I really want to thank folks for their help right now. I was really stressing out with all the expenses of getting moved and set up. Akhmetov, Donovan, Janne, Stepan, Ryan, Chris, and Martin; thank you. Your help really got me out of a jam. I appreciate every last bit I get. Till I get a teaching job, I'm subbing. One missed day is bad.

Something that's been suggested to me is to write a story in serial similar to what I've been doing in Horizons. Apparently that's becoming more of a thing and I could publish it on Amazon. We'll see. I need to get Horizons finished. I hope that Thunderhead will post the link be finished in 1-2 chapters, the core in 2-3, and the story in 5. Then done... hard to imagine. But if I do get an original work going, I'll be sure to let folks know. It won't have ponies, but it will be all my IP.

Anyway, huge thanks to Hinds and Bro for helping me fix this up to make it decent to read. Trust me. If it weren't for them... well... it'd be ugly. I hope next chapter will have Hidden too. Thanks to Kkat, as always, for creating FoE. I hope that she gets to read chapter 34 and 35 and get a laugh out of it. And last but certainly not least, thank you everyone for reading, giving me the feedback and encouragement to keep going, and the generous tips to deal with all the real life crap thrown at me recently.

Thanks.)

(Author's notes: I'd like to thank Bro, Hinds, and Swicked for putting up with an absolutely grueling chapter. This one turned out more of a pain than I ever expected, and I am thankful for them taking the time to brush out several with Gdocs being a complete nightmare. It'll be nice to be finished, put everything on FimFic and be done. Couple more chapters to go.

In other news, I am still unemployed. The part of the federal government that does background checks is apparently 'non-essential' so until Washington pulls its head out of its ass, I am broke. Any help right now would be supremely appreciated. Tips are through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. If things don't straighten out soon... well, hopefully I can snag some seasonal work here in vegas. Otherwise I don't know what I'm going to do.

I'd like to thank everypony that has stayed with the story this long. It really means a lot to me that I've done something folks enjoy. Comments through Cloudsville are appreciated too. I want to get these last chapters done well. Hugs to Kkat for making FoE and hugs to everyone for reading along. Thank you.

Part 1 Notes:

(Author's notes: Sigh... I really wanted this chapter to be the finale of the Thunderhead Arc. I really did. But after edits... revisions... more revisions... re-revisions... it got to the point where if I wrote out the whole thing, it'd be 70 pages. Much as I love Kkat's canterlot chapter, that's a bit much for any one chapter to read through at once. So this chapter is coming in two parts. Part Two will be in a few more weeks.

As usual, I want to give thanks to Hinds, Bronode (AKA Niphl), Swicked, Fuzzy, and Hidden Fortune for helping me get this chapter out. We went through four versions, one with no pony dying, one with the general dying, one with the general and captain dying, and one with just the captain dying. I think this version is the best, though it will change the general's arc. As always, thank you Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And I'd like to thank everyone who has continued reading this long and provide feedback wherever it gets posted.

Lastly, I'd like a special thank you to certain people who have helped me immensely this month. As some of you may know, the teaching job I moved here for fell through and the school decided not to fill it. So I've been struggling to get into their sub teacher program, but it's been an arduous process. I'm still waiting for the background check to pass. I have a temp job, but it's only 16 hours a week and brings in less than 200 a week. I'm starting to work on an original manuscript for E-publication too; hopefully that will help me get ahead of my bills too. Still, if it weren't for these people's help, I probably wouldn't have made it.

So a very heartfelt thank you to Кутлуев, Steven, Stepan, Donovan, Michael, Mel, Alexander, Nathan, Kenneth, Frank, Michael L., Keith, Lawrence, Alexander L., Tech, Martin, Nick, Swicked, Wes, Stuart, Cory, Jeremy, Brandon, Brian, Mac, Steven Z, Spencer, Christian, Ryan, Patrick, Erick, Jeffery and all the others who helped me out. When I started writing this, I never imagined the generosity and kindness of my readers. As much as the support and feedback keep the story going, these generous folk have helped to keep me going. If it weren't for them and others like them, I wouldn't have made it. So thank you and thank you to everyone who supports this story and its creator. Any additional help will be greatly appreciated till

Clark County School District gets its head out of its butt and finishes processing my paperwork.

Again, thank you everyone.

- - -

Part 2 Notes:

(Author's notes: Whew. You have no idea how hard it was to get this chapter done and out. Holidays, finals, and other drama constantly pushed it back and pushed it back. But this is the end of the Homecoming Arc. Now there's just the finale. I'd like to thank Hinds, Bro, and Swicked for helping me get this done without killing each other, or me, or me killing them... really, a lack of killing all around is good. I'm thankful for folks who took a peek ahead of time. I hope that it's a good read.

Edit: also, I know some folks may think Blackjack's upgrades are a bit... much. Please bear with me three more chapters. I know what I'm doing... I hope.

In other news, we will be going back sometime relatively soon and tightening up Mare Do Well in the second half and make a few other little tweaks to this arc before coming on to the finale. I also want to tell folks I finally got some what steady employment starting in January. Now it's just a matter of hanging on till then. I'd like to thank everyone who sent me tips this month. They're basically the only thing keeping my bills paid that this point. The temp work is... sigh... temp work. Anyway, thank you so very much, everyone who contributed. Some folks were uncomfortable when I named names, so just know I thank and appreciate you so much. If it wasn't for you, I'm not sure I could have made it.

I also found out that Kkat read Horizons up to chapter sixteen and said it was okay... wildly off canon from what she planned... but good. So that's good too. I will always be grateful for her for creating FoE and letting all of us play in her sandbox. I hope the Finale will meet with everyone's enjoyment. Take care and I hope everyone will enjoy the last arc: Horizons.)

Volume 5: HorizonsAppendices

(Author's notes: Whew. On to the last arc. Tried something new here. We'll come back to this twice more. I don't know how many chapters it will be. As usual, the chapter grew larger than I originally planned. It was going to start out just Scotch, Glory, and Dawn and then go from there, but it mutated on me. Honestly, at this rate, there's a lot more in the air than I thought. I don't know who will live or die before we get to the end of this thing. I do thank the critical work of my editors, who spend incredible amounts of time trying to get every sentence right… and talking me out of using Paladin Mustang, Hawkeye, and Havok… sniff… .

So I'd like to thank them, and to the people who have stuck with the story long enough to get through to this final push. I really hope it's been worthwhile. I have a few more twists in store and then everything should get sorted out in short order. Maybe. I hope… I really want to move on to new projects before 2015!

Also, a few people have asked about work. Yes, I am subbing. Unfortunately, I won't get paid till next wednesday, so bits right now are extra precious. Subbing is very unstable work, as I have no idea day to day if I'll work or not. I have to work 20 days a month, which is almost every day, to meet bills. I really hope folks can continue to help. If not, I understand. Donations can be sent to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Also, thanks to the many other writers out there trying to continue this thing. Horizons is wrapping up. So is MN7 and potentially heroes. I hope that many of you will give new fics a try, like Treasure Hunting or Merchants of Hope. I've been glad to help continue FoE, but we'll need many more stories to keep us going past season five!

Hinds: If we're recommending other FoE stories, I'd like to particularly mention All That Remains (which has a thread on Cloudsville) and Wasteland Bouquet. Hm, The Hooves of Fate and The Daily Unlife have somewhat interesting concepts, also, and The Ditzy Doo Chronicles recently returned from nearly a year of hiatus. That's probably enough for now, but there's a lot of good fic, FoE and non, out there.

(Author's notes: Sorry this is late. Last week, I was sick and we had problems getting through it. I'm very sorry. Next chapter should be Cognitum. Then we get to find out more stuff. Oh, and find out what's up with Boo and Discord. Don't worry. It'll be okay. Probably. Unless I botch it... which I probably will... sigh...

In other news, looking for a teaching job. If you know of any in your area, let me know. My applications from teacher for teacher has gotten be zero replies and I need a placement before June. Can't sub in the summer. If folks want to help out with bits, they'd be appreciated, but I think I should just barely squeak by this month. I hope. If I don't get sick. Or lose this sub assignment. ::crosses hooves.::

Anyway, thanks so much to everyone for reading through this final arc. It looks like I really am going to get it done this year after all! Also, there's a concerted effort to get me to Bronycon. I have no idea if it'll actually happen. I'd have to crash with someone at the very least. Still, it'd be cool. Maybe I'd get to meet folks! n.n Anyway, just thought I'd mention it.

Also, thanks to Kkat for creating FoE and thanks to my editors who take all my lackluster drek and make it actually work reading. Thanks for folks who leave feedback at cloudsdale, reddit, and 4chan (even if 4channers hate my guts, it's still appreciated). Thanks for everyone that donates a bit to help out. And just thanks for reading, period.)

(Author's notes: Story isn't over. I swear. Really. I do want to apologize for its lateness though. Scheduling problems, real life issues, slow typing, and other problems took forever to work through. It's a huge chapter and I apologize how much how much of it is horrible talk talk talking. Still, there was a lot that needed to be addressed in this chapter. This is where most of the plot threads had to be addressed, one way or another!

I'd like to thank every one that's stuck with it so far and gotten through this monster of a story and this monster of a chapter, especially Hinds, Bronode, and swicked. We found a new way to brush that was a bit quicker so we'll see what this portends. I hope the story continues to be entertaining as we go towards the finish. I swear I'm going to have this finished inside three years... Grrr...

Anyway, next week is spring break, which I don't get paid for... sigh... so bits right now would be extra super appreciated at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you very much everyone that helped out last month. You made it possible for me to take a test that will hopefully get me a full time science position. We'll have to see. I might find some position somewhere else too. I'll let folks know.

A few chapters left to go. Wow. Well... hope the chapter was okay. Maybe I should have broken it into two... I dunno... still, I hope it stays a fun read. Please give feedback at Cloudsville... Reddit... 4chan if you're feeling adventurish. Sadly, I can't read comments at TvTropes forum. Got myself banned... bad Somber... .bad... .)

(Author's notes: So, another step closer to the end. Thanks so much for following along for so long. While I'm not sure if I'll get to the end before 70, I do hope I will get it done soon. Thanks to everyone for being fans and sticking with the story as long as you have. Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and equally huge thanks to Hinds, Bro, swicked, and Heartshine. The school I'm working at decided not to give me a job, so I'll be moving home in a month. Tips at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal will be appreciated greatly, given that I'll be unemployed for 3 months. Yeah. Here's hoping I get a reply to one of my applications. Sigh.

Anyway, hope the story was decent… .and I really need to get a girlfriend… boyfriend… lyra plushie… something! ::hurries off in shame::)

(Editor note: Just to be clear, when the wires in Charm's brain snapped taut, she flipped over her back. ~swicked.)

(Author's notes: Sorry for the long wait. Things got busy the last few weekends and we weren't able to get finished till now. I'd like to thank everyone who's followed along up to this point. It's been a long haul. I hope that we can finish this year... .I really... really want to finish this year. As always, huge thanks to Kkat and my editors. It can be a little crazy at times, but Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine have carried me through.

I'm also done with sub work until I can pick up some temp work. I have no idea what I'll get, but hopefully I'll pick up something. Folks who want to help me out with bits can do so through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. Also, some folks want me to go to Bronycon. I have no idea how to make this happen, but some folks are trying to put together a musical collection as a fundraiser to get me there. I don't know if it'll happen, but it'd be nice to meet some folks face to face.

Next chapter, reuniting with friends, new and old. Hope it finishes well. Thank you again for reading.)

(editorial wisecracks:

swicked: DUN DUN DUNNNNNNN!!!

Bronode: Still loading. Lolbethesda. Also, OH GOD MY MOUTH.

Heartshine: I hope we finish this year, too. Otherwise I'll probably end up under Somber's desk as he tries to write. For 'motivation.' (Somber: :D) Bronode says he wants motivation. I'm too flirty for my own good. Hinds was confused. Swicked said I would regret this for the rest of my life. He may be right.

Hinds: I was told that I had to put a wisecrack here and that this would count. :)

Oh, and apparently math has a very low LD50 among Heartshines.

swicked: IT'S A MATHACRE!

Somber: I love my editors…

Bronode: I like how we've kicked you off your own footer section.

Hinds: We do seem to be getting a bit silly…

Bronode: No, we're 'MERRY WITH TIREDNESS'.)

(Hinds on 2014-6-15: Just so you know, Blackjack was mistaken about the proper procedure for handling someone having a seizure. From Silver136, who's the closest readily quotable source on this I have to hand at the moment: "When someone is having a seizure, you're supposed to turn their head on their side so they can't choke, try to cushion their head, and prevent them from hurting

themselves as the thrash." My apologies for not thinking of doing this earlier, and my thanks to Icy Shake for suggesting it. And to Silver136 for being nearby, quotable, and, as far as I know, correct. Oh and to clarify: we were aware of this during production of the chapter. Blackjack is quite correct that she knows just enough to know to do this, as her knowledge stops just short of adding the “don’t” to the beginning. :))

(Author's notes: Bleaah. Real life really waged war with this chapter. I'd hoped to get it out week before last, but real life took out my editors. Then last week, I was away for a con. This week, I'm sick. So stick a fork in it and get it out! Horrible chapter, and so frustrating. Looking back at the last 3 chapters, I really wish I'd had Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape there. Then so many things popped up that delayed BJ and I was just as frustrated at the pacing...
Sigh. Always trying to find ways to improve.
Anyway! A little further on in the story. Thanks everyone for reading. Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE and thanks to Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine for their hard work these last few weeks. I've only had 2 interviews this summer for work so if folks want to help out, bits through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com would be hugely appreciated. Thanks to everyone that helped me get to Everfree Northwest. I had a wonderful time and it was wonderful to meet everyone I did!)
(PS: Con crud sucks butt...)
(Heartshine: Yeah, the delay is sort of my fault because I moved and then decided to drag Somber up to Seattle for shenanigans at Everfree Northwest. Somber's a great friend, and I was glad that I was able to meet him. I keep telling him he needs to look for jobs up here, so at least he'd have friends to see after teaching. But everypony send positive thoughts his way!)
Bronode: Or money. Money works too.
(Hinds: I was a bit dissatisfied with Virgo's explanation of the implant stuff and wrote some replacements. I was then informed that, while my versions were indeed more technically accurate, they would have left most of the attendant ponies rather uncomprehending; the not-smart-pony explanation was desired. For any interested parties, though, here are the things I made:
"Well, I never thought about it till today, but... yes. They could. The implants have short range networking capability to coordinate their activities with needing even more invasive and complicated wired connections. Even in case where those connections are used, the wireless networking capability is still present, just inactive, due to the standardization of parts. The system is pretty robust where random interference is concerned and is even designed minimize the damage caused by pulse weaponry, but if somepony knew exactly the right way to get in and manipulate it…they could do

anything. Upload every bit of data the implants can gather. Or download new programming or commands. Take control of cybernetic limbs. Accelerate the heart until it gives out if the pony still has one; shut down the blood pump if they don't. Cause crippling migraines, or maybe even brain hemorrhage…The details depend on exactly what implants a pony has, but there's a lot of damage cracking the system could do to even a minimally augmented pony."

"I could try to write a patch to make the implants to ignore any additional input," Virgo said thoughtfully, "and send it out over the radio network, but that would be taking advantage of the same vulnerabilities we're trying to fix. And if the professor really was using them like this, she might have put in defenses that I'd have to get through. She's more familiar with the system than me, too. It would be easier if I could connect to the implants directly, and that would be the only way to make it work if I'm completely locked out of wireless access. I'd need the ponies with them to come here for that, though.")

swicked: ... and I have nothing to add! Goodnight everybody!

(additional note from Hinds on 2014-07-16: swicked has commented that he has a few problems with the above paragraphs and would have raised them if the paragraphs had been otherwise accepted. The reader is advised that flaws may exist.)

(Author's notes: Okay! Another chapter down! This is another chapter that started to grow on me and I had to cut it off. Next chapter should finally bring about other things. We are getting closer to the ending... promise. Really! This chapter was very hard to write and I'm sorry if it upset people. All these chapters are just going to get rougher to the very end as Blackjack works to try and stop Cognitum.

I'd like to give the usual round of thanks: to Kkat for creating FoE; to Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine for editing it; to everyone who put in the time to read it; and to everyone that gives feedback either at Cloudsville or FimFic. It's very appreciated. Also, if anyone wants to help support the story, bits can be donated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com.

Two other pieces of info! First, some incredibly talented and generous musical artists have made a Project Horizons Club soundtrack. It was supposed to get me to Bronycon this year but, sadly, that's just not in the cards. Still, it is greatly appreciated and can be picked up at: http://hoofingtonrises.bandcamp.com for seven dollars.

Secondly, I have a new story project I'm working on though FimFic. http://www.fimfiction.net/story/204342/broken-accords It's essentially a typically overly complex and horribly written story. If you've enjoyed Horizons, hopefully you will enjoy it too.

Again, thank you.)

(Heartshine: This was a fun and painful chapter to edit. Gotta love romantic situations! Also I twitched so much with Blackjack being 'glazed.' That stuff is hell to get out of your hair…)

(Bronode: If anyone lost their lunches this chapter, that's my fault. I pushed for most of the drippy descriptions. I'm not sorry.)

(swicked: I enjoy working on these things way too much. And the 'champ' has finally been unseated! Long live our sexy blue demigod of love and his many-horned crown of pre-lubricated, vibrating appendages!)

(Hinds: So... I think that the chapter lives up to its number. There's a lot of good non-sex-related stuff in it too, of course (I'm interested to hear if anyone has thoughts on Blackjack's speech; there's a lot going on there), but…yeah. Chapter 69, everyone!)

(Author's notes: The universe hated this chapter. It did everything it could to conspire against me getting it out. I had writers block and frustration. There were huge banal scenes. People got sick. There was lightning storms knocking out power and fire drills going off and just everything went wrong. This chapter was really a continuation of the last chapter, getting things set up for next chapter, and just kept growing and growing... it's like in FONV where you're about to go to the Hoover Dam and the game asks 'Are you sure you want to go, because you can't resolve any more quests from here on out if you do!'

Anyway, finally got the thing written and edited. It's horrible... so sorry. I'm sorry it took so much longer than I intended. I wanted to thank Kkat for creating FoE in the first place, and Bro, Hinds, swicked, and Heartshine for their hard word in making this a better story. Even if we had to add in seven or eight pages... seriously. It was crazy.

Anyway, I hope folks leave feedback. I really do like reading if I do things right or not, even if I'm quiet about it. You can put it on Reddit, cloudsville, or on FimFic's blog. Also, if anyone wants to donate, it would be *incredibly* welcome this month. I haven't gotten much subbing work, so bits at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal would be hugely appreciated. I wish I knew how to set up a Patreon thing. Anyway thank you for reading. Next chapter is going to catch Cognitum and... stuff...

EDIT: Oh! About Homage! I spoke with Kkat about her origins. It was actually different than what I had in my head, so I'm very glad to have gotten her input. This wasn't something I just made up.)

(Bronode: I was responsible for 1 and a half-ish pages of the new growth. Blame swicked for the other stuff. And friendly synthetics that show up and don't immediately get ganked! Finally my wish came true!! ... Well, I kind of *made* it come true, but it still counts!)

(swicked: Huzzah, the chapter is complete! And gosh, wasn't it grand? That Twist saving Peppermint scene had me in stitches!

And also I'd like to extend a personal thanks to Bronode for helping edit in an accent he absolutely hates.)

(Author's notes: Horrible chapter. Just horrible. Horrible to write. Horrible to edit. I think this chapter has taken more time and effort than any chapter before. I'm sorry for the wait and I hope that everyone who's read continues to do so. I want to thank my editors for extreme frustration and exhaustion many of them have faced. Many of them suffered major sleep deprivation for this chapter. I hope to get the next chapter out because… hell of a place to leave things.

I'd like to thank Kkat for writing FoE. It's really amazing to think we're so close to being done after so long. I'd like to give special thanks to Hinds for his… expansive knowledge of rockets, Heartshine for her expansive knowledge of crazy people, Swicked for his expansive knowledge of knowing when a fight just ain't good enough, and Bro for actually knowing great synonyms for 'Look'.

I also want to thank everyone for reading as long as they have. Right now work is bad, given that I'm losing 500 dollars this month and 1000 dollars in december. No sub work over holidays. So I hope folks will help though Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Gifts are so needed and appreciated. Feedback… sigh… yes, I hope to hear from everyone. Just know that I'm sorry.

Music I was imagining for the final scene.)

(Hinds: … Well now. That was…quite the ending. As you probably can understand (particularly if you know who my favorite character in PH i-- was), I'm feeling slightly emotionally dazed at the moment. I wrote the release note before reading this end scene, and I'll probably have recovered by the time it's time to post the chapter (hopefully) tomorrow (later edit: We're now going to be trying for next Saturday.). Well, technically later today, since I'm typing this timestamp at 010220. Yeah.

… Well, I'm not sure what more there really is I can say about that ending. And my writing isn't at its best at the moment. So…on with the note I planned before I even knew that this chapter would have a big ending, much less what it was. Ahem. Regarding the aesthetics of the rockets, I imagine that the ESS-A1 looks rather N1ish and the older ships have some similarities to the R-7 family. There are of course differences; sizes vary, and the ESS-A1 is a single stage while even the most primitive of the older ships is two stage, core and boosters, among other things, but I like to think that the general *looks* of the ships have commonalities. For those of you

curious about the propulsion systems, the idea is that both the ESS-A1 and the older rocket core stages use Magical Thermal Rockets (propellant generating), with similarities to NTRs (including having an onboard magical reactor for power) but using magical heating on propellant generating by hydrogen talismans (as introduced in the original FoE for airships and here also powered by the reactor). Both the ESS-A1 and the older rockets therefore have effectively unlimited Delta-V in space as long as nothing breaks and the reactors have power, but they have differences in available acceleration. Most impactfully, the ESS-A1 has enough thrust to take off and land on Equus as a full SSTO. The older rockets do not; when tail-landing at the ends of their missions, they run their engines in LAMTRpg mode. Since they don't have oxygen talismans, though, they have to run that on an internal LOX tank, and the designers decided that it would be prohibitively difficult to make this large enough for both takeoffs and landings. Launches are therefore performed with the assistance of four conventional chemical RP-1/LOX boosters. (The boosters originally were LH2/LOX, but then it turned out that Somber wanted burning pools of fuel scattered around the place; please let me know if we've missed any places that still suggest LH2, which now probably isn't on the launch field at all.)

... And now I'm sad again, because it occurred to me that Glory would probably enjoy this little educational interlude…

... Which reminds me of a bit more education, at least: Blackjack really ought to have been able to find a way to get that hatch open, and pretty quickly and easily, too. Sadly, Apollo 1 provides us with ample evidence that hatches poorly designed for emergency opening are not unrealistic. Of course, if Blackjack *had* gotten that hatch open, it may well have doomed the planet, but…Sigh…

There wouldn't really have been a another way for Glory to make the launch unstoppable, under the circumstances, other than sabotage, though, and that she didn't know how to do. With all the technicians dead, she'd be more likely to either do nothing or stop the launch herself.

... And I think I'm just kind of rambling now. Well, goodnight, everyone!

And welcome to the endgame of Project Horizons. It is going to be a bumpy ride.)

(swicked: I like zebra ^_^

Also: it is truly tragic you guys will never have the pleasure of hearing the enthusiasm in Hinds' voice when he describes his rocket erections.)

(Hinds: …You know full well I'm talking about raising rockets from their horizontal transportation positions to their vertical launch positions. :))

(Heartshine: this chapter came in a time when life was really kicking everyone's butts. Also the line "It was a price to be paid. I could accept that. What I could not accept was another person paying it." hit me a lot harder than I thought it would when Somber and I talked about it a few months ago. Ulg…Not envious of BJ and would totally have been tempted to blow the damned door open. Somber and I have had long conversations on the meaning of sacrifice, and it's always interesting to hear other people's points of view on it. All I know is that I'm used to being the one who *makes* sacrifices, at least with my job. So when put into spots where I *can't* make that sacrifice, things tend to end emotionally about as well for me as they did for Blackjack. Anyways, no one probably cares, but goddesses if this chapter didn't hit hard.)

(Bronode: "No one probably cares" ಠ_ಖ್ಯ

So yes, rocket erections. I believe we have it on good authority that horsecock-shaped rockets would be "aerodynamically unsound" Three guesses where that came from.)

(swicked: Only if they're uncut.)

(Bronode: [Broken at the behest of Swicked's purile sense of humour…and horse circumcision is an ongoing area of investigation - look for the conclusions in your favourite pone-dong-related, peer-reviewed journal soon!] I wish I could remember more, but I kind of... *overdid it* on the sauce this chapter in anticipation of *my* favourite character getting scrubbed. To be honest, Glory going out like that kind of came out of left field for me. I actually sat down hard later and said "Glory can't just be gone. She's too boring to go out like that." Three years, I've spent with that character. I was the one who gave her her AER-14. She wasn't my favourite, not by a long shot, but still. And there's at least another four chapters of this to go. Seems Somber's not gonna be happy unless I end up with cirrhosis.)

(Author's notes: I am so very sorry for the tardiness of this chapter. Just about everything that could go wrong, short of losing an editor, went wrong. Car problems. Dog eating a roach poison tablet. Losing 21 pages stored on a flash drive. Plague. Medical scares regarding my heart. Christmas. Yeah. But it's here, and I'm sorry that it's so terrible.

If folks are wondering why I did the chapter as I did, I want the end of Horizons to be more than just Blackjack. I hope that, even if people don't care much for the secondary characters of the fic, that they can respect what the characters are attempting in pulling together and working together. If you didn't enjoy it, I apologize.

As usual, I want to thank Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria,

[Somber's mother's machine decided to punk out at this point; he plans to finish the note later. Don't forget, any donations to david13ushey@gmail.com through Paypal would be greatly, *greatly* appreciated.]

Editor's notes:

swicked: Somber has informed us that extensive technical explanations in the editor's notes are NOT appreciated. Ergo, we have convinced the engineer (well, one of them, anyway) of our number to forgo a lengthy discussion on tank mechanics.

You are welcome.

Bronode: I figured out why photon torpedoes are called photon torpedoes. But I'm not allowed to explain it. So take that, I guess. Also, anything involving interphasic anything is bullshit.

(Author's notes: Okay. In order to prevent a sixty page chapter, it was best to end here. Hope it was okay. This one was a pain to edit, but I'm glad that all my editors put in the time and effort to make it better. I want to thank them for their hard work at making sure this ending is everything I planned it to be. I hope it turns out alright.
Thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria in the first place, and thanks to everyone for reading as far as they did. Next chapter is the showdown with Cognitum. I hope It's decent too. I look forward to reading people's feedback on Cloudsville, FimFic, or Reddit. Let me know what I did wrong.

Also, if folks want to help out, bits would be very welcome now. I'm not going to be able to do the teaching abroad thing... and the IRS decided that there's a problem with my tax return, and are sitting on it till it gets resolved. (Someone used my SSN to file their taxes). So bits to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal are very much appreciated. It's the difference between paying rent and not these days. I'm working on getting a Patreon account going. I have no idea if it will work but I can hope...

Anyway, thanks for bearing with me. I hope it all turns out okay.)

Hinds: Just thought that I'd clarify, for anyone who was wondering, the design of the Luna Astrostable and why our recent edit of Chapter 19 to change the design did not change it to what is seen here. Out of universe…Let's sum it up by saying that there was much confusion and miscommunication. In-universe, changes were made; Stable 90 already showed both the readers and Blackjack, after all, that what was seen in Chapter 19 did not always correspond to the reality.

Heartshine: I don't have any clarifications, but a little bit of praise for Somber, as he accidentally did a clever. This was a really… interesting chapter. The ability to feel the moment of death of one of my enemies is one of my own worst nightmares.

swicked: Special thanks to Heartshine for teaching me, if you ever feel a bit too excited while looking at Stonehenge, just eat a whole raw potato and those less than double-holy thoughts with clear up in a snap.

Heartshine: Just trying to help swicked out when he needs to study.

(Author's notes: the song is Johnny Cash's version of Hurt. This chapter is too painful to talk about too much. Sorry.)

(Heartshine: I agree. I argued for Superior's "Polaroid Millenium". But I'm also tired of trying to type through tears.)

(Bronode: Fuck it. Just…fuck everything. A high blood alcohol level usually just provides adequate editorial performance. This time, it's the only reason I made it through.)

(Author's notes: I'm incredibly sorry that it's taken so very long to get what we've gotten done. The chapter is simply so long and there was no natural breaking point. Add to the joy of medical woes of me and a kidney stone and it just seems we weren't able to get it done. My greatest regret is that I wasn't able to get all of Horizons finished before EFNW. The chapter simply had too much going on. I know that I could have cut out entire scenes and put them in an epilogue, but I wanted to show the events in the hoof.

In other news, the entire editing team is going to be coming to EFNW with me at the end of May. I'll also be moving out of Vegas and back to mom's at the same time, and be unemployed till I get a teaching job elsewhere. So bits donated to David13ushey@gmail.com would be extremely welcome right now and deeply appreciated. I also have a patreon at https://www.patreon.com/Somber ... and I would DEEPLY appreciate help with improving it. Seriously. It's horrible...

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who's stuck with me patiently for all of Horizons. I'd like to thank Kkat for creating FoE, and my EXTREMELY hardworking editors for the hours and hours they've poured into the story. Also, one final bit... if you love FoE and want to write stories for it... do. Don't let Horizons intimidate you. Tell any and all stories about the wasteland you want. Stick with it, and work at your story to make it the best you can. Thank you.)

Editor's note (Heartshine: I'm just glad that we were able to get this chapter split. It's been a ton of fun seeing all of Blackjack's friends this chapter, even though different points of view have been sort of difficult on the editors. Progress gets hard when we have slightly different narrators, and everyone has slightly different ideas of how they'd be responding. That said, this chapter is fun! Even if Somber keeps breaking the poor Raptors. Q.Q I'm going to privately hope that Somber is able to move up here to Portland. For reasons. That have nothing to do with me dating him. Nope. >.>)

swicked: Hey reader! Have you ever wanted to meet Somber? Conversely, have you ever wanted to know exactly where he is, so as to be as far from him as possible? Well, now you can!

Coming to Everfree Northwest: Somber! And the rest of us! But mostly Somber!

He'll even be on a panel (yes, they gave him a guest pass, so he's even all official and junk)! Ask questions! Demand answers!

Whatever, really.

I'll be the one in the LSP ballcap. See y'all there.

Hinds: By the way, the ESS-A1 doesn't actually have artificial gravity. It's just flying a full Brachistochrone trajectory, and Blackjack is out of it during the turnover.

Bronode: My head's full of metal cubes. That is all. And my thoughts now need to be refined with a belt sander.

(Edited note: Scotch Tape's age would be roughly 14-15 years old. I don't know how that translates in pony years, but it's younger than Bastard would like. EQG had the CMC's in a high school after all so, you tell me.)

(Author's notes: And that's the end of the chapter. Sorry it was so long, but that goes for Horizons in general. I'd like to thank my editors who have worked so incredibly hard to help finish this enormous monster of a chapter. The stage is set. The final act is up. Blackjack will be back in the Hoof with the final face off with the Eater to save the world. But at what price?

I'd like to thank Kkat for Fallout Equestria in the first place, and all the readers of all the fics and all the writers who keep this story and fandom going. Huge thanks to Erin and the Wasteland Wailers for taking a peek at the songs and making sure they were okay. I hope they're okay... okay... they suck, but maybe someone with musical talent can make them not suck quite so much. I just wanted her to sing...

Also, a reminder that in two weeks I'll be at EFNW. They're even going to let me be on a panel. I'm be the ugly mess of a person at the very end picking their nose with all the zits.(Heartshine: Why would you mention zits!? EEWWW swicked: Because he doesn't care about your feelings, clearly.) Still, I hope I'll be able to meet people. It'll be nice to meet and talk with folks. In light of the upcoming trip, and me moving up to Oregon for job opportunities, tips are hugely appreciated through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com , or, if you'd like to support me long term, I now have a horrible Patreon at https://www.patreon.com/Somber

Also... the things I have to put up with from my editors in the comments... .

Edit: Also, FoE radioshow! Listen and enjoy! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcEa5s6cd6A)

Heartshine: This chapter. So much violence. Is there a talky, peaceful solution? Or is this the wrong crowd? I don't even. I need Somber hugs.

swicked: That song (excuse me, battle hymn) was weird, right? Really, really weird. I mean here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVLlUoR-rvk#t=26m25s

So yeah, weird. I just... yeah.
Weird.
I... won't even comment on the second "song". Guh.
... IGNORE ME!
Heartshine: I rewrote the 2nd song to its present incarnation, and put it to guitar chords. :P Maybe if swicked is nice to me at Everfree I'll sing it for him.
swicked: I probably won't be nice to her at Everfree :D
Heartshine: Q.Q if only Hinds would bring swicked his 4.4 grams of candy.
Bronode: What's the going exchange rate between candy and sexual favours?
Heartshine: Depends on the favour and the person asking for them?
swicked: I'll take the candy thankyouverymuch.
Bronode: Why do I ask these questions? I always regret it.
Heartshine: Solis rather likes gummy candy, Bronode. And she lives with me. You could test this theory. She seems to be rather fond of you. Maybe that'd help the exchange rate.
Hinds: I was again told to type something here and that this again counted.

(Author's notes: The penultimate chapter. I really wanted this to be the very last one. I really did, but there was just too much to wrap up. I hope that folks can forgive me. The next chapter is the last, and then there should be a brief epilogue. Then there's a few places we'll do some little fixes, and then upload to FimFic. Then done! Done done done done done…

For everyone who's stuck with me through all of this, I want to thank you. It's been an incredible saga, which has only been possible with your reading, the mind numbingly awesome assistance of Hinds, Bro, swicked, and Hearthshine, and the financial support of generous readers. As always, thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. We need to draft her for doing something with Fallout 4 when it comes out! Draft Kkat! Do eet!

To folks that read and critique the story, thank you so much for your feedback. The occasional video reviews have been awesome, and fair. I hope when I start my next big project that I remember everything that I've learned. I hope to have the story done before moving up to Oregon and resuming teaching… I so hope it's done…

To people who would like to support Horizons or my future projects, bits can be donated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com or through my (still horrible) patreon account at www.Patreon.com/somber. Special thanks to Spencer, AllisOne, Quotidian, Dust Eagle, Carlis, Mysfit, David, O'neil, Fdot, Michael, James, Chris, Mark, FallenAngel, Kristian, GoFish, Robojan, and special thanks to Allen Medlen.

swicked: Reread the scene starting on the lower half of page 29 while listening to this: https://youtu.be/eqqSa9n2ZQk?t=2m15s

It wasn't in Somber's head when writing it but it captures the scene so well…

Oh, and you'll never guess what Bastard's real name is, but trust me, it really *is* that embarrassing.

(Author's notes: Story is done. Epilogue to follow.)

(Hinds: I'm just going to go ahead and paste the release announcement I wrote for the forum:

"Well, everyone…It's out. 77. The final chapter, with the epilogue after it. I doubt that this is the end of work on PH; there will be typos found and fixed, almost certainly, there are a few edits Somber wants to make, and we hope to get it on FIMFiction. This is, however, the end of the story, over 1.6 million words resulting from over four years of work. We did it. It has been quite a ride. Kind of hard to believe that this is the last time I'm expecting to fly the Somber Signal... Though the Signal wasn't there at the beginning, of course, when PH, was just another small, anonymous FoE sidefic in an EQD compilation post, less than ten chapters to its name. Only two chapters posted, when I first saw it, and certainly no dedicated comment thread; I left my error-spotting mixed in with posts about many other stories. Still, Somber saw them, and [i]somehow[/i], I'm not really clear on the details now, I ended up working with him in the document for Chapter 3. I do rather wonder how my life might have been different if I'd decided to spend that time reading some [i]other[/i] new two-chapter story in the compilation. PH has gotten so, well, okay, not big [i]exactly[/i], since it's still a niche within a niche within a niche, but hopefully you know what I mean. Speaking of that, thank you all very much for reading; without you, our readers, I doubt that we'd have lasted anywhere near this long. Some of you may have helped more than others, but I think every bit of positive or constructive feedback has probably helped. Anyway. The end of the story is here. I hope you enjoy it. :)"

Oh, and, after Murky, Somber asked if any of us had ideas for cameos of characters from other FoE stories. He ended up going with my suggestion of Whiskey Rose and Caravan Lily from Cascadejackal's Wasteland Bouquet. Which I keep trying to drum up readers for, as it has less than a hundred votes total and only eighty-three upvotes. If you're looking for another FoE story to read after PH, why not give it a try?)

(Author's notes: It's over. It's finally over. After four years and two months, Horizons is done. I hope that people feel the ending was worth the ride. It's been pretty intense this whole time. I couldn't have done this without the incalculably valuable assistance of Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine. These are individuals who have donated weeks of their time and energy into making each chapter as good as they can possibly be. I could not have finished Horizons without their assistance, and I will be forever grateful for their help. No matter how frigging frustrating they may be at times…

(Bronode: Right back atcha, chickpea!)

Another person I'd like to thank is Kkat, for her creation of Fallout Equestria and for her immense generosity in allowing us to create our own story in her world. I owe thanks to all the readers and commenters who have given feedback about the story and how to improve it. In addition, special thanks should be given to Sethisto at Equestria Daily. If it wasn't for him, Project Horizons would have been consigned to the side fic page and dwindled away. I hope that readers of Horizon move to other fics in this world.

Lastly, I need to thank individuals who contributed money to keep this work going. Writing takes time, and fanfiction doesn't pay the bills. Every single bit has been extremely valued, and I would like to thank my patreons and individuals who donated directly to this story. I don't know what project I will work on next (hopefully something MUCH smaller in scope than Horizons) but I'll keep folks appraised on what's coming next.

If this epilogue clashes with your own headcanon for what comes after Horizons, feel free to ignore it. This was the ending that all my editors felt would be best. There's all kinds of story hooks in place, some of which I might take up, and others which I editors wish to explore in their own works.

(swicked: Except for Hinds, who instead began questioning what "best" could mean, empirically. Did you know that Somber originally intended this fic to be *shorter* than the original? *Because I sure didn't!*)

Ahem. So thank you again for reading. It's been a long, long trek. I hope it has been worthwhile.

Thank you.

Somber.)